

**Iceland and Images of the North. Edited by Sumarlidi Isleifsson and Daniel Chartier. Québec: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2011. 624 pp, 39 figures.**

The newly published book *Iceland and Images of the North* is printed under the Droit au Pôle collection, which focuses on culture and identity in circumpolar regions. In this rather extensive volume, containing over 600 pages, the main focus is on creation, alternation, identification, definition, and utilization of Iceland's image seen through different optics of both Icelandic and international scholars. The book is an outcome of close co-operation within a group of researchers focusing on various aspects of history, culture, and identity in Iceland. The research project was supported by the Icelandic Research Fund's Grant of Excellence.

Coming from continental Europe, I have been armed with a wide range of images and stereotypes about Nordic countries, including Iceland. Images about physical characteristics such as climate and landscape, as well as about cultural phenomena such as daily behaviour, alcoholism, welfare, or open mind, were fairly altered during my four years stay. But it was not until I started to read this book when I first questioned the origin, evolution, and purpose of those images—especially the aspect of belonging to a certain geographical region (Nordic countries or Nord in this case) and its influence for establishing national identity and image, which is well documented in numerous studies. But even readers without previous knowledge about Iceland can get fulfilling insight into selected aspects of the nation's identity thanks to the structure of the book, which includes an extensive index. Considering the variety of studies included, it seems unwise to focus on each chapter separately, so this review will deal with the publication as a whole.

The text is divided into two main parts: historical images focusing on image formation until the beginning of the twentieth century, and contemporary images. There are twenty-one different chapters, each represented by one article written by a single author. While images of Iceland and their connection to our perception of the North is articulated to be an intertwining concept within the whole book, the focus, approach, and depth of articles differ significantly through the content. Of course some diversity in such a large project is inevitable and perhaps desirable, especially considering the wide range of disciplines addressed and methods used.

The global economic crisis in 2008 did not merely change the perception of capitalism or financial institutions, but has had a significant impact on local identities. This is especially true for Iceland, a country that built its wealth and pride on a gargantuan and aggressive banking sector, and was the first to be crumbled into pieces under the weight of the new economic

reality. The emergence of new images coming from both outside and inside Iceland created an outstanding opportunity to study the formation of identities in process. Especially, but not only, discussion about the impacts of newly generated images on old ones, the mediatised division of the nation between the general public and reckless bankers, or the formation of new values within the society (which has lost part of its pride), all seems to offer great material for study. Sadly, issues regarding representation and identity of Iceland and its inhabitants after the crisis are not specifically targeted within any article. Surprisingly, the context of successful pre-crisis Iceland seems to be also under-represented in the book. Rather, the articles are discussing formation, influences, and representation of Icelandic identity in the historical part of the book, and images or stereotypes about language, drinking, design, gender, tourism, and the North within the contemporary topics.

So while making my way through the volume of interesting articles describing the evolution of ideas about the North, I started to wonder about one basic question: "What is the purpose of this book?" Is it to reclaim and declare Iceland's position within Nordic countries, which are unaffected by troubled fame—perhaps to remember old values on which the society is based and help with recovery or formation of identity? Or is it possibly to demonstrate Iceland as an educated nation with the ability to produce a major research publication? The direct answer to this question stays hidden to the reader, in part because a chapter summarizing overall results and drawing conclusions is missing. Since I do not consider myself to be an expert on identity, I have decided to borrow words of Chartier to help me shed light on the topic:

It may happen, that selection of object ... leads to a reactivation of images, representation and stereotypes otherwise forgotten or marginalized. Researchers within the field do shape and create new representations, images and stereotypes. (517)

Under the spell of these words I am inclined to believe that this book is intended, at least partly, to reclaim the essence of Icelandic identity unburdened by the recent past, and spread it both within Iceland and abroad. It is up to the conscious reader to determine whether to agree or disagree with such an interpretation. Either way, the book can be seen as an interesting collection of studies about formation of identity, representation, and images of a somehow exotic Iceland. As such, it can be useful to anybody with an interest in Iceland or focusing on any of the main research topics of the book.

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