



## Iceland Today. H. H. Árnason, 23 síður, ódagsett

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Bjarni Benediktsson – Iceland Today. H. H. Árnason, 23 síður, ódagsett

## Tekið af vef Borgarskjalasafnsins

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## ICELAND TODAY.

H. H. Arnason.

Iceland has been discovered again. Periodically this island on the edge of the Arctic circle is thrown by great events into the public eye, and the outer world learns once more about the neat little civilization of 130,000 people which cultivates its own garden with decorum and considerable skill. Eighteenth century English poets wrote with enthusiasm about the achievements of the old Icelandic poets and prose writers. During the Napoleonic wars the island became something of a cause celebre in England's relations with Denmark and almost passed under the British flag. The Romantic Revival of the 19th century encompassed the Icelandic Sagas and led to considerable serious research by German, English, and Scandinavian scholars on the classic literature of Iceland. It also brought many English and American travellers to the country, and each independently was amazed not by any material progress but by the grim maintenance of a high level of culture in the face of centuries of adversity.

So these travellers and those who visited the country before and after the last World War continued to rediscover the Sagas and Eddic poems, the fact that even the most poverty-stricken farmers were not only literate but often well-read in modern and foreign as well as ancient literature. Each wrote his own account, fairly well in a standard pattern, praising justifiably the intellectual accomplishments of the people, while describing sometimes sympathetically, sometimes with heavy humor the physical misery that resulted from natural disasters and centuries of foreign domination.



Now Iceland has been rediscovered, but the discoverers are no 19th century Romantics making a literary pilgrimage. They are thousands of ordinary American boys, most of whom on their arrival knew nothing about the history or achievements of this outpost they had been sent to defend. And it is their opinions that are forming those of millions of other Americans at home.

What are these opinions? Needless to say they are not all favorable, and they are certainly not arrived at by any process of objective analysis. One can scarcely expect a soldier, isolated in a Nissen hut on a barren lava field, waiting tensely for something to happen, to be objective. He is lonely, often bored and on edge; and little things can very easily be magnified in his eyes. Missing his own family, he may easily be resentful of the peaceful Icelandic family life which he can observe but not share. So many such comments have been made as: "The Icelanders don't like us. They scowl at us on the streets. They stare at us angrily out of their windows. They won't invite us into their homes. They hide their women from us as though we were thugs. They overcharge us and rob us in the stores."

Shortly after the troops arrived and were engaged in the tremendous task of settling in, a great windstorm swept the island. Motion pictures of this were the first glimpse millions of Americans had of Iceland, with the result that even if they do not visualize the land as an Arctic waste, they do believe its weather to be one continuous storm.

The fact that most of the American troops' first impressions have long since been corrected is evidenced by the number of soldiers who now have good Icelandic friends, the number who leave the country with regret and the firm determination to come back and visit it in peace time.



The first impressions were the natural ones always involved in the meeting of peoples with different national characteristics and backgrounds, accentuated here by the natural difficulties of the particular situation. But it was not long before the Americans, particularly in the country districts, had seen many instances of the Icelander's true hospitality, his willingness to help in any emergency. He learned that the Icelander's grim exterior was very much a surface characteristic, arising from the simple fact that his centuries of isolation had made him shy and a little ill at ease in the presence of strangers. The Icelander stares at the stranger for the simple reason that he is curious about him and interested in him. When he sits at the window and looks out it is, just as in any small town or community, because he knows most of the people he sees and is interested in what they are doing. As one soldier put it, "The only difference between this place and my home town is that up here they don't hide behind the curtains."

The soldiers have finally realized that discrepancies in amounts received in stores arise from the fact that Iceland is on the metric system. The more understanding know that the high cost of living is a natural consequence of the unusual amount of spending money in the country; and that the Icelanders are much more affected by the condition than the Americans, and are doing everything to try to prevent rampant inflation.

