

THE ICELANDIC CANADIAN MAGAZINE

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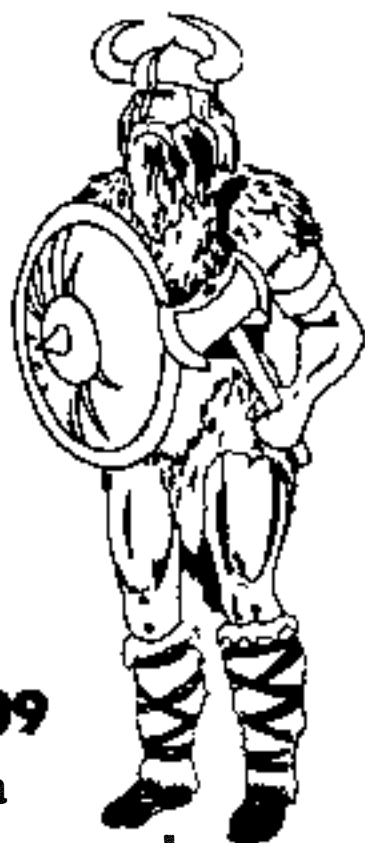
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Canada

On the Cover



Ellen Scobie

Editorial

“Uma, I lov U” - Tom

by Sheryl Hoshizaki

My mother could be described as a liberal parent, but as an Amma, she probably would be defined as “parenting without borders.”

It was about fourteen years ago when my life became one big commute from Dryden to Toronto every weekend. My Mom was having her place rebuilt, so she found herself staying with us, which is using the term loosely, as I was often in Toronto.

The few times she was left in charge of my six year old son, she and Tom synchronized their activities with ease. Take out meals, realms of reading materials, both with lego for Tom and crossword puzzles for my Mom, things fell into place without much of an effort.

That is, until Tom came home from grade one, on a Wednesday, and announced that he would be going to the movie theatre that evening, with a friend from school. I don’t think my Mom even looked up, she said what she had been saying to all of her six kids for the last twenty years and that is, “Not on a school night.”

Well, Tom had rarely heard the word, “no”, let alone from his Amma. He went into a rant with all the theatrics of a monkey on steroids. My Mom just kept reading. He finally went upstairs, commenting loudly on his opinion of her, her status and authority, and his lack of feelings for her. Stomping to his room, he slammed the door. My Mom, like she had for the many years before, just kept on reading. I remember how irritated I was when my tantrums did not have an audience with her. It wasn’t long after that my Mom ambled upstairs to check on Tom to make sure he hadn’t tied the bed sheets together and scampered out his window. It was at

this time that she found a lone scrap of paper with a remorseful yet incorrectly spelled, “Uma, I lov U, Tom.”

This story illustrates to me a parenting style that was conducive to Icelandic culture, and my mother epitomized it. “Parenting,” she would say, “is another word for patience.”

I have never been able to separate my mother’s uniqueness, and some would say, quirkiness, from her personality and her heritage. When I listen to the conversations she has with my aunts, I assign it to both.

As an educator, I have searched for the answer in terms of why children read, why they want to read, and what makes them successful readers. I explored these questions more deeply in the past few years, since I served a community of predominately English Language Learners whose parents’ first language was not English.

Our school’s student achievement levels in the area of reading and comprehensions fell well below the provincial average. In fact, 52% of the students were reading well below a competence level. With this startling statistic, I knew, as a leader in the system, that it would translate into the more tragic number and that is: 1 in 3 English Language Learners drops out of secondary school, compared to 1 in 4 English speaking counterparts. Before embarking on any deep research in language acquisition, I simply asked the teachers why they thought their students did so poorly. Overwhelmingly, the teachers said that their parent’s didn’t speak English. Secondly, the excuse was that the socio-economic level of parents, who were factory workers, who didn’t have a literacy rich environment at home, and therefore, didn’t support what was happening at school.

Another interesting challenge presented by the teachers was that without English, the parents couldn’t help their children with their homework.

Looking more closely at the results of our school’s assessment, it was glaringly clear that our students exceeded the province and our board’s average, which has been traditionally higher than the province, in mathematics and in writing.* The math achievement was easier to explain given the less need for English comprehension; however, not having support from parents could not be a factor impacting on students’ reading abilities. The real mystery to me became the high levels of achievement in writing for all students, given the strong connection between reading and writing. Interestingly enough, educators understood the connection between the development of literacy through a child learning to speak and recording what they have said, to reading what they have recorded.

Without going into an academic plan as to how we improved our reading levels, I can uncover for you the very essence of creating a literate society, and how this influences the academic achievement of the students. In researching the home country of our community and finding out that it celebrated a 92% literate population, it was easy to determine that the community enjoyed a rich oral history. In addition, the country had produced and published more poets that most countries per capita, except for Iceland!

I always knew Iceland enjoyed a 100% literacy rate and accepted that fact easily when I only saw half of my mother’s face for most of my life. However, I wondered if there was a link between the literacy rates of countries and their standard of living. It seems that the literacy rate of a country could be connected to the fact that two countries with a 100% literacy rate also do not have a military. As my Mom would say, “Why dance when you could be reading a good book?” Why fight, when you could be reading a good book?

Another interesting fact is that several countries with high literacy rates are not the richest countries in terms of world

power or economic basis. Cuba, for example, has a significantly high literacy rate. This is a country where many Canadians travel and comment on the apparent poverty of its people. With the economic downturn, the standard and quality of life is no longer being measured by wealth or home ownership, but by satisfaction or happiness. Guess what people in what countries are the happiest? Not the countries with the most stuff or the finest weather, but those countries with the highest literacy rates. I can still hear my Mom say, “It doesn’t matter what the question is, the answer is education!” And education to my Mom, is access to books. Today, it is access to information. As a librarian, my Mom would always tell us that the library is a poor person’s university, and I always remembered this. As a school principal, I made sure that the school library was open to parents and their children well into the evening hours.

Knowing that our school community had such a rich oral history, we used this as the foundation to bring parents and grandparents into the school to have them share their stories in any language. The students, in return, recorded the history rich stories, and once the stories were “published” in our library, they were shared with all their classmates.

There were many lessons in this simple activity. It was the foundation of building relationships with the parents and the grandparents. It validated their culture and language. But most of all, it said to our teachers that literacy exists in all languages and the conversations of English are only bridged when everyone has an understanding of this.

Oral language is the key to commonalities of highly literate countries. One storyteller once announced that the world is not made up of atoms but of stories. What we call stories, researchers call case studies.

I remember visiting our relatives in Arnes, Manitoba, and after every great feast, my aunts and uncles and cousins would sit around a fire with a slice of vinaterta and a strong cup of coffee or a shot of Brennivin, taking turns reciting poetry or telling stories in Icelandic. Not

understanding much, I watched their faces as they listened and I could tell that they were nodding their heads in agreement to the accuracy of the facts or moving their lips silently as they too recited the poetry. At the time, I thought Icelanders were nerds. How did these adventurous bullies of the seas become the poets of present day? "Evolution," my Mom would reply. Now, of course, I have grown to understand my mother's superior and sarcastic personality but more importantly, I have grown to understand how a country instills its love of learning, not by rigor and standardized tests, but by celebrating their oral histories, recording their stories, and investing in its expressions.

So, when parents wonder why their child isn't reading, before thinking someone or something is at fault, talk to them. Do they have stories to tell, but no one listens? Do they know how to converse by taking turns talking? Most of all, are they excited by the stories you tell them?

My Mom was raising six children, all within eight years, and I remember telling a sibling how I knew I was my Mom's favourite. It took me a long time to realize that all of my siblings thought they held that special place in my Mom's heart. It wasn't because my Mom was fickle. It was because she understood that if children are to learn, you must build a unique and authentic relationship with them.

The greatest impact on improving literacy in North American public schools, has been the approach to differentiating the teaching strategies and teaching every student one by one, believing that each child can learn. When a student doesn't get it, doing the same thing over and over again only questions which one has the problem . . . the teacher or the student? Research, conducted in the soft sixties, which focused on the importance of connecting to the student, or, engaging a student in their learning, has become as important as the learning strategies. This means that homework, computer technology, and wealth are not the factors contributing to student achievement, and the factors we had thought to be barriers, are not only solvable but as the elegant leader to the south of us says, "It

will take all of us to educate the children."

Next September, we will witness a record number of students applying to post secondary institutions in an effort to equip themselves with the knowledge and skills of a society not known yet. When I attended university, the percentage was the difference of having five grade 12 academic classes to one grade 13 academic class. This is not a great statistic, but it does illustrate that in the seventies there were other choices for high school graduates.

Now that I have read about the Icelandic education system, and how a student who completes their secondary education can pursue post secondary education if they desire, I know why my Mom never told us, her children, we had an option. I learned that parenting skill at an early age, of giving choices to children and students only ensure that both choices are means to the same end. It was never; "Are you going to university?" It was which university are you going to?

So in hindsight, was Mom's parenting a result of her personality or her Icelandic heritage? Why did it have such a profound impact on the way I approached my job as an educator? I know there are similarities in the Icelandic culture and my approach to education. That may also be the result of looking at a country with a 100% literacy rate and being proud of that heritage. However, I do believe my Mom's approach to life has always been, "Don't sweat the small stuff," and she has this defined better than anyone I know. The second most important gift she has passed on to her children is integral to parenting and to teaching, and that is, the gift of optimism. If we don't believe this, then what chance do we have in sharing the world where children can believe in a future?

Amma, I love you.

**It should be noted that this school's student achievement remains higher than the province and the school board average in the area of reading comprehension.*



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Ellen Scobie: Artist of Digital Imagery and Photomontage

Interview by N.C. Guttormsson

“I aim to create art that is as beautiful as it is visually arresting. My current work focuses on exploring compositional possibilities of digital data.”

As a visual artist, Ellen Scobie works with digital print technologies. Following a successful career in graphic design, and later, in marketing communications with a prominent architectural firm, she turned her attention to her own art in 2006 when she embraced the opportunity to pursue personal artistic goals. Ellen established a studio for her company, Verosimile Design, in her home in Burnaby, a suburb of Vancouver, where she works full-time.

Born and raised on Vancouver Island, Ellen was encouraged by her parents to pursue her artistic talents from a young age. She began taking art classes as a child and has continued her art education throughout her life. Her maternal grandparents are Dr. Pétur Guttormsson and Salín Reykdal. Their parents were settlers in New Iceland and in the Argyle district of Manitoba: Vigfús Guttormsson, Vilborg Anderson, Kristján Reykdal and Sigurborg Pétursson.

Ellen graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Art History from the University of Manitoba where she was honoured on the Dean’s List. While there, she also studied literature with David Arnason and painting with Dale Amundson. Further training in lithography introduced her to the process of fine art printmaking. She continued her art studies at the historic London College of Printing in England. She completed her year with distinction.

After several years in Spain, Ellen returned to the West Coast where she experimented with a wide variety of media including water-based paint, sculptural

form and collage assemblages. All of these influences have shaped her current artistic practice of digital photomontage. She explains that the art of photomontage, a composite picture made by combining several separate pictures, is a technique that artists have used since the late 1800s. Historically, it involved placing one or more negatives into an enlarger to create a multiple exposure. Now, digital techniques allow the artist more freedom to experiment by greatly reducing traditional dark-room time while allowing for an unprecedented level of image control.

Ellen has developed her own process of ‘visual digital sampling.’ She explains that just as some composers select sounds, beats and rhythms from various sources in order to create a new piece of music – a technique known as ‘sampling’ – she also samples photographs for her own creative work. Her methodology starts by photographing the landscape and scanning ephemera and found objects. She has amassed an archive of over 12,000 files of this digital material from which she draws for her art. Laughing, she admits, “My archive is growing, but I still don’t have enough!”

In the same way that an oil painter applies colours and textures to a canvas while working with a brush and a palette of paint, Ellen selects colours and textures from her archive and applies them to her digital canvas. She begins by layering sections of photographs, one by one, to create her image. Typically the art consists of 25 to 75 layers of juxtaposed and digitally altered photographs. When completed, it is printed by a high resolution inkjet printer onto paper or canvas, or onto photographic paper in a lab.

Using the computer to create photomontages, Ellen has adopted the capabil-



Downtown with Daffodils By allowing the images to merge one into the other, the multi-sensory impact of walking down a busy city street is evoked.

ities of the software and its compositional possibilities as an integral part of the development of her image-making. The computer program is more than a tool. She views it as a kind of non-thinking collaborator in her work. "I have a type of dialogue with the software," she elaborates, "in the sense that it responds to my input and I react to the outcome. But I control the process every step of the way by selecting the program variables. Nevertheless, the results are often unexpected and exciting."

