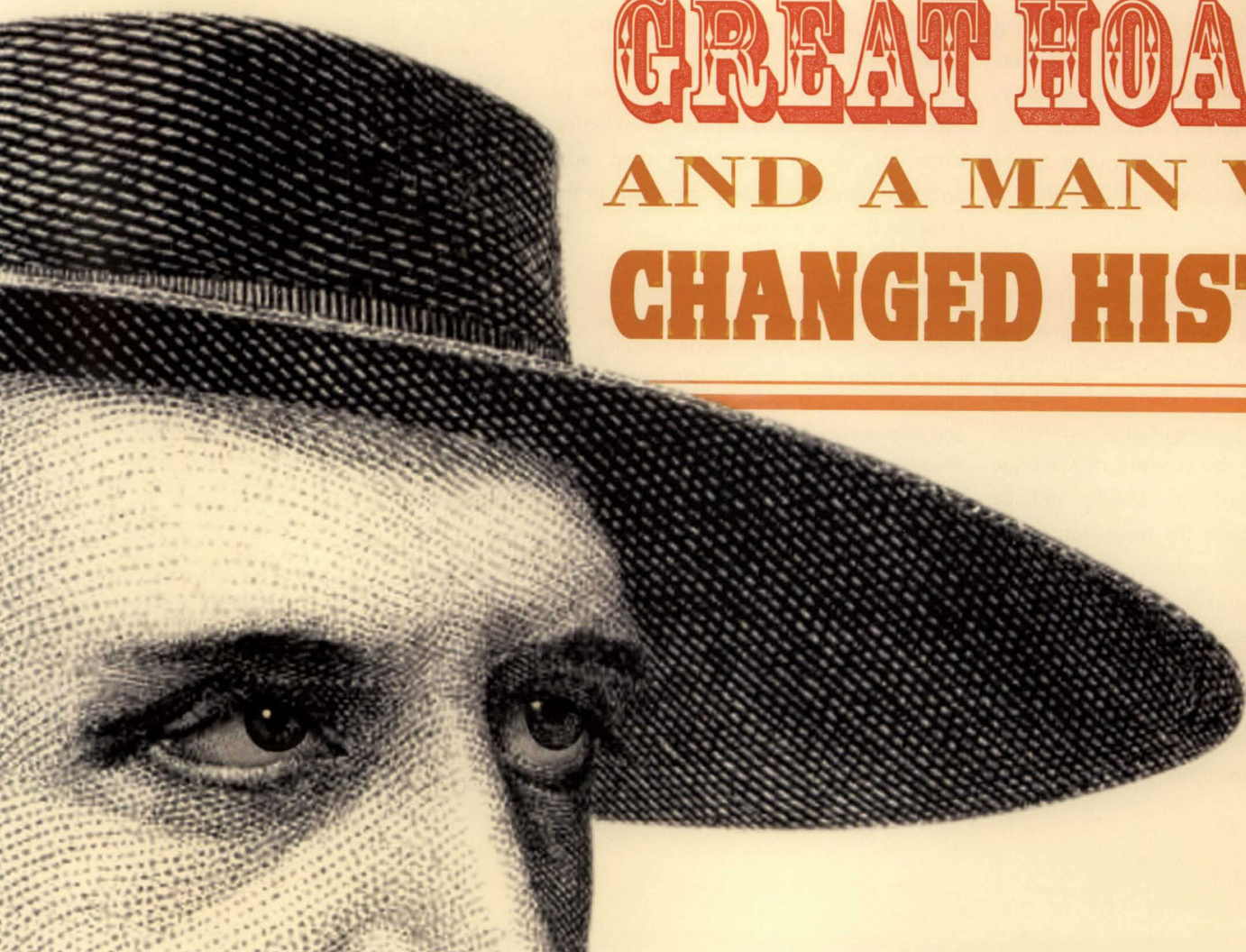


LAST VIKINGS



FRANK COWAN,
PENNSYLVANIA'S OTHER
GREAT HOAXER
AND A MAN WHO
CHANGED HISTORY

By Scott Tribble

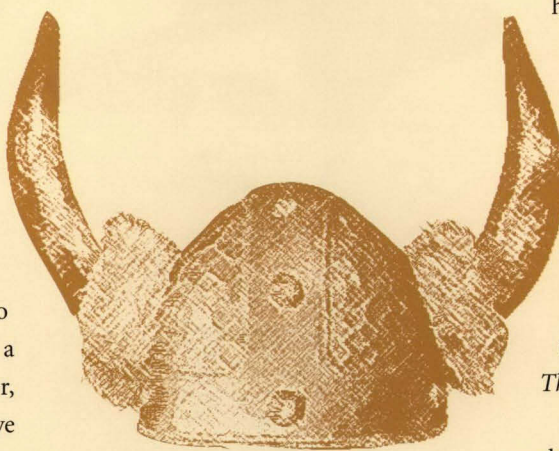


The American literary hoax, a time-honored though often-overlooked tradition, traces its roots to Pennsylvania. Benjamin Franklin devised fake media stories for the *Pennsylvania Gazette* and *Poor Richard's Almanack* to dupe friends, satirize emerging American culture, and achieve political ends. Literary humbug, whose later practitioners would include Mark Twain, Edgar Allan Poe, and others, would reach its pinnacle in the 19th century, after which modern communication methods and journalistic oversight combined to make mass deception markedly more difficult.

