

# ICELANDIC CONNECTION



ISSN #1920-423X

*Vol. 67 #2 (2015)*

# ICELANDIC RIVER ROAST

## FRESHLY ROASTED & BLENDED

The sale of Icelandic River Roast coffee beans is a fundraiser in support of Icelandic River Heritage Sites Inc., dedicated to preserving and celebrating historic sites, buildings, and place names.

Available from Icelandic River Heritage sites  
204-378-2482 (Manitoba)  
or [tander@mymts.net](mailto:tander@mymts.net)



[www.icelandicriver.com](http://www.icelandicriver.com)

# ICELANDIC CONNECTION

VOLUME 67, NO 2 (2015) • WINNIPEG, CANADA

<b>On the Cover</b>	51
<b>Editorial</b>	52
Birna Bjarnadóttir	
<b>Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason</b>	55
Gyrdir Eliasson	
translated by David Gislason	
<b>Icelandic Sheep Bone Toys Of Long Ago</b>	66
Gail Halldorson	
<b>Tipperary</b>	70
Einar Vigfusson	
<b>Glad Poverty</b>	73
<b>The History of Two Poor Icelandic Women from Minnesota</b>	
Bill Holm	
<b>Icelandic hreppur: The Historical Context of a Medieval Sodality</b>	80
John S. Matthiasson	
<b>Eirík's Saga Rauða, The Saga Of Erik The Red</b>	86
Translated by Emil Bjarnson	
<b>Poetry</b>	
<b>Applied Spirituality</b>	91
Richard Bredsteen	
<b>Why do we play this game</b>	92
Richard Bredsteen	
<b>Book Review</b>	
<b>Butterflies in November</b>	93
Review by Alicia Sylvester	
<b>Contributors</b>	95
<b>The Back Page</b>	96

# ICELANDIC CONNECTION



North America's quarterly magazine in celebration of the Icelandic Heritage  
published by Canadian Icelandic Heritage, Inc., Winnipeg, Canada

**MANAGING EDITOR** Lorna Tergesen  
**CORPORATE SECRETARY** Lorna Tergesen  
**DESIGN & TYPOGRAPHY** Catherine McConnell

## SENIOR EDITORS

**FAMILIAR ESSAYS** Elva Simundsson  
**FICTION** Helga Malis  
**INTERVIEWS** Helga Malis  
**REVIEWS** Lorna Tergesen  
**SCHOLARLY ESSAYS** Norma Guttormsson  
**COMPETITIONS** Valerie Hoshizaki–Nordin  
**MISCELLANEOUS ARTICLES**  
Stefan Jonasson, Avery Simundsson, Heida Simundsson,  
Wendy Johnson, Elin Thordarson

## REGIONAL EDITORS

**SEATTLE** Rob Olason  
**BRITISH COLUMBIA** Norma Guttormsson

## BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

**BUSINESS MANAGER–TREASURER** Rick Loftson  
**ASSISTANT MANAGERS** Moyra Benediktson, Valdine Bjornsson  
**ADVERTISING & PROMOTION** Allison Holm

## SUBSCRIPTIONS, ADVERTISING & EDITORIAL CORRESPONDENCE

Icelandic Connection, Box 1156, Gimli, Manitoba R0C 1B0 CANADA  
**CONTACT** Lorna Tergesen (204) 642–9650 for inquiries about the magazine

## SUBSCRIPTION RATES

**CANADIAN** \$40 CAD yearly, \$80 two years U.S. & INTERNATIONAL \$46 USD yearly  
**E–JOURNAL** \$30 CAD /\$30 USD  
**SINGLE COPIES** \$10 CAD plus postage  
**WE ACCEPT U.S. & CANADIAN FUNDS, MASTERCARD AND VISA**

Typed submissions of articles, book reviews, short stories and poetry are welcome.  
Unsolicited manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

**E–MAIL SUBMISSIONS WELCOME** [editor@icecon.ca](mailto:editor@icecon.ca)

**VISIT OUR WEBSITE AT** [www.icecon.ca](http://www.icecon.ca)

*The views expressed in all contributions which appear in the Icelandic Connection are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily reflect the view of the publisher or editorial committee.*

**Printed in Winnipeg, Canada by Dycom Direct Mail and Lögberg–Heimskringla**

**ISSN: 1920–423X**

# ON THE COVER



PHOTO: LORNA TERGESEN

Icelandic Sheep Bones

# Editorial

## Reading Literature

---

by Birna Bjarnadóttir

---

In the fall of 2014, a reading seminar on translation and cultures took place in the office of the University of Manitoba's Chair of Icelandic. Twice a week during the fall term, the participants formed a circle there and discussed a selection of texts. At some point, these gatherings were referred to as the Oxford style seminar. In addition

to the seminar's old style (and now almost extinct) academic setting, an old copy of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* on one of the office's book shelves may also have served as an inspiration for the seminar's nickname. A book that was purchased a long time ago in a second hand bookstore in Oxford, this weathered two volume





paperback edition of a great novel in English translation did at least serve as a reminder of how far literature can travel.

When exploring the subject of translation and culture within the context of Icelandic literature, another book reminded the participants of something equally significant in relation to literature's cross-cultural nature. This book was removed from one of the office's book shelves and placed within the circle. Published in Iceland in 2011 and edited by Baldur Hafstað, it contains the first part of Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason's *Diary*, he who left Iceland for Canada as a boy in the late nineteenth century, never to return, and became known during his lifetime as one of the key authors of modern Icelandic literature.

Like a few other key authors of modern Icelandic literature who either emigrated to – or were born in – North America, Jóhann Magnús wrote his works in Icelandic. As a reader of world literature, and in the spirit of writers like Stephan G. Stephansson and Guttormur J. Guttormsson, the *Diary's* writer seems to travel relentlessly across cultural regions, and become deeply inspired by writers of several nationalities. Thus, the significance of this book reminds us of some of the remarkable linguistic and geographical realities in the world of literature. The significance of Jóhann Magnús' *Diary* is no less perceivable in the way in which it provides an opportunity to reflect upon the far from clear cut cultural origins of at least this writer's work.



PHOTOS: BJÖRK BJARNADÓTTIR.

At left and above: The University of Manitoba's Chair of Icelandic office

As discussed in the reading seminar, another key author of Icelandic literature did play a role in the publication enterprise of the first part of Jóhann Magnús's *Diary*. Appearing originally in *Tímarit Máls og menningar* in 1997, and again in the year 2000 in the book *Undir leslampu* (Under the Reading Lamp), Gyrðir Elíasson's essay "Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason" served as a great incentive for the publisher Ingólfur B. Kristjánsson. The same essay seems to have been equally fateful for the reading seminar's participants. During their in-depth travels in the world of translation and cultures, the discussion of Gyrðir Elíasson's essay may have served as a watershed moment. No wonder, then, that Gyrðir's illuminations of the life

and work of Jóhann Magnús resulted in one student's translation of the essay in question. With Gyrðir's most appreciated consent, David Gíslason's translation was submitted to the *Icelandic Connection*, and – as the magazine's current issue demonstrates – approved for publication.

An essay that will most likely add to Borga Jakobson's tireless work in introducing Jóhann Magnús to the English speaking world, its readers should also prepare themselves for a moment of revelation. And why is that? Chances are that Gyrðir's essay on the humble master of narrative will transform people's ideas about literature's nature, and enlighten its readers of Jóhann Magnús' influence on some of the better known authors of modern Icelandic literature.

## Celebrating over 50 years of Caring for Seniors



Our modern two storey care facility is government approved and specifically designed to offer a homey atmosphere in a safe contemporary setting. We are located in Osborne Village convenient to all amenities and services.

The Registered Nurse and certified staff cater to the residents' personal care, comfort and supervision. Medications are administered, bath assist, meals, housekeeping and laundry are included.

Our goal over the years has been to provide a moderately sized, non-institutional environment with services to meet the needs of those in the later stages of life. We seek to maintain a quiet, comfortable atmosphere where our residents can feel cared for and safe in a home-like surrounding. We strive to maintain the health, vitality and quality of life of each of our residents.

## Thorvaldson Care Center

AN INTERMEDIATE CARE FACILITY

- 24-HOUR SUPERVISION
- GOVERNMENT APPROVED FACILITY

*Herman Thorvaldson*

Herman O. Thorvaldson, President

### THORVALDSON CARE CENTER

495 Stradbroke Avenue • Winnipeg • Manitoba • R3L 0K2

Phone: 204-452-4044 • [www.thorcare.ca](http://www.thorcare.ca) • E-mail: [thorcare@shaw.ca](mailto:thorcare@shaw.ca)



# Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason

by Gyrðir Eliasson

translated by David Gislason

## I

“Soft and melodious of speech like a pleasant murmuring brook, as well as the modest charm of a storyteller comes to mind when I least expect it. In my opinion one of the finest novelists writing in Icelandic, though some may raise their eyebrows at this declaration and respond with a stony silence. Many do not know his name. The author is Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason”.

Halldór Laxness, *Í túninu heima*  
(In the Home Field)

It may be that Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason could be considered “one of the more pleasant influences” in the life of Halldór Laxness, and thus he is more generous in his praise of him than of those who clearly moulded his writer’s career; uppermost among them Hamsun and Strindberg, to whom he was reluctant to award the credit. Nevertheless, on close inspection it is hardly an exaggeration to say that Jóhann Magnús certainly did have an influence on this epic writer of ours, perhaps even greater than he himself realizes – perhaps right up to his biographical masterpieces *Í túninu heima* and the three accompanying books. Along with Einar Kvaran, Gestur Pálsson and Jón Trausti, Jóhann Magnús was an influential and popular author in his time. One could even produce evidence that Halldór

Laxness is not our only major writer to fall under the influence of his writing style; the “atmosphere” which Halldór speaks of in Gunnar Gunnarson’s *Fjallkirkja* (Mountain Church) frequently demonstrates a characteristic resemblance to Jóhann’s major work, *Eiríkur Hansson*, where one can find passages surprisingly akin to those in Gunnar’s work; in some places they virtually correlate word for word. Admittedly, those books mentioned here are autobiographical novels, in particular Halldór’s memoirs, though there the illusion moves in another direction. Perhaps there is some Icelandic “tradition” behind all these writings which accounts for the similarities.

Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason is to some extent distinct from his aforementioned Icelandic contemporaries: Einar, Gestur, and Guðmundur Magnússon. He emigrated to Canada as a lad not yet ten years of age, never to return. From that time on all his knowledge of Iceland was gained through books and other Icelanders in the West. Certainly he was well informed on Icelandic literature, from both ancient and modern times, though he developed as a writer more under the influence of Anglo-Saxon writers, in a different and stronger way than, for example, the other three. Certainly they were all very knowledgeable in English literature. Einar and Gestur had both spent time in the West, but arrived there as mature men having up until then developed more from the well

of European learning through their channels in Copenhagen. Halldór Laxness has, in an article on Einar Kvaran, cited the rebellion he had conducted against the style of the Icelandic sagas, and sees him as a forerunner of the modern language in books. Jóhann Magnús could well take his place there beside him. In fact, when one picks up a book by Jóhann Magnús, one is immediately taken by the straightforward and unpretentious expression which is relatively free from the bad habits of his contemporaries and flows like a running brook, never stale or forced, but natural and unaffected.

Jóhann Magnús himself considered his Icelandic to be wanting, clearly having a sense of inferiority compared to those who remained at home in Iceland, the fount of the language. Some critics emphasized the fact that this author was situated in that decadent society in the West, and one could hardly expect to find decent Icelandic from that direction. That same attitude was at times even levelled at Stephan G. Stephanson. It was in fact Stephan G. who wrote one of the first commentaries on the writings of Jóhann Magnús, this on his *Ljóðmáli* (Collected Poems) published here in 1898. Stephan trod softly on the young writer's poetry. They were somewhat acquainted with one another, and Stephan may have wanted to reach out a helping hand. The critique is no pat on the back though, but rather a clear and insightful guide pointing straight to the heart of Jóhann Magnús' composition. Stephan makes no secret of the fact that here he was taking his first steps as a writer and made a few missteps on the way, but at the same time he is confident that this writer would overcome these weaknesses and sees in him the makings of a true poet. He almost hints at that which would come to pass - that character delineation might suit him best. It may well be that this critique served to influence Jóhann Magnús when he began to focus on prose writing. A remarkable letter-

writing exchange developed between these two men. These have been published, and there one may clearly see the respect that the younger of the two developed for the elder, and there one may also find other sources of influence on Jóhann, for he frequently mentions writers and articles he had been reading. Jóhann was very impressionable and read incessantly. His most exhaustive work of prose, and which he prepared for publication during his final years, is his diary. There he writes sincerely of his inner life and of what, in literature, influenced him the most. The intention was to publish his diary along with a compilation of his writings. This has not yet come to pass, and the diary remains unpublished, for the most part. Only a few excerpts have come out in Western Icelandic papers and periodicals. It is clear from those fragments that his diary well deserves publishing and is unique in many ways. External events are not predominant, but rather occasional stepping stones on his own personal journey. Jóhann Magnús was a man with a quest from which he never veered. It was life-long.

In the third volume of *Íslenskrar bókmenntasögur* (The History of Icelandic Literature) it is stated that the stories of Jóhann Magnús exhibit a "childlike simplicity". To some degree this is correct, yet reveals only half the reality. They also bear witness to a complex personality. However, he had always been a strong believer in humanity, with an unflinching belief in the good in mankind and the triumph of the forces of good in this world. One can read between the lines that he did not come to this conviction without a struggle. Here and there one can find signs of wear where doubt and struggle have taken place, but out of it all he emerges with a solid and seamless attitude - and that is what matters most, not that which is in the past. For him it is not worth the effort to revisit paths which he has long since left behind. Thus there are fewer characteristics



PHOTO: HRAFNHILDUR RAGNARSDÓTTIR

### Borga Jakobson and Gyrðir Elíasson

that lead, for example, to aspects of religion in Jóhann Magnús' stories than in Einar H. Kvaran's. It must be noted that Jóhann was a great admirer of Einar, and in some respects it seems that he felt he owed a debt of thanks to him as an author. Halldór Laxness feels that Jóhann's distance from religious matters is obvious when loosely compared with Einar, and it may well be that his stories will be more long-lasting because of this. At least it does seem that his writings are closer to modernity with their clean simplistic style, where the personalities are people and not mouthpieces. This is not to say that Jóhann did not have opinions on these matters. It is clear from his diary that he was a strong believer, but avoided lengthy dissertations on the subject. His friend, Jóhannes P. Pálsson, writes in an interesting memorial article on

Jóhann that he was not much for attending church. Theological disputes are obstructions in literature, and Jóhann was by nature too much of an artist to allow such things to distract him.

