

## **OXFORD NATIONAL DICTIONARY OF BIOGRAPHY**

**Magnusson, Magnus (1929-2007)**, Icelandic scholar, broadcaster, and heritage expert, was born on 12 October 1929 in Reykjavik, Iceland, the son of Sigursteinn Magnússon (1899-1982), European Export Manager of the Icelandic Co-operative, and later Icelandic Consul General for Scotland, and his wife Ingibjörg Sigurðardóttir (1905-1983). The second youngest of four children, he had a brother, Sigurður (1927-1985), and two sisters, Margrét (1928-1996) and Snjólaug (b. 1935). With this nationality and parentage, he should have been called Magnús Sigursteinsson, but this was regarded as too difficult for non-Icelanders to pronounce in the family's newly-adopted country of Scotland, where they moved when Magnus was nine months old. So, Magnús Magnússon he became, and remained, although he anglicised the spelling by removing the accents. He was educated at Edinburgh Academy, where he was Dux (he later wrote the school's history, *The Clackan and the Slate*, 1974), and, having won an open scholarship, at Jesus College, Oxford, where he graduated with a second class degree in English in 1951.

### **Journalist and broadcaster**

Forsaking the academic life, Magnusson began his long and distinguished career in the media. He started as a staff writer and was later Assistant Editor (1953-61) of the *Scottish Daily Express*. He was head hunted by Alastair Dunnett, the Editor of *The Scotsman*, as Chief Features Writer and rose to become Assistant Editor. It was in these jobs that he honed his skills as an investigator and wordsmith of repute. Meanwhile, on 30 June 1954, at Wardlawhill Parish Church, Rutherglen, Glasgow, he married Mary Ian (Mamie)

Baird (daughter of John Baird, janitor, and his wife Sarah) a fellow journalist and Chief Feature Writer on the *Scottish Daily Express*. They had five children, Sally, Margaret, Anna, Siggy, and Jon. Sadly, Siggy was killed in a motor accident aged eleven. The other children followed in their father's footsteps into radio or television broadcasting. Magnusson was a true family man, being described by his daughter Sally as "the most generous, steadfast, loving and loved of husbands and fathers" (*Times*, 8 January 2007).

Magnusson began his television career as a presenter and producer of current affairs and documentaries on BBC Scotland in the mid-1960s. This was followed by two years as a presenter on the late evening current affairs programme, *Tonight*. A long-running archaeological programme, *Chronicle* (1966-80), followed; Magnusson was creator, researcher, and presenter, displaying his mastery of gathering knowledge and communicating it to a wider audience.

Magnusson was best known as the "interrogator" in the television quiz series, *Mastermind* which he fronted for twenty-five years, from 1972 to 1997. This programme suited his approach to knowledge: he described his hobbies in *Who's Who* as 'digging and delving'. He had a mellifluous voice and deep humanity, always putting contestants at their ease behind the scenes with a smile and a joke. The phrase he made famous, 'I've started, so I'll finish', had special significance as Magnusson was the consummate finisher of everything he started. The final programme, recorded in St Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall, Orkney, brought together three facets of his interests: broadcasting, the Nordic world, and outstanding national heritage.

## **Icelandic scholar**

Magnusson was deeply attached to his native country in mind and soul, although he never lived there permanently. 'My hearth is in Scotland, but my heart is in Iceland', he often said. He was a master of Iceland's history and folklore, an expert on Icelandic literature, could read Old Norse and modern Icelandic with ease, and could speak and translate the Icelandic language fluently. He studied Old Norse literature at Oxford University and in Copenhagen. With his colleague and collaborator Hermann Pálsson, he translated five of the Sagas: *Njál's Saga* (1960), *Eirík's Saga* (1965), *The Vinland Sagas* (1965), *King Harald's Saga* (1966), and *Laxdæla Saga* (1969). Such was his meticulous approach to translation, the sign of a true scholar, that he revised his translations for a new publisher late in life.. He was a consummate interpreter and teller of Iceland's history. Those fortunate enough to hear him give a recitation from Lögberg (the Law Rock at the world's first democratic parliament, the Althing, in Thingvellir) felt they had experienced the drama and significance of the original proceedings. He led tours telling the stories set out in the sagas. Listening to him telling the story behind the name of each hummock in the landscape was to attend a master class in cultural history. He translated five of the novels of Iceland's Nobel Laureate in Literature, Halldór Laxness, bringing to the English-speaking world otherwise inaccessible novels of the highest quality. His services to Iceland were recognised by the award of Knight of the Order of the Falcon in 1975 and Knight Commander in 1986, and also by an Edda (equivalent to a BAFTA award) for his contribution to television.

