ICELANDIC CONNECTION

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Icelandic National League of North America
Þjóðræknisfélag Íslendinga í Vesturheimi
100th Annual Convention

Come and celebrate this Icelandic National League of North America milestone in the city where it all began.

Join us in Winnipeg
at the Fairmont Hotel
May 16-19, 2019.

Honour, Celebrate, Build

ICELANDIC CONNECTION

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ICELANDIC CONNECTION

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Icelandic Connection, Box 1156, Gimli, Manitoba R0C 1B0 CANADA
CONTACT Lorna Tergesen (204) 642–9650 for inquiries about the magazine

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ON THE COVER

PHOTO: GLEN MARTIN

Early morning Willow Island hoar frost

Editorial

Icelandic National League Of North America

100 Years
Honour, Celebrate, Build

by Judy Bradley

Celebrate the 100th Anniversary of the Icelandic National League of North America in Winnipeg, Manitoba. In honouring our past, celebrating the present and building for the future, the Icelandic Canadian Frón, who shares this anniversary, is proud to host the 100th convention at the Fairmont Hotel May 16-19, 2019.

One hundred years ago, when the North American Icelanders established Þjóðræknisfélag Íslendinga í Vesturheimi, they had a vision to preserve the language and culture of their homeland.

These early immigrants maintained strong physical and cultural ties to the land of their birth while at the same time taking an active role in the citizenship and development of the country of their choice here in North America. This is their legacy to us, the descendants of these immigrants. It is a testament to them that we, the descendants, continue to actively promote and celebrate our cultural heritage in the country of our citizenship and work to maintain the ties to our North American and Icelandic cultural community.

It is fitting to mark this 100th anniversary milestone in the city where it all began. Members of the Icelandic Canadian Frón in Winnipeg are planning a program that honours the immigrants and their descendants and the 100 years of history that binds us together as an organization; that celebrates the reality of the strong connections between both Icelandic communities in North America and with Iceland; and builds these connections and communities into the future.

The pathway set by the Icelandic National League of North America 100 years ago, through its conventions and the cultural work of the individual clubs and organizations, has maintained our strong ties to our Icelandic heritage that will live on into the future.

Honour, Celebrate and Build at the 100th Anniversary INLNA Convention in May, 2019!

PHOTO COURTESY OF JUDY BRADLEY

The INLNA 2019 Convention committee.
Front: Kendra Jonasson and Judy Bradley. Back: Dawn Hjalmarsson, Ron Johnson, Susan Hjalmarson, Karen Botting, Linda Hammersley, Serena Goebel. The two other members not in photo are: Pat Odegard and Maureen Olafson.

Icelandic-Canadian Pioneer Stories Part One

complied by Gail Halldorson

Introduction

Oral and written narratives about many Icelandic-Canadian immigrants to the Interlake of Manitoba from the time they arrived in 1875 until the early 1900s have been selected: some happy stories, some sad, some funny, hopefully all interesting (there are a couple of Winnipeg stories, too). There is a preamble before each story to 'set it up' as well as a title for each item. The stories are in italics and have been edited for length and readability using mostly ellipses … and square brackets [ ]. Regular brackets ( ) are from the original story. The oral narratives are from Magnus Einarsson's book (see bibliography). I tried to keep the spontaneous charm of the spoken word alive. The word "Indian(s)" is used if it fits the time period. Today we would use the word "Indigenous". There is a glossary of terms at the end that may be useful.

1. Guðrún and Ólafur Hallson were married in Iceland and arrived in the Interlake in 1910. The first story: Gúdrun tells how she felt when they first came to Canada. The second story: Iris Wilson tells a story that she heard from her mother, about Mrs. Hallson.

I Never Wanted to Leave Iceland

I never wanted to come to Canada. It is a hard thing to leave one's homeland and loved ones. It seemed so far away! We had a lovely home in Reykjavík. Oli had a good job and our home was the meeting place for scores of relatives and friends. Life was good! Oli began to press for us to follow his parents to Canada. I resisted for two years! Never will I forget the heart-rending experience of leaving family, friends and possessions –for there was little we could bring –and venturing to this new land with two small children and a third on the way.

In 1912, we were making our way with the children to the school for a Church service, and Oli said, "Just think, in about 25 years, people will say –There go the old Hallsons to Church" and my reply was, "Heaven forbid that I should have to stay in this God-forsaken place that long." But the time came that I was perfectly happy and satisfied to stay.

Cups and Saucers

In 1912, my parents had gone to Winnipeg…and while they were away fire broke out in their store…in a short time everything was burned to the ground. My mother had some lovely pieces of china and these were lost in the fire. The following April, mother had been in Winnipeg to buy some things…and on her homeward journey the train went off the track…her few new dishes were broken.

Mother used to tell how…one day Mrs.

Hallson called and brought her a little gift of six cups and saucers. Mrs. Hallson could not speak English and, of course, Mother could not speak Icelandic…nevertheless, they enjoyed their tea together out of the new cups. That day marked the beginning of a lasting friendship.

2. Pétur Pálsson was the Gimli Postmaster from 1886 to 1891. Thorleifur Jóakimsson wrote this about Pétur's family.

Interesting Visitors

An incident long remembered by the Pálsson family was the visit of Louis Riel, who came to their house with a group of his followers. The Metis leader, with his dark, flashing eyes, made a lasting impression. This was told to her grandson by Petur and Gunlaug Pálsson's daughter, Pétrún.

3. The two principal religious denominations among Icelandic Canadians were Lutheran and Unitarian. In the early years some attached themselves to various fundamentalist, evangelical sects –especially in Winnipeg. This is an oral remembrance from Ásgeir Gíslason, who was about 20 years old when he arrived in Canada in 1901.

Oh Lord, We Pray

The Holy Rollers was a sect in Winnipeg; they had their own chapel. Their pastor was Lárus Guðmundsson. This happened when Halley's Comet passed over the north end of the city and people thought it would reach to earth. At that time, Lárus preached, "Almighty God and Father, hold a protective hand over our chapel because it is Your house, but if it strikes Winnipeg, let it hit the First Lutheran Church or the damned Unitarian shack."

4. Thorgrímur and Seinunn Jónsson arrived from Iceland with the 1876 group and settled in "Akri" on the bank of the Icelandic River about a mile south of what is now Riverton. Their granddaughter, Aurora Stinson (nee: Sigvaldson), lived with her mother and father on the same property. She wrote many stories of life there; here are two of them.

Blind Hans

With [my grandparents] since the first time I can remember, lived a blind man, Hans Egilsson. He had known them in Iceland, and having lost his sight shortly after arriving in America, had been taken into their home and cared for the rest of his life until he died past the age of 100 years. Hans, who in his younger years in Iceland had been a shepherd, had whiled away the hours while watching his flocks by reading endless stories by the light of the midnight sun, and also hobnobbing with the [hidden people] and other wraiths and apparitions.

When dusk arrived and the wood box had been filled in preparation against the fury of the winter wind, I would wend my way over to my grandparents' house and sit by the hour listening to these stories. Hans firmly believed that all these supernatural beings existed and would become quite testy if I expressed any doubts. So, to keep the stories coming, I pretended that I believed, too. In exchange, when I learned to read Icelandic, I would read him the serial stories in Lögberg *and* Heimskringla, *and any little bits of news I thought would interest him. He would also teach me how to recite the old "rímur" in that doleful sing-song tone that he was so familiar with from his early years.*

Medicine Man

In Iceland, my grandfather had read and studied, on his own, books on Homeopathic medicine and healing. When he arrived here, he was the only medicine man in the community. He obtained the concentrated drugs 'aconitum', 'belladonna', 'ipecacuana', etc. from another Homeopathic man in Gimli. These he mixed with 'spiritus' 65

O.P. – pure colourless alcohol. For what ailed you, he prescribed the appropriate drug, and you would measure 4 or 5 drops from the little cork-tapped glass vials that he filled. Each one of these glass vials he sold for 25 cents. This would, in time, cure the headache, upset stomach, or other common ills. I know it cured me of many ills and upsets – or so I firmly believed – and so did many others for sometimes business was quite brisk.

He would also, day or night, be ready to set out on foot with his little medicine satchel to sit beside the sick and dying, or to lay out the dead. He would also vaccinate against smallpox, set broken bones, pull dislocated limbs into place, and in his younger years help usher in new life.

Aurora finished up her writings with this paragraph:

I really would not want this world back, but I am glad that I knew it and can remember it from my own experiences, for I know it will never come again.

5. Sigurður Erlendson relates the first story from memory at age 80, 34 years after he came to the Icelandic Reserve with his wife and four children. He mentions his oldest son, Stefan, who was his workmate in the first few years. In the second two stories, it can be seen just how successful Stefan became: the visit of Premier Roblin to Hnausa, an excerpt from 'Gimli Saga'; and the donation to the Waterfront Centre told by Dr. Steinn O. Thompson.

Looking Back, at 80 years old

[1876-77] I chopped down several trees, intended for a log cabin, however that never materialized. I went further north to what was [Mickley], and there was a man of Scotch descent overseeing the lumber mill. He loaned me a hut, poor in shape, there was a clay stove in one corner, but no chimney to or through the roof, it was almost unbearable with smoke, however we had no alternative but to spend the winter therein. November 1st the snow came. My son, Stefan, now twelve, and I had to trudge in favourable weather through snow reaching up to our thighs searching for dry wood to chop and carry home…we were most often choking from smoke or shivering from cold.

[1878] I bought land one mile north alongside the lake…I borrowed one cow from the government. My son, Stefan, was my right-hand man, and followed me at every task. Johannes, then eight, brought our noon meal every day…he walked two miles every day –no road to follow in good or bad weather. My two sons warmed my heart and I now felt sure, given an opportunity, they would do well with their lives. I named my homestead 'Skogum'.

[1879-82] The next winter I became the proud owner of one-third of an ox. We had to walk six miles to the hay meadow to make hay for the cow and the ox. The second winter a man arrived on horseback with wheat to sell, he sold one sack of wheat for 56 whitefish. The third winter another man came and gave us seven cents for one whole whitefish. The fourth winter I set out for Winnipeg on my ox with 220 whitefish and 160 pickerel in a bag… [I sold them and] I now had more provisions than we ever had since arriving at this new land.

[1910] I accomplished what I set out to do, to bring my family to Canada; that they might have a better life than what I could give them in Iceland. And now in the end my dream has come true.

Two Stories of Stefan's Success

[Winter,1900-01] …the most elaborate reception of all was staged at Hnausa. Premier Roblin was received at the palatial home of Stefan Sigurdsson of Hnausa. An avenue of evergreens had been set in the snow leading from the highway to the house. Decorating the entrance were the words "Here you are at Home". A sumptuous feast had been prepared

for the Premier and his retinue and later an honour parade was held from the Sigurdsson mansion to the Hnausa School, and again the route was lined with evergreens…the prominent citizens carried Union Jacks and sang Icelandic folk songs with great gusto.

In the year 2000, the family made a gift to the Betel Heritage Foundation to construct the 'Lady of the Lake' Room in the Waterfront Centre at Gimli. This facility is a state-of-the-art theatre and is dedicated to the memory of the Sigurdssons and their families who were involved in the fishery on Lake Winnipeg…a mural was commissioned to commemorate the five generations of Sigurður Erlendsson's descendants and is displayed in the 'Lady of the Lake' room.

6. This anecdote was written up in Icelandic in the notebook of Stefania Magnusson, born in 1878 near Riverton. It is presented here as her oral narrative, just the way she told it to her fellow inhabitants of the Betel Home for senior citizens in Gimli. It is about Gestur Oddleifsson, a farmer in the Geysir settlement. Stefania heard him tell the story making fun of himself.

