



Recent Books About Iceland

Seven Books Mysteriously Missing from the Icelandic Library System

I often hear of books that I want to look at because they are relevant to issues in Iceland today. Usually, a book like this is too expensive to buy just to read once or skim. Here is a short list of such titles. All deal with important issues where Iceland could surely benefit from outside perspectives.

– **The high cost of free parking**, by Donald C. Shoup (2005). Parking in Reykjavik has become harder and harder. It looks like this author has thought hard about the economic incentives involved.

– **Supermarket wars: the future of global food retailing**, by Andrew Seth and Geoffrey Randall (2005). Supermarkets are so important to Icelandic life and politics that I've been thinking I'd like to learn more about the whole industry.

– **Urban multi-culture in Norway: identity formation among immigrant youth**, by Mette Andersson (2005). I chose this title more or less at random from among the many books on the immigrant experience in mainland Scandinavia that aren't available here.

– **Rebuilding inner city airports**, by Prianka N. Seneviratne (1996). Reykjavik is not alone in struggling with the question of what to do with a downtown airport built at a time when the city was much smaller.

– **A place in the sun: Shetland and oil**, by Jonathan Wills (1991). With Iceland planning to explore for oil in the seas to the northeast of the island, it would be good to listen to a balance of voices about oil's effect on our almost-next-door neighbour, Shetland.

– **Estonia: independence and European integration**, by David Smith (2002). Estonia, another peripheral Nordic country with an economy vaguely similar in size to Iceland's, pegged its currency to the Euro some years before formally joining the European Union. I'm not saying we should necessarily do this too, but I'd like to know more about why it worked (or didn't work) for the Estonians.

– **A farewell to Greenland's wildlife**, by Kjeld Hansen (2002). This book shows how our neighbours, the Greenlanders, are caught in their very own, and somewhat different, marine harvesting debates.

The Iceland Connection

By D. Edward Bradley
(Tarbuton Press, 2006)

I found this novel at Eymundsson. The National Library also has a copy, or it can be ordered from Amazon or from the publisher. It is the third volume of a trilogy, which follows a young British student from his entry to boarding school in the first years of World War II through young adulthood in the 1950s. This volume is principally about his girl troubles, which intensify after a university-sponsored field "expedition" to Iceland. Most of the novel's action takes place in Britain and Canada. The author is a British-Canadian physicist who turned to novel writing after his retirement from academia. He is a contemporary of the main character and there are autobiographical threads in the novel.

The novel has a soap-opera quality to it, with a succession of textbook romances and betrayals. The writing is a bit wooden, and there are some slightly forced plot turns (one character is introduced when his plane crash-lands in the North Atlantic right next to the transatlantic ocean liner carrying two of the other characters). A mystery that drives the plot through the first six chapters is simply dropped and left unresolved. While I can understand why no mainstream publisher published this book, what made it readable for me was the author's evident sincerity, and also his success in creating a certain amount of genuine suspense. I'd say it's suitable for light vacation reading. The climactic event in the story takes place in northern Iceland, more specifically just outside of Dalvík, but the novel has somewhat less to do with Iceland than the title suggests.

Cultures of the World: Iceland

By Jonathan Wilcox and Zawiah Abdul Latif
(Marshall Cavendish, 2007)

Originally published in 1996, this hardcover pictorial reference book was substantially updated and reissued in 2007. At first, it appealed to me because of its low price (US\$27.95 from Amazon), its combination of thorough text and candid photos, and its focus on everyday life in Iceland. Although part of a series pitched to school libraries and teenagers, the language in the book is advanced, and adults wouldn't feel strange receiving it as a gift. The first author teaches Old English at the University of Iowa. The second author appears to work for the publisher, and has also written titles on Lebanon, Lithuania, and Sudan. It is always fascinating to see what image of Iceland gets presented to the world in such books.

Unfortunately, this book is uneven. It has good parts, but does not fully live up to its promise. Though some photos are new, many are noticeably out of date. The book makes plenty of accurate observations about Icelandic society, but there are also a lot of bloopers. So, for example, we are told that all of Iceland's vegetable production is in greenhouses, that "it is unusual to find a dark-haired Icelander," that "whaling traditionally occupied a significant part of Iceland's economy," that orcas are more commonly sighted around Iceland than minke whales, and that all Icelanders "use the same form of address in both formal and informal circumstances." Other statements are years out of date, such as that Icelandic kids start learning Danish two years before they learn English, that "any foreigner who adopts Icelandic citizenship also has to adopt a suitable patronymic," and that Iceland has five universities, all of which are state-funded and tuition-free.

And I do think there could have been fewer spelling errors: we find "Jökulsarion," "Reykjahlio," and the hypercorrect "Vestmannæyjar," as well as multiple transcriptions for Þ and Ð, which is no longer acceptable in the Unicode age. In fairness, it is hard for a single author to write such a reference book without making mistakes, but it is usually possible to catch most of them with good editing and proofreading. It would also have been appropriate if the blond girl on the inside cover photo had posed with an Icelandic sheepdog rather than a Blenheim spaniel. There are worse books to give as souvenir gifts to people who have visited you in Iceland. But even for the price, it would have been nice to see a little more work put into this one.

Memoirs of an Icelandic Bookworm

By Jóna E. Hammer
(Xlibris, 2006)

Born in Akureyri in 1943, Jóna Hammer went to college in Massachusetts and has spent her adult life teaching university students in the United States. Her book, which I found on sale at Eymundsson, has an unusual format: sections of memoir alternate with Icelandic folktales that she has translated into English. The memoirs describe her childhood in Akureyri: family, school, acting, reading, friendships, and summers on a farm. The folktales are very nicely selected, well translated, and helpfully introduced.

From the first page, Hammer is an amusing, cheery, and irreverent companion. For example, I liked her story of how she had to read Halldór Laxness on the sly, as his books were forbidden as dangerously radical in her childhood home. I enjoy memoirs, so I'd be pleased to see Hammer expand and rewrite the recollections in this book. I'd gladly hear more detail about her mother, her friend Ranka, and her summers at Sandvík, and I'd like to learn about her British father and her adjustment to life in America. An expanded version could benefit from a little more active editing. Shorter sentences and fewer parentheses, semicolons and asides wouldn't have to disturb the exuberance of the writing.

Hammer published this book through Xlibris, one of several new American self-publishing services which allow writers to get their work out to readers without a huge initial investment. The first such book I read was Douglas Wells' super memoir of jump-starting the tourist industry on the Estonian islands in the early 1990s, and since then I have really been impressed at the amount of creativity that this new publish-on-demand business model has unleashed. Jóna Hammer perhaps thought of her book rather casually, as amusement for her friends and daughter. But she has created something that many others can enjoy. I hope she finds time to write more in the future.

Text by Ian Watson