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# ICELANDIC CONNECTION

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# ICELANDIC CONNECTION



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# ON THE COVER



# Editorial

## Yes we can!

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by Linda Sigurdson Collette

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**YES WE CAN!**  
Repeat this to yourself several times. What is it that you can do? What will you add to these words? Think of this as you read what I have to say. Thank you, *Icelandic Connection*, for this opportunity to write the editorial.

For me, yes I can write this editorial although I am behind schedule. Oh Life, why do you not cooperate? Here I think of one of our great poets, Stephan G. Stephanson.

What is it that I wish to discuss with you? Well, I must explain that I am interested in how we move forward in our identity, how I view the position of the Fjallkona, how I honour the women in Manitoba who won the right for me to vote and changed Canadian history, and how we have strong women among us accomplishing great things. Through almost 75 years, these topics are contained in articles in the *Icelandic Canadian* now the *Icelandic Connection*.

What is it in the DNA of people with Icelandic heritage that cause them to never give up? They are independent, family oriented, creative, debaters, literate, charitable, hospitable, lovers of freedom, justice and democracy. Dr. Kjartan Johnson stated that all you need is one

drop of Icelandic blood in your veins to be Icelandic. We are in a global world unimagined by our ancestors. Thankfully, they created for us a firm foundation on which we must continue to build. Their endeavours in North America are found recorded in publications and the histories of the settlements.

What now will you do to carry on? I think that we must reach out to the non-Icelandic organizations to find those with that one drop of Icelandic blood. I envision speakers with power point presentations telling the stories of our 140 history in Manitoba, stories of the constitution of New Iceland which has fascinated a university law professor, the multitude of accomplishments by people who came to this country as immigrants, survived, achieved, contributed. In Winnipeg, there are opportunities, for instance, with speakers' forums at the libraries, social groups, service groups. Our future depends on those who follow, those who will decide if their Icelandic heritage is relevant to them. All of the organizations are stressed; they need new, younger members.

What may intrigue people to value their Icelandic heritage? Throughout our history, names of notable women surface. Many of us can trace our geneology back



to them. This issue of the *Icelandic Connection* contains the stories of strong women. One in particular is the story of Margrét J. Benedictsson whose dedication to her goal changed our lives and Canadian history. Many articles are online, but her story is not well-known to the masses. Benedictsson first spoke on equal rights between women and men and the right for women to vote at a meeting in 1893. She never gave up publicly until 1910 when her life took a spin. She and other women and men in the settlements had carried on through the decade of quiet times until the final push between 1912 – 1916. The main force now was the Political Equality League.

What can you do? Look to your ancestry to learn of the work by your family members on the path leading to the right to vote in Manitoba and elsewhere. Among other places, you may find their names on the many petitions submitted to the Manitoba government. These are preserved in the Archives. Support efforts to give honour and recognition to Margrét Jónsdóttir Benedictsson. Tell her story to your family members of all ages. Give the gift of this issue of the *Icelandic Connection* magazine to the young women who are searching for mentors in a time of change. Value the work and dedication of Lorna Tergesen and the women and men supporting the publication of the *Icelandic Connection*.

One constant in our lives in Manitoba and elsewhere is the Fjallkona, Woman



PHOTO: DILLA NARFASON

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### Helga Sigurdson and Linda Sigurdson Collette

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of the Mountain. She appears each year at Íslendingadagurinn to remind you of your heritage, to praise your efforts and achievements and to give wisdom from the three millennia. Though she is appointed by the Icelandic Festival of Manitoba Inc. she belongs to all of us. She is part of the continuum and without her, it can be said, we have no visual focal point. Think not of the woman so honoured; think rather of your heritage and land of origin. With her comes the 1100 year history which you must add to your identity. Iceland has maintained steadfast records. With them and the histories written about the North American settlements, you know who you are. I am proud to have been named the 92nd Fjallkona and prouder still that my mother was Fjallkona in 1988. When I

speak of being so named, a presence takes over. I am the Fjallkona. Once again, it will be only a woman selected and so honoured. I say that women carry the cultural gene, but that is another story.

In conclusion, I must mention the greetings and congratulations sent to editor Laura Goodman Salverson from Nellie McClung and published in the December 1942 issue of the *Icelandic Canadian*. She

endorses “the sentiment expressed in the editorial of Volume 1, No. 1. It is not enough that we should be proud of our ancestors. What we owe them now is not worship but work.” To these sentiments I add my own. Congratulations once more to the *Icelandic Connection* magazine members on your dedication. You ensure that for decades, past, present and future, we can find our identity.

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# Icelandic Women and the Right to Vote

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by Anna Birgis

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The year 2015 is the 100th anniversary of the right of women to vote in Iceland and that has been celebrated in commemorative events all year. The celebrations culminated on the 19th of June, Women's Rights Day. One hundred events were held throughout Iceland in the year 2015. We have been remembering the first leaders in Iceland who fought for this equality right that today we think is so self evident. A hundred years ago opinions were certainly more divided. The more progressive elements (and the same can be said about this struggle in many other places, including North America) were solidly behind the women's rights struggles.

It is hard for us today to understand how different the times were. The leading ladies were only demanding fundamental human rights for women, the right to vote and they encouraged women to challenge the status quo created by men. They wanted opportunity for girls and they were against the injustice towards girls and women. Keep in mind the first Manitoba Constitution stated that lunatics, criminals, idiots and women were banned from voting. Although nothing so drastic was on the books in Iceland, the resistance was there.

Iceland in 1915 was among the first countries of Europe to give women political suffrage and the first of the Nordic countries to give municipal suffrage to widows and independent women. But it had been a long battle.

The right to vote for the re-established Althingi (the Icelandic self-rule parliament)



in 1845 had been limited to men of certain age, taxes and property. The restrictions on property and taxes were lifted gradually, so that in 1903 almost all men who were not farm laborers could vote. The Icelandic Parliament discussed women's suffrage more than once in the 19th century, and most parliamentarians supported that cause. Despite the support shown in Iceland, the Danish authorities vetoed all bills containing women's suffrage because they all proposed changes in the relationship between the countries as well. The women's movement grew side by side with the Iceland's national fight for independence in the 19th century. The first women's organization in Iceland was founded in 1869 in the rural areas.

In 1904, Carrie Chapman Catt, the

leader of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA), contacted an Icelandic woman, Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir and asked her to establish a suffrage society in Iceland. Bríet can be said to have been a kind of Nellie McClung (Manitoba's leader of the suffrage movement) of Iceland. Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir had everything that was required to create a social movement. Being a widow she was financially independent as well as being her own master. She knew Danish and English, which meant that international communication was possible. She was interested in women's suffrage, and last, but not least, Bríet owned the woman's magazine *Kvennablaðið* (The Women's Magazine), which was very popular among women all over Iceland. She attended the IWSA congress in Copenhagen in 1906 where she was introduced to the various political work that women were engaged in, including running slates at local elections and school boards, for example in Norway, England and Australia.

She was also introduced to the suffragists' vision of a new world where women were seen to use their vote to change the legal and social positions of women and children in order to create a better world for all. The goal of most socially engaged women in Europe and North America in the first years of the 20th Century was that women participate in policies and gain autonomy in issues concerning women and children. Many of them also believed that through gaining the right to vote they would be able to construct politics for women and children. Bríet met many influential foreign women and stayed in touch with them.

Strong lines of direct personal communications existed between Iceland and the Western Icelanders and there is no doubt that Icelandic women leaders in Iceland had direct contact with their Western Icelandic fellow suffragists. At the end of January 2016 Manitoba, the first

province in Canada to do so, celebrated its centennial of the right of women to vote in provincial elections and the strong support of the Icelandic women in Manitoba was a significant influence in that achievement.

A key strength in the struggle that led to this provincial milestone, the first in Canadian history, were the Western Icelandic lady suffragists; none more so than the strong and persuasive Margrét Jónsdóttir Benediktsson who was born in Iceland in 1866 and died in 1956. She held effective lectures and talks and had a huge influence, not least through the remarkable magazine *Freyja*, which she started in 1898 and continued as editor and main writer, publishing out of Selkirk until 1910, a very influential women's magazine indeed. In these centennial years 2015 and 2016, we certainly have a lot to celebrate, both in Iceland and Manitoba.

When Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir returned to Iceland, after attending the IWSA congress in Copenhagen in 1906, her magazine became the most ardent supporter of women's rights Icelanders had seen. It brought news of the feminist struggle throughout the world and gave small biographies of leading feminists. Bríet also occasionally submitted news to IWSA's magazine.

Bríet turned to the Icelandic Women's Association and asked the president of Iceland to renew the suffrage issue. When the president refused because of the unpopularity of the cause, Bríet started a new organization, The Icelandic Women's Rights Association, founded in January 1907. The association promptly joined the IWSA. Its purpose was to work for women's rights with suffrage as the first and necessary means. As Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir wrote in *Kvennablaðið* (January 21, 1907):

"The experience of the last fifty years or so has proven to women elsewhere in the world that in order to establish equality



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ICELAND

between men and women and gain full political citizenship for women, only one thing is essential, that thing being the cornerstone for all other women's rights; that thing is political rights: women's suffrage and women's eligibility in politics. All other rights are derived from this".

The nation was awakening, the battle for independence had aroused the patriotism of the women, the poets wrote inspired songs and all the youth felt a glowing enthusiasm and a new faith in the future.

In 1874 Iceland got its first constitution and the parliament, "Alþingi", was granted legislative power. By all this Briet was strongly moved and said that she was always thankful for having lived in such a great age.

Married women became voters at the local elections of the capital city, Reykjavik, on January 1 1908. Unmarried women and widows who paid taxes but were not maids had already gained that right in 1882. The idea of entering a separate women's

slate at the town council election in 1908 came naturally to Briet who had heard of such actions through her contacts with the IWSA.

The women of Reykjavik stood for election in order to influence the town council on matters concerning women and children. Their entrance into the political arena marked the beginning of organized politics in municipal matters in Iceland.

The women prepared for the election with astonishing degree of organizational skills, the like of which Icelanders had never before seen. Indeed it was the first modern political campaign in Iceland with organized meetings, personal visits to every registered woman, posters and leaflets and coordinated from a central election office. It is likely that the women had obtained valuable knowledge from the IWSA on elections management.

The women's slate in 1908 in Reykjavik was victorious at the polls, receiving 22

percent of valid votes cast and four of the 15 councilors. Women in Reykjavík entered a slate at every election until the election year of 1918. At this time, considerable development was taking place in the town to cope with the increasing population.

