



Address
by
the President of Iceland
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson
at a gala dinner
given by
King Carl Gustaf XVI of Sweden
The Royal Palace in Stockholm
17 January 2018

Your Majesty, Carl Gustaf;
Your Majesty, Queen Silvia;
Your Royal Highnesses;
honoured guests; dear friends,

I bring You greetings from Iceland and the Icelandic people. I should also like to thank You and the Swedish people for all the goodwill and hospitality that my wife and I, and our entourage, have received here in Sweden. Though we are divided by the ocean, we have common roots and will succeed better in meeting the challenges of our times and of the future if we continue to seek solutions together.

It is recorded in Old Icelandic writings that it was a Swedish viking, Garðar Svavarsson, who was the first to spend a winter in Iceland, together with his companions. One of them was named Náttfari; it is not clear whether he was a free man or a slave. He and Garðar became separated at sea, so Náttfari became the first person to settle in Iceland, according to *Landnámabók*, an ancient account of the discovery and settlement of the country and its early history. It also names various other Swedes among the first settlers: Ingimundur, an earl from Gautland; Brúni the White, a son of Hárekur, Earl of Uppland; the royal Björn, a son of Hrólfur, and others.

Your Majesty, I also cannot avoid mentioning that one of the best-known Swedish figures in the Icelandic sagas, and the one that Icelandic schoolchildren

most likely learn about, was the ghost Glámur. Our outlaw hero, Grettir the Strong, bravely faced him, wrestled with him and slew him, but Glámur put a curse on him, with the result that forever afterwards, Grettir was afraid of the dark, which caused him all sorts of problems and self-doubt. However, if Grettir really existed as he is described in the saga, then we must face the fact that the ghost only existed in his imagination.

Are these ancient records and stories relevant to us? They were written down centuries after the events they describe; they are fiction ‘within the limits of what is credible and probable’, as the Icelandic scholar Sigurður Nordal put it nearly a century ago. In the late Middle Ages, when the Kingdom of Sweden grew in power and prestige, its leaders found the need to have some accounts of its origins, of its old heroes and kings, the descendants of the Æsir and the Ynglingar; stories that could be used to unite the people of Sweden under one flag in a single kingdom. And so it was, that learned men here in Sweden turned their eyes to Iceland, just as the Danes were doing on the other side of the Øresund channel. ‘... we have the famous Snorri Sturluson to thank for our first glimpse into the history of Sweden,’ said Uno von Troil, a great scholar who visited Iceland in the eighteenth century and later became Archbishop of Uppsala.

I hope we Icelanders will be forgiven for boasting that it was in our country that Nordic history and traditional lore were recorded on vellum. The accounts preserved in Icelandic manuscripts were later used in nation-building and the development of national images in the other Nordic countries, where so many of the manuscripts ended up, including the remarkable Uppsala *Edda*. We shall be seeing that *Edda* manuscript later in this visit, and in Uppsala, Iceland’s foreign minister will be handing over 400 copies of a modern and readable version of the Icelandic Sagas in a new complete Swedish translation. This is a token of Iceland’s gratitude for the centuries-old friendship and cooperation between our countries. The books will then be distributed to libraries and cultural institutions, where I hope they will kindle interest among new Swedish readers in this remarkable heritage that we have in common.

Your Majesty: On the occasion of this visit and this excellent dinner, it is a pleasure for me to recall the great benefit and support that Iceland has long derived from our friendship and relations with Sweden. Together with other nations, we have enjoyed the fruits of your talents, technical inventions and energies over the centuries. Nearly a hundred years ago, Sigurður Nordal, whom I mentioned earlier, held a lecture on the Norse saga heritage here in Stockholm. He gave glowing reports of you, the Swedish people, when he returned to Iceland. Naturally, he said, there was no need for him to spell out how much Iceland could learn ‘from Sweden’s abundant expertise in the sciences, the arts, agriculture and other fields.’

Collaboration with Sweden in research and education is still of great value to Iceland today. Staff of the University of Iceland were involved in about 200 research projects last year with their counterparts in the universities of Stockholm, Uppsala, Göteborg, Lund and other places.

And then we come to cultural influences. Once again, there is only time to mention a few names: Selma Lagerlöf, who captured the imagination of Icelandic writers, as did August Strindberg. Halldór Laxness, Iceland's only Nobel Prize winner, described how he devoured Strindberg's works in the public library in Helsingborg. And I must make special mention of Astrid Lindgren who, in the Icelandic translations of *Emil i Lönneberga* ('Emil í Kattholti') *Ronja Rövardotter* ('Ronja ræningjadóttir') and *Pippi Långstrump* ('Lína langsockur') has been a permanent guest in our home.

"He's the strongest man in the world," said Anna. "Man, yes," said Lína, "but I'm the strongest girl in the world; remember that." A model like that is something we should feel grateful for these days: the arrogant, overbearing man was no match for Lína. Astrid Lindgren also makes us aware of the importance of cooperation and real friendship in a harsh world. Ronja, the robber's daughter, and Birkir Borkason, whose fathers are fighting each other as enemies, quarrel over a knife which goes missing but is later found again.

'Just as well it turned up again [said Birkir.] It was just lying here underneath the moss, waiting while we were arguing and shouting at each other.'

Ronja sat in silence for a long time. Then she said:

'Do you know what I'm thinking? I'm thinking how easy it is to ruin everything, completely without any reason.'

'We must remember that from now on,' said Birkir.

'It is easy to ruin everything.' One of our best-loved poets in Iceland, Einar Benediktsson, wrote about the persistent feeling of remorse that follows when we do something for which we cannot make amends. 'How many lives regret a hasty glance / that no amount of wishing can call back.'

Your Majesty: During our visit, Eliza and I will be learning about Swedish history and culture, and at the same time looking towards the future with sustainability and scientific collaboration as leading themes. At every moment we are aware of what we, the people who live in Iceland and in Sweden, have in common. We must know, and protect, our Nordic cultural heritage, not least our old sagas and our newer literature. We must defend the values we share regarding equality and prosperity in states under the rule of law; we must allow these values to flourish in a world of diversity and globalisation. In your recent New Year's Address, Your Majesty also drew attention to the threat of climate

change and the need to follow the guidelines laid down at the summit meeting in Paris in 2015. In this we most certainly have interests in common.

Your Majesty: ‘To a friend’s house, the way lies straight,’ runs an old Icelandic proverb. I hope that Eliza and I will soon have the opportunity of returning the deep friendship and hospitality we are now enjoying. I repeat our gratitude to our hosts and I wish the people of Sweden prosperity in the future. I should now like to ask everyone to rise and lift their glasses in a toast to His Majesty, King Carl Gustaf XVI.