



From Western Icelanders to Icelandic Canadians

Rev. Stefan M. Jonasson

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On the eve of the First World War, my paternal grandfather arrived in Canada as a young boy. By then, the migration of Icelanders to North America had slowed to a trickle, the settlement patterns in their new home had been well established, and the dream of a “New Iceland” (where the expatriates would dwell together) had all but been abandoned. My grandfather was brought to this new land – where he would eventually grow to maturity, work hard to establish himself and his family, and eventually be laid to rest – by his mother and step-father. My grandfather’s step-father – “Old Jónas” as he’s known in our family – can hardly be described as a willing immigrant. He brought his adopted family to Canada after his store in Bólungarvík burned to the ground. Old Jónas would now be characterized as having been an economic refugee – a fact that gives me pause when I hear so many of my hard-hearted neighbours casually dismiss those who still seek to build new lives in this grand country of ours as economic refugees, as if those who have come here have ever been anything but! Old Jónas rebuilt his life from the scorched earth upwards, establishing a dairy at Selkirk before acquiring the Oak Dairy in East Kildonan. This enterprise shared a telephone line with the A.S. Bardal Funeral Home, something that must have left his customers wondering about the quality of the milk! Old Jónas never really settled into Canadian life – his heart longed for the homeland. It was his considered opinion that Canada was a good place to live and work ... but he wouldn’t have wanted to die here. So, in 1932, he returned to Iceland with my great-grandmother. By then, his three step-sons were well established here and not even the effects of the Great Depression could lure them to return to the land of their birth.

In contrast to Old Jónas, one of my great-great-grandfathers, Elías Kjærnested, came to Canada with the intention of remaining. Before he left his home in Iceland, he paid a genealogist to trace the family tree, for he knew that he would never return to the old country but he wanted his two daughters to have a record of their rich ancestral heritage. Elías was fifty years old when he sold his Icelandic farm in 1881 and embarked upon the ocean voyage which carried him to the Muskoka district of Ontario by way of Glasgow and Québec City. He abandoned his Muskoka home two years

later, settling on a farm at Husavik, near his brother who had immigrated to Manitoba a year after the initial settlement of New Iceland. The common hardships of pioneer life took their toll on Elías. Within a decade of his arrival in Canada, his youngest daughter noticed him “trudging with a stoop, tired-looking, slow of foot. This kind of a life ages a man ... before his time.” Years later, she recalled asking herself, “Is this my father? Is he getting old?” So she averted her eyes and hurried away before her father noticed her presence. “I could not account for it,” she wrote, “but I would have been ashamed to have him see that I realized that his Viking strength and spirit were declining.”

These two figures from my own family’s past are representative of the tension between the two different ways that those of Icelandic descent have come to understand their identity. As a youngster, I remember people using the terms “Western Icelander” and “Icelandic Canadian” almost interchangeably. In recent years, however, there has been a periodic debate among members of the Icelandic community in Canada about which term more accurately reflects our identity. Old Jónas was a “Western Icelander,” pure and simple, who looked affectionately to Iceland as not only the land of his birth but also as what Dorothy, in *The Wizard of Oz*, would have called “the land of his heart’s desire.” In contrast, Elías allowed Iceland to become an artifact of his past – a place once known and loved, but clearly a place that was no longer his home, however much it continued to inspire him. In his trudging gait, stooped and slow of foot, Elías took the first steps towards becoming an Icelandic Canadian.

I am not an Icelander of a diaspora but rather a Canadian of partial Icelandic descent – not a Western Icelander but an Icelandic Canadian. The difference is more than simply semantic and it seems clear to me that the Icelandic experience in this country has been marked by the steady evolution from a self-identification as Western Icelanders to one as Icelandic Canadians. While the term “Western Icelander” might still offer a convenient label for the collective community of those who claim Icelandic heritage in Canada and the United States – and even the hardy souls who settled in Brazil – it does not adequately reflect our identity after so many generations away from the land of fire and ice. From Old Jónas I take my family name but from Elías I claim my spirit.

The late Axel Vopnfjord, long-time editor of *The Icelandic Canadian*, wrote: “There can be no doubt, that the ideals and traditions that sustained the Icelandic immigrants in their time of trial and tribulation, and led them to victory over unfavorable and undesirable conditions, must have been built on solid foundations. We, their descendents, can still draw the living waters of inspiration from the heritage they cherished.” Yet, at the same time, he maintained that “it is not desirable that we consider ourselves hyphenated Canadians,” but rather Canadians first, who appreciate

“the value of the Icelandic heritage, not only for its own sake, but also as something which can enrich the cultural aspect of Canadian ... citizenship.”

When I think of the enormous contributions that people of Icelandic descent have made to this fair land, it is a source of both great pride and honest humility. From industrious farmers to risk-taking entrepreneurs, from sensitive men to powerful women, from gentle poets to insightful scientists and explorers, from concerned educators to public figures, Icelandic Canadians have contributed many sparkling tiles to the Canadian mosaic. It is hard to imagine what Canada – and Manitoba in particular – might have looked like without the contributions of those whose gifts sprang forth from their Icelandic ancestry. It is equally difficult to imagine what life might have been like for those generations who have been heirs to the migration of the Icelanders to this beautiful and prosperous land. Here we have been part of a bold and imaginative experiment, where the Icelandic heritage enriches what it means to be a Canadian for *all* Canadians, and being Canadian fulfills the hope embodied in our ancestors’ noblest dreams.