The Keystone State's hoax tradition did not begin and end with Franklin, however. In 1867, Greensburg native Frank Cowan diverted the nation's attention from an impending Constitutional crisis with news of an "extraordinary discovery." According to Cowan, archaeologists had found proof of a Viking presence along the Potomac River, placing them in the United States a full five centuries before the voyages of Christopher Columbus. The idea that Vikings had sojourned within the modern United States had profound implications for prehistory. An expansive Viking role in the ancient past necessarily diminished the legacy of the American Indian—a palatable scenario for many white Americans of Cowan's day. The hoax eventually was revealed, but not before Cowan had fooled scientists, newspaper editors, and the public alike in the defining moment of a long and distinguished public career.¹

Frank Cowan was born in Greensburg, Pennsylvania, on December 11, 1844. He was the second of three children, between older sister Elizabeth and younger brother James. His father Edgar, a Westmoreland County lawyer, came from Scotch-Irish stock, his ancestors having arrived in Chester County during the early 18th century. His mother

Lucetta had mixed ancestry and traced at least part of her family to the Huguenots of Germany and the Netherlands. Young Frank Cowan received his education at Mount Pleasant College, an early incarnation of Mount Pleasant Institute. Reflecting on his studies as a youth, Cowan cited the *Eddas* among the first writings to "interest and excite [his] imagination." The *Eddas*, a body of Old Icelandic poetry and prose composed between the 10th and 13th centuries, describes the origin of the Norse mythological world as well as chronicles the



exploits of heroes such as Sigurd. Cowan was inexorably drawn to the evocative tales of adventure and exploration, and, as a youth, wondered if he himself had descended from Viking forbears. It was a distinct possibility. After all, Vikings had occupied portions of his father's Scotland and Ireland for centuries beginning in 795 C.E.²

From this steady diet of marauding tales, Cowan very early developed an irreverent and at times contemptuous sense of humor. He likewise cultivated a propensity for mischief, or "piracy," as he later would put it. Sunday school classes kept him on the relative straight and narrow for a time, but eventually he learned that not everyone appreciated his brand of comedy. In fact, shortly after his matriculation at Jefferson College in Canonsburg, the faculty expelled him for a prank.³

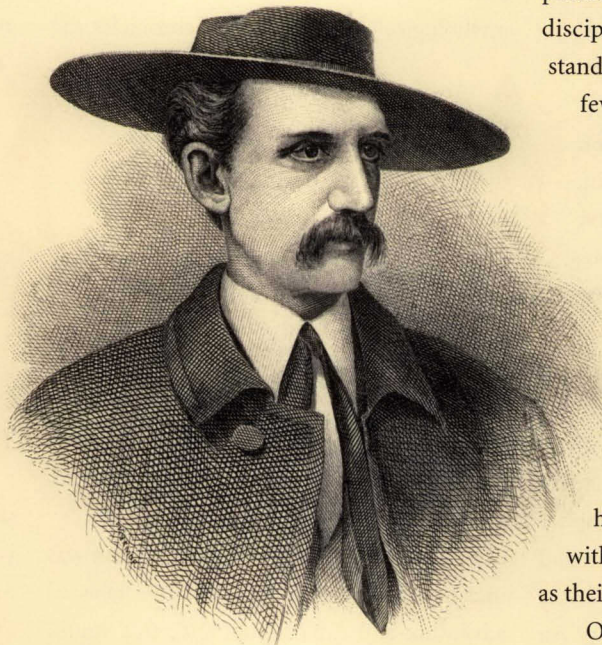
Fortunately for Cowan, he landed on his feet. Pennsylvania's Republican legislators elected his father to the United States Senate in 1861, and young Frank promptly joined him in Washington. As chair of the Committee on Patents, Edgar Cowan installed his son as clerk to that body. Over the next few years, Frank Cowan was exposed to the inner workings of Congress as well as to the Supreme Court. He also spent time in the Oval Office relieving Abraham Lincoln from the bureaucracy of land patents. An inspired Cowan subsequently rededicated himself to his personal and professional growth. In an impressive two-year stretch between 1864 and 1866, he gained admittance to the Westmoreland County bar and published two scientific tracts: *Curious Facts in the History of Insects* (1865) and *The Physique of the United States Senate at the Close of the War* (1865). He even found time to publish a five-act play, 1866's *The Three-Fold Love*.⁴

The fortunes of the Cowan family shifted beginning in 1867. In January of that year, Edgar Cowan lost his bid for re-election. Since Andrew Johnson had succeeded Lincoln in the Oval Office, the Radical Republicans of Congress, led by Pennsylvania's own Thaddeus Stevens, had been embroiled in a war with the new President. While these Republicans advocated a hard line in the Reconstruction of the South, Johnson, a Southern Democrat who had joined Lincoln's war ticket, did not believe in treating the former Confederate states as conquered provinces. Over the course of 1866, Johnson vetoed several key bills, provoking whispers of impeachment in the halls of Congress. Edgar Cowan, who had deviated from his party during the Civil War, sided with the embattled President and further earned the enmity of his colleagues.

