

Recent Books about Iceland

Reviewed by Ian Watson

These five intriguing books are all either wholly or partly about Iceland and all have come out over the past year or so. All are available on loan from Reykjavík’s libraries, or can be ordered online or from Bóksala studenta.



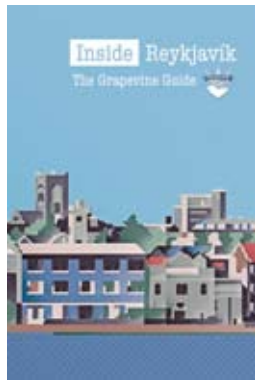
The Ice Museum: In Search of the Lost Land of Thule
By Joanna Kavenna.

The Ice Museum is a kind of travelogue about north European regions, with chapters on Oslo, Shetland, Iceland, northern Norway, Estonia, northwest Greenland, and Svalbard, loosely tied together by the puzzle of trying to identify the place that the ancient explorer Pytheas called Thule. Kavenna also reports on a visit to Munich where she tries to understand the Nazi fascination with the north.

I found Kavenna’s web site on the Internet, and saw that she has also written some fine travel journalism and a novel. But this book, unfortunately, offers little to those who know the north already. The search for Thule is too thin a concept to sustain a book, as she half admits. Nor is The Ice Museum a fully satisfying travel book. Kavenna’s love of commas and run-on sentences makes her prose sputter and cough, and her insights into this jumble of eight very different places are necessarily shallow. Her Iceland write-up rehashes earlier journeys by Burton, Auden, and MacNeice, and she wastes three pages ranting about the Volcano Show in Reykjavik, to which she took a peculiarly strong dislike.

Kavenna lives in London, in an apartment overlooking an expressway, and what she is really chasing is an elusive, half-real landscape of open space and broad ice fields, not the human reality of the countries that she visits. Over and over she uses phrases like “northern dreamworld,” “silence of the plains,” and “purity as a plain white space,” and she admits to an “anti-social impulse.” Recalling part of a winter spent living near Trondheim, Kavenna says that “everyone was quiet and friendly in this snow world [and] they waved from a distance” – a compelling image if you are squeezed into a sweaty subway train in London, but one which turns the people who live in the snow world into stick figures. There are few insightful character sketches in the book, she seems ill at ease with people, she spends a lot of time in bars, and many of the interactions she reports on are anonymous. In Iceland, the only person with whom she reports a conversation is a poet she meets briefly in a pub who claims to write in the tradition of the sagas.

How much better a book this might have been if Kavenna had been able to make readers genuinely feel the paradox of human settlement in the far north: lives lived out every day on the brink of habitability, the fragility of supply and communication, the coexistence of beauty and danger, and the small scale of social institutions. Her Greenland chapter comes closest to managing this, and also has the most interesting cast of characters. But for the most part, I found The Ice Museum hard going.



Inside Reykjavik: The Grapevine Guide
By Bart Cameron

Yes, I have a conflict of interest in reviewing this book, as I have done work for the author, and the Grapevine holds the copyright, and some of its material originally appeared here in this magazine. But hey, I’m not on this newspaper’s staff, and nobody else on the island seems to have reviewed this truly unusual book. Someone had to do it, and because I have slogged away in the travel guidebook industry for nearly 20 years and am supposed to have developed some kind of perspective on it, I gave myself the job.

Inside Reykjavik is not precisely a guidebook to Reykjavik, as it’s way more sophisticated and doesn’t cover hotels, transport or sightseeing. It’s more of a companion to the city. It lists restaurants and clubs, but not their hours or prices. It covers daily life, swimming pools, cafes, food, going out, shopping, music and art, and daytrips. There are more than thirty superb candid photos, selected by Guðmundur Freyr Vigfússon. (I recognised a few people I know; so might you.)

Bart means to be tongue-in-cheek when he says that the book is “doing a commendable and historical sociological service in documenting the phenomenon that is Reykjavik today,” but in fact this is just what the book does. And it’s cutting edge. It’s ahead of the curve. As Bart himself might put it, the book voices “key thoughts” about Iceland that many people think but are “unable to state.” It’s one of the best things to come out in English on Iceland since Amalia Lindal’s Ripples from Iceland.

