

## ***Monuments and folklore: Tracing lived traditions in an Icelandic village***

Words and images: Marian Reid for ROAM Magazine



*“They built this town on the herring, but they forgot to tell the herring.”*

Shortly before I arrived in North Iceland to live in the town of Skagaströnd for two months, almost everyone I knew in Australia asked me if I had read *Burial Rites* by Hannah Kent. It’s a remarkable novel set in a small town not far from Skagaströnd. Aside from its central plot, it’s a tale that evokes a very traditional farming life in a bleak and cold landscape during one of Iceland’s darkest periods.

I arrived in Skagaströnd to find blizzards, dramatic windswept coastlines and Icelandic horses peering out from under their shaggy manes, just as anyone who has read *Burial Rites* would imagine. But as for a traditional way of life – like most developed nations around the world – it has largely disappeared. Even so, as I settled into the slow rhythm of winter in northern Iceland, I became curious to learn what threads of tradition were still alive in this little town and the enduring landscapes around it.

The village of Skagaströnd sits on the on the bay of Húnaflói. From the harbour, across the bay, you can see the striking cliffs of the Westfjords rising from the Greenland Sea. Away from the sea, behind the cluster of town houses and farms, rises the flat-topped mountain of Spákonufell. Skagaströnd is a village that was founded on farming and, later, herring – a lucrative fish that disappeared from local waters in the 1940s. *“They built this town on the herring, but they forgot to tell the*

*herring,”* jokes local resident Ólafur Bernóðusson. There’s a dark side to his little joke, though. After enormous investment in Skagaströnd in the 1940s, the herring’s migration patterns changed and they left the local waters before the new fish factory was even finished. What remained was broken dreams and a town scattered with abandoned monuments – purpose-built fish factories that still shadow the harbour as reminders of what was meant to be.



## Salting fish and other tales

*"You have to get the fish without cutting the stomach. And we need cod, not haddock. Ask them for two cods. They usually haven't opened it."* I'm sitting with Ólafur Bernóðusson (Óli) in the Skagaströnd library among the town's historical book collection. From here, through the upstairs windows, we can see the harbour and the old herring factory, which is mostly empty these days. Óli is telling me how he makes salt fish: *"I would start by taking the head off. I cut it from the back, you know, along the spine. And I take out the bones in the back. The fish will stay as one this way. Then I wash it and squeeze out the blood. And then we salt it."*

Óli thinks he may be the only person left in Skagaströnd who salts their own fish. He's promised to show me if I buy some fresh cod, but during my last few weeks in Skagaströnd a blizzard hits, the fishing quotas are full and fishing boats rest quietly in the snow-covered harbour. No fish comes in for me to buy. So Óli just has to tell me about salting fish instead. *"The first idea for the Icelandic national flag was supposed to have three salted fish on it because it was so important for our exports. It was the only way before we had freezers – you either had to dry the fish or salt it."*

There's a two-storey skeleton building in Skagaströnd that used to be a busy fish-salting factory. It's where Óli got his first job when he was a boy, more than 50 years ago. *"It was complicated to salt the fish because you had to take the head out and the bone, then salt it for three to four days in liquid salt. Then you had to put it in dry salt. Then, in two weeks, you would take all the salt off and start again. Then we would pack it in hessian and send it off to Spain and Greece."*

The factory closed in the 1970s when a financial crash in Europe meant Greece and Spain stopped buying salt fish. With it, went the tradition of salted fish in Skagaströnd.

When I first arrived in Skagaströnd, the fishing boats were active. I'd see them heading out early in the morning, when the light was still cold blue – before the sun thawed the ice hanging from the gutter around my house. In the evening light, they'd return and unload their haul of cod, haddock, snapper and lung fish into colourful pallets.

These would then be trucked to another town, an hour away, for processing. If you went down to the harbour as the fish came in, the fisherfolk would sell you a fish right off the boat for just a few dollars – extras they couldn't count in their quota for the day.



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But by mid-April, the boats sat forlornly in the harbour because when the quotas are full and the weather is bad, it's just not worth going out. Their stillness was also indicative of the decline of fishing in little towns all around Iceland, where there are fewer boats, reduced fishing and less income for local fisherfolk.

