

# ICELANDIC CONNECTION



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# ICELANDIC CONNECTION

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# ICELANDIC CONNECTION



North America's quarterly magazine in celebration of the Icelandic Heritage  
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# ON THE COVER



PHOTO: LINDA (THORSTEINSON) JOHNSON

This fellow travelled to various Icelandic National League of North America sites prior to arriving at Vancouver for the 2016 INL of NA convention.

# Editorial

## Thoughts from a first time attendee on the INL of NA convention in Richmond, BC, April 29-May 1, 2016

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by Joan Bjerring Christensen

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The 97th Annual Convention of the Icelandic National League of North America, held in April 2016 in Richmond, B.C. was my first INL convention. It was a marvellous experience which exceeded any expectations that I had. I look forward with anticipation to attending next year's convention in North Dakota.

My path to this convention was four years in the making. In 2012, I was living in Toronto and, along with some friends, was planning a trip to Scotland to hike the West Highland Way. In looking for inexpensive airfares, we found that Iceland Air offered us the best deal to Glasgow. The advertising suggested that we stop off in Iceland. This was an exciting idea. I grew up in Winnipeg. My father was Icelandic and his parents were a major part of my life until my Amma died when I was 17. The family scattered across the continent shortly after, but I retained warm and loving memories of my grandparents and their home. The Icelandic language was the lullaby of my childhood. It was all around me although no one spoke to me in Icelandic. Consequently, to my regret, and with the short sightedness of childhood, I made no

attempt at that time to learn the language.

The thought of visiting Iceland was exciting. I had done some genealogical research on the ancestors of both my parents. I knew names and places, but I did not know a single soul in Iceland. We decided to spend a week in Iceland on our way home from Scotland and, being the 'Icelandic one', I was in charge of our Icelandic itinerary. I arranged to rent a four wheel drive SUV from Extreme Iceland, who also planned our itinerary and arranged accommodation for us. I asked that the itinerary include a stop at the farm, Göutlond, near Lake Mývatn, where my grandmother had lived as a child before coming to Canada. This was a fateful request. At that point, I was only hoping to see the farm from the highway. However, my grandmother's relatives, who still farmed the farm, were contacted. They knew where I fit into the family tree and welcomed me with open arms. I had such an amazing time. I loved meeting so many relatives and I couldn't get enough of the landscape. I couldn't wait to return. So, the next year, 2013, I returned to Iceland with Snorri Plus. Again, I was welcomed warmly and met many more relatives.

It was a fantastic experience. I felt so at home. I belonged.

When I returned to Toronto after my first trip to Iceland in 2012, I wanted to learn the language and immerse myself in Icelandic culture. I joined the ICCT and soon became their membership secretary. I did not learn much Icelandic but I met many new friends, I did learn how the language worked and became familiar with spellings and some words.

In 2014 one of my daughters was diagnosed with a terminal brain tumour. We decided, while we still could, to make a family trip to Iceland together – children, grandchildren and spouses – 14 in all. We rented a bus, found a wonderful driver and tour guide, (Kent Bjornsson) and spent a week in Iceland in June 2015, going clockwise around the ring road. My family was dazzled. They loved every minute – even when the bus got stuck in the middle of nowhere. Iceland was at its best. Even the weather was amazing. Sunny and warm!

When my daughter was diagnosed, I moved west to Vancouver to be with her. Needing to make a life for myself, I signed up for Icelandic classes at the Scandinavian Centre and volunteered to help with the convention planning. Soon, because of my membership experience, I was doing the registration. The committee planning the convention did a terrific job and I was honoured to be part of it. They were so knowledgeable. They shared with me a love of Iceland and things Icelandic and we worked hard to make the convention happen.

Now, to the convention -- I felt 'at home', just as I did in Iceland. Everyone was open, warm and welcoming. I also noticed that there is a distinct 'Icelandic look'. In looking around the convention gathering, I felt that I had met everyone before. This is not surprising, since we

all descend from a very small group of first settlers. For a thousand years there was not much immigration into Iceland. Consequently, the gene pool is pretty small. We are all related!

The River Rock Casino was, to my great surprise, an excellent venue. A great choice! The facilities were superb and the casino itself did not in any way impact the convention. It was out of sight and out of mind – unless one was specifically looking for it.

The theme of the convention, "Strandarsaga", was perfect. I was surprised to learn of the early Icelandic settlements on the coast. I had no idea that there were groups of Icelanders who came west early in the 20th century. However, I remember a family story telling how, before they were married, my grandfather had wanted to go to Blaine, Washington, to see about relocating there. Had he been enticed to do so by the contemporary advertisements encouraging settlement on the coast? My grandmother said she would not marry him if he went. They stayed in Winnipeg. I was impressed by the Icelandic stamina and determination of those who settled on the remote islands north of Vancouver and was upset to hear of the struggles of those trying to settle in Victoria. As a hardworking and talented immigrant group, there was prejudice against them by those who felt their jobs were threatened.

I did a mental inventory of my extended family when Fred Bjarnason spoke of the migration patterns of Icelanders – from Iceland to the prairies and then to the west coast. It is true of my family. Twenty of the 32 direct descendants of my Icelandic grandparents live in the west. Even my grandfather, after the death of my Amma, remarried another Icelandic woman and they had 15 years together in Vancouver. He finally made it! But when he died, we took him back to Winnipeg to be buried

with Amma.

There were other excellent speakers. I particularly enjoyed the presentation by Edward Rickson of Birdlife Iceland. Such fantastic photographs! I was proud to hear of the environmental work being done to protect the birds. It was particularly heart warming to hear how the presenter, originally from England, went to Iceland as a student 20 years ago, loved it (and a young woman he met), and stayed.

I was enthralled by the stories of the Seawomen of Iceland and I thoroughly enjoyed the very pithy plays written by Guttormur J. Guttormsson and presented by his granddaughter, Heather Alda Ireland.

Having been to Iceland and felt the power of the landscape, I was impressed to hear of the well known Icelandic

painter, Johannes Kjarval, and to see how he captured and expressed that amazing landscape.

Then, Bill Valgardson delighted us all with his presentation “Coming West”. His sense of humour pulled the whole convention together. The rather tongue-in-cheek after dinner speaker, Donald Gislason spoke with great humour about his experiences with Icelandic food and what passes as a ‘delicacy’ for the Icelandic palate. He left me totally sated with the whole convention experience.

The convention was a great experience, from the welcome by the Tsatsu Stalqayo – the coastal Wolf Pack – to the Sunday Tour. I will be at the next one. Had I known it would be so terrific, I would have persuaded my brother to attend. He would have loved it!

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# INL Convention 2016

## Keynote Address

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by Donald Garth Gíslason

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Your Excellencies, distinguished visitors, ladies and gentlemen – or, as I like to think of you, descendants of Viking heroes. Because that is who we are.

We in this room are the descendants of those who belonged to a society permeated by heroic values. So I'm going to take a little romp through the early history of Iceland to find out just what heroism meant to our ancestors, and just what it might mean to be a hero, in the Icelandic sense, today.

While I suspect at least *some* of you here tonight will be too young to remember, the year 793 AD was a banner year for the Viking brand, marking as it did the emergence of Viking plundering raids as a “thing,” to use the language of the younger generation.

The Vikings became a “thing,” a presence impossible to ignore, when they sailed from their Scandinavian homeland to the northwest coast of England and burst in, uninvited, into a richly endowed monastery on the island of Lindisfarne.

They were *not* stopping in for tea and cream cakes. They went there to slaughter and to pillage, and by all accounts, they did a bang-up job.

One can be reasonably certain that there was cheering in the bleachers when they got back home to Scandinavia, laden with booty and plunder.

Nowadays, of course, most people take a dim view of pillaging and plundering, so this branch of the Viking brand has largely been outsourced to the Icelandic banking sector, with all the economies of scale that

one would expect from modern financial institutions.

In fact, raiding parties that used to take days, or even weeks, can now be carried out at the speed of an electronic wire transfer.

But the Vikings of the 790s complained little at the slow pace of their excursions, and indeed seemed to enjoy these predatory outings immensely. So much so, in fact, that they did little else for the next 250 years.

But early in the Viking period, a most extraordinary thing happened.

Beginning in 874 AD Norwegians of Viking stock began landing in Iceland, following the example of my great-great-great-23-times-great grandfather, Ingólfur Arnarson, who appears to have had a knack for real estate development.

Here we see him laying the foundations for a new housing subdivision, in Kópavogur.



But setting up shop as sheep farmers must undoubtedly have been a let-down of sorts for these men.

They were used to the thrill of sea travel, the visceral excitement of mortal combat, and the promise of great riches.

Let's take a look at these two professions for a minute.

Here is what a heroic raiding warrior looks like.



And here is what he does for a living.



Now here is an Icelandic farmer, and here is what *he* does for a living.



Let's try that again. Here is a Viking warrior.



And here is his day job (right).

Now here is an Icelandic sheep farmer.



OK, maybe if you encountered a rare warrior sheep, those horns *could* be dangerous but ...

... not really.

I think that it would be fair to conclude that pirate raiding and sheep farming require two different skill sets.

The qualities that make you a leader in one profession aren't *necessarily* transferable to another. Farming just doesn't go well with fighting and it took a few centuries for the fighting spirit to die down. It never really disappeared.

And in fact, the bullying of local war lords in Iceland got so bad that by the middle of the 13th century they had to call in the King of Norway to take command of the country in order to put an end to the chaos and disorder that was ripping it apart.

Now, this would be a fertile field of enquiry for Reince Priebus, Chairman of the Republican National Committee, who might well wish to put the phone number of King Harald V of Norway on speed dial.

Just a suggestion ...

But to return to our narrative, with

the royal takeover in the 1260s, the Age of Heroism came to an end as Icelanders became (somewhat) loyal subjects of first the Norwegian, then the Swedish, and finally the Danish Crown, from which Iceland only became completely independent in 1944.

So are we Danes, then? My admiration for Victor Borge notwithstanding, I think not.

How, then, are we to relate to our ancestors?

How are we to feel ourselves in some meaningful way Icelandic, in a direct line of descent from Icelandic values, and the Icelandic way of life?

Well, for Western Icelanders here in North America, the answer has been a very practical and pragmatic one: food.

I grew up in a household where the Icelandic “high holidays” of mid-summer were celebrated in Gimli, where delicacies such as *kleinur* and *skyr*-with-blueberries were available at Amma’s Kitchen over at the park pavilion.

And the dining room table at home was laden with homemade *pönnukökur* and *vínarterta*.

My mother was a particularly proud exponent of the seven-layered *vínarterta*, and looked down on her six-layering culinary competitors with a mixture of Christian compassion and austere Lutheran disdain.



To be Icelandic, in my household, was to eat Icelandic foods, at Icelandic events,

with other Icelandic-Canadians, and that was the extent of it.

But events such as this Convention set as their goal the *deepening* of our connection to Mother Iceland and here is where the *food* strategy for doing so begins to wade into deep waters. Because what might have begun as an act of cultural commemoration risks ending up as a daunting test of digestive endurance.

Like an arm that has been amputated, but can still be felt by the owner to whom it was formerly attached, there is a class of Hallowe'en horror foods in Iceland that live on as an indelible reminder of the lopped limbs of suffering that lie firmly, traumatically rooted in the Icelandic past.

As Andri Gunnar Hauksson put it in an article in the *The Grapevine*, Reykjavik’s pop-cultural newspaper of record:

Icelandic traditional cuisine, in all its fermented and pickled glory, was developed under the constraints of long dark winters and the necessity to make food last over a long period of time while nothing could grow. It’s not really something to *enjoy*. People had two options: Eat smelly things or die.

So let us review now the options for those hoping to become real, authentic Icelandic foodies.

Shall we begin with *harðfiskur*, which is say hard fish?

Those looking for delicacy of flavour and tenderness of texture will intuit from the name alone that a problem lies ahead.

With most of the charm, and all of the flavour of a wicker mat when placed in the mouth, hardfish, the mummified remains of formerly frolicking North Atlantic cod, haddock or flounder, is a popular quick snack for Icelanders on the run.

You see it for sale at gas stations even in the most remote corners of the country.

Once you overcome the impression, however, that you must have mistakenly been eating an Ikea throw rug that has been

chewed up by the family dog and left on a tree somewhere for weeks on end, there is some reward to be gained from your meal.

At upwards of 80% protein content, it is a very filling and satisfying snack – if you can get it down – with generous latherings of butter being the favoured digestive shoehorn that will smooth its way into your esophagus.

But then there is *hákarl*, fermented shark meat.

This is Jaws meets Jamie Oliver.



Only a sharp intake through the nose of the volatile fumes of a household cleanser can adequately prepare you for this “delicacy” – and I use the term with an almost wanton looseness.

