

Americans from Norseland

"Modern Sagas: The Story of the Icelanders in North America," by Thorstina Walters (North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, Fargo, N. D. 250 pp. \$3.75), reports of the settlements of a hardy people on this continent and also gives some account of their origin in a rugged, northern land. Here it is reviewed by the distinguished explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson.

By Vilhjalmur Stefansson

IN THIS graphically written and admirably organized volume," as Thorstina Walters's "Modern Sagas" is characterized by Allan Nevins, we have the story of the Icelanders on the mainland of North America through ten centuries, from the late tenth to the middle twentieth. The author does not play up what was the contention of our State Department, during the Administrations of Lincoln and Johnson under Seward, that Iceland itself "belongs to the Western hemisphere and is an insular dependency of the North American continent." Instead, she speaks as if Iceland were in Europe, as indeed many Icelanders contend it is.

"Modern Sagas" is in the main the story of Icelandic pioneering in the nineteenth-century development of the North American Middle West, but its first chapter reviews the first three centuries of contact, from 982 to 1342, beginning with the well-known stories of the exploration and colonization of Greenland, led by Erik the Red, and continuing to the still better-known discovery of the North American mainland by Erik's son Leif (pronounced Lave, to rhyme with Dave) in 1000 and the less often mentioned three years' exploration, and colonizing attempt, by the Icelanders and Greenlanders under the leadership of Thorfinn in 1003-06 or perhaps 1004-07. Thereafter the contacts of Iceland with the mainland were chiefly indirect, through the Scandinavian Greenlanders who fetched their house-building and ship-building timber from Labrador. The last recorded contact was in 1342, when a Greenland ship, returning from Labrador with timber, was driven by gales to Iceland.

The nineteenth- and twentieth-century relations between Iceland and North America, which are the main concern of Mrs. Walters, do not begin till the 1850's; for the Icelanders, who had been the first of all the Scandinavians to visit North America in the old days were, in the new, the last to become immigrants. The trailbreakers this time were not converts to Roman Christianity, as Leif was when he sailed from Norway with two missionaries for the conversion of the Greenlanders and found Wine Land; these were, instead, converts to Mormon Christianity who accompanied some Danish Mormons from Copenhagen in 1855 to join Brigham Young's march to Utah, the Icelanders settling at Spanish Fork. This Mormon phase is considered to have been over by 1860; and when the main westward movement started, a decade later, the Lutherans were the influential church and the migration, first to Wisconsin and Nova Scotia, turned in the main eventually toward Minnesota-Dakota in the States and toward Manitoba in Canada.

Two important figures of North American history were concerned in the Icelandic re-beginnings of which Mrs. Walters writes, Lord Dufferin as Governor General of Canada and General Grant as President of the United States. Dufferin led himself into it; Grant was led.

DUFFERIN'S belief that Icelanders would make good colonists for the treeless prairie rested on what he had seen in treeless Iceland during 1856, as told in his best seller, "Letters from High Latitudes"; so, as Governor General, he took a hand in steering Icelanders toward Manitoba. Grant, bewildered over a number of things during a troubled Administration, had on his hands the problem of what to do with Seward's Folly, as the Democrats called Russian America that had been purchased by the Republicans under Johnson. He was receptive, accordingly, when an Icelandic super-salesman named Jon Olafsson called to suggest that colonization by his landsmen could perhaps change Alaska from a liability to an asset. So, with Olafsson for leader, a committee of three visited Alaska aboard a warship. Despite a favorable report, the Government took no action.



—By Francis Jaques, for "Snowshoe Country" (Univ. of Minnesota Press).

The Icelanders who have since been to Alaska appear to have done well, on the average, but no better than the rest of the Scandinavians. They have shown no special fitness for treeless country, failing, in that, Dufferin's expectation and Grant's hope. So far at least as Mrs. Walters's showing goes, they have fulfilled better the implied prophecy of James Bryce, author of a respected book on the United States, "The American Commonwealth," who wrote of Iceland in another of his works, that of the three great literatures of pre-Renaissance Europe, the Icelandic ranks in quality above the Roman though below the Greek. The Icelanders were, when they copied down the eddas and wrote and composed the sagas, the most bookish of the Scandinavians, and this bent seems at least a plausible key to the success stories that Mrs. Walters, like nearly all writers on immigrants, tells in "Modern Sagas." For she can report on only one or two notable inventors, and the like with millionaires. Her success tales are chiefly of professors and scientists, of writers and politicians, of lawyers and judges. Only in the third and fourth generation are the Icelanders being Americanized into businessmen and baseball fans.

As Mr. Nevins implies in his introduction, "Modern Sagas" has a special interest among works on immigrants and immigration through dealing with considerably the smallest group that has its own distinct language. The Icelanders are so few that you feel as if a laboratory type of study were feasible—there are only about 150,000 of them in the Old Country and less than half that many in the United States and Canada.