

***Leifsbudir: The Vikings in Newfoundland.* B.D. Fardy.**

Stuart C. Brown

Volume 10, Number 2, Fall 1994

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds10_2rv02

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Brown, S. C. (1994). Review of [*Leifsbudir: The Vikings in Newfoundland.* B.D. Fardy.] *Newfoundland Studies*, 10(2), 287–295.

Leifsbudir: The Vikings in Newfoundland. B.D. Fardy. St. John's: Harry Cuff Publications, 1993.

STUART C. BROWN

THE MANY PROBLEMS of this misbegotten publication begin with the title's reference to the Vikings and the front cover which depicts a longship. As I and several others have pointed out before, the use of the term "Viking" in the context of Norse colonizing expansion into the north Atlantic may strike a romantic chord but it is historically inappropriate and misleading (Brown 1993:100). *Vikingr*, a West Norse term, literally means "pirate" or "raider" and applies only to those Norse who, in the eighth and ninth centuries A.D., attacked and plundered numerous settlements, primarily along the western European seaboard. Thereafter, the Norse expansion turned from raiding to relatively peaceful colonization.

In addition, the Norse never took longships into the North Atlantic for which these essentially coastal vessels would have been wholly unsuited. Instead, they used a type of ship called a *knarr* — a single-masted, broad-beamed craft with higher gunwales and a deeper draught than a longship. Yet the misleading illustration on the front cover, the references to Eirik's "longship" in Greenland (p.10) and "the Viking longships which prowled the waters of Vinland" (p.65 caption), as well as the ridiculous suggestion that the "Beothuk canoe with its broad midships and high, upswept prow and stern is eerily suggestive of the Viking longship" (p.43), all suggest that the author is unaware of this piece of basic information. Furthermore, the photograph of the *Gaia* (p.28), described as a reconstructed Norse *knarr* which visited Newfoundland in 1991, requires some qualification since *knarrir* had open central sections for cargo and this reconstruction, while probably faithful to the overall dimensions and design of the prototype, had its central section enclosed.

No serious account of the Norse visits to Vinland can ignore the complex nature of the source material since the two sagas involved, while agreeing on some details, give such radically different accounts that, in many aspects, they cannot be reconciled. Fardy provides no discussion of the sources which, throughout the text, are referred to indiscriminately as "the sagas". For example, the description of the

landscape and climate around Leifsbudir in the *Groenlendingasaga* is transferred in *Eiriks saga raudi* to the settlement at Hop. Despite this, in his account of Thorfinn Karlsefni's meetings and clashes with the Skraelings, Fardy shows no awareness that the two sagas differ markedly concerning the location and details of these encounters.

In addition, Fardy frequently refers to secondary sources when primary sources would be more appropriate and this, in some cases, leads him into error; e.g., the assertion (p.15) that Eirik did not convert to Christianity (the reference is to C.W. Ceram's *The First American* [1971], a very general account of North American archaeology) is contradicted by *Eiriks saga raudi* in which Eirik, slow at first to accept Christianity, eventually celebrates Christmas (Jones 1961:146).

Still on the topic of sources, Fardy repeatedly goes far beyond the bounds of permissible inference. For example, he unequivocally asserts that the term "Skraelings" is a "contemptuous term which meant 'wretches' or 'weaklings', or 'screamers', or 'screechers', probably a reference to the Indians' war cries, and indicative of the Norsemen's pique at having lost their leader to a band of 'primitive savages'" (p.25). In *modern* Icelandic and Norwegian, "skraeling" means respectively "churl" and "coarse fellow" and it is derogatory. However, the term used a thousand years ago is more likely derived from Icelandic *skraelna* ("shrink") than from Norwegian *skraela* ("scream") (Gordon 1981:218). So, the term which the Norse used for *all* the native peoples of Greenland, Markland, and Vinland quite possibly refers to their short stature rather than their behaviour and it is only Fardy's assumption that the Greenland Norse used the term contemptuously.

The author perhaps is persuaded in that belief by the Magnusson and Pálsson translation of the sagas which he quotes on p.37: "Karlsefni, with typical Viking disdain of the natives, later described them as '[dark-coloured] and evil-looking, and their hair was course (sic!)." Gwyn Jones translates the same passage as follows: "They were dark, ugly men who wore their hair in an unpleasant fashion" (Jones 1961:151). Comparison of these translations and an awareness that the sagas were undoubtedly somewhat elaborated during several centuries of oral transmission might have persuaded the author to greater caution before inferring "typical Viking disdain". Inconsistently, the same passage appears in a different translation on p.41 — derived once again from the secondary source of Ceram's *The First American* who, in turn, depends on Helge Ingstad's *Die erste Entdeckung Amerikas* (1966). So, let's see, Fardy's source here is an English translation of a German book which quotes a German translation of a Norwegian translation of the Icelandic sagas — a bit far removed from the original, to say the least!