Though he himself considered his style wanting, he was meticulous and nothing left his desk without thorough review. He considered his books as primarily having entertainment value, and had no high hopes of their lasting value to ensuing generations. His books are entertaining, of that there can be no doubt, but they are more than that. Firstly, they are built from a wholesome and in many ways a unique view of life. They carry a certain charm, which is not to be found everywhere. He has the storyteller's true gift of making his stories believable, regardless of how otherwise unrealistic they may be. This is

particularly true of his short stories, which in many respects are more complete as art forms than his lengthier novels. Secondly, they are stories which in many respects document the lives of the Icelandic settlers in the Western Hemisphere, and provide in a unique way an insight which regular historical writings cannot. Now, at a time of renewed interest in the emigration, his writings should enjoy a reawakening. Even though this may not come to pass, they deserve ongoing interest. He talks about people's lives as they are and have always been, at all points in time. In that sense he is "classic". He had admired William Shakespeare more than any other writer, and one can see the "old man" peeking out from his lines in places, especially in the children's story, *Karl litli* (Little Karl). One might easily imagine that he was also a great admirer of Shakespeare's contemporary, Ben Jonson. As a matter of fact, his diary includes lengthy entries where he attempts to make a case for Jonson having been of Icelandic origin. As far as one can see his argument is rather thin, other than the spelling of his name, but he also felt that Jonson's writings were Old Icelandic to the core.

In many ways, Jóhann Magnús was more an Icelander than those who stayed home at that time. He lived and moved on a different path in an English-speaking world. He was a strong nationalist in the best sense of the word, but perhaps went a bit too far in his enthusiasm to champion the merits of Iceland and Icelanders alongside other lands and peoples. His aforementioned friend, Jóhannes P. Pálsson, wrote in his article that he sometimes couldn't refrain from teasing Jóhann just a bit over his tremendous love of everything Icelandic, and occasionally Jóhann had taken offence. He left his homeland as a child and seems always to have yearned for Iceland, though he called his foster country, Canada, "mother" as time went on. The weakest segments in Jóhann Magnús' books are where he strays into a

rather unconvincing comparison with other nations; then it is as though a wearisome simplicity gets the upper hand and the Icelandic nation becomes somewhat pale in his composition. He comes into his own when he writes about individuals – then the story unfolds freely and it seems doubtless that he has known the individual, and known him well. He is not a deep thinker or a philosopher, at least not in the accepted meaning of those words, the result of which is that, more often than not, he loses his focus in dealing with larger issues. It is in his diary that his thoughts on such things come to their own; there the mind follows another path. First and foremost, Jóhann is a storyteller. He writes in a clear and refreshing manner and there is joy behind his words even when he is dealing with sadness. Certainly this is not an exuberant joy, but rather a joy that radiates from his lantern, lighting the way for his readers if but for a brief moment through the darkness that envelops all existence. Most likely he would have been unable to be a signatory to the human condition being shrouded in darkness; rather that it was illuminated in light, and that the light had but to break through. With that, though, we have touched on theology, which is something that he would not have wanted. Unlike Stephan G., he stayed clear of the religious turmoil in the West and, truthfully, it is amazing how deeply the Rocky Mountain Poet involved himself in those disputes, as lacking in religious faith as he claimed to be.

If one were to compare Jóhann Magnús with English writers of his time, the first that come to mind would be people like Dickens, Stevenson, Haggard and possibly Kipling. These men are not much alike, and their influence on Jóhann varied. There are two sides to him, which at first seem irreconcilable; on the one hand realism and on the other a touch of fantasy. Jóhann's character had room for both. In his letters

to Stephan G. he rejects Rider Haggard's influence. It was, for him, much like Halldór Laxness when he rejected two of his saviours, Hamsun and Strindberg, who freed him from the bonds of fossilized narrative form. But neither one of them can deny what is clear as day. Jóhann seems more ready to acknowledge the guidance of Dickens and Stevenson. In *Eiríkur Hansson*, Dickens stands out in the overall picture as well as in a few incidents and character descriptions and, in fact, in some respects they are spiritually akin. Influenced or not is hard to tell, but it is likely that men do not incline towards that which is not part of their own being. Jóhannes P. Palsson leads us to believe that Dickens has coloured Jóhann's views and Stevenson his style. To this we might add the adventure components in Stevenson's stories. Jóhann Magnús says in his diary that he owns most, if not all of Stevenson's writings, and reads them over and over. He places him above all other foreign writers, Shakespeare being the one exception.

Be that as it may, it is still true that when all is said and done, Jóhann Magnús is first and foremost true to himself; that is to say his writings bear witness to the hand that wrote them and that here was no paper person - rather a living being. Of course each individual is always in some respects like someone else, yet still an individual. From the beginning there are elements that are common in every person's writings and connect them across the centuries, yet at the same time there is room for uniqueness. It would be unfair to call Jóhann Magnús simply a follower of these world-renowned authors. He has secured something from each of them and other qualities from the common treasury of the human spirit, and adds to this from deep within himself. By nature the outcome is about equal, for these world-famous men sought this and that from others as well. It is not a shortage of originality; rather a certain equanimity, for no one escapes being human.

The gods of the literary world are perhaps not always so much taller than their less well-known counterparts. Many have offered the opinion that if Stephan G. Stephanson had composed his poetry in English, he would have been placed at the side of Wordsworth or Tennyson, but what does that matter when all is said and done? As for Jóhann Magnús, he seems hardly to have considered writing his stories in any language other than Icelandic. Fortunately, he did not do that and consequently a unique author's work was added to Icelandic literature. In prose form this would stand equal to that which Stephan G. set out in poetic form, albeit not nearly as large in quantity or grandiose in some respects. Jóhann's talent is finely woven and modest, but it is no less original than Stephan's and leaves us with a more complete picture of the life of the Icelander in the first years of the settlements in Canada than otherwise would have been afforded. Stephan draws up enormous pictures with charcoal, and Jóhann sketches lightly in ink. Apart from all historical and cultural value is the undefined, yet precious artistic value, which results in our still reading these authors today for enjoyment and enhancement. Jóhann Magnús scarcely considered himself artistic, at least not when feeling despondent and writing to his literary brother or (father?) Stephan, but his work ethic removes all doubt.

## II

Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason was born at Meðalnes in Fellir, North Múla County, May 24th, 1866. In 1875, at nine years of age, he emigrated to the West with his parents. His time there measured nearly seventy years, for he died at his home in Elfros, Saskatchewan, Canada, on September 8th, 1945. He always lamented the place of his childhood, and said in a letter to his friend, Eyólfur S. Guðmundsson in Tacoma,



Washington, written in 1930: “One always has melancholic memories of childhood which one would cherish and must not forget, even though they awaken pain and longing. How well I remember a grassy glade near Lagarfljót in the Fljótssdal region where, an eight-year-old lad, I once shed glistening tears. That glade is, in my mind, the brightest spot on Earth. If an acquaintance of mine were to visit that spot this summer, I would ask him to take a photograph of this glorious and magical place. I know that I shall never again in this life see those places with my earthly eyes.”

During his time in the West he was, for the most part, a teacher in the province of Manitoba, and as with most Icelandic writers, wrote in any spare moments he could find. Everyone agrees that he was an excellent teacher, though as time went by he began to find it exhausting and a drain on his energy for writing. However he was always impoverished and had to support himself and his family under those circumstances. This story has a familiar ring. His own schooling was sparse; he was for the most part self-educated. He had an unquenchable thirst for knowledge like other impoverished young Icelanders, but with time acquired a practical education in his own right. He began around the age of twenty to publish some poetry in the newspapers of the West. His first book, *Sögur og kvæði* (Stories and Poems) came out in Winnipeg in 1892. In brief, it must be said that this book attracted little attention, and it can hardly be said that in this the writer had found his calling.

His next book was published in 1898 as has been stated, *Ljóðmáli* (Poetry) and now that literary West-Icelandic giant, Stephan G. Stephanson, took up his pen and wrote a friendly critique of these poems, evaluating them with honesty and insight, and predicting good things for the author. Guðmundur Finnbogason

made positive comments on the book as well. This should have encouraged Jóhann Magnús to work harder on his poetry; instead he turned from composing poetry to storytelling from then on. Over the years 1889-1903 he published, in three volumes, his novel *Eiríkur Hansson*. This is a story of pioneering life in Nova Scotia as it really was. Built into this is also the story of his own personal experience, though above all it is a novel. About a quarter century later Gunnar Gunnarsson, another “exile” also connected to the Fljótssdal region, published his book, *Fjallkirkjan*. On close inspection one may find parallels and similarities in these two books which can hardly be pure coincidence.

Jóhann Magnús instantly gained popularity with his book, and from then on was one of the most widely read novelists in Iceland and in the Icelandic communities of the West for decades to come. He is little read today, yet there are still older readers who admire him above other writers and see in his writing a magic that others have not captured. This easily bears up under scrutiny. His stories are surprisingly gripping and have a fascinating atmosphere seldom found in the pages of a book. It is as though the reader is invited in for a visit, and in a soft and gentle manner told of the various faces of destiny which awaited in that huge continent of the West where the bulk of Jóhann Magnús’ stories are set. Literally speaking, Canada is his homeland, but his personalities are primarily of Icelandic origin - those who carry the old country in their hearts wherever they go. In this respect Jóhann Magnús is reminiscent of the American writer, William Saroyan, of Armenian background, who wrote primarily about people who had taken their old country with them across the sea. Undoubtedly there are countless examples of such writers, and in recent years they have attracted special interest in America.



A few years after the arrival of *Eiríkur Hansson*, another lengthy novel was released in two volumes by Jóhann Magnús, this one set in South America. This is the book, *Brasíluþfararnir* (Emigrants to Brazil), published 1905-8. I am not aware of Jóhann Magnús ever having gone to Brazil, and I do not know to what extent he drew on sources from the Icelandic settlements there. Above all it is an adventure story, written with charm and energy, and full of the most amazing adventures.

The king of adventure stories at that time, Rider H. Haggard (himself a great friend of Iceland and writer of novels based on the Icelandic Sagas), was captivated by this book. Sometimes there is a story within a story within a story, like the unfolding of a Russian mamushka doll. The story shows the manifold story-telling talents of Jóhann Magnús, for here he makes an about turn from the realism in *Eiríkur Hansson* to the world of fantasy, at least on the surface, but underneath one finds the same sharp eye which makes it all believable. The reader believes the story for the duration, and that is, of course, the basic premise of all writing, but a requirement that is harder to fulfill than many would think.

It is truly healthy to read good fairy tales and thus re-live in a way, one's childhood. Surely it is a measure of intellectual decline



PHOTO COURTESY OF DAVID GISLASON

**David Gislason and Gyrirðir Eliásson (right) by the monument to Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason**

to grow out of reading such stories, for one must believe something to live. A complete unveiling of disillusion can be questionable. Later on Jóhann Magnús himself felt that he had ventured too far into the world of adventurous zeal with this book. From here on his stories are a unique blend of total realism mixed with mysterious wonder. His third novel, *Í Rauðárdalnum* (In the Red River Valley), was published as a small press publication in the periodical *Syrpa* in Winnipeg over the years 1914-1922. It is likely that some would have become impatient to see the end of the story after an eight year duration, but it is a gripping tale in

the best sense, though interlaced with many digressions. Sometimes Jóhann Magnús' stories call to mind the French writer, Eugène Sue, who wrote *Leyndardómar Parísarborgar* (The Mysteries of Paris). As straightforward a person as Jóhann Magnús is said to have been, it is remarkable how his stories are filled with secrets and secrecy, frequently rather shady, at least until all has been revealed. Then, often as not, it turns out to have been simply smoke and mirrors. Jóhann's ability to unravel complexities in the style of a secret agent are considerable. The magical nature of his stories lies neither in this nor in their adventurous story line, but rather in the colourful nature of their telling; their unique view of landscape and surroundings, and an amazing feel for the destiny and isolation of people in an enigmatic world. The only thing that is clear is that good wins out in the end, but up to that point everything remains a mystery. Jóhann Magnús could hardly have ended his stories in any other fashion, but he does not always reveal the secret nature of his characters, and magnifies in this fashion the charm with which they are endowed. Surprisingly few of his short stories have found their way into the anthologies of Icelandic short stories, although some of them are pure treasures – the best he has to offer.

To return to the influence that Jóhann Magnús had on Halldór Laxness, it is quite clear that his short stories have found their way deep into Halldór's mind and stayed there when he himself, as a young man, took to writing stories which he published under the titles *Nokkrar sögur* (A Few Stories) and *Fótatak manna* (Footsteps of Man). Here of course it would be possible to make a plausible case to back this up, but best would be that these few lines about Jóhann Magnús stirred an interest in some people to read him, and satisfy themselves of the fact – or to find otherwise. To each his own, not the least on the question of “alleged” literary influence.

In 1910 (when Halldór Guðjónsson was eight years old) Jóhann Magnús published his short story collection, *Vornatur á Elgsheiðum* (Errand Boy in the Mooseland Hills). The original publication contained seven stories, later republished and augmented under the same title. There we find in combination the spirit of the imaginative and the everyday realism of the settlers, as before. The essence of it is such that one feels the need to delve into seeking out the veracity of these tales, but that would be like going to a goat pen to get wool; Jóhann Magnús was first and foremost a poet. Imagination is his tool and with it he builds his characters and worlds. Much later, in 1928, he published his second collection of short stories *Haustkvöld við hafið* (Autumn Evening by the Sea). This volume included some of his earliest writings, previously published in periodicals. This collection is perhaps not uniformly of the same quality as the first, mostly on account of the infusion of older material. At the same time there are stories on a par with the best that he has written. They show that there is no mistaking his great gift as a writer and that he will take his own path. Though the reputations of the great writers of his day were a force to be reckoned with, his strong affiliation with his material and how to present it was also in place.

