

Þorvaldur Thoroddsen

(1855–1921)



A celebration of a world-famous pioneer
in geology and natural science on the
centenary of his death

Þorvaldur

(1855–1921)

Thoroddsen

Life and Work



Þorvaldur Thoroddsen was born on Flatey island off west Iceland on 6 June 1855. He was the son of Jón Thoroddsen, poet, novelist and sheriff, and his wife Kristín Ólína Þorvaldsdóttir Sívertsen.

At the age of 11 Þorvaldur was sent to live in Reykjavík with his maternal aunt, Katrín, and her husband, National Librarian Jón Árnason, who is famed as a collector of folktales. He graduated from the Learned School (now Reykjavík High School), but showed little interest in his studies there. Instead he read independently: mostly foreign publications about nature and the earth by renowned authors such as Alexander von Humboldt, Charles Lyell and Charles Darwin.

The first Icelandic geologist

In 1875 Þorvaldur went to Copenhagen intending to study zoology, but soon turned to geology. And he may justly be called the first Icelandic geologist, as he worked in the field all his life. He returned to Iceland in 1880 without completing his degree, and started to teach natural science, initially at Möðruvellir School in north Iceland, then at the Learned School in Reykjavík 1885–95. His approach to teaching was freer than was common at the time. He shunned cramming and learning by rote, but had a talent for telling students about what was not in the books. In 1895 Þorvaldur moved to Copenhagen, where he lived for the rest of his life, writing and pursuing research.

When he was still at university, Þorvaldur travelled around Iceland for research purposes. He was a member of a Danish expedition in 1876 to study the impact of the powerful explosive eruption of Mt. Askja in the previous year. That expedition had a crucial influence on Þorvaldur, focussing his attention on geology; it also led him to realise how little was known about Icelandic nature, especially in the highland interior.

Explorer in his own land

After university Þorvaldur embarked upon organised research on Iceland. He made major expeditions almost every summer from 1882 to 1898, travelling all over the country, uplands and lowlands, inhabited and uninhabited regions. Þorvaldur thus became in effect the explorer of Iceland. No geologist had previously travelled around the country, researching it as a whole. Þorvaldur carried all his scientific equipment and camping gear on packhorses, and camped out in tents, whether in verdant valleys or in the

barren highlands. During the winter he worked through the data he had collected the previous summer, delivered lectures, and wrote essays and books about his findings, in addition to drawing various maps of the country.

Þorvaldur's accuracy and his sensitivity to nature are well displayed in his famous geological map of 1901, and in the revised edition (1906). No map of this kind had been made before Þorvaldur's time, and it is a landmark publication – of such outstanding quality, and informed by such understanding of Icelandic geology, that it is quite astonishing. For nearly a century, Þorvaldur's map remained the only complete geological map made of Iceland.

One masterpiece after another

Þorvaldur is indisputably one of the most prolific writers Iceland has ever had. He wrote in Icelandic and in other languages, both educating his fellow-Icelanders about the nature of their country, and informing the international scientific community about scholarly advances based upon his research in Iceland. He was most productive after he settled in Copenhagen in 1895. He received grants, *inter alia* from the Alþingi (Icelandic parliament), the Danish state, and private benefactors, and he was granted the title of professor at the University of Copenhagen in 1902. He never formally undertook the professorship, however, and thus he could devote his energies to research and writing. And one masterpiece after another was produced.

Landfræðissagan (Geological History) was published in four volumes, 1892–1904, and in a German edition in two volumes 1897–98; *Landskjálftar á Íslandi* (Earthquakes in Iceland) in two parts, 1899 and 1905; a brief *Lýsing Íslands* (Description of Iceland) 1881, 2nd edition 1900; *Jarðfræðikort af Íslandi* (Geological Map of Iceland) to a scale of 1:600,000 was published in 1901, and a revised edition in 1906; *Ævisaga dr. Péturs Péturssonar, biskups* (Biography of Bishop Dr. Pétur Pétursson) 1908; a new and improved *Lýsing Íslands* (Description of Iceland) in four volumes, 1908–22; *Ferðabókin* (Travel Book) in four volumes 1913–15; *Arferði á Íslandi í þúsund ár* (A Thousand Years



Þorvaldur with Ögmundur Sigurðsson, who accompanied him on almost all his travels in Iceland. Photo taken in Akureyri, date unknown.



of Climate in Iceland) 1915–16; and many more. In 1909–12 Þorvaldur also wrote his great opus on Icelandic volcanoes, *Geschichte der Isländischen Vulkane*, which was not, however, published until after his death, in 1925. In addition to his books, Þorvaldur also wrote innumerable articles and essays on various subjects which were published in newspapers and periodicals.

Although Þorvaldur accumulated material over many years for his major works, both in Icelandic nature and in European museums and libraries, his productivity was extraordinary, and the quality is generally high.

Þorvaldur was an active participant in the work of scholarly and scientific societies, both in Iceland and elsewhere. He was awarded honorary fellowships in the Geological Society of Denmark, the Royal Geological Society in London, the Icelandic Literary Society and the Icelandic Natural History Society. He received many honours and awards from scientific organisations abroad, such as the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences in Stockholm, the Geography Society in Paris, the Royal Geographical Society in London, and the Royal Danish Geographical and Scientific Societies. In 1907 he was awarded the Charles P. Daly Medal by the American Geographical Society, which is a rare honour, bestowed every few years to an outstanding scientist.

Personal life and final years

In 1887 Þorvaldur married Þóra Pétursdóttir, the daughter of the Bishop of Iceland, Pétur Pétursson. Both were well educated and cosmopolitan people, who made their mark on society in Iceland and abroad. They had a daughter, Sigríður, in 1888, and the family moved to Copenhagen in 1895. Þorvaldur also had another daughter, María Kristín, born before his marriage, who was brought up by friends of Þorvaldur in Akureyri. Þorvaldur outlived both his daughters: Sigríður died in Copenhagen aged only 14, while María Kristín died of tuberculosis at the age of 23 in 1907. Þóra died in 1917, after which Þorvaldur largely withdrew from public life, and spent his final years writing. He sustained a stroke on 3 December 1920 at a meeting of the Scientific Society in Copenhagen, after which he was largely bedbound.

Þorvaldur died in Copenhagen on 28 September 1921, at the age of 66.



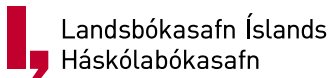
Þorvaldur Thoroddsen and Þóra Pétursdóttir, date unknown.

Artifacts and photographs in the exhibition are property of the National Museum of Iceland.

Medals in the keeping of the Central Bank of Iceland.

Statue and geological map are property of The Icelandic Museum of Natural History.

Books from The National and University Library of Iceland.



VÍSINDAFÉLAG ÍSLANDS
stofnað 1918