



The Sea Road

Margaret Elphinstone

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A haunting, compelling historical novel, *The Sea Road* is a daring retelling of the 11th-century Viking exploration of the North Atlantic from the viewpoint of one extraordinary woman. Gudrid lives at the remote edge of the known world, in a starkly beautiful landscape where the sea is the only connection to the shores beyond. It is a world where the old Norse gods are still invoked even as Christianity gains favor, where the spirits of the dead roam the vast northern ice-fields, tormenting the living, and Viking explorers plunder foreign shores. Taking the accidental discovery of North America as its focal point, Gudrid's narrative describes a multilayered voyage into the unknown, all recounted with astonishing immediacy and rich atmospheric detail.

The Sea Road Details

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Author : Margaret Elphinstone

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Barbara says

This haunting book, set in Iceland, Greenland and Vinland, and on the sea that connects these lands, transports the reader a thousand years back through time. Back to when ordinary people didn't read or write or have access to mirrors. When people improvised to build seaworthy ships. It's a spiritual journey, too. Near the end of her life, Gudrid made a pilgrimage to Rome, where a cardinal decided he wanted an account of her life, presumably because she converted to Christianity while living among Vikings who still worshiped the old Norse gods. An Icelandic priest, Agnar, was assigned to write down her riveting life story, exactly as she told it to him over three months of daily interviews. Gudrid reminisces about what she learned from the people she lived with, from the natural world and the sea, and how her own beliefs were formed along the way.

Jason says

Another marvelously, almost preternaturally evocative novel from Margaret Elphinstone. She has such a gift for situating her readers in the eras and environments about which she writes -- it's a bit like time travel, really, and like entering into and navigating the souls of those about whom she writes. This treatment of the life of a woman, Gudrid, whose life has been either largely absent from the thoroughly examined historical record or largely seen through the scrim of the men who were her contemporaries, feels something like a conferred blessing. It's a lovely work of imagemaking, of wisdom, of suspense and empathetic immersion.

Zora Wyatt says

It's not very often that we get to see from a woman's viewpoint in a work of historical fiction in this time period (early middle ages). Margaret Elphinstone's brilliantly researched book *The Sea Road* portrays the life of Gudrid Thorbjornsdottir, now a national hero of Iceland. She lived in the household of Erik the Red and married his son, but after his death she married Thorfinn Karlsefni, a great explorer in his own right. She went to Vinland after Leif Ericson discovered it, and lived what must have been very harsh conditions there. And she did so many things later in life, including a trip to Rome!

Elphinstone brings Gudrid alive. The character is very believable, and I felt like the author had plucked her out of history so that I could sit down with her at the kitchen table.

Fine piece of writing. I'd recommend it to any lovers of historical fiction.

The Idle Woman says

This wonderful, evocative novel tells the story of a remarkable woman. In her youth, Gudrid was one of a small company of settlers who sailed west beyond the known world to the shores of Vinland, a country of grain, grapes and timber, with the ambition of setting up a traders' camp there. Now an old woman, she has

turned her face east and made a pilgrimage from the borders of the world to its centre, in Rome, where she is invited to tell her life story to a young Icelandic monk so that it can be written down for the edification of the Church. Gudrid's world is one where the boundary between the human and the spirit worlds is fluid, and where a voyage beyond the charted waters of the mortal realm might well take you into the domain of the gods. Over the course of a long Roman summer she conjures up the ice and bleak beauty of her childhood and youth in Iceland and Greenland, and the community of brave men and women who lived there, culminating in the story of one of the greatest expeditions into the unknown in history.

Elphinstone adds conviction to her story by steeping every page in a sensitivity to the cultural mores and the folklore of 11th-century Iceland. This is a period when Christianity is still finding a foothold in these wild places, and Gudrid's world is one where the new Christ sits uneasily alongside the enduring traditions of Thor, Hel and the ghosts and demons whose unquiet souls roam the landscape. It's eerie in parts, adventurous in others, but never less than captivating; and Gudrid is an attractive and compelling narrator. Highly recommended for anyone interested in early medieval Europe and fans of the sagas - but also for those who simply enjoy fine writing. A dignified, elegant treat of a book.

