

# **‘Strange companies’: The Northman in popular historical fiction**

Lisa Bennett, Flinders University, and Kim Wilkins, University of Queensland

**Abstract:** *This essay analyses how Bernard Cornwell and Giles Kristian, two authors of popular novels about Vikings, navigate historical research and dominant stereotypes about Vikings. The ubiquitous figure of the hyper-masculine and barbaric Viking may be at odds with the expectations that historical fiction will reflect a realistic portrait of past times. Cornwell and Kristian strike a balance between dynamic drama and embodied historical detail to arrive at a figure who reads as authentically of the Viking Age and persuasively of the desiring imagination of the present.*

**Keywords:** *Vikings, Northmen, Bernard Cornwell, Giles Kristian, popular culture*

## **Introduction**

Popular culture website *tvtropes*, a fan-based wiki that gathers and describes enduring tropes across media, offers an entry titled ‘Horny Vikings’ to define this type of Northman as:

seldom seen without those spiffy horned helmets and are sometimes adorned with Pelts of the Barbarian. Vikings are always quite hairy, with long beards and longer Braids of Barbarism flying in the ocean breeze... Expect them to approach aboard intimidating, monster-headed longships, fierce men aboard fearsome boats (2018).

While obviously not a scholarly source, *tvtropes* is a reliable repository for summarising prevailing stereotypes. Its cultural criticism tends more towards parody rather than nuance, and yet the tropes noted above do inform a generally held view about Vikings in popular culture. Nor is this view a recent one. In medieval Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman chronicles, letters, myths and histories written in Latin, Old English and Old Norse, Vikings are conceptualised as raiders who are both barbaric and awe-inspiring. The entry for the year 793 in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* famously records ‘terrible portents [that] came about over the land of Northumbria... fiery dragons were seen flying in the air... and a little after that in the same year... the raiding of heathen men miserably devastated God’s church in Lindisfarne by looting and slaughter’ (cited in Swanton 1996, 55-57). Simeon of Durham likewise mentions these same portents, but adds that ‘the pagans from the Northern region’ came by ship to Britain ‘and overran the country in all directions, like fierce wolves, plundering, tearing and killing’ (cited in Stevenson 1855, 457). In one of five letters written

to King Æthelred in Latin on the subject, Northumbrian priest and scholar Alcuin (d. 804) laments the terror of this ‘pagan race, nor was it thought that such an inroad from the sea could happen’ (cited in Whitelock 1973, 842). Wolves, dragons and fierce outlanders arriving by sea to slaughter Englishmen are likewise some of the familiar, and admittedly thrilling, images seen across popular media, including popular fiction, over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It goes without saying that these images’ relationship to historical record is contentious, and it has become commonplace for those with a stake in historical accuracy to discredit such tropes; one need only think of the Jorvik Viking Centre in York, UK, which is at pains to point out through its displays that Vikings did not wear horns, but were traders and farmers who spent a lot of time in villages doing peaceful, ordinary things. The pleasure, however, of imagining that Vikings were large, hyper-masculine barbarians is always close by; in the plastic horned helmets available in the gift shop, for example, but especially in the famous ‘Lloyds Bank Coprolite’, a giant Viking Age human dung specimen excavated in 1972, and proudly displayed at Jorvik under museum lights with its own interpretation board.

This essay seeks to explore how the ubiquitous thrills of the ‘Horny Vikings’ trope may produce tension with the expectations of the historical fiction genre, and analyses how Bernard Cornwell and Giles Kristian, two authors of popular novels about Vikings, navigate historical research and dominant stereotypes. In their respective series, Cornwell and Kristian strike a considered balance between the ‘Horny Vikings’ of *tvtropes* and the ordinary (potentially uninteresting) traders and farmers of Jorvik; they present Vikings as narratively dynamic seagoing adventurers who are also nuanced enough to engage with and embody historical details. The texts under consideration here were all published in the twenty-first century, so this discussion is in some ways a presentist account, that is, how popular historical fiction might respond to the current Western literary marketplace. However, it also has an eye on the past and presents the idea of the Northern ‘Other’ as a long-standing element of cultural imaginary in the West. Using historical documents and close textual analysis, this paper analyses how place (the wider world, the sea) and culture (literature, attitudes to women) are represented in popular historical fiction about Vikings. Our goal is not merely to show a correspondence between the historical record and representations of Vikings in popular historical novels, but to suggest that specifically contemporary concerns skew representation, meaning that the present always inhabits these images of the past. The consistently porous boundary between Northman and Englishman seems to suggest that difference is easily troubled. Alterity, in fact, is at least partially constructed in the imagination, allowing us to reflect on the imaginary nature of any reconstruction of history, even historical fiction that presents itself as adhering closely to historical fact.

Historical fiction is, by definition, not historical fact; it is in many ways able to cleave more towards the pleasures of imagination than the strictures of historical record. Of course, another pleasure of historical fiction is finely grained and accurate research; but the novelist, according to Hilary Mantel, 'offers up a version of the past — there can be others, and there will be' (2017). The novelist, she says, 'owns up to invention' while the historian 'struggles for neutrality'. Cornwell illustrates this sentiment in the 'Historical Note' appended to his novel, *Sword Song*. While explaining how there is 'more fiction' in this book than in others in the *Last Kingdom* series and highlighting some of the liberties he has taken with history here, Cornwell quips: 'I suspect I have been extremely unfair to the real Æthelred, but fairness is not the historical novelist's first duty' (2007, n.p.). In describing the function of invention in historical fiction, György Lukács develops the concept of 'necessary anachronism', where the 'inner substance of what is represented remains the same, but the developed culture in representing and unfolding the substantial necessitates a change in the expression and form of the latter' (1962, 61). Putting aside Lukács' highly contestable comment about 'developed culture' — imagining medieval culture as thoroughly superseded has long been a way of securing the modern subject's certainty about the present — the gesture towards *necessity* suggests that there may be compelling reasons to diverge from the historical record, depending on the intended audience. Meeting the demands of and working with the expectations and competencies of an audience is something that genre fiction is widely understood to do very well (Fletcher et al 2018).

