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Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

Here you will find information about interesting books on the immigration experience, genealogical manuals, books on Swedish customs, and much more. We welcome contacts with SAG readers, suggestions on books to review perhaps. If you want to review a book yourself, please contact the Book Review Editor, Dennis L. Johnson, at <1_viking@verizon.net> or Dennis Johnson, 174 Stauffer Road, Bucktown Crossing, Pottstown, PA 19465, so he knows what you are working on.

Vikings in the West


Vikings in North America have long been a subject of great interest to many Scandinavian-Americans, and to the people in their countries of origin. Solid evidence of their presence in North America has, however, been scant and usually highly controversial. A new book from a somewhat different tangent. The author, Annette Kolodny, is described as "a feminist literary critic, activist, and retired professor in humanities." She has written several books and essays centered on the role of women on the frontier, and on higher education in the twenty-first century. This is her first work on Vikings in North America.

Until about 1960 no solid evidence had yet been found of the presence of Vikings in the New World to confirm the stories in the ancient Norse sagas. This was greatly changed with the discovery then of what appeared to be remains of a Viking settlement on the northern tip of Newfoundland, Canada. First thought to be from Native Americans, this discovery near the small fishing village of L'Anse aux Meadows by Norwegian Helge Ingstad and his wife Anne Stine Ingstad, was further examined and excavated over the next decades. After finding artifacts that were only known to Vikings and not natives, and after carbon dating of some objects, this site came to be accepted by most authorities as real evidence of a settlement by a group of Norse Greenlanders. The remnants of their houses, boat sheds, a charcoal kiln and smithy, evidence of domestic animals, a woman's spindle whorl, a cloak-pin, and other Viking items confirmed the presence of Vikings in about the year 1000.

Theories about Vikings in North America did not begin with the L'Anse aux Meadows discovery, however. In the Viking Age (750 A.D. to 1050 A.D.) oral sagas recited by storytellers were common. Many originated in Iceland, which was settled from about 900 A.D. Many of these sagas were written down in Old Norse in the 13th century, and were eventually translated into English by the early 19th century. Both American and Scandinavian writers soon found these sagas to be the basis for further theories and speculations about the voyages to North America led by Leif Ericsson, Thorfinn Karlsdóttir, and others.

In 1837 a Danish philologist, Carl Christian Rafn, published large volumes including some eighteen documents written in Iceland in the original language. These, together with certain objects discovered in New England in North America, claimed that the area was visited by Vikings in about 1000 A.D. English translations soon followed which launched works by several writers and popular lectures about this claim. Many items of physical evidence were identified, including the Dighton Rock, the Newport Tower, a skeleton in armor, and other objects were claimed to support Rafn's arguments. All were later discredited as Viking items, but other writers and poets were inspired to support or to romanticize these claims. Examples of poems attributed to these discoveries include Longfellow's "Skelton in Armor" and Whittier's "The Norsemen" which appeared in 1840.

This early history of these claims is traced thoroughly by the author, who views them as an effort to discredit or diminish the discovery of Columbus in 1492, mainly by those who had trouble crediting Italians with this accomplishment. New England's romantic poets also saw these events as a source for their own creative efforts. A lively competition continues to this day between Italian-Americans and Scandinavian-Americans over who first "discovered America." This competition continues to be disparaged, of course, by Native Americans who occupied North and South America for thousands of years. The Viking supporters, bowing to political correctness, now cite Leif Ericsson's voyage as "The First Europeans to visit North America."

Ms. Kolodny devotes many pages to examining the literature of the nineteenth century for opinions and theories about the Viking presence in North America, most of which has long been considered either spurious, misguided, or written to support a particular agenda of the many writers. Events such as the Chicago
World's Fair of 1892 (The Columbian Exposition) and the presence of a replica Viking ship which sailed from Norway to New York, thence through the Great Lakes waterways to Chicago, and many other events served to keep the name of Leif Ericsson in the news and in the public consciousness. Statues erected to Leif Ericsson are shown, and even the well-known Kensington Runestone in Minnesota deserves a mention. (It is regarded by most experts as a hoax, but avidly promoted by local adherents.) Its claimed date on the inscription is 1362, more than three centuries after the Viking visits to L'Anse aux Meadows.

