

**“THE NORTH BEGINS INSIDE”:
IMAGINING ICELAND AS WILDERNESS AND HOMELAND**

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In 1937, W. H. Auden and Louis MacNeice published a whimsical account of their trip to Iceland undertaken the previous summer. The work, *Letters from Iceland*, was mostly written in the form of letters to family and acquaintances at home. Five of the letters were addressed to the poet Lord Byron, and in these, rather than reporting on their adventures or offering tourist tips, Auden and MacNeice playfully contrasted their northern travel with the Grecian and Italian voyages of nineteenth-century Romantic poets such as Byron. When so many other European artists had sought inspiration from southern travels, why, the authors repeatedly asked, did they choose to go north? Various answers are hinted at, and, in the final poem in the book, MacNeice reminisced about the trip after their return home, and addressed his companion:

And the don in me set forth
How the landscape of the north
Had educed the saga style
Plodding forward mile by mile.

And the don in you replied
That the North begins inside,
Our ascetic guts require
Breathers from the Latin fire.¹

In posing the Northern journey as a welcome respite from the classical voyage, MacNeice linked the landscape of Iceland with the medieval Icelandic sagas, and suggested that the visual landscape of the country shaped the qualities of its literature. Such an idea was a fairly common assumption among travelers to Iceland by the time of MacNeice and Auden. For example, the British saga scholar and amateur painter, W. G. Collingwood, wrote forty years earlier, in his 1897 *A Pilgrimage to the Saga-Steeds of Iceland*, that he intended landscape pictures in the book:

to illustrate the sagas of Iceland. It is intended to supply the background of scenery which the ancient dramatic style takes for granted. . . . the intense tenderness and the intense passion of the sagas could only be developed among scenery which, whether the actors felt it or not, reacted upon their sentiment. It was in this

belief that we undertook our pilgrimage. We went to see the very places where events so familiar in books occurred in reality; and we found that the belief was true.²

In repeating what had become a well-established trope, MacNeice, however, gave it an additional twist. His companion Auden apparently took issue with the standard interpretation: for him, the qualities of the “North” were not found in landscapes that travelers observe, rather, the “North” was located inside the travelers themselves. To elaborate this theme, the poem implied that what travelers see in landscapes is dependent upon their ideas about the place formed before their arrival.

My research project, “Narrating the North: Travel, Nature, and Cultural Identity in Iceland, Greenland, and the North Atlantic,” explores how European travelers interpreted Icelandic and other North Atlantic landscapes and nature from the mid-eighteenth century to the present. I take as a starting-off point that ideas about these landscapes and nature are located inside the travelers, and can be best understood when placed in the context of their assumptions and expectations about Iceland, rather than as transparent representations of their experiences there. In other words, their ideas about North Atlantic nature had as much to do with their experiences before and after their journeys as during them. The North Atlantic region—which includes not only Iceland, but also Greenland, Norway, and the Faroe, Orkney, and Shetland Islands—was often understood as a frontier or wilderness region by these travelers, as the borderlands of the civilized, European world. For them, it was, as Larry Wolff has commented about Eastern Europe in this same period, a place “within Europe, but not fully European.”³ The region was sparsely populated in comparison to the homes from which the visitors came, and seemed to have little to offer them in terms of material comforts or technological development. Another, more famous British traveler, Sir Richard Burton, wondered why anyone would go there at all, and derided the imaginations of those who, like Auden and Collingwood, found the landscapes thrilling. In his opinion, the only people who were entranced by Iceland were those who had limited experience outside their own countries, unlike Burton, who was famous from his travels in India, Africa, and the Near East.⁴ However, despite the litany of complaints about the poor hygiene and lack of accommodations and conveniences when traveling in Iceland and the North Atlantic, European travel to Iceland steadily increased from the time of the first visitors around the middle of the eighteenth century to the time of Auden and MacNeice, when regular ferry connections departed from Hull and Leith. In 1772, Sir Joseph Banks, who later became president of the British Royal Scientific Society, had to use his personal connections with the Royal Navy in order to

procure the boat for his trip to Iceland. Auden and MacNeice, on the other hand, advised the traveler to book passage on the boats “some time beforehand during the season” in order to ensure a place.⁵

