

MY IMPRESSIONS OF ICELAND

INTRODUCTORY NOTES

Iceland is a county which to many is very remote, largely owing to its geographical situation. It is regarded by some to be a place of frozen ice and snow, largely un-inhabited. Many books and other literary matter has been written about this country and it is not my intention to add or to duplicate this knowledge but to give my impressions of this great island and its people as I see them, much of the information I record is never given in such publications. I feel that it would be a great pity to lose by faulty memory many of the things that are of interest and I know of no way of retaining these impressions better than recording in this manner, and I trust that this material may be of interest to others.

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September 1966.

Index

1. The First Glimpse
2. A Visit to the Country Districts
3. The North
4. Reykjavik

THE FIRST GLIMPSE.

It was dull with mist when we left Leath, Edinburgh at 8 p.m. on the 13th June, this atmospheric condition accompanied us for the greater part of the journey; northerly until the north of Scotland was reached and then in a north-westerly direction. Our view was completely obliterated by fog for most of the journey and it was not until we had been at sea for two whole days and were nearing Iceland that we were able to enjoy a view although there was little to see as these northern waters seemed completely deserted.

It was during the evening of the second day that the lonely horizon gave vent to huge black rocks at starboard, our first glimpse of this great Island. The weather was clear and bright and not in the least cold and for the next hour or so my time was spent scanning this large horizon. It was now getting late in the day but I was able to continue my search until past midnight as it was still light.

The lightened atmosphere did not give off much of interest and it was more the dark rocks that caused speculation and further ahead an occasional break of green, a hut here and there, a waterfall, the water apparently escaping to the valley with the thaw of the ice now visible on the summits of those dark mountain ranges. From starboard we could see a volcanic island its fire long extinct, but close by the well known Surtsey very much alive, the ashes of which poured over the ship which made the place filthy.

Eventually the visible excitement died down and I retired to be awakened by the noise of the clanging of the great chain with anchor being dropped into the sea bed. I clambered on deck to see a most wonderful and colourful panoramic view of this northern city of Reykjavik the capital of Iceland. It struck me with amazement to find such a large and orderly collection of modern architecture in this arctic region about 150 miles from the arctic circle.

The vision extended over many miles of fine buildings with colourful roofs of red and green, which gave justice to the cards and literature issued with so many gay colours. Upon leaving the ship I entered the City of Reykjavik where after examination I found that by far the larger part of the buildings were constructed of corrugated iron in most cases painted so delightfully with roofs of red and green which gave the place an astonishing colourful appearance. I was also impressed by a number of large buildings of modern design, mainly built of cement with sheet iron roofs.

This could well be a city in a more temperate zone. The streets were generally clean and it was not difficult to imagine oneself in any city elsewhere. The air was fresh, not cold, as one might expect in this part of the world. As I travelled to the outskirts of the town, I found much to my surprise a large number of multi-storied flats and many more in the course of erection. This was not the Iceland that I expected to see. I learned later that the cement was produced locally which is practically the only thing in the building that has not to be imported.

A VISIT TO THE COUNTRY DISTRICTS.

The roads after leaving the town were found to be in a very bad state, mostly of hard pressed earth repaired in places with volcanic dust and granite with many a pothole to remind one of their condition. Journeying further, I found the country barren and desolate, little appears to grow, the winding road tracks leading through valleys and across plains, the dark mountain ranges forever in view with their snow covered summits, and patches of snow in the crevices and ledges making such a contrast with the black surroundings.

Sheep had free range over this deserted countryside, nibbling at heather and the very limited amount of grass available, perpetually calling a lamb to their side as they all seem to have one. These animals seem to be in a reasonable condition in view of the hard living. Occasionally a few patches of green grass would emerge and it was on these areas that cows could be seen grazing. I learnt that this grass was brought about by cultivation manuring and reseeded and it appears that this is the only way of producing this rich fodder. The colourful green of these enclosures stood out most effectively compared with the drab uncultivated countryside. Sheep it appeared were not permitted to benefit from this lush grass as it was reserved for the milk producing cows which serve the most important task of supplying the nation with fresh milk upon which commodity the country is self-supporting.

As I travelled I noticed that many comparatively small enclosures were being cultivated apparently for reseeded with grass, but there appears to be practically nothing else grown. I was told by my Guide that Potatoes were also grown but these have not been very successful in the past year or so owing to the short and unfavourable seasons. There was no evidence of this crop during my visit in the middle of June, but these could well be below the surface as potato growth would be much later in sowing itself than in countries further south.

It was interesting to note how well the Crofters appeared to be housed compared with those in lesser remote islands elsewhere. The houses were of good construction, mainly of cement with the colourful corrugated iron roofs and usually of the four to six roomed type. Electric wires spanned many miles of this lonely countryside denoting the appropriate service and the availability of telephones seems to be good. The communications over many remote parts are also linked by a bus service negotiating the rough unmade road tracts with many a bridge spanning the numerous waterways that are brought about by the constant flow of water from the surrounding ice capped hills as the thaw continues. Sheep seem to benefit from these waterways as the grass is usually lush and green close by and there is always a supply water.

