

Imagining Vínland: George Mackay Brown and the Literature of the New World

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Abstract - This essay looks at George Mackay Brown's novel of 1992, *Vínland*, in the context of nineteenth- and twentieth-century "foundation myth" literature inspired by the Viking discovery of North America as originally recounted in medieval Icelandic sagas. This body of writing ranges from the New England "Fireside Poets" to Otilie Liljencrantz's Vínland trilogy (1902–1906) to Nevil Shute's *An Old Captivity* (1940). The overarching aim will be to assess Mackay Brown's Orcadian perspective on Vínland in the context of what can broadly be regarded as a literature of colonialism; that is to say, a literature that explores the unequal relationships and value differences between the colonizers and the indigenous population.

Introduction

Vínland is an imagined space. Judging from the thirteenth-century literary evidence of the so-called Vínland sagas, *Eirík the Red's Saga* (*Eiríks saga rauða*) and *The Saga of the Greenlanders* (*Grœnlendinga saga*), it was a stretch of coastline on North America's northeastern seaboard where salmon teemed and grapes were abundant. The location could be as far north as the Gulf of St. Lawrence and as far south as modern-day New York, although the imaginative preference for its location has tended to be the New England coastline. Nevertheless, apart from the Norse settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows, not a single credible material artifact has ever come to light to establish a Viking presence south of the northern tip of the island of Newfoundland (Wahlgren 1986:99–120). This is not to say that Viking explorers did not venture southwards; indeed, it would be somewhat unusual had they *not* done so. Rather the point is that literary artists imagining Vínland some one thousand years later have been either unhampered by facts or otherwise credulous when it came to claims concerning evidence for a widespread Viking presence in North America. This was particularly the case during the latter half of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century, a time when the Vínland sagas were commonly regarded as historical evidence and when the science of archaeology was still in its infancy. The first half of this paper will therefore survey some of the literature of this period that was set in Vínland. After this, it will turn to an examination of the key messages in the 1992 novel *Vínland* by the Orkney author George Mackay Brown.

Background Literature

Vínland has functioned as a stage setting for a wide range of contemporary concerns for over

a hundred and fifty years: politics, race, religion, and gender. Yet the abiding dramatic structure has been conditioned by the interplay between utopian expectations and dystopian outcomes. While not articulated in quite this way in the Vínland sagas, this same shift occurs in the changing apprehensions of the Viking adventurers of their New World.¹ Thus, according to the Vínland sagas, shortly after 1000 AD, Leifr Eiríksson and his crew sailed west from the Greenland settlement and discovered a frost-free land ripe with the promise of good living. Yet, despite the congeniality and abundance of the land, the greed and brutality of subsequent voyagers to Vínland is revealed in their inability to live in peace with the native population, so ultimately denying them permanent settlement. While the ostensible purpose of the Vínland sagas is to celebrate the courage and daring of the forebears of thirteenth-century Icelanders and, perhaps, Greenlanders, they are basically a record of failed colonization. Vínland itself, however, remains in the sagas as a lost opportunity, an ideal land beyond the grasp of early European adventurers. This idealized Vínland, considered both in social and religious terms as a marker of human inadequacies, is what has continued to occupy the imaginations of literary artists; in other words, the contrasts between perfection and reality, success and failure, heaven and earth.

Knowledge of the Vínland sagas in scholarly circles became more widespread through the early eighteenth-century Latin paraphrases of them by the Icelandic historian Torfaeus, and it was probably transcripts of these that came to the approving attention of Benjamin Franklin as early as 1750 (Barnes 2001:39–41, Kolodny 2012:27–28). A more popular appreciation of the Vínland sagas and the subsequent rise of a Viking "foundation myth", which ultimately included not only an aetiology but also an ethno-genesis of white America, came in two successive