Northmen in popular culture may share the same DNA as Northmen of the Viking Age (Lukács' 'inner substance') but the evolutionary pressures of culture and medium result in different phenotypes, or different expressions of that DNA. Not all Vikings grew horns in popular culture, after all. The genre of historical fiction exerts its own pressures on representation, which depend on its audience's expectations as well as its creator's tastes and the industrial complexes that seek to bring them together (Wilkins 2005). While fantasy fiction continues to gain pleasure from the monstrous northern Other (who is mapped onto wastelands and jagged mountain peaks inside front covers), and romance fiction continues to derive pleasure from the brutish Viking love interest (whose eroticised hypermasculinity is always fetishised on front covers), historical fiction plays by quite a different set of genre conventions. It is heavily concerned with research and the importance of historical accuracy (Newman 2016, 329), and is 'aware of the potential deceptions of the smooth narrative', recognising that history is 'messy, dubious, an argument that never ends' (Mantel 2017). Newman and Mantel write here particularly about middlebrow and literary historical fiction, the kind of books that garner prestigious reviews and win prizes (six of the last ten Man Booker prize winners have been historical novels, including two of Mantel's own). Yet popular works, such as Bernard Cornwell's *Last Kingdom* series and Giles Kristian's *Raven* and *Rise of Sigurd*

series, must pay enough attention to historical accuracy to satisfy historical fiction readers and also keep the pages turning to fulfil the demands of a popular market.

These three series follow narrative arcs that will be familiar to readers of other, earlier Viking Age fiction, which tell the tales of young men who travel far and wide due to blood feud commitments, such *King Olaf's Kinsman* by Charles Watts Whistler (1896), *The Men of Ness* by Eric Linklater (1932), *Hrolf Kraki's Saga* by Poul Anderson (1973), and *Blood Feud* by Rosemary Sutcliff (1976). In Cornwell and Kristian's stories, like the ones depicted in their antecedents, the young male protagonist's 'coming of age' coincides with losing his father (or, in the case of Osric/Raven, his father figure) to violent attack from outsiders and/or betrayal from within by a fellow warrior. This inciting incident occurs within the first few chapters of the first instalment of Cornwell and Kristian's series, but the repercussions play out over the remaining books. There are three novels each in Kristian's *Raven* and *Sigurd* series, and eleven novels (as of October 2018) in Cornwell's sweeping *Last Kingdom* sequence. In each case, the protagonist is removed from a relatively mundane life in his home village (Osric/Raven and Sigurd) or his ancestral kingdom (Uhtred) and is thrust into a warrior's world of thrilling adventure of seeking vengeance for his lost kinsman. This quest for revenge takes both Raven and Sigurd on seafaring journeys far from their homelands and all over early medieval Scandinavia, England, Wales, Northern Africa, Rome and Constantinople, while Uhtred's *raison d'être* — to punish those who usurped his father's Northumbrian kingdom and, eventually, to regain these lands for himself — sends him from battlefield to battlefield in the British Isles, and from lofty positions at King Alfred's court to a long stint as a lowly, seafaring slave.

These familiar narrative trajectories offer some evidence of how Cornwell's and Kristian's novels are situated within — and also perpetuate — the tradition of popular Viking Age novels. These authors admire the genre and each other's work within it. Cornwell provides a glowing front cover endorsement for Kristian's *Raven: Blood Eye* and Conn Iggulden offers similar praise for his *Sigurd: God of Vengeance* (which Iggulden beta-read for the author; Kristian 2014, 'Acknowledgements'). Meanwhile, Kristian's brief bio cites Cornwell as one of his 'writing heroes' and in the 'Author Interview' included at the end of *Raven: Blood Eye* Kristian names Margaret Elphinstone's *The Sea Road* (2000) and Robert Low's *Oathsworn* books as particular favourites and influences on his own writing (2009, 411).

Nevertheless, both Cornwell and Kristian are more noticeably concerned with making their historical research obvious for readers. As discussed below, Cornwell's repeated use of Old English poetry in his depiction of Uhtred's life and Kristian's almost *verbatim* inclusion of the Old English elegy *The Seafarer* in his first novel highlight their conscious inclusion of medieval material in their

modern stories. Moreover, these references are mingled with Old Norse gnomic 'wisdom' such as that found in the many verses of *Hávamál* in order, it seems, to lend 'authenticity' to the depiction of these fictional warriors but also to ground these narratives in historical research. Cornwell is keen to link his stories to the Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse sources that have inspired them (see for instance, the 'Historical Notes' that serve as appendices for each volume of his epic series) while the 'Author's Note' that prefaces Kristian's first novel directly cites the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle entry for the year 793 as a means of demonstrating how 'the story's historical context is consistent with contemporary sources and the conjecture of many of today's medieval scholars' (2009, ix-x). Likewise, the 'Historical Note' and 'Author Interview' that bookend this novel (401-412) go to great lengths to illustrate how long Kristian has been engaged in researching Viking Age Scandinavia and Anglo-Saxon England and which scholarly volumes have informed his fiction (e.g. *The Vikings* by Magnus Magnusson and Paddy Griffiths' *The Viking Art of War*). All of this research, though sometimes bordering on 'info-dumping' in Cornwell's books, largely serves to underscore story and character development and to convey to modern audiences that these fictional figures, like the historical ones that inspired them, 'were nobles and outcasts, pirates, pioneers, and great seafarers. They were the Norsemen' (Kristian 2009, x).

