

FOR THE GOOD OF THE NATION JÓN SIGURÐSSON 1811-1879

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1. THE AGE OF SETTLEMENT

GRÉLÖÐ SETTLES IN ICELAND

The great Arnarfjörður – “Eagle Fjord”

According to the medieval *Book of Settlements*, Arnarfjörður is named after a certain Örn (whose name means Eagle) from Rogaland in Norway. When Iceland was settled around 900 AD, he was the first settler in the fjord.

Arnarfjörður is a huge, wide, deep fjord, a place of stunning natural beauty and awe-inspiring rugged mountains, with its own mystical ambiance. Until the middle of the twentieth century Arnarfjörður was densely populated with a farming community, which also relied on the fisheries for survival. Today only a few farms remain, in addition to the village of Bíldudalur.

The Irish earl’s daughter

The first inhabitants at Eyri (later Hrafnseyri) on Arnarfjörður were Ánn *rauðfeldur* Grímsson and his wife Grélöð Bjartmarsdóttir, who was the daughter of an Irish earl.

They had previously spent a winter at Dufansdalur by the same fjord, but Grélöð did not like the smells from the earth there. So they moved to Eyri, where the grass is said to have had the scent of honey.

Ánamúli (Ánn’s Hill) towers above the farmstead, and at Grelutóttir (Grela Ruins) are the relics of a medieval farm site on the spit at the mouth of the Hrafnseyrará river.

Excavations at Grelutóttir

The Grelutóttir site was excavated in 1977-8, revealing a longhouse, smithies and underground structures dating from about 900 AD

2. THE MIDDLE AGES

HRAFN SVEINBJARNARSON

Eyri becomes Hrafnseyri

Around 1200 Eyri (= Gravel spit) by Arnarfjörður was the home of one of Iceland’s most powerful leaders, the chieftain Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson. The place later came to be known as Hrafnseyri (= Hrafn’s Spit).

Hrafn the Healer

In his youth Hrafn travelled widely. He is believed to have had some connection with the first medical school in Europe, which was founded in the ninth century in Salerno in Italy.

On his return to Iceland, Hrafn became a physician: the most renowned healer in Iceland during the period of the Old Commonwealth (10th to 13th centuries), he was probably the best-qualified doctor in the Nordic region. The *Saga of Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson* recounts many tales of people visiting Hrafnseyri to be treated by him.

Hrafn operated ferries across Arnarfjörður and Breiðafjörður: such services were only reintroduced in the 20th century.

Hrafn's murder

Hrafn died a violent death at the hands of his kinsman and rival Þorvaldur of Vatnsfjörður, who made an armed attack on Hrafnseyri on 4 March 1213, and slew Hrafn in front of his home. A modern memorial stone marks the spot where Hrafn is reputed to be buried, in the old churchyard by the church on his estate, of which traces are still visible.

TÍMAÁS TIMELINE

Interactive timeline on a multi-touch screen

3. THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

HARD TIMES

One-fifth of Icelanders die of starvation and hardship

The last decades of the eighteenth century were in many ways a catastrophic period in Icelandic history, yet also a time of change and progress in government, trade and the church.

One of the largest volcanic eruptions in Iceland's history commenced on 8 June 1783 in the Lakagígar craters in the southeast. Known as the "Skaftá Fires," the eruption spewed toxic ash and gases which killed vegetation and livestock, and for many months a haze in the air blocked out the sun, leading to a total crop failure. About 70% of farm animals died. People were forced to abandon their homes in search of food, and many died of starvation or disease. The eruption and the "Haze Famine" cost nearly 10,000 lives, or 20% of the population.

The end of an era

After the Haze Famine, Iceland made a slow recovery.

Due to the natural disasters of the late 18th century, which included a massive earthquake in the south, the episcopal see of Skálholt, together with its school, was transferred to Reykjavík in 1785. The see of north Iceland at Hólar was abolished in 1801. From that time the Icelandic church had one bishop, based in Reykjavík.

Abolition of the Alþingi

The old Alþingi (national assembly) at Þingvellir also came to an end. Established in 930 AD, it was the parliament, legislature and high court of Iceland under the Old Commonwealth, until 1262 when the Icelanders submitted to be ruled by the king of Norway. From that time its influence dwindled, until it functioned only as a law court. The last session at Þingvellir was held in the summer of 1798. The Alþingi assembled in Reykjavík for two more years, before being abolished in 1800. It was replaced by a new High Court in Reykjavík.

The last famine

After the Haze Famine, a number of progressive steps were taken. In 1786 several ports were granted charters as trading towns, and in 1787 the pernicious monopoly trading system under the control of the Danish crown, which had been in force since 1602, was abolished, after which all subjects of the Danish king were free to trade in Iceland without restriction. These changes led to flourishing commerce and trade. But in 1807, during the Napoleonic Wars, the British attacked Copenhagen and largely destroyed the Danish merchant fleet. Iceland's links with Denmark were cut off, and the country found itself under British control, and at the mercy of buccaneers. In 1808 Jørgen Jørgensen, a Danish adventurer under British protection, seized power in Iceland, imprisoned the Danish governor, and ruled as "Protector" for a few weeks before being deposed and deported.