True, the Icelandic weather is changeable, often stormy, but it is also often incredibly beautiful; and the wonder is, considering the geographical location of Iceland, that it is not infinitely worse. While to a South Carolinian the weather might seem severe, to anyone used to Minnesota winters it is positively balmy. While many Americans may object to the weather's changeability, they should remember the Icelander who, after a



summer in New York, came back complaining bitterly about American weather. "Always the same, day in and day out!"

As time has progressed many Americans have gone on to rediscover, as so many travellers have before them, the great cultural accomplishments of the Icelanders; and once more, as though it had never been done before, we are hearing the stock praise of the Icelandic Sagas, the erudite farmer, the fisherman with several volumes of verse to his credit; we are learning that Leifur Eiriksson, the Icelander, discovered America. But this view of Iceland is little more complete today than the first impressions of the soldiers. We can still look with wonder on the great past achievements that this little nation has to its credit, but we must realize that the Iceland of 1943 is in no sense the Iceland of 1873 - or even of 1918. Iceland today is a modern nation where one may live as comfortably, as enjoyably, and intellectually as fully as anywhere in the world.

How has this been achieved? Even 25 years ago Iceland had no roads, no industry, few schools; and life in the outlying districts was lived much as it had been for hundreds of years. Many English and Americans are under the impression that the rapid modernization of the country is a result of their presence here. However, while no one can deny that the presence in the country of great numbers of foreign troops has influenced ideas and customs, the changes that the occupation has wrought represent only one phase of the process of change that has been going on for at least 25 years.

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The great impetus to the building of a modern culture, the improvement of all phases of living conditions was given in large degree in 1918 by the Union Laws wherein Denmark recognized Iceland's independence. This event led naturally to a resurgence of the national spirit whose effects are everywhere apparent today.



In the last 25 years Iceland has modernized its entire communication system, has developed many new industries that aim at a greater and greater degree of self-sufficiency, has built fine modern schools in every part of the country as well as a University as efficiently designed as any to be found. Natural resources such as the hot water springs have been put to work in a great system of greenhouses where practically anything can be grown, and in the heating not only of many single buildings in different districts but currently of the entire city of Reykjavik. Formerly a country of isolated farms, the modern tendency has been towards urbanization; and more and more Iceland has come to realize that in its fishing grounds, the richest in the world, lies its principal hope of future prosperity.

In the last 25 years Iceland, whose cultural tradition had for a thousand years been expressed through literature, has developed a fine school of landscape painters. The theater, always formerly restricted by the scattered nature of the population, is now flourishing, and the same is true of music. Fine choral societies abound throughout the island and Reykjavik has its own symphony orchestra. How rapidly the arts other than literature have progressed in recent times is apparent in the very limitations that still exist. The theatrical groups present their productions to continually packed audiences in a small, inadequate playhouse while a National Theater is in process of construction. The concerts of the choruses or orchestra must be presented in churches or in motion picture houses at hours when movies are not being shown -- either very early or very late. The excellent collection of Icelandic antiquities is crowded into the attic of the National Library. Until the opening of a temporary exhibition hall by the artists' society this spring, painters and sculptors had literally no place to hold their shows. To study Icelandic painting in the absence of a National Museum one must go from house to house.



All of these lacks are symptoms of the way in which the communal arts have sprung up over night, and Icelanders are so acutely aware of them that steps are under way to correct them all. It is only a matter of relatively brief time before Iceland has its own Symphony Hall, its National Gallery, as well as its National Theater.

Already the general enthusiasm for the arts has manifested itself in many ways. There are few places where one finds such thorough and intelligent governmental support of the poets and painters and writers and musicians. Ever since the Icelandic Althing or Parliament first gained control of the country's finances through the Constitution granted in 1874, stipends have been voted to individual writers. Since the beginning of the 20th century the most outstanding artists have been put on a more or less permanent salary, while special grants are also made yearly to others. Particular grants have been given to painters and musicians for study abroad. Under the system now used, the money for cultural advancement is voted in a lump sum and divided among the executives of the four branches of writing, painting and sculpture, music, and drama of the Artists' Society, which then decides the individual allotments. The Advisory Educational Council of the Government also administers a considerable fund for the purchase of contemporary Icelandic works of art, of which the Government already owns some 300.

