



Address
by
the President of Iceland,
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the opening of an exhibition
commemorating
Jón Sveinsson – Nonni
Kyoto Japan
2009

Ladies and Gentlemen

Jón Sveinsson – Nonni – is one of those artists who have been most active and successful in projecting the image of Iceland abroad. He saw the charms of our country with the eyes of a child, and so managed to awaken the child in his readers all over the world. His sincerity, and the special aura in which he clothed the events of daily life, captivated everyone.

But he was not only renowned as a priest and a writer. He was a popular speaker wherever he went, from Denmark all the way to Japan, and such a gifted linguist that he spoke and wrote Icelandic, Danish, German and French – all fluently. He held thousands of talks, always with the focus on Iceland. They were spiced with a story-teller's enthusiasm and his expression of love for the land of ice and fire, with gorgeous descriptions of its natural wonders and vivid accounts of daily life. But the main appeal in these talks was the man himself. As our Nobel Laureate, the author Halldór Laxness put it, Nonni was “one of those few people who are completely and absolutely enchanting.”

The Nonni books, which we recall with affection from our childhood reading, gave young people all over the globe a glimpse into the static world of rural life in Iceland, a setting where plucky boys were never far from adventure and mortal danger. These books gave many people a reason for visiting the country in the far north to see for themselves the scenes where the stories took place. The immense

popularity of an Icelandic television series based on the Nonni books a few years ago showed how many people still remembered them well, and on my travels around the world I have often come across people who have been keen to talk about Nonni.

I am among the many people who can testify to the great effect that Nonni's stories had when I first read them as a young boy in a fishing village in the West Fjords of Iceland. My friends and I read them all, some of them again and again, and always the magic worked, drawing us into a world of thrills and marvels.

Now, more than 150 years after Nonni's birth, it is fitting to commemorate him, as is being done in various ways. We are especially pleased about these exhibitions in Japan where Nonni has had many admirers. I send you all my best wishes and sincere thanks to all who have played a part in putting these exhibitions together.