



Friðriksson, Þ., *Keltar: áhrif á íslenska tungu og menningu*. Reykjavík: Sögur útgáfa, 2022. 207 pp. ISBN: 978-9935-31-153-5. 4.890 ISK soft cover.

The word Celts always sparks interest no matter in what language it appears, so it was no surprise that the book *Keltar: áhrif á íslenska tungu og menningu* ‘Celts: impact on Icelandic language and culture’ was among the most popular books published in Iceland in 2022. The cover design is eye catching as it emphasises the Celtic aspect since it is decorated with the familiar Celtic knotwork and as such is a book that would suit nicely as a decorative piece on any living room table. It hit the bookstores just before the start of the *jólabókaflóð* ‘Christmas book flood’. In the week before Christmas 2022, the book was the second most-sold book of the year according to Forlagið bookstore (Forlagið). Additionally, it was awarded the 2022 book award of the Association of Bookstore Employees ‘*Félag starfsfólks bókaverslana*’.¹ However, this speaks more to the popularity of the book and its aesthetical pleasing design than its contribution to scholarly publishing, as will become apparent.

The author, Þorvaldur Friðriksson, has for many years been interested in the connection between Iceland and Ireland in medieval times, and reportedly he has been working on this book for more than a decade. I wish the product mirrored the dedication. Sadly, it does not. It is woefully lacking as a scholarly book, and it is the worst thing to introduce a general reader to this field as a book of general interest.

The word *Keltar* in the title of the book serves as the glittering jewel dangling in front of the curious reader of a field that has in general been rather inaccessible to the general audience, particularly in Iceland. Every now and again articles pop up or mention the relationship between Ireland and Iceland during the settlement period of Iceland in the late ninth century. There has been a real keen interest in the origins of the settlers for a very long time, and this interest was fuelled by the attention garnered by a study of the genetic makeup of Icelanders, published in 2000 (see Helgason et al. 2000), which concluded that a large proportion of the female settlers of Iceland were from the British Isles. This has been enough to keep the interest alive for those interested willing to read anything and everything they come across containing the word Celt(s) in the title.

The book is divided into eight chapters plus an introduction. The first seven chapters touch on various topics concerned with the settlement period of Iceland and the settlers. It is interesting to note that (at least in my edition) the page numbers given on the contents page and the actual page numbers in the book do

1 It is very difficult to find anything about this organisation online, and their website does not seem to have been updated since 2020.

not line up, for example: 'Allra fyrstu landnemarnir' 'The first settlers' begins on page 20, not page 18. There is at least a two-page difference between where a chapter is said to start and where it is in the book. In addition, some of the sub-chapters in the book are not included on the contents page. In the first chapter, Friðriksson introduces where the Celts come from and their supposed origin. In the second chapter, he discusses the earliest possible settlers of Iceland and the influence of St. Columba in Iceland. The third chapter includes a discussion on the *Landnámabók* 'Book of Settlement' as well as some notable figures from Iceland's early history. Chapter four 'Keltesk áhrif á Íslandi' 'Celtic influence in Iceland' is divided into discussion on numerous instances of possible Celtic influence on Icelandic culture, which is also continued in chapter six when he discusses the pre-Christian religion and traditions. In chapter five, Friðriksson hypothesises on the connection of the wider world, bringing Faroe Islands and Greenland into the discussion. In the seventh chapter Friðriksson gives a short discussion on the gaps in sources, as well as the influence of natural disasters, such as volcanic eruptions, and the impact this can have on further analysis of the settlement period of a given region. The eighth and final chapter of the book is a dictionary of words Friðriksson suggests are of Gaelic origin. The dictionary is divided into group of words concerning; animals, fishes, birds, plants etc, proper names, food as well as other words and finally a list of placenames. It should be noted that all chapters and sub-chapters are rather short and easily digested.

The issue of the number of Irish-speaking settlers in Iceland has over the years been a point of contention between scholars, where some debate that they were not all that many, but others contend that their numbers have been significantly underrepresented. Friðriksson's main reason for publishing this book is to suggest that Celts, mainly people from Ireland but also possibly other Celtic-speaking areas of the British Isles, constituted a much larger part of the settlement population of Iceland than has generally been acknowledged and that this can be seen through various words and placenames. However, there are some fundamental problems with his work.

