

## Wasteland with Words. A Social History of Iceland

**Review Number:** 1066

**Publish date:** Friday, 1 April, 2011

**Author:** Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon

**ISBN:** 9781861896612

**Date of Publication:** 2010

**Price:** £25.00

**Pages:** 288pp.

**Publisher:** Reaktion Books

**Place of Publication:** London

**Reviewer:** Chris Callow

*Wasteland with Words* is a very welcome addition to the small number of academic books about Iceland's modern history available in English. The few other works on modern Icelandic history are largely written in Icelandic for local consumption. This means that the rest of the world is largely starved of any broader or deeper understanding of Iceland beyond the headline-grabbing activities of its bankers and volcanoes.

Of course it would be unfair to say that Iceland has been totally ignored by the wider world. As Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon notes (p. 258), Iceland was 'cool' in the 1990s, thanks in no small part to the global success of pop singer Björk. Iceland largely continues to be so thanks to the efforts of its tourist industry and the exploits abroad of musicians and sportsmen and women whose individual and team success exceeds what one might expect of a country of 300,000 people. Cultural exports have continued to get Iceland noticed: the last decade has seen the rise of modern Icelandic crime fiction through the success of the likes of Arnaldur Indriðason and Yrsa Sigurðardóttir. The culture and history of medieval Iceland are still sufficiently in vogue for there to be fairly regular, new translations of sagas and poetry of different kinds. New archaeological discoveries and new studies of 'Viking' DNA continue to foster broader interest in Iceland's significance within the Viking expansion. There is a plethora of educational children's books on the Vikings in which Iceland's colonisation and 'parliament', the Althing, play their part and – despite the UK education system largely denying people the opportunity of studying such things between the ages of 11 and 18 – a significant number of history, literature and archaeology students study Iceland in some way in UK universities. For all this general interest, the only other recent, relatively accessible works in English that deal with Iceland's *post*-medieval history are a single-volume work, Gunnar Karlsson's *The History of Iceland* (1) and one reference work (Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, *A Historical Dictionary of Iceland* (2)). *Wasteland with Words* therefore aims to appeal to a general but still fairly specialist audience and it largely succeeds in doing so.

Iceland has had a peculiar trajectory from its first colonization by humans in about AD 900 to its rapid development into a modern, wealthy state in the late 20th century. This presents anyone writing its history with some decisions to make about the chronological and thematic scope of their work. On one level it may seem like no great challenge to encapsulate the history of an island country which only began in c.900 and for most of its past has had a population of less than 100,000. Iceland being an island, isolated and a single polity (although mostly a colony of Denmark) also makes it easier to write a 'national' history in a way

which might no longer be seen as appropriate for larger, more complex polities.<sup>(3)</sup> In some ways, the great continuities in Icelandic history – its poverty, continued use of turf-built dwellings, lack of urbanization, dependence on fishing and pastoral farming, linguistic conservatism, and amid all this surprisingly high levels of literacy and strong storytelling traditions – all make it harder to identify beginnings and endings for the sake of writing historical works. Iceland's history does not fit into the neat periodisations applied to western European history.

Of course, there *were* major events in Iceland's history before the Second World War. There was the formal subjugation of the island to Norwegian control in the 1260s; its transfer to Danish control in 1380 (a situation which lasted until independence in 1944); the devastation of the Black Death (just after 1400 and so 50 years later than in most of western Europe); the arrival of Lutheranism (1550s); epidemics and natural disaster in the 18th century (small pox, the Lakagígar eruption); then mass emigration to the New World and the development of a strong independence movement from the 19th century into the 20th. But, for all these, it was probably only with the mechanization of the fishing industry (from just after 1900) that Icelandic society witnessed any really large scale changes. Arguably the occupation of Iceland by British forces in 1940, followed by that of US forces in 1941 until the end of the Second World War, followed by a continued US presence at the airbase at Keflavík in south-west Iceland from 1951–2006, had an even stronger impact. Iceland grew much wealthier during the second half of the 20th century through increased revenues from the export of fish and a subsequent general diversification to move away from dependence on this single industry. Although the country was plagued with bouts of high inflation, Icelanders' health and welfare increased steadily as did their total numbers, from about 130,000 in 1945 to nearly 300,000 by the end of the century.

