

FLOSI BJÖRNSSON, 13 Dec. 1906 - 22 May 1993

An Appreciation



Flosi Björnsson

I write in appreciation of Flosi Björnsson, as one of the many scientists who visited Öraefi and benefited from his knowledge and the warm hospitality which he and his family showed so readily to visitors. I first met him in 1970 when making a reconnaissance visit to Breiðamerkurjökull in preparation for a programme of glaciological work. I had been told that he had a fund of knowledge from which I might learn, and recall standing with him outside his door in light rain for two hours whilst I was introduced, with increasing fascination, to the view of the world from Kvísker: on the character of the Icelandic weather; on the natural history of the region; on the vagaries of the North Atlantic cod; on the settlement of Öraefi; on the plumbing of volcanoes, and on the Vietnam war. Though he had used his English very little, its clarity and elegance was extraordinary. It was as if Charles Dickens was standing behind him and handing him a carefully composed script. He would determine what he wanted to say, compose a pithy sentence, and deliver it in the lilting tones of Öraefi. Silence would then ensue until he had more to say. Though the na-

tive speaker, my gabbling haste compared ill with his measured and elegant delivery. One learned to measure one's speech more, and to appreciate the role of silence in conversation.

There is too ready an assumption amongst experts that it is for us to opine and for others to listen. Flosi Björnsson was a representative of a culture of learning and study, used to observing events in the life of the dramatic natural environment around him, and to draw his own conclusions based on his experience and his studies. He could readily recall the precise date and nature of this flood, that glacial advance or meteorological event, and speculate on possible causes with a simple logic that demanded respect and revealed strong insight. Moreover, if there was a problem which he felt he could do more justice to than in a brief conversation, it was not unusual for him to write, many months later, after consulting his notes and books, and discussing with other members of his family or people in the region. I recall, for instance, a letter he wrote, reconstructing with forensic care, from parish records and from his,

and his brother Sigurður's knowledge of the character of the region, the most probable location of the farm Breiðá on Breiðamerkursandur and the circumstances in which it might have been destroyed in 1732 by the advance of Breiðamerkurjökull.

His acumen and persistence as a natural scientist were brought home to me in the late 1970s, when he inspected weekly, through two winters and summers, packages of monitoring equipment which had been emplaced at the margin of Breiðamerkurjökull. In wintertime he would walk over a frozen lake, Breiðárlón, often in the teeth of a strong wind, check the equipment, observe the changes in the glacier and make whatever notes he thought were appropriate.

I still use the notebooks which he compiled as sources of data, and as illustrations to students of the way in which a good natural scientist should observe and record the natural world around him.

Icelandic science and learning has benefitted greatly from the contributions of many such as Flosi Björnsson, with independent and enquiring minds not easily cowed by the dogmas of official learning. It is a tradition which I envy. I hope that it can be sustained.

Edinburgh, 29 December 1993
Geoffrey Stewart Boulton