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ICELANDIC CHURCH SAGA.

by

John C. F. Hood.

Δ Δ

Thy glory went through four gates, of fire, and
of earthquake, and of wind, and of cold.

II Esdras 3,19.

x

Thy spirit, independence, let me share,
Lord of the lionheart and eagle eye.
Thy step I follow with my bosom bare,
Nor heed the storm that howls along the sky.
Deep in the frozen regions of the north
A goddess violated brought thee forth,
Immortal liberty, whose look sublime
Hath bleached the tyrant's cheek in every varying clime.
Tobias Smollett, (1721-71).

If I have not been able to write well, I have at
least written truthfully, using as authorities those who
are best informed about the subject.

Adam (Canon) of Bremen, first historian
of Icelandic Christianity (c 1100 AD).

ICELANDIC CHURCH SAGA

Two years in Iceland has brought the British Garrison into close touch with the Church in that isolated country on the edge of the Arctic Circle, whose bishop and presturs freely afforded us the hospitality of their cathedral and other places of worship. We learnt that their ecclesiastical fittings and ceremonies bear a close resemblance to those prescribed by the Use of the Church of England. Further study showed deeper resemblances in their Church's early celtic affinities, in its mediaeval independence, its post-Reformation revival, rationalism and mystic strain. The Lutheran Reformation made a break in episcopal succession, but, as in England, continuity in Faith and worship was maintained.

No account of the Icelandic Church exists in English. Jón Helgason, Bishop of Iceland 1917-38, has published in Icelandic a valuable though undocumented history of the Christianity of his country (Kristnisaga Islands, 2 vols. Reykjavik 1925-7). The only other history is the imposing Latin work of Bishop Fimur Jónsson in four quarto volumes complete to 1740 (Historia Ecclesiastica Islandiae, Copenhagen 1772-8), continued by Bishop Pétur Pétursson (1740-1840).

Original sources are markedly reliable. An early priest Ari Thorgilsson (1067-1148), known as the Wise, set himself to collect accurate records of his country's origins, which are contained in *Islendinga-bók* and *Kristni Saga*, both composed about the year 1130. *Landnámabók*, the Book of the Settlement, compiled about the year 1150, gives a detailed account of the colonization of Iceland (874-930). All these records pay special attention to Christian origins and development.

1. The plural of this word is *prestar*, but just as sagas has become the anglicised plural of *saga*, by reason of our familiarity with those attractive writings, so with '*prestur*' - our friendship with many of them has anglicised the plural. The word '*pastors*' has an un-Icelandic connotation.

Ecclesiastical traditions are embodied in the early sagas, accounts of bishops and leading churchmen, written by authors evidently in close touch with the periods they describe. These Lives were collected and published in two stout volumes by Mollers of Copenhagen in 1858 and 1872, a monumental work now out of print and almost impossible to obtain. They were presented to me on my leaving the country by the local printers of 'The Mid-night Sun' (a paper I edited for the forces in Iceland), a typical gesture of goodwill.

These accounts carry us to about the middle of the xivth century, after which we have numerous and varied Annals, and a succession of Church and State documents, collected in the thirteen volumes of the valuable *Diplomatarium Islandicum*. After the Reformation, which led to a revival of interest in past history and literature, a remarkably large number of personal records ^{were} carefully drawn up by a literary nation inspired by the noble ambition to make plain to posterity that the same fresh springs of inspiration fed the apparent backwater in which they lived as filled the larger stream which flowed past them unconcerned.

Of the many travellers' reports and accounts drawn upon for details referring to the xviiith and xixth century special mention must be made of the Reverend Ebenezer Henderson's delightful Journal (1813-4). Almost alone of scribacious visitors he, like the present writer, appears to have spent more than a month or two in summer in the country and to have made contacts in all parts of the hospitable island.

This Account of the Church in Iceland has been given the title of Saga not so much because of the appropriateness of the attractive word (*adsit omen*), as for the non-abstract method it implies of letting the story itself delineate the characters of its heroes and the principles and problems involved.

This Icelandic Church Saga investigates the traces of early Christianity in the island among pre-Settlement culdees and early settlers, and describes the militant missionary efforts which led to the official adoption of Christianity in AD 1000.

It recounts the development and consolidation of

the Church under the first seven Bishops of Skálholt (1056-1211) and their contemporaries in the northern diocese of Hólar, including the story of Iceland's two episcopal saints, St. Jón and St. Thorlak.

A survey is attempted of ecclesiastical influence on education and letters and of difficulties which arose over the introduction of Canon Law especially in the matter of Church ownership. The independence of Icelandic churchmanship in the Middle Ages is illustrated in its different aspects. A description follows of the decadence of the Church and nation in the xivth and xvth centuries after the union with Norway in 1262 and a visitation of plague and physical disasters; with an estimate of the forces in moral, social, economic and intellectual spheres making for a reformation.

After the Lutheran Reformation was imposed by force on apathetic laity, bishops proved the leading men of the age which followed in learning and letters. In a period of unusually severe volcanic devastations, followed by disease and famine, the mystical side of Lutheranism found expression in the poems of Hallgrímur Pétursson (ob AD 1674) and the sermons of Bishop Jón Víðalín (ob. AD 1720), though in the next century latitudinarianism prevailed. In the 20th century Church and State carried into effect a growing dissociation from Denmark culminating in the Proclamation of Independence on June 17th 1941.

This war has intensified the country's isolation. The Icelandic Church is cut off from its sister churches on the Continent. It claims over 98% of the inhabitants, but even so, it is a small community of 130,000 souls under a bishop and 103 presturs, administered through twenty-one rural deaneries, scattered over an unaccommodating country five-fourths the size of Ireland.

When the British suddenly appeared in June 1940 to garrison their country, Icelandic clergy regardless of

misunderstanding and possible future consequences, offered to us as brethren in the Faith the hospitality of their cathedral and parish churches; and thus hundreds of our men, exiles on active service, preserved a link with their religion and their home. For this practical co-operation we are under an obligation to the Church in Iceland.

The British Forces have afforded material protection to the country; the British Council has helped its university by sending out a professor and offering bursaries. It would be well if the Church in England in its sphere could lend a hand. But before we can offer any real fellowship, it is advisable to learn something of the spirit and achievements of the Icelandic Church. It is with this end in view that I offer this account, written beneath the midnight sun and in the long sub-arctic nights.

V

THE CHURCH IN ICELAND.

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ABBREVIATIONS IN THE NOTES.

- Lndbk = Landnámabók (c.AD 1150) - Book of the first Settlement.
- Hv. = Hungrvaka (c.1200), Story of the first five bps of Skálholt.
- S. = Saga, e.g. Kristni S., Njál's S.
- B.S. = Biskupa Sögur, a collection of Lives of bps. 2 vols Cpn 1858-72. B.S.II = 2nd Series post-Reformation.
- Dipl. Isl = Diplomatarium Islandicum 13 vols Cpn and Rvk 1857
- Annals = esp. Islenskur Annaler (AD. 803-1430) Cpn 1847, Rvk 1922; Gustav Storms: Islandiske Annaler (-1578) Christiania 1858.
- O.I. = Origines Islandicae, collection of early accounts, Lndbk, Hv. etc, with trans. Ed, Vigfusson and Powell, 2 vols. OUP 1905.
- Espolin = Jón Espolin: Arbaekur Islands i Soguformi 1262-1832 12 vols. Cpn. 1821-55.
- F.J. = Bp Finnur Jónsson: Hist. Eccl. Island., History of the Icelandic Church (in Latin) to 1740; 4 vols Cpn 1778.
- P.P. = Bp Pétur Pétursson, Continuation of the above to 1840 Cpn 1841.
- J.H. = Bp Jón Helgason: Kristnisaga Islands, Hist. of Ch. in Iceland (in Icelandic) 2 vols. Rvk 1925-7.
- Gj. = G.J. Gjerset: History of Iceland. N.Y. 1924.
- E.H. = Ebenezer Henderson: Iceland (Journal of visit 1814-5) Edinburgh 1819.
- Bp = Bishop. Cpn = Copenhagen. Rvk = Reykjavik.

24° | 23°

Arctic Circle - Grimsey



0 10 20 30 40 50
English miles

N

ICELAND.

W. of Greenwich | 15°

23° | 22°

14° - X

CHAPTER ONE.TRACES OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY.(1) Pre-settlement Culdees, AD. 795.

During a pastoral tour in the second year of the world war, I was returning in the trawler "Tordensköld" down the east coast of Iceland. We had passed the cliffs south of Seydisfjörður in admiration at their brilliant mineral blues, reds and greens, and it was growing dusk. Before the Northern Lights began their winter night display, a little light shone out from the shore, and the ship's captain said: "I was expecting that. It's Papey.

I thought it seemed an unIcelandic name, and found that it is one of the oldest in the island, having been inherited by the original Norwegian settlers in the ninth century from earlier inhabitants. Near it is a fjörd called Papeos and another called Papafjörður. The gleam from Papey lighthouse has historic symbolism. It marks the first touch of Christianity in Iceland.

(a) Unusual facilities exist for determining accurate details of Icelandic Christianity from the start, as an early group of Icelandic scholars took pains to set down authoritative accounts of the origins of Icelandic civilisation.

For this purpose the most valuable accounts are given in *Islendingabók*, written with unusual skill and accuracy by the priest Ari, known as him Frodi-the Wise; 1.

1. (c1067-1148 AD). For details see under 'References' ad fin.

and Landnámabók an annotated List of Settlers compiled in the twelfth century from the researches of Ari. The prologue to Landnámabók records a definite tradition about the earliest inhabitants of Iceland and connects them with Papey and kindred place-names:- "Before the country was settled by Northmen (i.e., Norwegians) those people were there whom the Northmen call Papar. They were Christian men, and people think that they must have come from the west of the sea" (i.e. the British Isles), "because after they had gone they found Irish books and bells and croziers, and more things by which it might be perceived that they were Westmen. These things were found in the east, in Papey and Papyli. And it is also mentioned in English books that at that time there was traffic between the lands."

The mention in these records of Irish bells, i.e. handbells, and staffs, indicates that the Papar belonged to the Columban school, which laid great stress on these insignia. The Icelandic or old Norse word used for staff is 'baglar' from the old Irish 'bachall', Latin baculus, possibly suggesting itinerant missionaries. But these Papar did not missionize anybody, and lived probably as hermits or culdees. They appear to have lost also the true Columban courage. In earlier days guardians of the insignia would have defended them with their lives, rather than fleeing and leaving them behind. The reason for the monks withdrawal is added in Islendingabók. "The Papar left because they would not dwell here with heathen men." They knew too well the "fury of the Northmen", bracketed in our old litanies with fire and famine; as it was due to devastations on Iona and other Irish monasteries that these Papar had sought security in this isolated sub-arctic island. The sequence appears to be: Danes ravage the Hebrides; Columban monks take refuge in Iceland. Norwegians invade the islands (AD 865-80). Ketill Flatnose and other Northmen, driven from Iona and the isles by

1. L. Gougaud: Christianity in Celtic lands pp 131sq.

Harald Haarfagre, King of Norway, emigrate to Iceland, from which the Irish monks withdraw (AD 870sq.)

Ari suggests that they fled precipitantly at the appearance of the first settlers, who arrived "at the time when Ivan Lodbroksson killed St. Edmund, King of the Angles," (AD.870).

All place-names associated with these Irish monks appear in the SSE corner of the country. There too the traditional spot, where Injolf and Hjörleif, the first settlers, landed, is commemorated by headlands bearing their names. Between these historic sites lies the almost pre-historic Kirkjubaer, the traditional chief monastery of the Papar. A recorded saying of Injolf shows him to have been a stalwart pagan, who would not readily have welcomed Irish priests, especially after Irish slaves had slain his comrade Hjörleif. Injolf pursued these slaves to their refuge in the islands called after them, Vestmameyjar, and slew them there.¹ It would not be surprising if the neighbouring Irish Papar at Kirkjubaer heard of this and fled; though their more distant fellow countrymen at Papey and Papyli may not have gone at once, especially as Injolf soon afterwards left to seek a settlement on the West coast.

The fact that some Irish place-names survived the settlement indicates that Irish Christian occupation was not completely obliterated. These names, preserved even by heathen settlers, and handed down the ages, remain as memorials in Iceland of Celtic Christianity, to which much of the British Isles owes its civilisation.

(b) The reference in Landnámabók to records in English writings is borne out by passages in Bede, Adamnan and a traveller-monk called Dictuil.

1. Lndbk 1, 6, 7-8 (O. I.) inf. p 10.

Ultima Thule is used in ancient writers of different places, but Bede's mention of Thule "six days sailing north of Britain" clearly applies to Iceland.¹ In his commentary on 11 Kings 29,9, concerning the shadow on the dial, he gives an Icelandic illustration. "The people who dwell in the island of Thule....observe....every summer that the setting sun, below the earth to most observers, is yet visible to them all night. They see him go slowly back from west to east....as people of our own days, who come from these parts, tell us." The venerable Bede died in AD 735, and his statements show that there was intercourse between Britain and Iceland at least 130 years before Norsemen settled in the country in 870.

Adamnan (ob.AD 704) may take us further back. In his life of St.Columba he tells of a prophecy of the saint concerning a hermit Kormak, who made three voyages in St.Columba's days (521-597) in order to find a deserted spot in the ocean (eremeum in oceano)- possibly the Faroes, though, an apt description of Iceland even today.²

Dictuil writing about AD 825, speaks of islands "now empty of anchorites on account of pirate Northmen."³ He says that the Faroes had been tenanted by Irish for a century. From there they went on to "Thile, one days journey from the frozen sea."

A homely touch authenticates Dictuil's report. "It is now thirty years, (he writes) since I was told by Irish clerics who had dwelt in that island (Thile) from February 1st to August 1st"(i.e.,75 years before the Norse settlers arrived)"that the sun scarcely sets there in summer and even at midnight always leaves enough light to do one's ordinary business." i.e.a monk's customary evening work.

1. De Ratione temporum.
 2. Life of Columba 1,6; 11,42. Gj pp 5-6
 3. Liber de Mensura Orbis Terrae, vii, 15.

The light is so clear at midnight that one is able "pediculos de camisa abstrahere tanquam in praesentia solis." Soldiers of our garrison in this war would have no doubt that this refers vividly to Iceland.

All this evidence makes it plain that more than a century before the settlers arrived Iceland had stray colonists, Christian hermits from Ireland and the Western Isles of Scotland, who made no attempt at missionary work but fled soon after the coming of the Northmen.

For a time the hammer of Thor drove out the cross, but a dim light remained shining in the darkness.¹

1. The swastika is the modern form of the sign representing Thor's hammer.

1. (ii) Christian Settlers, AD. 895.

Some half-dozen Norwegian settlers in Iceland, coming from the British Isles, definitely professed Christianity, and a few more had been impressed without being persuaded; but as no Christian priests took part in the migration, after the first generation Christianity almost lapsed.

(a) Landnámabók records about 400 names of settlers, including many "from Sodor, west of the sea." (i.e. the Hebrides) and from Ireland. Diversity of opinion exists as to the relative percentages of British, or rather British-Norwegian, and purely Scandinavian settlers. But it has been estimated that 400 heads of families would mean about 1,000 immigrants, of whom the British Isles contributed 126, about 12.5 per cent.¹ Probably by the end of the Settlement in AD 930, the country would have a population of 45,000, of whom some 5,000 derived from the British Isles.² Recent blood-tests of the present population support this proportion, and a visitor may notice that about one in ten Icelanders, not the least handsome, are conspicuously tall and have black hair.

These hundred-odd settlers, though originally they came from Norway, would have had opportunities of coming into contact with Christianity, during their visits to North and East Ireland and the Hebrides, both at this time vigorous centres of Christianity, particularly of that refreshing form of it implanted by St. Columba and his disciples. But no Christian teachers accompanied them to their new home, and they built there only one or two churches. Landnámabók gives the names of six settlers, who "men say were baptized:" - Ketill the Fool, Aud the Deep-minded, Órlyg the Old, Helgi Bjolan, Helgi the Lean and Jörund the Christian, "and most of

1. Art, by Prof. Gudmundur Hannesson in Rvk University Year-Book 1925.
2. Islandica Vol XX pp 7-12.

them that came hither from the west of the sea," which probably means the families and retainers of those named. We can add three or four more names.

Of leading settlers nine appear to have come directly from Ireland, and three times that number from the Hebrides. Some of them, and almost all of their retainers, would have been born and brought up in those parts. Most of them would have lived there long enough to have imbibed something of the Christianity there implanted by St. Columba (ob. AD 597).

(b) The most conspicuous Christian family is that of Ketill Flatnose, driven out of Iona by King Harald (AD 880), whose grandson was nicknamed Fíflski the Fool, "because he was a Christian." An account of his descendants is given in the first part of the famous Njal's Saga and in the delightful Laxdale Saga, both compiled no doubt from traditional sources about the middle of the 13th century.

His daughter Aud, the Deep-minded, a great lady, came to Iceland in AD 895, after the death of her husband, Olaf the White, King of Dublin. With twenty retainers and many slaves she settled in the North-West on the shores of Breidafjörður (Broadfirth), which became one of the earliest centres of Christianity in Iceland. "She made an oratory in Krosshólar, where she had crosses set up, for she was baptized and of the true faith." 1 Her struggle with the sorceress Gulbra typifies the contest between Christianity and heathendom. Aud lived to a great age, and died sitting in her state chair, having dressed herself in her robes for the occasion. She is said to have been buried as a chieftainess, or rather as a chief, her body being laid to rest, as she had directed, in a ship below high-water mark, for she would not lie in unhallowed ground, since she was a baptized woman. 2

1: Lndbk II, 14, 8. (O.I.)
2. l.c. III, 15, 15; Lax. S. vii.
3. Olaf Trygg. S. 125-6.

Afterwards her kinsmen turned Krosshólar into a High Place, and offered sacrifices there, for they reverted to paganism, presumably in the absence of Christian priests and teachers.

Another connection of the family, Órlig the Old, Ketill's nephew, had also been brought up in the Hebrides under a bishop called Patrick, who sent him to Iceland with timber for building a church, a gold coin (gollpening), an iron bell, a plenarium¹, and consecrated earth to put under the corner posts to serve instead of consecration. The bishop told him to land where three promontories could be seen from the sea with a fjórd between each of them, and to build a church there, dedicating it to St. Columba. While looking for the spot, Órlig wintered in a bay in the north-west, which he named Patreksfjörður, after his foster-father. With his wife called Help (Hjalp) and his sons Órlyg eventually settled at Kjaljarnes under Mt. Esja at the top of Faxafjörð. There he set up his church and dedicated it to St. Columba, but he proved so fervent and ill-instructed a disciple of the apostle of Northern Britain that he appears to have worshipped the saint instead of Christ.² He cannot have made much use of his plenarium.

However this church, though apparently it had no priest, is said to have preserved an old gospel book, written in Celtic characters, no doubt the plenarium, which was probably treated as a cathac or mascot.

Hardby this solitary Christian outpost at Kjaljarnes stood a heathen temple or hof, dedicated to Thor, with its sacrificial stone, on which bodies were broken after being condemned at the adjacent Circle of Judgement (Domhringur), a miniature Stonehenge. Here one of the largest local things or moots assembled before the general Parliament (Al-thing) was established at Thingvellir in AD 930.³

1. (missale) plenarium, i.e. complete, as issued to missionary priests occasionally in the 9th century, general in the 10th. Used of the complete book of gospels given by King Atherstone to Canterbury Cathedral.
2. Lndbk I, 6, 1. Bp Patrick does not appear in the incomplete catalogue of bps of Sodor (South Is. i.e. Hebrides) & Man.
3. See note on Pagan Sacrifices inf p 16. Islendingabók 3; Grettir's S. 10; Eyrbyggja S. 4.

Órlyg's sons, though unbaptized, also put their trust in Columbkille. But they owe their mention in this early history chiefly to the fact that they were ancestors of Thorlak, Bishop of Skalholt when the work was compiled. It states also that Helgi the Lean was the ancestor of Ketill, Thorlak's northern colleague, who together were the patrons of the book. It is not surprising too to learn that Helgi Bjolan (in Irish, Beolan) Aud's brother, was the ancestor of Jón the Saint, Ketill's predecessor at Hólar.¹

Names are given of other notable Christians who came from Ireland: Jörund, nicknamed in derision the Christian, who, though surrounded by pagans, "steadfastly kept his faith until the day of his death", and became the first of Icelandic hermits. His nephew Asolf Alskik is said to have been such a strict Christian that he would not fraternise with heathen men. He settled at Holt under Eyjafell with eleven followers; which suggests that except for his temperament, he came as a missionary. When his companions died, Asolf was driven away to Irá - Irish river, which owes its name to him. The suspicions roused by solitary Christians in this period are shown in the alarm of his neighbours at his unaccountable powers as a fisherman, which caused him once more to move on and settle finally near his uncle at Holm in Akranes, where he lived as an anchorite.² After his death a church was erected over his cell at Holm and dedicated to St. Columba, though later on Asolf was venerated as a saint, and the dedication changed to St. Asolf.

These examples show that the distant isolated country of Iceland should be added to the noble roll of lands in North-West Europe which first learnt Christianity through the disciples of St. Columba. But the seed sown withered away untended leaving but a mellowing memory.

1. For Helgi and his connections, see Viga Glum's Saga, Trans E. Head; and Ljosvetninga S.
2. Lndbk I, 7, 3-6.

(c) Tribute must be paid to those lonely Christians who maintained their faith with no outward religious support surrounded by unsympathetic neighbours in a harsh new land.

Definite believers were few, but there was a large number of half-Christians, perhaps more dangerous to believers than stalwart pagans, who in an age of transition treated Christianity as a form of paganism. For instance, Aud the Deep-minded set up her crosses as if they were heathen pillars. Prayers made before them were vague, as we can see from the recorded aspirations of Glum, who embraced Christianity in his old age; - "Good ever be with the old: Good ever be with the young." ¹ Some favoured a measure of the new religion without breaking with the past, as Aud's brother-in-law, Helgi the Lean, son of an Irish princess, Raferta, who called his new home Kristnes, "and yet on voyages, in bad stresses and in all things he most cared for, he called on Thor." ² Others had abandoned Thor, but professed to trust in their own right arm. Witness the lament of the first settler Injolf over his companion Hjorleif, slain by his Irish slaves: - "Such must ever be the fate of a man who refuses to sacrifice to the gods." ³ Injolf's grandson, Thorkell the Lawman or Speaker, was carried out from his death-bed into the sunshine, and commended himself to the God who made the sun. Moreover, "he lived as cleanly as any Christian." We read of another Thor, who, in spite of his name, (always a favourite in Iceland) refused with his son Hall to offer sacrifice, and relied on his own might; and of Asgar, who gave up sacrifices of his own free will.⁴

Some settlers paid respect to the spirits of their strange new country, good and ill. Trolls who lived in rocky haunts and wrought mischief on their neighbours; berserks, who possessed men so that they ran amok; and in later ages, ghosts of the departed who 'walked after' (burial), and afflicted all that they deemed to have wronged them - these relics of an older religion proved inveterate opponents of the missionaries and priests of the new.

1. Lndbk I, 6, 5.

2. l.c. III, 14, 3.

3. l.c. I, 6, 7; E.H. p 244: cp Laxdale S.xl (of Kjartan).

4. Lndbk III, 4, 4; IV, 3, 21. As - one of the ancient gods.

Some ideas of Scandinavian paganism acted as a bridge to Christianity. The Viking Cross at Gosforth (c 1000 AD) displays Vidar with his booted foot rending the dragon's jaw, together with Christ on the Cross exemplifying the same principle. Similarly Viking coins of Northumbria show the hammer of Thor alongside the Cross of Christ (AD 875-954.), an example of historical transition. This is the conflate religion of Helgi the Lean which could have been quickened into a full Christianity by opportunities of instruction and worship.

But for over a century no such facilities followed the settlers in Iceland. It is therefore not surprising to read in the last sentence of Landnámabók that such Christianity as the settlers brought with them soon died away and "the land reverted to heathendom for a hundred (=120) years." 1

This is a general statement. The light of Christianity did not quite go out. In the second missionary attempt a century later, when Thangbrand came to Kirkjubaer in the south-east 'Side', he found living there Swart, son of Asbjörn, son of Thorstein, son of Ketill the Fool, who had "all of them been Christians from father to son." Ketill had taken over the settlement from Irish Christians after an abortive attempt of a pagan settler to do so, "because the heathen might not dwell there."

Later the place became a numery, and is now a church and prestur's farm-house² - the oldest Christian inhabited site in the country, though the only vestige of mediaeval days remaining, in addition to the name, is a basalt memorial stone with an undecipherable inscription.³ Nevertheless Kirkjubaer provides a remarkable instance of spiritual succession from the dawn of Icelandic history.

1. The duo-decimal system used up to modern days in Iceland (and some parts of Sweden) is said to have come from Babylon. The long or great hundred = 120. Cp hundredweight = 112 lbs, USA = 100 lbs. So English farmers in sales of cheese etc., give 100 lb = 112, little hundred, 120 great hundred. Mallet's Northern Antiquities, ed. Bp Percy p 219-20
2. prests-setur.
3. EH. p.237.

1. (iii) First Missionary Efforts.

Thorvald Kodransson and Bishop Fridrek AD.981-4.

The first attempt to preach the gospel in Iceland should be credited to Thorvald Kodransson, the far-farer, friend of Sweyn Fork-beard, King of Norway, a noble Icelandic viking who accompanied Sweyn on his ravaging expeditions to the British Isles and ameliorated his excesses. Afterwards he travelled to Saxony, and was converted and baptized there by Bishop Fridrek. The young viking then persuaded the bishop to return to Iceland with him to evangelise his own folk, who had loved him little and treated him badly. The vicissitudes of this enterprise were picturesquely described 200 years later, in Thorvald's Saga, translated from the Latin life written by the erudite monk Gunnlaug (ob. AD 1218.)

For four years these pioneer missionaries (to use the words of the saga) "fared all round Iceland to preach the word of God" (Faro their vida um Island at boda Guds ord). They met with considerable opposition but made a number of converts in the north. Some men abandoned heathen sacrifices, already becoming unpopular, but would not give up their sacred pillars. At least three churches were built, at As, Hawkhill and Holt, and priests appointed to serve them. But after four years, Thorvald and his bishop were driven out.

(a) The missionaries arrived in Iceland in AD 981, and set up a farm at Laekjamot in the north-west, an early Christian centre. The story of the conversion of Thorvald's father Kodran illustrates the difficulty of Christian missionary work, the irrationality of the appeal made, and the apparent lack of instruction for converts. "On a certain high season, when Bishop Fridrek and his clerks were celebrating the festival service, Kodran stood near, more from curiosity than sympathy. But when he heard the sound of the bells, and the clear singing of the clerks; when he savoured the sweet smell of the incense and saw the assistants clothed in white robes with bright coverings and the bishop in splendid vestments, and the fair white tapers shining with mickle

1. Kurtz: Church Hist. 93,5 questions his episcopate.

brightness all around; then these things made a great appeal to him, and he came to his son Thorvald and said "Now I have seen and somewhat considered the service you offer to your God. It seems to me, your God rejoices in that light which our gods dread. This man whom you call your bishop, is your spaeman, because you learn from him those things you offer us, on behalf of your God. I too have a prophet of my own who is of much use to me. He guards my cattle and warns me what I must do, and of what I must beware. Therefore I put great trust in him."

Then Thorvald who did the speaking as the bishop did not know Icelandic, pitted the weakness of his prophet the bishop against his father's strong spaeman, promising that the bishop would use "the strength of God the Creator, who lives in eternal light and fetches to His glory all who believe in Him and serve Him faithfully." 1

At this the bishop exorcised the heathen spirit from its rocky haunt; and after that Kodran the bondi was baptized with Järngerda, his wife.

(b) However his son Orm would not let himself be baptized at that time, nor would he accept prime-signing, so he had to leave his family, for in those days heathen and Christians would not mix either socially or for business. Some pagans for this reason were prime-signed - a kind of christening rather than full baptism, that in most cases was not further followed up, but provided a passport for social intercourse, a foot in each camp.²

Orm was baptized twenty years later, as the outcome of a striking incident, while the adoption of Christianity was being publically considered. A great band of pagans assembled and agreed to offer some men as human sacrifices to the gods to avert the loss of their religion.

1. Homiliu-bók Introd. Fridrek Paasche p.8.
2. Egil's S. 35.

Christians then met and decided to outbid the heathen. Whereas pagans were prepared to throw their weakest men over the cliffs, the Christians called for the two best of their adherents from each Quarter to offer themselves as living sacrifices, a victory gift of their lives to Christ. Leading representatives immediately volunteered from all districts except the western Quarter, which only produced one. "Then up spake Orm: If my brother Thorvald had been in the country, there would be no gap there. But I am willing to fill it, if you will have me." They consented, and he was at once baptized.

(c) Bishop Fridrek prime-signed one of the great chiefs of the north, Thorvald son of Baedwar the Sage, who ("some say") was afterwards baptized in England, from which he brought timber to build a church on his farmstead at As. That ineffective opposition was aroused is indicated by a story of Gunlaug's that attempts to burn down the church at As were frustrated in a miraculous manner. The more reliable Kristni-Saga adds a practical testimony: "This church was built sixteen years before Christianity was made Law in Iceland (i.e. 984 AD), and it was standing when Botolf was bishop of Hólar (1238-1246), although it had only been repaired with a thatching of turves," - a homely practice which has lasted to this day.

Thorvald's father-in-law Olaf built a church on his homestead at Hawkgill, for which Thorvald gave the wood. Converts diverted their temple tax to the upkeep of this building, so that heathen priests were roused to opposition.

The Saga derives the name Hawkgill from two berserks of that name, who challenged the bishop to an ordeal of walking through fire. Fridrek got the better of them, by sprinkling the fire with holy water and passing over it in full robes and a mitre; whereas the berserks, biting the edges of their shields, yelling and brandishing their swords, fell dead. Gunlaug is careful to add that he got this story from Glum a veracious man, who heard it from Arnorr, son of Arndis, a cousin of Thorvald.

Another traditional derivation is connected with the church at Holt near Managardur, and Manafoss near Svinavata. Bishop Fridrek baptized an anchorite called Mana, who became renowned for his devotion and benevolence and, like other notable early converts, was nicknamed "The Christian." His abnormal skill at obtaining salmon below the foss, which afterwards bore his name, averted a famine, so that the local fishing rights were vested in Holt church. In this remote spot traces of an anchorite's cell could be seen in Gumlaug's day with the remains of a tún called Managardur, constructed by the hermit for his one cow.¹

(d) Opposition from heathen spaeman or sooth-sayers and priests did not stop the promotion of missionary work, for Thorvald and the bishop evangelised from place to place. But when Thorvald preached at the Al-thing, the centre of national government and religion, such opposition was evoked that two skalds or state poets made scurrilous verses against the missionaries. Matters were thus brought to a head, for Thorvald who had won fame as a gentle viking proved a vindictive Christian and slew two skalds; so that he was outlawed. Even the patient bishop was attacked, and he too had to leave the country.

Fridrek returned to Saxony and died there, leaving a reputation for saintliness. Thorvald at first engaged in merchant expeditions, then he visited the Holy Land and Constantinople (called by old Icelandic writers Mickle-garth), and finally settled in Russia, where he is reputed to have built a monastery on the Dneiper.

It cannot be maintained that this mission showed many signs of success. In a tolerant people it had rather provoked than allayed antagonism. But at least the challenge of Christianity had been thrown down. The cautious and conservative Icelanders at last were faced with the need for personal consideration in the matter, the ground was prepared for further efforts, and in the northern fashion when the time came for the question to be settled one way or the other, having individually expressed their opposition the whole community voted for the adoption of the New Faith.

1. Thorvaldsvidförla S. 8. tún = fenced meadow-land.

NOTE on HUMAN SACRIFICE IN ICELAND.

Evidence is scanty except for topographical indications, a few stones and place-names, and some sub-contemporary historical references, especially those in the reliable Landnámabók - "Book of the Settlement" (c1150 AD), and Kristni Saga based on the researches of the accurate Ari Thorgilsson (c1130).

More traces of pagan temples are found in Iceland than in the rest of Scandinavia, because the island's lack of wood led to the use of large rough stones, some of which remain in situ. Hof as a place-name, denoting a heathen temple, exists in all four Quarters, probably indicating the chief centres of heathendom, planted by the early settlers (870-930):-

1. Hofstadir, in the NW, built by Hall a settler (Lndbk 19-). The Annals for 1320 record a court held here; presumably the settlers' court near their temple lasted until Christian times.

2. Hof at NE corner, on a mound, site of an exceptionally large hall of Broddi Thorsson. Tradition held that the strong wooden door of the church there had been taken over from the temple. (Kristni Saga, App. 4,2)

3. Hofstadir, near Myvatn in North, excavated 1908. Considerable remains of stone foundations indicate that pagan temples in Iceland were modelled on Irish churches, familiar to many settlers, who, though Norwegian, came via Ireland and the Hebrides. (Gj. p 3ln with ref.)

4. Hof, at SE corner, on top of the cone-shaped Godaborg, a foothill of the gigantic Oraefajökull; a large square stone of sacrifice, traditionally human sacrifice. (Henderson: Journal 1814/5, p207.) Gud=God, god=pagan deity, godi=chieftain-priest.

5. Helgafell, on Thórsnes in NW, the 'holy hill' dedicated to Thor by the settler Thorolf, godi from Moster in Norway who brought the wood of his old temple with him. Helgafell was kept sacred from trespass of man or beast or any defilement. No one was allowed even to gaze at it with unwashed face. Here was a court, Thorsnesting, and a hof with 'Thor's Stone', on which men destined for sacrifice were broken. Here too was a doomring (dom-hringr),

"in which men are condemned as victims." - a miniature Stonehenge.

(Lndbk 11,10,1-4; Eyrbyggja SS 4 sq. E.H. p 336-9; Burton, Ultima Thule 11, pl04.)

6. Kjalarnes at head of Faxafjörð; hof dedicated by Thorstein godi, with blood-bog (Blót-kelda). Here was an important court in which several neighbouring godar united, until the general Al-thing was established in 930 at Thingvellir.

