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## **Septentrionalism: Whiteness and 19th Century Representations of Scandinavia**

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Septentrionalism: Whiteness and 19<sup>th</sup> Century Representations of Scandinavia

by

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## **Abstract**

During the nineteenth century, the British Empire grappled with a rapidly changing world, both in terms of the industrializing landscape at home and the multi-ethnic nature of their expanding empire. With native white British making up the privileged minority, the understanding of what a subject of the British Empire looked like began to change, contributing to racial anxieties and a rise in British nationalism. To consolidate and strengthen their sense of national identity, many white Victorians sought to define Britishness upon racially exclusive lines, prioritizing a Germanic or Anglo-Saxon ethnicity above all others, including other European ethnicities. One way the Victorians achieved this narrowing of racial identity was through using representations of Scandinavia to encourage the predominately English public to identify with the heroic and mythic elements of the Viking Age. The Viking Revival, a renewed interest in Scandinavia among Victorians contributed to the narrowing of British definitions of whiteness, which in turn helped to support and validate British imperial ambitions against both non-white countries and non-Germanic Europeans like the Irish. However, representations of Scandinavia served a dual purpose. Victorian portrayals of Scandinavia were either romanticizing through Gothic depictions that emphasized the mysticism and heroism of the Viking Age or presented the Nordic nations as either primitive backwaters or

quainter, poorer versions of England. Through these representations the Victorians were effectively able to objectify Scandinavia. Such objectification served to place Scandinavia, and other non-English Germanic cultures, in a position of inferiority to the allegedly superior British Empire. In effect, the British used their shared connection with Scandinavia to elevate themselves over non-Germanic Europeans, and then objectified Scandinavia to further elevate themselves above the world.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Throughout the nineteenth century the British Empire expanded across the world reaching its zenith in the late Victorian period, when the Empire had colonies on every continent but Antarctica. The vast British Empire encompassed lands with many different races, ethnicities, cultures, religions, and languages, yet all were subject to British supremacy. The multiracial nature of the expanding empire created a hectic and overwhelming world, a far cry from the idyllic agrarian past Britain had enjoyed. The loss of their pre-Industrial and primarily white identity challenged Victorian understanding of Britishness by presenting the British with a rapidly modernizing society where traditional practices and values were replaced by new technologies, cultures, and races.

Postcolonial scholars have explored the intersections of power and empire in depth and have crafted detailed understandings of how the British empire used exotic imagery and objectifying discourse to portray indigenous populations as subjugable Others. According to Michel Foucault, “there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterize, and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation, and functioning of a discourse” (Foucault 93). Discourse, or the way in which a conversation surrounding a particular subject is

structured, not only impacts but *creates* understanding or knowledge; by shaping the conversation about a certain subject, discourse influences that subject's power dynamics. Therefore, discourse creates power. In this sense, imperialism creates race through a discourse of power and Othering. Through Othering portrayals of colonized people, an empire creates a race that is viewed as different and inferior to the "standard" race of the metropole. This framework is foundational to understanding the ways in which empires use representation to assert power over their colonies.

Only more recently have scholars turned their attention to the nature of whiteness in the British Empire, specifically how Great Britain manipulated its understandings of whiteness to create a system of racial superiority among other Europeans and how that system supported other imperial ideologies. Scholars like Karen Brodtkin and David Roediger have built careers on their influential contributions to the study of whiteness, though their work focuses on whiteness in the United States. Even Noel Ignatiev's famous *How the Irish Became White* focuses on Irish whiteness in the United States. Often, it seems, whiteness studies address the experiences of immigrants in highly racialized societies like the United States (Arnesen 5). One consequence of this focus is that the nature of whiteness in more racially unified places goes largely unexplored. This thesis aims to explore the ways in which the nineteenth-century British constructed their own understanding of whiteness through representations of Scandinavia and how that understanding informed their imperial practices among other European nations.

At the height of the Victorian Age, Great Britain ruled over colonies in Africa, the Caribbean, India, Asia, and North and South America. While the British Empire was the largest and most powerful of the nineteenth century, the vast majority of British subjects in the empire were non-European. With the majority of the subjects of the British Empire of brown and black races, the very idea of what being British meant began to change. Great Britain's contact with and administration of regions and people of varied beliefs, languages, and ethnicities exposed the British to a multitude of cultures, all informing and enriching the culture of Great Britain. These cultural interactions and foreign influences began to change British identity. No longer were all British subjects the white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant men and women of England, Scotland, and Wales. The British Empire had become a racially and culturally diverse community, headed by a white minority. Though these racial and cultural anxieties were inherently created by the assertion of imperial power over other races, these anxieties inevitably led to a rise in British, and especially English, desire to define British whiteness. By creating new boundaries for what was and was not considered white, Victorians were able to assume power over all those who were not only of a different race but also all who were not British.

## **Chapter 2: Whiteness and 19<sup>th</sup> Century Representations of Scandinavia**

England frequently strengthened its claim over subjugated territories by appropriating and manipulating representations of the indigenous people. These charged representations of non-British culture both served to debase and dehumanize the native populations such as the Irish and the Indians and to emphasize exotic elements of native cultures in order to create the conception of the Other. However, incorporation of the exotic Other and the accompanying shift in the ethnic profile of the British Empire caused many Victorians to feel that Anglo-Saxon culture, heritage, and even British identity were at risk of being lost or altered by the influences of what were viewed as inferior nations. The growing population of non-white British subjects led to a fear that the particular British flavor of whiteness would be lost. The flashy and overstimulating world of the mechanical nineteenth century destabilized British conceptions of their past and traditions while increasing racial diversity chipped away at the conventional understanding of the British as a homogenous culture.

For the Victorians, whiteness was a complicated, exclusive category with a strict ethnic hierarchy. The Victorians placed Germanic ethnicities at the top, including people of various Germanic tribes like the Norse, the Angles, the Saxons, the Jutes, and the Franks. Through this racial structure, the British developed a racial theory known as Anglo-Saxonism, which is based in the idealization of the Germanic elements of British

heritage. Anglo-Saxonism employed a discourse of nationalism and racial purity to situate the British in a position of racial superiority, thereby allowing them to exert imperial power not only over black and brown bodies, but also over non-Germanic whites.