Such a Good Lunch

Gestur came from Iceland in his youth, and as soon as he could, he tried to find himself work. There was a sawmill at Point Douglas where it was easy to get work, and Gestur was one of those who was hired. Across the way was an Indian Camp, tents, and various houses, or shacks, where the Indians and half-breeds lived who worked at the mill. And, among them was one [girl who was] very beautiful and to whom Gestur, among others, was very attracted, and he was lucky enough that she also liked him, so there was a good friendship between them. And one Saturday evening she told him that her mother and father were going away the next day so she would be home, alone, and that he should come and have lunch with her. As might be expected, Gestur was delighted by the invitation and he had a cheerful face the next morning as he got dressed in his very best for that welcome invitation, which he so looked forward to.

He set off rather early because he wanted to be sure that he didn't keep her waiting with the meal. And when he got near her house, he noticed the aroma of a roast that he had never smelled before. So, at lunch they had this good meat with a delicious gravy and other things, but nothing as good as the excellent meat, and he ate heartily. Then they sat down and started talking about local matters, so to speak, until she said, "Don't you want to know what that good meat was that we ate?"

"Yes, I certainly would like to know. It was so good." he said.

"It was Dad's white dog that you saw around here."

Gestur didn't draw out the ending of the story but said he never visited her again after that.

7. Bergljot (Begga) Sigurdson, Guttormur J. Guttormsson's daughter, has written about her family and life at the Guttormsson homestead called "Víðivellir" (Willow Flats). She inherited her father's talent for writing as illustrated in the following portraits of her mother Jensína, her grandmother Pálína, and her step-grandmother, Snjólaug.

Jensína

Mother was the heart of our home. She was a gracious, lovely lady, beautiful in her youth as she was throughout her years, and always with an air of dignity. She was completely unselfish in tending to my father's needs and to those of her family, and throughout all that remained good-natured and often sang as she went about her work. She gave us the security we needed. I recall the cold emptiness of the house whenever she had to be away. Although she was only ten years old when she left Iceland, she retained an abundant store of knowledge of the interesting ancient history

of Dalasysla. We were thrilled by her stories. One of her great pleasures was reading a good book. My father read his poetry to her for her approval, and she was a good critic.

Pálína

My grandmother was a delicate lady who was ill much of the time. A poetess, she was very fond of reading and did not like farming, but it was she who had to do the milking as my grandfather had never learned to milk a cow! I wonder – did she stand on this spot on the edge of the river watching, and for a long time in vain, for the boat that was to bring her sister and two children? She had not seen them since she left Iceland. One day she sees a boat coming in, and in her loneliness prays that they have come at last. She is overjoyed when she sees a woman with two children on board and rushes over to "Ósi" where it lands – only to find that it is not her sister. Then my father said he saw his mother weep.

I hope that there were some bright moments in the years that remained of my grandmother's life. She died at the age of 43.

Snjólaug

My grandfather [was] remarried [to] Snjólaug in 1889. She was a handsome woman, a meticulous housekeeper, and an excellent cook. She was chubby and jolly, had pierced ears, and wore gold earrings…we were very fond of her even though she scolded us constantly for not working harder, and spending too much time in play.

Sunday was not the time to visit Snjólaug, but we had to take the milk to her, as we did every day. We inevitably found her reading her Bible – sitting in her rocking chair and rocking to and fro for what seemed an endless time, as we sat quietly and waited, the clock ticking loudly in the silent room. Our patience was rewarded by a piece of 'Jelly Cake'.

8. There was a way to test wood stove oven temperatures. Then the trick was to keep the temperature fairly even. Rabbits were plentiful. Some Icelanders were unsure that their religion allowed them to eat rabbit, but their families were hungry.

To Test Oven Temperatures

Sprinkle a teaspoon of flour on an inverted pie plate and place in oven.

-delicate brown in 5 minutes = slow 250-325 degrees F.

-golden brown in 5 minutes = moderate 325-400 degrees F.

-deep brown in 5 minutes = hot 400-450 degrees F.

Stuffed Rabbit

1 rabbit – skin and wash thoroughly with warm salt water. Stuffing – Summer savory and celery added to ordinary bread or potato stuffing gives rabbit a delicious flavour. Place rabbit breast down on the rack in baking pan. Place strips of bacon over rabbit for flavour.

Bake in a moderate oven. Add 1 cup water to pan to keep meat moist and from burning. Bake 2 hours. Carve and serve with your favorite vegetables and cranberry sauce.

9. The Liberal Party in power at the time of the Icelandic migration had a policy of giving financial help to immigrants in order to help them succeed. The Conservatives opposed this policy and used the Icelandic-Canadians as an example of what they considered to be the Liberal's failed policy.

Politics as well as Policy

Opponents of Prime Minister Alexander Mackenzie's Liberals had cited the Icelandic colony as an example of the government's failed colonization policy. These critics accused government officials of making a grave error in the choice of colony site, and accused the Icelanders of being an "effete and unprogressive race…not equal to the struggle of life on this continent and must inevitabl[y] succumb to the fate of the least fit."

The 'Globe' correspondent defended the government…"But what are the facts?" He asserted that the Icelanders were an orderly, literate, and hardworking people intent on achieving social and material progress. Therefore "the experiment of this colony may be pronounced a success." Unknown to 'Globe' readers was the fact that the author was none other than John Lowe, Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, and thus one of the people principally responsible for orchestrating the colonization scheme.

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Glossary of terms

Akri – the homestead of Thorgrimur and Seinunn Jonsson in the Icelandic Reserve.

Dalasysla – One of the pre-1988 traditional counties of Iceland. Leif Eriksson grew up there; Snorri Sturluson was born there.

effete – unable to produce; worn out.

Eyólfstöðum – the homestead of Magnús and Ingibjörg Magnússon.

hidden people (huldufolk); also known as elves (alfar) – They are believed to live in rocks, cliffs and hillocks--side by side, but independent, of humans. They look, speak and act like humans. Hidden people are bound up with a rocky topography and are known in Iceland, but seldom in New Iceland (unofficial name for the Icelandic Reserve in Canada).

Icelander's River – The river was known as the White Mud when the Icelanders arrived. They changed it to Icelander's River and it later became the Icelandic River, which is what it's called today.

Lady of the Lake – a famous boat that belonged to the Sigurdsson Brothers of Hnausa.

Lögberg and Heimskringla – Two newspapers printed in Icelandic at that time. In the present day, they have amalgamated and are printed as one newspaper in English.

Ós (or Ósi) - the homestead of Ólafur Ólafsson in the Icelandic Reserve.

Rímur – Ríma literally means 'a rhyme' in Icelandic. 'Rímur' is the plural form and means poems written in 'rímnaháttir, which is a style of poetry using alliteration and consists of 2 to 4 lines per stanza ('rímir meters').

Skogum – the homestead of Sigurður and Gudrún Erlendsson in the Icelandic Reserve.

Viðivellir – the homestead of Guttormur and Jensína Guttormsson in the Icelandic Reserve.

Down Memory Lane With Solveig Sveinsson

by Solveig Sveinsson

A three-part story reprinted from the* Icelandic Canadian *Winter 1972, Spring 1973 and Summer 1973 editions

The first installment of "Down Memory Lane With Solveig Sveinsson" ends with a poignant account of her pioneer mother's homesickness and heartsickness in "this god-forsaken country", while the ten-year old daughter finds the country a beautiful place. She loves the country and does not miss the things she had never had.

Now begins her school career and the glimpse of a new world for Solveig.

School days and a glimpse of an outside world

That summer Reggie and I helped Dad a lot with his haying and all the other work on the farm. With the increasing stock and a garden there was more work than one pair of hands could do, no matter how willing.

Berries were plentiful that summer and had to be picked, for mother had started to make jams and other preserves. With Colin on my back I picked and picked, though the river and a swim called, as well as the new boat father had just made. I knew by now that we kids would have to help all we could. All of us and especially I, "I was the oldest!"

That fall a big event came to pass, when Reggie and I started going to school. I was eleven years old and he was ten in July. It was like a new world opening for us. Coming in contact with so many children in one place, even with more adults than we had ever seen on the farm, for people came to the school to talk to the teacher about their children about the books to get them, and so forth.

Father was still on the school board and had to attend meetings, usually he'd be at the school just after school let out. I felt a glow of pride seeing my father laughing and talking with the other men. I felt sure he was one of the greatest men in the world. I was also amazed how many people there were in the world, and I had known nothing at all about them.

From the start I loved school. Loved the contact with so many children. The teacher was very pleased with what mother had taught us, and said that Reggie and I were away past the "cat and the rat" stage so at the end of the year we were moved into second grade. I was very happy and studied my lessons faithfully.

That winter and spring passed pleasantly enough, at least as far as I was concerned. In the early summer an event of note took place in our little community. My father bought the first mowing

machine that was seen in that part of the country.

With pride we kids clustered about while Dad showed admiring neighbors how his miracle worked. Even mother thawed a little bit towards this country when she saw the marvels it performed. Even if we kids knew very little about our neighbors, it came easy for us to feel that now our Dad was a leading farmer in the community.

That summer passed with summer's usual activities. I was very anxiously looking forward to school starting again the first of September. I do not recall ever looking at it as a drawback that we had two and a half miles to walk to school or that Reggie and I had to milk two cows a piece before we left for school.

The narrow path through the woods to the highway was really a very lovely walk. That is when the weather was dry; but when we had a rainy season it was something else again. In winter we waded through snow up to our knees, that is on the stretches to and from the highway. The highway itself was most of the time kept passable. But over such hardships we kids never lost any sleep.

We learned that nothing comes to us free. Be it just a little bit of joy or the necessities of life, in some way we must earn it. I am afraid we did not come to this conclusion at once. We just took things as they came, not asking why. A happy time!

Coming home from school one day, I was quite surprised to find that one of the youngsters from upstairs had been moved downstairs, where things had been shoved about to make room for it. Mother explained why. A man and his wife and three young sons had arrived in the district, hoping that a cousin of his would give them shelter till he found a place for himself and his family. But this cousin had only a cabin about the size of ours but with no upstairs and he had a wife and four children so it was impossible for him to take in the newcomers. These newcomers had tramped from farmer to farmer for two days without success. The man was helpless. "The poor man was stuck," mother said. "He could not stay and he could not go back. There was nothing for us to think about, just let him have the room upstairs," she said. So the family moved in and stayed all winter in the room upstairs.

In the spring they moved to another settlement quite far away. There the man had the promise of work on a big farm and the use of a small two-roomed house to live in. I heard my parents talking this over and rejoicing at this stroke of luck.

"Imagine," said mother, "what a thrill it will give her to have two rooms all to themselves after being cooped up in the little cubby-hole upstairs."

So we were all glad for them; since father and mother saw it that way so did we children. And since mother did not mention it, no one else thought of her difficulty in managing with six children in the one small room downstairs.

Sitting upon my hill of years today, I become confused. Which am I; the old lady viewing the events of the days of long ago or am I the little girl that half resented having her bed pushed back into the corner of the room, behind, the stove, and yet because of the stand her parents took, realizing that this was the only thing – the right thing to do. Still perplexed, I realize also that gone are the cramped pioneer cabins from the face of our fair land. There is no lack of room, today in our seven or nine room model houses ... but, as well as the cabins, has not something else gone from amongst us – from our hearts? Have we let affluence kill something precious? Something that hardships and heartaches nourished and kept alive?

PHOTO COURTESY OF NELSON GERRARD

Solveig Sveinsson

But my mind is wandering. Back to the story.

With the people upstairs gone, we children – and a lot of other stuff – were moved upstairs again and life went on the same as it had been before. Except that slowly but surely life was getting easier. Dad now had a small flock of sheep and about sixteen head of cattle, half of them milking cows. And of course there were chickens and that meant eggs.

