

Icelandic-Canadian Memory Lore



Magnús Einarsson

ICELANDIC-CANADIAN MEMORY LORE

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ABSTRACT

This selection of 332 examples of Icelandic traditional poetry and other bound language contains children's rhymes, rigmaroles, riddles, lullabies and prayer verses, as well as adult lore such as dance and drinking songs, religious and humorous poems, plus proverbs and sayings. These texts are from a collection recorded in western Canada and two of the American border states, North Dakota and Washington, in the late 1960s.

RÉSUMÉ

Ce volume présente un choix de 332 pièces de poésie traditionnelle et de formes d'expression de la langue islandaise. Les comptines, les énumérations, les énigmes, les berceuses et les prières rimées y côtoient des pièces du folklore des adultes telles que les chansons à boire et à danser, les poèmes humoristiques et religieux, ainsi que les proverbes et les dictons. Ces textes sont tirés d'une collection de documents enregistrés à la fin des années 60 dans l'ouest du Canada et dans deux États américains limitrophes, le Dakota du Nord et Washington.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my thanks to C.C.F.C.S. ethnomusicologist Dr. Carmelle Bégin for her musical transcriptions; to Heather Hucul for making this material presentable for publication; to my supervisors, Drs. Stephen Inglis and Paul Carpentier, for their support and encouragement; and to my friends and colleagues, Dr. Robert Klymasz and M. Lucien Ouellet, for their advice and assistance. And, as always, I wish to express my deepest gratitude to my many friends and countrymen in the Icelandic-Canadian communities who gave so generously of their knowledge and hospitality.

ICELANDIC–CANADIAN MEMORY LORE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	III
Acknowledgements	V
Table of Contents	VII
Introductory Note	9
Transcription Symbols	15
Rhymes About Familiar Animals and Pets	
(1-12)	19
Rigmaroles	
(13-30)	33
Nonsense Rhymes	
(31-48)	77
Riddles	
(49-82)	99
Game Verses	
(83-86)	137
Rhymes About Grýla and Other Scary Figures	
(87-99)	143
Lullabies and Soothers	
(100-105)	163
Prayer Verses	
(106-112)	171
Drinking Songs	
(113-119)	181
Dances and Reels	
(120-130)	191
Humour and Satire	
(131-135)	207

Narrative Poems	
(136-140)	215
Mock Narratives	
(141-142)	241
Proverbs and Sayings	
(143-332)	245
Music Transcriptions (Carmelle Bégin, Ph. D.)	299
Notes	319
Key to Abbreviations in Notes	349
Index of Tale Types	353
List of Informants and Their Contributions	357
Map	359

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

This volume contains a selection of traditional Icelandic poetry and proverbs collected during the second half of the 1960s in the Icelandic communities of western Canada and two of the American border states, North Dakota and Washington.

Much of this material is what in the English speaking world would be regarded as nursery lore, while the remainder is adult entertainment, religious and wisdom lore. I am calling all of this material, regardless of age-group affiliation, 'memory lore' because it has ceased to have much life outside of individual memory.¹ There are, of course, exceptions. A mother or, more likely, a grandmother will recite and try to teach a child a rhyme or a prayer verse if the primary language in the home is still Icelandic. And, at occasional gatherings where conviviality is enjoyed in robust measure, a song may still be heard in praise of women, wine and noble steeds. Likewise, proverbs may occasionally find their way into conversation. However, this type of formal Old Country lore, so dependant upon the language skills of performer and audience, and so readily replaceable with English language entertainment lore (oral as well as printed), increasingly falls on deaf ears among my informants' younger compatriots. What was once a shared experience is becoming more and more an individual memory experience.

Other reasons have been offered in my hearing for the decline of traditional lore in oral circulation in the Icelandic communities. Modern child-rearing theories discouraged the frightening or misleading of children with Old Wives' tales, and progressive members of the community frowned on the open display of this kind of "old-fashioned" peasant lore for fear of incurring mainstream ridicule. Also, and perhaps more importantly, women very likely had less time in North America to pass formally bound, and sometimes long and difficult, texts on to their children, at least during the early homesteading period. Life in Iceland, the argument goes, had been hard, but working life was set into predictable rhythms with established rest periods

¹ Folktales and other international entertainment narratives included in the first volume of this series, ICELANDIC-CANADIAN ORAL NARRATIVES (Hull, Quebec; Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1991) also fall under the rubric of memory lore, and for the same reasons.

that allowed for the sharing and teaching of folklore as well as other more important matters. There is probably much truth in all of this, but what must also be considered to be a critical factor is that many family elders, who normally would have taken up the slack as teachers, had chosen to remain in the Old Country, leaving their children's Canadian-born offspring without ready access to this type of lore, thus hastening its demise by a generation. Then, on the other side of the coin, the immigrants' children, and especially their grandchildren, became less and less receptive to this lore as language skills declined and Icelandic came to be increasingly spoken and understood as a foreign language. While words continued to be understood, their metaphorical tenor relating to history and culture, and especially values and feelings, became increasingly obscure and ceased to be able to enchant in the same way that similar English language materials now could.

