ICELAND.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Starting the other day on a cruise to Iceland, in the steam-ship *Mastiff* fitted out for the purpose by my friend Mr. John Burns of Glasgow, I thought it might be well to follow out what has become an old practice with me, and write some short account of what I might hear and see upon the way. But when I got on board I found, provided by our host for the delectation and instruction of his guests, so extensive a library of Icelandic memoirs that I was obliged to declare to myself that nothing more could be wanted. Not to mention Von Troit’s letters written in the last century, there has been a constant succession of books of every description, grave and gay, philosophical, historical, and social, depicting the present and past state of Iceland, given to us during the last eighty years,—beginning with the quarto of Sir George Steuart Mackenzie, published in 1811, and continued up to Mr. Burton’s Ultima Thule in 1875. With Sir George Mackenzie in 1810 went to Iceland our old friend Sir Henry, then Dr. Holland, who seems to have departed from us but the other day, and who renewed his acquaintance with Iceland by a second visit after a lapse of fifty years. He wrote a preliminary dissertation to Mackenzie’s book, which is probably, as a short account, the most useful history we have of the state and political condition of the island up to that period.1 The fullest work we have is, perhaps, Ebenezer Henderson’s journal of a two years’ residence in Iceland in 1814 and 1815, but this will hardly be much read now, unless by those who are in want of extensive Icelandic information. We have John Pfeiffer’s journey there in 1845, and in 1856 Lord Dufferin’s High Latitudes, which. no doubt to present English readers is more familiar than any other story of travels in the country. Who does not know Wilson, and the Latin speech, and the astonished traveller? Then there is Burnt Njal,—Sir George Dasent’s book,—being a picture of life in Iceland in the tenth century,—an Icelandic Saga,—or novel after the life us we might call it, though it has much more of truth in it than the novels to which we are accustomed. To this is prefixed an explanation of the history and literary merits of the Sagas, which is quite as interesting as the tale itself. Mr. Murray also has published a guide to Iceland in connection with his guide to Denmark. I cannot mention all, but I found that above twenty different books about Iceland, in the present century, had been published in the English language. I must own that my energies were depressed by this discovery, and that it was not without a little editorial encouragement that I was enabled to add these few words as to what I saw in the country during the week that I passed there.

We anchored in the harbour of the capital, Reykjavik, with the intention of riding up to the Geysers and back again. This we did, and no more. But, through the hospitality of our host, Mr. Burns, we had an opportunity of seeing something of the manners of the people; and I think that I learned something of their ways of life, —of which I certainly knew nothing before my visit.

My readers probably do know that Iceland is what we should call a Crown Colony dependent on Denmark, and that Reykjavik is its capita’. I shall take the liberty of presuming that they know no more,—merely because my knowledge was confined to so much before I went thither. One matter of information I was unable to obtain even by going; and that one, which is generally considered to be of importance. I could not ascertain where Iceland is. We had two charts on board, both recent, and both authoritative, as I was assured by competent nautical authorities. One declared Iceland to extend beyond the Arctic circle, and the other says that it fall. short of it. The Encyclopedia Britannica, which for all Britons is supposed to be a gospel of information,—and by no Briton more faithfully than by me,—settled the question twenty years ago by declaring Iceland to be altogether south of the Arctic circle. I can only say that the charts now in use differ as I have described. We had two British admirals on board, and their minds were left in doubt!

There can be no doubt, however, that Iceland is near enough to the pole to be very cold and to enjoy perpetual daylight in the summer months. We were there in June and July, and the daylight never waned. The name of the country is I think hardly deserved. Occasionally, but only at the interval of many years, by certain operations of winds and floods, its northern shores become .logged and enveloped by floating ice from the northern seas. Such was the ease during one of the early attempts at colonization made by the Norwegians; and such was the effect of the cold superinduced over the whole island, that the strangers departed from the inhospitable land, and gave to it its present name. But Iceland is not peculiarly a land of lee, though it is a land of snow.

