

Images of the North, Sublime Nature, and a Pioneering Icelandic Nation

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Abstract – This article sheds light on the issue of national identity as related to the Tourist Association of Iceland, which was founded near the end of the 1920s. Written Association sources illustrate how the leading participants interpreted their work ideologically, with nationalistic connotations. Not only did they see themselves as heirs of Iceland’s celebrated first settler, Ingólfur Arnarson, but they applied this picture of themselves to the nation as a whole. While engaged in opening up the country—in particular its uninhabited highlands—and in building up a modern travel infrastructure, they interpreted these undertakings as parallel to Iceland’s initial settlement. They therefore viewed themselves as pioneers who had taken on the mission of pacifying the still frightening Icelandic environment and providing access to its resources. In this way, they would not merely contribute to modernizing their country, but also to cultivating a positive national self-image. This self-image was based to a large degree on self-assertion over nature, as well as on portraying the nation as the most northerly preserver of culture within European civilization. Curiously, this meant assigning attributes to Iceland’s own interior that depicted it as a “Far North,” a North that ought to be challenged and wherever possible conquered.¹

Keywords – Image, landscape, nation, national identity, nature, pioneering, settlement, the North, the sublime, travelling

Introduction

In the first decades of the 20th century, the search for a viable national identity played a significant role in Icelandic society, permeating contemporary discussion on various levels. This search had clearly become pressing: while the fight for independence in the 19th century had generally been confined to ideology, the early 20th century saw actual changes such as the gaining of sovereignty and

¹ Quotations in Icelandic translated by Philip Vogler.

finally, in 1944, the founding of the Icelandic republic. As Benedict Anderson has so convincingly shown, national independence movements tend in every case to present their nation's history as a teleological development and to deploy political myths that buttress their struggle.² Frequently, these myths refer back to a Golden Age or some appropriate historical origin. Mythically reworked past events or heroic figures serve to give an aura of legitimacy to the political goal of national sovereignty as one that has long and constantly slumbered in the "soul" of the nation. In the first decades of the 20th century, Icelandic intellectuals like the historian Jón Jónsson Aðils and others became quite influential by compiling the country's history and introducing it to the public through their lectures.³

The present article endeavours to outline how the Tourist Association of Iceland (Ferðafélag Íslands), established in 1927, contributed to forming and moulding an Icelandic identity. Reference is made to extant writings relating to the Association, for example, formal speeches, minutes and rules, newspaper and magazine articles, trip reports, and in some cases autobiographical records. Since the period studied reaches from the initial decades of the century until around the mid-1940s, it covers the time just before national sovereignty was officially achieved. From its beginnings, the Tourist Association was not only seen as a travel or recreation club, but was rather ascribed a significant role in nurturing and unifying the Icelandic nation. Association materials turn out upon perusal to combine into a self-description of the nation as a whole. Moreover, they often call on the Icelandic people to cultivate a love for and pride in their country. Also of interest will be how a stereotypical image of Icelanders was connected to an image of the physical environment, and in turn to an image of the North.

The Tourist Association of Iceland

On 27 November 1927, the Tourist Association of Iceland was founded at a public meeting in Reykjavík, following preparatory work at preceding meetings by men highly influential in Icelandic society at

² Anderson 1983.

³ Aðils 1903, 1906.

the time.⁴ Among these men were politicians, merchants, publishers, and others who had appealed to their countrymen by publishing promotional articles in various newspapers.⁵ At the founding meeting, a speech was delivered by Björn Ólafsson (1885–1974). He described the purpose of the new association, which he perceived as serving to encourage and facilitate travelling in Iceland.⁶ However, he felt it necessary to explain this purpose better:

Some people may find it strange to find an association for encouraging trips in their own country. To my mind, nonetheless, this plan is so worthwhile, so crucial to our nation, that the people of this country will be unable to become good Icelanders, in the fullest sense of these words, without being acquainted with their own land, without having been influenced by the land itself, without having breathed in strength from its powerful natural surroundings, without their eyes having been opened by this land’s beauty and grandeur, to the extent of thanking Providence with deep emotion for being allowed to call it their fatherland.⁷

Ólafsson’s speech tells how the establishment of this association and its proposed activities will touch on nothing less than the self-esteem of Icelanders and their relations with their country, even referring to it patriotically as their fatherland. Connecting back to previous discussions, he went on to point out the following:

⁴ According to the first paragraph of the association’s founding articles, its formal name in Icelandic is *Ferðafélag Íslands*, in Norwegian *Islands Turistforening*, and in English the *Tourist Association of Iceland*. Þorláksson 1928.

⁵ See “Ávarp” [Address] 1927: 2.

⁶ *Ferðafélag Íslands* 1927 (manuscr.).

⁷ “Sumum kann að þykja kynlegt, að stofnað sje fjelag til að styðja að ferðalögum í eigin landi. En í mínum augum er sú stefna svo mikils verð, svo nauðsynleg þjóðinni, að landsmenn geti ekki orðið góðir Íslendingar í orðanna fyllstu mörkinu (sic), án þess að þekkja sitt eigið land, án þess að hafa orðið fyrir áhrifum frá sjálfu landinu, án þess að hafa andað að sjer þrótti frá hinni máttugu náttúru þess, án þess að augu þeirra hafi opnast fyrir fegurð landsins og mikilleik, svo að þeir með klökkum hug þ akka forsjóninni fyrir að þeir geta kallað þetta land föðurland sitt.” *Ferðafélag Íslands* 1927 (manuscr.).

