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Loftur Bjarnason

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The Land of Song and Saga*

LOFTUR BJARNASON**

Perhaps you will allow me to introduce my subject with a quotation from *Hávamál*: *The Sayings of the High One,* that quintessence of wisdom as expressed by our Viking forefathers over 1,000 years ago.

Deyr fé. Deyja frændr.
Deyr sjálfr et sama,
En orđstýrr deyr aldrei
Hveim sér gođan getr

Deyr fé. Deyja frændr.
Deyr sjálfr et sama
Einn veit ek sem aldregi deyr
Dómr um dauđan hvern

Rather freely translated into English and with no effort made to reproduce the poetic quality of the original, these verses mean:

Cattle die. Kinsmen pass away.
We all die in our time
But the memory of a man lives on
Provided that memory is good

Cattle die. Kinsmen pass away
We all die in the course of time
One thing only lives forever
The judgment passed on a man at his death.

If one will reflect for a moment on the deeper meaning of these few lines—and these are only eight out of several hundred of Hávamál—I think he will reject the Hollywood

*A Brigham Young University forum address given on July 25, 1968.
**Dr. Bjarnason, professor of literature at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, was visiting professor at BYU's Summer School 1968. He is a recognized authority in Scandinavian languages and literature and has published an anthology of Icelandic literature as well as articles in other scholarly journals.

image of the Viking, our Scandinavian ancestor as a rather brawny but brainless savage, dressed in wolf or bearskins, wandering aimlessly and stupidly around looking for someone to run his spear into. I suggest, indeed, that these few lines—and I emphasize again that they represent only an infinitesimal portion of the complete poem—have an ethical, almost a religious message for us today, one that we in the second half of the twentieth century can take to heart and use to bring greater significance and purpose to our lives. I propose to return to this message a little later, but first let me explain how it came about that this and other great poems of our pagan ancestors happened to be preserved and handed down to posterity.

As you know, Charlemagne, the king of the Franks, was crowned emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in Rome on Christmas day in the year 800. He thus became ruler of an area embracing not only modern France but also portions of Spain, Italy, Switzerland, Austria, and Germany—a greater area than anyone in Western Europe had ruled since the downfall of the Roman Empire. His name was well known and respected as far away as Kiev in Russia and Bagdad in the Middle East. The Russian king eagerly sought an alliance in marriage with one of the daughters of Charlemagne, and Harun al Rashid, the almost legendary potentate of the Near East, sent ambassadors and emissaries to the court of the great Frankish king. He was, indeed, a world-renowned figure.

Whether inspired by the success of Charlemagne, as some historians assert, or whether goaded to it by the taunts of a beautiful Swedish girl whose hand he sought in marriage, a young Norwegian princeling by the name of Harald, at first called "Lufa" or "Shockhead," later, "The Fairhaired," began about 868 to conquer all of Norway and make that (which up to his time had been a free independent country ruled by local chieftains) a monolithic state ruled by a despotic and autocratic central authority, namely, Harald himself. Naturally, the petty chieftains viewed with alarm this unprecedented threat to the ancient ways of the country. They began to organize resistance, but Harald moved too rapidly for them. He defeated one chieftain after another, claiming their territories as his by right of conquest and levying taxes upon the people to support his schemes of aggrandizement against the

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others who still resisted. Finally, in a great sea battle fought at Hafrsfjord in southwestern Norway, Harald overcame the last organized resistance. He had conquered the last of the great barons and was now ruler of all of Norway, including Norwegian colonies in Ireland, Scotland, the Shetlands, the Faroes, and the Hibrades.

After this decisive battle Harald gave his conquered enemies three choices. First, they could swear allegiance to him, become his men, and forfeit any inherited rights and privileges including the ancient right to inherit property. Second, they could march up and have their heads cut off. Third, they could leave the country, never to return. The first choice was really no choice at all for men who had from time immemorial considered themselves free men. It would mean surrendering that which they valued more than life itself. No more could they own land in their own name or pass it on to their sons. Few of the real leaders accepted the first alternative. The second choice had somewhat more appeal, especially to the younger, unmarried men. Some wonderful stories are told about how they joked with each other while waiting their turn to be decapitated. By far the greater number of responsible former nobles and landowners, however, accepted the third alternative and left the country. So many left, in fact, that whole districts were depopulated. Harald, in order to stem the tide of emigration, was finally forced to impose a tax on anyone who desired to leave the country.