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phases. Firstly, there were the comprehensive studies of Danish antiquity by Paul Henri Mallet, the 1763 edition of which was published in English as *Northern Antiquities* by Bishop Thomas Percy in 1770. Secondly, there was the work of the Danish antiquarian Carl Christian Rafn, published in 1837 as *Antiquitates Americanae*. This volume included all known accounts of Viking voyages to America, as well as Rafn's confident commentary on supposedly runic inscriptions and Viking Age artifacts to be found across the eastern United States, all of which have since been discredited. Yet at the time, for many New Englanders keen to identify themselves with their Scandinavian homelands, previous cautious speculations concerning Vinland and the Viking legacy quickly transformed into unassailable truths. In certain fiercely Scando-/Anglo-/Germanophile circles, one casualty of this was Christopher Columbus, whose Catholic faith and Italian origin were considered to be religiously and racially repellent. Among those helping to promote this view was the Wisconsin-born professor Rasmus B. Anderson, whose bluntly titled *America Not Discovered by Columbus* (1874) comforted those who preferred to ignore the fact that, in or around the year 1000AD, Leifr Eiriksson's Christian conversion could only have been into the Roman Catholic faith (Björnsdóttir 2001:220–226). White racial supremacism and religious bigotry would go on to play a significant role in early imaginings about Vinland.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the so-named New England "Fireside Poets" were musing on America's Viking foundations. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, an enthusiastic Scandinavianist (Hilen 1947:28–46, 67–87), depicted Vinland in his "The Challenge of Thor" (1863) as the place where the violence and jealousy of the old pagan gods was supplanted by that of the peace and calm of harmonious Christianity (Arnold 2011:139–142). Similarly, James Russell Lowell's prophetess in "A Voyage to Vinland" (1869) foresees in Vinland the promise of ripe cornfields and open-doored hospitality, where the age of the sword would give way to an age of community and shared endeavor (Arnold 2011:142–144).

Meanwhile, in Britain, novels with a Vinland setting, such as R.M. Ballantyne's *The Norsemen in the West or America before Columbus* (1872) and J.F. Hodgetts' *Edric the Norseman: A Tale of Adventure and Discovery* (serialized 1887–1888), adopted a more imperialist tone. Both these writers perceived in the Vinland sagas good material for a "masculine romance or ripping yarn" for schoolboys (Barnes 2001:92). Accordingly, in these novels, men are men and should be respected for being so by otherwise distracting women and, of course, those of inferior race, the natives or *skraelings*, as they were

derogatively known in the Vinland sagas (Barnes 2001:92–103, Wawn 2001:201–203). This male chauvinist fancy was taken up in a form of meta-narrative, a story about a story, in "The Finest Story in the World" by Rudyard Kipling (1893), where the novelist anti-hero succumbs to feminine wiles and so fails to complete his muscular Vinland yarn (Wawn 2001:191–192). Vinland is utopian when Nordic masculinity or masculine imaginings have free reign but threatens to become dystopian when others fail to recognize the importance of this or are simply unable to join in by dint of race or gender.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, the American author Ottilie Liljencrantz delivered a measure of gravitas to Viking enthusiasts in her highly popular trilogy of novels on the Vinland voyages, beginning in 1902 with *The Thrall of Leif the Lucky*. Acknowledging her debt to Mallet, Rafn, and Anderson (Kolodny 2012:356, fn 51), Liljencrantz's overarching intention was to show the Vikings as a crusading master race of high moral purpose and indomitable spirit, commanded with missionary zeal by the almost saintly Leifr Eiriksson. Much like British imperialist writers, such as Ballantyne and Hodgetts, Liljencrantz contrasts the racial superiority of the Vikings with the vulgarity and grotesquery of the natives, whose underhand tactics and extreme violence eventually lead to the expulsion of the white settlers. Liljencrantz, however, departs to some extent from a purely racial explanation for the settlers' failure, as is made clear in the next novel of the trilogy, *The Vinland Champions* (1904). In this novel, enforced withdrawal from Vinland is unlike that in the novels of her British counterparts and more a matter of divine punishment than of the lamentable immaturity of the natives. As the Viking leader, Karlsefne, pronounces, their retreat has been brought about by those among the settlers who failed to contain their "beast-cravings" (Liljencrantz 1904:249) and that "the trouble that has come into it [Vinland] is of our own bringing, brought in as vermin are brought in ships. The hand of God is against us ..." (Liljencrantz 1904:268). Dystopian Vinland, for Liljencrantz, resulted as a direct consequence of miscegenation addling the bloodstock of America's noble founding fathers, a notion that was close to the hearts of many white Americans.

