

Jón Kristinn Einarsson, *Jón Steingrímsson og Skaftáreldar*
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This book is about human existence in exceptionally adverse conditions. Volcanic eruption on the immense scale of the Laki eruption (in Icelandic named ‘Skaftáreldar’) which broke out in 1783 was extremely destructive. Earthquakes and eruptions are a perennial threat in Iceland past and present. The catastrophe striking the country during the years 1783–1785 was by far the severest experience the islanders have faced from the period of the settlement in the late ninth century.

The times were testing and one of the most pressing questions was how to bring aid to the people who were abandoning their farms in flocks in the area near the Laki volcano. This was the task officials in Iceland were faced with during the summer of 1784.

Jón Kristinn Einarsson has written a detailed account of a dispute which led to public charges against one of the royal officials, the provost in the South, Jón Steingrímsson (1728–1791). His work, *Jón Steingrímsson og Skaftáreldar*, is in two parts, first a historical essay (pp. 21–119) and then primary sources (letters and Steingrímsson’s monograph) in an appendix skillfully introduced and edited by Professor Már Jónsson (pp. 121–236).

In his essay, Einarsson puts events into context and discusses the case against Steingrímsson. The essay is divided into three main chapters. The first chapter is an introduction describing the circumstances and historical perspective, the administrative system and the royal officials involved in the Steingrímsson case. The Laki eruption and its effects on people and livestock is also discussed (pp. 41–47) as well as the historical context of disaster relief in the eighteenth century (pp. 28–34). A fundamental objective of the administration was to prevent people from vagrancy. The second chapter (pp. 51–61) describes the response of the adminis-

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tration in Copenhagen during the winter of 1783–1784 when a fundraising was carried out in Denmark and Norway. It is informative to read about the European and Danish context of proposed humanitarian aid. Einarsson stresses that the nature of the Laki catastrophe was different from more common disasters such as crop failures caused by bad weather or epidemics (p. 59).

These two introductory chapters lead to the main chapter titled 'The Jón Steingrímsson Case' (pp. 65–108). Steingrímsson, the provost in the South, where the fires were burning, is the person 'who is most closely associated with the Laki eruption in the minds of most Icelanders', as Einarsson writes (p. 239). In historical writings during the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century Steingrímsson was much admired and even idealized for his courage and powerful prose. The tale of the Fire-Priest and the Fire-Mass is a familiar one to Icelanders young and old. On 20 July 1783 Steingrímsson's preaching miraculously stopped the flow of lava when it was approaching his church in Kirkjubæjarklaustur (p. 65). However, as events unfolded in 1784, Steingrímsson faced enormous challenges. The lava flow was very destructive and the eruption was traumatic for himself and his flock. To make matters even worse Steingrímsson was charged with unlawfully distributing public money from a government fund to destitute farmers during the summer. This puzzling case is at the heart of Einarsson's narrative.

In May 1784, the Governor of Iceland, Lauritz Andreas Thodal, handed over to Steingrímsson a sealed parcel (containing 600 rdl.) which he was supposed to deliver to the County Magistrate in Vestur-Skaftafellssýsla, Lýður Guðmundsson, who was meant to distribute the money to farmers on the brink of destitute in the county. The aim was to able the farmers to buy new livestock and stop them from abandoning their farms. But on the way back home from the Seat of the Governor (Bessastaðir) Steingrímsson met many of his parishioners fleeing their farms. He (and to make the case more complicated, Sigurður Ólafsson, the monastic proprietor at Kirkjubæjarklaustur, who was accompanying him) decided to start the distribution of the relief money immediately. Steingrímsson was thus in breach of official regulations but he felt it was his duty in these extraordinary circumstances to act in an hour of need.

Einarsson's research gives a fresh perspective on the Steingrímsson case. The case is well-known. Hitherto in historical studies Steingrímsson's explanations of his actions have not been questioned (p. 9–10, 241). Steingrímsson's autobiography discusses the case in details. There he claims that the charges against him were orchestrated by his adversaries and that he had been treated unjustly (chapter 42).¹

¹ In English translation: Jón Steingrímsson. *A Very Present Help in Trouble. The Autobiography of a Fire-Priest*. Translated by Michael Fell (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2002).

