

THE ICELANDIC CONNECTION: FREYJA AND THE MANITOBA WOMAN SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT*

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Freyja (qui signifie 'femme') fut le seul périodique publié au Canada pour le droit de vote pour les femmes. Produit par Margret Benedictsson et son mari Sigfus au Manitoba entre 1898 et 1910, le journal était "dédié aux droits politiques, économiques et sociaux pour les femmes." Dans cet article Mary Kinnear examine comment l'intérêt porté par les femmes islandaises aux questions féministes du début de siècle étaient transmises par les pages de Freyja.

Le journal souscrivait à une idéologie plus radicale que celle présentée à la même époque par les anglophones partisans du droit de vote pour les femmes. Bien que la direction de Benedictsson encouragea les Islandaises du Manitoba à appuyer les questions féministes, les liens de communication avec les partisans anglophones étaient très modestes – un manque de coopération attribué par les Islandaises à "l'ignorance ethnocentrique."

Freyja, which means "woman," has been described as "the only woman suffrage paper published in Canada."¹ It was produced by Margret Benedictsson and her husband Sigfus in Manitoba between 1898 and 1910. The title page described its purpose as "devoted to woman's political, economical and social rights."

This article is an outline of the interest of Icelandic women in turn-of-the-century feminist issues as reflected in *Freyja*. First, there is a brief examination of the place of the immigrant Icelandic community in Manitoba, with particular reference to the status of women within the settlement. The article then compares the feminist philosophy contained in *Freyja* with the feminism of the anglophone leaders of the Manitoba movement. Finally, an attempt is made to assess the impact of *Freyja* and of Icelandic women in the province on the Manitoba woman suffrage movement.

By 1898, Icelanders had been settled in the province for over twenty years. The community numbered approximately 6,000 people. The 1901 Census records 11,924 Scandinavians in the province,

composing 4.7% of the total Manitoba population, of which it is estimated that ½ were Icelanders.² Women were already accustomed to working in the churches' Ladies Aids groups, and additionally in local Women's Societies. These helped new immigrants and the poor of the community but, even in the early days, priority was accorded to education: two girls were given bursaries to study music. The Women's Society also organised traditional festivals, like the Midwinter celebration. A feature of the 1884 Midwinter festival was a speech on equal rights for men and women and a second speech, by a woman, on the cultural position of Icelandic women.³

The women's movement in Iceland was already underway in 1885. The newspaper *Fjallknönn*, Maid of the Mountains, carried the first article on woman suffrage to be written by a woman, Briet Bjarnhedinsdottir. Her ideas were later echoed in many respects by *Freyja*'s Benedictsson. Bjarnhedinsdottir stressed the importance of education, and parents' responsibility in seeing that daughters, as well as sons, were adequately prepared for economic independence and for independence of mind. She alluded to the prominent part played by women in the ancient sagas, and encouraged modern women not to be disheartened by contemporary opponents of progress. In 1895 she founded *Kvennabladid*, The Women's Paper, and later in 1907 became first president of the Iceland Society for the Emancipation of Women.⁴ Over the years she corresponded with the editor of *Freyja*.

Margret Benedictsson emigrated from Iceland as a single woman, arriving in 1893 in Winnipeg after spending some time in the North Dakota Icelandic community. She took advantage of a newly-offered course in shorthand, typing and book-keeping, and soon married. She and her husband Sigfus operated a printing and publishing business, at first in Selkirk and subsequently in Winnipeg. In 1910 she left Sigfus and with her three children went to live in Blaine, Washington.⁵ Her im-

portance in Manitoba derives from her editing, printing and publishing of *Freyja*, 1898-1910. The magazine served a responsive audience.

