

THE ICELANDIC CANADIAN MAGAZINE

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The ICELANDIC CANADIAN



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THE ICELANDIC CANADIAN

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Canada

On the Cover



"It's a perfect day to catch the fish, it's a peaceful place to be"

Editorial

Recording History

by Agnes Bardal Comack

With my 1943 nursing classmates I've just celebrated our 65th reunion. It was a wonderful event! The best part was to be able to set a precedent in our Nurses' Alumni by presenting a book full of memories of the 'good old days.' This book will eventually be part of the Winnipeg General Hospital/Health Sciences Centre archives. I was so proud to be able to collect 25 stories from classmates across the country, who range in age between 87 and 94 years. What stories they had to tell!

Our training covered every aspect, with time spent at the old Children's Hospital (which was then on Redwood Avenue) and the King George, as well as in Public Health and Psychiatry. We had training in Maternity, Obstetrics, Operating Room, Urology, Surgery, Ophthalmology, Otolaryngology and Medicine. Our training was very strict and for the three years we lived in constant fear of making a mistake. However, during all of that time we developed a very strong bond, always being on hand to help, console, and support one another so that even today we are still like sisters.

We worked from 7 AM to 7 PM, six and one half days a week. The half day off was after working from 7 AM to 1 PM. Each day we had two hours off for classes and one half hour for meals. Being up at 6 AM, we were ready for sleep at lights out at 10.30 PM. There was never an overnight leave, not even on Christmas Eve. Our instructors were very strict (and on occasion some seemed even heartless!).

The use of mustard plasters and hot fomentations as well as leeches for eye care were the orders of the day. With the shortages during war time, catheters, needles, and syringes were all boiled and reused.

Infections were a rarity and an occurrence demanded a strict investigation as to the cause.

The stories I collected from my nursing sisters also told of their experiences before and after training. One classmate worked in the thirties as a Girls' Matron at an Indian Residential School in Birtle, MB where she felt very fortunate to have learned some of the Saulteaux language. This was a great help to her over the years, communicating with Native patients who couldn't speak English. Another was present to observe the famous Sister Kenny who had revolutionized the treatment for the polio patients that we nursed in the Children's Hospital as well as the King George Hospital for Communicable Diseases. Another served part of her training at Margaret Scott Mission. My father used to talk of Margaret Scott and her compassionate care of the needy people in the core area of Winnipeg. He told of taking 'wayward girls' to Margaret Scott when he had his cab business in the 1890s (I assumed they were young homeless immigrant girls).

The stories following training were just as interesting. Imagine being on call in the country to assist at a baby's birth, and being paid 65 cents if you were there for less than an hour! One classmate was Dr. P.H.T. Thorlakson's scrub nurse. She said that during wartime he would be in the operating room from 7 AM until 3 PM most days. The nurses had to clean and autoclave the instruments themselves and if they broke anything they had to pay for it. Consequently, they were very careful. Post op infections were a rarity. Another told of her experiences after joining the Army Medical Corps and being posted overseas.

I was instructed on how to store these valuable stories in a binder that contained plastic envelope-like pages where the original written and signed stories were kept along with the typed copies. There they would be safely preserved. I also had copies made for my classmates to cherish.

This experience has made me aware of how important it is to record our memories of the past. I regret never asking my mother about her early life as an immigrant from

Iceland in 1887. My father wrote down many of his memories but I have no doubt he could have regaled me with many more interesting tales about his life before and after arriving in Canada in 1886 at the age of 20.

Today with the use of audio recording devices these family stories are so much easier to collect. And what a treasure you will have for your offspring when you do so.

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A Tribute to the Fishers of Lake Winnipeg

The Lake Winnipeg Visitor Centre in Gimli Manitoba was officially opened in 1999. The building, located at the mouth of the harbor was once a B.C. Packers fish packing plant. The Centre is the community focus that gives a physical description of the lake and tells the stories of the lake's fishery and the fishermen.

The exhibits include several information posters, a 500-gallon fish aquarium, a 35 foot 1940s era whitefish boat and a mini-diorama depicting the evolution of ice fishing on Lake Winnipeg. The natural history of the lake and the history of the fisheries are depicted through a series of displays. The center also serves a dual function, in that it is the tourist information center for Gimli and the surrounding area. It annually attracts between 10,000 and 11,000 visitors in the three and one half months it is open from the end of May to the September long weekend and it is open by request year round for tour and conference groups.

Over the last few years, several fishing families in the area have made major donations to the New Iceland Heritage Museum, specifically to ensure that their history will be preserved. In October 2007, the New Iceland Heritage Museum unveiled the "People of the Lake" wall at the Lake Winnipeg Visitors Centre. There were six fishing families that unveiled their history. These six families were the Isfeld Family of Winnipeg Beach, the Sigurdson Family of Hnausa and Riverton, the Kristjanson, Olson, Solmundson, and J.B. Johnson and L. Stevens families all of Gimli.

In October 2008, a large crowd gathered at the Lake Winnipeg Visitor Centre to honor two new fishing families for their contribution to the New Iceland Heritage Museum. The Benson and the Goodman families of Gimli were both recognized and their histories were added to the "People of the Lake" wall. Plans are in place to add the Peterson family of Gimli as well. One of the features of the "People of the Lake" mural is an excerpt from Eric Goodman's poem "Season to Season" which is reproduced here.

- Catherine Robertson, October, 2008

Season to Season

by Eric S. Goodman

Rise up ye men, young and old
For the weather is calm now you see.
It's a perfect day to catch the fish
It's a peaceful place to be.

The weather is calm, the winds are low
And the nets are three days old.
For the last three days it blew like hell
With the north winds icy cold.

The nets come over the bow of the boats
and the seagulls are squawking out loud.
As we fishermen pull all the heavy weight
Picking fish after fish at the bow.

The winds have come up, there's still halfway to go
The sun's getting low in the sky.
The boats half full with three days of fish
And the men, they have sleep in their eyes.

The current is strong, the nets very tight
And the language is not very nice.
A wave splashes over the front of the boat
And forms into a sheet of glazed ice.

There's ice on the face of the bearded men
The ones without are blue.
The feeling has left all their fingertips
As they hurry to pick and get through.

When the nets have been lifted and the men back on shore
And the last man is leaving the dock,
He looks down at his wrist with a smile on his face
It's dark now, but just six o'clock.

Many hours go by as they work on their catch
 The men are too tired to talk.
 Sorting the fish according to size
 Preparing and packing each box.

It's morning once more, and they're back on the lake
 Most of them raring to go.
 They're all pulling their nets to be off the lake
 'Cause the season has come to a close.

We must stop for a while and think about things
 Sip on our beer 'fore it warms.
 We'll just sit here all day drinking beer after beer
 Reminiscing about the worst of the storms.

The nets are all spread, now a month has gone by
 The ice has formed over the lake.
 We go out on the ice, making our claims,
 Jigging nets under, stake after stake.

It's a dangerous job, to be out on the ice
 A place where you have to be quick.
 It makes a terrible sound as it cracks all around
 With the ice only four inches thick.

The strong winds come up and the ice starts to move
 And piles up under nature's great force.
 For the mountains it makes, and the fishermen it breaks
 Losing their nets in the course.

As the weather gets cold, the ice becomes safe
 The fishermen make daily lifts.
 You will notice a smile on each brown, windburnt face
 As they bombardier over the drifts.

Day after day and month after month
 They fish on the snow-covered plains.
 The nets slide up through auger-drilled holes
 And get pulled back under again.

Days are now long and the nights not so cold
 The sun changes snow into rain.
 The slush from the snow, makes it real hard to go
 The season is ending again.

The weather is warm, there's work to be done
 They're painting the boats to go north.
 It won't be too long 'til next season is here
 They'll be leaving after May 24th.

There's talk in the town, there's pickerel around
 And the saugers are plentiful too.
 The whitefish boats will be heading up north
 And the pickerel will be going there too.

It's pickerel we want on the south of the lake
 But sometimes are hard to be found.
 There's sunfish, suckers, tulibee and carp
 It's a good thing there's sauger around.

The harbour seems empty without the big boats
 They're a sight when they all come back in.
 Like the Odinn, the Viking and the Icelander, too
 Many others, and the big Sigga Lynn.

It's been a good season for the boats up north
 They brought in a pretty good haul.
 But we, in the south, didn't do quite as well
 We'll have to fish that much more in the fall.

We all have our good days, and even the bad
 It seems like it's always that way.
 It's what we make of each day that counts
 For things can't go right every day.

So rise up ye men, young and old
 Be proud with your heads held up high.
 We don't work quite as hard as our ancestors did
 But we give it a pretty good try.

The Blacklisting of Halldór Laxness

by Chay Lemoine



Halldór Laxness

Icelandic Nobel Prize winning writer Halldór Laxness was blacklisted by the policies of the United States government during the infamous “red scare” period of American history, using the same fear and intimidation that threatened to ruin the careers of Hollywood screenwriters such as Dalton Trumbo, Ring Lardner, Jr. and American novelist Howard Fast.

Recently declassified FBI documents show that J. Edgar Hoover and the State Department of the United States government authorized an investigation of Halldór Laxness which resulted in publishers refusing to publish the works of the Icelandic writer. These investigations and later inquiries were also aimed at ruining the reputation of the writer in the eyes of the reading public both in Iceland and in the United States. The United States State Department ruined the literary career in English of Halldór Laxness during the late forties and early fifties and prevented him from having continued success in the United States.

Independent People has been acknowledged as one of the great novels of the twentieth century. In celebration of its seventy-fifth anniversary in 2002, *World Literature Today*, a respected literary journal published at the University of Oklahoma, selected a list of the forty most important novels of the last seventy-five years. *Independent People* is on that list as well as on numerous other lists compiled by academic organizations, respected magazines and newspapers.

When the novel was resurrected in English through the efforts of novelist and academic Brad Leithauser it had been out of print for almost fifty years. Vintage International’s reissue of the English translation in January 1997 sold well which resulted in the reissuing in English of six Laxness novels that were previously in

translation but were also out of print.

When *Independent People* was published in English in the United States in 1946, the book was a major best-seller. It was a Book-of-the-Month selection selling nearly 450,000 copies. Certainly Laxness’ publishers would be looking for a way to quickly follow up with another book now that the American reading public had an interest in the new writer. *Salka Valka* had been translated by F. H. Lyon and published in England in 1936. There could have been a quick reissue of this novel until translators could complete work on *World Light* or *Iceland’s Bell* two Laxness novels that had already been published in his native Iceland. There was no follow up to *Independent People*. Even after Halldór Laxness won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1955, *Independent People* was not reissued even in a limited edition.

In a front-page article in the *New York Times*, on Friday, October 28th, 1955, it was announced that Icelandic novelist Halldór Laxness had won the highest literary honour in the world. The article focused most of its comments not on Laxness’ literary merits but on his past political associations. He was portrayed as rich, hypocritical, anti-American and leftist. The article states “informed sources said the Swedish Academy, some of whose members disapprove of Mr. Laxness’ political views, decided to award him the prize this year only because of the relaxation of East-West tensions.” When Boris Pasternak won the Nobel Prize for Literature in Oct 24 1958, the *New York Times* headline read “Nonconformist Russian.” The fact that Pasternak’s novels were not allowed to be published in his native communist Russia contributed to the glowing account of his life. The article placed Pasternak in a pastoral setting, “spade in hand, digging in his vegetable

garden of an early spring morning or pruning his fruit trees in an October afternoon." He was described as living in "a quiet two-story wooden house."

The *New York Times* could have saved its venom. By 1955 Halldór Laxness did not have a literary career with English speaking readers. J. Edgar Hoover, infamous Director of the FBI, had personally directed an investigation of Laxness that included surveillance in Iceland by the Icelandic embassy. The concern was that the monies Laxness received from the sale of *Independent People* were funding Communist Party activities in Iceland.

In a recently declassified, top secret memo dated Sept 19 1947 with the subject line "Halldor Kiljan Laxness, Special Inquiry, State Department." Hoover instructs the Special Agent In Charge of the New York Office to "endeavor to discreetly ascertain the amount of money Laxness has received from the sale of his book in this country through the Book-of-the-Month club. This information should be

furnished to the Bureau promptly." The New York Bureau worked quickly and in a memo to Hoover dated September 25 1947, details were given about the financial arrangements made between the Book-of-the-Month club and Alfred A. Knopf Publishers. The director of operations of the Book-of-the-Month club provided the bureau with the details.

