

Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, *Wasteland with Words. A Social History of Iceland*. London: Reaktion Books 2010. 288 pp. [ill.] ISBN: 9781861896612.

It rarely happens that the publisher of a scholarly study can so easily tie in with current political issues, as is the case with *Wasteland with Words*, a social historical work on the development of Iceland, roughly since the late eighteenth century until the present. The publisher doesn't beat about the bush in the press material, which accompanies the book, stating that it is "highly topical after [the] volcanic ash cloud caused worldwide chaos". It is undoubtedly remarkable that such a small, geographically as well as culturally, peripheral nation has drawn such considerable attention from all over the globe as it has done recently. Most of the interest triggers negative connotations, because of volcanic ash clouds disrupting worldwide air traffic and the collapse of the Icelandic financial system, causing severe disruption of the global economy. But, apart from the negative impact of these things in Iceland as well as in the rest of the world, the country still possesses a surprisingly rich cultural heritage and overwhelming natural wonders. Iceland, thus, is a country of contrasts and contradictions, and this book by Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon offers a highly interesting and well written tool kit to obtain solid insight into the history, culture and people of Iceland, by far surpassing the shallow stereotypes and mumbo-jumbo offered by most journalists in the wake of recent events.

Magnússon's main concern is to present and discuss the evolution – and in some respects even radical transformation – of Icelandic society, offering special attention to literacy and taking autobiographical texts (diaries, letters, memoirs, etc.) as his main source material. Magnússon's emphasis is primarily on the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but he also offers occa-

sional forays into the earliest, medieval history of Iceland, and thereby establishes an interesting connection between the earliest literary relics and so-called 'living' memory. But the most striking feature of *Wasteland with Words*, is the fact that Magnússon, as in his earlier work, focuses on sources created by 'ordinary people'. Thus, while applying the method of microhistory, Magnússon offers a number of unique insights in everyday life on this inhospitable island, through the eyes (and pens) of those who lived it and managed to endure it. In a number of chapters the author focuses on particular areas of interest such as, education, work and entertainment as strategies for "emotional survival", the role of death in daily life, the changes in housing customs and living conditions in rural areas and the social impact of urban development, etc. The primary strategy of the microhistorical approach offers the possibility to single out one detail and, by investigating this isolated aspect of history, to describe it as comprehensively as possible and thereby open it up for new insights in its context, going from detail to the overall perspective, instead of the other way around, one might say. In the case of Iceland, this approach clearly has advantages, as material (archaeological) historical sources are rather scarce, but it also fits in with the increasing interest in individual aspects of historical experience, in e.g. contemporary museum studies.

Although the microhistorical approach is the main methodology, all chapters contain solid macrohistorical information – facts, data and figures – about the demographic development, economy, infrastructure, the political culture, power and family structures, religion, as well as data on nourishment, education, housing, communication and even identity, etc. This particular microhistorical methodology also rests on the principle claim or hypothesis, that material circumstances have significant consequences for people's mental conditions too. In a wide range of

cases Magnússon demonstrates how famine, epidemics, poor housing etc. “have consequences beyond the merely physical; they also affect the way people think and how they view the world and react to everyday life experiences” (p. 46). This may appear a rather obvious, not to say commonplace, point of departure, but Magnússon turns it convincingly into the cornerstone of his book, supported by an abundance of source material. The notion of highlighting mental and emotional aspects of everyday life plays for example a prominent role in chapter 5, where the paradox of poor public educational facilities and at the same time extremely high literacy rates, is discussed in detail. Here the author introduces the hypothesis of the importance of an informal educational system – strictly family oriented and based upon everyday working routines – counterbalancing the official school system. Or as Magnússon puts it: “what we have are two different types of educational practice: one that was compulsory and rigid, and another that was fluid and fuelled by a desire for knowledge and entertainment and rooted in popular culture” (p. 85). Thus, the eagerness of Icelandic children to learn to read and write can, at least in part, be explained as a result of the tradition of gathering the entire household during the long winter evenings to work, entertain and learn together. But, according to Magnússon this does not explain their overall eagerness and he proposes another motive too. Especially for children it was of vital importance:

[t]o be able to face up to the hardships of their lives they turned to literature, and above all the Icelandic sagas, for relief and moral support. [...] this love of the written word was hardly coincidental: it provided an escape from the harsh realities of life and a flight into a world of the imagination. (p. 96)

Magnússon repeatedly makes this point (e.g. pp. 108-109, 118, 140-141) and it becomes an increasingly plausible explanation,

through the abundant support of numerous autobiographical testimonies. Finally Magnússon concludes, that:

Reading and education provided a way of coping with the emotional stress that formed part of daily life and became an important tool in many people's tactics for mental and spiritual survival. [...] It was all part of the peasant mechanism for survival. (p. 173)

Nevertheless, the question still remains, why exactly it was in Iceland that this mental requirement took on this particular shape.

*Wasteland with Words* contains truly remarkable accounts of ordinary farmhands, fishermen, housewives and clergymen that are deeply rooted in a strong Icelandic literary tradition, which connects contemporary culture with the earliest sages of Icelandic history. Magnússon at the same time shows that these stories are not the result of just a limited social group's ability to dominate the construction of a collective self-image or historical narrative, but they originate from far more nuanced and varied sources.

In the final chapters, Magnússon takes a detailed look at the booming social and economic development during the latter half of the previous century, which coincided with Iceland's independence as a nation-state, and finally the collapse of the country's financial and political structure. These dramatic contemporary crises are dealt with in historic perspective and some harsh criticism is directed towards members of the political elite in Iceland and their (lack of) self-knowledge and self-criticism. In these final chapters the source material no longer primarily consists of autobiographical texts, but the emphasis shifts toward public records and media, i.e. speeches, newspaper articles and interviews.

*Wasteland with Words* is an indispensable book for everyone who is interested in the history of Iceland. It is a highly informative piece of solid scholarly work, with a clear methodology and it is

simply very well written. Finally, just a word of praise about the superior choice of illustrations throughout the book and the highly informative captions that accompany them.

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