

From the President and Board

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Head out to Metchosin!

Our next two social events – the movie afternoon on Sunday April 26, and the potluck to celebrate June 17 – will be held at the home of Runa and Vince Pleshak at 4431 Leefield Road, Metchosin.

The April 26 event starts at 2pm and features a recent Icelandic comedy which we will start showing at about 2:30pm.

June 17 falls on a Wednesday this year and the potluck will start at 5pm. We aim to eat at around 6pm. Please bring your family, something to drink and some food to share.

We look forward to seeing you!

Thorablót 2009 in Victoria, B.C.

By W. D. Valgardson

In spite of rain and sleet and snow, they came to Victoria's annual Thorablót. Unseasonal weather and the resulting dangerous roads kept some people away, but those who did make it to Norway House for our annual celebration had an excellent time.

For many years past Norm Jonasson and his family have prepared the Thorablót meal. Tragically, Norm died last year. This left the club executive in a quandary. Fred Bjarnason has a new job that is keeping him very busy so our professional chef couldn't take over. Tom Benjamin, our president, decided that we could do just fine if we got ourselves organized enough.

Beverley, Tom's wife, had meetings with Ruth, Norm's daughter and between them, they worked out

Almanak 2009

April 26	Movie/Social	2 pm
June 17	National Day Potluck	5 pm
Sept 25	AGM	5 pm
Oct 25	Movie/Social	2 pm
Dec 6	Christmas Party	1 pm

a schedule for everything that needed to be prepared. The list was detailed right down to the moment the oven had to be turned on and at what temperature. To make certain that there would be enough desserts, Tom hosted a pönnukökur night at their house. Volunteers came and made pönnukökur for hours on end. The results were delicious. Tom also put out a call for skýr, and volunteers all over the city made skýr for the first time in their lives and were surprised at how easy it is to make. Beverley was to be the sergeant major spending the entire day in the kitchen with her lists of everything that needed to be done.



Photo by Trish Baer

Unfortunately, Beverley was unable to attend due to a family emergency. That left our intrepid hero, Tom, in charge of everything, including transporting the pots and most of the food in his Smart car.

The volunteers were quite amazing. They turned up at ten a.m. and began preparing food. Three of us set up tables. Vince Pleshak and I chopped strawberries. Meanwhile potatoes were being peeled in vast quantities by Kay Sessions and Emily Campbell, salads were made, and meat was prepared for the oven. For much of the day Runa Pleshak was in charge of the kitchen, Tom being spread thin, and she did an amazing job. We were stymied when we couldn't find the table cloths but Fred turned up with them and also explained how to get everything ready at once. I think everyone sighed with relief with Fred's appearance. In the meantime name tags were being prepared and sorted and one of our regular bartenders for the Thorrablót, Richard Baer, appeared with the beer and wine.

I headed home once the strawberries were ready so I missed the rest of the preparations but they included particularly attractive table centerpieces made by Jodi Johl that consisted of Viking long ships set atop vases with flashing lights in the bottom and filled with blue coloured mesh for waves. Jodi also made a very impressive volcano for the stage.

The big question, beyond the effect the snow would have, was could a bunch of volunteers bring together a good meal for around a hundred people. While we were waiting to find out, our Kristjan Butler, started the evening by asking Heather Alda Ireland to sing the Canadian and Icelandic anthems. Past Fjallkonas assembled on stage and Kathleen Arnason read two of her poems, one of them dedicated to the Fjallkonas. Tom gave the Honorary Life Membership to Barbara Falck for her years of volunteer work for the Club and the President's Award to Al Olafson in recognition for all that he has done for the Club.

By the time the formal part of the evening was done, supper was on the serving tables and Fred was standing at the end with carving knife and fork in hand. The results were exceptional. Plates were filled and there were nothing but compliments from the diners. When it came to dessert, there was skýr with strawberries, tarts, vinarterta, calla lilies, and more. Icelanders and Icelandic Canadians love desserts and these desserts were indeed loved. The pönnukökur

that were made as a group effort went down effortlessly.

At many of our Thorrablóts the guests leave early but this time they stayed to dance. There was a lot of visiting among tables, acquaintances renewed, stories shared. Now that I'm nearly seventy, I don't stay until the party ends but I danced and I stayed late and I enjoyed myself thoroughly. When we left the snow had stopped, the sky was clear but the warmth of the evening stayed with us on the drive home. Much of that warmth came from working with a group of dedicated people on the preparations for the Thorrablót. Next year we'll tackle the job again but this time with some experience and more confidence.

Pictures from the Thorrablót taken by Trish Baer are available at:

http://www.flickr.com/photos/ice_of_vic/sets/72157615042470946/



Photo from Bill Holm's web site.

Bill Holm

I first met Bill Holm one summer day when he appeared on my doorstep to inform me who he was and that he had come by sailboat to Victoria and just had to look me up. At six foot eight and broad as a barn door, he filled up hallway and then the living room. We had a quick coffee and conversation and then he was lunging out the door to get back to the harbour and the sailboat. The house and I felt a little

askew as if a large wind had swept through the house but it was a warm wind, a friendly wind, one of smiles and laughter and sparkling eyes.

I read his book *Coming Home Crazy* and thought to myself this is indeed a fine writer. Many reviewers also thought so. If you haven't read it, you should. It tells us about his time in China but more importantly, it tells us about America and what it is about America that makes people crazy. The craziness that Bill talked about is the craziness that has wrecked our economy, destroyed people's savings and jobs. It's the craziness that got carried to Iceland where it was and is even more destructive. If *Coming Home Crazy* had been compulsory reading for American politicians and they'd been forced to prove they understood what they'd read, we probably wouldn't be in today's recession and China wouldn't be staggering under the weight of American T-bills.