One delightful detail in the program might be noted particularly. When modified prohibition was adopted in Iceland it was decided that fines for infringement of the prohibition laws should constitute a fund known as the Cultural Fund to promote cultural projects such as the purchase of works of art, the promotion of national research, or the publication of worthwhile books at low cost.

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Added to all this there is a popular public support of the arts such as can scarcely be found in any other country. That the Icelanders are the most literate people in the world is sufficiently well known. In proportion to population they produce fantastically more books and articles than any other nation. There are so many newspapers in Reykjavik, a town of 40,000, that a press conference takes on the character of one at the White House. Throughout Iceland there are over 70 book dealers. In Reykjavik alone there are at least 14 thriving book shops, whose shelves are thronged not only with Icelandic works but with English, French, German, Danish, and now particularly with American books and magazines - all of which the multilingual Icelanders consume avidly.

The Icelanders are justifiably annoyed by the too prevalent belief abroad that all of their country's literary achievements are concentrated in the Saga Age. Actually they have a continuous and considerable literature extending from that time to the present and right now there is in Iceland what could be called a literary renaissance. The great tradition of lyric poetry is carried on by such men as David Stefánsson, while the Icelandic delight in poetic craftsmanship and ironic humor was never better exemplified than by the young Reykjavik poet, Tomas Gudmundsson. In the more recent medium of the novel a remarkable contribution has been made by such writers as Gudmundur Hagalin, Gunnar Gunnarsson, Gudmundur Kamban, Kristmann Gudmundsson, and Halldór Kiljan Laxness. In bitterly felt realism expressed in superb prose the novels of Laxness equal the best works of Hemingway and William Faulkner. A new sort of Icelandic literary man has appeared in the person of Professor Sigurdur Nordal. A great scholar of classic Icelandic literature and history, he is as well master of a fine prose style and a critic of profound discernment. His Islensk Menning (Icelandic Culture), the first volume of which has recently



appeared, may when it is completed reveal him as a philosopher of history of the stature of Toynbee.

Not only is the Icelander intensely interested in his own literature, but he is well aware of the trends of other countries. Translating is a major profession in this country, and newspapers and magazines carry in virtually every issue translations from English, American, and Scandinavian sources. Dozens of translated books appear every year, and while these ~~too often include ephemeral best-sellers,~~ there is also a continuous stream of classic and modern literature, history, current affairs, and criticism from other lands. Perhaps the most popular American novelist of the moment is John Steinbeck, most of <sup>w</sup>hose works have been or are being translated. The war has given the Icelanders an increasing knowledge of and interest in American literature and general culture - of which they, like so many Europeans, formerly had little more knowledge than the distorted impressions they gained from the movies. Bookstores are now literally filled with American books and magazines, and whenever a new shipment arrives a scene ensues reminiscent of a bargain basement at Gimbels.

Any concert, even when held after the movie at 11.30 P. M., in one of the Motion Picture Houses, is always sold out far in advance. But even more interesting is the popular response to the arts developed more recently, such as theater, painting, sculpture, and architecture.

Theater is an art which cannot develop without cities. In the long centuries when Iceland was a collection of isolated farms, there could be prose and poetry but no real dramatic writing simply because it was too difficult to collect any considerable audiences. With the growth of larger towns during the last half century interest and enthusiasm for drama and acting have developed in great degree. There has not yet been time to produce a considerable dramatic literature, but many plays have been translated, and Icelandic authors have experimented with virtually every



form of drama from musical comedies to tragedy. First-rate actors such as the Borg sisters and L arus P alsson have done much to promote the public enthusiasm, and the latter, as teacher, actor-manager, producer, and advisor to the State Radio on drama, has kept Iceland abreast of modern experiments in American and English drama, as well as including some of his own. He has been particularly successful in the introduction of radio drama, one of his most successful efforts this year having been Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men.