I travelled many miles over this bleak countryside with a farmstead here and there with its surrounding patch of re-seeded green pasture, a herd of cows grazing on this lush grass with sheep almost everywhere until we reached a fertile valley, made more so by the presence of hot water geysers which are a phenomenon on this volcanic island. This hot water is brought to the surface by a volcanic force from the bowels of the earth. It appears to be perpetually boiling and at moments unable to contain itself it burst into the air to a height varying with its size from ten to twenty feet or more.

This hot water is harnessed and utilised for the heating of greenhouses with some success and I was able to see many crops growing which looked extremely well. Perpetual daylight is probably an asset to these horticultural activities and I understand that these people work very long hours, during the summer of endless daylight although they are not known to be early risers. Small villages have been built around these hot water oasis which seems to be an improved source of income for the inhabitants. Occasionally a dog can be seen by these holdings and I learned that these were the only

dogs allowed which are for the attention of stock. No pet dogs are kept anywhere on the island.

As I journeyed further, I could not but notice the complete absence of trees of size, nothing but a few bush like ones only a few feet high. There does not appear to be any satisfactory answer to this lack of tree growth in these northern islands as in the case of the northern Scottish islands. One theory is that the high winds in these areas does not permit satisfactory root settlement. The view continued with more ice-capped mountains with numerous waterfalls caused by the falling water from melting ice and snow and much larger ones such as the Gullfoss with its rapid fall of water in the main rivers rushing with all haste to the sea. These large waterfalls are a sight worth seeing. Now and again a very trim small church is to be seen, always well painted and very clean. I visited the interior of one of these and was surprised to find that the inside was even in a nicer condition.

The Icelanders are well enlightened and the standard of living appears to be very high which is surprising in this poor and desolate country. During this journey I was fortunate in being able to visit the place of the first Icelandic Parliament (The Althing), which was created in the year 930 at a spot known as Pingvellar, and is probably the oldest legislative assembly in the world. This is quite an interesting spot on the Northern shores of the largest lake in Iceland with a wonderful view of the surrounding ice capped mountains.

THE NORTH.

The size of the island together with the impassable glaciers and mountains made it necessary to journey by air to see the out lying parts of the North. On the subject of travel I understand that air travel plays an important part in communications over this large island as many of the larger towns and outlying districts are linked in this way. The Icelanders claim to be the most air minded people in the world. There are no railways and the coastal towns are linked by a very good sea supply route which encircles the island. In this way provisions are supplied to all coastal towns from which road transport completes the further connections.

Whenever it is physically possible this road connection exists although the roads are in a very poor condition which is quite understandable when one considers that there are no less than 7,000 miles of these roads to be up kept by a population of about 190,000. numerous rivers are spanned by very narrow bridges of concrete and steel which is something of an achievement. I was surprised to find life in the north very much the same as in the south.

I visited the town of Akureyri with a population with a population of 9,600. and was surprised to find a modern hive of activity similar to any town of its size elsewhere, notwithstanding its northerly position about 50 miles from the arctic circle. I spent part of the evening here and as it happened to be the 17th June Iceland's independence I was able to see apart from the town itself a large number of the inhabitants also as they appeared to turn out for this occasion.

A band was playing English tunes in the market place and how delighted I was to find something English in this pro Danish country. This town with its near 10,000 people was populated with only 400 a century ago and now it was decorated and very gay for this annual occasion. I was amazed at the high quality of services and accommodation afforded in the food houses. The place has a number of gardens surprisingly so gay with flowers, so unusual for its geographical position but I understand that the Gulf Stream plays a great part in making this possible.

This northern town of Akureyri has a fine port and is a commercial area and one of the centres for the fishing industry which is so important to Iceland accounting for about 90% of the total exports. There is also some spinning mills in this town which is which is sometimes known as the " Capital of the North". About 30 miles east is the fishing town of Husavik with a population of about 1,800 and about the same distance north west is another fishing port called Olafsfjordur with a processing plant and a population of about 1,000, a few miles north-west of this is another town called Siglufjordur with a larger population of 2,400 with a large Herring processing industry.

There is also a large port of Isafjordur with a population of about 2,400 at the extreme north west of the island. It is interesting top note that even the isolated small islands to the north are inhabited, one of which Grimsey is actually of the Arctic Circle. I travelled over many miles of this northern territory with the unusual ice capped volcanic hills and here in the north the snow and ice was present around us in low lying caves and other spots so it was possible to handle the cold stuff even though the atmosphere was reasonably warm, so much so that the inhabitants wore light summer clothes.

I was able to visit a cave with hot water which was fed by a hot spring and found bathers enjoying this warm bathe in an area which would be regarded as the frozen north. Further a field were hot water geysers dotted over this desolate countryside. The whole area seemed to be alive with them, some of them which were clamped with solid concrete surrounds with a metal pipe protruding and permitting this hot steam to be forced out in a powerful spray covering several yards. This steam some of which was already being piped was to be utilised in some way in a factory that was being

built nearby.

