III.

NOTES RESPECTING THE LIFE OF SWEIN ASLIEF, AN ORKNEY VIKING, OF THE TWELFTH CENTURY, ILLUSTRATING THE ANNALS OF THAT PERIOD. COLLECTED FROM THE EARLY NORWEGIAN SAGES. By W. H. FOTHERINGHAME, Esq., F.S.A., Scot. Kirkwall.

Swein or Svein Aslief, one of the most remarkable of the Orkney Scandinavian warriors, lived in the middle of the 12th century, during the governments of the Orkney Earls, Paul Haconson; Erlend Haroldson; Ronald, the nephew of St Magnus, himself enrolled among the saints; and Harold, son of Maddan, Earl of Athole, and nephew of Earl Paul; and he was a prominent actor in all the transactions that took place in the north and west during his busy life. His father, Olaf Rolfson, dwelt at Gairsay; but he had another house at Dungalsby, in Caithness, where he governed the country under Earl Paul. His mother, Aslief, was distinguished for her race and her noble disposition; and from her, after the death of his father, Swein was named Swein Aslief. The house at Dungalsby was surprised and burnt by Aulver Rosta, and Olaf himself, with his soldiery, consumed in it. Swein was absent when this took place; but, on his return, seeing what had happened, immediately took boat to the Island of Swannay, in the Pentland Firth, and thence was conveyed by Grim, one of his friends, to Knarston, in Scapa, on the mainland of Orkney.

[1] Wilson's Annals, p. 325.

[2] Ibid. p. 288, part ii., chap. v. See also the previous chapter.

Having paid Grim with a gold ring for the finger, he went to Earl Paul, who was holding the Yule feasts at his palace in Orfer. Earl Paul received him kindly, and placed him at his right hand at the feast, which was given in the great hall. Among the guests was Swein Briostreip, who had had disputes both with Olaf the father and Swein Aslief. During the feast, horns were quaffed to the memory of gods and heroes, with the prologue of speeches before drinking; and amidst the drunken conviviality were some rudeness and quarrelling, and Swein Briostreip was overheard muttering that a Swein would kill a Swein. This was told Swein Aslief, with a caution that an evil spirit spoke out of Swein Briostreip's mouth; and it is said of Swein Briostreip that he was addicted to magic, and he had spent the whole of the preceding night (it was Christmas eve) without sleep at the graves of the dead to consult them, and obtain their responses. Swein Aslief, thus cautioned, slew Briostreip as the company were going from the feast to the chapel to say prayers. He immediately fled across the country north to Damsay; and by Blain, the governor of the castle there, was sent to Bishop William, in Egilsay, who had him conveyed to Holbod, in the island of Tiree, in the Hebrides, where he passed the winter, highly honoured by the inhabitants. (*Vide* note at end.)

In the beginning of spring Swein Aslief returned from the Western Isles, and visiting at Athole, Earl Maddan and his Countess Margaret, daughter of Earl Hacon, formed plots with them which were followed by the kidnapping of Earl Paul, in Rousay. (1137.) The Earl was surprised while hunting otters in the caves at Skebro-head, in the island of Rousay, hurried on ship-board, and carried away by Swein Aslief and a band of followers. Landed first at a port of Scotland, named Eckialsback, in Breidafiord, or the Murray Firth, the Earl was sent overland to Athole, after which nothing certain is known of him. Kalr, or Ronald, the nephew of St Magnus, after failing in a first attempt, had now a second time invaded Orkney. Sigurd of Westness, missing Earl Paul, imputed his loss to Earl Ronald; but some time afterwards, nine armed men, one of whom was known to be Swein, came from Scapa to a meeting at Kirkwall, when Swein told the Bishop the fate of Earl Paul, and that it was vain to look for him, because he was mutilated and dismembered. (1139.) Two years afterwards Earl Ronald, now sole Earl of the Islands, was giving his Christmas feast at the house of Knarston, when the Bishop of Athole came to him on an embassy from Earl Maddan and his Countess Margaret, daughter of Earl Hacon, claiming Earl Paul's half of Orkney for their son Harold, Paul's nephew, a boy. A meeting was then fixed on, and took place in Caithness the next Lent, when a division of the islands was made, and arrangements formed for the management of affairs during Harold's minority. Swein Aslief is mentioned as joining with

