

Book Review: Seawomen of Iceland: Survival on the Edge by Margaret Willson

In Seawomen of Iceland: Survival on the Edge, Margaret Willson offers a new ethnographic study that traces a largely forgotten history of Icelandic seamen, eloquently weaving together the past and the present. This book shows how deep curiosity and the posing of seemingly small questions can lead to large-scale insights, and should be read by all those interested in ethnography, recommends Younes Saramifar.

Seawomen of Iceland: Survival on the Edge. Margaret Willson. Museum Tusulanum Press/University of Washington Press. 2016.

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Ethnography, the backbone of cultural anthropology, is an exhausting task for a researcher. First, convincing the social scientific community that the chosen inquiry is socially relevant before stepping into the field. Then, proving the realities that one describes exist while persuading others to remain receptive and open-minded about the evidence after returning from undertaking research. Margaret Willson's book, *Seawomen of Iceland: Survival on the Edge*, embodies this challenge by knitting together the sounds of the Icelandic sea and silences of the seamen whose history and existence have been largely denied. By way of ethnographic tales across seven chapters, she encourages readers to look behind the curtain and break some of the myths surrounding [a country that has been ranked first for women's empowerment in the world](#).



The book begins by linking an anthropological curiosity about the present to the larger social history of Iceland and its forgotten past. The 'deep curiosity' of an outsider (9) was provoked by a sign that read 'Thurídur Einarsdóttir, one of Iceland's greatest fishing captains, she lived...' (6). The author blends past and present by bringing together the question of how a woman could find a place in a highly male-dominated profession while also reflecting on her own background working on fishing boats.

Every step of her query becomes more intriguing as the people with whom she spoke initially claimed not to know any seamen. However, Willson's persistence jogged their memories, and slowly names and histories were recalled, leading to a five-year adventure that became this book. Her determination stemmed from the fact that an experienced ethnographer can speculate that there should be some seamen today if their traces can be found in the history two centuries ago.

The introduction and the first chapter dive into the history, law, records of trade, folklore and family histories to present a consistent narrative of a 'disturbingly uneven' history (19). Willson shows how seamen have been neglected by historians despite a long tradition of family and social history writings in Iceland. Seamens are not mentioned unless something remarkable happened to them. Even Thurídur, who was known for years of sailing and fishing without any loss of her crew, was rather remembered because she assisted in solving the mystery of a famous robbery.

Willson's archival research highlights the hidden history of seamen by compiling historical narratives around them. The historical evidence provokes her to ask what encouraged women to seek opportunities at sea during the nineteenth century. She suggests that the occupation of men on the farmlands created a chance for Icelandic women to become seafarers. She fills the gaps in existing histories through astute anthropological analysis informed by social imaginaries as well as economic and political circumstances. The first chapter also offers more than mere historical narrative when the author inserts the story of a 'modern-day farmer seamens' (51). Willson's apt juxtaposition of past and present narratives stops readers from getting lost solely in the history.



Image Credit: Fishing boats, Husavik, Iceland ([TJH1976 CCO](#))

The discovery of clues in forgotten histories nonetheless continues in her second chapter where Willson points at how the knowledge of working at sea was circulated among families and seafarers. She highlights the theme of expertise to stress how women were excluded in the Canadian and Australian fishing industries because they lacked the required sea knowledge, but in Iceland they remained crucial. They handed skills to later generations of seamen and seawomen, and this role became the proof of their necessity to the fishing industry.

Willson also shows how the prosperity of Icelanders presented a new turning point for seawomen. Iceland became wealthy through the easing of trade restrictions by Denmark around 1904, and a new category of 'respectable women' (88) subsequently emerged. As Willson wryly observes, Iceland cherished its women and adored them to the extent that Icelanders hoped their country would be the 'ultimate kingdom in which most women will be queens' (88). Iceland began to build a golden cage around women by way of this respect, adoration and enforced femininity. It is at this junction that Willson asks us to look beyond the superficiality of this male-articulated empowerment discourse to inquire: where did this turning point leave the seawomen? Willson's analysis shows how seawomen's job security remained precarious and dependent on patriarchal impositions that were circulated at the shore.

In Chapters Three and Four, Willson concentrates on modern-day seawomen. She portrays the allure of the sea to speak of the endurance of the seawomen, despite the fact that 'fishing [...] is considered a male occupation' (113). Willson leaves no stone unturned in identifying all possible factors that contribute to the current gender disparity between seamen and seawomen. She begins with legal issues, corporeality and motherhood, unwanted sexual advances, the challenges of working alongside men in a confined space, how seawomen see themselves and, finally, the perceptions of people on the shore. The narratives that hold these last chapters together go beyond storytelling skill and beautiful prose. They also demonstrate the acute ethnographic insights of a researcher who has been able to collect stories that are not usually told or articulated.

However, Willson extends her analysis further in order to explain the impact of the 2008 financial crisis on seawomen. While the shortage of men opened up a space for women at sea centuries ago, men reappeared after the financial crisis to reclaim jobs at the sea. Due to the resilience embedded in the lineage of seawomen who resisted restrictions, othering by seamen and those on the shore since the early 1900s is diminishing. Yet, the institutionalisation of fishing practices, the emergence of large-scale fishing boats, new technologies and the economic meltdown have nonetheless pushed seawomen aside. Willson stresses that 'here's what emerges: a population [of] young women [...] with little connection to or knowledge of fishing' (225), and the gradual relegation of Iceland as a fishing nation to an increasingly distant horizon.

Sailing on the eloquent prose of Willson's research on Icelandic seawomen is the definition of experiencing the pleasure of reading a good ethnography. The book shows how deep curiosity and small questions lead us to large-scale insights. Willson begins with a micro-story and masterfully portrays how this can inform wider politics. The tales of seawomen are the tangible demonstration of the butterfly effect: how anthropologists can productively chase butterflies instead of submitting to investigating neoliberal buzzwords for the sake of research agendas and grant writing. At times, I wished the author had increased the book's theoretical flavour in a much more explicit manner instead of focusing on storytelling. Nonetheless, this is a book that everyone with an interest in ethnography should read regardless of the kind of anthropology or social science they are engaged with.

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Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.