

National Day Speech in Winnipeg, Manitoba, 17 June 2017
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Iceland

Minister, Council General of Iceland, Fjallkona, Ladies and
Gentlemen,

I am very honored, as the Rector and President of the University of Iceland, to address this gathering on Iceland's National Day. As, of course, all of you know, on this day Icelanders commemorate their national hero, Jón Sigurðsson, who was born on 17 June 1811, in the rectory in Hrafnseyri on Arnarfjörður in the Westfjords of Iceland. On the same day in 1944, just 73 years ago, the Republic of Iceland was founded on Althingi's ancient site, Thingvellir, and since then, Icelanders have celebrated their National Day on June 17. Those of us working at the University of Iceland associate this day with yet another occasion because the school's formal founding was on 17 June 1911, on the centennial of Jón Sigurðsson's birth. Today, the University of Iceland is therefore 106 years old.

It was no coincidence that those fighting for the founding of a university in Iceland chose Jón Sigurðsson's birthday as the day of the school's founding. In their minds, the University of Iceland was a worthy symbol of the ideals for which the national hero fought, and they also viewed the school as one of the most important prerequisites for the nation being able to achieve the political goals that Jón Sigurðsson saw in his dreams. Finally, they deemed it appropriate to connect the founding of the school with the name of Jón Sigurðsson because few Icelanders, in his time, emphasized education as much as he did as an instrument of progress in stagnant societies and to strengthen the solidarity of nations. The newly restored Althingi in Iceland convened for the first time in Reykjavik in the summer of 1845. Thus, one of the first matters Jón Sigurðsson introduced in Althingi was the founding of what he called a national school in Iceland. By this he meant an organized educational system covering basic education, occupational education and education of the country's highest officials. He said that no matter was "as urgent and momentous for Iceland's welfare and revitalization" since education everywhere was "deemed the core strength of all progress, spiritual and physical". These words are as true today as they were then. At this time, there was only one school in Iceland, the Latin School in Bessastadir. However, all children's

education went on at home, and Icelanders had to seek university education in the capital of the kingdom, Copenhagen. Jón Sigurðsson wanted to rectify this because the nation's welfare required a school as similar as possible to what other neighboring countries had.

At that time, nothing came of the founding of a university in Iceland because the majority of MPs did not think the nation had the wherewithal to operate such an institution. In addition, our countrymen numbered just under 60,000, and the population of the biggest urban area, Reykjavik, was right around one thousand. Most of the country's basic social infrastructure was also underdeveloped. All roads were lacking. Trade was in the hands of foreign merchants, and the business community in Iceland was modest and primitive. The last decades of the century were also difficult for Icelanders, with severe cold, thick pack ice off the coasts and ever-increasing poverty. For these reasons, many Icelanders viewed leaving Iceland and moving across the ocean to America as their best option in search of a better life in the Midwestern parts of the United States and Canada. This decision was perfectly normal because as things were in Iceland in the last decades of the 19th century, the

future did not appear particularly bright. The biggest group of emigrants settled here in Manitoba, and it is their offspring that celebrate here today their Icelandic heritage on Iceland's National Day.

Despite the difficult times and emigration, the idea of founding a university in Iceland did not die. Icelanders' Althingi thus enacted a law on founding such a school in 1893. However, the Danish king did not approve and refused to agree to it. At that time, the king had to sign all laws for them to enter into force, and the idea of a university therefore automatically fell through. In support of his rejection, the king argued that Icelanders did not at all have the wherewithal to pay for such an institution because their numbers were few, and their poverty great, and they would therefore have to live with this and continue seeking their university education in Copenhagen. One could say that Icelanders were caught in a vicious circle: The nation's most notable people were convinced that a domestic university was a prerequisite for Icelanders to establish a modern society. At the same time, the nation was deemed too underdeveloped to operate its own university.

The founding of the University of Iceland in 1911 sliced through this Gordian knot. Even though it was small at the start—with 45 students in four departments—and it had no building for the operations, people nevertheless had great hopes for this new institution. The school's first rector was Björn M. Ólsen, professor of Icelandic linguistics and cultural history. In his founding speech on 17 June 1911, he used the proverb "from acorns come mighty oaks" about the school. There he pointed out that despite the university being one "of the smallest and least modern" universities in the world, it nevertheless rectified Icelanders' most urgent needs. Many universities had also begun small, he continued, but later grew little by little. He hoped that this would also happen in Iceland, and that the University of Iceland would in time become a full-fledged citizen of the international "republic of the sciences".

