

# Images of Iceland and Greenland in the Late Seventeenth and First Half of the Eighteenth Century

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Of the Northerne Islands

The Northerne Sea is by some called *Marimorusa*, that is the dead sea, and by Tacitus, *Mare pigrum* [slow, tired]. Some are perswaded that the sound of the Sun is heard, as he riseth out of this Sea; and that many shapes of gods are seene, and the beames of his head [...] At this sea (the report is credible) is the end of nature and the world. The principal Islands dispersed in it are 1 Groenland, 2 Island, 3 Freezland, 4 Nova Zembla [...].<sup>1</sup>

These introductory words are taken from *A Little Description of the Great World* (1639) by the English scholar Peter Heylyn. From his description we can deduce that Iceland and Greenland are the main islands in the high North Atlantic, followed by the imaginary island Freezland, and that this area was the end of the world. It is so cold there that the sea scarcely moves (*Mare pigrum*) and these islands can barely foster any life. On the other hand, this area is also the place where the gods can be seen and the sun rises from the sea. It is both a beginning and the end of the world. Thus there was ambivalence about these islands: were they devilish or godly?

This article considers external images of Iceland and Greenland in the latter part of the seventeenth century and the early part of the eighteenth century, particularly in terms of their perceived ‘otherness’. It is based on my Ph.D. thesis, *Tvær eyjar á jaðrinum: Ímyndir Íslands og Grænlands frá miðöldum til miðrar 19. aldar* (Islands on the Edge: Images of Iceland and Greenland from the Middle Ages to the Mid-Nineteenth Century, 2014).<sup>2</sup>

On the one hand is Greenland, which in the early part of the period was only occasionally visited by European explorers and some whalers. It was colonized in the early eighteenth century and the Inuit, of a different cultural origin than the Europeans, were gradually Christianized. In this period very little was known of Greenland. It was, for example, not known if the country ‘ein festes Land seye, an Lappenland und der neuen Welt hangend’, as stated by the German scholar

Rudolff Capel in 1678. Most authors were of the opinion that it was an island, but the question of whether or not Greenland was part of a continent was asked right up to the late nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

Iceland, on the other hand, was inhabited by people of mostly Scandinavian origin. Right from the settlement of the country in the ninth century there had been both cultural and commercial relations with Europe, especially with Denmark after the introduction of monopoly trade in 1602. However, many or most narratives, from the earliest accounts dating from the High Middle Ages, had described the country as an alien other.<sup>4</sup>

This study focuses on the images of these two countries, countries that were on the 'edge' of the Danish–Norwegian state to which they belonged. It is my position that images of Iceland and Greenland were similar during the time period under consideration despite significant differences between the two countries themselves and the cultures of their inhabitants. In short, the countries were seen as parts of the same region, the realm outside the civilized world. Life there was thus thought more to reflect social conditions of countries outside Europe than within it. This theory contradicts the prevailing views in Iceland and Scandinavia since the nineteenth century that the outside world considered Iceland to be part of Europe, a part of its civilization rather than apart from it. Further, one of the main themes in the self-imagery and nation-building of twentieth-century Icelanders was the act of distinguishing themselves from Greenlanders and Inuit. There were certainly some claims in the preceding centuries that Iceland was civilized, but those ideas were far from dominant. It is the primary objective of this article to substantiate this theory and to answer the question as to why the two countries were considered part of the same region.

In order to understand how these ideas came about, we turn to imagology, or image studies. Imagology concerns itself with how images have originated, appeared, and developed, and not least of all how phenomena are rendered meaningful by means of comparison. It is equally important to look to postcolonial studies, 'the study and analysis of European territorial conquests... [and] the discursive operations of empire'.<sup>5</sup> I do so as I believe that representations of Iceland and Greenland are similar to narratives of the colonial world in the period, since the same type of dualism appears in the discourse on colonies and other distant lands. It is precisely this dualism that the Indian scholar Homi Bhabha describes when analysing the symptoms of colonial discourse. He says it is

recognizably true that the chain of stereotypical signification is curiously mixed and split, polymorphous and perverse, an articulation of multiple belief. The black is both

savage (cannibal) and yet the most obedient and dignified of servants (the bearer of food); he is the embodiment of rampant sexuality and yet innocent as a child; he is mystical, primitive, simple-minded and yet the most worldly and accomplished liar, and manipulator of social forces.<sup>6</sup>

What Bhabha is describing here is what is called 'stereotypical dualism', which is one of the main symptoms that appear in narratives of the colonial otherness.<sup>7</sup>

As we can see here, opposites are an important part of this discourse: paradise or the netherworld, the noble or the brutal savage, kindness or evilness, utopias or dystopias. The descriptions are thus full of contradictions that seem unreconcilable. But they are nevertheless two sides of the same coin and play a similar role: to evoke an image that is exotic and full of wonders that are an important characteristic of otherness. The communities described in this manner thus become heterotopias according to the French philosopher Michel Foucault's account of such places.<sup>8</sup>

