

HISTORY OF EDUCATION IN ICELAND

BY
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A Glacial River of Iceland

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Preface

Previously to the present change in international affairs the island of Iceland was merely a tiny spot on the world map, of little importance; economically, strategically, or otherwise.

On the big stage of history, where the scene is constantly changing and dramatic events occur in rapid succession, the unexpected had happened: This "insignificant" island had become an important strategic point in the allied line of defence. Iceland had come to the fore almost overnight. It had come out of obscurity to appear in the front-page news of our newspapers.

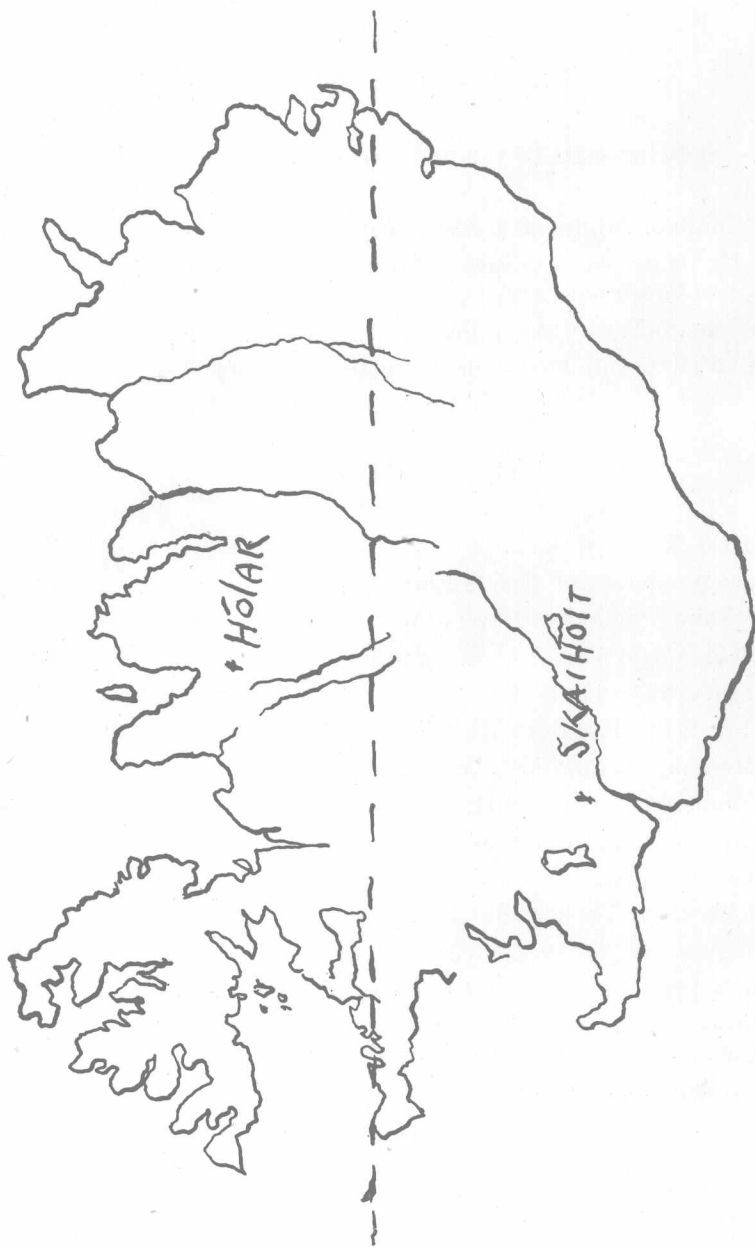
Webster's dictionary informs us that the island of Iceland lies in the north Atlantic Ocean and belongs properly to the Western Hemisphere. Says Webster: "The great importance of Iceland as a country lies in the old Norse stock here displayed in its purest and best development. The language and spirit of the race are expressed in an interesting literature. At the time when America was unknown, poets and story-tellers and historians flourished in Iceland. Poems and that peculiar form of epic called the Saga abounded before there was any extensive English literature."

Frankly, I had never paid much attention to this far-away country. America was enough for me. Then came this drastic change; sudden and unexpected. I found myself on the way to this outpost of defence—and civilization—to this old Saga-Island, with its peculiar name of Ice-land. To see this volcanic island, covered with ice and snow, rise out of the ocean one nasty cold winter morning was really an imposing, but not very inspiring sight. One is tempted to agree with the old Viking, Hrafnafloki, who gave the country its chilly name. The cold wind blowing from the north which seems to penetrate right through the marrow and have a hypotensive effect upon one's mental functions, makes one wonder what could tempt human beings to inhabit such a rocky island where infernal fires are burning underneath a cap of ice. However, when one steps ashore in Reykjavik, the capitol of Iceland, a surprise is in store.

