

Scandinavians: In Search of the Soul of the North

Robert Ferguson

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Scandinavians engages with the explorer's spirit that still sheaths the north lands in romance.

Robert Ferguson's *Scandinavians* is a work that is certain to delight curious adventurers as it captures rich cultural histories with infectious aplomb.

Over drinks with a new friend, Robert Ferguson discloses that he intends to journey across Scandinavia, ending in the heart of its melancholy. His dubious tablemate wonders how he's so certain that he'll find the land's spirit in such a specific direction. Though Ferguson seems somewhat impervious to the critique at the time, that exchange comes to characterize his book: he is always certain that, in his love for it, he understands the North; yet his travels in it, and interactions with records of it, continually reveal something new.

There's a magic to this lengthy and unusual text that resists strict categorizations. It is both a travelogue and a cultural history, both an ingathering of facts and an ode. Early chapters trace the march of Christianity across a land once dominated by Vikings and myths; a mid-book break introduces a full drama, with Ibsen taking center stage. Royals both weak and strong take nations through strange historical turns; violence when norms are defied proves brutal. Recent acts of terrorism are here, too, but they come to feel an absurd fit within the land that Ferguson draws out.

The severity and beauty of the region's landscapes—from long, dark winters, to striking fjords that proved the perfect trap for Nazi ships—are also teased out in the text. Ferguson's affection for his setting is always apparent, whether he's snapshotting his wife in a communal moment atop an ancient burial mound, or recalling Denmark's absolute, congenial refusal to bend its principles to suit Nazi whims. Cultural oddities pervade, from a doomed North Pole expedition in a hot air balloon, to the ostentatious, poorly planned ship *Vasa*.

Ferguson's text runs along a wide time line, but its progress is steamed by its affection for cultural oddities. Reading *Scandinavians* is as much about edification as it is about engaging with the explorer's spirit that still sheaths the north lands in romance.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (May/June 2017)

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