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# A Draught of Fishes



I did not run away to sea. Had I done so it might have made a good opening for this book. But it did not cross my mind to do so. Yet even so the sea was my companion as I grew up: we lived in sound of it, on that flat Lancashire coast, and I, an only child, had the run of the beach in all weathers, collecting driftwood, setting nightlines, fishing. I knew the summer sea could swash against my legs as gently as a cat licking, and I knew that it was not ever to be trusted, for that same cat could have tigerish rages when the very pebbles of the storm beach were moved by the wind roaring in your ears and the tall grey waves were thunder as they broke on the shore. From the beach in clear weather I could see the hills of the Lake District. In winter Black Combe was sometimes capped in snow. We got very little snow in the Fylde: it was one of those depressing places where a child might see snow on the distant hills, but too rarely did it come down to us to fall soft into the edge of the tide. And I loved snow. I remember being taken by my father to see a film called *Scott of the Antarctic*, with John Mills as Scott. I would have been about seven, I suppose. I can still see the painted-on frostbite and hear Scott's noble words on the voice-over against the studio wind. It made a great impression – and Vaughan Williams' music, too, would not let me go. (I had then of course no idea who RVW was.) Later, a wise headmaster, whose own son

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Martin was at that very time in the Antarctic, gave me as a prize Apsley Cherry-Garrard's remarkable book, *The Worst Journey in the World*,<sup>2</sup> about Scott's expedition. I did not read it immediately – the title, the weight and thickness, and the pages unfamiliarly and puzzlingly uncut were hardly what would grab a thirteen year old. But when I did read it, the lure of the Poles came through again, and caught me, even despite the graphic accounts of the hardships polar travel can impose. For many boys of my generation, and class, in England, Scott was a model, and even a mere dusting of rare snow saw us out with our orange boxes playing at being Scott of the Antarctic.

Those two things, the sea and the top of the world, have been like leitmotifs in my life and thinking. For well over twenty years I could neither go to sea again nor take off to anywhere remote. But that period was rich in journeys and exploration of another sort, a trek deep into the stacks of libraries, and following trails to unexpected conclusions and enthusiasms. This Cambridgeshire house, the garden with the slow stream at the bottom where our ducks dabbled, the family growing up – those were all demands gladly met. But the determination and the longing to go North again, one day, never went quiet. And it has not done even now, when the sun is low in the west.

Beyond the windswept fields that started just beyond our house lay Fleetwood, at the end of the tramline that ran right along the Fylde coast. From our attic window you could look out over the Wyre Channel that led from Fleetwood's quays to the Lune Deeps, and see the big Isle of Man and Belfast ferries, and a few boats with general cargo, and the trawlers heading out to the grounds off Iceland, or the White Sea, or Rockall. I knew, even envied, boys whose fathers followed the sea, as Conrad put it. To look north was to waken longings and ideas so much more interesting than to look south, to the nightly glare of Blackpool, whither each morning the tram took me to the routine of school.

I always liked Fleetwood. Much later in life I came to be

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<sup>2</sup> Published by the author and distributed by Chatto and Windus, London 1922.

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interested in how Sir Peter Hesketh Fleetwood, who owned the land, in the 1830s had built it from scratch, expansively and expensively, at the mouth of the Wyre – which offers the only safe harbour on that tricky coast – on the lines of rabbit-infested dunes to seaward of the marsh his family had newly drained. He employed Decimus Burton, a pupil of the great Nash, to design the town, basing it on a series of wide avenues radiating from the greatest sand-dune, the Mount, whereon was set a gazebo and a beacon for the convenience of mariners seeking entry into the Wyre. Sir Peter had brought the railway from Preston to Fleetwood, and at Burton's beautiful station passengers could walk across the platform to board the steamers for Belfast and Douglas, and Ardrossan – for this was before the railway was built over Shap and later Beattock summits, and so travellers to Scotland had to go by sea. (Sir Peter, in fact, bankrupted himself.) Though when I was a boy Decimus Burton was an unknown name and an informed appreciation of architecture and town planning lay many years in the future, I knew I liked the spaciousness of Lord Street with the trams running down the middle, the graceful symmetry of the curving façade of the North Euston Hotel and the dignity of the terrace of Georgian houses by the elegant railway station. The short pier was long enough for you to be able to cast a line, even with my makeshift, homemade, fishing rod, into the Channel at high tide. (The pier had had to be short, compared to the Blackpool ones, so as not to be a hazard to ships working up the Channel.) The Marine Hall Gardens and the promenade running round to Rossall Point had a quietness Blackpool did not offer, and as you got near the point the blowing sand had built up dunes against the sea wall and sometimes the soft sand spilled over it. The grey green spikes of marram grass bent to the wind off the shore, and if you were lucky you could find sea holly in flower in season. Already I had come to like, love even, the in-between places, like sand dunes, and salt marsh, as later I came to love the detailed miniatures of tundra. And Fleetwood's Channel had those ships. To be sure, there were some of the usual seaside attractions, and none the worse for that. The pier had an amusement arcade. Boats were for hire on the

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Marine Lake, and the Sea Scouts also had an old Navy whaler on it in which one occasionally saw them rowing splashily about. Often, you would see the old bucket dredger *Grassendale* working up and down the channel of the Wyre, clearing the silt so that the bigger boats would have enough clearance to get in at any state of the tide. When I was very young, I loved being taken to see that boat, and hear across the water the clanking of the line of buckets as they rose out of the water and along the steeply angled track to spill their load into the hold. Sometimes, if she was working the steep-to channel by the ferry and the wind was right, you could catch her salty wet smell. Then, full of the silt the river had scoured out of the distant hills that saw its birth and from the clay plain it drained, she would puff off to dump her burden in the Lune Deeps. I so wanted to have a model of her if I could not have the real thing.

But things do change. I have not seen a dredger at work for years – though writing this is a sort of dredging, I suppose. Quite recently, on the sea front, just beyond where the ferry to Knott End used to leave every few minutes for the short trip across the Wyre, ‘They’ have been Artistic. The pavement, laid out broad by the builder of the port in the days of its prosperity for the promenading of people in elegant crinolines and decorous top hats, has had inserted into it a sinuous coloured path, with fishes picked out in a different hue, and the climax of the assembly is a rather poor bronze statue group of a slim girl in a skimpy dress and flipflops, with two obviously angelic children, waving out to sea to Daddy who is coming home from the fishing. Even the bronze dog is excited.

That statue sticks in my craw. I don’t remember things were like that at all. Trawlermen’s wives when I knew them were a tough lot – they had to be – who certainly did not wear skimpy dresses, and rarely went to see their men come home: they were working, and their hands were rough, and they had no way of knowing exactly when the men would be back. As for goodbyes, they were said the night before sailing. Far closer to the hard truth of their men’s most dangerous of callings is the World War II mine, painted red and white, which now stands a little further along the front, doing duty

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as a collection box for the RNLI. That bronze statue trivialises our debt to those who came before us, as does the turning of the now beached *Jacinta*, one of the last big trawlers, into part of the Heritage site near the Freeport Outlet Village and Leisure Centre. That complex has replaced the docks where once upon a time tall ships scribed their weather-stained yards against sky, bringing timber from Norway and America, and general cargo to trans-ship to Sir Peter's railway. Once upon a time coal-burning trawlers with their tall stacks and their mizzen sails smokily brought fish from Iceland, and from the yet colder seas of the further North, and their successors the diesel trawlers noisily unloaded their catch in the same spot. The quotidian heroism – yet they had little choice – of the ancestors who went down to the sea in ships deserves more honour from us than to be sentimentalised, theme-parked.



As a port Fleetwood had seen better days, even when I were a lad. Once it had handled cargo from all over the world. Ships were built there, and schooners of 400 tons or so used to be built up river at Wardley's Ferry in what is now a muddy creek. Socially, Fleetwood was substantially Catholic, and had close connections with Ireland because for a century it had been the ferry port for Belfast. In my youth black-gowned Sisters of Charity would often be seen in pairs walking down Lord Street with the wings of their huge starched white headdresses catching the wind. In the 1950s it had become a one-industry town: fishing, and everything that went with it – ship repairing, the chandlery that ships need, the making of ice, the marketing and dispatching of the catch. You could even say that Lofthouse's Fisherman's Friends, the best of cough drops and now marketed all over the world, were a spin-off from the fishing. I feed them to my pupils if they dare to cough.

The smell of fish dominated the town when the west wind dropped, and against the eastern sky the huge ice plant loomed, with its chutes roaring with ice as the boats were loaded. At this

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time, of course, there were no such things as refrigerated trawlers: you filled the hold with broken ice, which congealed into a small iceberg, and then broke up the mass as needed with picks and shovels to spread as needed on the layers of gutted fish. Most people in Fleetwood had some connection with the industry – even our cat came to us as a stray kitten from the docks. Everywhere you went were the reminders of the sea. In Pharos Street stood the tall Pharos (would anyone call a lighthouse that now?), with its lower light on the sea front, to guide ships up the difficult channel of the Wyre: you were in the safe water if from the helm you saw one above the other. Decimus Burton designed both. The gale-piercing manic laugh of herring gulls – the black-headed had not then become the commonest species – and the sombre seriousness of sirens as ships cast off were the sounds of the town. To hear those noises now, anywhere on the globe, sends my mind back involuntarily to memories made before I knew what memory was, to Fleetwood, to the salty smell of the beach and Channel at low water, to gulls sitting on the wind, keeping station with the most minuscule of muscle movement, heads ever alert for what might be edible. Those sounds resonate even further back, to the early memory of our first Christmas after Dad came home from the War, in rooms in Windsor Terrace by the sea: and Dad came in out of the December gale with a cock pheasant for our Christmas dinner. I stroked it, for I had never seen one before and I thought it was too beautiful to eat.

Dock Street began with the emphatic elegance of Burton's late Georgian terminus for the London, Midland and Scottish Railway – still to my mind one of the most beautiful of railway stations. It was demolished in the barbaric 1960s, of course. From its platform Queen Victoria used to take the ship to Ardrossan on her way to Balmoral. Outside, across the wide street, the regular rhythms of Burton's Queen's Terrace pleased even my very young and untutored eye. Thence you went past the Victorian Gothic extravaganza of the Central Library, to the collection of pubs and shipping offices built in hard red Accrington brick with sandstone quoins, which jostled at the entrance to the main docks. If the wind was blowing the smell

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of fish and kippering inland, the smell of tar and hemp filled the air, and through half-open green painted doors one glimpsed the women – trawlermen’s wives, many of them – walking ropes, or knitting nets with their deft needles. Their hands were almost permanently black with the tar off the twine. At the docks end of Dock Street were the shops of the chandlers, like Gourock Rope Company, or Great Grimsby Coal Salt and Tanning Co. I loved that shop and its smells, especially of Stockholm tar lapping round the clammy smell of oilskins. I loved the treasury of seaboots, and yellow oilskin sou’westers, and coils of grass-smelling rope. They sold everything you would need for the Atlantic winter, from woollen long johns outwards, and also the comfort of black shag and twist tobacco. Bits of gear a ship might need could be fetched from the cavernous warehouse at the back: brass navigation lights, shackles, eye-spliced wired rope, parallel rulers, dividers, compasses, patent logs – all the gear, tackle and trim that beautifully and economically fitted its purpose for men who had their business in great waters. Then there were the offices of the shipping agents and the trawler firms, Boston Deep Sea Fishing Company, J Marr and Sons... names now history, for real deep sea fishing from Fleetwood is dead. The railway ran down the river side of the road, and beyond it was a long quay where boats that could take the ground moored. Further down still, near Wyre Dock station, was the level crossing into the main docks, where lock gates held back the water in two basins as the ebb drank the estuary dry. Outside the basins, common or garden boats, not the aristocratic deep sea trawlers, slowly reclined on to their elbows, and woke up as the tide made again.

Mum had got to know several people in the fish trade. Our neighbour Mr Cavanagh – one of the two people on our road with a car, whose daughter Bernardette was (perhaps...) not realising she was beginning to feature considerably in my imagination – was a wholesale fish merchant. He, like others in his line, had an office over the level crossing inside the dock itself. I think it was he who must have been the means whereby Mum turned my silly suggestion, ‘I’d like to work on the trawlers’, a boy’s unconsidered impulse, into



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something definite. That suggestion had seemed a good idea at the time: I was very young. In the church choir we sang, in the cycle of psalms for the day, about going down to the sea in ships, and having business in great waters, and seeing the wonderful works of the Lord, and I remember, when I was very small, at Crosscrake where my Uncle Alec was then Vicar, crying because when we sang

‘Eternal Father strong to save

Whose arm doth bound the restless wave’

it seemed so beautiful. Of such potency can words and a minor key be. And in the anticipated glory of ‘going to sea’ I basked at school when it was months distant. It was what no-one at Arnold School had done before, and the Headmaster’s wife, who was important enough to have launched and named a trawler (the *St Bartholomew*, I think) was graciously complimentary. Then began the uneasiness as it drew closer, and then – well, one of my friends said, just at the end of term, ‘You can’t funk it, you know. It was your idea.’ Nor could Mum, as ever so afraid of over-protectiveness, funk it. For she and I both knew that at a word from her I would have gratefully turned back from that shore – and that that word must not be spoken.

I had to join ‘my’ ship, *Boston Seafoam*, FD42, at Wyre Dock, at 0630, for she would sail in the slack water at high tide, when the dock gates would be opened and the ebb would help her and the other ships down channel and on their way to the long swells of the Atlantic. The first tram used to go past at about 5.30 in the morning. The throaty hiss of the trolley on the wires, and the long *scrauch* of the wheels as they took the bend in the line that ran beyond the field from the back of the house sometimes used to wake me up. That July morning I caught that tram by the skin of my teeth: the goodbyes had been laconic, yet slow. I set off down the path in my gumboots, not daring to look back to where I knew Mum was watching, clutching Dad’s old Army grip (his Army number was inked on the canvas), wearing over my oldest clothes the Army greatcoat with which all Arnold School Combined Cadet Force cadets were issued. I was to sail as a half-deckie – that is, a trainee deckhand, or, in a bad ship, a dogsbody at whom everyone

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swore. *Seafoam*, diesel, up to the minute, all 160 feet and 398 tons of her, was owned by the Boston Deep Sea Fishing Company. Her skipper, Walter ‘Fly’ Holmes lived quite close to us in one of the big houses on West Drive that successful skippers liked – and could afford. We did not know him. He was a rich man, and had won his riches by both skill and luck. In 1932 he had taken the *Margaret Rose*, loaded with all the coal and ice and salt she could carry, in search of new fishing grounds, for the hake for which Fleetwood was famed, and which supplied most of the fish and chip shops of Northern England, were becoming scarce. He did not find that hake, but in grounds that no British vessel had fished before he found haddock in such quantity that the nets parted. And later, he had sailed out of Boulogne, and developed some of the Norwegian grounds. I had no idea, of course, that I was to sail with a man who was a legend, who never had any trouble getting the best of crews. For, indeed, there were some skippers, and not always unsuccessful ones, with whom men did not sail if they could avoid it.

I can’t now remember much of that morning, except the noise: the roaring cascade of ice from the overhead conveyor into the hold filling up the last crevices, the periodic and (to me) puzzling throwing of huge joints of meat into that iceberg growing in the dark, the last-minute loading of stores, and the clangour of a busy dock – at that time of high fish stocks and small boats, on a single tide six or seven ships might go out. And I remember the engines, those wafts of hot oil smell coming up from the open hatch, the throb that would not cease until again she docked at Fleetwood, a heartbeat on which our lives depended. The smell of a hot marine engine, even now, takes years off me, and I am again standing on the brink of that longest journey.

