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**Introduction.**

*We are not changing ground to escape from facts  
But rather to find them.*

Louis MacNeice, 'Letter to Graham and Anne Shepard'

Travel stories are a type of literature that has always enjoyed great popularity. From ancient times people who ventured far away from their homes have been writing about their experiences, or, at first probably, reciting them for those who stayed at home. Stories of distant or unknown places have always intrigued people, especially those who never had the chance to go anywhere. Countless books have been written through the centuries about travelling and faraway places. In this essay I want to take a look at travel stories about Iceland with a main emphasis on two books that strike me as special. *Letters from Iceland* by the two poets W. H. Auden and Louis MacNeice that was published in 1937 and *Moon Country: further reports from Iceland* by two other poets, Simon Armitage and Glyn Maxwell, published in 1996, are works that catch the eye among travel writings. In my opinion they stand out among other travel writings for the reason of their originality of approach and treatment of material. The main intention here is to make some analysis of each one of the two in order to show what makes them special. Then the two of them will be compared and their similarities pointed out. A brief comparison will also be made between them and other travel writings about Iceland in order to demonstrate in which aspects they differ. The focus concerning other stories will, however, only be minimal or just enough to get a rough picture for comparison. It will also be mainly on books written since the 18th century and no extensive analysis be made of the stories in question. The purpose is only to give a little idea of what most travel books have in common. I intend to underline the main characteristics of each one of the two books I am dealing with, trying to point out similarities between the two of them and to demonstrate in what way they are different from other travel books.

**Travel books as a genre.**

In times when only very few people had the opportunity to travel, reading about the experiences of those who did was an intriguing pastime for those who did not. Travel books can be of many kinds. They can be very basic documentations of a journey, only written to remember the basest happenings on the way. They can be written about one particular place, describing its characteristics of landscape or culture. They can also be written with the main purpose of directing or guiding other potential travellers on their prospective journeys. All the above mentioned kinds fit within the travel book genre. The concept of visiting and experiencing new places is one that most people find exciting, at least to read about, if nothing else.

Travel books can be roughly divided into two categories. One of them covers guide books that are mainly meant to guide and inform potential travellers to a certain place. They are usually filled with practical and interesting information about the place in question, how to get there and what to do and might even be put in a category with handbooks. Then there are books that recount journeys that people have taken and those would be placed among literature. They can have several things in common with the first type but also include the personal and detailed accounts of the writer. The first travel books were probably more of the latter kind and it was probably not until later, with the growing likelihood of more people following in their footsteps, that travellers started writing with the exclusive purpose of guiding other travellers. With that change the books also became more specialized and evolved more in separate directions. Guide books can be seen as providing information about a particular area while the travel stories themselves emphasize more on describing the travellers' experience of their journeys.

The main purpose of travel books, at least over the past two centuries, has been to describe the writers' experience of a particular place or journey. People often write detailed descriptions of everything they notice on the way. The emphasis can be on descriptions of landscape /townscape or geographical phenomena of some kind, or on activities and characteristics of the people encountered. Most often it is a mixture of all that. It is in the nature of travel writing to find and observe what is different from the travellers' own

country and strange or interesting in his eyes. Observing and getting to know different cultures can also provide a way to increase understanding between peoples and to widen perspectives or, as Charles L. Batten says: “It promotes and facilitates the intercourse of countries remote from each other; it dispels from our minds unreasonable and gloomy antipathies against those manners, customs, forms of government, and religion, to which we have not been bred” (27).

Initially travelling was a thing that only very rich people, merchants and officials could do. To venture any further away from home than dire necessity demanded was simply considered unthinkable. To travel for the purpose of travelling was something common people did not do in any measure until the eighteenth or nineteenth century. Then, with the advent of the Industrial Revolution, a new class of people, the middle class, grew larger and more powerful. Peoples’ wages increased and transport became a possibility for the ordinary middle class man. The cost of transport also decreased, making travel easier and more affordable for a larger group of people, so the culture of travelling gradually evolved to include the growing middle classes. Some four centuries ago rich young men in England started taking what came to be called “The Grand Tour“. This usually followed university graduation and was often seen as a rite of passage. Taking a Grand Tour meant travelling through Europe exploring its cultures; mainly fine arts and architecture (Rosenberg). Writing about their experiences became an almost necessary feature and publications of those stories were usually very popular. Travel books from that time and earlier were often as much about information as for pleasure which is understandable in light of the fact how few people could travel; the writers felt both need and obligation to inform their readers, as well as to please them. In the late eighteenth century this changed and travel books diverged in two separate directions: “the purely entertaining travel book and the instructive travel guide” (Batten, 29-30). When the French revolution brought an end to the Grand Tours of Europe prospective travellers started looking farther afield for places worth visiting. In Britain, and Northern Europe, interest in Nordic culture increased in the eighteenth century and concurring with it a more positive attitude towards Nordic peoples and their culture (Ísleifsson, 85). Subsequently, more travellers discovered Iceland.