In general, Canadian Icelanders supported women's emancipation. As with the anglophone women's movement, there was a strong connection with temperance. Helen E. Gregory, in a series of newspaper articles written for the *Toronto Globe* in 1890, noted that "last spring their temperance society held a picnic and debate and the subject chosen for discussion was Equal Rights."⁶ The main organisational impetus for Icelandic suffrage organisations came from Benedictsson. After 1905 she encouraged the Icelandic Ladies Aids groups to incorporate woman suffrage into their aims. She was gratified by an editorial statement in 1907 from *Logberg*, one of the two main Icelandic language newspapers in Winnipeg, in sympathy for woman suffrage. Benedictsson announced in 1908 the formation of the "first Icelandic Suffrage Association of America," in Winnipeg, with herself as president. She then joined this organisation to the Canada Suffrage Association, and thereby also the International Woman Suffrage Alliance. In November 1908 an Icelandic women's group devoted exclusively to woman suffrage was founded in the small rural community of Argyle; the following year others were founded. These separate organisations each sent petitions to the Manitoba legislature in 1910 and a joint petition was sent in 1912. The bill giving women the vote was introduced into the Legislature in January 1916 by the province's Solicitor-General and acting Premier T.H. Johnson, himself the son of an Icelandic suffragist.⁷

Freyja's own aims were described in the first issue:

Matters pertaining to the progress and rights of women will always be our first and foremost concern. Freyja will support prohibition and anything that leads to the betterment of social conditions.⁷

For twelve years Benedictsson issued the



Icelandic Pioneer Women, 1891

Credit: Photo by Baldwin & Blondal. Courtesy of Manitoba Archives

monthly magazine. About a quarter of its thirty or forty pages (the issues varied in length) was taken up by advertisements, both in Icelandic and English. Up to half the text was taken up with poetry and a Children's Corner. Articles signed by pennames ("Baldur," "Lucifer") appeared, but most articles were either written by Benedictsson or Sigfus, or were translated by then from the writings of American feminists. Most articles were directly related to "the progress and rights of women."

In this *Freyja* took a distinctively radical line. With regard to women living in poverty, *Freyja* argued that the state should be involved in social welfare. At the same time, attention was drawn to the bind of the married woman who had no choice but to bear children, without the independent economic means of supporting them. Divorce was a topic of particular interest to *Freyja*. "A philosophical divorce" in 1900 described the onset of incompatibility in a marriage: "we have decided to separate without bothering the Court of Justice. . . We each go our own way as each member does when a Society is dissolved for some good reason and depart as friends." A couple of years later Sigfus painted a more bitter picture of a couple forced to live together: ". . . he to undertake to support her forever, no matter how loathsome she became, she to give him all authority over her freedom in

both a physical and spiritual meaning." *Freyja* in a subsequent issue disputed Sigfus' view of married women as dependents. Marriage was like a company, with two departments, "the domestic and the provision departments. Both are of equal worth to the company."⁹

Freyja recognised that most of the reading audience, Icelandic women, were actively involved in local community work. In an early article Benedictsson offered her view of an ideal Ladies Aid Society, less an institution of a charitable nature, and more of an insurance society. Her model was the North American Independent Order of Foresters, Women's Branch, which offered its members life and health insurance.⁹

While never disowning a woman's role as wife and mother, Benedictsson wished to see the woman in the family recognised as an equal partner, as in a business concern. But there was no doubt that she wished to see woman's role expand out of the family and into public life. She was interested in more than new opportunities for professional and bourgeois women. Benedictsson also emphasized the need to improve conditions for working class women.

In 1901 *Freyja* printed reports on a society establishing rules regarding work and wages for domestic servants, "working women," in Chicago: "Domestics should be given time off on Mon-

days. . . The householder should have no right to hinder the social life of the domestics. They should be allowed visitors in their time off."¹¹

