

Out In the Open Air

The Liberating Legacy of Stephan G. Stephansson

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The American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson idealized the poet as the representative human being, in whom the powers of both divinity and nature came into focus. “The poet is the person,” he wrote, “in whom these powers are in balance, the man without impediment, who sees and handles that which others dream of, traverses the whole scale of experience, and is representative of man, in virtue of being the largest power to receive and impart.”¹ Few societies have better understood Emerson’s sentiment than that of the Icelanders, who have celebrated their poets throughout the generations.

As we mark the sesquicentennial of his birth, scholars and general readers alike acknowledge Stephan G. Stephansson as the finest poet among the Icelanders in North America, if not the finest poet in modern Icelandic literature. Richard Beck described him as “one of the most prolific as well as one of the greatest poets Iceland ever produced,” whose “literary achievements are astounding” and “presuppose unusual genius, irrepressible creative urge, and an untiring devotion to the poetic art.”² Watson Kirkconnell styled him “Canada’s leading poet,” speculating that he would “some day be acknowledged as the earliest poet of the first rank, writing in any language, to emerge in the national life of Canada.”³ Harvard University’s Stanton Cawley described him as “the greatest poet of the Western world,” arguing that his work eclipsed that of the American giants Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson.⁴ Whichever superlatives one may choose, Stephansson clearly ranks among the poetic geniuses of human history. But great souls often defy the labels that are applied to them. It is insufficient to call Stephansson a great poet, unless we mean to do so with Emerson’s understanding of the poet as a representative person; otherwise, we must acknowledge that Stephansson’s greatness cast its influence over a wider sweep of earthly concern than the art of poetry. As Richard Beck observed, “no one can read Stephansson’s poetry thoughtfully and intensively without coming to recognize the greatness of the

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Poet” (1843).

² Richard Beck, *History of Icelandic Poets, 1800-1940* (Cornell University Press, 1950), 203.

³ Watson Kirkconnell, “Canada’s Leading Poet, Stephan G. Stephansson (1853-1927),” in *The University of Toronto Quarterly* 5/2 (January 1936), 277. In the introductory paragraph of his essay, Kirkconnell predicted that when Canada began the “place-worship” of establishing literary shrines, as was the custom in Europe, Markerville would have “a strong claim to recognition,” owing to the poetic genius of Stephan G. Stephansson. The establishment of the Stephansson House Historic Site in 1976 fulfilled this prediction.

⁴ F. Stanton Cawley, “The Greatest Poet in the Western World: Stephan G. Stephansson,” in *Scandinavian Studies* 5 (1938), 101-105.

man as well as of the poet.”⁵ While many have focused on Stephansson as a poet in the literary sense, less attention has been given to him as a social prophet and philosopher. A pioneer farmer and poet, he was as importantly a pioneer thinker.

People often point to the title of Stephansson’s collected works, *Andvökur* – or “Wakeful Nights” – as a particularly apt metaphor for the poet’s life, driven as he was to compose his verses into the wee hours of the morning after long days of labour on the farm. Yet I would argue that his spirit is better captured in the title of his slender first collection of poetry, *Úti á víðavangi* – “Out in the Open Air” – which was published in Winnipeg in 1894. It was out in the open air that he worked the land to earn a living; it was out in the open air that he allowed his mind to transcend the limitations of conventional thought; it was out into the open air where he sought to lead those who have whiled away many a wakeful night reading his words and pondering their rich meaning. Emerson wrote that “poets are thus liberating gods”⁶ and there can be little doubt that Stephansson’s influence during his lifetime, and his enduring influence since, has been as a liberating force in the life of his readers, whether in politics, religion or literature. It is still out into the open air where this poet and prophet leads us.