Due to these upheavals, Icelanders again suffered death by starvation, especially in 1812-14. The population fell once more. That was the state of the nation when Jón Sigurðsson was born, in 1811.

4. THE WEST FJORDS

A FLOURISHING REGION

No food shortage in the West Fjords

Today the West Fjords, in the far northwest of the country, are seen by many Icelanders as a remote and inaccessible region. But was this so in past centuries?

At times when many Icelanders experienced hunger and hardship, food security was greater in the West Fjords, with accessible fishing grounds, as well as seabird colonies on cliffs and islands, where birds were hunted and eggs gathered. In 1801 the region accounted for 15.6% of the population of Iceland. Today only 2.3% of Icelanders live in the West Fjords.

In the harsh conditions of the late 19th century many Icelanders emigrated to the New World, but very few left from the West Fjords. During the 19th century the population of the West Fjords almost doubled. It was only in the twentieth century that people began to leave the region in large numbers, mostly to settle in and around the growing capital, Reykjavík.

Flourishing trade

Over the centuries, the main ports in the West Fjords had direct connections with other countries, and they were not reliant on importing goods and commodities from other parts of Iceland.

Around 1300, fish products became Iceland's principal export commodities, superseding woollen goods which had been important in the middle ages. The west of the country always produced the bulk of the catches, and fishing ports on the west coast became thriving trading posts. Fish was exported direct from the West Fjords to European markets, and thus the region was economically self-supporting. The West Fjords were home to some of Iceland's wealthiest and most powerful clans.

Fishermen and sorcerers

In the nineteenth century the men of Arnarfjörður had a reputation as fearless mariners and fishermen. They were even believed to have supernatural powers.

All the farmers in the fjord also rowed out from their farms to fish. During the winter fishing season they established fishing stations in the outer reaches of the fjord and ventured farther out to sea in search of catches. They also hunted whale and seal.

In 1806 the merchant at Bíldudalur, Ólafur Thorlacius, launched a fishery using schooners. Icelanders had previously fished only from rowing boats. Schooners – sailing vessels with a deck and hold – enabled fishermen to go farther, stay out at sea longer, and bring in bigger catches. Such ships had been in use for hundreds of years in Europe, but reached Iceland only in the 19th century. With the advent of the schooner fishery, Arnarfjörður was at the cutting edge of the Icelandic economy.

A farming community

In 1801 the parish of Hrafnseyri comprised 17 farm estates, of which several supported more than one household. The population of the parish was about 200, their average age 32 years.

At about that time the Rev. Jón Sigurðsson, grandfather and namesake of Iceland's national hero Jón Sigurðsson, built himself a grand turf-and-stone gabled farmhouse in the latest style. Like many others in the fjord, he was a progressive, forward-looking man.

5. THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

A new beginning

After the catastrophic consequences of the Skaftá Fires eruption and the Napoleonic Wars, the Icelandic economy gradually began to develop and prosper, at the same time that Jón Sigurðsson and other campaigners for national freedoms were urging their fellow-countrymen on to greater achievements. A sign of the change is that the value of Icelandic exports rose sevenfold from 1819 to 1872. The increase was largely in woollen goods and saltfish. Although Iceland's trade was still largely

dominated by Danes, Icelanders gradually established themselves in the field. They also expanded their expertise in agriculture and fisheries.

The nineteenth century would be a century of effort and campaigning, for self-determination and improved standards of living.

6. INFLUENCES

(A mosaic of images from the nineteenth century)

7. THE LONGED-FOR CHILD

First-born son

On Saturday 17 June 1811 a baby boy was born in the vicarage at Hrafnseyri. He was the first child of the Rev. Chaplain Sigurður Jónsson (1777-1855) and his wife Þórdís Jónsdóttir (c. 1772-1862).

His birth was cause for celebration, as he was the first child of his parents after eight years of marriage. He was their longed-for child. They could never have imagined that he would one day be called “the nation’s longed-for child.” Nor could they have foreseen the significance of their son’s birth for the future of the people of Iceland.

8. CHILDHOOD

Jón’s playthings

No doubt Jón Sigurðsson was the apple of his parents’ eye, and that must have given him confidence at an early age. Like other Icelandic children of his time, he would have played with the improvised toys available on a farm: sheep bones and horns, used in all sorts of games of make-believe.

As Hrafnseyri is by the sea, and the fishery was an important element of life on the farm, the sea also provided playthings for children.

Working children

By the age of five or six, children were expected to take contribute to the work of the farm. In winter they knitted woollens and took care of the livestock. In summer they took part in haymaking, and watched over the flocks of sheep. When they were a little older, boys went out fishing and seal-hunting with the older men.

When he was nearly 13 years old, Jón Sigurðsson spent the winter season as a ship’s lad on a fishing boat owned by his father.

The crew lived for the season at a fishing camp in Ystidalur. Before long Jón objected to being a “lad” with only a half-share of the catch, and was promoted to be a full member of the crew.

