

The NELSON BIRTHRIGHT

A BOOK OF REMEMBRANCE

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by John D. Nelson  
son of George & Audrey Nelson  
son of Carl & Hazel Nelson  
son of Niels & Tomine Nielsen  
son of Mathias & Bengta Nilsson

A Brief History of our Fathers  
including  
A History of Mathias Nilsson and Bengta Olsdotter

who restored the gospel to our family  
and brought our family to America

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## THE DREAM OF AMERICA

“Like most others who have done the impossible, they were dreamers.”  
Peter Ebbesen, Danish immigrant 1868

## BACKGROUND

### Scandinavian History

Scandinavia, now an obscure region for most people, once had a great impact upon world events. As early as 100 B.C., Scandinavian tribes clashed violently with Rome. The Cimbri and the Teutones descended upon Italy in 113 B.C. and crushed in succession each of the three Roman armies sent to halt their advance. The ease with which these “barbarians” defeated Rome’s finest legions ignited great alarm and panic in the Roman capital, as the Republic teetered on the brink of destruction.

Having only vague goals, which led to indecision, the invading tribes became distracted, divided, and eventually destroyed by Rome’s remaining armies. Relieved of the present danger, the Republic never again breathed easily. For decades, Romans looked towards their northern borders with unsettled apprehension.

### EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Human nature is such that with each conflict, we prefer to paint one side as the hero, and the other as the villain. This account is no exception, for it clearly has its own bias. Yet when reading early commentaries and established histories of our forefathers, it would be well to note that most of those accounts were written by their most bitter enemies. If we had their own writings to stand in their defense, we would be able to see them, and their foes, in a different light. But their records have been destroyed or hidden up.

Allowing our children to grow up dependent upon Roman sources for a knowledge of our forefathers would be as irresponsible as an American Indian chief trusting his children to learn about their past through classic Western movies. We all know who was usually portrayed as the “bad guy” in Hollywood. Although we do not yet have much of a record from our fathers, we still cannot afford to blindly trust the tales of their enemies to form an opinion of them. As George Jowett, defender of early British history writes:

“The Romans, who had ground so many nations under their despotic heel, looked upon all nations with scorn as inferiors, labeling every enemy as barbarian, no matter how significant their culture” (92).

For the next few centuries, Rome attempted to subdue and conquer our forefathers in northern Europe, but the Roman legions time and again were driven back. As the Empire weakened through the centuries, the vigor of our forefathers only increased, and Rome once again was caught on its heels. Throughout the next few centuries, waves of warriors from the North crossed the frontiers of the Empire. In the fourth and fifth centuries A.D., Rome itself was plundered and overrun by tribes which had originated in Scandinavia; Goths, Vandals, and Visigoths. They are credited by most historians with the final demise of the Roman Empire.

At roughly the same time that Rome was being conquered, droves of other adventurers - Jutes, Frisians, Angles, and Saxons, left the Danish peninsula, arrived on the shores of England, and eventually established the Anglo-Saxon nation which now bears their name - "Angle-Land".

Other Germanic tribes spread into France (the Franks), Spain (the Visigoths), and Northern Africa (the Vandals), where they established kingdoms whose roots survive in today's nations.

This period of massive upheaval is known as the Great Migrations. Jordanes, a fifth-century Roman historian of partial-Gothic descent, described Scandinavia as "a hive of races or a womb of nations". (Compare Genesis 48:19).

During the next few centuries, Scandinavia vanished temporarily from world events while it struggled against plague and internal strife. Then, just prior to 800 A.D., Scandinavia was stirred again from its slumber.

At this time, Scandinavians and their neighbors had a form of worship other than Catholicism. Charlemagne, king of the Franks as well as Emperor of the Christian domain, attempted by bloodshed to forcibly convert the Scandinavian Vikings and their neighbors from the faith of their fathers. His methods were ruthless...and fateful.

"...Charlemagne instigated a policy involving eviction of population, wholesale destruction of districts and a system of concentration camps. Thousands...were deported from their native homes and other thousands were killed in bloody massacres" (Starcke, 147; D. Nelson, 9). His policies of terror and concentration camps among our forefathers were unparalleled until the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Charlemagne's attacks were "not more of the sword than of the cross, against Saxons, Avars, Slavs, Danes...where monasteries are fortresses and baptism the badge of submission" (Bryce, 66). Is it any wonder that monasteries were a prime target of the Vikings?

The Scandinavian reaction was violent. After having their temples destroyed and thousands of their people crushed by Charlemagne's crusading armies, the rising Viking generation backlashed with fury against Christian Europe - the hornet's nest had been jostled.

First, building the Danevirke, an earthen bulwark across their southern boundary (similar in purpose to the ancient Wall of China), the Danes and their neighbors gathered strength from behind their defenses for a final retribution. This defensive zone (Old German: "March") of the Danes is believed by many to be the source of the name Den-mark.

Within a few short decades, most European nations were brought to their knees by the fury of the Northmen. Few cities escaped destruction or pillaging. Thrones were toppled, villages were burned, and churches were gutted.

Christian clergymen preached that it was the pride and folly of the Christian nations

which brought upon them the scourge from the North. Many saw the continuing devastation as one of the signs that the Second Coming of Christ was near (Matthew 24:3,6,7). There were those who believed that Christ's 'thousand-year reign' began with his ministry on earth and was to end around 1000 A.D., and the wars and destruction now served to confirm their reckoning. A new addition was made to the Catholic litany: "From the fury of the Northmen, deliver us, O Lord!" But the first millennium came and passed, and the Viking attacks only increased in intensity.

