

Facing natural extremes: The catastrophe of the Laki eruption in Iceland, 1783–84

Margrét Gunnarsdóttir, National Archives of Iceland

Abstract: As a consequence of a large-scale volcanic outburst, the Laki eruption in 1783–84, the focus of the world turned suddenly towards Iceland, a province of the Danish crown. The dynamic volcano in Iceland had far-reaching consequences for the outside world as the pollution was carried further by the wind, causing dramatic changes in weather conditions. The temperature in Europe fell by 1.5 °C over a two-year period. Icelanders endured extreme hardship as sulphuric haze swept the country during the summer of 1783 and temperature dropped considerably for a time. The period which followed is termed ‘The Famine of the Mist’ in Icelandic history due to the thick fog caused by the eruption and the extreme cold weather. This article will discuss the experience the people of Iceland underwent at the time. Correspondence, which is the main source of the article, gives an intimate glimpse of people’s lives during this critical period caused by the Laki eruption. The letters reveal that, albeit exhausted and traumatized, people were striving to remain optimistic. The eyes of Europe and the enlightened world of scientists were cast on Iceland during these testing times. Icelandic contacts with the outside world, despite Iceland being located far away in the North Atlantic, were various and flowed in more than one direction. The administration of Iceland was centred in Copenhagen where a plan for free trade was already in preparation at the outbreak of the eruption.

Keywords: Iceland; volcano; climate; unstable weather; free trade; Enlightenment.

Recommended citation: Gunnarsdóttir, Margrét, ‘Facing natural extremes: The catastrophe of the Lake eruption in Iceland in 1783–84’, *1700-tal: Nordic Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 19 (2022). 72–93. <https://doi.org/10.7557/4.6611>

Copyright: © 2022 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), which permits

Introduction

Iceland is widely known as a volcanic island. That term was highly appropriate during the Laki eruption, which had dramatic consequences near and far. The flow of lava and poisonous gases spoiled farmland and destroyed crops all over the country. The sulphuric haze led to a drop in temperature and the climate became unstable and unpredictable. More than half the country's livestock perished as the vegetation was decimated. The mist led to cold weather, which also had a negative impact. Hunger struck and diseases followed. The population decreased dramatically. Between 1783 and 1786 the population of Iceland fell from about 49,000 to about 39,000. The extreme weather conditions were testing. People had to endure unimaginable hardship and many deserted their farms.¹

The aim of this article is to study how people reacted locally to the calamities they were facing and how they made sense of a critical and stressful reality caused by natural forces. A twofold question will be addressed: What were people's responses to the dramatic effects of the eruption and its resulting short-term climatic changes and in what way was Iceland adaptable in the long run towards the critical situation?

The historian Katrin Kleeman has studied the Laki eruption and its climate history and how shifting climate affects societies. Kleeman stresses the importance of an interdisciplinary focus in climatic historical studies. In this growing field of studies it is highly relevant to turn the spotlight on Iceland, where the Laki eruption has been an important narrative on climate changes and natural extremes.² Recently the attention of researchers has been drawn towards the micro-level, i.e. the need to focus on the local aspects of natural crises. A wide-ranging survey of 165 studies published in the first two decades of the twenty-first century which

¹ For informative research on the impact of the eruption in the form of articles and primary sources, see *Skaftárveldir 1783–1784: Rílgerðir og heimildir*, ed. by Gísli Ágúst Gunnlaugsson and others (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1984). See also David McCallam's insightful study on the meaning of volcanoes in the eighteenth century, where the Laki eruption is compared to other active volcanoes in Europe in terms of their effects on natural research as well as their political and social significance: *Volcanoes in Eighteenth-Century Europe: An Essay in Environmental Humanities*, Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment (Oxford: Liverpool University Press, 2019). See also: Alexandra Witze and Jeff Kanipe, *Island on Fire: The Extraordinary Story of Laki, the Forgotten Volcano that Turned Eighteenth-Century Europe Dark* (London: Profile Books, 2014); Karen Oslund, *Iceland Imagined. Nature, Culture, and Storytelling in the North Atlantic* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2011), pp. 35–38.

² Katrin Kleemann, 'Telling Stories of a Changed Climate: The Laki Fissure Eruption and the Interdisciplinarity of Climate History', *RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society*, 4 (2019), 33–42 (p. 41).

interconnect climate changes and history from 700 to 1815 concluded that there had been an overwhelming emphasis on the link between crisis and collapse in these studies. In a recent *Nature* article, a group of climate historians including the Nordic experts Katrin Kleeman and Heli Huhtamaa suggest that the focus should be turned to interactions ‘between environments and populations on small scales before considering connections between broad features of the climatic and human records.’³

As explained by Kleeman, the frightful elements of nature and the hardship it has caused are still a part of the cultural memory of Icelanders to this day.⁴ The fate of Icelanders during the Laki eruption is embedded in their souls, the threat of nature being a part of Icelandic reality. Its presence is encompassing. One way to come to terms with this grand-scale history of natural catastrophes is to write about it. The literary scholar Auður Aðalsteinsdóttir points out that depiction of natural disasters, such as the Laki eruption and the Famine of the Mist, in contemporary Icelandic literature can be interpreted partly as a literature dealing with climate changes in the modern world.⁵

Recent geological research has confirmed that high latitude volcanic eruptions, such as Laki, cause gigantic global climatic effects.⁶ Indeed, the far-reaching effects on the climate and weather conditions became apparent all over Europe and beyond in the weeks following the outbreak of the eruption in June 1783. Naturalists and scientists all around Europe, not only in Britain but also in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark as well as in Friesland, Switzerland, Germany, and the south of France, were perplexed when observing the various luminous phenomena in the sky and the red sun, and when measuring the drop in temperature after the eruption. David McCallam has dealt with the wide-ranging impact of volcanoes and its cultural meaning in the eighteenth-century world of the Enlightenment and argues that these observations give ‘much more than a touch of local colour to the climate devastation wrought by Laki’. The eruption in Iceland and the speculations it sparked amongst naturalists, thinkers, and officials might even be interpreted as one root of the modern environmental awareness: ‘Taken collectively, they may even represent the first glimmers of a modern ecological consciousness lit by the destructive fires of volcanoes.’⁷ The eruption was, according to McCallam, a token of and ‘a singularly

³ Dagomar Degroot et al., ‘Towards a Rigorous Understanding of Societal Responses to Climate Change’, *Nature* Vol. 591 (25 March 2021), pp. 539–550 (on p. 542). [Crossref](#)

⁴ Kleemann, p. 33.

⁵ Auður Aðalsteinsdóttir, ‘Up in Smoke and Flames: Social Turbulence and Volcanic Activity in Icelandic Fiction’, *Scandinavian Studies*, 93 (2021), pp. 329–356. [Crossref](#)

⁶ Hera Guðlaugsdóttir, *Climatic Fingerprint of Volcanic Eruptions* (Reykjavík: University of Iceland, 2019), pp. 13–14, 33–35.

⁷ McCallam, p. 227.

potent illustration of the interrelation of volcanism and the fragile equilibrium regulating both natural and social ecologies at the time'.⁸

The visible consequences in the environment were both wide-ranging and harmful, as ashes and brimstone, which caused sulphur dioxide pollution, entered the atmosphere. This caused a drop in global temperatures, leading to crop failures in many countries. The sun dimmed during the summer of 1783 and the winter of 1783–84 was extremely cold in Europe and North America. The toxic haze affected the western jet stream which weakened the African and Indian monsoon circulation. This led to a reduction in rainfall over eastern Africa, causing droughts, famine, and disease in Egypt. Climatic imbalance was felt in China and India as well. Weaker monsoons caused the Chalise famine in India where millions lost their lives. As these facts show, the Laki eruption in Iceland led to a climate disorder on a huge scale.⁹ As a result the planet cooled on average by one degree Celsius for the next several years.¹⁰ These wide-ranging consequences constitute a highly important context for this study.

