

Iceland.

A Cultured People of the Hardy North

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A PART from the important factors of origin and environment, perhaps the most powerful influences that have been at work in moulding a racial type in Iceland have been the spiritual unity and culture in which the generations of the Icelandic people have been linked together from the beginnings of the island's history.

The Icelanders, a thrifty, industrious, and enlightened community, inherited from their Norse ancestry the practical sense which has steered them in good stead in their hard battle for existence with the remorseless powers of nature. Yet, with their stern sense of realities, there is a visionary and romantic strain in the people, partly derived from communion with the solemn grandeur of nature and partly from the Celtic infusion in their blood.

They have retained a contact with their past, and particularly with the past of their golden age, which is unique in the history of European peoples. They speak the language, in more than the literal sense, of the twelfth century, read the books of that age, and write

their poetry in alliterative form. Their speech is the old Norse, the synthetic or inflexional language spoken a thousand years ago by all Scandinavian peoples. Even children can read without difficulty the still popular sagas of the twelfth century.

The composition of the sagas extended probably over one or two centuries, and most of them had been told and re-told for generations before they were first committed to writing. All alike are told with the supreme art of the story-teller who has seen, with

the mind's eye, all he describes, and who can make us see with him and share the interest with which he himself follows the doings of his personages.

Iceland's population of 95,000 souls is thinly spread over a country considerably larger than Scotland or Ireland. There are about nine persons to every ten square miles, but as the interior is a high plateau, covered with barren mountains, glaciers, lava-fields, morasses, and desert wastes, the population is largely concentrated in the lowlands near the coasts. Nowhere, however, is the population



STAR OF THE NORTH

Beauty stamped with exceptional dignity is the heritage of this daughter of Iceland, whose fine bearing suggests that in her veins runs the blood of heroes sung in saga



GLORIOUS HAIR TO ADVANTAGE DRESSED

Very long, fair hair is a chief beauty of the women of Iceland. They wear it hanging in thick plaits, surmounted by a cap of dark cloth with a long tail twisted into semblance of another plait

dense, except in the town of Reykjavik, the capital, which has 18,000 inhabitants—about one-fifth of the whole population.

The Icelander is generally of good stature, and of a strong rather than of a powerful frame. It is rarely that he runs to flesh; on the contrary, he is often lean, wiry, and weathered in his looks. Usually he is light-complexioned and fair-haired, but a combination of dark hair and blue or grey eyes is not uncommon. The men have strong or rugged features; the women are frequently gifted with physical beauty and refinement, but their greatest charm is perhaps a complexion of delectable freshness and delicacy.

Apart from the general use in the country districts of *vadmál*, a kind of

frieze, which is woven on the farms, the dress of the men is that ordinarily worn in Western Europe. The women, however, with few exceptions, are faithful to their national costume. Their ordinary dress (*peysuföt*) consists of a jacket and skirt of dark material, a silver belt, a tasselled cap (*húfa*) and, out of doors, a shawl. The hair, often beautiful in colour and texture and of great profusion and length, is worn in plaits. The festival dress (*upplutur* or *skautbúningur*) is of great antiquity. The *skaut* is a headdress of lawn, bound over the forehead with a band of gold. The bodice and skirt are most richly embroidered.

A few women have adopted "European" costume, which is said to be more comfortable, if less picturesque, than the national dress. The ordinary *peysuföt* is especially becoming when worn as a riding-habit; and to see, as one sometimes does, a company of

ladies on ambling ponies is a vision that is strangely reminiscent of the Middle Ages. The trains of pack-horses one meets occasionally on road or bridle-path strike, too, the medieval note that is so insistent. There are, by the way, no railways in Iceland, and roads are few and hard to travel over in carriage or motor. The ordinary means of transit is on the backs of the sure-footed and friendly native ponies along bridle-tracks, where cairns point the way in winter, and where, here and there, is a *Saeluhús* to offer a welcome shelter to the traveller overtaken by storms.

