

ICELANDIC CONNECTION



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Ljósanótt

evening of lights

Tribute Dinner

in Honour of
Past Presidents, Directors,
Editors, & Volunteers
of Lögberg-Heimskringla, Inc.

Friday, November 9, 2018
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ICELANDIC CONNECTION

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ICELANDIC CONNECTION



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ON THE COVER



PHOTOS: AKUREYRI MONUMENT KRISTÍN JÓHANNSDÓTTIR / MOUNTAIN MONUMENT SUNNA FURSTENAU

The Káinn Monuments in Mountain, North Dakota and Akureyri, North Iceland

Editorial

“Kæra foldin kennd við snjó” Symposium of Káinn

by Kristín M. Jóhannsdóttir

When you visit Akureyri in North-Iceland, you can visit the houses of children’s book writer Jón Sveinsson (Nonni) and poets Matthías Jochumson and Davíðs Stefánsson. However, even though all of them called Akureyri home for one time or another, none of them were actually born and bread fed in town. Kristján Níels Júlíus Jónsson, Káinn, was. But he does not have a museum dedicated to him – and until recently – not even a memorial. Even though his memory lived a good life in North Dakota, where a monument does indeed commemorate his life, his picture had started to fade in Iceland and his poems were mostly held dear by grandfathers who sometimes and sometimes not recited them to their grandchildren.

Kristinn Már Torfason, the instigator of the Káinn-group, was one of the children who learned to appreciate Káinn through his grandfather. On a sunny day in the botanical garden of Akureyri, it dawned on him that Akureyri had nothing to remind us of this wonderful poet. In fact, most people do not even know that Káinn was from Akureyri. Kristinn set out to change this. He contacted

head librarian Hólmkell Hreinsson and historian Jón Hjaltason and along with Professor Kristín M. Jóhannsdóttir who joined shortly thereafter, the Káinn-group was formed. These four decided that a monument would not be enough; they needed to make more noise, tell people about Káinn, remind them of him. A symposium would be in order. A cross-disciplinary symposium about Káinn, his life, his time and of course his poetry.

The symposium was held at the University of Akureyri, August 26, 2017, in cooperation with the Icelandic National League of Iceland, The University of Akureyri and the Akureyri Library, and funded by the town of Akureyri, Icelandair, KEA, Kjarnafæði, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Norðurorka.

The program was both ambitious and impressive. It started with greetings from the collaborators; Dr. Sigrún Stefánsdóttir addressed the meeting on behalf of the University of Akureyri, Mayor Eiríkur Björn Björgvinsson on behalf of the town of Akureyri, and Hjálmar W. Hannesson on behalf of the INL of Iceland. After these official greetings from the collaborators, it was time for one of the highlights of the



PHOTO COURTESY OF KRISTÍN JOHANNSDÓTTIR

The Káinn Group

symposium. Eleanor Geir Biliske and her son Ed addressed the symposium. Mrs. Biliske might be the only person alive who actually knew Káinn. While Biliske mother and son gave their talk a beautiful picture of Eleanor sitting in the lap of Káinn was shown on the screen above her, clearly showing the love between old man and child and the picture along with Mrs. Biliske's memories of Káinn moved everyone to tears. The surprise for the Icelanders in the room was the completely different picture of Káinn, pictured by Mrs. Biliske. Reading the most known of Káinn's poems, it is hard not to draw the conclusion that he was a drunk who mostly thought of life's pleasure. But that was not the Káinn that the children on the Geir family knew. That Káinn was a warm and hardworking man, good with children. Little Eleanor never saw him under the influence of alcohol. Sure, he enjoyed his

drink, but just like there is so much more to his poetry than his ditties of alcohol, there was so much more to this man. The Káinn Mrs. Biliske told us about was a man we all wanted to have known.

After a musical interlude from *Vandræðaskáldin* (The trouble poets), who performed a new song by Vilhjálmur Bergmann Bragason to a poem by Káinn, historian Jón Hjaltason gave an interesting talk on why the Icelanders emigrated to North America, and why possibly Káinn went. Historian Jónas Þór then discussed the North American society and how the Icelanders managed to settle in. However, literature theorist Viðar Hreinsson discussed the question of whether Káinn was a poet or just a skilled versifier. His conclusion was that of course Káinn was a poet. His brilliance is far beyond knowing how to use alliteration.

After the lunch break, it was time

for Káinn's poetry. Writer Böðvar Guðmundsson started by a heartwarming talk about his relationship with Káinn's poetry and then Hulda Karen Daníelsdóttir, project manager for the city of Reykjavík, discussed Káinn as he was represented in *Lögberg-Heimskringla* from 1990 to 1992. Helgi Freyr Hafþórsson, project manager at the University of Akureyri, then showed us how it is always appropriate to quote Káinn, even when rejected by a woman in a pub. The discussion of Káinn's poetry continued with a presentation from Bragi Valdimar Skúlason of the Icelandic band Baggalútur, who dedicated a whole album to Káinn's poetry. After his talk, Baggalútur performed several of their songs from the album.

The final part of the symposium discussed Káinn today and started with Egill Helgason who played the interview with Stína litla, Christine Geir Hall, from his television series *Westward Bound*. Sunna Pam Furstenau, president of Icelandic Roots and of the INL, was the last speaker of the day. She discussed Káinn in Thingvalla, his connections, celebrations, and community.

Sunna also presented the relief of Káinn, given to the city of Akureyri by the Icelandic Roots, the Icelandic Communities Association of NE North-Dakota, and from friends of Káinn. The original plan had been for the monument to be unveiled after the symposium, but unfortunately that was not possible due to the unpredictable Icelandic nature; a basalt column, big enough for the relief, was hard to find. Instead, there was a short ceremony at the symposium where Sunna delivered the relief to the mayor of Akureyri, Eiríkur Björn Björnsson.

The symposium was particularly well

attended. Approximately 200 people were in the audience, coming mostly from Akureyri and surrounding but a considerable number came from Reykjavík and a few even from North America. The big assembly hall at the university was packed and could not have held many more. The symposium was a huge success and everyone in the attendance was thrilled. Some had planned to listen to a talk or two but ended up staying the whole time. Some even said this was the best symposium they had ever attended. This was partly due to a successful program but mostly because a symposium about Káinn simply could not fail—he had seen to that.

On October 25th, the monument was finally unveiled in Aðalstræti, close to where Káinn was born. Kristinn Már Torfason gave a short speech about how this all came about, and then the mayor and the president of the town council, Matthías Rögnvaldsson, jointly clipped the ribbon of the monument. Afterwards, everyone was invited to a reception at the town library, where Vilhjálmur Bergmann Bragason Vandræðaskáld performed his song again and Kristín M. Jóhannsdóttir gave a brief presentation about the life of Káinn. The ceremony ended on a very appropriate note, eating *kleinur* and *vínarterta*.

It is our hope that now that Káinn's monument graces the old part of town, his memory will not die in Iceland. Children will ask their parents about him. Parents will recite his poetry. The teachers of Akureyri will make Káinn a part of their curriculum. Schoolchildren will learn his poems by heart.

Káinn was the son of Akureyri and we will not forget.



PHOTO: LORNA TERGESEN

Iceland to Create a Replica K.N. Júlíus Monument

By Sunna Furstenau

Near the birthplace of our beloved poet, K.N. Júlíus, a replica memorial will be created. A committee of interested people has been formed and they are working on this project. Akureyri celebrated their 150th birthday the summer of 2017 during the last weekend of August. The launch of the project occurred during that weekend.

Kristján Níels Jónsson Júlíus (1859-1936), a satirical poet, was born near Akureyri, Iceland to Jón Jónsson and Þórunn Kristjánsdóttir. His father was a blacksmith. K.N. or Káinn (pronounced like 'Cow-En') as he was known at the time, left Eyjafjörður in 1878. K.N.'s older brother, Jón Júlíus Jónsson, had left in 1876. Two of his younger sisters came to America in later years

Their mother died when K.N. was 14 years and afterwards, he lived with his uncle, Davíð Kristjánsson.





He lived there until he was eighteen. In 1878, he immigrated to the west. At first, he lived in Winnipeg and then moved on to Duluth. Finally, in 1893, he moved to the Thingvalla area of North Dakota. He never married and had no descendants. His education was mostly self-taught and he had very little formal education before leaving Iceland.

Káinn labored for most of his adult life in the northeast North Dakota rural community called Eyford, which is in Thingvalla Township. Many of the graves in the Thingvalla Cemetery were dug by him and he was the last grave-digger to live in the Eyford community. The following is taken from an old newspaper:

“He went at his task as if he were making up a bed for a tired friend, said his close friend, Dr. Rognvaldur Petursson, and most of those buried there were the poet’s personal friends. Here he, too, rests now on the grassy flat, with a small

stone at his head. But at the side of the church stands a stately monument with his likeness carved into it. It was placed there by the friends and admirers of K.N. in the United States and Canada, but designed by the neighbors, who thankfully remember the poet whose gentle humor lightened their burdens and eased their struggles for half a century, brought sunshine into their homes, and was an ever active geysir of fun and easy, original wit. Poor as he was in terms of material possessions, K.N. enriched these communities and set their cultural atmosphere as no other man has.”

K. N. Julius was a unique, beloved poet and humorist. Some of his poems became published in two books. The original book, *Kviðlingar*, was published in 1920. *Kviðlingar og Kvæði* (Ditties and Poems) was published in 1945 and edited by Richard Beck. In 1937, a book in Iceland was published called *Rabb um K. N. og Kveðskap hans* by Magnús Gíslason. In 1965, a book called *Vísnaþók Káins / Kristján Niels Jónsson (K. N.)* was produced by Tómas Guðmundsson in Iceland.

In the 14 Aug 1946 edition of the *Heimskringla*, you can find an advertisement selling New Books by the Björnsson Book Store. K.N.’s book, *Kviðlingar*, is for sale at \$15.85 and is one of the most expensive books listed. That would be over \$210 in the 2017 value of the dollar.

A large monument, dedicated to K.N. Julius, was built on the north side of the church in 1936. The inscription on the monument to K.N. reads: In Icelandic:

Kimnisskálidið

(by Richard. Beck)

Fæddur til að fækka tárum.
fáir munu betur syngja.



Kímnileiftur ljóða þinna,
létta spor og hugann yngja.
Svo dreми þig um fríðan Eyjafjörð,
og fagrar bernskustöðvar inn í sveit.(K. N.)

The Satirical Poet

Translated by Magnus Olafson

Born to make tears few.
The mocking flashes of your verses,
Lighten and renew the spirit.
So dream about the beautiful fjord,
of your beautiful childhood home
in the countryside.

The monument was originally built in 1936 and was reconstructed in 1999 in conjunction with the 100th Annual “Deuce of August Celebration.” The celebration was originally called the 2nd of August Celebration.

Now these flags fly above his grave and his monument. It is fitting that the North Dakota flag, the Icelandic flag, and the USA flag fly above the grave of this man who knew two homelands. He lived most of his life in North Dakota in the years from 1893 – 1936.

It would be a great honor to contribute to the K.N. Julius Replica Monument in Akureyri. To make a US Tax-Deductible Donation, click the 'Donate' button on the top of the page. 100% of your donation will be spent on the K.N. Project if you designate this on the form.

To read more about K.N. and his poetry, continue reading below.

About Little Christine Geir

Translation by Magnus Olafson

Since the first I saw you near,
My need for sunlight dwindled;
The light for my life's path,
Is by the light in your eyes kindled.

Síðan fyrst ég sá þig hér,
sólskin þarf ég minna.
Gegnum lífið lýsir mér
ljósið augna þinna.

Anna Geir was a widow with five young children. When Káinn arrived in Pembina County, he was searching for work. He was informed about the family's situation and he worked on the Geir farm as a farmhand for the remainder of his life. Christine (Geir) Hall was born and raised on the family farm where Káinn lived and worked. K.N did some brick laying work in the community along with digging most of the graves at the Thingvalla Cemetery. He died on the Geir farm of a stroke 25 Oct 1936.

Here is the address given in 1999 by Christine Geir Hall at the rededication

ceremony of the monument:

Dakota Sunshine

Translation by Gudrun Hanson

When our weary winter yields
And spring relives its story,
Ah, what a pretty sight to see
The sun in all its glory!
And when the wide Dakota fields
With ripening wheat are swaying,
A pretty sight to see the sun
Upon the uplands playing.