the Bishop in forwarding the arrangement; and his brother-in-law, Thorbiorn Klerkr, or the clerk, was appointed by Earl Ronald to take care of Harold's education. Swein is said now to have got possession of all the lands possessed by his father Olaf, and brother Valthiofr, drowned immediately after Olaf's murder. He lived in great pomp, and maintained a large retinue, having a guard of armed men continually about him. His sagacity was rare, and he had a surprising turn in conjecturing events, but he had a very cruel disposition. (1139.) About this time he attacked his father's murderers, Aulver Rosta and Frakaurk, in Sutherland, and burnt their house, with Frakaurk in it. Aulver Rosta escaped to the Western Isles, and was heard no more of. In the meantime, a messenger from Holbod, in the Western Isles, who had received Swein when he fled from Orkney after the slaughter of Swein Briostreip, applied for his aid in recovering lands in Cornwall taken from him. (1140-1.) Swein joined Holbod at the Isle of Man; and, after a summer spent in piracy on the shores of Cornwall, and other places, destroying all before them,—burning, it is said, six villages in Cornwall one morning before breakfast—they returned in harvest to the Isle of Man, where Swein married Ingerid, the widow of a nobleman in the Isle of Man, and rich both in lands and money, and passed the winter in that island. Next spring and summer Swein continued his piracy in Cornwall, the Scilly Islands, and coast of Ireland, and would appear then to have returned home. A difference arose between him and Thorbiorn Klerkr, (1141-2 to 1149, Orkneyinga Saga), on account of the slaughter by Thorbiorn of two associates of Swein in the burning of Frakaurk, who was Thorbiorn's grandmother. Earl Ronald reconciled them. Next appears an expedition of Swein against his former friend Holbod, in the Western Isles. Holbod fled; but the expedition made great booty, and returned to Caithness. In the division of the spoil, Swein acted unfairly, and thence incurred the enmity of Thorbiorn Klerkr, who shortly after repudiated his wife Ingerid, the sister of Swein Aslief. Swein had left the fortress of Dungalsby under the command of a follower, Margad Grimson. Margad oppressed the people heavily, and, going to Wick on one occasion, murdered Roald of Wick in his own house, with some others, after which he returned to Dungalsby. Swein collected a band, seized the castle of Freswick, or Lambaburgh, and, having provisioned, resolved to defend it. He was immediately besieged by Earl Ronald, prompted by the son of the slain Roald, and by Thorbiorn Klerkr and others, on account of the unfair division of the spoil taken in the Western Isles. Swein and Margad let themselves down from the castle walls along the cliff to the sea at the base, swam ashore, and so escaped. Swein obtained a boat at a town called Deveron, goes to the Isle of May, which he plunders; thence proceeding to Edinburgh, he is kindly

received there by King David, with whom he leaves Margad, and, returning to Orkney, he is restored to his family and possessions. Swein having escaped, Earl Ronald disdained to take revenge on the besieged left in the castle, and on their surrender set them at liberty.