There is an old myth which I would fain believe if I could, that Iceland was first discovered by Irish Christians who settled themselves and left behind theta crosses and other symbols of their religion when they perished, probably during some such ice invasion as that mentioned. But the Icelandic, and even the Norwegian, accounts are at variance with each other, and the stern historian had better accept the Irish period with a doubt. Then came Norwegians, probably driven here in the first instance by storms, then induced by the beauties of the summer to remain, and then again driven away by the inclemencies of the winter. So there grew up in Norway a knowledge of Iceland; the first Norwegians coming over about the year 8GO. Not long afterwards, towards the end of the ninth century, there was a tyrant in Norway, one Harold Harfagra, under whom certain landed yeomen could not live in comfort, as certain English yeomen could not do under that British tyrant James I.. Su, as the indignant Britons went to Massachusetts in the *Mayflower*, did the Norwegians to Iceland. Such is the real history of the population of the country. For four centuries there existed a Republic, and the progress of the people during that time both in learning and social comforts seems to have been marvellous when we remember the difficulties of their position. Then, apparently with the consent of the people, the country passed under the dominion of Norway. In the dynastic changes which have since taken place among the Scandinavian realms, Iceland has ever gone with Denmark, and is now, among Denmark’s external possessions, probably the most important. She has a Governor sent to her from Denmark—with whom in managing the affairs of the island is comprised a council, a little parliament we may perhaps call it. The power exercised is probably that of an absolute Crown, but the exercise of the power is mild and beneficial.

We are apt to think in London that we are the very centre and navel of the world. Perhaps we are. But in so thinking we are led too frequently to believe that the people who are distant from us, and altogether unlike us in these circumstances, must be very much behind us indeed. There are those Icelanders, with almost perpetual night during a great portion of the year, without a tree, living in holes for protection against the snow,—almost we may say without any comfort,--a barbarous unfortunate people certainly! But when I was in Iceland, especially when I was in Reykjavik the capital of Iceland, I did not think the people whom I saw to be at all unfortunate, and certainly in no degree barbarous. Everybody seemed to be comfortable. Everybody was well clothed. Everybody could read and write. I saw no poverty. I saw no case of a drunken man, though I heard of drunkenness. I found a taste, for prettinesses,—notably as shown in the ornaments and dress of the women; a very general appreciation of literary pursuits; a tendency to religious worship; orderly easy comfortable manners, and a mode of life very much removed, indeed, from barbarism.

Reykjavik at present contains a population of 2,500 souls. Such at least was the information given to me on the spot. Sir George Mackenzie gives the number us having been only 446 in 1806. The total population of the island was stated to me as being-90,000. This is probably in excess of the true number. Sir George gave it as 48,063 in 1808,—stating that it had amounted in 1703 to i0,444. These numbers are, if true, very startling,—showing that the increase for a century, say for the eighteenth century, had been nil. There had been, in fact, a small decrease; whereas the increase in the existing century has been very great, the population of the whole island having nearly doubled itself, and that of the capital having more than done so.

It is, however, to be remembered that there do come in Iceland periods of great want, almost of general starvation, as to which no-thing can as yet be done in foretelling them, and but little in pre-venting them. The northern portion of the island becomes blocked with floating ice. showered temperature falls upon the entire land. Grasses die, and with the grasses the flocks and herds which feed upon them. With the flocks it is impossible but that men and women should perish also. Then too there come volcanic eruptions which are equally destructive. Mackenzie gives us a table showing that between 1783 and 1784 the numbers fell, of cattle from 21,457 to 9,986; of horses from 36,408 to 8,305, and that from 1770, the last year as to which the number of the sheep is given, to 1784 the number of sheep fell from 112,809 to 42,243. In the year 1783 there had been the great eruption of Skaptaa Yokul, a second Hekla; but bigger and higher than Hekla. I can find no statement to show what was the immediate effect on the population of this terrible misfortune; the return given by Mackenzie simply states that the population in 1801 was the same as in 1783 just before the eruption. There had indeed been a very small decrease, from 47,287 to 47,207. But the immediate effect on the cattle and sheep is stated above. The author adds, however, that the loss as given in the table appears to have been exaggerated. These misfortunes do not appear to be frequent enough to cause immediate fear. “It is true,” one man said to me in answer to my enquiries; “but it is very seldom,”

When on shore we soon made acquaintance with many of the inhabitants. The ladies, for we had a bevy of ladies with us, demanded to be taken to the jewellers and purveyors of knick-knacks. We bought silver ornaments, dog whips, and shoulder-bags,--every lady her silver ornament, her dog whip, and her shoulder-bag, and every man one of the two latter articles. The dog whips were for the ponies we were to ride, the bags to carry our small travelling gear, and the ornaments for our general delight. The whips and bags were made in the island, and were good as mementos. The ornaments we were told were the old decorations of bygone Icelandic beauties. They had probably reached Reykjavik from Birmingham, via Copenhagen. They will now come back to England much raised in value by their travels.