A unique contribution of the author is her effort to seek out any parallels to the North American contacts by the Vikings in the sagas with Native Americans in their own legends and oral histories. We do know that these first contacts usually resulted in violence, mainly due to misunderstandings and problems communicating in disparate languages. As a result of these contacts, the Vikings soon withdrew from further voyages when they found that the lands were occupied by far greater numbers of people with roughly similar weaponry. Kolodny has searched the Native oral traditions for traces of these first contacts. After interviewing several native storytellers from tribes inhabiting New England and the Maritime Provinces, and other sources, she was able to find only a few references that could be construed to relate to first contacts, and those required a significant stretch. There was a pattern of stories relating to the coming of the white man from the east, but not specific enough to identify them with which white men. One story from a dream identified a “floating island which approached the shore, the island had trees on it and bears in the trees subsequently identified as men.” A Viking ship has a single mast, one spar, and has little need for crew to climb up in the rigging. A later multi-masted sailing ship with crewmen working in the rigging might have more likely accounted for the natives’ description in this story.

This search for native parallels to Viking sagas was exhaustively pursued, described, and well documented in the appendix, but it appears little solid evidence was found. Whatever references were found that appeared to have some relevance required as much if not more speculation and conjecture than did the stories handed down to us from the Vikings' versions of these contacts. This reviewer’s “reading between the lines” of the text seems to suggest strong sympathy for the native accounts of events, yet goes far to ridicule much of the nineteenth century American writers’ speculations about Viking presence in New England and Canada.

Despite this new volume, solid evidence of the Vikings’ explorations in North America a thousand years ago remains slim. What we know for sure today remains the sometimes inconsistent accounts in the two sagas, backed up by the real Viking remains at L'Anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland. The most recent view is that this location was not Vinland, but Leif’s houses and camp were to be a base station for further explorations in North America, but not a permanent settlement. Birgitta Wallace, successor to the Ingstads in investigating the Newfoundland site (and one of many sources for Annette Kolodny’s book) puts forth this theory, and the explorations to the south along the coast of the Maritimes and New England and possibly the coast of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, led to other sites referred to in the sagas. A site in New England would be more consistent with some of the descriptions such as the presence of grapes, self-sown wheat, and days where the “nights were more nearly equal to the days.” Possibly Vinland was one of these sites. Thus far, no authenticated artifacts have been found to support this theory, however. Meanwhile, a presidential proclamation still recognizes Leif Ericsson Day on Oct. 9 each year in the U.S., and a Viking ship replica, The Norseman, based near Philadelphia, sails each year on that date and at other times to remind Americans of the accomplishments of the Vikings and Leif Ericsson a thousand years ago.

For those new to this subject, In Search of First Contact provides an excellent and up-to-date summary and reference book on the history of Vikings in North America, very thorough and readable. The book is accurate in separating fact from conjecture and misinformation, and explores in depth the motives of the writers in what they believed and why they wrote. Those enthusiasts already well-read on the subject will find little if no new evidence or facts
about the Viking explorations, but a great deal of detail on the literature of the quest for solid information and the multiplicity of theories advocated by numerous writers over many years.

Dennis L. Johnson

Finns in Sweden & Norway

The Forest Finns of Scandinavia, by Maud Wedin, Finnbygdens Forlag and FINNSAM, Falun, 2011, 34 pages, Illustrated, Softcover, American Swedish Institute, Minneapolis, about $13.00 plus shipping.