Maurice Hewlett's *Gudrid the Fair: A Tale of the Discovery of America* (1918) is, as the title suggests, much devoted to defining the ideal woman as mother and wife, notably in the person of Karlsefne's wife, Gudrid, who if threatened by, in this case, "savages" (Hewlett 1918) can also lead the female to become ferociously protective. This last quality is best epitomized in the maternal instincts of Freydis, whose Amazonian breast-beating challenge to the natives

is, for Hewlett, a marvellous sight to behold. Departure from Vinland in this novel is simply one aspect of responsible parenting rather than mission failure. Vinland may have promised a utopia but, in practical terms, the only real utopia is where the family unit thrives. As Hewlett implies, the Vinland ideal lives on wherever the traditions of middle class Victorian family values are upheld; indeed, any place where the women folk “could be happy if [...] allowed to love”, most particularly in a religious sense, for “a woman can always love God” (Hewlett 1918:Chapter 19).

It would not be until the war years that Vinland once again received the attention of novelists. One likely explanation for this is that Nazi ideologues had done a good job of monopolizing the market in respect of ideas about Nordic racial supremacy. For the Nazis, the Viking expansions were testimony to the vigor and superiority of the Aryan people and not merely a matter of the violent dispossession of those they encountered far from home (Arnold 2011:129–136).

Nevil Shute’s novel *An Old Captivity* (1940) and his film script *Vinland the Good* (1946)—the former a dream sequence, the latter a schoolmaster’s somewhat eccentric history lesson—are, in certain obvious senses, a prelude to the post-colonial Vinland fictions that have come to characterize more recent ideas about early European failure in the New World. In Shute’s novel, Vinland is, and remains, otherwise uninhabited and environmentally perfect, an Eden. This ideal land is deeply appreciated by the two romantically entwined Celtic slaves, who regard it as a fine place for them to settle and raise a family, whereas, by contrast, their Viking masters are so fearful of what may lie in store for them that they hardly dare venture from their ships. Dystopian colonial failure is displaced to the Greenland colony where, here again, the natives are obnoxious and where the isolated colonists, much like Liljenkrantz’s Vikings, submit to their “beast-cravings”, fail to adapt, and ultimately die out.

Shute’s film script imagines a slightly less ideal Vinland, for here there is predatory wildlife, signs of native settlement, and the prospect of gruelling work, as well as a Leifr Eiríksson who is less than convinced by his role as Christian evangelizer commissioned by the Norwegian King, Óláfr Tryggvason. There is also a less-than-positive imagining of modern industrial America through one character’s dream vision, the first time such a perspective had occurred to any novelist. Viking colonial failure in Vinland is candidly asserted by Shute’s narrator to be due to the absence of guns, which is why successful settlement only came about some five hundred years later. In Shute’s imagined Vinland, the utopia/

dystopia equation is not so much a linear progression but a consistent juxtaposition largely derived from a pessimistic view of human social evolution (Barnes 2001:111–116). This implicit social critique, partly prompted by wartime disillusionment, is what was to become the hallmark of post-war imagined Vinlands.

From the early nineteenth century through to the mid-twentieth century, Vinland served as a location for expounding ideas about the superiority of traditional white European and/or American racial, religious, and gender values. Since then, the demands for civil rights, the perceived blight of industrial capitalism, an increasing consciousness of ecological vandalism, and a growing sense of shame over the past depredations of colonial powers, have prompted literary artists to see Vinland in increasingly abstract terms as a metaphor for American society. One striking example of this is Thomas Pynchon’s *Vineland* (1990), a savage critique of crisis-torn, late twentieth-century urban America, where California is presented as the ultimate dystopian expression of the New World grown old, intolerant, and, for many, inhospitable. To put it briefly, the modern imagined Vinland, in both film and fiction, is either wholly dystopian and so functions to explain all the ills of contemporary society, or is wholly utopian and becomes a comfortable terrestrial afterlife for the socially weary and excluded, where, for example, therapeutic self-discovery is made possible (Arnold 2011:146–149). In all cases, Vinland has become a form of dreamscape, a place of extreme possibilities, good and bad. It is this same consciousness that is expressed in George Mackay Brown’s novel *Vinland*.