In combining an ostensibly realistic portrayal of Vikings and a more narratively dynamic portrayal of Vikings, a tension between the demands of objective fact and the demands of the imagination is revealed. That tension — one might argue a central tension of popular historical fiction — is exemplified by how imprecisely 'Northern' Vikings are shown to be in the works under consideration. Popular fiction in the Anglophone tradition has, unsurprisingly, inherited the view of Vikings as an historical enemy of England. While Viking activity was known in many places around the globe, the initial contact zone in the Western imagination has popularly been seen as England, specifically Lindisfarne; Neil Oliver's popular history of the Vikings notes that with the attack on the English monastery, 'the Age of the Vikings had begun' (2012). And yet the borders between Britishness and Northernness are troublingly porous. This porousness replicates the logic of the imagined past's relationship to the present in Viking historical fiction, and in historical fiction more broadly. The boundaries between us and them, North and South, are as potentially troubled as the boundaries between now and then. The two sides of these binaries actually keep 'strange company' (Kristian 2011, 314), and the two-way pull they exert alerts us more acutely to the constructed nature of historical accuracy.

Old Norse uses two words to define 'Vikings' and 'viking activity': *vikingr*, which refers to a person, and *viking*, which refers to an activity, such as raiding by sea (Jesch 2001, 44). Northmen are defined both by the noun *vikingr* and by the abstract *viking* activities they embark upon. *Viking* is both doing and being, identity and activity (Abrams 2007, 90). Contemporary audiences understand

Viking Northmen as seagoing adventurers, and Cornwell and Kristian play to this expectation with the conflicts inherent in these adventures, and the characterisation of men who understand the sea in an almost mystical way. Uhtred describes the ‘joy in a good ship, and a greater joy to have the ship’s belly fat with other men’s silver. It is the Viking joy’ (Cornwell 2005, 88) and bluntly links seafaring with a Northman’s sense of identity saying, ‘We had Odin, we had Thor, we had our ships, we were warriors’ (Cornwall 2004, 144). Throughout Kristian’s narratives, we see ‘these hard men from the north’ as ‘masters of the ocean and the elements... lords of the sea’ (2009, 83), Northmen who ‘would sail off the lip of the world for a fistful of silver’ (2009, 51) and to whom ‘the sea was a rolling road to wherever they pleased. It was unbound and unfettered, endless’ (170). A sense of vast space and distance is embodied in these quotations. The image of sailing off the edge of the world performs the function of a long ‘zoom out’ of the narrative frame. The characters have almost unlimited scope to do what they will, a scope echoed by the triptych of words that are formed in opposition to strictures: *unbound*, *unfettered*, *endless*. These are men without limits, who grow uneasy if kept away from their ships for too long (175, 182, 313), and uneasy still at the thought of dying in a forest a short walk from home, ‘not on the whale’s road but the wound sea’ (2014, 109). These seafarers are defined in terms of their lack of limits and, by inference, borders.

This last example reflects a shift in perception of what it means to be a Northman; that is, a seafarer who places great value on travelling beyond the confines of home without expecting to return, despite the blood feud obligations awaiting him there. To die in a local Norwegian forest suggests that the protagonist Sigurd’s life has been landlocked, sheltered; that he lacks sufficient wanderlust; that he hasn’t left the fjordlands and become ‘someone who gets off his arse and see[s] the world’ (Kristian 2017, 228), despite the risks involved. After Sigurd’s Wolfpack survives a terrible storm at sea, a young Norseman is inspired to sing a rendition of *The Seafarer*, an Old English poem recorded in the Exeter Book, a codex of Anglo-Saxon poetry compiled in the mid- to late-tenth century (c.950-990) that Kristian adapts to his story. The date of this poem’s composition is uncertain; its Christian themes place it somewhere after the seventh century (when the Anglo-Saxons were being converted) and its inclusion in the Exeter Book marks the latest date it could have been written, but at what point in the intervening centuries *The Seafarer* came to be is a matter of debate (Orton 1991, 37). Usually categorised as an elegy, it presents the story of a sailor beset by hardships as he travels alone *on hwælweg* (on the whale-road/the sea) as a means of exploring ideas of physical, social and spiritual exile. Simultaneously, this poem both rhapsodies the potential of the sea for adventure (*monað modes lust mæla gehwylce / ferð to feran, þæt Ic feor heonan / elþeodigra eard gesece*: the desire of my heart urges all the while / my spirit to travel, that I far hence / seek the homelands of foreign folk; lines 36-39, our translation) and

laments the inevitable ‘*merewerges mod*’ (sea-weary spirit; line 12, our translation). Although he is conflicted — the Old English seafarer is literally and figuratively an outsider, the sea a vehicle for separating him from the kin in his homeland who will never undertake, much less understand the reasons for taking, a journey like his — it is increasingly evident that he has hope that this wilful exile, this *peregrinatio pro amore dei* (pilgrimage for the love of God), will pay off in the end. Much better are the eternal joys of the Lord, the seafarer explains, than ‘*þis deade lif*’ (‘this dead life’; line 65b) here on earth. Though lacking the Christian message of *The Seafarer*, Kristian’s portrayal of Northmen in fiction reflects the Old English narrator’s internal conflict and the poem’s pervasive tone of uncertainty; these seafarers set out willingly, but without knowing if they will ever return.