## 2.1 British Whiteness and Ireland

The United Kingdom and Ireland have a long and complex history. Centuries of war and conquest have all but decimated the relationship between the two island nations, yet they remain linked through a shared history and shared land. Northern Ireland, a small portion of Ireland's own island that is controlled by the United Kingdom, is both the source of much unrest between the United Kingdom and Ireland and the tie that binds the two nations together. Long before the nineteenth century, England had set its sights on Ireland. Starting in the Middle Ages, England battled for land and control over the Emerald Isle (Prestwich 34). Through establishing plantations, primarily in the north of Ireland, England was able to secure influence and control over the native Celtic peoples and eventually assert Protestantism over the native Catholic inhabitants (Akenson 165). Though Ireland remained an independent kingdom until the nineteenth century, England, and later the United Kingdom of England, Wales, and Scotland, controlled the majority of the island. In 1800, the Irish signed the Act of Union, formally joining the United Kingdom (Akenson 402). Throughout the nineteenth century, the United Kingdom passed a series of laws meant to dispossess Ireland of its lands, resources, and rights. From the Irish Land Acts, which forbade any Catholic to own land,

to the suspension of *Habeas Corpus* and Trial by Jury, the United Kingdom's dominion over Ireland became an assault on not only the land but also the people.

As Samuel Taylor Coleridge noted, land ownership formed the “fastenings and radical fibres . . . by which the Citizen inheres in and belongs to the Commonwealth,” indicating an understanding within the United Kingdom that for the Irish “landed property [offered] simultaneously the experience of community and the experience of individual agency” (Maurer 89-90). Ireland's deep sense of dependence on its land as a source of national identity is significant because British requisitions of land place the center of Irish national identity in the hands of the oppressor. The British controlled the land, and therefore they controlled Ireland. Through controlling the expression of Irish identity, British imperialists were able to shape the conception of what it meant to be Irish both within Ireland and abroad.

One way the British Empire manipulated conceptions of Ireland was by capitalizing upon the image of the Irish as a primitive and racially inferior people. While Britain depended upon a sense of racial superiority to justify their imperial ambitions in Ireland, Britain could not colonize them in the same way they did with their non-European colonies. The Irish were still white, and according to Anglo-Saxonism, still superior to the other races. England tried to get around the conundrum of colonizing another white nation under the banner of racial superiority by taking whiteness away from the Irish through animalistic, ape-like portrayals, or by attempting to trace Irish heritage back to Africa (figure 1, figure 2).



Figure 1. John Tenniel. "Two Forces," *Punch*, 1881.



Figure 2. H. Strickland Constable, *Harper's Weekly*, 1899.

By removing the whiteness of the Irish, the British sought to avoid any sort of moral contradiction in colonizing a European country. The Victorian British believed that as a racially inferior nation Ireland should be subjugated to the rule of a superior power. This line of thinking can be traced back to the theory of Social Darwinism, which applies the notion of “survival of the fittest” to social systems. Social Darwinism was founded by Herbert Spencer when he applied biological principles to the building of civilizations in his 1852 *A Theory of Population Deduced from the General Law of Animal Fertility*, though Spencer did not refer to his theory as such because Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* had yet to be published and the term “Darwinism” had not yet been coined. Joseph Fisher first coined the term “Social Darwinism” in his 1887 article “The History of Landholding in Ireland” (Leonard 40). The idea that the strong have a right to dominate the weak has long been held in association with Britain’s colonization of Ireland, and according to this understanding Ireland deserved to be colonized by the British Empire. This way of thinking clearly demonstrates how Victorian Britain’s ethnic nationalism propped up Victorian imperial ideology, justifying Britain’s imperial pursuits around the world.

While British representations of the Irish were more racially charged than depictions of Scandinavia, Victorian attitudes toward the Irish, and even the Finnish, regarding matters of race prove that the Victorians did not see non-Germanic European countries as their equals. The Anglo-Saxonist values that Britain had cultivated through the idealization of their Scandinavian past enabled them to view the Irish as non-white, subhuman, and even as a threat to British purity (figure 1). As John Stuart Mill said in

1875, “The sacred duties which civilized nations owe to the independence and nationality of each other, are not binding towards those whom nationality and independence are certain evil, or at best a questionable good” (167-168). The British had long treated the Irish as a threat to the prevailing racial hierarchy. “Ireland had an old antislavery tradition, going back to the Council of Armagh in 1177, which had prohibited Irish trade in English slaves” (Ignatiev 22). Though Britain had abolished slavery in 1833, the Irish predilection for respecting the autonomy and sovereignty of other races directly challenged the British Anglo-Saxonist worldview. If the Victorians saw the Irish and other non-Germanic cultures as a threat to their own identity, then, according even to reformers like John Stuart Mill, the British had a right to subjugate those threats. Mill’s perspective sounds eerily similar to the way African and other non-white people were viewed at the time. “The Negro has no rights a white man is bound to respect” (Ignatiev 54). The idea that imperial powers had no obligation to respect the rights and sovereignty of those they saw as inferior clearly is founded on racial underpinnings. This is why representations of Scandinavia are so crucial to understanding the British imperial psyche. These representations enabled the Victorians to define their whiteness in the narrow terms of Germanic ethnicity. Any culture that was deemed a threat to British whiteness could be subjugated without compunction.

## 2.2 British Germanicism

By placing the Germanic European ethnicity as the most valued in the white race, Victorians changed the meaning of what it meant to be white to idealize their own

heritage and culture. In her essay, "The Body of the Princess," Diane Roberts explains that as the Queen of England Victoria served as the ideal of British whiteness (Roberts 32). Victoria was of German and Scandinavian descent; there were even claims that she was a descendant of the Norse god Odin (Creasy 174, Hackwood 13). Though these claims were sensational even at the time, Victoria's personal heritage helped to elevate the Germanic ethnicity for the Victorians.