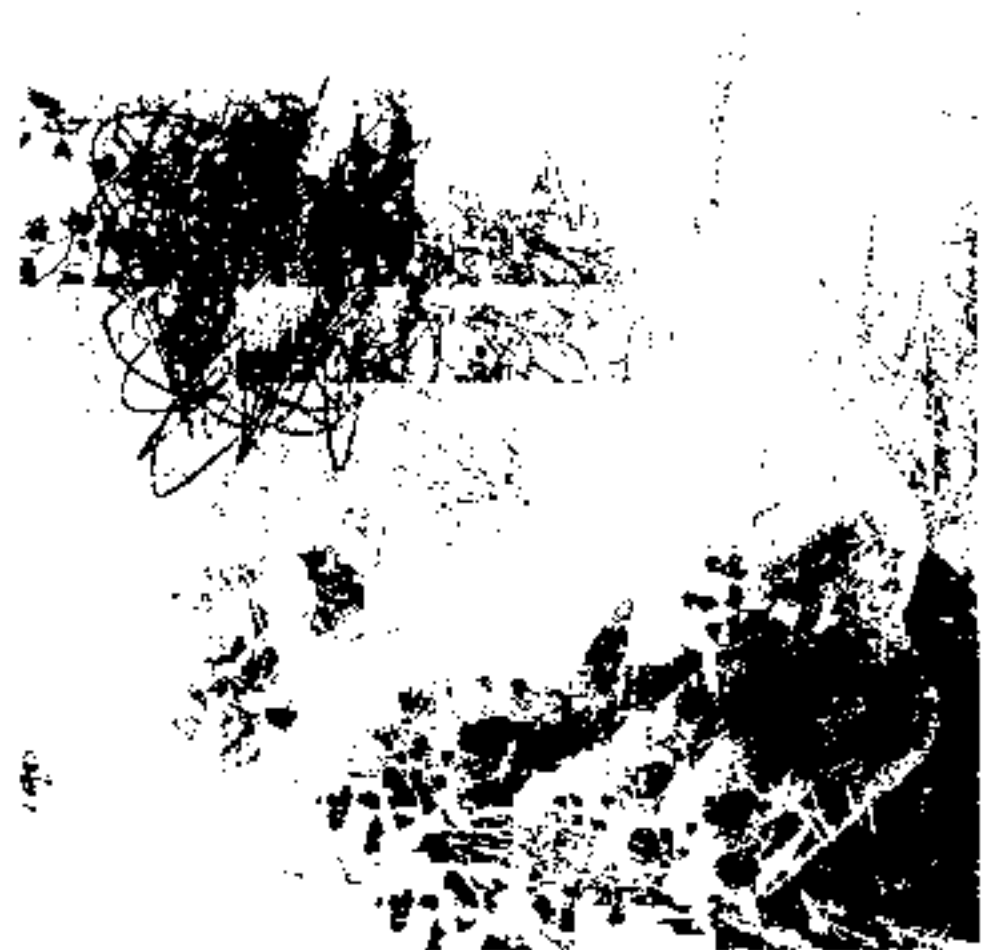
The inspiration for her images is derived from places visited, memories recalled and dreams envisioned. Her goal is simple: to communicate the experiences of

being alive through an aesthetically intriguing visual interpretation. An understanding of her work is described in her own words: "My art is about conveying emotion – conjured up by memory, lived or dreamed, consciously experienced or not. Our singular lives are made up of individual events, yet bound by a commonality of feeling. In the community of strangers in which we often find ourselves living, I aim to establish a connection with others through the human capacity to express emotion."

Ellen's artwork is sold through several venues in Greater Vancouver and online at her website. Prints from her growing body of work have been exhibited in Los



The Dream that Won't Go Away - The poetic world of human emotion and the subconscious are explored in this visual amalgam.



Sacks of Yesterdays - Out of the layering of branches, root tangles, boulders and scribbles begin to emerge figurative markings with emotive associations. Twigs scrape out an undeciphered babble; bulbous and knotted shapes become the embodiment of feeling.

Angeles, Texas and New York. They are also held in collections around the world. As a prolific artist, the increasing inventory filling up their home tends to pose a 'pleasant' problem for her and her husband. Her only child, a 19-year old daughter, is currently studying at the Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication in England. Alazne is showing every sign of following a creative path like her mother.

Through the compositional narratives of her artwork, Ellen desires, "to evoke imagery that will stimulate the imagination

and resonate with one's own perception of our world." To view Ellen's artwork is to appreciate the knowledge of artists who work with twenty-first century technology. Her creativity is truly astounding.

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The Woman Who Reappeared

by Elin Thordarson

Canadian Letters has always had the good fortune of being a literary realm populated by the works of women. Consequently, it has never been difficult in my lifetime, to be able to rattle off a sizable list of women from Canada known for their contribution to literature. Take for instance: Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence, Nellie McClung, Gabrielle Roy, Beatrice Mosionier, Carol Shields, Miriam Toews, Jane Urquhart, Ann-Marie MacDonald, Lucy Maud Montgomery, Alice Munro, Emily Carr . . . etc. But, as of late, it has begun to concern me that there is at least one name missing from my personal, rapid fire, Can. Lit. mash-up: Laura Goodman Salverson.

In 1939, in fact, the very year our canadienne bien-aimée Margaret Atwood was born, Salverson's autobiographical account of growing up a woman, of an ethnic minority, in poverty, at the dawning of the Twentieth Century was awarded the Governor General's Literary Merit for Non-Fiction. Nowadays the Governor General's Award could be considered Canada's pre-eminent "feather in cap". So how can it be that this celebrated writer has become a relative unknown to the modern Canadian reading public? Well, in addition to the Icelandic plumage her *Confessions of an Immigrant's Daughter* is rumoured to have ruffled, another reason for her unpopularity may be the "universal feminist" criticism her autobiography garnered from scholars in the late twentieth century. It is through my presentation of Salverson's autobiographical first wave feminist stance, and the subsequent second wave "universal feminist" criticism it received, that I intend to pull *Confessions of an Immigrant's Daughter* from its abyss of silence through a third wave rhetoric.

Feminism, in the Western and patriarchal context, has come to be referred to in

metaphor. It has been a social movement that has "washed" over our political consciousness in a wave-like pattern since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. That is also to say, when dealing with a wave analogy, that the movement has had a tendency to ebb away from popular discourse. Three of these waves have crashed upon Western society thus far, each qualified by its own distinct tone and unique temper.

Western Icelander, Laura Goodman Salverson, born in Winnipeg in 1890, wrote in contemporaneity with feminism's first wave. This wave, of course, is dominated by the political crusade of the women suffragists who sought not only political autonomy for women, but also a subsequent improvement in women's social circumstances. *Confessions of an Immigrant's Daughter* is ripe with Salverson's impressions of the conditions under which women lived, in particular, the iniquitous estate bestowed on non-Anglo women during these early episodes of urban prairie life.

She writes:

"For girls like us the dice were loaded from the start. The ensign of the mop and dustbin hung over our cradles. No wonder thousands of us married any old fool! Bed and board! Was that the answer? Was that all of life? Was there no room in this iron world for the quickened sensibilities? For the white fire that raced along the edges of the mind at the beautiful, swift soaring of a bird? No meaning to the strange, insistent yearning for a deeper fulfillment of purposes? Just to eat and sleep, propagate your misery and die!" (323).

Indeed, this is one of Salverson's central confessional/autobiographical themes, the way in which women can experience poverty – namely through demeaning labour coupled with the sentiment that

one's role, as a woman, is to merely generate a reserve army of degraded workers. For instance, she is quite caustic in her details of the suffering of women who come to her aunt's midwife establishment to be "eased of their unwelcome burden, and to hide from society" (271).

She describes her first experience of a birthing:

"My impulse was to flee, but my feet refused to move. What followed was so hideous, I felt as though my own flesh were riddled and torn with a battery of javelins. That sudden assault upon the nerves was nothing compared with the subsequent shock of horror when the significance of those ghastly cries flashed upon me . . . Yes, now I understood what was going on up there. What, my terrified mind told me, was going on and on and on all over the whole wide world." (259).

She then continually references her contempt for this aspect of misery, its procreation, through out the piece:

"To what conceivable end, I wonder was it so important to perpetuate this dreary existence?" (291).

"Nature be damned, said we . . . If other laws of nature were circumvented and controlled, why should generation be the one exception?" (288).

"Mrs. Wilmot rocked in the shade, grumbling at the everlasting babies" (313).

"(T)he same intuition which had quickened my first understanding left me in no doubt as to my mother's own secret resentment. She had had enough of babies. Yet, there she was, absorbed and utilized in the unwelcome business, and daily more oppressed by the approaching event" (211).

There are a couple of specific episodes from the women's hospital in Duluth, Minnesota. Chapter forty-one, entitled "The face of virtue" is basically a rundown of a few memorable cases that came through Aunt Halldora's doors. Two of whom, experience the mortality of their infants as the path to the freedom from their lives' burden:

"There was a young stenographer from St. Paul, who looked like a scared kitten, all eyes and quivering nerves . . . The morning after her baby was born I was wondering

what sort of collapse to expect, when I brought up her breakfast. What I saw was a pair of glowing eyes and a broad grin. 'Gee!' she piped. 'The kid's dead – ain't that great!' (370).

The other is an instance where Salverson recollects walking in on a young mother attempting to stifle her baby's breath:

"There she was, white as a sheet, a crazy light in her eye, her hands on the baby's neck, shutting off the maddening yowls" (373).

Salverson's non-fictional piece has a decidedly feminist, albeit first wave, rhetoric. And its not just because her good friend and advisor happened to be Manitoba's most notorious "suffragette", Nellie McClung, but because this autobiography, without specifically referencing the women's suffrage movement, makes a strong appeal for social change in the lives of lower class women. In an age that expected nothing but piety, modesty and obedience from its female contingent, Salverson quite radically shines the stark light of truth on what lower and working class women would have faced, especially in pregnancy and childbirth.

But feminism will always be a complicated movement, and will always bound up in historical circumstances. It won't be long before the second wave rhetoric appears on the scene, complete with its very own temporally based philosophy on femininity and its own subsequent methodologies of literary criticism, based on a philosophy of "universal feminism."

Helen Buss' piece on women's autobiographical writing, tellingly entitled *Mapping Our Selves* (1993), devotes a sizable section to the criticism of *Confessions of an Immigrant's Daughter*. Buss' problem with Salverson's autobiography is that as a confessional piece, written by a woman, it fails to explore what she calls the "maternal pre-text" (179). Salverson wrote deliberately corrosive words on her witness to the labourings of women, and then went on to give scant detail of her own experience of pregnancy and the delivery of her one son. According to Buss, Salverson did indeed adequately map the origins of

her problem with femaleness. It was rooted in the deaths of her mother's infant children, the effect of which "was a kind of fearful distaste for all babies. They were such unstable entities, predictable in nothing save the certainty of their sure departure" (1939: 138-9). Buss continues on with a recognition of Salverson's awareness that the maternal function "can enslave otherwise powerful beings" (176). Which lead to, what Buss claims was, an alienation from her own female body (176). She could not articulate her own subjectivity, that is, a womb narrative; though not for a lack in herself "but in the social structures, the discourses, and the generic forms in which she had to map her identity" (175). Buss then concludes her criticism of *Confessions of an Immigrant's Daughter* with a call for "the need to unearth and remap our linguistic formation and our generic tradition to find the parts of ourselves patriarchy has suppressed, disallowed, so that we may address the maternal pre-text on a personal and cultural level" (179).

Amongst the few twentieth century scholars that have examined Laura Goodman Salverson's work, this line of judgment appears to prevail. It is paralleled in Barbara Powell's assertion that Salverson "never did learn an authentic woman's tongue to tell her story" (1992: 78). It is mirrored again in Daisy Neijmann's claim that Salverson had to suppress her female voice in order to gain recognition as a serious Icelandic-Canadian writer (2001: 153). Each of these scholars appear to share a similar view of how women write, or should write. "Female voice", "women's tongue" and especially "maternal pre-text" are terms that have all the telling earmarks of a "universal feminist" rhetoric. This is the philosophical belief that all women share some sort of universal subjectivity, in fact, this was the flag under which women were encouraged to unite in the feminist protests of the 1960's and 1970's. But this view, though present still in scholarship nowadays, has been widely criticized, especially by third wave thinkers.

