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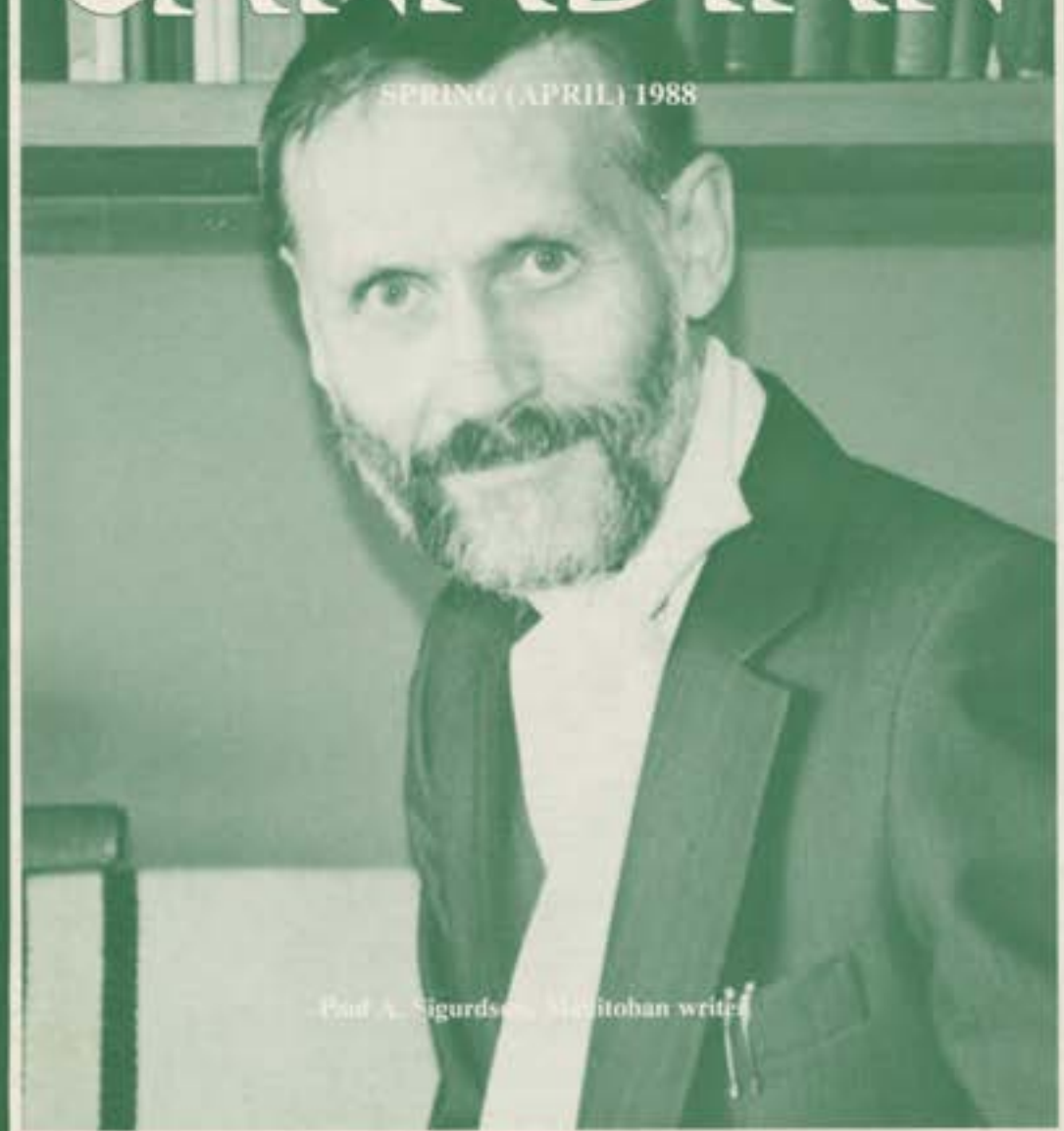
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# THE ICELANDIC CANADIAN

SPRING (APRIL) 1988



Paul A. Sigurdson, Manitoba writer



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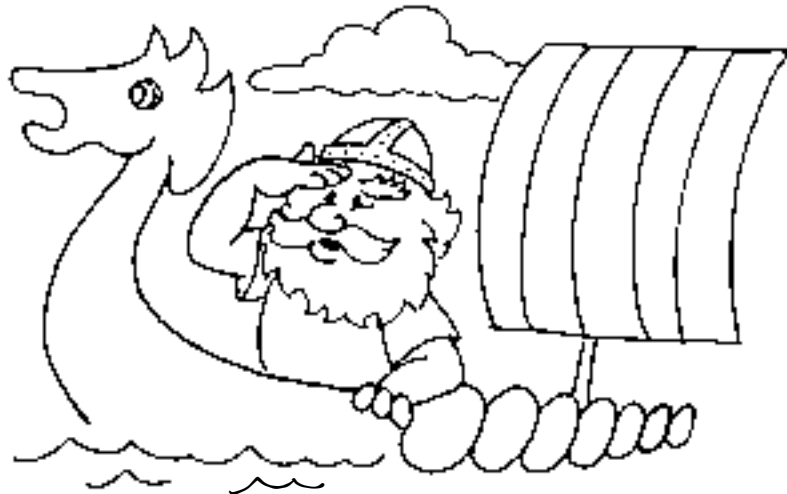
# THE ICELANDIC CANADIAN

Volume LXVI, No. 3

Winnipeg, Canada

Spring, 1988

<i>Editorial</i> — by <i>Kristjana Gunnars</i> .....	5
Readers' Forum .....	7
<i>Feature Article</i>	
Paul A. Sigurdson — by <i>Roy St. George Stubbs</i> .....	9
A Look at Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason's Markland Years — by <i>Laurence Gillespie</i> .....	17
<i>In the Red River Valley</i> , Chapter I — by <i>Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason</i> , translated by <i>Thelma Whale</i> ....	20
Interview with Frú Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, President of Iceland — by <i>Amalia Lindal</i> .....	28
Poet's Corner	
Two poems — by <i>Kristiana Magnusson</i> .....	34
People .....	36
<i>Book Notes</i> — by <i>Sigríð Johnson</i> .....	41
<i>Book Reviews:</i>	
<i>Iceland River Challenge</i> , National Geographic Video, reviewed by <i>Thomas R. Einarson</i> .....	42
<i>Refska</i> — by <i>Kristján Gunnarsson</i> , reviewed by <i>Loftur Bjarnason</i> .....	44
Notes on Contributors .....	48



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## EDITORIAL

by **Kristjana Gunnars**  
*Managing Editor*

The Manitoba spring arrives with resistance. Cold winds and nightly frosts hang on. Children still wear mittens. People huddle half chilled at bus stops. There is a sense of expectation in the air. The city of Winnipeg is abuzz with politics for elections are looming. Reporters with notepads are polling passers by on sidewalks and in cafés.

As I sit down to write this editorial I sense the strong enigma that overhangs the province. This is my last issue on the board of *The Icelandic Canadian*. I am saying good bye to Winnipeg, my home for many years now, from where I have observed the culture and society of West Icelanders across Canada and the American Midwest.

It is hard to make pronouncements about West Iceland because it is a shifting phenomenon. Lodged in a plethora of mainstream and ethnic cultures all competing for definition, the West Icelandic group is constantly changing. Newcomers make their presence felt and old faces disappear. East Icelanders arrive, contribute, and go away again. Nothing stays the same.

Yet we know West Iceland is strong and very much alive. The Icelandic culture in North America defines the lives and thoughts of thousands of us. It is a group with its own history and its own language now. The people in this issue testify to the dynamic nature of the Icelandic culture as it goes on outside of the island of its origins.

*The Icelandic Canadian Magazine* is here to chart the growth and development of the West Icelandic culture, all across North America. There is much to be learned and much to contribute. Every voice counts.

Every experience, every life story, every attempt at spoken Icelandic, no matter how fluent or broken, is of special significance.

It has been a pleasure to work with West Icelanders everywhere. Each issue is a learning experience for an editor. I have had an opportunity to visit with many of our contributors and to learn their stories. One thing has become clear to me: it takes a long time to understand what West Iceland is all about.

This issue is a people issue. As managing editor this time around, I have chosen to include articles on various personalities. Each one has important contributions to make; their stories and activities can help us understand ourselves. Above all, knowing more about each other will strengthen the bond that keeps us together as a group, however scattered. The better we know each other, the more we know about ourselves.

I urge our readers to send us more material: with this issue I hope to show some of what we are looking for. Essays, interviews, fiction, poetry, scholarly articles and book reviews are more than welcome. They are needed, because otherwise we cannot know what our true subject is.

To all of you in West Iceland, we on the board wish you the finest of summers.

— *Winnipeg, April, 1988*



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## READERS' FORUM

*The following are excerpts from some of the recent letters our editors have received. We'd like to hear from you, too. Submissions and comments are always welcome.*

*From Sveinbjorn Gerhard Pálsson,  
Fort McMurray, Alberta*

I am 71 years old and was born of Icelandic parents on Hecla Island Lake Winnipeg, which I think must have been the most Icelandic Community outside of Iceland itself. I can speak and read Icelandic fluently. I have been subscribing to the Icelandic Canadian for many years now and must say I am glad you decided not to change the name. I like it so much that I often sit down with it as soon as it comes in the house and I won't put it down till I have read it from cover to cover (ads & all). Please keep on featuring articles on outstanding Icelandic personalities from around North America. I am very proud of my heritage and more so after I spent 3 weeks in Iceland. The people were all so genuine.

*From Paul Magnusson,  
Sky Hill, Saskatchewan*

I have received the book "Framfari" some months ago. I enjoy it very much, and I have spent many hours reading about the early Icelanders in this new land which was unknown to them. It makes me wonder how they survived. It was the same with all the nationalities that came to this country then. I would strongly advise people of Icelandic descent to have this book.

I will be pleased Olafur Thorgurson's "Almanak" is put into book form like Framfari. This was mentioned in December issue of Icelandic Canada.



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Manitoban writer, Paul A. Sigurdson

## FEATURE

### PAUL A. SIGURDSON

by Roy St. George Stubbs

First in the front rank of faithful contributors to the Icelandic Canadian stands Paul A. Sigurdson. His pen has been a busy and a versatile one. He has contributed original poetry, translations of Icelandic poetry into English, editorials, essays, short stories, a one act play, *New Birth*, on a Biblical theme, and the words and music of a song, "Sara's Carol" (Sara is one of his daughters). But the significance of his contributions is not their quantity, but their quality, their range and variety.

In the first of the de Coverley papers, Addison observed that a reader, for a right understanding, likes to know something about the author whose work he reads, whether he be "a black or a fair man, of a mild or a choleric Disposition, Married or a Batchelor, with other particulars of the like nature." My purpose in writing this article is to tell you something of Paul Sigurdson in the hope that I may add another dimension to your enjoyment when you read his contributions to this Journal.

Paul was born in Morden, Manitoba, on September 18, 1927. He enjoyed the advantage of having cultured parents. They were both of Icelandic descent. His father was a contractor. His mother was content to be a housewife and mother. In their home books and music were part of everyday life. When family and friends gathered there was a glutton's feast of music and poetry. Paul began writing poetry as soon as he had learned the alphabet. An early ambition of his was to be an opera singer. Nature had given him the gift of a rich

tenor voice. From grades one to eight he attended Elk Creek School. He took his high school in Morden. After finishing his schooling, he taught for a year at Peguis School, near Clandeboye, in Manitoba. At nineteen he entered United College, from which institution, in due course, he received the degrees of B.A. and B.Ed. In 1952, after graduation from United College, he married Ivadell Rampton who is of English descent.

Paul was six when he lost his father. Until that time Icelandic was the language spoken in the family home. After his marriage Paul set off for Iceland with his bride. He wanted to tighten his hold on his Icelandic heritage. His heart was then, as it is now, with the poetry and sagas of Iceland. In Iceland he studied his native tongue, earning his living expenses by tutoring in English. He returned to Canada in 1953.

There is no armour against fate. Shortly after his return home, Paul was stricken with polio. He spent two years in King George Hospital, in Winnipeg, one of them in an iron lung. After leaving hospital, he convalesced for two years in the home of a relative, Gunnar Thorlakson. In 1957, he began teaching half days in a school in St. James. In 1958 he joined the staff of Morden High School, where he taught English until his retirement in 1977.