The main sources for the study are a selection of letters and reports written by Icelanders. These writings are characterized by their distinctive presence, written when people were faced with the extremes. A particularly useful source to evaluate experiences of Icelanders is the autobiographical writings of the provost Jón Steingrímsson (1728–91) who served the people in the south where the fires were burning (Vestur-Skaftafellssýsla).

The first section of the article explores local reactions to the eruption and its various consequences. The second part addresses the distant understanding of events, when information based on local experience was finally published in Denmark, in newspapers in the autumn of 1783 and two pamphlets by Icelanders which were published during the winter of 1784 (the first in Danish and German) and the second (in Danish) in 1785.

The final part of the article sheds light on the economic factors shaping Icelandic society and the economic changes of free trade, which was a process – in the spirit of the Enlightenment – that had been going on with minor intervals for the last three decades and was about to be put into effect. In the midst of hardship, the prospect of free trade in Iceland was a welcome hope for a hard pressed society.

⁸ McCallam, p. 199.

⁹ McCallam, pp. 215–16. Sigurður Steinþórsson, 'Annus mirabilis: 1783 í erlendum heimildum', *Skírnir* 166 (1992), 133–55. The explanation for the effects of Laki on the unstable weather following the eruption is not fully understood. There were also other factors involved. See Eyþór Halldórsson, 'The Dry Fog of 1783: Environmental Impact and Human Reaction to the Lakagígur Eruption' (unpublished master's thesis, University of Vienna, 2013), pp. 101–02.

¹⁰ Witze and Kanipe, pp. 24, 138–48.

Facing the volcano: Reactions to a harsh reality

In the beginning of June 1783, when the sky is at its brightest and the midnight sun gives the inhabitants of Iceland a pleasant feeling of freedom and joy after the darkness of winter, the sky suddenly turned dark as heavy volcanic clouds burst on the scene accompanied by earthquakes. These were the first signs of the Laki eruption in the south-east of Iceland on 8 June 1783. Afterwards people also recalled that in the days before the outbreak the air was filled with a bluish smoke.¹¹

The forces of nature, which Icelanders surely never underestimated, with the frequent eruption of volcanoes as a sure reminder, had the most catastrophic consequences this time around. Contemporaries estimated that no such catastrophe had ever happened before. Never since the settlement of the island in the late ninth century had the inhabitants faced such a disaster.¹²

The ordeal had serious psychological effects. Years after the crisis people in Iceland were still dealing with various melancholic consequences according to the Scottish missionary Ebenezer Henderson.¹³ Henderson travelled throughout Iceland during the years 1814–15 and was in close contact with Icelanders. At that time the catastrophic eruption was still in living memory: ‘the contemplation of so tremendous an event is certainly calculated to produce a train of serious thought in every reflecting mind’.¹⁴

What was the situation like during the first weeks of the eruption? Accounts from the nearest locality of the eruption in Vestur-Skaftafellssýsla, where the fires were burning and the lava was flowing in constant streams, depict a beastly reality. People were forced to leave their farms in haste.¹⁵

At the height of the eruption in June 1783, the Dean at Mýrar, Jón Jónsson, wrote a startling account of a priest who had to flee during the night:

When we met there [at the farm Langholt], it would have wrenched the heart of any person with human susceptibility and compassion, as it did mine, to see the priest’s own distressed appearance, his panic-stricken state, and his terror when he said that the lava would swallow them up before they could get across the river; to see him and

¹¹ Magnús Stephensen, *Kort Beskrivelse over den nye Vulcans Ildsprudning i Vester-Skaptfields-Syssel paa Island i Aaret 1783* (Copenhagen: Nicolaus Møller, 1785), pp. 2–3. Sigurður Þórarinsson, ‘Annáll Skaftárelda’, in *Skaftáreldar 1783–1784*, pp. 11–36.

¹² Sæmundur Magnússon Hólm, *Om Jordbranden paa Island i Aaret 1783* (Copenhagen: Peder Horrebøw, 1784), p. 40. Magnús Stephensen, *Kort Beskrivelse*, pp. 1–2.

¹³ Ebenezer Henderson, *Iceland, or a Journal of a Residence in that Island during the Years 1814 and 1815*, 2 vols (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Waugh and Innes, 1818), I, p. 274.

¹⁴ Henderson, p. 288.

¹⁵ Gísli Ágúst Gunnlaugsson, ‘Fólksflótti úr Vestur-Skaftafellssýslu í kjölfar Skaftárelda’, in *Skaftáreldar 1783–1784*, pp. 119–28 (p. 124).

