

quæ Piscis *Nahui*: Hujus carnem si quis comedat, statim moritur: habetque dentem in interiori capitis parte prominentem ad septem cubitos. Hunc quidam pro Monocerotis cornu vendiderunt. Creditur venenis adversari. Quadraginta ulnarum longitudinem habet bellua. *Foster*, centum triginta ulnarum est, caret dentibus. Ejus caro esui accommodatissima gratissimaque, pinguedo multis morbis medetur. *Cetus Britannicus*, longitudine triginta ulnarum: dentibus caret, linguamque septem ulnarum habet. Est & maximum *Cetorum* genus quod raro apparet, Insulæ magis quam Piscis simile. Insequi minores Pisces præ corporis illa immani mole nequit, capit tamen illos sua quadam arte & astutia. Alius item piscis *Stantus valur* dictus, totus cartilagineus, Raiae aliquo modo similis: sed infinitis modis major, Insulæ speciem cum apparet, præ se fert, alis naves evertit. Sunt & *Seenaut*, Boves marini, colore griseo: & alij. Ad montes transito, Islandiæ (inquit Georgius Agricola) tres sunt Montes e-

cravir, ut inde ad octoginta miliaria grandiores machinæ bellicæ explodi putarentur. Apud hunc vorago quædam, ubi spectra se offerunt, congressibus hominum tam manifesta, ut tanquam viventes accipiantur ab ignaris mortis illorum: nec deprehenditur error, prius quam disparuerint umbre. Sed hæc aut fabulosa sunt, aut certe Dæmonum ludibria, Ipse Jonas fabulosa putat. Crantziiu Islandos specus plerumq; habitare scribit, ad montium latera excavatis mansuiculis. Quod idem quoque Olaus asserit, in primis tempore brumali. Ex ossibus Piscium domos exstruunt, penuriâ lignorum. Contra Jonas, dicit hic Tempia & domicilia exstare satis multa ex ligno, cespite, & saxis satis magnifica & sumptuosa. Duos habet Insula Episcopatus Cathedralis, *Holm* sub quo sunt Monasteria *Pingora*, *Remested*, *Modur*, *Munkeniene*: *Scalholt* cui Monasteria subsunt *Videy*, *Pyrnebar*, *Kirkkebar*, & *Shieda*. Ex Vellei hujus tabulæ auctoris tamen scriptis intelligitur novem in ea esse Monasteria: & Tempia præterea

Montes,

Opera & publica & privata.

terea

Daniel Vetter

IN THE LAND OF ICE AND FIRE



Map of Iceland by Petrus Kaerius from 1630. Private collection of Dariusz Rott

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ISLANDIA.
Dividitur verò Insula universa in totidem partes, quot sunt Mundi cardines. Orientalem vocant *Austlendingafjörðung*, Occidentalem *Westlendingafjörðung*, Septentrionalem *Nortlendingafjörðung*, Meridionalem *Sudlendingafjörðung*. Urbibus carent, montes praeurbibus habentes. Ions hic qui fumigantis aquæ vitio nativam rei cuiuslibet originem demolitur: & quicquid fumi hujus exhalatione respersit, in lapideæ naturæ duritiem transmutatur formaque durior super-

Fontes.

lati in Coelum, quorum vertex perpetuâ nive candent, radices sempiterno æstuant igne. Primus vocatur *Hecla*, alter *Crucis*, tertius, *Helga*, id est sanctus. Ab Hecla non longè absunt fodinæ Sulphuris, pæne unicum Incolarum mercimonium, & vectigal Insulæ: Mercatores enim naves eo onustas evehant. Mons ipse cum furit, ut horribila tonitrua insonat, projicit ingentia saxa, Sulphur evomat, cineribus egestis omnino longè brevius complet, ut ad vicissimum lapidem terra

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For a 17th-century European, Iceland must have been an almost mythical island – a land of smoking volcanoes and icy winds surrounded by a hostile ocean full of fantastic beasts and sea wonders. It was the destination of Daniel Vetter, a young member of the Unity of the Brethren and a well-educated humanist and future printer, who reached the island in 1613. He recorded his observations from his several-week stay in one of the most intriguing travel works of Old Polish literature – *Islandia álbo Krotkie opisanie Wyspy Islandyji* (*Iceland, or a Short Description of the Island of Iceland*).