In support of a more public life for women, *Freyja* articles utilised philosophical arguments based on justice and historical example, contained uplifting biographies of non-traditional women, and reported the activities of women's rights organisations, both locally and in the United States and Europe. At a time of local elections, a thundering editorial used the text "Taxation without Representation is Tyranny" in an effort to inspire women readers to use "a weapon that is sharper than all others" – love – in order to influence men in voting for candidates supporting equal rights for women.¹² Benedictsson's view was that justice and freedom applied with equal force for men and women. She was not anxious to maintain or encourage a retreat onto the pedestal. In one revealing piece written in 1904, she identified her personal struggle for independence with that of nineteenth-century countries struggling for freedom. As a young girl she had read about the Iceland patriot Jon Sigurdsson. He campaigned for responsible government and, in 1874, Iceland was granted independence in domestic affairs from Denmark. She was inspired by his yearning for liberty: "Angry and distressed I read the laments of oppressed persons, unhappily married women, and the misfortunes of young girls. And it is this evil that aroused in me. . . a yearning to break down all the fetters that tie people to evil and distress."¹³

Benedictsson's inspiration was different from that of Manitoba "mainliners," so was her religion, and her ethnic background. As Carol Bacchi has pointed out, most of the leaders of the Canadian women's movement were Methodist or Presbyterian, with few from Anglican or other denominations; they were middle class; either British immigrants themselves or daughters of Ontario British; housewives, although there were journalists and a few professional women among them; and most subscribed to the prevalent ideology of "maternal feminism."¹⁴

Benedictsson shared one passion with the Manitoba suffragists – a belief in temperance. But her views on divorce, pacifism, and the need for women to be in all aspects of public life were generally more outspoken than theirs. They were inclined to appeal to the argument of bringing

women's moral superiority out of the kitchen and into the legislature.¹⁵ She invoked the ideal of equality rather than superiority. However, they all recognised the desirability of co-operation amongst women committed to social change. Was there joint activity between the groups she had done so much to establish and the English-speaking Manitoba suffragists?

Occasionally there was. In 1902 the Icelandic Women's Christian Temperance Union (W.C.T.U.) co-operated with the Winnipeg W.C.T.U. in presenting a woman suffrage petition to the Legislature. In 1911 the Winnipeg Women's Labour League met with the First Icelandic Suffrage Association in America in the Winnipeg Trades Hall to discuss whether it was appropriate to present another petition to the Legislature: they decided not to. In 1914 the Icelandic suffrage association accepted the Manitoba Political Equality League's invitation to join in a meeting with Premier Roblin. Again in 1915 the Association joined the League in a delegation to the Premier. Later that year, after the Liberal election victory, Icelandic groups circulated petitions for woman suffrage along with the English-speaking suffragists in order to present evidence of support to the new Premier Norris.¹⁶ Most of the time, however, little effort was taken by the mainliners to bring about effective communication or co-operation. As early as 1893 one of the Icelandic newspapers related a circumstance which set a rather unhappy scene.

In February 1893 Benediktsson, newly arrived in Winnipeg, lectured on women's rights to Manitoba Icelanders. This coincided with the preparations of the Winnipeg W.C.T.U. to stage a Mock Parliament on the subject of equal rights for women. The Icelandic weekly newspaper, *Heimskringla*, reported the efforts of the "English-speaking ladies of Winnipeg" to get a petition and publicity for the cause of woman suffrage:

These highly esteemed ladies have considered it below their dignity to seek the co-operation of the Icelandic nationality here in this matter. . . These English ladies no doubt expect little appreciation of a matter like this from a foreign nationality which has come hither from a remote and poor country. . . They do not expect any help from us.

The newspaper went on to describe women's municipal voting rights and educational privileges in Iceland, and



Margret Benediktsson and family, c. 1905

Credit: Western Canada Pictorial Index

pointed out that if the English speaking women were less stand-offish they could "learn a little lesson from us in some matters" and could get the support of Manitoba Icelanders in the struggle for legal recognition of women's natural rights.¹⁷

Twenty-two years later, at the time of their 1915 convention, the Manitoba Political Equality League did go so far as to solicit support by placing a notice in the Icelandic newspaper:

The League particularly desires that Icelandic women attend and address the convention; it would be appropriate because it was an Icelandic woman who first established an association of this nature among her compatriots, although it is no longer in existence.

