

For the Good of the Nation – Jón Sigurðsson 1811-1879

Bicentenary of the birth of Jón Sigurðsson, leader of the Icelandic campaign for self-determination in the 19th century

On 17 June 2011, two centuries will have passed since the birth of Iceland's national hero "President" Jón Sigurðsson. A Jón Sigurðsson Bicentenary Committee was appointed on 17 June 2007 to plan a programme of celebrations of the bicentennial year. Appointed by the Prime Minister on behalf of the Alþingi (parliament), the Committee comprises, in addition to the chair, former president of Alþingi Sólveig Pétursdóttir, representatives of all political parties in parliament, a representative of Alþingi, and a representative of the Hrafnseyri Committee.

Events organised by the Bicentenary Committee include exhibitions, seminars, publications etc. throughout 2011. The largest project is at the Jón Sigurðsson Museum, at his birthplace, Hrafnseyri in Arnarfjörður (West Fjords). On Jón's birthday (Iceland's National Day), 17 June 2011, a new exhibition will be ceremonially opened there in improved premises, with a variety of multimedia features.

The name of Jón Sigurðsson is indissolubly bound up with the history of Icelandic self-determination and independence. In the mid-nineteenth century he launched the Icelanders' peaceful campaign for emancipation from Danish rule, and for political and economic autonomy. In his time he was the unquestioned leader of the Icelandic nation.

After his death in 1879 Jón continued to be a beacon to his fellow-countrymen, inspiring them to subsequent victories on their journey towards greater freedom and democracy. The nation honoured his memory by founding the University of Iceland on the centenary of his birth in 1911, and in 1944 his birthday was chosen for the foundation of the Republic of Iceland; since then, 17 June has been Iceland's national Day.

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Jón Sigurðsson was born at the parsonage of Hrafnseyri in the county of Ísafjarðarsýsla on 17 June 1811, the son of the pastor. After being taught at home by his father, he left for Reykjavík in 1829, aged nearly 18, in order to take his matriculation examinations for entrance to university in Denmark. After working in a Reykjavík shop for a year he was secretary to the Bishop of Iceland for three years. At the bishop's residence he studied Old Icelandic manuscripts, and learned to decipher them and make legible copies.

In 1833 Jón Sigurðsson sailed for Copenhagen, and at the beginning of 1834 he enrolled at the university. He lived in Copenhagen for the rest of his life. Initially he studied linguistics and history, and later economics. Although an outstanding student, he never completed an academic degree. Before long he was in demand to undertake various scholarly tasks for the Árni Magnússon manuscript collection and Danish academic organisations, to research and copy Old Icelandic documents. He made an important contribution in this field, editing and publishing a vast array of literature and documents.

Denmark was a hotbed of political unrest at that time, following the July Revolution in France in 1830. It was around 1840 that Jón Sigurðsson began his career as a political activist, by writing about Icelandic affairs in the press. The ancient Icelandic Alþingi (national assembly or parliament), founded around 930 AD shortly after the settlement of the country, had gradually declined over the centuries. Iceland had been under foreign rule since the 13th century, and by the eighteenth century the Alþingi functioned only as a court of law. It was abolished in 1800, and replaced by a new High Court. By the 1840s the Icelanders were calling for their Alþingi to be re-established, and Jón Sigurðsson was among the supporters of this step towards democracy.

The Alþingi was re-established in 1844, initially only as an advisory body to the king of Denmark and Iceland, who was an absolute monarch. In the first parliamentary elections, Jón Sigurðsson was a candidate in his home region, Ísafjarðarsýsla. Although he was not able to travel home to Iceland to campaign for election, he won a convincing victory, and he sat in parliament for the district for the rest of his life. In 1845 he returned to his home country for the first time in twelve years to attend the first session of the new parliament (initially the Alþingi met for four weeks in alternate summers). Jón rapidly became a leading member of the new Alþingi, and from 1849 he was generally elected president (speaker) of the house: he came to be known by the honorific title of President Jón, and still is today, although of course he died long before Iceland became a republic in 1944.

Jón Sigurðsson had become engaged to his cousin, Ingibjörg Einarsdóttir, before he left for Denmark, and she waited twelve years at home in Reykjavík for him. In 1845 they were married, and she returned with him to Copenhagen. Their home was always open to their fellow-countrymen in the Danish capital, especially students, and it became a social centre of the Icelandic community there. Jón and Ingibjörg had no children of their own, but they took in Jón's young nephew Sigurður at the age of eight, and raised him as their son.

After the French Revolution of 1848, which sparked a revolutionary wave in Europe, Icelanders became more vociferous in their demands for a constitution of their own. In 1851, when the king of Denmark and Iceland had given up his absolute powers, a constitutional assembly or National Convention was held in Reykjavík. Iceland's status within the Danish realm was to be clarified by consultation with the Icelanders themselves, but when it came to the point the Danes were unwilling to make any real concessions. The royal representative unceremoniously dismissed the delegates, at which Jón Sigurðsson and most of the other delegates chorused: We all protest!

At this point Jón Sigurðsson was forty years old. He had established himself as the unchallenged leader of the Icelanders' campaign for self-determination. He lived in Copenhagen, where he worked on scholarly projects and publications of Icelandic literature, while also pursuing an active political career.

He published the annual Ný Félagsrit/New Social Journal for thirty years from 1841, corresponded with a vast number of people in Iceland, and was

unflagging in his efforts to promote progress and enlightenment in his native country.

The first major political victory was the granting of Free Trade to Iceland in 1855, largely due to Jón's lobbying and campaigning efforts.

In 1874, on the millennium of the settlement of Iceland, the Icelanders at last acquired their longed-for constitution. The millennium was celebrated with festivities at the ancient parliamentary site of Þingvellir, and King Christian IX visited his Icelandic subjects, the first monarch to do so. Jón Sigurðsson was not invited to attend the celebrations: this was alleged to be because he was so much more popular than the king!

Under the constitution of 1874 the Alþingi gained limited fiscal powers. One of its first actions was to award Jón Sigurðsson an annual honorarium; and some years later the Alþingi purchased Jón's extensive library of books and manuscripts.

Although he was the Icelanders' undisputed leader, with loyal support in all parts of the country, Jón was not universally popular. Towards the end of his life, some younger activists felt that Jón was over-cautious. But Jón, with all his years of experience in politics, was a pragmatist, who knew what was practical.

Jón Sigurðsson sailed home to Iceland fourteen times to attend parliament. He last made the journey in 1877, by which time his health was declining, and he took little part in proceedings. He died on 7 December 1879 at his home in Copenhagen. His wife Ingibjörg survived him only for nine days. Memorial services were held in Copenhagen, and much was written about Jón in the foreign press. The couple were given a splendid state funeral in Reykjavík on 4 May 1880.

The bicentenary of Jón Sigurðsson's birth will be marked in various ways during 2011, and especially at his birthplace in Hrafnseyri, in Reykjavík, at Jónshús (Jón Sigurðsson House) in Copenhagen where he lived for many years, and among the Icelandic community in the New World.