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### SEVERING THE TIES - ICELAND'S JOURNEY FROM A UNION WITH DENMARK TO A NATION-STATE

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# Guðmundur Hálfðanarson

## SEVERING THE TIES – ICELAND'S JOURNEY FROM A UNION WITH DENMARK TO A NATION-STATE

*At the time of the foundation of the Icelandic republic in 1944, most Icelanders regarded the dissolution of the union with Denmark as a natural conclusion of a long struggle for freedom. The fact is, however, that the idea of self-determination only emerged in the early 19th century, gaining total hegemony a century later. This article explores this sudden paradigm shift in the Icelandic political discourse.*

'The long-awaited goal of this nation's struggle for political freedom has been attained', Gísli Sveinsson, the Speaker of Alþingi, declared elatedly as he and his fellow members of the Icelandic parliament celebrated the foundation of the Icelandic republic on 17 June 1944. 'At last, the nation has returned home with all of its belongings, sovereign and independent. The political severance from a foreign country is completed. Icelandic republic has been established. Ancient liberty has been reclaimed'. Sveinsson's words echo universally held sentiments in Iceland at the time, as everyone seemed to regard the termination of over half a millennium of political union with the Danish monarchy and the founding of a fully independent Icelandic nation-state as absolutely self-evident. 'It was as a long and difficult journey was finally over', another contemporary observer remarked, 'and we had come home, home, home'.<sup>1</sup>

These words reflect the foundational myths of the Icelandic republic, because for its 'founding fathers' the day marked not an establishment of a new state but a fulfillment of an ancient dream. The republican ideal had lived with the nation through centuries of humiliation, they maintained, because to them the new regime was the true constitutional heir of the so-called Icelandic commonwealth of the period before the country's entrance into the Norwegian monarchy in the late 13th century.<sup>2</sup> In this way, they anchored the very modern ideas of 'national liberty' and 'self-determination' in Icelandic history, and thus the foundation of the republic had to be seen as something more than 'one sacred moment, filled with vague nationalist sentiments', to quote the leader of the Socialist Party, Einar Olgeirsson. Rather, the independence of Iceland was, to quote Olgeirsson, the 'crown of a long and incessant struggle for liberty, full of sacrifices. It was the victory that the nation finally

accomplished – deserved and just victory, which previous generations had earned through an obstinate and persistent struggle, armed and unarmed’.<sup>3</sup>

This line of reasoning served a very particular political purpose at the time of the establishment of the Icelandic republic. Thus, in spite of the absolute unity when it came to the actual secession from Denmark, the timing of the dissolution of the union had been criticized in Iceland both on legal and moral grounds. In 1944, Denmark was under German occupation, and therefore a group of Icelandic intellectuals advocated a delay in the secession proceedings until the end of the war. Moreover, the group argued, it was doubtful if Iceland could abrogate the Act of Union with Denmark unilaterally, because the 18th article of the act specifically stated that it could only be terminated through formal negotiations between the two countries.<sup>4</sup> The war rendered deliberations of this sort impossible, and therefore the opponents of speedy secession encouraged their compatriots to be patient and to wait until the negotiations could be carried through according to the strict interpretation of the law and the desired freedom thus achieved with full dignity.<sup>5</sup> The theory of incessant struggle against foreign oppression, as it was expressed in the public discourse of ‘the year of the republic’, served as an ideal response to these words of caution, as it legitimated the foundation of the new regime. The struggle for independence was ‘comparable to the fight of an enslaved person for full liberty and individual rights’,<sup>6</sup> a leading proponent of immediate abrogation of the Act of Union argued in 1943, and therefore he thought that Iceland had full moral right to sever its ties with the former ruling state when it saw it fit. As it turned out, the overwhelming majority of Icelanders agreed with him, because over 98% of those eligible to vote cast their ballot in a referendum on the new republic in the spring of 1944, and of these over 97% voted for a declaration of independence.<sup>7</sup>

In spite of its popularity, it is difficult to find much historical evidence for this idea of incessant struggle. Thus, until the end of the 18th century, even the staunchest patriots in Iceland used every opportunity to proclaim their loyalty to the Danish king, praising his benevolent government of the country. Eggert Ólafsson, the 18th-century naturalist and poet, who is often regarded as the precursor of Icelandic nationalism,<sup>8</sup> argued for example time and again that it was only through the caring guidance of the Danish king that Icelanders would have any hope of improving their economic and social conditions.<sup>9</sup> For him, Icelanders were certainly a distinctive people, speaking their own language and preserving unique customs, but that did not oblige them, in his view, to demand political autonomy.<sup>10</sup>

The call for autonomy of some sort emerged as late as the early 1830s and became hegemonic in the Icelandic political discourse around the mid-19th century. The nationalist turn of Icelandic politics was not an isolated affair, as similar change took place all over Europe in the same period, but what makes the Icelandic nationalist argumentation worthy of note is how successful it was in convincing the people it needed to convince, that is the prospective Icelandic nation as well as the Danish authorities. Thus, a counter-narrative, praising the Danish government for its civilizing influences on Icelandic society or suggesting closer relations between the mother country and the dependency, never developed in Icelandic politics. This is what makes the dissolution of the Icelandic-Danish union interesting; that is, why was the paradigm shift from total loyalty to the Danish monarchy in the late 18th century to nationalist orthodoxy around the mid-19th century so swift and thorough?

