

January 2017

Book Review: *Survival on the Edge: Seawomen of Iceland*

Wendy K. Rockne
Bridgewater State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rockne, Wendy K. (2017). Book Review: *Survival on the Edge: Seawomen of Iceland*. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 18(2), 289-292.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol18/iss2/24>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Authors share joint copyright with the JIWS. ©2022 Journal of International Women's Studies.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. ©2017 Journal of International Women's Studies.

***Survival on the Edge: Seawomen of Iceland*, Margaret Willson, 2016. University of Washington: Seattle. 312 pages. 20 Illustrations, 2 Maps, 2 Tables, 3 Appendices included. \$34.95, hardcover.**

Reviewed by:
Wendy K. Rockne¹

In most countries, seafaring has traditionally been a male-dominated vocation. Iceland is no exception. Margaret Willson's ethnographic research reveals that despite its claims of being a society that promotes gender equality, and despite centuries-old laws dictating equal pay for both genders, Iceland does, in fact, have a significant amount of gender inequality at its core. As an island nation with few agricultural resources inland, Iceland relies heavily on the fishing industry not only for its own economic stability, but also for the very survival of its people. Willson, a former fisherwoman herself, begins research for this book in an attempt to discover why, in a country surrounded by the ocean, females are almost completely unrepresented in the lore of the nation's substantial seafaring tradition. What she uncovers is a rich but submerged oral history, laden with tales of successful, strong, brave, determined seawomen who have ultimately been "erased" from existence by their own society. Her objective is to write them back in.

After stumbling across the memorial plaque on the home of Foreman Thurídur Einarsdóttir (1777-1863), who worked as a successful fisherwoman in the mid-nineteenth century, Willson becomes curious about the scores of other women who may have worked alongside men on the rough, cold, forbidding and often deadly seas surrounding Iceland. The author states that this book is primarily "about the realities of working at sea in Iceland, its history and its present, but uniquely, entirely from women's experiences and perspectives" (22). In truth, it is more about gender bias and inequality, but it also praises the hard work and strength of form and character demonstrated by so many women over so many centuries.

Willson uses the biographical accounts of Foreman Thurídur Einarsdóttir as a means by which to anchor the stories and historical information in this book. Thurídur becomes a sort of spokeswoman for the seawomen of Iceland; even still, she is actually "mostly remembered because of her brilliant detective work on a famous robbery" (19), not for her success as a fisherwoman and sea captain. As Willson notes, "because men wrote the vast majority of the early accounts, the recorded memory of these seawomen is entirely dependent upon whether these men felt women were important or interesting enough to be included in their writings" (19).

Foreman Thurídur Einarsdóttir is called "Foreman" because it is the traditional title given to the person in command of a fishing vessel. Born in 1777, she grew up on a farm near Stokkseyri. Her father fished in order to supplement the family's farm income. By the time she was eleven, Thurídur was fishing alongside her father and brother, and when her father died two years later, she and her brother took over the responsibility of earning enough money on the boat to support their family. At a young age, Thurídur was known for her wisdom and for her ability to bring in the largest catch. As she grew older, and as many Icelanders faced starvation and poverty, she was able to sustain a successful living by fishing, and later, by captaining a boat (11-13). It is this

¹ Wendy K. Rockne, Ed.D. is a Visiting Lecturer in the Department of English, Bridgewater State University. wrockne@bridgew.edu

woman's story, a woman who flew in the face of tradition and triumphed where others failed, and who ignored gender roles and societal expectations, that inspires Willson to begin her research. She knows that seawomen exist, but aside from Thurídur, "no one seemed to know much about any other seawomen, either in history or in the present" (13). Having worked at sea herself, Willson knows there must be something somewhere.

At first, Willson admittedly finds her research difficult. She notes that the historical accounts are "disturbingly uneven" (19) and that "seawomen are not mentioned unless something remarkable happened to them" (19). In fact, most of the people she interviews cannot recall knowing of any women who work on fishing boats. She writes: "Nearly all Icelanders with whom I have spoken, with the exception of a few seawomen themselves, are sure seawomen have never existed" (21). Disturbed by "this silence and plain erasure, particularly occurring as it does in a country that prides itself on its gender equality, and where fishing has been central for centuries" (21), she is inspired to persevere. She is not disappointed. As she digs deeper into various books, articles, and archives at the National and University Library of Iceland, she finds "dozens upon dozens of accounts of seawomen, and mentions of hundreds" (53). She delves into the historical and biographical works of Bergsveinn Skúlasón (1899-1993) and Thórunn Magnúsdóttir (1920-2008) and travels to various coastal fishing towns across the country, interviewing over 150 seawomen who "worked at sea for varied amounts of time and in varied positions between the 1940s and 2013" (15), to find out more.

