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Martha  
Brooks

SUMMER  
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Cover Photo: Martha Brooks

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**EDITORIAL**


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by *Sigrid Johnson*

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As a result of the women's liberation movement, which by 1970 had spread across the Western world, and due to measures taken by the United Nations, 1975 was declared The International Women's Year.

Activities in Iceland in connection with The Women's Year included meetings, exhibitions and a conference in Reykjavik in June that addressed various aspects of women's issues. At this conference it was decided to urge all women in Iceland to stop working for a day in order to demonstrate the importance of their share in the function of society. On October 24, 1975, referred to as the Women's Day Off, the entire female population of Iceland laid down tools, typewriters, pots and pans, and even babies, and went out on strike. The action was extremely successful throughout the country, and in Reykjavik some 25,000 people, mostly women, gathered in the city centre for a public meeting. This action, both, proved that society comes to a virtual standstill without the work of women, inside the home as well as outside, and made women more conscious of their own status and in that respect has contributed to a gradual change of attitudes towards questions of equality.

The most significant progress made with regards to women's issues in Iceland since 1975 has been in the field of politics and leadership. Vigdis Finnbogadóttir, elected Iceland's first woman president in 1980, is a prod-

uct of that year. The debate that had taken place during the five years preceding her election had made it both natural and desirable to propose a woman for that office. Following her victory, however, women had an even stronger sense of their lack of political power than before and the discontent within many women's groups soon led to the founding of the Women's Party (Kvennalistinn) in 1982 and the election in that same year of two of the Party's candidates to municipal council seats in Reykjavik and Akureyri. Less than a year later three Women's Party candidates were elected to the nation's 60-member legislature, the Alþing. In the year 930, when the oldest parliament in the world was established on the windy, watery plain called Þingvellir where the women sat on a lonely cliff overlooking the valley while the men played competitive games below, who would have thought that one day members of a women's political party would have a voice in the government body that created the laws of the land and that a woman would be the head of state.

Iceland's Women's Party did not, however, spring from nowhere. The climb down from the cliff of the year 930 has been a long one for the women of Iceland. It was not until this century, on June 19th seventy-four years ago, that Icelandic women were given the right to vote. Their progress in higher education, the professions, literature and the arts has come much

more quickly than their progress in the field of politics and leadership. Nonetheless, in recognition of that turning point in their lives, on the 19th of June every year, Icelandic women celebrate their own day, Women's Day.

North American women of Icelandic descent have also made progress and been recognized for their achievements in politics and leadership, higher education, the professions, literature and the arts. In commemoration, therefore of the nineteenth of June the summer issue of *The Icelandic Canadian* features a

women's theme. All the contributors are women. Between the covers of this issue you will journey from saga times through Kirsten Wolf's "Women in Old Norse-Icelandic sagas" to modern times as Phyllis Webster interviews a 1989 nominee for a Governor General's Award in "Dancing on the stars: an interview with Martha Brooks". This issue is primarily literary in nature, but plans are in the works for future issues highlighting North American Icelandic women's contributions in politics, higher education, the professions, and the arts.

## 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Issue !!

1992 is our 50th anniversary!  
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with your ideas soon!*

## FEATURE

# Dancing on the Stars:

an Interview with

## Martha Brooks

by Phyllis Webster

A single battered leather skate hangs on the wall of Martha Brooks' study. Next to it is a tapestry of a fairy tale church in wonderful shades of blue, red, yellow, rust, white, brown and beige. Both draw the eye away from the standard accoutrements of a writer's life, a typewriter, a word processor and neat piles of papers and books. The skate and the tapestry represent something very important to the life and art of Martha Brooks, author, playwright and observer of life. The skate (its partner is in the home of Martha's sister, Alice) is a fond memory of her father who

taught her to skate while holding her between his knees on the pond at the Manitoba Sanatorium and of the love and joy she felt as they glided across the ice together. The tapestry had been created by Gwen, a former T.B. patient who had befriended and had been loved by Martha when she was a young girl. Her story is beautifully and tenderly told in *A Hill For Looking* published in 1982. The room speaks of the two themes which inform the writing of Martha Brooks, those of love and loss. *Paradise Cafe*, published in 1988, is a collection of short stories about teenagers and their



Martha Brooks

"Afi" Reverend Runolfur Marteinsson, Martha, Alice and "Amma" Ingunn Marteinsson



Left to right: "Father" Dr. Al Paine, "Mother" Teddy Paine, Alice, Martha and their dog Tim

struggles to learn about relationships, change and pain.

I began by asking Martha when she had started writing and whether she had been an early reader.

A: I guess we all start writing when we learn about the written word when we are very young, but what separates artists from people who write words

is, I think, artists tend, by their very make-up from the very beginning to be a little eccentric. Perhaps there is a feeling of being set apart, a feeling of being a little different. I grew up in a TB sanatorium and as a child I was ill a great amount of the time. My illness made me an observer and artists are observers. I was not an early reader; in fact, I think I was a bit dyslexic and

I had a very difficult time learning to read. My mother actually taught me to read and once that happened, I was away but I would have done fine in Arabia because I was reading from right to left, she discovered.

Q: I have just finished reading *A Hill for Looking* which is set in the Manitoba Sanatorium near Ninette where your father was the Medical Superintendent and Chief Surgeon and your mother was a nurse so I have a wonderful sense of the place where you grew up. You were obviously surrounded by illness and consequently by people who were dying. You also suffered from severe bouts of pneumonia and probably hovered close to dying yourself because antibiotics were quite new. Both *Paradise Cafe* and *A Hill for Looking* deal with death but you are never grim or morbid. Can you tell me what happened in your childhood that helped you to deal with it so . . . intelligently?

A: Well, I think anyone who has ever had to deal with illness has to either sink or swim. Anyone who has ever had to deal with the formidable things that life sometimes thrusts at us . . . either becomes very bitter or becomes an individual who survives with hope. Not necessarily with hope that is grounded in an ingenuous, innocent optimism, but in an intelligent hopefulness.

Q: *A Hill for Looking* is obviously autobiographical.

A: It's autobiographical in the sense that the events which are chronicled in the book happened, but they didn't all happen in 1955. Let me digress a little bit. Among people who denigrate autobiography, who say it isn't a valid art form, there is a lack of awareness

of the fact that when you become the author of your own life, and try to bring to your life certain universals, it becomes very much an art form. And we are all, one way or another, writing autobiography, whether we are writing strictly fiction or whether we are writing autobiography, you are the sum of your experiences, your memories and other people's memories, what you observe and bring to life on the page and what you know and what you've experienced as a human being. So my autobiography was not so much written with the desire to get at facts but to present the truth of the time, the truth of an era in which people struggled with a disease that was as fearful as AIDS is becoming. But unlike AIDS, tuberculosis was not a disease without hope.

Q: I was delighted to discover that your father had done the beautiful linocuts and your mother had tinted them. I thought it was such a family book in a way. Tell me about Gwen, who was such an important character in the book. Is she a real person?

A: She is a real person and she was a real friend... a very good friend who died, just in the spring. She spent the last five years of her life in the Palliative Care Ward of St. Boniface General Hospital. One of the stories in *Paradise Cafe* called "Dying for Love", which is one of my favourite stories, chronicles the experience of visiting the dying on the Palliative Care Ward. That story comes out of my observations of those last five years of visiting her often.

Q: There seem to be two major themes in your work: love and friendship and the growing knowledge that everything changes. There is also the idea that



Back row: Todd D., Brian D., Carey D.  
Centre: Ed and Alice Drader, Dr. Al Paine, Teddy Paine, Martha and Brian Brooks  
Lower: Mike D. and Kirsten B.

change doesn't necessarily need to be negative.

A: Eudora Welty in a book called *Conversations with Eudora Welty* suggested that once an author finds her voice, she settles into the theme she will write about all her life. And that, I think, is going to be my theme — the theme of love and how it affects us and makes us courageous. How it helps us survive. We take from that bitter-sweet juxtaposition of love and loss the kind of strength we need to become good human beings. I think where literature for young adults separates from literature for adults is

the necessity for hopefulness. Young adults need to feel hope and that is very much a part of my writing. No matter how bad things are for the characters in my stories, there is always hope; there is always a door open for happiness, for joy, somewhere, even in the poorest places. Because I think life can be like that, life can be terribly, terribly sad, but in order to survive you must search for that ray of hope.

Q: Your narrators in *Paradise Cafe* shift between the male and female characters. I find that it doesn't matter to me which sex the narrator is be-

cause the "voice" is always sensitive and powerful. When you begin a story do you start off thinking that this story would be better from the point of view of a male or of a female?

A: I don't consciously think about that. I think the theme of the story, the core being that of love and loss, but riding above all that is always something, there's a nudge, an idea . . . I woke up in the middle of the night with the lines "My dog is old. And he farts a lot." And that became "A Boy and His Dog" which won the Vicky Metcalf Award for the Best Short Story for Children's Literature for 1989. Inherent in those first two lines was humour, but also the sadness of love and loss because the dog was ill and the voice that emerged from those first two lines was a male voice.

Q: Is that how you get your ideas for your stories? Where does your inspiration come from?

A: Inspiration is basically fixing yourself to a chair and writing for a number of hours. Certainly with novels it's that way. It's just heavy slogging right through to the end; however, the kind of energy that you need to write short stories is a more spritely energy. It's a kind of a trip across the Grand Canyon on a tight-rope with a net underneath where

you can do all kinds of dazzling footwork and if you fall off, it's okay because it's only about three months work. With a novel it's a year and a half. It's scarier. But I tend to be more playful with my short stories. I tend to let them go free a little bit more. And so the initial page comes out of midnight ramblings or an idea that sparks — the colour of somebody's shirt, or a conversation overheard, or a memory that fleets across the mind just as you're falling asleep. And all of a sudden, usually the voice comes and I might write a page and then go back and look at it. What's this and where has it taken me? It becomes almost stream of consciousness. I think the best of writing comes from stream of consciousness. There is a quote from one of Ellen Gilchrist's stories "The Famous Poll of Jody's Bar" in which the character Sandy says: "In a school I went to in Texas, a poet used to come and teach my English class once a month. He said the most important writing gets done in your head while you think you're doing something else." If you've done your work as a craftsman, then the art is allowed to flow through. And you come up with stories that you think are spontaneous, but very often, if you go back, they took their genesis from somewhere else. They've been fomenting in your head, in your subconscious, and they come out.