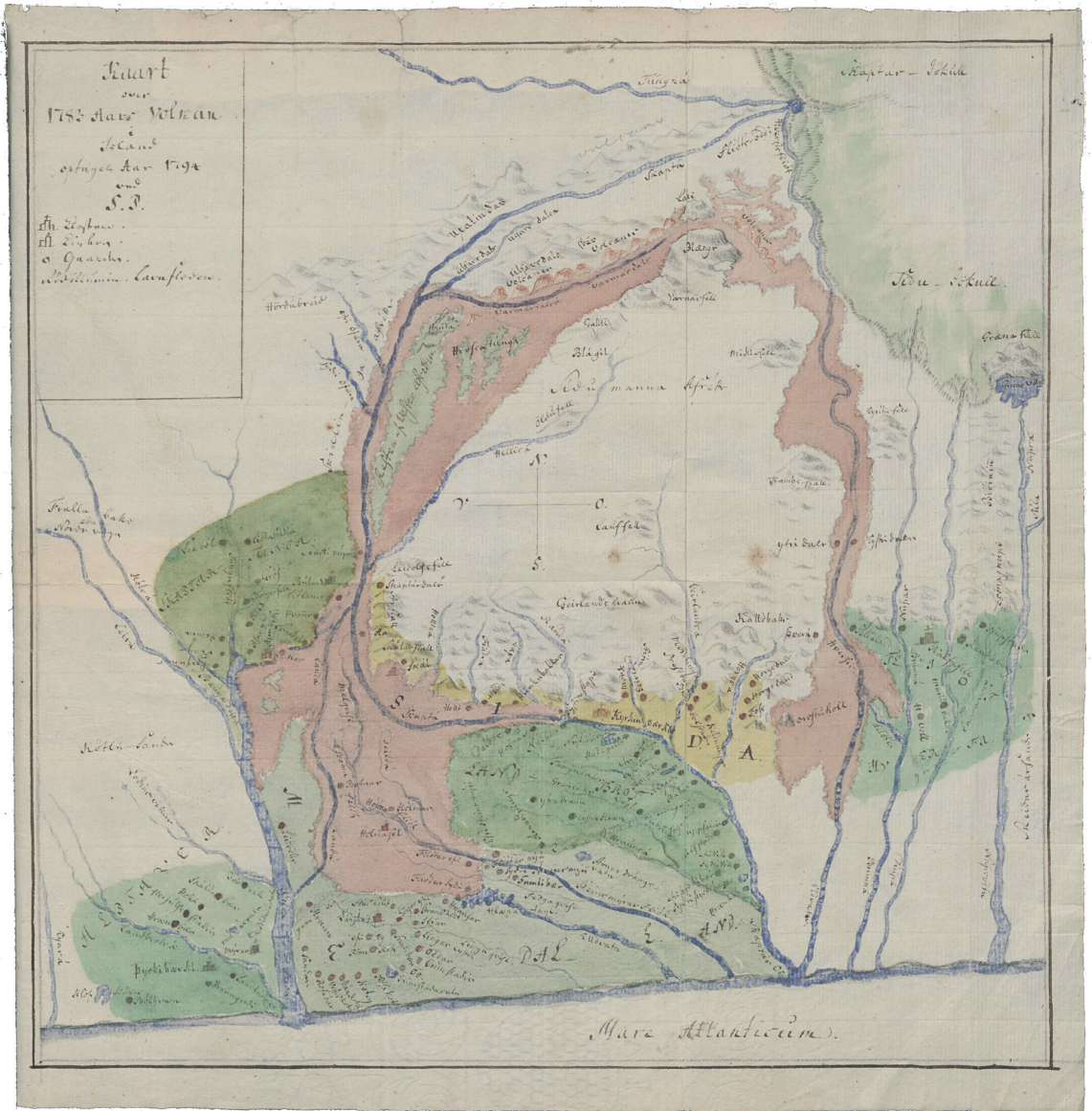


Fig. 1: A map of the Lakagíggar lava flow and the 'fire-farmland' by Sveinn Pálsson, 1794, as part of his description of the eruption of Laki. The lava flow is shown in brown and the green areas are the inhabited rural areas. In the upper right corner in light-green is the edge of the glacier Vatnajökull. (From Lbs. ÍB 23 fol.: Tillæg til Beskrivelse over den Volcan der brændte i Skaptefell Syssel Aar 1783; Samlet ved en Reise i Egnen Aarene 1793 og 1794. Digitized by Landsbókasafn Íslands Háskólabókasafn. Public Domain)

the others drifting around, with no place for rest or privacy, in these cramped crowded hovels with the storm outside, his belongings lying scattered and neglected in the mud. There was the same hysterical fear in the jumbled, nonsensical talk of everyone present, not only of those from the inland farms or those who had fled there because they were nearest to the smoke and the lava-fires, but also of those from the most southerly farms by the ocean.¹⁶

Jónsson stressed the panic and terror caused by the fire and alarming thundering noises: 'No description of mine can do justice to the reality of the scene. Who would not excuse that fear if he were to picture the scene to himself?' The fleeing priest had met '[a] mountain of flaming lava pouring over the land and advancing toward him, spewing opaque clouds over himself and his household; thunder and lightning from every quarter; discharges and blasts from the knolls and crevices on the ground in front of [the advancing lava] in every direction!'¹⁷

The most comprehensive narrative of the eruption and its aftermath in the nearest vicinity of the Laki craters was written by the Provost of the South, Jón Steingrímsson.¹⁸

Steingrímsson's autobiography is a unique account of the hardship people faced: 'The air was so thickly contaminated that I never ventured to breathe in fully and hardly went outside when there was no sun, all that year and the next', the Provost recalled. He is remembered as the Fire-Priest as during one of his sermons he managed, as the story goes, with his heartfelt prayer to stem the flow of encroaching lava that threatened to destroy his church.¹⁹

This so-called fire-mass which Jón conducted on 20 July 1783 was widely regarded as a miracle. By expressing trust in God, Steingrímsson wrote, fear and disaster could be held at bay:

¹⁶ 'The Flight from Hólmasel during the Laki Eruption of 1783', appendix 2, in Jón Steingrímsson, *A Very Present Help in Trouble: The Autobiography of the Fire-Priest*, translated by Michael Fell (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2002), pp. 346–47.

¹⁷ 'The Flight from Hólmasel', p. 347.

¹⁸ Steingrímsson, *A Very Present Help in Trouble*. Steingrímsson also wrote a factual account of the eruption (Eldritið) in 1788: *Fires of the Earth, the Laki eruption 1783–1784*, translated by Keneva Kunz (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 1998). Steingrímsson's chronicle and observations of the eruption are truthful from geological point of view. See Þorvaldur Þórðarsson, 'The 1783–1784 A.D. Laki-Grímsvötn Eruption I: A Critical Look at the Contemporary Chronicles', *Jökull*, 53 (2003), 1–7. See also from a historical point of view: Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, 'Um eldritin 1783–1788', in *Skaftáreldar 1783–1784*, pp. 243–62 (pp. 246–50).

¹⁹ David McCallam gives a natural explanation. The lava flow came to a standstill because of a hill near the church and from then on spilled in another direction, eastwards. McCallam, p. 221.

The fact is that through all the prodigies that befell us I felt absolutely no fear, however much the earth and the houses trembled and shook, thunderclaps crashed and fireballs flew around me, and though the darkness in all directions was tangible. I felt such courage in God, because I hoped and trusted that if I walked in His ways and carried out the duties of my priestly office rightly and faithfully, He would help me to pass through these trials and out of them – which is in fact what happened.²⁰

Steingrímsson's fearlessness at this point was in striking contrast to the atmosphere prevailing amongst his flock. 'During this summer, autumn, and winter, when the eruption was raging most dreadfully, the alterations that took place in every aspect of life are beyond my power to describe,' Steingrímsson wrote:

People were fleeing hither and yon. If one man would not risk staying in a certain place because of advancing lava, another would flee to that very same place. So it went back and forth. [...] Night and day I had to be helping people in various ways, giving them testimonials, keeping their possessions for them, and so forth, but above all by instilling into them faith and courage. When the other priests fled, many begged me in God's name not to leave them; for they believed that if I remained here and prayed to God for them, the molten lava would not injure any farm or any person – and so it happened!²¹

Although these words are high-spirited, the fire-priest was himself struggling with life just like his fellow countrymen. After three years of malnutrition and starvation his health was very poor. By 1786 he was desolate, desperately missing his wife who had passed away in 1784, depressed and suffering from insomnia.²² The previous years had been an overwhelming traumatic experience.²³

Steingrímsson's neighbour, the County Magistrate in the south (Vestur-Skaftafellssýsla), Lýður Guðmundsson (1728–1812), wrote a report to the Governor L.A. Thodal (c. 1718–1808) informing him of the situation in June and July. The inhabitants were 'terrified' and a 'fear filled their hearts'.²⁴ People were

²⁰ Steingrímsson, *A Very Present Help in Trouble*, p. 181.

²¹ Steingrímsson, *A Very Present Help in Trouble*, p. 183.

²² Michael Fell, 'Preface', in Steingrímsson, *A Very Present Help in Trouble*, pp. 1–21 (p. 18).

²³ The Famine of the Mist caused insanity and depression amongst some, see e.g. Ingvi Leifsson, *Með álfum: Ævisaga flökkukonunnar Ingiríðar Eiríksdóttur frá Haga í Þingeyjarsýslu 1777–1857* (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 2015) p. 17. Archaeological research indicates that bone tissue in humans might have been affected because of the trauma: Hildur Gestsdóttir, Peter Baxter, and Guðrún Alda Gísladóttir, *Fluorine Poisoning in Victims of the 1783–84 Eruption of the Laki Fissure, Iceland: Eystri Ásar & Búland – pilot study excavation report* (Reykjavík: Fornleifastofnun Íslands, 2006), p. 27. For a contemporary account, see Hólm, *Om Jordbranden paa Island*, pp. 51–52.

