



**ICELANDERS OR NORWEGIANS?  
LEIFUR, SNORRI, AND NATIONAL IDENTITY THEN AND NOW**

**Lecture  
by  
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I will begin with a short story, but one with a long time frame. The autumn of 1975 was a tense time in US-Icelandic relations. Negotiations on the continued presence of American forces in Iceland had been concluded but loose ends remained. Furthermore, the government in Reykjavík had decided to extend the Icelandic fishing limits to two hundred miles, a move that was bound to cause friction with Britain, a new “cod war”, which could harm Icelandic attitudes towards NATO. Therefore, it could not come as a surprise when the Icelandic Ambassador in Washington D.C. requested a meeting at the State Department.

The wish was granted. On 23 September, the Ambassador arrived, and lodged a formal protest – but not about the US base, or an imminent “cod war”. A few days before, the White House had issued a presidential declaration on “Leif Erikson Day”, paying homage to, as was stated, the “Norse explorer, Leif Erikson, and his intrepid crew”. The declaration’s final line had a particular resonance: “In honoring this great Norwegian we honor all those who came to our land and enriched the history of the United States.”

A mistake had clearly been made, Iceland’s Ambassador emphasized. Leif Erikson – or to be precise, Leifur Eiríksson – was not “Norwegian”. In a spirit of compromise between two friendly nations, or a ceasefire of sorts, the Icelanders

and Norwegians had agreed to describe him as Norse or as a Viking explorer. In Iceland, people were still hesitant to accept the “Norse” description with its clear connotations with Norway, but “Norwegian” was completely out of the question. This, the Ambassador emphasized, was “very much a matter of national pride to each individual Icelander.”

The Ambassador could also have mentioned that in 1930, one thousand years after the foundation of the Althing, the oldest parliament in the world, the U.S. authorities had given us a statue of Leifur Eiríksson, thereby recognizing that he was “the son of Iceland”, as one newspaper in Reykjavík put it in October 1965, in a news item about Leif Erikson day that year.

The precise timing of that celebratory occasion could be a cause of concern for Icelanders, however. The first Leif Erikson day had been held the previous year, and the day chosen was October 9. Why? It was not Leif’s birthday or the day he set foot on land to the west of Greenland around the year 1000 – such precise details we will never know. No, October 9 was chosen because on that day in 1825, the good ship Restauration arrived in New York harbour, having sailed from Stavanger with six Norwegian families. This journey was the start of organized immigration from Norway to the United States. Thus, from the onset Leif Erikson Day had clear connections with Norway.

Still, the first Leif Erikson proclamation did not contain direct references to Norway. Leifur was dubbed a Norseman, true, but also a Viking and it was noted that U.S. citizens of Scandinavian descent had taken inspiration from his momentous voyage. The wording in 1975, the label on Leifur as a Norwegian, was a unique mishap. Having lodged the formal protest, the Icelandic Ambassador acknowledged that it was too late to do anything about the forthcoming proclamation for that year. “He asked, however,” as I read years later in the Gerald Ford Presidential Library in Michigan, “that measures be taken immediately to see to it that any proclamations being made by state governments this year avoid the same error. The Department assured the Ambassador that although it could give no guarantees, it would do what was possible to meet his request.”

And that they did. I will not go through all the Leif Erikson proclamations but they are similar, and for years they have contained a precise, thought-out phraseology. On 9 October last year, President Barack Obama issued the annual proclamation which began with these words: “More than 1,000 years ago, an intrepid Scandinavian explorer, Leif Erikson, embarked on a voyage that landed him on the North American coast. A son of Iceland and grandson of Norway,

Erikson and his crew are believed to be the first Europeans to reach the shores of our continent.”

“A son of Iceland and grandson of Norway” – a masterful ploy in diplomacy, if ever there was one. I believe that today both Icelanders and Norwegians can be content with this compromise. With Snorri, however, there can be no surrender. Some Icelanders were not too happy a few years ago when Snorri Sturluson was counted among Norway’s main writers throughout history. “A son of Iceland and a very distant relative of Norway.” That would be the middle ground which Icelanders would possibly be willing to accept.

Your Majesty, dear friends! I say this lightheartedly in 2017, safe in the knowledge that we Icelanders and you Norwegians not only share a common past but also a sense of humour. There are serious undertones, however, as was so clearly apparent that afternoon in Washington D.C. in 1975.