Since shark meat cannot be digested in its raw form, the solution found by the resourceful Icelanders has been to bury it in the sand for a couple of months, until the smell of ammonia wafting up from the mound alerts the local population that it is “done.” But not quite.

It is then sent for a finishing “cure” in sheds where it is hung up like a common criminal, to await its being drawn & quartered into cubes, and shipped to the refrigerated food aisles of Icelandic grocery chains.

*Hákarl* used to be served only once a year. But in an ominous trend, it is now available year-round in 24-hour convenience stores, a development unthinkable a mere 20 years ago.

I have tasted it myself, the first time in Hofsós at the home of Valgeir Þorvaldsson, who sits among you tonight. I can report that the texture is fully that of meat, and that it caused me no digestive upset whatsoever.

My advice, however, would be to avoid breathing until the deed is done, and to keep a chilled shooter of Brennivín or some

other strong alcoholic drink at the ready, as a chaser.

*Hákarl* is an entirely manageable eating experience, because there is little in its physical appearance that sets off alarm bells.

The same, however, cannot be said of the macabre food-stuff known as *svið*, or singed sheep’s head, which is eaten in half-head portions.



Now it is commonly held that a nation’s food reflects its culture, but here we have more than a mere reflection.

Here we enter the world of food that, when you look at it, actually looks back at you.

What I worry about is the children. Early childhood trauma can be so damaging, and you don’t want children coming home and reciting:

*Mary had a little lamb  
She thought it might be tasty,  
So up she boiled its small singed head  
And ate it fast and hasty.*

Fortunately, the most enthusiastic consumers of *svið* are not children.

They are adults of drinking age who, after a heavy night of clubbing, like to stop in at the shop window behind the BSI bus station in Reykjavík at 4 am for a hot meal of cheeks, tongues and eyeballs.

I have eaten *svið*, but not the eyeball. I simply can’t see my way to doing so.

Moving on now, reluctantly, to the back of the animal, I need to mention *brútsþungar*, ram’s testicles.

And that’s all I’m going to do: mention it. We’re just not going to go there.

I offer as my final exhibit the fish known as *skata* – “skate” in English.

I don't know whether this dish is mentioned in any international treaties on chemical weapons, but such a measure might well need to be considered.

Prepared by letting the fish stew in its own juices for months on end until it is partly rotted, and the rest fermented, it is boiled and brought to the table by Icelanders of strict observance on December 23rd, *Þorláksmessa*, the feast of St. Þorlákur, patron saint of Iceland.

To say that its odour raises alarm is to state the obvious. A casual stroll down the well-groomed streets of Reykjavík's Vesturbær district on the 23rd of December is a bracing olfactory experience even for those with the most congested nasal passages. Many home-owners, you see, have taken to preparing it in the garage, because if prepared in the home the smell will stay in the drapes for six weeks. Needless to say, special clothes, the Icelandic equivalent of culinary hazmat suits, must be worn by those preparing it, and changed-out-of immediately afterwards, to avoid social ostracization.

In a fit of patriotic fervour for the land of my ancestors, I insisted on trying it one Christmas when in Iceland, and the experience has marked me for life.

Walking innocently into a seafood restaurant down by the Reykjavík harbour, I seated myself and waited to begin my culinary communion with Saint Þorlákur.

No matter that it was served with an



ample helping of potatoes, I experienced an explosion of ... well, I wouldn't exactly call it "flavour." It was more like an industrial spill that hit my mouth, scalding my taste buds into a state of anaphylactic shock.

My teeth clamped instinctively onto the plastic fork that had carried the weaponized fish flesh to my mouth, and I imagined feeling what a prisoner on death row must feel in the electric chair the moment the switch is pulled.

I stand before you today as proof positive that the experience can be endured, but not, I hasten to add, recommended.

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So I think it ought to be clear that exploring authentic Icelandic culinary traditions is not the most efficient way of deepening our relationship with Iceland. So I would like to suggest another way.

I would urge you to believe, despite the passing into history of medieval warrior heroism, that another type of heroism remains alive in the Iceland that we know today.

It is the heroism of the communitarian spirit that seeks to make life better for us all. And Iceland offers us so many of these heroes. I'm sure that most of you can name a handful off the top your head.

There's Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, a champion of women's rights, president of Iceland from 1980 to 1996, the world's first elected female head of state. (Take note, Hillary.)

There's Halldór Laxness, the 1955 Nobel Prize winner for Literature whose passion for contemporary social and political issues shines luminously through his sturdy but elegant prose.

Many of you might have a particular fascination with Icelandic eccentrics (a term wide enough in its application to include the entire population, I have found) but there are those who are especially gifted in

literary endeavours.

Dórarinn Eldjarn, the son of Iceland's third president, is one of these. His *Disneyrímur*, a cycle of poems in the traditional forms of medieval verse, recounts the life of Walt Disney and his most famous creation, Mickey Mouse, simultaneously satirizing with exquisitely dry humour the epic pretensions of the cartoon genre itself, while paying affectionate homage to his country's abundantly rich literary heritage.

In that vein, some of you might pick as your hero Jón Gnarr, former leader of the Best Party, who skillfully straddles the divide between political discourse and stand-up comedy.

Mr. Gnarr, star of a hit television series, was elected to public office on a platform of making the Icelandic Parliament drug-free by the year 2020.

Now perhaps it is time to reveal who my *own* personal hero from Iceland is.

He is a figure that most of you will not likely have heard of.

Does anyone know who this is?



This is Gylfi Þorsteinsson Gíslason (no relation), who served as Iceland's Minister of Education from 1956 till 1971.

Now, I'm sure you will want to know why, with so many important figures to chose from, I as a trained musicologist should choose as my own personal Icelandic hero, a little-known figure from recent political history.

Well, it's because in my view, Gylfi is the person who has had the most far-reaching influence on the development of musical talent in Iceland. In the 1960s, he introduced legislation that provided for public funding for all music schools in Iceland.

Under this legislation, public funds would pay for the salaries of music teachers in any music school set up to operate permanently in any district of the country. Tuition fees would pay for the rest of the costs, such as rent and maintenance. Given that salaries account for 70% of the operating cost of these schools, this meant that parents could provide their children with private musical instruction for 30% of the actual cost.

There are now more than 90 Icelandic music schools spread throughout the country, and as a direct result Iceland has seen an explosive amount of musical activity in recent decades. In a typical year, the Iceland Airwaves music festival only accepts the top 200 Icelandic bands, out of the 450 that apply.

For comparison, *are* there even 450 bands performing publicly in the entire city of Vancouver, with twice the population of Iceland?

And the kids aren't just getting music lessons in piano and guitar. Even a cursory glance at the popular music scene in Iceland shows that when forming garage bands, the kids just bring whatever instruments they are learning at music school.

So you get bands like Orphic Oxta, comprised of: trumpet, trombone, clarinet, flute, saxophone, violin, and, of course, accordion. (Even some heavy metal bands

in Iceland have an accordion-player.)

Or the bassoon, that ugly duckling of the orchestra.

Who would have thought that a bassoon would fit in to a popular music ensemble?

And yet here is Rebekka Björnsdóttir, bassoonist with one of the most popular bands in Iceland, Hjaltalín.



Iceland's enlightened policies on music education have created a society in which music is studied, performed and appreciated by a vast swathe of the population. And it is no coincidence, I think, that many Icelandic musicians have captured world attention. I need only mention Björk, to start with.

And then there is operatic bass Kristinn Sigmundsson, who sings at the Metropolitan Opera in New York and in opera houses throughout Europe.

And the young composer Ólafur Arnalds, who used to be the drummer of a thrash punk band with name so vulgar I won't mention it here.

But at a party one night someone put on the Shostakovich 8th String Quartet (such things happen only in Iceland) and he was so impressed, he enrolled in music school and started writing for string quartet, along with piano and electronics.

Last year, Óli won a prestigious BAFTA award for his sound track to the British mystery series *Broadchurch*, and was nominated again this year.

Or Jóhann Jóhannsson, who won a Golden Globe for his score to *The Theory*

of *Everything*, and was nominated for an Academy Award for his score to the film *Sicario*.

The list goes on, and on ...

And it's not only those who go on to have musical careers that benefit from Iceland's commitment to musical education.

It's everyone.

Neuroscientists have found that our brains use a much wider range of functions when listening to music than when hearing ordinary sounds.

So our brains get a harder workout, and improve their functioning, by studying and playing music.

Not only that, reading music increases our visual ability to recognize patterns. And the muscular coordination plus emotional awareness involved in playing music engages both the left and right hemispheres, strengthening the neurological pathways used for complex problem-solving.

So the next time you're in Reykjavik having a drink at one of the popular bars in the centre of town, you might just hear a young man come up to a buxom young woman and say: "Hi, my name is Helgi. I just love the way your left and right ... hemispheres work so well together."

And she might reply: "You know, I really admire your visual pattern recognition skills."

And you'll know that they both had music lessons while young, all because of my hero, Gylfi Þorsteinsson Gíslason and the legislation he introduced in the 1960s.

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Now to conclude, let me just say that while my hero might not be yours, you can see how whipped up I get about the guy. And I hope you'll get whipped up about someone Icelandic, too. Because every country has its share of people that contribute something really unique to their nation, and those contributions should not just stay there. Their accomplishments should be shared with the

nations of the world.

Looking across the North Atlantic to Iceland, we here in Canada see a country reaping the benefits of a national musical education system. And that's a point of reference for us for when the Vancouver School Board tries to cut music classes in the schools, as it just tried to do this week.

And Icelanders for their part, looking at Canada, might see a banking system that, while hardly dynamic, is nothing if not solid, and not likely to crash the national economy. Some might even look to Mark Carney, our former head of the Bank of Canada (now head of the Bank of England) as their hero.

That's how cultural interchange works. Icelanders have their heroes. We have our heroes. And when we each have heroes in the other's country, then we understand each other so much better, because we automatically have a language in common: the language of mutual admiration.

So my message to you this evening is: find yourself an Icelandic hero, or several, but don't keep him, or her, to yourself. We here in North America need to hear more about Iceland. Share your hero with your fellow citizens.



PHOTO: LISA SIGURGEIRSON-MAXX

Donald Garth Gíslason with  
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# Four Famous Women of Iceland's Saga Age

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by Dr. Valdimar J. Eylands

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When Vigdis Finnbogadóttir was elected president of the Republic of Iceland on June 29th, 1980, she became instantly the most famous woman in Icelandic history, and attained at the same time preeminence among women the world over. There have been, of course – and there are – women performing as chiefs of State, but they have inherited the office. But the Icelanders are the first nation to elect a woman – indeed a member of the intellectual aristocracy in the land, a person held in high esteem in the field of education and drama – to the highest office in the country, thus departing from a timeless universal tradition of masculine preference.

Such an event is bound to stimulate a great deal of discussion in the public media, and among all people who are interested in social activities and world politics. There are those who see in this election only a manifestation of a restless fumbling age trying to find its way out of present precarious predicament. Others regard the election of a woman to an office such as this a long overdue recognition of the equal rights of women, and a most welcome emancipation from their centuries-old confinement to the Germanic concept of “a children-cooking-church” programme. It is now high time for the “fair sex” to come forth with their “fair play”. Let women show on the national level their domestic

specialty of justice, loving concern and tactful leadership. Congratulations to Iceland for its courage and initiative. They were pathfinders in the democratic way of life among the northern millions, and now, after eleven hundred years they have reaffirmed their faith in the democratic process and the basic principles of equal rights for all people regardless of sex, social or economic status.

The many people of Icelandic extraction living in North America are very much interested in this unique event in the history of the old mother land. The Editor of the *Icelandic Canadian*, has taken due cognizance of it by planning to place a photograph of Her Excellency on the front cover of the summer issue 1981 of the magazine, and by requesting a short essay on four specified women of the Saga age; namely Auður (Unnur) Ketilsdóttir, Hallgerður Höskuldsdóttir, Bergþóra Skarphéðinsdóttir and Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir. This may perhaps be considered as a Toast to the women of Iceland. It is obvious that Iceland has throughout its history had women who were loved and adored in their generation, but also those who were hated and feared. But the four named above tower like mountain peaks in the ancient sagas, which furnish the only information we have concerning them.

