

***Sword Song* as her “Swan Song”: A Fitting Culmination of the
Rosemary Sutcliff Legacy?**

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The novel that Rosemary Sutcliff was revising when she died suddenly on July 23, 1992 at the age of 72 was to have been called *The Sword Song of Bjarni Sigurdson*.¹ Sutcliff had seen the manuscript through two-thirds of the second draft of her traditional three -draft writing process before making a fair copy (Meek 62 qtd. in Garside-Neville). Sutcliff’s cousin and godson, Anthony Lawton, transcribed the draft, and Sutcliff’s long-time editor, Jill Black, did the final editing of Lawton’s transcription. *Sword Song* was published in 1997.

Early reviews of the novel were mixed. Sandra Johnson’s review in *The (London) Times* considered the opening a “stunner,” explaining that “a 16- year old boy is exiled from his settlement.” She continued, “Regrettably, the story quavers thereafter, meandering around the coast of Britain as young Bjarni sells his fighting skills to one fiery-beardy after another, but the dense historical detail and rich colours are all still there” (n. pag.). Compare this assessment with *The Horn Book* reviewer’s high praise for the novel: “Sutcliff’s careful handling of how a young man, influenced by hero-worship and the force of custom, deals with the difficult choices that lead to maturity is nothing short of masterly. An unexpected and most welcome gift”(n.pag.).

Today I aim to convince you of the validity of yet another reviewer's comment, that "*Sword Song* is a fitting capstone to Sutcliff's marvelous career as one of Britain's premier authors of Historical fiction" (jacket hard cover edition).

Rosemary Sutcliff declared on more than one occasion that she "belonged to the minstrelsy" (Thompson n.pag.), and her poetic prose attests to her calling as storyteller. Like Kipling, to whom she acknowledges her debt, she emphasizes the rites of passage of her young heroes. She is like Kipling also in her choice of subject matter, as Sandra Garside-Neville reminds us, quoting Margaret Meek's recognition of parallels between Sutcliff and Kipling: "he [Kipling] acknowledges the settling of England by many peoples, and the way they eventually learn to create a new nationality" (qtd. in Garside-Neville 52).

Sutcliff focuses on the development of her young heroes as part of a community, for example, as part of a shield ring or band of warriors (*The Shield Ring* 1956), as foster brothers who will accept the blood feud of their brothers as their own (*Blood Feud* 1976), as outsiders who must find a place to belong and call home (*Outcast* 1955), as loyal followers of a leader who bids them marry a foreign woman to strengthen the bonds between two nations and begin the process of melding them into one (*The Lantern Bearers* 1959), or fighting to the death as loyal followers of a king (*The Shining Company* 1990). Sutcliff's young heroes are flexible and versatile, yet they have their rough spots and prickly tempers like one of her favorite heroes, Marcus Flavius Aquila in *The Eagle of the Ninth* (1954). Theirs is never an easy path.

In an interview with R.H. Thompson in 1987, Sutcliff discusses her heroes as exemplifying the Renaissance concept of "the complete man," stating that they "nearly

always have come quite a long way by the end of the story” (n.pag.). When interviewed by Emma Fisher in 1973, she insisted:

I’ve only got one plot; a boy growing up and finding himself, and finding his own soul in the process, and achieving the aim he sets out to achieve; or not achieving it. And becoming part of society. (Wintle and Fisher 190).

Sutcliff’s novels are *bildungsromanen* built around the main characters, and her readers come to expect an outcast or underdog who, almost in fairy tale fashion, is able to conquer against all odds, and become the man of the hour whether he lives or sacrifices himself as does Lubrin in *Sun Horse Moon Horse* (1977) in a kind of ritual offering of self for the survival of the remnant of his people. Some Sutcliff heroes are exiled and/or sold into slavery, as is Beric in *Outcast*, and struggle to overcome the difficult situations and decisions they face. Victory is always bittersweet, and usually entails new beginnings, as we can see in *The Shield Ring* (1956) and *Sword Song* (1997) discussed in some detail below.