As the chilly feeling, caused by the raw north wind and by the first impression of the country from a distance, begins to wear off, one realizes that the air is not as cold as expected. The mental outlook becomes more cheerful. Here, in the middle of the winter, close to the Arctic Circle, one would naturally expect

an Arctic storm howling or a blizzard blowing. But the climate does not seem to be at all harsh. Fur-clad persons are nowhere to be seen. Men and women, old and young, are walking along the streets in their summer clothes. The winter sun is shining and the mountains in the distance look beautiful in their winter dress. I have been here for six months and the winter has, so far, been quite mild. I am told that there are evidences that the climate is getting warmer. The big glaciers, Vatnajökull, for instance, are decreasing.

Although the climate is improving, the winters are terribly long and dreary. The winter days are short and the sun is low in the sky. The Icelanders, who are industrious people, have availed themselves of modern things. They have electricity to brighten up the long winter nights. Progress is everywhere in evidence, progress which is a direct outcome of democratic liberty.



Seats of the first Bishoprics and two schools of Iceland

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PART I

The Cultural and Literary Advancement of Iceland by Centuries

9TH CENTURY 775-925.

VIKING PERIOD.

Religion based on mythical characters, Odin and Thor.

Part of mythological poems of older *Edda* composed.

Rune letter inscriptions in wood, stone and metal.

10TH CENTURY 903-1030.

SAGA PERIOD. THE HISTORY CENTURY.

930—Parliament founded.

The Althing was the holy centre of the nation where men and women gathered in order to seek instruction and culture.

Poets stayed with the kings to put the story of the king's exploits into poetry. At meetings, sports were held: horse fights, foot races, glimur, etc.

11TH CENTURY 1030-1152.

Christianity introduced by Gissur Hviti and Hjalti Skeggjason at the Althing.

Foreign bishops came to train priests to spread Christianity.

The meetings of the Althing in the spring and autumn were the basis of all Icelandic culture at this period. All events that took place in between were discussed and passed on.

In the schools of this period the subjects taught were:

Reading.

Theology.

Writing.

Making hymns in Latin.

Singing of Masses.

12TH CENTURY.

THE PEACE PERIOD.

1204—Bishop's seat and school established at Holar.

Schools also started in Odda and Haukadal.

1207—First book written which was a law book, *Vigslodi* (Way to the Fighting).

Arni, the learned, writes the history of the Norwegian Kings and a short history of the Icelanders up to this period.

B

Cloisters were established at several places in the country but fell into disrepute soon afterward.

From this time documents and books were written on parchment.

13TH CENTURY 1152-1262.

STURLUNGA PERIOD.

1170-1230—Most Icelandic Sagas written. Snorri Sturluson wrote *Heimskringla* and *Edda*. Superstition began to grow.

14TH CENTURY 1262-1400.

PERIOD OF NORWEGIAN KINGS.

Icelanders wrote the Chronicle of Norwegian Kings. Happenings began to be recorded in the form of stories concerning actual people, but with much romance added. Then romantic tales of western Europe were brought over. New style of Saga writing, "Lying Saga." Fictional.

15TH CENTURY 1400-1550.

PERIOD OF THE POWER OF THE CHURCH.

Culture of this period was concerned with hymns, both religious and fictional.

Fairy tales and rhymes.

Decline of old Nordic literature.

Book printing begun.

16TH CENTURY.

PERIOD OF MONARCHY.

Rule of Norwegian Kings.

A school was founded at Holar in 1652 and at Skalholt in 1653.

The main subjects in this school were Latin, Greek and Theology.

Translation of the Bible from German.

17TH CENTURY.

Contrast: Much superstition and witchery during this period, among the common people; but the beginning of scientific writing by learned men.

Passion psalms by Hallgrimur Petursson.

Collecting of parchments and old literature.

18TH CENTURY.

Monarchy and monopoly.

Outstanding men, such as Arni Magnusson and Pall Vidalin, work hard for civilization.

Eggert Olafsson and Bjarni Palsson worked much for the sciences and civilization.

Rules given as to how and what children shall be taught.

Societies: Icelandic Scientific, 1729.

