

Frithiof at Sea: Viking Hero, Victorian Role Model

Although relatively unknown today, *Frithiof's Saga* remained one of the most popular of the old northern sagas in Britain throughout the nineteenth century and into the early decades of the twentieth. Like the medieval romances of King Arthur, the adventures of the Scandinavian hero Frithiof became the subject of many retellings in poems, songs, plays, and novels. Frithiof's sea voyage to Orkney was a particular favorite, inspiring children's book authors from Charles Kingsley to C.S. Lewis.

In the tale, Frithiof is separated from his true love Ingeborg by her jealous brothers and sent by them to collect tribute from their territory in the north of Britain. In his journey from Norway to Orkney, Frithiof encounters turbulent waters and fearsome sea-witches, but he never waivers from the Viking Code that sustains him. However, the "Viking Code" that Victorian antiquarians like George Dasent celebrated as "the most perfect summary of the rights and duties of the generous Viking" would come to be identified with distinctly British values. In addition to Frithiof's extraordinary patience to recover his bride, he shuns drink and women throughout the voyage, seeks fame rather than fortune, and extends mercy to those who beg for peace. In his devotion to duty, Frithiof shares more in common with Britain's Admiral Nelson than with the marauding Viking berserkers of popular renown.

In this paper, I argue that Frithiof's geographic passage through the turbulent waters bordering Scandinavia and Britain transforms him from Viking hero to Victorian role model. According to Franco Moretti, the space of the border invites transformation to occur—that to cross a border is to enter a "site of adventure" and the unknown. Using Moretti's theory, I argue that representations of Frithiof in nineteenth and early twentieth century books for children—such as George Stephens' *Frithiof's Saga* (1839), Eirikr Magnusson and William Morris' "The Story of Frithiof the Bold" (1871), and G. C. Allen's *The Song of Frithiof* (1912)—demonstrate how the turbulent waters of the border transform him into an adolescent role model that supports Victorian and Edwardian family values.