The Viking of old lived by a heroic code, an article of which called upon him to take life as it presents itself to him, to accept the bludgeonings of fate with fortitude. Paul Sigurdson is a Viking, true to the Viking's code. When misfortune struck him, as

Walt Whitman has it, he knew that the powerful play must go on, and he hoped that he would be able to contribute a verse. He once wrote, "Yes, I inherited the Icelandic spirit . . . In spite of those who believe strongly in the power of environmental influence, I know I cannot escape the color and shape of the spirit inherited in my chromosomes any more than I can escape the color of my hair or the shape of my nose . . . The early Viking had a heroic concept of life. He did not fear death . . . The Viking also had a clear understanding of the evil of life, and had the courage to resist it and overcome it. Moreover, he had no compromise with any thing which gave him shame or made him a lesser man. He knew he had a free will and he knew that if his will was strong enough, he could keep an undefeated spirit and master his own life. He could resist fate even though he could not overcome it."<sup>1</sup>

Paul has kept an undefeated spirit. But he has had to make some adjustments in his way of living. He had been active in all sports, and, in their pursuit, he had led a vigorous life. Such a life was now out of the question. Curling had been his favorite sport. He had been a curler of championship calibre, right up top with the best. "Curling," he once wrote. "That's my game. It gives me moments of exquisitely agonizing suspense. It gives me fellowship and intellectual challenge. No other game gives me all this in like measure."<sup>2</sup> And as he pointed out. "No game so shatters the walls among classes and individuals." Curling is a game in which the best man wins. And the best man is the man who can adjust to the ever-changing condition of an ever-changing game. And it does not matter a whit on which side of the tracks he may live.

In 1966, he gave proof that his interest in the game still runs high. He published a poem, "The Shot of Angus Stone" — a poem of 48 stanzas, each 8 lines in length.

Angus Stone was a granite Scot transplanted from the glen, who curled "for competition, not for game."

"He had a childish passion for the game;  
And on the ice it seemed his body glowed;  
And eagerness ignited all his frame;  
And every move enthusiasm showed;  
Tho he was down or leading — all the same —  
He played his wins and skunkings "a la mode."  
And when he felt his zesty zeal was slipping,  
He paused for breathing — or for brandy sipping."<sup>3</sup>

His enthusiasm for the game prompted Angus to make a pact with the Devil "to ride the blizzard winds till Judgment Day," for assistance in making a shot "which started west, chipped round in one clear circle, finally going east," which enabled him to win a curling match against a rival, for whom his love "was watered down and thin."

Although his playing days are long since over, baseball is another sport in which Paul has maintained a lively interest. In 1985, he was invited to write a short history of the Morden Whiz-Bangs, a girls' baseball team that established a remarkable record in tournament play over the years 1947 to 1951. He was pleased to accept the invitation and produced an interesting 24 page booklet. A man cannot put his pen to paper without revealing something of himself. Paul has revealed much of himself in his account of "the Remarkable Morden Whiz-Bangs." Listen! he is speaking: "Coaches and sports managers lie awake nights trying to piece together the right formula, the right mix, to get the best out of their teams. But the more they seek for the formula the more they come to realize there is no formula. A formula implies something mathematical and scientific. Finally, they reach the conclusion that human beings are Godly, emotional, and unique, and that they cannot be grooved, or honed or tuned like a machine, or mixed like a choice cocktail. The swizzle stick

does not work in the blending of character; and no formula can produce that rare, precious and noble combination of what we commonly call 'heart.' Perhaps that is as close as we will ever come to defining a champion."<sup>4</sup>

Standing shoulder to shoulder with Paul, through the years, and sharing the bitter and the sweet of his life, has been his wife, Ivadell. They have always worked as a team. Paul calls her a helja. This word is a common word for an outstanding woman. Paul prefers to translate it as a "heroic person." Before their marriage, Paul wrote this sonnet to Ivadell.

#### SONNET I

When I describe upon this lasting page,  
The love I feel for you within my heart,  
I realize tho' we give way to age,  
Tho' time's grim stroke will move us far apart;  
Some lover long ahead in untold book.  
In chapters yet unread by time's keen eye  
Will love, ad on my humble words will look,  
Will think and say the same as here did I.  
For love dies not as mortal lovers do,  
But lights its vibrant flame in young love's  
minds,  
And thrives and brightly burns unending  
through  
The ages, to complete its true design.  
Tho' thrones may fall, be moulds to dust  
decaying,  
Words live in lovers' hearts for future saying.<sup>5</sup>

This sonnet reaches a plane far above the commonplace. It can be judged by the highest standards. It might have been written by a contemporary of Shakespeare. No one can deny to the man who wrote it the name of poet.

Translation is the only means by which the curse of Babel can be defeated. A writer who writes in his native tongue speaks only to those who know that tongue. Translators may speak in all tongues. As Ivan Franko, the great Ukrainian man of letters, said, a translator "builds a golden bridge of understanding and awareness between his nation and distant peoples and bygone generations."<sup>6</sup>

For those of us who know only English, Paul Sigurdson has brought many rare jewels to the surface from the rich mines of Icelandic poetry. His translations start at the top of the poetic ladder, with the work of two Icelandic poets who reached the summit of poetic endeavour — Stephan G. Stephansson and Guttormur J. Guttormsson. He has translated Stephansson's great indictment of war which he calls "Battle Pause"<sup>7</sup> and Guttormsson's masterpiece "Sandy Bar."<sup>8</sup> Speaking broadly, there are two ways of translating: one is to be literal, to regard the text as sacred; the other is to attempt a re-creation of the text, to reshape the poet's thought. Whichever method is used, a good translation should read as though it had been written in the language into which it has been translated.

In his translations, Paul Sigurdson always aims at reproducing the tone and the flavour and the metre of the original author. I offer as an example of his work, his translation of a poem by Stephansson, "The Robber" (Shakespeare):<sup>9</sup>

He wasn't a Viking who ravaged the shores,  
He wasn't for pillage and fire;  
And yet with the deft of his quick-thieving  
hand,  
He mesmerized Europe's entire.

We complain of his bias, his word-stealing  
way,  
His rhyme and his inconstant styling;  
Yet we give him honor, forgiving him all,  
So rare was his theft, and beguiling.

His right to this thieving we frankly admit,  
Though statutes and rules he did sunder;  
For the world has been thrilled by the  
treasures he left,  
The best of his fabulous plunder.

His phrases are gilded, distinctive and rare,  
And each with his magic is glowing;  
And others who trifle or play with his loot,  
Are fooled with their shortcomings showing.

He didn't conform to old customs and ways,  
Nor statutes, nor stories in fashion;  
With man's naked passions he candidly played,  
Transcending the laws of the nation.

To him all the world was a fantasy place;  
The power of storms in his thinking;  
With his flash he can lift you to mountainous  
heights,  
Or join you with gods in their drinking.

He so overwhelms you, you're hardly  
prepared,  
His art can beguile with its magic;  
Thus Brutus reflected his soul, and MacBeth,  
And all that was comic or tragic.

His characters always in tune with themselves,  
When least it's expected we wonder,  
That landsliding violence erupts on the stage  
And volcanic bursting and thunder.

The stuff of his work was unique to himself,  
And shows what man hates or he praises;  
The poet affirming the right to explore  
And measure men's souls with his phrases.

The honor of nobles, its curse and reward,  
He amply received for his art,  
And choosing the lot of a magical thief  
With kingliness stole from each heart.

Stephansson did not succumb to the magic of Shakespeare, who had the good sense to borrow or steal from the thoughts and ideas of other men whatever he thought he could make good use of — and his use more than justified the offence.

In 1964, when, in his own words, "I had behind me five years of university, a year's sojourn in Iceland, two years at King George Hospital "Chess Club" (polio ward) and six years of teaching English."<sup>10</sup> Paul, began his translation of "Sandy Bar." Six years later it was finished. He sent an early draft to Guttormsson. In reply, Guttormsson wrote him saying that "Sandy Bar," despite several attempts, was untranslatable, but he added: "There are many indications that the writing of original poetry is more in your line than translation (you are not alone in this respect) and I would encourage you (to use your talents) accordingly. I wish you good success."<sup>11</sup>

Those who have read Paul's numerous original poems that have appeared in the Icelandic Canadian will certainly agree with Guttormsson. Speaking personally, in the time-honored way of school teachers,

I would give a star to many of his original poems. Here are two of them — both short. This is the first:

#### EQUITY

What does it matter —  
To wash with a Bendix,  
Or scrub crude cotton,  
Like an Arab, with his feet —  
Which is right?

What does it matter —  
Diamonds flashing,  
Blue-cold fire,  
Coiled on the neck  
Of a vain debutante;  
Or beads of teeth  
Torn from a tiger,  
Snaking between  
The potent breasts  
Of a Nubian virgin —?

Are we whites  
The wise people?  
Is there no ignorance  
In sophistication?

Sometimes I feel  
Life's true meanings  
Are saved for the hungry,  
The weary, the simple,  
The sad, the lost and the pained.<sup>12</sup>

The intellectual and emotional implications of this poem are great.

A poet gives himself away every time he takes up his pen. We know that this poem was written by a man who is not on the side of the big battalions, a man who has a deep fellow feeling for the humble and the lowly, who gives his allegiance to the individual, not the crowd, who does not judge a person's worth by his ability to make money, who has questioned the way this weary world is wobbling on its course. Here is the second:

#### UNCERTAINTY

Above, the hawk awaits its prey,  
Below the songbird bravely sings;  
Its one defence on freedom's way  
Are fragile wings;  
The only payment for its lay,  
Its warblings.  
Do I hear the echo of its rapture,

Too filled with morning joy for death to  
capture?<sup>13</sup>

A real poet is here at work. This brief poem wakes up the imagination. It ponders over the ultimate meaning of the universe.

Though he has read deeply in two languages, Paul has not taken his ideas about life from literature. As a poet he draws his materials from the well of experience. He never bars the gate to any theme. To suggest his range, here are some of his titles: "Motherland," a tribute to Iceland; "Outcasts," about a fair woman and a dark man; "The Cycle," echoes "Sandy Bar." (In his recent book, *Seven Books Between Two Covers*, Gus Sigurdson has a reference to this poem: "'The Cycle,' a poem we praise, is precious to all of our race."); "Weeds," the bane of farmers everywhere; "Man and the Rototiller,"<sup>14</sup> the machine age, gain or loss?; "The Game," spectator sports.

When Pistol was expressing woolly thoughts in woolly words, Falstaff said to him: say what you have to say like a man of the world. Paul Sigurdson always speaks like a man of the world. He believes in simple, direct statement and he wants to be understood, not by furred and gowned academics, nor by a circle of long-haired esthetes, but by everyday people in the everyday world. His poems never set metaphysical puzzles or present intellectual conundrums. He does not have to supply a crib for anything he ever wrote.

Some suggestion of his poetic faith is offered by these words from the preface to his poem "The Shot of Angus Stone:" "You have none of the modern poetic characteristics. You are, alas, comprehensible — and that's a fault. You lack meaningful words — most of yours are understandable. Your hero is not a homosexual, a fink, a lunatic, a pimp, a gigolo, a junkie, an emasculated rounder, an alcoholic, nor an adulterer. He is almost a normal man who has missed the extremities of life."<sup>15</sup>

As a maker of plays, Paul Sigurdson's masters have been Euripides and Ibsen, not Somerset Maugham and Noel Coward. To say the same thing in other words: his aim has been to produce a nourishing main course dish, not a frothy tea-time confection. To illustrate, I refer to his three act play *The Icelander*. The central theme of this play is as old as the hills of Iceland. It is this: as material standards of living, stimulated by technological progress, improve the quality of life qua life is impoverished.

Magnus Thorsteinson, the Icelander, was a man permanently stuck in yesterday. The old ways were his ways. He resented change as an evil thing. During the last war, when the Americans established an airport at Keflavik, a great deal of American money poured into Iceland, and, as a consequence, the standard of living of the average Icelander was raised considerably.

Iceland was the Holy Land of the Icelander's soul. He resented the Americans. He hated the new spirit which they had brought into his country — a spirit exemplified by boys of fifteen leaving school to learn how to drive cars and trucks so that they could work for the Yankee dollar. As Magnus said to the elder of his two daughters, who had given her heart to an American officer: "Yes, they are turning us into a nation of softies. We are forsaking our manhood. For centuries we suffered, we starved, we wore our fingers down, but we endured. Nature culled us and the strong survived. The strong and the worthy survived."

