

# Myths of the Rune Stone: Viking Martyrs and the Birthplace of America

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Stanley in 1956, Edwards returned on occasion to visit and maintained ties with relatives in North Dakota. To research the book, he did a number of oral history interviews, checked the local newspapers and histories, and plumbed his memory and the memories of others for stories of his home town. *Natives of a Dry Place* is the result, a memoir that tells the story of town and county residents in an interesting way.

After explaining how the oil boom of recent years has pulled at the fabric of society and changed the landscape in troubling ways, Edwards lays out the design of his book: he will tell stories of local people who represented the virtues that are so vital to their society. Edwards understands that Stanley's people "cultivated a distinctive way of thinking about the world and how an upstanding person ought to behave, a set of values or character traits or habits of mind," that is, virtues (24). People in other places had them, too, Edwards says, especially on the northern Great Plains. Virtues he highlights include resoluteness, steadfastness, devotion to community, pluck, commitment, optimism, a spirit of adventure, and modesty. Each virtue has its own story, each one highly engaging and readable. Resoluteness tells of the death of Tom Scrivner in 1923 and the men who tried to rescue him without thought of themselves from a deep, dry well left behind on the prairie when the original landowner moved away. Steadfastness is the story of his father, "a necessary man" (45)—rural mail carrier, town fix-it man, pillar of the community. Pluck tells the story of Edwards's much older sisters, who moved to Portland, Oregon, during World War II, to be welders in the shipyards. Each chapter has depth and complexity. Edwards's father was not a good family man at first but he grew into it. Tom Scrivner may have been pushed into that well by angry young Finns, who resented his dalliance with a young Finnish girl, whom he married when she became pregnant. No one in this book is perfect. Many human foibles are on display, but virtue shines through.

*Natives of a Dry Place* is well written, heartfelt, and thought provoking. Those who grew up in small towns in the Midwest or on the Great Plains may find much to relate to. Those who want to understand the values that shaped rural society in the past and that remain present today, even in the face of demographic change, decline, or displacement, will learn much from this book.

*Myths of the Rune Stone: Viking Martyrs and the Birthplace of America*, by David M. Krueger. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. x, 213 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$130.99 hardcover; \$36.99 paperback.

Reviewer Kristin Elmquist teaches history at Park Center Senior High School in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota. She holds an M.A. in cultural anthropology specializing in immigration history at New York University.

*Myths of the Rune Stone* is the latest contribution to a long discussion of a curious event that occurred in rural Minnesota at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1898 a Swedish immigrant farmer named Olof Ohman claimed to have unearthed a stone near Alexandria, Minnesota, that was inscribed with ancient runic characters that told a strange story. According to the translated runic characters on the stone, in 1362 Viking warriors were present in the area and were attacked by “skraelings”; they left an inscription on the stone in memory of their dead. Ever since, scores of Minnesotans have taken sides in the debate over the authenticity of the stone and the possibility of a Viking trip to the heart of Minnesota—an area thickly populated with Swedish and Norwegian immigrants by the 1890s when the stone was found.

Religious studies scholar David M. Krueger dives into the Kensington rune stone story, not to address the familiar arguments about the stone’s veracity but to analyze the significance of the intense interest in the stone from its “discovery” until the present. He exhaustively examined archival texts, published books, and accounts of rune stone-related events, and analyzes those events as “rituals” performed for “civil religious” purposes to meet the needs of different populations.

Krueger focuses on different themes for different eras of the rune stone story. The earliest phase focused on immigrant communities’ sense of belonging, particularly in the context of the 1862 Dakota War in western Minnesota. Krueger examines the alleged deaths chronicled on the stone as a “blood sacrifice myth,” absolving immigrant communities of guilt for displacing the earlier residents of the area. In this way, the indigenous population was scapegoated in the conflict over territory. Krueger interprets interest in the stone in the 1920s up through the 1948 display of the rune stone at the Smithsonian in the context of rural vs. urban, immigrant vs. “American,” and intellectual vs. common-sense struggles in the definition of American identity and values. He argues that the rune stone played a role in religious debates between Catholics and Protestants in the 1950s; the stone could be seen as “proof” of Catholic patriotism, because the pre-Reformation Christian Vikings who allegedly came to the middle of the North American continent would necessarily have been Catholic. He goes on to situate later public rituals involving the rune stone in the Cold War and Vietnam eras, including a National Guard helicopter mission to locate evidence of an ancient Viking settlement—what Krueger terms the “re-taking of rune stone hill.” Krueger speculates on what new narratives await

the rune stone story, particularly in the face of renewed immigration to Minnesota from other parts of the world and new communities competing for Minnesotan—and American—identities.

This is an excellent contribution to the long history of rune stone discourse. Krueger's disciplinary background brings a fresh and potent perspective to the subject. Scholarly in his approach and format, Krueger supports his ideas with deep knowledge of rune stone texts, events, pageants, comic books, and speeches and the views of both prominent supporters and detractors. In addition to its local interest, the book will be fascinating for anyone exploring how civic myths are constructed, and in this case how a region can appropriate civil religious ideas for its own purposes and to help construct its own identity by reimagining its history, creating its own rituals, and defining itself against other groups in a national context. Krueger's study makes a valuable contribution to regional and immigration history and elucidates the role that civil religious rituals play in defining a community's identity.

*Barnstorming the Prairies: How Aerial Vision Shaped the Midwest*, by Jason Weems. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. xxvi, 340 pp. Illustrations (some in color), notes, bibliography, index. \$122.50 hardcover, \$35.00 paperback.

Reviewer Jane Simonsen is associate professor of history at Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois. She is the author of "On Level Ground: Alexander Gardner's Photographs of the Kansas Prairies" in *Recovering the Prairies* (1999).

*Barnstorming the Prairies* makes the Midwest's dubious reputation as "flyover country" worth a double-take. In this image-rich investigation of prairie landscapes, aerial views become the defining angle of a modern perspective that shaped agricultural policy, regional art, and architectural innovation in the first decades of the twentieth century. Earlier midwesterners primarily experienced the landscape as horizontal, but the prospects enabled by flight shifted their visual axis to the vertical, reorienting ocular perceptions of "progress." Weems's study performs a similar function, creating a fresh take on visual studies of midwestern landscapes by ascending to the aerial.

Elevated prospects were not an entirely modern invention. Bird's-eye views date back to the Renaissance and were a common way to represent the expansionist's romance of distance. Gridded landscapes—emphasizing equality, control, and individual opportunity—operated in conjunction with other methods of spatial understanding, including topographical maps, farmstead lithographs, and citizens' profiles. Agricultural crises during the interwar years made this idealism untenable