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THE LIFE OF A WORKING-CLASS WOMAN

Selective modernization and microhistory in early 20th-century Iceland

The methods of microhistory are applied to the narrative of one woman's life – Elka Björnsdóttir. She was a working-class woman in Reykjavík, Iceland, at a critical time in the development of the city; when the country was moving slowly but steadily from a peasant social structure towards an urban way of living. The life of Elka Björnsdóttir provides an interesting opportunity to analyse how old ways die hard – how the Icelandic society managed to take aggressive, yet progressive, steps to a more modern society in the early 20th century without ever losing its sight on traditional cultural standards. This process is here named 'selective modernization' and illustration of its effect on the Icelandic people's general outlook on life is provided.

Keywords microhistory, ego-documents, cultural history, gender roles, selective modernization

Introduction

The history of Iceland in the 20th century can be divided, without serious oversimplification, into two periods, before and after 1940. Up to 1940 Iceland is best viewed as an essentially agrarian and to some extent, in cultural terms, an insular society. Although the country had undergone a number of significant changes in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries, these had caused little fundamental disruption to people's existing cultural outlook and their ways of thinking.¹ Society was grounded in the traditional peasant values of thrift and financial restraint, combined with conservative attitudes in matters such as culture, class structure, human relations and living standards. The great change came with Iceland's imposed emergence on the international scene when the country was occupied by British forces in 1940 to secure the Allied control of the North Atlantic in World War II. The Americans took over from the British in 1941.²

In the final decades of the 19th century, Reykjavík developed into the dominating centre for manufacturing, commerce, services, transportation, communications and administration in Iceland.³ By 1890 its population had grown to almost 3,900, or 5.5% of the total population of the country. By 1910 this figure had risen to 11,600 (13.6%), by 1920 to 17,450 (18.5%), and by 1930 to 28,300 (25.8%). Over the country as a

whole, the number of Icelanders living in 'urban' areas (villages and towns with over 200 people) rose from 3% in 1860 to 12% in 1890, 44% in 1920, and 57.3% in 1930.⁴ But for all its rapid proportional increase, in absolute terms, Reykjavík remained tiny by any international standards. And Reykjavík was a very special case in Iceland, far outstripping any other urban centre in the country. This again gives us cause to be sceptical about exaggerated claims of the degree of change in people's general outlook and behaviour patterns in the wake of increasing urbanization and modernization.⁵

In this article I propose to consider the impact of the coming of the modern age and the changes that accompanied it – the modernization process – on the life of a single individual who, like many others, moved from the countryside to the growing town of Reykjavík in the early years of the 20th century in search of work.⁶ The experiences and attitudes of this particular woman can, in many ways, serve as an example of the process I have chosen to call 'selective modernization' – the practice common among Icelanders of embracing new ideas about life and existence without rejecting older traditions and ways of thinking that had developed in people's everyday lives over the centuries. In order to demonstrate how selective modernization operated in an Icelandic environment, I shall also seek to interpret the social developments against the background of the values of everyday life. This, I believe, provides a worthwhile counterbalance to the conventional view whereby it is assumed that Icelandic society embraced the modern age fully and unconditionally in the early years of the 20th century with the mechanization of the means of production. These arguments have, in other words, embraced the modernization theory foolhardily, where Icelandic society is seen as a part of an inevitable development that accompanied industrialization, urbanization, growing political participation, mass communication, etc., often trapped in political and economic determinism.⁷

One of the distinguishing features of microhistory concerns the position of the individual in the research.⁸ The essential point here is the correlation between the external conditions that circumscribe his or her life and the inner life of the person in question. Individuals in all societies live by particular rules and laws and are expected to go along with predetermined ideas on behaviour that tradition has shaped from generation to generation. But every individual has longings and desires which pull her or him in different directions and each and every one of us perceives her or his possibilities in different ways, often in opposition to received traditions, new currents, and the precepts of society. In other words, the way society works calls up different responses in each individual and as a result the paths that people choose for themselves often go directly counter to the paths they are supposed to take.⁹ It is important to provide room in research for these conflicting influences, along with the interactive element between social structure and people and even mixed consonance within the 'system' since they are the key to all changes that occur in society. Without this internal tension society would remain essentially in a state of stasis. Using the methods of microhistory, a new path can be opened in the study of the modernization process, as this article is to demonstrate.¹⁰

Microhistorians usually study smaller units than is customary for most historians – for example social historians – and they attempt to present and analyse their subject matter in the greatest depth possible, making use of all available sources which touch on the topic in question. As I argued before, microhistory is an important tool for historians to use, especially those who constructively use personal sources in historical research. I do not adhere to the so-called 'Italian school' of microhistory, which aims at

reinterpreting historical sources which were originally made for a totally different purpose, and concerns itself primarily with people who lived on the margins of society and who left behind no sources about their own lives. The challenge here is to devise a conceptual framework which captures the multi-dimensional nature of personal sources – like diaries – and works towards a systematic analysis of different historical phenomena like the modernization process.

By reducing the scale of observation, as I am partly planning to do here, I will reveal the complicated function of individual relationships within each and every social setting and how they differ from the general norm. It needs to be kept in mind that microhistorians tend to focus on *outliers* rather than *average* individuals as defined in quantitative research. Thus, they scrutinize those individuals who did not follow the regular paths of their average fellow compatriots. In microhistory, the term ‘normal exception’ is used to emphasize the importance of this perspective, meaning that no one reveals all of her or his secrets. Seeing what is usually kept hidden from the outside world, we realize that our focus has only been on the ‘normal exception’; those who in one segment of society are considered obscure, strange, and even dangerous. They might be, in other circles, at the centre of attention and fully accepted in their daily affairs. The individual who is the focus of attention in this article falls into that category; somewhat unusual human being, but at the same time a perfectly average person in her struggles for survival in the early 20th-century Icelandic society.