Still, it can be argued that memory lore has had an important role to play. For my informants, whether born in Iceland or Canada, it has been a source of emotional comfort and readily available private entertainment that they can return to at will. One informant told me he recited rhymes and verses while doing monotonous farm chores, and another, having lost much of her vision, recited rigmaroles to pass the time when she was no longer able to read.

Also, at a community level, this material, along with other surviving Old Country artifacts and mentifacts, has taken on a certain symbolic value. Although most of the middle-aged and younger Icelandic-Canadians I met on my collecting trips didn't know this lore, many knew of it and knew people who knew some of the texts. The attitude of this younger set of informants toward this material was ambivalent, showing touches of embarrassment and patronizing amusement but also affection and respect. What seems to happen with mentifacts, as it does so obviously with artifacts, is that once they become separate from their original function and meaning, they are reinvented as souvenirs of a bygone age, and especially as icons or markers of ethnic identity. While this is indeed not as obvious with mentifacts as with artifacts I have interviewed enough informants to know that similar attitudes exist toward both kinds of materials. The text as objectified fact and vehicle of sentiment becomes more important than the text as a vehicle of entertainment and meaning.

The importance of this material for me as a folklorist is that it is an integral part of the overall Icelandic-Canadian folklore complex and it can't be left out of a representative collection. It is, of course, also instructive to look at this material and compare it with what exists in similar collections gathered in Iceland, to see what has been retained and what has been abandoned, and why. (This is a study that must be put on hold for another day, but, in general, the other great change in Icelandic-Canadian folklore, aside from symbolization, has been simplification, meaning that shorter and simpler texts have had a better chance of surviving the immigrant experience. This will become more apparent in my third volume dealing with occasional

poetry. A third type of change, much apparent in the first volume of narratives², involves an emphasis on realism and an interest in individual experience rather than that which is fictional and non-specific.) On a more applied level, I see this material having value as a part of a resource package for anyone interested in Icelandic and Icelandic-Canadian language and culture. My special hope, however, is that this collection, recorded as it is from Icelandic-Canadian sources will be of use to young Icelandic-Canadians interested in exploring their own ancestral culture.

The texts in this volume fall basically into three parts. The first part consists of children's rhymes and riddles. The second part consists of adult entertainment and religious lore, and the third part consists of proverbs which should also be considered as adult lore. I have left out many items that I know or suspect to have been memorized directly from books but left in other items that, while they existed in print during the informant's upbringing, were, nevertheless, learned from oral sources. That also goes for the dance songs (nos. 120-130) which almost certainly first saw the light of day in print in pamphlets or magazines (many translated from Danish) but were quickly memorized and passed into oral circulation among the youngsters in the turn-of-the-century fishing villages of Iceland. This type of popular lore was so obviously an integral part of the repertoire of people who emigrated in the period between 1900 and 1914 that I felt it had to be included. This material reflects the big change that was then well under way in Iceland; namely, the move from country to seaside village.

My original intention was for this volume to contain only nursery lore, but it soon became obvious that my term 'memory lore' had a broader scope. Satirical and humorous poems, drinking verses, prayers, religious poems, and dance songs had to be included as well; that is, not just the lore of childhood, but also the lore of later years. To place all of this material under this rubric is risky. All of it has existed in oral circulation in Canada, at least for the immigrant generation and its children and, occasionally, its grandchildren. However, by the time I came upon the scene as a collector in the mid-1960s, it was largely confined to memory. One might describe the state of the rest of Icelandic-Canadian folklore at that time in a similar fashion, but with the difference that the verses and anecdotes and other reality-based lore was still being shared within a given age group. The memory lore, on the other hand, was only very occasionally being passed 'down' to grandchildren, and laterally among peers, almost certainly, never. People might still be interested in hearing and even learning a clever lampoon or a ghost story from a friend or a neighbor, but no one would bother passing along or learning a rímarole or a folktale, unless specifically asked by those of us with a strong antiquarian interest.

A few words about my informants. Most of them are known from my previous volume (cited above) in this series. The large majority, 31 out of 43, were born in Iceland. Of these, slightly more than half (17) were from the north of the country.

² Op. cit.

were born in the eastern part, four in the southwest, and three in the northwest. Only one came from the inland agricultural region of the south. Most were children and teenagers when they arrived. Five of them were 5 years of age or under; four were between 5 and 10; five were between 10 and 15; and another five were between 15 and 20. Eight, however, were between 20 and 30; two were between 30 and 40; and only one was over 50 when she arrived from the southern quarter of the island.

