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978-1-108-04972-6 - *An American in Iceland: An Account of its Scenery, People, and History, With a Description of its Millennial Celebration in August 1874; With Notes on the Orkney, Shetland and Faroe Islands, and the Great Eruption of 1875*

Samuel Kneeland

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An American in Iceland

Samuel Kneeland (1821–88), educated at Harvard and in Paris as a doctor, served as an army surgeon during the American Civil War. After the war, he returned to lecturing on physiology, and expanded his academic interests to zoology and to natural history in general. His expedition to Iceland was fuelled by a fascination with volcanoes, volcanic islands and the flora and fauna that abounded on them, but Kneeland was as much a cultural and historical tourist as a scientist, enjoying the millennial celebration of the first settlement by Norwegians, the spectacle of geyser eruptions, and the Norse history and traditions of the Icelanders. This 1876 work offers a chronological account of his party's travels through the Scottish islands and around Iceland, bringing a very individual touch to a description of the country, its culture and its outstanding landscapes.

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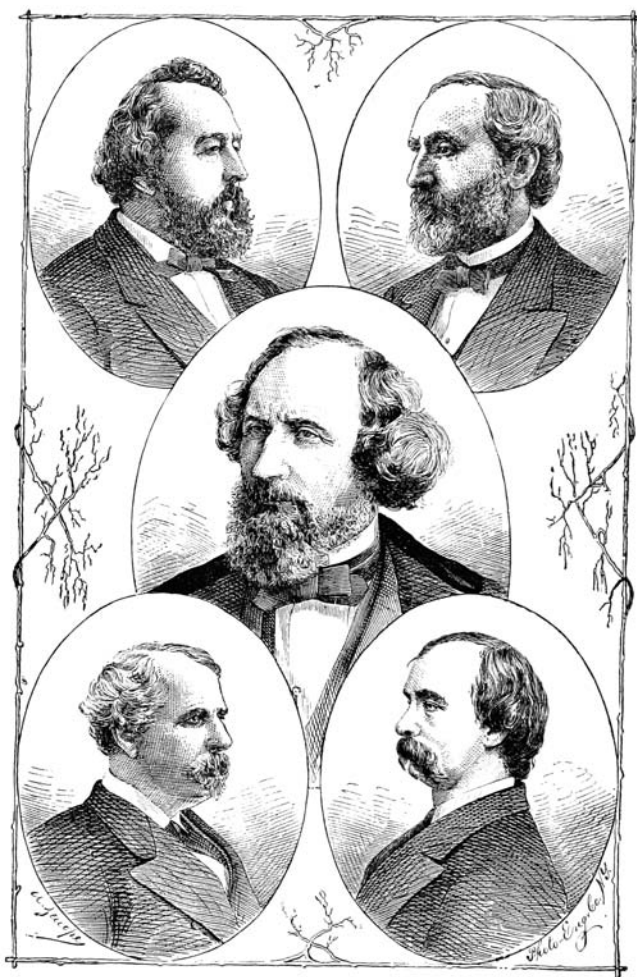
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WITH

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IN AUGUST, 1874;

WITH

NOTES ON THE ORKNEY, SHETLAND, AND FAROE ISLANDS,
AND THE GREAT ERUPTION OF 1875.

BY

SAMUEL KNEELAND, A.M., M.D.,

SECRETARY AND PROFESSOR OF ZOOLOGY AND PHYSIOLOGY IN THE MASSACHU-
SETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY.

With Map and Nineteen Illustrations.

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TO

HON. JOHN AMORY LOWELL,

Trustee of the Lowell Institute,

THESE PAGES, IN THE MAIN PREPARED AS INSTITUTE LECTURES,

ON HIS KIND INVITATION, ARE RESPECTFULLY

DEDICATED BY

THE AUTHOR.

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P R E F A C E.

I HAD the satisfaction during the summer of 1874 of visiting Iceland, on the occasion of its celebration of the thousandth anniversary of its settlement by Norwegian rovers. I was led to this distant, and supposed cold and cheerless, region by several motives, prominent among which were: 1. The desire of comparing its volcanic phenomena, exhibiting the singular paradox of extensive glaciers and eruptions of fiery lava and boiling geysers in close proximity, with those of the Sandwich Islands, which I had visited in 1872. Having gazed into the horrible cauldron of the "Lake of Fire;" having witnessed the magnificent spectacle of Mauna Loa and Mauna Kea, fourteen thousand feet high; having toiled to the top of Haleakala, ten thousand feet, and stood within its extinct crater, twenty-seven miles in circumference, — I longed to see Mount Hecla, which conceals under its mantle of perpetual snow volcanic fires which have many times spread desolation for several

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miles around its base. 2. The hope of collecting specimens of natural history from this isolated region; and 3. The desire of seeing its curious and remarkable people, enjoying the rare celebration of the thousandth birthday of their country.

We are making extensive preparations to celebrate the one-hundredth anniversary of our national independence in 1876; and we naturally call to mind the great advance of our country and of the world in that century—political, educational, financial, social, and religious—in which America has taken a most prominent and honorable part. But what has Iceland done for humanity or for itself, that it should publish to the nations its millennial celebration? It has done much for liberty, the advance of knowledge, and the preservation of historic records; and at a time when other more favored nations were stationary or going back to the darkness of ignorance and superstition,—and under conditions of isolation and hardship, which prove that man is superior to his surroundings, and that misery cannot stifle the aspirations of liberty, nor degrade a poetic and heroic race.

I propose to take up the subjects in the following order:—

1. What we saw on the way, including the islands to the north of Scotland, all at some time invaded or inhabited by the same race that peopled Iceland;

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the reader is thus better prepared for the Icelandic national traits, and will better understand their history, especially its relation to maritime discovery and the settlement of Greenland and America five centuries before the time of Columbus.

2. The royal reception in Iceland, and the commencement of the festivities, with an account of the strange physical conformation of the island.

3. The volcanic phenomena of Iceland with the millennial celebration in the lava valley of Thingvalla.

4. The Geysers and Mount Hecla.

5. The characteristics of the people.

6. Their history, present condition, and hopes in the future.

In addition to my own experience, I have consulted all original works on Iceland within my reach, from Banks and Van Troil in 1772 and 1780, Olafsen and Paulsen, Mackenzie and Henderson, to Professor Anderson's writings in 1875. Information received since the text was stereotyped has been embodied in "Notes" at the end of the work. The reader is referred to these in advance, especially the latest account from a friend in Iceland of the great eruption of 1875.

The illustrations have been made by the "Photo-Engraving Company" of New York; the greater

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part of them from original photographs obtained by me in Iceland.

Though in many cases incorrect, I have adopted the spelling of Icelandic names most familiar to English readers, lest I should be suspected of affecting a knowledge of the Icelandic language which I do not possess. In many cases I have used the phonetic spelling, as better than the native assemblage of consonants and vowels, which, if not unpronounceable, seem often unnecessary. I think the interest of the book will thus in no wise be diminished.

S. K.

BOSTON, Oct. 20, 1875.