The principal industries are sheep-farming and fishing, and in these more than sixty-five per cent. of the population

ICELAND & ITS PEOPLE

are directly engaged. The coasts are everywhere rich in bird life, and the waters teem with fish of great economic value. Iceland's mighty falls of water and hot springs are great potential sources of wealth as yet undeveloped, though a woollen mill, near Reykjavik, is operated by water-power, and has limitless supplies of hot water for the processes of manufacture and heating from a neighbouring hot spring.

With so small a population to so large a territory it may be surmised that there is more than enough work for every available pair of hands. The country priest is invariably a farmer also, and, may be, a postmaster. The schoolmaster in vacation lends a hand in harvesting the hay—Iceland's only crop—or pulls at an oar in a fishing-boat. The leading tragedian in the Repertoire Theatre is probably a bank manager when he is off the boards.

Yet Iceland finds a way to enable her most gifted sons to specialise in science, in literature, and in the arts. She has produced, even in periods of national depression, poets—some really great lyric poets—statesmen, and scholars. To-day drama, music, and landscape painting flourish; and Einar Jónsson, of Reykjavik, is one of the greatest living masters in the art of sculpture.

Reykjavik—an unpretentious but agreeable little capital—is picturesquely situated on Faxa Fiord, with green hills about it and a background of mountains and glaciers. The dwelling-houses are generally small and are built of wood with roofs of corrugated iron; the public buildings are of stone or concrete. The social life of the capital, with its Parliament,

university, cathedral, and artistic circles, is charming in its naturalness and obvious sincerity. Manners are simple, and the people most kind and hospitable. Excellent coffee and pastries are offered at all times, and sometimes the national dish, skyr, or curds. In the winter dancing is fashionable, and the young people ever take delight in singing. Many can converse freely in Danish or English, and the general standard of education is high. Iceland is "dry," though it has been found necessary to re-admit Spanish wines.

The first authentic mention of the island is found in a work, "De Mensura Orbis Terrae," by an Irish monk, Dicuil, who relates (in 825) that he had conversed with monks who had visited the island of Thile, or Thule, which may almost certainly be identified with



FAIR MOTHER AND HER FAIRER DAUGHTERS

Warm and close family affection is a trait of all Scandinavian peoples. It is charmingly in evidence in this group of a sweet-faced Icelandic mother with her daughters, on whose countenances candour and confidence are written

ICELAND & ITS PEOPLE

Iceland. Dicuil's story is confirmed by the earliest Icelandic accounts of the Norse settlement in Iceland.

Naddoddur, sailing from Norway to the Faroe Islands in 870, was driven out of his course by storms and carried to a country unknown. He landed on the east coast, and gave to the country the name of Snaeland, or Snowland. The next visitor, Gardar Svavarsson, called it Gardarshólm, or Gardar's Island. Gardar was followed by Flóki of the Ravens, who, finding drift ice in one of the fiords, gave to the island its present name.

Men and Matters of the Sagas

The pioneers in the colonisation of Iceland were two brothers, Ingólfur Arnarson and Hjörleifur Hróðarsson. They were followed from Norway by many Northmen of good family (874-930), and by others from the Norse Kingdoms in Ireland. Of the 312 names of the first settlers mentioned in the Landnámabók or the Book of Lots—the most detailed account of its origins that any people possesses—more than half are those of men from the British Isles. Many bore Celtic names.

In the saga period (930-1030), in which occurred most of the events that are recorded in the wonderful stories of the people (Íslendingasögur), the Icelanders established a Commonwealth that appears to have had its origin in a spontaneous movement among the leading men to provide a legal sanction for the existing local forms of government and to secure a uniform administration of a common code of laws through the island. The local Things, or parliaments, over which the great chiefs presided, became the model for the Althing, or general Court of Parliament, which was established in 930.