Perhaps, the seeds of his ultimate defeat are contained in the thought that the strong can be equated with the worthy. To the American officer, who is a splendid representative of his race, cultured and interested in things of the mind and the spirit, a man whom Magnus, under different circumstances, could have taken to his heart, Magnus said: "Do you think we are a people who take bread before liberty? We

love this little island. We love it for its beauty, its ice, its fire, and, yes, we love it for its harshness too. It is not a place for weaklings, it is a place for men. It is a place for men with heart."

For all his brave talk of liberty and of men with heart, Magnus did not allow liberty to his wife and three children, and his children must have often thought that he had a stone where his heart should be.

Nemesis was bound to catch up with such a man. It caught up with Magnus, in full measure. His wife died, worn out with overwork and drudgery. An electric dish washer and an electric washing machine would have added years to her life. His elder daughter married the American and left Iceland for the United States. His son, a wayward youth, preferred fast cars to poetry and the old traditions. And his younger daughter, the apple of his eye, whom he was grooming as the crown and flower of Icelandic womanhood, became pregnant — by an American. He was left with a bitter cup of gall to drain to the lees. Poetry and chess, his favorite pastime, still remained for him, but they were ashes in his mouth, when he had no one to share them with. As an old Icelandic saying runs: "A man alone is only half a man, but a man with others is more than himself."

I have never seen *The Icelander* performed, but, from reading it, I can vouch that it is a powerful, thought-provoking play. It was first staged by the Morden Little Theatre. Paul had been the moving spirit in organizing this theatrical group and was its director from 1963 to 1975, during which time he directed and produced twenty-one full length plays (three from his own pen) and numerous skits and one act plays. In May, 1971, *The Icelander* was produced by the Manitoba Theatre Centre, in Winnipeg. In the same year it was performed at the annual Icelandic Festival. In 1974, under Paul's direction, it was performed by a group of players from

Morden, at the Canadian Multicultural Festival in Ottawa. In a review of the performance the Ottawa Citizen said: "The cast performs with integrity, though with varying degrees of skill . . . the play is well-constructed and it speaks from the heart." It might have added "and to the heart."

Paul has written fifteen full length plays, among them, one called *The Resurrection of Crazy Horse*. The scene of this play is a remote valley in British Columbia. The chief character is an Indian, who, with all the odds stacked against him, qualifies as a lawyer. The villain is a social system which leaves much to be desired, as represented by a mean, grasping, land-hungry white man. The play offers no sugar-coated depiction of Canadian society — a society that is about a light year away from true civilization. It is a society in which the cards are stacked in favor of the crafty and mean-spirited, one which has turned a deaf ear to the message of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony — all men are brothers.

In his dictionary, Dr. Johnson defines an essay as "a loose sally of the mind, an irregular indigested piece, not a regular and orderly composition." In simpler words, an essay is a leisurely and discursive reflection on men and manners. Paul Sigurdson is quite a good hand at the familiar essay. At a few removes, his essays have the genuine Elia flavor. In some of them, notably "Be Serious — It's Golf" and "The Art Show," he is in a playful mood. On golf, he offers this counsel: "There is only one way to approach the game of golf. You must take it seriously. Don't appear at the first tee like a misplaced Haight-Ashbury hippie, togged in blue jeans, running shoes and a black ten gallon hat, brim up and askew on your head. Don't resurrect your old uncle Jockerby's ash-shafted clubs, and don't be seen with any of those freshly enamelled balls you buy from the little link-rats at the entrance gate." In short, Be

Serious — It's Golf.<sup>16</sup>

The Art Show relates the adventures of an art lover among the masterpieces on display at a small town art show. In this piece, Paul's sense of humor shines through to good advantage. "The names (of the pictures)" he confides, "are revealing. There is one showing a boy feeding hay to a cow, and the name of the picture is 'Boy Feeding Hay to a Cow' . . . And there is another one showing a dog chasing a frightened rabbit. I was impressed with the title: 'Dog Attacking Rabbit.' Now there was a bold sally of the imagination!"<sup>17</sup>

In some of his comments, Paul mixes just a drop or two of acid: "I don't want to omit the spectators. After all it was for them the show was organized. Here was their opportunity to wade knee-deep in culture. They stroll about pausing here and there, smiling, frowning, chortling as they react to the strangeness before them. It is revealing to note their comments. You begin to understand their deep feeling for art. Such discriminating phrases as 'this is nice,' and 'this is very nice' and 'this is pretty nice' are commonly heard, but sometimes someone comes up with a truly memorable gem like 'damn good' or something equally inventive."

An essay is a sort of glass in which the reader catches sight of the author's face — not full face, but in profile. It always strikes a personal note. Individuality is its kernel. Paul's essays are written for the serious, but not the highly instructed PhD level. They reveal a pleasing personality.

One of the stories that Paul has contributed to the *Icelandic Canadian* is called simply "Battle."<sup>18</sup> It is the tale of a chess game between Hastings, a young Englishman, an army captain, one of the breed, who, in E. M. Forster's words, go forth into the world with well developed bodies, fairly developed minds and undeveloped hearts, and Sigfus Jonasson, an old Icelandic farmer, who by virtue of native in-

telligence and intellectual curiosity, without benefit of public school or university, has become a man of culture and education. During a snow storm, Hastings has to abandon his jeep. He seeks refuge at Jonasson's farm. Hastings is a member of the British occupying force in Iceland. "Only the British war office knew how many troops were sent to 'occupy' the island. Because the country was defenceless, the Icelandic parliament had sanctioned their presence. But the ordinary citizen was revulsed by the sight of foreign troops. They were a peace-loving people. They had never had an army. From the first they were sullen and unfriendly, and Hastings, put off by their coldness, regarded them with subtle disdain."

But Jonasson, one of nature's gentlemen, knew his obligations to a stranger who makes a call on his hospitality. He says to his wife: "Friend or enemy we will treat him like a guest. He is just another human being. He has no uniform now. While he is here we will forget his allegiance."

To pass the time, Hastings challenges Jonasson to a game of chess. Jonasson wins the game handily. Hastings wants a return match. Nothing in all his experience had fitted him to appreciate such a man as his host. He under-estimated him completely. "He did not know the character of the Icelandic country man. He knew nothing about his heritage: that he had felt the first glow of poetry in his breast as he took his mother's milk, that many of the great sagas were in his head before he cut his first tooth, that his grandmother had brightened his dreams with the tales of fairies, elves, trolls, and outlaws throughout all his early years. His natural intelligence had been honed by careful study, and wide reading had given him broadness of mind far beyond the common man. Almost alone, he had learned to read French and German. English he could read and speak. Danish he could read and speak flawlessly. He was

also a master of his mother tongue. Since he was four years old he played chess and had studied the game assiduously. He felt no disgrace at being a farmer who stepped in dung every day. He kept his eyes uplifted to *Elsja*, the fabled mountain, whose deep purple always gave promise of God and better days. Because Hastings knew none of those things he was not prepared for the old sheep farmer's play."

Jonasson accepts Hastings' challenge for a second game. "The game went on: two strong men locked in the silent clash of wills. Hastings broke out in a sweat. His imagination told him he could not lose, but reality impinged on his brain. He knew deep down he was gradually, mercilessly, being forced to yield. An old sheep farmer from an unknown island was pressing hard to undo him." I am not going to tell you how the game ends. If you want to know, you must read the story. It will be a rich experience.

"Battle" is not just another competent machine-made story. It is a good story. All the details play their significant part. The atmosphere is authentic, the dialogue is natural. It is well balanced. It moves with a steady pace from its opening to its end. A good beginning is strengthened by a good ending. It merits a place among memorable Canadian short stories.

Music has always meant a great deal in Paul's life. He never had any professional training as a musician but, when he was growing up, he was saturated with music and song. He learned his notes with his letters. He taught himself to play the piano by watching how others did it. He has written some 300 songs which range over three fields — the popular, the serious and the religious. Four of his songs have been published — "Sara's Carol," "This is the Homeland that I love," "Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee" and "This is the Love." He has written the words and music of a children's operetta, also a three act musical

comedy.

He has never lived on a Fantasy Island level. He is down to earth. He knows that there is no comforting escape from reality. He realizes, with Wordsworth: "But in the very world, which is the world of all of us, — the place where, in the end we find our happiness, or not at all."

Deep in memory's hold, I suspect that Paul Sigurdson has many pleasant memories stored away; that, through the years, he has been able to extract much happiness from life; that he has found many meaningful satisfactions. May I name three: First there has been the love, and the companionship, of his wife. Second, his pride in his family of five children — Signy, Stephen, Gus, Sara and Sylvia. Third, the delights he has found in his own mind and in creative labor. Since, as a small boy, he scribbled with a short pencil on odd scraps of paper, Paul has always enjoyed writing. He has never been on an assembly line. He has never written against time, under a feeling of compulsion, but only when the spirit moved him. "The delights of creativity are highly rewarding," he once said, "and very often creative energy is self-rejuvenating." He never let the act of writing become a burden to him.<sup>19</sup>

He has always lived on good terms with nature. He has always preferred the country to the city. The outdoors has a fascination for him. When he retired from school teaching, he built a house, swiftly converted into a home, a few miles east of Morden on a truly beautiful site. His home nestles among low undulating hills which give the lie to the libel that Manitoba is all flat prairie. From his front porch, in summer, he can watch the flowers in bloom in his wife's garden, and, winter and summer, he can feed a great variety of wild birds whom he looks upon as friends.

With the years, Paul has grown steadily in depth. Now in his sixty-first year, he gives no sign of any intellectual stagnation.

He has not lost all of the oil of youth. Indeed, all his faculties seem to be at their peak. If I may make a bold judgment, I will say that his best work lies ahead. His potential is very far from exhausted.

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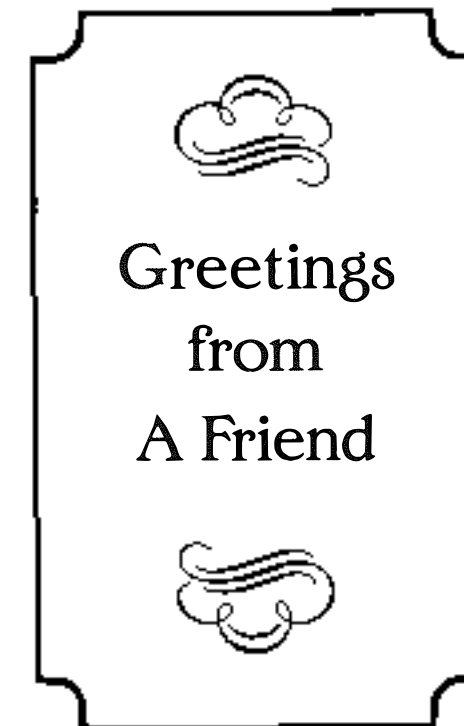
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## A LOOK AT JÓHANN MAGNÚS BJARNASON'S MARKLAND YEARS

by Laurence Gillespie

About 50 miles north east of Halifax there are some holes in the ground. They are not the most imposing holes in the world. Indeed, they are not even easy to find among the dense underbrush and heavy coniferous forests that cloak the Mooseland hills. A hundred years ago, miners were digging for gold nearby, but these holes contain no gold. At best, they might yield a few broken bits of glass or metal, or perhaps the remains of a cast-iron stove that's rusted beneath the moss and leaves for a long, long time.

These holes and rusted stoves are about



all that physically remains of the second Markland, the ill-fated Icelandic settlement near Mooseland on Nova Scotia's eastern shore. Yet meagre though its material legacy may be, Markland has a more enduring literary one. One hundred years after its settlers abandoned it for good, it still lives on in the works of Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason. Indeed, there is probably no other community in Nova Scotia or in Canada which inspired as much literature in so short a time. For although it only lasted seven years and had never more than 200 inhabitants, Markland was the setting for a

three-part, 500 page novel and literally dozens of short stories. Its literary impact was far out of proportion to its economic or social one.

Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason arrived in Halifax 29 October 1875. Though only nine years old, he had doubtless seen his share of hard times by then. For this period would mark the first time since the Viking Age that the Icelanders became "boat people" on a large scale. From the 1870's to the outbreak of the First World War over 14,000 of them would travel "west over the sea" to escape hunger, repression, and volcanic fall-out. And though he was not an orphan like the eponymous hero of his *Eiríkur Hansson* (his novel set in Nova Scotia), he was no stranger to the poverty and grim conditions he described. For though his parents survived his childhood, his siblings did not. Only one of his eight brothers and sisters would survive into adulthood, and she died a little over twenty.