There can be no doubt about the future of the theater in Iceland, and there can be no doubt that the imagination and literary fertility of the Icelanders will result in important contributions to the drama of the world. In the theater as in all the other arts here, the fundamental factor is the great public receptiveness and enthusiasm. This enthusiasm has already manifested itself over a long period in the field of music. While original compositions are a relatively new thing, love of music is innate in the Icelander. Singing in the home and in choral groups has existed far back into history. In modern times Iceland has produced musicians of such international reputation as the composer-pianist, Sveinbj rn Sveinbj rnsson and the singer, Maria Markan. In Iceland today there are such excellent composers, thoroughly trained in European conservatories, as P all Is lffsson, Bj rgvin Gu mundsson, Hallgrimur Helgason, and many others. Probably the most impressive feature of Icelandic music today is the splendid choral groups that exist all over the country. These will bear comparison with any European or American choral societies and deserve a much wider reputation than their isolated position has given them.

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Again, in the fields of painting, sculpture, and architecture - in the visual arts - Iceland presents a unique and fascinating study. Until modern times there was no real architecture in the country principally because there were no adequate building materials. Farm houses were made of sod on a timber frame, and the timber had to be imported to this relatively treeless land. This type of architecture had to be renewed virtually every generation with the result that Iceland has few old buildings. In contemporary times architects, like all other professional men, began to be trained abroad, in Denmark and Germany, and brought back with them the most modern ideas in construction and design. Using the economical material of reinforced concrete they have in 25 years turned Reykjavik into a city with as high a proportion of truly modern houses as any in the world. A city-planning commission has worked energetically and intelligently towards a solution of traffic congestion in Reykjavik, and controls new construction with a well-conceived project for the enlargement of the city. The downtown area of Reykjavik is at the present badly crowded. Throngs of Icelanders, soldiers, and foreign sailors fill the narrow sidewalks, while the streets are packed with the American cars which have been imported so plentifully as well as with military vehicles. While the high cost of construction prevents much immediate remedy for the situation, a complete plan for clarifying and rebuilding the downtown area is already in existence, merely awaiting the right time to be put into effect.

While much needs yet to be done in the business section, the great achievements of the Icelandic architects are everywhere apparent in the homes. These are as modern as any American one. The Icelander displays what is commonly thought of as an American enthusiasm for elaborate kitchens and bathrooms, combined with a more European love of elegant entrance halls and stairways. Large casement windows make the most of the light on the short winter days.



Architects are increasingly experimenting with new stucco combinations, involving vari-colored stones to relieve the grey monotony that characterized the earlier concrete structures. Increasingly, well-kept gardens have become a feature of the newer houses; separated by neat concrete walls, and including not only the greenest lawns imaginable, but all the colorful arrays of flowers that Icelandic ingenuity has made to grow, and carefully nurtured trees, many of which in size and profusion effectively give the lie to the stories about Iceland's complete treelessness.

On this point, incidentally, it is always necessary to say a word. There are few trees of any size in Iceland. Indiscriminate cutting down in former times and subsequent erosion destroyed the forests that once were here. However, there is absolutely no reason why trees cannot grow here. The hardy Icelandic birch has survived all vicissitudes, and an intelligent program of reforestation has taught people to experiment with other species and to protect their trees from the winds and animals. Progress is such that another generation will inevitably have seen considerable change in the Icelandic landscape. On the other hand it may be pointed out that much of the stark grandeur, the sense of illimitable distances in the Icelandic landscape arise from its relative treelessness. The point of view of the Icelfander on this score was well expressed by the one who returned from Norway and was asked his opinion of Norwegian scenery. His reply was: "Couldn't see a thing. There were trees everywhere getting in the way of the landscape."

