In Search of First Contact
The Vikings of Vinland,
the Peoples of the Dawnland, and
the Anglo-American Anxiety
of Discovery

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WITH DEEP LOVE AND ENDLESS GRATITUDE,
THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO MY TRUEST TEACHERS,
PAST AND PRESENT:

Sarah Katz Rivkind and David Rivkind,
doting grandparents who believed I could do no wrong

Esther Rivkind Kolodny, my loving mother who did her best

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Wayne Newell, Passamaquoddy elder and educator

James G. Sappier, Penobscot Nation elder and former elected chief

Charles Norman Shay, decorated World War Two hero,
Penobscot Nation elder, and grandson of Joseph Nicolar

Daniel James Peters, novelist, friend, and patient loving
husband since 1970
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In September 2000, as the Smithsonian Institution launched its Viking Millennium Project with the touring exhibit titled *Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga*, and as both Canada and the U.S. geared up to recognize the thousandth anniversary of Leif Eiriksson’s voyage to North America, my long-simmering project—which now seemed so timely—had to be put on hold when I was diagnosed with early-stage ovarian and endometrial cancer. Dealing with the cancer was complicated by the fact that I was also battling increasingly crippling rheumatoid arthritis. Three gifts helped me get through the surgery and months of grueling chemotherapy. My dear friend, the internationally known American studies scholar Cathy N. Davidson, alerted colleagues across the country so that every day brought new communications of good wishes and healing vibes from almost everywhere. My graduate students rallied round, staying with me when my husband needed to leave the house, driving me to various appointments, running errands, and on occasion even cooking for us. The third gift was the integration of conventional Western medicine and complementary alternative modalities designed for me by Dr. Andy Weil. The team of medical, dental, and alternative practitioners on whom I have relied—and, in some cases, still rely—include Christy Allen, Joseph Buscema, the late Joel Childers, Linda Karl, Evan Kligman, Randall Knuth, Jennifer Schneider, and Daniel E. Shapiro. For all these gifts of caring, “thank you” does not seem enough.

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Sadly, before the manuscript was finished, two extraordinary friends and colleagues who had read an early draft passed away: Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna Pueblo) and Patricia Clark Smith (Euro-American and Mi’kmaq). My former University of Arizona colleague, the late Vine Deloria Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux), also read that draft. Each one gave me just the encouragement I needed and pointed me in important research directions. I join both academic colleagues and nonacademic admirers of their work from around the world in missing them sorely.

When I thought the manuscript was finished, three outstanding scholars agreed to read it as a personal favor to me and helped me understand that I still had more work to do. I am deeply grateful to William A. Haviland, Amanda R. Ritchie, and Birgitta Linderoth Wallace for allowing me to impose upon them in this way.

I also want to thank a lifetime of students, both undergraduates and graduate students, for keeping alive my faith that ideas have power, that words matter, and that intellectual curiosity opens new worlds for each of us. I loved learning with you all.

Finally, my largest debt of gratitude is owed to my husband of over forty years, the novelist Daniel Peters. This book could not have been researched or written without his unfailing love and his willingness to accommodate the needs of a partner whose body, over the years, became increasingly enfeebled and crippled. His constant caretaking of me in recent years has placed a terrible burden on him, but he has more than once saved my dignity, my sanity, and my life. I could not have survived without his wicked sense of humor. In our next life together, it will be my turn to do the heavy lifting.
Note on the Problematics of
Word Choice and Usage

When applied to the Americas, the term “prehistory” has generally been used to designate that grand span of time before the Americas and their indigenous peoples entered into the writings and, hence, the mental world of Europe. Concomitantly, the term “the historic period” has referred to the period commencing with the appearance of the Americas and their peoples in European documents. Of course, the histories of the peoples of the Americas did not begin with Christopher Columbus’s voyage in 1492 or with those peoples’ earliest appearances in European texts and on European maps. These terms thus distort and truncate the long continuum of Native American presence in the Americas. But because several of my sources have used these terms, and because these terms continue to be operative across several disciplines, both locutions necessarily find their way into some of my chapters.

“Precontact” is another problematic term because it seems to imply the period preceding some certifiable first moment of contact between Europe (or elsewhere) and the Americas. Also, the word seems to attribute significance to that initial contact moment. My own research suggests that the concept of a first contact is a convenient European construction and may not reflect Native American understandings. The notion of precontact is thus slippery at best and, at worst, inherently imprecise. But, again, because the term is so prevalent in the historical and archaeological literature, I have been unable to avoid it in these pages.

Nineteenth-century references to the Scandinavian countries are often confused and confusing because, at the time, those countries were not the clearly separate independent nations they once had been and are today. Until 1814, Norway was a part of Denmark. Then, as an outcome of the Napoleonic Wars, Norway entered into a union with Sweden. After a peaceful secession from Sweden in 1905, Norway finally achieved its modern independence. As a result, some nineteenth-century writers described journeys to Denmark or to Sweden and incorporated time spent in Norway without naming it as such.
Some wrote about aspects of life and culture in Denmark or Sweden when they were really describing aspects of Norway. Similarly, Finland, which had long been a quasi-autonomous grand duchy under the control of Sweden, during the Napoleonic Wars was invaded by Russia and annexed in 1809. Finland’s national identity was thus also sometimes blurred (or entirely lost) in some nineteenth-century texts.

Leif Eiriksson’s name is differently spelled throughout these pages, depending on the source cited or quoted. All the variants are easily recognizable and often derive from attempts to replicate or transliterate Norwegian, Icelandic, Danish, or Swedish renderings of the name. My own choice for spelling his name follows the spelling used in the particular translation of the two Vinland sagas quoted in this book.

As used in these pages, “runes” and “runic writing” refer to ancient characters used in Teutonic, Anglo-Saxon, and Scandinavian inscriptions, probably beginning as early as ca. A.D. 300. Runes were used extensively in northern Europe, Iceland, and the British Isles through the Middle Ages and appear to have persisted in parts of Scandinavia until the nineteenth century. Adapted to carving and later to vellum and paper, runic characters consisted of perpendicular, oblique, and a few curved lines. Ancient runic inscriptions have been found all across Scandinavia.

