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Forest Lost and Paradise Regained

Hervé Brunon

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Skrúður, Núpur

The XXIV International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens

publication edited by
Patrizia Boschiero, Luigi Latini, Domenico Luciani

Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche
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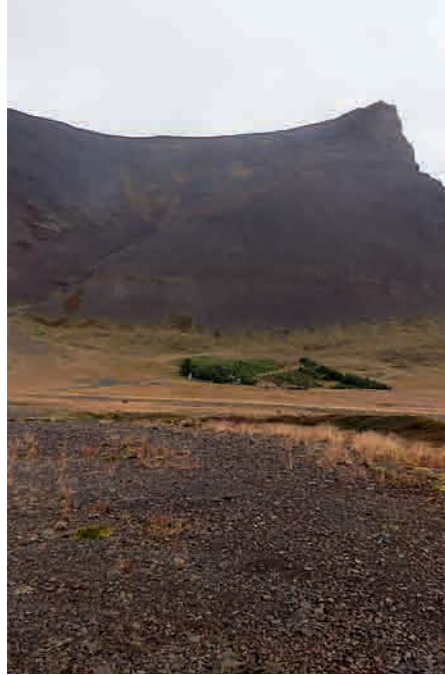
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**Hervé Brunon
Forest Lost
and Paradise Regained**

*in memory of
Annick Bertrand-Gillen*

There is something extraordinary, almost miraculous, about Skróður. Certainly this is the initial impression that strikes people the first time they come across this small garden on the shore of Dýrafjörður, one of the innumerable inlets in the Westfjords peninsula – *finis terrae* linked to the rest of Iceland by an isthmus which is so narrow that it seems almost an island in the middle of an immense ocean – very close to the Arctic Circle, where the traveller feels on the very edge of the world.

Such was also my first immensely strong and unforgettable impression when, at the beginning of September 2012, we came upon Skróður during our study trip. Small though this scrap of green actually is, it strikes one with incomparable force when one sees it from the road, the deep green of its trees

standing out at the foot of the mountain in a wide open, mainly mineral landscape in sharp contrast with the monotony and the unvarying late summer colours typical of the layer of low, scattered vegetation of the tundra. If the image it immediately brought to my mind was of an oasis in the middle of the desert – an experience shared by my friend José Tito Rojo (here, pp. 158-165) – it was probably because it reminded me of an aerial photograph of an orchard irrigated by a canal in the middle of an arid plateau in Iran, the illustration that opens *Jardins italiens* by Günter Mader and Laila Neubert-Mader, the first book I bought when, about twenty years ago, I started my studies of the history of gardens¹.

Of the terrestrial biomes or broad ecosystem types described in classical biogeography, the circumpolar tundra on the one hand and xerophytous deserts on the other belong to regions that would appear, *a priori*, to be the complete opposite of each other. Nevertheless, they feature a number of similarities, especially as regards their low, rather

sparse vegetation, determined by the “extreme” climatic conditions, which inhibit the development of denser, taller, more diversified plant formation such as is found on grasslands and above all in forests. The lack of rain, the cold or the wind considerably shorten the growing period so the flora is confined to species that can withstand the constraints. Nevertheless, this approach has been much revised since the first developments during the XIX century of biogeography as a scientific discipline, which still tended to describe the spatial distribution of living beings on the earth without taking account of anthropic influence. Nowadays, however, we know that every landscape is the outcome of an interaction between a natural history and a human history.

Today there are almost no forests in Iceland: recent estimates put coverage at scarcely 1.5 per cent of the overall surface area of the island and just 3.6 per cent of the parts below an altitude of 400 metres². But has this always been the situation? A reading of the exceptionally fine literary heritage of

the island suggests the contrary. As regards the “Period of Settlement”, the *Íslendingabók* (*The Book of Icelanders*), written in Iceland by Ari Þorgilsson at the beginning of the XII century, states that: «Í Þann tíð var Ísland viði vaxit á milli fjalls ok fjöru» («At that time, Iceland had woods growing between the mountains and the shore»). As we know, woods often play an important role in the sagas: in the late-XII century Saga of Gísli Súrsson, for example, the hero, denounced and banished from the community after the killing of his brother-in-law, spends part of his long exile hiding in thick woods³. These texts, however, were written three centuries after the “Period of Settlement” (*landnámstíð*, 874-930) and some scholars consider such quotations to be suspect.