(Lndbk 1,9; Islendingabök 3; Grettir's S. 10.)

It is evident that most godords or clans established a hof and a thing. Some had sacrificial stones. The Courts inflicted punishments, usually fines or outlawry. But some of the criminals in early days were sentenced to death at a thing, and executed or sacrificed to propitiate the offended deity. Three methods are indicated: they were broken on the stone (5), suffocated in the marsh (6), or thrown over a cliff (4).

(Kristni S 2; F.J.1, pp21-2.)

At the epoch-making Althing in the year 1000, when Christianity was adopted, some pagans wished to try to avert that event by making human sacrifices. Leading Christians retorted that whereas pagans only offered maimed and aged persons in sacrifice, they were ready to offer to live for Christ. We may conclude that such a practice was not then unthinkable. Such sacrifices would be akin to the exposure of infants which continued for some years after the adoption of Christianity. From the Christian taunt we infer that the practice was half-hearted; and the way was pointed from the external to the inward sacrifice.

(Kristni S 8,7.)

Old religious rites are described in Eyrbyggja Saga, Viga-Grum's Saga and Vatnsdæla Saga. These stories, though committed to writing more than a century after the period concerned, embodied traditions handed down by word of mouth. The fictional Kjalnessaga with its story that Bui destroyed the temple with its sacrifices typifies the victory of Christianity.

That sacrifice of a human being as a great prayer or bribe to the deity was practised up to the XII century in Scandinavia is clear from notices in sub-contemporary records. Adam of Bremen gives vivid descriptions of such sacrifices at Upsala in Sweden and at Møster (Maeren) in Norway. Such blood offerings were forbidden by King Inge Stenkilsson, an unpopular course which led to his abdication. King Aun or Una of Sweden sacrificed his nine sons to Odin "in order to be granted a long life." ¹ Icelandic Annals record a victory of Hákon, Earl of Norway, over the hitherto invincible Jömsvikings obtained "at the great price of the sacrifice of his eleven-year-old son to Odin." Hákon is called elsewhere in the Annals 'Blót-Hákon' or 'Blót-Jarl' - the sacrificer and later the 'Evil Jarl', so it appears that this action was not usual and brought him notoriety.²

Odin in Iceland never became a popular cult. Sacrifices of human beings there seem to have been penal and not propitiary. As the country's learned antiquarian Amgrim states in 1609; "sometimes men were sacrificed at the Blót-kelda of Kjalarnes and at Thorsting" (near Helgafell). "where the stone kept its dark stain for many ages." King Olaf Tryggvason did his best to stamp out such barbaric worship, which had had a long and painful history, as is shown by the story of Jephthah's daughter in Judges XI. We read of it in Heimskringla as late as 1021 when "a great blood-offering at Møster took place in midwinter;"³ but by then, even in the long dark nights of the North, men were learning to associate that season, not with the fierce powers of darkness, but with the birth of Christ, come to reveal the sacredness of all human personality.

1. Ynglinga S. 25, in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla.
2. Olaf Tryg. S. 42, 50. -do-
3. l.c. 108-9. In gen. cp. C.J.A. Oppermann: Eng. Missionaries in Sweden and Finland, pp 16-24. Lond. 1937.

CHAPTER TWO

ICELAND ADOPTS CHRISTIANITY.

(1) Olaf, King of Norway, takes action, (996-9).

The conversion of Iceland to Christianity was chiefly due to the initiative and compelling enterprise of Olaf Tryggvason, King of Norway (c995-1000 AD), and was completed in three stages:- (a) Kjartan's abortive lay commission followed by Stefnir's negative effort, (b) Thangbrand's aggressive campaign, and (c) the persuasion of the Althing by the chiefs' Gizur and Hjalti.

(a) Olaf Tryggvason emerges from romance as a viking of commanding presence, crowning his adventures by plundering the coasts of England. Here he became a Christian and is said to have been confined by Alphege, Bishop of Winchester. Consequently he pledged himself never again to war against Britain. He determined, however, to regain the throne of his fathers in Norway, and there became a viking on behalf of Christ. "No man durst gainsay him, and all the land was christened wheresoever he came." 1

Iceland next became Olaf's special interest, for many leading Icelanders used to visit his country as a qualification for high status in their own land. The education of young chieftains was not considered complete until they had 'fared overseas'. On their return they brought back timber for building and fine raiment, gave an account of their travels and, as it were, came of age. They acquired merit if they had been received at the Norwegian court, and still more so if they had been made hirdmen or liegemen of the king. To embrace his new religion might therefore be accounted a degree in continental civilisation.

This is well brought out in a tale that must have been recounted often in the long dark Icelandic winters until it became woven for all time in many sagas.

1. Olaf S. Trygg. 79, (V.31 Heimskringla). Krist. S. 3, suggest that Olaf's Christian campaign in Northern lands was advocated by Alphege; Olaf was baptised in the Scilly Is. cp. and ct. Adam of Bremen, ii 34-5.

It illustrates the next stage in the story of Icelandic Christianity.

In the year 995 Kjartan, noble Icelandic grandson of an Irish king, fared overseas to Norway with ten high-born companions. They found that King Olaf "was ordering a change of faith in his country, and that the people took to it most unequally". Several Icelanders of high standing were waiting to sail home, but the king would not let them go, because they refused to accept the new Faith that he was preaching. Kjartan and his friends joined their fellow countrymen at Nidaros, and bound themselves not to be baptized. However Kjartan, a great athlete, was won over by the skill and charm of the king, who beat him at a swimming match in the Nid, and he finally succumbed to Olaf's preaching and the Michaelmas services. On the day that Kjartan laid aside his baptismal robes he became a hird or liegeman of the king, who then sent him back to his country "to bring men to Christianity by force or by expedients." Not until all Iceland became Christian would he let the hostages go. The king gave Kjartan a jewelled sword as a parting gift, and laid on him a charge to keep his faith well.

In spite of an apparent lack of instruction we are told that Kjartan observed Lent, being the first man in Iceland to do so. But his new faith, though it inspired him to build a fine church, did not much affect his manner of life. He still took personal vengeance on his private enemies, for which the king's sword proved useful.¹

(b) As foreseen by King Olaf, other leading Icelanders as well as his retainers, followed the example of their popular young chieftain Kjartan and were baptized. Their preparation would be even less thorough than his own, and their practices less changed.

A notorious example of the unconverted baptized pagan appears in the sagas in the person of Hallfred Ottarson, one of Olaf's hostages. Like other reluctant converts, he made it a condition of his baptism that he should become the king's hirdman. Then he used his position as licence for committing acts of violence and even

1. Olaf S. Trygg. 88; Kristni S. 6,3-4; Laxdale S. 40.

manslaughter. As we have seen, even Christian missionaries could not keep themselves from these viking outrages. But Hallfred stooped to unicealndic vice. To get even with a chieftain enemy Gris, he assaulted his wife. Later he became Olaf's principal court-skald or poet-laureate, saying; "what you taught me is not more poetic than my poetry"¹ At the death of the king in battle in the autumn of the year 1000, he composed a sincere lament of lofty tone, which suggests that Hallfred could have had great influence, if he had been as loyal and devoted a hird of Christ as he was of Olaf. He died in 1007 and was buried in Iona, by the side of Macbeth. Kjartan did not do much, except indirectly, to forward Christianity in Iceland. But King Olaf's aggressive championship was beginning to tell. We read of a great traveller Thorer, son of Skeggi who had a merchantman he built blessed by Bishop Sigord the mighty, Olaf's court bishop, and afterwards was himself baptized. Landnámabók probably records this incident because door-posts made of ship's beams told the weather until the days of Bishop Brand (1163-1202) i.e. until shortly before the Settler's Book was compiled.

King Olaf was not lacking in determination or resources. He followed up the commission to Kjartan by sending a priest Stefnir Thorgillson, a great grandson of Bjolan, one of the Ketill clan, pioneers of Christianity in the country, most of whom subsequently lapsed. Stefnir, an Icelander, by birth, accompanied Olaf on his campaign on Britain and afterwards was baptized and ordained in Denmark. He went to Iceland in 996 with a body-guard of nine retainers and journeyed north and south, preaching with vigour. Since he evoked no response he wrecked temples and burnt idols, which grossly offended the Icelandic principles of toleration. As Stefnir sheltered under the aegis of his chieftain-connections at Kjaljarnes, the Al-thing passed a law making Christianity Fraenda-glömu, (a family disgrace), putting the onus of prosecution on the offender's relatives. Consequently Stefnir was banished and returned to Norway.

1. cp W.A.Craigie: Icelandic Sagas pp 48-9.

He then joined the missionary Thorvald the Far-farer and travelled with him to Constantinople returning to Denmark, where he lampooned Earl Sigvald and was put to death.

(c) Stefnir's negative effort was followed by the militant mission of Thangbrand¹, Olaf's German court priest, a passionate ungovernable man, "great in growth and mighty in strength".² Thangbrand had fled from Denmark because he had slain in a duel a man wanting an Irish slave-girl, whom he bought with silver given him by King Olaf in exchange for a shield emblazoned with a crucifix. The saga tells how the shield had been presented to Thangbrand by the Archbishop of Canterbury with the words: "Thou art to all intents and purposes a knight, so I give thee a shield. The crucifix marks thy priesthood." Olaf appointed Thangbrand as priest of Moster in Norway, where he squandered the church funds and turned pirate to replenish them. Soon after Stefnir returned to Iceland in AD 997, the king summoned Thangbrand and told him he could have no robber in his service. Thangbrand begged to be sent on some hard errand; so the king sent him to Iceland to make the land Christian.

The Icelanders' experience of missionaries had prejudiced them against Christianity, but a chieftain Hall-of-the-Side, impressed on Michaelmas day by a sermon on the glory of St. Michael³, let Thangbrand's party winter in his tun, and was baptized with all his household in his own beck Throttá on Saturday before Easter. In summer Thangbrand who was "clever of speech", rode with Hall to the Thing and "dauntlessly pleaded God's errand before the assembly"⁴. So that he baptized many, including prominent chieftains afterwards to become leaders of the Icelandic Church; among them Gizur the White, and his son-in-law Hjalti Skeggjason, Hild the Old and Hjall of Bergthorsnvell, noble hero of the most famous of all sagas, who had long been persuaded of the superiority of the Christian faith over paganism. Another Hall (of Haukadal) was baptized in

1. Heimskringla, 65, 74; Laxdale S. 41; Kristni S. 3sq. etc.
2. Olaf's S. Tryg. 138, 216.
3. Homiliu-bók p 8.

999 when he was three years old. He was destined to grow up to be the friend and counsellor of the first bishops of Skálholt, and his remarkable memory to a very old age was a great help to Ari the Wise in compilations of the early history of the country.

Once again pagan poets went into action against the spread of Christianity. Some of their hostile rhymes are preserved in Kristni Saga, but today do not seem to be worthy of attention.

One skáld said, "Drive away the foul blasphemer of the gods". Another, "I will not take the fly that Thangbrand casts". For this kind of insult the ruthless Thangbrand and his assistant priest Godleif killed two poets. Then another skáld sung, "Roodbearer slew a skáld with a sword." A more subtle attack was made by Steinvor, a temple priestess, who owned and served a pagan temple. She collected the temple toll and would have natural apprehension of the loss of her accustomed dues. She asked Thangbrand if he had heard that Christ dared not accept a duel to which Thor had challenged him. Thangbrand replied "I have heard that Thor would be nothing but mould and ashes if God wished him not to live". As Sir Richard Burton says, "Thor died hard because he was essentially an Icelander, blunt and hot-headed, of few words and many blows." Odin had little influence in Iceland, and has left few traces, but Thor remained popular in formations of Christian names, and the Icelandic week continued to begin on Thursday evening.¹

Thangbrand travelled over most of the island, preaching, fighting and baptizing. But he was disappointed with his reception, and in the summer of 999 went back to Norway in his ship Ironbasket. On his report that there was no hope of Iceland accepting Christianity, King Olaf took steps to punish the Icelanders he retained in his country.

1. R.F. Burton: Ultima Thule 1 pp 94, 150. Of men's Christian names in 1855, Jón = 1/5, Thor and derivatives 1/10. The commonest female name was Gudrun, after the heroine of Laxdale Saga.
"M or N." = Jón or Gudrun.

That summer there were great debates on religion at the Al-thing, where the newly baptized chieftain Hjalti¹ retaliated on the pagan skalds by reciting a poem on the Law-hill calling Odin and Freyja dirty names. At this Runolf, the pagan high priest, naturally sued him for blasphemy; but Hjalti was popular and the powers of heathendom were waning, so that only with difficulty could he obtain a conviction; and then Hjalti was outlawed for three years. He set out for Norway significantly accompanied by Gizur the White. They put the problem before the king in a more hopeful light than Thangbrand had done, and stayed his hand in the matter of reprisals against their fellow-countrymen, binding themselves to bring it about that Christianity would succeed in Iceland.

Thus the final stage was reached in Iceland's acceptance of the Faith.

1. His name suggests a connection with the Shetlands, = Sholto.

11. (ii) St. John Baptist's Day, AD. 1000.

Gizur and Hjalti sailed home early in the memorable year 1000 in order to arrive in time for the Al-thing. King Olaf had sent an impressive company of priests headed by one Thormod. They came and rallied their party at Vellankatla, North-east of Thingvallavatn where they were joined by fellow Christians from all over the country. So they made a goodly array as they rode round the lake to the Assembly at Thingvellir. At sight of them the heathen chieftains rushed to arms with their followers, and a conflict in the sacred enclosure was avoided with difficulty. It was a promising sign that leading men who were not Christians strove to prevent civil war.

Next day, Sunday June 23rd, Thormod and six priests celebrated mass, and then the whole Christian congregation headed by the priests in vestments and two large crosses went in procession to the Lögberg. This was a Christian counterpart of the ancient legal midsummer procession from the heathen temple to the Law-rock (Lögbergisganga). The crowds were much impressed by the incense and by the crosses, one of which had been made significantly the size of King Olaf, and the other the size of Hjalti, who was legally an outlaw.

By now Christianity had been adopted in all northern countries, and Icelanders who had travelled were familiar with its tenets. In their own country since 930, when the new Al-thing was established, some godar or leading chieftains had become sufficiently identified with the new Faith to remain outside the state organisation. Already the number of godar professing Christianity had increased to nine, nearly a quarter of the whole actual parliament, and they had King Olaf actively at their back ready to make reprisals on the hostages he held, including Svarting, son of the heathen high priest

Runolf, and three other young chieftains.¹ Christian chiefs refused to join in heathen sacrifices, so the constitution itself was in danger. The nine chose Hall-of-the-Side as their own Lögsgumadr, Lawman or Speaker, and threatened to set up a separate Thing.

Gizur and Kjalti addressed the Assembly and explained their mission in a harangue "surprisingly brave and telling" and made clear that King Olaf was supporting them. This courageous action was followed by awed silence and no heathen dared reply. Christianity had shown itself aggressive and paganism became passive. Then each side started to outlaw the other, when a strange interruption occurred. A man ran up and shouted: "Fire has broken out of the earth near Olfus and is over-running the homestead of Thorodd the (great heathen) godi." People said "No wonder! the gods are wroth at the speeches we have just heard". But Snorri the leading heathen godi asked: "Then, what made the gods angry when the lava on which we are standing was pouring out?".

After that the Assembly broke up. It had become clear how things were shaping, so Hall-of-the-Side made a masterly decision. He approached the Lawman, a pagan priest called Thorgeir, and engaged him at a fee to put the Christian case in whatever judgement he should pronounce. Then Thorgeir returned to his booth for a night and a day, and covering his head with his robe meditated in silence on the momentous issue. During this time the heathen held a meeting and agreed to offer human sacrifices to avert Christianity -- a counsel of despair. The Christians countered by a call for volunteers to offer themselves as a living sacrifice to Christ.² Next evening June 24th, Thorgeir emerged to announce his critical finding. Today we can stand on the Rock, from which he addressed the Assembly and the crowd, and imagine the proceedings.

1: Heimskringla, trans. Erling Monsen p.187.

2: Kristni S. 8.7.

Drawn up beneath him on the slope down to the river stood the thirty chieftains of the old order and the nine adherents of the new, each backed by their armed retainers spoiling for a fight. Behind him beneath the precipice thronged the women and children in much trepidation as to the outcome. The slanting rays of the sub-arctic sun, in the heavens there all that night, would be shining over the lake, touching the stern background of volcanic mountains with gracious colours.

Thorgeir mounted the Law-rock and urged on the people the folly of breaking the peace of their country by dividing into parties, which could only sweep away all they held dear. "Let us avoid extremes, and take a middle course; let us all have one law and one faith" (Ein log ok einn sid).

The Assembly agreed and committed the decision to him. Then he made the memorable pronouncement that from henceforth the official religion of Iceland was to be Christian. All people were to be baptized at the earliest opportunity; but private worship of heathen deities was not forbidden, and some pagan customs were allowed to remain. Eating of horse-flesh and even the exposure of infants were permitted.¹

Thus civil war was avoided, the constitution was preserved, and by mutual concessions, chiefly on the part of the heathen, the new religion was peacefully established.

All the heathen appear to have been baptized before they reached home. Thingvallavatn is a cold lake, being fed by deep icy waters emerging along sunless rifts from glacial mountains. However, over the eastern ridge lies Laugavatn, a lake of hot springs, and most of the people preferred to be baptized in its warm waters as they went home. The Westerners under the influence of Snorri the godi were baptized in their own warm springs in Reykjadal, afterwards called Kroslaug.

1. Islendinga S. 7; Kristni S. 11.

Some might say that a certain tepidity has marked the Christianity of the nation ever since; others that the incident illustrates its practical common sense.

Hjalte was witness to the baptism of the heathen high priest Runolf, his former enemy, and could not resist a dig at him: "Now" he said, "we'll teach the old priest how to mumble the salt".¹ The success of the Christian challenge to heathendom owed a great deal to Hjalte's wit, wisdom and courage, more to the outstanding character of Gizur and perhaps most to fear of King Olaf.²

The Christian victory was externally complete, but the heart of the people had barely been touched. It now remained to train the hastily acquired converts, organise their churchmanship and instruct them in worship and character. And there were remarkably few people in Iceland at the time capable of doing this, so that the momentous decision of the Althing was not followed up for some years.

1. At baptism the candidate after being signed with the sign of the cross was given consecrated salt.
2. Bogi Th. Melsted; *Islandinga S.* lll, p 11.

11. (iii) Strengthening the Stakes.

(A) Church Building.

It must be put to the credit of the national Assembly of Iceland that six years after its adoption of Christianity, it officially abolished duelling.¹ This proclaimed an ideal which might have saved the country from breaking up through civil war. But its government, like the abortive League of Nations, which in a small way it resembled, had no executive power. Private feuds diminished, as the sagas show, but chieftains began to enlarge their domains, and these aggressions finally led to a conflict of clans as bitter and deadly as any which darken the pages of Scottish history.

A few years later one of the most far-reaching of early family feuds developed to such an extent that the protagonist on one side, the wise Christian chieftain Njal, was burnt in his house with his family; and the repercussions of this calamity broke up the Althing itself the following year in battle in the sacred enclosure.² Clearly the turbulent Icelandic nature, as hard and eruptive as the country of its adoption, had not been tamed. With their baptism the people had not put off the old Thor.

(a) Nothing much in fact was done to promote Christian order and worship in Iceland until the second Olaf, afterwards called the Saint, became King of Norway in 1016.³ He found in his own country that almost all the Christianity that his namesake had forced on it twenty years before had not unnaturally lapsed. Those that remained Christian were merely so in name. Much the same must have occurred in Iceland, which had few priests and places of worship, and apparently not any teachers. Nevertheless the seed had been sown at last, though the ground was stony and many briars grew strongly.

1. Bogi Th. Melsted: *Islendinga Saga* pp 182, 186; Sir Geo. Mackenzie: *Travels in I.* p. 39. The last legal duel (holmganga - fought on an islet) was one between Gunlaug Ormstunga and Hrafn Mundarson over Helga the Beautiful.
2. Njal's S. xxvii, cxxxv, Tr. G. W. Dasent.
3. S. of O. Haraldsson the Saint. 111, 133.

King Olaf persuaded Skapti Thoroddsson, the vigorous Lawman, who succeeded Thorgeir, to complete the adoption of Christianity by repelling any recognition of pagan practices. As a reward for this compliance, the king sent timber and a great bell for a church to be erected at Thingvellir - Parliament Fields.

This building was burnt down a hundred years later, but it has been provided with successors down to the present day. A little church - the original cannot have been much smaller, occupies the same site by the river bank near a wishing well, overlooking the adulteresses' pool, and facing the Law-rock. Olaf's church at Thingvellir probably replaced the heathen temple.

(b) This royal benefaction gave an impetus to church-building in Iceland, which had been sparse and spasmodic even in the early days of Christian conversions, and later had almost lapsed. Settlers' foundations, such as Kjalarnes, Hawkhill and Holm, had probably vanished before the arrival of the first missionaries, who left few churches, (As, Holt etc.,). Snorri the great godi, after his conversion, built churches at Helgafell and Tongue, where he was buried in 1031. Some say he also helped in the second church at Helgafell which Gudrum built.¹ Snorri's relative Styrr erected a church at Hraun (Lava), and Thorodd the Taxmonger had one built at his homestead at Froda "as soon as the Christian-making moot was over."² Sagas speak of other churches at Knapstadir, Vellir, Raudaleyker and a few other sites. According to Runolf Dalksson a XIIth century priest, quoted in Bjarnar Saga, Björn the skald or poet, who died in 1024, composed a eulogy to St. Thomas the Apostle, and dedicated a church to him presumably in Hitardal where he lived, destined like Helgafell to become a monastic centre.

1: O.I. 11 p 135.

2: Eyrbyggja Saga 48 and 65; Collingwood and Stefansson: Pilgrimage to Sagasteade of I. pp 61-9.

A church was built at Borg in the West by Thorstein, son of the great viking and poet Egil. Here in AD.1003 the murdered Kjartan, Olaf's convert, was buried. His body was carried many miles as there was no church near his home. At the time the church had just been consecrated probably by a visiting bishop, Bernard of Saxony, and was still hung in white. Up to the last century travellers have been shown at Borg church a half-obliterated runic inscription commemorating "the brave Kjartan".¹

Somewhat later the most famous church of early Christian days was built at Helgafell in the north-west by Gudrun, one of their most famous women, who had Kjartan slain. It was built soon after the adoption of Christianity, for her father was buried there in 1019. The early settler Thorwolf first established Helgafell as a sacred mountain dedicated to Thor - a place of judgment and prayer, and a sanctuary where no man or beast might be slain.² The fame of its subsequent monastic learning probably inspired the story in the Laxdale Saga (c 1250AD) about the dying pagan chieftain who asked that his body might be laid to rest on the "holy hill" for that will be the greatest place about this countryside, for often have I seen a light burning there."

Here Gudrun in her old age, having been four times married, lived as a nun or a recluse. "She was the first woman in Iceland to know the Psalter by heart, and accompanied by her grand-daughter Herdis would spend long hours at night saying her prayers in the church she built"

Gudrun's church was rebuilt in the next generation by her son Gellir "in a stately fashion", and like so many of these wooden structures was destroyed by fire. Its successor a hundred years later became a monastic centre, and a church stands there today.

1. Laxdale S. 11; Hooker in 1809 Journal Ip. lxxxii; Miss Oswald, By Fell & Fjord p 183. 1882.
2. Eyrbyggja 4, 11 & 28. Lndbk. 11 10. 2.
3. Laxdale S. lxxvi.

The chief, Gizur the White, "who came with Christianity to Iceland" built on his homestead at Skálholt, on the Hvítá twenty miles S.E. of Thingvellir, a church soon to become the mother church of Iceland.

About the year 1030 Oxi son of Hjalti, the other Christian protagonist, built a church at Hólar reputed to be the largest church in the country. It had a wooden roof (tréthak) covered with lead, and it was well furnished. "This church was burnt with all its fittings by the secret judgement of God."¹ Its successor became the cathedral of the north.

(c) In pre-Christian days chieftains had built temples on their estates and had acted as priests themselves. Some of them like Snorri attained eminence over a wide area by their second sight. They were prophets as well as priests, and indeed in their little goderds or clans petty kings.

Some of these temples were converted into Christian places of worship. Other early churches were built by chieftains and enclosed within the turf walls protecting their farmsteads which also contained labourers' bothies (buthir) and a "tún," the valuable cultivated meadow. We can see such homesteads still in outlying parts of the north. The arrangement and the name 'tún' underlie our ancient towns. Adam of Bremen's strangely expressed observation: "Icelanders have their mountains for towns" probably means they make their 'tuns' on rising ground.² Chieftains are said to have been encouraged to build churches for more than their immediate circle i.e., larger than private chapels, by the promise that each could admit into heaven as many as his church would hold.³

1. Jónssaga 9.1.

2. Adam of Bremen, Hist. Eccl. IV, 35, ed. G. Waitz.

3. Fyrbyggjasaga 51, 53.

The godar were owners of the temples they erected or inherited and, when Christian churches were similarly built, the founders claimed them as part of their estate, especially as they were expected to maintain them. This matter of ownership of ecclesiastical buildings became a most vexatious question argued between church and chieftains for many generations.

11. (iii) Strengthening the Stakes.

(b) The Ministry and People.

King Olaf Haraldsson took more definite steps for consolidating the infant Church by providing visiting bishops, whose names were given to the historian Ari by Teit, the son of the first native bishop. We note that almost all of them came from the British Isles.¹ In spite of this provision there was as yet no ecclesiastical organisation.

(a) Bishop Bernard Vildradsson, called the book-learned, spent five years in Iceland (1016-21). He is said to have been English by birth and to have been brought to Norway by King Olaf as his court Bishop. Nothing is stated of what he did while he was in Iceland, though his nickname suggests that he owned, and used, at least a small library and impressed that fact, probably by instruction, on the people. We may hope that he ordained priests and consecrated churches.

Four years later a Norwegian bishop Kol came over. He stayed with Hall of Haukadal, a pillar of the early Icelandic Church, who was baptized twenty years before by Thangbrand. Kol died four years after his arrival, and was buried at Skálholt, the nearest church to Haukadal. "He was the first bishop to be buried in Iceland and gave the church at Skálholt a prestige which it never lost".² This fact no doubt contributed to its subsequent elevation to be the first cathedral in the country.

Iceland appears to have been without a bishop for five years until Rudolf arrived, banished from Norway. He was a relative of Duke Richard of Normandy and had been brought over by King Olaf in 1015. He should be given the credit of establishing at Bae in Borgarfjörð Iceland's first monastery, where he lived for nineteen years with other monks³, and must have trained and ordained men for

1. Hv.3; Islendingabók 8.
2. Hv. B.S. 1, 65.
3. Lndbk. 1, 16.

the priesthood. He retired to England in 1050, when he was made Abbot of the monastery of Abingdon by his kinsman Edward the Confessor, and died in 1052.¹

During Rudolf's period in Iceland, Bishop Henry came from the Orkneys for two years, followed by Bishop Jón, who remained four years. The early account of the bishops called Hungrvaka, cautiously adds: "Some men hold it for true that Jón afterwards fared to Vinland (i.e. America, discovered by an Icelandic settler in AD.1000) and there turned many men to Christianity, and that in the end he fared through martyrdom to God." Adam of Bremen makes the more probable statement that this sincere and God-fearing missionary was martyred by the Vandals.²

Bernard, known as "the Saxon" was the most notable and longest resident of the six bishops, who for twenty years trained the infant Church of Iceland, until it produced its own bishop and established a certain measure of law and order. He stayed at Vatnsdal in the North-West and afterwards became Bishop of Selja, off Bergen in Norway. No account appears of the activities of them, but of Bishop Bernard, Hungrvaka quaintly records in the alliteration beloved of Icelandic writers: "He hallowed many things, churches and chimes, bridges and burns, woods and waters, buildings and bells. These things are held to have brightened the lustre of his honour." Bishops for many centuries acted as bridge-builders. The trees, always scanty and small in Iceland, were blessed when their timber was used for house-building or churches. Rivers will have been "prayed-over" not only on account of the ever-prevalent danger in crossing them, but also in order to help the salmon-fishing, and by waters holy wells may be indicated. We note also his consecration of churches. Rocks were blessed because by that means trolls were thought to be exorcised.

1. Hist.Mon.Abingdon, Rolls Series 1, 463-4.
Bruce Dickens on St.Olave in Saga Bk of Viking Sec.XII,
2 p 56n.
2. F.J. I. p 87. For Vinland see G.H.Gathorne-Hardy:
The Norse Discoverers of America, London 1922.

(b) Bishops would have been required for the purpose of ordaining priests, for the supply of ministers was a problem of those early days. *Fyrbyggjasaga*, which pays careful attention to the development of Christianity in Iceland, sadly records that "there were no priests to say the hours at the churches even though they were built, for there were few in the country at the time."¹ Some chieftains hired untrained priests as an inferior kind of private chaplain. Such priests were regarded as so much a part of the household, that if they ran away any one who failed to return them to their master was outlawed.² They cannot have had any moral status or shown leadership.

Some church-building chiefs were ordained to look after their own churches following the custom of heathen godar. This custom like all great ideals had its own dangers. But it led to a higher standard of education among the chiefs of Iceland in the 12th century than was found at the time in any other country in Europe. It produced some outstanding leaders of the nation, such as Ari, the first historian of his country, (1067-1148), and Saemund the Wise (1056-1133), but for many priest-chiefs their priesthood had little influence on their lives, and so had little influence on the lives of their people.

Nevertheless the absence of a narrow ecclesiasticism, a merely professional priesthood, made the Icelandic Church a really national institution, with a variety and width of interests that touched life at all its points.

During this time not only the Church but also the country was painfully acquiring civilisation. "The northern nations entered late into the inheritance of Roman civilisation which had survived in Western Europe."³ When Iceland adopted Christianity in its own unique fashion, it possessed no literature and indeed no form of writing other than runic signs, painfully and infrequently cut on the sparse wood of the country or its intractable basalt rock.

1. *Fyrb.* S.48.

2. *Grágas* 3.

3. *Phillipotts Edda and Saga*, p.215.

(c) But a Church does not consist merely of its buildings and its ministers, and it has been a distinguishing mark of Icelandic Christianity in almost every age to produce laymen and women who have helped to strengthen its stakes, not only in the countryside, but also in the eternal values of truth, beauty and goodness. Prominent among these early leaders, we have noticed Jörund the Christian, pioneer of Christian perseverance, Thorvald the first missionary, Kjartan the chief convert of King Olaf, Hall of the Side and Hall of Haukadal foster-fathers of the young Icelandic Church; and in particular Olaf's champions Hjalti and Gizur, valiant for truth. Among notable women the high-minded Queen Aud and Gudrun the penitent would find a place.

Is it possible to trace the influence of Christianity on the rank and file of those days? Many sagas give vivid accounts of early Christian and pre-Christian times, but although they reflect traditions of the 'saga-age', which finished a generation after Christianity was adopted, they were not written until a century after that, when the Faith had got a firm hold of the country. Indeed so well established was their new religion that the Church was not afraid to let paganism fill a large and not unattractive part in the written saga. This is also a testimony to their truth. Most of the sagas centre round a blood-feud; but it is also significant that after Christianity had reached the country, their descriptions of persons and events reflect something of the spirit of the new religion.

It is only necessary to read some of the old sagas with their gruesome accounts of slaughters on almost every page to see into what a dark world the light of Christianity was brought and so to realise how deep and far-reaching was its influence.¹

Conspicuously against the cruel and vengeful background of the old vikings is set the new virtue of kindness. We read of the generosity of Ingrimund the Old to a pagan hag and her son, who repaid good with ill, for which Ingrimund bore no malice; and of Thorvard "the christian" at As, feeding many whom pagans were letting die of hunger.²

1. e.g. Njal's S 62, 111, 144; Grettir's S. 40, 35; Laxdale S. 67, 55. "blackguardly and gruesomely done."
2. Vatnsdale S. 22-6, Trans. Baring Gould; Iceland, its Scenes and Sagas, pp 141 sq. Olaf S. Trygg. 225.

The unheathen virtue of forgiveness is nobly illustrated in the saga about one of the finest of early Christians - the chieftain Njal. Njal bears no hatred in his heart and is "always ready to make up a quarrel". The last words of the dying Haukskald to his treacherous assassinator were: "God help me and forgive you." In Flosi, Njal's principal enemy, the conflict of rival motives is exemplified, just as the viking Cross at Iona shows man between two lions. When Flosi determines on the unheroic deed of burning Njal in his home, he acknowledges his responsibility before God, "for we are Christian men ourselves." It is sometimes thought that this great battle-saga end in anti-climax, for what the reader would expect to be the final battle-royal is dissolved in a handshake. But there is conflict other than that of arms; and when Flosi at last has at his mercy after a shipwreck Njal's son-in-law and avenger Kari, he asks him to stay in his house until winter ends. "Thus they were atoned with full atonement."¹

The saga of Viga-Grum describes the long life of an old pagan worshipper and fighter, whose religion and pugnacity brought him little profit, so that at last old,² blind and in exile he turned for comfort to Christianity.

The kindly atmosphere cast over old stories when they came to be written down, may perhaps have been a form of Christian tract. Nevertheless, even if they imperfectly represent the period depicted, yet they show the influence of Christian qualities in their compilers not long after the adaption of the new religion.

It marked a great advance when the Althing consisting of chieftains attempted to forbid personal conflicts so soon after Christianity "was taken up into the Law." "This counsel of perfection, not even thought of in England for seven centuries afterwards, though it failed to prevent blood-feuds or duels, helped to mitigate the violence and vengeance of chieftains, and at least disseminated a spirit of forgiveness and consideration. Just as the recitation of old sagas proved easier than their transcription on vellum, so the proclamation of the new religion came more readily to Icelanders than the writing of Christian law in their hearts.

1. Njals Saga. 158; Dasent: The Story of Burnt Njal, pp clxxxvii-cxcv.

2. W.S. Craigie: The Icelandic Sagas, p 43; Trans. E. Head.

CHAPTER THREE.

CONSOLIDATION OF THE ICELANDIC CHURCH.

