



# Spring Equinox/Vorjafndægur Newsletter

## SELJALANDFOSS



Seljalandsfoss Waterfall – kimkim.com

The rain has sparkling clean and clear  
turned my pond, the sun made it dawn-pure.  
Migrating birds  
now rest there in flocks.  
They know the path light takes through autumn and fog –  
And they are travellers out, like me.

From "Morningshine" by Stephan G. Stephansson  
Translated by Kristjana Gunnars



## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

*Stefan Jonasson*

### Hekla looms large in the Icelandic imagination

Seventy-five years ago, without warning, Iceland's most famous volcano, Hekla, erupted with a loud roar just before dawn on a spring morning. Within 30 minutes, the plume above the mountain reached a height of 30 kilometres and ash fell in Helsinki, Finland, within 51 hours. The eruption continued for more than a year – from March 29, 1947, to April 21, 1948 – adding more than 50 metres to the mountain's height.

Hekla is known to have erupted 22 times since the settlement of Iceland, beginning in 1104 and most recently in 2000. The 1104 eruption, which came after two and a half centuries of dormancy, made Hekla famous across Europe and, during the century that followed, it took on symbolic importance in the writing of European monks, who described it as the “gateway to hell” and the “prison of Judas.” It is estimated that one-third of the volcanic ash deposited in Scandinavia, Germany, and the British Isles over the past 7,000 years emanated from Hekla.

Hekla looms large in the Icelandic imagination and the immigrants to Canada and the United States brought their memories of this iconic mountain with them to their new home. It has been adopted as the name of settlements and geographic features, streets and parks, clubs and schools, ships and airplanes, even companies and mines. The name itself, Hekla, is derived from an Old Icelandic word to describe a cowled or hooded frock, and it may well be that it describes the way in which a cloud often wraps itself around the mountain's peak.

“I must express my sincere admiration for the way that the first Icelanders in Canada brought their language with them, and introduced Icelandic placenames into English,” said former president Vigdís Finnbogadóttir when she spoke to the Icelandic Hekla Club's annual *Samkoma*, which was held in conjunction with the Icelandic National League of North America's convention at Minneapolis in 2015. “You Western Icelanders must often be asked what all these placenames mean – and it must be a thrill to explain, starting with the words: ‘Well, when our ancestors came to this country they brought with them the Icelandic tradition of naming places as they appeared to them in nature.’ Iceland was originally settled not only by people, but also by words, language.”

As a beloved name they carried with them, Hekla was a comforting reminder of home, a witness to a thousand years of history, and a symbol of the raw power of Icelandic nature and the refined power of its people. A volcano transforms the landscape and it tests human resilience and adaptability. As such, it was a fitting symbol for the immigrants, who were to experience unprecedented change as they found their place in a new homeland. I wonder, sometimes, if it was the mountain or the frock they had in mind when they adopted Hekla as a name for places and institutions. For us, Hekla is not a gateway to the netherworld but a name that connects us with our ancestral homeland, reminding us of its natural majesty and enfolding us like a comfortable frock.

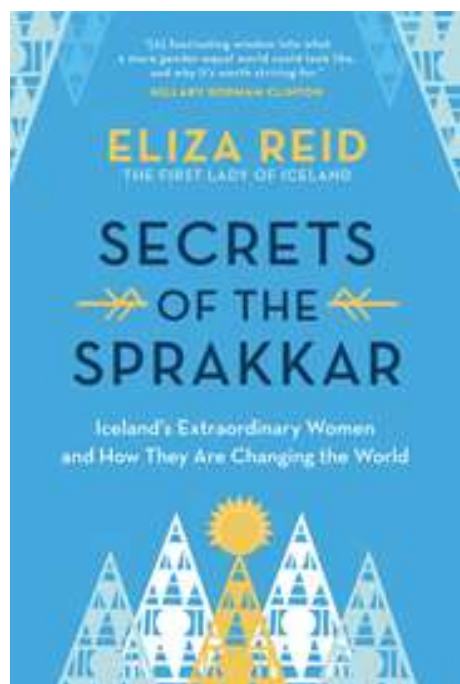
## BOOK ISSUE

*Bettyjane Wylie*

I'm calling this our Book Issue, because I have three new books and one old one, all of relevant interest. I have read them and offer reviews. You can find other reviews of the three new ones and I'll point you in the direction of the old book. Enjoy!

### Secrets of the Sprakkar: Iceland's Extraordinary Women and How They Are Changing the World

by Eliza Reid  
Simon & Schuster, 2022



After a big review in the NYT Sunday edition, *Secrets of the Sprakkar* is one of the Editors' Choice Staff Pick for the following week, with the brief explanation: "For a dozen years, Iceland has outranked all other countries in terms of gender equality. Eliza Reid, the Canadian-born first lady, explores why."

