

**Address by Jón Atli Benediktsson, Rector of the University of
Iceland, at the opening of the symposium Letters to Iceland. Held
in Veröld – House of Vigdís on Friday 21 June 2019 at 4 pm**

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my honour and pleasure to say a few words here to start this part of the Letters to Iceland conference. The symposium today is entitled Poetic Encounters with the North.

In the medieval period often referred to as the 'Viking Age', Norsemen carried out frequent raids on the British Isles and conquered a large area. Many traces of Norse settlements remain, for example in place names.

The Norse chapter in the history of the British Isles is an important part of the history of Iceland and played a significant role in shaping the first generations of Icelandic settlers. Several of the first settlers in Iceland were Norsemen from the northern parts of the British Isles, where some of them had been living for a long time. Recent genetic research shows that the first generations of Icelanders were a much more diverse group than the written Icelandic sources suggest, primarily focusing as they do on the links between Iceland and Norway. We now know that there were nearly as many people of Celtic origin in the early days of the Icelandic nation as there were Norsemen. And there is also various evidence to show that direct communication and trading between Iceland and the British Isles (including Ireland) was much more extensive in the medieval period than indicated by

the written sources, which tend to emphasise the sea routes between Iceland and Norway.

This is not to say that surviving medieval Icelandic sources are completely silent on the subject of Icelanders sailing to the British Isles. They are certainly mentioned. One prime example is Egil's Saga – and here the connection with poetry is immediate, since Egil was among the most renowned poets in Iceland at this time.

Many people will remember the story of Egil's troubles when he went to York – which is not far from the home of the new British poet laureate, Simon Armitage. According to the saga, Egil had to literally save his neck and his life by composing a poem for the king Eirik Bloodaxe – which he did, later giving it the title 'Head-Ransom'. It is therefore particularly amusing that on Sunday our guests from the British Isles will be visiting Egil's old farm in Borgarfjörður. You never know – they may be forced to come up with some poetry themselves!

The history of people travelling between Iceland and the British Isles is long and colourful. People from the British Isles soon began sailing north to fish and trade, sometimes getting into conflicts, most notably in the 15th century, which in Iceland is often called the 'English Age' – all the way up to the so-called Cod Wars between Iceland and the United Kingdom in the 20th century.

In 1772, the famous naturalist Sir Joseph Banks visited Iceland, sparking a rise in general interest in Iceland among the inhabitants of the British Isles. There were many British visitors to Iceland in the 19th century, all in pursuit of various different goals – people such as Henry Holland, Ebenezer Henderson, Lord Dufferin and W.G. Collingwood. Some came to pay pilgrimage to the literary sites, among them William Morris, who will be the subject of today's symposium. Not only did he explore the settings of the Icelandic Sagas, he also translated these sagas into his own tongue, in collaboration with the Icelander Eiríkur Magnússon. These two men, an Englishman and an Icelander, worked together to translate Icelandic literature into English. This was at once a dialogue between them and a mutual journey.

Dialogues and journeys of these kinds between Iceland and the British Isles continue to this day, as evidenced by the visit of the three esteemed poets here today. Lavinia Greenlaw, Paul Muldoon and Simon Armitage. I wish you a particularly warm welcome to this conference at the University of Iceland and extend my sincere thanks for your contribution. Ladies and gentlemen, I now declare this symposium open.