

# Stephan G. Stephansson's 170<sup>th</sup> Birthday Celebration

KATELIN PARSONS

Poet Stephan G. Stephansson (October 3, 1853–August 10, 1927) was only nineteen when he boarded the crowded, foul-smelling horse ship that would carry him away from his birthplace of Iceland. He belonged to the first large group of Icelanders to emigrate from the island in 1873. At the time, Canadian government land agents were heavily promoting Canada as a settlement destination for Icelanders. Most emigrants were destined for Muskoka, Ontario, where the inhabitants of a nearly treeless island were expected to transform forests into farmland.

Stephan landed in Québec on August 25th, 1873, and headed with his parents and sister for the United States. He turned twenty in Wisconsin, where he spent his first years in North America. He married his first cousin, Helga Sigríður Jónsdóttir, in 1878, and their oldest son, Baldur, was born in September 1879. The young family moved to Pembina County, North Dakota, where they farmed at the Icelandic settlement at Gardar. They relocated to Alberta in 1889, leaving behind Helga's parents and extended family in North Dakota. They lived on a farm near the small village of Markerville by the Medicine River, where they built a house that later became a provincial historical site and museum. It was at their house in Alberta that Stephan wrote most of his best-known poetry. Famously, Stephan suffered from insomnia, and he would compose poetry during his long nightly waking hours. His six-volume poetry anthology, *Andvökur* [Wakeful Nights], is a product of his seemingly ever-wakeful mind.

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Stephan and Helga Stephansson had eight children: Baldur, Guðmundur, Jón, Jakob, Stephanie, Jennie, Gestur Cecil and Rosa. Their son Jón passed away as a toddler in 1887 during an outbreak of diphtheria in North Dakota. Gestur was struck by lightning in June 1909, shortly before the publication of the first two volumes of *Andvökur* in Reykjavík. These tragedies deeply affected their family, and Stephan's poetry became an outlet for his grief. The third volume of *Andvökur*, which was published in Reykjavík in May 1910, contains a memorial poem to Gestur.

*Andvökur* met with widespread acclaim in Iceland and in Icelandic immigrant communities in North America. In 1917, Stephan again crossed the Atlantic. He had left Iceland as an unknown, self-educated farmer's son. Now, he came to Iceland as an honoured visitor: the legendary Poet of the Rockies, whose movements were reported upon enthusiastically by the press.

An exhibition celebrating Stephan G. and his work was opened on October 3rd of this year at the Icelandic Collection at Elizabeth Dafoe Library, which preserves Stephan G.'s book collection. Stephan G. Stephansson's printed books include many gifts sent from other authors active in North America and Iceland. Many were immigrant writers who, like Stephan, continued to write in their first language of Icelandic. Others were Icelanders who admired Stephan's work. From the 1880s, publishing industries thrived both in Iceland and in Icelandic immigrant communities in Canada and the United States. Hun-

dreds of Icelandic books crossed the Atlantic every year.

The following are a selection of hidden gems from Stephan G.'s collection:

Jón Trausti was a popular author who, like Stephan, grew up in poverty and was largely self-educated. He was born at Rif, the northernmost farm in Iceland, on 12 February 1873, a few months before Stephan emigrated to the United States. His birth name was Guðmundur Magnússon. His life changed for the better when

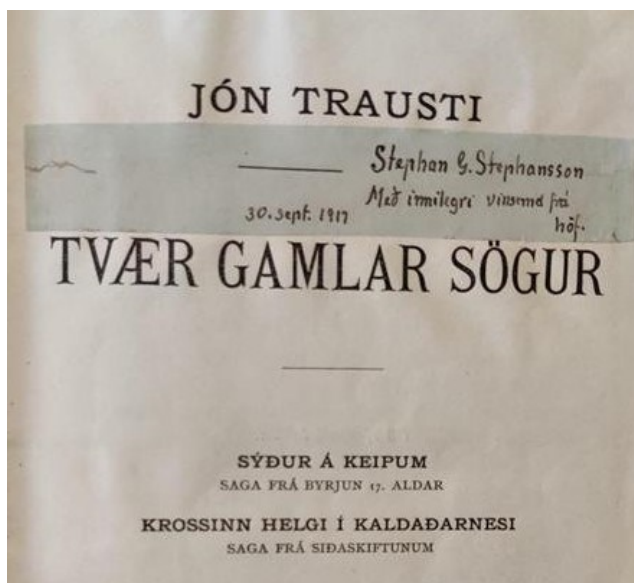


Figure 1: Jón Trausti, *Tvær gamlar sögur* [Two Old Tales] (Reykjavík, 1916). All photographs taken by Katrín Nielsdóttir.

he moved to the town of Seyðisfjörður, where he began his career as a printer. His first novel was published in 1906. He died in Reykjavík on 18 November 1918 during the Spanish Flu outbreak, just a year after sending this book to Stephan.