Initially the bureau did not approach the officials of Alfred A. Knopf Publishers because Hoover had explicitly used the word "discreet." The September 25 memo states that "since Knopf is the publisher of the work of Philip J. Jaffe, subject of Bureau case entitled "Philip J. Jaffe, et al, Espionage. In the course of this investigation it was noted that Jaffe was on extremely friendly terms with officials of the Alfred Knopf Company." Jaffe was key player in the Amerasia spy case in which he was accused of obtaining over 1,700 top secret documents from a State Department employee. Not only were Knopf officials deemed untrustworthy but it was felt that even the Treasury Department of the United States could not be trusted to act discreetly in this top secret operation. The memo states "it was not deemed advisable to direct a letter to the Treasury Department for the above information in view of the apparent discreetness of the investigation requested by the State Department." Of course word was out that Halldór Laxness was being investigated by the FBI and was a known communist. Laxness' publisher did not reissue or translate any of Laxness' previous works to follow the success of *Independent People*.

In order to assure that future novels written by Laxness had no chance of publication in the United States, the Icelandic Embassy fanned the fire and sent a "Confidential" or top secret telegram on Feb 22, 1948 to the Secretary of State of the United States warning that the Laxness' novel *The Atom Station* was set for release. "Legation informed it is bitterly anti-American in tone and advances thesis that ICE faces destructions in aggressive war U.S. now planning . . ." Lest there was any doubt as to the motive of those who sought information, the memo further states

"Consider Laxness's prestige would suffer materially if we let it be known that he is an income tax evader."

The investigation continued and at this point it was decided that the Treasury Department could be trusted after all. In Mar 16, 1948, Joseph Gorrell, Chief of the Withholding Returns Section of the Bureau of Internal Revenue gave a report on Laxness' tax status. In Mar 18, 1948 the State Department warned the Icelandic embassy that "It should be noted that it is understood from the Bureau of Internal Revenue that any action the Bureau may take on the basis of tax delinquency in this case would very likely involve the publishing company and agents in the United States rather than Laxness."

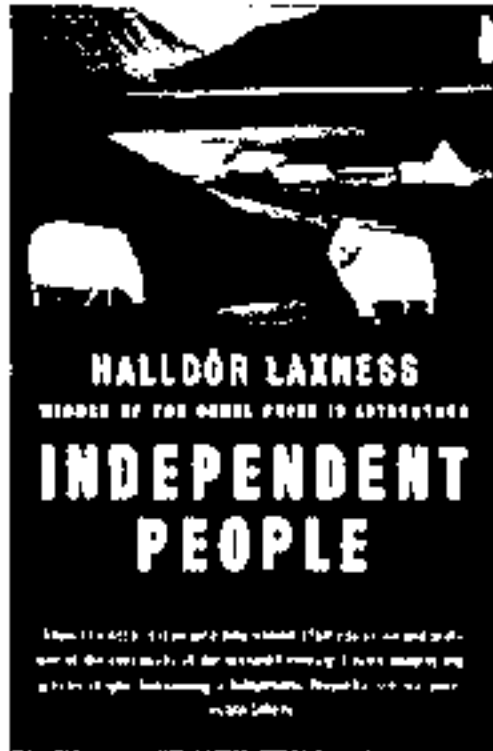
This warning by the State Department did not stop the American Embassy in Iceland from following the movements of Laxness both in Iceland and outside the country and reporting these movements to the State Department. In a recently declassified top secret "airgram" dated Nov 5, 1948 it is reported to the State Department that: "Halldor Kiljan Laxness has left Iceland for the winter and has lately been visiting France. He is believed to be in Italy. It expected that he will get in touch with Communist leaders in the countries through which he travels and will write articles for publication in Iceland and abroad."

The House Un-American Activities Committee had begun its witch hunt in 1947 around the time of Laxness' investigations. American writers during the late forties and early fifties who were considered leftist or had in any way supported the Communist party, were not only blacklisted, they were often jailed for refusing to name names before Congressional committees. Successful novelist Howard Fast was jailed for three months in 1950 for refusing to give a list of donors that contributed to a hospital built for refugees of the Anti-Franco war. When Fast was released from prison, he wrote an historical novel that his publisher Little Brown planned to publish. Pressure from the United States government forced them to reject the book. No other publisher would handle the novel, so

Fast published it himself. *Spartacus* became a huge success and a movie based on the novel was also successful.

If the American publishers were attempting to wait out the controversy before publishing more of Laxness' novels, the jailing of Howard Fast in 1950 (the McCarthy era) and the blacklisting of American screen writers, were all factors preventing Halldór Laxness' works from being safely published in English. American publishers had begun policing themselves and in order to avoid a confrontation with the U.S. State Department and the U.S. Congress, they quietly allowed politics to determine what would be sold to the American reading public. The fact that Laxness won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1955 did little to interest American publishers.

After Congress officially censured Joseph McCarthy in 1954, the insanity of the period began to subside. Giving McCarthy full credit for the travesty of the "red scare" may be giving too much credit to a sad alcoholic who used immoral tactics to further his career. The evil of the "red scare" was fed and nurtured by the American people and the popular culture of the time. McCarthy died in 1957 but his death did not end this especially horrific chapter in American history. The American press still felt the need to persecute when Laxness won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1955. It would take several years to wean them off the "red scare



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mentality”.

In England, publishers were influenced by the prejudices of the United States but they were the first to begin publishing Laxness' books in translation, starting in the late fifties. In 1958 *The Happy Warrior* was published in a limited edition in England. An English translation of *The Atom Station* was also published in England in 1961. *The Atom Station* was not published in the United States until 1982, by Second Chance Press, a small independent press in Sag Harbor, NY. Laxness began to see his books published in the United States in the early sixties. *Paradise Reclaimed* was published in 1962, *The Fish Can Sing* in 1966 and *World Light* in 1969. All of the novels with the exception of *The Happy Warrior* were translated by British television personality Magnus Magnusson. The books were not best sellers and were published by small presses or university press publishers. There was no mention of political controversies on the dust jackets.

In the late fifties and the early sixties, Laxness and Iceland were comfortably and securely confirmed socialists and there was little threat of the country reverting to Soviet communism. There was little threat of that happening when Laxness was being investigated as confirmed by a declassified top secret CIA document. The document dated October 18, 1949 and declassified on January 23, 1978 titled "Current Situation in Iceland" states "The Communist Party, as such, is no longer an important factor in Icelandic politics. It can no longer make or unmake a government; it will lose votes in the coming election, possibly two out of its ten seats, and its chances of participating in the new government are nil."

Laxness visited the United States in September 13, 1959 and a memo was sent by the Special Agent in Charge in New York to J. Edgar Hoover telling of his arrival and that he was staying at the Barclay Hotel in New York. It is the last top secret document in the FBI/Halldór Laxness files. J. Edgar Hoover was now losing interest in the Icelandic writer.

For over fifty years Laxness' voice was silenced in English.

In 1997, Brad Leithauser wrote "A Small Country's Great Book" for the *New York Times* Review of Books which resulted in the reissuing of the epic novel *Independent People*. As a result of that article and the surprisingly brisk book sales, Laxness rose like a Phoenix from obscurity to become recognized as one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century. In 1989 the Berlin Wall was torn down and in 1991 the Soviet Union fell. Six years later a novel that had been accused during the 50s of being a socialist diatribe written by a "commie sympathizer" would once again capture the imagination of the American reading public. Today, Laxness is acknowledged as deserving of the greatest literary prize. There is little chance that his books will be out of print in English once again and he has entered the international literary canon. English speaking readers and academics have accepted Halldór Laxness.

Halldór Laxness died in 1998, just one year after the reissuing of *Independent People* by Vintage International. He was 96 years old and had been suffering from dementia for several years. He may have had some realization that his book was going to once again be offered in English in the United States, but he died before the full implication of its reemergence became clear. It is important that we acknowledge Halldór Laxness as one of the blacklisted artists of the period. He was not a novelist whose great work was lost because of a fickle and disinterested public, poor marketing by his publisher or because of some literary anomaly.

Halldór Laxness and his great epic novel *Independent People* were victims of political persecution which resulted in the destruction of a world writer's reputation.

As a result of petty political interference by the two controversial and much discredited American figureheads J. Edgar Hoover and Sen. Eugen McCarthy the Laxness' literature was hidden from a large audience of potential readers.

Generations of English readers were unable to experience one of the greatest novels ever written.

Halldór Laxness's speech at the Nobel Banquet at the City Hall in Stockholm, December 10, 1955

(Translated from Icelandic)

I was travelling in the south of Sweden a few weeks ago, when I heard the rumour that the choice of the Swedish Academy might possibly fall on me. Alone in my hotel room that night, I naturally began to ask myself what it would mean to a poor wanderer, a writer from one of the most remote islands in the world, to be suddenly singled out by an institution famous for its promotion of culture, and brought here to the platform by its command.

It is not so strange perhaps that my thoughts turned then - as they still do, not least at this solemn moment - to all my friends and relations, to those who had been the companions of my youth and are dead now and buried in oblivion. Even in their lifetime, they were known to few, and today they are remembered by fewer still. All the same they have formed and influenced me and, to this day, their effect on me is greater than that of any of the world's great masters or pioneers could possibly have been. I am thinking of all those wonderful men and women, the people among whom I grew up. My father and mother, but above all, my grandmother, who taught me hundreds of lines of old Icelandic poetry before I ever learned the alphabet.

In my hotel room that night, I thought - as I still do - of the moral principles she instilled in me: never to harm a living creature; throughout my life, to place the poor, the humble, the meek of this world above all others; never to forget those who were slighted or neglected or who had suffered injustice, because it was they who, above all others, deserved our love and respect, in Iceland or anywhere in the world. I spent my entire childhood in an environment in which the mighty of the earth had no place outside story books and dreams. Love of, and respect for, the humble routine of everyday life and its creatures was the only moral commandment which carried conviction when I was a child.

I recall my friends whose names the world never knew but who, in my youth, and long into my adult life, guided my literary work. Though no writers themselves, they nevertheless possessed infallible literary judgment and were able, better than most of the masters, to open my eyes to what was essential in literature. Many of those gifted men are no longer with us, but they are so vivid in my mind and in my thoughts that, many a time, I would have been hard put to distinguish between which was the expression of my own self and which the voice of my friends within me.

I am thinking, too, of that community of one hundred and fifty thousand men and women who form the book-loving nation that we Icelanders are. From the very first, my countrymen have followed my literary career, now criticizing, now praising my work, but hardly ever letting a single word be buried in indifference. Like a sensitive instrument that records every sound, they have reacted with pleasure or displeasure to every word I have written. It is a great good fortune for an author to be born into a nation so steeped in centuries of poetry and literary tradition.

My thoughts fly to the old Icelandic storytellers who created our classics, whose personalities were so bound up with the masses that their names, unlike their lives' work, have not been preserved for posterity. They live in their immortal creations and are as much a part of Iceland as her landscape. For century upon dark century those nameless men and women sat in their mud huts writing books without so much as asking themselves what their wages would be, what prize or recognition would be theirs. There was no fire in their miserable dwellings at which to warm their stiff fingers as

they sat up late at night over their stories. Yet they succeeded in creating not only a literary language which is among the most beautiful and subtlest there is, but a separate literary genre. While their hearts remained warm, they held on to their pens.

As I was sitting in my hotel room in Skåne, I asked myself: what can fame and success give to an author? A measure of material well-being brought about by money? Certainly. But if an Icelandic poet should forget his origin as a man of the people, if he should ever lose his sense of belonging with the humble of the earth, whom my old grandmother taught me to revere, and his duty toward them, then what is the good of fame and prosperity to him?

Your Majesties, ladies and gentlemen - It is a great event in my life that the Swedish Academy should have chosen to link my name with the nameless masters of sagas. The reasons the Academy has given for singling me out in so spectacular a manner will serve as an encouragement to me for the rest of my days, but they will also bring joy to those whose support has been responsible for all that my work may have of value. The distinction you have conferred on me fills me with pride and joy. I thank the Swedish Academy for all this with gratitude and respect. Though it was I who today received the Prize from Your Majesty's hands, nevertheless I feel that it has also been bestowed on my many mentors, the fathers of Iceland's literary tradition.