The children's story, *Karl litli*, came in 1935. There the fairy tale rules with little interference from reality. In some respects this fairy tale bears the stamp of outside influences. There we find atmosphere from Shakespeare's comedies, the stories of H. C. Andersen and the wonderland of Lewis Carroll, as well as some reminiscence of Sigurbjörn Sveinsson. But as before, Jóhann gathers most of the reins under his own command. As a work of art this children's story is somewhat too disconnected and hazy to stand the test of time as well as much of what he delivered. There are though, lively fragments where his capabilities are fully utilized.

In later years Jóhann Magnús turned more towards the fairy tale in its unspoiled form; in total he would have written some eighty short fairy tales or fables which were published in various papers or periodicals both in Iceland and in the West. He launched his career as a realist with several poems and stories. Midway through these two streams merged into one, but in the end the fairy tale writer won out. There is, in fact, much in Jóhann's personality that calls to mind the "good writer" of fairy tales, H. C. Andersen – childish simplicity alongside a sharp eye for the inequalities of human existence and the benevolence which makes its way through the lines of their stories. These fairy tales were published a year after his death. As in *Karl litli*, we sense a light touch of the Danish writer, and also a confluence of branches from other directions – from folk tales and mythology to the real American aboriginal, mingled with a European flavour. We can argue over whether this combination works, and yes, the fairy tales are of varied quality, but as before, a radiance shines through.

Jóhann admired the writings of E. Pauline Johnson, and even Shakespeare himself had to give way to her at times. She was of Native extraction and wrote poems and told tales of her upbringing. Her writings had a strong influence on Jóhann Magnús. In this fashion Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason augmented Icelandic literature with a new tone which is more than suitable, for the Natives were helpful to the Icelanders of New Iceland at the outset. Jóhann Magnús may be known as the first Icelandic author to repay that kindness to a degree, as the poets Guttormur J. and Stephan G. wrote rather carelessly of these "children of nature," somewhat in the fashion of the general opinion of the white race. Jóhann Magnús takes a further step, reaching out from the tenacious prejudice of one race towards another. It must be said, though, that he is not always as generous in

his commentary on other races. That must be recognized. In *Brasilíufarar*, we sense the flavour of Kipling and other prophets who considered the superiority of the white races to be natural. This resulted much later at Djúpavogur in Stefán Jónsson, as a child, wanting so much to see a white man that a friend of his dashed home for a mirror and showed him the reflection of himself, which of course was a great disappointment. It is as though it had taken some time to overcome the dogmas that were rife in the blend of cultures of the West. One can follow the development of his thinking in these matters by reading through his books from beginning to end. Eventually, as his own philosophy matures apart from that of Emerson and Thoreau, he develops a deeper understanding of the brotherhood of man. Indeed, that was in all respects more in line with his wholesome brotherly disposition towards others.

His stories about people of Icelandic extraction in the western world are, in a sense, a contribution to the history of Icelanders in the West. In some ways it could be said that his stories are akin to a new approach to history known as micro-history, where the part is made to mirror the whole. In fact, the distinction between fiction and history is often blurred, especially in the new literature – for example in the books of Böðvar Guðmundsson. An interesting book, *Menntun, ást og sorg* (Learning, Love and Sorrow) by Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, was published recently applying the micro-history approach. This book is drawn from the diaries of two brothers from Strandir. Their thirst for knowledge, life struggles and calamities are all found in the pages of their diaries which mirror, in fact, the entire community on the boundary between the old times and the new. The diary which Jóhann Magnús kept admittedly deals less with outside events than the diaries of the two brothers and places more emphasis on

the inner life. But among other things which the diaries of these three individuals have in common is the constant mention of what is being read. Jóhann Magnús is, for the most part, a self-educated common man as were the brothers here at home who were of a similar age to him. His search for knowledge was unending in his poverty, just as theirs was, and his diary bears clear witness to that. Whether or not his writings had come to be, his diary bears one man's witness to the community and the world in which he lived.

As previously mentioned, only fragments of this diary have been printed in newspapers and periodicals, in spite of offers of publication that appeared in the foreword to the previous printing of his collected writings. Those fragments show clearly that it would be well worthwhile to have them published. A copy of his diary is now preserved at the National Library, but the original is still in Manitoba.

Manuscripts home! Likewise from the West.

### III

In his life, Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason had been an almost uniquely fortunate person; he married a wonderful woman and lived happily with her for half a century. They fostered a child, a girl who brought them much joy. He was respected and admired as a teacher and as a writer – actually the aura which radiated from him as a person reminds one most of the Ancient Greek, Sophocles, upon whom fortune smiled, and suggests, in fact, a blinding glow of fame on top of all the other emanations. From whence, through all this light, came the deeper understanding with which these men were endowed, an insight into the darker side of humanity? That is where a writer's gift comes in to play and it defies explanation. Naturally it is not being suggested here that Jóhann Magnús

is being held up as an equal to Sophocles, who long since has become almost god-like in the world of literature, yet comparisons of height are not at issue. In the first place, Jóhann Magnús was by nature a more optimistic person than Sophocles, whom the historian, Will Durant, considers the most pessimistic person in history. He is amazed at this dark view in contrast to his bright and successful life. Still, one can clearly see when reading between the lines that Jóhann Magnús had known depression and hopelessness. His diary touches on this side of his life. On the other hand, the overall result is bright – and who can say that of Sophocles? It can also be said that Jóhann Magnús was a playwright as well. He wrote over twenty plays which were staged by enthusiastic actors in the West, but all have been lost. Sophocles wrote about 100 plays, seven of which remain, but he was at least 2000 years ahead of Jóhann in a long line of playwrights. Was Jóhann such a poor playwright, then, that forgetfulness has swallowed up his works in this category so quickly? Of that it is difficult to speculate now. Doubtless he was no Sophocles and these would not have been any tragedies, rather comedies, and he himself sometimes played the main role. Yet it seems unbelievable when compared with his other writings that these plays should all have met such an early demise. Perhaps they will be found later, in some archives in the West. In addition, there could be hundreds of letters lying in the same archives, for he was a very dedicated letter writer and breathed life into them as with his other writings. Previously mentioned was his exchange of letters with Stephan G., and some letters to Guðmundur Finnbogason have also been printed. These letters bear witness to a unique man, ever searching, open, ambitious, yet always in doubt about himself and his own ability.



He had a rich sense of humour, but was perhaps personally over sensitive at times, unlike Stephan G. who had a thicker skin and could speak rather coldly of himself at times. He certainly was not lacking in self-consciousness – and perhaps because his self-image was stronger than the younger man's, he could allow himself more banter at his own expense. It seems that Jóhann was always very sensitive, and so are most fairy tale writers on close examination.

#### IV

Some writers are dead long before they die, but Jóhann Magnús lives on - now a half century after his passing. His books contain a life of their own, whether they are read purely for pleasure; to gain an insight into the history of the Icelanders in the West; or as a mirror on humanity, unbound by time and surroundings. It may be that some are better than others in a “literary fashion,” but that fashion changes with time, and though readers in our time may feel that not all aspects of his books stand the test of time, there is something else that holds up its part rather well. Good writing consists of more than simply clever construction. Jóhann's stories are written with sincerity and affection and with considerable talent – we really could not ask for more. All books that are written from these precepts have a right to a life longer than the paper on which they are written, and though they belong to the style of a time which has passed, it is always worthwhile to read about a time which is gone – lost except in books written as that time was passing. The present is also the past – it does not take an expert to see that. From it rises the future. We cannot afford to let West Icelandic writings fall by the wayside. Our wayside is not that large. Jóhann Magnús stands among the best writers of Icelandic in the early part of this century.

No need to attach “West” in front of that. I once met a popular and major novelist who suggested that novels were short lived. That may be so, but the humanistic core never dies if it was there from the beginning. That core is to be found in the books of Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason, who always wrote far from the land that gave him the language, the tools and the fire.

#### Translated from:

Eliásson, Gyrðir. (2011). “Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason.” Introduction. Bjarnason, Jóhann Magnús. “*Dagbók vesturfara 1902-1918*.” Reykjavík: Lestu.is, 2011. 18-31.



## CONSULATE OF ICELAND

**Gordon J. Reykdal**  
Honorary Consul

Suite #205 10230 142 Street  
Edmonton Alberta T5N 3Y6  
CANADA

Cell: 780.497.1480

E-mail: [gjreykdal@gmail.com](mailto:gjreykdal@gmail.com)

# Icelandic Sheep Bone Toys Of Long Ago

---

by Gail Halldorson

---

In May of 2014, Reykjavík City Museum in Iceland held a Game of Bones event during their Children's Cultural Festival. Children and adults were invited to play with ancient Icelandic miniature farms that children made from bones, shells, rocks, and other things from nature. The publicity poster said: *"Visitors are encouraged to participate in this fun and creative blast from the past!"*

This is the story of two games the Icelandic children of long ago played to entertain themselves when they had any spare time: Völuskrín and Vala. The children did not have store-bought toys. They played with bones brought home by their fathers after sheep went to the slaughterhouse in the fall.

We are fortunate to be able to refer to an article that Stefania Thordis Dignam (nee Sveinbjarnadóttir) wrote for the Icelandic Canadian in 2007. Stefania was born in Reykjavík in 1944 to a family of four girls and two boys. As a young girl, she stayed with relatives in the country each summer. There she fell in love with Icelandic sheep. In 1973, she immigrated to Canada. With a little skulduggery and a lot of passion, she introduced the first Icelandic sheep to North America in 1985. Stefania played sheep bones games when she was a girl in Iceland and we quote her reminiscences of Völuskrín and Vala later.

## Völuskrín

In this game of bones, the children set up a play farm using materials found

in nature. Each child had a collection of well-cleaned sheep bones for their animals. Völuskrín was named after the bag or chest they kept their precious bones in, stored under their beds for safekeeping. Because they were isolated and seldom saw each other, there were many different rules and practices in various families and communities. Outside in the farmyard, the children made a farm, making sure they did not interfere with the regular workings of the real farm. If there was a small hill (mountain) and a stream (river), the site would be perfect. This is an example of what bone was which animal:

- sheep horn – sheep
- sheep leg bone – horse (an adult made a hole to put a rein in)
- sheep jaw bone – cow
- sheep ankle or foot bone – dog
- fox – any bone chunk
- ghouls and goblins – big bone or skull (a very special possession)

The Arctic fox was the only predator. Lambs were in danger when the flock was out to pasture in the summer, especially when the fox kits were small and had to be fed. Ghouls, goblins, and others from folklore and myth were also a danger to the flock. During breeding season in areas near the sea, the shepherd had to keep an eye on the sheep. A creature named ShoreWalker, about the same size as the sheep, had the nasty habit of trying to breed with the ewes. The lambs sired by this creature were often born paralyzed and/or deformed. When the ewes had milking problems, the fallow –





PHOTO: GAIL HALLDORSON

**Voluskrin, the play farm game. Sheep in the enclosure watched by the horse and dog. Cows on the left.**

finch was believed to have flown under them and picked at their udders. Some thought the Huldufólk milked them roughly. Still others believed that the damage was caused by a creature sent by the devil to steal milk.

Here is an edited excerpt from Stefania Dignam's writings:

"I have bought a few plastic animals for grandchildren and other young friends. When I do, I think of the times when I, myself, played 'farm' with the bones of the sheep. Certain bones had certain roles. The horns were our treasured sheep, the leg bones were horses, the small bones above the hoof were the dogs, and the cows were the lower jaw bone. Every fall at slaughtering time, the farmers brought home boxfuls of sheep horns and bones. It fitted beautifully

that after being kept for a whole winter, the bone inside the horn came loose and – the ewe was lambing. There were two ways that I remember putting the sheep to graze. One was that the sheep were put into enclosed areas. The other was when we let them go to the mountains. Then we threw them as far as we could, saddled up our horses and went to round them up. The dog would help, too. It was important to know how many sheep one owned. If one was not found, the (real) farm dog would run away with it. The lower jaw bone of the sheep was the cow. The molars were the teats and to milk we pulled on these. I doubt that the new version of the farm animals give any more pleasure than the old version gave. In my memory, there is a certain

warmth associated with the memories of playing with my bones and horns.”

### Vala

In this game of bones, the vala was the sheep’s anklebone and was used to predict the future and answer yes/no questions. The word, vala, has multiple meanings in Icelandic: anklebone, pebble, prophetess. As with *Völuskrín*, the rules varied. Here’s how to play: hold the vala against the cheek or roll it on top of the head saying:

Vala, vala, soothsayer;  
answer my question.

If you tell me the truth,  
I will gladden you with gold,  
I will feed you silver.

But if you lie to me,  
I will burn you in the fire or  
throw you in the chamber pot.

Ask your question and  
let the vala drop to any  
smooth surface. Read your  
answer:

If the hump of the  
bone faces upward, the answer is YES. If  
the hollow side faces up, the answer is NO.

If it lands on its side (which seldom  
happens), The answer is DON’T KNOW  
or WON’T TELL.

Stefania wrote about the game of Vala:  
“Another game used the vala bone and we  
could ask it a question. I would ask the  
question and let the vala bone drop to the  
floor. If the hollow side landed up, it meant  
‘yes’. The other side meant ‘no’. I might be  
wrong, I don’t think I was ever quite sure  
which side meant what.”



Vala, the fortune telling game. Then with knucklebones,  
now with dice.

Children and adults have played with knucklebones in many countries for hundreds of years. The games were enjoyed in the past and are still enjoyed today. Jacks is a game of skill. In the past, five knucklebones would be used. In the modern game, manufactured ‘jacks’ are used with a rubber ball. A yes/no game of fortune telling is also universal. In olden times, knucklebones would be used. Now there are specially made dice.