The third wave is the latest chapter in, and some would say the natural progres-

sion of, the historical feminist movement. One of its tenets is the criticism of its predecessor's rhetoric. Where the second wave was popular for its universal approach to feminist scholarship, the third wave attempts to challenge any universal definition, while representing pluralism and difference. In order to resurrect Laura Goodman Salverson from wherever this criticism sent her, I think its useful reconsider her under this new light.

Earlier I mentioned Margaret Atwood, a very important figure in the Canadian culture chronicle as well as feminist thought. Her essay, entitled "*On Being a 'Woman Writer'*" addresses exactly what Buss, Powell, and Neijmann exercise in their negative criticism of Salverson's work. Atwood calls it "one-dimensional Feminist Criticism" (1982: 192), the approach to literature by women, which awards points "according to conformity or non-conformity to an ideological position" (192). In this case, their criticism rests on Salverson's non-conformity to a universal feminism, a "maternal pre-text," or an "authentic women's tongue." And not only is this sort of criticism one-dimensional in scope, it exhibits what Atwood calls "Quiller-Couch Syndrome." Based on an essay by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, Atwood diagnoses this as an affliction of the critical capacities where one's mind is bound up in engendered differences. Namely, it is a view that women write differently than men and vice versa, and that this difference must be the foundation of feminist scholarship and literary criticism.

Another giant in third wave discourse, who has written extensively on this misnamed "woman-writer" figure, is bell hooks. In her piece *Writing Without Labels*, hooks addresses the issue of the identity of the writer and the problem it often presents to literary criticism. She claims labels and identifiers, whether based on "race, sex, or some other characteristic that sets an individual apart from others ... is always limiting" (1999:54). Unlike our three, second wave inspired, feminist critics listed above, who view Salverson as a woman who writes, hooks would make the important distinction that Salverson was

instead a writer who happened to be a woman. She makes the claim that art and literature transcend categories, but also that one must recognize that artists are indeed informed by the "specifics of race, class, and gender" (50). So though the specificity of the experience of growing up a woman, of an ethnic minority, in poverty, at the beginning of the twentieth century strengthened Salverson's inherited creative gifts, she must not be identified by these alone.

It is a shame that Salverson's contribution to Canadian Literature often registers a dull gaze of ignorance. Her literary voice has been stifled and her reach among readership shortened. The universal feminist criticism she received of late has not done her any favours on the matter. But these criticisms were wholly based on a one-dimensional and narrow definition of the concept of "the woman-writer." In order to reevaluate Salverson's *Confessions of an Immigrant's Daughter* we need to become reflexive on these categories of thought. We must examine Laura Goodman Salverson's humanism and social consciousness that was informed by her experience as a woman of an ethnic minority, who lived in poverty. Without, of course, falling into a pattern of thought that catalogues personal identifiers first when dealing with literary criticism.

I am very well aware that this should not be considered the conclusion on the process of exhuming Laura Goodman Salverson's work. Really, at this point, this

is merely the introduction, there is much more theoretical work to be done on the subject. But I have attempted, based on a feminist perspective, to lay down some tramlines that would facilitate a new criticism of Salverson's autobiography, and hopefully raise her name into the proud company of writers from Canada, who also happen to be women.

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Undan Snjóbreidunni

What Lies Beneath the Snow

Revealing the contributions of Icelandic pioneer women to adult education in Manitoba, 1875 - 1914

by Jo-Anne Weir

New Iceland

The community was made up of several rural settlements located along the shore of Lake Winnipeg, the Icelandic River, and on Mikley, which was later renamed Hecla Island. It was the first area of settlement for many Icelanders upon arrival from Iceland before they migrated to other communities in Manitoba. The pioneer families of New Iceland faced the hardships of disease, flooding, extreme temperature, and religious divide. With an estimated population of 2500 Icelanders in 1901, this was a predominantly Icelandic community and the second largest in Manitoba. The pioneers were commercial fishermen and farmers and also cut and sold cordwood to supplement their incomes. Though the settlement of New Iceland began in 1875, its economy was hindered by the slow arrival of the railway. After some 30 years, the railway finally reached the settlements along the Lake Winnipeg shore. In terms of religious faith, the many settlements located within New Iceland had churches of both Lutheran and Unitarian faiths.

Posen

Posen was made up of a small number of rural settlements located along the eastern shore of Lake Manitoba and inland. It was a small secondary community for many Icelanders who had settled earlier in New Iceland or Winnipeg. Despite their small population they were the ethnic majority of the district. The land was better suited to livestock than crops, so the pioneers had few crops, raised livestock, fished commercially on Lake Manitoba and expanded into dairy production for added income. The settlement began in 1887 but

the railway was delayed and arrived 17 years later. Both Lutheran and Unitarian churches existed in the community.

Argyle

The district of Argyle includes several rural Icelandic settlements located on the grasslands of south western Manitoba. This community was situated away from the two largest lakes in Manitoba, which was a considerable change for a group of immigrants who were accustomed to living close to the water. In 1901, it was estimated to be the third largest Icelandic settlement in Manitoba, with a population of over 1000 Icelanders. This was generally a secondary settlement, though many also settled in Argyle directly from Iceland. They joined what was already an Ontario British farming community and benefited from the expertise and goodwill of their British neighbours. They benefited most, however, from the almost immediate arrival of the railway, which came in 1886, the same year the Icelanders began to arrive in Argyle. The Icelandic pioneers soon prospered through grain farming and raising livestock which they were able to ship to market via the railway. Surprisingly, only the Lutheran Church was established in Argyle, with no mention of a Unitarian congregation in the area.

Selkirk

The city of Selkirk is located on the Red River between Winnipeg on the south and Lake Winnipeg to the north. It is also located on the well traveled road between New Iceland and Winnipeg. As a result of its geographic location, many Icelanders used Selkirk as a stopping off place while

traveling to and from Winnipeg by road or river. Over time an Icelandic community began to form in Selkirk as people found work there, and by 1901 approximately 700 Icelanders lived in the urban community. They were one of the minority groups within Selkirk, which had an influential British majority and culture. Historical accounts of the Icelandic pioneers in Selkirk are limited, but it seems many of the men worked as part of the fishing industry, and or laboured at the sawmill, while some raised dairy cattle. The Icelandic community or settlement within Selkirk is said to have been well established by 1888. The railway between Selkirk and Winnipeg had been in operation since 1883. An Icelandic Lutheran church and congregation existed in Selkirk, while Unitarians living in Selkirk would have had to travel to Winnipeg to attend church.

Winnipeg

The largest Icelandic community in Manitoba, settled in the city of Winnipeg and numbered approximately 4000 in 1901. The Icelanders were one of several ethnic minorities in Winnipeg among a large British majority. Like many other ethnic minorities in Winnipeg, they eventually settled in one section of the city and were able to establish a community within a large urban centre. The community was located in the west end of the city along Sargent Avenue which some referred to as the "Icelandic Main Street". The Winnipeg community began in 1875 and was established through the first large influx of Icelandic immigrants in 1876. Continued immigration and migration within Manitoba brought more and more Icelanders moving into and out of Winnipeg. As Winnipeg grew as a city, new and varied opportunities for employment arose for the Icelandic immigrants. This urban experience was new, as most Icelanders had emigrated from rural Iceland as farmers and fishermen. The railway arrived in Winnipeg in 1881 and the Winnipeg boom soon followed. Winnipeg was home to an active religious community for both Lutheran and Unitarian mem-

The five communities posed different challenges for the pioneer women who lived in them. Who these women were and how they responded to the challenges they faced through educational activities make up the findings of this research. These findings are presented in the following seven historical narratives.

The first narrative provides a very human introduction to the findings by profiling five Icelandic pioneer women. These five women were chosen because they were influential and present a variety of educational approaches across all five of the communities studied in this research. These are their stories.

Melting the Snow: Five Icelandic adult educators revealed

The five women chosen to be profiled here can be characterized as adult educators for the many ways they facilitated formal, non formal and informal learning opportunities for their fellow Icelandic pioneer women. This historical narrative describes how each of the women helped organize



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educational activities through her leadership and service to the Icelandic communities. As is the case with effective educators, they also acted as role models as they lived their lives driven by their passions for social justice, music, poetry, literature, language and health care. As you will read, each of these five women brought their own unique way of acting as educators within their communities.

Margret (Jonsdottir) Benedictsson



No history of Icelandic pioneer women in Manitoba is complete without highlighting the influence of Margret Benedictsson. Her role in the woman's suffrage movement in Manitoba is well documented in several articles and texts (Armstrong (2002); Crippen (2004); Johnson (1994); Kinnear (1987); Kristjanson (1965)). Her contribution towards securing the vote for women in Manitoba makes her influence widespread beyond just the Icelandic community.

Her life as Margret Jonsdottir began in Iceland, where she was born in 1866. Strong feelings of independence were a necessity, as she was on her own at age thirteen years, but they were also fueled by her reading of Iceland's patriot Jon Sigurdsson and women's rights activists Lucy Stone

and Elizabeth Cody Stanton. She left Iceland at the age of twenty-one and settled in North Dakota where she worked to put herself through grade school and later spent two years studying at Bathgate College. She continued her education after moving to Winnipeg, where she attended night school and took a clerical course.

Margret soon met Sigfus Benedictsson and they were married in 1892. Margret was twenty-six years old. They went on to have two children, and Margret was devoted to her role as wife and mother. The Benedictssons lived most of the time in Winnipeg with a short stay on Mikley in New Iceland and a few years in Selkirk. She and Sigfus shared a love of writing and a strong and outspoken belief in women's suffrage. Together they set up a printing press in Selkirk and began publishing *Freyja*, the Icelandic word for woman and the goddess of love and beauty from old Norse mythology. It was monthly women's suffrage paper, the first of its kind in Canada. Most articles were written by the Benedictssons, though much material was from other sources and translated into Icelandic for publication in *Freyja*. All issues of *Freyja* were published in the Icelandic language. The paper became hugely successful and by the second year there were over 500 subscribers, both men and women across Canada and the United States. Most saw Margret as the editor of *Freyja*, and because of her other role of wife and mother, she did most of her editorial work and writing in the evenings.

In addition to suffrage and temperance, the paper tackled radical topics such as divorce and labour rights for working women. *Freyja* also brought to light the plight of women living in poverty and married women's lack of choice in bearing children. Disagreement and strain began to show in the Benedictsson marriage and in the editorials of *Freyja* towards the end of the twelve years of publication. In 1910 Sigfus blocked Margret's access to the printing press, which he owned, and *Freyja* ceased to exist. Margret left Winnipeg in 1913 to go and live with her daughter who was married and living in Washington State. Her son stayed behind with his

father in Winnipeg. There is no record of Margret Benedictsson ever returning to Winnipeg. She passed away in 1956 at the age of 90.

During the heady years of *Freyja*, Margret had other suffrage initiatives in which she was actively involved. She was a confident and persuasive public speaker, and she traveled throughout the Icelandic communities of Manitoba to generate support for woman's suffrage. As president of the Ladies' Aid society of the Icelandic Unitarian Church of Winnipeg, she helped create a standing committee on suffrage. She was successful in getting many other Ladies' Aids to also adopt woman suffrage as part of their mandate. Margret extended the profile of the Icelandic suffrage workers by forming the First Icelandic Suffrage Association in America, which was soon invited to join the Canada Suffrage Association and made member of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance as well. Women in Manitoba were granted the vote in 1916, three years after Margret Benedictsson left the province. (Johnson (1994); S. Johnson, (personal communication, September 25, 2007; Kristjanson (1965, p. 371); Petursson (1954)).

The life of Margret (Jonsdottir) Benedictsson shows a strong personal faith in the value of education. She participated in formal education in North Dakota through grade school and Bathgate College and in Winnipeg at night school and the clerical course. Evidence of her on-going nonformal learning and informal learning is seen through her involvement in various organizations and her reading, which kept her informed of suffrage developments worldwide.

Her life also shows a considerable and important influence on the non formal and informal learning of Icelandic pioneer women throughout all five communities studied in this research. Her speeches to suffrage societies and Ladies' Aids groups provided non formal learning opportunities for her peers. The reading of *Freyja* provided informal learning opportunities for Icelandic pioneer women about not only suffrage, but many other important issues facing women at that time. Margret

Benedictsson's influence resulted in the Icelandic pioneer women in Manitoba being a uniquely informed group of immigrant women during this time period; a tremendous achievement, though not without personal consequence for Margret Benedictsson.