### **Travel books about Iceland**

Despite being so close to Europe, geographically “Generally speaking, it can be said that Iceland hardly existed for educated Europe until after the middle of the eighteenth century“(Ísleifsson, 113). Before that time there was, though, a handful of people who had come here and written accounts of their journeys. However, many of the earliest writings about the country were done by people who had probably never visited it, although some claimed to have. They based their works on the same few accounts by others, spiced things up and interpreted quite freely the knowledge they had gained. One of them was a Dutchman who called himself Dithmar Blefken, but of whom little is known. His book was published in 1607 and was widely circulated. (Ísleifsson, 47) He claimed to have visited the country but that sounds rather unlikely when his writings are examined; his descriptions are so incredible. For instance, the natives are said to become up to 300years old, they wash themselves out of their bedpans and love their dogs more than their children, amongst other things (qtd. in Ísleifsson, 48). Similarly ridiculous statements about natural phenomena follow.

Much of the earlier writings were more about the people and the country as such rather than actual travel journals. The country and its people looked quite strange and peculiar to most Europeans so this is well understandable. In times when only very few people had the chance to travel any distances it was easy for a traveller to “spice up” his tales, by adding some little bit of extra material to them. The temptation to make things sound more exotic or more dangerous than they were in reality seems to have tickled many and tales like that would also be more likely to charm the readers and attract more of them. Phenomena of nature or environment, and human behaviour that struck a foreigner as special or strange would often be drawn out and overstated in order to achieve an effect of excitement and shock, even. A handful of earlier writings show an exaggerated picture of the country. There it is often described as a land of wonders and extremities that has „poisonous fountains and destructive volcanoes, and Hell or Purgatory might even be found on the island, with devils flying about“(Ísleifsson, 113). Such writings may have inspired

interest in adventurous people. It must also be considered that some of the people who wrote about Iceland had never visited the country but had only read other peoples' writings about it. This relates, however, mostly to earlier writings. Later visitors to Iceland made it their object to rectify such writings. Their purpose was to show the country, and its people, in their "true" light and thus to enlighten their readers instead of just exciting them. The Swede Uno Von Troil, who some years later became the Archbishop of Uppsala, might be said to be one such writer. He came to Iceland in 1772 with Joseph Banks (later Sir). He wrote one of the first reliable accounts on the country. He made thorough observations and wrote fairly accurate reports of his discoveries. His book could hardly be called a travel book, though, since it is more like a report on the country and its people. It is made up of many chapters, most of them rather short, in letter form, each about a specific subject and addressed to some friend or patron of the writer (Von Troil).

We, modern people, tend to think that nobody ever came here and therefore the number of people who travelled to Iceland in earlier centuries often surprises us. We often think that the only people who came here were the sailors of the merchants ships that brought goods the Icelanders needed and exchanged them for some of the limited selection of Icelandic products considered useful elsewhere. If we consider Haraldur Sigurðsson's bibliography *Writings of Foreigners Relating to Iceland* it becomes apparent that surprisingly many people did come here. To list their reasons for coming here would be much easier; the majority of them came out of general curiosity for this unknown neighbouring country. It may be simplifying things a little to say that they came here mostly for "the fishing, the geology, or the old literature" as E. J. Oswald says but it is not far from the truth (Oswald, 1). When looking at books that were written from the mid-nineteenth century, it soon becomes clear that the history, saga's and the Viking heritage have had the greatest attraction, along with the geology.

What most travel books about Iceland (as well as other places) have in common is that they recount the journeys, in all their diversity, in linear narrative from beginning to end dotted with observations about various things. They are often like log books where the progress of a journey is described in factual detail. Examples of this can be seen at all times. One of them is with William Morris who travelled to Iceland in 1871 and 1873. He

writes home to his wife and daughters mainly telling them what he sees and does on the way and while he stays there (Morris, vol 1). Another and much more recent account of a somewhat similar kind is Lawrence Millman's book, *Last Places: A Journey in the North* which was published in 1990 (Millman). Iceland was a quite big part of his itinerary on the journey from Norway to Newfoundland. One of the reasons he visits Iceland is that he had many years earlier met an Icelandic man, in a completely different part of the world, who had told him many things about his country. This encounter stays with him and he has in the meantime read the Icelandic Sagas and W. H. Auden's *Letters from Iceland* (Millman, 5). And even this modern man in his modern age does find things about this island and its people that strike him as strange. He does, however, write a fairly ordinary travelogue, where the journey is recorded in chronological order of events. Travel books like that will probably keep being written in years to come and they need certainly not be boring in any way. Each traveller and each writer of a travel story has to find and use the kind of medium that suits him. Those who on the other hand aspire to anything different will do as they please and the outcome of new experimenting ways will be something to look forward to.