Throughout this period, Viking fleets controlled and preyed upon waterways from the Baltic to the Mediterranean and even as far away as the St. Lawrence Estuary in North America.

Shortly after 1000 A.D., the Vikings finally succeeded in subduing all of England. For almost thirty years, a Viking king, Canute the Great, and his sons ruled the English throne. At its height, Canute's North Sea empire included England, Norway, Denmark, and vast stretches of the southern Baltic coast.

King Edward the Confessor, the English successor to Canute's short-lived Danish dynasty, was a temporary respite between two Nordic conquests. Edward died in 1066, the same year that the Normans (themselves descendants of the (Vikings) conquered England under the leadership of William the Conqueror - the third great-grandson of the Viking founder of Normandy (a region named after its Northern conquerors).

Then, as if a candle were suddenly extinguished, the impetus of the Vikings died out - around 1070 A.D. By 1100 A.D., the Scandinavian kingdoms were all converted to a specific version of Christianity.

Today, most Scandinavians look proudly upon their Viking heritage. With wry humor, they explain that they got the badness out of their system centuries before most people.

For the next three centuries, the Scandinavian kingdoms were relatively quiet compared to their violent past. The Nordic kings were occupied more with stabilizing their rule than conquering foreign nations.

In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the rising power of the German Hanseatic Merchants influenced the threatened Scandinavian kingdoms to unite in defense - a union which lasted for over two hundred years.

The Union of Kalmar began to deteriorate shortly after the foreign threat dissipated. Petty rivalries and the greed of the nobility widened the growing cracks in the Union. Finally, the Swedish nobility chose a king from their own ranks and broke away - and the Union crumbled.

Shortly afterwards, the Scandinavian kingdoms adopted the Lutheran faith as their state church. One 'lame-duck' Catholic clergyman in southern Sweden (a region which at that time was still part of Denmark) attempted to retain his flock despite the Reformation. He stole into the church late one night on a silent mission. On the next morning, the pious Christians found to their fear that the pictures of the biblical scenes on their chapel walls were dripping with blood.

Many attendees were convinced, to the satisfaction of the clergyman, that this was a divine sign which stated plainly that the Lutheran Reformation was hurting the church. However, a missing key to the church and the remains of a slaughtered animal nearby brought the clergyman to the attention of the authorities. His confiscated key is kept on display in the chapel in memory of the event.

With the dismemberment of the Union in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, bitter rivalries and border disputes flared up between the Scandinavian countries. Scania, a fertile and populous region at the southern tip of the Swedish peninsula was one of the disputed territories. Geographically, it belonged to the Swedish peninsula, but historically, it had always been part of the Danish realm.

(During the Viking Age, a great forest hedged the northern boundary of the province, effectively isolating Scania from the rest of the Swedish peninsula. The narrow sound between the Danish islands and Scania was more of a highway than a boundary, so it was only practical for the region to initially be part of Denmark.)

But now, fertile Scania became a bloody battleground. Both Swedish and Danish troops devastated the region as they marched through the countryside.

To protect his realm and his subjects, King Christian IV of Denmark took action. In 1612, just after Swedish troops had burned and razed several unprotected Scanian villages, Christian ordered a fortress city to be constructed on an island near one of the largest smoldering towns. This new city was the first renaissance-style fortress cities to be constructed in Scandinavia.

Upon the completion of Kristianstad (“Christian’s city or place”), many of the war-buffed locals (probably including some of our forefathers) moved to Kristianstad where they could be better protected by the city’s troops, wall, and moat.

Meanwhile, Sweden was relocating some of its citizens, but on a grander scale. In 1638, New Sweden was founded in the New World on the banks of the Delaware River. Although the colony only maintained its independence for seventeen years, several of America’s founding fathers can be traced back to those early Swedish settlers.

Back in Scandinavia, the farmers of Scania were not content just to be caught in the crossfire of war: they created one of their own. Near the forests of northern Scania, they organized efficient bands of sharpshooters to plague the Swedish troops. Several of these militia men paid dearly for their actions, for when the Swedes captured them, they were impaled on stakes along the side of the roads. Monuments exist throughout Scania to this day in honor of those brave men.

For a time, when Sweden was gaining the upper hand, the Swedish king risked a visit to his troops in Scania. He began making regular visits to the vicarage of Ahus nearby, but on one occasion, advancing Danish troops suspected his presence there. As they attempted to force their way into the vicarage, the vicar came up with an idea. He helped the king up into the guest room chimney where, despite his discomfort, he was able to avoid detection from the searching Danes.

(A different version of the story, preserved in Scania to this day, claims that while the Danes were pounding on the gates, the vicar's wife "alone with the king in the chamber", herself the alleged object of the king's frequent visits, helped his majesty up into the chimney.) Whether true or false, this version offers some explanation as to why our forefathers were willing to risk their lives to avoid being subjected to a king they considered unfit to reign. The "king's chamber" is still a popular tourist site in Ahus.

In the seventeenth century, Denmark was eventually defeated by the Swedes, and in concession the King of Denmark was forced, under bitter protest, to hand over Scania and two other provinces to the Swedish realm. Legend states that he then ordered the windows of Kronborg Castle facing the Sound blacked up - for he was unable to bear looking out across the water towards the green coastline of Scania.

Denmark tried repeatedly over the next sixty years to regain Scania without success. For the first few decades, Scanians joined the Danish troops in the attempt to drive the Swedes out of Scania, but after the first generation passed, the Swedish schools and ministers succeeded in assimilating the younger Scanians into Sweden...for the most part. To this day, there persists the wry expression in Scania: "I'm happy to be Swedish - at times - but I glory in being Scanian!"