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First and foremost, we wish to found this association in order to assist Icelanders in becoming acquainted with their own country, to urge them forward in doing that, and to make it easier for them to achieve that.⁸

The association would thus have no interest in working with foreign tourists in Iceland or with the growing Icelandic tourist industry, as some had feared; rather, the opposite was to be the case, with the emphasis placed on fellow Icelanders and their ties to the homeland.⁹

Ólafsson's speech certainly paints a quite negative picture of how much Icelanders knew about or were interested in their homeland at the time when the association was founded. He felt that Icelanders knew too little of their country, since they hardly travelled at all and certainly never visited the uninhabited parts of the island. Trips into such parts were considered too expensive, too difficult, and too demanding, and the dangers of the isolated areas were imagined to be even greater than they actually were. The speech implies that fear of the unknown played a role in these misconceptions, so that the association would help out in opening up the country. The association would promote the development of tourism infrastructure by clearing roads and building mountain huts, while ensuring that meals and accommodation remained affordable. Yet another task for the association would be to publish descriptions of routes and trips, as well as maps. The association would have cairns raised in the deserted highlands to guide travellers on their way, so that they would once more be able to use the long-forgotten highland trails. The association's intention of publishing "short, easily understood descriptions for the general public" of flora and fauna and of geological formations would allow for a "new dimension to travel enjoyment."¹⁰ Only when the cliffs, mountains, glaciers, and uplands have become a great, remarkable book which they are capable of reading, the speaker declared, will travelling turn into a true pleasure for people.

⁸ "Við viljum stofna fjelag fyrst og fremst til þess, að hjálpa Íslendingum til að kynnast sínu eigin landi, örva þá til að gera það og greiða fyrir að það takist." Ferðafélag Íslands 1927 (manuscr.).

⁹ "Stofnun ferðamannafélags" [The Founding of a Tourist Association] 1927: 6.

¹⁰ Ferðafélag Íslands 1927 (manuscr.).

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The intentions listed above are based on a definite enthusiasm that aimed at making Iceland accessible, both physically and mentally. The present essay will not address the details of how most of the goals were later dealt with and carried out, but rather will focus on an interpretation process that occurred and developed in the context of the Tourist Association.¹¹ From the very beginning, public attention was directed towards the parts of the country that appeared distant and strange, removed from everyday life and in fact hardly known. These parts were the Icelandic highlands: expansive, unsettled, and at the time seldom visited areas, lying far back from the coast and seeing almost no practical use. Fantasies of all sorts were still connected with them, nurtured by folk tales and anecdotes from the past. In succeeding decades, nevertheless, the highlands triumphed as the very image of what comprised “Icelandic” countryside, having been remodelled into a “national landscape.”¹² Paradigms for describing this landscape were often sought in Romantic literature. In addition, selected images of the highlands were presented whenever people wished to portray a living national identity. The outcome was, on the one hand, that nature was concentrated into a single idea and, on the other hand, that this idea was intertwined with Iceland’s national identity.

In 1952, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Tourist Association, Björn Ólafsson suggested that no other society existed which could boast with as much justification as the Association that it was an “association of all Icelanders,” standing supreme above all quarrels of class or politics and working to unify the nation by teaching it “to know and appreciate what all Icelanders possess in common: the beauty, glory and power of Icelandic nature.”¹³ Nature is in this way presented as a unifying concept and is given certain attributes. Nature is not merely what all Icelanders possess in common but is seen as power that the nation can consume and as an opportunity for the nation’s self-reflection. However, the question remains, what traits are attributed to this image of nature?

¹¹ For a more detailed discussion, see Lerner 2010.

¹² On “national landscape,” see Tuchtenhagen 2007.

¹³ Ólafsson 1953.

Wastelands of the North

During the period 1947 to 1956, two natural scientists who both served for decades as officers on the board of the Tourist Association, Pálmi Hannesson and Jón Eyþórsson, published a series of volumes entitled *Hrakningar og heiðavegir* (Perilous Journeys and Highland Trails).¹⁴ While their first volume mainly consisted of historical and contemporary articles by scientific professionals or writers who concerned themselves with nature and travel, Hannesson and Eyþórsson had already modified their editing policy by the second volume, calling upon their general readers, the “plain people” of Iceland, to send in reports of their own travel experiences and of noteworthy trips they had heard about. This proposal was enthusiastically received and led to widespread interest in the series. Not only did the two men edit and then publish the reports they received, but they also collected oral reports and produced their own written versions, besides gleaning snippets of information from newspapers, magazines, and chronicles and turning them into travel descriptions. The publishers’ interest was above all oriented towards *brakningasögur*, or stories of people suffering accidents, getting lost, or being threatened by other perils on journeys through the highlands, across passes through mountain ranges, and on glaciers. Nine such journey descriptions in the volumes of *Hrakningar og heiðavegir* were penned by Hannesson (1898–1956) himself and later reappeared in various editions of his works.¹⁵ Recently, these nine stories were gathered into a single dual-language edition, with Icelandic and German on opposite pages.¹⁶

One of these nine stories, written by Hannesson in 1933 and entitled *Villa á öræfum*, can be seen as setting the tone for the entire group of nine.¹⁷ The story contains an extensive introduction, where the writer points out the significance of such writings for the Icelandic nation and explains why he finds it essential to collect texts

¹⁴ Eyþórsson & Hannesson 1947–1956.