The profusion of flowers is another unexpected element in the Icelandic scene. While the summer days can be incredibly beautiful and colorful in their light effects, Iceland is naturally subject to long periods of grey and stormy weather. It is perhaps in reaction to this that the Icelanders have so enthusiastically planted all sorts of gay and colorful flowers



that will grow not only in their gardens but in the public squares. The many, hot-water-heated Icelandic greenhouses concentrate on growing not only every conceivable fruit and vegetable but also every imaginable flower. And because these are something which they have learned to know and love recently the Icelanders treat flowers with respect and will spend what we might consider disproportionate sums to have them around on all occasions.

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They decorate the home as they might decorate an altar, and quite understandably, because the home is the altar of the Icelander's entire existence. Much of the building of the last generation has resulted from the deep desire for a permanent home and a willingness to pay extraordinary sums to achieve it. When an Icelander settles down in his own home, there is always involved a very great feeling of permanence. This is seen in his purchase of furniture that will last, furniture either beautifully hand made in the excellent native furniture shops or imported regardless of expense from England and the continent. While the older generation goes in for period styles in the American manner, the younger naturally prefers modern designs, many based on the English and Danish interpretations of the style, in dark glossy woods and dark, well-woven textiles.

Newer American furniture designs involving lighter woods and more colorful textiles, scaled to the size of the rooms, have just begun to appear, and will certainly have a considerable effect. However, the American conception of house furnishings as something to be changed at fairly frequent intervals can catch on here only if the present momentary prosperity is to continue.

One factor which relates the Icelandic home of today more to the American home of the last generation is the profusion of paintings on the walls. The most recent European and American tendencies in interior



design, with their concentration on large, clear cut units and color areas, have increasingly prevented the individual from the owning and hanging of any quantity of paintings; and because of their discouragement of the purchase of works of art may even have had an unfortunate effect on the advance of art. The Icelander has no such inhibitions. He covers his walls with paintings, collects them with the enthusiasm of a minor Mellon or Frick, and loves to have them all around him. Thus, the decorative scheme of the ordinary Icelandic home might not accord with the most advanced American standards, but it has the virtue that it has not stood in the way of the free development of contemporary Icelandic painting.

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The history of painting and sculpture in Iceland can be written almost entirely within the last generation. While excellent craft work existed throughout Icelandic history, again a lack of a concerted public as well as of materials and the isolation from outside influences prevented the growth of anything that could be called an Icelandic tradition until within the last 50 years. But now, in proportion to population, Iceland has as rich a tradition of painting as any in the world, all achieved in one generation. This tradition, because it is in very process of formation, is naturally an essentially representational one, and the interest of both the artist and the spectator is principally in the subject matter. That such should be the case is natural not only because it normally is at the beginning of modern artistic traditions, but also more particularly because the Icelanders have a knowledge of and love of their grand and beautiful country that has to be experienced to be believed. They have an intimate knowledge of every hill, every valley, every lava field, not only because they have travelled over so much of the land, but because there is scarcely a spot that does not have literary associations in Icelandic Saga and Poetry.



Thus, when an Icelander looks at a landscape painting, the subject has more than an ordinary significance to him and it is more than ordinarily difficult for him to take liberties with that subject. Despite this fact, the adaptability and interest in new ideas of the Icelanders have resulted in the introduction of virtually every form of abstraction and expression. Asgrimur Jónsson, dean of Icelandic painters has moved logically from representation to increasing emphasis on the structure of nature, because he, like Cezanne, has looked at nature long and honestly enough to see through the surface details. It must also be remembered that all Icelandic painters have received at least some of their training abroad, in Denmark, Sweden, France, Germany, or Italy, and so are by no means isolated from the trends of contemporary European art. Painters like Thorvaldur Skúlason, Gunnlaugur Blöndal, Gunnlaugur Scheving, and others have brought back many forms of European abstraction with them. Influences from Maillol to Mestrovic can be seen in the sculptures of Asmundur Sveinsson.

Expression of ideas comes naturally to Icelandic art, because of the strongly expressive imagination of the people. The first great Icelandic sculptor, Einar Jónsson, to whose works the Icelandic government has dedicated an entire museum, reveals in his reinterpretation of themes from Icelandic story and folklore a consciousness of the literary tradition of his people and an ability to transpose that tradition into sculptures which in their romantic expressiveness can be called at times surrealist.

