

Bjarnadóttir, Birna, and Finnbogi Guðmundsson, eds. 2007. *My Parents: Memoirs of New World Icelanders*. Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press. ISBN: 978-0-88755-699-9.

Imagine yourself an ordinary literate reader and speaker of English anywhere on earth. You've heard of Iceland, know roughly where and what it is, but it does not barge to the front of your consciousness. You have just cracked the spine of *My Parents: Memoirs of New World Icelanders*, edited by Birna Bjarnadóttir and Finnbogi Guðmundsson. You can't begin to pronounce the editors' gnarly names. You begin reading the seven memoirs of Icelandic pioneer emigrants to Canada and the U.S.; half the original 14 published in Icelandic in 1956 in *Foreldrar Mínir*. What pleasure and wisdom can this book possibly provide you? What connection can there be between your world of 2009 and these now long dead pioneers who never made it all the way into inhabiting your language even if they were your physical neighbours in North America?

Both Canadians and Americans at the moment grapple with these vexed questions surrounding immigration. Elections are won and lost over which baggage of language, culture, or habit we allow new immigrants to unpack. How many is too many new neighbours? How quickly do we expect them to answer us in English and redesign their names so that we can pronounce them?

A quarter of the whole tribe of Icelanders left their island between 1850 and 1900, most after 1870. They left mostly for Canada and the U.S., the poorest people in Europe—maybe on the planet—speaking an incomprehensible language, owning nothing except a few books and primitive tools. These seven essays give a good sample of what became of them in the new world, and of what peculiar qualities of mind and character they brought to it. The obituary essay (*Minningar* in Icelandic) is a literary form much loved and practiced in Iceland, weekly in a special section of the largest newspaper *Morgunblaðið*. The writers are most often the children though sometimes friends or other relatives. The most frequent question though in all seven in this book is: what experience or habits of mind has one generation willed to the next? What were these people like, and what can we learn from their stories?

First, the U.S.-Canadian border is completely porous to an immigrant—for them, Iceland is the root, and after that, survival, wherever it can be found. Of the seven, four died in Canada, three in the U.S. All seven had family connections in both; their children (authors of their biographies), marry and move back and forth across the border during their lives. Three lived in the U.S., four in Canada.

Independent writer and poet, memoirist and musician

All seven authors grew up speaking Icelandic as a first language and wrote these essays in (as I have been assured) correct and elegant Icelandic that waited over 50 years to be translated. The language did not begin its disappearance until the second generation. By the third generation (my own) it was gone, a heritage to be sentimentally revered, but unfortunately unlearned, maybe too much archaic grammar to thrive in the New World.

Of these seven immigrants, six came from poor isolated farms in northeast Iceland, as far from urban civilization as possible in Europe, maybe on the planet. The seventh, Sigurlina Backman, was born of parents who came from priests' families in the south and were educated and reasonably well off. Her father emigrated from curiosity, the other six from desperation. But the new world dealt even this more prosperous man a hard hand. He landed in the midst of a smallpox epidemic: "One house was so full of caskets, you could hardly move. One family lost all seven children in a week." They arrived in Winnipeg and began their family, but lost their first three children to diphtheria. We ought not to imagine emigration a triumphant experience; it is always tragic at the beginning. Humans don't leave their homes joyfully, only necessarily.

All of these memoirs are gilded with extensive genealogies, the Icelandic national sport and obsession. The sagas all begin with the roll call of generations—parents, grandparents, and on back. How strange for these immigrants to come to this new place where most fellow citizens can't remember their own grandparents' names. The new world Icelanders have maintained their genealogy habit even now, though the Icelandic end has weakened a little with time. More of these names in genealogies made sense to readers in 1956 than now.

Two of these biographies describe both life and works of the greatest immigrant poets: Stephan G. Stephansson's life remembered by his daughter Rosa, and Guttormur Guttormsson using his keen poet's eye to describe his parents, and create a rich picture of their lives, both in Iceland and Canada. His essay is a brilliant piece of writing: sample his description of the white throated sparrow, of the horse trains carrying fish out of Lake Winnipeg, and of his retelling of hauntings and ghosts. Though he claims to be a skeptic himself, he confesses that he is (like Grettir) "afraid of the dark ... to this day." This rich and masterful essay is a gift to English.

The other fine essay in the collection is, oddly enough, also by Guttormur Guttormsson—though a different one. Guttormur was the priest in Minnesota until his death in 1956, when the Icelandic version of this book first appeared. He baptized and confirmed me, and willed me his piano—my first of many. He was born on a farm near Vopnafjörður, home country for many of his parishioners. Guttormur was 13 or 14 years old when his family emigrated in 1893, and his descriptions of daily life on an Icelandic farm are the clearest I've read. Like the

other Guttormur, his powers as a writer are considerable, so the reader is carried into the life he tells. He's also perceptive on immigrant psychology, how the Icelandic mindset moved intact to the new world. I regret being born too late to appreciate the depth and power of this man's mind. I would recommend this essay to anyone—Icelandic or not—who wants insight into the immigrant experience.

His essay—like all seven in this book—is garnished with poems, his own, his neighbors, remembered verse from Iceland. The real peculiarity of Icelanders as a tribe is the central necessity of poetry to their lives and habits of mind. It is, of course, a world lost to those who have lost language, but these finely made translations restore glimmerings for us, and we ought to be grateful for them.

One of the un-translated essays was by my great grandfather, Bjorn Gislason, so I suppose I ought to protest the incompleteness of the book ... but I won't. Birna Bjarnadóttir, the editor, has chosen wisely from the original essays to give a fair and comprehensive view of the immigrant experience. If we want the rest, then we are doomed to learn Icelandic, no easy labour. But it is a culture which has, far more than others, survived on its literature and it deserves your labour to penetrate it. Meanwhile, most of us make friends with good translators.

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