I did not know enough to ask questions about what I didn’t know and I think I must have got in everyone’s way. I look back on my younger self and am disconcerted by the naïveté I see, and (as far as I can remember) the lack of curiosity. The equipment, the paraphernalia, of trawling, which would so soon become utterly familiar, I don’t think I even noticed. As for the crew, I knew nobody:

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and in my sartorial inelegance was regarded with some (kindly) amusement by them, for they were all smart and Brylcreemed in their wide-trousered 'go ashores'. Yet they made me, the greenest of greenhorns, welcome. They knew what even a summer sea might do to me, as it had once done to them. I remember them so well even now: Aloysius from Belfast who called on the Blessed Virgin and the Saints so frequently that they could have had none of their eternal rest; George Nelson the mate who had just got his master's ticket and was hoping for a command of his own; Nat Lofthouse the cook, his dark narrow face split when he smiled by a cliff of dazzling teeth; Bert the Bo'sun, who wore women's stockings with the feet cut off round his wrists when we were working to save him from those troublesome saltwater sores – I owed them all a lot, for they could have made my life difficult. Instead, they gave me one of the lower berths, where the ship's motion would be slightly less. I did not realise then what that motion would do, I whose longest sea journey hitherto had been on the little steam ferry, the Wyresdale, across the estuary to Knott End (fare one penny, and a halfpenny for a bicycle).

Late July is a deceitful time in the West. The weather can change in hours from a luminous calm, when the gulls rest like halcyons upon the languor of the waters, to a furious gale, heralded by the ragged edges of cirrus high in a whitening sky. By the time we were well out beyond Wyre Light, the calm of that bright morning was noticeably less. A little wind from the southwest was picking up, and the swells, still smooth, were restlessly stroking *Seafoam's* low waist. By late afternoon it was what I called 'a gale': nothing to bother the ship, of course, but lots, very soon, to bother an uncomprehending me.

I wanted to die: a cliché, but utterly, totally true: anything to stop feeling. Leaning over the rail had become too hazardous, so I had been parked in the heads, on my knees, where the bowl of the lavatory became the comfort and centre of my existence. The next day or so is no memory – or, rather, memory of nothing. Somehow I was in that lower bunk, and dimly aware of Nat Lofthouse the cook occasionally in his bunk above me. It must have been some twenty

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hours after that first devastating attack when, beginning to feel better, I ventured onto the dark deck to see all round us the urgent luminous wakes of warships unlit against the moon: the Home Fleet on exercise in the Minch. But what once might have stirred excitement simply stirred the stomach, and back below I went for a further spell of oblivion.

It was when we were well out into the North Atlantic – as I later knew – that Nat shook me by the shoulder and made me get out of that bunk. He was the cook, and a good cook too. He made me go to the galley: the black range, with its fiddles to stop the pans sliding off, was cold, for it was mid-afternoon. What was left of the breast of lamb stew that had been dinner for the crew was white and congealed in the pan. He ladled me out a basin full, with cold boiled potatoes. The white fat stuck to the ladle. Everything about me heaved. ‘Eat it.’ Uh uh. ‘Eat it, I said.’ And, being an obedient boy, I dug a spoon into the stiff mess and put it to my lips. The grease coated them, it clagged round my teeth, but suddenly the taste was good, very good, and I began to eat ravenously. I had another helping. ‘Now you’ll never be sick at sea again’. And, so far, Nat has been right. I know not what happened to him. He always hoped he would win a fortune on the horses, and leave the sea, and keep a pub. Nat’s passion for horseracing must be at last quiet. On him be peace.

And after that strange meal (one of the most memorable, and frankly, one of the best, of my life) it was like being reborn. I went on deck: there was no land to be seen, only long regular easy swells of bright water to which *Seafoam* curtseyed before sweeping over them, flouncing her tight little stern. The fulmars – ‘mollies’, birds fishermen loved, birds I had never seen before – followed astern on their stiff wings with their preoccupied gaze, and sunlight fractured in the spray from the bows. Sheer delight simply to be alive again: resurrection must be something like that feeling. We may find out.

I had no idea where we were. Nor, I suspect, did many of the crew, for a skipper’s favoured fishing marks were something he kept a close secret, for on the success of each and every voyage depended

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not only his income but his chance of keeping his place as skipper. I should explain. The boat was owned by the company, but the pay of the men aboard depended utterly on the success or otherwise of the skipper in finding fish, and bringing them to market at the time when the price was right. So, from the skipper down to the half-deckie, everyone's pay at the end of the trip was a percentage of the price the catch fetched. But at the time, feeling well again, I troubled my head not at all about that. It was enough to be out on water of a clarity far beyond the imagination of someone who had been brought up beside the sand-cloudy tides of the flat Lancashire coast.

Probably, the 'storm' that had laid me low was no more than a force five or six, and after it we had a spell of settled, bright weather for the trip to the first ground (the St Kilda Bank, as I later found out) for hake. After all, when we saw the islands there was no secret about where we were. The next morning's dawn came up behind a distant Boreray, with its dizzying cliffs covered with gannets, now in full breeding season. Now work began, and I had to learn it if I was not to be a danger to myself and to the others. A ship that is not fishing is not earning: and so once on the ground, the trawl was shot every four hours whatever the weather, time, or inclination of the crew, and hauled up some four hours later to spew its load, large or small, into the fish pounds on the open waist of the ship. And before it comes up again, that lot has got to be gutted, sorted, stowed below. If you have time to straighten up before the next haul, you know your pay will be less; but if you are earning as you wish, the work is unremitting, and hands, even in gloves, become swollen, covered with little cuts and sores, which the salt water bloats and stings. If she rolls too much, you fall over in the slippery mess of blood and guts, which by the end of a haul is probably knee deep. I did. And everyone laughed: it had happened to them once. 'She's baptised you!' I had to be hosed down with the donkey afterwards. And my gumboots were thrown overboard, to be replaced with an old pair of thigh boots of George Nelson's.

The principle of the side trawler was ingenious. The roughly conical net had a footrope on which a number of steel balls ('Dan

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Lenos': why, I asked, were they called after a Victorian comic? Nobody could tell me: they just were) could revolve as they rolled over the sea floor, while the head rope had floats to help it keep up. The floor of the net was protected to some degree against damage from snags on the seabed by a line of raw cowhides along the footrope. (Nothing protected the seabed vegetation from the damage that the trawl did, but the consequences of that destruction were not to be noticed for decades yet.) The apex of the cone, the cod end, was whither all the fish were funnelled, and on the security of the knot with which it was closed the whole operation depended. Only one man, the bo'sun, tied that knot, and only he undid it, standing right under the suspended tons of fish when the full net was hoisted inboard by the derrick.

But the cod end was no good without the real business done by the two otter boards: huge heavy steel and wood doors, one at each side of the open mouth of the net. (They are called otter boards, so I am told, because they were first used in 1894 on the Scottish trawler *Otter*, out of Peterhead.) To them were attached, by massive angled brackets, the two wire warps from the winches just forr'ard the wheelhouse. The boat, hove to for the haul, had the net more or less floating on the water, and the otters hauled up tight against their gantries just aft of the foc's'le and just forr'ard of the little poop. But as soon as they were lowered into the water, and the winch began to run, the ship got way on her, and the two otters began their work of taking the net down to the bottom and holding its jaws open, each veering off in different directions. As they dragged along the bottom, they ploughed the sediments and plants, and created a cloud in the water that frightened the fish into the jaws of the trailing net. A boat that is trawling has to keep moving, or the net collapses, and, with that enormous drag on one side of the boat, 35 degrees of opposite helm was not too much. *Seafoam*, like most boats, had two nets rigged, one on each side, and used the lee one, for it's easier to haul inboard the footrope of the net with your back to the weather. And the nets got damaged, of course. Once the starboard net came in with all its bottom ripped out. The men said it was a snag on the bottom: but

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in later years it became clear that occasionally submarines would tangle, sometimes fatally, with a trawler's nets. Whatever the cause, the mad work began of weaving a repair into it as fast as possible. The bo'sun's deft hands, with their cuffs of nylon stockings, knitted in the tarred hemp that I was loading on to netting needles as fast as my own sore hands would work.

I kept a sort of diary, in one of those little blue notebooks we used to use at school for French vocab. I found it again after something of a search the other day, forgotten in the inner drawer of my great-grandfather's writing slope, on which he used to write his sermons. I must have put it there soon after I came back, and I cannot have looked at it for fifty years. I am not proud of it: its script is immature, all flashy swashes, and it does not read well. It says nothing about feelings or impressions. It tells me laconically about the weather, which seems to have been fairly awful for much of the time, and it's scrappy, progressively less detailed, showing all the signs of a mind not awake, not up to – not able to conceptualise? – the experience it was having. It does not quite say the equivalent of 'hoping this finds you as it leaves me, in the pink' like those heartbreaking letters home from the mud and squalor of the Front, but... (When my son Justin went to Svalbard years later – but he was only a little older than I had been – his diary was almost publishable. I hope it is a question of upbringing...) The entries become the more banal the further you read, until the account of my next trip, on *Fleetwood Lady*, FD1, merely records details of weather and where I thought I was and what I had for dinner and listening to Radio Luxembourg in the wheelhouse – how that dates me! – and what time I turned in... It's not the use to me as I write this that such things are conventionally supposed to be. But, oddly, and I do not know how, as I think about that time and write, the gaps between the banalities seem to fill themselves up, with memories I did not know I had, as fresh as spray on your face on a bright morning when the world was young. But one entry in particular remains mysterious, and I can draw up nothing to the surface: 'Wednesday. In search for plane'.

Bright morning... I came up the companion into the sunlight

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on deck, the sun still low in the north-northeast. A fair west wind chivvied the waves into occasional foam, which spread white lace over their troughs. The trawl was down on the starboard side. I walked forr'ard to her waist, making my way to her fo'c'sle, because I had come to love leaning over the stem and watching the occasional pod of porpoises surfing on the bow wave. As I came round the wheelhouse the wind roughly nudged me, and I looked to windward, to port, and there, low on the horizon, was a gleam of white catching the sun. Not at all slowly, she got closer, and there was a sight I shall never see again and which not many of my generation ever saw: a four-masted barque foaming along under full sail, a bone in her teeth, with royals and topgallants set, and all her sails gleaming in the early sun. It was the *Pamir*, of a famous family, the Flying P-Line (*Passat, Pommern, Preussen, Potosi, Padua...*). She was the last big ship to round the Horn under sail (in 1949). She was on one of the last voyages she ever made. For she was lost with almost all hands the next year, off the Azores. Only when you have seen such a vessel under sail do you realise the truth of that remark that sailing ships, in their final maturity two hundred years ago, were one of mankind's most extraordinary technological achievements.

And another morning sticks out, a morning when the rain cleared and the sun made rainbows in the spray the bows threw up each time they ducked a wave. We were heading easterly, and over *Seafoam's* bow as it dipped and rose I kept glimpsing what seemed to be snow. It was a quiet time, just then, so I went forr'ard and up on to the fo'c'sle: one of my favourite spots when I had leisure. The easterly wind in my face was suddenly strong. But unusually for an easterly, it seemed a good-tempered wind, almost playful, not dour and mean like most of them. There ahead of me was my snow: a peak of old rock rising from the water, iced with the guano of innumerable birds since ever time was when the birds first came north to the unfrozen seas. Sula Sgeir: the men called it 'sulaseeger' or 'sulisker'. It means 'gannet skerry' in the Gaelic. I was not the only one enjoying it: the man at the helm – to my shame his name has gone – who had a good view, said later that he loved that sight



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on a summer morning, that the place always brought good luck. And he told me about its neighbour, North Rona, eleven or so miles to the east, where there was green land enough to raise a family, and where once there had been crofts – until one winter the people all starved when rats got ashore from a wreck and ate everything they had. Did we have rats on *Seafoam*? I don't know. I never saw one. But I do remember the black conical shields that were strung on the warps when she was moored, to stop them climbing aboard by that route.

Bits of proper equipment had by this time been found for me, by the kindness of the crew. I had brought with me my father's old yellow oilskin sou'wester, sticky with age. An old pale blue PVC gutting smock, stiff as armour – I had forgotten that until a moment ago – and George's old boots, and a knife, for gutting the fish, which I remember treasuring. And I was expected, quite rightly, to use them. There is no room, and smaller time, on a working boat for people who do not pull their weight according to their measure. I had to take my turn at the half-deckie's usual job, peeling spuds for dinner. I attempted to learn how the Decca navigation system by radio beacons worked, and the rudiments of navigation by the stars: thank Heaven I was never asked to put it into practice! (And the old Decca hyperbolic radio system did not work well in the north, even in the waters off west Scotland: you could be half a mile out in your plotting, which might be inconvenient, or more.) I had to learn to stand watch, and steer the boat on a steady course, though I was never allowed to do this when we had the trawl down, as a wobble then could have disastrous and expensive effects on what was happening many, many fathoms below. Above all, I had to muscle to when the trawl was shot and when it was hauled.

It took a long time to get the trawl up from the sort of depth we were usually working. The ship hove to, just enough way on to keep her more or less head to weather. Her waist, which on a side trawler has to be low, could in even a smallish sea be quite a wet place to be. The winches began to wind in, with the mate standing by. It was only a couple of years before I went to sea that the fitting

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of emergency stops for the winches had been made compulsory on all boats, after the *Hildina*, out of Fleetwood, with relatives on board of people with whom I sailed, caught her trawl on something deep down in the fertile darkness and steadily hauled herself under while the waves piled over her: six men died, I think. There were other stories about the unstoppable winches too: one deckie on *Seafoam* had the middle finger of his left hand missing. It had been trapped in the turning winch, and to avoid his whole arm being wound up and mangled he had quick as a flash whipped out his gutting knife and neatly cut the sinews round the third joint. Deep sea fishing was – is – the most dangerous of occupations. As, later, I came to know Fleetwood even better, I realised that almost every family had a relative who had been lost or mutilated at sea. And it was accepted as one of those facts of life, like weather. But the grief remained. And the candles burned each Year's Mind and each All Saints' Tide in Pugin's St Mary's Roman Catholic Church on Lord Street.

Lots of things, some I don't want, come out of the deep of memory... like being afraid of being afraid, or showing it... First the otter boards would break surface, then the cod end, a temporary island of closely packed fish straining the web of the net. The birds always seemed to know when we were hauling: you would have just the odd one or two, if that, and not a bit of land in sight, and then miraculously the sky would be full of them, wheeling and squalling above the boat. We had them with us every haul, even in those never really dark northern summer nights. They went crazy: the delicate kittiwakes, the preoccupied mollies, would try to perch on the obscene island, pecking through the net at the eyes and bellies of the fish. We were never out of range, it seemed, of those mighty hunters before the Lord, the spectacular gannets, for St Kilda and Sula Sgeir, where we did our first spell of fishing, were then their major colonies south of Iceland. Their speciality was the fish that escaped from the net, completely disoriented by the rapid change in pressure and light, and swimming weakly, often white belly up, near the surface. But sometimes not that near. In that clear ocean, you can see down many feet, and I have seen the gannet cruise, then

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pause in mid flight, half close its wings, and then, from sometimes 80 feet up plummet down, take a fish many feet down, and in the act of swallowing it surface on the other side of the boat. The white of the bird shifts to a deepening blue for watching eyes as its dive deepens, and the bubbles of its rapid passing leave a darkening turquoise trail behind it, fainter and fainter until it disappears when the bird begins its return to light and air. That sight of gannets diving has never lost its wonder for me, and idly watching them from Mullach Mor on Arran's Holy Island on that last holiday with Jenny brought back all that first painful joy at seeing something utterly perfect.

Of course, well fed and supported by technology, one has the luxury of that feeling: that habit of the gannet was put to good use in other, hungrier times when the beauty may have been noticed but was not remarkable. Man is the most dangerous predator of all and change in the diet of men may have a lot to do with the gannets' expanding population and colonisation of new sites in the northern seas. For in much of the Hebrides, the men would nail a herring on a board and let it drift. The gannet would break its neck with the impact, and the solan goose is, people say, good eating, if a little strong. And each year the men of Ness in Lewis take 2,000 of the hugely fat immature gugas, just before they fall out of the nest (they are too fat to fly) to the water below. For two weeks the men camp on Sula Sgeir, and go home with the birds split, pickled and salted. They are the last folk still to do so, and for many young men the danger and skill involved is a sort of rite of passage. (Many, many years later, I read Dean Munro's account of his visitation of the islands in 1549. He records that the Lewis men of Ness sailed their small open craft to 'fetche hame thair boatful of dry wild fowls with wild fowl fedderi' from the rock.) Lewis was far from the only community to harvest the apparently inexhaustible birds. All over the north men took their feathers for bedding and trade, their eggs and their well-fed young for food. Men swung out on ropes over the high cliffs, caught them in scoop nets as they flew home, snatched them off the ledges. And so often the skill tested not only a young man's courage but was a recommendation in getting a wife: he

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had the strength to feed her. All over the North families had their jealously guarded cliffs, just as Isle of Man families I knew had their own patches, which others respected, of the rocky shore, slippery with bladderwrack, where they knew there were crab holes in which at low, low water they would find the big crabs lurking.