(1) The First Native Bishop - Isleif (AD1056-80).

It had always been the fashion for the sons of chieftains to "fare abroad" in order to gain experience in foreign lands before settling down. On their return they described their experiences and displayed acquisitions to their family circle. These men came into touch with continental Christianity and thus indirectly prepared the way for the Church. Its consolidation and development waited until Icelanders themselves had been taught to supervise it. For Iceland makes little response to outside influence unless it is mediated by her own people.

(a) The adoption of Christianity in Iceland was largely due to the initiative of Gizur the White, who afterwards "set his whole mind to effect its strengthening."¹ He sent his son Isleif to be educated under the Abbess Godesti at the famous school of Hervorden in Westphalia, thus solving the main problem which confronted the undeveloped Christianity of the country - the training of a regular ministry. For after ordination Isleif settled on his father's estate at Skálholt and established there what the Bishops' saga² naively calls "a good cure and a parish", apparently the first to be properly organised in the country.

When Isleif reached home "his kinsfolk thought it good that he should strengthen his position by taking a wife. Down to the period of the Reformation, the Church in Iceland ignored papal decrees as to celibacy. Not for 120 years do we find a bishop, unmarried himself, attempting to force celibacy on his clergy; and the results of this attempt proved disastrous.

The story of Isleif's courtship is typical of the spirit of that day. With a friend he went to As in Vidadale,

1. Kristni S. 10, 1.

2. This homely and personal story of the first five Bishops of Skálholt is quaintly named Hungrvaka - The Appetiser.

where a Christian church had stood for almost a century and a half. He told his errand to the girl's father Thorwald, (who bore the same name as his ancestor, the builder of the church), but met with the reply; "Good accounts are going of thee, but thou must dwell farther north, if thou wilt be wed". Isleif answered: "I do not agree to leave my parish; rather, we must part".

With that he and his companion mounted their ponies and rode off. Now Dalla "the fairest of women" was up in a hayrick and called to her father asking who the men were, and when she heard, added; "I have the ambition to possess the best husband and the most famous son with him that were ever born in Iceland; therefore I think it is not inadvisable to send after them." ¹

Isleif and Dalla dwelt at Skálholt and had three famous sons: Gizur, bishop after his father; Teit, the learned instructor of the historian Ari, and Thorwald, "a mickle chief".

(b) In the year 1056 it was the counsel of the people to have a bishop over them; and Isleif, then 50 years old, was chosen as bishop "by the whole commonwealth of Iceland." He was bidden to go abroad for his consecration at the hands of Archbishop Adalbert of Bremen, who in 1053 had received authority over all Christians in northern lands.² On his way he went to see Henry, Emperor of Saxony, taking him a white bear that had come, no doubt on polar ice, from Greenland. That winter and the next were notoriously severe, lasting with snow until June and causing great mortality through famine. The Emperor gave Isleif a pass, and then he went to obtain a brief from Pope Victor II. The Pope appointed Whit-Sunday for the consecration, "Hoping that long honour might accrue to the bishopric, if the first bishop of Iceland were consecrated on the day on which God adorned the whole world with the gift of the Holy Spirit." This was done, but it

1. Flatey Book, II, pp 140-2. Dipl. Isl. I No 18.
2. Adam of Bremen: Hist. Eccl. IV, 35.

is significant that the date was noted in Icelandic story as "fourteen nights before Columba's mass", (May 26, 1056). This reckoning not only avoids the ambiguity of a movable feast, but it also indicates the respect of the Icelandic Church for St. Columba as one of their spiritual fathers,¹ to whom some of their earliest churches were dedicated.

Bishop Isleif set his chair in Skálholt church which then became the mother church of Iceland, the chief centre of culture in the island until the end of the XVIIth century.

(c) One of the first and greatest of Isleif's achievements was the establishment at his bishopstead of a school especially for ordinands, which was continued by most bishops down the centuries until the place was destroyed by an earthquake in 1784. Isleif admirably combined national traditions with European culture. To start with the country had to be taught to write. Runes laboriously carved for memorial inscriptions on basalt pillars had not taken scribes far on the road to writing characters on parchment or vellum. Isleif had been trained at Herford on the Weser, and would introduce the continental script, in which his son Teit appears to have proved an apt pupil, passing on his knowledge to Ari who was not slow to set down in writing lucid and enduring records. Chieftains seized this opportunity for sending their sons to Isleif, and many afterwards became good clerks. Two became bishops, Kol at Vik in Norway and Jón son of Ogmund, first bishop of Hólar, the northern see in Iceland. It is remarkable that a small isolated country, hardly out of the nursery of civilisation should train a priest so that he went to serve abroad, and attained high office on the continent where education had flourished for centuries.

Jón used to pay a fine tribute to his foster-father. Whenever in later life he heard a man speak of any who were handsome, or wise, or worthy he used to declare that Isleif came into his mind.

In the matter of temporalities for the see the new bishop had also to begin from nothing. He had little income, though Skálholt was to become the best farm in the country. But "there was much outgoing, and the bishop found it hard to live".

1. A similar reckoning is used for Bishop Gizur's death infr: p 40. The date - Columba-mass, appears as late as 1498.

He succeeded in getting sanction from the Althing for a toll (tollr), probably a head-tax, out of which other than personal expenses were met.

The bishop used his influence to mitigate external feuds between chieftains, which were beginning to satisfy their viking energies in place of the sea-roving, so vigorously denounced by King Olaf Haraldsson. Interest was growing in learning and literary pursuits fostered by the episcopal school, and in the development of the Commonwealth under Christian conditions. It is characteristic of the Icelandic Church that most men of standing were ordained, thus ensuring a general high level of scholarship.¹ But moral laxity had increased since the old days of faithfulness and devotion to duty to such an extent that the bishop had to censure a Lawman who had married both a mother and her daughter.

(d) Isleif and his people were troubled by episcopi vagrantes, one of the ecclesiastical diseases of the Middle Ages. Islendingabók gives the number of those "who said they were bishops" as five, and states their names. Three of them were Armenians, possibly of the Low Church Paulician sect.² They laid down easier rules than Bishop Isleif, so they found favour with evil men, "until Archbishop Adalbert issued a writ against them." In the bishop's latter days his greatness and goodness became manifest; so says the Hungrvaka, which illustrates his two-fold gift of healing in one of its vivid and memorable pictures: "He blessed drink into which darnel had got and rendered it drinkable, and many mad folk were brought for him to lay his hands upon them, and they went away healed."

Isleif exercised great influence through the Althing. From the first the bishops were allotted seats in the Assembly and at least filled the place of the heathen high-priests. For it was while Isleif, as chaplain, was celebrating mass at the annual gathering that he fell ill. He had a room prepared for him in Skálholt cathedral church, from which he gave much final counsel. He died there at the age of 74, after an

1. Kristni S. 17.

2. cp. Gibbon: Decline & F. ch 54.

Peter, Abakan and Stefan II (Stigjorn)

Origin of Christian Church in Iceland (Gylf. p 250)

episcopate of twenty-four years that augured well for the Church in Iceland, on July 5th - "three nights before the Festival of the Selja Saints, AD.1080.¹ The careful historian Ari adds: "I was there with Teit, my foster brother, being twelve years old."

1. "three nights", the ecclesiastical reckoning of the day beginning with its eve at 6 p.m.; a custom still continued. But Cp. our 'fortnight'. Tacitus, Germania 11, "Night, the mother of the day." and 2, nec dierum numerum, ut nos, sed noctium computant.
For the Selja Saints see Note p 55.

111. (ii) The Notable Rule of Bishop Gizur.
(1082-1118)

Isleif on his death-bed was invited by the Althing to nominate his successor. Thus a fortunate precedent was set in the method of electing the country's bishops. When the nominee refused, "the whole Althing turned to Gizur his son and bade him fare abroad to be consecrated." Thus the nation paid a great tribute to the inaugural work of their first bishop. He had tackled the main problems before the young Church and State with resolution and tact, and laid down principles in which satisfactory solutions might ultimately be found. Before consenting Gizur shrewdly obtained the Assembly's promise of support. Then he procured the Pope's brief, and was consecrated by Hardvig, Archbishop of Mardeburg on September 4th 1082, being then forty years of age. Like his father he had been educated at Harvorden and had travelled widely.

When Harald Hardrada, King of Norway, met him he said: "Out of Gizur three men might be made. He is well suited to be a viking captain, and that he might be. He is well suited to be a king. But he is best suited to be a bishop, and this office he shall have, and be held a most notable man therein".¹ Hungrvaka says: "He excelled in all things that a man ought to know"... On his return as bishop, the people received him joyfully and he won such honour and esteem that "everyone was willing to sit or stand as he bade.... and it would be true to say he was both king and bishop over the land while he lived".

He was practically the founder of the dioceses of Skalholt and Hólar; but he proved to be a great statesman as well as an ecclesiastic. A striking testimony to his strength of character is paid by the record that he kept such peace in the land that feuds between chieftains ceased and the carrying of weapons almost fell into disuse.

1. Harald Hardrada's Saga. O.E., I p596.

(a) His episcopate was marked by four great achievements.

1. He rebuilt the cathedral and endowed it with money and lands. After the death of his mother Dalla he gave the family house to the see, declaring that "there should always be a bishop's chair there while Iceland is inhabited, and Christianity endures."

Alas, for the frailty of human wishes! After a century of devastating volcanic eruptions and earthquakes, the last of which in 1784 destroyed the cathedral, this historic see was transferred to Reykjavik by Denmark in 1785 at the end of 700 years of service, which survived the Reformation.

2. With a view to establishing a system of tithes, the bishop had a census taken of the bondi or yeoman-farmers which gave the following interesting results: In the Southern quarter 1000 = 1200; In Eastern 700 = 840; In Western 900 = 1080; and in the Northern 1200 = 1440 - a total of 4560. Allowing for dependents Gjerset estimates that this would make the total population about 50,000. These were scattered over, or rather round an island five-fourths the size of Ireland segregated into small communities by mountains, by unnavigable rivers and by deserts of sand and lava, making administration an exacting enterprise.

3. By the help of two eminent counsellors, Saemund, priest of Oddi (1056-1133) "the most prudent and learned man of the day", and Markus Skeggisson (ob. AD 1107) the Speaker, the bishop established in 1096 through the Althing a system of tithes to be distributed in four parts: (1) for the bishop (2) for the Church; (3) for the clergy (4) for the poor. (Such Episcopal revenue was unusual). Thus the clergy

1. Kristni S, 13. Islendinga, 10. Gj p 67.
(In 1790 after a century of volcanic disaster, there were only 40,000 in the island; in 1890, the total was about 70,000; in 1940 120,000, of whom one-third live in Reykjavik.)

obtained a fixed income and became less dependent for their living on the patronage of chieftains or on secular pursuits. The maximum stipend for priests was 12 marks (= 5 cows) together with fees for funerals and masses for the dead.¹ Clerical tithe was abolished in 1914. the quarter-tithe earmarked for the poor reverted to the community to administer, a method unknown on the continent indicating the national character of the Icelandic Church.²

The author of *Hungrvaka*, writing after the Church had a century's experience of tithe importance and intricacies, adds a suggestive comment:- There has been no such foundation in Skálholt for wealth as this tithe-tax, which was laid on by reason of the popularity and power of Bishop Gizur".

4. In 1102, at the request of the people of the North "the thickest settled, most famous Quarter", Gizur granted them a bishop of their own; and "there was afterwards chosen by God and good men", Jón, son of Ögmund, pupil or foster-son of Bishop Isleif. After his consecration by the Primate at Lund, Bishop Jón set his chair at Hólar in Skölgafirth, and established there a centre of learning and civilisation in the North. Jón, who was afterwards venerated as a saint, had a distinguished episcopate which deserves a section to itself.

(b) In 1110 AD a bishopric was founded at Gardar in Greenland, which had been discovered by the Iclander Eirek the Red in 981, and Christianized by his son Leif at the instigation of King Olaf Tryggvason.³

In these early days the Church of Iceland took much interest in its daughter Church in Greenland. The Skálholt Annals record that Eirek, the first (according to one MS) Bishop of Greenland, went to search for Vinland, as the sagas call the West coast of America, and

- 1: Grágás 6; Dipl. Isl. 1 (No 22) pp 70-162; B.S.I., 29 & 68.
- 2: Gregersen: L'Islande - Son Statut....p 40.
- 3: Eiriks S. rauda, Flateybk III, p446; Gj pp 114-6.

was heard of no more, (AD 1112-21.) The second bishop, Arnald, spent the winter of 1124-5 with Saemund at Oddi; and one of his successors was entertained at Skálholt in 1203 by Bishop Pál.¹

An attempted resettlement perished like the first. The last bishop was Alf, who according to the Annals, went out in 1368 and died in Greenland in 1378.

The present missionaries to that bleak country have difficulties other than the climate with which to contend. The Eskimos have never seen sheep, so the metaphor of the Saviour as the Lamb of God has to be conveyed to them as "God's baby-seal".

(c) When Gizur had been bishop for 36 years, being then 75 years of age, he became dangerously ill, and sent to the Althing the name of Thorlak for election as his successor. His pain increased, and his wife Steinunn begged him to allow vows to be made to alleviate it. But the bishop said "It is not permitted for a man to have himself prayed out of God's Battle".

He died "12 nights before St. Columba's day", (May 28th, 1118) Hungrvaka adds "Many men who were at Bishop Gizur's deathbed never forgot it as long as they lived; and it has been the opinion of all wise men that by the grace of God and his unusual talents he has been the noblest man in Iceland, both of clerks and laymen". So Ari similarly: "He was more beloved by his fellow countrymen than any man we know to have lived in this land."

Of Gizur in particular Adam of Bremen must have been thinking when in 1100 he summed up Church rule among the Icelanders: "For a king they have their bishop, and to his nod all the people attend. Whatsoever he lays down from God or scripture or from customs of other nations, that they have for law."² Adam shows the same reserved enthusiasm for these early Icelandic bishops as Bede had for the Celtic missionaries. He praises their saintly sincerity of life (*sancta simplicitas*).

1. The Greenland settlement flourished until the Black Death of 1349, when it was cut off from communication. A visitor later found no trace of it, except for a few skeletons with tombstones inscribed with runes, and some sheep and cattle gone wild. Whether the community perished of plague or Eskimos is unknown.
List of 8 Bishops, Dipl. Isl. 111, pp 24, 27.
2. Adam of Bremen: *Hist. Eccl. IV*, 35. cp. *Giraldus Camb.: Topographia Hibernica*, 13 "Their pontiff is their prince." AD 1187.

III. (iii) Storm, Strife and Scholarship.

Storm, strife and scholarship marked the Icelandic Church almost throughout its history. For the people live on the edge of devastating volcanoes and have natural propensity for personal quarrels and clannish feuds; and yet even in their most disastrous and bellicose periods they maintained an intense interest in literary pursuits.

During the constructive epoch of the first two bishops, Hekla and her fiercer sisters were quiescent, and men's passions followed suit, so that the era was known as the Peace Period. Furthermore though sagas were being preserved by recitation, and episcopal schools were teaching the art of script introduced by Christianity, Icelandic literature hardly began until soon after Bishop Gizur's death when the priest Ari Thorgilsson inaugurated a long series of historical writings of remarkable brilliancy.

(a) In order to mark the greatness of Bishop Gizur, Hungrvaka emphasises the atrociousness of the weather in the year he died. It is right that we should be reminded that the Icelanders' character and religion have been shaped largely by the trying climate and harsh conditions of their country on the edge of the arctic circle.

"There was such a storm in Holy Week that the clergy could not take services on Good Friday. Few could receive Corpus Domini on Easter Day." (This provides a timely illustration of pastoral work in Iceland, as we realised when our Forces were stationed there in the World War). "A merchant ship was cast up under Eyjafell and turned over keel upwards. Another storm came, as men rode to the Thing (in June) and killed cattle in the north. This destroyed the church of Thingvellir for which the King of Norway had given timber. That summer 35 ships came to Iceland but only eight went out to Norway, a week's journey.

"The fall of Bishop Gizur forboded a period of universal suffering in the country, shipwrecks and loss of life and scathe of cattle." The Annals call this undrar, - Year of portents. Most of the calamities mentioned, including the first recorded eruption of Hekla in 1029¹ actually preceeded his death, so we feel that the real disaster to which they lead up is "the dissention and lawbreaking, and thereby such death of men in the land, that the like has never been seen since the country was inhabited." What Icelandic writers call Fridaröld - the Peace Period (1030-1118) ceased on the death of Bishop Gizur.

(b) When his strong rule was removed feuds between chieftains recently suppressed broke into open conflict. How furious such feuds could be is shown in the sagas of Njálf and Grettir. Those were days of personal vendettas, before Christianity got hold of men. Nevertheless when religion closed the safety valve of Viking searoving, chieftains sought outlets for their combativeness within the narrow confines of their country. Soon leading chieftains began to multiply their adherents and so upset the balance of power. The national régime formed a league of petty nations or clans without a police force, so that eventually the government broke down. The Church itself was not strong enough to maintain order, but leading ecclesiastics by their personal influence especially in early days sometimes did so. For instance, in the year 1120, when rival chiefs appeared at the Thing to assert their rights with their followers at their backs fully armed, battle was only avoided by the intervention of Bishop Gizur's successor Thorlak Runolfsson (1118-36). with the help of the venerated and now venerable Saemund the Wise.²

Icelanders are litigious by nature, and priests got into trouble for taking too much time over law-suits to the neglect of their parishes. They found it a means of adding to their meagre incomes. Nor were clergy themselves free from the lawless spirit of the age. We read how a

1. Hv. 2, 23.

2. Sturlunga S. 1,5-27.

priest Ketill, who had heard that his wife Groa had been solicited by a chieftain called Gudmund, attacked him on the highway, but got the worst of the encounter and lost an eye. However, honour had been satisfied, and Ketill was afterwards made bishop of Hólar (1122-45). It is impossible not to admire the priest who took the law into his hand in a lawless age, and it is gratifying to note that later, when Gudmund fell into poverty, the bishop offered to look after him.¹ Ketill later used this personal episode with its conclusion in peace of mind won by forgiveness, to assuage the anger of a vindictive chieftain.²

The old law of Iceland, hitherto proclaimed by the Lawman from the Law-mound at the Althing, was for the first time written down in 1117-8 at the Lawman's dictation. Following this lead Bishop Thorlak took in hand the transcription and codification of all existing church law, being assisted by Bishop Ketill, the learned priest Saemund and Ozur the Primate, of Lund. This Kristinrettr was passed by the Althing in the years 1122-23, and incorporated in the Law of the land. This was Thorlak's great achievement, and made a notable advance in ecclesiastical administration, actually anticipating the first codification of Canon Law in the Decretum of Gratian AD 1140. Copies of the Law were kept at the bishopsteads, the final authority being the copy at Skálholt. To this copy the odd title of Grágás was afterwards given, probably on account of its binding of grey goose skin.³

It is characteristic of Iceland that this ecclesiastical Law was administered by the Althing and not by the Church. Breaches of ecclesiastical discipline were dealt with by an ecclesiastical tribunal of the Althing called prestadóm, but civil and criminal cases were brought before the ordinary courts.⁴

1. Ljósvefninga S.31.
2. Sturlunga S. I,7-39.
3. First in Bp Finarsson's valuation Mar 26 1548; Cod Reg Grágás, introd. Olason.
4. Grágás 28; Gregersen: L'Islande...p40.

(c) Iceland was beginning to take pride in its own history. National consciousness was developing. Bishop Thorlak's great talent lay in his scholarship, a product of his home with his foster-father at Haukadal. "He was devoted to priestly learning." He continued the training school for clergy at Skálholt, in which he was ably seconded by Tjorvi, the former bishop's grandson and chaplain, who appears to have been a model bishop's chaplain: "Every day he sang 30 psalms distinctly and intelligently, and between his devotions he studied and transcribed the scriptures. Also he taught and gave healing advice to those men who needed it and came to visit him. Though he had the reputation of being close-fisted in other things, he was ready with alms."

For three years before his death Bishop Thorlak was confined to his bed "surrounded by his learned men". We can imagine his scholarly converse with Ari and Sæmund, planning history that has lived. Standing by would be his seven-year old foster-son, Gizur son of Hall, destined to grow up to be the chief source of information for the anonymous author of *Hungrvaka* in his story of those days.

As his illness grew the bishop had read to him Pope Gregory's greatest book "*De cura pastoralis*." After that "he attended better to preparing for his death, which he did in his own way." Thoughtful Icelanders of the day were not mentally isolated from Catholic culture, but the time had not yet arrived for the type for which such a book stood to prevail over the insular tradition.

They were acquainted also with catholic canticles. Thorlak died on St. Bridget's Eve, 1133. "At the same moment", *Hungrvaka* records with reserve, "a learned and well born priest called Arni was faring on his way in the north, when he heard over his head the fair singing of Bishop Lambert's cantilena; "*Sic animam claris caelorum reddidit astris*". Many thought there was much in this circumstance, and never let it fall out of memory."

1. Bp of Maestricht (c633-700) martyr and saint; cf Migne:

P. L. vol 132, pp 643-59.

Bishop Thorlak's foster-father, Hall son of Thorarin, who had been responsible for his love of learning, was a remarkable man. He lived over fifty years at Haukadál fifteen miles north-west of Skálholt in a district now wild and barren just north of the great Geysir. He had been a friend of King Olaf the Saint and remembered his own baptism at the age of three at the hand of Thangbrand in the year 999. He had remembered too most of the great events since then. Like all true scholars he was most generous with his knowledge which he passed on to another foster-son Teit, son of Bishop Isleif, and through him to Ari, the author of *Islendingabók*, who also was a pupil at Haukadál from the age of seven; so that if Ari be styled the father of Icelandic history, Hall of Haukadál is its foster-father. He died in 1089 at the age of 93.

Thorlak in his turn became the foster-father of Gizur, Teit's grandson, and predicted rightly that he would become a man of mark. This Gizur became a notable Law-man or speaker, "One of the treasures of Iceland"; who lived to the age of 80, and was a friend of five bishops of Skálholt (ob. AD1206); so says the author of *Hungrvaka*, acknowledging his indebtedness to "that learned man."

Thus for 200 years the lamp of knowledge was passed on from generation to generation in this obscure northern outpost of civilisation, and the clear beams then kindled illuminate us yet.

The priest Ari Thorgilsson the Wise (1067-1148) was a great-grandson of Gudrum, the heroine of the *Laxdale* saga and descendant of Hall-of-the-Side, one of the first Christians to be baptized. He was foster-son and pupil of Teit, son of the first bishop, and learned much also from Thurid, Snorri the godi's daughter, "who was both wise and truthful." ¹ Ari devoted his life to establishing the details of the foundation and Christianizing of his country, summing them up admirably in the *Islendingabók* his *Libellus* which he made for Bishops Thorlak & Ketill, the earliest historical work in the native tongue (probably AD1122-33).

1. *Islendingabók* 1.

He based his conclusions on careful enquiry, stating his authorities and weighing the evidence. "This I learned from Teit, who learned it from one who was there." His reading extended to the works of Bede, whom he quotes. Ari's researches also underlie *Landnámabók* - the unique and invaluable Book of the Settlement. Snorri Sturluson (ob. AD 1241) pays him a worthy tribute in the prologue to his famous *Heimskringla*: "It is not surprising that Ari was excellently informed about early events....since he had learned from old men and wise, and was himself eager to learn, and had a good memory." 1

Saemund inn Frodi, the Wise, (1056-1133) grandson of Hall-of-the-Side, counsellor of three bishops, is described in the saga of St. Jón of Hólar as "the man who of all others has been the greatest help to the Church of God in Iceland." He was educated in Paris, and returning about 1078 to be ordained, settled in his father's farm-estate at Oddi in the South, where he built a large church dedicated to St. Nicolas.² Here too he founded a school, passing on his culture through his sons Eyjolf and Lept. Saemund as a mediaeval scientist practised astrology, and so acquired a reputation as a magician, a wizard almost of uncanny arts.³ Eyjolf Saemundsson became the greatest teacher of the day, and trained Bishop Thorlak, one of the two national saints. From the school of Oddi emerged in the next century the *Heimskringla* of Snorri, foster-son of Jón Leptsson, grandson of Saemund.

Academic chroniclers tend to forget that history is lived before it can be written. Hence the weakness of monkish annals. The soundest history is based upon experience, a living concrete happening taken into the life of the recorder. The schools of Skálholt, Haukadál and Oddi, though cradled and fostered in the Church, went further. Their writers were themselves vigorous shapers of the events they vividly recorded. This literary productivity would not have been possible had not the Runic alphabet been translated into Roman letters, an achievement said to have been brought about by a carpenter at the beginning of the XIth century, though no

1. cp. Vigfusson: *Sturlunga S.* I pp xxvii sq., and esp. art in *Islandica* vol XX by Halldor Hermannsson.
2. *Isendingabók* 9; B.S. I p 320.
3. B. S. I 227-9.

doubt foundations of a national script were laid by Bishops Bernard and Rudolf and followed up at the four great schools. The oldest extant Icelandic manuscript dates from AD. 1150.¹

A little later a masterly piece of mathematics was carried out in adapting the old computation of years to the Julian calendar, introduced into the country by Christianity.

Icelanders still like to reckon only two seasons in the year, and observe as holidays the first day of summer and winter, April 24 and October 25, in a semi-pagan or rather, delightfully historic fashion that the matter-of-factness of modernity has not succeeded in obliterating.

A significant feature about this great Icelandic prose literature indicates the patriotic and independent spirit of the country and its Church. Almost all the writing, ecclesiastical as well as so-called secular, was in the vernacular. Except perhaps in actual devotions, the language of the Church, like the language of literature, was the language of the people.

1. Icelandic Illuminated MSS of the Middle Ages Introd. p 9.

NOTE on the SELJA SAINTS.

Seljamen's-mass, the festival of the Selja Saints appears on July 8th in the Norwegian and Icelandic Kalendars and breviaries. It is also included in the Scots Menology, a memorial of the period 1152-1472 during which the Orkneys were under the jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Nidaros, afterwards Trondhjem.

The festival was popular in Iceland, especially in the southern diocese. Bishop Magnus (1134-48) changed the Churchday, the annual festival of Skalholt cathedral, from Holy Cross day in Spring (May 3) to Seljamen's-mass, which followed after the annual meeting of the Althing, held 25 miles off at Thingvellir, and made a good climax to that legal and social Assembly.

This festival was used in the ordinary way to mark a date, e.g. Bishop Isleif died in 1080 "three nights before Seljamen's-mass," Selja saints' vigil is the date of a fray reported in the Annals under AD1362, in which a taxgatherer called Smith was killed (Gj. p248)

Selja is an island off Bergen in Norway, where in the days of King Olaf Tryggvason (according to his saga) a workman found a luminous skull. He took this to the king, knowing his fanatical zeal in the cause of the Church. Then sailors in passing ships reported the appearance of a strange light coming from a heap of rocks, underneath which the king found a female body intact, and other bones. The body was believed to be the remains of an Irish princess, Sunniva, who set out from Ireland in a vessel without sails or rudder, to escape the unworthy attentions of a heathen chieftain:- a Scandinavian version of the story of St. Ursula and her companions.¹

King Olaf built on the island a church and a monastery dedicated to St. Alban, the proto-martyr of Britain, evidence of the close connection between the two churches in the days of early Norwegian Christianity.

1. Olaf's S Trygg. 107-8, 149; Sigrid Unset; Kristin Lavransdottir, note pp 931-2. ? St Alban = Sunniva's brother.

England repaid the tribute by extensive devotion to the cult of St. Olaf (Heraldsson), the patron saint of Norway. This devotion links England, Norway and Iceland.¹

In 1170 the Selja relics were removed to St. Michael's monastery in Bergen, which received additional endowment in 1280 from Arni Thorlaksson, Bishop of Skálholt, by the gift of the Westman Islands. In 1545 the monastic possessions were vested in a leper hospital in Bergen.

1. Bruce Dickens: Cult of St. Olave in the British Isles. Art in Saga Book of the Viking Society. XII ii 1940.

CHAPTER FOUR.

CLIMAX OF THE ICELANDIC CHURCH.

(i) Two Chieftain-bishops.

(a) Magnus (AD1134-1148.)

In this imperfect world it is easy to criticise prince-bishops and parson squires. The Barchester novels show how they tend to become more secular than spiritual, like the "half-priest" mentioned in one of the sagas.

In specialist days, such criticism is sharpened. In cities the artisan who shapes the chair-leg will have nothing to do with the seat or the fixing. In the country still a single craftsman will take pride in turning out the job complete. So the early bishops in Iceland, who held that Christianity should influence all sides of life, proved master-craftsmen of the Church.

If Isleif may be termed the St. Paul of the growing Icelandic church and Gizur the St. Peter, then Thorlak may be termed its St. John and Magnus its St. Barnabas.

(3) Thorlak's successor at Skalholt, Magnus, a grand-nephew of Hall-of-the-Side, had been well grounded in letters and religion by his father and step-mother, Einur and Oddny, daughter of Magnus, priest of Reykholt. Hung-rvaka gives a characteristically long genealogy and long alliterative list of his good qualities, out of which emerges the fact that he earned popularity as a priest for charm, generosity and peace-making.

Thorlak Runolfsson died in February, 1133. Magnus Finarsson in the customary way was elected at the summer Al-thing but owing to storms, although a good seaman, he could not go abroad until the following summer, when he was consecrated by Ozur Archbishop of Lund, King

Harald of Norway gave him many valuable gifts, including a loving cup which the bishop made in to a chalice.

He returned home the year after, reaching Eyjafjörð in the north while the Al-thing was in session. He went straight over the mountain passes to Thingvellir where the chronic litigation between chieftains had reached a dangerous stage. But when a messenger announced to the Law-men "Now rides Bishop Magnus to the Thing", dissension dropped (Thá ridi Magnus biskup á Thingit").

On arrival the bishop climbed the mound in front of the church and gave the assembly and the crowds an account of his experiences in Norway, thus lifting their provincial thoughts into a wider world; "And all men thought a great deal of his eloquence and dignity".

Traveller's tales formed a welcome element in Icelandic education. Young men of standing travelled to Norway and sometimes beyond it, to Sweden, Germany, even to Paris and Rome, and on their return retailed their experiences and news of world-happenings to appreciative but critical home-circles. These travellers tales had to pass the renowned Icelandic standard of truth. Among conspicuous ecclesiastical travellers we have already mentioned Thorwald the Far-farer, Kjartan, Hall of Haukadal, Isleif, his sons Teit and Gizur, and Saemund the Wise. It will be noted that the Church provided a valuable link in this education process. Small sailing vessels that braved sub-arctic seas in those early years were more numerous every summer than were the larger ships which steamed across them in the sixteenth century.

Sailing boats in a fair wind took about six days to cross from the North of Ireland to the South-west corner of Iceland,¹ and the steamers from Leith took not much less time; (although in the world war 52 hours was a good journey from Reykjavik to the Clyde, and I flew from Skerjafjörð to Milford Haven, 1000 miles, between breakfast and tea.)

1. Reeves: Ecclesiastical Antiquities p 386; Olaf Tr. S., 112.

(b) "Bishop Magnus rides to the Thing", would make an attractive subject for a picture of a great churchman's influence on the turbulent passions of his half-tamed people.

In the rock-walled valley we would see in the clear northern sunshine at the head of the tranquil lake 36 chieftains in their resplendent uniforms, drawn up in rival clans, backed by their retainers, armed with battle-axes and swords. Their anxious women-folk richly robed, with their long fair hair plaited and diademed, would be grouped by the booths which line the rocky banks of the Oxará.

As angry clamant shouts assail the Law-men and re-echo in the valley, a messenger runs up and points northwards, where through a gap in the great mountain wall a small company of ponies is seen approaching, and the joyful cry runs round the assembly: "Thá ridi Magnus biskup á Thingit".

In spite of his popularity and accession of power the youthful Magnus retained towards all the same humility as he had shown before he became bishop. "Therefore he was more beloved than most other men, and was able to do many great deeds."

He spared neither time nor money in order to settle disputes, and so there were no quarrels and no litigations while he was bishop.

Magnus enlarged his cathedral at Skálholt, and changed its festival (kyrkjudagr) from Holy Cross Day in Spring (May 3rd) to the festival of the Saints of Selja-Seljemen's Mass - July 8th. This favourite commemoration would associate the cathedral festival with the memorial of the first bishop's death, and falling later in the season following the session of the Al-thing, would better suit the convenience of visitors.

The bishop presented the cathedral with a costly altar frontal which he had brought from abroad. He also brought over purple from which was made that cope called, says the Hungrvaka, 'Skarbending' 1

1. v.l. skarmendingr; a full chasuble, an Icelandic fashion. Or ? curiously fastened cp. Skaru-bunden in Beowulf, cunningly bound, with a curious artistic clasp. Cp Bp Audun's gift to Holar infr. p 129.

He endowed the see with numerous lands, in particular purchasing the Westman Islands in which he proposed to establish a monastery on the lines of that founded at Thingeyrar in the north in 1133 under the auspices of Ketill, Bishop of Hólar.

(c) Both Magnus and Ketill came to an untimely end. When Ketill reached 70 years of age he desired to retire from his bishopric, and commended himself to the prayers of the Synod of priests at the Al-thing. Then Magnus invited him to his dedication festival at Skálholt, in connection with which he gave a banquet serving a goodly supply of mead, the whole "so elaborate that it had scarcely a parallel in Iceland." At this feast no doubt, in accordance with the Christianized version of an ancient northern custom, a bumper (Icelandic bumba) would be drunk to departed relatives, then to Christ (Kristsmíni), then to the patron saints.¹

After supper on the Friday following, both bishops went to bathe in the adjacent hot springs. Consequently the aged Bishop Ketill died. Great sorrow fell on the festive company until the close of his funeral, when "the comforting speech of Bishop Magnus and the excellent drink provided made men forget their sorrows sooner than they would otherwise have done."

Three years later Bishop Magnus went to Hitardal to keep Michaelmas, when it happened the night afterwards that the house in which he was staying was burned down. 72 men were burnt to death including seven priests, among whom was Tjorvi, faithful chaplain of three bishops. Tidings were sent to Hall, son of Teit, and Fyulf, son of Saemund, the most eminent clergy in the country, who took in hand the funeral of Bishop Magnus and Tjorvi at Skálholt. (October 10, 1148). "So great was this calamity that every one seemed to have lost his best friend."