In 1987, Régis Boyer, writing of the Westfjords where the Saga of Gísli Súrsson is set, mentions that «the region was heavily wooded and our saga confirms this at several points»; immediately after, however, he adds that «we must not distort the sense of what is

1-4. Four views showing the relationship between the enclosed garden of Skróður and the surrounding landscape, at the foot of Mount Núpur, September 2012.

2. See BJÖRN TRAUSTASON-ARNOR SNORRASON 2008.

3. *Saga de Gísli Súrsson*, XXVII, in *Sagas islandaises* 1987, p. 617: «He runs through the woods, for there the trees have encroached into many parts»; here as in similar cases, quotations from editions in languages other than English have been specifically translated for this dossier.

1. MADER-NEUBERT-MADER 1987, p. 10.



5-6. Piles of driftwood thrown up on the shore of Húnaflói Bay, between Hvammstangi and Hólmavík.

4. *Sagas islandaises* 1987, p. 1698 (note 5 on p. 603).

5. BOYER 2002, p. 25. Boyer does acknowledge, in connection with the statement quoted above, which occurs at the beginning of *The Book of Icelanders* that: «It is possible, and archaeology would tend to offer confirmation» (p. 72); but elsewhere he speaks of the «somewhat fanciful tradition» according to which «Iceland was thickly wooded at the time of its colonization» (p. 22).

6. According to THRÖSTUR EYSTEINSSON 1996, p. 40.

7. *Saga des Groenlandais*, v, in *Sagas islandaises* 1987, p. 364. The text appears in the *Flateyjarbók*, an illustrated manuscript dated the end of the XIV century (p. 1616).

8. See THRÖSTUR EYSTEINSSON 1996.

being said, for it is probable that Iceland has never known real forest coverage. At the most, there will have been woods, but however many trees they contained they will not have grown above average height, probably because of the winds that lash the island throughout the year»⁴. Returning in part to this point in his overview of *L'Islande médiévale*, published in 2001, the great historian continues to be doubtful or at least wary: «It is not impossible that the country once had extensive woods, as legends recount and as the ancient texts affirm, but close reading of them reveals clear echoes of the Bible and the discovery of the Land of Canaan, and the wind, which prevails over everything in those parts, cannot have helped the growth of large woods»⁵.

The information provided by archaeology over the last few years, however, has banished almost all doubt in the matter. Prior to the last glacial periods of the Pleistocene, Iceland was covered by mixed boreal forests consisting of conifer (*Pinus*, *Picea*, *Abies*, *Larix*) and broad-leaved species (*Betula*, *Acer*, *Alnus*). At the end of the last glacial episode, around 10,000 years ago, the *Betula pubescens*, the main surviving forest species, became predominant all over Iceland and at the time of Scandinavian colonization about a quarter of the island's surface was covered with forests. But the trees all but disappeared during the XII and XIII centuries⁶. Evincing the factual and often laconic style typical of the genre, a passage from one of the earliest *Sagas of Vinland* – tales of expeditions to North America –, based on an oral tradition, conveys the amazement of the Icelandic explorers when they reached apparently virgin lands: «The country seemed to them to be beautiful and tree-covered and the forests came almost down to the sea-shore»⁷. When these lines were committed to parchment, Iceland must have looked quite different.

