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## **Venturing a Little Further: Margaret Elphinstone, *The Sea Road* (2000)**

When Willy Maley and a team of critics assembled the *100 Best Scottish Books of All Time* for *The List* in 2005, one that made the cut was Margaret Elphinstone's historical novel about Gudrid of Iceland, an eleventh-century female explorer of Greenland and North America. For whatever reason (perhaps the book was "top 100" but not "top 30," or perhaps it's fading from memory), the book failed to make this most recent, more pared down version of favorite Scottish books.

That's too bad. Taking nothing away from the excellent books on the current list, which fall into several categories of personal favorites (literary, genre, classic, etc.), few of them channel the same majesty of mind (or call it what you will: imagination, heart, spirit) as Elphinstone's soaring tour de force. Plus, in reviewing the novel prior to writing this response, it struck me as a more relevant work to a history of the present than other historical novels on the list. Consider, first, a hauntingly beautiful passage like this one:

At the edge of the world there are mountains of ice and frozen seas, and a sky so vast that all the souls of the world could never breathe it in. No one has gone so far, not even in his mind. And if one did, all he might hope for, beyond the boundaries of what exists, would be to find nothing.

And now compare it with an evocatively similar, but subtly distinct thought a few pages earlier:

Our world is made out of the empty places ... and we'll never touch anything but the fringes of the unknown. That seems to prove to me that it wasn't made for us.

While the first excerpt evokes qualities that seem at once timeless and modern(ist)—generic adventurousness tinged with an existential attraction to the void—the second speaks to a world from which we seem increasingly estranged: politically (as fractiousness and outright boorishness drive wedges between communities), environmentally (as a growing number of scientists, surveying the ecological damage caused by our species, declare humankind unfit for the planet we inhabit), and philosophically (as theories of the posthuman, seeping further into popular consciousness and underscoring the perpetually revolutionary technologies, cause us to question the viability of the fragile identities we craft for ourselves). Together, the passages speak to, and from, a novel for many seasons: the eleventh century, the early and late twentieth, and who

knows how far into the twenty-first. Indeed, *The Sea Road* is one of the great Scottish novels about the unknown; and, for a world that seems ever less knowable, it is perhaps the nation's greatest contribution to the modern zeitgeist.

But the novel gazes on the unknown with wonder rather than angst, making it invitingly generous and hopeful—an allegory of promise rather than loss. What is more, it is a formally engaging work, with the narrative consisting of a dialogue from which we only ever take in half (the Icelandic monk ostensibly writing the text receding behind the replies of Gudrid, his subject). It's a grand achievement of craft and style, then, as well as concept, and its absence from the list only trivializes the excellent books that were included.

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