For a longer review, please see my blog:
<http://theidlewoman.blogspot.co.uk/20...>

Speesh says

'The Sea Road' is an imaginative and beautifully written attempt to recreate the life of an Icelandic woman called Gudrun Thorbjarnadottir. If you have no idea who that is, that's ok. Not many will know who she is. She is a Norse woman, who appears in the Icelandic Sagas, the wife of Karsefni, of the few Norse adventurers to have visited North America - five hundred years before Columbus.

The story begins though, in Rome in 1051 and Gudrun is at the end of a pilgrimage. She is relating her life story to a fellow Icelander, a monk, called Agnar. She is of interest to the Church, because of her travels. She is "...one of those who have gone beyond the confines of the mortal world, in the body. She has dwelt for over a year in the lands outside the material world."

The theme, the idea, of her having been 'outside the world' is just one of the many layers to this wonderful book. She has, by having visited and lived in the Norse settlement in North America, been 'outside' the world as it was known at the time. She too was of the opinion that she had been outside the world and subscribed to the Viking view, that this was the land that ran round the edge of the world as they knew it and that if you sailed along the coast far enough south, you'd reach Africa. This feeling of being 'outside,' is also used to symbolise both the position of the Norse Pagan beliefs being outside those of the arrogant up-start new religion of Christianity and the flight of the old Norse beliefs, out of the 'old world' they once ruled. There is no room for them in the new, Old World and they, along with the remaining Norse believers, find themselves being pushed further and further west. But can the New World be a new home for an old world religion?

Despite Gudrun's own conversion to Christianity, there is a sense of sadness, mixed with longing, for the old ways. The story she relates has it too. A sadness, a regret, that a time, a productive, sensible, well-founded, earthy, functioning culture has passed. Through no fault of its own. A connection to the world around them, now lost to the peoples of Christianity. Forced to the edges of the world and then beyond, as the story says several times. Others seem to have converted to the new religion, for more practical reasons: "'It's all very

well for a man at sea to pray to Thor, but here on land we're overrun by demons, and more and more people are being driven off their land by the dead who refuse to lie quiet. This new power might be just the thing we need.'"" They clearly saw the new god first as an addition to, rather than a replacement for, the older gods. A new solution, to some old problems!

Gudrun tells of the arrival in Iceland when she was a child, of a wild, red-haired adventurer called Eirik Raudi. Regarded by most as a notorious outlaw, he convinces several Icelanders, including Gudrun's father, to move to a new land he has found, that he has deliberately enticingly called the Green Land. Though Eirik's wife is now a devoted Christian, he is old school Norse: "The very mention of a new god made Eirik flame. "Take away your milk-and-water gods, your gods for infants!" he used to shout. "What kind of man do you want if you fancy a god who hasn't the guts to lift a hand to save himself? Don't tell me stories about flocks of sheep! I want men like wolves! What kind of country do you think this is?" Life is hard in the Green Land and the eastern and western settlements struggle along, but gradually, through being blown off course by storms trying to reach the settlements, sailors come in with reports of even more lands sighted to the west. Their desire for the new land, is purely practical. Trees have been sighted and trees are a scarce to non-existent in the Green Land.

It is Eirik's son, Leif, who first makes inroads into the new land and he builds houses ('Leif's Houses') there. It seems however, like they never really intended settling in the new lands, merely using them to supply Greenland and to sell what they found in the New World, to the Old.

Gudrun and Karsefni also travel to America and remain there for around a year, but problems with the local inhabitants - not clear if it was Inuit or 'Indians' - mean they have to return earlier than expected to Greenland. She refers to the final voyage that is mentioned in the sagas, though only in passing, because she wasn't a part of it and it didn't end well. Margaret Elphinstone is obviously using the actual Viking remains found in northern Canada, at L'Anse aux Meadows, as her - the Icelandic Sagas' - 'Leif's Houses.' She also has Gudrun suggesting that they sailed a lot further south from Leif's Houses, definitely what is now the USA (material has been found at L'Anse aux Meadows, which points to other, southerly explorations), maybe even into the St. Lawrence seaway. She does make it clear that there were other voyages, apart from the ones she mentions - the ones the sagas mention - and that is also without doubt true.

And there's a twist in the end of the tale, so you'll want to have kept your wits about you and have an eye for detail...I'll say no more.

