

Navigating Iceland in the Nineteenth Century

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You must be provided with a compass and Gunnlangsson's [sic] map, then you can find your way as well as without a guide. The map can be obtained at Reykjavík for 16s.; from Messrs. Williams and Norgate, Henrietta Street, Covent Garden, for 30s.; or from Mr. Stanford, Charing Cross, for 2l. 12s.

Sabine Baring-Gould *Iceland. Its Scenes and Sagas*¹

Such was the advice that Sabine Baring-Gould (1834–1924), who visited Iceland in the summer of 1862, passed on in his travel account to readers planning an Icelandic adventure of their own.² Baring-Gould spent two summer months travelling around Iceland on horseback as part of a small party. The group (which included Icelandic guides) set off from Reykjavík and headed for the north of the island, visiting Þingvellir (the site of the ancient parliament, founded in 930 AD) before crossing part of the central Highlands. On reaching Vatnsdalur in the north, they travelled east, then looped back to the west, ending at Geysir where they camped for several days before returning to Reykjavík and catching the steamer *Arcturus* back to Liverpool.

The map recommended by Baring-Gould was a relatively new one, published in Copenhagen by Olaf Nikolas Olsen for the Icelandic Literary Society (*Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag*) in the 1840s (it is dated 1844 but does not seem to have been completed before 1848) on the basis of surveying undertaken by Björn Gunnlaugsson between 1831 and 1843.³ It was an enormous advance on previous maps, but it nonetheless had gaps. Baring-Gould claims, in his account, to be the first foreign visitor to Iceland to get to the mighty Dettifoss waterfall in the north-east – but this was the fortunate result of hearing about it by chance, since this magnificent sight was ‘unknown to the compilers of the great map of Iceland’ and not marked on it.⁴

Gunnlaugsson's map was also misleading in certain ways. Baring-Gould's expectations of what the trading-post of Borðeyri in Hrótafjörður in the north had to offer, for example, were confounded by the reality of what he actually encountered:

On the map of Iceland, Bortheyri is marked in large type, as though it were a capital town, and I had expected to find that it consisted of at least half a dozen cottages, not of a wooden shed only, which is locked up all the year round, except during the fortnight in the summer when the merchant ships lie off it.⁵

Journeying across the Arnarvatnsheiði region (a lake-studded heath that forms part of the western part of the uninhabited central highlands) also brought to light inaccuracies and lack of detail in the representation of that area. Old routes across the heath link the north-west and west of Iceland. Journeys across it, and the utilisation of its rich natural resources, are attested in medieval sources such as the Sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*).⁶ But in the nineteenth century, navigating it presented challenges – certainly for foreigners – and according to Baring-Gould, no one except the farmer at Kalmannstunga (a farm on the western edge of the heath) ‘knew the way thither through the labyrinth of lakes.’⁷

This farmer was employed to escort Baring-Gould’s party over the heath but riding on ahead, Baring-Gould and a companion lost their way. ‘The great map of Gunnlaugsson was at fault,’ Baring-Gould notes,

the Fiskivötn (fish lakes) were marked on it evidently somewhat at haphazard, and incorrectly. The river traced on the map as connecting the lakes nowhere exists, but the tarns lie land-locked in every dell and hollow of the heithi, surrounded by stony bare hills. Little Arnarvatn is not named on the map, so the compass was unavailing, we knew not the direction in which to steer.⁸