The man who came to be known as the “Poet of the Rocky Mountains” (*Klettafjallaskáldið*) was born Stefán Guðmundsson⁷ on October 3, 1853, at the farm Kirkjuhóll in Skagafjörður. Like the other three farms where he spent his childhood and youth, the croft at Kirkjuhóll is now abandoned, its productive capacity having been largely exhausted even before the future poet’s family occupied it. The material poverty of his childhood did not yield a poverty of the intellect, however, since his parents, Guðmundur Stefánsson and Guðbjörg Hannesdóttir, “possessed both intellectual alertness and cultural appreciation.”⁸ According to his own testimony, Stefán Guðmundsson was unschooled as a child, so his education was mostly the result of an insatiable thirst for knowledge. He described himself as “a parasite on others when it came to books” and he managed to befriend enough individuals with libraries of their own or membership in literary clubs that he was widely read even as a young man. All told, it was an unlikely beginning for a great literary figure. As Skuli Johnson observed at the dedication of the provincial park in Stephansson’s honour, “there is nothing in the antecedents or in the circumstances of Stephan G. Stephansson to account for him.”⁹

⁵ Richard Beck, 210.

⁶ Emerson, op. cit.

⁷ Stefán Guðmundsson adopted the name Stephan G. Stephansson while homesteading in Dakota Territory. While it would be most appropriate to refer to him as Stefán Guðmundsson until sometime around the period when he organized the Icelandic Cultural Society, this essay will use his adopted name throughout in order to minimize confusion.

⁸ Richard Beck, 201.

⁹ Skuli Johnson, “Stephan G. Stephansson (1853-1927)” in *The Icelandic Canadian* 9/2, 1. This article was the printed text of Johnson’s address at the unveiling of a monument and

In 1873, when he was nearly twenty, Stephansson emigrated to North America with his parents, which numbers them among the first large group of Icelandic emigrants to North America. He worked as a labourer in Staughton, Wisconsin, for nearly a year before moving north to Shawano County, Wisconsin, where he worked seasonally as a lumberjack and fieldhand. There he homesteaded on 160 acres of spruce woods in the first of three attempts to establish himself on the land. While in Wisconsin he married Helga Jónsdóttir, his first cousin, with whom he would have eight children – five sons and three daughters. They were married by Rev. Páll Thorláksson in “his first priestly duty among the Icelanders.”¹⁰ The Shawano Icelanders, Stephansson included, moved to Garðar, Dakota Territory, in 1880. En route to his new home, the trunk full of books that he had accumulated over the years was destroyed, leaving him without his personal library.

Back in Wisconsin, Stephansson had been a member of a small Icelandic congregation led by Páll Thorláksson, who was serving a nearby Norwegian Lutheran church. When Thorláksson established a church at Garðar, Stephansson participated in its organization, serving as secretary at the founding meeting. At the end of this meeting, Thorláksson observed that the secretary had not signed the bylaws, which were patterned on those commonly found in the Norwegian Synod. When the minister questioned Stephansson about this, the latter indicated that he alone had voted against two of its provisions, one concerning the creeds and another prohibiting women from voting in congregational matters, which was contrary to the custom in Iceland. In an act of compromise that was uncommon for both men, the minister asked if he could append Stephansson’s name to the bylaws as long as it was accompanied by a notation that he did not accept all of the bylaws’ provisions. Stephansson agreed and was counted among the congregation’s charter members. Following Thorláksson’s untimely death in 1883, at the age of 33, the Garðar congregation split into two, with the majority seceding to form the Park congregation. While the presenting issue involved the rights of women in parish matters, the split also revealed a deeper cleavage in theological matters. “Without realizing it,” Stephansson later wrote, “the congregation split laid the foundations for the New Theology movement [which] denied the infallibility of the Creed and the Scriptures.”¹¹

dedication of a provincial park in honour of Stephan G. Stephansson at Markerville, Alberta, on September 4, 1950.

¹⁰ Stephansson, *Bréf og ritgerðir*, trans. Kristjana Gunnars, in *Stephan G. Stephansson: Selected Prose and Poetry* (Red Deer College Press, 1988), 15-16.