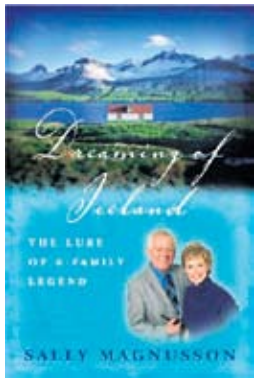
Bart bursts tourist clichés. He shows you how to think beyond weather, volcanoes, and the old story about Iceland and Greenland being misnamed. He explains why you shouldn’t discuss elves, Vikings, or geology with Icelanders. He includes Sólhleimajökull, Hafnarfjörður, and EVE Online in the daytime section. He reviews swimming pools and fast food, and dares to discuss cod worms. Actually, I found the fish section a bit weak, but the other 99% of the book convinces me of the merits of guidebooks written by people who really know a town, not scribblers who fly in one week and fly out the next. For travel guidebook junkies: Inside Reykjavik has similarities to A User’s Guide to Tallinn, put out by students at the Estonian Art Academy several years ago, but it is more practical and less fartsy.

The best thing about this book: This guy Bart Cameron can write. There’s one great sentence after the next. And he’s never boring. Some of the listings will be out of date soon, but this book will always be a monument to Reykjavik in 2006.



The Killer’s Guide to Iceland
By Bane Radcliffe.

The main character in this novel is a Scottish dot-com entrepreneur who sells his company and moves to Iceland to live with an Icelandic geologist he meets by chance in Glasgow. She doesn’t know that he is still haunted by memories of his former girlfriend and business partner. But she too turns out to have a more interesting past than he bargained for. Despite its implausible plot, stereotyped characters, sometimes clumsy dialogue, and misspelled Icelandic, why did I actually enjoy reading The Killer’s Guide and not want my time back? I think it was because of the pleasure of seeing the Reykjavik I know on the pages of a cheesy British novel. Radcliffe did his homework and much of the description of Iceland reads quite true to life. And, having been once new in Iceland myself, it feels a bit flattering to see the experience of newly arrived foreigners here given book-length treatment. Still, I wish I had a hundred crowns per “Heimæy,” “Bíra” and every other misspelled word in the book, and anyone who actually lives here will find some of the story details a bit too much to swallow.

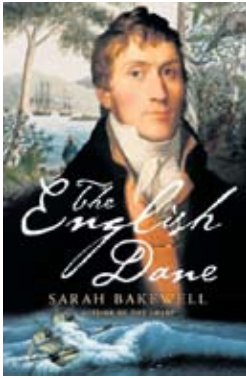


Dreaming of Iceland: The Lure of a Family Legend
By Sally Magnusson

Scottish television anchor Sally Magnusson asked her father, the Icelandic-Scottish translator and television personality Magnus Magnusson, to go with her on a trip to Iceland to visit the places his family came from (mostly around Akureyri

and Húsavík). While not a work of genius, the book that resulted is short and easy to read, Sally Magnusson comes across as a friendly sort of person, and if you have a maiden great-aunt (especially in Britain) who has never been to Iceland but would like to read something about it, this might be the gift for her. And I gotta say one really good thing about this book: Sally got herself a damn fine proofreader. All the Icelandic is spelled absolutely right. There are no Sigridurs or Þorbjorgs in this book.

The Magnussons are not your average Icelandic family. Though born in Iceland, Magnus Magnusson grew up in Scotland where his father was the head of the SIS export office in Edinburgh and later the Icelandic consul there. These are fine folk. They take a taxi from Keflavik to Reykjavik and their cousin built Hótel Borg. Sally and her dad are familiar to millions of British television viewers and they get the red-carpet treatment from everyone they meet. So this is kind of a celebrity confessional book, and one which will mean most to those who know Sally and Magnus from TV. It’s also a book about family history (someone else’s, of course), as well as an example of a rare genre: Icelandic diaspora literature. Sally, to her credit, is smart, and not a snob, and tries to ask critical questions about her Icelandic heritage and her family’s myths, though she doesn’t have room to go into much depth.



The English Dane
By Sarah Bakewell

On 25 June 1809, the Danish governor of Iceland, Frederik Trampe, was arrested in his home on Aðalstræti in Reykjavik, marched under armed guard to the harbour, and imprisoned on the British ship Margaret & Anne. The next day Iceland was proclaimed free and independent of Denmark, and Jørgen Jørgensen, a Dane who had lived for some years in England, was appointed acting governor. Chapters four and five of The English Dane, a fine biography of Jørgen Jørgensen, tell the story of his brief “reign” as protector of Iceland in 1809.