²⁴ Lýður Björnsson, 'Skýrsla Lýðs Guðmundssonar sýslumanns Vesturskaftafellinga til Thodals stiftamtmanns á Öxarárþingi 26. júlí 1783 er rituð með hendi Lýðs', in *Skaftáreldar 1783–1784*, pp. 276–78 (pp. 277–78).

frightened as the smoke from the earth was all around and the fires broke out near ‘the feet’ of people on the run.²⁵

‘Unnatural frost’ causing famine and death

The situation was no better in the north than in the south where the fires were burning. The hardship is evident in a letter written during the winter of 1784 by a midwife in Skagafjörður, Guðrún Jónsdóttir (1732–91). Outside her farmhouse freezing cold prevailed: ‘all around there is only famine and death [...] if I had 10 sheets of paper and time on my hands I could not even describe how many sheep and cows have been put to death on the neighbouring farms.’ The only salvation was to be found in the mercy of God.²⁶ Jónsdóttir comforted herself by saying that things couldn’t get worse. However, if the crisis went on for too long it would lead to ‘extinction’, she said.²⁷

The recipient of the letter was Jónsdóttir’s son, Sveinn Pálsson (1762–1840). Pálsson had recently moved from Skagafjörður and was living in the south-western part of Iceland. During the spring of 1784 he wrote a brief account of the fires in Laki, describing particularly the effects it had in the north-west (in Skagafjörður where his mother lived). He was at this point preparing himself for further studies in Copenhagen where he became the first Icelander to study natural sciences.²⁸ Pálsson recorded his observations systematically. He noticed that the weather was at its coldest and the frost bit hardest when the atmosphere was thick with haze. The frost had been ‘intolerable’ and unusual in Icelandic experience. Pálsson labelled it ‘unnatural frost’.²⁹ Magnús Ketilsson (1732–1803), a County Magistrate in the western part of Iceland, did some observations at the time and concluded that the frost had been unusually strong and continual, often more than five days in a row –18 °C, and it rarely dropped under –12 °C.³⁰ Weather conditions in Iceland and the meteorology had for the past few years been closely observed by the

²⁵ Lýður Björnsson, ‘Bréf frá Lýði Guðmundssyni sýslumanni Vesturskaftfellinga, dagsett 2. ágúst 1783’, in *Skaftáreldar 1783–1784*, pp. 283–86 (p. 285).

²⁶ Guðrún Jónsdóttir to Sveinn Pálsson, *Steinstöðum á síðasta sunnudegi í þorra, Sendibréf frá íslenzkum komum 1784–1900*, ed. by Finnur Sigmundsson (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1952), p. 6. Þorvaldur Thoroddsen, *Landfræðissaga Íslands III: Hugmyndir manna um Ísland náttúruskoðun og rannsóknir fyrir og síðar*, ed. by Gísli Már Gíslason and Guttormur Sigbjarnarson, 2nd edition (Reykjavík: Ormstunga 2005), pp. 125, 142.

²⁷ Guðrún Jónsdóttir to Sveinn Pálsson, p. 6.

²⁸ Þorvaldur Thoroddsen, *Landfræðissaga Íslands III: Hugmyndir manna um Ísland náttúruskoðun og rannsóknir fyrir og síðar*, pp. 116–18.

²⁹ ‘Eldsaga Sveins Pálssonar 1784’, in *Skaftáreldar 1783–1784*, pp. 419–22 (p. 421).

³⁰ Magnús Ketilsson, ‘Efterretning om Dale-Syssel’, in *Skaftáreldar 1783–1784*, pp. 359–61 (p. 359).

royal astronomer Rasmus Lievog (1738–1811).³¹ Research shows that the drop in temperature in Iceland was radical. The frost was hard and rarely less than –15 °C during the winter.³²

An official report, dated 23 September 1783, painted a grim picture of the psychological and physical effects the eruption had had on some of the inhabitants. One of the county magistrates located in the north, Jón Jakobsson (1738–1808), described how sulphur saturated the air and darkness had prevailed during the summer. To make matters even worse, soon after the outbreak ‘particles of pestilence’ which made the eyes feel as if they were burning started dropping like rain from the air. People could hardly breathe in the poisonous air which caused strong headaches. It was worrying that some people had fallen into ‘deep melancholia’ with dreadful consequences. Jakobsson speculated that the main reason for the psychological signs of depression was the darkness, smoke, and thick fog, as well as the incipient famine.³³

Personal sources express the same feeling of despair. The letters of Margrét Finnsdóttir (1734–96) to her brother, the Vice-Bishop Hannes Finnsson (1739–96), written during these difficult times, are a valuable source. Finnsdóttir belonged to an upper-class family in Iceland. She was the mother of six and the widow of the bishop of the Hólar diocese in the northern part of Iceland, Jón Teitsson, (1716–81).³⁴ By May 1784 everything was miserable, according to the widow, and many people had died. Prospects were bleak and many more would die. During the winter people had managed to survive by eating their livestock, thus threatening their future livelihood. Flocks of vagrants were wandering about. God almighty needed to show mercy on the poor souls of the Icelanders.³⁵ ‘I am at my wits end,’ Finnsdóttir confided to her brother: ‘I must remain here, as I do not have a horse anymore.’³⁶ Without a horse it was impossible to fetch necessary subsistence. More than 60 per cent of the horses in the Hólar diocese died.³⁷

³¹ Landsbókasafn Íslands Háskólabókasafn (National and University Library of Iceland; hereafter Lbs.), ÍB 234 4to a. Astronomiske og meteorologiske Observationer fra Island.

³² McCallam, p. 216. McCallam refers to Clive Oppenheimer, *Eruptions that Shook the World* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 2011), pp. 279–82. [Crossref](#)

³³ ‘Underdanigst Pro Memorial Om Øefiords Syssels nærværende Tilstand’, Þjóðskjalasafn Íslands (The National Archives of Iceland, hereafter ÞÍ), Rentukammer (Rtk) 1928 B27/10 – Bréfadagbók 6 (Íslands Journal 6) 1783–1784, nr. 402.

³⁴ Æfisaga Margrétar Finnsdóttur Eckiufrúr Jóns Teitssonar Biskups yfir Hóla=Stiþti (Leirárgörðum við Leirá: G. J. Schagfiord, 1797).

³⁵ Lbs. 28 b fol. Margrét Finnsdóttir to Hannes Finnsson, 10 May 1784.

³⁶ Lbs. 28 b fol. Margrét Finnsdóttir to Hannes Finnsson, 10 May 1784.

³⁷ Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, ‘Búfé og byggð við lok Skaftárelda og Móðuharðinda’, in *Skaftáreldar 1783–1784*, pp. 163–78 (pp. 170–72).

Similar stories are abundant in local letters written at the time. Jón Eiríksson (1728–87), who held a high post in the *Rentekammer*, the treasury in Copenhagen, received a letter, written in August 1783, from the Deputy Governor Ólafur Stefánsson (1731–1812) who lived in the western part of Iceland. Stefánsson said that the darkness had been overwhelming as thick haze brooded over the whole country. Alarming thunderous sounds filled the air, and when on occasions the sun was visible it was red as blood. Stefánsson concluded in line with others that the wrath of God was to blame.³⁸ Next spring the prospects were no better. Stefánsson informed his son-in-law, the Vice-Bishop Finnsson, that people would not survive as most of the livestock had been killed.³⁹

Reports to the *Rentekammer* in Copenhagen, written in the spring and autumn of 1784 by the Deputy Governor Stefán Þórarinnsson (1754–1823) reveal that the situation was bad. By the spring of 1784 famine was impending.⁴⁰ As there was nearly no food available the government banned all food exports from the north and the east of the country. The administration in Copenhagen sent a ship with cereals in the autumn of 1783. As it happened it did not reach Iceland until the spring of 1784. The drift ice from the Arctic had by then reached the fjords in the north and prevented the aid from reaching people in need.⁴¹

A farmer and a supervisor of Crown estates in the western part of the country named Brynjólfur Jónsson had by May 1784 lost most of his livestock because of ‘poison in the grass and the hay.’ The sheep, horses, and cattle only survived for a few days after eating grass covered with poisonous ash. According to Jónsson the catastrophe had spread around the whole country, people were roaming around from farm to farm dressed in rags, desperately cold, ‘some dropping dead between the farms [...] The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away,’ he wrote, wondering if the almighty God was punishing the people of the island.⁴²

This is one of the letters Grímur Jónsson Thorkelín (1752–1829) in Copenhagen received at the time from his countrymen. The letters were filled with news of what had happened at home in Iceland and how the situation evolved from month to month. Thorkelín was a young lawyer and antiquarian (and later appointed Royal Archivist). As his family and friends in Iceland were confronting traumatic

³⁸ Ólafur Stefánsson, ‘Extract of Amtm. Stephensens Brev til Conferenceraad Erichsen 15. Aug. 1783’, in *Skaftáreldar 1783–1784*, p. 279.