We all called in a body, sixteen of us, upon the Governor, by whom we were received not only with courtesy,—but cordially. Afterwards we made acquaintance with his wife, a dear motherly woman, handsome withal, who delighted to make new friends and to talk about her children. I do love to find a human being, a woman by preference, who under the sanction of sudden and somewhat unusual circumstances can throw herself into sudden intimacies. The precocities of Mary and the ailments of Jack become interesting to me, and I find myself talking about them as though my whole heart was there. One’s whole heart is not there; but there has been a little green spot which never becomes wholly dry or desecrated afterwards. There was the Bishop too, with a delightful daughter,—Bishop Pjetursson with his wife and his daughter Thora,—with the latter of whom we really did form an abiding friendship. There was a good deal of pleasant raillery displayed by our young men, four or five of them, at the expense of Miss Thorn. The Icelandic beauty was able to receive all their shafts on her little shield, and to return an answer to each from her own quiver of wit. And she had to do this in English, as none of her opponents could touch her in her own language. One and all we lost our hearts to the Bishop’s daughter.

There were four languages going, English, French, Danish, and Icelandic. Of the latter two, none among our party could speak a word, and yet there seemed to be very little lack of the means of conversation. I was astonished to find how many there were who could speak English. The intercourse between Iceland and Scotland is no doubt frequent, the regular steam-boats which come from Copenhagen every month during the summer stopping first at Leith before they make their way up to Thorshavn in the Faroe Islands, and thence to Reykjavik.. But such communication between two ports does not teach us English people a foreign language. The difference, I suppose, has to be found in the fact that English is necessary to their comfort, but that Icelandic is not needed by us for ours. The Leith shopkeeper or mariner will not trouble himself to talk to the stranger in other language than his own;—but the Icelander must trouble himself to maintain the needed communication. In the old Roman days, the great Roman held it to be below his dignity to talk to any barbarian in other than his own language. The normal Englishman is somewhat like the great Roman. The result, however, shows itself in extended information on their part, and in intellectual aspirations which cannot but be useful.

Reykjavik is a dear little town, pervaded no doubt by a flavour of fish which is to the Icelander an article of important commerce, with two main streets, and a little square in which there is a statue of Thorwaldsen, whose father was u native of Iceland. In one corner of the square is a large well-arranged church, with galleries and an organ, very much like an ugly English church of fifty years ago. The glory of the church consists of a font given by Thorwaldsen, with bas-reliefs by the great artist on the sides of a square pedestal. The houses are of wood,—all of which has to be imported. They are comfortable and sufficiently spacious. I was inside four or five, and was surprised at finding how very much an ordinary sitting-room in Iceland is like to one in an English provincial town. No one would soy the same of France,—or even of Germany generally. In Reykjavik the Governor’s house and the Bishop’s house and the Postmaster’s house, with various little shops into which I made my way, had to my eyes hardly any air of strangeness. One morning early I rambled about a photographer’s house, anxious to find the room in which he was at work, and wandered by ‘chance into an inhabited bedroom. My speedy retreat did not enable me to see whether I bad disturbed the slumbers of a lady or a gentleman; but the occupant showed no signs of annoyance, or, as far as I could see, of surprise.

The harbour of Reykjavik is landlocked, secure, and very picturesque. As you lie there you are surrounded by islands and headlands which block out the open sea. On one of these islands we found a farm of cider-ducks who are fostered and nurtured for the sake of their feathers,—eider-down being, as we all know, much in quest by those who love soft feathery coverings to their bed. The unfortunate maternal bird thrice strips her own bosom annually- to make a nest for the preservation of her young ones. Twice are the feathers taken away. The third time she perseveres, but should she be a third time robbed, she will give up her work in despair. But the nest, when she has had her use of it, is still serviceable;—so that three crops per annum are garnered from her prolific breast. The owner of the birds showed us his operations, and allowed us to picnic on his island. He sold a pound of his feathers to one of the ladies of our party for, I think, 12*s*.