Society (Icelandic) for Public Education, 1794.

19TH CENTURY 1750-1918.

National feeling grows and a fight for liberty begins.

Literary Society founded.

The National Library is started.

Now the civilization grows and many people who have learned abroad come back with new opinions. Agricultural Schools for men and women are founded.

Household schools, adult schools, newspapers and journals begin.

20TH CENTURY.

University and special schools founded.

Great advance in the arts, and interest is aroused in the theatre.

Moving pictures and sports (new) are introduced.

Table of Events

A.D.

- 870—Harald, the fairhair, ruled Norway and forced many people who wished to remain free chieftains to flee the country, many came to Iceland.
- 871—The Norwegian chiefs, Ingolfur and Hjorleifur, land in Iceland for permanent settlement.
- 930—Representative and democratic government was founded by pagan chiefs on the plain of Thingvellir. This was the organization of the Icelandic Commonwealth.
- 1000—Christianity was adopted by the law of Olaf Tryggvason, King of Norway. Leifur, son of Eirukur the Red, discovers "Wineland the Good," or North America.
- 1056—First school founded at Skalholt by Bishop Isleif Gissurarson.
- 1100—Son of Bishop Gissurarson, Teitur, founded a school at Haukadal.

A.D.

- 1107—Second school founded at Holar by Bishop Jon Ogmundsson.
- 1133—Monastery of Thingeyri founded, oldest monastery in Iceland.
- 1178—Birth of Snorri Sturluson, famous Icelandic historian, at Reykholt.
- 1200—School at Holar closed due to lack of funds.
- 1236—Skalholt school closed.
- 1270—School at Holar re-founded.
- 1277—Church ordnance passed that all children 7 years of age should learn "Confession of Faith" and "Ave Maria."
- 1341—School at Holar closed again due to lack of funds.
- 1380—Iceland with Norway comes under Danish rule.
- 1393-1474—Nothing recorded concerning schools or teaching in Iceland.
- 1402—Black death sweeps the country.
- 1491—School at Skalholt refounded by Bishop Stefan Jonsson.
- 1530—Jon Arason, last Catholic Bishop in Iceland, set up the first printing press.
- 1542—The Danish King, Christian III, passed the law that all children of Iceland should learn to read. Also, two Latin Schools should be founded, one at Videy and one at Helgafell. Neither was founded, due to lack of money. A children's school was to be founded at three monasteries in Skalholt Bishopric. This was not carried out, due to lack of funds.
- 1552—First Grammar School founded at Holar.
- 1553—Bishops were ordered to maintain boarding schools for 24 pupils in each of the schools, Holar and Skalholt.
- 1571—Gudbrandur Thorlaksson becomes Bishop for Holar and publishes numerous books. First Icelandic translation of the Bible.
- 1575—King Frederick II of Denmark issues decree that Deacons in monasteries of Holar Bishopric should teach children Luther's Short Catechism on Sundays.
- 1594—Luther's Short Catechism printed for the first time.
- 1610—Luther's Large Catechism printed in Iceland for the first time.
- 1635—Decree was issued by the King of Denmark that priests must visit homes and instruct the children.
- 1655—First Icelandic elementary reading book printed and used.

A.D.

- 1736—Jon Thorkelsson goes to Denmark to present school situation of Iceland to the King.
- 1741—Survey made of Icelandic schools by Ludwig Harboe, special emissary of King Christian VI of Denmark, and Jon Thorkelsson, former headmaster of the school at Skalholt.
- 1745—An elementary school was founded in Westmann Isles which lasted fifteen years.
- 1773—First Icelandic periodical published (monthly).
- 1784—Skalholt school destroyed in an earthquake. Most violent in history of Iceland.
- 1791—First permanent school founded at Hausastadir. It is still in existence.
- 1792—Library founded by Stefan Thorarensen, district leader or sheriff for Hunavatns, Skagafjardar and Eyjafjardarsysla.
- 1794—Library founded for the southern districts of Iceland by Rev. Markus Magnusson.
- 1799—Committee appointed to investigate school and church affairs in Iceland.
- 1801—Elementary school at Holar merged with elementary school in Reykjavik.
- 1804—Elementary school at Reykjavik was closed due to bad condition of the building.
- 1804-1805—No elementary schools in Iceland except the one at Hausastadir which had twelve pupils.
- 1810-1816—Great lack of elementary school books for the children.
- 1812—The school at Hausastadir closed, leaving no elementary school in Iceland.
- 1816—Icelandic Literary Society founded by the Dane, Rasmus Christian Rask.
- 1830—Private elementary school founded in Reykjavik with grants from the Thorkillis Fund.
- 1833—Reading Club founded at Flatey Island in Breifafjardur. This is the oldest reading club in the country.
- 1835—Periodical *Fjolnir* (personal name from the old Sagas), a cultural magazine published in Reykjavik.
- 1842—Jon Sigurdsson wrote an article on education in the periodical *Ny Fjelagsrit*, setting forth educational problems of the period.
- 1846—School at Bessastadir is moved to Reykjavik. This is the beginning of the Latin or Grammar School in Reykjavik.

