NORSE NEWFOUNDLAND: AN ONGOING TRADITION?

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Last night as I lay on my bunk I dreamt a pleasant dream;
I dreamt I was back in Scotland beside a flowing stream.
The girl I loved sat on my knee and a bottle in my hand,
But I woke up broken hearted on the Banks of Newfoundland.

Newfoundland could be the most westerly of the Hebrides. Larger than Iceland it is a cross between Lewis and Argyll, a kind of Skye without the Cuillins, so far as topography is concerned. The capital, St Johns, a haven for centuries of ships fleeing the wrath of the Atlantic, is strangely reminiscent of Bergen. On October 27–30 1979, a weekend of lashing gales and freezing rain completely typical of the climate of the Atlantic littoral, the Memorial University of Newfoundland at St Johns in association with the Provincial government hosted a symposium on 'Early European Settlement and Exploitation in Atlantic Canada'. Advance publicity had proclaimed – 'the Vikings are coming!' – but in the event they must have been blown off course for they were conspicious by their absence in lecture content and audience alike. Two notable and welcome exceptions were Dr. Helge Ingstad and his wife, Anne Stine recipient of an honorary doctorate from Memorial at the start of the conference.

When Helge Ingstad landed at Épaves Bay in 1960 to commence excavations at the site which would become associated with L'Anse aux Meadows he was to make discoveries even more momentous in their way than those of Leif the Lucky almost one thousand years earlier. There had been, and according to some authorities, there continues to be, a conspiracy of silence by the North American archaeological establishment on the subject of pre-Columban America. By 1960 several scholars had announced that they were convinced by the testimony of the sagas of the Norse discovery of America. Leif and his crew landed on an island 'which lay north of the mainland ... They saw that there was dew on the grass, and it came about that

they got some of it on their hands and put it to their lips, and they thought that they had never before tasted anything so sweet'. Whether or not these dew drinkers landed in Newfoundland had been a matter of considerable dispute but Dr. Ingstad was to convincingly demonstrate in six seasons of excavation supervised by Anne Stine that *some* Vikings had settled at L'Anse aux Meadows. Ingstad has recounted the long saga in which he trekked from Norway to Iceland, Greenland, Helluland, Labrador and the lengthy coastline of North America in search of a Viking site in his book *Westward to Vinland,* while his wife has described the excavations in *The Norse Discovery of America.* The story, however, is not yet over.

Several of the papers delivered at the symposium were unbelievably bad; others were full of sound and fury signifying little. One speaker whose thesis was swept away in the waters of the Belle Isle Strait had recorded a cod fish which weighed over two hundred pounds. There was to be a lot about cod, among other fish, at this conference. Newfoundland floated on the creatures. Basques and Portuguese as well as English and French were drawn by the legendary quantities of fish in these waters. David Quinn of Liverpool, doyen of students of the early Atlantic voyages, estimated that the value of the New Land fisheries for England and Europe was equal to that of the gold and silver taken out of Spanish America. In an eloquent paper he traced the emergence of Newfoundland in early maps. The first separate map of the island was published by John Mason at Edinburgh in 1620.

Basil Greenhill of the National Maritime Museum attempted the impossible by discussing both Viking ships and the ship revolution of the Later Middle Ages. There were a couple of interesting discussions of settlement in the 16th and 17th centuries. Robert Grenier, marine archaeologist with Parks Canada, described his underwater excavation of a whaler – or more accurately, perhaps, a transporter of whale products – of 1565, from Red Bay, Labrador. Nearby Professor Tuck is currently reconstructing a closely associated whaling station. Through such painstaking and fascinating research the New World is able to teach the Old about its own early industrial and

naval history. The Vikings figured in only two papers. Peter Bennett, speaking as an administrator rather than an archaeologist, talked about the site at L'Anse aux Meadows. For once administration (a Canadian obsession) is of interest. Those of us who have raged over the apparent neglect of so many Hebridean monuments or who discussed the future of the Freswick complex at the Caithness conference last year can only wonder at the scale of Canadian conservation, though we may also envy their resources. In 1968 L'Anse aux Meadows was recognised as a National Site. In 1970 an International Advisory Committee was set up drawing scholars from all over Scandinavia, Britain and America to consider the future of the site. Following their deliberations the Norse complex was taken into Federal control under Parks Canada in 1977. So far two million dollars have been spent on the site. Thirty one square miles of land and sea have been taken into protection. Expenditure of a further one and a half million dollars is planned. Well away from the Ingstad excavations where the topography is being restored to what it was in 1960, Parks Canada is reconstructing the Viking houses and other buildings as well as display material and, probably, a long ship. There was no road to the place until 1966. That road will be completely surfaced by next summer to cope with the expected hordes of visitors. The nearest accommodation is thirty miles away at St. Anthony's Hotel and dining facilities for tourists are being left to private enterprise.

In 1979 L'Anse aux Meadows was the first site anywhere to be accepted by the World Heritage Convention of UNESCO. Now if enraged Newfies should revolt, unable to thole the neglect and mismanagement which has persisted since they joined the Canadian Confederation in 1949, the oldest (and so far the only) Viking site in North America will somehow be protected. All of these measures are admirable. Less fortunate was the determination of the conference organisers to prevent any vocal scholarly acrimony over the site or its excavators. One can only admire the tenacity and determination of the Ingstads but there was no hint at this conference that there has been widespread disagreement over the interpretation of some of Anne Stine's data. Certain wood fragments from the

excavation have now been analysed but no-one was on hand to enlighten us about them. Incredibly there was no mention throughout that Parks Canada have been excavating at L'Anse aux Meadows for three seasons with the results so far unpublished. This was surely the occasion for some kind of interim report but none was forthcoming.

