

# Introduction<sup>1</sup>

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The current volume was produced to honor John Lindow on his sixty-fifth birthday and to capture, in some small way, the profound influence that he has had over the course of his forty-year career on the fields of Old Norse-Icelandic literature, Scandinavian folklore and mythology, and the broader field of Nordic studies as a whole. While this volume was in preparation, John unexpectedly announced his retirement. Consequently, the volume also serves to celebrate his move from the regular faculty ranks to that of Professor *emeritus*. There can be little doubt that John will continue to be active in research, teaching, and mentoring, and so this volume stands more as a mile post marking his transition from one scholarly status to another. Given John's long-standing interest in mythology and ritual, the transitional nature of this volume is only fitting: it is hard not to read the performative aspect of this *festskrift* as a van Gennepian rite of passage, providing some ritual protection for the journey across the limin of retirement, a fraught space betwixt and between where the normal rules might not always apply.

If the normal rules had applied to John, it is unlikely that he would have ended up as a professor of Scandinavian languages and literatures in California. A far more likely career trajectory would have been that of a banker, attorney, physician or engineer. John was raised on Long Island, the eldest of two boys and spent his high school years at the well-regarded Manhasset High School where he excelled academically, played football, and ran track. A great deal of his time was spent on the waters of the Long Island sound where he became an expert sailor, teaching youngsters to sail at the Point Washington Yacht Club. John's burgeoning knowledge

of sailing and navigation were probably his first meaningful connection to the world of the Vikings, however tenuous that connection may have been. Indeed, for all the kids who learned to sail on the Long Island sound in the 1960s very few—apart from John—became experts in medieval Scandinavia and authored articles on Viking ships, picture stones, and sailing (see Lindow 1993.1).

Besides academics and sports, John dabbled in film during high school, producing two memorable, yet relatively unknown, shorts—the retrospectively titled “The Godfather, Part ½” and the slightly more experimental “Pumping Tin”. These films became the foundation for later work that has delighted Old Norse graduate students for many years. Best known of these films is the now classic philological short, “Umlaut and Breaking,” produced, like another famous film, using a Super-8 camera on a grassy knoll (this time on the Berkeley campus) and screened repeatedly since.

John’s teen-age interest in film and the visual arts were easily indulged in the vibrant arts scene of New York City in the 1960s. Unlike many of his contemporaries who became denizens of East Village coffee houses, his attention lay farther north along Central Park West. John had become intrigued by Wagner’s Ring Cycle, parts of which were performed at the Metropolitan Opera (“The Met”) during the 1961 and 1962 seasons. Although one would like to imagine him sailing down to Manhattan after commandeering a skiff from the yacht club marina and then perhaps scaling the walls of the opera house to peer in through a skylight on these productions, it is far more likely he simply took the train, walked up the front steps, bought a ticket and sat down in the audience. This youthful exposure to the early Nordic heroic literature had a profound and lasting effect and doubtlessly sowed the seeds for his later scholarly endeavors.

John left Long Island in 1964 to attend Harvard, a small liberal arts college outside of Boston. While there, his mentors included Albert Lord and Einar Haugen. Although John had initially expressed some interest in studying Slavic languages and literatures, perhaps an unconscious nod to the masters of avant-garde film to

whom he must on some level have been attuned, Albert Lord insisted that he major in something else. “Mr. Lindow,” he said, “do not major in Slavic! You will never get a job!” John took this advice to heart and went off to search for a new major with better employment prospects. One cannot help but imagine the scene where John walks past the buildings housing Economics, Law, Medicine, and other profitable majors and instead turns into the one housing obscure and less commonly taught subjects. Of course it is the great fortune of our profession that he passed those earlier buildings by and became a Scandinavian major.

Used to hard work from grueling workouts as a member of Harvard’s freshman track squad, John continued straight on to graduate school after receiving his A.B. in 1968. Four years later, including a yearlong stint in Uppsala, John was a newly minted Ph.D. in Scandinavian. In the fall of 1972, he moved with his wife Kitty to California. There he joined the faculty of UC Berkeley as the newest member of the Scandinavian Department, having been recruited by Lars Lönnroth. John has been at UC Berkeley ever since, challenging students with his lively lectures and rigorous seminars, contributing immensely to the running of the university and pushing the boundaries of knowledge in his voluminous and engaging research. And occasionally dabbling in film.