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Q: *Paradise Cafe* would be an excellent choice for young people to use in English classes. Are you hoping it will be used in the schools?

A: Well many of the short stories have been anthologized across the country. Also the American edition of *Paradise Cafe* is being published in the spring by Little, Brown and Company of Boston, the same people who published J.D. Salinger, and Gilchrist, marvellous writers I have admired. I'm also pleased that Little, Brown and Company will be the American publishers of my next book as well.

Q: Can you tell us a little about your new book which is in the editing stage?

A: For the moment it's called *Lucky Blue Lady*; the title may change. It's a book about family love and the grieving process. The young heroine of the story is Sidonie — named after her French grandmother. She's a young girl growing up on the prairies in a tuberculosis sanatorium. This book is not in any way autobiographical. It simply happens to be an interesting setting. Her doctor father does not copewell after the death of her mother. He is a workaholic and it's an island — an island of loneliness, cut off from the rest of the world. Her sister has come back for the summer to try to pull the family out of their lethargy.

Sidonie has sunk more and more into depression in this year after her mother's death. Incidentally, her mother had died on her birthday. So this is a story about turning a corner in grief and it's a story about love . . . and hope.

Q: *Lucky Blue Lady* is young adult fiction?

A: It is young adult fiction, and of course *Catcher in the Rye* is young adult fiction. *Lucky Blue Lady*, of anything I've written, is the most complex; it's very layered and very textured. The story is about a fifteen year old girl and of the six major characters only two are young adults. Stylistically, it is sophisticated. The readership is not going to be strictly young adult alone; I think anybody who has ever felt despair and loss will find this, I hope, a thoughtful book.

Q: You are also a playwright.

A: Yes, my last play *Andrew's Tree*, was actually nominated for a Dora Mavor Moore Award. And the reason it was nominated was because it was playing in Toronto on a school tour. Most children's plays are performed in schools. I also co-authored *A Prairie Boy's Winter* and *I Met A Bully on the Hill* which were performed at Prairie Theatre Exchange.

Q: Are you an actress as well a writer of drama?

A: No, but I studied opera for a few years and I sang jazz with Jimmy King for awhile, flirted with Rainbow Stage, flirted with all those things for awhile.

Q: *Paradise Cafe* was nominated for a Governor General's Award for Young

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Adult fiction in 1989. Was that a good experience?

A: It was a wonderful experience; it was marvellous because it propelled me, it gave me a national stature that I had not had before and I'm sure that because of that, Little, Brown and Company became interested in what I was doing. Having been nominated can cause a great amount of stress because you feel you have to best yourself and everyone else does too. You feel you are being watched. And you worry that you will disappoint people, and you try very hard. And I'm also, frankly, a very ambitious person.

Q: I'm certainly waiting for the next Martha Brooks' novel! Are you hoping to make your living from writing?

A: Well, certainly it's important to make a living; money makes things so much easier. But to go over and above that, what motivates any artist is the desire to be the very best you can be in what you do. And if that takes you dancing on the stars, then that's terrific. That's what you aim for; that's what I aim for.

Q: You have been giving writing workshops in schools under the Manitoba Artists in the Schools program. Do you enjoy teaching?

A: I do. I'm teaching creative writing now to junior and senior high students. I'm becoming more picky about how many schools I'll immerse myself in for a week because it's all time away from my writing and I find it exhausting. I want to give them something really meaningful. Of course, like most people who are artists who care about what they do, like any teacher who really cares, you want to give your very best and that

takes a lot of energy. Last year I spent about fourteen weeks reading and touring.

Q: Tell me a little bit about your Icelandic background. I know you like standing on hills with the wind in your hair and you had Icelandic grandparents whom you loved very much. How does that background inform your life?

A: Because of who my grandparents were as human beings, I have a warm connection with their past and with their traditions. I remember that they lived their lives very well, as good people. My grandmother was a good cook. They spent a great deal of time with us before they died. There was a tradition in our family of taking care of people who had given you your life to begin with. We did that for my father before he died.

Q: What are your hopes for the future?

A: I suppose I would like it if I could grow old gracefully into my senior years making raspberry custard pies and still writing short stories.

Martha Brooks, author, playwright, observer of life, conveyor of hope in an unhappy world is a person who, for this reader, makes "dancing on the stars" and raspberry custard pies seem real, valuable and worth waiting for.



# Women in Old Norse-Icelandic Sagas

by Kirsten Wolf

When *Wealththeow* in the Old English poem *Beowulf* reminds the hero Beowulf, after he had slain the monster Grendel, of his obligation to King Hroðgar and, perhaps more important, of his obligation to protect her sons, the Danish queen strikes us as a strong, yet ultimately helpless figure as she seeks to ensure peace within a patriarchal society. Like other figures in Old English poetry, she functions in a sophisticated way as a "peace-weaver," attempting to bring closure to hostilities, but failing in the face of a social structure that finds its impetus in blood-feuds and intrigues. Such is, perhaps, the case also in the enigmatic *Wulf and Eadwacer*, a riddle spoken by a woman whose lover has, so it seems, been outlawed. In her heartfelt words of loss and deprivation resides a plea for resolution, a plea for closure. The women's voices

in these and other poems display a certain depth and richness, but at the same time, we as readers stand always at a remove from these speakers, despite their sometimes poignant words and emotions, all of which seem formalized, distanced, and perhaps even lacking in those characteristics that make them convincingly human, participating fully within the world of human affairs and yet rich in psychological depth.

When we turn to the Old Norse-Icelandic sagas, however, we notice a striking difference in the characterization of women. The women are generally far from being passive figures, nor are they always bent on seeking closure. They often display a type of mental toughness as they adopt the role of the active partner, inciting revenge (or even taking matters into their own hands), engaging

in battle, and seeking to defend the honour of the family. While the motivations of the female characters are generally clear, rarely do we glimpse directly the psychological depth of character that resides behind the motivation; there seems to be a greater complexity of mind and emotion residing just beneath the surface. In the *Saga of the Greenlanders* (*Grænlandinga saga*), Freydis carries this type of portrait to its extreme, and she appears as a hard, self-centred woman who readily violates family honour and social norms in her own interests. Along with her brothers, Helgi and Finnbogi, Freydis mounts an expedition to Vinland. Discontented with what she found there, Freydis goes to Finnbogi's house early one morning to exchange ships, for his is larger. Finnbogi agrees, and Freydis returns home to her husband. But here the narrative takes a harsh and unexpected turn. Freydis tells her husband that Finnbogi beat her, and she incites him to revenge: "But you, you wretch, would never avenge either my humiliation or your own. I realize now how far I am away from my home in Greenland! And unless you avenge this, I am going to divorce you." They go to the brothers' house, tie them up, and drag them outside, where "Freydis had each of them put to death." But the episode does not end here, for although the men were reluctant to kill the women that remained, Freydis takes up an axe and kills all five of them; and "Freydis thought she had been very clever about it." As readers, we are repulsed by her cruelty, but we are also drawn into the action of the narrative as we contemplate how far Freydis will go in her cruelty and then find ourselves shocked by its realization. The typical male role-model of the sagas is reversed, and with it our expectations

are turned upside-down.

The portrait of Freydis presents an extreme, although not entirely uncommon, type of women in the sagas. Generally, however, the women are depicted as bent on protecting the honour of the family. Bergþóra in *Njal's Saga* (*Njáls saga*), for example, is involved in no fewer than five murders. In the first instance, Bergþóra, Njáll's wife, had insulted Hallgerðr, Gunnarr's wife, by suggesting that she arranged to have her former husband, Þorvaldr, killed. One day, Bergþóra sends her servant Svartr to fell wood at Rauðaskriður, land owned jointly by Gunnarr and Njáll. The agreement was that each would take as much timber as was needed, but Hallgerðr believes that "Bergþóra is trying to rob me in everything." Apparently she still smarted from Bergþóra's earlier remarks and from the fact that Gunnarr had not avenged her honour on that count. Hallgerðr then sends her servant, Kolr, to kill Svartr. In retaliation for the killing, Bergþóra sends another servant, Atli, to kill Kolr. The emphasis in these scenes is not on the actual killing, but on the growing animosity of the two women; and although the exchange of words is sparse, the sense of mounting tension rings clearly in the narrative. Here two strong women come to loggerheads, and the reader watches in suspense, anticipating further conflict. In other instances, Bergþóra is more outspoken, as when she incites her sons to kill Sigmundr, who had earlier reviled Njáll's sons by composing a number of malicious poems: "You amaze me. You kill when killing is scarcely called for, but when something like this happens you chew it over and brood about it until nothing comes of it. . . . So if you really want to do anything, you must do it now."

Active participation in the events



and a commitment to action thus characterize the women of the sagas. Rarely do we find in these works the weak, pleading figure, lacking in confidence and fearful of actions or their consequences. This is, perhaps, the most fundamental difference between the women of Old English and Old Icelandic literature: in the former, women work towards "closure" of action, some sort of resolution that will re-establish order and harmony (this is not only the case in a work such as *Beowulf* or *The Wife's Lament*, but can also be said of the saints' lives, where re-establishment of a Christian order where the right relationship between the godhead and humankind is at issue); in the latter, "closure" is not central. Action brings response, and there is little thought to re-establishing a harmonious balance. Rather, gaining the advantage is more at issue. This would help to explain the dominant female character who continually incites vengeance

often, but not always, under the guise of family honour, for wilful pride, economic advantage, and power are equally strong motives. Guðrún in *Laxdæla saga* knows how to incite her brothers to attack Kjartan: "You would have had just the right temper if you had been peasants' daughters — you do nothing about anything, whether good or bad. Despite all the disgrace and dishonour that Kjartan has done you, you lose no sleep over it even when he rides past your door with only a single companion. Men like you have the memory of hogs. It's obviously futile to hope that you will ever dare to attack Kjartan at home if you haven't the nerve to face him now when he is travelling with only one or two companions. You just sit at home pretending to be men, and there are always too many of you about." Men, of course, do attempt to take a stand against such railing and goading, as in *Njáls saga* when Flosi rejects Hildigunnr's attempts to goad him to

vengeance: "Monster," he cried. "You want us to take the course which will turn out worst for all of us. Cold are the counsels of women." While men may have the "memory of hogs," women rarely forget, and a response such as Flosi's, an earlier remark, insult, or slap may well have serious consequences at a later time. In *Njáls saga*, Gunnarr stands on the verge of being overcome by attackers, who have succeeded in cutting the string of his bow. Beside him stands his wife, Hallgerðr: "He said to Hallgerðr, 'Let me have two locks of your hair, and help my mother plait them into a bow-string for me.' 'Does anything depend on it?' asked Hallgerðr. 'My life depends on it,' replied Gunnarr, 'for they will never overcome me as long as I can use my bow.' 'In that case,' said Hallgerðr, 'I shall now remind you of the slap you once gave me. I do not care in the least whether you hold out a long time or not.' 'To each his own way of earning fame,' said Gunnarr. 'You shall not be asked again.'"

