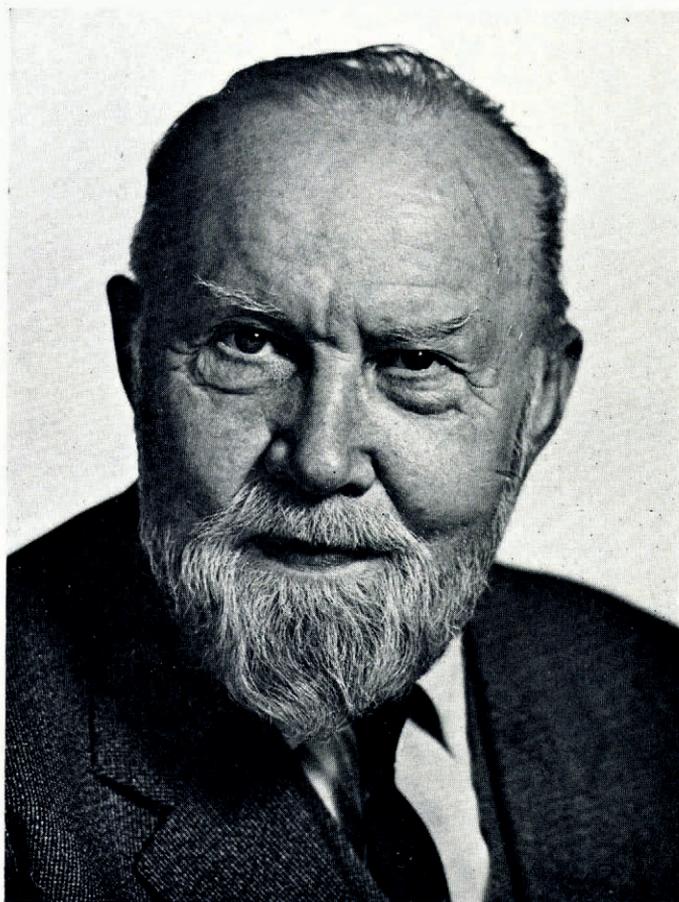


OBITUARIES



JON EYTHORSSON—1895–1968

IN his book *Land of ice and fire* Hans Ahlmann gives an account of the Swedish-Icelandic Vatnajökull expedition in 1936 which was led by him and Jon Eythorsson. This expedition was snow-bound on the central plateau of Vatnajökull during the first half of May under extremely severe weather conditions. One of the expedition members, Mac Lilliehöök, developed frostbitten feet and had to be taken to a village on the coast. Ahlmann writes in his book:

“But now Mac must get down to the village. He had already delayed too long. Jon Eythorsson, who always took the most difficult tasks upon himself and whose unbreakable spirit never faltered, went with him. The journey which did not end until the early hours of the morning was exceedingly arduous for both of them.”

Two days later Eythorsson returned from this journey. Ahlmann writes:

“He resumed his place in the expedition as if nothing had happened and he had merely returned from a trifling little walk.”

These words of the renowned Swedish geographer describe adequately some of the qualities of Jon Eythorsson, Iceland's pioneer glaciologist, who died on 6 March 1968, at the age of 73. Jon Eythorsson was born in the Húnavatn district of northern Iceland on 27 January 1895,

the son of a farmer. He graduated from the "gymnasium" in Reykjavík in 1917 and then studied natural history for two years at the University in København, but in 1919 he went to Norway in order to study meteorology and took his master's degree in Oslo in 1923. He had then worked two summers in the meteorological station in Bergen and continued to work there for the following three years under the leadership of Jack Bjercknes. Bergen was in those years the leading centre of meteorology in the world, with such eminent scientists as V. Bjercknes, T. Bergeron and H. Solberg working at the Geofysisk Institutt, having there laid the foundation of the "Bergen School" in meteorology. It was during these years that Eythorsson became acquainted with Ahlmann, who in 1920 had started his glaciological career by studying the glaciers in Jotunheimen.

In 1925–26, Eythorsson and Ahlmann built the first high-altitude meteorological station in Norden, on the 2 070 m mountain Fanaråken, near Styggedalsbreen which was the main object of Ahlmann's studies at that time.

In 1926 Eythorsson went back to his homeland and was employed by the newly founded Veðurstofan (Meteorological Office) in Reykjavík, where he worked as a forecaster until he retired in 1965.

Although Eythorsson had a full-time job at the Meteorological Office, he was active in many other fields. He was one of the founders of the Ríkisútvarpið (State Broadcasting Corporation) and Chairman of its board in the 1930's, and his radio causeries every Monday over many years won him an enormous popularity all over the country.

He was a leading man in the Ferðafélag Íslands (Iceland Tourist Association) for some thirty years. He wrote, translated or edited a great number of books.

In view of the fact that the work already mentioned is much more than a normal life-work, Eythorsson's important glaciological research work in Iceland is really astonishing. His interest in glaciology was awakened during his co-operation with Ahlmann in Jotunheimen. He started and organized systematic observations of the longitudinal variations of Iceland's glaciers in 1930 and with the help of volunteers, mainly farmers, he measured annually the longitudinal variations of most of the glaciers, not only in the coastal but also in the inland areas, for 37 years. As many of the glaciers are very inaccessible, this was a most creditable performance. As already mentioned, he organized and led the Swedish–Icelandic Vatnajökull expedition in 1936 together with his friend Ahlmann. This important expedition laid the foundation for our present knowledge of the balance of this vast glacier. He also led the Icelandic–French Vatnajökull expedition in 1951, the main aim of which was to measure the thickness of the glacier by seismic soundings. Besides Vatnajökull he studied especially Drangajökull and Mýrdalsjökull. He was an excellent expedition leader, effective and inspiring, never rushing but indefatigable.

Eythorsson had in common with Ahlmann a keen interest in the climatic amelioration of the first half of this century and he wrote important papers on the temperature changes in Iceland.

In 1950 Eythorsson founded the Jöklarannsóknafélag Íslands (Iceland Glaciological Society) and he was its president and editor of its journal, *Jökull*, until his death. Most of the members of this society are not professional scientists. They are drivers of vehicles, mechanics, engineers, carpenters, nurses, teachers, etc., having in common an interest in glaciers and a willingness to take part in expeditions, in building huts, or in aiding the research work in other ways. The inland glaciological station of Jökulheimar on the western border of Vatnajökull was built entirely by these volunteers. Eythorsson realized at an early stage that without the help of volunteers, glaciological research in Iceland would necessarily be very limited and his creation of this group of enthusiasts will be very important for future glaciological research in Iceland.

Jon Eythorsson was certainly a remarkable man and he will long be remembered by those who knew him, above all by those who worked with him on the glaciers of Iceland.

SIGURDUR THORARINSSON