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Editorial — by Kirsten Wolf.....5

Feature Article:

Individual Idealism in the Realistic Nature Poetry

of Stephan G. Stephansson — *by Raelene Johnson9*



Charity and Fairness — *by Stephan G. Stephansson*

Translated by Kirsten Wolf20

Christmas — *by Christine (Johannson) Best24*

The Tree of Knowledge — *by Guðrún H. Finnsdóttir*

Translated by Ámý Hjaltadóttir31

In The Red River Valley — *by Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason*

Translated by Thelma Whale36

Poet's Corner

Vilhjalmur's Statue • Black Wave • Sea Morning

— *by Paul A. Sigurdson43*

Kaslo — *by Kristiana Magnusson44*

Book Reviews

Íslendingadagurinn — *by Jónas Þór and Terry Tergesen*

Reviewed by Sigrid Johnson45

Pioneer Icelandic Pastor — *by George J. Houser*

Reviewed by Ingthor Isfeld50

Notes on Contributors56

Cover Photo: Stephansson House, Photo by Stephansson House
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EDITORIAL

By Kirsten Wolf

The emigration of Icelanders to North America in the last century brought with it a remarkable flourish of literary creativity. One Icelandic immigrant writer, Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason (1866-1945), provides a telling anecdote in a letter

of 28 January 1899 to the poet Stephan G. Stephansson (1853-1927) that attests to this unusual literary activity during the early stage in the growth of Western Icelandic or Icelandic-Canadian literature, as it is commonly designated:

... "good Lord" (says my neighbor, old Jón Sveinsson, whenever he mentions his brother Benedikt's politics), and "good Lord!" say I when I think of the many thousands who compete for the title of poet. I rarely open a newspaper without finding somebody "illustrating his name," as the priest puts it. All the magazines come monthly replete with a brand new author, and it's impossible to step into a neighbor's house without running into a budding poet. There are about forty families around here and I think every fifth man and woman is thought to be a poet (by the people). It is a rare Sunday when I am not asked to listen to a new poem or part of a story ... Gunnsteinn lives nearby; people call him a "competent poet." Þorsteinn Borgfjörð owns land two miles from my house; people call him a "national poet" (as clever as Jón E. Eldon). Jón Guttormsson's sons are here also; both are called "poets of quality." Then there is Haraldur, Pastor Sigurgeir of Grund in Eyjafjörður's son; he is considered one of the "major poets" of the Western World. I could also count a certain Sigurgeir Einarsson, Jón Stefánsson and Baldvin Halldórsson. Andrés Jónsson Skagfield has moved to Selkirk, and in Selkirk every other man is considered verbally gifted. There is such a swarm of poets in and around Gimli that it is amazing.... Poets are everywhere: most teachers are poets; all Icelandic clergymen in the West write poetry, except Rev. Jón; everyone who has been to school in Iceland writes as soon as he comes to this country. I know two fellows who took up poetry writing for the first time when they were well in their sixties; one of them now has almost half a trunk full of manuscripts. Finally there are the wandering poets — it is pure torture to run into them. (Finnbogi Guðmundsson, *Stephan G. Stephansson in Retrospect: Seven Essays* (Reykjavík, 1982), p. 42; Finnbogi Guðmundsson, ed., *Bréf til Stephans G. Stephanssonar* 1 (Reykjavík, 1971), pp. 142-3).

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Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason's description of the literary scene in Manitoba provides what to our ears seems a somewhat comical situation: almost everybody was a writer in this phase of Icelandic emigration. But his words may not be far from hitting the mark, for they do, in fact, reveal a thriving literary circle that included known authors and amateur enthusiasts alike and that gained support, both direct and indirect, from a wide variety of local newspapers and literary societies.

Indeed, Ólafur F. Hjartar's bibliography, *Vesturheimsprent: Skrá um rit á íslensku prentuð vestan hafs og austan af Vestur-Íslendingum eða varðandi þá* (Reykjavík, 1986), attests to this unusual activity during the early stage in the growth of Western Icelandic literature. But many more authors can be added to Ólafur F. Hjartar's list, authors whose works appear in a variety of Western Icelandic newspapers, magazines, and journals from this early period, such as *Framfari* (1877-1880), the first Western Icelandic newspaper, which was later followed by *Leifur* (1883-1886), and the weeklies *Heimskringla* (1886>) and *Lögberg* (1888>). There were also several "church-journals," such as *Heimir* (1904-1914), associated with the Unitarian Church, and *Sameiningin*

(1886-1964), *Aldamót* (1891-1903), and *Áramót* (1905-1909), all associated with the Evangelic-Lutheran Church. Other publications include *Freyja* (1898-1910), *Vinland* (1902-1908), *Breiðablik* (1906-1913), *Tímarit Þjóðræknisfélags Íslendinga* (1919-1969), and *Saga* (1925-1931) to mention but a few.

Literary expression also found ready support through a network of reading circles and cultural and literary societies, such as "Hið íslenska menningarfélag" ("The Icelandic Cultural Society"), founded in North Dakota in 1888, "Hagyrðingafélagið" ("The Verse Maker's Club"), founded in Winnipeg in 1903, and "Þjóðræknisfélag Íslendinga í Vesturheimi" ("The Icelandic National League in America"), founded in 1919. These societies, newspapers, and magazines were as much a product of the literary activity as they were factors that promoted it.

In many respects, this early activity was an outgrowth of what for lack of a better term we may call a "literary cottage industry." Its exponents were not "authors" in the sense we have come to use the term, that is, legitimized by publication and, in some instances, by the accruing of royalties; they were not necessarily educated; nor were they to be consid-

ered professional writers. Although we should resist viewing these writers through rose-coloured glasses as products of a golden age marked by homeliness and a certain pastoral simplicity, what they do reveal, above all, is a different perspective on the craft and content of writing. For these authors, known or obscure, writing was not necessarily directed outward, to a faceless public, but inward toward their own culture. The literature is at once self-regarding and, even when not self-consciously addressing its culture, nonetheless mirrored what was important to that culture — most significantly, a sense of cultural preservation and unity. These writings thus have something to tell us, whether it be couched in the halting words of a farmer as he recounts his long and varied life, or the sonorous, provocative prose of a

priest as he tells of daily life in New Iceland.

This "literary cottage industry" stands as a hallmark of Western Icelandic culture. To lose that tradition is thus to lose the intangible center that provides continuity and identification. One of the objectives of *The Icelandic-Canadian* is to preserve this literary heritage; and, if nothing else, this editorial serves as both a reminder of the past and as a call to the silent cottage industries of sitting rooms and kitchens to enter the ranks of, what Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason calls "the many thousands who compete for the title of poet."



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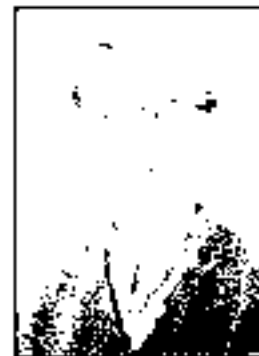
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FEATURE



by
 Raelene Johnson

Individual Idealism in the Realistic Nature Poetry of Stephan G. Stephansson

Editor's note:

This essay was originally written as a term paper in "Canadian Literature" taught at the University of Manitoba by Professor E. F. Dyck. We are grateful to Professor Dyck for his comments on the original version of the essay and for his editorial assistance.

1. Introduction

The Icelandic-Canadian poet, Stephan G. Stephansson, reveals, through his realistically descriptive nature poetry, a personal and social philosophy as well as his distinction from his English-Canadian contemporaries. Stephansson believed strongly in his fellow man, and that he could overcome any obstacle, social or environmental, that stood in his way without allowing the struggle to embitter him (Bessason, p. 73). In his own life as well, he lived by the rule "not to let the bitter struggle of life make him a lesser person" (Bessason, p. 48). He perceived nature with a clarity of one who works closely with the land, and his representations of nature retain this clarity of vision. This is hardly just a physical vision but a philosophical one also.

In his poem "The Spruce Forest" (Gunnars, p. 55), for example, Stephansson uses the large, implicit metaphor of a spruce forest, in which the situation and

character of the common people, who struggle with adverse conditions to improve their lives while retaining their inner goodness, is personified. A similar idea occurs in "Saffron" or "Crocus" (p. 79), where nature is personified to illustrate Stephansson's fellow man as well as the endurance of the human spirit.

His English-Canadian contemporaries, however, represented nature very differently. Theirs was a romantic view of nature as an escape, a healer, or possibly even a way of understanding man himself. Most of the Confederation poets, who tried to represent political or social ideas, failed in their attempts (Pacey, p. 9). These English poets were influenced by a totally different tradition of poetry than was Stephansson. Despite any influences he may have had, Stephan G. Stephansson was an individualist in thought, word, and deed. He moved to Alberta so he could see things objectively, he was a "free-thinker" in matters of religion and societal concerns, and he used all available Icelandic verse forms in his poetry. There seems to be no doubt that he deserves the accolades many scholars have bestowed on him, and that he is, as one of these scholars

suggests, equal if not superior to any poet Canada has produced in English (Kirkconnell (1935), p. 10).

2. An Early Example

One of Stephansson's early poems, "The Spruce Forest," was included in a collection published in 1889, during the Confederation period of literature. The phenomenon of a spruce forest and its environment and hardness is the vehicle in an implicit metaphor whose corresponding tenor is the common people. These ordinary people would be people with whom Stephansson identified, workers and farmers like himself who struggled with the soil and their social position to make a life for themselves. The first stanza of the poem gives some traits of the spruce forest which grows where nothing else will, in shadows under mountain inclines, and surrounded by "black bogs." One can immediately compare this description to the position of the settlers in Western Canada, who were given undeveloped and undesirable land on which to make their living. Yet, these people did settle there and with hard work made



Stephan G. Stephansson

it prosper. The second stanza goes on to describe the hardships the trees or humans suffer, like the bitter cold winters. The first inclination that the forest is a metaphor and has an underlying meaning occurs here when parts of the trees are referred to in human terms. The trees have "frost-bitten feet" or roots, and their branches have "fingers and joints." The poet reveals the harshness of the winters with the wonderfully strong image of "steel hard, strong, blue ice pounding." In the third stanza, we are given the forest's environment, one of the factors which impede its success. These trees look out on to a black, barren marshland, a muddy

gorge lacking in any sort of aesthetic beauty. Also there is the yellow hill that overlooks the forest threateningly. These are images of hopelessness, ugliness, yet they also represent the environment of the ordinary citizen. The land is obviously very poor for farming, being marshy, and the "yellow maw" is actually a metaphor for the bourgeois class whom Stephansson deplored. These are the people who cause the lower classes to live where they would not and who exploit their position. This is a part of his social philosophy coming through, where he blames the establishment for the condition of the ordinary people. Therefore, it is not only the envi-

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ronment that works against their success, but social aspects as well. We get further into his social sympathies in the next stanza. Here, despite all of these adverse circumstances, the trees or people thrive and become tall, or prosper. From out of this decay, the "nursery underlays," they rise so that others, who are not so hardy, have to stretch to realize their height. Here is Stephansson's unwavering faith in his fellow creatures, people like himself who through their own strength and means overturn the factors that hold them down.