I was surprised to find that a town which seemed to be so well civilized as Reykjavik should be without the ordinary resources of a bank. The trade of the island is considerable, and was of importance enough for well-arranged statistics even so far back as the period of Sir George Mackenzie’s visit. He gives lists of the articles imported and exported. Of the former there are thirty-eight named, consisting chiefly of cereals, strong liquors, tobacco, coffee, tea, soap, iron, and salt. Singularly enough he does not mention timber, which of all articles brought into the island, must be the most important and the most necessary. The exports consist chiefly of fish, and the oil taken from fish, and of wool and woollen goods. To these are to be added tallow, skins, and eider-down. Since the beginning of the century the trade has very greatly increased, the people having been accustomed to luxuries of which they then knew nothing. But yet there is no bank! When I spoke to the Governor about it, he acknowledged the want and surmised that it would come. This he said with the air of a man who did not quite like to hear his deficiency exposed. At present all payment for goods imported must be made with goods exported. When we go to the bottom of things, we learn that this must be done in truth by all importing countries. Unless a country has something to sell, it cannot go into the market and buy. But a medium fur the making of purchases has been found to be essentially necessary for commerce in these latter days;—and this medium takes the shape of paper promises which can be negotiated only by means of bankers. In Iceland there is no banker, and paper promises are therefore useless. English money in the shape of sovereigns,—even in the shape of shillings and half-crowns, is acceptable everywhere in Iceland. But a £5 note is of no service, unless a man has such communication with England as will enable him to send it thither by post in a letter. Cheques, promissory notes, and hills of exchange are of no avail in Icelandic commerce. The. man who takes thither timber or tea, must be content to take back fish or feathers. The Governor, however, was probably right. It will come. Reykjavik with its college, its education, and its comforts will not be long without its bank.

I have spoken of the necessity and the want of timber. It must be remembered that there is not a tree in all Iceland. This is the case - now. There is, however, ample evidence that it was not so always, as large lumps of old timber are found imbedded in the bogs, —as is the case in Ireland. It is probable from many signs that: there has been a time in which the cold was less severe or at any rate less enduring. At present there is nothing bearing the resemblance of a tree,—nothing that can be called even a shrub, except a low spreading ground birch, which creeps along over large extents of land, but which does not rise above a foot in height. There are willow plants also of the same description. All wood therefore fur useful purposes must be imported; and yet the houses are generally constructed of wood. The difficulties arising from this want are, of course, infinitely enhanced by the fact that there is no means of carriage throughout Iceland otherwise than by ponies. There is no such thing as a wheeled carriage. A few miles beyond Reykjavik there is no road on which wheels can travel. A log of wood or a few planks will be fixed on lengthwise to the pony, and so the little beast will travel, trained to the work.

The length of the summer, joyous and pleasant as is the summer, does not suffice for the growth of trees, hardly for that of corn or even vegetables. There are four months which are not wintry—June, July, August, and September. September, however, though not wintry, cannot be culled warm. And then throughout the summer the nights become cold, though the light is as clear then as at midday. When travelling on horseback during the night I found the air so cold as to make it necessary that I should have a woollen comforter with me ready for use. The days were extremely bat, hot as to make riding at noon very disagreeable, whereas the nights were so cold us to feel almost like frost. The consequence is that all growth is stunted, that flour and other cereal provisions must be imported, that vegetables are rare, and that there is no such thing as a tree on the island.

In walking round Reykjavik I found the people hard at work getting in their peat for fuel,—turf as we call it in Ireland,—very much as the Irish do. There is a little lake at the back of the town, and in the soft marshes round this they were piling up the sods for drying. The importance of these operations will be borne in mind, when the length and severity of an Iceland winter is remembered, and also the fact that there is neither coal nor weed provided by nature. Coal we did find at Reykjavik, imported from England,—or more probably from Scotland,—and sold at prices not much exceeding those which we pay at home. But that was close to the sea-side, whither coal can be carried cheaply by water. The conveyance of coal into the interior of the island without roads, or wheels, or water carriage is of course impossible.

There is a college at Reykjavik with learned professors, professors whom I believe to be ripe scholars as regards the classics; and, latterly, inferior schools have been established. It may I think be taken as a fact that everybody,—almost everybody,—can read and write. There are five newspapers in Iceland, two of them published in the capital, a copy of one of which is now before me. It begins with a poem in fourteen stanzas, and devotes only a part of one out of eight columns to advertisements. From this it may be argued that the Icelanders are given more to noble, and less to mean, pursuits than ourselves. Four columns are devoted to one essay or leading article. I wish I could read it, so as to make known the subject which at present dwells most in the minds of the Icelanders. I can perceive that a notice of two lines is devoted to the Congress at Berlin, and that the arrival of our vessel and party is chronicled in nine lines. The printing is very good,—the type being excellent. On Sunday-, on board ship, we sang two hymns, which had been printed for us, of course in English, on the Saturday. There is not an error in them. I have brought home with me an Icelandic translation of Macbeth, translated, printed, and published at Reykjavik. I presume this may be taken as evincing some appreciation of our great writer in the country.