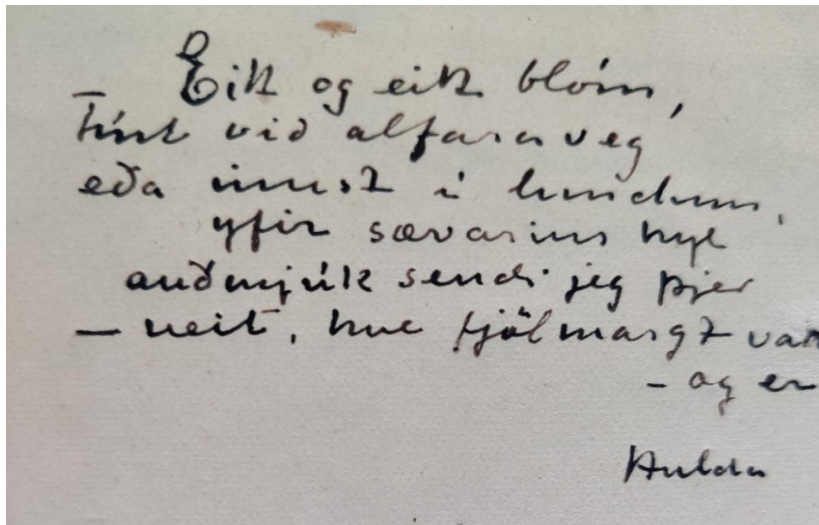


Figure 3: Inscription from Hulda, *Kvæði* [Poems] (Reykjavík, 1909).

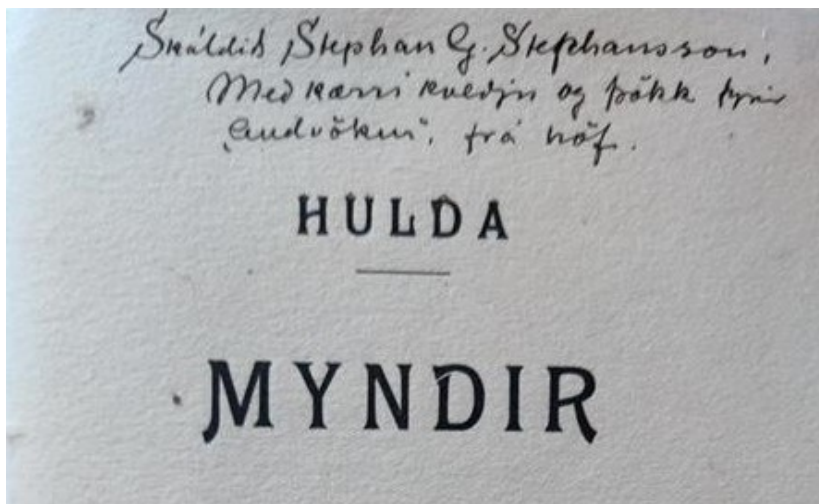


Figure 3: Hulda, *Myndir* [Vignettes] (Akureyri, 1924).

Hulda (1881–1946) was the penname of author Unnur Benediktsdóttir Bjarklind. She was heavily influenced by Icelandic folk poetry and oral traditions, particularly *þulur* poetry. Like many Icelandic women writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Hulda longed to study and to explore the world. She never came to Canada, but she made two extended trips to England and mainland Scandinavia, where she spent time with academics and fellow writers. Shortly before her death, she won a national poetry competition held to mark the founding of the Republic of Iceland in 1944.

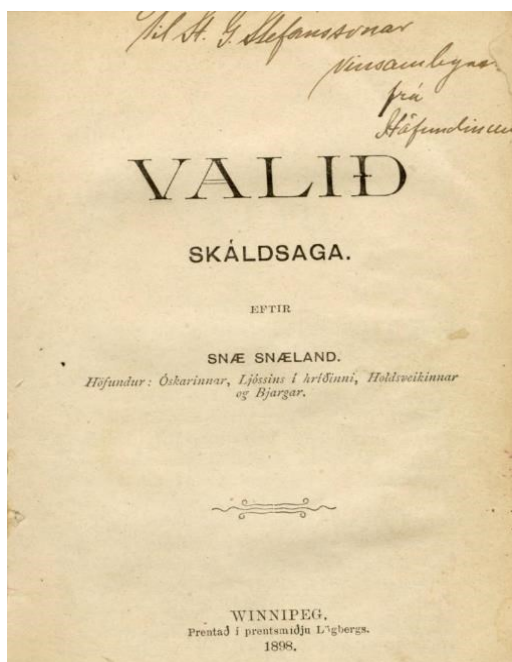


Figure 4: Snær Snæland, *Valið: skáldsaga* [The Choice: A Novel] (Winnipeg, 1898).