The term “Native American” is now commonly used in the U.S. to refer to the indigenous peoples of North America. In Canada, the terms “Aboriginal,” “First Nations,” or “First Peoples” are commonly used and have sometimes been adopted by both Native and non-Native writers in the U.S. Also used in both countries is the phrase “Native peoples.” While most Native peoples of my acquaintance identify themselves by the name of their pueblo, tribe, or ethnic community, they also write and speak of themselves as “Indians.” Because it is not my place to privilege any one of these locutions over the others, I have employed almost all of them in these pages.

One important aspect of the decolonizing project of Native peoples has been the reappropriation of the right to name themselves. While, in some instances, this entailed a dramatic throwing-over of names imposed by European writers and administrators, in other cases this meant little more than a change of spelling to correct a linguistic error. The relatively recent preference for Mi’kmaq over the older “Micmac” is one such example; the preference for Maliseet over “Malecite” is another. Wherever possible, I have endeavored to use the name currently preferred, although older forms repeatedly appear in some of my quoted sources. Where the currently preferred name has not yet
been widely adopted or would not be recognizable to most readers, I have retained the older name to avoid confusion and indicated the current preferred name in parenthesis. In this way, for example, I hope to make clear that the people once called the Montagnais now call themselves the Innu.

Although the term “tribe” is used within quoted materials in this book, wherever possible I have tried to avoid using it in relation to the particular Eastern Algonquian-speaking peoples who are the main actors in some of these chapters. Europeans originally coined the term as a way of designating groups whom they considered inferior as compared to the supposedly superior established nations or organized states of the “civilized” world. Later, the U.S. imposed the term on Native peoples as a means of defining them as legal entities and simultaneously also imposed a centralized political organization on Indian communities, many of whom traditionally had functioned in a variety of ways, including through villages, bands, and chiefdoms with shifting and often temporary alliances. While the Maliseet, Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, and Mi`kmaq who make up the Wabanaki Confederacy each today have centralized governments with elected chiefs (or governors) and elected councils, throughout most of their history and into the early decades of the nineteenth century, these groups were constituted by shifting alliances between various bands and villages, each with their own unique structures of organization and authority. In the twenty-first century, many ethnologists and anthropologists (including Native anthropologists) prefer to speak of Eastern Algonquian-speaking peoples in terms of ethnicities, linguistic groups, and dialect differences. Among these groups, only the Penobscot Nation officially calls itself a “nation” (even though the official title of their historian is “Penobscot Nation tribal historian”). Where appropriate to some particular Indian group, the term “tribe” is used in these pages.

As much as possible, I have tried to avoid using totalizing racially inflected constructs such as “white man,” “red man,” and “black man.” Nonetheless, where this terminology actively informs the texts or particular situations that I am examining, in order not to distort the text being discussed, I am sometimes unable to avoid these usages.
Prologue

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A BOOK

The Great Spirit said unto me, “There shall be other people live on the land as well as your people.”

—KLOSE-KUR-BEH’S PROPHECY TO THE INDIANS,
Joseph Nicolar, The Life and Traditions of the Red Man (1893)

Wodin’it atog’agan.
Mi’kmaq: “This is a story . . .”

This book has had a very long genesis, a genesis that, in retrospect, seems to have stretched across most of my adult life. Although I did not realize it at the time, the project began when, as an undergraduate at Brooklyn College in New York, I elected to use a study abroad scholarship to enroll in the Literature Program at the University of Oslo in the summer of 1961. There, struggling through texts in Old Norse as well as modern Norwegian (with few reliable English translations available to help me), I had the good fortune to study Old Norse mythology, Norwegian folklore traditions, and, most important for this present study, the sagas of medieval Iceland. My teachers included Drs. Bjarne Berulfsen, Reidar Th. Christiansen, and Odd Nordland, all scholars whose work is still honored by today’s literary critics and literary historians in Norway.

Upon my return to Brooklyn College for my senior year, I again picked up my major in English with a concentration in American literature. While I remained fascinated by the medieval sagas I had studied in Norway, I couldn’t connect them to anything else I was studying at the time.

Eventually I pursued graduate studies in early American literature at the University of California at Berkeley. My Ph.D. dissertation examined the literary language and symbolic systems that had facilitated one environmental devastation after another as a colonial enterprise became a new nation and as that nation spread itself across the continent. Out of this work came an ongoing commitment to the newly
developing field of ecocriticism and my first two books, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (1975) and *The Land before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630–1860* (1984). In time, I also came to identify my work as American frontier studies. Based on this research, I developed both undergraduate and graduate courses that combined analysis of the literatures of the seriatim American frontiers with gender studies and environmental concerns.

Meanwhile, my husband, the novelist Daniel Peters, was researching and publishing a trilogy of historical novels about the great pre-Columbian civilizations of Mesoamerica and South America: the Aztec, the Maya, and the Inca.1 Because I read Spanish easily and spoke it serviceably, I accompanied Dan on all his research travels to archaeological sites from Mexico to Bolivia and Peru. For his part, my husband studied the languages of the peoples he was attempting to re-create. Together, we read and spent countless hours discussing all the available historical, anthropological, and archaeological data. In the process, my courses on the American frontiers took on a new shape. Where my husband ended each of his novels with the arrival of the Spanish, I now began my courses with the journals of Christopher Columbus and the extant writings of the Spanish explorers, conquistadores, and priests. Instead of identifying the beginning of an American frontier with the arrival of the Pilgrims at Plymouth in 1620, I relocated the first frontier to the explorations of the Hispanic Southwest in the sixteenth century. The frontier hadn’t moved from east to west, I argued, but rather, at first, from west to east and from the south to *el norte*. Increasingly, I pushed back the meaning of “frontier” to its origins in the earliest European texts of exploration and contact, beginning with Columbus. And I asked my students to consider the possibility that American literature really began in these early “contact” narratives that constructed a so-called New World and its peoples through and for the contemporary cultural understandings of the European imagination. Many of those constructions were still with us, I pointed out, even if in repressed or disguised formulations.