¹¹ Stephansson to Baldur Sveinsson (July 10, 1910), quoted in Jane McCracken, *Stephan G. Stephansson: The Poet of the Rocky Mountains* (Alberta Culture, 1982), 39. The New Theology movement among Icelanders in North America was led by Rev. Friðrik J. Bergmann, who was minister of the Garðar congregation before taking up the pastorate of *Tjáldbuðin* (The Winnipeg Tabernacle) in 1903. Advocating an increasingly liberal and modernist theology, Bergmann led nine congregations out of the Icelandic Evangelical Lutheran Synod after a dramatic confrontation at the synod convention in 1909. In 1921, The Winnipeg Tabernacle amalgamated with the First Icelandic Unitarian Society to form the First Federated Church of

Stephansson was one of two representatives from the Park congregation at the first annual conference of The Icelandic Evangelical Lutheran Synod of America, which convened in Winnipeg towards the end of June in 1885. He was a reluctant delegate but he did not want to let his liberal friends down in the event that a controversy arose at the founding convention. When Jón Bjárnason nominated Stephansson for the vice presidency of the synod, he declined the nomination and Magnús Paulson was elected instead. Remembering the event a quarter-century later, Stephansson wrote to a friend, “You understand that Magnús as vice president could, in the absence of the president, become president, or bishop. I could have been in his position but I was so much to the left that two lifetimes separated me from the bishop’s chair.”¹² He was then nominated for secretary but refused that position as well. In the end, he was elected assistant secretary of the synod. “I stated the obvious,” he later wrote, “that I was too lazy to refuse such a meaningless office.” By the time the synod met for its second annual conference, Stephansson had left the Lutheran church and he never again belonged to any church.

Influenced by their reading of American freethinkers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Robert Ingersoll, Stephansson and a half dozen other men from the Garðar and Mountain districts in Pembina County organized the Icelandic Cultural Society (*Hins Íslenzka Menningarfélags*) during a meeting at the poet’s home on February 4, 1888. Stephansson was the first secretary and leading spokesperson for the group, which included Ólafur Ólafsson of Espihóli, Jónas Hall, Björn Pétursson, the pioneer Unitarian missionary among the Icelanders, and two of the Brynjólfsson brothers, Magnús and Skapti, the latter being president of the society. The society quickly grew beyond thirty members and counted several prominent pioneers among its small membership.¹³

According to its bylaws, which were written by Stephansson, “the objectives of this society are to support and promote culture and ethics, that ethics and those beliefs which are based upon experience, knowledge and science. In place of religious sectarianism, it seeks humanitarianism and fellowship; in place of unquestioned creeds, reasonable and unfettered inquiry;

Unitarians and Other Liberal Christians (literally, “other religious liberals”). Two years later, the United Conference of Icelandic Churches was founded, bringing together the Unitarian and New Theology congregations under one denominational umbrella. Ironically, it seems probable that Bergmann was behind Jón Bjarnason’s challenge to Stephansson when the Icelandic Cultural Society was organized.

¹² Stephansson to Baldur Sveinsson (July 10, 1910) in *Bréf og ritgerðir*, vol. 1 (Reykjavík, 1938), trans. Ninna Campbell, in *Selected Translations from Andvökur* (The Stephan G. Stephansson Homestead Restoration Committee, 1982), 68.

¹³ The Icelandic Cultural Society ceased to exist in 1891, largely because of the removal of its leaders to other places. Stephansson himself moved to Alberta in 1889, while Björn Pétursson moved to Winnipeg the following year with his new wife, Jennie E. McCaine, where they founded the First Icelandic Unitarian Society. Several of the early members of the Unitarian Church in Winnipeg had been involved in the Icelandic Cultural Society before relocating to Manitoba.

in place of blind faith, independent conviction; and in place of ignorance and prejudice, spiritual freedom and progress upon which no fetters are placed.”¹⁴

The Cultural Society was patterned on Felix Adler’s Society for Ethical Culture in New York, which Stephansson had become aware of through the Free Religious Association.¹⁵ It sponsored public addresses, debates and group study on a wide variety of subjects, including literature, religion, ethics, natural history and human psychology. Its most tangible effort was the establishment of a community library, the cost of which it was underwritten by levying dues of one dollar per year.

The leadership of the Icelandic Lutheran Synod was not pleased with this development in Dakota, seeing it as a thinly veiled threat to the church and its teachings. Given that a literary society already existed in the area, which was dominated by influential churchmen, the Synod’s suspicion was not without foundation. Jón Bjarnason, the president of the Synod and editor of its periodical, *Sameiningin* (Unity), waged a bitter public feud with Stephansson.¹⁶ Having been the champion of a more liberal perspective during the great religious debate with Páll Thorláksson a decade earlier, Bjarnason now found himself defending the increasingly conservative position of the Lutheran church, which was growing closer to the doctrinal emphases of denominational Lutheranism in North America and away from the relative theological liberalism of the church in Iceland.

