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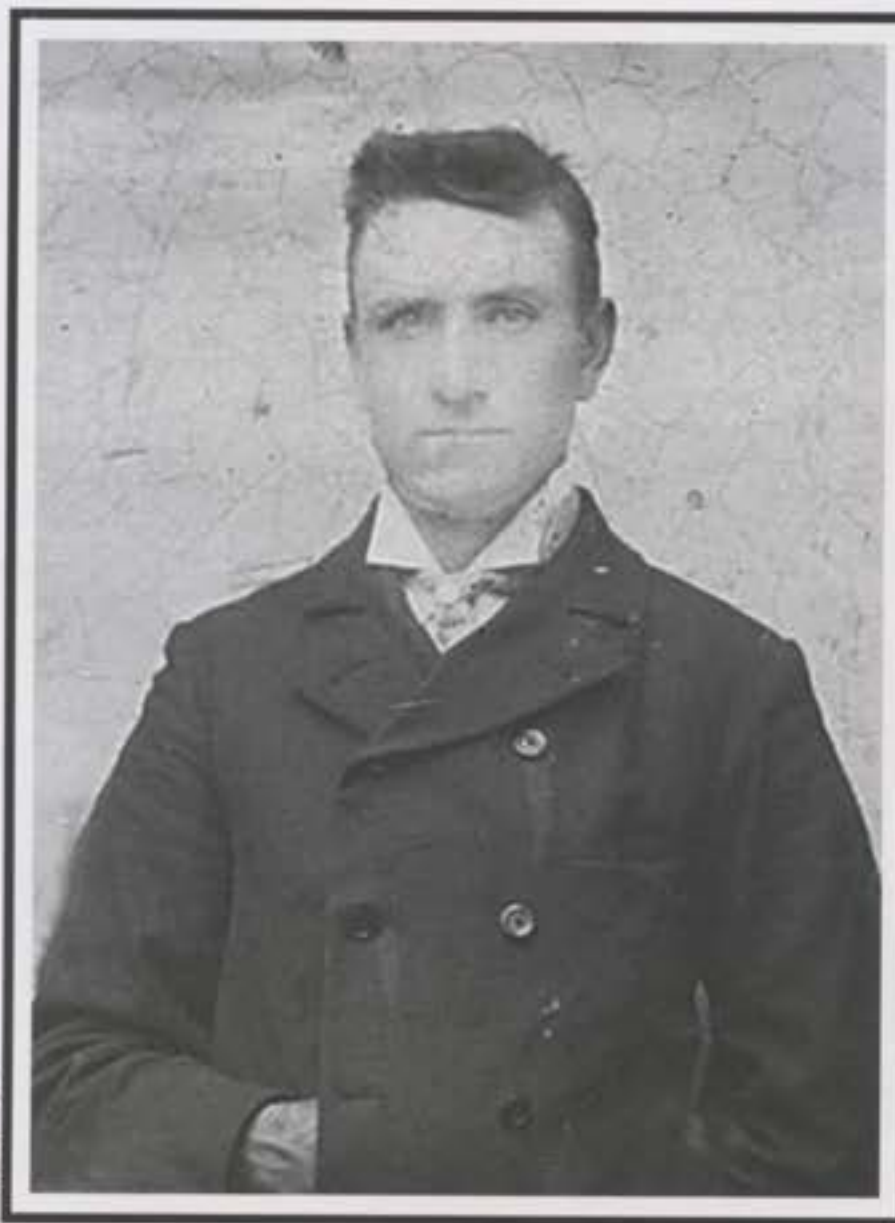
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The
ICELANDIC
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21st Annual Icelandic Festival of Manitoba
Íslendingadagurinn 2010
Manitoba Gaman!
 Hjúsnorunin 2010 (Helmingur 2010)

July 30 - August 1, 2010
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ICELANDIC CONNECTION

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ICELANDIC CONNECTION

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On the Cover



Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason with class at Geysir School, 1900. Photo courtesy of Nelson Gerrard.

Editorial

Our Evolving Identity

by Lorna Tergesen

The first issue of Icelandic Connection has gone out and we have received more letters of praise than those who have questioned our bold move. We thank you for your ownership of the magazine and welcome any suggestions for improvement.

However, a huge road block has been put in our way. In the past, you may have noticed that the Canadian issues have been sent as "Publications Mail" allowing us to send these magazines at a very reasonable rate. Local mail in Gimli in the range of 33 cents, those in the next provinces with an "S0" or "P0" or "K0" were costing us 47 cents each. Then those in the rest of Canada cost us 68 cents on the last mailing. (Over the past years, each mail delivery seemed to increase by a penny or two in all categories.) International mail and that to United States of America range from over \$6 for International and usually \$3.50 for American subscribers. That subsidy was taken away a number of years ago.

Now that Postal Assistance for Publication Mail has disappeared, I don't know what it will cost to send each magazine out, but you will observe on your envelope what will be. It could be as high as \$2.00 per issue.

This of course will mean that our rates will need to rise drastically, but we are also thinking of other methods to decrease the weight of each magazine in order to bring the price down as low as possible. We may use a lighter weight for the cover, we may need to increase our

advertiser base, although that is becoming more difficult as tighter times reign for everyone. We may even go to a lighter stock paper.

While at the Icelandic National League Convention in Toronto at our presentation, I asked how many would be interested in receiving the magazine on line. To my great surprise nearly half of those in the session said they would be happy with that. This would involve developing a whole new aspect of our operations, including the technical challenge of setting up on on-line presence. The cost benefits are significant but I am personally one who loves to hold my books and reading materials and know that many of our readers are in that category too.

We would then offer two alternatives; one for the regular style of the magazine and the other on-line. A very good suggestion was to enquire at a local school or college for assistance from student(s) as to setting up the on-line program. Knowing that everything has been done voluntarily other than the desktop setter and the printing house, we would still like to keep that aspect viable. Being anything but a technically inclined member of the board I wonder if this would work.

So we will proceed and inform you as to what needs to happen in order that we can continue to put out the magazine. Your input is very welcome.

CANADA ICELAND FOUNDATION INC. SCHOLARSHIPS OFFERED

We invite students to apply for the following scholarships which are offered, or administered, by the Canada Iceland Foundation. Priority may be given to first time applicants.

ALL APPLICATIONS MUST BE RECEIVED BY FRIDAY, 10 SEPTEMBER, 2010

Information and applications are available electronically by request at Canadalceland@netscape.net (for application requests only), or in hard copy from Lögberg-Heimskringla.

The completed applications are forwarded to:

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The Heiðmar Björnson Memorial Scholarship

In the amount of \$500, will be given annually to the student obtaining the highest academic standing in Icelandic Studies in his/her final year at the University of Manitoba. The award will be made by the Department Head.

The Margaret Breckman Mack Scholarship Award

In the amount of \$500, will be given annually to a needy student of good scholastic ability who is enrolled in the University of Manitoba bachelor of Science Nursing Degree Program.

The Canada Iceland Foundation Scholarship

One scholarship of \$500, to be awarded annually. Award to be determined by academic standing and leadership qualities. To be offered to a university student studying towards a degree in any Canadian university.

Einar Páll & Ingibjörg Jónsson Memorial Scholarship

One scholarship of \$500, to be awarded annually. Award to be determined by academic standing and leadership qualities. To be offered to a high school graduate proceeding to a Canadian university or the University of Iceland.

Emilia Pálmason Student Aid Award

An award of \$500, to be given annually. The recipients must be of good moral character, college calibre and primarily in need of help to continue their studies in high school, college, or at the university level. The donors hope that "somewhere along the highway of life" the award winners will try to provide comparable help to another needy student.

The Gunnar Simundsson Memorial Scholarship

One scholarship of \$500, to be awarded annually. This annual scholarship will be awarded to a student in university or proceeding into a university in Canada or the United States. The recipient must demonstrate financial need and high scholastic ability.

Thorvaldson Scholarship

One scholarship of \$500, to be awarded annually. This annual scholarship will be awarded to a student in university

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John Jónas Gillis Memorial Scholarship

The late Ingunn Gillis made a gift to the Canada Iceland Foundation to set up a scholarship in memory of her son. A scholarship of \$500 will be awarded.

Arnold W. Holm Scholarship

One scholarship of \$500, to be awarded annually. This scholarship is to be awarded to a student demonstrating financial need and who qualifies to proceed to university education and a degree.

The Kristin Stefanson Memorial Scholarship

One scholarship of \$500 to be awarded to a student who is registered or will be registering to take a course offered by The Department of Icelandic at the University of Manitoba. Preference may be given to students who have not previously taken a course offered by that Department.

The Lorna and Terry Tergesen Scholarship

One scholarship of \$500 to be awarded to a student entering the second or a later year of study of architecture, fine arts, design or graphic design, music, dance or voice.

The Walter and Beulah Arason Scholarship

One scholarship of \$500 to be awarded annually to a student of good academic standing entering the University of Alberta or continuing their education there.

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Scholarships of \$500 each for students pursuing a post secondary education, who graduated from a high school in Evergreen School Division in Manitoba and who demonstrate scholastic ability.

The Judge Walter J. Lindal Memorial Scholarship

A scholarship of \$1000 to be awarded annually, in memory of Judge Walter J. Lindal, to a student registering as an undergraduate at The University of Winnipeg with a view to proceeding from there to the study of Law.

The Island

by Einar Vigfusson

They had come to the island in late October on the last boat north . This group consisted of young men from the Framnes area immediately west of the settlement of Ardal, now called Arborg in Manitoba. They were first and second generation Icelandic Canadians and spoke mainly in the Icelandic language. This group had adopted the fishery on Lake Winnipeg as their vocation, along with the farming that was their main occupation.

The boat approached the dock on the sheltered side of the the island. A light

island.

No one could ever tell when the ice would form on the lake, but a cold spell, often after a snow storm, could freeze the lake over in a few days. Sometimes there would be a storm and the ice would break up again. This was quite common.

Among this group of fishermen were my father Jóhann and his two brothers, Einar and Bergur.

This was to be Dad's eighth winter on the island even though he was still only in his twenties. His younger brothers had been there during the previous winter



Drawings by Einar Vigfusson



rain was falling as they began to bring their meager possessions up on the deck and unload them in the dark by the light of the lanterns which were hung on the pier.

They would spend the next weeks preparing the log cabins for winter and getting the nets and equipment ready for the upcoming fishing season. As they waited for the ice to form on the lake, they prepared the dog teams they would use for winter fishing.

They had also brought with them several horses which would be shod with special shoes called grousers. This improved the stability of the horses and their ability to pull heavier loads on the ice. They also brought hay and some grain for the horses with them to the

although they had fished further south on the lake before that.