It is also important here to mention the discourse on islands in general, one feature of which was that the island was often thought to be different from the mainland and a setting for peculiar phenomena. Then there is the discourse of the north – or high north – which is also of great importance. Up to the eighteenth century the prevailing view of the north was a negative one, though contradicting narratives were also known. These different ideas of the north were important in colouring the images of Iceland and Greenland. When we connect ideas about the farthest north with reports of the exoticism of these two countries, descriptions appear that we can classify as borealism, orientalism or tropicality with characteristics of the farthest north. The concept of orientalism is well known; as for tropicality, it is characterized by 'a deeply ambivalent discourse, with positive and negative strains captured, respectively, in the image of tropical island edens (such as Tahiti) and the spectre of the jungle (such as the Belgian Congo) as 'the white man's grave'.<sup>9</sup> Another main objective of this article is thus to analyse the borealism that appears in the discourse on Iceland and Greenland in the time period: what is its nature, and does it follow the same rules as tropicality?

The principal sources are published writings by Western European authors, mostly from Britain and Germany where most of the sources regarding these two countries were written. They consist of a few travelogues but mostly of scientific treatises on geography, cosmography, and history, as it is in such works that the standard notions of otherness appear most clearly.

### *Primitive Dystopia in the North*

In recent decades, Icelanders have grown accustomed to the discussion of their country and nation usually being positive, even extremely so: the landscape sublime and the people exceptional, though maybe with the exception of some bankers after the financial crisis in 2008. But descriptions of Iceland were far from predominantly positive during the time period in question. Regarding Iceland, we can take an example from a travelogue by the French physician and writer Pierre Martin de la Martinière (first published in French in 1671):

The people of Iceland, for the most part, dwell in caverns, hewn out of the rocks, and the rest live in huts, built like those in Lapland, some with wood, and others with fish bones covered with turf; and both they and their cattle lie under the same roof. Their beds are composed of hay or straw, upon which they lie in their cloaths, with skins upon them, and make but one bed for the whole family. Both men and women have very disagreeable persons: they are swarthy, and dress like the Norwegians, in coats made of the skins of the sea calf, with the hair outward [...] They live by fishing, are very brutal and slovenly, and most of them pretend to necromancy.<sup>10</sup>

As can be seen from this text and other sources, the appearance of the Icelanders and fundamental aspects of their daily life such as food and shelter are often topics of discussion illustrating the barbaric customs of the inhabitants of this exotic island. They were even believed to have contact with the spirits of the dead. Their complexion was also regarded as a point of difference: for example, they were either as white as snow or blackish, 'swarthy'. Some authors stated that they were very small, even dwarfish, and never exceeded five feet in height.<sup>11</sup> They looked like animals because they were always dressed in furs in the icy cold climate, and they slept on 'hay or straw' like animals too. Mayor Johann Anderson of Hamburg stated in his book *Nachrichten von Island und Grönland* (1746) that the Icelanders would not eat 'weder Fisch, noch Fleisch, frisch gefangen oder ohnlängst getödtet, sondern werfen alles zuvor eine Zeitlang hin, daß es in etwas faulen muß, anders rühret es die fühllosen Würzlein ihrer Zungen nicht, sondern kömmt ihnen als ungeschmackt vor.'<sup>12</sup> The Icelanders were thus described as scavengers like some animals, i.e. hyenas.

There was also ambivalence about their Christianity. The Reverend Mr. Paschoud, author of *Historico-Political Geography*, stated in 1726 that many of the 'Natives, not yet civiliz'd, who commonly abscond in Dens and Caves, still adhere to their ancient Idolatory'.<sup>13</sup> Since they were not Christians, or only pretended to

be so, it was no wonder that they behaved like the worst savages, as Johann Anderson discussed when describing the qualities of the Icelanders:

Der ganze Hause weiß also wenig von Gott und seinem Willen. Die meisten sind abergläubisch und leichtsinnig in Schweren: so daß mancher sich kein Gewissen macht für ein paar Mark wider seinen nächsten Blutsverwandten einen falschen Eyd zu thun. Sind zänkisch und boshaftig, rachgierig, hämisch und tückisch: unmäßig, geil und unzüchtig, betrieglich und diebisch. Ja, was kann man von Leuten, die ohne innerlichen Zaum, ohne rechte äußerliche Aufsicht, in der größten Ungebundenheit, in Wüsten und auf dem Meer, unter stetigen Gelegenheiten unvermerkt und folglich ungestraft ihre Begierden zu erfüllen dahin leben, annebst an der fruchtbarsten Mutter aller laster, der Trunkenheit, so gar stark, so beständig und so durchgängig liegen und saugen, nicht für Untugenden vermuthen?<sup>14</sup>

Stealing, cheating, lying, drinking, and whoring were the main characteristics of the Icelanders, according to Anderson.

