



**“WE ALL PROTEST!”
DIVERSITY, CRITIQUE, AND FREEDOM
AS THE ESSENCE OF HISTORICAL RESEARCH**

**Speech
by the
President of Iceland
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at**

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On a rainy day in the summer of 1944, around thirty thousand Icelanders, nearly a quarter of the nation’s population at the time, gathered at Þingvellir – Assembly Fields, the site of the country’s ancient parliament. They gladly endured the bad weather because there was elation in the air. On the 17th of June 1944, Iceland became a republic. The people of Iceland severed all constitutional ties with a foreign power, after centuries of first Norwegian and then Danish rule. A new constitution was adopted, the Danish King replaced by an Icelandic President. Iceland joined a select group of relatively few independent states in the world. Independence – this majestic goal, had finally been achieved. It may be added here that the authorities in Moscow were among the first to support and recognize this new state of affairs.

Yes, the final goal was reached, after a long story of incremental victories and compromises. Even the outbreak and battles of the Second World War did not manage to push the Icelanders off course. After previous steps, in particular sovereignty, separate statehood and a provisional Union Treaty with Denmark in 1918, full independence in the mid-1940s was the most likely outcome.

But why the 17th of June in 1944? Why that particular date? It was not chosen randomly and it was not the result of negotiations and talks during the war. The reason goes further back. On that particular date in 1811, a boy was

born in a remote part of the Westfjords in Iceland. Named Jón Sigurðsson, he grew to become a scholar and archivist, living and working in Denmark for all his adult life and usually referred to as Jón *forseti*, president Jón, since he headed the Copenhagen chapter of the Icelandic Literature Society. However, from 1845 Jón Sigurðsson was also a member of Iceland's restored consultative assembly, the Althing, and became the undisputed leader of Iceland's struggle for increased autonomy from Denmark.

By the time Jón Sigurðsson passed away in 1879, a framed photograph of his stately face adorned almost every living room in Icelandic homes. On his casket, these words were inscribed: "*Óskabarn Íslands, sómi þess, sverð og skjöldur*" – "Iceland's favourite son, her honour, sword and shield."

In 1911, the University of Iceland was founded, on Jón's birthday. Later that year, a statue of him, in a dignified posture, was unveiled in Reykjavík. In 1931, it was moved to the city's main square in front of the parliament building. Around that time, a five-volume biography of Jón Sigurðsson also appeared, a glowing tribute to a life devoted to the Icelandic nation – hundreds of pages of praise, hundreds of testimonies that president Jón could do no wrong. "No praise of this man can ever be too great," wrote the author, historian Páll Eggert Ólason: "... Thus accounts will be made of this man, one century after another, for as long as Icelanders maintain their national identity ... He will be an inspiration to all of Iceland's national leaders ... "

No surprise, then, that the birthday of this embodiment of Icelandic nationhood was chosen as the new republic's founding date in 1944. Ever since, Icelanders have celebrated the 17th of June, with festivities in Reykjavík, the country's bigger towns and at Jón's birthplace in the Westfjords. In the capital, the president lays a wreath at the foot of Jón Sigurðsson's statue on parliament square. The day remains alive, Jón remains alive.

Still, the veneration and respect for Jón Sigurðsson has diminished. In the early 1970s, rebel singer and artist Megas described him as walking around naked in his apartment in Copenhagen, using a golden chamber pot every now and then. In 1994, in a documentary about Jón on the fiftieth anniversary of the republic, historian and writer Þórunn Valdimarsdóttir defied objections in official circles and referred to rumours that had survived persistently but were almost never aired publicly; namely that our national hero had suffered from a venereal disease, caught during his time in Copenhagen. In a new biography of Jón at the start of the new millennium, historian Guðjón Friðriksson also published this conjecture – which naturally implies that Jón had been unfaithful to his fiancée, Ingibjörg Einarsson.

Similarly, Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, the Jón Sigurðsson professor of history at the University of Iceland, always aims to paint an honest image of Jón,

with his faults as well his undoubted achievements and qualities. In short, a more critical approach can now be detected in textbooks and academic works. Thus, Icelandic school children and the general public learn more about Jón's disagreements with other leaders in the independence movement, or more trivial matters like the fact that he received a handsome payment from a wealthy Englishman to write the history of Iceland but never got around to doing it.