I must not forget to mention fish, because from the beginning it had been the mainstay for us and many of the settlers in our neighborhood. All the year around we had fish to eat – and to clean. The cleaning of fish was a special job in the fall; then Reggie and I worked hours daily cleaning fish. Washing it in cold water, salting it and packing it in barrels ready to be taken to market. That meant either Winnipeg or Selkirk. A long haul.

After going through all the trouble of getting it to market Dad would get only three dollars for a barrel of fish. He would also occasionally take a young steer to sell for beef and for that he would not get much more than for the barrel of fish. That would be all the money Dad had to pay for all the necessities he could not raise on the farm.

Flour and oatmeal was a must; coffee and sugar when there was enough left over to buy these luxuries. Material for mother to sew clothes for us came last, and sometimes not at all. As for our parents – I don't remember them ever buying anything for themselves. If they did it was so seldom and so little that I forget.

As for money, that was something we children never saw. To us it was an unknown quantity. A little incident when I was about ten years old proves beyond a doubt the scarcity of money among the settlers in the 'eighties and well into the 'nineties. Like everything, in these memoirs this is not exaggerated, just the truth.

A neighbor boy about fifteen years old, a strong, husky lad, came over to help Dad to do something he could not manage by himself. After the work was done he was called in for coffee. No one ever came to our place who was not invited in for coffee –and a little chat with my parents.

As the boy stood up to leave father reached up to the shelf just under the ceiling for his old leather purse to pay the boy for what he had done. I'll never forget how his face lit up as father handed him his pay. Two silver quarters and a shiny new dime! A fortune.

I felt so proud that my dad could do so well by those who did work for him, but I would not have, remembered these details if it were not for the tragic events that followed.

About an hour and a half after the boy left he was back again, his face grim and pale. He had lost the money! There had been holes in his pocket. Dumbfounded we listened to his story. He had been almost home when he discovered his loss and promptly came back the same way in the hope of finding the money. But, no. Neither the dime nor a quarter did he find, so he thought maybe he had lost it as he left.

All of us came out to look, even mother with a baby in her arms. The older boys and I went all the way back with him but found nothing. I could have cried for the boy. Dad would have made it up to him if he could, I doubt he had that much money left in the house.

Only a few years later it would have been unbelievable that the loss of sixty cents could cause a near panic, but such was the scarcity of money in those days that five cents were guarded like a hoard of gold.

I feel that I must record here a little

episode that came to pass a few months later. A bad fire came up in one of the neighbors' cabins, doing some damage to the cabin and destroying some of the family's belongings. The men had already got together, to repair the cabin with what material they could scrape together, but there were things that had to be bought. As usual there was no money.

The family was without clothes and bedding. Definitely something had to be done and a new-born Ladies Aid decided to do it. They planned a get together in one of the settlement's biggest houses. They scraped the countryside for talent for there was to be a program that people would not forget.

A "big-shot" from Winnipeg who happened to he around would give a speech; two men from farther north would sing solos and duets. After the program there would be a dance with excellent music, a noted violinist and two mouth-organ players! Admission would be (15) fifteen cents and refreshments free.

Everybody was urged to come. Everybody that could possibly do so, as it was for a good cause. Mother said she would have liked to go. It would be a treat to hear somebody sing after all those years, no matter how badly. But of course for her to go anywhere was impossible with all those babies.

My brother Reggie and I wanted to go, and no "buts" about it. We thought about it and talked about it very seriously, but without much hope of ever being able to get all that money. I'll never know exactly what emotions were working in my father that day but one afternoon he came to us with his old leather purse he had brought from the old country in his hand, and handed out the money. Fifteen cents apiece! We could go to the concert.

Reggie at once looked to his pockets; there was going to be no loss that way this time. I tied my money in the corner of an old handkerchief and hid it, of course, under the hay mattress in my bed. And now to wait without "busting" for the great night to come. Reggie too, sang and skipped all over the place.

Knowing how scarce and precious money was I wondered what had come over my father? Had Reggie and I become of some importance now that we were in our third year of school in this new country – or had my father just remembered some foolish fancy of younger days. Remembered that which youth wants so badly, so intensely – and so understood for us.

The day before the party a neighbor girl my age came over on some errand for her mother. Reggie and I were so full of joy about the prospect for tomorrow night that we spoke of nothing else. Asking Lily, the neighbor girl, if she was not going, she started to cry; said her dad could not raise the money. She was so woe-begone that we kids almost cried with her.

We fell silent and heartsick. Here was a chance of a life-time to see and hear something wonderful and – and poor Lily could not come with us. Then my father reached up to the shelf beneath the ceiling for his old leather purse and handed Lily fifteen cents. We were all struck with surprise and joy.

Lily jumped up and threw her arms about my father's neck and kissed his wrinkled cheek. I am sure he must have thought the joy in her tear-filled blue eyes was well worth the fifteen cents, even at that time.

As for me, I could not help wondering how could father have all that money? And after giving us our admission fee. I felt he must be one of the greatest men in the world. Not only because he had all that money, but also because he could be so kind a man as to be sorry for that little girl

who was crying. I almost burst with pride. The winter sun shone brighter than ever on our cabin and a snow-covered world.

At that time I childishly thought that having a lot of money would solve all problems. Through the many stages of life that I have travelled I have often wondered which is worse – too little of it, or too much!

The next fall a lady came from Winnipeg to teach at our school. She was young, dressed well and always gave me the impression that it was wonderful just to be alive. I remember her best in a gray, woolen skirt and a red waist with gold buttons. She wore her hair in two long braids hanging down her back, or sometimes wound about her head like a crown. She was beautiful. I could never look my fill at her.

Somehow she made our lessons come alive, and it was pure joy to listen to her tell about what she had seen or what she had read. I think all the children liked her but I loved her and from watching her I first decided to become a teacher, then perhaps I could become in some way like her. Just as soon as I had any money I would get myself a gray skirt and a red waist.

She had important-looking books and papers on her desk. Books she read at lunch time while we children played outside. Sometimes I made up excuses to go inside so that I could watch her, hoping she would notice me and talk to me. Sometimes she did and sometimes she did not.

Once she called me to her desk and showed me her books. Then she drew my attention to a paper magazine she had been reading and said it was just the paper I should have to practise reading English.

"This little paper has everything." she said. "Nice short stories and long serial ones. It tells how to cook and all about the latest fashions. It has pictures of people and places of interest. It comes monthly and only costs (25) twenty-five cents a year."

She let me have the paper she had been reading and told me to read a short story in it. With a little help from her I found the story fascinating.

The name of the paper was "Good Literature". I knew right then that I wanted that paper. Or, rather, I had to have that monthly paper.

There was a girl at school I had chummed with since my first day there. Her name was Dawn and she was the cleverest girl in school; I enjoyed every minute of her company. Together we studied that paper whenever we could get it and soon she wanted it as much as I did. But neither one of us had the necessary quarter.

Her prospects for getting the twenty-five cents were no better than mine, so we decided to go into business together. Even at that we had to wait – wait and see what happened.

Whenever we were together we talked about everything under the sun. Since attending school, an outside world had been beckoning to us. Thirst for knowing more about that unknown world consumed us both. Lately I had begun to suspect that the settlement was not all there was to life and I wanted to know what else there was.

Reading the old sagas and the Bible held no lure for me anymore. All that was so unconnected with life here in the settlement that it almost sounded silly. Where were we to find a lion's den to throw a Daniel into? Where were we to find anyone that could walk upon the waters and turn a few loaves of bread into hundreds of them?

No. That was alright in the long, long ago but not for now. The short story in "Good Literature", was much more interesting. A story about a young girl in a big house, with a lot of lovely clothes and a horse of her own and – oh, well, that was about life as it was now, and that was what

I wanted to know about.

My girl friend at school and I we thought a lot – and talked a lot about all this but we had a problem on our hands. So far we had seen no way to raise the money needed to buy "Good Literature", we were getting pretty tired waiting.

When neighbors came over now I sometimes listened to them talking to Mother and Dad, was interested in what they were saying. From their talk I gathered that life was a lot easier than it had been when first they started homesteading. I supposed that was so but one certainly did not pick up twenty-five cents just when one thought of it, especially when you wanted it for something foolish; something you could neither eat nor wear. So we just had to wait and hope. That, at least, cost nothing.

So wait we did. The school term was finished and our lovely teacher was gone. Summer activities came on with a rush and we older children were busy from early morning till late at night. Especially was that so in haying time. With increased stock, enough hay to see him through the hard winter months was an important matter for my father. I heard him say that Reggie and I saved him the wages of a grown man. Even if we were tired we were proud to hear that.

More than once after a long day I heard my mother remonstrate with my dad; he should use discretion how he worked us.

"Their bodies are immature, their bones unhardened," she said. "You could cripple them with some of this work."

"But," my father replied, "this work has to be done if we are to survive, and I cannot manage it alone."

That summer (1889) I was twelve years old and in July Reggie was eleven. I never felt that Dad was abusing us and I am pretty sure Reggie felt the same. I was sorry for my dad for having so much to do, but later I saw the wisdom of mother's remarks. Dad was kind but he was also very strict. He had to be.

After haying, things became easier. We children got in more swimming, more playing in the river. Then berrypicking came and with Colin on my back I picked berries endlessly. Those years I usually had a young child on my back whatever I was doing or playing.

Once I heard a woman say that she thought "this poor girl would be driven nuts trying to mind all those children." I was quite surprised. Only once in a while did I find it hard. I knew mother had to get the younger children from under foot when she was working, sewing, mending and doing so many things. She had to have me help her. And of course, I was

the oldest.

Thinking about it later – and always afterwards I could never feel my parent's attitude towards all their children had been anything but kind and just. Always bearing in mind what was best for us, never thinking about themselves – their personal longings or needs. In their dealings with others it was the same. Integrity in the deepest sense of the word came to them naturally. They were born that way. When I was young I loved them. Now I still respect them.

"All things cometh to him that waits," I remember from my Bible readings, and sure enough so we found it to be. Between us, my girl friend and I got the twenty-five cents needed so that we could send for "Good Literature." We were so excited and elated about the prospect of getting the paper that I forgot whatever it was we had to go through to obtain the quarter.

Once every two weeks mail was delivered at the Post Office two miles from our place. But the day it brought our paper was a red letter day in my life.

It was in the fall, and the first week of school That was fortunate for us, for at school we could be together five days a week and could read the paper and discuss whatever we read or saw in it, to our hearts content.

We read it avidly and faithfully. Not an inch was left unread. It revealed a world hitherto hidden from us. All through the winter I waited anxiously for the next number to come that I might hear more about this fascinating world I had known nothing about before.

Abruptly, yet so clearly, its stories, and even its advertisements and pictures opened my eyes to the lack in my life of so many pleasant things of which there seemed to be no lack once you got out of this settlement.

Gradually life would have done just that but "Good Literature" did it suddenly and effectively. Stories about modern life and about modern people. Stories about a way of life so different from our existence here in the settlement that it was almost unbelievable. Big houses, all kinds of furniture, nice clothes and parties where you danced and sang and – and even girls learned to play the piano.

As fast as I could I got through the work I had to do so that I could read the paper. Every night I read in bed; would have read all night if my father's voice had not come up to me in tones not to be mistaken: "Blow out that light at once."

What fascinated me most was the parties – festivities at Christmas and the parties on birthdays. The beautiful presents on so many occasions. The dolls – I had never owned a doll. None of us ever had a Christmas or a birthday present. Once when I was reading a story that featured a gay birthday party I was quite surprised to feel the hot tears running down my cheeks.

I could almost feel myself holding the doll I read about. Holding that blue-eyed, flaxen-haired doll. Dancing with it in my arms, laughing and singing to it, myself in a frilly pink dress.

I would be thirteen this winter. Old enough to crave so desperately the beautiful things I read about, but also young enough to feel so keenly my helplessness – my inability to do anything about it.