Bill came to Victoria many times, unofficially and officially. By that I mean he sometimes just turned up, leaping from sailboats or struggling out of a car. But other times, he came for The Beck Trust and those were good times indeed for the Trust provided him with his favorite two things, a piano and an audience. He loved them both. And they loved him back. He read from his books, he detoured in pronouncements and he stopped everything time and again to sit down and bang out tunes on the piano.

He was a tremendous performer and entertainer. Maybe part of it was his bigness. But men can be big without filling a room. He filled a room. He filled it with his passion and his words so that no corner was untouched. If someone had asked me what is it like to really be alive, I would have taken them to a Bill Holm performance.

That energy is still now. We have only our memories of him. But we have his books. They're worth reading and, if you've already read them, rereading. It is hard to believe that he will not, at any moment, pound on the door, looking like some Viking warrior with his broad shoulders and his beard. He was unforgettable and I say that from experience for once when he was here for the Trust, I went to his hotel. We got onto the elevator and a woman looked up at him, what other direction could she look?, and said "You're Bill Holm, aren't you?" It wasn't really a question. She knew he must be Bill Holm. He was mightily pleased to be recognized in an elevator in Victoria, B.C.

He leaves behind him good memories, good times, good literature. He's gone too soon but he's left us those parts of his life that we can continue to enjoy. He's sailed away once again. Bon Voyage, Bill. You'll be missed and you'll be remembered.

W. D. Valgardson

“The Power of the Poets: Extempore Incantations in Iceland and Ireland”:



Richard and Margaret Beck
Lecture by Professor Bo Almqvist

January 26, 2009
University of Victoria

Article by: Naomi Smedbol and Michael Stevens.

In Iceland there were until recent times poets who were believed to possess the power to hurt or kill their enemies, dispel ghosts, eradicate pests, procure necessities in time of famine, and cure illnesses through their improvised verse. These poets, known as *kraftaskáld*, or *ákvæðaskáld*, that is “power poets” and “poets whose words are effective,” had extraordinary and mystical powers according to Bo Almqvist, who recently delivered three Richard and Margaret Beck lectures at the University of Victoria.

Most power poetry comprises only a single stanza, a quatrain marked by alliteration and rhyme. This improvised verse was directed towards the target the poet wished to affect, whether for the purpose of revenge or protection. The poems, called *kraftakvæði*, differ from ordinary magic formulas and charms” in that they receive their power from the emotional fervour of the poet and can only be used once.

“Emotions of the strongest kind were involved,” says Almqvist. “The poets were frequently in a state of extreme rage or distress, and it is often implied that these mental conditions contributed to the efficacy of their verses.” To demonstrate the impact the spoken text would have had on the targets, Almqvist quoted several *kraftakvæði* during his lecture.

Unlike most forms of magic, which depends on

secrecy, power poetry was public. The poems were improvised and recited while face-to-face with the poet's adversary, often in front of witnesses. Power poets gained much fame not only for the supernatural powers the poems set in motion, but their ability to compose this technically complex poetry on the spot. "If the poets stammered or hesitated ever so little, the stanzas would lose their effect," said Almqvist. Allegedly, one power poet, Þórður á Strjúgi felt regretful after cursing a group of Danish merchants and so tried to compose a second verse undoing the curse of the first. But it didn't work, and the regretful poet realized, "I could not have wished those Danish dogs well with such burning fervour as I wished them ill."

Many of Iceland's most famous poets were *kraftaskáld*, including Hallgrímur Pétursson, Stefán Ólafsson, and Sigurður Breiðfjörð.

Power poetry flourished in Iceland from the 15th to the 20th century. Yet Almqvist argues that the genre's roots are evident in Old Icelandic literature dating back to the first settlement in the 9th Century. *Eirík's Saga* and family sagas and king's sagas mention verses with similar content and supernatural effects. Surprisingly, although the majority of settlers of Iceland arrived from Norway, these poems have no antecedents in Nordic literature. Almqvist argues instead that the source was the Gaelic cultures of Ireland and Scotland, which were in close contact with medieval Iceland and which possess a similar tradition of incantatory poetry with supernatural effects

"Like the Icelandic power poets, the Irish ones could affect or kill animals as well as humans," says Almqvist. "And like their Icelandic brethren, the Irish power poets played the part of the underdog; they were the spokesmen for the poor and oppressed"—Anglo-Irish landlords play the same role in their poetry as Danish merchants in the Icelandic poetry.

Both the Icelandic and Irish power poets were able to affect objects, and both traditions boast of power poets who could burst barrels and sink ships that carried enemies. "I could go on for a good while," Almqvist remarked "listing such remarkable similarities in the uses to which magical, original poetry were put in Iceland and Ireland." Indeed, recent research proves that the mutual influence between the two cultures runs much deeper than used to be

thought. "There is no doubt that the Icelandic and Irish traditions about power poets cast considerable light upon each other," concludes Almqvist. "They provide interesting insights into the life conditions of the two nations over a span of one thousand years."

Message from the editor

It would be a great help in keeping our membership informed about our community if members would send information about anything that is of interest. That includes news about events that involve our members but also such simple things as who has come to visit, births, deaths, close calls. The purpose of a newsletter is to keep us up to date on our community and anything that affects it. So send me emails at wvalgard@telus.net. If not, you'll have to put up with endless articles written by me.

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<http://www.victoria.tc.ca/Community/Icelanders> (case sensitive).