The strong, wilful woman is something of a commonplace in saga literature. While in the case of Bergþóra we move slowly through a web of retaliations in which her actions and her interplay with other characters have a cumulative effect, other characters act more overtly impulsively, if no less effectively. In *Laxdæla saga*, for instance, Auðr goes about dressed in trousers like a man. (According to early Icelandic law, it was grounds for divorce if the husband wore effeminate clothing, and the same applied if a woman wore masculine clothing.) Accordingly, her husband, Þórðr, has himself divorced from her, and Auðr, sword in hand, personally takes revenge against him: "She went into the bed-closet; Þórðr lay on his back, sound asleep. She

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

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

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

*Soon I shall seek to leave.  
My passion abates not at all  
For the spender of treasure.  
I shall die pitifully.  
For I loved the treasure-embracer  
With passionate, warm emotion.  
I cannot conceal my sorrow.  
I sit alone and recount my misery.*

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

The type of psychological depth in its more developed form familiar to modern readers comes with the fiction of a later period. Here in these early works, two elements in the construction of character predominate: action and, to a lesser extent, description. Characterization is usually brief. Of a man, the author may provide a number of details, but of a woman, the author usually only notes that she was good-looking; and he may add that she was intelligent, a

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

Women can also fulfil roles as prophetesses, predicting fortune good and bad. In *Eiríks saga rauða*, for instance, the seeress Þorbjörg attends a feast at Þorkell's farm, at which she predicts that the famine will come to an end and that Guðrún will start an eminent family line, "and over your progeny there shall shine a bright light." In other instances, as in the romances (*riddarasögur*), women possess the ability to perform magic, at times to assist a hero, or, as in *Gibbons saga*, to remain invisible or to disappear, as Nitida does on her supposed wedding day in *Nitida saga*. Some sagas also depict women as having the ability to cure diseases and wounds. In *Mírmanns saga*, for example, Mírmann, who is a leper, travels to Sicily, where he is cured by the beautiful Cecilia, whom he mar-



ries. And in *Rémundar saga*, Rémundr's wounds can only be cured by Elina, the most beautiful woman in the world. Although readers may be less attracted by the fairy-tale quality of the later tales, the portraits nevertheless add to the view of the female character as multifaceted, both within her abilities and in her function in the narrative. Interestingly, in some of the later *riddarasögur*, we find women adopting the male roles, not only in their actions and in their wilful independence, but also in dress. Male society, of course, offers opportunities closed to the female, and the exchange of role and dress, bringing, as it does, greater freedom to the women, offers an attractive, and strikingly modern, comment on the division and interplay of social roles.

The role of women in Old English poetry has been described as an "ideal of aristocratic woman as primarily a passive, peaceful, and colourless ad-

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

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# Anna



*By Christine (Johannson) Best*

*To my grandchildren*

When Anna opened her eyes this morning she remembered that this was going to be a very special day. Her father had promised to take her to Grandma's and Grandpa's farm tonight after work. She would be allowed to stay behind and visit for a few days all by herself.

School was out for the summer and she felt a rush of freedom as she quickly dressed and hurried to the kitchen where mother was busy getting breakfast. Being good was very important today. Anna set the table and made up her mind to eat those shrivelled, stewed prunes and the

mushy oatmeal porridge without complaining.

Anna had packed her little suitcase the night before, remembering to put in the warm blue sweater Grandma Olof had knit for her.

As the day passed and Anna cheerfully did her chores, thoughts of Grandma and Grandpa Eric were running through her head. Would they once again tell the stories of their growing-up years in Iceland. About the day the ram treed Grandma as she herded her father's sheep on the mountain side. And the dark night Grandpa thought a ghost was fol-

lowing him, but once safely inside, he realized it had only been his frozen coat-tail nudging the back of his leg.

Anna loved their stories, especially the one about how they had met. Grandpa was travelling and had stopped for a meal where Grandma worked as a serving-maid. As she served him, he gazed at her and in his straight-forward manner announced that he had just met the girl he would marry. These stories made it possible for Anna to imagine Grandpa as a young and handsome man sweeping his love off her feet, like in the movies, only better, as this had really happened and to her own Grandma Olof.

After supper, Anna and her family squeezed themselves into the car, a Model A Ford which father had fondly named "Henry". The motor roared to life as father turned the crank and they were off down the bumpy road that led to the farm, just three miles east of town.

The road followed the river, its every curve winding its way past the familiar farm homes where there would usually be a collie dog waiting at the gate. The dogs would bark and chase after the car until they tired. This barking was terrible and Anna was always so afraid father would run right over one of these dogs. He would curse them, calling them mangy, stupid, and under his breath other choice words that mother said were not fit for young ears.

Around the next bend in the road was a small family grave yard, its white stones standing erect like ghosts

of the people buried there.

They were nearly at the farm now and could see the white house with its big porch just across the river. The planks of the wooden bridge rattled as "Henry" carried them across.

The children scrambled out of the car. They ran to meet Grandpa coming from the barn carrying a heavy pailful of milk in each hand, two cats following closely at his heels anxious for their share of the warm milk.

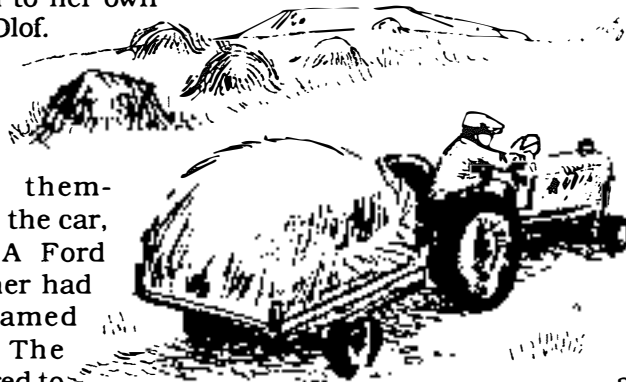
As they entered the porch, Anna could hear Grandma at the woodstove starting the fire so that the grown-ups could have their coffee.

She thought of tomorrow, when she could coax a cup of coffee from her without mother there to know.

The usual caraway seed cookies were passed around and, at father's

suggestion, the children went out to explore the yard and to see the spring lambs. Grandma sent a bottle of warm milk to be fed to Blackie, the orphaned lamb which she had nursed in the spring. A box lined with an old woolen sweater of Grandpa's had been his home behind the kitchen stove for some weeks. Blackie had become quite tame and still expected to be comforted when people came near. He no longer needed the bottle of milk as he now drank from the river like the rest of the sheep.

Anna was fascinated by the river that curled itself almost completely around the yard where the house stood. Behind the house was the tool shed that always smelled of wood shavings and the musty gunny sacks



piled in the corner. The well with its squeaky iron pump stood close to the shed and the puddles left there made the earth slippery and gooey, perfect for mudpies.

A path shaded by large maple trees led to the ice-house. The children played their favourite game of hide-and-peek between the sheds and scrambled down the river bank, getting snagged in the vines that grew there. Anna's brothers would pick up frogs, even put them in their pockets. Anna did not want to feel

their bumpy skin in her hands and, besides, didn't everyone know that if you touched a frog you would get warts!

Grandpa caught Anna's eye as the family climbed aboard "Henry" for the ride home. He took her hand and said, "Shall we go and open the gate?" Anna liked to be alone with Grandpa. She liked to feel his big warm hand wrapped around hers as they walked back to the house. The pair settled into the wooden rocking-chair in the kitchen for the much loved bed-time stories.

Anna, feeling the softness of Grandpa's beard on her face as she snuggled against his chest, felt very content. She watched Grandma light the coal-oil lamps that would be carried up the stairs when they went to bed. Later, Grandma tucked Anna in and they solemnly said the Lord's prayer together.

Moonlight replaced the lamp-light, casting shadows on the walls and Anna was alone with her thoughts. She remembered Grandpa telling her of his life back in Iceland when, as a young man, he often read by moon-

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light late into the night. Anna drifted off to sleep in the very room in which she had been born on a stormy February night.

Waking to the sound of clanging pails, she knew that would be Grandpa coming in from milking. If she hurried she could turn the handle of the milk separator and watch the stream of thin blue milk splash into a large pail while the thick yellow cream oozed into a smaller one.

As Anna came down the stairs she

could smell the toast Grandma was making on the wood-stove. Two slices of bread held between a wire rack were placed over the glowing coals. Nothing tasted better than this toast made from Grandma's own home-made bread, smothered in butter and the cranberry jelly that was so bitter and yet so sweet. No mushy oatmeal porridge to force down this morning.

Haying was in progress and Grandpa patted Anna on the head as he left for the fields. She busied her-

self helping with morning chores, gladly running errands back and forth to the ice house. Milk, cream and butter were kept in a metal pail with a rope attached to the handle. This Anna would lower onto the ice in the deep pit. The ice was covered with sawdust and it gave a woody smell to the small dark house.

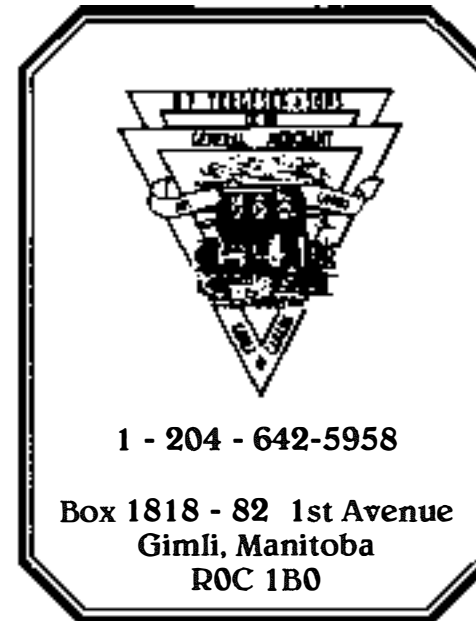
Grandma had promised to show Anna family pictures in the afternoon. These were kept in a wooden chest brought from Iceland. They sat on the edge of the bed, and Anna reached into the chest and carefully lifted out the most beautiful seashell she had

ever seen. It was heavy and filled both of her cupped hands. Grandma smiled wistfully as Anna's eyes filled with wonder at the sea sounds she heard when she held the pretty pink shell to her ear. Anna had never been to the sea and the sounds she heard gave her a longing to see and hear it in person. Grandma seemed to understand such thoughts and she, too, said she longed for the sea which had been such a big part of her girlhood days.

