

Hreinsson, Viðar. 2012. *Wakeful Nights: Stephan G. Stephansson: Icelandic-Canadian Poet*. Calgary: Benson Ranch. 607 pages. ISBN: 978-0-9733657-2-6.

Stephan G. Stephansson (1853-1927) is regarded as one of the greatest poets in the history of Icelandic literature. Although he was born in Iceland, Stephansson produced almost all of his life's work in a small Icelandic settlement in Alberta, Canada, where he made his living as a farmer. The so-called *Klettafjallaskáld* [Rocky Mountain Poet] is known for his pacifist, anti-religious, and socio-critical views, expressed primarily in the form of poetic verse, but also in essays, letters, speeches, and even plays. An insomniac, he penned his verses during the night hours, which inspired the name for the six volumes of poetry published between 1909-1938: *Andvökur* [Wakeful Nights]. Stephansson wrote exclusively in Icelandic, and although English translations of some of his poems have been published previously (586-7), the bulk of his literary output is little known outside of his native land. The same is true of his life story.

Viðar Hreinsson's massive biography of the Icelandic-Canadian homesteader, farmer, and poet seeks to rectify this situation. Written "in a narrative manner without intrusive authorial comments," the work aims "to present English-speaking readers, particularly Canadians, with a comprehensive biography of Stephan G." (19). Managed and funded by the poet's grandson, Stephan V. Benediktson (who wrote the introduction), the over 600-page book is an abridged version of a two-volume Icelandic biography written by the same author and published in 2002-2003. The backbone of the work is Stephansson's poetry, and, indeed, the life story of the poet is told around his verses, which the author translates "as literally as possible, well aware that such prose renderings do no justice to great poetry" (19). Prose and poetry alternate naturally and provide the reader with a sense of the poet's own voice and the events of his life as he experienced them.

The biography is divided into two parts. Part I, "Age of Ideals," begins with Stefán Guðmundur Guðmundsson's birth at Kirkjuhóll to Guðmundur Stefánsson and Guðbjörg Hannesdóttir. He had a somewhat itinerant upbringing in the Skagafjörður region of northern Iceland. The family was poor, and Stefán was mostly self-educated. He was a gifted poet from a young age and had already composed his first verses by the time he turned eleven years old. In August 1873, hardships in Iceland led Stefán, his parents, and his sister Sigurlaug to immigrate to North America, along with a number of other Icelanders. They settled first in Shawano County in northern Wisconsin, where Stefán worked as a lumberjack and farmer. In 1878, he married his first cousin, Helga Sigríður Jónsdóttir, with whom he would have eight children (only six lived past childhood). In 1880, Stefán and his family moved to North Dakota to a new Icelandic settlement in Pembina

County named Gardar. Stefán—who during this time adopted the Anglicized form of his name, Stephan G. Stephansson (taking also his father’s “surname”)—composed verse as well as plays, many of which were highly critical of political and religious leaders among the area’s Icelanders. Stephansson’s disputes with these figures, coupled with overcrowding in the North Dakota settlement, prompted his family’s relocation northwest to the district of Markerville in Alberta, Canada. In the Markerville settlement, Stephansson farmed by day and wrote poetry by night. In 1894, he published his first book of poetry, entitled *Úti á víðavangi* [*Out in the Wilderness*], which the author notes is “the first volume of poetry in the literary history of Alberta” (276). The farmer-poet was an important community leader who helped establish the Markerville Creamery, built *Hólaskóli* [Hóla School], the district’s first school, and served as Justice of the Peace.

Part II, entitled “Age of Violence,” starts at the beginning of the new century, with Stephansson and his family well established in central Alberta. The Markerville settlement was thriving, and the author sums up the poet’s activities during these years when he writes that Stephansson “worked hard at farming, writing poetry, rebuking the world’s authorities, praising nature, and forging universal ideas that substituted for old religious ones. He also wrote on Canadian life, striving for harmony with his adopted home” (337-338). He continued his social criticism in verse form. One of his most controversial poems—both in Iceland and Icelandic settlements in North America—was *Á ferð og flúgi* [*En Route*] (1900), a lengthy narrative poem about a young Icelandic immigrant woman-turned-prostitute who is abandoned by her compatriots. In the first decade of the century, Stephansson went on a speaking tour of Icelandic communities in Western Canada and the American Upper Midwest and published the first three volumes of his poetic anthology *Andvökur*. With the start of the First World War, he began composing poems reflecting his pacifist views and highlighting the horrors and injustices of war. In 1917, shortly before the war’s end, Stephansson journeyed to Iceland for an invited speaking tour around the country. Upon his return to North America he became involved in a bitter debate surrounding a memorial for Icelandic-Canadian soldiers who had served in the war. In 1920, Stephansson’s anti-war poems were published in an anthology named *Víglóði* [*Trail of War*], earning the poet both high praise and scathing criticism. In 1923, the fourth and fifth volumes of *Andvökur* were published, and around the same time Stephansson’s health began to fail. He travelled to Winnipeg for medical treatment in 1926 but died the following year at the age of 73.

The biographical material is supplemented throughout by maps charting Stephansson’s movements in Iceland and North America as well as photos of important sites and of the poet and his family, friends, rivals, and correspondents. Also included is a brief overview of Icelandic literary history (to contextualize

Stephansson's poetry), as well as a chronology, detailed bibliography, and subject index.

Although intimidating in length, the biography is very readable due to the narrative approach taken by the author. It is meticulously researched, but not dense, and demonstrates a thorough knowledge of and admiration for Stephansson's literary output as well as his life and ideals. The inclusion of poetry translated and summarized by the author is of great value, especially considering how little of it is available in the English language. The work will be of interest to academics and the general public alike and will hopefully spark scholarly interest in the poet among not only Scandinavianists but also translators and those working in Canadian history and literature. Most importantly, it will bring the story of this remarkable individual to the attention of the English-speaking world and will help to further secure him as one of the most important literary and cultural figures of North America and of Iceland.

Natalie M. Van Deusen
University of Alberta