

In Stephan Stephansson's Footsteps - slide show comments
by Penney Kome
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I'd like to give you a little background about Alberta's "Poet of the Rockies," Stephan Stephansson. He was born in Iceland in 1853. Unschooling, he read voraciously. In 1873, when he was nearly 20, he emigrated to North America with his parents. After three attempts at homesteading in Wisconsin, he moved to Alberta in 1889. By then, he was already following his conscience in religious matters.

The young man left the Evangelical Lutheran church because the leadership offered a by-law that would have prevented the congregation's women from voting. Icelandic women had always voted! Stephansson also kept up with Ralph Waldo Emerson and other free thinkers. He wrote the by-laws for the Icelandic Cultural Society, emphasizing humanitarianism, inquiry, and spiritual freedom – instead of creeds, sectarianism, and blind faith. The Society's most tangible achievement was a community library.

Stephansson had a huge impact on Alberta's culture and politics in the nearly 40 years he lived here. He opposed war in vivid language: "In Europe's reeking slaughter-pen/They mince the flesh of murdered men/While swinish merchants, snout deep in trough/drink all the bloody profits off." He liked to spend time with Unitarians, although there's no record that he ever became a congregation member. He was a Friend.

These days, the Rev Stefan B Jonasson proudly carries on Icelandic traditions in his Winnipeg home and ministry – most recently as an NDP candidate. He kindly provided an Icelandic story for the Stephan G Stephansson service. He regards the Icelandic myths as being on a level with Greek and Roman myths. He wrote to me, "Sagas, edds and poetry were the *real* scriptures behind the Icelandic Unitarian movement! And Stephan G Stephansson was both a great poet and a bridge between the Icelandic immigrants and the radical/liberal movements in North American culture."

Stephansson was a farmer by day and poet by night. Farming supported his family, his wife and eight children. But he had insomnia. During his *Wakeful Nights* (the title of his best-known book) he wrote 1800 pages of poetry, in Icelandic, which were later published in six volumes. He wrote another 1400 pages of articles and letters. This body of literature has kept scholars busy for more than a century.

Stephansson's great grandson, William Sigurd Bourne, is a Juno-winning musician with 22 albums to his credit. To listen to him sing is to recognize the poetry in his soul.

I'll close with a poem that probably most of us have heard, without necessarily knowing that Stephan G Stephansson wrote it:

Through seasons of winter and summer,/This truth we instinctively see,/ to make what is good
into better/And strive for the best that can be.