It is interesting that Friðriksson chose to use the term 'newest research' (p. 55) when discussing the genetic research I referenced earlier in the review. The research is, in fact, more than twenty years old and has now been superseded by more recent scholarship in the field of genetic anthropology, so it is highly misleading to use the term 'newest', especially since he omits telling the reader when the research was conducted and published.

At best this study is now dated and should be treated with caution as the field of genetic research has come a long way in twenty years. In 2018, as part of her PhD thesis, Dr. Sigríður Sunna Ebenesersdóttir published an article in collaboration with other scientists on the ancient genome of Iceland (Ebenesersdóttir 2018). The article suggests that while ancient DNA revealed both Gaelic and Norse origins, it is still skewed heavily towards the Norse. In addition, even though we were to

put our faith in the genetic mix of Celtic and Norse genes around the settlement period, there is nothing to say it occurred in Iceland. We must not forget that by the time Iceland was being settled there had been Norse presence in the British Isles for about two hundred years already.

The author's treatment of genetic research is generally somewhat questionable where right at the start of the book he links the genetic makeup of Ötzi (ca. 3230 BCE), the mummified iceman of the Ötztal Alps between Austria and Italy, to that manifested in Wales and Iceland (p. 11). However, a simple google search, supported by at least four sources, reveals that Ötzi is more closely related to southern Europeans, especially Corsicans and Sardinians (Keller, A., Graefen, A., Ball, M. et al 2012; and Callaway 2012), than to Celts, of which there is no mention. In any case, Ötzi is so far removed in time and space from a discussion of the population makeup of the ninth century that it is baffling why Friðriksson felt it necessary to include this in the book.

Probably the biggest red flag I noticed was the lack of sources cited. There is not even a bibliography of the works used, and no mention of any dictionary or any source material for the Gaelic words Friðriksson suggests were adopted into the placenames in Iceland. True, some of the scholars who have previously written on the subject are mentioned, including Hermann Pálsson, Helgi Guðmundsson, Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Gísli Sigurðsson, but for the most part their works are not used (or at least not cited) to support the central hypothesis of the book, that the number of Irish settlers of Iceland were more than generally assumed (p. 59). Many placenames have been discussed at length by other scholars (including linguists such as Helgi Guðmundsson)² but none of their works are cited or seem in any way utilized or expanded upon. If he had incorporated previous scholarship, it would have lent the book more credibility as most of those words have been convincingly argued to be of Gaelic origin, but he completely disregards previous works. It is also noticeable that the individuals mentioned in the book are generally not linguists but, like the author, enthusiasts who are intrigued by the possible relationship between Ireland and Iceland during the medieval period (p. 60).

Friðriksson also falls into the trap of discussing the Celtic church, a somewhat outdated notion of a Celtic Christianity that was in some way special and different from European Christianity (p. 17). He seems to not understand the fact that Ireland and Iceland during the settlement period were still part of Europe and their respective cultures showcase that; in other words, these countries were neither singularly 'Icelandic' nor 'Irish' at that time. Therefore, there is no reason to maintain that the words in question must come from Gaelic rather than Norse, Danish, Swedish, German, French, English or Latin. Indeed, Friðriksson seems

2 Guðmundsson, Helgi. *Um Hafninn: vestrænir menn og íslensk menning á miðöldum*. Háskólaútgáfan, 1997.

to be mainly advocating two points: first, that there was a large part of Gaelic speaking settlers in Iceland, so large in fact that they managed to permanently affect the language and therefore the landscape, and second, that, also, in less than two or three hundred years that same language was completely forgotten, so the author of the *Landnámabók* would not have any reminiscence that Gaelic had been spoken previously in the country, let alone knowing any Gaelic himself.

The biggest issue with this book is that the author is not a linguist, which is excruciatingly obvious throughout his discussion. He refers to the language as ‘Gaelic’, apparently because of previous scholarship by the linguist Helgi Guðmundsson (p. 59), but Friðriksson does not seem to fully grasp what is meant by that term. There is a sub-chapter called ‘Landnámuhöfundur skilur ekki gelísku’ ‘The author of the *Landnámabók* does not understand Gaelic’ (p. 43), but the thing is, neither does the author of this book. Not only does he not understand Gaelic, he does not seem to understand what is meant by the term Gaelic as a language. This is reflected throughout the book as he does not differentiate between linguistic areas or linguistic changes over time; he gets lost in the terminology and does not differentiate between (Old or Middle) Irish and Modern Scottish Gaelic words or spellings.