Order, Justice, and Prosperity

In the year 965 the whole island was divided into four Quarters or Provinces, each Quarter to have its own Court of Justice at the Althing. The Quarters were again each sub-divided into three jurisdictions (Thingsóknir). Each of the Quarters had its Quarter Thing,

and each of its sub-divisions had its Spring Thing. Suits begun in the Spring Thing might be carried to the Quarter Thing, and thence, if desired, to the Althing.

An important change was made at the same time in the constitution of the Althing. The Lögrjetta, or Court of Law, while retaining its deliberative and executive powers, was shorn of its judicial functions, which were distributed among four Courts representing the four Quarters. A Fifth Court, or Court of Appeal, was established in 1004 by the advice of the great lawyer, Njáll.

From the conclusion of the saga period (1030) down to the beginning of the Sturlunga period (1197), the people enjoyed the blessings of good government and public order. A literary period of extraordinary brilliance opened in 1117-1118, when for the first time the laws were written down in good Icelandic. Ari Thorgilsson (1067-1148) laid the foundation of Icelandic saga with a sketch of the island's history down to 1120. Ari is also believed to have collaborated with Kolskeggur the Sage in the composition of the original Landnámabók already referred to.

Norway's King and Iceland's Pawns

In the Sturlunga period (1197-1262), the Icelandic Commonwealth was rent and torn by the feuds of four great families, including the powerful Sturlungar. The great chiefs were devoid of patriotism, and often conspicuous for their vices. They appealed, when in difficulty, for assistance to King Haakon of Norway, and King Haakon astutely played off one chief against another. From acting as arbitrator in this way Haakon proceeded to appoint this or that chief as Jarl of Iceland, and more than one chief conspired with Haakon to bring Iceland under the rule of the kings of Norway. Ultimately Haakon, growing dissatisfied with the dilatoriness of Jarl Gissur, sent one of his own men to Iceland who compelled Gissur to take action in the interests of his master Haakon.

The Althing that assembled in 1262 agreed to a covenant (Gamli Sáttmáli)

ICELAND & ITS PEOPLE

under which Iceland entered into a personal union with Norway. The King of Norway was to be represented by a Jarl, though, as a matter of fact, there was never again a Jarl in Iceland after the death of Gissur (1268). The Icelanders were to retain their ancient rights and laws. The Quarter Courts and the Court of Appeal were abolished, the judicial attributes of the Althing being transferred to the Lögrjetta, which now consisted of thirty-six members.

Under the Commonwealth the spirit of the Icelandic people had been remarkable for its sturdy independence and its power of initiative. Under the kings of Norway it drooped, though at times it could offer a stout resistance to the oppression of the foreign tax-gatherers to whom the kings, from 1354, leased out the revenues of the island. In 1388 Iceland passed with Norway under the rule of Denmark.

Danish Scorpions for Norwegian Whips

The yoke of Denmark proved to be heavier than had been that of Norway. The rights and privileges of the nation were filched one by one, till at last, in 1798, the last shred of independence disappeared with the abolition of the Althing. In the sixteenth century Lutheranism was imposed upon the island with the aid of Danish battle-ships, and the lands of the Church were transferred to the Danish Crown.

In 1662 the Danish Governor, Admiral Henrik Bjelke, coming with a battleship to Iceland, compelled the Icelanders to swear fealty to King Frederick III. and his dynasty. Two years previously the Danes had given absolute powers to their sovereign, but to impose absolutism on the Icelandic people was again a violation of the Covenant, the one constitutional link between Iceland and Denmark. The Icelanders, overawed by Bjelke, agreed to sign the document presented to them, but only after a clause had been introduced which confirmed them in the possession of their ancient rights and privileges.

Twenty years later (1680) the Danes began to enforce more rigorously the trade monopoly they had established in

Iceland. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the foreign commerce of the island had been in the hands of English traders, who were first attracted to Iceland by its fisheries. Later the competition of German and English merchants improved matters for the Icelanders, but ultimately the Danish kings stepped in and excluded both English and German merchants from the Icelandic trade. The foreign trade of Iceland was placed in the hands of Danish monopolists.