Myth in all its manifestations has been one of John’s very favorite subjects: myth in saga (*Bandamanna saga*, for example), saga as myth (including *Íslendingabók*), myth as history (as in *Ynglinga saga*), and—always—myth as a meaningful system through which people structure knowledge and experience. John has brought individual myths of Thor, Loki, Njörðr, Bragi, Skaði, and others under the loupe, and he has written an astonishing array of reference articles on gods and monsters and the prose and poetry they inhabit. His longest study of myth, *Murder and Vengeance Among the Gods* (1997.1), ransoms Baldr from the perennial desire of scholars to make him the god of rebirth. He shows that “Baldr the Dying God” is most significant for dying, the god whose death paralyzes the community because it cannot be avenged, settled, or undone. He restores Baldr’s death to the society for whom it was meaningful.

Snorri has fascinated John because myth fascinated Snorri. John shows great respect for Snorri as an author and mythographer, one who, while he may not always have understood the most original and pagan form of the myths he retells, always understood something. That is, Snorri had a specific understanding of his material that he was interested in communicating to his readers in a sophisticated, artistic way. John, unlike some of his oldest intellectual forebears, has always valued that understanding of myths as highly as any reconstructed original, if not more highly.

Poetry was long the medium of privileged knowledge, of *fræði*, in the North, and perhaps for that reason has attracted John's attention again and again. He has looked for narrative in supposedly static skaldic verse and excavated some of its art. His article "Riddles, Kennings, and the Complexity of Skaldic Poetry" (1975.1) is one way of answering the question *how is skaldic poetry like riddles?* It is also an exploration of what the difficulty of skaldic verse was good for in the context of its performance. Elsewhere, he examines the relationship between poem and patron, whether that patron was St. Óláfr or Thor, and between poetry and audience. He is intrigued, too, by the poetic duel, perhaps especially when it involves an otherworldly opponent—perhaps a dwarf (as in *Alvíssmál*) or a mound-dweller (as in *Kumlþúá þátr*).

The Otherworld intrigues John where it intersects with ours, and the field benefits as a result. His essay on *Dorsteins þátr skelks* (1986.2) is one of the best articles written about the supernatural in saga and whether its original audience found it realistic or fantastic. It is also an exemplary application of modern folklore scholarship to an Old Norse problem that has nothing to do with orality. Though so much of John's work is about the Otherworld, all of it is ultimately about historical worlds and human societies. The Other contrasts with the "We", whether the Other is supernatural or just another ethnic group (a hazy distinction, it turns out), and the "We" is the real object of study. The concerns of the Æsir upon Baldr's death are the concerns of a particular society with a particular legal system—law being the other meaningful system through which people structure an existence among like beings. (And like myth, law involves rituals like those that make blood brothers or that

manumit slaves.) An ethnographic sensibility runs through John's scholarship from the very beginning. He reads sagas, eddas, *þattir*, and *vísur* for what they say about the concerns, beliefs, and understandings of actual human beings at specific moments in time. He listens for the voice of a society talking to itself and talking sometimes in verse and often about trolls, but always talking about itself.

Trolls, of course, are a common supernatural feature of the folkloric landscape of Scandinavia, and so it is no surprise that John's folklore scholarship focuses on supernatural beings and interactions across the boundary between this world and the Otherworld. John's engagement with the Nordic region is far ranging, including considerations of folk belief and folk narrative from Iceland in the west to Finland in the east, from Denmark in the south to Sámi land in the north. Thousands of students of Scandinavian folklore have, over the years, learned about Swedish legends and folktales on the basis of John's influential annotated collection of tales (1978.1). His annotations—mini articles in their own right—situate the stories in the lived experiences of the storytellers, bringing the historic context of the telling into the interpretation of their stories while, at the same time, linking these stories to earlier tradition and scholarship. John's abiding concern with understanding the stories in the context(s) in which they emerged is a strong corrective to the overly normative and largely National Romantic approach to the study of national folklore traditions that tend to creep into studies of such traditions. John's approach, in contrast, links the stories he presents to many of the concerns of the tradition groups themselves. His collection still stands, after thirty years, as the gold standard for annotated and translated editions of national folk narrative traditions.

