



# THE ICELANDIC CANADIAN

SPRING 1994

**1994  
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**Icelandic National League**

1994 is a memorable year for Icelandic people everywhere: it marks the 50th year of Icelandic independence. In addition, the INL celebrates its 75th Annual Convention, this year in Selkirk, Manitoba. The Convention, indeed the INL itself, is crucial to the survival of the fabric of the Icelandic community in these disparate times. INL has developed programs to weave our communal strands into something stronger, more flexible to sustain our cultural identity as Icelanders in other homelands.

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**THE  
ICELANDIC  
CANADIAN**

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# THE ICELANDIC CANADIAN

A North American quarterly published in Winnipeg, Canada,  
dedicated to the preservation of the Icelandic heritage.

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## GUEST EDITORIAL

by *Betty Jane Wylie*

*The fierceness of men rules  
the fate of women.*

the Elder Edda



Icelandic women are the longest-lived women in the world. Life expectancy for Icelandic Canadian women may be slightly lowered due to the excesses of the New World and the dilution of the genetic stream through marriage with other nationalities, but they're right up there. I was surprised when my mother (Inga Tergesen McKenty) died at 82 because I had expected her to live at least another

ten or twelve years. My aunt Anna (Anna Tergesen Jonasson) didn't leave until she was 97. I figure I'm going to stick around for a while. Air and car travel present more of a threat than the major diseases. Here I am, in good company, and I still have work to do, as do you all.

Women with that thick, rich, Viking blood are not the only ones today facing longer life spans than

Painting on the cover, "*Sóley, The Light of Iceland*," courtesy of  
The Icelandic Canadian Club of British Columbia.



About the artist:

### Patricia (Guttormson) Peacock

White Rock, B.C. has been home to Pat and her family for the past fifteen years. She was born and raised in Gimli, Manitoba. Pat's interest in drawing and painting began at a very early age and she was fortunate to have parents and one very special teacher who encouraged her to draw. Formal art education included the Fine Arts program at Kwantlen College, Langara College, summer workshops - U.B.C., Federation of Canadian Artists - Salt Spring Island, Coupeville Arts - Washington. Pat is an active member of the

Federation of Canadian Artists and the White Rock/South Surrey Art Club. Pat is presently involved with developing a summer school of the arts in White Rock. Pat has, over the years, participated in numerous shows and competitions. She was selected to jury the United Nations Children's Competition for Expo 86. Last year Pat did the illustrations and cover for the book *Aurora - poems by Guttormur J. Guttormsson*. This past winter Pat donated the painting "*Sóley, The Light of Iceland*" to the Icelandic Canadian Club of B.C. for a raffle fund-raiser. With the delight and approval of the artist this painting has been made into reproductions through the Icelandic Canadian Club.

Pat's interest in her Icelandic heritage and Norse mythology have influenced her work. Strong suggestions in the paintings of the female characters can be seen as representation of the Norse goddess. Pat likes to portray the women of Iceland symbolically as one with Iceland. The character of Iceland and her women are equal. The many facets that make up the island - beauty, power, strength, courage, mystery - can be equally applied to the island's women. Pat's paintings have been collected across Canada, California, and Iceland. "I knew when I was very young that I would be an artist. I can't think of anything else that I would rather do. At times it is very frustrating and discouraging but I feel that I learn so much about myself and the world around me through my art. I paint not to make pretty pictures, but to enjoy the process of creating: the doing. The end result is only a stepping stone to the next painting. I feel that I am very fortunate to have this gift."

most women did in the not so-distant past. At the turn of this century the average life expectancy of a woman was 48 years. A stalwart husband could put to rest two or three wives, dead of childbirth or exhaustion, before he and their many children were buried beside them. Walk through any old cemetery and read the tombstones if you don't believe statistics. Antisepsis changed all that in North America (that and decent nutrition). A girl-child born today has a life expectancy of 78 years; a woman who is 65 today can expect to live at least another 18 years, and counting. Icelandic women have longer than that. Women used to have one career: marriage/family. Few of them lived until menopause, let alone past it. Not any more.

American psychologist Abraham Maslow pointed out that only after people have met their basic needs - food, shelter, safety - do they go on to solve life's problems, to try to become what he called self-fulfilling individuals. Yes, and add to that, only after they stop dying in childbirth, and only after they quit thinking their work is done when the birds leave the nest, and only when they stop retiring after menopause. Gerontologist Alex Comfort says that retirement should last about two weeks and then every

mature person should have a second trajectory career. (These days it's an economic necessity!) He's talking about men. Women, of course, have several trajectories in a lifetime, overlapping.

Most women do not follow a simple arc in their life. They move around the top of several rings, all linked: half-way around, move on, around, move on, around. They work, they marry, they have babies, they raise them, they send them off, they keep on working, and then someone blows the whistle. Quittin' time. Quit? Just when they've taken care of all those (delightful) interruptions and they can concentrate on - whatever? They're not quitting, not any more. They've only just begun.

If you're an Icelandic-Canadian woman, you never did quit. Young and old, you have faced challenges with the secure knowledge tucked somewhere inside your psyche that you have world enough and time. You have made and are making good use of the years that have been given to you.

This issue is devoted to our women, their interests, challenges and achievements. Celebrate, and remember what else the *Elder Edda* said: "Men's minds are unstable towards women."

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## FEATURE



By  
Sigríð Johnson

# Margret Benedictsson, Freyja and the struggle for Woman's Equality

The Icelanders who began emigrating to North America during the 1870's were a people hardened by a life of deprivation and hardship, but with an unquenchable thirst for knowledge. Iceland did not, as yet, have an organized school system, but almost every person could read and write. Most received a basic education in the home or were tutored by the local church minister. A winter's evening entertainment in an Icelandic household typically consisted of a person reading aloud from the

Bible, the sagas or the local press. The Icelanders were an island people, but they followed world affairs with great interest. Since master and servants, men and women, adults and children, alike gathered together in the evenings, all benefited by the reading.

Women in Iceland had long enjoyed a prominent position in home and society. Prominent roles were played by women in the old Icelandic sagas. The existing Icelandic tradition of respect for women was unusual in nineteenth century Europe and not commonly accorded their sisters on the Continent. Icelandic women had



Margret Benedictsson, her husband Sigfus and children, Ingi and Helen

Photo from *The Icelandic Collection*  
University of Manitoba

long been able to own land. Women in Iceland were granted the right to vote in municipal and congregational elections as early as 1881 and in 1902 became eligible to hold office in these local affairs. By the 1890's there were three women's colleges in Iceland, maintained at public expense, and women were eligible to graduate as Bachelors of Arts at the college in Reykjavik.

Viewed from the vantage point of the 1990's, and keeping in mind the accepted social pattern of women today, it seems incredible that within the memory of some of Canada's population women did not have the right to vote. There existed strong opposition to granting the franchise to women. Only following a great deal of hard work, and with much perseverance were those women successful in bringing about a reform that we now take for granted.

During the latter part of the nineteenth and the earlier part of the twentieth centuries references to election results as "the voice of the people" were only references to a portion of the population. On the basis of property ownership and sex many Canadians were excluded from taking any part in political life. Furthermore, "while women could and did own property in their own right, they were barred from many types of work and community activity, mostly by custom and unwritten law rather than by any acts on the statute books." For the most part, "they remained, in the eyes of society at that time, virtually non-persons. But times changed, and the ferment of ideas that spread across the country in the last decade of the 1800's brought a small, but growing demand for equality of the sexes, the first target being the right to vote."

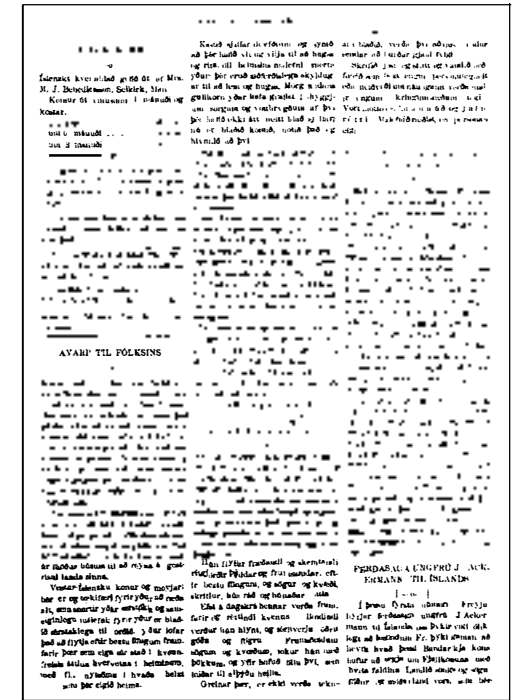
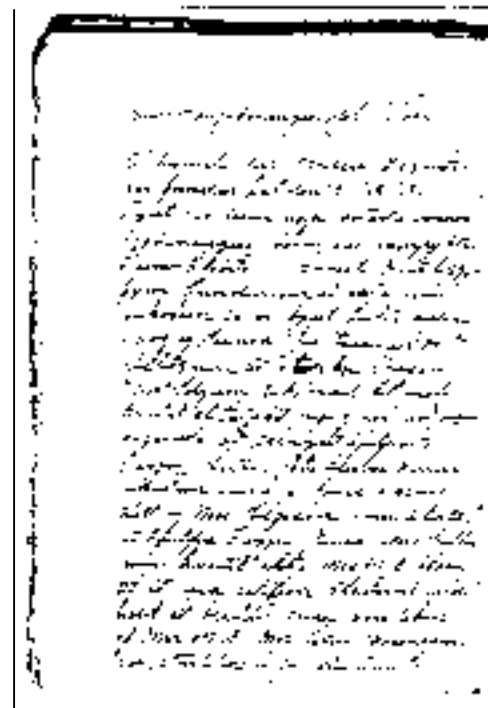
The Prairie Provinces were the first

to achieve women's suffrage. "The feeling generally prevailed that women as well as men had opened up the country, had shared the experiences of settling a new land, and were, therefore, entitled to a voice in making the laws."

On January 27, 1916, the Provincial Legislature passed a bill granting full political privileges to the women of Manitoba. Next day, royal assent was given, and by so doing made history, not only for Manitoba, but for Canada, as this was the first province to make its women full citizens by granting them the provincial suffrage.

Icelandic suffrage workers became involved early on, played an active and, for a time, a prominent role in the campaign for woman suffrage in Manitoba. In fact, "for the first faint stirrings, it is necessary to go back to the beginning of the 1890's when a group of Icelandic women founded the pioneer suffrage organization in the province, and for that matter in the entire West. Although they sometimes collaborated with English-speaking groups in delegations to the government, they carried on their own campaign for a quarter of a century by frequent petitions to the legislature and through articles in the Icelandic press."

In Iceland, the first woman suffrage worker was Briet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir (1856-1924). In 1885 she wrote the first article on woman suffrage to be written by a woman. It's publication in the newspaper, *Fjallkonan*, marked the beginning of the woman's movement in Iceland. Bjarnhéðinsdóttir emphasized the importance of education, and parents' responsibility in ensuring that daughters, as well as sons, were sufficiently prepared for economic independence and for independent thinking. In 1895 she founded



Pages from *Freyja* above and top left.

Lower left shows a page from the minute book of the woman suffrage society "Von".



Briet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir

*Kvennablaðið*, a woman suffrage paper, and in 1907 she became the first president of the Iceland Society for the Emancipation of Women.

The first group of immigrants from Iceland arrived in 1875 and for the next quarter century new recruits from Iceland continued to swell their

ranks. By 1893, Winnipeg, Manitoba's capital, had become "a city every eighth of whose inhabitants is an Icelander."

The first years in the new land were difficult ones for the Icelandic immigrants. These were years of hardships and inconveniences. The sudden change in climate and diet, especially the lack of milk, and crowded living quarters, took their toll on the health of the newcomers. While in Kinmount, Ontario there was an incidence of a severe stomach disorder, and all the children under the age of two along with some of the older people died, the total number being upwards of thirty. In New Iceland the newcomers were greeted by mud and pestilential swarms of flies, and within the first five years of the settlement they had experienced a smallpox epidemic and a major flood. The smallpox epidemic spread to all parts of the colony with only eleven or twelve houses out of one hundred unaffected. The total number of deaths was just over one hundred although one-third to one-half of the population contracted the disease. Many of the immigrants did without milk for two years due to the shortage of cattle in New Iceland. When the "Great Flood" of November 5, 1880 occurred, at a farm house just north of Gimli, water rose almost to the level of the bed of a woman who lay in childbirth.