It is certainly not unusual for authors of Viking Age novels to recycle early medieval poetry and to integrate excerpts, settings, themes and even characters from these classics into their own narratives. *Beowulf*, for example, is a perennial touchstone for Bernard Cornwell and Giles Kristian, and in his *Last Kingdom* series Cornwell has also adopted the enigmatic refrain from the Old English *The Wanderer* as his protagonist’s oft-repeated tagline: ‘*Wyrð bið ful aræd!*’ (usually translated as ‘Fate remains wholly inexorable,’ but Cornwell also substitutes ‘inescapable’ when it suits the narrative; 2007, 10). Such borrowings function as shortcuts. They quickly lead readers back to an imagined legendary past while sketching out the social and heroic ethos encapsulated in epics like *Beowulf*. Like *Beowulf* itself — an Old English poem that imagines early Scandinavian heroes and settings — these medieval borrowings offer evidence of authors viewing people and places of the past through the lens of the present, often (inescapably) conflating the two in their narratives.

Depictions of sorrowful, profoundly anxious travellers like the ones narrating *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer* are not what twenty-first century audiences typically associate with the axe-wielding, longship-sailing, Valhalla-or-bust Northmen often found in modern popular depictions of the ‘Horny Vikings’ variety. Even so, the inclusion of several (slightly altered) passages from *The Seafarer* in *Blood Eye* (2009), the first book of Giles Kristian’s two Viking Age trilogies, and indeed Uhtred’s constant reminder that ‘*Wyrð bið ful aræd!*’ (fate is wholly inexorable) sets a more elegiac tone in these narratives than what might be expected from action-adventure stories about Northmen. More than merely depicting the Northman as a figure who ‘has no fear of death if he holds a sword’ (Kristian 2009, 125) and whose countrymen are ‘cautious creatures on land, as though they had stowed their confidence aboard their longships’ (182), these stories depict warriors in more complicated and emotionally conflicted ways. For instance, upon hearing the first few verses of *The Seafarer* Raven observes, ‘The men were smiling and nodding in appreciation. They all knew the sea and knew that she would sometimes swallow even great men. But the sea was their domain, too, and they loved her’ (74). That blurring of difference

(the civilized reader and the barbaric Viking) is attached to the blurring of literary difference (Old English and Old Norse). Vikings are both us and them, both South and North, both fearless and fearful.

Such passages certainly reflect the notion that Northmen were preoccupied with and identified by ships, sailing, voyages abroad ‘and the military and social ethos which lay behind or even which resulted from these activities’ (Jesch 2001, 6). But even as these novels portray traversing space and borders as a central part of a Northman’s life and identity, it is also repeatedly shown to cause these men grief, much as it does for the Old English seafarer. In Old English elegies, as in these novels, the sea offers an opportunity for new experiences — but often at the cost of being with kin, at home. In *The Pale Horseman* Uhtred declares, ‘until I reached Bebbanburg [his ancestral home] I would be a wanderer’ (Cornwell 2005, 314) and in *Sword Song*, when he temporarily finds himself ‘where the Temes flowed towards Lundene and the sea,’ Uhtred describes himself as ‘an *exile* and a warrior’ (2007, 24; emphasis ours). Similarly, although the Northmen in Kristian’s series believe ‘their kinfolk would be proud to know they had journeyed so far and won so many hard fights’ (2011, 116) they frequently reflect on how far they have travelled from home (2017, 118, 126, 128), which often amounts to tallying how long they have been away; ‘We had come so far along the sea road that men began to say they could no longer remember the faces of their wives and children back home’ (2011, 439). A sense of weariness from being at sea is also displayed in small, but telling, observations. When the weather turned bad, men ‘talked of their kinfolk back home’ (2011, 125; 2010, 170), while ‘in far-flung lands, [they] observe even more fiercely the habits and customs of their home’ (2011, 174) and the further they sail, the more nostalgic their thoughts become; ‘Hedin Long Face said the place looked like Fensfjord, where most of the Fellowship came from, but Olaf barked that that was *hjem lengsel* — homesickness — talking... The sea here was not as clear or deep, the land not as high, and the air not as sweet as a Norwegian fjord’ (2010, 132). Homesickness here is defined by an idealised contrast of sensory ideas: visual scale and olfactory pureness. But this idealised contrast may be imaginary, since some of the men are not sure if their memories of home are accurate, allowing the possibility that the North as an ideal may be partially created from the desiring imagination as much as from objective fact. This dynamic shares a similar logic to the contemporary West’s cultural imaginings of the Vikings themselves.

Throughout these series, there is a subtle shift in the way warriors like Raven, Sigurd and Sigurd’s warband are portrayed, a shift that is also evident in the characterisation of Uhtred in Cornwell’s *Last Kingdom* series, which sheds some light on new ways ‘Northmen’ are reimagined in twenty-first century popular fiction. In these books, Northmen are not homogenous crews of fame-seeking, fearless berserkers who point the fierce dragon-prows of their longships West, intent only on increasing their fame and their hoards before returning,



holds full of plunder, to generic, snow-covered Nordic lands — lands, to borrow Robert Macfarlane's phrase, 'where wildness survived' (2007, 7). At least, they are not *only* that. Cornwell tends to embrace the notion that 'to be a Viking was to be a raider' (2004, 101) who rapes and pillages (119, 125-126, 143, 226) and who should aim to 'start [his] killers young, before their consciences are grown' (103), but Kristian in particular softens these stereotypes. Though his Northmen are 'gods of war' who certainly slay on the battlefield, they otherwise tend to keep potentially harmful blades — those made of flesh — sheathed.

