

# Impressions of an Icelandic Experience

The following is an account by English professor Florence Boos of her recent Icelandic experience and impressions as a Fulbright lecturer at the University of Iceland. Boos, who specializes in nineteenth-century British literature, has been on the Iowa faculty since 1973. Her doctor of philosophy degree is from the University of Wisconsin, her master's degree from Harvard University, and her bachelor's degree from the University of Michigan.

I am a student of William Morris, a nineteenth-century British poet, designer, and pioneer of British socialism, who also helped translate the Icelandic sagas, wrote poetry on Norse themes, and visited Iceland twice, in 1871 and 1873. To gain some knowledge of Iceland and its language, I spent last fall as a Fulbright lecturer in American literature at the University of Iceland, and enrolled with my husband Bill in the university's full-time introduction to Icelandic language, conducted largely in that language. Icelandic has preserved most of its medieval inflexions, but changes that have occurred in the pronunciation make it still harder to learn.

The university's very existence is a brave act for the country of 240,000 inhabitants. Unfortunately, the current government beggars its public employees, and much university teaching is actually done by an underclass of *stundakennarar* (section-teachers).

A high-school teacher will earn about \$7,000 a year in a country whose cost of living is higher than that of the United

States, and a university lecturer about \$9,000. A Cambridge graduate *stundakennari* who teaches phonetics in the English department makes ends meet with 43 weekly class hours of laboratory and conversation, and consults on the side as well. It is not uncommon to meet a married couple who hold four jobs between them.

The English department is a subdivision of the Faculty of Arts, and is located in a residential house. There is one *professor* (in the British sense of this word), one *dosent* (reader), two *lektorar* (tenured lecturers), and several hard-working *stundakennarar*. Student advisement is informal.

The department teaches courses in Old English, Medieval English, history of the language, grammar, and several surveys in British literature.

My Icelandic students of American literature were eager and diligent, and responded with quiet enthusiasm to works by native American, black, and women writers. Of the novels we read, they liked best Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*.

Driven by the pay differential, many students said with fatalistic shrugs that they will become secretaries rather than teachers. I urged them to consider graduate school in the United States, where they can support themselves rather better for a few years as teaching assistants, and learn as well.

One of 83 professors is a woman, nine of 83 *dosentar*, and 13 of 59 *lektorar*. One of the nine *dosentar* teaches two women and literature courses, and a section teacher offers women's history.

A recent strike by Flugleidoir stewardesses was outlawed by Parliament on Women's Day itself, and the woman *forseti* (president, an honorific office in Iceland), was constrained to sign the bill.

The weather is surprisingly "English"; wet, not cold, with light snow and ice, not the foot-high snow we are used to in Iowa. Winter temperatures are often in fact above freezing. The name "Iceland" derives from the island's vast central *jökklar* (glaciers), but "Windland" might be more appropriate. Artic air masses usually yield to warm ocean-borne currents, but major gales sometimes arise from the clash of the two. In early November we experienced a *stormur*, a strong gale that lasted many hours, and gusted up to 90 miles an hour. En route from my class, I was blown twice into a tree, and saw the contents of my shoulder bag scatter at high speed to the winds—glasses, books, teaching notes, student papers. In an open field I saw several others struggle desperately to reach the next building; one woman was knocked to the ground, and flailed for some time before she could stagger away. One can only respect the stoic farmers and sheepherders who faced such winds.

The latitude of 66 degrees N. and oblique light affect the sky in many striking ways. November brought a subtle array of rose, turquoise, and lavender skylscapes, and a bright moon was often prominent in the daytime sky. On *Skamnidagi*—"short-day," the period near December 21—the sun rose shortly before noon, and set soon after three. An understandable response to the gloom is

the very elaborate Icelandic celebration of *jolin*, or "Christmas," a two-day holiday, which involves much caroling and bell-ringing, placement of small flames on the graves of relatives, great arrays of traditional foods, and convivial drinking of *jolaglögg* and *brennivín*.

Iceland is a nominally Lutheran country, but according to one rather notorious poll, more Icelanders believe in *álfar* than in their official Lutheran God. *Álfar* are not our "elves," but dignified, larger-than-life beings who inhabit stones or other natural objects, and who are endowed with assorted magical powers.

Even if one lived there only a short while and learned only a modicum of its complex language, one cannot fail to sense how massive were Iceland's problems of survival, much less "cultural survival." For centuries, there was no wood with which to build or burn, and much of the tiny population of 47,000 in 1800 huddled in turf dwellings and burned cow and sheep manure for fuel. Only in the twentieth century did mechanized fish freezing provide a cash industry for what had been an island of sheepherders and farmers (the latter confined to the arable one percent of its landsurface). At the outdoor museum "Árbaer" ("river-farm"), now surrounded by the suburbs of Reykjavík, one can visit a turf hovel, semi-sunk beneath the surface, in which one must crawl from one room to the other on one's hands and knees. In such conditions, the population's fierce pride in its traditional literacy becomes moving and appropriate.