Eventually, Cowan had little recourse but to join the weaker Democratic Party. After

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Cowan's failed re-election bid, Johnson nominated him as minister plenipotentiary to Austria. In March 1867, however, the Senate rejected the appointment out of apparent political spite. Next, it was to be Frank Cowan's turn. After the Senate's special session in April, Johnson again attempted to reward the Cowan family for its support, this time by appointing 22-year-old Frank as his own personal secretary to manage land patents.⁵



A dashing Frank Cowan six years after the Viking hoax. Westmoreland County Historical Society

With Congress adjourned, Frank Cowan did not expect to learn his fate until the end of July, or possibly even November if the Senate recessed again without taking up his nomination. An interesting diversion, however, soon presented itself. At the beginning of July, Thomas Birch Florence, who previously had represented Pennsylvania's First Congressional District, re-branded his struggling Georgetown newspaper *The Daily Constitutional Union* as the *Evening Union*. Florence wanted to make an according splash, and so he encouraged Cowan to devise a literary hoax in the grand

tradition of Poe and others. Ever the prankster, Cowan consented and immediately sought inspiration in his long-standing obsession with the Vikings. Soon, he had the basic outline of his story: an archaeologist claiming to have found evidence of Norsemen in America—centuries before the voyages of Columbus.⁶

In many respects, Cowan's conceit was well positioned to succeed. American science at the time barely resembled the modern profession we know today. The various disciplines, for the most part, lacked standards and advanced methodology, while few so-called “experts” enjoyed the benefit of university training. In fact, in these days before professional certification, amateur enthusiasts and outright quacks swelled the ranks of the community and frequently became leading voices on public matters of science. The raw and unsettled state of American science in the first half of the 19th century emboldened hoaxers, who repeatedly vexed scientists with their manufactured curiosities as well as their fictional reportage.⁷

Of all the disciplines, American archaeology resembled least its modern counterpart. Despite strides toward physical documentation and classification in E.G. Squier and E.H. Davis' *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley* (1848), American archaeology remained largely an outlet for armchair speculation. Much of this conjecture dealt with the identity of the so-called “Moundbuilders,” the race responsible for the earthworks of the American South and Midwest. Few antiquarians were willing to concede the truth: that American Indians had been responsible for their construction. They considered the mounds to be beyond the artistic and architectural capability of the so-called “savage” race. Instead, early archaeologists ascribed the construction of

Constitutional Union

MONDAY AFTERNOON, JULY 8, 1867.

Extraordinary Discovery Below the Great Falls of the Potomac.

Icelandic Woman, Buried in 1051, with
Trinkets, Roman Coins, &c., Exhumed.

A Remarkable Runic Inscription.

America Discovered by the Irish.

To the Editor of *The Evening Union*—

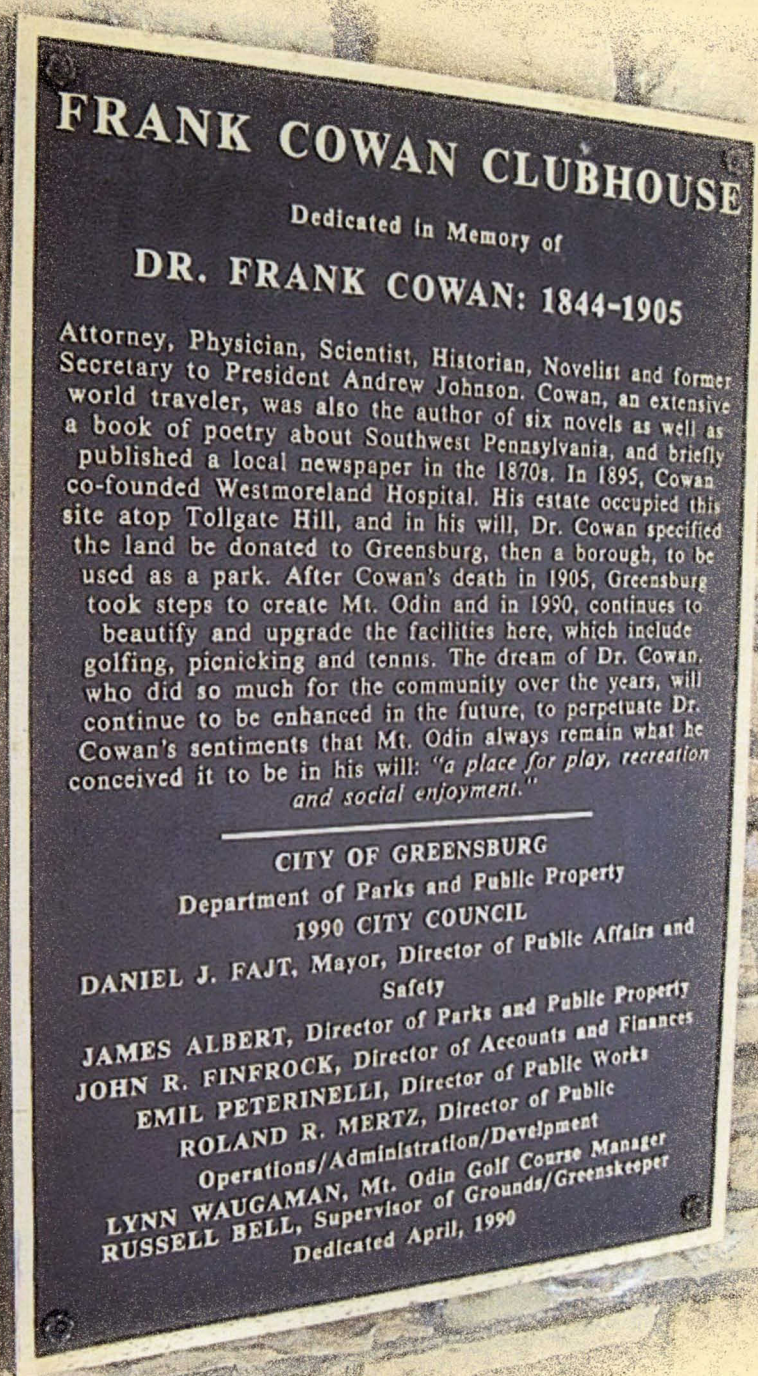
Permit me, through your columns, to publish the details of the discovery, near the city of Washington, of the remains of an Icelandic Christian woman, who died in the year 1051, and of the inscription in Runic characters which marks her grave, the announcement of which has already sped by telegraph through the New World to the Old—to publish a fact which materially affects the history of the discovery of America by Europeans, by adding one more proof to the many, now generally received by historians, of the extraordinary voyages by the adventurous Northmen, without compass or quadrant, to the eastern coast of this continent, five centuries before the landing of Columbus, and to fix the extent of their inland explorations, at least in one direction; besides, to re-