I was also able to see a volcano still smouldering from one of the many high peaks in view and nearby was a mountainous heap of dead ash from some previous eruption. Volcanic lava fields were very much in evidence now with unusual rock formations. I understand that there has been as many as 25 active volcanoes and the ashes from these have been known to have risen to 16,000 feet and the dust carried by the upper air currents as far as Norway and Scotland, and at one period in history one sixth of the inhabitants destroyed and one third of their cattle. The highest of these mountains rise to some 6,000 feet and the inactive ones are perpetually covered with snow.

Every few miles a village emerges comprising of a few clean and well painted houses, an occasional church in prim order and in some places a building used as a hall for a meeting place or possibly for a restaurant or banquet hall well built and modernly decorated, which is surprising in these out of the way district. Service is excellent in these restaurants, but one wonders where the custom comes from, as there are so few people about in these areas. The food served is usually good, most meat dishes comprises of local mutton or lamb, a commodity plentiful so much so that a small quantity is exported.

Fresh eggs are plentiful together with milk and small potatoes, all of which are produced locally on the small farms. Other vegetables we are told are grown here but I did not see anything more than Tomatoes which were grown in hot water heated glasshouses. Rhubarb seems to be an exceptional crop which appears to flourish here.

As I travelled over this countryside with its open plains and valleys in the bright sunshine, I could not but ponder as to what conditions would be like in this area in winter. I could picture strong ice-cold gales blowing over this bleak land giving a very different picture to this lovely June day. I understand the temperature in this northern part of the island is on an average 8 to 10 degrees Fahrenheit lower than the south but the atmosphere is clearer and less subject to intermittent spells of rain.

During my visit I found the climate very pleasant, not hot or cold, but fresh, bright, and reasonably warm, and I understand that the winters are comparatively mild for this region due to the favourable influence of the Gulf Stream which in part completely encircles the island .

REYKJAVIK

I returned to the Capital to learn more of this city and the way of life of the inhabitants. The population of Reykjavik has increased greatly in recent years and has now reached the figure of 75,000 out of a total population for the whole country of about 190,000. A century ago it was recorded that 2,500 people lived in this town out of the island population of 70,000 so apart from the enormous growth of the population there has been a marked movement from the country districts to this and other towns of which there are about twelve with populations of 2,000 to 10,000.

Reykjavik is the seat of the Government and since 1911 has been the proud possessors of a university. Much of the country's past history can be found in the guide books so I have not enlarged on these matters but have written what impressed me most. Celebrations of the 17th June (Independence Day) were in full swing until past mid-night and many were still celebrating until about 2 a.m. the following morning in daylight, but there was very little activity later when a town usually awakes. Life here is very much the same as in any town. The traffic is not quite so heavy but heavy enough, omnibus transport linking the town with many of the country districts. Most houses in this city are heated by water from the hot springs, and is proudly known as the "smokeless city". Chimneys are still there to remind one of the days when the orthodox method of heating had to be relied upon but I cannot understand what form of heating this was as there is very little coal, some peat and practically no wood owing to the absence of tree growth.

On the subject of heating there are also other towns heated by the hot water from the springs. In parks and gardens every attempt has been made has been made to provide colour with flowers and grass with reasonable success, although during my visit it was a little to early in the year to see these at their best. Shops are stocked reasonably well with supplies at very high prices, a large proportion of the goods are British. As I have pointed out earlier dogs are not allowed to kept by private householders so the place is free of these animals which are only kept on the farms.

All goods and services are dear compared to those of the United Kingdom, due to transport and government duty. This cost varies from 100% to 400% above UK prices. All prices seem to be very inflated which makes it difficult for foreigners with limited income to stay in Iceland but this very favourable for Icelanders going elsewhere.

Some Icelanders I found to be very gratified with purchases made in Scotland particularly clothing as these cost only a portion of what they would in Reykjavik. The shops carry such names as Bjornsson, Halfdanarson, Marinsson, Hansson, and Jonsson due to a patronymics system of naming whereby a son takes his father's Christian name and adds "son" and the daughter likewise add "dottir" (e.g.) if the father's Christian name was Robert, the son's surname would be Robertson and the daughter Robertdottir. The daughter would retain this name even after marriage. No other method of naming the children is now permitted so as I see it in due course all male Icelanders will have names ending with "son". Those at present without such names are those who had their names as such before this became law. Furthermore, to become an Icelandic citizen one must adopt an Icelandic name.

This country is not all what the name suggests, in fact here in Reykjavik at this time it is difficult to realize that this is Iceland. The great Valnajokoll glacier about 100 miles east of here and as large as East Anglia does give adaptability to this name, but this is only about one tenth of this great country which in fact after seeing some parts it could suitably be named Greenland. Perhaps the author got the names wrongly presented.