The amount of erudition among the people is certainly remarkable, and is attributed by themselves to the necessity of passing the long evenings of winter in occupation within doors. I do not, however, believe that any amount of incarceration, front long darkness or from other causes, would produce such a result in a tropical country. The mind of the Icelander is active and does not allow him to remain ignorant. I think that this is the case more in Scotland than in England;—much more in England than in Spain; more in Spain than in Cuba, where the white Creole has no objection to any amount of ignorance. At what most northerly point this peculiarity may cease, I am not prepared even to guess. An Esquimaux is not I presume a peculiarly intellectual human being. Perhaps my surprise in Iceland was occasioned by previous misconception on my part,—by a mistaken idea that an Icelander was no better than a semi-Esquimaux. That the traveller should meet there a Tyndall or a Huxley, a Macaulay, or a Tennyson, or a Gladstone, I will hold out no hope; but that the ordinary Icelander who earns his bread by the sweat of his brow will be found to be a more agreeable companion than the English labourer by any educated traveller who can use a language in which to talk to him, I feel quite sure.

I never quite believed in that Latin speech of Lord Dufferin’s. It was too super-Sheridanean to have been delivered at the spur of the moment. But it suffices to tell us that he had found it necessary to exchange ideas in the old classical language with a people who, though so far removed from the world, had dabbled with the classics. When our party was riding out to the Geysers,—as I will tell a page or two farther on,—one of us was met by the parson, or minister, of a district in which we intended to halt for the night. “Via lapidosissima,” said the parson, intending to express his pity for any sufferings we might have endured. The conversation was not I think carried farther at the moment. But that may have been the fault of the Briton rather than the Icelander.

On our ride we were accompanied by five guides, of which the chief had with him a nephew who acted as one of them. He was a young man about twenty, who told us that he had just left the university, and was mingling holiday work and business while thus assisting his uncle. He could speak English almost fluently, and I fell into conversation with him as to his past studies. I had a little Horace in my pocket, and he read to me the first ode. How far he may have gone with his Horace I could not say, but he himself led the way to Cicero, and I found him to have a much more ample knowledge of the author than is common to young Englishmen of that age who have had all the advantages of education which money can give them. He was very enthusiastic as to the Pro Archia, and knew all the details about Catiline.

Some of us attended the church service on Sunday morning. The mode of worship is Lutheran. The hymns were very long, and five different hymns were I think given. The Bishop, with whom we had previously made acquaintance, did no part of the work; nor, us I think, did he attend. He was probably preparing a charge for his clergy. The service took nearly two hours and a half, and was well attended. After service the clergyman walked away amidst the reverential feeling of his flock, conspicuous for an enormous Van-dyke ruff round his neck. Whether he would have been so much regarded without his ruff I cannot say.

Mr. Burns gave a dinner party on board the *Mastiff* and ten or twelve of the principal inhabitants of Reykjavik sat at his table. The Governor and his wife were there, and then it was that I became so pleasantly acquainted with the lady who sat next to me. There was the Rector from the College, and the Governor Prefect or Amptman, and the Treasurer, and the Judge of the Superior Court, and the Bishop, and the Sheriff, and their wives and daughters in proper Iceland costume. We drank the Queen’s health;—that of course first;—and then the King of Denmark’s, and then the Governor’s. The Governor responded in French. Then we drank the ladies, and after that we had a dance upon the deck. ‘Waltzes were quite common to them, but when some of our Scotch friends danced a reel, they were highly delighted.

We had time but for one inland trip, and that was to be made to the long-famed Geysers. The question would naturally be between the Geysers and Hekla to those who like ourselves could not do both. But Hekla was not in motion, end is difficult of ascent; and on the road to the Geysers, independently of the hot springs themselves, there is more of interest to be seen. The ride to the Geysers for two or three men is not much of an exploit. The distance is about seventy miles, and though the road is in parts rough enough, —via lapidosissima,—it is not difficult. It is generally performed in two days, with a night’s rest at Thingvalla, half-way, and thus forms a not inconvenient little excursion for four or five days. But the work is no doubt hard to ladies, especially for those not accustomed to riding;—and oven for gentlemen not frequently in the saddle the exercise is almost more than sufficient when carried on for four consecutive days without bed. Taken as a whole we were a hardy lot; but some of us at the end were tired enough, among whom I do not scruple to name myself, who was probably the oldest of the party.