Similarly, in describing Karlsefni's trade of milk for furs, the author concludes, "Already, the whites were showing the exploitation of the natives that would so characterize the settling of the new-found-land" (p. 36). But where is the evidence for exploitation here or elsewhere in the Norse sagas? Barter trade works only if both sides are satisfied and in this case they apparently were. The violence which

broke out between the native population and the Norse was evidently generated by cultural misunderstanding and not by any exploitation.

Fardy's writing style is pedestrian and shot through with purple prose; e.g., "given the bloodthirsty nature of the Norsemen" (p.53). But the author really warms up to Freydis who is variously described as "less the fair damsel... more an amazon" (p.46), "the she-cat" (p.49), "the fiery" (p.49), "the crafty" (p.50), "the bloody-handed butcher of Leifsbudir" (p.53), "Freydis the bloody" (p.53) and "the bloody-handed Freydis" (p.60). Again, at no point does Fardy inform the reader that the two sagas differ markedly in their characterization of Freydis — in *Eiriks saga raudi* she is a heroine while the *Groenlendingasaga* portrays her as a murderer. Leif Eiriksson is ludicrously portrayed as "perhaps the 'renaissance man' of the Viking era. He personified the Viking spirit of adventure but spurned the savage and superstitious ways of his forefathers" (p.19). One wonders what Fardy understands about the term "Renaissance" (always capitalized, incidentally) when he feels free to apply it in this context. The remainder of the quotation is remarkably naive. The Christianity to which Leif Eiriksson turned was every bit as "savage and superstitious" as the traditional beliefs of the Norse, or has Fardy forgotten such charming Christian diversions as the Crusades, the Inquisition, indulgences, possession by the devil, burning witches, pogroms against Jews etc. etc.?

The map entitled "Munn's and Mallery's Vinland" (p.72) locates ruins of "Viking longhouses" at Conche and Englee and "Viking artifacts" at Sop's Arm which is also identified as the Norse settlement of Hop established by Thorfinn Karlsefni (see also p.36 for the same assertion). Many readers will be unaware that there is absolutely no substance to any of these claims and Fardy evades his responsibility by failing so to inform them. A.H. (not A.E.) Mallery, incidentally, is not identified until p.78 and his book (Mallery 1951) is not listed in the bibliography. Fardy evidently knows of the work only from a brief article published in the *Newfoundland Quarterly* by Saunders (1963; Fardy's reference is incorrect and it should be noted in passing that the Saunders article, to which Fardy frequently refers, is an entirely superficial discussion which locates Helluland in Newfoundland, Markland in Nova Scotia, and Vinland in New England). The contention that Mallery had the backing of the Bureau of American Ethnology of the Smithsonian Institution (p.78-9) is incorrect. Matthew W. Stirling, Director of the Bureau, did write an introduction to Mallery's book as an act of friendship but was careful to state emphatically, "This introduction is by no means intended as an endorsement" (Mallery 1951:x). Stirling's disassociation of himself and the Bureau from Mallery's work is entirely understandable since the credulous Mallery believed that pre-Columbian European settlements of Irish Celts and the Norse stretched from Newfoundland through Labrador as far west as the Great Lakes and as far south as Virginia, that Norse rune stones could be found "scattered along the coasts of New England and Nova Scotia" (Mallery 1951:181), and that interbreeding of the Norse with natives of Ontario had produced the Iroquois. In short, the man was a crank

and his book is without any historical value. Fardy could have checked all this out but failed to do so.

In his account of the Ingstad expedition (pp.79-81), Fardy leaves the reader with the impression that it was Helge Ingstad who effectively directed the excavations at L'Anse aux Meadows when, in fact, it was his wife, Anne Stine Ingstad, who did so. Helge Ingstad has many qualifications (barrister, trapper, explorer, writer) but he is not an archaeologist.

