Iceland's Abandoned Farms: Twenty Years of Photos

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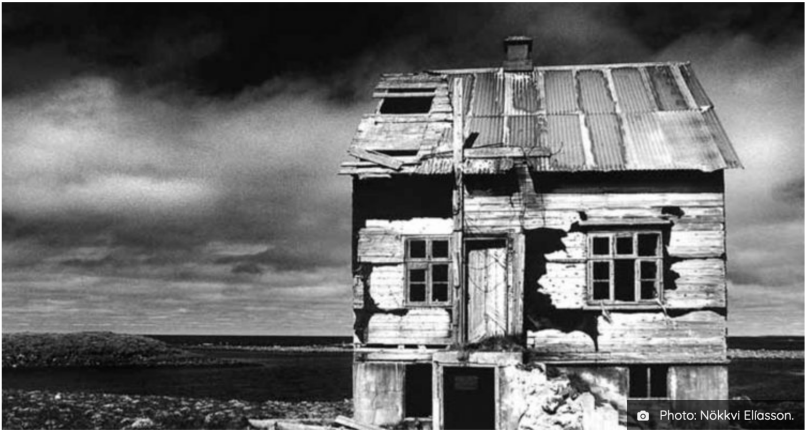

Photo: Nökkvi Elíasson.

In 2004, poet and publisher Aðalsteinn Ásberg Sigurðsson and photographer Nökkvi Elíasson paired up with one goal in mind: assembling Elíasson's twenty-years' worth of photographs of Iceland's abandoned farms and publishing them alongside Sigurðsson's poetry.

The resulting collection reveals the ways that Icelandic lifestyles have changed over time: details as particular as the shape and size of beds, the grasses used to scent linens, the equipment used to reap and sow.

Nökkvi's acumen for capturing the natural world's incursions into these structures over time makes the forces that have moulded them seem almost human in their decisiveness. The patchwork of carpentry that's left behind feels like an abstract installation—its beamwork and foundation transformed into the off-kilter architecture of a puzzle house. Though many of these homes were built to withstand the often catastrophic forces that reign over Iceland, they've largely dwindled into habitats better suited to nesting birds than human beings.

Photo: Nökkvi Elíasson.

Nökkvi Elíasson's careful cataloguing of these structures—many of which have collapsed, been demolished, or converted into summer houses—preserves them. From 1985 to 2010, he travelled to each quadrant of Iceland in pursuit of uncanny beauty and managed, ultimately, to catch and keep a gradually disappearing, and crucial, part of Icelandic history.

Sigurðsson writes that although the book is "foremost a collection of photographs and poems, information on where and when Elíasson documented these abandoned farms provides insight into the history of rural settlement in Iceland."

Photo: Nökkvi Elíasson. Billows engulf an abandoned house in rural Iceland.

At the same time, the Icelandic Abandoned Farms Association, a team made up of historians, architects, archaeologists, and students, among others, has since 2011 conducted research into the heritage value of these artifacts. They aim to “motivat[e] their protection” on the basis of their historical worth as traditional homes and farms; they are monumental records of spectacular adaptation over time. Information on the hundreds of homesteads they’ve visited has been published in five volumes that showcase the evolution of building techniques and the lifestyles of their former inhabitants. Their research included interviews with local inhabitants, investigations into the history of each area, and proposals for the future use of the abandoned farms, including restoration and reuse as summer homes and guesthouses.

Photo: Nökkvi Elíasson.

But let's rewind a hundred and fifty years. Iceland's villages rely on husbandry and fishing for survival. Massive soil erosion and deforestation have changed the landscape of the island. Iceland's storytelling culture has blossomed, in part due to the nightly tradition of reading or reciting folktales, poetry, and the sagas aloud to one another, and in part due to a surplus of sheepskin, made into vellum.

Even in a society of farmers, Iceland is socially stratified: landowners have power over land-workers who 'lease' themselves out as farm hands for one year at a time. The rental fees for access to fishing grounds—the majority of Icelandic farms didn't even have a view of the sea—are steep, and the wooden, deckless fishing boats most often used were hazardous in the freezing coastal waters.

Photo: Nökkvi Elíasson.

But Iceland is on the cusp of industrialization after nearly a thousand years. Skúli Magnússon's efforts have led to the founding of the Reykjavík's first factories; a century later, the first trawler is imported to Iceland from Aberdeen. Gradually, farmers leave their sparsely populated villages and flock to the city. Iceland is about to undergo a massive reorganization that will impact every rung of society.

Photo: Nökkvi Elíasson.

And their farms, their former homes, are left to decay. Together, Elíasson's images communicate a wholeness of historical experience that's nearly tangible. The scent of coffee that lingers long after the batch has been worn to dust. The unexpected appearance of buttercups in the middle of what was once a living room. The wheelbarrow still leans up against the house, even though the garden is long gone.

Historical memory is contextual; it relies on the construction of a complex narrative based upon the very few artifacts we have at hand. These barren monuments have stored Iceland's past under bed frames and in haylofts, hanging on *hjallar*—wooden structures for drying fish or laundry. And Elíasson has, without restoring them with his own hands, revitalized them by representing them photographically.

Photo: Nökkvi Elíasson. Many farmers left behind their belongings as they flocked to the city.

In concert with Elíasson's images, Sigurðsson's poems aim to capture the spirit of these abandoned farms; the book's title poem leaves us with a deep sense of loss, perhaps raising its head against high winds in a statement of perseverance that, at the same time, communicates a deep resignation to progress and time:

Hús eru aldrei ein
Þegar upp er staðið.

Houses are never alone
When all is said and done.
(Trans. Aðalsteinn Ásberg)

The book is available in an updated English edition (published 2013), Black Sky: Vanishing Iceland, from Dimma Press by emailing Dimma.