Even before Stephansson’s announcement of the Cultural Society appeared in *Lögberg*, Jón Bjarnason attacked the new organization in the pages of *Sameiningin*, writing, “one should not overlook that this society has been organized by uneducated Icelandic farmers who have attained such arrogance here in America that they consider themselves competent to challenge the Christian Church, the greatest institution of all time.”¹⁷ As the debate progressed, church leaders were not alone in their concern about this new development. Like other ethnic communities in Canada and the United States,

¹⁴ *Bylaws of the Icelandic Cultural Society* (1888), a composite interpretation based on the translations of Wilhelm Kristjanson and V. Emil Gudmundson.

¹⁵ Felix Adler was both Leader of the New York Society for Ethical Culture, which he had founded in 1876, and, from 1878 until 1882, president of the Free Religious Association, which had been established largely by disaffected Unitarians, in 1867, who were reacting to what they perceived to be the growing conservatism of American Unitarianism. Ralph Waldo Emerson was the first member of the FRA. When Stephansson refers to Adler and his movement as the inspiration for the Icelandic Cultural Society, it is difficult to tell whether he is making reference to Ethical Culture or the FRA but the choice of name coupled with his specific reference to Adler seems to point to the former. Moreover, the nearby town of Hoople, Dakota Territory, was home to a small Ethical Society at about this time, which suggests the possibility of local influence from outside the Icelandic community itself.

¹⁶ Jón Bjarnason’s dispute with Stephansson does not appear to have extended beyond matters of religion. While Bjarnason was critical of what he saw as the poet’s pessimism and was uncomfortable with his use of satire, he was quick to recognize Stephansson’s gifts as a poet of first rank.

¹⁷ Jón Bjarnason, *Sameiningin* (1888), quoted in V. Emil Gudmundson, *The Icelandic Unitarian Connection* (Wheatfield Press, 1984), 21.

the church had become an important symbol of cultural solidarity among the Icelanders, helping them to preserve their language and customs against the forces of assimilation.¹⁸ At the time, the Lutheran Synod was the only significant institution, other than the newspapers, that bound Icelanders in North America together beyond the local level. So even the unchurched were naturally concerned when conflict arose between the Synod and the Cultural Society, though for cultural rather than religious reasons.

Stephansson was immersed in the writings of the leading freethinkers of his day, for whom even Unitarianism was held to be confining and conservative. He was familiar with the work of Frances Ellingwood Abbott, a founder of the Free Religious Association, Felix Adler, the founder of the Ethical Culture movement, and Robert Ingersoll, who was called The Great Agnostic. Both Stephansson and Björn Pétursson, the founder of the first Icelandic Unitarian church, read *The Index*, a weekly published in Boston by the Free Religious Association under the editorship of William J. Potter and B.F. Underwood. When *The Index* ceased publication in 1886, its list of subscribers was transferred to *Unity*, a publication of the Western Unitarian Conference in Chicago. While the Icelandic Cultural Society owed much to Stephansson's familiarity with the freethought movement, it was not, strictly speaking, a freethought organization, whatever Bjarnason and the synod may have believed. Several of its members had withdrawn from the church but others appear to have remained.

For the thirty-four-year-old Stephansson, the organization of the Icelandic Cultural Society marked a watershed in his life. To begin with, it was in announcing the society's formation that he unveiled his new identity to the world, becoming Stephan G. Stephansson instead of Stefán Guðmundsson. Unlike some of its other members, the Cultural Society did signal a final break with the church in his case. Moreover, the ostracism of him and his family that resulted from his very public dispute with the synod leadership, coupled with poor agricultural conditions and an economic downturn, surely contributed to his decision to join the westward migration from Pembina County. Finally, his literary output increased, only to explode once he reached Canada.