At this time (1152 to 1153) Earl Ronald with Bishop William went to Jerusalem. In his absence Eysten, king of Norway, came to Orkney on an expedition to the east coast of Scotland and England, said to be the last made by the Scandinavians against England, and to have taken place in 1153, in the reign of King Stephen. Erlend, the son of Harold the orator, had got a grant from Malcolm, king of Scotland, of the half of Caithness, with the title of Earl, and now obtained from Eysteen, king of Norway, the half of Orkney which belonged to Earl Ronald, absent on his journey to the Holy Land. A difference arose between Swein Aslief and Earl Harold, because the Earl had banished Gunn, a brother of Swein's, for getting his mother Margaret with child. When Earl Erlend went to Norway to King Eysteen, Swein resided at Lambaburgh, and one day seeing a boat crossing the Pentland Firth, he attacked and plundered it. It was a vessel carrying Zetland rents to Earl Harold at Wick. Going then to Orkney, Swein robbed Fuglis of his ship as he was journeying to visit Earl Harold, and at the same time robbed Sigurd Klaufa, a tenant of Harold's, of twelve ounces of gold, which he was carrying to deposit in the church of St Magnus for security. Swein afterwards visited King Malcolm of Scotland, a boy of nine years of age, at Arduness, in Sutherlandshire. Returning to Stronsay in Orkney, he meets Earl Erlend on his return from King Eysteen in Norway, and Erlend's enmity to him for burning his grand-aunt, Frakaurk, is put an end to, and a treaty made between him and Swein. Swein advised Erlend immediately to demand of Earl Harold the half of Orkney (about 1154). They found Earl Harold at Kiarekstadr, or perhaps the roadstead of Kirkwall, sitting up late on Michaelmas eve in his ship. On observing the long-ship approaching, Harold fled with his guards to the castle. Arni Raffnson is said to have fled so rapidly to Kirkwall, that he had his shield on his shoulder and stuck in the door. After some days of siege a reconciliation was made between Earls Erlend and Harold, and Harold's own half of Orkney yielded to Erlend, after which Harold went to Scotland. A Thing was immediately held at Kirkwall, at which Erlend produced his right from King Eysteen, and, aided by Swein, obtained the obedience of the meeting on the condition that, on Earl Ronald's return, he would give up his own half to that Earl. Swein cautioned Erlend not to be secure with Harold; and Harold did come to Orkney, intending to attack Erlend, who was however on his guard. On the eleventh day of Yule, Swein, who had gone to his house in Gairsay, was drink-

ing with his friends, and rubbing his nose, said, "I think Earl Harold is now on his way to these islands." Erlend and Swein were on their guard, and lived mostly on ship-board during the winter.

In the spring Earl Harold besieged Erling the younger, who carried off his mother to the castle of Mousa, or Moyseaburgh, in Zetland; but having failed in cutting off provisions, and the siege occupying some time, an accommodation was entered into. Erling obtained the Earl's mother in marriage, and accompanied Harold to Norway. In his absence Earl Erlend and Swein went on a piratical expedition along the east coast of Scotland as far as Berwick, and came home in the harvest. Earl Ronald returned to Orkney at Christmas (1155 or 1156) from his eastern expedition. The succeeding summer (1157) an agreement was entered into between Earls Ronald and Erlend; but Earl Harold, on his return from Norway to Orkney about the same time, being pursued by Earl Erlend and Swein Aslief, fled to Thurso, where a new agreement was entered into between Earls Ronald and Harold, to the exclusion of Erlend. Ronald and Harold went to Orkney; and Erlend and Swein, with a weaker force, sailed between Caithness and Orkney in the Pentland Firth during the autumn, and simulating an intention of going to the Western Isles, they suddenly, with a fair wind, sailed back to Waas, and took by surprise the fleet of Ronald and Harold at Knarston, in Scapa, the two Earls escaping with difficulty to Caithness. Swein advised Erlend to station his ships for the winter at Waas, but he preferred the island of Damsay in the Bay of Firth. Swein had gone to Sandwick to settle some differences between a female relative, Sigrudis, and a neighbour (1157). During his absence the two Earls, Ronald and Harold, surprised Erlend on ship-board late at night, and he was slain in a state of drunkenness. The body of Erlend was interred in St Magnus. Margad, a leader of Erlend's soldiers, observing the Earl's defeat went to Rendall, and sent messengers to Swein, who joined them. From Rendall they went to Rousay, and observing through chinks of a house a party of enemies rejoicing, Swein slew one Erlend, who boasted of having given Earl Erlend his death-blow, and he wounded and made prisoners the rest of the party. Swein having then gone to his uncle Helgr at Tingwall in Rendall, received there a message from Earl Ronald, which led to a reconciliation. Swein was to pay each of the Earls a *mark of gold*,[1] and retain a long-ship and the half of his farms. But Earl Ronald would not receive the fine from Swein, saying he did not wish to injure him, and preferred his friendship to his wealth. Earl Harold, however, went to Gairsay, and took several things belonging to Swein, on which he complained

