

## Comptes rendus de livres

### DIANE CHISHOLM

Review of

Ingstad, Benedicte. 2017. *A Grand Adventure: The Lives of Helge and Anne Stine Ingstad and Their Discovery of a Viking Settlement in North America*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Pp. 455. Hardcover. B/w and colour photographs, maps, index. Translated by J. K. Stenehjelm. ISBN 9780773549685.

*A Grand Adventure: The Lives of Helge and Anne Stine Ingstad and Their Discovery of a Viking Settlement in North America* is not just grounded in biography, but in social history and archaeology. It is a story that has great piquancy since it is told by the Ingstads' daughter, Benedicte, professor emerita of medical anthropology at the University of Oslo. The volume chronicles the events that led to her parents' discovery of a centuries old Viking settlement in the northern region of Newfoundland, at L'Anse aux Meadows, made public in 1961. But alongside that story we are treated to an insider's view of the relationship of the Ingstads as a married couple and as professional colleagues, and how societal pressures of that period affected them. Additionally, we are given a revealing picture of the world of archaeology in the middle of the 20th century and how the Ingstads and their work were regarded in academia, and the established archaeological community, worldwide.

The book is based on source material in the possession of the author: forty shelves of boxes of archival data, diaries, unfinished autobiographies by both Helge and Anne Stine Ingstad, and documents from the National Museum in Iceland, the University of Alaska in Fairbanks, and Memorial University of Newfoundland. Woven into these tangible sources, however,

are the intangible—memories and perceptions based on the author's lived experience. *A Grand Adventure* resonates with the author's personal observations since she accompanied her parents on some of their trips. Benedicte's recollections are also framed by the fact that she is herself a social scientist who is trying to present a clear and informed record of what transpired around the discovery of the Norse habitation. She sets out to correct false assumptions that still adhere to her parents' legacy fifty years later and exposes behind-the-scenes manoeuvrings by others that directly affected the Ingstads' work at the time.

Both of the Ingstads were strong-minded individuals. Helge's singular persona might best be summed up in a line from one of his poems, "Being surrounded by people brings on loneliness." He once wrote in reference to his sister's marriage that "Half the purpose of a woman's life is to get married and have children, not to wander about like me and be a vagabond who never settles." It is somewhat ironic to consider he eventually marries a woman who has these unfeminine inclinations.

The author demonstrates that her father was meticulous and thorough in his research methodology. Helge wrote the well-received book, *The Land of Feast and Famine*, based on his early travels. It brought him the funds and celebrity to

continue his expeditions, and Benedicte offers us details that explain the appeal of her father's writing. She tells us Helge described survival habits of the Indigenous peoples he encountered in the north and the respect he had for their traditional ecological knowledge (Helge learned, for example, that ingested moss in reindeers' stomachs can be consumed by humans as a food source. Advice that is unforgettable no matter how hard one tries!).

*A Grand Adventure* necessarily covers a lot of history since Helge's life played out against a backdrop of significant events: the dispute between Norway and Denmark over East Greenland; the deaths of national "heroes" Amundsen and Nansen which opened the way for a new explorer like Ingstad; his appointment as governor of Norwegian territories in the north; his dealings with the notorious Vidkun Quisling. Conversely, Benedicte's mother, Anne Stine Ingstad, is depicted as a young woman fuelled by notions of romance and adventure. She determined she would marry Helge after reading *The Land of Feast and Famine* and struck up a correspondence with him. Anne Stine was actually engaged to a German nobleman when Helge finally proposed at the beginning of the Second World War. The author views her parents' courtship and subsequent marriage with a dispassionate eye—her father was nearly twenty years older than her mother and accustomed to following his own inclinations. A certain amount of strain must inevitably follow from such a union and this forms part of the narrative of this book.

As the rigours of marriage to Helge continue, Anne decides she must have her own purpose in life independent of her husband. To this end, she begins a course of studies in history that eventually leads her to become an archaeologist in her own right (she was mainly interested in the Stone Age). Since it is the middle of the 20th century, Anne's choices do not seem as natural as they would today; a wife at that time was still expected to keep house and stay at home and this was certainly Helge's expectation of Anne. In this regard, *A Grand Adventure* is a chronicle of social history as the phrase "anatomy is destiny" begins to lose its meaning, not just for Anne Stine but for women in general. It is worth noting that both Helge and their daughter, the author, view Anne's first archaeological job in another

community with deep resentment—such that Anne was forced to commute the 140 km north to Oslo, even though Helge and Benedicte could have moved to be there with her. This eventually leads to two suicide attempts by Anne—no doubt painful stuff for a daughter to commit to paper.