Prior to the speech, H. Bergstrand, former Rector of the Caroline Institute, addressed Mr. Laxness: «We know that Alfred Nobel regarded life with the eyes of a poet, and that his gaze was fixed on a far-off dreamland. Accordingly, literature should have an idealistic tendency. This is something else than the admission of the lad who later called himself Halldór Kiljan Laxness when he listened to the sayings of the pipe-player. He said that the player's talk hid no deeper meaning than an ordinary landscape or a finely painted picture, and they therefore had the same self-evident charm. «From the day I learned to read», he continued, «I have been irritated by stories with a moral, a hidden pointer, in the guise of adventure. I immediately stopped reading or listening as soon as I thought I understood that the purpose of the story was to force on me some kind of wisdom which someone else considered noteworthy, a virtue that someone else found admirable, instead of telling me a story. For a story is still the best thing that one can tell».

I am convinced that the Swedish Academy was of the same opinion when it awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature to a modern incarnation of an Icelandic teller of sagas. And no one can deny that his tales move the mind, a prerequisite that Horace demanded for the works of a poet, in the words: <et quocunq; volent animum auditoris agunto>».

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Icelandic and a Few Other Languages

by *Haraldur Bessason*

Presented at a meeting in the Department of Icelandic Language and Literature, University of Manitoba on April 12, 2007).

Our knowledge of the medieval Scandinavian languages comes mostly from 12th- and 13th-century books, written in Iceland. As a rule, I therefore prefer the term Icelandic to Norse for the language of Iceland in its spoken and written form, old and modern.

The Icelandic language is spoken by about 350 thousand people, most of them living in Iceland. This number sets narrow limits for its horizontal or synchronic dimension. To give an example, Icelandic authors, poets, translators, journalists and others writing in their native tongue, have only a small readership to rely on. Therefore, the question is often raised by those unfamiliar with the history of Iceland whether the language spoken in that country does not fall in the category of the world's endangered languages. My own reply to that question always includes a reference to a diachronic or historical dimension, pointing out that speakers of Icelandic are, in our day, about nine or ten times more numerous than they were two hundred years ago. This sometimes makes me wonder if, at the present time, probabilities of the disappearance of Icelandic may not be nine or ten times less than they were at the beginning of the 19th century. At that time Iceland was an oppressed colony whose prospects were quite grim. To this we may add that the country has now been an independent republic for more than sixty years, which undeniably carries with it some degree of language protection. In recent years, annual publications in Icelandic, including books, magazines, newspapers and other printed media, have been almost overwhelming. At the turn of the 19th century, these were few and far

between.

Lately, prominent financiers in Iceland have suggested the adoption of a policy of bilingualism, placing Icelandic and English on equal footing. In their opinion this would help them cultivate and strengthen their ties with foreign companies and commercial enterprises and facilitate business transactions between Iceland and the outside world. I doubt if these forward-looking individuals fully appreciate the meaning and implications of legislative Acts regulating the use of more than one officially recognized language. However, past generations of Icelanders may not have been without experience with people using more than one language in their day-to-day affairs, since a quick look at their nation's history reveals a few instances which, at least to a limited degree, point in the direction of bilingualism. In the well-known medieval Icelandic *Laxdæla Saga*, set in Iceland around the year 1000 A.D. and written shortly before the middle of the 13th century, we read about a powerful and prestigious man, Höskuldur Dala-Kollsson at Hjarðarfell in the district of Dalir in the western part of Iceland. He is said to have sailed to Norway to buy timber for his new farmhouse in Iceland. On the same visit, he also acquired a beautiful concubine whom he brought back home with him. Höskuldur knew from the beginning that his attractive concubine had one drawback: she was speechless and thus unable to express herself in words. In due course, the concubine bore Höskuldur a son who came to be known by the name Ólafur the Peacock, a boy of exceptional promise who later became one of Iceland's most admired public figures. From *Laxdæla Saga* comes the following story about Höskuldur, his attractive concubine, and their young son

Ólafur:

"It so happened one morning that Hoskuld was out of doors seeing to his farm; it was a fine day and the dawn sun was shining. He heard the sound of voices and went over to the stream at the foot of the sloping homefield. There he saw two people he knew well; it was his son Olaf, and the boy's mother. He realized then that she was not speechless at all, for she was talking busily to the child. Hoskuld now went over to them and asked her what her name was, and told her there was no point in concealing it any longer. She agreed and they sat down on the slope of the homefield.

Then she said. 'If you want to know my name, I am called Melkorka.' Hoskuld asked her to tell him about her family. 'My father is called Myrkjartan, and he is a king in Ireland. I was taken captive and enslaved when I was fifteen.'

Whether or not Melkorka is a mere figment of the imagination of the author of the saga, Icelanders take great pride in being descended from her, even though this may mean, in the words of Halldór Laxness, that, as a rule, Icelandic people are descended from books. But the preceding story about Melkorka raises an interesting question about the use of language. Were Melkorka and her son Ólafur speaking Irish or Icelandic, we may wonder, when Höskuldur happened to find them in conversation on a sunny morning? The author does not deal with that question directly. Also, one is bound to suspect that Höskuldur himself neither spoke nor understood Irish. Melkorka must therefore have told him the story of her life in Icelandic, an admirable accomplishment on her part, considering the fact that from the time of her arrival in Iceland she had, to the best of people's knowledge, never said a word in any language. Yet she was found to have had secret conversations with her young son Ólafur. Later on in the saga, its author, almost unwittingly, it seems, sheds important light on the problem at hand. Having reached adulthood, Ólafur the Peacock makes a voyage to Norway where King Haraldur Grey-Cloak not only entertains the young man from Iceland, making

him a member of his court but gives him, in addition, a set of scarlet clothes and a ship. He then sets sail for Ireland and finally meets his maternal grandfather King Myrkjartan, who immediately recognizes that Ólafur is a man of noble birth who speaks exceptionally good Irish. This kind of information about the use of languages is rarely offered in the Icelandic sagas, even though their authors often embroidered the known historicity of 9th- and 10th-century characters. Uninitiated saga readers are therefore likely to assume that, in the Middle Ages, Icelandic was spoken and understood, not only throughout Scandinavia, but in the Baltic regions and even Russia and of course in the British Isles. This imaginary expansion of geographic language territory seems to have been almost an unconscious attempt on the part of medieval Icelandic poets and storytellers to elevate their own past to the level of myth or legend to make it acceptable. The author of *Laxdæla Saga*, however, is realistic enough to inform us that Ólafur the Peacock had to use his impeccable Irish when he met his grandfather King Myrkjartan. From this we may deduce that, about the time Christianity was being introduced in Iceland, a somewhat constrained brand of bilingualism may have been in existence at the odd farm in the district of Dalir in western Iceland. Whether or not the Irish princess Melkorka, who became a slave girl in Norway and was brought from there to Iceland, ever existed, her story depicts a situation which may not have been uncommon in 9th-century south-west Iceland. A number of people of Celtic descent and others who had been living in Scotland, Ireland and the Hebrides then settled in that part of the country where at many a farm an Irish mother may have taught her child her mother tongue. Unfortunately, many of these people came to Iceland as slaves and were then relegated to an inferior social status. In his book *Gaelic Influence in Iceland* Gísli Sigurðsson has this to say about our previously mentioned Melkorka: "Melkorka is worthy of special mention. The only reason why she is acceptable as a mother for an Icelandic hero, is that she is in fact a

princess. Nevertheless, her son has to suffer in Iceland for his ignoble mother! If this was the case with royal persons from Ireland who were captured into slavery, how much more so for slaves of less noble status. Can we expect them to be mentioned at all?"

Whether instances of this kind of bilingualism in Iceland were either few or many, no one really knows, but Celtic dialects in the country seem to have disappeared early and left behind only a small number of names of people and places, and a few other words of Celtic origins. Nevertheless, memories of these people lived on and influenced some of the major 13th-century Icelandic Sagas, notably the ones that were set in the south-west part of the country, *Laxdæla Saga* being a good example of the preservation of such ancient memories.

About the turn of the 13th century, one detects a certain kind of what might be called restricted bilingualism in Iceland, in that it mainly occurred in written works. Lately, this topic has not received much attention. Nevertheless, the highly esteemed scholar Sigurður Nordal, in several of his brilliant works from the early 20th century, called attention to two different schools of thought reflected by the use of language in early Icelandic historical and literary works. Professor Nordal saw these two trends as being in direct opposition. According to him, learned brethren or monks at the monastery of Þingeyrar in northern Iceland concentrated, for a short period of time, on the writing of historical works or chronicles in Latin. At almost the same time, two other centres of learning in southern Iceland, at Haukadalur and Oddi, embarked upon a much broader spectrum of literary and scholarly activity in works which were written in Icelandic and marked the dawn of vernacular writing in Iceland and throughout the Scandinavian countries. These date back to the first half of the 12th century and became an important foundation of Iceland's classical literature and history. In addition, they secured for Icelandic, the language in which they were recorded or written, a unique position within the family of the Nordic languages

comparable to that of Latin in southern Europe. This accounts, at least in part, for the subsequent evolution of the Icelandic medieval classics and makes clear the fact that Iceland became and still remains almost the only storehouse of Northern history and literature from the Middle Ages. Furthermore, it explains to some degree a strong continuity in language and literary activity throughout the entire history of the country.

The claim that those who used their mother tongue in their writings prevailed in a kind of contest with Latinists from their monastic community is perhaps too simplistic a deduction in regard to this kind of bilingualism. In the Middle Ages, and for a long time afterwards, Latin, i.e., medieval or vulgar Latin, was the *lingua franca* among the European upper classes, and the people of Iceland used Latin similarly. To a considerable extent, it was through Latin that they established in the beginning and then maintained a strong link with cultural movements on the European continent. This in turn protected the authors of scholarly and literary works against isolation from some of the main-streams of civilization and enabled them to reach a remarkably high professional level in a remote part of the world. They understood that for Europe to extend as far north as Iceland more was necessary for intellectual stimulus than the north wind alone. Throughout the centuries this link has proved to be an enduring one indeed. Born in Iceland in 1568, Arngrímur Jónsson the Learned, a strong proponent of humanism and a classicist, published in his day no fewer than eleven books or booklets in Latin. Some of them were intended to be in defense of Iceland, where Jónsson severely criticized foreign authors who out of mere ignorance had written somewhat entertaining but nonetheless slanderous works about Iceland and the Icelanders. Nevertheless, these same works also served as an introduction of the Old Icelandic literary heritage to the outside world and gradually attracted the attention of the European scholarly community. To quote a learned comment on Jónsson, he "played a formative role in the development of

European nationalism, participating in the ethnographic insult and counterinsult by which European countries came to distinguish themselves in print.”

The achievements of the renaissance humanist Arngrímur Jónsson lay in his ability to bring his work into proper relationship with prevalent philosophical ideas within the European community, emphasizing the value of a cultural heritage represented by classical art and literature. From an Icelandic point of view, he was the originator of a trend which gradually gained momentum and led to the founding of numerous centres of Icelandic studies on the European mainland, the British Isles and eventually in North America, and beyond.

About the middle of the last century, this international stamp of approval, indicating among other things that the study of Icelandic was considered to be an integral part of a wider field of research in the area of early English literature and language, inspired those who spearheaded the establishment of The Department of Icelandic Language and Literature at the University of Manitoba. They were well aware that, about the middle of the 19th century, Oxford had become the cradle of Icelandic studies in England. From there and other institutions of learning in England had come a large body of scholarly publications, including learned treatises on Icelandic history, language and literature, English translations of prose and poetry and last but by no means least a large Icelandic-English Dictionary published at

The Clarendon Press in Oxford in 1874.

Special mention should be made of Professor Skúli Johnson, one of the visionaries behind the founding of The Icelandic Department. Professor Johnson was a classicist who, in his younger days, had attended Oxford on a Rhodes Scholarship and written an MA thesis on the subject of studies and research in Icelandic Language and Literature at academic institutions in England. In a sense, his humanistic interests at the University of Manitoba cast him in the role of a modern counterpart of Arngrímur Jónsson the Learned. Even though these two men were born in the same district in Northern Iceland, they were three hundred years apart and could therefore meet only in spirit. Obviously, the trend which the Icelander Arngrímur Jónsson set in motion in the late 16th century finally reached the University of Manitoba where the historical or diachronic dimension of Icelandic was clearly understood. As a result, it became a basic ideological element in a foundation which also received strong support from another source, which was mainly the Icelandic ethnic community in Canada. At that time, the University of Manitoba was perhaps the only institution of learning outside Iceland where academic interests of this nature could be expected to blend in with those of a surrounding community.