'The Sea Road' is based on the mentions of what we now know to be North America, in the Icelandic Sagas. The Sagas were written after the oral story-telling tradition of the Vikings. If you're thinking 'Chinese whispers,' it should maybe be pointed out that they are, in that respect, at least as accurate as Homer's tales of Ancient Greece. People were selected (or selected themselves) for their ability in story-telling. As in, remembering what they were told and how the story should be told. There was no TV, no internet, no newspapers, no radio. Telling stories in the evenings was what they did. They knew the stories by heart and loved them told in the right way. You read a child their favourite story each night, then try changing a word or a scene - see how far you get. The Vikings didn't write that much down at the time (unfortunately), remembering was what they were good at. Stories of their gods or ancestors, or also as in 'The Sea Road', sailing directions to places. Get one of those wrong and you don't sail any more. It's interesting too, that the Danish word for 'speak' is 'tale.' As the book points out, once a story was written down, it was dead. Telling and re-telling kept the story alive, the people and the places involved alive too.

I remember thinking several times, that this was not so much an idea of what it must have been like, but that this was how it was. She has surely come that close. I began thinking about it and analysing the story as if it

were an actual record of what happened. Speaking of which, it was a good one to read having just come off the back of reading Robert Enterline's 'Viking America.' A happy accident. 'The Sea Road' fits very well with and develops much of the conjecture, possibilities and evidence that put forth. 'The Sea Road' would even, I think, make more sense, give even more pleasure, if you had read 'Viking America' first. It's by no means essential, you'd just know that more of 'The Sea Road' could actually be true than you might otherwise have thought.

It doesn't feel like reading a work of fiction. This is like reading their diary, their thoughts. It came over as if Gudrun is trying to remember what happened in her dreams. Trying to glimpse the events through the mists, through the trees. Like trying grab hold of smoke. The idea of the story being told once again to, or by, a monk did raise a few groans from me at the start. It's been surely done to death. But as, to be fair, the only ones who could write back then were monks and because it in no way got in the way and the monk, being a fellow Iclander, understands her better than a lot of the monks do in similarly related books, it works an absolute treat.

'The Sea Road' is a much more 'honest,' moving, thought-provoking and ultimately satisfying 'Viking' book, than ever your Giles Kristians and Robert Lows are. A beautifully written glimpse, full of longing, of regret and of happiness of a time and a people lost forever.

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Rebecca Upjohn says

Reading *The Sea Road* in conjunction with *The Vinland Sagas* gives this story a rich context. I found it fascinating. Gudrid tells her story to Agnar, an Icelandic monk and through her we learn about the Norse Greenlanders and how they came to North America. The conversion from the old beliefs to Christianity and the resulting friction threads through the book as does the role of women. Gudrid is a strong character holding her own in the larger than life tales of Eirik the Red and his son Leif Eiriksson the Lucky.

On a different but connected note, if you find yourself in Newfoundland, go and visit L'Anse Aux Meadows. It is the one verified location proving that the Norse landed in North America. The remains of the original buildings are buried so what you see are low lying mounds showing the shape and location and size of what is believed to be a winter and boat repair encampment. The nearby recreated peat, wood and thatch buildings give a good sense of Viking life and seeing it on the Newfoundland shore with the surrounding sea (even though the water is lower 1000 years later) brings the Sagas and Gudrid's story to life.

Marieke says

This book was a wonderful indulgence as I've been recovering from a cold this week. With the wind howling outside, *The Sea Road* took me to medieval Iceland, the first settlement of Greenland and beyond... to North America.

This fascinating historical novel is the story of Gudrid of Iceland, daughter-in-law to the explorer Erik the Red, as she accompanies her countrymen to the newly discovered land of Vinland.

Gudrid of Iceland was the furthest travelled woman in the world during the Viking Age... and for a thousand years she has deserved a saga in her own right, says the back of the book.

I was happy to see the note in the front that the characters and events in the novel are based on accounts recorded in those times, around the year 1050. The discovery of a new world is riveting--all the more so for the real sense I got of how these people lived and where they had come from.

I think even more than by the exploration of a new land, I was most intrigued by the way of life in Iceland, this only the third generation of settlement on that island. The ghosts, plagues, witchcraft and long, dark winters with their stories and folktales were vividly portrayed through Gudrid's words.