When all this tender hay is cut,
In sickled-tows reclining,
Ah, what a pretty sight the sun
Upon the meadows shining.

Then he who yearns to catch a fish
Goes to the river streaming.
A pretty sight to see the pike
In sunny water gleaming.

When in the morn the farmer milks,
His brow with pleasure showing,
A pretty sight to see the sun
On all the cattle glowing.

If one can get a bit of gin,
At best by illness hinting
Then 'tis a pretty sight the sun
Upon the bottle glinting.

And now it seems to be the trend
To dress in latest styling,
And 'tis a pretty sight the sun
On lovely dresses smiling!

And if you long to go to church,
Your gladdened faith aligning;
Then 'tis a pretty sight the sun
Upon the preacher shining!

And though the 'take' is very small
The man's surprise be showing;

It is a pretty sight the sun
Upon the platter glowing.

But if I had to go to church,
My need for succour pining,
I would as life the sun itself
Refused to go on shining.

And when I've passed beyond this place,
My bones to dust decaying,
'Twill be a pretty sight the sun
Upon my tombstone playing.

This next poem is about the Icelandic celebration in our area called "The 2nd of August" and also known for over 50 years as "Deuce of August." This is one of KN's famous drinking poems. He talks about Reverend (Séra) Hans Thorgrímsen who is one of my favorite pioneers. Séra Hans was a highly respected pioneer pastor and he probably did not find KN's drinking poems very funny. Séra Hans was very much against drinking and local stories say that he had not attended the party alluded to in the poem and he was very angry about this poem. North Dakota was a dry state at this time.

August Second

Many left in drunken sail
Everywhere flows beer and ale;
Whisky? No one lacked a bit,
Cause Swain and Dor were selling it.
Women served their coffee swill;
Men ranted speeches at their will;
There was singing, there was dance.
There was I with Reverend Hans.

Annar Ágúst

Margur þaðan fullur fór
Freyddi á skalum malt og bjór
Brennivín þar brast ei neinn,
Því báðir seldu, Dóri og Sveinn.

Kvennfólk var með kaffisull
 Karlmenn fluttu ræðubull
 Þar var söngur, þar var dans
 Þar var ég og Séra Hans.

Séra Hans was the pastor in Pembina County from 1883-1886 and then again from 1901-1912. Káinn came to Thingvalla Township in 1893 when Reverend Friðrik Bergmann was the pastor. So, this poem, “Annar ágúst” (August Second), was most likely written between 1901-1912.

The very short version about the ND alcohol law is as follows: North Dakota was approved for statehood 22 Feb 1889 (four years before Káinn arrived). A clause was proposed at the 1889 North Dakota constitutional convention that summer to prohibit the sale and manufacture of liquor. The clause was voted on by the people of ND and was approved at the October 1st vote. Saloons, liquor sales, and alcohol manufacturing were outlawed, beginning July 1, 1890.

Finally, in 1932, ND voted to repeal state prohibition. Alcohol could be manufactured, bought, and sold legally for the first time since North Dakota became a state. Káinn was still alive to see prohibition repealed but Séra Hans was the pastor in Grand Forks at the time. I suppose that Káinn could have written this poem when Séra Hans was working in Grand Forks and maybe even after prohibition was lifted in 1932. If anyone knows the actual date this poem was written, please let me know.

I am glad this is one of the poems on the panel. Some told me it was not appropriate as part of the church memorial. I believe it helps to tell the story of our ancestors and it brings us some humour. Something that seemed important to Káinn and to his honor, this storyboard panel was designed.

Björn Olgeirsson is quoted in the *Lögberg-Heimskringla* newspaper 24 September 1999:

Björn Olgeirsson knew K.N. well in his youth. “He was a bit unusual,” Björn said, “but he did not drink as much as he is rumoured to have done. He only made the occasional trip to town and got a bit cheerful. Then he walked back, making poetry on the way. He was a great humorist who made many interesting poems.”

A few other poems that have been translated into English are as follows:

Back Home

So dream about your lovely island fjord
 And childhood haunts upon the upland run;

Where nowhere do the colors of the land
 Shine fairer in the glory of the sun.

As shepherds halloo from the mountain passes,
 Their flocks descending to the valley grasses.

In The Barn

One day when all was quiet
 I heard the moo-cows bawl;
 I think that they were holding
 A “Ladies Aid” for all.

For everyone was yapping;
 But none were understood
 They talked of all and nothing,
 But most concerning food.

“Yes, we’re full and chubby,
 And we have lots of feed;
 Like corn and ground up barley,
 And stacks of hay with seed.”

“It’s not my business really,
 and I don’t care, ’tis true,
 But by the way, dear Spottie,
 What is the date you’re due?”

“Come has the time for supper,
 What will we get for treat? Be damned!

Here comes that K.N.,
And brings us straw to eat!”

Is It Any Wonder?

No wonder that he dabs in rhymes,
And likes to chase the chicks;
No wonder that he drinks a lot,
And has a yen for tricks;
No wonder that he steals a bit,
And is a liar too;
No wonder when he hangs around
With such a rascal crew!

The Dance

I attended a dance there one evening,
I'd been feeling so lonely and low;
I wanted to go and observe it,
And watch how the evening would go.

There youth celebrated its hour.
I felt a familiar fire.
I sat til the daylight was dawning,
In the swirl of hypnotic desire.

The glorious maidens kept dancing
With spiffy admiring guys.
I sat in a corner unbothered,
Alone there with curious eyes.

They bared both their arms and their bosoms,
Their ringlets asway and aglow;
Such goddesses filled with a power
To rouse all the sick with their show.

The blood in my veins was aboiling,
My lips were a flammable red;
My eyes with the fires of passion
Were popping right out of my head.

The fires ignited my body,
And burned at my heart-strings too;
They singed a part of my jacket,
Eventually burning it through!



PHOTO COURTESY OF KRISTÍN JÓHANNSDÓTTIR

**Mayor and Chairman of the Akureyri City
Council unveiling the Káinn Memorial**

The Poet with calloused hands Life on the Geir Farm

by Edward Biliski

KN had a special place at the dining table, his rocking chair in the front room and he had the south upstairs bed room.

An endearing trait of KN's was his love for children (as well as his ability to make fun of himself) This special love for children he lavished on two generations of Geir's.

About little Christine Since the first I saw you near. My need for sun light dwindled;
The light for my life's path,

Is by the light in your eyes kindled

A common sight in the Geir home was the toddlers sitting on KN's knee
When KN would go to town children would flock to him.

He would entertain them speaking in his verses.

When KN first arrived in Eyford in 1893 Eleanor's grandmother Anna Geir was a widow with five children. A one year old being cared for at neighboring farm.

KN was searching for work and was informed of the family's situation.

The Geir farm became KN's home for the next 44 years and the rest of his life.

Through out KN's life he gave much of himself. The work he did was very physically demanding. KN helped with redundant chores, he worked in the harvest field built chimneys and dug many graves – some in the heart of winter.

KN went about this task as if making up a bed for a tired friend. Most were friends.

When there was work to be done KN was always there. Not only with hard work did he give of him self but also with his loving kindness and his warm friendship.

KN helped Eleanor's grandmother survive unspeakable grief and hardship.

In December 1895 three of Anna's daughters became ill with fever.

KN walked in the cold and snow after medicine through two days and a night.

He stopped at a friends to rest for only a few hours.

Anna and KN did every thing they could for the children. All three passed over a couple of weeks.

Anna's fourth daughter Lauga and son Kristjan escaped the illness.

Kristjan later married having 11 children privileged to grow up in the same home as KN I think Anna became sort of a mother figure in KN's life. KN came to America at the age of 18 having lost his mother four years prior. Geir family members were often aware of the depth of KN's feelings, how deeply he sympathized with those who were hurt or grieving.

A memory of Christine Geir Hall was KN's tears when Grandma Anna died.

Christine mentions her own tears after KN's passing.

Christine was going through some papers in KN's room and came across a poem KN had written at the time of Anna's death.

KN's own grief was expressed – he did not mourn only for himself. He mourned for "all of us".

This depth of feeling and concern for others was so typical of KN.



Eleanor Geir Biliski and her son Edward at the Káinn Conference

Anna Geir's Memory

In the realm of the dead I feel numbness tonight; My thoughts are all about you.
I sit by your grave where the wind is so cold, My tears flow as I think about you.
You know how I value your love and trust.

You were always so steadfast and true. Dear friend now my promise fulfilled
When you asked me to come and help you.

I bring you a message from the one you love best, And where in the world they will go.
They will never forget your kindness and love. And they will miss you more than you know.

The children, so small, will miss you the most Will remember a Grandma so good
Have yet to appreciate the gold that you gave They just cry as I knew that they would.

She who cared for you with tenderness And shared your last days on earth
Bereaves at your passing, Her heart bleeds tonight Feels lost as she values your worth.

By holding the mirror up to people KN made them see themselves, and life generally in a truer light.
In a broader sense, KN's satire was directed at narrow mindedness, folly superstition and hypocrisy
One of KN's most attractive qualities was his delight in making fun of himself

Born to make tears few. The mocking flashes of your verses, lighten and renew the spirit.
So dream about the beautiful fjord,
and your beautiful childhood home in the country side

KN's legacy is of course his poetry. Speaking for the Geir family our dearest wish is that KN
be remembered for the very special person he was.

With much affection

It is difficult to find proper words to thank all who have made this dedication possible.

I will ask Gods Blessing on the memory of KN Julius—Poet and Friend

Eleanor Geir Biliski's Memories of KN

I am happy to be here in honor of KN

I am Eleanor Geir Biliske

I am the oldest surviving member of the Geir family where KN had his home, worked and
took care of our family

needs for more than 40 years

As one of 11 children I remember KN caring for us

He would often have one of us toddlers sitting on his knee while reciting his poetry and
humming his tunes

This made us very happy

There are few words to properly describe KN's loving kindness patience and gentleness.

The little verse he wrote about Christine we forever cherish.

In looking back we have come to realize how privileged we were that through all of our
growing up years we had

KN in our midst and how much our lives were enriched.

Mama and Pabi were pleased to have KN as well

We realized KN was a well known poet but little did we dream he would one day be deemed
a literary giant.

To us he was just KN.

This is my son Edward.

He has researched KN's life and realizes why we all love KN.



Kristján Niels Júlíus, the farm had poet, with his pipe holding Eleanor Geir Biliski at the Chris and Solveig Geir farm near Mountain about 1930. Julius, a loveable bachelor, wanted to be buried with his best pipe, since he could never find a woman to marry him. (Courtesy: Mrs. Joe (Christine) Hall, Gardar)

SUBMITTED COURTESY OF EDWARD BILISKI

Minn Káinn

August, 2017

by Böðvar Guðmundsson

When I was first asked to speak at a symposium in Akureyri on the 26th of August 2017 about Káinn (declines like Práinn), the topic was to be how he was seen in letters and writings from Icelandic settlers in North America. I was a bit dismayed. In those numerous letters from North America that I reviewed and prepared for printing, some thousand in number, there was not a single letter from Káinn. There could be several reasons for this. Káinn was a letter writer, but those letters that I researched were all in correspondence with other

Icelandic-North Americans. In addition, all his siblings emigrated to North America, except one, Rósa Þorvaldsson, who is recorded as residing in Akureyri in 1945. Perhaps someone in Akureyri knows more about her life than I do, and perhaps some letters still lay undiscovered in the keeping of one of her relatives.

When Káinn's mother died, he was 14 years old and he went to live with his mother's brother Davíð Kristjánsson at Jódísarstaðir in Ongulstaðahreppur, and stayed with him for four years, but he is listed as a hired hand



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Böðvar Guðmundsson

at the farm in Helgarsel in 1878, the year he emigrated. He was then nineteen years old. I did not find any letters that mentioned him when I was browsing through the University of Akureyri region's archival collections while doing research here a few years ago. However, it is not impossible that some letters or letter fragments may turn up with further investigation. Also, we have to remember that, before the regional archives was established, it was common to burn all the papers of the deceased, along with other very personal items that related to the individual. Unfortunately.