But let us go for a moment to distant days. What would Leifur, Snorri and their contemporaries have thought themselves? That we will never know for sure, of course. Let’s look at somewhat more recent history, however. We, the two friendly nations, share so many traits and circumstances, and here’s one more: In the nineteenth century, Norwegian and Icelandic intellectuals and scholars were busy constructing a national identity for their respective peoples. In Iceland, to name the best-known person, we had Jón Sigurðsson, the leader of the movement for increased autonomy from Denmark. Their main message was simple: Initially, the Icelanders had been free and prosperous but then they lost their independence. The dark ages of decline and foreign rule descended upon the nation. But the glorious past was still there, national heroes like Leifur and Snorri.

Here in Norway, a similar use of history to advance the national cause occurred. You will know the names; scholars like Henrik Wergeland and Ernst Sars, and allow me to quote Gregers Fougner Lundh who stated his determination to prove that the Norwegians were “one of Europe’s oldest, most historically renowned peoples”. In both countries, this perception of history as a means to unify the nation survived well into the twentieth century. Back home, we had for instance the historian Jón Jónsson Aðils. At the century’s onset he published a collection of lectures on the settlement era with a telling title, *Iceland’s Golden Age*. The concluding words were also informative: “Let the memory of our forefathers be an inspiration for their descendants.”

But then there was a historical change, a revolution in fact. In both Iceland and Norway, professional historians discharged themselves from the burden of telling stories about the past with a political and national purpose. I know that I am

oversimplifying a complex development but instead of one unifying history we got many histories. Instead of a common national purpose, we had gender and class conflicts, less emphasis on “great men”, and the recognition that national minorities and other groups had been left out of the grand narrative. In short, the historians were no longer patriots, first and foremost. They had become revisionists, even revolutionaries.

Almost thirty years ago, I joined their ranks. Early on in my academic career, I began to revise and criticize the commonly accepted version of Iceland’s fishing disputes in the second half of last century, most notably the “cod wars” with Britain. We were not always united, right was not always completely on our side, we did not always lead the way in the development of the law of the sea. Later on, I also took a wider look at the past and turned my critical eye to Icelandic politicians and statespersons who, in my not so humble opinion at the time, adhered to an outdated, romantic and overly nationalistic version of history.

All the time I noticed as well the fresh look of my fellow revisionist historians who specialized in other periods of the past. Informally or on paper, they would argue that it was not very useful, or even outright silly, to argue whether Leifur and Snorri had been Icelandic or Norwegian. Identity was completely different then, they would argue, and over a cup of coffee at the office, one of these revisionistas said to me something along these lines:

If we’re going to give Leifur Eiríksson a passport, let’s have it a Greenlandic one. He moved to Greenland at the age of four, sailed westwards from there. The Greenlanders of today are a nation in need of increased self-belief and common purpose – and therefore a common past. We have no need for Leifur anymore, let’s give him to them!

In Iceland, these recent revisionist historians have not only doubted the national identity and importance of individual icons in the past, they have called into question their very existence. True, they have left Leifur alone in that regard but, for instance, the two blood brothers, Hjörleifur Hróðmarsson and Ingólfur Arnarson, commonly known and glorified as the first settlers of Iceland, have become victims of the revisionist trend. Many decades ago, traditionalist historians had already concluded that Ingólfur could not be Arnarson, the son of Örn, but rather that his father’s name was Björnólfur. And Hjörleifur? He is and was a fiction, most historians will tell us today. He never existed, was made up a few centuries after the settlement era by chieftains who wanted to use history for their present purposes, establish themselves as the heirs of original settlers and heroes.

Furthermore, if we are to base our settlement tales on the old saga sources, we really should be true to them and grant the honour of “first settler” to two slaves, Náttfari and an unnamed woman, who are said to have been left behind on the island well before Ingólfur. On top of that, recent archaeological evidence suggests that voyagers may well have established fishing stations in Iceland prior to the settlement era. And then there were the Irish monks who lived in solitude on the island when the Norse settlers arrived, according to Ari the Learned’s *Saga of Icelanders*.

All this was fine revisionist material, ammunition I could use in the battle against the established, nationalistic history that we, the new generation of historians, felt was outdated and partisan.