Though his earliest childhood memories were of Iceland, J.M.B.'s Markland years were his formative ones. He received three years of education under Alexander Wilson, a schoolmaster from the Orkneys who did not spare the rod. Doubtless some of his taskmaster is reflected in old Cracknell, the teacher who terrorizes Eiríkur Hansson and his classmates with his switch, his belated "Palman qui feruit merat" (which always preceded a beating), and his habit of wearing certain kinds of hats when he was especially angry (which also preceded a beating). Yet Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason has kind words for Wilson too, just as for Cracknell. Perhaps his own experiences on the other side of the classroom later in life made him more sympathetic to those who taught and beat him. Or perhaps there was an affinity between the Icelander and the Orkneyingur that goes back to their Old Norse roots. Whatever the case, a hundred years later in the Musquodoboit Valley



(just north of Markland) they still tell tales of this fearsome teacher (though he seems to have taught only Icelanders), a lesson for all who would enter that profession.

As it was, Bjarnason would earn his living as a teacher. When he and his family moved to Winnipeg following the collapse of the Markland settlement in 1882, he was able to complete the necessary education to become a teacher. From 1889-1922 (except for a stint as a housebuilder's bookkeeper in Vancouver 1912-15) he taught at a variety of Icelandic settlements in Manitoba, North Dakota, and Saskatchewan.

What precisely made J.M. Bjarnason into a writer is of course mysterious, like all artistic callings. His came early. He notes in his diary that he was writing (and just as quickly destroying) plays as early as 1881 (back in Nova Scotia). In 1888 (1887) came his first published poem "Tofrakastalinn" — "The Enchanted Castle." Thereafter there is no turning back. Over the next 57 years he would produce three major novels, 20 plays, and hundreds of articles, poems, essays, and short stories. He also maintained an extensive correspondence with the leading Icelandic-Canadian cultural figures of his day, such as Stephan G. Stephansson. He did this, moreover, as a sideline from his

full-time duties as a teacher and despite frequent bouts of ill-health.

Though Bjarnason wrote much in the tradition of his day, he was not afraid to break new ground either. The many plays he wrote attest to an interest in creativity rather than fame and fortune, for he wrote them for the schools and communities in which he lived, with little prospect of publication. His "An Icelandic Sherlock Holmes," set in Markland and Shubena-cadie, N.S., was the first detective story ever written in Icelandic. He experimented extensively in writing for children, trying new forms and adapting old ones such as the fairy tale.

In the end, Bjarnason's most enduring legacy, like that of Markland, was not material. He never made much from his writings financially. His magnum opus, *Eiríkur Hansson* only netted him a hundred dollars (and even then he had to pay for his own copy of the second installment of the book). All his life he was to struggle with limited finances, despite the high regard he was held in by Icelanders and Icelandic

Canadians alike. But through his books he brought to life the world in which he lived in a way few others have. And as long as there are those who can read Icelandic, there will be those that know Markland was more than a few dank holes and rusted lumps of iron. His writings have left a mark that will remain long after the last hole fills in and the last bit of stove rusts away.

Johann Magnus Bjarnason died in El-fros, Saskatchewan early in September 1945, only a few days behind his wife, Guðrún Hjörleifsdóttir. She had been his staunch supporter through thick and thin for 58 years.

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Remains of a Markland farm, Nova Scotia

## IN THE RED RIVER VALLEY

by Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason

translated by Thelma Whale

Book 1 — Chapter 1

The Crooked House

It was late in the evening of January 28th, 1883, when I arrived in Winnipeg. I had spent five days travelling from Nova Scotia which had been my home for eight years. I was sixteen years old; travelling by myself; I knew no one in Winnipeg and was all alone in the world except for a cousin, named Solrún, whom I had never in my life set eyes on. But it was to her that I had written before I set off from Halifax and I knew that unless unavoidably detained, she would meet me at the railway station in Winnipeg that day.

I had now arrived in Winnipeg, this progressive city in the fertile Red River Valley, the capital of the broad, rich, but thinly-populated Canadian North-West, the city to which men from many lands streamed by thousands, which the Icelanders in the Western World had already taken as their own. Young as I was, I had long dreamed delightful dreams about this town, had concocted many grand hopes about her and had long desired to see her and make my home there. I expected to become rich and to live happily ever after.

At this time Winnipeg was quite insignificant compared to what she is now. She was then in her youth, exceedingly large for her age and precocious, but with a rather unimposing and ugly face. Now she has developed and attained greater growth, greater beauty, greater perfection, and will undoubtedly become one of the handsomest cities in the Western World.

I remember clearly how surprised I was when I came to Winnipeg. Everything was completely different from what I had expected; everything had a different appear-

ance than I had first anticipated. That day, there had been a downpour which was just clearing up as I stepped out of the railway car. I found a kind of dullness resting over all; water dripped in large drops from the roof of the station waiting room which was an ugly wooden structure, very unlike the stately structure which stands there now. The streets were wet and dirty and great mud puddles stood here and there, even on Main Street. Men and animals travelling on the roads were spattered with clay and the gummy Red River mud clung to their feet and piled and kneaded itself around the horses' hoofs and the boots of the people so that, at a distance, it appeared as if everyone was trudging along with the greatest difficulty on heavy snowshoes. All the sidewalks were made of planks; nowhere was pavement to be seen. And the sidewalks were so narrow that two men could scarcely walk abreast on them. On several streets, even in the middle of town, there were still no sidewalks at all. The houses were low and scattered and not always in straight lines along the streets, not even on Portage Avenue or Main Street. On the east side of Main Street, all the way from the C.P.R. station and south on Logan Avenue, which was then called Logan Street, there were only tiny, low shanties, looking like skull caps. Some of them stood just a short distance from the sidewalk. But in many places in the lanes between these huts there were tents, some white and new, some striped and others faded with age, some brown or stained and weatherbeaten. In most of these tents cold drinks and fruit and trinkets were for sale.

Just north of the railroad tracks, opposite the station, were heaps of coal and east of them stood stacks of lumber and firewood, and all around were those strange-looking shanties and those little, white, striped or brown tents. But south on Main Street and also on Princess and King Streets could be seen tall buildings, some built of bricks, others of lumber, some finished and others still under construction.

Thus did Winnipeg appear to me when I first arrived there. This enchanting city of my day dreams, this lovely Eldorado which I had built in my many visions of a brilliant future, was after all, no more imposing than this. However, she was big for her age, spreading over all the land between the Red and the Assiniboine rivers, from Kildonan to Armstrong Point, reaching her fingers into the western prairie, striding giant steps in the direction of prosperity and progress and giving good expectations of being, in time, a large and beautiful city. Those expectations have already been fulfilled, and more than that. Who could have believed, in the spring of 1883, that after scarcely thirty years, Winnipeg would become what she is today?

A few minutes after I stepped out of the railway coach, all my fellow passengers had disappeared. None of them was Icelandic, as far as I could tell. I was surely the only Icelander who arrived in Winnipeg that day. Some of the people walked into town with friends and relatives who had come to meet them. Some were taken away in cabs, but most of them left with the drivers from the various hotels. When a train was expected, these drivers were stationed right against the west end of the train station and, as soon as the train arrived, they moved to the sidewalk on the north side and shouted continually, each competing with the others. One named this hotel, and another that, as loudly as their voices allowed. I remember that some of the hotels have since changed their

names or have ceased to exist, for example: the Grand Union Hotel, Hasting's House, Davis House and the Gable Hotel.

Now I was the only one left of all the travellers. I peered in every direction, trying to see some woman who might look like an Icelander, but no woman was to be seen. The few women who had been standing on the station platform when I arrived had now all disappeared. My cousin had certainly not been among them. To be sure, I had never seen her but I had often heard her described and did not doubt that I would recognize her if I saw her. I had been told she was short, with thick blonde hair and a fair-sized dimple on her chin. It seemed to me that this should be sufficient for me to recognize her. And she should be able to recognize me because I had a large scar on my left cheek and was tall for my age, though rather slim and rawboned.

Some minutes passed. Still my cousin did not appear and I began to think of asking the station agent to point out an Icelander to me. If I could just talk to an Icelander, I was sure I could find my cousin. I did not know the name of the street she lived on or the number of her house for she had never mentioned them in her letters. Anyway, except for certain streets, there were no numbers on the houses in Winnipeg. But I knew that my cousin's house was on Point Douglas close to the river.

Just as I was going to talk to the station agent, I noticed a little woman walking towards me along the railway track from the east. She walked briskly and energetically and swayed a little and threw out her right arm occasionally, as if she was warning someone away. As she came nearer, I saw that she had light hair which was just beginning to gray. There was a tiny dimple on her chin and some wrinkles on her cheeks. Her eyes were large and clear, with many lines in the corners. She appeared to be about fifty. I knew immediately that she was my cousin, Solrún. She walked directly

to me, greeted me in Icelandic and gave me a resounding kiss.

"I would have to be stone blind not to recognize you even among many thousands," she said, "because you are the image of your late grandfather. However, I thought you would not be quite so tall but would be fatter. Please forgive me for being so late. The train arrived earlier than I expected and also, there were other things that delayed me."

I asked her not to say anything more about it because I was so pleased to be in Winnipeg and to have found her.

"We will start out immediately for my home," she said, "and don't worry about your luggage until tomorrow."

And so I set off with my cousin, my suitcase in my hand. We first went east along the track for a bit and then turned north towards the river. My cousin walked so fast that I could hardly keep up with her. Nor was she silent on the way, talking incessantly about various things, especially about the many jobs then available in Winnipeg, the high wages and the chronic shortage of people.

"Now we have come to Gladstone Street," she said suddenly, "and over there you can see the 'crooked house' where I live. She pointed to a big house which stood on the river bank.

"Why is it called the 'crooked house'?" said I.

"Because it leans a little," said my cousin. "But I find it suits me very well because the river is so close and the rent is not so high compared to other places. I have four rooms upstairs. Anna and I moved there early this spring. She works during the day at a laundry just south of the railroad station, but I do laundry at home for several people in the neighborhood, and as well, I sell board and room to three men. My boarders are all Icelandic."

Shortly after, we reached the crooked house. It stood on the bank of the Red

River, a very short distance from the old mill on Point Douglas. It was one of the oldest houses in the city and had once been a splendid hotel or inn which was called "The Buffalo." But in 1882, when the river flooded Point Douglas, it shifted quite a bit and thus became the "crooked" house. Because of that, little care had been taken of it since. It was a huge, two-story timber house with a flat roof and had originally been painted white but in later years had become gray and ugly. It had stood for many years, alone and aloof on the banks of the Red, like a beached ship, silent and gloomy. Its shadow seemed to be blacker than the shadows of other houses, and the wind seemed to stay there longer and whistle more dismally. The south-eastern rains searched it out more often and found more holes in it everywhere; the hoarfrost was thicker on its panes than on other windows and it seemed that the snowbanks were both higher and denser around it than elsewhere. And although the town grew year by year with great haste, stretching itself far west over the prairies and spreading itself over all of Point Douglas, and though the houses became denser and closer along every street, it was as if everyone avoided building near this solitary, weatherbeaten, crooked house. It was as if everyone regarded it with distaste and wanted to build as far away from it as possible, and even to walk by it as seldom as possible.

The crooked house always reminded me of the leaning tower of Pisa. Likewise, it called to mind a ruin which was said to be haunted because of its story, mostly true, but perhaps partly untrue, a story of a strange happening, which had taken place within those walls in former years, when most of the white men in the Red River Valley were adventurers and heroes. But this story was never recorded and is now known to very few.

The house faced north and south, and

most of the windows faced the river. The main doors were on the south side, and on the north a staircase with handrails led upstairs. Underneath half the house was a cellar which had at first been deep but had now collapsed and was never used. From two or three places outside, it was possible to crawl under the house (under the muddy beams) into holes which had been formed by the pressure of the flood in the spring of 1882 and had not yet been filled in or covered up. The wind blew in there under the floor and howled mournfully, often keeping awake the people who lived upstairs. No one had lived downstairs since the house began to lean. The windows were nailed shut and the doors were locked.

My cousin and I walked up the stairs into the crooked house. The stairs led up to the balcony and the platform in front of the entrance. They creaked and rattled and the handrail trembled as we mounted. Along the length of the upstairs was a narrow, dark passageway which had six rooms on one side and five on the other. In between the second and third rooms on the south, the side which had only five rooms, was a space approximately ten feet in width. There had once been a stair leading up from the hall downstairs. Now boards were nailed over the opening and various kinds of rubbish were stored in that corner. On the roof was a small window which let in the only light when the rooms were closed. Everything pointed to the fact that very little care was given to the house. The hall had certainly not been whitewashed for a very long time. The plaster had fallen off the wall here and there, and where it had not fallen out, it had yellow streaks and cracks and small stains everywhere. Most of the doors were off their hinges and locks were broken or something else was wrong. I could see immediately that only the poor lived here and that the rent would be especially low. Of course, I found out very quickly that it was indeed so. All who

lived there were newcomers to this land. They were poor day-labourers, the Cinderellas of mankind, men and women, who had probably, in one way or another, suffered the shipwreck of their hopes and had, in their own land, been defeated in the endless battle for every crust of bread.