As each new group of immigrants passed through Winnipeg on the way to New Iceland, many of the single, young women remained behind where they soon came to be in great demand as domestic servants. The young women immediately had to master the art of cooking and housework in the Canadian way. Without the medium of a common language this was often difficult. And, not surprisingly, wages for domestic

servants who had some command of English were twice the amount paid those who had none. Icelandic children were accustomed to contributing their earnings to the support of the family and so these young women often sent part or all of their earnings home to families in New Iceland.

Three observations, therefore, come as no surprise. One, that the Icelandic immigrants to Manitoba should become interested in woman suffrage, for the movement for equal rights of men and women was already well afoot in Iceland at the time of the immigration to Canada; two, that Icelandic suffrage workers should play such a prominent part in the campaign for woman suffrage in Manitoba for Icelanders constituted a considerable portion of the population; and three, that the women should wish to seek improvements to lives fraught with a sense of isolation and hopelessness grown out of sickness, death and poverty in primitive conditions that they were powerless to control. What does come as a surprise is that they found the energy and possessed the stamina to take on yet another struggle.

Icelandic immigrant women were active in community life from the beginning, playing an important part in the congregation, in the Sunday School and in the Icelandic Society. When the Icelandic Society was founded in Winnipeg on September 6, 1877, women joined along with men "to promote the honour of the Icelandic people on this Continent and to preserve and cultivate among the Icelanders the liberal and progressive spirit of culture which has throughout the ages characterized the Icelandic nation." In addition to sponsoring a Sunday school, the Society worked to help new immigrants and the poor in the

Icelandic community. Women quickly became accustomed to working in organizations and in 1881, they founded the first Icelandic women's organization, the Icelandic Women's Society, in Winnipeg. The Women's Society was founded primarily to aid people in difficult circumstances, but also to support undertakings that would keep young and old away from the pitfalls of city life. But, even in early years, priority was given to education; two Icelandic girls were provided with the funds necessary to enable them to study music at a convent school. The Icelandic Women's Society also inaugurated in Winnipeg the traditional Icelandic mid-winter celebration, Þorrablót. Featured at this first gathering in 1884 were speeches by B.L. Baldwinson on equal rights for men and women, and by Kristrún Sveinungadóttir on the cultural position of Icelandic women.

Around or before 1887, however, the struggle had begun particularly, as a result of granting women the right to vote in church matters. The establishment of Ladies Aids followed quickly wherever an Icelandic church organization existed. The Ladies Aids were the first step. The women began to govern, and discussions regarding women's rights arose, both in the Icelandic press and through local public debates. Early in 1890, *Heimskringla* published a column entitled "Women's Affairs" sponsored by the Icelandic Ladies Aid of Winnipeg. Written by a member of the Ladies Aid, the column discussed matters ranging from the affairs of women's organizations and the right of free speech to temperance and emancipation of women. Thus the foundation was laid. What was lacking in those early years was some dynamic leadership, but that soon followed in the person of one Margret

J. Benedictsson (1866-1956).

Born in Iceland, Margret Benedictsson emigrated to North America in 1887. She settled first in North Dakota. There she worked her way through grade school and two years at Bathgate College. She then moved to Winnipeg where she attended night school and completed a course in shorthand, typing and bookkeeping. Shortly thereafter she was married to Sigfus B. Benedictsson and thereby undertook the duties of wife and mother. In addition to the duties of her household she and her husband operated a printing and publishing business, and she found time to give herself to literary work, mostly of a controversial nature, in support of human causes in which she was keenly interested. Of these women's rights was foremost in her mind. As a young girl she had read about patriot Jón Sigurðsson's (1811-1879) struggle for Iceland's autonomy from Denmark. In 1874, Iceland was granted independence in domestic affairs from Denmark. She admired his unrelenting quest for independence. "Sorrowful and angered" she had read stories of oppressed people, unhappily married women and unfortunate young girls. "This aroused in me an unquenchable desire to break all chains." She read about Lucy Stone, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and many others who were doing battle for women's rights and later made their personal acquaintance through correspondence. "But she wasn't satisfied with a merely passive interest in justice for women, she determined to do something about it. She felt that her part in the struggle would be that of converting the Icelandic women to the Cause."

On February 2, 1893, Margret Benedictsson delivered her first lecture on women's rights to members of Winnipeg's Icelandic com-

munity.

In November 1897, Ólafía Jóhannsdóttir, president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union in Iceland, arrived in Manitoba for a visit. For the next three months she travelled throughout the province, visiting the Icelandic communities and lecturing on the subjects of temperance and women's rights.

The visit of Ólafía Jóhannsdóttir appears to have given Margret Benedicsson the final impetus required to commence publication of *Freyja*, "the only woman suffrage paper published in Canada."<sup>13</sup> Together with her husband Sigfus, she set up a printing press in Selkirk in 1898, and in February of that same year the first issue of *Freyja*, dedicated to Ólafía Jóhannsdóttir, rolled off the press.

The title page declares *Freyja's* purpose as "devoted to woman's political, economical and social rights", and in her first editorial, Benedicsson describes the policy of the paper. *Freyja* shall be completely independent in all matters. It aims to enlighten and delight. *Freyja* will not, without cause, become involved in matters that are likely to cause dissension such as religion and politics. There is, however, no subject matter pertaining to human and moral issues which *Freyja* considers irrelevant, and will not be obliged to keep silent about such matters... *Freyja's* foremost concern will be developments in women's rights. *Freyja* will support prohibition and anything that leads to the improvement of social conditions."

*Freyja* began as an eight page monthly which at its height reached forty pages in length. It is to be rated a literary as well as a woman suffrage paper. About a quarter of the paper was taken up with advertisements, mostly in Icelandic, but occasionally

in English. Included were serial stories appropriate to the policy of the paper; biographical sketches of prominent people such as Herbert Spencer and Henrik Ibsen, in addition to those of Lucy Stone, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and others doing battle for women's rights; literary reviews and a Children's Corner. There were articles signed by pen-names ("Plain Dealer" "Lucifer"), but most articles were either written by Benedicsson or her husband, or were translated by them from the writings of American feminists. Periodically there were lists of new subscribers, and in each issue space was devoted to announcements of events in the Icelandic community.

*Freyja* was an immediate success, apparently beyond the wildest expectations of its editor, for with the publication of the third issue, the paper was being welcomed into three hundred homes. Criticisms made of the paper were not of the content material, but of a poorly printed product and one containing too many grammatical errors. By the time Benedicsson launched into the second year of publication the paper had five hundred subscribers. Both women and men subscribed to the paper and it travelled, not only to homes in Manitoba, but elsewhere in Canada and to the United States.

An examination of *Freyja's* articles reveals Margret Benedicsson's radical views on turn-of-the-century feminist issues. Women living in poverty were often the subject of articles. To improve the living conditions of such women, Benedicsson argued that the state should be involved in social welfare schemes. Singled out was the plight of the married woman who had no choice but to bear children without independent means of supporting them.

Divorce was another topic fre-

quently discussed on the pages of *Freyja*. Translated news reports concerning new or revised divorce laws were included. In an early article, entitled "A philosophical divorce", an ideal way of divorce is described: "My wife and have lived together for fifteen years and have been as compatible as most married couples... But now we have discovered that we have so many differences that we have decided to separate without bothering the Court of Justice... and depart as friends." A few years later Sigfus argued for a more liberal divorce law in Canada. He described the situation of a couple unable to divorce and forced to live together: "He to support her forever, regardless of how loathsome she became, she to give him complete authority over freedom of her body and soul." Not to be outdone, in a subsequent article *Freyja* disputed Sigfus' portrayal of married women as mere dependants. The article argued that marriage was like a company, which "has two departments. Both are of equal value to the company. The money earned by the foreman of the provisions department does not belong to him only, but to the company. In running the household, cooking his meals, mending his clothes, serving him and performing all the other jobs that are necessary to make a house a home, and of course raising the children as well, the woman is doing her share for the company."

Sigfus' interest in divorce was indicative of the state of the domestic relations of the Benedicssons which had become increasingly strained over the years. When *Freyja* ceased publication in 1910, it was because Sigfus put a hold on all mail addressed to the paper and refused his wife access to the printing press which he owned. She then left him,

and in 1913 moved to the state of Washington where she resided until her death.

Women in the Icelandic community were not confined to the home, but participated actively in local community work. With this in mind, Benedicsson in an early article offered her view of how the Ladies Aid Societies, based in the local Icelandic churches, should function. She felt that the Ladies Aids should be less associations of a charitable nature, and more akin to life or health insurance organizations. Life insurance was essentially the domain of wealthy men; few women at all held life insurance. Furthermore, the executive members of such a society would benefit from the responsibilities of financial administration.

Although Benedicsson never dismissed woman's role as wife and mother, she wanted to see the woman in the family accorded equal partnership as in a company. She also wished to see woman's role expand out of the home and into public life. In support of her view that woman's role expand out of the home and into public life, Benedicsson included articles on women in non-traditional roles and reported on the activities of women's rights organizations, locally, nationally and internationally (in particular, her reading audience was kept up-to-date on progress being made in Iceland). Benedicsson was interested in more than increased opportunities for bourgeois women. *Freyja* stressed the need to improve conditions for working class women, including domestic servants.

*Freyja* was published from 1898 to 1910 (from 1902 to 1910 in Winnipeg). The need was to convert as many women as well as men to the Cause, and through *Freyja*, public

lectures in the Icelandic communities, and personal contact, the work progressed. Margret Benedictsson was a capable speaker and so she extended her campaign to the public lectern in Winnipeg and the rural districts of the province. By 1906 Icelandic Ladies Aids throughout the province had written the struggle for woman suffrage into their platforms. In 1907, *Lögberg* officially stated sympathetic support of the struggle. *Freyja* was no longer alone in the field.

As *Freyja* entered its tenth year of publication in 1908, Benedictsson greeted readers with the announcement that in January of that year "The First Icelandic Suffrage Association in America" had been established in Winnipeg with herself as president. That same year this organization was invited to join the Canada Suffrage Association. The invitation was accepted and thereby automatically made the organization a member of The International Woman Suffrage Alliance as well.

The following November, a group of Icelandic women gathered in Argyle for the purpose of seriously discussing the subject of women's rights. The outcome of this gathering was establishment of a woman suffrage society in Argyle "Von," as it was named, the first such organization among Icelandic women in rural Manitoba. Suffrage organizations in the other Icelandic communities throughout the province soon followed.

The Icelandic women at Gimli were the first to circulate a petition requesting that women be granted the franchise. In January 1910, members of Gimli's Woman Suffrage Association, "Sigurvonin," set about gathering signatures under such a petition within their constituency. The following month, a delegation

from "Sigurvonin" presented "The Petition of Johanna Jonsdottir, et al., praying for the passing of an Act to enfranchise all women, whether married, widowed or spinster, on the same terms as men" before the Manitoba legislature. Other petitions by the Icelandic Women's Suffrage Associations followed, but all to no avail.

While they were waging this campaign, it became increasingly obvious to the members of the Icelandic Woman Suffrage Associations that if positive results were to come of their efforts, they would have to begin working together with their English-speaking sisters in the province. In 1911, the Winnipeg Women's Labour league and the First Icelandic Suffrage Association in America held a joint meeting in the Winnipeg Trades Hall to discuss whether it was an opportune time to present another petition to the Legislature: they decided that the time was not right.

During 1912 and 1913 the Icelandic Suffrage Associations in Manitoba continued to work quietly in their respective communities. *Freyja* was no longer published, but the two Icelandic weekly newspapers, *Lögberg* and *Heimskringla* (which threw its support behind the struggle for woman suffrage in 1910), kept the Icelandic community informed of the latest developments in the struggle for woman suffrage.

In 1914 the First Icelandic Suffrage Association in America accepted the Manitoba Political Equality League's invitation to join in a meeting with Premier Roblin. Again in 1915 the Association joined the League in a delegation to the Premier. Later that year, following the Liberal Party election victory, members of Gimli's Woman Suffrage Association toiled industriously alongside their

English-speaking counterparts, securing signatures on petitions in support of woman suffrage to present to the new Premier Norris. "Sigurvonin" urged all Icelandic women in the province to apply their signatures to the petition saying, "Icelandic women here in the province were the first to make any moves in this matter. It will be a lasting tribute to the nobility of the Icelandic women of old, if we, their descendants here in a foreign country, tackle this energetically. Icelandic women in Winnipeg, Argyle and Gimli struggled for woman suffrage before it became popular and while criticized by most as not being feminine ... it would not be in keeping with our Nordic character to retreat."