The poem goes on in the fifth stanza to show how much better this plebian forest is than those who are considered higher in society. In this stanza, the so-called king of trees, the mighty oak, is left a "frost-bitten" and "bare" ghost of its summer self. It does not survive the cold and winter as the evergreen forest does. It is also further personified when its branch is likened to an "outstretched hand," turned grey, colorless from the cold. This is contrasted to the spruce forest in the sixth stanza where, as the mighty oak loses its color, the spruce remains green. Summer stays forever on the spruce hill because it is evergreen. This greenness, the goodness of the common people, is like a decoration to this frost and deathlike place. It provides an oasis-like quality within the spiritual wasteland they live in. The seventh stanza reinforces this whole idea of the forest being born from out of the darkness and decay, to become green and by struggling through adversity to thrive and rise above its condition. Of course, this parallels the situation of Stephansson's commoners. In the last two lines of this paragraph, he says that the trees never lose their needles, limbs or green color until

death. Similarly then, the people's strength, courage and hope never leave them. They continue to struggle until the end. Finally, in the eighth stanza, Stephansson reveals the spruce forest to be the vehicle of a metaphor. In it he says "(m)any a one," meaning many a person, is "like the spruce trees." They are helped in their personal growth through adverse conditions like winter or poor environments like the dark marsh land which physically and spiritually surround them. These help to make them strong and hardier, and they succeed despite the ever-present bourgeoisie who try to keep them down. Up until this point in the poem, however, the reader does not know precisely that the forest is to be paralleled with the common person. In looking back at the beginning, one notices that Stephansson addresses the forest as "you" from the first stanza onward. This use of apostrophe is a subtle hint that the forest is not to be viewed as just an inanimate feature. By using a direct personal address, Stephansson gives the trees a human quality which he clarifies in this eighth stanza.

The image in the last two lines of stanza eight may need some clarification due to the difficulty in

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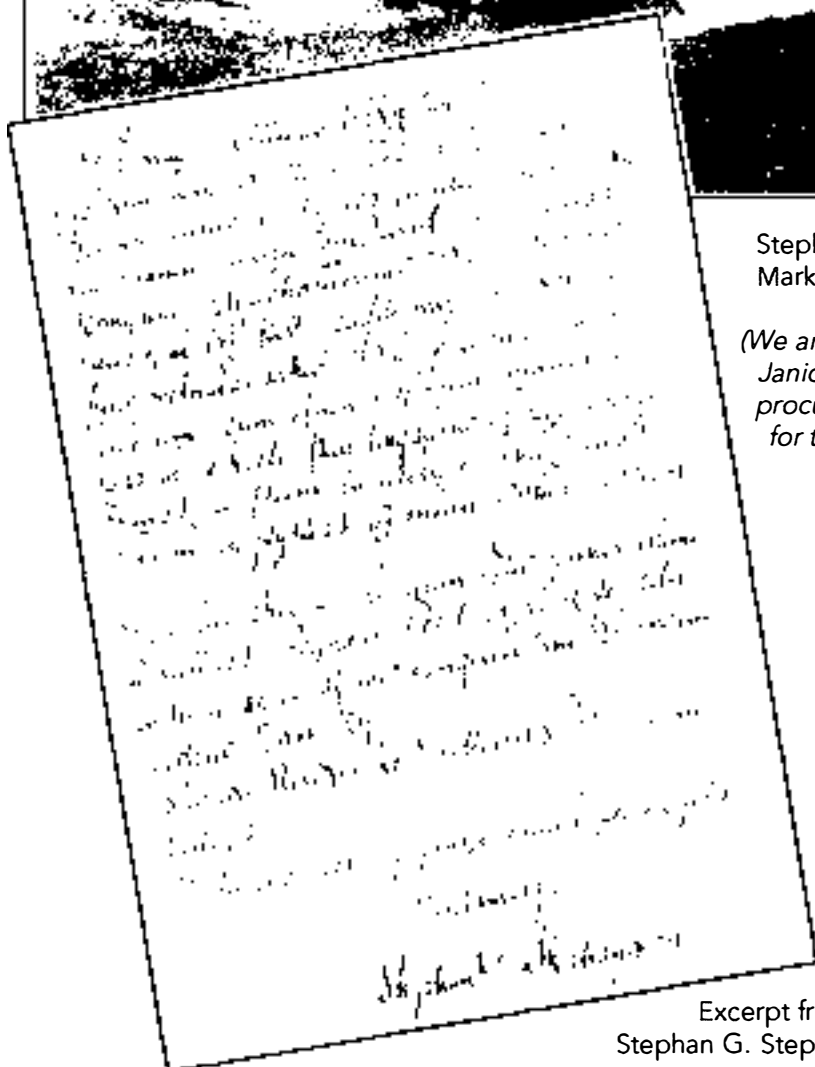


Stephan and Helga Stephansson



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*(We are grateful to Ms.
Janice Campbell for
procuring this photo
for the Magazine -
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Excerpt from one of
Stephan G. Stephansson's letters.

translating the Icelandic. The jaw-bone-yellow is actually the yellow tinge the skin of the jaw bone takes if a person suffers from jaundice. Here, the yellow is caused by the arrogance of the higher classes which is always hanging above the common people. The yellow color refers back to the yellow hill that is mentioned earlier in the poem and therefore links the spruce forest once again to human beings. The final stanza again reinforces the metaphor and its meaning, where the trees rise from the shadows and poor soil to survive evergreen, or ever-good. The key to their stability is in their roots, roots of hope which never bend or break in the storms of life. This is a very long and intricate poem, in which the poet consistently alludes to the underlying parallels between the character of the common citizens and his true to life description of the qualities of a spruce forest through personification and use of apostrophe.

Stephan G. Stephansson's accurate world-pictures of the forest itself reveal his talent in writing wonderfully descriptive nature poetry, but the way in which he works his philosophy in through his intricate metaphor reveals him to be a man of vision. He is set apart from his English-Canadian peers in the fact that he successfully incorporates his beliefs into his poetry, and without sacrificing the beauty of it. The rhythm and rhyme are consistent

with the rigid Icelandic demands, and the images are alive and real. Images like those of the third stanza, where the poorness of the environment as well as the social aspect of the "yellow maw" are included in the one stanza, show the complex relationship between the forest metaphor and the common man. According to one critic of the social or political poetry attempted by the Confederation poets, theirs did not succeed. Most of these writers wrote about nature in a romantic sense, with the belief that it would heal or help them understand themselves. Archibald Lampman escaped most of the criticism levelled at the romantic nature poetry of the time because he died young, and he tried to write some social satires near the end. It has been noted, however, that he wrote these mainly because they were in vogue (Pacey, p. 11). Stephansson, on the other hand, wrote with his convictions all his creative life, and most of his nature poetry contains his beliefs beneath the surface. In his craftsmanship of poetry and in his deeply felt individual philosophy, he remained constant all his life. Even his later works contain the unwavering belief in the people with whom he identified.

3. An Example of the Later Poetry

The poem "Saffron" or "Crocus" (Gunnars, p. 79), which may be a more apt title, is one of these later poems (1920s) in which Stephansson incorporates his philosophy. It does not deal as much with the common man's struggle with his environment and the higher classes, as it does

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Stephansson's personal life rule, which was mentioned in the introductory paragraph. He believes that a person should not let the hardships of life embitter him or her. His imaginative ability is apparent in this poem with his word perfect pictures of the crocus's growth and how it parallels that of the human spirit. In the first stanza, the setting of the poem is given, on a hilltop, in the April sun. This is early spring, the time for the birth of the crocus which abounds in Alberta and is the first flower to come out. In the initial warmth, the first shoot appears and arises from the decay of the past winter and the sterility and lifelessness of the land. Immediately in this initial stanza there is a link between the flower and man through personification, since it has a "hair cap on its head, and a fur cape on his shoulders." The pronoun "his" denotes this unnamed man and is used throughout the poem to make the metaphorical connection.

The middle stanzas of the poem deal with the growth and struggles in the life of the crocus. The second stanza describes the conditions the new plant must endure in the first awakenings of spring. There is the "cool soil" and the breezy air, and late frosts which make it difficult to survive. The "half naked" creatures, flower and man, struggle through all

this to survive, so that on the outside they may look like only a grey husk, dead, but on the inside something beautiful is developing. The blue color of the petals of the crocus symbolize man's inner goodness forming through the experiencing of the struggle for survival. Summer arrives after hailstorms have battered the creatures, and man is at a time in his life for growth (stanza 3). The crocus is the first to open itself up, and it stands open and stretched high towards the sunlight with its golden pistil personified as the "sungilt hair" of a man. Man is like the crocus stretched towards the light of excellence, striving to be worthy. In the fourth stanza, he, meaning man, is full of this light, this goodness. He is like a vessel full to overflowing. It is all very positive with the petals of the flowers raised and fully extended to soak up all the light. But there is also a further parallel between the crocus and human beings which re-

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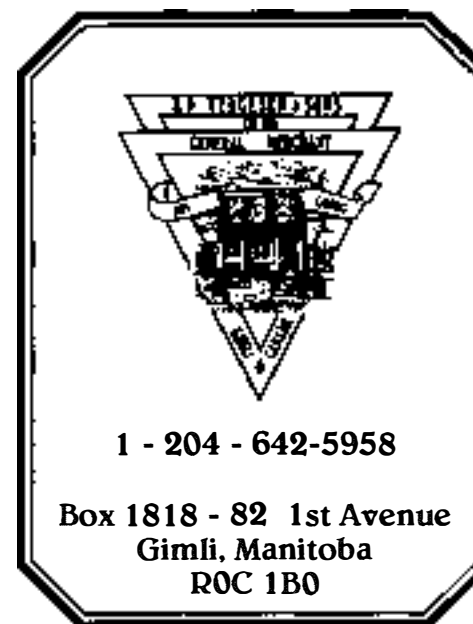
inforces the metaphor. A crocus flower is noticeably veined just like a human hand. "(A) glance of red, like blood of veins ..." (Gunnars, p. 81) forms a powerful connection between nature and man, and reveals Stephansson's rich use of language.

"His true-to-life pictures of various natural phenomenon in the Canadian West make his poetry special, but it is his talent for incorporating his philosophy into his nature descriptions without affecting their beauty which makes him memorable."

The final stanza takes on a change in tone with the exuberant first words, "Oh Welcome!" The poet himself is embracing what he has been singing about with the verb "sing," empha-

sizing his joy. He is embracing the crocus, the beautiful sign of first life, and therefore his fellow man. This is Stephansson's philosophy revealed: he is identifying with the nature of Alberta and most importantly to him, with his fellow man through claiming kinship with them. The shortness of human life is alluded to in the following lines where the flower's life span is described. It is the first to possess life and yet the first to lose it as well; it resembles man's time on earth. Yet, this realism of the poem, in the acknowledgement of inevitable death, doesn't lead to a bleak outlook to life (Johnson 1974, p. 40). Instead, the poet seems so excited by the aptness of this crocus metaphor that he carries it one step further, so it becomes a symbol. In the end he suggests that wreaths of crocuses be given to every human being when they are born and when they die. This would make the crocus a symbol of the cycle of human life by greeting and bidding farewell to each person as they enter and leave this world. The image presented is a positive and beautiful one for it alludes to the beauty of life and the acceptance of death. Thus, Stephansson praises the ability of the human spirit to overcome the hardships of life while maintaining its beauty.