Gas and water supplies were installed, the first streets were paved and a new harbour was built, to name but a few projects. The general view of the town authorities, however, was that providing care for the townspeople was a matter for motivated individuals and voluntary organizations. Thus, the town had no hospital. Women town councilors were quick to involve themselves in all these civic issues. The first matter taken up by the women was that girls should, like boys, be taught to swim in the town swimming pool.

The rest is history. The Danish King signed the Althingi's bill on June 19th 1915 giving the Icelandic women 40 years and older the right to vote. This age limit to women was lifted in 1920.

Bríet stood for elections to the Parliament in 1916 but did not win her seat. She was a member of the Reykjavík Town Council from 1908 to 1911 and again from 1913 to 1919 and was a champion of many worthwhile causes, mostly in education and health care. This Icelandic champion of women's rights died in 1940 at the age of 84 leaving a legendary leadership legacy behind.

The right to vote was achieved, but the battle was not yet fully won. At the town council election in Reykjavík in 1922 the political parties refused to put women in safe electoral seats. This so enraged women that they decided to enter a women's slate in the parliamentary election later that year. The reasons they gave for this, apart from having being kicked out of the town council in Reykjavík, were to shoulder the responsibilities that the franchise put upon women. They maintained that women had

more interest in social welfare issues than men, and that their voice was needed in parliament. They also wanted to ensure that parliament started building a national hospital for the considerable funds that women had raised to commemorate the suffrage.

The women's slate received 22.4 percent of the vote and the first woman entered parliament, Ingibjörg H. Bjarnason. She sat in parliament for eight years. During her service as a parliamentarian she continuously supported the rights of women and initiated bills to that effect. One of the things she initiated was to get women elected on all boards and committees that the parliament or government established. She failed in that mission, but she managed to get enough support for a bill that eliminated all text in legal statutes that stated that women could be refused the right to stand for nomination in municipal and school boards elections. She also supported expanded education for women and campaigned for an increase in the salary of midwives and teachers.

Ingibjörg H. Bjarnason followed through the dream of women's organizations of a national hospital. The hospital opened its doors to its first patients in 1930 in a beautiful building that is still one of the landmarks of Reykjavík, and a commemoration to women's suffrage. On 19th of June in 2015, a statue of Ingibjörg H. Bjarnason was unveiled beside the parliament building in the heart of Reykjavík, facing the statue of Jón Sigurðsson.

On October 24th 1975, the women of Iceland went on a strike for totally equal rights. 90% of women walked off their jobs and out of their homes, shutting down the entire country. The men could barely cope. The next year, Parliament passed a law guaranteeing equal pay. Five years later Iceland elected Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, the world's first democratically elected woman President. And now Iceland has perhaps

the highest gender equality in the world.

The 24th of October, 2015 is the fortieth anniversary of the Women's Day and will be celebrated as such in Iceland. This day is celebrated throughout Iceland every year since that famous 'Women's Strike' day.

We have come a long way in Iceland in recognizing equality of rights for women in the last hundred years, and so have the women of Canada. We look forward to the 100th anniversary celebrations in Manitoba beginning in January.

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## Manitoba's 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Women's Right to Vote

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by Elva Simundsson

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In the 19th century female property holders in Canada and the United States began to agitate for the right to vote. Citing the principle that was so effectively used in the American Revolution of a century earlier "No taxation without representation", propertied women gained the rights to cast ballots in municipal elections. In 1850 in Ontario, municipal and school trustee elections were opened to women of property and by 1900 most municipal jurisdictions throughout Canada had followed suit. By the late 19th century Canada was experiencing profound growth in its population, immigration and industrialization. Changes in societal circumstances for Canadians brought with them significant stirrings for social change that continued into the 20th century. However, the right to vote in provincial and federal elections still eluded women in Canada.

In 1876 in Ontario, the Toronto Women's Literary Club was set up as a screen for women's suffrage activities and

numerous petitions and bills to provincial legislators were submitted to no avail. In the 1890s the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) joined the fight as the leaders felt that votes for women would be necessary in their struggle for Prohibition. In 1910 the respected and influential National Council of Women joined the struggle by speaking out for women's suffrage.

In Manitoba, before the Manitoba chapters of the WCTU and National Council of Women joined the struggle, the earliest proposals for women's suffrage had come from the Icelandic communities. In 1881 women in Iceland had received the right to vote in church and municipal elections and national suffrage was being hotly debated. Icelandic immigrants in Manitoba followed with great interest the struggles of their countrymen in Iceland in their on-going struggle to gain independence from Denmark and the accompanying arguments for women to gain equal rights within Icelandic society.



In Manitoba's Icelandic communities the women quickly formed societies to provide support for such endeavors as scholarships for women, financial assistance for newcomers and employment counseling for young ladies.

The General Alliance of Unitarian Women and the Liberal Christian Women's club were formed in Winnipeg early in the 20th century. The WCTU was also active in Winnipeg and these organizations all banded together to promote women's rights. Margrét Benediktsson, the champion of women's rights in the Icelandic community was a member of these two organizations and enlisted the aid of other members to the cause. The Icelandic immigrant women's societies enthusiastically endorsed the women's right to vote movement.

Margrét Jónsdóttir Benediktsson was born in Iceland. As a young woman she had been very much aware of the struggles of her countrymen in their fight for self-rule and ultimately, independence from the Danish crown. Wilhelm Kristjanson states in his book, *The Icelandic People in Manitoba* that Margrét had read accounts of Iceland's champion for independence, Jón Sigurdsson's struggles for freedom and "had been possessed by wonder and admiration". Kristjanson further states: "... and sorrowful and angered, she read stories of oppressed people, unhappily married women and unfortunate girls. This kindled an unquenchable desire to break all chains."

Margrét immigrated to the United States at the age of 21 to the Dakota Territory. Two years later in 1891 she moved to Manitoba. She brought with her this unquenchable passion for fighting for human rights. She became acquainted with the writings of champions of the women's suffrage movement in Manitoba and Ontario and began personal correspondences with them. In Winnipeg she became involved in the Icelandic

Women's Society. In 1892 she married Sigfus Benediktsson, a like-minded champion of human rights. Sigfus was already well-known in the community, having presented lectures in Winnipeg on the emancipation of women prior to meeting Margrét. Margrét joined him in the suffrage struggle and in 1893 she gave her first lecture on women's rights.

Margrét and Sigfus became founding members of the First Icelandic Unitarian Church of Winnipeg. They had chosen Unitarianism over the more-common Icelandic Lutheranism because of its doctrine that promoted the inherent worth and dignity of every person and its promotion of individual freedoms, social improvement and tolerance. The Icelandic Unitarian congregation became strong supporters of the suffrage movement.

Together, Sigfus and Margrét acquired a printing press in Selkirk and in 1898 the first issue of the newspaper *Freya* was printed. *Freya* is said to be the only women's suffrage paper published in Canada at that time. Issues of *Freya* were published over a period of twelve years and had subscribers, both men and women, primarily in Manitoba but also in the neighbouring provinces and the United States.

In her lectures and in essays in the newspaper *Freya*, Margrét agitated for women's rights, social equality and the expansion of the role of women outside the home into the public sphere. Her words and writings influenced and inspired an untold number of women in Manitoba to join the suffrage cause. There is much evidence to show that the men in the Manitoba Icelandic community were equally influenced by the message of equality for women and supported their wives, sisters and mothers. Among others, the Icelandic Unitarian minister and a prominent Icelandic lawyer in Winnipeg both became avid spokesmen on behalf



of the movement within Manitoba's political circles. Numerous men are listed as subscribers and financial contributors, both to the *Freya* newspaper and to the suffrage associations.

Although the newspaper *Freya* ceased publication in 1910 and Margrét Benediktsson moved away from the province in 1912, the fire among the Icelandic women of Manitoba stayed lit. The Political Equality League was a group active in Manitoba between 1912 and 1916 that successfully lobbied for women's suffrage at the provincial level. In 1914 the Winnipeg Icelandic Suffrage Association joined forces with the Political Equality League. A Political Equality League delegation of women presented a petition to the Premier of Manitoba, Rodmond Roblin who famously rejected their proposals with the quote "nice women don't want the vote". This statement became widely known and mocked by both men and women who were angered by his condescension. The League garnered the support of the leader of the provincial Liberal opposition, Tobias Norris. Norris promised the League delegation that, if elected, he would pass legislation granting women the right to vote if he received a petition of at least 20,000 names. In 1915 the Conservative Roblin government was forced to resign due to a corruption scandal and the Liberal Norris became the new premier.

The Icelandic Women's Suffrage Associations in Selkirk, Gimli and Argyle worked diligently along with the Political Equality League and other suffrage societies in Winnipeg and throughout the province in 1915 to gather signatures on petitions to be presented to the newly elected Liberal premier. The combined forces were successful. By December of 1915 men and women of the suffrage movement in Manitoba presented two petitions to Premier Norris with twice the required number of signatures. Norris kept his word. On January

27th, 1916 the third reading of the bill was moved by Manitoba's Solicitor-General and Acting Premier, Thomas Johnson (himself a member of Manitoba's Icelandic community). The bill received Royal Assent the next day and Manitoba became the first province in Canada and in fact, in the entire British Empire, to grant women the right to vote and with that, also the right to run for office for the provincial legislative assembly.

Three months after the triumph of human rights was achieved in Manitoba, the provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta legislatures passes similar bills, followed shortly by British Columbia. In 1917 the province of Ontario changed its laws regarding women's enfranchisement and one by one, each province thereafter. On the 24th of May, 1918 all female citizens of Canada became eligible to vote in federal elections regardless of whether or not they had attained the provincial franchise.

It is amazing to think back one hundred years; certainly not at all a long time in the overall history of mankind. In 1870 the Province of Manitoba joined the Canadian confederation and at that time the Federal Elections Act stated: "...that no woman, idiot, lunatic or criminal could vote". It's actually within the lifetimes of our grandparents that women were exempted from that dreadful list.

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# Elin Salome Halldorson

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by Allison L. Mckinnon

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*Excerpts from Icelandic Canadian Vol. 50 #3 1992*

Born December 29, 1887, the first Icelandic-Canadian baby born in the Lundar district of Manitoba, to Halldor Halldorsson and Kristin Palsdottir. They had emigrated from Isafjordur earlier that year with two sons (Johann and Halldor) and four daughters (Margret, Gudrun, Maria, and Halldora.) Two brothers, Kristjan and Margrave, were born after Salome and four other children died young.