Also in this group was a young man, seventeen years of age. His name was Laurence and he came from the area between the towns of Selkirk and Clandeboye. He will be mentioned again later in this story.

Now that the boat had gone each man felt a certain amount of loneliness. They knew they would be pretty well isolated for the next few months, away from family and friends and maybe girlfriends whom they would not see during this time. The only real connection to home would be through letters which could be sent and received at the post office at a place called Poplar River on the mainland, approximately twenty-five miles to

the east. Often the mail could take up to several weeks to get to its destination. Even the happy times of Christmas and New Years would only live in memory.

But now, here they were, with several of their neighbors and friends, ready for the winter's work.

One evening shortly after they arrived on the island one of the men had gone to the lighthouse. He came running back to the camp and said: "There is a light on the horizon and it looks like a boat is coming." Many of the young men sat down to write letters to their dear ones in hopes of getting them onto the boat if it should come to the island. Then they all went down to the shore by the lighthouse to await the landing of the boat.

The unbelievable disappointment was evident as they milled about on the beach, trying to get a glimpse of the light out on the lake. Nothing . . . nothing out there. Only the reflection of the moon on the waves was visible to them. What had caused the light to shine in the night? Perhaps it was a "will o' the wisp" that gave off an eerie light which was caused by phosphorescence of dead fish in the water. Or what? It was a sad group that slowly walked back to the camp. The thought of their terrible isolation was very prominent in their minds. Very few words were spoken as each one dealt with his own disappointment. Silently and without any more introspection they went to their beds. Tomorrow would be another day of hard work for them as they continued to prepare for the winter of fishing on the ice.

Soon, ice began forming at the shore of the island, but waves and the warmth of the November sun always melted it, except in shaded parts of the shoreline. It seemed to them that the wind never died down long enough for the ice to take hold. This island was well known as one of the windiest places on the lake. So it was that the ice did not freeze well

enough until after the middle of December that year and its safety was still questionable right up until Christmas.

As soon as it was possible, the men began setting their nets under the ice in fairly close proximity to the island. As the ice thickened, they moved out further. This was hard work as they chipped their way down through the ice, making holes with a narrow chisel known as a needle bar. Then they drew an instrument they called a jigger under the ice from hole to hole. This board was unique as it clawed its way under the ice away from the man that pulled at the line in short jerks. It had a separate line attached to it which it dragged to where the other man chopped a hole when he thought it had gone a net length. He could easily hear it clawing under the ice so he knew where it was all the time. Sometimes it was more difficult to hear it in high winds or if the ice became very thick, as it often did later in the winter. This little gadget saved an awful lot of work for those men setting nets under the ice. The line that the jigger pulled between the holes was used to pull the nets under the ice so they lay between the two holes.

Just before Christmas, somewhere in the American west, probably in the Colorado area, a storm of great magnitude was forming. It then moved in a pattern now familiar to the weathermen of today, northeast to the eastern shore of Lake Winnipeg and then about halfway north and back west across the lake in the familiar hook visible on today's weather maps. These storms generally dumped large amounts of snow before moving into northwestern Ontario. They were usually followed by intense north-westerly winds that blew mercilessly across this part of the lake.

So, this was what the men on the island were faced with. A heavy snow-storm blanketed the island for several days, making it virtually impossible for

them to go out on the ice to lift nets. Then the cold north-westerly wind came up with savage fury and drifted a lot of the snow off the smooth ice surface.

It was a complete whiteout, the likes of which they had never seen before. Being forced to stay in camp for a few days was not to the liking of the men as they were brought up on hard and steady work and did not find idleness very appealing.

And so it was that Jóhann and the young man by the name of Laurence, on a cold, clear morning, between Christmas and New Year's, decided to venture out on the ice to take the mail from the island to Poplar River. They hoped to return with mail from home, from friends and family.

"We will have to go right out on the open ice to cross to the mainland as there is too much rough ice east of our island" said Jóhann, "so we will go on the glare ice and then turn northeast just before we hit the bigger island. Then we should have good travelling from there. We will have to wear our grousers on our feet as the wind has polished the ice to a slippery finish. We won't take the dog team, but let's take a couple of dogs with us, mostly for company. If we have trouble we can always stay over in Poplar River as I know the trader and we have become good friends over the years. I also know his sons who trap on the east shore of the lake. We will have to wear our best all weather gear and pack enough food for a couple of days." They would wear a lot of woolen clothing and mittens topped with the heavy canvas parkas and very deep hoods also of canvas that were commonly used by the fishermen of that time.

They set out on their little adventure at daylight under a clear sky. The wind was still quite strong, whipping the remaining snow into little snake-like banks on the glare ice. About a mile out from the island they arrived at a small

crack in the ice but took little notice of it as this was a common event on the lake that fishermen dealt with daily. Without hesitation they stepped across it.

Accompanying them on this trip were two favorite dogs; a gray one known as Gráni and a very dark colored one named Surtur. They would provide good company for the men on their journey.

The grousers on the men's boots provided excellent grip on the slippery ice even as the wind increased to a high velocity. Jóhann wondered whether they had perhaps made a mistake to set out on this journey as it could become difficult to navigate if the wind should increase much more. Around noon they came to a ridge of ice thrown up at the time of freeze-up on the lake. This would be a good spot out of the wind to eat their first lunch. The dogs stayed close to the men, trying to keep out of the icy wind and hurriedly ate their food, which was mostly fish.

"We must keep going in order to reach the east shore before dark, or we will have to spend the night out on the lake," said Jóhann. This was a prospect neither of them looked forward to.

As they prepared themselves for the rest of the journey Jóhann looked at the ice-covered lake and at the distant landmarks. He became very thoughtful and then he said to Laurence, "I think there is something wrong here. The high point on the horizon seems to have moved while we ate our lunch. What in the world is happening? Are we moving? I have never experienced anything like this before and it frightens me greatly. Remember the crack we crossed this morning? I think we are on loose ice.

We had better travel as fast as we can towards shore and hope we can reach the shoreline as soon as possible.

It seemed to them that they were actually moving away from the shoreline and that, in fact, was what was happen-

ing. A large area of ice was turning, driven by the now very strong wind which was becoming intolerable. Jóhann said, "We are being driven south along the lake. The ice will break up as it approaches the shore so it will be very difficult to find a place to get to land. But don't give up. We will keep going as fast as we can but we may have to stay out on the ice overnight because it will be impossible to try it in the dark." It seemed that they had been walking forever as the darkness began to set in. They searched for and found an area of thicker ice where they would spend the night in shelter of broken slabs of ice, pushed up at the time of freeze-up. By now the wind had abated somewhat and the night sky was lit by the moon and a myriad of stars.

The dogs were nervous as they lay down and their eyes shone like live coals as they reflected the moonlight and starlight in the cold winter night. "We can only catnap," said Jóhann, "we have to keep our bodies in motion or we will succumb to the cold. I think we will be alright 'til morning." They stood together and asked God to help them. Jóhann spoke Icelandic as he began the Lord's Prayer. "Faðir Vor Þú sem ert á Himnum . . ."

Laurence recited his in English. "Our Father who Art in Heaven . . ." Then they took turns sleeping as much as they could under the circumstances.

Finally morning arrived and they shook their bodies back to life by swinging arms wildly. A cold mist or fog hung over the lake as they continued on their difficult journey to the east shore. Now, they saw a rather high promontory in the distance. Jóhann said, "I know where we are now. That high point is near Leaf River. We will come ashore nearly thirty miles further south than we intended to. The ice has carried us far during the night. Our only hope is to access the shore on the south side of the highland where the ice may still be in place because of the lee."

By noon the wind had become more severe and soon there was a continuous roar of breaking ice as they approached the shore. On the north side of the point, they could see large slabs of broken ice being driven by the wind and crashing right up on the shore in a mad frenzy. The small trees of the east shore stood no chance against this huge invasion and were soon broken down and covered with piles of ice as one sheet slid over another. It seemed that this would never stop.

Soon, the sheet of ice they stood on moved past the promontory and was partly sheltered from the biting wind. With much difficulty they managed to get onto the rocky shoreline and up into the woods

much to the enjoyment of the dogs who now ran around investigating all the sounds and smells of the new environment into which they were cast.

This journey was not about to end soon. Now they would have to figure out a way to get back to the island or to Poplar River.

The sun was beginning to slant towards the horizon as they followed a well-worn trail up along the river. Jóhann said, "I think the boys from Poplar River have a cabin in this area that they use while they are trapping. It is probably up above the rapids and there we might find a way to get north across the river."

"If we find the cabin before dark we will be able to spend the night in relative comfort and warm ourselves by a fire. There might even be some food there."

Just as darkness fell, they came to the old log cabin which to them, at the time, looked like a castle. A lock hung on the door and they were forced to break it in order to get inside. A leg of frozen caribou hung in the entrance and they quickly made a fire to cook some of it for themselves and for the dogs. They were all extremely hungry and ate well before falling asleep in the welcome warmth of the trapper's cabin.

With the arrival of dawn they began making their plans for the day. Then they made preparations to leave. They prepared a lunch of caribou and some old biscuits and left a five dollar bill, a huge sum in those days, on the table to pay for the broken lock and for the food. This custom was common among the people of this area when they were in need of shelter and sustenance. Very soon they found the rapids, and, further up, saw where the trappers had crossed over the river. There the ice was flat, quite thick and suitable for crossing. The trapper's trail was easy to follow as they used it at least once a week to tend to their traplines.

"We could make it all the way to

Poplar River in a couple of days if we are lucky," said Jóhann, "and then we can maybe get word out to the island that we are still alive."

These amazing young men were well used to travelling through rough country and by evening they had come a long way. They stopped when they found a small shelter used by the trappers when they were travelling back and forth to their camp at Leaf River.

This shelter consisted of several small black spruce trees arranged in a semi-circle against a larger tree. In the opening was a place where the young trappers had had a fire to cook their meals. This was an excellent spot to spend the night, warm and cozy in front of the fire. Before going to sleep they cooked some of the meat they carried with them from the cabin. Woodland caribou of the region was delicious, especially if you were as hungry as they were. Soon they would be fast asleep, dreaming of the days to come when they would be reunited with Jóhann's brothers and all of their friends on the island.

They awoke at dawn with a strong feeling of anticipation as to what the day would hold for them. Soon they were on their way north, ever north. As they came to a gradual bend in the trail they noticed that the dogs Gráni and Surtur began to act strangely, making low growling noises, while the hair on their necks stood straight up. The dogs had not acted like this previously on this journey so Jóhann and Laurence wondered what was up ahead. Jóhann said, "Perhaps there are timber wolves near by and dogs are quite scared of them. Anyway, we will likely soon find out what is out there."