Recent research into the cultural world of Icelandic working-class diarists has demonstrated that manuscript material played a much more significant part in the Icelandic rural community than was hitherto thought. The Icelandic historian Davíð Ólafsson, working on the nature and development of the diary tradition in Iceland in the 18th, 19th and the 20th centuries, has concluded that some of these diarists used their diaries in part to survey their other literary activities. Some of them did much more than write diaries; they also collected and collated diverse written material produced by people participating in popular culture, and they were indeed largely responsible for keeping it alive. These characters Ólafsson and I have named ‘barefoot historians’.¹¹

Women participated in this scribal culture, but their ‘official’ status in the private sphere differed from their male counterparts. It can be argued that they were, for example, less likely to write diaries than men because their circumstances did not allow them to hold onto their private belongings. Their social status as servants in rural areas gave them limited room for individual literary activity. In urban areas like Reykjavík, however, people went about their business in a different way.

A working woman in Reykjavík – the life and times of Elka Björnsdóttir

Elka Björnsdóttir was hardly a well-known figure in her own time, but her name crops up sporadically in historical discussions of the turbulent times that characterized Reykjavík in the early part of the 20th century. This interest in Elka Björnsdóttir stems from the diaries she kept over the years 1915–1923,¹² which contain eye-witness accounts of everyday life in an uncertain and rapidly growing urban society.¹³ Elka Björnsdóttir died in February 1924, aged only 43, after a long struggle with poverty and bad health. She had lived and worked in Reykjavík since 1906 and remained unmarried and childless

throughout her life. Elka was a working woman, with a firm religious faith and an interest in labour issues, education, culture and social progress. She was also uncowed by those more powerful than herself, and had a strong sense of social justice. Urban culture, though still in an embryonic stage, sat well with Elka, though, as noted later, she often looked askance at its frivolity and the hustle and bustle of the new town. She attended church regularly. Despite her limited means, she took a keen interest in cultural events and was an active participant in politics and the movement for workers' rights. She was one of the very few female members of *Hið íslenzka bókmenntafélag* (The Icelandic Literary Society) and a keen attendee at its lectures and meetings. She was politically active as a founding member of *Alþýðuflokkurinn* (The Social Democratic Party) and sat on the first council of *Verkavennafélagið Framsókn*, the first trade union in Iceland to represent women's interests. But, still, she cannot be labelled as a member of the working elite; in fact, she was just a regular working woman.

Elka was born on the farm of Reykir in Lundareykjadalur, western Iceland, on 7 September 1881 and grew up at the farm Skálabrekka in Þingvallasveit region from the age of two. She moved to Reykjavík in her mid-twenties. For the first few years in the capital, she worked in domestic service in middle-class households before turning to labouring jobs such as salting herring and salt-fish processing. Later she worked as a washerwoman at the hot-springs in Reykjavík, which served as a laundry site just outside town, and as a domestic cleaner in buildings such as the offices of the mayor of Reykjavík and, from 1917, the central fire station. Most of her life she lived in rented accommodation in various parts of town, sometimes with relatives, and never far from destitution.

In her diary Elka describes both her day-to-day activities and events of a wider significance.¹⁴ Sometimes she is a spectator, more often a participant in what she relates. The diary provides a rare testimony of the living conditions of the section of the population about whom we generally hear the least, that is, working women in Reykjavík in the early years of the 20th century. Life was a daily struggle for Elka but she always tried to hold her head up in spite of her limited resources, irregular work, and poor housing. Perhaps most poignant of all was people's helplessness in the face of disease, as witnessed eloquently in Elka's detailed account of her brother's death and her own battle with ill-health.

In the early hours of the Sunday morning, 25 April 1915, the fire bell sounded in the fire station at Tjarnargata 12, close to the parliament building and the cathedral in the city centre. According to Elka Björnsdóttir, at least three fire alarms had gone off. The centre of Reykjavík was in flames. The fire brigade, the reserves and volunteers fought the blaze long into the morning and, by the time the flames had died down, 12 houses on Hafnarstræti, Austurstræti and Vallarstræti, in the very heart of town, were either burned to the ground or had suffered serious damage. In her diary entry for that day Elka Björnsdóttir describes the efforts of the firemen, the damage and the confusion in graphic detail, not least the lack of preparedness and equipment with which the firefighters had to contend. Her account of the events as they unfolded reveals interesting attitudes to the times and the modernization of society. After describing the conflagration in detail, she writes:

The fire has been swift to destroy the care and effort of many years and disrupted plans for the future. It is noteworthy that the fire should have started in the great

house of profligacy. [The reference here is to Hótel Reykjavík, the town's best-known venue for drinking and dancing.] But God, who rules all, always shows his mercy in times of distress: the weather was favourable, just a southerly breeze which carried the flames out to the sea; had it been from the west the whole east town would have gone up, and if it had been easterly the fire would have spread west as far as the hay meadows or beyond. Fire-fighting equipment deficient and much of it in bad condition, as ever. Water pressure not half sufficient and no rescue equipment. The only thing of any human help was a pump that had been brought in on the initiative of Ágúst Flygering and offered for sale to the city council but not accepted and was due to be sent back out again. It pumped water from the sea over the buildings with incredible force and it was this to thank for saving the buildings around it. A British auxiliary warship put in at around 10 o'clock, had seen the blaze from out at sea. This is the biggest fire there has ever been in Iceland and is likely to stay in the minds of many.