In the book I edited, *Bréf Vestur-Íslendinga I-II* (2001-2002), there are three references to Káinn. In 1891 Stefán Gunnarsson from Mýrar in Skriðardalur, who lived in Winnipeg, wrote to his sister, Margrét Sigurðardóttir at Stafafelli:

... well, my daughter Sigurbjörg is engaged to Bjarni Björnsson's son, nephew to Kristján Jónsson, the verser. He is currently at a religious college in Chicago. (*Bréf Vestur-Íslendinga I*, 2001:309)

Kristján Niels had no brother named Björn but he did have a brother named Bjarni, but that's neither here nor there and we should not make anything more of these few words than that he is called a 'verser' rather than a 'poet'. I am not sure what we can make of that, other than that at the time Stefán wrote this letter, Káinn had been in North America for thirteen years and was already well-known for his verses. I would like to mention here that Niels Jónsson, Káinn's great uncle was known in his time as 'Niels the Verser'.

Þorvaldur Jónsson Reykdal of Borgarfjord, who was from Reykholtsdal and later lived in Lundar, Manitoba, writes to his sister Guðrún Jónsdóttir at Húsafell in Hálsasveit in the year 1935:

I have very few books; mostly books of verse. I have all the books given out by Matthías, 5. All of Stefán G., Bólu-Hjálmar,

Steingrímur, Þorskabítur, Gestur Pálsson and a few smaller: K.N., Guttormsson and a few more by Icelandic-North Americans... (*Bréf Vestur-Íslendinga II*, 2002:123)

And then finally Þórarinn Stefánsson from Álftagerði in Mývatnssveit, who lived in Winnipegosis, writes twice about Káinn. In a letter to his sister, Guðbjörg Stefansdóttir at Garður in Mývatnssveit, in 1920:

...two new books of verse are being printed here, one of which I have seen, "Bóndadóttir" by Guttormur J. Guttormsson . /.../ and now a book of verse by Kristján Julius (KN), of interest to Icelanders both here and back home. But many of his verses will pose a problem for those who do not understand English as a lot of his humour and hidden meanings are in the English he throws into his poems which also is an example of the Icelandic-North American's use of the Icelandic language. (*Bréf Vestur-Íslendinga II* 2002:213-214)

In a letter to his brother, Hjálmar J. Stefánsson at Vagnbrekka in Mývatnssveit, better known as "the Fiddler at Vagnbrekka", Þórarinn writes in 1939:

There are two Icelandic poets in Wynyard, Saskatchewan, Magnús Ingimarsson frequently publishes poetry in both papers (*Lögberg* and *Heimskringla*), some of it rather decent but perhaps a bit too much of it. However, Jakob Norman's poetry is wonderful. I have included a verse of his here. Then there are two verses that came out in *Heimskringla* last October 4th and you will get to see them later. It is evident that he is mimicking the style of K.N. (*Bréf Vestur-Íslendinga II*, 2002:251)

Then follows a verse where J. Norman throws in some English-isms:

Voru og eru oft með spar.

Allir segjast vera ræt.

Vilja stundum fara í fæt.

Flestir þessir County Guide.

(*Bréf Vestur-Íslendinga II*, 2002:252)

Thrifty they were and most still are
 All of them are sure they're right
 And sometimes spoiling for a fight
 Those readers of County Guide
(transl. Ingrid Roed)

County Guide was a Canadian journal, a farm paper that published articles on farming and country living. In these words of Þórarinn's, we can see that he was familiar with Káinn's humorous use of Western-Icelandic.

There was nothing else of use in the letters I had researched. I then approached the Amtsbókasafn librarian [Hólmkell Hreinsson] as to whether I might speak on something relating to my personal opinions of Káinn and his poetry or my thoughts on his work as it relates to my generation. He replied in his well-known easy going way: 'Do whatever you wish,' he said.

I can say that I do not remember a time when I did not know of Káinn. It is interesting to consider why this is. I spent my youth in the Hvítársíða in what one might call the last few decades of the settlement age, for the modern age had hardly arrived there at that time. Haying was done, by and large, with the same type of tools as were used in the days of Helgi Magri and Þórunn hýrma: scythe and rake. Food was soured in whey, salted, dried and smoked much like it was for the family at Kristnes in the year 880. We sometimes listened to the radio during the long winter nights in my youth, but that what entertainment it provided was often so abysmal that we called it 'piano-blubbering' or else 'symphony-squawk'. But in my earliest years, 'rímur' (rhyming chants) were still being recited on the radio. It was said that this stopped when the British Army moved onto the island at the start of WWII because every time they heard these long, drawn-out recitations, they thought it was

some kind of air-raid warning.

But good poetry was, then as now, always pleasing to the ear. And Káinn was especially popular with readers and listeners throughout the country. His book, *Kviðlingar*, which was published in 1920, was widely available, as was the book *Kviðlingar og kvæði* (publ. 1945). I did not read Káinn in my youth, but I learned his poetry because the people around me, residents at the farm as well as guests and neighbours, would recite his poems. I first began reading Káinn in 1965 when *Visnabók Káins* was published and I came to realize that there was much more to his work than the short verses I had learned as a child.

It is interesting to speculate as to why Káinn's poetry resonated so well in the hearts and minds of the Icelanders. We must remember that in the 1950s and 1960s there was still some resentment towards those who had left Iceland and emigrated west to Canada and the United States in the latter part of the nineteenth century. This resentment applied to everyone – except the poets. I have never heard anyone criticize Stephan G. for being an Icelandic-North American. The same goes for Káinn. Their styles were completely different however. So was their relative popularity. Everyone liked Káinn, whether they were 'poetry-lovers' or not. On the other hand, Stephan G. would certainly never be called a popular poet. When Stephan G. wrote about his opinions on the horrors of the World War, some of his countrymen tried to get him arrested for treason. Meanwhile Káinn was writing about anything and everything else.

Although Káinn is seldom mentioned in letters of Icelandic North Americans, I thought that it would be fun to think about the themes in his verses and examine them from the viewpoint of the Icelandic and North American communities where

people memorized his verses and recited them at every opportunity. Of course, it is not a particularly scientific endeavour to identify and list themes and count up the poems and verses in which these themes appear. Firstly, there can be more than one central theme in just one little verse, let alone a whole poem, and secondly, readers may not all agree on what the central theme actually is. Nevertheless, I shall endeavor to identify those themes that I deem to be particularly his.

BJÓR

Þu móðurtungan mæra,
sem mér er hjartakær!
Ég man það máski betur
en margt sem skeði í gær,
hið fyrsta af öllum orðum
er orð ég mynda fór,
var orð, sem aldrei gleymi,
en orðið það var: Bjór.

Svo fluði eg feðra grundu,
mér fannst þar allt of purrt;
að leita fjár og frama,
eg fullur sigldi burt.
Af hafi hingað komnum
mér heimur birtist nýr,
þá lærði ég orð í ensku,
en orðið það var “Beer”.

Og fyrr en fjandann varir,
ef fullur sting ég af,
og dreg á kalda djupið,
í dauðans kyrrahaf -
Og hvað, sem helst að drekka
í heljarsolum finn,
er bjórkut best að grafa
á bautasteinininn minn.

It would be ridiculously foolish for me to recite here all those poems and verses of Káinn's that relate to alcohol so I won't do that. But there are two things that

Gamli Bakkus

It is likely no surprise to anyone that alcohol is a frequent theme in Káinn's poetry. According to my tally, there are no less than sixty poems and verses about hard liquor or beer in the 1945 publication of his collected poetry. And I must tell you that these poems are not preaching temperance or abstinence. I don't know, for instance, how those who supported prohibition and the banning of beer sales felt about the following 'Beer' poem:

BJÓR

You extol this mother tongue
that my heart holds so dear!
More than much of yesterday,
this in my memory clear
Is the first of any words I formed,
no other word before,
This word I never will forget:
this word was “Bjór”.

And so I left my father's land,
too dry it was for me,
To seek my fame and fortune,
I set sail upon the sea.
A world completely new to me
is what I have found here,
Then an English word I learned:
this word was “Beer”.

Before the devil notices
as drunk, I slip away
Down to the chilly depths
of death's dark, quiet bay,
Again there in the halls of hell
I'll find my favourite drink;
A beer keg would suit best upon
my gravestone, I should think.
(transl. Ingrid Roed)

distinguish his poetry. One is the promise of alcohol, as in the works of the French poet, Charles Baudelaire, who composed that great poem: ENIVREZ-VOUS, which Jón

Óskar translated as Ölvið Ykkur (Ale Yourself Up). Káinn would certainly have translated it as ‘Drink Yourself Drunk’.

Sometimes his poems show his unhappiness over the Prohibition Era in the United States from 1920-1933 and beer that was limited to 2% alcohol content. More often than not, there is also praise for home brew. As you know, Káinn was living in the United States and suffered from the Prohibition laws as did his fellow countrymen. This theme in his poetry resonated well with many of the Icelandic farmers. Just the word ‘Brennivín’ by itself was enough to bring on a smile. And it still does. All the better farmers during those pioneer years knew this verse of Káinn’s, which is actually about a woman: **‘The Guardian Angel’ (Verndarengillinn):**

Gamli Bakkus gaf mer smakka
gæðin bestu, öl og vín.
Honum á ég það að þakka,
að þú ert ekki konan mín!

Dear Bacchus offered and I drank
Sweet draughts of ale and wine.
For this gift him will I thank
That you’re no wife of mine!
(transl. Ingrid Roed)

Feminine beauty

Then we get to the second most common theme of his poetry: women. Káinn never married and was never associated with any particular woman all his life. He was a ‘baslari’, a Western Icelandic term for ‘bachelor’. But women were nonetheless very much in his thoughts, and he often boasted about his popularity with the ladies as can be clearly seen in ‘Vorvísur’ (Poems of Spring) which first appeared in the publication *Kviðlingur* (publ. 1920).

Vorvísur

Kuldinn dvínar, - kemur nú
kempan mín frá Hruna.
Hver með sína fjósafnú
fer á synínguna.

Góða tíðin gleður lýð,
gróa í hlíðum stráin,
vorið blíða og fljóðin fríð
fara að þíða Káin.

Furðuljóst það flestum er
‘fyrir löngu síðan,
upp við brjóstin á sér ber
allar vilja þíða hann.

(Editor’s note: The poem describes the spring thaw and then tongue-in-cheek says that the season brings out the ladies who wish to ‘thaw’ Káinn)

There are many types of women, as a wise man once said, and Káinn’s image of women would no doubt be judged harshly by hard-line feminists. In poems and verses from his earlier years, they are often lovely and madly in love with him or else foolish or rather silly. But later in life, when he was older and frail, his women are described as being more saintly. And it is with no word of a lie that many women were warmly disposed towards this happy-go-lucky old bachelor. They gave him clothes and food and even gave him a carpetbag which he always called it his ‘ráptuðra’ or ‘travelling sack’. I do not know what this bag looked like, but it is interesting to remember that, in the book *The Atom Station*, Halldór Laxness has Ugly use this word for what women often use to carry small items, most commonly called a ladies’ carry bag.

The Creed of the Heifer’s Rump

After women, the next most common theme, according to my unscientific count, is ministers. Ministers and religion. Káinn is no religious rebel, but he makes

good-natured fun of religious matters, for example, in this very well-known verse:

Káinn is Grilled about his Religious

Views:

Kýrassa tók ég trú
Traust hefir reynst mér sú
Í flórum því fæ ég að standa
fyrir náð heilags anda.

I took the creed of a heifer's rump,
And I've found that it doesn't fail;
In the gutter floor I have to stand,
For the holy spirit's mercy-grail.

These themes might suggest an answer to the question: why is it that Káinn touched the hearts of so many Icelanders? There is nothing new in stating that Icelandic society from settlement times till the Second World War was a farming society, and what this society appreciated in general, and no less in poetry, had to do with farmers. And men. For in those days, most farmers were naturally men. And what men liked was, of course, 'brennivín', of which there was never enough, and what they found entertaining was drinking, fighting and womanizing.

Children Will Long Remember

Man ég tvennt sem mér var kennt á Fróni,
og minnkun ekki pótti þá;
það var að drekka og fljúgast á.

This I was taught that is was alright
Back home and here as it might;
That is to drink and pick a fight.