A little further along the trail their question was answered. They heard the sound of two young men talking and laughing as well as the sound of the dog teams they were driving. Suddenly they came around a bend in the trail – and were



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greeted by an unbelievably welcome sight. Two young men came into view with two teams of large grey dogs, their timber wolf ancestry obvious, even at this considerable distance. The boy trappers looked at what they thought was an apparition - two men and two dogs where they were sure none existed. As they came nearer one of them shouted, "Joe, what the hell are you doing way out here? How in the world did you get to this place?" Jóhann answered, "It's a long story and we will tell you all about it after we catch our breath. You are sure a sight for sore eyes. Laurence and I thought we would never get out of this predicament alive, but now our luck has turned and we are among friends again".

Then he told them the story of the broken ice and their subsequent drifting on the lake.

"We will get you north to Poplar River as soon as we can," said the boys in unison. That said, they turned their teams around and fixed the sleigh loads so that their passengers could ride whenever they wanted. They found they were better off taking turns running as their friends did, so they would not succumb to the cold. Most of the time this was done to keep the blood flowing and to produce needed body heat. Jóhann and Laurence were warmly dressed and well conditioned by hard work so they were able to keep up with the dog teams fairly well. Their dogs, Gráni and Surtur, after some initial

growling were quick to realize who was the boss in the dog world and fell into line at the back of the group without any complaints.

Night was approaching but the group kept right on going. One of the boys said, "We will arrive at Poplar River sometime around midnight but the moon is out and we know this trail like the backs of our hands. It will be alright." After what seemed like an endless time, they finally saw the lights in the windows at the Poplar River store.

The parents had not expected the boys to come back until the next day, but like all parents they had left the lights burning, just in case. They entered the log cabin store and found hot coffee on the old wood stove in the corner and warm food in the oven.

After they all had their fill, Jóhann and Laurence spread a few big Hudson Bay blankets on the floor and fell into a deep untroubled sleep.

When they awoke, breakfast was ready for them. It consisted of tea with bannock and butter and some excellent jams made from some of the plentiful berries that grew on the east side of the lake; blueberries, raspberries and others.

The trader and his wife were very happy that their boys could help their friends in a time of need. After Jóhann and Laurence had eaten their fill, they went into the post office, which was a part of the store, and delivered the mail from the island. They also picked up a bundle of mail that they would take back to their camp with them.

Jóhann held in his hand a letter from a dark haired girl with blue-green eyes that he had met the previous summer when she was teaching in the Framnes district at a school called Vestri. Strangely enough he had just delivered his own letter to her a few minutes before. (Incidentally, these letters were both written in their mother tongue, Icelandic).

Then it was time to go back to the island, courtesy of the boys and their dog teams. They now travelled north of the area where the ice had broken away a few days before. Shortly after noon they arrived back on their little island and were welcomed heartily by everyone there.

"Where are Einar and Bergur?" Jóhann asked.

The fishermen told them the story of what had happened when they realized that the ice had broken apart. They were all sure that Jóhann and Laurence had most certainly been killed in the ensuing breakup. His brothers, along with several others, had formed a search party and gone immediately to the east shore on the unbroken ice.

They were hoping to meet Jóhann and Laurence somewhere along the shore or perhaps find their bodies thrown up by the high winds. The search party had not been seen since.

While Jóhann and Laurence had been at the Poplar River store, Einar and Bergur and the other searchers had turned south along the lakeshore to look for them, so their paths never crossed. Later that day the party came to where the broken ice was piled up on the shore, having been driven there by the high winds. In some places it had completely covered the trees on the shoreline.

It was obvious to them that no one could have survived the devastation that they observed. So, with heavy hearts they made themselves ready for the return trip to the island.

Because they had two excellent dog teams, the trip home to the island took only a few hours. The dogs knew that they were heading home, so they kept up a rapid pace and seemed quite willing to get to the island in a hurry. As the party approached the island the heaviness in the men's hearts became unbearable. They would have to tell everyone the sad news that they had found no sign of Jóhann and

Laurence and presumed that they had died somewhere along the east shore where their bodies most certainly would have been thrown up by the storm.

As they neared the cabins, they were met by some of the fishermen who happily informed them of the arrival, earlier that day of Jóhann and Laurence and how, three days before, they had escaped almost certain death.

They also told them of their rescuers, the boy trappers from Poplar River who had helped them get back to the island.

When they entered the main cabin there were many tears of joy shed and everyone listened to Jóhann and Laurence tell of their adventure on the lake. Later, the cooks happily prepared a very fine meal in celebration of their escape from the claws of the storm.

It was getting very late when the men went to their beds. The excitement of the past few days and how fortunately everything had turned out left all the fishermen in high spirits.

Before everyone fell asleep they thanked God for his mercy on their friends Jóhann and Laurence.

The next few weeks were a bit more normal, weatherwise, and the island fishermen began fishing in earnest as the ice thickened and became more stable. As the winter dragged on, some of the men became tired of the isolation and hitched a ride south to civilization with the fish freighters, whose horse-drawn sleighs moved the winters' catch south to the nearest railhead, Riverton.

Often, these men would then find employment in the districts adjoining the lake or simply go back to their families' farms for the rest of the winter. Some of the others stayed on even after the fishing ceased and worked at filling the ice houses for the summer season when the catch was packed in ice and moved south by boat. They also cut firewood for next winter's fishing season.

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These men all braved the hardships and loneliness of Lake Winnipeg extremely well and were seldom heard to voice any complaints about their lot in life. All of these experiences became a thread in the fabric of their lives and they often enjoyed reminiscing about their adventures on Lake Winnipeg.

A Postscript:

This story took place in the 1920s when Jóhann was about 27 years old. His brothers would have been about 25 and 21 years of age at the time.

As a youngster I heard this story and many other stories of the lake when my uncles Einar and Bergur shared stories with my dad, Jóhann. They had ceased fishing on the lake except for some summer jobs, mostly in the Hecla Island area. Finally they all quit and devoted the rest of their lives to farming in the Arborg and Framnes districts.

Through the years, we would be visited by Laurence when he worked in the vicinity. He worked on the dredge that cleaned the harbours all along Lake Winnipeg and if we were lucky he would let my dad bring us aboard the huge machine when he worked at the Hnausa dock. What an adventure that was for us boys!

Of course they never forgot to talk about their early adventures and the ordeal on the lake which I have written about here.

The “dark-haired girl” Emilía Rósa Jónsson, who sent the letter to Jóhann, became his wife and the mother of their four sons . . . but that’s another story.

I would like to add one more fact relating to this story. My middle name is Laurence. I like to think that this was done to honour their very dear friend who had been part of their young lives, so long ago.

Sighvatur and his tale of the Landsend Man

by Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason

From *Timarit* 1943-44

Translated by Nina Bjarnason Campbell

Editor's Note – Landsend can be translated into English as “a wanderer, vagabond, tramp, a boulder, or a land looper. The term refers to the fact that a landsend man comes from the outskirts or the furthest reaches of a country.

I have often mentioned in these stories of the Icelanders in New Scotland (Nova Scotia), that in the summer of 1880, I had been working in an eastern gold mine by the ocean. I was fourteen years old at the time. I have also mentioned that I had room and board at that time with six Icelandic students who also worked in the mine. Their shanty was under dense green bushes high on the mountainside north of the mining town and not far from the main highway which went over the Elk Mountain Road and east to the ocean. Icelandic guests would sometimes arrive in the yard. One of these was a bachelor, around thirty years old, whose name was Sighvatur. I never knew what his father’s name was, but he had adopted the surname “Sutherland,” shortly after he moved to America.

I remember well when Sighvatur arrived. It was on a Saturday night early in August, 1880. He came from Newfoundland, where he had been working in a copper mine for three or four years. He was on his way south to Boston, where his brother had been for about a year. Sighvatur came to us to say goodbye to the Icelandic students, whom

he knew well, since one of them was his cousin.

Sighvatur was of medium height, dark haired, keen-eyed and resolute. I heard the Icelandic students say that he was a hard working and trustworthy fellow, though he had an odd temperament and he stood firm through changes. They had all traveled together from Iceland to Ontario in the summer of 1874. They accompanied him east to the ocean that autumn. He parted from them in New Brunswick. The following summer he went to Halifax, Lockeport and other places on the coast, lastly to Newfoundland.

Sighvatur stayed with us from Saturday night till Monday morning. That was the only time I ever saw him. Otherwise, I know very little about him, though I certainly heard him mentioned after he moved to the United States. I remember a short story he told to the students shortly before he bade them good bye. It is as follows:

“In my search for work here on the Atlantic coast in the summer of 1875, I was hired by a wholesale company which owned three large warehouses in a big city. The boss of the company was named Milman. He was getting up in years when I became acquainted with him. He was regarded as hard working with a rigid disposition, but a reliable business man. He immediately wanted to know what nationality I was, as he heard that I had

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difficulty expressing myself in English. When I told him that I was an Icelander, it seemed to me he did not believe it.

"I have never in all my life met an Icelander," he said, "and I have no idea how they look. I have seen Norwegians, Swedes and Danes. You resemble some of them. Furthermore, you are not unlike some of the younger men that have come here from Northern Ireland."

"Nevertheless, I am an Icelander," I said. "I was born and raised in Iceland."

"Certainly it is true, if you affirm it positively" he said in a cool tone. "It would be rather foolish to call yourself an Icelander if you weren't one."

Milman had about thirty men in his employ, some having been there for many years. I could not help but notice that they all liked working there and found the wages satisfactory. I was there for nearly two years. During that time all the same men were employed except for the night watchman. The same watchman was seldom there longer than two or three months, for some unexplained reason. The watchman that was there when I came was released after roughly a month, and he never returned. The next watchman was there around three months when he was also let go. He never came back.

I never heard anyone mention why these men were released from their jobs. It was as if no one thought it strange. But

then I started to think that the watchman's job in the Milman warehouse was for the most part difficult. With that in mind I felt certain that I could have a steady job at the warehouse for a long time. I built myself a small log cabin just a stone's throw east of the warehouse, not far from the ocean. I got permission from Milman because the wholesale company owned the land. I bought a little stove, a small table and two inexpensive chairs. I lived there alone, quickly realizing that this arrangement was much cheaper than taking room and board in town.

So it was that one day in the spring of 1877, Milman mentioned to me that he wanted me to take the watchman's job.