John's ongoing research on understanding how stories—particularly legends—create meaning for the tradition participants runs as a red thread through all of his folkloric essays and links this work inextricably to his work on mythology and the sagas. In one of his earliest articles, John considers the personification of the threat of the Black Plague in Nordic legends (1974.2), reading this personification as a representation of the capricious nature of the

disease as it ravaged Scandinavia. In another article, John reveals convincingly how supernatural encounters tend to cluster around significant life events (birth, marriage, death) (1978.3). Using the model of rites of passage, John explains how the intrusion of the supernatural into the everyday—and the response to that intrusion—helps people narratively structure these liminal events. Indeed, this focus on the limin is a hallmark of John's folkloristic work. These studies range from a convincing explanation of the male focus of Scandinavian household spirits (*nisse* and *tomtar*) (1985.3) to an exploration of the motif of the strong wife in Nordic legend (2009.1).

Ideas concerning economic exchange and the shifting economic terrain of nineteenth-century Scandinavia also inform a great deal of John's work on Scandinavian legendry. In an article about legends of buried treasure in Sweden (1982.1), he resists the standard interpretation of these legends as an expression of the structure of peasant economies based on the notion of limited good and instead proposes shifting the focus of the analysis to the economic demands confronting the storytellers themselves. In a later article, he explores the economic challenges posed by disabled children and their manifestation as changelings in narrative tradition (2008.2). John's work reveals a deep appreciation for the lives and experiences of the storytellers and a wide-ranging knowledge of the social, political, and economic demands confronting these men and women. In his work, John strives to understand the stories as meaning-making narratives for the tellers and their audiences.

As a logical development of this concern with the contemporaneous meanings of folk narrative expression, John has written several important works that link earlier folklore traditions to contemporary traditions. Perhaps best known of these is his work on Swedish legends, tracing the motifemic equivalence of different classes of threat over the course of many centuries (1989.2). Here, John shows that motifemic slots such as villain that had been occupied by supernatural beings in earlier traditions are, in contemporary tradition, occupied by ethnically marked outsiders. This substitution reveals the narrative strategies of ethnocentrism and xenophobia that have increasingly begun to mark the political

landscape of the Nordic region. John's deep knowledge of the earliest folkloric expressions—perhaps best reflected in his co-edited work, *Medieval Folklore* (2000.3)—allows him to trace these developments with authority and see connections that might elude others. In all of John's work, one finds an exceptional ability to meld distant reading to close reading: he traces continuities across time and space, while simultaneously providing historically sensitive close readings of the texts under question. The supernatural, the uncanny, the unusual is made familiar, while the familiar is put under question. The end result is that a student of John's scholarship can access a nuanced, complex understanding of folklore, mythology, and culture across the Nordic region through history.

The first half of this volume is dedicated to essays that consider Old Norse literature, mythology, and other Icelandic subjects. In the opening essay, Margaret Clunies Ross investigates the mysterious *reginnaglar* mentioned so fleetingly in the prose of *Eyrbyggja saga* and the verse *Glalognskeiða*. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, they are nails driven into the high-seat pillars of a pagan hof. In Þorarinn loftunga's poem, they are part of a difficult kenning in a stanza exhorting the king, Sveinn Álfifuson, to pray to St. Óláfr Haraldsson. Clunies Ross argues that the eleventh-century Christian poet knew enough about paganism to see a parallel between high-seat pillars studded with metal and saints' relics ornamented with gold and to use his realization to poetic ends.

In the next essay, Jens Peter Schjødt explores Dumézil's three functions in relation to the Æsir, ideas with which John has also worked. Dumézil himself thought the tripartite scheme fit the Norse mythological material less than perfectly: Odin has rather a lot to do with war for a god of sovereignty, for example. This imperfect fit is the way in, and Schjødt shows us that the model becomes more illuminating when we look at the big three—Odin, Thor, and Freyr—as pairs opposed to a third. The point is not whether Dumézil's theory as a whole is right or wrong, rather the point is that we have learned something about the Æsir.

Anders Andrén turns his attention to the archaeological record and addresses Thor and evidence of his veneration on the island of Gotland. Gotland has long been a place to itself, and it is not always adequately represented in studies of Scandinavian paganism. Andrén fills this gap and argues convincingly from place names, archeological finds, and *Guta saga* that Thor was foremost in the Gotlandic pagan mind.

