



**Speech by
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
President of Iceland
at
The Stephansson House
July 27th 1999**

Distinguished Icelandic-Canadians
Ladies and Gentlemen
Dear friends

After a day dedicated to the memory of Stephan G. Stephansson, with visits to his Monument in Markerville, his grave in the Kristinsson Cemetery and now gathering at the Stephansson House, I feel it is appropriate to make a few remarks about this great Icelandic-Canadian poet.

The story of Stephan G. Stephansson's life has become a legend. He was farmer who after a long day of tilling the earth wrote poems which have long earned him a place of honour among the greatest poets in the Icelandic language. His life is an enduring testimony to the triumph of the soaring spirit.

Stephan G. Stephansson was one of the pioneers, a farmer all his adult life, but is remembered above all for his poetry. It is magnificent, sometimes dark, charged with wisdom and a steadfast quest for the truth. He was not a man of compromises, never swaying from his conviction even when his opinions occasionally cost him the disapproval of his fellow citizens.

His output was prolific, especially when we bear in mind that he only wrote in his limited spare time, nourished his mind after labouring to provide for his family. His collection of verse, appropriately titled *Andvökur* – Wakeful Nights – runs to well over two thousand pages in

several volumes, and his letters to friends and relatives fill additional five impressive volumes.

Stephan married a fellow Icelander, Helga Sigríður Jónsdóttir, and their marriage was happy and loving, with a unique sense of togetherness in the struggle to earn a living. Although Stephan never enjoyed formal schooling, he showed at an early age an unquenchable thirst for knowledge and learning. He is said to have learnt to read at the age of five and acquired his taste for Icelandic poetry while still very young, absorbed the saga heritage and would often write about ancient themes after settling in the New World.

Although Icelandic nature and history have strong roots in his poetry, he also wrote many powerful poems about his new home, not least after moving to Alberta. He relishes a unique vision of nature, presenting his surroundings as symbols of the human condition.

Skörðótt og hnúkótt við himininn bera þau.
Helming af vesturátt þver-sundur skera þau:
röð þessi af heiðhvítu hrönnunum, kyngjunum,
hnjúkum og strókum. Úr blágrýtis dyngjunum
rammbyggða heimsálfugirðing svo gera þau.

This was his image of the Rocky Mountains and he rendered it into the language of his childhood just after crossing to arrive here in 1889, undoubtedly moved by the magnificent view of mountains which perhaps reminded him, on a grander scale, of the landscapes back in Iceland.

In the country of his birth, many of Stephan's poems have long been acknowledged as classics, while here his achievement has been cherished by people of Icelandic descent, and the authorities in Alberta have made an outstanding effort to show his memory the honour it deserves.

Stephan G. Stephansson made a triumphant visit to his native Iceland in the summer of 1917, at the invitation of the Icelanders. He was welcomed with the highest honour, poets praised him in ornate verses, scholars wrote and talked about his work. The scholar Guðmundur Finnbogason said:

“This man who as a child lived the plain life of a common country boy in isolated places, and for almost every day after that had his hand fixed to the axe, the plough, the scythe, the shovel – he is the settler of one of the largest territories and among the most noble figures in the

Icelandic nation's spiritual realm. When he left the country at the age of twenty and everyone imagined he was taking along all his worldly belongings in a single trunk – he took with him an invisible treasure-trove of all that is most precious and original in our language, literature and character, and the telescope that showed him his native land in all its glory and beauty whenever he put it to his eye.”

Þó þú langförull legðir
sérhvert land undir fót
bera hugur og hjarta
samt þíns heimalands mót,
frænka eldfjalls og íshafs!
sifji árfoss og hvers!
dóttir langholts og lyngmós!
sonur landvers og skers.

This poetic vision by Stephan G. Stephansson crystallizes how wherever we go we carry the uniqueness of Iceland in our hearts.

The poem has become a patriotic symbol. Created in Canada in a world which has now vanished, it has, in modern Iceland, inspired a harmony between our homeland and the dramatic changes now transforming the globe.

At my Inauguration in the Icelandic Parliament House in 1996 this poem was my choice for the song which traditionally precedes the oath of office, signifying my desire to bring together all the people of Icelandic descent wherever their formal residence might be.

It has a deep personal significance for me and my family and it was also sung at the funeral of my wife Guðrún Katrín last October.

Thus all of us, people of Icelandic descent, both here in Canada and in Iceland, have in times of both sorrow and joy been brought together by the magnificent poet Stephan G. Stephansson.

It is with profound gratitude that I honour him here today.