"Tomorrow I will let the man who is working there go---he has been here two months," said Milman. "He is certainly a good man, but not suitable for the job. I believe you have, on the other hand, the qualifications a watchman needs. I would like you to start tomorrow night. If it goes well and the company likes you, then you can stay on here. Your pay will be increased a little next month. You will have to be here in the warehouse from the time the workmen quit work in the evening until they begin work in the morning. You may go home every night at midnight to eat but remember to be back here in an hour. Tomorrow night I will know whether or not you will be suitable."

I replied that I would try to take over the job since it was a concern to him. But I was not altogether pleased, because I thought it was certain he would discharge me at the end of the month.

The next night I took over the watchman's position after Milman had thoroughly described the duties to me. But then a brief incident occurred, which will remain with me for a long time. One night in the beginning of the fourth week of being the night watchman, I went

home as usual to my cabin around midnight to make some tea and a bit to eat. When I had heated the tea, put bread and molasses on the table, poured the tea into a bowl, I was about to sit down at the table. But I heard footsteps coming toward the cabin that belonged to a heavy individual.

I didn't sit down but waited until there would be a knock on the door. A few moments passed and there was no knock. Suddenly the door was lifted up and a man walked in. He was tall and heavysset. He stopped near the table. He was obviously not older than his mid twenties. He was fairly handsome but his face was dark and dirty as if he had come from a coal mine. But his hands were clean and white. He wore an old wind-breaker, quite long, had well worn shoes on his feet and a grey hat on his head. He didn't greet me and seemed to ignore me. But he moved closer to the table and looked at the food that was there as if he wanted some. I decided to speak up.

I asked him, "Who are you? Where you from? What is your business here?"

He jerked around, looked at me and replied, "I am a landsend man, a wanderer and come from all directions like the wind. I came from the north yesterday. The south this morning and will be going west within the next few days. But I come here to see how hospitable you are. I am starving. I accept willingly and with many thanks all that you offer me."

"Sit down at the table," I said, "and may good come of that which is there."

Before I had said the last word he was seated at the table.

"Where is the cream for the tea?" he asked.

"I never have cream in my tea," I said.

"Where is the sugar?" he asked.

"I never buy sugar," I replied. "But I use molasses in my tea. There on the table is the can with the molasses, if you

please."

He put two or three spoons of molasses in the tea, stirred it well and tasted it.

"It doesn't taste too bad," he said. "It can easily be drunk. But you have forgotten to put butter on the table."

"I never buy butter," I said. "In its place I put molasses on my bread."

He took a slice of bread and put molasses on it. When he had eaten three good slices of bread (that was all that was on the table and when the tea pot was empty, he passed it to me asking if there was any more left.

"The teapot is empty," I said, "and I do not have time to make more tea because I am a watchman. I have to be at work in ten minutes. I ask you to leave now and I bid you goodnight!"

"Is it a long time till morning?" asked the visitor.

"It is soon one minute after midnight," I said.

"Listen to what I am going to tell you," he said. "It is my custom to work all night and sleep during the day. I will work your shift for you. I see that you are terribly sleepy. Just lie down on the couch and go to sleep. Tell me where the place is and I will take over the watch for you. I will come and wake you up at day-break. By doing this I can repay you for your hospitality which you have shown me. Will you accept my offer?"

"No," I said. "I cannot accept your offer, good night!"

I put out the light and opened the door. We both walked out of the cabin. I then locked the door with a key, again bade him good night and walked over to the warehouse. But the visitor walked in another direction. He said nothing when I left. I thought that maybe I had offended him by refusing his offer.

The next night around midnight, I drank some tea and ate bread in peace and quiet in my cabin. Just as I was going to

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put out the light and return to the warehouse, the door was flung open, roughly at that. The same man who had come the night before walked in.

"What is the matter now?" I asked "are you hungry or what?"

"Oh no," he said. "I am not hungry now. I met some good people near here today. They gave me food and drink without being asked. The guard at the hotel by the ocean offered me this when I went there this evening." He showed me a small bottle he took out of his jacket pocket.

"See! This is French cognac of the best kind. But I never drink alcohol. For that reason, I ask you to take the bottle. You need some refreshment. You can sip this alcohol little by little when you are getting sleepy." He offered me the bottle.

"No thank you," I said. "It is the same with me as with you. I never drink alcohol."

"That is very extraordinary," he said.

"I can tell you more," I said. "Even if I desperately desired alcohol and had a quart bottle full of the best cognac, for good reason I would not drink one single drop of it tonight."

"That is strange," said the visitor.

I looked at my watch. "Now I must go."

I put out the light and walked out. The visitor followed me with the bottle in his hand.

"You sure are in a hurry," he said.

"Good night!" I said, as I locked the cabin door and started off in the direction of the warehouse. But the visitor remained behind by the cabin door.

He called to me. "How long till morning?"

"The clock will soon be one minute after midnight," I replied.

He said something, but I didn't hear what it was. I was quite relieved to get away from him.

I did not go home the following night

so I wouldn't have a visit from the wanderer. I brought two slices of bread and tea in a glass to work. At two in the morning, I had to go into the most easterly warehouse, to open certain windows there and lock some others. When I was opening the side doors of the warehouse I became aware of a large man standing not far from me. Though it was quite dark outside, I immediately saw that it was the same man who had come to my cabin on two previous nights. I couldn't shake the feeling of dread, thinking maybe that this man was altogether different, or worse, than a usual vagabond.

"Who is there?" I asked.

"Your friend," was the answer. The man came quickly up to the warehouse door that I had half opened.

"Up to here and no closer," I said. "What do you want?"

"I want to pass what time is left of the night, to talk with you and shorten the time. In that way I can repay you for the hospitality and friendship you have shown me---a lonely landsend man."

"But you will have to leave here at once," I said in a commanding tone. "I have to go inside the warehouse and will be there till morning."

"I will go in with you, whether you like it or not," he said.

"I say that you will not under any circumstance go into the warehouse!"

"You cannot keep me from coming in," he said. "I am bigger and stronger than you."

While he was saying this, he grabbed me with quite a strong grip and tried to push me away from the door which was still half open. I resisted, though I expected it would be of no use. I quickly realized that he was strong as a giant while I was light as a feather. As soon as he swung me away from the door of the warehouse, I unintentionally put my foot in his way. It happened that he fell and lost his grip on me at the same time. He

got up rather slowly. I thought he might have hurt himself.

"I hope that you didn't hurt yourself too much," I said, pushing closed the door of the warehouse. "This heavy fall was your own fault. Stand up. Be on your way and don't come here again!"

He stood up very slowly. He looked at me in silence a few moments.

Then said in a low voice, "Tell me something. Is it long till morning?"

"I cannot see my watch in this darkness," I said. "I am not here to tell people long the night is. My job is to stay awake here overnight and see to it that tramps and evil men do not break into this warehouse. Go away from here immediately."

I said this reluctantly, because by nature I am not very brave and am far from being a strong man. I thought that this young and healthy landsend man could dare go where and whenever he chose. He obviously had the strength of three men my age.

"Since you are so inclined," he said quietly and slowly, "it is maybe best that we part this time."

"Yes, forever and ever," I said.

He started off going slowly, in the direction of the town.

The next night at midnight, I went home to my cabin. I drank a full bowl of hot tea in peace and quiet. I was not aware of anyone about that night either in the cabin or the warehouses. It was the night before Thursday. Four more nights

passed and all was quiet on the rounds I had to patrol.

The next Monday morning when I was going home and the workmen were coming to the warehouses, one of the men came my way. He told me that Milman wanted to see me in his office at nine o'clock that morning. I thought he was going to let me go.

At nine o'clock that morning I walked over to Milman's office which was near the warehouses. It so happened that Milman was not present but was talking to a man in an adjacent room. One of the clerks told me that Milman would be coming any minute. The clerk asked me to wait and showed me to a seat. When I was seated I noticed a young man, tall and well dressed sitting at a small desk in one corner of the office. He was looking over some papers which were on the desk. I got a start when I looked at him, realizing at once that he was the same man who had come three times to me at midnight dressed like a poor tramp. He soon noticed that I had looked at him with interest. He nodded his head. I pretended not to notice.

All at once he stood up, took the papers off the desk and gave them to a man who sat at a desk near me.

As he walked past me he looked at me and said, "You likely recognize me. I have visited you at least three times. I stand with grateful thanks for your good welcome."

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"It is not necessary to thank me for that," I said.

With that he went to the door, turned around quickly, looked at me for a few seconds then went out.

I moved over to one of the office clerks seated near me and asked him, "Who was the young man who just went out?"

"He is the stepson of Mr. Milman," answered the clerk. "He has recently come home from a long trip in the northern regions."

A short time later Milman came into the office. He greeted me warmly and invited me to go into the adjacent room since he wanted to talk to me. We walked into the room where he usually greeted the warehouse customers.

"Now you have been a night watchman here for a whole month," said Milman when we were seated. "I can tell you this: I want you to remain here for the winter. I am going to raise your wages by one dollar and seventy-five cents a week. My stepson considers you a trusty watchman. He strongly recommended that your wages be increased."

"But I can tell you something Mr. Milman," I said. "For the last ten minutes I have come to the conclusion that it is best for me to quit the night watchman job at once. I resign this position at this time and will not take any higher pay for the last month than what you promised to give me when I started. Although I have difficulty expressing myself in English, I hope you understand that our business has now ended."

"How can this happen?" said Milman who was obviously very surprised. "What reason do you want to leave this position, just when you were praised for your watchfulness, your energy and you were offered a raise?"

"Your stepson knows the reason," I said.

"It is impossible that he knows your

reason for giving up your position," said Milman. "He has given testimony that you are a competent night watchman in all areas. You do not sleep when you are on watch, you do not drink alcohol and you let no one into the warehouse at night."

"But how could he know that?" I asked.

"He has his own ways of finding out."

"Yes certainly," I said. "But he did so in a way which did not please me."

"You cannot let that bother you, though he used unusual methods to discover your watchman's ability and competence," said Milman after a brief silence.

"You are an outsider," Milman said. "You say you are an Icelander. In this area there is no one who has ever known an Icelander. I felt it was very important to be certain that you could do the work I needed you to do. My stepson offered to take on the task to decide the matter. He was well pleased with the success of that experiment."

"But all things considered," I said, "I am firmly resolved to quit my job and move from here."

"Well and good," said Milman. "I do not want to keep any workman against his wishes. But I will tell you one thing and it is this: you have to be here as watchman for at least half a month, according to our rules, so I have time to find another watchman."

"I hear and obey," I said, and bade Milman goodbye. I went home to my cabin.