*Völuskrín* is making a comeback. [hello@voluskrin.is](mailto:hello@voluskrin.is) is the website of a company that wants to promote and



PHOTOS: GAIL HALLDORSON

**Dangers to the sheep. Fox and kits on the left. Ghouls and goblins on the right.**

re-establish traditional toys. A few years ago, they produced a game called Völuskrín with plastic replicas of sheep bones, farmers, and cardboard fences. The box doubles as an olden days farmhouse. This game is currently available. Their website states, *“In Völuskrín these classic childhood treasures will be found, lovingly remodeled by Icelandic designers.”*

Many visitors to Iceland don't know about the game of bones tradition in Iceland. The following two comments were posted on the internet. On the website of the Völuskrín plastic replica, *“And I thought [we] were hard-core with the ‘all toys must be made of natural materials’ bit at least we don't make our kids play with sheep bones.”* This caption appeared on a tourist's blog under a picture of the outdoor display at Skogar Museum, *“A creepy corner at Skogar*

*Museum: Bones piled by miniature Icelandic village.”*

If you have an Icelandic history in your family, you may find the information here is not what your Amma or Afi told you. That's as it should be. The Icelandic children used their imaginations to create and expand the games, all the while learning from each other at every opportunity.

Thanks to:

Reynir Adolfsson of Akureyri, Iceland, who sent me the original sheep bones in a black bag in 2007.

Sharon Halldorson of Winnipeg, who edited this article and made suggestions.

Ryan Stewart of Winnipeg, a summer employee at New Iceland Heritage Museum in 2014, who helped with the Game of Bones display window at NIHM.

# Tipperary

---

by Einar Vigfusson

---

There is a wilderness area in the western part of the Interlake area of Manitoba, known as the Sleeve Lake Wildlife Management Area.

This area once consisted of many small communities which were settled after World War I under the Soldier Settlement Board. Those that settled there were of many ethnic origins and the names of the communities reflected this. Usually, both the Post Offices and schools bore the districts' name - names like Tipperary, Lillesve and Otto, just to mention a few.

These small districts were populated by families of English, Irish, Swedish, Icelandic and Jewish origins. Many of these settlers had no farming experience, and their transition to rural living must have been extremely difficult.

All these people lived together in relative harmony as they shared and dealt with their new enemy: extreme poverty and hardship in an unfamiliar environment of rocky, undrained and unproductive land. The drought and economic downturn of the Dirty Thirties added to the desperate conditions.

By the mid 1940s, the difficulty of trying to make a living on this almost barren soil had long since driven the settlers off to greener pastures except for a very few diehards that still remained at that time.

This area was heavily populated by a variety of game, both birds and animals and was a place where hunters of the surrounding districts, as well as the local people came to get food for their table. This was especially

true in the dire years of the Great Depression.

Farmers in the area depended heavily on the availability of wild meat as a source of food for their families in order to save the few head of cattle which were then sold, in order to pay for taxes and living expenses.

It is a place that always brings forth fond memories of my youth.

As a teenager, I often accompanied my father and some of his friends and neighbours when they hunted deer in the area. I was a good walker and soon became proficient at finding and chasing the deer into range of the adults' rifles.

In later years I would hunt deer there with my brothers and still later with my sons. I really enjoyed the times we had together, exploring this picturesque wilderness environment. Many of the signs (post offices and schools) still remained at that time and piqued our interest in the fascinating story of the early settlers. With the passage of time, these wooden signs no longer existed.

Now we come to the day, long after my hunting days were pretty well over, a day when I decided to make a sort of solitary pilgrimage into this area just to see it once more and in effect, bid it goodbye.

As I was no longer interested in hunting, I left the other members of the group and proceeded on my own across the beautiful expanse of the game management area. I carried my camera, my lunch and a rifle although I never did put bullets into the magazine. Today I would simply be an observer.

Snow was falling lightly as I began my journey in the Sharpewood area, an area settled by people of English descent. As I passed the rubble that remained of the community; churches, homes and schools, my thoughts turned to the people who had lived and worked there.

As I continued west, I looked over the field to the four mile long lake called Parnells' Swamp and recalled many happy days spent in this place.

Many deer trails were visible in the fresh snow so I walked down to the swamp to see if I could spot them. Suddenly, at what we called the point (a narrow place in the swamp) I saw them playing games out in the open.

Deer often play with each other. They chase each other and appear very happy, a sight that few people get to see. On the way up from the swamp I noticed trails of two moose and a sign of a small herd of elk (wapiti) coming back from the hayfields to the east.

I felt good seeing that the wildlife still existed here.

Then I came to the crossroads where the Tipperary road intersected the road I was on.

The remains of the old buildings at Tipperary were still visible and the old wood stove was still there. I thought of the hundreds of home cooked meals that must have been prepared on it and the warmth it provided at the same time.

I was on my way west to the end of the management area and still had many miles to go. By now the snow had all melted and the weather was quite warm, I took my sweater off, and put it in my pack.

I travelled west along a fairly high ridge overlooking a large open area till I came to a place called Kalevela, where there had obviously been a large homestead long ago.

It was dry with little vegetation, unlike most of the district although there was a small lake at the end of it.

A small lake or swamp up above the yard would likely have held drinking water for the cattle and the people who lived there. To the south, lay grass covered meadows that would have supplied plentiful hay for the cattle herd.

The late October sun was getting warm, so I found a good spot by one of the rock piles, spread my sweater out over the stones and relaxed in the sun. I thought about the people who had lived there so long ago. Was it a large family as was usually the case in those times? How did they survive those dreadfully difficult times? Were they happy? Why did they finally give up and leave this place?

I must have slept awhile, but was suddenly awakened by the sound of cowbells coming from below the hill. The sounds of the hooves got louder as though they were approaching the barnyard, the cattle making all sorts of mooing noises. Then I heard


www.inlofna.org

## Icelandic National League of North America

ORGANIZED 1918    INCORPORATED 1930

### *Support Your Icelandic Culture and Heritage*

Check our website [www.inlofna.org](http://www.inlofna.org)  
to find a member club near you  
or contact our office for more details

**INL of NA OFFICE**  
103-94 First Avenue  
Gimli, MB R0C 1B1  
Phone: 204-642-5897  
Email: [inl@mts.net](mailto:inl@mts.net)




Find us on  
**Facebook**



dogs barking loudly. Suddenly I heard the unmistakable sound of children laughing and playing. This brought me back to the present and of course there was no one there but me.....alone in the wilderness.

I was really shaken by this experience as I prepared myself for the long walk back to the truck and my friends. I lingered for a while still thinking about what had happened a few minutes before. As I turned to go, I saw them. Two little piles of rock, side by side, overgrown with grasses and a few dead flowers of summer. I knew immediately what they were. Judging by their size it was obvious to me that they were the graves of two young children. Now I suddenly realized that the sounds I heard before, in my reverie,

were part of something I had stumbled into; sounds from another time.

A feeling of wonder swept through me as I thought about the people that had once been there. Were they trying to make contact with me? What more did they want me to see? Or was I trespassing?

A few steps away from the graves I saw it. Because the snow had melted so quickly a little rivulet or brook had opened up and was flowing rapidly down the hill towards the place called Kelevela. It was a bubbling brook and the sounds emanating from it were much like those of children laughing. Maybe that explained it all to me but as I walked back to the truck I had many different thoughts on the happenings of the day. Was I really dreaming while I sat there in the sun or was I transposed into another time?

Suddenly I noticed that the sun was slanting towards the horizon. The day was done and I had miles to go before I would rejoin my friends. A huge golden moon hung in the east and with it to light the way, I knew that I would have no trouble finding my way out in the night.


As darkness set in, I felt as if I was in a different world: old stumps and strangely shaped trees began to look ghostly and I found the hair on my neck rising as I passed them in the night.

A timber wolf howled nearby and added to my feeling of isolation.

After awhile I fully regained my senses and kept on walking, admittedly faster than usual. Then I saw the truck lights at the end of the swamp, still four miles away! Now I felt safe knowing I would soon join my friends.

When I rejoined my partners later that evening they asked, "did you see anything interesting today?" I replied, hesitantly, "no, not really."

I have not returned to this place again and probably never will, but that afternoon stands out in my mind as the most interesting hunting adventure that I ever had.



**counterwise**  
DRUG MART  
*We Share Great Values*

**Pharmacists**  
*V. T. Eyolfson • B. Whitby*

**Free Prescription  
Delivery**

Monday - Saturday	9 a.m. - 6 p.m.
Friday	9 a.m. - 8 p.m.
Sunday	Noon - 4 p.m.

**ARBORG  
PHARMACY**

Ph: 376-5153  
Fx: 376-2999



# Glad Poverty

## The History of Two Poor Icelandic Women from Minneota

---

by Bill Holm

---

Reprinted from *The Icelandic Canadian*, Volume 52 #4 (Summer 1994)

*I come to the garden alone,  
While the dew is still on the roses;  
And the voice I hear, Falling on my ear;  
The Son of God discloses.*

*Chorus: And He walks with me, and He  
talks with me,  
And He tells me I am His own,  
And the joy we share as we tarry there,  
None other has ever known.*

– C. Austin Miles

### I

Sara Kline was the most visibly poor woman in Minneota when I was a boy. Old, small, shrivelled, hunched over, almost toothless, she wore the same black rags for years on end, the same black high-top tennis shoes with a dozen frayed knots in the laces, her stringy greasy grey hair covered with the same black scarf. Her stoop probably came from scouring the gutters with her poor eyesight for serviceable cigarette butts which she liberated from the cement or under the sidewalk gratings into her filthy cloth bag – a Minneota “bag lady” years before that language became fashionable.

But the strongest image of her poverty

came not so much to the eyes as to the nose. Within twenty or thirty feet, her presence announced itself: a stale smell of unwashed damp rags, sweat, uriny underwear, rotted food in rotted teeth, old cigarettes, the fetor that rises off a mattress that should have been thrown away decades ago, the smell of the old and poor who have ceased to be able to care – whose vanity has atrophied out from under them.

I came from a family of big men, making my judgement of human size, particularly those out of memory, probably not trustworthy; but I remember Sara as half the size I thought a normal human. She was closer to the earth than she should have been. That proximity is not a bad metaphor for her whole life.

In the forties and fifties, Saturday was the night for open stores, shopping, visiting, cleaning up after a week of farm work, driving the pickup or old car down the gravel road to town, buying groceries, beer, bolts of material, haircuts, oyster shells for the chickens, Velveeta for the humans, gossiping while you sat on the warm car hood, going to Medart Debbaut’s Joy Theatre for Hopalong Cassidy, popcorn and Mr. Nibs. This was the midwest version of bright lights and urbanity. The town crinkled crisp new bib overalls; the wind of

a summer night lost itself in a labyrinth of sticky hair spray and died calmly away.

But Sara was always there to remind you that this was not Norman Rockwell's America, not a Farm Bureau poster of contented, prosperous rural family life, that God, even if he were on duty at the moment in heaven, had not quite yet managed to make all things right with the world.

The Saturday night division of labour in the Holm house was this: my father said his obligatory hello's to whoever my mother thought necessary, and then disappeared into the Round-Up Tavern for whist, rummy, buck-euchre, beer. Camels, swearing, and male privacy; my mother investigated whatever bargains might have surfaced during the week at the Big Store, or Johnson's Red Owl Store, and exchanged her ritual information with other ladies who liked Saturday night chumminess; I tried to disappear into Hopalong Cassidy as quickly as possible, or find some gang of underage street marauders setting off to engineer themselves into parentless, thus more interesting situations.

Before these rituals began, however, there came another and sterner test. My father parked his dirty brown Dodge as close as possible to the Round-Up. This meant we passed Sara's light pole. She lived in a room back of a crumbling frame building on an alley behind the Round-Up. Minneota was then a town of broad front porches, picture windows facing the street, unshaded and unhedged front lawns, and chairs set on the grass in front of the house. An alley meant something to hide, a place to throw garbage, to piss, to be drunk, to quarrel, to smoke (if you were a teenager), to tell low jokes, a place for shame, for the poor, for strangers, for what did not want to be seen.

Children are constitutional xenophobes: it is their natural instinct to humiliate and abuse the crippled, the old, the ugly, the

peculiar, the grotesque. Children love their own beauty and energy so much that they excoriate others for lacking it. Neither any of my contemporaries in Minneota nor I was unusual in that regard. The process of being made to feel guilt and shame for that xenophobia, thus stopping its progress, is called civilization. It is the first duty of parents.

Mine took their responsibility with what, at the time, I thought was an uncommon severity. They instructed me that I was never to pass Sara Kline without shaking her hand, greeting her courteously in Icelandic, and worst of all: bending down to kiss her on the cheek. Even as a young boy, I towered over her shrunken black figure. My mother coached me in proper Icelandic grammar, so that I would not commit the awful sin of using a male ending to address a lady. "Komdu sael og blessath. Sara. I would mumble, preparing myself for the smelly and humiliating ordeal.

She was always there, waiting on the sidewalk in front of the old barbershop and workboot store that shared the front of the ramshackle building. My father greeted her on his way to the Round-Up door: my mother chatted a bit in Icelandic, probably inquiring after Sara's health, and then it was my turn. With a feigned courtliness, I greeted, shook hands, kissed, all the time hoping that none of my classmates was watching this ordeal. Sara would tell me that I was a nice boy and getting so big with such fine red hair just like my mother's and then reach up and pat my cheek with her leathery, grimy hand. Then it was over for perhaps another week.

I had not, at the time, read the story of Jonathan Swift and the story of Jonathon Swift and the beggar woman outside St. Paul's Cathedral in Dublin. After preaching one Sunday on the subject of charity and humanity to the poor, he was making his way down the steps of his Cathedral still

dressed in his ecclesiastical robes when an old beggar reached up her hand for alms. Swift looked down at the hand, then turned away in disgust. "She might at least have washed that hand," he is reported to have said, and so might I have said, if my parents would not have disowned me for saying it.