Playmates

When Jón Sigurðsson was five years old, there were 12 children between the ages of five and nine years in the parish of Hrafnseyri.

No doubt the children on the neighbouring farms – Hrafnseyrarhús, Auðkúla and Tjaldanes – were the little boy's playmates; and at Sunday services in Hrafnseyri Church, most of the local children had a chance to meet.

Child of the Enlightenment

As soon as children had learned to speak, they were taught to recite the Lord's Prayer, the Blessing and various prayers. Boys often received lessons in writing, but lack of paper was sometimes a problem. Ink was made from various substances, such as the bearberry plant, soot or animal blood.

Jón Sigurðsson was confirmed, in his 14th year like other Icelandic children, on 9 April 1825, together with three other local children. Youngsters were required to learn to read before they could be confirmed. The Rev. Sigurður gave his son the following report: "a fluent reader, well-informed and honourable."

"I clearly remember a modest and intelligent lad at Sandar, at my wedding there."
Comment by a bridegroom about Jón at the age of 12

The Rev. Sigurður expected his children to study diligently. Jón's reading included writings published by *Lærdómslistafélagið* (the Society for Learned Arts) and other books inspired by the ideas of the Enlightenment. The rationalism of these works, in the tradition of Newton, Locke, Montesquieu and Voltaire, would be a seminal influence on Jón's thinking.

With the advent of the Enlightenment, the strict, sober and repressive principles of Lutheran orthodoxy were challenged by a new optimism and belief in progress and individual talent and potential.

Home schooling

In Jón's day Iceland had no organised education system, with the exception of a single school at Bessastaðir near Reykjavík which prepared pupils for university studies in Denmark. Instead of sending Jón away to school, his father decided to teach him at home; this was probably for financial reasons.

Jón's mother, Madame Þórdís, who was "renowned for her outstanding gifts," also contributed to her son's education.

9. SHOP AND BISHOP

Reykjavík village

Although Reykjavík had grown to be Iceland's administrative capital, and its largest urban centre, in 1830 the population numbered only 600. The village was dominated by the only large building, the residence of Danish Governor Lorents Angel Krieger (now Government House, originally built in the 18th century as a prison).

Reykjavík had no school, no hospital, no printing press, and no building which could house meetings or social gatherings, except for a small wooden house known as *The Club*, a drinking club for the local elite.

Leaving home

At the age of 18, in the spring of 1829, Jón Sigurðsson left his childhood home for good. He went to Reykjavík, where he stayed with his paternal uncle, Einar Jónsson.

Einar also gave his nephew a job in the store he managed for one of Reykjavík's major merchant enterprises, owned by the wealthy and powerful P. C. Knudtzon, who lived in Copenhagen.

Graduation *cum laude*

Following his studies under his parents' supervision, Jón took his matriculation examination (qualification for university). His examiner was the Rev. Gunnlaugur Oddsson, pastor at Reykjavík Cathedral and one of the most learned Icelanders of his time. Jón passed *cum laude*.

At the bishop's residence

After working for a year in the Knudtzon store, Jón was engaged as secretary to the Bishop of Iceland, Steingrímur Jónsson, whose residence was at Laugarnes, outside Reykjavík.

For the next three years Jón lived under the bishop's roof. This would prove helpful to his career, as the episcopal residence was constantly visited by both clergy and laymen, including the pupils at Bessastaðir School who, like Jón, intended to pursue further studies in Denmark. Viðey island, just off the shore of Laugarnes, was an important centre of power and culture in those days; as everyone who went out to the island passed by the bishop's residence, Jón had the opportunity to make the acquaintance of many Icelandic intellectuals and leaders of society.

Immersed in history

At the bishop's residence Jón had access to Iceland's most extensive library of books and ancient manuscripts; he thus had a unique opportunity to learn all about the history of his country, and the treasures of its ancient manuscripts.

The manuscript collection included the archives of the old bishopric of Skálholt, together with the personal collection of Bishop Hannes Finnsson (1739-96) and his family, who had been leading scholars and collectors for many generations. Jón became so skilled in reading the old manuscripts that he was assigned to assist scholars who visited to study the collection.

A very long engagement

In 1833 Jón Sigurðsson became engaged to his sweetheart Ingibjörg, who was his first cousin. She was the daughter of his uncle Einar, who employed and housed Jón when he first arrived in Reykjavík. Ingibjörg was seven years older than Jón, born in 1804.

That autumn Jón sailed to Copenhagen to enter the university, leaving his fiancée at home to wait for him. No-one could have foreseen at that time that they would not marry for another twelve years, during which time they never met.

Imports and exports

Around 1830, Iceland's principal export commodities were on the one hand fish products – mainly saltfish, stockfish (dried fish) and shark-liver oil (used as lamp-oil, for instance) – and on the other hand agricultural products: wool, yarn, knitted and woven woollens, and tallow (rendered animal fat).

Rye – grain and flour – was the largest import in terms of weight, and salt was also imported in quantity. Other imports included such commodities as pots, pans and other metal implements, and importation of luxuries such as coffee, liquor and tobacco was on the rise. At this time, most Icelandic garments and textiles were made of home-grown wool, but textiles were also imported on a small scale, for instance fabrics for making aprons.