Similar descriptions are easily found regarding Greenland. According to *Geographia Universalis* from 1697, Greenland was not a place for Europeans because of the terrible cold and fog.<sup>15</sup> The country was clearly not a place for people used to a temperate climate; Greenland was, however, a place for another kind of people, of 'schwarßbrauner Farb [...] und haben einen übeln Geruch'.<sup>16</sup> They lived in caves and looked much more like monkeys than people, were 'mißtrauisch wie das Vieh und ohne Verstand; Die Weiber allen gemein.' They ate bread made from fish bones and drank seawater without being harmed. Furthermore, they were not Christians.<sup>17</sup> Compared to the Danes, the inhabitants of Greenland could not be more different.<sup>18</sup>

People in these parts were thus grotesque both in appearance and in manner. As we can see from these descriptions, the subjects of Iceland and Greenland were frequently considered guilty of lies and schemes, treachery and trickery, coldness and cruelty. Promiscuity and prostitution were also part of the narratives. Icelanders and Greenlanders were not Christians, or only pretended to be so; they practiced witchcraft and had connections with the dead and evil forces. They even drank seawater, and unrestrained consumption of alcohol was also a popular topic of discussion. When these people sang, they growled, and when they spoke, they sounded like animals. If they danced, they also moved like animals. Their houses were like dens or hovels made of bones, or they lived in caves or holes in the ground.<sup>19</sup> As can be seen, there is not much difference here between the behaviour of animals and humans. Furthermore, according to some descriptions, the difference in appearance of the men and women was

negligible; it can be inferred that there was little distinction between the sexes. People from these regions were thus hybrids in more than one way, neither/nor or both/and.<sup>20</sup>

This discourse can be said to have been the most common concerning Iceland, Greenland, and their inhabitants until the mid-eighteenth century. It closely resembles the dominant discourse of the European cultural world mirroring itself both in regions on the 'edges' of the continent – for example, Ireland and the northern regions of Scandinavia inhabited by the Sami – and in other parts of the world, such as America and Africa; the borealism of the high north and the tropicality of the south seems to be similar.<sup>21</sup>

This can clearly be seen when the narratives of Iceland and Greenland are compared with narratives of Africa in the eighteenth century, as the following example from *The Modern Part of an Universal History, from the Earliest Account of Time* (1760) demonstrates. There it is stated that the Africans have always been the same. They were evil-minded and had

the most odious and despicable character, as proud, lazy, treacherous, thievish, hot, and addicted to all kinds of lusts, and most ready to promote them in others as pimps, panders, incestuous, brutish, and savage, cruel and revengeful, devourers of human flesh, and quaffers of human blood, inconstant, base, treacherous, and cowardly, fond of, and addicted to, all sorts of superstition and witchcraft; and in a word, to every vice that came in their way or within their reach.<sup>22</sup>

The discourse on the two countries is clearly similar to the discourse on Africa; not least do Johann Anderson's writings about Iceland resemble this text in most aspects. There is a difference, however. In the high north the cold was intense, scarcity and wretchedness prevailed, and compared with the temperate climates, life was as repulsive as it was possible to imagine.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, the heat was also terrible in the extreme south and seemed to have the same consequences.

This leads us to the theory of climates and the climate zones. The 'best' zones were the temperate zones, but in the hottest and coldest zones, cultural life could hardly exist.<sup>24</sup> So the coldest and the hottest zones were similar in many aspects, and in both zones people lived in caves or holes because of the extreme cold or heat. These ideas on the high north and the extreme south appear clearly in the eighteenth century, for example in the poem 'The Nature of Man' (1711) by the English poet and physician Sir Richard Blackmore. There Blackmore describes how the cold, wind, and fruitless soil in the north have the effect that the life of the people

Is barren too of Wit, and void of Sense.  
Th' unsprightly, coarse, and unfermented Blood,  
Form'd of base Juices and unwholsome Food,  
Flows thick and lazy in the Venal Road.

According to Blackmore, the heat had the same influence on life in the hottest south:

So void of Sense the Hotentot is found,  
Whose Speech is scarce articulated Sound,  
That 'tis disputed, if his doubtful Soul  
Augment the Humane or the Brutal Roll:  
Nor do's the Cafres barb'rous Race express  
More Marks of Wisdom, or of Dullness less.<sup>25</sup>

So even though there was a great difference between the highest north and the burning south, the effects were the same. These areas did not offer any possibilities for a civilized life.

The high north and the extreme south were thus mirrors for Europe, showing Europeans the high quality of the life they lived there.