But first—no, you have to wait for her—first you must read about how Iceland's extraordinary women are changing the world. After that you can start filling in the blanks about Eliza Reid. Her bio is impressive and her journalistic skills outstanding. She describes historic *sprakki*, pl. *sprakkar*. (The ancient Icelandic word 'sprakkar' means outstanding women.) Then, as the good reporter she is, she interviews and profiles almost 40 modern ones from all walks of life: e.g. an elected member of parliament (who nursed her baby while chairing a meeting and speaking to a question); sheep shearer; farmer; stand-up comedian, and so on—a roster of interesting women most of us would never meet—all confirming Reid's point about gender equality in Iceland, the best in the world for over 12 years, but with room for improvement.

Eliza keeps emphasizing this and yet she manages to remain apolitical. She focuses on individual stories with empathy and humour.

She says, "this book is my love letter to Iceland". It's also her love letter to her husband, Guðni, whom she reveals in loving asides, giving glimpses of herself as well. Guðni Thorlacius Jóhannesson, (born 26 June 1968) is an Icelandic historian serving as the sixth and current president of Iceland. That NYT review suggested that she should be the subject of her next book.

There is surely no doubt that there will be another.

## How Iceland Changed the World: The Big History of a Small Island

by Egill Bjarnason  
Penguin Books, 2022



This book is so factual and so entertaining that it's going to take you a while to read, full of information you thought you already knew but with a twist, maybe, but certainly with new insights. I read the book a few weeks ago and I was all set to write the review but I made the mistake of taking the time to refresh my memory of Egill's expertise and style, both surprising.

You do know that I am not being disrespectful of the author; Icelanders are always referred to by their first name. Most of them, Egill included, will explain to you the use of the patronymic, and also, more recently, of the matronymic, for the surname. Everyone gets listed twice in the Icelandic phone book, separately, by first and last name. It's a good thing the population is so small, else it would be a cumbersome book. Egill's book, too, has proved to be cumbersome for a different reason--because I want to re-read it right now.

It took me a long time to write this much. I want to tell you everything but then why would you bother to read the book? And

you should read it, if only to clarify your own thinking--and to settle a few arguments with friends. Iceland has been pivotal in our (all of our) history for 1200 years. Egill deals with the French Revolution, the Cold War, the moon landing, a couple of significant volcanic eruptions with far-reaching effects, the Chess-Board War between the United States (29-year-old Bobby Fischer) and the Soviet Union (24-years-straight-winner Boris Spassky), the financial crisis in 2008, and the foundation of Israel. Among other things.

Hard to condense, but easy to enjoy. In his acknowledgements Egill is grateful to recognize his editors' efforts to limit his allowance of bad jokes. I enjoyed them all.



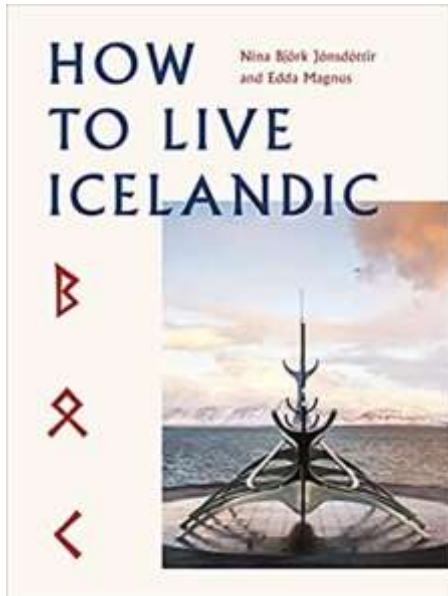
The first INLNA Reads event of 2022 is here! Join us on Zoom for virtual book meetings to discuss *How Iceland Changed the World*. An introduction to the book was held on Sunday, March 27<sup>th</sup> and the second session will be **Sunday, April 24<sup>th</sup> at 8:30 PM Eastern Time**.

Register ahead of time on the INLNA website <https://inlofna.org/inlna-reads> to get a link to join the meeting via Zoom sent to your email.



## How to Live Icelandic

by Nina Björk Jónsdóttir and Edda Magnus  
White Lion Publishing, 2021



Be warned: the table of contents of this charming, funny book works as an index for you if all you want is instant information, but whatever you look up to read, you'll keep on reading, and laughing. The authors have been friends since they were schoolgirls and though each has travelled and worked abroad and Edda lives in Geneva with her husband and two children, they are still close. They are godmothers to each others' first borns, and together they have written this book. It's a labour of love. They thank their friends for advice and information and also for being so photogenic.