I had only a vague knowledge of the story, and had been under the mistaken impression that Jørgensen was some kind of deranged sailor who acted alone in proclaiming himself sovereign of an unprotected Iceland. In fact, there was a whole group of adventurers involved, Jørgensen was not even necessarily the ringleader, and no less prominent a figure than Sir Joseph Banks was in on the plan. The episode had not only to do with the power vacuum in Iceland after the Danish military was disabled in 1807, but also with British interests in breaking the Danish trade monopoly in Iceland.

Jørgensen lived an eventful life. He was born in Copenhagen in 1780, into a well-connected Danish watchmaking family. He had already sailed around the world on British ships before his Icelandic caper. Afterwards, he spent several unhappy years in Britain, ending in bankruptcy, a theft conviction for pawning his landlady’s mattress, and ultimately, in 1826, transport as a convict to Tasmania. There he worked as a police constable, what we would now call a freelance journalist, and as a hired explorer, mapping trails through the wilderness of western Tasmania.

Jørgensen is a troubled figure, swinging between debt, depression, drink, and gambling on the one hand and great energy, generosity, organisational skill, and prolific writing on the other. He had a talent for messing up his life, and sometimes my stomach churned with embarrassment at the scrapes he got himself into. There are many high points, such as the banquet he attended on Viðey island on 27 June 1809, and many low points, not least his narrow escape from a death sentence.

The book is meticulously researched and referenced, but all the footnotes are kept out of the text and the narrative is pretty lively and fast-moving. A few sections may go into a bit too much detail for the casual reader, but overall this book, which is also available in an Icelandic translation, gets my thumbs up.

The Bell of Iceland *An excerpt*

By Halldór Kiljan Laxness Translated by Keneva Kunz

Chapter One

There was a time, the story goes, when the Icelandic nation possessed but one thing of value. A bell. This bell hung from one gable-end of the Law Council house on the plains of Thingvellir on the Óxará river, suspended from the roof beam where it had been secured. It tolled the judgements of the Council and was a signal for executions. The bell was so old that no one knew its age for certain any longer. But by the time this story begins, the bell had long since developed a crack and the oldest men seemed to recall that it had once rung with a clearer tone. All the same, the old men had a great affection for this bell. In the presence of the magistrate, a lawyer, an executioner and a man who was to be beheaded or a woman to be drowned, the sound of the bell could often be heard, accompanied by the din of the waterfall in Óxará, the breeze slipping down from the nearby mountains Súlur, and the smell of the birch shrubs in the groves of Bláskógar.

Until the year came when the proclamation was borne out to Iceland, that the king’s subjects were to surrender all the copper and brass they possessed, for the purposes of reconstructing Copenhagen after the war, and men were sent off to fetch the ancient bell from the plains of Thingvellir on the river Óxará.

Only a few days after the Council had adjourned, two men rode up trailing pack horses along the path following the western shores of the lake and descending the steep canyon path to cross the river at the shallows of its delta. There they dismounted at the edge of the lava fields near the Law Council building. One of them was pale and fair-haired, with small, close-set eyes. He walked with his elbows protruding out from his sides in a child’s imitation of a gentleman, wearing a now shabby coat several sizes too small for him which had once clothed an aristocrat; the other was a swarthy and ugly pauper.

An old man and his dog making their way from the lava field cross the path of the horsemen.

And who might the two of you be?

The fat man answers: The administrator and representative of His Royal Majesty’s justice I am.

Isn’t that so, mumbled the old man, his voice hoarse as if it had come a long way.

I’ve a letter to prove it said the king’s representative.

I’d expect as much, said the old man. There’ve been so many letters. And many a letter yet to come.

Are you accusing me of lying, you old devil, the king’s representative asked.

At this the old man ventured no closer to the horsemen but sat down instead on the remains of the stone wall encircling the Law Council building to watch them. There was nothing to distinguish him from other old men, a grey beard, red eyes, woollen cap, twisted legs, bluish knuckles clenched around the walking stick upon which he leaned forward, his head swaying slightly back and forth. The dog continued over the fence to sniff the travellers without giving voice, as is the way with sly and vicious dogs.