These disasters emphasise the fact that it came natural to Icelandic churchmanship to fulfil the apostolic injunction to be given to hospitality, and illustrate the difficulty and dangers of social intercourse.

1. Hakon's Saga, 16, 1.

The life of Bishop Magnus is a fine illustration of Adam of Bremen's testimonial to the character of Icelanders: "They are remarkable for their charity." 1

1. Adam of Bremen, Hist. Eccl. IV, 35.

IV. (1) (b) Klaeng, Bishop of Skálholt.
(AD1105-1176).

The Althing elected Hall son of Teit as successor to Magnus, which would have put learning once more on the episcopal chair, and carried on the line of Isleif the first bishop. But Hall died on his way to be consecrated, a reminder that to fare overseas could be a trying experience. Then Klaeng son of Thorstein was elected.

(a) In 1152, the year of his consecration, the English cardinal Nicolas Breakspear, afterwards Pope Adrian IV, visited Norway and established an archdiocese at Nidaros under which the two sees in Iceland were put. Thus these dioceses could be more strictly supervised by a primate more accessible and in closer touch with Rome. Bremen in Germany and Lund in Sweden had previously accomodated the primates, who were then too remote to interfere with the Icelandic' Church's national development. Nidaros, the capital of North Norway received the name of its countryside Trondheim in the later Middle Ages. The province consisted of Norway, Iceland, Greenland and the Orkneys and Hebrides.¹

An archbishop at Nidaros provided the King of Norway as well as the Pope with a closer opportunity for direct intervention in political and ecclesiastical affairs in Iceland. When Eystein Erlendsson was appointed Primate in 1159, he attempted by correspondence to strengthen the hands of the two bishops in their efforts to stop the violence and immorality of chieftains and contumacious priests. The weapons used were those of ecclesiastical ban and excommunication. But Icelanders are not the sort of people to kiss the rod; and later bishops tended to use their rights for the aggrandisement of the Church. Nor did Icelanders welcome interference with their independence by an external power. A survey of the first two centuries of Christianity in Iceland under the notable first five bishops of Skálholt and their Northern colleagues, shows that the greatest influence in the land came from patriotic prelates and priests of character and repute. It proved to be no use

1. Dipl. Isl. I, pp717-8: The Hebrides appear as "ecclesia Sancti Columbi (sic) de insula Hy (Iona) et Sudereiensis alias Manensi", (cp. Sodor and Man).

elaborating ecclesiastical machinery without improving the status and calibre of ecclesiastica who after all have to run it.

Klaeng was a bishop of the old school. He was a northerner trained by Bishop Ketill and was an eloquent preacher and a skilful poet. "He became a great lawyer and chief. There was not a suit, but what the bishop was not taken into it." Like Magnus, Klaeng settled the feuds of the chieftains.

Nevertheless, what was afterwards known as the Stone-Throwing Summer, 1163, occurred in Klaeng's time. In a fight which broke out on the sacred soil of the Thing, a priest, Halldor Storrason, was killed, which shows how difficult it is to be in the world and yet not of the world. The fact that at this time similar feuds raged incessantly in Europe (as e.g. Guelfs and Ghibellines) does not justify this secularisation, though it provides some extenuation. Halldor was a member of the Snorri clan whose conflicts in the next century were to lead the loss of Icelandic independence.

After Klaeng's consecration he fell in with Gizur, Hall's son, on his travels, whose father had been elected bishop. The two made a pact of friendship and returned home together. This, says Hungrvaka, "gave the country the opportunity of welcoming the two men most valuable to it." Gizur became a Law-man and settled at Haukadal, where he kept up the reputation of that house for sound, that is sacred, learning. He had eight children including Hall, also elected Speaker, who afterwards became Abbot of Helgafell (ob.AD1225) and Magnus II, Bishop of Skálholt (ob.AD1237).

(b) Klaeng also brought back from Norway timber for rebuilding the cathedral. Iceland has never been able to grow trees. Its graceful birches and rowans, refreshing in a land of rock and lava, are not much more than shrubs. All the churches constructed in these early centuries depended on timber procured by private benefactions, brought overseas and then pulled by ponies up country over rough tracks and passes in the mountains. For repairs drift-wood from the shore was used.

The cathedral at Skálholt had been built on his farm by Gizur the White, father of the first bishop, about 998 AD., rebuilt by his grandson Gizur, the second bishop (1082-1118), enlarged by Bishop Magnus 1145, and now rebuilt by his successor probably about 1153. As a Saxon church-nave of upright half-timbers has lasted at Greenstead in Essex for a thousand years or more, there may be more to be said for the English climate than we think. But as the enlargement by Bishop Magnus indicates, reconstructions of Skálholt cathedral were carried out chiefly in response to a call for more accommodation.

It is clear that the engaging author of *Hungurvaka* was present at the rebuilding of the cathedral, for he paints an enthusiastic first hand account of the new building "which surpassed all in the country in wood and workmanship". He gives the name of the principle artificers: Arni chief architect, and Björn Thorvaldsson the Skilful. Illugi Leigsson shaped and cut the wood.

Icelandic sagas contain woven into their narratives short poems which hardly reach the high standard of the prose. *Hungurvaka* observes both these principles here, for it adds that when the church was all finished, Rurolf son of Bishop Ketill sang this song:-

"Strong the temple that is fashioned
 Unto Christ the merciful,
 Firmly founded by the council,
 Of the ruler bountiful.
 Happy fate that Igultarni
 Here the house of God should build;
 Holy Peter owns with favour
 Björn and Arni, workmen skilled".¹

Here it is in 12th century Icelandic, which is remarkably close to the current language of the country today:-

1. Igultarni is an Icelandic 'kenning' or poetical circumlocution; = sea-biter = bear = Björn. Trans. by Mrs Disney Leith.

Hraust var Höll, fú er Kristi
 Hugblidum let smida,
 Góð er rót er ráðum,
 Ríkr stjórnar sliðum
 Gípta varð that er gíörði
 Guðs rann Igultanni;
 Petr hefr eignaz itra,
 Arna smid oc Biarnar.

(c) The bishop presented his cathedral with a chalice of gold, set with gems, and directed that the service-books be re-written 'in the best script.' Two schools of script had been introduced into the country.¹ The continental script would be that learnt by Bishop Isleif in Westphalia, and taught on his return. But Klaeng was a pupil of Ketill, associated in the Canon-Law transcription with the first Bishop Thorlak, who was trained by Hall of Hawkadal, the friend of St. Olaf, patron of English visiting bishops, and they would teach the Saxon script. We conclude that Bishop Klaeng's order as to his service books meant the supersession of the Continental script by the Saxon at Skálholt.

The cathedral was consecrated on 'St. Vitus' Day' June 15th; the outside by Bishop Klaeng, the interior by his colleague Björn of Hólar. The sermon was preached by Nicolas Bergsson, the eloquent and much travelled Abbot of the newly founded monastery at Thvera. Afterwards in bountiful Icelandic fashion the bishop invited to a sumptuous breakfast all the congregation who sat down 'not without difficulty to the number of 700' - i.e. according to the reckoning of the Scandinavian long hundred, 840. The whole affair is a good illustration of Icelandic ecclesiastical fellowship in the early days.

Klaeng was a great builder and founder, and in his day (though Hungrvaka strangely omits to record it), Augustinian monasteries were established at Mitardal, Thykkvabaer, Flatey and a Benedictine nunnery at Kirkjubaer.

1. Icelandic Illuminated Mss. of the Middle Ages, Introd. p 9.

Klaeng maintained the episcopal school and theological college, and himself took pains to instruct the students in copying the scriptures and singing the psalms in the approved manner.

In spite of his ecclesiastical magnificence, Klaeng proved more ascetic than his predecessors 'in watchings, in fastings and in raiment.' Often by night in frost and snow he would go barefoot. Such austerity led to his final illness at the age of 70. On signifying to the Althing his desire to retire, they let him choose his successor, and he nominated Thorlak Thorhallsson, the saintly abbot of Thykkvabaer, destined to be canonized after his death. Klaeng then took to his bed and died in the following winter, February 28, 1176. The *Hungrvaka* adds: 'It seems to us for many reasons that Iceland has never had a man of such magnificence as Bishop Klaeng; and we believe that his munificence will be remembered while the country is inhabited.'

Such a characteristic aspiration encourages a recorder of today to pass on the stories of these pioneers, which bring home the spirit, method, and effectiveness of the early Icelandic Church in the face of an intractable country and people.

IV. Culmination of the Icelandic Church.

(ii) Two episcopal saints.

(a) St. Jón of Hólar. (AD 1052-1121)

Jón Ógmundson, the first bishop of the northern diocese of Hólar, developed a side of episcopal administration that was new to Iceland. He exercised his ministry not so much as pastor or administrator, but as priest. His pioneer work in founding the see with its cathedral and school and in particular his inspiring life led to his local canonisation within a century of his death.

(a) Like Bishop Magnus, Jón was descended through his mother from Hall-of-the-Side, one of the earliest chieftain-champions of Christianity in the country. It would be difficult to exaggerate the influence of a few great families on the early centuries of Icelandic church life. We have noted the leading parts played by Gizur the White and his episcopal son and grandson, and by Hall of Haukaál and his learned disciples, Ari and Saemund, both descendants of Hall-of-the-Side. Most of these leaders were married priests, and their children carried on their work; so that the general ignoring of papal injunctions to celibacy by ecclesiastics in Iceland proved of far-reaching value to the Church.¹

Jón was trained by Isleif, first bishop of Iceland, and his life and work paid a great testimonial to that training. Sagas like to begin their lives with a genealogy, followed by a glowing description of personal characteristics. Jón's saga says of him that in his youth he gave great promise of future greatness by his ordered life and mastery of sacred learning. He is depicted as tall, strong and handsome "with uncommonly fine eyes; and with all gentle and lowly."

1. Canon Law 132 enjoins celibacy. (Cod. Juris Canonici Rome 1917.)

After his ordination as Deacon, like other chieftains' sons he desired to travel, "to observe the ways of good men and to continue his education".¹ He visited Norway, Rome and Denmark where he became a favourite of King Sweyn, who was attracted to him on account of his "noble and clear" reading of the story of the Passion.

He accompanied Magnus, King of Norway, on a marauding expedition to the Hebrides. Heimskringla tells how they visited Iona, where King Magnus opened the door of the small chapel-shrine of St. Columba, hastily shutting it with the words "No one should be so bold as to enter here".

On returning to Iceland Jón conferred a great boon on his country by bringing back with him his cousin, Saemund the Wise, "the man who of all others has been the greatest help to the Church of God in Iceland". Popular legends make play with the notion that Jón rescued Saemund from a School of Black Magic, which had no windows and all its doors faced north, where in mastering Black Arts, Saemund had forgotten his own name. Saemund's real contribution to his country was his foundation of the school at his homestead of Oddi.

(b) In the year 1105, as has been recorded, the second Bishop of Iceland was petitioned by the people of the north to grant them a bishop of their own, on account of their distance from Skálholt and the vast size and comparatively large population of their Quarter. With the consent of all the priests and laymen in the north, the bishop nominated Jón Ogmundson, then aged fifty-four, serving as a priest at his home at Breidabolstad. After much hesitation owing to his humility, Jón agreed and went overseas to Ozur of Lund, the Primate.

The saga records a story that illustrates one of the unusual gifts of the bishop-elect, and also the friendliness of high ecclesiastics of those days and

their devotion to the daily offices. Jón arrived in Lund late one evening when vespers were almost finished, and he began to sing them with his clerks outside the choir, so that the archbishop looked down the church to see who was chanting. Afterwards the archbishop's clerks said to him: "Now my lord, have you not yourself broken your rule against gazing about the church during divine service"? To which the archbishop replied: "True indeed! but I have never heard so angelic a voice".

Jón went to stay with the archbishop, and when he disclosed his errand and presented his papers, Ozur said, "I see thou hast about all the qualities that fit thee for a bishop. But as thou hast been twice married I cannot proceed with the consecration without the sanction of the Pope". A dispensation was granted, and Jón was consecrated on Sunday April 29th 1106.

(c) The north of Iceland has the largest population of the four Quarters. The people live widely scattered along the fjords that stretch out to the Arctic Ocean. Winters there are longer, snows deeper, storms more frequent. For weeks from October to April in the deeper valleys the sun is not seen, with the tiring compensation that in summer the sun never dips below the horizon. Consequently in the northern diocese the problems of isolation and distance increase the normal difficulties of supervision.

Early settlers, not least those who had Christian affinities, favoured the north and north-west. Most of the converts made by Thorvald and Fridrek lived in those regions, which contained some of the earliest notable churches As, Holt, Holm and Helgafell.

Hólar was chosen as the seat of the northern bishopric because none of the northern chieftains would give up his heritage and his home, except Illugi, a priest and owner of Hólar, who withdrew to Breidabolstad, Jón's homestead and former parish.

Hólar is finely situated in the rich green valley of Hjaltadal "the garden of the north", leading down to Skagafjörð and the Arctic Ocean.

Here the new bishop established his see round his cathedral and a school. He had brought a ship load of timber back from Norway, and he built well. The cathedral though constructed of wood and exposed to fierce buffeting of arctic storms, lasted for two centuries, after which it was rebuilt in stone by the munificent Bishop Audun. Bishop Gizur of Skálholt transferred a quarter of his income towards the endowment of the new see, which of course received the tithes of the northern quarter, and became unusually wealthy. At the Reformation it tempted the Danish Crown to confiscate its 300 farms with their pasturage for 15,000 cows, and its historic rock-island of Drangey, though the grasping officials ignored its valuable rights of driftwood along a long stretch of coast.

(d) Jón also built an extensive bishopstead and an elaborate school, which spread culture and civilisation, and so provided one of his chief direct methods of meeting the difficulties and dangers of the day, due to the undisciplined nature of leading chieftains and priests, aggravated by isolation and ignorance.

The idea of the school Jón took over from his foster-father Isleif, and developed it more thoroughly, especially by the provision of foreign teachers. As Head he imported from Gothland a learned young priest called Gisli, who combined teaching with a lectureship at the cathedral. The bishop appointed his "chaplain and great friend" Rakinne (Racine), a Frenchman, to teach singing and verse-making, a favourite Icelandic accomplishment. Thus at this northern Christian outpost from the first two main functions of a cathedral were established; it became a centre of sacred music and a home of sound learning. A twelfth century French Psalter, used as a palimpsest after the Reformation, was brought from Iceland

by Arni Magnússon in the seventeenth century and is preserved at Copenhagen University.¹ It may well have formed part of the equipment of the French precentor Rakinn.

Not the least striking thing in the story of the celestial singing heard in the north when Bishop Thorlak died is the fact that so sequestered a part of the world at that time should be familiar with the canticles of Christendom.

One of the masters was Isleif, son of Hall, whom the bishop wished to succeed him. And most remarkable of all was a successful teacher of Latin, a maiden called Ingun who had Latin books read to her while she did needlework. A story in Jónsaga illustrates the effectiveness of the Latin teaching and the aptness of the ordinary Icelfander as pupil: when the Latin class was meeting on summer sitting in the sunshine, the architect on the roof of the cathedral he was constructing hard by, picked up the language so readily that he became a competent Latin scholar.²

All candidates for the priesthood in the north had to pass through this college, and most chieftains' sons went there. So that many afterwards in high positions owed their training to Bishop Jón. Among them the names are recorded of Klaeng, afterwards Bishop of Skálholt,³ Beorn, second bishop of Hólar, Vilmund first abbot, and Hvein third abbot of Thingeyrar, and Bjarni, priest and arithmetician.

(e) By improving the quality of the clergy rather than by setting up or developing ecclesiastical machinery the bishop adopted the only sound method of dealing with their loneliness and independence, and through them of improving the faith and morals of their people.

For the principal problem which faced the church at this time arose largely from isolation which caused much turbulent independence in franklins and chiefs. Loose

1. Icelandic Illuminated Mss of the Middle Ages, Introd. by Halldór Hermannsson, p.9; (a magnificent volume) Cpn 1936
2. B. S. I, pp 235sq.
3. Klaeng was rebuked by Bishop Jón for studying surreptitiously Ovid: de Arte amoris.

living and aggressive self-seeking led to strife; local "things" or courts fostered rather than settled quarrels. Jón's first business, after attending the Althing and arranging there with his colleague of Skálholt rules of church administration, was, in accordance with ecclesiastical law, to go round on a visitation of his diocese. He inculcated daily prayers in church, or at a wayside cross, and ordered worship on holy days, and frequent doctrinal sermons. He abolished heathen charms, lewd plays and poetry, and he emphasised the connection of Christianity with daily life by changing the pagan five-day week to one of seven days, the pagan dedications of which to Tui, Odin, Thor and Freya he abolished in favour of Third-day, Mid-week-day and the like.¹ "In short, Christianity in the North never showed such blossom as it did in the days of the holy bishop Jón."

Jón's indirect influence in promoting righteousness lay in his own personal sanctity. He had not long been bishop before "he began to raise men's ways on to another level that they had not been on before. He rebuked those of evil life, and showed in his own life that what he taught he followed himself. He loved his people as his brothers and sons, and rejoiced when it went well with them and condoled over all that went otherwise." He was not satisfied unless everyone in his diocese came to see him at least once a year. Crowds made the journey to Hólar, especially at festivals, to join in the cathedral services, so well were they performed there, and to hear the moving sermons of the bishop or the teacher Gisli. Jón was praised for his fine addresses. Gisli is recorded to have preached from a book on a desk in the choir, an unusual custom due to his youth and humility.² At Fastertide, according to Jónssaga, more than 400 (i.e. 480) would attend. Some of them brought their own food, but most of them had to be fed by a committee or chapter, which the bishop appointed to assist his wife Valdis in the management of the bishopstead.

- 1.. R. F. Burton: *Ultima Thule*, p 73. Jón's names were introduced into the southern diocese and still obtain in Iceland, Saturday being known as Laugadagur or "bath-day."
2. *Homiliu-bók*, *Introd. Fridrek Paaske* p 9.

Some families came to live at Hólar near the church and school, - a good example of how towns grew up. In these more secularly civilised days we string together a monstrous conglomeration of houses without planning for church and religious school, and so often the people have no focus of worship and Christian fellowship and the youth get out of hand.

After Jón had been bishop for fifteen years, at the age of 69, he passed away (April 23, 1121). As he died he was reciting the psalm "My soul shall make her boast in the Lord: the humble shall hear thereof and be glad," - a verse which effectively sums up his ministry of love, joy and peace.

His body was buried in the cathedral garth, but eighty years later, after "God had made manifest His grace by sure tokens," "his halidom" was placed before the altar by Bishop Brand, and the Althing paid him the honour of canonization.

IV. (ii) (b) St. Thorlak (AD1133-93).

Thorlak Thorhallsson afterwards called hinn helgi, the Saint, developed the type of episcopacy introduced by Jón of Hólar, and his life and work produced the hagiographical style of chronicle usual in the Middle Ages, but not before adopted in Iceland. He took the first steps to assert the bishop's right to churches and glebes and was the first to use the power of ban and excommunication. These claims led to opposition, but his life of devotion and self-denial won universal veneration, which was increased by stories of posthumous miracles, and so led to speedy canonisation by the Althing.

(a) Thorlak was born in 1133, the year the elder Bishop Thorlak died, at the farm of Hluderendi in the South country, famous as the home of the heroic Gunnar in Njalssaga. He was the product of noble lineage and a good home. His parents taught him the Psalter and good manners, and sent him to be educated at the neighbouring school at Oddi, which had become under Eyjolf Saemundsson the foremost school in Iceland. He was ordained deacon by Bishop Magnus (ob. AD1148) so that he cannot have been more than fifteen years old. Afterwards he devoted himself to book-learning and especially writing, not neglecting "prayers in the midst of these". His mother also taught him family history and genealogy, always an Icelandic speciality. At the age of seventeen or eighteen he was ordained priest and travelled abroad, spending six years in the crowded lecture-rooms of Paris and at Lincoln. The fact that Geoffrey of Monmouth (ob. AD1154) brings Iceland into his romantic history as one of the countries in subjection to King Arthur has not the historical significance that Geoffrey would desire, but his reference indicates that at this time English people were interested in Iceland. And Thorlak's lengthy visit and many references in Icelandic Annals show that the interest was reciprocated. On Thorlak's return it was remarked that he had retained his humility (an un-Icelandic virtue commended in these Lives of early bishops) and "gave kindly countenance to his sisters."

1. Hist. Ant. ix, 10, 12; Cp. Dipl. Isl. X No 1, AD 1169: King Henry II of England accepts a Norwegian hawk and an Icelandic falcon; cp Giraldus Cambrensis AD 1187 ut sup. p 47.

Thorlak's unusual departure from the almost universal custom of priestly marriage is embodied in the story of a dream he had when he was staying at a farm where he had gone to seek a wife. By night a saintly figure appeared to stand by his side telling him: "There is a much higher bride destined to thee, and none other shalt thou take".

Next morning he bade farewell to his intended, and went to live with a learned priest at Kirkjubaer, until in 1168, after six years of great contentment, he was chosen to take charge of a monastery just founded in the neighbourhood at Thykkvabaer. Here he instituted a strict mode of life which impressed many visitors with its order and devotion. Many men with various ills came to him and "he chanted over them, so that they went away whole". Valuable cattle too were cured by incantations. However, we read some men found a difficulty in recognising this holiness.

After he had been six years abbot he was elected by the Althing as Bishop Klaeng's successor at Skalholt but owing to dissension at home and difficulties with Norway it was two years before he was consecrated. When he returned to Skalholt as bishop in 1178, though he might have dispensed with the monastic rule, he kept it "alike in dress, in watchings and fastings, and in prayers". He was a monk in heart to the end and never an administrator.

(b) Thorlak's episcopacy was marked by a call to priests to more faithful performance of their sacred office and to a more converted life. Laity too he urged to greater continence. But his moral reforms did not cause such an outcry as his vigorous attempt to restrict lay ownership of churches and advowsons.

He had been consecrated by Eystein, Archbishop of Nidaros, an ecclesiastical reformer, from whom he received letters patent to enforce the rights of the Church.¹ Eystein had little success in Norway, and in the greater isolation and independence of Iceland, Thorlak met with much opposition.

The situation is illustrated in a story recorded in the Oddaverja saga in which Bishop Thorlak's own sister and Jón Loptsson, the most learned and powerful chieftain of the day are concerned. The incident vividly shows the bishop's courage and the difficulties with which he had to contend, and brings out the strange mixture of character in a leading Icelander of the period.

Jón, son of Lopt, governed Oddi as one of the godar or leading chieftains. He was also in deacon's orders "with a fine voice in holy church," and had shown himself an energetic churchman. Nevertheless, for many years he had lived in bigamous union with Ragnheid the bishop's sister. Their son Pál had been one of Bishop Klaeng's nominees (with Thorlak) as his successor, and actually was a great friend of Thorlak.

In the place of two churches on Jón Loptsson's estate blown down in a storm, he "built an elaborate new church, and the bishop came to consecrate it". Thorlak asked him if he knew the Primate's mandate as to the bishop's rights in the matter. To which Jón answered, "I am minded to hold him at nought. I think he knows no better than my forbears, Saemund the Wise, and his sons. Layman should rule those churches which their forefathers gave to God, handing on their authority to their successors". The bishop then refused to consecrate and rebuked Jón for reducing the number of clergy for whom he was responsible, and finally for living in sin. He put him under ecclesiastical ban and threatened him with excommunication. At this Jón made plans to capture the bishop, and his son laid in wait for him with an axe, but the plans miscarried seemingly miraculously. Then Jón gave way. The church was consecrated

1. Gj. pp158-60 (who translates the archbishop's letters in full from F.J.) Eystein visited England in 1182 (Annals); Dipl. Isl. I, Nos. 53-4.

and the bishop joined in a family banquet. Jón however refused to put away Ragnheid at the bishop's request, though later he did so of his own free will "at God's bidding," and Ragnheid and he received absolution and penance from the bishop. Their son Pál became the bishop's chaplain and succeeded him at Skálholt.

The bishop had similar controversies with other chieftains, notably Sigmund, son of Orm, who, like Jón Lopteson, refused to recognise the right of Eystein and other foreigners to interfere with Icelanders' privileges. The bishop would not consecrate their churches and put them under ecclesiastical ban. Then they threatened violence, but finally yielded.

Thorlak appears only to have taken notice of moral misdemeanors when they accompanied breaches of ecclesiastical order. Snaelaug, daughter of a rich priest called Högni, had an illegitimate child, and after the death of its father Hreinn, married a priest called Thord. Her father built a church and, as was customary, desired to retain the advowson. The bishop refused to consecrate the building, and denounced the daughter's marriage, as the husband was Hreinn's fourth cousin - a not uncommon relationship in Iceland, as almost everyone was descended from the first few settlers. The couple protested strongly, but finally agreed to live apart in order that the church might be consecrated. Subsequently however, they had three children.¹

(c) It cannot be concluded that Bishop Thorlak's church policy met with any real measure of success, as regards either chieftains or clergy. But his courage, restraint and personal piety won him high esteem. He was at heart a priest rather than a preacher or administrator. "He often taught precepts of virtue, and therefore it was a great misfortune that his words were hard and slow".²

1. Oddaverja S. 3. 1, Bogi Th. Melsted; Islendinga S. vol III pp 288-291.
2. Cp. Giraldus l.c. "Icelanders use very few words, and speak the truth. They seldom converse, and then briefly, and take no oaths, for they know not what it is to lie." He might have known Thorlak.

Again (according to his saga) "he feared nothing much except the Assembly and the Fubar days;" (Some modern bishops might agree with him in that respect),-the Althing because of the excessive weight put upon his words, and ordinations on account of the unworthiness of the candidates.

The bishop introduced the feasts of St. Ambrose, St. Cecilia and St. Agnes, and ordered fasting on the eves of festivals of apostles and of St. Nicholas. He effected the change in names of weekdays as Jón had done in the north. He laid stress on abstinence on Fridays, the name of which Jón and he changed to Föstu-dagr, "fastday", allowing only one meal and restricting himself to vegetables (a luxury in Iceland today). He drank water, but "was not fastidious at feasts, and blessed ale in its brewing so that it never burst". He was a popular host, as he liked music and good stories.

After fifteen years as bishop, Thorlak resolved to resign and retire to his monastery, but before he could do this he died on the night before Christmas Eve 1193. During his illness he was attended by the wise chieftain, Gizur, Hall's son, who "sorrowfully made up the church accounts so that all should be handed over in good order". Pál, his sister's son was also present. When he was dying he lifted up his eyes and called out "whither fared Thorkell just now?" referring to the founder of his monastery, come, as Gizur averred, "to lead him to the heavenly life".

Gizur made an oration at his funeral. A more telling eulogy was the presence in church of a leper whom Thorlak had saved and cared for.

(d) The veneration in which Thorlak was held is shown by the record that 230 wax candles were burnt at the memorial service on the first anniversary of his death. His successor Bishop Pál asked Brand, Bishop of Hólar and a popular northern priest, Gudmund Arason, to deal with Thorlak's posthumous reputation, and at their recommendation he was canonised by the Althing in 1199. The previous year Pál had "a shrine made for his relics which (says his saga) now stands to this day over the high altar." Dr Uno von Troil saw St. Thorlak's coffin denuded of its gold and gems at Skálholt in 1772. The shrine was sold in 1802 when the bishopric was transferred to Reykjavik, and now no man knoweth of his sepulchre.

The pre-eminence of St. Thorlak in the select hierarchy of Icelandic saints is indicated by the appearance of his figure in the centre of a mediaeval altar cloth used at Hólar cathedral until recent years. Hólar's own saint Jón and the Blessed Gudmund are depicted as supporters of the country's patron saint.¹

Among mediaeval robes preserved in Reykjavik is one with an embroidered picture of a ship on which a bishop in his vestments stands admonishing or blessing the crew. This is held to represent an incident in which Thorlak in God's name forbade a crew to overload a ship in which he was a traveller.

The name of Thorlak hinn helgi often appears in the Annals as denoting a date, or receiving vows of shipwrecked sailors (AD1360) or being accredited with posthumous miracles (1388)

St. Thorlak is commemorated by two days in the Icelandic Kalendar:- December 23, the anniversary of his death, and July 20, the day of the translation of his relics.

Except by the Althing, Thorlak was never formally canonised, yet not only was he long venerated in the

1. Baring Gould: Iceland - its scenes and sagas, p. 236.

northern lands but according to a later saga his cult extended to England.¹ At Kynn (? Kyme in Lincolnshire), one Audun put up in a church a statue of the Blessed Bishop Thorlak.² A local priest being told who it was, ran and fetched a sausage, and offered it to the image, saying, "Wilt thou, man of suet? Thou art a suet bishop", referring, as an English beef-eater, to the Icelandic custom (still common) of living on mutton. The priest's hand was then smitten with cramp, and was only restored in response to earnest prayers of bystanders, which God and the Blessed Thorlak heard. About the middle of the xivth century, Bishop Laurence uses this story to rebuke similar arrogance on the part of a visiting Norwegian priest.³

The fame of St. Thorlak reached the Middle East, for at Constantinople, which Icelanders called Micklegarth, the church of the Varings, Scandinavian bodyguard of the emperor, was dedicated to him.⁴

No adventitious reasons led to such widespread renown. The Althing must have been impressed not merely by the posthumous miracles advanced in favour of his canonisation, but also by the courage with which he stood up to the chieftains, his celibacy and personal piety, and his powers of healing.

The Althing acted without any thought of referring the matter to Rome, and history has justified their decision. With the possible exception of the great statesman-prelate Gizur, the Icelandic Church has produced no finer leaders than Jón and Thorlak.

1. F. J. I p 298 (except Sweden, according to the learned Swede, von Troil: Letters p 78.
2. E. Magnusson, Fells Series 65 pp 10-11
3. B. S. I p 357; Larentius S 19.
4. Varings or Varangians, probably so-called like the Vikings from a district in Norway, was the name given by Greeks and Slavs to Northmen who invaded the East in the ixth and xth centuries. They were Christianized by Vladimur in AD 988, and a bodyguard of them was retained at Constantinople until it fell in 1453. (See Saga of St. Olaf 219. Grettir's S 85; Laxdale S. 73; Scott Count Robert of Paris.)

CHAPTER FIVE.SPIRIT, MIND AND BODY.(i) The "Religious" Life.

It is noteworthy that the pioneers in Iceland of the life technically called "religious" came of the same race and adopted the same profession as the Columban culdees of the pre-settlement period, who fled when the new settlers arrived. After a succession of hermits, two Benedictine monasteries were founded, Thingeyrar 1133, and Thvera 1155, followed by five Augustinian foundations: Thykkvabaer 1168, Flatey 1172 moved to Helgafell 1184, Videy 1226, Modruvellir 1296 and Skrida 1493. Two Benedictine nunneries were established, Kirkjubaer 1185, and Reynistað 1296. Most of these religious houses made a great contribution to the country as homes of learning and teaching and produced some notable books until in 1551 the Crown under the guise of the Reformation swept them away and confiscated their valuable property.

(a) The first authenticated hermit was an Irishman, Jörund, contemptuously nicknamed the Christian, who in the midst of his derisive neighbours stuck to his religion to the day of his death, and to enable himself to do so, in his old age built himself a cell at Gardar in Akranes "intent on prayer and meditation day and night."

His nephew Asolf Alslik had arrived in the country with eleven followers and settled at Holt, probably with a view to establishing some kind of Columban evangelistic community. When his companions died he refused to mix with his heathen neighbours and went to live as a hermit near his uncle.¹

Gudrun, the interesting heroine of the Laxdale Saga,

1. Lndbk. I, 7, 3-6; ut sup. p 9.

"the goodliest of women who grew up in Iceland," after the vicissitudes of four marriages, two of which were brought to an end by murder, one by divorce and the last by shipwreck, turned for peace of mind to the religious life, and spent her days, like aged Anna, never off the door-step of the church she built at Helgafell.¹ Such was the tradition, doubtless founded on truth though embroidered picturesquely a century afterwards by one of the most romantic of sagas.¹

Gudlaug, the eldest son of Gudrun's counsellor, Snorri the godi, prominent in the later heathen and early Christian life of his country, found no niche in Iceland where he could lead an ascetic life, so in 1016 he took vows and went to live as a recluse in England, perhaps at the suggestion of the visiting Bishop Bernard, reputed to be of English birth.²

It has already been noted that another of the visiting bishops, Rudolf, made the first attempt at a monastic establishment in Iceland at Bae in Borgarfjörður, where he lived for nineteen years (1030-49). On his departure for England he left behind him three monks of whom we hear nothing further.

A century had to pass before Christianity in Iceland had sufficiently developed to establish its own monastic life. No more male hermits are mentioned, but we hear of a woman semi-recluse. Groa, daughter of Bishop Gizur and wife of Bishop Ketill, "best of matches", in defence of whose honour her husband lost an eye, lived after his death for many years as a nun at Skálholt, dying in the days of Bishop Klaeng (1152-75) who himself lived an ascetic life and founded three monasteries.

Groa's example was followed by Ketilbjörga, who lived at Skálholt in the days of Bishop Pál. At the same time Ulfruna, another anchoritess, lived at Thingvellir, so obsessed by a love of solitude that she refused to see her only son when he paid her a visit. These recluses took the place of the heathen spae-women or prophetesses, as is shown by a visit paid to Ulfruna by Gudmund, when in doubt

1. Laxdale S. 32 & 76 (ut sup p 31.)
2. Islendinga S 11 30; ut sup. p. 34.

as to whether he should accept consecration as bishop of Hólar.¹ That they were not infallible is clear from the ill effects of the advice she then gave. Gudmund, a successful and popular priest, had none of the qualities which make a good bishop.