³⁹ Lbs. 29 fol. Ólafur Stefánsson to Hannes Finnsson, 19 January and 3 May 1784.

⁴⁰ ‘Um ástand Íslands frá september 1783 til október 1784’, in *Skaftáreldar 1783–1784*, pp. 303–35 (pp. 305–10). Lbs. 28 b fol. Margrét Finnsdóttir to Hannes Finnsson, 2 January 1784. See similar worries: Lbs. 29 fol. Jón Jónsson to Hannes Finnsson, 17 April 1785.

⁴¹ Sigfús Haukur Andrésson, ‘Aðstoð einokunarverslunar við Íslendinga í Móðuharðindunum’, in *Skaftáreldar 1783–1784*, 215–33 (pp. 222–24).

⁴² Lbs. JS. 95 a fol. Brynjólfur Jónsson to Grímur Thorkelín, 5 May 1784.

experiences he was on a path to success. In 1783 he was honoured with the title of Professor Extraordinarius. In three years' time he would be on his way to Britain on behalf of the Danish Crown.⁴³

In August 1783, Árni Þórarinnsson (1741–87), the Provost of Oddi, sailed for Copenhagen to be ordained Bishop of Hólar diocese in the north. He was able to deliver first-hand information on what was going on. When he was back in Iceland in the autumn of 1784 he wrote to Thorkelín: 'God has given better times!'⁴⁴ The situation was severe but the Bishop emphasized the need to stay positive. His optimistic spirit is evident in a letter he wrote to Thorkelín during the summer of 1785. Despite the terrible consequences of the eruption, rebuilding deserted farms and healing people 'would not be an impossible task'.⁴⁵

Yet the bishop experienced personal tragedy as two of his children died during the summer of 1786 in the smallpox epidemic that ravaged the country from the autumn of 1785.⁴⁶ These personal losses had their effects. He confided in his friend Jón Eiríksson in a letter written two years later, in the spring of 1786, that his thoughts were dark.⁴⁷

In the spring of 1786 things began to look better, wrote the widow Margrét Finnsdóttir from her farm in the north to her brother Finnsson, then ordained bishop in the south.⁴⁸ The times had also been testing for the newly appointed bishop in the south during the past few years. He had lost his first child, a newborn, in the winter of 1784. He and his family had also, like many people in the southern part of Iceland, experienced the most ruinous earthquakes. And his young wife passed away in February 1786 from the smallpox epidemic.⁴⁹ These two examples taken from the bishops' personal lives show how complex the ca-

⁴³ Kristian Kaalund, 'Grímur Thorkelín', in *Dansk biografisk lexikon. Tillige omfattende Norge for tidsrummet 1537–1814*, ed. C.F. Bricka, 19 vols. (København: Gyldendalske Boghandels Forlag, 1887–1905), XVII, pp. 258–60.

⁴⁴ Lbs. JS. 95 a fol. Árni Þórarinnsson to Grímur Thorkelín, 21 September 1784. Þórarinnsson biography: ÞÍ. Æfir lærðra manna 2019 A/3-1-1, Árni Þórarinnsson, pp. 47–90.

⁴⁵ Lbs. JS. 95 a fol. Árni Þórarinnsson to Grímur Thorkelín, 30 August 1785. (From Þórarinnsson: ÞÍ. Rtk. 1928 B27/45, sheet 5. Árni Þórarinnsson to Christian Martfelt, 1 September 1785 and B27/45 (6), 9 September 1786).

⁴⁶ ÞÍ. Rtk. 1928 B27/45 (sheet 6). Árni Þórarinnsson to Christian Martfelt 9 September 1786. In general: Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, 'Mannfall í móðuharðindunum', in *Skaftáreldar 1783–1784*, pp. 139–62 (pp. 155–56).

⁴⁷ Jón Eiríksson. 'Tvö bréf, 17. apr. 1784 og 2. júní 1786. Frá Jóni Eiríkssyni konferenzráði til Árna biskups Þórarinnssonar', ed. by Björn K. Þórólfsson, *Blanda VIII* (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 1944–1948), p. 38, 42, 45.

⁴⁸ Lbs. 28 b fol. Margrét Finnsdóttir to Hannes Finnsson, 10 January and 23 June 1786.

⁴⁹ Guðmundur Jónsson, *Ævisaga Hannesar Finnssonar* (Leirárgörðum: G. J. Skagfjörð, 1797), pp. 31–33.

tastrophe was – eruption, powerful earthquakes, severe cold, famine, decimation, epidemic. There was no escape even for those who were well-off.

Bishop Finnsson had studied and lived in Copenhagen over long periods of his life (nearly two decades) and was regarded as one of the most learned persons in Iceland. Finnsson gathered extensive data and information on the population. Finnsson's essay gave a realistic picture of what Icelanders had endured during the past few years when 'the father and the mother died, and the children were found dead or in their last breath when someone from the neighbourhood stopped by.'⁵⁰ Even though the loss of life was enormous, wrote Finnsson, Iceland is not uninhabitable, although it was subjected to frequent periods of hardship as 'the good years far outnumber the bad.'⁵¹ But Finnsson's optimism also reveals that Iceland had resources to fall back on. The fishing grounds were rich and needed to be utilized to a greater extent, as the administration in Copenhagen was planning to do.⁵² By linking Iceland closer to the already worldwide Danish trading network, and attempting to increase free trade, food security would be better ensured.

As new research indicates, local circumstances need to be examined when societal consequences of environmental disasters are evaluated. It has been emphasized, for instance, that 'societies that did not depend on temperature-sensitive grains could be especially resilient to cooling.'⁵³ This was the case in Iceland.

Distant reactions

It was in early September 1783 that confirmed news from Iceland about the Laki eruption reached Copenhagen. Letters describing the situation were printed in the Copenhagen press as well as elsewhere in Denmark during the autumn.⁵⁴

Previous scholarship on the Laki eruption has noted the wide interest in it in Enlightenment circles. The summer of 1783 was labelled the summer of darkness in Europe as a peculiar red sun lit the dark and heavy sky. The year was also known as 'the annus mirabilis' due to the climatic abnormalities. Luminous phenomena

⁵⁰ Hannes Finnsson, *Mannfækkun af hallærum*, ed. by Jón Eyþórsson and Jóhannes Nordal (Reykjavík: Almenna bókafélagið, 1970), p. 119.

⁵¹ Finnsson, p. 4.

⁵² Sigfús Haukur Andrésson, *Verzlunarsaga Íslands 1774–1807: Upphaf fríhöndlunar og almenna bænaskráin I* (Reykjavík: Verzlunarráð Íslands og Fjölsýn Forlag, 1988), pp. 303–15.

⁵³ Degroot et al., p. 544. Benjamin Liberman, *Climate Change in Human History: Prehistory to the Present* (London: Bloomsbury 2018), pp. 244–45.

⁵⁴ Sigurður Steinþórsson, 'Annus mirabilis. 1783 í erlendum heimildum', 142–48; Már Jónsson, 'Sorgarviðbrögð Sæmundar Hólms vegna Skaftárelda', *Nýtt Helgakver*, ed. by Guðmundur Jónsson, Gunnar Karlsson, Ólöf Garðarsdóttir, and Þórður Helgason (Reykjavík: Sögufélag 2019), p. 174, 176.

in the sky were observed in England as well as in Denmark and on the continent. After a very hot summer, with darkness prevailing, the polluted air, described as a ‘dry fog’ causing a sulphureous smell, gave way to a clear atmosphere for a brief period. But all was not over yet. In the autumn the volcanic haze resulted in an abnormally cold winter with an average drop in temperature of 1.5 °C in the next two years in Western Europe. The rivers of Europe froze and when it started to rain heavily, large-scale flooding followed in Eastern Europe. The abnormal temperature was also felt in North America.⁵⁵ The British poet and hymnwriter William Cowper (1731–1800) gave an insightful account of the feeling these conditions aroused in himself in the poem, ‘The Task’ (1785):

This Fires from beneath, and meteors from above,
Portentous, unexampled, unexplained,
...
And pillars of our planet seem to fail,
And nature, with a dim and sickly eye,
To wait the close of all?⁵⁶

The natural forces stirring the earth and waking the volcanoes from sleep provoked feelings of anxiety and despair.

