



**Address by  
The President of Iceland  
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson  
at the opening of the exhibition  
“Maps of Iceland”  
at the National University Library of Iceland  
16 September 2000**

Virðulegu sýningargestir  
Ladies and Gentlemen:

Við Íslendingar höfum löngum ræktað þá sjálfsmynd sem sótt er í fornar sögur, skáldverk og ljóð og með sjálfstæðisbaráttu okkar og fullveldi varð þessi arfur meginstoð í málflutningi hinnar nýfrjálsu þjóðar.

Það var ekki fyrr en á síðari áratugum að áhugi okkar efldist á að skoða og gaumgæfa þá mynd sem aðrir gerðu sér af landi okkar og þjóð, hvernig eyjunni í útnorðri var lýst í máli og myndum, hvernig sá heimur þekkingar og túlkunar sem helgaði sig gerð landakorta leit á hið sérkennilega land elds og ísa.

We Icelanders have for a long time cultivated an identity derived from the ancient sagas, literature and poetry, and with the campaign for independence and sovereignty this heritage became central to the way we presented ourselves as a newly independent nation.

It was not until recent decades that we began to take a deeper interest in examining and studying the impression which other people had of our country, how our island in the far north was portrayed in words and images, how the world of knowledge and interpretation which focused on the making of maps saw this strange land of ice and fire.

Indeed, in the maps made of Iceland in centuries past we have discovered a unique treasure which has gradually come to occupy a special position in the new perspectives we have now acquired towards our country and history.

The shape of the land, knowledge of topography, landscapes, the interplay of natural wonders and mystery, the magical world of animals and fantastic creatures, mountains and fjords, what was mentioned and what omitted, priorities and focuses – all these provide us with invaluable information about how extensive knowledge about Iceland was in other countries, in particular during the centuries which were overshadowed by suffering and hardship and have not yet been shown the scholarly interest they merit.

At the opening of these informative and entertaining exhibitions I would like to pay tribute to the Icelandic pioneers who made the collection and analysis of ancient maps into a respected branch of Icelandic cultural studies.

I remember how, when I was a student collecting material for my doctorate at the old National Library, I often used to watch the late Haraldur Sigurðsson at work on his history of Icelandic maps, a masterpiece which will remain one of the central works of Icelandic cultural studies for the foreseeable future.

He would sit through the dark winter with the light from his lamp on the centre table in that elegant reading room illuminating the world of wonders that those maps portrayed, and we young students, although engaged in different fields of study, had the honour of enjoying his stories and sharp insights.

Haraldur Sigurðsson would have been delighted to join us at the international symposium here today and we pay tribute to his memory and that of other pioneers of Icelandic cartography with deep respect and gratitude.

Many people have been involved in collecting of maps in more recent times, and the whole Icelandic nation certainly benefited when the National University Library acquired Kjartan Gunnarsson's unique collection and, together with other fine maps, was able to show this remarkable aspect of our national history the honour it deserves. Hopefully the Library will in the future have the resources to devote even more effort towards this important element in the preservation of our nation's historical relics.

On the occasion of this international cartographical symposium I have the honour of opening two exhibitions here today, one dedicated to ancient maps of Iceland and the other to the unique work of cartographer

Samúel Eggertsson, who during the first decades of the twentieth century gave us a new vision of Icelandic history. He presented the settlement and sea voyages, the links between the ancient commonwealth and local communities, in a new guise by creating distinctive maps to portray the great historical events that our forebears, the literary geniuses who wrote the sagas and other works, had laboured to recount in many volumes of complex narratives written down on calfskin.

Samúel Eggertsson neatly summed up his own mission when he described how one of his best maps came into being: “The names, families, origins, places of residence, achievements and descendants of most of the settlers are largely traced in the unique Book of Settlements and many other unparalleled accounts. I consider it the sacred duty of all Icelanders to acquaint themselves as closely as possible with these writings, which are the foundation of our entire history. Since no teacher can avoid explaining our history as closely as possible, I am taking the liberty of recording this account if it might serve to encourage and guide others in this notable field of study. The main factor that sustained Iceland and its progress during the Age of the Commonwealth was the sea voyages made by our forebears. By travelling abroad they acquired wealth and fame and when they returned home they used their influence to enrich their nation with diverse culture and independence. Schools and literature, writing, sports, poetry, trade and many kinds of agricultural developments sprang to life, flourished and were sustained for as long as we retained our independence, then gradually dwindled and died out by the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The map on the title page shows Iceland’s geographical position and the red lines from it show the routes travelled by Icelanders during the Age of the Commonwealth and into the Middle Ages. The routes taken by Eirik the Red to Greenland and Leif the Lucky to Vínland the Good, as well as the journeys made to the south by Icelandic bishops and other important personages through the known world at that time, all the way to Rome and Jerusalem.”

This text by Samúel Eggertsson clearly shows how the identity which for centuries served as encouragement to the nation, and as I mentioned earlier would become central to the campaign for national independence in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, inspired the great cartographer in the first half of the twentieth century to create the unique works we see here today.

In his day Samúel Eggertsson earned the praise and support of other scholars who were also pioneers in their fields, in particular the natural scientists Þorvaldur Thoroddsen and Bjarni Sæmundsson. He also made land surveys and plans of towns, villages and many natural relics,

compiled a history of Iceland containing chronicles, graphs and maps, made a landscape map of the entire country and was engaged in other works for advancing the study of Icelandic culture, all aimed at promoting understanding of the wider context of Iceland's history.

It is a particular delight to have the chance to see Samúel Eggertsson's works here today and admire how well they fit in with the maps of Iceland from former times.

I would like to welcome our distinguished visitors from abroad to this symposium on cartography and hope that you will have enjoyable discussions and an interesting stay.

Með þessum orðum lýsi ég sýningarnar Forn Íslandskort og Kortagerðarmaðurinn Samúel Eggertsson formlega opnaðar.