the mounds to seafaring Vikings, Irishmen, Phoenicians, even to a mythical indigenous white civilization. European antiquarians likewise were not immune to the romance of a white prehistory. In fact, nationalistic impulses spurred them to identify their own races and nations as the progenitors of modern American civilization. Over the course of the 1830s, for instance, Carl C. Rafn, a Danish antiquarian, corresponded with New England historical societies in an attempt to connect their artifacts with Viking lore. In 1837, he published the fruits of that dialogue, *Antiquitates Americanae*. Rafn badly misinterpreted native and colonial artifacts in concluding that the “Vinland” of Scandinavian lore was, in fact, present-day New England. He likewise interpreted references to a “Great Ireland,” a land south and west of Vinland and visited by Irish sailors, as the region between the Chesapeake Bay and Florida. Rafn’s seminal publication did lead indirectly to the discovery of a pre-Columbian Viking settlement in Newfoundland, though no concrete evidence of Irish settlement has ever been found. Still, modern archaeologists maintain that Norsemen likely did not sail further south than the Atlantic coast of Canada. In the 19th century, however, Rafn’s misinterpretation of the American archaeological record only fueled wild and grossly inaccurate speculation.⁸

On July 8, 1867, Cowan ignited the already controversial field by publishing his literary hoax in the pages of the *Evening Union*. It took the form of a letter from “Thomas C. Raffinsson,” a fictional member of Copenhagen’s Royal Society of Northern Antiquaries. The *Union* gave the letter complete reign over the front page, bumping other major stories such as the trial of John H. Surratt, an alleged conspirator in the Lincoln assassination, as well as the ongoing power struggle between Congress and the

Frank Cowan’s Viking hoax led the *Union*’s front page news on July 8, 1867.

Library of Congress



Although a plaque commemorating Frank Cowan at Mt. Odin Park identifies him as an attorney, physician, scientist, historian, novelist, and former Secretary to the President, it doesn't mention his little-known stint as hoaxer. Scott Tribble

President. Raffinnson's letter followed a series of sensationalized headlines, among them "Extraordinary Discovery Below the Great Falls of the Potomac" and "A Remarkable Runic Inscription."⁹

Before delving into the particulars of his discovery, "Raffinnson" set the stage by reviewing earlier scholarship, much of which Cowan had adapted from Rafn and tweaked for the purposes of his narrative. In particular, Raffinnson cited the discovery of the "Skálholt Saga" in 1863 and its subsequent translation by an Englishman named "Sir Thomas Murray." This saga—a figment of Cowan's imagination—allegedly described the voyages of Hervardur south and west of Vinland, while also relating his daughter's death at the so-called "White-shirt Falls." According to Raffinnson, Murray postulated that this woman died at the Great Falls of the Potomac, some 15 miles northwest of present-day Washington, D.C. Raffinnson himself claimed to have ventured to the Potomac region in June in search of archaeological evidence to support this hypothesis. On June 28, while inspecting the Falls' well-known "Arrow-Head" rock, Raffinnson allegedly discovered an inscription, partially covered with lichen and sheltered by a nearby spruce pine. The inscription contained letters from the Runic alphabet, an early Germanic script. Translated, it read:

Here rests Syasy, or Suasu, the fair-haired, a person from the east of Iceland, the widow of Kjoldr, and sister of Thorgr, children of the same father.... twenty-five years of age. May God make glad her soul. 1051.

Raffinnson and his companions—given names by Cowan that conspicuously resembled those of leading American scientists—immediately began to excavate the surrounding area. Soon, they unearthed

the teeth and bones of Syasy as well as a series of trinkets and ornaments. According to Raffinnson, the discovery profoundly changed notions of America's ancient past. Syasy's remains placed the Vikings in the modern United States and seemingly validated the sagas as historical documents. For Raffinnson, this latter point was especially crucial. The Skálholt Saga, in keeping with other Norse manuscripts, made reference to the Irish having previously settled the lands in and around Vinland. With the sagas now shown to be historically accurate, the Irish suddenly had become the true discoverers of America and, along with the Vikings, major players in the early history of American civilization:

The page of American history that treats of the partial occupation and exploration of the New World by the Northmen, five centuries before the discoveries of Columbus, which have rendered his name immortal, is no longer a conjecture but a fact ... No longer is the discovery of America by the Irish, in the dim distance of the panorama of history, pointed to as if by the spectre of a dream.¹⁰

Within a matter of days, the "Raffinnson" letter was national news. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* reprinted it in full, while the *New York Evening Post* issued a revised timeline of world history in light of the recent discovery. A writer to Massachusetts' *Newburyport Herald* crowed that the exploits of Scandinavian sea kings had joined "Indian barbarisms" on the "dim and blurred" pages of American prehistory. Raffinnson's findings likewise appeared in the pages of *Scientific American*, the nation's preeminent science journal, though the editors of that publication exercised caution by labeling the news: "Important Archaeological Discovery - Perhaps." Still, most publications tended to take the word of

"Raffinnson" at face value and presented it to the public as established fact. The *Hagerstown Mail*, for instance, informed its readers in the following manner: "The discovery proves the visit of the Northmen to our shores five centuries before the time of Columbus, and that they made explorations inland."¹¹