I think I knew at the time that St Kilda had been abandoned as a settlement about 25 or so years before I went, and I had been so taken by the place that I read up about it when I got home. I have been back since. It can be a wonderful place in summer, on the sort of day when I first saw it, but the full force of Atlantic gales and storms in winter can be pretty dire. Yet for centuries it was home, and a place of being born and dying, for people who loved it. And a place for love: and young girls seem to have been hard to please. She expected her intending husband to prove his worthiness. On Hirta, where the village was, there is a tiny spike of rock nearly detached from the cliff. It falls 1,000 feet sheer to the sea. The two would go there, and the swain was expected to climb it, and then stand on his left heel with his toes well over the edge, extend his right foot over the birds wheeling far, far below the void, and bend down to touch his right foot. Then he could ask her. At least she would know she was getting a good cragsman, who could feed a family from those teeming bird cliffs. I would have done many things for my wife, but not that, and had I been a Kildan I think I would have died a bachelor.

But such thoughts troubled me not at all at that time of first awakening. The cod end is on the surface, the birds are a cloud of screams round us, the waist of the ship has been divided up into six-foot square pounds by planks slotted into the permanent stanchions that dot it – for a weight of slippery fish sloshing about on a rolling boat could seriously affect her stability. The fish hatch is open: the malodorous hole to the oil well is open too, for the money made from the oil – not a lot of it cod – in the rotting livers was a useful addition to the often meagre rewards for a trip. Sometimes it was my turn to go below, to take an ice pick and hack away at the wall of ice, breaking it up to pack the fish as they started to be thrown down the hatch, each species to its own area, where they would stay, the

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ice slowly melting round them, until that morning when they would be offered for auction to men in trilby hats and belted gabardine macs, and make a weekend fortune for us. 'Fresh Fish Daily'... in those days it had often been dead and kept just at melting point a fortnight or three weeks before it got near a shop. Hacking at the ice one had to watch out for meat: the ice pick would hit shoulder of lamb, or something like that, and that makes quite a different noise. But that is how the meat was stored, and it lent some uncertainty to the cook's plans for meals. For this was long before refrigeration, large or small scale, became possible on the boats. And then came the back-breaking job of shovelling the ice onto the fish, as the boat wallowed, hove to, while the net was prepared for shooting again.

But being down below was out of the weather, which could have its merits. It could be quite nice up on deck if the sun was on your back and the wind in your hair, even if she was rolling and you had the guts of hundreds of fish sloshing around your feet in your pound. But gutting in stinging rain with a half gale egging it on and blowing the wet up your smock – well, it's an acquired taste. Whatever the weather, the gutting had to be done. You get a rhythm: thumb behind a gill, tail down, each fish a quick single cut from gill to vent, a snip to cut out the innards, and then down the hatch. A good gutter could do twenty a minute. I managed about five, which was thought quite good for a beginner: I took some pride in that. But even in summer the weather could be relentless, with drenching spray, bitter wind, and the endless motion of the boat. It was – is – difficult to imagine what it must have been like in winter when the spray would freeze on the derrick, on the gunwales, even on the PVC smoothness of your gutting smock, and if not chipped off the weight of ice could even capsize the boat. 'Come with us at Christmas to Muckle Flugga' was the challenge they threw at me every time I thought I was getting on top of a particular job. Quite right: one of the worst things you can have on a boat is an overconfident crewman.

My deplorably inadequate diary – how I wish I could do that trip again with the eyes and knowledge I have now! – reminds me

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that the rhythm of the day, broken up by the regular hauling of the trawl, lost all relation to the landlubberly hours of rest and sleep. One worked till one was finished, and then, if lucky – and they were kind to me – you got a few hours' sleep before the next session of standing braced against the roll, slitting the guts out of fish, sometimes still just alive, taking care to chuck the livers down into that oil well. If you can stand that smell at sea, seasickness will never bother you. Gutting became automatic, the beauty of the creatures eviscerated – I still think fish utterly beautiful – no longer perceived. If you were lucky – though not lucky, because it meant less money – you cleared the load from one haul before the next came up, and could hose the deck down, perhaps straighten up, stretch stressed muscles. More often, as that sparse record tells me, the next haul was on deck just as the last of the last catch was going below. Indeed, there was one extraordinary haul on my second trip, on *Fleetwood Lady*, when we must have taken an entire shoal of coalfish (saithe, or callaig), so miraculous a draught of fishes that the cod end was so full that we did not dare trust the derrick to raise it in one go against the stability of the boat: and so a complicated series of operations, with a series of slings, divided the bloated mass into three, and hauled first the cod end and emptied in into the pounds, then tied the end again and threw it overboard, released a sling so that the next load of fish could be taken into the cod end, then repeated the manoeuvre – and again. And each time the boat listed to starboard as the weight came free of the supporting water. My boots, slightly too wide for my thin legs, came halfway up my thighs. It was on that haul that I had fish inside my boots: not recommended. It took eighteen hours to clear that lot, all the while the men cursing that it was the low-value coalfish rather than the cod or hake that would have made double the price.

One species always dominated the trawl, as we were working for schools. Now cod, now haddock, now hake (if we were lucky), but too often, especially on subsequent trips, coalfish. There were always a few oddities, which I tried to take to one side so I could draw them. I had no camera, and it would have been little use if I

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had had one. I also tried to draw, on the back of discarded traces printed out from the echo sounder, panoramic views of the islands we passed. Those traces were to me themselves a treasure, even without my drawings: I treasured especially the one from when we came home down the Minch. For the great cliff of the Fault showed starkly – and I was just beginning a lifelong interest in physical geography – where the bottom had fallen out of a much older landscape: a hundred fathoms, to depths deeper than much of the Continental Shelf. But the echo also picked up shoals of demersal fish like mackerel and horse mackerel, and the numbers were then so great in the shoals they showed up as a solid lump, as seemingly one and indivisible as a flight of winter starlings as ‘it’ (what is an individual?) makes its sunset arabesques against the frosty sky. (Mum, in one of her tidying fits – ‘paper baths’, she called them – threw the sketches out when I was at Cambridge. I was speechless with anger.) The trawl also brought up the odd bits of coral it had broken off, which I bleached in the galley and took home. Again, Mum threw out my memories, my madeleines. Once there were a lot of lumps of coal; another time suspicious-looking drums, which were promptly heaved over the side for another trawl to catch.

But it was the living, or recently living, things that caught the imagination. The rapid decompression from the depths had not allowed the true fishes to adjust, and their swim bladders in most cases had swollen to grotesque choking gags that protruded inches from their jaws. The elasmobranches, the dogfishes, sharks and skates, had no swim bladders, but suffered, I am sure, in other ways. Monkfish – years later in Greenland I would catch lots of them, good sport, on my little folding rod – I had never seen. There was nobody to point out to me how perfectly adapted to their ecological niche they were, for that sort of thinking was (for me at least) still years in the future. They were just ugly. The rare and elegant garfish, with his turquoise bones and long snout, was just the ‘herring pilot’ to the men: they had seen his like too often to take much notice. Once we brought up a long dead, half-eaten sunfish, six feet from fin to fin: and during that same haul George pointed out hard on

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the port bow a sail-like thing sticking out of the water some six feet: another, much bigger sunfish, almost beyond unawake imagination to grasp. Then there were the squid, sometimes lots of them, but mainly little ones no more than five feet long, their huge eyes suggesting an intelligence I did not then know they had. Then it was overboard with them all: not wanted on this voyage. Thousands of lives shovelled overboard. We did not even think about it.

There was one night, dark of the moon, when the cod end as it broke surface glowed with a spasmodic and cold moonlight of its own. It was full. The derrick brought it in above the deck, swaying with the boat, and the bo'sun bent under it undoing the knot. A sudden cascade of cold fire enveloped him, and spread over the deck. And as you looked close, you saw that this great mass of fish was the useless ratfish, and that every one of those hundreds and thousands of footlong lives had been gorging on little luminescent organisms. For through the walls of the stomach cavity the entire digestive tract could be seen, pulsing with the blue fire of what it had eaten. And it was all going straight back overboard, with the profligacy we then took for granted. A little miracle, but to my shipmates, and soon to me, everyday.

The best fish went to the galley – and why not? I have never eaten so much turbot since, nor have I ever tasted mackerel like those trapped in the rising trawl, and taken still quivering, colours iridescing in the varying light as the dying muscles twitched the skin, to the galley. A slash along the sides, some butter, and some salt, and then ten minutes in a hot oven – magnificent. Crabs, big ones, and lobsters, occasionally came up: again, straight to the galley, but I did not fancy either of them. And there were the occasional halibut – not the apology for halibut that masquerades as ‘Greenland halibut’ (which is not the same fish), but the really big powerful predators, with flesh firm as a muscle-builder’s, wonderful – as they do it in the Faeroes – with fried onions. One monster weighed a hundredweight, and when it was gutted – it took two men to do it – its heart, as big as my fist, continued to pulse on the deck. I can remember now, quite clear, the sudden shock, and pity: what have



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we done? A feeling made worse when I gutted a pregnant viviparous shark, and the little young wriggled in the mess on deck with their yolk sacs still attached. I threw them overboard, as the men laughed, and, sure enough, the birds got them before they were a foot down – and they would not have survived anyway. (The little sharks, like dogfish, then sold as rock salmon, as rock eel, or huss: cheap, but right good meat – and no bones.)

‘See the wonderful works of the Lord...’ What came up from the depths, out of that unplumbed mystery? Our species’ history too, for once we had gills – we still do in the aqueous ocean of the womb, for a space. We drew up from the sea’s deep memory our cousin the halibut, whose heart beats like ours, and then is still. And were they conscious, all those other lives we took for our comfort and profit? Who can tell what is dragged up to the surface of the mind, the gannet thoughts pouncing on the half-seen flashes of memory? I do not know whether I had such thoughts then. It would be nice to think I did.

We filled her hold, and turned for home. A time for sleep and rest, for most of the hands, but as in the morning sunlight we came past Rathlin Island, green with a lush vividness I did not know my eyes had missed, the ship had to be made tidy, presentable for port. Around the boat bits of painting had to be tidied up, the rust stains on the white bands round the top of her bow had to be painted out, the fishing gear stowed for harbour, the decks had to be scrubbed and hosed down, and the bronze and brass had to be polished with Brasso and a rag. As it happened I hated polishing brass, as I could never get my CCF brasses to the requisite brilliance and was always being told off about it at school, and annoyingly it fell to me to do the sea-darkened brass round the portholes. I did it with a surliness I can still remember. But it was a good custom, this getting her all shipshape and Fleetwood fashion. Just so the men themselves cleaned up as best they could – there were no showers on the boats then of course – and Brylcreemed their hair, put on their go-ashores. It did wonders for pride in team and boat, and she did look good, less weary and workstained.

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My first homecoming: an awareness that inside somehow, dimly perceived, not understood or even articulated, things had changed. Landfall is a good metaphor: you see the place you know so well, but from a new and dislocating viewpoint. The Wyre Light had always been ‘out there’; now it was ‘in there’. Fleetwood, familiar and friendly, was a strange and foreign smudge on the low horizon, gradually growing into coherence: the Pharos standing tall – Burton got it right! – the ice plant, the North Euston. Then the lines of houses along the Promenade, and finally, the run up the channel on the flood close in past the steep-to shore and Burton’s Lower Light, and the Ferry, and the moored Isle of Man boat and into the open gates of the basin. There were no girls in skimpy dresses waving on the Prom, just a few people, some with dogs on polite leads, pausing in their walk to watch the boats come home.

I caught the tram home. It all felt subtly different. I remember wanting to tell everyone, all those strangers on a tram, that I had just come westering home from the sea, but nobody would have been interested. I walked up the path of the house, went in the back entrance, and saw my parents, heard their voices, for the first time. The world had changed, and the cord was broken. No going back.



She paid off, at her owners’ offices, after the catch had been sold. Of course I went to watch. Working below, one gang of lumpers loaded the fish, by species, into ten-stone ‘kits’, which the derrick then hauled up on deck to the waiting team of men who, each in turn, with balletic grace swung their two-foot-long iron docker’s hook onto a kit and towed it at a run up the narrow plank from the deck to the quay. Then it was immediately set next to the others containing its kind. When all the fish were landed, the bidding could begin, and the boats could be moved to the other dock to be readied for sea again, for a ship in port is not earning anything. Tanks had to be filled with water and diesel (a very few boats still burned coal), and bales of spare netting, balls of tarred twine, great yellow cans

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of grease had to be stowed in the forepeak. One of those trolleys of joints of meat waited on the quay. From time to time someone would pick one and chuck it into the cold cascade of ice from the ice factory. Someone else, perhaps, would be able to enjoy breast of lamb stew.

The prices were recorded each day in the *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*: prices per species, and what each boat made. (*Seafoam* made just on £5,000 that first trip I was with her, a goodly amount, for the majority of the catch was the valued hake which Fly Holmes had a reputation for finding.) Some fish – a fair quantity, in fact, and a lot even for a family to get through, for this was long before fridges, let alone freezers, were common – was usually given to the hands after the auction, in big straw basses, the straw darkening as they got gradually wetter. Meanwhile the hands gathered on the pavement of Dock Street, waiting for the last bids of the merchants to be made and the tally to be made up; by which time the morning was well spent, and the pubs had opened, and the lines of railway trucks, reeking of their burden and of many others before it, slowly clanked past Wyre Dock Station, taking the fruits of our labour on its way to tables and grease-stained newspapers beyond the rumour of the sea. Some men – the prudent – went straight home and gave their wives the money (or their prudent wives came to the office with them). Men who had not seen their family for a few weeks, and who – a living had to be earned – would sail again in another two or three days could be excused using some of that money to buy flashy clothes, and to get drunk in them with religious fervour while they were ashore. Weekend millionaires, they were – or spent like them. They might die next week. When later I was a bus conductor on Ribble Buses at Fleetwood depot I used to take them home to the big council estates on Eden Avenue or Homestead Drive on the F1 bus when the pubs emptied. They never gave me any trouble. Some of them I had sailed with.

Fleetwood had lots of pubs. There were the ones where the men went, near the sea in Dock Street and London Street, and then there were the ones which sometimes called themselves ‘hotels’, like

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the Mount, where they would take their wives, all spruced up in makeup and jewellery and big hair. (But many still had the stained hands of their jobs, the gold of wedding ring highlighting the roughness of hard work.) Some pubs had acres of carved mahogany: usually those had been built at the time when the brewery trade was very prosperous. For breweries to own pubs to sell their beer was usual: Thwaites, Samuel Smith, C&S XL Ales, Tetley, Dutton, Bass, Boddingtons – they were all part of the townscape, all with their distinctive architectural styles. Opening hours were still restricted by DORA – the Defence of the Realm Act passed during World War I – and its licensing laws had not yet been altered. A noise of talk and laughter – no over-amplified music then, of course – and a smell of beer and tobacco, spilled out of the friendly doors into the winter dusk as a smaller me had used to hurry past, and on cold days the warmth inside made the glass weep with the condensation, the trickles running across the lettering ‘Lounge Bar’, ‘Public Bar’, ‘Smoke Room’ etched in the elaborately frosted glass. For the larger pubs often had a Lounge Bar, where ladies – but not usually unaccompanied – might go as well as men. They had a Public Bar where pretty well only men went, and a Bottle and Jug door opening onto a counter for Off Sales: there children could still sometimes be seen with white enamel quart-sized jugs going to get beer for their father at home.

