

**REV. DR. BELKNAP'S  
BIOGRAPHIES OF THE EARLY  
DISCOVERERS OF AMERICA: A  
REPRINT OF THE FIRST EDITION OF  
1798**

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**JEREMY BELKNAP**

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OF  
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OF  
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*A Reprint of the First Edition of 1798.*



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"HAS STOOD THE TEST OF CRITICISM FOR THREE-QUARTERS OF A CENTURY."

BANCROFT.

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# BIOGRAPHIES OF THE EARLY DISCOVERERS.

BY JEREMY BELKNAP, D.D.

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## BIRON.

BIRON, A NATIVE OF NORWAY—HIS DISCOVERY OF ICELAND AND GREENLAND—AN ACCOUNT OF HIS VOYAGE—CHARACTER AND APPEARANCE OF THE NATIVES.

THE ancient inhabitants of Norway and Denmark, collectively taken, were distinguished by the name of *Normans*. Their situation near the coast of the sea, and the advantages which that element presented to them beyond all which they could expect, from a rough soil, in a cold climate, led them at an early period to the science and practice of navigation. They built their vessels with the best of oak, and constructed them in such a manner as to encounter the storms and billows of the northern ocean. They covered them with decks and furnished them with high fore-castles and sterns. They made use of sails as well as oars, and had learned to trim their sails to the wind, in almost any direction. In these arts, of building ships and of navigation, they were superior to the people bordering on the Mediterranean Sea, who depended chiefly on their oars and used sails only with a fair wind.

About the end of the eighth and beginning of the ninth century, the Normans made themselves famous by their predatory excursions. England, Scotland, Ireland, the Orkney and Shetland islands, were objects of their depredations; and in one of their piratical expeditions, A.D. 861, they discovered an island, which from its lofty mountains, covered with ice and snow, obtained the name of *Iceland*. In a few years after they planted a colony there, which was continually augmented by migrations from the neighboring countries. Within the space of thirty years, 889, a new country, situated to the west, was discovered, and from its verdure during the summer months, received the name of *Greenland*. This was deemed so important an acquisition, that, under the conduct of ERIC RAUDE or RED HEAD, a Danish chief, it was soon peopled.

The emigrants to these new regions were still inflamed with the passion for adventure and discovery. An Icelander of the name of HERIOLF and his son BIRON\*

\* His name is spelled by different authors *Biron, Biorn, Biron, and Biarn*.



made a voyage every year to different countries for the sake of traffic. About the beginning of the eleventh century, 1001, their ships were separated by a storm. When Biron arrived in Norway, he heard that his father was gone to Greenland, and he resolved to follow him; but another storm drove him to the *south-west*, where he discovered a flat country, free from rocks, but covered with thick woods, and an island near the coast.

He made no longer stay at either of these places than till the storm abated; when by a north-east course he hastened to Greenland. The discovery was no sooner known there, than LEIF, the son of ERIC, who, like his father, had a strong desire to acquire glory by adventures, equipped a vessel, carrying twenty-five men; and taking Biron for his pilot, sailed in 1002 in search of the new country.

His course was south-west. On the first land which he saw, he found nothing but flat rocks and ice, without any verdure. He therefore gave it the name of *Helleland*, which signifies rocky. Afterwards he came to a level shore, without any rocks, but overgrown with woods, and the sand was remarkably white. This he named *Markland*, or woody. Two days after, he saw land again, and an island lying before the northern coast of it. Here he first landed: and thence sailing westward, round a point of land, found a creek or river, into which the ship entered.

On the banks of this river were bushes bearing sweet berries; the air was mild, the soil fertile, and the river well stored with fish, among which were very fine salmon. At the head of this river was a lake, on the shore of which they resolved to pass the winter, and erected huts for their accommodation. One of their company, a German named Tyrker, having straggled into the woods, found *grapes*; from which he told them, that in his country they made *wine*. From this circumstance, Leif, the commander of the party, called the place *Winland det Gode*, the Good Wine Country.

An intercourse being thus opened between Greenland and Winland, several voyages were made, and the new country was further explored. Many islands were found near the coast, but not a human creature was seen till the third summer, 1004, when three boats constructed with ribs of bone, fastened with thongs or twigs and covered with skins, each boat containing three men, made their appearance. From the diminutive size of these people, the Normans denominated them *Scrælings*,\* and inhumanly killed them all but one; who escaped and collected a large number of his countrymen, to make an attack on their invaders. The Normans defended their ships with so much spirit that the assailants were obliged to retire.

After this, a colony of Normans went and settled at Winland, carrying on a barter trade with the *Scrælings* for furs; but a controversy arose in the colony, which induced some to return to Greenland. The others dispersed and mixed among the *Scrælings*.

In the next century, 1121, Eric, bishop of Greenland, went to Winland, with a benevolent design to recover and convert his countrymen who had degenerated into savages. This prelate never returned to Greenland; nor was anything more heard of Winland for several centuries.

This account of the discovery of Winland is taken from Pontoppidan's History of Norway, Crantz's History of Greenland, and a late History of Northern Voyages, by Dr. John Reinhold Foster. The facts are said to have been collected from a

\* Cut sticks, chips—dwarfs.

"great number of Icelandic Manuscripts by Thormond Thorfœus, Adam von Bremen, Arngrim Jonas, and many other writers, so that it is hardly possible to entertain the least doubt concerning the authenticity of the relation.