10. STUDIES IN COPENHAGEN

Hotbed of student radicalism

All Icelanders who went to study at the University of Copenhagen were provided with accommodation at the Regensen hall of residence. Some Danish students resented this privilege, which Icelanders had enjoyed ever since the 16th century.

When Jón Sigurðsson arrived at the Regensen hall in 1834, the students there were agitating for civil rights and the abolition of censorship in Denmark, where the king still ruled as an absolute monarch. Students in Denmark were influenced by the July Revolution in France in 1830, when Charles X was overthrown.

The Regensen hall was one of the hotbeds of radicalism in Copenhagen. No doubt Jón was influenced by this fervour for reform, although he did not become politically active himself for many years.

The Romantic Revival

Copenhagen was caught up in the Romantic Revival, a trend in literature and the arts, linguistics, history, philosophy and politics which had sprung from Enlightenment principles.

A response to deadening rationalism and utilitarianism, the Romantic Revival was a liberating movement which emphasised the importance of feeling and imagination. Its philosophy was individualistic and mystical, and looked back through rose-tinted spectacles to the ancient roots of the peoples of Europe.

The nation state: a new idea

At that time in the German-speaking world new ideas had arisen about nations and nationality. These views, which were closely linked to the Romantic Revival, became influential in Denmark.

The new concept was one of national identity, leading to the proposition that every nation has a natural right to self-determination. Prior to that time, states had existed on a basis of consensus between monarchs and their subjects, regardless of ethnic nationality. Hence a single state might include many different peoples; and one nation, speaking the same language, might be divided between two or more states.

The realm of the Danish king was diverse in composition: about one-fifth of his subjects were German-speaking, while the people of Iceland and the Faroe Islands, for instance, spoke their own languages. In the dominions of the Danish king, growing consciousness of national identity was thus a divisive force, but in other parts of Europe, such as Germany and Italy, nationalism led to unification of these previously fragmented nations.

German-speaking subjects of the Danish king, mainly in Schleswig-Holstein, rebelled against his authority, and demanded independence, or to be subsumed into a new great German state. On the same principle, Icelanders started to suggest that they too had a right to nationhood.

Scholars started to research the histories of nations, their archaeology and ancient manuscripts; they went out and collected folklore and folk music. Museums of national culture and history were founded. That time of ferment set the stage for the life's work of Jón Sigurðsson.

Studies and military service

Jón Sigurðsson studied linguistics and history, and also plunged into research on manuscripts and other documents. His skill and diligence meant that he always had plenty of work.

During the summer vacation every student was required to take part in military exercises with the *Kongens Livkorps* (Royal Life Guards). Jón served in the Fourth Division, where his number was 31.

“Handsome Sivertsen”

At that time Jón Sigurðsson started to use the more Danish-sounding surname “Sivertsen.” Tall and slim with dark hair and sparkling dark eyes, he was popular with the ladies.

Although he was a conscientious student and worker, Jón had no objection to a little social life. Some of his Icelandic contemporaries at the university in Copenhagen fell prey to the many temptations of the city, neglected their studies and eventually dropped out.

There was plenty to tempt a young Icelander: bars and cafés on every corner; and in summer there were picnics in the woods outside the city. Icelandic students gathered at inns such as “Mjóni” on Kongens Nytorv, the favourite haunt of the Copenhagen intelligentsia. It was a small community: everyone knew everyone else.

11. ENTERING POLITICS

Birth of a politician

In January 1840 Jón fell gravely ill with syphilis (a widespread disease at the time) and was confined to bed until the summer. Full recovery took far longer.

The illness appears to have been a wake-up call for Jón, reminding him of all he wanted to achieve in his life. No doubt his brush with death focussed his mind, and made him more perceptive, more impulsive and more daring. When he rose from his sick-bed, he seemed to have found a new purpose in life: a role in politics. Jón Sigurðsson the politician was born.

Wars of words

During the summer of 1840 Jón Sigurðsson became involved in a prolonged debate with his former employer, the Reykjavík merchant P. C. Knudtzon: Jón called for Iceland to be granted Free Trade without any restrictions.

Jón's views were in the spirit of liberalism, which enjoyed growing support in Europe. From that time Jón became one of the political leaders of the Icelanders in Copenhagen.

In 1841 Jón and his supporters launched a new annual journal, *Ný félagsrit* (the New Social Journal). In the first issue Jón wrote a long essay calling for the Alþingi to be re-established; he maintained that Danish rule over Iceland was unnatural, as it was based upon one nation oppressing another. Every nation, he maintained, had a natural right to govern itself.

Jón plants the seeds of political consciousness

The people of Iceland, who numbered just under 60,000 at that time, were mostly impoverished, and lived in sparsely-populated rural areas, as urban development had hardly begun. They had no experience of uniting in a common cause, and had no idea how to hold a meeting or make a speech.