The women of Manitoba were overwhelmingly successful in their campaign. On December 23, 1915 a delegation of men and women presented not one but two petitions to Premier Norris with twice the required number of signatures. On January 27, 1916 third reading of the bill to grant women the provincial suffrage was moved by the province's Solicitor-General, and acting Premier, T.H. Johnson, a member of Manitoba's Icelandic community. The next day, royal assent was given, and for the first time in Canadian history women were granted the provincial suffrage.

The women of Manitoba now had the right to vote and this was a privilege that they immediately began to utilize. The women of Manitoba had also been granted the right to sit as members of the legislative assembly. However, the province has elected few women to the provincial legislature, and most of those in recent years. The Icelandic community has returned only one woman since that historic day. This being Salome Halldorson, a member

of the Social Credit party, who was elected to represent the St. George constituency in 1936.

Reflecting back, at the time, on the struggle of the past quarter of a century, the Icelandic suffragists must have viewed the victory of Manitoba women as bitter-sweet. The only woman suffrage paper published in Canada had been produced by a woman who was a member of the Icelandic community. The first woman suffrage association in Manitoba was established within the Icelandic community by that same woman. And, the first petition requesting that women be granted the suffrage came from Icelandic women in New Iceland. Yet it was the Manitoba Political Equality League that led the women of Manitoba in their final and successful campaign for provincial suffrage. This turn of events was largely due to the fact that the English-speaking suffragists made little effort to communicate or co-operate with the Icelandic women. It was also due, in part, to the fact that *Freyja* was an Icelandic language paper; the English-speaking suffragists were unable to access its contents. But, would improved communications and additional attempts at co-operation have made a difference in the way events unfolded?

Benedictsson's ideological leanings, religion and ethnic background were different from that of her English-speaking counterparts. Leaders of the Manitoba movement were Anglo-Saxon; they were Protestant; they were middle class; they were housewives, although there were some professional women among them; and they stressed the sanctity of marriage and motherhood according to the prevailing ideology of "maternal feminism."

Although Benedictsson shared

with the English-speaking suffragists, the belief in temperance, her views on other matters were markedly different. Her views on divorce were more outspoken than theirs. She was a pacifist; they were staunchly patriotic. Benedictsson emphasized the need for women to take on a public role in life. While they contended that women's moral superiority should be brought out of the home and into the legislature, she stressed the ideal of equality as opposed to superiority. The likelihood that improved communications and increased co-operation between the English and Icelandic groups would have altered the course of events would therefore appear to have been slim. The Icelandic suffrage movement failed because the ideological sympathies upon which it was based differed too greatly from the views held by the English-speaking suffragists.

Margret Benedictsson was a woman "ahead of her time," in Canadian terms, when she argued for equality. Yet in terms of her cultural background and upbringing she was arguing for a position for women in Canadian society that to her was right and just. Education was accorded high priority in Iceland and parents were encouraged to see that daughters, as well as sons, received sufficient education. Why shouldn't there then be equality of opportunity for women as well as men in Canada, not only in the educational sphere, but in employment and in public life as well.

The struggle for woman suffrage is but one example, albeit a significant one, of Icelandic Canadian women's pursuit of equal opportunity. Icelandic Canadian women have pursued equal opportunities alongside men in most walks of life.

The first Icelandic immigrants to Canada, were true pioneers. They arrived at a time when both Manitoba, as a province, and Winnipeg, as a city, were in their infancy. In clearing the forest, tilling the land, digging ditches and building railroads they helped lay the foundations of the province and the city. Men and women co-operated, doing that which was necessary to get established in their adopted country. A large number of New Iceland colonists typically obtained employment in Manitoba and their earnings were sufficient to support their families during the winter. In some instances this involved the men going off to work on building the railroad while the women remained in New Iceland to look after the children and the farm. On other occasions women obtained work as domestic servants in Winnipeg leaving the men in New Iceland to mind the homefront.

Perhaps it was this pioneering spirit that inspired the women and helped them gain the support of men in their various pursuits. For example, men not only subscribed to *Freyja*, but also supported the women in their petitions and delegations to the government about granting women the franchise. In

1914, the Reverend Runolfur Marteinson accompanied the Icelandic women in their delegation to Premier Roblin and acted as their spokesman. Lawyer, J.T. Thorson accompanied and spoke on the Icelandic women's behalf when they met with him again the following year.

Early in the history of Icelandic settlement in Manitoba, women went off in pursuit of higher education. Before the turn-of-the century several women had graduated with teaching certificates from the Manitoba Normal School. In 1905, Mary Anderson became the first Icelandic woman to graduate from the University of Manitoba. Solveig Thordarson Gislason was the first woman of Icelandic origin to graduate from the Manitoba Medical College in 1922, and in 1919 Jorunn Hinriksson Lindal was called to the Bar making her the first woman lawyer of Icelandic origin in the province. Icelandic women have made their mark in public and community service; Margret Benedictsson is probably the earliest example in this category. Icelandic Canadian women excelled in music, art, drama and literature, and have continued to strive for greater heights in every pursuit imaginable.



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## Jón Sigurðsson Chapter IODE



**T**he Jón Sigurðsson Chapter of the IODE was formed in 1916, and is celebrating its 78th year. The IODE is a national organization of Canadian women interested in education, good citizenship and service work. Our chapter has approximately 20 active members.

Some of our projects: Scholarships, financial assistance to crisis centers, student emergency fund, children's summer camps, the Peace Gardens, as well as supporting Löberg-Heimskringla, Icelandic Canadian Magazine, and the Icelandic Festival. The Chapter is responsible for the independence day wreath-laying and program.

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# Dr. Sigríður (Sigga)

## Christianson Houston

by *Connie Geller*



(compiled from information supplied by her son, Dr. C. Stuart Houston, and adapted from his article "A Pioneer Woman Doctor, Sigga Christianson Houston," published in *Manitoba Medicine*, June 1993.)

**S**igga Houston celebrated her 100th birthday in a Saskatchewan nursing home with a *vinarterta*. That she celebrated a century of living on June 28, 1993 is a remarkable achievement in itself but the fact that she is of Icelandic descent and is Canada's oldest living female medical doctor make her saga especially interesting to readers of this publication. Descended from an Icelandic family who pioneered in the Vatnabyggð area of Saskatchewan, this remarkable woman successfully pursued a medical degree, despite many hardships and obstacles. She went on to practice medicine for half a century.

Sigríður (Sigga) Christianson was the daughter of Geir Christianson (born May 23, 1860) from Hafnarfjörður, Iceland. He inherited the surname Kristjánsson from his father Kristján Jónsson but, as often happened to new arrivals to Canada, the spelling was Anglicized by an immigration officer.<sup>1</sup> Sigga's mother was Sesselja Rakel Sveinsdóttir, who

was born August 12, 1857 to Sveinn Ásmundsson and Sigríður Jónsdóttir of Starrastaðir, 15 km south of Varmahlíð. The family was made up of four children, one boy and three girls. Bill, the eldest, was born on March 25, 1892 followed by Sigríður (Sigga) on June 28, 1893, Halldora (Dora) on January 13, 1896 and Björg (Babs) on January 28, 1898.<sup>2</sup>

Although he was a journeyman carpenter, Geir had worked in the Skagafjörður hayfields as a young man. It was there that he fell in love with Sesselja Rakel, a member of the crew. The following year when he returned to the hayfields, Geir learned that Sesselja Rakel had emigrated to "America". Undaunted, he obtained passage on a ship and, in his homespun suit, he set out to find her. From Halifax, where the ship landed, he took a train to "the second largest Icelandic city in the world." When he arrived in Winnipeg, he inquired around as to the whereabouts of Sesselja Rakel. His remarkable good luck held out. Someone in Winnipeg

was able to tell him that she was employed as a maid at the Winchester Hotel in Pembina, North Dakota, about a hundred miles south of Winnipeg. As family tradition has it, "with twenty-five cents left in his pocket," he set off to find and marry his love. Icelandic stubbornness or laudable persistence, whichever you prefer to call it, paid off. This trait was passed on to his first-born daughter, Sigridur.

Sigga's determined nature is what spurred her on over what must have seemed like insurmountable obstacles in fulfilling her life-long ambition to become a medical doctor. When she was twelve, her family left Grand Forks where her father had been a carpenter. They joined hundreds of other Icelanders homesteading in the Wynyard-Mozart area of the new province of Saskatchewan. As with so many of the other Icelandic settlers of the Vatnabyggð area, their posses-

sions were meagre...

*"Our belongings included two oxen, twenty chickens ...some pots and pans and a few dishes. Mama... brought her spinning wheel, a feather down quilt and Icelandic sheepskin slippers."*<sup>3</sup>

...and their hardships many,

*"We lived for six weeks in a tent... (during) a rainy spell... damp, cold and miserable. Mama did what cooking she could under the wagon... we walked to the creek, a half mile away, for water. Dad made a frame ...from it Mama hung the two pails. In winter, we melted snow. Dad and brother Bill... would travel twelve to sixteen miles (for firewood). Dad always had a big woodpile, one of our proudest possessions."*<sup>4</sup>

Sesselja Rakel must have been a skilled and versatile homemaker for, as her daughter Dora tells it...

*"The first winter we had no potatoes, no vegetables and little*

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Sigga Christianson, M.D. 1925  
Photo Courtesy: Dr. Stuart Houston



Sigga and Bill Christianson, ca. 1897  
Photo Courtesy: Dr. Stuart Houston

*meat... no fruit, jams or jellies. We did have a few chickens and... eggs... We always had coffee. Mama made good bread... (and) was smart at whatever she did, especially dressmaking."*<sup>5</sup>

Dora also said that the children learned to speak Icelandic when they moved from Grand Forks because "so many of the older people from the settlement did not use English." They learned to read Icelandic by reading to their mother from the Icelandic paper, *Heimskringla*.

Dora, aged 9, and 7 year old Babs were thrilled with living in a tent and not having a school to go to. However, Sigga was a dedicated student and was desolate when she discovered that she would have to wait for a school to be built. In Grand Forks, she had loved school and she had decided that, no matter what, she was going to go to university. A year later, she was able to attend the new Mountain School, where she completed her grades 7 and 8. But there were more setbacks to be endured. There was no high school. Fortu-

nately, the family's nearest neighbour and good friend Bill Olson was able to secure Sigga a position in his mother's boarding house in Winnipeg. There she was able to work for her room and board and attend high school. She had no warm winter coat and, before she could leave for Winnipeg, \$10.00 had to be found for a coat. Her uncle Gisli Sveinsson (Sesselja's brother, born March 15, 1859) who lived in Loni Beach, Manitoba, heard about his niece's plight and gave her the necessary money to begin her "longed-for" education. While at Mrs. Olson's boarding house, Sigga rose at 5:00 a.m. every morning to prepare breakfast for twenty men before leaving for school.

After high school, Sigga went on to Normal School in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan and graduated in 1914. For four years, she taught in the rural schools near Wynyard and Bruno, Saskatchewan in order to save enough money for university. When Sigga was accepted into the College of



Picture of the family with the woodpile they had to work so hard for.  
(Not a tree in the pix, all prairie) Photo Courtesy: Dr. Stuart Houston

Medicine at the University of Manitoba, she was one of thirteen women. She continued to teach school during the summer months while she attended medical college in order to be able to continue to pay her expenses. There were no holidays for this very determined and dedicated person.

In 1925, the year that Sigga graduated, she was the fifth woman of Icelandic descent in the world to achieve a medical degree. The other four were Steinunn Jóhannesdóttir (Steinunn Alice Hayes) Los Angeles 1902, Kristín Ólafsdóttir (Reykjavik 1917), Katrín Thoroddsen (1921), and Solveig Thordarson Gislason (1922).

For a year, Sigga worked in a tuberculosis sanatorium in Fort Wayne, Indiana. After this year's absence, she agreed to join her persistent suitor, Clarence J. Houston, M.D. (Manitoba, 1926), in Grand Forks, North Dakota. They were married December 3, 1926 in Crookston, Minnesota, after convincing the court house clerk that the compulsory waiting period should not apply to Canadian citizens. "He saw no need to protect a couple from another country from rash and impetuous folly." They went on to practice medicine in

Watford City, North Dakota for 13 months. An opportunity to practice in Saskatchewan came up, so they packed their belongings and their infant son and moved to Yorkton, Saskatchewan.

For half a century, Sigga and Clarence worked side by side in a practice that served Yorkton and surrounding district - he in surgery and hospital visits and Sigga in paediatrics and gynaecology. Patients regularly came from hundreds of miles away specifically to see Mrs. Houston, the doctor, (Clarence had the appellation Dr. Houston) for she had gained a reputation for having great success with infants who were failing to thrive. Infants were sent to her to be assessed and put on a formula of her own devising. They invariably thrived.