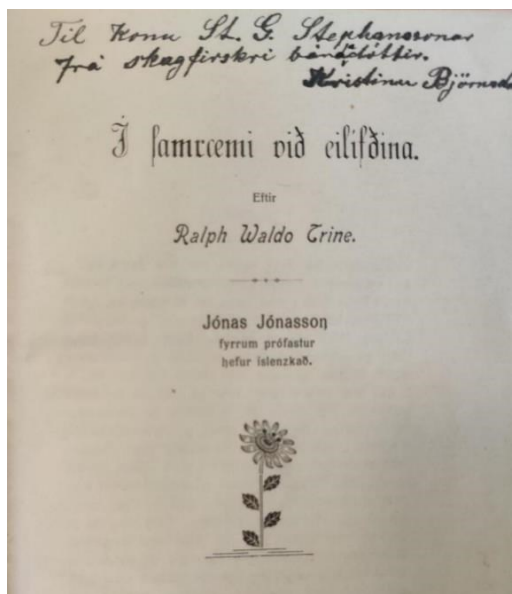


Figure 5: Ralph Waldo Trine, *Í samræmi við eilífðina* [In Tune with the Infinite], translated by Jónas Jónasson (Akureyri: Guðspekistúkan á Akureyri, 1917).

Snær Snæland (1861–1924) was a pseudonym of Winnipegger and Icelandic-Canadian immigrant author Kristján Ásgeir Benediktsson, who also published under the name Kr. Ásg. Benediktsson. He came to Winnipeg with his family in 1895 and was active as a writer in Winnipeg's Icelandic community. *Valið* was his first novel and is a romance set in North Iceland. His views on military action differed radically from Stephan's: he joined the Canadian army in 1917 but lost his sight in one eye in an accident and was discharged. He was unable to support himself after his accident and moved to Gimli, where he focused his energy on genealogy and history.

Not all books in the collection belonged to Stephan G. Stephansson. Ralph Waldo Trine (1866–1958) was an American philosopher and member of the New Thought movement, which promoted the power of human thought in influencing one's circumstances and one's personal success. This translation was published by the Akureyri lodge of the Theosophical Society. The translator, Jónas Jónasson from Hrafnagil (1856–1918), is best known today for his monumental book on Icelandic folk customs, *Íslenskir þjóðhættir*. Kristín Björnsdóttir, a self-described farmer's daughter from Skagafjörður, sent Helga Stephansson a copy as a gift.

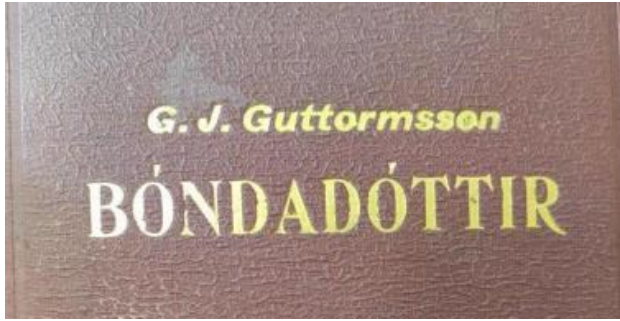


Figure 7: Guttormur J. Guttormsson, *Bóndadóttir* [Farmer's Daughter] (Winnipeg, 1920).

Poet and playwright Guttormur J. Guttormsson (1878–1966) was the Canadian-born son of Icelandic immigrant parents, poet Pálína Ketilsdóttir (1849–1886) and her husband, farmer Jón Guttormsson (1841–1896). He lived most of his life at his birthplace of Víðivellir, Manitoba, just outside of Riverton. Although he was fluent in English, he

used his mother tongue of Icelandic for his writings. His family donated his personal library and writing desk to the Icelandic Collection of the University of Manitoba. This copy of *Bóndadóttir* contains a verse specially addressed to Stephan. In a letter sent 9 September 1920, Stephan thanked Guttormur for this book and responded with a verse of his own: they may have grown up with sheep and cows, but Iceland's farmers' daughters were fine ladies now.

