

INTERNATIONAL VISITS PROGRAM

by Gail Einarson-McCleery, O.F.

The resurgence of interest in the ties of Icelandic-Canadians with Iceland has taken on near phenomenal proportions in the past few years. Before then, when observing the scene from Toronto, I could only regard with envy the ever increasing number of Icelanders who ventured to the Interlake area of Manitoba bringing with them displays of artistic and intellectual talent. On a visit to Red Deer, Alberta in 1995 while attending the “Icelandic Connections” conference, I was delighted to see the participation of so many people from Iceland, but felt it was a shame that they had made such a long journey only to be restricted to a “one off” twenty minute presentation and to such a small audience. My immediate thought was that people of this caliber, with so much of Iceland to communicate to all of us, should be able to visit all over Canada and the U.S., and to do so in an on-going manner.

From that thought, came the idea of creating something permanent in the way of cultural visits between Canada and Iceland. The result was the formation of the Icelandic National League’s International Visits Program, now in its (sixth) year. From the outset, the idea was enhanced to create an exchange program; in effect, offering Icelanders the opportunity to know something of the artistic talents of Icelandic-Canadians. I had been active in the Icelandic Canadian Club of Toronto for many years, and I knew of several people within our own group who would be very supportive of the idea. Local artist, Tom Bjarnason was quick to respond and he suggested that the first person to introduce to Canadians was the Icelandic art critic, Aðalsteinn Ingólfsson. “Addie” was a former curator of the National Gallery in Iceland, and with the support of Garry Oddleifson, president of the ICCT at that time, the concept was presented to the INL convention and accepted as a viable project.

PARTICIPANTS IN THE PROGRAM (FROM ICELAND)

- 1997 Aðalsteinn Ingólfsson – Icelandic art – 16 lectures and slide shows.
- 1999 Páll Stefánsson, *Iceland Review’s* internationally acclaimed photographer
- 2001 Fríður Ólafsdóttir, leading expert in the national costume led workshops
- 2002 Inga and Gurry ... Ingveldur Ýr Jónsdóttir, soprano and Guðriður St. Sigurðardóttir, pianist – 10 concerts and 6 workshops in schools
- 2007 Víkingur Ólafsson, pianist, and Karen Ouzounian, cellist, presented ten concerts, and then Víkingur went on to do two solo shows in Ottawa, all to rave reviews.
- 2007 Bjárki Sveinbjornsson, musicologist, toured the west to talk about early Icelandic North American composers and collect yet more information on them.
- 2008 Ýrsa Sigurðardóttir, writer of mystery novels and geothermal engineer, visited 13 towns and cities to read from her books and talk about energy.

PARTICIPANTS IN THE PROGRAM (TO ICELAND)

Tammy Axelsson suggested we make this an exchange...

- 1998 Patricia Peacock of Vancouver – her Norse themed art to Hofsós
- 1999 Einar Vigfusson, naturalistic bird carver showed in Hofsós, Nordic Centre and University of Iceland

- 2001 Carol Davis, soprano from Vancouver with accompanist Harold Brown, toured Reykjavík, Seyðisfjörður, Akureyri, Hofsós and Ísafjörður
- 2002 Doug Rognvaldson, spinning wheel maker from Edmonton demonstrated his craft in Akureyri and Reykjavík
- 2003 Ruth Christie, aboriginal storyteller and descendant of John Ramsey, spoke in schools and libraries.
- 2003 Martha Brooks from Winnipeg did double duty, reading from her stories for teenagers and singing with her trio in Akureyri and and at the Jazz Festival in Reykjavík.
- 2006 Steve Benediktson, oil specialist from Calgary ... JOAN AND GWEN TO FILL IN!!!!

As each tour was planned, local clubs across the country became more and more involved. Artists, previously known only to a narrow group of people, began making themselves known and asked to be considered as exchange candidates. This has provided all of us with an added bonus....we have all been able to learn more of the creative talent within our own communities as well as those artists coming from Iceland. Before long, our friends in the Icelandic communities in Minneapolis and Seattle became participants in the program.