The interconnection between Iceland, which was an outpost of Europe on the map, and the center, i.e. the European continent, was strong. For the past decades interest in Iceland had been growing. During the summer of 1772 Sir Joseph Banks (1743–1820), having recently arrived in England after taking part in the *Endeavour* expedition in 1768–71, decided on an excursion to Iceland. There he and his team made geological observations. Mounting Hekla, the most widely known volcano, was regarded as the greatest achievement.⁵⁷ Professor Anna Agnarsdóttir points out that the geological aspects of Iceland had woken Banks’s interest in the country. In his journal he wrote that the volcanoes of Iceland were interesting for natural research, along with the fauna and flora of the country.⁵⁸

One of Banks’s fellow travellers, the Swede Uno von Troil (1746–1803), naturalist and later Archbishop, wrote *Letters on Iceland*, published in Uppsala in 1777. The first part of the book is entitled *On the Effects of Fire in Iceland*, which indicates that volcanoes were the main focus of the expedition. The work was published in

⁵⁵ McCallam, pp. 216–17.

⁵⁶ William Cowper, *The Task* (London, 1785), p. 57.

⁵⁷ McCallam, pp. 210–11.

⁵⁸ Anna Agnarsdóttir. ‘Introduction: Banks and Iceland’, in *Sir Joseph Banks, Iceland, and the North Atlantic: Journals, Letters and Documents*, ed. by Anna Agnarsdóttir (Abingdon: The Hakluyt Society, 2016), pp. 1–34 (pp. 8–9).

English in 1780 and three years later, in the very year of the Laki eruption 1783, a new edition appeared (printed in London and Dublin).⁵⁹ Von Troil knew that he could ‘hope to find many remains of our ancient language’ in Iceland and he was ‘certain to see nature in a new point of view’. This made him happy.⁶⁰ Von Troil described the awe-inspiring nature of Iceland: ‘It is true, beauty is pleasing both to our eyes and our thoughts; but gigantic nature often makes the most lasting impressions.’⁶¹

In a letter to Professor Bergman, a Swedish geologist ‘Of Mount Hecla’, von Troil gave a description of Hekla, which had erupted six years previously, and which Joseph Banks and his company had climbed for the sake of scientific observation.⁶² The publication of von Troil’s writings shows a keen interest in the nature of Iceland and its geological aspects around the time of the Laki eruption. By that time Banks was at the forefront of the Enlightenment as the president of the Royal Society in London. Transnational connections were his strength and the world of scientists could turn to him for information on Iceland.

In early 1784 a pamphlet entitled *Om Jordbranden paa Island i Aaret 1783* (On the Volcanic Eruption in Iceland in the year 1783) was published in Copenhagen, describing the eruption from a local perspective.⁶³ It was written by an Icelander, Sæmundur Magnússon Hólm (1746/9–1821). Before leaving for his studies in Copenhagen, Hólm had been an assistant to the Provost of the South, Jón Steingrímsson. Hólm was born on a farm in the south of Iceland, Hólmasel, which was destroyed by the tremendous outflow of lava from the Laki craters, and he found it his duty to inform the wider world of the situation amongst his friends and family.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Uno von Troil, *Letters on Iceland: containing observations on the civil, literary, ecclesiastical, and natural history ... made, during a voyage ... in ... 1772, by Joseph Banks ... assisted by Dr. Solander ... and several other literary ... gentlemen ... To which are added the letters of Dr. Ihre and Dr. Bach [for rather, Bäck] ... concerning the Edda and the elephantiasis of Iceland: also, Professor Bergman’s curious observations and chemical examination of the lava ... produced on the island, etc.* (London: J. Robsson, W. Richardson and N. Conant, 1780), pp. 1–14. The first edition of the work: Uno von Troil, *Bref, rörande en resa til Island* (Uppsala: Magnus Swederus, 1777).

⁶⁰ von Troil, *Letters on Iceland*, p. 2.

⁶¹ von Troil, *Letters on Iceland*, p. 4.

⁶² von Troil, *Letters on Iceland*, pp. 239–44.

⁶³ Hólm, *Om Jordbranden paa Island*. A German edition came out in the same year, *Vom Erdbrande auf Island im Jahr 1783*, transl. Christian Carl Pluegh (Copenhagen: Prost, 1784).

⁶⁴ Már Jónsson, ‘Inngangur’, in *Draumadagbók Sæmundar Hólms* (Selfoss: Sæmundur, 2019), p. 13. About the farm Hólmasel and the last-minute escape of the people from the fire on 20 June 1783: *Diplomatarium Islandicum. Íslenskt fornbréfasafn II, 1253–1350*, ed. by Jón Þorkelsson and others (Kaupmannahöfn: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag 1893), p. 873.

Hólm's writings aroused immediate interest in enlightened circles in London. The Swedish botanist Jonas Dryander (1748–1810), who was in the service of Sir Joseph Banks, read it as it was published in Danish and gave an account to Banks. The eruptions of Vesuvius, the very active and powerful volcano in Italy, were according to Dryander 'mere trifles' in comparisons to the Laki eruption in Iceland.⁶⁵

Hólm's 80-page pamphlet was based on letters received from his homeland. There the air was thick and total darkness prevailed, it was even hard to breathe and explosions filled the air.⁶⁶ The pamphlet echoed the feeling of helplessness the personal accounts reveal. Many had decided to abandon their farms in order to escape. There was a feeling of anxiety and fear in the air, and according to Hólm many living closest to the volcanic activity would die in agony.⁶⁷ Hólm's own mother, Guðleif Sæmundsdóttir, passed away in August 1783.⁶⁸ Hólm also noted, as is documented in several of the aforementioned letters, that many people had stopped thinking rationally. For some time confusion and even madness prevailed. This was not only due to the eruption, with fire-tongues constantly squirting pyroclastic stuff over the land, according to Hólm. The powerful earthquakes and incessant frightening detonations gave no peace to the mind.⁶⁹

Magnús Stephensen (1762–1833), later Chief Justice, criticized Hólm for his work as giving a too pessimistic, chaotic, and exaggerated picture of events.⁷⁰ The young man was studying in Copenhagen at the time, and the courtier H.C.D.V. von Levetzow (1754–1829), who became the provincial governor in Iceland in 1785, were appointed by the Danish administration to sail to Iceland in the autumn of 1783 to gather information about the situation.⁷¹

⁶⁵ Jonas Dryander to Joseph Banks, 24 October 1784, *Sir Joseph Banks, Iceland, and the North Atlantic*, pp. 203–04. For a comparison with Vesuvius and other eighteenth-century eruptions, see McCallam, pp. 32–39, 71.

⁶⁶ Hólm, *Om Jordbranden paa Island*, pp. 8–9, 44–48. Lbs. JS 98 fol. Ólöf Bjarnadóttir to Sæmundur Magnússon Hólm, 10 August 1783, Jón Sveinsson to Sæmundur Magnússon Hólm 18 August 1783, Guðmundur Thorgrímsson to Sæmundur Magnússon Hólm, August 20, 1783. ÞÍ. Rtk. 1928 B27/45 (sheet 45): Sæmundur Magnússon Hólm to Christian Martfeldt, 26 July 1784.

⁶⁷ Hólm, *Om Jordbranden paa Island*, pp. 47–48.

⁶⁸ Már Jónsson, 'Inngangur', in *Draunadagbók Sæmundar Hólm*, p. 13.