I continued to work as a watchman for two more weeks. When I came back to the wholesale office to get my pay and return the keys and lantern, Milman again asked if I was determined to leave my position. I said it was so.

"I am not happy to see you leave," he said and took my hand. "I wish with all

my heart that good fortune follows you always. Farewell!"

Several days later I sold my cabin, the stove, couch, table and chairs for a good price. It was Milman who found the buyer. Not long after that I moved to

Newfoundland where I got a job in a copper mine."

This is the story I heard Sighvatur tell the Icelandic students in Nova Scotia in early August, 1880.

- Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason

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The Oil King

by Elín Þórðardóttir

John D. Rockefeller has just shuffled off his mortal coil, and though the lamps had not been lit to guide his way, his embodied spirit somehow finds itself at the gates of heaven. The snuff taking apostle Saint Pétur, after a long peruse, can't find Rockefeller's name of his list of those granted access to the kingdom of eternal bliss and pleasure. So what is a monopolist to do? How does one almighty get into the kingdom of The One Almighty? Bribe the Saint, naturally.

"You might have eight or maybe nine barrels filled with oil of mine, just for permitting me inside' Peter was shocked: - 'Johnnie. Oh my!'"¹
(trans. George Pattern).

And on learning that the moral righteousness of heaven's gatekeeper is indeed unshakeable, Rockefeller is directed towards Hell whose energy supply is ever dwindling, unlike the ever-sustaining lights of heaven. A shrewd merchant in death, as in life, Rockefeller prepares to drive the price of oil up, and take the devil for all he is worth!

This is a paraphrased account of Icelandic-Canadian poet Guttormur J. Guttormsson's satiric poem "Rockefeller," also entitled "Olúkóngurinn" (The Oil King). At the time it was written, John Davison Rockefeller was indeed still alive, and had been retired from his position as the

chairman of the Standard Oil Company for some time. The piece is a vindictively humourous attack on greed, specifically the greed of the richest man the early twentieth century had ever seen. But there is a lot more going on in this piece than a simple moral tale with a facetious spin. As a piece of satire written in Icelandic in Canada, there is sort of a double translation occurring. Of course, the translation of Icelandic into English is one mode of this duality, the other is the translation that occurs, that in fact even defines, satire. The translated piece "Rockefeller," in this respect, is a sort of chimera; an entity composed of the parts of two different species whose true nature is yet unclear. It is the intention of this paper to explore the underlying, hidden nature of "Rockefeller," in its English translation of a satire, in an attempt to understand what this unique piece can tell us about language and truth.

I believe the chimera analogy is an apt one in dealing with "Rockefeller." So in order to discover its hidden essence we need to, pardon the term, vivisect the thing and examine its parts individually. In order to start we need to have on hand a couple of specialists in the fields of translation and of satire: the German Walter Benjamin and the Canadian Northrop Frye, respectively; beginning, I think, with the views of this piece's resident expert on translation and language, Walter Benjamin.

¹ "Þið megið eiga átta eða níu/ ámur fullar með steinolíu/ fyrir að leyfa mér aðeins inn"/ Þá undraðist Pétur: - "Nonni minn!" (Guttormur J. Guttormsson: 1920).

We cannot underestimate or overstate the importance that language has and will always play in the creation and the reading of Guttormur J. Guttormsson's works. Every single piece he wrote, he wrote in Icelandic, a language spoken by only a very few, relatively speaking that is. It is as though he locked his poetry up in its own language, even at a time when he would have sensed that the use of Icelandic was unfortunately on the wane. But that is another matter altogether. What is important for us is that a small number of gifted translators have taken on the lofty task of steering Guttormur's Icelandic works into English; one of them being George Pattern, the translator of "Rockefeller."

So to begin, we have to ask ourselves: what is translation? What is going on during the process of translating a piece of literature from one language, that is, from one set of abstract symbols, into another? Specifically, what is this seeming "middle ground" in the field of translation? It is here, in the theoretical space between two languages where we find what is essential. According to Walter Benjamin, in his piece entitled "The Task of the Translator" (1969), this area of conversion could be viewed as the suprahistorical point of origin of all languages. Basically, it is the domain of pure language, the "language of truth, the tensionless and even silent depository of the ultimate truth which all thought strives for" (p. 77), but that not one language can adequately realize (p. 74). It is a rather difficult concept to speculate upon, and it is impossible to express the nature of this field of truth using language. One can only approximate oneself to it. Translation is one way of actually accessing this hitherto inaccessible realm of truth. A translator like George Pattern

would have to pull Guttormur's literary intentions in Icelandic, through that area of the inexpressible word, into an approximate effect in English. Walter Benjamin refers to this intended effect as the "echo of the original" (p. 76). Which brings us nicely to the second aspect of this chimerical piece: Guttormur's intended effect, to which is in a word 'satire.'

Just as language is a wholly inadequate means of expression, so too is humanity an inadequate species of life. We are notoriously ridiculous, shamefully scandalous, not to mention weak and mortal. Our brief lives are spent wrapped up in the thousand natural shocks our flesh is heir to and satire is the critical uncovering of these, our most foolish



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traits. We need to look a little closer at the process of satire, at its role as a narrative category, or mythos, to borrow a term from Northrop Frye (1957). It becomes clear that the creation of satire is one that is like the translation of languages, the mutation of one structure into another. Canadian literary theorist Northrop Frye's chapter on irony and satire from his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) is key to our understanding of this translation that occurs in and defines satire.

It is in the third essay of his four part oeuvre: *Anatomy of Criticism*, where Frye explores the narrative categories which constitute literary expression: Comedy, Romance, Tragedy, and finally, Irony and Satire. It is no coincidence that ironic and satiric literatures have been paired together in Frye's exploration of their natures. In fact, he states it rather frankly: "satire is militant irony" (p. 223). In other words, as a literary category, satire is the aggressive use of irony typified by an intended emphatic effect. Frye goes on to make the distinction between satire and irony because it is clear that both streams use language to somehow signify an opposite. So how do they differ? Content, says Northrop Frye.

"Irony is consistent both with complete realism of content and with the suppression of attitude on the part of the author. Satire demands at least a token of

fantasy, a content which the reader recognizes as grotesque, and at least an implicit moral standard" (p. 224).

Guttormur J. Guttormsson's "*Rockefeller*" naturally fits into Northrop Frye's categorical definition of satire. Firstly, it is founded in fantasy: the world's most infamous oil tycoon in a scene outside the pearly gates. Secondly, it has an implicit moral standard: an attack on human greed and the everlasting pursuit of the almighty dollar. It is precisely the satiric nature of "*Rockefeller*" that is the centre of the second seeming translation occurring in the piece. One must realize how structurally close satire and irony actually are to one another. This is because satire is built out of that which is ironic, but as a rule leans towards the comic as its mode of expression. Northrop Frye quotes John Milton from his *An Apology for Smectymnuus*, which may help us bring home the origin of satire by an author who influenced our Guttormur as a young poet: "a Satyr as it was borne out of a Tragedy, so ought to resemble his parentage, to strike high and adventure dangerously at the most eminent vices among the greatest persons" (1957: p. 228).

Below is the final portion of Guttormur's piece where we can discern the comedic satiric nature that has been translated from a dire ironic outlook on

the shortcomings of the human race. It begins with St. Pétur speaking to Rockefeller on how he may not even qualify for access to Hell due to his excessive greed on earth:

"Your greed is the cause and greatest sin,

So perhaps he will not take you in.

The fire now is glowing red.

For lack of oil, it's almost dead.

If cheaper oil cannot be found, then Hell will have to be closed down."

"Then I intend to wait out here, - answered John D. Rockefeller,

"keeping oil prices very dear until every last drop has burned.

The Devil, in this way, I'll squeeze

for then to me he'll have to turn.

I'll take his name, that's no concern,

then light the fire below afresh

because in oil I have excess"²
(trans. George Pattern)

Now comes the tricky part, trying to reassemble this chimera of a piece in an attempt to make some sense of its nature. What we have, when we combine its separate qualities: translation and satire or rather translation of a satire, is an utterly truth seeking piece of literature. The very process of translation is a deeply profound search for abstracted meaning. By diving into the original text, published

1920, translator George Pattern had to have traveled briefly through the language of truth in order to move the satiric meaning of the poem from Icelandic into English. When you have a translation such as this one, where the effect is poignantly navigated into the second language, perhaps we get a sense that we have approached truth itself, the truth that lies beneath all languages.

The fact that "*Rockefeller*" is a satire is the other way in which this poem seeks the truth. The truth is that John D. Rockefeller held a monopoly in the oil and gas industry in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. The sheer callousness and abuse of power it takes to sustain monopoly is the sorry truth too oppressive to even want to consider. Satire takes the oppressive truths and makes them bearable and lighthearted and thereby exposes the truth itself through a twisted use of language.

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² "Og þér að kenna allt það er/ svo óvíst hann taki móti þér/ Að öllum líkum er nú Rauður/ af olíuleysi nærri dauður./ Ef olía hvergi ódýr fæst./ þá upp mun Helvíti verða læst."/ "þá ætla' ég að bíða úti hér."/ - anzaði John D. Rockefeller, - / "og halda olíu í háu verði./ unz hver einn neisti þrotinn er./ að fandanum á þann hátt ég herði./ að hann má til að lúta mér./ Og nafnið hans mér fullvel fer./ Ég kveiki upp eld þar neðra að nýju./ því nóg hef ég af steinolíu." (Guttormur J. Guttormsson: 1920)

Good-bye to Name Games

by Gudrun Gail Helgason

“What is your name?”

For most people, this is a straightforward question. For me, thanks to my Icelandic heritage, it never has been. All too often my name has been my torment and my frustration—as well as my distinction and my pride.

My parents christened me Gudrun Gail Helgason at my birth in Foam Lake, Saskatchewan. Gudrun was a nod to the Icelandic heritage of both my first-generation Canadian parents. Gail might have been influenced by the popularity of the American actress Gail Storm. (Storm’s real name, incidentally, was Josephine Owaissa Cottle). Or maybe my parents just liked the short and snappy sound.

My name challenges might have ended there, except for two other choices my parents made: they decided that my first name would be Gudrun, but I would be called by my second name, Gail.

My father’s preference was to call me Gudrun. My mother vetoed this idea, sensibly arguing that such a name could create difficulties for a little girl surrounded by Shirleys, Judys and Debbies.

In choosing to keep Gudrun as my first name, my parents followed a family tradition. My father, mother and sister were all called by their second names. The deciding factor, however, might have been that “Gudrun Gail” simply sounded more euphonic than “Gail Gudrun.”