In 1893 Salome began her formal education at the Franklin School near Lundar. She apparently excelled in her early school years, so that plans were made for her to attend Wesley College in Winnipeg. Before starting university, however, she completed a third class Normal course and obtained a permit to teach school. In 1905, at age seventeen she began teaching as a means to finance her college education. By teaching school six months of the year and then entering classes at Wesley College one month later. Salome earned \$40.00 to \$50.00 toward her annual tuition (\$35.00) and room and board expenses (\$10.00 per month).

She majored in languages, studying French, German, Icelandic and Latin. She won a scholarship in German, Honorable Mention in Icelandic during her second year, and a bronze medal

(second highest) in modern languages in her final year at Wesley College (1910). Salome was elected Lady Stick of her graduating class. She received her Normal School first class teaching in 1911 and began teaching in various schools in Manitoba.

In 1920 a teacher of languages was urgently needed at the Jon Bjarnason Academy, the Icelandic Lutheran high school in Winnipeg. She was urged to accept this position although concerned about her mother's need for help at home. Thus began a 19 year commitment to teaching at the Academy. Sadly, her early years were marked by the death of her mother in 1920 and her father in 1921 and brother Joe in 1922.

She developed a reputation as a very good teacher of languages, the school being rated highly by the Department of Education. In 1939, a visit to Canada of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth, Salome received a medal from Buckingham Palace in recognition of her achievements as a teacher.

Salome was also very proficient in music and had learned to play the piano and violin "with the skill of inborn ability". Her musical interests led her to direct a series of school choirs which competed and performed in concerts.

Snjolaug Sigurdsson, the well-known pianist, accompanied a 1935 male voice choir directed by Salome and featured on Winnipeg radio programs.

How did it happen that she became a candidate for political office? According to James Gray (1966), author of the *Winter Years; The Depression on the Prairies*, those who became most sensitive to the depression were not the politicians, but the school teachers and the preachers. Both had their own financial crosses to bear. They were underpaid at the best of times everywhere in western Canada.

The depression years of the 1930s had hit the Jon Bjarnason Academy hard, and the teachers, among them Salome Halldorson, accepted very low salaries, perhaps half of what they might have had elsewhere. By 1935 the Lutheran Church had discontinued its support for the Academy and it was completely dependent on private donations for survival. Salome was the Dean at the time, having served from 1919 to 1926 as a teacher, as principal 1926-1927 and dean since 1927. Seeing the devastating effects of depression on her students, the Academy, her family, and other she sought to understand the economic basis of depression and to seek ways to improve the social order.

As a school teacher, Halldorson had the advantages of an inclination toward study,

an awareness of books, and a receptiveness to new ideas. She became interested in the “new Social Credit Theories being advanced by William Aberhart of Alberta, and they appealed to me as being worth looking into.” She claimed an academic interest in economics, not party politics, as her primary motivation. Even so, Social Credit represented a significant departure from the liberal politics of her family upbringing. In early 1936, Salome attended a public meeting in Winnipeg, where the newly elected Premier of Alberta, teacher and preacher, William Aberhart, promoted Social Credit as a solution to the economic problems of western Canadians. Aberhart’s influence on her political thinking was immediate,



strong and convincing.

In 1936 Salome was nominated at Eriksdale to stand for the Social Credit as a candidate in the St. George Constituency. Using her skills as a teacher, she set about to educate people on the Social Credit movement. She was instrumental in turning Social Credit into a political movement, offering an alternate for voters dissatisfied with the status quo. Besides the economic benefits, the humanitarian ideals of Social Credit appealed to her and many others in the Interlake. Her support garnered her a win, over the incumbent, Skuli Sigfusson of Lundar. The margin of victory was slim, but she had captured 53% of the vote and won 13 of the 23 polls.

This win signaled the end of her association with the Jon Bjarnason

Academy.

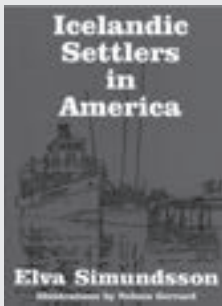
She was soon known in the popular press as the “Only Woman Member”, singled out as the “second representative of her sex ever to win a seat in the province” When she stepped forward to introduce herself to members of the House and respond to the Speech from the Throne she revealed her multiple identities as an Icelandic-Canadian, a woman, an elected political representative, a school teacher and an advocate for social change.

For Salome, this was clearly a time when constructive action was needed, regardless of party politics. She urged members of the assembly to “get together with sympathetic understanding, to work for the real betterment of the condition of the people we are privileged to serve. “Let us sink all the little differences that

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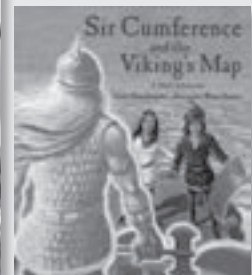
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are nothing compared with the hard struggle for very life that our people are going through. I know there is not a man among you who would not want to take measures to relieve the suffering of our people if you could be convinced they were feasible and effective.”

By 1941 doubts were increasingly raised among Manitoba voters about Social Credit’s ability to fulfill promises for economic and social reform. Elections in 1941 saw Salome defeated by Skuli Sigfusson of the Liberal-Progressive movement.

At this point she returned to teaching in many areas, Morden, Transcona, Stonewall and other communities. She continued teaching till age 70 and then continued with private tutoring. Her

interest in politics did not wane. The Canadian constitution, fluoridation of water supplies, employment equity legislation, racial discrimination, Kruschchev and communism, political tensions between Soviet Russia and Ukraine, the implications of Britain entering the European Common Market, national sovereignty and world government. Her political views remained with a right wing theme.

In a tribute to Salome Halldorson she was decribed as a dynamic person who put her whole soul and body into any undertaking. She passed away in 1970 at the age of 82. She is buried in the Lundar cemetery with a suitable epitaph “Our duty, Mr. Speaker, is to study, to decide, to act.”



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# Kristjana Thordarson

by Katherine Olafson



In 1914 the women of Manitoba were told by then-Premier Roblin: “Nice women don’t want the vote.” Women of Manitoba proved him wrong. Kristjana Thordarson was a nice woman and she wanted the vote. And so did over eleven hundred other women who signed a petition in the Gimli area. In Iceland women had recently won the privilege of property and voting rights and they wanted the same rights in their new country.

Outside of Winnipeg, the community of Gimli proved to be the area with the largest concentration of supporters for the Women’s Right-to-Vote movement. Kristjana was the President of the Gimli Suffrage Association. She worked closely

with Margrét Benedictsson, editor of *Freyja*, the only women’s suffrage newspaper in Canada. She spearheaded the gathering of multiple signatures in Gimli on petitions to present to the Manitoba Legislature. Together with many other women of Icelandic descent, they helped the Manitoba movement to become the first province in Canada to give most women the right to vote.

Kristjana came to Canada when she was six years old. She was the daughter of immigrant pioneers Sigurdur Erlendsson and Gudrun Eiriksdottir of Thingeyarsylsa, Iceland. The family settled in Hecla where she grew up and married Bergthor Thordarson. The couple moved to Gimli in 1908. Kristjana and Bergthor believed in the value of community service and participated in all aspects of Gimli life. Kristjana was both the sister and the wife of mayors of Gimli. Her brother Johannes Sigurdson was the first mayor of Gimli and husband Bergthor served in that position from 1916-1920. Kristjana was the first woman in Gimli to sit on the Gimli Public School Board. She was the hostess for many dignitaries visiting Gimli and her fish dinners were renowned and sought after.

Kristjana sold her baking in the confectionary corner of Hannes Kristjanson’s general store. Her granddaughter Stjana Stefanson fondly remembers stopping in on her way home from school to get a treat from her amma.

Kristjana instilled the importance of education and community service in her



children. Her son, Thordur Thordarson, (m. Gudrun Benson) known as “Doddi”, was a local fisherman. He was the town policeman from 1933-39 and caretaker of the skating rink for many years. They had two daughters, Kristjana and Lara. Kristjana’s daughter Runa stayed in Gimli (m. Magnus Arnason) and had four daughters, Bara, Eileen, Lara and Margaret and two sons, Kristjan and Stefan.

With the encouragement of their mother, two of her daughters went on to have professional careers, certainly not as common at that time as it is today. Daughter Lara B. Thordarson (m. Ingi Sigurdson) was a teacher in Gimli. She was active in many Icelandic organizations including the Icelandic Canadian Club as well as the Gimli Cemetery Association. She was proud to serve as Fjallkona in 1935 for the Icelandic Festival of Manitoba. Daughter Lilja (m. Arni Olafson) went into nurse’s training at the Winnipeg General Hospital and graduated in 1933. After completing her post graduate work in psychiatric nursing she worked for the Alcoholics Foundation of Manitoba at the Winnipeg Health Sciences Centre. She served as secretary for her alumni nursing year until her death. Lilja and Arni were active in the Icelandic Canadian Club and the First Lutheran Church of Winnipeg for many years. They had three boys, Brian and twins Douglas and Donald.

Kristjana’s family is very proud of her contribution to Manitoba history. They remember her fondly as a strong

woman who stood up for what she believed in and worked tirelessly to provide a better life for her children, her neighbours and the greater community. Her descendants have continued to honour her memory by naming their children after her. Kristjana’s name is still being passed on to her descendents, now into the fifth generation. Kristjana Thordarson lived a good life; surrounded by her family and well loved and respected until her death in 1955.



Kristjana with daughter Lilja

# Margaret Anna Bjornson; Famous Historian and Baroness

Margaret Ann Bjornson, historian, was born in Winnipeg 17 June 1915. She married Arthur Elton in 1948 (who succeeded in 1953 as the 10th Baronet Elton). He died in 1973. They had one son and two daughters. She died in London, 16 May 1995.

Many of Margaret Ann Elton's friends will remember her best in the library at Clevedon Court: a fire, a vodka, and orderly pyramids of books on the tables and every book bearing a marker and every pile in progress.

Here, after her husband Sir Arthur Elton's death in 1973, she continued their battle on behalf of the family home which had been restored and then given in 1960 by Sir Arthur to the National Trust in lieu of death duties. She strove unremittingly to ensure that Clevedon Court, a 14th-century manor house on the coast west of Bristol, might be further endowed and that all its varied contents, telling the story of a Bristol merchant family, might be retained after her death. And here also, surrounded by a superb local history library, and by archives, pamphlets, catalogues, prints and albums of cuttings, she wrote *Annals of the Elton Family*. Published last year, it is a dense and brilliant book, one of the finest of all British family histories.

Every visitor to Clevedon Court will remember the special warmth of her welcome, the slow and elegant gestures with which she replaced errant wisps of hair to a reluctant bun, her distinctive accent which bemused so many and, above

all, her bold and original intellect.