Icelanders tended to be submissive to all authorities. But Jón Sigurðsson, openly defiant of the Danish merchant class and powerful royal officials in Iceland, soon became the hero of Icelandic countrymen. Ordinary, poverty-stricken Icelanders started to send him money for the cause.

Jón was of the view that apathy was the Icelanders' worst enemy. He wanted to force them to think, and spur them to action. He encouraged them to write petitions and form societies, for such causes as agricultural schools, cultivation, fisheries, commerce, public libraries and temperance, and practise their public-speaking skills.

He was making his fellow-countrymen ready to take their place in a new parliament.

12. THE CONQUERING HERO

Restoration of Alþingi

On 8 March 1843 King Christian VIII of Denmark and Iceland issued a decree for the re-establishment of the Alþingi. This was in line with the foundation of consultative assemblies in Denmark known as Estates General. The new Alþingi was to have only an advisory role, and would be without political power. But it would be a useful forum for Icelanders to put their views to the royal authorities.

Jón Sigurðsson immediately started making plans to be elected to the new body. Only those who owned property were eligible to stand for election, and Jón only qualified because he owned part of an estate in Arnarfjörður, which had been a gift from his grandfather.

In Ísafjörður in the West Fjords, the church became a polling station on 13 April 1844. Jón Sigurðsson was elected to represent the constituency of Ísafjörður, with 50 of the 52 votes cast. He retained his seat in parliament for the rest of his life.

Home to a seat in parliament

Jón Sigurðsson was the only Icelander resident in Copenhagen who was elected to the first Alþingi. Before he sailed for Iceland to attend the session of Alþingi, his fellow-Icelanders held a farewell feast for him. They continued the custom every time he sailed home to attend parliament – fourteen times in all.

The new Alþingi came together on 1 July 1845 in the assembly hall of the new Learned School in Reykjavík (the latest incarnation of the old cathedral schools and the Latin School, and today Reykjavík High School, still in the same 19th-century schoolhouse). At once Jón took the lead, and put many issues to the assembly. He was only 34 years old, but people all over the country already saw him as the leader of the nation.

A married man at last

In the summer of 1845, when he took his seat in parliament, Jón was at last reunited with his fiancée, Ingibjörg Einaradóttir. She had been waiting for him for nearly 12 years, and was now 41 years old. They were married in Reykjavík on 4 September 1845, and that autumn they sailed to Copenhagen to set up their first home together on Admiralsgade.

Ingibjörg was loyal and supportive of her husband throughout their marriage. They hardly spent another day apart, as she made a habit of accompanying him when he went to Iceland to attend parliament. The couple were close and affectionate. Ingibjörg was seen by many as Iceland's first lady.

An addition to the family

Once it was clear that Jón and Ingibjörg would not be able to have children, the idea arose of taking in a foster-child, and in 1859 they did so. Eight-year-old Sigurður Jónsson, Jón's nephew from the West Fjords, the son of his sister Margrét, came to live with the couple in Copenhagen. The arrival of the little boy transformed their lives; Ingibjörg was 55 and Jón 48. They appear to have doted on the boy, lavishing books

and toys on him, and doing all they could to give him a good upbringing. He was sent, for instance, to art school to learn drawing, and then to the best schools in the city. He graduated from Borgardyskolen in 1869, and in 1875 he graduated in law from the University of Copenhagen. He was an ardent follower of his foster-father's political views. In 1878 he was appointed district commissioner of the county of Snæfell and Hnappadalur. He died in 1893, aged only 42.

13. THE FALL OF ABSOLUTISM

Revolution in Denmark

In 1848 the February Revolution in France, which led to the foundation of the Second Republic, gave rise to a wave of unrest throughout Europe. In Denmark the revolutionary pressure forced the new King Frederick VII to renounce his absolute powers, and promise his subjects a constitutional parliamentary monarchy and civil rights.

In the winter of 1848-9 a constitutional assembly was at work in Denmark. It included five representatives from Iceland, Jón Sigurðsson among them. A constitution (*Grundloven*) was drawn up, which became law on 5 June 1849. This day has been celebrated ever since as Denmark's national day.

A new frame of reference

Jón Sigurðsson's interpretation of the relationship between Iceland and Denmark was that the Icelanders had sworn loyalty only to the monarch. Now, when the king had renounced his authority, which had passed to the people of Denmark, he should also resign his authority over the people of Iceland. In the revolutionary climate of 1848, that is what the Icelanders were promised.

In a letter King Frederick wrote that the Icelanders too would have their own constitutional assembly, to be followed by a constitution for Iceland.

A Call to Icelanders

During the revolutionary unrest in Denmark in early 1848, Jón Sigurðsson was writing his most famous work, *Hugvekja til Íslendinga* (A Call to Icelanders), in which he explored the status and position of the Icelanders, and argued that they should enjoy the same rights vis-à-vis the king as the people of Denmark.

He emphasised the importance of separating the fiscal affairs of Iceland and Denmark. He proposed that an "earl" or governor be appointed. The governor, together with a lawful government, would submit royal Bills to parliament, and would be answerable to the people. Jón never, throughout his political career, suggested that Iceland should throw off royal rule and become a republic. The idea was born in later times.