(b) Bishop Klaeng's predecessor, Magnus, bought most of the Westman Islands in order to found a monastery there, but he lost his life in a fire before he could begin the work (ob. AD 1148)

By then a Benedictine foundation had been established at Thingeyrar, the place of the Spring moot. Its large church owed its origin to Jón, the first Bishop of Hólar (1106-21). Soon after his consecration, and at the end of an exceptionally bad winter, the earth showed no signs of growth when the Thing met on the last days of May; consequently in Old Testament fashion the bishop made a vow to build a church if the drought broke. He marked out the building, and as often happens in arctic lands, spring burst on the country in a week. Shelley's dream came true, and "bare winter suddenly was changed to spring". But the monastery was not established until 1133, when it was put in the charge of an abbot called Vilmund, trained at the episcopal school at Hólar.²

This community became famous for historical work. Here in the middle of the thirteenth century, Gunlaug Leifsson (1219) and Odd Snorrason (ob. AD 1200) composed sagas about King Olaf Tryggvason, while their abbot, Karl Jónsson, wrote a spirited Life of King Sverrir of Norway, in which the king co-operated though he was a pronounced anti-clericalist.³ Gunlaug also compiled Latin Lives of the country's episcopal saints, Jón and Thorlak, and paraphrases of Merlin. It is clear that at least in the thirteenth century Iceland maintained some contacts with the wider world. Another monk, Arngrim, wrote one of the sagas on the buccaneering Bishop Gudmund. Another Gudmund, about 1310-39, is praised in the Annals for his "usefulness" in training erudite priests.

1. Sturlunga S. 3, 14.
2. List of Abbots AD 1325 in Dipl. Isl. 11 p 2.
3. W. A. Craigie: Icelandic Sagas, p. 81. The Kg. pays a tribute to Englishmen who had brought wheat, honey, flax and home spun.

A second Benedictine monastery in the north was founded in 1155 at Thvera, later called Munkathvera, by Björn, Bishop of Hólar. Its first abbot, Nicolás Bergsson, (ob. AD 1159) acquired a reputation as a great traveller, another far-farer, and wrote a guide-book to the Holy Land called Leidavisir, and a poem on St. John the Evangelist. A versatile fourteenth century abbot, Berg Sokkason translated Latin Lives of saints to meet the taste of the day, and was known as an orator, and musician. He resigned in 1334 by reason of his humility.¹

In 1203 and 1212 the Annals record the deaths of two abbots of a monastery at Saurbaer, also near Eyjafjörð, a short lived foundation about which little else is known.

(c) The first steps for establishing convential life in the South were taken by Thorlak, afterwards bishop and saint, who lived under rule for six years with Bjarnard, priest-owner of Kirkjubaer, until a neighbouring chieftain gave his farm at Thykkvabaer "to Christ and His saints", and by the counsel of Bishop Klaeng founded an Augustinian Priory there, with Thorlak as its head. (1168-74). Many visitors came from parts of Iceland and abroad "to learn for the first time the value of the holy life he led and enjoined."

Thykkvabaer, later called Ver and Alftaver ("haunt of swans") possessed a fine library and had some learned abbots one of whom, Brand Jónsson, became Bishop of Hólar 1263-4. He was the author of a remarkable paraphrase of the historical books of the Old Testament in Icelandic, later incorporated with an unfinished commentary ordered by Hakon V. This large compilation called Stjórn "Foundation" appeared at the beginning of the xivth century (c1310) at a time when monks were making translations of Lives of saints, but no one else appears to have tackled the Bible, so that Stjórn remained the only work until after the Reformation in which unlearned men could get any knowledge of the Old Testament.² In 1402

1. F. J. IV, pp 44-5.
2. E. Henderson: Journal pp 463sq. As a colporteur Dr. Henderson took a personal interest in this matter. The commentary covered Genesis - Exodus xxii.

this monastery housed an abbot and twelve monks, when half of the brothers died of the plague.¹

A second Augustinian community was established in 1172 in Flatey in the North-west by Ögmund Kalfsson who became its first abbot; but twelve years later, no doubt on account of the wind-swept nature of this small island, subject to earthquakes, the monastery dedicated to St. Mary was transferred to Helgafell, formerly Gudrun's retreat, and originally the most famous of heathen sanctuaries. The learned Hall Gizurarson became abbot here (1221-5), after having served as Lawman. He was the author of *Flos Peregrinationis*, of which nothing but the title is known. That itself, like Abbot Nicolas' *Leidavisir*, indicates Icelandic interest in pilgrimages. Those to the Holy Land became a fashion of these centuries and gave a surname to more than one pilgrim (e.g. Jórsala-Björn c 1225; Björn Jór-salfari 1250). Helgafell was destined to become one of the most important monastic houses in Iceland, distinguished for its large library, vast estates and scholastic enterprise.²

The third religious house inaugurated by Bishop Klaeng was established about the year 1166 at Hitardal, possibly as a memorial foundation, since it had been the scene of the fire in 1148 in which Bishop Magnus and 72 others were burnt to death. Its glebe remained in lay hands, an arrangement which was contested a hundred years later by the zealous Bishop Arni Thorlaksson, so that after having five abbots the monastery was dissolved and its goodwill passed to the Augustinian house on Videy island.³

The attempt of the deacon-chieftain, Jón Loptsson, to found a monastery, for which he built a fine church at Keld in 1190 was quashed by Bishop Thorlak on account of what the Annals tersely call *Ragnhildar máli* - the trouble about Ragnhild, who was the bishop's sister.⁴

1. Annals; inf. p 159.

2. F. J. IV, pp 65-77; inf. p 149-50.

3. F. J. IV, pp 24-6; J. H. p 101; inf p 100.

4. sup. pp 76-7; Ann s. a. 1164. Al.Ragnheid.

In 1226 the father of Jarl or Earl Gizur founded a monastery for Regular Austin Canons on Videy Island on Faxa Fjörð. Here the Jarl ended his days after a troublous life, but he died before he took the vows. Videy, like Helgafell and Thykkvabaer, acted as a school when the episcopal colleges lapsed, and acquired lands as a condition of teaching chieftain's sons. In the year 1518 the register of Skálholt was officially inspected by "brother Ögmund, by Divine tolerance, Abbot of Videy".¹

This foundation, the richest monastery in the country owning 131 farms, was the first to tempt the State raiders at the Reformation.² Much of the mediaeval building still remains, its strong basalt walls having weathered the hurricanes which sweep the island, now a sanctuary for eider duck. The church was restored in 1904 and preserves the old woodwork including a well carved confessional (skriftstóll). It is one of the few churches in Iceland with an ever-open door; here to let the birds fly in and out.

(d) Two nunneries found a place in the religious life of Iceland, one in each diocese. A Benedictine nunnery was established at Kirkjubaer, Thoriak's original retreat-house, the fourth religious house to be consecrated by Bishop Klaeng. This homestead in early days had been taken over as a Christian settlement from Irish monks by the line of Ketill, Christians from father to son for many generations. In 1188 the influential priest-owner Bjarnard presented it to be used as a nunnery, and so it continued with an abbess and thirteen sisters down to the time of the Reformation, when its thirty-six farms were confiscated by the Crown, and the place became a church-farm from that day to this. Its name Kirkjubaer-klauster indicates its history.

The first and last and three others of its twelve abbesses were called Halldora. In 1343, according to the

1. Dipl. Isl. IV. pp 170-1.

2. F. J. IV. pp 82-96. inf pp 172, 181.

Annals sister Christina was burnt alive for promiscuous incontinence, on the plea that she had in writing given her body over to the devil. But Annals, like newspapers, record the unusual. They make no mention of lives of quiet service and steady devotion. Kirkjubaer suffered terribly in the great plague. The abbess and seven sisters died, leaving six to run the nunnery and milk the cows, as all domestics died. So many bodies were brought for burial that they could not be counted.¹

A nunnery, also following the rule of St. Benedict, was consecrated in 1296 by Bishop Jörund at Reynistad in the fertile valley which leads into Skagafjörð, not far from Hólar. Of this cloister, dedicated to God and St. Stephen, Bishop Aundun's confirmation of the original deed, dated 1315, remains to this day. After the plague there is no mention of the nunnery for ten years, but in that period Hólar had no bishop for seventeen years. Except for the names of ten abbesses up to the time of the Reformation and 45 small farms, we know little about this nunnery, which thus possessed the happiness of having no history.²

About the same time Bishop Jörund established a monastery for Austin Canons at Mödruvellir on Eyjafjörð, reserving to the Bishop of Hólar the right of being abbot. The endowment for these two foundations came from the estate at Stad given for the purpose by Jarl Gizur - after the bishopsteads the best farm in Iceland. The joint rule of bishop-abbot and prior led to difficulties, which came to a head when Laurence was bishop, and led to an appeal to the Primate at Trondhjem, who finally supported the bishop. (inf. p 145). The monastery was burnt down through carelessness in 1316, which gave Laurence an opportunity for a display of generosity in re-building the place. His church with its delightfully named bells was destroyed by a storm a century later, AD 1431. The fine library was frittered away

1. Annals s.a. 1403. inf p 159
2. F.J. IV, pp105-113.

before the Reformation, when the Crown confiscated its 59 farms. However Torfi, the son of the last prior, became a prestur under the new order.¹

The last religious house to be built was an Augustinian Priory, founded in 1493 by the learned Bishop Stéfan Jónsson at Skrida, the only monastery in the Eastern Quarter. The house, a local benefaction, was dedicated to God, the B.V.M. and the Sacred Blood, and its church to Corpus Christi. Some ruins of this cloister remain at the top of the beautiful valley of Lagarfljot. At the Reformation the 37 monastic farms supported two monks under a Prior, 83 years of age, who had three sons.²

The result of the impact of the Reformation on Icelandic monasteries was almost entirely negative. King Christian III wrote on Nov. 21 1542 to the Abbot of Helgafell, and in the same year to the Prior of Skrida and to the Abbess of Kirkjubaer, asking them to remain at their posts and establish schools for teaching reading, writing and the principles of true religion; but this project came to nothing. The number of the 'religious' had been much reduced by the beginning of the xvith century; so that Kirkjubaer had six, Thykkvabaer five, Videy four and Helgafell and Skrida only two under vows. In spite of the unfeeling treatment meted out to his monastery, the abbot of Videy adopted Lutheranism. At the confiscation of the monastic estates in the year 1551, all the religious were pensioned out of the spoils, and a few farms allotted, or small payment made, to pastors of the reformed Church.

(e) All the Icelandic monasteries followed the Benedictine or Augustinian rule. No strict white-robed Cistercians settled in this stern country, nor did grey-habited Franciscans wander over its townless stretches. We meet only black-robed Benedictines with their rounds of services, and

1. Annals; Laurentius S. 47, 52-61; F.J. IV 96-105.

2. F. J. II, pp 492-3; IV. 113-121.

studious Austin Canons, whose reputation for learning was nobly upheld in their libraries painfully compiled on the edge of the Arctic Circle. Thus these foundations made a conspicuous contribution to Icelandic life, offering Divine and human companionship to isolated and harassed souls.

Three characteristics of their work emerge:-

1. Like the early Icelandic Church they were intensely national. It was more than the time factor which prevented the early foundations of the foreigners Alskik and Bishop Rudolf from coming to anything. After the close of the xiiith century, when Church and State fell under foreign domination, only one small monastery was founded. Abbots and monks continued to be natives of the country. Visitors from overseas came to admire but were not encouraged to settle.

2. Most of the foundations became homes of learning and literature. It is chiefly to the Church that Iceland is indebted for her literature down the ages. This significant fact will be illustrated in the following chapter-section. Here it has been indicated that a large and valuable contribution was made by monasteries, not only in ecclesiastical writings but also in historical research and the humanities.

3. Episcopal schools in south and north served the church and the country well during the first two centuries of Christianity in Iceland. When foreign bishops neglected to maintain the schools, monasteries took their place as centres of teaching. In spite of the disintegration and decadence of the country, the general level of education in the later Middle Ages was higher than that of Norway and far higher than that of England;¹ as indeed it appears to be today.

The intellectual spirit which animates Icelanders found a home and was fostered in the monasteries. Even though in the dark years of the xvth and xvi th centuries the clear and sparkling stream of Icelandic literature ceased to flow, yet these communities never failed to offer draughts from the sacred fount of learning. *Hinc lucem et pocula sacra.*

V. (ii) Ecclesiastical Influence in Icelandic Literature.

The small sub-arctic Commonwealth of Iceland produced a literature which has won almost universal recognition, as it handed on a more complete and accurate account of the early history of Norway and Iceland than that produced by any other country in the world.

(a) Impetus to this great achievement was given by the adoption of Christianity, which led to the acquisition of writing. Hitherto runes incised on basalt rock had satisfied the needs of a people, who cultivated the gift of memory and revelled in the art of recitation; but from the middle of the XIth century the Church taught European script first to its priests and soon afterwards to a larger proportion of laymen than other countries could boast. This enterprise resulted in the production of a native literature, for the genius of the country soon discarded Latin for the native tongue.

The historic Sturlunga Saga states that "all sagas were committed to writing before the death of Bishop Brand" (ob. AD 1201).¹ But this estimate seems to refer only to pre-Christian sagas (i.e. before 1000 AD); and even so, modern critics extend the period of their transcription another half century. So that we may say that the ancient heroic sagas handed on by oral tradition were written down from about 1150-1250. The earliest of these prose epics have a straightforward, almost colloquial, style - a prose so terse, clear and picturesque as to make a reader wish all prose were spoken before being written down. Later compilations are romantically elaborated.² The heroic sagas compiled in Christian times faithfully retain an atmosphere of exuberant paganism. Prof. Macalister points out that this absence of expurgation of heathenism indicates

1. Sturl. S. I, 107.

2. W. S. Craigie: I. Sagas pp 30-1. Turville-Petre had shown (History Sept 1942) that some later recensions curbed the loquacity of some sagas orally handed down.

the strength of the Christian hold on Iceland in the days when the sagas were put into writing. The country could afford to be generous to the old faith, because it had ceased to be dangerous. "It is needless to kill dead gods."¹ Some of the later sagas, e.g. two of the most famous and interesting, Njala and Laxdale, have interpolations of Christian details and incidents. Furthermore this departure from the usual ecclesiastical editing of past records indicates the independence, nationalism and devotion to accuracy inherent in the Icelandic Church.

(b) Before the sagas were committed to writing the initiative in Icelandic literature had been taken by Saemund (1056-1133) and Ari (1066-1148), priests designated as the "Wise", who specialised respectively in early Norwegian and Icelandic history. The work of these pioneers has already been described (supr. pp 52-3), and also the notable and varied monastic contribution (V (1)).

The mantle of Saemund fell on his foster-son Snorri Sturluson (1178-1241), compiler of the renowned prose Edda and Heimskringla.² The Edda, together with some references in old Icelandic poems and sagas, preserve for the world almost all that is known of ancient Scandinavian mythology and Germanic religion (which is much the same today as it was in pre-Christian times). There is nothing particularly ecclesiastical in Snorri's work, but it was cradled in the school at Oddi, founded by Saemund and continued by his priestly descendants. Dr. Bertha Philpotts suggests that the name Edda may mean "the book of Oddi".³

The work on Icelandic history initiated by Ari was carried on by many anonymous authors of Lives or Sagas of individuals. The large ecclesiastical element in Ari's *Íslendingabók* found an expansion in *Kristni Saga*, based on his researches.

1. Archaeology of Ireland p 232.
2. Edd (it is now considered) of the outstanding Njal's Saga.
3. Edda and Saga, p 19.

(c) The lives of the first five bishops of Skálholt are recounted in a homely and picturesque little book bearing the odd title *Hungrvaka* - "Hungerwaker", which the anonymous author gave it, because he hoped it might rouse the curiosity of his young people to learn more about the remarkable men whose careers it relates, and to learn in what manner and with what customs Christianity had spread in the country.

The writer compares his book to a horn-spoon, homely and useful, and yet a thing which the user can carve into beauty. Thus he bespeaks imagination in his readers. He expresses his indebtedness to Gizur (1124-1206) a great grandson of Isleif, the first bishop of Iceland, who knew five bishops of Skálholt. This reference together with other evidence suggests that *Hungrvaka* was compiled about the year 1200.

Three characteristics of this attractive record emerge:-

1. *Hungrvaka* is no monkish chronicle. Its atmosphere is refreshingly clearer than that of the saga of Thorvald and Bishop Fridrek, Iceland's first missionaries, picturesquely recorded in Latin by Gumlaug, a monk of Thingeyrar (died 1213) about the time when *Hungrvaka* was written "in the Norwegian tongue", i.e. in Icelandic.

2. The picture is given a national rather than a Catholic atmosphere. Bishops stand out as leaders of the people rather than promoters of a system. The author prefers the type of Pál with whom he lived rather than St. Jón of Hólar or the Blessed Guðmund. His indifference to monastic establishments is significant; he does not use their foundation to add to the glory of his heroes such as Bishop Klaeng, as if he felt them foreign to Icelandic churchmanship. For this author catholic Christianity means that which touches life at all its points in the spirit of his heroes, who were leaders in all social and national concerns.

3. The author of *Hungrvaka* is not a mere annalist. His book would not come under Dr. Johnson's ban "as a kind of almanack-making". In the saga manner by the

selection and presentation of facts, rather than by didactic abstractions or philosophising, he brings home to his readers the spirit and complexion of the Church of his country in the glowing first century of its growth. He is intensely proud of the national existence of Iceland and its Church, and like Ari and other writers of his time, he is determined to hand down an accurate account of their history and the principles of their development. As R. H. Gretton said of Macaulay "the motive force in his work is concern for the existing state of affairs, and an interest in the conditions which produced it".

(3) Pálssaga, the detailed life of Pál, seventh bishop of Skalholt (1195-1211), seems to have been written by the same author, who lived obviously in close touch with the bishop's circle. The required conditions would fit Pál's wife's brother Thorlak or Gudlogus Þyjolfsson, grandson of Saemund the Learned, the span of whose lives covers the period of the first seven bishops.

The lives of the two episcopal saints were recorded in sagas of their own. An account of St. Jón of Hólar has come down to us in two versions in Icelandic from a Latin original by the learned monk Gunnlaug.

We have also two editions of St. Thorlak's saga written by a contemporary the second of which adds controversial matters, and a later life embroidered with miracles. The original versions of the sagas of these two saints may well have been adapted from the eulogies read at the Althing before their canonisation.

Abundant interest of another kind fastened on the strange turbulent life of Guðmund, Bishop of Hólar, (1161-1237) which evoked four sagas; two by contemporaries - one about his popular priesthood, written by a companion called Hrafn, and the other describing his militant episcopate written by Aron, one of his more respectable associates; a third and longer life written after his death and a later miraculous Latin Life by Abbot Arngrim about

1345, existing in an Icelandic translation.¹

Many passages in these sagas recall the spirit and stir, the violence and clash of character, which animate the old epic tales, and indeed their hero was himself a reversion, a viking of the Church.

Two other bishops deservedly were commemorated in sagas - Arni Thorlaksson a vigorous bishop of Skálholt (1269-98), and Laurentius Kalfsson a popular and pious bishop of Hólar (1323-31). Both these important lives were written by contemporaries. The life of Bishop Arni was set down by his nephew and successor Arni Helgason (1303/4-20). It fills a gap in historical records and throws searching light on the discreditable contest between Church and chieftains over ecclesiastical property. The life of Bishop Laurence by his chaplain Einar Haflidason (1304-1373) has the distinction of being the last historical work in old Icelandic literature.² It subtly reveals the complexity of character that marks even saintly lives.

(e) It may be argued that sagas deal with persons and periods, not with problems and principles, and so make poor history. But Iceland is an intensely individualistic country, and the problems of its Church and Commonwealth, largely the product of isolation and harsh natural conditions, have been personal in their essence and in their treatment. The Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus (c AD1200) well says: "The pains of the men of Thule may not be blotted in oblivion; for, though they lack all that can foster luxury (so naturally barren is their soil), yet they make up for their neediness by their wit".³

The particular genius of Icelandic literature lies

1. Craigie pp 71-2., 75-6. Turville - Petre and Olszewska Life of G. pp xxvi-vii.
2. Gj. pp 237-8.
3. cp. Phillpotts Edda and Saga p 228.

in the story with its details and pithy savings and its play of character. Sagas indeed present no philosophies or academic abstractions, but they reveal "the baffling crosslights, the heat of loves and hates, the intangible suspicions and the equally intangible confidence and trust which make up the moving forces of life."¹

The classical sagas described heroic events which took place before the year 1030. Lives of bishops followed this "saga-age", as if their ecclesiastical authors were determined to make one fact plain to posterity, (for though remote and comparatively unimportant, they consciously wrote for all time) - the fact that the heroic spirit was not dead but lived on in the achievements of leaders of their country's Church. These writers, almost all of them anonymous, may rest well content that they have succeeded in their high-hearted and altruistic enterprise..

1. R. H. Gretton on "History".

V. (iii) Church Law, Property and Patronage.

The most remarkable feature of the Icelandic Church, at least until the Norwegian aggression in the 13th century, was its national character. The Church was not a separate self-governing corporation in the State, as in other countries, but it was bound up with the State so completely as to constitute the country on its religious side.¹ This nationalization is apparent in the method of election of bishops, in the administration of the law, and in the private ownership of churches and glebes.

(a) The first native bishops were elected "by the whole commonwealth," i.e. by the chieftains and other members of the Althing. Then they went to see the King of Norway and the Pope, and were consecrated by the Archbishop of Bremen, Primate of the North. Jón Þgmundsson, the first bishop of Hólar, was elected "by God and good men". He then took Bishop Gizur's writ to the Pope before his consecration by the Archbishop of Lund. Gizur nominated his successor to the Althing and on other occasions the assembly referred the choice to the bishop. When Klaeng's episcopate was drawing to its close, the Althing could not decide between three candidates, and entrusted the nomination to the dying bishop.

A similar procedure was followed up to the death of Bishop Gudmund, which occurred in the same year as that of the southern bishop. The two bishops-elect went overseas for consecration in 1238, but were vetoed for political reasons, and substitutes were elected by the chapter of Nidaros, later called Trondheim.

Norway retained the initiative for two centuries, and foreign bishops, many of them unworthy, were foisted on the long-suffering country. After 1413 Iceland was left much to itself, but interest had been well nigh killed, and bishops of varied origin followed in quick succession for a century.

1. Aage Gregersen: L'Islande - Son Statut á travers les ages p 43.

In 1522 the Trondheim Chapter renounced electoral powers in favour of the Icelandic synod, who nominated two native bishops of the old type, destined to fall before Norwegian State aggressions at the Reformation. Since then the State has always appointed Icelanders.

It is noteworthy that full and exact dates of the consecrations and deaths of early Icelandic bishops are preserved; testimonial to their historians' detailed accuracy and appreciation of the importance of these prelates.

(b) The Church in Iceland obtained its first property when Bishop Gizur on the death of his mother inherited the ancestral estate at Skálholt and made it the bishopstead of the diocese (c 1096)

It acquired its endowment on the passing of the Tithe Law in A. D. 1096 on the advice of Markus Skeggjason, the Law-speaker, in response to the advocacy of Gizur, supported by the priest, Saemund the Wise.

Bishop Gizur may be accounted the founder of the Icelandic Church. Before his day the bishop, like the Celtic bishops, was nomadic. As the *Hungrvaka* says, "the see was nowhere." Churches depended on the generosity of chieftains to found and maintain them and provide their priests. Encouraged by the bishop, chieftains took orders themselves and served the churches which they built on their estates. State and Church were one, as in the days of the heathen god, and as in the time of the Old Testament, when Israel became the People and the Church of God. So in Gizur's days, most of the leading men of the country were priests and at the same time chieftains, (*prestar tho at hofdingjar*).

This is a high ideal. Human nature could not maintain it long. When bishops were humble and unacquisitive, and chieftain-priests loyal and devoted, the ideal worked. Gizur won allegiance as an almost perfect prelate; being "both king and bishop over the land as long as he lived." And all men regarded Saemund and Ari and Hall, son of Teit, and their successors in the next generation as leaders of their country in things temporal as well as in things spiritual.

(c) A compendium of Church law, drawn up by Bishops Ketill and Thorlak I, on the advice of Ozur the Primate and Saemund, was approved by the Althing in the years 1122-33, and incorporated in the Law of the Land.¹

It includes the following interesting regulations:-
On Faith and Baptism.

"All men shall be Christian in this country and believe in One God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost." And so, "every child shall go to baptism as soon as may be. The three men who bring the child to baptism shall be fed by the yeoman-farmer (responsible for the church). Every man and every woman that hath understanding thereto is bound to learn Paternoster and Credo on pain of a fine."

On Burial.

"Yeomen are instructed to feed bearers and horses. Graves shall be the same price whether near the church or away from it in the churchyard.² (Ten (= 12) ells of wadmál cloth shall be paid for adults, 5 ells for infants. The priests shall have 5 ells for the service.³

Burial in the churchyard is forbidden for the unbaptized, for suicides and for outlaws, unless the bishop gives consent."

On Priests.

"A yeoman is responsible for fostering and training a boy for the priesthood."

(This characteristic Icelandic custom has given the Church its most notable bishops, priests and scholars, and was continued with effect after the Reformation.)

"A priest shall say mass, mattins and evensong every holy day. At Long-fast and Yule-fast (Lent and Advent) he shall give public notice of his engagements. A priest shall not hire out his services, nor say more masses than two (daily).⁴

1. ut sup. p50; Codex Regius Grágás, ed. Olason; Islandica IV, ppl2-15. Canon Law, collected by Gratian c1140.
2. English cemetery custom has not reached this Christian equality, even in the face of death, the great leveller.
3. 100 = 120 ells = 1 cow = 6 sheep = 240 fish. GJ p 206.
4. Later Canon Law restricted priests to one mass. Hence the addition of a second (anomalous) Gospel to eke out the fee.

"The bishop is bound to go round his diocese and visit each Quarter once a year for consecrations and confessions, and so that men may see him".

Holy Days.

The list of approved mass-days includes:
 Jan. 21 - Agnes, Feb. 1 - Brigid, Mar. 12 - Gregory, Mar 21 - Benedict (later), Ap. 23 - Jon of Holar, Ap. 25 - first Gang-day, (Fogation), May 3 Cross-mass, June 9 Columba, July 8 - Seljamen's mass, July 29 - Olaf's mass, Aug 10 - Lavran's mass, (St. Lawrence), Sept. 14 - Cross-mass, Dec 23. (afterwards July 3) - Thorlak's mass (whose festival with the Church Day is among High Days to be kept.) There were four Mary - masses: in the sagas Aug 15. and Sept. 8, and later also Feb. 2 and Mar 25. The Arna-Magnean collection at Copenhagen shows that Kalendars had found their way to Iceland early in the xiith century.¹

Yule was hallowed for 13 days. The first, eighth and thirteenth day i.e. twelfth night, being kept as Easter Day. St. John the apostle does not appear in this Kalendar. For the early Icelandic Church St. John means the Baptist whose festival ranked among the High Days. It fell during the Al-thing and was the day when Christianity was "taken into the Law". St. John Baptist was a favourite saint with Bishop Thorlak who appealed to him as "God's champion". "well-nigh the most noble of all God's saints."² Of the 330 churches in the country 150 were dedicated to B.V.M., 60 to St. Peter, 52 to St. Olaf, 40 to St. John (probably the Baptist) 13 to St. Andrew and 3 to St. Paul.³

Churches.

"A church burnt or destroyed (by storms) must be re-built by the land-owner, who should endow it and arrange an Annual Church Day to be as Holy as Pask-Day".

"The yeoman dwelling in the church estate is responsible for carrying fire into the church and for ringing the bells. The priest also may do this and light the candles".

1. Icelandic Illuminated Mss. pp10-11.
2. Sturlunga S.I, pp 29 sq.
3. Gj. pp 279-80.

"Men shall not bear weapons in church, and shall not set them against the walls on pain of fine. These were reckoned weapons under this head: axe, sword, spear, cutlass, and halberd". We found difficulty in meeting Lutheran feeling in this matter during the British occupation of 1940-42. Nehemiah 4, 14-21 suggests the answer.

"If a man go berserk (run amok), he shall pay a fine, and all bystanders, if they fail to stop him".

"If a man dwell on a glebe or church estate, he shall keep up the houses and garths. If the property be wasted, he shall make amends to the Church. If a man better church-land, he shall have God's thanks, but he shall not get amends therefor".¹

(d) Charters were drawn up defining church rights and properties. Many copies have been preserved and are reprinted in the monumental *Diplomatarium Islandicum*.²

One original vellum broadsheet has survived fire, tempest, earthquake, robbers and Reformation, and exists today after 800 years - the oldest Icelandic document extant. It is reproduced in Sir Rd. Burton's *Ultima Thule* (II p 70). This charter of Reykholt Church, started in the years 1178-95, was added to between 1204-8, and again in the years 1224-41, and completed later.³ History and graphology indicate that the first three owners were Pál, an easy-going forgetful priest (ob. AD 1136); his son Magnus, a simple broadminded man who fell on evil days, and about the year 1206 handed over his estate to the historian Snorri Sturluson, whose script indicates a writer of an unbridled artistic nature with a remarkable memory and an urge for creation.⁴

1. Chiefly from *O.I.*, I pp 616-24.
2. esp. vol. II - IV; *O.I.* I pp 624-38. For specimens see infra pp 102 sq.
3. Reykholt's *Máldagi* by B. Olsen and J. Hoffery, Cpn 1883; Art. on graphological aspect by G. Turville-Petre in *Vik. Soc. Saga Book XII - III 1941*, pp 195 sq.
4. *Sturlunga S.* I. 141 sq, 153; II 30; II 73.

In the Ketill-Thorlak codification of ecclesiastical Law there is little questioning of lay-ownership of churches, but the responsibility of chieftains and yeoman-farmers (bondi) for priests, buildings and land is clearly laid down. This early Church Code reflected Bishop Gizur's principles, and depended on an administrator of his character, firm but not aggressive, to maintain its basis. After his death some priests were inclined to act as petty chieftains, and many of the chieftains stretched their liberty into lawlessness. Some of them acted as secularised ecclesiastics, ("half-priests", they were dubbed) and other chieftains insisted on appointing untrained private chaplains, responsible to no authority but their chieftain-masters.

These irregularities provided occasion for bishops, jealous for the Church's rights, to ride roughshod over the hereditary claims of lay-patrons, who took a native pride in the benefices they had founded and maintained at much sacrifice. After two centuries the apostolic comprehensiveness of early Icelandic Christianity hardened into rival secularities, political and ecclesiastical. Abp Eysteinn (1178-93) like his contemporary Grosseteste in England, set out to bring the North into line with later Canon Law, and instigated Bishop Thorlak's opposition to the chieftains' claims. The furious resistance this aroused has been illustrated in the section on the bishop's life. The matter was dropped by his successor Pál, with the result that his episcopate breathes a fragrant atmosphere reminiscent of the glowing epoch of the early Icelandic bishops.¹

But his northern colleague Gudmund displayed a different spirit. Where Thorlak had threatened, Gudmund used force. He stalked up and down the country asserting his rights, backed by a band of outlaws and marauders.²

Such was the ignoble beginning of a long and bitter struggle, which played into the hands of external powers, leading to the degradation of the Church and the country. Norway, finally called in to arbitrate, seized the chance to assert her domination over her "colony", and Rome was not slow in support of monarchy to appoint foreign bishops more amenable to her discipline, and thus to denationalize the Icelandic Church.

In this way the contest over ecclesiastical patronage and property more than anything else, brought about the decadence of the Church, and, as we shall see, contributed largely to the fall of the Icelandic Commonwealth.

1. infr pp 106-111

2. infr pp 112-119

APPENDIX TO CHAPTER FIVE, (iii)

Some Church Charters preserved in Dipl. Isl. I
no 25 (Stafaholt AD1140) III & IV etc.,

St. Peter's - REYKHOLT - AD 1178-

To the church in Reykholt belongeth the home-land, with the profit of all the land that pertaineth thereto; twenty cows, a steer two winters old, a hundred and thirty ewes (= 156).

There pertaineth thereto five parts of all Grimsd, but three parts not, save what I will now count up - that is, all the flood fence and three parts of the river north of Mid-rock, but the fourth not. There pertaineth thereto also a fourth part of Harrow-pool, after the sixth part is excepted, and the fishing down at Redwater-oyce.1

There pertaineth thereto three horses no worse than fourteen ounces (worth apiece). There pertaineth thereto also a (mountain) sheepwalk at the Copses, with the river fishing, a half that pertaineth thereto, and commons in Ramfjörd heath, and the intakes (isolated spots) that she (the church) hath in Fax-dale and Goatland with the thicket; - the thicket in Sanddale down from the rocks that are callen Cloven, - they stand over against Sanddale-river, and thence up to the Fell-brow.2

There pertaineth thereto the wood or rushes on Thwart-water-lithe for wood for the shieling. A turbarry in Steinthors-stead land; a measure of seed-corn sown.....

(O. I

Dipl. Isl. I, no 120.

1. Grimsd, southern tributary of the Hvítá, still a good salmon river, and easily fished.
2. Vigfusson likes translating place-names; Cloven rocks i.e. Skorradal, by the lake.

VIDEY CLOISTER.

This Charter was made at the Althing by the counsel of Bishop Magnus (1216-37) (of Skálholt); and Snorri Sturluson¹ brought it up at the Court of Law, and named witnesses.

That between Reykness and Boz-river there shall be paid by every homestead where cheese is made, such a loaf (of cheese) as is there made, to the church-estate of Videy every harvest, and in return all they that pay this homage to the church-estate share in the prayers of the brethren and clerks of the church-estate, as it is set in the rule, every day with all those that do good or pay rent to the church-estate for charity or the good of souls.

These are witnesses:- Magnus Gudmundsson² and Asmund his brother; Arni Magnusson; Thorleif,³ Bodvar and Marcus, sons of Thord; Teit Thorvaldsson;⁴ Sigurd Jónsson;⁵ Styrmir Karsson;⁶ Ketill Thorlaksson;⁶ Orm Kodransson;⁷ Styrrkar Sweynbjörnarnson; Jerusalem-Björn;⁸ Kodran Swartheadsson.

Dipl. Isl. I, no 124.