Although the population of Iceland in the Middle Ages amounted to no more than

a few tens of thousands, it was human pressure that lay at the origin of this radical and perhaps brutal change to the landscape. The new inhabitants – as in all rural societies of the time – started to cut down trees to lay in stocks of firewood and building timber and to till the soil to create more fields and pastureland. Sheep-breeding, for wool and meat, became fundamental in an economy which, apart from fishing, could count on only meagre resources; the resulting over-grazing prevented any regeneration of the forests. In the 1600s, the need for charcoal, which was indispensable for metallurgy, led to the over-exploitation of the dwarf birch (*Betula nana*), a shrub that does not reach more than 50 centimetres in height⁸. Once the trees were gone, the porosity of the volcanic-origin soil, the high rainfall and the violence of the winds combined to hasten erosion. The process of deforestation was stopped only as late as 1950. The almost religious care with which the inhabitants still collect and stockpile driftwood borne by sea currents from Siberia testifies to the implications for society of the absence of forests in a land which is so isolated and unfertile.

It was only on the threshold of the XX century that measures began to be taken to reverse this phenomenon and encourage reforestation – or rather *afforestation*, given that the land had borne practically no trees for centuries. 1899 saw the planting of pines at Þingvellir, a site of national historical importance. In 1907 Parliament adopted legislation providing for the protection of forests and soil and the *Skógrækt ríkisins* (Iceland Forest Service) was set up a year later, significantly just one year before the creation of the Skríður garden (1909). Conservation of the few surviving birch woods and the first experiments based on non-native species was followed up, from around 1950, with an ever-expanding programme of planting which by 2005 had reached a rate of over 6 million new trees a



year and an annual increase in overall forested area of 1,000 to 1,500 hectares⁹. The 2,300-hectare National Forest of Hallormsstaður, in eastern Iceland, is now the country's biggest. Albeit on a much smaller scale, with the wood on the eastern side of its garden, Skríður too is part of this effort to “reconquer the desert”.

Following the suggestion of Giambattista Vico's *Scienza nuova* (1744) – «This was the order of human institutions: first the forests, after the huts, then the villages, next the cities, and finally the academies»¹⁰ –, Robert Harrison, in a stimulating reflection on forests and the western imagination, suggests that the history of civilization should metaphorically be seen as the gradual expansion of a clearing. In its constant quest for more light, society, through its dominant institutions, gradually pushes back the “edge”, the frontier that separates it from the forest, and thereby takes its place; thus the forest becomes symbolically its “shadow” in the cultural memory, the otherness that defines the very idea of civilization. «This

gradual loss of an edge of opacity, where the human abode finds its limits on the earth, is part of the global story of civic expansionism. In the West its first and last victim has been the forest»¹¹. The indefinite expansion of the clearing is not only a symbolic image but links up with a geographical reality. Harrison notes how the process of «mindless deforestation» seems to be an inevitable by-product of the expansion of the Greek and Roman civilizations in Antiquity: with the advance of the great empires from east to west, the forests disappeared from around the Mediterranean and towards Northern Europe; by causing erosion, he suggests, deforestation was one of the factors that precipitated the decline and fall of some of the richest and most important cities of Antiquity, places such as Ephesus, which was abandoned by its inhabitants as a result of the gradual silting up of its natural harbour¹². Harrison thus raised an issue that since then has been widely studied and debated in the context of *global environmental history*¹³: the more or less crucial impact of the poor management