Ruin Wrought by Natural Forces

In 1783 volcanic eruptions were responsible, directly or indirectly, for the loss of 9,000 lives, and for the destruction of 11,000 cows, 27,000 horses, and 186,000 sheep. In the following year further destruction was caused by earthquakes. To such an ebb had the fortunes of the Icelandic people sunk in 1785 that the Danish Government decided to transport the whole surviving population to Denmark, and to re-settle it upon the moors of Jutland; but nothing came of this project.

The Icelanders are a tenacious breed, and deeply attached to their homeland. By the thirties of the nineteenth century they had recovered from the effects of the disasters that had befallen their land in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, and had initiated a national movement to recover their lost political and economic liberty. In spite of opposition from the Danish Governor, the Althing was restored in 1843, though it did not actually meet till 1845. A few years later it was strong enough to resist successfully an attempt on the part of Denmark to reduce the status of Iceland to that of a Danish province.

Union of Iceland and Denmark

From 1850 the political movement was guided by Jón Sigurdsson, one of the wisest statesmen that ever directed the destinies of a nation. Sigurdsson possessed all the qualities of a great political leader. He won the respect and trust of his adversaries, while he commanded in unstinted measure the love and devotion of his friends

ICELAND & ITS PEOPLE

and followers. Sigurdsson's first important success was gained in 1854, when the trade of Iceland was thrown open to the world, and this freedom of trade, won by Sigurdsson, laid the foundation of the great material prosperity that Iceland has since enjoyed.

The second great achievement of the Icelandic statesman was the winning of a Constitution in 1874. This constitution was imperfect from the Icelandic standpoint. An Icelander became Governor of Iceland, but, on the other hand, one of the Danish ministers acted as Minister for Iceland, and advised the King in matters relating to the island. This minister was in practice solely responsible in Icelandic affairs, and many Bills passed by the Althing were vetoed in Copenhagen. By an amendment of the Constitution in 1903 Iceland received a Prime Minister, who was to be an Icelander and to reside in Reykjavik. The Prime Minister was to be responsible to the Althing, and to be assisted by an executive consisting of a Secretary of State and three departmental chiefs.

From 1904 the King never exercised his power of veto over Icelandic Bills.

The relations of Iceland and Denmark, notwithstanding, continued to be strained, till at last, in 1918, a Commission, sitting in Reykjavik, agreed upon the terms of a Treaty of Association between the two nations. The Danes, accepting the Icelandic contention that the Gamli Sáttmáli was a covenant between two equal and free peoples, agreed to acknowledge Iceland as a sovereign and independent State, united with Denmark by one King. Under the new Constitution the King of Iceland acts solely on the advice of his Icelandic ministers, who again are solely responsible to the Althing. The two nations cooperate in certain matters of mutual interest, but Iceland

has declared her neutrality in all wars in which Denmark may become engaged. The Treaty, if not previously renewed, will lapse in the year 1943.

Denmark in the past carried things with a high hand in Iceland, yet it would be difficult to find a parallel in the history of international relationships to the reasonableness and magnanimity that Denmark has displayed in her dealings with the Icelandic people from the days of Jon Sigurdsson onward. Till 1918 Denmark had paid to Iceland for many years interest on the computed value of the lands, etc., in Iceland confiscated to the



THE SOVEREIGN STATE OF ICELAND

Danish Crown centuries ago. The rate of interest was, no doubt, infinitesimal, but the acknowledgment of the debt was an act of justice rare, if not unique, in the history of nations.

The Icelandic people has passed through trials and tribulations, but to-day it may with truth be described as a happy and prosperous community, though, since the Great War, nouveaux riches and a proletariat have, unfortunately, emerged and present a sociological problem that is new and disquieting. The population has almost doubled within the last century, while the public revenue and external trade of the island have shown commensurate progress, the imports in 1918 totalling £2,259,235, and the exports £2,033,050.