Óli blames the quota system, which was introduced to stop over-fishing, but which has also changed the tradition of being a local fisherperson. *“The quota affects the fisherman badly. He feels like a pirate. Everyone thinks he has a quota so he is rich. But he is not a quota king. He is just a fisherman. He may be 76 years old and he has been doing this all this life, since he was 12. And then someone from up high comes down and says you can only fish this much, and so on. And he just has to make the most of it.”*

That evening, I go to the little supermarket in town to buy the only fish available – frozen cod fillets, probably shipped up from Reykjavik and caught on one of the big industrial fishing trawlers. The next morning, I go out for a wander in the snow, past the entrance point to the harbour and scramble down the rocks to the old fish-salting factory where Óli worked. Builders have been here recently and the skeleton building with its peeling paint and rusty salt-soaked walls is slowly being reimagined

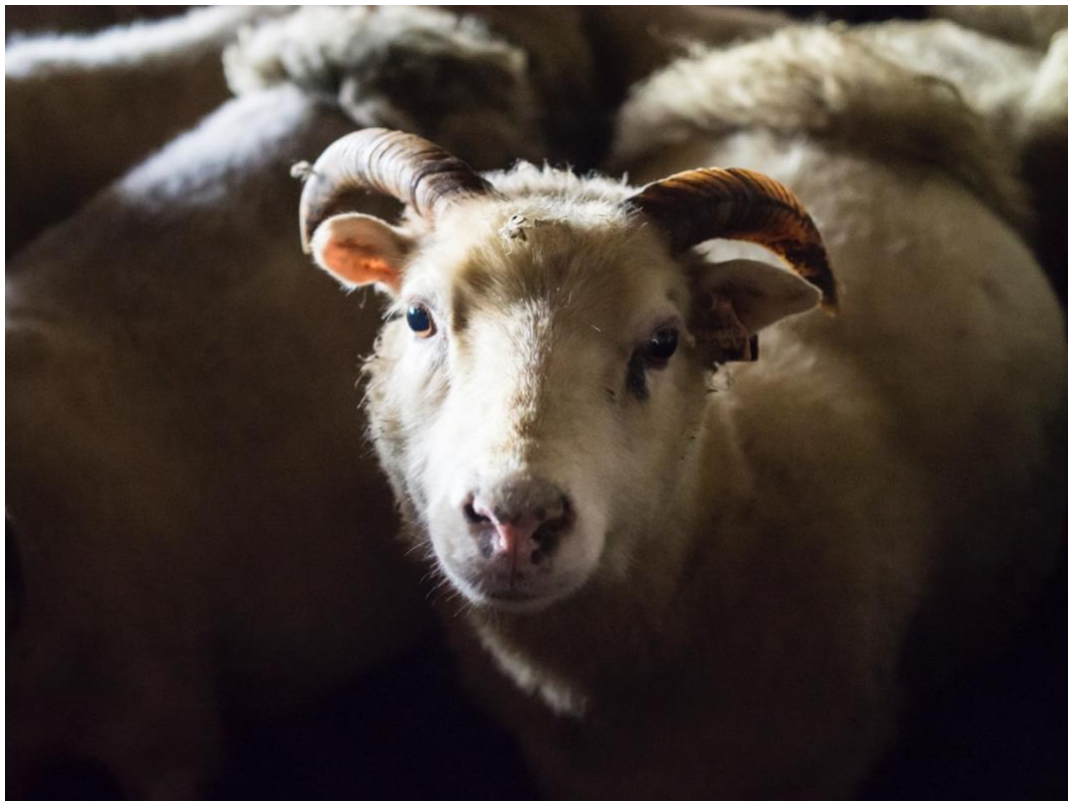


as a hotel for artists who visit the town. As I am poking around the discarded pallets and timber to one side, I come across some fish hanging to dry in an open shipping container. Tied with bright orange twine, the fish sway in the breeze to the rhythm of the drip of melting snow – tucked away in a quiet corner of the town where no-one comes much.



### **Re-weaving the old stories**

While the harbour in Skagaströnd is dominated by relics of the past, this entire region is built on much more than the story of the fish. And it's these stories that will resurface in the space left by fishing's decline. Not everyone outside Iceland realise, but the fishing industry came late to Iceland. This tiny nation was built on farming and wool. Everyone had sheep. The main export was weaving, and from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, knitting.



*"It was a huge identity for Iceland," says Ragnheiður Þórsdóttir (Ragga), a weaver and teacher at the Icelandic Textile Centre in the town of Blönduós, 20 minutes south of Skagastaðir. There are not so many weavers left now. Yet the weaving tradition holds many of the narratives of Iceland's past. "Everything in weaving is connected to stories. The patterns always have some meaning," says Ragga. "You would weave your life. What you wove is how you would spend your life."*

We are sitting among old wooden looms in the attic workshop of the textile centre. These are the very looms Ragga herself played under when she was a small child and her grandmother was a teacher at the centre, which was then a women's school. The way weaving and stories were intertwined can also be found in some old Icelandic poems, that were actually instructions for weaving. *"We used to teach the children through songs, and they could learn weaving through dancing because then people didn't write things down. Icelandic rhymes are full of textiles."*

Today, weaving in Iceland is hardly practiced – something Ragga thinks is damaging for future generations. But she also sees how people are becoming more nostalgic about the old times and interested in rediscovering old techniques: *"People have an idea that weaving is calming – that the act of weaving is your heartbeat heard in the 'click click click' of the loom."* Although weaving is something of a lost tradition, the act of creating with wool is far from lost in Iceland. It's been transferred, in a way, to the simple act of knitting, which is more portable and not expensive – even the smallest supermarkets sell wool because so many people knit.