Also interesting is the description of the meeting of human cultures when Icelanders and Native Americans encounter each other for the first time. Gudrid describes the natives as savages and *skraelings*, or demons or devils. The Icelanders were predisposed to fight and kill when encountering anything new or strange, and so you can guess what the outcome was. Violent conflict.

But because we experience these encounters through the eyes of the Icelandic witch (as Gudrid was), knowing their cultural assumptions and biases enables us (me anyway) to imagine a different encounter where violent suspicion and bloodshed are not the first resort.

This was the perfect time of year to read this book, with the encroaching darkness and cold, the time of witches and magic, of howling wind and wandering ghosts. I'd recommend it to anyone fascinated by stories of the Far North and of Viking exploration.

Rebecca says

This book truly shows the origins of Historical Viking fiction by demonstrating how any good historical novel doesn't just focus on the events featured but on the people those events effect.

In this case it was the life and travels of a young Icelandic woman called Gudrid and the transformation and dramatic shift her life takes as she grows up in Iceland where Christianity still vyes with the beliefs of the Nordic Gods, to then set sail with her father in the hope of meeting up with an old friend who left many years before, in the newest found lands of Greenland. From there she finds herself fated to marry several times after tragic deaths before the biggest challenge awaits her with her soon to be future and lifelong merchant husband, the journey to and settling over Vinland (North America). A land that is so foreign it has dangers that not even the old gods can protect them from

It is a remarkably captivating book despite the way it is narrated through several perspectives and reveals the life of nordic people in such magnificence and beauty you couldn't ever think of them as being related to those that raided and invaded Englands costs only a few hundred years ago when the story is set.

Definitely a classic to look into for any viking fiction fans.

Helen says

This is a novel of Eric the Red and the adventurers who sailed from Iceland to the Green Land, told from the point of view of Gudrid. We've followed her childhood and she is now at an age when she could be married so the tension has increased. It is not lessened by Gudrid's father announcing that he is going to sail with Eirik Raudi (Eric the Red). Gudrid goes along and we follow her through two marriages and the birth of her son. She goes to Vinland and sees the conflict with the Skraelings, as they call the people. Gudrid narrates the story to an Icelandic monk in Rome, where she has come on pilgrimage in her later years. You have to imagine what the monk says to her because you only see her responses. For a calligrapher one of the most moving passages is when she is allowed to look at a real book with illustrations in Norse/Celtic form. It is magically beautiful to her and she is amazed that she is allowed to turn the pages. The author has kept the narration true to its time frame as far as I can tell so Gudrid doesn't have thoughts that belong in some other time or place. There is a very telling bit when she talks about the colour she sees in every place other than Iceland. Other places can dye their wool and there is jewelry with coloured stones so that there is a lift from browns and greys that dominated her life. A fascinating book

Diana says

It appears that I'm obsessed with historical fiction about Vikings. Sadly, 99 out of hundred books in this teensy genre are bodice-rippers, which don't interest me at all. This one is no bodice-ripper, and I liked it a lot. *The Sea Road* is based on the true story of a woman named Gudrid, who was born in Iceland, lived near Eric the Red and Leif Ericson in Greenland for a while, and traveled as far as Labrador (Markland) and Newfoundland (Vinland). She spent most of her married life in Iceland, but traveled to Norway, and later, as an old lady, to Italy.

The Vikings were so tough. They lived in Greenland on little more than buttermilk and seal meat. They sailed insanely long distances through wild northern seas in small boats with almost nothing in the way of navigational equipment. I find it so interesting that they lived in Greenland for something like 300 years, then almost completely disappeared, and that they made it all the way to Newfoundland. Plus, when they weren't exploring or making war, their lives were mostly those of subsistence farmers in pretty harsh circumstances, which is interesting, as well.

The Sea Road tells the story of a people's conversion from paganism to Christianity, and how sometimes, the two coexisted, and it offers interesting things to say about marriage and all the different feelings that coexist in a long marriage.

Jane says

I felt this book had such promise but it didn't deliver. I thought it would be more enthralling than it was: one woman's journeys in the Viking Age. In Rome, an Icelandic priest at the behest of a cardinal, is transcribing the life's story of an old woman, Gudrid. She has come there on a pilgrimage.