In her essay, Merrill Kaplan returns to a hoary problem that has long vexed scholars of the mythology: the significance, if any, of the mistletoe in the myth of Baldr. When Frigg says that she thought the plant too young to make swear, Kaplan hears legal language and looks to *Grágás* for confirmation. She shows how saga and heroic verse portray boys too young to make a legally binding oath as threats to peacemaking and argues that the mistletoe in *Gylfaginning* is Snorri's articulation of a cultural anxiety about the legal system.

Carol J. Clover, John's colleague in Old Norse-Icelandic literature at UC Berkeley, turns a legal eye on *Njáls saga*, looking for evidence of fact-finding in the complicated legal proceedings that characterize that saga. She finds this evidence not in court, where historians of law have looked for it, but rather as implicit in saga scenes that fill in who could have known what and why. Careful reading reveals a literary work at pains to explain, unobtrusively, how anyone could know what happened inside the burning farmhouse at Bergþórshváll after the last eyewitness escaped. Lars Lönnroth also examines saga, but in this case it is a missing one. A *Saga of Þorgils Hölluson* is mentioned in passing in *Laxdæla saga*, but no such work survives. Lönnroth teases apart the prosimetrum in search of the shape of the vanished narrative and a different take on Þorgils.

Two contributors shed light on eddic poetry, but from surprising angles. Gísli Sigurðsson comes by way of recent folklore and gives us a fascinating glimpse of a corpus of Icelandic language folktales, poetry, and other material collected in North America during the early 1970s. Male and female repertoires are markedly different. If subject matter can vary so dramatically within the oral lore of a single, small community at one time and place, could the

contrast between the eddic poems about heroic exploits and those about family conflict and high emotion be attributable to gender too? Kendra Willson also provides a new perspective on eddic poetry in an investigation of how translators make the Poetic Edda sound like a national epic in ears tuned to Kalevala meters and vice versa. Though national epic is an international genre (and very much a constructed one), the elements that signal a work's epic status vary considerably from tradition to tradition. Meter, Willson shows us, can make a work suitable for presentation to foreign dignitaries as an expression of a specific nationality or, failing at that task, damn it to endless parody.

The modern construction of epic is not far from the construction of modern myth, and Úlfar Bragason introduces us to the mythmaking and mythbreaking Rasmus B. Anderson, founder of Nordic studies in the United States. In *America Not Discovered by Columbus*, Anderson offered an alternative, counter-Columbian foundation myth for the United States, one with ample credit assigned to the Norse.

The second part of this volume is dedicated to aspects of Nordic folklore, belief and culture. In the first essay, Ulf Palmenfelt wed concerns of the contemporary folklorist with those of the narratologist. He considers personal experience narratives of Gotlanders and shows how these narratives intersect with the concept of the “Grand Narrative.” Palmenfelt provides us with a method for understanding the interrelatedness between an individual's narrated world and the more collective grand narrative that constitutes the shared experienced world of individuals encapsulating the historical fabric of a period. He concludes with the suggestion that this same framework may help us understand the world(s) of early Scandinavian mythology in a more nuanced fashion.

Thomas Dubois, in his essay, offers a cross-cultural analysis of folktales classified as ATU 710, “Our Lady's Child”. Working with three tales—one Northern Sámi, one Finnish, and one Norwegian—Dubois provides a series of culturally sensitive readings that help explain the culturally- and historically-based

variations across these tales. He reveals how these tales created meaning for the individual tellers, emphasizing that first and foremost, even the most traditional of tales have to be meaningful for the tellers and their audiences for them to persist in tradition. Terry Gunnell, in an article that focuses on local legends about ghosts, emphasizes the importance of the local meanings created by these stories. He decries the normalizing tendencies of “national” folklore scholarship and instead strives to situate the expressions in the communities and local histories in which they emerged. Timothy Tangherlini, in his essay, echoes this theoretical premise and uses it as the basis for his effort to understand stories and storytelling in the context of contemporaneous economic and social change. In a close reading of a series of tales from late nineteenth-century Denmark, he reveals the deeply transgressive nature of selling something on the way to market—a common occurrence in folk tales, but one that also violated the law. This understanding of the law would have been immediately available to contemporary audiences, but is largely unknown to contemporary scholars.