"There was nobody in that part of Saskatchewan who was better with children," recalls Dr. H. Crossley... "Children loved Sigga and she loved her babies."<sup>6</sup>

A large part of her effectiveness can be credited directly to her personality.

"She'd lecture mothers and if they balked... she was firm... (she would) come right out and tell you what she thought. Though physically a small

person, she was a dominating presence."<sup>7</sup>

The University of Manitoba's yearbook, *The Brown and Gold*, said of Sigga in her graduating year,

"A Saskatchewan product and a credit to the province. Her tenacity of purpose and diligence in studies has only been exceeded by her loyalty to her many friends. ...A tender heart, a will inflexible."

As well as busy in her practice, Sigga was the office manager, a forthright Icelander, she had no compunction in billing for services rendered.

A delightful aside, which parallels the story of some other Icelandic women, is that she lied about her age. The bride of a man seven years her junior, she felt compelled by the social climate of her time to pretend that they were closer in age. So, when she retired from active medical practice, at the age of 82, in 1975, everybody thought that she was 75. Even in her official documents and health card, she stated that she was born in 1900. It was not until her 90th birthday in 1983 that she admitted to her deception.

Sigga's husband, Clarence J. Houston, predeceased her in 1986. C.J. stopped doing primary night calls in 1975 and ceased surgery a year later. He had morning office hours for another two years after Sigga retired, while he co-authored *Pioneer of Vision*, a biography of Dr. T.A. Patrick

(published in 1980).

A strong influence on her descendants, her remarkable saga continues through the medical dynasty that she has founded. Her only child and three of her four grandchildren are medical doctors. Her son, Dr. C. Stuart Houston, born September 26, 1927, is a professor of radiology at the University of Saskatchewan and throughout his career has been showered with many honours and awards, among them the Order of Canada, the Canada 125 Medal, the Distinguished Canadian Award and the Saskatchewan Order of Merit. Her grandson, Stan, is a specialist in infectious diseases at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. Margaret Sigrithur, her only granddaughter, has her Master's degree in epidemiology and is in family practice at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. Another grandson, Donald, has his Ph.D. in physiology and is teaching haematology at the University of Manitoba. Grandson David has a Master's degree in science and is employed with an engineering firm in St. Catherine's, Ontario.

Sigga, a truly gifted person, with outstanding achievements and accomplishments, is a tremendous credit to the Icelandic community. Her drive and determination will be an inspiration to future generations of Icelandic Canadians.

1 Geir's great-grandfather, Christian Weldingh (1761-1844) had settled in Hafnarfjörður, where he married Kristín Jónsdóttir (1759-1842). Kristín's daughter, also Kristín (1791-1863), married Jón Jónsson.

2 Sigga's sister, Dora, who married Bogi Bjarnason, a newspaper publisher, had three children; Bernice and

Don became social workers and Brian an airline pilot. Sigga's sister, Babs, married Valdimar Kristjansson, foreman of a gravel crusher crew with the Manitoba Good Roads Commission, and had two children; Myra, a nurse, married Ole Thorsteinson, a chartered accountant and Ken worked with the Canada Post. Sigga's brother, Bill, married Inga Johansson of Winnipeg

but he died eleven months later from typhoid fever.

3 Bjarnason, Dora (sister to Sigga Houston). *The Early Years*.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Warden, Kathryn. "Access-Profile." *Saskatoon Star Phoenix*, Saturday, September 4, 1993.

7 Ibid.

## Concert Singer Valdine Anderson is Interviewed

by Helga Malis

**V**aldine Anderson, one of Canada's talented young sopranos, graciously agreed to be interviewed at her mother's (Helga Anderson's) home in November 1993. She had come to Winnipeg to perform in "Israel in Egypt" with the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra at the Centennial Concert Hall. Valdine and her three young daughters were staying at "Amma's," where this relaxed conversation between Valdine and Helga Malis took place.

**Helga:** I understand you are living in Germany. the German market. It's very exciting for us.

**Valdine:** Yes, we've just moved there. My husband is working for a Canadian firm which just moved into  
**Helga:** Where in Germany are you living?  
**Valdine:** We are living in a town just

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Valdine Anderson prepares to sing Handel with Winnipeg Symphony, Mennonite Oratorio Choir.

Soffia Louise, Ingrid Anne and Brigitte  
Photo taken September 1993  
at Hofheim, Germany



twenty minutes out of Frankfurt. It is really nice to be there, but I haven't even begun to check out the "scene" - to find out what opportunities are available to me. Really, it's just where I live at this point.

**Helga:** How long have you been there?

**Valdine:** Only a few months - our residency became official on July 11th.

**Helga:** It must be difficult for you to manage all this with such a young family, yet you seem calm and relaxed.

**Valdine:** Well, I have a lot of help -

my Mom, au pairs, and then Eva (from Iceland) who became like family.

**Helga:** You really need help like that.

**Valdine:** Well, yes I do. Actually, we are looking into having someone full-time. When we had only two children it was not as complicated as with three.

**Helga:** They are all pre-schoolers?

**Valdine:** My oldest is just starting kindergarten in Germany.

**Helga:** Can you tell me something about your early years in music? I understand you studied piano before voice.

**Valdine:** I started taking piano lessons when I was five or six years old. When I was ten or twelve, I began flute lessons. I just thought the flute was such a nice instrument. I studied piano and flute all through school and I majored in piano. It wasn't until I stopped studying piano at the University of Manitoba that I started to do a bit of singing. I obtained a job on the television show, "Hymn Sing" and earned a bit of money that way.

**Hjelga:** You must have had an obvious talent to get a job on "Hymn Sing."

**Valdine:** Well, they were looking for somebody, and I was just in the right place at the right time. I certainly wasn't training to be a singer, but they needed someone who had a good academic musical background and I had that. I was a quick learner, so maybe they saw some potential in me. It's a good way for Winnipeggers to make a bit of money. You can't always obtain scholarships. Actually, I think maybe it's the only venue in Winnipeg for singers.

**Hjelga:** Have you always been devoted to music? As a young person, did it ever occur to you to stop studying music, or to think that you really wanted to try something else?

**Valdine:** No. I always knew that no matter what I did, I would be involved in music. When I was in high school studying, say, geography, I knew that it wasn't all that crucial for me.

**Hjelga:** Did you know that you had a talent for voice when you were younger? Can you expand on how and when you switched to voice?

**Valdine:** Well, I did sing when I was younger, but I didn't believe that singing was a particularly dignified way to make music. I wasn't too keen on singing. At university, many of the singers were older, had begun to

study singing later and had less background in music, so that they were miles behind academically and I thought that was very unusual. I had a good ear and was quick to learn, but I didn't really think I was going to make a career out of singing.

**Hjelga:** You studied at the University of Manitoba. Did you find it a good place to study?

**Valdine:** I studied a year of piano there and then I moved to the University of Toronto, where I continued to work another two years on piano. I then switched to become a theory major, because I did well in the academic part of music. But, it just wasn't for me. I stayed with it for only a year. I came back to Winnipeg, transferred all my credits to the University of Manitoba, and took up singing as a major. (That's when I got the job on "Hymn Sing.") I would say that I had a very good voice teacher. I believe she was the one that really made the difference.

**Hjelga:** What are some of your favourite works or roles?

**Valdine:** They change a lot! There is always a current favourite, but when you are younger you have idealistic favourites that you hope one day to do. As you get older and learn that there is a definite type-casting as far as voices go, you become more realistic and set your goals to roles that are written in your voice range, your dynamic range.

**Hjelga:** Therefore are there certain roles that you wouldn't be able to sing? – that are not in your range?

**Valdine:** Oh, yes. I could never sing the heavy Verdi roles, like Aida, or even Puccini properly. The "Toscas" – I can't sing them either – the heavy Italian ones. I'm certainly a "Mozart" soprano, and some of the more lyric or modern ones, like "Juliet" and

"True Love" by Stravinsky – that would be my type. And I like them. You know, it's funny, after awhile you realize that the roles that are suitable to you suit your personality. I don't think I'm the tragic heroine type.

**Hjelga:** That's interesting. So, if you had thought, when you were younger, that "Aida" was the role you wanted most, you willingly gave up that dream, as it were.

**Valdine:** Yes. At first there's no holding you back from an aria except your range, so you try to sing it. It's not until you look at the work more closely and listen to the orchestration that you wonder how you would ever be heard over that unless you were a much bigger "voice." And the same goes for a smaller voice – they wouldn't cast me in the "subrettes" – the very light roles for soprano.


**Hjelga:** How does a singer such as

yourself obtain work? Do you send out curriculum vitae, do opera associations call you?

**Valdine:** I have an agent, and my agent has contacts all over Canada and a good part of the United States. In the early days, he would send out publicity material on me, hoping to get an audition for me. These days, my agent receives a phone call that someone needs a soprano – they've heard about me or heard me sing and, on that basis, they hear me. The details are worked out with my agent and then they call me to see if I'd like the part.

**Hjelga:** So, you would only be called for works in your range.

**Valdine:** In Europe the voice ranges are strictly categorized. A lyric soprano will sing only seven or eight roles in repertoire. As soon as you say you are a "lyric soprano," they know what




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kind of voice you have and you would never go beyond that. Everyone's quality is different, but they know the size of your voice and what your voice can do. Over here (in Canada) there is a little more "give and take" and a soprano is allowed to do "this" or "that" – I think mainly because our concert halls are not a standard size the way they are in Europe. In Europe, a lyric soprano would sing in a certain size of hall, and a dramatic soprano would sing in a larger size of hall.

**Helga:** How interesting! I understand that you have an interest in modern music, "new music" as it is called.

**Valdine:** Yes, I do. I love it. Almost half my work is in modern music. I'm so pleased to do it and enjoy it a lot. There aren't many who work in modern music, so it's nice to have speciality. I think in this day and age you really do need something different. If it is not that you can sing higher or louder than anybody, it may as well be that you are willing to interpret the music.

**Helga:** Do you learn this music in the same way as traditional music?

**Valdine:** It tends to be more time consuming because there's not usually a recording in the library, so it's something you have to work out on the piano or try to hear in your head, rather than listen to a tape, and say, "Oh, this is how it goes." You hope that you are right and you try to do what the composer had in mind. Often the composer conducts his own work. It must be similar to what singers did in earlier times when they worked with Mozart or Schubert, having the composer speak directly to you. Most composers want their work optimally performed so they need to help with the interpretation, yet not to be too dogmatic about it.

**Helga:** I find that the new music sometimes is not as melodic as the music audiences are used to hearing – some people might even have difficulty listening to certain pieces. Is it difficult to sing this type of music?

**Valdine:** Learning the pitches is tricky, but you keep in mind that you have to make some kind of music out of it. It is only difficult if you can't do that. I have found that there is always a thread of a musical thought that I can see. Maybe that doesn't always come through in the performance. You just never know how it comes across – it is less concrete and I find it quite intense.

**Helga:** I'm learning to like this music. In the past, I have tended to have a fairly closed mind towards it.

**Valdine:** Most people do, but there's sometimes a drive and intensity that you just can't get with the harmonic or lyric work. We have to keep in mind that this music is an expression of our times. It will take awhile, but already it is beginning to be accepted.

**Helga:** Yes, that's true, it being an expression of our times – the noise, the busyness...

**Valdine:** And the discord and tension. It's exciting.

**Helga:** Have you ever had difficulties during rehearsals or productions - difficulties working with certain personalities, directors...

**Valdine:** I haven't experienced any. Nothing along the line of the great diva stories. I've heard of some others having difficulties, but for the most part, people now are just so delighted to be working, and so happy to work together, that it is like old home week when we are in a production!

**Helga:** Maybe the public is conditioned to expect temperamental personalities in opera.

**Valdine:** Sure, there are some of those, but for the most part people tend nowadays to laugh at the idea of a "diva" having a tantrum. And, when work is so hard to get, most conductors just don't want to put up with that sort of behaviour unless you are a big superstar, such as Kathleen Battle or Jesse Norman. They'll just get someone else, so everyone is pretty careful. A bad reputation sticks and it takes years to get rid of.

**Helga:** Does the conductor make a difference for you? Is the music elicited from you or is it just always there, ready to come forth?

**Valdine:** I haven't worked with many poor conductors. Sometimes you get an inexperienced conductor and you sense that they are hoping that you will make more of the music than they can; but most are fine conductors. Some are from the old school, where there's no coffee, no gum; practice is serious and when the conductor enters you say, "Hello, Maestro," and you call him Maestro all the time. Whereas, there are others that say, "Call me John, or whatever." In either case, it has nothing to do with the way they want to relate to you, rather, it's about how they deal with the music, how they express it and what they think you can accomplish. And, if they expect your best, you usually try to give it.