Victoria's husband Albert was also of German birth. Through his affiliation with the house of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, Albert's marriage to Victoria brought an additional dose of Germanicism to the cult of personality that was the British monarchy. Though Prince Albert was never wildly popular with the public, his dedication to education and the arts, as well as his skill for modernizing both the nation's finances and military left a lasting legacy of progress and enlightenment. One of Albert's most profound legacies was South Kensington, a complex of institutions dedicated to the arts and sciences. Albert himself called it "an establishment in which by the application of Science and Art to industrial pursuits the Industry of all nations may be raised in the scale of human Employment and its results each nation may gain and contribute something" (Hobhouse 110). South Kensington and the institutions affiliated with Albert's passion for improvements are frequently considered his most meaningful contribution to England and did much to cement Germanicism as the peak of progress and success in the minds of the Victorians.

With the Royal Family acting as the embodiment of the new British race, interest in Germanic culture and history rose. However, British connections to Germanic culture

go deeper than the Royal Family. Scandinavia, Northern Europe and Great Britain share a history of Pre-Christian Paganism. In fact, the Norse pantheon would have been familiar to the Medieval Englishman. “The Germanic god Óðinn [Odin] was worshipped as Woden by the Anglo-Saxons before their conversion to Christianity” (Rix 2). Hence, that the English have a long and established tradition with the Norse pantheon. Prior to Christianity's influence in the British Isles, pagan beliefs suffused the British psyche, enriching traditional folklore and song with the mystical imagery of the North. These influences shaped British culture throughout the Christianized Middle Ages, lending a strong tradition of mysticism and mystery to British folktales, mimicking themes found in traditional Norse mythology.

Oddly, one way that the Victorians sought security in their Scandinavian heritage was by celebrating their own colonization at the hands of Denmark, a strong Medieval nation of Germanic Europeans who asserted power over the partly Celtic Brits. Throughout the last few centuries of the first millennium and into the first part of the second millennium, Vikings battered the English coasts with annual raids, the first of which occurred at Lindisfarne Monastery in the English kingdom of Wessex in 793. These raids continued until the first part of the Eleventh Century, when Vikings began to colonize England. In 1013 Sveinn Tjú-guskegg (Sweyn Forkbeard) and his son Cnut the Great invaded England and overthrew the Wessex king Æthelred the Unready (Bolton 9-10). Following the death of Sveinn Tjú-guskegg in 1014 and his succeeding son, Harald II of Denmark, Cnut the Great ascended to the throne and established a Danish dynasty that would rule England until 1042 (Bolton 10). Though Cnut the Great's son

Harthacnute, who was the last Danish king of England, would eventually be dethroned and replaced by his own half-brother, the Wessex king Edward the Confessor, the English never forgot their colonization at the hands of a powerful Northern European nation (Bolton 29). Instead, the British continued to respect and fear Scandinavians for their cultural unity and the power the Vikings once had.

In addition to a shared history, Britain and Scandinavia have long been trade partners. Going back at least 900 years, England and Iceland, which was under the rule of Denmark until 1944, engaged in the stable and mutually beneficial trade of fish (Wawn 9). The Icelandic fish trade was not only lucrative but undoubtedly increased the amount of interaction between the Icelandic and the English, leading to a blurring of cultural boundaries. British interest in the political and economic state of Denmark persisted into the nineteenth century. From the late 1790s until 1813 Britain entertained several proposals to annex Iceland from Denmark (Gissurarson 3-4). Reasons for the proposals ranged from economic and political to military. Iceland's fisheries were rich and much closer than the British fisheries in Newfoundland and their sulfur mines were deemed to be "inexhaustible" and much more accessible than those of Italy (Agnarsdottir 86). The wealth and proximity of these natural resources were appealing to the British, but the political and martial motivations were far more compelling. During the early years of the nineteenth century Denmark joined a continental coalition against the United Kingdom and sided against Britain and Germany in favor of Napoleon (Gissurarson 3). Great Britain had already seized Danish colonies in the West Indies in retaliation but cutting Denmark off from their Icelandic sulfur supply

would severely hamper their military capabilities. These economic connections to Scandinavia tied Britain closer to the Nordic nations, creating a sense of family through trade. The political and military tensions between Great Britain and Denmark held Scandinavia up in the British mind as a viable power, albeit one weaker than the British Empire. By imagining Scandinavia as a powerful family member, the Victorians strengthened their belief in Germanic superiority. Great Britain never managed to annex Iceland, but interest in Scandinavia continued to grow.

British fascination with Scandinavia is reflected in William Morris's "The King of Denmark's Sons," a lengthy poem detailing the lives and deaths of Cnut the Great and Harald II of Denmark. In "The King of Denmark's Sons" Morris portrays the two Danish princes as model leaders, Cnut wise and peaceful, and Harald a bold explorer and mighty warrior.

Fair was Knut of face and limb

As the breast of the Queen that suckled him.

But Harald was hot of hand and heart

As lips of lovers ere they part.

Knut sat at home in all men's love,

But over the seas must Harald rove. (Morris 1.7-12)

Morris's beloved Knut is Cnut the Great who united the kingdoms of England and Denmark and was preceded in ruling England by his elder brother Harald II of Denmark. Morris connects to the collective British memory of their historic Danish rulers, portraying England's early Viking rulers as strong, admirable leaders. Morris thus underscores England's Scandinavian past and frames it as a history of which to be proud.

England's connection to Scandinavia inspired centuries of fascination with the mysterious Nordic people. Though the British idealized their Scandinavian heritage and the Germanic influence of their monarchy, political tensions between Germany and Denmark throughout the nineteenth century prevented many Victorians from wholeheartedly embracing the shared cultural connections with Scandinavia. To reconcile their love for all things Germanic with political tensions on the European continent, Britain sought to maintain distance from their political rivals. By envisioning themselves as superior, even among other Germanic people, the British were able to legitimize their imperial dominance over other whites.

Great Britain achieved this stratification by presenting Scandinavia as an Other. Similar to how exotic representations of colonized people serve to dehumanize them, Othering depictions of Scandinavia served to objectify Germanic people and present them as mysterious yet quaint people who were not equal to the British. These depictions celebrate white Germanic culture while, at the same time, creating a subtle hierarchy of supremacy within the larger category of whiteness, following Edward Said's model of Orientalism. Through the Viking Revival, Scandinavia becomes the new Orient,

a mysterious and exotic land whose traditions are appropriated to shore up British whiteness.