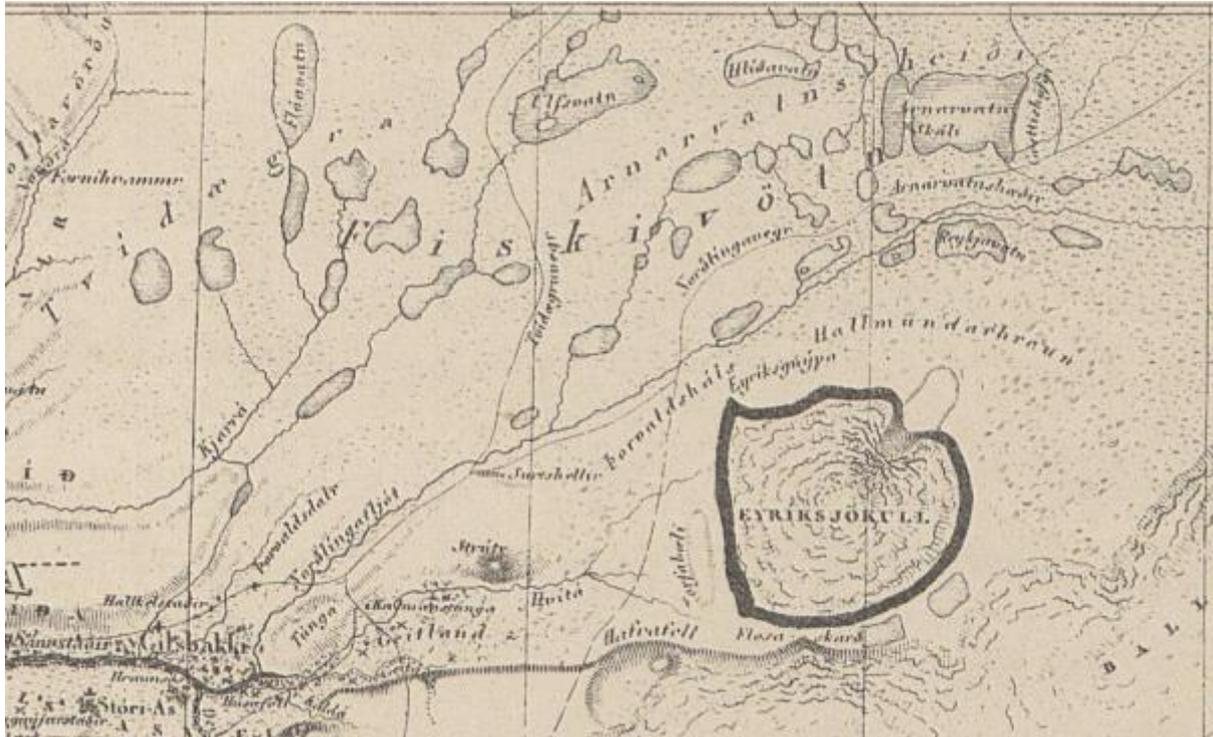
Retracing their path, they found the farmer and others in their party, however, and continued. After camping by ‘Little Arnarvatn’ (Arnarvatn litla) they headed on to ‘Big Arnarvatn’ (Arnarvatn stóra).

If Baring-Gould had the four-sheet version of Björn Gunnlaugsson’s map with him (at a scale of 1:480,000) rather than the single-sheet version (at 1:960,000⁹), the place-name Grettishöfði (Grettir’s bluff), which is inscribed along the eastern edge of lake, would not have escaped his attention. It commemorates the outlaw-hero Grettir Ásmundarson, born in the late-tenth century, and the protagonist of *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, which was probably written in the fourteenth century. Grettir is said to have hid out by the Arnarvatn lake for three years at the beginning of his nineteen-year-long period of outlawry.

Throughout his travel account, Baring-Gould’s commentary is coloured and shaped by his various interests – birds, wildflowers, folklore, music – but most prominent of all is his passion for the Icelandic sagas. The sagas were the principal reason for Baring-Gould’s visit to Iceland. As he states in his Preface, the Icelandic expedition had the twofold aim of ‘examining scenes famous in Saga, and filling a portfolio with water-colour sketches.’¹⁰

At Arnarvatn, Baring-Gould notes how Grettir ‘twice had he there to do battle for his life against hired assassins, and yonder is a cleft in which he and his brave friend Hallmund defended themselves against fearful odds.’¹¹ The remote site is, in Baring-Gould’s opinion, ‘The most desolate spot imaginable ... Poor Grettir! A sad place of exile indeed!’ There is a great contrast with Baring-Gould’s idyllic impression of the farm of Bjarg, in north Iceland, where Grettir is said to have been born. On reaching Bjarg, Baring-Gould exclaims with excitement:

Here is Bjarg! This little farm with its red gables and grass-grown roof, and its green *tún* in a dell of buttercups! I stood on the rocky platform in front of the house to survey the landscape over which Grettir's eyes must have roamed so often.¹²



Arnarvatnsheiði. Detail from sheet no. 1 (Suðvestr – fjórðúgr) of Björn Gunnlaugsson's *Uppdráttir Íslands* (1844–48).