As noted earlier, Sigurður Nordal maintained that there were two different schools of thought in 12th-century Iceland whereby some historians or literary authors chose to write their works in Latin

while others used Icelandic, their native tongue, for the same purpose. According to his thesis, the two languages, Latin and Icelandic, were placed in a contrastive position for a short period of time, which meant that, in written form, they had to compete with each other. This was in other words a contest in which Icelandic won an easy victory. However this may have been, it should not be overlooked that despite the elegance of this idea or thesis, the fact remains that from the time the Icelanders put quill to vellum to write the first book in a Scandinavian language, Icelandic and Latin remained in a complementary position in Iceland for many centuries. The writing of this particular book, which became the forerunner of other books, began in the winter of 1117-1118 at which time portions of the Laws of the Icelandic Freestate were put down on parchment at a farm in northern Iceland. Later, it most likely came to be known by the name Grágás (Grey Goose) and appeared in a two-volume English translation as part of the University of Manitoba Icelandic Studies series in 1980 and 2000. As to Latin influences on its origins, suffice it to say that, in the beginning, Icelandic scribes had to make do with the Latin or Roman alphabet in their vernacular writings, to which they gradually added a few runic characters.

Through the Latin language the Icelanders were able to stay aware of and identify at least some of the cultural sources and trends in Europe that would work to their benefit. Through the same language, as I mentioned earlier, they also created an interest in their own heritage and made it known far beyond the shores of their homeland. I have already referred to the works of Arngrímur Jónsson as an example. To this I must add that as early as the 16th and 17th centuries, quite a few Icelandic classics, poetry as well as prose, were translated into Latin, remarkable undertakings which then were continued at varying intervals. Special mention should be made of Njal's Saga, published in 1808 in the Latin translation of Jon Johnsonius. In passing, it may also be pointed out that Latin translations of medieval Icelandic lit-

erature have often proved helpful to translators of Icelandic Sagas into the modern languages. The late Professor Lee M. Hollander of the University of Texas in Austin, a noted scholar in the field of Old Germanic languages and one of several translators of Njal's Saga into English, freely acknowledged his debt to the Latin translation of the saga which he often consulted when in doubt about the meaning of a word or a phrase in the original text.

Also, a most intriguing instance of this interplay between Icelandic and Latin is the fate of the ancient Saga of the Skjöldungs, a legendary account of the origins of the Danish dynasty, who traced their lineage to the god Óðinn. In the early 17th century, Arngrímur Jónsson the Learned translated this remarkable saga from Icelandic into Latin, or produced a summary of it in that language. This was most fortunate indeed, since, some time after the Latin translation appeared in print, the original Icelandic manuscript was lost. Without the Latin version the divine origin of the kings and queens of Denmark would still be uncertain, if not totally unknown. It is doubtful, however, that with the passage of time, the Saga of the Skjöldungs remained popular in Iceland. Perhaps people in that country found it difficult to believe that the Danish monarchs, who had become their overlords, could possibly be the descendants of divine beings. This may in turn explain why one of the original written proofs of such dignified beginnings was thrown by the wayside somewhere in the mountains of Iceland, and also why a derivative account in Latin would never be accepted by the Icelanders as valid documentation.

In 1982 an unusual circle was completed when Arngrímur Jónsson's Latin translation of Skjöldunga Saga was published in an Icelandic translation by Professor Bjarni Guðnason. Thanks to the Guðnason translation people in Iceland can now read the saga in their own language with true delight. With all political ties with the Danes severed more than sixty years ago, cruel exercise of Danish power in their country is long since forgotten. Her Majesty Margrethe Alexandrine Þórhildur



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Ingrid, the present Queen of Denmark, not only bears an Icelandic middle name but is a friend of the Icelanders. For them Her Majesty's divine origin is beyond dispute.

I realize of course that the term bilingualism is quite an inappropriate designation of the way in which Icelanders in past centuries used Latin and their native language to communicate or even reciprocate with other nations in the cultural arena. On a lighter note I must however add that distinguished foreign visitors to Iceland in the 19th century praised the high quality of education in that country, where good command of Latin, they maintained, was not only achieved by members of the clergy and public officials but was quite common among ordinary people. In Iceland the common man knew that his pastor was fluent in Latin and learned the language from him. This kind of private tutoring is hinted at in the published works of Lord Dufferin of England and Professor Willard Fiske of Cornell University who, respectively, visited Iceland in 1856 and 1879 and wrote about their experiences there. In their day,

these two gentlemen took a strong liking to peoples living on the periphery of civilization in geographically remote areas. The culture and mode of living they discovered in such out-of-the-way parts of the world impressed them, so they tended to elevate what they found there to the plane of legend or myth, a level where bilingualism in Iceland most likely belongs.

Iceland was under Denmark for more than six centuries. During that period, all matters of administration and trade were in the hands of the Danes. In business and government the Danish language predominated. So much has been said and written about corruptive influences of Danish on the Icelandic language that even a summary of all that criticism would be too long for my presentation. Allow me only to suggest that voluminous publications in Icelandic from earlier times with references to government announcements or edicts, loosely translated from Danish into Icelandic, do not yield reliable information about the general language status in Iceland at the time of their issue. These documents often contain a peculiar and almost unintelligible mixture of the two languages, and can only be seen as a Danish garb of coercive and oppressive officialese, the kind of jargon used in government offices, which must have been difficult for the public to understand, something they would hardly pay any attention to or accept anyway.

Numerous collections of Icelandic folktales are supposed to be informative sources about the condition of Icelandic spoken by people in general in all the different areas of the country for centuries. Thus it is believed that in some way these literary documents give an overall picture of the abilities of ordinary Icelanders to express themselves in their mother tongue. The straightforward narrative style of the folktales shows no signs of decay or corruptive influences from a foreign language, and here I am of course making the naive assumption that a loan from a host language always works to the detriment of the borrower. With this and many other things in mind, we can conclude that, despite the strong political and cultural ties between Iceland and Denmark which lasted for

more than six hundred years, the Danish language in Iceland never rose to the level of becoming one of two languages in a bilingual community.

In his recent book, *Creators – From Chaucer to Dürer to Picasso and Disney*, English historian Paul Johnson writes that “Chaucer was probably the first man, and certainly the first writer, to see the English nation as a unity.” Chaucer's works also reflect that he saw the English language as a unity of many diverse dialects. Furthermore, Johnson claims that Chaucer brought together a great variety of dialects into a unified artistic and dignified whole, fit for the expression of literary art of a high calibre. This explains his great appeal to his contemporaries, who no longer read French easily, if at all, and who wanted to read about themselves in English. “What Chaucer gave them was this, and something more: his was the English they spoke. It was one of the great creative gifts, which no one else was to possess to the same degree until Shakespeare came along, that he could write in a variety of vernaculars.”

In their works, these two masters of English literature drew on the varied landscape of the entire territory of English speaking people, which they saw as their proper domain. Partly therein lay their success.

Many centuries before Chaucer and Shakespeare laid their respective cornerstones of Modern English, anonymous authors composed the poems of *The Elder Edda* or *The Poetic Edda*, the best-known of all Icelandic books. Its manuscript has been dated to the middle of the 13th century but it contains poems of a much earlier provenance, which means that they must have been part of an oral tradition and handed down continuously from one generation to the next. Some of these poems have been dated as far back as about 800 A.D. and would therefore be older than the discovery and settlement of Iceland.

Among them is one of the masterpieces of Northern mythological or heroic literature, a poem about the craftsman *Völundur* whose story parallels to some extent the Greek myth about *Daedalus* the designer

of the Labyrinth. The *Völund* poem is rich in imagery but its words and phrases sometimes point beyond the limits of the Old Nordic language, a designation which may be appropriate here, and in the direction of other Old Germanic languages as, for example, Old High German and Old English. The poet borrows words and phrases from these languages, giving them at the same time a purely Nordic or Icelandic countenance. Yet, without recourse to texts in Old High German and Old English for explanation, their correct meaning would elude us or, at best, remain a mystery.

How did this come about? The answer to that question is not an obvious one. At the time the poem was composed not only had the Old Germanic Language broken up into many different dialects but, with the passage of time, these dialects had become mutually unintelligible languages. The author of the *Völund* poem appears to have been well enough at home in both Old High German and Old English to be able to adjust his borrowings almost imperceptibly to his Nordic language environment. Perhaps though they were, in the poet's day, remnants from an earlier stage in the development of his language. Their intrinsic value may have secured for them exceptionally long life spans. Second, it should not be overlooked that, during the Viking Age, men from the north, including Icelanders, travelled widely and must have come into contact with those who spoke languages closely related to their own. Many of them settled in the British Isles where Nordic dialects and Old English, in varying degrees, intermixed. Language contacts of this nature must have made it relatively easy for well-crafted words or phrases from Old High German or Old English to wend their way into a Nordic territory for permanent placement in a poetic masterpiece. This may indeed have been the case with some of the expressions in the *Völund* poem.

Whether or not its author lived in the 8th century or later, some of the already mentioned language borrowings, if I am allowed to use that term, give me among other things the distinct feeling that, sub-

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consciously, he/she was making an attempt to reach a much wider language territory than was within immediate reach. Without being fully aware of it, the poet may have thought of long gone colleagues who, even in the eighth century or somewhat later, had become part of remote antiquity, and whose language domain had been Old Germanic in its almost undivided form. In theme, the Völund poem is, as the other poems of The Poetic Edda, without territorial constraints.

Yet the Nordic tongue in which it was composed must have had narrow boundary lines in terms of both language and geography. On the level of expression, the author of the Völund poem, and some other Nordic poets of the same period, could nevertheless have felt, consciously or not, that, through their choice of words alone, they were taking steps back in time to reach a larger and more populous language domain than would otherwise have been accessible. Deep down, their objective would then have been similar to that of Chaucer and Shakespeare in England some six or eight centuries later, which was to reach the undivided territory of a certain language and bring to it a degree of unity by drawing on all its vernaculars or dialects. If this comparison makes any sense - in my mind it is a thought rather than a suggestion- the Nordic poets were, to some extent, looking to a domain long since vanished, whereas the English masters had theirs right before them.

Shortly before his death in 1241, the Icelandic historian Snorri Sturluson had this to say about his fellow countryman, Ari Þorgilsson the Learned, who wrote the first work of history in a Nordic vernacular shortly after 1120: "Priest Ari the Learned ... was the first man in this country to write in the Norse tongue about lore both ancient and modern." The English designation Norse comes from the Dutch word 'noors' which means Norwegian and is often used nowadays, it seems, to deice-landicize medieval Icelandic literature, which explains why I myself never have taken a particular liking to it. Nevertheless, the Icelanders shared their language with people living in the western regions of

Norway for quite a long time, or at least until the 15th century, when the Nordic languages or dialects on the European continent were rapidly drifting away from the language which the Danes, Norwegians and Swedes once had in common, and which we still know as Icelandic. Eventually, all this linguistic drift brought about a major shrinkage of the domain of the Icelandic language.

On two occasions, the medieval Icelanders carried out explorations beyond their own country with the intent to found settlements in previously unexplored parts of the world. In the summer of 985 or 986 A.D. a fleet of twenty-five ships left the south-west of Iceland for Greenland under the leadership of Eiríkur the Red Þorvaldsson where he and his followers eventually established, on the west coast of Greenland, two different settlements with altogether 280 farms. Almost four hundred years later, according to information from Icelandic Annals, the Greenlanders (the Icelanders in Greenland) had a hostile encounter with the natives of Greenland who at that time were moving away from deteriorating climatic conditions in the northern regions of the country into its southern parts in search of less inclement weather. An entry from an Icelandic annal for the year 1379 has this to say: "Skrælings (i.e. Inuit people) attacked the Greenlanders, killing eighteen of them and carrying off two boys into captivity." Nothing is included in this grimly laconic report about the exchange of words or a conflict between two unrelated languages. The last reference to Greenland in the Icelandic Annals is for 1410, when an Icelanders returned home after spending four years in Greenland. Since then, Norse or Icelandic people in that country have not been heard from.

