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Esbjörn Rosenblad and Rakeł Sigurðardóttir-Rosenblad's *Iceland: From Past to Present* [Review]

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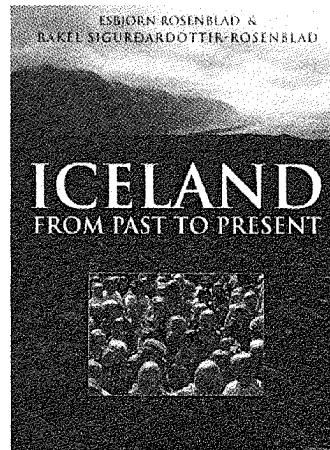
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ICELAND FROM PAST TO PRESENT

*By Esbjörn Rosenblad and Rakel
Sigurðardóttir-Rosenblad.*

*Translated by Alan Crozier. Reykjavík: Mál
og menning, 1993. Pp. xxi, 438.*

Reviewed by Anne Brydon.

Judging by the number of foreign-language books on Icelandic history and culture found in Reykjavík bookshops, explaining Iceland to outsiders seems to be as much a national pursuit as drinking coffee or talking about the weather. A reader might be forgiven for showing scant enthusiasm when handed another such book: at least, that was my initial reaction. Yet soon after an initial flipping through pages, I became engrossed in looking favourite subjects up to see how well the authors handle them. For the most part, I found the results satisfying.

I have enjoyed reading *Iceland from Past to Present* and am delighted by the straightforward and intelligent quality of its writing. Having examined many books of its type, I would rank it the best English-language introduction to Icelandic history and society written for a general audience.

Chapter One, "Historical and cultural background," surveys Iceland's history, with special attention to the Commonwealth era (pre-1262) and the begin-

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nings of nationalist politics (beginning ca. 1830). The intervening years are less thoroughly documented, but this reflects an area of relative neglect in historical scholarship and is nothing for which this book can be faulted. The authors do an excellent job of balancing their account between discussions of intriguing and influential personalities on the one hand, and of social and cultural forces on the other hand.

Chapters Two and Three, 'Eddas and sagas' and 'Folk beliefs and folktales,' present familiar material with an engaging freshness. Some stories are related in detail, while others are placed in the context of a detailed overview. Chapter Four, "The cultural heritage as a source of inspiration," surveys the art, literature, and music of the 20th century, with primary emphasis on established artists such as Halldór Laxness and Johannes Kjarval. But more recent achievements are also documented, such as the paintings of the prolific Erró and the American-based Louisa Matthíasdóttir. Translations of poems intersperse the text of this chapter.

Chapters 5 through 10, comprising half the book, provide an excellent, up-to-date account of contemporary Icelandic society. Unlike most nationalist accounts, this book takes an international perspective on issues such as NATO and security policy, ecological problems, the cooperative movement, foreign debt, and foreign affairs. This perspective may be a product of the Swedish background of one author (Esbjörn has lived in Iceland since 1977 and served in the Royal Swedish Embassy), although it also reflects the more international outlook of younger generations of Icelanders. The economy and politics are clearly described with reference to current considerations.

The absence of any discussion of the women's movement is one disappoint-

ment. Neither is there any discussion of social problems or reference to issues which are hotly debated within present-day Iceland. The authors aim for and achieve a smooth, unruffled portrait of their beloved country. New insights from specialists are frequently introduced into discussions of less heated topics. The authors attempt a balanced view in certain areas of controversy, such as the question of Icelandic ethnic origins, or the radiocarbon-dating of settlement-era archaeological finds. This attention to differing opinions is to be commended.

Despite the book's emphasis on informed discussion, nowhere does the text become dry or overly detailed. The authors have a talent for educating and entertaining the reader simultaneously. Endnotes to each chapter provide additional information for those wishing to pursue a particular topic. An extensive bibliography of books in English (only a few journal articles are cited) will be useful for students of all ages. The listing of films, both silent and contemporary, is a wonderful addition.

Unlike the usual high cost of Icelandic books, this hardcover text is available for the reasonable price of 2.394 Ikr. (US \$33.50). Whatever the gift-giving occasion; consider this book as a present for that person you know suffers from, in Sir Richard Burton's phrase, "Iceland on the brain."

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