

Tim William Machan and Jón Karl Helgason, eds. 2020. *From Iceland to the Americas: Vinland and historical imagination*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. xv + 288 pages. ISBN: 978-1-5261-2871-1.

The Norse (or “Viking”) presence around the year 1000 in what is presently North America has long attracted the attention of readers, scholars, politicians, artists, writers, and cultural agents of all sorts. *From Iceland to the Americas: Vinland and Historical Imagination*, edited by Tim William Machan and Jón Karl Helgason, gathers a collection of essays on the multifaceted reception of this “small historical fact” over the last 200 years or so (p. xii). More than simply offering a record of relevant examples, however, the collection endeavours to interrogate how and why “Vinland” first became and continues to be such a potent cultural touchstone.

From Iceland to the Americas begins with an introduction authored by Machan that provides valuable background information and context for the volume as a whole, the remainder of which is divided into three sections. The first section, “Imagination and Ideology,” opens with an essay by Seth Lerer concentrating on what he terms “the professorial sublime,” which refers to the crucial role of language and philology in the experience and subsequent conjuring of certain 19th-century journeys to imagined or “extreme” places, including Iceland. Next, Kevin J. Harty explores the cinematic, historical, literary, and political reception of the well-known “Viking Tower” in Newport, Rhode Island. Following this, using several examples from the latter half of the 20th century, Matthew Scribner investigates how certain popular histories have invoked the Norse voyages to Vinland to criticize Columbus’ legacy but have still adopted a decidedly Eurocentric perspective on North American history. Finally, Verena Höfig discusses the popularity of “Vinland” among contemporary neo-pagan organizations in the United States. She first focuses on the misogynistic white supremacist neo-pagan group known as the “Wolves of Vinland” before examining broader neo-pagan currents, which includes a growing number of organizations that speak out against misogyny, racism, and bigotry.

The next section, “Landscapes and Cultural Memory,” begins with an essay by Amy C. Mulligan illustrating how events and performances at and surrounding the 1893 Chicago’s World Fair, including the voyage of the replica ship *Viking*, affected Americans’ views of the significance of the medieval Norse voyages to Vinland. Bergur Þorgeirsson follows with an examination, largely centred around the activities, published works, and influence of Norwegian-American historian Rasmus B. Anderson, of the role both the idea of Vinland and the dissemination of Old Norse literature played in constituting

Norwegian-American cultural identity during the late-19th and early-20th centuries. In her contribution, Emily Lethbridge next turns to a selection of Iceland travel books published in the United States between 1854 and 1914, which are less well-known than their British counterparts, and emphasizes how these works reflect more about the authors' attempts to express what it means to be American than about the culture and history of Iceland. Simon Halink closes this section with an essay on the significance of Vinland among the community of Icelandic immigrants to Canada in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which he contrasts with the corresponding ideas of Icelanders in Iceland during the same time.

Angela Sorby commences the collection's final section, "Recasting the Past," with an essay discussing four 19th-century American poems, each of which features an imagined Norse presence in North America's past, and demonstrates how the poems reflect contemporaneous questions concerning history, race, and national identity. Next, Jón Karl Helgason directs his attention to several pre-Marvel comic book iterations of Thor and a few other Norse gods from the 1940s and considers how their depictions were shaped by fascism's rise in Europe and the events of the Second World War in numerous ways. Then, Dustin Geeraert offers a close reading of the Batman film *The Dark Knight* against Old Norse mythology centring on certain symbolic echoes converging around trickster-figure archetypes that feature in both the film and in certain mythological narrative traditions. Finally, closing both this third section of essays and the collection as a whole, Heather O'Donoghue examines Neil Gaiman's novel *American Gods*, as well as its recent television adaptation, and reflects on how Gaiman's use of elements and figures from Norse mythology ties into the wider mythology of emigration/immigration embedded within his fictional narrative.

As a whole, *From Iceland to the Americas* offers many compelling arguments and explanations for how and why the brief Norse presence in what is presently North America has endured as a modern cultural touchstone. Drawing on diverse source material, as described above, these arguments and explanations centre around ideas and ideologies relating to identity, race, colonialism, emigration/immigration, politics, aesthetics, and artistic production. Several essays in the collection cover somewhat familiar terrain for those already well-versed in the subject (e.g., Harty, Höfig, Þorgeirsson), but these essays will doubtlessly prove intriguing and cover vital ground for those with less experience. Yet, a number of other essays deal with material that has attracted little previous scholarly attention (e.g., Lethbridge, Halink, Sorby). Thus, the collection, including Mahan's lengthy introduction, offers both an accessible entry point for the uninitiated as well as much unanticipated substance for more seasoned readers.

Still, some may find the overall cohesion of the volume a tad strained by those contributions (Lerer, Helgason, Geeraert) that, though insightful and well-executed, touch on aspects of the modern reception of Old Norse-Icelandic

history and literature without a clear connection to “Vinland” as such. Moreover, some may also register slight disappointment when finding that, aside from parts of Machan’s Introduction (pp. 8–11) and Scribner’s essay (p. 67), which very briefly draw examples from Mexico, Central, and South America, and Halink’s essay on Icelandic-Canadian traditions, the collection is decidedly focused on the culture and history of and about the United States of America. This somewhat disproportionate picture of the “Americas,” as promised in the book’s title, underlines the ongoing need for a broader outlook on the cultural, historical, and political reception of “Vinland.” Hopefully, this otherwise admirable and highly valuable collection will act as a catalyst for scholars to continue their efforts to fill in these gaps.

Christopher Crocker
University of Iceland, 2022