That Christmas my mother found me hiding in a corner crying. She put her arms about me and I am afraid she was crying too, as she whispered, "What is the matter, darling?"

"This is no Christmas," I blurted out, trying to stop crying.

"I know it," she said trying to look brave. "But come and eat with us. I have raisins in our rice pudding."

Instantly I thought, and felt for my mother. Raisins in the rice pudding! Her

feeble attempts at making a Christmas feast for us! I thought of her gorgeous national dress and of father's frock coat. Doubtless they had had a very different life of their own before they came to pioneer in the wilderness of Manitoba. For the first time now I seemed to understand fully about my parents heartaches and loneliness. Bravely I suppressed my own feelings and went back with mother to have my rice pudding.

* * *

*Part II of Solveig Sveinsson's story told of hospitality shown to a newly-arrived immigrant; how two silver quarters constituted a fortune and even 15 cents could open the gates to paradise for two young girls. A new teacher makes the school lessons come alive and 25 cents for "Good Literature" opens a view of a fascinating new world. (*Spring issue 1973)

Life went on. We kids of school age kept on going to school. Neither muddy roads nor biting cold weather could keep us away. Slowly but surely life was getting a little easier on the farm. Father was adding twice as much to the house, for much-needed room for his growing family. My girl friend and I had much less trouble getting the twenty-five cents for our paper.

Getting the paper to read and reread was a must, but it was fast becoming not enough. I did not want to just read about things. I wanted to become a part of the world I had now discovered. I wanted to live with people who had parties and gave presents – beautiful presents, even dolls I knew I was too old to have a doll of my own but anyway I could not help wishing I had one. People would think I was crazy.

"What would she do with a doll? She with all those kids to help look after!" And, of course, I was the oldest. I stared at the page that held all the pictures of the dolls for sale and half wished I was smaller again and maybe could have a doll. Then resolutely I closed my eyes, foolishly thinking that by closing my eyes I would also close out foolish thoughts.

But, no. The foolish thoughts persisted. The more I read the more dissatisfied I became with things as they were. The stories were the most up setting. They told about such a wonderful life. Homes large and lovely. Furniture in every room. People had fine clothes, gave parties and danced to lovely music.

I was fascinated by the fine manners of the people in the stories. So different from the people in the old Sagas and the Bible. Women always spoke softly, men lifted their hats as they passed women on the street, and pulled out chairs for them to sit on, even rushed to open doors for them. That just about settled it for me. I must get into a life where men rushed to open doors for me!

At school I studied harder than ever, and at home sometimes away into the night. I obeyed, of course my father's voice to blow out the light before I put the house on fire, but nothing could blow out my resolution to study and study hard till I could become a teacher and could earn money that would help me have my childish dreams come true. I would go through fire and – and whatever else it was that I would have to go through, to get what I wanted out of life.

At the end of that school year the teacher came to see my parents. He told them something to the effect that I was a good student and would be able to pass the exams to enter a collegiate, (as high schools were known in Canada). I think both my parents were pleased with what the teacher said about my studies but my mother worried because Dad would not be able to send me to school in Winnipeg.

I heard my mother talk it over with a

neighbor lady. "She should go to Winnipeg anyway. She is getting to be a big girl," the lady said brightly. "She should be able to get three dollars a month looking after kids. She has had a lot of experience in that line. Of course my girl gets six dollars a month, but then she is nineteen and does everything. Three dollars is not bad to start with."

My heart sank within me as I listened. Go to Winnipeg and start working for three dollars a month. All of me rebelled against the idea of what that would lead to. No education, no books – probably working in somebody's kitchen all my life.

But to Winnipeg I must go. Trust to luck that when there I would find some way to go to school. I knew that once there I would have no one to seek refuge with except a casual aquaintance of my parents who might not mind keeping me for a night or two. It was a frightening prospect but I must try it.

So to Winnipeg I went, holding a little box with my few belongings, and a dollar in my purse that my Dad gave me. I was to go to people my mother had written to and they would direct me as best they could.

My hostess had several places in mind when I arrived: Washing dishes at a restaurant and looking after children with more than one large family. She could not help sensing that I was not enthusiastic about any of them, so I guess she thought I was just a lazy little brat. Well, what else could she think?

I heard her worrying about me to a friend. The friend turned accusing eyes upon me as, silent and ashamed, I dried dishes.

"Listen, my little friend," she said sensibly. "You can't be too particular when you have nothing. If you are ambitious you could perhaps make three dollars a month washing those dishes. Then you could at least buy yourself a decent pair of shoes. Better think about it, my dear."

I felt my face go flaming red and my heart sank sank all the way down into my horrid shoes that I had so ineffectively been trying to hide. I knew as well as they how awful they were, but they were the only shoes I had. There was no way for me to hide my feet and I felt that I was going to cry, so hurriedly I left for my room.

I wished desperately that I was back home again where I could go barefooted without anyone looking at my feet. I wondered if Colin and Kris were crying for me to take them with me out into the woods to pick berries or to gather kindling for my mother to start the fire in the morning. Here I felt such a misfit that I dreaded having to go downstairs in the morning.

So I cried till I could cry no more, and then came the calm after the storm; the blessed relief that a torrent of tears gives a tortured heart. Saner thoughts crept into my mind and I knew that here I would have to stay. I would go down town in the morning and accept the dishwashing job.

When I came down stairs the next morning there was a strange lady visiting with my hostess. They turned questioning eyes on me. I suppose my hostess wondered why I had gone to bed so early last night. Our visitor came towards me and smiled as she said:

"Good morning, my dear. Are you the little girl that wants to go to school?"

I was so taken back by her friendly attitude that I could not say anything, but I think I nodded my head.

"That is why I came so early, to get you before you went out," she said. "There is a family that lives not far from me; they are looking for a girl to stay with them. They have three boys, one thirteen, one eleven and one eight years old. The man works for the C.P.R. and leaves early in the morning. The mother is not very well." She came

over and put her arm about me as she continued, "Do you think you could get breakfast for the boys and get them ready for school?"

"I'm almost sure I can," I stammered, not yet sure what she meant.

"Good girl. For that you would get your room and board and a dollar a month. Of course, after school you would have to help all you could."

"And – can I go to school?" I stammered again.

"Of course, my dear, that is why I came to tell you. They are good people. You will get by, I think," she smiled at me.

I felt like throwing my arms about her neck but my hostess was looking at me and I did not dare make a show of myself. The tears came to my eyes as I tried to make her feel my gratitude. With her arm about me I felt the warmth of her kindness seep through me, driving away the sense of hopelessness of the night before. I felt like crying and laughing at the same time.

That day I moved to what was to be my home for practically three years. Even if I was homesick and sometimes felt pretty lost I was for the most part content with my life with those people. They were considerate of my comfort, but from the start I knew that I had better keep my part of the bargain or else. That was fine with me. I was thankful to have the chance to go on with my studies.

During the first month of school I took very little part in the games, played outside during recesses. The girls were all so well dressed and seemed to know each other so well that I felt shy and odd amongst them and mostly stayed inside and studied my lessons. Studied and tried to hide my shoes under the desks. When a month had passed and I was paid my dollar I was let off early so that I could go down to Robinson's Department store and buy my shoes. I bought a beautiful pair of shoes but it took my whole dollar. But anyhow, I walked on air going back, happy not to have to be trying to hide my feet from people any more.

Walking down to school the next morning I was happier than I had been for a long time. In front of the school there stood a big group of kids mostly gathered about Jack – I don't remember his last name but all the kids called him Jack. He was about three years older than I and dressed, I thought, like a prince.

He reminded me of my brother Reggie, so witty and quick with his answers like Reggie was. Jack was always having a good time; mostly laughing and talking to the girls, and secretly I hoped that sometime he would speak to me for he was the loveliest being I had ever laid eyes on.

Because I was feeling so good that morning I walked through that group of kids boldly and sort of hop-skipped up the steps. Just before I reached the door Jack's voice sounded high and clear for all the world to hear –

"Hi, kids. Come quick and have look. Old Book Worm has a new pair of shoes."

I thought I would die. Die right then and there on the school house steps. I have no idea how I got to my seat.

But no. I did not die. After the first shock there awoke within me a new emotion – a new strength. A slap in the face would have made me angry. I would have hit him back and we would have been quits. But this, as well as making me angry, also made me think. This was mean! This was cruel! To make me a laughing stock for what I could not possibly help. I was not going to take this sitting down.

I knew that I must have shown that I bad felt like a stranger – a foreigner among my school mates. Sometimes because of my tattered shoes, and other times because I was always conscious of where I came from. The cabin – bare-foot children

running about – my parents, always working – working so hard and yet having nothing pretty and pleasant like the people about me now seemed to have.

Because of my own struggles I now saw and understood my parents better than before. Fate had shifted them out of the grooves where they belonged and dumped them down in the wilderness of a strange country where bewildered they might flounder for a while, but they would find their feet, and so would we, their children, find our feet and fall into step with a new life in this new and beautiful country.

I remember my mother saying, – "You have the blood of Vikings in your veins," and I decided boldly I would not let my schoolmates bully me any more. That I had nowhere to go for help made it a must that I have confidence in my own strength, but inside of me I cried a little. I was only fourteen years old.

I started that same day and went out bravely and joined in the games the kids were playing. They made it a little awkward for me at first but they soon learned that my tongue could be sharp and accepted me as one of them. I made friends among them that remained friends far into my long life.

* * *

PART III of Solveig Sveinsson's story tells of the determination of a young girl to do well at school and to "become a part of the world" she had read about. To Winnipeg she must go and attend collegiate.

To Winnipeg she proceeded to a friend of the family, with a dollar in her purse which her dad gave her. She obtained a place where she could work for her board and attend school, and in addition receive a dollar a month.

At school she was at first derided for her clothing and worn shoes, but she showed spunk. With her first dollar earned she bought a "beautiful pair of shoes". Presently derision changed to respect and she came to be accepted by her fellow students. (Summer 1973)

Time passed and did not hang too heavily on my hands with a little childish fun snatched here and there valued the more, because it came so seldom. I studied hard and really lived for the time that I would be through, at least that far that I could get a permit to teach at one of the schools in our district. I was sorely in need of so many things. My dollar a month could not be stretched further than I did manage to stretch it. The older I got the more keenly I felt the lack of so many things that all the other girls seemed to have.

The time came sooner than I expected. One day in November I was instructed to stay in after school.

Trembling, fearing that something had gone wrong, I appeared at the teacher's desk after school. Smiling she told me she had good news for me.

The man who had been engaged to teach at my home school found it necessary to leave, so the school board, which consisted of my father and two neighbors, had written to the Department of Education in Winnipeg, requesting that I be granted permission to teach at their school to finish the other teacher's term.

"The Department got in touch with us this morning asking for your qualifications. If you are interested I will go down with you in the morning to see the Department and get your permit," the teacher said, smiling at me.

If I was interested! I could not believe my good fortune. When I undressed that evening I felt that I was also shedding my privations and hardships like an old stocking. I was on my own! I realized, of course, that I was still very for from my goal, but – but from now on it was up to me! I had been given my start. That night I fell asleep with tears of joy and gratitude

wet on my cheeks.

Although the teacher who had left was to have thirty dollars a month and I was to have only twenty-five dollars, I could not have been happier. Of that amount, I would give father eight dollars a month for my room and board. Not, that he asked for it; I knew that was what teachers at nearby schools paid for their room and board. I would still have to walk two and-one-half miles to school.

I looked forward to teaching; I looked forward to having a chance to handle books, read and study along with my job. I was also looking forward to being able to buy some materials for mother and help her sew clothes for the children. I saw a busy time ahead. Five days a week at the school, and on evenings and weekends there would be plenty for me to do helping mother at home.