The émigrés, representing in many cases the most aggressive, the most gifted, and the most cultured men of the country, fled first to the Norwegian possessions overseas, that is, to Ireland, Scotland, England, the Isle of Man, etc. Here, mingling with, and in many cases intermarrying with, the intellectually sophisticated and culturally advanced inhabitants of the British Isles, they aquired much of the culture of their new neighbors. Especially, it is thought, they may have been exposed to the teachings of Christianity, for England had been Christian since 597, while at this time the Scandinavian north was still pagan. England had also known and produced great imaginative and creative literature such as the deservedly admired Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf,* "Deor's Lament," and others. No doubt, the newcomers quickly saw the advantages of putting significant ideas down on paper—or rather vellum—

and, as they left the British Isles and wandered on to their final home in Iceland, they took with them the cultural advancements that they had acquired during their sojourn in the British Isles, including perhaps the art of writing. They also took with them their English or Irish wives, relatives, and friends. This is attested by the great number of non-Scandinavian personal and place names in Iceland. From not only the personal and place names but from a study of anatomy and blood types it has been deduced that possibly as many as fifty percent of the original pioneers, the early settlers of Iceland, were of British as opposed to Scandinavian origin. Let us not underestimate this addition, for the Celts have always been an intellectually gifted race. They have excelled in the arts requiring imagination—music, poetry, and painting.

Pioneers to Iceland

Like the Utah pioneers of 1847, these pioneers 1,000 years earlier first turned their attention to the necessities of life. They chose their land, established boundaries, determined fishing rights, and built houses for themselves and barns for their livestock. These things done, they began to establish law and order and to pursue cultural activities. In the year 930 they established on the plains of Thingvellir about 30 miles northeast from Reykjavík the famous Althing. Here all the great cases were heard and verdicts passed. With only negligible breaks in continuity the Althing has met every year since its establishment in 930. Now, after more than 1,000 years of continuous meeting, it is the oldest deliberative and parliamentary assembly in the western world, far antedating the famous British Parliament.

In the year 1,000, by democratic vote at the Althing, Christianity was adopted as the State Religion of the Republic of Iceland. It is noteworthy that Christianity was not forced upon the people of Iceland by some outside power or at the point of the sword; it was rather freely accepted by the people themselves, voting without restraint and with no fear of reprisal. Consequently, it was a somewhat different brand of Christianity that existed in Iceland for the next several centuries. Little or no attempt was made on the part of the Church to root out and destroy any latent traces of paganism that might have existed. As a result, the people of Iceland

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were free to enjoy and to pass on to their descendents the great treasure of literature, mythology, and heroic legends which they had brought with them from the mother country and which, because of the frantic activities of the Church on the mainland to stamp out any suspected spark of heathendom, had soon become lost and forgotten everywhere but in Iceland.

Precisely when that great body of poetry which we now call the *Poetic Edda*—and of which the aforementioned *Hávamál* constitutes only a part—when these poems were first composed will probably never be determined with certainty. Some scholars say they could have their origins during the period of the migrations of nations, i.e., possibly 400-600 A.D. Other authorities insist that such a date is too early; they suggest about 700 to 1,000. In any event, all agree that they date from a time when the Germanic and Scandinavian world was still not yet completely subjected to the influence of Christianity. Whenever they were composed, we know that they had been collected by the end of the first quarter of the 12th century and were being written down and copied for the now well-to-do and culturally inclined Icelandic landowners and chieftains. This body of poetry, consisting of ethics and teachings as well as heroic legends and mythology which comprise the *Poetic Edda,* sometimes called the *Elder Edda*, is our main, and, by far, our most reliable source of knowledge of the culture, religion, and literature of the pre-Christian North. Without it we would find it difficult indeed to reconstruct the beliefs and the intellectual life of our Scandinavian ancestors. Fortunately, at least one copy of the manuscript has escaped the fires, the earthquakes, and the floods of Iceland and is now known as the Codex Regius—"The Royal Manuscript."