To deal with all of this, Sigurður Gylfi – it is conventional in Iceland to refer to scholars by first name(s) rather than by patronymic – who is a specialist in late 19th- and early 20th-century Icelandic social history, makes some nods to Iceland's more distant past, but focusses on the period since 1850, especially that between 1850 and 1940. The book's alliterative title plays on many foreigners' and Icelanders' views of some of the dominant things which have characterized the country – its largely uninhabitable landscape and its long-lived and well preserved oral and written culture – but the continuities with earlier centuries are not emphasized much beyond the title. An example of these is the fact that the great stability in rural settlement patterns from Iceland's earliest centuries coupled with the density of the coverage of 'Sagas of Icelanders' actually means that many contemporary farms play a part in these medieval stories and modern farmers know them. English speakers have probably been exposed enough to romantic ideas about modern Iceland's connections to its past so perhaps it is no bad thing that such 'othering' does not go much beyond a catchy title.

The book is divided into 18 short chapters of which the longest is 21 pages. Each of these functions well as an independent essay although their order is not explained and they are not explicitly grouped together. In chapters one to three, the necessary 'broad-brush' socio-economic context which is required for any overview work of this kind comes from the works of those other Icelandic historians who have published most extensively on early 20th-century Icelandic society and politics (Gísli Ágúst Gunnlaugsson and Guðmundur Hálfðanarson). It might have served the reader well to have had chapter ten, 'The Middle Ages and beyond: a cultural foundation' as part of this introductory section because a part of Sigurður Gylfi's distinctive contribution is his emphasis on literary culture and education. Such evidence is often presented to the reader: the inclusion of many ten- to 20-line translated excerpts from diaries, autobiographies, letters, newspaper articles etc. gives the general reader a good sense of the material. For example, the cultural peculiarities which led to appalling levels of sanitation and health in 19th-century rural Iceland come across tragically well (pp. 53–63). Just under 50 black-and-white photographs, interspersed throughout the book and usually accompanied by short explanatory paragraphs, work in a similar way.

From chapter 12 onwards the book largely deals with post-1945 society, mostly in relation to urbanisation and urban life, i.e. the increase in size, wealth and social complexity of Reykjavík (chapter 12). The last two chapters, 'Selective modernization and capitalist euphoria' and 'Black-out' serve to critique the Icelandic

political system, a system which enabled the country's economy to become so unstable and, ultimately, collapse in 2008. Like other commentators, Sigurður Gylfi sees part of the underlying problem as Iceland's continued sense of inferiority as a small nation.

Sigurður Gylfi's own particular interest is in microhistory and a microhistorical approach is deployed to great effect in many parts of the book. In a ten-page chapter called 'Blind spots in history' Sigurður Gylfi sets out what he sees as his distinctive contribution to modern Icelandic history because he has 'long held reservations about the validity of "broad-brush" overviews of history as a medium for presenting and explaining events from the past.' (p. 14). He considers that historical scholarship on Iceland too often consists of 'wide-ranging syntheses' which implicitly overstate the ability of historians to understand the past. Thus, as many parts of this book and his previous work have demonstrated, Sigurður Gylfi sees himself as following in the footsteps of well-known (non-Icelandic) microhistorians by describing and analysing particular examples of phenomena. The difficulty with such an approach is, of course, steering a path between the typical and atypical, giving a sense of the mundane and the exceptional. In any case, this book relies almost as often on presenting a general picture as it does using extended case studies and it is none the worse for doing so; an unremittingly detailed study would have been less palatable to a non-Icelandic audience than *Wasteland with Words* will prove to be.