Beginning around the year 1600 a migration began of people from the area of Savo in central Finland. Finland was part of the Swedish kingdom from the 13th century until 1809, and the Finns living in that area were known as Forest Finns, differing in culture and background from their traditional Swedish and Finnish farmer equivalents. King Gustav Eriksson (Vasa) (1523-1560) and his sons encouraged this migration to help populate Swedish interior forested areas which had not yet been settled. Better lands along the coasts, lakes, and rivers in Sweden and Finland were already occupied, and these farmers and their children showed little interest in these poorer, forested lands. They were used only for hunting and fishing, and a few outland farms.

The author, Maud Wedin, has written a small but informative book about these Forest Finns and their impact on these areas, largely in Sweden and also some in Norway, which were affected by this migration. She writes about the reasons for the migration, the culture of the settlers, areas of distribution, foods, handicrafts, buildings, their economy, and the present state of these Forest Finn areas. Many old maps, and newer sketches and color photographs serve to locate the settled areas and to illustrate settlement patterns and farming methods used by the Forest Finns. A section near the end serves as a reference to language and family names, and the various organizations and museums and visitors’ centers dedicated to the Forest Finn settlements and people.

The Forest Finns had over many generations become expert at a type of farming in forested areas known as “slash and burn” (svedjebräning) farming. The method of doing this varied from place to place, but generally consisted of raising one or two crops after cutting all trees in an area and burning the brush in place. This was usually done in late June, and when the ashes had cooled, some rye was sown of a type that grew in tussocks. These seedlings were then by the end of summer grazed by cattle. The following spring, the rye plants began to grow again and the area was fenced to keep out cattle and game. By fall, the rye was harvested with sickles and dried on long ricks or in drying houses. The period from cutting and burning to harvesting a crop often took 3 to 4 years, and only two harvests could be taken from one field. After this the area was left fallow, or was used to graze cattle. Sometimes, turnips could be grown on this land.

Cattle raising and dairying often became occupations for the Forest Finn women. With the production of cattle manure on these fields, sometimes arable crops of barley or oats could then be grown. The farmers augmented their income and diet by hunting and fishing. In areas where mining took place, they could find employment in this industry, in forestry, or later when industries began to develop in these areas, by working as craftsmen in these industries. Slash and burn farming often was resisted by the forest and iron industries, since they competed for wood needed by the sawmills and for charcoal needed for iron production.

The author goes on to point out that today many of these former slash and burn areas are abandoned or sparsely populated. The former farmers have over several generations migrated to the cities or abroad, their language is being lost as they adopt Swedish, and they become

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Book Reviews

An adoptee’s search


Many books and articles have been written by authors who have chronicled their search for their ancestors using generally accepted methods of tracing their parents and previous

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had never mentioned a word about this. After thinking it over, he decided not to ask his parents directly, not wanting to hurt their feelings. Not until many years later did he talk to his father about this as he neared death, and finally, at the approaching end of her life, to his mother.

After first learning of his adoption, Richard developed an intense interest in finding first his birth parents, and later on any new relatives he now had as a result of this information. He began a many-year quest to find out what he could, turning to whatever sources he was able to find. This quest moved in fits and starts over the years as his own life, career, family, and other matters often interrupted his intermittent yet persistent efforts to satisfy his desire for information. There was no one else to ask, he was an only child, his grandparents had passed on, and he knew only of two older cousins. During the next years, he was occupied with graduating from college, a first job, meeting and marrying his wife, starting a family, and going to graduate school. The family settled near home in Michigan, where he had grown up in a small town near Grand Rapids. His wife prompted him to resume his search for his birth family.

In their conversation his father had told him that his birth mother was named Jackie, who was divorced when he was adopted, and that she also at the time had an older son, and that Jackie had arranged with his parents to adopt him just after his birth in 1946. His father knew little more about Jackie except that she had several boyfriends and male acquaintances, enjoyed a wide social life, and one candidate after another emerged and for one reason or another had to be ruled out. The following chapters detail his long and frustrating process of tracking down these individuals. Some were dead, or could not be found, but through dogged work and interviewing of a number of people who may have known them, Richard makes slow progress. The book reads like a detective story with its alternating successes and dead ends. Finally, he narrows the search to a
family with five sons, almost any one of whom were known to Jackie and could have been his birth father. He must then resort to DNA testing to identify his real father, and as in many suspense-filled detective stories, a last minute twist comes as a surprise to Richard and the reader to make the story complete. Fortunately he was able to win the friendship and cooperation of this family and was, in fact, soon welcomed as a family member.

