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[Editor's note: Alan Dundes died March 30, 2005.]

The Folk-Stories of Iceland. By Einar Ólafur Sveinsson. Revised by Einar G. Pétursson; translated by Benedikt Benedikz; edited by Anthony Faulkes. (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2003. Pp. 319, preface, notes. £12 paper)

The question that echoes through the mind of the critical reader of this recent revision and translation of Einar Ólafur Sveinsson's mid-twentieth-century survey of Icelandic folktales (1940) is, "Why this book and why now?" The alarmingly short preface by Einar G. Pétursson does little to clarify the mystery, and the answer to this nagging question remains elusive even after one finishes the book. This is not to say that the study by Einar Ól. is without merit, but (as will be shown) it does not rise to the standard of a classic in the field of Nordic folkloristics. Accordingly, this revised translation cannot be seen as a companion to translations such as those of Olrik's *Principles for Oral Narrative Research* (1992) or the important articles and excerpts in *Nordic Folklore: Recent Studies* (1989) or even the Krohns' *Folklore Methodology* (1971).

Einar Ól. is best known for his work on Old Icelandic literature including saga literature, such as his work on *Njáls saga*, and Eddic poetry (see for example *Íslenzkar bókmenntir í fornöld* [1962]), where he emerges as a strong advocate of the "Icelandic school" in Old Norse-Icelandic scholarship, as well as for his work on Icelandic folklore, something that should have been made clear in the preface. In the present volume he is at his best when he explores the relationship between Old Norse literature and folktales and folk belief. Yet while his command of the literary record is extraordinary, he seems to be somewhat adrift discussing

oral tradition, particularly stories recorded in more “recent” times, such as those found in Jón Árnason’s nineteenth-century collections of Icelandic folk narrative (1862-1864), deprived as he is in these cases of a literary anchor. The student of Old Norse literature who has folkloristic tendencies may find this work useful in isolating instances of folk belief and folktale motifs in the earliest literature—but most students of Old Norse interested in questions concerning the relationship between Old Norse literature and later recordings of oral narrative would have little difficulty in accessing the Icelandic original.

The book was intended as a general survey of motifs in Icelandic folk narrative for an Icelandic-speaking audience. Its main premise is that there is value in searching the early written record for attestations of folk motifs, a by-now outmoded approach to the study of folk narrative. Einar Ól.’s dogged yet inconclusive search for earliest variants and his imaginative speculation as to the historical roots and cultural origins of stories and motifs can become rather tedious. Here he should not necessarily be faulted, as this approach toward folk narrative had a degree of currency in 1940, a period that was teetering on the cusp of the structuralist revolution in folkloristics. What should be questioned instead is the surprisingly cursory introduction to the present translation, which fails to set the author’s folkloristic work in a proper intellectual context and can give the unwary reader the impression that this approach to the study of folk narrative still has currency in Iceland. A more suitable introduction would not only have detailed the contours of folklore study in Iceland through the 1940s and on to the present, but would also have set this particular work into the overall context of Einar Ól.’s own significant and extensive contributions to the fields of Old Norse literature and Icelandic folklore. However, given this particular book’s theoretical datedness, one wonders why it was chosen for translation rather than Einar Ól.’s classic *Verzeichnis isländischer Märchenvarianten* [Types of the Icelandic Folktale] (1929).

The Folk-Stories of Iceland does have some excellent qualities, but one needs to work a bit to isolate them. Part one provides a survey of the development of worldwide folk narrative studies up to 1940, and reveals Einar Ól.’s leanings toward the exploration of survivals in folk tradition and their literary analogs. Part two includes not only a wealth of information about folk motifs in Old Icelandic literature but also a helpful discussion of early collectors and collections of Icelandic folk narrative. Part three on folk belief in folk legends is of little use to modern scholars, owing principally to Einar Ól.’s superorganic conception of folk

belief that ascribes no importance to individuals, although this section does identify areas of apparent differences between Icelandic tradition dominants as reflected in printed collections and those of the other Nordic countries broadly conceived (for example, differences in the conceptions of trolls). Part four is more of historical interest than of methodological or theoretical import as Einar Ól.'s discussion of fairy tale is by now thoroughly outdated. The final section, part five, "On the world of men and the hidden world" could easily have been incorporated into part three, but that is a criticism that comes sixty years too late.

Although the translation of *The Folk Stories of Iceland* is easily readable and accurate to the original, and the few obvious revisions and expanded apparatus are helpful, without a substantive critical introduction the work stands as an oddity. Certainly Einar Ól. is an important scholar, but this is hardly his most important work, even in the field of Icelandic folklore. A much better project for everyone concerned would have been a selection of translated articles and book excerpts on Icelandic folk narrative and folk belief from a variety of scholars (including Einar Ól.) providing an overview of the development of Icelandic folklore scholarship and its relationship to currents in international folk narrative research from the end of the nineteenth century to the present. If the editors were set on revising and translating this particular book—one that has little to add to the methodology for the study of the folk tale and one that contributes little to the theoretical debate surrounding the study of folk narrative—they should at least have contextualized it historically in the introduction. As it is, this at times tedious survey cannot stand on its own and misrepresents both the important and far-reaching scholarship of Einar Ól. and the status of folk narrative research in Iceland today.

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The Flowering Thorn: International Ballad Studies. Edited by Thomas McKean. (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2003. Pp. 388, introduction, acknowledgments, photographs, musical notation, tables, notes, bibliographies, indices. \$21.95 paper)

The International Ballad Commission (*Kommission für Volksdichtung*) was founded in the mid-1960s with a mission to construct, along the lines of the Arne-Thompson index, a cataloguing system for ballad and folk-song. In recent decades, though, the Commission has attracted a cadre of younger scholars from various disciplines whose interests in ballads extend well beyond classification, covering such topics as interpretation; repertoire analysis; singer profiles; the history of ballad scholarship and collection; politics of culture; the interrelations of traditional, popular, and literary forms; issues of revival and regional/national identity; and many others. *The Flowering Thorn* brings together twenty-six essays presented at the Commission's 1999 annual meeting, hosted by the Elphinstone Institute at the University of Aberdeen.

To a certain degree, *The Flowering Thorn* is a pauper in prince's clothing. The volume is beautifully designed and editor Tom McKean has done a fine job of organizing a rather unruly mob of papers into coherent thematic groupings. McKean's introduction, fittingly dedicated to Barre Toelken, offers a concise, insightful overview of recent trends in ballad research. In addition, each group of essays begins with a one- or two-page preface discussing how the thematic area dovetails with current concerns in ballad scholarship and how the various authors have tackled the issues. Coupled with the introduction, these prefaces ground the sections theoretically as well as thematically, which helps build connections that are not always apparent in the content of the individual essays. Yet despite the high caliber of publication and the first-rate work of the editor, there is no disguising the fact the volume is an edition of conference proceedings. Only a handful of the articles approach the length of fully developed essays; a few retain the character of conference