

Karen Oslund. *Iceland Imagined: Nature, Culture, and Storytelling in the North Atlantic*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011. xvi + 260 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-295-99083-5.



Reviewed by Kai Heidemann

Published on H-SAE (December, 2012)

Commissioned by Michael B. Munnik (Cardiff University)

For centuries, Iceland has occupied a peculiar place in the European imagination. It has appeared utterly familiar and proximate on the one hand, while simultaneously exotic and remote on the other. This striking contrast serves as the launching point for Karen Oslund's compelling and richly detailed book, *Iceland Imagined: Nature, Culture and Storytelling in the North Atlantic*. The book offers a historical exploration of how Iceland (as well as Greenland and the Faroe Islands) was discursively constructed through the narratives of European travelers, naturalists, scientists, and statesmen from the early eighteenth through mid-twentieth centuries. Through an analysis of various texts such as travel books, naturalist essays, governmental policy reports, missionary documents, and academic studies, Oslund illustrates how different sets of Europeans traveling to Iceland produced a Janus-like image of the island based upon a dichotomous narrative structure of "familiar/exotic."

Through clear and concise writing, Oslund does a commendable job of illustrating how this

structure was produced by European travelers as well as how it became periodically adopted and reinvented by residents of Iceland and the North Atlantic so as to cultivate a sense of place based upon a tension between notions of modernity and tradition. Perhaps one of the most compelling dimensions of Oslund's book is what her analysis tells us about Europe, Europeans, and the powerful Eurocentric category of "modernity." "By looking at the edges of Europe in the North Atlantic, we can understand what it means to be European by identifying which aspects of life on these borders traveling Europeans found to be exotic, strange and disconcerting" (p. 7). Ergo sum, by looking at the discursive construction of "the Other" we may then also understand how European travelers understood "the Self" in terms of what was recognizable and normal.

After an introductory discussion that provides some theoretical context, Oslund divides her book into five chapters oriented around four themes: nature, technology, language, and religion. While the first two chapters focus primarily

on Iceland, the third, fourth, and fifth focus on Greenland and the Faroe Islands, respectively. She then concludes her book by bringing her analysis of Iceland into the contemporary era.

Oslund writes that from the 1700s onward many European travelers had been “thinking, describing, classifying, imagining and writing about Iceland and the North Atlantic region with surprise and wonder about its ‘contradictions,’ ‘paradoxes’ and ‘extremes.’ Their stories, the reactions of the natives to their stories, and the consequences of these narratives and counter-narratives for the region, are the topic of this book” (p. 6). As a way to analyze and theorize on these discursive processes, Oslund initially looked to extant scholarship on “Orientalism” and “internal colonialism” so as to make sense of how the European gaze constructed Iceland and the North Atlantic as being situated simultaneously within the “modern” West and the “primitive” Third World. However, its geographical and ethno-cultural proximity to Europe blurred the boundary between what could constitute the familiar European Self and the exotic non-European Other. Oslund points out that this ambiguity in boundary construction was largely absent when Europeans developed colonial narratives about the places and peoples deemed geographically distant and culturally distinctive in territories such as Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Conversely, Iceland often appeared as a remote and harsh “outpost of European civilization” (p. 22). On the other hand, the endemic poverty, infrastructural underdevelopment, and volcanic subarctic landscapes were all aspects invoked by Europeans so as to render Iceland as an isolated, unusual, and often destitute territory destined for European exploration and intervention.

For Oslund, theories of internal colonialism based upon the premise of an exploitative center-periphery relationship are useful but also inadequate in explaining the ways in which Iceland was imagined. The reasons for this, she argues, lie

in the fact that while Danish dominion over Iceland was paternalistic it never really played a highly instrumental role in the development of the Danish nation-state, as was the case with regions such as Wales in the development of the United Kingdom or Brittany in France. Nevertheless, while Iceland was “too close” to Europe to be perceived as a primitive and exotic territory in need of colonization, it was also “too far” from modern Europe to be perceived as a modern equal capable of shaping its own national destiny. Thus, as Oslund shows, Europeans often approached Iceland as an untamed territory whose rugged countryside and impoverished peoples were in need of external management and guidance. While Oslund never clearly outlines an alternative theoretical framework, her critique of extant theories in the introduction does well to illustrate the importance of looking at cases which blur the boundaries of membership between the “core” or “developed” community of nations on the one hand, and the “peripheral” or “developing” nations on the other.