At the same time, I also introduced in my courses the extant stories and recorded legends of the Native peoples who had been encountered at each frontier site. I tried to emphasize to my students that, even before the contact period, Native peoples had migrated from one location to another and confronted their own new frontiers. When I could find them, I especially enjoyed teaching Native American versions of what had transpired in the collisions of cultures, whether with other
Native peoples or with Europeans. My understanding of “frontier,” in other words, had gradually shifted back to include what was then generally called the precontact period.

Then I thought again about Eirik’s Saga and The Greenlanders’ Saga, both of which I had studied in Norway all those years ago, and both of which told stories about the Norse explorations and attempted colonization of North America somewhere around the year A.D. 1000. After years of letting them gather dust, I finally unpacked the boxes of notebooks from my summer at the University of Oslo. As I read through old handwritten notes, I remembered how the two sagas recorded delight with the mild climate and fertility of the place the Norse named Vinland the Good, and I remembered that the sagas recorded encounters with Native peoples (whom the Norse dubbed, pejoratively, Skraelings, meaning “wretches” or “people who screech”). These, I realized, were the earliest known European narratives of contact with North America. With no little excitement, I started to rethink everything I thought I already knew. First, I composed a kind of position paper for reconceptualizing the literary history of the American frontiers, a literary history that would necessarily include, among scores of other texts, Native American materials and the two Vinland sagas. My position paper appeared as an article in the journal American Literature in 1992, under the title “Letting Go Our Grand Obsessions: Notes toward a New Literary History of the American Frontiers.” Then, in the fall of 1994, after stepping down as dean of the College of Humanities at the University of Arizona and taking up full-time teaching duties again, I tried an experiment: I assigned English translations of the two Vinland sagas as required reading in my undergraduate survey of American literature and, as well, in my yearlong graduate seminar on the theory and literature of the American frontiers. By then, a great deal of excellent interpretive criticism and historical scholarship on the entire saga tradition was available in English, so I felt I could prepare to teach the two sagas in a reasonably up-to-date manner.

To my surprise, student responses in the two courses were markedly different. Despite my attentiveness to the literary conventions informing the sagas, the undergraduates wanted to read them as history and were thrilled to encounter what were to them rather exotic “discovery” narratives that most of them had never heard of before. In contrast, the graduate students protested that the sagas weren’t written in English; they weren’t composed for an “American” audience; and they had had no known influence on real American literature. So why had I assigned them in an American literature course? For those students
who had read “Letting Go Our Grand Obsessions,” the inclusion of the sagas in our seminar on frontier literature was less problematic. But these same students posed yet another set of important questions: Where was Vinland located, and what had really happened there? And were there any Native American stories about this early contact?

In the summer of 1995, I began searching for answers to all those questions and objections. This book is the product of that search.

I began by trying to identify the Native peoples with whom the Norse might have come in contact. Based on what we know about Norse explorations to the west and north of Greenland—in addition to their contacts with Inuit (an Eskimoan people) in the Arctic—the Norse could also have encountered the Beothuk, who once inhabited Newfoundland, as well as the caribou-hunting Naskapi and Innu (formerly known as the Montagnais) of Quebec and Labrador. But if reports of wild grapevines in the sagas were accurate, then the Skraelings encountered in Vinland were located farther to the south, from the Canadian Maritime Provinces to New England and beyond. In that case, the Norse probably met the ancestors of one or more of the peoples who today comprise the Wabanaki Confederacy (also called the Wabanaki Alliance). These include the Mi’kmaq, the Maliseet, the Penobscot, the Passamaquoddy, and several closely related groups who identify as Western Abenaki or, simply, as Abenaki. The terms “Wabanaki” and “Abenaki,” sometimes used interchangeably, are, respectively, the English and French approximations of the Eastern Algonquian word Wobanakikiiaq, meaning Peoples of the Dawnland, that is, the peoples living farthest to the east, where the sun first rises. All are Algonquian peoples who speak related dialects of Eastern Algonquian. Through a variety of complicated and changing historical circumstances, these peoples at times made war upon one another, but they also joined as allies, intermarried, took in one another’s refugees from European diseases and raids, and shared stories and traditions. According to reports from the Smithsonian Institution’s Bureau of Ethnology, as late as the 1880s there was evidence of the continuity of traditional practices among these peoples, including storytelling, pictographic writing on birch bark scrolls, and the pecking of petroglyphs on rock faces. Despite the crushing population losses and European cultural impositions that began at the end of the fifteenth century, I wondered, might any trace memories of the Norse contact have managed to survive?

But all this was only conjecture because what is known as the Historic Period doesn’t really begin until the sixteenth century and early
seventeenth, when most historians say that Europeans first began to record in writing their encounters with Native peoples. Unfortunately, even at this early period, Native peoples were already experiencing significant population declines and geographic relocations due to imported diseases, and the European records are not always trustworthy about which Native group lived where. Moreover, the French and English often had different names for the same Native group or territory. So any estimation of specific Native territorial distributions around the year 1000 must necessarily rest on a sometimes shaky foundation of incomplete archaeological evidence, ongoing indigenous memory, and often conflicting observations in documents from European explorers, missionaries, merchants, and would-be colonists.