### **Letters from Iceland**

*Letters from Iceland* does indeed look like an experiment in a new genre of travel writing. It could be said that it breaks up the "normal" form of such books and goes its own way. It departs from the well known form of chronologically organized narrative and introduces a collage made of various sketches in diverse shapes. It is, however, not immediately apparent that this was done by intention. It was rather the writers' originality of thought and maybe also the fact that there were two of them that brought it about. The book is an amalgam of poetry, letters to people, both living and dead, and a collection of information for tourists, both practical and humorous. The compilation looks somewhat haphazard at first sight and it is not easy to see whether there is any conscious calculation behind it. It is also very humorous but still without being frivolous.

It is well known that Auden had been very interested in Iceland from an early age. His father was very interested in Iceland and handed that interest down to his son. His going to Iceland came about, however, quite by coincidence. He met a friend, and former

pupil, Michael Yates, and it came up in their conversation that Yates was going to Iceland with some people (Carpenter, 195). Auden became excited and contacted his publisher (Faber and Faber) proposing to them a contract to write a travel book about the country, which they agreed to (Carpenter, 196). The reason why Auden and MacNeice wrote the book together is not perfectly clear but at some point “- Auden could not subsequently remember when – he had asked MacNeice to join him in Iceland and collaborate on the travel book” (Carpenter, 200). They had known each other for some years and had formed “a mutual professional respect and a personal rapport without which collaboration is unthinkable” (qtd. in Longley). Despite its rather casual beginnings the collaboration of those two creative minds proved very successful and “The result was something far removed from the conventional travel book” (Osborne, 129).

Auden says in his first letter to E. M. A. that he has “been here a month and haven’t the slightest idea how to begin to write the book” (106). This indicates that he had not made any outline of his intentions in advance. Then, in his letter no. 2 to E.M.A. Auden at one point mentions, as in passing, that he has come upon “a bright idea about this travel book” so somewhere along the way he has had a revelation (139). What he says in the following lines is something I find to be a ground breaking point in travel writing:

I brought Byron with me to Iceland, and I suddenly thought I might write him a chatty letter in light verse about anything I could think of ... This letter in itself will have very little to do with Iceland, but will be rather a description of an effect of travelling in distant places which is to make one reflect on one’s past and one’s culture from the outside. But it will form a central thread on which I shall hang other letters to different people more directly about Iceland. ... The trouble about travel books as a rule, even the most exciting ones, is that the actual events are all extremely like each other – meals – sleeping accommodation – fleas – dangers, etc, and the repetition becomes boring. (139).

Although Auden had said at the beginning of his journey that he did not have any idea of what the book was to be like, we can see that at this point an idea is starting to form. And the outcome is certainly not boring. These lines also sound as if he is developing in his



head a truly original idea and that he is now intent on doing something entirely different from what has been done before. The book is, however, not written as such during the journey but put together later from the pieces that he and MacNeice wrote along the way. They do realise that their work is different from what has been done before but there is no pretension in anything they do. When MacNeice says in his poem Letter to Graham and Anne Shepard: “We are not changing ground to escape from facts/But rather to find them” he is probably only talking about this journey away from home and to another country (31). I am, however, in light of later works, tempted to read this as a key sentence concerning the book’s ground changing effect. They did indeed find something new and special. Maybe they did not find many new facts but they found a new and original way to portray them.

Although Auden set out to write a travel book, that was initially only a way to get an excuse to go to Iceland and to finance that trip. Despite being constantly writing about things that caught his attention while there Auden was not writing a travelogue in that sense, he was writing while travelling and the outcome would only be known afterwards. What he and MacNeice wrote along the way only became a book later on. As MacNeice put it: “Our travel-book was a hodge-podge, thrown together in gaiety ” (qtd. in Longley ) That gaiety shines through in many places, particularly in the chapter about older travel writings and, last but not the least in “Their Last Will and Testament”. The hodge-podge was, however, probably not as casual as he made it sound since the idea had always been to write a book; after all Auden set out with a signed contract with his publisher. Auden and MacNeice write in a manner that intrigues and wakes up curiosity in the reader. It is true that their methods can at times look somewhat puzzling to a reader who might expect an “ordinary” travelogue. It is tempting to assume that they are trying to state a belief that travelogues should not be anything ordinary.

They are obviously well familiar with travel books that have been written before. There are numerous examples, from centuries past, of travel writers making comments on things and people they meet that sound as if they were only meant to excite or entertain a potential reader. Those writers do not seem to have had any qualms about truthfulness. Many writings are so far from truth or reality that the people they were written about would have gasped in indignation had they ever had the chance to read them. A good example of

this kind of writing is given in the chapter “Sheaves from Sagaland” which is dedicated to observations by other and earlier travel writers. There they have gathered together a good collection of observations from people who have travelled to the country (and/or written about it) in earlier centuries. These are mostly some quirky comments on the country, its people or the people’s habits. They are often coloured by prejudice or ignorance and only make their writers look laughable in the eyes of a modern reader. This is a truly funny part and the pieces are taken from many writers and different times. Auden and MacNeice obviously pick the most malicious and bizarre comments they can find and cram them together, making for a really compact course on older “knowledge“ about the country. The first one is, quite fittingly, an acknowledgement of the existence of the country:

*Iceland is real*

‘Iceland is not a myth; it is a solid portion of the earth’s surface’ -- Pliny Miles. (58)

This also demonstrates how vague some of the first written comments on the island had been. Another one concerns the Icelandic people and is meant to assure readers of their connection to the rest of humankind:

*The Icelanders are human beings*

‘They are not as robust and hardy that nothing can hurt them; for they are human beings and experience the sensations common to mankind’ --Horrebow. (61)

The writers clearly think that this is something that their readers will appreciate. It goes to confirm that *Letters from Iceland* “acts on a further shared belief of the two poets: that poetry should be a kind of fun as well as a kind of journalism“ (Longley 49). Although the book is not all poetry, much of it is. The humour beams out of it and the other parts are no less fun.

The outlook on the country and its people that Auden adopts is interesting. In a letter to Kristján Andr sson he says that “the remoteness of Iceland, coupled with its literary and political history, make it a country which, if visited at all, is visited by people with strong, and usually romantic preconceptions” (210). He goes on to talk about his father’s passion for Iceland and the influence it had on himself. How his father’s reading to

him from the saga's, folk tales and mythology instilled in him and incurable enthusiasm for this island in the North. Then he visits the place and gets to see it with his own eyes, which gives him a totally new perspective. Although the country and its people strike him as peculiar in many ways it does not seem to have any negative effect on his feelings towards them as we can see a little later on: "As I am going to be frank about what I disliked, I must say at once that I enjoyed my visit enormously" (210). He does as many have done before him, and as travel writers will always do, point out things that strike him as funny or strange. It is, no matter with how humorous a note, always in a kindly manner as we see in one verse from "Letter to Lord Byron"

I've learned to ride, at least to ride a pony,  
 Taken a lot of healthy exercise,  
 On barren mountains and in valleys stony,  
 I've tasted a hot spring (a taste was wise),  
 And foods a man remembers till he dies.  
 All things considered, I consider Iceland,  
 Apart from Reykjavík, a very nice land. (198)

The note on the food is worth mentioning since he did not seem to like it very much. He talks about a soup that tastes "of scented hair oil" and of dried fish that "tastes like toenails" and like "the skin of the soles of one's feet" (40). This mixture of admiration for the country and its old culture on one hand and the humouring of things in the everyday life of its modern people on the other, is one of the things that make the book most interesting. As Lars Lönnroth says in an article - in *Scandinavica* -: "It is this tension between irony and nostalgia that makes his travel reports so charming that most other books about Iceland by comparison seem heavy-handed and pedestrian, even though they may be more reliable in factual details" (Lönnroth, 50).

In this book we do not see any high-flown descriptions of things or the use of strong adjectives about the writers' experiences that are so common in many other travel books. Still they do not seem to have enjoyed themselves any less than others. As Humphrey Carpenter says

As a holiday, a piece of fun, the trip had been a huge success. But whether Auden's more ambitious objectives had been achieved was another question. He had absorbed a great amount of information about Iceland, but he was too independent, too self-sufficient, to respond quite freely to what he saw. It was not an experience that changed him. (Carp 202)

Despite being enchanted by the country he does not fall into the trap of romanticising it. His acquaintance with it rather helps him keep his feet on the ground and he is faithful to himself and his potential readers. Auden at one place mentions a Scottish woman he meets at Hallormsstaður, where he stays a night. He calls her an "Icelandophil" and says that "She thinks them like the Greeks" (142). It is obvious, judging from his descriptions of her, that he does not like her and that her attitudes are of the kind that he detests. The reader gets the feeling that she is in his eyes the epitome of the ordinary traveller who does things by the book and that is something he does not care for. She comes to the country with too many preconceived ideas and it is likely that she will find only what she expects and look for nothing more.

Auden has a very special eye for things. For instance, the lake Mývatn area is by most people considered one of the most beautiful places in the country but Auden only gives it about four lines: "The lake is surrounded by little craters like candle snuffers and most attractive. Hay was being made everywhere and the haymakers were using aluminium rakes, which I have never seen before (135). Descriptions of this area hardly come any shorter in travel books on Iceland. This is well in keeping with what he writes in a letter to Kristján Andr sson: "I do not intend to expatiate upon the natural beauties of your island: to you they need no advertisement and for the tourist there are many guide books" (210). When reading those words it is understandable that he talks more about the aluminium rakes, which strike him as something peculiar. It also shows the main element of difference that this book has from most other. Writing a travel book that is neither of the things that he mentions there is bound to have a different outcome. The main characteristic of most travel books is often either descriptions of the beauties or looks of a country - or place - or offering advice to other prospective travellers.

This seemingly disjointed concoction of a book is due partly to outside influences. For instance the letters to Lord Byron that might look out of context in a book about Iceland are not as far fetched as they appear at first. Auden was reading Byron on the ship to Iceland and was intrigued by him. In fact, it might be guessed that the book was his major, or only, comfort on the journey judging from one of the lines in the Letter to Lord Byron, Part I, where he says; “I read it on the boat to Reykjavik/Except when eating or asleep or sick” (16).