Now it was time to put things back into the chest to be treasured again another day.

The mid-afternoon sun was hot as Anna walked across the field to where Grandpa and the horses were moving slowly together. The big Clydesdales with their hairy hooves and neatly braided manes stopped and started in tune with Grandpa. He spoke to them like you would to old friends as he pitched the hay high up into the rack. Anna approached Grandpa and he called to her, "You are just in time to have a ride to the hayloft." He always knew what she was hoping for and Anna giggled as she stepped up to the top of the rack from his strong shoulders.

She was feeling on top of the world, sitting in the sweet smelling hay, saying to herself, "this has been a grand day!"



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Laura Goodman Salverson



Translated by  
Tristin Tergesen

# The Greater Gift

By Laura Goodman Salverson

The best known English-writing Icelandic Canadian has been novelist Laura Goodman Salverson. She was born in Winnipeg in 1890. Her father, Lárus Guðmundsson, came from the Borgarfjörður region in the southwest of Iceland, while her mother, Ingibjörg Guðmundsdóttir, was from Ísafjörður in the northwestern part of the country. Her parents emigrated from Iceland in the early 1880's, living in Winnipeg, in Duluth, Minnesota and elsewhere. Though sickly, she managed to acquire some high school education prior to her marriage, in 1913, to George Salverson, a Norwegian American. Mr. Salverson was employed by a railway company so the couple moved frequently. Because of this she was constantly undergoing new experiences and meeting new people with the result that in her memory was a virtual storehouse of actual storylines and living characters.

In 1922 Laura Goodman Salverson won a prize for the best short story describing life in Western Canada. This was "Hidden Fire", her first short story. With the publication of *The Viking Heart* in 1923, she won instant recognition as one of the best novelists in Canada. She was the first Canadian author to win the Governor-General's award in two literary divisions. She received her first award in 1937 for the novel *The Dark Weaver*. The second award came in 1939 for her autobiography, *Confessions of an Immigrant's Daughter*. In 1938 she won a gold medal from the Paris Institute of Arts and Sciences. In 1955 she received the Ryerson Fiction Award for her book, *The Immortal Rock*. She died in Toronto in 1970. Her most popular short story was "The greater gift", a Christmas tale, printed and reprinted in a host of periodicals and anthologies.

Little Magnús watched the weather closely. It appeared there might be a snowfall. It seemed as though the clouds kept coming closer and closer to the roof of the cottage, on the other side of the street, and he thought he might be able to reach his hand out and touch them if he could have been up on top of it.

Out in the street, he saw a hungry little dog whose snout hung down to the ground. He would poke his nose sullenly, as though he were looking for something, and he reminded Magnús that he himself was hungry.

Slowly, he turned and looked at his mother, who was busy ironing linen. She was rather short, but vivacious, and her hair curled over her forehead, which was wet with sweat, instead of laying flat. It is perhaps the gift of those people who need to show courage. Her face was flushed from the heat and she was very tired. A basket full of laundry rested on a chair right beside her, and she had to iron it all, because the merchant's wife needed to get her laundry that day.

"Mamma, I think I am a little hungry", said Magnús. His mother put down the iron, with her hand wiped the sweat from her brow and smiled.

"Isn't that good, my little lamb? Then you will be even more pleased to get your porridge, when it comes. If you will try to be good until I am finished ironing the jumper there, then we shall wake María and have our dinner."

"Mamma, is it true, that God loves little children?"

"Of course, my dear."

"And is it not Christmas now, Mamma?"

"We might say at home in our fatherland, that it begins at 12 o'clock tonight ... you shall see ... the stars

will glitter with more beauty than usual, because the angels will increase their brightness with joy."

"Mamma, Samuel told me that there would be a Christmas tree in the church tonight. May I go there?—A Christmas tree with many lights on it, he said. Oh Mamma, I have never seen a Christmas tree. It is not too terribly cold. Elsku Mamma, may I not go?" She hung the laundry with care over the back of a chair, put away the table and the iron, and went slowly to the little stove, which was in a corner of the house and stood there motionless for a while, maybe in order not to show her emotions.

Out of the next and only room which the house had, beside that which they were in, came a weak male voice, asking about the time.

"It is 12:30, Pétur", answered his wife.

"Mamma, may I not go?", asked Magnús.

"Don't you think you would be scared to go alone, my dear? I cannot go with you, because your father is so sick."

"No, no. Oh Mamma, this will be a real Christmas. And I will hear the song in the church and see the stars as well. Pabbi, pabbi, I want to see the Christmas tree in the church", he yelled out (breaking the silence) and ran to the bedroom door of his father. The father, looking pale and tired after a chronic illness, examined the boy before him, as he stood there at the bedroom door with a hopeful look on his face. He sighed and said:

"You'll freeze, Magnús, and become as ill as your father."

"No, I will run...and I'll hold my hands inside my parka arms and Mamma will put paper in my shoes, and then I will not be cold, if I run fast enough."

During the poor meal, his mother

tried to make many things clear to him, without being too explicit.

There may be gifts on the Christmas tree, Magnús minn, for the children who have healthy fathers. You must not be hurt, even though you get none.

But Magnús was thinking of something else. Hadn't one of his playmates told him of a wonderful person who gave little boys gifts at Christmas, that's to say, if they were good boys, and hadn't he always been a good boy, fetched both water and firewood for his mother, and carried the heavy laundry basket for her. Had he not always taken care of his sister María, when his Mamma was away from home, and hadn't his Mamma said to him that God loves little children. So there must also be something wonderful for him on the Christmas tree—the tree in God's

house—of this he was convinced and he also let God understand this in his prayers.

Right after 7 o'clock, Magnús went to wash up, because he wanted above all to have a clean face.

He washed his face and ears and was so very careful that he even asked his mother to check his ears, in order to see whether they were clean enough. He brushed his short hair very carefully. Then his mother dressed him in a clean shirt, brushed his old sweater and put paper in his shoes, which were getting small on him, then stood and looked at him with sorrow.

But little Magnús was restless and could not stay still for a moment. His gladness burst out in a song—a bright, joyful child's song. His father clenched his fists hard together in his dark room when he heard him singing like a bird in the early morning.

"Oh my Lord, fill the heart of some man with pity...my poor little boy, my poor little boy!"

When Magnús was ready to go, he went in to his father and bid him farewell with a kiss. He hugged his sister, little María, and squeezed her against him until she started to make a fuss. Then he ran with outstretched arms to his mother, who was smiling at him; she embraced him and kissed him, and said:

"Now, you be a good boy and remember that if your father was not so ill, then you would receive a gift as well. Try to be tough against the frost, and be a brave boy."

Then Magnús ran out, stoopingly, when he had gone some steps from the house, he turned around and waved to his mother joyfully.

"You shall see Mamma, that something will come of this trip, you just wait and see."

When he was gone, his mother sat down exhausted. Little María came

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over to her mother and tugged at her sweater arm, but she did not pay attention to her so the child began to cry and sat down in the other corner and started talking to the people on the other side of the wall.

"Wasn't that a mistake my dear, to let the boy go?" said Pétur in a weak and breathless voice.

"Of course", answered his wife, "but he could not have understood, nor ever forgotten it, if we had denied him something so little. Oh Pétur, and this is Christmas Eve!" So the conversation ended.

Little María quickly tired of talking with the imaginary people on the other side of the wall, and fell asleep in the corner, where she sat. Her mother took her in her arms and laid her in bed. Then she sat down, but she could not relax, because her heart was full of uneasiness and apprehension. She was continuously looking at the clock. She tried to knit, but that did not relax her. She cleaned the stove, and gathered together the papers, which little Maria had scattered about the floor.

Little Magnús ran all the way to the church. He gnashed his teeth together, and would not admit to himself that he was cold. The long street was white with snow and looked ghostly from the streetlights along it. Now and then, he met people in the street, or rather he rushed past them, without paying attention to them.

When he finally saw the grey stone church, which seemed to him to be enormous, all decorated with Christmas lights, his heart began beating in his chest. He saw the light shine through the red coloured window panes and he was enchanted by it. Up on the roof, he saw the cross; it looked like silver in the moonlight, and his pleasure over seeing this was so great, that the tears flowed from

his eyes involuntarily and his amazement was even greater, when he, cold and tired, had come in and sat in the corner in the last row of the church.

It was so difficult for him to get his bearings at first, after he came in. The warmth was so nice, the smell from the fir tree, which stood inside the church, and the humming of the people who were talking filled the air. He unbuttoned his coat with his fingers, which were nearly frozen from the cold and hung it with utmost care on the chairback behind him so that it would not be damaged.

Then he sat in the seat and watched and watched.

The church was decorated inside with green tree branches and wreaths and the lights flickered all about it. But the most wonderful of all in Magnús' eyes was the tree, which stood in front of the altar, big and tall and lights blinking all over. It was all

one wonderful dream. It was almost unbelievable, but all the same, true and real. Highest over the altar were the letters in gold and brightly spelling out: "Glory to God in the Highest." He was able to easily read the words. He had read this message at home with his mother so often. But now an indescribable energy came to him and the splendour enwrapped him in a warm glow of light. He did not hear much of the priest's sermon. But he wished that he dared to sing. The song was so beautiful and when the white clad group of children came forward and marched down the aisle of the church and sang "Oh, Little Child of Bethlehem", then tears came to his eyes.

While this took place, Magnús sat still in his seat and did not show any feelings. A tall, thin woman had sat down in the seat next to him, and a merry, flushed man sat on the other

side. They looked at him out of the corners of their eyes at first, but then ignored him.