The matter of language conflict rather than language contact is clearly addressed and sometimes hinted at in the 13th-century Icelandic Saga of the Greenlanders and the Saga of Eiríkur the Red, the two Vínland Sagas which in part are about the discovery of Vínland and subsequent attempts by members of Eiríkur the Red's family to establish a settlement in what is

probably now the Canadian Maritimes, shortly after the year 1000 A.D. The Saga of the Greenlanders describes a band of Algonquins (Beothuks), the natives of the Maritimes, on their visit to the houses of Þorfinnur Karlsefni, where they intended to do business with the newcomers from Greenland. Thinking that the visitors meant harm, Þorfinnur barred the doors of his houses against them. The author of the saga explains this unfortunate and bizarre business meeting with the simple statement that "neither side could understand the other's language." At the time of this confrontation, neither the Algonquins of the Maritimes nor the Icelanders from Greenland knew that all languages are the same in the deep structure, something which Professor Noam Chomsky of MIT claimed to have found out a long time afterwards. I doubt though if knowledge of Chomskyan deep structure in grammar would have been of much help in this instance. An impenetrable language barrier remained the obstacle which, among other things, made both camps suspicious and hostile towards each other. In the end, the Icelanders from Greenland, with odds obviously against them, aborted their plans of permanent settlement in the new world and went back to Greenland and Iceland. For them the atmosphere in Vínland seems to have grown tense beyond endurance in a short period of time.

Völuspá (The Sibyl's Prophecy) is a 10th-century Icelandic poem which I have ventured to call the Bible of the North. It traces the history of the universe from the time of Creation to Doomsday and ends with Revelation. The principal characters are the heathen gods of the Northmen. In the words of Sigurður Nordal, "The Sibyl's Prophecy has won greater fame from within the Scandinavian countries, and even beyond, than any other poem." In a way I always feel as if, through this literary masterpiece, its anonymous author conquered the entire universe, making Icelandic thereby the universal language on earth and in heaven. This feeling has been reinforced by the fact that another Icelandic mythological poem dating from the same time as The Sibyl's Prophecy has been ascribed to the

supreme god Óðinn himself. Surely, a supreme divinity always uses a language which is universal and therefore understood everywhere in the world.

During the last quarter of the 19th century and the first decade and a half of the 20th century, a number of people left Iceland and founded settlements in Canada and the United States. This virtual exodus brought about the only expansion of language territory the Icelanders ever achieved. About 1940, censuses for Canada and the United States included information about some forty thousand people in North America who claimed that Icelandic was their first language and that, occasionally, they still used it in their day-to-day affairs. In the North American-Icelandic communities the immigrants' mother tongue finally became "the other compo-



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ment" in what can truthfully be labelled as bilingualism.

In the early years of their history, strong voices were heard from within the Icelandic pioneer communities in the United States and Canada advocating unity among the people who had come there from Iceland. The founding of an Icelandic colony in North America was, in the opinion of some individuals, the only way for the immigrants to preserve their ethnic identity, and that staying together was necessary for the cultivation and maintenance of the most important feature of that identity, which was the Icelandic language. A poet, editor and a visionary of a rare magnitude by the name of Jón Ólafsson was, to mention only one individual, an ardent proponent of the separate-colony idea. An exceptionally eloquent man and gifted with a strong personality, Ólafsson made contacts in Washington D.C., where he is said to have befriended the President of the United States, Ulysses S. Grant. From the government in Washington he obtained, in 1874, a special rank in the United States Navy. Almost immediately afterwards, he was sent on a special mission, in the company of two other Icelanders, to Alaska where the three of them searched for a suitable site for an Icelandic colony. In his report on their findings, written in Icelandic and published in Washington D.C. in 1875, Ólafsson had high hopes for the future of Icelandic people and their language in an attractive region he and his team had picked out in Alaska. There, according to his logistics, it would take the Icelandic colonists anywhere from three to four centuries to reach the 100 million mark in number, at which time the boundary of their original colony would long since have been done away with and the new and extended domain under their jurisdiction would stretch from Hudson Bay to the Pacific Ocean. From there the Icelandic language could then spread south, replacing, in Ólafsson's own words, "the degenerate English tongue".

A careful reading of Jón Ólafsson's report leaves one with a strange feeling. He seems to have believed or wanted to believe that, in its southward flow, the Icelandic

language would assume the force of a tidal wave. One can even go further by saying that Ólafsson, who was indeed a poet, envisioned his native language as a new and powerful element of nature, rushing forth with a steadily growing intensity, leaving its speakers behind and submerging at the same time all the other languages on the North American continent, including such dialects as English and French.

Needless to say, Jón Ólafsson's grand scheme never materialized. Therefore, people of Icelandic descent in Alaska are still few in number. Ólafsson himself seems to have lost interest in his project soon after he gave his report to Washington. I have tried to understand his sudden change of mind and come to the conclusion that it must have resulted from his own volatile way of thinking. However, the idea has also occurred to me that, having completed his Alaska report and submitted it to his friend, the President of the United States, Ólafsson may all of a sudden have realized that, on the mythological plane, an anonymous Icelandic poet and the supreme god Óðinn had used their poetic skills almost a thousand years earlier to make Icelandic the language of the world. In comparison, a minor conquest of only the North American continent could then have begun to appear to him as no more of an achievement than carrying coals to Newcastle. After a fairly short but colorful career in North America, Ólafsson returned to his native land where he lived for the rest of his life. There he found himself again in the vicinity of Óðinn, a supreme sovereign and a god of poetry. From times immemorial, Óðinn had been the one to give directions to the Icelanders and others living in more ways than one on the world's peripheries, leading them, on occasion, into the mythological realm where the laws of nature no longer obtain and the greatest of conquests are within reach.

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Magnus Eliason: A Savant?

by Kevin Jon Johnson



Magnus Eliason

Recent internet surfing took me to the *60 Minutes* website featuring savants, taken from their Monday 4 August 2008 broadcast, and it reminded me of Magnus Eliason. In the documentary Dr. Oliver Sacks remarks that the human brain is far more complex than any supercomputer; the neural web that creates consciousness baffles science although it draws many like physicist Roger Penrose to speculate on it, a trend already well under way when Julian Jaynes published *The Origins of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* in 1976. The final word on consciousness may remain a generation or two down the road, at a bare minimum.

Savants exhibit striking skill in visualization, memory, mathematics, or music most often in a mind otherwise handicapped or defective, Dr. Sacks comments. Only around 50 true savants populate our world today, a rare breed indeed. Because most savants have severe retardation or autism they cannot communicate to us as to how they accomplish their breathtaking acts. A lone exception to this rule, Daniel Tammet, has normal intelligence and has made his way in this world like most of us; he visualizes numbers, and has a visual image of every number up to 10,000. For Daniel numbers come in unique colours, shapes and textures, thus 289 is ugly but 333 is round and beautiful to him. An answer to a mathematical question comes to Daniel as a colourful, textured landscape that he simply describes to give the answer.

George Finn, a savant obsessed with dates, inspired the memorable portrayal of a similarly gifted individual by Dustin Hoffman (Raymond Babbitt) in the 1988 Oscar winning *Rain Man*, a few years after Finn's uncanny ability received note on a *60 Minutes* television broadcast. What day of the week was 30 May in the year 1? Wednesday, Finn answered after a

moment's pause; this and other such answers all proved correct!

Magnus Eliason shared this ability, at least to some degree, with Finn, but unlike the mentally handicapped Finn the mind of Magnus was much better than average and he made his way successfully in this world. Once when Magnus overheard me say that my birthday was 20 August 1963, he quickly responded, "You were born on a Tuesday."

Without question Magnus had a prodigious memory like many Icelanders and Icelandic Canadians, but unlike most he had impaired vision due to his albinism with only ten per cent vision as a child, then regarded as clinical blindness in Canada. Only Douglas Lloyd Campbell (1895 – 1995), Magnus commented, exceeded his political memory. Campbell served as a member of the Manitoba Legislative Assembly for 47 years and as Premier of Manitoba from 1948 to 1958.

For those who have read Magnus Eliason: *A Life on the Left*, they may have noted the plentiful statistical data, but many may not know the process by which this book was created. Magnus spoke with Melinda McCracken and his conversations recorded onto cassettes, so the source of this Canadian social history was Magnus's unaided memory. I transcribed the oral into a written text, strengthening the verb integrity, style and grammar, and checking the numerous dates and recollections of political election results against the published historical record. Magnus made no errors.

Winnipeggers may also recall how Magnus would frequently recite poetry most often in Icelandic at our Icelandic Canadian Frón events to the delight of our guests from Iceland. On Monday, 12 February 1996 we recorded Magnus reciting seven poems at CKJS in Winnipeg;

Pastor Ingthor Isfeld edited the Icelandic text and I provided an introduction. The master of this recording now resides, I believe, in the Icelandic Collection at the University of Manitoba. The poems included Sandy Bar in Icelandic (5:02) and English (5:21), Dettifoss (2:20), Halftanarskeið (3:02), Heima (1:16), Winnipeg Icelander (2:26), and Grimur frá Grund (3:41), or about 23 minutes in total. Magnus did make mistakes on each poem and pastor Isfeld conscientiously corrected him; the Pastor had copies of the poems in hand, but Magnus worked entirely from memory, and these poems had likely been committed to memory decades earlier.

Magnus depended on his memory during his early political days as an organizer for the CCF and NDP. He routinely memorized train schedules and the phone numbers of important contact people in a city or town he would visit, thus he could jump off the train and go immediately to the telephone with no wasting of time. He also largely memorized significant details about the ridings in provincial elections, so he could get all the left-wing voters out in time in the close ridings.

Magnus spoke of having a sense of politics in his bones, and a key example of this occurs in his book. In 1965, Ed Schreyer won the election in the federal constituency of Springfield. Already Magnus envisioned Ed as a future Premier of Manitoba, a vision further into the future than Mr. Schreyer could see. By 1968, the federal constituency of Selkirk received totally new boundaries. Ed Schreyer ran in Selkirk defeating Eric Stefanson in the 1968 federal election. Only ten days before the Manitoba NDP convention, Magnus had to resign as Party organizer to take a seat in October on the Winnipeg City Council. The following telephone conversation occurs on page 131 of *Magnus Eliason: A Life on the Left*

Ed usually went straight to the point. He said, "Magnus, why are you insisting that I become the leader?"

"It is very simple, Ed," I replied. "With Sid Green we'll take 17 seats; with you we will take 26, and I don't know anything about The Pas and Rupertsland."

"I can take them both," Ed added.

"Well, it's 28," I said, "if you are the leader."

Ed Schreyer left Ottawa and took the leadership of the NDP, becoming the Premier by winning 28 seats as predicted!

Magnus Eliason had a remarkable mind, perhaps with elements of a savant, but the memory, like any muscle, grows with exercise and atrophies with neglect, and Magnus exercised his mind rigorously all his life, bringing his leadership, insight and dynamic personality to bear in many matters, great and small. Magnus succeeded in fulfilling the purpose he saw in life: it is not enough merely to live, but one must add to the quality of life for our contemporaries and for future generations in some measure.

Say Goodbye For Me

by Nehushta Collins

reprinted from Volume 1 #2, December 1942

The stars still shine over Iceland. It is true that the black harbour waters do not always reflect back the golden lights of Reykjavik, but so far there has been no attempt made to black out the moon. So the moon still smiles down in silver splendor on the people who live their lives in the mountains and the valleys.

But the days are strange in Iceland. Rumours of war spread from the city dwellers to the farmers in the hill valley, to the fishermen in the winding fjords, and the shepherds who tend their sheep on the flowering mountain sides. The shadow of martial wings hovers over all. War has touched the land with a changeling hand, bringing fear and resentment, anger and silent resignation.

Small places, sacred to the huldafolk, have been desecrated and disturbed. Big guns crouch in the grass and among the rocks like vicious, chained dogs, ready to spring to the end of their tether with a rumbling roar if strangers approach.

At first the cattle and horses on the hill farms and the peaceful mountain sheep used to scatter and race in panic when the huge war-birds swooped low over them; deafening them with a roar like that of the gods when they are angry. Now they no longer lift their heads from their grazing. Even the animals have come to accept those things that must be.

They tell a tale in Iceland. It is whispered among the women as they grumble over their scant coffee cups. It is spoken among the men as they sip their vanishing Spanish wine. It is the story of a woman who was and is no more. One who died that another might live. It is the story of the woman who is, because of the one who was and of the man who loved them both. It is strange, this tale. But then, all things are strange in Iceland now.