Even so, one fact seemed certain: the Norse had been in North America, around the year 1000. The stories in the sagas had been given a physical reality in 1960, when the Norwegian adventurer Helge Ingstad discovered the remains of a Viking-era site at Épaves Bay, near the fishing village of L'Anse aux Meadows, at the northeast tip of Newfoundland. Excavated in subsequent years by Ingstad and his archaeologist wife, Anne Stine Ingstad, the site showed evidence of having been used for Norse ship repair as well as evidence of the presence of women. A comprehensive report of the excavations from 1961 through 1968 was produced in 1977 by Anne Stine Ingstad, with additional contributions from several of her coworkers. In that volume, titled *The Discovery of a Norse Settlement in America*, Anne Stine Ingstad detailed the unearthing of the remains of eight house sites, four boat sheds, a charcoal kiln, evidence of domestic animals, a woman’s spindle whorl, a smithy for forging iron, iron nails and nail fragments, and a “ring-headed pin, which is a Viking Age form of jewelry” used for fastening a cloak (239). Carbon-dating of these finds, combined with the specific architectural features of the tiny settlement, led Anne Stine Ingstad to conclude that it “suggest[ed] Iceland as its cultural source,” but that it ultimately “derivative[d] from Norse Greenlanders and is of an early date, probably of the first half of the eleventh century” (238). As her husband argued in 1969 in *Westward to Vinland*, his account of the discovery and excavations written for a popular audience, all this coincided perfectly with the descriptions of the Vinland venture found in the two sagas. Indeed, as Helge Ingstad made clear, the sagas had provided important and “reliable information” that guided him to this northern outpost (33). And, as he strongly hinted, for him, the L’Anse aux Meadows site was Vinland.

Helge Ingstad’s theories aside, there was still no conclusive evidence
that L’Anse aux Meadows was the Vinland of the sagas, and some of the
details from the sagas seemed to suggest otherwise. Most notable is
the absence of any sign of wild grapes ever having grown at L’Anse aux
Meadows. The scientific analysis of ancient soil cores demonstrates no
evidence of wild grapes growing north of the Penobscot River. During
periods of climatic warming—as when the Norse ventured to North
America—wild grapes could be found on the East Coast only as far
north as Passamaquoddy Bay. The attempted Vinland colony, there-
fore, had to have been south of L’Anse aux Meadows, possibly in south-
ern Maine or southern New Brunswick, or even farther south. Again,
this pointed to the territories once occupied by the ancestors of today’s
Wabanaki and Abenaki peoples.

As I continued to read all the available archaeological, ethnographic,
and historical studies of the northeastern Indians, I received a seren-
dipitous telephone call from my friend and colleague, the late Patricia
Clark Smith, then a professor in the Department of English at the Uni-
versity of New Mexico in Albuquerque. Pat was calling about other
matters, but I insisted on telling her about my current project. With
her Ph.D. in American literature from Yale, Pat had shared my long-
time frustration that almost none in our generation of scholars had
been taught anything about Native American literatures and oral tra-
ditions in our graduate school training as Americanists. Pat had been
one of the first to introduce such material into her own courses and
to write about it. Her motivation was both scholarly and personal: she
was herself part Native American.

On the phone that evening, I confided that, because the sagas de-
scribed Skraelings in “skin-boats” (or hide canoes), I was leaning
toward identifying the Mi’kmaq (who had used moose-hide canoes in
earlier periods) as one possible candidate for the Skraelings encoun-
tered by the Norse in Vinland. This was not a detail the Norse would
have gotten wrong, I explained to Pat, because their own ancestors had
also once used boats constructed of hides stretched over some kind of
ribbed framework, and Norse mythology was full of references to skin-
boats (see Gardiner 72; also Brøgger and Shetelig 12–17). Moreover,
the Mi’kmaq had once lived in territories that could have been Vinland.
Up until the contact period, the Mi’kmaqs’ principal territories are be-
lieved to have included Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and most
of New Brunswick north and east of the St. John River. During the
sixteenth century, they occupied the territory south and west of the
Gulf of Saint Lawrence: the Maritime Provinces and the Gaspé Penin-
sula, as well as a small piece of northern Maine. At that, Pat stopped
me abruptly. “My skin is rising,” she said with excitement. “My grandmother was Mi’kmaq.” Until she said it, I hadn’t made the connection.

Pat said that everything she knew about her Mi’kmaq ancestry—especially their expertise as mariners and the alacrity with which they mastered European sailing vessels in the sixteenth century—seemed to confirm my hunch. She pointed me toward a number of French sources for descriptions of the Mi’kmaq written by early explorers and missionaries. And through her, both directly and indirectly, I came to meet not only other Mi’kmaqs but also members of the two Passamaquoddy communities in Maine and members of the Penobscot Nation.

Over several years, my husband and I made trips to Nova Scotia and New Brunswick and, still today, almost annual trips to Maine. As friendships developed and trust gradually grew, many of my Indian friends took a genuine interest in this project and tried to help me. They taught me about their language and their history, and, in some instances, they shared what they believed were very old stories still told within their family. In every case, I promised that I would publish nothing of what they told me without their prior permission, and I would write about nothing that was considered sacred or privileged knowledge. Additionally, I sent drafts of everything I was writing to my various helpers and assured them that I would make whatever changes they required (or, if needed, drop the material altogether). Never once did I receive anything other than helpful suggestions or friendly corrections to something I had gotten wrong. I then rewrote and sent back the corrected draft for a final approval. Inevitably, this slowed the process of composition, but since I was not a member of any of the communities I was writing about, I felt—and still feel—that it was the only ethical way to proceed. As many of my Native friends and teachers had explained to me in great detail, they had already suffered a long history of finding themselves and their cultures misrepresented and distorted in the writings of generations of “outsider” researchers and scholars. They now wanted to control how they were represented.