Sutcliff believed in exposing young readers to the themes of the great “ancient hero myths and legends,” as she explained in her 1985 acceptance speech for her first Phoenix Award book, *The Mark of the Horse Lord* (1965):

Stories dealing with the big basic values . . . love and hate, cowardice and courage, loyalty and divided loyalty, the quest for honor, above all, the unending struggle between Good and Evil, which almost always ends tragically in the death of the hero, usually in his hour of victory. Children should always be allowed the great themes, which are also often tragic themes, which they can receive and make use of better than most adults can. (Helbig and Perkins 8)

Many have noted how involved young readers become in Sutcliff's books.² Her stories speak to them on several levels. The part of Sutcliff's message that readers of all ages will find appealing is that one person *can* make a difference. Fred Inglis comments on Sutcliff's awareness "that social orders change hugely, that people are swept along in such changes but that they aren't merely the object of the change; they are also its subjects and may bend it, however slightly, if they have the luck and courage, to their own will" (222).

Important as character was for Sutcliff, her primary research written in "large red notebooks" did not contain kernels of plot, but focused on the settings of her stories. Her goal was to depict the complexities of the historical milieu her characters inhabited. What I find surprising is that Sutcliff commenced writing after composing a draft outline of two to three thousand words.

Sutcliff has been acclaimed for her historical accuracy; yet she sometimes realized that her depictions were less than historically accurate. In a prefatory note to *Sun Horse, Moon Horse*, she acknowledged that had she read T.C. Lethbridge's book entitled *Witches* prior to writing *The Eagle of the Ninth*, the Epidii would have been portrayed as "a slightly different people" (n 8). Their depiction at a period 200 years later in *Sun Horse, Moon Horse*, is, she asserted, more historically accurate.

She had "a terrific thing about continuity," an aspect of her writing critics have tried to define. Sutcliff's depictions of early Britain attest to the continuity in history. Evans-Gunther, among others, has noted the reappearance of the flawed emerald ring with a dolphin carved on it. It appears in *Eagle of the Ninth*, *The Silver Branch*, *Frontier Wolf*, *The Lantern Bearers*, *Sword at Sunset*, *Dawn Wind*, *The Shield Ring*,

and *Sword Song*, books written over a period of thirty-five years.³ The continuity within Sutcliff's work, I suggest, hinges on her returning again and again to themes and peoples that have caught her fancy. In returning to Norman Britain in her last novel *Sword Song*, as Anthony Lawton explains in his prefatory note, "Rosemary returns to the Norse world she had so memorably portrayed many years earlier in *The Shield Ring*" (*Sword Song* n. pag.).

Trained as a painter of miniatures, Sutcliff pays attention to minutiae and often includes symbolic details in the tapestry she weaves: a rowan tree, a damson bush, a flawed emerald ring, a character's favorite landscape, a hearth, a beloved pet, gestures like the cupping of hands in supplication or in making an offering or gift -- all these are familiar facets of a Sutcliff novel. When asked by interviewer Emma Fisher whether objects like the flawed emerald ring in the Roman books symbolized that they "live on while people suffer and die according to their destinies," Sutcliff replied: "No they're not symbols: it's just continuity. I've got this terrific thing about continuity" (Wintle and Fisher 186).

Often the old religion vies with the new in Sutcliff novels. She stated pointedly in interviews that her period was early Britain and that she could not write about the period between 1200 and 1500, and about nothing post-1700. She offered as her excuse to Fisher, "I think I can't accept a world which is quite so absolutely impregnated with religion; the terrific hold that the church had in every facet of life. I can't understand itAfter the late Norman times, I just don't understand the people" (Wintle and Fisher 186).⁴

