

puzzlement into enthrallment is missing.

Which is a shame. "In the end, only Freeland is real," says Hannibal. It is testimony to the fertility of Leithauser's

imagination that readers may accept this proposition even as they wish Freeland were real enough to have inspired a book other than this one. ■

ARGADES

Paradise

ELIOT WEINBERGER

Snaefellsnes Peninsula. Iceland has created the most perfect society on earth, one from which the rest of the world has nothing to learn. Its unlikely utopia is the happy accident of a history and a geography that cannot be duplicated, or even emulated, elsewhere.

Outside the South Pacific, no ethnic group so small has its own entirely independent nation-state. There are only 268,000 Icelanders, of whom 150,000 live in and around Reykjavik. The second-largest city, Akureyri, known for its arts scene and night life—their Barcelona—has 14,000. In the rest of the country the treeless wilderness of volcanoes, waterfalls, strange rock formations, steaming lava fields, geysers, glaciers and icebergs seems like the end of the earth, as though one had crossed into Tibet and found the sea.

Nearly all the roads are sparsely traveled and unpaved, yet this is a modern Scandinavian country where everything works, and where the state protects its citizens from birth to death. There is universal education, virtually no unemployment, no poverty and no conspicuous wealth. Per capita book consumption and production is by far the highest in the world. Icelanders live longer than most anywhere else. There is no pollution: Almost the entire country is green.

There is no army, few handguns, little crime. Prisoners, except the dangerous, go home for the holidays; small children walk in the city alone. For the past thousand years, Icelandic women have had rights unimagined elsewhere, such as the ability to divorce and keep half the property. It was the first nation with a woman president, and is the only one with an all-woman political party with seats in Parliament. The Icelanders invented the idea of a Parliament.

Incredibly, it is a capitalist society without excess. The people have everything, but only one or two kinds of everything. They live without the bombarded frenzy of com-

peting brands, the demands of consumer expertise and the attendant dread that one has made the wrong choice. The traditional occupations of the major non-mineral exports—fishing and shepherding—are now performed by only a fraction of the population. The rest of the tiny work force must fill all the roles of a modern society: ambassador, plumber, anesthesiologist, programmer, cellist, cop. There is one well-known film director, one Nobel Prize-winning novelist, one international rock star. In Iceland, modern life is complete, but lived on the scale of the tribal.

Like a tribe, it is a society rooted in the archaic. Icelanders may be the only technological society on earth whose people could speak fluently with their ancestors from a thousand years ago: Icelandic has remained the same since it split from Old Norse, and its alphabet retains two runic letters that no other language uses. Icelanders are required by law to have traditional names, and follow the ancient system of first name plus father or mother's name plus "son" or "daughter." The telephone book lists people by their first names, and they're all the same: Olaf Magnuson, Magnus Olafson, Greta Olafsdottir. They can differentiate one another because they *know* one another.

Icelanders, they are self-absorbed. In the thirteenth century they produced a vast body of literature, unlike anything in Europe, that was a meticulous description of themselves. These are the sagas: the tales, not of heroes or gods but of ordinary people, the actual settlers who had come to the uninhabited land 300 years before. There are hundreds of sagas, all interlocking. The same stories are told from different points of view; a person mentioned in passing in one becomes the protagonist of another. It is an enormous human comedy of love, greed, rage, lust, marriages and property

settlements, travels, revenge, funerals and festivals, meetings, abductions, prophetic dreams and strange coincidences, fish and sheep. Nearly everyone in Iceland is descended from these people, and they know the stories, and the stories of what has happened in the generations since.

One travels through Iceland with *The Visitor's Key*, an extraordinary guidebook that follows every road in the country step by step, as though one were walking with the Keeper of Memories. Iceland has few notable buildings, museums or monuments. What it has are hills and rivers and rocks, and each has a story the book recalls. Here was a stone bridge that collapsed behind an escaping convicted murderer, proving his innocence. Here lived a boy whose magical powers were such that he could wither grass. Here a man died of exposure in a snowstorm, not knowing he was a few yards from his house. It is said that two chests of silver are hidden somewhere on this hill. In this hot spring, a famous outlaw boiled his meat. A man was buried here because the horses carrying his body refused to take another step. Here a man who stole more sheep than he needed was slain by a 12-year-old boy. This farm refused shelter to a pregnant woman, and was buried in a landslide that night. People have seen a man walking by this cliff with his head under his arm. Here was the home of a clergyman who was honored abroad for his development of medicinal cod liver oil, and was also known for having kidnapped his bride. Here lived a popular postman in the eighteenth century.

What other modern society so fully inhabits the landscape it lives in? Where else does the middle class still remember?

Sir Richard Burton, after the tropics and the deserts, was appalled by it. William Morris learned the language and translated some sagas but preferred his reading to his two visits. Jules Verne never came, but placed the entrance to the center of the earth at the Snaefellsjökull volcano. Trollope came, late in life, and wrote a jolly account of huge meals and pretty women, but was shocked to find no bank. Here the young Auden, just before the war in Spain, wrote his strangest book.

They bake bread by putting it in the ground; they prefer their shark meat rotten. The use of pesticides is unknown among them. Nearly all the women have their first child before marriage. They allow no dogs in the capital. Their eyes are the exact pale blue shade of an iceberg. They believe in Hidden People. Their horses grow long coats in the winter, and sleep lying down. I have never seen so many kinds of moss. ■

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