

Destination Iceland: Þuríður formaður

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The struggle for women's rights has been a long one and is still ongoing. The women's movement couldn't have done better than to choose Þuríður Einarsdóttir for their case that women can do any job a man can do.

“Þuríður Einarsdóttir (mainly known as Þuríður formaður) (1777 – 13 November 1863) was one of most remarkable women in the Árnesþing district in southern Iceland in the 19th century. She was best known for her success as a fisherman and for solving the case of the robbery at Kambur. She went to sea until 1843, for most of the time as steerer of fishing boats. That was regarded as exceptional for a woman to do in her time.

“Þuríður formaður was born on the farm Stéttir in the Hraun area, where her parents lived for a long time and where she grew up until age 25. Her mother was Helga the younger, daughter of Bjarni Þorsteinsson from the smallholding Upper Ranakot whose father Þorsteinn Jónsson lived on the small holding Sandlækjarkot in the year 1703. Þuríður's life is often divided into three periods:

“For the first, until she reaches age 25, she lived with her parents at Stéttir. She started rowing on her father's fishing boat at age 11 and did so during the spring and autumn fishing season for her father and for her brother Bjarni until, aged 20, she became a fully rated fisherman for the winter season for Jón in Móhús. During these years she dressed as a man, for which she needed special permission from the district governor.

“The next period in her life covers the years 1802 – 1830. During that time she lived in different locations in the Stokkseyri area, for the longest time at a place called Gata. Those were her best years, during which she started being a steerer, first during the spring and autumn season, then for the win-

ter season as steerer in Þorlákshöfn from 1816 – 1830.

“The third period reaches from 1830 until her death. For most of that time she lived in Eyrarbakki, except for seven years (1840 – 1847), when she worked for merchants in Hafnarfjörður. During her first decade in Eyrarbakki, she rowed from Þorlákshöfn as steerer of an eight-oar boat for the winter season and fished very successfully.”

Þuríður was considered a good captain. She was cautious and careful but knew when to take chances. She was popular with her crew mates.

“For most of her life, she looked after herself, either as a cottager or as a tenant on the farm Skúmstóðir, but she needed to accept help from the parish for the last eight to nine years of her life, when she reached her late seventies. She died in Einarshöfn in the autumn of 1863, astonishingly healthy until the end.

“In 1949, the replica of a fishing bothy called Þuríðarbúð was erected in Stokkseyri in her memory, close to where her bothy had been.”

Life for fishermen during the time of the open boats was extremely difficult and dangerous. The fishermen lived in temporary huts with little or no heat. They slept on beds made of stone, sand and seaweed. Their waterproof clothes were made from sheep skins rubbed with fish oil. They often went to sea without anything to eat and only took whey with them to drink. Sometimes they were at sea for more than 12 hours.

The boats were frequently in poor



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Þuríðarbúð á Stokkseyri

condition. When there were no jetties or piers, they had to push the boat through the surf, in itself dangerous, and spend the day in wet clothes during freezing weather. On their return, they had to land sideways to the shore, pull the boat up above the tide line, then deal with the fish.

An eight-oared boat might hold 15 crew. When such a boat sank, the crew would drown. Few could swim and, even if one or more could, the frigid water, the waves, the heavy clothing, guaranteed that no one would survive. Many descendents of Icelandic emigrants have said to me that someone in their family, often a great-grandfather had drowned.

A tip of the hat to Þuríður Einarsdóttir. When you are in Iceland, go to Stokkseyri and say a prayer for her. If you have a daughter and anyone tells her that there is some job she can't or shouldn't do, tell her about Þuríður Einarsdóttir.

Quotes from is.wikipedia.org/wiki/Þuríður_formaður.

Translation by Klavía Robertsdóttir.

NB: “formaður” translated a “steerer” based on Concise Oxford Dictionary, dto “búð” as “Bothy”.