The reason why the book is made up like this might be explained by the fact that the writers are poets. Writing such a great part of the book in poetry form is probably something that maybe comes easier to them, and is a more natural way for poets to express themselves than the prose form is. It could be said that Auden and MacNeice are ploughing an old ground anew, giving the soil a new fertilizer, then planting out “[a]nd new plants flower from that old potato” (99). A new kind of a travelogue is being born here and although the old fashioned travel books sometimes look a bit stale and predictable in the comparison with those here, they are all grown from the same ground.

### **Moon Country**

In many ways, *Moon Country* echoes *Letters from Iceland*. It is a fact that at least a part of the reason why Armitage and Maxwell came to Iceland was the influence of Auden and MacNeice. It is known that they did admire the older poets and that they came here to go in their footsteps, to some extent at least. Auden had likened the effect Iceland had on him to sunset on mountains, the sun still shining on them and the light reflecting from them, lighting up the world although the sun had set and was out of view (37). Maxwell refers to these words when he says in a newspaper article that “Auden and MacNeice themselves cast a beam like that on two equally young poets, who felt that same draw northwards” (Maxwell, 52). They probably wanted to find out what it was that the others had been inspired by and to see if it would have the same effect on them selves. According to P. J. Kavanagh it was Faber & Faber, Auden’s publishers that sent Armitage and Maxwell to Iceland (Kavanagh, 1). They were also to record their experiences for BBC Radio 3 which subsequently broadcast their recordings (Kavanagh, 1). One of the things that they did

while in Reykjavík was interviewing the famous Icelandic poet, - and editor - Matthías Jónhannessen, about his acquaintance with Auden (37). He had met Auden when he revisited the country in 1964. They also met with other Icelandic poets and even attended poetry readings with them.

It is obvious right from the start that Iceland strikes the writers of *Moon Country* as something special or even strange. The title alone tells us that the experience of the country is quite unique. The book starts with a little poem by Armitage, simply called “Iceland“:

Midnight. Vodka, down  
in one. Spied through the bottom  
of the bottle: sun.

Scotch on the rocks, straight  
down. Seen through the empty glass  
the moon. It’s twelve noon.

Calling this poem Iceland indicates that this is how they see the country; this is the core of it. The extremities of the country and its people are observed and portrayed very thoroughly in these few lines. Daylight at midnight in the summer, dark enough to see the moon at noon in winter, and drinks swallowed in one gulp.

These descriptions of extremities and peculiarities go on throughout the book in six small poems by Armitage titled “From Where We Stand“. Each one of them then describes different things. The subjects covered in those poems are as diverse as the writers’ experiences along the way and each one points at a certain feature of strangeness. One describes how “bananas and vines/do well/on account/of the hell/underground“ (40). They have apparently visited, or at least heard of, the horticultural school where bananas and vines are grown in geothermally heated greenhouses, thus the “hell underground“. The difference of daylight between seasons is a constant matter of wonder and day and night merging together during the summer obviously inspires: “the days/are strained and sieved/through the nights,/and the nights arrive/with the days stirred in“ (51). A striking picture is painted of the interaction of fragile plants on the rough and barren, and, even

newly created, landscape: “Surtsey dreams/of a beard/of grass,“ and “ash and willow/pick their way/on tip-toe/through a spoil of stone“ (97).

The book is put together of many small pieces like *Letters from Iceland*. There are, alternately, poems and observations on various things. In between them are squeezed the – three- acts of a play that Maxwell writes in prose, almost Shakespearian at times, at least in spirit (sometimes reminiscent of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*). The scene and characters are a strange mixture of the night-life in Reykjavík and some old folk tales. Barflies and trolls are mingling in this truly entertaining concoction that travels between down-town Reykjavík, Þingvellir, an imaginary fishing trawler and an imaginary farm, amongst other things. The action weaves together modern technology and experiences, and fictitious unreality with an outcome that is really amusing. A “*seal-burger grows flippers and becomes A REAL SEAL*“ (59) and one character in the play, who becomes tired of waiting for the end says: “Someone flick the pages quick/And fax me how it ends!“ (62). This adds a quirky note to the book and is one of the things that make it special among travel writings.

Although the compilation of *Moon Country* is not in exactly the same form as *Letters from Iceland*, the similarities are quite strong. The chapters, if that word is the right word, are much shorter and they follow a more distinct pattern than the chapters in *Letters from Iceland*. It could thus be said that the outcome is a mixture of the effect Iceland has on its writers on one hand, and the effect of *Letters from Iceland* on the other. Whether Armitage and Maxwell consciously intended to write something similar to *Letters from Iceland* will not be discussed here. Still, it is easy to imagine that the compilation of *Moon Country* was not purely coincidental. Giving it this form may even have been meant as a part of the tribute to Auden and MacNeice that the book in fact is.