**Helga:** It must take a lot of time to learn the music.

**Valdine:** For orchestra and symphonic works you can use the sheet music, but for opera and recitals in general, you sing from memory. It is nicer to be off the page even for symphonic works. It is much easier to relate to your audience. There is much to learning opera roles, as all roles relate to one another and they

come in at different times – so you have to learn the music for the roles around your part as well as your own, so you'll know when to come in. It's tricky, but if you love what you're doing, it's fun!

**Helga:** Do you have Icelandic songs in your repertoire?

**Valdine:** A few. I sang in Icelandic for the President of Iceland when she visited Winnipeg, but that's the extent of it. I don't know the folk songs, although I know that there are a few out there. I don't speak Icelandic, but I am hoping to go there and maybe have a recital. It would be very exciting if that happened. It is such a small country, but yet so culturally alive!

**Helga:** Wouldn't Icelanders love to have you come to perform for them – with your lovely voice, your Icelandic name and looks. What are your goals for the next three or four years?

**Valdine:** Well, I hope to make some inroads in Germany. When I move back to Canada I would like my traditional repertoire and my reputation in opera or symphonic works to be established enough so that I can pick and choose from those fields. Also, by that time, I hope to have enough connections in the new music area that I could maybe form a trio, or do some new works. The Canadian Broadcasting Company in Toronto is commissioning a composer to write a new piece for me. That really interests me, and I'd like to do more work like that.

**Helga:** Have you performed new music from other countries?

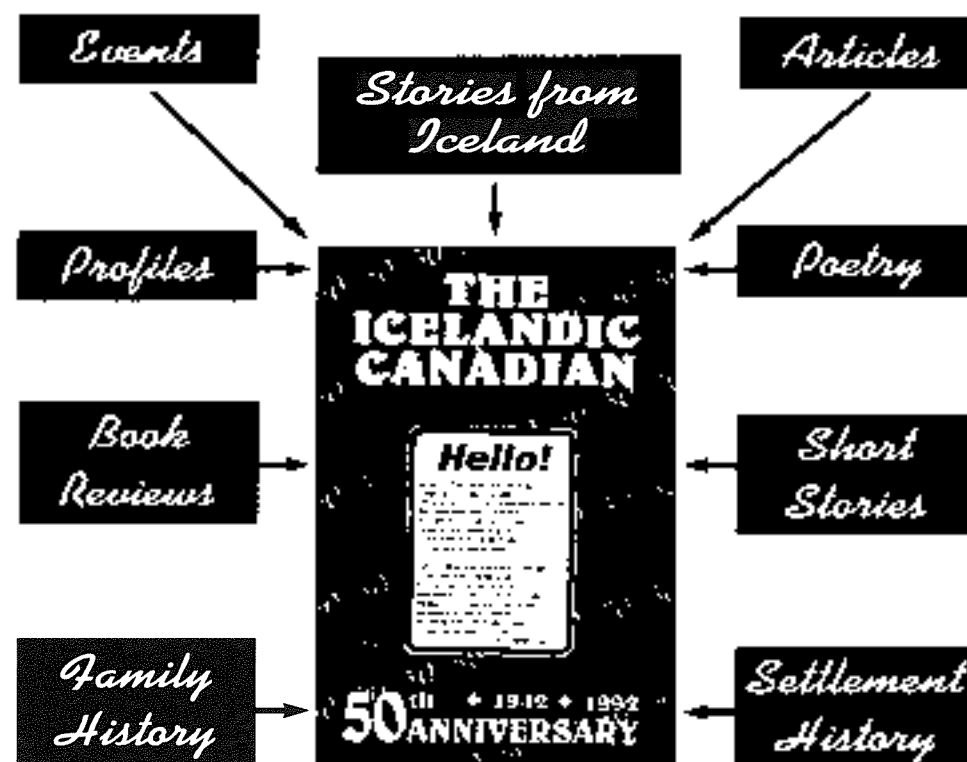
**Valdine:** Yes. The first was a beautiful piece for soprano and ensemble, written by an Austrian composer. Then, I worked with a group of Hungarian composers and that was very different. This was followed by

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two pieces by a British composer, who came to Canada to conduct his work. And finally, a prominent Hungarian composer sent me a score and asked me to perform one of his pieces - there will be a North American premiere in Toronto; it's very exciting!

The composers are so different - some make more of the text than the music, and some the other way around - they have text that is ambivalent and vague, and others have no text at all. The Vancouver Opera commissioned a work by a local artist. The first half of the opera was workshopped to see how it would sound before going on to do the other half. I was part of that workshop and I was given the part that I had worked on. There are six performances planned for June 1994 and I am thrilled to be a part of them. They liked my interpretation of the character and, based on my voice, the composer wrote the part for the second act. I'm sure, most composers hear a voice when they are writing for a part - I'm thrilled.

**Hjelga:** It's really great if you do have a name for doing work such as that - because you will be sought out.

**Valdine:** Even though governments are cutting back, they will still have to support today's composers to some degree. And, no matter what, there will be new pieces written, so it's relevant - a good place to be.

**Hjelga:** Yes - when you think of it, there are not very many people doing that type of work.

**Valdine:** Well, it helps to have perfect pitch.

**Hjelga:** Is one born with perfect pitch, or is it something one learns?

**Valdine:** Really, I don't know. It's just an acute tonal memorization. For example, you can remember the

sound of "A," like you can remember the colour of yellow. You seem to be born with it. There may be people who have that capacity and have never honed it. I was lucky to be born to a very musical family, so I was surrounded by music from morning to night. I noticed when I was humming that I was always on pitch, but I didn't know what it meant. My father had perfect pitch too.

**Hjelga:** Your little ones sing as well - I remember.

**Valdine:** Yes, they do - I encourage them.

**Hjelga:** Do you think you'd like to do some composing yourself?

**Valdine:** No, I don't think I'm inspired that way. No, one's head has to be swimming with original ideas that it just can't contain - these ideas must come out, like those of a writer. I couldn't ever write something considered profound.

**Hjelga:** What are your plans, then, for the next few years?

**Valdine:** I am hoping to do an "audition tour" next year and, to do that, will contact various managers and theatres to sing for them. It is possible, through a manager, to have auditions arranged with various houses, and thus secure a position. If you secure a position in Europe, it's your living. Musicians there work a 30-hour week, with two days off each week. It is recognized that, because you have this position and are working on a regular basis, you will be supported by many people. It is part of the culture in Europe that people go out to hear music. Managers there can afford to have staff.

There is no equivalent in Canada. There is only contract work, and musicians simply go from job to job. The Manitoba Opera, for instance,

cannot afford to have a house chorus that they pay - it's all on a voluntary basis.

Nevertheless, after our three years in Germany, we want to return to Canada and come back to Winnipeg. Winnipeg has always been "home" to my husband and to me, and we would rather not have to consider any other place to live.

**Hjelga:** Thank-you Valdine and good luck!

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Complete History of  
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*The slim and keen-eyed scholar was in his mid-fifties. The room was scattered with volumes of books in French, Icelandic, English and other languages. Reels of magnetic tape, canvases and easels were stacked around the room.*

*With his eyes brightening he often recalled the earliest written description of an Icelandic musical event.*

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Receiving the crown from Gwen Cronshaw, 1992 Fjallkona.

Just what is it like to be a Fjallkona? Certainly it is one of those rare happenings in a person's lifetime, an exhilarating and demanding experience that is something akin to living a dream.

This is not to say I had ever dreamt of becoming the Fjallkona for Gimli's Íslendingadagurinn, but the actual reality of taking on the role carries with it a mystical quality that is dreamlike in character.

The Fjallkona is invited to assume the appointment for a year; that is to say, from the time it is announced in April or May until the following spring when a new Fjallkona is named.

The Fjallkona for the year learns of the appointment well in advance of it being announced publicly, so there is a period of respite before any action or programs take place. During that time it is difficult to keep the fact a secret. However, this time allows the Fjallkona to prepare herself for the coming three-day Icelandic Festival of Manitoba, held annually at Gimli, as well

as other programs and festivals she is invited to attend.

Certainly the excitement began in earnest at a Gala Dinner and Dance held at the Hotel Fort Garry in Winnipeg where the Icelandic Festival of Manitoba president, Art Kilgour, announced that I would be the 1993 Fjallkona. When the 1992 Fjallkona, Gwen Cronshaw, placed the crown and veil on my head, it then became a reality for me. I felt a part of that Icelandic community which revels in tradition staying alive among us, that common bond that makes us one big family being maintained. The torch had been passed on to me in that relay which perpetuates the Fjallkona image at Íslendingadagurinn, a challenge that brings with it profound responsibility to carry out duties peculiar to a most unusual office. Little did I know how much more was involved than appearing in the festival parade and delivering the Fjallkona's message on the first Monday in August. There were to be many

events, both before and after Íslendingadagurinn that I would attend as Fjallkona.

My first appearance as Fjallkona was at the June 17, 1993 celebration of Iceland's National Day in Winnipeg, a program jointly sponsored annually by the Jon Sigurdsson Chapter IODE and the Icelandic Canadian Frón, (Winnipeg's Chapter of the Icelandic National League). It is with a wreath laying ceremony at the Jón Sigurðsson statue on the Manitoba Legislative Building grounds that the National Day celebrations traditionally begin.

As in the past, the event opened with a procession which began at the foot of the steps of the Legislative Building, with those gathered for the occasion proceeding to the monument on the north-east corner of the grounds. Included in the assembly were representatives from the various Icelandic organizations in Manitoba, the Icelandic Consul General, officers of the IODE and dignitaries from the Government of the Province of Manitoba, several of whom addressed the gathering. It was a privilege for me, as Fjallkona, to speak at the close of the ceremony and to lay the wreath that day.

A gala reception at the Scandinavian Cultural Centre in Winnipeg followed the wreath-laying ceremony.

June 24 to 26, 1993 found me attending the annual Scandinavian Hjemkomst Festival in Fargo, North Dakota. A number of women of Icelandic background from Manitoba had been invited to participate in the annual 'Costume/Style Show' at the Festival. Some forty costumes representative of the five Scandinavian countries were displayed with the Style Show commentator describing the details of each ethnic costume. The majority of those in attendance had not seen the Fjallkona costume

before. They were particularly impressed with the unusual white gown, the green mantle and the crowned head-dress, as well as the significance of the apparel.

The gracious hospitality extended to the Manitoba participants by the members of the Icelandic Club in Fargo was much appreciated by our group. My husband, Russell, and I stayed at the home of two members of the planning committee of the Festival, Ima and Denny Dinusson. Ima was born in Iceland and her love of entertaining was certainly evident at a garden party she hosted for some twenty Icelanders, the majority of whom had travelled from Manitoba to participate in the Festival.

The next celebration I attended was the Festival of Nations, an annual South Central (Manitoba) Heritage Festival which took place in Swan Lake, Manitoba. The Icelandic Festival committee had received an invitation from the Icelandic pavilion group in that region requesting the presence of the Fjallkona. Once again, a number of women from Winnipeg who own Icelandic costumes were also invited to participate in the program at the Icelandic pavilion. There were seven countries represented at this Festival but the Icelanders were the only Scandinavians to host a pavilion.

One thing was certain, whenever I appeared as Fjallkona, people were impressed by the elegance of the costume. The children, especially, would ask if I were a "queen." One small child at the Icelandic Festival wanted to know if I was an "angel." I was most happy to be approached by people and proudly explained the symbolic aspects of the Fjallkona image.

With all these events taking place before Íslendingadagurinn, I felt fortunate in that I was somewhat more prepared for the big Celebration.

But, nothing could surpass the exhilaration and excitement of the three-day Festival when it finally happened. Once the Festival is upon you, the time passes all too quickly!

It was the 104th anniversary of Íslendingadagurinn, and I was the 70th in a long line of Fjallkonur to be appointed to represent the Icelandic heritage as "Mother Iceland" at the annual event.

The first description of the Icelandic nation being portrayed as the "Fjallkona" is found in a poem written in Iceland about 1750. The poem described the apparel of a woman named *Isafold* who wore a white gown; on her head was a crown from which a fiery volcano was erupting. The Fjallkona is a symbol of the essence of Icelandic culture and history, which, in turn, draws attention to the ancestral origin and the ties that bind all Icelanders to the Motherland. The white dress represents purity and integrity. The high, white lace head-dress and veil recalls Iceland's snow-capped mountain peaks; the green mantle calls to mind the lush green slopes and valleys of Iceland. The veil is held on by a gold crown. The crown radiates sunshine and has a star in the centre standing above the rising sun, with the Icelandic coat of arms above it. There are four shield bearers, symbolizing the guardian spirits of Iceland. The four symbols are emblematic of the unity of Iceland. The splendid Fjallkona crown and the belt, also of gold, were crafted in Iceland over sixty years ago.