¹⁵ See Hannesson 1959, 1975.

¹⁶ Hannesson 2007.

¹⁷ “Villa á öræfum/Allein durch die Einöde,” in Hannesson 2007: 108–145.

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of this sort and ensure their survival. The introduction commences with the following image of the highland landscape:

Rising above the communities and uppermost ends of the valleys, the deserted highlands take over, empty and lonely, in all their pathless expanse. No one has ever lit any fire there; never has the chime of consecrated bells been heard there. These gaping deserts drone and boom beyond the bounds of civilization, unknown and unsettled—still retaining the countenance of all beginning, back when time originated. An eternal battle proceeds as the bitter forces of nature attack merciless almost anything that breathes. Whereas whole reaches are ruled by sheer nothingness, there are some spots where short-lived, stunted vegetation manages to grow during the days of longest sunlight, when a touch of wildlife appears. As autumn approaches, however, storms tear away anything attempting to show life above the surface of ground or water.¹⁸

The above portrait is dark: it recalls the opening words of the Bible, referring to an age before there were any people on earth, before they subdued and obtained dominion over it. Various allusions and indirect quotes in the passage bring out images associated with the settlement of Iceland: not until a person has lit a fire on land does it belong to that settler, not until Christian civilization has penetrated a wilderness with the chime of consecrated bells can the wilderness be considered accessible. However, this territory, isolated from human communities, still remains “unknown and unsettled,” as the text has it. The raw forces of Nature have the last word, with mere people standing no chance against them. As at the dawn of all days, the endless wastes continue to “drone and boom.” Elements of style like alliteration draw attention to the absolute primitiveness of the scene,

¹⁸ “Upp frá byggðum og daladrögum breiðast öræfin, hin veglausá víðátta, auð og einmanaleg. Þar hefur enginn farið eldi um, og aldrei hefur heyrt þar hljómur vígðra klukkna. Utan við endimörk mannegs síðar þruga þessi miklu firnindi, ókunn og ónumin, með svip sjálfs upphafsins enn, eins og í árdaga. Römm náttúruöfl eiga þar ævarandi baráttu, harðbýl og fjandsamleg við flest, sem anda dregur. Á stórum svæðum er þar alger auðn, en annars staðar nær skammær og kyrkingslegur gróður að þrífast, meðan sólargangur er lengstur, og fáein dýr viðgangast þar um sinn. En þegar líður að hausti, sópa harðviðrin burtu öllu því, sem unír lífi ofan vatns og molda.” Hannesson 2007: 108.

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with the sound and rhythm of the words imitating fairly well the dark droning and booming of the wilderness. The reader perceives the underlying message that mankind still lacks the knowledge, abilities, and strength to make any progress in conquering this repellent, hostile environment.

The story that is told by Hannesson in *Villa á öræfum*, on the other hand, is definitely no song of praise to wild nature. Although the author shows deep respect for the wilderness described, there is no tendency to glorify it, and the actual object of his piece is not the wilderness itself, but a human encounter with nature. His subject is Kristinn Jónsson, a young farm worker who became lost while looking for sheep in north Iceland during late autumn 1898. Due to fog, he ended up in the central highlands, with which he was completely unfamiliar. As chance would have it, he also chose Iceland's longest river to show him the way, and it unfortunately did not flow towards the north, as he assumed, but rather into south Iceland. Kristinn Jónsson trudged on for long days and nights. Not only was he without food and badly prepared for the cold and wet, but for most of the time he had nothing to orient himself by and was tormented by loneliness. Despite all this, overcome and exhausted, he continued as long as he possibly could, finally driven onwards solely by the desire to reach people once more and be buried and rest in human society. His final rescue seemed practically a miracle, leading numerous contemporaries to believe that he had been saved by Providence, and that his lost wanderings were an evil game which merciless powers had been playing on this young man.

Hannesson, however, tells the story as one of a hero who, through his own endurance, determination, and strength of character, pulled himself out of the vicious grasp of the wilderness, albeit just barely. This hero is described as a commoner who accomplished an admirable feat and saved his life by facing vastly superior natural forces even though the odds seemed overwhelming. Kristinn Jónsson is painted as a representative of the Icelandic people and as a model of "composure and manliness."¹⁹ The author goes so far as to compare the journey of this Icelandic farm worker and similar documented occurrences to the achievements of explorers and

¹⁹ Hannesson 2007: 136.

expedition teams, who at the time were highly honoured and travelled around the globe as representatives of their nations, advancing into the unknown, risking their lives on far-off ice fields, and establishing national claims:

Foreign nations revere the names of those men who have demonstrated achievements in the polar wastes or other places, and erect magnificent monuments to them. To my mind, this story of Kristinn Jónsson is so remarkable that it ought to be preserved through national commemoration. Lacking any gratitude, he himself lies in the Hólar cemetery, Eyjafjörður.²⁰

By recording this story and fixing it in the nation's cultural memory, Hannesson recovers it from oblivion and wishes to make it a monument to this representative of the Icelandic people. He also lends it the significance of a national monument, or one which embodies the symbol of a nation, one where the nation will be able to find its traits modelled.²¹ Even if this symbol is neither chiselled in rock nor moulded of bronze, publication has preserved it for future times. In this way, the author has succeeded in adapting the oral heritage that stemmed from authentic travel experiences to textual form and perpetuated it for coming generations.