"Crocus" is a poem about the pulsing life of nature (Johnson 1974, p. 40) and its beauty, but it is not a romantic poem. It is not an escape to some other world where man has no place, and it does not seek to establish a significance in nature in any way (Pacey, p. 11). In this poem, the idealism and capability of deep thought of Stephan G. Stephansson is shown. His view of nature is a real one and yet, as he sees nature for what it is, he can still look further to



parallel it to man. There is no power struggle here between man and nature. It is purely a philosophical view of nature, one of pure thought. His philosophy on how to live life and his faith in his fellow human beings' spirits' ability to overcome adversity is represented successfully. Stephansson's lack of romanticism in his view of nature and his skill in creating poetry, which is not only beautiful but has a purpose or meaning, sets him apart from any of his English-Canadian counterparts.

4. Conclusion

These two poems by Stephan G. Stephansson show that he is a poet of great skill and vision. His down-to-earth attitude, possibly from being close to the land himself in everyday life, allowed him a unique view of nature which is reflected in his poetry. He possessed deep human concern for the attainments of his fellow commoners (Bessason, p. 73) and earned F. S. Cawley's praise as "the most extraordinary common man Canada has ever produced" (Bessason, p. 73). His true-to-life pictures of various natural phenomenon in the Canadian West make his poetry special, but it is his talent for incorporating his philosophy into his nature descriptions without affecting their beauty which makes him memorable. The imaginative metaphor using the spruce forest represents Stephansson's beliefs about the common people's predicament and character. The crocus in its turn reveals for him the struggle the human spirit must go through to overcome the obstacles in its way to

a higher level where even death is seen as something positive. These poems also show that Stephansson was politically and socially aware in his poetry from the beginning of his writing career. In his earliest collection, he incorporates his humanitarian ideals with nature descriptions, unlike his fellow Canadians in English who searched for themselves or a new world in nature. In Stephansson's view, man was in nature, especially the common man, like himself, and this set him apart as well. He went beyond his contemporaries because he knew what he believed in and never wavered from it. It is important to note that Stephansson was not ignorant of what was happening in the English tradition of poetry, but he was not influenced by it (Skuli Johnson, p. 51). Despite his coming from a different poetic tradition, his



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poetry is Canadian in context, and he wrote from his experiences in Canadian life. Bessason puts it best when he states: "The language in which they were written (i.e., the

poems) will pose a problem for many but their wholesome view of humanity defies the limitation of both language and geography" (Bessason, p. 76).

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Stephan G. Stephansson

Charity and Fairness

translated by Kirsten Wolf

Editor's note: Although chiefly a poet, Stephan G. Stephansson also wrote a number of short stories. During the years 1894-1901, he wrote a series of sketches called "Ar" ("Motes in a Sun-Beam"). The following sketch, "Charity and Fairness," is translated from "Kærleikur og Sanngirni," which appeared in *Heimskringla* in 1899 and was later reprinted in the fourth volume of *Bréf og ritgerðir* (Reykjavík, 1948), pp. 50-53.

Century after century and year after year they had been travelling companions throughout the world. They were old when the first Christmas celebration was held on earth.

Nonetheless, they have never been able to lodge in the same place. Where Charity is welcomed, Fairness is denied shelter. In the hovel, where the door is opened unto Fairness, Charity cannot get a foot over the threshold.

Charity is friendly and smiling

like a respectable, upright man with crosses and badges on his chest who associates with bishops and kings.

Fairness is thoughtful and serious like a prophet in his own land, and plainly dressed like a poor woman.

Charity is aristocratic like one who is used to being in high rank. Fairness stoops like one who is used to waiting for a long time. This is how it is with Charity and Fairness.

All year they had been travelling about performing their task. On Christmas Eve the whole world is

their destination.

From the newborn baby in the shed on Crime Street, Fairness rushed to the nobleman's castle, where the heir was being swaddled. "This is shortsighted," she shouted, "this is shortsighted. Two generations useless for the nation. Poverty there and wealth here. Don't discriminate between people. Then everyone will feel better." The servants pushed her outside the gate. They thought she had escaped from the lunatic asylum.

Before the gate shut, Charity came. The guards led her in with their hats in their hands. "There are no clothes for the child in Crime Street," said Charity. "No clothes. My God!" said the noblewoman. "Maid, give him some Christmas clothes." "I'll bring them myself," said Charity. Everyone bowed with respect, as she was led down the stairs. Charity was not allowed to enter the shed in Crime Street, be-

cause she came from the nobleman's hall. Baseness and Wretchedness lived on his property and remembered that they had been unable to pay the rent. She turned away and instructed a heavily armed policeman to deliver the gifts.

Considerate people praised Charity to the skies. Then Fairness came to a court, where a sentence was being passed on a burglar who had killed a swindler for money. "Stop it," she screamed, "it's merely loss of blood and not an improvement to attempt to condemn half of the crime. Don't make wealth desirable, and release both the usurer and the murderer!" She was thrown out for breach of legal sanctity.

Charity came and reduced the sentence to life-long imprisonment. And good people admired Charity.

Fairness was present where Idleness stood with empty hands. "You're



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a bum," she said, "you who live off other people's toil. An honest life is toil. Forget about all personal privileges to such a life of idleness, which has passed from hand to hand. Service alone is worthy of idle pastime, so that it may enjoy some of its own efforts." She was exiled because of her revolutionary theory.

Then came Charity with a bag of bread. It contained crumbs from full idle people to hungry idle people.

Charitable organizations fell on their knees before Charity.

Fairness came to where Ingenuity and Intelligence lived in resentment and negligence, because society chained them to the same bench as it did to store-clerks. "That's because noble-mindedness has been trampled down," she said. "Don't bury such powers alive; place them where they may do justice to themselves, and don't squeeze out of them each honest drop of blood." She got a bad reputation for having robbed Craftiness of his cause.

With Charity's help they picked up good Christmas food as a reward for being witty and entertaining at parties.

The liberals made Charity's name their war cry.

Fairness also came to where a great power was attempting to subdue its tributary country with sword's edges. "Let these people go in peace," she said to the great power. "It's better to have a content friend than a subdued thrall who does damage to both by being kept under control." She was threatened with treason.

Charity came when the war was over, when fathers had fallen and homes had been burnt. She collected money for widows and stood for political reform for the improvement of conditions for children and elderly people.

And the great poets composed hymns in honor of Charity, and the small poets fourlined stanzas.

Even the poets!

Christmas Eve they met at the archbishop's gate. "Where are you going now?" asked Fairness.

"First I'm going in here," answered Charity, "then to the king, the headmaster, and the court poet. They have all invited me. Where are you going to spend the night?" She smiled sympathetically like one who has accomplished much. "I don't know," replied Fairness, "I've not been invited anywhere."

She hurried down the icy, windy street. The cold wind led her like a girlfriend. Up among the house ridges, a long and narrow fringe of grey, dry sky could be seen, with staring stars that were hardly visible, like the eyes of a man who sleeps with his eyes open. On both sides rimy rows of houses towered, with dark-grey smoke rising like poles from the chimneys and with gleams of light shining from each window like a sparkling glacier. Nowhere did she ask for shelter. She knew that each house was full of Christmas guests and that she was superfluous. Finally, she stopped by the smallest hut, farthest out in the poorest area of the city. The door was open, so that the light from the stars shone in and the smoke blew out. Inside a faint shine came from the embers in an old boiler, like twigs burning in a charcoal stack. It was the oven and the Christmas candle. By the candle sat an old and exiled anarchist. He made a living selling cooks matchsticks. In appearance he was grey and distorted like indignation itself and disgruntled like a bad conscience.

"Don't enter my house," he shouted. "You who steal the annual supply, but pretend to give a mouth-

ful — away with your alms. You are the eighteenth I chase away tonight. Leave me alone!"

"I come to ask for a Christmas gift, not to give you one," said Fairness. "My name is Fairness. No one will put me up; all the houses are

crowded, because everyone has invited Charity. Will you let me stay?"

"Welcome, poorwretch," answered the anarchist, "we can take turns sitting by the embers and sleeping in the chip pile."



"By the candle sat an old and exiled anarchist. He made a living selling cooks matchsticks. In appearance he was grey and distorted like indignation itself and disgruntled like a bad conscience."

Christmas

by Christine (Johannson) Best

Christmas — the very word held such magic and excitement for Anna. She could hardly wait as she thought of the many things that Christmas brought to her. Besides the longing for toys and games, there was the tree to decorate, gifts to wrap and that special part in the Sunday school pageant to hope for.

Anna had always wanted to wear an angel costume, and this Christmas she felt sure she would be chosen. The women of the Lutheran church made the costumes, and Anna thought the angel's gowns were the prettiest. The flowing white gowns with their wide bell sleeves trimmed with silver garlands, the silver cord at the waist and the large pair of gossamer wings gave the desired angelic effect. Yes, this was definitely what Anna wanted, nothing other than to be an angel for one night.

The Eaton's catalogue was showing signs of wear as Anna, her sisters and brothers studied it and made suggestions to mother what they would like Santa to bring. Of course Anna knew in her heart who Santa was, but the pretense was necessary so as not to spoil the fun for the younger children. Santa was no less real to her, whoever played the game.

There would be one gift for each child, and for this Anna was thankful.

Mother often reminded them of the poverty so many people suffered and that they were not to be greedy and selfish, especially at Christmas.

By this time of the year Anna's village had a heavy covering of snow causing the branches of the fir trees to droop to the ground. The top of each fence-post held what looked like a perfectly formed ice-cream cone. The world seemed cleaner and prettier as she trudged through the heavy drifts on her way to school. The children would walk in single file, the older ones breaking a path for those coming behind. Neighborhood children joined them in their walk, and soon there was a good path through the snow.

Over the fence and across the school yard they trooped, anxious to be inside where it was warm. The school consisted of five classrooms — all smelling of chalk-dust and the oiled wooden floors. A wide hallway decorated with a picture of the king, endless rows of coat-hooks lining the walls — this was the scene that greeted Anna each day.

Layers of clothing had to be removed, the girls emerging in their school tunics and white blouses from under the itchy woollen pants which now hung in the hall, dripping melting snow onto the wooden floor. Anna

and her friends gathered in a corner of the classroom exchanging secrets and giggling till the bell rang.

Miss Rasmussen didn't put up with any nonsense and the day's work was begun. Harold sat behind Anna and as usual was bothering her by tugging at her pigtail or poking her in the back with a pen nib. Anna was repeatedly told to face the front and pay attention!

Spelling was not Harold's best subject. During this period everyone went up to the black-board and Miss Rasmussen called out names and gave each person a word to spell. Harold, standing next to Anna, whispered in her ear for help. Her heart softened and she quickly wrote the word correctly for him. To her surprise and embarrassment Harold gave her a quick kiss on the cheek in front of the whole class. Well that did it — from then on everyone teased her. Harold

began to see Anna in a different light. He enjoyed her embarrassment, but never again did he poke her or pull her pigtails. Harold had gained a new respect for Anna, and she became more tolerant of this somewhat stupid but loveable boy.

Time to go home for dinner at noon. The walking had become much easier, as passing sleighs had packed down the deep snow. There was good reason to hurry, as tummies growled their emptiness and the cold north wind stung their faces.

Mother was always there, and the table was set. Steam escaping from the bubbling pots on the wood stove filled the kitchen with the aroma of boiled beef and vegetables sending the children scurrying for their places at the table.

