

PREFACE

Henry I Sinclair cast a long shadow in the annals of Orcadian history. He was but one in a long line of noblemen to brandish the ancient Norse title of earl over Orkney, an island province that, until the close of the fifteenth-century, was part of the Atlantic realm of Norway. There was, however, something special about Henry I. Sources imply that he was a potentate of unusual acumen and achievement. A Lowland Scottish aristocrat, he had little more than a vague hereditary claim to the distant Norse earldom, yet he shrewdly navigated Orkney's turbulent political landscape, outstripping his rivals and winning the confidence of a 'foreign' king in mainland Scandinavia. In doing so, Henry I also revived the earldom, an ancient order of governance that had for decades laid vacant and in peril of redundancy. Soon after his installation in 1379, he set out to restore the earldom's supremacy, quelling local opposition and taking an active role in island administration. Yet he is remembered less for fostering tradition than for signalling change. By circumstance or design, he became a lodestar in the earldom's late-medieval transformation, ushering in a new era of Scottish influence under his Lothian-based dynasty, a house that cultivated intimate ties to Scotland's kings and witnessed the isles' mortgage to that crown in 1468. For that reason, Henry I has been both credited with and chastised for heralding the demise of Norwegian authority in Northern Isles.

Henry I was indeed remarkable, but is there any room or reason for examining him further? Having devoted much of my career to the study of medieval Orkney, I felt that that Henry I's story had long been written, and that scholars before me had left few stones unturned. Although sceptical when first approached to review this work, I was surprised to discover just how much there was to learn about the earl and his enterprises. This is not due to any specific deficiency in previous scholarship, but rather to the vast complexities of Henry I's biography, which, as the late Vicki Hill points out in the present study, had yet to be coordinated in a modern, comprehensive analysis. It was her aim to tie together the wide body of academic and amateur historical research and provide a coherent and detailed examination of the earl, his exploits and the appraisal he has received from scholars. In that pursuit, Vicki employed what was for this reviewer an unfamiliar method. Her work is neither a descriptive biography nor a chronological survey of social and political developments in the isles. She compiled it rather as a casebook that tests the veracity of different claims and theories relating to Henry I individually. Although unconventional in the field of medieval history, Vicki's method can help historians to differentiate fact from fiction, history from hyperbole. It was a daunting undertaking involving years of independent research and frequent correspondence with historians and archivists specializing in various aspects of the theme. The resulting work makes accessible a range of evidence previously featured only in academic publications. As Vicki points out, academics often invest little energy in presenting material in a digestible and widely accessible format. By contrast, this study enables both academics and a wider public to follow the events of Henry I's life as well as the academic debated surrounding them.

Although a novel contribution to the theme, this study should not be read in isolation. Vicki's analysis supplements previous scholarship, injecting new life in long-standing debates, and I would like to offer here some brief, preliminary comments as to how her study corresponds to, or diverges from, contemporary academic discussion on late-medieval Orkney.

The first concerns Vicki's treatment of Henry I as a product of both Scottish and Norwegian societies. Inspired by previous research of Barbara E. Crawford, Vicki devotes equal attention to earls' Scottish and Scandinavian relations and presents Orkney as a zone of convergence for two cultural and political spheres.⁴ Scholars have argued that convergence also precipitated competition, as kings of Scotland and Norway actively vied for influence over their common frontier. Vicki also accepted that premise when studying Henry I's exploits. Drafts for this publication were completed prior to the publication of my own book on late-medieval Orkney, which in fact challenges that prevailing notion of competition.⁵ The Norse-Scottish frontier of the late Middle Ages was, in my view, often shaped by cooperation, not competition, between Scottish and Scandinavian monarchs. Earls, I maintain, were both expected and conditioned to balance different national interests. Of course, very few managed to live up to that ideal so successfully as Henry I, and Vicki's emphasis of that earl's acumen and achievement is no doubt warranted.

The second theme concerns the autonomous governing agency of Orkney's earls. As Vicki points out, early-modern scholars were often overzealous in their adulation of Henry I's sovereignty. Older antiquarian works tend to wax nostalgic about Viking Age traditions in which earls were princes by their own right and ruled their patrimony without the constraints of royal law or decree. Vicki's analysis reveals, however, that many of the powers attributed to Henry I by later authors cannot be substantiated with extant primary source material. Her conclusions generally support those of other scholars such as Randi B. Waerdahl and Steinar Imsen, who in recent years have delineated the processes by which Norway's monarchs strengthened their hold on island leaders in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.⁶ Scrutiny of Henry I's individual powers supports the notion that, even without any authority to make and amend laws or mint coin, Orkney's earls belonged to the highest echelons of the Norse aristocracy; Henry I may not have been a prince, but he was certainly one of the Northern world's most outstanding potentates.