[1] Mark of gold, eight ounces to mark. Ounce at L.4, mark L.32, supposing coinage not to have existed in the north till a later period.

to Earl Ronald, who advised Swein to remain with him, and he would send a messenger to Earl Harold, and said that Swein, though a brave man, could not contend with Harold. Swein, however, went to Gairsay, intending to kill Harold. The peace was broken. Earl Harold came to the island to hunt hares. Swein went to Hellisey or Elgarholm, and hid himself in a cave, from which, concealed himself, he heard the conversation of Earl Harold and his followers in pursuit of him. Harold departed, and Swein went to Sanday and North Ronaldshay. Earl Ronald followed him to North Ronaldshay. Swein having observed the approach of the Earl's long-ship from an eminence, came down to the beach and rowed in a small boat from the shore to the Earl's ship; when near, he stood up with a spear in his hand, on which Earl Ronald held before him a shield. Swein, however, did not throw the spear, and when the Earl observed this, he indicated security by the suspended shield of peace, and asked Swein to return ashore, when concord was restored. He soon after obtained peace with Harold, but not relying on it as sure, went to Caithness and the Western Isles (1158 or 1159). Swein, after Easter of 1159, returned from the Hebrides with sixty men, and seized at Rousay Hacon Karl, who had followed Harold when Earl Erlend was slain. Hacon redeemed himself by paying a ransom of three marks of gold. Earl Ronald afterwards obtained a confirmation of the peace between Harold and Swein, which was made during the holy week in the cathedral of St Magnus; and at a subsequent meeting farther arrangements were made between Harold and Swein. Swein, however, attached himself to Ronald.

Swein, Thorbiorn Klerkr, and Eric Slagbreller, then went on an expedition to the west, and as far as the Scilly Isles, where, in the haven of Saint Mary's they obtained a great victory, and returned with much spoil. After this, Swein made a piratical expedition to the Hebrides, where, at the request of Ronald, he went in search of Gilla Odran, a Scottish homicidal outlaw, who, when received and protected by the Orkney Earls, had slain Helgr, a friend of Earl Ronald's. From Orkney Odran had fled to Somerled, Thane of Argyle, by whom he was protected. Swein attacked Somerled, and destroyed his fleet; but finding Odran was not in it, he continued his pursuit of him, and having at last encountered, slew him at Myrkvafiord or Black Firth, in the west of Sutherland, with fifty of his men. Thorbiorn Klerkr had at this time been banished from Orkney by Earl Ronald for a murder in Kirkwall, where he took refuge in the Cathedral of Saint Magnus, venerated as a sanctuary, and thence betook himself to Scotland. The two Earls went as usual during the summer to hunt in Caithness and Sutherland, and Earl Ronald was slain by Thorbiorn Klerkr at Kalfadal or Forn, near Thurso,—according to Torfæus,

20th August 1158, or to the Saga, in 1159. It is satisfactory to find that Thorbiorn Klerkr did not escape, but was immediately killed by the Earl's friends.