Reverting to Climate Theories

Hannesson proceeds to present the character traits supporting these achievements as being traits not only of certain individuals but typical of the Icelandic nation itself. Using as an example the hike of a farmer, Sturla Jónsson, over the ice- and snow-covered Sprengisandur uplands in 1916, Hannesson comments that even though this hike differed from that of Kristinn Jónsson in that Sturla had planned his trip and equipped himself suitably, nonetheless both walks might be

²⁰ “Erlendar þjóðir halda mjög uppi nöfnum þeirra manna, sem afrek hafa unnið á öræfum heimskautslandanna eða annars staðar, og reisa þeim veglega minnisvarða. Mér virðist þessi saga Kristins Jónssonar svo merkileg, að hún eigi að geymast í minningu okkar þjóðar. Sjálfur hvílir hann óbættur í kirkjugarðinum að Hólum í Eyjafirði.” Hannesson 2007: 136.

²¹ On “national monuments,” see Mayer 2004.

taken as noteworthy signs of the “bravery and tenacity” which a merciless and hostile environment had instilled in the Icelandic people.²²

The gist of this argument is that the Icelandic people possess certain characteristics that they have acquired through natural conditions—through their centuries-old fight with the countryside they inhabit. Such a view corresponds very closely to traditional climate theories which align a nation’s character with interpretations based on climate in a broad sense (i.e., taking into consideration latitude/longitude, local topography, etc.). This kind of interpretation has been familiar since antiquity. In his survey of how theories of this kind evolved, the German scholar Gonthier-Louis Fink illustrates how climate theory, in contrast with scientific climatology, has remained a solely European interest and comprises a facet of European history.²³ In the final analysis, this interest represents the efforts of European peoples and, as time went on, of nations, to establish their identities *vis-à-vis* those of neighbouring peoples with whom they were dealing. Nature was called upon in an endeavour to ground the distinctions detected.

At first sight it may indeed appear to contribute to our comprehension if we generate models that build their explanations on contrasts in living conditions. Nonetheless, these models result in problems when we do not limit their application to deriving living habits from climatic effects but go on to include anthropological or moral aspects such as mentality and national character, or attempt to show the roots of religion or of political orientation.²⁴ Ever since antiquity, climate theories have also served to denigrate other peoples. In conformity with ethnocentric perspectives, they have purported to objectify the advantages of one’s own people by attributing them to a set of beneficial external conditions.

Aristotle introduced a three-dimensional model in which the south and north represented extreme conditions (hot versus cold),

²² Hannesson 2007: 136. On the hike of Sturla Jónsson, see the travel account “Dirfskuför Sturla á Fljótshólum/Eine gewagte Reise,” in Hannesson 2007: 146–175.

²³ Fink 2001.

²⁴ Fink 2001: 46.

leaving only the temperate zone between these extremes with the opportunity to develop advanced cultures. While three-dimensional models were used until the 18th century, they were then renovated into binary systems that more starkly emphasized a North–South contrast and omitted the buffer zone in between. Such regions, despite being ostensibly based on the compass directions of north and south, have frequently shifted, depending on where the cultural and spiritual centres of power were located at the moment. During the 18th and 19th centuries, for instance, the “North” was mainly a political and less a directly geographical concept, as the German scholar Hendriette Kliemann-Geisinger points out.²⁵ The border between the European “North” and “South” can however generally be ascertained to have moved farther and farther northwards. In addition, the 18th century experienced the beginning of a double-faceted reverse in paradigms, whose end result was that, firstly, positive traits were now ascribed to the North and, secondly, the culture–nature duality was reassessed so as to valorize what was natural and simple and till then had been perceived as barbaric or uncivilized.²⁶ This paradigm reversal stemmed mainly from the writings of Montesquieu and Rousseau, although as time passed it was primarily German and Scandinavian writers who reinforced it.²⁷ Through the formation of national states and each state’s search for a national character, often based on the anthropologically coloured ideas of Herder, this reversal in values assumed an ideological shape and was later driven by clearly political motivations.²⁸ The re-evaluating reached such degrees that, for example, Germany found it favourable in the 19th century to align itself with the North and even to utilize Scandinavian and Old Icelandic literature for itself and its own Germanic cult, culminating under the Nazis.²⁹

In Iceland climate theories were particularly influential in the first decades of the 20th century, as the young nation was especially attracted by the higher value assigned to the North in the context of such theories, along with the great importance assigned to nature.

²⁵ Kliemann-Geisinger 2007.

²⁶ See Fink 2001: 80–81.

²⁷ See Laudien 2007.

²⁸ See Henningsen 2007.

²⁹ See Henningsen 1993 and Julia Zernack in this volume.