Demand for the *Evening Union* skyrocketed in the wake of Cowan's sensational story. To further stoke interest, he and Florence collaborated on a series of follow-up articles. In one "biographical" piece on Raffinnson, they predicted that photographs of the antiquarian soon would grace thousands of American households and that his name would endure "as long as there will be an American history." On Saturday, July 13, the *Union* ran a special edition that included all news to date on the discovery. While he undoubtedly inflated the number to attract advertisers, Florence estimated the special edition's circulation at 20,000 copies. With coverage so heavily focused on the Potomac inscription, local wags began to refer to Florence's newspaper as the *Evening Runic*. In keeping with public demand, Florence and Cowan also staged a makeshift exhibition at the *Union's* offices. Cowan furnished Florence with artifacts from his own archaeological cabinet as well as a photograph of the inscription that he subsequently had engineered. These items brought sizable crowds to the *Union's* offices, so much so that Florence eventually moved the exhibition to the more conveniently located Getty's Bookstore.¹²

At the height of public fervor surrounding the "discovery," Cowan received word that the Senate had confirmed his nomination as secretary to President Johnson. The *Union* hailed the "excellent appointment," praising Cowan as a "talented and estimable young gentleman." Among his

specific accomplishments, the newspaper cited Cowan's "valuable contributions to American literature" as well as his "ever active" pen. Both were legitimate compliments, to be sure, though they took on special irony in light of the ongoing hoax. Still, with his appointment secured, Cowan decided to reveal the truth about the inscription to friends and colleagues. In early August, the *Union's* rivals became aware of the fraud and brought the truth to the masses. The *Evening Star* called Cowan's hoax "the biggest sell of the century." Enterprising readers soon recognized clues to the deception that Cowan had left within his original letter. "Thomas C. Raffinnson"

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Mt. Odin Park, Greensburg, Pennsylvania, remains the last vestige of Frank Cowan's lifelong Viking obsession. Brian Butko

clearly was a reference to the late Danish antiquarian Carl C. Rafn, who overzealously had situated the Vikings within New England. "Phillip Marsh," the man said to have discovered the "Skálholt Saga" in 1863, very likely was George Perkins Marsh, one of Rafn's foremost adherents on American shores. "Thomas Murray" likewise was English geographer Hugh Murray, who joined the intellectual debate over Vinland decades earlier. While Cowan himself remained outside the fray, those who knew him attempted to explain his rationale to a wider audience. As one unidentified writer to *Historical Magazine* noted, Cowan simply had been "ventilat[ing] his Scandinavian lore" with the literary hoax.¹³

Over the next year and a half, Cowan focused on his new role in the White House, managing land patents on behalf of President Johnson. Along the way, he would become a witness to history, as the Radical Republicans

of Congress eventually did succeed in impeaching the President, though they failed to remove him from office. After Johnson's death several years later, Cowan would provide insight into the President's mindset during this time of crisis, noting that Johnson maintained a spirit of optimism during public appearances but, in fact, was deeply pessimistic about his chances before Congress. At the same time, Cowan recalled private moments with Johnson, including one occasion in which the normally grave and taciturn President showed an unexpected enthusiasm for Chinese history. After Ulysses S. Grant succeeded the lame-duck Johnson, Cowan opened up a law practice in Washington. Around the same time, he concluded his nighttime studies at Georgetown Medical College and graduated as president of his class in March 1869. Still, for all Cowan's professional and intellectual ventures, the Runic hoax never was far from

his mind. His first legal client was Joseph Henry, secretary of the Smithsonian Institution who publicly acknowledged the ingenuity of Cowan's hoax. At the same time, antiquarians continued to fall prey to Cowan's deception, even after the truth had been revealed. In 1868, London's *Anthropological Review* reported Raffinsson's discovery as major scientific news. Newspaper editors obviously had not been nearly as diligent in spreading the truth about the inscription as they had the lies.¹⁴

A few months after completing his studies at Georgetown, Cowan returned to Greensburg. He married Harriet Jack, daughter of the late Congressman William Jack, and soon the couple would have their first child, daughter Lucy. Cowan simultaneously opened up medical and law practices in Greensburg, while also launching *Frank Cowan's Paper*, a publication focused on Western Pennsylvania's native industries.

The productive Cowan further worked to honor his region by amassing local folklore and history into what eventually would become *Southwestern Pennsylvania in Song and Story* (1878). Still, this period was difficult for Cowan both personally and professionally. In 1873, after giving birth a second time, his wife Harriet died, and infant son Jack likewise succumbed a few months later. Frank Cowan himself fell into ill health during these years, and, as a result, he was forced to shut down his newspaper. He eventually sought refuge in the manner of his Viking ancestors, sailing away to distant shores. Cowan visited Australia, New Zealand, Brazil, Hawaii, and India and became one of the first Americans to spend any significant time in Korea. Upon his eventual return to Greensburg, Cowan wrote extensively on the so-called “hermit nation,” describing the state of Korea’s medical profession, while also furnishing the State Department with valuable information on its natural resources and economic potential. Cowan also published volumes of poetry on his experiences abroad and issued linguistic tracts on the languages of the South Seas as well as the vernacular of English-speaking sailors.¹⁵

In his later years in Greensburg, Cowan continued to write prolifically while also appearing on the popular lecture circuit. Still, he was fast becoming known as an intellectual recluse. Even simple interviews with local newspapers became exercises in heavy sarcasm and hyperbole, with the reader left uncertain as to when Cowan actually was being serious. On one occasion, for instance, Cowan cited bad poetry as the cause of a current illness. At the same time, he befuddled the public with his constant references to Norse culture as well as his self-identification as the “last of the Vikings.” In a representative example of his latter-day mindset, Cowan gave the following answer

when asked why so many of his writings remained unpublished:

Because I am a typical sea-rover in the Hall of the Chosen of my Scandinavian forebears. I go from one adventurous voyage to another—I delight in the strenuous, in the extreme, I enjoy a battle of making a book ... When I finish a book it belongs to the past while I belong to the future, and when I fall it will be with my wounds in front and my face to the foe.