Years, years later, I found some poems, quoted among his examples of verse forms (*Háttatal*) by the thirteenth-century Icelandic historian and politician Snorri Sturluson in his *Edda*, and recognised that nothing had changed:

Waves beat on the high rowing benches, the keel cuts through the waves... the cold wave makes the weak keel strong, and she rushes ahead – just as the year goes by... The long ships rest after the voyage, and good ale eases the men’s weariness, and the full golden bowl passes round, full of drink.

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Apart from engines.

As ever, anticlimax. I loved the first trip, I loved the clear seas and intense light of the North, and the birds, and the wealth of the seas, and immediately, without consulting the parents, signed on for more. But, alas, not on *Seafoam* as she had no need of an extra hand. The next time was on *Fleetwood Lady*, FD1. A 'good sea boat', they said she was, but I never loved her as I loved *Seafoam*. (*Seafoam* was lost by stranding in 1987, almost a Viking end – I am glad she was not ignominiously broken up, or taken down to the depths as *Fleetwood Lady* eventually was off Newfoundland, where strange lights glimmer and the great squid pulse past.) She had a full crew, and I was a supernumary. That meant there was no bunk for me, so I had to kip on the cushions in the cabin behind the wheelhouse, and keep my dunnage in that old canvas grip. It is very strange how quickly even the smallness of a bunk can become a sort of home, and to be without that refuge made things uncomfortable, as if I had no place. But at least Nat's cure for seasickness was still holding good.

*Fleetwood Lady's* skipper, younger than Fly Holmes, was not as sharp as Fly at his job: I realised that even then, and the men spoke of him differently. For one thing, his ship's stores had not been properly overseen before sailing. Somewhere off Rockall the engineer said he was short of grease for the engines and the gear, and this was a matter of real concern. RT calls to the owners ascertained that another boat was about a day's steaming away, and so we moved at half speed to meet her. The two boats came head to sea about a couple of cables apart, just enough way on to keep steady, and a line was fired across from us to her. The other chaps drew in the heavier warp behind the light line, and made fast a 50-gallon drum of grease. Of course, once in the water the thing was virtually weightless, and the bo'sun easily drew it to our side hand over hand, and then leaned over the gunwale in the waist to attach the tackle from the yard to hoist it aboard. Three times more, and the two ships veered away from each other, back to their marks, and the excitement was over. But not the grumbling among the crew, for nearly a whole day's fishing in ideal weather had been

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lost, and that meant the wages would be less. That young skipper learned an important lesson, but the bars of Fleetwood would take a long time to let him forget the learning. The glamour of command? Forget it: ambitious young men got their master's tickets, and sailed even as deckhands because ships were hard to come by, and were getting harder. And those men worried aforetime about what they might do if they did get a ship, and how they might keep it. For only successful skippers, ones who regularly turned in a high-value catch, kept their jobs. The young mate and his friend, a deckie, on *Fleetwood Lady* both had masters' tickets, and spent hours discussing whether it was better to play safe and go after the cheaper coalfish, which were already more plentiful than the much higher value hake, rather than go home with a hold half-full. Following the sea was a hard calling, at any level.

And indeed, on that trip the skipper was often visibly anxious: even I could see that. The trawls were light. On one ground we saw a dozen boats fishing, and there cannot have been that much to go round. I noticed the skipper looking through his field glasses at other boats as they hauled their trawls: was he trying to see how full the cod end was? And RT calls between the boats would never elicit from any the size of their catch, or where they might go next. After all, they were competing with each other. So he struck out on his own, and found a lonely ground where nobody was fishing and the low-value coalfish were endless, endless. Indeed, on that trip, there seemed to be much less excitement, and all that voyage gave me was the ability to swear with an aplomb of which I was naïvely proud, and tar on my smart grey trousers which, this time, I had brought with me as 'go ashores'. I bought Benson and Hedges cigarettes duty free in the red tin boxes of 50 (for my father). I tried so hard to be grown up – but it was not much use. Nobody believed me. The crew were different too – or I was. They successfully teased a greenhorn like me, as the others had not, and I may well have deserved it. But one joke was, I admit, a good one. For at the end of the trip, we anchored off Wyre Light, waiting until there should be fewer ships landing their catch in the market. (Fewer ships might

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mean we would raise the price we made.) We could see Fleetwood across the oil-smooth sea: at low tide we could almost have walked home. We sat on the hot deck, where the tar of the seams was melting, idly smoking (I wasn't, for that vice had not then got a hold on me) all that hot August day, with a big gull silently watching us from the end of the derrick. And anchored as we were, they put me 'on watch' on the bridge, and told me to 'keep her heading NW by West'. No amount of frantic spinning of the wheel made the slightest difference of course, and it took a full half hour before I realised what a fool I was.

I remember being given a bass of big hake, part of the crew's perks, when she paid off. I took it on the Ribble bus on another hot day to my parents who were staying with my aunt and uncle in his new parish near Ulverston. I stood all the way, for it was high season and the buses were full. I was wearing my best suit, but even so people seemed to avoid me, to try to stand apart from me. But the fish was appreciated, or so they said.



Some made a fortune out of fish. Some skilful, or lucky, skippers in the 1950s could make £5,000 a year, which was a lot. But the price of fish was – is, for the accident rate has not dropped – men's lives. At the end of a working life, the hands had little to look forward to. It was a bloody life: poor, brutish, often short. I would have hated it as a job. But I am glad – grateful – I did it. And things were never the same again.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Just how different, but no less testing, things are now is clear from Redmond O'Hanlon's *Trawler* (Hamish Hamilton 2005). Mark Kurlansky's *Cod: the Fish that Changed the World* (Vintage 1999) is essential (and fun) for anyone who wants to glimpse the profound effects of *Gadus morhua* on the economy, politics, religion and digestion of Europe and beyond from very early times.

# Down *to the Sea in* Ships



**D**orothy Whitelock, Elrington and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon in the University of Cambridge, was one of the smallest women, and one of the most indefatigable smokers, I have ever met. She was a noticeable character in the Cambridge of my youth. She drove a little Austin, and her diminutive form could hardly be seen as she drove it. It was said, probably with some exaggeration, that she looked through, not over, the steering wheel – and strong men were said to blench at this apparently driverless car making towards them. But if it was warm and sunny, the driver's identity could be guessed from the wafts of smoke from the open windows. So it was with some curiosity that a gown-clad I knocked on her door: my Director of Studies in English, John Holloway, had sent me to call on her in her smoke-filled rooms in Newnham College. For I had expressed a desire to study Anglo-Saxon and her scholarship and pedagogy were deeply respected. Nothing much came of that early interest 'til much later, as it happens – and then largely as a result of an interest Jenny had caught at Edinburgh.

We had a few sessions together. She promised, in the end, *Beowulf*, and I think she thought she made it sound like a treat. But initially



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I was broken in quite gently with the account in the Old English translation of Orosius' *Historiae adversus Paganos* of Othere's visit to King Alfred – Ottar, in fact, who came from somewhere north of Trondheim up near the Lofoten Islands.<sup>4</sup> (In unguarded moments I am prone to quote it now to anyone who will listen: 'Ohtere sæde his hlaforde, Alfrede cyninge, that he ealra Norþmonna norþmest bude...') And then I was introduced to some of the shorter poems, their rhythms and patterns indelibly inscribed in my memory, and to the kennings, the metaphorical phrases that were the stock in trade of the *scop*, the building blocks of his art. And so I came to those poems we call *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer*.

This first encounter, at Cambridge, with the Otherness of Anglo-Saxon poetry, stirred something almost like a recognition, manifested as a sort of momentary hotness in the throat and a pricking, a wetness, of the eyelids – the physical symptoms that have all my life stayed with me when greatly moved by art or music. The breath of those verses (Professor Whitelock read, almost sang, well), long ago mouthed mint-new by a man of like passions with me, blew into flame the embers of ancient memories, going back to late childhood, of reading ('retold for children') the myths of the Norse and Saxon pantheons, of Thor's visit to Utgard, of the Nidhogg gnawing at the roots of Yggdrasil, of Ragnarök, or of the dire gold of Andvari's ring. In my veins runs the blood of those men and women who worshipped those gods – only yesterday in the time of our race.

*The Seafarer*... slowly making the meaningless words and strange sounds mean individually, then like crystals gathering round a core, making sense, then finally the splendour of the lines and their captured cold and harshness breaking like surf through the centuries. The poem can still send a shiver down my spine:

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4 The controversy over who Ottar was, and where he lived, continues. The best recent work on him is in the magisterial survey by Englert and Bateley, *Ohtere's Voyages: A late 9th Century Account of Voyages along the Coasts of Norway and Denmark and its Cultural Context (Maritime Culture of the North)* (Oslo: Viking Ship Museum, 2007), which also looks at the whole pattern of Norse trade in the period. There is also a short piece by Inger Storli in *Archaeology in North Norway*, ed. Stephen Wickler (Tromsø University Museum, 2004).

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*Mæg ic be me sylfum      soðgied wrecan,  
siþas secgan,      hu ic geswincdagum  
earfoðhwile      oft þrowade,  
bitre breostceare      gebiden hæbbe,  
gecunnad in ceole      cearselda fela,  
atol yþa gewealc,      þær mec oft bigeat  
nearo nihtwaco      æt nacan stefnan,  
þonne he be      clifum cnossað...*

My own song I myself shall sing,  
Truly my travails in travel to tell.  
How oft, on ship, heart sick, I have seen  
Bitter care, the clashing of crushing waves.  
In black night, while the boat heaved by high cliffs,  
The steering oar stayed me at the stern.  
Cold thrawn, my feet fettered by frost,  
My heart seethed with hot worry.  
Hunger within gnawed my sea-wearied soul.  
That man who lives on lush land,  
Can't grasp how I, grieving, wretched,  
Wintered on waters icecold, an exile  
Cut off from kin. Ice covered my clothes,  
Hissing hail harried.  
There naught heard I save sounding seas,  
Icewhitened waves.  
Sometimes there cheered me the swan's call,  
Gannet's call, cry of the curlew,  
The seamew - but never the mirth and mead of men.  
Storms beat on stone cliffs; shriek of snowy tern answered.  
Not seldom horn-beaked eagle screamed,  
There no kin had I to comfort my careful heart.  
Little kens that man, living in cities,  
Joyous of life, proud, laughing with wine,  
How I, oft weary, had to stay in the seaway.  
Night's shades darkened, snow came from the north,

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Frost fettered fields, hail fell on earth,  
Coldest of corn.  
And yet –  
Even now, thoughts toss and tug in my heart  
That I should again seek the waves, the high seas –  
Heart's desire, every time, drives the spirit  
To set forth, far to fare,  
To seek out cities of strangers.

In all Middle Earth is no man  
So proud, so prodigal in giving gifts,  
So bold in his youth, brave in his deeds,  
So loved by his lord,  
That he seldom has sorrow in his seafaring,  
Or dread of what God will doom to him.  
Not for him the hearing of the harp,  
Nor giving of gold rings, nor joy of a woman,  
Nor world's glory - nay, nothing at all,

But he has ever that longing, he who fares on the sea flood.

The groves put on bloom, cities grow bonnier,  
Fields adorn themselves afresh, renewed is the world.

Yet: all those yield to the eager yearning,  
The desire to set forth, of him  
Who fidgets to travel far  
On the whales' road, the ways of the waters.

The cuckoo, herald of summer, doleful calls,  
Singing of sorrow bitter in the breast.  
No man blessed with carefree comfort knows  
What those suffer who seek of exile the paths.

Yet: even now heart has boundless hankering,

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Flies wide over the whales' realm, the sea flood,  
Ranges earth's realms, returns to me  
Greedy and hungry with great longing.  
Lonely bird calls, compelling heart to haste  
To the waters, the whales' way,  
For the joys of God matter more to me  
Than this dead life on land. I believe not  
That wealth of this world lasts for ever.  
Ever one of three things threatens, drives men into doubt  
Before their last day: disease, eld, sword-hate –  
Each can destroy lives of men, doomed to death.  
Therefore for every man the best memorial  
Is praise of living men, of those he leaves behind,  
After his death. So great deeds he must do  
Against fury of foemen, be doughty against the Devil,  
That the progeny of princes may praise him hereafter,  
His glory live on lauded by angels,  
Ever in eternity, among hosts of heaven.

The great days are departed, gone the grandeur  
Of earthly kingdoms: kings and kaisers  
Goldgivers even, as once there were, are gone,  
Those who did glorious deeds, and  
Lived lordliest in long renown.  
Gone now all that host, gone their gladness,  
The weak remain to rule the world,  
Keep it in fearful care. Flowers are faded,  
Earthly nobility grows old, nears to naught,  
Just so through middle earth does every man.  
Eld pursues him, face fades to pallor,  
Grey haired he grieves, for gone are the great ones,  
Friends of the former time, kinsmen of kings,  
Gone to cold ground.  
Then his flesh home, life fading away,  
Cannot swallow the sweet, cannot compass pain,

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Cannot have his hand hold, or mind meditate.  
Though his brother embellish with gold a brother's grave,  
Bury his body among the dead with bounty of treasure,  
Yet gold will not grace a ghost full of sins,  
Before God's high wrath, though here on earth he hide them.  
Great is God's power, guiding the earth,  
For he stablished it fast, the foundations of stone,  
The lands of the earth, the heaven lofty above.  
Only a fool does not fear his Lord,  
For death him unthoughtful destroys.  
Blessed he who bides humble; grace greets him from heaven.  
The Lord steels his spirit because he believes in His might.  
Man must master headstrong spirit, hold to his hests,  
Live pure in his paths.  
Every man in his ways should use measure,  
With loved and loathed in all dealing.

Mighty is Fate, far mightier the Lord's law,  
Than Man may measure.  
Think we then where home lies for us,  
Then compass how we come thither.  
Then let us labour to have leave  
To come to blessedness without bound.  
There life belongs in the love of the Lord,  
Hope in the heavens. The Holy One  
Be thanked, He who has honoured us,  
Granted us glory, the Lord everlasting.

But the questions press forward. Why was he sailing? (He isn't of course: he's writing a poem, but let that pass.) Whither? What drives the wanderer? Why do we have that very old itch, what Masfield called *Sea Fever*, that problem, that pain, that joy? What did his boat handle like? Even then, those questions bubbled up. They still do.

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For a long, long time I could not afford physically to go north, and did not have the opportunity to find anyone else to pay for it. All the travelling I could afford to do in those early years of (glad) responsibility to Jenny and a young family was in books, for the next best thing to travelling was reading: voraciously, uncritically, everything I could lay my hands on, well or badly written, about travel ancient or modern, in the polar regions or to islands at the edge of the world. For a time books on such places lay everywhere about the house, and I know that some of them Jenny read too as a relief from trying to bring order into the chaos two small children, an untidy husband and a large dog casually created. It was when I came home and found her reading Cherry-Garrard, and then Edward Wilson's *Diary of the Terra Nova* expedition to the Antarctic,<sup>5</sup> and nothing but a cold scratch supper, that I began to realise that she too seemed to be catching the bug. But she would never go there, would she?

That early prize of Cherry-Garrard's book steered me, prejudiced me, towards the South, but the chances of going there were (I thought) zero. But the seed planted in Cambridge (and earlier), those sagas and poems of the north, gradually drew me closer to the worlds of *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer*, of Njal and Grettir, to the North. At about this time I read C S Lewis's description of how he too had come under the spell of what he called 'northern-ness' and I knew exactly what he meant. I discovered in the library a whole range of sagas in parallel text (the old Nelson series), which became bedside reading. In fact, Jenny had read a good deal of Anglo-Saxon and some Old Norse when at Edinburgh University – indeed she knew more Anglo-Saxon than I did – and we shared (or at least she grasped) that growing interest, which even extended to us both reading sagas in bed, our arms and hands getting colder and colder

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<sup>5</sup> Edward Wilson, *Diary of the Terra Nova expedition, 1910–12* (Humanities Press 1972).