Magnusson was immensely passionate about Iceland's natural environment, had little time for conserving just a few special places, and argued that the whole of the highlands should be a national park. Unfortunately, this was not achieved in his lifetime. He acted as the environmental guide and mentor to his great friend, the former President of Iceland, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, who later said of him "no one has matched the scale on which Magnus presented Iceland to the English speaking world" (Funeral oration). He was revered throughout the Nordic world and doors opened to greet him whenever he visited those northern realms. His daughter Sally's account of visiting Iceland with her father in *Dreaming of Iceland: the lure of a family legend* (2005) told of the handing on of the love affair with his native country and provided perceptive insights into her father's character.

### **Writer and speaker**

Magnusson was a wordsmith of the highest calibre. He authored some fifteen books, translated another ten, and contributed to other publications. What began as a small task might end as a well researched and highly readable book. A talk on the Hebridean island of Rum ended with a book on its history (1997). The series of broadcasts entitled *Tales of a grandfather* (after Sir Walter Scott's classic book) ended as a 700-page tour de force, *Scotland: The Story of a Nation* (2001), which was described by a reviewer as "so well written, so well researched, so well understood". Erudition, scholarship, rigour of research, vigour and determination in the execution, along with elegant phrasing of text,

were hallmarks of his approach. Quotations from many sources peppered his talks and books. He was particularly fond of Gerard Manley Hopkins. He published a book of quotations collected over his lifetime of reading, *Keeping My Words* (2004). He devoured dictionaries and was a severe grammatical task master. It was said about working with him, “to unforgivably split an infinitive ... was a serious offence” (Smout, 16).

Magnusson researched each subject meticulously, whether for a book, a speech, or a broadcast. He prepared for every event as if all of life depended upon it, whether a meeting with a government minister, or a parliamentary committee, or a board meeting. He recorded briefings on his trusty pocket recorder, listened to them assiduously, and typed them into his notes. His preparation of a lecture or talk was equally detailed. He wrote all of his speeches and declaimed them word for word, although few realised this as his delivery was so accomplished. Giving a speech from notes left too much to chance, he believed, but he admired those who could do it.

### **Heritage and environmental campaigner**

Magnusson’s contribution to heritage and the environment was also very significant. The starting point was bird watching as a school boy at Edinburgh Academy. At the age of fourteen, he won the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)’s Public Schools Essay Competition on the mating rituals of blackbirds. Later in life, he became President of the RSPB (1985-90) and loved to focus the lens of his precious Bausch and Lomb binoculars on a bird and identify it by its “jizz”.

Magnusson was chairman of the Scottish Churches Architectural Heritage Trust(1978-85), and of the Ancient Monuments Board for Scotland (1981-9). His work on national heritage, particularly in Scotland, in increasing understanding by the public through broadcasting and writing and through committee work was recognised with the award of an honorary KBE, and the Medlicott Medal of the Historical Association, both in 1989. Sir Malcolm Rifkind, the Secretary of State for Scotland, surprised many and silenced critics by appointing him as the chairman of the newly-created Scottish Natural Heritage (1992-9). In preparation for this role, he was appointed by Rifkind successively as Chairman of the Scottish Advisory Committee of the Nature Conservancy Council (1989-91), and Chairman of the Nature Conservancy Council for Scotland (1991-2). He was the right person to fulfil the vision of bringing nature and people together and making sure that this had resonance in Scotland. He worked tirelessly for the cause, challenged old ideas, and engaged with enormous determination to solve the many inherited conflicts.