Actually, the table of contents really will work well as an index/guide to a subsequent book, especially if you have to write it. Each category—chapter? — deals separately with labelled sections, so it will be easy to update one or two without rewriting them all. For example, in the chapter on Holidays and Celebrations, the section, Rotten Fish—an Icelandic Festive Favourite—perhaps hints that the custom may not last much longer.

“...some people may think of it as a delicacy. Others don't consider it food at all. The flavour is quite unique but it could be likened to a cheese that is so strong that it brings tears to your eyes and melts the mucous membrane in your mouth!”

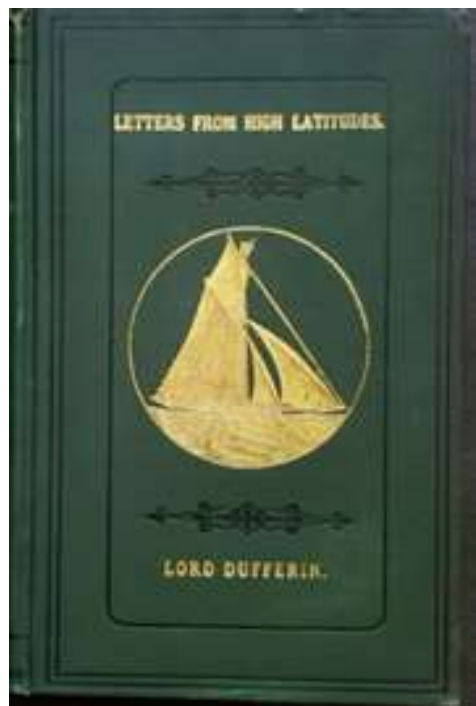
It is a guidebook with reliable information. I guess the writers can't help it that a lot about Iceland is funny. Also impressive, awesome, intriguing and unique. You have to be there and live it.

But read the book.

## Letters from High Latitudes

by Lord Dufferin, 1857

The book is available from a publisher specializing in rare and out-of-print titles:  
Aeterna [www.valdebooks.com](http://www.valdebooks.com)



A young Lord Dufferin took a voyage to the North Atlantic: Iceland and points beyond; crossing the Arctic Circle in a search for Jan Mayen\* Island east of Greenland; on to other ports thanks to a free ride—being towed by *La Reine Hortense*, thanks to the generosity of the Crown Prince of France. The earl even attended a ball given by the Prince in Reykjavik before he set out on a voyage that was horrendously dangerous because of ice. (He had a good navigator.)

\*[ Jan Mayen is a Norwegian volcanic island partly covered by glaciers. Located in the Arctic Ocean at the border of the Norwegian Sea and the Greenland Sea it is still uninhabitable with perhaps 18 people employed by the Norwegian Armed Forces and the Norwegian Institute of Meteorology. *Wikipedia*]

There is so much unfamiliar geography that I had trouble following Dufferin and there is so much in what he reports, all of it really wonderful, that I am having trouble recapping it all. He is a young man, only 30 years old, and he wrote the letters, mostly but not all, to his wife about his adventures navigating the northern ice in too light a ship (the “Foam”). He is eager, fearless and untiring, awake and working for hours in the endless Arctic light, yet able to sleep because, he says, of the (gently?) rocking boat. He is also erudite, classically educated (there are a couple of pages written in Latin in one of the letters that I could not read, though I took Latin and Greek at University, but only for two years). His writing dazzles. A sometime poet, lyrical about the beauty of the Arctic icescape, and an historian with a lively knowledge of Norse sagas, heroes and villains, the Lord also has a sense of humour. The review that caught my eye called his Letters a “comic travelogue”. It is so much more than that and is of particular interest to those of us who are kin to Icelandic immigrants.

Years later, this same Lord Dufferin, now an elder statesman and the third Governor-General (1872-1878) of the fledgling Dominion of Canada, intervened to help a group of Icelandic immigrants who had suffered severe hardships and tragic losses in their attempt to settle in Kinmount, Ontario. He recalled his voyage as a young man and his respect for the Icelandic people, especially a man called Sigurður, with whom he had travelled. He gave the Kinmount settlers a grant that made it possible for them to move to Manitoba where every year (except for the Covid19 exceptions) the descendants of the Kinmount survivors celebrate *Íslendingadagurinn* in Gimli with family reunions.