## What kind of Union?

In late June 1770, three royal commissioners came to Iceland from Copenhagen to study the economic and social conditions in this distant province of the monarchy.<sup>11</sup> The objective was to work out a plan for economic progress in Iceland, and thus to increase the inhabitants' welfare – which, in turn, was to boost the king's revenue from the island.<sup>12</sup> The commissioners traveled widely in Iceland through the summers of 1770 and 1771, receiving letters and reports from hundreds of Icelanders of various social ranks. Among the many documents stored in the commission's archives is a letter from Bjarni Jónsson, the rector of the Latin School in Skálholt in southern Iceland, offering a detailed list of suggestions on the advancement of Icelandic society. The first item on his agenda concerned the future role of the Icelandic language, and the relations between Iceland and other parts of the monarchy. 'I deem it not only to be useless', the rector stated, 'but also very harmful, to preserve the Icelandic language. As long as the Icelanders spoke the same language as the other Nordic nations, everyone regarded them highly; but at the present time, since their language has become incomprehensible to others, they are treated with disdain. This hampers their communication with other nations, in their trade and conduct. Why should one be so persistent in this respect? Let us follow the Norwegian and Faeroese examples and take up the Danish language, as we are under Danish rule and in communication with the Danish people'.

Jónsson lamented not only the Icelandic linguistic conservatism, but also suggested a modernization of the Icelandic fashion, and then of the women's dress in particular. Like in their speech, Icelanders had to adopt the dress codes of the people in other parts of the state if they wanted to be taken seriously in the world. 'The women's white headdress and black cap must be abolished', the rector insisted, 'and everywhere the clothes have to be fashioned according to Danish practices'.<sup>13</sup>

To the nationalist historian Jón Jónsson Aðils, these suggestions were shockingly unpatriotic and naïve. 'Is it not a dangerous situation', Aðils asked in 1910, 'when even the most distinguished men of the nation are so horribly mistaken?' For this reason, he dismissed Bjarni Jónsson's proposal as sheer subversive illusion.<sup>14</sup> If we look at Bjarni Jónsson's suggestions from the point of view of 18th-century politics, however, they make perfect sense. Since the Lutheran Reformation in the mid-16th century, the Danish government had attempted to integrate Iceland more closely into the administrative structure of the state, and cultural assimilation of the type suggested by Rector Jónsson was fully in line with these efforts. To put it differently, his idea was that Iceland would follow a route similar to the French provinces, where the upper social echelons were integrated into uniform French culture in the centuries before the French Revolution.

It is doubtful if Bjarni Jónsson's cultural assimilation was ever seriously considered in Copenhagen – it was at least never put into practice. Similarly, although in the second half of the 18th century one can find hints of growing opposition to the traditional linguistic purism in Iceland, which one of Jónsson's contemporaries referred to mockingly as 'Archaismos',<sup>15</sup> most of the leading lights in Iceland of the time were still intensely proud of their language.<sup>16</sup> Thus, one of the main objectives of the first periodical published in the Icelandic language, *Rit þess íslenska lærdómslistafélags* (the *Journal of the Icelandic Scientific Society*, 1780–1794), was to 'keep and preserve the Nordic language as a beautiful principal language [*sem eitt fagurt*

*Adalmaal*], which has been spoken for a long time in the Nordic countries, and to attempt to purify it of foreign words and expressions', as it was stated in its original program.<sup>17</sup> One can take Eggert Ólafsson as an example of these attitudes, as he abhorred all foreign influences on the Icelandic culture. People living close to the market villages on the southern coast, where Danish merchants peddled their goods, were generally degenerated slobs, he maintained, because 'they learn more bad things than good from the [foreign] salespersons'. Similarly, the peasants around the Latin School in Skálholt were among the worst in Iceland, because Latin and the other foreign languages taught in the school contaminated the peasants' speech.<sup>18</sup> In Ólafsson's opinion, there was a direct link between the cultural purity of the group and its moral stature, and thus he was convinced that it was necessary to preserve the Icelandic language and customs in their pristine form. 'We can see from many examples', he wrote in one of his essays, 'how deeply whole peoples have been transformed, after adopting other nations' customs and speech; from then on, they have turned fickle and lethargic, prone to take up foreign vices, and, after one generation, they do not recognize themselves'.<sup>19</sup>

These two 18th-century commentators represent diametrically different visions on the possible development of the Danish composite monarchy. Both agreed on the benefits for Iceland of belonging to it, but they disagreed totally on how the union between the center and periphery should evolve. Bjarni Jónsson sought inspiration in the universalistic ideals of the Enlightenment, believing modernity to emanate from the center of the state, spreading out to the underdeveloped periphery. According to this understanding, local idioms and languages impeded progress, as they sheltered superstitious beliefs and hampered the flow of information from the more developed parts of the realm to its backwaters. Thus, he argued for more cultural cohesion in the Danish monarchy, where Iceland should adopt, without any reservation, the dominating cultural modes of the state. Eggert Ólafsson, on the other hand, saw the state as a mosaic of cultural communities, united under one king. Language was to him much more than a tool of communication, because it was also the most important source for people's identities and the real basis for their moral behavior.