It was a peculiar honour for me personally to actually be playing the role of Fjallkona, since I had attended the Icelandic Celebration so often through the years. I had that innate awareness of being "Icelandic." All my grandparents had come from Iceland and, having been born and raised in

the west-end of Winnipeg, I was surrounded by Icelanders a good deal of the time in my youth. Indeed, there has never been a time in my life when I have not been involved in Icelandic organizations. I have visited Iceland three times and will be travelling there once again on the charter flight from Winnipeg this coming summer to join in some of the festivities celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Republic of Iceland.

It was especially wonderful to have all my own family on hand at Íslendingadagurinn. Being in the parade with my two attendants, my granddaughter, Caitlin Spauls and my niece, Elin Thordarson, was such a thrill. As usual, hundreds of people lined the streets of Gimli. It was amazing to see the crowds gathered, five and six deep along the parade route, waving and calling out greetings as we passed by in the long, white convertible. I loved it, waving and responding to their cheers as the excitement of the day began to take hold. And the momentum that began with the parade continued for the rest of the day!

The luncheon with the guest speakers taking part in the main program gave us the opportunity to relax before returning to the Gimli Park for the official afternoon program. As we were being ushered towards the main stage, by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, we paused for a few moments at the Íslendingadagsklukka. (See story in the Summer 1993 issue of *The Icelandic Canadian*). It has become a tradition, since the centennial celebration of Íslendingadagurinn in 1989, to announce the entrance of the Fjallkona into the Gimli Park by the ringing of this bell, and thereby begin the celebration of the bonds between Iceland and North America. I laid a wreath at the memorial plaques beside the Íslendinga-

dagsklukka, then rang the bell three times before proceeding to the platform.

The following excerpts from my Fjallkona message that day express some thoughts pertinent to the whole aspect of being a Fjallkona.

*"Gleðilega hátíð!" A warm welcome to all present in this place today, those who have come from far and near, from various parts of Canada, the United States and from Iceland.*

*It is understood that taking on the image of the Fjallkona allows me the privilege of giving love and guidance to you, to draw attention to our ancestral origin and the ties that continue to bind us to the Motherland... By absorption we still retain the mould in which we were cast. And, although this may eventually not be as easily discerned as it is today, the strands of the Icelandic cultural heritage will, no doubt, continue to reinforce the mosaic fabric of the Canadian nation.*

*Today, you in Canada and my children in Iceland have progressed far since the turn of the century, functioning now in the mainstream of world affairs. When the pioneers came from Iceland beginning in 1875, not only did they bring their books of law and literature, they also brought something that was more valuable - a strong faith in Divine Providence. Their faith sustained them throughout the early struggles of our people, both in Canada and in the United States, the same faith that had sustained the Icelandic nation through the tribulations of 1000 years of Icelandic history...*

*The 'New Iceland' republic, founded upon the laws, literature and liturgy of their former homeland... continued to develop the attributes inherent in the Icelandic culture. Literary societies, libraries, schools and churches flourished wherever the*

*Western Icelanders founded new settlements...*

*Today, we still retain a part of our roots, that of our Icelandic heritage. Over the last sixty years, beginning first with the historical millennial celebration in 1930 of Iceland's first parliament, voyages and charter flights have brought many westerners of Icelandic background in contact with their relatives in Iceland. Once you experience a visit to Iceland there is a bond that is immediately felt. There is indeed an innate fondness that the people of Iceland have for the Íslendingar í vesturheimi, and their warmth and hospitality is an experience one will always cherish.*

*There have remained amazing parallels between our people in America and those in Iceland... Men and women alike have gone forth, many becoming leaders in various areas of commerce; others successful in the fields of teaching, medicine, law, architecture, and so on. Still others express themselves in the arts and crafts - there are very fine musicians, writers of prose and poetry, artists of all kinds, on both sides of the Atlantic.*

*As you reflect on your childhood, whether you live on this continent or in Iceland, you become aware of the culture and characteristics of your people... their gentleness of spirit, their courage in facing disasters and their faith in God brought them through whatever hardships and crises that confronted them... Indeed, Iceland is a microcosm of what happens on a larger scale world-wide.*

*Whatever befalls a nation, people do not give up until they emerge free and victorious in their own right . . . The people of every race and creed need that recurring introspection into their past, to always take what proved best in former times, work diligently at their dreams today, so that*

*tomorrow they can live in a peaceful land and remain loyal and faithful to their neighbour and their country to the end of the Age."*

The three days at Gimli were indeed very exciting. Just being a part of all the activities, the receptions, the concerts, dinner, luncheon, and meeting so many people was fantastic. I owe a debt of gratitude to the Icelandic Festival Committee president, Art Kilgour; to my escort during the festival, Ernest Stefanson; and to all the Committee members for their gracious hospitality. I also appreciated the genuine kindness of the Prime Minister of Iceland, Davíð Oddsson and his wife, who had come from Iceland for the 1993 celebration.

There were to be three more events following the Icelandic Festival of Manitoba for which I was granted the privilege of wearing the Fjallkona costume. During the second week of Winnipeg's Folklorama, "Festival of Nations," in August 1993, at the Scandinavian Pavilion, I wore the Fjallkona costume for two days. With four shows each evening, (eight performances) I was pleased to explain just what the Fjallkona represents.

The next event took me out to the Brandon, Manitoba "Heritage Festival" at the Keystone Centre, October 1-2, 1993. There I spoke at the opening ceremonies, once again appearing in the Fjallkona costume, and spent some time at the Icelandic display area. Again, the Icelandic club of Brandon, Fálkinn Chapter of the Icelandic National League, was the only Scandinavian ethnic group represented at this annual 3-day

festival.

Last, but not least, we were invited to the Norsk 'Høstfest' in Minot, North Dakota, October 16-18. Our hostess while in Minot was Hilda Almquist, an Icelandic woman eighty-seven years young.

The opening ceremony of each performance of the Høstfest's main-stage show consisted of a parade of flags, during which the United States, Canada and all five Scandinavian countries were represented by standard bearers. Four times I proudly carried the Icelandic flag, as "O Guð Vars Lands" was being sung, during the elaborate ceremony. Our group from Manitoba again participated in two 'Bunad/ Costume' shows at the unbelievably gigantic 3-day annual Norsk Høstfest, (estimated attendance 70,000-80,000 people).

It has been a year of new experiences for me. I was most grateful to have the support of my husband throughout all these memorable events, and to my family who were there for me at Gimli for Íslendingadagurinn. Also, I am indebted to the women who accompanied me to the out-of-town festivals and wore their Icelandic costumes. They were all great ambassadors for our ethnic group.

It was with some nostalgia that I returned the Fjallkona costume to the Icelandic Festival Committee. To them I say, "Thanks a million!" I will cherish the memories always.

Congratulations and warm wishes to the Fjallkona of 1994, Dilla Narfason. To you I hand over the crown and veil to begin yet another chapter in the annals of Íslendingadagurinn.



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# Making Memories

By Agnes Bardal Comack

It is interesting to find, as I get older, that some of the things I do somehow bring back memories of women I have known. The fragrant aroma and delicate taste of pincherry jelly simmering on my stove at our cottage at Caddy Lake always brings back memories of my mother's eldest sister, my Auntie Helga Christianson, who lived in Beaconia, Manitoba.

Another simple gesture is pouring water from a kettle. When I was very small, I spent two happy weeks with Stefania and Paul Magnusson in their little house on Dufferin Avenue in Selkirk. I would watch in amazement as Stefania lifted her kettle from her wood-burning kitchen stove. She would hold it high in the air so the long thin stream of boiling water would bring the cocoa in my cup bubbling to the top.

Stefania was a sort of foster mother to my mother. I never understood their relationship but I have pictures to show that Mamma lived with Stefania and Paul when she was a teenager. It was obvious to me that there was a very strong bond between the two women.

Many times on a Sunday afternoon, we'd all pile into the car for the drive from our home in North Kildonan to travel north along Henderson Highway and over the bridge crossing the Red River at Lockport. From the River Road we would continue north on what was then called Parkdale Highway

towards Selkirk.

Dufferin Avenue was a dirt road. On a rainy day, it was frightening to me as the car would slither from side to side. The sidewalks were wooden except for a strip of cement sidewalk near Stefania's house where we could play "hop-scotch."

Stefania always greeted us with open arms. What astonished me most of all was watching her load her round oak table with food as she spoke in Icelandic with my father and mother. When I hear the term "table spread," I think of Stefania.



Stefania and Paul Magnusson



Mamma, Margret I. Bardal and Johanna Jonasson wearing the hat.

While the feast was being prepared, we were left on our own in the small front room. There was a player piano! No one complained about the racket we made as we pumped on the pedals and marvelled to see the keys moving on their own. In addition to the piano there was, in the corner of the room, a small table where a bowl full of snapshots kept us happily amused.

Stefania's house was spotless. The bathroom was stark but shining with a high ceiling that was wondrous to me.

During my two week stay I met new friends on the street. To a kid from the suburb of North Kildonan, Selkirk was a city. With my new friends, I combed the back lanes searching through garbage cans behind the stores for new additions to my valued bottle top collection which contained labels such as Cream Soda, Ginger Beer and Wynola as well as Orange Crush and Coca Cola.

Paul had a little store on the front



Rannveig Bardal with her uncle A.S. Bardal, my pabbi.

corner of his lot on Dufferin Avenue. I well remember the joy I felt being told by Stefania to go out to Paul's store and pick whichever can of soup I fancied for my lunch.

When I pour milk from a carton I'm reminded of my Auntie Johanna. She was married to Jonas Jonasson, who was an uncle to my mother. Uncle Jonas had a dairy farm at what was then the end of Sidney Avenue in East Kildonan. Someone told me recently that a house with half the basement above ground was an Icelandic-type house. I don't know if that is true, but that is the type of house they had on the dairy farm. Uncle Jonas delivered milk to our house in North Kildonan travelling in a horsedrawn cart.

After he died, Auntie Johanna moved to a basement suite in the Agnes Apartments on Ellice Avenue. She was a frequent visitor to our home and much loved and respected. She was always well-groomed and had a happy disposition.



Ingunn Marteinnsson

One day she showed me how to make skýr from buttermilk. As she poured the milk from the carton, I watched her as she held it in mid-air until every drop escaped. I thought to myself,

"There's a dairyman's wife."

Kleinur remind me of my Auntie Ingunn, my father's sister. On Sundays, after my father dropped my older brothers and sisters off at church to attend Sunday School at First Lutheran, he'd take me with him to Auntie's house on Lipton Street. I don't know the number, but I could pick out the house with the long oval window in the front door. My aunt was married to Reverend Rúnólfur Marteinnsson.

I remember standing on a chair and singing the song my mother taught me, "*Dansi, dansi, dúkkan mín*," and all the love and praise I received as I filled myself with Auntie's freshly made kleinur.

Being one of the youngest in our large family, it's not surprising that



Olavia Finnbogason

my first cousin, Olavia Finnbogason, was twenty-six years older than I. Next to my mother, she was probably the most important woman in my life.

It so happened that Olavia's son, Alan, was born the day after I was. I was my mother's thirteenth child and, as she wasn't well, Olavia offered to breast feed me along with Alan. Even to this day Alan chides me that, as a result of his mother's generosity, he was an emaciated child because I had a stronger "pull."

Olavia and I continued to maintain our special bond. From the time I was married and living in a suburb of Winnipeg, many was the time the phone would ring in the morning and there would be Olavia. "What are you doing today? I want to come out to see you." I'd bundle up the kids and go down to the bus stop to meet her.

Olavia had a lot of class. You never saw her when she wasn't beautifully dressed, with her makeup on and earrings to match her outfit. She loved to play the piano and her

favourite song was, "The Song of the Moldau." She played it for me when she was well into her eighties.

Olavia's home was always open to guests. She loved to entertain. Her hospitality was the ultimate and there was nothing she enjoyed more than to offer you a drop of sherry, which she referred to as a "shot in the arm." She was also a wonderful cook. When I look at the recipes she so generously passed along, I laugh to myself. Each one has an extra "pinch" of this or a "dash" of that.

What an incredible character she was!

In telling these stories, I'm reminded of the best story-teller of them all, my cousin Rannveig Bardal.

