



**Speech**  
**by**  
**the President of Iceland**  
**Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson**  
**at**  
**the University of Manitoba**  
**Celebration of Alumni of Icelandic Descent**  
**Winnipeg**  
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Distinguished President,  
Alumni, friends,  
Scholars and scientists

For a former professor it is always a pleasure to join a university crowd and on this occasion I am especially pleased because of the Icelandic connection. As you know, the University of Manitoba is held in high regard by my nation. It houses the Icelandic Collection and has for a long time been an important centre of Icelandic studies.

Within the extended global family of scholars and researchers devoted to furthering knowledge of the Icelandic language, our literature, our heritage and our culture, the University of Manitoba holds a unique position. Being the leading institution of Icelandic studies in North America, where a large proportion of the Icelandic nation chose to settle, the University has the potential to utilize the growing network of scholars all over the world who have decided to promote Icelandic studies in various ways.

The language has always been the foundation of Icelandic identity; the poems were our castles and our cathedrals; the farmers and the fishermen who for centuries barely survived in isolated turf houses sought inspiration from stories and texts, the books which became a repository of memories and the main justification when the nation began the fight for independence after centuries of colonial rule and exploitation.

Those who sailed across the ocean and settled in this land were profoundly moulded by the heritage created by this literary tradition. The most precious belongings they brought with them and guarded keenly on board the ships and on the long train journeys were the books which, in dark winter nights and bright summer evenings back in Iceland had been the focus which brought the families together.

When the Icelanders gathered on the prairies of Canada and across the border, started farming in strange surroundings where the weather and the soil, the fields and the forests were like another planet, so unlike the mountains, valleys and barren sands of their homeland where the glaciers and the ocean had so dramatically extended the horizon, they were determined to advance the learning of their children, fully aware that the key to success was to acquire extensive knowledge.

They began by building the churches; schools were their next endeavour, serving as centers of assembly and symbolizing the togetherness which had always characterized the Icelanders despite the disputes, the arguments, the conflicts which they had – so skilfully, always and everywhere – managed to create. In this new land, the Icelanders preserved admirably the tradition from the old country that everyone should speak their mind and have a say, that even the poorest of the poor had the right to challenge those with power and prestige.

These elements in Icelandic culture became important foundations for university education, both among the Icelanders in North America and back home, where the establishment of the University of Iceland demonstrated the success of the Independence Movement.

Consequently, we now enjoy a stronger assembly of scholars and scientists, researchers and experts than ever before. Their presence and influence within the Icelandic communities in Canada and the United States has been an important factor, enabling those communities to maintain their identity and cohesion to a greater extent than most other immigrant groups who have settled on this great continent.

In Iceland we have been blessed with tremendous flowering of scientific progress in recent decades, the establishment of many new universities and research institutions making our society and our economy more knowledge-based than ever before and inducing many distinguished universities in other countries to seek active cooperation with Iceland.

Three weeks ago, I visited Harvard and MIT in Boston and also Ohio State University, the largest university in the USA. In each of these pillars of American scientific progress, I had stimulating discussions on how active cooperation between leading American universities and

Icelandic scholars and scientists could significantly advance research and discoveries and lay the foundation for progress across the world in many significant fields.

Similar discussions were held during my previous visits to Columbia University in New York, Amery in Atlanta and Dartmouth in New Hampshire.

In Canada there are many unexplored possibilities in this respect, especially since the northerly position of Canada and Iceland puts both countries in the front line in the growing global concern about climate change, the threats to the Earth's biosystem and the security and prosperity of mankind which pose greater scientific challenges than we have ever before encountered.

Let me therefore take this opportunity to emphasize our willingness and strong interest in establishing ties with a selection of universities and research institutions in Canada, utilizing both the strength of our scientific communities and the common heritage which brings us together.

The University of Manitoba is especially well placed to further such cooperation and the alumni of Icelandic descent are in this respect an important resource.

I hope that during my visit we can explore how best to advance this vision and I encourage you all to support and participate actively in this effort; I can assure you that it could turn out to be a fascinating journey.

It would also be a fitting tribute to the great people who, despite their poverty, succeeded in establishing thriving and prosperous communities in both Canada and United States, primarily because they brought with them from Iceland the deep conviction that education and learning will always be the best way to ensure progress.