Research for this book brought me to the Archives of the Indies at the University of Seville in Spain and also took me three times to Norway and once to Denmark. In Norway and Denmark, I visited medieval archaeological sites and again talked with scholars at the University of Oslo about the sagas, Vinland, and the excavations on Greenland. At least some of these meetings were arranged by my dear friends, Professors Brita Lindberg Seyersted and Per Seyersted, internationally known American literature scholars who taught at the University of
Oslo. In fact, in 1993, when I made the decision to teach the Vinland sagas, I had written to Per and asked him to recommend a good English translation. Per replied that he’d gone “just up the road” from his home in the wooded area outside of Oslo to consult with “a very knowledgeable neighbor” to get me an answer. That neighbor was Helge Ingstad. As a result, through Per’s good offices, on an overcast afternoon in June 1999, my husband and I spent four hours with Helge Ingstad in his home in the woods outside of Oslo. Trained originally as a lawyer, Ingstad served for a time as the governor of Spitsbergen, a large island belonging to Norway, located in the Arctic Ocean, but he eventually gave up the law and became a self-taught ethnographer, historian, and explorer. His many early adventures included four years in Canada, where he lived as a trapper with the Chippewa (who now refer to themselves as Anishnabek), a sojourn with the Apache near their White Mountain Reservation in Arizona, and a journey to the Sierra Madres in the 1930s in search of a fabled “lost tribe” of Apache. After first ushering us into his study, with its maps and site plans of L’Anse aux Meadows spread on large tables, Ingstad took us into a living room filled with the souvenirs of his adventurous life. The head of a musk ox was mounted on one wall, a polar bear rug lay across the polished wood floor, and Indian blankets served as throws on several chairs. There were also photos of him and Anne Stine Ingstad (who had died in 1997) at L’Anse aux Meadows.

Ingstad was then ninety-nine (he died the next year, at one hundred) and in particularly good spirits that day because he’d just learned that *Time* magazine was about to name L’Anse aux Meadows one of the hundred most important discoveries of the twentieth century. Although frail in body, he was mentally as alert and as argumentative as ever, and his excellent English-language skills more than compensated for my rusty Norwegian. For him, L’Anse aux Meadows was still Vinland. And even though, as a young man, he had lived for years among aboriginal peoples in the Arctic and in the American Southwest—and despite the fact that he himself had sought out stories and legends among the Naskapi of Labrador in 1961, hoping to find additional Norse sites—he dismissed as “inventions” and “fantasies” any stories by Algonquian speakers that claimed to relate Viking contacts south of L’Anse aux Meadows. Ingstad didn’t believe that Native peoples had been able to hold on to ancient traditions or to cultural memories in the face of European colonization and radical population declines. But above all else, it was clear he feared that if L’Anse aux Meadows proved not to be Vinland, that fact might diminish the significance of
his discovery. Our conversation, therefore, meandered into other subject areas.

Ingstad began by recounting how the Norse ventured south from Greenland, passed the bleak, stormy coastlines of Baffin Island and northern Labrador, then sailed south along the wooded coasts of central Labrador and across the strait of Belle Isle to make a first landfall and set up a base camp at L’Anse aux Meadows. We discussed the findings at L’Anse aux Meadows and what they revealed about the lives of the men and women who had lived there a thousand years ago. We discussed the impact of a roughly three-hundred-year period of climatic warming, known as the Medieval Warming, during which air and sea temperatures were warmer, storms in the north Atlantic were both less severe and less frequent, and the pack ice was significantly lessened. This had certainly facilitated the Norse voyages to North America, said Ingstad, while the later return of colder climates forced Columbus to take a southern route rather than retrace the Vinlanders’ northern route. Ingstad was also willing to speculate that at least some knowledge of the sagas and the Norse voyages to Vinland had circulated in the ports of Europe before Columbus. And he said he found it curious that the documents authorizing Columbus’s first voyage were vague about the admiral’s ultimate destination. Even allowing for the probability that the Spanish crown was intent on thwarting Portuguese spies in the court, Ingstad said he was still puzzled by the fact that Columbus was commissioned not to seek a water route to the Indies or to the kingdom of the Great Khan but, rather, more ambiguously, to seek “certain islands and mainlands in the Ocean Sea” (qtd. in Zamora 28). This language seemed to Ingstad to open all sorts of possibilities. When Dan and I finally took our leave of this determined and brilliant man, I found myself replaying all his reasons for designating L’Anse aux Meadows as Vinland.

Yet when my husband and I finally visited L’Anse aux Meadows in May 2000, it seemed to us that it resembled every early medieval ship-repair station we’d seen excavated on the Danish and Norwegian coasts. And a thousand years of climate change notwithstanding, this landscape didn’t resemble the Vinland of the sagas. When, that same spring, we met in Halifax with the archaeologist Birgitta Linderoth Wallace, who had followed the Ingstads and completed the L’Anse aux Meadows excavations for the Canadian Park Service, she offered additional evidence for why that site probably wasn’t Vinland. Over dinner, she detailed the evidence found at the site for Norse explorations southward and confided where she thought a colony might have been
located. On another afternoon in Halifax, Ruth Holmes Whitehead, a
historian, museum curator, and recognized expert on Mi’kmaq history
and material culture, listened patiently as I asked endless questions
and speculated wildly. She thereby helped me prepare more questions
for those I would meet a few weeks later, when I visited reservations
in Maine.

During the early years of pursuing this project, I used to tell people
that I intended to read the sagas through whatever Native traditions
might survive, and that, conversely, I was going to read the Native tra-
ditions though the images in the sagas. This, I hoped, would be my way
of answering graduate students’ questions about what really happened
in Vinland and justify assigning medieval Icelandic texts in an Ameri-
can literature course. If I could find even traces of memory of that con-
tact in Native sources, then I could legitimately claim an (indigenous)
“American” contact narrative continuity. I even dared hope that if I
could find any evidence that Columbus was aware of the sagas and the
Norse expeditions to North America, then I could also claim the sagas
as the precursor contact narratives that had enabled all the European
contacts and narratives to follow.

But as I proceeded, reliable facts and conclusive evidence were hard
to come by, while stories were everywhere. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-
century Euro-Americans enunciated all sorts of theories about the ori-
gins of the Indians and invented fantastical stories about the contin-
ent’s prior settlement by non-Indian “superior races,” including the
Norse. Popular nineteenth-century American literature was filled with
tales of Viking adventurers in a New England Vinland. For their part,
some of the Algonquian-speaking communities of the Canadian Mari-
time Provinces, maritime Quebec, and northern New England have
traditions about the many comings of “the white man” and at least one
recorded story about a first arrival. Stories of Viking forebears are still
sometimes heard along the Miramichi Bay in Canada to explain early
explorers’ statements about encountering Natives with light skin and
blue eyes. And despite deep roots in oral tradition, when finally writ-
ten down sometime in the thirteenth century, both Eirik’s Saga and The
Greenlanders’ Saga were composed not solely as history but also as lit-
erature, that is, as good stories to be recited at public entertainments.

