

Sölvi Helgason, 1820–1895

Sölvi Helgason was born in Skagafjörður, north Iceland, in 1820, to Helgi Guðmundsson and his wife Ingiríður Gísladóttir. Sölvi's father died when he was only three, and his mother remarried. The family lived in poverty, and at the age of eight Sölvi was placed in another home. When he was 11 he was placed in the home of the Rev. Ólafur Hjaltason Thorberg at Hvanneyri in Siglufjörður, where he learned to read and write, and had access to the pastor's library. Sölvi's mother died when he was 14. One of his last homes, around the age of 20, was in the household of Bjarni Thorarensen, regional governor and poet, at Möðruvellir in Hörgárdalur. After that Sölvi embarked on a life of vagabondage, and often found himself at odds with the authorities and others.

At that time, when landless people were compelled to servitude on farms under yearly contracts, certain individuals refused to comply and lived on the edge. A vagabond had to rely upon the hospitality of rural communities, which upheld the virtue of providing shelter and food to travellers. Vagabonds were active participants in the community, repaying hospitality by entertaining their hosts, passing on news from neighbouring communities, and performing various chores – often dirty or unpleasant ones.

Sölvi was an eccentric. He would boast of his own talents and virtues, and was sometimes regarded as a difficult character, though he appears to have become less prickly as he grew older. He won renown in his own time for his unique personality, and for his travels all over the country. He was artistic, writing and drawing with pencil or pen and colouring his works. He would sometimes repay his hosts with a picture.

On his travels in Húnavatnssýsla in the north, Sölvi got to know Júlíana Sveinbjörnsdóttir. Like him, she had grown up in harsh circumstances. She was disabled, and lived as a pauper. They fell in love and Júlíanna joined him on his travels. In 1867 they had a daughter, Stefanía Kristín Sölvadóttir, who emigrated to Canada in 1899.

Sölvi carried his artworks and art supplies on his back in a coffer which also served as his drawing-board. Sölvi died in 1895 at the age of 75, after an eventful life. By then he had become a living legend, better known to some of his contemporaries than many prominent Icelanders.

Bonded servitude

Sölvi was born in the era of bonded servitude (*vistarbandið*): in the old agrarian society, landless peasants were compelled to work on farms under yearly contracts, with no freedom of movement. Some people were able to find casual work, but their lives were more precarious. Such bonded servitude was also practised elsewhere, e.g. in Denmark. Many farm workers were able to gain their freedom when they married and attained access to land to farm, but a certain number lived all their lives in such servitude. In 1783 casual employment was formally prohibited, though people found ways around the rules. In 1863 casual employment was legalised once more.

People in bonded servitude, or casually employed, were generally aged around 15 to 25. Most people married at the age of 25-30 and were able to start farming on their own account. So bonded servitude was mainly confined to young people. In the 19th century about 25% of the Icelandic population lived in bonded servitude, or were in casual employment.

There were always certain individuals who did not fit into the social framework, for one reason or another. Some enjoyed support from family members, while others embarked on a vagabond life. In a sense, permitting vagabondage could be positive, spreading the burden of supporting the individual. But official attitudes varied, and authorities sometimes intervened.

Available crime data for the latter half of the 19th century show that most of those who were sentenced to imprisonment were unmarried men aged 20-30 who were bonded labourers. An average of four people were sentenced to imprisonment each year: three men and one woman. The vast majority had been prosecuted for theft. Many tales of vagabonds were told. They do not only recount stories of eccentric individuals: they also tell us about social attitudes, marginalisation, tradition and solidarity, power and violence. Perceptions of vagabonds grew less judgemental in the course of the 20th century, as people encountered fewer such outsiders, and society came to make better provision for “misfits.”