Mackay Brown’s *Vinland*

A unique and often paradoxical aspect of Mackay Brown’s historical fiction is that it articulates certain very modern ideas through a pastiche of medieval saga narrative, a genre that Mackay Brown read enthusiastically and repeatedly in translation. This fictional modus has, for some critics, been perceived as “a glorification of former times [which is] both simplistic and limited” (D’Arcy 1996:253). As Maggie Ferguson’s excellent biography of Mackay Brown reveals, he was dismissive of, or at the very least circumspect about, virtually all things modern (Ferguson 2006). His idealization of what he perceived to be a finer, more natural, more honest pre-industrial past is perhaps best expressed in *An Orkney Tapestry*, his history of the isles (first published 1969; reprinted 1973). Robin Fulton’s near-contemporary assessment of this work was not untypical:

He is liable to make references back in time in order to gain a stance from which he can

militerate against the kind of society most of us in North Europe and North America now live ... such reference is utilised to show that the rest of us are out of step. (Fulton 1974:113)²

Mackay Brown's disregard for historical accuracy in preference for the didactic power of "ritualised symbolism" (D'Arcy 1996:255) has also brought forth criticism. In this case, his images of life and death in idealized rural communities "... tend to be moved round like counters in all too predictable patterns" (Fulton 1974:112) and "... are manipulated to show that the new life is shabbier than the old one" (Fulton 1969:6).

Added to this is the irritation that some critics have felt in respect of certain inaccuracies, both historical and geographical; deviations from medieval Icelandic sources from which *Vinland* is not exempted (D'Arcy 1996:273). In some of Mackay Brown's work, this was clearly deliberate, as is evidently the case in his novel *Magnus* (1973), which sanitizes the *Orkneyinga saga* account of the career of the posthumously sainted, twelfth-century Orcadian earl Magnús Erlendsson (D'Arcy 1994:310–315; Phelpsstead 2007:119–132). Similarly, Mackay Brown's account in *Vinland* of the Viking attempt at settlement in America is an abridgement of the several voyages to Vinland described in the Icelandic sagas. Creative license is, of course, one obvious reason why Mackay Brown felt unconstrained by his sources, in as much as historical detail was, for Mackay Brown, secondary to both plot and message. Moreover, as Mackay Brown may also have known, *Orkneyinga saga*'s status as wholly accurate and impartial history is somewhat doubtful, as its "sources evidently ranged from sketchy recollections of the early period of the islands' history to detailed second-hand accounts or even first-hand accounts of events in the twelfth century" (Chesnutt 1993:457). Much the same could be said of the Vinland sagas, both of which give quite dramatically different versions of events.

Nevertheless, such is the power of Mackay Brown's vision of the past and its relevance to both the present and the future that much of the negative criticism noted here may be missing the point. In broad terms, it does not appear to be history in any academic sense that interests him and drives his narrative; rather, it would appear to be a more profound and certainly less pedantic idea concerning the nature of Time. This much was noted by Elizabeth Huberman in her study of *Magnus*, where she identifies the eponymous saint's preoccupation with the "timelessness of time" (Huberman 1981:130), and ultimately concludes that the novel as a whole is itself "a true and timeless work of the imagination" (Huberman 1981:133). In the case of *Vinland*,

published just four years before author's death, Time and the sense the novel's main character can make of it is at the very heart of the story.

