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“Enterprising Ladies”: Women Travellers and the Saga-steeds of Iceland

As is well known, over the course of the 19th century Iceland became a tourist destination not only for those interested in the country’s awesome fiery and icy landscapes, but also for those who wished to visit saga-sites. As W. G. Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson put it so memorably in the closing paragraph of their 1899 book *A Pilgrimage to the Sagasteeds of Iceland*, they wished to “find the scenes of long ago ... put a background to the figures of history.” Many others before and after travelled to Iceland with the same aims and subsequently published accounts of their experiences. These travel books weave landscape description together with anecdotes from the sagas and can be seen as part of the vigorous rewriting tradition that kept interest in the sagas alive over time, both in Iceland and beyond.

Most of these visitors were (wealthy) men and their accounts have been foregrounded in scholarship on the genre hitherto. But women made the journey too, and some of them were well-versed in medieval Icelandic language, literature and culture—themselves translators, teachers, writers. In this paper, these women’s contributions to the ‘saga-pilgrimage’ genre will be examined, with examples drawn from 19th- and 20th- century travel accounts, both published (e.g. Ida Pfeiffer, Mrs Hugh Blackburn, Elizabeth Jane Oswald, Adela Elizabeth Orpen, Caroline Alicia de Fonblanque, Ethel Brilliana Tweedie, Mrs Disney Leith (Mary Charlotte Julia Gordon), Olive Murray Chapman, Alice Selby); and unpublished (e.g. Emma Georgina Holt, May Morris, Bertha Philpotts). Are these accounts distinctive in any way when compared with male-authored ones, especially with regard to their treatment of saga-related material? What details caught these women’s eyes and were considered worthy of description or discussion in their accounts? The new research presented in this paper is part of a planned bigger project about gendered saga landscapes, their representation in medieval Icelandic sources and in modern accounts.