

Hjálmar Jónsson. 2018. *Selected Poems*. Edited by Ólafur Gunnarsson and translated by David McDuff. Kansas City: John Brown Press. 90 pages. ISBN: 9781718965331.

Most English-language readers could be excused for supposing that Icelandic poets took a long hiatus between the late Middle Ages and the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, very little Icelandic literature from that period has appeared in print in English translation, including much of the wealth of poetry written in Iceland during the nineteenth century. For this reason alone, Hjálmar Jónsson's *Selected Poems*, translated by David McDuff, is a welcome addition to the small body of works written by nineteenth-century Icelandic poets presently available in English translation.

Hjálmar Jónsson (1796–1875)—better known in Iceland as Bólu-Hjálmar—was a prolific poet whose most well-known poems often exude a palpable streak of bitterness and reflect the hardships of life as a poor farmer. In the poem “A hard time for verses,” for example, the poet writes “My hand can scarcely hold the pen, / a hard time for verses, / in long nights I wake again, / no light in my chilly den, / body shivering as gout traverses” (13). Ill health and hunger are recurring themes in many of Hjálmar's poems, which also tend to linger on the ravages of old age and death. These poems are often intensely personal while simultaneously offering universal, profound ruminations on the nature of the world and of human existence, though not entirely without humour. Despair was, indeed, not the only topic of Hjálmar's poetic output. His poem “Lines to a secret benefactor,” for example, is a touching expression of gratitude not only to the poet's secret patron but to God as well, while the poem “Song for the National Assembly” presents Hjálmar's unique twist on nineteenth-century Romantic nationalism. Poetry itself and the work of other Icelandic poets are also the subjects of several of Hjálmar's poems, and still others are concerned with love, nature, and the workings of nineteenth-century Icelandic society.

In addition to a diversity of subject matter, *Selected Poems* also reflects the stylistic variety of Hjálmar's poetry, which is always a paramount concern for the translator. The highly inflectional character of the Icelandic language and the relative syntactic freedom that it often allows for presents a particular challenge for the translator tasked with rendering poetry that makes use of consistent rhythmic features into English verse. As with much other nineteenth-century Icelandic poetry, the use of end rhyme is a key stylistic element of many of Hjálmar's poems, though the traditional use of alliteration is also a common feature of his poetry. Translator David McDuff has mostly retained the rhyming schemes of the original poems in his translations, though in places he has made clever use of imperfect, semi, sight, and weak rhymes, to strike a fine balance between retaining both the meaning and the rhythm or other stylistic

features of Hjálmar's poetry. However, in at least one instance, in the third line of the poem "The poet's life," the translator strangely disrupts the consistent typographical pattern Hjálmar employs throughout the original poem, which he reproduces in all other lines of his translation, an error which was perhaps overlooked during the proofreading process. Like most Icelandic to English translators, McDuff seems to allow alliteration to arise where it comes naturally and never forces the issue.

Along with the poems, the volume also contains helpful paratextual material including a preface written by the publisher, Fred Whitehead, and an introduction by the translator himself, each of which help to frame the conception of and intention behind the effort to introduce Hjálmar's poetry to an English readership. The most substantial paratextual component of the book is an afterword in the form of an English translation of a biographical essay on the poet and his work written by Icelandic poet and politician Hannes Hafstein (1861–1922), which was first published in 1888. Regrettably, the text of the translated essay features several typographical errors, which could have been caught and corrected with closer proofreading, but the essay nevertheless provides crucial information about the cultural, historical, and literary context in which Hjálmar's poetry can be more fully appreciated.

Though his work is still widely read in Iceland, Hjálmar is less well-known outside of the country than many other poets of his era, most of whom were educated in Copenhagen and were closely associated with Icelandic Romanticism and the independence movement (e.g. Jónas Hallgrímsson, Matthías Jochumsson, and Benedikt Gröndal). The publication of Hjálmar's poetry in English translation thus offers hope that more poets from the nineteenth and early-twentieth century well-known within Iceland but less so outside of the country (e.g. Sigurður Breiðfjörð, Ólöf Sigurðardóttir, and Unnur 'Hulda' Benediktsdóttir Bjarklind) will have the opportunity to find their own English readership. Hjálmar Jónsson's *Selected Poems* introduces readers to the work of a remarkable Icelandic poet in a well-executed translation, but the volume also helps to advance a richer image of Iceland's vast and varied literary history.

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