In what may prove the greatest single advance in American Norse studies since the Ingstads' discoveries, Robert McGhee, Arctic Archaeologist with the Canadian National Museum of Man, discussed the distribution of Norse artefacts throughout the Arctic. Such objects as fragments of chain mail, pieces of woollen cloth and clinker nails have been unearthed in sites associated with the Eskimo Dorset culture. One site dated to c. 1200 on the west side of Hudson Bay produced three fragmentary iron nails, one of which had been smelted. Baffin Island has produced wooden figurines almost certainly Norse. Arguing that such objects probably represent trade and barter rather than plunder McGhee cited similar finds from a dozen sites inside the Arctic Circle. Traces of the Dorset culture have been found at L'Anse aux Meadows which reminds one of how frequently the Vikings chose previously occupied sites for settlement in Scotland and Ireland. Some trade could have been carried on through the Newfoundland habitation site. The item most sought by the Norsemen was apparently ivory gathered from walruses. Have any items, possibly of Dorset ivory, been recovered from Scottish sites? Might they represent the British end of trade routes which extended north of the Arctic Circle?

Vikings at the moment are somewhat passé in North America which is currently caught up with the wild speculations of Barry Fell and his disciples. A marine biologist at Harvard, Fell, who boasts a Ph.D. from Edinburgh University where he read Gaelic for two years, finds inscriptions all over America testifying to the presence of Phoenicians, Egyptians, Jews, Basques and Celts to name but a few in *America B.C.* (Americans consider Time to be divisible into Before Columbus and After him). McGhee has claimed an ogam inscription from Newfoundland. Fell finds traces of the Celts all over the place, notably in

inscriptions which he calls 'ogam' but which no Celticists recognise and in certain New England buildings which some American historians date to the Colonial period. Fell detects traces of Norse and Gaelic, as well as Egyptian, in the Micmac language. His book, *America B.C.* created so much interest that Carleton State College convened a conference in 1977. The proceedings were published in a volume entitled *Ancient Vermont* (ed.) Warren L. Cook. The editor believed that this gathering represented 'the finest assembly of minds that may have taken place in' the state of Vermont. If so Vermont is in dire need of divine assistance. An embarrassing number of those on the rostrum and in the audience seem to have been dafties. On the side of reason Bill Nicolaisen questioned Fell's Celtic linguistic evidence as well as his alleged American Celtic place-names. Anne Ross saw no ogam in the New England specimens with which she was presented. Their opinions were unanimously rejected by the faithful. Fell himself emerges from the volume of proceedings as an arrogant individual whose claims are undoubtedly of interest but which inevitably extend to pure fantasy – astro-archaeology, ritual buttock marks cut on stone or the Gaelic influence on Algonquian, for example. There can be little doubt that America had transatlantic visitors, quite apart from the Norse, long before Columbus' time. Fell and company deal in intuition and coincidence which are unscholarly and quite uncritical. For a more sober discussion which still sails pretty close to the heady wind of uncritical enthusiasm see Salvatore M. Trento, *The Search for Lost America.*

It would be foolish to pretend that anything like a Scandinavian tradition survived in Newfoundland but the island's history offers numerous parallels to the experience of Celtic Britain, the Northern and Western Isles and Scandinavia. Newfoundland and her people have been cynically exploited since the first settlements in the 16th and 17th centuries. Poverty has been endemic and virtually without parallel in the rest of North America. The Newfies, in turn, wiped out the island's native people, the Beothuks, the last of whom died in 1829. Although not a numerous section of the population the Scots arrived in the mid 19th century with names like McLellan,

MacIsaac, MacDonald, Gillies and MacLeod from such places as Morar, Eigg, Lochaber, Skye, Barra and South Uist. (see Rosemary Ommer, 'Highland Scots Migration to Southwestern Newfoundland. A Study in Kinship' in *The Peopling of Newfoundland* (ed.) John Mannion, Memorial University 1977, pp. 212–233). In 1924 George Allan England entitled his magnificent account of 'the greatest hunt in the world', the great Newfoundland seal hunt, *Vikings of the Ice.* This remarkable annual carnage recalls, though it exceeded, the heroism and hardship of the Lofoten fishermen on the other side of the Atlantic. Between 1870 and 1914 almost 70% of all the ships engaged on the seal hunt were lost. Poverty bred a race of men for whom in England's unsentimental account the death of a sealer is only slightly more noteworthy than the death of a seal. That same poverty probably explains Newfoundland's losses in the Great War which were colossally out of proportion in terms of population.

Newfoundland has coped alike with desperate poverty and the economic boom of say, fishing. Her people are hospitable and humorous. Now oil has been discovered off her shores and the locals, starved of employment, are ready for it. It is all rather reminiscent of Shetland in 1968. In the event of an oil strike close to L'Anse aux Meadows that site, with the protection that three and a half million dollars can buy, will at least be safe. As the Icelandic voyagers to the New World used to say, 'where there's Leif there's hope'. It is to be hoped that in the longer term the oil turns out as sweet as the dew of the sagas.

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