



ICELANDIC FOLKLORE AND THE CULTURAL MEMORY OF RELIGIOUS CHANGE

by
ERIC SHANE BRYAN

ARC HUMANITIES PRESS



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We have all forgotten our names.

—G. K. Chesterton



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PREFACE

THERE IS SOMETHING inherently offensive about the study of folklore. Inevitably, the student of folklore becomes either an imposter, an opportunist, or (most often) both, because they presume to project objectivity upon something that was never meant to be objectified. The search for such objectivity, further, is an endeavour doomed from the start. Folk stories, as one part of folklore, can never be objectified in the way the student would hope; the folk story is the action being done, not an object upon which something is done. Once it becomes the object, it ceases to be folklore. Scholars normally call this kind of agency performance, yet when it is objectified, the performance must be torn from both the performers of the action—the storytellers, the singers, the dancers, the actors—and the recipients of the action—the hearers, the audience, the cultural life in which the folklore acts. Nor is it enough for the student of folklore to remain quiet and still and allow the story to speak for itself, without interruption or analytical lens, because it is not possible to hear or read any story without also becoming a participant in it. The human mind will always participate in the story being told. This much, at least, we know for sure. The best the student of folklore can hope for, perhaps, is to participate in a specific way: by telling the story ... and then by telling the story of the story. This volume represents an effort to participate thus in five of the greatest stories ever told in the northern world.

This book attempts to understand the origins and development of religious belief in Iceland and greater Scandinavia through the lenses of five carefully selected Icelandic folktales collected in Iceland during the nineteenth century. Each of these five stories has a story of its own: a historical and cultural context, a literary legacy, influences from beliefs of all kinds (orthodox and heterodox, elite or lay), and modalities (oral or written) by which the story was told. These factors leave an imprint—sometimes discernable, sometimes not—upon the story, and when that imprint is readable, the legacies and influences upon these stories come alive to illuminate a tapestry of cultural memory (that is, a society's perception of itself, its past, and its prospects for the future) and cultural development that might otherwise be hidden from the reader's eyes. So much is the aim of this book: to tell the story of five great stories.

It remains only to be added that I hope any of the offences that inevitably accompany a study of folklore will here be forgiven by virtue of the deep appreciation and wonder I hold for these (and all) Icelandic folktales, and for the people and the land from which they come.

Eric Shane Bryan
Saint Louis, Missouri
February 14, 2020

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