9. See DAMMERT 2001; THRÖSTUR EYSTEINSSON 2009.

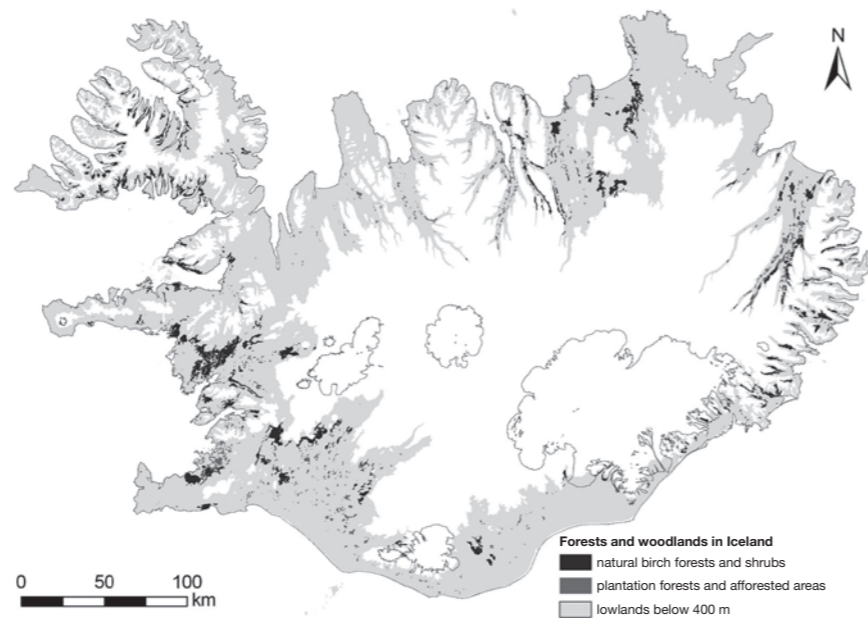
10. Giambattista Vico, *Scienza nuova*, 239, in VICO 1990, p. 519.

11. HARRISON 1993, p. 247.

12. HARRISON 1993, pp. 55-58. See, amongst others HUGHES 1982; KÜSTER 2009, pp. 78 ff. However, RADKAU 2008, pp. 131-136, calls this historiographical model into question: archaeology has shown that in some parts of Greece deforestation and erosion were already underway in the Neolithic, while the rapid, large-scale deterioration of Mediterranean eco-systems in mountainous areas dates from the XIX and XX centuries.

13. For this line of research, see the analyses of LOCHER-QUENET 2009.

7. Distribution map of the forests and wooded areas in Iceland today, reproduced from BJÖRN TRAUSTASON-ARNOR SNORRASON 2008, p. 43.



of territorial resources on the “collapse” of certain societies – a subject that has attracted the attention of the public at large thanks to the success of Jared Diamond’s *Collapse. How societies choose to fail or succeed*, published in 2005, which also relates the theory to the colonization of Iceland and Greenland¹⁴. Without entering into detail concerning these extremely complex problems, I wish simply to stress that in the case of Iceland, the history of forests involves stakes that are amongst the most critical in the contemporary world and of the planet-wide ecological crisis. Though scientists continue to wrangle over the starting point of the Anthropocene, i.e. the current, post-Holocene geological era, during which human influence over the terrestrial system has become predominant – the industrial revolution? the Neolithic revolution? – it can be argued that on this island, where latitude, isolation and geology combine to make the vegetation especially vulnerable and weaken the resilience of the ecosystems, the Anthropocene began around the year 1000, more or less around the time of colonization and at the latest a few generations after the

arrival of the earliest inhabitants. As far as forests are concerned, Iceland in a certain sense offers a speeded up picture of human history on the Earth¹⁵. It should not be forgotten, in fact, that according to the estimates in the latest FAO report on the state of the world’s forests, «about half of western Europe’s forests are estimated to have been cleared prior to the Middle Ages»¹⁶ and before the sharp decline in the continent’s population in the XIV century. And in the long term, global deforestation, whose trajectory «has more or less followed the global growth rate of the human population», would appear to be «one of the most widespread and important changes that people have made to the surface of the earth. Over a period of 5,000 years, the cumulative loss of forest land worldwide is estimated at 1.8 billion hectares, an average net loss of 360,000 hectares per year»¹⁷. According to the United Nations Organization and its programme *Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD)*, half of the forests, this time of the whole world, were felled during the

14. DIAMOND 2006, chap. 6-8. See also the works published previously TAINTER 2003 and PONTING 2007. For a critical point of view see the volume by MCANANY-YOFFEE 2010.
 15. As regards this “didactic” value of the environmental history of Iceland, see RADKAU 2008, pp. 165-166.
 16. *State of the World’s Forests* 2012, p. 11.
 17. *State of the World’s Forests* 2012, p. 9. For this point, see WILLIAMS 2006.



