

Þorlákur Axel Jónsson, Dagur Austan. *Ævintýramaðurinn Vernharður Eggertsson* (Akureyri: Völuspá, 2009)

Þorlákur Axel Jónsson's slender volume (104 pages in total) is written in Icelandic and inaugurates a book series devoted to the history of northern Iceland's Eyjafjörður and its inhabitants: *Safn til sögu Eyjafjarðar og Eyfirðinga*. Yet, in a way that is commented upon in the following paragraphs, this book is relevant to Nordic and Mediterranean studies and it has therefore been decided that *Nordicum-Mediterraneum* should carry a belated review of it, given the book's relatively old year of publication, i.e. 2009.

Vernharður Eggertsson (1909-1952) was known also as Dagur Austan, a marginal contributor to 20<sup>th</sup>-century Icelandic literature, to whom serious critics and well-established literary reviewers have paid hardly any attention. Despite his vivid depiction of police callousness, or his groundbreaking references to homosexuality and child abuse by Catholic priests (79), the author's little fame between the 1930s and the 1950s was due primarily to infamy or, to put it more correctly, to notoriety. Before and during the years in which Dagur Austan published one book (*An Icelandic Adventurer in the Spanish War*, 1938), one booklet and a handful of short stories (including the 1950 "The Dog and I", perhaps the most successful of them), the name "Vernharður Eggertsson" appeared repeatedly in Iceland's newspapers and even more frequently in the official records of Iceland's police, courts of law and prisons for a long string of petty crimes, often related to alcoholic beverages.

Since at least 1931, when he experienced a stint in a Canadian jail for a somewhat mythical case of prohibition-era smuggling (24-7), Vernharður Eggertsson's life was marked by the homelessness, poverty, instability, mendacity, proneness to self-harm and the erratic behaviour that are often associated with excessive drinking amongst working-class men. On top of that, his professed adherence to communism made him a target of exemplary toughness by Iceland's police authorities (60-3). During a remarkable dry spell facilitated by the Salvation Army in the early 1940s, Vernharður Eggertsson did succeed in finding a wife and fathering a host of children, from whom he was eventually separated by his overwhelming propensity for the bottle (see esp. 64-70). What is more, before and after this spell, he worked in the family brewery (9-18), travelled the world as a sailor (21-3, 82-7), witnessed and probably fought in the Civil War in Spain (44-59), walked rarely trodden paths in his native country after a jail break (35-43) and managed to charm and befriend many fellow Icelanders, including young artists, journalists and literati (78-81, 101).

In the end, Vernharður Eggertsson suffered a tragic death in a shipwreck off Caithness' perilous coasts, probably after sailing in the treacherous Pentland Firth (87), crowning a tempestuous existence with the kind of salt-water tragedy that fate reserves to the true adventurer, which is the way chosen by the book's author to refer to Vernharður Eggertsson,

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i.e. *Ævintýramaðurinn* (“the adventurer”), and possibly the one in which Vernharður Eggertsson liked thinking of himself as well.

Certainly, the gritty tales that Dagur Austan recounts in his book on the Spanish Civil War—passages of which are included in Þorlákur Axel Jónsson’s text—are worthy of the most audacious adventurer, if not of a hero, which is the term used by the Swedish communists’ journal *Ny Dag* to salute in 1936 the brave Iclander that was reported to have fought for the Republic in the International Brigades (57). Besides, Dagur Austan’s matter-of-fact, adventure-centred outlook on the bloody fights between Republicans and Monarchists, as well as between Anarchists and other Republicans, offers an unusually fresh, ideologically uncompromising and little-known account of the Civil War itself. Historians that are interested in what happened in Spain during those terrible years may well find it a valuable integration of more commonly cited sources.

The author of the volume hereby reviewed is a historian and social scientist. His style is dry, unadorned and non-evaluative. He is careful in the selection of, and the references to, the sources utilised for his biography of Vernharður Eggertsson aka Dagur Austan. Photographs (mid-book insert, 1-8), a thorough critical apparatus (88-94), a poem (2) and a short story penned by Dagur Austan himself (95-100), plus a 1952 obituary by Sverrir Þórðarson (101) complement it effectively, giving a concrete sense of the times and the lives that are touched upon. The resulting volume is not big, its short chapters offering a dozen of highly effective sketches, rather than a lengthy account, of salient moments in the life of Vernharður Eggertsson and of his family. If neorealism were a literary style, rather than a cinematographic one, Þorlákur Axel Jónsson’s book would be an instantiation of it.

One may wonder why such a peculiar citizen of northern Iceland should have been chosen to launch the book series on Eyjafjörður and its inhabitants. Though unquestionably exciting and romantically eccentric, Vernharður Eggertsson’s story is neither enviable nor edifying. As Sverrir Þórðarson wrote, he was “a son of the street” (73). Yet, it is true that Icelandic literature has never eschewed the darker margins of the island’s society, whether by devoting entire sagas to famous outlaws or by celebrating the most poetically talented psychotic murderer of the Viking age, Egill Skallagrímsson. If divine wisdom informs the entirety of God’s creation, then lessons can be learnt from all walks of life. Thus, pondering upon Vernharður Eggertsson’s tribulations may remind the reader of how healthily insignificant is a comfortable middle-class life.

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