

MARITIME DISASTERS IN REMOTE FARMING COMMUNITIES IN SOUTHEAST ICELAND 1841-1945: NARRATIVES OF SURVIVAL, TRAUMA AND RESILIENCE OF WIDOWS, HOUSEHOLDS AND THE CHILDREN OF THE DECEASED

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ABSTRACT

The history of Iceland is characterised by numerous adversities, including natural and maritime disasters, climate-related calamities, crop failures, epidemics, poverty, and other catastrophes. Extensive literature exists on maritime disasters along Iceland's coasts, particularly major shipwrecks and offshore disasters, which often focus on the sequence of events and the fate of those who survived or perished in their struggle against the sea. Less scholarly attention has been devoted to the impact of such disasters on the public, particularly rural farming communities that relied on open rowboats and lacked natural harbours along the sandy coastline. The livelihoods of these communities depended on fisheries, but they faced extreme peril during fishing expeditions due to hazardous landing conditions. This study examines narratives concerning the households (particularly widows and children) who lost husbands and fathers - typically the primary providers - in maritime disasters on the south coast of Iceland between 1841 and 1945, before the establishment of the Icelandic modern welfare society. The analysis highlights the existential threats, poverty, and hardship these families endured, including family dispersal, the placement of children as paupers, household dissolution, poverty, illness, reliance on public support, institutionalization, and, in some cases, suicide following trauma and bereavement, and stories of bravery and resilience. Drawing on official records such as parish registers, census data, obituaries, biographies, folklore, and other sources, this research illuminates the broad societal impacts of maritime disasters. It underscores the harsh realities faced by impoverished rural communities along Iceland's southern coast.

Keywords: Maritime disasters, 19th-century Iceland, trauma, resilience, rural communities, poverty and hardship

INTRODUCTION

This study concerns the history of hardship among the poor and isolated rural communities along Iceland's southeast coast, and the harsh struggle for survival that characterised the lives of the Icelandic farming communities well into the mid-20th century. The threats were numerous: harsh weather, epidemics, and supply shortages threatened people's lives and well-being, but it was the sea (one of the main lifelines) and seafaring under challenging conditions that posed the greatest danger.

Before the age of technology and modern welfare society, and until World War II, Iceland was the poorest country in Europe. At the beginning of the 19th century, Icelandic society