### 2.3 Gothic Representations of Scandinavia

One way that Great Britain envisioned Scandinavia as Other was through representing the North as the embodiment of all things Gothic. “The term ‘Gothic’ was introduced in the sixteenth century by the Italian artist and historian Giorgio Vasari, who disparagingly attributed the by-then-old-fashioned style [of architecture] to the Goths, the Germanic invaders who had ‘destroyed’ the Classical civilization of the Roman Empire that he preferred” (Stokstad). This pejorative use of the word “Gothic” persisted for two hundred years, until the mid-eighteenth century. As Robert W. Rix notes before the mid-eighteenth century, the term “Gothic” was only used as an ethnic reference to anything Germanic, including the Scandinavian North and until the latter half of the eighteenth century, the term “Gothic” as a reference to all things Germanic in nature was used as a pejorative (Rix 1). This derogatory interpretation of Germanicism favored the Roman perception of Northern Europeans as barbarians devoid of knowledge and reason.

This opinion is well in line with eighteenth-century Enlightenment ideals that eschew the mystery and superstition of Scandinavia in favor of logic and relative reason championed by the rest of Europe. It is not until the cusp of the nineteenth century that the Germanic Gothic becomes something to be celebrated. For example, in *The Stones of Venice*, John Ruskin admires the architecture of Northern Europe for its harshness

and brutality: “If, however, the savageness of Gothic architecture, merely as an expression of its origin among Northern nations, may be considered, in some sort, a noble character, it possesses a higher nobility still, when considered as an index, not of climate, but of religious principle” (Ruskin 615). By placing the Gothic architecture of Northern Europe on a pedestal of nobility and religious purity, Ruskin asserts Northern European supremacy over the rest of Europe. Ruskin’s focus on Gothic architecture was not lost on Victorian audiences, evoking not only images of the supernatural horror with which, by the time of *The Stones of Venice’s* publication in 1851, the Victorians had come to associate the term, but also the staggering beauty of northern Gothic cathedrals like the Roskilde Cathedral of Denmark, where all the Danish monarchs are buried. Though Ruskin calls upon the old Germanic interpretation of the term “Gothic,” this was not the only connotation the word carried for Victorians.

After Walpole used the term in the subtitle for *The Castle of Otranto* in 1766, “Gothic” came to be associated not only with Germanic Europe, but also with the dark, fearsome, and supernatural. For the English, this connection between the North and the supernatural was not new, but rather went back to the shared Pre-Christian Paganism of Northern Europe and Great Britain. For example, the supernatural in Denmark features in one of Britain’s most canonical literary works, *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare. Set in the northern Danish town of Elsinore, based on the real town of Helsingør, Denmark and the imposing Kronborg Castle, *Hamlet* thrilled English audiences with a tale of supernatural horror and revenge. Shakespeare directly portrays Denmark as a dark and decaying place when he writes, “Something is rotten in the state

of Denmark” (Hamlet 1.4.728). The play is full of ghosts, terror, and mystery, making it a perfect example of Scandinavian Gothic. The corruption, mystery, and darkness of Denmark in Shakespeare’s play influenced the English’s perception of Scandinavia for generations.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Gothic literature had developed a subgenre of texts that situated Gothic themes and plots within an imperial setting. Known as the “Imperial Gothic,” texts such as *The Surgeon’s Daughter* (1827), *Jane Eyre* (1847), *The Moonstone* (1868), and *Heart of Darkness* (1902) present the mystery and horror of the Gothic within or informed by imperial settings (Daly). Whether the imperial was manifested in colonial locations like India and Africa or in the depiction of colonized races as in the implied race-mixing of Jamaican-born Bertha in *Jane Eyre*, the Imperial Gothic directly connected horror and supernatural elements with the black and brown countries that Britain colonized. In fact, the Imperial Gothic was concerned with aligning imperialism with the burgeoning interest in occultism. By tying the occult to imperialist expansion, the British were able to treat the unfamiliar cultures and customs of foreign lands as grotesque curiosities to be possessed and consumed just as the natural resources of those same lands were exploited. As Patrick Brantlinger states, “Imperialism thus maintained an esoteric import trade in ancient religions, everything from Buddhism to Rosicrucianism, as a “spiritual” accompaniment to materialistic trade” (246). This function of the Imperial Gothic also applies to Victorian imaginings of Scandinavia. Though not a British colony, Scandinavia presented Victorians with a

culture and history that was richly infused with the occult, enabling the British to exploit the Gothic elements to objectify Scandinavia.

William Cosmo Monkhouse contributed to the tradition of connecting Scandinavia with the supernatural and violence, in his 1865 “On Reading of the Death of a Danish Officer at Dybbol, Three Days After His Marriage with a Girl of Nineteen.” The poem reflects the sadness of a new bride turned widow due to what was likely the Second Schleswig War (Feb 1, 1864 – Oct 30, 1864), an armed conflict between the Danish and Prusso-Austrian army regarding the Schleswig-Holstein Question (Gründorf von Zebegény 5). Monkhouse reflects on the morbid grief and tragedy of the young Danish woman by comparing it to the greater national pain of Denmark. “The heart is all too small to comprehend / The sorrow pouring from a nation’s wound;” (Monkhouse 1.5-6). The gory image of sorrow pouring like blood from a wound demonstrates the Gothic association with Scandinavia by creating violent imagery. Throughout the poem more images of violent horror and the supernatural are used to describe the desolation in Denmark:

Alas, now daily am I used to lend

My ear to tales of blood in battle shed,

Of ruin’d towns, and hamlets strewn with dead,

Unmoved, and unimpatient of the end. (Monkhouse 1.1-4)

The brutal and somber imagery of these lines evokes the element of horror so well embodied by the “Norse Terror” and all things Gothic. The ruined towns and dead bodies lying in the streets are horrific images that not only portray the brutality of war but also call up the image of a desolate wasteland fit only for ghosts and gore-crows. By personifying the dead bodies as “unimpatient” Monkhouse invokes the supernatural. Patience is a quality of the living. The implication that the dead bodies still have agency places them in league with ghosts or zombies, undead beings that are still able to interact with the world. Such imagery firmly seats the poem within the Gothic tradition surrounding Scandinavia. The depiction of a broken and desolate land also presented Dybbøl, and Denmark as a whole, as weak and easily defeated. While the Gothic elements of the poem served to make Denmark an Other, the imagery of military defeat implicitly debases Scandinavia.

