

REVIEW

SEAWOMEN OF ICELAND: LIFE ON THE EDGE

Margaret Willson, 2016. University of Washington Press, Seattle; 312 pages, 20 figures, 2 tables, 2 maps, index, 3 appendices; ISBN 978-0295995502 (hardcover) \$34.95.

Reviewed by Katherine Reedy

Department of Anthropology, Idaho State University; reedkath@isu.edu

Seawomen of Iceland: Survival on the Edge is a refreshing read about generations of strong arctic seawomen as told by a strong seawoman herself. Unlike the women in this story, including the author, I am an anthropologist working in a similar climate in the Aleutian Islands who is a poor swimmer, who is terrified in any amount of rough seas, and who gets seasick even standing on docks (although I may have to try to cure this with Icelandic “horse medicine” by getting my head dunked into the cold sea). My fieldwork requires overcoming massive fears every time I go to work. I love reading about women I so want to emulate.

Willson is a historical detective investigating a large case of missing persons. Icelanders are sure there are no seawomen at first. The sea is men’s space; their trials and heroic tales do not include women. If they are at sea, they must be support staff for the men, stereotyped as whores or lesbians, and subject to rude labeling by the communities. The author instead finds an eclipsing of women’s work at sea, their stories forgotten over time, their roles undervalued, and their lives not memorialized in any significant way. She gradually dusts these rich tales off, awakens memories, and gives the women new life across many centuries. The process of discovery of these women exposes a collective forgetting, and I find myself wondering if I am also complicit in erasing the role of women in my own fieldwork in Alaska fisheries. Icelandic seawomen are probably not the global exception in an otherwise male-dominated occupation, but they are the ones who are getting the proper attention by Willson.

The women of Willson’s story are tough. They wore leather coats rubbed with fish and liver oil and layered, heavy, wet wool skirts that would pull them down to their deaths if they went overboard. As farmhand crew, they were expendable, enslaved on farms as “foster” children, receiving less clothing and food than men, and sent to sea to fish no matter the weather. Willson characterizes many faces of seawomen over time as farmers, rowers, advocates for women, women who are *fiskin* (they attract fish), weather readers, seal hunters, mothers, wives, crew, and helmswomen.

Male privilege runs through the stories and women’s exasperation (and resignation) that, even with a precedent of the 1720 law of equal pay, as soon as a job is well paying and desirable, the men snatch it up and deliberately exclude women. Following the plague, women worked on boats because the labor was needed, but then were overshadowed again by men on the rebound. Following the financial crisis in 2008, men in other trades lost their jobs and now compete over the fewer jobs at sea, pushing women completely out of the labor pool.

The book mirrors the Icelandic ability to comfortably move between centuries and “time slippages,” and does so with ease. The volume tracks many changing tides of the nation: tides of superstition—seawomen are *fiskin* and good luck in one era and fish repellent and bad luck on the boats in another; the tides of identity—seawomen are unfeminine, unattractive “trolls” in one era, and hardworking family women in another; the tides of work—women are fishing farmers, necessary labor in hard times, but

had to become housewives and more “womanly” under Danish rule; the tides of vessel changes—seawomen needed smaller boats to fish after the plague and mass death but were generally not allowed to work on the large boats post-Industrialization; and the tides of place—people are scattered to villages and outposts in one era, and consolidated in larger communities in another. Throughout these shifts, dark times followed by prosperity came with the same cost: women moved to shore, their work at sea met with disapproval and viewed as temporary until the men recovered their roles. The stories show that was not the view of the women themselves.

The privatization of fisheries in the 1980s appears at the end of the book yet is clearly a watershed moment in Iceland that likely came up in many interviews around the island. A quota system accelerated many changes, such as the abandonment of villages and outstations. Willson shows the move from scattered villages to harbors to accommodate larger boats. Families left the small outer islands for larger communities. Women worked in processing but not at sea. The policy also shifted the sense of home to shore, away from the sea, not a part of it. Still

women have always done small inshore fishing while the men were out on the big boats, but many coastal communities have been gutted.

The economy relies heavily on tourism now. I have had the pleasure of traveling to Iceland twice for conferences and touristy things and have read enough of Halldór Laxness to be thoroughly depressed. I was on the lookout for all things fishing-related and wish I had this book in hand then. It should be required reading for the tourist as it helps to interpret the landscape.

Overall, this is a delightful collection of women’s work through hardship. It is completely accessible to a general audience, an important contribution to maritime and gender studies, and perhaps of interest to psychologists working on social amnesia. Seawomen are erased from history or get no credit for their work in a slow, insidious, and complete process because they do not fit in the society. Willson has a unique voice and style that is warm and inviting, one that she skillfully uses to illuminate the voices of these seawomen and inspires the need for investigation of women’s lives in other so-called male professions.