JoAnn Conrad explores the representation of folklore as “national” culture in her examination of the illustrations accompanying the well-known folktale collections of the Norwegian scholars Asbjørnsen and Moe. She provides a detailed history of the development of these collections as well as an analysis of the processes by which the famous illustrations of trolls that accompany them came into being. The next essay, by Hanne Pico Larsen, also remains rooted in the visual. She uses a painting of the main street of Solvang by Thomas Kinkadee as a means to interrogate questions not only of ethnicity and belonging but also of the representation of traditional culture in a contemporary society marked by consumerism. She proposes the theoretically rich concept of the “third gaze” as a means for understanding the overlapping and at times contradictory meanings available to the audience of Kinkadee’s painting.

In the next essay, Tok Thompson offers an examination of the ritual practices of the Sámi, exploring the complex site of belief and worship represented by the *seite*. A similar interest in the idea of “cultural property” and “ownership” animates Valdimar Tr.

Hafstein's exploration of United Nations cultural policies related to traditional and minority cultures. He also considers the dynamic processes that are a hallmark of contemporary cultural production. His astute theoretical reading of the political dynamics of this global phenomenon is brought down to the level of a specific case study in the volume's final article by Kirsten Thisted. Focusing on the recent victory of a Greenlandic choir in a Danish television talent competition, Thisted follows the *Julie AllStars* choir as it progresses through the stages of the competition, revealing how the choir accesses, represents, and negotiates aspects of traditional Greenlandic culture as part of their public expression of Greenlandic identity. The result of their triumph is one that aligns well with the shifting political terrain of Denmark-Greenland relations, where Greenland emerges out from under the colonial shadow of Denmark as an independent and competent—indeed triumphant—cultural group.

John is curious about other worlds—be they conceptual such as the worlds of spirits and the supernatural, or be they actual, such as the diverse and varied groups that constitute the Nordic region—and so are his students. They have flocked to his classes, eager for *fræði* [wisdom] from beyond (or if not from beyond, at least from John). They have all learned more than they expected, and his popularity among his students is well known. In 2006, UC Berkeley's graduate student government, the Graduate Assembly, selected John for the Distinguished Faculty Mentor Award, the highest graduate teaching award at Berkeley. On the basis of dozens and dozens of letters from students and former students supporting his nomination. His dedication to his students has been marked in other, smaller ways. Late in the spring of 2005 a student left an envelope in John's office mailbox. It turned out to contain a playing card—not one from a normal four-suited deck but from a card-based game that allows players to pit heroes of history and legend against each other: Achilles vs. Grettir the Strong, Miyamoto Musashi vs. Beowulf, the armies of Amazonia vs. Freydís Eiríksdóttir. This particular card bore the name Canute the Great. John has never consumed much of the pop culture expressions of his subjects of study, though he has always had students who do. The accompanying note explained the intent of the giver.

King Canute—Knud or Knútr—held a North Sea Empire from 1017 to 1035 that included England, Denmark, Norway, and some of Sweden, maintaining an Anglo-Scandinavian court where skaldic art and Christian learning flourished, a site of hybrid *fræði*. John, in a similar manner, has supported, taught, and mentored students in multiple disciplines—not just Scandinavian Studies and Folklore, whose close ties at Berkeley owe much to John, but Celtic Languages and Literatures, Religious Studies, Medieval Studies, and others. He has helped make possible several *ad hoc* interdisciplinary degrees and allowed students of Folklore to continue their studies at the Ph.D. level within the Scandinavian Department. In 2005, when his own friend and mentor Professor Alan Dundes unexpectedly died, John, ever generous with his time and support, stepped in mid-semester to teach Alan’s classes and ensure that his students were not forgotten. As the student who left him the playing card put it, these were all chieftainly acts, all the more so for being carried out quietly. Thus the card was a light-hearted but deeply felt token of appreciation. We hope that this small volume is received as a similar token of appreciation. We feel that the essays presented here capture the some of the excitement, the vibrancy, and the inquisitiveness that is a hallmark of John’s scholarship.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> References to John Lindow’s work throughout this introduction refer to the bibliography of his work at the back of this volume. The format is year followed by a period and then a number designating the order in the list for that year of the referenced work.