### *Primitive Utopia in the North – Island Paradise*

Another dominant theme in the otherness of these two northern islands is one we can call primitive utopia. Let us examine a text by Gideon Pierreville (probably a Frenchman, at least temporarily living in Denmark) from the late seventeenth century to explain better what kind of ideas could be expressed about these remote areas and the people who lived there, in this case the Icelanders:

The modern Natives for the most part are plain and simple, living on what is given them by nature, without the help of Art; more than that of making Cheese and Butter: the Mountains serving them for Towns, and the Rivers for Drink, and they quarter with their Horses and their Oxen under one and the same roof. As they do not stand in need of either Physick or Physitians, so neither do they use any, their temperance in meat and drink, and the naturally strong constitution of their Bodies enabling many of them to attain to the age of 150 years, and more, Nay, *Olaus Magnus* affirms they commonly live to the age of three hundred years...<sup>26</sup>

As can be seen, it is the primitive life in Iceland that is praised, and this simplicity is taken as the explanation for a high quality of life, unbelievable old age, good health, and even beauty: 'The women are exceeding faire, but they do not know how to attire themselves', Peter Heylyn stated in the mid-seventeenth century. This text and similar narratives commended the modest lives of unspoiled people in distant lands who even shared their homes with their livestock. Emphasis was placed on the hospitality of these people, their honesty, kind-heartedness, chastity, faithfulness, and piety. Nowhere could one find a simpler way of life. This was evidenced by houses that were usually just caves or holes in the ground, food that could scarcely be simpler, and the fact that they only had water to drink. It was noted that as a result of this simple way of life, the people were quite healthy and also grew incredibly old, some reaching an age of many hundreds of years.

Discussions of Greenland of this kind are particularly evident from the early eighteenth century, thus a bit later than those of Iceland. They reveal the clear influence of the Danish and German missionaries who first came to Greenland in the 1720s and ideas of the noble savage that became current during the Enlightenment. Hans Egede, the Norwegian-Danish missionary in Greenland, described the Greenlanders as modest, kind, unspoiled, and pure of heart:

In short, every one is contented with his own state and condition, and are not tormented with unnecessary cares. Is not this the greatest happiness of this life? O happy people! what better things can one wish you, than what you already possess? Have you no riches? yet poverty does not trouble you. Have you no superfluity? yet you suffer no want. Is there no pomp and pride to be seen among you? neither is there any slight or scorn to be met with. Is there no nobility or high rank amongst them? neither is there any slavery or bondage. What is sweeter than liberty? And what is happier than contentedness? But one thing is yet wanting: I mean, the saving knowledge of God and his dear son Christ Jesus, in which alone consists eternal life and happiness.<sup>27</sup>

These ideas concerning Greenland were influential until the end of the period under discussion, the mid-eighteenth century. The life of the inhabitants was in most ways ideal, even though they had not yet been Christianized. It can be stated that in this kind of text both Icelanders and Greenlanders were represented as the opposite of the amorality and excess of the civilized.

Perspectives of this kind, applauding the most primitive and contrasting it with the corruption of civilization, were not new at the time. These age-old views were part of the knowledge that was based on classical fields of study and medieval literature; ancient accounts of, for instance, the carefree Hyperboreans in the high north are in some way templates for the stories of Icelanders and Greenlanders as

primitive and kind people.<sup>28</sup> Descriptions of this kind were also connected to the discourse that had often depicted islands as places where people lived in frugality, far from the world of excess. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the idea was connected to that of the noble savage, which in turn was closely linked to the discourse of colonialism. The simplicity of the Icelanders and Greenlanders was a testament to a way of life that the rich and civilized Europeans could learn from.

### *Treasure Islands?*

As we have seen, many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers believed that Iceland and Greenland were barely habitable countries, given the continuous cold throughout most of the year. In the book *Geography Anatomized* (1704) by Patrick Gordon, a Scottish general in the Russian army, it was stated for instance that

Iceland; being so named from the Abundance of Ice wherewith it is surrounded for the greatest Part of the Year. [...] By reason of the frozen Ozean surrounding this *Island*, and the great Quantity of Snow wherewith it is mostly covered, the Air must of Necessity be very sharp and piercing.<sup>29</sup>

In addition, the country was 'incumbered with Deserts, barren Mountains, or formidable Rocks'.<sup>30</sup> Many descriptions of Greenland were similar. It was commonly claimed of both countries that they were simply uninhabitable due to the cold and the lack of vegetation, similar to other regions along the northernmost edges of Europe. But this is only one side; the other side, that of the paradise island or treasure island, also appeared in the discourse on the two islands.

Some of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century narratives of the two islands in the high north are related to narratives of the treasure islands. Concerning Iceland, its wealth and wonders appeared, for example, in the form of hot fountains, or in such abundance of fish that it was difficult to preserve the catch, the same problem affecting the butter because of the huge quantity that was produced.<sup>31</sup> *Grosses Vollständiges Universal Lexicon Aller Wissenschaften und Künste* from 1735 discussed these difficulties: 'Es ist auch da die Butter in solcher Menge, daß sie gleich dem Kalcke auf grosse Haussen zusammen geschlagen wird.'<sup>32</sup> The inhabitants could also enjoy life, giving unbelievable feasts and inviting 'twelve hundred Persons for fourteen days together at a Banquet; and at the departure of his Guests made 'em all presents, every one suitable to his quality; many more instances have they of the same kind.'<sup>33</sup> Sometimes this kind of narrative was

connected with an assumed Golden Age of Iceland in the old times when there were 'vast quantities of Beef, Mutton, Butter and the like [...] dried Fish, and Brimstone'.<sup>34</sup>

Similar narratives appeared regarding Greenland. As was the case with Iceland, they were connected with the Greenlandic Golden Age in the past when there were 'schöne Wiesen, luftige Hügel und nußbare Ebenen gefunden. Die Wälder waren mit vielen wilden Thieren, Hirchen, Wölffen, schwarßen und weissen Bären, Füchsen und Renn-Thieren angefüllet. Die Lufft war weit temperirter als in Island und Norwegen.'<sup>35</sup> In other words: in the past Greenland had been a much better place than Iceland and Norway.