Poems about women and womanizing were always entertaining. "Obscene" was what the sainted Jón Ögmundsson called poetry about women. In my younger years, dirty verses were frequently recited wherever two or more men got together, followed by loud laughter, thigh-slapping, falling backwards and tossing back another one. I

suspect that this still goes on. Some might say that there are no dirty verses to be found in Káinn's books. That is no proof that he never composed any. Salacious poetry had never been considered appropriate for print. But like any other poetry, dirty verses can vary in quality and those that would be considered closest to being print-worthy would be the ambiguous ones. That is to say, something is said in an innocent way, but can be construed very differently. There are very few of these ambiguous verses are in Káinn's poetry. However, I cannot resist presenting one here because it fits so well with the subject of farming and farmers.

This verse is about Magnús Stefansson:

Á merarstræti meyjjar náði hann fundi
og mjög að henni kankvíslegur veik;
eins og krummi uppgefinn af sundi
augum votum litur krókasteik.
Hann var ao fala að fá að setja inn
i fjósið hennar gamla klárinn sinn

Shuffling down Mare's Street, a maid he met
And a fondling gaze on her he turned;
Like a drowning crow, worn out, might set
Its eyes on a piece of meat for which it yearned.
Permission he sought, might he be able
To put his old workhorse in her stable.
(*transl. Ingrid Roed*)

We don't need to explain this poem as is sometimes necessary with some of Iceland's ancient literature which is published with a side-bar of explanations. The poem speaks for itself. What I find more entertaining than the double meaning is the surrealistic simile: "Like a drowning crow, worn out, might set/ Its eyes on a piece of meat for which it yearned." Can you imagine how Magnus' eyes leered at the ladies?

Poetry Themes Here and There

Brennivín, women and religion or ministers: these three, along with the

weather, were what dominated the thoughts of the men in the rural communities in times past. Weather was not so dominant in Káinn's poems, as the weather in Dakota is more predictable than in Iceland. He praises sunshine, and I will touch on that later. But brennivín, women, ministers and religion were foremost in people's conversations and may still be so. I cannot resist telling a story here to prove my point. When I was a child at Hvítársíða, I heard it said that Danes had a shot of brennivín each morning, which was called their 'morning-jolt'. Later, my co-workers in Bergen, Norway, told me the same story, but there was a big difference in the way the story was told. Norwegians told this story as a criticism and were appalled. The Hvítársíða people were green with envy.

Religion and ministers were a common subject of conversation. And also frequently the subject of ridicule. Sometimes it happened that a visiting minister conducted a service. Everyone went to church and took note of how he spoke and how he sang off-key. Then they imitated him and made fun of his sermon and that was thought to be great entertainment. This was not an example of a lack of faith or malice towards the minister. It was just common practice, fun, where there was often little or no entertainment or, worse yet, only 'piano-blubbering and symphony-squawk' on the radio.

Certainly, the Icelandic pioneer communities in Canada and the United States were not very different from farming communities in Iceland. Those who emigrated to the West were virtually all from farms in Iceland and enjoyed stories about womanizing and these other two subjects as much as they had back home.

In spite of the distance between them, communities in Iceland and in the West had the same themes in their poetry:

brennivín and women. A few years ago, I was asked to speak about the songs and poetry of Icelandic poets and students in Old Copenhagen. On that occasion, I had to say - and I thought this was a big discovery - that it was unbelievable that the students never sang about anything except women and brennivín. An intelligent young woman looked at me in amazement when I announced this big news and said: 'Is this anything new?'

No, this is nothing new. And last week I was in rural Ireland, a country so Catholic that women are forbidden by law to use contraceptives. There the men and women sing with great gusto late into the night. And what do they sing about? *Molly Malone* and *There's Whisky in the Jar*.

Of course, Káinn composed poetry about more than just women, brennivín and ministers and religion. He composed beautiful verses about children and for children. One of these was particularly well-received:

Ný Vöggvísá

Farðu að sofa, blessað barnið smáa,
Brúkaðu ekki minnsta fjandans þráa.
Haltu kjafti! Hlýddu og vertu góður!
Heiðra skaltu föður þinn og móður.

Go to sleep, my blessed child so small
No more of your stubbornness and bother.
Hush your mouth and heed my call!
Respect you must, your father and your mother.

Sarcasm or Cheerfully Poking Fun

Þórarinn Stefánsson called Káinn the best Icelandic poet of mockery. We will briefly explore this issue. Now, the word 'mockery' has a somewhat negative connotation in ordinary Icelandic speech; it is negative, bad, indecent to make fun of others. Sinful even. Hallgrímur Pétursson, in one of his poems, wrote that the devil is waiting to catch and punish those who

“use deceit and mockery”. And to “use deceit and mockery” is, among other things, to make fun of others. But humour is often based on mockery, or more accurately stated, on something being other than what it is supposed to be. Many religious fundamentalists thought that laughter was for the sole purpose of entertaining the devil. They did not believe that our Lord could appreciate humour. This calls to mind a well-known enemy of laughter in more recent literature: Jorge, in *The Name of the Rose*, had no doubt that the devil waited by the fires with the whip raised for those who use deceit and mockery. This is reminiscent of Hallgrímur. I think Þórarinn writes as he does not to criticize Káinn but to characterize his writing. Fun, humour, joking are all positive words, but it is not considered nice to “make fun” of others. It is much more positive to “joke about” or “poke gentle fun” at others, so we have to be careful in our choice of words.

And maybe what Káinn did, first and foremost, was to gently poke fun at many things. To ridicule others, to make fun of them, to mock them, was not what Káinn wanted to do. There was no one that Káinn made more fun of than himself, and many people could take a lesson from that.

Despite threats and punishments, we love things that are funny and we are grateful to those who draw our attention to funny things. Káinn was such a person. Nothing was sacred to him but he bore no ill will towards anyone. He saw first and foremost the humour in this world. Even in obituaries he wrote about friends who had passed away, he shows his humour, but not to hurt or cause pain.

In a memorial poem to Wilhelm Paulson, he says:

Forlög, (Decisions)

Í kirkjunni leit ég þig síðasta sinn,
þá sé þar ei tíður gestur.

Heyrðu það, Wilhelm vinur minn,
ég var þar og Sigmar prestur.

‘Twas in the church I saw you last,
A place you seldom came.
Yes, we were there, Wilhelm, my friend,
I and the reverend, Sigmar by name.
(transl. Ingrid Roed)

Perhaps rather than enumerate Káinn’s themes, it would be more appropriate to count up the things he made fun of, but I will leave that decision to others. Icelandic rural society liked good-natured humour. Káinn’s humour was sometimes a bit crude. Let’s take, for example, the verse he composed about the Lutheran Church Conference of 1913. But first we need to explain a little about North American church conferences. Neither Canada nor the United States has a national religion. Everyone is free to believe what they will and no one is born into a particular religion according to the laws of the land. Specific religious denominations that fled from Europe to the New World in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries called America ‘The Land of Freedom’, by which they meant, first and foremost, freedom of religion. Icelandic congregations in the West quarrelled among themselves about what constituted correct doctrine, and not always in the biblical spirit of those of whom it was said ‘how beautiful are the feet of the one who brings news of peace’. Lutheran Church conventions were established to make peace and maybe also a little to clear away misconceptions that may have crept in from the Unitarians, spiritualists, Baptists, Quakers, Methodists, Mennonites, Pentecostals and later the Mormons. The Lutheran Conference of 1913 was praised in the Icelandic papers for its good work and the great accomplishments of its delegates. This caught Káinn’s attention and he composed the following poem:

Eftirköstin (Results)

Í lagri bygging búska hjá,
bak við skólahusið,
að minni hyggju mætti sjá
mikið liggja eftir þá.

In a little building near the bush
Back behind the schoolhouse,
I think we all can see there was,
A great deal they produced.
(*transl. Ingrid Roed*)

So, what was this little building by the bush behind the schoolhouse?

Another good example of Káinn gently making fun of something is his ('hlunkhenda' clunky verse), a poetic form he made up. This is a four-line poem with internal rhyme and without the odd-line alliteration, and therefore the poetic feel, of traditional Icelandic poetry used both in Iceland and North Dakota. This must be the oldest 'hlunkhenda':

Hringhend Hlunkhenda (Internal-Rhyme Verse)

Það, sem ég meina, sérðu, sko! -
vera ekki það neinu rugli;
hara að reyna að drepa tvo
steina með einum fugli.

This is what I mean, if you will,
empty drivel, I tell you, it's not;
there are two stones I intend to kill
with the one bird that I've got.
(*transl. Ingrid Roed*)

He used the 'hlunkhenduna' to make gentle but ridiculous fun of various verses that many thought were particularly prized verses. The composer of this verse I have not found, but it would be good if someone knew. The verse is about a trip to Iceland.

Fæðraslóðir fór að sjá,
færðist blóð í kinnar.

Kappinn rjóður kyssti á
kyrtil móður sinnar.

(*Editor's note: Poet describes here how he travelled to his motherland and kissed the hem of her skirts*)

I have to say that I am in agreement with Káinn that this is a dreadful doggerel. Káinn's 'Hlunkhenda' version sounds like this:

Verðæunavísu (Prized Verse)

Eldhúss hlóðir fór að sjá,
kerald stóð þar innar;
kappinn rjóður settist á
kollu móður sinnar.

(*Editor's note: Káinn describes visiting a closet back of the kitchen where the pot is but instead he sits on his mother's cup*)

Western-Icelandic

But, as Þórarinn Stefánsson very correctly states, "many of his verses will pose a problem for those who do not understand English as a lot of his humour and hidden meanings are in the English he throws into his poems which also is an example of the Icelandic-North American's use of the Icelandic language."

Those verses that I heard as a child were the ones that did not include 'Western-Icelandic'. In those years there was little or no understanding of English in the rural communities. But there was plenty of other material, even though it was 'Western-Icelandic', that Káinn made fun of the most. This was not done with indignation or moralizing over the deterioration of the mother tongue among his compatriots in the West; rather it was, first and foremost, done in fun.

Good-natured fun. His friend, the Icelandic-Canadian poet, Guttormur J. Guttormsson, whom I have seen mentioned in Canada as 'the second-greatest West-Iceland poet' (however that

might be measured) and who was born in Canada, was a master of making fun of and using ‘West-Icelandic’. He composed this good poem about the hunting trip:

Winnipeg Icelander which begins like this:

Ég fór on í Main Street með fimm dala cheque
 Og forty-eight riffil mer kaupti
 Og ride út á country með farmara fekk,
 Svo fresh út í brushin ég hlaupti.
 En þa sa eg moose, uti i marshi það lá,
 O my eina sticku eg brjótti!
 Þá fór það a galop, not good anyhow,
 Var gone, þegar loksins eg skjótti
(Editor’s note: poem is in bad-grammar Icelandic, Icelandicized English words and is impossible to translate)

There are many verses in which Káinn uses ‘West-Icelandic’. We do not need many examples, but I will mention one which he calls **Í Danslok**:

Hættu að dansa og gætni gleym,
 gríptu „chanc-ið, maður!
 Taktu kvensu og töltu heim.
 „Tell your friends to do the same”.

At The End of the Dance

Stop dancing and forget all care,
 Grab your chance, man, while it’s there!
 Take the chick home, don’t be lame,
 “Tell your friends to do the same”
(transl. Ingrid Roed)

Or the verse he calls **Hefnargjöfin** (Revenge Gift), that deals with his favourite theme, brennivín:

Hvenær skal ég læra svona að lifa,
 að lífið verði mér ei hefndargjöf;
 enn má drottin skuld hjá K.N skrifa,
 já, skyldi ég eiga að fylla ‘drunkard’s’ gröf?
 Nú er ég veikur eftir þetta ‘spree’,
 og ‘it is plenty good enough for me’.

When will I ever learn how to live
 So life doesn’t take its revenge on me;
 Still the Lord K.N.’s debt will not forgive.
 Is a drunkard’s grave the sure end I see?
 Now I am growing sick of this spree
 and it is plenty good enough for me.
(transl. Ingrid Roed)

And the unforgettable entertaining turn-about of the poem by Longfellow, **The Arrow and the Song**. In Longfellow’s poem the poet shoots the arrow into the air and out of sight and he does not see where it lands. Then he whispers a poem into its wake and again does not know where it goes. A long time later he finds the arrow stuck in a tree and the poem, from beginning to end, in the heart of his friend.