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in that unheated winter bedroom. A bonus was that my first job, in publishing, led me to be Geography Editor in a publishing house, and physical and historical geography became a passionate interest too: I read vast amounts of the firm's backlist in the slack times while waiting for authors to deliver their MSS – authors are never on time. Then someone (who wanted the space) gave me a shelf-full of back numbers of the *Mariners Mirror, wherein be discovered his art craft and mystery after the manner of their use in all ages and among all Nations*: the journal of the Society for Nautical Research has as its title the beginning of the orotund and ornate *incipit* of the 1588 volume. I promptly joined the Society, to Jenny's consternation, as she saw yet more of the space in the house being taken up with shelving for the journal. And then in the University Library I found the entire run of Hakluyt Society volumes, devoted to making available accounts of early travel and knowledge of the face of the globe. All this was not exactly distraction from the business of earning a living – it actually converged to some degree with my job in publishing – but it stopped me writing the academic things I ought to have been writing, of course, and seemed to be going nowhere. But I would not have missed that wodge of reading for the world. For when the whirligig of time did bring me the chances to go to high latitudes again, that reading coloured my vision and put voices in the wind.

Bit by bit a picture came clearer of the seas of the north very efficiently crossed and used by a multitude of people who had none of the things we assume to be necessary. Flimsy boats – or so we thought; no ready availability of cheap worked iron; no charts or maps; no compass; no means of finding longitude, and no concept of it. They did not even have the more efficient stern (median) rudder or the fore-and-aft lateen sail (which latter came from the Arabs) until about the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. And yet they did those huge voyages, and got back to where they started from, and did them again. They knew how to find the way, and their ships were up to it. And so the 'how' questions began to force themselves on me. Once a young I was saying, with the chronological snobbery that is the default position of us moderns, to a wise and elderly

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Biblical scholar, how surprised I was to find the third/fourth century Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea using critical tools I recognised as ‘modern’ to question the attribution of the Epistles General of St John. And got the stern rebuke, ‘Did you not think there were intelligent people then as there are now?’ Yes indeed: the old folk made all the major breakthroughs, from the taming of fire to the invention of the wheel, to the working of metals; they found out the paths of the stars and the virtues of plants; and they travelled across the face of the waters to the uttermost parts of the earth. We should never underestimate them – as we do – or their technology. Everything we do is built on the foundations they laid. And even that, their technology, has a habit of throwing up major surprises that periodically upset the orthodoxies. And recently they have been most interestingly disturbed. For once, the overused word ‘exciting’ seems to me appropriate.

Three examples stand out: a temple in a dessicated part of Turkey; a bit of bronze found by a metal detectorist in the Harz mountains in Saxony, and a lump of corroded bronze fished up from the seabed by Greek divers off western Crete. For decades nobody knew in the National Museum of Athens knew what to do with it, but did not quite like to throw it away.

It used to be not uncommon to teach the young – maybe people still do – that organised religion, even the concept of religion itself, was consequent upon people settling in communities and becoming dependent on the annual cycle of agriculture. But then Göbekli Tepe – which translates as ‘Potbelly Hill’ – about 15 kilometres from Sanliurfa, Southeastern Turkey was discovered. In the 1960s it had been dismissed by an archaeological survey as a mediaeval cemetery. But in 1995 Klaus Schmidt re-examined the hilltop, and showed conclusively that its complicated circular and oval layout of T-shaped megaliths (some 6m tall) and the sophisticated and beautiful representational carving on them destroys the conventional view of the rise of civilisation. Foxes, snakes, wild boars, cranes, wild ducks abound. Most are carved into the flat surfaces of the pillars, but there are also some three-dimensional sculptures, like the one of a lion,



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head done on the side of a pillar. Predating Stonehenge by 6,000 years, and long before the cities of the Indus or of Mesopotamia, it is the work of a Neolithic hunter-gatherer community; but such groups do not build things, do they...? And why did the builders of this magnificent monument ensure its survival for thousands of years by simply backfilling and burying the various temples deep under an incredible amount of material? The books will all have to be rewritten. Common ideas of the sociology of religion will have to be modified – could it be that it is religion that leads to ‘civilisation’, in its strict etymological sense of ‘living in communities’, rather than the other way round? That might be an interesting cat among the pigeons. And who knows what else is waiting to be found?

Two other finds confirm how precarious are our certainties and how inventive were our ancestors – so inventive it is not easy to see how they did what they did. In 1999 metal detectorists, illegally, unearthed a Bronze Age hoard on Mittelberg near Nebra in Saxony in Germany. Among the objects, later recovered, is the Nebra Sky disc, which shows the moon in its phases, a schematised map of the heavens, a recognisable cluster of the Pleiades constellation, the Sun, and what has been identified as a ship sailing between them. The metalworking is extremely sophisticated, of a quality and cleverness not hitherto suspected of that period. At first, many people, as did Professor Peter Schauer, said it must be fake, and that you could produce a comparable amount of corrosion on a modern bronze disc by urinating on it and then leaving it buried in soil for a few months. But very severe metallurgical analysis has securely dated it to between 1600 and 1500 BC, and identified where the metals came from: the copper came from near Salzburg and the alloying tin, and the gold, from Cornwall. How the object was used nobody knows. But the people who made it had a very good grasp of the workings of the heavens and the technology and conceptual strategies to represent it. The image of the Pleiades and sun boat on the Sky Disc predate those from Babylon and Egypt. This makes it the earliest depiction known in the world. What is particularly disturbing is that ‘til now archaeologists maintained with confidence that detailed

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understanding of the stars and astronomy started in the Middle East, and that the Bronze Age society of Northern Europe was by contrast primitive. The discovery of the Sky Disc utterly demolishes this view, and indicates that sophisticated knowledge of the stars, among some people at least, in Northern Europe was much earlier than previously thought. As the website of the Landesmuseum of the Landesamt für Denkmalpflege und Archäologie Sachsen-Anhalt says, 'The Sky Disc is one of the most important archaeological finds of the past century.' The National Maritime Museum website agrees. A lot is going to have to be rethought. And, not least, how the concept of a ship got into a precious object about as far from the sea as one can get in Europe when people were not supposed to be able to travel much.

And thirdly: just before 80 BC – the date is secure – a ship, overloaded with marble and bronze statues, and other valuable objects, was making its way (we think) to Rome, perhaps via Delos, originally perhaps from Pergamum: coins found by Jacques Cousteau in the 1970s at the wreck site might suggest that city as an origin. Its cargo may well have been booty after the Mithridatic Wars. A storm caught it off western Crete, near Antikythera, and it sank, coming to rest on a sloping shelf of rock. There it lay, until in 1900 sponge divers found it – or rather found eyeless faces looking at them from the mud of the sea bed. In 1900-01 the Greek navy explored the wreck, and raised a goodly number of statues, many of which are now in the National Museum in Athens: including, for example, the wonderful 'Antikythera youth' (Perseus? Paris?) which may be a relic of something in bronze by Euphranor (340-330 BC). There were a lot of coins, too, and one object, a mass of corroded bronze, which defied analysis for more than three quarters of a century.

Early attempts to make sense of it got not much further than recognising it was a mechanism of some sort. That in itself was thought provoking, for the competence of the ancients in making precise small mechanisms of any sort was, to say the least, not well understood. But recent work has shown something quite extraordinary. The certainties of centuries are slipping.

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This machine has the oldest known complex gear mechanism. Some have called it the first known analogue computer. The skill with which it has been made suggests that it is not the first of its type, but had – as yet – undiscovered predecessors during the Hellenistic period. In 1974, Professor Derek de Solla Price concluded from gear settings and inscriptions in Koine Greek on the mechanism's faces that it was made about 87 BC and thus was lost only a few years later. The most recent work on it by Michael Wright has pretty conclusively demonstrated that it is a very sophisticated astronomical computer.

The mechanism was operated by turning by a hand crank which was linked via a crown gear to the largest four-spoked gear, which allowed setting of the date on the front dial. Turning the hand crank would also cause all the interlocked gears – there are 30 gears inside the machine, some epicyclic, one with 223 accurately cut teeth – inside the mechanism to rotate, resulting in the calculation of the positions of the Sun and Moon, and showing other astronomical information, such as phases of the moon, eclipse cycles and the location of the five planets known to the ancients. On the front was a zodiac scale. The back section of the spiral dial calculated the orbits of the constellations and planets. It allowed for the apparent retrograde motion of the planets. It also demonstrates the Metonic cycles: the Metonic (named after Meton of Athens of the fifth century BC) cycle or Enneadecaeteris (from εννεαδεκαετηρις, 'nineteen years') is a period of very close to 19 years, remarkable for being nearly a common multiple of the solar year and the synodic lunar month. Meton observed that a period of 19 years is almost exactly equal to 235 synodic months, and rounded to full days counts 6940 days. The difference between the two periods (of 19 years and 235 synodic months) is only a few hours, depending on the definition of the year.

A clue that there were such objects is in Cicero's *De Re Publica*. One of his characters in that dialogue talks of a mechanism, designed by Archimedes of Syracuse, that Marcellus, the general who sacked Syracuse in 212, brought to Rome. (Marcellus had

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given orders that Archimedes should be spared, but the great god Muddle ensured that in the confusion of the sack a common soldier killed him. Plutarch says that he was carrying his mathematical instruments, and was killed because the soldier thought that they were valuable.) As it happens, Syracuse was a Corinthian colony, and the inscriptions engraved on the mechanism use the Corinthian letter-forms. But what Cicero's character describes does not sound anywhere near as complex as this. The Antikythera mechanism cannot have been the only one of its kind: this is no prototype. It was clearly regarded as valuable, or it would not have been on a treasure ship. The technicalities and maths are awe-inspiring, and too hard for Bears of Very Little Brain. But the implications are obvious. Nobody had any idea that the ancients could make machines anywhere near as complex and precise as this – it far surpasses anything available in modern Europe until the twentieth century. It summarises the astronomical knowledge, and the mathematics, that reaches back through the Greeks to Sumeria: but it *models* it. The history of technology needs to be rewritten. And if this sophisticated tool or others like it were available to the learned, it is most unlikely that the practical applications of such detailed knowledge of the heavens were not understood by those who would make it their business to guide ships across the treacherous waters as safely as possible. Nobody *wants* to be drowned.

How much our remotest ancestors used the sea – confidently and frequently – is increasingly clear. Far from dividing, it united, it enabled. Barry Cunliffe has made this very point in his book, *Facing the Ocean: the Atlantic and Its Peoples, 8000 BC to AD 1500* (Oxford University Press, 2001). In the Middle Ages far more linked the Cinque Ports with their French counterparts 30 miles away – both had an informed interest, and skill, in piracy – than linked them to London. Architectural styles, language, boat types, trade links between East Anglia and Holland are obvious, and in the Middle Ages that brand of English and Dutch were pretty well mutually comprehensible. Indeed, it might even make more sense to think of communities as inhabiting a 'maritory' – an ugly coinage that

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I have heard used in august circles – rather than a ‘territory’. The North Sea is a case in point. Michael Dye is only the most recent to argue<sup>6</sup> not only that it provided a common linking space but also simply by being that, had a profound affect on everything from fashion and disease to economics, politics, science and religion – and that its influence reached far beyond its geographical limits to encompass southern Europe, Iceland and across the Atlantic. That sea at the edge of the Roman world refocussed Europe away from the Mediterranean Rome had dominated.

But it’s on a bigger scale than that. Ancient peoples across the world were very mobile: indeed, *homo peregrinus*, man the traveller. It is only when you settle down to growing crops, a long term investment of time and labour, that you need to stay in one place, and that radical shift in human culture is actually pretty recent in our long history. In 2004-05, ahead of a housing development at Cliffs End Farm in Thanet, an emergency dig found a number of late Bronze Age to Middle Iron Age (1100-200 BC) burials. There were some 24 people, ranging in age from six to 55. Analysis of strontium isotopes showed that nine had been born locally; eight grew up in Scandinavia; and five came from the western Mediterranean. The Amesbury Archer, buried with his weapons, grew up in the Alps. He was a long way from home. The ‘Boy with the Amber Necklace’, a 14 or so year old found on Boscombe Down near Stonehenge in 2005, who died 3,550 years ago, grew up by the Mediterranean. What were their stories?

Nor was trade, even in the Bronze Age, just local. On the north coast of the Wirral peninsula in Cheshire lies Meols, not now a specially prepossessing place: bungalow, wind-blasted privet hedges, salt-browned hydrangeas in optimistically low-walled gardens. But once – for a very long time indeed – it was the most important port in the North-West. It is next to the ‘Hoyle Lake’ (which gives its name to neighbouring Hoylake, with which it has coagulated), a haven on the difficult eastern Irish Sea coast, which so often with

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6 In *The Edge of the World: How the North Sea Made Us Who We Are* (Viking 2014).

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the prevailing wind from the west can be a tricky lee shore. But coastal erosion washed much of the low-lying shores away, leaving a vast extent of flats at low tide. A nineteenth-century parson, known to local fisherman and farmers as interested in old things, was brought objects that they found on the beach. He showed them to friends, and much was recognised as Roman. But the story was much older than the Romans. During the nineteenth century, over 3,000 objects dating from Mesolithic to post-medieval periods were collected from the eroding shoreline. Iron Age, Roman and medieval material indicates trade not just along the coast, not just up the rivers at the settlement's back, not just to Ireland, but as far afield as Europe, Scandinavia and the Mediterranean. The extent and range of medieval finds in a now obscure coastal village is greater than from any site outside London. The artefacts indicate settlement and trade over thousands of years, with peaks of activity in the Roman, Viking and medieval periods. Meols, facing the Irish Sea, has easy access to two major river systems, the Mersey and Dee. Lead from the Welsh hills, brought down the Dee, may well have been traded at Meols, possibly as long ago as the Iron Age. Wool and grain, and salt from the brine springs of Cheshire (crucial to the pre-modern economy as a preservative) were exchanged there over many centuries. The archaeological remains may be some of the most important evidence in Britain for prehistoric, Roman and medieval coastal settlement and trade.

Meols was a permanent settlement, to be sure, but not a very big one. Seasonal fairs, when people would flood in from all over the place, might multiply the population many times over – for a short period – as with the great fairs of mediaeval Europe: Stourbridge, Frankfurt, Troyes, and earlier Kaupang and Dorestad. It clearly had a special role as a trading centre, as a 'beach market', over nearly two millennia, drawing its custom from all over western Europe. Nor is it the only one on the Irish Sea. There seem to have been other beach markets at Ronaldsway on the Isle of Man, on the Isle of Whithorn in Galloway, and near Dublin. There may be others. Suggestive bits of pottery have been found, for example, at the

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mouth of the little river Altcar near Formby, where it runs through the sand dunes to the sea. But the inevitable conclusion is that it was by sea that for millennia goods were exchanged, and people moved about a lot: water transport was far easier and more reliable than land. And the pattern seems to continue right up to the farthest tip of Norway.

Speculation needs to be held in check, but it is fun. Those known or suspected beach markets in the Irish Sea are more or less equidistant from the Isle of Man, which can be seen in good weather from all of them. That fertile island, defended by awesome reefs at the wrong state of the tide, is stuffed with prehistoric, Iron Age and Norse remains. Was Man the focus, religious or economic, of a whole culture in the prehistoric periods? One thinks of an exactly similar situation with Arran in the Firth of Clyde: easy of access from Ireland, from the Clyde system, from the Highlands, from Galloway. And stuffed with burials, standing stones, stone circles. Or Sark, visible and equidistant from the Channel Islands and the mainland, and now showing for the first time, with recent excavation, the deposition of objects of significant value, like highly wrought axes, that cannot have originated on the island. (In the late eighteenth century a massive deposition – the word ‘hoard’ raises a lot of questions – of Thracian silver was found there.) Were those centrally placed islands culturally or religiously somehow special? Like Wyre or Mainland in Orkney? Or Heligoland? Or Malta, with those magnificent temples and not a sign of any form of defensive structure?

But whether that is true or not, the key thing is reliable sea transport. And the Neolithic, Bronze Age and early Iron Age objects and sites from Spain to north Norway suggest a common culture with centres in regular contact. Which means sea-going ships, quite big ships. According to the Roman poet Ovid, civilisation started with a voyage – the first voyage of all, that of the *Argo*. He’s wrong, and probably knew he was, but he was right that the importance of the sea and shipping cannot be overestimated.