This kind of discourse was, however, not only bound to a distant past. When writing on the contemporary situation in Greenland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was not uncommon to describe the country as a treasure island. A typical example of this is a text by the English publisher and cartographer Richard Blome from the late seventeenth century. Blome stated the following on Greenland:

They say that in several parts of *Groenlandt* there are Lands which bear as good *Wheat* as any ground in the World; and *Chestnuts* so large, that their kernels are as big as *Apples*; that the Mountains yield *Marble* of all sorts of colours; that the Grass for *Pastures* is good, and feeds quantities of great and small *Cattel*, that there are *Horses*, *Stags*, *Wolves*, *Foxes*, Black and White, *Bears*, *Beavers*, *Martles*, &c. That the *Sea* is full of great *Fishes*, as *Sea-Wolves*, *Dogs*, and *Calves*, but above all of *Whales* [...] that their *Fish Marbval* carrieth a *Tooth* or *Horn* so strong and long [...] and they assure us that the *Horn* is of the same greatness, form and matter and hath the same properties as those which we here esteem on the *Unicornes*.<sup>36</sup>

According to these narratives, both countries were then presented as isles of plenty dripping in butter, with an abundance of fish and even granaries, precious metals, rare gems, sulphur, and such rich pastures that cattle had to be herded away so as not to burst from overeating.<sup>37</sup> The air was healthy, and there were springs or wells that improved people's health and heated the homes.<sup>38</sup>

From the discussion above, it is obvious that the conflicting views that appeared about the inhabitants of the two islands in the north applied as well to the countries themselves, which could be both positive and negative. Looking closer at this discussion of the treasure islands, it becomes clear that this trope was to some extent applied to Iceland and Greenland. The rich, prosperous island was thus one of the images that characterized the discussion of Iceland and Greenland. Expectations in this vein did in fact follow exploration and colonization,

where hunger for gold and hope for profit were powerful driving forces; this tradition was also based on texts from the sixteenth century that described those two islands as islands of plenty.<sup>39</sup>

From the above one can see that dualism is an important feature of descriptions of Iceland and Greenland, as the images often appear as opposites, positive or negative discussions, very similar to narratives from other peripheries. Naturally, there is considerable difference between them, but they also have much in common. This dualism appears as different narratives in different texts but can also be seen within single narratives, describing a people both as savage and noble and the countries as on the one hand useless and desolate and on the other hand rich and abundant. A clear example of this can be found in *Geographia Universalis* from 1697: 'Dieser Insul-Besißer seynd die besten und getreuesten Diener von der Welt, ihre niedrigste Speise ist halb verfaultes und mit Würmen angefülltes Fleisch.'<sup>40</sup>

### *Civilization of the Farthest North: Model Communities and Ordinary Folk*

Many, if not most, of the descriptions of Iceland and Greenland assumed the two islands to be marginal lands with little room for education or culture. There were, however, important exceptions, especially with regard to Iceland. Such emphasis may be found upon analysis of thirteenth-century texts on Iceland that spoke of the nation's flourishing literary tradition.<sup>41</sup> This discourse became prominent in the sixteenth century, but its impact dwindled in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century when other narratives became more influential. It was, however, still visible. For example, in some sources it was stated that the Icelanders 'were formerly the greatest Wits of the North, having preserved their ancient History in Verses, written in their own Language'.<sup>42</sup> Their ability in playing chess was also admired, but at the same time it was inquired as to 'how such a studious and difficult Game should get thus far Northward, and become so generally used.'<sup>43</sup>

As is well known, this tradition grew ever more popular with the rise of anti-classicism and nationalism in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Over time, medieval Iceland became a model of education, spiritual power, creativity, physical prowess, and beauty. The country even became a sort of cradle of Nordic and Germanic culture, a Hellas of the North. At this time it generally became accepted that Iceland was part of Europe, even a particularly important part. Among other reasons, this was due to the country's location along the edge of the con-

continent that allowed it to preserve cultural values that were important for all of Northern Europe.<sup>44</sup>

Ideas of this type may also be observed about Greenland. In the sixteenth century they were brought to life in Venice with the Zeno brothers' map of Greenland and their text on the city of Alba in northeast Greenland, now generally agreed to be a forgery and a travel lie.<sup>45</sup> In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, narratives of this kind on Greenland appeared regularly, describing the comfortable life in the city of Alba in far northeastern Greenland, an educated utopia on an island of plenty. There monks were to be found living in the monastery of Saint Thomas. Their life was comfortable, Rudolff Capel stated, as they could use

einen Brunnen von heissem siedendem Wasser, mit welchem die Mönchen [...] Vätter kochen, und ihre Wohnungen wärmen [...]. Nahe bey dem Closter ist ein Meerhafen, in welchen das gemelte Wasser sich außgiesset, und selbigen also er wärmet, daß er nimmermehr gefreuet: darumb dann unzählbahrlichviel Fische dahin kommen.<sup>46</sup>