Cowan even made the Vikings part of his daily home life, fashioning his late father’s hilltop estate into a living memorial to the Norsemen. He christened the hill “Mount

Odin” after the chief Norse deity and installed a hammer at the estate’s entrance in honor of Thor. A series of concentric drives likewise became “Utgard,” “Midgard,” and “Asgard,” while Cowan called the two houses “Valhalla” and “Vingólf.” He even gave Norse-styled names to various trees and stones on the property as well as to his pets. Cowan’s eccentric home life was anything but a secret to the residents of Greensburg. For instance, he once threw a public party at his so-called “Hall of the Chosen,” but only those citizens of Scandinavian ancestry were allowed access. While on one hand honoring a legitimate

part, and the menu was prepared by this

VIKING FIRE SHIP OF DEATH AND DR. FRANK COWAN, WHOSE PASSING AWAY THE BOAT IS DESIGNED TO SYMBOLIZE.



ERASMUS WILSON THINKS DR. COWAN MAY GREET THE BLUE BIRDS WHEN THEY COME IN THE SPRING

Erasmus Wilson, inspired by a piece of poetry to be found elsewhere in this paper, writes in the *Pittsburg Gazette* as follows about Dr. Frank Cowan:

And so say we all, for he is a jolly, good fellow and has been around the earth several times, and through it no one knows how often. He was the first white man to cross the bridge of death that separated the royal palace of Korea from the outer world, and to stand face to face with the high executioner, whom he overawed or hypnotized with his long, flowing, now-white beard, so that the man of blood fell down and worshipped him as an ancient come down from heaven to wreak vengeance on those who favored opening the gates of sun-kissed Korea to all the dogs outside.

Many have been the ventures and the adventures of Dr. Cowan, and many dark mysteries he punctured and let in the light. And in order to maintain a proper equilibrium he has mystified and darkened some simple things so completely and so cleverly that wise savants have looked upon them reverently and pronounced them good.

His fire boat is a mere side play and so trivial as compared with other schemes and notions, that he was greatly surprised that his fellow-men should think it worthy of more than a passing notice. He doesn't.

Dr. Cowan's venturesome spirit is likely to lead to his undoing here on earth, and there is no telling what it will do or what may become of it when free from the grasp and control of the sage and prophet of Mt. Odin, for it will be just as likely as not to run amuck through the most crowded parts of spirit land, not forgetting to raise a pampus

and firmly believed by many to be true and authentic. The hoax, on the most successful on record, the work of Frank Cowan, son of Senator Edgar Cowan, of Pennsylvania who was studying natural history the time in the Smithsonian Institute and was only 23 years old.

UNDERSTOOD.
I value more than I despise
My tendency to sin,
Because it helps me sympathize
With all my tempted kin.

He who has nothing in his soul
That links him to the god,
Knows not that joy of self-control
Which lifts him up to God.

And I am glad my neary can say,
When others trip and fall
(Although I safely passed that way,
"I understand it all."

—Edna Wheeler Wilcox.

in Pluto's kitchen.

But he is up against a stiff proposition just now, and up against it so hard and tight and fast that he is about ready to call on his friends to help him break away from it.

Seeing that he had vanquished about every lion he had met in the way and sighing for other lions to kick aside, he boldly tackled one labeled la grippe, and for nigh onto a year he has been doing his level best to get a throttle hold on it, but it appears that he can give the master jiu-jitsu artist cards and spades and win easily.

Yes, he is up against la grippe. Heaven help him!

And so say we all.

But when the blue birds come again it would not surprise them, nor his more intimate friends, if he shall be the first to greet and welcome them, for it is

Cowan resolved he would be buried in a replica Viking fire ship, one of his final hoaxes.

Westmoreland County Historical Society

passion and also reveling in the role of public eccentric, Cowan also clearly was feeding his ego. The Viking references served as a constant reminder of the Runic hoax, which Cowan called the “first of my literary successes, and the most remarkable.” His sense of the hoax’s import only had grown in recent years, as noted naturalist Armand de Quatrefages de Bréau and geographer Gabriel Gravier both had cited Raffinsson’s letter as fact within their own scholarly works.¹⁶

Upon falling gravely ill late in 1904, Cowan resolved to exit the stage in dramatic fashion. He planned another media hoax that at once honored the memory of the Runic fraud as well as served as its logical extension. In December of that year, he engaged local carpenter John Walthour to build him a replica “fire ship,” the funeral vessel of Viking chieftains. After Walthour delivered the 8x3 foot boat, the dying Cowan conducted an interview with reporter Walter H. Gaither. Cowan explained that he had instructed his family to place his remains within the fire ship and bury it beneath “Yggdrasil,” a tree at the summit of Mount Odin. He likewise

outlined his preferred orientation within the unconventional coffin as well as his desire to have his corpse covered with quicklime. Once Gaither’s article had circulated, the dying Cowan was besieged with angry letters. One minister, for instance, denounced the plan as “heathenish” and likewise bemoaned the “desecration of the conventional Christian coffin.” For effect, Cowan subsequently disavowed Gaither’s explanation of the fire ship. He wrote a follow-up letter to *The Weekly Clipper*, in which he pledged to set the record straight, but Cowan only stoked the controversy further. On one hand, he maintained that, even if his family substituted an effigy for his corpse, his symbolic aims still would be achieved. At the same time, however, Cowan described Yggdrasil as the point selected for his “symbolic sailing over the Sea of Appalachia, or [his] inhumation.” The former reference implied the presence of the effigy, while the latter left open the possibility of the fire-ship burial. A week later, Cowan again referenced the uncertain fate of his corpse. In a letter to the local newspapers, he wrote:

I, as the last of the Vikings or Berserkers, desire *my effigy or cold corpus* to drift away over the mountainous billows of the Sea of Appalachia and sink in a blaze of glory in the womb of the west—which, from the pier of my departure is the cloud of smoke and soot over the city of Pittsburgh. [*emphasis added*]¹⁷

Cowan finally succumbed on the morning of February 12, 1905. He was 60 years of age. Within days, when Cowan was interred at the St. Clair Cemetery in Hempfield Township, it became evident that he had hoaxed the public a second time. One newspaper with apparent knowledge of the situation reported that Cowan never had any intention of being buried in the fire ship and, in fact, had arranged for a cemetery plot early in his illness. The hoax had been a gambit to keep his friends—and the public—invested in him until the very end. Cowan caused enough of a stir that, in the coming weeks, newspapers such as the *New York Times* added disclaimers to his obituary to indicate that the fire-ship burial had not, in fact, taken place.¹⁸

At Cowan’s direction, Mount Odin eventually passed to the city of Greensburg for the “play, recreation, and social enjoyment” of its citizens. Today, Mt. Odin Park boasts public tennis courts as well as a golf course that winds up and down the formidable hill. The “Frank Cowan Clubhouse” stands where Valhalla once did, though a biographical plaque makes no reference to the two Viking hoaxes. Still, more than a century after Cowan’s death, the name of “Odin” serves as a constant reminder of the diverse accomplishments—and unusual passions—of one of Pennsylvania’s most unique historical figures. And, just as Cowan would have wanted, it likewise pays tribute to the brave early adventurers who may never have seen New England or the Potomac River, but who, at least in spirit, ended up permanent residents of Greensburg and Westmoreland County.¹⁹



Greensburg’s own Valhalla. Westmoreland County Historical Society

ODDITIES OF A NOTED MAN.

Dr. Frank Cowan Writes as He Is Slowly Dying at His Hermitage.

BOAT SHAPED COFFIN IS IN "GREAT HOUSE."

Extraordinary Closing Days of a Philosopher, Scientist and Author.

BY WALTER H. GAITHER.

GREENSBURG, Pa., Jan. 7.—As the shadow of death is slowly but surely enveloping all that is mortal of Dr. Frank Cowan, of this place, his eccentricities are gradually developed to the world. In his life of studentship he had become a philosopher, an explorer, a physician, an attorney-at-law, an author, a poet, a composer of music, a lecturer, an historian, and in fact everything which by his own efforts man may attain, everything save the position of a successful business man.

While he is at his own little farmhouse some miles from this place, propped up with pillows, he is constantly writing. Writing has been his life and it will be his death. A stone's throw away from his bedside in the "great house" there awaits him a boat-shaped coffin. In a nearby field there is a grave already dug. Everywhere in and out there is plain evidence of the peculiarities of this extraordinary man.

Changes Farm Into Park.

Down from one generation to another came valuable land in Westmoreland county. Situated on a picturesque hill some distance from here are 100 acres, which represent a portion of this man's share in his father's estate, for his mother still lives. Ten years ago the old Cowan homestead burned to the ground and a new farm-house sprung up. It is in this Dr. Cowan lies awaiting the

Cowan captured the limelight until the very end.

Westmoreland County Historical Society

Scott Tribble, M.A., is a freelance journalist and independent scholar. His book on the Cardiff giant hoax will be published by Rowman & Littlefield Publishers in 2008.

Endnotes

- ¹ For more on literary hoaxes in American history, see Fred Fedler, *Media Hoaxes* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1989). Earlier locally-focused retrospectives on Frank Cowan include: Daniel J. Ackerman, "Dr. Frank Cowan, Poet Laureate of the Westmoreland Bar," *The Sidebar: The Newsletter of the Westmoreland Bar Association* 18, no. 5 (2006), 15-17 and James V. Steele, "Frank Cowan: The Sage of Mount

Odin," *Westmoreland History Magazine* 4, no. 4 (1999), 22-28.