After Earl Ronald's murder, the whole of the Islands were subject to Earl Harold. Swein undertook the charge and education of Hacon, one of the Earl's sons. It is told of Swein at this time that he lived at the house of Gairsay, entertaining eighty men. In the summer, after the seed was sown, he went on a piratical expedition, and returned in the autumn to reap the crop; but as soon as the harvest was over he went on an autumn piratical expedition, from which he returned home to spend his Christmas and pass the winter in Orkney. He went on an expedition to the Western Isles, where the terror of his name led the tribes to fly to the caves and rocks with their effects. Thence he proceeded south to the Isle of Man; but not getting booty, he sailed to Ireland, and, near Dublin, made prize of two vessels from England to Dublin, laden with English cloth and many valuable articles. When he came back to Orkney, he sewed the English cloths to the sails, and, from their red colour, the expedition was called the Scarlet Expedition. On his return home he made a magnificent feast, at which it is told there was plenty of wine and other pleasant liquors, some of the fruits of his piracy. At this feast a remarkable conversation is told between Earl Harold and Swein. The Earl advised Swein to give up his piratical expeditions; and Swein, after a good-humoured retort on the Earl, declares his intention of doing so after his next harvest expedition. A short time after (1160), Swein, taking with him Hacon, Earl Harold's son, went on an expedition to the Western Isles; and not getting booty there, he sailed for Ireland, and surprised Dublin. A great booty was taken and the principal men made prisoners, and ransomed on their promises to surrender the city, to pay what sum of money might be demanded, and to receive troops in garrison. This was sworn to, and Swein returned in the evening to his ships, intending next morning to take possession of all the town. During the night the inhabitants of Dublin planned the destruction of the Orkney invaders. Within the walls, along the streets through which Swein was to pass, they dug ditches covered over with wood and stone, done with such art as to be entirely concealed. Next day Swein entered the city with his band, and being received by the citizens, suddenly fell into the ditches, on which armed men sallied out of the adjoining houses and attacked them so entangled in the ditches; while another party shut the gates, to prevent aid coming from the ships. Swein and his band thus entrapped were all slain, himself the last man; and the last words he spoke were these:—"I would have all of you to know, whether I die or not, that I am one of holy Earl Ronald's guards, from whom now, after God,

I hope for aid." Such of the expedition as escaped immediately went aboard their ships and returned to Orkney. This is the end of the story of Swein Asleif, which misfortune was foretold by Earl Ronald, and more recently by Earl Harold. He is esteemed to have been the most considerable private man in the west, of the Scandinavian times. After his death, his sons Olaf and Andrew divided his property, and built transverse walls across the great hall in Gairsay. Andrew married Fridu, daughter of Kolbein Hrugu, and sister of Biarn, Bishop of Orkney.

NOTE.—The following extract from Torfæus's Orcades, cap. xxiii., is illustrative of the manners of the Orkney Scandinavians. It is the only passage in the Orkney chronicles where the incidents of a feast are mentioned, and the most particular notice given of one of their houses. At this moment there are not in existence in Orkney any considerable remains of buildings of the Scandinavian period. What are called Picts' houses are of a more remote time, and if ever inhabited other than as temporary places of concealment and refuge, seem to belong to a race in an earlier stage of society than either Picts or Scandinavians, classing, perhaps, with the sunk habitation of the Bosjesman and the Siberian Tartar, and the cave of the old Troglodyti of Ethiopia.

"Arnkell of Knarston went with Swein to Orfer, where he was courteously received, being first brought to his relative Eyvind, the son of Melbrygd, and by him in turn to Earl Paul, who welcomed him, but was much grieved when Swein told him of his father's fate, and regretted the loss he had sustained by the death of such a man: therefore, to sooth his grief, he invited Swein to stay with him, and treated him honourably, consoling him with attentions worthy of a nobleman. They then went to evening prayers. There were at Orfer magnificent buildings, which stood on a rising ground; behind was a gentle declivity, and above it was the hill of Orfer; underneath the hill on the other side lay the Aurridia Fiord, or Bay of Firth, with the island of Damsay, of a castle on which Blain, the son of Thorstein of Flydrunesi, was the governor. In this building at Orfer was a very large hall, calculated for entertaining a great number of guests. In the south wall, near the east corner which joined the two sides, was a door, and before it an elegant temple, to which the path from the hall by the door led sloping. When you entered, there was on the left hand a large vaulted cellar, within which there stood several large casks full of ale; then you came to another door, opposite which was a cœnaculum, or kind of drawing-room. When the evening prayers were ended, the Earl ordered that the guests should be directed to their seats. At his right hand was placed Swein, son of Asleif; on his left, Swein Briostreip; and next to him, his