Likewise, Jón Sigurðsson's interpretation of the past has come under scrutiny. In his arguments with the Danish authorities, Jón used significant milestones in Iceland's history, not the least the fact that in the thirteenth century, the country's chieftains had pledged their allegiance to the King of Norway, and later the King of Denmark, but never to either the Norwegian or the Danish nation. Consequently, he argued, the abolition of absolute monarchy and institution of democratic rule in Denmark surely meant that the Icelanders were no longer bound constitutionally to the rulers in Copenhagen.

Speaking to his fellow Icelanders, Jón also invoked the memory of the nation's glorious past, as did the intellectuals and poets of the times, encouraging the people of Iceland to rise up and reclaim the independence they had enjoyed during the first centuries of the country's history.

In other words, history was a powerful weapon which was wielded to unify the nation, to fight the foreign foe. In recent decades, however, historians, writers, journalists and others have criticized this view of the past. While they have understood and explained its roots and rationale, they have deemed it romantic and outdated in the contemporary world. And here it is worth mentioning in particular that academics have cast doubt on Jón Sigurðsson's historical viewpoint. "We have shaken [it] off our shoulders," historian Helgi Þorláksson stated at the start of this century.

But does that mean that Jón Sigurðsson has been forgotten, an irrelevant relic of previous times? As early as the mid-1950s, a decade or so after the foundation of the republic, intellectuals in Iceland complained that the nation's youth knew little or nothing about Jón Sigurðsson. Today, many Icelanders, old and young, seem to think that we call him president Jón because he was the first president of Iceland. Such ignorance and misconceptions would have seemed unthinkable to the Icelanders who remembered Jón at his death in 1879 as the nation's favourite son.

Even so, practically every Icelander knows today that Jón Sigurðsson did exist, that he was important, and, furthermore, that he can be invoked as a powerful ally in political and societal disputes in Iceland. As historian Páll Björnsson demonstrated in a study of the uses of Jón Sigurðsson and his "eternal afterlife" as it were, people are often tempted to draw Jón unashamedly in their camp in various debates and campaigns. Staunch nationalists will highlight his

love and work for the country and the nation; proponents of international cooperation and modernization will point to his support for free trade and rejection of hollow nostalgia.

Moreover, Jón regularly seems to come alive as he stands at parliament square, cast in copper, and stares at our representatives in the Althing. The statue joins ranks with the public there. Students protesting over poor funding have put a schoolbag on his outstretched arm; feminists have dressed him in pink; environmentalists have rejected aluminium smelters by covering him in tin foil; most recently asylum seekers and their Icelandic supporters hung a handwritten sign on his shoulders, saying “I am surrounded by wonderful people”.

Is this in order? Should this be allowed? Should this be prevented? Surveys show that the large majority of Icelanders are proud of Jón Sigurðsson and agree that his great life and legacy should be highlighted. Thus, many Icelanders were aghast or found it inconsiderate of recent historians and biographers to discuss his alleged sexual disease. Presumably they were pleased when historian Margrét Gunnarsdóttir subsequently argued, based on medical research, that Jón suffered from another illness which certainly could not be traced to sexual encounters.

Evidently, many people want to defend Jón Sigurðsson, Iceland’s national hero. We can detect a clear resentment or resistance to the revisionist tendencies in academic circles. “[Jón] is without doubt the foremost and most able and intelligent Icelander of all time,” one of the critics, Jakob F. Ásgeirsson, asserted in the summer of 2011, on the two hundredth anniversary of his birth, complaining about all the negative and deconstructionist drivel at the University of Iceland.

Likewise, many people think that Jón Sigurðsson’s statue should be left in peace, that the good name of Jón should not be abused by protesters. “This would never happen in other countries!” some Icelanders have said after the statue has been decorated – or defaced – in one way or another.

Dear guests! I hope you have enjoyed this short overview of Jón Sigurðsson, his leading role in Iceland’s road to increased autonomy in the nineteenth century and his afterlife as the nation’s favourite son. It is an Icelandic story, but it has familiar elements.