Ólafsson's opinions closely resemble Johann Gottfried Herder's emphasis on language and the *Volksgeist*, although he did not share the German philosopher's dislike for large, composite monarchies – which Herder described as 'unnatural expansion of states, the wild mixing of races [*Menschen-Gattungen*] and nations under one scepter ... without inner life and sympathy between the various parts'.<sup>20</sup> Thus, one could say that Ólafsson adhered to the basic cultural principles of 18th and 19th-century cultural nationalism, without adopting its political program. For this reason, one should not classify him as a nationalist, in part because the ideology did not exist in its modern form in Denmark in his lifetime.

These two visions on the union with Denmark took on entirely new meaning in the revolutionary period at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries, as democratic ideas and nationalism shattered the state structures of *ancien régime* Europe. To a certain degree, Jónsson's and Ólafsson's ideals presaged this change. The former advocated a transformation similar to the one later attempted in revolutionary and republican France, which developed from a multi-ethnic composite monarchy to *une et indivisible* nation-state, where the citizens spoke one language, and enjoyed equal rights. The latter signaled a future where nation-state boundaries were

drawn along cultural lines, breaking up existing empires or uniting small states into one polity. In other words, the two visions represented two different types of nation-state formation in Europe, which the German historian Friedrich Meinecke once called *Staatsnationen* and *Kulturnationen*.<sup>21</sup> As it turned out, only the second type gained support in 19th-century Iceland, as cultural nationalism became hegemonic in Icelandic politics.

### The Danish Leper

'I have often wondered', wrote a young Icelandic university student in Copenhagen, Gísli Brynjúlfsson, in his diary on 15 June 1848, 'why the Danes still possess Jutland, as often as it has been taken away from them ... they are like lepers, who lose one limb after another, and the same will happen now'. Two days later, Brynjúlfsson came across an article in the Danish newspaper *Berlinske Tidende*, translated from the English daily *Morning Chronicle*, where the division of Schleswig along linguistic lines was compared to a bloody amputation. This remark shocked Brynjúlfsson, because it implied that a 'country was like a living organism, and the nations should not automatically be separated! In my anger, I composed an Icelandic battle cry in my mind, against Danish bloodsuckers ...'.<sup>22</sup>

Brynjúlfsson's comments were written at the height of the insurrection in Schleswig-Holstein that had begun in the early spring of 1848. In his diary, one senses unflinching sympathy for the German rebels,<sup>23</sup> in part because he thought it was pointless for a small and declining monarchy to obstruct the inevitable progress of history – that is, the rise of Germany. The Germans 'form a large part of the human race, but the Danes=0,' Brynjúlfsson commented in his diary, and this was a fact that the Danes simply had to accept.<sup>24</sup> But he also regarded the German uprising as an integral part of the general nationalist reorganization of Europe he desired, and for that reason it had clear implications for Iceland's future. During the early April, for example, he noted in his diary with great enthusiasm that soon the Russian tsar might accept Poland's secession from Russia. If this would happen, the Russian monarch would take the lead in the Slavic world, 'and then Bohemia will also go free, and all nations secede and become pure, and this is the way it should be, everyone friendly to each other, but unattached and independent ...'. These were good times for Iceland, Brynjúlfsson concluded, and in the end the country 'will automatically fall from Denmark'.<sup>25</sup>

These opinions are a testimony to the nationalist paradigm shift in the Icelandic student community in Copenhagen during the 1830s and 1840s. The new perspective was based on the belief that the rule of one nation over another was, in principle, entirely unnatural, and had for that reason to be averted. The Danish government in Iceland was a clear example of this principle, Jón Sigurðsson, the emerging leader of the Icelandic nationalist movement, argued in 1841, especially because the two societies were so diametrically different.<sup>26</sup> But Icelandic nationalism was also based on an important reinterpretation of the country's history. According to 18th-century Icelandic patriots, the palpable poverty and underdevelopment of their country was of its own inhabitants' making. It appears as 'evil spirits dwell in the Icelandic air', Eggert Ólafsson had complained in 1764, namely 'the unfortunate *Præjudicia*, or the

ingrained, unproven, and erroneous opinions, which cause all ill temper, wretchedness, misery and the various wrong decisions of most Icelanders'. If nothing was done, he warned, daily life in Iceland will soon 'petrify and perish, terminating in wretched, sullen, acrimonious, and ever-wicked and infamous lethargy'.<sup>27</sup>

The 19th-century nationalists found a very different cause for the alleged predicament of the Icelandic nation. Rather than blaming it on the Icelanders themselves, they traced the poverty and stagnation in Iceland to the harmful government of foreign kings. In the first centuries of Icelandic history, the nation was vigorous and enterprising, Gísli Brynjúlfsson wrote in 1852, but under an alien government their spirit became languid and weak. The reason was both that gradually Icelanders lost all responsibility over their own administration and that the foreign power sealed them off from the world. 'The Danes', Brynjúlfsson maintained, 'had always tried to exclude [Iceland] from all acquaintance with the civilized and more advanced nations, since Christian IV had placed the monopoly trade on the throne at his side'.<sup>28</sup> As a result, Iceland received all its political and intellectual influences from France and Germany, through Denmark, rather than from England and the United States, which he thought would have been much more advantageous for the Icelanders.<sup>29</sup> From these assertions we can discern the opinion that the union with Denmark was the primary cause for the stagnation and misery in Iceland. This was a great change from the 18th-century discourse on the government of Iceland, which had always regarded the Danish king and his rule as the safest route for Iceland into modernity.