It is no great wonder, with two poets writing the book, that a great part of it is poetry. The poetry is one type of a vent for the travellers’ experiences and makes for a really diverse expression of emotions. Through this medium they convey what they encounter in an unusual and interesting way. A poem is followed by a play act followed by a diary entry of sorts and every part lights a different angle of Icelandic landscape, national character or the daily life of the people. In a book that is built up like this the reader is kept

constantly on the alert and never has a chance to become bored with repetitious treatment of material. Like all travellers at all times they see things from the outside, with a keen guests eye. They notice things that the natives never would and what is more, they express their sentiments in a very original way. At Krafla they see the results of some of the newest volcanic eruptions in the country. Armitage describes the impression it has on them. He talks about the earth as “a living creature, inching its way forward“ (125). Landscape is something people most often see as a very solid thing; there are numerous stories and paintings in the world of landscape that looks the same today as it did hundreds or thousands of years ago. Here he realises that landscape is never finished. The creature earth is simply “sleeping it off at the top of the hill, waiting to be woken“(125).

Journeys are certainly linear, although the lines followed may be all but straight, but the memories we have from them are not. The memories are in a way more like photo albums that are made up of snapshots from a journey. We never photograph every minute of a journey, only things that rouse our interest from time to time. Then we throw away those that are less important to us. Similarly, the memories tend to get organized in our heads by the different weight of importance of each incident along the way. This book resembles a photo album in that it stores the snapshots from a journey. Some of the „pictures“ are small and detailed, like the short poems, while others, like the play and some of the longer chapters, are more like video clips. They are artfully „taken“ and organized in a way that makes the reader eager to flick the pages further.

Among the most memorable things that Armitage and Maxwell do while in Iceland is to take a tour with a trawler from The Westman Islands, the “Gullborg”. The decription of this trip is one of the highlights of *Moon Country*. The understated subtitle, “The Water Is Not Very Still“ is a good indicator of what is to come. Maxwell makes fun of his and Armitage’s cowardice when faced with the real act of going on board a fishing vessel. They try to find some way, any way, to eschew the thing and contemplate whether or how they can get away with only interviewing the fishermen. Their horrendous experience of the tour is described in a very humorous manner although humour was painfully absent from their persons while the tour lasted. Armitage is beside himself all of the time, suffering severe sea-sickness while Maxwell tries to brave the elements and document some of the



happenings on board. His text is interweaved with speculations about his “maritime ancestors“ and pieces of poetry describing heroic seafarers and their deeds. At one point he reflects that “he’d like to have seen Auden trying this“ (77).

One of the many things that Armitage and Maxwell do during their stay in Iceland is to interview people. There are, however, only two interviews but each one has its significance. The first one is with their fellow poet, Matthías Jóhannessen and is mainly done to inquire about his acquaintance with Auden. Matthías talks about Auden with great reverence and tells of how he wanted to make him feel good; he wanting to be a dictator to be able to stop the radio, which apparently annoyed Auden (37). Then he talks with mixed emotions about the Icelandic language and its developments. He talks with an air of regret about its deterioration on one hand and with pride about the inventiveness within it, how Icelanders immediately invent new words for new things (38).

The other interview is with Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, the president of the country at the time and the first woman in the world to be democratically elected into such a position. That interview is on rather formal notes, understandably maybe, since the author’s probably do not interview heads of state every day. They ask her questions about the context between the history of the country and the presence, about critical issues like the fast development of the society and the conspicuous absence of trees. Those are all issues that cause frequent curiosity with visitors. Not to mention, again, her unique position. At one point in the interview Vigdís says: “I am of the belief that Iceland has to be visited to be understood“ (96). This is worth noting since in a way it touches the essence of what a lot of travel writing does, namely to inform and increase understanding of distant places. Those two interviews, along with their meetings with other poets and people in general, all go to make up the varied picture that the book paints of the country and its people.

Although Armitage and Maxwell are writing their own distinct work the reader is at regular intervals reminded that they are in Iceland also to go in the footsteps of Auden and MacNeice. Every now and then they come to places where the others had been and even try to do things exactly the same. This can be seen, for instance, when they visit Kalmanstunga farm. It is a place that Auden and MacNeice also visited and MacNeice describes it in his spoof letter “Hetty to Nancy“ (180). They had stayed there overnight on the return from the

journey around Langjökull glacier. Auden, apparently, had played the piano there and Armitage and Maxwell seem to have felt the need to do the same. They simply knock on the door and are let in, play one song on the instrument and then leave (102). They mention what MacNeice does not, that this was the very piano on which the Icelandic National Anthem was composed.

It might be said that their experience of Iceland, and subsequently their advice to other travellers, is summed up in the last verse of the “Harald and the Lonely Hearts“ play:

Here you can find us, we do hope you will,  
 We're sorry it's pricey, it's worth it though.  
 Fly, or you'll get most emphatically ill,  
 You want to eat puffin, you eat your fill,  
 Thick socks, a Minolta, and loads of dough,  
*Just so you know.*(170)

*Moon Country* is written in a light hearted and humorous tone. Still it manages to be taken seriously with very thoughtful observations in between. The humour never spins into nonsense for very long and despite slight side steps of curious speculations the writers always sway smoothly back onto track again. They let themselves be inspired by the country and its people and share their feelings generously with their readers. The effect that the place has on the two men travelling there immediately finds an outlet and they give in to the sensation freely and spontaneously. The result is a lively and many-sided book.