We started from Reykjavik with sixty-five ponies, a cook and two servants, and with five guides whose duty consisted chiefly in looking after the ponies and the baggage. Everything necessary for eating and sleeping we had to take with us on the backs of ponies. Mattresses were carried for the ladies;—for the gentlemen a blanket apiece and whatever coats and rugs the individual tourist, thoughtful of himself, might manage to have introduced among the luggage. As to food I may say here us well as elsewhere that during my visit to the country I did not eat a mouthful of anything which had not come from Scotland, except milk and curds. I saw none of their bread or meat. The Governor told me that their mutton was as good as the world produces; but it is not cheap enough,—or in other words there is not enough of it,—for common consumption. It is generally eaten salted. The people live very much on salt fish,—and very much on milk. I fancy that European travellers in this country have generally endeavoured to carry with them us far as they could their own provisions. We took with us for our party over a hundredweight of cooked meat, with bread, butter, tea, coffee, and potatoes. Wine and spirits of course we took also. It is not to be supposed that there are inns on the way to the Geysers.

It was arranged that each equestrian was to have two ponies fur his or her own personal use. As we began to know the ponies and their qualities, we did not stick to any rule, all of us encroaching on the others, and deserting the bad beasts very much at the cost a the good beasts. I began with a brute, doing the first half-day’s journey on him, so abominable in his nature that I refused to mount him again on any consideration. I have ridden many a horse with a bad nature, but of all equine natures that I have known his was the worst. He would linger wilfully and knowingly, in opposition to all provocatives, till he was the Lot of the procession, and then when some turn of the path, some rock or some hill had placed all his companions out of sight, he would turn suddenly, and with dogged, resolute purpose, and a lowered head, endeavour to make his way back. Once he succeeded in getting me in this way out of sight of the world beyond, and then I had a battle with him which needed all my strength. But for the dog whip of which I have spoken, he would certainly have conquered,—and then how mean would have been my position at Reykjavik while all the others went out to the Geysers I must own, however, that remorse for the evil done to me, and then perhaps some recognition of my equestrian capabilities, procured for me afterwards a relay of wonderful little animals who never flinched beneath my weight, and never made it necessary that I should lag behind. The ponies generally were very good, marvellously safe, travelling with us very frequently at about eight miles an hour, and never as far as I could see giving signs of real fatigue.

Our head guide was named Zoega,—a man of European Celebrity. He was contractor as well as guide, supplying everything. As far as I could learn, the ponies cost about £1 each in the expedition,— all other expenses incidental to them, such as that of the guides themselves, being included. But as our host paid for everything, refusing to move on any other terms, I am unable to speak with accurate certainty.

We took tents with us, which Zoega supplied,—as he did the boxes in which our provisions were packed. Going and coming we were to stop at Thingvalla, where the ladies, we were told, might be allowed to sleep in the church. At the Geysers we must all lie in tents. We might have been taken in at a farmhouse with willing hospitality, but the farm is too far from the Geysers to admit of a rush out to see the eruptions when they might be pleased to erupt. We agreed therefore, ladies and all, to remain upon the ground in the neighbourhood of the hot springs.

After our first day’s journey over rough and somewhat uninteresting ground. we reached Thingvalla. “Few countries in the world,” says the writer in the Encyclopedia Britannica, “present a more forbidding aspect, than Iceland.” With this opinion I can by no means agree. Nowhere is the route we had passed devoid of some charm. Nowhere is it flat, or without distant hills. Quick bright streams have to be passed frequently. A traveller in many countries will have come over many miles infinitely more tedious than that first day’s journey to Thingvallas At ThingvalIa the scenery is romantic and magnificent, and continues to be so almost up to the Geysers.

The description of Thingvalla with the sudden descent into the valley which bears the name,—a. descent which is made down the :almost perpendicular side of a riven crag,—has been so clearly given by Lord Dufferin that I do not care to repeat it. The rider,—or walker as he probably then becomes, allowing his pony to follow him, —makes his way down into a broad green valley, through which runs a rapid bright river to a magnificent lake, which has been seen long before, and remains in view long afterwards. Here he finds the stream and comes to a church and the minister’s house close to it. Behind the church, at the distance of a quarter of a mile, is a spot to which the name of Althing is given. Here we are told was held in ancient days the Parliament of the country,—by which it should probably be understood that here was the supreme justice-seat of the nation. It is a peculiar spot, because it lies amidst the singular rifts or clefts in the rock made by volcanic eruption, and is so surrounded by these clefts that it can only be approached at one narrow entrance. It was covered with wild flowers and the greenest of grass, when we were there, and was altogether mast interesting and picturesque. The field is about four hundred yards long, and on an average fifty broad.