1. The historian-statesman (ob. AD 1241)
2. Nephew of Bishop Pál, Bishop-elect of Skálholt, drowned 1240.
3. Protagonist in battle at Bae in 1237. Sturla Sighvatsson; 30 men killed. (ob. AD 1257)
4. Leading priest, twice Lawman 1219, 1236. (ob. AD 1259)
5. A remarkable man; priest, called the Prior, and the Wise; Lawman 1210, (ob. AD 1232) F.J. IV p123; J.H. I ppl46sq.
6. Priest (ob. AD 1273)
7. Priest (ob. AD 1253)
8. A Pilgrim.
9. gdson of Lopt, son of Saemund (p53).

The church owneth Hitarnes land with all its profits. She hath ten cows, and 100 ewe-worth sheep; 1000 ells in farm-implements and house furniture; 20 weights of meal except of seals and fishes.

This is the outlay for this property:- there shall be a priest domiciled to sing all the services, and every other day in the Long Fast (Lent), two masses; everyday in the Yule-fast (Advent) a mass.... There shall be lights every night from the second Mary-mass (Mar 18) until Pask week is over.

There shall be two poor women of the kin of Thorhall and Steinunn that can help themselves.

Jörund shall be warden of this property, and his heirs, if the bishop think them fit, or else one of Thorhall's kin or Steinunn's.

The church has 3 altar-cloths; 2 candle sticks; 2 bells; 2 hand-basins, and a hanging to go round the church; 10 marks of wax. At four marks of wadmál the priest shall be fed.

Burial is allowed there.

O.I. I, pp630-1.
Dipl. Isl. I, p275.

Saurbaer in Hvalfjörð.
(AD 1352)

Kirkiu: Saurbae fylgia xi kyr. thriar oc xx aer. thriar hestar. fimm gellðfiar kugilldi. xx hundrad j metfie. threnn messuklaedi oc ij hokla lausa. ij sloppa. ij altaraklaedi. ij kantara kápu(r). krossar ij. mariu skript oc johannis baptiste og olafs skript. kertti-stikur ij. vatzketill. glodaker. baksturjarnn. merki ij. xx baekur. (Dipl. Isl. III, No. 26.)

The church of Saurbaer possesses 11 cows, 23 (milk) ewes, 3 horses, 5 non-milk ewes, valued at one cow's value, 20 cows' value in prized living stock. Three sets of vestments (mass clothes) and 2 loose (separate) copes, 3 gowns, 2 altar cloths, 2 chanting (Choir) copes, 3 crucifixes, a picture of (St.) Mary and of (St) John the Baptist and of (St) Olaf, 3 candlesticks, a water kettle, a warming pan, an ironplate for baking sacramental wafers, 2 banners, 20 books.

CHAPTER SIX.THE LAST YEARS OF THE ICELANDIC COMMONWEALTH.(i) The Last of the Prince-Bishops - Pál (1195-1211)

Icelandic history is concerned with persons rather than with movements; or indeed with principles dramatised through personality. This gives it vivid interest. Abstractions are concretized. What chiefly counts is individual character, and in that, ideals and movements are envisaged.

Thus the adoption of Christianity centres round the protagonists Hjalti and Gizur, Snorri and Thorgeir; the Reformation embodies what might well be a saga of the redoubtable catholic champion, Bishop Jón Arason. So the end of the heroic period of the Icelandic Church emerges in the contrasting Lives of bishops Pál and Gudmund.

The political and ecclesiastical causes which led to the collapse of the Commonwealth are involved in the character and exploits of bishops and chieftains, realistically described in contemporary sagas: Pálssaga, Gudmundssaga and Sturlungasaga. The last forms a history of Iceland from 1100 - 1262 arranged round Lives of leading men in Church and State.

(a) The saintly Thorlak on his deathbed handed his episcopal ring to Pál, the illegitimate son of his sister. Pál was then 40 years old, a deacon like his father, the powerful chieftain Jón Loftsson, and married to a priest's daughter. All that blazons forth the irregularities of the old régime, but its real greatness - such as the maintenance of peace and holding the country together, lies deeper.

Pál was a godi - a magistrate, almost a judge, acting as a chief in his countryside. In his youth he had been hird or aide-de-camp to Harald, Earl of the Orkneys, and later went to England to be educated. On his return he acquired a reputation for skill in making verse, and for general book-lore, and for his musical ability. In these respects he resembled his versatile father, as godi, deacon, scholar, singer; in his courtliness (kurteise) and piety we conclude he took after his mother.

1. This is not a native word (nor a native grace), and had perhaps been imported by St. Thorlak from Paris or by his nephew and successor Pál from England.

These social and personal qualities marked him out as Thorlak's successor in the bishopric of Skálholt. The irregularity of his birth made some hesitance necessary. The Althing naturally had much debate as to whether they should accept Thorlak's nomination, but finally referred the matter to Brand, Bishop of Hólar, who had no scruples about asking Pál to fare overseas to be consecrated. However Pál himself felt some reluctance, until at his father's old home in Oddi at the church festival on Seljamen's-mass he felt moved to "put himself under the burden".

Eirik the Archbishop of Trondheim had been forced to flee from Norway, but King Sverri received Pál with great honour, and he was ordained priest by the Archbishop at Lund in the Lent Ember Days, and consecrated bishop "on St. Jón of Hólar's day" - April 23rd 1195. That the pope resented the independence of the Icelandic Church and particular the friendship of its bishops with King Sverri, an opponent of ecclesiastical claims, is shown by a letter of Innocent III to Bishops Pál and Brand on July 30th 1198.²

At the start Pál won the hearts of his people by deferring his first mass as priest and bishop until he could celebrate it at his own cathedral. For this a great congregation assembled, including his father and brothers, and the venerable churchman Gizur Hall's son, father of Magnus, who was to succeed Pál.

(b) Like most chieftain-bishops Pál enriched his cathedral. He had brought from Norway "for his spiritual spouse" two windows of glass, the first mention of glazing in Icelandic history, windows hitherto being mere lattices to let out smoke.

He made another advance in ecclesiastical architecture in having a steeple (stæpel) erected to house the bells presented by his predecessor. To build this he imported wood from Norway, and entrusted the work to Amund Arnason, "the best carpenter in the country", and as we shall see, a poet, though not the country's best. He made the upper storey

1. Canon Law 212: Bps and Abbots must be born in legitimate wedlock.
2. Dipl. Isl. I. nos 75, 76.

of the belfry into a chapel dedicated to St. Thorlak, with a crypt in which he placed an elaborate stone coffin to receive his body after death; a custom followed by priests down to modern times, in humbler material but in a more conspicuous position in the church. Pál translated the remains of Bishop Thorlak to his chapel in 1198, after obtaining the consent of the Althing and collecting offerings. Later he had a large shrine wrought in gold and gems and burnt silver by Thorstein, the most skilful metal-worker in the country.

A festival of St. Thorlak on December 23rd was established by law in 1199 throughout the land, with two days fast preceding it. The Althing acted in this matter without any reference to Rome. But no ill effects appeared to follow from such ecclesiastical inadvertence, for we read that many pilgrims came not only from all parts of Iceland but also from overseas, "and carried away proofs of the saintliness of the Blessed bishop Thorlak and of the liberality and magnificence of bishop Pál." "The glory was Thorlak's, the good hap was Pál's."

Better than this, many visitors noted that the new saint's nephew resembled him in character and devotion, and applied here in Icelandic fashion the local proverb: "A man takes after his mother's brother." Pál lived for the most part ascetically, though given to hospitality, and became noted for his almsgiving, humility and patience.

Moreover, his saga records "for the example of posterity" that Bishop Pál seldom preached, confining himself to four times a year - Christmas Day, Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday (Skirdagur) and Dedication Festival, and only otherwise when he had something special to say.

(c) As the main object of this sketch of Pál's episcopate is to set out the contrast between a bishop of the old school and one of the new, and the changing temper of the times, the story would not be complete without some account of Pál's impressive family life.

His wife Herdis justified her upbringing as a priest's

daughter, as she proved a skilful manager at the bishopstead, though there were one hundred persons on the estate, including seventy or eighty servants. As we have seen, the bishop maintained the reputation of an Icelandic chieftain. To celebrate his consecration he gave a feast to his northern colleague, Brand, and other friends, serving "wine and ale of the best". He commemorated similarly the translation of St. Thorlak's relics.

A memorable visitor in 1203, welcomed with another feast, was Bishop Jón of Greenland, whose visit cemented the friendly relationship between the two Churches that had existed from the beginning. The two bishops "laid wise plans, and hallowed much anointing oil." Bishop Jón produced a recipe given him by King Sweyn for making wine out of crowberries, which Pál used for the sacrament. The Annals note that this was the first occasion on which wine was so made in Iceland.

Pál and Herdis had four children, "the best brought up in all the countryside." Their several excellencies are thus commemorated in a skaldic quatrain by the cathedral artificer Amund: "Loft was growing up skilled in handicraft, Ketill in handwriting, Halla in booklearning and housecraft, Thora in obedience and love....So it went with each of them, until the day on which they were visited with misfortune."

On May 17th 1207, (these exact details attest the attachment of the author of Palssaga's to the household, Herdis with her children Ketill and Halla went to the bishop's house at Skard to get servants and to see to affairs. They were accompanied by the bishop's chaplain, Björn, and Herdis' niece, Gudrun, and others. They had to cross the Thorsá, even in the height of summer a furious river, which they found on their return to be in flood as the glaciers were melting. The ford was impassible, so that a boat was obtained and the horses towed across. Herdis' horse was washed away, nevertheless she persisted in fulfilling her plan to get home that day. But the boat foundered, and Herdis, Halla and Gudrun were drowned. When the bishop was told at midnight "it was plain to all that God had measured close what he could bear." But he faced up to the consequences, so that

men learnt the truth of the proverb: "A deep plough stands stronger than a shallow one." The household management was taken over by Thora, a maiden fourteen years old, "with her father's loving supervision, and all who knew about it thought she managed very well."

Other personal losses shadowed Pál's episcopate. On Nov. 1st 1197 his father Jón Loptsson died, aged about 73. The saga calls him "the noblest chief in all Iceland", but the epithet in justice should apply to his status rather than to his character, in which the elements were so strangely mixed. But in spite of moral aberrations, even for those days excessive, in an age heading for disaster he devoted the strength of his wealth, position and talents to the maintenance of peace and order. Having inherited the wisdom of Saemund his grandfather, he handed on the torch to his foster-son Snorri Sturluson (ob. AD 1179), the leader of the next generation. Jón twice averted or postponed civil war, the second time, with the help of Bishop Pál, not long before he died. His mother was the illegitimate daughter of Magnus Bareleg, King of Norway, which added to Jón's prestige in that country and in his own. His personal qualities bore out this royal relationship, and such was the general deference to his judgement and aptitude for rule, that he came to be regarded almost as "uncrowned king of Iceland."¹

Towards the end of his life Jón Loptsson, the chief-tain-deacon, built an elaborate church on his estate at Keld in the volcanic district of the South, and would have founded a monastery there if its dangerous situation or the scruples of Bishop Thorlak had not prevented it.² Jón was living at Keld when his last illness seized him, and had himself carried to the door to see his church for the last time, saying: "There standest thou, my church! Thou bewailest me, and I bewail thee."

Another remarkable leader died a few years later, on July 6th 1206, at the age of 82 - Gizur Hallsson, doyen of the Church, the most learned man of his day. Grandson of the first, and foster-son of the third, bishop of Skálholt, he

1. B.S. I pp 83, 282-4; F.J. I pp 292sq, 331sq. Islandica XXII pp 10-12.
2. F.J. IV pp 27-8 (fatis impeditus) ct. Oddaverja S.

had proved the friend and councillor of every bishop afterwards and the stabilizing factor in their policy. The author of *Hungrvaka*, the homely account of these early bishops, expresses his indebtedness to Gizur's fund of information. Another side of his character which illustrates the rest of it, is revealed in a footnote to his life added by Bishop Pál's brother:- "In any kind of company Gizur was the rock or castle of all merriment."¹

(d) Bishop Pál was responsible for two effective measures, one ecclesiastical and the other civil.

In order to determine and meet parochial needs, he took a census of the priests in the three Quarters comprising his diocese, and found that there were 220 churches served by 290 priests. This does not appear to include the four or five small monastic establishments then existing. The Bishop of Hólar at the time was so fully engaged in a militant crusade against his chieftains that no such survey can have been made in the North. But adding rather more than one-third for the largest Quarter to complete the total for the island, Bishop Helgason estimates that 330 churches with 440 priests would make the complement at this time, (against 276 churches in 111 pastorates with 108 ministers, the total of today.)²

Pál's other achievement shows the connection of the Church of his day with everyday life; for it dealt with the length of an ell in measuring wadmal, the local homespun, about which much loose dealing prevailed among Icelanders and traders from overseas.

1. *hrokr staddr*, a remarkable early reference to chess, a game at which Icelanders show exceptional skill. Until the xvth century, the queen could only move one square diagonally, so the rook was the most valuable piece. (Rook? from Persian *ruk*.) When Icelanders used to make chessmen out of fishbones rooks were represented as captains, called centurions, each carrying a sword and blowing a little horn. The Annals record that a ship called *Skak* - Chess, was wrecked in Spring 1320 in the *Fastfjörð*.
2. J. H. I. pl09.

In AD1200 the bishop persuaded the Althing to fix this measurement. They laid down that all men had to carry yardsticks of two ells in length, i.e. about 36 inches, and this statutory measurement had to be marked on the walls of all parish churches. Opportunity was then taken to introduce (approximately) the English yard, a fact which indicates the amount of traffic there was at this time between the two countries.1

(e) The appointment of Gudmund Arason to succeed Brand as Bishop of Hólar in the last part of Pál's episcopate let loose a tornado of civil war in the North, on which Pál attempted to exercise a moderating influence. Such an attitude must have been the outcome of conviction and strength rather than of irresolution, for he was pressed by letters from Archbishop Eirik to support his colleague in fighting the chieftains on behalf of ecclesiastical rights. When we come to consider Gudmund's extraordinary campaign, the justification of Pál's attitude will be apparent.

Humility, tolerance and fellowship had always been among the highest ideals of the seven southern chieftain-bishops. In a land of arrogance, self-assertion and individualism, they made good as conquering Christian qualities, and were never so "precious" (to use the saga word) as in the latter years of Bishop Pál.

This "model biography of a model bishop"2 thus ends:- "After governing God's Christendom in Iceland for sixteen winters with great temperance, Pál died on the Eve of St. Andrew's-mass, 1211." Amund, the episcopal laureate, confirmed the saga's judgement in a poem which commends the bishop as "a maker of peace and lover of justice....in a time of war, rapine and arson, and the death of men in many dreadful ways."

The golden Day of Icelandic churchmanship was drawing to an end. As the sombre night of conflict began to close in on his country, Pál's gentle loving character glowed with a steady light on the gathering clouds.

1. B.S., I pl35. Thingvellir church (and St. Mary's Nottingham) once had yards marked on walls.
2. Vigfusson: Sturlunga S. Introd. p cxx.

VI. (ii) The Turbulent Crusade of Bishop Gudmund,
(1202-37.)

Gudmund Arason, popularly known as the Good and later as the Blessed, inherited an obstinate and truculent spirit, and was given a harsh upbringing; and, though he showed himself a pious and gifted priest, his thirty-five years as a bishop, spent in recklessly championing ecclesiastical rights, brought nothing but strife to the diocese of Hólar and was largely responsible for the loss of independence which soon after his death befell his Church and country.

(a) Gudmund was the natural son of a famous warrior, Ari the Iclander, who died fighting in Norway when the boy was seven years old.¹ Thus he was brought up by his uncle Ingimund, "and the first compensations he got for the loss of his father were floggings to make him learn, for he was extremely obstinate." But Ingimund was a scholar and loved his ward, and his affection was returned, so that Gudmund became a changed man when, after his ordination as priest, he had to bid farewell to his guardian and to his best friend, Thorgeir, son of Bishop Brand.² Nevertheless at first his character was deepened and his priesthood enriched. People credited him with unusual powers of exorcism, and though he had crushed his foot in a shipwreck as a young man, he travelled incessantly blessing springs and healing the sick. He acquired immense popularity for his asceticism (like Bishop Thorlak he was celibate), his optimism and his beneficence. "The common people showed their opinion of him by nicknaming him Gudmund the Good." In later lists of bishops he is termed godi - The Chieftain.³

An illustration of Gudmund's popularity appears in an incident which may well have proved a turning-point in his life. In 1195 he was asked by Halldora, Abbess of Kirkjubæur, a veritable mother in Israel, to help her in the supervision of her nunnery. Gudmund agreed to do this, and

1. Gudmund's S. in P.S. I pp 407-558; trans. G. Turville-Petre and E.S. Oleszowska 1-4, 6.
2. l.c. 13-4.
3. Dipl. Isl. II: AD1325c Bps of Hólar - "Gudmund godi Arason." AD 1494 in Will: "St Jón of Hólar and godi Gudmund bp."

episcopal consents were given; but the churchpeople of Vellir were so much upset at the thought of their loss that they held a meeting and induced Bishop Brand to withdraw his approval. So Gudbrand did not come under monastic discipline, but continued his itinerant mission as a priestly wonder-worker, until five years later much against his will he was elected bishop.¹ Bishop Pál's consent to this step was given after some hesitation, but Gudmund let his better judgement be overruled by his ambitious uncle and unbalanced women-recluses.²

(b) Gudmund was consecrated in 1202 at the age of 41 by Firik, Archbishop of Nidaros, a prelate with a mediaeval mind, who instigated the new bishop to stand up for episcopal rights over ecclesiastical property and for exemption of priests from civil jurisdiction. Thus his campaign had official prompting.

It was fostered also by the spirit of the age, always a deceptive counsellor. His episcopate opened in an epoch when anarchy was beginning to stalk the land. Gone was the old healthy balance of chieftain power, often preserved by merely personal feuds. Strife now grew almost into civil war. Estates were falling to fewer owners, who collected followers to oust their rivals and increase their domination. These contests for pre-eminence form the theme of the Sturlunga Saga, called after the Sturla family, who gave their name to this disastrous period, 1200-65.

Part of the aggressiveness of Gudmund's campaign was due to the turbulence of the time; but more arose from the truculence of his own character, for his southern contemporaries, Pál and Magnus Gizurarson, in spite of personal appeal from Firik, kept themselves free from strife and attempted a mediatory policy. The Archbishop later played into Gudmund's hands by sending for Magnus to Norway on some obscure ceremonial question and keeping him there for some years, while Gudmund carried his campaign into the

1. l.c. 26; Bogi Th. Melsted; Isl.Saga III p 331.
2. Gudmund's Saga 42-7.

southern diocese.

Gudmund's spirit and methods chiefly reflected his own character and upbringing, but he derived his inspiration largely from the example of St. Thomas Becket (ob. AD 1170), sagas of whose life grew to popularity in Iceland at this time. Gudmund's antagonist Kolbein complains in a poem that God made him a second Thomas for masterfulness (slikan Thoma at riki).¹

The connecting link with this English champion of the Church's rights appears to have been Hrafn Sveinbjornarson, a great friend and adviser of Gudmund, and the author of the "youngest" biography about him. In 1195 Hrafn captured a walrus which took some landing, so he made a vow to reward St. Thomas if he would help him. In fulfillment of this promise, two years later he went on a pilgrimage to the shrine at Canterbury taking the tusks of the walrus, and probably returned with a copy of the Life of St. Thomas, then being propagated throughout the country.²

Hrafn accompanied Gudmund in 1202 when he went to be consecrated, and has vividly described how fierce tempests drove them through the Hebrides and round Ireland before they could make across to Norway.

(c) After his consecration Gudmund found his chief antagonist in Kolbein Tumason, leading chieftain of the north, a man with a temper as aggressive as his own, who had been prime mover in securing Gudmund's nomination as bishop, and on the strength of that patronage had taken over the administration of the episcopal estate at Hólar.

At first Gudmund's use of his power of excommunication had a weighty effect on Kolbein and other chiefs, but this weapon was soon blunted and broken by arbitrary and excessive use. Firing priests fled to the bishop to escape the law and he refused to give them up. Finally the chiefs besieged Hólar, but to avoid a fight the bishop rode out

1. E. Magnusson: Thomas Saga Erkebiskups, Rolls S.65.
2. B.S. I. p641; Sturlunga S.II 277, 245sq.

and away, supported by 360 retainers, headed by three abbots and a couple of monks with vagabonds and woman-tramps in the rear. Gudmund owed his band of followers to his former beneficence as priest. Afterwards his more reputable supporters fell away, and he was followed up and down the north by a ragged regiment whom he called "God's Almsfolk", though they included some doughty outlaws, who fell out among themselves over the spoils they wrested from a resentful countryside. On this occasion Kolbein pursued the bishop's band from Hólar until he cut them off at Vidines on Sept. 9th 1208 where a pitched battle was fought, in which Kolbein was killed and his followers fled. This death directly or indirectly led to the Sturlunga disasters and the break-up of the commonwealth.

Light is thrown on the character of this protagonist of chieftain rights by a poem he composed:-

Heyr, himna smidur,
hvers skáldid bidur;
komi mjúk til min
miskunin þin;
því heitk á þig,
thú hefr skaptan mig;
ég em thraellinn þinn,
thú 'st drottin minn.

Hear, Lord of the sky,
the poet's cry;
let Thy mercy free
reach even to me;
I cry to Thee;
Thou hast fashioned me,
Thy slave am I now,
my master Thou.

Gud, heitk á þig,
ath graedir mig;
minnst mildingur min,
mest thurfum þin;
ryð þú röðla gramur,
riklyndur og framur,
höld hverri sorg,
ur hjarta borg.

God, I pray to Thee,
O heal Thou me.
Thou, merciful, know'st
my need the most.
O king of the sun,
most mighty one,
Chase sorrow cold
From my heart's stronghold. 1

In spite of Bishop Pál's intervention, the quarrel in Icelandic fashion was taken over by Kolbein's relatives, the Sturlunga clan, who brought about the bishop's banishment for some years.

1. Trans. Beatrice Helen Barby.

(d) On his return the old game re-opened. The ragged regiment reformed and harried the countryside, so that the people appealed to their chiefs, and active war was renewed. In 1221 Gudmund and his followers took refuge in Malney, a little barren island off the north coast, while Kolbein's nephew occupied the bishopstead at Hólar. Here he was raided by Gudmund's needy gang, taken unawares by night and killed - an act condemned by old heroic ideals unlearned in civilised warcraft. Then the bishop had to flee to Grimsey in the Arctic Circle, where he was attacked, and after desperate adventures his band was defeated and he was once more banished. When he returned in 1226, for two years he was kept prisoner in the bishopstead.

All these escapades make good stories in Gudmund's sagas and would be enlivening, if not inspiring, in the pages of ecclesiastical history, as the hero of them is a bishop.¹

Bishop Pál again attempted mediation and offered to house Gudmund at Skálholt, but he preferred his independence, distrusting his colleague's noble proclivities. On another occasion Pál sent his chaplain, offering to pay for any damage Gudmund might consider he had received. But naturally he refused to be bought off, and charged Pál with abetting the chieftains. An offer by Gudmund to refer the matter to the archbishop for arbitration was rejected by the chieftains, whose patriotic independence led them to foresee the outcome of bringing in external authority.

And so the childish campaign went on. Its ecclesiastical aims had long since merged into a clash of clans. Gudmund made himself in turns a popular hero and a public nuisance. We can discover few episcopal functions performed by him. On Aug. 29th 1220 just before a battle in the churchyard he consecrated a church at Helgastadir, and during the next ember days (Sept. 16-18) held an ordination at Saudanes on the North-east coast. Once he celebrated mass on a rock on the precipitous Drangey islet, property of the Hólar see.

1. G.S. 84, 87-93.

It is clear that he allowed the cathedral school to lapse, for after a visit to Norway he returned at the archbishop's desire with a teacher. When he was kept out of the bishop's stead he settled with his undisciplined band on some sympathetic farmer, until the neighbourhood grew tired of their maraudings. He spent three or four long periods overseas - outlawed, or escaping from chieftains' revenges, renewing his ecclesiastical zeal or doing penance at Rome.

The grievous effect on religion of all this is strikingly summed up in Gudmund's Saga (62). "Wretched and lamentable was the state of the Christian Faith there in those days. Some priests abandoned the celebration of Mass for fear of God" (i.e. of Gudmund who had forbidden it); "but some performed it because of their fear of the chiefs, others by their own desire. The cathedral church, the mother, stood in sorrow and grief, as did some of her daughters too, but others exulted in her tribulation, and everyone lived just as he pleased, and no one dared to remonstrate."

Finally in 1232 a new archbishop deprived Gudmund of his office, at the same time censuring the chieftains for their opposition.¹ However the energies of the stalwart bishop by then were beginning to fail, and no steps were taken to elect a successor. In his few remaining years he regained some of the popularity of his priesthood and happily when at last the pope issued a writ for his suspension for incapacity, Gudmund had died before it was signed.² His last gesture illustrates much of his character. From his death-bed, blind and feeble, he had himself carried out of the house, and like an ancient hero, laid on a hurdle spread with ashes so that he should not die under a roof, but on the earth, beneath the open sky, with the feel of the wind on his face.

1. Sturlunga S. 295

2. Dipl. Isl., no 132 dated May 11 1237. On the same day the Pope also directed the suspension of Bishop Magnus for infirmity. Gudmund died March 16, 1237.

(e) Gudmund's unyielding struggle for ecclesiastical rights brought nothing but disaster to his diocese and nation.¹ But he was popular with the people, for they appreciated his priestly powers of healing and exorcism. He had proved himself a people's bishop, siding with them against feudal ideas in the country, as his bodyguard of "God's Almsfolk" made inconveniently plain. Men of a higher type, like Hrafn, Bjolf and Aron, also supported him especially in his earlier campaigns, admiring his unsparing energy and relentless zeal.

Nearly a century after his death, one of Gudmund's successors at Hólar, a similar godi-bishop, the Norwegian Audun, (1314-23), paid him the honour of beatification. His neglected grave was discovered with difficulty and his remains exhumed, being recognised by great knobs on his broken leg.² An elaborate tomb was prepared inside the cathedral, and Gudmund's day - March 16, was established as a holiday, being known by the homely name of Gvendar dagr. He owed this distinction partly to the admiration of King Hákon V, but chiefly to the desire of expressing official approval of his struggle for ecclesiastical rights, which Norwegian bishops in Iceland were then bringing to a successful conclusion.

Nevertheless Gudmund's campaign defeated its own ends. His taking of the sword to exact by force the requirements of Canon Law and the privileges of the priesthood led to defeat by the sword. If victorious he might have won (as did later ecclesiastical aggressors) material advantages, but only at the cost of losing the goodwill of those who had built up the Church in the country, and forfeiting spiritual leadership. It is significant that he was celibate. Had he obeyed the apostolic injunction in this matter, like almost all his brethren, he might have found that a wife would have given him a sense of proportion and kept him from eccentric aberrations.³ Like Pál's wife, she might have ruled the bishopstead, obviating the intrusion of Kolbein Tumason, which greatly aggravated the contest at the outset, and she would have kept in order the

1. Turville-Petre and Olszewska l.c. p xxiv.
2. Larentius S. AD1314.
3. I Timothy iii, 2-5.

bishop's rampageous crowd of pensioners. Had he remained a priest, especially if he had put himself under discipline in a monastery, his unusual powers might have been transmuted and have proved of positive value to the Church. As it was, his episcopate did his Church and Country irreparable harm, for it proved the occasion, if not entirely the cause of the loss of their liberty, as his wilful truculence played into the hands of external ecclesiastical and political authority.

Magnus Gizurason, Bishop of Skálholt, an aristocratic prelate of the old school, died in the same year as Guðmund, so that the Althing, following their invariable custom, elected two priests who went overseas for consecration. But Norway's opportunity had arrived. The nominations were ignored, and two Norwegians were sent as bishops to Iceland.

The independence of the Icelandic Church came to an end. Had it remained as strongly national as before, it might have held together the disintegrating Commonwealth. As it was, it hastened its collapse, and by the end of the next generation, control of the country was assumed by Norway (1262-6).

VI. (111) END OF THE EPOCH. (1238-62)

Bishop Gudmund's reckless truculence opened the door for direct papal action through the archbishop. This offered an opportunity for political intervention by the State, of which the astute King Hákon Hákonsson (1217-63) was not slow to take advantage.

Thus the ambitions of the King of Norway for overlordship of Iceland were furthered by external ecclesiastical aspirations, so that in this respect the subjugation of Iceland by Norway resembles the conquest of England 200 years earlier by their cousins from Normandy, which ruler and pope were allied against the people.

(a) In this anti-national move the Church took the lead and provided the protagonists. About the same time the Pope was getting into trouble for staffing English benefices with Italian priests, a proceeding which the Statute of Provisors attempted to restrict (AD1351)

By transferring the election of Icelandic bishops from the Althing to the Cathedral Chapter at Nidaros, the archbishop acted plainly contrary to the custom of the Icelandic Church. Had he desired only to remove the anomaly of lay patronage, he could have ordered canonical chapters to be formed at Skálholt and Hólar; though the chieftains would have contested the cession of their prerogative to priestly fellow-countrymen outside the Althing.¹ But he was well informed about the temper of the country. In spite of the equalitarian principles of its government, the order of bishops met with more than mediaeval deference. For notwithstanding Gudmund's secular activities his office and person were treated with strangely patient consideration. So that even Norwegian bishops when consecrated and sent into the country were able to count on acceptance.

1. Gj. p 183.

Furthermore, as in the matter of the Icelandic adoption of Christianity two and a half centuries earlier, the consciousness that the King of Norway was behind its protagonists considerably accelerated the proceeding, so now, acceptance of a new régime in Church and State was stimulated by the recognition of foreign control.

(b) Gudmund's campaign, or the bankruptcy it showed in Icelandic Church leadership, was made the occasion for Norwegian interference, but it was not the only cause of it.

Persistent lawlessness in highplaces, which the patriarchal government proved too inefficient to control, broke up the aristocratic commonwealth of Iceland. The balance of power among chieftains had collapsed in the growing dominance of one or two rival families, so that one or other sought to establish preeminence by soliciting outside aid. In the old days control was maintained by strong bishops like Gizur, son of Isleif, Magnus, Klaeng and Pál and by highborn ecclesiastics like Gaemund and Jón Loftsson.

Family retainers had grown tired of being forced to act as pawns in their leaders' wearing struggle for preeminence, and looked for peace and stability and improved social conditions in a strong external government.

People's minds had become reconciled to the idea of royal rule. Popular sagas of King Olaf the Saint "had given Kingship a special consecration". Heimskringla, the famous contemporary work of Snorri Sturluson, had brought the attractive story of Norwegian Kings to every winter fireside. Monks had popularised the life of Sverri, King Hákon's predecessor. At this time Icelanders were reading with interest "an eloquent panegyric on royalty" called "the Kings Mirror". The Church found this favourable regal atmosphere congenial, as it did in England in the 17th century. The cardinal who crowned Hákon in 1246 went so far

as to send a message to the people of Iceland commanding them to submit to King Hakon "as it was improper for them not to be governed by a king, like all other nations".¹

Thus was the ground sedulously prepared by the Church for the acceptance in Iceland of external overlordship.

(c) The first Norwegian bishops appointed for Iceland by the Chapter of Widaros openly acted as royal agents. Civil war had broken out, the Sturlung family in the North under the historian Snorri being opposed by Gizur Thorvaldsson, descendant of the early Southern bishops. Gizur, who had been appointed the King's representative, ingratiated himself with Sigvard, the new bishop of Skálholt, to such good effect, that when he arranged the assassination of Snorri on the night of Sept 23 1241, Sigvard protected him against the natural resentment which followed this treacherous deed, and took an active part in the indecisive battle which followed.

The bishop further encouraged Gizur's ally Kolbein to resist Thord, the last of the Sturlungs, who came to Iceland to avenge his famous father, and allowed Kolbein and his band of 700 men to fortify the bishopstead at Skálholt against him.

The final battle actually took place at sea in Humafloi bay - the first Icelandic naval engagement. Kolbein proved victorious, but became ill and made an agreement that the matter should be referred to the King (1244).²

Kolbein died; Gizur was detained in Norway; Thord was appointed King's representative, and with Heinrich, the new Norwegian bishop of Hólar, came with the Cardinal's mandate to put the king's case to the people. The Bishop of Skálholt now gave his support to Thord as the king's representative and, had it not been for Thord's ambition for personal domination, the matter might have been settled (1248).

1. Hakonarsaga 257; Gj pp 193, 203. Craigie I, Sagas pp 51-2, 85.
2. Sturlungasaga II, 7, 61sq. 83.

Bishop Heinrik reported Thord to the King who replaced him by Gizur, who in his turn allowed his desire for self-aggrandizement to revive. Thus Icelandic independence continually defeated itself.

(d) The family feud flared up again, and the commonwealth, which deservedly had long survived internal disasters, finally succumbed after a glaring act of perfidy unsurpassed in its previous history.

The scene is vividly described in the monumental Sturlunga saga, and may be summarised here, as it gives a picture of the inevitable end of the epoch, with its internecine quarrels of intransigent chieftains, the partisan intrigues of the Church, and the lack of authority.

Gizur drove from his settlement a certain Eyjolf, who plotted vengeance and enlisted the ready help of Bishop Heinrik and other northern leaders. They formed a conspiracy to attack Gizur during wedding festivities for his son Hall, who was marrying Ingibjörg, daughter of Sturla, thus joining the once rival houses.

Gizur welcomed 120 guests and expressed the hope that peace would now be kept between the families in accordance with the recent understanding and pledge. One of the guests, Hrafn, knew about Eyjolf's plot, and yet joined in the party, even drinking the loving cup, without revealing it.

On the night after the party broke up, Eyjolf and a band of fifty-two men attacked the house, but failing to break in, they set it on fire in the pagan saga-fashion of three hundred years before. Gizur's wife Groa and his two sons perished in the flames. The young bride, Ingibjörg, refused the assailants' offer of release, preferring to die with the others, but she was carried in her nightdress to the church for sanctuary. Her bridegroom tried to fight his way out, but was wounded and brought to the church to

die. Twenty-five people were burnt to death though Gizur managed to save himself in a remarkable way by escaping to the outer pantry and getting into a vat of whey, where his enemies could not find him. When they left, he crawled to the church, though nearly dead from shock, exposure and grief. Eyjolf and his band, thinking Gizur was burnt, hastened to Hólar, where they were welcomed by Bishop Heinrik and given absolution.

