Gerry Kearns’ book review essay

Ireland’s Brexit Problem

Ashley Dawson’s

Extinction:
A Radical History

Reviewed by
Christopher R. Cox,
John G. Hintz,
Jody Emel,
Justin McBrien,
and Ashley Dawson

Gerard Toal’s

Near Abroad:
Putin, the West and the Contest Over Ukraine and the Caucasus
Reviewed by Alexander B. Murphy,
John Agnew, Klaus Dodds,
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The Making of America’s Culture Regions
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The AAG Review of Books began publication in 2013 as a quarterly online journal of the American Association of Geographers. The AAG Review of Books (The AAG Review) was created to hold scholarly book reviews as formerly published in the AAG's flagship journals, Annals of the American Association of Geographers and The Professional Geographer, along with reviews of significant current books related more broadly to geography and public policy and/or international affairs.

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Contact. Please direct suggestions for content and any questions regarding The AAG Review of Books to Editor-in-Chief Kent Mathewson at aagrb@lsu.edu.

The AAG Review of Books (Online ISSN: 2325-548X) is published online quarterly for a total of 4 issues per year by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC., 530 Walnut Street, Suite 850, Philadelphia, PA 19106.

Annual Subscription, Volume 6, 2018. Online ISSN – 2325-548X. Online subscription to The AAG Review of Books includes a subscription to six issues of Annals of the American Association of Geographers, four issues of The Professional Geographer, and two issues of GeoHumanities. For information and subscription rates please email subscriptions@tandf.co.uk or visit www.tandfonline.com/pricing/journal/rrob
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Into the Ocean: Vikings, Irish, and Environmental Change in Iceland and the North


Reviewed by Russell Fielding, Department of Earth and Environmental Systems, University of the South, Sewanee, TN.

Kristján Ahronson asks a simple research question: What is the provenance of a series of crosses carved into the walls of a set of artificial caves in southern Iceland? His path toward an answer, however, is anything but simplistic. The seven chapters of his book, *Into the Ocean*, approach this question from a variety of disciplinary perspectives including those of the linguist, the archaeologist, the geographer, and the environmental historian. Although each chapter could easily stand on its own as a complete study put forth by a specialist in the field, Ahronson links them to one another with a fluid sense of interdisciplinarity that recalls an old liberal arts ideal that is all too elusive in today’s academy.

Ample peppered with epigraphs from scholars both international and interdisciplinary—and showing clear favoritism for the philosopher Karl Popper—*Into the Ocean* begins by setting the stage: early medieval Christian monasticism in the North Atlantic; revisions to already-revised histories; and new questions regarding the spread of people, their beliefs, and their environmental impacts across the ocean. Geographers familiar with Sauer (1968) will feel as though they are rereading *Northern Mists* as they tuck into Chapter 1. Both books entertain the idea of seafaring Irish preceding the Vikings across the North Atlantic, eventually entering the St. Lawrence and settling in North America. The association between this book and Sauer’s will break soon, though, as Ahronson dismisses *Írland et mikla*—Greater Ireland or White Man’s Land—as but an example of “the mortality of our ideas.” He lets us down easily, though. If the Irish didn’t make it to North America, could they have at least reached some of the North Atlantic islands? Here, Ahronson’s narrative suggests a bit more confidence. He introduces Dicuil, a ninth-century Gaelic cleric whose description of Christian monastics in the Faroe Islands is generally accepted as believable and who, Ahronson contends, described a similar settlement in the south of Iceland. Going further west than this in a study of medieval European Christian expansion, in Ahronson’s words, is to go “too far.”

So our westward exploration shall stop in Iceland. After a tangent—perhaps a necessary one, but a tangent nonetheless—into the Popperian philosophies of science, knowledge, and certainty in Chapter 2, Ahronson delves into the question at hand: Where did those crosses in the caves come from? His first method of inquiry—narrated in Chapter 3—is linguistics, specifically, a study of toponyms. Although the association of the *pap-* place names (e.g., Papey, “priest island”; Papafjörður, “priest fjord”) with Christian monastics is well attested, Ahronson shows that the standard linkage might be overly simplistic. He cites as examples dozens of *pap-* names found throughout Iceland, the Faroe Islands, the Shetlands, the Orkneys, and the Hebrides. These place names, however, were bestowed by the Norse and might not always have referred to an actual previous habitation of these places by Christians. Some could, in fact, have been given explicitly to connect late Viking Age Christians with an imaginary,
but very much desired, continuity with a Christian past in places where none but pagans had lived before. Others might indeed have been given to places where "priests" lived. Ahronson's conclusion on the study of toponyms is that pap- place names are suggestive of Christian associations in places named by the Norse, but not conclusive.