Lara (Gudjohnsen) Bjarnason



Lara Gudjohnsen was raised in Iceland in a home surrounded by music. Her father, Prof. P. Gudjohnsen, was known as the "Father of Modern Icelandic music". Lara received her formal training in music in Iceland and used this gift throughout her life. In 1870, while still living in Iceland, she married Jon Bjarnason who was a Lutheran pastor. The couple left Iceland in 1873, and after a few years in the United States they came to New Iceland. They arrived in 1877, after which a religious debate and divide occurred in New Iceland, with Rev. Bjarnason in the midst of it. This was eventually resolved and Rev. Bjarnason became a very influential and much loved spiritual leader in the Icelandic settlements. Together Lara and Rev. Bjarnason traveled throughout New Iceland, often on foot, providing for the spiritual and other needs of the Icelandic pioneers.

As wife of the pastor, Lara had an opportunity to become an influential force in the pioneer communities, and she embraced the role. She taught school in Gimli in 1878 and 1879 shortly after the new settlement began. Later in 1879, Rev. Bjarnason became the pastor of the First Lutheran Church in Winnipeg. There Lara became the music leader in the church, leading choirs and other musical activities. Their home became a place where people came to play, learn and enjoy music. The Bjarnasons had no children of their own, but adopted three children. Rev. Bjarnason struggled with health issues off and on during his 30 years as pastor of the First Lutheran Church. In addition to caring for their children, Lara also cared for her husband through his bouts of illness.

Lara Bjarnason was also very involved in social issues. In 1881 she was active in the Icelandic Women's Society, which was an organization that provided for the many needs of the Icelandic immigrants and taught them how to adapt to their new country. In 1884, she was on the executive of the Temperance Society in Winnipeg. In 1886, she provided strong leadership in the new formed Ladies' Aid of the First Lutheran Church in Winnipeg. She led several fundraising efforts to raise money for the church and community. She is best remembered for being the first to voice the need for a home for aged and or homeless Icelanders. Her suggestion was the impetus for the fundraising of the Ladies' Aid towards the creation of Betel Homes, which continues to exist today. The Rev. Bjarnason died from his illness in 1914. Lara Bjarnason passed away in 1921. (Kristjanson (1965) p. 63 121-122, 197; Thomas (1947) Thorvaldson (1995)

Lara Bjarnason received her formal education in Iceland as a musician and learned informally to teach school in New Iceland's education system. She must have also learned to speak English before coming to New Iceland because the Icelandic pioneers had insisted on English as the language of instruction in their schools from the outset. Informally, she probably expanded her musical abilities through the musical influence of her father.

As wife of a pastor, she was able to influence the non formal and informal learning of Icelandic pioneer women primarily in Winnipeg, but also in New Iceland and Argyle. Non formally, she provided choir and musical instruction in the First Lutheran Church in Winnipeg, and informally, she provided musical opportunities in her home. Her leadership in organizations such as the Ladies' Aid, Icelandic Women's Society and Temperance Society contributed to the non formal learning of their members. The instruction she provided to new immigrants in her home provided informal lessons of assimilation. Lara Bjarnason took full advantage of her privileged position as the pastor's wife to influence the learning of the Icelandic pioneers.

Kristrun (Petursdottir) Fridfinnson



Kristrun Fridfinnson is described as a small woman with dark hair and striking blue eyes. She was born in Iceland in 1850 and came to Manitoba with her husband Sigurdur and two sons. They had faced many hardships while in Iceland, including the emotional hardship of losing two young daughters in one week. During her lifetime, Kristrun gave birth twelve times, with only five sons surviving to maturity. When she and Sigurdur arrived in the

Geysir district of New Iceland, they were assisted by other families who opened their homes to them until they were able to get settled on their own homestead. Kristrun, Sigurdur and their sons farmed, yet income from outside the home was still needed for the family to survive. It was easier in Manitoba at that time for women to find work and Kristrun, like other women in the community knew of work available in Winnipeg. On more than one occasion, Kristrun and some other women would walk to the city, a distance of approximately 160 kilometers, to find work scrubbing floors and washing clothes. This work provided much needed cash to purchase the family's necessities, which were then transported back by the women on foot.

Kristrun worked hard and endured hardship and loss, yet maintained her love of poetry, which she composed and recited throughout her life. She and Sigurdur provided a home for their sons rich in literature, poetry and religious teachings. Kristrun was also devoted to the literary needs of her community. For a couple of years the community of Geysir discussed the need for an Icelandic library without result. Taking a much needed direct approach, Kristrun took it upon herself to travel on foot, home to home, to generate support and action. Kristrun's efforts led to the March 10, 1911 meeting where the plan for the library was approved. In honour of her role in the creation of the library, Kristrun was asked to name the library. She humbly declined the honour, but submitted a verse she had written which contained several possible library names. The name chosen from her verse was Visir, meaning beginning, growth or sprout. The library went on to serve the community for fifty years and earned Kristrun Fridfinnson the title of "Mother of the Visir Library". Kristrun passed away in 1923 at the age of 74 years. (Geysir Historical Society, 1983, p 176)

The story of Kristrun Fridfinnson's life shows her to be an active informal learner who influenced the informal and formal learning of her community in New Iceland. Upon arrival in Canada, she and her family had to learn informally to farm

in a new country with a different geography and climate. Her informal learning extended to the city, where she learned the skills needed to work as a domestic servant in the homes of British families. She may have also learned some English language skills while working for these English speaking employers. In the private sphere of her home she continued to learn informally and contribute to the informal learning of her family. Her sons Johannes and Fridrik shared her poetic ability. Her ability to recite poetry was a result of the informal readings of poetry in her home in Iceland and in New Iceland. These poetry readings throughout her life no doubt nurtured her own interest and aptitude in composing poetry.

In the public sphere of her community, Kristrun Fridfinnson's reputation as a poet gave her influence in the cultural affairs of Geysir. Using that influence, combined with her determined personality, she was able to contribute to the formal learning of the community of Geysir. The definition used in this research included libraries as a means of formal learning (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Kristrun's influence on formal learning in this New Iceland community continued for the fifty year life of the Visir library. Kristrun's story is an example of the important role that poetry and literature played in the lives of the Icelandic pioneers by educating and sustaining them during times of hardship.

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Sigurveig (Olafsdottir) Christopherson



Sigurveig Olafsdottir was born in Iceland in 1853. She received training as a midwife while living in Iceland. She and her husband Peter and their two daughters Rosa and Helga immigrated to the Argyle district in 1893. They purchased a homestead there and began farming. After just a few years in Argyle, their youngest daughter Helga died at the age of eleven, and that same year their son Helgi was born. A few years later, their daughter Allabjorg was born and contracted polio. She was confined to a wheelchair and died at the age of twelve.

Despite Sigurveig's own personal losses and a farm to help manage, she continued to meet the high demand for her skills as a midwife. At a time when medical help was unavailable in the outlying rural areas, she was often called upon to assist women in giving birth. She was well known for always carrying her leather case with medicines and instruments for birthing.

Sigurveig was also involved in her community through her membership in Von(Hope), the suffrage society of Argyle. She and her daughter Rosa were among those who traveled throughout Argyle collecting signatures on the women's suffrage petition that was presented at the Manitoba

Legislature in 1910. Sigurveig Christopherson gave unselfishly to the communities in Argyle through her roles as a midwife and suffrage worker. She passed away in 1931 at the age of 77 years (Rural Municipality of Argyle, 1981, p 118, 341).

Sigurveig Christopherson participated in formal learning in Iceland through her midwife training. Upon arrival in Argyle she continued to learn non formally through her involvement in organizations such as the suffrage society Kvitabundi. She was probably a subscriber to the suffrage paper *Freyja*, which gave her informal opportunities to learn about the issues affecting women.

Her influence on the learning of Icelandic pioneer women in the community of Argyle begins with her midwifery. Each time a trained midwife such as Sigurveig helped deliver a child, those around her learned informally through observation. Women knew that whenever a friend or neighbour needed help in birthing that if a trained midwife could not get there in time, they would want to help the best they could. Many pioneer women were self-taught midwives and no doubt learned through observation of trained midwives.

As a woman with formal training and a highly valued position in the community as a midwife, it is probable that Sigurveig was influential within the suffrage society. Her position of influence afforded her the opportunity to influence the non formal learning of her community. Her involvement in the petition that played a part in granting Manitoba women the vote demonstrates a wider influence on the lives of pioneer women. Her commitment to women's suffrage in the midst of her responsibilities as a mother, farmer's wife and midwife is admirable. To take on this campaign during a time of physical and emotional hardship as a pioneer woman who had lost two daughters, is remarkable.

Sigurveig Christopherson's life as a pioneer woman shows an influence on the informal and non formal learning of her peers in Argyle. She arrived in Argyle with skills as a midwife that she learned through formal learning in Iceland. Sigurveig and her fellow suffragettes learned non formal-

ly through their membership in the suffrage society in Argyle.

Margret (Danielsdottir) Kristjanson



Margret Danielsdottir arrived in Winnipeg in 1892 from Iceland as a fifteen year old girl. Shortly after arriving, she found work with an English speaking family and used this experience to learn to speak, read and write using the English language. In 1895 she married Magnus Kristjanson, and they settled on a homestead in Shoal Lake in the Posen district. Together they farmed and raised their four children. Their son, Wilhelm, went on to become a scholar and writer and is referenced throughout this thesis.

Margret's husband Magnus held the title of Postmaster of Shoal Lake (later called Otto) for thirty years, though Margret was the one known to be fully in charge of the post office. The post office in Shoal Lake, like most others, was a lively community centre on days the mail was delivered. In addition to sorting and distributing the much anticipated letters, newspapers, periodicals and books, the postmaster, or in this case the postmistress, also provided conversation and hospitality. Due to Margret's English abilities, she was also often called upon by the community members to assist them in writing letters in English. In her role as the unofficial postmistress of Shoal Lake, she provided for

many of the needs of her community. Margret lived a long life, passing away in 1968 at the age of 91 years (Lundar and District Historical Society, 1980, p 526).

Margret Kristjanson was an active informal learner. In order to survive when she arrived in Winnipeg as a fifteen year old girl, she had to quickly and informally learn the domestic skills needed to work in a British-Canadian home. She also learned informally to gain English literacy skills. This informal learning of the language hastened the assimilation into Canadian society of both herself and her children. Her informal learning continued in her unofficial role of postmistress. It is probable that her husband received training from the Canadian postal service and then showed her informally the skills needed for the job.

Margret contributed to the informal learning of her community in Posen through her role as postmistress. Facilitating the distribution of correspondence and reading materials played a part in helping others to learn informally. The social environment of the post office created an informal learning centre for the Icelandic pioneers that operated regularly each time the mail was delivered. Her literacy skills, which she used to help others to write letters, also provided a type of informal learning opportunity for those learning English. Margret Kristjanson's story demonstrates several ways that Icelandic Pioneer women used informal means to obtain job skills and literacy skills, which they in turn used to influence the learning of others in their community.

This concludes the first historical narrative, which has profiled five Icelandic adult educators: suffragist, Margret Benedictsson, church leader, Lara Bjarnason, Mother of the Visir library, Kristrun Fridfinnson, Midwife, Sigurveig Christopherson, and postmistress, Margret Kristjanson. They are an impressive representation of the Icelandic pioneer women of Manitoba. Many other remarkable women were revealed in this research, and it was difficult to choose just five. The individual Icelandic pioneer women of Manitoba continue to be a fertile ground for further research.

To be continued in the next issue

STEPHAN G. STEPHANSSON ICELANDIC SOCIETY

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Big Projects - Small Community

by Bill Birse

*And the sons become the fathers and the daughters will be wives
As the torch is passed from hand to hand and we struggle through our lives
Though the generations wander, the lineage survives
And all of us, from dust to dust
We all become forefathers by and by*

- song "Forefathers" by Dan Fogelberg

"Well, we may not be big, but dontcha' ever think we ponder small." Andy Fergusson, Markerville's great dane was sitting on a park bench on the banks of the Medicine, deep in conversation with Nels Borg, keeper of the Huldufolk garden in Markerville.

"Yah," said Nels. "T'was ever so. Those Icelanders that thought they found paradise here back in 1888 knew this was the end of the road. There was no more travellin' on. They couldn't go back and they had nowhere else to go to so they were forced to stay."

"They figured they needed a way to make some money so they built the creamery. Supposed to be a big investment," said Andy. "Hah! All they got back was a cream cheque every month."

"Yah, but t'was enough to keep 'em going. Paid some bills. Let 'em build their farms," Nels added.