This self-control supports Erika Ruth Sigurdson's argument that rape is 'not an integral aspect of Viking masculinity [in modern popular fiction]. On the contrary... the hero's masculinity was defined instead by his sexual restraint, and his ability to love a worthy woman and look for her love in return' (Sigurdson 2014, 262). Even in romance fiction, where 'essentialised sexual difference is a key pleasure' (Wilkins 2016, 6), Viking lovers contemplate forced sex but do not carry it out; although, as Wilkins goes on to write, sometimes their actions 'at the very least redefine widely held notions of what constitutes appropriate consent' (9). Restraint in these novels is a way of showing the presence of love (7), and both Sigurd and Raven clearly follow this trend. Kristian's protagonists both fall hopelessly in love with the only woman in their crews; after many chapters yearning for these women, both men spend one night finally (and secretly) having sex with the objects of their desires (although one of Kristian's female characters is a shieldmaiden and the other a powerful witch-warrior-princess, these women nevertheless function primarily as love-objects for the heroes) and neither Sigurd nor Raven ever repeat this act. These are men whose love is perpetually fixed on one woman, and in both cases circumstances conspire to prevent the couples being together for long.

There is one instance of rape in *Blood Eye*, the first of Kristian's books, and modern sensibilities and discomfort with this situation are evident in Raven's internal monologue. After winning a fight against the Welsh, Raven's crew decides to present him with a Welsh lass to be his 'pillow for the night' (2009, 347). Still a rookie in this crew, Raven is afraid of disappointing his companions, so he accepts the gift without a word. Even though the girl fights it, Raven goes through with the act — but not without great inner turmoil; 'I felt filthy to the soul, far worse than the lowest beast. And yet the self-disgust, the shame that burned in my heart, did not make me stop... When I had finished... loathing pulled at my deepest being, dragged me down like some malevolent shadow spirit from Satan's pit' (348). The language here is unequivocally condemnatory: 'filthy', 'lowest beast', 'disgust', 'shame', 'loathing', 'dragged me down'. These words, gathered in a close knot and focalised by the character's viewpoint, have a visceral impact, enacting their judgement of rape. It is possible to interpret Raven's self-reflexive shame as a product of his Christian upbringing in England (he cites Satan, after all). However, it is more convincing to view it as a sign of the twenty-first century historical fiction writer's conception of the

Northman as someone with a complex and emotional inner world, and a sense of masculinity that does not rely on casual rape. The line between heathen and Christian, Northman and Englishman, is as porous as the line between past morals and present morals. This notion is further demonstrated in the remaining two books of the *Raven* series, and all six of the *Sigurd* books. By far the most impressive, successful and masculine warrior of all Kristian's characters, Sigurd remains a bachelor throughout his adventures, never condescending to dally with whores at taverns the way his men sometimes do, much less commit rape during or after raids. These are heroes not for a Viking age, but for a contemporary Western age.

In many ways, Kristian's heroes behave as readers might expect Vikings to. They are seafarers who go on raids, who seek vengeance and adventure while travelling to far-off lands. Yet these characters are also more than that. They are men from the wild north who have melancholic feelings that readers can sympathise with and understand. Even as the tyranny of time might serve to alienate these Northmen from today's readers, their updated (and often admirable) morals and inner conflicts serve to draw them closer to 'us'. At points like these, the work of the historical fiction genre in recouping and re-presenting the past for the present becomes more readily visible.

Historical fiction allows readers to experience the drama and radical difference of history from the inside, softening the alterity between 'us' in the present and 'them' in the past — a division that has been present in historical and fictional writings about the Northmen for centuries. The early Anglo-Saxon letters cited in this paper both view and write about Northmen from an outsider's perspective, an us/them dichotomy that is delineated by faith (the Northmen are 'heathens') and/or territory (who come from 'Northern countries'). Whether it appears in its Latin form (*Northmanni*) or its Old Norse equivalent (*Norðmenn*), the term 'Northmen' has been consistently used as an Othering device in medieval sources, intended to distinguish the authors' peoples from those who winter elsewhere. (The term *austmaðr* (pl. *austmenn*), 'Eastman' or 'Easterner', is more generally used in Icelandic sources to describe the 'Northmen' referred to in this discussion, particularly the Norwegians, because, geographically-speaking, Norwegians are more eastern (and southern) than northern when viewed from an Icelandic perspective). Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* (c.1068-75), for example, identifies the Danes and 'the other peoples who live beyond Denmark' as Northmen (I, 16:20). In Norwegian texts written in Latin — the anonymous *Historia Norwegiae* (before c.1330), Theodoricus Monachus' *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium* (c.1177-1187) — and the anonymous *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum* (c.1190) — phrases such as 'our people' (Latin, *gentis nostrae*; ON, *frænda* and *menn*), 'the whole country' (Latin, *tota patria/toti patriae* or 'whole population' *totius populi*; ON, *landit í öllum*) and 'our country' (employed as in 'our peoples', *nostrum gentum*; ON, *landsfólk*) suggest an awareness of belonging to an imagined community based