The Gothic Othering of Scandinavia effectively created an air of mystery and adventure that surrounded the North in the British imagination. This sense of mystery inspired many intrepid men and women to travel to the farthest reaches of Scandinavia and bring back tales of hardship and mythic lore. Sabine Baring-Gould was a prominent figure in the genre of Icelandic travel literature. He published dozens of works on Icelandic geography, history, and culture, as well as a translation of the Grettis Saga, a famous piece of traditional Icelandic literature. Baring-Gould’s translation of the Grettis Saga would prove influential, inspiring a string of English translations of the other Icelandic Sagas. Baring-Gould’s work served to pave the way for William Morris’s

lifelong fascination with Iceland by exposing Morris to his first images and descriptions of Iceland and its fantastic lore.

William Morris traveled to Iceland several times in his life, desperate to connect to a mythic and idealized past and bring it back to Great Britain. After returning from a trip to Iceland in 1871, Morris remained deeply affected by the somber and austere environment in which he had resided. Filled with longing for Iceland, William Morris set to work immortalizing his impressions of the Nordic nation in two poems, “Iceland First Seen” and “Gunnar’s Howe Above the House at Lithend” (Wawn 246). Originally intended for publication in *Ný Félagsrit*, a literary journal edited by Morris’s old friends Jón Sigurðsson and Eiríkur Magnússon, these poems were reviewed with censure. Sigurðsson wrote to Magnússon saying that the two poems portrayed Iceland as “rather grey and scrawny, drab and sad” (Wawn 246). In the end, only “Iceland First Seen,” translated into Icelandic as “Í landsýn við Ísland,” was published in the Icelandic journal with “Gunnar’s Howe Above the House at Lithend” excluded entirely (Wawn 246). Both poems, with the second in a much-edited form, would appear in Morris’s 1891 *Poems by the Way* with some of his other Nordic-themed works such as “To the Muse of the North” (Wawn 246). In *Poems by the Way* “Iceland First Seen” presents a gloomy view of Iceland by referring to it as a “desolate strand” and a “mountain-waste voiceless as death” (Morris 1.9-10). This grim depiction of the island creates an air of ominous mystery for readers. Morris further enriches this feeling of supernatural mystery by acclaiming Iceland as a “building of Gods that have been,” and a place where “the tale of the Northland of old and the undying glory of dreams” lives on (Morris 1.5-14). In

“Iceland First Seen” Morris conveys the sense of awe and reverence he felt upon witnessing the severe and powerful geology of the Nordic island, allowing his readers to experience second-hand his passion and respect for the mysterious nation. Though Jón Sigurðsson and Eiríkur Magnússon deemed “Iceland First Seen” a gloomy portrayal of their homeland, for Morris the poem was a celebration of the elemental power and ancient heritage instilled in the nation.

William Morris’s personal infatuation with Iceland should not be confused with the way Great Britain at large thought of the island. Certainly, Iceland was viewed as a mysterious land of geologic dynamism and ancient conquest, but many Victorians would have agreed with Jón Sigurðsson’s and Eiríkur Magnússon’s appraisals of Morris’s poetry. The gloomy and desolate descriptions of Iceland resonated with Monkhouse’s Gothic portrayal of Denmark. Again, a land of mystery and power is envisioned as barren and depressing. The sensational mystique of Scandinavia is yet again burdened with the taboo of austerity. These portrayals make Iceland seem an alien land and set Scandinavia apart from and below Great Britain.

#### 2.4 Heroic Representations of Scandinavia

While Gothic portrayals of Scandinavia Othered the northern nations, other more heroic depictions maintained the sense of ancestral closeness with Scandinavia the Victorians needed in order to fuel their understanding of whiteness. A careful balance was struck between embracing the Germanic elements of Scandinavia and Othering the aspects the Victorians saw as inferior, such as the poverty, harsh living

conditions, and adherence to pre-Christian traditions. Often this manifested in celebrations of ancient folklore alongside condemnations of modern superstition and poverty.

The folklore and mythology of Scandinavia is full of heroic feats and valor, concepts that the Victorians used to idolize the North. Thomas Carlyle directed Britain's attention to the North in his *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, by drawing connections between heroic ideology in Scandinavian and English poetry (Walker and Roxburgh, *Outlines* 87). Carlyle asserts that worshiping the divine was the earliest form of hero worship and he uses early Scandinavian worship of Odin as an example: "We have chosen as the first Hero in our series Odin the central figure of Scandinavian Paganism; an emblem to us of a most extensive province of things. Let us look for a little at the Hero as Divinity, the oldest primary form of Heroism" (Carlyle 1). Carlyle idealizes England's Scandinavian past by claiming that the Norse gods represented a proud and powerful people, a people from whom the Victorians had descended. According to Carlyle, Victorians viewed Scandinavia as "a 'gloomy palace of black ashlar marble, shrouded in awe and horror', falsely erected on a much more nuanced, noble and heroic tradition," (Carlyle 31). In his lectures, Carlyle attempted to dispel the Gothic association with Scandinavia by highlighting the noble and valiant characteristics of Norse mythology, even as he claims that the "'half-dumb stifled voice of the long-buried generations of our own fathers'" draws the Victorian to the mysterious and austere culture of Scandinavia (Rix 16). For many Victorians, the dead religion and its heroes

were a metaphor for the dying national identity of Great Britain amid its growing ethnic diversity.