As previously mentioned, the chapters and sub-chapters are short and easily read, but this adversely affects the discussion of the topic at hand as this precludes any in-depth discussion on a complex matter. Friðriksson discusses the establishment of the kingdom of Dál Ríata, a kingdom that during the sixth century expanded from the northeastern part of Ireland to include the western seaboard of Scotland, and with it the spread of Gaelic to Scotland (p. 46). However, he glosses completely over the mainland of Scotland and the question of Pictish, focusing completely on Gaelic. This is perhaps understandable since we still have little knowledge of Pictish. However, considering that at least some of the purported settlers of Iceland from the British Isles came from a region that would have been considered Pictish at the time, possibly to some extent Gaelicised, it seems strange to ignore this when researching placenames. In addition, since the only real linguistic evidence we have for the Picts in Scotland is based on placenames I would have expected at least a reference to it. But as it stands, there is a whole linguistic area that is completely ignored in Friðriksson’s discussion on the languages of the British Isles.

Friðriksson references words from Old Irish through to Modern Irish and Scottish Gaelic as if they are the same word in the same language, with the same meaning, and he does not provide the etymology of any of them or even explain why a particular word was adopted above others. Moreover, he is not hesitant in his suggestions and rarely offers more than one possible word, and in doing so excludes other potentially valid words from the discussion. When I say valid, I mean valid in the way he seems to pick and choose at random the words he puts forth as being the loanwords adopted.

All throughout this book Friðriksson references ‘Gaelic’ words, but he does not provide their etymology or a standardized form of how they would have been written at the time of the settlement period of Iceland. For instance, instead of *becán* ‘small, little’ (O.Ir), he gives *beagan* (ScG) for *Bekanaðir* (p. 141), which is a later form of the word. He often provides the much later Modern Scottish Gaelic form of the word, not realising that the progression of time could also have affected the meaning of some of the words.

If the intention behind the publication of this book was to publish a good academic discussion on the influence of Gaelic on the Icelandic language at the time of the settlement, it could have done with some serious editing. The more I read through the book the more I am almost certain that this publication was rushed. In addition, with the mis-alignment of the chapters there are obvious spelling mistakes like *Samhein* instead of *Samhain* (p. 65 and p. 69) and *Imblog* instead of *Imbolc* (p. 65). There are also instances of peculiar spellings which suggest the author’s lack of knowledge of Gaelic, both Old/Middle Irish and Scottish Gaelic. This is obvious, for example, in the case of the term *tairngiri* ‘prophecy’ which is frequently referenced throughout the book as *tairgiri* or *tairrgire*, which are later forms (ScG) and generally not considered correct for the period, as well as *flaith* ‘chieftain, prince’, which is given as *flath* (p. 50). In another instance, it is suggested that the name Grænland ‘Greenland’ derives from the Gaelic word for sun. Still, the written form *grian* ‘sand’, ‘earth’ or ‘land’ is provided rather than the correct form *grían* ‘sun’ (p. 87). Such inattentiveness to accurate spelling is rampant throughout the book. My quibbles may seem pedantic but in a book such as this, it is imperative to provide correct spelling with accents when appropriate to avoid any misunderstanding. Even in other places, with attested Gaelic origins, his orthography of the Gaelic word is either wrong or inconsistent. This is the case, for example, with the Icelandic placename *Kalmanstunga*, which Friðriksson connects to *Calaman*, *columan* (p. 170) where the correct form would be *colmán*, ‘little dove’ to say nothing of the appropriateness of the connection. For the placename *Kollafjörður* Friðriksson provides *coill*, *coil* or *coille* (p. 177) for ‘forest’; however, it means ‘hazel-tree’, *caill* being the word for a ‘forest’. This all becomes even more convoluted when you look at the next entry for *Kollsvík*, and instead of suggesting that they may both be cognate with *caill*, he suggests the word *caille* ‘veil’ (pp. 177–8) being adopted for *Kollsvík*.