The year that North Dakota achieved statehood, Stephansson moved once again, this time to Markerville district in what was then still Alberta Territory.¹⁹ When the family first settled in their new home, the nearest post office was reportedly seventy miles away! He was to spend a little more than

¹⁸ See Jane McCracken's concise but insightful analysis of this issue in *The Poet of the Rocky Mountains*, 35-36. The later emergence of Unitarianism provoked similar anxieties about cultural cleavage and its consequences, which only really began to be healed with the organization of the Icelandic National League in 1920, by which time the process of assimilation and acculturation was already well underway.

¹⁹ To understand Stephansson as a pioneer farmer, it is helpful to remember that the present-day political divisions with which we associate him in many cases did not yet exist when he arrived.

half of his life on the farm that has since become a shrine to those who love the verses he composed there in the quiet stillness of the night.

Those who claim that Stephansson's individualism caused him to stand aloof from organizations of any kind fail to remember the numerous ways he was involved in the community life of the Markerville district. Among other involvements, he was the founding chairman of the Hóla school district, secretary-treasurer of the district's creamery association, and the area's Justice of the Peace! Any one of these offices would have marked him as a community leader. His antipathy towards political parties and religious movements did not extend to the many other human organizations that sought to promote the common good. Practical initiatives to improve the community were able to draw him out of his study to add his efforts to those of his neighbours. Addressing the people of the Markerville district on New Year's Eve in 1891, he declared, "If we feel our community lacks some amenities needed to make it a more pleasant place, we can do something about it. We know Nature did not corral all hardships to leave them near Red Deer. ... So, if we feel that something is amiss, let's get our hands out of our pockets and do something about it."²⁰

Stephansson's family rarely attended church in Markerville and, when they did, it was for a funeral or to hear a visiting minister from Winnipeg, especially if he were a Unitarian. Despite his disdain for the clergy, he developed a close and affectionate personal relationship with Rögnvaldur Pétursson, a Unitarian minister in Winnipeg who became the denomination's field secretary for Western Canada. Their friendship began in the first decade of the new century and continued until the end of the poet's life. Pétursson was the son of neighbours in Dakota Territory and was himself a gifted man of letters. Stephansson sought Pétursson's pastoral support when his son Gestur was killed and he wished himself to be buried by the Winnipeg minister, even naming him as his literary executor. But while he asked Pétursson to send liberal ministers to speak in Markerville, and while he applauded the establishment of Unitarian churches among the Icelanders, seeing the Unitarians as part of the larger freethought movement, "Stephansson's relationship with the Unitarian church itself remained ambiguous," according to Jane McCracken.²¹ While he may have found the Unitarians more congenial to his own thinking, even this liberal church must have seemed timid in its

²⁰ Stephansson, *Bréf og ritgerðir*, vol. 4, trans. Bjorgvin Sigurdson, in *Selected Translations from Andvökur*, 18.

²¹ Jane McCracken, *Stephan G. Stephansson: The Poet of the Rocky Mountains*, 108-109. If Stephansson's relationship to the Unitarian church seemed ambiguous, the same cannot be said about Icelandic Unitarians' feelings toward Stephansson. Just as his organization of the Icelandic Cultural Society helped lay the groundwork for the eventual organization of Unitarian churches among the Icelanders in North America, his poetry provided the closest thing to devotional literature that the Icelandic Unitarians had at their disposal. At Icelandic Unitarian funerals, families were as likely – and latterly *more* likely – to request selections from Stephansson's poetry than selections from the Psalms! During his lifetime, it was the Unitarian-sponsored publications that were most receptive to his work.

challenge to religious orthodoxy, while continuing many churchly practices that differed little from their Lutheran neighbours. Moreover, his concern for this-worldly matters left him impatient with the metaphysical preoccupations of religion, whether liberal or orthodox:

*I quite expect that very soon
I'll weary of this fussing
How holy men are splitting hairs
When God they keep discussing.*²²

Like most freethinkers of the time, Stephansson held the person of Jesus in high regard, even if he dismissed any notion of his divinity. He held him to be a prophetic teacher, a social revolutionary, who challenged the selfishness and greed that led human beings to exploit one another, offering an ethic of love as an antidote:

*He preached that human love, alone,
Could lead the way to Heaven's throne;
That all our deepest wisdom went
To waste, if lacking good intent.*²³

At the same time, his admiration for the pioneer, who prepared the ground for those who followed, led him to ask the audacious question, "Yet was not the Baptist / Greater than the Messiah?"²⁴ For even his more liberal readers this rhetorical question, which esteemed John the Baptist over Jesus, was unthinkable. Overall, neither Jesus nor conventional religious themes figured prominently in Stephansson's poetry. His poetic imagination preferred sagas to scriptures, nature to theology, and everyday figures to distant messiahs.