In the first and second chapters Oslund explores the central role played by the natural world in the narrative construction of Iceland. As Oslund explains, “The motifs of Icelandic nature were commonly viewed as literal signifiers of a folk history and a national history” (p. 46). In particular, she shows how European discourses came to imagine the Icelandic land and peoples as embodying both familiarity/proximity and difference/distance. In chapter 1 (“Icelandic Landscapes: Natural Histories and National Histories”), for example, she pays particular attention to how periodic volcanic eruptions and earthquakes influenced the imagining of Icelandic nationhood. Oslund explains how episodic natural disasters such as the famous Laki eruption of 1783 led Europeans to further view Iceland as a wild, unpredictable, untamable, and thus wholly unusual place. Such narratives about the volatile physical landscape then functioned to influence discourses about the cultural identity, economic circum-

stances, and national destiny of Icelanders. Oslund argues, for instance, that the perceived harshness of the subarctic landscape often served as a metaphorical reference for constructing narratives of Icelanders as proud, rugged, and obstinate peoples living in extraordinarily difficult conditions punctuated by famine and poverty. In this context, the island's inhabitants were often portrayed as the descendents of adventurous Vikings carrying European cultural heritage onward. Icelanders were also, however, construed as the perpetually unfortunate and impoverished non-modern Others in need of external assistance from a wide variety of European experts, planners, and authorities. The cultivation of this double narrative structure would have important consequences for how many Europeans interacted with Icelanders in a paternalistic manner as well as how Icelanders would come to claim ownership over their national landscape.

In chapter 2 ("Nordic by Nature: Classifying and Controlling Flora and Fauna"), Oslund explores how European experts and authorities engaged with Iceland's physical landscape through a long-running series of attempts to understand, manage, transform, and control its treacherous and undomesticated territory. The logic of these interventions, Oslund argues, was not only to render the island more livable for its inhabitants but also to make it more productive and linked in to the emergent system of modern capitalist economics. For example, Oslund points to Danish-led efforts to tame the Icelandic landscape through the introduction of "modern" technologies and agricultural methods linked to sheep and reindeer husbandry. Within this context, scientists and economic planners looked to import "European" methods already in use in places such as Denmark, Scotland, and Norway. Cadres of experts thus worked to de-exoticize the Icelandic landscape by insisting that the right agricultural methods could transform the island into a more productive and hence European-like territory. The island's wild and untamable qualities were, it was

argued, greatly exaggerated and no match for good scientific planning, thus further "shortening the distance between Iceland and Europe" (p. 79).

In chapters 3 through 5, Oslund leaves Iceland to explore the historical discursive construction of Greenland and the Faroe Islands. The context of Greenland stands in stark contrast to Iceland in that it was approached by Europeans (primarily the Danes) from a much more explicitly colonialist standpoint. In chapter 3 ("Mastering the World's Edges: Technology, Tools and Material Culture in the North Atlantic"), Oslund explains how Greenland, in contrast to Iceland, was perceived as an utterly foreign territory populated by an "uncivilized" and wholly non-European Other: the Inuit. While some of the earliest visits to Greenland in the modern era were intended to locate the "lost" Nordic communities which had settled on the western coast long ago, over time the European stance taken up toward Greenland was based largely on the strategic interests of Christian missionaries, scientific exploration, and economic exploitation. Of particular interest here is the link between European discourses on the technologies of exploration and exploitation and the Inuit inhabitants of the island. While the Inuit were typically approached as lacking civilization and modernity, they were nevertheless perceived as extraordinarily savvy and skilled in their exploitation of the "harsh" natural world in which they not only survived but thrived. According to Oslund, arctic explorers such as the famous Knud Rasmussesen (himself part Inuit) helped to develop a narrative about the ancient and masterful material culture forged by the Inuit over centuries. Inuit tools and techniques were thus viewed by Europeans as indispensable for their explorations of the island. Oslund explains that, despite this largely positive and empowering narrative about indigenous Inuit technologies, the Inuit people were still largely constructed from a classic colonialist position as a backward heathen population in need of both spiritual and scientific salvation by the more rational and advanced Eu-

ropeans. The dominant dichotomous narrative emerging about the Inuit was thus simultaneously paternalistic and romantic.