In this text Greenland is an island of plenty and boasts both Christianity and civilization. In the eighteenth century these stories merged with the narratives of Nordic peoples who had lived in Greenland and were probably still living in the cultured, utopian city of Alba. This notion of Alba was popular through the eighteenth century but began to dwindle in the nineteenth century as hopes of finding people of Scandinavian origin in Greenland steadily declined. It should be noted that this discussion was confined to people of Norse origin with respect to their possible descendants in Greenland.<sup>47</sup>

Here it can be mentioned that throughout the time period, we also find ideas about the residents of the northern islands being 'normal', similar to people in the authors' homelands. This emphasis appears in various publications on Iceland from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Reports and counter responses from Icelandic authors also played a role in Iceland being presented in this manner.<sup>48</sup> With contributions from Enlightenment authors from around the mid-eighteenth century, a consensus was gradually reached that Icelanders were 'normal' people, albeit at the edge of the continent.

A similar discussion on the 'normalcy' of the Inuit may also be observed, portraying them as intelligent, clever, and determined people adept at solving the problems they faced in their native land. In this context, the Inuit in Greenland were sometimes compared to Europeans, but this was often linked to conjectures about whether they might harbour an obscure connection with the country's vanished Norse residents. The tales of their survival turned out to be incredibly

long-lived in Greenland.<sup>49</sup> As we have seen, these two islands in the north were also sometimes considered to be civilized, at least partly. It was also maintained that the people who lived in these places could be similar to those the authors knew in their homelands, 'regular' people. This type of rhetoric, however, was not widespread during the time period under discussion.

### *Conclusion*

The tradition of how one should describe Iceland and Greenland in the late seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth century was full of disparities, so contradictory that many texts appear to be strangely amalgamated fusions of utopias and dystopias. Upon analysis it can be seen that similar themes are discernible in descriptions of the two countries throughout the period.

Descriptions of Iceland and Greenland are often illustrations of great exoticism, an opposite side or back side of the dominant self-perception of the major Western European states. We can call this otherness borealism, orientalism or tropicity with characteristics of the farthest north. These descriptions are often based on ancient premises, ancient knowledge of peripheral regions. They are built upon the superiority of the centre over the periphery. In essence, the discourse is historically similar to the discourse on those territories under Western European influence outside of the continent.

Here at last can we ask why Iceland is placed in the same category as Greenland despite the fact that the former island's people and culture – which were, for instance, Christian – were in many ways similar to the peoples and cultures of other European countries. The reason is that Iceland was simply too far away from 'civilization' for educated Europeans to imagine it as capable of sustaining civilized life. The country was also so far north that civilization was not considered possible according to many ideas of how life was lived in the extreme north.

It is therefore critical not to remove the discussions of Iceland, or of Greenland, from their context but rather to consider them as part of a much larger whole in order to better understand their character. There is thus every reason to discuss images of the two countries in light of colonialist discourse, the 'knowledge' of which was indeed transferred to Iceland and Greenland.

Iceland and Greenland, like many other 'exotic' countries, thus each played a role as a kind of mirror for civilization, a mirror that could reflect either coarse barbarism or an impeccable way of life, depending on what was being looked for. Correspondingly, their descriptions often contained reminders of the authors'

own communities, or glorification that served the authors and their societies. Furthermore, these descriptions could serve as justifications for any sense of superiority and for dominance and seizure of power of the regions in question; in addition to texts on Greenland and Iceland, many discussions of Ireland are also good examples of this.

It is also important to mention here the discourses on islands and the North, which have had a major impact on the production of images of the two countries. As mentioned above, ideas about islands have often been positive, though notions of the 'evil island' were also well known. On the other hand, for most of the period under discussion here, conceptions of the North were negative. Ideas about islands and the North may even be seen as a kind of magnet with the North on one side and the island on the other, their forces pulling in opposite directions, positive and negative. This often led to doubts about what sort of places Iceland and Greenland were. Were these countries good or evil? The answers were not unanimous. Negative discussion predominated most of the period under discussion.

Descriptions of Iceland and Greenland were in many ways similar until the mid-eighteenth century. But after that the discussions of the two islands gradually drifted apart as time passed, especially in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Iceland became part of Europe – home of the Vikings, Nordic culture, and the people who epitomized the Nordic stock – but Greenland continued to be remote and primitive and inhabited by people of an 'inferior' race. Despite these changes, both islands also continued to be described as strange and exotic places, as heterotopias: they were places without being places. And they still are. But that story is a subject for another discussion.