"They worked hard—those people. But they were smart enough to know they had to stop every once in a while so they could have a little frivolity. If Tindastoll was to have any heart, it had to have a gathering place. So then they built a hall."

"Then, a few years later, they built a church. They had no money. Their farms weren't finished. But they built a hall and built a church" added Nels.

"I was married in that church," Andy said sombrely. "We got married and then we all walked down to the hall and had the lunch. There was no room for tables so people ate their lunch on their laps."

"I learned how to dance in the hall," Nels replied. "My folks took us all, bundled us up in the wagon and off we'd go. When the little ones got too tired, they just buried themselves in the pile of coats and went to sleep."

"Those were the days," Andy replied slowly with a far-away look in his eyes. "Yep! Those were the days!"

It is hard to fathom with that sort of history, the sons and daughters two generations removed could bring themselves to the point of throwing up their hands and saying the land was more valuable than the buildings and should just be sold off to some outsider who wanted to build a nice house in a quiet hamlet.

So, if the land wasn't going to be sold off, something had to be done to the buildings before they fell in on themselves like the proverbial house of cards.

It became a no brainer!

The buildings would need to be restored.

And, as Andy says "We may not be big but dontcha' ever think we ponder small."

This is the way it all got started!

In 1889, Stephan G. Stephansson immigrated to the Markerville area (Tindastoll, as it was known back then) and proceeded to build a homestead. Although he was in what was then known as the Northwest Territories, his passion and his heart remained in Iceland. And how he displayed that passion was through his poetry. As a matter of fact, he became the poet laureate of Iceland. As Andy once said,

"Poetry in Iceland is like hockey in Canada—and Stephansson was the Gretzky of poetry."

By 1974, his homestead was falling into neglected and uninhabited disrepair. Joe Johannson of Markerville had a forward thinking vision that the house should be restored. Bernice Andersen, Joe's daughter, remembers him shaking his head gravely and saying words to this effect. "The preservation of the house will be a monument to all Icelanders and Icelandic/Canadians as well as preserving a look into the lives of the pioneers."

Joe proceeded to spearhead the formation of the Stephan G. Stephansson Icelandic Society. He travelled the countryside selling memberships for \$5.00 and in February, 1974, the club was formed with Joe as the president and a major focus being the restoration of the house. Members from the Edmonton and Calgary Icelandic clubs joined together with the club in Markerville and formed the Homestead Restoration Committee.

In 1975, the Farmers Union in Iceland donated \$10,000.00 toward the restoration of the house at an official presentation to dedicate the house for restoration. The Government of Alberta needed convincing there was local support for the project and Joe—together with Rosa Benedickson, Stephansson's daughter—was instrumental in generating that support. Eventually the Government of Alberta declared the house a Provincial Historic Site and restored the building beautifully to its 1927 appearance. The house was officially opened as a museum in 1982 at an event that attracted 700 people including a plane load of visitors from Iceland.

The house restoration, though, was not enough for Joe. He next turned his attention to the abandoned Markerville Creamery which sat deteriorating on the banks of the Medicine River. In 1975, the Stephansson Society purchased the creamery for back taxes with the intent of restoring the building. Joe thought the restoration of this building would be a monument to the mostly Icelandic pioneers who formed the Tindastoll Butter and Cheese Manufacturing Association. Despite signif-

icant local opposition, (to which Joe mournfully shook his head and said "they're just not thinking right!") the Markerville Creamery was declared a Provincial Historic Resource by the Government of Alberta. The Stephansson Society undertook a total restoration which commenced in 1984 with the building being jacked up in preparation for a new foundation.

Joe passed away in November of 1984 but, as Bernice recollects "At least he got to see the project off the ground." Literally!

The creamery opened in 1986 as a museum and was officially opened in 1988 at a huge homecoming celebration of the centennial of Markerville. The rest, as they say, is history. And, that's exactly what it's all about. The preservation of history.

So, just how does a sleepy hamlet of 50 people generate the restoration of a number of buildings that were built around the turn of the century—the last century?

Put simply, the first step in the process is the vision—and without a dream, where would we be?

Any of us!

Just where would we be without a dream?

The second step is interpreting that vision through leadership.

Way, way back in 1891 on New Years Eve, Stephan G. Stephansson himself said "If we feel our community needs something to make it more pleasant to live in within human control, we can do something about it. We know that nature did not corral all hardship to leave it near Red

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Deer. So if we feel that something is amiss, let's get our hands out of our pockets and do something about it."

Similarly, in 1974, Joe Johansson had the enthusiasm and persuasion to create a mission—and the Stephansson House was restored. Following that, he carried on in generating support for the restoration of the Markerville Creamery.

After the Stephansson House and the Markerville Creamery were restored, the Markervillians looked down the street and saw the Fensala Hall—which was built in 1902—sagging on the outside and decrepit on the inside. Again, a vision and Ken and Marie Sveinson spearheaded a project to see the oldest hall in continuous use in Alberta be restored to its original state. Following the restoration, it has become a functioning part of the community—its heart if you will.

And now, the church, with its cedar shingles ripped asunder in a pounding prairie hailstorm and the original sandstone foundation decaying under the building that was built in 1907, needs help. The Stephansson Society as the new owners of the church have established a restoration committee under the leadership of Bernice Andersen and Donna Nelson and the shingles have been replaced. The next important task is to stabilize the church with a new foundation.

Yet again, another vision!

"Visions are cheap," you say "and this country is loaded with leaders, but how exactly did these projects get done?"

A commonality of all these leaders is they are descendents of the original Markerville Icelandic pioneers. What their forefathers had scabbled together with nickels and dimes and built with brute strength and determination, they were not willing to let fall in on itself or face the wrecking ball. It became their passion and for Joe and Ken and Marie and now Bernice and Donna, it turned into a life-saving mission.

Another common talent these leaders had, and continue to have, is the ability to inspire others to share their dreams—to get people excited about those projects and

then get the money and the volunteers to complete the task. By diligent use of committees with specific responsibilities, the task is spread over many and becomes a promising undertaking rather than a tedious chore.

A major step in any restoration is getting a commitment from government sources and accessing grants. The designation of these buildings as historic resources creates a major funding source through the Government of Alberta Historical Resources Foundation. That designation also makes it easier to be successful in applying for grants and accessing much needed support from the federal, provincial and municipal governments as well as generating major corporate and private support.

Once that designation is approved, it is necessary to obtain a professional feasibility report including necessary architectural reports. This involves a bit of a gamble as there is a period of no money coming in and no idea of how much money is going to be required—and it will cost to get this information. However, on completion of the feasibility report, a budget can be established and fundraising can begin in earnest. At that stage, it is important to break down some responsibilities, set up a variety of committees charged with specific tasks, and get down to the business of getting the job done. It is also vital to hire a competent project manager who understands the construction business and works well with volunteers. Hiring the right person will actually pay for itself in the long run.

A key component of fundraising by the Stephansson Society is the use of creative fundraising efforts that are, in fact, enjoyable. Every November for the past eight years, the Icelandic Society has held a cookie walk in conjunction with a local three day craft show. During that time, an estimated one hundred thousand cookies have been baked by hundreds of volunteers. This has raised \$28,000.00. Many years, when cookies were running out before the Sunday close, ladies—and often their husbands—would rush home on Saturday night to bake more cookies to provide a fresh batch for Sunday morning.

As Bernese Lewis spoke for many of the volunteer bakers "I may not be able to pound a hammer but I can sure bake cookies".

For the past seven years, a golf tournament has been sponsored by the Society to support the Fensala Hall and, on its completion, the foundation for the church. This event raises money but also generates a sense of ownership within a larger community towards the project. People who may not be able to volunteer are willing to throw in a few dollars on mulligans or for draws for donated custom golf clubs to support the goals of the project. Over the years, the golf tournament has raised an estimated \$20,000.00 for these projects. It was all for a good cause—and a good time was had by all.

During the war years, a theatre troupe from Markerville would perform a play in the neighbouring communities to raise money to support the 'boys' overseas. This tradition was continued in 1999 and 2002 when plays were written and performed to raise funds for Fensala Hall.

1999 was the Centennial of the Markerville Creamery and was a good cause for celebration and another homecoming. 'Andy Fergussen's Birthday Party' celebrated the history of the creamery through song and story, was written and acted by local volunteers and performed as open air theatre for three evenings to a packed house. It was also commissioned by the Alberta Museum Association to be performed at their annual convention as dinner theatre and received a standing ovation. Once again, exposure and awareness to the Markerville scene.

The success of that play inspired the idea for a second play. This play—*A Quilt of Many Cultures*—was a joint project of the Markerville Creamery, the Dickson Store Museum and the Danish/Canadian National Museum. The play honoured the immigrants and pioneers of western Canada and again, using local volunteer talent, the show was performed a number of times during the summer of 2002. A comment from one of the attendees who, after the performance, came with tears in her eyes and said "I have never been so proud

to have come from Markerville." A culmination of its success was receiving a joint award from Museums Alberta for community programming.

Over the years, these fundraising events have generated in excess of \$74,000.00 in pure profit—and when used as a match with government grants, often doubles in value. It is important to realize that all the volunteers who participated in these events feel a sense of connection and ownership in the project—and they had fun doing it.

There are also more common methods of fundraising and the Stephansson society makes very good use of these. Such things as bingos and casinos can provide a good profit with some amount of volunteer effort. Fensala Hall is supported with events ranging from gala affairs to monthly themed potluck suppers complete with entertainment. A Christmas Eve service at the church is filled to capacity and while it may not raise a large amount of dollars, it adds to the value in the eyes of the community.

A constant theme that runs through everything the Stephansson Society does is volunteers. From those who have the original vision to the people who bake cookies for the cookie walk to the hammer and nail guys, the whole thing falls apart if there are not enough committed volunteers to see the job through. And, when doing a major restoration, it is vitally important to keep a record of all the folks who contributed labour to the project as this is often taken into consideration when accounting for various grants. Once the project is finished, it is necessary to manage it effectively. Management involves a strong executive committee of dedicated people who create an accurate budget and business plan. Eventually, resounding success required some of this responsibility be transferred to a professional manager.

There is always a niggling fear that these projects are not sustainable in the long run. There is knowledge that, as Stephansson feared so many years ago, the Icelandic heritage is fading. Perhaps we will leave the last word on this to our old friends, Andy and Nels.



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"Nels", Andy was saying "you ever notice we're not gettin' younger?"

"Yah" was Nels steady reply. There was a quiet, pensive moment before Andy continued.

"So.... Ya' ever think about the young people? How they're gonna' take over? Run these things when we can't."

"You mean, like my old truck and my..."

"No. No. No." Andy interrupted. "Things like all these here museums. Like the creamery. And Fensala. Who's gonna' look after 'em when we can't?"

Nels paused for a minute. "Ya' know, Andy. I thought about that when we were fixin' the hall and I was nailin' down the ridge cap. I had a real good view of the whole town. 'What are we doing all this here for?' I said to myself. 'Do you suppose the younger generation even cares?' Then it hit me. Do you tink for a minute all those old Icelanders gave it a second thought about the next hundred years. No! All they thought about was how they could make things good for themselves and better for their kids. That was it! So, that's how I got it figured. The gift those pioneers gave to us in these buildings, we're just passing them on to the next generation just as that. A gift! What they do with it.... Well, I suppose that's up to them."

Andy sat, staring off in the distance. After all, sitting and thinking was one of the things he did best. "Ya' know what I think, Nels. When all is said and done, nothin' good ever gets started by thinkin' there won't be people to carry it on."

Nels said "Yah, that's right. "We just need a little fate."

Andy paused in puzzlement. "Don't you mean faith, Nels."

"Yah," Nels replied indignantly in his thick Swedish accent "that's what I said. Fate! Ya gotta' have a little fate!"

Greetings and Welcome to Gimli "Home of the Gods"

Address given to the Canadian Consul of Women, Manitoba
Branch on the Mother's Day weekend, 2006

by Lorna Tergesen

The Gimli area has nurtured some exceptional women over the years.

The first of these women were those Icelandic Settlers who arrived in late October of 1875. In fact, on October 21, when a storm was raging on Lake Winnipeg and the barges on which the settlers were traveling were cut loose to drift into the bay at Willow Island. These immigrants from Iceland had tried to settle in the heavily wooded Muskoka district of Ontario, but found that life there didn't offer them what they had dreamed of. In that settlement they had lost many of their children to disease and they wanted to make a new start. As most of these families were from fishing towns along the coast of Iceland, the large lake was a major attraction.