Not surprisingly, then, although it takes full advantage of much re-
cent scholarship in archaeology, anthropology, ethnology, and Ameri-
can history, this book is overwhelmingly about stories: about who told
them, when, and where. It is a book that seeks to understand why
stories of this particular contact endure, and what functions those
Most Native Americans of my acquaintance say that if anyone discovered America, it was they and their ancestors. Whether their peoples' lore speaks of ancestral journeys from other places, describes an emergence from within the earth, or claims the traditional homeland as itself the place of origin, for them the very language of “the Columbian discovery” is both ahistorical and demeaning. For several years now—and especially since the 1992 Quincentenary—in many cities, the annual Columbus Day festivities have become sites of protest and conflict. Ironically, in 1992, the planned parade in Denver had to be canceled due to threats of violence, even though Colorado had been the first state to declare Columbus Day a holiday in 1905. The American Indian Movement (AIM), as well as many other Native groups and individuals, have asked to have Columbus Day removed as a national holiday.

It is an issue around which, understandably, passions run deep. In the view of the nation’s Italian American communities, Columbus Day does not just celebrate the man they believe first connected Europe to the Americas, but it also honors their own ethnic tie to their adopted country. Indeed, amid the overheated anti-immigrant rhetoric of the nineteenth century, claiming Columbus as their precursor provided these newcomers with a sense of legitimacy as Americans. Their forebear, too, had played a vital role in the nation’s history. By contrast, in the view of many Native Americans, what happened to Native peoples in the wake of Columbus’s so-called discovery was nothing short of a catastrophe. And for them, in the words of an AIM statement prepared in 1991, Columbus Day represents only “a perpetuation of racist assumptions that the Western Hemisphere was a wasteland cluttered with savages awaiting the blessings of Western ‘civilization’” (qtd. in Grinde, iv).

What most Americans may not realize, however, is that Columbus was a relatively inconsequential figure up until the Revolutionary War, and his primacy as “discoverer” had been challenged long before Native peoples raised the issue in the twentieth century. In fact, Columbus’s name is almost entirely absent in the writings of colonial America, and he only became a figure of consequence during the Revolutionary
War period when rebellious partisans sought to construct a national history that diminished the significance of England. “Columbia” was even briefly put forward as a possible name for the new nation. Thus a largely invented and heroicized Columbus first began to appear in schoolbooks and enter the national imagination only toward the end of the eighteenth century. For example, in Joel Barlow’s sprawling epic poem, *The Columbiad*, published in 1807 (a revision of his earlier poem, “The Vision of Columbus,” published in 1787), Columbus is an old man dying in prison, all his sufferings vindicated by a vision of the future glories of the America that he has discovered.

Images like these, linking Columbus to discovery and to the nation’s future promise, went largely uncontested until the late 1830s, when English-language translations of the two Vinland sagas began to circulate in both scholarly venues and the popular press. Subsequently, as this book demonstrates, Anglo-Americans, especially, eagerly embraced the romantic notion of a Viking heritage and a Vinland colony located in New England. As these ideas gradually fed into national anxieties over changing patterns of immigration, the figure of the bold, enterprising Northman, Leif Eiriksson, increasingly challenged the Italian Catholic Columbus for the title of “discoverer.” Just as during the Revolutionary War, the nation’s origin story again required adjustment. And while this book follows the development of America’s romance with a Viking past only through the nineteenth century and up until its demise in the early decades of the twentieth century, for good and for ill, its echoes and reverberations are still very much with us.

Consider, for example, an embarrassing episode at Yale University in 1966. A year earlier, with great fanfare in October 1965, Yale University Press had published *The Vinland Map and the Tartar Relation*, and the library announced the acquisition of the originals through a gift from a then-anonymous donor. *The Tartar Relation*, which gives an account of a thirteenth-century papal mission from France to the Mongols, was of interest mainly because, at some point in its history, the Vinland map was bound into it. This map created a worldwide sensation. Originally dated by researchers to about 1440, a good fifty years before Columbus’s initial voyage in 1492, in its extreme northwest the map depicts a large island with two deep inlets, identified as “Vinilanda Insula.” A Latin legend next to that landmass describes its discovery in about the year 1000 by Leif Eiriksson and Bjarni Herjolfsson. Almost immediately, the authenticity of the map was called into question, and it remains even today a subject of controversy. Over the years, several
different scientific tests of the map have produced widely variant conclusions as to its date. When I personally examined the map, in Yale’s climate-controlled Beinecke Rare Books Library in May 2000, I queried the librarian’s view of the map’s authenticity. He declined to reply. But while the possibility that the Yale Library had accepted the gift of a fraud was certainly embarrassing, even more so were the antics in one of the freshmen dormitories on Old Campus a year after the map’s much-heralded publication.

On Columbus Day 1966, students strung together several bed sheets and inked on them, in large black letters, “Erikson Sí, Columbus No.” They then proceeded to hang the bed sheet banner out of a window facing Chapel Street, just as New Haven’s annual Columbus Day parade went marching by. The insult to the city’s large Italian American population was palpable. And it repeated, even if unwittingly, the racist slights and ethnic slurs that had once marked the discovery debates of the nineteenth century.

When I arrived in New Haven three years later as a new-minted Ph.D. from Berkeley, taking up my first full-time teaching post in the English Department at Yale, all of these young men were now seniors, and some of them became my students. To this day, I have no idea what they were thinking when they hung out their bed sheet banner, although a few said it was only intended as a joke to display their support for the authenticity of their school’s controversial map. Whatever their conscious or unconscious motives, however, a nation self-consciously made up of the descendants of immigrants is necessarily always nervous about national origin stories. That is why successive waves of newcomers always try to find ways to claim their right to be here. Thus, despite what politicians like to proclaim, the U.S. has never been simply a nation of immigrants.