“Narrating the North” asks why and in what ways Iceland and the North Atlantic was an important region for Europeans. In answering this question, the project focuses on the different conceptions of nature in the North Atlantic that emerged in several different but intersecting circles, including local authorities, foreign explorers, and distant officials. Was it merely for reasons of personal taste that Collingwood found Icelandic landscapes thrilling and significant for the reading of the sagas, while Burton found them banal, and was more interested in the potential for profit from Icelandic natural resources? One of the few Icelandic landscapes that Burton did deem worthy of comment was a landscape in a region of sulfur deposits, which he called “not pretty save to the capitalist’s eye.”⁶ Although certainly personal taste played a role in perceptions of Icelandic nature, I situate both reactions within a longer tradition of debate concerning the nature of the North Atlantic and its relationship to European nature. Since about the middle of the eighteenth century, a discussion had arisen among natural historians about whether Icelandic nature was “exotic” or “ordinary.” Was it different from nature in European countries, and therefore extraordinary, or was it just a poorer copy of what could be found at home, and therefore not worthy of much interest? Driven by the eighteenth century’s fascination with classifying, measuring, and calculating, scholars and officials entered into a debate about what kinds of plants and animals existed in the North Atlantic, whether the laws of nature were the same there as they were at home, and the relationship between this nature and the people who lived in it. For example, in one of the early attempts to set the record straight about nature in Iceland, in 1752 a Danish natural historian, Niels Horrebow, disputed the claim of Johann Anderson, the mayor of Hamburg, whose 1746 *Nachrichten von Island, Grönland, und der Strasse Davis* had described pools of burning water in Iceland that ignite spontaneously for fourteen days every year. There is no reason, argued the Danish naturalist, to think that water and fire in Iceland behave differently than in other countries, as “two opposite elements will not unite in this country any more than in any other.”⁷

Anderson’s claim and Horrebow’s corrective represent, in my view, two poles of a European debate carried on about Iceland and the North Atlantic, one holding that Northern nature was exotic and unpredictable, the other that it was just the same in this country as in any other. Disagreements about nature in foreign places were quite common in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European travel literature, as travel to the Americas, the South Pacific, and Africa provided a wealth of previously

unknown specimens to discuss and classify. Often authors of natural histories used these disagreements over specimens in order to assert their claims of authority over other authors. Many of the places visited by the natural historians, however, were so distant and so far outside European boundaries that both the outlandish claims and the contesting of these claims seemed unsurprising. Precise knowledge about faraway places was understandably difficult to obtain. From a European perspective, Iceland and the rest of the North Atlantic, however, were not in the same category as Africa or Hawaii. However disgusting the food or rude the natives might be, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century North Atlantic was still part of a European state. Iceland, Norway, the Faroe Islands, and Greenland remained provinces within the Danish kingdom, while the Shetland and Orkney Islands had been given to James III of Scotland as part of a marriage alliance between Scotland and Denmark in the fifteenth century. Therefore, understanding nature in these remote and sometimes peculiar provinces was not just an endeavor for scholars in scientific societies. Obtaining accurate descriptions of nature in the North Atlantic, and especially the sometimes catastrophic consequences of that nature, was a bureaucratic concern of the state.⁸

In this context, I argue, these descriptions of nature had political meanings, uses, and implications. By tracing the debate between the two poles of the “exotic” and the “rational” or “ordinary” nature over this period, I show how European descriptions of North Atlantic nature and of the people living within that nature often contained implicit or explicit commentary on state management. Long before National Socialism made a reference to the “pure” nature and *Volk* of Iceland a piece of its political agenda, British explorers interpreted Icelandic volcanic eruptions as symbols of the endurance of these people and their resistance to Danish oppression, an example of a “wild” nature that reflected the character of this people.⁹ Danish officials, on the other hand, saw the aftermath of a natural disaster as an opportunity to introduce alternative crops and better methods of animal husbandry, to overcome the resistance of the farmers to modern scientific agriculture and to compel them to adopt the practices that the officials imagined were accepted in other provinces of the kingdom.