Margaret Ann Elton, a Canadian of Icelandic descent, was the daughter of Olafur Bjornson, Professor of Obstetrics at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg. In 1939 she was studying for a postgraduate degree in English literature at the university when she was asked to fetch John Grierson, the great pioneer of the documentary film movement, from the railway station. Shocked to find such an able girl working on Milton as the world was about to be overwhelmed by war, he employed her at the newly established Canadian National Film Board in Ottawa. After the war, Grierson sent her to England where she met Arthur Elton, himself a former protégée of Grierson and an outstanding documentary film-maker. They were married in 1948. In 1953 Sir Arthur inherited the baronetcy and the family estate.

Sir Arthur was also a collector of vision, gathering together a vast number of books and works of art concerning the Industrial Revolution in 19th century Britain. On his death in 1973, Lady Elton fought hard to keep this unique collection together and thanks to her efforts it eventually went in lieu of death duties, to the Ironbridge Gorge Museum. Its controversial valuation had become closely involved with Lady Elton's determination to see that more of the contents of Clevedon Court were secured for the National Trust, that the endowment was increased and that more of the surrounding land was preserved for



Clevedon Court

PHOTO COURTESY OF WIKIPEDIA

the people of Clevedon.

Beset by inventories, insurance problems, burglar alarms, repairs and such daily disasters as “filling in 20,000 holes in the garden (cattle in twice, each with four feet)”, she became an impatient expert in the complexities of inheritance tax. “I am, after Hugh Leggatt,” she noted, “the authority on how it does not work or is only made to work by persistent beavers like colonial me.” Her wry humour sustained her: “Inevitably,” she wrote in 1985, “it is I who have had to inform the National Trust that if I die in the same year as the Duke of Devonshire or the Earl of Bassetshire, Mother Thatcher’s ceiling of £3 million on ‘In Lieu of’ provisions will cut out my modest but time-consuming efforts to benefit the nation by dying.”

In Margaret Ann Elton’s book *Annals of the Elton Family*, we are soon reminded that the earliest Eltons to own the

Manor of Clevedon, acquired in 1709, “had obligations as well as rights”. She described herself as a steward of the house, its contents and its history. To the partnership with the National Trust – a delicate relationship that can bring such crucial vitality and continuity to its houses – she brought a rare commitment and understanding, and great generosity. To her book, researched and written over 10 years, she brought a passionate belief in the value of local and family history. Her book is as illuminating about 18th-century Bristol as it is about 19th-century Clevedon. She was, of course, especially qualified to write perceptively of Clevedon Court’s literary associations, from Coleridge, Lamb and John Clare to Arthur Hallam, Thackeray and Tennyson. But few family historians can have so deliberately acquired such an exceptional breadth of background knowledge – of

changing agricultural conditions, Bristol's trade, institutions and charities, the Poor Laws, ecclesiastical factions and fashions, Victorian drainage and sewage disposal and very much more.

The 19th-century Eltons were intimately involved with the development of Clevedon, its churches and schools, its pier, dispensary and hospital, exercising

planning control often more effectively than can local councils today. Margaret Ann Elton understood exactly how interdependent this relationship between town and family had been and she maintained it unquestioningly, utterly unconcerned that there had long since ceased to be any return, beyond the deep affection of so many local people.

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## Nellie Award Winner

Connie Magnusson Schimnowski was raised in Gimli, Manitoba, a third generation Icelander, whose grandparents landed on the shores of Lake Winnipeg from Iceland between 1876 and 1880. She is the daughter of Franklin Bergthor Magnusson and Ellen Gudrun Magnusson (nee Frederickson).

Her grandmother, Pálína Gottskálksdóttir, the eldest child of pioneers Gottskálf Sigfússon and his second wife Hólmfríður Jónatansdóttir, was born at Keflavík in the Grytubakki district. She emigrated with her parents at age six in 1876. They were part of the second wave of Icelanders, the large group that followed the first arrival of immigrants to New Iceland on the shores of Lake Winnipeg and they settled in Gimli initially. Raised to adulthood in her parents' homes in New Iceland and Dakota Territory, Pálína moved to Winnipeg as a young woman and married Pétur Magnússon who had recently emigrated from from Uppsálar on the Barðarströnd Coast of Western Iceland.

Their son Franklin married Ellen, the daughter of Páll T. and Elisa (Björnsdóttir) Frederickson who emigrated from Thingeyar district to settle near Baldur, Manitoba.

Connie's father, who after service in the Canadian Navy during WW I, returned home and eventually became a conductor with the Canadian Pacific Railway. He married Ellen Frederickson in 1940. Frank died of a heart attack in the spring of 1950.

Connie's mother, Ellen Gudrun Magnusson (Frederickson), grew up in the Baldur, Manitoba district. She received her teacher's training at Manitou, Manitoba and taught five years in Arnes South School District, from 1929 to 1934, then Huff School District, and Norris Lake. In 1936 Ellen was offered a position in the primary section of the Gimli Public School No. 1 where she taught until her marriage to Frank in 1940. After 10 years of marriage, five young children and Frank's death in 1950; Ellen returned to teach in the Evergreen School Division in



PHOTO COURTESY OF CONNIE MAGNUSSON SCHIMNOWSKI

**Connie Magnusson Schimowski, centre, displays her Nellie surrounded by her children Stefanie, husband Ingvar Karvelson, Jacquie, Stefan and John.**

1951. She was assistant Principal at the Gimli Elementary School 1963-67, was active in organizing teachers' conventions and was a member of the Language Curriculum Revision Committee of the Department of Education. In 1961 Ellen was given the honour of being chosen Fjallkona (representing the symbol of Mother Iceland) for that year's Icelandic Celebration, Íslendingadagurinn. Ellen died in the summer of 1985.

Connie attended the Gimli Public School and is a graduate of the Gimli High School. She married John Schimnowski from Winnipeg in 1966 and began their family. After 20 years of marriage, John died suddenly at the age of 41. While raising her children, Connie attended

the University of Manitoba attaining her Bachelor of Social Work degree and later her Master of Social Work. She was employed by the Middlechurch Personal Care Home as the Community Outreach Worker for Seniors in the East and West St. Paul Communities and later as the Home's Social Worker.

Connie's career eventually led to Palliative Care and she was hired as Palliative Care Support Coordinator of the South East Interlake District; working out of the Selkirk and District General Hospital. In 2005 together with the Regional Palliative Care Director, she developed the North East Palliative Care Program out of the Gimli Community Health Centre and became the first





Palliative Care Support Coordinator for the North East Interlake. She was chair of the Betel Home Palliative Care committee. She is a member of the original team that developed Camp Stepping Stones, the first camp in Manitoba for children ages seven to seventeen who have experienced the death of a significant person in their lives. This camp provides the opportunity for kids to experience a fun camp life while at the same time providing the opportunity to share their feelings with their peers; other children who have suffered a similar family loss. Connie was an active volunteer and leader in the Icelandic community in Gimli, chairing the Icelandic Festival of Manitoba (IFM), Íslendingadagurinn in 1996-97. Her service to the festival and to the Icelandic community led to her being given a lifetime membership and then honoured again by being chosen Fjallkona in 2012.

Connie has been the IFM representative on the Canada Iceland Foundation for many years. As of December 31, 2015 she has completed a three year term as the President of the Westshore Community Foundation. She is a member of the Community Advisory Committee, Cancer Care Manitoba, member of The Manitoba College of Social Workers, past member of LEAF (Legal Education Action Fund for women) and the Elizabeth Fry Society, recipient of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Medal and one of the recipients of the five "Most Beautiful Women Award" in 2012 offered by The Winnipeg Women Magazine for "courage, strength and perseverance". Recently Connie was very honoured to be one of the recipients of the Nellie McClung Award, named after the leader of the suffragette movement that successfully obtained voting rights for Manitoba women 100 years ago, January 28, 1916.



# Lianna McDonald

## Executive Director of the Canadian Centre for Child Protection

Lianna McDonald is the Executive Director of the Canadian Centre for Child Protection (Canadian Centre). The Canadian Centre is a national charity based in Winnipeg, Manitoba, dedicated to the personal safety of all children. The Centre began as Child Find Manitoba in April 1985 following the disappearance and murder of 13-year-old Candace Derksen. Candace's mother, Wilma, and a group of dedicated volunteers, created the organization to provide essential services that her family didn't have access to throughout and following Candace's disappearance.

"The opportunity to work with families and children who have experienced terrible tragedies has taught me so much over the years," said McDonald. "I view what I do every day as a privilege and chance to serve so many Canadians".

McDonald was born in Portage la Prairie in 1969. Her father, Bryan McDonald, was in the banking business in town at the time. The family moved to



Winnipeg shortly thereafter and McDonald and her two sisters, Wendy and Arleen, grew up and attended school in the River Heights neighborhood.

"Growing up in Winnipeg was fabulous. The people are generous and grounded and it is a wonderful place to raise a family and to have lifelong roots," remarked McDonald. "My childhood

memories are steeped in spending summers at the lake in Gimli. At Winnipeg Beach, we enjoyed playing for hours on end by the water and in the sand.”

McDonald completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science and her degree in Early Childhood Education at the University of Manitoba. In 1995, at the age of 25, she had her first and only child, Riel Madeline McDonald.

McDonald’s mother was Maureen McDonald (nee Freeman, 1947–2015), the daughter of Helgi Asmundsson Freeman, born in 1916. Helgi was one of seven children born to Asmundur Magnusson Freeman, born on October 7th 1877 at the farm in Ferstikla, Hvalfjörður Iceland and Gislina Sigurðardóttir Ingólfsson born on May 19th, 1889. Asmundur Magnusson Freeman was the son of Magnus Frimann Olafson who was born September 30th,

1851 on the farm Brekka in Skagafjörður, near the town of Varmahlö, Iceland. Asmundur’s mother was Helga Jónsdóttir who was born February, 23rd 1853 at the farm Ferstikla in Hvalfjörður, not far from the town of Akranes, Iceland.

Lianna McDonald’s langafi Asmundur (Asi) Magnusson Freeman’s parents immigrated to Canada in 1885 and settled in Lundar, Manitoba in 1887 where they were one of the first group of Icelandic settlers. The family soon relocated to the ‘Narrows Settlement’ where Asi grew into adulthood.

Asi was very industrious and started several businesses, including construction, lumber and fishing enterprises until he retired in Lundar in 1948. McDonald’s afi Helgi joined his father in running the family business until he moved to Gypsumville, Manitoba and opened “Freeman’s General Store” in 1959. Helgi later moved his family to Winnipeg.