Right in the north of Norway is a pocket of very fertile land,

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warmed by the Gulf Stream and watered by the Alta, one of the finest of Norway's salmon rivers where the great and good – and very rich – have for a couple of centuries gone for the fishing in season. (I have looked at that river longingly, wishing my lot had cast me differently.) Since the Ice Age the land has been rising as the weight of ice was removed from the rocks beneath, floating on the molten mantle of the Earth from which aeons again they were formed. This is granite country. The rise of the land was not uniform. It paused, and the sea ate into the rocks with its tireless rough caress. Along the coast in these parts there are four levels of raised beach marking the major pauses. At each level, the highest about 30m above the current sea level, on one special headland, Hjemmeluft, or, in Saami, Jiepmaluokta – there may be more to discover, and there are more than a few other sites scattered around the northern coast of Norway: the rocks are covered with carvings of men and animals – reindeer, elk, bear – and of enclosures and boats and birds. The top level is about 6,200 years old; the next 5,300; the next 4,200, and the youngest 3,200. (Compare those dates with the Pyramids, or Ur, or Stonehenge.) What they mean is almost impossible to say. But they took a lot of time. 4,200 years or so ago someone made one of my favourite carvings: three men in a boat, fishing. The line goes down the rock for about a metre before ending in a recognisable halibut – a fish shown quite a lot, and there are still a lot of really big halibut just off the continental shelf, which is why the sperm whales come there to fatten themselves up for breeding. The boats: the largest has a high stern, a high bow, shaped, it seems, like animals. It shows 32 people aboard. Whether that is a true picture of anything or not, it indicates beyond question that the *idea* of a ship carrying many people was accepted. And the fishing for halibut means that they ventured miles off shore to where those noble fish live, even out of sight of land. But how did they know they were there in the first place? Another puzzle...

A ship carrying 32 people... Three Bronze Age boats have been found, so far, at North Ferriby in Yorkshire's East Riding. The first was found in 1937. These are some of the earliest known



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boats found in Europe, although the recently found smaller Must Farm boats from near Peterborough are of similar date; and one of them actually floated when excavated, woken from its long sleep in the mud's embracing. Carbon-14 dating, with the refinements of method now in use, gave Ferriby Boat 1 a date of 1880-1680 BC, Ferriby 2 1940-1720 BC, and Ferriby 3 2030-1780 BC – a century or so after the Alta carvings. All examples were found near estuaries and the seaways. These are boats that can go to sea. They would be nearly 16m in length with a maximum beam of about 2.5m. They had curved lines, box scarfing of planks to form a keel strake, and their planks were sewn together with withies of yew – the thin roots are best – and willow. The hull was caulked with moss. Cleated stays and ribs made the hull rigid. Some think that where these boats were found was part of a boat yard on the foreshore of the Humber, where building as well as operating the boats went on.

Stitching ships together, quite big ones, is a perfectly sound technique. It still went on in the Arabian Peninsula in the 1930s: Freya Stark describes it. Yew and willow twine has immense tensile strength. But it becomes essential to use something like that in an economy where either you do not have iron – you have not invented it yet! – or iron is in very short supply, as in the early Viking period. Some Viking ships were indeed sewn together. After all, the technology even of the eleventh century still required two days of smelting, with a huge use of charcoal, to produce a very few pounds of iron even from high-grade ore. The stuff was very valuable. Of course, when you can get nails, the development of the clinker method of construction, which is very strong, is natural, and the Norse peoples and mediaeval Europe in general soon seized on that. So the Ferriby boats are at the cutting edge of technology: and at the end, at that date, of a very long process of development of which we have pretty well no record. Yet.

Boats like the Ferriby ones could sail perfectly well. Backed by the National Maritime Museum, a replica was built in Falmouth and in March 2013 *Morgawr* – all ships deserve names – took to the water. Professor Robert van der Noort, who led the project

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said, ‘When I was steering the boat and it got up to speed, I could turn her easily and it was more seaworthy than I expected. We have learnt so much through the whole process and the launch has revolutionised everything we knew.’ Never underestimate the ancestors... The three sailing reconstructions of the fourteenth-century cog recovered from the mud of Bremen harbour, in which she had slept for seven centuries, show that that round-bellied, flat-bottomed, single-masted workhorse of the middle ages sailed beautifully. Her single big sail gave lots of pulling power, she could go higher on the wind than expected, she could take the bottom (necessary when loading and unloading on a beach), and a couple of men and a boy could handle her. Cargo handling was excellent, with the yard doubling as a derrick.

The idea we grew up with in primary school of ‘simple dugout canoes’ (what *is* a simple dugout canoe? – try making one!) just will not work. The beautiful Byrke boat of about 100 AD in Roskilde Museum near Copenhagen is made out of a single tree, it is beautifully shaped, and its carving is so precise that its sides are only a uniform one inch thick. The 12-metre one, from about 2500 BC marvellously preserved and recently examined in Lough Corrib, County Galway, has sides a uniform 2cm thick. (The problem with that sort of boat is that you waste a lot of useful wood.) A quietly efficient technology already in place in prehistoric times produced families of boats that were perfectly adapted to local materials, conditions and purposes and were used for thousands of years – until yesterday, in fact. Some examples: the *fjaeringar*, the small boats of the fjordlands, have the same sort of lines as the old Viking ships, and are now moulded in plastic where half a century ago they were still planked in larch. But the design is a thousand years old and much more, because it *works* in those waters. The dinghy found with the Gokstad ship in the burial mound, from sometime around 890 AD, has very similar lines. The Humber keels are another example of a design that has a very long ancestry indeed, probably back beyond the Vikings, and was ideally suited for launching off a beach and being managed by a man and a boy. Furthermore, the twelfth-

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century Bryggen ship, recently excavated in Bergen from near those lovely Hanseatic warehouses, shows that builders in the continuing Viking tradition were capable of building very large cargo carrying vessels, capable of long ocean voyages. (She was about 30 metres long and 10 metres in the beam, and may have been a two-masted busse.) It is also surprising how well these ancient ships could work to windward: *HMS Victory*, to give us a standard, could manage 67 degrees to the wind, and most of these old ships could do better.



About 1,200 years ago – that is, a bit before *The Seafarer* but a bit after the events that gave rise to the triumph and tragedy of Beowulf the Wedergeat – someone wrote an account of the voyage of a man called Brendan, who died sometime between 570 and 583. In all probability, Brendan founded the monastery of Clonfert in Galway, and he is also associated with others in Kerry, Clare and Galway, and along the Shannon. The story claims he travelled all over the North Atlantic. Some think the account (in the form we have it, written some two hundred years after the voyage) remembers a landing in America.

Brendan, son of Finnlug Ua Alta, of the race of Eoghan... was famed for his great abstinence and his many virtues, and was the patriarch of nearly three thousand monks. ...There came to him one evening a certain father, named Barinthus, of the race of King Niall. When the saint questioned him, he did but weep, and cast himself prostrate, and continue the longer in prayer. But Brendan, raising him up, embraced him, saying: ‘Father, why should we be thus sorrowful on the occasion of your visit? Have you not come to give us comfort? You ought, indeed, make better cheer for the brethren. In God’s name, make known unto us the

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divine secrets, and refresh our souls by recounting to us the manifold wonders you have seen upon the great deep.’

Then Barinthus proceeds to tell of a certain island far, far to the west – the Promised Land of the Saints. Forthwith, with a small band of his brother monks, Brendan built a boat of oxhides, and set sail...

Why?

In the fifth to the early ninth centuries, most of Europe was in sometimes chaotic transition from the Last Days of the Roman Empire in the West – much messier and untidier than most films and novels present – to the establishment, on the Continent, of the hegemony of the Franks under Charlemagne and his successors. Seven Anglo Saxon kingdoms quarrelled in what is now England. A few last ‘Romano-British’ strongholds held out in the west. Ireland, by contrast, was as peaceful as Ireland ever has been, and was the great powerhouse of scholarship. It was the last place in the West where Greek was studied, until the Renaissance revived it. Irish scholars were at the forefront of learning. The energy behind this was the Church: the conversion after St Patrick was rapid and pretty total, and it was a conversion of a culture where the scholar, the bard and the seer had already very high status. These were roles the new priests seamlessly took over. Irish priests not only travelled widely including into Moorish Spain, to meet other scholars, but also were missionaries who achieved marvels in converting the pagan Germanic tribes who had arrived in the West. Columba on Iona, Cuthbert and Aidan in Lindisfarne, Columbanus in France and Lombardy, St Gall in Swabia, St Kilian in Switzerland – all familiar names even now: and the conversion of Germany and Frisia was done by Irish or Irish-trained monks. Important centres of scholarship and sanctity, like Luxeuil, owed their foundation to the Irish. Irish monks regularly travelled to study at the monastery on the Ile d’Hyères near Marseilles, where they encountered the Christian scholarship of the Mediterranean and of Byzantine

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Greece – indeed, some scholars think that the knitting patterns of the Aran Islands are derived from Byzantine designs. The lasting influence of these men was huge.

Irish monasticism used few of the structures that we associate with Western monasticism and the Rules for communities descending from the first of them all, that of St Benedict. The monasteries in the Mediterranean the Irish visited were influenced by the Greek tradition, even of the Egyptian Desert Fathers (like St Anthony, fasting and praying in a life of extreme asceticism) who began it all – if the Syrians did not get there first. Western mainstream monasticism, to be sure, has a key place for the ascetic life, but the extremes to which asceticism was taken on the one hand by the stylites (St Simeon, for example, spent 37 years atop a high pillar near Aleppo) and the Irish on the other make the usual version look sybaritic.

To glimpse what drove men like Brendan, or Cuthbert, or Columba, we need some grasp of what asceticism was about. (Be it clearly understood that I write as a sympathetic observer, not as an *athleta* myself.) For asceticism is a going into training, as an athlete does, a training of the body to work in unison with the mind to apprehend the shadows of the Divine as they appear to mortal sense. For, so it was held, at the Fall the body/mind harmony was fatally dislocated, and appetite began its despotic rule. Excess of food, far beyond what was needed for survival, led to the unruliness of the desires and the uncontrollable impulses of the body to sex, and anger, and covetousness, and sloth. Asceticism, the privation of all that was not absolutely necessary, aimed to bring the body and its desires back into proper subjection to the spirit. So fasting and watching, discipline and silence, were not ends in themselves. They were very far indeed from life-denying, but means to achieve a fullness of spirit and prepare for the joy beyond the walls of this world which all desire, though they may know it not.

So the Irish monks, sometimes separately, sometimes together, sought ever more remote, inhospitable places for their prayers and studies. Even as communities, their lives were solitary, each one in his own little cell – rather like at a later date the Carthusians. Dotted

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all round the coasts of Ireland and Scotland are traces of these little beehive huts, ingeniously built of dry stone, not much bigger than a large dogkennel, that were the homes of these *athletae Christi*. St Columba's is still pointed out on Iona, a circle of fallen stone – the roof has caved in – where the wind keens in the heather of the moor and the sound of the restless sea to the west underlines the silence. It overlooks the eastern beach where the Norsemen massacred the monks in a raid in 794. Skellig Michael, off the Kerry shore, a tower of rock rising straight out of the sea with scarce land to feed a hen, was home to a community, who painfully made little gardens for vegetables out of broken limestone and seaweed and protected them from the Atlantic gales with drystone walls. St Ronan took up his lonely station on North Rona, off Lewis, and it is said his sister took herself off to the wave-gnawed rock to the west, Sula Sgeir, over which the waves break in big storms. She was later found dead in a bothy there, her rib cage protecting the nest of a shag. It is said that sea-lashed Rockall had its hermit; Faeroe certainly did, and the Norsemen seem to have found the Irish there when they arrived. By these standards, Iona is positive luxury; compared with the Farnes (where Cuthbert, leaving Iona, meditated for years) St Herbert's Island in Derwentwater, or Cuthbert's own cave on Lindisfarne, was a land flowing with milk and honey. And these strange men, to whom the things of this world seemed as nothing, acquired a huge authority among those round them: the people of Northumbria constantly sought the counsel of Cuthbert; men and women travelled from all over Strathclyde to seek advice, and arbitration of disputes, of St Molios sitting in his cave in the steep side of Holy Island in Arran. I have drunk from the spring he used. (The island is now dotted with Buddhist shrines.)

But complete abandonment to the will of God, as *peregrini*, to the Spirit that bloweth where it listeth – the ultimate aim – could be taken utterly literally. Brendan in fact was taking it quite easy in his voyage: he had oars, and a sail. There are records of monks setting out in a boat with few if any provisions, without oars or sail, so that the winds and currents which obey the will of God could take them

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whithersoever. They translated into northern terms the pilgrimage of the Israelites in the wilderness – what Columbanus in a homily called ‘peregrination for the love of God’. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for 891 records that three Irishmen called Macbeth, Maclimmin, and Dubslane, came to King Alfred in a ‘boat without oars or sail, bent on serving God in a state of pilgrimage’. Many of these pilgrims surely drowned: some arrived somewhere. And there they made their habitation. They took *Hebrews xi* literally, that all are pilgrims, that man is an exile from his true home, for here is no Eternal City, here is no abiding stay. ‘Onward! We would be at Jerusalem!’ says good Walter Hilton.

So Brendan’s voyage is a spiritual journey, seeking salvation. The physical journey is an explicit metaphor for the spiritual. Exploration for its own sake, of course, is not an idea to be encountered much before Captain Cook – in fact our mediaeval ancestors would have been horrified by any such idea, seeing it as a manifestation of that dangerous moral weakness, *curiositas*. (Now we know why it killed the cat...)



Brendan’s little group saw many marvels. Many are garbled in the telling, filtered through inadequacies of description and communication. On one island, in an empty hall, food appeared magically for them. On another they were so many sheep the ground could not be seen; nearby they found the Paradise of Birds, where some of the birds spoke to them in human speech. They camped on a bare island, without sand or shore, and lit a fire on it – but the island began to move, for they had camped on the back of a great fish asleep upon the waters. Next they came to a monastic community where they were welcomed for the fifty days from Easter to Pentecost. On yet another island was a well which sends those who drink of it to sleep, and then they came to a part of the sea where it was, so to speak, clotted and movement was impossible.

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They were pursued by a ravening beast, spouting foam from his nostrils, and were saved from him by the appearance of another beast which killed him, and they cut up the dead monster for food. Another island was inhabited by three choirs, perpetually hymning the Creator. And so it goes on: an island of luscious grapes, a sea so clear they can see right to the bottom, with all the fish thronging round the boat, and an island like a crystal pillar, another full of noise and fire and smoke whose inhabitants throw hot rocks and lumps of slag at them, and an island with a mountain belching fire. They find Judas having a respite, a *refrigerium* or cooling off from Hell, solitary on a rock, and on another rock Paul the Hermit leads his solitary life. Finally, they came to the land of the Saints, so encircled by fog that it is hard to find. The island was full of sweet water and fruiting trees, but in it was a river they were not yet permitted to cross. And finally, they returned home. Theirs is a tale with many previous and later echoes, from the *Odyssey* to Mandeville's *Travels* and C S Lewis' *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. And quaint enough, and patent nonsense. But... experience has taught me to be very cautious about dismissing things out of hand.

A major ocean voyage in a leather boat is perfectly feasible. The intrepid Tim Severin did it years ago in the North Atlantic. He was seeking to prove that stories, like Brendan's, of Irish monks crossing the Atlantic to what we now call America might have happened. Of course, to prove it could have happened does not prove it did, any more than Thor Heyerdahl's various crossings of the oceans of the world on an assortment of implausible craft, from reed boats to balsa rafts, proved his theories about migration. They prove only that the thing is possible. As it happens, I myself am happy to accept Heyerdahl's argument for cultural influences from Peru impinging on the Polynesian peoples of the eastern Pacific, despite the fact that mitochondrial DNA proves their racial origin to be different from the South American peoples. Likewise, I am morally pretty certain that the Irish did get across the Atlantic, but it cannot yet be conclusively proved and probably would not matter much if it could.