Sutcliff shows how faith and superstition often intermingle, and how people are suspicious of rituals that they do not understand. The Norse follow the religion of the old gods Thor and Odin; yet some of their clansmen follow The White Christ. Jestyn in *Blood Feud* does not go to either the Christ Church or the god-house. As part of the war host who will later swear allegiance on Thor's ring, he goes to the shore and prays, "Dear God, I do not ask you to forgive me, only to believe that there isn't any other way"(98-9). Bjarni in *Sword Song* faces a similar dilemma:

the rest of the settlement shared their worship—when they worshipped at all—between the church and the God-house. Bjarni did nothing about either of them. He had lost his own gods, as they had lost him, on the night that their priest [convinced by his daughter that Bjarni has shamed her] had demanded the death of [his dog] Hugin, but Bjarni felt no call to cross over to follow the Lady Aud's god. (102)

Later Bjarni is prime signed, a kind of threshold to accepting the White Christ, Lady Aud's God. Sutcliff in a number of novels illustrates how experiencing shattering events breeds religious doubt.

Religious beliefs are part of Sutcliff's narrative design, but are not as pronounced in her children's books as in the strong religious overtones in her adult novel *Blood and Sand* (1987) where Thomas Keith converts to Islam after much soul searching. Granted, Sutcliff's novel is based on a true story, but she traces the main character's quest for a faith that satisfies his spiritual longings. At first Keith is afraid that he might be making his choice because he can never advance in the Viceroy's army unless he converts. Unlike his Scots medical friend who converted without any

strong convictions, Thomas does a lot of soul searching and knows instinctually that he has made the right choice.

The act of mending or healing is often intertwined with religion in Sutcliffe's novels and this is true of *Sword Song*. After jumping overboard in a storm after his beloved dog Hugin has been thrown from the ship, Bjarni is washed ashore and found by Angharad. She has the power of healing, especially with medicinal herbs. When Angharad's father was dying, he took her to a nunnery so that she would be safe from the ploys of her land-greedy cousin Rhywallan. It was here that she trained with Sister Annis, who taught her

some [remedies] that the mother superior maybe did not know about, that came from part of an old book that was saved when the Emperor Theodosius burned the great library at Alexandria. Such knowledge is forbidden to us because it came from the ancient world before the birth of Christ. (232)

Angharad's discussion and justification of her methods to Bjarni also illustrate Sutcliffe's attention to historical detail. Frequently Sutcliffe's priests of the White Christ, such as brother Ninnias in *The Lantern Bearers*, are the ones who develop healing powers.

The minstrelsy theme runs strong in Sutcliffe's novels. Not only did she believe herself a storyteller who could sacrifice historical reality to the way the story, in her opinion, ought to be told, but she often emphasized the role of the harper as story teller in her novels treating battles that determined the fate of a clan or nation. In *The Shining Company*, old Aneirin is removed from the last scene of battle along with the

wounded so that he will be able to compose the great song commemorating the last stand of the 300 Companions.

Sword Song is fittingly named, since its hero Bjarni Sigurdson develops his voice as bard as the novel progresses. As it concludes, the chieftain of Rafnglas can rest assured that his foster brother has forgiven him for the oath breaking that Bjarni caused five years earlier when he accidentally drowned the priest who had kicked his dog. In typical Sutcliff fashion, this novel comes full circle, and has no loose ends. The chieftain invites Bjarni to recite “the Sword Song of Bjarni Sigurdson” on the evening of his return to the settlement. Bjarni, who was presumed dead by Heriolf, the merchant, has many adventures to relate; he now has two swords, the one in his kist delivered to the chieftain by the merchant, and the finely carved one that the Lady Aud had given him as a gift when he left her service. He will give his original sword to his future son. Again Sutcliff captures that sense of continuity. Bjarni has proved himself, and is ready to establish a place of his own with his marriage to Angharad. He retrieves the blue Dolphin that he buried at a spot where he thought he would like to establish himself if and when he returned from his imposed exile. It is Angharad who is in possession of the flawed emerald ring, her father’s ring that she used to cure warts. The only reference to a harp in this novel is the metaphor Bjarni uses to compare Angharad to a harp too tightly strung, but he does recite the tale of his adventures, thereby taking on the role the harper usually assumed.