As the pendulum swung back and forth between these two positions, what was ultimately at stake was whether the North Atlantic was conceptualized as a wilderness outside of Europe, or as part of Europe. This was by no means a clear-cut question. When travelers considered religion and state bureaucracy, the North Atlantic provinces seemed familiar and indisputably part of Europe. Eighteenth-century British, German, and French travelers understood very well that the correct procedure upon their arrival in Iceland was to present their letters of introduction to the

Danish governor, who would assist them in procuring horses and guides for their journey. As they left Reykjavík, however, and turned their attention to the technology, agricultural practices, and landscape around them they often found that, again in the words of Auden and MacNeice, “Europe is absent. This is an island and therefore/Unreal.”¹⁰ This was a contradictory and confusing experience for many travelers, and they often reported sensations of psychological or even physical discomfort on the journey. Carl Julian Graba, who traveled to the Faroes in 1828, spoke of the “homesickness” induced by the strange landscapes which were like those of the “New World” to a European.¹¹ In this project, I concentrate on such moments of confusion and disorientation on North Atlantic journeys, and find that these tend to occur around the encounter not only with landscapes, but also with flora and fauna, with technology and material culture, and with language. From this, I argue that European travelers who commented on conditions in Iceland had certain standards and notions in mind about what constituted a “European landscape” or a “European tool.” In either a positive or a negative sense, Iceland and the North Atlantic did not match their expectations in this regard.

As the time span of this project is long, and because it deals with knowledge about the North Atlantic existing in different European circles, the primary sources are diverse. Images of the North Atlantic appeared in several different kinds of sources for my study. These include travel books, such as Auden’s and MacNeice’s; reports by officials, especially those in the Danish colonial administration on environmental conditions, including agricultural and fishing conditions; natural histories and other scientific reports, such as those of Horrebow and Anderson; studies of language and literature, especially of the Icelandic sagas; and fiction set in Iceland, such as Pierre Loti’s *Pêcheur d’Islande* and Jules Verne’s *Voyage au centre de la terre*. Naturally, the conventions of each genre have to be taken into consideration in analyzing the different types of sources. Reactions to Icelandic landscapes expressed in fiction are quite different from those in the reports of government officials. It is, however, noteworthy that the same themes and characteristics of Iceland—the landscape, the technology, and the language—that foreigners considered remarkable in travel books also appear in administrative documents. This suggests a certain continuity of assumptions about European culture and nature, and Icelandic exceptions to those norms.

Did this history of European visions of the North Atlantic have any lasting legacy? Can any European or American still think of the North Atlantic as exotic when a direct flight departs every day from the Washington, D.C. area to Iceland during the summer months? How is Iceland perceived today? The country, along with the other North Atlantic

nations, modernized rapidly following World War II. It was a beneficiary of Cold War politics, as its geographical location was considered strategically ideal by the Americans, who financed the construction of the country's transportation infrastructure, including its highways and international airport.¹² The airport where one arrives from that direct flight from the Washington D.C. metro area is a legacy of the U.S./NATO base at Keflavík, about 50 kilometers outside of the capital. This base, of course, was also the entry point for other kinds of modernity, about which the Icelanders were much more ambivalent: American television and rock music.¹³ With Iceland's high standard of living and new technological modernity, it would appear that the discussion is now closed, and that the country, independent of Denmark since 1944, has become indisputably part of Europe (although not of the European Union). The anthropologist E. Paul Durrenberger declares decisively that

Iceland is not exotic. It has electricity and central heating and cars and buses. It has telephones that work and supermarkets and electric milking machines and tractors. People live in high-rise apartment buildings or modern single-family houses. Icelanders have credit cards, money machines, color TV. Except for a couple of letters the alphabet is the same as we use for English. Iceland is a thoroughly modern country.¹⁴

In most respects this is true. While Iceland is still routinely spoken of as "Europe's last wilderness," this language is mostly used in tourist literature, where such exoticism is a marketable commodity. In the conclusion of "Narrating the North," however, I concentrate on a few contemporary episodes in which the definition of North Atlantic nature is again a contentious issue. One of these is the whaling controversy, which came to international attention following the introduction by the International Whaling Commission (IWC) of new regulations and a ban on commercial whaling in 1986. In this dispute, some North Atlantic inhabitants, including many Norwegians, Icelanders, Greenlanders, and Faroe Islanders, argue for a certain relationship to nature—the right to hunt and eat whales—that most European countries, including Great Britain, France, Germany, and also the United States, have rejected in international discussions at the meetings of the IWC. Today, all four of these countries kill and eat whales, although these hunts are classified and treated in different ways under the IWC guidelines. Thus, the choices made in the North Atlantic about the human relationship to nature conflict with values that an international community wishes to establish as normative. While the rhetoric of some pro-whaling organizations, such as the World Council of Whalers, claims that whale meat is an essential and necessary element in the North Atlantic diet, whaling is actually an in-