⁶⁹ Hólm, *Om Jordbranden paa Island*, pp. 47–48. See also: Hólm, *Vom Erdbrände auf Island*, p. 61.

⁷⁰ Magnús Stephensen, *Kort Beskrivelse over den nye Vulcans Ildsprudning i Vester-Skaptfields*, pp. 50–52. Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, 'Um eldritin 1783–1788', in *Skaftáreldar 1783–1784*, p. 244.

⁷¹ *Lovsamling for Island*, ed. Oddgeir Stephensen and Jón Sigurðsson, IV (Copenhagen: Andr. Fred. Høst, 1854), pp. 756–60; Ingi Sigurðsson, *Hugmyndaheimur Magnúsar Stephensen* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1996), pp. 165–66.

Stephensen wrote a pamphlet afterwards, published in Danish. It was hard to face the reality of hunger and deprivation the natural catastrophe had caused, according to the young author.⁷² The work is a systematic survey of the eruption in the spirit of the Enlightenment. Stephensen brought back to Denmark samples of ash and pumice for mineral research in the autumn of 1784.⁷³ For the next decades Stephensen became the main advocate of the Enlightenment in Icelandic society.⁷⁴

During the winter of 1784 scientists and thinkers obtained the first information on the eruption. But more was needed. The theologian Christian Wilhelm Schneider (1734–97) in Eisenach in Thüringen requested more information from Vice-Bishop Finnsson on the eruption and the harm it had caused on the island.⁷⁵ Like many other naturalists on the Continent he needed more information to make sense of the dramatic changes in the weather he had witnessed during the summer of 1783. Finnsson was well known in the Republic of Letters and in 1772 had visited the famous botanist Linnaeus in Sweden.⁷⁶

Sæmundur Hólm also gave a personal account of what he himself experienced during the summer in Denmark. The sun had been red, and a strange fog had prevailed. The weather had been unusually hot. He referred to the observation of a Copenhagen professor of German origin, Christian Gottlieb Kratzenstein (1723–95), when he described the climatic changes during the summer. Kratzenstein had linked the strange weather conditions to the eruption in Iceland.⁷⁷ Further south, a French naturalist, Jacques Antoine Mourgeu de Montredon (1734–1818), gave a presentation to the Royal Academy of Science in Montpellier based on his daily observations from 17 June until 22 July. Montredon connected the Icelandic eruption with the haze.⁷⁸

⁷² Stephensen, *Kort Beskrivelse*, pp. 132–34, 136. Stephensen criticized Hólm's account for being too bleak, pp. 50–52.

⁷³ Stephensen, *Kort Beskrivelse*, p. 91.

⁷⁴ Ingi Sigurðsson, 'The Icelandic Enlightenment as an Extended Phenomenon', *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 35 (2010), pp. 371–90. [Crossref](#)

⁷⁵ Þí. Áfir lærðra manna 2019 A/15-1-1, Finnur Jónsson, p. 195. Lbs. 30 fol. Letter from Chr. Wilhelm Schneider to Hannes and Finnur Jónsson.

⁷⁶ Jón Helgason, *Hannes Finnsson: Biskup í Skálholti* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1936), p. 62.

⁷⁷ Hólm, *Om Jordbranden paa Island*, pp. 52–54. Már Jónsson, 'Sorgarviðbrögð Sæmundar Hólms vegna Skaftárelda', in *Nýtt Helgakver*, ed. by Guðmundur Jónsson, Gunnar Karlsson, Ólöf Garðarsdóttir and Þórður Helgason (Reykjavík: Sögufélag 2019), pp. 167–81. Bjarni Jónsson, *Íslenskir Hafnarstúdentar* (Akureyri: Bjarni Jónsson, 1949), p. 122. Þorvaldur Þórðarsson, 'The 1783–1784 A.D. Laki-Grímsvötn Eruption I: A Critical Look at the Contemporary Chronicles', *Jökull*, 53 (2003), 7. An extract from *Om Jordbranden paa Island* was published in the *Ephemerides Societatis Meteorologicae Palatinae, Observationes Anni 1783* (Mannheim, 1785).

⁷⁸ McCallam, pp. 228–31

The hope of free trade for Iceland

The American diplomat, politician, and polymath, Benjamin Franklin (1706–90) experienced the haze or the ‘dry fog’ period in France during the summer of 1783. His scientific observations that summer, written in May 1784, were published in England three years later: ‘During several of the Summer Months of the Year 1783, when the Effect of the Suns Rays to heat the Earth in these northern Regions should have been greatest, there existed a constant Fog over all Europe; and great Part of North America.’ This phenomenon Franklin speculatively linked to the fires in Iceland.⁷⁹ Franklin’s observations were similar to Kratzenstein’s, to which Sæmundur Hólm had referred in his pamphlet. Franklin, who corresponded with his friend in London, Sir Joseph Banks, during the winter, was in Paris presiding over the United States delegation taking part in forming a treaty to end the American War of Independence (Peace of Paris 1783).⁸⁰ The task was also to establish free commerce on a global basis and Franklin was hopeful that through more freedom with the abandonment of mercantilism the world might become more peaceful.⁸¹

New research suggests that access to international trade networks increases resilience to the effects of climatic extremes.⁸² This is interesting as free trade was occupying the minds of Icelanders and Danes at the time. There are indications that, even though the situation was grave during the period of the Famine of the Mist, officials in Iceland as well as the administration in Copenhagen had serious intentions for a large-scale restoration of Iceland. In the spring of 1785 a commission was founded (The Second Land Commission) to provide a detailed plan for improvements with special emphasis on free trade.⁸³

One of the commissioners was the aforementioned Jón Eiríksson. Eiríksson had for many years, as a respected official in the *Rentekammer* on matters concerning Iceland and the regions in the North Atlantic, been involved in the economic

⁷⁹ ‘Meteorological Imaginations and Conjectures, [May 1784]’, Founders Online, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-42-02-0184>. [Original source: The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, vol. 42, March 1 through August 15, 1784, ed. by Ellen R. Cohn (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017), pp. 289–94.] First published in Benjamin Franklin, ‘Meteorological Imaginations and Conjectures, [May 1784],’ (London: C. Dilly, 1787), pp. 82–85.

⁸⁰ Gordon S. Wood, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Penguin, 2004), pp. 196–200.

⁸¹ Béla Kapossy, Isaac Nakhimovsky, and Richard Whatmore, ‘Introduction: Power, Prosperity, and Peace in Enlightenment Thought’, in *Commerce and Peace in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 1–19 (pp. 1–2). [Crossref](#)

⁸² Degroot et al., p. 545.

⁸³ Sigfús Haukur Andrésson, *Verzlunarsaga Íslands*, pp. 317–28.



CHRISTIÁNS - MÁL.

Vaknaðu Muni at veiga fóknum
 Vina Þórs, ne feru linr;
 Arum lióttadu flugar sírugt
 Fram í fevar-diúpi gamma;
 Þvíat mig uggir, ádr enn leggir
 Ad í kiala-sát Gunnladar,
 Öll hafi skáld til frekrar fylli
 Frá mer dropa hverjann fopit.

Svángle-gann aprt fer eg hingat
 Sækia ródr fiadra móðann,
 Hafa mun lític hrept án efa
 Hugi döggar í sónar löggum;
 Þó skal neyra, lítt at láiz,
 Lids til svala-dryckiar hali,
 Mærdar timbr meðan eg herdi
 Meg, úr hofi spjalís út-vega.