Helga was Gunnar's wife. She was beautiful in a grave, quiet way and she was a good wife. Five years they had been married; five contented, quiet years. That was before war came to brood over the land. Helga sang at her cooking and bent her fair head over intricate embroidery for her company table. Her strong hands churned butter and carried water for her household needs. She cheerfully scrubbed the heavy clothes that Gunnar wore on his little fishing boat. She scrubbed the floors until the wood was white. She was happy looking after Gunnar's house. Yes, she was a good wife. Gunnar was happy too. One day slid into another day so quietly that their passing was hardly noticed.

When winter came and the snow, their small house was snug and warm. As the holiday drew near Helga polished and baked, pausing to smile happily at Gunnar where he sat in his chair by the fire. On Christmas Eve they rejoiced with their neighbours. The lights shone out in the darkness and the winds died down to listen once again as people sang the old old words of Holy Night. Dishes were set on the table for the Little People and sacred candles were lit for their night long vigil. When the midnight bells rang Helga and Gunnar went to Mass. So the pleasant years passed flowing one into the other as quietly as the days.

The skies over Europe grew troubled and men hinted at war. But it was far away and life went on as usual. Clouds gathered in the troubled skies, gathered and grew dark with menace. Still life consisted of little things. Then the heavens erupted and war came. Whole nations went to bed as free peoples and woke up as slaves. The beast of prey gorged on innocent blood and grew stronger; struck, and fed, and struck again. Its shadow reached out and dark-

ened the whole world. Ancient traditions perished and ancient prides were ground into the dust. Cities were laid waste. Old men and women and little children died senselessly, horribly. Refugees crowded the country roads and crumbled under machine gun hail. The world knew total war.

Gunnar's cousin, Olaf in distant Canada, joined the air force and went overseas. News came that he had gone to his death like a modern Viking in a flaming plane.

Time passed; Gunnar listened and grew restless. Always in time of war the young grow restless. Helga wated and said little. She talked of small things while a nameless fear hung heavy in her breast. "Not Gunnar," she prayed "Please God, not Gunnar!"

The Marines came to Iceland and their enemies too. Treacherous man made fish lurked in the waters. Crippled ships limped into harbour and bits of strange wreckage drifted up on the beaches; pitiful remnants of ships and people. That was how Gretchen came into the lives of Helga and Gunnar on the morning after a great storm.

She was unconscious when Gunnar found her. Her long golden hair was rimmed with salt and ends flowed free from the braids. White salt streaks were stiff in her full dark skirt and her feet were blue and bare. She was only a little thing but she lay like a dead weight in Gunnar's arms as he carried her up the path to the cottage.

Helga put her to bed and cared for her. Gunnar did not leave the house that day. The sun was red in the western windows

before she stirred. She awakened later to quiet moonlight lying like a silver arm across the window sill. Her blue eyes were clouded with remembered suffering, dark with unforgotten fear and dread. She spoke but the words were alien. Some of the shadows left her eyes as she glanced around at the quiet room; at the snowy curtains, the singing kettle, the pictures on the wall and the friendly faces of the man and woman. She smiled faintly and slept.

For days she rested, gathering strength, relaxing in the peace that was around her. Day by day she grew more beautiful with a delicate pink and white loveliness. The two women talked sometimes, each asking questions in their own language and the laughing merrily at their inability to understand each other.

The day Gretchen got up for the first time was one of pleasure to all of them. Later she spent long hours in the blessed healing sunshine. She was standing there one day where the path wound down over the cliff when she saw her first plane. Instinctively, she threw herself flat on the grass, shaking, remembering. Gunnar found her there when came up from the sea. He helped her gently to her feet and put his arms about her and held her close to still her trembling. The fragrance of her shining hair was pressed against his breast. She drew away after a moment and laughed shakily up at him, then they walked slowly to the house.

In the mornings the women worked at daily tasks that women do and gradually their words came to have meaning to each other. They became friends, Helga, and the

girl from shattered Holland. Bit by bit her story was told. A common story now but none the less tragic because of that. A bombed village, a broken home, father and brothers gone in hopeless effort to resist and finally, escape by ship. They were only four then---herself, her mother and two little sisters. Stunned, desperate, hardly able to believe that they were free and on their way to safety. Then the torpedo in the night. The scramble for lifeboats and rafts. Endless hours of black drifting, the storm and at last, merciful unconsciousness.

Such things should never be. They stamp themselves indelibly upon the mind. They are always there, ready to spring into being at a stray word or thought. But temporarily, sometimes they can be forgotten.

Gretchen learned to forget and to think of other things. More and more often as days went by she would stand at the window and look out over the sea. The sea where Gunnar spend his daylight hours. Her eyes would light up with a shy smile when he came in the doorway at night and Gunnar would smile back at her.

Many times in the evening Helga would notice Gunnar watcing Gretchen's bright head in the lamplight and pain would come like an aching throb to her heart. As the days passed and her time drew near, she grew heavier. Even the joy of planning for her first-born child could not dim the fear inside her. Gretchen blossomed into greater loveliness and the contrast between her and Helga became more marked. Willingly she did more of the work and insisted that Helga rest. To hear the two talking one would have thought that Gretchen was to be the mother, so eager she was; so proud and happy about it. Bur Helga saw the light in their eyes when they smiled at each other as Gunnar came in, and she knew that, man-like, Gunnar did not realize where his thoughts were leading him. She knew that Gretchen too was unconscious of what was happening. But her wisdom told her that it would take only a small thing to open their eyes to the truth. The knowledge hung over her like a sword on a slender thread and she waited and dreaded the revelation.

When a man has been married to a

woman for years and life has settled into a contented routine he takes his love for her for granted as he takes her love for him. Gunnar was happy. He too was looking forward to the birth of the child. He hoped it would be a son but it didn't really matter. They had wanted a baby for a long time and now that it was a certainty, it didn't seem of great importance whether it was girl or a boy. The important thing was that they were to have a child. So Gunnar dreamed too as the weeks grew out of the days.

There came a morning when the sun rose out of the sea like red sails on the horizon. Gunnar smiled reassuringly into the sea-wise, anxious eyes of the two women, and went down to his boat, promising to return early.

Helga rested while Gretchen whisked about the small house, sweeping the floors, shaking pillows, dusting and cooking. She was thoughtful, answering Gretchen's bright chatter absently. Gretchen kept glancing at her and chattering on, determined to keep Helga's mind occupied with cheerful things. But after awhile her own fears grew so strong, she too lapsed into worried silence. She had been looking out of the windows more and more frequently as the morning passed. She had watched the sea grow uneasy and scurry aimlessly back and forth. The breeze had freshened and teased the waves until they gathered themselves together and reached up in futile white-capped anger. The skies frowned darkly as rolling clouds swept up to hide the sun. The world turned gray and there was evening in the afternoon. The heavens wept to see the day die so young. Wind-blown rain struck at the house savagely. Still Gunnar had not returned.

Gretchen lit the lamp and the two women looked at each other, white-faced. Their glances met, held and shifted. Gretchen turned again to the window, looking out as the veiled sea. "Gunnar, Gunnar," she pleaded silently. "Please come home. Dear God, keep him safe out there. Bring him back to me."

Somewhere deep down inside her, she heard a mocking laugh. "Bring him back to YOU?" a jeering voice asked. "Why to

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you? This man you are praying for is Helga's husband; not yours. And Helga is your friend. Why do you pray that he come back to you?" Gretchen's bewildered mind answered falteringly, "Why...because he is my friend. Because I like him." "Because you like him!" the voice mocked. "Be honest with yourself, Gretchen. You mean, because you---" "No! Don't say it! I won't listen to you! It isn't true!" Gretchen put trembling hands over her ears while her eyes grew wide with sudden comprehension. But the jeering voice went on relentlessly. "Be honest, Gretchen. You love Gunnar, Helga's husband! You have loved him for weeks."

Gretchen's mind raced back over the weeks just passed. She thought of Gunnar's home-coming smile, his deep, kind voice, his gentleness. She remembered the warmth that came like sunshine to her

when she saw him come in at night. How blind she had been, how stupid not to have realized sooner! But what of Helga? Had she noticed, Gretchen wondered.

She whirled to find Helga watching her with dark pain in her eyes. Helga looked at the white face of her friend; looked and knew that the slender thread had broken, the sword had fallen. With a muffled sob she reached blindly for an old coat of Gunnar's that was hanging by the door, clutched it around her shoulders and fled into the storm.

Gretchen stared at the swinging door and the rain that ventured in to collect in pools on the wooden floor. Some remote part of her mind insisted warningly, "Helga shouldn't be out in this. Go after her. Hurry! She may come to harm." Gretchen came to with a start and raced outside. She saw Helga, a dim shadow in the rain, at the top of the cliff, where the path wound down to the shore. "Helga! Helga! Come back!" The wind tore the words from her lips and flung them back in her face. The figure ahead hurried out of sight over the rim. Gretchen ran with fear choking the sobs in her throat. She did not see Helga when she started down the narrow, treacherous path but she heard her scream.

She found her around the first curve where she had slipped in her haste and heaviness on the rain-wet, greasy way. Slipped and fallen over the edge of the steep path and down among the crowding black boulders below. She was moaning faintly when Gretchen scrambled down to where she lay. The rain and the wind struck cruelly at the tortured face. Gretchen knelt down beside her, tears lost in the rain on her cheeks. Helga looked up at her and smiled mistily. "It's all right, Gretchen. Don't cry. I'm not hurt. At least," and she shifted her body slightly, "I don't think I am." Gretchen gripped Helga's arm and helped her to her feet, steadying her when she swayed. Helga straightened up cautiously. She took a slow step and a gasp of pain came from her tight lips. She moved again, moaned and slid to the ground. Her eyes were closed and her breath was coming quickly, unevenly. The blue veins in her

white temples throbbed in time with her pounding heart.

Gretchen stared around wildly. She must get Helga in out of the storm! It had to be done, somehow. She bent over the unconscious woman and tried in vain to lift her but she was far too heavy for Gretchen's slender strength. In desperation she dragged the still form up on to the path and toward the house, resolutely closing her ears to the pitiful moans that came from the twisted lips.

After what seemed hours of effort, spent and exhausted with aching muscles and shaking limbs, she reached the house with her helpless burden. With a final, heart-breaking effort she pulled Helga inside and shut out the rain. The bed was out of the question. She spread a blanket on the floor, stripped the wet clothing from the limp figure and piled feather ticks around and over her. There was agony in the still white face and the shallow, labored breathing frightened Gretchen.

Helga should have a doctor at once, but, Dear God, how could she get one? Oh, if only Gunnar were here! Somebody, anybody, to go for help. There was Dr. Bjornsson across the fjord, a scant quarter of a mile by water. Six miles by foot, the long way around. And the only boat on the beach, a tiny rowboat!


Gretchen gazed out unseeingly. Helga her friend, the one who had nursed her and given her back her life. Helga, the wife of Gunnar, whom she herself loved. Helga, who was soon to be the mother of his child, dying perhaps while she stood idly by and did nothing. A low anguished moan sounded in the stillness; lingered in the room. Gretchen moved swiftly and put on a heavy jacket. She leaned over and gently touched Helga's forehead, burning hot now under her cool fingers. Then she went out and down the path to the sea.

Lights twinkled from across the fjord but the houses themselves were lost in the mist. The little boat lay high on the beach. She turned it over and pushed it down to the water's edge. Her manner was sure and steady. There was no hesitation in her actions. She waded out a little way, pushing the boat ahead of her. When it was afloat,

she climbed in, seated herself and picked up the oars.

Three times the sea rejected her small craft, gathering it up contemptuously and throwing it back to the land. Gretchen tried again and this time the waves picked the boat up and closed themselves around it till it creaked and trembled with the strain. Gretchen was amazed at the strength and fury of the sea and the wind. She bent low over the oars while the salt spray drenched and blinded her. She was in a small, shifting world of gray-green waters that tumbled her backward and forward, bearing her up to their roaming heights and crashing her down to their angry depths. Her mind and her body grew numb. She felt nothing and heard nothing but a long continuous roar of thunder in her ears. She rowed like a mechanical doll that had not yet reached the end of its winding.

It was the wind that carried her forward now, the sea wind of the open fjord. Dully she realized that she did not know just where she was going. Realized too that



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there was little she could do about it. If she landed anywhere close to Dr. Bjornsson's it wouldn't matter. If she landed! The possibility that she might not land had not occurred to her before. But she must! She had to get the doctor for Helga!

