

" THE LONG SHIPS "

Frans G. Bengtsson tells thrilling tale of Viking days
their raids and romances.

A great writer recreates the coming of Christianity to
the pagan North.

Reviewed by Howard Mingos.

The New York critics have termed it probably the best historical novel of the year. Beyond all question it is one of the best stories of the Vikings ever published. Why not? Frans G. Bengtsson, long famous in his native Sweden as essayist poet, historian and novelist, has acquired magnificent stature as a sound craftsman who has employed his 60 years to learn seven languages and do odd jobs translating masterpieces of English, French and Icelandic literature, meanwhile contributing some of the best Swedish essays of this or any other generation. In research he is a master, and that accounts for the full flavor of this gay, exciting, gory and savage story of a Viking chieftain.

Here we read and live the lives of those northern people as they lived and fought and died a thousand years ago. However fictionized, it is historically accurate in its thrilling details of the 10th century Vikings, their piracy, pillage and rape, their loves and hates, their bravery and their gallantry, their loose morals and for all that a code of honor—the Viking chieftains kept their word to friend or foe. The author spent six years writing this story during World War II, and it was popular abroad. Alfred A. Knopf now has sent it well toward the top of the best sellers in the United States by publishing an excellent translation by Michael Meyer under the title of *The Long Ships*.

Fascinated as we were throughout by the vivid, again historically accurate, struggle of the northmen up from paganism and into the sublime light of Christianity we had to laugh again and again. Frans Bengtsson is a humorist, naturally so, we suspect, because from one scene to another, in romance and murder, he must have chuckled as he wrote, determined to let his readers chuckle with him. Quite a trick, we think, while chronicling that somber era. The hero chieftain, incidentally, brave as they come, is afraid of catching cold. He is clever, too, yet only the reader knows that one of his favorite sons is not of his doing. Grim humor — plenty of it. After Orm, our hero, has sent his opponent's head rolling into a cask of ale — which enlivened King Harald's Christmas banquet to the delight of everybody present, including the ladies — Orm lies wounded and feverishly sick with broken ribs, knowing he soon must die because the King's daughter can find no lice in his hair. Happy is the day for both when she finds a louse "fresh and full of blood" so Orm knew he had no poisoning and would recover.

Then again, with the publisher's permission, we quote this from one of the Viking chieftains whom a bishop in England was trying to convert:

"The twenty-seven winters', he said, I have served as priest at the great Uppsala sacrifice; and you do me little honor in filling my ears with such prattle as this, fit only for children and gammers. With this ax which you see here I have hewn off the heads of the harvest sacrifices, and hung their bodies on the sacred trees that front the temple; and there were Christians among them, ay, and priests too, naked on their knees in the snow, wailing. Tell me what profit they gained from worshipping this God you speak of".

The Christian priests apparently brought knowledge of medicine with them to the pagan lands, and so healed the body as well as the soul. Such was Willibald who possessed other remarkable traits. He was with Orm and a few of his fellows fleeing from wicked King Sven:

"Brother Willibald bent down, picked up a large stone, and flung it with all his might.

"Love thy neighbor." he grunted as it left his hand.

"The stone struck King Sven full on the mouth with a loud smack. With a howl of agony, he crumpled on the horse's name and slithered to the ground.

"That is what I call a good priest", said Rapp".

We read with delight how Orm and his bride built their estate in Skåne. They had plenty of money buy a neighbor declined to sell them hay and hops until they could raise their own next season. So Orm with four henchmen rode over to the neighbor's (Gudmund's) place a little before dawn.

"He succeeded without much difficulty in gaining entry to Gudmund's house, picked him out of his bed carried him out through his own front door, and dangled him by one leg over his own well, while Rapp and the others set their backs against the door that the people in the house might not disturb their parley. After Orm and Gudmund had argued the matter for a while over the mouth of the well, a bargain was concluded between them by which Orm was to receive all the hay and hops he required at a fair price, whereupon Orm turned him right ways up again and set him on his feet, pleased at having been able to settle the transaction without being forced to resort to violence".

Thus with lively humor the author takes us from one adventure to another through the lands of the northern seas, even down Russian rivers- a thrilling saga of an age which spawned so much of northern civilization.