Iceland's reevaluation of the union with Denmark has traditionally been interpreted as an 'awakening' of a slumbering Icelandic *Volksgeist*, which is traced to the efforts of the Icelandic students and intellectuals living in Copenhagen in the 1830s.<sup>30</sup> According to this interpretation, the struggle for independence was more or less a spontaneous undertaking, because the longing for sovereignty had always existed in the hearts of Icelanders – as it had lain dormant for centuries in the nation, the nationalist spirit only had to be stimulated in order to be revived. But rather than regarding this turn as an Icelandic development, the beginning of Icelandic nationalism should be studied in the context of Danish politics. The fact is that the Danish composite or conglomerate monarchy – *den danske helstat* – lost its legitimacy not only among Icelandic intellectuals in the first half of the 19th century, but also among their Danish colleagues. Both groups considered the nation-state, unified on the basis of common culture and language, as the state form of the future while complex monarchies, mixing people of various cultural backgrounds under one government, were linked to absolutism and the reactionary politics of the past.<sup>31</sup> 'In my opinion', stated the influential Danish politician Orla Lehmann in 1865, 'the state is the external form, inside and through which a nation [*et Folk*], as an organic unit and living personality, should display the content of its life ...'. Therefore he did not believe in the unification of the Danish and German nations in one monarchy, because these 'two nationalities belong to two families, different in mentality and character and separated by their memories of the past and hopes for the future ...'.<sup>32</sup>

This impression was reinforced throughout the 19th century as the Danish monarchy became ever smaller and more homogeneous, losing Norway to Sweden in 1814 and Schleswig-Holstein to Prussia and Austria in 1864. To the Danish politicians, this forced the nation to focus its attention on the state's internal

uniformity, both in cultural and political terms. The maxim was to reclaim inwardly what had been lost outwardly, to paraphrase P. H. Holst's famous slogan from 1872,<sup>33</sup> and in that process there was no room for provinces with particular rights or identities – they had either to become Danish or simply to leave the union.<sup>34</sup>

### From *Helstat* to Dual Monarchy

In August 1850, a group of around 180 people met at Þingvellir, the place where the ancient Alþingi had gathered annually from its institution in the early 10th century until it was moved to Reykjavík in 1798 and abolished two years later. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the basic principles of a new constitution for Iceland, which the Danish government had promised to introduce in a special constitutive assembly to be held in Reykjavík the following year. Although some of the most prominent officials of the state were present at the meeting, including Count J. D. Trampe, the Danish governor (*stiftamtmand*) of Iceland, its conclusions on the future government of the dependency were surprisingly radical. In its address to the nation, the Þingvellir meeting declared that the union with Denmark could only benefit Iceland if 'correct principles would guide legislation in the union and the government of the country'. These principles, the address stated, had to be based on the 'old covenant between our fathers and the kings of Norway', which recognized Iceland as a distinctive nation with full rights and in a free alliance with Denmark. According to this covenant, the address alleged, the country was not a part of Denmark, and it was 'neither a colony nor defeated in a military conquest'. The meeting called, therefore, for almost full autonomy for Iceland, with a separate Icelandic cabinet consisting of three ministers based in Iceland, independent public finances, the same status for Alþingi as for other national parliaments, and, finally, an Icelandic envoy in Denmark who would mediate between the Icelandic government and the king.<sup>35</sup>

The address from the Þingvellir meeting, which echoed the ideas of Jón Sigurðsson,<sup>36</sup> set the tone for Icelandic nationalism for the next decades. Its main assumption was the firm belief in Iceland's status as a separate nation which, according to the nationalist principles of the times, gave the country natural rights to administer its own affairs. Moreover, the Icelandic nationalists interpreted the union with Denmark as a relation between two equal partners, because Iceland – according to their historical interpretation – had entered the Norwegian monarchy of its own free will, as an independent state. Therefore, they thought that Iceland was a voluntary partner in the union with Denmark, which gave its inhabitants full authority to exit the alliance with the mother country when the ties of absolutist rule were broken and they felt the union did not serve Icelandic interests any longer. Danish legal scholars categorically rejected this interpretation, calling it 'utterly false' (*fulstændig falsk*).<sup>37</sup> The so-called Old Covenant (*Gamli sáttmáli*) of 1262, between the king of Norway and Icelanders, had not, they claimed, established a personal union between the king and his Icelandic subjects, and even if it had, through the long history of Danish rule Iceland had become an integral part of the Danish realm. From a legal point of view, the Danish scholars had a strong case,<sup>38</sup> but in the end that did not settle the issue. As the conflict was really not of legal nature, it was not settled in scholarly skirmishes,

but rather in the political practices of the Danish government and the decisions of the Icelandic political leaders.

The Danish government's first response to the Icelandic demands was to offer the inhabitants of the dependency to join the new constitutional monarchy as equal citizens. In the summer of 1851, at the constitutive assembly held in Reykjavík, the king's deputy presented a bill proposing that the Danish constitution of 1849 was simply put into effect in Iceland. This suggestion was categorically rejected in the assembly, as it treated Iceland 'as a large Danish rural commune [*hreppur*],' to quote one of the representatives, 'and in this rural commune, the people are not allowed to discuss their legislative, judicial, or executive affairs, except, perhaps, in the most insignificant matters ...'.<sup>39</sup> The offer was a far cry from what had been expected in Iceland in the preceding years. We have not only the right to have '*equality to other provinces in the Danish state*,' a parliamentary committee wrote in a report on the constitutional bill, 'but also to get an independent government. Therefore, it seemed obvious to the majority of the committee, that we neither could nor should accept this offer ...'.<sup>40</sup> In response, the committee wrote its own constitutional bill which reiterated the demands for autonomy from the Danish government and parliament, while wishing to remain under the Danish king.<sup>41</sup> As the royal deputy could not offer any concessions to the Icelandic demands, he dissolved the meeting and thus it ended in an impasse.<sup>42</sup>