Much as the Icelanders loved good poetry and heroic legends in verse, they enjoyed even more good stories of men they knew, told in a terse and graphic prose style. Out of this love of good storytelling developed the famous Icelandic Family Sagas. These are stories of actual men and women who are identifiable as historical characters and of events that unquestionably took place but were artistically retouched by the imagination of the storyteller. Some of these sagas are so meticulously based on history that they have been accepted by the most scrupulous of historians as actual fact. An ex-

ample of this type is the famous *Egil's Saga.* Others have been proved to have no historical foundation whatsoever and to be in their entirety highly artistic creations of someone's imagination. This, however, in no manner lessens their value as literary works; quite the contrary, it probably increases their value. We can turn to other sources for our historical information. An example of this purely fictional type of saga is the saga of *Hrafnkell, The Priest of Frey,* or *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* as it is called in Icelandic, and it is without a doubt one of the best motivated and cleverly written short novels ever put on paper. Only two examples out of several hundred sagas have been cited. Time will not allow a detailed discussion of the literature of 13th-century Iceland. I will merely assert that both in quantity and in quality it surpasses anything produced in Northern and Western Europe between the Age of Pericles on the one hand and the Age of Elizabeth on the other. I'll put it a different way: Any serious student can read just about everything that has been preserved of English and/or Anglo-Saxon literature up to the time of Chaucer (ca. 1400) in two or three evenings of reading. No one could possibly do more than skim the surface of the best of the Icelandic literature of this age in less than a month of diligent study.

Constant Icelandic Literary Production

Nor has there been any break or hiatus in Icelandic literature from that day to this. Icelandic authors and poets have been active and creative even at times when the economic level of the country was at a pitifully low ebb. For centuries it has been the custom in the Icelandic farmhouses for everyone to gather in one room and spend the long winter afternoons and evenings listening to one of the members read from the old sagas or quote poetry. Usually, each member of the family would take his turn at reading for a half hour or so while the other members carded wool, spun, knitted socks, repaired harnesses, or wove horsehair ropes. This custom not only provided each member of the family practice in reading; it also gave every member an opportunity to become well acquainted with the history of the country and its literature. Finally, it also provided each member with an opportunity to compare Iceland's literature with that of the outside world, for the reading was by no means confined to any one sub-

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ject or any one era. One of the favorite sports was a sort of spelling bee with poetry. The first person would quote a poem—as long or as short as he liked. The next person had to quote another poem beginning with the same word as the last word of the poem just quoted. Somehow, I am inclined to think that such a custom is about as entertaining and certainly more intellectually stimulating than watching paid entertainers on television.

Since about 1800 or soon thereafter, there has been even greater literary activity than before. Almost everyone has heard of Halldór Kiljan Laxness who won the Nobel Prize for literature a few years ago for his novel *Independent People.* Recently he has written an almost whimsical account of how Mormonism was preached in Iceland during the latter half of the last century, how the Icelandic Mormons came to Utah, and what happened to them there. As famous as Laxness is, however, there are some who contend that Gunnar Gunnarsson who writes historical novels is the more creative artist. Kristmann Guðmundsson, though not so well known, has produced several really good novels. Davið Stefánsson, who died just recently, was certainly as great a poet as many whose works are more widely known. Einar Benediktsson and Stephan G. Stephansson (who left Iceland as a young man, lived for several years in North Dakota, and finally moved to Canada) are both poets that can be compared favorably with any living in the English-speaking world during the last century or so. Nor has the short story been neglected. There are at least a dozen Icelandic writers of short fiction that I would rate favorably with most writing in the rest of Europe or the United States. In fact, the short story as a form of artistic expression is vigorously practiced and enthusiastically read and appreciated. Books of short stories actually rival books of poetry in status. This is the more significant when one considers that poetry has long been the favorite form of literature among the Icelanders. In fact, it has sometimes been asserted that almost any Icelander would rather be considered a good poet than be elected prime minister.

Although the Icelanders are very fond of the drama, they have not been as successful in that field as in the novel, the short story, or in poetry. Still, there are at least a half dozen or so Icelandic dramas that deserve high praise. At the present

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moment Agnar Thordarsson, the national librarian, probably evidences the greatest promise in this field, but he by no means has the field to himself.

