

ALDA SIGMUNDSDÓTTIR

THE LITTLE  
BOOK OF THE  
ICELANDERS

VOL. 1

50 miniature essays on the quirks  
and foibles of the Icelanders.



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## INTRODUCTION

**D**issecting the psyche of a nation is a daunting task. It is also doomed to failure. It's completely impossible to make a claim about "the Icelanders" without someone popping up and saying, "Yes but ... but ... but ... I'm not like that!"

"I don't drive like a bandit!" "I'm not crap at hitting on women!" "I don't invite 100 people to my birthday parties and pay for all the booze myself!" "I don't mix up my v's and w's!" "I know how to have conversations with people!"

All of which will be true. Which is why we need to get something out of the way right now: this book is stuffed with sweeping generalizations and subjective opinions, armchair philosophies and random musings. No special studies were carried out in the writing of this book. And when I refer to "the Ice-

landers” I do so completely generically – though I do like to think those statements will apply to at least a handful of Icelanders. Ideally the majority.

I moved back to Iceland in 1994. At the time I’d just crawled into my thirties and had lived abroad more or less since the age of five. I had a passable command of Icelandic and no telling accent, an Icelandic name, and passed for a native in most respects. But make no mistake: I was a foreigner. Granted, I had “my people” here, but since I had not grown up with them they were effectively strangers. And since I’d not been a part of the Icelandic school system (apart from three hazy years between the ages of seven and ten) I didn’t belong to any groups or cliques or even sewing circles, which are ubiquitous among Icelandic women. This set me quite distinctively apart from most Icelanders, who tend to form those sorts of groups in elementary or secondary school.

Because I had all the trappings of a normal Icelander, I was instantly regarded as “one of us”. But having been socialized on a different continent, I was completely ignorant of the social mores and standards that prevailed in Icelandic society. This garnered me some pretty strange looks and even hostile reactions in those early days. I can still remember sitting in the coffee room at work one day, less than a year after moving back. It was in the first days of January and everyone was talking about what they’d served

for dinner on New Year's Eve. I said I'd cooked some *ýsa*, or halibut. The room went silent and suddenly all eyes were on me. Some people fidgeted and looked uncomfortable. I was stunned. *What exactly did I say?*

What I did not know then was that Icelanders do not eat mundane food like *ýsa* on New Year's Eve. (Not even if they cook it in an extra-special way, like I did.) Both Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve are steeped in tradition in Iceland, and according to that tradition people need to cook something out of the ordinary on those days, and that does not include *ýsa*. Indeed, the main course planned for Christmas or New Year's Eve is a popular topic of conversation all through December. It's the sort of thing you talk about at Christmas parties. When you run out of things like the weather.

Tradition is of extreme importance to the Icelanders. So is conforming. First after moving back I rented a basement apartment from a lady who lived on the upper floor in the same house. She chose me from among several prospective tenants (rental properties were pretty hard to come by at the time, and in fact still are) because, as she put it, "we just want to have people like us living here." It was put forth in a perfectly sweet and amiable manner, and describes rather well the prevailing sentiment in Icelandic society, where that which comes from outside is usually just a little bit uncomfortable. Alas, she found out to her dismay that I was not

much like her at all, and I think it upset her worldview a little bit – at least temporarily.

Incidentally, I don't think most Icelanders realize to what extent those unwritten rules and standards govern their lives. Which I guess is normal – much in the way fish don't know they're wet. There is a collective need in Iceland to stand together and not rock the boat – something that is largely unconscious and which has served the Icelanders well throughout the ages, when people's very survival depended on everyone doing just that. It also provides a sense of comfort and security that is good in many ways. There is something inherently good and lovely in many of the traditions and cultural norms that prevail, like wrapping yourself in a warm blanket. But, like many other sources of comfort, there is a line you can cross, and when you do those things suddenly become limiting and even oppressive.

Yet while most Icelanders do not realize the impact of all those unwritten rules upon their lives, they do recognize the value of going abroad to live for a longer or shorter period. Indeed, the Icelandic word for “stupid” is *heimskur*, which is derived from the word *heima*, or “home”. The person who is *heimskur* is the person who has not left home.

A few words about the structure of this book. There isn't one. When I sat down and decided to write it I basically just wrote down 50 things that I thought were kind of quirky about the Icelanders, and went from there. Afterward I

thought I probably should have tried grouping things in a more organized fashion, with special chapters focusing on different aspects, like NATIONAL PSYCHE or QUIRKS or TRADITIONS or whatever, but the thought of going back and reworking things to fit into that sort of model seemed to me kind of daunting. More importantly, I thought it might kill all the spontaneity. (Or maybe I was just lazy.) I've made a cursory nod in that general direction by at least trying to cluster things together in some kind of order, albeit with limited results, I fear. Meaning that most of this stuff is pretty random. Also, advance apologies: I seem to have been a little bit obsessed with names and things to do with names ... I have no idea why, but there are several blurbs with that sort of focus.

Finally, even though I may sometimes come across as harsh on my fellow countrymen (yes *men*, because in Iceland, women are men), I would like to say that the Icelanders are still my favourite people in the whole world. And even though they do sometimes do stupid things (like orchestrate the largest financial collapse in the history of the world) I wouldn't want to belong to any other nation of people.



## THE INDEPENDENCE THING

The Icelanders are a literary bunch. They love books and are deeply proud of their literary heritage, not least their Nobel laureate for literature, the late Halldór Laxness. Many people feel that, in his work, Laxness managed to capture the soul of the Icelanders better than anyone else.

If there is one book more frequently mentioned than any others in this regard it is Laxness's *Independent People*, the story of the peasant farmer Bjartur í Sumarhúsum (Bjartur of Summerhouses) and his obstinate struggle to lead an independent life. Bjartur is often spoken of as being synonymous with the Icelandic people, because if there is one thing that reflects the core of the Icelanders it is their deeply-rooted desire for independence and their fear of servility.

This quality manifests in myriad ways. One of the most obvious at the moment is the profound dread some people have of joining the European Union. The older generation – those old enough to remember the Danish colonial masters, or at least the collective sense of freedom when the shackles were finally cast off in 1944 – is particularly opposed to EU membership. (Also exceedingly antagonistic are those groups that stand to lose interest or power if the country were to join, such as farmers or owners of the fishing quotas. But that is another story.)

Another manifestation is the Icelandic propensity to own

rather than rent property. This is deeply ingrained into the Icelandic psyche. Most Icelanders own their own homes – though there has been a shift in that regard in the wake of the economic collapse. The rental market has traditionally been very small in Iceland, and renting is almost always considered an interim solution – either before being solvent enough to buy, or in between home purchases. Owning your own property is considered synonymous with security.

Icelanders are also notorious for being at the last minute. (More on that later.) This applies to everything from showing up at an appointment to booking a summer holiday. I have often wondered whether this is to do with a curious and insidious fear of commitment that seems to plague many Icelanders ... but then, the fear of commitment is, essentially, the fear of losing independence. For example, if you commit to a holiday that's supposed to happen nine months from now, you're effectively restricting your independence, right?

I could go on – but instead I'll let some of the observations in this book speak for themselves. Happy reading!