In the days of old there were no letters, the old man mumbled to himself.

At that the swarthy one, the pale one’s companion, called out, Right you are, friend. The hero Gunnar of Hlíðarendi never had a letter.

Who are you? asked the elderly man.

He’s nothing but a rope thief from Akranes who has been lying in the Slaves’ Hold at the Governor’s residence at Bessastaðir since Easter, answered the king’s representative aiming a brutal kick at the dog.

At this the dark one spoke with a grin that showed more than one white tooth, And he’s the king’s executioner from Bessastaðir. All the dogs pee on him.

The elderly man sitting on what was left of the wall said nothing, nor did his expression reveal anything as he continued to watch them, one eye blinking slightly while his head swayed to and fro.

Now, Jón Hreggviðsson, you wretch, climb up on the roof of the building, said the king’s executioner, and cut the rope holding the bell. It tickles my fancy to think that the day His Majesty has proclaimed that I should put the rope around your neck here on this site there won’t even be a bell to ring.

the cry,

A bone seldom breaks when it’s got no backing, man, as Axlar-Björn said when they were breaking his.

When the king’s executioner had turned the bell so that he could strike it on the inside, with the flagstone for support from the back, it split apart along the crack. The elderly man had sat down on the remains of the wall again. He stared into the distance, his head gently swaying and his sinewy hands grasping his stick tightly.

The executioner had another shot of snuff. The bottoms of Jón Hreggviðsson’s feet could be seen as he perched up on the roof.

D’you plan on riding that roof top all day, or what? called the executioner to the thief.

To this Jón Hreggviðsson responded from the rooftop of the Law Council building

Never shall these strapping arms entwine

A maiden, nor on her sweet couch recline,

Nor on her sweet couch recline

Lest she be plump and rich and kind.

They gathered up the pieces of the bell in a large sack which they then lifted up onto the pack saddle on the opposite side of the sledge hammer and axe and then mounted the horses. The swarthy one drew the pack horses after him. The fair-haired one rode at the head of the train as suited his position.

Farewell then, you old Bláskógar devil, he said. Give the my regards to the minister along with those of the Lord and you can tell him that this was the work of his Majesty’s own administrator and representative Sigurður Snorrason.

Jón Hreggviðsson chanted:

On we march young squires straining,
Gallant lords and ladies uncomplaining
Gallant lords and ladies uncomplaining
Gallant lords and ladies uncomplaining,
With iron bits their stallions scarce restraining.

The train of horses left the same way as it had come, crossing the ford of the Óxará river, climbing the steep path through the canyon across from the river delta and heading southward along the west shore of the lake over the heath of Mosfellsheiði.

About the Author

Halldór Kiljan Laxness was born in 1902 in Reykjavik, the capital of Iceland, but spent his youth in the country. From the age of seventeen on, he travelled and lived abroad, chiefly on the European continent. He was influenced by expressionism and other modern currents in Germany and France. In the mid-twenties he was converted to Catholicism; his spiritual experiences are reflected in several books of an autobiographical nature, chiefly Undir Helgahnúk (Under the Holy Mountain), 1924. In 1927, he published his first important novel, Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmrí (The Great Weaver from Kashmir). Laxness’s religious period did not last long; during a visit to America he became attracted to socialism. Althy-dubókin (The Book of the People), 1929, is evidence of a change toward a socialist outlook. In 1930, Laxness settled in Iceland. Laxness’s main achievement consists of three novel cycles written during the thirties, dealing with the people of Iceland. Þú vinviður hreini, 1931, and Fuglinn í fjörinni, 1932, (both translated as Salka Valka), tell the story of a poor fisher girl; Sjálfstættfolk (Independent People), 1934-35, treats the fortunes of small farmers, whereas the tetralogy Ljós heim-sins (The Light of the World), 1937-40, has as its hero an Icelandic folk poet. Laxness’s later works are frequently historical and influenced by the saga tradition: Íslandsklukkan (The Bell of Iceland), 1943-46, Gerpla (The Happy Warriors), 1952, and Paradisarheimt (Paradise Reclaimed), 1960. Laxness is also the author of the topical and sharply polemical Atómstödin (The Atom Station), 1948. From Nobel Lectures, Literature 1901-1967, Editor Horst Frenz, Elsevier Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 1969