Icelandic art today is very much subject to unrelated and at times conflicting influences. What directions it will take in the future is difficult to say, although an effective compromise between form and subject matter can already be seen in the works of Jón Thorleifsson, and some indication of the force of the Icelandic environment may be seen in the career of the painter, Finnur Jónsson. Trained in Germany between 1920 and



1925, a member of the Sturm group that included Kandinsky, Bauer, and many other leaders of German abstraction and expression, he has since his return to Iceland moved more and more towards a controlled but nevertheless realistic rendition of the local scene - one of the few artists in history who began as extreme abstractionist and ended as a representationalist.

But whatever the directions of Icelandic art there can be no doubt that it has a future. It is nurtured not only by the fortunate appearance of a disproportionate number of competent artists and intelligent government support but again, as in the other arts by the intense public appreciation and enjoyment. Everyone not only buys paintings and has them around him continually, but everyone is in greater or less degree an art critic. While the whole development is too new for the appearance of professional art critics and historians, there is scarcely an Icelander who will not show the paintings in his home at the slightest provocation and discuss them and the merits of their authors with heat and often considerable insight. The whole relation of the artist and the community in Iceland is medieval in its intimacy. The smallness and closely-knit character of the civilization permits every spectator to be on personal terms with every artist, and permits every artist to express the ideas of the community with a knowledge which comes of direct association. In fact Iceland is one of the few places in the world where art is thriving as it did in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance - because it is an integral part of the everyday life of the individual.

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Art is a part of the home, and it is in the home life that the truest picture of the permanent values of Icelandic civilization can be observed. During the long centuries when Iceland was only a series of isolated farm-houses the cultural life of the nation centered about the home. Each home had to be self-sufficient and, during the nation's dark ages, the repository and guardian of its literary and educational traditions.



Today, even in the midst of the great changes the country is undergoing this feeling for the home remains something deeply-rooted and eternal. The social life of the Icelander revolves essentially around his home. Women, even in the wealthiest circles, are taught the homely virtues, and it is not at all unusual to see the attractive, smart, and extremely liberated daughters of the household modestly assuming the responsibility for all the minor details of a large entertainment.

The position of women in Iceland has been a subject of some controversy. Americans here often do not feel that Icelandic women are accorded the courtesies which their attractiveness merits. And one point on which all Americans here agree is that Iceland has the highest proportion of attractive and even beautiful women of any country they have been in. Icelandic men do not cluster about a lovely woman. They do not normally rise when a woman enters the room. But what the visitors do not realize is that in Iceland women have for centuries been accorded an intellectual equality which is extremely rare even in America today.

Also, there has been some misunderstanding because the Icelander is diffident about inviting soldiers to his home. What the troops often do not know is that the Icelander does not invite anyone to his home unless he has become fairly well acquainted with him and really likes him. He is simply incapable, through custom and desire, of throwing his home open to large numbers of strangers and semi-strangers. But what many soldiers have also found out is that once they have been invited to an Icelandic house, accepted into the household, that house is always open to them. They are at liberty to drop in whenever they wish, and if they do not it will even be resented.

Hospitality is in fact one of the major Icelandic virtues. For centuries the traveller went from farmhouse to farmhouse. At each one



everything that the farm could offer was set before him, and he would have insulted his host beyond all measure if he had offered to pay. Today as in former times the first invitation to an Icelandic home is normally to coffee. Coffee is truly the national drink. Every afternoon all effort throughout the country stops while business men, laborers, farmers, and housewives have their coffee. Coffee in the home is no simple meal. It is accompanied by delectable, paper-thin pancakes filled with whip cream and jam, every sort of cake and open sandwich. Nowadays, when there are often scarcities in tradition foods, the housewife will go to endless effort and expense to ensure that the meal is presented in the proper and accustomed style. The invitation to the home is always formal in the first instance and the host prepares for the visit with untiring zeal. Formality and the observation of the amenities form the framework of Icelandic entertaining. A dinner invitation always means black tie and a ball necessitates tails. At these affairs the ladies appear in gowns as up to the moment as anything to be seen in New York or London. An American correspondent, primed with all the customary misapprehension about Iceland, was taken to the Press Ball the evening after his arrival. He spent the evening trying not to feel too shabby and out of place in his dinner jacket and muttering defensively, "Well, it's good enough for the Stork Club."