As for the boats: as anywhere, you use what material there is to



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hand. Coracles for one person used to be common enough. They were still used on the Wye by salmon fishers when I was young, as they were used on the Yorkshire Ouse in the seventeenth century by Andrew Marvell's 'Salmon fishers moist', carrying them home on their head like 'Antipodes in shoes'. Curraghs are much bigger, but the principle is the same, of a lightweight frame of wood over which is stretched a watertight covering. (Shapes do vary somewhat from region to region). Nowadays the covering would be canvas that would then be tarred – as it still is in Tristan da Cunha, or was until recently (maybe still) in the Aran Islands; but in Brendan's time it would be leather – ox hides. These would be sewn on the framework, and the stitching and seams smeared with tallow or other grease waterproofer. Oxhide is immensely tough, and can take a lot of punishment that rigid wood can't, and like the shock-absorbing inflatable dinghy, this sort of boat is ideal for landing on a rocky beach. Their suppleness does not prevent them taking sail. (Of course, a shallow drafted keel-less boat will not work well to windward.) They are also very light, replaceable and repairable: *The Voyage of St Brendan* describes how

The saint and his brethren, using tools of iron, made a light vessel, with wicker sides and ribs, such as is usually made in that country, and covered it with cow-hide, the which was tanned in oak-bark. They tarred the joints thereof, and put on board provisions for forty days, with butter enough to dress hides for covering the boat and all things needed for the use of the crew. They also put a mast in the middle, and took a sail, and a steering oar. They carried into the boat hides for the making of two other boats. The saint then ordered the monks to embark, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

Brendan's journey – or the story of it – sets some problems. First, perhaps because they were the literate class, we know about some of the monks' voyages, but we have no idea about the voyages of lay

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people. So we cannot be sure how representative they were. Secondly, the writers are simply not interested in the things we are, and even if they had been, they did not have the tools for description that the centuries between us and them have developed. They had no interest in providing a topography, or an account of a journey for someone else to use. It was an edifying narrative to stress the virtue of the saint, his especial holiness, and the grace of God that supported him. Saint's lives are a very specific literary form, designed to be edifying, and for use as a devotional aid – to make others saints, in short.

But this is complicated in the *Voyage of St Brendan* by a sort of fusion with another kind of narrative which we find in Old Irish and to some degree Old Welsh. This is the *immram*, or voyage to the Other World. In Irish the best known is the journey of Oisín, son of Finn MacCumhail, to the paradisaical Tír Na nÓg, the Land of Youth, in the far, far West. Oisín goes off as a young man, and stays young during the short year he thinks he is in the Land of Youth: but as soon as he touches Ireland on his return, he is centuries old, and has only time to tell his story to St Patrick before he expires. England is short on these Other-World narratives where a different time operates, but there is one connected with Melrose. On the side of the Eildon Hill, beside the old road, now closed to traffic but traversable on foot or bicycle, that links the A6091 above Melrose with the B6389 at Newtown St Boswells, is a stone erected in 1929 to commemorate that, under an ancient hawthorn tree that once stood there, the historical Thomas of Erceldoune (*fl.* late thirteenth century) slept, and was carried off as her lover for seven years by the Queen of Faerye as she rode by a-hunting with her court...

Clearly Brendan's voyage took over some features of these very ancient stories: the paradise in the far west where all tears are wiped from all eyes, its fruitfulness, and the welcome the travellers are given. But in Ireland in the eighth century you could hardly not include elements of the Land of Youth voyage if you wanted your writing to be taken seriously: it comes with the package, just as in the West there are certain conventions that quite simply have to be there, or at least hinted at, for us to grasp what sort of story we are in.

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So Brendan's story builds on a tradition, common along the seacoast of Western Europe, of lands to the far west. In Portugal there was a legend of seven bishops who, to escape the invading Visigoths, sailed with their flocks to a land in the west called Antillia: and when real islands to the west were found in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, one group of them was called the Antilles and people spent a lot of time trying to find those Christian communities that ought to be there. Brazil is called Brazil after Hy-Brasil, a phantom island featuring in many Irish stories. It was said to be cloaked in mist, except for one day each seven years, when it became visible but could still not be reached – interesting how that motif surfaces again in Lerner and Loewe's 1954 musical *Brigadoon!* St Brendan's Island could well be Hy-Brasil.

Can anything remotely factual be decoded from the *Voyage?* The boats and the ocean journey itself are no problem. If you think where a boat might be carried from western Ireland, given the prevailing weather patterns in summer, given the usual position of the polar front, it is northerly and northwesterly. So Rockall becomes a perfectly plausible place for Paul the Hermit, though on a bad day (as when I glimpsed it to windward in the teeth of the wind and spray) it might suit better for Judas's holiday from Hell. The Paradise of Birds could be pretty well anywhere, for there are so many islands where even now the birds fill the air: St Kilda, Fair Isle, Mykines in Faeroe – though it must be within a day's sail of the community where Brendan and his brothers stayed. The Island of Sheep is probably Faeroe – which is what the Norse name means, but there is a problem about who put those sheep there in the first place. The clotted sea looks awfully like the Sargasso Sea, far away to the south, distorted by many retellings of the actual experience, but it could equally be the soft fringes of the polar pack. The Island of Crystal is clearly an iceberg, so that must have been seen pretty far north. For icebergs were rare in the north Atlantic at that time: after all, when the Icelanders colonised Greenland, there was no ice in the Greenland current.

The Island of Grapes is probably the eastern seaboard of America,

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which the Norse discovered centuries later and called Vinland. The land enveloped in fog may be Labrador or Newfoundland, and the clear sea full of fish the Grand Banks. The Island of Smiths sounds like a volcano erupting, with a literary memory of the Cyclops thrown in, and there are at least two candidates in the Westman Islands, or Jan Mayen. On the other hand, the pursuing monster, the Gryphon and other marvels are straight out of the collection of symbolic mythical animals that come right down to the early modern period: a gryphon in a twelfth century manuscript, for example, engages in its usual pastime of molesting horses, and it did not like people either. It's often a symbol of the Devil. So with the great Island Fish, Jasconius, whom Brendan encounters twice:

When they drew nigh, the boat stopped ere they reached a landing place. The saint ordered the brethren to get out into the sea, and make the vessel fast, stem and stern, until they came to some harbour. There was no grass on the island, very little wood, and no sand on the shore. While the brethren spent the night in prayer outside the vessel, the saint remained in it, for he knew well what manner of island was this, but he wished not to tell the brethren, lest they might be too much afraid. When morning dawned, he bade the priests celebrate Mass, and after he himself had said Mass in the boat, the brethren took out some uncooked meat and fish they had brought from the other island, and put a cauldron on a fire to cook them, After they had placed more fuel on the fire, and the cauldron began to boil, the island moved about like a wave. Thereupon they all rushed towards the boat, and implored the protection of their father, who, taking each one by the hand, drew them all into the vessel. Then relinquishing what they had removed to the island, they cast their boat loose, to sail away, whereupon the island at once sunk into the ocean. Afterwards they could see the fire they had kindled still burning more than two miles off, and then Brendan explained what had happened: 'Brethren, you wonder at what has happened to this island.'

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‘Yes, father,’ said they, ‘we wondered, and were seized with a great fear.’

‘Fear not, my children,’ said the saint, ‘for God has last night revealed to me the mystery of all this. It was not an island you were upon, but a fish, the largest of all that swim in the great sea, which is ever trying to make its head and tail meet, but cannot succeed, because of its great length. Its name is Jasconius.’

It is difficult indeed to see what factual basis there might be for this account of Brendan’s celebrating Mass on his back. It’s an oddly tenacious legend, though – it is depicted on the Arab Piri Reis map of 1513 – and very useful as a symbol of deadly danger unsuspected: in *Paradise Lost* in 1667 Milton (ll. 200-208) describes the vast bulk of Satan as like

...that Sea-beast  
Leviathan, which God of all his works  
Created hugest that swim th’ Ocean stream:  
Him haply slumbring on the Norway foam  
The Pilot of some small night-founder’d Skiff,  
Deeming some Island, oft, as Sea-men tell,  
With fixed Anchor in his skaly rind  
Moors by his side under the Lee, while Night  
Invests the Sea, and wished Morn delays...

Whales, big ones, could not have been unfamiliar to the western Irish, and the story’s roots may lie in the rather disconcerting encounters one can have with sperm whales and the great basking sharks, their huge filtering mouths wide open to welcome little fishes in. I have had such an encounter. I was once fishing off Arran in an inflatable, when my grandson Tom, with some alarm, silently pointed to a big triangular fin a few yards away. Several yards behind the fin a tail projected from the water. A basking shark, of course, a gentle beast, not at all interested in us. He (she?) lazily

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sashayed round us for a minute or two, then as lazily swam off to find something more interesting. Young Tom's knuckles on his rod unclenched, unwhitened... or again, miles off Tromsø, in a bigger boat – but not *that* big – about a dozen yards to port the water boiled, and a big square grey barnacled snout poked out of the water, and slowly the back heaved up. The blow, slow and languorous – ‘ah, that's better!’ – drifted down on us, wet, warm, smelling of fish, and I at least recognised a distant mammal cousin (actually, closer to the hippo than to me). And the great bull whale heaved his back up into the thinness of air, the flukes came up, and with sinuous grace he balletically dived deep, deep down to where the halibut live. He cared not for us, going about his business in great waters. Only, he was that Leviathan!



The story of Brendan could record an actual crossing of the ocean, by men who lacked tools to describe and communicate what they had seen to those they told of their experiences. And those people repeated the story, time and again, altering its emphasis from the factual to the spiritual, in a sort of Chinese whisper (like that story of the signal received by Staff behind the Front in the First World War: ‘Send three and fourpence we're going to a dance’ / ‘send reinforcements we're going to advance.’) There were then, and there are now, problems with the language in which we can describe the unknown and unfamiliar: yet we base our certainties on such information.

And legends are long lived. Maps of Columbus's time often included an island called St Brendan's Isle in the western Atlantic ocean. Admiral Samuel Morison, who wrote on Columbus in the last century, documented the legend that Columbus was once in Galway and heard stories of the voyage of Brendan, which gave him the idea of sailing west to find a new land. Like Morison, I don't think there is much in that story itself, as Columbus had other fish to fry,

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and they were pretty hard commercial ones: but, as Geoffrey Ashe demonstrated in his *Land to the West* in the 1960s, the persistence of legends of the lands beyond the sunset is clear.

The *Navigatio* exists in vernacular versions, including the seminal Dutch, as early as the twelfth century. It was printed very early in the new technology, in German, by Anton Sorg in Augsburg in 1476. Printers don't print except for money: Sorg thought he had a market. Now it is extremely interesting that about the same time he printed an illustrated copy of *Mandeville's Travels*, supposedly recording a journey to the fabulously rich lands of the East, which asserts that with a good ship you could encircle the entire globe. We know from the Portuguese journeys round Africa to India that there was a lot of interest at this very time in finding a passage to the East. There was a lot of money involved in the spice trade, and a lot of politics in making links with potentates in the rear of an aggressive Islam. Augsburg happened to be the base of one of the most influential banking and finance houses in Europe, the Fuggers, whose links were everywhere: Venice, Burgundy, London, Spain. They had a lot of interest in those projects for voyages to the East: and in the 1470s there was growing interest in the possibility of a voyage west direct to India and China. Influential people like the mathematician and polymath Paolo Toscanelli, Canon Fernão Martins, and Nicholas of Cusa, backed it. (Toscanelli's – too small – calculation for the circumference of the Earth was used by Columbus.) Nobody knew America was in the way... I am certain that Sorg's publication of the *Voyage of St Brendan* was part and parcel of that interest in those projects, for any information, however old, just might be useful. And so the old saint, nine hundred years dead, was pressed into the service of a new project which would transform the economy and history of the world.



But that world had already been turned upside down by the Norse diaspora, of which we are the inevitable heirs. In 787, according to

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the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a royal official encountered a group of men from Norway who had landed in Portland, in Dorset. He thought they were merchants. When he tried to get them to accompany him to the king's manor to pay a trading tax on their goods they murdered him. Five years later, in 793, when Beorhtric was King of Wessex, Simeon of Durham recorded the first serious Viking raid on the British Isles:

And they came to the church of Lindisfarne, laid everything waste with grievous plundering, trampled the holy places with polluted feet, dug up the altars and seized all the treasures of the holy church. They killed some of the brothers; some they took away with them in fetters; many they drove out, naked and loaded with insults; and some they drowned in the sea.

Alcuin of York, who founded the Palace School at Aachen under the patronage of Charlemagne, wrote:

For 350 years we and our forefathers have inhabited this lovely land, and never before has such a terror appeared as this we have now suffered at the hands of the heathen.

And he quoted *Jeremiah* 1:14, 'Then the Lord said unto me, Out of the North an evil shall break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land,' seeing the raiding Vikings as God's instrument of divine retribution upon a sinful people – ironically, just as the Romano-British monk Gildas, three hundred years before, had seen his countrymen's sins as demanding God's punishment in the coming of – well, Alcuin's forefathers, the Angles and Saxons.

Keen cuts the wind tonight,  
White horses scour the sea.  
I fear not this night the men of Lochlann,  
Spurring the horses of the sea...



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The Irish monk who wrote that relieved little poem in the margin of a manuscript on which he was working, sometime in the ninth century, had good reason to like stormy nights, for within the next five years – merely five! – after 787, Vikings attacked Lindisfarne and Jarrow in Northumbria, Wales, Ireland, the Isle of Man, Iona, and raided even down to Aquitaine in France. It must have seemed, to those accustomed to the teleology of the *Revelation of St John the Divine*, like the beginning of Apocalypse. Yet they did not have it quite all their own way. Their victims could be as bloody as they were, and occasionally the Vikings were beaten off. Indeed, a grave excavated in June 2009 in what was Wessex, on Ridgway Hill near Weymouth, might well record a raiding party that did not make it back to the ship. Fifty four men, who grew up in Scandinavia, most aged between 18 and 25, with one over 50, had been decapitated, and their bodies had been chucked any old how into a disused quarry of Roman date. Their heads had been piled up on the southern side of the grave. Carbon-14 dating gives a date between 970 and 1034: there were attacks on Dorset in 982 (when Portland was put to fire and sword), in 998, in 1015 and 1016. A mass execution in a very visible spot, an Awful Warning? The men may have been humiliated by stripping before their deaths: there was no evidence of clothing. The *Jómsvíkinga Saga* of around 1200 records such a mass killing of captives, and how the long hair of which Vikings seem to have taken such care was tied up to keep it out of the way of the sword or axe blade. (But the neck vertebra of one of the Ridgway Hill men shows it took four goes to sever his head.) Setbacks there were, but nevertheless over the next 250 years the Vikings became feared throughout Europe, from Orkney to Sicily, Ireland to Rome, America to Byzantium. *A furore Normannorum libera nos, Domine*: ‘from the rage of the Northmen, Good Lord deliver us.’ Years ago, I was taught that that was part of the Litany in every medieval church. (Actually, no ninth-century text known has these words, though many medieval prayers do pray for deliverance from unnamed enemies – and probably with good reason.)

Latterly it has become fashionable to revise the image of the

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Vikings, not to see them as routinely engaged in rape, pillage and murder, but rather as able and vigorous traders, with admittedly some rather original ideas about market penetration. Trade they certainly did; rape *qua* rape they regarded as deserving death, and their law codes punish it so. They had a gift for organisation. Their jewellery, wood carving and even weapons show they were far from inartistic or insensitive to beauty. They cared about their personal cleanliness and their appearance: a tenth-century Persian explorer describes Vikings in Russia wearing trousers made of ‘one hundred cubits of cloth’, and a number of runestones show warriors with flared breeches. Combs are one of the commonest of grave goods. Indeed, the English cleric John of Wallingford, writing in the mid-1200s, complains that the Danes in York ‘...caused much trouble to the natives, for after the fashion of their country, they combed their hair every day, bathed every Saturday, changed their garments often, and beautified their persons by many frivolous devices. In this way they laid siege to the virtue of married women, and persuaded the daughters even of nobles to be their mistresses.’ We can also forget about those ridiculous horned helmets – it’s a totally silly idea, for such helmets would have been a liability in a scrap. But there is no getting away from the fact that it would not have been nice having them, clean and spruce or not, call on you. Yet the whole history of Europe, including many of its greatest and most significant achievements and some of its most rooted ideas, would simply not have happened without the forces that drove that longboat ashore on Lindisfarne in June 793.