For the next 20 years, Iceland was left in a constitutional limbo. The government tried repeatedly to come to terms with Alþingi on the country's future place in the state, with no avail. In these negotiations, the majority in the Icelandic parliament consistently refused to accept anything that seemed to contradict the historical interpretation outlined above – that is, Iceland was to be treated as an equal partner in a union with Denmark, but not a part of a Danish nation-state – and that was something the Danish government could not accept. The Danish stand was a bit more complex, because Danish politicians found it hard to fit Iceland into their own nationalist vision of the world. First, Danish commentators generally agreed that Icelanders formed a nation apart, rather than seeing them as an integral part of the Danish nation. Obviously, the two peoples spoke distinctive languages and were geographically separated, and in liberal circles in Europe these factors were usually thought to contribute to the formation of national identities.<sup>43</sup> Second, many Danes argued that Icelanders deserved a special treatment in the nationalist reorganization of the monarchy, although they were not ready to give them their own state, at least not as long as it could not sustain itself and had, therefore, to be funded to large degree from Copenhagen. This sentiment was based on their high regard for the Icelandic cultural heritage: 'when I described them [Icelanders] as an image of our forefathers', Orla Lehmann declared in parliamentary debates, 'then this is an expression of veneration, which has its justification in the appreciation for what all the Nordic people owe them for faithfully preserving the remnants of the past, from which we all must obtain our future hope. I admit to harbor this veneration and I confess that without it I would in all honesty not know what would move us to acknowledge, or to put it more correctly, to offer Iceland a status in the state, to which it would be difficult to find any parallels'.<sup>44</sup>

By this he meant that although he sincerely believed that Iceland was 'an indivisible part of the Danish state,' it 'should have a real self-government' in its own

internal affairs.<sup>45</sup> Third, and related to this, according to the liberal worldview that guided the Danish politics of the 1860s, self-determination was a necessary precondition for self-reliance and responsibility, and hence for material and cultural progress.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, Iceland had to govern its own internal affairs, albeit with Danish guidance and assistance, if it was ever to be able to prosper.

This did not mean that the Danish politicians were ready to let Iceland go. As a poor and underdeveloped country, the dependency seemed to require substantial financial aid from Denmark to run its basic public services and to build up its infrastructures, and this need bound the two countries together. Also the idea that a country of 'only 80,000 souls could be on equal ground with Denmark, Norway and Sweden', to quote an essay by the legal scholar Knud Berlin, sounded as a mere self-delusion to most Danes.<sup>47</sup> Even those who generally held Icelanders in high regard, and supported their cause in Denmark, ridiculed the growing restlessness in Iceland following the dissolution of the Norwegian-Swedish union. Thus, in 1906, one year after the Norwegian independence, the Danish critic Georg Brandes mocked the Icelandic demands in two newspaper articles, comparing Iceland's secession to giving independence to the island of Amager.<sup>48</sup> 'We, as two old and experienced men,' he wrote in a letter to an Icelandic friend, 'must agree that it is insane for a nation of only 70,000 people to desire a separate state. Iceland has no trade, no industry, no army, no military fleet ...',<sup>49</sup> and therefore its request for autonomy could not be taken seriously. Finally, the parallels between Iceland and Schleswig-Holstein were frequently mentioned in the Danish press. Many Danes traced Icelandic separatism to the example set by the German inhabitants of Schleswig-Holstein,<sup>50</sup> – surrender to Icelandic demands would have given credence to German nationalism in the duchies, and therefore they thought they had to be condemned and resisted.

As it turned out, it was difficult for Icelandic nationalists to insist on the petition from 1850 and the constitutional bill from 1851, because few of them really believed that the country could survive without substantial subvention from Copenhagen. They insisted, however, that the union with Denmark had to be regarded as an alliance of two separate nations tied in a political marriage of convenience. Jón Sigurðsson gave this political view its final form in the 1860s. Through an ingenious study of the financial relations between Iceland and Denmark, he 'discovered' that the subsidy from Denmark was really not a financial assistance at all, but rather a just compensation for what the Danes had profited from their rule over Iceland through the centuries.<sup>51</sup> The Danes always rejected this idea,<sup>52</sup> but it made it easier for Icelanders to accept the Danish financial contributions, because they interpreted them as reparation for damages rather than as charity.<sup>53</sup>

Icelandic historians have always stressed the difference of opinion between the Icelandic nationalists and the Danish government during the slow but continuous dissolution of the union with Denmark, which stretched over the century from the establishment of Alþingi in 1843 to the foundation of the republic in 1944. 'The struggle proved hard and long', writes the historian Þorkell Jóhannesson about the struggle for independence, which usually is called the struggle for freedom (*frelsisbarátta*) in Icelandic history books.<sup>54</sup> In reality the government and Alþingi agreed on most of the fundamental principles of the debate, because from the mid-19th century and onwards, all but the most conservative politicians in Denmark agreed with the Icelandic nationalists on the separate nationality of Icelanders.