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This inconspicuous work, first published in 1638 by Vetter's own printing house, remained forgotten for a long time, existing only in specialist reprints. It was only thanks to the research of Prof. Dariusz Rott, a literary historian, media expert and editor, author of, among others, the book *Daniel Vetter i jego „Opisanie wyspy Islandyji”* (*Daniel Vetter and his Description of the Island of Iceland*) of 1993, that it was rediscovered, edited, and made available to contemporary readers in an understandable form.

‘When Daniel Vetter arrived in Iceland in 1613, he may have been a bit surprised, although I do not think that anything particularly shocked him’, explains Prof. Dariusz Rott. ‘He was, after all, a well-educated man – he studied at German secondary schools and at the Heidelberg University. During his studies, he had to gather information about this distant corner of Europe. He most likely had access to contemporary atlases, in which Iceland was presented in a highly fantastical way. And this is how he had imagined it’. Iceland, this ‘land of fire and ice’, which for Europeans was a borderland where the known world ended and something completely different began, became an area of research for Vetter. Contrary to the stereotypical image of a traveller of that time as a collector of anecdotes and fantasies, the future printer from Leszno proved to be a perceptive and critical observer. The researcher emphasises his modern approach to writing:

‘Vetter does not build his accounts in a linear fashion (journey – stay – return) but thematically. Each chapter is devoted to a different aspect of life on the island: geography, flora and fauna, religion, customs, climate. Thus, we can find separate

sections devoted, for example, to roads in Iceland, water, the organisation of day and night, and, what’s particularly interesting, religious services.

As a representative of the Protestant community, Vetter met with the bishop in Skalholt and took part in the deliberations of the Althing, one of the oldest parliaments in Europe. His account of these events is an invaluable testimony to Icelandic culture from over 400 years ago.

Importantly, Vetter does not take everything at face value. When he hears stories about damned souls whose cries are said to resound from the Icelandic mountains, he writes: ‘I was there – I saw nothing of the sort, I heard nothing’. This rational approach means that the text does not succumb to sensationalism, but rather resembles a modern travel report in which the author verifies preconceptions and stereotypes about this specific region of the world.

But who was Daniel Vetter himself? As the literary scholar reminds us, the author of *Iceland, or a Short Description of the Island of Iceland* came from a family with deep traditions in the humanities. His father was a printer and translator of the so-called Kralice Bible – the first complete translation of the Bible into Czech. In the 1630s, he settled in Leszno, a notable town which was the centre of Czech Protestant emigration and one of the most important centres of Reformation culture in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. There he managed the printing house, which produced the works of Jan Amos Komeński and other Protestant thinkers. Vetter himself was friends with Komeński, who was godfather to his eldest son.

The motives behind Vetter’s trip to Iceland

remain a subject of speculation to this day. Was it part of a classic educational journey? Or perhaps a religious mission – an attempt to establish contacts between Protestant communities? Or was he simply attracted by the exotic and the desire to face the unknown? Whatever the case may have been, the account he left behind has grown to be considered the most outstanding text written about Iceland by a foreigner in the 17th century – a fact proudly noted by the Icelanders themselves, when they published a modern translation of the work.

Today, Vetter lives on – not only in the research of Professor Dariusz Rott but also as a source of inspiration. His life and work influenced, among others, Piotr Milewski, author of the book *Iceland or The Coldest Summer in 50 Years*, who used excerpts from Vetter’s account as chapter mottos. A bibliophile edition of Vetter’s work has also been published, enriched with woodblock prints from *A Description of the Northern Peoples* by Olaus Magnus, graphically illustrating the world described by the 17th-century author. It was published by the Museum of Polar Research in Puławy.

Thanks to the work of the Polish studies expert from the University of Silesia, Vetter has gained a new life – not only as an object of interest for researchers of Old Polish literature but as a genuine cultural figure. Meet-the-author sessions with the writers inspired by Vetter, radio broadcasts, bibliophile editions and even mentions in tourist guides have ensured that Vetter’s name has not been forgotten, and his work continues to encourage readers to head north, seeking not only ice, fire, and ‘sea wonders’ but also fascinating culture and history.