## Notes

1. Peter Heylyn, *A Little Description of the Great World* (Oxford: Academia Oxoniensis, 1639), p. 515.
2. Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson, *Tvær eyjar á jaðrinum: Ímyndir Íslands og Grænlands frá miðöldum til miðrar 19. aldar* (Reykjavík: Háskóli Íslands, 2014).
3. Rudolff Capel, *Norden, Oder zu Wasser und Lande im Eise und Snee* (Hamburg: Johann Nannmann, 1678), p. 174.
4. Ísleifsson, *Tvær eyjar á jaðrinum*, pp. 57–73.
5. 'It is clear [...] that post-colonialism as it has been employed in most recent accounts has been primarily concerned to examine the processes and effects of, and reactions to, European colonialism from the sixteenth century up to and including the neo-colonial-

- ism of the present day.' Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, & Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 186–188.
6. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 118.
  7. 'split into two opposing elements', Stuart Hall, 'The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power', in *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*, ed. by Stuart Hall et al. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), pp. 184–228 (pp. 215–216).
  8. 'Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias.' Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias', <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf>, pp. 1–9 (p. 4), from *Architecture/Mouvement/ Continuité* (October 1984) ('Des Espaces Autres,' March 1967, translated from the French by Jay Miskowicz).
  9. Daniel Clayton & Gavin Bowd, 'Geography, Tropicality and Postcolonialism: Anglophone and Francophone Readings of the Work of Pierre Gourou', *L'Espace géographique*, 3 (2006, tome 35), pp. 208–221 (p. 209).
  10. Pierre Martin de la Martinière, 'A Voyage to the North of Europe; Containing an Account of the Sea Coasts and Mines of Norway, Lapland, Siberia, Borandia, Iceland, Zembla and other Countries', in *A New and Universal Collection of Authentic and Entertaining Voyages and Travels, from the Earliest Accounts to the Present Time* [etc.], ed. by Edward Cavendish Drake (London: J. Cooke, 1769), pp. 421–440 (pp. 439–440).
  11. Cristoph Benjamin Häckhel, *Allgemeine und Neueste Weltbeschreibung* [etc.], (Ulm: In Verlag Daniel Bartholomäi und Sohn, 1740), p. 3104.
  12. Johann Anderson, *Nachrichten von Island und Grönland* [etc] (Hamburg: Georg Christian Grund, 1746), p. 118.
  13. Paschoud, *Historico-Political Geography: Or, A Particular Description of the Several Countries in the World* [etc.], vol. II (London: F. Clay [etc.], 1726), p. 392.
  14. Anderson, *Nachrichten von Island und Grönland*, p. 136.
  15. François Pétis de la Croix & Hieronymus Dicelius, *Geographia Universalis. Das ist: Allgemeine Welt-Beschreibung nach neuer Art und Weise, wie diese Wissenschaft leicht zu begreifen, und erlernt werden kan* [etc.] (Leipzig: Johann Ludwig Gleditsch, 1697), p. 375; Johann Gottfried Gregorii Melissantes, *Cosmographia Novissima, oder allerneueste und accurate Beschreibung der ganzen wunderbaren Welt* [etc.] (Leipzig: Johann Chrisoph Stoessels, 1715), pp. 965–966.
  16. Alain Manesson Mallet, *Beschreibung des gantzen Welt-Kreisses, in sich begreifend verschiedene Vorstellungen der Welt, allgemeine und besondere Land-Charten der alten und neuen Erd Beschreibung ... In fünf Theile verfasst: I.* [etc.] (Frankfurt am Main: Johann David Zunner, 1684), p. 137.
  17. de la Croix & Dicelius, *Geographia Universalis*, pp. 375–376; see also Melissantes, *Cosmographia Novissima*, p. 965; Capel, *Norden, Oder zu Wasser und Lande im Eise und Snee*, p. 176.
  18. Mallet, *Beschreibung des gantzen Welt-Kreisses*, p. 18.
  19. Melissantes, *Cosmographia Novissima*, pp. 965–966.