Indeed, Guttormur Guttormsson, the Icelandic minister in Minneota for fifty or sixty years, did not say it either. Like Swift, he was dean of a St. Paul's, but this smaller one was built of oak in 1895. He greeted Sara each Sunday at the door of the church with the same courtesy and, of course, the same impeccable Icelandic that he used for his most elegant parishioners. She was a regular church-goer, always arriving a bit late and sitting alone at the back of the church. She had, without intention, a private pew, and her fellow Icelandic Lutherans should be forgiven for not wanting to crowd her too closely. Guttormur's sermons were heroically long, and the church stuffy.

By the time I was a teenager, I had become a sporadic church organist, with a perch in the balcony where surveyed the congregation, read D. Lawrence novels, and otherwise avoided being improved by length discourse on the theology of sanctification and grace. I always carefully watched Sara while the collection was taken: she never failed to put her coin or two into the velvet dish full of silent paper, always letting go of them with a little regret, turning her head to follow the plate of money as it made its way down the aisle toward the pink painted Jesus.

Like many other old ladies, both rich and poor, she asked me to sing at her funeral, and I did. For Sara, I sang "Come, Ye Disconsolate" and "I Walk in the Garden Alone." She was cleaner in her coffin, brighter, paler, though even smaller, and, I think, happier. There was, as I remember, no family at all to sit in the mourners' pews, but, instead, a good many of the congregation who of course, had known her well for three

quarters of a century.

My mother was a great repository of stories and local history, a sort of village gleewoman, but she was always closemouthed when I asked her for the history of Sara Kline. "She was a poor woman, and her life was full of suffering," Jona said, "and children were always mean to her because she was dirty and oddlooking. You mustn't add to that: and when you see Sara always go out of your way to greet her respectfully in Icelandic and kiss her hello. She deserves ..."

"Yes, yes, yes," I would interrupt this often chanted mantra, "but what happened to the poor woman that reduced her to such a god-awful life?"

"Her life was full of suffering, and you must always ...," Jona started again, making no progress at all in giving me the details of Sara's obviously dark chequered past.

I found out something of her past almost accidentally, long after both she and my parents were dead. Sara was buried in the Icelandic town graveyard a half mile south of Minneota. Most of the names on the stones there were normal, everyday names like Gislason, Hallgrímsson, Björnsson, Guttormsson, Hrafnson, Jokull, but there were a few odd ones like Schram and Kline. Their oddness never occurred to me as a boy; I assumed that God had made certain that only Icelanders wound up in such a favoured spot, and could be trusted to dispose of others elsewhere. But one day, I was walking through the cemetery with a family of distinguished and elderly Minneota Icelanders who knew everyone in the place, and addressed them by name as they stepped over their stones.

"Look at that," said Bjorn. "Someone mowed Skunk's grave, and planted flowers on it. It's better than the son-of-a-bitch deserves."

"Skunk?"

He pointed down to the grave of a man

dead in 1945. "Why is his grave next to Sara's?" I asked.

"Didn't you know? Sara was his mother. She was a hired girl brought over from Iceland by old Schram. He was German by descent, not Icelandic, an old pirate of a merchant. One of his brothers got Sara pregnant, and then gave her nothing. He went back to Iceland. She was a poor ignorant girl, and raised her boy alone. He grew up to be a drunk, stole from his mother, abused her, finally died drunk."

"And his nickname was Skunk because ..."

"It suited him."

The poor withered, unwashed body of Sara rose up inside me; I smelled the stale half-smoked butts in her bag, felt her leathery paw on my cheek again. This was the story my mother never told, the reason I was so punctiliously trained to treat Sara as if she were a countess. Quite enough had happened to her in this world, thank you very much, and she needed no more indignity on her way out of it. Civilization often consists not so much in knowing what to do the first time around, as in being intelligent and humane enough to try, without much hope, to repair the damages, or at least to offer some honest consolation on the second go.

Sara's poverty and misery were of the kind that could not be hidden. She had no resources to hide them anyway. She was not beautiful, she was not educated, and she was not endowed with the arrogant bravado and self-possession that sometimes get you through this world without either gift.

## II

Just as Sara Kline could never hide her poverty, so my Aunt Olympia Vilborg Sveinnsdóttir Holm Amundson Ouamen could never show it. My father was the baby

of a family mostly of sisters, and despite the fact that by the time I knew him he was a rough-spoken, grey-haired, burly man, he was pampered and bossed like a small boy by his three older sisters: Soma, Dora and Ole. I loved them dearly as a boy, those three big kindly women, but Ole had me entirely in her thrall, as she did all men.

She was born in 1904, and I still own a photo of her as a teenager, taken in 1922. It shows her dressed in a gauzy light-coloured dress that whips around her knees in the wind. She grins coquettishly straight into the camera. She is standing in front of the old Round-Up, a few Model Ts parked in the background. She loved having her picture taken; she loved being watched and admired; she loved men, like Oscar Wilde, not wisely but too well; she probably loved the unknown cameraman taking the snapshot on the main street of Minneota, and flirted with him both before and after, and clearly during the picture. I would bet my last dollar that it was not a woman holding that camera, and no one who ever met Ole would bet against me.

She was not, I suppose, a beautiful woman by conventional standards; she was vengefully Scandinavian-looking. But then, how am I to judge? She was my aunt, and I was in love with her too, from the age of perhaps three onwards. It is enough to say that other human beings always found her attractive, and when she walked into a room full of strangers, she never failed to get her fair share of their attention. She had been, for part of her life, a beauty parlour operator, and never allowed anyone to see her less than well turned out. Her hair, elegantly snow white for the last fifty years of her life, was always "done"; her makeup was in place; her fingers were ringed, not expensively, but splendidly and gaudily like a Viking gypsy; her clothes were bright and silky, lavender and cream; Ole was no Puritan. And her Emeraude! It was, I

imagine, dime-store perfume, but I smell it as I write this sentence. It is redolent of attar of roses, of ambrosia, of lavender, not of women but of movie goddesses, not of reality but of memory. After Ole sat in a room, it held her ghost in the curtains, in the cushions of the sofa and the chair, in the crocheted tablecloth, for hours, for days, I think, for years afterwards.

Probably much to her own daughters' chagrin, she loved little boys much more than little girls. My first memories of Auntie Ole were her visits to my father's farm. She swept into the small cold parlour, Emeraude trailing behind her, rings clanking like Cleopatra's tambourines, and hoisted her small fat bespectacled nephew into her lap. "And how's little Bill? You've got dimples just like your father used to have; and you're getting so big and strong! And how much do you love your old Auntie Ole today?"

How do you answer a question like this? I remember rashly promising to get rich when I grew up, so that I could buy my dear Auntie Ole a fur coat. Her not entirely whimsical complaint to the universe and to any adult within earshot was that her old Persian lamb was moth-eaten and bare, and she could afford only fake coats, an unsatisfactory substitute.

The offer of the coat delighted her, and she then plunged into her second perennial request. "And you have such a beautiful voice, little Bill, you must promise me that you will sing 'I walk in the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses...' at my funeral."

With violent protestation that she was never going to die, I would promise it, and then shift subjects as fast as possible. It remains one of my small gratitudes to the divinities of luck that I had to wait a very long time to make good on that second promise.

On the first, the fur coat, I failed, But

then Ole never really expected men to get rich or to make good on their promises of wonderful gifts. Experience in that regard had been too unkind to her.

Her father, my grandfather, died of pneumonia when Ole was five, and her widowed mother raised five children with next to nothing, partly on the charity of better-off relatives. Ole married young, a handsome though none too prosperous local Norwegian farmer, and had her three children during the depression. Just when times might have improved for her, her husband died of epilepsy, and left her, like her mother, a poor widow with young children.

She moved to South Dakota, and opened a beauty parlour, assuming, I suppose, that beauty was the only skill that nature had left her to put money in the bank. But her bad luck continued. She turned out to be allergic to the chemicals she had to use, her Icelandic skin burst into fiery rashes, her blood pressure went up, and her temporary trade was finished. By this time, she had met and married her second husband, Earl, a carpenter and stone mason. He was the uncle I remember, a gruff, grizzled and likeable man, a little Bogart machismo about him without Bogart's handsomeness. And he drank a little ....

And a little more as time went on, so that Ole found herself broke again. She was not, I suppose, a good manager of money, and was at least partly to blame for her own troubles. Her health began to give out in her sixties and seventies, though it was never visible behind the disguise of Emeraude, rings, lavender dresses, and a fluff of elegantly coiffed white hair. But when she was widowed for the second time, she cracked, overdosed drastically on her pills for various ailments, and she found herself confused, almost comatose and broke. She involuntarily moved back to the nursing



home in her home town, Minneota.

By this time, I had moved back to Minneota too, and saw Ole several times a week. As I approached my forties, I was a little old to go through the old routine of crawling into her lap, but Ole was not past her part in the charade. Despite the ravages of bad luck, illness and poverty, she remained a good-looking woman. Her vanity was intact. Emerald was still on sale at the drug store, and Ole's bottle was not empty.

The sun room of a nursing home is not a cheerful place, despite the sun. Rather it is a sort of canyon floor, strewn with the wreckage of great falls from the cliff, the bodies not yet quite washed away by the river. Remnants of human beings sit strapped into their wheelchairs, leaking on themselves, moaning in an undecoded language, half asleep. Having known Ole in something like her prime, at fifty, I could see the ravages of her experience in her face, in her talk, in the slight disarray of her blouse, but in that room, even in her reduced grandeur, she was not a client, but a countess come to visit the old, cheer them, and scatter the largesse of her elegance. At core, she was still the old Ole. She flirted. When a man walked in the room, twenty years dropped off her, her eyes brightened, and she almost audibly mumbled: "Here we go again!"

I knew she was not long for the nursing home when I came one day and found her in a lively conversation with one of the other inmates. The other woman was kidding Ole about being broke, and in need of a man, preferably rich. "Why, Ole, old Steve is ninety-two, owns three farms, and one of the nurses said he could still get it up when she came into his room. He's the man for you. Ole."

Ole said, "I wouldn't touch old Steve with a ten-foot pole if his ass was plated in platinum." Ole, for better or worse, married

only for love. She was romantic to the end.

Another day, I brought a friend, an out-of-town girl, to meet Auntie Ole. Ole told her funny stories about the old Icelanders.

"What is an Icelander, Ole?" my friend asked.

Ole paused, but not for long. "An Icelander, by descent, is forty percent Norwegian, forty percent Irish, and twenty percent travelling salesman."

Her wit was bawdy and vivacious, and it never left her. But neither did her complaining. Those she had no interest in charming, she blamed. Every magnificent character has her own darkness, even if we choose for a while not to see it.

One day, I went to see her, and she was gone. "Back to Sioux Falls," said the nurse, "and into a nice apartment building for old folks. Everybody dresses up fit to kill there."

"She'll like being among the rich," I mumbled.

"You know," the nurse mused, "I could never figure out why a woman as fancy as your aunt came back here. She was always so gracious and kind, but you could tell she was used to money. She was classy. Was her husband a banker?"

I think I fell to the floor in a fit of involuntary laughter before I could reply. "Ole was so poor her whole life that she often had no money to eat, went days without food because she was too proud to use food stamps. She had," I emphasized, "neither a dime nor a pot to piss in for over seventy years."

"Well, you never know ..." sighed the nurse.

Indeed, you never do. Ole blossomed in her last few years, found a lively boyfriend, a good dancer, but he up and died of a heart attack, so she found another one – a retired South Dakota real-estate agent. The two of them were inseparable and probably illegal, but Ole was Ole, and nearing eighty is no time to moralize.



They lived together, had little spats, made up, rolled their eyes at each other, and generally enjoyed life.

But even long lives end. John died, and Ole's will to go on seemed to leave her. Eighty was enough. I went to see her a few days before she died. I walked into her hospital room and found her still Ole. Her hair was lovely, though she apologized for it.

"You should have warned me you were coming." She was wearing not a hospital robe, but a silk dressing gown, and there was Emeraude somewhere in the air. Solicitous as always about male comfort, she insisted that her daughter Emmy Lou and I walk her down to the sun room. "Damn fools in this place won't let you smoke in the room." I had been warned that she was having hallucinations – seeing people who weren't there.

The three of us sat in the empty room full of brilliant sunlight, not talking much. Finally, Ole said, "There he is again!"

"Who is it, Auntie Ole?"

"It's the little boy. He's there in the corner behind the curtains. He's following me; don't you see him?"

"Oh, Mother, there's no one there," said Emmy Lou.

"Well, if you say so. But he's there." Her angel of death was true to her character. It was a handsome boy. If a little girl had come, I think Ole would have refused the summons.

As I did for Sara, I wound up singing "I Walk in the Garden Alone" for Ole. The chorus was weirdly appropriate: "He walks with me, and he talks with me / And he tells me I am his own." Jesus as a gentleman caller was the only theological image that made any sense to her.

After the funeral, drinking coffee with relatives. I proposed that the scheme for Ole's funeral had been all wrong. She ought to have been cremated, and her ashes taken up in an aeroplane somewhere over

the American west and dropped on a town full of lonely men. Many heads nodded in agreement.

An historian examining bank statements and indebtedness would probably not find much difference between Sara Kline and Auntie Ole. Yet in actuality, a whole universe separated these two Icelandic women. One sank under the weight of her poverty, and wore its visible signs like Hester Prynne's scarlet A; the other used up all her energy as a human to stay visibly afloat and buoyant, even though sea monsters had fastened their tentacles around her legs, trying to pull her under. The question of which poverty was more glad is not as easy to answer as you might imagine.

*Ed. Note:* Reprinted with the permission of Bill Holm. Originally published in its entirety in *Beyond Borders, An Anthology of New Writing from Manitoba, Minnesota, Saskatchewan and the Dakotas*, edited by Mark Vinzand and Williams. (Minnesota: New Rivers Press; Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1992.)

Part 1 originally published in *Unexpected Fictions: New Icelandic Canadian Writing*, edited by Kristjana Gunnars. (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1989). The story has been translated into Icelandic by Árný Hjaltadóttir and published in Iceland.