A.D.

- 1847—Theological Seminary founded in Reykjavik. This was the beginning of the first faculty of the University.
- 1852—An elementary school founded at Stokkseyri.
- 1853—Proposed legislation regarding elementary schools in Iceland is discussed at the Althing.
Elementary reading book is published and distributed for the poor children.
- 1859—The Althing agrees to the suggestion of founding of elementary school in Reykjavik.
- 1862—Elementary school founded in Reykjavik by an act of the Althing.
- 1870—Elementary school established at Akureyri.
- 1872—Elementary schools are founded at Gerdir in Gardur and at Grunnastadir.
- 1874—Elementary school founded at Isafjordur. A school for girls (Secondary) founded in Reykjavik called the Household School.
- 1876—Medical Faculty established in Reykjavik.
- 1877—Elementary school founded at Modruvellir. The Flensborg School founded at Hafnarfjordur. This school gave general education; the graduate from this school could not enter the Grammar School or University.
- 1879—Secondary school for girls founded at Blondas.
- 1880—An Agricultural School is founded at Olafsdal by Torfi Bjarnason. Law passed by the Althing making it compulsory for schools to teach reading, writing, arithmetic and religion.
- 1882—Farmers' School at Holar founded by an act of the Althing.
- 1883—Farmers' School at Eidar founded.
- 1889—The Society of Icelandic Elementary School Teachers founded.
- 1890—A total of sixteen Reading Clubs founded in Iceland.
- 1892—A department for training teachers for elementary schools founded at the Flensborg School at Hafnarfjordur.
- 1897—The first periodical for children is published in Reykjavik by Briet Bjornhedunsdottir, the first lady member of the Althing.
- 1904—A technical school is founded in Reykjavik. School for Deaf Mutes founded in Reykjavik.
- 1905—Commercial school is founded at Hvitarbakki by Sigurd Thoralfsson.
- 1907—The Education Act passed by the Althing.

A.D.

- 1908—Jon Thorarinson becomes the first Director of Public Education. Teachers' Training School for elementary teachers founded in Reykjavik. A Law Faculty is established by the Althing.
- 1911—The University of Iceland founded by an act of the Althing.
- 1915—The Marine Engineers' School founded in Reykjavik by an act of the Althing.
- 1918—The Co-operative Society for Farmers establishes a Commercial School.
- 1919—Act was passed concerning appointments and salaries of teachers.
- 1921—The Union of Icelandic Elementary School Teachers founded.
- 1924—The quarterly periodical for teachers, *Menntamal*, is started.
- 1929—The Althing passes an act creating District Schools.
- 1930—Largest elementary school building in Iceland is put into use in Reykjavik. Capacity of five thousand students. Home for feeble-minded children at Solheimar in Grimsnes opened.
The secondary school at Akureyri gets grammar school privileges by act of the Althing.
- 1931—A School of Music is founded in Reykjavik. A district school at Reykir in Hrutafjordur is established.
- 1933—A School for the Blind is started by Blindravinafelag Islands (Society for the Friends of Blind People).
- 1936—The Althing passes a law concerning textbooks being printed by the State. The Althing revised the Education Act of 1907, making school attendance compulsory from 7 to 14 years of age.
- 1939—A State Horticulture School at Hveragerdir started. Established by an act of the Althing in 1937.
- 1940—A Commercial University started in Reykjavik. British Army of Occupation arrives.
- 1941—School terms are reduced from one to two months, due to war conditions and occupation of buildings by the British Army.
United States Army of Occupation arrives.
- 1942—Grants are made by the Good Templar Organization for the making of moving pictures of Iceland to be shown in the schools for educational purposes.
Visual education is being stressed in the schools.
Grant of \$15,000 made to the Medical Faculty of the University of Iceland by the Rockefeller Institute.