Vinland is essentially a fictional biography recounting the life and the times of an Orcadian farmer by name of Ranald Sigmundson. At the outset, the young Ranald is forced by his overbearing and violent father to abandon his duties at the farm in Breckness and sail with him on a trading voyage to Greenland. In route, they stop over in Iceland, and Ranald seizes the opportunity to escape from his father and stowaway on the *West Seeker*, a ship captained by Leif Ericson and bound for uncharted lands in the far west. Leif is happy to accommodate his stowaway and, as a result, Ranald is among the first Europeans to set foot in the New World, the place Leif names Vinland. In this way, Mackay Brown is able to provide an eyewitness account, or rather version, of what at first transpires in *Eirik the Red's Saga* and *The Saga of the Greenlanders*. Forced to accept their failure to make a permanent settlement, Leif and crew head for Greenland, where Ranald, feeling homesick, joins the *Laxoy*, a cargo ship headed first for Norway, then Orkney. In Norway, he is summoned before King Olaf, presumably Óláfr Haraldsson, who wishes to know more about trading opportunities in Vinland, for "It seems to us a pity that the oil and fruit and mines of such a land should be wasted on the greedy Greenland and Iceland merchants." (Mackay Brown 1992:47)

Meanwhile, it transpires that the *Laxoy*'s skipper has died; thus, on arriving in Orkney, it falls to Ranald to get the best possible price for the cargo. This he excels at and heads for Breckness with his share of the profit, only to discover that his father has drowned and that his mother has been evicted. Wise from his adventures, Ranald now contrives to recover the farm from its new owners, a task which he completes without bloodshed. He then sets about making the farm profitable. At this point, the first section of the novel ends.

The central section of the novel is modelled loosely on the eleventh-century dynastic intrigues and power politics as recounted in *Orkneyinga saga*. However, almost all of this is seen from Ranald's perspective, often as an unwelcome intrusion into his personal life. His progress is like that of the character Everyman in the medieval morality play, a likeness that is made explicit toward the end of the novel. In the meantime, however, Ranald makes sufficient money through trade to revitalize the family farm, marries, has five children, and soon becomes eminent in the locality. Yet one unfortunate consequence of his prominence is that he gets increasingly drawn into the world of high politics, where he is horrified by the murderous treachery of the Orkney

earls and is obliged to give service to Earl Sigurd at the calamitous Battle of Clontarf in Ireland, an event which traumatizes him and deepens his sense of alienation from the affairs of men.

Trade, fame, and war, Ranald comes to believe, are all “vanity and vexation of spirit” (Mackay Brown 1992:189), and, believing this, he turns in on himself searching for ways to shun material comforts. Eventually, he not only avoids the powerful, but also tries to exclude all news of them in his company. He is generous to his neighbors and works hard to support his irreconcilable mother and wife. Soon, however, he abandons even these efforts and spends his time living apart from his family in frugal conditions, choosing to “wash his hands of politics and violence” (Mackay Brown 1992:226) and preferring only the company of the poor folk eking out a living on land and sea. It is from this point onward that Ranald becomes ever more obsessed with the idea of one more visit to Vínland, and it is Vínland that comes to symbolize all that Ranald has learnt and all that he still needs to learn about life’s higher purpose. Although Ranald’s time in Vínland occupies but a few pages in the novel, it embodies the novel’s whole meaning, both in terms of the protagonist’s life and in terms of Mackay Brown’s overarching moral message.

Like previous authors who have made Vínland the setting for their heroes’ adventures, Mackay Brown has to account for the Norse voyagers’ flight from the region. The young Ranald’s initial perception of Vínland is as a wide-eyed teenager who is thrilled by this unparalleled land of plenty, where he befriends a native boy of similar age. Inevitably, however, Viking cultural insensitivity and then aggression results in the killing of one of the natives, to whom they have foolishly given alcohol and then misinterpreted their drunken antics. Open hostility ensues, and Ranald’s new-found friend turns against him. Obligated to retreat, Leif Ericson reflects on the experience:

The skraelings, that we thought so savage and ignorant, were wiser than us in this respect. They only killed as many deer and salmon as they needed for that day’s hunger. We are wasteful gluttons and more often than not leave carcasses to rot after a hunt—a shameful thing. Did you not see what reverence the Vinlanders had for the animals and the trees and for all living things? It seemed to me that the Vinlanders had entered into a kind of sacred bond with all creatures, and there was a fruitful exchange between them, both in matters of life and death. (Mackay Brown 1992:24)