Moreover, both subscribed to the basic idea of nationalism, 'which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent', to quote Ernest Gellner's well-known definition.<sup>55</sup> For this reason, they never seriously contemplated to force Iceland to accept a complete integration into the Danish nation-state. But as long as Iceland needed Danish assistance, the Danes were not willing to let the Icelanders run their affairs without Danish guidance and surveillance. The Icelandic opinions were not very much different, in fact, because at the same time as nationalists like Jón Sigurðsson vehemently defended what they termed as Icelandic national rights, he never called for a dissolution of the union with Denmark. Thus, in 1856, Sigurðsson reiterated the historical and legal prerogatives of the Icelandic nation, but his immediate political demands were fairly restrained. For him, Iceland's 'particular nature and conditions', gave Iceland the right to call for some form of self-determination, but he did not request full autonomy. In his words, 'the country should be allowed to govern itself as much as possible, in order for the great energy, which is inherent in the country but lies dormant, to be revived and to mature'.<sup>56</sup> In fact, Sigurðsson seems to have doubted that Iceland was mature enough to stand on its own feet and therefore his political strategy was to stall the issue as long as he could, in the hope that full sovereignty would be obtained, sometime in the distant future, when the country could actually govern its affairs on its own.<sup>57</sup> Similar reservations could be heard among Icelandic politicians and commentators well into the 20th century. As late as 1906, Hannes Hafstein, the first minister of the Icelandic home rule, declared in Danish newspapers that 'there was, as far as he knew, not a single person in Iceland, who seriously thought that the island could secede from Denmark'.<sup>58</sup> Although the minister was not entirely honest in this answer, as the secessionist movement was gaining ground in Iceland around that time, most 'respectable' politicians in Iceland still thought that the union was of vital importance for Iceland.

In spite of their apparent agreement, Alþingi and the Danish government were locked in fierce debates on Iceland's position in the state for much of the second half of the 19th century. Through the 1860s, the Danish national-liberal government attempted to negotiate with the Icelandic parliament on a new constitution for Iceland, but they were never able to reach an agreement that satisfied both parties. This chapter of the story ended when the government cut the Gordian knot by the passing of the so-called Status Law in the Danish parliament in 1870, fixing the financial support to Iceland, and introducing unilaterally a constitution for Iceland in 1874, providing Alþingi with limited legislative power in the country's domestic affairs. The second chapter in the saga centered on the Icelandic desires to revise the constitution from 1874, demanding increased executive power in Iceland. This struggle got tangled with the general constitutional debates in Denmark during the last decades of the 19th century, and the conflict could only be resolved after the fall of the conservative government in Denmark in 1901. In 1904, the Icelandic home-rule government was established, with one minister of Icelandic affairs in Reykjavík, who was responsible to Alþingi but formally a member of the Danish cabinet. The third chapter of the debates ended with the Act of Union in 1918, which divided the Danish realm into a dual monarchy of two sovereign states – Denmark and Iceland – sharing the same king. With the act, which was negotiated during the summer of 1918 in a committee of Danish and Icelandic parliamentarians, Iceland became practically an

independent state, as the king never used his extensive constitutional powers to interfere in Icelandic matters.<sup>59</sup>

In Iceland, the different milestones on the journey from Danish absolutist monarchy to Icelandic sovereignty in 1918 – and later to full independence in 1944 – are almost universally used to structure the chronology of the 19th and 20th-century Icelandic history. Dates like 1851 (the Constitutive Assembly), 1874 (the constitution), 1904 (home rule), 1918 (sovereignty), and 1944 (republic) are commonly seen as watersheds, or as points of dramatic change.<sup>60</sup> This brings the political tussle between Iceland and Denmark into the foreground, and raises people such as Jón Sigurðsson to the pedestal of national heroes. The underlying processes, which made the increased autonomy of the nation possible, are not ignored, but they are usually analyzed within the framework of the political development. In this way, the ‘struggle for independence’ is seen as the determining feature in the history of the 19th and 20th-century Iceland, but the rapid social and economic transformation of Icelandic society in the same period is regarded as a dependent factor, or as the result of the political change. In many ways, this reverses the causal relations between the political and social development in Iceland in these years, because it was only when the Icelandic economy had become strong enough to sustain an independent state that the nationalist demand for autonomy became convincing – and did, indeed, convince both the Danish authorities and the Icelanders themselves of the possibility for Icelandic sovereignty. Thus, with the Act of Union, when the Icelandic fishing industry had taken off and Icelandic society was modernizing rapidly, the Icelandic parliament was finally willing to forgive the alleged Danish debt to Icelanders, which had been the core of Jón Sigurðsson’s political message. This happened simply because with its economic modernization, Iceland did not need Danish subsidies to run the state and thus the country gained the confidence needed to break their union with Denmark. From the Danish side, Iceland’s sovereignty met only limited opposition in the end. ‘It can never be of interest for a small nation as the Danish’, the Danish Prime Minister Carl Th. Zahle remarked in 1918, ‘to attempt to oppress one that is even smaller. We must, in the firmest manner possible, uphold every nation’s right to lead its own independent and autonomous life. As the Icelanders now assert that they have enough vigor, because of the country’s increasing population numbers, their economic situation, their political development, and their cultural stature, to live their own national life, then it is only they and not us or anyone else who are entitled to decide if they are correct in that assessment’.<sup>61</sup>

In this spirit, the Danish parliament passed the Act of Union at the end of November 1918, and thus the Icelandic struggle for independence was over.

