

# REFLECTIONS

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## FIMBULWINTER 2015

I'm writing this in March 2015, and probably this is not the best moment to be talking about the winter that is currently afflicting most of the eastern United States while I sit out here in pleasant sunny California, where things this year have been, well, different.

We do get a sort of winter in my part of California—the San Francisco Bay Area—but temperatures below freezing are rare occurrences, snow is essentially unknown except on the highest mountain peaks, and the plants in my garden flourish and bloom all the year round. This winter has been particularly gentle for us, the warmest in our region's history, one warm, sunny day after another, while a dome of high-pressure air shields us from the rainy winter storms we so desperately need and sends them roaring on eastward, transmogrified by their journey through Canada into horrendous blizzards. “We are being devastated by a slow-motion natural disaster of historic proportions,” says E.J. Graff, the author of a column called “Boston's Winter from Hell” in the *New York Times* for February 21, 2015. “The disaster is eerily quiet. There are no floating bodies or vistas of destroyed homes. But there's no denying that this is a catastrophe. In just three weeks, between Jan. 27 and Feb. 15, we have had four epic blizzards—seven feet of precipitation over three weeks—which crushed roofs, burst gutters, destroyed roads and sidewalks. . . .”

What the East Coast is going through, this winter, is a fair approximation of the Fimbulwinter of the old Norse myths, the Mighty Winter, the Great Winter, which is the dire forewarning of Ragnarok, the Twilight of the Gods and the imminent end of the world—a three-year winter uninterrupted by spring or summer or autumn, the Winter of Winds, the Winter of the Sword, and then the Winter of the Wolf. As the Elder Edda, that great Icelandic or Norwegian compilation of pre-Christian Norse myths puts it:

*An axe-age, a sword-age, shields shall be Sundered  
A wind-age, a wolf-age ere the world falls  
The sun turns black Earth sinks in the sea  
The hot stars down from heaven are whirled;  
Fierce grows the steam and the life-feeding flame  
Till fire leaps high about heaven itself.*

It sounds pretty bad. But bear in mind that I write this in March of 2015, and spring may well be around the corner, even for beleaguered Boston. If you are reading this in yet another ferocious January and there has been no intervening season of moderate weather, perhaps Fimbulwinter is indeed upon the land, the Fenris-wolf will burst its bonds and slay Odin, Thor will be killed by the Midgard Serpent, the wolves Hati and Managarm will devour the Sun and the Moon, etc., etc. It's a dire scenario, but whether it will actually happen remains to be seen.

And—though it may seem condescending for an inhabitant of cozy California to be offering consolation to the snow-plagued people of New England—the climate *does* fluctuate, and all this has happened before.

I cite the example of the radical changes in the climate of Northern Europe between the twelfth and nineteenth centuries, events that may very well have given rise to the apocalyptic poetry of the Elder Edda. Consider Greenland, first settled in 986 A.D. by emigrants from Iceland and Norway, the countries that gave us *The Elder Edda* and the concept of the Fimbulwinter.

Greenland was not exactly a land of milk and honey when the turbulent Norse-

man Erik the Red made landfall on its northern coast. What confronted him was an icy shore, with glaciated mountains behind it. But he headed south until he found the fjord area now known as Julianehaab, where he saw groves of willow and birch, bushes laden with berries, and plentiful pasturage for cattle and sheep. He named the place Greenland, saying "that having a good name would entice men to go thither," and, returning to Iceland, he collected hundreds of settlers and founded two colonies on the big island to the west.

Life on Greenland was never easy for these intrepid Vikings—green it wasn't, except along the coast—but they were able to farm the narrow strips along the coastal fjords, and within a generation Erik the Red's colonies may have reached a population of three thousand. In 999 his son Leif Eriksson, who had gone to Norway to fetch a Christian priest for the Greenlanders, was carried off course on his return voyage and eventually arrived at a place he called Vinland, a lovely place of large trees, grassy fields, and rivers thick with salmon. Here "Leif the Lucky," as he was dubbed, founded yet another Norse colony in what apparently was modern-day Newfoundland. At a site in northern Newfoundland known as L'Anse aux Meadows the archaeologist Helge Ingstand found in 1963 the unquestionably Norse relics of a settlement of some eighty or ninety people that could be dated to about 1000 A.D.: three longhouses of Viking style, the remains of some sod huts, anvils, hearths, fragments of forged tools, traces of woven goods.