One key example will serve to show why a microhistorical approach can raise as many questions as it answers. Sigurður Gylfi is concerned to emphasise the incompleteness of the historical record in his opening chapter but the real issue is the potential traps of a microhistorical approach. Thus the book opens with a quotation from a late 19th-century love letter by one Níels Jónsson, a farm labourer in the north-west of Iceland, to his fiancée. Níels uses highly emotive language to explain his strong feelings for his future wife in this letter just as he apparently does in other letters to her. In relation to this Sigurður Gylfi explains that he has already published a book on this couple's relationship (4) and that afterwards he received correspondence from an elderly reader who had had a connection to Níels Jónsson. In a dramatic turn of domestic events, according to this reader, Níels had later castrated himself, apparently in a fit of anger after an argument with his now wife about another woman. One can understand Sigurður Gylfi's surprise at finding this out but the issue is not so much the incompleteness of what the preserved texts about Níels' life tell us, but of the typicality of Níels as a 19th-century farmer and therefore his literary outpourings. Irrespective of Níels' handiwork on his external genitalia, it is clear that he was not an average farmer. Níels' letter-writing and his 40 years or more of diary-writing were rare, even allowing for high levels of literacy in rural Iceland (p. 127). Few farmers can have also had a brother (Halldór) who was equally keen on writing and went so far as to produce a local newspaper (p. 126). As farmers Níels and Halldór were a bit odd too: after their parents refused to allow them to alter the location of their farm's water supply they got up in the middle of night to do it anyway (pp. 137–8). Thus, while the preserved diaries and other writings by Níels and his brother do provide a good understanding of *some* aspects of economic, social and cultural life, and in other respects their writings are entertaining, we might wonder as to how representative these men were of farmers in general. Sigurður Gylfi makes extensive reference to these men and their families' lives – they appear on at least 25 pages – and they are the focus of several sections: on mourning (chapter six, pp. 103–7); on personal expression through writing and 'The shaping of modern man'; and an interesting investigation into the connections between individuals' emotions and the desire for 'progress', a key element in the public discourse about independence (chapters nine and ten, pp. 123–46). Through these texts we have *a* view of the phenomena discussed but it would be interesting to hear about other views.

Sigurður Gylfi's own distinctive perspective comes across in his choice of topics elsewhere. He dedicates chapters to childhood and death in Reykjavík, for instance: there is (rightly) a continued emphasis on the combined emotional impacts of pre-industrial Iceland's extremely low life expectancy and miserable physical environment. Men, women and children worked hard, often having multiple seasonal, temporary and sometimes dangerous occupations. Only after successive education reforms, and not until after the Second World War, did children attend school for anything like the length of time that their peers did in other parts of Europe. Yet, as the earlier part of the book aptly demonstrates, within the household, significant amounts of time were used by parents, clergy and others to educate children. *Wasteland with Words*

reinforces the image of Icelanders as avid readers, thirsty for knowledge of the world beyond Iceland.

One of the most novel chapters of the book ('Monsters from the deep and the Icelandic way of thinking', chapter 16) takes the reader back to rural Iceland and to an event from 1963 when a dead leatherback turtle was discovered just off northern Icelandic coast. The arrival of an exotic, dead animal to Icelandic waters counted as significant news in Iceland in 1963 and Sigurður Gylfi uses the episode as the starting point for a consideration of Iceland's isolation and national identity. Such was the turtle's notoriety that it was eventually put on display in Reykjavík and thousands of people queued to see it. The arrival of the killer whale Keiko, star of the *Free Willy* films in the 1990s, to his watery retirement home on Iceland's southern coast was met with just as much fanfare. By contrast, a small country like Iceland can understandably feel threatened by too many intrusions. Sigurður Gylfi uses the rest of the chapter to discuss measures put in place by the authorities to protect Icelandic identity in the face of greater threats to national cultural purity such as the influence of foreign troops. British and US troops stationed in Iceland were especially perceived as a threat to Icelandic women in much the same way as US troops were seen as a problem in Britain. The broader, continued opposition between the Icelandic and the un-Icelandic is usefully pointed out because it is something which most foreign visitors and potential readers of this book might otherwise not sense quite so forcefully.

