

**Ávarp Jóns Atla Benediktssonar, rektors Háskóla Íslands, við ráðstefnuna
„Sir Joseph Banks, Daniel Solander and the Icelandic Expedition 1772 –
250 Years“. Haldið í Þjóðarbókhöðunni 29. ágúst 2022 kl. 13**

Prime Minister, Ambassadors of Sweden and the United Kingdom,
speakers, chair, ladies and gentlemen

It is both an honour and a pleasure to be invited to say a few words at the opening of this symposium entitled „Sir Joseph Banks, Daniel Solander and the Iceland Expedition 1772 – 250 Years“. Earlier this summer a terrific exhibition was opened here in the National and University Library to mark the occasion that it is now 250 years since the Iceland expedition of Sir Joseph Banks arrived on these shores.

The exhibition which is open until the November the 20th emphasizes the role of the leader of the expedition, Joseph Banks, but this symposium will also focus on Daniel Solander, a Swedish naturalist and Banks's closest collaborator who accompanied him on the six-week expedition to Iceland, from August 29th – to October 9th 1772.

As recounted in the exhibition catalogue, the Banks Iceland Expedition was recognised as an important event at the time. In fact, this was the first British scientific expedition to Iceland. The English visitor was not just anyone **but a famous explorer** and naturalist who had participated in one of the most significant voyages of exploration of all time, namely the *Endeavour* voyage, the first of Captain James Cook's three voyages. The ship had sailed to the South Seas, to Australia and to New Zealand, indeed circumnavigating the globe. And Solander, of course, accompanied Banks on the voyage.

A year later Banks sailed off again, this time to a remote island in the North Atlantic, with the aim of observing Iceland's nature, in particular the volcanoes. He planned to ascend Hekla which he accomplished. It can be argued that Banks was the first „Friend of Iceland“ not only because of his interest in the country and its people but because he made firm friends among the Icelandic elite and would later become Iceland's protector and benefactor. The account of the friendship forged between Banks and the family of Magnús Stephensen, which had such dramatic but positive consequences during the Napoleonic Wars, is both thrilling and almost defies belief.

In September 1807 war broke out between Denmark and Britain. The Royal Navy captured many of the Danish vessels trading with Iceland. This was serious. Without supplies **famine** would follow.

It so happened that Magnús Stephensen, Chief Justice of Iceland and the leading Icelander of his day, was on board one of the captured ships. He realised how dangerous the situation was. On his own initiative he wrote a letter to Joseph Banks, the only Englishman he knew, begging him to come to the assistance of the Icelanders. **This** Banks promptly did, contacting his friends in high places, successfully obtaining the release of the ships and permission for them to continue their trade. Thus he saved the Icelanders from almost certain starvation.

Dear guests,

This symposium demonstrates brilliantly the importance of historical research and how the living past can influence the present for the better.

Historical research in Iceland and at the University of Iceland is flourishing. This spring the fifth Icelandic Historical Congress was held at the University of Iceland with an extensive and varied programme. But history does not only look back to the past, but also to the future, for instance by using the latest technology.

Just launched is the new Centre of Digital Humanities and Arts (MSHL) which will focus on strengthening, development and access to digital databanks in the humanities and arts.

The centre will be an important research base for those using the databanks, contributing to significant historical research in the future.

Dear guests.

I will say no more but hope that the symposium will prove to be interesting, stimulating and thought-provoking.

Thank you.