This is completely turned around in Káinn’s poem, **Örin og Ljóðið (The Arrow and the Verse)**:

Upp i loftið ör ég skaut,
 og einhvern fjandann burt hún þaut,
 en hrafn sem sat á hári grein,
 Hélt það væri „aeroplane”.

Á eftir henni litið ljóð
 um loftið sendi ég beina slóð;
 og hrafn, sem uti á haugi sat,
 með hörkubrögðum eygt það gat.

En ör og ljóð ég aftur fann
 og aldrei þeim fundi gleyma kann;
 á húsgangsrölti hitti ég ljóð,
 í hjarta vinar örin stóð.

The Arrow and the Verse

I shot an arrow into the air,
 Some devil took it who knows where.
 But Raven sitting high in a tree
 Thought: looks like an “aeroplane” to me.

Next a little verse I sent
 Straight skyward; who knows where it went.

And Raven sitting on a grave down low
Strained his eyes to see it go.

Both arrow and verse again I see,
I'll never forget this memory:
The verse crumpled at a hallway's end,
The arrow stuck in the heart of a friend.
(*transl. Ingrid Roed*)

I don't want to waste your precious time reading my text on Káinn's poetry; instead I suggest you read his books. They contain countless examples of 'Western-Icelandic', but those verses, for obvious reasons, were not as popular in rural Iceland as his other poetry.

Sunshine in Dakota

Naturally, Káinn wrote about more



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things than we have considered here. Like other Western Icelanders, he was a man of two cultures, his feet firmly planted in the West but his heart still bound to the old country, though it had little to offer him. A great love for this new 'foster home' in Dakota is another characteristic of Káinn's poetry.

These poems were not as well received in Iceland, where, as I mentioned earlier, there was resentment regarding emigration to the West. Those Icelandic-North Americans, mostly of the second or third generation, who visited the remote areas of Borgarfjörð in my youth were considered odd. They spoke poor Icelandic with an American accent, and it was great sport to imitate them. In the case of the poem **Sunshine in Dakota**, people twisted Káinn's words. I think they took it as ironic. But it is a lovely poem:

Þegar vetur vikur frá
og veðrið fer að hlýna, -
þá er fögur sjón að sjá
sólina okkar skína.

Sunshine in Dakota

When the winter winds have waned
And warm breezes play
What a lovely sight to see
The sunshine on your day.

Then everything that is good is listed: the wheat, the hay, the pike (a freshwater fish), the cows, the minister and the unforgettable brennivín.

„Alcohol” er hægt að fá,
helst ef fólk er lasið,
þá er fögur sjón að sjá
sólina skína á glasið.

If one can get a bit of gin,
At best by illness hinting
Then 'tis a pretty sight the sun
Upon the bottle glinting.

(transl. from Embassy of Washington article)

In the delightful poem entitled **Minni Dakota-Byggðar**, (In honour of the Dakota County) which was considered inappropriate for Icelandic patriots or young people – he compares the old country with the new and says:

Pó vanti þig fossana, firðina og margt
sem fjallkonan gat okkur veitt,
Þá bætir upp akranna skinandi skart
og skóglendið völdugt og breitt.
Þú sveltir ei börn þín, sveitin mín kær,
og solskinið lætur þeim falt;
allt sem þau þarfnast í görðunum grær,
og Guð hefur blessað það allt.

(Editor's note: Poem states that although there are no waterfalls and mountains in Dakota there is sunshine and rich farm fields but the old country, there is poverty and hunger. None-the-less, God blesses all.)

In poems he calls **Brot (Pieces)** that I never heard recited, he addresses Iceland 'that proud Mountain-Queen'. In spite of everything, he wants to show her his respect, but the tone is bitter:

Það eg lengi muna má, -
mig þú burtu flæmdir
mínum bernskuárum á,
útleigð sekan dæmdir.

Blærinn væri annar á
ástarkvæðum mínum,
mig ef sett þu hefðir hjá
hirðskáldunum þínum.

(Editor's note: Here he describes how, in spite of his love for his mother country, she has forced him to move away)

Káinn in his time and place

Káinn was well known on both sides of the Atlantic. There is no debate about that. In both places people enjoyed poetry about

brennivín, women and ministers, although his 'Western Icelandic' drew more laughs in the West than in Iceland. One sign of his popularity in Iceland around the middle of the last century might be the number of my contemporaries who can recite one of his poems when the occasion arises. When I was researching the themes of his poetry, I amused myself by making note of how many verses in the 1945 collection I had learned as a youngster. I counted about forty. Might that be a sign of how much enjoyment people got from his work?

Once did, but no longer do - or do they?

The ways people relax and enjoy themselves and what they think about is very different in 2017 than it was in 1891, when Sigurbjörg, the daughter of Stefán Gunnarsson from Mýrar in Skriðdal, was engaged to Björn Bjarnason, the nephew of Kristján Jónsson, the verser. I can well imagine that there are now many more people in Iceland than in the West who can enjoy the 'West-Icelandic' humour in Káinn's poetry. And I can also well imagine that young people very seldom quote Káinn's verses on their cell phones.

Those who enjoy Káinn's poetry these days are probably old artifacts like myself, who remember little other than what they learned in their youth, or else literature lovers or researchers. Yes, times and styles change. People are even beginning to enjoy 'piano-blubbering' and 'symphony-squawk'.

Playing With Language [Toga í Túngu: to play with your language tongue; Playing with words]

Then there is one aspect of Káinn's poetry that I am sure knowledgeable, literate people may study and enjoy. This is the way he plays with words, not his just use of 'West-Icelandic' but his talent for using words humorously. There are not

many Icelandic poets who, as one might say, 'strip down the language' as he did, creating humour with everyday words as in the poem:

Á Föllum Til Augnlæknis (Going to the Eye Doctor):

Silkisþjara sólin rara,
sín með ber augu,
ætla hann að fara að fara
að fá sér gleraugu.

Silken cloth the sun through,
Across his eyes it passes;
As he gets going to go to go,
To getting himself some glasses
Or Else:

Ég fer ekki fyrr en ég hætti,
og færi ekki,
þó að ég matti,
og hætti ekki fyrr en ég fer.

I will not go before I stop,
Though I could go,
I would not,
Before I go, I will stop.

Language, both Icelandic and West-Icelandic, was his plaything, and he relished playing with both. An amusing example is his poem called **Ágúst H.** which, as the title indicates, is about Ágúst H. Bjarnason, PhD in Natural Sciences and Psychology. He was the first professor at the University of Iceland with a PhD and was Chancellor of the university from 1918 to 1928. He visited the Icelandic communities in Canada and the United States and gave lectures there. He was always called Ágúst H., and Káinn used this in the following poem:

Ágúst H.

Nú heilsa ég heimspæking frægum
og hneigi mig. - Sæll vert þú -
heiðraði herra Ágúst,
H. - „do you do?”

Við braðum hér syðra að sjá þig
og setjast hjá þér í „bíl”
og hlusta á þig, herra Ágúst,
H. - „do you feel?”

Það er svo hressandi, heilnæmt,
og heimskuna dæmir í bann,
að hlusta á þig, herra Ágúst,
H. - lærðan mann.

Peir sem að þekkja þig vita,
þegar að komið er haust
heldur þú heimleiðis, Ágúst
H. - vaðalaust.

Now I greet the famed man of learning
With a bow - Pleased to meet you,
Honoured sir, Mr Ágúst
H. - How do you do?

We here down south have longed to meet
you;
For us, this is a big deal
Let's hear you talk, Mr Ágúst
H. - How do you feel?

So wholesome and invigorating,
All foolish thoughts you ban,
We devour your words, Mr. Ágúst
H. - such a learned man.

Those who know you surely know this:
That when summer turns to fall,
You'll be heading homeward, Ágúst
H. - no doubt at all.

(transl. Ingrid Roed)

(Editor's note: the play on the Icelandic/English is in that the letter 'H' is pronounced as 'How' on Icelandic)

The way he plays with the language and his agility and skill in versification were perhaps the two things that best accounted for his popularity. I say “versification” – this word is sometimes used pejoratively, as people say there is a

difference between a person who writes verse and a true poet, but versification can also be the primary characteristic of true poetry. Unnecessary words are so rare in Káinn's poetry that a single instance would break a poetry lover's heart.

Still another example of Káinn's popularity is that some verses are attributed to him that are not in any of his books. I, myself, know several such verses, but I will not bore you by reciting them. Some bear a very definite resemblance to his style, others not so much. There is a tendency to attribute well-known poems to well-known poets. And now since I have made such a respectable speech, I will allow myself to conclude it with an ambiguous verse, and you can make up your own minds as to whether it is legitimate or not.

A woman, named Mánnga appears several times in Káinn's poetry. In a poem called **Heiðarbylið** (The Hut on the Heath), a young girl who offers the poet overnight accommodation is very accommodating. She is called 'Beautiful Mánnga'. Another Mánnga is mentioned in one of Káinn's 'Threshing Poems'. There are several of these. Cutting and threshing grain was done in a rush. The English word "harvest" became "harðvist" in West-Icelandic, and in fact harvesting was hard work. In the harvest crew's food wagon, the 'carið' as the West-Icelanders called it, there was always a woman in charge. In a poem Káinn calls **Home, Sweet Home**, the woman is named Mánnga. And the story goes that Mánnga disliked the poet's drinking and she scolded him as he sat with his flask then Káinn said:

Heyrðu, Mánnga, brott á brá,
biddu á meðan, sérðu:
Pannig ganga þyrfti frá
þér að neðanverðu!

Listen Magga, swift to scold,
Let's let this discussion slide.
This how this talk will fold,
Stuffed up your own backside.

And he stuffed the cork back into the flask.

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(Translated by Elva Simundsson except where otherwise noted)

Káinn: The Greatest Poet of North Dakota

by Kevin Jón Johnson

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Kristján Niels Jónsson, born to a blacksmith and his wife in Akureyri in 1860, died of a stroke in the Pembina County of North Dakota on 25 October 1936. Known as K.N. Júlíus, he laboured on farms and dug graves for a living. Tammy Einarson calls him the greatest poet of North Dakota in her well researched essay in the Summer 1994 issue of *The Icelandic Canadian*. This year is the sixtieth anniversary of Káinn's death.

To celebrate the anniversary of this unique and gifted poet, an idea recommended to me by Baldur Schaldemose, I will rely on the efforts of Magnús Einarsson and draw some examples of Káinn's poetry from the resource of his book, *Icelandic Canadian Popular Verse*.

Tómas Oddsson of Arborg, Manitoba, remembered the following verse:

Ég er að skrifa hédan heim
því heill og feitur er,
og ennþá lifi á óstyrk þeim
sem ellin veitir mér.

Magnus Einarsson translates this poem, which reflects the typical ABAB rhyming pattern employed by Káinn, as follows: "I am writing home from here,/ As I am hale and hearty,/ And still live on the non-support/ Which old age grants me" (33).

After attending Mass one Sunday,

when the priest exhorted the congregation on the many things in our behaviour that could be abandoned, Rósmundur Árnason of Elfros, Saskatchewan, remembered the reply of the poet:

Kvennfólkið er að kyssast
og kemst svo aldrei af stað;
það er nú eitt sem mætti missast
minnið þið prestinn á það.

This translates as: "The women are always kissing/ And can never get going;/ That's one thing that could be eliminated,/ Remind the priest about that." Einarsson notes that Icelandic women customarily greeted each other with a kiss, in those days (94).

On another occasion, when K. N. dirtied his hands cleaning a barn, an itinerant preacher, Sigurður Sigvaldason, challenged the poet as to the nature of his beliefs. Unsatisfied by the reply that K.N. did not believe in anything, Bible Siggí pressed further. Ásgeir Gíslason of Leslie, Saskatchewan remembered the spicy reply:

Kýrassa tók ég trú,
trú þeirri held ég nú;
í flórnum fæ ég að standa
fyrir náð heilags anda.

Einarsson translates: "I placed my faith in a cow's ass,/ That faith I hold onto now;/ In the dung channel I'm allowed to stand/

By the grace of the Holy Ghost" (95).

Something of Káinn's gift for parody appears in the following lines remembered by Páll Hallson of Winnipeg. The poet refers to the American liquor prohibition in this contemporaneous verse:

Pá voru landar miklir menn,
meiri en jötnar í hömrum.
Margur fékk kjaftshögg, ég man það enn,
meðan við drukkum á kömrum.