Almost from the beginning of colonization, Euro-American immigrants and their progeny facilitated brutal abductions from Africa and prospered from three hundred years of unpaid slave labor. And even when slavery was finally abolished, those same immigrants, and their sons and daughters, refused to share the bounty of the continent with the now freed slaves and their sister and fellow citizens, instead opting for a hundred years of discrimination, segregation, and Jim Crow laws. Pertinent to this study is also the fact that the immigrant newcomers from Europe invaded, dispossessed, and almost annihilated a long-settled and thriving indigenous population. By what right did those seeking new homelands for themselves take over the homelands of those already here? The inability to offer a satisfying answer to that
uncomfortable question has left this so-called nation of immigrants with an ongoing anxiety of legitimacy, though it is rarely named as such. Even so, the nineteenth-century belief in a “superior race” predating the Indians and the debates over who first discovered America were, at least in part, an expression of that anxiety. The question of discovery thus became intimately intertwined with the question of who really belongs here.

There are still many Euro-Americans unwilling to abandon the idea that the Vikings were here. Even proven frauds and fakes do not deter them. To cite just one instance, in 1971, a part-time carpenter and jack-of-all-trades from Maine named Walter Elliott claimed to have found three engraved stones on the banks of the Morse River near where it widens into what is called Spirit Pond in the area of Popham Beach and the township of Phippsburg. Two of the stones were covered with incised symbols, while the third appeared to show a map of Popham Beach. The find generated a great stir of publicity when Elliott identified the strange markings as medieval Norse runes. Based on his discovery, Elliott declared himself “convinced that Maine is Vinland,” and many of his fellow enthusiasts began looking forward to the prestige and tourism dollars that would surely now flow into Maine (qtd. in Trillin, “U.S. Journal,” 70). “As all of the people involved acknowledged” to Calvin Trillin when he covered the story for the *New Yorker*, “They want to believe the stones are real—to believe that Viking ships once sailed through the islands that lie off Popham Beach and up the Morse River and into the shelter of Spirit Pond” (72). But the stones weren’t real. Like a number of other imputed artifacts that Elliott claimed to discover in subsequent years, the Spirit Pond stones, too, proved to have been etched with an electric steel engraving tool (though Elliott denied this to his death). Elliott’s attempts to sell the stones for money were thwarted by the fact that they had been found on state land and were thereby legally state property. In the end, Elliott was “encouraged” to turn them over to the state by a $4,500 gift from a private donor. At that point, performing its due diligence, the state had the stones examined by several expert runologists, and all concluded that they were fakes. (See figure 1.) In 1977, the eagerness of so many local citizens and dignitaries to accept the stones as genuine became the subject of Trillin’s gentle satire in his novel *Runestruck*, set in a fictional Maine town.

Today the Spirit Pond stones are housed in the Maine State Museum in Augusta and, when exhibited, are clearly labeled as fakes. None-
theless, as late as the 1990s, at least one self-taught runologist and modern-day antiquarian was publishing articles claiming to have deciphered “the Spirit Pond inscription” by identifying its medieval Norwegian origins in “an obscure poetic meter which has evaded [previous] investigators” (Carlson, “The Spirit Pond Inscription Stone,” part 1, 1). For this writer, the stones are authentic, and the “inscription takes us back a thousand years” (1). From the point of view of devoted amateurs like this, the so-called experts trained by the universities are too often doctrinaire and unwilling to contemplate what another such writer called “alternative scenarios” (Friedrich 12). Certainly, it is true that dedicated amateurs in a number of fields have always made lasting and significant contributions, often by challenging the accepted orthodoxies espoused by established experts. But, as seems to have

1. One of the three Spirit Pond runestones supposedly “discovered” in Maine in 1971 and subsequently identified as faked Viking artifacts made in the twentieth century with an electric drilling tool. Courtesy of the Maine State Museum.
been the case here, amateurs can also allow their theories to get ahead of the evidence, and they can become enthralled by the allure of some romanticized past that never was.

A small group of us saw the power of that allure firsthand in Maine in June 2000. I traveled there with my husband, Dan, and my former research assistant, Chadwick Allen, a scholar of comparative indigenous literatures. In advance of our arrival, I had arranged for Moses Lewey (Passamaquoddy) to help with our research as our local guide and assistant. I had told Moses about my project and asked him to introduce me to people who might be helpful. In addition to introducing me to individuals within the Passamaquoddy communities, Moses had also taken the initiative to call all the local historical societies in the area and inquire about their holdings. A member of one of these societies told Moses that his group’s small museum possessed what he and his fellow members believed to be a Viking-era carved stone. So Moses made an appointment for all of us to visit the museum.

When we arrived at the small building, we were greeted by an older retired gentleman who volunteered as the museum’s part-time director and caretaker. He began by showing us drawer after drawer of glass display cases filled with (mostly unidentified) Indian arrowheads. In response to our questions, he admitted that no one in the society had attempted to contact any of the local Indian communities in order to share their holdings or to inquire about the possible uses, age, or tribal affiliation of any of the arrowheads. “We just store whatever anybody brings in or donates,” he told us. Clearly, Indian history and Indian artifacts were not this group’s keen interest. Instead, as he gradually revealed to us, most of the members of this local historical society were convinced that ancient visitors from Europe and even Africa had once plied the Maine coast and perhaps established a settlement for a time. And then he offered to show us the society’s most prized possession.