on shared territory, and does not include the term 'Northman'. However, in his analysis of the early medieval traveller and chronicler Ohthere's journey (as recorded in the *Old English Orosius*; attributed to King Alfred), Shane McLeod argues that 'Northmen' (OE *Norðmonna*) relates to the supra-regional area in which Ohthere situates Hålogaland, the district-area where he lives 'at the northern end of a larger territory that he knew of as Northway [*Norðweg* = Northway/Norway], which probably included all of the land along the "north way" sailing route to Kaupang' (2008, 5-6). In this case, Ohthere may in fact be employing the term as a means of identifying himself with the group of Scandinavians who inhabited the 'north way' sailing route, including the Norwegians (6-7). Meanwhile, in the twelfth-century Icelandic law code *Grágás*, 'a distinction is made between the inhabitants of Iceland and foreigners. In the terminology of the law, foreigners were *útlendir menn* ('out-landers')... The out-landers included the inhabitants of the [Icelanders'] countries of origin – that are Norwegians, Danes and Swedes (*Grágás* Ia: 172; II: 338; and III: 448), who were in other contexts set apart from the rest of the world' (Hastrup 1990, 85-86).

However, in Kristian's and Cornwell's novels, early medieval sources like these are remembered, reinterpreted and reused in ways that perpetuate, dramatise and complicate the perception of Northmen as Other. The boundary between 'us' and 'them' is blurred in these books by the fact that both the protagonists (Raven and Uhtred) are at first abducted by, and then assimilated into, crews of Northmen (them) from England (us, from where most of our cultural conceptions about Northmen arise). In *Blood Eye*, young Osric witnesses the frightening arrival of Sigurd's 'wolves' in the village of Abbotsend in England; 'These outlanders leaping from their dragons were armed and fierce. They were warriors' (2009, 16). Like Kristian's Northmen, Cornwell's are initially described by outsiders in a passage that echoes the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entry cited above. First, Uhtred's father calls them his 'old enemy' and,

they came, he said, from northern lands where ice and mist prevailed, they worshipped the old gods, the same ones we had worshipped before the light of Christ came to bless us, and when they had first come to Northumbria... fiery dragons had whipped across the northern sky, great bolts of lightning had scarred the hills and the sea had been churned by whirlwinds (2004, 9).

In these scenes, the Northmen fulfil their much-practised role as the Other.

However, long before Jarl Sigurd renames Osric 'Raven' — indeed, almost immediately upon seeing the Northmen for the first time — the boy quite literally begins the process of understanding them. 'The outlanders' sharp language began to change, seemed to melt, the percussive clipped grunts becoming a stream of sounds that were somehow familiar' (2009, 16). Throughout the series, Raven mimics the Northmen's language and behaviour, 'repeating them until... I understood them', and in so doing, eventually forgets he was ever an

Englishman. Though Cornwell's *Last Kingdom* is set in 866 — around 100 years after Osric's/Raven's story took place — the circumstances are similar. Osbert (soon renamed Uhtred) is taken from his homeland in Northumbria by Vikings and very quickly assimilates. Likewise, Uhtred soon embraces paganism over Christianity and revels in the 'fury of the Northmen' (2004, 144) and prides himself on being a warrior (103-104, 198). Despite their origins, both protagonists soon identify as Northmen. As Sarah L Higley points out,

Identity implies similitude and recognition — what is *idem*, 'like'. It covers everything from that which keeps a culture or a nation together to that which keeps the human body intact. Being able to identify what fits into the pack and what does not has always been essential to both animal and human societies (2005, 340).

In Raven's case, this pack mentality is made manifest as he becomes one of Jarl Sigurd's 'Wolfpack,' and their collective identity is further symbolised by the wolf tattoos they all get, which they see as, "Something that reminds us who we are. . . And what we are. We travel so far from home, I don't want to forget" (Kristian 2010, 265).

While Uhtred is characterised as the more vicious of the two protagonists, he is nevertheless more uncertain and confused about his positioning as a Northman, declaring, "I'm a Dane," I said and, at that moment I meant it' (Cornwell 2004, 75). Yet at other times, "I was sure I was a Northumbrian, a secret *scea-dugengan* hidden among the Danes, and in truth I was confused" (76) and "Of course I was confused" (95-96). In *The Pale Horseman*, he explains, 'I had learned [the Danes'] language and worshipped their gods until I no longer knew whether I was Danish or English' (2005, 18) and yet "I'm a Northumbrian!" And that was part of the problem. I was an outsider' (33) and even still, "I'm a Saxon," I said again, sounding more certain than I felt' (168). This uncertainty continues throughout the ten-book series. Benedict Anderson (1983) and Michael Hechter (2000) have argued that 'imagined communities' — which includes groups of genetically unrelated people like large crews of Northmen — are intangible, existing largely in the psychological bonds that connect their members. Uhtred's wavering self-definition reflects the general lack of clarity surrounding what qualities define a Northman. Indeed, in all three series, the definition of a Northman is as unclear as it is in the medieval sources cited above. "I'd sooner trust a Dane," says Floki in *Blood Eye*, to which Raven replies, "The English think you *are* Danes... They think all heathens are Danes" (2009, 168). In *The Last Kingdom*, Ragnar explains that it is not where a man comes from but where he goes that makes him a Northman; "The Svear, the Norse and the Danes were the Northmen, the men who went on Viking expeditions" (2004, 55), a point echoed in Kristian's *Odin's Wolves*: 'All must at some point have reflected on what a strange company we were nowadays. Norsemen, Englishmen, Danes, Greeks, a woman, a monk, a blauman, an emperor and a wolf, all sharing labor (*sic*), food and drink, and the rolling sea road

and all destined for the Great City, Miklagard' (314). This equivocation reflects the difficulty of maintaining hard boundaries between nationalities and, by extension, the boundaries between present and past.