Compounding Leif’s disgust at the values and practices of his own kind is his dream back in Greenland, wherein he foresees the Vínland natives vanishing from the earth in the face of a tide of European invaders. This pessimistic prediction in *Vínland* is characteristic of Mackay Brown’s contempt for all things modern. It is also somewhat reminiscent of Nevil Shute’s post-war disillusionment in *Vínland the Good*, where the schoolmaster explains why European settlement of Vínland failed at first but succeeded some five hundred years later, once the invaders were armed with guns. In effect, Mackay Brown’s Vínland is too fine a place for the Norsemen but is nevertheless doomed to suffer the consequences of European cunning, greed, and short-sightedness at some point in the future, something which is signalled early in the novel when the ambitious King Olaf quizzes Ranald about Vínland’s commercial possibilities.

As an anachronism, Leif’s ecological and social idealism is an absurdity, for no Viking could ever have entertained such ideas, let alone articulated them. In this respect, Mackay Brown’s work has been deemed to be “at its weakest” (Fulton 1974:113) when he too openly inserts his own views about the failings of modernity into the mouths of characters for whom such notions simply could not have existed. This, however, assumes that Mackay Brown’s disregard for historical accuracy is a result of his desire to proselytize, irrespective of historical provenance, whereas an alternative explanation may be that Mackay Brown’s view of historical truth—social and political—is not in terms of the chronologies of power but instead in terms of a continuum of past, present, and future. In this, as Ranald comes to believe, there are such things as eternal truths, among which the lowly and disregarded are exalted.

As no commentator on Mackay Brown’s work could fail to observe, his devout Roman Catholicism is the guiding principle of just about all he wishes to say. Some critics have found this difficult to admire, considering it to be “theological moralising which may well prove somewhat irksome, if not incomprehensible, to non-Roman Catholic readers” (D’Arcy 1996:267). Certainly, Mackay Brown’s religious beliefs were something about which he was both open and determined to explain. In his posthumously published autobiography *For the Islands I Sing*, he tells us that the urge to convert to Catholicism was initially most strongly felt by him through his reading of the martyrdom of Magnús Erlendsson in *Orkneyinga saga* (Mackay Brown 2008:40–48). Mackay Brown’s writings reflect a lifelong engagement with, and commitment to, both Orkney’s medieval past and his personal beliefs, matters which for him were clearly interrelated and the main source

of his artistic inspiration. It is, then, unsurprising that *Vinland*, published by the author at the age of 70, provides profound insight into the complexities of religious conviction through the depiction of the spiritual struggles of the aging Randal.

The yearning to return to Vínland that comes to preoccupy Randal does so not in the sense of him actually achieving spiritual perfection but rather in the sense of his journey toward it—it is the journey that matters. Vínland, for Randal, signifies a preparation for death, and the great events of the world, in other words “history”, are, for him, no more than a crude record of human strife. It is, in a Norse pagan sense, what can be wrung “out of the tight fist of fate” (Mackay Brown 1992:185) or, in a more Christian sense, it is the measure of free will or freedom from material constraints that can be achieved that is truly important for Randal. The essence of life is not marked in “history” but in a space outside of it, in contemplation, something that Mackay Brown has famously referred to in his poem “The Poet” of 1965 as the “true task, interrogation of silence” (Mackay Brown 1991:24).

To emphasize the point, Mackay Brown appears to see progress in what otherwise might be considered a deterioration in his hero’s mental health, where events from the past become as real to him as events in the present. Freedom, he suggests, is as much to be free of restricting and delimiting notions of individual destiny as it is to be free of the encumbering increments of personal history. Randal’s metaphorical journey to Vínland thus becomes his *raison d’être*, and it is one that the local abbot parallels in the old tale of St Brandon’s journey to an “Earthly Paradise”, a staging post toward heaven “further west” (Mackay Brown 1992:180–181). This is also a place that Mackay Brown sees paralleled in the Celtic Tir-nan-og, a land of eternal youth and, tellingly, the title he gives to the final section of the novel. At the end, Randal dies and is interred with all due ceremony in the monastery chapel; an ordinary man whose questioning has transcended the lures of life and achieved for him an obscure saintliness.