When the service and the proceedings were over, a tall man with a smile on his lips began calling out names, and each time that he called out a name, a child got up and went to him, and came back from the man and the tree, smiling, with a present in his arms. When the children went by him with their presents, Magnús longed to congratulate them, and perhaps see what was in the parcels, but he did not move. The man carried on reading out the names. Magnús thought it was strange how long the man was at it, and it seemed to him that they had taken from the tree all the parcels which had decorated it before.


It was as if, all of a sudden, he awoke from a dream. The man had stopped reading out the names. The



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children had stopped running up the aisle. Then the congregation all stood and sang out loud, and not particularly well, and then they began to go out of the church.

The tall, thin woman who had sat in the row with Magnús wrapped herself in a fur coat, lifted the fur collar up so it reached up over her ears. The little rosy man put on his overshoes, and seemed to be working very hard at it. But little Magnús, shocked, sat there like a stone...this was God's house and he had been a good boy ... and still God had forgotten him. He bit his lips, reached for his coat, somehow wrapped it round him and sauntered out of the church. As the evening passed, Magnús' mother became more and more uneasy. She could not stay still. She stood up and went to the food pantry. There was not much in it aside from a little flour with which she intended to bake a few pönnukökur, although there were no eggs to improve them. She was becoming used to making pönnukökur without eggs in them, and they were not bad.

When she had finished making pönnukökur, she rolled them together, cut them in pieces and set them up tastefully on a dish. Out of an old trunk she took the old white tablecloth, and laid it on the table. Then she fetched an oil lamp and placed on the table too. Again she went looking in the trunk, without being really sure what she was looking for, and luckily she found a little white candle and put it near the dish on the table. Then she sat down and listened for Magnús' footsteps. When it was nearly 10 o'clock, she was beginning to become very anxious. She went to the door and looked out. It had started to snow and wind blew the snowflakes around. She could hardly breathe when she went out of

the house and out into the street. There came Magnús towards her and fought his way forward through the snowstorm, crying. When he came to his mother, he was starting to drop down.

"Mamma! Oh, Mamma! ... and I tried to be so good!" She clutched him into her arms and carried him into the house and sat with him in her lap on the chair near the stove, and took his shoes off, and his snowsuit without saying one word to him, letting him cry unceasingly.

When she had removed his shoes and snowgear and wrapped him in a warm shawl, she put her hands about the boy's face, looking at him smilingly and said: "So you got the best gift of them all, my dear".

He looked with big eyes at his mother and fought to hold the tears back. Magnús was a child with a rich imagination. Maybe the Christmas gift had been sent to his home. How could he possibly have been so stupid not to think of this.

"What is it, Mamma?" His mother squeezed him tightly to her and adjusted herself in the chair, to let his feet warm up from the stove.

"You have heard the story of the little child, Jesus. You remember, that when he came into the world, there was a bed for him in no other place than the barn."

"Yes, Mamma."

"And, think about the noble Mary, the mother of Jesus: she was grieving and shed tears ... because this place was not chosen for her child. You remember, the King would have taken Jesus' life if he could, and Jesus' parents had to flee with the child; it was most sorrowful, Magnús minn".

"And the good times Jesus had may have been few in Galilee...You remember about the sad times, which came later?...You remember him,

when he was alone in the garden, in the darkness of night?...When he stood before Pilate, and you remember about the cross?"

"Yes, Mamma."

Little Magnús was becoming tearful at the thought of Jesus' treatment.

"Christmas is above all a time of remembrance and joy. You know, my little boy, that Jesus Christ comes to earth each and every Christmas in the likeness of a child as he once was...and he comes to the child who is the most deserving to receive him that year. While he is with the child, the shadow of the cross is placed over him anew, just like when he lay in the manger, and it also falls over the child whom he has chosen—that is the true Christmas gift, The grace of God."

"Oh, Mamma!" said little Magnús, and there was wonder shimmering in his eyes. His mother tried to hide her feelings, adjusted the shawl, which she had wrapped him in, and squeezed him tighter to her and smiled tenderly to him.

"This is the gift which you received, my little Magnús."

"But, Mamma?"

"Did anyone pay attention to you in the church? Did anyone there see you? Did anyone there talk with you, or try to delay you?"

"No, Mamma. But?"

"Well, now don't you understand this? It couldn't be any other way, it is impossible. These people didn't see you. Their own concerns make them unaware of your presence. It is always so with the children of the cross, they do not travel with the crowd. They accompany their master. A fleeting moment of entertainment is of no value to them. The stars are their companions and the angels their guides. Smile again, my love. Are you not pleased to find grace in the eyes of the Lord?"

"Oh, Mamma!" said Magnús and wrapped his arms around his mother's neck and kissed her affectionately. "Oh, it is so beautiful, so sweet! But how did you know this?"

His mother smiled happily, it was as though a stone had been lifted from her chest. She stood up on her feet, carried Magnús to the table and sat him there in a chair.

"Perhaps it was whispered to me", she said. "But now look, here is a little something to cheer us up." She poured coffee and milk in the cups which were on the table, and then sat down with him.

When Magnús saw the candle with the red ribbon next to his plate, he clapped his hands together with gladness. "Oh, let's light it Mamma, so that we can look at it while we are eating."

"No, my dear, we shall light it when you go to bed, and let it burn beside your bed while you are sleeping. It is a Christmas candle just like the candles which children lit in my dear fatherland, and so you will dream, my little Chosen one."

After Magnús was gone to bed he lay awake and watched the light from the candle for a while. Then he called his mother. She came to his bed, tired, but with a look of pleasure on her face, leaned over him, and he wrapped his arms around her neck.

"Mamma", he whispered. "Do you think that this might have saddened him? That I had been crying, because I did not understand."

"No, my dear boy. I think that he understands everything that takes place."

Magnús looked seriously at his mother for a short time and then said: "I wonder whether, when you were little, the shadow had also fallen over you, and this is why you understand it so well."

# In the Red River Valley

*(continued from the Spring Issue, 1990)*

by Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason

*Translated by Thelma Guðrún Whale*

## Book I Chapter VII The Letter

*Fort Garry on the Red in Canada  
On Catherine's Mass, Nov. 25, 1869*

**M**y dear sister!

The last time I wrote to you I was in Marseilles, France. It was, as I remember, late in the last month of winter, 1859. It could be that my letter never reached you and, no doubt, you have long counted me among the departed. After such a long silence, you will be very surprised to get a letter from me from the wilds of North America. The main reason I have not written for so long is

that I have never given myself time to do so, having all my life had an unwillingness to take my pen in hand. I seldom found time for such a task, having spent most of my life sailing the oceans of the world. Also, in later years, I have felt badly that I am so poor in Icelandic that I hardly dare to write one short letter in that language. However, I hope that no one will blame me though I have become rusty in it, as I have not talked to a countryman for a full twenty-five years nor seen

any Icelandic book all this time except St. John's Gospel, which I have often read for my consolation and uplift and never allowed to leave me, but preserved like a holy relic. — I can tell you truly, my dear sister, that I have many times landed in great dangers and adversities in the last years and I would repeatedly have despaired and fallen overboard, had not the power of a true belief supported me and given me strength and vigour. The longer I live, the more I am convinced that a belief in God is to each man, and not least to a sailor, altogether as necessary as the clean air he breathes. I have never yet met a sailor who has not been a strong believer in God. I could write much about that if circumstances permitted.

But, my dear sister, I must now speak of my latest voyage and let you know why I am here, many hundreds of miles away from the sea. This will doubtless be my last letter to you, because my career has come to an end. My health is such that I cannot expect to live through this winter. You must not think I dread death, though I would gladly live a little longer in order to complete the task I promised to do for one of my noble brothers, who is now dead in the Lord. But because I am not able to keep that promise, I decided to write to you, while my strength and judgment allow, in the hope that you and your children can finish what I must leave undone.

I shall begin by telling you that when I came from Australia to that huge place, New York, in the year 1866, I became acquainted with an honest, honourable seaman, named William Trent, whose friendship and confidence I finally obtained. We sailed together for close to three years and he always showed himself to be a

loving brother. I cannot keep the tears back when I remember his sad fate. I have never known such a virtuous man, except for my dear father. This honest man, William Trent, did not, however, escape the censure of the world because dishonest men said he had Mammon for his god, which, however, was far from the truth. It was true that he was most cautious with regard to money and did not squander unnecessarily what he had gained through sour sweat, but one cannot call that reprehensible. He had never married and when I met him, had no one to look after because his good parents were long dead. But to his brother, Henry, who is still living, as far as I know, he often gave large gifts of money, for Henry was a poor man, although he was respectable and intelligent in many respects. His full name is Henry Arthur Samuel Trent and he lives at No. 843 Oak St. in Brooklyn. Later in this letter I will refer to him more fully.

Now I will tell you how I and the afore-mentioned William Trent signed on as seamen on a large three-masted vessel which shipped goods between England and various ports in America. That was the fall of 1866. This ship was named the Galahad for one of the brave and honourable knights who lived during the time of the celebrated King Arthur. The ship's captain was Jeremias Gale, a man of about sixty, an ordinary gentleman, particular in his habits and well-versed in all the duties of a captain. I loved him like a father, as he deserved.

The first two years I was on this fine vessel, there were no serious accidents and I felt well during this time. But last summer, I suffered great trouble and danger. In August we set sail from the port of London, England, towards York Factory, which

is situated on the lower Nelson River in Canada. At first the winds were gentle and favourable. But when we entered the bay called Hudson, we encountered such strong head winds and high seas that everything on our good ship was in disarray. One day, when the weather was at its worst, my good friend, William Trent, landed under a heavy cask which was rolling about on the deck and that honest man was so badly hurt internally that he died within a few hours, retaining full consciousness right up to the end. Shortly before he expired, he asked me to take all his money and deliver it to his brother (Henry A. S. Trent) or to his heirs, if Henry were dead, when I returned to Brooklyn. I swore a solemn oath to do as he asked if I lived through the danger which was threatening us. He showed me his pocket-book which contained twenty banknotes of five hundred dollars each and some English gold coins which would come to about one hundred and fifty American dollars. It was a habit of his, strange for such an intelligent man, never to put his money in a bank, but rather to carry it with him wherever he went. So secretive had he been, that even his closest friends had no knowledge of it until his dying day, when I found out about it. With sore anxiety, I took this money into my custody, knowing how dangerous it was to carry so much money with me on a long voyage. I have carried the bank notes on my person in a belt which I have never taken off.