This translates as: "Our compatriots were mighty back then,/ Mightier than giants in cliffs./ Many got a blow in the chops, I remember it still,/ When we drank in outhouses" (138).

Gísli Gillis of Wynyard, Saskatchewan recalled this verse about a hard winter. Siggí Ptarmigan, so named for his dapple-coloured hair, shared a room with K.N.:

*Vetraförða eigum ei
utan skuldasúpu,
það veit Guð og María mey
um mig og Siggá rjúpu.*

Einarsson translates: "We don't have winter provisions,/ Except for some soup on credit,/ God and the Virgin Mary know that/ About me and Siggí Ptarmigan" (148-149).

On another occasion, Káinn perceives something of the brevity of life, and the surety of decay, when observing his roommate Siggí asleep:

Það veit Guð mér gremst að sjá
gráflökkótta kúpu
þegar ég fer að háttá hjá
henni Siggú rjúpu.

This recollection, also from Gísli Gillis of Wynyard, Saskatchewan, translates as follows: "God knows it irritates me to see/ The grey-patched skull/ When I go to bed down with/ Siggí ptarmigan" (367).

When a friend had lost his girlfriend, and asked K.N. to produce a fitting, forlorn

poem, Sveinn Björnsson of White Rock, British Columbia remembered the reply:

Ég hvíldi þreytta hjartað
Við hvelfdan barm á þér
og þúu lagðir vinstra lærið
við lærið hægra á mér.

This translates as: "I rested my tired heart/ At your swelling bosom/ And you laid your left thigh/ Up against my right thigh" (307-308). In English poetry, this ironic change in tone in the final two lines is called "bathos." The parodist wields bathos with precise and constant skill.

The comic tradition of writing that K.N. Júlíus belongs to traces back in Icelandic literature to the some-times humorous and sexually explicit comments recorded in the sagas. In the western tradition of literature, such wit, sarcasm, parody, and word-play stretches back to the Greek dramatist, Aristophanes, whose raucous and racy language entertained thousands of Athenians each year in the Classical Age. The Athenians used the farfetched, fanciful and bawdy plays of Aristophanes to break the tension of the tragedies, with which they competed for attention, during a period when they fought for survival against the Spartans in the Peloponnesian War. Humanity always has a need for humour.

The great American humorist, Mark Twain, sometimes despaired because he could not write serious, tragic and profound literature. Writing with a darker theme, even in the Icelandic literature of North America, seems to gain in significance over "less serious," humorous writing. This bias, which claims that tragic literature lays closer to the heart of the Norse Muse, recommends the superiority of Stephansson and Guttormsson to Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason and Káinn.

Comparing Aristophanes to Sophocles, Mark Twain to William Faulkner, or Káinn

to Stephansson is like comparing kangaroos to pigeons – there is little ground for comparison, and therefore little ground for preference. Tragic and humorous elements intertwine in experience, and these strands of literature ought not to be spread apart, studied and rated.

Tammy Einarson called K.N. Júlíus the greatest poet from North Dakota. Sixty years after his death, his drinking songs are still sung in Iceland, which supports the merit of such praise. To many, laughter may seem_ a greater gift than seriousness of purpose.

K.N. Júlíus honoured

by Christine Hall, Mountain North Dakota

Reprinted with permission from Lögberg-Heimskringla, 24 September 1999

Christine Hall (nee Geir) was the youngest of the Geir family with whom K N. Julius lived for many years in Mountain, ND. The following is her address delivered at the rededication ceremony of the K. N. Julius monument at Mountain ND. on Monday August 2.

President Grímsson, dear friends who are gathered here to honour the memory of K.N. Júlíus.

I am the oldest of the Geir family where K. N. had his home for forty years. I've been asked to say a few words about the K. N. we knew and loved. It is in looking back that we have collie to realize how privileged we were that through all our growing up years we had him m our midst, and how much our lives were enriched. We knew he was a well-known poet, but little did we dream he would one day be deemed a literary giant. To us he was just K. N. He had his special place at the dining table, his special rocking chair in the front room and upstairs he had the south room.

An endearing trait of his was his love for children. In thinking about this I've come to realize that this special love he lavished on two generations of Geir children. When he first came here my grandmother was a widow with four children. Ours was a family of eleven. There are no words to tell of his loving kindness, his patience and gentleness. It was so usual that the toddler in the family was perched on his knee. The little verses he wrote about us we cherish.

I have many memories of people who came to our home to visit him. Those he enjoyed very much.

Throughout his life he gave so much of himself. The work he did was hard work. He helped with chores, he worked in the harvest: field, he built chimneys, he dug the graves, I've wondered how many, and some in the dead of winter. And when there was work to be done, he was always there. Not only with hard work did he give of himself but also with his loving kindness and his warm friendship.

He helped my grandmother survive through unspeakable grief and hardship. I think she became a sort of a mother figure in his life. He came to America at the age of eighteen, having lost his own mother at a young age. I was often aware of the depth of his feelings, how deeply he sympathized with those who were hurt or grieving.

I remember K. N.'s tears when grandmother died. I also remember my own tears when after he had passed away, I was going through some papers that had come from his room. There I came upon a poem he had written at the time of her death. His own grief was expressed, but he didn't just mourn for himself, but for all of us. This was so typical of him, this depth of feeling and concern for others.

K. N.'s legacy of course, is his poetry. But speaking for my siblings and myself, our dearest wish is that he also be remembered for the very special person he was. We all remember him with much affection.

There aren't words to say thank you to all who have made this restoration and re-dedication possible. I will ask God's blessings on the memory of K. N. Julius, the poet and the friend.

Til Stíunu litlu Geir
eftir K. N. Júlíus
Síðan fyrst ég sá pig hér,
sólskin þarf ég minna.
Gegnum lífið lýsir mér
ljósið augna þinna.

150 years since the birth of K.N. (Kristján Níels Júlíus)

New CD from Baggalútur Sólskinið í Dakota

Reprinted with permission from Lögberg-Heimskringla, originally courtesy of the Embassy of Iceland Washington newsletter, Vol. 2. No.6 April 2010

When we visit the Heritage Center at Icelandic State Park in Mountain North Dakota, the Stephan G. Stephansson monument at Garðar, ND and K.N.'s (Kristján Níels Júlíus) grave at the ruins of the Þingvallakirkja outside of Mountain, ND, we are reminded of the past. How Stephan G., one of Iceland's most beloved poets, who lived at Garðar with his family in the 1880s, before moving to Markerville in Alberta, was able

to overcome unbelievable difficulties.

We are also reminded that this month, on 7 April 2010, 150 years have passed since K.N., who also is one of the most beloved Icelandic poets, was born. He left Iceland in 1878 and lived in Pembina, ND till his death in 1936. Last year in June in nearby Grafton, ND Kristín Hall celebrated her 100th birthday. She and her generation and many much younger people of Icelandic descent, both in the

USA and Canada, still speak Icelandic. She is “Stína litla” in K.N.’s poem. These and many other Icelandic heritage matters are precious, their value cannot be calculated in monetary terms. They must be preserved forever. There are many ways to preserve the heritage, traditional and new. One new way is the Baggalútur way. Recently the Icelandic Baggalútur band travelled in this area of North Dakota and also above “the line” to Gimli, MB, and got to know the people there, the descendants of the Icelandic settlers, most of whom left Iceland between 1870 to 1914. They made wonderful modern music to K.N.’s poem for Kristín Hall’s birthday. Baggalútur did more than that. The band was so taken by what they experienced during their trip that they produced a whole CD called *Sólskinið í Dakota* with their fabulous music and singing to K.N.’s and Stephan G’s poetry. With Baggalútur, Megas and Gylfi Ægisson also sing on the CD. What a perfect new and old Icelandic harmony! A modern popular band singing texts of K.N. and Stephan G. The Embassy highly

recommends Baggalútur’s CD, *Sólskinið í Dakota* – “The Sunshine in Dakota”.

See: baggalutur@baggalutur.is

Dakota Sunshine

When the winter winds have waned
 And warm breezes play
 What a lovely sight to see
 The sunshine on your day.
 If in Dakota land you dwell,
 And harvesters you meet
 What a lovely sight to see
 The sunshine on the wheat.
 When the meadows have been cut,
 and in rows it lay,
 What a lovely sight to see
 The sunshine on the hay.
 If you hunger for a treat
 And fish is what you like,
 What a lovely sight to see
 The sunshine on the pike.
 When you want a glass of milk,
 Oh, you may raise your brow;
 But it’s a lovely sight to see
 The sunshine on the cow



Baggalútur playing at Symposium

Reflections from North Dakota

*These vignettes come from the handwritten notes of **Halldora (Jónsson) Bjarnason**.*

To introduce her, the following are the opening paragraphs of her story.

My father, Halldór Jónsson from Litla Bakka í Hróarstúngu in Suður Múlasýsla and my mother Sigurbjörg Jónsdóttir originally from Berunesi near Faskruðsfjörður, Suður Múlasýsla. They came to America with their children, Thorunn age 19 or 20, half sister as my father was a widower when they married. Margaret Johanna age 9, Helga aged 3 and Rustikus a little over a year. He died from malnutrition on the trip from Iceland.

They were with many other people came by boat down the Red River from Duluth and landed on the shores of Lake Winnipeg, in Gimli in 1876. They lived in tents first and eventually a log cabin. There were a lot of hardships for those first four years as smallpox went through the settlement.

Thorunn had gone to Winnipeg to work as all able-bodied girls did and had met a man by the name of Oli Lee, a Norwegian. They married and moved to the Dakota Territory. In April, 1880 my parents started out to join them. My folks took as little as they could which I suppose was nearly all they had with the in a Red River cart from Gimli to Winnipeg. I remember my sisters saying that the grownups had walked and the little girls had taken turns at riding on top of the goods in the cart that was pulled by an ox.

They took a train to Pembina where they stopped to wait for Thorunn's brother-

in-law who was to meet them. They stayed with Björn Petursson and his wife Olafia for several days but the man did not come, so they started walking. The distance was forty miles into the wilderness. They walked twenty miles the first day and stayed with some pioneers who's home they saw. The next day they covered twelve miles and also stayed in a cabin that they saw along the way. The following day they covered the eight remaining miles to Thorunn's place. The trip was very memorable for them. In April with no roads, a few trails and snow and slush everywhere. In numerous places, the run off formed sloughs and riverlets and small lakes so deep that Dad had to carry Helga and Joa as they were so small. They never met the cart that was to meet them. He apparently had lost his way.

In spite of all this, the reunion was very happy. My family stayed with the Lees in their cabin.

They had a wee daughter, Dena two years old. Our own log cabin was built that summer and was very close to the Lees place.

In the end of July, Thorunn gave birth to a boy who was named Hilmar and on August 6th my mother gave birth to me. We were very happy for awhile when both the Lee children became ill with something that our folks had never seen before. My brother-in-law went to Grand Forks or Pembina, I don't remember which, to get a doctor. One came and said he did not know what ailed them and could not help, so after a short while both children died, a few days apart. Our happiness was short lived. My sister Thorunn told me years later that she had almost lost her reason

to live but she spent her time coming over to our house to spoil me. She said it had saved her from utter despair.

When I was not quite four years old my sister Joa was married to Stephen Johnson who owned a farm about 4 miles north east. Of that I remembered very little but since I have learnt

That by then the town of Grafton had come into being with a store or two and people moving into the neighbourhood so there was the place to buy things for the wedding party. I remember seeing Joa's wedding dress. It was made of material, something rather thin like cashmere in a very pretty shade of wine with a row of glass buttons of the same shade. The clerk sold her a very fine white net which she told Joa was the proper thing or the forerunner of the veil. Incidentally, this veil was passed over the right shoulder and crossed on the

left hip with a flower or a pretty ribbon bow and then there were a bunch of flowers in her hair. They moved to Stephen's farm but I don't remember anything special about that except that a little time later Helga who was 10 or 11 went to live with them as Joa was lonesome in a small cabin on the prairie miles from the next neighbour.