Father came in from his workshop, and Anna's embarrassing moment was laughed at again in the retelling. How the news had spread during recess — the whole world would soon know of Anna's first kiss. Anna blushed and pretended to mind, but in her heart she felt flattered and enjoyed the attention the kiss had brought her. She was beginning to learn about the world of boys.

Mother reminded Anna and her sisters of the after school choir practice at the church. Perhaps today they would be told of their places in the pageant. Anna closed her eyes as she always did when she prayed and pleaded with God to let her play the part of an angel. She crossed her fingers just for luck in case God did not hear her.

The river road through town had been cleared by the horse-drawn ploughs, and after school the children made their way easily to the white wooden church with its pretty stained-glass windows and high steeple. Mrs. Anderson, the pianist, was

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practising the carols, and the sound of "Hark the Heral Angels Sing" fed Anna's hopes.

Mrs. Olafson, the choir leader, passed out the song sheets and arranged the children according to size in the choir loft. Anna had grown quite tall and was placed in the back row. The singing progressed as the children followed the waving arms of their leader, their voices rising and falling with her movements. Mrs. Olafson's shining face alternately beamed her approval or scowled her disapproval — her face was fascinating and held everyone's attention. The little church was filled with the sounds of Christmas.

After the practice, the children in the two back rows were asked to stay behind as each part in the pageant had to be filled. The boys, who had been told they must attend the practice, were quietly sneaking out the back door, but Mrs Olafson was ready for them. "We need boys for the parts of Joseph, the wise-men, and shepherds," she called after them. She managed to stop some of the meeker ones, but Harold and his friends were already half way home.

Mrs. Anderson was busy unpacking last year's costumes, holding them up to judge their usefulness. As she held up the white angel gowns, Anna stood nearby as did several of her

friends. "The girls that have never been angels may try these on," she said. "Anna, you have grown quite tall, I think you might just fit into one of these." Anna's heart pounded as she slipped the flowing white gown over her head. How special she felt as she pranced up and down the church aisle waving her arms with the angel wings protruding from her back like the wings of a bird. She couldn't wait to tell mother and father that she had been chosen. Anna's faith grew, for God had answered her prayers.

Dusk was falling as Anna and her sisters walked home, past the corner store on Main Street, where for a nickel you could buy a bag full of candies. Today wasn't Saturday so they hurried on — across the railway tracks and along the river road. There were no street lights in the village, but the fresh white snow gave off a brightness of its own and in every house lights twinkled in the windows. The girls burst into the house filled with the excitement that angels and Christmas carols had created this day.

Christmas was also a testing time as exams at school were about to begin. Miss Rasmussen expected the good students to do better and the slow ones to improve themselves.

Books were spread out on the sturdy, round kitchen table. Father had pumped air into the gas lamp and lit the sock-like wicks which then glowed with a blue light. The lamp was hung over the table where heads were bent over the books. Anna was determined to try for first place in her class and wondered how Harold could be so happy, when he usually took last place.

The days passed quickly, busy with exams, choir practice and fun in the snow. Great drifts had filled the ditches with hard packed snow, and

the children created a world of their own in the tunnels and snow houses they dug there. The tunnels were only large enough to crawl through, but the hollowed-out igloo-like caverns were large enough to hold several children. The boys made connecting tunnels between these hidden houses. Sunlight filtered through the top of the snow-houses giving light, and the children imagined themselves to be Eskimos.

Emerging from the tunnels Anna and her sisters did look like snow people as they were covered from head to toe with snow. It clung to their woolen pants, scarves and mitts in matted balls which had to be scraped off before going indoors.

The wood-stove made the kitchen warm and cozy, and mother sat the girls in front of the open oven door, their feet propped up to thaw out. They had been having so much fun they didn't realize till now how cold their feet had become. Mother rubbed their feet gently till the redness disappeared. Anna was sure there was no one that had a mother as good and kind as hers.



Exams were written with Miss Rasmussen's eagle eye trained on the class. She would walk slowly up and down the aisles between the desks, slapping a ruler into the palm of her hand as a sort of warning of her presence. Anna felt sorry for Harold as he sighed in his frustration, but she dared not give him any help.

When Anna arrived home after school there were cookies to sample, as mother was preparing for Christ-

mas. The coffee pot was kept hot at the back of the stove, and often there would be a neighbor chatting and sipping coffee with mother.

Father came in and mentioned that Saturday would be a good day to get the Christmas tree. He had been talking to Uncle Steve and arrangements were made. Uncle Steve had a pair of Clydesdale horses and a large flat sleigh that could hold both fathers and all their children. Anna looked forward to Saturday and a sleigh ride into the woods.

Saturday morning arrived crisp and clear. The children were bundled up, and Anna watched eagerly for the horse-drawn sleigh. Soon the dark shapes of the big horses could be seen, and she could hear the sound of the harness bells. Uncle Steve stood, legs spread apart to brace himself, with the reins held firmly in his hands. "Whoa," he called as he pulled back on the reins. With shouts and laughter the children climbed aboard. Uncle Steve gave the reins a snap across the broad backs of the horses, and with a loud "Giddap" they were off.

The woods were on Uncle Steve's farm, just north of town, and today they were especially beautiful. Sunlight created twinkling stars in the fresh snow, and the fir trees with branches bent to the ground under their heavy mantle made a fairyland for Anna.

They came to a clearing, and before the sleigh had come to a stop, the children jumped off, running helter skelter in every direction in search of the most perfect tree. Father reminded them not to choose too big a tree as the living-room ceiling had its limitations. A bushy, neatly formed fir tree was found. How happy they all were as they plowed through the deep snow, dragging the tree



behind them.

A red-headed woodpecker was drumming on a tree, and father pointed out the tracks of weasels and other wild creatures that lived in the woods. The children watched carefully hoping to catch a glimpse of the rabbit whose tracks were imprinted so neatly on the snow. Anna and her family had a very good morning, but now it was time to go home and trim the tree.

After supper the family gathered in the living room for the decorating. Father had anchored the tree securely, and now the children happily hung the strings of popcorn, bells and stars cut from silver paper, tinsel and garlands. Lastly the candle holders were carefully clamped onto the branches. Candles were placed in these holders but would not be lit till Christmas Eve. Anna went to bed tired but content and dreamt of what was to come.



It was Sunday and the night of the Sunday-school pageant. It was cold as the family walked to church. Father's car was not used in the winter — it stood, with its tires removed, on wooden blocks in the garage. How Anna wished father had a horse and sleigh like Uncle Steve and Grandpa.

The church was warm, and Anna soon forgot the cold as she gazed at the huge Christmas tree that reached up into the rafters. The candles were lit, creating halos of light that reflected off the silver tinsel and garlands. Anna's eyes shone as she felt the glow that sent tingles of excitement through her. She hurried to the

dressing-room behind the altar to put on her angel gown.

Mrs. Olafson was flustered as she desperately tried to help everyone at once while listening for the sound of music to start the procession. To the tune of "Away in the Manger" the choir filed out, taking their places to the left of the altar. A doll to represent Jesus had been placed in the manger to the right of the altar; it was around this table scene that Mary, Joseph, the wise-men, and the angels arranged themselves.

Anna walked slowly and carefully so as not to jostle her wings or put out the flame of the candle she held so tightly in her hand. She searched the faces in the congregation and shyly smiled at mother as she caught her eye.

Every pew was filled as were the aisles of the little church. Seated at the front of the church next to the tree was Anna's father as well as other fathers, their eyes trained on the candles, buckets of water ready should the tree ignite.

In song and recitations the Christmas story was told, with Mrs. Olafson beaming her approval as she directed them. Anna felt very proud as she caught the envied glances of her school chums.

The pageant came to a close, and now the time had come for treats. Under the big tree stood two wicker laundry baskets filled to overflowing with colorful red and green mesh bags. In the bottom of these bags was placed a Japanese orange and the bag filled with rock-hard candies that stuck stubbornly to the mesh. The children in the congregation filed past, and the baskets soon emptied as eager little hands reached out. Anna hurried out of her angel-gown, anxious for her bag of treats. She need not have worried as Mrs. Olafson had

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set aside enough bags for everyone.

The pageant filled Anna with the spirit of Christmas, and that night she fell asleep full of anticipation, for tomorrow night would be Christmas Eve.

As was usual, Grandma and Grandpa came for supper Christmas Eve. After the dishes were done father said it was time to light the candles on the tree. The family gathered around the tree and in hushed silence watched as each candle came to life. Grandpa began to softly sing his favorite Icelandic carol, and his eyes twinkled as one by one the children joined him repeating the words he had so patiently taught them.

Father had quietly slipped out of the room, and before long the jingle of bells was heard outside the front door. Could that be Santa? A scurrying to the door — shouts of joy resounded through the house as a big box of presents was dragged across the threshold.

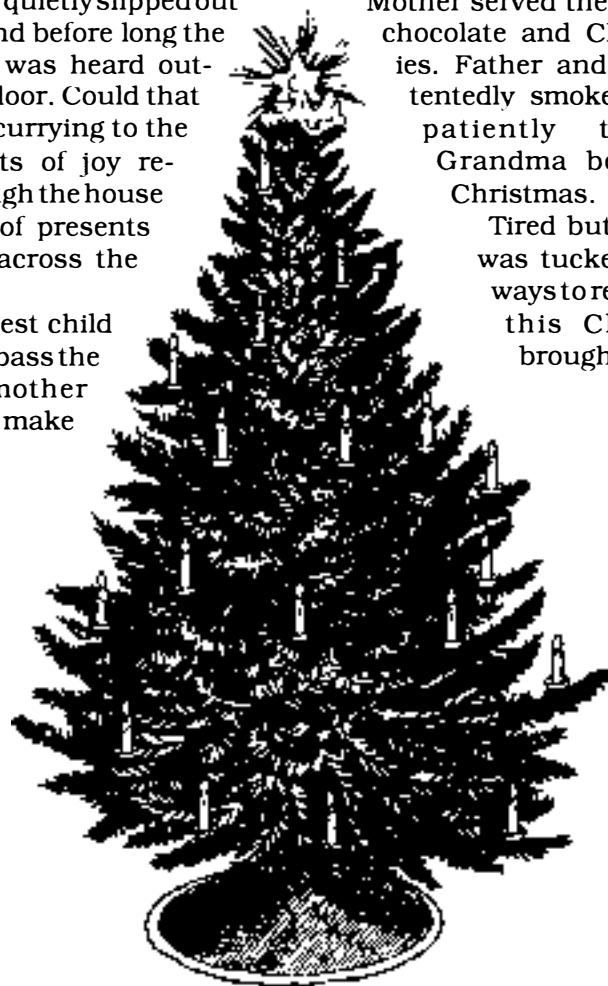
The youngest child was chosen to pass the gifts, with mother supervising to make

sure everyone received their special parcel. Wished-for toys sprang out of the wrapping paper and ribbons that now covered the living room floor. Father was once again seated in his usual place keeping one eye on the ever-dangerous candles. Anna carried her special gift, a china tea set, to where Grandma sat. They admired the small tea pot with its lid, the cream and sugar bowl, cups, saucers and plates, all so prettily painted with flowers. Anna promised Grandma she would be invited to have tea with her tomorrow.

Sister's dolls and brother's trucks and games were admired and played with late that night.

Mother served the customary hot chocolate and Christmas goodies. Father and Grandpa contentedly smoked their cigars, patiently tolerated by Grandma because it was Christmas.