### **Comparison**

*Letters from Iceland* and *Moon Country* are two truly original travel books, both unlike most other such books. Between the two there are, however, striking similarities in many aspects. The unconventional form is in many ways similar: both books are comprised of many small chapters that are not very tightly fitted together. They could be compared to patchwork quilts that are made up of various different pieces. Sometimes there are similarities in patterns, sometimes in colour and sometimes none. All the same, though the idea of such a patchwork may not sound very charming at first, the finished piece, when

completed, makes a surprisingly beautiful picture.

It is quite clear that the four poets in question here were setting out to do something different from what had been done before in travel writing. Writing a book in cooperation with another person requires mutual trust, agreement and a certain amount of flexibility. Otherwise it is likely that the outcome will be too disjointed or fragmented. It can hardly be said, though, that the two books are written jointly, apart from Auden and MacNeice's "Last Will and Testament". They are made up of each writer's separate pieces that are put together afterwards like a jigsaw puzzle. Despite being different, the pieces from each writer in both books, work well together and compliment each other. The space in *Moon Country* is very justly divided between the writers, whereas Auden's part is considerably bigger than Mac Neice's in *Letters from Iceland*. This may possibly be attributed to Auden's inherited interest in Iceland; it was his idea to go there and he had for a long time been preoccupied with the idea of it. He also went there and stayed a few weeks before MacNeice joined him and had travelled quite widely around the island by that time. *Moon Country* also looks a little more coherent than *Letters from Iceland*.

The fact that all these writers are poets undoubtedly has its influence on the shape of the works. The obvious one is the amount of poetry, and letters in the form of poetry, but there is also something else that is more difficult to put a finger on. It seems that they are all avoiding tying their works together into too tight a knot or too firm a shape. They are, after all, going for originality and avoiding laying their ideas down in any conventional pattern.

In both books we meet with the attitude that the "effect of travelling in distant places ... is to make one reflect on one's past and one's culture from the outside" (139). Auden says this when he has just come up with his idea for the book and with those words further establishes the belief that shines through the whole work that travel writing does not necessarily have to be entirely about travels per se. Very much in tune with that is a whole chapter towards the end of *Moon Country* that Armitage spends musing on his past and on life in general, things that have little or nothing to do with the place where he is at the moment. He feels that his thoughts are out of place and that there may be an "unwritten rule of inversion, to do with distance" and goes on to talk about places "where you rub noses with yourself, catch up with yourself" (143). He does not mention Auden's afore mentioned

comment, but when that remark is borne in mind his situation seems to echo Auden's frame of mind from all those years ago.

A lot has changed over the sixty years that elapsed between the journeys, concerning travel conditions in Iceland. Armitage and Maxwell have a completely different experience of the trip to Iceland than Auden all those years earlier. Auden travelled by boat from Hull which was probably not very comfortable: "The voyage took about five days, and he was bored and sometimes sea-sick" (Carpenter, 197). Armitage and Maxwell flew, which only took a few hours and they had "a faultless flight" which reflects all the technological advances of six decades (9).

Armitage and Maxwell seem to be having the same kind of problems with their project, i.e. how to begin writing. Armitage states that "This is the last day and these are the last hours. I should be writing but haven't managed a single word yet," (143). Auden and MacNeice are writing in a time when horror is lurking in all corners of European politics. The Great Depression is raging and the outbreak of World War II is only a few years ahead. There is also warfare going on when Armitage and Maxwell visit Iceland, this time in former Yugoslavia, and at the time no one knows how that will end. Armitage and Maxwell are writing in times where anything goes and still find the medium of the older poets fitting their own purposes. They have an historic perspective hugely different from that of Auden and MacNeice. WWII and the Cold War are both in the past and Iceland has been an independent republic for 50 years. The world has changed a lot and the Icelandic community has seen changes that are even way beyond the measure of most of the rest of Western Europe.

Armitage and Maxwell come into much closer contact with the people in Iceland than Auden and MacNeice did. This is only natural considering the great changes in the Icelandic society over those sixty years. Everything is much more open and tourism, which was almost non-existent in the 1930s, is now an industry of its own and that a booming one. The fact that almost everyone speaks English in the nineties, whereas only a handful of educated people did in the thirties, also provides for a hugely different experience. Auden did meet a few people from the Icelandic literary scene but apparently they were not many. In fact he complains that the first week he spent here was rather miserable since all the

people he had introductions to were away (106). The language barrier alone accounts for a much more limited contact with the locals for Auden and MacNeice. Armitage and Maxwell not only met with other writers and poets but they also attended readings contributing some of their own works, which now poses no difficulty on the language side.