Despite his deep affection for his friends and neighbours, which is most evident in his touching eulogies, his broad sympathy for humankind, and the idealism of his social views, Stephansson was not much given to sentimentality. In light of the remarkably wide range of subject matter and styles in his poetry, his work contains surprisingly few verses that might be considered love poems. Richard Beck writes of the poet's "manliness" and it may well be that Icelandic culture is one of the few remaining that consider poetry a "manly" art rather than a pursuit of the soft-hearted and sentimental. Yet there is an unmistakable tenderness reflected in his work, such as his eulogy for his son, Jón, who died at the age of three while the family still lived in Dakota. This poem was composed in four stages over a period of fourteen years, the second part a year after his son's death:

*Just one year ago,
When buds were springing
Wakened by April showers,*

²² Stephansson, "God Under a Magnifying Glass" (1914), trans. Paul Sigurdson, in *Selected Translations from Andvökur*, 67.

²³ Stephansson, "Eloi Lamma Sabakhthani" (1901), trans. Paul Bjarnason.

²⁴ Stephansson quoted in Johnson, op. cit., 3.

*Down this same pathway
Where alone I walk now
You romped at my side, my darling.*

*Wild flowers bright and
Green leaflets shining
You clutched in your wee soft hand;
And from the bushes
When you scampered to me
Piping, "See daddy, I'm here!"*

*Fall is approaching,
Frozen hoary
The leaves by the pathways I walk on;
Your feet are unmoving,
Your lips are cold now,
And stiffened your little fingers.*

*Along here I wander,
No one to pick me
Flowers that grow by the wayside;
Yet I keep hearing
From the rose bushes,
Your baby voice, "Daddy, I'm here!"²⁵*

Years later, Stephansson lost his sixteen-year-old son, Gestur, who succumbed to the rare misfortune of being electrocuted by grasping a wire fence that had become charged with electricity from a lighting strike. These losses must have been especially bitter to a man who harboured no faith in personal immortality, believing as he did that, while life itself had a quality of immortality, individual humans did not. "As far as one can see," he wrote, "life is eternal; it was and it will be. ... What each and every individual has in common with the life of the living will live on after he ceases to exist."²⁶ Both Stephansson's stoicism and his belief only in the immortality of influence were reflected in his graveside address for Gestur: "Had he lived longer, he would have become more of a man but never a better one. ... He has enriched our memories, and although it is so very painful to lose him, the void in my life would have been far more grievous had he never been mine and if I had never known the enjoyment of his company."²⁷

Stephansson's most original creations found their inspiration in the natural world with all its majesty and meaning. This tendency is seen even in his earlier work, such as this passage from his days in Dakota:

²⁵ Stephansson, "To My Lost Son" (1887, 1888, 1895 and 1901); trans. Paul Sigurdson, in *Selected Translations from Andvökur*, 37.

²⁶ Stephansson (1910) quoted in Roy St. George Stubbs, "North America's Unknown Master Poet," in *The Icelandic Canadian* 41/4 (Summer 1983), 25.

²⁷ Stephansson, *Bréf og ritgerðir*, vol. 4, trans. Bjorgvin Sigurdson, in *Selected Translations from Andvökur*, 34.

