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REVIEW

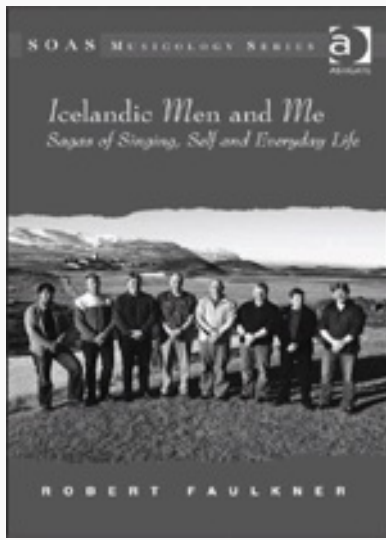
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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Singing in the Ice

Myrdene Anderson (bio)

ICELANDIC MEN AND ME: SAGAS OF SINGING, SELF AND EVERYDAY LIFE Robert Faulkner Ashgate
Publishing www.ashgate.com 252 Pages; Print, \$113.95



In a land far away, a mere island speck between Greenland and Scandinavia, running cold and hot with ice and volcanic geysers, men in Iceland sing together through the thick and thin of daily life. It's that simple a saga, this book, a saga about song, about songs arising in sagas.

Sagas came along for the ride when the Norse settled Iceland in the ninth century. Sagas were, and are, individually rendered prose and poem narratives about the grand mythic actors and episodes of pre-medieval to medieval times. “Saga” and “song” are etymological cousins, from an Indo-European root, meaning “something said.” The saga of this book traces the transformations of diverse vocal practices through Iceland’s first millennium, to the group singing of the 19th century onwards—these choirs inspired by the musical revolution that was everywhere in Europe contributing to national identities. During the past century in Iceland, the exigencies of rough daily life on land and on the seas found both individual song and collective choirs becoming, overwhelmingly, a male prerogative.

Robert Faulkner, a Brit with musical passions, was first initiated into the Icelandic song world in London at a Christmas feast of Icelandic friends where the entire family—parents and children—held forth in three-part harmony. He was then drawn to northeast Iceland to live, work, and research, first networking with kin of his earliest Icelandic friends in London. For twenty years at the end of the last century, he taught music, sang in and directed choirs, and undertook a study of vocal culture among native Icelanders, focusing on the fusion of males with their bodies and societies via their own voices. His research relied on ethnographic participant-observation, ordinary conversation, and the diaries and memories of friends who enthusiastically became his subjects.

In this book, many years in the writing, Faulkner shares these

experiences in what he aptly describes as “auto-ethnographic constructions,” an approach he grounds in an “interpretative phenomenological framework” for those wishing to regard the subject as social science. Despite some academic window-dressing, this book is nothing short of a song of Faulkner himself.

The Viking settlers of Iceland in the ninth century could not be called “colonizers” in the absence of nation-states. Centuries later, the eventual nation-state of Iceland only became independent of their own colonizers, Denmark, in 1944. Meanwhile the medieval Icelandic Edda sagas had been maintained as an oral tradition with the inevitable accidental and deliberate editing through the ages and was finally transcribed in the thirteenth century. Thirty years after independence, these treasured original manuscripts returned to Iceland to be regarded as foundational for Icelandic nationhood. That awe inspired respect for the sagas turns out to be ironic because emerging nationhood was primarily predicated on Icelanders distancing themselves from both formal saga recitation and informal two-part vocal traditions, as well as from folk dance. Faulkner describes the introduction of collective, romantic, and nationalistic traditions, as well as diatonic harmony, from Western Europe in the century as a virtual “vocal cleansing” as the new four-part and three-part harmonies swamped Icelanders’ traditional song and two-part bawdy tunes and deemed them profane.

While the poetry and prose of the sagas celebrated individuality, self-reliance, resilience, and elaborate dramas, as Iceland came of age as an outlier of 19th century Europe, the romantic literatures of Europe were emphasizing subjugation to collective nationhoods. Inspired by nation-building on the continent, missionary-musicians travelled about Iceland introducing adaptations of the harmonic singing traditions developing in parallel on the continent. Some of the songs came to incorporate Icelandic saga references and folk tunes indexing the rugged arctic landscape, but the individualistic attitudes of the original sagas came to be associated with ancient conditions of hardship, poverty, epidemics, and even the tyranny of volcanoes that ironically intensified the arctic