As we said, the original settlers of Iceland arrived between 874 and 930 and were of Scandinavian—principally Southwestern Norwegian—stock strongly mixed with Celtic and British blood. When they arrived they must have been amazed at the number of geysers and hot springs, for it is unlikely that they had seen such phenomena in Scandinavia or the British Isles. They soon made use of them, however, by diverting their warm water runoff into pools for bathing and swimming or for washing clothes. This trend has continued even to the present day. The whole city of Reykjavík, for example, is now heated by hot water from the boiling springs located just on the outskirts of the city. What a convenience it is to have one's house always at the precise temperature that one desires it, never to have to haul coal or tend the furnace. Hundreds of farmhouses out in the country have also diverted the natural hot water to heat the houses and even the barns. Acres of greenhouses are warmed in a like manner so that roses, carnations; tomatoes, and other flowers and vegetables; and even grapes, figs, and bananas can now be grown inside the greenhouse, while outside the bitter arctic wind may whistle directly down from the north pole. These green houses, although covering many acres, cannot raise enough, however, to affect the economy of the country. Still, they represent a promise of what can be done in the future.

Iceland's Imports and Exports

Because of the location of the country—its northern tip lies just inside the Arctic Circle—and because of excessive rain during the growing season, grains and fruits do not ripen well in Iceland. With negligible exceptions, all grains and fruits and many vegetables must be imported. To pay for these, Iceland exports fish in all forms—fresh, dried, salted, and frozen; meat, especially succulant young lamb; hides and skins; and feathers, particularly eiderdown. Eider ducks are protected by law with a severe fine for anyone who molests them, especially when they are brooding. Nevertheless, over ninety percent of the economy of the country depends upon fish and fish products, that is, cod-liver oil, fish meal, fertilizers, etc.

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Recently a small amount of manufacturing has been developed in Iceland principally furniture and carpets. Some amount of processed woolen goods such as ski sweaters, mittens, socks, etc., are exported or sold to tourists, and very recently a modest amount of mining has been done. But still, as we have said, approximately ninety percent of Iceland's exports are fish and fish products with the overwhelming percentage going to Russia. Because of unfavorable trade restrictions the United States imports relatively little.

In addition to utilizing the hot water of the springs and geysers, the Icelanders during the last half century have harnessed the electrical potential of their numerous rivers and waterfalls. The result is that electricity is now so inexpensive in Iceland that Reykjavík and the other major cities are brilliantly lighted even during the long winter nights, while out in the country, houses, which were once dark and gloomy from mid-November to mid-March, are now not only well-lighted both inside and out, but are efficiently and comfortably heated with hot spring water or electricity—whichever is the most convenient in the area. Obviously, this means that cooking over an old-fashioned peat- or turf-burning stove is outmoded. The latest in electric stoves, washing machines, dryers, vacuum cleaners, and even hair dryers, are eagerly purchased by the Icelanders, and today the most remote farmhouse may have the latest in AM-FM radio or an ultramodern TV set by means of which the farmer keeps abreast of the weather and the world news. This may, of course, produce some strange incongruities. The Icelandic housewife may be spinning yarn on a wheel used by her great-grandmother while watching a Perry Mason "who-dun-it" on her ultramodern television set.

As you undoubtedly already know, Iceland is located not quite halfway between Greenland and Norway and is about 40,000 square miles in size, or about one-half the size of Utah. Nearly eighty percent of the land is high mountainous plateau, covered for the most part with barren fields of lava or shifting sands, with elevations reaching up to nearly 7,000 feet. At this latitude—bordering on the Arctic Circle—such plateaus and especially such peaks are completely uninhabitable. In the wintertime they may be covered with ten to twenty feet of snow. At any season of the year the winds are likely to be severe and biting. Most of the people live within a few miles

of the sea, where the modifying effects of one branch of the Gulf Stream produce a climate very much like that of Seattle or British Columbia—damp and rainy, but not excessively cold. Something like two-thirds of the people live on the fertile southern coast stretching from just north of Reykjavík eastward to Myrdal. More than a third of the total population of 200,000, or about 80,000, live in Reykjavík, the capital city, thirty miles north of the U.S. base at Keflavík. Reykjavík is an ultramodern and cosmopolitan city in every respect, with several art museums, excellent theaters and movie houses, three or four daily newspapers, a university, a classical Latin school, a teacher's college, a national library, three or four excellent hotels, and many beautiful homes. Schooling is compulsory through the equivalent of our eighth grade and available to anyone beyond that point who proves himself capable and eager to learn. There is no illiteracy in Iceland.