Magnusson never avoided difficult tasks, but sought resolution between opposing factions in Iceland and Scotland. Some very knotty problems were what he called 'a two pipe job'. Every angle would be rigorously examined and a resolution achieved often in clouds of pipe smoke. Contentious debates about the future of the Cairngorms Mountains in Scotland (he chaired a government working party in 1991-3 to bring the parties together and agree a new future), about geese and farmers on Islay, or about access over sporting estate land in Scotland, were addressed, along with a foray into the conservation battles around Lake Mývatn in Iceland. To all of these issues and many other contentious

ones in the environmental field, he applied his intellect and humanity alongside his ability to ensure that opponents began to see the sense of a different approach. It is not without coincidence that his report on the Cairngorms was titled *Common Sense and Sustainability*, both a literary play on words and a sentiment echoing his whole approach.

### **Educationist**

Magnusson devoted a great deal of effort to the education of younger generations and being with children gave him great delight. He was chair of the Scottish Youth Theatre (1976-8). He was a very effective Rector of Edinburgh University (1975-8), bridging the gap between the student and academic communities. He later took on the mantle of Chancellor of Glasgow Caledonian University (2002-7), and devoted his boundless energy to it. He would have been delighted with the Magnus Magnusson Awards established by the university in 2007 to promote the ideas of young people, and the Magnus Magnusson Fellowships to stimulate discussion of issues of major concern to society, and the Magnus Magnusson PhD studentship, first awarded by Scottish Natural Heritage in 2008. His contributions to Scottish life were recognised by the honorary degrees awarded by seven universities (Edinburgh, Glasgow, Glasgow Caledonian, Napier, Paisley, and Strathclyde).

### **Character and assessment**

Magnusson was a brilliant, charismatic man of many parts who graced public life, literature, and the media in Scotland, in Britain, and Iceland. He achieved more in one lifetime than most would achieve in three. He was the archetypal polymath and, as he liked to say, an opsimath: a learner late in life. He was also one of the most kindly and humane people, with a twinkle in the eye and a great sense of humour. He had his favourites, people whom he trusted and who shared his visions, took action, and were not bowed down by bureaucracy. A favourite phrase was 'I like the cut of his jib', of someone he had newly met and was keen to work with. He could use his personality and knowledge to gain the upper hand, for example, in meeting with government ministers, much to the chagrin of their officials. To others about whose views he was sceptical he would respond enigmatically, 'You may well be right'. He was by nature an optimist and always wished to find solutions. He despised humbug and arrogance, and was intolerant of negativity. He was very demanding and expected everyone to work as long and as hard as he did; he could not tolerate missed deadlines. His daughter Sally summed her father up exquisitely: he "did everything to excess: drank hard, smoked fervently, loved deeply, gave generously, worked furiously, committed himself passionately to the things he cared about and drove himself relentlessly. Mediocrity was anathema. Political correctness never got a look in" (*Sunday Herald*, 11 March 2007).

Magnusson died of pancreatic cancer on 7 January 2007 at his family home, Blairskaithe House, in Balmore, Torrance, north of Glasgow. He was buried ten days later at Baldernock Parish Church near his home and beside his son Siggy, perhaps reflecting where his heart ultimately lay. By the time of his death, he had raised the standard of



television broadcasting to new heights through his research and communication skills, and through the most famous quiz programme of his generation. In her funeral oration for Magnusson, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir said that “he transformed the way the world saw Icelandic culture and civilisation” and that “he was a cultural icon in both Britain and Iceland”. He demonstrated that a combination of intellect, hard work, meticulous preparation, and a winning smile could result in significant movement from entrenched positions. He galvanised a new approach to dealing with environmental conflicts in Scotland. And he made a more comprehensive contribution to communication and broadcasting than almost anyone of his generation.

Roger Crofts

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Personal knowledge

Private information

M cert

D cert