I went down to Bankastræti this morning around 8 o'clock, saw nothing of any use, the fires had mostly died down by then. The buildings, especially the hotel, had burned in just a few minute like a pile of wood shavings.¹⁵

Elka's account of the whole incident demonstrates how ill-prepared society was to deal with vicissitudes of this kind. But she makes it clear that, in her opinion, things could be done better; with better planning and the right equipment it might be possible to provide for unforeseen eventualities. Appeal to causes beyond human power and comprehension has given way to an informed and rational attitude to life and existence. This attitude is perhaps surprising in a woman like Elka, brought up in the countryside with few opportunities to gain any kind of educational sophistication. However, popular culture in Iceland – though informal and deficient in many respects – offered interested young people with inquiring minds opportunities to meet and assimilate often complex abstract ideas through their reading of literature ancient and modern.¹⁶ The knowledge thus acquired was then fairly readily transferable to the more complicated situations in life.

Shortly after the fire – between 17 May and 2 July 1915 – Elka was working in the salt-fish processing. The work consisted of carrying, washing and stacking fish and took a heavy toll on the body. The hours were long and the pay low, but having a regular income meant that in the spring of 1915 Elka was able to buy herself shoes for the first time in seven years. Early in July, Elka left town for a small fishing port, as was common among working people in Iceland, to work as a migrant labourer in the herring pickling. There was either nothing to do, or the work went on for days on end, and after a month at the place Elka fell seriously ill and never again fully regained her health. The work in the fish was typical in that people were expected to keep going till they dropped, in fact to wear out their bodies beyond their powers of recovery. Such was the story of Elka's life, oscillating at regular intervals between bouts of unremitting toil and periods of sickness which confined her to the bed.

As noted earlier, Elka Björnsdóttir took a deep interest in social issues and was an active member of various societies. In her diary entry for 24 June 1915, she describes a meeting of *Verkakvinnafélagið Framsókn* – 'the Progressive Association of Working Women'. Among the subjects for discussion were the recent improvements in women's rights that had come with the ratification of the new constitution, and it was agreed that

this would be celebrated with a parade through the streets of Reykjavík at the time of the opening of parliament on 7 July. Elka ends the entry talking about the women's rights leader, Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir, who had attended the meeting and explained the importance of the improved rights for Icelandic women. Bríet was perhaps the most celebrated advocate of women's rights in Iceland and had set up a newspaper, *Kvennablaðið* – The Women's Paper, dedicated to the advancement of women's issues. I have argued elsewhere that Bríet was first and foremost a product of her own class that when discussing the rights and duties of women she shared and promoted the attitudes of the middle classes to which she belonged.¹⁷ On the subject of working-class women her ideas were, it seems to me, much more ambivalent, and this is precisely how Elka Björnsdóttir saw it:

It was for the most part a good meeting, except for how angry Bríet got, and made a lot of fuss because we intended to buy this new newspaper and were not buying her *Kvennablaðið* paper. She said that only one working woman had taken out a subscription this winter and threatened to shut it down. She received some short but determined objections. The women said that she was looking at this entirely from one side of the argument and they felt they had every right to be able to choose for themselves what newspaper they bought. The meeting ended at around 10 o'clock. I said not one word, but it made me glad to see the initiative of these young people with their paper, all the more so because we working folk have no newspaper where they can discuss our issues, and most of these young people are likely to produce something worthwhile in this respect. . . . I had been intending to take out a subscription of *Kvennablaðið* but had not sent off the order. But now, with Bríet behaving like this, I am not going to. She vowed she would not be attending the next meeting.¹⁸

What strikes one here is the idea of economic improvement, the idea that one can take control of one's fate if one goes about things in the right way. Elka's personality comes across very forcefully in her comments on the debate between Bríet and the working women. She is not going to be ruled by others, even by a 'comrade' like Bríet whose interest seemed to lie in women adopting bourgeois values like her own. This kind of talk had no place among a group of women whose every effort focused on having enough to put food in their bellies and clothes on their backs.

Elka's understanding of her situation was not always so bright and balanced, however. She remained deeply rooted in the thinking of rural society about how best to arrange one's thoughts and actions. On her 34th birthday she contemplated her situation and saw things as follows:

When I was a youngster, and then again in my adulthood, I found my birthdays a trial, because at such times I felt even more keenly than usual how profitless my pitiful life was. The feeling does not soften with age. As things stand, I can accept everything that was, but not what is my own fault – the things I have left undone and that perhaps could have been attained if I had had the energy and proper ambition. But God in his deep and loving kindness has brought me to this hour and he is to be thanked and his glorious name praised, because I am not worthy of any good, rather the opposite.¹⁹

This peculiar blend of boldness and vision, on the one hand, and religiosity and unreconstructed conservatism, on the other, reveals Elka in an unusual light. Urban culture was not always to her taste, as we find from her diary entry for 15 September 1915: 'The young girls stepped lightly upon the dance floor, perfectly innocent in itself, but by no means harmless entertainment for the inner soul. It is self-indulgence, like wine, and its effects will accept no limits'.²⁰

Elka lived solitary and alone, working constantly when there was work to be had, and by doing so barely managed to provide for her needs. She received regular food parcels from her parents in the countryside which helped to make life a little easier. They also maintained her contacts with the places of her childhood. Her brothers on the farm stood firmly by her and did what they could to support Elka in her needs.