I sincerely doubt whether there is anyone in this auditorium who does not know that just 121 years ago, in 1847, the Mormon pioneers under the leadership of Brigham Young entered the Great Salt Lake Valley. There may be a few, however, who do not know that scarcely three years later, in 1850, Mormon missionaries from Utah were active in Denmark. Among the nearly 400 converts that they brought into the faith during the next few years were two Icelanders who were in Denmark studying and learning a trade. One of these two young men, Gudmundur Gudmundsson, traveled with the other converts to Zion, arriving in Utah in 1855, the first Icelander, as far as we know, to travel so far west. The other, Thorarin Haflidason, returned to Iceland to spread the glad tidings of the gospel. He converted several to the faith, but unfortunately, his activities were cut short by his untimely death by drowning only a few months after returning home to Iceland.

It might be mentioned that when Thorarin Haflidason went back to Iceland after his conversion to the faith about 1853, he was followed by several missionaries who were sent out from Utah. In fact, for over half a century Latter-day Saint missionaries labored in the Land of Song and Saga .Many converts were made and many more Icelanders became friends of the Church, but for one reason or another chose not to join officially.

The momentum gained, however, was continued, and other missionaries took over Haflidason's work. Of those people con-

verted to the faith, a group of sixteen left for Utah, arriving in 1855. They were led by a man called Samuel Bjarnason. Brigham Young directed them to settle in Spanish Fork where a colony of Scandinavians had already established themselves. This modest group of sixteen were soon joined by others, including my grandparents. During the next twenty or thirty years, forty or so Icelandic families made their way to Utah to augment the Icelandic colony in Spanish Fork, some of them participating in the famous Handcart Brigade. A memorial to this original group of sixteen stands at 3rd South and 8th East in Spanish Fork. It is an artistic and fitting memorial to a group of people who, motivated by faith and a commendable religious zeal, gave up the ties that bound them to the homeland, gave up peace and security, braved the dangers and endured the hardships of pioneering a new area, and established homes in the wilderness.

Icelandic Influences in Utah

These Icelandic settlers brought with them the traits of industry, the love of learning, and the endurance and fortitude that have always characterized their race—characteristics that their descendants have preserved and perpetuated. Naturally, they have intermarried, so that now there are few in Utah who are Icelandic on both sides, but they have, nevertheless, contributed generously to the economic, social, and cultural life of their adopted community. They have become good citizens, capable businessmen, respected judges, and leading educators.

About the time of World War I the Icelandic Mission was closed by decision of the Church. I understand that steps are now being taken to reopen this mission. I predict, on the basis of my experience there, that Latter-day Saints will find goodwill and friendship among the Icelanders when the mission is actually opened. This is because so many Icelanders have an Uncle John or an Aunt Sigrid here in Utah and they have experienced and heard little but good of the Latter-day Saints. Others have traveled in the United States, have come to Utah, and have been impressed with what they have seen here. Whatever the number of Latter-day Saints actually living in Iceland at the present time—and they are admittedly few—the Church can count on a firm basis of friendship and goodwill when our missionaries arrive.

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The Icelander's philosophy of life has been precisely that which is stated in the excerpt from *Hávamál* which I quoted earlier—namely that what happens physically to the man is unimportant; inevitably he will die and his possessions will pass away; but what good he does for his fellow human beings will be remembered. His memory will be treasured, not for the material possessions that he amasses, but for the great and noble
erial possessions that he amasses, but for the great and noble
deeds that he accomplishes. Perhaps this is a point of view that we can all take to our hearts and allow to become our guide and lodestone in our dealings with each other. Certainly, such a philosophy will give us greater understanding and sympathy for our fellow human beings and lead us into a more civilized and Christian way of life.

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