Unlocking a large wooden wall case, he brought out a locked glass box that housed a gray stone about six inches in diameter and eighteen inches long. One side of the stone was relatively flat, and on this side was a crude graven image of some sort of male warrior figure holding in front of him a round shield. This was the Viking artifact about which Moses had been told. It had been found locally years before and donated to the museum, though no record of the place and date of the find seemed to be available, not even the name of the person who first uncovered it. When I explained to the museum’s caretaker-director that my husband and I had studied Viking-era artifacts on our trips to
Norway and Denmark, and we now wished to examine the stone more closely, he unlocked the glass box, removed the stone, and gingerly placed it in my hands. Dan and I turned the stone over and over, looking at it in full daylight as well as under the incandescent and fluorescent lamps of the museum. We also peered at it through a magnifying glass. “I don’t think this is Norse,” I told the gentleman. “It doesn’t resemble anything I’ve ever seen in the museums and archives of Scandinavia.” “Then it must be Phoenician,” he replied. “They were here too, you know.” Finally, I asked if Moses could examine the stone, and the gentleman agreed. “No, it’s definitely not Indian,” Moses declared with conviction. “It looks to me like it was done with a Dremel tool,” he added.

The museum’s caretaker-director had clearly hoped that, as a university-affiliated researcher, I might validate and add authority to his and others’ belief that the carved stone was an authentic Viking artifact. When I didn’t, he immediately switched to his alternate theory that the stone was Phoenician, and he completely ignored Moses’s quite accurate observation that the engraving on the stone was a modern fake. As we drove Moses back to his home in Pleasant Point that evening, he kept asking over and over again, “Why would anybody make these fakes?” and “Why do they want to do that?” Unfortunately, the many and complex motivations behind the forging of ancient artifacts—fame, money, the desire to “fool the experts,” a commitment to some particular view of history for which no other evidence is available, or some combination of these—were beyond any of our abilities to explain. One impression emerged clearly, however. Many non-Native people are fascinated by the mysteries of the remote past, and some of them will hold on to an improbable theory rather than approach their Native American neighbors in order to ascertain whatever insights into a knowable past might be gained by sharing collections of Indian arrowheads.

With Moses’s questions still unanswered, the conversation turned to the stories that Native peoples tell about ancient contacts. These are rarely “discovery” stories in the way that term is commonly understood. Instead, the Native stories are largely fulfillment stories in the sense that the events they unfold represent the fulfillment of what has already been prophesied or foreseen. As the Great Spirit prophesied to the Penobscot culture hero, Klose-kur-beh, in Joseph Nicolar’s masterpiece, *The Life and Traditions of the Red Man* (1893), “The white man will feel it as a duty to his children to seek new lands for them, and... he will not rest until he finds the land the Great Spirit gave unto you.”
Therefore look for him always” (115). Within Nicolar’s narrative construction, it is the Indian who discovers the white man, for whom he has all along been prepared.

To end where I began, my graduate students were certainly correct when they said that the Vinland sagas were never intended for an American audience or composed as American literature. Nonetheless, the many nineteenth-century English-language translations and redactions of those sagas entered the national imaginary and had a profound impact on major American writers. As a direct consequence of the sagas’ popular circulation, moreover, Euro-Americans were forced to rethink the previously orthodox Columbian discovery story and, however briefly, reconceive the accepted origin myth. Equally important, at least some residual trace memories of first contact—or just first sightings—remain inscribed in the stories told by Native peoples. In other words, Native peoples have preserved their own traditions about first contacts and what Euro-Americans still too often call “discovery.” And these stories, too, are part of the rich tapestry of our shared American literary inheritance.

As for the two remaining questions—Where was Vinland located? and What really happened there?—I have no conclusive answers. Regarding Vinland’s geographical location, these pages offer the most authoritative speculations now available from historians and archaeologists. Clearly, L’Anse aux Meadows was a landing site and a place for repairing ships, but it was not the Vinland where grapes grew wild. Perhaps it is best, therefore, to think of Vinland as what it became for Euro-Americans in the nineteenth century, that is, a geographical site that was transfigured into an imagined landscape for the projection of dreams. As for what really happened there, the evidence is both incomplete and inconclusive. The stories told in the sagas only imperfectly coincide with the stories Native peoples tell. But where we have clues in the archaeological record, it is reasonably clear that conflict was at least one outcome of the encounter. Unlike the encounters of later centuries, however, in Vinland the Native peoples prevailed, and it was the Europeans who were driven out.
Notes

Prologue


2. Subsequent “AMS radiocarbon dates on twigs and small branches” preserved at the site “date the Norse occupation to somewhere right before or after A.D. 1000” (Wallace, “LAnse aux Meadows, Leif Eriksson’s Home in Vinland” 121).

3. As a Mi’kmaq elder explained to the seventeenth-century French missionary Abbé Maillard, “In olden times, instead of the birchbark we use now, our ancestors used moose skins, from which they had plucked the hair, and which they had scraped and rubbed so thoroughly that they were like your finest skins. They soaked them several times in oil and then they placed them on the canoe frame, just as we do with birchbark today, fitted them, stretched them and fixed them by sewing them, sometimes with animal tendons, sometimes with spruce roots” (qtd. in Whitehead, The Old Man Told Us 20).

4. Petroglyphs in Norway clearly indicate that although skin boats were “a legacy . . . of the early Stone Age,” that legacy “maintain[ed] itself well into the Bronze Age” (Brøgger and Shetelig 28). Pre-Christian Norse mythology retained scattered references to such craft.


6. When I visited the area in June 2000, a number of local people still believed the Spirit Pond runestones to be authentic and even arranged for me to visit with Elliott’s widow at her home. My husband, my research assistant, and I were all graciously received. A retired schoolteacher, Elliott’s widow was happy to share old newspaper clippings and odd “finds” brought home by her late husband over the years. But she declined to say whether she believed any of his discoveries to be authentic. “I just don’t know” was her only answer.

1. The Politics of American Prehistory

1. D’Arcy McNickle (Cree/Salish) earlier entered this same debate in They Came Here First: The Epic of the American Indian (1949).

2. Pagden’s translated quotation is from Bartolomé de las Casas, Historia de las Indias, ed. Augustin Millares Carlo, 3 vols. (Mexico, 1951), 1:149.