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Climate theory explanations were shown particular enthusiasm in the context of the Tourist Association. The founder of the mountain climbers' society *Fjallamenn* (which eventually entered into the Tourist Association) was the painter–sculptor Guðmundur Einarsson (1895–1963), associated with Miðdalur. He fervently supported the stance that Iceland's environment played a considerable role in shaping the character of its people. In his opinion, the nation's inhospitable surroundings had rendered it stronger, tougher, and more resilient, a conviction which he presented in allegorical statements about a tiny flower.³⁰ Finding the flower within a cavity in a lava chunk while he was building a mountain hut by the glacial ice, some 900 metres above sea level, for several days he carefully protected it against the fierce glacial winds. His remarks about it conclude as follows:

For me, this little plant had by now turned into an image of the toughness distinguishing Icelanders and of their ability to establish themselves even in the most difficult of conditions. Whereas flowers reach different sizes depending on the conditions, the ones growing in harsh environments often develop a brighter colour than those which remain warm in greenhouses.³¹

Guðmundur Einarsson implies that the austere harshness of the North is preferable to the gentle softness of the South, seeing how the North brings out desirable characteristics, capable of lasting over the long term. Elsewhere, in his extremely conservative thoughts on national art, he goes so far as to claim that the general spiritual renewal, which he believed was urgently required, would most probably stem from peoples living in mountainous areas.³²

When those leading the Tourist Association activities during the 1920s and 1930s referred to Nature as the educator of their nation, they were favouring ideas that had already entered Icelandic literature by the early 19th century. One of the country's principal literary

³⁰ Einarsson 1946.

³¹ “Þessi litla jurt var nú orðin mér ímynd seigunnar, sem einkennir Íslendinga, og hæfileikans til að festa rætur, jafnvel við hin hörðustu skilyrði. Blómin verða misstór eftir aðstæðum, en þau, sem vaxa við harðrétti, eru oft skærari að lit en hin, sem vermast í gróðurhúsum.” Einarsson 1946: 172.

³² Einarsson 1928.

pioneers of Romanticism was Bjarni Thorarensen (1786–1841), whom the literary scholar Þórir Óskarsson views as “the only Icelandic poet who can with any accuracy be called a genuine romantic poet.”³³ Thorarensen was esteemed in the 20th century for his poems about nature and the island that was the home of the Icelanders. His interpretation of the relationship between man and nature is paraphrased by Páll Valsson as follows:

What enthuses Bjarni Thorarensen is power; he lingers on what is spectacular in the landscape. Following directly on [...] his ideas about the interaction between man and nature and Nature’s educational role, he reaches the conclusion that Icelanders have survived precisely due to the might of nature—one which has hardened and steeled the nation.³⁴

Leading voices in the Tourist Association went so far as to ascribe the same vision to Thorarensen as that being pursued by their 20th-century organization. A good example of this is an article entitled *Fjallvegafélagið* (the Society for Mountain Trails) published in 1931 in *Árbók Ferðafélagsins* (the Travel Association Yearbook). Thorarensen had founded the society in 1831 and kept it running for eight years. The article portrays the 19th-century poet as a direct forefather of the Tourist Association.³⁵ The association’s reason for this was that Thorarensen’s most famous poems (for example, one entitled “Ísland,” or “Iceland”) “mainly considered the uninhabited and uncultivated side of nature and praised the wild and magnificent powers that had threatened his countrymen the most” and regarded these natural forces as the “guardian angels who protected the nation

³³ Óskarsson 2006: 251. See also Gylfi Gunnlaugsson in this volume.

³⁴ “Það er krafturinn sem heillar Bjarna, hann staðnæmist við hið stórbrotna í landslaginu og í beinu framhaldi af [...] hugmyndum um samspil manns og náttúru og uppeldishlutverk hennar, dregur hann þá ályktun að einmitt vegna hinnar máttugu náttúru hafi Íslendingar komist af, náttúran hafi hert og stælt þjóðina.” Valsson 1996: 275–276.

³⁵ This estimate of Bjarni Thorarensen and the Society for Mountain Trails does not pass the test of investigation into the goals and methods of the society, particularly when one also notes that there were absolutely no grounds for domestic tourism in Iceland in those days. The present paper, however, will not deal further with this matter.

from the weakness of more southerly countries,” as Óskarsson puts it.³⁶

Ideas of this kind were central to the leadership of the Tourist Association, which tended to repeat and promote them, not perceiving any ideological threat in them. Examining the actual operations of the Association during its initial years confirms that the officers had the clear mission of educating the Icelandic people. Their wish was to cultivate and educate “the nation,” facilitating access to the countryside as part of their educational programme.

Images of the Sublime in Nature and the Icelandic Nation

In the 1930s and 1940s, the above-mentioned Guðmundur Einarsson was very successful as an artist, mainly depicting landscapes and scenes of animals or the common people in large-scale oil paintings. He mostly encountered his landscape subjects on expedition-like trips to the mountains, highlands, and glaciers of Iceland. According to the art historian Kristín Guðnadóttir, the following motifs seem to typify his paintings: volcanic eruptions, storm clouds, freezing mountain fog, and other sublime scenes of the Icelandic wilderness, such as high peaks and barren wasteland.³⁷ The following three motifs can be added to that list: steep cliff walls, canyons, and lava fields. In his style and thoughts, Einarsson kept within the framework of traditional imagery; typical for his oil paintings is their austere, traditional structure and subdued colour contrasts.³⁸ Finally, he strived to make his art portray the effect of nature’s elementary powers.