Placenames can serve as evidence for a language being spoken or used in a specific area and they can give us an impression of the possible relationship between language groups in that area, but this evidence is also very restricted. Onomastics is, like any other subject in the field of language studies, subject to a certain order in which placenames are constructed, and this is something that Friðriksson seems to have ignored completely. There are certainly words that are undisputedly of Gaelic origin, such as *Brian* in *Brjánsstaðir* (p. 145),

Dubán/Dubhán for Dufansdalur (p. 151) and *Conall* in Konálsstaðir (p. 178), to name a few. What the placenames, Brjánsstaðir, Dufansdalur and Konálsstaðir all have in common is that the first element of the placenames are proper nouns, Brian ‘Brjánn’, *Dubán/Dubhán* ‘Dufan’ and *Conall* ‘Konáll’. This is the easiest way to form placenames and cannot be considered an indication of significant language influence, because we cannot be certain that these people spoke Gaelic even though they bore Gaelic names. If we are to assume that Gaelic speakers affected the Icelandic language enough to litter the landscape with placenames of Gaelic origin there would undoubtedly be more obvious Gaelic placename elements found within them, i.e., *achad* ‘field’, *alt* ‘cliff’, *áth* ‘ford’, *cenn* ‘point, promontory’, *cnocc* ‘hill, mound’, *druim(m)* ‘ridge’, *dún* ‘fort, enclosure’, *glenn* ‘valley’, *mag* ‘plain, open stretch of land’, *tech* ‘house, dwelling’, *tulach* ‘hillock, mound’ or *úaim* ‘cave’. One would expect the Gaelic speaking settlers to describe their surroundings in their own language and for the relevant elements to be fossilized in the placenames. Instead, we have none of the landscape elements appearing in the placenames and therefore the conclusion must be that the number of Gaelic speakers was significantly smaller than would have been needed to influence the language of Iceland during the settlement period to a lasting degree.

It would have been interesting to see a proper engagement with previous scholarship to support the hypothesis as well as a more region-based analysis of the placename’s relation to known or suspected presence of Irish settlers. Friðriksson jumps between regions, countries, and timelines without connecting one to the other and he does this in a very haphazard way. He references Boudica and druids, as well as the writings of Julius Caesar and other authors on the pre-historic Celts, who are all unconnected to the settlement period of Iceland. It also goes without saying that their language was vastly different from the Gaelic spoken at the time of the Icelandic settlement. Friðriksson also tries to demonstrate a connection between Ireland and an engraving on a clock, which belonged to the great-aunt of Jón Steingrímsson (1728–91), called *eldklerkur* in Icelandic, i.e. ‘fire priest’ (*Eldmessa*). The Latin text on the clock was *Vox mea est bamba, possum depellere Satan* ‘My sound is Bamba, I expel Satan’ (p. 21) in Latin. Friðriksson contends that the name Bamba is a reference to an old name referring to Ireland, except the name is Banba and not Bamba. There is no reason for a person in the late 1600s to be referring to the name of Ireland to repel Satan; rather, this is much more likely an invocation to some obscure saint of unknown European origin.

Friðriksson offers more of a continuation of a mythological origin story of the settlement of Iceland than a proper academic discussion. Various people in Iceland, including some scholars, have been wanting to find evidence to support the theory that the Irish-speaking settlers were in fact more numerous than has previously been argued. However, this is not a book to help bolster that argument. In the age of misinformation and false representations this is a work of the kind that every serious scholar should stand against. The general reader should also

stay away from the book because it will only lead them astray. Sadly, the labour that apparently has gone into this book, while doubtless very time-consuming, has certainly not yielded a product that mirrors it.

List of References

- Callaway, E. 2012. 'Iceman's DNA reveals health risks and relations' *Nature*. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nature.2012.10130> (accessed 16/4/2023).
- Ebenesersdóttir, S. Sunna et al. 2018. 'Ancient genomes from Iceland reveal the making of a human population' *Science*. 360 (6392), 1028–1032.
- Helgason, A., Sigurðardóttir, S., Gulcher J.R., Ward, R., Stefánsson, K. 2000. 'mtDNA and the origin of the Icelanders: deciphering signals of recent population history', *American Journal of Human Genetics* 66, 999–1016.
- Keller, A., Graefen, A., Ball, M., et al. 2012. 'New insights into the Tyrolean Iceman's origin and phenotype as inferred by whole-genome sequencing'. *Nature Communications* 3, 698.
- Eldmessa*. Available online at <http://www.eldmessa.is/eldmessa/23/> (accessed 16/4/2023).
- Félag starfsfólks bókaverslana*. Available online at https://www.wikiwand.com/is/B%C3%B3kmenntaver%C3%B0laun_starfsf%C3%B3lks_b%C3%B3kaverslana (accessed 10/4/2023)
- Forlagið*. Available online at <https://www.forlagid.is/metsolulistinn/> (accessed 10/4/2023).
- Ötzi*. Available online at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%96tzi> (accessed 16/4/2023).

Elín Ingibjörg Eyjólfsdóttir
University of Iceland