But then I ran for president. During the campaign last summer, I quickly discovered that if you want to become head of state, having been a revisionist historian is not necessarily the most favourable background you can ask for. My critics accused me of belittling the nation’s achievements, dishonouring those who fought in the “cod wars”, and being out of touch with the general Icelander, isolated in the ivory tower of academia.

Naturally I found this unfair. My books for the public have sold well and all this was partly campaign politics. Many of those who objected to my writings have since wished me the best of luck. Still, as a historian and presidential candidate I had to explain my point of view. On one occasion, I put it like this:

If elected, I don’t want to undergo a complete transformation. I don’t want to become the president who praises the unity we showed during the glorious “cod wars” and then hope that nobody googles me. But I would want the nation to understand that we can present the past in all its variety without being accused of disparaging the achievements of those who were in the forefront.

In other words: Can a revisionist be a patriot? Can a revisionist be president? Well, I got elected and I am convinced that the answers to these questions are a resounding yes. Let me begin my explanation by telling you a short anecdote. A few years ago, the Association of Icelandic Historians announced an evening seminar on the theme, “the end of nationalism”. Shortly before it was meant to take place, it had to be cancelled. It turned out that on that evening, “our boys”, the men’s handball team, had a decisive game in an international tournament. Talk about “the end of nationalism”!

Furthermore, if there are any old Marxist historians in the room they might recall the mantra about thesis, antithesis and, finally, synthesis. In Iceland, some of my revisionist colleagues have asked themselves if they went too far in their eagerness to revise, fragment and deconstruct the traditional version of the past, if a more nuanced version might not be in order. I wonder if this is also the case in Norway.

As for myself, I aim to combine revisionism and my view of history as free from the purposes of state- and nation-building with the duties of a head of state who must highlight those facets of society which should unite us. Thus, I am not going to instruct the foreign minister of Iceland to ask the US administration to stop calling Leifur Eiríksson the son of Iceland – if only because you Norwegians might then be quick to embrace him completely. Nor am I going to suggest that we tear down the statue of Ingólfur Arnarson in Rivedal here in Vestlandet.

As a matter of fact, I have this passionate belief that history, which is freed from a single purpose, can be contradictory and controversial but that is all the better because then it will be liberating, multifaceted and exciting. It is simply a matter of perspective and balance. Excessive belief is bad but so is excessive doubt. No deconstruction without reconstruction, that's what I had already began to think before I entered this new phase in my life.

Dear friends: During the presidential campaign in Iceland last summer I did not foresee that my views on history would be so much in the foreground. As president, I have voiced my opinions on certain things without an inkling that they would cause the stir they did. A good example is the way my wife Eliza and I celebrated Christmas with our children at Bessastaðir, the presidential residence. In all innocence I explained in an interview that since she is Canadian-born we adhere to the North American custom of opening presents on the morning of Christmas Day, not Christmas Eve in the Icelandic tradition. Most people saw nothing wrong with that but some did complain that Icelandic customs must be respected at Bessastaðir. In our defence, we did honour the old Icelandic belief in thirteen yule-lads, their evil parents and the horrible Christmas-cat who will devour children if they are not dressed in some new clothes at Christmas.

But what about people who have come from abroad to live and work in Iceland? Today, ten percent of the population are first- or second-generation immigrants. Some of them do not celebrate Christmas at all; as it happens less than a third of Icelanders attend church at Christmas. And some belong to the Orthodox Faith. A week ago, I met one of them in Grindavík, a small fishing village on the south coast of Iceland. In the early 1990s she and her husband fled the civil war in

Yugoslavia. In perfect Icelandic this fine woman said: “I am an Icelander with Yugoslav blood”. Incidentally, her family has solved the conundrum of celebrating Orthodox Christmas in a predominantly Protestant country by observing it twice each time, first on 24 December and then on or near 7 January.

Flexibility and tolerance; those are the key words. In the description of this event, the following questions were posed: “Can we not take positive pride in our heritage without succumbing to chauvinism? Or, has any pride in one’s national heritage by now become inherently questionable?” Dear Icelanders, dear Norwegians: We can and should be proud of our heritage but if we are going to use history in some way to unify the population, whether here or back home in Iceland, we have to realize that the people in Iceland and Norway today do not all share a common past or heritage. And, therefore, contemporary nationalism must be inclusive and tolerant towards those who are tolerant and want to be included. I, for one, will be happy and proud to promote such nationalism.