Scandinavia is not an easy part of the world: even at the climatic optimum, around the year 1000, when mean temperatures were warmer than they are now, the growing season was short, and apart from some good land in the Trondelag and round Oslo and Stavanger, Norway is mainly rock and mountain. Sweden, despite

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its flatter land, is colder because it is further from the Atlantic. Useful arable land is scarce. The scraps of land at the heads of the fjords could only rarely support more than a few families, and in many cases are cut off from land contact with each other. So what do you do when you have sons growing up and no land to give them? You export them: exactly as Greece, another mountainous country with a fissured coast, made up of fiercely independent and often antagonistic little communities, exported its surplus men: you send them off on piratical voyages to find their own land – anything to get them from under your feet where they would cause trouble.

But push that parallel with Greece a little further. Consider a society where the male values are valour, honour, *kudos*, the esteem of one's peers, *arete*, the ability to fight well and hard, where the worst of deaths is to die in one's bed. A world of constant fighting, of resignation to one's fate, of fierce loyalty to the clan family, that can result in generation after generation of bloody feud. Raiding one's neighbours, or persuading them to join with you to raid someone else, is part of the pattern of survival: you are wealthy and powerful in so far as you have booty and slaves and can defend your having them. Now that describes the Greece of Homer accurately enough, where the taking of a concubine at the point of a spear, having killed her husband and father, as Achilles did with Briseis, can seem normal, praiseworthy – what her men would have done had they had the chance. And as Homer tells us, Briseis can love, and mourn for, those men among whom she has fallen. But saving the fact that in Scandinavian society free women had a lot of clout, and a place in the story, as does Aud (sometimes called Unnr) the Deep-minded in *Njal's Saga*, what I have summarised about Homer's world is true in almost every respect of the physical, geographical, moral and political organisation of the north: exactly the heroic world we see reflected in the sagas. And it is very uncomfortable to receive the attentions of such heroes. What to the Anglo-Saxons, and the Irish, and the Franks, was rape and murder was to the Vikings true manliness, the fitting of oneself to win a place in Valhalla, to fight alongside father Odin at the great Last Battle of Ragnarök.

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Those young men were not just barbaric, not just Homeric. They were not just boneheads. Nobody need starve in Norway, Sweden or Denmark if you like fish, and fish is, they say, very good for the brain. These young men who swept in wave after wave over the western world when the population reached the limit their land could support in the ninth century were bloody fighters, great organisers, intellectually as tough as nails, and made the world we know what it is.

Generally, the men of Norway expanded north and west, the Danes to England, settling in what became the Danelaw, and marked our placenames from Essex to the Lothians. People from what is now Sweden generally went east, around the Baltic, and down the great rivers of Russia. But the groups were not clearly separated, were united by a common Old Norse language, a common culture, and a common set of values, and they mixed. In wave after wave they set out, originally raiding, seeking booty with which to reward their followers – Adam of Bremen talks of the piles of gold heaped up by them – seeking stores, then camping for the winter, then staying for good. And indeed, to a man brought up in Norway, the fat land of Orkney or Aberdeenshire, let alone the soft land of East Anglia or France – land that grew things, that had peasants to work it for you – must have seemed very heaven. Why, indeed, go home? They brought their extended families of thralls and dependents with them as the pressures on land in Scandinavia increased, and as jarls in Norway like Harald Fairhair or Haakon Ladejarl or Olaf Tryggvason sought to impose central control – in the end successfully – on fierce little independent clans. (Harald had vowed not to cut his hair until he had brought all Norway under his rule.) The Danes first wintered in England in Thanet in 851, in London in 870, and the pattern was repeated all over northern Europe. They had taken over Orkney, Shetland, the Faeroes by 800; by around 870 – when they first wintered in Sheppey on the Thames – they had begun to settle Iceland, one of the world's last large islands to be inhabited by man: the *Landnámabók*, or 'Book of Settlements', says that Ingolfr Arnarson from west Norway was the

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first man to settle. There were Norse kingdoms in Dublin and York by 900; they gave names to much of the Lake District, and southern Scotland. They held the Isles of Scotland and the social structure and the ships of that part of Scotland retained many Norse features until the eighteenth century. The Dukes of Argyll, even in the early 1700s, had a right reaching back to the time when they were jarls, to call out a war galley, built by one of their hereditary shipwrights, in time of crisis.

But they were reaching even further afield. To America, certainly; to Spain and the Canaries, to the Mediterranean, where they were raiding Sicily and North Africa before 1000. But also all along the Baltic and up the north flowing rivers of Europe – the Dvina, Oder, the Vistula – and to the east; for the Baltic is a thoroughfare too, giving access to the rich heartlands of Europe along the river systems, and once you have made the portage over the watershed, you can follow the rivers in your ships down to the Black Sea, the Caspian and the Mediterranean. We easily forget that at least as many Vikings went east, down the Dnieper to the Black Sea, as went west. They built great fortresses and trading centres – Hedeby in Schleswig, the Jomsborg in Pomerania, Holmgård or Novgorod, their first capital in what became Russia – all placed strategically as secure bases for their trade and booty on the routes they dominated. Hedeby, now deserted, was the largest Nordic city during the Viking Age. Its location is ideal, and a tribute to the lost surveying skills of that period: there is a short portage of less than 15 km to the Treene River which flows into the Eider with its North Sea estuary, so goods and ships could be taken overland for an almost uninterrupted seaway between the Baltic and the North Sea, avoiding a dangerous circumnavigation of Jutland – exactly as does Bismarck's Kiel Canal, which passes a few miles from Hedeby. An Arab trader, Al-Tartushi, from elegant and refined Moorish Cordoba, visited it in the mid tenth century, and was not very impressed – a town 'poorly off for goods and wealth... the chief food is fish, for there is so much of it... I never heard more horrible singing... it is like a growl, or the barking of dogs, only more beastly.'

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But he found it curious, remarking how much freedom of behaviour and in law the women had, how children born there were often exposed or thrown into the sea ‘to save bringing up’, how there was a mix of heathen and Christian, how both sexes used make-up to make themselves more beautiful. (The idea of a raiding party passing round the eye-liner before landing is an entertaining one.) But it was a rich and busy place, fully occupying about 60 acres surrounded by a defensive rampart. Ohtere went there, and it was a key point in a well-organised trading network that reached up to Kaupang on Oslo Fjord, to Novgorod, to Spain.

In Byzantium (Miklagarðr) by 839 the Emperors had an elite corps of Vikings as mercenaries, whose distinguishing weapon was the enormous two-handed axe. This Varangian Guard for centuries served as a *corps d’élite*, and they became so well paid that membership had to be purchased. It was very common for noble men from the north to serve for a time and return home rich. The most famous is King Harald Hardrada, ‘Hardruler’, who in 1030 campaigned before Jerusalem. Thirty-odd years later he would be fighting Harold Godwinson in Yorkshire in those fateful days before Hastings. After William the Bastard’s Conquest, Edgar the Atheling, grandson of Edmund Ironside and last of the Anglo-Saxon kings, also joined the Guard. Some of these Varangians went in for serious graffiti that they intended to be permanent: they carved their names on the balustrade in Hagia Sophia. At Piraeus, the port of Athens, there was a white marble lion on the shoulders of which they carved runes. (The lion gave the port its Venetian name, Porta Leone. The Venetians liked it and took it home, as they did so much else, to put it in front of the Arsenal.) The runes, now indistinct, are carved in a dragon-headed wormlike scroll, like many runestones in the North. In 1856 C C Rafn deciphered the left shoulder: ‘Asmund cut these runes with Asgeir and Thorleif, Thord and Ivar, at the request of Harold the Tall, though the Greeks considered about it and forbade it.’ And on the right, ‘Hakon with Ulf and Asmund and Örn conquered this port. These men and Harold Hafi imposed a heavy fine on account of the revolt of the Greek people. Dalk is

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detained captive in far lands. Egil is gone on an expedition with Ragnar into Romania and Armenia.’ It takes a long time to carve letters in marble, even if you have it on your hands on a hot Greek afternoon. But what puzzles me is whom Asgeir and Thorliel and Asmund thought likely to read their despatch.

By 862 Rurik controlled Ladoga and built Novgorod, and a line of important trading posts had been established from the Baltic along the Dnieper down through the land they named after themselves: Russia. Staraja Ladoga, Novgorod, and of course Kiev, seat of the first great Viking dynasty which Rurik fathered: and the nucleus of modern Russia. Rurik’s descendant Oleg, or to give him his Norse name, Helge, transferred the capital to Kiev in 886, and by 911 was making a treaty on equal terms with the Byzantines. For the raider turns into a trader: the wealth of the north in amber and furs – high value, low bulk – can be exchanged for that of the south – oil, spices, silks, salt, gold – and those in the way find a lot sticks to their hands. The Norsemen, in fact, positioned themselves very successfully along the major trade routes, and came to dominate many of their European termini.

And in the West? Well, the partition of England with them was all the great Alfred could actually achieve, and constant Danish pressure led to the collapse of the Anglo-Saxon polity under Ethelred the Ill-Counselled and the succession of the still pagan Canute – Knutr – of Demark to the throne of all England. But the most significant settlement was not in England but in the Seine valley. Thirteen ships led by Asgeir arrived in 820, and systematically burned and looted – not just once, but whenever the country’s feeble recovery made it worthwhile. Twice they were bought off from sacking Paris with huge sums. And of course they fell to quarrelling among themselves. At the end of the century, a man from Ålesund called Hrolfr (Latinised as Rollo) the Ganger, because he was so tall no horse could carry him, who could not stomach the unifying pressure of Harald Fairhair, (who, having successfully made himself first king of all Norway, had, one assumes, recently had his hair cut) imposed his authority on them all as Jarl of Rouen. He attacked as

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far as Chartres, just recovering from the sack and slaughter of every man, woman and child in 857. And so they now put up statues to him... By 911 King Charles the Simple was forced to make a treaty with Rollo, turning the poacher into a gamekeeper, and entrusting the Seine valley to his guard against further Norse invasions. The Jarl of Rouen is now a duke, and finally settles down to call the fat land, with its deep grass, its orchards and its dewlapped cattle, his own: Normandy, the land of the Northmen. The very chancy invasion of England by Rollo's descendant, William, which came off by sheer and uncovenanted fluke, can be called the last of the big Viking invasions in Britain – not quite the last, for raids from Denmark continued for at least another century, and a huge Viking fleet was defeated at Largs in 1263. As kings and states began to exert more control over their towns and subjects, however, they gradually became more piratical pinpricks than serious challenges.

By 1100, the Northmen had significantly affected and in some cases taken over the power structures of every country in northern Europe. In Normandy they took over a rich land with a functioning administrative and revenue-gathering infrastructure. The Normans were a remarkable hybridisation, culturally, of Norse and what might be called late Carolingian. On the one hand, the Norse, fiercely independent, and as we can see in their Althing at Thingvellir in Iceland, or the Tynwald (= Thingvellir) of the Isle of Man, very careful of law and right and custom and precedent to regulate relations between competing human imperatives. On the other hand, the Carolingian awareness of a massive scholarly and religious inheritance from the past, and the idea of Empire, of Rome, of the universal empire reborn. And the Normans were, so to speak, civilised by the people they conquered, for they converted to Christianity. Indeed, in the hierarchical structure of the Church and its idea of the ruler as God's Vicegerent on Earth, they found an ideology which validated their own conquest and power, and very quickly they developed views of history, and myths, which explicitly did that. Their conversion made them aware of the close link between church structures and secular power structures,



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and they became great patrons of the Church. They also gave up their language, and used the French of the land – and French was a language which could take you pretty well anywhere on the continent of Europe. They gave to French many words, and almost all the nautical terminology still used today. But to the culture they took over they brought a radical analytical and dialectical habit of mind where, as in their customary law, debate between opposites was a way to find the truth – or at least a compromise. Their talent for organisation and political administration led directly to the way we conceptualise and conduct politics and law now – not least in the adversarial structures of parliaments and law courts. However we discuss the whys and wherefores, the fact is that something remarkable – revolutionary – happened in northern France in these centuries. The twelfth-century explosion of intellectual, economic and artistic energy that led to the invention of the Gothic style and the building of the great cathedrals, to the invention of universities offering with little dialectical gimlets to open every safe in the intellectual universe, the huge labour of digesting and rethinking the learning of the past – that renaissance enabled the development of Europe as we know it and without it the Renaissance of the later Middle Ages could not have happened. Its epicentre was beyond question the Seine valley and Champagne.

The Norman Conquest of England altered world history for ever. I can't resist speculating what would have happened if it had not taken place, for it very nearly did not: if the wind had not backed southerly, which it ought not to do at that time of year... Harold was a very able strategist, a man of great energy, and had the makings of a good ruler. He nearly won at the hard day-long field of Hastings – only let down when his shield wall, scenting victory as the Normans feigned flight, broke in pursuit. But William did win. His victory's real significance was that it drew England into a continental, French-speaking community with its centre of gravity bounded by the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. Under Harold, England could well have remained within the Scandinavian-North Sea-Germanic community. Our language would have been quite

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different – for England spoke French for 300 years – and there would never have been that intense involvement with France, Brittany and Flanders that the dynastic inheritance of the Normans bequeathed to mediaeval England.

The Norse were still spreading, across Europe to the East, pushing at the boundaries of Slav culture; they were pushing at the Arab cultures of Spain and Sicily. At the end of the eleventh century, the Byzantine Emperor Manuel, after that terrible defeat by the Turks at Manzikert in 1071, appealed to the West for help. Pope Urban II, recognising as imperatives helping a fellow Christian against the infidel, and recovering Jerusalem from Islam, also saw a way to control the internecine violence endemic in western Europe – what Vikings were *good* at – by turning it outwards: if you can't stop it, turn it to better purpose. And so, at Clermont-Ferrand in 1096, the first crusade was preached, and at Christmas 1099 it took Jerusalem. Young Normans flooded to the East, and carved out principalities for themselves all over the near-east, some of which lasted for centuries. Now that crusade was only the first of many: and there is no need to elaborate the way crusading has affected the ideology, the self-images, the politics and the destiny of Europe and the whole world. We are still living with the consequences of all those younger sons taking up arms after Urban's speech. And they will not go away. The Vikings, the Northmen, the Normans, let several *djinns* out of the bottle, and they won't go back.



Ohtere the Norseman's talk with King Alfred cannot be exactly dated, and we are not quite sure why it took place. The Old English verb *secan* can mean 'seek out', 'seek out for protection', or just 'visit'. He may have been a rich merchant, seeking to trade in England. He might even have been one of those Norsemen or other foreigners who had entered the king's service – hence calling him his 'lord' – possibly as a rich chieftain seeking to get away from Harald Fairhair.

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We cannot be sure. But what is recorded of the conversation, in which Alfred was apparently very interested, indicates a man of real substance, with 600 domesticated animals, trading in many commodities, including walrus ivory, right round the North Cape, with the Saami or Lapps ‘who live by hunting in winter and fishing in summer’. He seems to think nothing of voyaging right up Norway – the name simply means ‘way to the North’ – or to the big market at Kaupang in Oslo Fjord, or to the hub of northern European trade at Hedeby on Schlei fjord in Schleswig. All in the name of an honest profit. And he has a near contemporary, a Saxon called Wulfstan, who left an all too short description of trading along the southern Baltic littoral – the western part the original home of the Burgundians, who have their epic in the *Nibelungenlied* – and the funeral customs of the Ests. These men are very different in their outlook to the abandonment to the will of God we glimpse in Brendan and his ilk. But they all followed the sea, used it, went to the old gray widowmaker for their fortune and their far faring, finding the committing of themselves to the restless wind as natural as breathing.

I love to imagine King Alfred sitting rapt, longing to go on a far voyage, as Ohtere tells his tale, eager ‘ever to hear new things spoken of’, like the boy with his knees drawn up under his chin listening to the old sea dog with a ring in his ear spin his yarn of the fabled west in Millais’ iconic *Boyhood of Raleigh*. That painting hung on the wall of my primary school. I too often saw myself as that boy.