14. NATIONAL CONVENTION

“We all protest”

By the time the constitutional assembly for Iceland, known as the *þjóðfundur* (National Convention), finally met in the summer of 1851, in the assembly hall of the Learned School in Reykjavík, Denmark was experiencing a political backlash. A new conservative-leaning government was unsympathetic to the idea of granting Iceland greater freedoms. The Danish authorities feared that the national convention might foment revolt, and sent military forces to suppress any unrest.

At the National Convention the king was represented by Governor Trampe, who presented the Danish proposal that under the new constitution Iceland should be treated as an administrative district of Denmark. When it became clear that the Convention would not accept this, Trampe unceremoniously declared the meeting closed. Uproar broke out among the representatives at the Convention, who shouted in protest and shook their fists at the Governor.

Jón Sigurðsson, leader of the majority party at the Convention, stood up and declared that he protested against this action, in the name of the king and of the people of Iceland, and that he reserved the right to make a legal challenge against this unlawful act. At this, Trampe marched out of the room, accompanied by Páll Melsteð, chair of the convention. Almost all the convention members leaped to their feet, shouting “We all protest.” From that moment, Jón Sigurðsson’s position was unrivalled as leader of the people of Iceland.

15. FREE TRADE AND SHEEP SCAB

Opening Iceland to the world

The disappointing National Convention was followed by an uneventful period in Icelandic politics, when little progress was made in clarifying Iceland’s legal status. But an important progressive step was taken in 1855, when Free Trade was granted: Denmark relinquished control of Iceland’s trade, and Icelanders were able to trade with people of all nations. This was due not least to the efforts of Jón Sigurðsson.

Free Trade was the first tangible benefit arising from Jón Sigurðsson’s political activity. He wanted Iceland to be opened up as far as possible to other nations; he favoured new trade arrangements with Norwegian and British businesses, and supported a French proposal to build a large fish-processing plant in Dýrafjörður in the West Fjords in 1856. But neither Icelanders nor the Danish authorities approved of the French plan.

Jón at odds with his people

In 1859 sheep husbandry, the pillar of the Icelandic economy, was under severe threat from an epidemic of sheep scab.

The Danish authorities were of the view that the disease could be treated, and the well-read intellectual Jón Sigurðsson was in agreement. Most Icelanders, however, believed that the only effective response was to destroy the animals.

Jón travelled around Iceland with a Danish veterinarian, but they met with resistance and scepticism wherever they went. When Jón and his wife Ingibjörg went home to Copenhagen late that autumn, Jón was furious and disappointed. He did not return to Iceland for another six years.

The Danish authorities may have been motivated partly by a desire to cause a rupture between the Icelanders and the leader of the movement for autonomy. They appeared to have had some success, as that summer Jón Sigurðsson was not elected President (Speaker) of the Alþingi. Some of his former allies turned against him, among them Jón Guðmundsson, Arnljótur Ólafsson, Gísli Brynjúlfsson and Grímur Thomsen, all of whom sat in parliament.

Jón regroup

In 1861 an official committee was appointed to submit proposals for the fiscal separation of Denmark and Iceland. Jón was on the committee. He reached the conclusion that the Danes owed the Icelanders considerable sums, mainly arising from estates taken over by the king and subsequently sold, and from the profits of the Danish monopoly trading system (1602-1787). Jón's interpretation was entirely new, as the assumption had always been that Iceland was a financial burden on the Danish state.

By his innovative argument, Jón established a new platform for the campaign for Icelandic autonomy; Icelanders could take a dignified stand, free of any shaming sense of being dependants of the Danes and begging for alms. This was the crucial strength of Jón's argument, known as the "Calculation Claim."

16. STRATEGY

Grassroots activist

Jón Sigurðsson's political activities were carried on in a variety of ways. In addition to the journal *Ný félagsrit*, he corresponded copiously with individuals, and this was one of his most important methods of reaching out for support. He spurred on his fellow-countrymen in their political efforts, while he and his wife provided a wide range of assistance and support to Icelanders in Copenhagen.

As the Alþingi functioned only as an advisory body until 1874, one of the most important methods for Icelanders to put their views on necessary reforms and improvements to the authorities in Copenhagen was to submit petitions. Jón took the initiative in the drawing up of many such petitions.

The importance of image

He took on a fatherly, statesmanlike role among the Icelanders. This was a conscious step on his part. He frequently had his photograph taken to send home to Iceland, and as early as 1857 a lithographic print of him was distributed in large quantities to

all the constituencies. At that time Icelanders had few pictures in their homes, but now they could hang a portrait of Jón Sigurðsson on the wall, instead of the king, or next to him.

“I wish that such a man might live for ever”

In Copenhagen Jón's lifestyle was lavish, and this helped him gain access to influential people, and be taken seriously. He seems to have been highly charismatic, and a persuasive public speaker.

In parliament in 1869 Jón delivered one of his most memorable speeches. Poet the Rev. Matthías Jochumsson, who heard the speech, reported that the members of parliament were overcome with by his eloquence; even one of his most vocal opponents is said to have called out, towards the end of Jón's speech: “I wish that such a man might live for ever.”