Tired but content, Anna was tucked into bed, always to remember the joy this Christmas had brought her.



translated by
Árný Hjaltadóttir

Guðrún H. Finnsdóttir

The Tree of Knowledge

Out in the lands of light and summer, on the borders of dawn and aurora, the garden of Eden was situated. When Yahweh had finished the Creation. He gave the garden to Adam and Eve to dwell in and to take care of. This was to be something of a trial farm, because Yahweh was still uncertain about the outcome. He remembered that He had made a mistake concerning some of the angels: He had given them a bit too much of his own investigative spirit, and He firmly resolved that this experiment must turn out with better results. So He immediately set down strict rules concerning what they were and were not allowed to do.

In the beginning, everything was peaceful and quiet and uneventful. The husbandry was very simple, because just about everything was provided for them. Adam's main pastime was to roam about and study the plants and the animals on his farm and give each one of them a distinct name. The grass grew, the tree branches swayed in the breeze, and the animals were meek and mild and played with each other. Everything appeared to be going as planned.

But Yahweh had not, for the moment, remembered Satan. Neither had He considered how big and strong Adam was and what a big appetite he had. Generally speaking, the food was rather poor in Eden, endless berries, vegetables and apples, which sometimes were sour, unripe and hardly edible, for Burbank and other botanists had not yet appeared in history with their improved vegetation. Sometimes Adam would have a stomach ache and other discomforts, and blame it on Eve's cooking. Eve

Editor's note: Guðrún Helga Finnsdóttir (1884-1946) was born at Geirólfsstaðir, Suður-Múlasýsla. She emigrated to America in 1904, settling in Winnipeg, where she lived for the rest of her life.

Most of Guðrún H. Finnsdóttir's published works appeared in *Timarit Þjóðræknisfélags Íslendinga* and in *Heimskringla*. Many of these were later reprinted in *Hinn galond* (Reykjavík, 1938), *Dagshríðar spor* (Akureyri, 1946), and *Ferðalok*. *Fyrirlestir, ræður, ævminningar, erfiðjóð*, was published after her death by her husband Gísli Jónsson (Winnipeg, 1950). Guðrún H. Finnsdóttir was also the editor of *Brautin* 1944-1946.

"The Tree of Knowledge" is translated from "Skilningstréð" in *Dagshríðar spor*, pp. 187-194.

cried, but bore the burden with composure and patience, which since then has been inherited by all her newly wedded daughters. She was very fond of Adam, as of an elder brother or a father, and firmly resolved to care for him as best she could to keep him happy and comfortable.

One night Adam suffered very badly from internal disorders. He suffered from indigestion and was bad-tempered as well. Eve was distressed over his condition. She had been sleeping in the branches of one of the trees and was awakened by Adam's groans. She dashed off at the break of dawn to look for some kind of remedy for him. But she was not the only one who was up early that morning in Eden. As usual, Satan was hovering close by. Ever since she had come to the garden of Eden, he had followed her like a shadow. He burned with the desire to poison Adam and Eve's relationship, and to get her into disfavor with Yahweh. It should not be too difficult to get this smiling, blond lass in his power. He had previously succeeded in making the charming, dark-browed Lilith the enemy of all first fruits and youth, so that Yahweh had to put Adam to sleep to take a rib out of him for a new wife. But so far Satan had not been able to do anything, and, to be honest, he was getting both tired of and bored with Eve's innocence and simplicity. He stood in the shadow of the Tree of Knowledge and looked at her with lustful eyes. Yet, he made a wry face and rolled his eyes with contempt. In reality, such a silly girl was not worth the humiliation one suffered from pursuing her. But he knew that of all Yahweh's creations, Eve was his favorite, and to her was given the responsible job of being mother and protector of the young

emergent life of the future generations instead of Lilith, who had failed Yahweh so terribly.¹

Satan watched Eve closely, as she was gliding beautifully and light-footed back and forth between the trees, looking for something. And he gloated inwardly, for he saw Eve unhappy for the first time since she came to the garden. Because Satan was a man, he immediately guessed the reason behind it. He had made up the proverb that the way to a man's heart goes through his stomach. There the opportunity to gain favor with the girl came to him. He stepped forward out of the shadow of the Tree of Knowledge, which stood in the middle of the garden and was covered with beautiful leaves and loaded with fruits. As he approached Eve, he held in his hand a ripened, ember red, scented apple. He quickly put on gentleman-like manners, donned a modest, holy look, and greeted her softly. He asked her how Adam was feeling, telling her he had heard him groan, and offered his help. But Eve was sad and said that she did not know where it would all end for poor Adam. Satan showed her the apple and told her that this kind of apple was an unfailing remedy for indigestion. He said that it was a proverb in his district that an apple a day keeps the doctor away.

Eve, who was only recently created, didn't know the difference between good and evil, and besides, she was so innocent and trusting, that she believed Satan's every word. She thanked him for his help and sympathy. Satan said that it would be best for her to taste the apple, so that she could judge how good and wholesome it was. He knew that Yahweh's thundering voice would fall upon her as soon as she had eaten of it, and then it would be easy for him to gain

control of her. He had no intentions of letting Eve take the apple back to Adam.

But suddenly everything changed. Eve was quicker than Yahweh's violent temper and Satan's hate and cunning. When she swallowed the first bite, it was as if her soul was freed from a spell she had been under and had thrown off the slough. At once, she became a perceptive being, able to pick and choose for herself, determined, free, and daring. It was as if a new-born source of power emerged from her soul and currents of warmth and happiness flowed through her. Her first thought was to have Adam share in this wondrous feeling. On the wings of love she flew with the apple to him. When he was swallowing the first or second bite, Yahweh's thundering voice boomed in their ears, and Satan realized that Eve had slipped from his grasp.

It is unnecessary to repeat here, in what way Yahweh showered his anger over these ungrateful and disobedient children of his. He was not just angry at them, but also disappointed over this model farm of his, and told them harshly that from now on they were on their own.

That same evening, the gates of the garden closed behind them for ever. There they stood, castaway and forsaken, with one half eaten apple between them, and a heavy feeling of guilt on their shoulders — en route to an unknown world with the pitch dark night ahead. Behind them, radiating fire flashed from the



Guðrún H. Finnsdóttir

cherubim's swords, who from now on stood guard at the gate. Out from the dark vast space came the voices of the night, dangerous and mysterious, the howl of wild beasts, the din of the sea and the whizzing of a thousand winds. Terrible fright penetrated their hearts. They did not know where to go, and searched for shelter. Adam felt his way about in the dark and took Eve's hand. She fell trembling into his arms. That night, for the first time on this earth, love between man and woman was kindled.

Already a new day was rising out of the east, and the rosy fingers of the morning glow announced the sun's arrival; the earth, swaddled in the

first of the morning sun, lay open before their eyes. Young and beautiful and rich in vegetation, she welcomed them. The voices of the night had taken on a different hue, because now they blended with the joyous songs of the morning, the harmony of a thousand voices, which brought new vigor and peace to the minds and hearts of these future children of the earth. They looked shyly at each other for the first time and found that between them a new mystery had opened up, which made them unafraid of work, trails or sufferings. The settlers' courage and desire for achievement seized them both, and they burned with desire for victory. That desire has been passed on from generation to generation and has grown and matured on the long road down through the centuries.

From the seed of the apple, which fell from Adam's hand where they

had their first night's lodging, grew a new Tree of Knowledge, which ever since has seeded itself all over the world. The spirit of each new generation is enriched by its fruits, until finally, the spirit of man will have no limit, that spirit which Yahweh automatically breathed into the bosoms of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden at the dawn of time.

1 Lilith is mentioned in various ancient eastern texts, including those of Babylon. There she is shown as some kind of evening vacillator or nightmare attacking men at night. She is mentioned once (Isaiah 34:14) in the original text of the Old Testament, but in the Icelandic translation her name is omitted and replaced with "night hag". In other ancient Jewish manuscripts there are many tales about Lilith. There she is thought to have been Adam's first wife, amazingly beautiful and skilled in sorcery, but she soon sided with the forces of darkness, so Eve was given to Adam as a replacement. Lilith is a grave danger to children, and therefore they are equipped with all sorts of charms to prevent accidents and misfortunes she might cause them.



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Compiled by Lundar and
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Lundar, Manitoba
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In the Red River Valley

(continued from the Summer issue, 1990)

by Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason

translated by Thelma Guðrún Whale

Editor's note: Our subscribers have requested that we publish more of Ms. Whale's translation of Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason's novel *In the Red River Valley*. We are pleased to be able to accommodate the request with this issue as we present chapters I and II of Book II.

Part II

Chapter I

A New Adventure

A year and a half after Arnór and Edna Trent left Winnipeg, I had had no news of them, for Arnór had not written me a single line. Mrs. Colthart said she knew nothing of them but thought it likely that Edna had returned to New York and that Arnór had gone to Iceland.

In the crooked house, there had

been many changes in the last six months. Potter, the Englishman, and O'Brian, the Irishman, had moved away with their families; the former had gone far out into the country, but Mr. O'Brian had rented a warehouse and stable west on Princess Street not far from the railroad. My cousin Sólrún now managed the whole of



Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason

the crooked house, that is, the eleven upper rooms. And now her boarders numbered twelve in all, including me. Björn and Kjartan still lived there, and Anna stayed at home to help her mother. I had an idea that Kjartan and Anna were engaged. I found nothing wrong with that. I myself had become attracted to a girl, and the strange thing about my love story is that I knew nothing about her, not even her name. But I must wait a little longer to tell you about my thoughts and my love affair because another more important detail of this story must be told first.

I must begin by telling about a wonderful Icelandic adventurer whom I met at this time, and who touches the story indirectly because it was due to him that the long-lost

Madeleine was finally found.

I remember clearly that one Sunday morning late in May, 1885, two men came up the stairs of the crooked house. One of them was one of the tallest men I had ever seen and at the same time astonishingly thin and lanky, with a long neck and so hunch-backed that he always seemed to be looking down at his toes. The other man was also thin, lanky, and long-necked, with a small hump on his back, but he was so short that one might easily have taken him for a twelve year old boy if it had not been for the large grey beard on his chin and cheeks and his extremely bushy eyebrows. He was quite dark-complexioned, almost like an Indian, and on the backs of his hands, pictures of sailboats under sail were tattooed

into the skin. He was as cheerful, in spite of his hunchback, as the other man was gloomy. He was either continually gazing up into the arch of heaven or else up into the face of the giant who was with him. This puny little man was about fifty-five years old, but he was so vigorous and agile and quick in all his movements that nothing seemed more likely than that he was an experienced gym teacher or a master swordsman. He appeared to be double-jointed. It would have done him an injustice to say that he was as nimble as a cat because no cat could have performed the same feats without becoming exhausted. — Each of these men carried a suitcase, large old-fashioned leather bags, or rather small leather trunks like those carried during the eighteenth century by military commanders going on an expedition. I can still see the men as they stood on the balcony of the crooked house talking to my cousin who had gone to the door when they knocked.

"Are you not Sólrún?" said the tall man in Icelandic, after greeting her with a handshake. He was exceedingly hoarse-voiced.

"Yes, I am Sólrún," she said.

"And are you not a widow?"

"Yes," said Sólrún, her face becoming rather flushed.

"I meant to say," said the tall man, "are you not the landlady here?"