The accounts of Bergsveinn Skúlasón are especially useful; he was a farmer who "seems to have begun collecting oral accounts of the people he knew and their ancestors in West Iceland while still a teenager" (19). He knew most of the people personally, and he "stated his opinions freely" (19). Because he "talked with and wrote about everyone, regardless of class, position, or gender [he] almost single-handedly...preserved the knowledge and experience of many women, including seawomen, of West Iceland" (19). As Willson states, "nowhere else in the country is such a rich and gender-equal history available" (19).

Willson also credits historian Thórunn Magnúsdóttir with providing a great deal of the information referenced in this book, specifically in her work, *Sjókonur á Íslandi 1891-1981*², which was used heavily by Willson in her research. Thórunn lived primarily in Reykjavík, where she worked as a schoolteacher and wrote about women's history. She also held various political positions. Because Thórunn's family was originally from Stokkseyri, there were many "strange circles of connections" (20) between her family and the family of Thurídur Einarsdóttir, and Thórunn carefully chronicled these connections in an effort to "dig the seawomen out from the 'space of forgetfulness'" (20). Thórunn's work is based on the daily crew registrations of fishing boats, but unfortunately a significant number of these records were destroyed by fire, water, insects, etc., leaving noticeable gaps in the history (20).

Willson integrates the above-mentioned works with her own research and personal interviews. She divides her findings into distinct sections, discussing the Icelandic seawomen's experiences with survival, strength, reputation, work, pay, and the changing face of the country's fishing industry. Throughout all of this, she clearly focuses on the daily trials and tribulations of being a woman at sea—a woman in a man's world. The accounts vary widely; in some areas, she discusses how seawomen are treated unfairly on the ships and are abused, assaulted, and underpaid. For example, in the Breidafjörður islands, "farmhand women received less clothing and less food than men, even when they went to sea" (33). Also, the farmer for whom the contracted seawoman

² Þórunn Magnúsdóttir. *Sjókonur Á Íslandi 1891-1981* Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 1988. Print. Ritsafn Sagnfræðistofnunar, 23.

worked would often take her “entire fish share for himself, giving her in return compensation unequal to men and much less than the actual fish share” (39). Often, seamen reported that the men expected them to sleep with them, and sometimes the threat of violence in these situations became a reality. They were disparagingly referred to as “hags, trolls, and whores” (81) by shore people and sea people alike.

This is not always the case, however. In other areas of the book, Willson discusses how seamen are respected, protected, and well-paid. Many even worked their way up to captaining a boat, like Foreman Thurídur Einarsdóttir, Audur Djúpúdgá, and Halldóra Ólafsdóttir. Seamewomen like Gudrún Jónsdóttir are known and respected for their bravery, taking on dangerous tasks no one else dared attempt. Many stories demonstrate a perception that “a woman can be an equal and strong seafarer” (95), and the seamewomen were known as “industrious and clever” (96). In most accounts throughout this book, women reportedly were paid the same as men when working on a boat. It was considered the only profession in which men and women could earn equal pay for the same job. Women also held the respect of the men on their boat once they earned it. Stories indicate that the women were in control of choosing if and when they wanted to have a sexual relationship with someone on the boat. Apparent contributing factors to the discrepancy between these accounts include time period and geographic location.

In general, fishing is one of the few jobs where women and men receive equal pay, so women who feel the “sea’s siren call” (139) and are strong enough to endure heavy labor, seasickness, and cold, wet conditions are often able to support their families quite well and sometimes even replace their husbands as the family’s provider. Most importantly, they really enjoy the work, the water, and the company.

Willson writes that it is very important to let the seamewomen’s “voices carry their story as much as possible” (16), and that her “aim is to let them tell their story” (16), but mixing all of their voices and stories together proves to be rather confusing at times, particularly with the translation of stories and terms from Icelandic to English. Most chapters end with a narrative-style story about one or more of the seamewomen Willson interviewed. These narratives help the reader connect with the author and her subjects, but in some places the book still leaves the reader with a sense of detachment rather than connectedness.

