

Kristinn Stefánsson

By Rev. Stefan M. Jonasson

In one of the older sections of Brookside Cemetery, canopied by trees, stands a grand memorial that one might imagine marked the final resting place of some important statesman or military hero. What a surprise, then, to discover that it marks the grave of a simple carpenter, until one learns that this working man was also one of the finest poets to ever call Winnipeg home.



Kristinn Stefánsson was born on an isolated farm, Egilsá, in the Skagafjörður region of northern Iceland, on July 9, 1856. He was the son of Stefán Tómasson, a farmer and physician who was known for his outstanding intellect and poetic gifts, and Vigdís Magnúsdóttir. Immigrating to Canada in the summer of 1873, as part of the first large group to leave Iceland, he settled first in Rosseau, Ontario before moving west to Winnipeg in 1881. After establishing himself in his adopted homeland, he married Guðrún Jónsdóttir in the summer of 1884. Robert Graves commented that, “to be a poet is a condition rather than a profession.” So it was that Stefánsson earned his living with his hands, fashioning works in wood even as he created works in words. He was frequently called upon to compose poems for recitation at events around the

province, defying C. Day Lewis’s wry observation that, “a poet is not a public figure. A poet should be read and not seen.” On ten occasions, he was one of the featured poets at Íslendingadagurinn, the annual Icelandic Festival of Manitoba, a record unsurpassed by any other individual.

Stefánsson’s earliest published poetry appeared in the pages of *Framfari* (Progress), which was produced at Riverton, during the fall of 1879. He was the most frequently featured poet in the pages of the Winnipeg newspaper *Leifur*, contributing twelve of the forty-one original poems published by the paper during its brief three-year run. When the pioneer women’s suffrage leader Margrét Benedictsson launched publication of *Freyja* in 1898, which billed itself as “the only woman suffrage paper published in Canada,” Stefánsson quickly emerged as one of its most popular contributors.

In 1904, Stefánsson joined the editorial staff of *Neistinn* (The Spark), a periodical produced by the Hekla Lodge of the International Order of Good Templars (IOGT), an American-based temperance society that had gained a strong foothold among Scandinavians on both sides of the Atlantic. That same year, he began contributing to *Heimir*, the monthly magazine of the Icelandic Unitarian Association. Despite their affiliations, like *Freyja*, both of these publications were noteworthy as much for their literary qualities as for the social or religious positions that they represented.

Vestan hafs (West of the Ocean), his first volume of poetry, was published in 1900 but his most popular work, and some would argue his best, is found in his second collection, *Út um vötn og velli* (Out Over Lakes and Plains), which appeared sixteen years later, just two months after his death.

Alongside the nature poetry for which he was most loved, *Út um vötn og velli* contained tributes to various individuals, both great and humble, verses celebrating both his native and adopted homelands, social commentary and a few interpretations in Icelandic of the works of others. Some of his poems betray the emergent bilingual culture of the immigrants, which was most strikingly illustrated by the English title he gave to an Icelandic poem (“Gravitation”).

Although unschooled in a formal sense, Stefánsson possessed a scholarly knowledge and understanding of the literature of both Scandinavia and the English-speaking world. While steeped in the Icelandic skaldic tradition, his own poetry was influenced by the work of Longfellow and Lowell, Byron and Tennyson, Björnson and Ibsen. The Icelandic American literary scholar, Stefán Einarson, commented that, “he was a radical socially and in church matters, as several of his satirical poems testify, but he also loved to describe and contemplate nature, notably in its spring and summer garb.” While much of his verse was inspired by the Canadian landscape, social reform also figured prominently. Satire and irony blended with sympathy and contemplation. His poetry ranged from rugged verses that “move like iron-clad legions” to the more purely lyric, which painted landscapes with words.



Stefánsson was instrumental in launching the campaign to raise funds to erect a statue of Jón Sigurðsson, the father of Icelandic independence, on the grounds of the Manitoba Legislature. It took a decade to accomplish the goal and, while Stefánsson himself did not live to see it, the Jón Sigurðsson statue was unveiled in 1921, the first statue to be placed on the grounds of the then-new Legislative Building. An unintended consequence of this fund drive was the bridging of divisions, both religious and political, that had been festering among the Icelanders in Manitoba, restoring a sense of unity to this immigrant community.

Kristinn Stefánsson died on September 26, 1916, following a brief illness. While his contributions to Icelandic Canadian literature were later eclipsed by those with greater longevity or more prolific output – not to mention willing translators! – Stefánsson was one of the most popular Icelandic Canadian poets during his lifetime and remains one of the most important, although the barrier of language hides his work from the view of most people in his adopted land.



A DAY IN SPRING

By Kristinn Stefánsson

Translated by Jakobina Johnson

Springtime, here's my hand!
Quickened thoughts expand,
Fleet as children in thy sunlight straying.
Life at rising tide
Seeks thy portals wide.
– Grant to youth its heritage of maying.

Realms of song untold
To my soul unfold.
Serve once more thy wine of glowing hours.
Let thy teeming light
Put my years to flight.
– Crown my life with sunshine through thy flowers.

A DROP OF BRINE

(An ode to a drop of water bottled and brought by a friend from the Pacific Ocean)

By Kristinn Stefánsson

Translated by Jakobina Johnson

By man imprisoned, ocean wondrous vast,
An atom of thee reached me through the distance.
– A briny drop thy billows once held fast,
But yielded to my friend without resistance.

This drop has rested in thy mighty veins,
In sound and swell thy impulse wild receiving,
As in the surf it sang thy proud refrains,
Or, rose in giant forms thy bosom cleaving.

Thy very marrow was its dwelling place,
Thy lungs and monster throat their power sharing.
Thy billows nursed and fitted for the race:
Thy name among the winds of heaven bearing.

My footprints ever far from thee remained;
– But as my youthful dreams are not refuted,
I hail this drop with joyousness unfeigned –
– It shared thy sovereign glory undisputed.

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