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The stories told through weaving are still alive, though, because Icelanders are great storytellers. The Sagas – stories about Iceland's founding families – and folkloric tales are embedded in the national psyche. One of the popular beliefs lies in the existence of 'hidden people' or elves that live among the local people. Most will tell you they only half believe in them, but there is reluctance by many to completely discount the possibility.

In Skagaströnd, there is an uncanny link between the home of the hidden people and the decline of the herring fisheries on which this town had invested so much. In 1946, when they were building the new harbour, engineers blasted some rocks from the cliffs where it was said the 'hidden people' lived. Not long after, all the herring swam away from the local waters and never returned. It's a story I heard many times from different residents of Skagaströnd. *"Everyone knows this story," says Óli. "I don't even know where I heard it. Some people still say they can see the elves and the little people. I don't know. But I am not sure so I don't do anything wrong by them."*

Steindor Haroldsson, an elder in the town, spent his childhood playing among the hidden people in the cliffs of Skagaströnd. The cliffs are a grassy area leading down to the ocean – a peaceful place away from the main town that I visited almost daily to think. One grey afternoon, Steindor agrees to take me on a tour of the hidden people's city, a wander that weaves through windswept grassy mounds to the icy edges of the Greenland Sea. *"There are a lot of hidden people. I don't see them but I feel it,"* says Steiner, between puffs on his pipe. *"I was here as a child, running all over this. My grandma always said: 'It's OK, he is playing with the hidden kids.'"* He pauses for a few seconds, then continues. *"When people didn't have any light, something was happening in the dark. The belief in something you don't understand was very strong. Many things happened you couldn't explain."*

Steindor shows me the streets where the hidden people live. Wide avenues made of soft rocks that have been moulded by the ocean and wind. Carved shapes that serve as homes and churches and a town hall for the elves. He reveals a narrow inlet where the wail of an infant could be heard on certain nights. In Iceland, it was usual to leave unwanted babies exposed to the elements. Here, Steindor tells me, is where a poor servant once left her child, wrapped in rags. It's a sad but common story in the Icelandic Sagas.







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Skagaströnd has its very own Saga, too, about a powerful fortune-teller called Þórdís, who founded the town and who is said to have buried treasure on Spákonufell. Local storyteller Dagný Sigmarsdóttir has built a museum in the town to honour Þórdís and her story, in which lies a prophecy about finding the treasure. *"Only a woman can find the gold chest. She cannot be connected to Christianity. And she cannot have a name that is connected to God or Christ,"* says Dagný. *"This person should only have milk to drink from a horse her entire life. If we find someone who can fill these skills, she just has to walk up the mountain. Two ravens will appear, one will show her the way to the treasure, and other will show her the key."*

The museum tells the story of Þórdís by oral tradition – Dagný takes her visitors on a journey through the ages to a time of magic, spells and runes, for which Þórdís became famous. She was also the only woman who played a central role in the Sagas, which was significant for Dagný when she was growing up. *"In Icelandic Sagas, people had the vision of Þórdís like she was a witch and not a good person. But I never found this in the stories,"* she says. *"Maybe it was because she was a very strong person and she wanted women and men to be equal. At that time there was always a man in charge, so when there is a woman in charge, of course people try to minimise her."*





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Learning about fish, weaving, folklore and prophecy in the short time I am in Skagaströnd leaves me wanting to know more about what other surviving traditions lie beneath the surface in this little town, and how they’ve been adapted to modern times. But I only have time to trace one more. On one of the last days in Iceland, I take the dirt road that leads north out of Skagaströnd along the cliffs to the very tip of the Skagi Peninsula. This is where the most remote farms are. Many have been abandoned but some are still working.



I’ve come to see sheep, but the farm I visit looks out to a spattering of tiny islands on which live a colony of Eider ducks. She’s not expecting us but in the true Icelandic way, Helga Hofnum – a robust and delightful woman who owns the farm – invites us

for coffee in her kitchen. I learn these Eider ducks are the source of cosy eider duck feathers that were used to keep early Icelanders warm. Of course, they still do – but these days eider duck feathers are more likely to be exported to Europe and Japan to be made into expensive duvets and down jackets. From binoculars in Helga's kitchen I watch the lovely ducks nesting in little red houses Helga has built on their island to protect them and their valuable down from the elements. It looks like a tiny Icelandic village, replicated in miniature and set against a wide expanse of sea and sky – much like Skagaströnd looks really.