A by-product of these initiatives was the belief that the talent emerging within Canada should be given the opportunity to display their wares to all of us here at home. So, the North American Youth Exchange program was born, initially under the capable hands of INL Cultural and Youth Director Leslie Bardal. Gwen Mann of Calgary organized the tour of the first participant, Ross Snashall, a visual artist from Calgary who toured in the summer of 2003 in Saskatchewan, Alberta, Manitoba and North Dakota.

After being appointed Honorary Consul of Iceland in Toronto, I resigned from directorship of the program at the Edmonton Convention in 2003, and Joan Eyolfson Cadham replaced me as director. Just before resigning, the committee and I had chosen an Icelandic writer to be the next visitor to Canada. However, the promised publication of her work in English did not come to fruition, so Joan had to reluctantly cancel this visit. In its place, she decided to ask a Canadian writer, Kathy Arnason, to tour North America. She read from her children's books and her new volume of poetry in Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal in February. Attempts to find a suitable date in Alberta did not work out however.

The mandate of the initial program was to organize tours of single or duo performers. We stretched the rules to include Martha and her trio. After the change in directorship, Joan took a little time to evaluate where the program should be going, and at the convention in Victoria in 2006, presented her suggestions. These included sending lecturers in areas of interest to Icelanders, such as energy, education, aboriginal issues, etc. and not limiting the mandate to singles and duos. Choirs and large groups would still not be handled by this program, however. Soon, Clair Eckley of Minneapolis became a co-director to represent the U.S. point of view.

The original committee which I worked with consisted of INL President Sigrid Johnson, writer W.D. Valgardson, anthropologist Anne Bryden, Iris Torfason as fundraiser, and later consultant Evelyn Downey and Dr. Haraldur Bjarnasson representing the U.S. In Victoria, the committee was restructured to consist of the Presidents of INL of NA and of Iceland, Regional Directors from across the country, the Communications Director (currently Margaret Grisdale)

and Iris Torfason. Since there is no Regional Director in the Seattle area, Anna Hauksdottir agreed to be part of the committee. The intent is that Regional Directors will communicate with presidents of chapters in their area.

All of these gestures to promote Icelandic culture within Canada and the U.S and to promote Icelandic-Canadian culture to Iceland come at a price. On a visit to Iceland, my husband Eric and I visited the President, Olafur Ragnar Grimsson, and he had a very good suggestion, which I followed up on. In essence, he felt that if interested Icelandic Canadians contributed a fixed sum each year to a fund, the program could be put on a firm footing. As a result, the Cultural Exchange fund was set up under the umbrella of the Canada Iceland Foundation so that it could make grants to artists for this important work. Initially, founding donors included most of the holders of the Order of the Falcon, as well as Consuls and other generous individuals. Now, a separate fund has been set up and as of 2006, charitable status is being sought. Donations from individuals, groups and corporations have been and are still much sought after and are publicly recognized.

All of us within the Canadian Icelandic community have been fortunate to receive the moral and financial support of many donors here and in Iceland. Icelandair has been a good friend from the beginning. Others who have generously contributed have included the Icelandic Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, Landsbanki, the Canada Iceland Foundation, the Canada Council for the Arts, the Canadian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Leica Cameras, and individual INL chapters. The continuing success of these exchange programs does, however, depend in great part on support from individuals and local community groups. Icelandic-Canadians have such a strong heritage to admire and protect. Our place within Canada and the U.S is unique. When viewed on a numerical scale, our numbers may be seen as small but, when we are seen, and see ourselves from the perspective of our cultural significance, we are writ large on the map of North America.

There have been many benefits of the program, including a chance for people in the various chapters in North America to get to know each other better by working for a common cause. The program could not have existed without the tremendous support and work from the presidents, executives, and others of each of the chapters. Another benefit, of course, has been the chance for Icelandic Canadians to get to know "real" Icelanders and to learn more about the country of their origin. An essential part of the program has been the billeting system, under which performers have a chance to be a part of the community for a short time and to form a better understanding of their cousins across the sea. Our hope for the future is that we can also make more of an impact on the general Canadian community, encouraging tourism and understanding of our rich heritage.