Throughout her later life Elka had to deal with recurrent bouts of ill-health. In her diary she records her life-and-death struggle against sickness and hunger. The diary provides us with a remarkable insight into how women in her position created an informal network that acted as a kind of substitute for the welfare system as it later developed in Iceland. Women helped each other in times of need, kept their eyes open for the well-being of the group and stood guard over the rights and duties of their friends. Elka's involvement in trade-union affairs was a natural extension of this informal activity that flourished in a society that remained immature or was at least far from being advanced economically speaking.

Lifestyle changes and urban development

Increasing urbanization was accompanied by a change in the composition of households in Iceland. This was true in all parts of the country, farming areas as well as towns and villages. For example, in both rural and urban parishes the number of servants per household fell dramatically.²¹ This decline in the number of servants can be viewed as one of the most significant changes of the period; from accounting for over a third of the general population, servants, at least in their traditional form, almost disappeared from Icelandic society in the early part of the 20th century. During the same period, the greater freedom of choice of occupation and accommodation led to a rise in the number of single tenants, that is, people living alone. Rather than being forced to seek accommodation as domestic staff in the households of established families, young people in urban areas now had the option of seeking work outside the home in industry or the fisheries.

If we attempt to categorize the period between 1880 and 1930, it surely is tempting to identify two phases as the historian Magnús S. Magnússon did in his work *Iceland in Transition*; an early transitional period from about 1880 to 1910, and, with a little more hesitation, the capitalist breakthrough between about 1910 and 1930.²² The migrants who settled as tenants in coastal towns and villages and took up work as labourers suddenly found themselves able to realize long-cherished dreams of independence. In 1930, for instance, migrant workers accounted for the majority of lodgers and tenants in Hafnarfjörður, a fair-sized fishing town near to Reykjavík.²³ This increase in the number of one-person households and single tenants had profound implications for the social, economic and political status of the family. Particularly in urban areas, the family gradually began to change into a different kind of unit from the extended household of traditional peasant society, that is, from a unit of production to a unit of

consumption. Despite the categorization of Magnús S. Magnússon mentioned above, it should be remembered, that the socio-economic changes involved were not felt equally throughout the country and their significance varied between rural and urban areas and between different urban settings.

There are also limits to how far the changes of the late 19th and early 20th centuries affected people's actual lives. The industrialization of the fishing industry and growth of manufacturing obviously had an impact on working patterns in Reykjavík, the only town to speak of, and other coastal communities, but not to such an extent that one can justifiably talk about Iceland's decisive move from a traditional rural society to a modern, urban, industrial one; that is, to refer to this development as 'a capitalist breakthrough'. For most people, the business of daily life went on largely as before, with similar tasks performed in similar ways. For instance, as noted below, agriculture and horticulture remained an important part of life for many town dwellers. Perhaps more importantly, attitudes to work did not change fundamentally; migrating from country to town did not involve any major recasting of people's world views or ways of living. People did not have to adapt to totally new rhythms of work and were able to draw on their previous work experience. The labour-intensive and unmechanized nature of work in towns made it comparatively easy for rural Icelanders to adjust to the new working patterns. The changes involved were of a very different order from what peasants elsewhere in Europe had experienced when adjusting to the far higher levels of technology in 19th-century industrial factories.²⁴

For the vast majority of those involved, the fishing industry did not provide a steady job and a reliable source of income. The gap was filled in various ways. Many households in urban areas, of almost all classes, kept sheep, cows, and often horses for personal use. With the head of the household and the older children employed elsewhere, tending the livestock fell mainly on the women and the younger children. Better-off families hired others to perform these tasks, creating a source of employment for people with relatively unstable incomes. Indeed, it can be argued that well into the 20th century the area of the country that saw the greatest growth in agriculture was in fact Reykjavík and its surroundings, particularly to serve the demands of the growing urban population, but a similar phenomenon can be observed in the smaller urban settlements around the coast.²⁵ Many urban families relied for their survival on a combination of employment in the fisheries for the main breadwinner (generally the husband) and agricultural work of one kind or another in the surrounding areas for the other members of the family. Contemporary sources are full of descriptions of farm work of this kind, often seasonal, which appears to have brought people considerable satisfaction as well as providing a significant supplement to the family's income and food supplies. This period also saw a marked increase in people establishing vegetable gardens for domestic consumption. Local authorities and various associations encouraged this development by providing land for use as allotment gardens. The most important crop was the potato, the introduction of which made a huge difference to the family's food stock and nutrition over the long winter months.

An article 'Vöxtur Akureyrar og afkoma bæjarmanna' (The growth of the town Akureyri and the inhabitants' survival) published in 1904 in the journal *Stefnir* gives us a vivid snapshot of urban life in Iceland around the turn of the century.²⁶ The article describes the situation in Akureyri, the second largest town in Iceland and largest town the north:

Akureyri has grown quite big in recent years. The population has doubled in the last ten years and now stands at 16 to 18 hundred. The great majority of the people of the town are employed in commerce, industry, agriculture and fishing, and we want to discuss each of these in turn. Agriculture and raising livestock is widely practised as a side-line but few have it as their main occupation. It is mostly those who work in commerce, the crafts' people, fishermen or the day labourers who do some farming part-time, and the animal husbandry consists mostly of the fact that many families try to have one cow, and a few two, and also a few sheep, and many also have horses. . . . Agriculture and animal husbandry cannot therefore be considered more than a secondary or ancillary occupation for a considerable number of the townspeople, but these activities often provide a good source of work for day labourers, since those who finance them, and for whose account they are driven, usually do not do the actual work themselves, but hire day labourers to do the work. Working in the vegetable gardens in the summer, preparing the meadows in the spring, working in haymaking in the summer, and tending the livestock in the winter – all these activities are mostly done by hired day labourers. Agriculture and animal husbandry are thus among the securest sources of daily and hourly work in the town, which is, in turn, the foundation for providing families a livelihood in the town.