Rae, as she was later called, specialized in ghost stories. One Halloween night we sat around in a circle in the H. S. Bardal home, on Sherbrook Street and Elgin Avenue, while Rannveig spun long horrifying tales. I have no memory of the stories but I well remember being thoroughly scared.

One night in the kitchen of our cottage at Gimli, she once more had us under her spell. For a long time afterward, I was absolutely convinced that there was a mysterious white baby grand piano in the loft of our cottage but, for some terrifying reason, I was far too afraid to climb up and peek through the trap door in the ceiling to find out for certain.

The women I remember from my youth were never anything less than loving, generous and extremely kind.

My eldest sister, Alla (Aðalbjörg), who was even older than Olavia, was married the year I was born so I had little contact with her for most of my life. I was named after Alla's maternal grandmother, Agnes Guðmundsdóttir. Alla's mother, Sesselja, my father's first wife, died in 1899.

I sometimes wonder about "fate" because it happened that my sister

came to live in my home during the last seven years of her life. I actually knew very little about her, as she had resided for most of her life in Vancouver. By 1964, she was a widow with no children and her nursing career was over.

Alla came to Winnipeg on a visit and phoned our place just to say, "Hello." At that time I was recovering from a car accident and our household was in a state of crisis. In no time a taxi arrived at the door and there was Alla to the rescue.

Ours was a busy home, with four children and a hectic lifestyle. This was the first time someone had come to actually help relieve the burden. Alla helped in the kitchen and she mended everything in sight. She even sewed buttons on the sweaters of my youngest daughter's playmates! Her hands were never idle. When there was no mending to do, she worked at her needlepoint. I can look around my house today and count twenty-three pieces on chairs, benches, stools, pictures and two chesterfields. Several other people also cherish pieces she gave away. Worldly goods were not important to Alla. Her now famous saying was, "If you want it, take it."

We were all enriched by our contact with Alla and I like to think that she enjoyed her last years with us. My children still recall one of Alla's favourite phrases, which seemed to capture her outlook on life. "Everything's beautiful in the garden."

So you see, we are not necessarily remembered for our daring deeds or grand escapades. Sometimes all it takes to create a lasting memory is a small word or kindness - and sometimes it is in giving the gift of our time and energy.

Could it be that maybe years from now, someone will taste pincherry jelly and think of me?

## Bláðakonan,



Caroline Gunnarsson is a "solid character." She is not extremely tall, has silvery soft white hair, lovely smile lines grace her round face. She dresses in a tailored style, giving off the air of efficiency. Laughter comes easily to her. She is definitely at ease with herself and everyone around her. She is never at a loss for conversation and loves to share her ideas. You could say she is feisty!

Icelandic women have always been

portrayed as a feisty sort, who stand their ground with any man, but retain a level head, in a sympathetic and nurturing style. This generalization could easily describe Caroline Gunnarsson. Karólína Gunnarsdóttir was born in Fáskrúðsfirði, Iceland. She was named for her great-grandmother, Karólína María Sigurðardóttir, a well known midwife in Iceland. In Iceland, Caroline's family nickname was 'Kalla.'



Baby  
Caroline in Iceland

Caroline,  
during her  
C.W.A.C. days.



Caroline (far left), aged 10, with her brothers and sisters in Iceland shortly before they left for Canada. All photographs courtesy of Caroline Gunnarsson's family.



Caroline, on the job,  
as editor of the  
Women's Section of  
the *Free Press Weekly  
Prairie Farmer*.

However, in Canada, her nickname was 'Lena,' and this she did not like, so she chose the English version of her Icelandic name and has been Caroline ever since.

Caroline's family left Iceland in 1914 to settle in Saskatchewan, near Churchbridge, in the Þingvalla community. At that time Caroline was ten years of age. Fond family memories kindle a warm smile on Caroline's face as she tells of pioneering hardships but close family ties. Her parents were Gunnar Gunnarsson and Gróa Þuríður Magnúsdóttir. Gunnar was born at Innri-Ásláksstöðum, Vatnsleysuströnd and Gróa Þuríður was born at Einarstöðum, Stöðvarfirði. Caroline's siblings are Inga Gíslason and Helga Sauer, both of Vancouver, and Hrefna Eyolfsson of Thunder Bay. Her sister, Jonina, and brothers, Eyjolfur and Gunnar, have died.

Even as a young girl, Caroline was writing. She prepared submissions for the Icelandic children's periodical

,*Sólskin*, but they were never sent. She recalls selling a Christmas story for \$5, which was a lot of money in the pioneer days.

She recalls that a big disappointment in her younger days was not having sufficient funds to attend the Chautauquas concert when it came to her area. The main speaker was none other than Mrs. Pankhurst, the suffragette worker. Caroline, even at that young age was highly aware of the women's movement.

Poverty was commonplace in the Þingvalla community. Water was a precious commodity in Saskatchewan, and Caroline proudly tells of her father's farm having had one of the best wells around. She also has wonderful tales to tell of the diviners and their search for water. Her questioning mind is fascinated by such things. She has shared these tales of diviners, and well-diggers with the youngsters at the Icelandic Language Camp. Caroline is a good storyteller as well as a good writer.



As a young woman, Caroline travelled to Winnipeg to study at business college and also to take a milliner's course. The latter showed her practical side — this was to be there to fall back on in case she did not land an office job. She made her "new home" with the Bjornson family (Sam and Ina) on Beverley Street. This became her second home. Mrs. Bjornson always treated Caroline as if she were a daughter, and to this day the friendship with the Bjornson children remains steadfast.

Caroline was not happy with "office work" and opted to join the Canadian Women's Army Corps (C.W.A.C.). Her basic training took place in Quebec. She then returned to Winnipeg where she served as a stenographer in District Depot. She then found great excitement in being transferred to Ottawa, where she was the editor in charge of a monthly magazine distributed to all the women's divisions of the forces. The monthly was an official organ of the C.W.A.C. and called the *Newsletter*.

Life in Ottawa was great! Here she found herself in the company of people from all over Canada who, like

her, were posted there. She found this very stimulating. However, after four years, the war came to an end and Caroline returned to the West.

Following her discharge from the service, Caroline accepted a stenographic position with a legal office. During this period of her life, she was a member of the Valour Road Legion, where she edited their little magazine, *Bronze Tablet*. She also found time to be a member of the Winnipeg Dramatic Society. "For, although I couldn't act," she says, with the proper spirit of true service, "I could be of use in various other ways." Caroline was a very active member of the board of *The Icelandic Canadian* as well.

In 1949 Caroline took on the position of news editor with the *Shaunavon Standard*, in a lovely little town in south-western Saskatchewan, close to the Montana border. Here Caroline was given a lot of freedom to develop her trade. She recalled the tough times the cattle ranchers were experiencing with poverty brought on by the drought. Cowboys were everywhere! However, just three years later, she left to

accept an offer to work for the *Free Press Weekly Prairie Farmer* based in Winnipeg.

This became Caroline's major life's work, for she stayed at the *Free Press Weekly Prairie Farmer* for over twenty years. She wrote weekly columns on almost every subject imaginable. She had complete freedom of expression. She loved being involved with rural Prairie people and events. As editor of the Women's Section, she was able to cover a wide range of topics and engage the progressively-minded farm women in the most current issues. Items included in the five page section ranged from current news, special achievements of farm women, fashion, household hints and just about everything else pertaining to the women's activities of the day. This position also provided Caroline with the opportunity to travel which was something she also enjoyed. While with the *Free Press Weekly Prairie Farmer* she also wrote under the by-lines, "Martha's Methods" by Martha Creighton and "Hints from Heloise." Many friends and relatives only recently learned that Caroline had been the author of last two! A highlight at the end of this phase of her career was the opportunity to cover the conference "Country Women of the World," which took place in 1967.

Caroline recalls the comradery at the "Press" during those years. She says everybody "pulled together" and helped each other out. Her friendships from the "Press" meant a great deal to her. She was elected president of the Winnipeg Branch of the Canadian Women's Press Club in 1957.

During this period, Caroline always maintained a lovely home, usually in the Wolseley district of Winnipeg, where she entertained in typical Icelandic style — making coffee for all

who called. Her treasured possessions included paintings from her birth place in Iceland, and a clock from Iceland that her father had given her mother when they were engaged. Another article that almost took on human attributes with Caroline, was her typewriter, 'Kolfreyja.' This typewriter is of an earlier vintage, but served her well. When she moved from the *Free Press* to *Lögberg-Heimskringla*, Caroline had 'Kolfreyja' adapted to the Icelandic alphabet. And as is the case with most Icelanders, books too were an important part of her household.

Caroline went to work for the Icelandic weekly, *Lögberg-Heimskringla* once she had retired from the *Free Press Weekly Prairie Farmer*. This position she held for five years. An outspoken person, she did have her battles with the newspaper's board of directors. She tells of being directed not to "take sides" with the Icelanders in the Cod Wars. This did not sit well with Caroline! She did manage to get a larger amount of the paper into English, knowing that the readership was becoming less and less fluent in Icelandic. This had another side to it however, because as she saw the Icelandic language slowly disappearing, she pondered if there would be need in the future for an Icelandic weekly.

Caroline also wrote for other publications such as the *Winnipeg Tribune*, *Winnipeg Free Press* and *The Icelandic Canadian*. She was an active member of the Icelandic community and was often sought out for her knowledge and reliable work. And, there was nothing she loved more than a good conversation or discussion on any current topic, preferably while enjoying a cup of coffee and a cigarette.

In 1977, the Icelandic community honoured Caroline by asking her to

be the Fjallkona at Íslendingadagurinn. This she did with great dignity.

In 1989, when President Vigdís Finnbogadóttir visited Canada, Caroline enjoyed a good discussion with her on the changing Icelandic language. With her honest and forthright manner, she told President Vigdís of her displeasure over some of the modern changes and additions.

Reading has always brought great pleasure to Caroline. She discussed various authors that she has enjoyed, with Laxness topping the list. She has read everything she can find written by and about Margret Benedicsson. Of Canadian writers, she has some criticisms. She feels that Martha Ostenso portrayed the Icelanders in a very poor light in her novel *Wild Geese*. She also feels that *Confessions of an Immigrant's Daughter* by Laura Goodman Salverson was a poor title. She says the publisher must have selected it! She does, however, truly enjoy the works of Canadian female writers such as Margaret Laurence and Gabrielle Roy. She says that she thoroughly enjoyed the *Anne of Green Gables* series — both book and television series — by L.M. Montgomery. And, Caroline feels that Mazo de la Roche is being forgotten by Canadians and this upsets her.

Caroline has done some translating of Icelandic works into English — several of which have been published in *The Icelandic Canadian*. She says she has done this so that

the younger generations will know their heritage. She has translated some family letters and notes that she wrote in earlier years for her nieces and nephews, but in her chiding way scolds them for not picking up and using the language well enough to be able to read it themselves.

Caroline describes herself as a "blaðakona," or newspaper woman, and she truly has lived up to that definition. "Women are still too submissive," says Caroline. She knows that this sentiment is not totally popular, but feels it is still a crucial point in today's feminist movement. She says, "great strides have been made since Margret Benedicsson's day, but there is still a big leap to be made to equality." Although she is of an older generation, Caroline's thinking is very astute and totally up to date!

*The Icelandic Canadian* has benefited from Caroline's work over the years. She has also assisted numerous other Icelandic organizations and events. She has always enjoyed her heritage. And although she was born in Iceland she became a very devoted Canadian, contributing strongly to the fabric of the Canadian mosaic.

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*Editor's note: The interviews with Caroline Gunnarsson and preparation for this article were done just prior to her passing in Winnipeg on March 20, 1994.*



## POET'S CORNER

# In This Kitchen



By Kristjana Gunnars

**i**n this kitchen there is none of me — a place of noise and bad manners — where the one son drinks his leisure coffee listens to Tom Waits and Lou Reed on the ghetto blaster reads Robert Priest's *The Mad Hand* and discusses Soviet astronauts' conversations with Alberta ham radio operators — where the other son brings the telephone discusses skateboard problems with the rest of the world — makes plans to sell one on philosophical issues for the benefit of young minds while eating bread — where the mother — in this case me — is usually silent wondering where all the minds at the table are off to and following sometimes with pride sometimes with suspension but wondering will I ever write the poem let alone get my head together for the novel I promised the Canada Council

this is just a family an average family of loves and apprehensions not something you'd want to trade in necessarily but a state of being and this kitchen is mostly a place of meals I did not cook and floors I did not sweep and pots I did not wash and shelves I did not wipe and when I come home on library day after writer in residencing it is a place of grease and chaos where no hand has been except the noisy and ill mannered one where food has been ripped from the cupboards and torn into crumbs over tables and floors and consumed in haste between urgent telephone convos where I become the disconsolate army surgeon slowly lifting broken items back into place and I must be dreaming in this kitchen there is none of me

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Ed. Note: Reprinted with the permission of Red Deer College Press Ltd. Originally published in *Kitchen Talk: contemporary women's prose and poetry* edited by Edna Alford and Claire Harris. Red Deer Alta.: Red Deer College Press, 1992.