Thus began a life of petty inconveniences and stuttering starts to new endeavors. Three other Gudrun Helgasons lived in our town, including my mother, my aunt and one cousin.

Endless letters needed to be re-addressed; endless phone calls needed to be redirected.

As I progressed along to university in Saskatoon, I became increasingly self-conscious about the wedge my first name created between my classmates and me. I cringed as professors stumbled over the pronunciation of my first name on the official rosters at the start of each term. I learned to inform them quickly to “call me Gail.” I blushed as I discovered a fictional “Gudrun” for the first time in university English classes (albeit a German one), in D.H. Lawrence’s *Women in Love*.

Despite these mild embarrassments, it did not once occur to me in my youth—as it would later—to give my second name as my first name when asked on official forms.

A fervent desire to follow the rules was partly at work, but another dynamic was in play. Yes, Gudrun was an unusual name outside our east-central Saskatchewan town or the neighboring communities of Leslie, Elfros and Wynyard. Yes, Gudrun made a particularly poor transition into English, with that awkward translated “d” (like a “th” I would insist to friends, even as their attempts exasperated me).

Yet Gudrun was my first name and I was never ashamed of it, rough and inelegant as it might sound in English. I was always aware that things could have been worse. (I could, for example, have been named Helga Helgason.)

In my early twenties I left Saskatchewan for Ontario and then

Alberta to become a journalist. At some point, I began to realize that my curious first name had its advantages. For one thing, it was a great conversation starter. The next question—“What nationality is that?”—was almost guaranteed to lead to detailed quizzing. Where was Iceland? Was it as cold as it sounded? Even my explanations that I had never been there failed to dim the intense curiosity my first name evoked.

As I settled into life in Alberta, establishing bank accounts and buying a house, I soon came to appreciate another benefit of my unusual first name. It provided a way to distinguish myself from the two other Gail Helgasons, married to two cousins, who lived within the metropolitan Edmonton area (one the same age and even the same height as me). Even then, at least two banks managed to mix up our accounts.

At that point, my name game moved into another phase: I decided on occasion to adopt my husband’s last name as a hyphenated addition to Helgason. I was certain there could be no other Gudrun Gail Helgason-Dodd on the planet. (The thought of adopting Gail Dodd had never for an instant occurred to me.) This proved to be both a good idea—and a bad one. It made financial institutions happy, but caused puzzlement when I went about simple chores such as picking up dry-cleaning. Was I picking up for Helgason or Dodd? Or Helgason-Dodd?

When computer technology became widespread, I began to have more second thoughts. Fitting Gudrun Gail Helgason-Dodd into a required “fields” in online reservation and shopping forms was akin to trying to squeeze a sheep into a shoe.

When did I decide to stop feeling irritated about my name (or, more accurately, names)? I can give you the precise date: September 4, 2005.

On that date, I arrived for the first time at Reykjavik airport. Shortly after deplaning, as my husband and I stepped onto an escalator, I noticed a huge banner hanging from the ceiling. It showed the face of an attractive young woman. The banner identified the woman as “Gudrun.” It explained that Gudrun was an ancient Icelandic name meaning “Eternal Mystery.”

Suddenly I saw in a different light the name that had tripped me up most of my life. Here, within my first few minutes on this rocky island, a gift had been bestowed upon me.

Gudrun, the banner signalled, was a strong, revered, ageless—and even “normal”—name. Yes, I knew all these things before I ever set foot on Iceland, but only then did that visceral knowledge truly settle into my bones.

From that moment on, it no longer mattered to me if my unusual first name caused curiosity, confusion or inconvenience. The honour of bearing such a name is worth a little trouble.

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Recession Proof

by Ingi G. Bjornson

The man had heard it said more than once—through governments, pulpits, and financial advisers—that it would be good to invest wisely in life. This seemed to him to be saying that if we invested unwisely in life that would make us a fool, and it only made sense.

The man's two sons had for many years built elaborate snow fortresses upon the lake ice in front of their camp. As soon as they all came off the trapline in December until the sun climbed high enough in late March and started the melt, they would work on these snow fortresses. And the man would help his two sons over the years, for it seemed to him a sound investment in life. When some stopped by to marvel at the snow fortresses from year to year, a common question was, "How long did it take you to build it?" The answer, of course, was that the construction was just continually ongoing until the March sun spoke strongly against it. Some children play on computers, some take piano lessons, some play hockey, and some children build snow fortresses; for life is a continual trade-off. And it seemed most fitting for the man's two sons to build snow fortresses since they lived out of town in the bush.

One day, and it truly seemed like just a day, the man's two sons grew up. It is the nature of all things to shed their youth, from grasses to flowers to trees to ravens to humans to thoughts and to perceptions of life. Is it not the very spinning of our world from day to day, from season to season, that gives it stability? And with its ancient spinning comes a measure of time, which prods things to shed their youth. It is for youth to spread their wings

and to seek the journey of discovery away from the place of their birth, whether from the loon's nest or the trees which stretch high upwards away from their roots, to those of the human kind that must see beyond the hill. And so it was that the man and his wife had their own empty nest that first winter.

The man started on the snow fortress by himself in the cold month of January of 2009. As the walls grew, with various rooms and arches and battlements, it brought back many pleasant memories, and at times some quiet haunting tears. It is an ancient truth that we cannot keep what is not ours, and his two sons were never his in the first place, for they are each of sovereign spirit as are all of humanity's children. It is true, the man and his wife shared the same house with their two sons for many years, changed their diapers, shared popcorn, and walked the trapline trails together. But really, the two sons were never owned property, but rather two precious human beings who would one day set out on their own journey of discovery as we all of us do. The man knew that his two sons would always come back to visit, and what more could a parent ask than that their children would want to come back to visit? Fond memories are easier to revisit than are uprooting ones, and that is an ancient truth, for we all of us need a sense of meaning and purpose in life to help curb the haunting void within.

It is good to create something of meaning with our hands and minds, and it brought much pleasure to the man to use his hands to shovel and carve the snow, for it is also an ancient truth that we need

to be meaningfully occupied in life. And the man knew that he would not add to the nation's debt or to his own personal debt by working with the snow, which was free. There is no law of the Land that says we must monetarily profit on that which we create, although it is good to bring in some monies, for even the squirrels gather cones for the coming winter, fulfilling an inherent desire for their most basic needs. It is just that the pen in the man's hand had prodded him to ask again an ancient question: when is enough, enough? Contentment is an elusive realm that respects no tribe, no culture, no era, no nations, but when found is the most wealthiest realm.

After the man had worked on the snow fortress for about ten days, he got to thinking that he ought to protect his investment. He had been told that it is good to invest wisely in life, which would be saying that to invest unwisely would then make the man a fool. And so one day he went to town to talk with an insurance agent. He said to the woman, "I've been working on a building for about ten days now, and I should probably think about insuring it."

The woman asked for more details, and the man said that the building was made of snow. The woman quickly answered, "No, it's too high a risk." In some ways it made sense to the man, but in other ways it did not.

The man knew in his heart that some things in life can be had by persistence. The pen in his hand prodded him that he must not persist in something if it was not just, yet this same pen in his hand prodded him to continue in his quest, simply because it was just.

One week later the man again saw the insurance woman and asked her, "Would you reconsider? My fortress is made of a hundred percent fire-retardant materials." And the woman replied, "No, it is too high a risk!"

One week later the man again approached the woman and asked, "Would you reconsider? I am willing to pay a \$200 premium, and I want you to write up the policy in such a manner that there is absolutely no chance whatsoever of me collecting any monies in the event of loss, which there will be." The woman was deep in thought for a moment and then burst out laughing, and said, "I'll see what we can do."

You see, the man was an investor in life, and as youth slipped away from him more and more even as the world spun from night to day, he knew with greater resonance that there was no law of the Land that said one has to monetarily profit on a car or boat or plane or house or a life. All he wanted was an insurance policy that was written in such a manner that there was absolutely no chance whatsoever of collecting any monies in the event of loss, which there would be. His wife of many years thought that the man was a bigger fool as he aged more, throwing away \$200 on some foolhardy, pretend insurance policy. But the man knew in his heart that his wife loved him, and the man's wife knew that sometimes there is merit in a fool's quest.

And so, about two months later, around March 19th when the eagle had just returned, the owner of the insurance company came to the man's camp for a cup of coffee and to take pictures of the man's snow fortress. The insurance man said, "You know, you don't need an insurance agent to write up a policy like this."

The man answered, "I know that, but I still want an insurance agent to write it up."

The insurance man said, "You don't have to pay me \$200. How about paying just \$10?"

The man responded with great concern, "I cannot do that, for if I only pay you \$10 then I will not look like a fool."

The insurance man scratched the

back of his head with his right hand and said, with a hint of a smile, "Yes, that is true."

And so the man wrote out a cheque for \$200 to the insurance man. He explained that he was writing a short story for a little book, and that he wanted to add the insurance policy and a fictitious name of the insurance man to it as well. He would combine the story and the insurance policy and bring a copy to the insurance man to look over if he had any concerns, for sometimes a little book can be on the shelves of stores for several years.

And so, the insurance policy came to be. The insurance man went by the name of "Walrus Gumboot," and he called his insurance company "Dewey Cheatum and Howe General Insurance." Many would think that this was just a pretend insurance policy, but sometimes a pretend policy can have merit and meaning. You see, the man was not yet so sure what he was doing with this policy, all he knew was that he was prodded to invest wisely in life lest he be a fool. And if he was a fool, he merely wanted to prove that he might not be the only fool in this world.

And so, one day while he was snowshoeing with his two dogs along his secret trail that wound through the boreal forest, it finally came to him. The subtle voice of the Land spoke to him. If the man was accused of being a naïve simpleton, a hermit, living in a little pretend world, a little bubble, all the man had sought to do by insuring his snow fortress was merely ask: Who were the hundreds of millions of naïve simpletons living in their little pretend worlds who thought their bubbles would not burst? Hence, the economic challenges of 2009; where did the money go?

The man knew that any nation could handle a minority, but no nation could handle a majority of its citizens who sought to take rather than to give. When

that line is crossed over, the decline begins—even the oracles of time have known this. Some mortals compared the debt of the United States in 2009 to 1929. Some thought there was a comparison and others not. All the man knew to be truth in his heart was that there was no comparison, for the GDP to debt ratio in the U.S. was higher in 2009 than in 1929. Our perceived entitlements—fat pension plans, demographics, the conscience of the times to take rather than to give—all these things added together were not sustainable for a time. And so we, the mindless mob who thought that we could think, were caught up in the flow of the times that we had written but knew not. An historic correction would come for a time; that is the nature of history of which we are all a part.

