

Ræða rektors Háskóla Íslands, Jóns Atla Benediktssonar, á afmælisráðstefnu, 100<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention of the Icelandic National League of North America (þjóðræknisþingi), Winnipeg, Kanada, 17. maí 2019.

**New Initiatives in the Invaluable and Enduring Collaboration between the University of Iceland and the Icelandic Community in North America.**

Ladies and gentlemen,

As the Rector and President of the University of Iceland, it was a great honour to receive the invitation to participate in the celebration of the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Icelandic National League of North America. In recent years, I have enjoyed the good fortune to become more familiar with the history of Icelandic immigrants and their descendants in North America, and witness, first hand, some of its gleaming manifestations through various community and cultural enterprises. It is safe to say that these visits have prepared me for the immense scope of this momentous event.

In 2017, I received the invitation to participate in the celebration of June 17<sup>th</sup>, the Day of Jón Sigurðsson, here in Winnipeg, and to visit with members of the Icelandic community in both Manitoba and North Dakota. My wife, Stefanía and son travelled with me at the time. As is the case with many of us in the old country, Stefanía has relatives on this side of the Atlantic, and I know that some of them are here to celebrate the great event. (**MYNDIR frá Winnipeg og North Dakota**).

Last summer, I crossed the Atlantic again and travelled with my family to Alberta where we visited with members of Icelandic clubs in Calgary, Markerville and Edmonton. (**MYNDIR**). During these recent visits, I have also met with Presidents and other administrators of universities in both Manitoba and Alberta to discuss collaboration. In Winnipeg I had excellent meetings with University of Manitoba President David Barnard where we discussed ways to strengthen collaboration between the universities. In Calgary, I met with Elizabeth Cannon, President of the University of Calgary and other administrators there, including Richard Sigurdson, Dean of Arts and former Dean of Arts at the University of Manitoba. They expressed great interest in increased collaboration between the two universities, not the least in the fields of engineering, human and social sciences, innovation and health sciences. The same is true of the administrators and research scientists I met with at the University of Alberta. While visiting there, we discussed ways to strengthen collaboration in engineering, the Nordic languages, innovation, energy research and disability studies.

The subject of collaboration has, in fact, shaped the vision of the University of Iceland throughout its history. As noted in the *Aldarsaga Háskóla Íslands, History of the University of Iceland*, published in 2011, the year we celebrated the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of our University, it was Björn M. Olsen, its first Rector and President, who in his inauguration speech highlighted international collaboration for the University, not the least as the way to cultivate students' vision of the

world and its cultures. (**MYND** af nemendum HÍ 1911 fyrir utan Alþingishúsið). We are still of the same conviction and view international collaboration as crucial for both our students and faculty. The only change to speak of is the fact that the University of Iceland is currently in demand as an international collaborator, thanks to its excellent ratings on the world's stage.

Within the context of our collaborators world-wide, our long-standing collaboration with the Department of Icelandic Language and Literature at the University of Manitoba stands apart. As such, it is a constant reminder of the invaluable and enduring collaboration between the University of Iceland and members of the Icelandic community in North America.

I will return to our collaboration with the only Icelandic department outside of Iceland, but as I highlighted in my speech on June 17 here in Winnipeg in the summer of 2017, throughout its history, the University of Iceland has benefitted greatly from the deep-running ties between the old country and the Icelandic communities in North America. A great example would be an event that took place in 1964, or when the electrical engineer Grettir Eggertsson donated a gift of shares in Eimskip to the University of Iceland. The shares were a legacy from the founding of the Icelandic Steamship Company Eimskip in 1914, but Canadians of Icelandic descent had made a large investment in the company. The fund was “established in memory of all Canadians of

Icelandic descent who participated in the establishment of Eimskip Iceland,” and its purpose was “to enhance the progress of the University of Iceland and support gifted students, as determined by the University Council.”

The University Fund of Eimskip Iceland has proven to be invaluable in the ongoing progress of the University of Iceland. It played a crucial role in the making of two of the University’s most important buildings: Háskólatorg, known in English as the University Centre, and Gimli. Both buildings were opened in 2007. As the name indicates, the University Centre is the heart of the university’s campus, and every day, thousands of students, faculty and staff arrive there.

However, the main purpose of the University Fund of Eimskip Iceland is to provide grants for the doctoral program in all academic fields, and it is through these doctoral grants that the University of Iceland has been able to establish a fully funded international research university.

Stretching over the University Centre’s biggest hall is a spectacular artwork, which shows geese in flight. (**MYND** af listaverkinu). We are free to interpret the artwork, but for many, it symbolizes the voyage of our people in the latter half of the nineteenth century to North America and their desire to expand their horizon.

And this brings me to other new initiatives in our invaluable and enduring collaboration. For those of you who subscribe to the *Lögberg-Heimskringla*, you may recall an extensive coverage by Stefan Jonasson on the inauguration of Veröld – House of Vigdís, at the University of Iceland in the spring of 2017. (**MYNDIR** af opnuninni), and the opening of its Vigdís International Centre for Multilingualism and Intercultural Understanding, UNESCO Category 2 Centre. That is when we announced the establishment of an endowment fund at the University of Iceland in the name of Stephan G. Stephansson, (1853–1927), the legendary author of Icelandic literature in North America. His grandson, Stephan Vilberg Benediktson, and his wife Adriana contributed the founding endowment in his memory. Other donors include Heather Alda and Bill Ireland, Donald K. Johnson, Moorea and Glen Gray, and Adam Kalbfleisch. And there are more donations about to cross the Atlantic, including a gift from Arni Thorsteinson. We are immensely grateful for the support we are receiving from this side of the water.