Rev. Stefan Jonasson

GIMLI UNITARIAN CHURCH

9 Rowand Avenue

Winnipeg, Manitoba R3J 2N4

Telephone: (204) 889-2635

Email: smjonasson@shaw.ca

# Icelandic hreppur: The Historical Context of a Medieval Sodality

---

by John S. Matthiasson

---

*(This paper was first published under the same title: "The Icelandic hreppur: the historical context of a medieval sodality" in The Content of Culture: Constants and variants: Studies in honor of John M. Roberts. New Haven, CT: HRAF Press, 1989. The copyright is held by Human Relations Area Files, Inc. from whom permission to re-publish has been received)*

## Background for the Settlement of Iceland

Anthropology has largely ignored Iceland, and this is particularly so with regard to the founding of the nation, even though that historical development provides the anthropologist with an unusual opportunity to examine the emergence of a new state. That development has been richly described in the sagas and family eddas, and in comprehensive volumes such as the *Landnamabok*, or *The Book of Settlements*, and *Gragas I: Laws of Early Iceland*. Until fairly recently however, much of this literature was not available in English translations.

A sociologist, Richard F. Tomasson, has described Iceland as the first "new society" (Tomasson 1980). Iceland meets the criteria of a new society, especially because it is a transplanted society. A population of chieftains and their followers left Norway to settle Iceland during the latter part of the first Millennium A.D., and established there a new society which had its roots in Norwegian social and cultural institutions and yet also produced new attributes in response to new adaptive needs.

One adaptive response developed over time by the settlers of Iceland was the creation of "neighborhoods" associations, or hreppur. These associations were the smallest non-kin social units in the new society. Essentially mutual aid associations of farmers, their importance at the time when they were most prevalent and their influence on the historical development of an indigenous Icelandic socio-cultural system, have been largely ignored by the many historians who have written about Icelandic history. In this paper the Hreppur (singular) will be treated as an early voluntary association which became a figurative building block of the Icelandic social system. Its place within the medieval politico-legal structure created by the Icelandic settlers will be examined, and some hypotheses will be offered on its influence on the development of social relationships among Icelanders that remain operant in the modern context. My real purpose in writing the paper is probably more limited than that. It is basically to record the existence of this early form of European sodality and to offer some tentative suggestions about its *raison d'être*.

Before examining the institution of the hreppur, a brief and encapsulated discussion of historical factors and facts of the time of its emergence may help to set the stage. The literature on the founding of Iceland is truly extensive and numerous controversies run through it, but some realities can be sifted out.

The early Icelanders were documenters of their own history. To what extent the skalds were also myth-makers is portions of

that history is still a matter of debate among medievalists. A popular interpretation of the forces behind the settlement of Iceland is that chieftains fled from a prospect of domination by a centralized kingship under the Norwegian king, Harald, or as he is often called, Harald the Fair-Haired. In this view, every effort was made in the newly settled country to create a politico-legal structure which would preserve independence and individualism and prevent any possible takeover by a powerful chieftain. Many Icelandic scholars consider Gjerset's *History of Iceland* to be the authoritative history of the country. In it, Gjerset writes:

*The leading landnamsmenn in Iceland belonged to the old Norwegian aristocracy. Some were sons of kings and jarls; others were hersar or local chieftains. . . . In defense of their aristocratic social organization many of them had waged war against the king, who sought to create a unified Norway under the rule of a monarch exercising sovereign authority in all administrative affairs (Gjerset 1923: 29)*

More recent historical revisionists have suggested that an equally potent force behind the emigration from Norway was economic, based on ecological pressures. Whichever interpretation one gives primary weight to, the fact remains and is documented in the *Book of Settlements*, that many of the chieftains who led the migration bringing with them their followers and slaves, had indeed waged war against Harald and his efforts form a kingship.

Not all were fleeing, however, although the earliest ones in many instances were doing just that. In some cases individuals got out of Norway not because of an urge for independence but because they had difficulties in the homeland. Ingolfur Arnarson considered to have been the first permanent settler had made enemies in Norway because he had allowed a friend, Leif of the Sword to marry his sister Helga.

His decision infuriated other suitors and their allies (Griffiths 1996). Foote and Wilson suggest that after the initial period of settlement relations between the Icelandic chieftains and Harald were fairly amicable and some new settlers were encouraged to make the move by the king himself. Until the formation of the Althing, Icelandic legal disputes were even given over to the Norwegian king on occasion for resolution (Foote and Wilson 1970). Many questions have yet to be answered about the real reasons for the settlement of Iceland.

The main settling of the island occurred roughly between 870 and 930 A.D. The earliest settlers found living there already a small scattering of Irish monks and there was some immigration by Norwegians who had lived briefly in the British Isles as well as by some Celts, but they majority came from Norway. There were taking up settlement in a virtually unsettled land. They brought with them social and cultural institutions but in a very real sense were faced with the task of forming a "new society." Institutions were modified and new ones formed. Social historians of Iceland have traditionally assumed that the institutions brought with the settlers of Iceland were typical of the Norway of the time.

A controversy has recently developed among students of early Icelandic settlement about the extent to which the social order brought by the settlers can be regarded as truly Norwegian. Because the debate is taken so seriously by many specialists, brief mention should be made here of the argument put forward by Barði Guðmundsson, even though it does not relate directly to the central topic of this paper. Guðmundsson has carried out intensive research on certain traditions which have often been used as thematic examples of early Icelandic culture. Two in particular are matrimony and skaldship. His thesis seems to be that skalds, the documenters in

what was often poetic form, of the events of medieval Iceland and Norway, were more common in Iceland than they had been in Norway. Furthermore, they were often the sons of women who held a higher position in the social stratification system than was typical for women of Norway at that time as evidenced in their exercise of the right to name their sons after themselves. He also claims that these mothers of the skalds often practiced witchcraft and were landowners. Gudmundsson concludes that the majority of the Iceland settlers came from eastern Norway and were from a population which differed in these and other practices from typical Norwegian ones. He also cites the western Norwegian practice of cremating the dead which was not perpetuated in Iceland. In his opinion the traditions that were brought to Iceland were in fact not Norwegian at all but had their historical roots in eastern Scandinavia and most probably in Denmark (Gudmundsson 1967).

Gudmundsson's thesis has generated considerable debate and seems to be winning converts. Future investigators of the roots of Icelandic social and cultural forms will have to examine it, if only to reject it. Such an analysis may in time shed new light on the origins of the institution of the hreppr.

During the sixty years of settlement the population of Iceland grew to approximately 60,000 (Foote and Wilson 1970). The population of Norway at the time was as high as 250,000. The migration seems to have been selective therefore, and this fact may give support to the traditional view that many settlers left Norway in hopes of preserving political autonomy as much to escape economic difficulties. During the latter period however, the king of Norway feared a possible depopulation of Norway and levied a tax on emigrants to Iceland (Foot and Wilson 1970: 53). Regardless of which interpretation is given dominance (and both were surely oppressive) the

conditions of settlement themselves forced the settlers to be innovative in the creation of new relationships with one another which would allow for mutual support and at the same time permit the maintenance of equality between peers.

It was because of these needs, to be discussed below, that the institution of the hreppr was established. It was as mentioned above, a mutual aid society composed of individuals living in the same "neighbourhood" or settlement area who saw value in protecting one another in the face of natural disasters such as fires. In a sense the hreppr was like a modern credit union without the encumbrance of a bureaucracy. Members accepted a common responsibility for fellow members and knew that they would be supported themselves if circumstances demanded. The concept of the hreppr is introduced here only to provide a definitional base for later reference to it. We will return to it throughout the paper.

### **Settlement Patterns in Iceland**

The publication in 1972 of a translation into English of the *Landnamabok* or *The Book of Settlements* was a landmark in Icelandic scholarship. It made available to a new readership the main source book on the settlement of Iceland and what is possibly the most complete record of the settlement of any country before modern times. Here it is possible only to summarize some broad patterns and identify one or two controversies.

Popular depictions of the settlers of Iceland which modern Icelandic writers often romanticize tend to portray Vikings driven by strivings for independence to settle a new and, to others, inhospitable land. It is true to some extent that they were Vikings. The chieftains had organized and participated in Viking raids, accompanied by their followers. Usually those who took part in Viking raids were second-and-



PHOTO: JERRY JONASSON

## Hólar

third born sons who because of the rule of primogeniture had not inherited land from their fathers. They were forced to pillage in distant lands to save enough capital to set up their own homesteads. In a history of Iceland as yet unpublished in English<sup>1</sup>, the noted Icelandic historian Sigurdur Nordal criticizes the concept of the early settlers of Iceland as Vikings (Nordal, n.d.). According to him, most of them were farmers. He recounts stories from the sagas of farmers who would plant their crops, then go off on raids to Ireland or the Hebrides only to return to their farms in time for harvest. He suggests that the number of early settlers who actually engaged in Viking raids was probably quite small.

Another attribute of the popular image of the settling of their country which Icelanders tend to cherish and which follows

logically the idea of a people fleeing political domination is one of equality. This is the image of highly atomistic Vikings driven on their precarious expeditions by personal greed. According to Nordal (n.d.), the values of the Vikings were in fact central to the setting of societal goals in Iceland and the leading Vikings were the chieftains whose political powers will be discussed later. To paraphrase Gjerset (1924) quoted earlier, it is true that the leaders of the migration to Iceland regarded themselves as equal to one another but also as an aristocracy in relation to their followers.

There were slaves, an anomalous social stratum existing in a society which was later to create a body of law based on the values of equality and individual liberty.

The practice of slavery was brought to Iceland from Norway by the settlers. It had



been enshrined in the epic poem *Völuspá* (Sybil's prophecy) and embedded in the code of the Law of Gulathing (Foote and Wilson, 1970: 65-69). According to the law which was later to become the model for Icelandic code slaves were nothing more than chattels who could own nothing and leave nothing to their heirs. If killed or injured the person responsible had only to pay restitution to the owner which was equivalent to the value set on the slave naked (Foote and Wilson 1970: 69). The slave had no legal status of his or her own. However slaves could become freemen and the sagas include many examples of ones who did gain this status.

The settlement of Iceland was accomplished by a clearly stratified population. At the same time the majority of the members of that population were freemen who came to the new land to farm and who were neither slaves nor active Vikings.

Settlement itself was largely a first come, first served basis. Chieftains took the better sites for their own. The interior of the country was uninhabitable and so farmsteads were established along the coasts and around fjords. Followers of chieftains probably preferred to settle near their chiefs for protection but this was not always possible. Also, although there was tendency for kinsmen to settle near one another, the availability of good farm land which provided easy access to the sea often precluded this. In many instances therefore, neighborhoods grew up which were composed of families that did not necessarily share allegiance to a common chieftain and were not connected by close bonds of kinship. It was in response to these facts which created a form of social atomism that the early hreppar or neighborhood associations were formed.

### Early Icelandic Political Systems

Before describing the hreppar, a brief discussion of the political structure of medieval Icelandic society may be useful. This structure has been described by virtually every writer

on Icelandic history and it became a basis for the formation of the Althing or parliament of Iceland. It was brought to Iceland by the chieftains from Norway although modified in some ways to fit the new circumstances.

The central figure in the incipient political system was the godi who presided over his own godord, or local district. The godar themselves were chieftains and their authority which was both civil and religious, was based on that of the Norwegian godar. Nordal (n.d.) suggests that they were the equals of the regional kings of Norway before the time of Harald. They owed allegiance to no one and so were largely autonomous except for the obligations created by alliances with one another. In fact, some writers suggest that many of the godar were closely related to one another.

The position of the godar was based at least as much on their religious authority as on their secular status as chieftains. In re-establishing themselves in Iceland they tended to use their religious position and its symbolic features as a basis for solidifying their political authority. Each godord had its own temple which was a place of worship for people in the region. The godar acted as priests, presiding at the sacrificial feasts at their temples at specified times of the year. All freemen were required to pay tolls to their godi in support of the temple. In fact Nordal suggests that the very word "Godi" is derived from a Germanic term meaning priest (Nordal n.d.).

Early Iceland was essentially a loose confederation of godords before the establishment of the Althing. Along with their religious authority, the godar derived power partly from the land which they and their followers had settled. However as Nordal points out their real secular strength came from their influence over men, not land and this fact made their secular positions somewhat tenuous (Nordal n.d.). They could levy taxes on their followers but they were often loathe to do so. Partly because of the somewhat random patterns of the

settlement and the nature of the habitable land followers of the Norwegian godar who settled in Iceland did not always reside in the immediate vicinity of the estates of their godar. Also, there were more settlements than there were godords and mountains and other natural obstructions often separated godar from their followers. The rallying symbol of godord unity was the temple. The independent spirit that chieftains brought with them was shared by freemen who refused to become peasants and stubbornly held on to individual autonomy. The godords then were geographically dispersed groupings of individual landholders sharing common allegiance to a godord which was governed by a godi who derived his authority from his priestly status. The only real authority of the godar was over those families who lived on their estates and worked directly for them.

Freemen belonging to a godord owed allegiance to a godi and doubtless were given some protection and support by him but essentially it was an allegiance of choice. The individual farmer could, and very often did change allegiance from one godi to another. Early Icelandic society then had something of the quality of a band society with shifting allegiances possible, if not actually common. It was largely because of this that the godar were reluctant to levy taxes on their followers and instead relied for financial support on the produce of their own estates and on tolls paid to their temples. The occasional Viking raid

probably contributed to their purses as well.

Nordal (n.d) claims that the godords were administrative units and it was the confederation of godords that formed the underlying structure for the Althing which first met at Thingvellir in 930, a date on which the Laws of the Commonwealth of Iceland were first enacted. The actual administrative functions of the godord however, were fairly loosely defined. Space does not permit a discussion of them here. Certainly the authority of the godar was strengthened after the establishment of the Althing when godar could require that their thingmenn or followers accompany them to the gatherings for the Althing, with penalties under the law for refusal to do so. But, even before that a gathering of a local thing or assembly, presided over by godi required the attendance of any landowners with a tribute being extracted from those who did not attend. This tribute was used to help defray expenses for those who did attend. Again though, individuals could change allegiance from one godi to another and so even this specific power of the godar was tenuous. There was some mutual aid or reciprocal sets of obligations between a godi and his thingmenn but during most of any year geographical distances between them made them less than fully satisfactory in terms of protection for the individual freeman.