In chapter 4 (“Translating and Converting: Language and Religion in Greenland”), Oslund continues her discussion of Greenland by examining the narrative of linguists and missionaries. Oslund does particularly well in this chapter to illustrate how interest in Greenlandic by Europeans was linked to strategic efforts to dominate the land and peoples. While the early efforts of missionaries to translate Greenlandic were linked to a spiritual colonization of the Inuit, she argues, latter efforts to codify and classify the language were part of a broader project of scientific and intellectual domination. In both contexts, the Europeans creating knowledge about the Greenlandic languages depended on the insight and hospitality of the Inuit natives. Despite opening their culture to inspection from outsiders, however, the Inuit played little to no direct role in shaping the knowledge and narratives about their own language.

Chapter 5 (“Reading backward: Language and the Sagas in the Faroe Islands”) continues with the theme of language so as to explore how nationalism influenced processes of linguistic planning and policymaking in the Faroe Islands during the nineteenth century. Of particular concern here is the question of how the Faroese people would work to claim agency over their own language and national identity by distancing themselves from Danish political and linguistic influence. The story of Faroese as presented by Oslund thus provides a useful comparison to the Greenlandic context whereby the Inuit largely lacked agency in defining their own ethnolinguistic identity vis-à-vis Danish power. Part of the Faroese nation-building project entailed the construction of a unique Faroese language with distinctive lexical and grammatical features. In this context, Oslund illustrates how activists looked to Iceland for inspiration when cultivating a narrative about a

unique and singular Faroese national identity that was still embedded within a broader Scandinavian heritage. As they worked to shape their national identity through language planning and policymaking, the Faroese drew upon and participated in the discourses of modernity, thus becoming a part of Europe rather than moving apart from it.

In her epilogue (“Whales and Men”), Oslund returns to Iceland to provide a helpful contemporary view on the narrative construction of the North Atlantic. Her attention in this context is placed on discourses surrounding biotechnological research on the one hand and the whaling industry on the other. Oslund shows how Icelandic authorities and elites reproduced narratives on the uniqueness of their nation’s natural and cultural history so as to exercise sovereignty over scientific and economic policies concerning the controversial practices of genetic mapping and whaling. By articulating Iceland’s uniqueness in the name of self-determination, however, these power-brokers were also positioning Iceland as a legitimate part of the wider community of developed nations shaping the path of modern science and industry. This has reproduced the dichotomous discourse on Iceland, according to Oslund, as a nation that is both proximate to and utterly distinctive from the Eurocentric category of global modernity.

Oslund’s compelling book is a welcome addition to the relatively small field of English-language scholarship on Iceland and the North Atlantic regions of Greenland and the Faroe Islands. I highly recommend it to any scholar interested in the modern and early modern history of this part of the world. The book is an enjoyable read characterized by an impressive level of detail and elaboration, which stems from Oslund’s meticulous scholarship and superb authorial skills. Her focus on the power of Eurocentric narratives in shaping processes of nation-building in the global “periphery” also renders this text a most valuable

addition to cultural historical scholarship in the vein of Edward Said or Michael Herzfeld.[1] One shortcoming of this book, unfortunately, is that the author largely buries her theoretical framework after the introduction. While Oslund dazzles the reader with scrupulous empirical detail and sharp writing, she only rarely extrapolates beyond the North Atlantic context so as to position her analysis in a more explicit dialogue with the wider literature on the narrative construction of place.[2] The reader is thus often left to her/his own devices to make any broader connections. As a consequence, the relevance of this insightful book for scholars interested in similar themes within other parts of the world remains rather minimal.

Notes

[1]. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978); and Michael Herzfeld, *Ours Once More: Folklore, Ideology and the Making of Modern Greece* (New York: Pella Publishing, 1986).

[2]. Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996); Setha Low and Denise Lawrence-Zuiga, *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003); and Yi-Fu Yuan, "Language and the Making of Place: A Narrative Descriptive Approach," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 81, no. 4 (1991): 684-696.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-sae>

Citation: Kai Heidemann. Review of Oslund, Karen. *Iceland Imagined: Nature, Culture, and Storytelling in the North Atlantic*. H-SAE, H-Net Reviews. December, 2012.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37621>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.