### To forget a Union

In his celebrated study, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson describes ‘the nation ... [as] an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign’.<sup>62</sup> This interpretation fits the history of the dissolution of the Danish-Icelandic union perfectly, because their divorce was driven by a fundamental shift in the political imagination of both parties to the marriage. In a few decades, or from the late 18th century to the late 1830s, the belief in the composite monarchy – the Danish

*helstat* – eroded rapidly, both in the center and the peripheries. This does not mean that the idea of Icelandic, or Danish, identity was constructed for the first time in this period, but only that it was imagined in an entirely new manner, and given entirely novel political meaning.

The change, which can be called a nationalist paradigm shift, has so thoroughly shaped the way in which Danes and Icelanders read their history that when they look back, they tend to consider the union between the two countries as either unnatural or simply forget that it ever existed. A good example of this collective amnesia is a recent text-book in Danish history, *1864: Fra helstat til nationalstat* (1864: From Composite Monarchy to Nation-State), which was written with the intention of raising awareness among Danish students to the fact that in the past their monarchy was more complex than it is today. In 1864, the two authors write in the introduction to the book, before the war with Prussia and Austria over Schleswig-Holstein, modern-day Denmark was ‘only one of four territories [*lande*] in total, which together composed the Danish monarchy. The multinational *helstat* had both Danish and German inhabitants ...’. The contention is reiterated a little later, where they argue that the ‘*Helstat* (*Gesamtstaat* in German) consisted of the four territories, which together composed the Danish Monarchy: the Danish kingdom proper [*kongeriget Danmark*], in addition to the duchies Schleswig, Holstein and Lauenburg. The *helstat* had both Danish and German inhabitants and that posed problems’.<sup>63</sup>

Iceland, in addition to the Faeroe Islands, Greenland, etc, is not mentioned in this reappraisal of the Danish monarchy, in part because it played only an insignificant role in the general historical development of 19th-century Denmark. Most contemporary commentators thought Iceland was a mere burden on the Danish public finances. Hence, while politicians and intellectuals like Orla Lehmann lauded Iceland’s contribution to Nordic history and culture, they ‘looked unsuccessfully for the pride and the heroic spirit’ which had characterized the Icelanders of the saga age.<sup>64</sup> For this reason, Danish historians have limited interest in the Atlantic dependencies of the monarchy, maintaining that their role in the break-up of Denmark was without any consequence for the state in general and for the construction of Danish nationality in particular. Therefore the contribution of these dependencies to and their membership in the composite state can simply be ignored.<sup>65</sup>

There is another and a more fundamental reason why Iceland is rarely discussed in relation to the dissolution of the Danish composite state. The fact is that even those who have consciously attempted to reinterpret the history of the Danish monarchy, looking beyond the historical frameworks constructed by the modern nation-states, find it difficult to escape the analytical tools they want to deconstruct. In the 19th century, the nationalist imagination of Icelandic identity posed no challenge to Danish nationalism, because Icelandic cultural nationalism confirmed the lines of demarcation between the Danish and German nations.<sup>66</sup> This was, undoubtedly, one of the reasons why Icelandic nationalism sounded so convincingly to the national-liberals in Copenhagen, which in turn thwarted the development of unionist counter-narrative in Iceland. But this has also created the sense of inevitability with regard to the dissolution of the Danish-Icelandic union. As it was not really contested, it appears as natural and given – and, therefore, it may seem to be of little interest to later generations.

## Notes

- 1 Jóhannesson, “17. júní,” 163–165. Iceland entered the Norwegian monarchy in 1262–64, but came under the Danish king when the Danish and Norwegian crowns merged in 1380.
- 2 Ibid, 152, and Ásgeirsson, “Hátíðahöldin 18. júní,” 265 and 273.
- 3 Olgeirsson, “Sögusýningin,” 386.
- 4 *Stjórnartíðindi* 1918, A: 78–79.
- 5 See *Ástandið í sjálfstæðismálinu*.
- 6 Benediktsson, *Lýðveldi*, 13.
- 7 *Djódaratkvæðagreiðsla*, 8 and 11; see also Kjartansson, *Ísland á 20. öld*, 240–245.
- 8 Jónsson, *Dagrenning*, 3–38 and Jóhannesson, *Saga Íslendinga*, 484.
- 9 See for example Ólafsson’s poems ‘Island’, ‘Einvaldsvisur’, and ‘Það uppvakta Island,’ in *Kvæði*, 9–29 and 72–77.
- 10 Hálfðanarson, “From Enlightened Patriotism to Romantic Nationalism.”
- 11 “Instruction for den islandske Landcommission,” 665–677.
- 12 Gustafsson, *Mellan kung och allmoge*, 102–169.
- 13 B. Jónsson, “Korte Forslag til Islands Opkomst.”
- 14 J. Jónsson, *Dagrenning*, 23–24.
- 15 Sveinn Sölvason, “Formaali.”
- 16 Hálfðanarson, “Language, Identity, and Political Integration.” It is impossible to guess how popular these opinions were among either the members of various social groups in Iceland or the general public – or, indeed, if the public had any idea about these debates – as no open, public discussion existed in Iceland until the latter half of the 18th century.
- 17 *Ens Íslenska Lærdoms-Lista Felags Skraa*, 4; Magnússon, “Fræðafélög og bókaútgáfa,” 189–196.
- 18 Ólafsson, *Vice-Lavmand*, 962–965.
- 19 Ólafsson, *Nockrar Hvg-hreystelegar Harma-tavlvr*, 6–8.
- 20 See Herder, “Ideen,” 384–385.
- 21 Meinecke, *Weltpbürgertum und Nationalstaat*, 9–26. In the English version of this work, the two concepts are translated as ‘political nations’ and ‘cultural nations’; see Meinecke, *Cosmopolitanism and the National State*, 10.
- 22 Brynjúlfsson, *Dagbók í Höfn*, 210 and 213.
- 23 Carl Plough, the influential editor of the newspaper *Fædrelandet*, later pointed out how the rebellion in Schleswig-Holstein instilled ideas about independence among young Icelanders, although it did not lead to any illegal activities; cf. *Fædrelandet*, 20 November 1868.
- 24 Brynjúlfsson, *Dagbók í Höfn*, 175.
- 25 Ibid, 146–147.
- 26 Sigurðsson, “Um Alþing á Íslandi,” 90–99.
- 27 *Ármann á Alþingi*, 116–119.
- 28 Brynjúlfsson, “Fyrrum og nú,” 15–16.
- 29 Ibid, 16–19.
- 30 See for example, J. Jónsson, *Íslenzkt þjóðerni*, 217–236.
- 31 See Frandsen, “Det nya Norden efter Napoleon,” 19–54.
- 32 Lehmann, “Om Personalunionen,” 125.
- 33 “Hvad udad tabes, det må indad vindes.”