*Expurgiscere, Anime, ad querendum nectar
 Poëticum, neque segnis esto;
 Remos volatús agita strenuè
 Profum in alto maris culturum;
 Nam vereor, ne priusquam attrigeris
 Stabulum carinarum Gunnlada,
 Omnes poëte ad nimiam satietatem
 Mibi guttulam quamque exhauferint.*

*At jejunum video huc retrò
 Dirigentem remigium alarum anbelum!
 Parum igitur sine dubio obtinuit
 Animus laticis in angulis lacús;
 Sed tamen utar, licet parum cedatur,
 Cerevisiá, ad bibendum poëte,
 Poëseos materiem, dum intendero
 Vires, e fano sermonis efferre.*

Dvi

Fig. 2: To honour the birthday of Christian VII on 29 January 1783, a book of poems on Icelandic society and its future development was published. The above engraving from the book depicts a variety of images associated with Iceland, including the recently introduced reindeer as well as merchant houses and trading vessels. The woman at the front signifies the goddess Fortune paying tribute to the Danish king, who 'before long would introduce free trade to Iceland.' The magnificent column was in honour of the Danish Crown for improvements which were already in the making. The 'peaceful' volcano in the middle is conspicuous; nobody could foresee the devastating effects of the massive eruption taking place later in the same year. (From Jón Jonsonius, *Christiáns-Mál* edr. Lof-Qvædi ... (1783). Digitized by Landsbókasafn Íslands Háskólabókasafn. Public Domain)

developments gradually taking place in Iceland. He stated that reports from Iceland since the start of the eruption showed that people had high hopes for a better future. These hopes were ‘well grounded’.⁸⁴

Ahead were major projects to strengthen Icelandic society and put the island in its proper place in the wake of modernity. In preparation were government actions to strengthen agriculture, industry, and fisheries. This, along with a plan for free trade gradually replacing the monopoly trade, would turn things for the better.⁸⁵

The hope for Icelanders, as expressed in many letters and accounts, rested on a plan for free trade, which had already been set in motion in government circles before the natural disaster struck. By active free trade Iceland could be turned into ‘a jewel’ of the Danish Crown as one of the Icelandic officials put it in a publication about the plan in 1784.⁸⁶

In 1782 the Danish Society of Agriculture and Economic Improvements (*Det Kongelige Danske Landhuusholdningsselskab*), introduced an essay competition about the best way to manage Icelandic trade. One of the most zealous advocates of the plan for free trade in Iceland for more than a decade was the secretary of the society, the economist Christian Martfelt (1728–90).⁸⁷ Martfelt had been corresponding with various Icelandic officials for years. One of his correspondents was the County Magistrate Magnús Ketilsson. In a letter written on 26 January 1784, Ketilsson informed Martfelt about the situation, the freezing cold, and the sulphurous haze in some parts of the country. Ketilsson told Martfelt that changes were urgent: free trade would be a helpful tool.⁸⁸ In the autumn, Ketilsson still emphasized the need

⁸⁴ Jón Eiríksson, ‘Minnisgreinar Jóns Eiríkssonar um móðuharðindi’, in *Skaftáreldar 1783–1784*, 423–35 (p. 434). Eiríksson also published a short account in Danish about the fires, *Efterretning om Ilds-Udbrydelsen i Vester-Skaptelfells-Syssel i Island* (Copenhagen: Höecke, 1784).

⁸⁵ Jón Johnsonius, *Christíans-Mál, edr. Lof-Qvædi [...] Qvædit i Nafni hinna Islanzku Þjóðar, á Norrænu, edr enn nú tíðkada Islanzka tungu med Látíknskri Utleggingu* (Kaupmannahöfn: Jóhann Rúdólph Thiele, 1783), p. 14. Karen Oslund explained that there was a strong link in the nineteenth century historiography of Iceland between the Danish monopoly trading and the natural catastrophe: ‘In Iceland, history had gone wrong with the arrival of the Danes upon the scene.’ Oslund, *Iceland Imagined*, p. 45. The optimism was reflected in purchasing orders by officials of luxury goods from abroad, see: Hrefna Róbertsdóttir, ‘Munaðarvara og matarmenning. Þöntunarvara árið 1784,’ *Saga* 49:1 (2012), pp. 99–111.

⁸⁶ Þorkell Fjeldsted, *Om en nye Handels-Indretning udi Island* (Copenhagen: Nicolaus Møller Kongelig Hofbogtrykker, 1784), p. 4. This description of the meaning of Iceland for the Danish Crown had its roots in pamphlets written in 1770–1772.

⁸⁷ Juliane Engelhardt, ‘Patriotic Societies and Royal Imperial Reforms in Denmark, 1761–1814’, in *The Rise of Economic Societies in the Eighteenth Century: Patriotic Reform in Europe and North America*, ed. by Koen Stapelbroek and Jani Marjanen (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 212–31 (pp. 214–16).

⁸⁸ Þ.Í. Rtk. 1928 B27/45 (sheet 29), Magnús Ketilsson to Christian Martfelt, 26 January 1784.

for free trade and explained that, as the fishing grounds around Iceland were rich, Iceland's economy could become profitable.⁸⁹

Sæmundur Hólm told Martfelt in 1784 that free trade and well-planned fisheries might be the solution to halt the death rate and poverty in the aftermath of the Laki eruption.⁹⁰ And in a long letter to Martfelt in 1787 Bishop Finnsson evaluated Icelandic society and the recent famine and concluded that free trade would be 'the biggest and best gift the King could deliver to Icelanders'.⁹¹

Conclusion

The individual responses of Icelanders when faced with the consequences of the Laki eruption were desperate and emotional. Correspondence and the autobiography of the fire-priest Jón Steingrímsson show the traumatic and devastating experience Icelanders faced as they encountered the most devastating forces of nature in their history. Personal sources reveal that this struggle with nature caused widespread feelings of apprehension and melancholia. The despair was evident as the only salvation in the midst of famine was praying to the merciful God. These words in one letter after another may seem to be fatalistic but should rather be interpreted as a sign of humility during the worst hardship. People knew from experience that better times would come. Furthermore, the rays of Enlightenment shone in Iceland as well as abroad, and government measures would bring progress.

The crisis facing people locally called for urgent action. During the worst crisis many believed that improvements in trade could be the right tool for rebuilding society. The abolition of monopoly in trade was already being discussed by government officials, and only two years after the eruption the first steps towards free trade were taken.

The letters of officials written after the eruption showed their positive outlook as they insisted that the restoration in Iceland should rest on free trade in the Enlightenment spirit. The Danish administration put great effort into the plans to modernize Iceland with an emphasis on free trade. This gift of the Danish crown, as Bishop Finnsson described the free-trade plan, would if successful put Iceland on the map as a 'jewel' in the Danish Empire. Although the project did not ma-

⁸⁹ ÞÍ. Rtk. 1928 B27/45 (sheet 30), Magnús Ketilsson to Christian Martfelt, 15 September 1784.

⁹⁰ ÞÍ. Rtk. 1928 B27/45 (sheet 45), Sæmundur Magnússon Hólm to Christian Martfelt, 26 July 1784.

⁹¹ ÞÍ. Rtk. 1928 B27/47 (sheet 16), Hannes Finnsson to Christian Martfelt, 26 March 1787.

terialize fully it can be regarded as a part of the official response to the natural catastrophe.

The weather conditions and climate changes were not only felt locally in Iceland but also far away. Iceland's Laki eruption caused a drop in global temperatures, leading to crop failures in Europe and across the world. Scientists in the neighbouring countries took an immediate interest in the eruption and described the changes in their own environment. The powerful reality of a summer of darkness in Europe (1783) and subsequent cold weather during the winter caused anxiety amongst people in many countries and opened new research interests amongst scientists who sought information from learned Icelanders on Icelandic nature and volcanoes. The large-scale natural catastrophe of Laki in Iceland which started unexpectedly in June 1783 increased awareness of the sensitivity of the ecological cycle that wraps the Earth.

MARGRÉT GUNNARSDÓTTIR (b. 1971) is an archivist at the National archives of Iceland and a doctoral candidate in History at the University of Iceland. Her main research interests are Icelandic-Danish economical and political history in the second half of the eighteenth century and first half of the nineteenth century.