- ² Cowan biographical items: *Connellsville Courier*, February 17, 1905; Cowan's interest in the *Eddas* and possible ancestry: *The Weekly Clipper*, January 17, 1905. For more on the Cowan family history, see John K. Fleming, *The Cowans from County Down*, ed. Richard P. Draves (1971; Reprinted by the editor, 2000), <http://users.telerama.com/~rpdraves/cowan/Cowans-FromCountyDown.PDF>. For a brief overview of Viking history and the *Eddas*, see Jonathan Wooding, *The Vikings* (New York: Rizzoli, distributed by St. Martin's Press, 1998) and John Haywood, *Encyclopedia of the Viking Age* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000).
- ³ *The Weekly Clipper*, January 17, 1905; *Connellsville Courier*, February 17, 1905; and "Oddities of a Noted Man," undated newspaper clipping, Frank Cowan folder, Westmoreland County History Society, Greensburg, Pennsylvania.
- ⁴ *Connellsville Courier*, February 17, 1905; Albert H. Bell, *Memoirs of the Bench and Bar of Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania* (Batavia, NY: The Batavia Times Publishing Company, 1925), 166-167; and George Fort Milton, *The Age of Hate: Andrew Johnson and the Radicals* (1930; Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1965), 232.
- ⁵ U.S. Congress, Senate Exec. Journal, 39th Cong., 2nd sess., 14 January 1867, p 76 and 26 January 1867, p 138-139; U.S. Congress, Senate Exec. Journal, 40th Cong., 1st sess., 8 March 1867, p 367, 9 March 1867, p 398, and 12 March 1867, p 428; *Titusville Morning Herald*, April 29, 1867. For more on the Senatorial election of 1866-1867, see John D. Stewart, "The Great Winnebago Chieftain: Simon Cameron's Rise to Power 1860-1867," *Pennsylvania History* 39 (January 1972), 20-39. For more on the conflict between President Johnson and Congress, see Milton, *The Age of Hate*; Hans L. Trefousse, *Impeachment of a President: Andrew Johnson, the Blacks, and Reconstruction* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1999); and Chester G. Hearn, *The Impeachment of Andrew Johnson* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2000).
- ⁶ Dates of 40th Congress: U.S. President, *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents* (Bureau of National Literature, 1897), 9:3715. In later recollections of the hoax, Cowan did not implicate or mention Florence. The editor's complicity is assumed not only from the multiplicity of articles in the *Evening Union* on the Runic inscription but also from equally sensational stories on American prehistory in the coming months. See *Evening Union*, August 9, 19, 24, 1867 and September 7, 1867.
- ⁷ For more on the pre-professional struggles of the American scientific community, see Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973) and mark Jaffee, *The Gilded Dinosaur* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2000).
- ⁸ For more on the history of American archaeology and the Moundbuilder controversy, see Gordon R. Willey and Jeremy A. Sabloff, *A History of American Archaeology* (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman, 1974) and Robert Silverberg, *Mound Builders of Ancient America: The Archaeology of a Myth* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1968). See also E. G. Squier and E. H. Davis, *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley* (New York: Bartlett & Welford, 1848) and Charles C. Rafn, *Antiquitates Americanae* (Hafniae: Typis Officinae Schultzianae, 1837). The exact location of "Vinland" remains unclear, but mainstream archaeologists today agree that it was either present-day Newfoundland or another location on the Atlantic coast of Canada. For more on the Vinland controversy, see Kenneth L. Feder, *Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries*, 4th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill/Mayfield), 2002, 133-148. For more on American interest in Norse culture, see Erik Ingvar Thurin, *The American Discovery of the Norse* (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1999).
- ⁹ *Evening Union*, July 8, 1867.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 16, 1867; *New York Evening Post*, rpt. in *Evening Union*, August 3, 1867; *Newburyport (Mass.) Herald*, rpt. in *Evening Union*, August 12, 1867; *Scientific American* 17, no. 5 (August 3, 1867); and *Hagerstown Mail*, August 9, 1867.
- ¹² *Evening Union*, July 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 1867; *Historical Magazine* 2, no. 2 (1867), 121-122; and "Oddities of a Noted Man," Westmoreland County Historical Society.
- ¹³ *Evening Union*, July 20, 1867; *Evening Star*, quoted in *Evening Union*, August 6, 1867; *Historical Magazine* 2, no. 3 (1867), 184; *Historical Magazine* 2, no. 2 (1867), 121-122.
- ¹⁴ Recollections of Johnson: *Pittsburgh Leader*, August 22, 1875, rpt. in Frank Cowan, *Andrew Johnson, President of the United States*, 2nd ed. (Greensburg, PA: The Oliver Publishing House, 1894); see Milton, 232-235 and Trefousse, 157 for key recollections. Cowan biographical items: *The Weekly Clipper*, January 17, 1905; *Annual Report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1874), 193-194 and James E. Morgan, *Addresses Delivered at the Twentieth Annual Commencement of the Medical Department of Georgetown College* (Washington, DC: Intelligencer Printing House, 1869). Later hoax victims: *Anthropological Review* 6, no. 21 (1868), 223-224.
- ¹⁵ Cowan biographical items: Fleming, *The Cowans of County Down*; "Oddities of a Noted Man," Westmoreland County Historical Society; John Newton Boucher, *History of Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania* (New York: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1906), 1:401-402. Cowan in Korea: William Elliot Griffis, *Corea: The Hermit Nation* (London: W.H. Allen & Co., 1882), 427.
- ¹⁶ "Sick Sage of Mt. Odin Pens a Note" and "Oddities of a Noted Man," Westmoreland County Historical Society; *The Weekly Clipper*, January 17, 1905; *Connellsville Courier*, February 17, 1905; *Greensburg Morning Review*, February 13, 1905. Later deceptions: Armand de Quatrefages de Bréau, *L'espèce Humaine*, 5th ed. (Paris: Librairie Germer Baillière, 1879), 156 and Gabriel Gravier, *Découverte de l'Amérique par les Normands au Xe siècle* (Rouen: E. Cagniard, 1874), 139.
- ¹⁷ "Oddities of a Noted Man" and "Devil May Yet Be Chadwicked," Westmoreland County Historical Society; *The Weekly Clipper*, January 17, 1905.
- ¹⁸ *Connellsville Courier*, February 17, 1905 and *New York Times*, February 13, 1905.
- ¹⁹ "Dr. Cowan Bequeaths His Estate to His 'Nearest of Kin' for a Period of 30 Years or Longer," Westmoreland County Historical Society.