20. Ísleifsson, *Tvær eyjar á jaðrinum*.
21. See for example Paschoud, *Historico-Political Geography*, p. 392.
22. *The Modern Part of an Universal History from the Earliest Account of Time. Compiled from Original Writers by the Authors of the Antient Part*, vol. XIV, (London: Printed for S. Richardson [etc.], 1760), p. 18.
23. George Meriton, *A Geographical Description of the World ... Together with a Short Direction for Travellers* (London: William Leake [etc.], 1679), p. 349.
24. Manfred Beller, 'Climate', in *Imagology. The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters. A Critical Survey*, ed. by Manfred Beller & Joep Leerssen (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 298–304.
25. Sir Richard Blackmore, *Nature of Man. A Poem in Three Books* (London: Samuel Buckley [etc.]), 1711, <http://www.poetrynook.com/poem/nature-man>.
26. Gideon Pierreville, *The Present State of Denmark and Reflections upon the Ancient State Thereof* (London: William Benbridge, 1683), p. 141; see also de la Croix & Dicelius, *Geographia Universalis*, p. 375.
27. Hans Egede, *A Description of Greenland by Hans Egede, who was a Missionary in that Country for Twenty-Five Years* [etc.] (London: T. and J. Allman, 1818 [1745]), pp. 224–225; Hans Egede, *Det gamle Grønlands nye Perustration eller Natuel-Historie og Beskrivelse over det gamle Grønlands Situation, Luft, Temperament og Beskaffenhed* [etc.], (Copenhagen: Johan Christoph Broth, 1741).
28. On the Hyperboreas, see Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson, 'Introduction: Imaginations of National Identity and the North', in *Iceland and Images of the North*, ed. by Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson & Daniel Chartier (Montreal & Reykjavík: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2011), pp. 3–22 (p. 10).
29. Patrick Gordon, *Geography Anatomiz'd; or, the Geographical Grammar. Being a Short and Exact Analysis of the Whole Body of Modern Geography* [etc.] (London: J. and P. Knapton, 1704), p. 223.
30. Patrick Gordon, *Geography Anatomiz'd*, bls. 224.
31. Sanson d'Abbeville, *Die ganze Erd-Kugel, Bestehend in der vier bekannten Theilen der Welt* [etc.] (Frankfurt am Main: Johann David Zunners, 1679), p. 77.
32. *Grosses Vollständiges Universal Lexicon Aller Wissenschaften und Künste* [etc.] (Leipzig & Halle: Johann Heinrich Zedler 1735), p. 1371.
33. Pierreville, *The Present State of Denmark*, p. 143.
34. Pierreville, *The Present State of Denmark*, p. 144; see also de la Croix & Dicelius, *Geographia Universalis*, p. 374.
35. Melissantes, *Cosmographia Novissima*, p. 963.
36. Richard Blome, *A Geographical Description of the Four Parts of the World: Taken from the Notes & Workes of the Famous Monsieur Sanson, Geographer of the French King, and Other Eminent Travellers and Authors* [etc.] (London: T.N. for R. Blome, 1670), p. 5.

37. 'The Country produceth so great a Quantity of sweet Grass that their Cattle would burst [...] if they did suffer them to eat it as they would'. John Augustine Bernard, *A Geographical Dictionary Representing the Present and Antient Names and States of all the Countries ... of the whole World* (London: C. Brome, 1695), p. 208.
38. See Ísleifsson, *Tvær eyjar á jaðrinum*.
39. See further Ísleifsson, *Tvær eyjar á jaðrinum*, pp. 81–153.
40. de la Croix & Dicelius, *Geographia Universalis*, p. 375; see also Herman Moll, *A System of Geography: or, a New & Accurate Description of the Earth* [etc.] (London: Timothy Childe, 1701), p. 347.
41. Saxo Grammaticus, *Saxos Danmarks historie*, transl. by Peter Zeeberg (Copenhagen: Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab, Gads Forlag, 2000), p. 15.
42. Paschoud, *Historico-Political Geography*, p. 190.
43. Robert Molesworth, *An Account of Denmark as It was in the Year 1692* (London: s.n., 1694), pp. 36–37.
44. On the matter see Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson, 'Icelandic National Images in the 19th and 20th Centuries', in *Images of the North, Histories, Identities, Ideas*, ed. by Sverrir Jakobsson (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), pp. 149–158.
45. Haraldur Sigurðsson, *Kortasaga Íslands frá öndverðu til loka 16. aldar* (Reykjavík: Menningarsjóður, 1971), pp. 225–228.
46. Capel, *Norden, Oder zu Wasser und Lande im Eise und Snee*, pp. 174–175.
47. Ísleifsson, *Tvær eyjar á jaðrinum*, pp. 143–146, 164–165, 239–242.
48. Ísleifsson, *Tvær eyjar á jaðrinum*, pp. 100–106.
49. Ísleifsson, *Tvær eyjar á jaðrinum*, p. 143.

## Summary:

### *Images of Iceland and Greenland in the Late Seventeenth and First Half of the Eighteenth Century*

This article considers external images of Iceland and Greenland from the latter part of the seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth century in terms of their perceived 'otherness' during that period. The main methodologies used are approaches derived from imagology, or image studies, and postcolonial studies. The principal sources used are published writings by Western European authors, mostly from Britain and Germany.

In essence, the most common discourse on Iceland and Greenland during the period in question reflects that of other marginal lands and territories under Western European influence. While images of these two countries did have their own characteristics because of their 'islandness', they were distinguished first and

foremost as being situated in the high north. We can call the qualities that were attributed to them *borealism*, a kind of orientalism or tropicality of the high north.

One of the dominant themes in the otherness of these two northern islands is what might be called 'primitive utopia'. The representation of Iceland and Greenland as paradise islands, even treasure islands, was also familiar. Negative and dystopian ideas were also common, in fact much more so for most of the period. By these accounts, the countries were described as uninhabitable because of the prevailing cold and wildness, and their crude barbarian inhabitants were depicted as being hardly distinguishable from animals. The same kind of dualism found in the narratives of the European Other in general was clearly an important factor in the process of the identity formation of these two islands.

*Keywords:* Borealism; dualism; dystopia; high north; islandness; utopia.