"I guess that is what I am," said my cousin.

"My Icelandic name is Þórarinn Bjarni Arinbjarnarson," said the tall man, looking down at the little man, "but in English I am John Johnson." (He pronounced it Djohn Djohnson, speaking so slowly that he seemed almost to be spelling every word.) "And I live west on Ross Street and work for old Harry Lee and am a 'straw boss', as men call it."

"Right," said my cousin.

"But my friend here is called Barði," said the tall man.

"Barði Howmann — yes, Howmann," said the little man, staring up into the big man's face, his voice deep and dark like the roar of a lion. My cousin was startled to hear such a strong, spectral voice from such a small body.

"He has newly arrived from the wilderness," said the tall man. "He is looking for board and room with Icelanders here in Winnipeg for a while."

"You don't need to have much fuss for me," said Barði, "just a small room to myself and three ordinary meals a day, — no coffee, no spicy food. But I have never refused gravy or cast away meat. — Yes, you don't need to fuss for me."

"He could not stay with me," said the tall man, "because of the crowding in the house and the noise of the children."

"I wish for peace and quiet," said Barði. "I have been so long in the toil and stress and storm of life, that my soul hungers and thirsts after calm and peace and rest. — Yes, peace and quiet."

"And you need not doubt that he will be prompt in paying his just debts," said the tall man in a very hoarse voice, squinting with one eye and looking down at his friend like a scientist examining an unknown organism under a microscope.

"I have always had enough to keep me," said Barði, gazing up into the face of the tall man who tottered over him like a rock on a precipice. "And I have never been accused of being stingy. — Yes, I have always had enough."

"Will you let my friend stay here, my good woman?" said the tall man, not looking at my cousin.

"First I must know if the blessed

woman will give me shelter," said Barði, in the thundering voice of a mad bull. "Yes, first I must know that."

"You are welcome here, if it is suitable," said my cousin. She told me later that from the first, she felt this man to be harmless.

"Then I say farewell, friend," said Barði, shaking hands with the tall man. "And I will go inside in the name of the Lord, — yes, I take my leave of you, friend."

He picked up both the leather suitcases as if they were small parcels and walked into the house. The tall man said good-bye to my cousin and walked quietly down the stairs.

It was as if Barði had previously lived in the crooked house because he walked directly into the dining room before my cousin had had time to invite him in. There he set down his suitcases, took off his hat and his jacket, hung them both on the highest nails on the wall, then left the dining room and strode into the kitchen.

"Here I want to be," he said when he got to the stove. "I have always felt good sitting by the fire, — yes, here I want to be."

He shook hands with everyone in the house, saying to each one, "The Lord bless you, — yes, you."

When he took my hand, I noticed that on his right arm up to the elbow and also on his neck were various grotesque pictures of animals and men which had been tattooed into the skin. And later, I found out that the same kinds of pictures covered his back, chest and legs. Some of the pictures showed snakes, savages and palm trees.

It so happened that there was no one in the room which had been O'Brian's bedroom; so my cousin allowed Barði to move in there. That was the best room upstairs. But Barði never stayed there all night. He generally went to bed at ten o'clock in the evening and was up early in the morning. He was never still for long but was continually trekking back and forth, either in the hall upstairs,

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or up and down the stairs, or out south along the river. He was most happy in the kitchen, and went in and out of there a hundred times a day, carried in all the wood, fetched all the water, washed up all the plates and cups and saucers and repaired everything in disrepair throughout the house. At first my cousin absolutely refused to allow him to do this. But he protested. "I have to work at something," he said, "because otherwise I would lose my health and die, — yes, die." He said he must not be idle while he was awake nor even while asleep. My cousin then said she did not want to charge him for his board because he did so much work in the house. Still, every Saturday, he paid her in full for the next week, no matter what she said. He was cheerful and lively and courteous to all. He made no noise when he walked up the stairs or on the balcony or along the hall upstairs. He seemed not to touch the floor or the steps and nothing he handled was ever upset or broken. He could, seemingly without effort, jump over gates the height of a man and climb up walls if there were any cracks in them where it was possible to anchor a nail or the blade of a knife. He could quite easily throw his heels up on to his shoulder blades and comb his hair with a comb held between the toes of his right foot. In other words, he appeared to be able to do everything shown by the foremost gymnasts in the best athletic exhibitions today. I concluded that he had once taken part in such performances. But I was mistaken in that, as in other things.

The longer I knew Barði, the better I liked him. However, I felt there was something mysterious about him and that he was hiding a secret. I longed to know all about it. I burned with curiosity. Curiosity was one of my

greatest faults, — it could even be called one of my vices. I remembered how I had first thought Arnór mysterious and strange, how I had sorely longed to know his secret and how well I had succeeded in sharing a part of it with him. Would I succeed in learning this man's secret? Arnór and Barði were very different. Arnór was, for example, very placid, shy and reserved, but it was possible to find out something of his thoughts and concerns from the few words he spoke. Barði, on the other hand, was most cheerful, sociable and talkative. However, he appeared to be trying, at all costs, to keep secret what had happened to him in the past. To be sure, he answered all the questions asked of him, but most of the time in a way that left one no wiser. He often told long tales about various adventures, of Indians on the buffalo hunts, shepherds in Texas and Montana, miners in California and Australia, pirates in the South Seas and dare-devils in the slave war. He seemed to have been to every country and thoroughly learned the customs and habits of all the nations of the world. And it was not unlikely, to judge by what he said, that he himself had taken part in all the adventures he narrated. One story he told us so awakened my attention, I decided to try to become even better acquainted.

I remember it as well as if it happened yesterday. It was a Saturday night, late in June. Outside, the rain was pouring down. There were six of us sitting in the kitchen, Barði, Kjartan, Björn, Sólrún, Anna and I. All the others had gone into town just before the rain started. We sat silent for a short time. It was Björn who broke the silence.

"Where in Iceland are you from, Greybeard?" said Björn, after staring

at Barði for a while.

"I was likely born in the north," said Barði "At least my father lived there all his farming days. — Yes, I was likely born there."

"But whose son are you?"

"I am my father's son, — yes, his son am I."

"It is likely," interrupted Kjartan, "that you are his son, but what was your father's name?"

"He was John, and his father was called John," said Barði. "And I was christened John. — Yes, his name was John."

"Are you then Barði John?" asked Kjartan.

"I am John Barði — yes, Barði."

"Is your name not also Howmann?" said Anna.

"What is this?" said Barði, smiling at Anna. "Now everyone is after me. But it is more than true that I am also called Howmann, though I was not baptized with that name. I have had to adopt so very many surnames during my life, depending on what nation I lived amongst. Yes, what is it?"

"Have you ever called yourself Berg?" I asked. I was thinking of Arnór's uncle.

"Could well be," said Barði, "that I might have called myself Berg when I was in Norway and Sweden. — Yes, it could well be."

"Have you ever been shipwrecked?" I said.

"Many times, — yes, often."

"Have you ever been shipwrecked on the reefs off Hudson Bay?" I said. — Who could say but what this might be Arnór's uncle?

"Both there and elsewhere, yes, elsewhere."

"Were you ever on a ship named Galahad?" I asked.

"It could be that I steered some big ship called that — yes, steered."

"And was your captain called Jeremias Gale?" I asked eagerly.

"That could very well have been," said Barði. "He may even have been called Ezekiel Snale. Yes — that could very well have been." And a light ocean breeze seemed to be playing around his beard as he said the last words.

I stopped my questioning.

"When did you begin calling yourself Howmann?" said Kjartan, jokingly.

"I'll tell you," said Barði. "I took that name when some South Sea islanders made me a king, — yes, a king."

"They made you a king?" said Kjartan, laughing.

"I'll never take back those words," said Barði. "They made me a king, those good men, and I ruled there for five years, five months and five days, yes, days."

"You must be joking," said Anna.

"No, miss," said Barði. "I am telling the truth. "I was made king on one of the Gilbert Islands and I reigned there with honour and much power, yes power."

"And how many subjects did you have?"

"That I can tell you exactly," said Barði. "When I took power, the inhabitants of the island numbered thirty-six thousand, two hundred sixty-three and when I surrendered power, there were forty thousand, eight hundred and one, — yes, one."

"Oh, tell us this story as it happened, from beginning to end!" said my cousin.

"I shall do that for you, my good woman, although I know you will not believe it," said Barði, "yes, for you."

And he told us the strange adventure which follows, without saying anything twice. And we thought that remarkable.

Chapter II

Adventure in Apemama

*(Only the last part of Barði's story concerns the plot
and therefore has been summarized.)*

Summary: Barði, the son of a learned clergyman, tells the story of his life, beginning with his childhood, his study of navigation, graduation as a helmsman and command of a large sailing ship which was taken over by the crew near the Gilbert Islands. He was set ashore on one of the islands, taken prisoner by a group of islanders, rescued the queen and her son Tembinoka from an enemy king, was made king, but refused the title of king, and was called Howmann, (meaning the highest man). He ruled fairly, started a school, educated the young prince, was married but soon became a widower. He allowed himself to be tattooed like the chiefs and kept white men off the island. When the boy Tembinoka was sixteen, he put him on the throne, rowed to another island, took passage to Australia, (having been given gold and pearls by the islanders). From Australia, he sailed to Victoria in British Columbia, worked on the building of

the railway for a time, then crossed the Rockies and settled in Batoche for a while. During the uprising he was taken prisoner, put into a cellar of an old house and would doubtless have been shot if he had not been saved by a Metis woman who, when she heard he was an Iclander, insisted that he be freed because she had once had an Icelandic friend whom she had met in the Red River Valley fourteen or fifteen years ago.

Barði continues: "She said he was dead but that his memory lived on in her heart. I was freed on her word. I thought this woman had spoken for me because she felt sorry for me, and that she had never known an Iclander, although she used that as an excuse. On parting, I asked her to tell me her name. 'You may call me Madeleine,' she said. And with that, I left. I arrived, hale and hearty, at Fort Qu'Appelle and from there came to Winnipeg. And now the story is ended."

POET'S CORNER

Vilhjalmur's Statue

Sculptor, you've caught the essence!
Here, in this modest park,
Under the skies of his nativity,
His soul and body leap to life in
bronze.

Northwest he aims himself,
His stride a frozen moving force,
And his nose, sharp as a Husky's,
Cutting the Arctic wind,
Heeding the summons of destiny.

Time did not wait for him,
Nor he for history;
That he made himself;
Making love to a frozen white virgin,
And building igloo treasures.

He gazed through an oil light,
Into man's distances;
And with fish liver in his mouth,
And caribou skins on his back,
He gave the world new visions,
With old dreams.

- Paul A. Sigurdson 1979

Black Wave

Must we fear the black wave,
Rushing into the womb of humanity?
Coloring the chromosomes?
Black eyes can see;
Black ears can hear;
Black skin can feel as we.

Who are we to try to whitewash,
The color of cascading generations?

- Paul A. Sigurdson 1969

Sea Morning

The rhythmic surf
Sun-white, rolling
Laps the burnished sands
Like liquid lace
And the billow-choir
In gliding majesty
Thunders the primal anthem
Of the Creator.

- Paul A. Sigurdson 1968



Kaslo

Kaslo with his lantern
walks into the night
fearful of spirits lurking
beyond gray creviced rocks
past craggy mountain caves
beyond ghost-laden houses
past aging picket fences
back to the back of beyond.