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**ICELANDIC MEN AND ME:
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Robert Faulkner

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By the end of the nineteenth century, the independent voice of the sagas gave way to translated four-part choral arrangements that were even notated and published in songbooks and psalters alongside rhetoric supporting communal song in the strengthening of family, community, and nation. The three-part songs Faulkner originally heard around a family Christmas feast turned out to

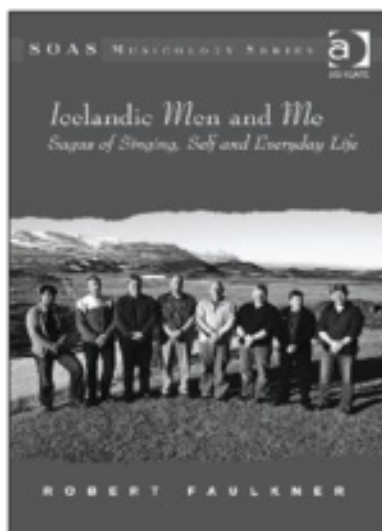
***Song glues together the sense of self,
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be renditions published early in the twentieth century. Widespread literacy allowed Icelanders to learn most of their new musical and other traditions from books and through social interaction rather than in schools.

Faulkner also discovered unpublished two-part harmonies limited to certain informal settings. Perceived to be crude residues of some ancient tradition, they are never included in any choir performance to this day. Most emphatically, Icelanders sing only in harmony, never in unison, and any occasional soloists shyly hide behind the collective performance, and they are all men.

While both women and girls do sing—regularly and enthusiastically—in informal gatherings and casually with men and boys, it is the men who make music—locally, nationally, and now globally. It is men who claim that singing is an act of performance, one committing their very manliness and affording them male agency. On a daily basis, individual men read, as it were, their current health condition by listening to their own voice: they explore their surroundings for spots and devices where their voice will be enhanced—from milk tank to rain barrel to rock face to emptied barn in spring to bar restrooms. While women collect in the powder room to talk, men assemble to sing, vocally preening. While women may seek feedback for self from a mirrored reflection, men are not asking "how do I look?" but rather "how do I sound?" Faulkner metaphorically captures these confessions as "acoustic signatures."

Collectively, men seek the same acoustic feedback from social harmony in various indoor and outdoor spaces, never through singing in unison. Instead, a group may stand so closely, perhaps in a circle and cheek-to-cheek, such that insect voices may resonate with more confident ones.



Men describe peak experiences arising while singing together: joy, entertainment, goose bumps, getting choked up, losing track of time and place. They also subscribe to belief in some magical acoustic "self-to-other ratio," both vocal and aural, and while this formula is grounded in their song world of choirs, the idea extends metaphorically to society at large. Voices joined in resonance enable bodies doing so in community and nation. Interestingly, competitions between choirs are conspicuously absent.

In contemporary studies of gender stereotypes across Europe, Icelanders almost fall off the map, as a distinction between genders are not sharply drawn. Female protagonists in the sagas as well as Icelandic women today are associated with autonomy, leadership, courage, and decisiveness, while their singing counterparts are proud to be gentle, tender, and compassionate. Why don't women sing outside of the incidental lullaby and spontaneous communal burst? Icelanders report that until recently, women were too busy to gather in choirs, and that, furthermore, women's and mixed groups don't sound as good as all-male four-part harmonies which are described as more complex and satisfying by both sexes. Oddly, the one Icelandic musician known around the world and for decades is a woman, Björk Guðmundsdóttir—a singer, songwriter, and performance artist; however, she is more recognized as a phenomenon outside the island than on it.

Faulkner's *Icelandic Men and Me: Sagas of Singing, Self and Everyday Life* has documented the lived experience behind, above, below, and beyond the social organization of men's singing habits, whether they are combating their child for an evening, keeping themselves company in the barn, or getting out to their choir practices despite weather, passing chores, and limited transportation. Song glues together the sense of self, the awareness of community, and the tangibility of nation, rendering life itself as a "musical event."

But things may be a-changing, reports Faulkner. Today people are smothered in noise, and media crowd out early-evening routines. Schools now push competitive sports and give music short shift. Absent the cultural immersion of male youth in chores and choirs, the Icelandic song world may be changing its tune, once again.

Myrdene Anderson is an anthropologist, linguist, and semiotician at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana. She has over forty years of fieldwork experience in Norwegian Lapland and is widely published in Sáami culture.



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