No source is provided for the map of the L'Anse aux Meadows site (p.58). Did Fardy conduct his own site survey? The plans of the buildings are inaccurately drawn and the functions of most are misidentified (cf. Wallace [1986] for an accurate site plan). The so-called "boat sheds" were actually set obliquely to the waterline and not straight on as in Fardy's plan; in any case, investigations by Parks Canada subsequent to the Ingstad excavation suggest that the "boat sheds" are actually natural features. Two structures (B and E) are misidentified by Fardy as "livestock sheds" when, in fact, they were respectively a house/workshop and a workshop. The Ingstads discovered traces of turf walls running east and west from structure C and possibly linking up with structures A and B and inferred that the enclosed area was possibly a livestock yard (H. Ingstad 1985:444). Fardy inexplicably identifies structure C as a "Slave House" and structure G as a sauna although the archaeological evidence suggests that both were probably small workshops. The sauna or *Eldhus* was actually located in room IV of structure F. Fardy also mistakenly applies the term *stofa* to the entirety of structures A, D, and F when, in fact, the term applies only to certain rooms in A and F with sunken fireplaces (Wallace 1991:177).

Early on (p.12, n.14), Fardy asserts without qualification that the L'Anse aux Meadows site is Leifsbudir. Later, he allows that "Scientific opinion is still not unanimous in stating categorically that Leifsbudir is the site of the Vinland of the Norse Sagas... however, some scholars have categorically claimed the site (L'Anse aux Meadows) to be Vinland... The evidence seems almost conclusive that Leif Eiriksson built his tiny settlement of Leifsbudir at L'Anse aux Meadows" (p.84). There is a scholarly consensus that L'Anse aux Meadows is a Norse occupation but this is an extraordinary series of statements, both nonsensical and misleading. First, the nonsensical: the fact is that *no one* claims that L'Anse aux Meadows is Vinland because Vinland was an area and not a specific site. Second, the misleading "still not unanimous" should read more accurately "far from unanimous". Certainly, Helge Ingstad, in his final report on the site (H. Ingstad 1985), a work which Fardy evidently never bothered to consult, dogmatically argues the claim despite an abundance of contradictory evidence (Brown 1988). However, the claim is vigorously disputed by Parks Canada archaeologists who extended the excavations. They believe that L'Anse aux Meadows was located at the entrance to the Vinland region but that it was a transit station and not the main settlement described in the sagas. Readers will look in the bibliography or endnotes in vain for any reference

to a dissenting interpretation. But see especially Wallace 1977, 1986, 1991; Schonback 1974; and Schonback *et al.* 1976.

There are numerous other problems with the book. The Sigurdur Stefansson map of the north Atlantic dating to 1570 (opposite p.7) is not identified and its significance is not explained. The Table of Contents is identified as p.iii but, four pages further on, the text inexplicably begins at p.7. It is common publishing practice to begin the pagination of a text at p.1 with previous introductory material separately paginated in lower case Roman numerals. All the pages devoted to the so-called "profiles", which are interspersed throughout the book, lack page numbers.

The first use of the term *knarr* occurs on p.8 without explanation or reference and is not discussed until p.11. The majority of the black-and-white photos are very poorly reproduced and important details are lost.

The maps (pp.iv or is it p.4?; 20; 54; 72; 86) are amateurish line-drawings. All but one lack any indication of scale, latitude or longitude, or projection (zenithal, conical, cylindrical, conventional?). Several inconsistencies and mistakes appear: e.g., on the map p.20, Brattahlid is misspelled; Eirik (text) becomes Erik; AD (text) appears inconsistently as A.D. and is placed after the date instead of before; Viking's should be Vikings'. Fardy, a senior cartographic technician with the Department of Forestry and Agriculture, is identified as the author of only one map. His responsibility for the others, whether personal or supervisory, is uncertain.

I have saved the worst for last. The profile on the Skraelings (pp.41-44) is so replete with mistakes and egregious statements that I scarcely know where to start. I am less concerned here with such minor errors as Fardy's reference to "random genetic drift" among the Beothuk (the "random" is redundant since all genetic drift is random) or the incorrect spelling of the name of the second of the Skraeling "kings" (p.48) identified by the two boys captured in Markland by Karlsefni (Avaldidida, not Valdidida). I am concerned with the misrepresentation of what we reliably know of Beothuk culture.