"These are my rooms," said my cousin. She pointed to four doors on the left side as one entered the hall. Then she showed me the rooms. They were all quite clean and bright and the windows looked out on the river. But the plaster on the walls was broken in many places and in some had fallen off. Mother and daughter had one room as their bedroom, another was used as a kitchen, pantry and laundry, the third was the dining and living room. The three men whom Solrún called her boarders slept in the fourth room.

"It is now five-thirty," said my cousin. "I must hurry to prepare the evening meal as my boarders will soon be home."

In a few minutes, she had changed clothes, made a fire in the stove and had begun to prepare the meal. She beckoned me to a chair in the kitchen and although she had much to do and was in constant motion about the room, she never stopped talking. She told me why she and her late husband tore themselves away from a good farm in Iceland in the spring of 1874 and moved to Kinmount, Ontario, and how it came about that they left there for New Iceland the next year. She told me of all the disasters that befell her during the two years she spent in a remote log cabin in the bush. There she lost her husband and two sons, all from smallpox. She told me how she and her daughter managed to get away from there to Winnipeg, and how, after she arrived there, she had to struggle along to make a living for the two of them, and how she had triumphed over all hardships and had now set aside so much money that she would soon be able to invest in a small property on Point Doug-

las. She said that Anna was now in her eighteenth year, a healthy, promising young woman who worked for a fairly good wage. She also told me a few things about the men who boarded with her, saying they were all exceedingly kind and honest men, that one of them, named Kjartan, worked as a builder not far away, another, Björn, worked at a sawmill near the Louise Bridge and the third, Arnór, worked here and there.

"He is a little strange, is Arnór," said my cousin, "but he is honest and well-behaved, and you will take to him when you begin to know him better."

When the clock struck six, and the whistles at the mill were blowing, my cousin was putting the tablecloth on and the meal was ready. Shortly after, the boarders came home from work and, a bit later, Anna arrived.

I kept staring at these men, for, although they were my countrymen and had no physical defects or unusual habits, nevertheless, they were, in my eyes, rather peculiar and quite unlike those few Icelanders I had known in Nova Scotia. I could see that Kjartan was quite a dandy. His clothes suited him very well and were clean, though he had come from work and the streets were sloppy. Around his neck he wore a white starched collar and a blue necktie. His bearing and deportment showed that he was quite vain and fancied himself a gentleman. He was neither tall nor broad, but he had a fine physique. He was dark-haired with a fair-sized mustache, nicely curled. He had a rather thin face and prominent eyes and was, I would guess, about twenty-five years old. When he came in, he took a folded newspaper out of his pocket, laid it on the table and began to wash himself with the greatest care.

Björn was about the same age as Kjartan but they were very different in most respects. Björn was of average height, very broad and thickset, fair of brow and face, round and

rosy-cheeked, cheerful and innocent in demeanor. All his movements bore witness that he was a healthy and virile male. He literally raced home from work in the evening, and seemed not at all tired, although he worked at the hardest job in the mill. He wore coarse blue cotton clothing and a strong sweaty odor emanated from him when he came in.

Arnór's appearance and manner were very different. He was in his twentieth year, tall and slim with auburn hair and large dreamy misty-gray eyes. He was not unhandsome but looked rather infirm and melancholy. Some kind of hidden suffering hovered over his countenance; some strange unrest was in his heart, and his eyes revealed a vague anxiety and restlessness. Even so, I felt, there was something about him which pointed to great gifts and a good heart. No doubt he was, as my cousin had told me, "more than a little strange," and not as other people are. He is also the main hero of this story.

This is how my cousin's boarders appeared to me. For unnamed but valid reasons, I am not going to mention their ancestry or their places of origin in Iceland. Both Kjartan and Björn had taken English surnames. Many Icelanders did that at the time and still do it today. You can hardly blame them because Icelandic names sound very ugly on the ears when pronounced by people of this country. And though some of the Icelandic surnames in the western world seem odd and not really Icelandic, many of them are, in my opinion, very beautiful and very appropriate to this country.

When everyone was washed and combed and Kjartan had put on a new collar and tie, the meal began. Various topics were discussed while we sat at the table. It was Kjartan who had the most to say because he could read English. He bought the morning paper every day and took great delight in telling about what was mentioned in it. At that time there were few Icelandic papers in

the western world for "Framfari" had folded and "Leifur" had just then begun to publish.

"How did you get along with your boss today, Björn?" said Kjartan as he sat down.

"Very well," said Björn. "He worked with me himself for a while this afternoon and called me his cousin."

"Did he call you his cousin?" said Anna. "Well, he must like you a lot."

"Yes, he called me 'frænda sinn' in every other word as we were piling the oak logs."

"You could not possibly be related," said my cousin, as she poured the tea.

"He just said it as a joke," said Kjartan.

"He was serious enough when he said it and the sweat was pouring off him," said Björn.

"And how did he say it?" asked Anna.

"Yes, how did he say it in English?" said Kjartan.

"Well, he just said, 'My friend, my friend,' and he said that with every word."

Everyone smiled, except Arnór.

"In English the word 'friend' translates as 'vinur' in Icelandic," said Anna. "He was calling you his friend, because he thought you were such a hard worker."

"Oh, friend just means 'vinur'?" said Björn. He had lived only ten months in this country. "Well," he said, "it doesn't matter. I would really rather be called 'friend' than 'cousin.'" And he smiled like a boy who is very satisfied with himself.

*(There followed a conversation about a millionaire's daughter from New York who had run away with a young man and an account by Kjartan of a robbery on Main Street in Winnipeg.)*

The meal was now over. A little later, Kjartan and Björn went into town for entertainment. But Arnór walked down to the river and sat down on the bank. My cousin began to wash up the dishes after eating a few leftovers and drinking one cup of tea. Meanwhile, she told me she was thinking of having me sleep in the dining room that

night. She said one of the rooms upstairs was unoccupied. The next day she was going to ask Anna to contact the owner of the house and rent that room. In the future, I was to sleep there and have as my roommate any one of the boarders I chose. I suggested she do whatever was most convenient for her and said I thought that Arnór and I would get along well. My cousin smiled happily and I saw she was glad that I had chosen Arnór. She seemed to know that I felt sorry for him.

Later that night, Anna and I walked down to the river bank. Arnór sat there gazing over the water. The Red River, a dirty brown color, rolled on, rapid, silent and heavy as death. Some tree branches and debris flowed along with the current near the bank and a single big log floated by further out in the stream. Here and there stood barefoot boys and men in high boots trying to hook the debris and pull it up on dry land in order to use it for firewood later. On the other side of the river was a broad, rolling, grassy plain.

Men and women were enjoying a walk in the evening stillness, strolling quietly back and forth. Now and again, the laughter of young men was heard from the dark green wood to the east. On the Louise Bridge, a few men huddled over the railing, gazing at the current in the river. And in the undergrowth at the end of Point Douglas, sat a few young men waiting for the dusk so they could bathe themselves in the river quite unnoticed. And yet, now and again, a fairly loud splash was heard and sometimes heads appeared, one by one, out in the river opposite the point. But they disappeared just as quickly.

Suddenly, I heard the whistle of a steamboat from the north. A few minutes later, I saw it come around the bend where the Redwood Bridge is now. It was a small but lovely ship, white in color and had in tow a barge loaded with lumber. Anna told me that this was the "Victoria," owned by Ice-

landers, with an Icelandic captain, engineer and crew. And the lumber which was on the barge had been sawed in the North on Lake Winnipeg by Icelandic mill workers in a mill also owned by Icelanders. I thought the boat much more beautiful and much faster than it had been before I found out that Icelanders owned and navigated it.

At that time it was very rare that Icelanders in America were anything but poor settlers in the bushlands or simple day labourers. By and large, Winnipeg Icelanders worked at hard labour, carrying the bricks and mortar for most buildings and shovelling mud and sand. They were thought to be good workers and the most energetic of men, and earned a reputation for endurance and industry. They acquitted themselves well, and with prudence and care were gradually able to cease the heavy, unskilled labour. Now many of them are craftsmen, others highly-esteemed businessmen and important farmers, some are office workers and highly-paid professional men, and a few have been elected to the legislature. Other foreigners have accepted the shovels and lime troughs from them and have inherited the heavy labour.

Anna and I walked back and forth along the river bank for a while. Now and again, I glanced at Arnór. He was still sitting in the same spot staring out at the river. Occasionally he looked over his shoulder and gazed up along the street as if he were expecting someone from that direction. I thought he didn't look well and I pitied him.

"Is he often so strange?" I said to Anna. "Yes, often," she said. "He is so heavy-hearted and full of daydreams that it is truly a problem. He never works at the same place more than a few days. At the least little happening, he runs away from his job. Yet, what is most peculiar is the number of times he disappears."

"Does he sometimes disappear?" I said, looking wide-eyed at Anna.

"Yes, that is what seems to us to be the

most pitiful of all. He is sometimes away for a whole week and no one knows anything about him."

"Does he drink?" I asked.

"We haven't noticed that," said Anna, "but it could be that he is on a drunken spree when he is away. Still, he appears well when he returns and is in quite good spirits for a while after. He disappeared this last time about the middle of the month. He went west into town late one evening and didn't come home for five days. He disappeared twice more this spring and was three days away one time and almost a whole week the other. Each time he has disappeared, Kjartan and Björn have asked Icelanders about him, for Kjartan knows all the Icelanders in town, and also they have asked the police, but no one knew anything; in fact few people know him, for he came to town only last fall."

"Haven't you asked him where he has been when he returns home?" I said.

"Yes, many, many times, but he never says anything about it."

"Does he have any relatives here in America?"

"Not here in Winnipeg. But he was in New York after he came from Iceland and he could have some family there. However, he told Mother that his parents were long dead and that he had one sister in Iceland."

"Does he pay his board promptly?" I asked.

"Yes, he always pays in advance for a full week."

"And do you have the least idea what he is doing when he is away?"

"No, not the slightest. But Kjartan thinks he is in some kind of secret society and has to go South to the States now and again to attend the meetings."

"This is all very strange and mysterious," I said.

"Yes, extremely puzzling," said Anna.

Then we began to talk of other things and a little later, walked home. But Arnór sat on

the riverbank and stared out towards the river until it was dark. Then he walked up to the young fellows' bedroom and went to bed.

Long after I was in bed and had blown out the light, I kept thinking of this odd young man and what Anna had told me about him and his secretive trips. It was very strange, mysterious and incredible, I thought, that he should now and again steal away and be away from home many days at a time, without mentioning to his fellow lodgers where he had gone and what he had

been doing. And I found that I sorely longed to learn his strange secret, to follow him some time when he stole away, for I felt that I would then get to see and hear much that was astonishing. And with this longing in my heart I fell asleep at last on my first night in the crooked house.

Arnór did not go to work the next day.



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## INTERVIEW WITH FRÚ VIGDÍS FINNBOGADÓTTIR PRESIDENT OF ICELAND

by Amalia Lindal

She is charming, witty, cultivated and popular. She is an advocate of equal rights. She is over fifty, divorced, and a single parent. She is the first woman president in the world. She is Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, President of Iceland.

*(Amalia Lindal, a Toronto journalist who lived in Iceland for 23 years, interviewed the new president on a recent visit to Iceland.)*

The startling absence of protocol is what surprises me at first, but then Iceland is a country of no titles but Reverend, and by tradition, its president is accessible to all.

I enter the warmth of Government House from the minus 13 degrees December dawn — the coldest year in Iceland's recorded history — and am directed to the waiting room by a gentleman pulling on his galoshes in the hall. A male secretary records my name, and the President's private secretary comes in to confirm the appointment time. Only a few moments wait and I am ushered into the sunny (it's now clear daylight) and comfortable receiving room, somewhat reminiscent of Victorian styling, but actually Danish traditional with heavy furniture, thickly upholstered.

Frú Vigdís (Frú or Mrs. is the way to address married women one has not met before) immediately takes the initiative with a cordial handshake and a disarming, "I really enjoyed reading your book some years back!"