It was Helge who first evinced an interest in the story of Vinland and it is this story that comprises the last section of the volume. In 1960 Helge began his search for the Vinland of Icelandic legend accompanied by Benedicte. Based on research done earlier in the century, primarily by Vaino Tanner, Ingstad was eager to explore land on the northern tip of Newfoundland's Great Northern Peninsula in L'Anse aux Meadows, near Epaves Bay (he had previously visited, and eliminated, parts of Maine, Cape Cod, Nova Scotia, and Cape Breton as possible locations of the Norse site). Ingstad believed the word *vinland* meant "grazing pasture" or "meadow" rather than *vin* meaning "grapes" or "wine," and L'Anse aux Meadows approximated the topography suggested by the word. This part of the book is doubly interesting because it conveys how logic and research were also dependent on luck, chance, coincidence, timing, and tenacity as factors that enabled Ingstad to find the ruins he sought.

The author describes the convoluted logistics involved in mounting the ensuing expeditions, which latterly included Anne Stine. Benedicte's observations about the Newfoundlanders living in the area—their speech and social customs—lend a compelling human picture to the text. Black and white photographs of the inhabitants further enhance its appeal as does a wonderful photograph of Anne Stine exuding confidence, secure in the belief Leif Eiriksson's settlement had been unearthed.

*A Grand Adventure* doesn't end with the discovery. Instead it turns into something of a cautionary tale. After Helge announced the L'Anse aux Meadows breakthrough, there was a backlash by the Danes beginning in October of 1961 and continuing for years. The Danish archaeologist Jorgen Meldgaard had investigated the northern part of Newfoundland earlier but never actually went to L'Anse aux Meadows nor found Norse artifacts or housing sites as the Ingstads had done. Nevertheless, people felt he deserved the credit for the find. Helge was referred to as an "amateur archaeologist," while

Anne's accreditation as an archaeologist went unremarked—treatment Anne was sure would never have happened to a male archaeologist. The National Museum of Canada weighed in with a statement to the effect that the only news of Norse settlements in Newfoundland it was aware of was the Ingstad discovery. The negative reaction of the Danish establishment persuaded Helge not to include Danish archaeologists on further expeditions. The matter raged on after the American photographer David Linton, working at a research station in Antarctica, wrote to the premier of Newfoundland supporting Danish claims; Premier Smallwood contacted Memorial University of Newfoundland to investigate. Thus academic warfare began, though Helge was unaware of these machinations even after his permit to continue excavating in Newfoundland was summarily revoked. The author solved the mystery of the “who and why” after the deaths of her parents, as she found Linton's letter in Memorial University's archives.

Benedicte chronicles the years that followed as the controversy would ebb and flow, even after discovery of the spindle whorl which conclusively proved Norse presence in Newfoundland. She describes the academic rivalries, one-upmanship, and posturing that went on as individuals tried to gain funding and promote their own self-interests. Even the late Canadian author Farley Mowat is mentioned as having demanded access to all the Ingstads' research reports so they might be used

as background for a book he was planning. She observes that public focus was primarily on her father while her mother's work was relegated to a minor position, despite Helge's efforts to stress Anne's role (letters would arrive addressed to Mr. Archaeologist Helge Ingstad and Wife). Benedicte also talks about the effect of the discovery on the inhabitants of L'Anse aux Meadows. She discusses challenges the couple faced when disagreements arose between their ethical concerns regarding some actions Parks Canada had taken at the site and the accusations of fraud they had to endure even many years after their discovery. As the volume winds down, it charts the growing rift between Helge and Anne Stine and their reactions to events in the aftermath of the Norse settlement discovery as well as conflicts with friends in the archaeological community. Benedicte witnesses and writes about her mother's death and her father's decline into advanced old age (he lived to be a centenarian) along with the importance of their find.

It is difficult to lay bare the underpinnings of your own parents' marriage and lives in any objective way, but Benedicte Ingstad has presented an even-handed portrait of the shared effort and relationship of two willful and drastically different individuals. *A Grand Adventure* is a painstakingly researched, detailed evocation of exploration, perseverance, and personality. It functions on many levels and is a compelling, instructive, and honest work.