Gail Einarson-McCleery, a member of the Icelandic Canadian Club of Toronto and a direct descendant of one of the surviving families offers a little clarification: “There were many more people than our family who moved from Kinmount to Gimli. Our family actually has a reunion once every five years, and 160 attended the last one. ‘



## Nordic Bridges - Cultural events all year!

This year - 2022 - marks the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic relations between Iceland and Canada and the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the embassy in Ottawa. To celebrate, the Embassy of Iceland Ottawa in partnership with the Canadian Embassy Reykjavik has organized a series of lectures on science and art exchange. Link to the Embassy through Facebook to get updates.

<https://www.facebook.com/pg/IcelandInCanada/posts/>

Nordic Bridges began a year-long initiative to foster cultural exchange between the Nordic countries. Working with partners across Canada presenting multidisciplinary contemporary art, culture, and ideas. There will be activities happening across the country. See the listings here: <https://nordicbridges.ca/events/> and make sure to check frequently as they continue to add events to their website. This was the January event, **Nordic Lights** at Harbourfront Centre, Toronto on January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

January 21 - art exhibition, SHARED TERRAIN, opens at DESIGNTO

January 29, art exhibitions with live art performances opens at The Power Plant, Toronto

Watch for events throughout the year, e.g. members of ICCT marched behind a Viking float in the St. Patrick's Day Parade in March, in Toronto.



**Canadian Nordic Society**

CNS welcomes His Excellency Hlynur Guðjónsson, Ambassador of Iceland to Canada, for this month's Distinguished Speaker Event. Today, all local electricity and district-heating needs in Iceland are met from renewable resources, including hydroelectric and geothermal. By harnessing domestic energy resources, Iceland has dramatically increased its living standards and created tremendous opportunities for energy-dependent industries to produce goods more responsibly. Ambassador Guðjónsson will discuss Iceland's position as it relates to renewable energy, technology and services. This will take place via Zoom at 7:00 PM on Wednesday, April 20. Zoom link will be distributed in advance via CNS-announce.

For more information, please visit the website [www.canadiannordicsociety.com](http://www.canadiannordicsociety.com)

## BRIDGING THE NORTH: THE 10<sup>TH</sup> PARTNERSHIP CONFERENCE

*University of Manitoba and University of Iceland*

*February 25 & 26, 2022*

*Jón Atli Benediktsson, Rector, University of Iceland*



<https://vinlandtovalinor.com/symposia/>

In 2021, the University of Manitoba's Department of Icelandic Language and Literature celebrated its 70th anniversary when we attended the Partnership Conference in Winnipeg and gathered in the beautiful Elizabeth Dafoe Library to view the Icelandic Collection.

On behalf of the University of Iceland I was honoured to address the 10th Partnership Conference between the University of Manitoba and the University of Iceland. In 2021, the University of Manitoba's Department of Icelandic Language and Literature celebrated its 70th anniversary and we were looking forward to attending the Partnership Conference in Winnipeg where

we gathered in the beautiful Elizabeth Dafoe Library to view the Icelandic Collection. This university Partnership Conference occurred in a virtual format.

In August 2019, the 9th Partnership Conference was held in Reykjavík, highlighting the subject of migration. The Agreement between the two universities continues to allow for an exchange of students and professors, and the series of conferences. The Partnership Conference is the corner stone of the Agreement. It provides the circumstances needed for scholars and students to cultivate the Canada-Iceland connection through an exchange of ideas, and in turn, to enlighten the general public on both sides of the Atlantic on cutting edge research findings from within various fields of academia.

The program of the 10th Partnership Conference, Bridging the North, was no exception. It featured Ryan Eyford as a keynote speaker. His book **White Settler Reserve: New Iceland and the Colonization of the Canadian West** is ground-breaking research on the colonial reserve system in nineteenth century Canada.

The Heritage Project, led by Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir, Höskuldur Þráinsson and Úlfar Bragason. is another ground-breaking research, which examines the language and culture of Icelandic heritage enclaves in Canada and the United States. The natural environment of the North, in times of climate change, was addressed in a panel by two of Iceland's leading scholars in the field, and the program also features panels on cutting edge research from both sides of the Atlantic on Institutions and Cultural Connections; Travel, Literature and Geography, and Aesthetics and Representation.

The subject of collaboration has shaped the vision of the University of Iceland throughout its history and we continue to view international collaboration as essential for both our students and faculty. Within the context of our collaborators world-wide, however, our connection with the University of Manitoba, thanks to its existence, strengthens our relations through new partnership initiatives, and also thanks in part to the support of the government of Iceland within the domain of the newly established Stephan G. Stephansson research position at the University of Iceland.





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Submission Deadline: The 20<sup>th</sup> of the previous month

Please send stories or inquiries to [bettyjanewylie@gmail.com](mailto:bettyjanewylie@gmail.com)