Sigurður Gylfi includes a chapter on women (chapter 13) where he asserts that the growth of Reykjavík in the early 20th century largely led to a greater sexual division of labour, particularly as a result of the growth in the number of young women employed as domestic servants. At the same time attitudes towards illegitimacy were hardening due to the increasing influence of foreign ideas on the urban middle class. In the 19th century, despite the importance of marriage as a precondition for rural couples establishing their own homes, illegitimacy rates had been high and there was no stigma attached to having children outside marriage. Thus, in Sigurður Gylfi's view, women's lives were worse in the first half of the 20th century than they were before or after. Here Sigurður Gylfi does not use first-hand accounts to make his case but it would have been no less valuable to have them here just as they are used elsewhere in the book. The history of gender relations in Iceland is an interesting and important issue; there are not many western countries that have experienced quite the (relative) scale of invasions by foreign troops as Iceland witnessed in the 1940s nor seen the kinds of mass, all-female marches which took place in Reykjavík in 1975 and 2010.

In summary, then, *Wasteland with Words* is only fleshing out the general picture set out succinctly by Gunnar Karlsson's thorough survey of ten years ago. However, its strength is that it provides a far better sense of mentalities than a more conventional account might have provided. The book is arguably uneven in its exposition – sometimes making sweeping generalisations, at other times carefully setting out a detailed case study – but as an introduction to 19th- and 20th-century Icelandic history it is excellent. Nobody could cover everything but there are a few things which I might have liked to have seen more of and think other foreign readers ought to know more about even if they perhaps stretch the notion of social history. Post-war cultural production, for example, is barely touched on, to the extent that even the iconic Nobel Prize winner Halldór Laxness only gets mentioned in passing. And a greater sense of how Reykjavík has developed spatially and how it has functioned as an urban place would have been insightful. On a smaller scale, Sigurður Gylfi has examined urban housing to good effect in previous work but sadly does not do so that much here. Local sports clubs might also have been discussed; my guess is that they have filled a far more significant feature in shaping people's lives in post-war Reykjavík than non-Icelanders could imagine. Given Sigurður Gylfi's interests, and the recent growth in historical studies of emotion, it would be interesting to see the Icelandic experience considered in the light of this historiography although clearly in a very different kind of book. A broader issue related to the last point, and mentioned in passing at the beginning of this review, concerns the perspectives of Icelandic authors and foreign audiences: as Icelandic historians tend not to study other regions and Iceland tends to get studied in isolation, works such as this can lack the occasional contextualising statements which would assist the foreign reader. As Sigurður Gylfi demonstrates, Iceland was not isolated, so arguably its history requires a bit more contextualisation than it sometimes gets.

The book's apparatus is both helpful and unhelpful. Nine pages of endnotes and two of English-language

bibliography will satisfy (the still fairly well-educated) current, past or future visitor to Iceland but are probably not enough to satisfy the academic historian of other regions of Europe. To get the most out of this book foreign readers will probably need more than the single map of Iceland with five places marked on it; I'll bet many will want to know where the self-castrating Níels Jónsson actually lived.

## Notes

1. Gunnar Karlsson, *The History of Iceland* (Minneapolis, MN, 2000).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *A Historical Dictionary of Iceland*, ed. Guðmundur Hálfðanarson (2nd edition, Lanham, MD, 2008).  
[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Linda Colley, 'Little Englander histories', *London Review of Books*, 32, 14 (22nd July 2010), pp. 12–4.  
[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Sigurður Gylfi, *Menntun, ást og sorg* (Reykjavík, 1997).[Back to \(4\)](#)

### Other reviews:

Reykjavík Grapevine

<http://www.grapevine.is/Home/ReadArticle/Wasteland-Review> [2]

Economist

<http://www.economist.com/node/16213940> [3]

---

**Source URL:** <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1066#comment-0>

### Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/5424>

[2] <http://www.grapevine.is/Home/ReadArticle/Wasteland-Review>

[3] <http://www.economist.com/node/16213940>