Poem to Björg Snifeld

(by Halldora Bjarnason)

Tap, tap, tap. Here comes the brigade
 Marching along in the birthday parade
 Led by the tiny comely queen
 The cutest old lady you've ever seen.
 Quick of motion and clear of eye
 Quietly greeting the passerby
 Knowing her age, I know you'll find
 Ninety-seven years she has left behind
 The work of a lifetime, a fabulous feat
 Of fortitude and courage now complete
 Has earned her the rarest rest and care
 And the right to our homage that few can
 share
 May the God of Mercy hold her little hand
 And help her to Cross the Bar at journeys
 end

Incidents from Cashel, North Dakota

by Halldora Bjarnason

(These events would have taken place around 1885 to 1889)

A man who had been a hired hand asked if he could get married at our house the next time the minister came to preach. (Our house was used as the gathering place.) He was told he could and the outcome was that another couple decided to marry at the same time. So, the day was set and weddings would take place on a certain Saturday at 6:30 PM. Planning for the party was got going and I was beside myself with excitement. Such things were


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exciting to think about. I had not attended a wedding since Joa's and Steve's and then I was too young to remember much about it.

Baking started with cookies about the middle of the week and the tantalizing smell of baking fancy edibles kept me on my toes. Friday the preparations went on as before but one of the brides turned up to help. Saturday morning everything was going at once and then Thorlakur (one of the grooms) came to see if he could do something. The other bride came about noon and the other groom came just after dinner. Next came the minister near coffee time and after 5:00 PM guests started coming in buggies, democrats and lumber wagons. Every Icelandic person in the community was invited. Nearly all came and then people from other communities from where the brides came from arrived. There were so many horses and wagons. I was very anxious not to miss anything.

Then came the big event. The brides came in dressed alike in nice afternoon dresses and they looked radiant. The minister opened his book and read, asked a couple of questions and they answered. So this was getting married, I discovered! After there was a lot of handshaking and kissing, laughter and talk. Then everybody had supper. Oh, such a lot of good things to eat. More talking and laughing and things that grownups entertain themselves with until quite late, then more coffee and goodies. Neighbours went home but those who came a long way stayed the night for the minister was going to hold a service the next morning. The way the people were put up was that the upstairs in the lumber house had not been finished so hay was carried upstairs the day before and two huge beds were made along the sides of the room. These were covered with blankets and sheets and what not. The women rested on the

hay bed on one side of the room and the men on the other side and all got a good night's sleep.

Come morning, everybody was fed breakfast and at 11 o'clock the service was held. The people who left the night before were all back for the church service. After the service, dinner was served to most, a very few of the neighbors went home but came back after dinner for coffee and fun. After the coffee, the minister left for his home and charge some thirty miles away and then the people started enjoying themselves. The party lasted until very late and all or most had slept in the loft the night before were there again but left Monday morning after breakfast.

By noon, all the guests were gone.

Another incident that happened was an accident. On a Saturday afternoon the farmers around us went to Grafton to do some shopping and to take some crop to market. It was a lovely day and as the minister was to hold a service the next morning at our place they expected to bring back a number of people. Soon after the noon hour the people that were coming were ready and the two loads of people in lumber wagons got started, one a little ahead of the other. The first one had eight or nine people. They had taken as many as the wagon could hold. All were happy and started singing as soon as they got underway. They drove maybe a couple of miles in this happy mood when a pair of runaway bronco horses came from behind so close that when the driver of the wagon had noticed it and got the team to veer over to one side enough to get out of the way, this run-away team was upon them. They struck the wagon box on the back, swept it over. This threw a man that was standing in the corner out of the box and also a woman who was sitting on a back seat. The driver of the wagon had been able to guide the horse a little

to one side so the horses ran away past but not before the horses struck the back of the wagon. Those people in the front seat and the other side were not hit but the man who was thrown out fell clear of the wagon but the woman was somehow tangled in the fall so she may have been dragged. Nobody knew for certain, but she was dead when the people could get to her. The man who was thrown from the wagon had been knocked senseless for a spell and a bit bruised but was eventually able to get up and walk.

They all went back to town to report the accident and to take the corpse to wait or burial and church service the next morning. It was a sad affair as the following Monday when she was buried in the cemetery that had been used not far from Cashel. I can still remember seeing the corpse in the coffin. The horse shoe mark on the side of her face was deep and

ugly. Mother allowed me to see it, saying it would prepare me for life to see and hear these things. I was nearly eight years old.

Another memory was the reading society being formed. Everyone pooled their books and each took a book. Soon after they were practicing a play from "*Maður og Kona*". Who knows; maybe this was the first attempt at acting an Icelandic play ever tried in America. I remember the people saying it came off very well for the facilities and place they had.

There had been now four of five years that an attempt had been made to have a religious congregation. The Grafton "sofnuður" (congregation) had been holding services four times a year with the Gardar minister in attendance. Services had been held in our house because it was big enough to hold the members of

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the community nearby. My brother-in-law had been chosen for president very early but Olafur Gudmundson who had been very much in the limelight when the congregation came into being was the representative to the Lutheran Synod once or maybe oftener.

One thing struck me as being very funny happened during service one Sunday morning. A visiting couple that were staying or living in Grafton were there. This man had been known to be a great singer. He was asked to lead the singing as there were no musical instruments. He very graciously accepted and when the minister read the hymn. He began singing in too high a key so when in each of the four or five verses he reached for the high notes by opening his mouth wide and stretched his neck all while fanning himself with the hymn book. He even stood on his toes and managed to make a very high-sounding voice. I got reprimanded for smiling while this went on or maybe for a subdued giggle.

Drought hit for several years. The first year, my sister Thorunn and Oli Lee sold their big farm and moved to Washington Territory. He took with him his hired men, two or three, furniture and even the dog. His cousin Peter Lee went too. The next years of drought, Steve sold his farm as well as most of the other Cashel Icelanders. There was such a shortage of water. Steve had put up his farm for sale in the spring and then proceeded to plant his field with grain. No rain had fallen so things did not look good. Early in June just a week after he finished seeding a nice rain shower came and everything began to show a little green. Just then, someone who was interested in the farm came out to see it and found it looking good, so he bought it. No more rain came that summer so the new owner plowed all the fields under before the summer was

over. The trouble on those farms was and is still, I suppose, that there is so much salt in the earth that it was not possible to dig a well deep enough to get unsalted drinking water for either people or cattle. It all had to be brought in and Park River was then the nearest place to us and it was about two miles away.

Saturday morning, July 13th, 1889 we boarded the train for Winnipeg. Steve and Joa, dad and mother, Helga and I. We waited on the platform at Cashel for the train. I was very curious and really frightened. I had seen the train approach and stop at the station before but now I was going to board this black monster. I was both curious and frightened. Those sensations gripped me when I saw it coming at the curve a little to the west of town. I was so petrified that Steve had to hoist me up onto the step. That was the beginning of one day that I will never forget. It was the beginning of a life away from our farm and of a brand new life in a strange city.

(The Halldora Bjarnason handwritten manuscripts are held in Gimli Manitoba's New Iceland Heritage Museum artifacts and archives collection and are reproduced here courtesy of the Museum.)

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„Heima í Eyjafirði“ At Home in Eyjafjörður

by Jón Hjaltason

In October 1856 the blacksmith Jón Jónsson marries Þórunn Kristjánsdóttir. He is listed as being 28 years of age and this is his first marriage. Of Þórunn there is very little mention in the church register other than that she is said to have resided in Akureyri, as had the bridegroom.

They are an unlikely couple. He is big and strong with coarse features and temperament. On the other hand, she is small, delicately built, pretty, friendly and cheerful. He is a drinker, she is quite religious and not given to alcohol; in fact it would have been considered heretical for a 19th century Icelandic woman to be seen to be under the influence. However, their opposite personalities appear to suit one other and Þórunn and Jón the blacksmith get along well. Some nine months after they marry, the 19th of July 1857 a son is born to them, who is then christened Jón Júlíus. Two years later – 7th of April 1859 – they have another son, Kristján, named after his maternal grandfather, and Niels in honour of his father's brother, Niels Jónsson. the Skagafjörður poet.

Both sons are born in Akureyri but by the time Kristján Niels sees daylight for the first time, a restlessness has come upon his father. He finds it difficult to live in the home within the crowded town area and has essentially already made up his mind to move some time before Kristján Niels is born. In January, 1859, Jón the blacksmith advertises in the newspaper Norðri: „Because I am not happy here in Akureyri, I wish to move from here out into a more

rural area.“ He must have been somewhat successful because he has a house to sell and asks those interested to contact him to discuss the sale.

That spring, the family moves across the bay and Jón becomes the farmer at Öngulsstöðir in that county. He occupies a half a farmstead which became available when the previous owner lost his life in a blizzard the previous winter. At Öngulsstaðir, they celebrate little Kristján's first birthday but a year later, in May 1861, Jón the blacksmith has had enough of the trials of farming. The family packs up all its belongings and moves back across Eyjafjarður and resettles at Akureyri. Kristján Niels has then just turned two years of age.

Now the family under Þórunn Kristjánsdóttir og Jón the smith's roof begins to expand. (Akureyri folk couldn't be bothered with such a long word as blacksmith and shortened his title which wasn't considered inappropriate.) There were the two sons, Jón Júlíus and Kristján Niels. They then acquired a sister. She was born in early December 1861 and is called Eleonóra Valgerður. Three years later, in October 1864, Jósep Vilhjálmur is born. Two years have passed when the midwife, Hildur Snorradóttir, is called to the little house on the bay shore where the woman of the house is in labour. Soon there were loud cries from the little girl who is, a few days later, given the name Steinunn Cecílía. This is in September 1866. There are now five siblings and one more is added to the count;

Kristinn Bjarni is born in March 1868. The joy of the birth of this little child is short-lived. The winter has been difficult for the household and the family is forced to ask for assistance from the town to survive.

– “Yes, we will loan Jón blacksmith some rye that he can pick up from Möller and Steincke which he can then repay at a later date,” the town council has decreed early in January. Then later, in June of that year there is further mention that the same agreement that has been reached with other households within the town that were in the same difficulties as the blacksmith had been the winter before.

The children of the couple on the bay are beginning to move out. To relieve some of the stress within the household, Jón Júlíus is fostered out to the couple at Brekka in Kaupvangssveit and they become his foster parents. A few months later, in August of this same year, the family again is diminished. Jósep Vilhjálmur, who was just two months short of his fourth birthday, lives his last day in this world. What was the cause of his death, we don't know. No illnesses were reported within the town, colds or otherwise. And the church registry has only a brief mention of the death of this boy. There is a mother in mourning and a father who uses every excuse to get into the drink. His neighbour, Bjarni Jónsson, is appalled at this behaviour and labels him the town drunk.

– “Both the high and the low are guilty of the same bad behaviour,” writes Björn in his diary in October of 1868. “The doctor is said to enjoy a drink as does Hansen the pharmacist, Stefán Thorarensen the regional alderman, the storekeeper P. Th. Johnsen and Lauritz H. Jensen barrel-maker and innkeeper. These are all well respected men in the town. Then there are others, such as Jón the smith as well as those unmarried men who drift through here off and on,” writes Björn.

This unruliness by her husband disturbs Þórunn to no end. The household is destitute, it is evident that the children are not being fed properly, but instead of working and earning, the blacksmith just drinks everything away. She threatens to leave him but she stays long enough so that another child is conceived. The seventh and youngest child of the blacksmith's couple on the bay shore is born on the 1st of October 1870 and is named Rósa Sigríður. In the church registry it shows that the child was christened in the church. Godparents are the neighbours in the bay, all upstanding folk in the town, Jón Chr. Stephánsson carpenter, Friðbjörn Steinsson, bookbinder and his wife, Guðný Jónsdóttir.

In the house of the blacksmith, the difficulties continue. The wife has borne seven children. One of her children has



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died and another has been taken from her and fostered out to another family. There are five children at home that need to be fed and clothed. The husband is a drunk and for married women there is little work to be had outside the home in the town. Þórunn Kristjánsdóttir then has to rely on her husband's earnings and increasingly on the support from the town. But most of all, Þórunn relies on the hand and the help of Almighty God. Her belief in the Almighty is strong and unyielding.

– “The Bible is the book of all books”, says Þórunn, and teaches her children the sign of the cross and to say their prayers. But she also has a great deal of admiration for literature and verse and enjoys discussing poets and poetry with her friends. Maybe she teaches her children poetry by her relative, Jónas Hallgrímsson. And unbeknownst to her, she has borne a new poet for the Icelandic nation, a poet who will often look for his pleasure and peace of mind through drinking.

