



P.H.T. Thorlakson, Canadian Centennial  
Committee, ræða haldin 14. apríl 1967

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Bjarni Benediktsson – Stjórnmaál – Forsætisráðherra – Vestur-Íslendingar

Tekið af vef Borgarskjalasafnsins

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Stjórnmaálamaðurinn  
Askja 2-34, Örk 10

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MR. CHAIRMAN, MR. PRIME MINISTER, YOUR EXCELLENCIES,  
HONOURABLE SENATORS AND MEMBERS OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS,  
LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

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On the first of July, our country will cross the threshold into the second century of Confederation. In honour of this historic occasion, Canadians have extended the traditional one day birthday celebration to one year of commemoration.

Many Centennial projects, varied and inspired in their conception, will remain as permanent tributes to the imagination and resourcefulness of the Canadian people.

There is an unmistakable desire on the part of many groups of Canadians to examine their own position and accomplishments relative to the opportunities that have been available to them since their arrival in this land.

At the close of this memorable Centennial year, every person will know more about the history and achievements of Canada - the land of his birth or the land of his adoption - and will have a deeper appreciation

of what it means to be a Canadian.

We have gathered here today, in this magnificent National Library and Archives Building, to honour the Centennial of Confederation and to commemorate the discovery of the Western Hemisphere by mariners from Iceland and Greenland in the late tenth century.

From the dawn of history, the Western Ocean - also called the Green Sea of Darkness - was a constant challenge and a mystery to the sea-faring nations of Europe.

A period of great expansion - commonly known as the Viking Age - commenced towards the latter part of the eighth century and continued for over two hundred years. From the present Norway, Sweden and Denmark, this expansion took Norsemen to the east, to the south and to the west. They landed in Normandy, England, Scotland, and Ireland. In 874, they reached Iceland and established the old Icelandic Republic in 930. Towards the end of that century, they pushed on, first to Greenland and then further westward to the shores of a new continent which they called Vinland. Thus the North Atlantic Ocean - the dreaded Green Sea of Darkness - was successfully spanned for the first time.

Knowledge of these explorations was bound to come to the attention of navigators and scholars in other countries. Indeed, we find the record of this knowledge in the writings of European scholars of that era, notably Adam of Bremen, one of the most distinguished scholars of Europe in the eleventh century. In his book, published in Latin between the years 1072 and 1076, he gives an account of the discovery of Vinland as related to him by the King of Denmark.

The settlements of Iceland and Greenland depended on foreign trade, mainly with Norway and England, for their existence. Sheepskins, hides, wool, tallow, cheese, sulphur, and dried fish were exchanged for timber, tar, flour, honey, linen, and metals. The luxury items of this trade and commerce - in those days - were white polar bears, walrus tusks and the renowned falcons, the hunting birds of royalty.

In the year 1396, the son of the Duke of Burgundy was captured by the Saracens. The Prince was held ransom for twelve Greenland falcons and this demand was duly met. This exchange serves to corroborate the fact that the trade routes to the far north were widely known.

Special mention should be made of the "court poetry" and the language of Iceland. During these early centuries, learned men - especially the Skaldic Poets - were invited to visit the courts of many European countries. These gifted men brought back important information from these foreign

lands regarding current events, much of which was later incorporated in the vast Saga literature of Iceland. This ancient, classic language of Northern Europe - Old Norse - spoken in Iceland today - has a close kinship with Anglo-Saxon which forms the basis of the most forceful and effective speech in modern English. Icelandic is one of the required subjects in advanced studies of English in the Universities of Great Britain, the older Universities of North America and in institutions of higher learning in other countries.

Trade and communication between Iceland and Greenland with the rest of Europe continued up to, and beyond, the period of active exploration and conquest of the New World by the Spanish, Portugese, English, French, and Dutch navigators and explorers.

During the years before and after A.D.1470, there was a determined effort by experienced and seasoned navigators to explore the lands they knew existed beyond the western horizon. They were encouraged and supported by merchants of means and by people in high authority.

On August 3rd, 1492, Christopher Columbus sailed southwest from Palos, Spain. He had carefully calculated the latitude along which he intended to travel. From his earlier experience as a navigator, while exploring the west coast of Africa, he knew that the prevailing trade winds blew westward at that time of the year. When he finally re-set his course due west, after reaching the

Canary Islands, he fully expected to reach the shores of Asia.

Thirty-two days later, he and his crew landed on the Island of San Salvador in the Bahamas - the first Europeans to sail that broad southern expanse of the Atlantic Ocean.

On some of the maps drawn in the fifteenth century, Vinland was shown as just another large island - "Vinlanda Insula" - in the North Atlantic, over twelve hundred miles north of the Caribbean Islands discovered by Columbus.

It is greatly to his credit that Columbus thoroughly informed himself before embarking upon his long and hazardous journey. By all reliable accounts that are available to us, he certainly did not just sail "out into the blue". If we can accept the biography written and published in 1521 by his own son, Ferdinand, as a reliable source of information, then Columbus visited Iceland in February 1477. His genius as a navigator and an explorer was enhanced because he had studied the scientific records of the time and thus, contrary to the popularly accepted theory of the day, he had sound reasons to believe that the world was round. By using the navigational information at his disposal, Columbus calculated that



land could be reached by travelling seven hundred leagues westward from Spain. This estimate proved to be correct, even though he failed to reach the East Indies.