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## BOOK REVIEWS:

# My Amma and Me

by Evelyn K. Thorvaldson

Winnipeg: Watson and Dwyer, 1993. Pp. 92.

Reviewed by Elva Simundsson.

Amma is the Icelandic word for grandmother. The book is about a relationship of a young lady with her grandmother. *My Amma and Me* is a book written as the biography of Kristín Thorsteinsdóttir Pálsson, the author's grandmother who was an immigrant pioneer in the Lunar district of Manitoba. Where the story intersects with Evelyn's life, the book also becomes an autobiography. This started out as a project to be shared only within the

Pálsson family. Fortunately for all of us, the publisher recognized the universality of the story and convinced the author to make the publication publicly available.

The story is divided into three time frames. The first takes place prior to Kristin's emigration from Iceland. There is a very clear and detailed description of the economic and social conditions in Iceland during the time when most of the Icelandic settlers to Canada emigrated. Although the story

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BY

EVELYN THORVALDSON

MY  
AMMA  
and  
ME



Evelyn K. Thorvaldson

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Evelyn Thorvaldson is Past President of the Icelandic National League of North America.

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# MY AMMA and ME



Evelyn K. Thorvaldson

follows Kristín Thorsteinsdóttir, the lifestyle described will have been very similar for most of those who made the decision to emigrate from Iceland to Canada just prior to the turn of the century.

The second block of the story deals with the pioneer experience during the first part of the twentieth century. This could be described as the "homesteading era" as it took place in Manitoba's Interlake area near Lundar. Again, though the story is specific to Kristín and her husband, Hjörtur, it is universal to all of our grandparents and great-grandparents who homesteaded on the rural Canadian prairies.

The third and final block of the story is more autobiographical. It deals with the author's coming of age and the role played by amma in the young woman's life. The story pivots through the rather transient youth that Evelyn experienced, but maintains its touch with the home base that is amma's place throughout the narrative.

With this book, Evelyn has created an incredible heirloom for her family. She has also let us share in the story by choosing to allow the public

release of the book. The experience of the young Icelandic woman running away from home to elope with her young man to the new world makes for a great story, fact or fiction. The descriptions are both vivid and detailed. The reader can imagine the family farmstead in Iceland; the setting out; the journey to Canada. We feel Kristín's emotion and anxiety of wanting a reconciliation with her family when they finally come to terms with her elopement.

The reader will experience the hardships of the early pioneers through Evelyn's filter. She does not permit the reader to see any despair or failure. She only talks of the strength and determination of people who were not afraid of challenge and would not accept defeat. We know there must have been incredible physical and emotional hardships faced in learning to survive in a strange, lonely land. Evelyn's story recounts cold winters, hot summers, illnesses and adversity, but only in a very matter-of-fact way which does not allow the reader to feel sorry for her family. They were not people who would accept pity.

In my opinion, the best part of the story is what Evelyn does as she evolves Kristín's biography into her

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autobiography. She acknowledges the standards and the old world values that have shaped her own life and personality. She pays a huge tribute to her amma by describing all that was good and noble in Kristín's character. She goes on to explain what she has learned from her amma and how she has tried to live up to the standards set by her mentor. It is truly a touching tribute.

When I first acquired the book, I did not immediately read it. Having spoken to the author during the time she was preparing her manuscript, I knew what the book was about. I was unsure of whether or not I wanted to pry into this family's personal life. I felt shy. However, once I got up the courage to meet the family, so to speak, my apprehension was gone. I did not feel as if I was intruding. I felt

that Evelyn invited me into the family. She tells the story as if the reader were part of the family and should be allowed in. All of us who have grandparents or great-grandparents who emigrated from Iceland will feel a kinship with Hjörtur and Kristín.

The book suffers in that the author did not have the opportunity to proof-read the final pre-publication copy. As a result, there are numerous typographical errors that detract from the otherwise careful research and presentation. None the less, I can only wish Evelyn were in my family. I would dearly love to have a book like this that would keep forever the story of the family's immigration to Canada and such a rich narrative of their experiences. The Palsson family have a wonderful legacy for their children and their children's children.

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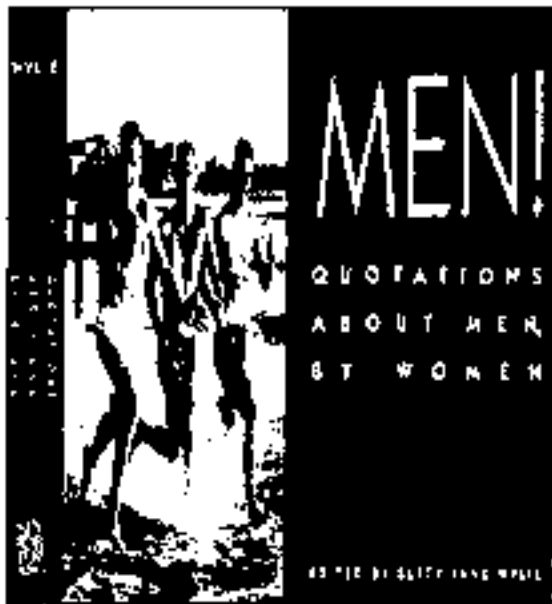
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# Men!

## Quotations about Men, by Women

By Betty Jane Wylie  
Toronto: Key Porter Books,  
1993. Pp. 192.



**Reviewed by Anne Brydon**

"Are men afraid we will mock them?" Well might Rita Mae Brown ask, and well might some men think when first reading the title of Betty Jane Wylie's latest offering. Relax, fellows. Wylie intends to entertain rather than torment her readers (of both genders) and, happily, she has succeeded in this endeavour, providing us with a source book brimming with wit and insight. Women will undoubtedly laugh with recognition at many of these observations, and men will laugh too - although, perhaps, a little more sheepishly.

While writing this review, I couldn't resist letting these diverse women's voices be heard: quoting becomes infectious when the expressions are this delicious. A quotable line can bestow immortality on its author. Intriguingly, decades or centuries do not much alter the sentiments underscoring some of these words, despite changes in the vernacular. George Eliot once described a man as "a cock who

thought the sun had risen to hear him crow." More recently, Zsa Zsa Gabor derisively noted that "macho does not prove mucho."

Although ostensibly about men, Wylie's book also chronicles women's understandings of their own lives. Some of those understandings are tinged with anger, such as Lady Nancy Astor's comment that "women have got to make the world safe for men since men have made it so darned unsafe for women." Others, like Gloria Steinem's, are ironic: "women age, but men mature" while yet others, like Bella Abzug's, are blunt: "all the men on my staff can type." This book shows off women's accumulated life wisdom in a particularly female fashion. As Simone de Beauvoir notes, "a man would never get the notion of writing a book on the peculiar situation of the human male."

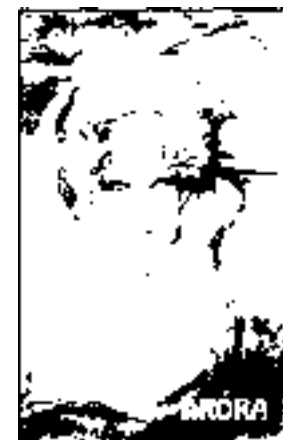
Arranging the quotations under general subject headings make browsing in this book all the more fun. Feeling resigned? Look under

"Boys will be Boys." Feeling confused? Check under "Relationships," "Communication between the Sexes," or "Sexuality." Frustration might be philosophically assuaged by "The Right to Rule" or "The Double Standard." And you will undoubtedly find useful sections concerning "The Family Man," "The Working Man," "Vulnerability," and "Aging." As a finishing touch, the illustrations by Kathryn Adams add humour and grace to this gift-sized, fit-in-your-pocket hardcover volume.

But perhaps there are few things men would rather not know women think, such as that "old boyfriends... make excellent cat-sitters" (Erika Ritter). Yet who could argue with Dorothy Dix when she observes that "the reason husbands and wives do not understand each other is because they belong to different sexes?" Occasionally Wylie slips in a remark which will bring some readers up short. Quoting from an International Labour Organization

study, Wylie lets us know that "men own 99 percent of the world's property and earn 90 percent of its wages, while producing only 55 percent of the world's food and performing only one-third of the world's work."

In real life men, like women, do not act according to simplistic stereotypes, a home truth which Wylie has kept in mind while choosing these quotations. Men are not always made the fallguys for women's banter. Affection, too, creeps in, as Anna Ford expresses: "The things I particularly like about men are their differentness, their simplicity, their cleverness, their ability to amuse and re-tell life better than it is, their sense of fun, their intelligence, their dependence on women, their boyishness... their charm, their insecurity, their character and, above all, when they reveal it, their gentleness and vulnerability." Yes, we are different sexes, yet oddly, we have the strangest affinity for each other.



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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

**Anne Brydon** holds a Ph.D. in Anthropology from McGill University in Montreal, Quebec, and is a professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Winnipeg. She serves on the executive committee of the Icelandic National League and is a frequent contributor to *The Icelandic Canadian*.

**Agnes Bardal Comack** is the daughter of the late Margrét Ingibjörg Ólafsdóttir and Arinbjörn Sigurgeirsson Bardal. She has four children and ten grandchildren and lives in Winnipeg with her husband, Hugh.

**Connie Geller** was an active member of the Manitoba Icelandic community prior to her move to Estevan, Saskatchewan where she now serves as the Saskatchewan editor of *The Icelandic Canadian*.

**Kristjana Gunnars** has written five books of poetry; an award-winning novel, *The Prowler*; two collections of short stories; and a non-fiction book, *Zero Hour*, which was nominated for the 1991 Governor General's Award. She teaches English and creative writing at the University of Alberta.

**Sigríð Johnson** is Head of the Icelandic Collection in the Elizabeth Dafoe Library at the University of Manitoba. She is editor-in-chief of *The Icelandic Canadian*.

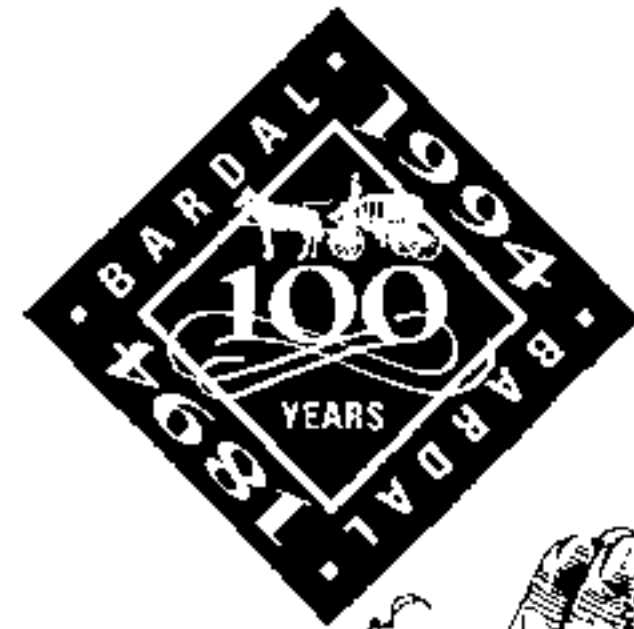
**Helga Malis** recently moved back to Winnipeg after having lived in Ottawa, Ontario for several years, and soon thereafter joined the board of *The Icelandic Canadian* as fiction editor.

**Shirley McCreeady** is a Winnipeg music teacher. An active member of several Icelandic Canadian organizations, she was selected to be the Fjallkona at the 1993 Íslendingadagurinn at Gimli, Manitoba. She is the familiar essays editor of *The Icelandic Canadian*.

**Elva Simundsson** is a librarian with the Canadian Grain Commission in Winnipeg, Manitoba. She is a member of the executive committee of the Icelandic National League and in the past she has served on the board of the magazine.

**Lorna Tergesen** is the secretary of *The Icelandic Canadian*. She is well-known throughout the Icelandic community. She has been involved in numerous Icelandic organizations and has served as President of the Icelandic Festival of Manitoba.

**Betty Jane Wylie** was born and raised in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and spent her childhood summers in Gimli. She received her B.A. and M.A. in English from the University of Manitoba. Since her husband's death in 1973, she has made her living as a writer. Her published works include children's books, cookbooks, plays, a biography and self-help books. She presently lives in MacTier, Ontario.



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