The grasses around were very rich, showing what is the agricultural or rather pastoral capability of the island. Grass is its one great source of rural wealth, and during the summer months is extremely exuberant. The cattle and sheep are fed plenteously on the mountains during the warm weather, when bay to a very large extent is made in the villages. When the hay harvest is over, the stock is brought down, and is kept out till the heavy snow falls. Then the animals are housed and fed during the inclemency or winter. In the early spring they are again enabled to pick their own living, and in May they are sent out again to the mountains. I am told that in some places sheep remain out all the winter; but I am inclined to think that this must be very occasional and that they still must be fed with hay. Mackenzie tells us that these regulations as to bringing in and sending out the stock at fixed periods were enforced under stringent laws. The practice seems to remain nearly the same, but with less of legal obligation.

On our arrival we found that our tents had been pitched in the churchyard, and that the cook was already busy within the same precincts. The minister was soon among us with his “via lapidosissima,”—not by any means disposed.to find fault with our intrusion or to reproach us with want of reverence. The church was altogether at our service for any use to which we might put it. One room with two beds fur a lady and her husband he could lend us. One of our party, a Lady, had become so fatigued that it was thought better that she should not go on. It was arranged therefore that she should remain as the guest of the minister’s wife. We became very familiar with the minister’s house and all his family, to whom we seemed to have come as a special Providence in the way of excitement. The house was commodious, with many rooms, each of the chief rooms taking the form of a gable. There were four gables, all looking in the same direction. The pitched roofs on the other side came down to the ground, and were all covered with growing turf. So the house on the three sides looked like a collection of largo mounds rising from the ground, as might so many large green hillock. Thus the snow lies as it would upon hillocks, and serves only to keep warm what is beneath it. On the side where are the door and the windows,—the side to the south which is the least exposed to the beating snow,—labour is of course needed to keep the egress and the ingress free. Such is the form of all the houses which we saw in the country parts of Iceland.

From Thingvalla to the Geysers the scenery is very attractive. There is a broad green valley among the hills, where all the mountain sides have been blasted by subterranean fires, but where the turf at the bottom is beautifully rich. Then we crossed a river called the Brüarü, which comes foaming and bright down a broad rocky bottom. In the middle of the channel is a vast rift, perhaps twenty feet broad, into which the waters tumble from each side, almost meeting with their crests as they fall. The traveller fords the breadth of the river, but over the rift there is a little wooden bridge, over which the ponies accustomed to the spot pass without a tremour. Around on all sides there are jagged hills, and then, close at hand luxuriant grasses. I deny altogether that the country has a forbidding aspect. But it may be that half a century ago the taste for the wilder beauties of nature had not grown to its present strength. A hundred and fifty years ago the Alps and Pyrenees were horrid only,—not beautiful.

We were of course full of the Geysers as we rode on. During our journey we had seen Jidda on our right, about, thirty miles off,— quiet as an infant. We had not expected Hekla to exhibit herself for our sakes, and were contented to know that we had seen snow on her summit. But we had expected much from the Geysers. Our party had at least expected much. I had seen the Geysers in New Zealand, and knew that those in Iceland would fall very short of my New Zealand acquaintances. We paused awhile at a farmhouse to which some of us rode so rapidly that others were more than an hour behind us, and there we feasted on curds and cream. It was very much like the minister’s house at Thingvalla, but larger. There were I think six gables. We went into every room in the house including the kitchen larder and dairy, which were behind, and saw all their stores and all their comforts. Of milk and cream there was the most profuse abundance. We saw, too, meat and hams hanging, :cud what I may call a full larder. But bread seemed to them to be rare. A fear crusts, or biscuits, which were brought in were eaten up carelessly, and then we were told that there was no more. But coffee was given to us with white lump sugar. And of cream there was no end.

A mile farther on we came upon the blighted field of the Geysers. It is a blighted field, near to a river side, with a hill rising above it, with no peculiarity of formation excepting that of the hot springs. Our tents bad not yet conic.. A few who were first therefore took their saddles off their horses, and proceeded to walk carefully among the boiling springs. There were two ladies with us and we went very cautiously. In a quarter of an hour we had seen pretty nearly all that there was to be seen. Then came the tents and we bivouacked and dined among the Geysers.