Early on in her career, Lianna McDonald worked in child care. She was the Director of the Learning and Growing Day Care Centre. She joined Child Find Manitoba in 1998, as Executive Director, and as one of only two people employed at the time.

Since then, driven by her passion and leadership, the once small, grass-roots organization has grown into an agency that is leading the country in addressing issues related to missing and sexually exploited children. In 2006, the organization was renamed the *Canadian Centre for Child Protection* to better reflect its national focus of reducing child victimization and supporting Canadian families.

The Canadian Centre operates and offers a number of national programs and services to prevent child victimization and support Canadian families. One of the Centre’s primary programs is Cybertip.ca – Canada’s first and only national tipline to report the online sexual exploitation of


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children. Launched initially in 2002 as a pilot initiative in Manitoba, [Cybertip.ca](http://Cybertip.ca) has been an official part of Government of Canada's *National Strategy for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation on the Internet since 2004*. To date, the tipline has received close to 180,000 reports from Canadians regarding the online sexual abuse and exploitation of children – resulting in police arresting more than 500 individuals and identifying and removing more than 500 children from abusive environments.

True to its Child Find roots, the Centre has always offered support and assistance to the families of missing children, and in 2011 launched [MissingKids.ca](http://MissingKids.ca) to offer these services across Canada. This national missing children response and resource centre provides 24/7 support and leverages technology to help searching families across Canada find their missing children and has so far worked with more than 6,000 families, providing support and assisting in the location and return of their children.

The Centre has also created two national education programs. Through Kids in the Know, the Centre's nationally recognized personal safety educational program that empowers and teaches children how to keep themselves safe, 40 percent of Canadian school students have been reached. Another successful program, Commit to Kids, helps to prevent child sexual abuse from occurring in child-serving

organization. The Canadian Centre's staff have delivered training sessions across Canada reaching more than 17,000 child-serving organizations.

In 2014, alongside the Prime Minister of Canada, the Centre launched the Digital Agenda for Protecting Canada's Youngest and Most Vulnerable Children. The Centre continues to focus its work on addressing the issue of child sexual abuse and exploitation and making sure it remains a national priority, including by helping to identify children in child sexual abuse imagery and prevent the victimization of others.

As the Executive Director of the Canadian Centre, Lianna McDonald was presented the Queen's Golden Jubilee Medal in December 2002, for her ongoing commitment to the protection and well-being of Canadian children. In 2012, she was awarded the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Medal for her advocacy for the safety of children.

Today, McDonald and her 45 person team at the Canadian Centre, which including herself, currently employs four people of Icelandic descent work each day to reach countless Canadians and advocate for improved laws that help to address the technological world, that is impacting the protection of children. McDonald and the Centre as a whole are proud of its role as a catalyst for change and innovation as to tackle these growing problems.

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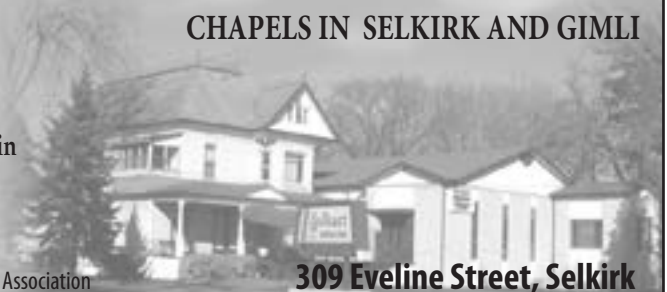
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# Nature's Patient Force or Shirleyarsaga: The Saga of Shirley McCreedy

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by Elin Thordarson

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There was a man named Erlendur who was the son of a farmer named Þórdur. Erlendur was a carpenter at the farm Kotá in Eyjafjörður. He had a wife named Signý Björg Erlendsdóttir from Gunnsteinsstaðir in Húnavatnssýsla.

Now the scene of the saga moves west to Winnipeg, Canada. Erlendur and Signý Björg sailed there with a large party of emigrants and there had two sons, Jóhann Friðrík and Vilhjálmur. Jóhann Friðrík Thordarson, known as 'Fred' had a wife Norma Thorbergsson of Winnipeg and together they had four children – Dorothy, Helga, Shirley and David. All four of their children enjoyed long lives and saw much of the fruits of their lineage and each had many adventures both joyful and sorrowful. But this saga follows Shirley, the third daughter of Fred and Norma Thordarson.

Above is what is known as the saga style, the classic laconic approach to story telling from the late pagan and the early Christian period in Icelandic history. In the saga style, whole generations appear and then disappear in the sweep of a sentence or two. It can gloss over the individual detail of a life, the hours of a day. All of it lingers in what is unexpressed. The saga style laconically shows the truth of life by allowing it to be seen hiding.

Time is long and fleeting all at once. Kinsmen die and cattle die after all. And I think my dear, late Auntie Shirley, who did so much for her community, her Icelandic-Canadian community in particular, would appreciate a saga style introduction to the telling of her life. But it is also something that I thought a lot about while wondering how to approach writing this article. How can one possibly paint a picture if how someone really was in life? How someone truly, truly was?

Shirley McCreedy (1922-2009) was born and lived her entire life in the city of Winnipeg. She married a great man, Russell McCreedy, and together they had three children. Shirley was a piano teacher by profession, teaching in her home studio for thirty years until her retirement in 1996. She was choir director for the New Iceland Choir of Winnipeg and the Saint Stephen's Church choir. There are several Icelandic-Canadian heritage groups that operate still today, Shirley belonged to them all, and held high positions in each. She was Vice Regent for the Jón Sigurðsson Chapter IODE, and coordinated the annual wreath laying ceremony at the foot of the Jón Sigurðsson statue on the Manitoba Legislative grounds to commemorate Iceland's Independence

Day on June 17. She was a member of the Icelandic Canadian Frón Executive, and board of the Manitoba Multiculturalism Resources Centre representing Icelandic culture. She was a board member for this self same magazine, then known as *The Icelandic Canadian*.

In 1992, Shirley received an Honorary Membership in the Icelandic National League and was a recipient of a Governor General's 125th Anniversary of Canada Medal.

All of this of course culminating in her appointment as Fjallkona in 1993, a high point of pride for Shirley and her entire family. But possibly her biggest gift to the Icelandic community in North America was her instrumental role in bringing the Winnipeg Falcons, Canada's first Olympic gold medal winning hockey team, a squad composed of Icelandic descendants, out of oblivion and to the forefront of Canadian hockey consciousness.

And this all reads so laconically as well. Impressive, yes. But it lacks so much of what is of importance. It lacks the laughter and the effort, the stumbles upon the way and bursts of inspiration. The difference between Shirley's saga and an Icelandic family saga being that there are people living today that remember Shirley McCreedy very well. This telling almost does a disservice to the strength of memory that many people, myself included,

have of her. Often, at various Iceland related events, I will be approached by people who remember Shirley so fondly that I can hear it in their throats and see it in their eyes as they fill with memories of the little women who worked almost tirelessly for the preservation of the Icelandic-Canadian community. I can only imagine what these memories entail and find myself dumbfounded by the sheer admiration for a woman that I have to admit I wish I had known better in life.

Shirley's obituary from 2009 which ran in the *Winnipeg Free Press* ends by calling her 'a force of nature.' My own recollection of my Great Aunt Shirley



PHOTO COURTESY OF ISLENDINGADAGURINN



could speak to nature's most persistent force, its patience.

As a child I took piano lessons from Shirley in her home. Every week I shuffled up the long driveway to the carport and the side door on Auntie Shirley and Uncle Russell's home in the St. James neighbourhood of Winnipeg. And every week I'd open the door to the final chords of the preceding lesson – knowing full well that I had made no time in the week to practice what she had assigned me and that this was going to be a very long half hour. But Auntie Shirley always patiently waded through the lesson to hear the pieces I had not looked at and had made no progress on; only to reassign them to

me for the following week. When I finally mastered a piece like the old standard *The Silver Skates*, she licked and placed a gold star in my piano book. I didn't last long as a piano student with her, or anyone else for that matter, but I will remember her patience with me – a child so embarrassed by her own laziness beside an even then old woman who worked hard every day of her life. I might have wrung my neck if I were my Auntie Shirley, and maybe she wanted to, and maybe she came close, but that's not the energy I felt sitting beside me on her piano bench week after week. A patient force allowing me to see into my flaws and not making any statement upon them. She must have known what I'd be missing out on by not cultivating a musical life and practicing *The Silver Skates* or *Hang Down Your Head* Tom Dooley, but that would be for me to reckon with.

I like to refer to what I call the Mount Olympus of Icelandic-Canadians. The more notable figures on the mountain will always be the poets, and the reverends, the politicians, and the undertaker. But Olympus is also filled with smaller figures, ones who worked every day to cultivate their heritage and preserve some part of it for future generations. This was my Auntie Shirley, a little old lady when I knew her, who worked tirelessly to hold onto her saga heritage.



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# Kristiana Magnusson Clark

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Source: The Icelandic Archives of BC

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**K**ristiana Magnusson Clark was born in Víðir, Manitoba, on February 8, 1918, one of sixteen children of Björn and Lára Sigvaldason.<sup>1</sup> She grew up in Arborg where she received her high-school education.



In 1937, Kristiana went to Winnipeg to enroll in the program for Elementary School Teachers at the Normal School. Upon graduation, she taught for four years in Framnes and Riverton. In 1941, she married Albert Magnusson<sup>2</sup> of Hnausa

where they owned and operated a General Store and Albert was involved in the fishing industry. Their two children, Lynne and Larry, attended school in Hnausa and Riverton before the family moved to British Columbia. Their daughter Lynne married Jean M. Taillefer and they have three children: Stéphane, Gilles, Paulette. Their son Larry married Nicole (née Bernard) and they have a son, Eric Björn Magnusson.

Albert and Kristiana became involved in community affairs in Hnausa. Albert served on the local School Board and the Lutheran Church Council while Kristiana served as President of the Hnausa Ladies Aid, and later, as President of the Hnausa Community Club. She was also a 4-H leader for ten years, training young members in public

speaking and demonstrations.

In 1966, Albert and Kristiana moved to Surrey, BC where they owned and operated a motel for six years. During these years, Albert became involved in house building and Kristiana served as Secretary of the BC Motel Association. In 1971, they joined the Icelandic Canadian Club of British Columbia. In 1972, they moved to White Rock, BC, semi-retired, but returned to Manitoba for three months every fall to attend to Albert's fish agency business. During these years, Kristiana joined Sólskin, the 1917 charitable women's organization in Vancouver and served as its President for many years. As a 'Ladies Auxiliary', they contributed to The Icelandic Care Home Höfn Society by providing countless hours of volunteer dedication to the senior residents. In White Rock, Kristiana was also a volunteer at the White Rock Museum and at a centre for people with special needs. They both enjoyed travelling during their retirement years, as well as curling, cross-country skiing, hiking and lawn bowling. In 1992, Albert, Kristiana's beloved husband of fifty-one years, passed away.

