

**The Complete Sagas of Icelanders:
Including 49 Tales**

Viðar Hreinsson (editor)

translated from the Old Icelandic

Leifur Eiriksson 1997

A book review by [Danny Yee](http://dannyreviews.com/) © 2001 <http://dannyreviews.com/>

Beginning in the 9th century, settlers from Norway created in Iceland a society of fiercely independent farmers, fishermen, and traders; in the 13th and 14th centuries their descendants wrote a whole series of stories about them. These family sagas tell of feuds, duels and battles, legal conflicts, love affairs, travels and raids to Norway and the British Isles and further afield, and the attempted settlement of Vinland. *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* is the first complete coordinated translation of these into English, containing all forty family sagas and fifty shorter tales.

The focus of the sagas is always on individuals and their relationships. They offer us strong men and outlaws, legal experts and tricksters, poets and warriors serving Norwegian kings, respected leaders and arbitrators — and powerful matriarchs, faithful wives, and trouble-stirring women. The saga writers never venture directly into the minds of their protagonists, but they produce vivid, distinctive portraits of individuals caught up in memorable events: Egil, imprisoned in York by King Eirik Bloodaxe, with one night to compose a poem to save his life; the final ridge-top stand of the outlawed Gisli; Askel working for peace, to the point of trying to arrange in advance the settlement for his own death; Kormak's life-long obsession with Steingerd; Gunnar turning back from going into exile, moved by the beauty of the landscape; the imperious Gudrun, revealing at the end of her life which of her men she had loved the most; the burning of Njal and his family and the protracted legal and armed struggle to avenge them; and many others.

The sagas draw on local family stories, older myths and legends, and the broader body of medieval literature, along with a good deal of invention and original creation. While some are awkwardly structured, others rework their sources in sophisticated ways and some are literary masterpieces. In

some, unity is provided by a biographical focus, sometimes ending with a peaceful death at the end of a long life, sometimes building with tragic inevitability to a climactic killing and the resulting resolution. Others are almost political studies, tracing the shifting balance of power between leading figures in a particular region. And while this genre of sagas is defined by a realistic treatment of early Iceland, many are (or incorporate) comic stories, fantastic tales, and romances.

In their attention to the actions of individuals within social networks, and the working through of their consequences, the Icelandic sagas are important precursors of the modern novel. They directly influenced many writers, among them Walter Scott and J.R.R. Tolkien. The sagas are also a valuable source of information about [medieval Iceland](#), a subject of interest to more than medievalists. One of its notable features is that it had a sophisticated legal system but no executive government, which makes it a magnet for political theorists — if you search the web for information on medieval Iceland, you'll find a running fight between the libertarians and anarchists over who can best claim it as an *exemplum*.

Some aspects of the sagas do take a little getting used to. They are episodic, sometimes covering events over several generations and jumping across decades to continue the story of a feud or the history of a region, and they alternate between periods of tension and relaxation. Characters are often introduced with a paragraph or two of genealogical information unrelated to the main story; and the sheer density of names, often shared by several characters, can be confusing. And obviously much of the cultural context is foreign to the modern reader. Elements of foretelling and prophecy, for example, are nearly ubiquitous in the sagas, though they never replace human actions and decisions as explanations of events. One soon becomes accustomed to these things, however, and overall the sagas are among the most accessible of medieval genres.

Unless your library has a copy or will obtain one for you, *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* is probably not practical for a newcomer to the sagas; cheap paperback editions of any of the better known ones should be easy to come by. But if you become seriously interested in the sagas — and I

should warn you that they are addictive — then it's hard to go past *The Complete Sagas*.

Firstly, the translations are good. My academic friends assure me they are mostly of high quality, accurate enough to be usable for scholarly purposes. More importantly for the lay reader, they are lively and readable, avoiding inappropriate archaism or colloquialism. The sagas are each preceded by a brief note on when they were written and their manuscript sources, but otherwise they are clean, mostly unburdened by unnecessary commentary or annotation. The only regular exceptions to this are marginal glosses for the "kennings", highly figurative stock phrases in the poetry embedded in some of the sagas, and some explanatory notes where texts are partial or put together from different sources.

For readers who do want some background information, *The Complete Sagas* has a really good general introduction, a glossary of terms which are likely to be unfamiliar, some maps, and an index of characters. A minor complaint here is that the maps could show more detail and that they are all at the end of volume five, instead of in the appropriate volumes — and the index of characters is useful enough that it could almost have been repeated in each volume.

Perhaps most importantly, this is the only uniform, coordinated translation of the family sagas available. Collecting alternative translations of them all would be a lot of work, if it is even possible, and the result would not offer as coherent a presentation of the genre. Places, characters and events often feature in several sagas, and motifs, stock phrases and thematic elements recur; a uniform translation scheme makes these connections easier to follow. On the other hand, the sagas do vary in style, mood, and structure, and this too is easier to appreciate when not obscured by variations in translation approach.

Finally, *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* is beautifully produced. The leatherbound volumes find an elegant balance between attractiveness and austerity, and are of a size, shape and heft that makes reading them a pleasure (unlike some "great books" editions which are obviously designed to look impressive on shelves rather than to be read).

One minor caveat is that the title *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, while technically accurate, may mislead some: all the sagas about early Iceland (the "family sagas") are indeed included, but not any of the "fantasy" sagas such as the *Saga of the Volsungs* (based on older legends) or "romances" (based on continental models) from the same period. We will just have to hope that Leifur Eiriksson Publishing takes on the translation of those as a future project. A paperback edition would obviously make *The Complete Sagas* much more accessible; barring that, it would be nice if the volumes were available separately, so people could collect the set over a period of time.

Note: Penguin has published a one volume paperback *The Sagas of Icelanders*, with a selection from *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*.

December 2001

External links:

- buy from Amazon.com or Amazon.co.uk
- buy *The Sagas of Icelanders* from Amazon.com, Amazon.co.uk or Amazon.ca
- details at Leifur Eiriksson

Related reviews:

- books about [Iceland + Icelandic history](#)
- more [Icelandic literature](#)
- more [medieval literature](#)
- other ["best book" selections](#)

%T The Complete Sagas of Icelanders
%S Including 49 Tales
%E Hreinsson, Viðar
%M Old Icelandic
%I Leifur Eiriksson
%D 1997
%O five volumes, hardcover, glossary, indices
%G ISBN 9979929308
%P 402, 466, 472, 472, 448pp

[Subjects](#) | [Titles](#) | [Authors](#) | [Best Books](#) | [Search](#) | [Latest Book Reviews by Danny Yee](#)