There was no darkness or even twilight, and from this time we gave up all idea of dividing the twenty-four hours into day and night. After dinner we wandered about and saw what there was to be seen. There is the Great Geyser. This consists of a pool of boiling water about fifty yards in circumference, two or three deep, in the midst of which there is a deep round funnel about eight feet broad, up which the boiling water is emitted. There is always a supply coining, for there is always a certain amount of hot water running out on two opposite sides of the pool. Here the visitor may amuse himself by dabbling with naked feet, scalding his toes if he goes too near the pool, warming his toes comfortably at an increased distance. Excavations suitable for bathers there are none,—as there are, so delightfully formed and so deliciously filled, at the Geysers in New Zealand. At a little distance, in a ravine, there was a hole in which some of us, one after another, endeavoured to sit and wash ourselves. Had. it not been in Iceland, it would have been thought to be a most uncomfortable tub. Occasionally, perhaps once in every four hours, a larger, and somewhat violent supply of hot water is thrown up the funnel, which has the effect of emptying the basin and ejecting from it the hot water rapidly. This occurs with a noise, and is no doubt the indication given of a real eruption when a real eruption is about to take place. But the indication too frequently comes without the eruption. This, when it does take place, consists of a fountain of boiling water thrown to the height of sixty, eighty,—some beholders have said two hundred feet. During the twenty-four hours that we remained at the place there was no such eruption,---no fountain,—although the noise was made and the basin was emptied four or five times.

About half a furlong of from the Great Geyser, or Geyser Primus, as we might call him, is Geyser Secundus, to which has been given the name of Strokr. This name we may perhaps write us Stroker. Stroker is an ill-conditioned but still obedient. Geyser. It has no basin of boiling water, but simply a funnel such us the other, about seven feet in diameter, at the edge of which the traveller can stand and look down into a caldron boiling below. It is a muddy filthy caldron, whereas the waters of the Great Geyser are pellucid and blue. The Geyser Secundus will make eruptions when duly provoked by the supply of a certain amount of aliment. The custom is to drag to its edge about a cart load of turf and dirt, and then to thrust it all in at one dose. Whether Stroker likes or dislikes the process of feeding is left in doubt. He bubbles about furiously with the food down in his gullet fur half an hour, and then ejects it all passionately, throwing the half-digested morsels sixty feet into the air with copious torrents of boiling muddy water. As far as we could judge the height was sixty feet. We are told that in 1789 Sir John Stanley saw water thrown up from this well 132 feet. That last figure in the total will be held to be convincing by many minds.

These are the two Great Geysers. Around are an infinite number of small hot springs, so frequent and many of them so small, that it would be easy for an incautious stranger to step into them. And the ground sounds under one’s feet, seeming so honeycombed and hollow, that a heavy foot might not improbably go through. Sonic of these little springs are as clear as crystal; in some the appearance is of thick red chocolate, when some red earth has been drawn into the vortex of the water. Sometimes there is a little springing fountain, rising perhaps a few inches or a foot, Had there been no other Geyser, no other little lakes of boiling water known in the world, these in Iceland would be very wonderful. When they were first visited and described, such was perhaps the case. For myself, having seen and described the Geysers in the Northern Island of New Zealand, I cannot be ecstatic about the Geysers in Iceland. There is too a lake of boiling water in the Cape Colony, near to the town of Worcester, which I have also described, and which throws into the shade the little lake through which the Great Icelandic Geyser makes its eruptions. But from the South African boiling lakes there are no eruptions.

After a day among the hot springs we returned by the same road to Reykjavik, riding chiefly by night so as to escape the heat. Very pleasant were those gallops in the cool evening when some of us, more or less vainly, attempted to keep up with the adventurous young ladies who led the way. From Reykjavik there had been a fishing expedition by some of our party, and they had returned laden with an enormous booty of trout. Stirred by this success, and having heard that in a stream running out from the Like of Thingvalla at some considerable distance from our route, there was quite a miracle of fishing to be found, they resolved, though at a great access of labour, to go to the river and fish it. It required that a day’s riding, already consisting of eight hours, should be extended to sixteen. But the temptation was great. Only let them beware of—flies! They went gallantly, clothed in mosquito nets, boots, caps, gloves, —impervious we might say. They caught one fish, and then the flies expelled them. It was impossible to stand on the spot after the flies had discovered their whereabouts. Elsewhere we were not plagued. There has never been, I am assured, a mosquito in the whole island. We certainly- did not see one.

I was much amused by finding at the end of Sir George Mackenzie’s book a recommendation that England should take possession of Ice-land! What part of the world has it not been thought at some time expedient that we take into our own hands or under our protection l Sir George tells us that his friend Mr. Hooker had thought this to be the only way of “relieving” the inhabitants, and that he thoroughly agreed with Mr. Hooker! Happily for ourselves, happily for Iceland probably, we abstained. Unhappily at the present moment we are in a more triumphal mood. It is pleasanter for us to look back at the idea of taking Iceland without a cause, than to think that we have been made to take Cyprus with such a cause.

Anthony Trollope.

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1. A considerable portion of this work, beyond the preliminary dissertation, was from the von of Dr. Rolland;—so much so, indeed, that the reader is surprised that the two names together should have appeared on the title-page. Portions also arc from the pens of other writers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)