Uniting the heroic depictions of Scandinavia with the trope of portraying the North as the seat of Gothic mystery, Britain is personified in terms of Scandinavian death and mourning. In his elegy "Thyrsis," Matthew Arnold writes of the death of a friend, Arthur Hugh Clough: "Our friend, the Gipsy-Scholar, was not dead; / While the tree lived, he in these fields lived on" (Arnold 1.29-30). In his grief, Arnold sees an old elm tree as a symbol for Thyrsis' life, and if the tree were to be gone, so too would his dead friend: "The light we sought is shining still. / Dost thou ask proof? Our tree yet crowns the hill" (Arnold 1.238-239). Here, Clough stands in for Britain. By referring to him as the "Gipsy-Scholar" Arnold calls to mind his poem "The Scholar-Gipsy" which was published before "Thyrsis." In "The Scholar-Gipsy" the eponymous character is a student who leaves Oxford behind to experience life among the Romani and assimilates to the carefree and artistic life of a nomad. The Scholar-Gipsy represents traditional English values that are changed by mysterious outsiders. By referring to Clough as the Gipsy-Scholar, Arnold makes Clough into a similar figure. His death represents the changing culture of the British Empire in the face of greater multiculturalism. The tree that represents Clough's life in the poem also represents the preservation of British identity. The idea of a tree representing life is a subtle reference to one of the most central stories of Norse mythology. In Norse mythology, Yggdrasil is a giant ash tree that is known as the World Tree, or The Tree of Life. Yggdrasil was so connected with the fate of the world and humanity that the tree came to represent the future in Norse

mythology (McCoy, "Yggdrasil"). Throughout "Thyrsis," Arthur Hugh Clough's life is tied to the fate of Britain, and is preserved through a central figure in Norse mythology. Though pre-Industrial Britain may be gone, the core of British identity is embodied in Scandinavian imagery and even preserved for the future.

In "Balder Dead," Arnold retells the Norse myth of the death of Balder, Odin's favorite son. Though it was largely deemed by Arnold's contemporaries as "frigid academic diversifying," "Balder Dead" continues to portray Scandinavia in heroic terms while connecting it to the British Empire through the language of grief (Ryals 67). The poem opens immediately at the scene of Balder's death:

So on the floor lay Balder dead; and round  
Lay thickly strewn swords, axes, darts, and spears,  
Which all the Gods in sport had idly thrown  
At Balder, whom no weapon pierced or clove (Arnold 1.1-4).

The rest of the first book of the poem goes on to describe how the gods mourn Balder and one tries desperately to bring him back. The Æsir's attempts to resurrect Balder is analogous to how some Victorians desperately wanted tradition and familiarity, symbolized by the bright and beloved Balder, in a changing and strange time. Balder embodies the British heroic ideal because he was impervious to all threats and attacks. Only through poisoning was he killed. The setting of the poem, Valhalla, is aimless and fractured after Balder's death, which mirrors Arnold's view of Britain (O'Donoghue 161). The invulnerability of Balder appealed to Victorian conceptions of

their empire as the mightiest in the world, while his death through poisoning cast the rising racial diversity within the empire as the most dangerous threat. Not only does “Balder Dead” act as a lamentation for the loss of traditional British identity, but it also valorizes the British and portrays all non-Germanic cultures as deadly threats to British whiteness. In order to form a clear national identity, the Victorians turned to their Scandinavian heritage to inform their creation of an elite tier of whiteness that placed the native British in a position of superiority over all other races and ethnicities. In the wake of the greater racial and ethnic diversity of the British empire, native British sought to preserve their national identity by cordoning off what they defined as true British whiteness from the rest of the world.

## 2.5 Domestication of Scandinavia

While male authors often idealized Scandinavia through descriptions of heroism, even as they Othered it as a primitive place of Gothic horror, the travel writings of female authors worked imperialism very differently. More often than not, female authors domesticated Scandinavia, rather than presenting it as a mysterious and powerful crucible of British culture. For example, female authors represented Iceland and Denmark in soft and pleasant terms in order to make lands that had previously been seen as exotic and mysterious seem relatable and similar to Great Britain. Women’s role as agents of social reproduction enabled their literary representations of cultures, both foreign and domestic, to influence the way the British Empire understood its position in relation to other nations. Through their responsibilities of maintaining traditions, female authors’ representations of Scandinavia worked to domesticate and

co-opt Scandinavian culture in order to fabricate a “superior” British identity and validate Victorian imperial ambitions on the European continent.

Through softened and optimistic portrayals of Scandinavia, women like Disney Leith and Ethel Brilliana Alec Tweedie appropriated Scandinavian culture and ethnicity in order to construct a hegemonically Germanic British identity. Both women were important contributors to the ethnic nationalism that developed as a reaction to the increasing ethnic and racial diversity in Imperial Britain. They, along with other authors, encouraged their Victorian readers to assert white superiority, and to establish it on the long history Britain shared with Scandinavia, going back to Pre-Christian Paganism, through the Danish colonization of the Middle Ages.

Disney Leith, a member of the Scottish gentry, was known for her children’s books and translations of Icelandic poetry. Her *Peeps at Many Lands: Iceland* was not published until 1908. However, Leith’s attitudes toward Iceland are holdovers from the previous century and are not aligned with the existential focus of early twentieth-century Modernism. The primary function of *Peeps at Many Lands: Iceland* was to indoctrinate children in Anglo-Saxonism by emphasizing the importance of Icelandic culture and folklore in building a British national identity. In the introductory pages Leith introduces the shared Pagan history to her readers. “Of course in those days they were all heathen, and worshiped a number of gods – Odin and Thor, and Freya, and Loki, and Baldur- whose names you meet with in old English histories, as they were common to the Anglo-Saxon and Norwegian and Danish peoples, and also to some of the German countries” (Leith 4). Describing the ancient Vikings as heathens serves to

disparage them as inferior people, while recognizing that the English, and all other Germanic people came from similar backgrounds. Therefore, the reader is meant to understand that though the British shared in a Pagan past, they have surpassed the heathen mysticism Leith is invoking in association with Iceland.

Leith performs the same maneuver later in her book when she introduces the Icelandic language:

Now I should like to tell you something rather curious about the Icelandic language. They use our alphabet, but have two extra letters – for the sounds of the *th* and *dh*...The Icelander, on the other hand, pronounces *th* just as we do. Now we had these two extra letters long ago, and they are found in old Anglo-Saxon writings; but while we have kept the sound, we now use two letters instead of one, while the Icelanders keep both sound and letters. (Leith 50-51)

Leith follows up this section with a brief list of words that are the same in both English and Icelandic, and states that “...the Icelandic tongue is the original, or what is called the parent language of our own, besides that of the Danish, Norwegian, and some others”(51). Leith goes on to explain that the English language further developed through contact with other European countries, but makes a point to emphasize that through isolation Iceland “kept the primitive old language almost exactly as it was spoken in the saga times” (Leith 51-52). Again, Iceland represents a common origin point that the British have outgrown. The Norse language and letters like þ and ð are but curiosities left behind by the empire that reached every corner of the globe. By

invoking the mystery of the sagas and presenting the Icelandic language as primitive, Disney Leith Others an entire history and culture in a single sentence.