The urban poor of the early 20th century not only had close ties with agriculture within the limits of their own towns, they also had more direct links with the rural areas. At the end of the fishing season in the spring many faced unemployment and were forced to seek work elsewhere.²⁷ This was the time when work in the countryside was heaviest, especially in the haymaking, and many people from the towns travelled to rural areas and hired themselves out as labourers on farms. Often their families went with them. Alternatively, if their husbands had work in the town over the summer, many women would go to the country on their own or taking some of their children with them. Children were also sent alone to work in the countryside, either over the summer or in some cases for longer periods.

For many this seasonal migration was considered a welcome break from life in the coastal settlements. The movement between town and country forms a recurrent theme in many Icelandic autobiographies. The tradition of sending children to the country to work in the summer persisted long into the second part of the 20th century. Earlier in the 20th century, though, the system was more formalized and often essential to the family's survival.²⁸

Migration in one form or another was not new to Icelanders; it had formed a central part of most people's experience in rural society in earlier times. As servants or as young couples setting up home for the first time, the majority of people lived for longer or shorter periods away from the parish of their birth.²⁹ Male farm-servants were often sent over the winter to work as fishermen at fishing stations along the coast. In this sense migration can be viewed as an important stage in the life of the typical 19th-century peasant and a part of the general culture, something that each generation was accustomed to inherit from the one before it. This system continued, in modified form, through the first half of the 20th century. For this reason it is misleading to view the growth of towns of Iceland as a decisive break with the past; this urbanization took place firmly within the context of pre-existing modes of existence.

Living conditions

Living conditions in towns and villages differed in certain respects from those in the countryside. In the rural areas the dominant form of buildings remained the turf house, while it was the growth of towns that accounted for most of the increase in the construction of stone and timber houses. In addition, in general the dwellings in the towns differed more in quality than those in the country.

Small houses and shacks were thrown up rapidly in the towns to cater for the stream of migrants from the countryside. Reykjavík took on a very mixed appearance, with the finer homes of the merchants and government officials interspersed with areas of shanties. As we find frequently mentioned in contemporary sources, the newcomers from the countryside, many of whom were not used to any form of urbanism, often found the town strange and outlandish with its prevalence of new types of housing. To the farmer Böðvar Magnússon (b. 1877), writing in his autobiography *Undir tindum* (Under the mountain peaks), Reykjavík appeared as vast and impressive when he first saw the town at the age of eleven – this at a time when the entire population numbered just around 3,800.³⁰ In time, and especially as we move further into the 20th century, growing numbers of people managed to build themselves better houses and the housing in Reykjavík began to improve. For the vast majority of the population, though, living conditions remained very poor. In his autobiography *Í útlegð* (In banishment) Þorfinnur Kristjánsson (b. 1887) describes his childhood home in Reykjavík:

As for the homes of ordinary people, I think it is safe to say that most were very poor. Our house could hardly have looked less prepossessing. There was no furniture other than the beds, a table and some stools. I do not remember that there were any pictures on the walls. And the same was true of most other homes I visited.³¹

In 1916, Guðmundur Hannesson, a professor of medicine at the University of Iceland, published a report on housing conditions in towns. Having observed that there were no published statistics for the size of the average home in Iceland, he extrapolated from the existing records and came to the following conclusion: ‘The average home would then have 2–3 heated rooms and 1–2 rooms without heating, in addition to a kitchen and a decent storage room. However, it is quite clear that the vast majority of houses are considerably smaller than this, a large percentage consisting merely of one-room dwellings. It is only the better off that live in reasonable comfort’.³² Guðmundur Hannesson’s report covers Reykjavík and three other villages and passes the following general comment on living standards in urban areas: ‘Whether we look at the three villages or the sample of dwellings in Reykjavík, we find that almost a half of all dwellings consist of a single room and a kitchen, or less. It is obvious that such dwellings are inadequate for families to live in and it is no comfort to realize that conditions are no better in cities in other countries. Basement apartments are rare outside Reykjavík, and there they are of very poor quality, both cold and damp’.³³

In an article called ‘Fátæku heimilin í Reykjavík’ (The poor people’s homes in Reykjavík) in the newspaper *Lögrjetta* in 1906, another doctor, Steingrímur Matthíasson, gives a graphic account of the conditions in which much of the population of Reykjavík was forced to subsist.³⁴ Like other family doctors, Steingrímur Matthíasson was quite familiar with the situation at first hand from his visits to families throughout the town:

To start with the basement hole, on entering or leaving it one generally hits one's head on the doorframe. Inside it is dark and gloomy, because the sun is not seen there the whole year around, except as a reflection in the windows of the house on the other side of the street. The air is damp and the walls are rotten and covered in mould. There is no proper heating, just a small stove where the food is cooked and the steam from the pot fills the room and mixes in with the foul-smelling air emanating from all the people that stay there night and day. Ventilation is non-existent except for the draught brought in when the door is opened.