Einarsson was a step ahead of most of his countrymen at the time, in that he knew the highlands and enjoyed staying in the Icelandic wilderness. When travelling through areas isolated from human settlements, he furthermore penetrated spots where hardly anyone else dared to go.³⁹ Upon returning, he painted the scenes, transmitting his interpretations of the highland landscape into

³⁶ Óskarsson 2006: 262.

³⁷ Guðnadóttir 1995: 4.

³⁸ Guðnadóttir 1995: 4.

³⁹ Magnússon & Guðmundsson 2006.

numerous Icelandic living rooms. Not infrequently, he even put his life at stake in order to experience volcanic eruptions or storms. Such experiences gave him a unique affinity with nature and set him apart from other contemporary artists producing landscape paintings. Art historian Aðalsteinn Ingólfsson considers this intimacy with nature to be one of Einarsson's strong points, noting that his pictures were unlike those of other Icelanders, who could be said to paint holiday landscapes for tourists, or colourful, summertime landscapes with plentiful light and not so much as a sign of storm.⁴⁰ Such tourist paintings created the impression of Iceland as a land rich in vegetation, mainly covered with woods, blessed by eternal summer, and greatly resembling areas south of the Alps. Einarsson provided a different image, according to Ingólfsson:

Guðmundur Einarsson, the mountaineer, knew otherwise. Having travelled through Iceland's wilderness, he was aware of the hazards facing one there; he had waded across glacial rivers, experienced murderous storms and seen the ground open up and emit scalding water, ash, or mud. His predecessors, however, generally avoided this aspect of Iceland in their painting, mostly because it did not suit the optimism integral to the fight for independence. They associated Iceland's wastelands, winter weather, volcanic outbreaks, and other natural catastrophes with everything which had afflicted its people in their dark past.⁴¹

By contrast, Einarsson was of the opinion that the Icelandic people had been moulded by their struggle with the island's uninviting, hostile natural environment. Colourful summer scenes would fail completely to communicate this aspect, and thus landscapes in his pictures were powerful, raw, dark, and repelling.

⁴⁰ Ingólfsson 1997.

⁴¹ “Fjallamaðurinn Guðmundur vissi betur. Hann hafði ferðast um íslensk öræfi og þekkti hætturarnar sem voru því samfara; hann hafði vaðið jökulárnar, upplifað manndrápsveður og séð jörðina opnast og gjósa heitu vatni, ösku og eimyrju. Þessa hlið á Íslandi sniðgengu forverar Guðmundar í málalístinum að mestu leyti, þar sem hún er ekki í samræmi við þá bjartsýni sem var fylgifiskur sjálfstæðisbaráttunnar. Þeir settu samasemmerki milli íslenskra öræfa, vetrarveðráttu, eldgosa og annarra náttúruhamfara og alls þess sem hrjád hafði íslenska alþýðu í myrkri fortíð.” Ingólfsson 1997: 129–130.

Not only Einarsson's landscapes but also Pálmi Hannesson's textual accounts have qualities that may be comprehended through the aesthetics of the sublime.⁴² Ever since Immanuel Kant related the sublime mainly to nature, such natural features as towering cliffs, swelling thunderclouds, lightning, volcanoes, high waterfalls, rushing rivers, etc. have been considered exemplary of the sublime.⁴³ Under the Kantian dichotomy, these features belong to the dynamic sublime, based on their overpowering might, whereas phenomena referring to the immeasurable and infinite belong to the mathematical sublime.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, the Kantian sublime is by no means inherent in the natural features themselves (the objects) but instead occurs in the observer (the subject) as a feeling induced by these features. This feeling is one of ambivalence, since it simultaneously entails delight and aversion. Because it can seem to the subject that the natural object possesses all the power, the subject realizes his physical powerlessness to some extent, yet notices at the same time his potential for considering himself independent of and superior to nature.⁴⁵ Therefore, nature is not deemed sublime because it inspires fear, but because it brings out a power in the human subject that potentially allows humans to transcend nature. In the final analysis, the resulting pleasure depends on human capacity.⁴⁶

Pioneering on the Fringes of the North

Hartmut Böhme, in his article "Das Steinerne" (Stoniness), illustrates how the natural features that Kant was speaking of corresponded exactly during his lifetime to the areas being dealt with at the forefront of scientific and technological control over nature.⁴⁷ One of these areas was infinite space, carrying forward the impact of the Copernican revolution. A further area was represented by the processes of practical development, which at the time led not only to the domination of higher mountainous regions (with the Alps as a

⁴² See Pries 1989.

⁴³ See Kant 1995.

⁴⁴ See Kant 1995: 185.

⁴⁵ See Kant 1995: 185.

⁴⁶ See Kant 1995: 186.

⁴⁷ Böhme 1989: 124.

prime, well-known example) but also to the formation of such new sciences and techniques as mineralogy and mining. By the beginning of the 20th century, this dynamic trend had indeed extended into the still unopened polar regions. Böhme's conclusion is that Kant's formulation of the sublime served as a forerunner in the realm of thought, in that it subdued those archaic fears of nature which, on the one hand, hindered the control of nature and, on the other hand, were extinguished by achieving such control.⁴⁸ Kant's philosophical contribution on that epochal threshold was to provide in advance an aesthetic interpretation (spearheading an industrial interpretation) of modern endeavours to empower ourselves as subjects and to control the object, nature.⁴⁹

Compared to central Europe, it took considerably longer before Iceland evidenced much progress towards modernization. Not until the 19th century was drawing to a close did the country undertake any urbanization, and as for industrialization, its effects initially only trickled to Iceland from elsewhere. The eventual result was that the years around 1900 can appropriately be thought of as the threshold to a new era: a time when far-reaching changes finally made deep inroads into numerous aspects of Icelandic society.