Leith emphasizes a tradition of shared religion, language, and culture between the Icelanders, Norwegians, and the English in order to promote an idea of Northern Unity and Anglo-Saxon superiority (Kassis, *Icelandic Utopia* 130). Despite being a fairly well known poet and an accomplished translator and traveler, Leith's children's book places her within the traditional Victorian role for women, responsible for cultivating nationalism. Leith's role as a replicator of prescribed Britishness and her eagerness to contribute to a manufactured racial hierarchy served imperial aims by reinforcing a Nordic heritage for Victorian nation-building. Through her focus on racializing and adopting an ethnic connection with Iceland, Disney Leith stands as a clear example of the British attempt to co-opt and denature Scandinavian culture in a manner that supported the British nation-building agenda and conceptions of whiteness.

Regarded as "an authority on the north," Ethel Brilliana Alec Tweedie, a noble-born Englishwoman, was a prolific writer who is notable for her impartial treatment of Scandinavian nations (Kassis, *Representations of the North* 302). In addition to advocating for women riding horses astride, Tweedie's *A Girl's Ride in Iceland* emphasizes her subversive role as a female within the travel culture of the nineteenth century. Few women traveled to rugged remote locations, and those who did, did so with the accompaniment of a chaperone and an entourage. Tweedie subverts these expectations by traveling unchaperoned among a company of men. None of these men

are family, nor do they serve as personal retainers. Rather, they are all simply friends who together have chartered a guided tour of the island.

“‘Where shall we go this autumn?’ And a list of places well trodden by tourists pass through the brain in rapid succession, each in turn rejected as too far, too near, too well known, or not embracing a sufficient change of scene. Switzerland? Every one goes to Switzerland: that is no rest, for one meets half London there. Germany? The same answer occurs, and so on ad infinitum.

‘Suppose we make up a party and visit Iceland?’ was suggested by me to one of my friends on a hot July day as we sat chatting together discussing this weighty question, fanning ourselves meanwhile under a temperature of ninety degrees; the position of Iceland, with its snow-capped hills and cool temperature seeming positively refreshing and desirable. (*A Girl’s Ride in Iceland* 1-2)

Tweedie’s journal indicates that she approached Iceland not as a scholarly traveler bent on examining and classifying the Icelandic countryside and people against a British standard, but rather as a tourist looking to experience the local culture for itself (Kassis, *Icelandic Utopia* 50). Tweedie’s unique experience as a woman, her open-minded approach to Icelandic culture, and her initial rejection of the Victorian drive to judge and classify everything are often interpreted as a feminist and anti-imperialist approach, but in fact, her gentle portrayal of the country serves to domesticate Iceland for British consumption as well as reinforce Britain’s racial favoritism of German European nations.

Just as Disney Leith's Icelandic journals and children's books deliver an idealized Germanic utopia, Tweedie's representation of the country softens the more exotic perceptions of Scandinavia in order to make them seem less powerful and more easily tamed. A tamed land is a subjugated land, and imagining other Germanic nations as weaker than themselves, elevated the British. In her early descriptions of Icelandic houses and furnishings Tweedie compares Icelandic living conditions those of other Germanic nations. However, when she describes the homes of poorer Icelanders, she compares them to the homes of the Irish:

Pretty muslin curtains and flowers adorn the windows, and as in this northern clime the keeping of flowers is no easy matter, the cultivation of them strikes one as highly praiseworthy. Inside the houses we found nicely polished floors, and simply furnished rooms, of a truly German style, stove included. The poorer abodes were mere hovels made of peat, admitting neither light nor air, and having the roofs covered with grass. One would have thought them almost uninhabitable, and yet I had seen dwellings nearly as bad around Killarney, and Glengariff. (*A Girl's Ride* 41).

The descriptions of the two classes of Icelandic abodes position Iceland somewhere between a superior Germanic nation and the supposedly inferior Irish. Tweedie's descriptions here do less to create an understanding of Germanic nations as superior and more to portray nations like Ireland as inferior by comparing Irish culture with the worst Iceland has to offer. By comparing the wealthier Icelanders to Germans, Tweedie reinforces the cultural familiarity between England and Iceland and juxtaposes the clean

comfort of German-style living with the squalor of the Irish. By comparing the poorer Icelandic homes to those found in Ireland, Tweedie, perhaps inadvertently, calls up images of a dirty, impoverished Ireland in the reader's mind, echoing the idea that Germanic cultures are superior to non-Germanic ones.

## 2.6 Whiteness and Finland

Victorian attitudes towards Finland display this same favoritism. Despite Finland's cultural distance from the other Scandinavian countries and its physical distance from Britain, Finland also had a fair amount of influence on the English Victorian Age. One Victorian, Charles Boileau-Elliott, wrote an expansive European travelogue addressing voyages all across the Scandinavian nations as well as Russia and Germany. *Letters from the North of Europe; Or a Journal of Travels in Holland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Russia, Prussia and Saxony* compares other non-Anglic European nations to Great Britain in the middle of the Victorian Age. Boileau-Elliott arrived in Finland amid a wave of Finnish Nationalism known as Fennomania, "the nineteenth-century Romantic movement in Finland which aimed at exploiting all the national elements that formed the Volkgeist of the country, Finnish language and folklore, in order to culturally distance itself from Sweden and protect the Finnish nation from the eminent Russification" (Kassis, *Representations of the North* 285). When Boileau-Elliott observed Finland, he observed a culture in rebellion against the oppressive Imperial Russian forces with which Britain sympathized.