There was no mistaking the change that had taken place in the settlement during those three years I had been away, except for brief holidays. The pioneering look was fast being wiped out. Of course there was no appearance of plenty, but the people had better housing, nicer clothes and were more relaxed and cheerful.

The older folks gave themselves more time for a little enjoyment, and there was a dance somewhere nearly every weekend. And I loved to dance.

Mother helped me make some clothes to wear to school and also a lovely pink dress trimmed with white lace for dances or any get-together the winter might have to offer.

Sometimes we would go to a dance with a group of young folks in a big sleigh when one of the young men or a father owned a team of horses.

This turned out to be a really busy winter for me. At the school all went well in spite of the fact that I was not the 'oldest', which scared me stiff at first. I called on all the diplomacy I could muster and somehow was able to make the children feel that though young myself I was in command and they had better behave and do as I wished.

At the school concert at the close of the term I was presented with a ring. It was the first present I had received in my life and I almost cried wirth joy. I loved that ring and kept it till it was worn through.

At that time the schools in our settlement closed earlier than schools elsewhere. This was not only because of impassable roads in the spring, but most of the farmers needed the help of their older children when summer activities began, for there was more work ahead of them than

one pair of hands could do.

The end of the school term marked the end of the social season of the year, if social season it could be called. There was a gathering in the biggest house in our neighborhood with a dance and refreshments, of course. The music was excellent, a violin and chording on an organ. All the young folk were there for their last fling till sometime next fall.

And what a good time we had! At least I did. I had many compliments on my pink dress; the girls could not believe I had made it mostly myself. I knew that many of them envied me mostly for Johnny dancing attendance on me all evening. He was the best dancer there and so handsome to boot. We had danced till after midnight and the strains of "After The Ball" filled the silence about us as it had been played for the last dance. Even if I looked forward to the challenge of my future, I still felt a little sad to leave this winter behind.

The stillness of the night was loud with music that still lingered on our ears and blended softly with the feeling of spring – spring everywhere under our feet, in the air we breathed and in our young hearts. There was no moon; dark clouds hid the stars.

* * *

I have lived a long life. I have known poverty without letting it destroy me. I have also had plenty, or what I regard as sufficient for gracious living. I have known sorrows and the bitter disappointments that come into most normal lives. I have also known contentment and a few, scattered joys that have given me a taste of heaven.

From time immemorial parents have felt anxious – worried about the future of their children. True to form I too am anxious – worried about the future of my children and grandchildren. I am worried about the future of the world.

About The Author

"Solveig Sveinsson was born in Iceland and as a child she came she came with her parents to settle in the wilderness on the west shore of Lake Winnipeg in Manitoba, Canada. Since then she has made her home in many different places but the longest in Chicago, Illinois. She was married to an American, Simon Sveinsson, and with him had four children, a daughter and three sons, all residing in the United States.

She has written several novels in book form as well as many short stories and articles on various objects but all under an assumed name except the two, *Life's Many Moods,* and *The Tangled Web*. Mrs. Sveinsson has travelled extensively in the States and Canada and has visited almost every country in Europe. She now makes her home, at least for the most part, in the border town of Blaine, in the beautiful State of Washington. She has been a widow since 1943."

– Biographical Sketch on the cover of *Life's Many Moods*

It was my privilege to meet with Solveig Sveinsson last winter, at the Stafholt Home, in Blaine, where she now makes her home. Her room number is 10. "Come to Number 10 Downing Street, London, England. Churchill may not be in, but I'll be there," she said.

She celebrated her 96th birthday last January. Her "Down Memory Lane" story she wrote at the age of 91.

Solveig Sveinsson's maiden name was Sveinsson. Two brothers with a permanent home in Manitoba have both been well-known for their inventions: Kelly Sveinsson of Winnipeg (now of Selkirk, Manitoba) and the late Helgi Sveinsson, of Lundar, Manitoba.

– Ed. (Editor-In-Chief Emeritis: Hon. W.J. Lindal.) Icelandic Canadian *1973*

The Saga of Redhead

by Lawrence Millman

anno domini 1434

In Suðurnes there lived a chieftain named Sveinn whose father was Ketill Cod-Breath, a whale hunter celebrated in many rhymes, and whose great-grandfather was the famous outlaw Thorgeir Hairybreeks, celebrated in even more rhymes. Already a few rhymes had been composed about Sveinn himself, though he was still a young man.

This Sveinn took to wife a woman named Guðrún, whose people only avalanches and the thrashing sea seemed to celebrate. While still in their youth, both her sisters were buried by rockslides, the one sister near Suðurnes, the other near Hellnar. Her three drowned uncles made a practice of drying themselves before the family hearth. They were men with skulls for faces – skulls with salt-widened eyeholes and strands of kelp hanging from their necks.

Guðrún saw her dead uncles more than a few times, but after the first time her thoughts began taking the darkest of turns. Any sign or omen she would read as some fresh disaster for her family.

A few days after Guðrún got with child, black rains fell, and they fell only on Sveinn's holding in Suðurnes. Then the bellwether of a sudden went blind. A cow bore a fish-headed calf who moaned in a human voice: "Oh my sorrow! I am a doomed soul!"

Guðrún told Sveinn that she feared her child would turn out different from other children. Perhaps it would be a deformed monster with horns or a tail. Or maybe it would have an extra head. Sveinn told her not to talk of such things. For he knew that many a monster is first conceived by a woman's tongue.

And then Guðrún gave birth to a son. His mother checked his body carefully, but she could locate no deformities. In fact, he did not seem very different from other boys. If anything, he seemed too strong, too healthy for a normal child. Indeed, he had vigor even as he lay on his mother's breast to drink.

He will be a warrior young and die in battle, Guðrún thought.

"Bring him to me, woman," Sveinn announced.

According to ancient custom, Guðrún placed her infant son on the floor and waited for Sveinn's decision: whether the boy should get his love and protection, or whether that boy should be left on a blustery mountain-top for the eagles or whoever might want a foster-son.

But Sveinn saw with great satisfaction that the boy had the face and thus perchance the nature of his great-grandfather, old Thorgeir Hairybreeks. So he gave him the name Thorgeir. And the boy already had such a mass of red hair curling over its head, a gift from long ago Irish slaves, that he gave it the nickname

Rauðhöfdi, Redhead.

"My father's mother's great-uncle Egill, son of Hjalmar, was a redhead," Guðrún said, "and he was buried by an eruption of Hekla."

"Hold your tongue, woman," Sveinn told her, raising his fist.

As the boy grew to speech and understanding, his father took it upon himself to tutor his son in the ways of the world. He told Thorgeir about the four powerful dwarves – Norðri, Suðri, Austri, and Vestri – who held up the sky, lest it fall down and crush the earth. And he told him of the goddess Freya, the giver of love, who travels around in a golden wagon. Any man who sees her is so smitten that he cannot step aside, but allows Freya to run over him, and thus he bears her mark forever.

As Thorgeir took on years, he ran when other boys would only walk, and soon he was running as fast as the fastest horse. He also learned to harden his body by swimming in glacial tarns or the River Ölfusá, wherever the cold water might bring a thrill to his skin. So adept did he become as a swimmer that no one, not even Grettir the Strong, could have bettered his powerful strokes, and he yet a lad of fifteen winters.

"Our son will surely bring fame to us," Sveinn said.

Guðrún thought to herself: "The ewe's milk has just turned green. Bad luck will follow."

In fact, bad luck did follow. The next evening Sveinn took to his bed with a stomach that was like a cushion of spears as well as limbs that refused to move however he plied them. Several days later, he was dead.

Sveinn's kinsmen came from far and wide to mourn him. It was their opinion that he had eaten shark's meat that had not been left to ripen long enough in the ground. Sveinn's brother Pétur said many more would be digging up unripened shark's meat if the current fashion for long winters persisted, and many more would be suffering the same fate as Sveinn.

In the dead man's hand was placed a sword, as ancient custom demanded, so that he could defend himself against the various monsters and demons that inhabit the Afterlife. After he was put in the ground, Guðrún walked thrice backwards around his grave. Otherwise, he would continue to occupy their marital bed.

So it was that Thorgeir became both husband and son to his mother. He was a boy of great diligence. As much work as the family holding demanded, twice that much he would perform. Soon there were farmers in Suðurnes who thought he would make a good match for their daughters. And those daughters themselves regarded his red hair as an indication that he would keep the fires of love well lit during the night.

Now it was the custom of the men of Suðurnes to visit a lorn scrap of rock called Geirfugla Skerry in early summer. Once there, they would climb the cliffs in search of auks and their eggs. The chief of fowlers, Thorolfur Twist-Foot, had seen Thorgeir climbing hills to bring back lost sheep, a sheep himself, and asked him to join his fowling crew. Thorgeir accepted. For he was pleased to be among such adventuring men.

Before her son left, Guðrún gave him a magic charm made from a bird's spittle, a quahog shell, the skin of a stillborn child, and a piece of fox dung. This charm would protect him from all harm, she said.

After the twelve-oar ship managed a landing on the skerry, a few of the fowlers stayed on board to keep a watch on the sea, and the others climbed to the cliffs. Ahead of them all was Thorgeir, leaping from pinnacle to pinnacle, a mountainy

ram among old ewes. Soon he was taking his spoil even as the others were tying their ropes to get onto the cliffs.

Ropes, he yelled down at the others, are for weaklings.

Soon came a cry from the boat urging the men back. The seas were growing quite rough, and it was necessary to pull away from the skerry right away.

The men boarded the boat, all but Thorgeir. He was still busily breaking birds' necks. They called after him again and again, making trumpets out of their hands, but so intent was he on his work that he didn't hear them. At last they were obliged to leave without him.

"Oars out!" yelled Thorolfur Twist-Foot to the rest of the crew, adding: "Either he remains behind, or we all remain behind. But he is very resourceful, this redhead. He will eat auks and scurvy grass until we return."

One of the other men laughed. "I have seen lovewort on the skerry as well. Maybe the boy will have bedded down a bird or two by the time we come back."

They took the matter rather lightly. Since it was summer, they did not expect Thorgeir to be stranded for more than a few days. But those days turned to weeks when howling storms released such a rage on the sea that no boat could be sent to retrieve the boy.

Guðrún could find no sign the reading of which might tell whether her son still dwelled among the living. Long hours she would stand by the shore and tear at her hair. Then with the first snows she retired to her bed and would not take food. Instead, she would alternately pray and beat herself with a hazel rod.

A widowed woman, Nína, daughter of Björn, was sent by the parish to look after her.

"Cheer up," said Nina in order to comfort her, "for no one lives beyond their fated day." Hearing these words, Gudrun beat herself even harder, now using a birch rod.

Early the next summer, the men of Suðurnes ventured out once again to Geirfugla Skerry in search of seabirds. As they approached the island, they observed a figure on the rocks.

"No doubt a poacher from Keflavík," said Ketill, son of Skapti.

"Let it be a poacher," remarked a man named Gunnar the Louse. "Worse things by far have been sighted here."

When the figure came down to the shore to meet them, they were more than a little surprised to see that it was Thorgeir Redhead. They had expected to find his bones picked clean by the birds, but here was the fellow himself, seemingly as healthy as could be.

"Thorgeir, is that really you?" the men said. For he was wearing a blue cloak of good cloth, but he had not been wearing this cloak when he was left on the skerry.

"Yes, it is me," he replied. He said he had not suffered in the least from exposure during the winter. On the contrary, he had been warm, very warm. Also, he had put on a certain amount of weight, which was not in keeping with many months alone on Geirfugla Skerry.

"How did you survive, Redhead, on this cold troll haunt?" the men kept inquiring. Thorgeir would only smile in reply. They brought Thorgeir back to Suðurnes, where Guðrún greeted him with all her lost joy. "Oh my son, my dear son," she shouted, "you are not dead, after all!"