- 34 Frandsen, *Opdagelsen af Jylland*, 557–569 and Østergård, “The Danish Path to Modernity.”
- 35 ‘Ávarp,’ 3–4.
- 36 A good example is Sigurðsson, “Hugvekja til Íslendinga.” See also B. Hermannsson, *Understanding Nationalism*, 173–210.
- 37 Berlin, “Om Islands statsretlige Stilling,” 183. See also Larsen, *Om Islands hidtilværende statsretlige Stilling* and Berlin, *Islands statsretlige Stilling*.
- 38 See Lindal, “Retshistorie og politik.”
- 39 *Tíðindi frá Þjóðfundi Íslendinga*, 149.
- 40 Ibid, 501. Emphasis in original.
- 41 Ibid, 509–517. The suggested relations with Denmark sounded very similar to those established with the Act of Union in 1918.
- 42 Ibid, 146–196, 412–413, 427–481, and 496–525. Cf. Kristjánsson, *Endurreisn Alþingis*, 305–398.
- 43 Smith, “Considerations on Representative Government,” 427.
- 44 Lehmann, “Ordførerens Gjensvar,” 51–52; see also *Fædrelandet*, 27 January 1870 and 17 May 1871.
- 45 Lehmann, “Ordførerens Inledende Foredrag,” 30–31.
- 46 Lehmann, “Betænkning over Udkast,” 18.
- 47 Berlin, “Om Islands statsretlige Stilling,” 195.
- 48 “Amagers Løsrivelse,” *Politiken*, 16 December 1906 and “Amagers Flag,” *Politiken*, 22 December 1906.
- 49 Quoted in Albertsson, *Hannes Hafstein*, 170. See also Friðriksson, *Ég elska þig stormur*, 477–478.
- 50 Cf. *Flyveposten*, 20 September 1851, *Folkets Avis*, 22 July 1865, and *Fædrelandet*, 1 February 1870.
- 51 Sigurðsson, “Um fjárhagsmálið.”
- 52 *Tíðindi frá alþingi Íslendinga* (1865), second part, 26–85; see also *Fædrelandet* 28 October and 20 November 1868, and *Flyveposten*, 16 December 1868.
- 53 Hálfðanarson, “Iceland: A Peaceful Secession,” 95–97. Later generations of Icelanders claimed that the Danes had accepted Sigurðsson’s arguments, but that was entirely incorrect (See for example H. Hermannsson, “Handritamálið,” 1, Sveinsson, *Handritamálið*, 8–9; on the Danish understanding of this issue, see Prime Minister Zahle’s speech in the Danish parliament in 1918, *Rigsdagstidende 1918–1919*, 1509–1510).
- 54 Þ. Jóhannesson, “An Outline History,” 48; see also Olgeirsson, “Sögusýningin,” 416–423.
- 55 Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 1.
- 56 Sigurðsson, “Um landsréttindi Íslands,” 5–6.
- 57 Hálfðanarson, *Íslenska Þjóðríkið*, 93–94; for a different interpretation of Sigurðsson’s political arguments, see Karlsson, “Jón Sigurðsson á 21. öld.”
- 58 “Island og Danmark. En Udtalelse af Minister Hafstein,” *Politiken*, 27 February 1906; see also Finnur Jónsson, “Islændernes ‘Løsrivelse,’” *Politiken*, 26 February 1906.
- 59 The most detailed studies of these debates are Arnórsson, *Alþingi og frelsisbaráttan 1845–1874* and Þórðarson *Alþingi og frelsisbaráttan 1874–1944*.
- 60 See for example Þorsteinsson, *Island*.
- 61 *Rigsdagstidende 1918–1919*, 1524–1525.
- 62 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 15.

- 63 Christensen and Stevnsborg, *1864: Fra helstat til nationalstat*, 7–14.  
 64 Lehmann, “Ordførerens Gjensvar,” 52.  
 65 See Frandsen, “Det nya Norden,” 35n.  
 66 Østergård, “Peasants and Danes,” 9.

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