It should be noted that the ancient

sagas purport to relate events which are supposed to have taken place eight or nine generations before they were put in writing. We may assume that the basic events and personalities existed, but also that the oral tradition on which the stories are based, are kneaded and variously moulded by the writers to suit their taste and purpose. It should also be observed that we of today can not judge the conduct and conversations of the Saga age by modern standards of social conduct. The people of the Saga age lived in a period of transition from paganism to Christianity. This is very well illustrated in the sayings of Njal at the time of the burning of Bergthórsvöll. To the offer to leave the burning house and thus saving his life, he replies: "I have no wish to go outside for I am an old man now and equipped to avenge my sons; and I do not want to live in shame." Then turning to his household he says: "Be of good heart – Put your faith in the mercy of God for he will not let you burn both in this world and the next." (Ch. 129) The basic principle of human relationship was honor. For the violation of honor, there was no effective remedy but revenge, which usually meant the shedding of blood. The lot of the women was particularly difficult. They were suppressed and supervised in turn by father, brothers, husbands or sons. It was a cruel men's world. Marriages were usually arranged by the father of a girl, often without consulting her or seeking her approval. To be a true helpmate to her husband a woman was expected to engage in all sorts of intrigue, and exhortations to revenge for insults suffered. Some of them did this with true conviction; others became introverts in the process, and turned their white fury upon their loved ones. The women of Iceland have travelled a long way from the degradation of the Saga age, to the triumph of Iceland's most famous woman of our day.

## I

## Auður, The Deep Minded – Princess and Pauper

She is the first woman mentioned in Icelandic history, and is spoken of in the earliest available records of the original settlers. In the *Book of Settlements*, (*Landnámabók*) there is a record of 430 individuals who settled in Iceland, and Auður is the only woman in the group. She enjoys this distinction not only due to her sex, but also because of her background and previous history. She was born a princess, and when she came to Iceland she was the widow of King Olaf the White, who had ruled a part of Ireland until he fell in battle. But Auður was obviously a resourceful and courageous woman. When tragedy struck she would not allow herself to be crushed, but took to the woods with a large number of her followers. There they built a ship which was dragged down to sea when completed and used for transportation for herself and company, first to Scotland, then the Orkneys, then to the Faroe Islands, and finally to Iceland where she settled. She assumed possession of a very large portion of western Iceland, including what is now most of the municipality of Dalasýsla. Out of this large area she staked out a number of farms which she gave to her slaves whom she set free, and to other followers and friends. It is believed that much of the Celtic influence which is clearly present in the Icelandic people even unto this day is due to the settlers who came with Auður from Ireland and the island adjacent the north coast of Scotland. Not much is known of Auður personally, except that she was the "great lady" of Iceland in her day. She lives to this day in the traditions of this area, and place names perpetuate her memory. A place where she is said to have breakfast one day is called Dögurðarnes, (Breakfast Head). Lady-like she seems to have been

concerned about her hair, as she is said to have lost a comb in a place which now the name of Kambsnes. (The promontory of the comb.)

Auður stood apart from the original settlers of Iceland in that she was perhaps the only baptized Christian among them. There was, however, no priest in her company and she built no churches in her wide domains. But she is said to have conducted worship services in the hills which came to be known as Krosshólar (The Hills of the Cross) where she had crosses erected. It is said that her family abandoned the Christian faith after her death, and that they built a temple for heathen worship where the crosses formerly stood. This became one of the first known cemeteries in Iceland as these people believed that upon dying they would literally go into the hills.

Auður's story ends with a peculiar tale concerning her burial. When she felt that her end was near, she invited her friends and relatives to a great feast which lasted for three days. At this time she gave expensive gifts to her guests, and free advice to anyone interested. At one point she declared that from then on the assemblage would engage in her own funeral feast, because she would soon die. This came to pass. She was buried on the seacoast at high water mark, because, says the record: "having been baptized, she did not want to lie in unconsecrated ground." A princess, a queen, the owner of a whole municipality, she died a pauper without a plot of ground for her burial, but had her body confined to the sand and the sea.

There has been much speculation concerning the significance of this burial place, was this simply the manifestation of the eccentricity of an old woman? How could the ebb and flow of the sea compensate her for the lack of consecrated ground? Perhaps she calculated that since the sea touches the shores of all lands, she

would somehow be brought into contact with the world community of Christians in this manner. Or was it an act of purification after the manner of Christ's baptism in water? Or was she "deepminded" enough to envision her Christian faith which had been temporarily submerged by the heathenism of her contemporaries, as being washed ashore with the tide of Providence and spreading to conquer and bless the land? We shall never know what she had in mind, but this we know, that Auður Ketilsdóttir was the first famous woman in Iceland's history. She was a princess, a pathfinder, a puritan, and yet a pauper in the midst of all her possessions.

## II

### Hallgerður Höskuldsdóttir – The Untamed Shrew

Hallgerður is the most wicked woman in Njal's Saga, Iceland's most famous story. A thoughtful reader will marvel at the imaginative powers of the writer of this story, his creative skill, and his simple narrative style. He shakes persons, such as you have never met, so to speak, out of a hat, makes them engage in conversations such as you have never heard, and all this with masterful simplicity so that you are apt to think you are actually reading a true story.

There may, indeed, have been a Hallgerður in the centuries old tradition which the writer wove into his story of Njall and he created her in the image desired by endowing her with all the worst traits in human character, and making her the scapegoat of a large catalogue of crimes. The reader is prepared for this extraordinary career in the chapter of Njal's saga, when we are introduced to Hallgerður as a tall beautiful girl, with silken hair so long that it bung down to her waist. Her father is exceedingly proud of her as she is playing on the floor, and he asks a visiting relative

what he thinks of her. This relative remarks coldly: "I can not imagine how thief's eyes have come into our kin." It is difficult to imagine how any man in right mind would make a remark like that about a child. This little girl was not a child of a miserable crofter whom one could insult at will. Her father was one of the great chieftains of the age, a close friend of kings and potentates, and her mother was also prominent in the society of that day. Common sense would rule out a remark of this nature, but the author is creating a Hallgerður of his own making. He is going to make her a thief and an untamable shrew and endow her with all the hatred, maliciousness and the murderous rage of the age. Giving her "thief's eyes" was a good beginning, preparing the reader for what is to come.

Although impetuous and willful, Hallgerður is married early, without consultation in the matter and against her will. She resents this, as well as the arrogance and overbearing attitude of her husband. The marriage is miserable from the beginning, and the young wife turns out to be an inefficient and extravagant housekeeper. The husband rebukes, they quarrel, and he slaps her face so hard that blood flowed. Shortly thereafter this would-be disciplinarian had his head split open with an axe, at Hallgerður's tacit approval. The second marriage to one Glum Olafsson seemed to have been happy to begin with, but soon came to the same sorry end as first one. The third time she selects her own bridegroom in the person of Gunnar Hamundrson, "the Prince Charming" of the community and of the entire Saga. This marriage seems to have been based on mutual love at first sight. They presented a most striking appearance as a couple. The future seemed bright. But "fate" was against Hallgerður in her matrimonial ventures. She soon became involved in a personal feud with

Bergþóra and Njall, Gunnar's best friends. Hallgerður was insulted, when as an invited and seated guest, Bergþóra insisted she stand up from the table and give her seat to another woman. Hallgerður's ire flared up instantly and she retorted: "I am not moving down for anyone, like some outcast hag." This was the beginning of life-long hostility between these two strong-willed Viking-spirited women, costing many of their man-servants their lives in mutual retaliatory slayings.

This exchange was also the beginning of domestic difficulties for Gunnar and Hallgerður, which culminated in the unforgettable bow-string episode. Gunnar is, of course, the great hero of the story, blameless in spite of all the blood he had shed. But finally he was outlawed. When he refused to obey the law of the land, he was besieged in his home by forty armed men who came there determined to kill him. He put up a remarkable defence until one of the enemy managed to cut his bow string with a sword. At this very critical moment he turns to his wife and says to her: "Let me have two locks of your hair, and help my mother to plait them into a bow-string for me." Hallgerður asks: "Does anything depend on it?" He answers: "My life depends on it." "In that case" says Hallgerður "I shall now remind you of the slap you once gave me. I do not care in the least whether you hold out a long line or not." This is the sentence which has made Hallgerður notorious. She has been cursed and cried over in countless Icelandic homes where this saga has been read throughout the centuries. Assuming that she was correctly quoted in the story, people were entirely certain that she was a historic personality.

It seems strange that this myth has so long persisted. Obviously the whole episode is the creation of the writer's imagination. First of all, there was no

competent witness present to report this conversation between them at the time of the siege. Aside from that, Gunnar's alleged request was utterly unreasonable and absurd. Even if all the women of the Rangarvalla district had made their hair available to him at this moment, it would have done him no good. Making a bow-string was a long and complicated operation, requiring ingredients other than hair, such as sinews and glue. It is hardly likely that the army of angry men attacking Gunnar for the purpose of putting him to death would have agreed to truce while he was having his women make another bow-string. A thoughtful reader must therefore declare Hallgerður innocent of this basic charge that history has made against her. What we have here is a literary device to heighten the drama, and crown Hallgerður's unsavory reputation.

Hallgerður's end was as sad as her life had been. She had been married to three men and seen them all die violently. Toward the close of her life we see her in the company of a wretch named Hrappur. In due time someone ran a spear through him, at which time a very casual conversation takes place which throws a clear light on the credibility of the narrative generally: As Hrappur's arm is hacked off, he says to the adversary, "What you have done certainly needed doing, that hand has brought harm and death to many." "This will put an end to all that," said his assailant as he ran Hrappur through with a spear. With Hrappur dead Hallgerður disappears from the story. She had completed her role in Njal's Saga as the untamable shrew.

But in spite of all, Hallgerður has found mercy in the legends of the nation. Once upon a time a grave was being dug in the cemetery at Laugarnes, near Reykjavík. The grave diggers came upon what appeared to be the skeleton of a woman with an extraordinary abundance

of hair. This could be none other than Hallgerður, who in her old age, according to the legend, had moved there to live with her son and had died there. Sigurður Breiðfjörð, a noted poet (1798-1846) must have believed that this was true because in a poem about Hallgerður he says: "að Laugarnesi liggur þar, lands að biskupssetri." (She is buried at Laugarnes, the seat of the bishops of the country.)

Thus we, have legend upon legend, and an endless speculation about the boundaries of fact and fiction.

### III

#### Bergþóra Skarphéðinsdóttir – A Woman Who Was Not The 'Better Half'

The average Njal reader will admire Bergþóra, but condemn Hallgerður, yet in the early chapter of the story they seem to outdo each other in intrigue and in stimulating strife and bloodshed. The plain fact is that apart from her words and actions on the last day of her life there is very little that can be said in praise of Bergþóra. She was the one who started the fatal feud with Hallgerður when she insulted her after she was seated as a guest in her own house, by telling her to get up and give the seat of honor to another woman who had just arrived. Nearly always when Bergþóra is mentioned she is planning to have someone killed. The fires of hatred and the Spirit of vengeance seems to have burned with greater intensity in her soul than in any of her menfolk. Njall tried repeatedly to restrain her fury, but she will not be assuaged. She challenges her sons again and again and chides them for their reluctance in going forth on slaying expeditions. The very thought of missing an opportunity for revenge seems to have been to her a great affliction.

But the most memorable event in her

story is when she has to choose between life and death. The anguish and lamentations of the women of the household become ever louder as the fires leap along the ceiling and the walls of the dwelling place. Flosi, the chief of the incendiaries becomes magnanimous and says to Bergþóra: “You come out, for under no circumstances do I want you to burn.” There it is that Bergþóra makes herself immortal in Icelandic history and literature by declaring calmly: “I was given to Njal in marriage when I was young, and I have promised him that we would share the same fate.”

But actually, she did not have much of an option. She had heard her husband respond negatively to the offer of leaving the burning building, and she knew that all her men would soon be dead. Even if she walked out of the fire it would be only to face a world of loneliness and shame. From now on, she would have no one to send on expeditions of death and revenge. She could do nothing but to accept her fate, but she did so with calmness and dignity which the world has admired. She manifested supreme loyalty to her husband, and perhaps a vague faith in the merciful God of whom he had spoken. The old couple walk calmly hand in hand to their deathbed as though it was their bridal chamber. Such fortitude in a fiery trial is indeed rare ill history.

#### IV

### Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir – The Tragic Lover

The Laxdæla Saga is in the main, the story of Guðrún's love affairs. The geographic background is that of her great kinswoman, Unnur the Deepminded, who settled and lived in those parts about a century earlier. This story gives an excellent portrayal of social conditions in the country at the time, as well as the prevailing

philosophy of life. It appears that people were strong believers in prophetic dreams and premonitions which would indicate to them the dictates of fate which no one could distract or avoid.

Guðrún had many strange dreams which upon interpretation revealed to her that she would be married four times. The first husband was represented by an ill-fitted headdress which she would soon throw away; the second, a silver armband which would slip out of her hand, suggesting that the man would be drowned; the third, by a gold armband which she would shake off her hand, implying that this man would be slain, at her suggestion; the fourth, by a helmet set with gems but it would roll off her head into the sea, warning her that this man would also be drowned. Upon hearing this interpretation, Guðrún remarked rather sadly to the wise man who thus predicted her fate: “... have many thanks ... yet wise as thou mayest be, mayest thou not dimly through these tangles see?” These predictions did not fit her hopes at all; at an early age she had an infatuation for Kjartan, her lovely dream boy. The fact that he did not enter into her predestined matrimonial plans led to the love-triangle and the tragedy which is the theme of the story.