Even in this land where everyone knows everyone or of everyone, it is still a shock to be so greeted by the president. But then she is an unusual lady — medium height

and fair-haired, with an aura as warm as her handknit beige dress — the kind of woman who dominates her clothes, yet wears little makeup or jewelry. What strikes me is radiant good health, shiny blond hair, twinkly blue eyes, and smile lines. How on earth does she look so alive on a midwinter day when daylight lasts only five hours.

"I'm a morning person," she confesses, waving me to a seat. (Her seat is *beside* the imposing desk, not behind it.) "I get up at seven and go right through the day at a good pace. The problem comes when my daughter, who is a night person, wants me to go over homework or play games with her in the evenings!" She shrugs this off with a smile as we run quickly through the questions to be answered.

Bits of related facts now spring handily to mind: Only as recently as 1944 did Iceland achieve complete independence from Denmark and become a republic. Until 1980, Iceland had had three presidents: the first, a lawyer/statesman; the second, a long-time Director of Education and Parliamentarian; the third, an archaeologist and long-time Museum Curator. All were men. Because the presidency is a non-political office — matters of state are handled by the Prime Minister, Cabinet and Parliament — the president must have a strong and unifying effect on the nation internally, and be able to represent Iceland well externally. Elections in this passionately patriotic land have always evoked more than an 80 percent voter turnout. 90.5 percent of the electorate voted in the 1980 presidential election for the three male and one female contender. Frú Vigdís outscored



Frú Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, President of Iceland

by only 1.5 percent the former University of Iceland president. Runners-up were a former ambassador, and a well-known businessman. My first question, therefore, is obvious:

*How does it feel to be the first and only female president in the world?*

"Very strange. I'm no more used to it now than when I was elected. I didn't realize it would be an international event. I was startled at how many people seemed to like a woman's face. In a campaign, you simply 'go for it,' not visualizing how it will end. I think I've succeeded in proving a woman can stand beside a man; it's been a challenge.

"During the campaign, it was the ordinary person who spoke for me: the seamen, the farmers, the young and the old. The seamen especially said they chose me, a woman, as a tribute to the women they left to struggle alone when they were off at sea for long periods. The middle-aged generally did not vote for me; they disliked the idea of a "single" as head of state. The fact that I was divorced was never a problem."

*Do you see yourself as the embodiment of women's rights?*

"No. I find equal rights natural. As you know, Iceland was one of the first countries to give women the vote, and it's nearly seventy years since women were given equal access to public office. I didn't have to strive to be theatre president back in 1972; I was offered the position. In 1980 I was only asked if I could do the job of president; people chose me as their spokesman. My line has been that when girls demand and require the same education as men, there will be no question of 'rights.' The difference in rights now is based on women having accepted less education than men, and having children or the care of a home too soon. I think women should finish their education before they marry,

and work awhile.

"Education is like having a large bank account in your pocket; it's an investment that's better than a chateau. The new freedom of birth control also permits finishing one's education first, even if one marries. In our generation we all married early, then worked for our children or husband. I think we are better able to plan our lives after a good education."

Her own life seems to prove it. Daughter of well-known parents: he, an engineer/professor and she, a Registered Nurse/women's rights champion, Vigdís was born April 15, 1930. She and her brother, a year younger, attended Reykjavik Gymnasium, but he died in an accident just as he was to enter the University of Iceland. Vigdís had graduated from the Gymnasium in 1949, then spent over three years studying French language, literature and drama at the University of Grenoble and the Sorbonne. In 1953 she returned to Iceland and married a former schoolmate, now a doctor. Their childless marriage lasted nine years.

After divorce, she worked as librarian, programme director and public relations officer for the National Theatre while continuing studies at the University of Iceland in English and French literature and philosophy. During those years she went abroad once again for courses in theatre history in Copenhagen and French philology in Sweden. Various positions as teacher at Reykjavik Gymnasium and in commercial public relations followed. In 1963 she helped found the first experimental theatre in Iceland, and in 1972 became its director. Icelanders came to know her during those years, especially when she taught French on Icelandic TV — her warm gaiety a contrast to the wooden demeanors and rather sterile dissertations that still characterize Icelandic national television. In 1973 she adopted a baby girl — the first adoption ever granted to a 'single' person.

*Can you describe a typical day?*

"It's very ordinary. I'm in the office at nine to read the newspapers and discuss news with staff. Three mornings a week, from ten to twelve, I receive people. Every citizen can apply for an audience. Perhaps because I am a woman or conversations are confidential, many people confide many things. Sometimes they are individuals with private grievances, sometimes members of societies or organizations. They all leave, feeling they have unburdened themselves. In the early afternoon I write my speeches and articles . . . Yes, I always write my own addresses. Around five, there is usually a reception at the residence, usually the Althing (Parliament) or anniversaries. As an example, the University of Iceland was 70 years old this year, and then the College of Surgeons asked me to host a reception. Things like that."

*How do you manage all this activity?*

"Organization is my key. I like to organize. Once I have a schedule thought out, it's easy to follow it through."

"I enjoy people and am never put off by requests, but I am grateful for every evening I can spend at home. I like to read and I like to spend as much time as possible evenings and weekends with my daughter. This is very important. Although I want to keep her off display, I take her to exhibitions, which always open in Iceland on a Saturday, and we always attend the cinema and theatre together. I've been in office (she counts on her fingers), 17 months, but I've tried to keep my two roles separate. I think I have succeeded. At a children's film première recently, the foreign newsman who took our photo didn't know it was my daughter who stood beside me! Astridur goes to school near the residence with other children from the neighborhood. Both of us come to town on weekends to

keep in touch with our old friends; many of hers are children of my schoolmates."

*You made a stirring comment in your New Year's address about drugs and young people. This seems to be a national problem now.*

"Yes. I am very afraid of drugs. I never realized the number of young people who, in an impulsive moment, smuggled in drugs and are now on a waiting list for a term in prison (not because there are so many offenders, but because our few prisons have hardly been filled in all the years till now). A young person gets six months for smuggling, but in the time he waits for space, he may marry, have a child or get a good job. His whole life may have changed, yet he must still serve his time.

It is great to have fun and to amuse oneself, but using alcohol or drugs to forget the moment, to forget the hour, to kill time! Why kill time? Time is precious. Under the influence of such drugs, one looks at interior illusions and becomes isolated. Society is for communication, for friendship and love, not isolation! If everyone did this, society would be paralyzed. The exchange of new ideas is inspiring. It takes time — and they want to *kill* time!"

*What are your pet concerns for Iceland?*

"To protect the country and the culture from erosion."

The President is an ardent conservationist. Wherever she goes in Iceland, it is part of her ceremony to plant three saplings: "one for the boys now growing up, one for the girls, and one for their brothers or sisters yet to be born." This is her way of continuing the drive for reforestation, for since settlement in the year 1100, the 25 percent of forested land (much of Iceland is covered by glaciers and lava) has shrunk to a miniscule 1/100th. The results of this casual devastation have influenced the living conditions, the economy, the cli-

mate, and, some feel, the temperament of the people themselves in this windy land.

With regard to culture, she feels it vital to keep the national heritage alive, and this includes Nordic culture in the broader sense. "There is more creativity among people in Nordic countries than elsewhere," she says, "because what people create is recognized and accepted and used. This, in turn, inspires greater creativity." Iceland, in particular, with proportionately more bookstores than anywhere in the world, is a nation of readers, writers and artists of all kinds. It is still a land where the artist is as revered as the statesman, always known, and often longer remembered.

*What do you do to keep physically and mentally fit?*

She laughs. "Walk, — I like to walk, swim, move around. I do bends and stretches in the morning to wake myself up. I'm not a health habit person or anything out of the ordinary, even in religion."

*How do you counter stress? What is your recipe?*

At this, her eyes begin to twinkle. "I try to remember how silly people look when they've been in a screaming bad temper. After seeing how ridiculous, funny, and embarrassing they looked, I decided to try never to let my own temper get out of control. So I don't throw dishes at the staff; I try to see the humour in the situation.

"And here's the dessert for my recipe: My father taught me to always think of what my attitude toward a problem would be in weeks or months hence. He taught me perspective. I vividly remember coming home in a fury one day about an undeserved bad grade I had received on a Somerset Maugham essay. My father said, 'It's so trivial; let's discuss it in detail a year from now.' A year later, when he called me aside for the interview he had marked on his calendar, I had completely forgotten the

incident. He encouraged me to learn restraint and perspective. I have noticed," she mused, "that fathers are more ambitious for their daughters than for their mothers, sisters or wives. It was also noticeable during elections that young fathers extolled me as models for their daughters."

*I understand you made several official visits to other countries in 1981 and 1982?*

"Yes, Denmark first, because of old bonds that have now become pure friendship, then Norway and Sweden."

Frú Vigdís did not go into details, for several visitors were already in the waiting-room and I had inadvertently captured the larger part of her time. According to information gathered beforehand, for Icelanders — a people notably sparing in their compliments to one another — those three state visits made her an instant celebrity in Scandinavia and tripled her popularity at home. Apparently she dented the belief that all Icelanders are stiff, humourless and remote. Although Danish, and now English, are required languages in the Icelandic school system, Vigdís had also gained proficiency in Norwegian and Swedish, and, of course, in French, her first foreign love. Her linguistic abilities stood her in good stead, making her readily understandable and "at home" in all the settings.

The presidential visits were glittering affairs, as the Icelandic newspaper photo morgues testify, of red carpets, inspections of guards, gala receptions, dinners and press conferences. In Denmark, she and Queen Margrethe seemed to take an instant liking to each other, and the population followed suit. The press discovered that the "Ice Princess," as they dubbed her, was a master of the one-line quip and at her best in impromptu humorous exchanges. In Norway, King Olaf and Crown Prince Harald and his wife, Crown Princess Sonja, were equally pleased, as were King Carl XVI Gustaf and Queen Silvia of Swe-

den. Everywhere she went, publicity followed, and an intense interest was engendered in Iceland — hitherto known to outsiders as exporters of beautiful lopa sweaters and gamesters in an endless cod war!

President Vigdís wore Icelandic furs, Icelandic knitwear of the natural earth tones, and a good deal of blue or white for her more formal clothes. Undoubtedly she would also have worn the Icelandic national costume of black and white with gold trim, but Icelandic "informers" were more interested in describing her taste: Elegant simplicity — neither man-tailored suits nor form-fitting décolletage, but easy dress/jacket combinations.

"I enjoyed the visits" was her modest summation of those trips. But she continued, "Such visits bring nations closer because there is a two-way focus on the nations. When Governor-General Schreyer and Mrs. Schreyer of Canada visited in June, for instance, there was interest in them, but also in the affairs and conditions of the rest of Canada. Coming from Manitoba, which has the largest grouping of Icelanders outside Iceland, he was obviously more than a little interested in Iceland and things Icelandic."

"In February 1982, I was invited to visit Queen Elizabeth of England." She had attended the Royal Wedding in July as a guest. "In September I attended the Scandinavian exhibition in the United States as keynote speaker for the Nordic countries."

"Scandinavia Today" was a year-long exhibition and celebration of Nordic plays, arts, crafts and music, with official openings in New York, Washington and Minneapolis. A busy schedule, but, as she says, "Exporting culture is the greatest channel for peace through understanding."

With her warmth, her informal poise, and her contagious sunny optimism, most Icelanders feel that in truth, Mrs. President Vigdís herself is their most valuable export.

Frú Vigdís is widely expected to be re-elected in the summer of 1988 for a third term as president of Iceland.



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## POET'S CORNER

### GRANVILLE MALL

the throbbing beat of  
 hard-rock metal and pounding feet  
 beckons the street children  
 from their ghettoes of alleyways  
 and pot-smoking rooms  
 to the seamy corridors  
 of Granville Mall  
 where denim clad punks,  
 street wise and cynical  
 beyond their years,  
 initiate the young who,  
 searching for a fix,  
 converge on Granville Mall.

here, acned pimps in flashy clothes  
 stalk the street for prey,  
 while mincing queens in drag  
 beckon with they swaying hips;  
 the haunting strains of a violin  
 mingles with the jangle of  
 upbeat frenzy and silent terror  
 that throbs along the street.

we, territorial trespassers,  
 cling together  
 as we scurry to the haven  
 of the Concert Hall,  
 behind whose opulence and grace  
 another world awaits.

*Kristiana Magnusson*

### THE VIKING SALT

Magnú of Eyjolfstöðum  
 whose very blood  
 and sinews  
 co-mingle  
 with the sea,  
 stubbornly strains  
 at filamented threads  
 of corks  
     and lead  
     and twine  
 bound up in  
 fathoms of nets  
 that comb  
 the treasured deep.

now this  
 old Viking salt  
 dreams  
 of his final  
 moment of glory  
 when,  
     borne upon  
     the fiery prow  
     of a Viking longboat  
 he sails on  
 to Valhalla.