cousin John. After supper they were informed that Valthiof Olafson, brother of Swein Aslief, was drowned. The Earl was very vexed when he heard of the double calamity of that family, and for that reason ordered that no one should tell Swein of it till the feast was over. At night, when they had drank sufficiently, Earl Paul went to sleep, as did the greatest part of the company, after his example; but Swein Biostreip, as usual with him, spent the whole night without sleep, at the graves of the dead, in order to consult them and get their answers. About the middle of the night, it being Christmas eve, all rose out of their beds, and were present at Divine service in the temple. Next day, Christmas, after celebration of the holy rites, they went to dinner, Eyvind, son of Melbrygd, who was master of the household (perhaps steward), gave orders how all things should be conducted, and for that reason did not sit down with the rest. Those who served the dishes, and those who attended to the candles at the table where Earl Paul sat, kept their own stations. Eyvind filled cups to both the Sweins, but Briostreip accused him of having filled his cup fuller than Swein Asleif's, and of having filled it before Asleif had drunk his cup, and blamed his friend in drinking, for there had been quarrels between Briostreip and Olaf Rolfson, the father of Swein Asleif, and Asleif himself, when he had grown up to manhood. After they had drunk some time, they went to the nones, or evening prayers. Afterwards, when they returned to the feast, horns dedicated to the memory of gods and heroes were drunk, prefaced with a prologue or speech. Swein Biostreip insisted to exchange his horn with Swein Asleif's, which seemed less than his. Enyvind, therefore, gave Asleif a more capacious horn, and he in turn passed it to Swein Biostreip, who, enraged that he was jested, muttered in a low voice, but so as Earl Paul and a few others heard him, 'Perhaps Swein may kill a Swein; yes, Swein may kill a Swein.' Swein Asleif walked before Earl Paul to the temple, Briostreip still remaining at the feast. When they were come outside of the hall, Eyvind, taking Asleif aside, said, 'Did you not hear what your namesake Swein muttered when you gave the horn to him?' and repeating the words, said, that an evil spirit spoke out of his mouth, for he had resolved to kill Swein Asleif that very night. Therefore, advising him to anticipate the mischief that was designed, and giving him an axe, he told him to stay at the cellar in the dark, and to strike Briostreip in the front, if his cousin John walked before him; but if John followed, to give the blow on the back part of the head. The Earl, paying no attention to what passed between Eyvind and Swein Aslief, walked to the temple, and shortly after Briostreip and John came,—John walking first, followed by Briostreip carrying his sword in his hand, as was his custom, though none else carried their swords. They came at last to the door, where there was

some light, though the sky was cloudy, and Swein Asleif struck the forehead of Briostreip with a mortal blow, which did not, however, make him fall, but he staggered, and on raising himself, as he saw before him his cousin John, not knowing who it was, Briostriep imputed the wound received to his cousin, and immediately drawing his sword, clave John's head down to the shoulders, and so both fell down with their wounds. When this was done, Eyvind came up and took Swein Asleif to the cœnaculum or drawing-room, which was opposite to them, and let him down from a window. There Magnus, a son of Eyvind's, had a horse saddled, which carried Swein to the Bay of Firth, where he got a skiff to convey him to the Isle of Damsay." Swein, we are told in the Notes, went from Damsay to Bishop William at Egilshay, who sent him to Tiree, where he resided during the winter. Torfœus continues,—"I shall now relate what passed at Orfer: As soon as it was known that Swein Briostreip was wounded mortally, and John also slain, both lying on the ground, they came out of the temple and carried Swein Briostreip into the house; for he was not dead, though speechless, but he died that night. In order, therefore, to discover the author of the slaughter, the Earl ordered every one to take his seat, and Swein Asleif being missing, is judged to have committed this crime. Then Eyvind stood up and said, it was evident that John was not killed by Swein Asleif, but by Briostreip. The Earl declared that a hair of his head should not be touched for killing Broistreip, for he had not done so without a sufficient cause; if, however, Swein Asleif declined to apply to him, he judged ill both for his reputation and safety. It was generally thought he had gone to Hacon Karl, (uterine) brother of Saint Magnus, in Papa Westray, a very excellent man, much esteemed for his prudence and moderation. Nothing, however, was known of him that winter. Therefore Earl Paul banished Swein Asleif from his territories, not so much for the slaughter, although done on so holy a day, and within his house, as for the contempt of his rank and authority, added to the crime."