In popular fiction, there is 'no longer any connection necessary between the signifier and a specific historical, geographical or cultural reality. Vikings do not come from anywhere' (Sundmark 2014, 209). Perhaps it is difficult to define Northmen because in both historical and fictional sources they are conceptualised as miscellaneous 'strange companies' that 'come from all over' (Cornwell 2007, 28) — bands of men and (sometimes) women who share gods and goals more than homelands. Nevertheless, despite their countries of origin, there remains a sense of displacement, an awareness of otherness and of not being 'at home' that colours depictions of Northmen in Kristian's and Cornwell's works. These texts seem to take pleasure in upsetting the received binaries of popular understanding around Northmen, to draw their characters with more nuance and depth, but also to show readers that differences between people of the past and people of the present are perhaps not as stark as imagined.

'History is other,' argues Jerome de Groot, 'and the present familiar... The historical novelist similarly explores the dissonance and displacement between then and now, making the past recognisable but simultaneously authentically unfamiliar' (de Groot 2010, 3). In fiction, views of the Northmen shift from the foreign to the familiar, from 'them' to 'us' and back again as Raven and Uhtred travel further away from their homes. Whereas in earlier Viking Age novels, such as Frans G. Bengtsson's classic *The Long Ships* (1954), 'The titular hero always comes back home after his travels' (Sundmark 2014, 203), in these more recent works Northmen can be seen as itinerant figures, symbols of displacement. Home, for these Northmen, becomes increasingly imaginary. It is a concept used to motivate or threaten, not a destination to which they can hope to return. Mantel argues that readers of historical fiction 'actively request... a subjective interpretation' of historical facts, and so the writer must 'recreate the texture of lived experience', 'activate the senses' and 'deepen the reader's engagement through feeling' (2017), as Cornwell and Kristian do through a series of deeply melancholic descriptions of homesickness.

As Sigurd's Wolfpack faces yet another battle 'he called the names of men's wives and women back home in Norway, rousing them to greater feats for their sakes' (2004, 361) but after all the feuding and strife in his early life, Sigurd also knows none of the men from Skudeneshavn (their home village on the island of Karmøy, Norway) can ever go back there: 'That thread of their lives had been cut, though no one spoke of it, each chasing fleeting memories amidst a dizzying swirl of them... For those men knew they could never hold their wives and comfort their children, not without putting those loved ones' lives at risk' (2014, 345). Raven, recently adopted into the Northman's way of life, is twice removed from home; he listens silently as his crewmates 'talked of their kinfolk

back home... for I had no kinfolk to talk of' (2010, 170). As much as his fellow warriors, Raven yearns to see Norway, though for him it will be a first. Murkiness surrounds Raven's past in all three books; he was raised in England but not born there, and he is convinced that 'eventually [he] would set foot on the rocks these Norsemen talked of so fondly, and [he] truly believed that when [he] did, the fog in [his] mind would clear and [he] would remember... [He] would know that the fjordlands were [his] home' (328). This quotation shows that home, even when deeply longed for, may be an imaginary place. Homesickness and nostalgia are revealed to be largely formed out of the imagination. Raven's melancholy yearning for his Viking home echoes our strong affective relationship with the medieval past. It is at least partly a past that is imagined in the present.

Unfortunately for this type of Northman, settling down is impossible (Cornwell 2004, 71, 74) and going home early from overseas voyages shows that he has lost the trust of his companions (99); he has not yet achieved enough fame or wealth to contemplate 'the day when he would sail back to Norway' (Kristian 2016, 422), or he has not yet had his fill of sightseeing: 'No one talked of going home, for we were caught up in the excited wonder of Miklagard like a dog chasing its own tail' (2011, 442). Even at an early stage in Sigurd's life, when he and his men have not yet travelled beyond Scandinavia — they sojourn in Denmark and in the land of the Svear-Spear (Sweden) for a time — there is a notable emphasis on the Wolfpack being heavy-hearted so 'far from home' (2014, 345; 2016, 216; 2017, 118, 126, 128). In the same moment as Cornwell and Kristian invoke the narratively interesting adventures of the sea, they shade it with an elegiac mood, adding depth to the characters and drawing them empathetically closer to the reader.

Sundmark argues 'it is far easier to idealise a Viking who stays in his home country rather than one who is essentially an invading enemy' (2014, 205), but from the perspective of two writers of genre fiction, it is far easier to make a Viking interesting and dynamic if he leaves home. Vikings have become a by-word for conflict in popular culture, and popular fiction has particularly enjoyed this hyper-masculine, mediievally irrational figure across a number of genres. Kristian and Cornwell, both historical fiction writers with an eye on the importance of research and realism, give us sea-going raiders and plunderers but humanise them by denying them a promise of return, taking them out of the North and yet always allowing them to be defined by the lands they have left behind. They are recast as travellers, sympathetic characters struck by wanderlust, compelled to go forward even though they are wistful for friends and family back home. These Northmen are 'fellowships of warriors, bound by honor (*sic*) and wanderlust, [that] would reach as far as Newfoundland and Baghdad, the sword-song of their battles ringing out in Africa and the Arctic. They [are] nobles and outcasts, pirates, pioneers and great seafarers' (Kristian 2014, x). The melancholic Viking responds to the needs of present-day popular historical fiction, to bring pleasure to reading audiences who prefer their pillaging with a

side of elegy and contemporary morality. This Northman, the ideal protagonist for the high conflicts and realistic characterisation of popular historical fiction, is both of the Viking Age and of the desiring imagination of the present.