Water sloshed back and forth in the bottom of the boat. It tilted perilously and then leveled out again, hitting the sea with a loud crash. Walls of water towered above her on all sides. The boat rose out of the trough and Gretchen caught a glimpse of the house lights, much nearer now. She was rapidly drifting out to sea but she knew that the boat was being blown in to the shore too and that it would probably strike the beach of the fjord. The sea swung her up and down ever closer to the land.

Suddenly the waves in front of her divided. A foam swept black rock rushed to meet her. Frantically she pulled at the oars and tried to avoid it but the sea held her tight, directly in its path. Fascinated, she watched it loom larger and larger. Then there was splintering crash and the black rock grew and spread until it covered the whole world.

Sigurd and Lars Petersson saw it happen. They had come down to the beach before darkness fell to see that their boats were safely anchored and would ride the storm through the night if need be. They saw the girl flung out against the rock and into the sea. They saw her washed ashore.

When they got there, she was still breathing. Very carefully, Sigurd picked her up and carried her as quickly as possible to the doctor's house. Gray-haired, kindly Dr. Bjornsson bent over the broken body. He wiped away a tiny trickle of blood that seeped out from between the bruised, blue lips Gretchen's eyes opened. "Are you in pain, child?" "No, Doctor not now." The whisper came faintly in pink foam from the girl on the couch. "Doctor," . . . he bent lower to hear the fading words, "Go to Helga, Gunnar's wife . . . she fell, on the cliff path . . . Thank her for all her kindness, and Doctor . . . please say good-bye for me." Then the tired eyes closed the voice was forever stilled.

The storm was dying down as if ashamed of the havoc it had done. Gunnar,

who had ridden the wind at anchor in a sheltered cove, started home. When he reached the landing below the cliff path and saw the doctor's boat tied up there, he hurried up to the house. He found the doctor leaning over Helga, who he had placed in bed. He looked around for Gretchen, who was nowhere to be seen. "Get the fire going, man. Hurry! We have a battle on our hands." The doctor spoke without taking his eyes off his patient. Gunnar hurried to obey, asking no questions. Helga stirred and moaned.

In a few words the doctor told Gunnar what had happened. Gunnar stared at him blankly, his mind refusing to believe the words that his ears had heard. Gretchen! Little Gretchen, dead! It couldn't be true! Why Gretchen was a part of him! She was always there to welcome him home. She couldn't be gone. He couldn't imagine life without her shy smiles and merry laughter. Slowly he sank into a chair and dropped his aching head in his hands. What a fool he had been not have known before! He had been in love with Gretchen! In love with the sunshine and the white and pink beauty of her. In love with her as one loves a beautiful melody, a lovely dream. Now she was gone; never to smile at him again.

But Helga was here! Helga, his wife. Helga, who he loved in a deeper, steadier way. The doctor's gruff voice broke into his thoughts. "There is no time for grieving now, Gunnar. You will have three to mourn instead of one, if you don't help me. Your wife and your unborn child are in grave danger."

Helga's eyes opened as Gunnar bent over the bed. She smiled at him and reached out to touch his arm timidly. He took her hand and held it tightly in both of his, bowing his head over it. Gently she stroked his tumbled hair.

Yes, they tell a tale in Iceland. It is whispered among the women and spoken among the men. It is a story of Helga, who is, because of Gretchen; and of Gunnar, the man who loved them both. It is the story of a first born child; a dimpled, laughing girl child. Her name is Gretchen too.

The Thrall's Tale

by Gail Helgason



Judith Lindbergh clearly remembers the day more than 10 years ago when she and her husband, who were then living in New York, walked down to the harbour and saw three replicas of Viking ships in port.

"When I saw those ships I was dumbstruck with awe," says the author of *The Thrall's Tale*, a spellbinding historical novel that explores the complex relationships among three women of Viking times. At the same time, Lindbergh thought "how very small and vulnerable" the ships appeared.

She was also struck by the physical appearance of an Icelandic woman who was one of the crew members, tall, blond

and wearing a thick Icelandic sweater. "I thought she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen," Lindbergh said during a visit to Edmonton last September as guest speaker at the Icelandic Canadian Club of Edmonton's Leifur Eiriksson Celebration. "Ironically, I had never thought about Viking women before."

The next day, driven by the desire to learn more about Viking culture, the American dancer-actress headed to the New York Public Library. There she came across another inspiration—Helge Ingstad's book, *Land Under the Pole Star*, which richly depicts the landscape of Greenland. "I adore this book," said Lindbergh, noting that the Vikings were the most technologically advanced culture of their time and a force for cultural transformation. "I discovered a rich society, poets, thinkers, philosophers even."

So began a lengthy quest that led Lindbergh all the way to Greenland and culminated in the 2007 publication of her first novel, now available in a 450-page paperback edition. *The Thrall's Tale* has been praised as "an epic debut" by Publishers Weekly and "a deeply imaginative and moving tale" by such luminaries as Gretel Ehrlich, author of *This Cold Heaven: Seven Seasons in Greenland*.

In writing *The Thrall's Tale*, Lindbergh says her goal was to portray the majesty of Viking life, in particular a story of Viking life that had not yet been told—that of its women. To do so, she set the novel in Viking Greenland in A.D. 985, focusing on three women: Katla, a slave or "thrall" whose Irish mother was seized by Vikings; Thorbjorg, a prophetess who practises the pagan Norse religion; and Bibrau, the silent, vindictive child of a horrific rape of Katla by her master's son.

Lindbergh follows the lives of these

characters with a dramatist's flair, building each scene with compelling graphic and historical detail. The role of women in Viking society, for example, is vividly portrayed through Thorbjorg's right to draw a boundary demarcating her property in the new and empty land—a task she hands over to Katla. "By the Althing law," Thorbjorg notes, "a freewoman's claim is the distance she may walk with a heifer in the length of a new spring day." Yet, as soon becomes clear, the distance between a freewoman's life and that of a thrall is beyond measurement. "Einar owns me," Katla reflects at the beginning of the novel, finding solace in the Christian teachings of her mother to overcome much hardship, but never able to fully transcend her history of enslavement.

At the heart of the novel is the conflicting relationship between Thorbjorg and Bibrau, the mentor and the apprentice into the ways of the Norse gods, Odin, Frey and Thor. Herself the daughter of a Viking priestess, Thorbjorg vows to imbue Katla's sullen daughter with all the wisdoms and secret skills of those pagan beliefs and practices. From a world of Odin's fluttering ravens, wild chants and animal sacrifices to Katla's joy at the construction of the first true Christian church she has ever seen, the novel spans not only two spiritual worlds but the gaping emotional chasms in between.

Yet it is the theme of freedom and enslavement, so integral to the novel, that provides its most potent insights and most strikingly holds up a mirror to our present world. "Freedom?" says one of Thorbjorg's slaves. "Had it once, and for it was harder beaten and far worse crook'd by as many men as ever menaced you with lustful glances." For her part, the imperious Thorbjorg declares that "we are all slaves." We are reminded once again that freedom can be no match for the iron bonds of the familiar and the routine.

Lindbergh's success in evoking the majesty of Viking life, however, is attained not only through her intensely rendered scenes but also through her surprisingly fluid language and sumptuous historical detail. Although she does not read or speak Icelandic, Lindbergh combed translations

of *Eirik's Saga* and Scandinavian folklore, to name only a few sources, and admits that she sometimes invented words, "or at least used existing ones in unorthodox ways." As many authors do, she often read aloud as she wrote, working to achieve unusual syntax, alliteration and other elements to create a layered and archaic effect. "Comes the ship ashore," she writes with a simplicity that is as powerful as it is fresh. "It is bare and creaking. All its crew look stunned, a-fright and weary, weaving through the waves."

As is the case with the best historical novels, Lindbergh chose to take the leap from known facts into the unknown in crafting *The Thrall's Tale*. Although she consulted with numerous Norse archeologists and scholars to inform the novel, the main characters are "at most a footnote in the well-recorded history of the Norse," she says. *The Vinland Sagas* recount the journey of 25 ships and 400 settlers from Breidafjord, Iceland, to Greenland in A.D. 985, with Eirik the Red leading this venture to the distant, unclaimed land he had discovered three years earlier. Eirik, as most Icelandic Canadian readers will be aware, gave the new land its appealing name to make it more attractive to prospective followers.

The Norse Greenland settlements continued for almost five hundred years, sustained by a climatic anomaly that brought warmer-than-average temperatures. There the newcomers established small isolated settlements. "Subsistence was never easy in Greenland," Lindbergh says, noting that the settlements slowly diminished until the onset of the Little Ice Age in the early fourteenth century. By the time the Norwegian priest Ivar Bardarsson arrived in the mid-fourteenth century, he found "nobody, either Christians or heathens, only some wild cattle and sheep." The Thule hunters, who had arrived from the high Arctic, outlasted the Norse and became the ancestors of Greenland's Inuit people.

The conversion of the Greenlanders to Christianity is not well known, so Lindbergh based many of her assumptions on Iceland's conversion, which occurred through a vote at the Althing of A.D. 1000.

Her copious reading and consultations resulted in reams of notes, which began to fit into a unified narrative when she discovered an ancient artifact with an inscription in the runic alphabet: "Bibrau is the name of the girl who sits in the blue." That inscription fueled Lindbergh to find out Bibrau's identity, and she thus became a key character in the book.

Now living in New Jersey, Lindbergh says she learned to write mostly by writing. "I also belonged to a writers group that met monthly for nearly a decade." She credits her greatest writing lessons, however, to an

acting instructor trained at London's Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts. "She taught me how to break down a scene, how to listen, how to respond, how to be in the moment and in character. She always used to call out during classes, 'Stay on the threat of the scene' in her rich, emphatic voice. It is an echo I still hear in my head while I'm writing."

As a result of writing the book, Lindbergh admits that she has developed a passion for Greenland and for Viking culture. "The Vikings were vulnerable," she says. "Basically they were human."

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Thorlakson family cookbook

by Margaret Kernested

Dedicated to the memory of Johanna Thorlakson



Johanna Sigurdur Thorlakson

Family Photo

My mother never considered herself a great cook. Yet when you talk to people who knew her, there is always a story of some special recipe of hers that they remember and ask about.

But, as in all things Icelandic, the telling can't begin there. It naturally has to begin with who she was, who her parents were, and from which part of Iceland they came.

Jóhanna was born on July 3, 1908, at the family farm "Hofn" on McElheran Road, in the R. M. of Gimli. Hofn is located in the area originally designated as Arnesbyggd in Nyja Island (New Iceland). The area had been incorporated into an expanded Province of Manitoba in 1881.

Jóhanna's father, Thorsteinn Sigurdsson, later shortened to Sigurdur, was born at the Birkinest homestead, located at what is now Loni Beach, in the R. M. of Gimli, on Nov 5, 1879. He was the son of Johann Sigurdsson who immigrated from Grenivik, in Eyjafjordur, Thingeyjarsysla Region of Northern Iceland, in 1878, along with his wife Jóhanna Jonatansdottir and five of their children.

Jóhanna's mother was Guðlaug Sesselja Pétursdóttir. She was born in Klyppstadur in Lodmundarfjordur, Iceland, and immigrated to the United States with her parents Pétur Eyjólfsson and Sigurbjörg Magnúsdóttir in 1889.

Jóhanna married Karl Oskar Thorlakson on October 22, 1939. Karl was the son of Halldor Thorlaksson and Groa Sigurdardottir who immigrated from Seydisfjordur, Iceland in 1914.

Jóhanna's mother was not healthy so Jóhanna learned very young how to cook for a large family. By the time she was twelve she was baking bread; up to a dozen

loaves a day. Like so many of the women of her day, the recipes were mostly in her head. Also, the way things were made would often depend on what was on hand. If today she had raisins then she put them in, next time she might use dates, or skip the fruit altogether. She made do with what she had, which might explain why, when we all claim to have Mom's/Granny's original recipe, they all differ!

Karl and Jóhanna had 4 daughters, Marlene (Forbes), Christine (Dann), Margaret (Kernested) and Hazel (Williams). To Jóhanna's family and friends her daughters were known as "Jo's Girls". When Jóhanna's daughters married and had homes of their own her recipes were passed on to them. Jóhanna was born legally blind. She had an exceptional memory but, when she told us how to make something, we kept notes. She would often say, "You made that a million times, why do you still need the recipe?" But, because we could see, we did not have the same need to memorize that she did.