Kristiana was a member of the White Rock/South Surrey Writer's Club serving at times as Secretary, Treasurer and Club Historian. She has had numerous articles, stories and poetry published in various magazines and periodicals, and most memorable are her contributions to this magazine, formerly known as *The Icelandic Canadian*. Some of her works were compiled in her own book *Winds of Spring* which was published in 1996. She has received poetry and short story awards several times at The Icelandic Festival Poetry and Short Story Contest.

She has written family historical books on the Magnusson family entitled, *So Well Remembered*, and on the Sigvaldason family, *Roots That Bind*, as well as a family history, *Searching For Freedom*, as narrated by a brother-in-law, Richard Rothe. She co-edited the book, *Sólskin Memoirs*, during their 75th Anniversary year in 1992.

Kristiana and several Sólskin members took over the task of sorting and cataloguing a large collection of books in Icelandic by Icelandic authors. This large collection of books was known as the Icelandic Heritage Library located at Iceland House in New Westminster, BC which was owned by The Icelandic Canadian Club of BC until the house was sold. Kristiana became a member of "Toastmasters" where she received her ATM, Advanced Toastmaster, in public speaking. In 1993, she was presented with a Life Membership in The Icelandic National League of North America, and in 1994, a Life Membership in The Icelandic Canadian Club of BC.

In October 1995, Kristiana married Alder Clark of White Rock. Alder was born and brought up in Prince Edward Island of United Empire Loyalist background. Kristiana wrote Alder's memoirs in the book entitled, *Horizons West*. For another ten years, she devoted her time and talents to the Icelandic community and then 'retired'. In 2008, a new Assisted Living residence in Vancouver, Höfn Icelandic Harbour, was completed. A large display case features a mannequin adorned in Kristiana's generous gift – upphlutur – her Icelandic costume. It is complete with the precious gold filigree jewellery and will always keep her in our memory. She is now 98.

1 See Sigvaldason family information in "Roots That Bind" by Kristiana Magnusson

2 See Magnusson family history in "So Well Remembered" by Kristiana Magnusson

# The Johnson Twins: Fjiola and Olavia

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by Sonja Lundstrom

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On a warm August day in 1915 in a modest home on Beaver Dam Lake, Manitoba, the world was brought alive by the birth of The Twins; first Fjiola Josephina and then Olavia Pearl. Born half an hour apart, their proud parents, Margaret and Adalsteinn Johnson and ten month old sister Thelma welcomed them. Adalsteinn had come from Husavik, Iceland at the tender age of eight and Margaret (nee Helgason), also of Icelandic descent, had been born in Cypress River, Manitoba. No one could ever have imagined what their more-than 93 years of life would bring.

Life for the Johnsons was filled with love and hard work and the family soon grew to 13 children. With the twins, six were under the age of four. The Johnson children were always with their parents; milking cows, feeding chickens, carding or spinning wool, spending time in the garden or hayfield or tending the household.

Births were challenging but Adalsteinn always managed to find a midwife to be present at each birth. Once he rode frantically for many miles to get help in time.

Their farm was in a low-lying area and subject to flooding so the haying had to be done farther afield. As the family grew, it became more and more difficult to be separated during haying and finally one spring they decided to move to higher ground at Lonely Lake. Margaret drove

one team of horses with a wooden box on the back where the children rode and Adalsteinn took another team with all of their cattle and chickens. They had to pass through flooded areas where the boxes sometimes floated above the wagons as the horses pulled their loads through to higher ground. Once they arrived, Adalsteinn built a log house on their new homestead closer to the hay fields.

Helping one another was how they lived. Once a child was three, they knew where to go to get a dry diaper and the older ones would help them change the baby. By the time she was five, Olavia's baby was brother Helgi. During her early life she looked after him and eventually he grew to look after her. All the children learned to milk cows and to be part of every chore on the farm at an early age. Working in the hayfield in the summer was something they all looked forward to and even later in life they would leave wherever they were to return each summer. The twins both learned to cook. Once when Olavia applied for a job cooking, her prospective employers asked her if she needed a recipe. She replied that she could make bread and pies without a recipe and she got the job. Sewing was Fjiola's passion and she made new outfits for everyone in the family, both at Christmas and for the annual summer picnics.

Adalsteinn was their first teacher. He taught them math, then reading and

writing – all in Icelandic – until the area school superintendent told them they couldn't home school anymore and had to go to public school. This was difficult and forced the family to exchange homes with another family to be nearer to the school. Because the twins were identical, they took turns going to school, and they both passed their grades with straight A's! School ended abruptly one year when one of their teachers was put in jail for forging cheques, yet they still managed to get their Grade Eight certificates.

Their Grade Eight education launched them into the working world. Olavia started working for the Molgat family and at Eyjolfson's fish camp and Fjiola worked as a domestic for another

family. Fjiola, however, had met her dream man in Marsi Erlendson and soon became the proud mother of Steini, followed by Christopher, Sylvia and then Valerie. They lived on a ranch until Marsi purchased a hotel in St. Laurent and later the Alhambra Hotel in Gladstone. Her warm, hospitable Icelandic heart welcomed everyone so people came from far and wide to see Fjiola, who became the first female bartender in Manitoba. Brothers and sisters soon joined her and her entrepreneurial spirit soared. Everyone wanted to be part of life at the Alhambra Hotel. Fjiola also really knew how to manage rowdy behavior in the pub: she just turned out all the lights, and all rowdiness disappeared!

Olavia moved to Winnipeg, first working for the Wortzman family, then she worked at Stock Yards restaurant during the war. This was an exciting time for her. She never missed a dance, yet she would still get up to make bread and pies for the restaurant the next morning. When she learned about the gold rush at Red Lake, Ontario, she seized an opportunity apply to cook there. She traveled by taxi to Lac du Bonnet, and then flew by floatplane to Red Lake. Imagine her surprise when they told her they thought she was Oliver – a man, according to her application over the telex – and that she would have to leave, because she would also be required to “sling beer in the hotel.”

However, Olavia stood her ground and said she wasn't leaving until she got her first week's pay, to compensate her for the taxi and airfare that had brought her there. However, after her first two days production of homemade bread, cinnamon buns and pies, she was hired full time. Olavia's passions embraced living: working, dancing, skiing, skating and having fun in the wilderness of northwestern Ontario. She loved the



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people in Red Lake and she was able to send twice the amount of money she'd sent home previously to her brothers and sisters at home.

Rickard, a handsome Swede she'd met at Eyjolfson's fishing camp on Lake Manitoba several years before had been working in the Northwest Territories on the boats and mines. When he found Olavia was at a gold mine in Red Lake, he was soon up there too. They married in June that year and soon welcomed Sonja and then Chrissie and ten years later, Linda into their world.

There are many stories to tell about these two strong and very authentic Icelandic women. Fjiola's daughter Sylvia was born in November, during a raging snowstorm. Marsi and a neighbour rushed Fjiola in an old Model T to be with Grandma. They arrived in the middle of the night, with Marsi and the neighbour running inside to start a fire and boil instruments. When they returned to the car to take Fjiola inside, Sylvia was already born and wrapped up in Fjiola's coat. She had managed to take care of the baby's birth all by herself.

At one point, Fjiola decided she wanted to connect with her relatives in Iceland and invite them for a visit. When they arrived, they spoke to both Olavia and Fjiola in Icelandic. Suddenly, a language that had been dormant for so many years came alive, and they found themselves both speaking the Icelandic



PHOTO: JOHN RICHTHAMMER

### The twins on their 90th birthday

they had once learned as children. This inspired several trips to Iceland and a blossoming connection to their extended Icelandic family. Whenever people came from Iceland, Olavia asked to go to their hotel (or concert, or elsewhere) to speak Icelandic and meet with them. On cold winter days, she would entertain herself by calling the phone operator in Reykjavik and pretending she was looking for someone, just for the sheer joy of speaking Icelandic. They always told her what fine Icelandic she spoke. She beamed when she shared this fact with her family. Their emotion and pride in being of Icelandic descent was strong, and they shared this fact with everyone they met.

Fjiola became a widow after years of caring lovingly for Marsi, and this inspired several Icelandic male friends to seek her hand. Her response was to get them all together and tell them she wanted a new house, a car, a trip to Iceland

and a horse. Walter offered her all that plus he included a new saddle for the horse. She married Walter but since all her gentleman suitors knew one another and were good friends, she decided they would all go to Iceland together, and so they did.

At the twins' 80th birthday party in 1995, everyone from far and wide was invited to Fjola's Guest House at the Lake Manitoba Narrows. Fjola had invited a band from Winnipeg and was pouring her own concrete dance floor the day before the event. With Walter's help, they got the dance floor done and everyone danced all the next day on it. She ran a popular Bed and Breakfast for hunters at the Narrows for years. The fridge always had cold beer for travelling guests, her garden was productive and her bar full. Her industrial sewing machine was part of the furniture and on it she made men's leather hats and fur-lined mitts that became very much sought after. Once she helped some folks out by selling them some fish she had in her freezer, only to be summoned to court in Ashern. Fjola went to court, all dressed up, with her walker and her radiating smile. The judge read the conviction and fined her then immediately adjourned the court and came down to chat with her. By the time she left, she had sold

him some fine handmade leather mitts and a hat she had made, which earned her enough money to pay the fine. After that, the judge came frequently to visit her at her B & B.

Olavia's life of adventure in the gold mines brought her, among other things, the winning trophy of the Power Puff Snowmobile Derby at Snow Lake Manitoba. She slept in a tent on the frozen lake some hundred miles north of Red Lake with the wolves surrounding them while Rickard was ice fishing. They lived in mining camps throughout northern Manitoba and Ontario, where Olavia wrote stories (to be best sellers), read coffee cups and created magic in the camp kitchens. An entrepreneur like her sister, Olavia created and sold lovers' mitts, wolverine bikinis and fashion gowns for the many mining events and she was the first to serve wine at the Fabric Centre Fashion Shows in Cochenour, Ontario.

Olavia could do anything – paddle a canoe, dig out an entire basement for a house, drive a boat, a snowmobile, ski, fish like a champion, dance all night, help build a log house and teach Sunday School and she always had her little red suitcase with home remedies for anything that ailed you. Olavia was perhaps best known for her coffee cup readings.

