
In 1840, upon the death of Jorgen Jorgenson, several of Tasmania’s newspapers published a glowing obituary describing him as ‘one of the most extraordinary men of his time’. ‘His political career’, they wrote, ‘is so well known that any detail of it would be superfluous – suffice it to say that Mr Jorgenson has figured in every sphere of life – from the Supreme Governor of Iceland, down to a bush constable in Van Dieman’s Land’ (p. 256). Sarah Bakewell’s extensively researched and eloquent biography animates the grand adventures and intimate quirks of what was indeed a most extraordinary life. It is not only the multitudinous selves Jorgenson played which make him such a fascinating historical subject; roles which ranged from sailor to explorer, spy, preacher, gambler, prisoner, police constable, editor and King of Iceland. It is also the extent to which Jorgenson seems to have been either present at or actively embroiled in vast historical processes throughout the age of Empire. Intellectual currents and cultural conflicts, from French republicanism and British constitutionalism to Christianity and the Enlightenment civilising project spoke through Jorgenson. They formed the epistemological repertoire from which Jorgenson, at times explicitly, drew to give meaning and moral justification to his life. To this extent, Bakewell’s biography is not only a rollicking good read accessible to a popular audience, it is also a contribution to historical knowledges of race and imperialism, colonial subjectivities, legal history and intellectual history. These strengths, however, may also be the book’s weaknesses. Bakewell at times seems constrained by the traditional generic conventions governing popular biographical writing. They are conventions which (contrary to Jorgenson’s life) presuppose a unified masculine subject whose heroic escapades and exceptional qualities often necessitate the author sacrifice historical complexity for romance and substitute criticism for celebration.

Born in 1780 to a Danish Royal clockmaker, Jorgenson, as Bakewell surmises was not ‘born for minute precise work, or for the fine-tuned manners of court life’ (p. 6). With a distinct antipathy towards Napoleon and an imagination brimming with fantasies of Empire, Jorgenson set sail for England at the age of fourteen on board an English coal ship. By twenty-one Jorgenson had commanded his own fleet around the South Sea Islands, circumnavigated the Southern coastline of Australia and had written voluminous accounts of his travels. His self-declared Anglophilia, however, suffered a blow after returning
to Denmark in 1808 to find it besieged by the British. With no justifiable pretext, beyond a display of military might against Napoleon, Britain spent three days capturing all but one ship of the Danish fleet and setting Copenhagen alight in a blaze of missiles. Jorgenson was summoned by the Danish government to avenge the two thousand Danes killed during the attack by commanding the last remaining ship into hostile British waters. The task placed Jorgenson in a state of internal turmoil and when he was eventually captured by the British he was found to be not particularly displeased by the prospect of once again living in Britain.

Whilst on parole Jorgenson became involved in a trading venture which sought to break the British-Icelandic trade embargo and supply Icelandic people with British goods. They arrived in Iceland and after encountering resistance to the venture on the part of the execrable Governor of Iceland, Captain Trampe, Jorgenson and his partners held Trampe as a Prisoner of War. Jorgenson declared Iceland an independent nation freed from Danish control and instated himself as the new Supreme Governor. However, Jorgenson’s reign as the benevolent ‘Icelandic King’ came to an abrupt halt when the British were informed of the situation. Jorgenson was promptly deported back to Britain where he languished in a prison hulk. Upon his release Jorgenson lived in splendid misery as a pauper, a drunkard, a gambler and a spy in the Napoleonic wars. He continued to rely on his influential and wealthy friends for money and legal assistance until he was finally transported to the direct antipode of Iceland: Australia. Again Jorgenson’s career was tumultuous and varied. He died in Tasmania having worked as a police constable enforcing martial law against the Aboriginal Tasmanians, a spy policing the convict population and as a writer for various Colonial newspapers.

As should be evident from the above synopsis, Jorgenson was by no means a unified man. In fact, he is the ideal post-modern subject: inhabiting multiple subject positions, constituted and governed by competing discourses which defy and transgress national boundaries. Yet it is the extent to which Bakewell attempts to shore up the otherwise porous boundaries of Jorgenson’s self and anchor him within heroic imperial narratives that is most disconcerting to the historian. This tendency is particularly pronounced when discussing Jorgenson’s complicity in Colonial violence. On Jorgenson’s first trip to Australia he worked briefly with the European sealers. In spite of ample historical evidence documenting the abductions, torture and sexual violence of Aboriginal women engaged in by the sealers, Bakewell quite bafflingly describes them as ‘tough and isolated’ men who ‘pioneered relations with Aboriginal people’ (p. 25). Similarly, when discussing Jorgenson’s role as a Tasmanian policeman in the 1830s enforcing martial law against the Indigenous population she is strangely reluctant to concede his active participation in racial violence.
Bakewell interprets one of Jorgenson’s reports where he writes of ‘capturing and destroying’ Aboriginal people as simply a product of his ‘careless or ambiguous’ language’ (p. 219). I do not wish to suggest that Jorgenson did not at other times express progressive racial ideas. Rather, it is the generic conventions which Bakewell conforms to that often prohibit any recognition of complex and contradictory subjectivities.

Similarly, Bakewell circumvents a more nuanced reading of Jorgenson’s fluid sexuality, insisting upon an uncomplicated heterosexual identity. Again this seems to stem from the popular generic conventions governing biography which crave a self-contained hero with a fixed and bounded sense of self. Jorgenson, however, simply defies this. He would write effusive declarations of love to his male friend, Hooker, swearing that he had ‘loved deeply indeed, but never did I with such eagerness wish to see any person, as I do you now’ (p. 132). When they are estranged he complains of a ‘broken heart’ (p. 248). Yet Bakewell precludes a queer reading of Jorgenson’s sexuality, warring the reader that ‘it would be a mistake to jump to over-hasty conclusions’ (p. 132). In my humble estimation, framing Jorgenson’s sexuality within a homosocial/homosexual continuum would not be ‘over-hasty’ so much as a plausible interpretation and an interesting contribution to histories of sexuality.

In spite of these criticisms, Bakewell tells a most extraordinary life story with skill and aplomb. She renders popularly accessible a complex narrative which is as much a history of ideas and social currents as it is a history of Jorgen Jorgenson. I have no doubt that because of Bakewell’s excellent research we shall see more of the ‘Icelandic King’ on the pages of future scholarly work.

Alecia Simmonds

_Love_ at the University of Melbourne


British colonizers signed treaties with the Native North Americans, the Zulu, and the Maori, but never with the Australian Aborigines. Academics continue to question the reasons why Britain never made treaties with indigenous Australians. Some claim that ‘Aboriginal people in Australia were less warlike’ than other indigenous groups among the British world (p. 12). Others, trying to explain the absence of an Australian treaty, emphasize the fact that the British found it difficult to negotiate with hunter-gatherer societies; proponents of this theory cite that the North American Inuit, another hunter-gatherer