



JÓN SIGURÐSSON MEMORIAL LECTURE

**Opening Speech by
the President of Iceland
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson**

**Reykjavík
8 September 2017**

Dear guests,

I will not use much time to introduce our speaker, the person who will this year deliver the Jón Sigurðsson Memorial Lecture. He is a well-known historian and his latest book, *On Tyranny*, has grabbed the headlines. For further information, just google Timothy Snyder and seek information through other channels – and read his new book, read his other books, read other's books! Attend events at the Literary Festival, enjoy the beauty of literature, both fiction and non-fiction. If we continue to write and read good books, all shall be well.

And allow me instead to introduce Iceland to our guest: Welcome to Iceland, Timothy Snyder. Welcome to the ultimate nation-state. You have arrived in a country with borders as clearly defined as can be. Furthermore, you are greeted by people who have for centuries been extremely homogenous. We can describe our clear Nordic origins through the Book of Settlements and the Book of Icelanders, written with that precise purpose in mind almost thousand years ago, to convince the world that honourable and noble people lived on this island, no descendants of slaves and thugs. True, we need to admit to traces of female Celtic blood but that only adds to our beauty, wisdom and wit.

And welcome to a country where history is primarily a source of pride. Welcome to the land of Vikings and voyagers, who ventured onto uncharted waters, as well as scholars and poets who composed epic tales and sagas, a unique contribution to culture and civilization. Centuries of foreign rule followed, centuries of decline after days of glory. But then the people arose and

the national awakening of the nineteenth century culminated in full independence in 1944. Welcome to the land of overly simplistic and nationalistic myths about the past if you ask many of the historians in this room. For decades, they have been hard at work, criticizing and deconstructing the collective memory of Icelanders, a state-favoured grand narrative.

Yes, it is easy to find faults with that storyline in its crudest form, and there is nothing particularly Icelandic about that. In one of your books on Eastern Europe, for instance, you mention how contemporary authorities convey “historical myths” to a mass public. Even so, historians need to acknowledge people’s need for a common understanding of where we came from and where we are heading. I have often told the story of a meeting on “the end of nationalism?” which the Association of Icelandic Historians had to postpone some years ago, because the men’s national handball team had a vital game that evening so nobody was going to show up.

We need to understand the power of positive patriotism. It is our task to foster in our national identity a feeling of open-mindedness and inclusion. In today’s Iceland, where more than one tenth of the population has overseas origins, this is a vital necessity, a self-evident approach. Besides, history provides ample examples about the benefits to societies of such tolerance and altruism. And history also serves us with bitter lessons. Here in Iceland, the emphasis on clear origins and uniqueness has influenced policies and our self-image. On the eve of the Second World War, Icelandic authorities were extremely hesitant to accept Jewish refugees to the country – there was unemployment, it was said, and these outsiders were alien, a potential threat to the purity of the Icelandic people.

Today, we should like to think that we have learned from the past, that we can welcome more stateless persons and refugees now than we did in the 1930s. We can never solve the problems of this world by welcoming all and sundry, but that does not mean that we can not and should not give shelter to desperate people in need.

Again, historians have a duty in society, a duty to take part in public debate. This is one of the main arguments in that brilliant book, *Thinking the Twentieth Century*, where you pose questions to the late Tony Judt about history and memory, about power and the public. Allow me to quote these words of wisdom from Judt: “Intellectuals with access to the media and job security in a university carry a distinctive responsibility in politically troubled times.”

Therefore, as great as this venue is, as great as the academic environment can be, we need to reach further out and take part in open and critical debate, on twitter and TV, on Facebook and other modern mediums. We must criticize the misuse of history for political purposes and denounce hate speech. Five years

ago, in my previous vocation as a professional historian, I happened to make note of comments which our esteemed guest made at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association, basically that historians are needed in the public sphere but that they need to say something more in five words than “well, that’s a complicated issue.” Welcome, Timothy Snyder, the floor is yours. Tell us something more.