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People she'd never met mailed cups to her, yet in the readings she was extremely accurate and predicted many events that later happened. It was her way of getting to meet and know people and she thrived on learning their personal stories.

Both twins had loving, caring and generous hearts that radiated out to everyone they met. Their love of family, children, grandchildren and animals was deep and heartfelt. Once they spoke to some horses in Icelandic, and because of their tender approach, the Icelandic owner of the horses moved them to the front of the line for a ride through the Spruce Woods desert.

When Olavia was in the nursing home, there was another lady there who was calling out. Olavia decided to be with her regularly. With her warm, loving hands, she calmed the lady who was frightened and reassured her that she would be there for her. The lady stopped calling out and she became friends with the entire family.

Late in life, Olavia was in the hospital and not able to see. While she was listening to music on TV one evening, she met a gentleman who later came to sing to her each evening, and then sang at her funeral.

The twins loved fashion, always dressed alike and with the same hairstyle. They talked to one another daily when they could or at least weekly. They loved hats and could be seen dancing at seniors' dances with fancy matching outfits and big white hats. They enjoyed traveling and together they went to Iceland. They went to every family wedding, even once to England, and each time wore creative designs they had made themselves or had gotten from daughter Linda, who grew up to be a fashion designer. People loved them instantly and wanted to be with them wherever they were. Olavia's

last months were spent in coffee shops or at street parties on Corydon Avenue in Winnipeg while she lived in the nursing home. Fjiola lived out her days in Gendreau Nursing home, where her old friends were, where they enjoyed cups of coffee together and she sang the old Icelandic songs.

The twins got together for every birthday, and the whole family got to celebrate with them in a variety of places: Fjiola's Narrows B & B, Bru Church near Baldur, Eddystone Hall, where all the family would come and create plays, sing songs, and dance. The last was their 93rd birthday in Winnipeg in 2008. All the sisters came together to take part in what would be their last celebration.

The legacy of "the twins" will live on with us forever – their complete and unconditional love, their warm hospitality, their comforting food and generous ways, their pride in their Icelandic heritage, their resourcefulness and resiliency in life, and their strong faith that could turn any challenge into a spirited adventure and opportunity. They believed they could do anything, and so they did. And they taught that to us, their children. It seems the world woke up the day they were born and has been fully alive ever since – and so we were all blessed.

*Rev. Stefan Jonasson*

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# Revealing a Gifted Soul in Search of Home

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by Debbie Patterson

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When I ask Erika what she's working on she groans.

Nine years ago she set out to make *Heimprá*; a film about her mother's fascination with her ancestors.

For an artist like Erika, who is continually questioning her practice, there are never any easy answers, simple stories or straightforward projects.

At the beginning of her development as an artist, Erika wanted to be a sculptor and applied to art school with that intention. But while studying at Emily Carr College of Art and Design, she discovered film and video art which significantly shifted her focus. She says her current practices have evolved organically from that discovery.

Even simply identifying herself as an artist is something Erika continually questions, always asking whether or not this is what she was put on this earth to do. She describes her work as an artist as a process of digging, unearthing deeper and deeper layers of truth, or of the self. And with each new discovery comes the realization that there is yet another layer underneath it. She's always assessing the work she's done, what she's learned, and how to do it better.

Erika's film and video work falls into two basic categories. First, she creates her own pieces about family or the places near to her heart. These projects she works on slowly and methodically, discovering how the story needs to be told through a very fluid and open process of making the work.

Her recent film from 2013, *May We Grow*, co-produced by MTS Stories From Home, was a study of a doomed elm tree outside her front window. In it we see her daughter Eva fearlessly swinging from ropes high up in the canopy while Erika's father Lorne MacPherson reads in a lawn chair at the base of the tree. In an early video from 1993 "Grandma Smokes for Jesus's Love" Erika plays with the stories of her grandma, intertwined with letter correspondence, myth and song to create an alternate identity for both grandmother and grand daughter. "The stories were true; my life was a lie."

In 2007, just before embarking on *Heimprá*, Erika shot "You Are Here/We Are There" along the shores of Jökulsá á Brú, the largest glacial river in eastern Iceland. The video gives us a final fleeting glimpse of the valley just prior to it being submerged under 57 square kilometres of water. The reservoir was created for the purpose of providing hydroelectric energy to a nearby Alcoa aluminium smelter. Images of the sublime Icelandic wilderness fill the viewer with a powerful sense of place and lingering questions of responsibility.

The second aspect of Erika's film and video work involves facilitating storytelling for other people who want to make the world a better place. This community engaged work evolved quite naturally from within her artistic practice. By pursuing her own personal projects, she



PHOTO: WILLIAM EAKIN



developed skills as an editor and camera operator, which made her a very popular collaborator for other filmmakers and video artists. That naturally led to her working with others – community groups or activists – to document their work. This in turn led her to creating documentaries with such groups.

Because of her own passion for social justice, Erika is very clear with herself about what projects she wants to work on. She's done work with Indigenous communities on projects around land rights, welfare, or heavy industry and land use. She's worked with sex trade workers and inner-city youth. She did a film with the disabled community which she says completely changed the way she sees people in the world.

Most recently she was hired by the National Film Board to co-write, co-direct and edit a film in collaboration with

poet Kate Vermette. The film, "this river" explores what happens to people when their loved ones go missing. It specifically looks at the disregard that the Indigenous community experiences in relation to their missing loved ones. They worked with Drag the Red, a volunteer-based group of people who are searching for clues of missing people by dragging the bottom of the Red River. Erika describes it as a very powerful piece to work on.

All of these projects within the community have given Erika an opportunity to learn more deeply the work that she considers to be her main focus at the moment: her yoga teacher training.

Erika doesn't use her yoga practice as a means to become more athletic. On the contrary she uses this physical practice to develop deeper, more fundamental skills. She talks about the four doorways of loving kindness, empathic joy, compassion

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and equanimity as techniques that can free us up to be our authentic selves in the world. Although these are simple ideas they are very difficult to do, requiring awareness and discipline to integrate them into our daily lives. Through these ancient techniques and repeatable actions we can, in Erika's words "lift ourselves up out of the mire of the drama of our everyday lives." Although Erika has been practising yoga for 24 years, the decision to embark on training herself to teach yoga has been a very recent development.

And just as her film projects in the community give her the chance to walk through these door ways and practice these ancient techniques, her yoga practice helps Erika to re-evaluate her work as a filmmaker. In this way her work, both in yoga and film, is a sort of laboratory for how to be a human in the world, how to be at home here.

Which brings us back to *Heimþrá*.

Erika's mother, Lillian Vilborg, was fascinated by a pair of parallel stories from her family lore. In 1910, when Lillian's grandmother, Helga Arnadottir Dalman, was just seventeen years old she made an arduous trek from Semens, SK to Lundar, MB in the Interlake region in order to return home to her birth mother. What Helga didn't know was that decades earlier her own mother, Emma Dalman, made a similar trek in Iceland at age sixteen from the Öxnadalur Valley in North Iceland to the farm Brú, in the east. Both girls had been sent to live with foster families in early childhood, both needed to reconnect with "home".

The first part of Erika's process was to embark upon a similar trek, in the Manitoba Interlake, but despite the benefit of gortex and satellite communications – modern conveniences unknown to either Helga or Emma – Erika was unable to complete her journey as planned. After two thwarted

attempts to recreate the trek, she decided she needed to find another way to pursue the project.

In a way, the creation of the film itself has become Erika's iteration of the long and arduous journey: a trek to connect with her mother and find "home". She wants the film to be a tribute to her mother, but she also wants to be brutally honest and avoid romanticizing her mother's fascination with these women.

And while the film is about Lillian, it's not about Lillian at all. By embarking on a film about the immigration of her Icelandic ancestors, Erika has come face-to-face with examining her own role in community in regards to settler heritage and her complicity in colonialism. The intergenerational trauma that Lillian was exploring in her obsession with this story is reflected starkly in the intergenerational trauma faced by Indigenous groups Erika works with.

"I find myself directly complicit in the reality of their lives by the intersecting trajectories of our own histories."

By trying to make a film about going home, Erika finds herself grappling with the very notion of home and what it means to claim that space on stolen land.

"It's really important to sit in these uncomfortable feelings and not squirm away into some kind of entitled pleasure. My work right now is trying to understand what complicity means and how to live with that."

This steadfast commitment to ethical practices, this willingness to explore from within the uncomfortable unknown as well as this focused dedication to mindfulness and discipline are what make Erika a significant artist in our community.

When I ask if she has advice for young artists, she is unequivocal.

She replied, "Don't ever make a film about your mother."

# Heather Alda Ireland

## O.F., B.A., A.R.C.T., L.M.M.

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by Bill Ireland

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PHOTO COURTESY OF HEATHER ALDA IRELAND ©

**H**eather Alda Ireland is the Honorary Consul General of Iceland for British Columbia and the Yukon.

Heather was born in Winnipeg, the daughter of Johannes Sigurdson and Bergljot Guttormsson and the granddaughter of Sigfús Sigurdsson and Sigurlaug Kristjánsdóttir and of Guttormur J. Guttormsson and Jensína Danielsdóttir. She was educated in Winnipeg schools and earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Manitoba (United College). When she was crowned Miss Manitoba, her afi, the esteemed poet, was heard to say: “Now I

am the grandfather of Manitoba!”

As a tribute to her afi and to acquaint English speaking Canadians with his writing, Heather published *Áróra*, (*Aurora*), a collection of his poetry in both the original Icelandic and in English translation. More recently, she was involved in the publication of the first translation of Guttormur J. Guttormsson’s *Tíu Leikret* (*Ten Plays*) by the University of Manitoba’s Department of Icelandic. Heather wrote the Foreword for that publication.

Music has been Heather’s passion throughout her adult life. She is an Associate of the Royal College of Music in Toronto (A.R.C.T) and a Licentiate in Music granted by the University of Manitoba (L.M.M.). She won the Gold Medal for highest standing. Prior to starting her family, she taught music and English in a Winnipeg high school and was the school librarian.

In her undergraduate days, Heather starred in a weekly musical show on CBC television and sang roles in university musicals and summer stage productions. Upon moving to Vancouver, she sang vocal recitals and was the featured soloist with orchestras and choirs. She was a founding member of the Vancouver Chamber Choir and a chorister in many productions of the Vancouver Opera Company.