Members of the First Icelandic Suffrage Association in America were affronted to learn that their organisation was considered dead.¹⁸

The conclusion must be that the Manitoba Icelandic women, along with their leader Margret Benediktsson and her magazine *Freyja*, had a minimal effect on the mainstream Manitoba woman suffrage movement. Examination of *Freyja*, however, serves to remind us both of the

vitality of the feminism within Manitoba's Icelandic community and of the ideological diversity in the early Canadian women's movement – a diversity which deserves fuller exploration.

¹W. Kristjanson, *The Icelandic People in Manitoba* (Winnipeg, 1965), p. 373; Catherine Cleverdon, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada* (Toronto, 1950; 1974), pp. 49, 53; Carol Lee Bacchi, *Liberation Deferred? The Ideas of the English-Canadian Suffragists, 1877-1918* (Toronto, 1983), p. 28.

²Table A-15, Ethnic Origin of the Population of Manitoba: 1881-1961, *Report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism*, Book IV (Ottawa, 1969), p. 259; Roy H. Ruth, *Educational Echoes* (Winnipeg, 1964), p. 113.

³*Report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism*, Book IV (Ottawa, 1969), p. 259; Laura Goodman Salverson, *Confessions of an Immigrant's Daughter* (Toronto, 1939); Kristjanson, *Icelandic People in Manitoba*, pp. 177, 194.

⁴*Fjallkonan* (5 June 1885).

⁵*Freyja* (1899), II, 34-35; *Heimskringla* (17 August 1911).

⁶Helen E. Gregory, "Icelanders in

Manitoba," [Toronto] *Globe* (4 October 1890).

⁷*Freyja* (1909), VII, 291; (1907), IX, 294; (1908), X, 6-7, 181; (1909), XI, 157; *Manitoba: Journals*, 1910, 14, 22, 79, 91; *Journals*, 1912, 13, 22; Edith F. Hurwitz, "The International Sisterhood," Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz, eds., *Becoming Visible: Women in European History* (Boston, 1977), pp. 325-345.

⁸*Freyja* (1898), I, 4.

⁹*Freyja* (1903), VI, 44-7; (1901), III, 99-100; (1905), VIII, 31-2, 75; (1907), IX, 240.

¹⁰*Freyja* (1898), I, 20; Veronica Strong-Boag, *The Parliament of Women* (Ottawa, 1976), p. 102.

¹¹*Freyja* (1901), IV, 176-7.

¹²*Freyja* (1907), IX, 245-9; (1899), II, 41-2; (1904), VII, 133-7; (1906), VIII, 205-8; 217-8; (1907), IX, 221-4; (1910), XII, 243-5; (1903), V, 209-210.

¹³*Freyja* (1904), VII, 41-3.

¹⁴Bacchi, *Liberation Deferred?*, viii, p. 149; Deborah Gorham, "The Canadian Suffragists," in Gwen Matheson, ed., *Women in the Canadian Mosaic* (1976), p. 30.

¹⁵Strong-Boag, *Parliament of Women*, pp. 104-6, 134-5, 183.

¹⁶*Freyja* (1902), IV, 5-6; *Heimskringla* (2 August 1911), 4 March 1914, 25 February 1915.

¹⁷*Heimskringla* (1 February 1893).

¹⁸*Heimskringla* (11 February 1915), 4 March 1915.

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NEGATIVE

one hat (off my
head) and this cat (I am this
cat) was this rabbit

you have achieved your great escape from
my scrutiny, and
now watch

your heart will call out for a truce

wait! said the cat to the rabbit
do not disappear on me again
a long time ago, yes-
terday, I was not only looking, but you
were my long lost friend

now
this cat is pausing over the rabbit
who is unable to move
from the moment
like us

in this
the cat is telling the rabbit
that his alone, his
moments will always cost

if you dislike
to pause over
an animal who is paralyzed
believing moments of fear
should be brought to an end

this
is a photograph in skin
of the cat and the rabbit
(my picture in kodachrome) who

knows where I stand?

Bonnie Levy
Toronto, Ontario