Einarsson introduces varied sources to shed light on this strange case, i.e. letters of officials, receipts and reports which are preserved at the Icelandic National Archive (pp. 17–18). Einarsson shows that the money Steingrímsson received from the Governor was not, as Steingrímsson has claimed, relief aid sent from Copenhagen in the spring of 1784 where funds had been raised during the winter. Sources reveal that no aid was sent to Iceland in the year 1784. It was Governor Thodal himself who provided the money from a public fund he was in charge of (*Jústitskassi* or the Judicial fund) (pp.77–78).

The detailed information revealed by Einarsson's sources are skilfully presented (pp. 80–103) and his readers can follow Steingrímsson's every step and communications while the money was in his keeping. Furthermore, Einarsson's neatly woven narrative of transactions between officials gives a thorough account of what took place in government circles and what was at stake in Iceland during those pressing times.

The narrative gives the reader the impression that the whole affair in its complexity was a case of misunderstanding and a falling out between the officials involved. Steingrímsson tells the story from his point of view in his autobiography as well as in his monograph on the eruption, which is printed in the appendix 'Ein fullkomin relation og skrif um jarðeldinn í Skaftafellssýslu' (pp. 175–236).² It is informative for the reader to be able to read interchangeably Einarsson's essay and the primary sources which his work is based on. In Steingrímsson's monograph, for example, we learn that his parishioners were torn by strife before the eruption ('eldkveikjur á milli nágranna við upphaf eldanna') and some of them turned on him because of disagreements about a new land survey (pp. 235–236).

Einarsson concludes that Steingrímsson's autobiography can not be regarded as a reliable source about the process of distributing public relief money during the summer of 1784. Steingrímsson skips some essential facts, most importantly that the monastic proprietor, Sigurður Ólafsson, had sealed the money-parcel before the two of them left Stórólfsvoll (the farm of the County Magistrate in Rangárvallasýsla), a seal Steingrímsson later broke (p. 117).

However it should not be over-looked that the honour of a dutiful royal official was at stake here. Einarsson writes that Steingrímsson was not as well known amongst his contemporaries as he is today (p. 24). It is true that his fame grew after his death but he was nevertheless a much respected royal official during his time. His great concern for his flock and cultivation of his farm (royal estate) had been noticed in high places before the charges were made against him. Steingrímsson was amongst the exemplary patriotic persons described in Ove Mallings'

² In English translation: Jón Steingrímsson. *Fires of the Earth, the Laki Eruption 1783–1784*. Translated by Keneva Kunz (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 1998).

book, *Store og gode handlinger* (pp. 415–420).³ The charges brought against him were obviously hard to bear as well as the final verdict. In his autobiography he uses impassioned words to describe his disgrace. Having to apologize publicly for what he himself regarded as false and misleading accusations by his adversaries must have been a heavy cross to bear for Steingrímsson who was by heart a loyal and dutiful royal official.

Einarsson attempts to put Steingrímsson's case into political context by observing prioritisation and interactions in the government circles of the officials involved in the case (p. 15). Lack of confidence had been felt between Icelandic officials and Governor Thodal and in the administration in Denmark voices of distrust towards Icelandic officials were noticed. Einarsson suggests that Steingrímsson's case could be seen as part of a 'deep-seated conflict between Icelandic officials and the governor representing the Danish central government' (p. 241). This interpretation is well argued with references to official sources, but the reader is nevertheless left with the feeling that the Steingrímsson case is not only political but also personal with various interests involved.

Jón Kristinn Einarsson's first work is highly interesting and thought-provoking. The book reveals that officials were confronted with pressing questions regarding their duties during the summer of 1784 when the effects of the Laki eruption were really starting to bite. It sheds light on the difficulties facing people and local officials in Iceland and gives insight into the hardship and traumatic situation evolving during the Laki eruption.

³ See: Ove Malling, *Store og gode handlinger af Danske, Norske og Holstenere* (København 1777), pp. 521, 526–528. As well in the edition from 1783, pp. 415–420.