The first such narrative is at the end of Chapter 1, and it is entitled: “Vallý: A Modern-Day Farmer Seamewoman.” Here, Vallý tells Willson how she started fishing on her father’s boat when she was two years old, and explains that though she left the profession at nineteen to marry and become a sheep farmer with her husband, they were unable to sustain a livelihood on that salary. She returned to fishing to earn a livable income. In this narrative, Willson reflects on the ancestral memories that seem to be inherent in the fishing families—knowledge, skill, and prowess passed down in the blood of each generation.

Another of these narratives appears in Chapter 3. “Hulda: A Housewife Goes to Sea” tells the story of eighty-eight-year-old housewife, Hulda, who lives along the southeast coast of Iceland. She started fishing for shrimp with her husband at age sixty, and said, “I really liked it at sea, so I decided I could take care of the house and kids and go fishing as well” (109). This narrative transitions into a discussion of the financial difficulties fishermen now face because of the 2008 economic crisis and the privatization of fishing rights known as the Individual Transferable Quota System, or more familiarly, the *kvóti*.

Other such narratives include “Bylgja and Vigdís: Seamewomen United” in Chapter 4, which tells of two women who started fishing together as teenagers because they loved being at sea as much as they loved adventure, and “Jónína: A Seamewoman of Many Talents” in Chapter 5, which

tells of a woman from Reykjavik who grew up fishing on her father's boat, attended marine engineering school and the School of Navigation, and eventually became a large-vessel engineer and commander.

The last narrative, "Guðrún: With the Sea for a Lifetime," appears in Chapter 6. Guðrún lives in a prosperous old fishing village whose inhabitants are deemed "rich" by residents of neighboring towns. Like so many others, Guðrún grew up on her father's fishing boat, later worked as a cook on another boat, and then married a boat owner and went out fishing whenever possible—"but not full-time, because I had plenty to do with six kids" (201). Guðrún also discussed the *kvóti* and stated that of the seven licensed fisheries in the area, three of them were owned and operated by women.

Towards the end of the book, inspired and informed by the above narratives, the author's focus shifts away from the plight of the "invisible" seawoman and towards the dwindling small-town fishing industry as a whole. She discusses the "*kvóti* rights" and analyzes their impact on small fishing towns now that there has been an influx of corporate fisheries. She also discusses the economic "crash" of 2008 and the migration of rural Icelanders to urban locations. All of these things have had profound and lasting implications on the Icelandic people, but they are confident that they will recover, adapt and survive as they always have. As one Icelandic woman states at the end: "We're survivors...that's what we do" (233).

The author presents her substantial data to the reader in an empirical way, so in many places the book reads very much like a case study intended for a decidedly academic audience. She admits that she has difficulty conveying the information in a linear, chronological fashion, attributing the "time slippage" (17) to the claim that "in Iceland, history telescopes into the present" (17). This "time slippage" makes it somewhat challenging for the reader to keep track of what is happening and when, but Willson writes this way because she feels as though it adds to the authenticity of the Icelandic people's stories. Unfortunately, the author also frequently neglects to distinguish one speaker from the next in her detailed accounts. She dissects their individual stories and pastes them piece by piece into collective narratives in pre-organized sections, a technique which leaves the reader feeling detached from the women and their experiences.

To supplement the information presented in the book, the author provides several useful reference tools. The middle of the book contains a section of approximately 20 photographs and illustrations with captions. Some images are of fishing vessels, others are of records, and still others of seawomen mentioned in the book. One photograph is of the former home of Foreman Thuridur Einarsdóttir, the woman who inspired the author to write this account. At the end of the book, Willson provides an appendix of names and descriptions along with substantial endnotes, but these tools are only moderately helpful because they are so brief and so abundant. Appendix A is a list of "Historical Seawomen born before 1900." Appendix B is a table of the "Age of Women Registered as Seafarers, 2007-11," and Appendix C is a table of the "Number of Female Fishermen, 1998-2011." Following the appendices are notes separated by chapter, citing sources, providing names and locations, and cross-referencing sources. A bibliography follows, and at the end of the books is an index of names, subjects, etc.

While the author's intent in this book appears to be to shed light on the brave seawomen who have been unfairly "erased" from history by a gender-biased society, in reality this book does more to explain the challenging profession of fishing in general. As a whole, though, this ethnographic study conveys with conviction the fact that no matter what happens to them, the Icelandic people are strong. They will adapt, they will persevere—and they will survive. Especially the women.