Fardy states that the "Beothuk developed a culture and language different from any other tribe in North America" but, in the following paragraph, he inconsistently avers that "their religious practices... probably differed little from those of other Algonquian tribes. They were sun-worshippers and their chief deity was Kuis, the sun god. Their most feared spirit was Ashmudyim, ruler of the darkness" (p.42). Had Fardy checked Hewson (1978:163), he would have found that "kuis/keuse/dewis" were terms the Beothuks used for both sun and moon; the inference that the Beothuks were "sun-worshippers" is a little stretched. The term "Ash-mudyim" is derived from one of the drawings of Shanawdithit which portrays an enigmatic, black-robed figure accompanied by Cormack's notation, "the Black Man or Red Indian's Devil". Howley remarks on the European appearance of the figure's rendition, clothes and stance, and suggests that it might be a portrayal of a French priest from the Placentia mission (Howley 1915: 247 and sketch VIII

opposite p.249). Be that as it may, Fardy's inference once again goes far beyond the evidence. We are also informed (p.23, n.5) that the Skraelings' boats, described by the Norse as "skinboats", were "undoubtedly Indian canoes and made from birch bark and not skins... As late as the 1700s, first-time observers of Indian canoes referred to them as being made of the 'skinnes of trees'." The term used by the Norse is *húðkeipar* and means literally "skincanoes" and not "barkcanoes". Fardy's contention that these observant, practical seafarers misidentified the materials covering the Skraeling canoes is hard to sustain. In any case, Beothuk use of skin-covered canoes is attested to by Albert Cantino:

the men of that country (Newfoundland) say they live altogether by fishing and hunting animals, in which the land abounds, such as very large deer (caribou), covered with extremely long hair, the skin of which they use for garments and also make houses and boats thereof... (Cantino, October 17, 1501, in Biggar 1911)

It should be stressed that some of the material in this profile of the Skraelings is extracted from a dreadful pair of essays on "Some Aspects of Beothuk Culture" written by L.E.F. English (1959, 1960; the reference provided by Fardy is incorrect). Space will not permit a review here of English's essays, but suffice it to say that they are in large part based on folklore from various areas of Newfoundland and an unbelievably muddled understanding of history and anthropology (unless you subscribe to the theses that the Greenlanders were actually a Norse/Irish mix, that the Beothuk language contained several Celtic terms, and that the Beothuk "practice of taking the heads of their slain enemies may be attributed to the generally accepted theory that the original tribe came from Malaysia where even among the primitive savages of Papua the custom of head hunting is prevalent" (English 1960:37). To cite such essays as if they were reliable sources simply demonstrates that Fardy lacks any critical historical sense whatsoever.

All of the preceding pales in comparison to the following which I find particularly pernicious; and that is the repeatedly expressed suggestion that the historic Beothuk were the result of interbreeding between the Norse and the Skraelings. To be scrupulously fair to Fardy, he does admit that "Evidence to support this conclusion is paltry, yet the theory should not be discounted... The theory that Viking refugees who fled to Vinland from Greenland fused with the Skraelings of Vinland is a tenuous one, but not an impossible one" (p.64). To anyone who ever read that tedious bestseller, *Chariots of the Gods?*, by convicted con-man, Erich von Däniken, the argumentative technique should be familiar: "The theory that the pyramids were built by aliens from outer space is tenuous but, hey, it's not impossible!"

At the door of the Society of Generally Accepted Knowledge, all hypotheses deserve to be heard but when they wildly and irresponsibly outstrip their evidential base, the underlying motivation becomes suspect. The illustrations on pp.40 and 44 show unidentified reconstructions of a Beothuk winter storehouse and a Beothuk

winter house or *mamateek*. The first is accompanied by the extraordinary statement that “Although built of logs rather than peat turf, it closely resembled the Viking storage and livestock sheds which had been built at Leifsbudir.” The second is described as “suggestive of the Viking *stofa*”. But where are these supposed resemblances? Log palisade walls do not resemble sod walls. Inasmuch as one can discern the plans of the Beothuk structures from the poorly reproduced photographs of reconstructions, there is nothing to connect them with anything Norse; *mamateeks*, for example, were multi-sided whereas the structures at L’Anse aux Meadows were, with one exception, rectilinear. In addition, these Beothuk reconstructions are based on relatively recent ethnohistorical accounts of such structures which are removed in time from the Norse occupation and the Skraelings by eight to nine centuries. Is the author seriously suggesting that Beothuk structures did not evolve and change over that long period of time? What we know of them from archaeological investigations strongly suggests that this is not the case (Pastore 1992:20ff.). Is the author also arguing that an ephemeral Norse presence fundamentally influenced traditional native construction and continued to do so for nearly a millennium?