Guðrún now had the roadmap of her life laid out in front of her. There is no use quarrelling with destiny, she must travel upon the road assigned. Like Hallgerður with whom she had many things in common, such as temperament and personal charm, she is married at age fifteen much against her will. She turned out to be an extravagant and wasteful wife. The husband scolds and slaps her face. She compliments him on the deed and says: “Now you have given me something that we women prize very highly, a healthy color in our face.”

She did not try to avenge herself by hurting or killing this man. She simply

ignores him, squanders all his money, and then leaves him and gets herself another lover. The fact that this second man was already happily married was to her a matter of no importance. She encourages him successfully leave his wife so that she herself could marry him. But shortly thereafter this man was drowned. In the meantime Kjartan and his brother Bolli had been in Norway. Bolli returns stating that Kjartan will most likely remain in Norway, and that he is on very intimate terms with Ingibjörg, the sister of King Olaf. After a while Bolli proposes marriage to the already twice married Guðrún, and she accepts him reluctantly, still thinking of Kjartan, her childhood lover. Then all of a sudden Kjartan returns, the royal romance having come to an end. Finding Guðrún married to his fosterbrother Bolli, he does everything in his power to insult and hurt the newly married couple, until Guðrún can endure it no longer, and takes matters into her own hand. She now plans and puts into execution the most dastardly plan of which there is a record in the otherwise bloodbespattered saga literature. She makes her husband and brothers ambush and kill Kjartan. At first Bolli objected to this plan since it involved the slaying of his best friend and stepbrother. Guðrún agrees with him that this is an unfortunate and embarrassing situation, but quietly expresses her disappointment at having a man for a husband who lacks the courage to vindicate his wife's honour, but that since such is the case she will forthwith leave his board and bed. She knew that this was his weak spot, as he loved her dearly. Bolli surrenders, and later that same day kills Kjartan with his own hands. He comes home crestfallen, and tells the sordid news to his wife. Guðrún seemed highly pleased, but expressed a sentiment which was both vile and contemptible: "What I think is most important is the

Hrefna (Kjartan's wife) will not go smiling to bed tonight." Of course this led to a chain of revenge and counter revenge, costing Bolli his life, with several other men, leaving Guðrún a chance to marry the fourth time. But this marriage – like her second one – was terminated by the man's accidental drowning.

As Guðrún grows older she is left with her many unpleasant memories. She speaks of her four husbands to one of her sons, one of whom was worthless, one wealthy, one wise, and the fourth a great lawman. "But which one of them did you love the most?" asked her son. After some evasion and hesitation she says softly: "I was worst to him whom I loved most." This is one of the famous "last words" of an important personality, and they have become the theme of endless stories and plays in many languages, analysing and elaborating on


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the eternal love triangle. Some Icelandic writers have gone into ecstasy over Guðrún Ósvifursdóttir. William Morris, a well known English poet immortalized her in English literature in 1968 by writing in her honor a very sentimental and romantic poem of 5000 lines, entitled "The Lovers of Guðrún".

According to the record Guðrún became very religious in her old age; she even became the first Icelandic nun, and spent much time in prayer and meditation. Grimur Thomsen, one of Iceland's great poets, summarizes her last years in a well known poem, of which one stanza is given here in a line for line and word for word prose translation: "Hatred is quenched, the wounds of heart / have gradually, but completely been healed / The tears of faith poished the wounds / at the same time they have dimmed my vision. / The years of life

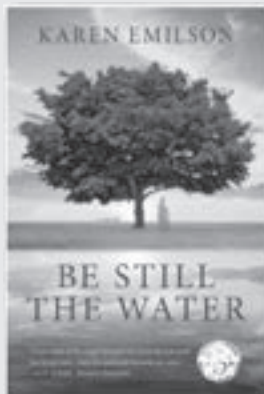
are soon spent / I am at peace with all men / My old age will be filled with remorse / until I fall asleep in Helafell."

By this brief and superficial study of the "famous four" Icelandic women of all Saga age their common traits have been noted: They were strong personalities, ambitious, ruthless, basically honest, hot tempered, loyal to their friends, and loving freedom. These characteristics have been found in Icelandic women in all ages, varying in intensity with the standards and the life-style of each generation. But the whole nation has been molded and refined in the crucible of experience during the many centuries since the Saga Age, and now in a flexible and changing generation the women of Iceland have surged forth to their greatest victory by placing one of their own sex into the White House of the nation.

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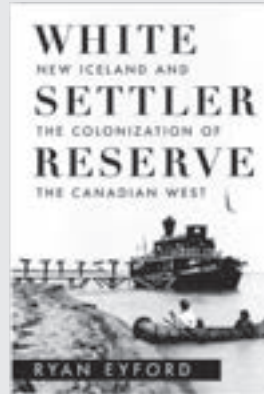
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# Women in Old Norse-Icelandic Sagas

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by Kristen Wolf

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When Wealhtheow in the Old English poem *Beowulf* reminds the hero Beowulf, after he had slain the Grendel, of his obligation to King Hroðgar and, perhaps more important, of his obligation to protect her sons, the Danish queen strikes us as a strong, yet ultimately helpless figure as she seeks to ensure peace within a patriarchal society. Like other figures in Old English poetry, she functions in a sophisticated way as a “peace-weaver,” attempting to bring closure to hostilities, but failing in the face of a structure that finds its impetus in blood-feuds and intrigues. Such is, perhaps, the case also in the *Wulf and Eadwacer*, a riddle spoken by a woman whose lover has, so it seems, been outlawed. In heartfelt words of loss and deprivation resides a plea for resolution, a plea for closure. The women’s voices in and poems display a certain depth and richness, but at the same we as readers stand at a remove from these speakers, despite their sometimes poignant words and emotions, all which seem formalized, distanced, and perhaps even lacking in those characteristics that make them convincingly human, participating fully within the world of human affairs and yet rich in psychological depth.

When we turn to the Old Norse Icelandic sagas, however, we notice a striking difference in the characterization of women. The women are generally far from being passive figures, nor are they always bent on seeking closure. They often

display a type of mental toughness as they adopt the role of the active partner, inciting revenge (or even taking matters into their own hands), engaging in battle and seeking to defend the honour of the family. While the motivations of the female characters are generally clear, rarely do we glimpse directly the psychological depth of character that resides behind the motivation; there seems to be a greater complexity of mind and emotion residing just beneath the surface. In the *Saga of the Greenlanders* (*Grænlendinga saga*) Freydis carries this type of portrait to its extreme, and she appears as a hard, self-centred woman who readily violates family honour and social norms in her own interests. Along with her brothers, Helgi and Finnbogi, Freydis mounts an expedition to Vinland. Discontented with what she found there, Freydis goes to Finnbogi’s house early one morning to exchange ships, for his is larger. Finnbogi agrees, and Freydis returns home to her husband. But here the narrative takes a harsh and unexpected turn. Freydis tells her husband that Finnbogi beat her, and she incites him to revenge; “But you, you wretch, would never avenge either my humiliation or your own. I realize now how far I am away from my home in Greenland! And unless you avenge this, I am going to divorce you.” They go to the brother’s house, tie them up, and drag them outside, where “Freydis had each of them put to death.” But the episode does not end here, for although the men were reluctant to kill the



women that remained, Freydis takes up an axe and kills all five of them; and “Freydis thought she had been very clever about it.” As readers, we are repulsed by her cruelty, but we are also drawn into the action of the narrative as we contemplate how far Freydis will go in her cruelty and then find ourselves shocked by its realization. The typical male role-model of the sagas is reversed, and our expectations are turned upside-down.

The portrait of Freydis presents an extreme, although not entirely uncommon, type of women in the sagas. Generally, however, the women are depicted as bent on protecting the honour of the family. “Bergþóra, *Njál’s Saga* (*Njál’s Saga*), for example, is involved in no fewer than five murders. In the first instance, Bergþóra, Njál’s wife, had insulted Hallgerður, Gunnarr’s wife, by suggesting that she arranged to have her former husband Þorvaldur killed. One day, Bergþóra sends her servant Svartr to fell wood at Rauðaskriður, land owned jointly by Gunnarr and Njál. The agreement was that each would take as much timber as was needed, but Hangerður believes that is “Bergþóra is trying to rob me in everything.” Apparently she still smarted from Bergóra’s

earlier remarks and the fact that Gunnarr had not avenged her honour on that count. Hallgerður then sends her servant, Kolr, to kill Svatr. In retaliation for the killing, Bergþóra sends another servant, Atli, to kill Kolr. The emphasis in these scenes is not on the actual killing, but on the vowing animosity of the two women: and although the exchange of words is sparse, the

sense of mounting tension rings clearly in the narrative. Here two strong women come to loggerheads, and the reader watches in suspense, anticipating further conflict. In other instances Bergþóra is more outspoken, as when she incites her sons to kill Sigmundur, who had earlier reviled Njál’s sons by composing a number of malicious poems: “You amaze me. You kill when killing is scarcely called for, but when something like this happens you chew it over and brood about it until nothing comes of it. . . . So if you really want to do anything you must so it now.”

Active participation in the events and a commitment to action thus characterize the women of the sagas. Rarely do we find in these works the weak, pleading figure, lacking in confidence and fearful of actions or their consequences. This is, perhaps, the most fundamental difference between the women of Old English and Old Icelandic literature: in the former, women work towards “closure” of action, some sort of resolution that will re-establish order and harmony (this is not only the case in a work such as *Beowulf* or *The Wife’s Lament*,

but can also be said of the saints' lives, where re-establishment of the Christian order where the right relationship between the godhead and humankind is at issue): in the latter, "closure" is not central. Action brings response, and there is little thought to re-establishing a harmonious balance. Rather, gaining the advantage is more at issue. This would help to explain the dominant female character who continually incites vengeance often, but not always, under the guise of family honour, for willful pride, economic advantage, and power equally strong motives. Guðrun in *Laxdæla* saga knows how to incite her brothers to attack Kjartan. You would have had just the right temper if you had been peasant's daughters – you do nothing about anything, whether good or bad. Despite all the disgrace and dishonour that Kjartan has done you, you lose no sleep over it even when he rides past your door with only a single companion. Men like you have the memory of hogs. It's obviously futile to hope that you will ever dare to attack Kjartan at home if you haven't the nerve to face him now when he is travelling with only one or two companions. You just sit at home pretending to be men, and there are always too many of you about." Men, of course do attempt to take a stand against such railing and goading, as in *Njáls saga* when Flosi rejects Hildigunnr's attempts to goad him to vengeance. "Monster," he cried, "You want us to take the course which will turn out worst for all of us. Cold are the counsels or women.'" While men may have the "memory of hogs," women rarely forget, and a response such as Flosi's, an earlier



remark, insult, or slap may well have serious consequences at a later time. In *Njáls saga*, Gunnarr stands on the verge of being overcome by attackers, who have succeeded in cutting the string of his bow. Beside him stands his wife, Hallgerður. "He said to Hallgerður, 'Let me have two locks of your hair, and help my mother plait them into a bow-string for me.' 'Does anything depend on it?' asked Hallgerður. My life depends on it,' replied Gunnarr, 'for they will never overcome me as long as I can use my bow.' 'In that case, said Hallgerður, I shall now remind you of the slap you once gave me. I do not care in the least whether you hold out a long time or not.' 'To each his own way or earning fame,' said Gunnarr. "You shall not be asked again."

The strong, wilful woman is something of a commonplace in saga literature. While in the case of Bergþóra we move slowly through a web of retaliations in which her actions and her interplay with other characters act more overtly impulsively, in no less effectively. In *Laxdæla* saga, for instance, Auður goes about dressed in trousers like a man. (According to early Icelandic law, it was grounds for divorce if the husband wore effeminate clothing, and the same applied if a woman wore masculine clothing.)

Accordingly, her husband, Þórður, has himself divorced from her, and Auður, sword in hand, personally takes revenge against him: “She went into the bed-closet; Þórður lay on his back, sound asleep. She woke him up, and he turned on his side when he saw a man had come in. Auður drew a short sword and lunged at him with it, wounding him severely; the sword caught his right arm, and gashed him across the nipples. So fierce was the thrust that the sword stuck fast in the bed-boards.” Freydis, one of the first women of Norse extract to set food on North American soil (Vinland) reveals herself as a courageous woman in an attack by *Skrælingar* (North American natives). In contrast to Auður, however, Freydis’ actions are entirely admirable and, for the reader, comically unexpected. During the attack, she tries to flee together with the men, but cannot keep up with them because she is pregnant. The Saga of Erik the Red (*Eirík’s saga rauða*) relates that “(s)he was following them into the woods when the Skrälings closed in on her. In front of her lay a dead man, Þorbrandur Snorrason, with flintstone buried in his head, and his sword beside him. She snatched up the sword and prepared to defend herself. When the Skrälings came rushing towards her she pulled one of her breasts out of her bodice and slapped it with the sword. The Skrälings were terrified at the sight of this and fled back to their boats and hastened away.”