An Icelandic dinner is always an impressive spectacle. The food is delicious and varied often to the point of the exotic. A sweet cream or fruit soup may be followed by Icelandic salmon in heavy cream sauce, the staple mutton or lamb cooked and spiced in many different ways, potatoes browned in a sugar sauce, on occasion ptarmigan with a wonderful wine sauce. For dessert there is often



skyr, a form of whipped soured cream eaten with cream and sugar, or one of the infinite and delectable desserts the Icelanders can make with prunes. For many years the dried prune was the only fruit that could be obtained, and the native ingenuity has been able to turn it into an incredible number of tasty dishes.

A party will normally include a cold supper or smorgasbord with a thousand different dishes, many acquired from Scandinavian countries, but also many traditional Icelandic dishes. The Icelandic party always begins slowly and most formally. The men gather in one room, the ladies in another, and solemnly toast one another. Every Icelandic drink is a toast, and all must participate in each toast, something that has been the ruin of many an innocent stranger. Within a relatively short time the atmosphere of formalism is broken down and the party is under way, often to last until dawn the next day. The winter season in Reykjavik is, in fact, a series of balls and parties which would - and have - completely broken down a hardened New York night club habitue.

These balls begin mildly enough with foregatherings of people from different parts of the country, all of whom have strong sectional loyalties, accelerate with various organizational and professional affairs, and end triumphantly with one called the "Cocktail Ball", whose name is its only excuse. They are interlarded with the private house parties, of which every prominent citizen has one or several during the season, and which are frequently explained by some anniversary or other. The use of an anniversary or birthday as an excuse for a party has a most logical basis, since the Icelandic modified prohibition law makes special exception for such events.



Also must be remembered the extremely active musical and theatrical season, whose intensity makes one always pause to recall and wonder that Reykjavik is only a city of 40,000 people. And nothing could be more indicative of the Icelandic personality than the type of play or revue which is most popular.

While there has been much serious discussion about the current American and English influence and its effect on Icelandic culture; while newspapers, partially from actual concern, partially for political reasons often deal with this theme and on such details of it as Icelandic girls going about with American soldiers, the most popular musical comedy of the last season dealt broadly and ribaldly with all the problems in modern Reykjavik incidental to the occupation. It featured an American naval officer and nurse, an Icelandic boy with many problems, not the least of which was the housing shortage, and various Icelandic girls who like to dance with Officers at the Hotel Borg. The whole theme was a sort of Icelandic version of "The Doughgirls", and the loud and continuous laughter that greeted all the situations was sufficient evidence of the Icelandic ability to see the irony and lighter side of problems which may be of serious national significance. In this the Icelanders are perhaps closer to the Americans than to anyone else. In fact, musicals such as this must inevitably remind us of such American classics as "Of Thee I Sing" in their ironic and cynical treatment of national affairs.

It is difficult for the stranger to realize and understand the strong sense of irony that underlies the serious exterior of the Icelander. To prove its existence one has only to look at the great proportion of literature in this form. It is manifested in the



general attitude towards the extremely complicated local politics, the delight in debunking pompously distinguished celebrities. It is part of his very great capacity for the enjoyment of life, his love of the arts, of good parties, of every kind of sport from skiing to gymnastics - all of which are followed assiduously the year round.