In the beginning, the main goal of the University of Iceland was to educate officials for the young Icelandic State, but research facilities for teachers were limited, and the study offerings were close to meagre. However, little by little the school grew, and it is now regarded as a full-fledged research university on an international scale, with 13,000 students in undergraduate and graduate programs in all the main fields of study. One may therefore say that Jón Sigurðsson's idealistic vision, which he set out in Althingi two centuries ago, has materialized, and the school has played a major role in the enormous progress occurring in Icelandic society in recent decades. It is safe to say that few of the world's universities have had as extensive impact on the community they serve as the University of Iceland because it is still the only comprehensive university in Iceland, and an overwhelming majority of university-educated Icelanders have attended it for at least part of their university education. However, at the same time as the school is a "national school" in the spirit that Jón Sigurðsson heralded in his address in Althingi in 1845, it is also, in increasing measure, an international university, collaborating extensively with comparable institutions on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. In recent years, international surveys have confirmed the school's position. Since the school's centennial in 2011, the

University of Iceland has been among the 300 best universities in the world in the prestigious Times Higher Education ranking list. For this, it can thank its teachers for very dynamic research and publications recognized in foreign scientific journals. The school is now in 242nd place on the list and in 15th place among Nordic universities.

The ties between the University of Iceland and the Icelandic-Canadian community have been diverse through the years. News of the school's founding thus drew considerable attention here in Canada, as can be seen in the news items published in the Icelandic papers in Winnipeg in the summer of 1911. For example: "The finest memorial Icelanders have built on Jón Sigurðsson's centennial", said *Heimskringla* in one news story on the University's founding. The news described the celebrations in Reykjavik for Jón Sigurðsson's centennial in a fairly long article. "It is safe to say," said the author in the conclusion of the article, "that Canadians of Icelandic descent rejoice with their home nation over the founding of this university, as they rejoice with it for each step it takes toward growing culture and national maturity." More than half a century later, in November 1964, Icelandic Canadians showed their regard for the University of Iceland in action when electrical engineer Grettir Eggertsson presented the school with a gift of

shares in Eimskip. 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's charter states, for example, that the fund was "established in memory of all of the Canadians of Icelandic descent who participated in the founding of Eimskip Iceland", and that its purpose was "to promote the prosperity of the University of Iceland as well as sponsor promising students for studies at the university, as determined by the University Council".

It is safe to say that this materialized because the University Fund of Eimskip Iceland has proven an invaluable source of support for the university to this very day. For example, the fund made a valuable contribution to two of the University of Iceland's most important buildings, Háskólatorg, known in English as the University Center, and Gimli. Both buildings were opened in 2007. As the name indicates, the University Center is in the heart of the university's campus. Every day thousands of students and employees go there. However, the main mission of the University Fund of Eimskip Iceland is to finance grants for doctoral studies in all academic fields, and, to this day, the fund has enabled 123 doctoral students to devote themselves to

studies. In this way, the University of Iceland has institutionalized a fully funded international research university.

Stretching over University Center's biggest hall is a work of art showing geese in flight. Flocks of geese fly between Canada and Iceland each year. The work's message is to remind us each day of the close relations between Iceland and Canada. The warm thoughts and generosity of Canadians of Icelandic descent have been of enormous importance to the University of Iceland, and we cannot ever fully express our gratitude for this.

Ladies and gentlemen, I wish in conclusion to mention the status of the Icelandic language here among Canadians of Icelandic descent. There is only one Department of Icelandic outside Iceland, and it is here at the University of Manitoba. On the day we all celebrate Iceland's National Day, we cannot but reflect on the crucial role of the Icelandic language and literature in both the struggle for independence and the shaping of the young democracy. This is even more reason to recognize—at all times—the establishment of the Department of Icelandic Language and Literature in Winnipeg in 1951 as a major event in the history of trans-Atlantic Icelandic cultural heritage. Needless to say, the University of Iceland continues to embrace collaboration with the department and the University of Manitoba at large

Congratulations on this day, and thank you very much.
Gleðiega þjóðhátíð.