There are a number of other points which need to be addressed. The contention (p.43) that Beothuk canoes had high prows because of the influence of Viking longships betrays a deep ignorance of birch-bark canoe building, and of the Norse who never used longships in the north Atlantic. To suggest that the Beothuks’ ability to work soft wrought iron when they came across it in the post-contact period can only be explained by the fact that “some of the skills and traits of the white men... lingered with the red men” (p.43) is a ridiculous and erroneous notion. The Beothuk applied their traditional skills of lithic technology to the new material and treated it as if it was a sort of malleable stone. The argument that the knowledge of how to “beat and shape metal... [was] unknown to American Indians before the second coming of the white man in 1500” (p.43) ignores the abundant archaeological evidence of the working of native copper and meteoric iron. The hypothesis that reports of tallness, light skin colour, and brown to blond hair among the Beothuks of the post-contact period can only be explained by “fusion with a white race” (p.42) displays an ignorance of normal genetic variation. In short, the “evidence” for interbreeding is not simply “paltry” — it is non-existent and this makes me wonder about the underlying motivations. In a province with outstanding Micmac land claims which have been stolidly resisted by the provincial government, the notion that the original inhabitants, the Beothuks, were half-Europeanized long before any Micmac presence has obvious political implications.

Who is to blame for this shoddy piece of work? The author, first and foremost, for he has piled mistakes on unwarranted inferences and has ignored nearly all recent archaeological and historical research and publications on the Norse settlement at L’Anse aux Meadows, on Recent Indians, and on the Beothuk of the post-contact period. The publisher bears a heavy responsibility for accepting

Fardy's manuscript without any expert editorial advice and for thereby not providing value to those who, in good faith, bought the book. So lengthy is this litany of errors of omission and commission (and mine is far from exhaustive) that it will bring no credit to Harry Cuff Publications. Finally, we come to the Provincial Government for the publisher "acknowledges the financial contribution of the Cultural Affairs Division of the Department of Municipal and Provincial Affairs" (p.ii). That's right, folks — even if you didn't buy the book, you still got shafted as a taxpayer! The bottom line is that the Cultural Affairs Division (now under the Department of Tourism) should not be funding or subsidizing publications that have not been subjected to expert peer review at some point in the process.

References.

- Biggar, H.P. (1911), *The Precursors of Jacques Cartier, 1497-1534. A Collection of Documents Relating to the Early History of the Dominion of Canada* (Ottawa: Canadian Archives Publications, no.5).
- Brown, S.C. (1988), "Review of *The Norse Discovery of America, Vol. 2: The Historical Background* by Helge Ingstad," *Newfoundland Quarterly*, 84(2):40-41.
- _____. (1993), "Norse Discovery," *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador, Vol. IV* (St. John's: Cuff Publications): 100-104.
- English, L.E.F. (1959), "Some Aspects of Beothuk Culture," *Newfoundland Quarterly*, 58(4):6, 40-42.
- _____. (1960), "Some Aspects of Beothuk Culture (continued)," *Newfoundland Quarterly*, 59(2):11-13, 37.
- Gordon, E.V. (1981), *An Introduction to Old Norse* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; 2nd. edition revised by A.R. Taylor).
- Hewson, J. (1978), *Beothuk Vocabularies. A Comparative Study* (St. John's: Technical Papers of the Newfoundland Museum, 2).
- Howley, J.P. (1915), *The Beothucks or Red Indians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Ingstad, A.S. (1985), *The Discovery of a Norse Settlement in America, I. Excavations at L'Anse aux Meadows, 1961-1968* (Oslo: Norwegian University Press).
- Ingstad, H. (1985), *The Norse Discovery of America, II* (Oslo: Norwegian University Press).
- Mallery, A.E. (1951), *Lost America: the story of an Iron-Age civilization prior to Columbus* (Washington, D.C.: Overlook Co.).
- Pastore, R.T. (1992), *Shanawdithit's People* (St. John's: Atlantic Archaeology).
- Saunders, R. (1963), "When Newfoundland was Little Helluland," *Newfoundland Quarterly*, 62(2):8-14.
- Schonback, B. (1974), *L'Anse aux Meadows, June to September 1974* (Ottawa: Parks Canada Research Bulletin 20).
- Schonback, B, B.L. Wallace and C. Lindsay (1976), *Progress Report on Archaeological Fieldwork at L'Anse aux Meadows, June to October 1975* (Ottawa: Parks Canada Research Bulletin 33).
- Wallace, B.L. (1977), *The 1976 Excavations at L'Anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland* (Ottawa: Parks Canada Research Bulletin 67).

- _____. (1986), "The L'Anse aux Meadows Site," in G. Jones, *The Norse Atlantic Saga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, second edition): 285-304 (Appendix VII).
- _____. (1991), "L'Anse aux Meadows. Gateway to Vinland," *Acta Archaeologica*, 6(1):166-197.