It would be a mistake, however, to view the women of the sagas as generally given in to disputes, killings, goading words, and the like. Other types of characters break this stereotype, bring the reader to consider a greater variety of the characterization of women. In the Saga of Bard (*Bárðar saga*), for example, we meet Helga, a character in whom we see the bitter consequences of a love that is abruptly brought to a halt. One day, Helga is caught on an ice-flow that takes her from Iceland to Greenland, where

she meets Skeggi. Although he is married, they become lovers in a relationship that lasts for two years until her father, Bárður, intervenes and brings her home. “She had no joy after she left Skeggi,” we are told; “(s)he grieved and faded ever away.” And she recites a sorrowful poem that cannot fail to touch any reader:

*Soon I shall seek to leave.*

*My passion abates not at all*

*For the spender of treasure.*

*I shall die pitifully.*

*For I loved the treasure-embracer*

*With passionate, warm emotion.*

*I cannot conceal my sorrow.*

*I sit alone and recount my misery.*

Helga then resolves to go into self-imposed exile into the hills. Were this Bergþóra instead of Helga, we might expect the father to receive a tongue-lashing, and for her to continue in her affair with Skeggi, despite her father’s protestations. But here we have a different sort of character, less overtly strong, perhaps, but no less realistically depicted (for perhaps even more so). Helga’s strength is a quiet strength built upon deep inner emotions, and it is this resource that enables her to abandon the company of men to inhabit the hills of Iceland.

The type of psychological depth in its more developed form familiar to modern readers comes with the fiction of a later period. Here in these early works, two elements in the construction of character predominate: action and, to a lesser extent, description. Characterization is usually brief. Of a man, the author may provide a number of details, but of a woman the author usually only notes that she was good-looking; and he may add that she was intelligent, a woman of temperament, skilled in magic, or the like, as in the introduction of Unnr in *Njáls saga*: “She was a good-looking, refined, capable girl, and was considered the best match in Rangárvellir.” In introduction of

Guðrún in *Laxdæla saga* must be considered unusually detailed (probably because of the dominant role she occupies in the saga): “She was the loveliest woman in Iceland at that time, and also the most intelligent, Guðrún Ösvifrsdóttir was a woman of such courtliness that whatever finery other women wore, they seemed more like mere trinkets besides hers. She was also the shrewdest and best-spoken of all women, and she had a generous disposition.” The portrait of Guðrún forms an exception to the often terse description of women given by the saga writers; and although many of the descriptions strike us as formulate and stereotypical, they are often more subtle than we first realize and, taken together, reveal a variety of portraits.

Women can also fulfil roles as prophetesses, predicting fortune good and bad. In *Eiríks saga rauða*, for instance, the seeress Þorgbjörg attends a feast at Þorkell’s farm, at which she predicts that the famine will come to an end and that Guðrún will start an eminent family line, “and over your progeny there shall shine a bright light.” In other instances, as in the romances (ridarsögur), women possess the ability to perform magic, at times to assist a hero, or as in *Gibbons saga*, to remain invisible or to disappear, as Nitida does on her supposed wedding day in *Nitida saga*. Some sagas also depict women as having the ability to cure diseases and wounds. In *Mirmanns saga*, for example, Mirmann, who is a leper, travels to Sicily, where he is cured by the beautiful Cecilia, whom he marries. And in *Rémundar saga*, Rémundar’s wounds can only be cured by Elina, the most beautiful woman in the world. Although readers may be less attracted by the fairy-tale quality of the later tales, the portraits nevertheless add to the view of the female character as multifaceted, both within her abilities and in her function in the narrative. Interestingly, in some of the latter *riddarasögur*, we find women adopting

male roles, not only in their actions and their willful independence, but also in dress. Male society, of course, offers opportunities closed to the female, and the exchange of role and dress, bringing, as it does, greater freedom to the women, offers an attractive, and strikingly modern, comment on the division and interplay of social roles.

The role of women in Old English poetry has been described as an “ideal of aristocratic woman as primarily a passive, peaceful, and colourless addition to society.” In stark contrast stand the women of the Old Norse sagas, who are colourful and active, proud and strong, fierce and defensive, skilled in magic and the healing arts, as capable of killing as they are of loving. The richness and variety of characterization commands the reader’s attention. Nor are the women mere appendages to the narrative, providing transitional interludes to the main action. Rather, their stories and their actions often form an integral part of the narrative, advancing it and developing its complexity. The positive characteristics associated with the men, such as strength, generosity, and a sense of honour, can equally be associated with women; and although the portraits may appear idealized even in the most “historical” of narratives, they nevertheless comment upon a medieval society’s view of the place and value of women within the social structure.

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## The Name Eyjafjörður

by Samantha Garnett Eyford

*When I grow up, I want to live beside the sea.*

*I'll plant my roots in scattered shells and blackened sands*

*My crooked tree diverts its limbs to foreign lands...*

*And here in salted air, I may forsee*

*The frozen tide rushing to embrace me*

“Hvað í ósköpunum ertu að gera krakki, hættu að fíflast og drífdú þig aftur að vinna!” He shouted to the group of child-workers across the gravel road. They had realized that their supervisor was distracted talking to me, and had taken to loitering about, playing on their expensive phones. One taunted a menacing rooster; another was attempting to climb the roof

of the shed. All the country school-age kids were required to work during their summer months to keep them busy; out of trouble is more like it. I had no idea what Helgi had shouted, but it made them jump and scatter, so clearly it was effective. He turned his attention back to me and his tone shifted to one that was slightly more solemn. “Do you want to say something?”

I looked down to the makeshift grave. A small yellow duckling lay lifeless in the sand. We were standing at the waterside to Eyjafjörður, the largest and most Northern fjord in Iceland. Moments earlier, when I had picked it up to place it in the hole we'd dug for it, I realized that it was still warm. “No, It's just a dead bird, I mean,” I bit my

lip. “I don’t know.” There’s an awkward silence between us. I could hear the kids screaming in íslensku behind us; it took only minutes for them to start goofing off again. The frigid water from the fjord began to saturate the makeshift grave, enveloping the fluffy little corpse. Its yellow feathers starkly contrasted the grayness of the watery earth. I can’t help but shiver and clutch my steaming mug of lavender earl grey. What a bizarre way to enjoy my morning tea.

Helgi stared at me with a quizzical look in his eyes. He must have thought I was either really smart or really dumb and hadn’t quite figured out which. “All right then,” he said dismissively, kicking sand with the side of his foot to informally fill in the grave. “We’ll head to our next job just as soon as the truck is loaded. We’re going to go cut the grass ‘round my father’s house on my family farm.” More awkward silence. I was hopelessly nursing my tea and gaping at the absurd baby-bird death-mound. After another moment Helgi nudged my shoulder to get my attention and pull me from my odd trance. “If it’s just a dead bird why do you look so sad?” He turned and headed back to the vinnuskúrinn- the work-shed where we based our rural landscaping operation. “Ég sagði þér að fara aftur að vinna! Viltu að ég reki löppina þvert upp í rassinn á þér!?”

*When I grow up, I want to work my own homestead.*

*Though summers short and winters long, I will abide,*

*To watch the lamb borne and ascend the mountain-side,*

*Through months of darkness we endure our dread,*

*With warmth of midnight sun we break our bread*

I fumed at the piece of lawn equipment that stubbornly squatted before me. Reinforce that there gender stereotype, Sam, yeah, cool. You got this. I was desperately trying to mow a decrepit farmhouse lawn

that probably hadn’t been touched once all summer with a mower that, although relatively new, had never been properly maintained. Every time I got it started, I moved it a matter of a couple meters before it choked and pattered out again. My hands were stained a vibrant green from all the mulch I kept wrenching from the overworked and under-functioning blades. I have tons of professional experience in landscaping, and yet I couldn’t get a simple lawnmower to do its job. I was trying to do a good job. I wanted to do a good job. I really should have been using a string trimmer to hack away at the mess of overgrown sod, but I’d been told it’s against policy for women to use those machines. “It’s bad for your woman-organs”, they kept telling me. What a load! “Fine,” they said, “But why would you want to do more work than you have to?”

In the middle of summer in Northern Iceland, it barely broke fifteen degrees Celsius. Back home in Canada, it was probably hovering somewhere around thirty. Working outside all day, I was thankful for this windy, overcast weather. With a pitchfork, I stabbed at a massive pile of freshly cut grass and tossed it into the back of an open trailer. Helgi sat inside a rickety old jeep to which the trailer was attached. He was blasting crappy German metal music and, I don’t know, probably thinking about naked girls or something.

“Hey dingus, why don’t you get out here and help?” I suggested teasingly, but still with some degree of, you know, get off your butt.

“Ehh,” he muttered, “I’ve got to take the kids back to the shed for their lunch break.” “We just had a coffee break like an hour ago!”

“Yep.” he said flatly, looking beyond me. He shouted at the underage employees that half-heartedly attended to their assigned roles- trimming hedges, raking grass,

standing around, weeding garden beds, playing with their iphones, and so on. “Það er kominn lunchtime, drífið ykkur inn í bíl!”

They dropped their tools and ran for the truck before he had even finished his sentence. At least, being older than these kids (or perhaps just foreign and scary to them), I got some kind of seniority privilege - they always left the front passenger seat vacant for me. I clambered inside and we drove off.

*When I grow up, I want to know my  
ancestors*

*To stake a hearth, a home, a name, for us  
they poured*

*Their heart and blood in glacial streams  
unto the ford*

*In future years my children may confer  
Why this place enchanted and possessed her*

Day two of cleaning up around Helgi's family farm. Helgi's young nephew, Danni, wanted a large clearing in an unused field so that he could play football, and we were perfectly content to use work time to grant him this wish. Danni was one of the only ones who didn't shy away from labour and therefore I liked him. Several coffee breaks came and went before noon. It doesn't matter where in the world I happen to be, I still find myself intolerant of lazy teenagers. I didn't talk much with the others, mostly because of the age gap, but also because of the language barrier. They all spoke perfect English but rarely bothered to. I didn't blame them. I'd been in Iceland for several weeks now and although I'm far from fluent, I found that I was able to pick up words here and there. “Why er þessi babe að work svona much? Hún fær not einu sinni paid fyrir this!” Something about my looks, my overenthusiastic work ethic and wondering why I did all this without earning a wage.

Not a lot of time passed before Helgi shouted that it was time to go back to vinnuskúrinn. This time, however,

Helgi turned to me and told me to stay behind. “I'll be right back,” He said from the driver's seat, “and when I return I'll take you up the hill.” I didn't particularly understand what he was talking about but I didn't ask questions- anything to avoid clambering back in to that dusty old work jeep. As the vehicle pattered away, I plopped myself down on fresh-cut grass beside a narrow glacial stream. I rifled through my bag to pull out the lunch that had been packed for me this morning by the doting old woman that was hosting me during my stay in the Svalbarðsströnd countryside, on a farm not far from here called Halllandi. I pulled out a box of what I could only assume was chocolate milk. “Kókovájólk” was emblazoned on the side in garish pink and brown lettering, a bizarre anthropomorphic yellow and pink cat spewed a speech bubble of some garbled Icelandic nonsense that I couldn't read. I imagined the cat saying, “Drink Me!” so that I might shrink away like Alice in Wonderland. After stabbing into the drink box with its attached straw and taking a sip, I confirmed that it was in fact chocolate milk, thick and sludgy with added sugar. Yuck. I put it down. Aside from the fact that I loathe chocolate milk, there was something about the phonetics of the word “mjólk” that turned me off. It sounded too guttural, and the cartoon cat seriously creeped me out. I felt guilty for this realization. Perhaps my distaste for Kókovájólk made me an inauthentic Icelander. I resigned myself to a plain cheese sandwich and the sweet, sweet silence next to the stream.

As promised, Helgi returned in no time at all. I had gone into a bit of a trance listening to the wind and the water so his approach startled me. He greeted me with a wide grin that I returned wholeheartedly. I was happy to have a quiet lunch hour alone with him. He is a strange and oddly-



humoured man, but an intelligent and thoughtful one. The fact that we share traceable common ancestors, despite having grown up on opposite sides of the world, only strengthens my admiration

“Up there is where my great-grandmother lived,” he said to me. Living on a massive fjord, everything sat on a slope. He pointed upwards across the riverbed, past his father’s house, past his own house, up to the grassy grazelands beyond. “It was knocked down many years ago. There’s only foundations now. Rubble. Perhaps not even that. It’ll be a bit of a climb. Do you still want to see it?”