I do not wish to describe the many disasters which befell me during my last days on the Galahad, but will only say that in the end, the good ship finally struck shoals about fifty English miles north of the Nelson River and went down with the whole crew of seventeen men, except for myself and

two others, the helmsman and one sailor, Daniel Wilde, who by God's mercy reached land. After many hardships, we arrived at York Factory four days after the ship went down. There some kind people nursed us as best they could. Shortly after our arrival, the helmsman died. I was full of grief, especially for his six young children and his poor widow in New York.

Now Daniel Wilde and I were the only survivors of all the crew. And because we knew there would be no ship coming to York Factory for almost nine months, we decided to start west on foot to Norway House which is at the north end of the great lake called Winnipeg, about three hundred miles from the ocean. We thought we could get by ship from Norway House to Fort Garry in the Red River Valley, and from there south to St. Paul in the United States, then east to New

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York. We set off from York Factory on the tenth of September accompanied by one white man and four Indians who were employees of the trading company named after Hudson Bay. Our trip to Lake Winnipeg was difficult and on the way, I felt the first symptoms of that virulent disease which has steadily worsened and is called "Bright's Disease" in English. We stayed a short time at Norway House, then went south on Lake Winnipeg in a sailboat and up the Red River to Fort Garry. It is a small town, or rather, a tiny fort with a few houses around it.

We arrived here at Fort Garry on the fifteenth of October. By then, I was very ill. I was very swollen about my feet and ankles and face. I could go no further as navigation on the Red River was about to stop because of the weather. I settled in an inn not far from the fort and here I have lived since, suffering severely in mind and body. I have received good care and everyone has been very helpful except my poor fellow-traveller and workmate, Daniel Wilde, who constantly tries to irritate and annoy me in many ways; but his stupidity and frivolity are more to blame than wickedness. Among the many who have shown me friendship and given me a helping hand, I want to make special mention of an honest and God-loving woman of Cree Indian descent on her mother's side, her name being Madeleine Vanda. Her father is European, either

French or Swiss, and he lives about two English miles north-east of the fort. Madeleine herself is at present a maid here in this inn. She is still unmarried and was twenty-two years old this last October, according to what she tells me. She has shown me sisterly care in my sickness and brought it about that an old and wise Indian doctor has visited me several times. I owe this virtuous woman much and I have a deeper respect for her than for any other person I have met here. And although she is rather dark-skinned, nevertheless there shines from her a loving friendliness. I ask you, sister, to fix her name in your memory and remember her in your prayers.

And now I come to the main part of this letter. I have for many days past felt great anxiety because I cannot deliver the money which my good friend, William Trent, entrusted me with. I know for certain that I will not succeed in getting to Brooklyn to meet his brother, Henry Trent. As I have mentioned, I had to remain here because of illness and now feel that my life is coming to an end, and I will not likely be among the living next summer. And what will then happen to the money which I have in my keeping? You, my sister, would have said that I could have sent all the banknotes in a sealed letter to Henry Trent, or else asked Daniel Wilde to deliver it, or thirdly, given it into Madeleine Vanda's hands to send east. And at first glance it appears that one of these three alternatives might have sufficed. But there is one drawback to each of them. First and foremost, here in the Red River Valley, there are bad men and the Metis and the whites have taken up arms against one another. This place is now in the hands of the rebels whose cause, in my view, is not just. And because I have heard





A View of Winnipeg in 1872

that among the rebels there are several wicked men, then I dare not send William Trent's banknotes in a letter for fear that it may get into their hands and the contents be taken by them as booty. On the other hand, with regard to Daniel Wilde. I do not trust him to deliver such a large sum of money, knowing he is a careless, fickle minded person, given much to drunkenness and temptation. As soon as he got the money he would tell everyone he met about it and then many snares would be laid for him. Therefore, although he would not be dishonest with the money, others would take it from him. And in the third and last place, regarding Madeleine Vanda, I would not put this in her hands even though I know no one is more honest than she. In order to bring the money east she would, of course, have to have the help of others and it could happen that she might choose men who were not as good as they should be. This honest woman thinks ill of no man and does not see the many and varied tricks of the world's children.

After having thought carefully about this matter for many days, I

came to the conclusion that my only course would be to bury the money. And one dark night, shortly before the first snowfall, I put all the banknotes, along with my own bank book, in a small tin and buried it three feet under at a place I will later describe. And I fixed it so that no sign of the work could be seen. Now it is my heart's desire, my dearest sister, that if you have a son, you will tell him this secret and send him, if he is old enough, west over the sea to meet the aforementioned Henry A. S. Trent who lives at 843 Oak Street in Brooklyn in the United States. Your son, who must know English before he leaves Iceland, will tell Henry Trent how the matter stands and translate my letter for him. Then they must undertake to travel west to the Red River Valley. When they arrive at Fort Garry, they must look up Madeleine Vanda who, I hope, will still be alive if this happens within a few years. They will ask her to direct them to the inn where I lived. She will remember "Berg, the castaway," for that is the name I am using here. And when they have found the house, they will see, standing about thirty-two fathoms north-west of it, a

huge oak tree. . . . The tin is buried five yards east in a straight line from this tree. It is sixteen yards east from there to where the grass first begins to grow on the river bank. There is a small break in the bank and directly opposite, on the other side of the river, stands an old log house in a small poplar grove. I did not bury the tin under the roots of the oak tree because I was afraid that it would come to light if a big wind uprooted the oak.

If this oak tree has disappeared when your son and Henry Trent get to these parts, then they must walk thirty-two fathoms, or sixty-four English yards, north-west in a straight line from the middle of the north gable of the house. They must then turn east and head straight towards the log house that sits on the other side of the river. Then, when they have gone five yards in that direction, they must stop and dig down three feet. Before they begin to dig, they must be sure they are sixteen yards from the first grass on the river bank. They must bear in mind that the small gully or break in the bank should be in a direct line between them and the log house so the house is midway between east and north-east from them. If they bear all this in mind and do not deviate from it in any way, they will not fail to reach the hidden treasure by digging down three feet at the spot I have designated.

As I have earlier stated, the tin contains twenty banknotes of five hundred dollars each, which my good friend William Trent asked me to look after, and my bank book which shows I have, in a reliable bank in New York, twenty-six hundred American dollars, which is fifty-two hundred Danish dollars. The name of the bank is in the book. I don't have to tell you that Henry Trent or his heirs are to receive

the banknotes. As to my own money, I want it disposed of as follows:

First and foremost, one hundred and fifty dollars is to be paid to Henry Trent, or his heirs, to replace the gold coins, earlier mentioned, given to me by William Trent. I had spent all my silver and knew I would be forgiven if I used them for my own needs.

Next, I want two hundred dollars of my money to go to that honest woman, Madeleine Vanda, as a small recompense for the sisterly care she has shown me. But the twenty-two hundred and fifty which are left, I give to your son, or whomever you send here to search for the money. He must see to it that my arrangements are carried out to the letter. I have written in my bank book in English that he who brings the book to the cashier of the bank may take all my money because he is my rightful heir, and signed my full name. I make the arrangement being sound of mind and body and of my own free will and without having asked for advice from anyone. And this is my last will and testament.

I have just one thing to add regarding this matter; if Henry Trent has died before your son comes to Brooklyn, then he must find the widow and children, or other close relatives, and tell them the truth about all this.

Of this I am certain; your son will like this country and he may settle here in the Red River Valley. Since I came here, I have often wished that all Icelanders were settled here, because the soil is fertile, much better than in Iceland, the winds favourable and the land largely unsettled by white men. Here all lakes are full of fish; there are elk in the bush and bison on the great prairie to the west. Icelanders would prosper in this country, for here one can equally pursue hunting, fishing, cattle raising and agriculture. The small group

of immigrants who came to this valley around the turn of the century, sponsored by that friend of man, the Scottish Lord Selkirk, has grown and prospered in later years.

I am not going to make this any longer, my dearest sister. But I trust you to consider with close attention what I have written. And I ask you to show no one my letter, nor let anyone in Iceland know its contents, except for your son, or whatever man you decide to send west.

In closing, I say farewell to you, my

dearest sister and I kiss you in spirit a brotherly, loving kiss, wishing you and yours God's guidance throughout life and for eternity. Thus speaks sincerely, with death in his heart.

Your loving brother,  
Hálfdan Arnórsson Berg

P.S. — I am enclosing a small strip of elk skin on which is written the name of the honest Madeleine Vanda and the marks after the name mean that her home is two miles north-east of the fort at Fort Garry. — H. A. B.

## Chapter VIII

### The Writing on the Wall

This was the letter which Arnór's mother received from her brother in the spring of 1870. I thought the contents very important and I believed every word of it. It seemed somewhat romantic but clearly showed Hálfdan to be honest and truthful. Still, I realized immediately that there was something missing which almost made me doubt that Hálfdan had been in his right mind when he wrote it. And there I was in agreement with Mrs. Colthart.

"I can see that you don't believe everything in the letter," said Arnór when I gave him back the letter and the diary.

"I think the letter is remarkable," I said, "and I believe your uncle has told the truth. But I am afraid he was a little confused when he wrote it."

"No, he was of sound mind," said Arnór. "But on the other hand, his friend William Trent was more than a little crazy."

"Why do you think that?"

"Because he carried all that money on his person wherever he went."

"He was just an eccentric miser," I said. "But your uncle, as he says himself, was sick in soul and body when he wrote the letter, for he has forgotten to name the inn where he lived. He does not describe it at all and does not mention the innkeeper by name. And this was of the greatest importance. Had he done that, you would have found the treasure long ago. All his thoughts were centred on Madeleine Vanda. He has obviously been sure she would still be alive when you came west. I don't think that shows a healthy mind."

"That he did not name the inn or the innkeeper," said Arnór, "was done so that I would be forced to search for Madeleine Vanda, and she would have a better chance of getting the two hundred dollars bequeathed to her in the letter. He knew she was young and healthy and expected she would still be alive when I came west, for he

thought it would not be long before someone was sent to fetch the money."

"You could be right," I said, "but have you at all inquired about the number of inns there were in Winnipeg in the year 1869?"

"Yes, I have," said Arnór. "There were four or five, for sure; three of them stood on the banks of the Red River and one of them was the house we are now living in. It was then called The Buffalo."

"Perhaps your uncle lived in this very house and wrote the letter by that window there."

"No here he was not," said Arnór ruefully, "because here there is no tree nearby, and no old house on the opposite bank. I have researched all this carefully many times. No, unfortunately, he has not been in this house."