As mentioned previously, Pálmi Hannesson described his heroes in terms of comparison with famous explorers, thinking of the polar expeditions of the early 20th century. It is noteworthy that he drew these parallels even though the journeys in his accounts did not at all involve planned departures to a Far North. Rather, the opposite was the case, with the heroes heading towards the island interior and frequently moving from north towards south Iceland or between the island's east and west, in geographical terms. Nevertheless, the distance, cold, darkness, strangeness, threat, and sheer raw power of nature that are associated with the country's highlands are also tied by our European, Western culture to connotations of what is Northern. Northern in this cultural sense often stands in sharp contrast to any simplistic relation with the compass points. The instance we have addressed, moreover, actually situates "the North" in the geographically central areas of Iceland. Pictured as remote and

⁴⁸ Böhme 1989: 126.

⁴⁹ Böhme 1989: 126.

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strange, this interior had for centuries been encircled by the accessible and settled areas where people lived. Continuing along this line of thinking, we start to visualize a country in the North which possessed its very own “North”—a culturally interpreted North in the land’s interior—and fully utilized the potential of that North for building up a relevant national identity.

Partly assisted by the development of the tourism infrastructure, a national advance took place in the first decades of the 20th century, aimed at Iceland’s interior and upwards onto its glaciers. This penetrating advance into the interior can be interpreted symbolically as an advance into “the North,” with the purpose of possessing and civilizing it and thereby, in the end, dispelling what was left of the raw, strange, and threatening. What was happening was also sensed as national expansion with ideological overtones: an act of claiming possession of the nation’s geographical core and of achieving self-realization there, an act tantamount to self-assertion.

At the beginning of the 20th century, a remarkably exaggerated pioneering rhetoric was ongoing in Iceland. Good examples are provided by some of the political speeches at the 1930 millennium of the Althing.⁵⁰ The rhetoric of pioneering and possessing the land was particularly attractive and deeply meaningful for the budding nation, since it had a well-known pioneering legend to refer to. This legend was personified by Ingólfur Arnarson, who figured as Iceland’s founder and first settler and was accepted as the epitome of a successful pioneer.⁵¹ A monument to this pioneer was erected in Reykjavík in 1924, following an initiative for building it that was launched in 1906. At the launching, the philosopher Guðmundur Finnbogason gave a public speech presenting reasons for seeing the monument as significant for the nation as a whole.⁵² He portrayed Arnarson as a forerunner, whose tracks every later generation of Icelanders had been able to follow. The speech described the original settler as a good-looking, noble young man, whose face and posture showed optimism, strength, and purposefulness. These were traits which the Icelandic nation ought to adopt at large. Finally,

⁵⁰ See Jónsson 1943.

⁵¹ See Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir in this volume.

⁵² Finnbogason 1943.

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Finnbogason said he felt the nation had a debt to the country's first settler: to pay him a debt of respect and gratitude and to carry on his mission in the context of the present day:

We have the ambition of being a separate nation. We have the ambition of wanting to determine our own fate, without having to satisfy anyone's claim but the verdict of history itself. We have the ambition of preserving the consecrated fire of culture by the Arctic Circle, closest to the northern lights. And we desire to prove this ambition by preserving and continually honouring every asset of our country and nation. We desire to take on the task from the point where our forefathers stopped, increase our inheritance and get interest on it. We desire to become settlers in a modern sense.⁵³

Establishing Arnarson as a model, the philosopher encourages his contemporaries to be new settlers. He links their political demands for independence to their responsibility to assert themselves once more on the northern edge of European civilization, and thus assigns a type of frontier status to their northern country. Living on this boundary of civilization, the foremost task of Icelanders should be to establish and preserve culture (as symbolized by the warmth of the fire which humans keep alive) against nature (as symbolized by the polar cold). This mindset is very similar to that of Pálmi Hannesson, though with a broader perspective.

Finnbogason is neither referring merely to taking possession of the Icelandic highlands, nor merely to pioneering in the sense of spatial expansion. Instead, he explains that expanding by gaining possession of more of the earth in general is more or less concluded, since mankind now possesses and controls every global region. On the other hand, for this very reason a fresh kind of pioneering is taking over, which he describes as the discovery and utilization of all

⁵³ “Vér höfum þann metnað, að vera sérstök þjóð. Vér höfum þann metnað, að vilja sjálfir ráða örlögum vorum og hafa þar engum öðrum reikning að ljúka en dómi sögunnar sjálfrar. Vér höfum þann metnað, að varðveita vígðan eld menningarinnar norður við heimskaut og næstir norðurljósunum. Og þennan metnað viljum vér sýna í því, að vér varðveitum og höldum í heiðri allt, sem vér eigum bezt í landi og þjóð. Vér viljum taka þar við, sem forfeðurnir hættu, auka arfinn og ávaxta hann. Vér viljum vera landnámsmenn í nýjum skilningi.” Finnbogason 1943: 36–37.