Kaslo with his lantern
yearns for days of love
seeking the spirit of youth
beyond time before this time
past days of schoolboy pranks
beyond lazy fishing days
past racing mountain streams
back to childhood once again.

Kaslo with his lantern
sleepwalks back and forth
dozing between now and then
beyond loving winsome maids
past golden fields of grain
beyond sun-lit fishing streams
past days of yesteryears
back to time before his time.

- Kristiana Magnusson

BOOK REVIEWS



*Íslendingadagurinn: an illustrated history:
saga íslendingadagsins.*

Jónas Þór and Terry Tergesen.

Íslendingadagurinn: an illustrated history: saga íslendingadagsins

Gimli, Man.: The Icelandic Festival of Manitoba,
1989. Pp. 150.

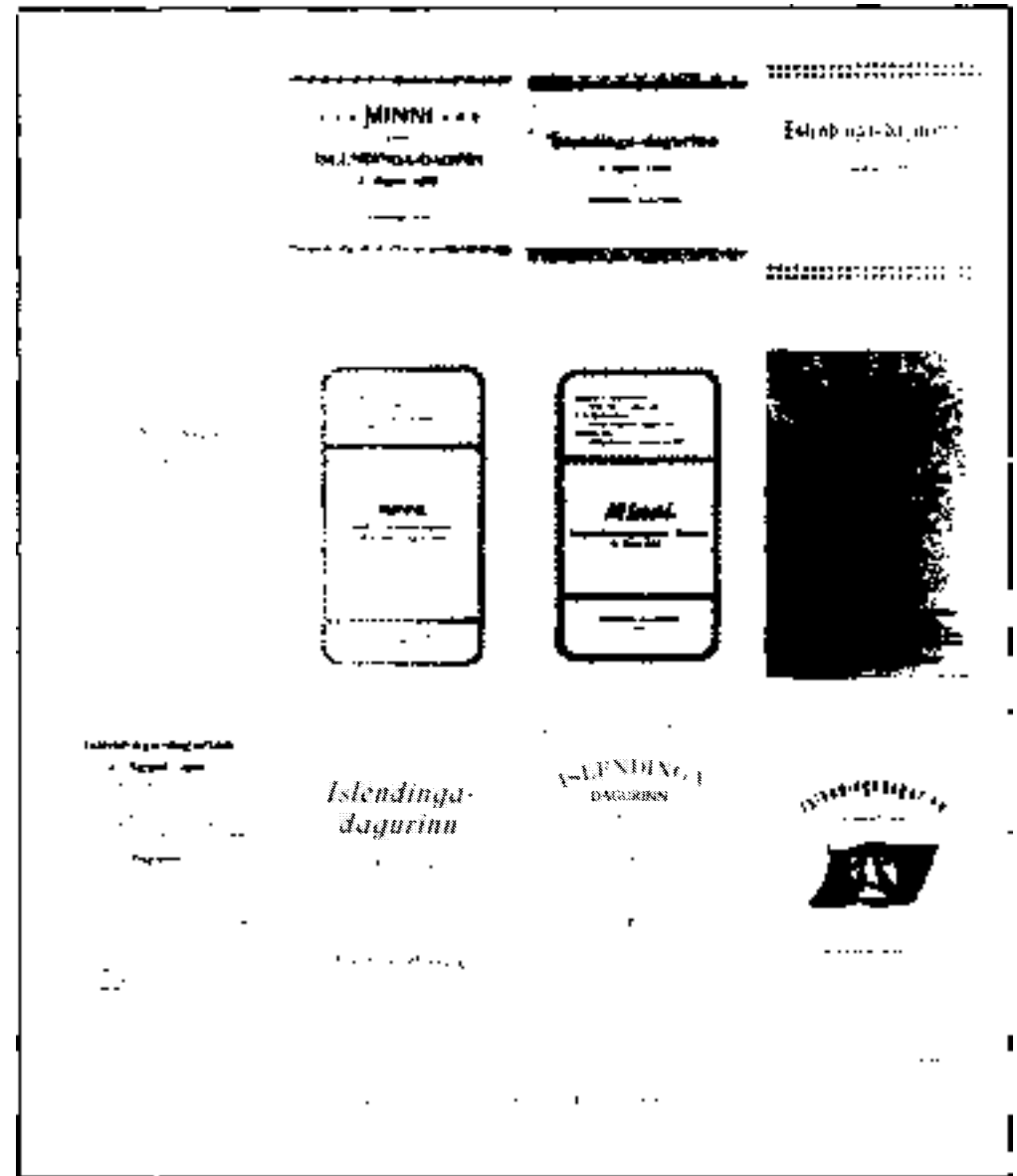
In recent years fourth and fifth generation Icelandic Canadians, the majority of whom do not read the Icelandic language, have lamented the fact that few English language publications documenting the history of Icelandic people in North America have been written. With the publication of *Íslendingadagurinn: an illustrated history: saga íslendingadagsins*, The Icelandic Festival of Manitoba has therefore taken an important step in making accessible, to present and future generations of Icelandic Canadians, a particular episode in the story of Icelandic settlement in North America.

In the foreword, G. Albert Kristjanson states that "The Icelandic Festival of Manitoba, *Íslendingadagurinn*, as far as we have been able to determine, is the second oldest continuous ethnic festival in North America. Only an Irish festival held annually in Montreal is a few years older." The first Icelandic festival in North America was held in Winnipeg and there it continued to be celebrated annually until 1931.

Since 1932 an annual festival has been held at Gimli. This book is therefore published in commemoration of the centenary of the Icelandic Festival of Manitoba and as a history of the Festival's development over one hundred years.

The text, written by Jónas Þór of Reykjavík, Iceland, a former editor of the newspaper, *Lögberg-Heimskringla*, documents important features, controversies and changes which the Festival experienced over a century. For Jónas Þór, the publication of this book concluded a project which he undertook nearly a decade before. The content of the text is based primarily on the minutes of meetings of the festival committee. In the early years the minutes were written in the Icelandic language. Direct quotations therefore have had to be translated. In his research Jónas Þór also examined 100 years of the Icelandic language weeklies, *Lögberg* and *Heimskringla*. Both newspapers included reports on the preparations as well as the Festival itself.

Complementing the text are illustrations selected by Terry Tergesen,



"Complementing the text are illustrations selected by Terry Tergesen, who for the final months leading up to the publication of the book, spent countless hours gathering, selecting, and arranging photographs, the result of which is a thorough and impressive pictorial record of the festival"

who for the final months leading up to the publication of the book, spent countless hours gathering, selecting, and arranging photographs, the result of which is a thorough and impressive pictorial record of the Festival.

The combination of text and pho-

tographs has resulted in an attractive "coffee table book" history that will no doubt become a family heirloom to many North American Icelanders. The sturdy cover is certain to provide the book with a lifespan of more than one generation!

As Jónas Þór states in the intro-



"The combination of text and photographs has resulted in an attractive 'coffee table book' history that will no doubt become a family heirloom to many North American Icelanders."

duction, "this (book) is about an event, not the individuals who so tirelessly organized it." What he writes is a general history of the Festival. He does not describe every festival, but rather has divided the Festival's history into four major time periods during which the Festival experienced important controversies, changes or additions. These time periods are: Settlement, 1870-1890; Struggle for identity, 1890-1924; Resurgence of heritage, 1924-1940; and Multicultural era, 1940-1989. Throughout the text he answers many questions that the present generation of Icelandic Canadians has asked regarding the Festival. Who do we meet on the first weekend of August in Gimli? Why the speeches and toasts, the races and dances? Why the Fjallkona? Why lay a wreath to the memory of the Icelandic pioneers? The answers lay in the stories of long forgotten debates documented, in Icelandic, in the minutes of the festival committee and the Icelandic

weeklies, *Lögberg* and *Heimskringla*. Jónas Þór has discovered the answers and made them accessible to present and future generations of Icelandic Canadians.

If the intention was to produce an attractive publication in the "coffee table book" vein, then the final product must be labelled an unqualified success. However, as a truly authoritative reference work the book falls short of the mark. Not a single footnote has been included, nor is there a bibliography. Researchers will be at a loss as to where to go should they wish to examine the photographs reproduced throughout the text. The owners of original photographs reproduced throughout the book are not uniformly credited. For example, the Western Pictorial Index is credited for the photograph of Main Street looking North from Portage and Main, 1900c, on page 18, while no credit is given to The Icelandic Collection at the University of Manitoba, owners of the original photograph of



"... the book has indexes to both the text and the photographs."

Íslendingadagurinn 1905 Elm Park on page 30. In a truly scholarly work, chapters 5-7 would appear as appendices. Examples of toasts to Canada and Iceland and the Fjallkona's

address would also be useful as appendices in such a publication.

To its credit, the book has indexes to both the text and the photographs. It is more than adequate as a

starting place for anyone interested in researching the history of the Festival. And let's hope that as G. Albert Kristjanson states in the foreword "that some of the readers of this book will find it sufficiently interesting that they might be stimulated to write histories of the many other Icelandic festivals that were held in other com-

munities," and therefore take further steps in making accessible to present and future generations of Icelandic Canadians additional episodes in the story of Icelandic settlement in North America — in English.

Reviewed by Sigrid Johnson

by George J. Houser

George J. Houser

Pioneer Icelandic Pastor: The life of the Reverend Paul Thorlaksson

Winnipeg: Manitoba Historical Society,
1990. Pp. 229.