Shades of Mackay Brown’s imagined Vínland are apparent in his poetry dating back to *The Year of the Whale* collection of 1965, where in “The Abbot” he tells of an Orkney boy who “was with Leif on the Greenland voyage” (Mackay Brown 1991:21) and who returned to enter a monastery. An even more obvious prelude to the novel is the poem “Vinland” from the collection *Voyages* of 1983, for here Mackay Brown (1991:121) is clearly contemplating the history/Time conundrum:

Too late for the rudder’s turning
Back into history,

The old worn web,
King, lawman, merchant, serf.
The prow breaks thin ice
Into new time.

While *Vinland* was originally intended to be a brief excursus for boys on the Viking discovery of America (Murray and Murray 2004:238), seemingly begun and then set aside at the same time as the poem “Vinland” was written, what emerged some ten years later is arguably the most complex and sophisticated conception of Vínland that has yet been written. Unlike the Vínlands imagined by those with a political axe to grind or a manifesto on race or gender to deliver, as surveyed at the outset of this essay, Mackay Brown’s Vínland is enlightened, free from prejudice and, as I have suggested, delivering a message that urges freedom from history. Certainly, he is obliged to show how and why the Vikings were driven out of Vínland and, in certain respects, he is similar to Maurice Hewlett in representing Vinland as an abstract ideal, a place that is ultimately more an idea than a physical region. What he does not do, however, is to seek either to justify the Vikings’ attempt at colonization or to malign those who prevented them achieving this end.

Whether or not Mackay Brown’s *Vinland* is perceived as the author’s personal declaration of his belief in the importance of spirituality over materiality, thus of Time over history, its central ideas, however anachronistic, are progressive, inspiring and, in the final analysis, optimistic. Mackay Brown’s unique articulation of the meaning of Vínland is, in its symbolic sense, a utopian ideal signified by a lifelong journey toward redemption rather than the actual achievement of it. In this sense, Mackay Brown’s Vínland is radically different from those Vínlands imagined in the novels discussed previously, where, no matter where the blame is laid or how the outcome is justified, a New World dystopia is the inevitable outcome.

Finally, Mackay Brown does not appear to make use of the Icelandic sagas in his poems and novels in order to get either them or medieval history better known, although, of course, his lifelong fascination with Orkney’s past has achieved precisely that. In the “Foreword” to *An Orkney Tapestry*, Mackay Brown describes his approach to the history of the islands as more concerned with “the vision by which the people live, what Edwin Muir called their Fable” (Mackay Brown 1969:1). This vision, he suggests, stands in contrast to what Muir termed “The Story”, which is no more than the “facts of our history ... a mask ... impressive and reassuring, it flatters us to wear it [but] the true face dreams on” (Mackay Brown 1969:1–2). In this sense, for Mackay Brown,

facts are the illusion, whereas dreams and visions are the reality. Given this conviction, for a fuller appreciation of Mackay Brown's work, it might be better to put any knowledge one might have of medieval Scandinavia and the Viking voyages completely out of the reckoning. Having done so, it is possible to apprehend that the novel *Vinland* is more a vehicle for a meditation on mortality than any attempt to present historical realities. In this respect, it is not difficult to see that the hero of *Vinland*, Randal Sigmundson, is a projection of the author and his own quest to be "content with silence".³

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Endnotes

¹For translations, see Keneva Kunz (1997:636–652, 653–74); for summaries and analyses, see Arnold (2006:200–213), and Kolodny (2012:44–102).

²As Tam Macphail, the Stromness bookseller and friend of Mackay Brown for the last twenty years of the author's life, recently pointed out to me, such criticism was deeply hurtful to Mackay Brown and may well have been behind his decision not to allow any further reprinting of *An Orkney Tapestry* after the late 1970s.

³“Carve the runes and be content with silence” was engraved on Mackay Brown's gravestone at his own request.