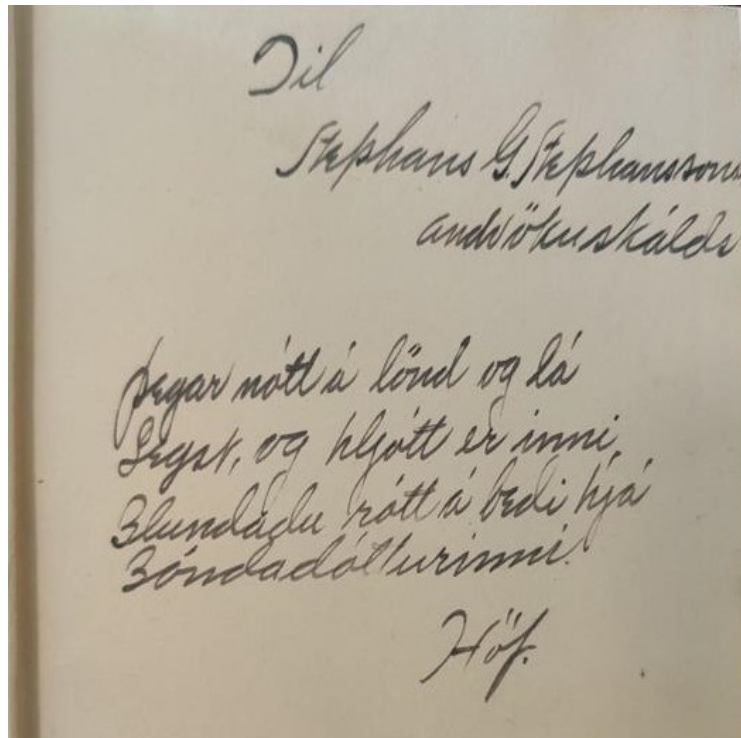


Figure 6: Inscription from Guttormur J. Guttormsson, *Bóndadóttir* [Farmer's Daughter] (Winnipeg, 1920).

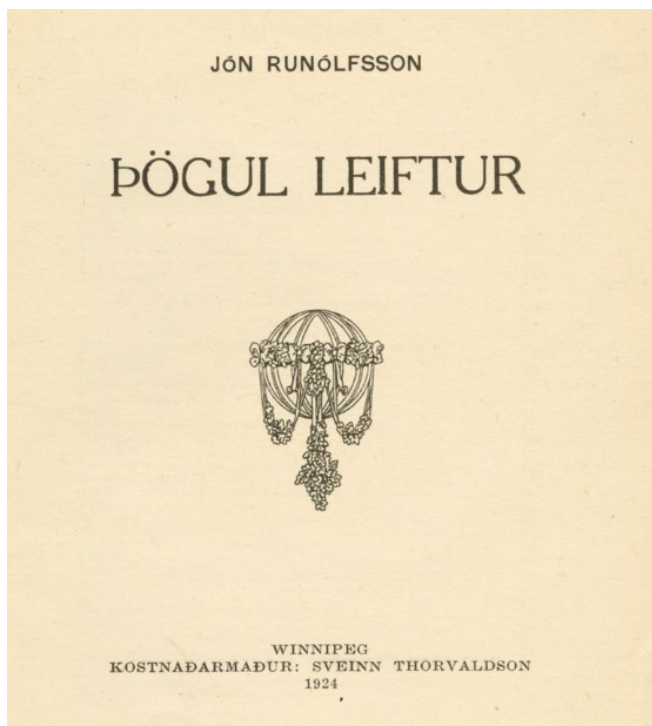


Figure 8: Jón Runólfsson, *Þögul leiftur* [Silent Flashes] (Winnipeg, 1924).

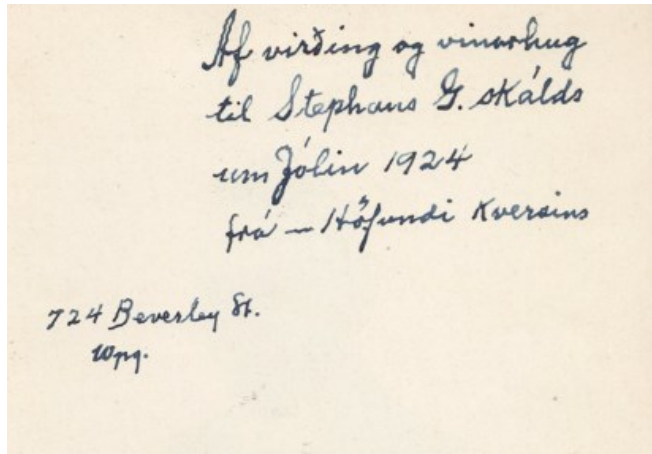


Figure 9: Inscription from Jón Runólfsson, *Þögul leiftur* [Silent Flashes] (Winnipeg, 1924).

Icelandic immigrant poet Jón Runólfsson lived in Winnipeg, where he worked as a teacher. Jón lived at 724 Beverley St. and sent Stephan a copy of his book as a Christmas present. The title of this book later inspired the name of the *Silent Flashes* exhibit on photography and Icelandic emigration, which was curated by Nelson Gerard and first opened at the Icelandic Emigration Centre at Hofsós in 2004.

All photographs from Stephan G. Stephan's personal library were provided by the University of Manitoba Icelandic Special Collections. All books photographed as well as the original cabinet and contents can be viewed inside the Iceland Room on the third floor of Dafoe library. An exhibition built on this collection and related archival materials was hosted in the Thorlakson Gallery in the fall of 2023.