"Vinland," pronounced one way, means "land of vines." Pronounced another, it means "land of grass." One persistent belief about this Norse settlement is that it produced wine, as one Icelandic saga claims, although grapes certainly do not grow in northern Newfoundland today. If it did, the climate there must have been much milder a thousand years ago. But was it? The scholars disagree. The Swedish archaeologist Axel Oxenstierna has said unequivocally, "Grapes never grew in Newfoundland." The wine that the settlers produced was made from the fermented juice of gooseberries, cranberries, or currants. Contrariwise, the British researcher Gwyn Jones asserts that Jacques Cartier found grapes growing along the banks of the St. Lawrence River in the 1530s, and says it is not much of a stretch to believe that in a warmer climate five hundred years earlier they grew much farther to the north. After years of debate the question remains open.

Wine or no wine, the Viking outposts in Iceland, Greenland, and, evidently, Vinland, thrived all through the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Then things began to change everywhere in northern Europe. There came a drought, and then floods, and then increasingly bitter weather. A mariner's guide written about 1250 warned that the old sailing route around the southern end of Greenland was now unsafe because of ice. In 1257 an unusually cold winter in England killed most of that country's fig trees. By 1323 the entire Baltic was a vast ice field and there was brisk traffic across it between Sweden and Germany. Of Vinland nothing more was heard. Contact between Greenland and its Norse mother countries grew less and less frequent, and by 1410 had ended entirely. An Icelander who made his way there in 1540 found no sign of life in the Norse outposts, and not until the eighteenth century was Greenland again reached from Europe. Bodies found in the abandoned settlements showed signs of terrible privation. The last of the Vikings in the Norse colonies of the west had starved to death.

Things were not much better elsewhere in northern Europe. What has been called "a little ice age" had descended, and gripped the land for centuries. Grapevines that had yielded creditable wines in such English regions as Gloucestershire since Roman times were killed. The Thames froze over. In Iceland three feet of snow fell on June 26, 1754. In New England, 1816 was known as "the year without a summer"—snow in June, frost in July. Not until 1850 did the weather relent, and a slow pattern of warming begin that is still in effect today.

By now, Greenland in particular is showing the signs of that warming trend. As I noted above, it was never a green and pleasant land, despite the euphemistic name that the optimistic Erik the Red, eager to encourage settlement, gave it a thousand years ago, but its climate back then was mild enough to allow its Scandinavian colonists to maintain self-sufficient outposts there for hundreds of years before the increasing cold forced them out. And now it is heading back toward that climate again. Glaciers are melting, fertile land is emerging from the ice, crops are thriving. Greenland is warming twice as fast as most of the planet. No one knows why.

But the Earth's climate does fluctuate, and it is not always the result of human impact on the environment. The sun's output varies over time; ocean currents change their courses; atmospheric patterns undergo alteration and stay altered for hundreds of thousands of years. And so the Fimbulwinter comes and the grapevines die in England and the Vikings are driven out of Greenland during a cold period; and so times of unusual warmth, such as we appear to be entering now, bring equally drastic changes in the other direction.

I'm not one of the current breed of climate-change deniers. I think we can't go on pouring carbon dioxide into the atmosphere without having to pay some sort of price for it eventually. But the people of Boston and surrounding regions, right now, are wondering where global warming has gone when they need it. While the sages discuss climate and its variations, the Easterners are getting weather, and plenty of it, this winter. (And, for all anybody knows, they will have also been through a record-breakingly hot summer, too, before this piece sees print.)

So the thing to remember, when discussing climate change, is that climate is not the same thing as weather, and even in a context of long-term climatic change, short-term weather fluctuations can be quite extreme. Climate itself can fluctuate pretty severely, too, as that Little Ice Age of the Middle Ages testifies, and the much greater one that our European ancestors had to endure twenty-five thousand years earlier, and atmospheric pollution is not necessarily the cause of the climatic changes that beset us now. The Ice Age that the Cro-Magnon folk had to deal with finally gave way to the much warmer weather that permitted the Neolithic agricultural revolution, and internal combustion engines had nothing to do with the change. It just happened. Things, alas, are never as simple as they seem.