In *The Shield Ring*, the forerunner of *Sword Song*, the young harper Bjorn proves his honor and bravery time and again. Thanks to information gleaned when Bjorn is in an eating place to collect new harp strings for his foster father Haethcyn’s

harp, Sweet-singer, members of the shield ring design and build a trap for the Norman enemy, “the road to nowhere” and completely remove traces of the road leading to their stronghold, the Shield Ring.

There is a kind of mystical magic attached to Haethcyn’s harp, an instrument far superior to the hall harp that is handed around after dinner for stories to be shared and riddles posed. Haethcyn recognizes Bjorn’s gift of music inherited through his Welsh mother, and trains the boy. Those listening to his first public performance in the jarl’s hall name it sword song, since it reminds them of a sword being brandished in a great battle. The novel itself becomes Bjorn’s sword song or story of the great feats, bravery, loyalty and unselfish actions of Aikin Jarlson’s supporters in the last battle against the Normans. Bjorn learns Norman songs from the Maezlin whom Frytha rescues, and whom Bjorn claims as a gift of war to ensure that the exhausted and mentally confused Norman lives. Bjorn also learns to recite *Beowulf* in the old tongue.

When the opportunity arises, Bjorn offers to infiltrate the enemy camp to discover when the Norman legion plans to attack the Jarl’s stronghold. A harper is always free to move as he pleases, and his friend Frytha follows and joins Bjorn on this mission. All does not go well after an enemy warrior recognizes him. Although there are many casualties, Bjorn and Frytha escape and are rescued by members of the Shield Ring. Nonetheless Bjorn all but loses his right hand. He and Frytha bring an unstrung and much damaged harp back to Haethcyn. As the novel closes, we know that Bjorn and Frytha have a future together in his reclaimed ancestral homestead. Frytha asks Bjorn, who has learned to play the harp with his left hand, whether he is

composing another sword song. Bjorn replies, no, that he is composing “A song of new beginnings” (234).

The “rich colour” of Sutcliff’s prose, mentioned by *The Times* reviewer, derives in part from her meticulous attention to detail. In a few brush strokes she can convey the broad sweep of history, or pause and capture an individual scene, a moment frozen in time. The latter often reveals details of the inner working of a character’s mind, and captures moments of self-realization through words spoken from the depths of the soul. The speaker’s recognition of the import of these words is only fully grasped later. Take, for instance Bjarni’s proposition to Angharad in *Sword Song*:

“It’s in my mind,” Bjarni said suddenly stopping on the bank, “that you should let him [her cousin Rhywallan] have Gwyn Coed, you should wish him joy of it, and come away with me. I will take you back to my own settlement.” He heard his own words, not quite believing that he was actually speaking them.
(241)

Later when Angharad’s cousin has set flame to her ancestral farm, Bjarni gives Angharad a choice:

To his own surprise he put out his left hand, a little clumsily, and set it over hers. “I will take you back to your nunnery if you’d have it that way. If you’re not for the Holy Sisters, then there’s not much you can do but come back to Rafnglas with me”. . . . and he heard his own voice saying the words as though they were not quite his own, and he was as surprised as it seemed that she was.
(262)

A gesture with the hand, whether symbolic or not, in many Sutcliff novels designates an unspoken pledge marking a new understanding between two members of the opposite sex.

Sutcliff ran the gamut of literary composition in that she wrote picture books as well as radio plays among her over fifty publications. One distinctive book is an edited collection of short stories, essays, and poems by well-known authors, entitled *Is Anyone There?* (1976). Sutcliff asked specific friends for contributions for this publication to establish greater awareness among young English readers of the Samaritans. Anthony Lawton, Sutcliff's godson who is a Samaritan, suggested the project and the introductory remarks by the editors Sutcliff and Monica Dickens explain the need for such a collection, and stress the availability of volunteer Samaritans twenty-four hours a day. In her own comments, Sutcliff reveals the loneliness of her childhood and her plight of not being able to confide in anyone.⁵

Sutcliff did occasionally write outside her preferred Roman, Norman, and Arthurian time frames. *The Armourer's House* is set in the time of Henry VIII and culminates with a family Christmas gathering. Dinner is followed by the singing of carols, and each family member asks for his favorite. The mother sings one for the son who has been lost at sea, and miraculously when the maid answers a knock at the door, it is Kit, the lost son, with many adventures to relate. This may be the closest Sutcliff ever came to writing romantic and somewhat sentimental fiction.