⁴ Barbara E. Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms: Orkney and Caithness from AD 870 to 1470*, Edinburgh 2013.

⁵ Jan P. Grohse, *Frontiers for Peace in the Medieval North. The Norwegian-Scottish Frontier c.1260-1470*, Leiden 2017

⁶ Randi B. Waerdahl, *The Incorporation and Integration of the King's Tributary Provinces into the Norwegian Realm c.1195-1397*, Brill 2011; Steinar Imsen (ed.), *Rex Insularum. The King of Norway and His 'Skatlands' as a Political System c. 1260-c.1450*, Bergen 2015; idem, *Kongemakt og skatland. Den norske kongens rike utenfor Norge i middelalderen*, Oslo 2018.

INTRODUCTION

The final theme concerns what is surely the most fascinating and, according to some historians, fictitious exploit attributed to Henry I in modern literature: his American voyage. Antiquarians have speculated that Henry I provided the historical model for Nicolò Zeno's sixteenth-century account of 'Zichmni', an island prince who travelled to Greenland after being regaled by fishermen's tales of land in the west. If the narrative bears any semblance to reality, Henry I would seem to have bridged a gap between two periods of exploration: the Viking Age, when Norsemen discovered and settled Greenland and mainland North America, and the Columbian Age that began roughly a century after Henry I's death. Readers should recognize, however, that academics regularly discredit the Zeno's tale and any assumed connections it has to Henry I. Most notably, Shetland historian Brian Smith regards the whole thing as an antiquarian hoax, albeit a harmless one.⁷ In the present work, Vicki entertains the Zichmni-Henry connection more liberally, and while she does not embrace the story without reservation, her consideration of its validity may unnervingly unsettle some critics. Still, the claim is a central feature in the historiography on Henry I, and its treatment in this analysis is unquestionably merited.

Henry I will remain an enigmatic figure, as the shreds of surviving source evidence will never allow us to develop a clear image of the man and his deeds. However, we may better grasp his role in Orkney's history by further sifting fact from fiction, a task that is well served by this casebook. The following is the fruit of Vicki Hild's diligent and thoughtful research, and while others have helped to see it published, the views presented in it are her own. I cannot claim to agree with all of them, but certainly support her overarching aim: to present a reader-friendly analysis that distinguishes, on a case-by-case basis, hyperbole from history.

Ian Peter Grohse PhD
Associate Professor Institutt for
arkeologi, historie
religionsvitenskap og teologi
UIT Norges arktiske universitet (Tromsø)

Although discouraged by school counselors to pursue degrees in history, as they "would not pay the bills", I opted first for a degree in Journalism, and then a Masters of Science in Public Health. Later, I should have written to those counselors and informed them that neither journalism nor public health was a moneymaker. Regardless of my professions, I continued to pursue my studies of the history of the British Isles, and in the last decade focusing on the history of Scotland.

There were several driving forces behind the *Casebook* on Earl Henry Sinclair. My interest first began while working on my genealogy when I learned that Earl Henry was one of my ancestors, albeit a distant one. Yet, his name was unfamiliar to me and I could not remember reading about him. When I went back to my history books, I found that he was only minimally mentioned if not totally absent.

On a search to learn more about him, I found books that stated amazing 'facts' about him: he was a 'Prince'; a powerful baron in Scotland; the jarl of Orkney; a crusader; was referred to as 'the Holy'; had the power and authority to mint his own coinage, make laws, crown kings, and so on; as well as he led an expedition to North America in 1398. I had to ask the question again; why were his name and deeds basically absent from history books if these 'facts' were accurate?

In 2010, I began my research investigation to learn more about Earl Henry. This led me to the research of Barbara Crawford, William P. L. Thomson, Brian Smith, Caroline Wickham-Jones, and many others; and several trips to Scotland and Orkney for archival research.

What I discovered:

- * Although there are excellent research sources on the Norse-Scots history in which some aspects of Earl Henry's life and actions are covered, there is no single comprehensive book that focuses exclusively on the aspects of his life.
- * Many of these works on Norse-Scots history are academic and not generally read by the public who have an interest in Earl Henry. A book was needed that would provide the academic research; but would need to be reader-friendly for the general public.
- * While it is certainly true that there is a great deal of hyperbole, which unfortunately has been perpetuated; it is also unfortunate that credible researchers have dismissed the hyperbolic claims as such without bothering to examine the documentation, which can provide evidence of the validity of those claims. Of the nine claims of Earl Henry's power and authority made by either James van Bassan or Father Augustin Hay, which have been dismissed as outright hyperbole, documentation shows that six fall into this

⁷ Brian Smith, "Earl Henry Sinclair's fictitious trip to America", *New Orkney Antiquarian Journal* 2 (2002).