Soon the mother was tending her son night and day. She brought him horse ribs to gnaw and strong ale to quaff. And he would just sit by the fire, eating and warming himself. When it came time to bring the sheep down from their upland pastures, he had become so sluggish in all his person that he could scarce climb

out of his chair, much less climb the hills behind Suðurnes. And he was now so large in the rump that his gait was hardly more than a waddle.

Then one day a horse was discovered frozen to death in a standing position – a very bad omen, especially since the weather was quite mild.

The next day Guðrún pried Thorgeir loose from his hearth-seat to attend the funeral of her half-brother Eiríkur, son of Halldór, who had drowned while fishing in the River Ölfusá. When they arrived at the Church, they noticed a little cradle at the door. At the foot of this cradle was a parchment with these words written on it: "He who is the father of my child will see to its baptism."

The priest lifted the coverlet of the cradle, and inside lay a child with a rich cropping of red hair. He asked whether any of the people in the church knew of this child.

No one admitted any knowledge, though many eyes fell on Thorgeir, for the infant was the very image of him.

"Do you know aught of this, Thorgeir?" the priest at last asked. Thorgeir shook his head vigorously. Almost immediately, a young woman walked into the Church. She had raven tresses down almost to her knees and was tall and stately, albeit somewhat stern of favor. She pointed to Thorgeir, saying, "This is your child, Redhead, and you promised to have it christened if I brought it to Church."

"I made no such promise," Thorgeir declared.

"Do you not acknowledge this child as your own?"

Thorgeir backed away, his hands raised as though to ward off some evil power. He said: "I acknowledge nothing in your presence, you witch!"

"And you say this after I tended and cared for you? After I saved you from your death?"

"The only thing I say is this – get away from me, and take your filthy spawn with you!"

The woman regarded him with eyes that seemed to bulge ever wider. At last she said: "I told you that you would pay dearly if you did not have our child christened. And pay you will! Henceforth you will be a whale, the biggest, most monstrous whale in all the seas, and many" – she swept her hands all around her – "many will die on your account." Whereupon the woman snatched the cradle and hurried away.

The priest told the assembled company: "That baby will die without being christened, and its ghost will be disturbing our sleep."

Some now crossed themselves, while others fell to talking about the strange woman. Ketill, son of Skapti, said: "I have not seen the world, but I have been to Hrísey, and this woman has the eyes of women there."

Someone else remarked that perhaps this was the widow in Mýrdal with whom Thorgeir was said to be keeping company shortly before he was marooned. But Gunnar the Louse held that the widow in question had since died and that, in any event, she was long past the child-bearing age.

A few others wondered whether the woman mightn't belong to the race of *Huldufolk,* trollish beings who live in all the desolate places, from Eldey to the Hornstrands, from Snæfellsnes to Njarðvík, and likewise Geirfugla Skerry. *Huldufolk* were known to mingle their squalid blood with the blood of Icelanders, and maybe the red-haired child was the result of just such a mingling.

Nína, Guðrún's housekeeper, said she couldn't help but overhear Thorgeir as he mumbled in his ale-stupor by the fire.

At such times, yes, he was wont to refer to the folk who looked after him on the skerry and to some strange pact he had made with them.

Pulling on her hair, Guðrún admitted that she knew something like this would happen. After all, a mizzling rain the color of blood was falling from the sky as she and her son had walked toward the church. And just as she left the house, she had seen a white raven hovering over its roof.

"That raven was the woman who stole my poor son," she declared.

"Are you sure it wasn't one of Óðinn's ravens all covered with snow?" a man named Snorri Short-Nose laughed.

As for Thorgeir himself, he seemed unmindful of this talk. His face was sunk in his hands for a long time. Then a shudder took hold of his body and made every one of his bones shake. Of a sudden, he rose up and ran as best he could out of the church.

A few men gave pursuit, for they thought he might do some harm to himself. They followed him to Stakkagynpa, a high cliff jutting over the sea. And whether he leaped off the cliff or whether he'd grown so large and ponderous that the rock split under him, the men could not say. But down he went, down into the sea, landing with a very loud splash.

One of the men later swore that when he peered over the cliff, he saw an enormous finback whale where Thorgeir had landed – a finback whale with a red head.

And soon it happened that a huge redheaded whale was harrying boats in the bay of Faxaflói. Rhymes were made about how this whale would come up beneath a boat and capsize it with its great back, then thrash the water with its

great tail until everyone who'd been in the boat was drowned or battered to death or frequently both.

A chieftain from Suðurnes named Bjarni, son of another Bjarni, composed a rhyme about the whale that began like this:

Giants and two-headed ghosts
any fool can dispose of,
but a red-headed whale
only a brave man can kill…

Shortly after he composed this rhyme, Bjarni rowed his boat into the bay, tied a bast rope around his waist, and lowered himself into the water. In one hand, he held a large whale-killing axe and in the other an adze. In his belt was a curved scimitar.

Bjarni's body was later found washed up on the strand near Grindavík. Needless to say, he composed no more rhymes.

The whale also drowned the son of the priest at Hvalsnes and the nephew of the priest at Kjalarnes. This upset the two priests quite a bit. Together they sprinkled holy water in the sea and entreated the whale in the name of Jesus Christ to give up its murderous ways. They also recited the Our Father backwards thrice a dozen times, by which method Bishop Thorlákur was known to have driven away all evil spirits from Látrabjarg in the Westfjords.

Yet in spite of the the priests' efforts, the whale remained the very crown of depravity. At Hvítanes, it capsized a boat belonging to the chieftain Halldór, with Halldór in it. At Hvalfardarstrand, it capsized a boatload of young girls on their way to first communion. And at Akranes, it even toppled a large boatload of sheep.

Said the Hvalsnes priest: "Perhaps we should seek the help of Guðrún Magnúsdóttir."

"Who is Guðrún Magnúsdóttir?" asked the Kjalarnes priest. "Some sort of sorceress?"

"They say she is the mother of the whale."

"The mother of the whale? Have I heard you correctly, my friend? What would our good Bishop Guðmundur say if he heard you spouting such nonsense?"

"I wouldn't have believed the story myself if I hadn't heard it from Heimar, son of Snorri, and a very reliable man. He says the whale will do no harm to any boat on which this woman is a passenger. Rival fishing crews have even taken to vying with one another for her use. For her part, she only wants to be near him whom she thinks is her son, however loathsome his manner."

So it was that the two priests journeyed to Suðurnes. There they met with Guðrún, now a half-demented crone who spent most of her time arguing genealogies with her dead uncles. She was at first unwilling to let herself be installed in a boat on the fjord. For only that morning she had read her drowning in the flight of an Arctic tern, and she did not wish to drown just yet.

"You will not drown, woman," the priests told her, "for God and Jesus Christ rule the seas, and they will not allow it."

"No, my son rules the seas," the old woman stated with a certain degree of pride.

"Well, your son will not allow it, then," the priests told her. This seemed to satisfy Guðrún, so she agreed to accompany the priests.

From Hvalsnes they set off, and hardly had their boat reached the mouth of the fjord when they saw a coal-black streak that resembled a shoal of fish pushing toward them. Then it drew alongside them, and they saw it was the redheaded whale.

Guðrún leaned over the gunwale to greet the whale, and both priests thought that it responded to this greeting with

a nod of its massive head. Soon the old woman was reeling off a mixture of farm gossip and family disasters, and the whale moved opposite, as though attending to her every word.

"We are leading him straight up the fjord," said the Hvalsnes priest to the other. "He is a mere lamb on account of this woman."

The whale followed them past the rocky finger of Thyrilsnes and into the shallows of Botnsvogur. All the while Guðrún kept up with her talk. She was now talking about the price of saltfish as well as those of her ancestors who'd had their eyes pecked out by birds of prey. She said: "I hope you are keeping well, my Thorgeir, despite all."

The Kjalarnes priest whispered to his companion, "In my parish, we turn loose such madwomen as this to wander the upland heaths."

"In mine as well," said the other, "but it is because of her that we now have the monster in our thrall."

And just as he said this, the whale let out an ungodly roar such as the demons make who live inside Hekla. For it had become stuck in the shallows. The priests drew out their ram's horns and blew loudly. All at once a group of men with spears and axes emerged from behind the rocks and boulders along the the shore, then dashed toward the water, shouting and yelling.

The son of the chieftain Bjarni called for vengeance in his father's name and leaped onto the whale's back. Then he proceeded to hack away wildly with a large broad axe. The others were right behind him. Again and again they plunged their weapons into the whale, whose body soon grew as red of hue as its head. It roared and slapped at them with its great tail, but to no avail.

It was told that during this battle Guðrún had the strength of a berserk, and that she tried to stop the killing of the whale all by herself, falling on one man, then another, kicking them, biting them, and tearing at their hair. But no berserk, not even one driven by motherly love, can defeat so many weapon-wielding men. Thus she could not stop them from making a spear-cushion of her son.

Just before the whale breathed its last, it gazed up at Guðrún, and there seemed to be a look of terrible sadness on its face.

"Oh my dear son, my Redhead," cried the old woman, "I knew you would come to a bad end."

Note

"The Saga of Redhead" is based on an Icelandic folktale I heard from an old fisherman on the island of Heimaey in 1987. In own my version of the story, I took quite a few liberties with the plot and the characters. I also used a style that at once honors and mocks the style of Icelandic sagas. One thing I did not change is the traditional Icelandic attitude towards red-headed whales – they're regarded as evil creatures who like nothing better than to wreak havoc on human beings.

Dreams and Claims
Icelandic-Aboriginal Interactions in the Manitoba Interlake

by Dr. Anne Brydon, PhD

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Part III: the conclusion, continued from Volume 69 #4

Dreams and the Ambiguities of Memory

My interest lies elsewhere, in understanding how history is selectively used to construct present-day identities, both personal and collective. This is not cause for moral judgement: constructing narratives to place one's sense of self within one's realm of experience is what humans do at individual and social levels. However, sometimes difficulties arise. The narrative can outlive its relevance; it can even become counter-productive to its original function. If, as I argue, the story of Trausti's dream once helped Icelanders to smooth over the emotional turmoil of emigration and pioneering, then we need to consider its continuing relevance to group representation once those social conditions were resolved. The membership of presentday Icelandic-Canadian ethnic organizations is aging. Few young people are motivated to identify actively with an image of Icelandicness largely drained of the rich complexity of human existence. Simple stories of success in adversity and harmonious relations convey none of this complexity to younger generations, who no longer need to justify past actions. I have spoken with a significant number of younger IcelandicCanadians who find the stories too sanitized and unbelievable to be usable for cultural identification.

Does the exclusive emphasis on Trausti Vigfússon's dream contribute to our limited understanding of the complex and fraught interactions between European settlers and Aboriginal peoples? Arguably, a most significant issue in contemporary Canadian society is finding ways of living equitably with cultural differences in a democratic society, in particular to recognize the effect of colonial thought and action upon Aboriginal peoples. Postcolonial studies have addressed this goal by investigating the plurality of histories and the role power plays in shaping historical knowledge. This has been my goal in this paper. Icelandic immigrants and Native peoples were caught up in the Canadian government's strategies for populating the West. The government's goal was to prevent American incursion and create markets for eastern Canadian manufacturers of farm equipment (my own ancestors were amongst those manufacturers who so benefited). Government policy effectively placed the Icelanders and Aboriginal

Peoples into structural positions that were immediately at odds, regardless of what other attitudes they may have had.