The near-even gender spread was somewhat surprising. Only slightly more than half, or 23 out of 43, of my informants were women while 17 were men. I expected, for no very good reason, that there would be a much higher percentage of women informants. Specifically, I did not expect to find any men reciting *rigmaroles*. This is, generally speaking, a woman's genre but obviously not exclusively so. On the other hand, I had not expected to find women reciting or singing drinking songs, but this, in fact, turned out to be less uncommon than men reciting *rigmaroles*.

The numerical distribution of items I classify as memory lore was as expected. 37 informants recorded 10 or fewer items. Three informants recorded between 10 and 21 items. One informant, Mr. Valdimar Johnson, recorded 56 items, while Mr. Gunnlaugur Holm recorded 144 separate items, most of them proverbs. These two informants, as well as Mrs. Sigurveig Sveinsson, differed from the other informants, not only in terms of the number of items contributed but also in the nature of their interest. All of them, especially Mr. Holm and Mr. Johnson, made a special effort, in their spare time, to collect rhymes, riddles and proverbs. Mr. Johnson kept a notebook with the texts he had recorded, and Mr. Holm had also written down, and even alphabetized, his proverb collection. However, both men were very clear about what was their own personal repertoire, and what was learned from other recent sources. The texts I acquired from Mrs. Sveinsson came to me via a long, informative letter after our initial encounter.

One final statistical note: over half of my informants, 23 of them, were from the New Iceland region of Manitoba (along the southwestern shore of Lake Winnipeg), the home of the greatest concentration of Icelandic speakers in North America. Three other informants were residents of Winnipeg and southern Manitoba, plus one from near Lundar, also in Manitoba. Six informants resided in the Lake Settlements of Saskatchewan, an area just south of the Quill Lakes. Five informants lived in Vancouver; two resided in Blaine, Washington; and three in Pembina County in North Dakota.

The informants of this type of traditional lore were, of course, all of different background and outlook, but they shared certain characteristics. They were, by and large, people whom neighbors would refer to as being "good Icelanders" (= *góðir Íslendingar*). All of them spoke good Icelandic and made a point of staying in touch with Iceland and all things Icelandic. Many had been back to Iceland on one or more occasions, mostly on charter flights that began in the early 1950s.

While the value of these “good Icelanders” as bearers of the Old Country culture has been invaluable, their knowledge is now largely unshareable, and their role, like so many other Old Country facets of ethnic life, has become symbolic. With their passing, in fact, one can see the demise of an active Icelandic culture in North America. Fortunately, however, that is not, of course, the end of the story, since the culture of the immigrant generation and their children has given rise to a uniquely Icelandic-Canadian culture. This ‘new’ cultural complex which has been gradually replacing the old, almost from the beginning, is reliant on the Old Country culture for most of its symbols and rituals of identity, and that includes texts such as the ones included in this volume. Whether they exist only in the minds of “good Icelanders” or in print, sitting on a parlour shelf, they retain their value, along with an array of other markers and identity icons, as symbols of this new culture—Canadian in content and intent, and Icelandic in look and form. On a qualitative, personal level, however, the greatest value of these texts lies in the pleasure and comfort they give to the few who are still able to enjoy them not merely as symbols or souvenirs but as vehicles of imaginative transport.

A few words about the translation. I tried where I could to translate line by line, rather than verse by verse, and I tried to have each line retain its original word order. I tried, likewise, since I see this as documentary resource material, to avoid being overly artistic. I sincerely hope, however, that someone will, in fact, volunteer their service in making these texts artistically more appealing for a general readership.

Hull, Quebec, 1992

WORK CITED

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TRANSCRIPTION SYMBOLS

The texts in this volume are recorded directly from my informants' oral rendition. In order to transfer the text to the page in an orderly and readable fashion, I have relied on the following symbols:

[. . .] and [. . . .]	= editor's deletion;
. . . and	= informant's ellipsis;
. .	= incomplete word;
—	= hesitation;
. .—	= incomplete word followed by hesitation;
. or	= incomplete word followed by informant's ellipsis;
/ /	= probable, but not clearly-heard, words.

Incomplete words shown in the English text are based on a translation of what I surmise the complete Icelandic word would be. When unable to determine the meaning of a partial word in the original text, I have transferred the Icelandic word fragment, intact, to the English text.

**RHYMES ABOUT FAMILIAR
ANIMALS AND PETS**

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1

Fuglinn í fjörunni,
hann heitir már.
Silkibleik er húfan hans
og gult undir hár.
Er sá fuglinn ekki smár,
bæði digur og fótahár.
Á bringunni svartur-- á bakinu svartur,
á bringunni grár.
Bröltir hann oft í snörunni,
fuglinn í fjörunni.

* * * * *

The bird on the beach
His name is Gull.
His cap is silky pale
And the hair under is yellow.
This bird is not small,
Both stout and long-legged.
His chest is black-- his back is black,
His chest is gray.
He often tumbles about in the snare;
The bird on the beach.

Mrs. Hrund Skúlason
Winnipeg, Manitoba

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