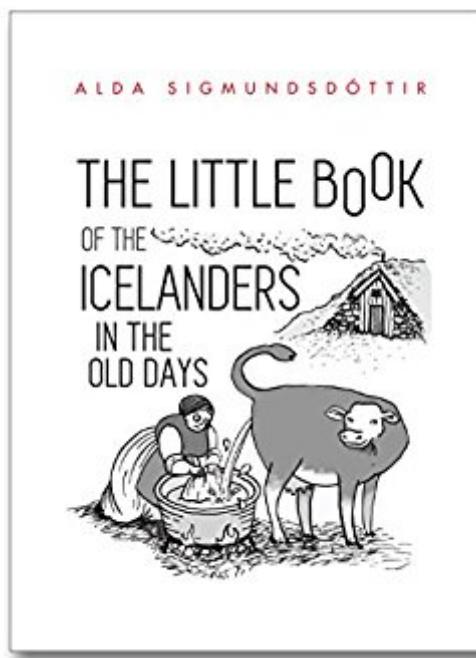


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The Little Book Of The Icelanders In The Old Days



Synopsis

Iceland in centuries past was a formidable place to live. Situated in the North Atlantic Ocean, on the edge of the inhabitable world, the nation was both isolated and abjectly poor. Centuries of colonisation translated into oppression and subjugation from the colonial overlords, and a hostile climate and repeated natural disasters meant that mere survival was a challenge to even the hardest of souls. In these 50 miniature essays, Alda Sigmundsdottir writes about the Icelanders in centuries past in a light and humourous way, yet never without admiration and respect for the resilience and strength they showed in coping with conditions of adversity that are barely imaginable today. Their ways of interacting with the natural world are described, as are their sometimes tragic, sometimes ingenious, means of dealing with maltreatment and injustice from the church and other rulers. These forms of oppression include a trade monopoly imposed by Denmark that lasted nearly two centuries, a ban on dancing that lasted for a similar length of time, the forced dissolution of households when the breadwinner of the family died, the tyranny of merchants granted exclusive right to trade with the Icelanders, and the dreaded decrees of the Grand Judgement - a court of law that was set up to punish various offenses, real or imagined. Yet it is not only the “big picture” that is described in this book, but also the various smaller aspects that shed light on the daily life of the Icelanders of old. These include their ingenious ways of coping with lack, of preserving food, of finding shelter, of creating or admitting light into their homes, as well as the innumerable and sometimes wacky superstitions attached to various life events, big and small. The hilarious customs of hospitality and visiting are also described, as are some of the sexual activates of Icelanders in the past, their belief in elves and hidden people, sexual interactions with hidden people (!), ways of dealing with grief, interactions with foreigners, and much, much more.

Today, Iceland is a modern, cosmopolitan place, with one of the highest standards of living in the world. Yet less than a century ago, this paragon of equality and peace was the poorest society in Europe. The conditions of life described in this book are therefore not very distant from the Icelanders today, and many of the aspects described are still very much reflected in Iceland’s unique culture. For example, the harsh climate and isolation of the past meant that there was a serious lack of grains for food. Consequently the Icelanders devised ways to make breads and cakes that used very little flour. The Icelandic “pancake”, similar to a French crepe, is still very much a part of traditional Icelandic celebrations, as is the “laufabraud” - a wafer-thin, deep-fried bread that is traditionally eaten at Christmas. The Icelandic language is also rich with throwbacks to the past - for instance the Icelandic word for “windfall” is “hvalreki” which literally means “beached

whale – this because a single beached whale in the old days was usually enough to feed an entire district, or one household for a full year, something that was immensely welcome in a country where food was in short supply. In short, The Little Book of the Icelanders in the Old Days is not only a funny, witty and wise expose on the Icelanders' daily life in the past, it is also essential to understanding the Icelandic national character today.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

My great-grandparents came from Denmark, and family lore says that one relative went exploring in Greenland. So my kids used to say we really came from Iceland. Because my 4th son in particular loved this claim, I bought him this book. It's a nice summary of life in Iceland before the most recent ice age, when people lived in large communal turf houses, and reputedly the land was covered in forests. This book is well written and light hearted, while still being informative. It is a relatively small paperback, thus the nomenclature "Little Book" is appropriate.

Did you know that there is a compound verb in the Icelandic language (boriðfæða) that literally means “left outside somewhere to die”. That this was something common enough in the Iceland of centuries past to warrant the creation of its own verb? This is just one of the many, many fascinating facts presented in Alda Sigmundsdottir’s wonderful work *The Little Book of the Icelanders in the Old Days*. Consisting of 50 short essays, the reader is taken on a cultural journey of how Icelanders eked out a living on this often-harsh island centuries ago, covering their daily habits, beliefs, and idiosyncrasies (and there are plenty). If you’re like me and have read a number of the Icelandic Sagas, and wondered just what details might have been left out of those tales, well, look no further. Well-researched and written in a light, engaging tone (there is plenty of humor in this book), *The Little Book of the Icelanders in the Old Days* is a welcome addition for anyone interested in the history of Icelandic culture and folklore.

The Little Book of the Icelanders in the Old Days is an enlightening view of the life our Icelandic ancestors led. The crowded conditions in homes and the legal structure of society made life difficult. If that is the only life you know, it may not seem as hard as when I compare it to the way we live today. The struggles with land and climate resulted in interesting superstitions to explain things, especially the death superstitions. The stories are well written and keep you interested in the next one. This is a good read.

The little book is a great way to get a condensed history of the daily life of Icelanders. Fascinating bits, well-presented, but not belabored! Loved it! Shared it with family members.

A wonderful little book. Funny but also proud and affectionate. I wholeheartedly agree with the reviewer who praised the epilogue. What comes through strongly is the story or feeling of hope within the Icelandic people. My only complaint is that the book could be longer!! Also, there was virtually no mention of music, and yet - if my experience is anything to go by - it is the seemingly endless parade of brilliant musicians and composers that both fascinates and delights millions of people around the world: Sigur Ros; Bjork; Emiliana Torrini; Olafur Arnalds; Johann Johannsson; Bardi Johannsson; Asgeir; Amiina; Jon Leifs ... what the heck is in the water up there!?

The book is an easy read, told on a humorous tone, good enough to give the reader basic insight

into the lives of Icelanders back in the old days. There were a few temporal references, but I would have wanted more dates in some parts of the book, (which would not have risked turning the book into a history treatise). In addition, I found the humour to be a bit too "colloquial" at times, and by the end of the book I developed an allergy to phrases like "the Iceland of old, the Iceland of yonder," etc. - used much too often - so often that it disrupted the flow of reading for me.

I read this book to my kids while touring Iceland last week - they all loved it, from the 5 year old to the 12 year old... there are a couple parts I had to skip over for content but, for the most part, it is the perfect accompaniment to a trip around Iceland. I really appreciated that the book focused on the every day lives of ordinary folks - not just a history of bishops and lords.

Never read it but like the idea of the book. I still have it on my shelf and might read it...one day.

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