The man saw a cure, an ancient utopian ideal, that could rid us of our economic-demographic challenges: all we had to do was seek to give rather than to take, leave the minimum wage intact, work an extra seven years or so before receiving our pensions, cut the wages and pensions of the middle-class by about 30% (leave the basic government pensions intact), and have all of the large multi-national corporations donate a substantial percentage of their profits to help cut down the nation's debt-load—one great big happy family working together to seek to give rather than to take. But this ideal would be seen, as always it had been, as utopian foolishness. All the man sought to do, then, by penning these words, was to prove that the monster of greed would have its way in varying degrees with all of us for a time, and we would follow the trail that we had blazed but knew not.

Know the patterns of history; it will generally not be the very rich who will lose out. Who, then, will pay the piper his due? Who, then, is the fool in life? And if greater wealth was used to further scar the Land, then that would also make those of great wealth fools as well, for who would be so

foolish as to taint the waters that we drink or foul the air that we breathe? The man knew that the piper must, and would, be paid in one form or another, for the piper must not be offended. Where goes the U.S. will go Canada, for a time. Know this riddle: All that is required for a great challenge in life is a great crisis, and a great crisis will magically appear as always it does—and this is an ancient truth. The man was prodded to ask little questions such as, What is the difference between bankruptcy and hyperinflation?

And so, the man was prodded to invest wisely in life simply because he had heard it thus preached from govern-

ments and pulpits and financial investors—he would invest in snow. If the man could sell ten copies of his little book, then he would break even in his \$200 insurance policy. And if he might sell a few more copies, then it would prove that even a fool could sometimes provide for his household.

The March sun grew in strength, April and May came and went, and the snow fortress was no more. Summer waned with the increasing strength of autumn winds; soon enough it was winter once again. A great snowstorm had come and gone, so the man could once again work on his fortress of snow.

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The Young Icelander

by Johann Magnus
Bjarnason, translated by
Borga Jakobson.

Reviewed in this issue of
the *Icelandic Connection*

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Arinbjorn “the Strong”

by Audrhea Lande

He has a Viking name and a Viking heart. My nephew Arinbjorn was born a big baby and his consuming interest has always been all things large and strong. He learned early of his Icelandic heritage, and he loved to don his armour and helmet, broadsword too heavy for his three-year-old arm to brandish in the desired manner. The suit of armour was one of his many “tepections”, along with motorcycle helmets, hockey shin pads, goalie gloves. When he started playing hockey, we felt that he loved it most the protective equipment - it made him look so big. We never had to coax him to don all the stuff - he did it voluntarily, frequently wandering around the house with the shin pads on, banging himself to show how tough he was.

We’d play imaginary games when I visited. One of his favourites we called “Jumping from Island to Island”. Cushions, chairs, the sofa back, all became islands of safety in a dangerous sea, where lurked the Giant Squid and the Great Blue Whale. As we leapt from one safe haven to another, his concern was for the size of the underwater threats. “How big is the giant squid, Auntie Audrhea? Is it bigger than this house?” “Oh, much bigger!” I’d say. “As big as this whole town?” “Maybe not that big, but close.” His blue eyes would sparkle, his jumps become even more energetic.

My tall young stepson would occasionally come along on my visits, much to Arinbjorn’s delight. Once, playing in the backyard with Joel, he called over the fence to his little friend next door, not to join them in play, but to marvel. “Jeremy, come here! Look at Dzole! Look how big

he is!” Once, walking with him down the treed lane at our cottage, going down to throw stones into the lake, he looked up at the huge 200-foot spruce tree by the roadway, asking “Auntie Audrhea, do you think this tree is as tall as my Pabbi?” Clearly, his Icelandic father stood tall in Arinbjorn’s three-year-old eyes.

At the Icelandic Festival, he was thrilled by the Strongman competition. How big and tough those guys were! How massive the boulders they could move! His hero was the winner of the competition, Magnus Ver Magnusson. We heard that name endlessly from his adoring lips: Magnus Ver Magnusson could move that truck with one push! Magnus Ver Magnusson could lift that stuck car out of the snowbank all by himself!

When his little sister, Sola, came along, Arinbjorn took to the role of big-brother-as-pest with vigor. One hot summer day when I was babysitting them, we were in the backyard kiddie pool, playing and splashing. Sola was getting the worst of it. Finally exasperated, I hauled Arinbjorn out of the pool, clutching his wet slippery hand, heading for the house. “Time out for you, young man!” As we marched up the steps, going inside, he turned to me, blue eyes snapping. “How strong do you think you are?” he asked, equal parts outrage and awe. “Do you think you’re as strong as Magnus Ver Magnusson?”

O Viking heart, nine-tenths curiosity and imagination, your forebears are smiling in Valhalla, while I bite my lip and mutter “Close!”

Poetry

by Thomas Thor Buchanan

Improvisation on Gimli

Quarterlight,
spilt from the grey jaws of the lake,
the day flashes its brindle coat.

I haven't been here in years, where the wind calmly scours the bones
And the landscape shows us its tonsure, its loose hair-shirt.

Where nothing climbs, any clear cathedral
Must be laid like rabbit fencing,
A heel-pressed grace.

I think of my grandmother
Crossing in her snowshoes
This atlas of snow
To visit the farm
Of an old Communist

Who showed her half-secret
Books whose pages were
Cut first in Russia
Carried hidden in
Apple crates stuffed with straw

Obscure teachers she sat
With under the brambles
Of a history
Drifting like flotsam.
She learned to hate guilt.

It was a line she took
For her own, fashioned
It like a guitar string
Laid it out, drew it
Tight. We lay on hands.

Palms upward,
Pressing close the calendar of years
And early evening coming on

I lay my face to the possibility of the next season
When this place will wear the burning fields like the hem of a gown

What will be found in the scorched ground
White stone, broken blade, old tooth, or
Something else.

Book Reviews



The Young Icelander

by Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason
translated by Borga Jakobson

Reviewed by Rob Olason

2009 was a watershed year for celebrants of the literature of Icelandic-North American authors.

In early spring an important new voice was added when Christina Sunley brought her debut novel, *The Tricking of Freya*, to the attention of North American readers. Sunley wove an intricate tale

about Freya, a young woman who tries to make sense of her seemingly rudderless adult life by returning to her childhood haunts along the shores of Lake Winnipeg. As she starts piecing together fragments of memory, conversations and new discoveries her past begins to take on a more meaningful shape. Sunley does a masterful job weaving the story of this quest for self-discovery with Freya's broader discovery of her long forgotten Icelandic heritage and the deeply rooted pull it has had on her life. With the introduction of *The Tricking of Freya*, we have gained an important new voice and a very important new work exploring the life of contemporary North Americans of Icelandic descent.

As 2009 drew to a close another important voice in Icelandic North American literature was given the opportunity to speak to new generations of North Americans of Icelandic descent. At the same time, English-speaking audiences had their first opportunity to read a classic of immigration literature from the turn of the last century. Borga Jakobson has delivered a masterful translation of a wonderful coming of age story that is at once a universal tale of the struggles of all immigrants in a new land and a testament to the resilience of the human spirit.

The Young Icelander, The Story of an Immigrant in Nova Scotia and Manitoba is the result of Borga Jakobson's translation of Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason's *Eiríkur Hansson: A Novel of Nova Scotia*, which was originally published in three installments in 1899, 1902 and 1903. In

her translator's notes, Jakobson points out that Bjarnason developed the narrative structure for the work in 1895 some twenty years after he left Iceland as a young boy, about the very age of Eiríkur when he begins to tell his story.

What is so fascinating about Bjarnason's novel is the first-hand account we gain on the challenges and struggles Icelanders faced in leaving their ancestral home, and often arriving penniless, and speechless, in a strange new world. For English speaking Icelandic descendants, discovering this important cultural work from the nineteenth century has involved a frustrating, century-long wait for the English translation to arrive.

When Bjarnason's Icelandic language novel was first published it was deservedly popular among the Icelandic settlers for its ability to capture their recent life-altering experiences. Borga Jakobson's translation now provides the descendants of those settlers an accurate glimpse into the world they inhabited and the challenge of their daily lives.

Writing some twenty years after Bjarnason, Laura Goodman Salverson gave the English speaking world the first fictional glimpse of the Icelandic immigrant's experience in her novel, *The Viking Heart* (1923). Born in North America, Salverson's work has the feel of anecdotes and stories passed down to the next generation, about the journey to America and the subsequent struggles to survive that were told to her and that she had woven into a romance novel.

Bjarnason's novel, which he insisted was fiction and not a true accounting of events, nonetheless, conveys the feel of a genuine first hand recounting. And while the story of young Eiríkur Hansson's journey to America and his years growing up there may be a fictional account, the

sense that the story flows from real-life events is inescapable.

The novel opens with this simple confession: "Since I am going to tell a story about my life, this story begins in Iceland. Actually, I can't tell you very much about Iceland because I was only seven years old when I left my country..." What follows is a masterful assemblage of images from his Icelandic childhood, glimpses of his amma and afi who are raising him, the farm they own, precise details of the animals, streams, fields and near-by neighbors whose eccentricities capture the attention of this young observer. Recounted through the hazy gauze of childhood memory, as these delightful memories unfold, new events, more difficult for our child-narrator to understand, break into his reverie. When a poor family spends a Christmas Eve, he senses the pain they carry due to their relentless poverty. The following spring the sky darkens during the day as volcanic ash slowly buries the farm. What becomes burnished into young Eiríkur's memory of that day was a single word he overheard an adult utter "Doomsday."

This last event provoked the most disturbing fact of Eiríkur's account: Afi and Amma decided to leave this home and move to the "Wonderland" called America. The family prepared to make the journey by disposing of all non-essential possessions. They then left home by horseback on trails crossing rivers to Seyðisfjórð where a boat would take them to Liverpool. From there they boarded a larger ship and crossed the Atlantic Ocean for America.

Bjarnason admired the work of the Victorian writers, especially Charles Dickens. Despite arriving on North American soil, Eiríkur's life experiences take on new challenges that most of

Dickens's characters would find daunting, as he finds himself careening between poverty and comfort, family and its absence, educational opportunity and dawn-to-dusk labor.

Eiríkur's story doesn't end with his arrival in North America. Over two-thirds of the novel is focused on Eiríkur's life on the new continent, as he grows up in Nova Scotia and later moves to Manitoba in adulthood. Bjarnason fills his story with memorable characters and dramatic incidents that paint a much different picture of the North American "Wonderland" that enticed the nineteenth century Icelandic settler. Far from being the utopia they envisioned on their ash blanketed farm in Iceland, the North

American continent becomes a mysterious and challenging world, filled with human kindness as well as shocking misery and despair.