The sagas played a crucial role in constructing Icelanders' and foreigners' perceptions of Icelandic landscape in past centuries – and they do so, still. Before cartographic maps of the country were produced, one function that the sagas fulfilled (together with other texts such as *Landnámabók*, 'The Book of Settlements', and local folktales), was to aid navigation, both physically and emotionally. The narratives are keyed into place-names and landmarks all around the country and are part of the land's geo-cultural stratigraphy.¹³ Before travelling to Iceland, Baring-Gould had worked at translating some of the sagas – *Grettis saga* included – from the Old Norse and once in Iceland, he had the opportunity to retell episodes from the sagas to his enthusiastic travelling companions *in situ*.¹⁴ Places at which the party stopped, and the landscapes they passed through, were thus animated. These serialised retellings subsequently formed a core part of the written-up travel account. *Grettis saga* features more than any other saga in this respect, and seems to have been Baring-Gould's particular favourite. Björn Gunnlaugsson's map aside, the sagas were instrumental in Baring-Gould's (and his companions') navigation of the country. Where topographical detail was lacking on the map, Baring-Gould filled in the gaps with saga narrative, while threading through the physical stages of the very stories being shared, and in doing so, adding to the story-map of the 'wildly beautiful island' to which he 'had learned to feel a very strong attachment.'¹⁵

ENDNOTES

¹ Baring-Gould, Sabine (2007) *Iceland. Its Scenes and Sagas*, p. 393. The book was first published in 1863. Digital images of Björn Gunnlaugsson's map are online at <http://islandskort.is/is/category/list/8>.

² On Baring-Gould, see Colloms, B. (2004) 'Gould, Sabine Baring - (1834–1924)' and references there. In H. C. G. Matthew and B. Harrison (eds) *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 23, pp. 78-80. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Online edition at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/30587>, accessed 3 August 2017. On Iceland as a tourist destination in the nineteenth century, see Wawn, A. (2000) *The Vikings and the Victorians: Inventing the Old North in Nineteenth-century Britain* Cambridge: Brewer.

³ The full title of the map, issued first in four sheets, was *Uppdráttir Íslands, gjörðr að fyrirsögn Ólafs Nikolas Olsens eptir landmælingum Bjarnar Gunnlaugssonar, er styðjast við prihyrningamál og strandamælingar þær, sem hið konúngliga Rentukammer hefir látið gjöra og reiknað hefir Hans Jakob Scheel: Gefin út af Enu Íslenzka bókmenntafélagi. Reykjavík og Kaupmannahöfn. 1844*. See Haraldur Sigurðsson (1978) *Kortasaga Íslands frá lokum 16. aldar til 1848*, pp. 241–61, with English summary at pp. 269–70. Interestingly, Iceland by the 1860s had become such a popular destination for northern adventures that several publishers in London and Edinburgh issued editions of Björn Gunnlaugsson's map for British travellers. These have titles and legends in English (locations of glaciers, hot springs and volcanoes were of particular interest to tourists), longitude reckoned from Greenwich rather than Copenhagen in some cases, and English miles added as a map scale.

⁴ Baring-Gould, p. 212.

⁵ Baring-Gould, p. 320.

⁶ See Ahola, J. (2011) *Arnarvatnsheiði and the Space for Outlaws* in N. Gvozdzetskaja et al (ed) *Stanzas of Friendship. Studies in Honour of Tatjana N. Jackson*. Moscow: Dmitriy Pozharskiy University. The fish in the many lakes were a resource utilised by Icelanders over many centuries and today it is a popular area for fresh-water fishing, and visited by Icelanders and tourists alike to this end.

⁷ Baring-Gould, p. 99.

⁸ Baring-Gould, p. 103

⁹ This was published in 1849.

¹⁰ Baring-Gould, Preface, p. xli.

¹¹ Baring-Gould, p. 111.

¹² Baring-Gould, p. 299.

¹³ See, Lethbridge, E. *The Icelandic Sagas and Saga Landscapes. Writing, Reading and Retelling Íslendingasögur Narratives*, *Gripla* 27, pp. 51–92.

¹⁴ On Baring-Gould's saga translations, see Wawn, A. (2007) *The Grimms, The Kirk-Grims, and Sabine Baring-Gould*. In A. Wawn (ed), *Constructing Nations, Reconstructing Myth: Essays in Honour of T. A. Shippey*, pp. 215–42. Turnhout: Brepols.

¹⁵ Baring-Gould, p. 391.