The hardships that these first women endured are difficult for us to imagine today. I want to mention two who have been recorded in history for their outstanding work. Aldis, or Mrs. Grimur Laxdal, had been vaccinated and hence when the small pox epidemic flared up she was the only one permitted to cross the quarantine line. She did so three times, once in the winter walking to Winnipeg to get much needed medical supplies. Because the trip was so long she would sleep in the bush at night. The other courageous woman was Snjolaug Johannesdottir, who although not vaccinated, entered homes during the epidemic and nursed the patients. Snjolaug was also the midwife in the community. These settlers had been offered a parcel of federal land in the Keewatin district of Rupertsland, just outside the province of Manitoba. The site consisted of a narrow strip that began at Boundary Creek in

Winnipeg Beach and went as far north as Hekla Island.

The women on those barges faced enormous challenges very bravely. One of the women gave birth in a tent shortly after arriving that miserable cold fall. She was my great grandmother.

The Icelandic immigrants wanted an education for their children and a school was set up immediately, for they had come to Canada to give their offspring a better opportunity. Icelandic women were usually treated as equals in their marriages and were quite used to being heard in their communities. These first pioneer women laid the foundation for their daughters and granddaughters to follow. Likely the most significant early action taken by Gimli women was in the effort to attain the vote for women. Thorbjorg Sigurdsson, Margret Benediktsson, Kristjana Thordarson and Steina Stefansson joined forces with Nellie McClung, Lillian Thomas, Cora Hind and Agnes Munroe to work tirelessly to attain their goal. It was on January 28, 1916 that they achieved their dream, when women were granted the vote. Premier Roblin was away and his deputy Premier was Tom Johnson, (who was of Icelandic descent and known well by the women) brought up the 'Vote for Women' issue in the Legislature. This gave Manitoba the distinction of being the first province in Canada to give women the right to vote.

There have been exceptional leaders, teachers and medical personal who have come from these roots. In 1915, a home for the elderly was established in the Icelandic community. It was located in Winnipeg for a very brief two years before it was moved

to Gimli. These women saw the need for care of the elderly and began what is now called the Betel Home. This was run as a charity with the women working tirelessly to provide all the necessities of a comfortable home by their volunteer work. The Matrons of the Betel Home were outstanding in their positions, giving so much of themselves to the elderly and infirm. This retirement home was begun in a house but the need for space grew and eventually a local hotel became the Betel Home and it served the community into the 1990's. Because this was a work of such dedication, the residents were treated as though this was truly their home. Many of the staff were well acquainted with the families of the residents, hence the excellent care dispensed with love was always a priority.

There were always women's groups that were active in the area, many still flourishing well today. The Women's Institute is a great example. Originally called the Homemakers Society, this group of women strove to improve local conditions, promote education at all levels, foster good citizenship and assist one another in daily living. During the war, these women here were no different than elsewhere in the Province or Canada, providing packages of knitting, food stuffs and tobacco to be sent to the troops. In the years leading up to 1970, the Women's Institute collected stories of the community and its families and produced one of the very first local histories, *The Gimli Saga*. It led the way for many communities to follow suit and even prompted the printer to produce a booklet

of guidelines for other communities to follow.

Church groups were and are still a major force in the area. There are still groups that work together to benefit small communities near Gimli, such as the Minerva Ladies Aid, the Husavik Ladies Aid and the Dnister Heritage Group just to name a few. There are also cultural groups that feed a need in the community. When the first library in Gimli was established with 1000 books (mostly in Icelandic), it was an indication of how important learning and being mindful of world events were. The women I especially want to bring to your attention are: Margret Benediktsson, who was not only a strong voice in the suffragette movement, but also an author and a publisher. She used these abilities to promote the movement and many of her writings have now been translated. They give us a better idea of what these women really were up against. Another author, of literature and music, was Blanche Bristow, who was author W.D Valgardson's grandmother. She wrote many plays for community events. These plays were put on in Gimli and the surrounding communities and were a major source of entertainment, as well as forming a base in cultural and social life. Her music was published around the late '20s. Blanche had the nickname of "Chatelaine", as she was so beautiful.

Miss Sigurbjorg Stefansson, was a teacher in the community for at least 30 some years; her intelligence and devotion to her students aided the community so

much that we have a named school after her. She had another gift to our community, in that she established with the aid of her Women's Institute friends, a library on one of the best sites in Gimli. This recently saw our community rally in defence of her gift, when a developer offered to buy out the building and move the library to a new site. How many towns can boast of a library, a central locale of learning, in the most desirous location on the lakefront!

There were some other wonderful teachers and I will name only three and they are likely selected because of my association with them. The first was Joey or Jorunn Thordarson who taught Grade one for years. Joey had the patience of Job. While I attended her Grade 1 class, she had in the range of 40 children, one of whom was a deaf and another that suffered with epileptic seizures. And there were no extra helpers. She did it all! Then there was Ethel Greenberg, who had such winning ways

with children. Ethel's quiet demeanour and elegant grace instilled in many the confidence that they could succeed. Kristine Kristofferson or Stina Benson, as many knew her by her maiden name, was an exceptional writer and a published author, no small thing in the 1940's. She wrote plays for her large classes, giving everyone the belief that they were able to act, sing or dance. I know that these traditions have had an impact on others, for I cannot but mention the wonderful work of two teachers of today, Pam Lamb and Janice Arnason who staged *The Wizard of Oz*, with two separate casts of Grade Six and Grade One students.

These teachers knew our families, just as those workers in the Betel Home knew our elders and so treated each person with respect and dignity.

This is what a small community can offer.

Two young sisters married two young



Joanne Gudmundson, Moyra Benediktson, Sheila Panteluk

Photo by Sheila Panteluk

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brothers in the early '30's. Nothing spectacular, but these were the first mixed marriages in our community. Sophie and Annie Slobodian (Kristjanson) were of Ukrainian descent and the brothers had an Icelandic background. Their long happily married lives (both over 60 years) led the way for the district to begin the assimilation of cultures that is so commonplace today.

World War II saw Gimli women enlist to serve as nurses, dieticians and recruiters. Happily, they all returned home safely. The Johnson Hospital was run by the Grey Nuns. It opened in 1939 and continued until the Provincial government took it over. These women, devoted to their God and church, were also strongly committed to their town. During the flood in Winnipeg in 1950, these sisters took in all the extra patients that were handed to them and did it all in stride. When the Airbase was functioning in Gimli there was often a heavy load with the newborns, and before there were government social services, the nuns looked after the severely retarded or handicapped, who actually lived at the hospital, as part of the Grey Nun family. Two women who were heroines in their own small way, were Jona Ingibjorg Jonasson and Margaret Sigmundson. From two very different eras, these two offered so much of themselves. Jona Ingibjorg was the wife of Dr. Jonasson and a mother of nine children. It is reported that she had a comforting sense of calmness about her. She would welcome patients into her home with a warm hand clasp and assured them that all would be attended to. As her husband was often late or away for long periods of time as his district was large, Jona would treat the patients as her guests until he arrived. Margaret Sigmundson, who was a nurse, took on the role of being a receptionist for the local doctors in the 60's and 70's. Many a story now relates how she actually performed many of the tasks that the doctors likely would have been responsible for, but were too busy to handle.

The community relied on her for instant advise and today her service would be called "Health Links" or nurse practitioner.

In the field of politics, Gimli had a



Violet Einarson

female mayor in 1962-67 and then again in 1972-77. Violet Einarson, a fisherman's wife and a mother, who took on a real estate job in town and became aware of issues that needed to be addressed, so she ran for mayor, won and began the work of managing the town. Violet was the first woman councillor Gimli had. As mayor she oversaw the installation the sewer and water works in the town. When the town was being sued for the dangerous streets, she convinced council to begin paving streets of the town. She was defeated in 1967 by 2 votes but was urged to run again in 1972, when she beat the other candidates by a large majority. Today's mayor or reeve is once again a woman, Tammy Axelsson. Tammy acted for years as Gimli's Honorary Consul for Iceland. She is also Executive Director of the New Iceland Heritage Museum.

My mother in law, Lara Tergesen, was a woman known for not mincing her words. She was the chairman of the Gimli School Board for several years, during some contentious times when the town was expanding. As a former school teacher she was a very strong promoter of education. Lara operated the local Extension Library of Manitoba out of the family store for years, until she with her fellow WI friends,

managed to have the present library built.

In sports, there seems to have always been many active and successful candidates from Gimli. Val Peterson, was a javelin thrower, she was the Manitoba champion and also was the winner of the shot put and long jump. She represented Manitoba in the Canada Summer Games in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia and came home with the Bronze medal. There were many achievers in the curling arena. There was a woman's hockey team in the very early 1900's. Today, although not particularly noted for their athletic abilities, The Hiking Vikings, a strong group of local women, have walked or run in the Cancer Society's 'Run for the Cure' annual fund raising event for years. Instigated by Sheila Panteluk, a cancer survivor, these women have raised over one hundred thousand dollars in the eleven or more years that they have been walking.

Ethel Howard, or "Scoop" her nickname, was the local newspaper reporter. Ethel moved into Gimli as a mature woman and took on the job with such a passion. She is one of the reasons that the Women's Institute began to collect the family and local histories. She loved the local stories and knew that they were worth keeping.

Later, Dilla Narfason and Mary Shebeski also gathered tales and photos to put together a collection called 'Gimli Memories'. These articles had run in the local paper during Gimli's centennial and once completed, Dilla and Mary compiled them into a booklet. Kristine Valgardson Johnson was an exceptional early photographer. A tale is told that she took photographs of the council in the early 1900's. When she asked them for payment, they refused. She destroyed their photos. However, she has left us with a remarkable set of historical photos of the community that are now part of the collection at the Manitoba Archives, and there is a pictorial display at our Library.

Two present day women of note are Senator Janis Johnson, who grew up in Gimli and has set up her permanent home here now. She is chairing the popular Gimli Film Festival. Speaking of films, Norma Bailey is also from here. She too has a cottage here and is frequently seen around town. Norma was one of the first to produce a successful series of films on women. Kathie Hastie has made a name for herself as one of Gimli's best known artists. The field of Art has expanded rapidly with a



Elin Kristjanson and her children, back row, left to right: Albert, Larry, Kris, Leo, Baldur, Burbank. Front row: Maria, Elin, Alda.

Photo by Chuck Lerner

very active Art club, which offers guidance and encouragement to so many budding artists.

Each year in the Icelandic community, the honour of being selected as Fjallkona (Woman of the Mountains) is given to a woman who has given of herself to not only her Icelandic culture but to the larger community as well. Many highly deserving women have enjoyed their role as representing "Mother Iceland"

I will single out only one special mother. Elin Kristjanson had a family of seven. It was her very democratic method of dealing with her children that is being brought to your attention. They held weekly meetings on Saturdays, where everyone had a voice and a vote was taken

as to the action that should follow. From this family all the boys went on to attain their PhD's and both of the girls had successful careers. They all have or had a strong sense of citizenship and of giving back to the community.

So lastly, I want honour our volunteers. It is impossible to mention all the ways in which so many women in our community choose to serve, but it is the backbone and the strength of the town.

The Women's Resource Centre is just one prime example of their work. By their service to the community, they enrich their own lives as well as those they serve.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to tell the tale of the women of this area.

The Angel of the Waterfront

by Audrhea Lande

Anna's story came to me sideways, edging up through the cracks of the story I was researching.

I had come to Victoria to ask Barbara Bjerring about her cousin-in-law, Sigurbjorg Stefansson, the highly-regarded, highly-private teacher from Gimli, Manitoba. So why was she telling me about someone named Anna? Who was Anna? Perhaps, I thought at first, Barbara had got her stories mixed up. She was, after all, ninety-four years old. A person is allowed to confuse the memories of ninety-four years. My gentle attempts to refocus her recollections on Sigurbjorg were rebuffed. I was going to hear the story of Anna Halldorson, even though Barbara was unsure of Anna's connection to Sigurbjorg.

It was sometime in 1976 when Barbara and her now-deceased husband Kari got involved in Anna's life. Sigurbjorg Stefansson - Kari's half-cousin on their mothers' side - had written to them, asking them to find Anna. Sigurbjorg had said that Anna's letters to her had become increasingly bizarre and then had ceased altogether. Could Barbara and Kari go and find her? Maybe she was in trouble. Maybe she needed help.