For one, it is the story of the growing divide in many parts of the world between history and heritage, and between academic research and public perceptions of the past, often state-sponsored. As David Lowenthal put it in *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*, “History explores and explains pasts grown ever more opaque over time; heritage clarifies pasts so as to infuse them with present purposes.”

Subsequently, this story of Jón Sigurðsson also indicates the limits of academic influence in society. Historians cannot control the public's view. For example, in their work on the Nazi occupation of Denmark during the Second World War, Claus Bryld and Anette Warring concluded that historians had played a "marginal" role in the shaping of the Danes' collective memory.

Primarily, though, this story of Jón Sigurðsson's afterlife is a story about diversity, critique and freedom as the essence of historical research. The authorities must not be allowed to dictate how the past is presented. Certainly, historians alone cannot and should not decide people's perceptions but neither should those who are in positions of state power.

If we in Iceland would have had laws on the protection of national symbols, I wonder if the artist Megas could have sung about Jón and his golden chamber pot, or if Þórunn Valdimarsdóttir, Guðjón Friðriksson and others could have mentioned stories about him having contracted an embarrassing disease, and would the protesters in recent years not have been dragged immediately away from his statue on parliament square?

Would that be a better society? Would we feel more pride in Jón Sigurðsson, more sense of unity? I do not think so. As for myself, I find some of Megas's lyrics maybe a bit too provocative, but they are certainly refreshing. I also think it is fair to discuss openly private aspects of Jón's life because they were clearly mentioned during his time; he rejected the rumours mentioned here but he knew of them and spoke of them in letters.

We should bring colour and character to persons of the past. Then they come to life. Then they are relevant. I readily admit that this is fairly easy in the Icelandic case. This tale I have told you and other historical controversies in my home country must seem trivial compared to the complexities of the past in many other parts of the world, including Russia of course. But the principle remains the same, the need for diversity, critique and freedom.

Put simply: In a free, democratic and civil society, citizens must be allowed to inspect the past, evaluate sources and reach conclusions, even if they offend other citizens, including persons of high authority. Naturally, there are considerations that need to be taken into account, laws on defamation and hate speech, for instance, but the freedom of research must be the overriding principle.

Should there be no respect, then, no emphasis on national unity and common values? For the last two years, on the 17th of June I have had the highest honour of laying a wreath at the statue of Jón Sigurðsson. Invited guests were present, members of parliament, foreign representatives and other notables. The public was also welcome, behind light barriers. Some carried protest signs,

some shouted slogans every now and then, although not to the same degree as a few years earlier.

I readily admit that I find it disappointing when a minority audibly disturbs the solemn ceremony on the 17th of June. In my experience, most of the people present convene to honour a tradition. They come to celebrate our nationhood, they want to listen to speeches and songs. This ceremony should be allowed to proceed in peace. Your right to swing your arms ends where my nose begins, as the old saying goes.

At the same time, people must be able on other occasions to protest in an orderly and non-destructive manner by the statue of Jón Sigurðsson, on the square outside parliament. It is a public sphere, not a sacred site or a family home. Protests, diversity of opinion, freedom of speech: These are also the fundamentals of a civil society.

Finally, let us not forget that Jón Sigurðsson himself was a dissident. He opposed the authorities, although never by force or violence. The pen and the tongue were his weapons. But if there is anything from all his works, all his speeches and all his campaigns that the people of Iceland can recall; that the children of Iceland learn at school and actually remember, it is his famous declaration when the Danish governor dissolved Iceland's national assembly in 1851. Then Jón rose and called out, not "I obey", but "I protest!" Almost immediately, his fellow elected delegates rose as one and exclaimed: "We all protest!"

Admittedly, these protesters did not represent the whole society. They did not represent the poor farmhands and fishermen, not the women of Iceland. Still, they represented progress. And for that we should thank them. Yes, we should not blindly revere Jón Sigurðsson and his associates, but we should still thank them. If they had not risen and protested, if others had not done the same throughout history, there would never have been progress from tyranny to democracy, from state oppression to the freedom of expression, from the rule of the few to the rights of us all.