Heather’s lifelong pride in her

Icelandic heritage has been expressed through her music. Her Canadian recital programmes have often included Icelandic repertoire and she has given both live and radio recitals in Reykjavik. *Morganblaðið's* enthusiastic article, following one of her concerts, was headlined: *Heiður Hin Bjarta* (*Bright Heather*). When she released a recording of Icelandic songs, it was titled *Komin Heim* (*Coming Home*) and indeed

she continues to be a frequent visitor to the Fatherland. For her service to Iceland as Honorary Consul General and her promotion of Icelandic culture, President Olafur Ragnar Grímsson presented her with the Order of the Falcon.

Heather lives in Vancouver with her husband William. She has three children, David, Signy and Erik, and four grandchildren.

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## The Double Life of my Icelandic Grandmother

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by Elaine Breault Hammond

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Was my Grandmother Bertha Johnson or Bjorg Sigurjonsdottir? Grandma always told the same story to her family of five children (she had given birth to six but one died in infancy) as they grew up in Baldur, Manitoba. She told them her birth-name was Bertha Johnson; that she had been born in Brandon, Manitoba to Canadian-Icelandic parents. Her father, a fisherman, had died while fishing on a big lake. It was left to their imagination to figure out what lake it could have been. Without a man bringing in regular money she and her mother were very poor. A man offered to marry her mother, but he wouldn't take her child. So, Bertha was sent away to do housework at the tender age of 12. Thus after a few years working in the

Grund area she came to the Baldur District where she met and married an Englishman, John Harmer, in 1911.

Bertha's children knew that their father was a home child, an orphan who lived in a home in England and was sent to Canada at the age of nine to work on a farm. He, John Harmer had never tried to hide his humble beginnings. But Bertha had become a snob. John was an Englishman, full stop. She considered the English the top of the social heap. In fact, as the family later found out, she had changed her Icelandic given name of Bjorg to Bertha which she thought to be a superior English name. And she never forgave her oldest daughter, Anna, for marrying a farmer.

The children believed her story as they



believed their mother's name was Bertha; they had no reason not to. But an incident after the Second World War made my mother, Anna, the oldest of Bertha's five living children, suspicious. Anna was a grown woman now with children of her own.

Two women came to the door of Bertha's home, in Winnipeg one time asking for Bertha, claiming to be her sisters. Bertha's son, my Uncle Bob, home from serving as a Spitfire pilot in the RCAF answered the door. He was excited since he had always hoped for relatives so he ran to get his mother. As Uncle Bob later told his sister Anna, Bertha seemed upset and sent the women packing. Anna didn't tell anyone of her suspicions.

Years later when Bertha was dead and when Anna was elderly and living alone as a widow in the small village of Baldur, the phone rang. She almost didn't answer it thinking it was probably another marketer calling. But when she lifted the receiver a woman's voice said momentarily: "My name is Grace

Murray and I think you are my cousin".

Grace made the call after reading about Bertha, Mrs. John Harmer, in the Baldur History Book (*Come into our Heritage: Rural Municipality of Argyle 1882-1982*) in a local doctor's office waiting room. Her mother had told her the name of her mother's half-sister was Mrs. John Harmer who lived at that time in Baldur. Also her daughter, Anna, also lived in Baldur. Grace lived in Wawanesa, Manitoba which is quite close to Baldur. And so it was that Cousin Grace came into our lives. Grace told Anna that her grandmother and Bertha's mother Gudrun was the same woman. Gudrun and the second man in her life, Asmundur Gudjonsson, raised a large family. Bertha had lots of half-siblings, one of whom became Grace's mother. Gudrun lived with Grace's parents at Sandy Hook, Manitoba until her death in 1925, before Grace was born in 1930. After the phone call Grace came to my mother's home and based on what her mother had told her, had a very different story of Bertha's origins than the one Bertha/Bjorg had always told.

Bertha was born in 1891 in Iceland to Gudrun Johannsdottir and Sigurjon Hallgrimsson of Medalheimur in Hunavatnssyla. She was named Bjorg. Anna had guessed her mother was more Icelandic than she pretended since after years of speaking flawless English with no accent, when she was old Grandma got dementia and spoke only Icelandic.

In 1898 Bjorg immigrated to Winnipeg with her mother, aunt and cousin. She had a brother Hannes who stayed in Iceland with his father. Obviously Sigurjon had allowed Bjorg to leave but not his son. Bertha/Bjorg must have felt hurt in spite of her excitement at emigrating. She must have felt that her father was anxious to get rid of her. It was to be her first rejection.

Things weren't as rosy in the new country as the immigration agents had promised.



First Bertha/Bjorg and her mother met a lot of discrimination for Bertha/ Bjorg's parents, Gudrun and Sigurjon, had never married. That was okay in Iceland but not in the Canada of that time. Second, they were so poor that the mother and daughter lived behind a Chinese laundry the first winter (they had never imagined the Canadian winter would be so cold) where they almost froze and starved.

When Asmundur Gudjonsson proposed marriage to her mother Gudrun she jumped at the chance to be cared for but Asmundur refused to look after her little girl, Bjorg. The child was sent away to do housework in Grund for a few years, then in the Baldur area. She must have felt an even greater rejection this time because her mother, who she relied on and presumably loved, had sent her away. So, this part of the original story was true but the part about her father being a Manitoba fisherman was entirely fictional - a result of Bertha/Bjorg wanting a respectable home life according to the mores of the time.

When Bertha/Bjorg did housework at Grund and Baldur, she lived with and worked for several Canadian-Icelandic families, the most prominent of which was the Rev Fridrick Hallgrimson family in Baldur. He was born in Reykjavik and was the son of a bishop. He was a pastor first in Iceland then (after 1903) in Baldur where he served the Lutheran Church until 1925. Then the Reverend's family returned to Iceland. After Rev Fridrik left Baldur, Bertha/Bjorg got a job as dining-room serving girl in the Baldur Hotel. This must be where she perfected her English. Then she met and married John Harmer.

We mustn't be too judgmental of what was done to little Bertha/Bjorg since those were hard times and few of us would know what we would do under similarly bleak circumstances. Her hurts explain why my grandma was such a bitter woman. She



**Bertha's monther Gudrun and  
Asmundur Gudjonsson**

was particularly cruel to her oldest child, my mother Anna, the only child given an Icelandic name. For Anna was conceived out of wedlock. Bertha/Bjorg blamed the child and could never forgive this even though John, ever honourable, married her before Anna's birth.

Unlike my Icelandic grandmother, I am proud of my Icelandic heritage. I am proud of my great-grandmother Gudrun who had the courage to apply for (and get) a homestead in 1900 at Sinclair which she and Bjorg lived on for a time. But the land was poor so Gudrun eventually sold it. And I am proud of my grandma, in spite of her being so messed up psychologically. She was proud of her five smart children and she loved her grandchildren and was kind to them - no mean feat when she had felt rejected all her life. She could not control the sad circumstances of her life so she made up a story of her origins. She could have done something far worse.

# POETRY

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## Mother

By Jonina Kirton

how you echo through my life  
each day that you are gone the sound of your voice fades a little more  
the feel of your cheek on my cheek so long ago  
yet lately time is on speed hurling me towards you  
but I put the brakes on take multivitamins  
daily walks to ward off our heavenly reunion  
I don't want my son to be motherless  
without you I wandered in and out weaving a life  
but like my knitting there were holes I could not fix  
so each night I unraveled it all tried to start over  
without you there are holes  
I cannot fix without you I am a motherless adult  
child of Lorraine Emily Denham granddaughter of Jónína Bauson  
your mother and I share a name but she had 17 children  
I had one but wanted two remember, Momma, how you came to me  
in my dreams how you sat on the chair by my bed to comfort me  
when I lost my girl a daughterless mother a motherless daughter  
I have no reflection yet there are echoes of you everywhere  
in picture frames you smile still inside I long to see you  
I walk a tightrope between you and the fate that awaits me  
I walk a tightrope between you and my son  
between you and my disappearing daughter  
and then my son smiles holds up his tomato plant and I see you  
shining in his eyes you offer so many clues  
that you are not gone you still echo throughout my life.

From the book *Page as Bone Ink as Blood* with permission from Talon Books

# Contributors

**LINDA F. SIGURDSON COLLETTE** Linda F. Sigurdson Collette is the daughter of the late Jóhann S. Sigurdson and Helga G. J. Sigurdson of Lúndar, MB. Both life-long contributors and supporters of the Icelandic community and heritage. Helga, Fjallkona 1988, and Linda, Fjallkona 2015, shared these honours together. Linda has initiated and organized many projects in various groups. She founded Lestrarfélagið Gleym-mér-ei, now ending its 20th year, an affiliate of the INL. She is also a founding member of Fara Heim, the Foundation searching for the early Nordic / Icelandic presence in North America.

**ANNA BIRGIS** Anna Birgis, wife of Ambassador Hjálmar W. Hannesson, Consul General of Iceland in Winnipeg, MB. She was chair and co-founder of the UN Women for Peace (WFP), launched March 11, 2008. She has studied languages such as German in Bonn, Mandarin in Beijing and Swedish in Stockholm. Anna is a proud mother and Amma.

**JONINA KIRTON**, of Metis and Icelandic descent has lived in Winnipeg and BC. Currently she is working on advocating for the lost and murdered indigenous women.

**BILL IRELAND** is a retired lawyer living in Vancouver. After graduating in Arts and Law from the University of Manitoba he practised for several years in Winnipeg and many more in Vancouver.

**ELAINE BREAUT HAMMOND** has lived in PEI for almost 20 years. She has written children's books most recently *Sky Pony in Iceland*.

**SONJA LUNDSTROM** is the daughter of Olive, retired nurse and amma. She is active in the Scandinavian Centre in Winnipeg, her Church and feeding the homeless. She loves life, enjoys water colors, being out on her skis in the winter and biking and canoeing in the summer.

**KATHERINE OLAFSON** grew up in Gimli, Manitoba. She worked at the University of Manitoba in the Faculty of Education and Department of Sociology. She retired in 2002 and moved back to Gimli. She spends her time writing and volunteering. She has just published her first book, *Just Scratch the Surface*.

**ALLISON L. MCKINNON** is a Ph.D in the Department of Sociology at the University of Alberta and an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Health Sciences at a McMaster University. She hails from Lúndar, Manitoba.

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**ELVA SIMUNDSSON** is a member of the Icelandic Connection board of editors and a regular contributor to the journal. She is retired and lives in Gimli, MB.

**ELIN THORDARSON**, an Icelandic Connection board member, is currently working in the Winnipeg libraries. She is a graduate (October 2011) of the University of Manitoba's Icelandic Department's Masters program. Her thesis *A History of the Unconsoled: The Plays of Guttormur J. Guttormsson* is the first graduate level piece to be written on The Poet of New Iceland's works.






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## The Back Page

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