Aha, I thought. So Anna was someone who corresponded with S.S. as I had come to call her. It was my first hint of a treasure trove of letters and essays that lay in wait for me, a treasure trove written by S.S., sent to others who, happily for me, saved them. When she asked Kari and Barbara to find Anna, they agreed. Kari and S.S. were very close family, having shared a home from 1916 to 1920, and a deep affection lay between aunt and nephew. If S.S. asked, of course Kari would do.

Kari had his own memory of Anna, Barbara said, from the time he was 5 years old. In 1916 he and his intrepid mother had gone to the prairie pioneer community of Wynyard, Saskatchewan, to get Sigurbjorg


and her mother to live with them in Winnipeg, so that Sigurbjorg could attend Wesley College. Kari's mother, Sigga Bjerring, was determined that her niece would not be denied the opportunity of an education, as she herself had been, due to poverty. After Sigurbjorg's father passed away, she took Sigurbjorg and her mother in with her family at 550 Banning Street, and funded her education.

It was there on the Saskatchewan prairie that Kari first saw Anna, sixteen years old, leaping over a small creek, golden hair flying behind her. She made an impression on the five-year-old. She was beautiful, he said.

"Aha", I thought. "A childhood friend, that's who Anna was to Sigurbjorg. A childhood friend who had stayed in touch, a special friend for whom Sigurbjorg cared deeply."

Barbara and Kari were dispatched to the place from whence Anna had last sent a letter, an area along the Vancouver waterfront, where she had been living with her brother, a boat mechanic. They didn't find her there, but they learned what had happened from the transients who lived by the tracks and storage facilities that lined the Fraser River. The vagrants knew Anna. She was the crazy character who wandered the water front, finding throwaway goods and redistributing them to homeless others. She gathered up grain spilt from boxcars to feed her few chickens. The brother she'd lived with had disappeared, they said. Anna had returned from her wanderings one day to find groceries and some money on the kitchen table, but no brother. He'd vanished, and was never heard from or seen again. Anna herself disappeared after that. Their Angel of the Waterfront gone off, wandering. Maybe looking for the lost brother? Who knows?

How they found Anna a hundred miles up river, living in a barn, Barbara can-



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not now remember. But somehow they tracked her down to North Bend, a small scattered village across the Fraser River from Boston Bar, reached by an aerial tramway.

Disheveled, filthy, straw sticking out of her hair like a scarecrow, they found Anna living in Mrs. Walker's barn, a refuge when her own shack had burned down one night and she appeared in her nightgown, asking for help.

She was given a room in the barn, where she set up a primitive camp, without power or water. She continued to live there for several months after Barbara and Kari located her.

Barbara tells of this time:

"We visited Anna there several times... On one of our trips we brought Anna back to Vancouver to see an ophthalmologist as her eyes were failing. While there, I offered to wash Anna's jeans, and found a huge wad in her pocket which turned out to be all her old age pension cheques from several years – uncashed. I also washed Anna's hair while she was staying with us and could understand how beautiful her hair must have been when she was young. It still showed golden lights."

Anna's eyesight diminished and she eventually became blind. The ophthalmologist put it down to her years of living in deprivation.

They referred the uncashed pension cheques to the government, which re-issued them. These Kari put into a bank account for Anna, in a Boston Bar bank.

Barbara again: "The next time we drove up to see Anna I suggested that we could take her over to the bank to get some money and she told me that she had taken all her money out of there. When I asked why she replied, "Well, Eddie was going to get it." "Eddie?" I asked and Anna answered, "Eddie, the Prince of Wales, of course." So, when the bulk of Anna's money was (later) returned from the government, Kari established a Trust Account for her in Vancouver, and he became the trustee"

It wasn't long before someone laid a complaint with the British Columbia Health Commission - an old woman was

seen to be living in a barn in North Bend. Before she could be evicted, Barbara and Kari moved Anna to a seniors care centre in Hope. Sigurbjorg wrote gratefully to them:

Now in better circumstances, the Angel of the Waterfront re-emerged. Barbara gave Anna a sweater for Christmas...next time she visited, someone else was wearing it. They gave her a radio for Anna loved to sing. It, too, she gave away. Kari paid Anna's bills from the Trust Fund and gave her spending money. Anna tucked all the money under the doors of the other residents.

Two years later her mental status had severely deteriorated. She'd be up at 5:00 a.m. banging pots around in the kitchen, claiming that she was getting breakfast for the threshing gang. She insisted that her father had been visiting her and she'd given him her cane. She introduced Kari to other residents as her father. And she continued to wander, once loading all her possessions into a wheel barrow and getting as far as the bus depot before she was nabbed. It came to a point where the home couldn't keep her any longer, and Kari, at his wits' end, turned the matter of Anna's care over to the Public Trustee.

From 1981 to 1986, they continued to visit Anna in a different care home, this time in Coquitlam. She still loved to sing her Icelandic songs and tell stories of her pioneer childhood. Sigurbjorg, in a letter to Kari and Barbara writes, "and what if she imagines that we whom she knew long ago are close to her? If that can be a comfort to her and make her better satisfied, that is, I think, all to the good."

Sigurbjorg herself died in 1985, but Kari and Barbara continued to visit and care for Anna, moving her to a care home in Victoria when they themselves moved there.

Kari died in 1993, and Barbara carried on that care alone, until Anna's death in 1996. Remarkable dedication, but not yet at an end. For two further years Barbara tried to locate Anna's family, for there was the matter of money left in the Trust Fund, as well as Anna's cremated remains. What to do with them? Letters went back and forth for two years – to Iceland, to Wynyard, to

every possible hint of a relative, all to no avail. Barbara's voice telling me of these efforts gave evidence of frustration and futility, as she concluded the tale. In the end, her decision was unerring.

She used the Trust Fund to provide the plaque in the crematorium vault. The Angel of the Waterfront would have a permanent address and eternal acknowledgment.

Months later, when my research uncovered Sigurbjorg's letters and essays, I found a fuller answer to my question "Who is this Anna?"

Anna's mother, Rosa Johnson, was an angel in her own right, the saving grace for Sigurbjorg's mother, when she emigrated to America in 1891.

Alone, handicapped by deafness caused by a typhoid epidemic in Iceland, seemingly abandoned by the man who was to meet and marry her, Sigurbjorg's mother, Thuridur Jonsdottir, was taken in hand by Rosa. She shared her rooms with Thuridur, found her employment in a Jewish tailoring shop, and helped her find her feet in the Icelandic community in Duluth, Minnesota. The two friends connected again, in Mountain, North Dakota, both now married and with children. In May 1905, they rode the same wagon train to a pioneer wilderness in Saskatchewan, where they settled on neighboring homesteads.

Their daughters, Anna and Sigurbjorg, would have played together on the prairie, as they were doing when Kari first saw Anna in the spring of 1916. The Wynyard community history *Reflections of the Quills* has a 1909 photo of Nordra School, the two girls sitting side by side on the steps, the first class with their young teacher Baldur Johnson. When Rosa died of pneumonia in 1913, no doubt Thuridur would have become an adopted mother to Anna.

A photo, provided to me by Kari's daughter Joan, speaks worlds. Here is Sigurbjorg tenderly holding Anna's hand.

Seems angels were in good supply, those days.



At the Hatlev Memorial Garden and Crematorium, 2050 Sooke Road, in Victoria, British Columbia, niche 307 bears this plaque.

Reflection

Margret Sigfusson

by J.G.J.

reprinted from *The Icelandic Canadian* June 1944, Volume 2 #4

Our pioneer settlements usually had among their people some individuals who, because of special attainments and natural endowments were able to give invaluable leadership and assistance during the early difficult years of settlement. They were the organizers of social life; they were the prime movers in establishing schools and churches, and in initiating local improvements. Most valued of all, in those pioneers days, were the ones who could give aid when sickness or accidents occurred. Such was Margret Sigfusson, who for so many years ministered with skill and devotion to the people in her district. It is as a fitting tribute that we here give this brief sketch of this grand old lady.

The pioneers who settled in the marshy district east of the Narrows on Lake Manitoba, found themselves about one hundred miles distant from the nearest railway and the nearest doctor. Travel, especially in summer, was very difficult; for the only roads were the primitive trails skirting the swamps or marshy inlets of the lake. Travel in summer was therefore, as often as not on foot, in winter, by open sleigh.

Just at the turn of the century, Mr. and Mrs. Sigurdur Sigfusson came from Iceland and settled in this district. Mrs. Sigfusson had had some training and experience in nursing in the Old Country. They were to be of inestimable benefit to the people among whom the Sigfussons came to live. Mrs. Sigfusson was soon making frequent trips through the settlement in response to calls for assistance. In spite of the many and arduous duties of a farmer's wife; whatever the season or weather, big-hearted Mrs. Sigfusson was always ready to answer such appeals. In summer these journeys often involved miles of walking over difficult terrain, had to be made on foot; in winter, there were long cold drives. Sometimes she was away from her home a matter of hours; sometimes for days.

During the years when medical help was rarely available, she took charge of maternity cases in the district. Here she was remarkably successful; for she never lost a patient, ---surely a testimony to her good judgment, painstaking care and faithful attention. Mrs. Sigfusson has long since lost count of the number of cases she has attended; they were not a matter of financial record or publicity.

The people of the district hold Mrs. Sigfusson in high esteem, and on two occasions have given warm and tangible expression of their love for her. In 1918, after her recovery from an illness, they gave her a banquet and presented her with some fine pieces of furniture. In 1940, a number of the younger people whose mothers she had attended held a gathering in her honour and gave her a silver loving cup. On that occasion the late Rev. Gudmundur Arnason, on behalf of the people of the district paid a glowing tribute to the many years of unselfish service she had given in the settlement.

Although more than eighty years of age, Margret Sigfusson is still hale and hearty; and loved by young and old, is not without honour in the community which she so long and devotedly served.

Poetry

Reflections of Iceland

by S. Renee Morin

Craggy and creviced,
wrinkled, wizened,
crinkled crow's feet criss-
crossing the newborn landscape.

Cool, clean, glacial,
genteel afire inside,
sulphury heat, spirited
laughter like water falling
light-heartedly.

Soft-spoken battle cries,
blue-eyed skies shaded gray
happily raining down,
tears drop on
every upturned smile.

A living contradiction;
fire and ice, gentle strength,
reflecting back its people
brightly, darkly
mirrored in a black ice pane.

Book Reviews

The Tricking of Freya



The Tricking of Freya

By Christina Sunley
St. Martin's Press, New York, NY 2009

Reviewed by Kristine Perlmutter

The publication of Christina Sunley's debut novel, *The Tricking of Freya*, in March coincided with Women's History Month. This is fitting as both celebrate the role of women in keeping the histories and cultures of their families alive and handing down their heritage through storytelling, traditions, recipes, family treasures and

heirlooms. It is interesting that, in the days of hand weaving in Scandinavia, one of the tools of the spinner was the distaff and the goddesses Frigg (who knows the fate of men) and Freya (the teacher of magic) were associated with spinning. Today, the "distaff side" of a family refers to the maternal line (a person's mother and her blood relatives). As I read Sunley's finely crafted work, I felt as though I was witnessing the weaving of a tapestry. Weaving begins with spinning and a fine tale has been spun here that illuminates the ways of Our People.

Our narrator, Freya Morris, is a young woman on a journey through her family's history. While her inner and outer quest to make sense of her family, her past and an unfortunate accident make a compelling read, there is much more here than a mystery and a chronicle of self-discovery.

The young Freya and her mother make the journey to Gimli, Manitoba to make connections with her mother's family, central to which is her unbalanced Aunt Birdie. Birdie contributes a variety of pigments to the tapestry depending on her moods—exuberant to despondent. She begins the lessons in the Icelandic language and cultural values that she deems essential for Freya and, when Freya is 13, travels with her to Iceland. Freya and Birdie travel through the Icelandic landscape—geographical, literary, mythical, sociological, political, historical, scientific, artistic and poetic. Freya is pulled into the magical web of Iceland itself and finds her first love. Birdie searches for lost letters written by her famous poet father, Skald Nyja Islands, and hopes to find approval for "Word Meadow," the poem in which she has invested so much time, energy and hope.

Sunley's feeling for the warp and weft of the tapestry that is the Icelandic culture

is evident through her allusions to Norse mythology, folklore, legend, genealogy, history, etymology, ghost stories, poetry, kennings and skalds. She highlights the love of books and literature, reading, writing and the reverence for writers, publishing, *Havamal*, the eddas, the sagas, the booksellers, librarians, the keepers of manuscripts, historical material and archival photographs fraught with memory. She reminds us of paganism, elves, hidden folk, that weird and wonderful Icelandic language with all its declensions and of the importance of dreams.