significant part of the North Atlantic economy, less than 2 percent of the GDP of any of the whaling nations. What is at stake in the whaling issue, however, is an expression of cultural values and national sovereignty.¹⁵ According to this argument, North Atlantic people have historically experienced a struggle for survival against the harsh realities of nature. Having survived this struggle, they as a nation have a different relationship with nature than foreign urban dwellers who are removed from the realities of life and death. Therefore, a person's national identity as an Icelander or Norwegian—although he or she lives in a major city, buys meat from the supermarket, and has never fished or whaled—endows this individual with certain rights, including the right to eat whale meat when it is served at a fashionable restaurant in Oslo. Furthermore, the opposition to the accepted position on whaling is an important piece of this identity in the political realm. Smaller nation-states consider it necessary to take a strong stance against what they perceive as unfair pressure from larger nation-states through the domination of the IWC; otherwise, they would appear manipulable, and their national sovereignty would be at risk.

As self-serving and politically motivated as this argument appears when it is elaborated in full, at its core is the long history of European debate about North Atlantic nature. Once again, one side understands the North Atlantic as a place of unique nature that, like a wilderness, must be preserved. The other side conceives of the animals of the North Atlantic as being similar to large game or domestic animals of other regions of the world, and routinely compares them to cattle, elk, kangaroos, and elephants in their efforts to argue that several species of the North Atlantic whale population are sustainable and should be subject to the same regulatory structures that facilitate the consumption of animals elsewhere in the world. The arguments of these pro-whaling advocates tend to shift the emphasis away from the whales, and focus instead on the characteristics of the people hunting or consuming whales. A Greenlandic indigenous rights activist, Finn Lynge, for example, claims that the indigenous peoples of Greenland intuit their connection to nature and perceive a direct relationship between their imagination and the landscape. He elaborates this argument into a defense of Inuit hunting practices against the opposition of international non-governmental organizations such as Greenpeace, claiming that, since the Inuit relationship with nature is not accessible to people who have separated their consciousness from the natural world, it is not morally legitimate for people operating within one type of relationship to nature to evaluate the actions of people operating within another.¹⁶

This understanding of the relationship between humans and nature in the North Atlantic is not fundamentally new, but is a reformulation of

the sentiment expressed in the poem by Auden and MacNeice: Nature does exist inside. North Atlantic nature is not understood from a transparent reading of a biological analysis of whale populations, but from a complex array of assumptions and expectations about the qualities of the place. Studying the history of these ideas helps to place such contemporary conflicts as the whaling debate in better context and to understand the driving forces behind the different positions. What has changed over the two-hundred-year history of this European discussion about North Atlantic nature is not so much the positions as the participants. Rather than European visitors commenting on nature in the distant hinterlands, the inhabitants of independent Iceland, Norway, and autonomous Greenland and the Faroes (with home rule governments within the Danish state) now have the voices to enter into debates about nature in their homelands.

Notes

¹ W. H. Auden and Louis MacNeice, *Letters from Iceland* (London, 1937), 260. On Auden's relationship to Iceland, see Sveinn Haraldsson, " 'The North Begins Inside': Auden, Ancestry and Iceland," in *Northern Antiquity: The Post-Medieval Reception of Edda and Saga*, ed. Andrew Wawn (Middlesex, 1994), 255–284.

² W. G. Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson, *A Pilgrimage to the Saga-Steads of Iceland* (Ulverston, 1899), v.

³ Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, 1994), 9.

⁴ Richard Burton, *Ultima Thule; or, A Summer in Iceland* (London, 1875).

⁵ Auden and MacNeice, *Letters from Iceland*, 38.

⁶ Burton, *Ultima Thule*, 295.

⁷ Niels Horrebow, *Tilforladelige efterretninger om Island* (Copenhagen, 1752). This quotation is from the English translation, *The Natural History of Iceland* (London, 1758), 19–20. An abridged version of Johann Anderson's *Nachrichten von Island, Grönland, und der Strasse Davis* (Hamburg, 1746) was translated into Danish in 1748.

⁸ I discuss one of these natural catastrophes, the 1783 volcanic eruptions in Iceland, and its contested interpretations in more detail in my "Imagining Iceland: Narratives of Nature and History in the North Atlantic," *The British Journal for the History of Science* 35, no. 3 (September 2002): 313–34.