According to the philosopher Charles Taylor, the nostalgic search for authenticity and wholeness in a world characterized by uncertainty is symptomatic of modernity's malaise. Nostalgia is predicated upon a desire to retell history only in the most purified forms, to avoid, perhaps, the realization that one's sense of self, shaped as it is by memory and history, is more often than not ambiguous, contextual, decentred and contradictory. Although authenticity is conventionally thought to be opposed to falsity or artificiality (Handler and Linnekin), it is more useful to think of authenticity as an idealization that imposes an unachievable –perfection upon lived experience. According to Taylor, the solution to modernity's malaise does not lie in individualized self-reflection; it lies instead in a reflection on the conditions of one's place within one's social and historical milieu. By extension, a social or ethnic group's sense of authenticity is contingent upon fully acknowledging its interconnections with others.

Icelandic-Canadian historiography retains a remarkable insularity. Repetition of the purified story of John Ramsay's help during the early years of settlement continues to silence Native voices. Nostalgic or sentimental acknowledgement of Native assistance, although well intentioned, does not allow for cultural difference. It does not take into account Native understandings and experiences. The other remains an extension of Icelandic identification with the victimhood that they, coming from a colonized and disenfranchised land, thought was a link between themselves and Native peoples. At the same time, they were in the position of colonizer, a situation some people found deeply troubling and others found acceptable.

Forgetting is a powerful cognitive tool for self-defence. Forgetting operates at both individual and collective levels; it insulates the subject from shame or culpability and from reliving traumatic events. It is an interim strategy for physical and emotional survival. But if we dismiss the past and its injustices, we fail to recognize the persistent relevance of history and memory in shaping present-day identities. Today, First Nations peoples in Canada struggle against powerful forces of forgetfulness. These forces operate throughout Canadian society, in Canada's judicial, educational and political ractices, in the attitudes and behaviours of Euro-Canadians and in First Nations communities. Yet the guarded optimism of the late anthropologist Sally Weaver does not seem out of place. She describes the emergence of a "permanent organic relationship," which recognizes that" cultures change and evolve over time" without leading towards convergence or assimilation (cf. Brydon 1987, 1990a/b, 1991). Initiatives in anthropological and historical research have sought to decolonize the writing of Canadian culture and history, to document the existence of many histories, many narratives told from differing perspectives.

In the first years of Icelandic settlement there was acrimonious debate, triggered by hardships, over whether the choice to come to New Iceland had been the right one. During the next decades, not all Icelanders bought into the myth-making about a more congenial past, which community leaders found conducive to their economic and political interests. But the dissenting voices remain locked in diaries and letters written in Icelandic and hidden in several archives in Canada and Iceland (Ólafsson and Magnússon).

A young generation of historians in Iceland is only now turning to these stories. No parallel initiative is emerging in Icelandic-Canadian scholarship, although alternative histories and difficult truths have been told through fiction and poetry. The early-short stories by W.D. Valgardson shocked his contemporaries by their frank telling of suffering, alcoholism, poverty and suicide. Gunnars' literary works (1980; 1983), based on her archival research into Icelandic settlement in Canada, evoke the psychic pain that the proximity of death must have caused the early settlers. Her writings evoke a bush of ghosts, the fear of which could only be tamed by recognizing that – unlike Sigtryggur Jónasson's stories of nomadic Indians – the Saulteaux experienced their lives and their sense of identity through a deep attachment to the land being taken from them. Such a potent attachment to place would have resonated with the reality Icelandic settlers had left behind in the homeland, where identities are connected inextricably to farms and landmarks. Gunnars came to Canada from Iceland as a young woman and was not socialized into a standard story of Icelandic-Canadian history; this may help explain her perspective.

Can the Icelandic practice of dream interpretation generate other interpretations of Trausti's dream about John Ramsay and his wife's grave? For Icelanders, as for the Saulteaux, the boundary between human existence and the animate qualities of other orders of being was quite shadowy. Dreams are thought to give access to an external, immanent reality that is difficult to contact in a waking state. Certain features can have direct meanings or can be prophetic: dream of a bear, be wary of meeting a powerful man. Sometimes people dream of the hidden people (huldafólk) who co-habit the island and choose when to make themselves visible to ordinary people, from whom they will typically extract a favour. In dreams, the dead return to let loved ones know of their passing and to say goodbye. Many deaths in pre-modern Iceland occurred at sea, when open boats would capsize and the people fishing from them – mostly men – disappeared forever. These dreams seem to provide a closure or finality to death that the body's absence would have left unfinished.

The topic of dreams and dream interpretation is a favourite one amongst Icelanders and Icelandic-Canadians, and the latter refer to this as evidence that their Icelandicness extends over generations born in Canada. Stories of significant dreams can be found in the medieval saga literature in Iceland, and interpreting dreams is a continuous folkloric practice. In nineteenth-century Iceland, keeping dream diaries was a popular addition to the flourishing practice ordinary writing. An already existing practice of dream interpretation was given new cultural force by its merger with a form of self-inscription that, arguably, was part of a new intellectual means for rethinking the self during the early stages of modernization in Iceland.

The Icelandic immigrants brought with them an understanding that dreams are significant. From an Icelandic perspective, Trausti's obedience to Ramsay's request requires no explanation. Trausti's visit from a recently deceased person is not unusual – it concerns someone dead bringing a message from "the other side" that must be taken seriously (Einarsson). The threat of an unhappy ghost exacting revenge was greater than a similar threat from the same person while alive. That the ghost was also Aboriginal and had justifiable reasons to be aggrieved would have added

to a sense of danger. The dream requires an act of completion. In Douglas's terms, obeying such a dream acts to restore the moral order by closing and solidifying the boundary between life and death. It is in keeping with this world-view that Trausti's dream should become part of Icelandic-Canadian folklore.

Before their arrival in North America, Icelanders had heard tales of murderous Indians. They knew of violent encounters between their ancestors and Aboriginal peoples – skrælings – from the sagas of Leifur Eiríksson's voyages. The contradictory experience of peaceable Native peoples offering needed help must have been confusing enough. Add to that the psychic pain exacted by the harsh, unfamiliar prairie environment, interactions with various unfamiliar nationalities and languages and acrimonious debates over the future direction of the colony: all of this must have been difficult for early settlers to deal with. Fear and pain can be turned inwards and lead to alcoholism, depression and suicide, all of which did occur. But fear and pain can also be externalized onto the social or natural environment. Ghosts can in some cases be thought of as such externalizations.

The transfer of Trausti's personal dream into a larger cultural realm is significant to the structuring of ethnic myths of identity, which take complex realities and render them safe and simple. In Kristofferson's telling, when Trausti, who was poor, obeys Ramsay and performs an act of restoration, he is rewarded with fish (Trausti's daughter says this is not true). The moral is clear: attend to the wishes of the dead, and order is restored. I suspect that Icelanders at the turn of the century knew of Ramsay's plight, and some

were conflicted by the morally ambiguous position in which it placed them. Icelanders interacted and learned from Natives and intermarried with them. Anecdotal evidence indicates a mixed history of reciprocity and prejudice. The dream can be interpreted as a symbolic attempt to offer restitution to Ramsay and to return a sense of order. At a social level, however, the dream also closes the narrative of IcelandicSaulteaux interactions, giving the mistaken impression that this is all there is to say on the topic. Each generation writes its history anew in order to revitalize cultural meaning. At this historic moment, not to question the myth of harmonious relations between Icelanders and Native peoples is to limit understanding of the present as well as of the past, and to shut down a necessary rethinking of how identities are made.

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The Proust Questionnaire

The Proust Questionnaire has its origins in a parlor game popularized (though not devised) by Marcel Proust, the French essayist and novelist, who believed that, in answering these questions, an individual reveals his or her true nature. In this issue of *Icelandic Connection,* author W.D. Valgardson takes time to answer the Proust Questionnaire.

1. What is your idea of perfect happiness?
Christmas dinner with my family and friends
2. What is your greatest fear?
Losing my ability to write
3. What is the trait you most deplore in yourself?
Insensitivity
4. What is the trait you most deplore in others?
Dishonesty
5. *Which living person do you most admire?*
The Dahli Lama
6. What is your greatest extravagance?
Having an apartment in my home town that I only use three months a year
7. What is your current state of mind?
Apprehension for the future
8. What do you consider the most overrated virtue?
Sincerity
9. On what occasion do you lie?
When the lie is minor and the truth hurtful
10. What do you most dislike about your appearance?
My height
11. Which living person do you most despise?
Donald Trump
12. What is the quality you most like in a man?
Compassion
13. What is the quality you most like in a woman?
Competence
14. Which words or phrases do you most overuse?
You know
15. What or who is the greatest love of your life?
My grandmother
16. When and where were you happiest?
Iowa. Graduate school.
17. Which talent would you most like to have?
Musicality
18. If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?
To be able to sing and play an instrument
19. What do you consider your greatest achievement?
Getting published
20. If you were to die and come back as a person or a thing, what would it be?
A medical researcher as successful as Banting
21. Where would you most like to live?
Near my kids
22. What is your most treasured possession?
My family photo albums
23. What do you regard as the lowest depth of misery?
The death of my brother
24. What is your favorite occupation?
Writing
25. What is your most marked characteristic?
Dogged determination
26. What do you most value in your friends?
Loyalty
27. Who are your favorite writers?
Hemingway, Flannery O'Connor, Theodore Roethke, Jane Austen, Al Purdy
28. Who is your hero of fiction?
Robert Jordan

29. Which historical figure do you most identify with?
Churchill
30. Who are your heroes in real life?
Bethune
31. What are your favorite names?
Valentinus
32. What is it that you most dislike?
Unfairness
33. What is your greatest regret?
Not having obtained a Phd
34. How would you like to die?
Instantly
35. What is your motto?
Make use of the talent you were given by God

POETRY

The Owl and the Wood

The weathered wood had better times,
Stood strong for many years.
A structure filled with laughing sounds,
Yet also wept with tears.

The walls surrounded love and hope,
Of a young man and his bride.
Then graced the wood with baby sounds,
Of coo's, and grunts, and cries.

Grandpa came to stay awhile,
When he was old and frail.
The wooden floors heard shuffled steps,
And saw he was so pale.

The children wrote upon it's walls,
And ran into them too.
But mother gently scrubbed the marks,
And kissed all the boo boo's.

A stranger came to call one day,
Asked the father if he might.
Take the pretty girl a dancing,
In the soft and clear moonlight.

The wood is much more tired now,
It rocks beneath the chairs.
A lifetime passed amongst the walls,
And answered many prayers.

The house became abandoned,
It weathered and it fell,
Some structure still does stand there,
There's a new life there to dwell.

The wisest of them all, is said,
To sit upon it's perch.
He listens to the tales of past,
It's all about the search.

The search for love and happiness,
You find within four walls.
Will never end and stop there,
For the wise owl knows it all.

Written by Lois Fridfinnson, January 2, 2016

The Old Hound Dog

I'm just a old hound dog laying around,
Planting my face on this dirty old ground.
I'm tired of hunting and looking for coon,
All through the night and under the moon.

I can no longer smell all the critters of past,
My snifter retired, it has sniffed it's last.
The bones they are aching, I've run many a mile,
So I think I'll just lay here and rest for awhile.

My son will take over, he's no longer a pup,
He's raring to go, so I'll tell him yup.
You'll do well my son, I taught you the ropes,
Just do your best, that is all of my hopes.

In the wee morning hours he hears all the barks,
He knows they are busy making they're marks.
He dreams in the shade of the whispering pine,
Remembering the hunt when it was "his" time.

