



**A Speech
by the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at a Luncheon hosted
by
the Governor General of Canada
Ottawa
9 June 2015**

Your Excellency;
Madame;
Ladies and gentlemen

I thank you profoundly for receiving us here today and for your kind words and friendship towards my country.

Canada has a special place in the hearts of Icelanders, our history and our culture, in the legacy from centuries past and in our vision of the future, our common responsibility for preserving the magic and the beauty of the Arctic.

Many in Iceland have a personal story of family ties to Canada, relatives, descendants of the settlers who journeyed across the ocean in the last decades of the 19th century. Some even boldly claim connections to Leifur Eiríksson and Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir, the most distinguished of the Viking discoverers who arrived in this country more than one thousand years ago.

Although Leifur has enjoyed greater fame, the travels of Guðríður are indeed more remarkable, making her on a world scale probably the most prominent woman discoverer of all times; a historic heroine whom Iceland and Canada can jointly celebrate.

She was born in western Iceland, late in the 10th century, sailed young to Greenland and then travelled with her husband and entourage, including priests, to the continent now called North America. Here she had the boy Snorri, the first child to be baptized in this great land and after a few years decided to return because she and her companions did

not want to fight the natives, first to Greenland, then to Iceland and later she travelled all the way to Rome, informing the Holy Church of the new continent. She was truly the first person in world history to be both in Rome and North America, almost 500 years before Christopher Columbus arrived on the scene; an achievement acknowledged by Pope Benedict XVI when, a few years ago, I had the honour to present to His Holiness in the Vatican an Icelandic statue of Guðríður, a gift from the people in her birthplace.

Nine centuries later, when the Icelanders were arriving in Manitoba, Alberta, Saskatchewan and other Canadian provinces, they were all familiar with the sagas of Guðríður and Leifur, preserved in the old medieval manuscripts. The Icelandic settlers were inspired by that cultural heritage of exploration as well as the literary creativity which continued to be celebrated among the new Icelandic-Canadian communities.

They published books and periodicals, built schools and churches; their poetry was popular back in the old country. Stephan G. Stephansson, a poor farmer and poet in the Rocky Mountains, became in his lifetime one of the giants of modern Icelandic literature; many of his poems are still dear to our hearts; one being sung at all my inaugurations.

Þótt þú langförull legðir
sérhvert land undir fót
bera hugur og hjarta
samt þíns heimalands mót ...

Though you travelled far, trod
and traversed every land,
your mind and heart bear
still your homeland's mould ...

It has been my privilege as president to strengthen these bonds and our modern endeavours, to join in the Icelandic celebrations in different parts of Canada; to begin my State Visit in 2000 on the steps of the Parliament in Winnipeg where the statue of Jón Sigurðsson, the leader of the Icelandic independence movement, shares a place of honour with Queen Victoria; to receive at Bessastaðir, the historic Presidential Residence in Iceland, every year now a delegation of young Canadians of Icelandic descent who are fellows of the Snorri Programme, named after Guðríður's son, the first Christian baby born on the this continent.

Our bonds are in deed of many dimensions, even ranging back centuries before Canada became a state, strengthened by the legacy so

vibrant and strong among the modern descendants of the Icelanders who during my grandparents' youth decided to make Canada their home.

These foundations will serve us well when Canada and Iceland, together with other Arctic states, move towards ever more extensive cooperation in the vast Northern territories of our planet.

One hundred years ago, the Arctic was still mostly unknown except to the Inuit and other indigenous people who had always made it their own, the European and American discoverers acquiring world fame for their journeys like Vilhjalmur Stefansson, the distinguished Canadian of Icelandic parents, a Western-Icelander as we call them back home, a term of honour and endearment. He became so popular in Iceland that many wanted to make him the first President of the Republic when it was founded in 1944.

Now, in recent years, the Arctic has become a new global playing field where the melting of the ice, the dramatic changes in the climate, the vast resources of multiple kinds and the new sea routes are among the many dimensions of the globally significant Arctic future. More than half of the G-20 countries, including the leading economic powers of Europe, Asia and North America have been, in one way or another, accepted at the table of the Arctic Council. Attendance at the Arctic Circle Assemblies which I together with other Arctic partners established a few years ago in Reykjavik – over 1500 participants from more than 40 countries – also demonstrates that the Arctic has in the early decades of the 21st century become one of the key areas of our planet where the future of nations, near and far, will be determined.

Canada and Iceland thus face, with our partners, greater challenges than before, new global responsibilities which offer us both economic opportunities and environmental duties; the results of our common journey of great consequence for all of mankind.

It is therefore a privilege to visit Canada in these important times and, during my visit to distinguished cities in your country, be able to continue this dialogue with political and business leaders, environmentalists and activists, scientists and experts.

Canada is in this respect, as in so many others, an important ally of Iceland and we thank you profoundly for the honour and friendship you have shown us here today.

And thus I ask all present to join me in raising our glasses to the long-standing friendship between Canada and Iceland, to the common endeavours ahead, to the Governor General and Her Majesty the Queen.