⁹ Aspects of the National Socialist use of Viking symbolism and imagery are discussed in *The Waking of Angantyr: The Scandinavian Past in European Culture: Den nordiske fortid i europæisk kultur*, ed. Else Roesdahl and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen (Århus, 1996), in *The Source of Liberty: The Nordic contribution to Europe*, ed. Svenolof Karlsson, trans. Linda Schenek, et al. (Stockholm, 1992) and Ingemar Karlsson and Arne Ruth, *Samhället som teater: estetik och politik i Tredje riket (Society as Theater: Aesthetics and Politics under the Third Reich)*, (Stockholm, 1983), esp. pp. 98–105.

¹⁰ Auden and MacNeice, *Letters from Iceland*, 26. As Eugene Weber has pointed out, Europeans who traveled into their own provinces and compared conditions there with the urban centers also often experienced the sensation of having left Europe behind. The difference between the experience he describes and those of the Icelandic travelers is that the nature

and landscape of rural France and Germany were rarely thought of as “exotic,” and the general impressions are overall much less positive than those of the saga enthusiast who went to Iceland. See his *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914* (Stanford, 1976).

¹¹ Carl Julian Graba, *Tagbuch geführt auf einer Reise nach Färö im Jahre 1828* (Hamburg, 1830), 244. For Graba’s compatriot, the German legal scholar Konrad von Maurer, who visited Iceland in 1858, this was a particularly perplexing situation because von Maurer considered medieval Icelandic law to be an exemplar of European traditions. On the other hand, he noted the poor condition of Icelandic gardens and their lack of basic agricultural implements in his travel diary, published as *Íslandsferð 1858*, trans. Baldur Hafstað (Reykjavík, 1997), 44–45. Von Maurer’s main work on Iceland is a history of medieval Iceland, *Island von seiner ersten Entdeckung bis zum Untergange des Freistaats* (Munich, 1874) and a treatise on medieval Icelandic law, *Die Entstehung des Isländischen Staats und seiner Verfassung* (Munich, 1852).

¹² Some of the consequences of this “technological indebtedness” are considered by Skúli Sigurðsson, “The Dome of the World: Iceland, Doomsday Technologies and the Cold War,” in *Aspects of Arctic and Sub-Arctic History*, ed. Ingi Sigurðsson and Jón Skaptason, (Reykjavík, 2000), 463–473, and in his “Electric Memories and Progressive Forgetting,” in *The Historiography of Contemporary Science and Technology*, ed. Thomas Söderqvist (Amsterdam, 1997), 129–149. A general history of this period in Iceland is Valtur Ingimundarson, *Í eldlínu kalda stríðsins: Samskipti Íslands og Bandaríkjanna 1945–1960 (On the Firing Line of the Cold War: Relations between Iceland and the United States, 1945–1960)* (Reykjavík, 1996).

¹³ The tensions and place of the military base in Icelandic society during the Cold War is the subject of Einar Kárason’s black comedy *Djöflaeyjan rís (Devil’s Island)*, which was made into a film by Friðrik Þór Friðriksson in 1997.

¹⁴ E. Paul Durrenberger, “Epidemiology of Iceland on the Brain,” in *Icelandic Essays: Explorations in the Anthropology of Modern Life*, ed. E. Paul Durrenberger (Iowa City, 1992), 3.

¹⁵ The importance of whaling to North Atlantic identity politics is discussed by Eydun Andreassen, “Ordinary Europeans from Northern Norway to the Mediterranean: On Gender and Identity in the Faroe Islands” as well as by Stein R. Mathisen, “‘Real Barbarians Eat Whales’: Norwegian Identity and the Whaling Issue,” both in *Making Europe in Nordic Contexts*, ed. Pertti J. Anttonen (Turku, 1996), 77–104 and 105–136; Anne Brydon, “Whale-Siting: Spatiality in Icelandic Nationalism,” in *Images of Contemporary Iceland: Everyday Lives and Global Contexts*, ed. Gísli Pálsson and Paul Durrenberger (Iowa City, 1996), 25–45; Arne Kalland, “Management by Totemization: Whale Symbolism and the Anti-Whaling Campaign,” *Arctic* 46, No. 2 (June 1993): 124–133; Finn Lynge, *Arctic Wars, Animal Rights, Endangered Peoples*, trans. Marianne Stenbaek (Hanover, 1992); and Tom Nauerby, *No Nation is an Island: Language, Culture, and National Identity in the Faroe Islands* (Århus, 1996).

¹⁶ Lynge, *Arctic Wars*.