We read of her girlhood, two marriages, children, and widowhood both times, the customs of those settlers, and, I must admit, beautiful descriptions of Iceland and Greenland. Most of the book was dull but it picked up where Gudrid describes her settling on Vinland and events during their stay. The name had been bestowed because of the wild grapes found there from which wine was made. The Norse finally left after

they found they couldn't get along with the natives, called by them, "skraelings" [wretched ones] and after killings during a skirmish ensued.

The book was well written and based on the true account of a woman of those times who went to Vinland. I didn't like the book switching back and forth from first person to third. Gudrid tells her story, but goes off on so many tangents, her mind wanders, and it's not completely chronological. Then the narration abruptly changes to third person, where it's as though a third person is commenting on what Gudrid has just told or is about to tell. Gudrid's whole narration feels like a dialogue with the priest, only his words are left out. That was confusing to me. I'm sorry I cashed in a gift certificate on this book.

Juliet Wilson says

This is a wonderful novel, based on the travels of Gudrid who was the furthest travelled woman in the Viking era. The reader feels really absorbed into the story and experiences the discomforts of the travel (sleeping in damp cloaks in the boats, living through hard winters with little food) and the beauty and harshness of the natural world:

We climbed up past the caves where the giants live, right to the glacier itself. Close to, the glacier isn't the smooth white cone you see from out at sea. It's streaked with spines of larva and the snow is dusty with ash. There was cloud over the mountain, where the ice disappeared into a clammy mist that caught us in its breath as we passed. Our ponies trudged through patches of snow and picked their way among boulders through streams of meltwater. The glacier took a long time to pass. Then we climbed down by a river with many waterfalls.

Gudrin really comes alive in the narrative and I found myself really empathising with her. She's also a fascinating historical character and this novel gives insight into her role in Viking explorations of Greenland and the eastern coasts of north America, where they cut down the forests to make boats and then left.

Mairi says

I adored this. I can imagine sitting and listening to Gudrid tell tales for days and weeks and years on end. I loved the way the fictive Agnar's fascinated, slightly scandalized demeanor came through by way of Gudrid's replies to his unrecorded questions and statements and looks. And the story. Oh, the story. Vikings. Adventurers at the ends of the known earth. Old religion and new. Hard winters and deadly journeys and glorious summers and each bit beautifully told.

T says

Not only is this a wonderful book, it's a great example of what *good* historical fiction looks (and reads!) like. I would say that if you are a fan of Medieval European/Viking Age history, this book will be right up your alley. Bookend it with Donna Jo Napoli's *Hush* and you have yourself a nice little reading list that is the next best thing to time travel.

My only complaint with this book is that Ms. Elphinstone kept on calling the Icelandic Horses ponies. Anyone who has ever been to Iceland knows that this is a major faux pas. Outside of that, this book is an absolute gem that will have you living and breathing right alongside the intrepid Viking explorers and settlers of Iceland, Greenland, and Vinland.

Highly recommended.

Suzanne says

Love Love Love. This just might be my favorite 2011 read. I love Gudrid, I love her story, and I can not get over how much I enjoyed this book.

It's the story of the 11th century Islandic woman Gudrid Thorbjarnardottir (Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir) as transcribed by the fictive Icelandic monk Agnar, when they are both in Italy - she for her pilgrimage, he for church government. Gudrid tells Agnar of her childhood in Iceland, her early days of womanhood in Greenland, and her travels to the place we now know as Canada. Slowly, a friendship between the old woman and the young monk develops and the stories become more personal and Gudrid's thoughts start to drift. Though Agnar writes down the story exactly as Gunnar tells it (complete with her thoughts and questions on their current roundabouts, life, death and God) and leaves out his responses, still, this becomes the story of Agnar too, I think, as in between there are little cursive bits in present tense which appear to be him painting the picture, but it is never quite clear who's telling these things and you can leave them out and the interview would simply continue. But nevermind.... this is a most interesting, wonderful story and though I usually do not mind finishing a book as it means I can go on new adventures by reading a new book, this one leaves me longing for just a bit more of Gudrid's wonderful presence.

p.s. Google Arnarstapi, Snæfellsnes and Glaumbær and get a little taste of Gudrid's Icelandic surroundings.