Eins og Þór er þorstlátur –
þar um frætt get rekka
verða sjórin þá mun þur
þegar ég hætti að drekka.

Like Thor who was always of thirst,
This is what I am thinking.
The seas would empty first,
Before I finally quit my drinking.

We will run over the younger years of our story's hero here, his schooling and confirmation, in order to hurry this story along, but early on, Kristján Niels begins to take on all the casual labour that he can find that was on offer for young men in the town. His father is more and more unable to take care of family's needs and continues to look to the town's authorities for assistance. He still owns the house in which the family lives but that was given as security for the

ever increasing loans from the town council.

Then the foundation of the home is taken from the family. There is a heavy storm cloud hovering over the little house on the bay. The woman of the house, Þórunn Kristjánsdóttir, becomes bedridden and does not recover. She is taken from her five children when her death occurs on the 28th of March 1873. Kristján Niels is the oldest, going on to his fifteenth year and Rósa Sigríður the youngest, only two years old. In the newspaper, *Norðanfari*, Þórunn is eulogized with these words: “she had been blessed with a strong personality; and I believe had all the qualities that a good woman should have”.

At the death of Þórunn Kristjánsdóttir, the household is split up. Jón the blacksmith sells the house and the children are fostered out to various good folks. At Jódísarstaðir in eastern Eyjafjörður there is a man, Davíð Kristjánsson who farmed half the property. To that farm, the fourteen year old Kristján Niels Jónsson is directed. Davíð is his maternal uncle.

Kristján Niels spends two years at the home of Davíð Kristjánsson then from 1875 to 1878 he is a farm labourer at Helgársel in Garðsárdalur. The otherwise childless couple who takes him in there were Eiríkur Jóhannesson and Sigurbjörg Davíðsdóttir. North of Þverá and lower in the valley at the farmstead Þröm lives Guðlaugur, a brother to Eiríkur. There are a lot of interactions between these two farms and the son of the Þröm farmer, Kristinn Guðlaugsson, is well aware of an old gentleman who has taken to his cot and is going to end his life there under the roof of Eiríkur the farmer at Helgársel. The old fellow is well fed as Eiríkur is relatively well off and is generous and friendly enough when he is at home very reserved in the broader community and felt there had been little value to all he has done in his life. Sigurbjörg his wife is in her in her fifties, of poor health and old

before her years.

– She was an old woman then, was what Kristinn held in his memory when he was recollecting fate of the old man who stoically awaited his demise in the cot at Helgársel.

– The elderly housewife could not cope with the old fellow and the hired women were disgusted and ignored him, recalled Kristinn many years later.

Kristján Niels takes it upon himself then to help the old man because the old fellow is bothered by the unruly mess his beard and hair has become. Kristján trims his hair and beard and cleans him up as best he can and in return, receives a lot of praise.

“However, it was said that he did this in order to bring attention to himself“, wrote Kristinn. “But certainly I knew that not to be the case.”¹

We will remember Kristján’s mother here, Þórunn Kristjánsdóttir who was always willing and ready to lend her helping hand though she never had much from which to offer. Kristján Niels later recollected his mother’s example in the following poem:

Gulls og silfurs dyngjur stórar hef ég aldrei átt,
og ekki er heldur viti til að dreifa;
en feginn vildi’ eg hjálpa þeim, sem eiga
eitthvað bág,
allt, sem mínir veiku kraftar leyfa.

Much gold or money I have never made
Or even done well in how I live
But gladly would I, the troubled aid
With all that my feeble strength could give

The homeland did not manage to keep the young man at home. In June 1878 the city in the bay fills up with travellers who are waiting for the ship to transport their households west across the ocean. In this group is the hero of our story here, Kristján Niels, nineteen years old, registered as a farm hand at Helgárseli on his way to North America. He is travelling alone.

So the bond is broken, the one that holds one to their motherland. For what reasons, we ask? No one knows the reasons. Maybe he was influenced in 1877 by the writings of Jón Ólafsson of Ytra-Laugaland. But Jón was an agent for the Allan Lines Shipping Company and his opinions undoubtedly reached the young hired hand at Helgárseli because it was just a short distance between the farms Helgársel and Ytra-Laugaland. Others have speculated that it was a matter of love that sent Kristján Niels west, but for rather different reasons than that which often happens. A woman became enamoured with him, the story goes, but he could not return her affections and therefore took leave of the farm at Helgárseli so as not to further hurt the feelings of the woman in

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question, who was considerably older than he was.

The likeliest explanation is probably that his older brother, Jón Júlíus, had moved west two years earlier. None of this is verifiable, but perhaps we can ask ourselves: did Jón Júlíus write to his brother and urged him to slip out of his home-ties? Or was it the dream of something better that called him? To become more than just some hired hand out on a farm?

Many years later, Kristján Níels, (who was by then, well known both east and west of the Atlantic as K. N. or Káinn) pondered on this question, in verse form.

He didn't want to live in poverty back home in Iceland and in North America was the golden dream of prosperity:

Svo flúði ég feðra grundu,
mér fannst þar allt of þurrt;
að leita fjár og frama
ég fullur sigldi burt.

So I left my fatherland
I thought it much too dry
To look for riches and try my hand
I sailed off and cut the tie

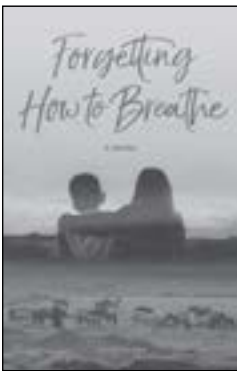
(transl. Elva Simundsson)

- 1 Kristinn Guðlaugsson: „Bernskuminningar Kristins á Núpi“, Menn og minjar, IX, (Reykjavík 1960), 16.

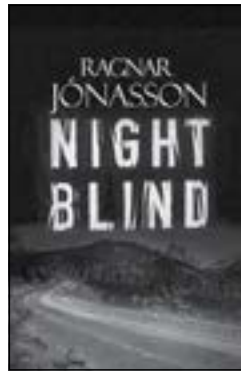
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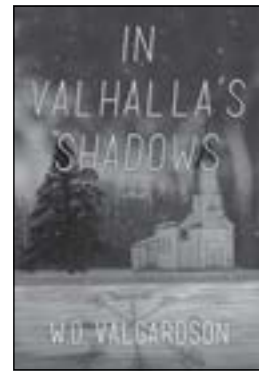
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PHONE ORDERS WELCOME

Kristjan Niels Julius (K.N.) four-part project

by Bill Holm

Reprinted with permission from Lögberg-Heimskringla, 7 December 1990

Kristjan Niels Julius (KN.) was born in north Iceland in 1860 and came to North America with the large wave of immigration in 1880. He was poor in Iceland, and remained poor here. He tried the Icelandic settlements in Canada, then Duluth, and finally settled in his thirties in Mountain, North Dakota, on the west ridge of the Red River Valley just south of Manitoba. He worked as a farm hand, grave digger and brick layer and lived in the south room of a small farmhouse that also housed 11 children, parents and a grandmother. He never married. He never attended school, on either side of the ocean. He was frequently drunk on vanilla extract, home brew, or any other alcohol he could cadge. Once in North Dakota, he never traveled further than a few miles from the farm where he had been given a room. At 60, he went to Winnipeg to supervise the galley proofs of a book of poems, but 10 years later, he was too broke to afford a good suit, and was ashamed to go back to Winnipeg in his old rough farm clothes, all he owned. When he was 75 years old, the Icelandic community gave him a birthday dinner and celebration, but he was drunk and had to be sobered up and then supervised in the Lutheran minister's house in order to be presentable to say a few words. The irony is that he was a vocal and notorious unbeliever and skeptic but considered the minister one of his best friends. The funeral

home for which he dug graves provided him with a free funeral when he died in 1936.

The facts of his life would merely be a typical story of tragicomic immigrant muddling and failure in a harsh obscure place, were it not for the fact that he is also one of the greatest and best known and loved poets of the Icelandic language in the 20th century. His complete poems have never been out of print in Icelandic, and were reissued in 1989 in a handsome, ferociously expensive standard edition. At a conservative estimate, 100,000 people know substantial amounts of his work by heart. The slightly spicy, obscene, satiric poems that he was too gentlemanly to print have been handed down intact orally for 54 years since he died. I have heard versions of them from at least 25 people, on both sides of the Atlantic.

This remarkably unremarkable man can tell us something with his life and work, and with the perceptions of, and stories about him that still persist two generations after his death, about the inner life of the pickled-in-amber immigrant culture that persisted for a few generations in every ethnic group. It had amputated the old world but didn't have time enough in one life to grow the new one inside itself. KN. Julius wrote Icelandic salted with English words, peppered with the malapropisms of immigrants who attached

Icelandic inflections and phonemes to English words, and new world meanings to unsuspecting ancient Norse words. He is

thought by Icelanders to have done for this old literary language what Whitman and William Carlos Williams did for English.



Káinn Memorial in Akureyri

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Editor's note: Due to the uniqueness of this issue serving as the Proceedings of the Akureyri Káinn Symposium, the conclusion of the Dr. Anne Brydon essay – "Dreams and Claims: Icelandic-Aboriginal Interactions in the Manitoba Interlake" will be published in the next issue.





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Háskólan á Akureyri, bjóð til miðlings
sem Akureyringinn Káinn, Kristján Nicl
Július Jónsson, í hálfdárla Háskólan
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Costajófr: Sigrún Sarfinsdóttir, formaður afmálinvafndar Háskólans á Akureyri.

Ávarp: Tirkur Björn Björgvinsson, bæjarstjóri Akureyrar.

Setning: Hjalmar W. Harðsson, formaður Þjóðraknabólags Íslandings.

Miðgjafi: Eleanor Geir Bláské og Ed Bláské ávarpa niðurstöfuggerði. Þessi er skylt

að geta að Eleanor er sennlega eins nuffandi manneskjan, vestan haft og

austan, er hafði persónuleg kynni af Káinn. Erlend sitt nefna þau: KH Julius The

Poet with calloused hands- Life on the Geir Farm.

Tónlist: Vandvæðaskáldin, Sesselja Ólafsdóttir og Vilhjálmur Bergmann

Jón Hjalason sögnfræðingur: Af hverja landflótti til Vesturlands?

Jónas Þór sögnfræðingur: Norðurlandamerískt samfélag - Íslandsk aðlögun.

Víður Hreinsson bókmenntafræðingur: Pegasus í fjölsmu og kynrassatrú.

Var Káinn skáld eða hagræðingur?

13.30-13.15 Matarhlé

13.15-15.00 Ljóst Káins

Fundarstjóri: Hölmekill Hreinsson

Bóðvar Guðmundsson íRitöfundur: Míran Káinn.

Hulda Karen Daníelsdóttir, verkefnastjóri hjó Reykjavíkurborg:

K. N. í Lögbergi Heimskringla á Ínusum 1990-1992.

Heigi Freyr Halldórsson, verkefnastjóri við NA: Frá K til N: Frá Káinn til nútímans.

Tónlist: Buggalötur

15-15.30 Kaffivælingar

15.30-16.40 Káinn í samtímanum

Fundarstjóri: Kristín Margrét Jóhannsdóttir

Egill Helgason dagbláðendurásmáður: Káinn settur í sjónsarp.

Sanna Pam Furstenau, forseti Icelandic Roots og forseti Þjóðraknabólags Íslandings í

Norður-Ameríku: Káinn's Thingvalla - Connections, Celebrations, and Community.

Bragi Veldimar Skúlason: Steina og Stjárn.

Tónlist: Buggalötur

16.40 Sítt

Kristín Margrét Jóhannsdóttir

Kæra niðurstöfuggerði, þúft hugfest að eftir allt miðlingsins, eða skúkan (17-15), verður afþjafaður réttisverði um Káinn sem Akureyrarber
hefur fergilíf að gíff þá Íslandsk Roots, the Icelandic Communities Association of NE North-Dakota og þá skólanum Káinn, Bazarýfrvöld
stærka fyrir athléttinní sem verður í fjósseni, írest í Amtsbókun, ekkí þessi þerðingur stafr Káinn. Þessu eru allar þjortaríngi velkomin.

Styrktaröðflur: Akureyrarbarar - Icelandair - K&A - Kjarnafæði - Utanríkisráðuneytið - Norðurloka

The Káinn symposium agenda held August 26, 2017

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