
H.E. Guðni Th. Jóhannesson

*The President of Iceland—and ASF Patron—
is the guest of Honor at the American-Scandinavian
Foundation’s annual Spring Gala.*

I CELAND’S PRESIDENT

GUÐNI TH. JÓHANNESSON was born in Reykjavik in 1968, just 50 years after his country gained its independence. Now, just 100 years after that sovereignty was secured, he finds himself firmly ensconced as President of that amazing Nordic nation.

After obtaining his B.A. degree from Warwick University in England he received a master’s degree in history from the University of Iceland and a Ph.D. from Queen Mary, University of London in 2003.

Jóhannesson is married to Eliza Jean Reid, a Canadian; they met at Oxford, have four children and have lived in Iceland since 2003. Jóhannesson secured the presidency in 2016 by winning 39.1 percent of voters in a multi-candidate general election.

Before assuming office, he was Professor of History at Reykjavik University. For a few years he also worked as a part-time reporter for the Icelandic State Broadcasting Company. As if this wasn’t enough, he has written numerous books on modern Icelandic history, including works about the Cod Wars, the Icelandic presidency, spying in Iceland and the 2008 banking collapse.

President Jóhannesson graciously agreed to comment on the following questions submitted by the *Scandinavian Review*:



PHOTO: THE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

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SR: *As a relatively new ASF Patron how dedicated are you to the exchange of culture between the U.S. and the Nordic countries?*

GJ: Culture can build bridges between nations. For years, the ASF has been a perfect vehicle for connections of that kind. The word for “stupid” in Icelandic is “heimskur” which essentially means one who always stays at home. Through fellowships and grants, internships and training, cultural programs and publications, the ASF promotes the exchange of ideas, information, and knowledge. In turn, such exchange supports increased understanding and broad-mindedness, which is vital in our globalized world.

SR: *As we've shown, Americans seldom choose a president from the realm of academia. Why do you think you were elected to the largely ceremonial position in Iceland?*

GJ: I would rather have someone else reflecting on that question. Now that I hold this office, I will just focus on doing my best. Before taking office, I taught contemporary history at Icelandic universities and was a frequent commentator on political developments, not least electoral results. This is no longer part of my duties, but I readily admit that sometimes I miss being able to give my opinion on the ups and downs in the political world.

SR: *Can a president of Iceland play a role in the political arena?*

GJ: Ever since the foundation of the republic in 1944, Iceland's presidents have played a role in the political arena, however eager or unenthusiastic they may have been about stepping onto that stage. As history shows, the president may refuse to ratify laws passed by parliament, leading to a national referendum about their validity. Also, the president is involved in the making of a new government, a process that has taken place twice already in my tenure. Furthermore, whatever the head of state says or does is often political in nature. In a new year's address or some other noteworthy speech, for instance, the president may decide to talk about one issue and not another, and that can certainly have a political effect, at least indirectly.

SR: *How do you see your responsibility to your fellow Icelanders?*

GJ: It would be hard to find a greater honor than to serve as president of one's country. In this role, I have the responsibility to listen to all voices in our society, and to strengthen the sentiment that while we all differ in many ways, we share the duty and privilege to live together in peace and harmony on this island. We must allow all individuals to seek their dreams and reach their potential, to enjoy their personal freedom—freedom of expression, freedom of faith, freedom of love. At the same time, we must safeguard the rule of law. Also, we must protect those who need protection, and help those who need help. Ultimately, that is in everyone's interest and that is something that I wish to underline in this privileged position.

SR: *How does it feel to be the holder of a position you as an Icelander have made an academic specialty?*

GJ: Yes, previously I wrote about the presidents of Iceland, their lives and challenges. I thoroughly enjoyed that task but I readily admit that it can be even more interesting to shape history than it is to write about it. It is almost as if you are given the opportunity to step into your favorite TV drama and become one of the main characters! Primarily, however, you feel the weight of responsibility on your shoulders, and the honor of serving your country and your people.



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