He has a lighter side, an ability to scoff at pretence, an innate passion for the arts, but he is in no sense merely a cynic or an aesthete. American doctors and scientists in the army have learned to respect Icelandic achievements in their fields, as Icelandic professional men have been quick and eager to exchange opinions with their American confreres now they are given the opportunity. While the Icelandic tradition of independence and individuality - characteristics that go back to Norse-Irish ancestors - make the Icelander resentful of being told things, particularly by foreigners, he is incredibly adaptable and quick to seize on new techniques and ideas and turn them to his own uses. During the last 25 years the Icelanders have gone out into the world and sought everywhere for ideas that would help them to bring their country up to date. The government has encouraged and assisted all possible students to complete their studies abroad. Formerly most of these went to Denmark, but now there are hundreds of Icelandic students in American Universities and technical schools. The opportunity to study the mechanical achievements of the Americans, as displayed by the activities of the troops, has been turned to the best advantage.

The prosperity and opportunity for gain that have come with the allied occupation have shown the Icelander to be a shrewd business man, capable of holding his own with anyone. He learned to trade shrewdly; just as the American Yankee did, from centuries of poverty



and even privation; and today, realizing fully that the present boom times will not last very long, he is putting his experience to the best use; spending freely and enjoying his prosperity while it is here, but preparing carefully for whatever may come in the future.

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The Icelander realizes to the full extent the changes that are encompassing the world and him with it. He knows, no matter how nostalgic he may feel for the past, that Iceland will never be the same again, as no place in the world will be the same. Iceland can never return to her former state of seclusion.

When the troops first came, the Icelanders, who had no army and no military history, were afraid and ill at ease. Not knowing exactly what they thought, they protected themselves as the residents of a small mid-western American town would try to protect themselves from the overpowering influence of a tremendous nearby military camp. They at first avoided contact with the troops as much as possible, tried to shield their daughters from associations with them. They thought and talked a great deal about the possible effects of the occupation on the treasured Icelandic culture and language. But as time went on they began to realize many things.

They realized that the military forces were determined at all costs to keep order, to keep incidents at a minimum; that the command leaned over backwards to invite and defer to Icelandic opinion; that they were gaining great advantages from the occupation - that it truly was a friendly occupation. As they gained a better perspective on the war they understood better the necessity of the occupation, how nearly the troops had been German Nazis rather than friendly allies. And <sup>their</sup> ~~his~~ acquaintance with Denmark and Norway was sufficient to make ~~him~~ <sup>them</sup> realize what that would have meant.



On the other hand, as time went on, the Icelander's natural curiosity made him more and more interested in the soldiers as individuals, and in the circumstances of their lives. He began to understand the hardships they must undergo, living under rigorous conditions, far from their homes and families, ever on the alert to protect this precious outpost. He grew more and more to sympathize with their hardships, to see them as men and individuals, not merely as foreign soldiers; and at the same time to be apprehensive of their opinion of him. He learned that the barriers he had at first erected in simple self-defense had often been misinterpreted and resented as indicative of actual antagonism; and more and more he has begun to make the opening gestures of friendship, difficult though that is for his shy and diffident nature. Gradually, by natural processes, English speaking Icelanders have formed friendships among the soldiers, and both have learned much from each other. In country districts even non-Icelandic speaking soldiers and non-English speaking Icelanders have learned in some wonderful fashion to communicate and through mutual help and assistance have formed fast and enduring friendships.

The Icelander has realized that he is able to live his own life without interference, despite the presence of great numbers of foreign troops in the country. In fact, he has become so casually used to their presence on the streets and in the shops, that there is little doubt that many Icelanders will feel a sense of loss when they are gone. Liking excitement and a sense of things happening, they have now become so used to the feeling of Reykjavik and other towns as cosmopolitan centers, filled with a constantly changing crowd of strange and interesting people, that they know it will be hard to adjust themselves after the troops have gone.



There are very few Icelanders who do not now realize that Icelandic culture, which has survived 600 years of foreign domination, which has withstood famine, plague, earthquake, and every ill that man is subject to, is too strong a plant to do anything but thrive and flourish on influences from abroad.