The people's friend

An important aspect of Jón Sigurðsson's political activities was that he and his wife Ingibjörg, as unofficial "ambassadors" in Copenhagen, were willing to perform a range of favours and services in the Danish capital for their fellow-countrymen. Many commodities were scarce or unobtainable in Iceland, and the couple were asked to buy goods of all kinds on behalf of Icelanders - anything from sewing-needles to fishing-boats. Jón also dealt with the authorities; he arranged for documents needed by people in Iceland and helped young Icelanders gain admission to schools and colleges in Denmark and Norway, and assisted those who were sent to Denmark for medical care not available in Iceland.

17. NATIONAL FESTIVAL AND CONSTITUTION

Denmark cuts the Gordian knot

The National Convention was followed by prolonged wrangling about the status of the Iceland within the Danish realm, and the fiscal separation of Denmark and Iceland. In the end the Danes cut the Gordian knot and made a unilateral decision: legislation was passed on the status of Iceland, ignoring Icelandic opposition. Under the Status Act, Iceland was defined as “an inalienable part of the Danish realm, with special national rights.” The Alþingi rejected the new Act, by 14 votes against 10.

At long last a constitution – but unilaterally issued by the Danes

In 1874 the Icelanders celebrated the millennium of habitation in the country. The Danes marked the occasion by presenting Iceland with its own constitution. Though drawn up unilaterally by the Danes, the constitution was a huge step forward for Iceland.

It granted the Alþingi legislative powers and budgetary responsibilities, with certain restrictions, and the Icelanders were guaranteed basic human rights. At last Jón Sigurðsson's efforts had yielded solid results. However, as the Icelanders had not been involved in formulating the constitution, they could happily continue to agitate for increased rights and freedoms.

Jón or the King?

When the millennium of the settlement of Iceland was celebrated in 1874, the King of Denmark and Iceland made a state visit to his dominion. This was the first such royal visit. King Christian IX attended the millennium celebrations, accompanied by a large retinue. Jón Sigurðsson, president of Alþingi and the Icelanders' acclaimed leader, was not invited to be present – a fact that was remarked upon both in Iceland and abroad.

“Had Jón Sigurðsson come to Iceland with the king, he would have been mobbed by the Icelanders, and overshadowed the king himself. The government could not risk that.”

Oddgeir Stephensen, director of the Iceland Department of the Danish government.

18. AT HOME ON ØSTER VOLDGADE

“It is much better to live here, out by the city walls, and have the woods and the park on our doorstep.” (Jón Sigurðsson to Páll Pálsson, 4 Oct. 1864)

A vast quantity of household receipts and accounts from Jón's and Ingibjörg's home has survived among his papers. They show that the couple bought the highest quality of furnishings, food, drink and clothing.

Almost every year Jón bought a silk top hat from the society hatter C. L. Machold on Køpmagergade 49, where his hats were repaired and altered in accord with the latest fashions. Ingibjörg carefully brushed his hats every day. Both Jón and Ingibjörg bought only the best and most expensive of goods.

19. SCHOLARSHIP AND PUBLISHING

The Scholar

At the “Tower”

Den Arnamagneanske samling, the priceless collection of Icelandic manuscripts accumulated by scholar Árni Magnússon (1663-1730) and bequeathed to Copenhagen University, was kept in the loft of the Church of the Trinity. A number of Icelanders were generally working with the manuscripts there, and preparing them for publication. They spoke of going to “the Tower,” as they had to ascend the church's Round Tower to reach the loft.

Jón was among the regulars at the “Tower” until a new library building was constructed in 1861 to house the university library and the Árni Magnússon collection. He also worked extensively for *Det kongelige Nordiske Oldskriftselskab* (the Royal Society of Northern Antiquaries) and *Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab* (the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters), editing publications of Danish historical documents.

“President” Jón

From his early years as a student in Copenhagen, Jón Sigurðsson was active in the Copenhagen branch of *Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag* (the Icelandic Literary Society).

He was elected secretary of the society, and served as its president until his death: hence he came to be known among Icelanders in Copenhagen as “President Jón.” He is affectionately called by this title to the present day. The society was the principal social forum of Icelanders in the Danish capital. Meetings were held on the topmost floor of Borchs Collegium on Store Kannikestræde.

(A bookshelf with Jón’s writings)

“My work is not much, and consists mostly of poking around down at the Exchequer or Chancellery on various errands.” (Jón Sigurðsson, letter, 18 June 1844).

Political transparency

Alongside his scholarly work editing and publishing Old Icelandic literature, such as the Prose Edda, Sagas and Old Norse poetry, and complete editions of the works of such poets as

Bjarni Thorarensen, Jón Þorláksson of Bægisá and Jón Thoroddsen, Jón devoted a lot of time to searching for old documents and records relevant to Iceland and its history and government, which he published with annotations. Examples of such projects are his *Íslenskt fornbréfasafn* (Collection of Old Icelandic Documents), *Lovsamling for Island* (Legal Code for Iceland), *Safn til sögu Íslands* (Collection for a History of Iceland), *Skýrslur um landshagi á Íslandi* (Reports on Economic Conditions in Iceland) and *Tíðindi um stjórnarmálefni Íslands* (Reports on the Government of Iceland). By this work Jón made important information on Iceland’s history and government accessible to all. This was in the spirit of the new democratic approach to politics, and also made a key contribution to the Icelanders’ ongoing campaign for self-determination.