However, being unaware of the political climate and cultural traditions of Finland, Boileau-Elliott interpreted what he saw as backward superstition and unrefined ignorance (Kassis, *Representations of the North* 285). The perception of Finland as backward is mirrored in the way he portrays the nation in his travelogue. Boileau-Elliott remarks that while he admires Finnish patriotism, “there is scarcely less of superstition; perhaps more of senseless mummery” which infuses the Finnish identity (22). He mirrors critics of the Icelandic people by claiming that the Finns are uncivilized and filthy: “According to the writer, their dirty and destitute appearance reassures the Western traveller that they belong to a primitive world, which is completely unintelligible to the average one” (Kassis, *Representations of the North* 294). By separating the “Western traveller” from the Finns, Boileau-Elliott suggests that the Finns have no place in the Western world, alongside Britain and the other Germanic nations of Europe. Boileau-Elliott is highly critical of the depressed conditions in Finland, yet he and his contemporaries are much more accepting of similar conditions in Iceland, stating that they are Britain’s down-on-their-luck cousins in need of aid rather than filthy and backward heathens.

In contrast, Tweedie’s *Through Finland in Carts* (1897), appreciates Finnish culture, giving a uniquely compassionate and open-minded account of the author’s time in Finland. Isolated from western Europe by the end of the Kalmar Union in 1809, Finland was forced to unite with the Russian Empire, a union that proved detrimental to the Finnish economy and psyche (Kassis, *Representations of the North* 303-304). Tweedie reflects all of this in *Through Finland in Carts*. According to Dimitrios Kassis,

“Tweedie diverges more than once from her contemporary travel writers, as she focuses on issues which constituted taboos within the framework of the Victorian society, such as... professional and intellectual emancipation” (Kassis, *Representations of the North* 306). By focusing on Finland’s national identity and rights as an independent nation, Tweedie paints a much more palatable picture of Finland for the Victorian reader, weaving a web of pride and romance around the nation to the north:

Finland has been progressing, and yet in the main Finland remains the same. It is steeped in tradition and romance. There are more trains, more hotels, larger towns; but that bright little land is still bravely fighting her own battles, still forging ahead; small, contented, well educated, self-reliant, and full of hopes for the future. (*Through Finland in Carts* x)

Despite this beautiful conceptualization of Finland, Tweedie has been criticized for romanticizing the nation in a way that is very much in line with the average Imperial Victorian’s view of “the other land,” a place that differs from Victorian ideals and values. Victorians of the time often romanticized foreign places that they did not understand as a way of searching for “a new Arcadia which is not burdened with the negative effects of civilization” (Kassis, *Representations of the North* 306). While Tweedie’s work did much to endear Finland to her many Victorian readers, it can be argued that she did little for the genuine betterment or understanding of the Northern nation. Her perceptions of Finland, while not derogatory or dismissive like Boileau-Elliott’s, paint Finland as a quaint, rural land brimming with old-fashioned superstition and antiquated traditions. She prizes the unique culture of Finland but does so

paternalistically. This attitude infantilizes the Finns and makes Finland seem like a weak country that has a lot of character and charm but cannot take care of itself with the imperial efficiency of Western, and especially Germanic, nations.

The different ways Victorian Britain viewed the depressed countries of Iceland and Finland reflect this ethnic favoritism. While Tweedie admonishes Russian imperialism for stifling the unique cultural expression of Finland, her implication that Finland is not yet able to take care of itself in a manner befitting a modern European nation serves to justify the Russian colonization of the country. After all, Finland is not a Germanic culture, and while Russia is not Germanic either, Herbert Spencer's popular nineteenth-century theory of social Darwinism would claim that since Russia was strong enough to subject Finland, Russia had the right to do so. This attitude clashes with how Tweedie represents Iceland because she does not focus on the fact that Iceland was a colony of Denmark at the time. Instead, she treats Iceland as a cultural cousin and an independent nation, while Finland is discussed exclusively within the context of empire. Both countries were under the dominion of larger empires; Iceland was under Danish rule and Finland was part of the Russian Empire. Both countries suffered from rampant crime and alcoholism, lack of education, and underdeveloped infrastructure. Both countries were actively petitioning for their own independence. Despite these similarities, Victorian Britain was much more permissive of Iceland's shortcomings than of Finland's. Victorian's more readily accepted the struggles of Iceland because they, when combined with the heroic imagery of the mythic sagas, enabled the British to simultaneously embrace a powerful Scandinavian past and elevate themselves above

the difficulties facing nineteenth-century Iceland. Finland, however, did not receive such treatment. Victorians exploited the poverty and under-developed infrastructure of Finland in order to portray the non-Germanic nation as inferior and justify the Russian Empire's treatment of the smaller nation. Russian treatment of Finland was similar to the way the British treated Ireland, and by justifying Russia's actions the Victorians implicitly validated their own.

### Chapter 3: Conclusion

Though many Victorian representations of Scandinavia appear to normalize or even domesticate Scandinavian culture and history for the purpose of making them seem familiar to the British, many additional representations of Scandinavia also cast them as the Other. Following Edward Said's understanding of empire and Otherness in *Orientalism*, the act of Othering Scandinavia serves to support British imperial ambitions.

It is notable that Great Britain never colonized Scandinavia. Outside of a few abortive attempts to claim Iceland, Northern Europe managed to avoid the depredations of the world's largest empire. Why then did Britain use Scandinavian imagery to support their empire? How can representations of a place the Victorians never colonized support colonialism? The answer lies between nineteenth-century racial theory and modern understandings of post-colonialism.

British depictions of Scandinavia certainly served to romanticize and valorize the culture and history of Northern Europe. From Gothic yet heroic poems to homey travel journals highlighting the national pride of the people, the Victorians used and perpetuated these renderings to create familiarity between themselves and the North. Doing so enabled the British to base their own sense of national and racial identity in a thoroughly Germanic culture. By narrowing the British definition of whiteness, the

Victorians were able to justify their imperial aggression towards white non-Germanic people such as the Irish who, like the Finns, were considered racially inferior. By Othering other Northern Europeans, Britain was able to position itself as the premier Germanic power, one that had transcended the primitive chains of poverty and superstition. Positioning themselves thus, the Victorians were able to create an exclusive national identity in the face of their expanding empire while at the same time asserting their power over their political rivals like Germany.

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