Auden talks about the Icelandic houses in a rather negative way and says there is no architecture (107). In 1964 he revisited Iceland and in his foreword to the 1967 edition of *Letters from Iceland* he mentions the architecture again claiming that it has improved: “Concrete, steel and glass may not be one’s favourite building materials, but they are an improvement upon corrugated iron sheeting“(7). This is an interesting point of view for modern people to contemplate, since the corrugated iron-clad houses are today seen as an important part of our architectural heritage and have gained a status of certain prominence. Armitage says in a much more positive tone that „the angular and colourful architecture gave the impression of a neat and tidy Lego-land, assembled only recently“ (MC 12). The town has of course expanded greatly between the two mens’ visits so their different outlook is understandable.

In *Letters from Iceland* there are, as the name indicates, mostly letters. But those letters are in various shapes and do not always look like “ordinary” letters. Some of them are in fact in the form of poetry, like Auden’s “Letter to Lord Byron”. In *Moon Country* the prose chapters look more like diary entries since they are not addressed to anyone particular. It is true that the title does not indicate letters, as does the older books’, but has a subtitle; *Further Reports from Iceland*, which rather suggests another form but also hints at an echo from *Letters from Iceland*. In *Moon Country* the poetry looks much more obviously inspired by Iceland. There are more direct references to places and phenomena, for instance in the “From where we stand“ poems, where Armitage brings out things that strike him as strange. In *Letters from Iceland* there are two poems by MacNeice that bear that mark. One is “Eclougue from Iceland” and is an imaginary conversation between two men and the ghost of Grettir Ásmundarson, a famous character from the Saga’s, best known for his physical strength. The other is simply called “Iceland” where he muses in a melancholy tone about the history and compares the old glory of it with the mundane way of living of the modern day people.

MacNeice uses an alter ego for his letter „From Hetty to Nancy“, and Armitage does the same in the chapters that look like diary entries (most of them bearing the names of Saints days). What MacNeice does is that he makes the all-male group that he and Auden travelled with around Langjökull glacier into females. His purpose with that may well have been only to entertain. What Armitage does is to change his own name and Maxwell's into Petersson and Jamesson, seemingly to fit the Icelandic patronymic tradition but without giving away too explicitly that he is referring to them selves. Maybe he does this to create some distance from himself and Maxwell or it could be that he thinks the third person narrative makes it sound more like a story.

*Moon Country* echoes *Letters from Iceland* in many ways but the resemblance is not too striking. Auden and MacNeice created something new and original with their book and although Armitage and Maxwell are partly going in the older guys' footsteps they also want to create something new and original in their own right. However much they admire the older poets they are never trying to imitate their work. The reflections from *Letters from Iceland* are well visible but they look more like a tribute to Auden and MacNeice, made to honour their work. Armitage and Maxwell are, after all, creating a whole new work of their own and have to give it their own signature.

Both MacNeice and Armitage compose poems titled “Iceland“. MacNeice's poem is a reflection on the history and old times in the country. He is wondering how things were then and comparing them to how they are now trying to imagine what life was like all those centuries ago. He demonstrates how modern time and old time clash:

Corrugated iron  
 Farms inherit  
 The spirit and phrase  
 Of ancient sagas

Men have forgotten  
 Anger and ambush,

To make ends meet

Their only business (225)

He makes the modern life seem dull compared to the glorified past. Now the stories of the glorious past have been forgotten by the modern people whose only care is to make a living.

There are many reverberations between the two books, or rather from Auden and MacNeice's book onto Armitage and Maxwell's. One could even talk about a Domino-effect, since Auden was influenced by his father's stories and then Armitage and Maxwell were influenced by Auden and MacNeice. Those two books touch on the same matters as practically all books about Iceland do: the history and the geology. This is probably unavoidable and despite those matters being so frequently covered by writers about Iceland the two duos artfully avoid clichés and manage to make things sound new and interesting.

## **Conclusion**

Although most travel books have in common the obvious element of being about travelling, they can be as different as black and white. The emphasis of each depends on the things that interest the writer in question, and that again is formed by his background, his past experiences and general outlook on life. Although travel books have been written over many centuries there is still space for development in the genre. The majority of them, though, still adheres to what seems to be the most popular form, (the relatively) linear narrative, and a story like that can certainly be interesting; it all depends on the nature of the writer's observations. It also depends on what each reader finds interesting. Some people like to read similar material again and again while others want to be constantly challenged with new approaches. New forms of travel stories can be intriguing for readers who crave for novelty. The two books dealt with in this essay are in my opinion very novel in form and approach. They are written about travels and thus fit well in with the travel story genre. They do, however, defy certain accepted criteria of such literature and go their own ways. They are both like collections of sketches, painted in different styles. The mixture of poetry, letters, plays and various observations are set forth in a very fresh

manner. Those are the things that make them different and distinguish them from other more traditional travel stories. They complement the travel story tradition, add new dimensions to an old genre and show us that, as long as people keep travelling the world, there will always be space for new ideas.



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