*Kristiana Magnusson*

# PEOPLE



Clark T. Thorsteinson, Ph.D.

CLARK T. THORSTEINSON, Ph.D., is professor of Health, Physical Education and Recreation at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. He is also Director of Cooperative Education at BYU. He has been president of the Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi at the same university. Clark Thorsteinson is the owner of Bonneville Health Systems which provides long term care services for the elderly throughout the state of Utah. He sits on the Board of Directors of three health care corporations and serves as a consultant to health care facilities throughout the western part of the United States. Currently he is serving The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in Texas as president of the Houston, Texas mission. This is a voluntary assignment without pay and he will be there with his family for the next three years. An article by Dr. Thorsteinson appeared in our winter issue, 1987.

## DR. DANIEL J. SIMUNDSON

On January 9, 1988, Dr. Daniel J. Simundson was appointed to a three-year term as Dean of Academic Affairs at Luther North-

western Theological Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, to begin July 1, 1988. Luther Northwestern is the largest of the seminaries of the newly formed Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Dr. David L. Tiede, president of the seminary, had nominated Dr. Simundson to the board, following the unanimous recommendation of a search committee.

Dr. Simundson grew up in Seattle, Washington, where his father, the Reverend Kolbeinn Simundsson, served many years as a Lutheran pastor. The Reverend K. Simundsson was born in Iceland, emigrated to Winnipeg at age twelve, and moved to Point Roberts, Washington, as a young adult. There he met and married Groa Thorstenson, who was born in Victoria, B.C., to Icelandic immigrants.



Dan Simundson

Dr. Simundson has degrees from Stanford University, The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, and has his Ph.D. from Harvard. He has spent sabbaticals in Cambridge, England, and in Jerusalem. He has been on the faculty at Luther Northwestern since 1972 and has served previously as dean and as chairperson of the Old Testament department.

In the last ten years several pastors from the Church of Iceland have spent sabbatical leaves studying at Luther Northwestern Seminary. In the summer of 1984, they invited Dr. Simundson to speak at the annual synod meeting of the church in Iceland. The Simundsons (Daniel and Sally and their two daughters, Susan and Ann Marie) had also visited Iceland on two previous occasions in 1978 and 1979.

Sally Simundson, Daniel's wife, has been one of the officers of the Hekla Club in the Twin Cities of Minnesota. Though not an Icelander by birth, she has become very much

involved in the life and culture of Iceland through her connection with the Simundson relatives and her own visits to Iceland.

Some of the older readers of the Icelandic Canadian may remember that Dan's father, the Reverend Kolbeinn Simundsson, filled the post of pastor at the Icelandic service held on Sunday evenings during the summer at the First Lutheran Church in Winnipeg, many years ago.

*Submitted by Vera Johannsson Younger*

## THE ICELANDIC FESTIVAL OF MANITOBA SCHOLARSHIP

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- qualities of leadership and community service
- need for financial assistance

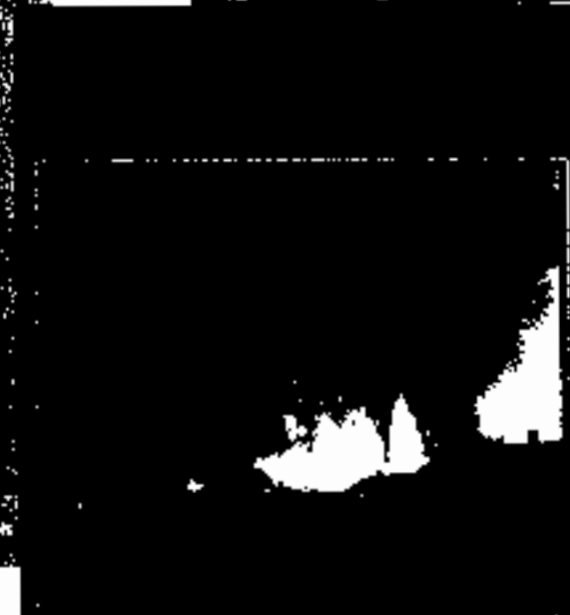
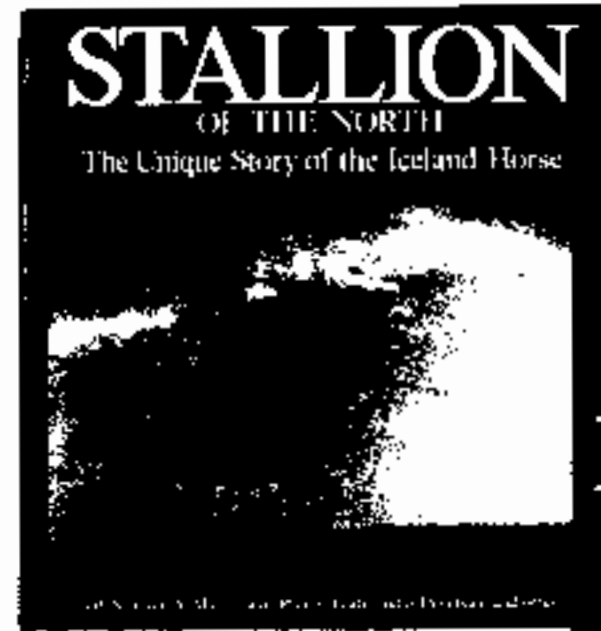
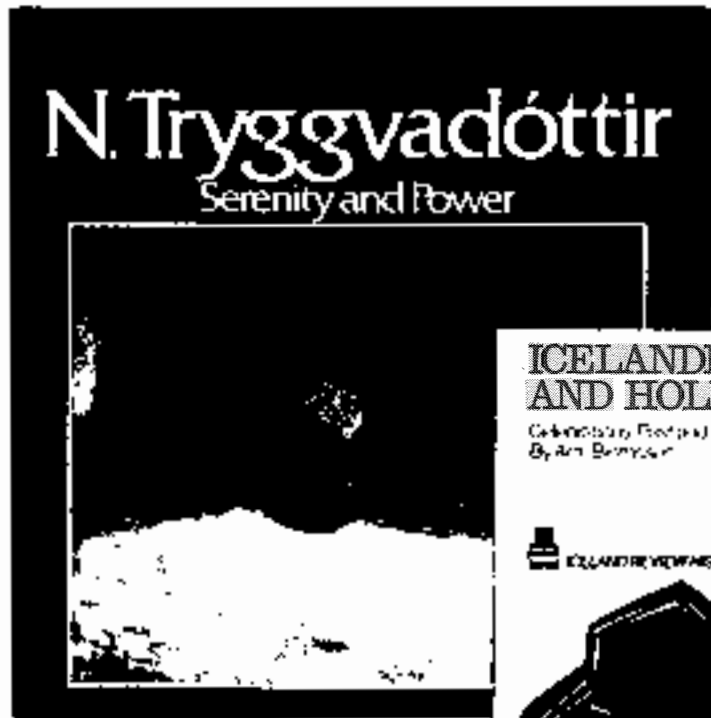
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The scholarship will be awarded at The Icelandic Festival of Manitoba in Gimli, Manitoba, on Monday, August 1, 1988.

# BOOK NOTES

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## BOOK NOTES . . .

by Sigrid Johnson

Reviews Editor

### Learning the Icelandic Language — Grammars and Dictionaries

Man's ingenuity knows no bounds when North Americans are asked their reasons for wanting to learn the Icelandic language. Whether one is planning to visit relatives or to participate in a geological expedition to Iceland and therefore simply wanting to do fair battle with the language on the normal fronts of daily living, or whether one has aspirations of becoming a serious scholar of ancient Icelandic texts, there are as many ways to learn the Icelandic language as there are needs or reasons to do so.

Undoubtedly, the best way to learn Icelandic is by travelling to Iceland and enrolling in one of the many excellent programs available to foreign students. Program offerings include: the University of Iceland's two-year course in Icelandic for Foreign Students, a course of study provided by the Reykjavik Municipal Centre for Adult Education (Námsflokkar Reykjavíkur) and courses offered by private schools, most notably Mímir.

Not everyone either wants to or can afford to travel to Iceland to study, however, so fortunately there are alternatives depending upon one's needs or reasons for wanting to learn Icelandic. Most chapters of the Icelandic National League of North America have at one time or another sponsored courses in conversational Icelandic. The University of Manitoba, through the Department of Icelandic Language and Literature, offers a program of studies leading to degrees at both the Bachelors and Masters levels. For those living in areas where organized courses are unavailable or for those who are unable to fit organized

courses into already hectic schedules, commercial offerings, such as the Linguaphone course on record or cassette, provide a solution.

A large plus for the Linguaphone course is that in addition to its regular course book and exercises, it also provides students with a copy of Stefan Einarsson's *Icelandic: Grammar, Texts, Glossary* first published in Baltimore by The Johns Hopkins University Press in 1949, and unequaled by any grammar textbook published to the present day. Not only does the grammar textbook provide the student with a comprehensive treatment of all major aspects of modern Icelandic but it does so without requiring the student to have a considerable background in language theory. It is an important backup to the Linguaphone material supplying answers to most problems a student, beginner or advanced, is likely to encounter.

Other grammar textbooks worth considering include Jón Fridjónsson's *A Course in Modern Icelandic: Texts, Vocabulary, Grammar Exercises, Translations* (Reykjavík: Tímaritid Skád, 1978), and Einar Pálsson's *Icelandic in Easy Stages*, No.'s 1 and 2, (Reykjavík: Mímir, 1975-1977). Also useful to the student of Icelandic is P.J.T. Glendening's *Teach Yourself Icelandic* (London: The English Universities Press, 1969).

It has been said that "Dictionaries are as vital to the language learner as cans of beans to the long-distance hiker, and come in almost as many varieties."<sup>1</sup> Dictionaries — Icelandic, Icelandic-English, English-Icelandic — which no student of the Ice-



landic language should be without include: Arni Bödvarsson's Icelandic dictionary, *Íslensk orðabók* (Reykjavík: Menningarsjóður, 1983), Icelandic-English dictionaries such as Richard Cleasby's and Gudbrandur Vigfússon's *An Icelandic-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press,

#### Useful addresses

##### Programs of study:

Icelandic for Foreign Students  
Háskóli Ísland við Sudurgötu  
Reykjavík 101  
Iceland

Department of Icelandic  
Language and Literature  
University of Manitoba  
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Canada  
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##### Bookstores:

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1957), and Arngrímur Sigurdsson's *Íslensk-ensk orðabók* (Reykjavík: Ísafold, 1983), and *English-Icelandic dictionaries including Sigurdur Örn Bogason's Ensk-íslensk orðabók* (Reykjavík: Ísafold, 1976) and Sören Sörenson's *Ensk-íslensk orðabók* (Reykjavík: Örn og Örlygur, 1984).

Whatever the need or reason to learn Icelandic, with a little investigation a student is sure to discover just the right program of studies, just the right grammar textbook and just the right dictionary.

Most commercial course materials such as that offered by Linguaphone and grammar textbooks can be special ordered through your local bookstore. Icelandic language dictionaries on the other hand are not typically stocked by North American bookstores and are best purchased directly from Iceland.

1. B.S., "From friendly strangers to lifelong companions," in *News From Iceland*, December 1985, pp. 14.

## REVIEWS

### National Geographic Society. *Iceland River Challenge*.

Video cassette, 60 minutes.

On a recent visit to a local shop that rented videotapes, I happened upon a videotape made by the National Geographic Society that may be of interest to the read-

ers of the Icelandic Canadian. It is a sixty minute film entitled **Iceland River Challenge**.

This film deals with the travel from the

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source of Jökulsa in Iceland's Vatnajökull to its mouth at the Arctic Ocean. Prior to this expedition, this river had not been navigated in its entirety. An international twelve man team from Britain, France, United States, Australia, and Iceland made this daring and adventurous trip. Their aim was to show that microlight aircraft could serve to transport both men and equipment over inhospitable and impassible portions of the river while kayaks and rubber rafts served to carry the adventurers through the navigable parts.

The team began their memorable voyage on the south coast of Iceland and travelled north to Vatnajökull. They lowered their kayaks by means of ropes down a large shaft which the vapours from hot springs below had melted within the glacier itself. The men actually made their way on the river from its source beneath the ice of Europe's greatest glacier.