Bjarnason has crafted a remarkable tale providing today's reader with a fascinating glimpse into the life of a nineteenth century immigrant to these shores. Borga Jakobson has complemented Bjarnason's work with her lively translation, making the fictitious young Eiríkur as alive for us today as he was for those Icelandic settlers who saw much of their life story in his. And readers fascinated with the Icelandic experience in North America, can hail 2009 as a watershed year, as they sample this bounty.



PHOTO BY MARSHALL BURGESS

Borga Jakobson and granddaughters Sara and Signy Perlmutter at the Markland Cairn. June 5, 2010. Borga had a book launch for *The Young Icelander* in the afternoon.



The Chain Letter of the Soul New and Selected Poems

By Bill Holm
Milkweed Editions, Minneapolis, Minnesota
ISBN 978-57131-444-4

Reviewed by Mhari Mackintosh

Title: A Life in E Major

The chain letter dates us. Popular in the fifties, it was a semi-magical form letter that nevertheless validated our youthful selves in a context of friends and strangers. It guaranteed our continued existence into some unknowable future. In its time, the chain letter was a serious undertaking for young people who lived in small hamlets like Gimli or Minneota. It was like throwing a bottle with a message into the lake. It was evidence of joy-

ful hope and belief. To read new names from exotic "not home" towns, that preceded your own familiar name was proof that a larger world awaited, and that you could dream of being part of it. It is fitting that this bit of cultural arcana was resurrected in the title of Bill Holm's posthumous book, *The Chain Letter of the Soul: New and Selected Poems*.

Bill's prologue to the book adopts the chain letter as a metaphor for his writing life in words that blend Blakean mysticism and good old American Transcendentalism:

For it is life we want. We want the world, the whole beautiful world, alive - - - and we live in it. That is the actual god we long for and seek, yet we have already found it, if we open our senses, our whole bodies, thus our souls. That is why I have written and intend to continue until someone among you takes up the happy work of keeping the chain letter of the soul moving along into whatever future will come.

This prologue and the title are prophetic and timely. In an age of intimidating technology Bill held to the ancient virtues of the handwritten word. He saw that the mindless swooshing of forwards, blogs and tweets to hapless friends and strangers in a virtual world threatens to make us mere operators of language machines, producing our words out of what he called in his poem "Ars Poetica," "something with a plug?" (8) It is good of Bill to remind us that such writing is not a "chain letter of the soul" but a passive soulless endeavour, another step in what he calls, "The Miniaturization of the

World.”

Publication of a volume of new and selected poetry involves a certain risk. Poems written a quarter century ago might fail to retain their integrity beside the most recent. Contemporary style, mature thought and the sheer weight of life experience can overwhelm earlier work and diminish the harmony of a collection. However, *The Chain Letter of the Soul* is amazingly coherent. The book is divided into four sections: I. New Poems, II. Boxelder Bug Variations (1985), III. The Dead Get By With Everything (1991), and IV. Playing The Black Piano (2004). From the earliest poems until those written just before his death, there exists a seamless progression. Bill’s preoccupation with writing and literature, geography, nature, individual lives and history is evident in the deceptively simple first volume *Boxelder Bug Variations*. These themes expand and amplify through his later collections to reach a magnificent coda in the final “new poems”.

It is a curious fact that often the most ingenious and intense pieces by the greatest composers, which seem to accumulate a lifetime’s whole knowledge and feeling into themselves, are long sets of variations that begin with trifles, with nothing, and build enormous, sublime, ecstatic, often humorous structures. (p. 109)

Bill’s observation in this piece from his earliest book predicts the actual shape of his poetic career—a series of variations on simple themes and trifles that build

over a lifetime to create a symphonically sublime body of work.

Bill Holm was a master of the individual portrait poem. His earliest poems celebrate the characters of small town Minnesota, the individual and the local.

Rose, her face pinched toward God, used to disappear during church picnics. The men spread out in the field until they found her preaching in Icelandic to the cornstalks with a loud voice. (p. 125)

The farmers of Polk County assembled to help one of their own:

My dad told me how the sheriff would ride out to the farm to auction off the farmer’s goods for the bank. Neighbours came with pitch forks to gather in the yard: (p. 126)

The cameo portrait of his mother Jonina Sigurborg Josephson Holm is shared with us:

Jona used nylon stockings as rope, made cats out of beer bottles and light bulbs, Christmas angels from rolled-up newspapers, (p. 102)

These American Gothic originals, that read like an Icelandic-American Spoon River Anthology, are created with humour and much love. In the new poem section these new world minatures expand to celebrate the folk around Bill’s new home place in Brimnes in Hofsos, Iceland. Bill’s impeccable ear has survived the transatlantic crossing, and his eye for detail and gesture applies itself to

the new task of recording his new neighbours and friends. We meet Palmi, the banker who loves poetry, Siggi from Husavik who answers Bill’s question regarding the number of people who oppose the new aluminum smelter with perfect Icelandic irony:

... Siggi says, “Two- but one,” a schoolteacher, “moved to Reykjavik.” I wait. “Now there’s me . . .” (p. 18)

Bill visits Didi and Dui as they watch American Idol with a motherless lamb between them on the sofa; a pastoral idyll all their own. Bill offers us luminous images of Pink Girl and Cows and Hafrun on Horseback where he imagines the nine year old far into the future in a Yeatsian moment:

She will be quite a piece of work at seventeen, and pure grandeur on horseback at seventy when we are all long dead, so we must imagine her now on this summer afternoon by the sea. (p. 79)

Or “Ragga’s Dog” where Bill asks, crankily “What’s a whippet doing in Iceland/with his thin coat, his flying feet?” (p. 78) All of these recent poems and occasional pieces dedicated to friends are snapshots of a moment that gestures to eternity.

When Bill was not painting portraits in language or executing poignant dioramas of past and present, he is celebrating music as only a talented musician can do. He tackles complicated classical music subjects, germane to a musician but he does so in a way that never alienates a

reader who does not possess his encyclopedic knowledge of the form. Whether elucidating the *Diabelli Variations* or introducing us to that “odd failure of a man” (p. 169) that was Glenn Gould, he does so with lightness and love. His passion for the grand masters of music does not exclude the good old Americans; the traditional Shaker melody and the music of Charles Ives stands beside Mozart, Bach and Haydn. The democratic poet does not indulge in a snobbish distinction but shares his vast knowledge and deep love of music with each person fortunate to receive this Chain Letter. Perhaps his finest musical gift to us is contained in “Playing Haydn for the Angel of Death” (p. 162) in which, Bill lets us in on the secret, that music like any other form of art, gives us a shot at immortality.

At a recent celebration of the life of Bill Holm, held at the University of Manitoba’s Icelandic Library, gathered guests heard Bill read once again. His ambivalent relationship with technology allowed the magic of his voice and musical performance to surround and comfort us. What was startling was that Bill’s speaking voice was the same voice that comes to us through his writing. His natural, conversational speech was poetic and his poetry was natural speech, albeit more erudite and intelligent than most of us can claim. The rhythms of his language replicate the musical phrasing that graced his piano performances. Musical jokes are a constant of classical composition and Bill approximated these in written text that played upon puns and allusions for the enlightened (*Transfigured Phone* (p. 32) see Schoenberg) but never at the expense of the reader who had no inside knowledge of such esoteric lore. In his

understated manner, really Icelandic sparse irony, Bill speaks to us:

Friends, hearing some of these poems, remarked that the connection between boxelder bugs and Beethoven's Diabelli Variations is not immediately apparent. (p. 109)

It is not essential to know the correspondence between boxelder bugs and hibrow composers but it is the sense of play that informs this poem ; it is vintage Bill Holm in life and art. Whether the subject is semantic, musical, literary, geographical, philosophical, political or technological—this *homo ludens*- this spirit of the man at play- stands as the core of his writing and his life.

Bill Holm , the poet shows us that an empathetic eye and an acute ear can enhance the work at hand, that is living the life authentic:

For it is life we want. We want the world, the whole beautiful world, alive - - - and we alive in it.

But he also tells us simply and directly that long conversations with the self are critical; “internal music being composed by an improviser” (p. 13). The resultant Song of My Self comes in your own voice:

Where does this voice come from? Is there more than one? No, I'm afraid it is my ordinary voice, the one I use to actually speak to you, or to a thousand people in a room . . . (p. 12)

These essential words in “I Began the Day in My Sixty-fifth Year” were written weeks before his death. They contain the key to this collection of new and selected poetry. Whether Bill is unpacking new technology with the wry humour of a self-confessed Luddite or contemplating life and death in “The Wisdom in a Rondo,” his poems allow us to eavesdrop on “the only important questions,” (p. 12) the ones he asks himself. Whatever Bill Holm loved or admired, celebrated or ranted against he has shared those passions with us and we should be grateful. In Section IV of “To explain my unusual interest in boxelder bugs, particularly those who live in my piano” he writes:

This piano kept itself lean, doesn't eat much,
Its voice darkened and mellowed since 1922.
It plays noisy music quietly, quiet music like feathers dropped in a well.
It's fit for Bach now, and music by old men.(p. 118)

Bill did not outlive that piano but like that patient instrument, his aging brought new tones, subtle registers, dignified modulations and ecstatic bursts of joy for our jaded ears.

Let us honour Bill Holm's achievement by taking up his challenge to recapture the delight and surprise that comes from passing words from one soul to another in real time and space. Read his *Chain Letter from the Soul*, begin to write your own and pass them on to someone YOU love.

Contributors

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AUDRHEA LANDE is a retired educator who now has time and space for her first love--research and writing. She became interested in the legacy of Miss Sigurbjorg Stefansson when her niece and nephew, who called themselves "Icelandickers" when they were little, began attending the early years school named after this remarkable teacher. She lives in Winnipeg, where she is deep into the writing of Miss Stefansson's biography.

MHARI MACKINTOSH is a writer and teacher who divides her time between Winnipeg and Gimli where she has summered since her birth. Born a Scot, she has taught creative writing in Iceland and Germany and is delighted to be considered a token Icelander.

ROB OLASON grew up in Washington State as a fourth generation North American of Icelandic descent. He operates a small business in Bellingham, Washington and is fascinated by the ways each generation of descendants interprets and responds to their Icelandic heritage.

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‘Áðgat skal höfð í nærveru sálar’
 ‘Care should be taken in the presence of a soul’
 ‘La présence d’une âme appelle le respect’

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