Steingrímur goes on to describe with similar outrage the attics that formed the homes of many town dwellers, before finally turning to the turf houses that still existed in some numbers in Reykjavík:

These are unfit for human habitation and an appalling disgrace to the town. Overcrowding is no worse than in other types of houses, but there is even greater lack of light and ventilation and the dirt floors and walls make these houses appreciably more wretched. In one place I came across a cow in a side chamber off the main living room. This, it occurred to me, was how they got their heat. The air was thick with cow dung and urine and the entire house reeked of the stench of cattle. What all these houses have in common is that they have whole families, maybe as many as ten people, crammed into them, subsisting day and night in rooms that are really only big enough for two.³⁵

The situation seems to have improved little in the first decades of the 20th century. A government official, the economist Indriði Einarsson, described conditions in Reykjavík in an article named 'Reykjavík fyrrum og nú' (Reykjavík past and present) in the newspaper *Ísafold* in 1919. He pointed out that the construction of new houses was lagging far behind the demand, which was caused by the large-scale migration to the town. As a result rents were rising steeply. He also points to the potentially catastrophic consequences of poor housing, as brought home during the Spanish influenza epidemic of 1918:

In one place, three sick girls lay in an attic. Over them was nothing but the iron-clad roof, and the ventilation was through the nail holes in the roof. A doctor was fetched to attend to some sick people who lived in some basement rooms in one part of town. In the front room he could hardly find anywhere to put his feet down because of people lying on mattresses, the floor was covered so thick. When the doctor comes to a place like this during the day, then the mattresses are in the beds, or placed in stacks, to make some space for people to move around. If a person dies in this kind of home, the body has to stay there in among the living. In many places, water and condensation run down the basement walls. The housing situation is woefully inadequate for as many as a quarter of the population of this town.³⁶

Other than the greater use of stone and timber as a building material, housing conditions for the poor in towns were thus not much different from those in the countryside. For the first decades of the 20th century progress was slow: even in 1928, 45% of dwellings in Reykjavík lacked sewers and toilets and only 11% had baths.³⁷ Other aspects

of living standards – health and sanitation, for instance – remained strikingly similar in both towns and the countryside.³⁸ It was only in the years following the Second World War that town and country moved decisively apart and Iceland could be said to have acquired a genuine urban culture.

New perspectives

On 3 September 1919, Elka Björnsdóttir looked out of her window and described in her diary what met her eye:

Just now I saw out of my window a thing that has never been seen in Iceland before, and twenty or twenty-five years ago, or even more recently, few would have imagined that it would ever happen to mankind, and least of all here: There were men flying in the air. In all honesty, I did not actually see any person, just the wings and the machine itself moving past there, and so gracefully too, with all kinds of sweeps and gentle turns, like when some skilful bird in flight is playing in the air.³⁹

In many ways it is fair to call the 20th century the age of progress and technology. Both, however, were relatively slow in coming to Iceland in comparison to many European countries that took the industrial process by storm, but they still had a great influence on how people thought about life. Moments like the one Elka Björnsdóttir experienced clearly changed people's perceptions of their world.

Throughout the country there were individuals who had been educated and perhaps understood better than the common mass the opportunities modernity had to offer. These opportunities were most obvious in connection with fishing and processing the produce from the sea. But similar things happened in other areas of life. At this point in the country's history Reykjavík was indisputably at the centre of science and learning, or the place to which people intent on becoming part of modern society and the new conditions inevitably looked. The present was in Reykjavík, exactly as the working woman suggested in her diary, and it was there that everyone headed who felt in any way that they were a part of the new age.

Elka Björnsdóttir's life can be seen in a sense as a microcosm of the society in which she lived. Her whole existence was built around an unending struggle to keep herself afloat, to provide for her immediate needs. Once illness was added to the equation, life became all but impossible and an uncompromising battle just to stay alive. Friends, family and even workmates stepped in and, to the limits of their limited abilities, offered their help. But society itself was still too weak to provide any serious protection against shocks and setbacks.

While all went well, Elka took full advantage of the opportunities the town had to offer as a centre for progress and culture. She attended lectures by the educated elite of Reykjavík, the so-called 'university lectures', where she could hear learned discourses on subjects that interested her. These lectures were set up in a systematic attempt to educate and inform the young nation, to encourage it to build up sufficient self-confidence to be able to aspire to national independence. The meetings were, of course, primarily intended for men. On 29 January 1919, Elka noted in her diary: 'The last two Monday evenings I have gone to listen to Sigurður Nordal speak on unity and diversity. I particularly enjoyed the second one. This is challenging psychology'.⁴⁰ Sigurður Nordal

probably remained the central figure in the intellectual life of Iceland for almost the entire 20th century, best remembered now as the leading name in the so-called Icelandic school of saga studies, but with a deep interest in all areas of Icelandic studies and in philosophy in general. In the same year Elka joined *Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag* (The Icelandic Literary Society) and at the first opportunity attended its annual general meeting along with all the outstanding intellectual figures of the country. She mentions in her diary that a number of ordinary working people had also attended the meeting, 'but no woman was there except me, neither high nor low, and I confess to having felt certain shyness, as was only to be expected. I have sometimes been shy on much lesser occasions, but it is much better to sit unknown among such cultured folk than among many other people, including one's equals'.⁴¹

Elka's cultural background shines through everywhere in her writings. Her language, thought and presentation are fully developed – exactly as if she had had a proper education and benefited from all the best that society had to offer. Nothing could be further from the truth. The struggle for life was hard and unforgiving, as she states herself in a few short reflections from around the turn of the year 1920–1921: 'I have still not recovered from the sickness I contracted last spring and had to spend all of 80 *krónur* from this miserable pay for help. You cannot afford much to go wrong when everything one needs is so terribly dear. I have been feeling fairly low now over the New Year. It is as if for some life is an unforgiving round of toil and suffering'.⁴²