We talked no more about it at that time.

A week later, Arnór and I went over to St. Boniface to find the woman who had told me that Madeleine Vanda was her sister. But when we came to where she had been living in the summer, she had moved away a few days before and no one could tell us where she had gone. Some said she must have moved west but others thought she had gone north to Lake Winnipeg with a group of Indians who had recently gone there. In that group had been the chieftain whom Arnór had intended to meet on August 25th, as he mentions in his diary.

It seemed that everything was working against Arnór in the search for Madeleine Vanda. He began to think he would never succeed in finding her. He resolved to halt the search completely. And he gradually began to realize how great a blunder Hálfdan had made by failing to describe the inn or give the name of the innkeeper.

However, his interest in this matter was rekindled by an incident which gave him new hope. One evening, shortly after we had gone over to St. Boniface, old O'Brian came to our room and asked to talk to us for a short while. He looked rather self-important. He sat down on Arnór's trunk, chin in hand, sighed heavily, talked of one thing and another for a time and now and again threw in a joke. Then, all at once, he stared right into my face and said, "Son, do you remember me telling you the other day that I have been very alarmed because of the strange letters I saw on the wall in my room?"

"I remember," I said, "that you said something about some writing you had seen on the wall. But I thought you were joking."

"No, I was not," said O'Brian. "Although we Irish sometimes play pranks and make fools laugh, still we bear at all times a great reverence for the hand that writes mysterious characters on the wall. Humour and reverence do not belong together, even among the Irish."

"This is all very fine," I said. "But what kind of writing was on the wall in your room? And who wrote it?"

"About the writing itself I must say, with a red face, that I don't understand one word of it. It could be Latin, Greek, Hebrew or even Icelandic, but I don't understand it. As I have said, I did not see the hand that wrote it and therefore haven't the slightest idea who is the author. It could well have been one of the spirits serving the great Solomon or even an Ice-lander." And the old man scratched under his chin with his left thumb, frowned slightly and gazed up at the ceiling.

"Stop this," I said. "Stop all your Irish drollery and tell us point-blank what it was that you saw on the wall

in your room, if there really was anything."

Old O'Brian became serious for a moment and even a little grim and gazed at me for a moment as if he saw something very strange about me.

"You too, my son!" he said. "No, I am not quoting any Irish witticism. They are very seldom used on children. But before I say any more about the writing on the wall, I want to lay one short question before you, my friend." O'Brian looked at Arnór. "It is this: Have you at any time lived in the room that is now my bedroom?"

"No," said Arnór, looking fixedly at O'Brian. "You moved here before I did. I don't ever remember having set foot in the rooms you now have at your disposal."

"What you say is right," said O'Brian. "Now the old Irish proverb proves true: 'Many a man asks about much that he already knows'. Tell me truly if you know anyone here who goes by the same name as you."

"No one," said Arnór, reddening. "Then, upon my word, this is very strange," said O'Brian, thoughtfully.

"Oh, don't drag this out any longer," I said. "Don't you see we are burning with curiosity?"

"Well then," said O'Brian. "My story is this: My bedroom is quite small and has one window, which looks west to the sunset. This window has needed repairs since I moved into the room; the panes were loose and the sill broken. There is a draught and a constant rattle when the wind is from the west. The gusts of wind have a special way of wailing and shrieking and whistling through every single hole and have kept me awake at night. One morning I took it upon myself to repair the window. I found a note which had been placed under the window cas-

ing. At first I thought it was a bank note, and I began to think I had stumbled on some fool's hidden treasure. But it was otherwise. It was only a piece of brown paper on which were written some words I did not understand. I would doubtless have flung the paper through the window had I not noticed, all at once, that the last letters on the paper showed a name which I knew well. "

"And that was — ?" I said.

"It was the name Arnór Berg! "

"Arnór Berg!" I repeated, glancing at Arnór, whose face was now blood-red. "That is impossible! "

"Yes, that is absolutely impossible," said O' Brian. "Absolutely impossible that you, my friend, slipped this note under the window casing in my bedroom, since you have never lived there. I am absolutely sure that this note was put there long before I moved into the crooked house, for it has become so worn and faded with age that it is almost impossible to make out some of the letters."

"Let us see the note," I said. "Who knows but what it may be in Icelandic."

"Gladly," said O'Brian. He took the folded paper out of his jacket pocket and handed it to me. "Now read the writing on the wall, like Daniel of old."

I took the paper and examined it minutely. It was about five inches long and four and a half inches wide, had once been white but now was yellowed and worn. On it were seven lines, written in pencil, but the handwriting was so faded that it was impossible to decipher some of the letters, especially the middle of the top lines. Still it was in some way possible to guess at the contents because what was legible

went this way:

Here I was .....than alive  
the night of .....ber  
when that good .....horse burned.  
I am than .....people who  
gave me a .....and especially  
that honest .....Madeleine  
dan Arnórsson Berg

That is all it was possible to read and here it is exactly as it was in the note.

I now handed the sheet to Arnór. He read aloud what it was possible to read and he read it again and again. I also read it many times. We turned the paper before us in different ways, spelled the words, read the lines backwards and tried in every way to fill in the blanks. And O'Brian sat calm and silent with a knowing air, frowning occasionally and scratching himself under his chin.

There was no doubt that Hálfðan, Arnór's uncle, had written these lines, for the handwriting was the same as in the letter he had written to his sister. But nowhere in the note could be seen when it had been written. It has probably been shortly after the new year of 1869-70. Hálfðan had moved into the crooked house, either late in November or some time in December of 1869 when the inn where he had been living burned down. No doubt that inn had been named after a horse — perhaps "The White Horse" or "The Big Horse" or something like that. And perhaps the contents of the note were thus: "Here I was moved, more dead than alive, the night of the first or second of the month of December, when that good inn, "The White Horse" burned. I am thankful to the good people who gave me a helping hand, and

especially that honest woman Madeleine. - Hálfðan Arnórsson Berg."

"Yes, my uncle wrote this," said Arnór in English, folding the note and returning it to O'Brian.

"Your uncle?" said O'Brian, more than a little surprised. "Has that unfortunate rascal used my bedroom as an office to write his love letters? Is it not, after all, a holier hand than his that has written on the wall? Be so good as to translate these mysterious runic characters. Perhaps it is a bitter love letter to my wife, Nora." And O'Brian scratched himself violently under the chin with his left thumb and gazed upward as he spoke.

"I shall tell you how it is, Mr. O'Brian," said Arnór.

"Yes, do that, my friend," said O'Brian, "and you will never regret it."

Arnór told him the story in a few words and even let him know the main content of the letter. Old O'Brian listened with great attention.

"Your uncle was neither a fool nor an imbecile," he said when Arnór had told him about the letter. "But he was not Irish because otherwise, he would have named the inn and the innkeeper."

We discussed this back and forth for quite a while and we all agreed that Hálfðan's treasure could not be buried near the crooked house even though all indications were that he had lived there during the last days of his life.

For the next two or three nights, we carefully searched northwest of the crooked house. But all those efforts were completely useless. There was no sign that an oak tree had stood nearby, or that there had

been a log house on the opposite bank.

"No, you must first find Madeleine Vanda, my friend," said O'Brian, "for she is truly the Alpha and Omega of this strange secret."

But Madeleine Vanda was nowhere to be found, however Arnór searched. And as the fall approached, he seemed to have stopped thinking about the matter. But he often sat talking with O'Brian.

After the New Year, Arnór packed his things and left for St. Paul, Minnesota. He said he was going to stay for a while with an Icelander he knew there.

Edna Trent left Winnipeg about the same time. When I asked Mrs. Colthart about it, she appeared not to know where Edna had gone.

And so time passed.

*End of Book 1*



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## POET'S CORNER

### Song of Love

*by Kristiana Magnusson*

Ingibjörg Magnúsdóttir,

there she sits

at her spinning wheel,

deftly winding

her bobbin of silken yarn,

spinning dreams of long ago;

of lovers locked in deep embrace

weaving, on wings of peace and joy

their magic dreams of love,

promising each other heaven on earth

in this motherland so dear

with its snow-capped mountains

and crystal-clear rivers,

its thundering waterfalls

and foam-spouting geysers.

Ingibjörg Magnúsdóttir,

there she sits

as the treadle whirls

and gently hums

its old familiar

song of love.



## Cradle Song

*Translated by Árný Hjaltadóttir*

Yes, I have loved before, but never thus so dearly.  
I know not weather changes — and I am never weary.  
Yes, I have loved before, but never thus so dearly.

Whenever I see him sleeping in a happy peaceful state,  
then I choose a lifetime, to look upon that grace.  
— And the workaday ghosts, I would like to drive away.

But again, as he awakens, and his dark and clear eyes,  
bless all far and near, in trust and affection smiles.  
Then I pray that they will shine while my heart still  
beats.

And if he entwines his arms with affection around my  
neck,  
and his soft cheek warms mine, — then my soul  
awakens free  
to sing of love and happiness — although often muted  
be.

And if he utters: Mamma, then I can remember not a  
thing,  
no, nothing ails me then, I am not at all weary.  
Yes, I have loved before, but never thus so dearly.

### Jakobína Johnson

Jakobína Johnson, poet and translator, was born at Hólmavað in Suður-Pingeyjarsýsla, in northern Iceland, in 1883, the daughter of poet Sigurbjörn Jóhannsson. She emigrated with her family to Canada in 1889, settling in the Argyle district in Manitoba. Following her graduation from the Winnipeg Normal School, she taught school in Manitoba for some years. After her marriage to Ísak Jónsson, brother of poets Gísli and Einar Páll, she moved to Seattle, Washington where she resided for the remainder of her life. The mother of seven children, with the accompanying household responsibilities, she still found time to write. A selection of her poems was published in *Kertaljós* (Candle light) in 1939. "Vögguljóð", a poem instinct with mother love and mother joy, is one of the poems in that collection.

## Vögguljóð

*Eftir Jakobínu Johnson*

Jú, ég hefi áður unnað, en aldrei  
svona heitt.  
Ég veit ei veðrabrigði — og verð ei  
framar þreytt.  
Jú, ég hefi áður unnað, en aldrei  
svona heitt.

Því ef ég sé hann sofa, með sælufrið  
um brá,  
þá kýs ég alla æfi þann yndisleik að  
sjá.  
— Og vofum virkileikans ég vildi  
bæga frá.

