

Beardmore: The Viking Hoax that Rewrote History by Douglas Hunter

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Book Reviews Spring 2019

Beardmore *The Viking Hoax that Rewrote History*

By Douglas Hunter

Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018. 475 pages.
\$34.95 hardcover. ISBN 978-0-7735-5466-5 (mqup.ca)

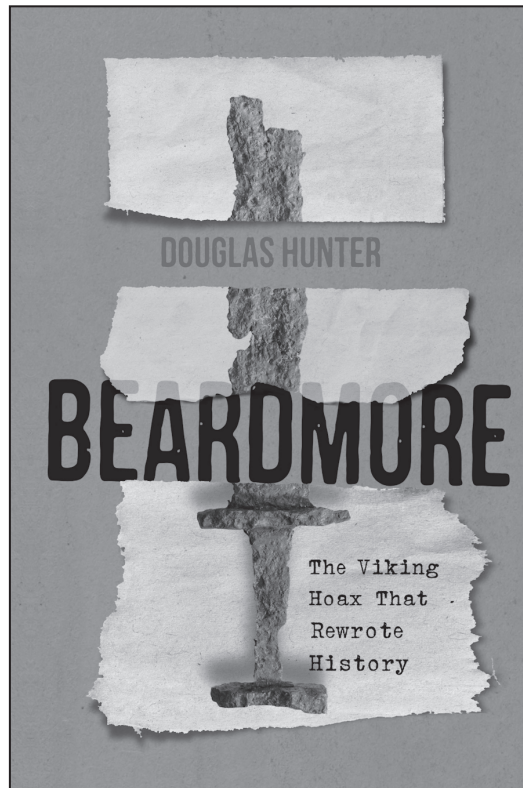
In 1936, the Royal Ontario Museum purchased a Norse (or Viking) axe head, sword fragments, and sleigh handle from Eddy Dodd, a railway worker and prospector in northern Ontario. (At the time, people assumed the handle came from a shield.) Dodd said he found them several years earlier while blasting quartz in search of gold east of Lake Nipigon near Beardmore. His discovery promised to rewrite history by demonstrating that Vikings had visited the North American interior nine hundred or so years earlier. There were, however, three problems with Dodd's statement: first, it was a lie; second, the ROM believed it; and third, the museum's credulity corrupted Norse historiography for the next twenty years.

Douglas Hunter's *Beardmore* tells that story in an engaging and highly detailed narrative and explores several themes beyond the scandal itself. Readers in Ontario, for instance, will be interested in his depictions of the over-confident characteristics of Toronto's university and museum elite between the 1930s and the 1950s in comparison to the working-class culture that thrived north of Lake Superior, with both portrayals capturing a sense of a lost time. Others will be intrigued by his analysis of the immaturity of Norse scholarship in the early twentieth century, when academics, dreamers, and cranks aspired to prove that Vikings traversed unlikely parts of North America, basing their understanding on misreading the evidence and letting them-

selves be deceived by various frauds.

Rather than finding the Norse artefacts while prospecting for gold, Eddy Dodd had removed them from the basement of a home he rented in Port Arthur (now part of Thunder Bay). The owner of the house was James Hansen, a Norwegian immigrant, who earlier had accepted them in relation to a debt owed by a fellow countryman, John Bloch, who had brought them to Canada in violation of laws

designed to prevent the export of historically significant materials from his homeland. He seems to have acquired them from his father, Andreas Bloch, a noted antiquarian and collector. Charles Trick Currelly, the museum's archaeological director, paid Dodd five hundred dollars for the objects. Naturally, he questioned Dodd's story, undertook research, asked scholars in Europe and North America for their opinions, and sent the museum's ethnography expert, Thomas McIlwraith, to examine the site of the supposed find. McIlwraith believed Dodd told the truth, and subsequently presented a lecture to an annual meeting of the Ontario Historical Society in support of that perspective. Despite these efforts, Currelly was not as cautious as he should have been, especially as the idea of a Norse find in northern Ontario had captured his imagi-



nation, which led him to overlook the problems with Dodd's tale and conclude that the objects were proof of a Viking presence in the province, which he promoted in the *Canadian Historical Review* in 1939 and defended against attack in the same journal in 1941.

From the beginning, however, people outside the ROM assumed that the story lacked credibility, so they conducted research and presented their find-

ings to the museum and the wider public, causing something of a scandal once the press became interested in the story. Beyond arguing against opposing but muted scholarly thought, part of Currelly's defence was a claim that other naysayers were not credible, either because they lacked the qualifications to form a sound opinion on the subject, or simply were not respectable, being working-class people of dubious morality, which is something of a surprise to read today in terms of his willingness to express such prejudices so openly. As late as his 1956 autobiography, he wrote that the objects were of the highest importance, being the only Viking artefacts found in North America up to that time. (It was not until 1960 that Anne and Helge Ingstad unearthed hard archaeological proof of a Norse presence in Newfoundland. Since

then, very little has been discovered elsewhere, and nobody has uncovered credible evidence for a Viking connection to Ontario.) Curiously, other ROM staff, including those who succeeded Currelly, either questioned or rejected the Ontario provenance, but stood behind the story—with some equivocation—until the mid-1950s when the truth could not be suppressed any longer. Today, the museum acknowledges that the doubters were right when it interprets the objects within the limits of their unprovenanced authenticity as Norse artefacts dating between 775 and 1025 CE.

In our more academically rigorous and somewhat cynical world, it is easy to condemn Charles Trick Currelly's naivety in accepting and then defending Eddy Dodd's story, but he was hardly the first or the last museum employee to make such mistakes. Furthermore, we ought to remember his importance in acquiring artefacts on a heroic scale to form the ROM's internationally significant cultural collection during its early decades. It is almost impossible for most museums, galleries, and historic sites not to have problematic artefacts. Aside from competently catalogued genuine ob-

jects, their collections often are polluted with modern fakes, or fictional pieces cobbled together from unrelated old materials, or real but ordinary objects "enhanced" by antique dealers to increase their monetary value, or items that have been misidentified as to their date or origin because of curatorial ignorance. As is the case with the Beardmore relics, museums also possess real objects that have been given false provenances intentionally in order to deceive. Sadly, we have museums across Ontario and beyond where more than a small percentage of their objects have been misidentified because the people responsible for collecting do not possess the expertise in material culture and connoisseurship they need to develop and curate their collections properly. Their failures consequently subvert their institutions' abilities to serve the public's interest in its heritage effectively. Thus, *Beardmore* may be read as a cautionary tale for the present day as well as an exposé of a sad incident in the history of Canada's pre-eminent museum.

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An Ethnohistorian in Rupert's Land *Unfinished Conversations*

By Jennifer Brown

Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2017. 360 pages. \$44.95 paper ISBN 9781771991711,
\$44.95 ePub ISBN 9781771991735, Free PDF ISBN 9781771991728. (www.aupress.ca)

Jennifer Brown's *An Ethnohistorian in Rupert's Land: Unfinished Conversations* is a stimulating contribution of one of Canada's premier ethnohistorians. This book is a real gift to the general public (the PDF is available for free on the publisher's website) and especially to scholars investigating fur trade

and Indigenous history in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario. Brown has already influenced so many over her four-decade long career at the University of Winnipeg, serving as director and publications editor for the Center for Rupert's Land Studies from 1996-2010. This book delivers more