There is satisfaction in recording that Gizur recovered and pursued the incendiaries relentlessly, putting twelve to death before the end of the year. This execution of justice was handicapped by Heinrik who put him under the ban of the Church, so that he had to move to the south. However, the Althing outlawed Eyjolf and fifteen of his band. Then Gizur was summoned to Norway by the king, and, like his rival Thord, kept in that country.¹

To promote his interests the king in 1256 sent out a Norwegian lay official who induced the people of the north, led by the bishop, to acknowledge the king's claims and pay him taxes.² And in 1262 the Althing of the country submitted, being finally persuaded by an earnest speech of Gizur, who had returned as the king's deputy or Jarl, and recognised that the day of independence was done. (The district of the Side fell into line in 1264.) It had been a great and glorious day, though clouded at its close.

1. Sturlunga Saga II pl92.
2. Gamli Sättmáli in Dipl. Isl. VI pp4-6.

CHAPTER SEVEN.EXTERNAL DOMINANCE. 1264-1380Canon Law.

Submission to the King of Norway brought to an end the golden age of the Icelandic Commonwealth, and closed an era of much splendour and intellectual eminence.

The gold was mixed with the alloy, but this rendered it the more serviceable for the hard conditions of sub-arctic existence.

The leaders of the Church in this small commonwealth had proved also leaders of the people and had played a noble part in its history. Bishops often forgot that they were churchmen in the outstanding qualities they showed as chieftains. But most of them excelled as men of learning and character. The Church in its schools and monasteries and by its individual scholars had a distinguished share in Iceland's almost unique contribution to world literature.

The collapse of the chieftains opened the way for the ascendancy of the Church, which is the most conspicuous feature on the years following the Norwegian Agreement.

An early period of constructive ecclesiastical development by chieftain-bishops had been succeeded by a period of rivalry between the leaders of Church and State, culminating in the submission of both to external control.

Chieftains were replaced by unpopular foreign officials, in conflict with whom the bishops gradually acquired the dominance formally held by leading laymen.

In the gradual decay of independence in the country during the next century and a half, they frequently abused these powers by exploiting their right of excommunication and the weakness of the people, so that in turn they lost their authority, and Iceland in the century before the Reformation socially, intellectually and spiritually sank to its lowest state.

(i) A. Denationalization.

For the period succeeding the union of Norway and Iceland we have two authoritative accounts - the Lives of the notable bishops, Arni of Skálholt (1269-98) and Laurentius of Hólar (1323-30), specially valuable at a time when there is little first-hand information about the history of the country. These two bishops had very different characters. Arni proved an able if aggressive administrator, whereas Laurence was a gentle teacher and a monk.

(a) Arni Thorlaksson interrupted the scheme for controlling the Icelandic Church by a Norwegian episcopate, for he was a native of the country, sprung from the illustrious episcopal family of Isleif and Gizur, and showed himself a worthy descendant of that line in his gifts of intellect and statesmanship. He had been a disciple of Brand, the learned Abbot of Thykkvabaer, and became expert not only in letters but in mechanical arts, and afterwards displayed leadership in public affairs. As a versatile skald he won the favour of King Magnus of Norway by his courtly poems and tales, and subsequently they helped one another in the process of denationalizing the Icelandic Church and Commonwealth. As bishop, Arni proved a vigorous ruler, taking in hand two thorny outstanding problems. He revised ecclesiastical law, and brought about a settlement, though itself a compromise, of the vexed question of Church property.

To bring Iceland into line with Norwegian jurisprudence, King Magnus VII, called Lagaböter, i.e. Law-reformer, in 1271 sent over a new code of laws, nicknamed not inaptly Jarnsida - Ironside. This was a contravention of the settlement of 1262 - the Gamli Sattmali, and although introduced by the Icelandic historian and Law-man Sturla, it met with considerable opposition. It rightly abolished personal requital for injuries, putting all punishment into the hands of the State, but its penalties were harsh and exacting, though it contained a saving clause: "We are to hate evil deeds, but love men as our fellow Christians, and most of all their souls." 1

However the opposition was so strong that the Code had to be modified on Icelandic lines, and in 1281 a new Code called Jón's Book was introduced by Jón Einarsson and adopted by the Althing.¹

Soon after his consecration on June 21 1269 Bishop Arni took steps to bring the Icelandic Church more completely under Canon Law. The existing ecclesiastical code was the Kristinrettr (summarised above p.98-100), which had been compiled by Bishops Ketill and Thorlak in the years 1122-33, and incorporated in the Icelandic Law-book 'Grágas'. Now the law-making king and bishop did their best to render Grágas out-of-date as a civil and ecclesiastical authority. Arni forwarded the king's new Codes in Iceland, while Magnus backed the bishop's Canon Law reforms.

Arni summoned a Conference of his leading priests and laymen and proposed the addition of five new clauses:-
1. That all worshippers should genuflect at the elevation of the Host.

2. That marriage should only be solemnized after publication of banns in church on three successive Sundays.

3. That concubines should be repudiated or married on penalty of excommunication.

4. That all churches and church-estates should be transferred to the bishop.

5. That it should be forbidden to let (ecclesiastical) goods and chattels on hire ?

(Nemini res inanimatas elocare licitum esto.)²

The Synod formally agreed to the first three of these additions, but boggled at the last two clauses.

(b) The two first regulations did little more than define existing regulations, but Clause 3 caused many searchings of heart, especially among the clergy, against whom it was particularly directed. Many a chieftain kept a concubine whom he could marry if he had not already a wife; but according to Canon Law priests had no such remedy. From the beginning of Christianity in Iceland

1. Jón's Bók, Facsimile and introd. Larusson

2. Arni Biskups S.5; Annals 1271; Dipl. Isl. II 23-52
F.J. II pp 3 sq.

bishops and priests had married. The only celibate priests were Thorlak the Saint and Gudmund, later styled the Blessed. Even St. Jón of Hölar was married, as was St. Denys of France, who however was not in orders. Leading priests, as Ari and Saemund, were married, though latterly clergy had contracted life-long unions with 'help-meets' extra ecclesiasm.

Bishop Arni attempted to enforce celibacy, and while his influence remained, even sub-deacons with families were compelled to repudiate their consorts. But the regulation soon became a dead letter, and as in Mediaeval England, concubinage of priests came to be tolerated as less ecclesiastically offensive than matrimony.¹ The effect of Arni's stringency was to make matters worse, for hitherto the apostolic independence of the Icelandic Church made such evasion of the issue unnecessary. Concubinage increased. Even the saintly Bishop Laurence in his early days had a son by a woman called Thurid, who afterwards bore a son to Sira Solomon, another priest.²

In addition to ensuring the publicity of marriage by ordering the publication of banns, Arni enforced the exacting mediaeval degrees of affinity and consanguinity. Prohibition was extended to such absurdly remote relationships as that of seventh cousin. This particularly hit an isolated island like Iceland, where there was much inter-marrying, and almost everyone was descended from the first few settlers. Later the injunction provided an excuse for grasping prelates to extort large fines from rich men who had married such distant relatives as their third cousins.³

All this intensification of ecclesiastical law had ultimately little effect on the common practice of priests and laymen, while it created a cleavage between Church and people, and weakened the influence of many clergy, whom it marked out as technical offenders.

1. G.G.Coulton: Mediaeval Panorama, pp 117-9
2. Laurentius S. 16, s.a.1304.
3. e.g. Bp Gottskalk Nikolasson inf.p 164.

(c) The last of the regulations proposed by Bishop Arni in 1269 is difficult to interpret. It appears to link up with the preceding order as to church buildings and estates, and the Meeting objected to both alike. 'Inanimate things' is a strange way of denoting church furniture. But the Thesaurus gives instances of the use of the expression by Jerome of a statue, by Boethius of furniture and Novellus of vessels;¹ so that it may cover all church property other than lands (and advowson). If chieftain-owners of farms had considered ecclesiastical buildings and their contents as part of their hereditary homesteads, their comprehensive view of religion would have led them to borrow church property for secular purposes, such as entertainment of guests. It is difficult otherwise to understand how provision was made for large parties which assembled for weddings, funerals and special occasions.²

Until lately some pastors have used churches as store-houses and even as dormitories for stranded visitors. This was due probably to an Icelandic rather than a Lutheran view of religion, and to the smallness and isolation of parsonages. When a pastor was asked by a surprised traveller if he did not think it irreverent to sleep in church, he replied: "No, except during the sermon". Some visitors who had availed themselves of such hospitality derided the custom in their reports when they got home; and some abused the privilege, desecrating even the altars, so that such use of churches is now forbidden. But *abusus non tollit usum*. During the recent British occupation some of our troops had only tents to live in, while snow lay on the mountains above them and hurricanes blew in from the sea. They would have been in a bad way, had not the local pastor offered them the time-honoured hospitality of his snug little parish-church.

(d) Before passing to a consideration of Arni's claims

1. *T. linguae Latinae*, Leipzig 1939.
2. Laxdale S., 27, sons of Hjalti entertained 1200= 1440 and Olaf the Peacock 900= 1080; sp Bp Magnus ut sup p 60 Bp Klaeng p 65 ; Bp Pál p 108 , and (later) Bp. Wilkin. p158.

on church buildings and estates, it should be noted that he issued many rulings in regard to baptism and confession, and introduced innovations in Iceland in regard to the mass. Communion in one kind was imposed on the laity, and the dogma of trans-substantiation was laid down.¹ The number of Fasts and vigils was increased. On the other hand an attempt was made to quicken the ministry of the Word, for in 1290 the Council of Bergen enjoined the preaching of a sermon every Sunday.²

Arni exacted tithes and church dues with the utmost rigour, and in 1275 even persuaded the people to pay an annual tax of one ell of wadmál for six years to support the last crusade, which he advocated in his sermons. "None took up the Cross, but many redeemed it". In connection with this, Indulgences were first put on sale by the two bishops. On pain of excommunication they enforced Peter's Pence (Roma skattr), one ell of wadmál from each family, which the king collected after Arni died.³

Like his forbear Bishop Gizur, Arni attained almost to a position of regent in Iceland, so that he was able to exercise the authority of the Church and Canon Law with energy and effect and to demand exemption of the clergy from secular jurisdiction.

His assertion of the Church's claims to ownership of ecclesiastical estates requires a section to itself.

1. F.J. I pp551 sq.

2. Homiliu-bók, Introd.

3. F.J. I pp 455 sq., 571-5. Wadmál is the Icelandic homespun. Householders paid 20 ells to the king under the agreement of 1262-4. 100 ells = 6 sheep = 1 cow. Gj. p 206.

VII. (IB) Stadarmal.

The strife between bishops and chieftains over ecclesiastical property - glebe and advowsons, conveniently called in Icelandic "stadarmal", after persisting for over a century was settled by a compromise in 1297.

The Ketill-Thorlak Code of Church Law appeared to assume lay ownership and advowsons of churches by laying down the responsibility of landlords for endowment and maintenance. Nevertheless some bishops, especially Thorlak II (1176-93) attempted to claim powers over church estates and to forbid marriage of priests. But even the popularity and noble life of Thorlak failed to effect this, and matters went on as before. Archbishops appealed to the faithful in vain. Mediaeval catholicity had much the same complaint against the Church of Iceland as it had against the English Church; it always came up against an incorrigible insular independence, tenacious of the customs of their first fathers in the Faith. Chieftains successfully maintained their rights in the churches they had built and endowed. Opposition roused by Thorlak's attempt to assert the Church's claims and the disastrous result of Bishop Gudmund's militant campaign in the generation after Thorlak led to quiescence, even on the part of Norwegian bishops, who cared nothing for Icelandic traditions.

(a) But Arni's Icelandic nature was endowed with his country's intractable temper. As soon as he returned home as bishop in 1269, he summoned a general council at Skalholt and proposed that all churches should be handed over to the control of the bishops. In spite of all previous attempts to effect this, almost all churches still remained in private hands. But the time-spirit now discounted chieftains. The bishops had behind them the admitted power of the king as whose agents they acted. As the king looked to bishops to further his cause (and taxes) in the country so in return bishops calculated on royal assistance to reinforce their prerogatives. Arni also, like Gudmund, did not hesitate to unsheathe the ecclesiastical weapon of ban and excommunication, which always affected Icelanders like a sorcerer's spell.

1. As it had against the 'private' churches in Germany, Switzerland and elsewhere, though these on the whole were given up earlier. see reff. p 273.

In order to bring the chieftains to heel Archbishop Jón and Arni induced King Magnus to hold a Council at Bergen in 1273. The king's disposition was placid and kindly, and he wished no severe action to be taken against the laity, but he was over-ruled by the prelates and handed the matter over to the archbishop, who proceeded to hear the two most important cases brought by bishop Arni, Oddi and Vatnefjörd.

The advowson and rich benefice of St. Nicolas at Oddi was withheld by Sighvat Halfdansson on the ground that the benefice had always been in the wardship of the Oddi family since the great days of Saemund and Jón Loftsson. Nevertheless the archbishop gave the case in favour of the bishop. At the same time he made the same award in regard to St. Olaf's Vatnefjörd, though its lay-rector claimed that his great-grandfather built and endowed the church on condition that his heirs should retain the administration of it.¹

(b) As we have seen, Arni included a general injunction for surrendering churches in a new Ecclesiastical Code which in 1275 provisionally was adopted by the Althing. His influence there was paramount, but although the Code was passed, the chieftains managed to get a proviso inserted making its sanction depend on ratification by the king and archbishop, which shrewdly provided an opportunity for them to temporise. When King Magnus VI was succeeded in 1280 by his son Eirik, a minor, whose Regents lost no time in taking steps to curb the Church's aggressiveness, the chieftains seized the occasion to appeal to the Crown. For ecclesiastical affairs in Norway had taken a turn unfavourable to Arni's overweening claims. The arrogance of Archbishop Jón had become so intolerable that he was banished from Norway in 1281. This encouraged the chieftains to stand out once more for their church estates, and as Arni would not yield, the conflict came to such a pass that he too was threatened with banishment and had to agree to leave the decision to the king.

1. F.J., II pp 7-8; O.I., I pp 637 sq. (O.I. makes the Abbot of Videy the judge but his statement is that made as Visitor in AD 1518; see F.J. p 41.)
2. Arni biskups S. 14, 19.

Two commissioners were sent to the country, one of whom was Sighvat Halfdansson, and laid down that matters should revert to the old state, until the case was decided. Arni remained intransigent; but the Bishop of Hólar, Jörund, desiring peace for his diocese wrote to the king promising full obedience. This compliance led to a gracious acknowledgement which provides a link at this time between our own country and Iceland. King Eirik's first wife, Margaret, daughter of King Alexander of Scotland, sent to Bishop Jörund a valuable royal cloak which the bishop turned into a cope, afterwards called "Drottingr naut" - Queen's Bounty.¹

Arni finally agreed to go to Norway to state his case and was detained there for three years, after which he returned home with the case unheard and renewed the controversy. But meanwhile the northern bishop Jörund had successfully inaugurated a compromise by buying out owners rights in glebe farms.² At Möðruvellir thus redeemed he established a monastery in 1297, and about the same time he founded a nunnery on a valuable estate at Reynistad, given him for the purpose by the unpopular jarl and chieftain Gizur Thorvaldsson.

In spite of the official pronouncement enjoining the status quo, Arni forced twelve representatives of the landowners to agree to hand over all churches in the diocese. But the king was on guard against further episcopal acquisitiveness, and though he refrained from directly attacking Arni, the subservient twelve were summoned to Norway to be tried for disobedience to the royal order.

1. F.J. II 146-7. Eirik's second wife was a daughter of Robert Bruce.
2. Arni B.S. 53; Larentius S.6.

Arni went with them, and on September 14 1297, the whole matter was decided by a compromise. Rights of lay owners were to be retained in all churches, of which they owned at least half the glebes; the other churches were to be handed over to the bishops.¹

The result of this decision held good up to the last century. Some farmers then still owned churches or glebes and were responsible for the upkeep of the buildings, though they were empowered to collect small dues from parishioners.

For other churches, presumably those surrendered to the bishops in 1297, the congregations were responsible and collected dues through trustees. A few of the larger and anciently more important churches had become "Crown Livings" - having been taken over from monasteries or chieftains at the Reformation. These included Hitardal, Helgafell, Stadarstad, Kirkjubaer and others. Latterly the prestar, ministers rather than farmers by training, let these large farms deteriorate.

(c) After the decision of 1297 which finally defeated one of the greatest ambitions of his episcopate, Bishop Arni remained in Norway and died there the following year, aged 62. Nearly six years elapsed before his successor was appointed. That Arni's perennial conflicts and final disappointment shortened his life is suggested by the fact that his more facile colleague Jörund died at a great age after an episcopate of 46 years (1267-1313).

It would be unfair to leave Arni's life and work without noting a reference to him in Lágréntius saga which epitomises his two-sided character. When Laurence, as a poor but promising young priest, went in 1294 to see Arni at Skálholt, the bishop received him graciously and gave him this advice, "If thou hast not yet mastered Canon Law, that

1. Arni B.S. 79; Gj pp 221-5.

must be thy business henceforth". Laurence later, when he had become a learned bishop and a holy man, emphasised a forgotten element in his patron's character; he used to say he had seen the face of a saint on two men only, on Arni Thorlaksson, Bishop of Skálholt, and on Björn, Abbot of Thingeyrar, at whose death, according to the Annals, the monastery bells tolled of themselves.¹

1. Laurentius S. 7. Ann.s.a. 1299.

VII. (ii) Bishops and Clergy in the XIVth Century.

The XIVth century in Iceland forms a transition between the robust individualism of the earlier period and the inanition of the century which followed. The Church still produced some vigorous prelates, and the people showed a measure of opposition to external aggression which decreased as the century wore on. There became more system and less personality.

This period is fortunate in being illuminated by a first-hand authority - the last historic work for 150 years - the Larentius Saga by Einar Hafliðason (1304-93). This is written in direct and unstudied style, after the manner of the earlier lives of bishops, and like them by an intimate of the subject of the biography. It gives an account not only of Laurence's training and episcopate, but also of the episcopate of the princely Audun and the redoubtable Jörund; and, supplemented by the Annals of the same author, throws a light on education and the monastic and social life of the century.

The Latinisation of the Church in Iceland is shown by the fact that although this life retains most of the unsophistication which gives earlier sagas the fragrance of open country rather than the mustiness of the study, its hero Lafranz or Lavrans is always called Larentius or even as bishop, Lord Larentius. A priest is entitled Sira (Jón), and a highly placed woman The Lady (Thurid).

And yet this outward courtliness does not extend to manners, for although we find less barbaric violence than in ancient sagas, rudeness and quarrels abound, as well as the slights that Icelanders are prone to give and quick to resent.

(ii) A. Prelacy.

(a) Laurence was the son of a priest, but as a votary of Canon Law was himself never married. As a poor boy he was adopted as foster-son by Bishop Jörund at Hólar, and brought up in the episcopal school. He had a hard struggle throughout his life, and his learned and imperious pronouncements gave offence to those in high place and created jealous enemies.

His skill at Latin was such that he could turn out Latin verses "as fast as men could speak"; and in pursuance of Bishop Arni's advice to study Canon Law he went to Norway, where he became a favourite of the archbishop after an unpromising beginning, described in the saga in a characteristic story:-

Sira Lárentius came to the archbishop holding a scroll. The archbishop looked at it, praised the handwriting and said: "Read before us that thou has written".

So Laurence read from it verses he had made in praise of the Lady Hallbera, Abbess of Stad, (*i.e.* *Reynistað*.)

"Is she a good woman", asked the archbishop, "Since thou hast praised her so much?".

"People in Iceland", replied Laurence, "take that for granted".

"Cease verse-writing henceforth", said the archbishop; "and study Canon Law instead". "Knowest thou not: *Versificatura nihil est nisi falsa figura?*"

"You must also know", retorted Laurence, "*versificatura nihil est nisi maxima cura*".

"Why do you wear red clothes", asked the archbishop, "which it is forbidden priests to wear?".

He replied, "Because I have no others".

Then the archbishop whispered to one of his pages, who went out and brought back some fine brown clothes of the archbishop's, which he gave Laurence to wear on festivals; and ordered his steward to buy some black clothing for every day use.

Laurence was soon able to give shrewd and skilful help to the archbishop in his dealings with his disloyal and obstreperous Chapter, which led to his unpopularity with the Canons.

After a visitation which he conducted for the archbishop on the Church of Iceland in 1307/8, when his strictness offended the bishops, his slacker colleague on his return to Nidaros slandered him to such an extent that the Chapter were able to seize on the occasion to throw him into a foul dungeon called Gulskitni, where he would have starved but for food handed him through a grating by Thurid, mother of his son. Finally after seizing all his books and goods, the Canons sent him back in chains to Iceland, where Bishop Uðrond appointed him a monastic teacher. He was hounded from monastery to monastery, from Ver to Munkathvera and finally to Thingeyrar, on account of the aged bishop's fear of the Chapter.

In the year 1317 Laurence and his son Arni, then thirteen years of age, took monastic vows at Thingeyrar. There we leave him for seven years faithfully keeping the rules of St. Benedict and humbly teaching and studying. He took in hand the education of his son, who became an accomplished Latin scholar and a fine writer and versifier. Notwithstanding this "religious" bringing up the priest's motherless son did not turn out well. Arni as a priest became a victim to drink "and other iniquity, and the Church got no good of his parts".¹ However, he is best remembered as the author of a Saga of St. Dunstan, one of the extensive collection of saint's Lives, which formed the popular reading of the day.²

1. Lar Saga 33 and 64.

2. W.A. Craigie: I. Saga p 107-8.

(b) In the winter of 1313-14 - a hard season nicknamed "horse-death winter", Jörund, Bishop of Hólar died. Latterly he acquired much power; in the saga phrase "all men rose up and sat down at his bidding".¹ His episcopate of 46 years created a pre-Reformation record.

In his place the archbishop consecrated Audun the Red, head of the Nidaros Chapter, a rich man of high standing; who had been priest of Trondenes parish on Lofoten Island in Halogoland, where the lofty church built in his day may still be seen below the mountains by the fiord approaching Harstad.

Audun was received with little ceremony when he arrived at Hólar, "though he was stiff with riding, being an old man". Sira Kodran and Sira Snjolf, leading priests, "did nothing but mock him; but scant heed he paid it".

Audun's episcopate (1313-22) was notable for his large expenditure on the bishopstead and cathedral. He bought over a stone-mason and made an innovation by putting a stone chimney to his wooden Great Hall. In the cathedral he placed stone steps and pillars and a stone altar containing a fire-proof safe. This may be the mediaeval stone altar seen at Hólar by Baring Gould in 1860 (5ft.9 by 3ft) with a frontal of five panels: the Blessed Gudmund, St. Jón, and St. Thorlak flanked by angels.² Audun's building was wrecked in a storm 1393. Audun beautified the sanctuary and presented a fine cope called Skarmande - a touch of the biographer's which indicates his acquaintance with Hungrvaka.³

1. cp. Hv. about Ep. Gizur, quoted supr. p 44.
2. Iceland: its Scenes and Sagas, p295 London 1863.
cp. the will of Rd. Russell merchant of York 1485AD. which provided for the erection of two altars, each to contain a cupboard for books and vestments. Frere: Essays p 147.
3. of Bishop Magnus, ut supr. p 59.

It is significant that Audun revived interest in the sainted native bishops. He appointed as Feasts the day of St. Jón of Hólar's translation and the day of the blessed Guðmund, whose neglected relics he found with difficulty and placed in a shrine.¹

He lived in such great magnificence, that his lavishness exhausted his private fortune, so he tried to extort heavier taxes and take over some glebes. This revived the old controversy, though a bishop's opponents now included not only chieftains, but leading priests, whose goodwill Audun tried to win by giving dispensations to their sons to take orders. "Many cases brought before him he could not settle, as he did not know the ways of the country". In the end leading northern laymen pledged themselves at the Moot to suffer no innovations at his hands.

Bishop Audun carried on his Chapter's strained relations with Laurence until Egil Eyjolfsson, his schoolmaster at Hólar, persuaded the bishop to abandon the feud in 1319 when he appointed him tutor to his grandson Eysteinn, who became a noted priest of St. Mary's, Trondheim.²

The bishop needed all the support he could win, for the official opposition of leading priests and laymen made the glebe controversy take its old course and led to the customary summons of the protagonists to Norway.

Audun spent the winter with the archbishop at Nidaros, and "feasted deep at Yule and so took gout which daily grew worse. So stout a fellow was he that he sat up with his mates making them as merry as though he had not a pang".

1. Lar Saga 33
2. Lar Saga 35. Eysteinn like his father was also called Rauda - Red, a surname in its early stage. Trondheim is the later name of Nidaros.

The archbishop asked who should succeed him at Hólar. Audun replied: "No man is more fitted than Brother Laurence. He is the best scholar, and skilled in Canon Law; and further he is bold and trusty in law-suits and in the defence of Holy Church. For the men of North Iceland need to have a bishop over them, one who is both a great scholar and strong enough to chastise all the perverseness and disobedience of the place." 1

(c) Perversity is often the reaction of a native independence provoked or wrongly led. It is significant that Bishop Audun's colleague in the south, Arni Helgason, did not meet with opposition. This bishop of Skálholt was a nephew of the great Bishop Arni and from his birth knew the ways of the country. He did not overpress the claims of Canon Law and external churchmanship, being careful to preserve the patriarchal relations which from the first in Iceland had signalized dealings of bishops with their people.

Three features of Arni's considerate episcopate emerge (1303-20) -

1. He wrote a saga on his uncle, Arni Thorlaksson, learning by contrast the better part.
2. Skálholt church was struck by lightning and burnt down on Saturday Jan 24 1309 "as swiftly as men swallow meat and drink at a meal".² Next year the bishop, having collected subscriptions throughout Iceland, went to Norway to get timber to rebuild it, and returned with many valuable gifts presented by King Haakon and his queen and many leading men, so that (according to the Annals) "it was a common opinion that no one had ever made a more successful trip to Norway since Iceland adopted Christianity".

1. Lar.Sag 36.
2. Annals.

3. King Haakon V, the last of the Norwegian line, died in 1319 and was succeeded by Magnus Smek, the infant son of his daughter Ingibjörg, who had married Duke Eirik of Sweden. Thus Iceland with Norway for some years came under Sweden, and disturbances arose.¹ The occasion was shrewdly seized by the Althing to set out their grievance under the settlement of 1262. Their spirited manifesto shows signs of episcopal influence, at least in its conclusion: "May the Lord Jesus Christ grant that you may take such steps as may redound to the benefit of the blessed King's soul, the honour and glory of Junker Magnus and the peace and joy of us all, now and forever. Amen".²

The bishops and leading laymen set out for Bergen to press their claims,³ though Bishop Arni died after the voyage, and Bishop Audun was driven back by storms. The conference evidently succeeded, for in the following year the Al-thing agreed to take the oath of allegiance to the new king.

(d) Arni's successor Grim Skullason only spent three months in the country. In that short time he squandered 300 hundrads, equivalent to the value of 300 cows. The annals point out that this extravagance occurred during a period of famine when a number of people died of hunger.

1. Vae terrae ubi puer rex est, or as the homely Icelandic has it: "No resting o' nights, for rats in the house, when the cat is a kitten". Quoted Sigrid Unset: Kristin Lavransdottir, p 170.
2. Gj. pp 235-6.
3. The rights demanded by Iceland were:
 1. Six ships to traffic from Norway yearly.
 2. No exportation of cod in seasons of famine.
 3. All magistrates to be Icelanders.
 4. Cases to be tried at home.

From the Norwegian settlement in 1262 to the Danish amalgamation in 1380, all but three of the ten bishops of Skálholt were foreigners. The Grim episode is typical of the callous indifference with which they normally treated the people and of the greed and grasp of power too often manifested, with the result that they created a growing opposition to ecclesiastical officialism, which became characteristic of Icelandic churchmanship in the centuries before the Reformation.¹

Here as in England the foisting of foreign prelates on the Church and ecclesiastical acquisitiveness largely helped to prepare the way for the restoration of a more apostolic method and spirit of church government.²

1. J.H. I. pp 189-90 GJ. p 237.
2. cp. G. Barraclough: Papal Provisions, pp viii, 174sq. Oxford 1935.

VII. (ii) B. Apostle Belle and Singing Maids.

When the election of Laurence to the bishopric of Hólar was announced in Iceland, many could not imagine who this Laurence could be; nor could Laurence himself believe it of his old enemies the Chapter of Nidaros. The Governor of Iceland Lord Ketil Thorlaksson announced the election on St. Laurence's day from the Quire of the cathedral. Then Te Deum was sung, followed by the ringing of bells, during which the bishop-elect was conducted to his seat.

The ship "Krafs" which took Laurence to his consecration was wrecked as it approached Norway and he lost most of his stores and all his money; but no one was drowned except Thordis known as "Blossom-check". The Bishops of Bergen and the Orkneys joined the archbishop in his consecration on St. John's Baptist's day 1324.1

(a) Laurence's episcopate was comparatively uneventful. Providential flotsam of a whale helped the see's impoverished finances at the start and enhanced the bishop's reputation, so that he was able to tackle with a firm hand the grievances he inherited, which had long been nursed by Thingeyrar and Munkathvera monasteries. Thingeyrar he knew from inside. Its tithes had been taken since Bishop Jörund's day for the bishopric of Hólar. To settle this, Laurence bought out a layman who owned the rich glebe of Hvamm, ancient home of the Sturlungs, and gave the benefice to the monastery.

Another northern monastery, Múdruvellir, had almost ceased to exist, since it had been burnt down some years before owing to the carelessness of tipsy monks. This he

1. Lar. Saga, 38. The diocese of the Orkneys was under the supervision of the Archbishop of Nidaros until 1472, when it came into the province of St. Andrew's. During the world war the Bishop of Aberdeen and the Orkneys took Confirmations for the British Force in Iceland 1940-1.

rebuilt, providing for its church "Apostles" bells and five "singing-maids" (probably deep-toned bells and trebles); but in accordance with its foundation charter he only appointed a prior, making himself abbot. The monks appealed against this, and the Bishop of Skálholt and the Abbot of Ver, (formerly Thykkvabaer) acting for the archbishop, decided against Laurence. Then Laurence in his turn appealed to the archbishop, who reversed the decision and presented Laurence's able emissary Egil "with a fair silver bason and the canon law book called Tancred".¹

To Munkthvera, whose abbot Thorir had been deposed by Bishop Audun, Laurence appointed Berg Sökkason, an old pupil of his, "a most accomplished scholar, a fine chanter and orator" and as we shall see a popular writer. Berg died in 1345.

Bishop Laurence having been monk and teacher himself, and being an Icelander, proved an able administrator of the schools and monasteries.

(b) Nevertheless his greatest contribution to the Church of his time lay in his personal life - a humble walk with God. He turned the bishopstead at Hólar into a sort of monastery and himself dressed and lived as a monk. But he kept up the Icelandic episcopal reputation for hospitality, for "he maintained a good table and laid in drinkables from wherever in the country he could get them, and always had shares in two or three ships coming to Iceland".

He established twelve almsmen at Hólar and gave much to the poor. In particular in this respect it is noteworthy that he founded an infirmary for aged and retired priests to which all clergy in the diocese subscribed half a mark a year for three years.²

He kept a notably good school, always having fifteen or more scholars, who presumably formed the cathedral choir. "He would never allow singing in two or three parts which he called fiddling folly. No, they were to chant plain song just as it was set in the choir books".

1. Lar.Saga. 52-61.

2. l.c. 48.

He rebuked deacons for not taking off their coats before putting on their cassocks (a northern choir failing) - "that was how the stuff got torn".¹

Laurence's sermons were notable, and Gamli, one of his priests, is called "a glorious preacher".²

At Mass, which he celebrated with heart-felt piety and tears, he would always have as server his friend and future biographer, the deacon Einar Hafliðason, who in the long winter evenings from dusk at two or three-o'clock till the vesper bell, read him Norse Lives of the saints or Latin stories. This serviceable deacon Einar, took a Boswellian interest in his master and deserves well of posterity.

He advanced the churchmanship of his day by introducing in conjunction with Bishop Jón of Skálholt the observance of Corpus Christi - a feast made law by the Althing in 1325.

One Easter evening of 1331, after a severe Lent, Laurence was taken ill. He sent his chaplain out to see how high the star had climbed up the sky. (For then, as now, Icelanders told the time in winter by the Pleiades.)³ Afterwards he took to his bed, and knowing his end was approaching wrote to the archbishop asking that his successor should be an Icelfander, for "such could better serve the Church in Hólar, as he would have an understanding of the people's character".

A few days afterwards he bade his chaplains read the Office of the Holy Spirit which he had said daily since his early troubles. The Mass was celebrated, at which he died during the blessing. (April 16, 1331).

(c) Laurence was succeeded by Egil Eyolfsson, his

1. Lar. Saga. 44.
2. Homiliu - Bk, introd.
3. cp. Ljosvet. Saga 43. "Keep to the Star" i.e. be in good time.

most brilliant pupil, to whom he had given his episcopal ring on his death-bed. After an uneventful episcopate of ten years - probably the happiest kind, - a Norwegian called Orm was sent over as his successor. He treated the people harshly, as did the Icelandic Bishop of Skálholt. Orm had twice to flee the country, and some time elapsed before anyone was officially appointed. A bishop going to take up his work in Greenland found this vacancy at Hólar and stopped there; preferring no doubt the green valleys of Iceland to the country-wide ice-cap of Greenland. However priests and people would not receive him until he could show the Pope's sanction, which he was unable to obtain until fifteen years later.

As the century drew to its close the Church in Iceland appears to have got along more comfortably without bishops.¹ Certainly foreign-born and foreign-minded prelates proved of no real use. The detailed accounts of Arni and Laurence show what greater response Icelanders gave to their own native leaders. After these capable administrators no bishop had any influence in the country until Iceland, with its ecclesiastical affairs in confusion, came with Norway under Danish rule in 1380.