of a land's available resources. In his view, pioneering the interior may in fact go on indefinitely, because in his speech he designates every kind of progress as pioneering in some sense, using for examples scientific and technological progress as well as ordinary entrepreneurship. What he is basically speaking of is modernization, and interpreted in that way, Iceland had already begun "a new era of pioneering."⁵⁴ Finnbogason thus points out how, at every individual site, Icelanders now perceived endless, untamed power and had once more begun to praise their homeland.⁵⁵ His speech not only expands the concept of pioneering to the development and utilization of science and technology, but also extends it to the areas of culture and the arts, where he remarks that much remains undiscovered:

Our goal and our standard should then be a constant pioneering in the world of objects and the world of ideas. No matter where, any pioneering is in reality similar; no matter when in history, it demands the same characteristics—the characteristics of the forerunner: courage and strength, knowledge and determination.⁵⁶

Whereas the painter Guðmundur Einarsson depicted his entirely down-to-earth expeditions into mountainous regions as pioneering and the writer Pálmi Hannesson attempted to get the journeys and outdoor trials of common Icelanders valued as pioneering, the philosopher Guðmundur Finnbogason expressed a vastly more comprehensive sense of pioneering. The philosopher challenged Icelanders to undertake pioneering in a modern sense, gathering knowledge and becoming actively engaged. His scheme was in fact a call to empower the subject and to gain overall control over nature, meaning far more than merely possessing the Icelandic highlands. Through enacting his scheme, the nation would be able to exalt itself, to conceive an image of itself as exalted and sublime. Mentioned repeatedly, the sight of the national image as reflected in the still undeveloped highland region, along with the challenges to civilization

⁵⁴ Finnbogason 1943: 36–37.

⁵⁵ Finnbogason 1943: 36–37.

⁵⁶ "Evarandi landnám í heimi hlutanna og í heimi hugsjónanna á því að vera mark vort og mið. En allt landnám er í raun og veru líks eðlis, sömu eðliseinkenni þarf til þess á öllum öldum, eðli forgöngumannsins: áræðið og aflið, vitið og viljafestuna." Finnbogason 1943: 38.

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which that environment entailed, would allow the nation to perceive itself as such a sublime subject.

The attempts of the Icelandic nation to describe itself, as presented in this paper, are saturated with imperatives. These are self-descriptions in which Icelanders' efforts to exalt their nation appear again and again. The attributes consistently emphasized in such descriptions are manliness, tenacity, endurance, courage and bravery, strength of character, enthusiasm for progress, etc. It is difficult to ignore the decidedly masculine character of a national identity distinguished by such attributes.

As I have elsewhere illustrated, there were actually two dominant ways to symbolize the Icelandic nation during this period: on the one hand as a pioneer and on the other as the Lady of the Mountains (*Fjallkonan*).⁵⁷ Although these two representations seem at first to point in different directions, they show more than contrasting or complementary maleness versus femaleness or activity versus passivity. Instead, it is more relevant to see them as representing two different segments of nationalistic time: constantly turning towards the future as well as the past, like the face of Janus. This time-scale anomaly, typical of nationalism, often appears through distinctions drawn between the sexes. As Anne McClintock points out:

What is less often noticed, however, is that the temporal anomaly within nationalism—veering between nostalgia for the past and the impatient, progressive sloughing off of the past—is typically resolved by figuring the contradiction in the representation of time as a natural division of gender. Women are represented as the atavistic and authentic body of national tradition (inert, backward-looking and natural), embodying nationalism's conservative principle of continuity. Men, by contrast, represent the progressive agent of national modernity (forward-thrusting, potent and historic), embodying nationalism's progressive, or revolutionary, principle of discontinuity. Nationalism's anomalous relation to time is thus managed as a natural relation to gender.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ See Lerner 2010.

⁵⁸ McClintock 1996: 263.

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Paired figures allowed for simultaneous twofold support of the national image, on the one hand by the female allegory of the Lady of the Mountains with her history-transcending values, and on the other hand by the male symbol of the pioneer with his orientation towards progress and the future. However, glorifying the pioneer and establishing him as a mythical guideline for today's world, which shines through in many contemporary sources, valorizes male attributes. One result is that no public monument has ever risen to the Lady of the Mountains in the island's capital, Reykjavík, while there is one to the pioneer. From the beginning, this was also perceived as a national monument, with the Icelanders being assigned attributes that fit with the monument.

The patriarchal officers of the Tourist Association saw themselves as modern, forward-looking pioneers. One of their priorities was to take possession of the interior of their country, which for them was still wild, distant, and symbolic of uncontrolled nature. They thus adopted the image of the first settler for themselves and their nation, since he had advanced into unknown territory and subdued it for himself and his descendants. Imbued with optimism for the future, these officers pictured themselves as trailblazers at the northern edge of civilization. In his story of 1933, Pálmi Hannesson challenged his nation to direct itself to the highlands, take possession of them, and observe its reflection in sublime nature. He was convinced that the nation was starting to awaken,

noticing the portion of its homeland that lies beyond the bounds of civilization: those pathless expanses rising above the communities and uppermost ends of the valleys, wastes droning and booming, sublime and lonely.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ “Því að nú er þjóðin að vakna til vitundar um þann hluta ættlands síns, sem liggur utan við endimörk mannegs siðar, hina veglausu víðáttu, sem þrumir ofan við byggðir og daladrög, stórbrotin, auð, einmanaleg.” Hannesson 2007: 136.

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