*When fields of grain have caught a gleam of moonlight
But dark the ground –
A pearl-grey mist has filled to over-flowing
The dells around;
Some golden stars are peeping forth to brighten
The eastern wood –
Then I am resting out upon my doorstep
In nature's mood.²⁸*

It was in Canada, though, that his nature poetry blossomed in both quantity and quality. If his childhood in Iceland unleashed his thirst for knowledge, and if his experiences in the United States led him to religious and social radicalism, then it can be said that it was in Canada where he matured as a poet and achieved greatness. Many of Stephansson's poems and especially his Alberta poems portray the breathtaking scenery of the Canadian landscape and distil from that landscape a sense of life's meaning, the "sermons in stones" of which Shakespeare wrote in *As You Like It*. He even managed to give texture to the Manitoba flatlands:

*By prairie and slough-side the train that we rode
Drove ever relentlessly north.
To our left the great River lay turbid and red
And sprawled itself sullenly forth.
Its breast never quickened in rapid or fall,
Its dull heavy waters were fain
To waddle forever with arms full of mud
And the slummocky clay of the plain.
The landscape unchanged and unchangeable stood,
Save only where dryads of grace
Had woven on edges of wandering brooks
A leafy embroid'ry of lace;
But the land itself lay like an infinite board,
Unslivered, unknotted, and clean,
As if all of the stuff of Creation were smoothed
And stained an ineffable green.²⁹*

It should come as no surprise, though, that Stephansson's best nature poetry drew its inspiration from the immediate neighbourhood of his modest Alberta farmhome. Few poetic descriptions of the Canadian landscape can surpass the incomparable beauty of the middle stanzas of his "Toast to Alberta" –

*Thy glorious valleys widen down
Through straths and shining passes,
By shelter-belts of forest brown*

²⁸ Stephansson, "At Close of Day" (1883), trans. Jakobina Johnson, in *Selected Translations from Andvökur*, 30.

²⁹ Stephansson, "En Route" (1898), trans. Watson Kirkconnell, in *Selected Translations from Andvökur*, 8.

*And hollows warm with grasses,
To a mighty plain of green, that wakes
In a wind that laughs and quivers,
Fringed with a hundred azure lakes,
Embroidered bright with rivers.*

*Here veils of Northern Light are drawn
On high as winter closes,
And hoary dews at summer dawn
Adorn the wild red roses.
Sometimes the swelling clouds of rain
Repress the sun's caresses;
But soon the mountains smile again
And shake their icy tresses.³⁰*

For one who never wrote for financial gain, the sheer volume of Stephansson's published work is astonishing. His poems fill 1,800 pages, while his articles and letters occupy a further 1,400 pages. Had his energy been devoted entirely to agriculture, coupled with his willingness to experiment with new methods, it is likely that he would have become a prosperous farmer in time. But his vocation for poetry meant that he was little better off materially than he would have been had he remained a tenant farmer in the old country.³¹ Nevertheless, it is almost impossible to escape the conclusion that the richness of his poetry grew, at least in part, out of the poverty of his material circumstances. It is hard to imagine that his words would have been more precious or profound had he been pensioned off to devote himself solely to writing, since the challenges of everyday life flow through his words.

It is not a simple matter to categorize Stephansson politically, since his social philosophy blended elements of strong individualism, on the one hand, and an embrace of socialist ideals, on the other. No political party was broad enough or, perhaps more accurately, sufficiently free of self interest, to encompass the full range and depth of his views. Consequently, his support for political parties or movements was always something of a pragmatic wager. In Wisconsin, he supported the Republicans, then still very much the party of Abraham Lincoln, while in Dakota he supported the Democrats, who at the time sought to reduce protectionism. After moving to Canada, he initially supported Sir Wilfrid Laurier's Liberals, who advocated economic reciprocity and distanced the dominion from the military and colonial policies of Great Britain. Later he supported the United Farmers of Alberta during that movement's more progressive period. Whatever party he supported, he held to the ideal of advancing democracy. "Democracy has this advantage over other forms of government, when it is free of corruption, in that it serves as a forum for the education of the public on how to live together in the most just and

³⁰ Stephansson, "Toast to Alberta" (1898), trans. Watson Kirkconnell, in *Selected Translations from Andvökur*, 2.