Pontoppidan says "that they could see the sun full six hours in the shortest day;" but Crantz tells us that "the sun rose on the shortest day at eight of the clock," and Foster that "the sun was eight hours above the horizon," from which he concludes that Vinland must be found in the 49th degree of northern latitude; and, from its being in a south-westerly direction from Greenland, he supposes that it is either a part of Newfoundland or some place on the northern coast of the Gulf of St. Lawrence; but whether grapes are found in either of those countries he can not say. However, he seems so fully persuaded of the facts, that he gives it as his opinion that the Normans were, strictly speaking, the first discoverers of America, nearly five centuries before Columbus.

From a careful perusal of the first accounts of Newfoundland, preserved by those painful collectors, Hakluyt and Purchas, and of other memoirs respecting that island and the coast of Labrador; and from inspecting the most approved maps of those regions, particularly one in the American Atlas, delineated agreeably to the actual surveys of the late celebrated navigator, Captain James Cook, the following observations occur:

On the N. E. part of Newfoundland, which is most directly accessible from Greenland, there is a long range of coast, in which are two bays, the one called Gander Bay, and the other the Bay of Exploits. Before the mouth of the former, among many smaller, there lies one large island, called Fogo; and before the mouth of the latter another called the New World. Either of these will sufficiently answer to the situation described in the account of Biron's second voyage. Into each of these bays runs a river, which has its head in a lake, and both these lakes lie in the 49th degree of north latitude.

The earliest accounts of Newfoundland after its discovery, and the establishment of a fishery on its coast, have respect chiefly to the lands about Trinity and Conception Bays, between the parallels of 48° and 49°. These lands are represented as producing strawberries, whortleberries, raspberries, pears, wild cherries, and hazelnuts, in very great plenty. The rivers are said to have been well stored with salmon and trout. The natives, who inhabited a bay lying to the northward of Trinity, and came occasionally thither in their canoes, are described as broad-breasted and upright, with black eyes, and without beards; the hair on their heads was of different colors; some had black, some brown, and others yellow. In this variety they differed from the other savages of North America, who have uniformly black hair, unless it be grown gray with age.

The climate is represented as more mild in the winter than that of England; but much colder in the spring, by reason of the vast islands of ice, which are driven into the bays or grounded on the banks.

On the north-eastern coast of Labrador, between the latitudes of 53° and 56°, are many excellent harbors and islands. The seas are full of cod, the rivers abound with salmon; and the climate is said to be more mild than that in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

Nothing is said in any of these accounts of vines or grapes, excepting that some which were brought from England had thriven well. If any evidence can be drawn from the comparison between the countries of Newfoundland and New England, it

may be observed that all the above-mentioned fruits and berries are found in the northern and eastern parts of New England as far as Nova Scotia, in the latitudes of  $44^{\circ}$  and  $45^{\circ}$ ; and that grapes (*vitis vulpina*, *vitis valbrusca*) are known to grow wherever these fruits are found.

Du Monts, in his voyage to Acadia in 1608, speaks of grapes in several places; and they were in such plenty on the isle of Orleans, in lat.  $47^{\circ}$ , that it was first called the island of Bacchus. Though there is no direct and positive testimony of grapes in the island of Newfoundland, it is by no means to be concluded that there were none. Nor is it improbable that grapes, though once found there, might have been so scarce as not to merit notice in such general descriptions as were given by the first English adventurers.

The distance between Greenland and Newfoundland is not greater than between Iceland and Norway; and there could be no more difficulty in navigating the western than the eastern parts of the northern ocean, with such vessels as were then in use, and by such scamen as the Normans are said to have been; though they knew nothing of the magnetic needle.

Upon the whole, though we can come to no positive conclusion in a question of such remote antiquity; yet there are many circumstances to confirm, and none to disprove, the relation given of the voyages of Biron. But if it be allowed that he is entitled to the honor of having discovered America before Columbus, yet this discovery can not in the least detract from the merit of that celebrated navigator. For there is no reason to suppose that Columbus had any knowledge of the Norman discoveries; which long before his time were forgotten, and would perhaps never have been recollected if he had not, by the astonishing exertions of his genius and his persevering industry, effected a discovery of this continent, in a climate more friendly to the views of commercial adventurers.

Even Greenland itself, in the fifteenth century, was known to the Danes and Normans only by the name of *lost* Greenland; and they did not recover their knowledge of it till after the English had ascertained its existence by their voyages to discover a north-west passage to the Pacific Ocean, and the Dutch had coasted it in pursuing of whales.

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## MADOC.

MADOC, PRINCE OF WALES—HIS SUPPOSED DISCOVERY OF AMERICA—AN ACCOUNT OF HIS VOYAGE EXAMINED—THE IMPROBABILITY OF HIS SUPPOSED DISCOVERY SHOWN.

THIS person is supposed to have discovered America, and brought a colony of his countrymen hither, before the discovery made by Columbus. The story of his emigration from Wales is thus related by Hakluyt, whose book was first published in 1589, and a second edition of it in 1600.

"The voyage of Madoc, the son of Owen Gwynneth, prince of North Wales, to the West Indies in the year 1170, taken out of the History of Wales, lately published by M. David Powel, Doctor of Divinitie."