The undeveloped nature of the Icelandic public sector, which took most of the 20th century to reach maturity with the establishment of the welfare system, set its mark on Elka's life. Conditions were extremely harsh and demanding; they called for incredible sacrifices from the ordinary working people, sacrifices that came at an enormous cost to their health and living conditions. But despite the drudgery and hardship, a woman like Elka Björnsdóttir could live with a degree of dignity that shines out of her narrative in many places. Even towards the end of her life, when the conditions were taking an increasing toll on her health, she continued to attend public lectures on a wide range of subjects from the world of science and learning. In one entry, in which she catalogues all the meetings she had attended, she adds: 'These lectures are precious hours of edification and delight for the listeners. So far as I am concerned there are alas far too few of them, of all the ones there could be. If I were out in the country I would long for them. But now I am here in among them, why shouldn't I make every effort to take advantage of this blessing of the spirit, and for free as well?'⁴³

It remains something of a mystery why people like Elka chose to construct their lives in an urban society – such was the grimness of its outer complexion. Elka and others like her were forced to live far away from the bosoms of their families, thrown upon the mercy and goodwill of strangers. But for all that, it seems that the town exerted an attraction on thinking people who wished to gain more from life than unremitting toil. This certainly seems to have been the case with Elka; she grasped with eager hands every opportunity the town presented to her to educate herself in informal ways and share and enjoy the intellectual fellowship of those who were closest to her. In addition, she could, without hesitation, write about this experience in her diary. Her modest private space protected her thoughts and ideas, which she enjoyed writing about. Such a joy demanded sacrifices and her decision to follow this path was accompanied by incredible hardships – and eventually led her to her death, many years before her time.

In the final analysis, the Icelandic society underwent considerable changes during the late 19th and early 20th centuries – changes which look drastic or even extreme. Some of them can, for sure, be viewed as overwhelming, almost revolutionary, like the transformation of Reykjavík as the most important urban centre of the country. But other areas of the daily life remained unchanged, something which has not been studied in great detail by Icelandic historians. This combination of modern, ‘progressive’, thinking and traditional conservative outlook on life, as can be discerned in Elka Björnsdóttir’s mentality, contributed to a rather successful development of Icelandic society until the Second World War. It continued to be a rather isolated society but at the same time with a modern way of thinking on important factors concerning certain aspects of culture and society.

By analysing the diaries of Elka Björnsdóttir, one is struck by the opportunity that research of this kind provides by shedding light on the lived experience of ordinary people and to establish links between these individuals and the social development all around them.⁴⁴ Here the conceptual framework that has marked traditional historical research has simply proved inadequate, not only in Iceland but also elsewhere.⁴⁵ One thing is certain: her desire for education was not addressed only by the traditional formal institutions which we are used to conceptualize in modern scholarship. Instead, education was obtained by means of psychological drive of young people in their attempt to cope with emotional strain which came along the transformation of the society – old and new.⁴⁶

Elka’s cultivation of literature and poetry, which, of course, often demanded a systematic application of abstract concepts, proved exceptionally useful to people like her when faced with the new, industrialized world of the 20th century. The Icelanders appear to have found the leap from the turf cottages of the 19th century to the steam trawlers and mechanized technology of the modern age comparatively easy in comparison to well-known cases in other European countries, and accomplished the adjustments needed without losing their links to the past. This attribute – the readiness to embrace the new while holding on to customs and attitudes developed over the centuries – left its mark on the country’s culture and economy.

I believe that the study of everyday life experience and social development requires new evaluations, entailing not only a fresh look at the sources used, but also a new evaluation of the concepts and methods that have guided our research. I am certain that a successful application of the methods of microhistory may open up unknown territory, namely the place where popular culture has the most meaning; in the everyday lives of ordinary people.⁴⁷

Notes

- 1 See the following work on the development of the Icelandic society in the period under investigation in this article: Gunnlaugsson, *Family and Household in Iceland*; Hálfðanarson, *Historical Dictionary of Iceland*; Jónsson and Magnússon, *Hagskinna*; Magnússon, *Iceland in Transition*; Pétursson, *Church and Social Change*.
- 2 Magnússon, *Wasteland with Words*, 222–58.
- 3 Hálfðanarson, ‘Íslensk þjóðfélagsþróun’, 9–58.