Chapter 4 turns to archaeology. If one cannot trust place names to accurately inform us about a place's previous inhabitants, perhaps the physical evidence will be less ambiguous. That artificial or, human-made, caves exist in southern Iceland is not disputable. These caves, centered around a region known as Seljalands but spreading along Iceland's south coast and occasionally appearing elsewhere around the island, have been inadequately studied and almost entirely unprotected for centuries. To wit: This reviewer visited a few of the caves in 2017 and was permitted by the landowner to touch the walls, to climb a ladder into a hewn loft, and to take flash photography. Although I appreciated the access, and especially the learning opportunity for the students who accompanied me, I cannot help but wish the sites were off-limits to visitors like myself. To the Icelandic government, the caves do not seem to merit national protection. To Ahronson, they are central to our understanding of Iceland's pre-Viking history, if such a history indeed exists. Because human alteration of the natural environment occurred in Iceland later than in almost any other large landmass on earth, our understanding of the first human settlers—those who first felled the birch forests, first introduced the domesticated animals, first exploited the native fauna, and first initiated large-scale soil destabilization—is crucial.

The archaeologist in Iceland is aided by the country's volcanos. Tephrachronology, the use of ash layers deposited by known volcanic eruptions for establishing chronological stratigraphy, is more readily and widely employed in Iceland than nearly anywhere else. Starting with the so-called Landnám Tephra, deposited in about CE 870 and conveniently serving to separate Iceland's prehistoric sequence from deposits made since settlement, Iceland's soil profile is regularly interrupted by ash layers associated with known and dated eruptions. Artifacts found between two layers must have been deposited at a time between the associated eruptions. After the previous chapter's introduction of the application of archaeological methods to the dating of the caves, Chapter 5—appropriately titled "Dating the Cave"—describes the process. Using ash layers from twelve known eruptions that occurred between CE 870 and 1947, Ahronson conjures a scene in which all one must do is dig until artifacts are found, taking note of each ash layer encountered, and establish the date based on the layers between which the item was found. It doesn't work out this easily. His goal was to find the debris created when the caves were first excavated and he did indeed find a cache of interesting pebbles about ten centimeters below the Landnám Tephra. This would indicate, with certainty, that this debris was deposited before the accepted date of Norse settlement. Distinguishing the pebbles, based on the angularity of their edges and possible tool markings on their surfaces, from the surrounding geology proved difficult to do with confidence. There just wasn't enough evidence to be certain that this debris was created when the caves were first hewn. You can tell that Ahronson wants to believe. He presents all the data he has on the pebbles, including those produced through geochemical and micromorphological analysis. It is a tribute to his integrity as a scholar that Ahronson resists making a conclusive statement on the matter.

The remaining chapters of the book—6, 7, and 8—have the feeling of a Geography 101 field trip trying to make use of extra time forced by bad weather or a closed museum. Since the cave question cannot—at this time—be answered definitively, Ahronson ventures into other areas where questions can be answered by his methods. He discusses the deforestation of Iceland and introduces a novel method of excavation that involves the removal of entire soil layers to expose previous land surfaces and allow three-dimensional analysis. Trunk casts indicate the presence of forests that no longer stand in Iceland. The comparison to Pompeii is apt. Returning one last time to the cave crosses, Ahronson takes his reader on a tour of the North Atlantic, visiting sites where similar Christian art is to be found. The stylistic comparisons with other carved crosses—particularly those in Scotland—are compelling. The crosses in Iceland certainly look like those made elsewhere by early Gaelic Christian monastics. “But the tephra . . .” Driven perhaps by Ahronson's complete dedication to scientific skepticism, the reader hesitates to draw any conclusions that the author himself will not.

This is perhaps the greatest strength of Into the Ocean, outside of its appeal to a specialist audience interested in the settlement of Iceland. The book represents an example of scientific integrity at its finest. Many a researcher would have allowed themselves to be convinced by inconclusive markings on the pebbles found in a debris pile. Others, as Ahronson showed, were convinced by narratives spun generations ago that led to the same conclusion: that of an Irish monastic migration across the eastern Atlantic to Iceland and—maybe—beyond. Sauer seemed to want Greater Ireland to exist. Kristján Ahronson obviously wants the cave crosses in Seljalands
to have been carved by those same Irish. Although the circumstantial evidence is intriguing, neither case can yet be proven.

My critiques of this monograph are few and should in no way detract from its value as an exemplary example of the rigor of science. Still, a thorough review must include the positives and the negatives. As such, I should point out that Ahronson assumes too much linguistic ability on the part of his reader. French epigraphs go untranslated, which remains frustratingly common in scholarly writing even as U.S. doctoral programs have largely done away with their language requirements. Worse, geographic features are sometimes named only in Icelandic in situations where the place name conveys vital information about the landform itself (e.g., “along a line defined by the Hofsá” in which á means “river”). In other cases he helpfully explains the meaning of terms for landforms, like foss for waterfall. Some images are frustratingly small or lack crucial detail. Others are so repetitive, such as the photographic series that contains images of what must be every cave cross found in Iceland, as to lose the reader in sheer volume.

Despite these very minor shortcomings, Into the Ocean is a valuable book, both for the specialist focused on the environmental and human history of the North Atlantic, and the general reader interested in the philosophy of science. It teaches a valuable lesson: why scientists, good ones at least, are so hesitant to say that they know anything for sure.

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