The objective of the Stephan G. Stephansson Endowment Fund is to promote scholarly research on the international stage in the field of literature, in memory of Icelandic immigrant poets and writers of North America. I assume many of you are familiar with not only Stephan G., but also Guttormur J. Guttormsson, the Poet of New Iceland, Jakobína Johnson, Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason and Helga Steinvör Baldvinsdóttir, to name a few (**MYNDIR** af skáldum vestan hafs). In addition to these

authors' far reaching vision of the world and its cultures, their legacy serves as a timeless reminder of the profound contribution of immigrant and émigré authors of literature in the history of world literature.

In order to cultivate this immensely rich field of research, the goal is to establish The Stephan G. Stephansson Professorship in Literature at the University of Iceland's Vigdís Finnbogadóttur Institute. With the establishment of the first Professorship in Literature at the University of Iceland, in memory of Icelandic immigrant poets and writers of North America, the experience, culture and history of Icelandic immigrants and their descendants in this vast continent will be commemorated with a rigorous and long-lasting research focus on the world's stage.

We remain hopeful that we will succeed in the fundraising enterprise. The circumstances are favorable, in the sense that in recent years, we have witnessed a growing number of both American and Canadian students at our university. In and by itself, this development is embraced by all. This particular development, however, provided us with the opportunity to apply for a charitable status in Canada. As noted by Stefan Jonasson in an article in *Lögberg-Heimskringla* last August, what this means is that Canadians can now donate to the university and receive income tax credit for their contributions. As well, Canadian registered charities will now be able to make contributions and grants to the University of Iceland provided that such contributions fall within their stated purposes. As noted also in the same article, the University

of Iceland is now one of only 69 post-secondary institutions outside of the U.S. and U.K. that enjoy charitable status in Canada.

During the application process, the University of Iceland relied on legal counsel from Blumberg Segal LLP, in Toronto. I would also like to use this opportunity to thank Hjálmar W. Hannesson, ambassador, Heather and Bill Ireland, and Stephan and Adriana Bendiktson for their great support during the application-process, Stefan Jonasson for his great coverage on the story, and his excellent writings on our collaborative initiatives.

Consul General, Þórður Bjarni, continuous to be of great assistance, also in what we refer to as the second chapter of the fundraising process. Dr. Birna Bjarnadóttir, former Chair of Icelandic at the University of Manitoba and who is currently a researcher and project manager at the University of Iceland's Vigdís Finbogadóttir Institute, will provide you with more information on the Stephan G. Stephansson Endowment Fund, including a related publication project, which has received the most generous support from the Government in Iceland and Skagafjörður, the region in the north part of Iceland that fostered the young Stephan G. before he voyaged west.

We will celebrate the publication of a bilingual collection of poems by Stephan G. at the upcoming Partnership Conference between the University of Manitoba and the University of Iceland. It will be held at the University of Iceland on August 29–30, and the subject will be

migration, past and present, in reference to Canada and/or Iceland. We anticipate papers from a range of fields, including literature, language, history, anthropology, museology, and law in reference to Canada and/or Iceland. At the partnership conference, we will also introduce a new lecture series at the University of Iceland, named after Guttormur J. Guttormsson, the Poet of New Iceland.

In closing, I would like to highlight the fact that throughout its history, the University of Iceland (**MYND** af Háskóla Íslands í dag), has enjoyed invaluable support from members of the Icelandic community in North America. The support has also created the circumstances needed for us to both establish and cultivate significant ties with universities in North America. What the University of Iceland envisions is that the fundraising enterprise in question will provide us with the opportunity to further strengthen our relations with both the Icelandic communities and universities across North America, including the Department of Icelandic Language and Literature at the University of Manitoba.

As many of you know, there is an existing agreement between the two universities. It was signed in 1999, thanks to the vision of Emöke Szathmáry, former President of the University of Manitoba, Páll Skúlason, former Rector and President of the University of Iceland, David Arnason, Professor Emeritus at the University of Manitoba and former Acting Head of the Department of Icelandic Language and



Literature, and Ambassador Svavar Gestsson, who served at the time as Consul General for Iceland in Winnipeg.

If anything, the Stephan G. Stephansson Professorship at the University of Iceland will strengthen all aspects of the existing agreement. Here, I am not only referring to the Partnership Conference, and exchange of both students and faculty. With the establishment of the Professorship, we would be able to expand the collaboration in a substantial way and create the possibility for the University of Iceland to revitalize the graduate program, to revitalize the Icelandic Field School, and last, but not least, to enhance our collaboration in research and publication in the field of Icelandic–Canadian literature and culture.

My vision for our enduring collaboration does not imply the creation of a transient construction. In my position as the Rector and President of the University of Iceland, I am more inclined to view the fundraising for the Stephan G. Stephansson Endowment Fund at the University of Iceland as a long-term investment in our shared history, and as such, more akin to the agenda of those who established the INL and who realized that there is a treasure to safeguard for future generations on both sides of the Atlantic.

And while I congratulate you all on the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, I would like to end this presentation by reciting a short poem by Stephan G., titled

Hugur og hjarta – Mind and heart. I will read it in both languages, and the English translation is by Paul Sigurdson:

Láttu hug þinn aldrei eldast eða hjartað. –  
Vinur aftansólar sértu,  
Sonur morgunroðans vertu.

Keep fore'er your mind and heart from aging,  
Be a friend to twilight's glowing,  
Son to morning's brilliant showing.