

Guðrún H. Finnsdóttir

(Guðrún Finnsdóttir Johnson)

By Rev. Stefan M. Jonasson

Skriðdalur is a long interior valley in the east of Iceland, a place rich in lore and landscape. At the north end of the valley, the Lagarfljót Serpent (Iceland's equivalent of the Loch Ness Monster) was believed to inhabit the nearby lake, while herds of reindeer, imported in the eighteenth century, wandered the birch and spruce forest, one of the few natural forests to survive the settlement of Iceland more than a thousand years ago. At the other end of the valley lies a highland moor where legend says a great battle took place during Viking times. And in the middle of it all is Thingmúli (Meeting Mountain), once the site of a pagan temple, where the district assemblies were held in centuries past and where fossils can be found to the present day. It was here, in this fertile valley for the imagination, where Guðrún Finnsdóttir was born on February 6, 1884 at the farmstead Geirólfsstaðir, the daughter of Finnur Björnsson and Bergthóra Helgadóttir.



When she was sixteen, Guðrún Finnsdóttir moved to the northern town of Akureyri, where she was enrolled in the Women's School. While living there with her maternal aunt, she met Gísli Jónsson, a printer and poet whom she married two years later. In 1904, they immigrated to Winnipeg, where Gísli pursued his trade as a printer while Guðrún raised the five children that came along in the fullness of time.

When their children reached an age that allowed her to turn her attention to literary pursuits, Guðrún Finnsdóttir began writing essays and short stories, which were published in various newspapers and periodicals, including *Brautin* (The Path), the monthly magazine of the United Conference of Icelandic Unitarian and Liberal Christian Churches, *Tímarit*, an annual publication of the Icelandic National League, and *Heimskringla*, one of Winnipeg's two Icelandic weekly newspapers. Most of her writing chronicles the everyday struggles of the immigrants to find their place in a new

homeland. Several of her short stories were collected in two volumes, *Hillingalönd* (Enchanted Lands, 1938) and *Dagshríðar spor* (Trails of Daily Struggles, 1946), while her essays were gathered and published posthumously in *Ferðalók* (Journey's End, 1950).

Guðrún Finnsdóttir and her husband were both very much involved in the social life of the community. An active member of the Ladies' Aid Society of the Unitarian Church, she served as president of the society from 1927 to 1928 and was involved in its varied projects, including its work to establish a lakeside camp for needy children and its wartime support for Red Cross relief efforts. In 1916, she was one of the founding members of the Jón Sigurðsson Chapter of the Imperial Order of Daughters of the Empire (IODE), an unusual branch of the IODE, which otherwise consisted almost exclusively of women of British heritage. During the First World War, the Jón Sigurðsson Chapter was involved in almost every conceivable effort to support Canada's soldiers overseas – sending knitted wear and personal parcels, raising funds for a hospital convalescent ward, entertaining military personnel and corresponding with soldiers at the front, while caring for their families at home. When the war was over, Guðrún Finnsdóttir served on the editorial committee and contributed numerous entries for *Minningarrit Íslenzkra hermanna*, a memorial book published by the IODE in 1923 to honour the women and men of Icelandic heritage who had served in the armed forces of Canada and the United States during the war.

At the time of her death, which came suddenly and unexpectedly on March 25, 1946, Philip M. Petursson paid tribute to her by saying, "she was one of the sanest and most clear minded women that I have known. She held clear and undeluded thoughts on most subjects. Emotionalism or prejudice were foreign to her and were not a part of her process of thought. ... And yet she was not cold or austere. She was full of human sympathy and understanding and insight, as is amply shown in her literary productions which were of a uniformly high quality. ... Her steadying influence and her quiet and reasonable presentation of her views, the dignity of her bearing at all times, her ability to mediate conflicting points of view, all combined in helping to make rough places plain and to calm turbulent waters."

"Death had never come so near to me before, and I understood better than ever before that now every avenue was closed between us. In that way every life ends. No one bids his friends farewell as warmly as he would have wished. No one expresses his thoughts or love as fully as he would have desired. No one finishes the work he had planned to do. No one finds the complete fulfillment of his fairest dreams."

- Guðrún H. Finnsdóttir

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