### Works cited

- Abrams, Christopher, 'Review of Matthew Arnold's *The Vikings*', *Saga Book*, 31 (2007): 89-91.
- Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*. Francis J. Tschan (trans) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983).
- Anderson, Poul, *Hrolf Kraki's Saga* (New York: Ballantine, 1973).
- Cornwell, Bernard, *The Last Kingdom* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004).
- Cornwell, Bernard *The Pale Horseman* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).
- Cornwell, Bernard *Lords of the North* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).
- Cornwell, Bernard, *Sword Song* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).
- De Groot, Jerome, *The Historical Novel* (London: Routledge, 2010).
- Driscoll, M. J. (trans. and ed), *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum, The Twelfth-Century Synoptic History of the Kings of Norway* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2008).
- Fletcher, Lisa, Beth Driscoll and Kim Wilkins, 'The Genre World of Romance', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 51.4 (2018): 997-1015.
- Hastrup, Kirsten, *Island of Anthropology: Studies in past and present Iceland* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1990).
- Hechter, Michael, *Containing Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- Higley, Sarah L, 'Finding the Man Under the Skin: Identity, Monstrosity, Expulsion, and the Werewolf', *The Shadow-Walkers: Jacob Grimm's Mythology of the Monstrous*, Tom Shippey (ed), (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2005), pp. 335-378.
- Jesch, Judith, *Ships and Men in the Late Viking Age: The Vocabulary of Runic Inscriptions and Skaldic Verse* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2001).
- Kristian, Giles, *Wings of the Storm* (London: Transworld Publishers, 2017).
- Kristian, Giles, *Winter's Fire* (London: Transworld Publishers, 2016).
- Kristian, Giles, *God of Vengeance* (London: Transworld Publishers, 2014).
- Kristian, Giles, *Odin's Wolves* (New York: Bantam Books, 2011).
- Kristian, Giles, *Sons of Thunder* (New York: Bantam Books, 2010).
- Kristian, Giles, *Blood Eye* (New York: Bantam Books, 2009).
- Kunin, Devra (trans) and Carl Phepstead (ed), *Historia Norwegiae & Passio et miracula beati Olavi / A History of Norway & The Passion and Miracles of the Blessed Óláfr* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2001).
- Linklater, Eric, *The Men of Ness* (Chipping Norton: Greensleeves Books, 1932).



- Lukács, György, *The Historical Novel*, Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (trans) (Brecon: Merlin Press, 1962).
- Macfarlane, Robert, *Wild Places* (London: Granta Books, 2007).
- McLeod, Shane, 'Know Thine Enemy: Scandinavian Identity in the Viking Age', *Vikings and Their Enemies*, Katrina Burge (ed), (London: Vikings Research Network, 2008), 3-16.
- Mantel, Hilary, *The BBC Reith Lectures*, transcript at [www.bbc.co.uk/radio4](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4), accessed 1 October 2017.
- Newman, Barbara, 'Of Burnable Books and Buried Giants', *Postmedieval*, 7.2 (2016), 328-335.
- Oliver, Neil, *Vikings: A History*, Kindle edition, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2012).
- Orton, Peter, 'The Form and Structure of *The Seafarer*', *Studia Neophilologica*, 63 (1991), 37-55.
- The Seafarer*, at [www.anglo-saxons.net](http://www.anglo-saxons.net), accessed 18 September 2017.
- Sigurdson, Erika Ruth, 'Violence and Historical Authenticity: Rape (and Pilgrimage) in Popular Viking Fiction', *Scandinavian Studies*, 86.3 (2014), 249-267.
- Stevenson, Joseph (trans), *The Historical Works of Simeon of Durham, The Church Historians of England*, vol. III, part II (London: Seeley's, 1855).
- Storm, Gustave, *Monumenta Historica Norvegiæ. Latinske Kildeskrifter til Norges Historie i Middelalderen, udgivne efter offentlig foranstaltning* (Kristania, 1880; facs. Aas & Wahl, 1973).
- Sundmark, Björn, 'Wayward Warriors: The Viking Motif in Swedish and English Children's Literature', *Children's Literature in Education*, 45 (2014), 197-210.
- Sutcliff, Rosemary, *Blood Feud* (London: The Bodley Head, 1976).
- Swanton, Michael (trans and ed), *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (London: Routledge, 1996).
- Theodoricus Monachus, *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium / An Account of the Ancient History of the Norwegian Kings*, David and Ian McDougall (trans) (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2006).
- Tvtropes*, 'Horny Vikings', <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/HornyVikings>, accessed 10 September 2018.
- Whistler, Charles Watts, *King Olaf's Kinsman* (Glasgow: Blackie & Son, 1896).
- Whitelock, Dorothy (ed), *English Historical Documents, Volume 1: c.500-1042* (London: Routledge, 1973).
- Wilkins, Kim, 'The Process of Genre: Authors, Readers, Institutions', *Text*, 9.2 (2005), [www.textjournal.com.au/oct05/wilkins.htm](http://www.textjournal.com.au/oct05/wilkins.htm), accessed 1 October 2017.
- Wilkins, Kim, 'Ravished by Vikings: the Premodern and the Paranormal in Viking Romance Fiction', *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, 5.1 (2016), <http://jprstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/RBVTPTPIVRF.07.2016.pdf>