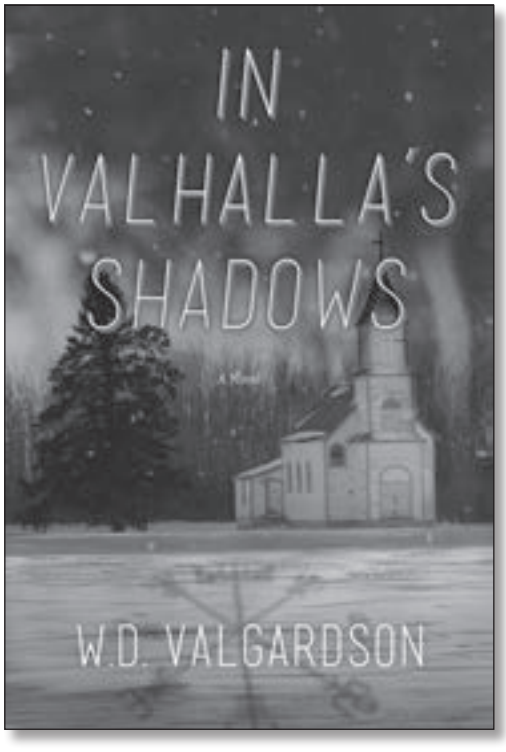
Written by Lois Fridfinnson, October 13, 2016

Book Review

In Valhalla's Shadows

by W.D. Valgardson

Reviewed by Nina Lee Colwill



In Valhalla's Shadows
By W.D. Valgardson
Madeira Park, BC: Douglas and McIntyre, 2013

W.D. Valgardson's latest book is the story of Tom Parsons, an ex-Mountie with PTSD, recently separated from his wife and trying to build a new life in the isolated Manitoba village of Valhalla. It's a murder mystery; a lesson in Norse mythology; a primer for the renovation of old houses; and a powerful psychological and philosophical treatment of PTSD, greed and generosity, the forced familiarity of people in isolated villages, and the treatment of Canada's First Nations. Valgardson builds his story layer upon layer upon layer, as he skillfully captures the scattered thinking of Tom Parsons, whose condition forces him to leap from idea to idea, from memory to memory.

I found myself caught up in every layer of this book. One in particular is Tom's reconstruction of his house and grounds. I've never had the slightest interest in engaging in anything resembling construction, yet I found myself following Tom's work step by step. Valgardson's writing is like that: It draws a person in.

This is a book of unforgettable

characters, and I had three favourites. There's Jason, head of the Godi, chosen by God to lead his followers in the worship of Odin, casting spells on the disapproving townsfolk, deciding which of his followers should sleep together and how much they should eat. There's the three Norns, the more-Icelandic-than-thou Simundson sisters, ancient, emaciated, "painted and shellacked" with "violent red lips", identically dressed, coifed, and be-spectacled. And there's Pastor Jon, mechanic, sheep and goat farmer, and honey salesman ($5 a jar), with his collection of stoles to fit every occasion and a six-foot multi-coloured and well-labelled papier mâché brain that he found at a science fair and installed at the front of his church.

W. D. Valgardson, or Billy, as we call him in Gimli, spends most of his summers in Gimli. So it was easy for me to interview him.

* * *

NLC: I've often wondered why you chose W.D. Valgardson as your writing name. It is your name, of course, but why just initials?

WDV: That's so far in the distant past that I don't remember. Billy Valgardson, Bill Valgardson, William Valgardson, William Dempsey Valgardson. I think I tried William D. Valgardson, but that was too long. It just didn't fit well onto a cover. K. D. Lang hadn't come along yet, so there was no influence there.

NLC: A great deal of thought must have gone into the title of *In Valhalla's Shadows*. How did you arrive at it?

WDV: I began with the title "Dry Rot". It captured the image of Tom fixing up the old house that he bought. It also captured the difference between the perfect Christmas card town he remembered and the reality one always finds in small towns (or big towns). But the publisher didn't think "Dry Rot" would help sell books and that there was more to the novel than that one issue and image. I went through dozens and dozens of titles. Nope, nope, nope. Some were too maudlin, some too romantic, lots of problems. Many people got involved. Finally, the publisher made some suggestions that broke the logjam.

NLC: People are referring to *In Valhalla's Shadows* as your first mystery. But as a mystery fan, I would have called *The Girl with the Botticelli Face* a mystery. Why wasn't it recognized as belonging to that genre?

WDV: Yes, I agree. The Girl with the Botticelli Face *was a mystery. But I think the humour and the voice were what people responded to. After all these years, I meet people who say they loved that first chapter with the shrink in the construction hole. I got a lot of phone calls, particularly from women saying thank you for writing the book. That has never happened before or since. Readers were less interested in the plot than in the characters.*

NLC: One radio interviewer suggested that Valhalla was really Gimli in disguise, and I've heard others make the same association. Yet there's little about Valhalla or its location that would suggest Gimli. What fuels the quest of reviewers and readers to identify the "real" location and the "real" characters in novels?

WDV: Yes, Valhalla is so small that it has one store. Gimli is so big that it has a traffic light. But the phenomenon seems universal; readers want to be in on the secret. I think it makes them feel part of the drama. And readers tend to impute things to authors that the author may never have intended. The classic case was "God Is Not A Fish Inspector." When the film based on that story was shown in Gimli, many people claimed to know Fusi, the protagonist. But nobody got it right.

NLC: Were you ever tempted to have one of your characters visit Gimli from

Valhalla to nip the inevitable comparison in the bud?

WDV: Yes. I put it in and took it out. I also thought about Tom visiting Hecla, but that raised all sorts of technical problems. I wanted Valhalla to be claustrophobic. If the inhabitants of Valhalla could easily leave the village, there would be no drama.

NLC: Might the relationship between Valhalla and Gimli in Norse mythology be more interesting than the comparison between the fictional Valhalla and the real Gimli?

WDV: Yes. I think it might have been more interesting at an academic level. That's always a problem. I tried including more mythology, but I realized the danger of bogging everything down for the applause of a few academics. Could I have layered it so that all the gods were represented or saga figures were represented? Probably. But would it keep the story moving forward? The same was true of the US occupation of Iceland during World War II. It was slowing the story down too much, and my editor recommended cutting a hundred manuscript pages.

NLC: Like everything you write, this was a highly visual book. Is the ability to create strong images a natural talent or a skill you've developed over time –a skill you've been able to teach your students?

I don't think in words. I think in images. Then I translate the images into words. My thought process is sort of like watching a comic strip without words. I wouldn't think, "Tom is lonely." Instead, I'd see an image of Tom sitting at a window in his parents' apartment, looking out at the street. Then I'd think, "Tom is lonely." Ever since I started teaching in 1961, I've had students draw in order to enhance their ability to see. Having been an artist for some time and having taught art for six years helped me develop a natural way of seeing.

NLC: Many Canadian bookstores have a section called "Canadiana". Is there really a Canadian story and a Canadian voice that Canadian writers tap into?

WDV: In high school we studied mostly English and American writers. We were fortunate that "David" by Earl Birney and "The Wind Our Enemy" by Marriott were included. At university, another student and I asked an English professor why we weren't able to study Canadian writers, and his response was "What Canadian writers?" The impression I got was that I had to write like the English or American writers we studied. When I discovered Al Purdy's "Cariboo Horses", it was a moment of freedom –similar to first seeing an exhibition of The Group of Seven. They painted the Canada I knew. Becoming Canadian has been difficult.

* * *

But fortunately, and in spite of the difficulty, you've told us Canadian stories in Canadian voices for several decades –through poetry, short stories, novels, plays, film, and radio dramas. Thank you for that.

Contributors

JUDY DALMAN BRADLEY is a retired President and a retired General Secretary of the Manitoba Teacher's Society who is now enjoying the opportunity to be more involved with her Icelandic heritage. She is currently President of the Icelandic Canadian Frón, and Vice-President of the Jon Sigurdsson Chapter IODE. Gimli is her home town and she can be found there during Íslendingadagurinn. Judy and her husband Garth, for about two decades, worked along side her brother at Íslendingadagurinn. Judy is also a retired scuba diver, who has been to the great depth of 185 feet.

DR. ANNE BRYDON, PhD, is a Professor of Anthropology at Wilfred Laurier University in Waterloo, ON. Her Master's research thesis was based on a study of ethnicity focusing on the Icelanders of Manitoba.

NINA LEE COLWILL was an Air force brat who went to high school in Gimli and returned there to live. She was a professor at University of Manitoba and spent a year as a visiting professor at University of Akureyri in Iceland. She currently does language editing for European academics and is writing her fourth book.

LOIS FRIDFINNSON is the daughter of Kjartan and Lillian Fridfinnson. She grew up in the Geysir area, which is located between the towns of Arborg and Riverton. Lois is one of 7 children. She started writing poetry as a young girl and never really shared her works until two years ago. She is currently in the process of publishing some of her poems.

GAIL HALLDORSON is a retired High School Librarian living in Sandy Hook, Manitoba. She enjoys her volunteer work at the New Iceland Heritage Museum.

LAWRENCE MILLMAN is the author of 15 books, including such titles as *Last Places, Northern Latitudes, Parliament of Ravens, Fascinating Fungi of New England, Hiking to Siberia,* and most recently, *At the End of the World. Last Places* is a travel narrative that follows the Norse voyages from the Old World to the New; *Parliament of Ravens* is a collection of Icelandic prose poems.

SOLVEIG SVEINSSON (see 'About the Author', p. 74 in this issue)

The tectonic plates whose turbulent interactions formed Iceland, are the Eurasian tectonic plate and the North American tectonic plate. Spanning the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, Iceland emerged as a result of the divergent, spreading, boundary between these two plates and the activity of Iceland's own hot spot or mantle plume.

The Back Page

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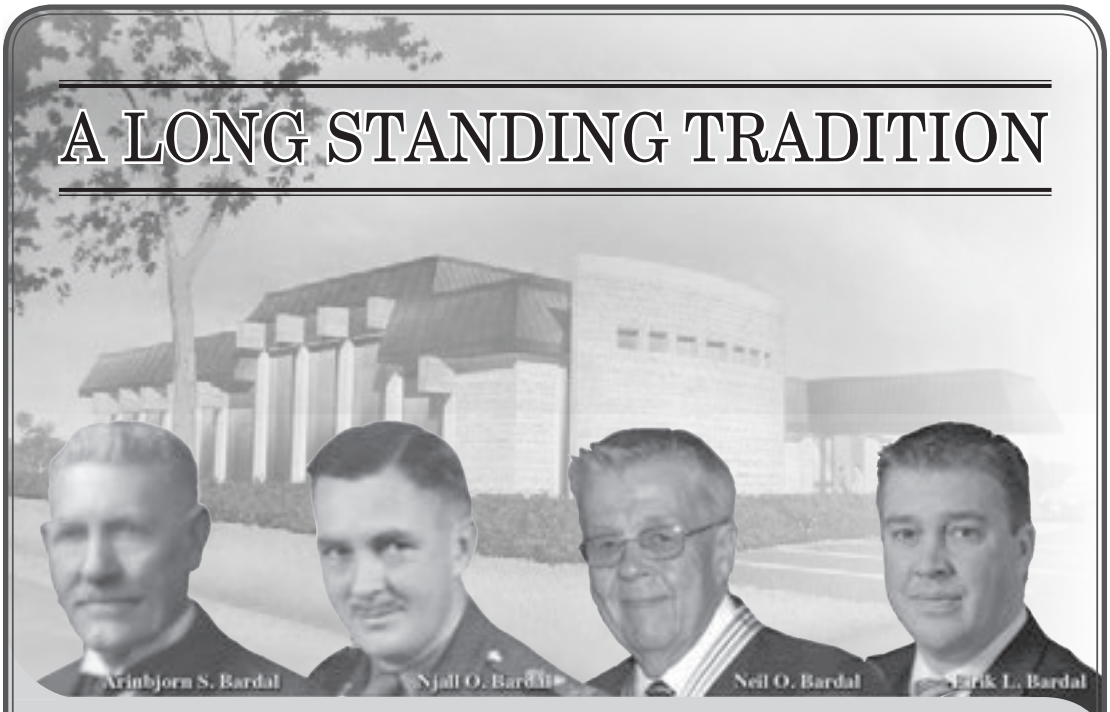

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