At length, they reached the open river with a blue sky, instead of ice, above. As the boatmen moved downriver, the microlight kept pace in the air and scouted problem spots in the river, as well as assisting in selecting a path amongst the ice floes and in finding places to rest or have meals.

Two Icelanders, Gisli Hjálmarsson and Gudbrandur Jóhannsson, formed the back-

up crew that ensured adequate supplies were available at the appropriate places. Hjálmarsson (true to his name) was at the helm of the larger raft while Jóhannsson drove the huge Ice Cat tractor which brought in supplies and was the main form of transport over the glacier.

The film showed many magnificent shots of the rugged and beautiful scenery of Iceland. Particularly impressive was Dettifoss, over which the microlight proved its worth in transporting the men and equipment, and without a problem.

When they reached the Arctic Ocean, the explorers realized that this team had proven the usefulness of the microlight aircraft in river exploration. Jökulsá had shown itself to be the ideal testing ground for this innovative method of river transport and reconnaissance.

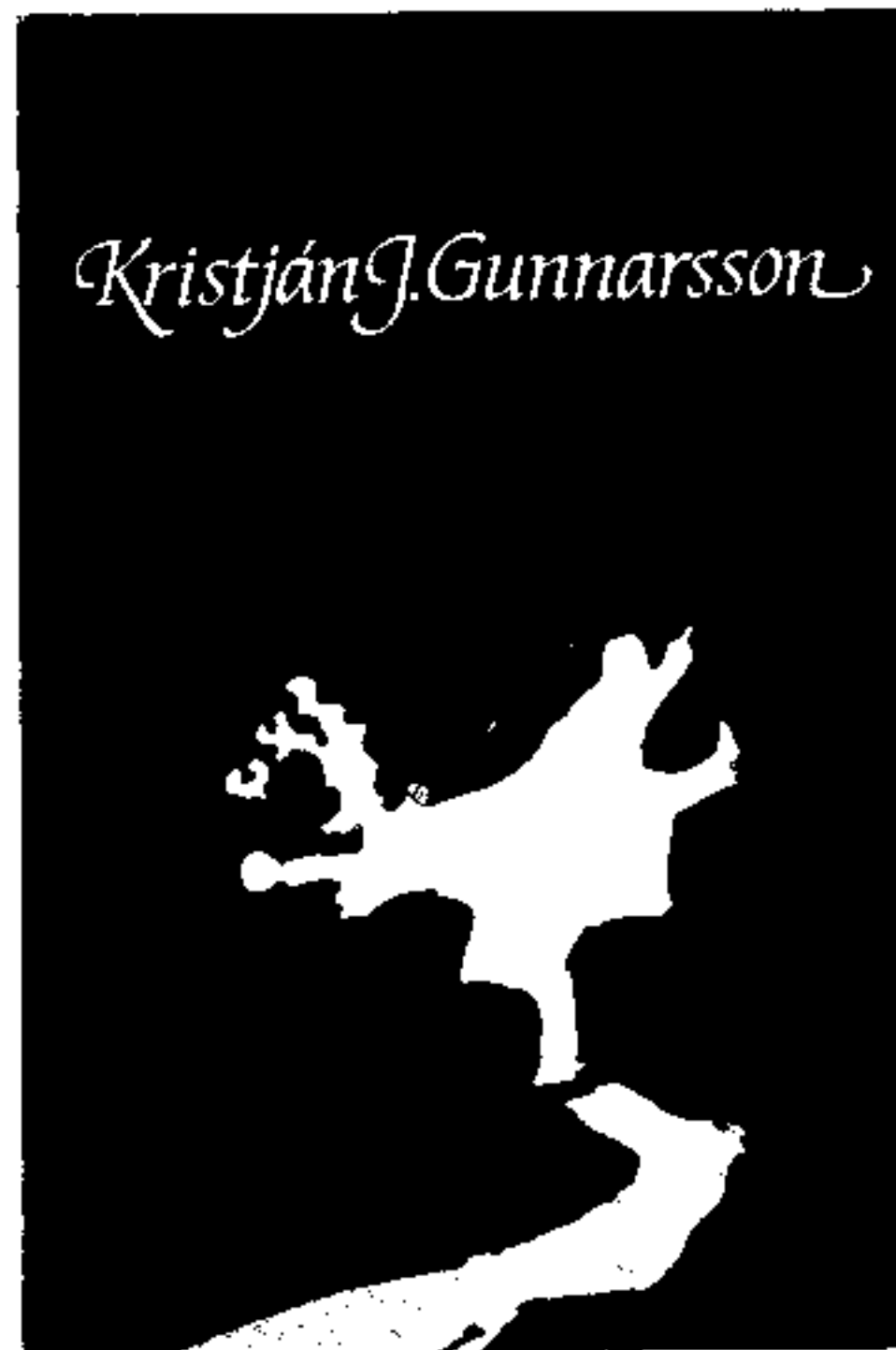
This film is thoroughly interesting and often exciting, while the scenery is breathtaking. The National Geographic did its customary excellent job in photography and in presentation of the film. It is highly recommended for all persons interested in Iceland and its scenery, in white water boating, in microlight flying, or in pure adventure.

*Reviewed by Thomas R. Einarson*

Gunnarsson, Kristján. **Refska** Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfa Menningarsjóður, 1986. 391 pp.

The Christmas book trade in Iceland is brisk indeed. Every publisher hopes to make enough at this time to last him through the rest of the year. Just about every writer tries to time the completion of his manuscript so as to cash in on the Christmas book rush. Just about every living soul in Iceland gets at least one book for Christmas, and, of course, many get several. Some of the books published at this time of the year are quite ordinary;

some of them sell well merely because they are on a subject that catches the popular fancy but have little or no lasting value. But occasionally a book is published at Christmas time that is quite out of the ordinary. Such a book is **Refska**. Written by Kristján J. Gunnarsson, former Superintendent of Schools for the city of Reykjavík, it was published by Bókaútgáfa Menningarsjóður just in time for Christmas 1986, 391 pages long.



This book is unusual for a number of reasons. First we might mention the humor, for it is a satirical work in the tradition of *Don Quixote*, *Gulliver's Travels*, or *Candide*. With tongue in cheek Kristján Gunnarsson makes fun of and lampoons the political, economic, and social scene in present day Iceland showing up the politicians for what they really are — what politicians are all over the world — namely, men pretending to represent the good of the people but all the time much more interested in lining their pockets and acquiring greater power than in planning carefully what is for the ultimate good of the nation as a whole. There can be little doubt that a number of members of Iceland's parliament have already found themselves reflected, as though through a looking glass, in this politically-oriented study of Icelandic life. All of it is done, however, with such a light touch and with such evident humor that it is quite possible that some readers will find themselves reading the book for its humor alone, and thereby perhaps miss the serious message behind the frivolity. But that is, of course, the very essence of satire.

Next we might mention the plot itself. The scene is laid in 10th and 11th century Iceland after the introduction of Christianity. The reader reasonably acquainted with *Njal's Saga*, *Egil's Saga*, *Laxdaela*, and other Icelandic sagas will have little difficulty in identifying most of the characters of the story. The events, however, are a lampooning of what is going on at the present time. To see Icelandic saga characters struggling with 20th century social, economic, and military problems is hilarious, but at the same time it is all too serious. The chief politician, for example, convinces his fellow politicians to allow a foreign power to establish a military bastion to protect the land from invasion. The contract calls, however, merely for the protection of the land itself and says nothing regarding the protection of the people. To

find out what this leads to, you will have to read the book yourself. We as human beings seem to make the same mistakes as our fathers did. Why can we not learn?

As a third point we might mention the sweep of the author's imagination. This, to a great degree, distinguishes the artist from the craftsman. **Refska** (meaning *fox skin* in Icelandic) purports to be the translation into modern idiom of an ancient book by the name of Skammir (abusive language), authored by Skuggi (ghost or shadow). It tells of the war between the Krisar and the vikings in the 10th century. Written in magical letters and signs, this book was preserved over the centuries despite being tossed into a fire, being dropped into the sea, and suffering other hazards. By a curious process it finally comes into the hands of a very wealthy American by the name of J. P. Toodlestick who makes it his life's work to translate it — obviously an extremely difficult task.

At the discretion of the God Shiva J. P. Toodlestick selects by means of his computer a banker in Reykjavik to whom the manuscript is then sent. Over the ages, however, parts of the original book had succumbed to destruction and mutilation. Such gaps were filled by a medium of easy virtue and her boy friend, the ghost of Skarphédinn, the son of Njál, one of the heroes of the *Njal's Saga*, mentioned earlier. Since Skarphédinn is a ghost, he obviously cannot enjoy the favors of this lady of easy morals except through a substitute. The banker resists as best he can, but if he wants the story to be complete (and this he wants very much), he has to play the game according to Skarphédinn's rules. It seems that Skarphédinn had his own keen sense of humor.

Finally, we must not overlook the style of the author. As mentioned earlier, Kristján J. Gunnarsson was, until his recent retirement, a teacher, a principal, and finally the Superintendent of Schools for the city of

Reykjavik With his education and experience, it is not surprising that he handles the Icelandic language with ease and grace. Any difficulties that one might have in reading this book are caused not by the lucidity of the language. The style is forthright and clear. Whatever difficulties there are, are caused by the complexity of the plot, the numbers of characters involved, and the mind-boggling problems of depicting 10th and 11th century characters involved with modern events and, as mentioned earlier, the degree to which the book reflects Icelandic social, economic, political, and military problems. In short, it is a complex and thought-provoking book, and not especially easy to read.

As Kristján Gunnarsson said himself in a recent letter in which he discussed **Refska**:

Well, I've said enough about *Refska*. The book is extremely political as you see and one has to read much between the lines. Sometimes one has to read again and again to catch on to what is being said. At least that is what a number of people who have undertaken to read this dreadful book have told me. I do not expect that *Refska* will be read very much by the ordinary reader, but I know that a number of politicians and members of parliament have read it.

At another point in the same letter he says:

I have never expected that *Refska* will be any "best seller." It is too difficult a nut to crack and too complicated for the casual reader. It will never make the author a millionaire . . . The sale has been neither greater nor less than I expected.

For the reasons adduced above, we must admit that it is a difficult book to read and will probably not appeal to those who read merely to pass the time away, although the humor in it and the high spirits of the author just might attract even such readers. But for the serious person — one who enjoys pondering on philosophical matters, one who enjoys watching the game of politics being played, one who is interested in world affairs, one who agonizes on what the super powers intend to do to solve their political and military problems, this book is not only entertaining; it is mind-nourishing.

Reviewed by Loftur Bjarnason  
Professor of Literature  
Naval Postgraduate School  
Monterey, California

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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

### **ROY ST. GEORGE STUBBS**

is a frequent contributor to this magazine. Before retiring he practiced law in Winnipeg, where he still lives.

### **LAURENCE GILLESPIE**

recently received his M.A. in Icelandic from the University of Manitoba. He is currently completing a translation of Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason's *Eiríkur Hansson* and *Vornaetur á Elgsheidum*.

### **THELMA WHALE**

is of Icelandic descent. Her father was born in Winnipeg, of first generation immigrants. Her mother was born in Vestmannaeyjar. She spoke only Icelandic until starting school but soon turned to English exclusively. She has studied Icelandic at university and visited Iceland. Since her retirement she has kept up her Icelandic through reading and translation.

### **AMALIA LINDAL**

has revisited Iceland many times since she lived there from 1949-72, married to an Icelander. Her controversial and popular book *Ripples From Iceland* (New York: W. Norton, 1962) will be reissued in paperback in April 1988 by Bókaförlag Odds Björnssonar in Akureyri, Iceland. Canadian distribution will be handled by Hounslow Press, Toronto. Ms. Lindal now lives in Guelph, Ontario.

### **KRISTIANA MAGNUSSON**

of White Rock, B.C., formerly from the Arborg-Riverton area of Manitoba, is an author and poet. She has been a frequent contributor to this magazine.

### **SIGRID JOHNSON**

is the librarian of the Icelandic Collection at the Elizabeth Dafoe Library at the University of Manitoba. Originally from Arborg, Manitoba, she now lives in Winnipeg and is the reviews editor for this magazine.

### **LOFTUR BJARNASON**

lives in Monterey, California. He plans to spend part of the summer in Iceland preparing for the administration of a fund he has established at Brigham Young University for the teaching of Scandinavian in general and Icelandic in particular.

*Submissions of articles, short stories and poetry are welcome. Please contact the appropriate editor.*

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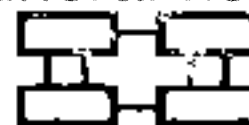
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