Jóhanna's family quickly expanded. Her grandchildren have homes of their own. Soon some of her great grandchildren will as well. Now they are the ones looking for the "family recipes" which now not only include Jóhanna's but those of her daughters as well. So, the suggestion was to put them all together in a book.

Sounds easy! Who's going to co-ordinate that? Marlene is the oldest – she can do it! She has been bossing the rest of us for years so it would come natural for her to be the driving force!

Though we tease her, it was a tremendous amount of work and it would never have come to fruition without her input.

First came the call for recipes. Actually, that call had to be repeated many

times, and to some family members more often than others. The idea was to have at least one recipe from each family member and to include all the recipes that had been passed down from Mother.

The next job was to cull out the duplicates. It was through this process that we discovered that often "Mother's original recipe" differed depending on which daughter it came from.

This would be a book for all the generations. When determining the number of copies we would need, copies were ordered to be set aside for even the very youngest of Jóhanna's family, some who would have no recollection of her. If the book was to be dedicated to her, which we all agreed it must be, then we needed to tell the young ones about her. We needed to include the memories and the things about her that made her so special and that made us who we are.

So, then came the story telling. The dedication and poems that told who she was and the reminisces from each of her

daughters that told of the childhood that she gave us.

Each entry had to be typed in a consistent format. The font and font size and spacing had to be determined and page breaks set.

Well, that didn't work so well. We have all these empty spaces. Now what? Songs Mother sang to us as children, poems and our own "handy tips" were used to fill the "part pages" Then came the proofreading and what seemed like never ending changes.

Finally it was ready for print. First we approached companies that typically print cookbooks. However, they only print recipes. Our book did not meet their criteria as it is far from just recipes. We had it printed by UPS. They did a wonderful job and we are all very pleased with the end product.

This was not an easy task and it would never have been accomplished without all of Marlene's work. Not only was she the driving force but she typed all 259 pages and did the layout work. From beginning to end the entire project spanned two years. However, I would recommend this project to every family. We had a wonderful time doing it and spent hours reminiscing. To us, our book is like a family heirloom. Originally written solely for family and our closest friends, other people seem to have taken a liking to the book. Requests have been received for copies and it is now in its second printing. We have even talked of doing another book. I think we will call the next one, "All the things we forgot to tell you ..."

Mother was such a remarkable person. Though she was almost blind and totally colour blind all her life, there was very little that she could not do. She brought up four daughters; sewed clothing for us, her sisters, friends and most of her neighbours; knitted (even Icelandic sweaters) and was always our favorite person to spend time with. She often said that there was nothing written about her family in any of the history books about New Iceland. I wonder what she would say if she could see her name in *The Icelandic Canadian*.



Gram's Pumpkin Pie

by Margaret Kernsted
(The Original Recipe)

1 tbsp. butter
2 cups pumpkin
2 cups milk
1 ½ cups sugar
3 eggs
1 tbsp. flour
2 tsp. cinnamon
1 tsp. ginger
¼ tsp. nutmeg
Pinch of salt

Put pumpkin into thick pot. Add butter and milk and let it get warm (don't boil) until the butter melts.

Put white sugar, flour, spices, salt and eggs in a bowl and beat with egg eater.

Pour pumpkin mixture into above ingredients and mix together with spoon then pour into unbaked pie shells.

Makes 2 pies.

Bake at 350 F until knife comes out clean (approximately ¾ hour).

Bread Pudding

by Christine Dann

3 cups dry bread cubes (doesn't have to be real dry as for stuffing merely bread that is drying out)

3 beaten eggs
2/3 cup sugar
½ tsp. salt
3 cups milk
1 tsp vanilla
¾ cup raisins

Dot with margarine and cover. Bake until firm and delicately browned at 350 F for 30- 40 minutes.

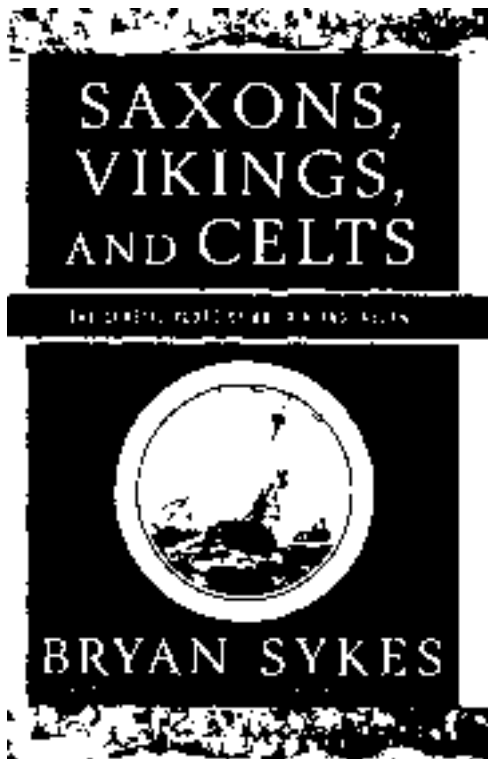
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Book Reviews



Saxons, Vikings and Celts

By Bryan Sykes
W. W. Norton, New York - London
307 pages

Reviewed by Helen Sigurdson

Saxons, Vikings and Celts is an excellent book for anyone interested in genealogy, especially those with roots in the British Isles. Bryan Sykes, in a clear and accurate way, helps the reader understand the complex study of DNA and its role in tracing ancestry.

Bryan Sykes is a professor of human genetics at Oxford University. He is the author of two other books, *The Seven Daughters of Eve* and *Adam's Curse*. The former, became a New York Times best seller. With the ease of a natural story teller, Sykes explains how, with the use of genetics and anthropology, it is possible to trace the genetic make up of Europeans back to seven primal women who he has named, the Seven Daughters of Eve. The second type of DNA, the male Y chromosomes which we get from our fathers, Sykes has traced to five groups which he has also named.

In the search for descendants of the seven primal women he traced the movement of early inhabitants of the British Isles. As the earth's temperature never stays the same, hunters and gathers followed migrating game as they followed their food supply. There is a gap in fossil records in the Isles between 12,000 and 26,000 years ago. There were probably no inhabitants in the British Isles during the Ice Age.

The DNA from the skeleton of a 9,000 year old man from Cheddar Grove in Somerset is found to be a match of a local teacher. Sykes had traced the teacher's ancestors back to a man who lived during the Old Stone Age.

The powerful legend of King Arthur had a strong influence on the history of Britain. The myth of a race of giants living in Britain, the magical power of Merlin and the story of the two dragons are well known and are laced with historical truths. The myths of King Arthur have been used

by people like King Henry II, Richard III and especially by King Henry VIII who used them to rationalize his break from the Roman Catholic Church. Even Martin Luther manipulated genealogy data to trace his ancestry back to Adam. Sykes maintained that there is, "dreadful power and dreadful danger in racial myth."

The sweeping movement of the Celts (Greek, meaning from another place) to the Isles is examined by Sykes who uses genetics to follow their advances from their European settlements. Sykes questions whether genetics can explain the distinctive music, art and spirituality that sets the Celts apart from the rest of the population of the Isles.

The emotional argument about the superiority of the different British clans reached its peak during the Victorian Age. The most violent was the debate between the racial character of the Saxons and the Celts. The anti Celtic ranting of John Knox had no basic support of scientific research. Dr. John Beddoe was the first to study the differences in the original inhabitants of the Isles. He used a rather crude method of eye and hair colour and shapes of skulls. He even resorted to grave robbery to procure skulls to compare their shapes.

Much of the history of Ireland is told by myths which makes very interesting reading. DNA studies seem to indicate that Ireland was settled by descendants of almost all the different primal clans in Europe. Ireland has a very diverse, ancient and colourful history.

This book gives a reliable account for the reasons the men of Norway left their country to plunder and pillage across Europe. At first, they raided Monasteries for wealth and glory, but soon the Vikings began to settle the rich lands of the Orkney and Shetland Islands. With intense research of the DNA of the present day residents of Norway, Ireland, Scotland and Iceland, Sykes attempts to prove or disprove the theory that the Norse men brought women with them when they raided the Isles or did they raid the Isles for wives. Sykes makes reference to the settlement of Iceland and the importance of the genetic research being done there.

The history of Wales is rich in stories of struggle and confrontation as far back as 43 AD. A part of that history explains why the eldest son of a British Monarch is given the title of "Prince Of Wales."

England has almost 80 per cent of the population of the Isles. It has nearly every kind of geological structure which makes it an ideal attraction for a variety of invaders. Literature and art have documented, in many forms, the history of England. The early settlers have left behind such monuments as Stonehenge and Avebury to tell their stories.

Saxons, Vikings and Celts contains an abundance of technical terms which at times are difficult to follow. Sykes is aware of this and states, "If your head is spinning you are feeling just as I did when I first tried to decipher these results." There are charts, maps, notations and a substantial collection of historical illustrations included to assist the reader.

Saxons, Vikings and Celts is the kind of book that can keep readers completely engrossed. It is an ideal book for anyone who enjoys learning more about genetics and anthropology or simply appreciates a good book that expands the mind. Sykes has written the book for all of us who really want to know who we think we are and to arouse our curiosity about our ancestors.

Rev. Stefan Jonasson

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Clarification

Dear Sir or Madam,

I enjoyed reading the short article in Volume 61, #4 of the Icelandic Canadian about Devon Lodge, the cottage built in Gimli in 1922 by my grandfather, Alfred Whiteway. I would be remiss in not pointing out, however, that while I've written (under my pseudonym C. C. Benison) portions of five novels at Devon Lodge, none of them have included a scene in which a drug deal was completed at Gimli's Falcon Restaurant in the 1960s, as the article states. While the notion of setting a fictional drug deal at the Falcon is certainly attractive, I believe such a transaction has already been ably portrayed, in *Cold Adventure*, a young adult novel partly set in Gimli, written in 1959 by Violet Paula Ingaldson, with whom I seem to have been inadvertently mixed up. Elsewhere, I might add, for the sake of family history, that I am Murray Whiteway's nephew, not his son, as stated in the article. My father's name was the same as mine – Doug.

Kind regards,

Doug Whiteway

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Contributors

HARALDUR BESSASON was Professor and Head of the Department of Icelandic Language and Literature at the University of Manitoba from 1956 until 1987, when he became Rector of the University of Akureyri in Iceland. He is now retired and lives in Toronto.

AGNES BARDAL COMACK was born in Winnipeg in 1921 to Arinbjorn S. and Margret Bardal, graduated in nursing in 1943 and married Hugh Comack in 1946. She raised three daughters and one son. She has been doing art work since 1970 and has won several awards.

ERIC GOODMAN has been commercial fishing since 1964. Born in Gimli, Eric lived on the family farm in the R.M. of Gimli until he was 18 years old. A certified carpenter, Eric also enjoys playing the guitar, composing songs and poems and woodcarving. Eric currently holds a Director's position on the Gimli Harbour Authority. He lives in the R.M. of Gimli with his wife, Linda, and their company of cats.

GAIL HELGASON is a freelance writer who grew up in Foam Lake, Sask. and now lives in St. Albert, Alberta. She is the author of a novel, *Swimming into Darkness*, a book of short stories, *Fracture Patterns*, and co-author of the newly revised *Canadian Rockies Access Guide*.

MARGARET KERNSTED is a third generation Icelandic Canadian who was born and raised near Gimli. She has recently moved back to the area and resides in Silver Harbour, Arnes. Margaret is active in the Icelandic community, and is currently a member of the Board of Directors for Logberg-Heimskringla.

CHAY LEMOINE is a Laxness scholar currently living Edwardsville, Illinois. Chay has written articles on Halldor Laxness for Icelandic publications *Mannlif* and *Grapevine*.

HELEN SIGURDSON is a retired teacher. She wrote a book, *I Wanted You To Know*, which is her life story. She has written book reviews for the Winnipeg Free Press and has acted as facilitator for a life story writing program at the Stradbroke Senior Centre. She lives in St. Vital with her husband, Frank.



PHOTO BY LINDA GOODMAN

The back page

Eric Goodman, Catherine Robertson, Tammy Axelsson and Bruce Benson at Lake Winnipeg Visitors Centre on October 19, 2008.



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