*When I grow up, I want to be one of seiðr  
Run across lava rock in nothing but high  
heels*

*Secrets of Fortuna formerly concealed –  
When Northern winds provoke the runes,  
I’ll hear*

*The voice of Óðinn’s prophecies endeared*

“Yeah, I totally hate this guy. We are technically trespassing on his property but,” Helgi huffed, “Who cares? Hey, watch that fence, don’t touch it!”

I was several meters ahead of Helgi. Clambering over uneven terrain up the side of this grassy hill proved to be exhausting, but in my enthusiasm to see this old homestead I hardly felt winded. I stopped short of a wire fence.

Helgi caught up to me. His cheeks were beet-red from the climb and he had to pause momentarily to catch his breath. “The fence”, he said between gasps, “Is electric. Be careful.”

Stupidly, I poke at the metal threads. Zap. Ouch. Yep. Electric.

With his jacket he pushed down on the humming wires so that I may comfortably hop over them. “This guy made the news a while back because his horses were found wandering in a valley in the middle of winter, so emaciated that their hair was falling out and they had been eating each

other’s tails.” Helgi awkwardly clambered over the fence after me. “I mean, we didn’t like him much before, but since then we don’t talk at all, even though he’s kin. We have no respect for those that abuse animals and that guy,” He pointed his thumb in a direction that I could only assume led to his home, “cares only about money. Forget him. Anyway, here we are.”

Where? I looked around. I didn’t see anything. Helgi motioned to the ground around our feet. Still nothing.

“It was bulldozed, remember? The grass has grown over everything by now.”

Upon closer examination, I did indeed see that the lumps of green- stones overwhelmed by grass- formed a squareish outline that easily could have once been the foundation to a modest home. I suddenly felt giddy and let out a squeal of delight. Uncharacteristically, I raised my voice, “Helgi, this is SO COOL! What was her name? What do you know? Tell me EVERYTHING!”

He seemed shocked for a moment- probably wondering why this normally soft-spoken Canadian chick had gotten so excited over a pile of rocks- but visibly shifted and began to look quite pleased. “Her name was Helga,” he replied. “Her father and your great-great grandmother were siblings. Goes quite a ways back but she’s still your aunt.”

I situated myself upon the rubble and clawed mindlessly at the grass. I’m not sure why I did this. My mind was racing. I was feeling a strange elation not unlike what children feel on Christmas morning. I lifted my head and gazed across the sparkling silver waters of Eyjafjörður. The humble city of Akureyri rested on the other side. The view was spectacular. It hit me, at that moment, that this dizzyingly beautiful place was my ancestral home. This very location was the reason I carry the surname Eyford.

Helgi sat and shared the view with me in silence for a few moments. But Helgi could never stay quiet for very long, and it seemed he had been reading my mind. "When you live here all your life you kind of stop appreciating its natural beauty. It's good to stop and acknowledge your blessings."

"You live in a place of magic, Helgi."

"I know. It has its problems, but it's my home, and I'll never leave."

There was a moment, then, of tranquility that I will never forget. Between the wind, the water and the earth, I had fallen completely, wholly, and utterly in love with the landscape of this country. "I guess we should head back. The kids are probably hanging from the rafters by now," I muse. "...Er, swinging. I meant swinging."

We begin our slow and peaceful decent back down the hill.

Somewhere along the walk, Helgi piped up, "You know, we're only cousins like really really far apart. Like five or six generations I think." "So?"

"So that means we're far enough apart to date and it wouldn't even be weird!"

"Shut up!"

*When I grow up, I want to know and love  
my soul*

*I'll bide my thyme and swim through  
purple-white lupin,*

*Bathing in ash to rest when frigid fog  
crawls in*

*Reflecting upon Huldufólk foretold,  
Hidden worlds of sublimity extolled*

It's July 1st Canada Day. I was sitting on a cliff that overlooked the Halllandi farm in which I'd lived the last month. I was idly watching a massive cruise ship embark out of the Akureyri port on the opposite side of the fjord. Between my fingers I grasped a tiny purple flower. It

had minuscule white tendrils coating the pod near the flower that caused it to cling to whatever it touched. A young girl had given it to me earlier in the day when we were taking our lunch at the vinnuskúrinn. She implored me to press it into a book and keep it forever, telling me that it was called Gleyim-Mér-Ei: Forget-Me-Not. She hadn't made much of an impression on me before that moment, but she told me how much I had inspired her to travel to Canada and that she hoped I would remember her when she did. She was not the first to express a similar sentiment to me. I had been so caught up on how the local population had impacted me that I hadn't once considered how I might have affected others. Carefully, I placed the small indigo flower into the journal that lay in my lap and scrawled down the young girl's name and the date. I closed the journal and put it in my bag. I inserted small black headphones into my ears and pressed shuffle on my music player. Through chance magic, the song "A Beautiful Place Out In The Country" by Boards of Canada began to sing sweetly. I took a moment to lay down in the grass and let my feet swing freely over the cliff's edge. For a while I watched the clouds swirl above me; in the violent Nordic winds to which I'd grown accustomed, I found the movement of silver, white and black clouds above me to be a beautiful cataclysmic dance. I stood and reached my hands towards the sky, then stretched out to the sides and began to spin. To the tune of the song that only I could hear, I swayed my hips and flailed my arms in fluid motion. The wind wildly blew my hair in every direction. Although not a soul was with me upon that isolated precipice, I truly felt as if my homeland was dancing along with me.



## Iceland Honeymoon

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by Melanie Hassett

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Iceland. A place of breathtaking beauty. A place that can make you believe in fairies and elves. A place of steaming hot natural pools and chilly winds. The place where my husband chose to surprise me with for our honeymoon.

No, you're right, it's not the first honeymoon destination that would come to mind. When one thinks of Iceland, one does not necessarily think of romance. But from the mists of Gullfoss Falls to the steam of the Blue Lagoon, we fell in love with the country.

When we got off the plane, with hardly

a plan in mind, we were assaulted with many pictures of the Blue Lagoon. The steam-shrouded, whitish-bluish-greenish colored water looked so unique and surreal, we couldn't help but hop on the next bus to the place. And yes, it was awesome. The next day, I found that the eczema on my hands caused by uncountable times washing them during each shift (I'm a nurse) was gone. I, of course, attributed it to the healing nature of the Blue Lagoon!

Our travels took us first to Reykjavík, where we stayed for a couple nights, exploring Laugavegur, a street with some



seriously sweet shopping if you're a millionaire, and stopping at The Sea Baron for some delicious lobster soup. We found out that the majority of street names were so long that asking for directions usually ended with us blankly staring and finally smiling and nodding while pretending that the last unpronounceable street name sounded different than the last two that were mentioned. It was windy, somewhat chilly, and sometimes rainy. But a visit to one of the many natural fed hot pools interspersed throughout the city, cured us of any lingering coolness.

One day, we decided to take a little horseback ride up the mountains. Our guide chattered to us about the strict guidelines that protect the Icelandic horses (no imports of horses, tack or anything horsey) into Iceland, thus making the Icelandic horse a very pure and hardy breed in its native country. We trotted by bubbling, odorous pools and swamps, constantly climbing and climbing up the mountainside. With the smell of sulfur permeating the air and the bleak, green mountain overhead, I was fairly certain the Icelandic book my mother read to me as a child would come true and I would see giant stone Flumbra and her children coming down the mountain. While that

bit of fantasy did not come true, we did see a group of hikers boiling eggs in the steaming hot pools we passed by. I was tempted to ask for a bite but I was too intent on our goal, a dip in a hot stream. When we got to our destination, we jumped out of our many layers of clothes and ran shivering to the river. It was truly delightful, after a windy cold trek up the mountain,

jumping in a steaming hot river is pretty much heaven.

On our flight over, our flight attendant raved to us about this crazy music festival on Vestmannaeyjar (anglicized as Westman Islands). Once we got to Reykjavík, we found out she was not the only one raving about this music festival. Apparently it was THE MUSIC FESTIVAL, like THE BEST ONE EVER. So, halfway through our trip, my husband and I decided to check it out. After a packed ferry ride over the island, we walked through a small town to the festival grounds. The festival grounds were in a natural amphitheater; mountains on three sides and the ocean on the other. It was absolutely picturesque. The funny thing was, there were tons of camping tents, but hardly any people. Apparently this crazy music festival was attended by 10 people and had no music. So, we walked up the mountainside and watched the adorable puffins. As the night approached, five of the 10 people started setting up the stage. By the time it was dark, I started to notice that there was at least 20 people wandering around, and that the people on the stage had turned on some music through the stereo system. Impressive. Suddenly, an

actual band showed up and droves of people started coming out of the tents. By the time the second band was on, the huge natural amphitheater was filled with thousands of people. There were lots of tents, but the number of people dancing and singing along and having the best time of their lives seemed to far exceed the capacity of those tents. Now I began to understand why this was the BEST MUSIC FESTIVAL

EVER. Apparently, the day was used for sleeping, and the night was used to dance to super awesome Icelandic and Scandinavian musicians. It was truly impressive (no sarcasm intended this time). In the midst of the crazy awesome party, proposals happened. We were confused when suddenly a lot of cheering happened in the middle of a song and the video on stage zoomed into two random people in the crowd. The friendly guy beside us happily explained that it was a tradition; Icelanders that come here every year often use this epic festival as a place to propose to their significant other, who, he said, they often met at this very festival.

After a night of pure awesomeness, we traveled back to mainland and slept in the car beside a thundering wondrous waterfall (there seem to be one around every corner in Iceland). We later visited the Geysir, got mesmerized by its gushing glory and Thingvellir Park, hiked around the rift-valley on which Icelanders built their early parliament. When looking at a map to decide where to go next, it was surreal to see names like Hekla, Árnes,



and Árborg; and knowing that these town names I had grown up around in Manitoba had originated from this beautiful but forbidding place. Considering I grew up in Arborg, we had to go to the municipality of Árborg. So go there we did, staying in a quaint guesthouse in the town of Selfoss. The owner of the guesthouse was excited to find out I was from Arborg, Manitoba and had a bit of Icelandic in my blood. Upon hearing this, the owner's son promptly turned to my husband and issued him a warning saying "Better watch out, she has Viking in her, never know the crazy she'll get up too".

We continued on from there, checking out the black beach by Vik with the basalt columns and doing a sweet glacier hike. It was all too soon and we had to turn around and head back to Reykjavik. We spent one last night in the city, slowly wandering around the streets and reveling in the light of the midnight sun. But sadly, our honeymoon was at its end. We left with promises to each other that we would return to travel the perimeter of the country, to explore the less travelled areas. It was truly the perfect honeymoon.

# Be Still the Water

by Karen Emilson

## Chapter One

*"Where good men go, that is God's way."*

- Tryggvi Emilson

I have watched old people die, and young ones, too. Most endings are the same so I'd be foolish to expect my passing will be much different.

They call me forgetful, eccentric. But never a fool. I am an old woman who has seen many things. Moving me to the palliative care room at the end of the hall underlines that I have little time left. When I stop taking in fluids it will take two days, maybe three.

Oh Freyja, where are you? Not knowing your fate has tormented me for nearly seventy years. Before I go, I will make good on my promise to find you.

How will I do that you ask? Quite simple. By travelling to the past.

Before you pooh-pooh the possibility – call me a crazy old loon – remember, I almost died once and it taught me something useful. Here, we will try it together: lie back, close your eyes, and let your mind soften. Focus on the blank space. Let yourself fall into it, that mysterious place between heaven and earth where all the answers lie to the questions hidden deep in your heart. Don't be afraid, your soul will return. As I said, I've done this before.

Time to relax and enjoy as a purposeful wind takes me now, back to 1906 and a place not far from here, nestled in the poplars under a giant oak, the place I still call home. *Ekheimar*.

\*\*\*

"I had a sister once."

These are the first words I remember Stefan Freeman saying to us. We were racing along the shoreline with you riding on his back, choking him as you hung on, spurring your heels into his thighs like he was a pony. Stefan was our first friend in our new home. We met him on the boat that brought our family from Chief's Point to the Kristjansson homestead a week earlier. One year younger than our brother Leifur, who would soon turn fifteen, Stefan was shorter but gave an impression of power. He twisted the brim of his cap to one side when he spoke and always seemed impulsively interested in everything that was going on. Father said Stefan must have a bit more Irish blood in him than the rest of us because of all the freckles and the hint of red in his wiry hair. He was the first boy to cause my insides to stir in that exciting way that makes girls do silly things.

We all competed for his attention, including Leifur, who would rather be off with Stefan hunting partridge or following a deer trail through the bush, not wasting time with his giggling sisters.

As you slid off Stefan's back and started kicking sand against his legs, he grabbed your hands and began swinging you around. At first, you screamed, demanding that he let you go, but soon you were laughing as your long skirt swirled around and around as Stefan's heels dug into the sand.

"Asta!" A voice called out to me.

