



**Speech by
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
President of Iceland
at KN Julius Memorial Rededication
August 2th 1999**

Dear friends and relatives
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great pleasure for me to come here today to honour the memory of Kristján Níels Jónsson, a poet of the people better known under his nom de plume Káinn. Born in Akureyri in northern Iceland in 1860, he moved to America at the age of 18. After spending his first years in Winnipeg, he moved here to North Dakota, where he would remain until his death in 1936, a farm labourer all his life.

He was a true “poet of the common people.” He never had worldly wealth, nor desired it, but devoted himself instead to books and poetry, composing witty and well-wrought verse with astonishing speed – as if by instinct – and generously enriching the life of his contemporaries from his treasure-house of words.

Káinn is best known for his short humorous verses, many of which were so witty, sharp and memorable that they spread like wildfire through the Icelandic communities, and even crossed the ocean to earn smiles, admiration and immortality back in Iceland where several collections of his poetry have been published.

Káinn was gifted in both poetry and prose, and certainly humorous. Once he was asked to give a talk about how he composed his poetry, and explained the process as follows:

“And I have also noticed, that people don't listen to or read long poems. They have taken up the same habit as our pastors when they say:

"and now let us sing the first and the last verse of the hymn." Therefore, I have acquired the habit only to compose the first and the last verse, so that they who look at it at all, will have to read the whole poem."

Yet Káinn had another, more private side, which we see in many verses of great tenderness and beauty, quite on a par with the best mainstream work of his time. With no children of his own, he could proudly voice his warmth and admiration in the following lullaby:

Síðan fyrst ég sá þig hér,
sólskin þarf ég minna;
gegnum lífið lýsir mér
ljósið augna þinna.

Since the first time I saw you,
I care much less for sunny skies;
Lighting my way all life through
Is the sunshine of your eyes.

It is with profound gratitude that I honour him here at his memorial rededication and bring him thanks and respect from the Icelandic nation.