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Abstract: The focus of this paper is on the portrayal of the medieval Icelandic Commonwealth and Icelandic saga literature in travel books published before the mid-point of the Victorian era (1869) by British and American visitors to Iceland. The period has been termed the 'heroic age of Icelandic travel' and by the end of the 1860s this heroic age was considered by contemporaries to be over. A regular monthly steamship service between Edinburgh and Reykjavík, running March to October, had been established in 1858, and in a book published in 1867 J. Ross Browne claimed, one suspects with exaggeration, that 'A trip to Iceland nowadays is little more than a pleasant summer excursion'.

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Early British and American Travel Writers and the Lure of Medieval Iceland and Its Sagas

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The focus of this paper is on the portrayal of the medieval Icelandic Commonwealth and Icelandic saga literature in travel books published before the mid-point of the Victorian era (1869) by British and American visitors to Iceland. The period has been termed the ‘heroic age of Icelandic travel’ and by the end of the 1860s this heroic age was considered by contemporaries to be over. A regular monthly steamship service between Edinburgh and Reykjavík, running March to October, had been established in 1858, and in a book published in 1867 J. Ross Browne claimed, one suspects with exaggeration, that ‘A trip to Iceland nowadays is little more than a pleasant summer excursion’.

A published bibliography has identified twenty-eight books of Icelandic travel published in English (mostly in Britain) between the second half of the eighteenth century and the end of the 1860s, but some of these were translations from other European languages (notably the notoriously unflattering account by the Viennese Ida Pfeiffer, published in seemingly quite independent translations on either side of the North Atlantic in 1852). Others are clearly the work of writers who never journeyed any closer to Iceland than their library. The *bona fide* British and American travellers are diverse, and towards the end of the period included men (there were no women among them) of more modest means and professional travel writers. But many were English or Scottish gentlemen of independent means, or people in the service of such patrons.

Their reasons for travel to Iceland were also varied, but until near the end of the period primary motivating forces tended to be a spirit of adventure and a wish to encounter the exotic and practically unknown, a desire for a respite from civilisation, or a wish to conduct research in geology or natural history. Early writers might be well read in Continental European scholarship relating to Iceland, and well informed about the origins and history of the Icelandic Commonwealth (by the standards of an era which usually accepted *Landnámabók* and the sagas as trustworthy historical sources). They might express admiration for the medieval ‘constitution’, and regret at how matters had sadly changed in Iceland (though unlike some twentieth century Iceland enthusiasts they did not discern strong democratic elements in the medieval Commonwealth). They tended at least to mention that Iceland had a considerable literature dating from the medieval period, and noted the custom of reading aloud from this literature in peasant households; and some discussed the literature at length, though without any reverential awe. What interest they displayed was far more in the poetic heritage – the *Poetic Edda* rather than the skaldic verse – than in the prose. Some mention in passing that medieval Icelandic literature is of considerable quality; others, such as William Jackson Hooker,

who visited Iceland in 1809, display an attitude that would not seem remarkable in the work of a Victorian anthropologist discussing the oral traditions of a newly encountered African tribe.

By the 1860s attitudes were clearly changing, although older ones had not entirely disappeared. Clearly evident is the idea of travel to Iceland as a pilgrimage to the onetime homeland of a dynamic and venerable culture which had nurtured men and women of the noblest kind, and produced one of the great literatures of the world. Intimately related in the minds of most of those who admired medieval Iceland, was the further idea that this culture was part of the racial heritage of nineteenth century Anglo-Saxons, who could and should claim kinship with medieval Icelanders. A growing interest in the previously rather neglected *Íslendingasögur* is evident, though in an era when English translations of sagas were still few, Eddaic poetry is still at least as strong a focus of interest. One encounters strong enthusiasm for the Old North as exemplified by medieval Iceland, and even some gentle and friendly mockery of the more extreme forms the enthusiasm could take. But while a visit to Iceland could evoke reverential awe at stepping where saga heroes once trod, the reality of nineteenth century Iceland and nineteenth century Icelanders could also be depressing for the pilgrim. ‘Icelandophile’ travellers of the period faced the dilemma which would challenge admirers of Nordic greatness for decades after their time: if it was to the Nordic element in their genetic heritage that Englishmen ‘owe most of their dash, their love of enterprise, their frankness, their liberty’, as Frederick Metcalfe wrote in 1863, why were the contemporary Scandinavian nations not in the forefront of Europe’s industrial and economic development, and in the creation of empires which would spread their values throughout the world?

Reference:

Travels in 19th Century Iceland: Sources/Bibliography

<http://www.northernlite.ca/19thcenturyiceland/sources/bibliography.htm>