Preface and acknowledgements

From Iceland to the Americas, an anthology of thirteen original critical essays, is an exercise in the reception of a small historical fact with wide-ranging social, cultural, and imaginative consequences. Specifically, medieval records claim that around the year 1000 Leif Eiriksson and other Nordic explorers sailed westwards from Iceland and Greenland to a place they called Vinland. Archaeological evidence has in fact verified this claim, though primarily by way of one small, short-lived Norse settlement in Newfoundland, which may not even have been Leif's. Whether or not this settlement was his, however, the contact associated with him has had an outsized impact on cultural imagination in and of the Americas. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, indeed, novels, poetry, history, politics, arts and crafts, comics, films, and now video games have all reflected a rising interest in the medieval Norse and their North American presence. Uniquely in reception studies, *From Iceland to the Americas* approaches this dynamic between Nordic history and its reception by bringing together international authorities on mythology, language, film, and cultural studies, as well as on the literature that has dominated critical reception. Collectively, the essays not only explore the connections among medieval Iceland and the modern Americas, but also probe why medieval contact has become a modern cultural touchstone.

Together, the essays point to contradictions in the reception of Vinland and the Vikings that may in fact partially account for this ongoing popularity. For nearly two centuries, there has been a persistent, even urgent desire to identify the historical truth of the Norse presence, both figurative and literal, in the Americas – to tell the authentic narrative. Yet the essays also suggest the malleability of this truth, particularly in relation to social, cultural, and political imperatives. And in this kind of search for authenticity, history comes to look more like mythology, for which critical judgements

can rest on experience and expectation as much as on fact. If the Vinland reception myths can entertain, then, they also can project anxieties about ethnicity, race, and nationalism, which, perhaps counter-intuitively, lend a special sense of urgency to contemporary discussions of events that happened long ago as well as to their reception in the interim. The Middle Ages in general has taken on important roles in such arguments about cultural memory and the knowability of the past, and the Norse Middle Ages has been particularly prominent, even divisive, in discussions that turn on questions like these: What really happened in the Viking Age? How can we know? What relevance does it have today? How is cultural memory fashioned? Can ideas – and peoples and things – become unusable in discussions of the past? Are historical events responsible for what reception makes of them?

From Iceland to the Americas cannot attempt, or even aspire, to answer all such questions. It offers instead a series of alternative narratives, some benign, some virulent, and some ambiguous and shifting combinations of both qualities. In doing so, it enacts a novel kind of reception history, in which events do not simply elicit responses but become ways to think about the past as well as the present. In these essays, the medieval Norse and their gods, whether in Vinland or elsewhere, are more than historical personages or ideas. They are continually evolving, modern figures, all at once proof of Scandinavian-American ethnicity; the means to affirm North America as a white, European discovery; a forge of social identity; and a dynamic intersection of medieval and modern emigration and settlement. Severed from real historical connections, Vikings and Vinland have increasingly served as cognitive tools that facilitate thinking about everything from literary production, to nationalism, to the power of human emotions and ideas, whether they relate to romantic ardour or to racism and misogyny. What perhaps began with Rafn's 1837 *Antiquitates Americane*, a volume mentioned in several of the essays, here ends with discussions of a movie and a novel that reveal the almost free associations that Norse material allows. In modern popular culture, it seems, images of Vinland and the Vikings can circulate without the awareness either of those who produce them or of those who see them.

While we have grouped the essays under shared topics, this grouping is more a matter of convenience, or necessity, than of an inherent structure or of an implicit argument. The essays might equally be arranged by historical focus, from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first. And individual essays might well be read within

multiple contexts: Sorby's for what it says about ethnicity, pedagogy, and imagination; Þorgeirsson's for what it says about imagination, cultural practice, and historiography; and Lerer's for what it says about historiography, cognition, and literature. The volume could conclude as easily with Höfig's essay as with O'Donoghue's, though the former conclusion would be a far more sombre and even pessimistic one than the latter. This kind of conceptual applicability illustrates perhaps the essays' most important implication for medieval studies, especially Norse medieval studies, in the modern world: the meanings of Vinland and the Vikings are not in fact foregone conclusions on a teleological trajectory. They are, rather, continually in process, depending, above all, on the contexts of users and uses. Ultimately, the nature of the topic is such that its component parts continue – and, we hope, will continue – to talk back and forth with one another, across time, across disciplines, and across objectives.

We want also to say a word about the book's treatment of Icelandic names, a perennial challenge in works on the Norse Middle Ages. Characters and places mentioned in the Eddas, sagas, and historical records appear in the most common English translated forms in recent translations of these texts, such as Leif Eiriksson and Thingvellir. Spellings of names in quoted translations are left intact, however. Titles of medieval Icelandic texts and manuscripts are accompanied by English translations, but titles of published critical works are given in their original language. In the Bibliography and Index, Icelandic patronymics are treated as if they were Christian surnames, so that Finnur Magnússon appears as Magnússon, Finnur.

Finally, for his valuable assistance in preparing the manuscript for production and compiling the index, we thank Zachary Melton, whose work was generously funded by the University of Iceland Research Fund. And we are glad to note as well that the volume was the inspiration for a conference of the same name that was held at the University of Notre Dame on 24–26 September 2018. The event gave contributors the opportunity to share penultimate versions of their chapters with a learned audience, and in the process, we believe, not only write stronger individual chapters but help fashion a more coherent volume. The University of Notre Dame is an especially welcoming venue for such medieval endeavours, and for the conference in particular we are happy to acknowledge crucial funding from a Faculty Assistance Program – Initiation Grant, the Institute for Scholarship in the Liberal Arts, the Notre

Dame College of Arts and Letters, the Henkels Lecture Series, the Medieval Institute, the Nanovic Institute for European Studies, and the Department of English. For help in organising and managing the conference, we thank Lauri Roberts, Christopher Abram, Thomas Burman, Jesse Lander, Lynn McCormack, and Megan Hall, as well as Will Beattie, Rich Fahey, Rachel Hanks, Margie Housley, Emily Mahan, Emily McLemore, Logan Quigley, Shela Raman, and Becky West.

Tim William Machan and Jón Karl Helgason