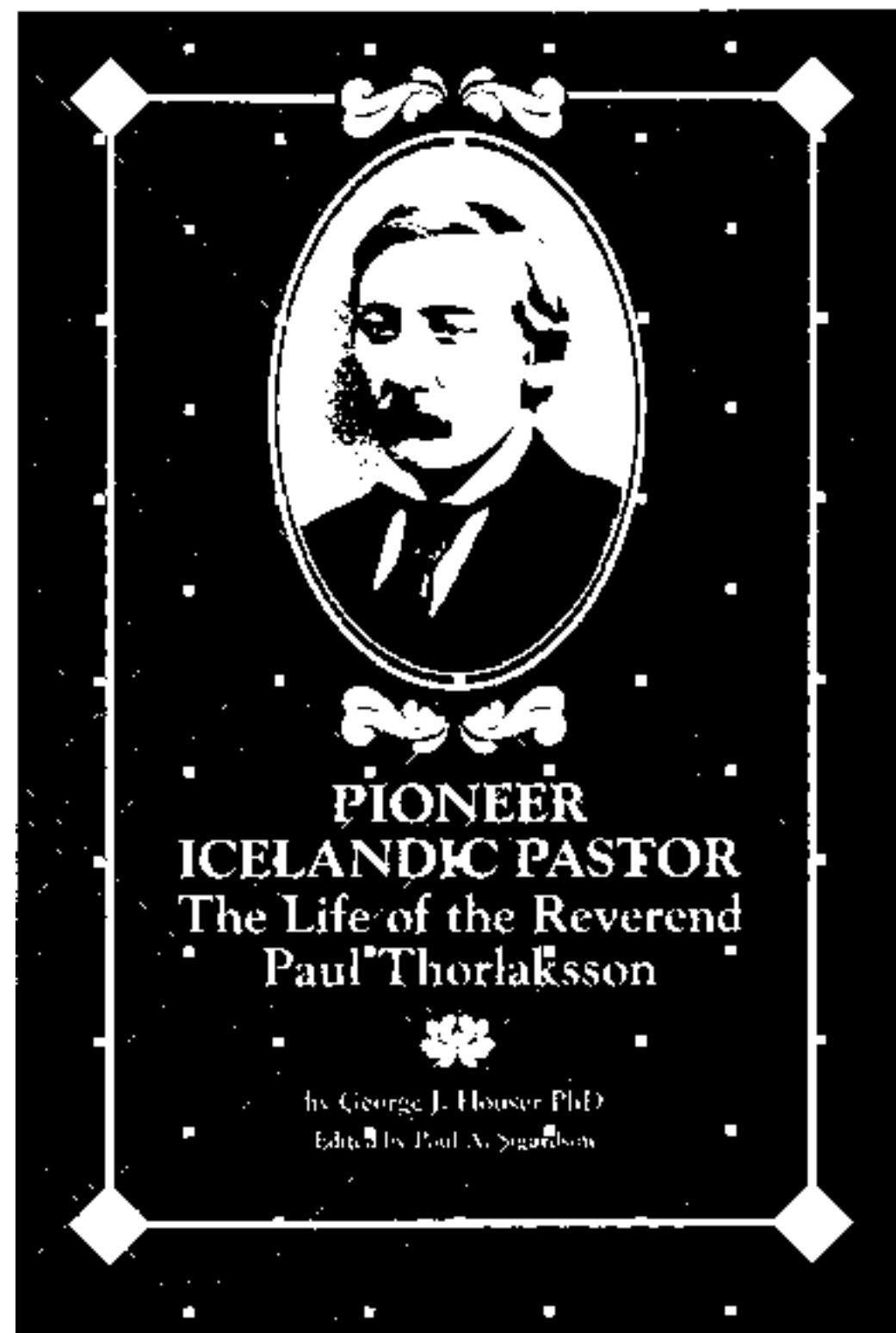
Let me begin by stating that I read this book with great interest and enjoyed it. The author, editor and publisher all deserve our thanks for this contribution to the history of the Icelandic pioneers, in general, and to church history and the biography of the Reverend Paul Thorlaksson, in particular.

The author approaches the subject from a broad historical perspective while somewhat neglecting the theological and psychological aspects. This approach makes the book more a history of the Icelandic settlement

than a biography of Reverend Thorlaksson.

It would have been preferable for the author to focus more closely on Reverend Thorlaksson. This could have been accomplished by including samples of his sermons and more descriptions of him by his contemporaries.

One such source was the Reverend Fridrik J. Bergmann. His father, Mr. Jon Bergmann, was a close friend of Reverend Thorlaksson. Reverend Bergmann taught in one of Reverend Thorlaksson's congregations in



New Iceland as a youth. A few years after Reverend Thorlaksson's death, Reverend Bergmann served the congregation Reverend Thorlaksson had established in North Dakota.

Reverend Bergmann writes about Reverend Thorlaksson with warmth and understanding:

"He (Reverend Thorlaksson) was in many ways one of the most remarkable Icelanders of this century. He was intelligent and an outstanding student. His character was firm, with a burning desire and unbending will to succeed; a man of deep faith, not deterred by any obstacles in his way, because he believed in the Lord. When he observed something that needed to be done, he never thought of the difficulties involved, but threw himself into the thick of it and fought his way through, whatever the cost to himself. If any Icelandic has had a faith that moves mountains, Reverend Thorlaksson did. He was a truly gifted man, sincere, straightforward, honest in all his dealings, open and earnest, and sensitive to the point that he could not bear to see anyone suffer, without helping. He was so unselfish, that he gave the weak and poor who came to him his last penny, if need be. But he was not a man to be easily persuaded. It was very difficult to have a conversation with him at any length without starting an argument. He held very firmly to his own opinion. It seemed that he had a firmly held conviction on everything and he could not be moved. Undeniably his religious views were considered rather narrow. But all around this man of burning religious



Reverend Paul Thorlaksson, circa 1875

conviction shot up the flames of unbelief. He set out to preach the narrow way, that leads to life and warn one and all in all seriousness against the wide road. He talked non-stop, as long as someone was within an earshot.

He was a quiet and convincing preacher, but less what is called inspiring. He always prepared conscientiously for his services, wrote most of his sermons, but preached once in a while from points only."

(*Almanak* 1902, published by O.S. Thorgeirsson. My translation from the Icelandic.)

I have included this rather long quote for two reasons. First, it is in my opinion the best description of Reverend Thorlaksson I have seen, drawing a vivid picture of a man of exceptional abilities, but also a man who was not one to compromise in any way and could be difficult to deal with. Secondly, this quote is from a very able and perceptive man who



Reverend Jón Bjarnason, Halldór Briem, Sigtryggur Jónasson and Reverend Paul Thorlaksson.

knew Reverend Thorlaksson well.

Comparing what Reverend Bergmann has to say and what Dr. Houser has to say in this book it becomes apparent to me, that Dr. Houser does a very good job of describing Reverend Thorlaksson's great gifts and many good qualities, but does not handle the difficult aspects of his personality very well.

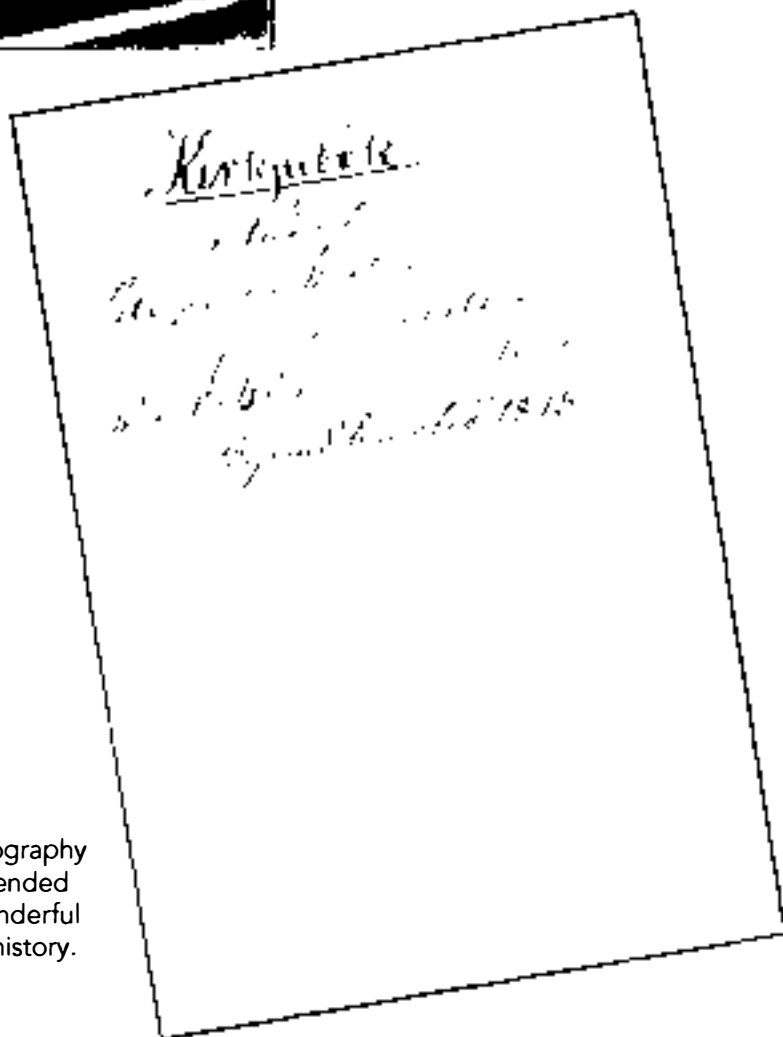
It would also have been desirable for Dr. Houser to attempt to make an

assessment of Reverend Thorlaksson's overall contribution to the pioneer settlement and how it has affected the history of the Icelandic people in this century, even though such an assessment would have been somewhat subjective. We are far enough removed from these events to begin to assess them without defending anyone or starting to replay the old battles.

Reverend Thorlaksson was obvi-



Vikur Lutheran Church, Mountain, North Dakota, the oldest Icelandic church in America.



Text and photography have been blended to create a wonderful collection for history.

ously correct in his opinion, that New Iceland did not offer good immediate economic prospects and settling in the United States would have brought more prosperity to the settlers in a shorter time. However, there were other factors to be considered. Many of the early settlers felt more at ease with the Canadian system of government. Settling in the United States would also have meant greater difficulties in maintaining the Icelandic identity and therefore a faster assimilation into American society.

It is not made clear in the book, in my opinion, how far out of step Reverend Thorlaksson was theologically with the vast majority of the settlers. The Norwegian influence of his mother and the theological influence of Missouri were alien to the Icelandic people. Sometimes these theological differences were tolerated, but at other times they interfered with people's ability to follow Reverend Thorlaksson's very sound practical advice.

Many books have been written about the settlement and history of the Icelandic people in North America. However, most of these books were written in the Icelandic language.

There is a great need for this story to be told in English.

One book can cover but one episode of this fascinating story. What I have written about the book in question is not so much to criticize as to point to the wide reaching possibilities for other writers and translators to inform the English speaking reader about the history of the Icelandic pioneers.

I am certain that this book, in addition to being very interesting in itself, can be the catalyst to stir the Icelandic community in North America to action in preserving its history for future generations.

Reviewed by Ingthor Isfeld.



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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS:

Raelene Johnson is the daughter of G. Ray and Norma Johnson from Portage La Prairie. She will be graduating from the University of Manitoba in October 1991 with an advanced major in English and a major in Icelandic. Raelene Johnson spent the year 1989/90 studying Icelandic at the University of Iceland.

Kirsten Wolf is Chair and Head of the Department of Icelandic Language and Literature at the University of Manitoba and Co-editor-in-Chief of *The Icelandic Canadian*.

Christine (Johannson) Best is interested in preserving the Icelandic culture through her short stories. She was brought up in the Interlake area of Manitoba and now makes her home in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

Árný Hjaltadóttir was born in Reykjavik and emigrated to Canada in 1969. She is now completing her pre-masters degree at the University of Manitoba and embarking on her M.A. in the field of Icelandic-Canadian literature. She also works as a research assistant in the Department of Icelandic. Árný Hjaltadóttir has translated extensively from Icelandic into English.

Thelma Whale is of Icelandic descent. Her father was born in Winnipeg, of first generation immigrants. Her mother was born in Iceland. Thelma Whale has studied Icelandic at the University of Manitoba and translated extensively from Icelandic into English.

Paul A. Sigurdson taught English at Morden High School until his retirement in 1977. He is a frequent contributor to *The Icelandic Canadian* and is the poetry editor for the magazine.

Kristiana Magnusson of White Rock, British Columbia, formerly from the Arborg-Riverton area of Manitoba, is an author and a poet. She is a frequent contributor to *The Icelandic Canadian*.

Sigríð Johnson is Head of the Icelandic Collection in the Elizabeth Dafoe Library at the University of Manitoba. She is Co-editor-in-Chief of *The Icelandic Canadian* and also the reviews editor for the magazine.

Ingthor Isfeld was born in Akureyri. He graduated from the University of Iceland with a Cand. Theol. degree and was ordained in 1959. The same year he emigrated with his family to Canada and now heads the congregation of the First Lutheran Church in Winnipeg.

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