When Columbus was forced, at the Robida Convent, to give his reasons for his belief that land existed beyond the rim of the Western Ocean, he stated that he based this conviction "...first, on the nature of things, second, on the reports of navigators; and third, on the authority of learned writers.."

In 1497, John Cabot sailed westward from Bristol, England, on a voyage of discovery. According to the well-known Canadian historians, Lower and Chafe, "...the prosperity of Bristol was dependent on the cod fisheries of Iceland. The agreement under which these were open to Englishmen was about to run out and the merchants of Bristol were naturally anxious to find new fishing grounds.."

Cabot explored and charted the coasts of Newfoundland and Nova Scotia. On his return to England, he reported - amongst other things - on the fabulous fishing grounds off the coast of Newfoundland. Subsequently, these fishing grounds provided an important source of food for the people of Europe.

In 1534 and 1535, Jacques Cartier sailed from France

and explored the mighty St. Lawrence River as far as the Indian village of Hochelaga where the City of Montreal now stands. Cartier was the first person to apply the name Canada to this country.

Mr. Prime Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen - to become involved in a Centennial project of this kind has many compensations, one of which is that it adds to one's knowledge of the time and events described in the early Icelandic documents.

The ancient Icelandic Sagas are receiving increasing attention by modern scholars because of their great literary value and by historians because of the important information they shed on events that occurred in the early history of northern Europe.

Lord Tweedsmuir, a former Governor-General of Canada, said that: "...for myself, I put the Icelandic Sagas among the chief works of the human genius.."

In 1966, extensive use was made of the Sagas as the most authentic and complete source of information regarding the Battle of Hastings in 1066.

These ancient records also have preserved a great deal of early Scandinavian history which would otherwise have been lost.

In 1965, the Yale University Press published a Pre-Columbian Vinland Map which provided further evidence to confirm the discovery of Vinland. This map was made about the year 1440 by a Swiss monk. At the top left hand corner of the map is inscribed the information that Vinland was discovered by Bjarni Herjolfsson and Leifr Eiriksson who found it a land of great fertility and many vines. The two inlets leading to the Hudson's Bay and the Gulf of St. Lawrence are clearly discernible on this map.

The recent archaeological discovery made at L'Anse-aux-Meadows, on the northern tip of Newfoundland, by Dr. Helgi Ingstad and his associates, has provided scientific proof of the existence of early Norse settlements in Newfoundland about the year A.D.1000.

When the plaque is unveiled, it may come as a surprise to you, Mr. Prime Minister, and to others - as it did to me - to see how small a portion of the plaque is occupied by the original Icelandic version in the centre as compared with the English and the French translations which appear on either side. The reason, of course, is that some of

the original Icelandic words - when inscribed on thin leather - were abbreviated to conserve space. One letter and a mark may stand for a word or even a phrase.

The upper section of the plaque shows, on the left, an open book and a quill which recalls the work of the Icelandic scholars who, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, preserved the records of their time for posterity. On the right, is a replica of that sturdy Viking ship in which the ancient mariners sailed across the stormy North Atlantic to the eastern coast of North America and made the first attempt at settlement.

The introductory paragraph at the top of the plaque reads:

THIS PLAQUE COMMEMORATES THE DISCOVERY OF THE EASTERN COAST OF CANADA BY MARINERS FROM ICELAND AND GREENLAND IN THE LATE TENTH CENTURY.

THE HISTORIC EXCERPT REPRODUCED BELOW IS FROM GRAENLENDINGA SAGA (THE SAGA OF THE GREENLANDERS) FIRST COMMITTED TO WRITING IN ICELAND ABOUT A.D.1200 AND PRESERVED IN FLATEYJARBOK (THE FLATEY BOOK) A VELLUM MANUSCRIPT COMPILED IN ICELAND ABOUT A.D.1390.

PART I RECORDS THE SIGHTING OF NEW LAND IN THE WEST BY BJARNI HERJOLFSSON, OF EYRAR IN ICELAND, IN A.D.986.

PART II DESCRIBES THE VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY OF LEIFR EIRIKSSON SOME YEARS LATER AND HIS LANDINGS IN HELLULAND (FLATSTONELAND), MARKLAND (WOODLAND), AND VINLAND (WINELAND). THESE EXPLORATIONS LED TO AN ATTEMPT AT COLONIZATION BY THORFINNR KARLSEFNI WHOSE SON, SNORRI THORFINNSSON, WAS BORN ON THIS CONTINENT.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN WESTERN GREENLAND AND EASTERN CANADA SUPPORTS THESE ANCIENT ICELANDIC RECORDS OF EXPLORATION AND COLONIZATION.

The discoveries of Bjarni Herjolfsson and Leifr Eiriksson surely constitute one of the earliest chapters in Canadian history.

I have the honour, Mr. Prime Minister, to present this bronze plaque to the Government and to the people of Canada as a Centennial Gift from Canadians of Icelandic descent.

Mr. Prime Minister, may I now invite you to unveil the plaque.

- P.H.T.Thorlakson,  
Chairman, Canadian (Icelandic)  
Centennial Committee.

Ottawa,  
April 14, 1967.