*To be continued in the next issue*

## PHARMACISTS

Ernest Stefanson

Garry Fedorchuk

Claire Gillis

Pat Sedun

Melissa Jacobs

**642-5504**

# PHARMASAVE

LIGHTHOUSE MALL GIMLI

**We care about your health**

LIVE WELL WITH

**PHARMASAVE**



# Eirík's Saga Rauða

## The Saga Of Erik The Red

*It is believed that this saga was written in the 13th C. The author is anonymous. It is about the Norse exploration of North America around 1000 AD/CE. There are fourteen chapters. In this issue, the saga continues with three more chapters. The late Emil Bjarnason wrote this translation from the original Icelandic. He explains, "In translation, except for the obligatory substitution of th for þ and d for ð, I have used the Icelandic spellings of names and places."*

### Chapter 4

At that time there were serious famine conditions in Greenland. Those who had gone fishing got small yields, and some never returned.

There was a woman in the settlement whose name was Thorbjörg; she was a fortune teller and was called Little Sybil. She had had nine sisters, all of whom had been fortune tellers, but she was the only one still living. It was Thorbjörg's custom in winter to go to parties and get herself invited to the homes of men most curious about their future prospects. And since Thorkell was the leading farmer, he invited her to his home so he could find out when the bad times would end. She was happy to be asked there, in accordance with her custom. She was provided with an armchair and a pillow to sit on, and it was to be filled with chicken feathers.

And when she arrived in the evening and met the man who came for her, she was dressed in a blue cape with a strap fastened at the neck and with a headdress set with stones and with glass beads around her neck, a lambskin tiara on her head, and lining of white catskin; and she carried a wand in her hand. It had a brass knob, over which were stone gems. She wore a seeress's belt, with

a large leather pouch in which she carried her magic charms which were necessary to her skills. On her feet she wore calfskin boots, with long thongs that had tin knobs on their ends. On her hands she wore white catskin gloves.

As she entered, all those present felt obliged to offer her appropriate greetings. She took that as indicating that they approved of her. Thorkell took her hand and led her to the high seat that had been built for her. Then Thorkell asked her to cast her eyes over the servants, the flocks and house. She looked at it all in silence.

Dinner was in the evening, and it must be said that the seeress had a greedy appetite for porridge made from goat's milk and anything cooked with the hearts of animals of all kinds that were available. She had a brass spoon and a knife with a handle of walrus tusk with a double copper ring and its blade point was broken.

After the meal, Thorkell the farmer went over to Thorbjörg and asked about her intentions, in particular, how soon she would be ready to answer the questions that would be put to her by those most curious to know. She replied that she would not do so until after a good night's sleep.

In the morning, after a late night, there were brought to her all the equipment she

needed to practise her art. She asked also to have brought to her those women who were knowledgeable about the needs of sorceresses, and who were called Vardlokar. But such women were not to be found. Then the women of the household were questioned. Then Guðrídur said:

“I am neither widely-learned nor a wise woman; however, my foster mother Halldís taught me a poem that she called Vardlokur.”

Then Thorkell said: “Then you are wise.”

She replied: “Only in this will I be of assistance, since I am a Christian.”

Thorbjörg said: “It may be that if you assist in this way, then you will be no worse a person than before. But we, Thorkell and I, will see to getting requirements, if need be.”

Thorkell now followed Guðrídur, but asserted that he would do as he pleased. The women then formed a ring around the sorceress’ high chair, while she sat in it. Guðrídur then sang the poem so beautifully and well, that all present felt that they had never heard it sung in a better voice.

The sorceress thanked her and many of the others also commented on the excellence of the singing, - “that much we have formerly not understood and not given us solace. And to me, many things are now obvious which before were concealed from me and many others. But I can tell you this, Thorkell, that this famine will not last beyond the winter, and things will improve in the spring. Also, the sickness that has taken its toll will also recover. And you, Guðrídur, I will reward the assistance that you have given, for your future is now clearly revealed to me. You will receive a proposal here in Greenland, an appropriate one, although you will not accept immediately since your future will be in Iceland, and there you will have many and good descendants and your lineage will be celebrated. And I have the power to see all of this accurately. Now go and be happy and well, daughter.”

After that many others received from her the answers to the questions they were curious about. She was also very good at story-telling, and what she told proved to be true. The news spread to other villages, and there she went. Thorbjörn was sent for because he did not wish to stay at home while such superstitious nonsense was going on.

The weather improved quickly, as Thorbjörg had predicted. Thorbjörn prepared his ship and sailed, until he reached Brattahlíð (Greenland). Erik received him gladly, and thought it good that he had come. He remained there during the winter together with his companions, but the crewmen boarded with farmers. In the spring, Erik gave Thorbjörn land at Stokkanes, and a suitable house was built, where he lived thereafter.

## Chapter 5

Erik had a wife named Thjóðhildur, and with her two sons; one was called Thorsteinn, the other Leifur. They were both substantial men. Thorsteinn lived at home with his father, but no man of rank in Greenland was considered his equal. Leifur had sailed to Norway and in service with king Ólaf Tryggvason. But as Leifur sailed from Greenland during the summer, they were blown off course to South Islands. They left there late, after staying a long time during the summer.

Leifur took a liking to a woman named Thorgunna. She was a woman of good breeding and Leifur thought her to be well educated. When Leifur prepared to leave, Thorgunna asked to go along. Leifur asked whether her relatives would approve. She said it would not matter. Leifur did not think it right to risk the capture of such a highborn woman in an unknown land - “but we are shorthanded.”

She replied, “I’m not sure that you could do any better.”

“I’ll take that risk”, said Leifur.

“Then I must tell you”, said Thorgunna, “that I will go, not just as a lone woman, for I am with child; I say it is of your making. I know that it will be a boy. And though you may not pay heed to it, I will bring it up and send it to you in Greenland, when it is possible to go there with other people. But I know that you will enjoy having a son, that will come of our parting. But I will return to Greenland before it ends.”

Leifur gave her a ring, a woollen mantle, and a belt made of walrus tusks. The child was brought to Greenland and was named Thorgils. Leifur accepted him as his child – it is said by some to have come to Iceland during the summer, but that Thorgils was later in Greenland and was believed to have no relations at the end.

Leifur and his followers left the South Islands and reached Norway in the fall. Leifur entered the service of king Ólaf Tryggvason. The king was pleased with him and considered him to be a well educated man.

One day the king came to Leifur and asked, “Will you be going to Greenland this summer?”

Leifur replied, “Yes, if you wish me to.”

The king replied that was so, and that he would like Leifur to convey his desire that Greenland should adopt Christianity. Leifur agreed, but added that it might not be an easy task in Greenland.

The king replied that he knew of no better man for the task – “and may you be successful.”

“That will be so only with your support.” Leifur replied.

Leifur sailed and was at sea for a long time and came upon lands of which he had no previous knowledge. There he found self sown wheat fields and vines. There were also maple trees of such quality that houses could be built with them.

On his way home, Leifur came across some shipwrecked men, whom he took with him. In this he was showing manliness and generosity, like many others and was thereafter called Leif the Lucky. Leifur landed at Eiríksfjörð then went home to Brattahlíð. He was well received. He urged people to become Christians and showed them the message from king Ólaf Tryggvason and told them of the many benefits that would follow from the new faith. Erik resisted conversion to this new faith but Thjóðhildur adopted it immediately and had a church built some distance from the home. It became known as the Thjóðhildur church. She prayed there with the other converts. She no longer desired marital relations with Erik, but that made him quite angry.

At this time there was much talk of people seeking to find the lands that Leifur had found. Their leader was Thorsteinn Eiríksson, a wise and good man. Erik, whose guidance was much valued, was asked to go along, but at first declined, but when his friends asked him he could not say nay. They now prepared to sail in the ship that Thorbjörn had brought, and recruited a crew of twenty men, with a minimum of provisions, not more than weapons and food.

That morning, as Erik rode home, he took with him a small chest of gold and silver. He hid it and went his way, and it came about that he fell off his horse and injured his shoulder. As a result, he told his wife to take the chest and contents, since he felt that the accident had happened because he had tried to hide the money.

Then they sailed out of Eiríksfjörð with great joy, they felt that everything was going well. But then they were tossed about in the sea and didn’t reach their destination. They came within sight of Iceland, and then saw a bird from Ireland. They took the ship into a harbour. In the



fall they left and were all wet and exhausted when at the beginning of winter they returned to Eiríksfjörð.

Then Erik remarked that they had left full of optimism, but returned in a more sober mood. Thorsteinn replied, “It would be proper policy to arrange for all these men, who are now helpless, and provide for them for the winter.”

Erik replied: “It is also true, as the saying goes, that nothing is given until it is asked for, and so it will be here. I will follow your advice in this.”

All those who had other accommodations went to them and others went to Brattahlíð and were there for the winter.

**Chapter 6**

Now it must be said, that Thorsteinn Eiríksson proposed to Guðrídur, and that proposal was well received, both by her and her father. It was agreed, and the wedding took place at Brattahlíð in the fall. The reception went well and was attended by many people.

Thorsteinn had a house in the western settlement in the place called Lýsufjörð. A half share in it was owned by a man named Thorsteinn, whose wife’s name was Sigríður. In the autumn, Thorsteinn and Guðrídur went to Lýsufjörð where they were well received. They stayed there



“Eiríks the Red saga” by Gilwellian - Own work. Licensed under Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons

through the winter. It happened that an epidemic occurred in that settlement, early in the winter. The foreman, named Gardar, was not a friendly man; he was the first to get sick and soon died. Soon people died, one after the other.

Then the disease affected Thorsteinn Eiríksson and Sigríður, his namesake’s wife. One evening, Sigríður decided to go to the outhouse across from the house door. Guðrídur led her and they looked

across to the house door. Then Sigríður shouted. Guðrídur said, "We have come too far and there is no doubt that you will be too cold, so we must return to the house quickly."

Sigríður answered, "Fate has not willed it so; I can see all those who have died standing in front of the door, including your husband Thorsteinn, and even myself and I look distressed."

Presently she said, "We can go now, Guðrídur, I no longer see the dead people."

Now Thorsteinn had disappeared. She believed that she had seen him with a whip in his hand, intending to beat the people. Then they went in and before morning she was dead and a coffin was made.

That same day the men went rowing and took Thorstein the black to see their fish catch. While there, he received word from Thorsteinn Eiríksson that all was not well, that Sigríður had tried to crawl into bed with him. When he, Thorsteinn the black came in, she was on the edge of the bed. He took her hands, dragged her off and struck her chest with his axe.

Thorsteinn Eiríksson died at sunset. Thorsteinn the black urged Guðrídur to lie down and get some sleep, and said he would sit up with the corpse. Soon after that, Thorsteinn Eiríksson sat up and began to speak. He asked that Guðrídur be called so he could speak with her.

"It is God's will that I be given this little time to speak my piece."

Thorsteinn the black did as he was asked and advised Guðrídur to seek God's help and repeated what her husband had said, "He wants to talk to you. You must decide what you will do, for I cannot advise you in these matters."

She answered: "It could be that this has to do with those matters that will now be my responsibility, after these strange events. And I wish to have God's grace over me. But should I forgo God's mercy

by meeting him and finding out what he wants to tell me for I must keep from doing harm to anyone. I would prefer that he went away, but I suspect that is not to be."

Now Guðrídur went to meet Thorsteinn. It seemed to her that he shed a tear. He spoke into her ear silently what only she should hear, but then spoke up for all to hear that those who held the

(Christian) faith and followed it were blessed, and added that many followed it badly.

"Is it not the custom that had been here in Greenland since Christianity was adopted, to bury men in unconsecrated soil with little funeral service? It is my wish to be taken to the church along with the other men who have perished here, except Gardar who should be cremated immediately for he has been responsible for all the apparitions that have been here this winter."

He spoke to her of her estate and of the great future that awaited her, advised her not to marry a Greenlander, and to give his money to the church and the poor. Then he fell gently away again.

It had been the custom in Greenland since Christianity was adopted to bury men where they died in unconsecrated ground. A post would be raised over the grave and later, when priests visited, the posts would be taken up, holy water poured into the grave and a service held, even if it were much later.

The bodies of Thorsteinn and his men were taken to the church in Eiríksfjörð and given a proper burial with a service. Erik took charge of Guðrídur and took the place of her father. A little later Thorbjörn died. Then all that property came to Guðrídur. Erik saw to it that she was well provided for.

*To be continued in the next issue*

# POETRY


## Applied Spirituality

by Richard Bredsteen

Smart power, digital savvy,  
 Quick, ever ready, detailed oriented  
 Mapping neighborhoods,  
 Herbal knowledge, applied spirituality  
 In the moment, on it goes...  
 Practice makes perfect,  
 forever hold your peace  
 a virgin light with the wisdom of an owl..  
 The toad in my garden is hidden, yet,  
 I trust he is here doing what he must,  
 Catching flies and bugs,  
 Leaping for joy...  
 Overcast skies cool

The hot summer day,  
 Bringing me solace  
 On my walk with Bella,  
 The old girl remembers the way  
 In spite of her self,  
 Slowing down to a crawl,  
 Life speaks to us now...  
 Gentle blessings,  
 a simple breeze  
 I manage to feel,  
 Is enough to know  
 There are real benefits  
 Each step along the way...

THE NORTH AMERICAN ICELANDIC COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER



L-H

Discover your Icelandic roots... subscribe today

[www.lh-inc.ca](http://www.lh-inc.ca) | (204) 284-5686 | 1-866-564-2374



LÖGBERG-HEIMSKRINGLA INC.