Renewal in the fisheries and agriculture

In addition to his scholarly work in editing and publishing literature and historical documents, Jón Sigurðsson was untiring in his efforts to urge Icelanders to modernise their economy. Most important was his campaign for Free Trade, but he also wanted to see change in the fisheries and agriculture, the twin pillars of the economy. In 1859 he published his *Lítill fiskibók með uppdráttum og útskýringum handa fiskimönnum á Íslandi* (Little Book of Fishing with Diagrams and Notes for Fishermen in Iceland), and two years later *Lítill varningsbók handa bændum og búmönnum á Íslandi* (A Little Book of Commodities for Farming Folk in Iceland). The Danish government contributed funding for the books, which were distributed all over Iceland.

20. JÓN AND INGIBJÖRG: THE FINAL DAYS

United in death

Jón Sigurðsson last attended the Alþingi in 1877. He was obviously not himself; he took no part in debates, and was withdrawn and absent-minded. He was clearly a sick man.

For the rest of his life he was bedridden for months at a time, and by November 1879 it was clear that the end was approaching. Ingibjörg, herself in very poor health, never left her husband's bedside. He died on 7 December 1877, aged 68.

After her husband's death Ingibjörg was confined to bed, until she too died only ten days later, on 16 December. She was 75.

21. FUNERAL AND DEBT

“Iceland's longed-for child, its honour, sword and shield”

On Saturday 13 December a well-attended memorial service was held for Jón Sigurðsson at the Garrison Church on Skt. Annæ Plads. As a sign of respect for the Icelandic leader, both houses of the Danish parliament recessed to enable members to attend. Representatives of the king and government, and the president of parliament, were present. In his eulogy the Rev. Georg Schepelern likened Jón to St. Paul the Apostle.

Icelanders in Copenhagen placed on the coffin a silver plaque engraved with the words “Iceland's longed-for child, its honour, sword and shield.”

Jón and Ingibjörg had requested to be laid to rest in Icelandic soil, and the following spring their earthly remains were returned to their home country. Their funeral, held on 4 May 1880, was the most magnificent and well-attended ever held in Iceland until that time. The couple were buried in the churchyard on Suðurgata in Reykjavík.

Was Jón bankrupt?

A wealthy Englishman, George Powell, had paid Jón a generous advance to write a history of Iceland. Surety for the payment was Jón's extensive collection of manuscripts and books, but the book was never written.

As Jón's health declined in the last years his life, this liability preyed on his mind. Tryggvi Gunnarsson, later a bank director, undertook to be financial advisor to the couple, in order to ensure that Jón Sigurðsson would not endure the shame of dying a bankrupt and forfeiting his books and manuscripts into foreign hands.

Tryggvi was able to ensure that the Alþingi agreed in 1877 to purchase Jón's collection for 25,000 *krónur*, and he also negotiated with Powell to write off the debt.

22. LEGACY

A unifying symbol

In his lifetime Jón Sigurðsson was admired and adored all over Iceland, although he always had vocal political opponents. But after his death he attained iconic status as a symbol of the Icelanders' campaign for self-determination.

For capitalists and socialists, nationalists and internationalists alike, Jón became a national hero. Even today, Icelanders ask and debate what Jón Sigurðsson would have done in a certain situation.

“When life has become naught but a shadow, death is preferable to life, for now the image of

Jón Sigurðsson rises up in a new glory after his demise, the image of a hero and a great man, the eternally-youthful campaigner for freedom; the image which will never fade or die in any Icelandic heart. It may be deemed our good fortune to have lived at the same time as such a man; and had Jón Sigurðsson not lived, what a void !!”

Steingrímur Thorsteinsson

23. 17 JUNE – REPUBLIC AND NATIONAL DAY

On 1886, a celebration was held in memory of Jón Sigurðsson on his birthday, 17 June, on the initiative of Reykjavík shopkeeper Þorlákur Ó. Johnson. The event was repeated the following year.

In the years after the granting of Home Rule in 1904, a wave of patriotism swept the country, and in 1907 Jón Sigurðsson’s birthday was marked for the first time with festivities in Reykjavík. Praise was heaped upon the memory of the great man.

On the centenary of Jón’s birth in 1911, sculptor Einar Jónsson made a statue of him, which was erected in front of Government House. In 1931 it was moved to Austurvöllur square, where it stands today facing Parliament House. The University of Iceland was also founded in 1911 on the centenary of Jón’s birth.

Iceland gained sovereign status in 1918, though still under the Danish king, and in 1944 the modern Republic of Iceland was founded on Jón Sigurðsson’s birthday, 17 June, which has been celebrated ever since as Iceland’s national day.

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