En aftur, ef hann vakir, og augun,  
dökk og skær,  
með brosi trausts og bliðu allt blessa  
fjær og nær,  
þá langar mig þau lýsi eins lengi og  
hjartað slær.

Og ef hann leggur arma með ástúð  
mér um háls,  
og mjúkur vangur vermir, — þá  
vaknar sál mín frjáls  
að syngja um ást og yndi — þó oft sé  
varnað máls.

Og ef hann mælir: Mamma, — þá  
man ég ekki neitt,  
nei, ekkert, sem mér amar, ég er ei  
vitund þreytt.  
Jú, ég hefi áður unnað, en aldrei  
svona heitt.



**Jakobína Johnson**

*Photo courtesy The Icelandic Collection,  
University of Manitoba*

## BOOK REVIEW

Elva Simundsson

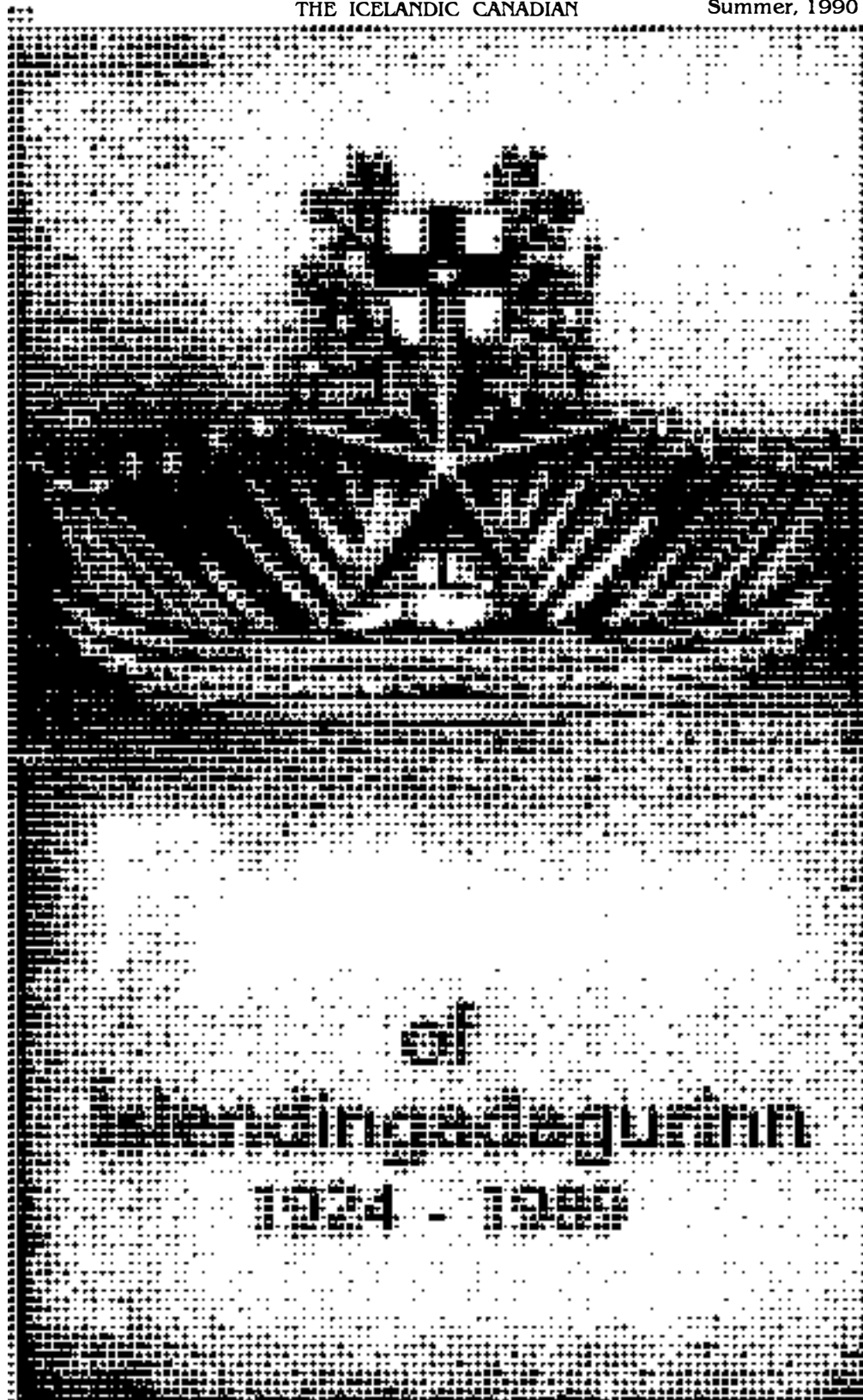
# Fjallkonas of Íslendingadagurinn: 1924 - 1989: 66 years of tradition

Centennial souvenir edition  
Winnipeg: Icelandic National League,  
1989. Unpaged.

In 1964 Íslendingadagurinn (the Icelandic Festival) published a booklet entitled *Fjallkonan í Winnipeg og að Gimli 1924 - 1964*. This booklet, written in Icelandic, chronicled forty years of the fjallkona (Maid of the Mountain) tradition at the annual celebration of Íslendingadagurinn. The booklet consisted of two sections: (i) a two page overview of the origin and history of the tradition and (ii) an album of full page photographs of each of the forty women who had been awarded the honour complete with brief genealogical notes on each woman.

In 1989 the Icelandic National

League issued a booklet entitled *Fjallkonas of Íslendingadagurinn: 1924-1989*. Although no reference is made to the earlier publication, the statement "Centennial Souvenir Edition" on the title page indicates that this is not a "first". It is an expanded, updated, English language version of the 1964 publication. In her preface, author of the text, Elva Simundsson, explains that the League chose to commemorate the Centennial of Íslendingadagurinn with the publication of this booklet in honour of the Festival's fjallkonas. 1989 not only marked the Centennial of Íslendingadagurinn, but also the



sixty-sixth annual occasion that the Festival chose to honour the heritage of Icelandic Canadians in the form of the fjallkona.

The present edition, like the earlier version, consists of text and photograph album. Simundsson has translated and incorporated much information from the account of the origin and history of the fjallkona tradition contained in the 1964 publication. However, her considerable research into the subject has resulted in a text that has been expanded to eight pages. The text is divided into three sections: (i) the origins of the tradition, (ii) the fjallkona of Íslendingadagurinn and (iii) the attire and customs of the fjallkona.

The tradition of representing the Icelandic heritage in the image of a woman is well established in Icelandic history. In the section dealing with the origins of the tradition, Simundsson reveals that the first description of the Icelandic nation personified as the fjallkona is found in a poem written by Eggert Ólafsson, an expatriated Icelandic living in Denmark, and published in 1832. The poem describes the dress and adornments of a woman named Ísafold, who represented the nation of Iceland. One of the earliest drawings of the image of Ísafold was published in 1866 in a book of Icelandic folktales and symbols translated into English and printed in Berlin. The sketch was by the German artist Zwecker and drawn according to publisher Eiríkur Magnússon's directions. Magnússon had based his visual interpretation of Ísafold on the image found in Ólafsson's poem. The picture of Ísafold was described and drawn by countless poets and artists throughout the years, but it was not until 1924 that the picture came to life. The occasions were the celebration of

Íslendingadagurinn in Winnipeg, Manitoba and Blaine, Washington. Both communities introduced the fjallkona at their festivities that year.

Several years after the introduction of the fjallkona at Íslendingadagurinn in North America, she was introduced to Iceland by North Americans of Icelandic descent and her presence has since become a regular feature of the National Independence Day celebrations in Reykjavik. The occasion was a 1939 gathering of North American Icelanders at Þingvellir, the site of Iceland's first parliament. The event was organized by Sigfús Halldórsson who had spent several years living in Winnipeg while he edited the newspaper *Heimskringla*.

The section of text which examines the fjallkona of Íslendingadagurinn details how, in Manitoba, the fjallkona tradition was originally introduced to boost attendance at the annual celebration. The first fjallkona was the winner of a popularity contest! Fortunately, the custom of choosing the fjallkona by popular vote was not retained for long. The present day practice, whereby the Icelandic Festival committee chooses a fjallkona on the basis of merit — their demonstrated commitment to the Icelandic heritage through work in the community and their service in the promotion and preservation of the heritage and culture the fjallkona represents — has been the preferred method of selection throughout the years.

The final section of text describes the costume worn by the first fjallkona of Íslendingadagurinn, Sigrún Lindal. It was, according to Simundsson, "a costume which has since become uniquely associated with the female figure who represents the motherhood of Icelandic Canadians". Sigrún

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1924

Sigrún Lindal

Lindal wore a kyrtilbúningur or shift dress, light green in colour, with matching stockings and a cloak in a darker green with a fur border. The crown she wore featured a centre star standing above a rising sun, with the Icelandic national coat of arms in the background. The attire symbolized the beauty of the landscape and the richness of the culture of Iceland. Although her costume was not identical to that of her successors, the basic style of dress has remained the same from one fjallkona to the next. The image created by Eggert Ólafsson has not changed. It is unfortunate, therefore, that the stanza of Ólafsson's poem that depicts Ísafold, which appears in the 1964 booklet, was not translated and included in the 1989 publication.

As the text of the 1964 edition has been expanded in the present edition, so has the section containing the photographs of the fjallkonas. The photographs included in the 1964 booklet have been augmented with photographs of the fjallkonas from 1965 to 1989. And, once again, accompanying the photographs is a brief genealogical

note on each of the women.

In publishing the present booklet, the Icelandic National League and Elva Simundsson have taken a giant step in both preserving and making accessible to present and future generations of Icelandic Canadians a significant episode in the story of Icelandic settlement in North America. It is disappointing therefore that the League chose the "souvenir booklet" format as opposed to a publication in the "coffee table book" vein. A larger and hard-cover format, using original photographs as opposed to reproducing the photographs from the 1964 edition, and a complete biographical sketch of each woman detailing why she was awarded the distinction of being named fjallkona would have gone a long way to making this a truly authoritative reference work. But perhaps the opportunity to accomplish just that has not come and gone what with the seventy-fifth anniversary of the fjallkona tradition at Íslendingadagurinn to be celebrated in 1998!

*Reviewed by: Sigríd Johnson*



## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS:

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### Árný Hjaltadóttir

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### Sigríð Johnson

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