[www.heimskringlog.com](http://www.heimskringlog.com)

# Why do we play this game?

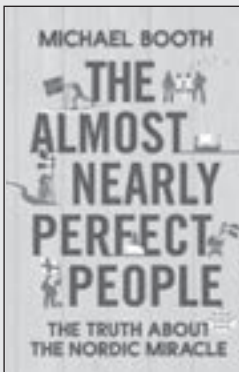
by Richard Bredsteen

Hanging on the edge  
 And yearning for more  
 To be a taker,  
 Yet, missing the point  
 Of comfort and pleasure  
 Leaves us an empty nest...  
 May I hang my hat  
 On the edge of a time being  
 once and for all?  
 Commit joyfully

And know the sorrow of loss,  
 The awkwardness of being in between...  
 Let the rest follow in pursuit,  
 and catch the one who hesitates,  
 embrace him/her as your own  
 for the moment it is real,  
 the home is where the heart is  
 they say,  
 and I am on the edge...

**T**ERGESEN'S  
 Original. Always.

GENERAL MERCHANT • GIMLI, MB  
 82 FIRST AVE. 204-642-5958



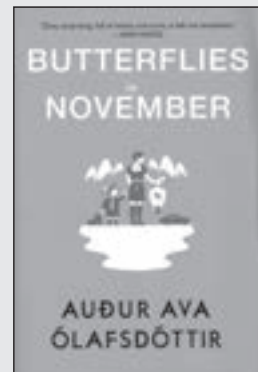
The Almost Nearly  
 Perfect People

JOANNE M. HARRIS  
 \$29.95 CDN



Westward Bound

DVD \$45.95 CDN



Butterflies in November

AUÐUR AVA ÓLAFSDÓTTIR  
 \$18.95 CDN

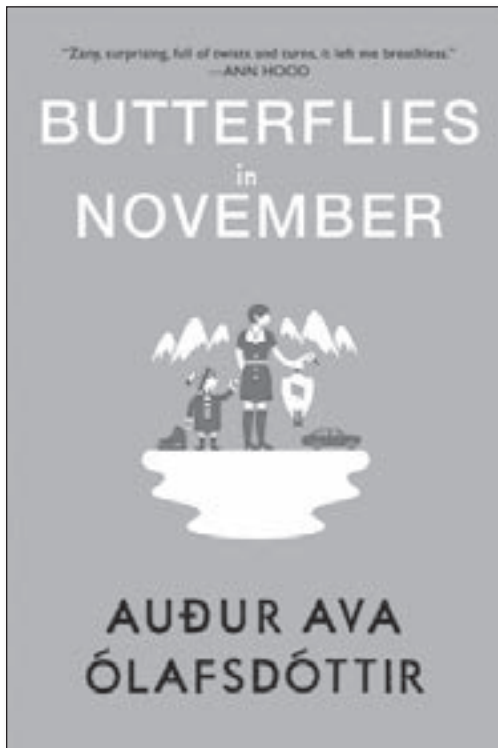
[tergesen@mts.net](mailto:tergesen@mts.net)

PHONE ORDERS WELCOME

# Book Review

## Butterflies in November

by Auður Ava Ólafsdóttir



**Reviewed by Alica Sylvester**

**Paperback 296 pages**

**Publisher: Grove Press, Black Cat  
(December 2014)**

**Language: English**

**ISBN-13: 9780802123183**

**ISBN: 080212318X**

*Butterflies in November* by Auður Ava Ólafsdóttir is a story about the journey of a woman who is unlucky in love, but finds luck in other aspects of life. After her husband and lover leave her in the same day, her injured friend's four-year-old deaf-mute son accompanies her on vacation where they develop a bond that is entirely unique to them.

The unnamed narrator leads a slightly unconventional lifestyle. She and Thorsteinn are partners in the institute of marriage, but she cannot be defined as domestic. After a few years, he finds it nearly unbearable that she will not bear his children and impregnates his colleague, Nína Lind, with whom he has decided to start a new life and family. The narrator has strong beliefs that she was not meant to raise children. She is not surprised by her husband's proclamation, nor does she seem to care, which is evident when her attention turns from their conversation to the sight of a butterfly that she observes is unusual for that time of year. She notes the differences in her life after her husband has left their home with the majority of their belongings. She is rather enjoying her solitude; her feelings are not what would typically be expected under the circumstances. They shared a conjugal bed, but not much else.

She is alone in her almost empty home when she gets news that she has won a



mobile home in a lottery she forgot she had entered. With nothing keeping her in Reykjavík, she makes plans to relocate for an undetermined amount of time to a remote part of Iceland during the darkest month of year. On the way to share her news of travel with her pregnant friend, Auður, the narrator discovers her friend with a badly injured ankle after a fall. Upon inspection at the hospital, a number of other complications keep her under the watch of doctors. What the narrator thought would be a weekend with Auður's son, Tumi, is extended by three or four months. Having no idea what a four-year-old child needs, she takes the boy to pick up a few items including a lottery ticket, letting him pick the numbers and unexpectedly win a large sum of money. After being thrust into the role of a temporary mother figure, the narrator decides that she has more than enough time and money for her trip; her biggest challenge will be Tumi.

They embark on their road trip and encounter many interesting people and situations along the way. The most notable being a hitchhiker that she makes love with in a lava field in complete darkness while Tumi is asleep in the car. She and Tumi make it to their final destination where they learn the hitchhiker is also residing. She develops a special friendship with the hitchhiker, verging on the beginning of a romance.

She had minimal contact with her ex-husband after their separation. He re-enters her life unexpectedly. He is not happy in his new life with Nína Lind. He wants a second chance to make their marriage work, but it is evident that she is not the same woman he married and does not feel the same. Tumi has changed her. For the first time in her life she has felt responsible for someone else's happiness. Unlike a grown adult, a four-year-old lacks the ability to fend for themselves in most

of life's daily events, so she had no other choice than to become a provider. She has become less selfish in her own life choices.

"It is precisely at that moment that it first dawns on me that I am a woman caught in a finely interwoven pattern of feelings and time, that there are many things going on simultaneously that have a significance to my life, that events don't just simply occur in a linear sequence, but on several plains of thought, dreams and feelings at the same time, that there is a moment in the heart of every moment" (pg. 150).

This excerpt captures the essence of the book. The events happening in the narrator's life and the thoughts occurring in her head are simultaneously significant. There is a greater meaning in each of life's little moments that may not be apparent on the surface.

The first person narrative allows the reader to feel as though they are experiencing the events of the woman's life from her perspective. The content of the story is eccentric and entertaining. Ólafsdóttir has taken a seemingly sad or lonely part of a character's life and created an opportunity to explore the concept of self-discovery. The reader does not feel bad for the narrator; she is oddly relatable. Aside from his affair, Thorsteinn was never a bad husband. He was just unable to provide what the narrator ultimately wanted from a partner. By the end of the book, she still does not have a clear idea of what she wants. It is not a typical love story. Her husband does not win her back, and she does not fall in love with a stranger. She falls in love with Tumi in the sense that they offer each other respect, affection, communication and understanding regardless of his disability or their difference in age. He has been the central factor that influenced her transformation that can be compared to the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly.

# Contributors

---

BIRNA BJARNADÓTTIR studied literature and aesthetics at the University of Iceland, the Freie University in Berlin and the University of Warwick, England. She holds the position of the Chair of Icelandic at the University of Manitoba. The author of *Holdið hemur andann. Um fagurfræði í skáldskap Guðbergs Bergssonar* [On Aesthetics in Guðbergur Bergsson's Work], her recent publications are prefaces to *The Young Icelander* by Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason, translated by Borga Jakobson (2009), and *The Fifth Dimension*, a collection of poetry and translations by David Gislason (2010). Her *book of fragments*, with a foreword by George Toles, and illustrations by Guy Maddin, Cliff Eyland and Haraldur Jónsson, was published in the fall, 2010.

RICHARD BREDSTEEN was born in California immigrated to Manitoba in 1998. He has tackled many different job roles in his life but writing poetry is his favourite pastime.

NORMA GUTTORMSSON, M.Ed., is a second generation Icelandic Canadian. She is the daughter of the late Dr. Pétur Guttormsson and Salín Reykdal. Norma is a retired ESL instructor living in North Vancouver. She has four children and four grandchildren.

DAVID GISLASON is a retired farmer from the Arborg district, and enjoys the challenge of translating items of interest from Icelandic to English.

GAIL HALLDORSON is a retired High School Librarian living in Sandy Hook, Manitoba. She enjoys her volunteer work at the New Iceland Heritage Museum.

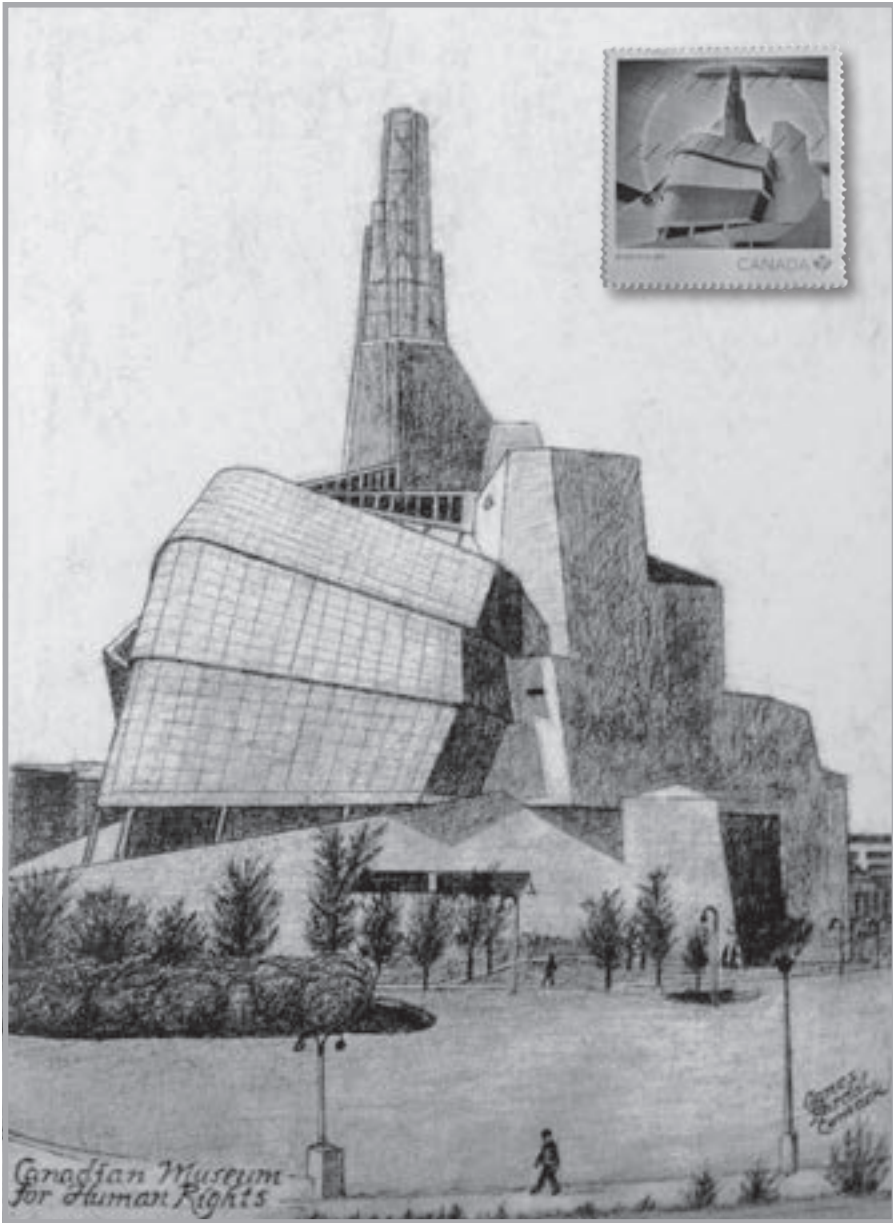
BILL HOLM (1943-2009) was born and raised in Minneota MN, the son of Icelandic pioneers. He was a marvelous mix of educator, poet, essayist, humourist and piano player; dividing his later years between his two homes in Minneota and Hofsós, Iceland.

DR JOHN MATTHIASSON (1936-2001) graduated from Cornell University with a PhD in Anthropology. He taught at several universities in the USA and Canada with his longest tenure having been at the University of Manitoba. He served on various Icelandic-Canadian associations and committees and was a former member of the board of editors for the *Icelandic Canadian* magazine.

ALICIA SYLVESTER After graduating from the University of Manitoba with a Bachelor of Fine Art (Honours), Alicia Sylvester moved back to Gimli, MB where she was born and raised. She is actively involved in the art community there.

EINAR VIGFUSSON is a retired farmer who lives on the family farm just outside Arborg, MB. He is well-known as a realistic wildfowl wood carver.





---

## The Back Page

---

Agnes Comack Bardal, aged 93, has been drawing local scenes for years. This year she challenged herself by drawing the new Canadian Human Rights Museum, which opened this year in Winnipeg.

# A LONG STANDING TRADITION

THE ONLY FUNERAL HOME OWNED AND OPERATED BY THE BARDAL FAMILY



Aarfbjorn S. Bardal

Njall O. Bardal

Neil O. Bardal

Eirik L. Bardal

- Traditional and Contemporary Funerals
- Preneed Arrangements
- Indoor Scattering Garden
- On-Site Crematorium
- Parking
- Across from Brookside Cemetery

Call: **949-2200**  
(204)

Gimli Call: (204) 642-7124

3030 Notre Dame Avenue  
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada R3H 1B9

[www.nbardal.mb.ca](http://www.nbardal.mb.ca)

Email: [info@nbardal.mb.ca](mailto:info@nbardal.mb.ca)

  
neil  
bardal  
INC  
FUNERAL CENTRE

ICELANDIC CONNECTION

---

CANADA

---

ICELAND

---

FOUNDATION

---

INC

---

An organization funded by Canadians of  
Icelandic Descent, dedicated to the preservation  
of their Cultural Heritage

For scholarship  
information  
please contact:

[canadaiceland@netscape.net](mailto:canadaiceland@netscape.net)

Gifts and bequests support our ongoing work