Despite the fact that Richard Hill found no Swedish ancestors in the course of his search, the book is an engaging story which will hold the reader fascinated until the very end. For readers interested in taking up a similar quest for their birth parents, the book is almost a guidebook for adopted individuals who do not know their birth parents. Along the way, one learns a great deal about adoption records in the U.S., the value of finding helpful friends and relatives in the search, and even quite a bit of the usefulness and limitations of DNA testing in positive verification of blood relationships. The author also teaches the values of persistence, and of diplomacy in approaching people about what could be for them a very sensitive subject leading possibly to an unwelcome outcome.

Dennis L. Johnson

Old nobility

*Äldre Svenska Frälselecter,* published by the House of Nobles (Riddarhusdirektionen), by Hans Gillingstam, Ph.D and Lars-Olof Skoglund, M.A. Volume II:2, 2013. 349 pages, personal, topographical, and biographical index to the whole work. For more information contact the Riddarhuset at <kansli@riddarhuset.se>

This long-awaited last part of the history of the “Old nobility” of Sweden covers four families that had become extinct by the time the Riddarhuset organization was founded in 1626 by the chancellor Axel Oxenstierna.

The four families in this last part of the *Äldre Svenska Frälselecter* contain genealogies of the families of Bergkvaraätten, Bese, Bralstorp and Bylow. Each genealogy is very well researched in medieval documents and they are all meticulously sourced.

Hans Gillingstam, Ph.D., is the master of Swedish medieval genealogy and has spent more than 60 years in untangling the difficult history of the old families long before the age of church records. He has used hundreds of parchment documents, that give details of dowries, inheritances, real estate businesses, and much more.

Elisabeth Thorsell

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**New and Noteworthy**

(short notes on interesting books and articles)

*The Genealogist’s U.S. History Pocket Reference* by Family Tree Magazine contributing editor Nancy Hendrickson delivers fascinating facts such as these: that the city of Vicksburg, Miss., didn’t celebrate Independence Day from 1863, when residents surrendered on July 4 after a 47-day Union siege, until 1945; or that during the Oklahoma Land Rush of April 22, 1889, two cities of 10,000 residents each (Oklahoma City and Guthrie) sprang up in less than a day; There are also timelines, charts (one, for example, summarizes the dates, causes, and outcomes of the major Indian wars), maps, important dates (including censuses), and lists of popular foods, books, music and trends. It encapsulates historical phenomena you might need a refresher on, such as the Triangle Trade and Bleeding Kansas. Link to the publishers on p. 30.

Recently I noticed a new (to me) crime mystery writer with a Scandinavian connection, named Kathleen Ernst. I have now read her *Old World Murder,* which is all about a museum curator named Chloe Ellefson, who works at the Old World Wisconsin Museum. The heroine turns out to be of Norwegian descent, and the mystery is mostly about where an old Norwegian ale bowl, decorated by rosemaling, has ended up. The book started a bit slow, but got more interesting after reading more. She has published more books in this series, but I would prefer knowing about more books with Swedish connections.

William Dollarhide is a man who has written, for instance, a *MapGuide to American Migration Routes 1735-1815* (1997). Not long ago I found that he has published a short *Online Resources for Finding Living Relatives,* which can be bought from Family Roots Publishing (link on p. 30) as a pdf for $3.99, or as a 4-page laminated quick sheet for $7.95. There are many useful links and hints for tracing living relatives that one might not think about. Also the links have descriptions of what you might find by using each resource. If the links go to subscription databases that is clearly marked by ($$). I found this useful. There are also a few UK links. Link on p. 30.