Descriptions of food from *vinarterta* and *ponnukokkur* to *hakarl* leave us hungry for more. We explore Gimli, Nyja Island and the West End of Winnipeg and attractions and scenery both in Canada and Iceland. We feel at home with the community in both places. We are reacquainted with the midnight sun, fog, Reykjavik

night life, Icelandic attractions, geothermal heat and, of course, sheep!

As the tapestry takes shape, Freya moves to New York and doesn't return to Gimli until the celebration for her Amma's 100th birthday. She is still trying to unravel secrets that she intuits beneath the surface of the version of her family story that has been deemed acceptable for her to know. It is on a second trip to Iceland that things finally make sense and the family myth is shattered.

If you wanted to give your family a crash course in the Icelandic culture in a way that would be understandable and easily accessible in the spirit of Women's History Month, look no further. Weave a Homespun cloth to meet your individual family needs by sharing *The Tricking of Freya* and making it a stepping stone to sharing the stories of your own family.

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The Tricking of Freya
Sunley's debut novel is an intricate family travelogue - a surprisingly lush experience."
- Publisher's Weekly

\$28.95

The Tricking of Freya



BOOKS FEATURED IN THIS ISSUE

PHONE ORDERS WELCOME



The Windows of Brimnes: An American in Iceland

By Bill Holm
Milkweed Editions, Minneapolis, 2007,
216 pages

Reviewed by Rev. Stefan M. Jonasson

Halfway through *The Windows of Brimnes*, Bill Holm reflects upon what he calls “the melancholy quotient”—the study of genealogy—wished upon him by his namesake cousin, which inspired “a consciousness of my own death, of the disappearance of everything I’ve loved or done, and also of the extent of my failure and stupidity. If those people are dead, so will I be soon.” Little could he have realized just how soon after the publication of his last and arguably best book these words would seem fulfilled, even if we refuse to allow either failure or stupidity to be attached to his name, given that he was surely the finest

Icelandic American author of his generation. Needless to say, he had no way of knowing that this work necessarily would be his last, having noted wryly, “only one certainty beckons ever closer though still invisible—like any sane human, I would prefer that certainty to remain invisible a good while yet.” So would we all.

I have now read *The Windows of Brimnes* three times—once shortly after I bought it, a second time because I loved it so (and had promised to write a review), and most recently because of Bill Holm’s death. I would like to say that it has been a different book each time I have read it, but the truth is I have been a different reader each time I’ve thumbed through its pages. The book has affected me a little differently each time I’ve picked it up and it will surely affect me a little differently when I read it for the fourth and fifth time. And I surely will, for it is rich in both style and substance.

The Windows of Brimnes is an interwoven collection of essays on a wide array of matters upon which its author reflected in the quiet sanctuary of his Icelandic summer home. Birds and landscapes, huldúfólk and hauntings, racism and xenophobia, genealogy and gastronomy, poetry and economics, immigration and mass media, worship and weed whackers, history and humour—there’s little that Bill Holm didn’t touch upon as he looked out the windows of his cherished cottage at Brimnes onto both his immediate surroundings in Iceland and his American home, from which he had become a voluntary exile for three months every summer. And yet he managed to weave these varied strands together into a tapestry of modern life as witnessed from an unlikely vantage point at the top of the inhabited world.

Bill Holm contended that we do not observe reality directly but “always through a window of some sort,” which may be physical or mental—perhaps both. At Brimnes, he was able to get away from the distraction and noise of his American home and, through its panes, see things more clearly. Comparing Brimnes with Henry David Thoreau’s cabin on Walden Pond, its “grand windows” became for

Holm “an instrument, a metaphor, an angle, a perspective from which to consider what has come of America.” Yet, while viewing America from afar, Holm takes readers on a frolicking, sometimes wild adventure through the Icelandic landscape and the unique culture it has inspired and sustained, using both to help us better understand the nature and challenges of his home far to the west.

His love of the Icelandic landscape shines through his writing, as he paints vivid portraits in prose of its haunting beauty, broad vistas and tenacious wildlife. We weep along with him as he describes the view from Arnarstapi and we either recoil or chuckle when he relates tales of the country’s haunted places. And while he obviously cherished the peacefulness of this sparsely-populated land, unlike Thoreau he welcomed the society which came knocking at his door. The cavalcade of characters we meet—from Sverrir of Skoruvík to Kristján the poet, and from Wincie the Hofsósingur to Anna Sigga the aria singer, not to mention the grand personalities from the Saga Age and the immigrant era—all serve to remind us of both the independent spirit of the Icelandic people and their overflowing hospitality.

Ever civil, if never merely polite, Bill Holm nonetheless exempted no one in his careful scrutiny of the follies of human society. He was no uncritical romantic, on the one hand, nor was he a despairing cynic, on the other. Holm paints as vivid a picture of the shadows he saw from Brimnes as he does of the light that shone through its windows. So, pen in hand, he boldly confronts the evils of McCarthyism, militarism, racism and materialism. He offers an unexpurgated account of his own first encounter with a person of colour and his painful discovery of racism where he had not expected to find it. And he meditates upon the folly of human warfare, while lamenting his home country’s seemingly irrepressible willingness to engage in it.

Having subtitled his book *An American in Iceland*, Holm was unsparing in his criticism of social, economic and political trends in the United States—espe-

cially actions undertaken by the Bush administration. While conceding the horror of the terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001, he laments the subsequent obsession with security and “draconian invasions of privacy.” Early on, he confesses that he often made his way to the “spare place” called Brimnes to escape those aspects of his homeland that most vexed him. “After a while, the United States is simply too much,” he declared: “too much religion and not enough gods, too much news and not enough wisdom, too many weapons of mass destruction—or, for that matter, of private destruction ... too much entertainment and not enough beauty, too much electricity and not enough light, too much lumber and not enough forests, too much real estate and not enough earth, too many books and not enough readers, too many runners and not enough strollers, too many freeways, too many cars, too many malls, too many prisons, too much security but not enough civility, too many humans but not enough eagles. And the worst excess of all: too many wars, too much misery and brutality—reflected as much in our own eyes as in those of our enemies.” As an antidote, he admonishes his fellow citizens to “go cold turkey on war, xenophobia, the remodelling of nature for commerce, and religious enthusiasm that veers toward fanaticism. And above all, we must curb greed. Don’t hold your breath waiting for progress. I’ve been waiting a long time.”

Of course, he also went after the “less-er evils” of television and weed whackers. In his criticism of many modern conveniences, there are times when he comes across as something of a Luddite or, perhaps, Icelandic America’s answer to the Amish. Yet, dwelling at Brimnes without



television, computer or telephone, he demonstrated how these devices often distract us from what's important, robbing us of something essential to our humanity, and how easily we can live without them, if we so choose.

"Every Icelandic story," he wrote, "whether the ancient sagas or the lively gossip around the coffee table, begins with the ritual chronicling of the ætt—family history." It is seemingly impossible for Icelanders to get very far in conversation or in correspondence without turning to genealogy, and Bill Holm was no exception. So, along with all else that he was able to see through the windows at Brimnes, he gazed steadily at his own family of origin, relating stories from his own childhood and from the lives of his recent forebears. Unlike those who pursue genealogy in search of nobles, saints and heroes, Holm willingly accepted his descent from a long line of "bottom dwellers"—the working men and women from whom most of us have inherited our genes!

Holm got the occasional fact wrong, such as when he refers to the burning of witches in seventeenth-century Iceland (they were actually hanged) or, more problematically, traces the division of the Icelandic immigrants into Lutherans and Unitarians back to the time of Rev. Páll Thorláksson. There were three major religious cleavages among the Icelanders—the Unitarian separation being the second, by which time Páll Thorláksson was long dead. In fact, several of the details in his chapter "Christianity Under the Glacier" are erroneous: Stephan G. Stephansson had no relationship and only limited awareness of the Norwegian poet Kristofer Janson, nor had Janson (whose name is misspelled) been the victim of "ruin and exile" on the part of the Norwegian Lutheran church, let alone been drummed out of the Lutheran ministry in which he had never, in fact, served. Similarly, Holm often exaggerates for effect, as when he asserts, "Icelandic society proceeded directly from the Middle Ages to the cell phone, the airplane and the Internet." But Bill Holm was a storyteller and polemicist—a master of literary hyperbole—not a historian, so he can perhaps be

forgiven the embellishments and embroidery that make for a more lively tale.

Other times he proved to be right on the mark, even when we might have preferred him to be wrong. Writing well before any of us became aware of how fragile Iceland's financial boom of the last decade would prove to be, Holm seems prescient in his alarm at its foundations, motivations and consequences. "When vast fortunes accumulate, as they recently have in Iceland," he wrote, "and a whole culture seems to join in the money grab, it does not give off a good odor. It cannot, by its very nature, any more than a pig lot or a pulp mill can."

Throughout its pages, *The Windows of Brimnes* reveals Bill Holm's vocation as a poet, even if it's never a good idea to identify it on one's income tax return. Even in his prose—no, especially in his prose—the poetic spirit shines through in its full elegance, whether he was writing about plovers or politics.

"Your place on this planet," he maintained, "if you are a human of some sort, is where (among other things) the light feels right to you." The light that shone through the windows at Brimnes clearly felt right to Bill Holm and it allowed him to view the world and its inhabitants clearly, conscientiously and compassionately. Now the light reflects back to us in the form of this testament from Brimnes and, as its pages illuminate our understanding of the world around us, its light feels right to me.

Contributors

BILL BIRSE is the author of two plays—*Andy Fergusson's Birthday Party* and *A Quilt of Many Cultures* and a book, *The Amazing Thing about Grace*. He lived in Markerville, Alberta for many years working as an artist/craftsman/woodworker. He is a past president of the Stephan G Stephansson Icelandic Society of Markerville. He now lives in Red Deer with his wife Sandee and his dog Skookum.

N.C. GUTTORMSSON is a second generation Icelandic Canadian who was born in Flin Flon, MB. She has a Master of Education with a specialization in integrated curriculum and arts-based teaching and learning. Her home is in North Vancouver, BC where she is currently teaching English as a Second Language. She has four children and four grandchildren.

SHERYL HOSHIZAKI is a retired principal who worked at the Cedarwood Public School with the York Region District School Board in Ontario. She works part time at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto as a Mentor in Equity and Human Rights. She is the daughter of Freda Hoshizaki (Thorkelson).

AUDRHEA LANDE is a retired educator who now has time and space for her first love – research and writing. She became interested in the legacy of Miss Stefansson when her niece and nephew, who called themselves "Icelandickers" when they were little, began attending the early years school named after this remarkable teacher. She lives in Winnipeg, where she is deep into the writing of Miss Stefansson's biography.

(SIMONE) RENEE MORIN is the great grand-daughter of Icelandic-Canadian composer and poet, Guttomur J. Guttormsson. Her work has been published in Lögberg-Heimskringla, The Icelandic Canadian, and The Collective Consciousness. Renee has been honored with first place wins in the Icelandic National League's Poetry Competition (2007), the Manitoba Icelandic Festival's poetry competition (2006), and their short story contest (1997). Renee's work has also been recognized by The Winnipeg Free Press / Writers' Collective with an honorable mention in poetry (2006) and the first place prize for short story fiction (2007).

KRISTINE PERLMUTTER is a regular contributor to The Icelandic Canadian and was on the Board of Directors for 25 years. She works as a special education teacher in the Pembina Trails School Division in Winnipeg and fits her writing and reading in when she has the time. She and her husband, Bill, are actively involved in the Icelandic community.

LORNA TERGESEN is Editor of The Icelandic Canadian Magazine. She is involved in the Icelandic community, enjoying her cultural heritage, and sharing it with others.

ELIN THORDARSON was born and raised in Winnipeg, Manitoba. She is a graduate student with the Icelandic Studies Department at the University of Manitoba.

JO-ANNE WEIR is a high school Special Educator who splits her time between her home in Winnipeg and her family cottage in Arnes, Manitoba. In 2008, she graduated with her Masters of Education from the University of Manitoba and completed her thesis entitled *Undan Snjóbreiðunni* (What Lies Beneath the Snow) Revealing the contributions of Icelandic pioneer women to adult education in Manitoba 1875 – 1914.



Photo by Einar Faur

The back page

In Memoriam

Bill Holm
1943 - 2009

The editorial board of The Icelandic Canadian offers their condolences on the loss of a great friend. Bill never hesitated to offer his help or writings. For this and his friendship we were truly grateful. He will be sadly missed.



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