³¹ See Johnson, op. cit., 3.

benign way possible. With all its inevitable faults, Democracy can in any case not put the blame on the government alone, for those who vote for the government in power will have to take responsibility for their decision.”³² However else he might be described, Stephansson was a radical democrat in politics no less than he was in religion. We often find his socio-political views expressed in biting social satires, some of which demolish conventional viewpoints in as little as a four-line stanza, but the essence of his social ethic is contained in his turn-of-the-century poem “Evening” –

*Where wealth that is gathered by taxes or tolls
Or tariffs – is counted as vain,
Where no one’s success is another one’s loss,
Nor power the goal and the gain
– The first of commandments is justice to all,
And victory causes no pain.*³³

Nowhere were Stephansson’s political views more strident than when it came to his unqualified condemnation of war as a means for resolving human conflict. It is impossible to escape the conclusion that he would have been disgusted to see the trivialization of warfare by present-day political leaders who speak of “cold wars” and “wars” on social ills, such as poverty or drugs, thereby desensitizing their citizens to the true horrors of modern warfare, which then makes it easier for those same political leaders to lead their nations to the battlefield. Stephansson was uncompromising in his pacifism and unwilling to mince words when writing or speaking about the evils of war:

*In Europe’s reeking slaughter-pen
They mince the flesh of murdered men,
While swinish merchants, snout in trough,
Drink all the bloody profits off!*³⁴

In the aftermath of the First World War, which had rallied most Icelandic Canadians in support of the British Empire, Stephansson published *The Trail of War* (Vígslóði), a cycle of thirty-eight poems, including such titles as “When Christ was Army Chaplain” and “The Protest of the Unknown Soldier.” But the most moving and memorable poem in the collection was the epic “Battle Pause” (*Vopnahlé*),³⁵ which portrayed the carnage of battle in stark realism. Two soldiers from opposing armies talk to each other across the battlefield during a pause to bury the slain and clear the field before the next encounter. In their unfolding stories, Stephansson pointed to the political leadership and vested interests on both sides that fueled the so-called “war to end all wars.” He

³² Stephansson, *Bréf og ritgerðir*, trans. Kristjana Gunnars, in *Stephan G. Stephansson: Selected Prose and Poetry*, 22-23.

³³ Stephansson, “Evening” (1899), trans. Jakobina Johnson (adapted), in *Selected Translations from Andvökur*, 62.

³⁴ Stephansson, “In Wartime” (1916), trans. Watson Kirkconnell, in *Selected Translations from Andvökur*, 77.

³⁵ *Vopnahlé* is more commonly but less accurately translated as “Armistice.”

spared no one, including the clergy who had once “sung of peace on earth” only to become pulpit cheerleaders for “the cause” once hostilities began. With feelings about the war still running high, the poem provoked a very negative reaction among Icelanders in Canada, even among Stephansson’s friends; but in the end, the greatness of his poetry and vision transcends even the offense it may give to some.

In seeking the words to describe Stephansson, Emil Gudmundson wrote that he “accepted no consistent label, but among those given him are freethinker, atheist, humanist, materialist, and unitarian. None really fully described him, and each had a limited usefulness, but in his poetry, letters, and prose he consistently raised some daring and provocative questions about the issues of the meaning of life and death.”³⁶ It may well be that “daring and provocative” are the most accurate things we can say about this master poet who lived out in the open air and who beckons us to join him there. But even daring and provocative only describe one side of his personality. One of his faithful translators, Paul Sigurdson, observed that, “humble in greatness, compassionate, loving, noble and forgiving, this simple-living farmer-poet epitomized most of the finest qualities that make up the mind, soul, and spirit of the human being.” One thing seems clear: years after the quarrels that surrounded him in life, many of the issues seem almost trivial, while the genius of his insight and the inspiration of his words continue to move us. And so it is that Stephan G. Stephansson has managed to capture the hearts and minds of generations of readers, who see in his words and work a commanding vision that leads us to follow him out into the open air, even when we would prefer to fall back on the comfort and safe haven of our established ways.

*We’re enriched by our vision not stories,
And mostly the truth is obscure,
But there is one standard prevailing
Which tells if an age will mature;
To live not for years but for ages
And not to claim all of one’s wages
For earth’s greatest good to endure.*

*Through seasons of winter and summer,
This truth we instinctively see,
To make what is good into better
And strive for the best that can be.³⁷*

³⁶ V. Emil Gudmundson, *The Icelandic Unitarian Connection* (Wheatfield Press, 1984), 15-16.

³⁷ Stephansson, “The Brother’s Share” (1906), trans. Paul Sigurdson (adapted), in *Selected Translations from Andvökur*, 53-54.