I looked back toward the barn to see Finn running toward us. He'd just finished slopping the pigs and was anxious to join in the fun. Pale as the underbelly of a fish, Finn was all joints and bone. Do you remember

Finn Kristjansson? He lived here on this point of land with his parents, the people who were kind enough to take our family in that summer. We'd only known Finn for a week but already had overheard Mother whisper that he was brilliant. In the world we were born into – despite the Viking myths – intelligence is valued over brawn.

"I'm done," Finn said, lips parting to show a set of large, gleaming teeth. "Now what shall we do?"

Stefan and Leifur would have preferred Finn not be included, even though they didn't say it, but this was his home and he so desperately wanted to be their friend.

"I know a spot where we can dig." Finn pointed up the beach. "The Indians had a camp there and I found an arrowhead once."

Dizzy by then, Stefan's one foot crossed over the other and he landed on his back with you crashing onto his chest. He lay panting, gently holding you as you flung sand in his face. Then he squinted up at the rest of us.

"I know," he said. "Let's go to Ghost Island."

Hovering above them, my soul watches the scene play out again. Finn sat at the back of the twenty-foot skiff holding the tiller while Stefan hoisted the sail. Leifur and I couldn't see Ghost Island as we set out, but they assured us it wasn't far away. As the boat skimmed across the water, seagulls hung noisily overhead and, believing we were fishermen, dipped occasionally to probe us with hungry eyes, expecting us to lift a net.

"I despise them," Freyja shouted over the thrumming of wind and sail, "I saw them rip a baby rabbit in half once and gobble it up."

Had it been Signy, our older sister, sitting beside Stefan, I would have been cross-eyed with jealousy but it didn't bother me in the least that all his attention was on sweet little Freyja who sat possessively with her hip pressed up against his, admiring his every move.

"They are a nuisance all right," he said,



searching the boat for something to throw at the birds.

I might as well admit the only reason I begged Leifur to go along that day was because of Stefan. We left without telling Signy, knowing she would have declared out loud that our father, or "Pabbi" as we called him, would have forbidden it. Our parents had left by steamship a half hour earlier to go to the Lake Manitoba Narrows store, so the boys were in charge. For years afterwards I regretted going and to this day still believe that if it wasn't for boys, girls would seldom get themselves into trouble.

"Gulls are useful scavengers," Finn said as he adjusted the rudder, peering beyond the mast in the direction of the island. "They keep the shoreline clean of dead fish and the mice under control."

"Yes, but they still shit on our heads," Leifur said.

"Then wear a hat," Finn said, so seriously that it struck Freyja's funny bone and she started giggling with such infectious glee that we all, including Finn, laughed harder than the words deserved.

Eight-year-old Freyja looked nothing like the rest of us. One evening she'd carried

the Eaton's catalogue to Mother's lap, and said: "Look. Me, Freyja." Her slender finger pointed excitedly across a page of porcelain dolls that looked much like her except that Freyja's hair could never be tamed. It grew wildly out in a fine mass of wild, white curls.

When someone met her for the first time, they would stop and stare, mesmerized. I would see their eyes soften as she danced around, telling stories that evolved from her make-believe world in such a clear, sweet, high-pitched voice.

Once you came to know her, you'd see her determination. She could coerce others into doing whatever she wanted and soon they'd believe her ideas were their own. Few could resist when Freyja reached out her delicate hand. They'd allow themselves to be dragged to see a nest of mewling kittens, and would pause to wait as she picked wildflowers.

As the boat skimmed across the water, Leifur and I dug our heels into the floorboards, leaning against the direction it was heeling, as Stefan had shown us, neither of us willing to admit we were afraid. We'd never been in a sailboat before.

"We're going to tip," Freyja cried, grabbing Stefan's arm.

"I have only put her over once, when I was first learning," Stefan chuckled. Leifur looked relieved and seeing that Finn was perfectly at ease helped calm my nerves.

"We set our nets here at freeze-up," Finn said, pointing to a narrow peninsula of rock and sand they named Gull Reef. A few naked trees angled up from the scrubby underbrush, every limb a perch for resting gulls. They, along with other water birds – cormorants and loons—nested here by the thousands.

We'd heard that Indians from the nearby reservation taught the first Icelandic settlers how to fish under the ice and, because of that, those pioneers survived their first harsh winter. Starvation and servitude

were things our forebears understood. The desire for independence is why so many of us immigrated to America. We chose to live where we could farm and fish because that is what we knew and, like so many immigrants, chose the wilderness because it would afford us the opportunity someday to own property, a privilege denied us in our homeland.

When it came time to decide whether to settle on Lake Manitoba or in New Iceland (the larger settlement 100 miles east on Lake Winnipeg), Pabbi was ready to flip a coin, that is until he spent a day fishing on Lake Manitoba. He returned home from the frozen lake that night excited as we'd ever seen him—holding up a large pickerel in each hand—his mind set. Access to abundant fishing grounds meant we'd always have plenty to eat and a commodity to trade.

And now, June couldn't have offered us a gentler day to travel the lake. The sun was high, the occasional wispy cloud passed overhead. The southwest breeze, soft and warm, carrying the slight scent of waterweeds and fish, was distinct and so pleasing. It's been said that once the essence of the lake is breathed in, it finds its way into a person's soul. That perfect June day it found its way inside me.

Ghost Island appeared from nowhere on the port side.

"There is a cabin at the north end," Stefan said, trimming the sail. "I will take you to the graves on the island, too, if you want."

I wasn't sure if we'd heard him correctly, given the wind and hum of the center board as it cut through the water.

"Drowned fishermen," he added. "The Indians believe there is a cavern beneath the lake where spirits live. If fishermen become too greedy, it angers the spirits, and a storm will suddenly come up, the ice will break, and the fish will jump back into the water."

Freyja's eyes grew wide. Leifur and I



looked at each other but didn't say a word.

"Nonsense," Finn said, still holding the tiller steady. "You sound like my Langamma. She tried to scare us with the old stories until Mother told her to stop."

We had a grandmother too, but our Amma had other ways of making us behave.

Stefan twisted his cap and grinned, motioning for Finn to start steering toward the island.

"Father didn't believe it either, not until he was lost in a snowstorm after his best day of fishing ever," he said. "On the ice just north of the island he saw something, a half-man, half-beast, standing five yards in front of him. He blinked and it disappeared. Since then he always throws back a large fish from every net, just in case."

Shivers worked their way up my spine. We'd heard many old stories too, back in the communal home where Mother's family gathered in the Baðstofa every evening. Huddled under wool blankets, we listened to old Uncle Ásgeir who stood bent under candlelight reciting from memory ancient myths that had been repeated for thousands of years. I'd assumed that we'd left the Huldufólk, Gryla, and Fylgjur—those hidden people and frightful spirits—back in Iceland.

"There is no scientific proof," Finn said. "My father does not believe any of it and neither do I."

The island grew and soon loomed beside

us. Towering trees ran in a wide strip down the center of it, surrounded by a wide belt of sand.

As Finn steered the boat to land, the bulk of the island stole our wind so the sail began flapping noisily. Stefan let the lines go and began pulling it down. Looking into the water, I saw the lake bottom rise up, and within minutes the keel scraped against mossy rocks. Stefan jumped out and pulled the bow up onto the sand so we could scramble out.

"The cabin is this way," he said, waving his arm for us to follow.

The boys ran ahead while Freyja and I struggled to keep up, following a trail that wound into the trees. Being in the bush was an unsettling experience for us. There was nothing like it in Iceland. There, we were accustomed to wide open spaces, rock, and ocean. And since arriving in Canada five years earlier, we'd only lived in the distant town of Lundi. I felt uncertain as the trees closed in around us. It was dark and the air cool. Birds chirped, insects buzzed, and leaves in the undergrowth rustled as voles and mice skittered underneath. There was a terrible stench of a carcass rotting somewhere.

"Asta, pick me up," Freyja said, tugging at my arm. She quickly wrapped her legs around my waist, tucking her face into my neck. "I don't like it here," she quivered. "There are trolls."

"No," I said to her. "They do not like it

# Guardian

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here in Manitoba. It is too cold.”

I fought to keep the uncertainty out of my voice. I could still see old Uncle Ásgeir standing over us, eyes wild as he warned against creatures of the invisible world that hid in the trees and burrowed under rocks by the streams.

“Wait for us,” I hollered, but the boys kept on so I ran to catch up.

The shanty was difficult to see as the weathered boards blended in with the oaks. Stefan pulled open the door and we followed him inside. I was surprised by how little there was. A stove, wooden table, and two chairs on a musty dirt floor, six beds built bunk-style along the walls, covered by worn feather ticks. There were no windows, so the only light that came in was through the door behind us.

“We were lost on the ice during a storm once,” Stefan said. “Good thing this place was here. We made a fire and stayed the night.”

Soon we were back on the beach at the foot of a lighthouse on the north end of the island facing The Narrows, the channel where the south and north basin of Lake Manitoba met. In the distance there was a small steamship but I couldn’t tell what direction it was traveling. I hoped it was not our parents already on their way home.

Leifur picked up wide, flat stones as we traversed the beach and threw them sidarm into the lake, counting the number of times each bounced across the surface. Broad shouldered and capable, our brother seldom drew attention to himself and didn’t seem to mind that our older sister often overshadowed him. Sometimes though, when I looked into those hazel eyes of his, I recognized a stirring. There was more going on inside Leifur than we girls ever realized.

Stefan tried showing Freyja how to skim stones, but each throw from her skinny little arm sent the stones either straight up or down and the rest of us shook our heads in laughter. We all joined in, flinging stones

out over the water.

“You’re no better than Asta,” Leifur teased Finn, causing us all to turn and watch.

Finn tightened his lips and, squinting, side-armed a flat, black stone and this time it skipped three times. He brightened when he looked at me.

“That’s nothing,” Leifur said, easily shooting one out so fast it jumped seven times.

We all cheered.

“Time to quit while you’re ahead,” Stefan said and we started out toward the west side of the island. He stopped for a moment to pick up an eagle’s feather then handed it to Freyja. She took it and ran the smooth edge against her hand and cheek. She held it up, twirling it, but soon grew bored with the feather, handing it back to him to put in his pocket.

Away from the shelter of the east side, the wind blew much harder, whipping our hair across our faces. Stefan stooped so Freyja could climb onto his back then boosted her up. We leaned in close to one another to hear what was being said as we kicked our way across the pebbly shore.

Finn paused to look up at the sky. “We should go back,” he said, “the wind is picking up.”

“We will, but first I want to show you the graves,” Stefan said, leading us away from the shoreline toward the bush. He’d said earlier that his father grazed sheep on the island and we could see them at the edge of a small meadow. The ewes turned their heads sharply when they saw us, bleating for their lambs. Our eyes were drawn up to a nest at the top of a dead oak that looked like a giant basket in the sky.

“What a terrible place to build it,” Leifur said. “There is no shelter here at all.”

“Their wingspan is so wide they can’t fly into the bush,” Finn said, shading his eyes from the sun. “That’s why they build at the top of a dead tree.”

“Look.” Freyja pointed over Stefan’s shoulder.

Two bald eagles stood silently on the graves, golden eyes staring down their beaks at us. They bobbed across the ground then effortlessly took flight. Their strong wings moved slowly, lifting against the wind, and within seconds they were soaring over the water. They made a wide circle back overhead again, landing at the top of a tree not far away.

“Predators,” Finn said. “They don’t hide. They hunt.”

I felt another shiver. It reminded me of the day we gathered to pray as Pabbi lowered our baby brother’s body into a grave at the edge of the yard. I remembered what our Amma had said: “There is no need to fear dead people, it is the live ones you have to watch.”

Stefan let Freyja down and took her hand. Two dead lambs lay at the foot of the graves, their eyeballs plucked out, bellies torn open. A ewe lay dead at the water’s edge, feet sticking up, half buried in wet sand.

Freyja squealed, covering her eyes. “Did the eagles kill them?” she asked.

“Probably the mother died first and then her lambs.” Stefan sighed. “This happens every year.”

“But did the eagles do it?” she cried.

“No,” Stefan said softly, but I heard in his tone that he would have told her that no matter what.

We leaned in to read the names on three crosses, but they were too weather-beaten. Stefan picked up a fallen grave marker and wiped the sand from it then carefully pushed it upright into the ground. He closed his eyes for a moment and, lips barely moving, silently recited the fishermen’s prayer.

“Did you know them?” Leifur asked.

“No, they died long before father came here.”

Finn was growing anxious so we started back toward the boat. As soon as we left the

graves, the eagles began circling again.

“If I were your father I’d shoot them,” Leifur said.

“You always want to shoot things.” Freyja pouted, dragging her feet as she looked back at the dead lambs.

“The Indians believe the eagle offers protection,” Stefan said, looking up at the treetops bending with the wind. “Best we leave them alone.”