8. Wooded area of Þingvellir National Park, around Lake Þingvallavatn, September 2012.

XX century alone¹⁸. And the consequences affect not only the soil, the water cycle, biodiversity and greenhouse gas emission, but also the productivity of economic activities, the quality of life conditions, the transmission of lifestyles, memory and culture. To what point can the “clearing” of human civilization continue to expand? Is not the extreme “insularity” of Iceland, which accentuates the fragility of ecological balance, perhaps a sort of synecdoche for the finiteness of the biosphere? In this case, the image of Skríúður as an oasis in the middle of the desert becomes immensely significant. The Reverend Sigtryggur Guðlaugsson’s achievement takes its place on the horizon of hope, of which Jean Giono’s short story *L’Homme qui plantait des arbres* (1953) – the tale of a simple shepherd who set out to reforest his region of Haute Provence –

is a parable. It could also bring to mind Osgood Mackenzie (1842-1922), who in 1862 inherited a vast estate of desolate moorland on a wind-swept coast at Wester Ross in Scotland; nothing grew there but a single twisted willow, yet he managed to transform the place by creating Inverewe, a botanical garden with thousands of different species¹⁹. Or in our own time, Wangari Maathai (1940-2011), who led the struggle against deforestation in Kenya through the Green Belt Movement (which she herself had set up in 1977) and caused millions of trees to be planted, creating employment and raising the profile of women in African society; her efforts and achievements were acknowledged by the award of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004. And like these there are many, many others all over the world. Like Yacouba Sawadogo in Burkina Faso,

18. Statistic given in JOIGNOT 2011.
 19. See *A Guide to Inverewe Garden* 2010, pp. 3-4.

whose efforts focus on stopping the advance of the desert and on “greening the Sahel” by improving the traditional technique of sowing in *zai* holes, which retain rainwater and use organic matter to attract termites whose tunnels improve the soil structure; since 1984 he has planted trees on dozens of hectares and encouraged the sharing of knowledge and seeds by organizing twice-yearly “market days” that bring together farmers from around a hundred villages²⁰. Or like Jadav Payeng, an Indian farmer who has, since 1979, with his own hands, planted an entire forest on a huge, empty expanse of sand in the middle of the Brahmaputra River, at Jorhat in the state of Assam²¹.

At the dawn of the third millennium Skríúður, the tiny rectangular garden with its simple orthogonal pathway, more archetypal than archaic, humbly and tenaciously teaches us of the sense of responsibility to everything surrounding us that we must bring to all our actions. In another book, in this case devoted to the gardener’s work as an emblem of the human condition, Robert Harrison starts from a famous quotation from Voltaire and goes on: «It is because we are thrown into history that we must cultivate our garden. In an immortal Eden there is no need to cultivate, since all is pre-given there spontaneously. Our human gardens may appear to us like little openings onto paradise in the midst of the fallen world, yet the fact that we must create, maintain, and care for them is the mark of their postlapsarian provenance. [...] The gardens that have graced this mortal Eden of ours are the best evidence of humanity’s reason for being on Earth»²².

This conviction was shared by Annick Bertrand-Gillen (1949-2012), a gardener who spoke of the place she and her partner Yves had created in Brittany at the edge of the Grande Brière marshes, a garden that enabled them to live an ecological and libertarian ideal, as a modest paradise. «I like to believe

that elsewhere on Earth there are other oases of peace which bear out my profound conviction that man is not made to destroy but to sow»²³.

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20. See OUÉDRAOGO-SAWADOGO 2005, and the documentary made by Mark Dodd, *The Man Who Stopped the Desert* (1080 Films, 2010).

21. See SHARMA 2012.

22. HARRISON 2008, p. x.

23. Unpublished text, quoted in Serge Steyer's documentary *Vivre en ce jardin* (Pois chiche films 2004). See BERTRAND-GILLEN 2009.