- 4 Gunnlaugsson, *Family and Household in Iceland*, 139.
- 5 See revisionist arguments on this development in Valdimarsdóttir, *Sveitin við sundin*; Ásgeirsson, *Íðnbylting hugarfarsins*; Magnússon, 'Hugarfarið og samtíminn', 28–39.
- 6 Stearns, 'Modernization', 3–12.
- 7 See for example, Karlsson, *Iceland's 1100 Years*; Kjartansson, *Ísland á 20. öld*.
- 8 See Ginzburg, 'Microhistory', 10–35; Magnússon, 'The Singularization of History', 701–35; Ginzburg and Poni, 'The Name and the Game', 1–10; Pomata, 'Close-Ups and Long Shots', 99–124; Szijártó, 'Puzzle, Fractal, Mosaic'; Szijártó, 'Four Arguments for Microhistory', 209–15; Brown, 'Microhistory', 1–20; Gray, 'Microhistory as Universal History', 419–31; Appuhn, 'Microhistory', 105–12; Peltonen, 'Clues, Margins and Monads', 347–59.
- 9 See for example an interesting studies dealing with class issues with the support of life writing or autobiographical sources: Maynes, 'The Contours of Childhood', 101–24; Graff, *Conflicting Paths*. Graff's book is among the most interesting yet produced in which personal sources take centre stage: see my review, 'Harvey J. Graff, *Conflicting Paths*', in *Journal of Social History*. See also: Maynes, *Schooling in Western Europe*; Heywood, *Childhood in Nineteenth-Century France*; Stearns, *Schools and Students in Industrial Society*; Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*; Stearns, *Anxious Parents*.
- 10 See the following articles written by me on the topic of microhistory: Magnússon, 'Social History as "Sites of Memory"?'; 'The Singularization of History', – the article was republished in an international collection of essays called: 'Cultural History'. In Burns, *Historiography: Critical Concepts in Historical Studies*, vol. 4. The general ideas presented in the *Journal of Social History* article from 2003 have received strong responds from both Peter N. Stearns and Harvey J. Graff; see Stearns, 'Debates About Social History', and Graff, 'History's War of the Wor(l)ds'. See more about microhistory my articles: 'Social History – Cultural History', 'The Contours of Social History', and 'What is Microhistory?'.
- 11 Magnússon and Ólafsson, 'Barefoot Historians'.
- 12 See an interesting collection of essays, which mostly deals with the use of personal sources, Lorenzen-Schmidt and Poulsen, *Writing Peasants*. See also: Ólafsson, 'Wordmongers'; Driscoll, *The Unwashed Children of Eve*. On memory and life writing (ego-documents) in Iceland, see Magnússon, *Fortíðardraumur*.
- 13 National and University Library of Iceland. Lbs 2234-7, 8vo. 'Dagbækur Elku Björnsdóttur 1915–1923'. See also Guðmundsdóttir, 'Elka, verkakona í Reykjavík', 24–6; Björnsdóttir, 'Hvíta stríðið', 97–103; Guðmundsdóttir, 'Alþýðukonan og listin', 16–25.
- 14 On the development of the Icelandic peasant diary-writing, see Ólafsson, 'Að skrá sína eigin tilveru', 51–88.
- 15 National and University Library of Iceland, Lbs 2234-7, 8vo. 25 April 1915.
- 16 Magnússon, 'From Children's Point of View', 295–323.
- 17 Magnússon, 'Kynjasögur', 137–77.
- 18 National and University Library of Iceland. Lbs 2234-7, 8vo. 24 June 1915.
- 19 Ibid., 8vo. 7 September 1915.
- 20 Ibid., 8vo. 15 September 1915.
- 21 Gunnlaugsson, *Family and Household in Iceland*, 143–69.
- 22 Magnússon, *Iceland in Transition*, 15.
- 23 Gunnlaugsson, *Family and Household in Iceland*, 156.
- 24 See discussions in Magnússon, *Wasteland with Words*.

- 25 Valdimarsdóttir, *Sveitin við sundin*, 50.
- 26 'Vöxtur Akureyrar', 149
- 27 See further discussion about the nature of this seasonal migration from coastal to rural districts in the 19th century in Jónsson, 'Þættir um kjör verkafólks', 63–80. Jónsson points out that the seasonal migration was considered to be a welcome diversion from the everyday affairs in the coastal areas, despite the fact that people worked extremely hard and long hours (that was something to which they were accustomed at home). They worked in rural areas during the two to three month haymaking season every year. See also a description of seasonal migration in the 1920s, in Magnússon, *Lífshættir í Reykjavík*, 123–41.
- 28 Eggert Briem discussed the relationship between these two social forms in a 1916 article where he dealt with the occupational character of both areas. He maintained that farm work was much healthier for people, both physically and mentally, and for that reason rural areas should enjoy some support from the government. He also points out that many thought 'that the countryside brings up so many people for the urban areas, that it is only fair that they are repaid in one way or another'. Briem, 'Landbúnaðurinn og sjávarútvegurinn', 57.
- 29 Gunnlaugsson, *Family and Household in Iceland*, 136.
- 30 Magnússon, *Undir tindum*, 153–7.
- 31 Kristjánsson, *Í útlegð*, 153.
- 32 Hannesson, 'Um skipulag bæja', 14.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 14, 16–17.
- 34 Matthíasson, 'Fátæku heimilin', 69.
- 35 Matthíasson, 'Fátæku heimilin', 69. See also an article by Guðmundur Björnsson, the Surgeon General of Iceland, on the turf houses in the capital and the social situation of the people who lived there. Björnsson, 'Bæjarbragur í Reykjavík', 94–100.
- 36 Einarsson, 'Reykjavík fyrrum og nú', *Ísafold*, 17 May 1919, 3 and 24 May 1919, 3.
- 37 See *Skýrslur um húsnaðisrannsóknina*, 7, 9.
- 38 Ísberg, *Líf og lækningar*.
- 39 National and University Library of Iceland. Lbs 2234-7, 8vo. 3 September 1919.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 8vo. 29 January 1919.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 8vo. 21 June 1919.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 8vo. 1 January 1921.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 8vo. 20 January 1922.
- 44 See an important research of Sigríður Matthíasdóttir who wrote her doctoral dissertation on nation-building in Iceland in the early 20th century from a gendered perspective. See Matthíasdóttir, *Hinn sanni Íslendingur*.
- 45 See for example the economic determinism which overshadows all other aspect of the human experience in the argument of Kjartansson's book *Ísland á 20. öld*. See my criticism in 'Aðferði í uppnámi', 15–54.
- 46 See fuller discussions of this argument in Magnússon and Ólafsson, 'Barefoot Historians', 175–209; Magnússon, *Wasteland with Words*, 123–73.
- 47 For further discussions on the development of the methods of microhistory see the following monographs and collections of essays: Castrén, Lonkila, and Peltonen, *Between Sociology and History*; Brooks, DeCorse, and Walton, *Small Worlds*; Ullbricht, *Mikrogeschichte*; Budde, Conrad, and Janz, *Transnationale Geschichte*; Lima, *A micro-história italiana*; Amato, *Jacob's Well*; Ouwenell, *The Flight of the Shepherd*.

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