CHAPTER SIX

THE VICTORIANS, THE DARK AGES AND ENGLISH NATIONAL IDENTITY

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During the last two decades, as Britain has moved increasingly towards devolution, there has been a growth of interest among cultural historians in the development of various British national identities in the nineteenth century. As part of this work, much attention has been allotted to Victorian Anglo-Saxonism—to the ways in which the Saxons were identified with the modern English, and were juxtaposed with the Normans, in the Victorian imagination.¹ Interesting research has also focused on the Victorian fascination with Britain’s Norse heritage. As Andrew Wawn has ably demonstrated in his landmark study of the subject, the Victorians effectively ‘invented the Vikings’.² However, it is by no means simple to ascertain how clearly Saxon and Viking were differentiated in Victorian culture.

On the one hand, the nineteenth century inherited a tradition of discriminating carefully between the two nations. Sharon Turner, in his 1799 History of the Anglo-Saxons, had dismissed any notion of kinship between the Saxons and ‘the Vandals of Scandinavia’.³ On the other hand, Thomas Percy, in the preface and notes to his 1770 translation of Mallet’s Northern Antiquities, had classed Saxons and Scandinavians together as Gothic tribes, stressing that they ‘used two not very different dialects of the same language’, while Mallet himself had argued that the Angles had originally been Danes and consequently ‘they waged war with the descendants of their own ancestors’.⁴

Each of these attitudes can be located in Victorian texts. In the 1840s, the scientist and explorer John Thomas Stanley conflated Scandinavians and Saxons, lamenting that the ‘Vikings’ had never ‘conquered Ireland and peopled [it] with Norwegians, Danes or Anglo-Saxons’. By contrast, Samuel Laing—writing in the same decade—hotly contested that there was any affinity between Germans and Scandinavians and criticized scholars for searching for the roots of pre-Conquest England in Tacitus’s Germania. Nineteenth-century linguists and literary scholars argued vociferously over the relationship between Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon, particularly in the second half of the century. While some maintained that the languages were unrelated, others insisted that they were simply dialects or variants of one language. A minority of Scandinavian enthusiasts towards the close of the century also developed a third position which echoed the views of Mallet, contending that not just the Anglo-Saxon language but the whole of Anglo-Saxon culture had simply been a degenerate form of Viking society.

In Paul du Chaillu’s 1889 study The Viking Age, for instance, the Anglo-Saxon invasion of Britain was dismissed as a myth, and the so-called Saxons identified as merely early Norse invaders, while in the 1850s, the historian and philologist George Stephens rejected the term ‘Anglo-Saxon’, coining his own description ‘Anglo-Scandic’ for Britain’s population. Such views often carried a political subtext in the 1850s and 1860s when Britain was witnessing a contemporary clash between ‘Saxon’ and ‘Viking’ over the governance of the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein, situated on the borders of Prussia and Denmark. For those British authors critical of Palmerston’s intervention, demonstrating that their country’s ancestry was more Norse than Germanic could be an indirect means of campaigning for Britain’s support of Denmark in that conflict.

These scholarly and political debates also seem to have filtered through to popular culture. This is suggested by Charles Kingsley’s description of the modern English as the ‘free Norse-Saxon race’, in a letter dated 1851, and also by the seemingly deliberate confusion of Saxons with Danes in Rider Haggard’s 1885 adventure novel King Solomon’s Mines, in which the narrator and a fictional editor quarrel over whether the Danes or the Saxons

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5 Wawn, The Vikings and the Victorians, p. 48.
6 Ibid., p. 99.
7 Ibid., p. 63, 48.
8 Ibid., p. 330.
9 Ibid., pp. 232–3.