When the skiff came into view, there was a sense of relief. We all climbed in. Leifur pushed the boat away from shore as Stefan readied the sail, and we were all glad to leave Ghost Island.

The wind came in gusts now and the water churned, sending a light spray up over the bow as we chopped through it. We were more than three quarters of the way home and could see Finn’s house when the wind shifted and began pushing us off course. Every time Finn pulled on the tiller to correct, the boom would swing back as the wind fell out of the sail.

“We should come about,” Finn called. “We need to start tacking to catch the wind.”

Stefan agreed and, crouching in the middle of the boat, held a line in each hand to pull the sail across. Finn turned the boat sharply and the sail began flapping furiously, creating a horrible racket overhead. Later I would learn this was the safest moment of the whole maneuver, but at the time, I closed my eyes and covered my ears, so I didn’t see what happened the moment the wind caught the sail. I only heard Stefan call, “heads down.” There was a thud, a surprised wail and, though I didn’t hear the splash, I imagined it in nightmares for many years afterward. I didn’t see Freyja in the water, not until the boat was past, but felt the jolt as Stefan sprang up and dove in after her.

Finn’s head turned and in a split second he made a decision.

“Release the sail,” he screamed as he steadied the rudder.

Leifur scrambled across to grab the line, jolting it as he'd seen Stefan do, and then the sail let go and began flapping again, the boom centering in the middle of the boat.

"Pull it down!" Finn yelled.

Now we were at the mercy of the waves that pushed us toward shore, increasing the distance between us and the two heads that bobbed in the waves. Leifur picked up the buoy tied to a long rope.

"Not yet," Finn hollered, looking past Leifur. "We are too far. Use the paddles!"

Each of us grabbed a paddle and began cutting into the water. I kept my eyes glued to the spot where they were, and started praying. Thankfully, our mother had insisted that we all learn to swim. Blinking hard, I could see Stefan's hands holding Freyja's as they both treaded water.

We were all screaming for them to hold on, that we were coming.

"She got scared and stood up," Finn said, the muscles on his lanky arms bulging. "I should have made her sit with me."

Freyja was struggling, her head tilted all the way back, chin pointing up to the sky. She bobbed as Stefan tried to calm her down. We heard some of it as we drew closer, the occasional steady word from him, her frantic cries that carried across the water. Then his voice rose, calling her name, as her head went under. He pulled her back up but she went under again. This time when she surfaced he pulled her close. Gasping like a drowning cat, she began clawing at him, trying to climb on top of his head.

I started screaming again.

Leifur kicked off his shoes, grabbed the buoy, slid it up to his shoulder and dove in.

Finn told me through clenched teeth to keep paddling. There was nothing more we could do as Leifur swam toward them. Freyja pushed Stefan under. Up he came, arms flailing, then he leaned onto his back and kicked her away with his feet. Freyja

struggled for only a moment then sank below the surface.

Stefan paused to catch his breath then dove under. Right when we thought both were lost, he re-surfaced, left fist clutching the front of Freyja's shirt, lifting her head out of the water. He turned over onto his back and slid her up onto his chest and began paddling backwards with one arm toward Leifur, who was moving through the water at a surprising pace. We'd never considered our brother a strong swimmer but that afternoon his determination changed the way I viewed him for the rest of our lives.

I made a silent promise to God that if He let Freyja live, I would never let anything terrible happen to her again.

Leifur thrust the buoy at Stefan, who grabbed it with his free arm and rested for a moment, then began kicking as Leifur pulled them along.

"Keep paddling," Finn reminded me. He grabbed the line and began pulling them through the waves.

"She's not breathing," Stefan said, gasping as he grabbed the gunwale.

Finn was right there to pull Freyja out of the water. I thought she was dead. Her eyes were wide open but unmoving, lips the color of a bruise.

Finn immediately turned her upside down like a newborn lamb. Then he began shaking her. He could have easily killed her, I know that now, but by some miracle it worked. Freyja started coughing and soon she was whimpering and retching. She began crying for Mother as I took her in my arms and rocked her like a baby.

Stefan and Leifur pulled themselves into the boat, exhausted, and flopped on the deck. They lay on their backs, chests heaving, eyes closed.

Finn began to shake and kept muttering to himself that all this was his fault, then he leaned over the gunwale to throw up.

Stefan was still panting. He turned his head to look up at me. "I had to let her go otherwise she would have drowned us both."

I was so thankful he'd saved her I couldn't muster one word.

"Nykur tried to take me," Freyja rasped. "He grabbed my foot and pulled me down. I saw his face."

We all instantly knew Nykur. The malevolent water horse that was always trying to steal children who misbehaved had tried to take my sister.

It was a somber journey back to shore with the boys paddling through the rough waves with the sail at half-mast.

"We must keep this a secret," Leifur said, digging into the water. He glanced back at me to be sure I was listening, then at Freyja who stared vacantly out over the water. We all agreed that under no circumstances would we ever tell the adults

what had transpired that afternoon on the lake.

Finn and I were the last to wamble off the boat. What I didn't see then because my back was to him, but I see clearly now, is Finn stopping for a moment to bend and pick something up. It was the soaked eagle's feather from Stefan's pocket. He stared at it for a moment in astonishment and wonder, then, as I turned to see if he was coming, he slipped it into his trouser pocket.

Years later, I would sometimes see Stefan staring at Freyja and sense that he was playing the events of that day over again in his mind. At the time I couldn't see it but now I do. There was something between the two of them even then.

Freyja nearly drowned twice that afternoon, first because of impulsiveness, and then when Stefan had no choice but to push her away to save them both.



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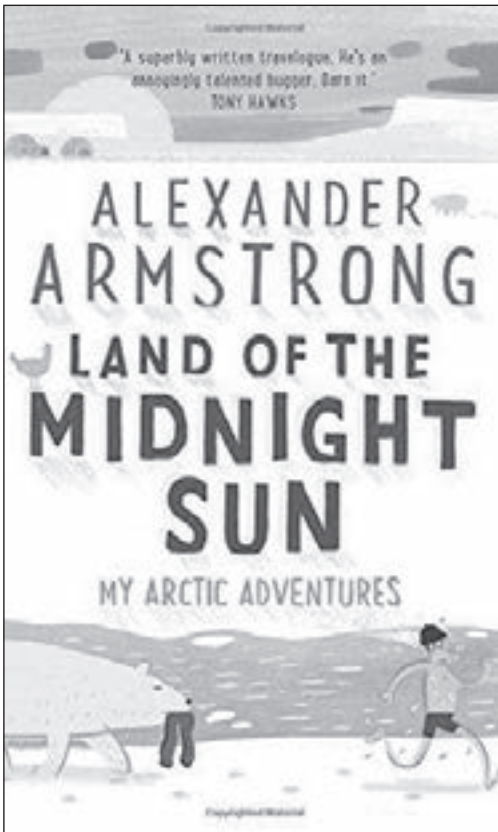
 

# Book Review

## Land of the Midnight Sun; My Arctic Adventures

by Alexander Armstrong



Reviewed by Elva Simundsson

London, UK  
Transworld Publishers 2015

Alexander Armstrong has written a truly interesting travelogue; not your usual touristy Tuscan vineyards or tropical island fantasy. Instead, Armstrong has travelled to the less frequently visited spots on our planet. His contract with a British television corporation has prompted an adventure tourism film series and with the filming, he has narrated the whole expedition with his own impressions and musings.

Armstrong travels to the lands of the midnight sun in the Northern Hemisphere. He touches on the northern tips of the Nordic countries: Finland, Sweden, Norway and Iceland then moves on to Greenland, northern Canada and finally finishing up in Alaska. At each stop he relates his experiences and his thoughts. His views are often laced with tongue-in-cheek asides and a gentle poking fun at himself, his crew and his hosts.

The most compelling thing about this book is reading how an adult discovers cold for the first time. Armstrong is British. Sure, he has seen snow and ice but always the 'hovering-just-below-freezing' slushy variety. Having grown up with cold winters, as presumably has most of our readership in Canada and the northern United States we know instinctively all the little things that

Armstrong was discovering on his Arctic excursion. We know that cold snow is not wet. We know the crunchy sound of snow under our boots when the temperature dips below -30° (at either Celsius or Fahrenheit it's still just darn cold!). We have experienced driving in the white-out of a blizzard. We know that wearing fur isn't a fashion statement but having a fur trimmed parka hood is just down-right sensible.

Each country Armstrong visits is reviewed in the same fashion. He focuses on the people he meets, the places he visits, the sights, the foods, the cultural differences he notices. For instance as a Canadian, I, of course think we are the normal and everyone else is just 'different' but Armstrong points out that Canadians are: "Grade A sticklers for rules". He says Canadians have lists of dos and don'ts posted everywhere – in hotel rooms, elevators, airports. Also he says: "Canadians take this French thing really seriously". All the Canadian women he meets are warm, funny, witty with HUGE (his capitals) personalities although Canadian men don't fare quite as well. Each nationality he meets gets a review. You will have to pick up the book to see if you agree with his assessments and to see what happens to those poor Canadian men.

Early in the book, Armstrong points out that a United Nations survey on happiness has placed each of these Scandinavian countries and Canada in the top-ten list of the happiest races in the world. One might think: what are they so happy about? Long cold dark winters in huge empty spaces of forests, tundra, mountains or snow and ice. Are people in cold climates just living closer to their ancient past as members of a tribe where we needed and supported each other in order to survive? Are people in warmer places and large cities therefore fundamentally less happy because they have lost their ties

to their caveman roots? Armstrong doesn't quite answer the question directly but his impressions of these northern folks leaves the reader contemplating his or her own thoughts on this very interesting concept of happiness.

### Correction

In the last issue of *Icelandic Connection*, Volume 68 #2, the back page cover poster credited the Government of MB Historical Society. The poster was courtesy of the Manitoba Department of Education.



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# POETRY

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## Vigilance

By Richard Bredsteen

The cry of loneliness  
The touch of friendship  
The earth in our hair and bones,  
love in our heart  
nurtured by the Mother protectress all knowing  
trust her  
cry out in your pain  
she will come  
hold and comfort you in your dreams  
The will to be human embraces us at every turn  
Nothing is taken for granted  
We each have a purpose  
Reflect  
Remember  
The ancestors will guide  
support and nourish you well  
Their strength endures ...  
Stand up be bold  
In our changing world be ready  
Your calling is a great responsibility,  
As rivers and mountains  
Oceans hold the mystery  
We too play a part  
Our children need love direction and space  
to grow up like a huge oak tree,  
Be patient with yourself  
Your parents your family your love  
Continue to learn to prosper  
There will always be suffering  
reach out  
heal yourself and others  
in the process ...



# Contributors

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RICHARD BREDSTEEN has been inspired to create poetry, write, and walk in nature throughout his adult life. He is originally from California and moved to Manitoba, Canada in 1998. He has a meditation practice, loves family and friends and work projects.

JOAN BJERRING CHRISTENSEN My maiden name was Joan Bjerring. I grew up in Winnipeg and received a BSc(HE) from the University of Manitoba. I lived in Toronto for 25 years and was a member of the executive of the ICCT in Toronto before retiring to Vancouver in 2015. I have made three trips to Iceland, the last in 2015 when I went with 14 members of my immediate family.

KAREN EMILSON has been writing professionally for nearly thirty years. She is the author of the the creative non-fiction bestsellers, *Where Children Run* and *When Memories Remain*. She can't sing, dance, draw or play an instrument but lives in awe of those who do. She loves photography and writing about everyday people. *Be Still the Water* is her first novel.

SAMANTHA EYFORD lives in Edmonton, Alberta with her cat, Ninja. She is a student, studying literature and creative writing, and is a passionate collector of kitschy knickknacks. She slings cocktails as a bartender on the weekends and likes to paint and sculpt in her free time.

DONALD G. GÍSLASON is a Winnipeg-born writer, editor and translator who summers in Gimli, winters in Vancouver, and spends as much time in Iceland as he can get away with. His early studies in Icelandic with Prof. Haraldur Bessason at the University of Manitoba held little hint of the Ph.D. in music history he was to receive from the University of British Columbia many years later. An avid photographer of daily social life, his his only career goal has been to be the perfect dinner guest.

MELANIE HASSETT is the first gal that a person usually sees after they say 'hold my beer and watch this'.... Because she's an emergency nurse. In her down time, she sleeps... Because she's a nurse. She grew up in Arborg, Manitoba and now lives in Stettler, Alberta.

ELVA SIMUNDSSON is a member of the *Icelandic Connection* board of editors and a random book reviewer and proofreader for the journal. She lives in Gimli, MB.





PHOTO: MACEY ANDVIK

### Sunna's Little Icelanders

From left to right: Bryden Boseck-Andvik, four; Payten Boseck-Andvik in National Costume, six; Kyla Andvik in National Costume, 11; Cayson Andvik, 19 months, Wyatt Andvik, eight.

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## The Back Page

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