Time does not allow for a consideration of many of the best know and most highly praised among Sutcliff's works. Her legacy as well as her popularity continues. That Sutcliff's achievement in children's historical fiction is still acclaimed is

reflected in the republication of many of her novels since 2005, and the existence of several active Internet sites that discuss her life and literary achievements.⁶

Her final novel, *Sword Song* does not “quaver,” but “re-members” the somewhat sporadic journeys of many a young Sutcliff hero who ultimately finds a place to belong. *Sword Song* is quintessential Sutcliff, and a fitting culmination of her legacy to us.

Endnotes

¹ *Sword Song* is indeed her “swan song,” her “final composition or performance,” and confirms the “belief that a swan sang sweetly when about to die” (Oxford English Dictionary def.).

² Sutcliff herself shared some comments from her fan letters in the interview with Emma Fisher: “sometimes they inquire anxiously about particular characters – did so-and-so find a nice wife, and this kind of thing, which I find really rather touching, because one feels they have become really involved, and the people are real to them” (Wintle and Fisher 191).

³ Meek’s monograph documents Sutcliff’s research methods.

⁴ In the 1987 interview with Thompson, Sutcliff is even more forceful, saying, “The Middle Ages I am not at home in. I am interested in them and love to read about them, but I can’t write about them, or practically not at all. I think it is because I can’t take the all-pervasiveness of religion which has a stranglehold on life” (n. pag.).

⁵ Sutcliff writes in the introduction:

I had a lonely childhood and growing-up time. My parents loved me and I loved them; but I could never talk to them about the problems and fears and aching hopes deep inside me that I had most need to talk about to someone. And there was no one else.

So when Anthony Lawton, my godson, had the idea for *Is Anyone There?* and asked me to help, in the first place by writing to the people who we hoped would contribute a story or poem or article, I had a very personal reason for gladness in being involved in the production of a book about or for people as lonely as I once was, or even much lonelier. (n. pag.)

⁶ These include an active Facebook site that gives a brief resumé of each of Sutcliff's publications, and now features a subsidiary "notes" site that includes earlier postings. A variety of sites give access to critical material, reviews, and reader comments. Some even draw comments from Anthony Lawton, her godson, cousin, and literary executor who keeps his own Sutcliff blog, Lawton's site's postings include biographical and critical information. Among the latter is the Garside-Neville essay, "An Appreciation."

I have listed several of the main Sutcliff sites under Works Cited. The Annis site reproduces the review of *Sword Song* (quoted at the beginning of my paper) that I attach below as Appendix A.

Appendix A

Go for good writing -

Children

Another of Blyton's traits I dislike is her laziness. I don't believe she ever researched anything - unlike her contemporary Rosemary Sutcliff, whose posthumously published Dark Ages saga *Sword Song* (Bodley Head, Pounds 12.99, ISBN 0 370 323 94 7) is packed with precisely described Viking sea battles and sacrifices in a linguistic smorgasbord of thongs, thralls and fiery-bearded men.

I was never a Sutcliff fan as a child, tiring too quickly of the sun glinting off the halberds of people with names that sound like Haggis Bogtrotterson, but the opening of *Sword Song* is a stunner: a 16-year-old boy is exiled from his settlement for the manslaughter of a monk who had kicked his dog. Beat that, Melvin Burgess.

Regrettably, the story quavers thereafter, meandering around the coast of Britain as young Bjarni sells his fighting skills to one fiery-beardy after another, but the dense historical detail and rich colours are all still there.

Go for good writing -

Children

Times, The (London, England)
August 23, 1997
Author: Sarah Johnson

Labels: Reviews, *Sword Song*

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