The Viking in the Wheat Field: A Scientist’s Struggle to Preserve the World’s Harvest


The Viking in the Wheat Field is a biography of Bent Skovmand (1945–2007), who received the Crop Science Society of America’s Frank N. Meyer Medal for Plant Genetic Resources in 2002. After receiving his degree from the University of Minnesota in 1976, Bent moved to CIMMYT where he variously worked as a wheat and triticale breeder, coordinator of CIMMYT wheat activities in Turkey (1984–1988), and head of CIMMYT’s wheat germplasm collection (1988–2003). From Mexico, he became director of the Nordic Gene Bank where, among other activities, he was instrumental in establishing the Svalbard International Seed Vault, also called the “Doomsday Vault.”

As important as Bent’s contributions were to global conservation of genetic resources, one might not expect a whole book to be dedicated to his work. The author thus commendably uses the biography as a platform to develop other themes, most notably the evolution of ideas about the use and conservation of genetic resources, especially in relation to genetically modified crops, patents, and “biopiracy”.

Minor concerns include the sometimes flamboyant writing style. For example, the author described CIMMYT as “young and new in 1976”, but the center was officially founded in 1966 and traces its history to 1943, when the Rockefeller Foundation established the Office of Special Studies in Mexico. Dates I checked were accurate, but historical details may be blurred by the difficulty of identifying the most knowledgeable sources and avoiding the understandable tendency of people to filter information that involves ongoing, potentially controversial research. While at CIMMYT from 1995 to 2002, I collaborated with Bent and other scientists at CIMMYT, IRRI, the University of Queensland, and elsewhere in development of the International Crop Information System. My recollections of the dynamics of this often frustrating effort differ substantially from those provided (pages 142–148), but the book does justice to Dr. Skovmand’s appreciation of the importance of database development work and correctly emphasizes that the difficulties involved both technical and social issues.

In an era when many researchers wonder where the next generation of field-oriented researchers will come from, The Viking in the Wheat Field is a valuable vehicle for educating the public about complex issues related to plant genetic resources and the future of agriculture. It would be especially useful as supplementary reading for a course on world agriculture or plant genetic resources.

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