1. J.H. I. pp 181 sq. Gj. pp 238-9.

VII. (iii) Learning and Letters.

In the realm of the arts the 14th century saw the culmination of Icelandic craftsmanship, especially in calligraphy, illumination of manuscripts and carving. Manuscripts preserved in the Arna-Magnean collection at Copenhagen, particularly the manuscripts of Bishop Brand Jónsson's Biblical Stjórn (c 1310) show workmanship of a high degree of skill.¹

Bishop Laurence of Hólar in his care for churches proved a patron of the arts. He entrusted Stéfan Hauksson "master of many crafts" with the beautifying of the famous cup of St. Jón of Hólar.² Thorarinn "the painter" (probably a layman) figures in correspondence in 1338 between the Bishops of Bergen and Skálholt;³ and the annals praise Thorstein Illugason, priest of Grenjadarstadir (ob. AD1334) for skill in calligraphy, painting and cross-carving.

But mediaeval art in Iceland was derivative and flourished when continental ecclesiasticism developed, while the country's original literature declined.

(a) In literature and education the 14th century witnessed a middle stage between the glowing enterprise of the first three centuries of Icelandic civilisation and the general decay during the 150 years which preceded the Reformation.

Great schools like Oddi and Haukadal had gone, but individual priests still showed readiness to act as teachers, and the bishopsteads and monasteries, such as Helgafell, Thingeyrar and Munkathvera, remained for a time centres of learning.

The golden age of saga-writing went down in a blaze of splendour in Njala about the middle of the 13th century.

1. Icelandic Mss of the Middle Ages, pp 12sq.
2. B.S. I, p 843.
3. Dipl. Island. II pp 723-4.

After that, Icelandic literature took on a twilight mood and became imitative, and finally writers turned mere copyists or scribes. The mediaeval genius for abstractions and allegory found no place for the vivid and objective saga-presentation of truth.¹

Cession of the larger glebes to the Church, i.e. to the bishops, meant the extinction of traditional seats of learning maintained by leading families. There were no successors to Hall and Saemund and Jón Loptsson, whose schools produced the sound scholarship and achievements of Ari, Gizur and Snorri Sturlusson. But some notable instances of fosterage remained. Arni Thorlaksson, Bishop of Skálholt (1269-98) was trained by the priest Grim Holmsteinsson at the historic prestsetar of Kirkjubæur. Bishop Laurence's great-uncle kept a similar school, and Laurence himself was adopted as a poor boy by Bishop Jörund and educated for the priesthood.

The episcopal school at Hólar, neglected since the troubled days of Gudmund, was re-opened by Jörund (1267-1313). Laurence himself taught there as a priest, and during his episcopate maintained it with never less than fifteen pupils, some of whom he induced to become teachers; notably his son Arni, Einar Hafliðason, his biographer, Berg Sokkason the hagiographer and Egil Eyjolfsson, who succeeded him as bishop and doubtless carried on this traditional episcopal enterprise. In the latter half of the century foreign bishops who were appointed to the see apparently took no interest in education and the schools lapsed. We hear nothing about the school at Skálholt from the arrival of the first Norwegian bishop in 1236 until the end of the 15th century.

(b) Nevertheless some monasteries maintained their love of learning and literature, and took over the work of the cathedral schools, training future clergy and sons of chieftains. Under Abbot Thorstein Snorrason (1322-51) and his successor, Asgrim (1352-79), Helgafell became one of the chief centres of learning in the country and possessed

1. Cp. The Mediaeval Mind, H. O. Taylor II p 280.

one of the largest libraries. According to an inventory dated 1397 it owned thirty-five Icelandic and nearly one hundred Latin books. It was also unusually rich in lands, owning 96 farms.¹ Another comprehensive library was owned by Múdruvellir, also in the North. an inventory made in 1461 shows that it contained 39 sagas, more than 30 writings in Latin, and no less than 70 Service books. A later inventory 1525 indicates that the library was dispersed in the dark period before the Reformation.²

To further the work of education, chieftains gave some of their lands. In the middle of the century Einar Thorlaksson handed over two estates to the monastery of Helgafell on condition that Abbot Asgrim instructed his son. Another landowner in 1377 gave half his estate to the same monastery so that his son could be trained to become a sub-deacon. Videy also received some lands with the proviso that the donor's son should be educated there for six years.³

Latin became the language of culture and the law—the general ecclesiastical speech; so much so that it was not until over a century after the Reformation that it ceased to be the language of the Church. Nevertheless, the people still used the vernacular, for when Jón Halldórsson, Bishop of Skálholt (1325-39) addressed a meeting of chieftains in Latin, Laurence said: "We all know, Lord Jón, that you have as fine a flow of Latin as of your mother tongue. But it is not understood of the people. Therefore let us talk clearly that all may understand." Afterwards, when the archbishop sent over a ruling, Laurence had it translated "into Norse" (i.e. Icelandic)⁴

(c) Lives of the saints constituted the popular reading of the day. The era of simple direct story had passed; these are veritable monkish productions, most of them translations from Latin into the vernacular. Runolf Sigmundsson (1307) Abbot of Thykkvabaer, now being called Ver, produced a Life of St. Austin. About

1. Dipl. Isl. IV. pp 170-1.

2. Dipl. Isl. IV. pp 286-90. Islandica IX pp 317-8.

3. Gj. pp 252-4.

4. Lar. Sag. 55,62.

the same time, another monk embellished an earlier life of St. Jón of Hólar with miracles. Arni Lafransson made a saga on St. Dunstan. Arngrim Brandsson, Abbot of Thingeyrar in 1345 was responsible for a Latin Life of Gudmund, which has come down to us in an Icelandic version. The cult of the northern saints was blossoming in those days. Another abbot, Arni Jonsson composed a popular hymn in honour of the blessed Gudmund. Berg Sokkason translated Lives of St. Michael and St. Nicholas of Bari, which showed no sign of losing their popularity fifty years after they were translated.¹ Other popular subjects were Edward the Confessor, St. Oswald, St. Thomas of Canterbury, Peter the Hermit and Legends of the Cross. Forty-five sagas of this kind are in existence and there is a collection of Mary-sagas.² Someone should have translated Adamnan's life of Columba but, as in England, a luxuriant exotic growth overlaid the rock from which they were hewn, and early history was given a southern twist.

Some table talk of Bishop Jón Halldorsson, has come down to us which does not fulfil the expectations raised by its title, as it merely contains fables such as Bishop Abraham and the Pheasant. Jón Halldorsson acquired a doubtful reputation for enlivening his sermons with "worldly stories".³

But these rechauffés did not fully satisfy the Icelanders' appetite for history. Early in the century when most men were paraphrasing, some were copying, and it is to this period that we owe Hauk's Book - the earliest surviving edition of Landnamabók and Kristnisaga, which was edited by Haukur Erlendsson⁴ (ob. AD 1334) one of the Lawmen of the country.

Another valuable compilation is the massive Flatey-book, a collection of ancient sagas made by the priests, Jón Thordarson and Magnus Thorhallson 1387-1395, which contains some new matter chiefly about the bringing of Christianity to the Faroes.⁵

1. Lár Sag. 33 and 47. Vigfusson - Sturlunga S. Prolegom lxxxiii sq.
2. Craigie: Ice Sag pl07.
3. B.S. II p221-230. Homiliu-bók, - Paasche, Cpn 1935.
4. presumably - søn, as his father was Norwegian.
5. Craigie: Ice. Sag. pp87-9. Flateyjar-bok, ed. Finnur Jónsson Cpn. 1930.

Mention has been made of Bishop Brand's O.T. paraphrase called *Stjórn* (c 1310) a unique work of its kind. (ut supr p 84).

(d) The most striking and famous religious work produced in the later middle ages in Iceland was *Lilja*, an encomiastic poem on the Blessed Virgin Mary, which was the work of a monk of *Thykkvabaer*, *Eysteinn Asgrímsson*, whose only other appearances in the *Annals* are disreputable. In 1342 he assaulted his abbot and was imprisoned for immorality. When released and readmitted as a monk at *Helgafell* he lampooned *Gyrd*, Bishop of *Skálholt*. However, he was soon restored to favour, for he was appointed officialis or bishop's deputy in one of the numerous vacancies (1349-51). In 1356 the archbishop sent him to hold a visitation in Iceland to try to extort more tithes which, like the two other recorded visitations (1307 and 1340), led to much recrimination. Afterwards *Eysteinn* sailed to Norway and was tempest-tossed throughout the winter until at last he effected a landing in *Halogoland* and died soon afterwards (1361)¹

It is difficult to find a place for the writing of *Lilja* in the varied ecclesiastical and temperamental life of the author. The *Annals* say that it was composed after the libel on the bishop. But legend or tradition tells how *Eysteinn* wrote it in prison in deep penitence, and as the poem lengthened and his devotion deepened he found himself lifted out of his cell. This may well figuratively express the truth. Some marked sign of repentance would be needed to restore this renegade monk to favour. Even though incontinence in a priest was not then regarded as a heinous offense, he had caused his superior to flee for his life. And the poem displays a mood of fervent penitence culminating in a personal prayer for grace and pardon.

1. *Annals*. F.J. IV. p 60 sq.

Lilja consists of 100 8-line stanzas, replete with Icelandic assonance and alliteration and interior rhymes; yet all through this intricate device it presents the unity of a lofty aim, and must have proved sonorous and stately in recital.

The poem contains three main sections, the central portion comprising half the matter and the last forming a practical conclusion.

I. deals with the Creation and Fall, like Caedmon's prototype.

II. Redemption through Christ: (i) His life on earth; (ii) His after-work; (iii) Hell and Heaven.

III. Prayers to God and Christ (ten verses); to the BVM (ten verses). Exhortation to the Reader, (five verses).

The poem opens and closes with the same stanza, addressing the Almighty, and the parts are marked and held together by a similar refrain, like Passion Music with chorales.

Thus the Lilja formed a valuable compendium of religious teaching, though distorting Biblical proportions in its over-emphasis on the B.V.M. and Rewards and Punishments. It deserved its firm place in the memories and hearts of many generations of Icelanders. A similar poem would be useful in England today.

How highly Iceland, at least in those centuries, thought of this poem which has been called - "the most skilled and artistic poem of the Middle Ages", is expressed in the sayings: "Öll skald vilðu Lilja kveðid hafa" All poets would fain have written "Lilja" 1

1. J.H. pp 212 sq. F.J.II, 398 sq. (gives the poem in full in original with Latin translation.)

CHAPTER EIGHT.DECADENCE OF CHURCH AND NATION. AD1380-1550.(i) Fury of the Elements.

Most modern accounts of Iceland are written by tourists who have spent there a few midsummer weeks, and paint a distorted picture of the country and its people. They touch up the climate and terrain, and caricature the inhabitants. The British Force who protected Iceland in the world war at least wintered and summered in that apparently ungracious and unfinished land and found it a country of stange contrasts. They wandered through the small hours of its lovely nightless June, when mountains and sky take on a glory of translucent colour; in the long dark hours of its winter evenings they stood beneath the Polar Star to gaze at brilliant skies shot through with Northern Lights; they endured its isolation, and made their way by stony or snow-bound tracks to cover its incredible distances; they transversed its savage seas and gave lives to its storms and hurricanes; and they came to marvel at the fortitude of that imperturbable little race that has fought its way down a thousand years of history to maintain its home and its national existence against the fury of the elements.

(a) Iceland has been called the land of ice and fire, and that describes the people no less than the country. Most of them are a mixture, hiding a warm heart beneath a forbidding exterior; a few, perhaps those of distant Celtic ancestry, seem excitable and volcanic; some present a cold, silent sluggish nature inherited from Norse forbears and moulded by their grim environment.¹

The opinion of their character held by King Eirik of Norway at the end of the 13th century is expressed in a story giving reasons for his devotion to St. Jón of Hólar. After praying in vain in a storm to other saints he was advised by an Icelandic sailor

1. cp. Olive Murray Chapman: Across Iceland pp 154-5

to try St. Jón. The King agreed to do so, adding: "Let him show that he is no sluggard, as Icelanders usually are".¹

Without going into the vexed question of heredity and environment, it may be noted that the melancholy grandeur of their country and its hard conditions have profoundly influenced the character of Icelanders and the spirit and methods of their church. Isolation and long winters hardened their native independence; grim surroundings and the reaction they provoked, intensified their stubbornness; the woe entered into their soul. This intransigence prolonged their resistance to papal claims on glebes and benefices, and to papal demands for full acceptance of Canon Law. In neither respect up to the Reformation did they yield completely.

Their character like their country resembles the stern hill country of Judaea rather than the soft sylvan stretches of the Campagna. Preceding chapters (it is hoped) have afforded ample evidence that Iceland's forbidding land and fierce seas produced tough bodies; and as Thomas Aquinas observes, "A tough body means normally a tough soul".

(b) Early Icelandic writers take no notice of the "wonders of nature" in their accounts. The first description of the country's natural features is that of Bishop Gisli Jónsson in the 16th century. Though Haukadal, where Ari the Learned was brought up, is within sight of the famous Geysir, neither he nor any other local writer takes any notice of it. The learned Bishop Brynjolf (1639-75), also a neighbour, is the first to mention it. Adam of Bremen (AD1068 sq) says: "Icelanders have their springs for their delights", presumably for warm baths, in the classic manner of the historian Snorri, who used to meet his friends for discussion sitting at his bath, the remains of which may be seen at Reykholt.

1. Lar. Saga 5.

Saxo Grammaticus who wrote in Denmark a century after Adam of Bremen, observes that "Iceland is a squalid country to live in (obsoletae admodum habitationis tellus) but it is noteworthy for marvels", of which he singles out Geysir and Hekla. "There is a spring which turns all to stone with its reeking fumes, and casts a mass of spray upwards; and there is a mountain which belches out floods of incessant fires in an everlasting blaze".¹ He also mentions mineral springs (near Hitardal) "whose waters resemble the bowl of Ceres," i.e. beer. The Royal Mirror (AD 1250 c) refers to them, noting their possession of the admirable property of losing their effect if not consumed on the spot. The pious Henderson viewed them with misgiving in 1814;² but our soldiers failed to find them. Icelanders call them *Blkeldar*. The Geysir stopped itself up with silica in 1916, but science came to the rescue in 1935, and operated on its lip, and by the help of soft soap a patient visitor may now see a fountain shoot up 150-200 ft.³ Smaller geysirs and hot springs appear in many parts of Iceland, some owing their origin and disappearance to earthquakes. Perhaps the second recorded eruption of Hekla in 1157 brought the great Geysir into action, which would account for the silence of Ari and its mention soon afterwards by Saxo Grammaticus. But it is more likely that local writers took such phenomena for granted, as they did their unrivalled waterfalls, colossal glaciers and aurora borealis.

The hot springs have two special ecclesiastical connections. St. Martin's bath near Haukadal was used by many in the Middle Ages to cure diseases. Being but twenty-five miles north of Skálholt, it was easy for the faithful to take a cure at the baths in connection with their attendance at the Dedication Festival at the cathedral. Hungrvaka records that the aged Bishop Ketill lost his life in 1145 after bathing in a hot spring after supper while staying with his friend Bishop Magnus for the Church Day.⁴

1. Hist. of Denmark Pref 6. trans. O. Elton, London 1894.
2. Iceland p 307.
3. see "The Midnight Sun" no 51 Aug 15 1941.
4. ut supr p 51-2.

The other connection is mercenary rather than religious. Many of the springs are sulphurous and the first speculator to see commercial possibilities in this seems to have been the Archbishop of Trondheim, who held a monopoly of the Icelandic sulphur trade in the 15th century.

(c) Sagas take for granted the normal hardships of Icelandic life. They note exceptional outbursts of natural forces, which appear to have increased towards the end of the Middle Ages, though Annals, which form our authority for that period emphasize, like journalists, the abnormal. Abbot Arngrim (ob. AD 1361) has a short section on the wonders of his country as a background for his Life of the turbulent Bishop Gudmund.¹

The first three records that "fire came up out of Hekla" occur in the series of Hungryvaka writings AD 1029, 1157 and 1206.² But these eruptions appear to have been episodes, and it was not until after the 14th and 15th centuries that an epidemic of volcanic disasters befell. The Annals state that on July 13, 1300 the sixth eruption of Hekla was so violent "that the mountain was cloven, as will be there to see while Iceland is dwelt in". (This characteristic prophecy has turned out to be more accurate than many made about permanence of bishoprics and reputations). A dark pall covered the land for two days and violent earthquakes destroyed local farms and cattle, followed by an epidemic which carried off 600 people.³ Storms in 1326 and 1350 prevented any ships coming with the unusual result (recorded in the Annals) that some churches, owing to the shortage of wine in the diocese of Skálholt, had no masses that year.

Frequent volcanic outbursts are recorded during the century with many severe winters, followed by floods causing widespread damage and deaths of people and cattle, especially in the south-east. Floods swept off sheep and

1. B.S. II pp 5-6

2. Hv. 2-20; 5, 13; Palssaga 7-6.

3. For list of 23 eruptions see Henderson, Iceland p 267 from Van Troil, and W.G. Lock's Guide 1882. Baring Gould: Iceland pp xxi-iii.

cattle, avalanches destroyed houses, pastures and woods, and famine and disease completed the devastation.

These calamities wrought widespread havoc on the economic and social life of the country; and it is a remarkable tribute to the dogged character of the people that so small and scattered a community survived at all.¹

Conditions of Church life became confused, as lack of supervision increased, and general sickness was intensified. No attempt at betterment was made until the end of the century when Wilkin, a Dane, was appointed Bishop of Skálholt (1394-1405). His able administration was abruptly terminated by the arrival of the Black Death, which had swept Norway in the middle of the 14th century and was brought across to Iceland during its second visitation fifty years later.

(d) We owe the account of this period to the "New Annals" (1392-1430), the last authoritative records for a century and a half. Annals had long been a characteristic feature of Icelandic historical expression, largely fostered by the Church and, though, like diaries, they make poor history by over-emphasizing details and idiosyncrasies, and obscuring tendencies and movements, they vividly illuminate these dark years.

1392. Lord Peter (Bishop of Hólar) arrived in 'Petersbowl', which was dashed to pieces between Krusivik and Grundavik (SW). All money was lost, but the crew were saved. Great storms and wrecks.

1393. On the 4th day of Yule, Hólar church and steeple fell.

1394. Lord Wilkin came out (to Iceland). He gave a great feast at Skálholt for seven days during which nothing was drunk but German ale, and then more costly ale. Such lavish hospitality was shown that all might drink as much as they wished, both early and late.

1. Annals record devastating earthquakes in 1300, 1308, -11, -13, -39, -70, -90, -91. E.H. p 451.

1402. The Plague (brada-sott) brought by a ship. At Skálholt everyone died except the bishop and two laymen.

1403. Many died in I., including the Lord Abbots of Videy, Helgafell and Thykkvabaer. At T. six monks died, leaving six. At Kirkjubaer the Abbess Halldora and seven sisters died, leaving six. This nunnery was thrice desolated of all men-servants, so that the sisters had to milk the cows. 640 bodies came here to be buried at the first counting; then so many that a count could not be kept. Thykkvabaer also lost all its menservants thrice.

1404. "Men's death-winter". Skálholt thrice lost all menservants. Three more priests died, leaving the bishop and his chaplain.

1405. 'Great snow-winter', with great loss of cattle. Of 300 horses at Skálholt only 35 were left with the bishop's 24. Bishop Wilkin went to Bergen and died there. He had been a great benefactor to Skálholt church, building a steeple and paying all its debts to Kirkjubaer.

1406. Björn Einarsson made a pilgrimage to Rome and Palestine, and came back by Canterbury.¹

.....

1415. Arni Olafsson became Bishop of Skálholt, and was appointed by King Eirik to be Governor of Iceland.

.....

1419. A great gale on Maundy Thursday wrecked 25 ships chaffering (chaffaring, trading) from England.

1420-21. Great Sickness..... A storm destroyed Möðruvellir (monastery).

1425. Helgafell monastery attacked and destroyed.

.....

1429. Munkathvera church and monastery burnt down in an hour and a half.

1430. A good 'un-snowsme' (esnjosamur) winter. Einar Hauksson died, sixteen years manager at Skálholt. a well-beloved man.²

Thus pestilence completed the onslaught of fire, earthquakes and floods, and resulted in the depopulation

1. Like his namesake in the previous century, he was known as Jorsalafari - - Jerusalem-pilgrim. He became a great church benefactor.

2. Rolls series 88.4, trans G.W.Dasent.

of whole districts and the impoverishment of the people who survived. Small-holders were unable to carry on, and their farms fell into the hands of the Church or of a few rich landlords such as Björn Jorsalafara.

Indirect effects appear in the lessening of public spirit in the people and in the weakening of their higher aspirations.¹ They were ready to respond to the least sign of leadership, but leadership at home and abroad was far to seek.

Calamities befell earlier generations, though we hear less of them, as in those days there were more stirring events to write about. Furthermore then the race and the individual were stronger. Their natural pride and independence of spirit showed at its best in tackling adversity and making nothing of it. The early national churchmanship developed and deepened those qualities; but they wilted under the dominance of later mediaevalism. For a stereotyped system is the graveyard of personality.

(e) Mediaeval Icelander's proved the truth of Homer's saying that the gods take away half of man's manhood, when he loses his freedom. As happened after the fall of ancient Greece, the country's literature became feeble and imitative; history and biography frittered away into Annals and religious romances; education almost died out, and enterprising sea voyages and travels almost ceased.

So in the matter of the Church, its machinery remained and even improved, but hard ecclesiastical legalism and biting officialdom well-nigh destroyed the native sovereignty of the Icelander's soul and the apostolic simplicity of his churchmanship. He was called on to practise obedience, exhausting almsgiving, patience in the Latin sense of resignation rather than endurance - the qualities of a subject.²

But seeds of resilience remained to spring up and blossom when the inevitable Reformation gave them opportunity. In the Annals quoted above, it is remarkable that in two or three years of plague two religious houses and a numery each thrice lost their Superiors, almost all their staff and all their domestics. Yet after each devastation the stricken community picked itself up and started all over again.

1. GJ. p 245. 2 cp. W.R.Inge (of the Greeks): The Church and the World, p54.

VIII. (ii) Mediaeval Medley.

Strange figures strut across the Icelandic stage in the fifteenth century, appearing like caricatures rather than characters. The external power, now Denmark-Norway, appeared not to adopt any settled policy for Iceland, provided that dues were paid and that any trouble was confined to its much harassed island partner. It was a period of foreign contacts. Bishops from overseas, most of them indifferent or tyrannous and acquisitive, increased the dissatisfaction with ecclesiastical dominance; growing trade, chiefly in stockfish,¹ led to inequalities of wealth at home but provided intercourse with European renewal of knowledge. These conditions opened the way for religious, political and economic change.

(a) That bishops were acquiring more authority and wealth is shown in the record of Arni Olafsson, Bishop of Skálholt (1415-9). The king appointed him Governor of Iceland; the archbishop made him Visitor of its two dioceses, and the absentee Bishop of Hólar gave him authority over his northern see. Thus Arni "had such great power as no man before him, either clerk or layman."² In his visitations over the whole island he acquired much wealth, some of which he devoted to enriching his cathedral, adding four altars and presenting a silver bowl and a monstrance. A large part of these exactions was due to Hólar, but when its bishop Jón finally came out to his diocese, Arni merely gave him the cross called "Dazzle", and Jón "felt it was a sorry recompense for the loss of his dues."

This ecclesiastical aggrandisement was displayed in a period visited by volcanic outbursts, (as shown in the Annals quoted above), with long hard winters marked by gales, floods and shipwrecks, followed by much distress, sickness and scarcity. That considerable feeling was roused against the Church is indicated by the attack on Helgafell monastery in 1425, which left it despoiled and desolate for

1. cp. Hakluyt: Voyages II, 136 (AD 1487) - "Of Island to write is little nede/save of stockfish."
2. Annals s.a. 1415, Rolls Series 83. 4 p 433.

four years.¹ Such outbreaks would account for the fact that many of the great monastic collections of manuscripts, such as that at Helgafell, were largely scattered before the Reformation.²

Arni was the only native bishop appointed until the end of the century. Skálholt had five Danes, one Englishman, Craxton, translated from Hólar, a Dutchman and an absentee German, Marcellus, (a favourite of the king, rejected for the archbishopric of Nidaros), who appointed a Vicarius to collect his revenues, (1148-60). Hólar had three Norwegians, two Danes and three Englishmen:- John Williamson Craxton (1426-35)³ - the only instance of the characteristically English custom of translation to be found in the long list of Icelandic bishops; John Bloxwich, a Carmelite (1436-40), and Robert Wodeburn, an Augustinian (1441)⁴ This episcopal invasion occurred (as we shall see) in a period of English trading, but the Icelandic Church never responded much to advances on the international front.

When vacancies occurred in bishoprics, there were often considerable intervals before a new appointment was made, and once or twice the country had no bishops for some years.⁵ The short tenure of their sees by many of the bishops suggests that old men were appointed, and it was doubtless salutary that not much more than their names has found a place in history, for the records of all those who figure prominently are unsatisfactory.

(b) The most notorious of these foreign bishops was Jón Gereksson, Bishop of Skálholt (1426-33). He had been

1. Annals l.c. pp 435-7.
2. Hermannsson in *Islandica* XIX.
3. Surely the first record - instance of an Englishman with two Christian names. Probably his name was John, and his father's William, and Iceland characteristically retained the patronymic.
4. J.H. *Biskupatal* I, p 265.
5. Vacancies at Skálholt - 1406-8, 1420-26, 1446-62, 1465-7, 1518-21; At Hólar - 1423-6, 1457-60, 1495-8, 1520-4.

Archbishop of Upsala, but owing to his vicious life had been tried and ejected. Nevertheless he remained a favourite of the king, a patron of wayward ecclesiastics, who had him elected Bishop of Skálholt. He did not take up his work until three years after his appointment, having stayed a winter in England and collected a body of retainers, "most of whom were little good to the land". The Annals add another cautious criticism: "The bishop sent back much stock-fish to England, for he was a great gatherer of fish and other things."

The bishop's exploits are elaborated in Jón Egilsson's Annals, compiled about the year 1600. With his body-guard of Irish rowdies he rode about the countryside doing much mischief in the fashion of Bishop Gudmund two centuries earlier. He carried two opponents, Teit Gunnlagsson and Thorvald Loftsson, prisoner to Skálholt and put them in irons, in which they languished for some months, until they found means to escape on an occasion when their guards got drunk.

The vengeance they justifiably planned, received fresh provocation from the ambition of the bishop's illegitimate son, Magnus, to marry Margaret Vigfusdottir, who was of the same high standing as Teit and Thorvald and would have nothing to do with him. Then Magnus set fire to her home at Kirkjuból and killed her brother. Margaret escaped "through an oven, in which she made a hole with her scissors," and vowed she would marry the man who avenged her brother. Thorvald came forward as her champion and with his friends advanced on Skálholt bishopstead at Thorlaksmas (July 2-10), taking cover behind the tents of those who had come for the Patron/Festival. The bishop got wind of this ambush, and rushing into the church with his gang, put on his vestments, barred the door, and started mass.

However Thorvald and Teit levered up the door-post and got in. The bishop held the consecrated wafer in his hand hoping this to escape as sacrosanct, but he was seized and dragged out of the church, carried to the rushing waters of

Bruard, put in a sack . . . weighed down with stones and thrown in. The bishop's men clambered up on the church rafters, from which they were despatched with bows and spears, and their bodies were buried in the "Irish yard".

The story ends in the approved manner. Thorvald married Margaret and both he and Teit lived long and enjoyed the people's highest esteem.¹

This incident indicates that Icelanders were ready to hold that the inviolability of bishops depended on more than their consecration, and to regard even the Host itself put to an unworthy use as not sacrosanct.

Two other bishops helped to undermine the foundations of prelacy: the litigious and grasping Olaf Rogvaldsson, Bishop of Hólar (1460-95), and his successor Gottskalk Nikolasson (1498-1520) known as 'the Cruel', owner of over 100 farms.² The latter, though he lived in concubinage, extorted such heavy fines from the Lawman Jón Sigmundsson, who in marrying a third-cousin had broken the ecclesiastical code of prohibitive degrees, that he finally left him penniless, as well as depriving him of his wife.

This hierarchial tyranny and rapaciousness helped to prepare the minds of people to welcome some measure of reform, already gathering momentum over a wide area of northern Europe. They held with the expressed protest of the English Parliament that "God gave His sheep to be pastured, and not shaven and shorn".³

(c) In the social and economic spheres also, influences were making for a change. The Jerusalem pilgrim, Björn, mentioned in the contemporary Annals already quoted, was one of the few rich and prominent families, who in a period of famine and loss of cattle and property, like the Church, accumulated most of the farms, to the social and economic disadvantage of the mass of the people.

1. Jón Egilsson; Biskupa Annalar 1603 AD. Björn of Skardsá Annals c. 1639 AD. Rolls Series 88.4.
2. F.J. II pp 590-644.
3. J.R.Green: Hist. of Eng. People p 230.

Such magnates kept up the old chieftain customs of foreign travel and of giving large feasts. Björn also endowed many churches with lands and gave money for masses. Inequalities multiplied and the people failed to get real leadership from bishops and chieftains. Money rather than character or prowess began to be reckoned the measure of a man's greatness, and brought him into favour in Church and State.

Not all pilgrims were rich. We read of "Wytrid.. a pilgrim of the island of Ysland", who claimed to be a relative of St. Thomas of Canterbury and so received from the Chapter there on Oct. 7 1415 a commendatory letter.¹ Thus travel and pilgrimages promoted Icelandic intercourse with the larger world overseas.

In creating an atmosphere favourable to reform, economics played both a direct and an indirect part. Trade with England and Germany in the xvth century provided Iceland with contacts with national aspirations which were beginning to assert themselves in Europe and fostered a new economic outlook and restlessness.

Traffic with England in fish had begun many years earlier. On August 23, 1224, King Henry III wrote to the harbour-master of Yarmouth ordering him to afford access to merchants from Iceland.² Leland records that Kingston-upon-Hull, soon after its foundation in 1299, sprang into importance owing to commerce with Iceland in stock-fish.³ The Sweden-Norway régime, commercially dominated by the Hanseatic League, regarded English trade with Iceland as piracy, so that at first it was accompanied by violence. For instance, in 1422 English merchants, failing to meet with a welcome on the northern coasts, raided the islands of Hrisey and Grimsey and the ancient port of Husavik and robbed churches.⁴ Such violence was no part of the official English policy in this matter

1. Rolls Series 85. 3 pl37. Wytrid had 8 children.
2. Dipl. Isl. I no 121 - De navibus deliberandis.
3. Itin. I, 51. In 1303 Commissioners met to consider how the new roads should be made. Leland adds that stones from Iceland brought back as ballast were used for paving.
4. At Husavik, a small British garrison in 1940-2 were freely granted the use of the church, where an English officer was married to an Icelandic girl.

for Henry V (1387-1422) turned his attention from his French wars in order to forward this expedition and sent with it a letter to the principal men in Iceland asking permission to trade in fish. Unofficially the people welcomed this trade as time went on, and in 1440 when it was forbidden by their king, Henry VI of England evaded the ban by granting a licence to barter fish for goods to the Bishop of Skálholt who had two boats in the traffic. In exchange for the best fish in Europe, Icelanders too often received wine and spirits, for the bishop's chief need for himself and his friends was for something stronger to drink than Icelandic beer. Owing to this traffic an ineffective state of war existed in 1469-74 between England and Sweden-Norway.

The most interesting illustration of the intercourse between Iceland and the rest of Europe at this period appears in a note in the Journal of Christopher Columbus: "In Feb. 1477 I sailed beyond the island of Tile (i.e. Iceland).. an island as large as England, where English merchants, especially those of Bristol, have commercial relations."¹ Columbus is said to have visited Hafnarfjörður at this time and it is possible that he heard there of the Icelandic discovery of 'Vinland' across the Atlantic, while he was feeling the urge for exploration, before he himself set out and re-discovered America.²

Towards the end of the century Germany commenced trading, and some conflict developed between England and Germany over the use of harbours. Eventually the English concentrated on Rif near Snaefellsnes and the Germans monopolised Hafnarfjörður, where they built a church for their seamen and merchants. This indicates that the religion which they held in common with the Icelanders was not as international as is often assumed. Commercial relations with Germany, as we shall see, provided for Icelanders a contact with the growing continental dissatisfaction with the spirit and methods which had come to dominate official Christianity.

1. Salvador de Madariaga: Chr. Col. London 1939, p 81.
2. Monsen: Heimskringla p 202 note.

(d) By the latter part of the xvth century Iceland had recovered from the ravages of plague and devastation by the elements, and secured a measure of its old independence in nominating native bishops of some education and character.

Sveinn Pétursson, Bishop of Skálholt (1467-75), graduated abroad as Master of Arts and was known as spaki-learned. His successors were also Icelanders. Stéfan Jónsson (1491-1518), the ablest of the later mediaeval bishops, restored to the church in his diocese much of its former order and spiritual leadership. He re-opened the episcopal school, and in 1493 founded an Augustinian priory at Skríða in the eastern district - the first religious house to be founded for two hundred years, and the last to be established in Iceland. He revised many Church Charters and Inventories, which indicates a general quickening of ecclesiastical life.

The cult of the Blessed Virgin flourished at this time, about half of the churches in the country being dedicated to her. Traditional verse-making and folksongs had lapsed or been driven underground under the dominance of external ecclesiasticism. Poetry took a religious form and began to show a revival towards the end of the century, chiefly under the inspiration of Jón Pálsson, priest of Grenjadarstadir (ob. AD 1472), who became known as Mariúskald - a poet-laureate of the Virgin.

Monasteries, such as Helgafell and Munkathvera, enjoyed some revival of learning. The episcopal school at Hólar was also re-opened by Gottskalk Nikolasson (1498-1520). This revival proved to be a final flicker, for afterwards obscurantism, aggressiveness and lack of spirituality once more prevailed. But the re-awakening of national aspirations in ecclesiastical government and in education prepared the way for the wave of independence in political and religious life about to sweep the continent and ultimately reach the naturally free and rugged shores of Iceland.

In moral, social, economic and intellectual fields the rising waters of reformation were being fed through many inlets. It remains to be seen into what channel they ultimately converged.