Environmental Images of Nineteenth-Century Iceland from Official Letters (*Bréf Sýslumanna og Amtmanna*)

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Abstract. Iceland may be said to have become part of the Danish kingdom in 1536, although it was not formally subject to Danish laws until 1662. In 1904 the union with Denmark began to dissolve when home rule was granted, and since 1944 Iceland has been a self-governing republic. For the period ca. 1700 to 1894 a valuable historical legacy from Danish rule exists in the form of official reports describing conditions in Iceland. The reports or letters were written one to three times a year by Icelandic officials known as *Sýslumenn* (Sheriffs) and *Amtmenn* (District Governors) and sent to the *Stiftamtmaður* or *Landshöfðingja* (Governors of Iceland). The letters were produced for all of the counties of Iceland (23) thus enabling comparison of conditions in different areas. These letters form a goldmine of climatic, environmental, and historical information. They are located in the National Archives in Reykjavík, are unpublished, and are mainly written in Gothic handwriting in Danish. The reports contain information on climate (especially temperature and precipitation), sea-ice variations, comments on glacial phenomena, environmental impacts such as the occurrence of volcanic eruptions and avalanches, as well as information on fisheries, livestock, grass-growth and hay yield, and human health. In this paper, the focus is on environmental images of Iceland during the nineteenth century, as seen through the eyes of the *Sýslumenn* and *Amtmenn*.

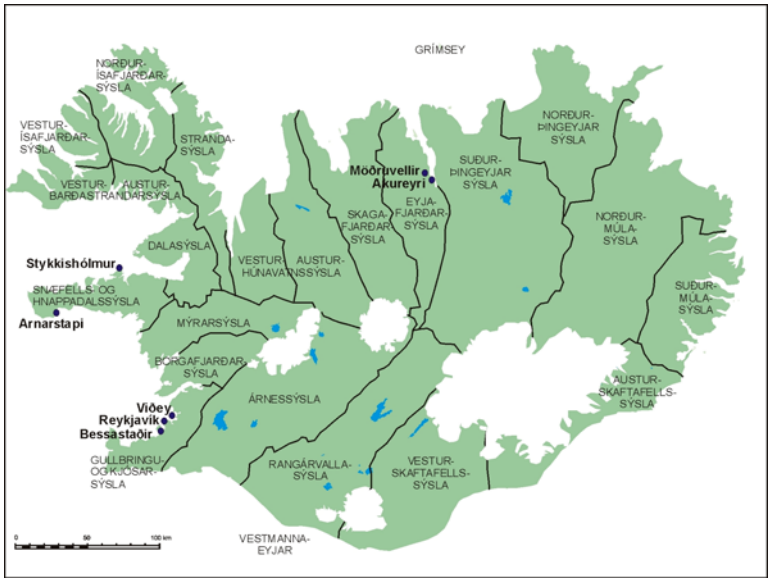

Figure 1. This map shows the 23 traditional counties or districts (*sýslur*) of Iceland. It should be noted that this is to give a general guideline only. Nineteenth-century boundaries varied slightly from the present. Also shown are the residences of the District Governor and the Governor, as mentioned in the text.

Introduction: The Origin of the Letters

> *Immediately after New Year, the inconstant and changeable weather which had prevailed for the last 2 months of the previous year was supplanted by a quite severe frost, partly caused by strong northeasterly storms and heavy snowfalls. This weather lasted, not just to the end of the month (January) but continued almost unchanged for the next 2 months, February and March. Although the wind occasionally changed to a southerly or southwesterly direction, this did not last for more than 1 to 2 days at a time before it began to blow again from the north with increased strength. Both the frost and the snow were much more severe than they usually are, even at this time of year. However, it was particularly the snow that was much more than usual as in most places the ground was covered by such amounts of snow that all transport by horse was impossible and even people on foot had difficulty. Communication by sea also ceased completely on account of the ice which filled up all bays and fjords. As a consequence, for all this time, all livestock needed to be kept in and given fodder, as not even horses were able to seek their food outside.* Extract from letter written by District Governor, Bergur Ólafsson Thorberg, dated 31 August 1866, Stykkishólmur, Snæfellsnessýsla[i].

It was in the nineteenth century that the medieval literature of Iceland, in particular the *Sagas of Icelanders*, really began to be "discovered" by the outside world. At the same time, travellers to Iceland, who had started to visit the island in the eighteenth century, began to increase in numbers. While many nineteenth-century travel and other writings concerning Iceland were published and enjoyed by a relatively large audience, certain other, detailed, descriptive writings exist which have been seen by very few. These include official letters that were written from all of the districts or counties in Iceland to the Governor and District or Deputy Governor of Iceland. These letters, in the form of reports on conditions in Iceland, were written annually from the early 1700s and the practice was continued to the end of the nineteenth century.

The officials responsible for the reports were called *Sýslumenn* (plural) or, in the singular form *Sýslumaður*. (*Menn* meaning, of course, "men", and *maður*, "man".) The most appropriate translation into English would appear to be "Sheriff"[ii] The term *Sýsla* was originally used in both Norway and Denmark to mean "work", "business" or "activity". It also came to refer to an official of the government; in particular, one who "does the work or business of the king" and was used as early as the tenth century (Benediktsson: 1-2). It has been suggested that the term *Sýslumaður* arose out of the practice of kings to send trusted men to carry out a task or mission (*sýsla*), especially in outlying regions (Lehmann 1888). It subsequently came to mean a jurisdictional area; an example is "Vendsyssel" in Denmark. In Norway, the term is no longer used except in regard to just one official, the *Sysselman*, on Spitsbergen. The word more commonly used in Norway for the same kind of official is *Lensman*. In Iceland, however, the term is still contained in the names of all the jurisdictional counties or *Sýslur* in the country (see Figure 1) as well as for present-day officials.

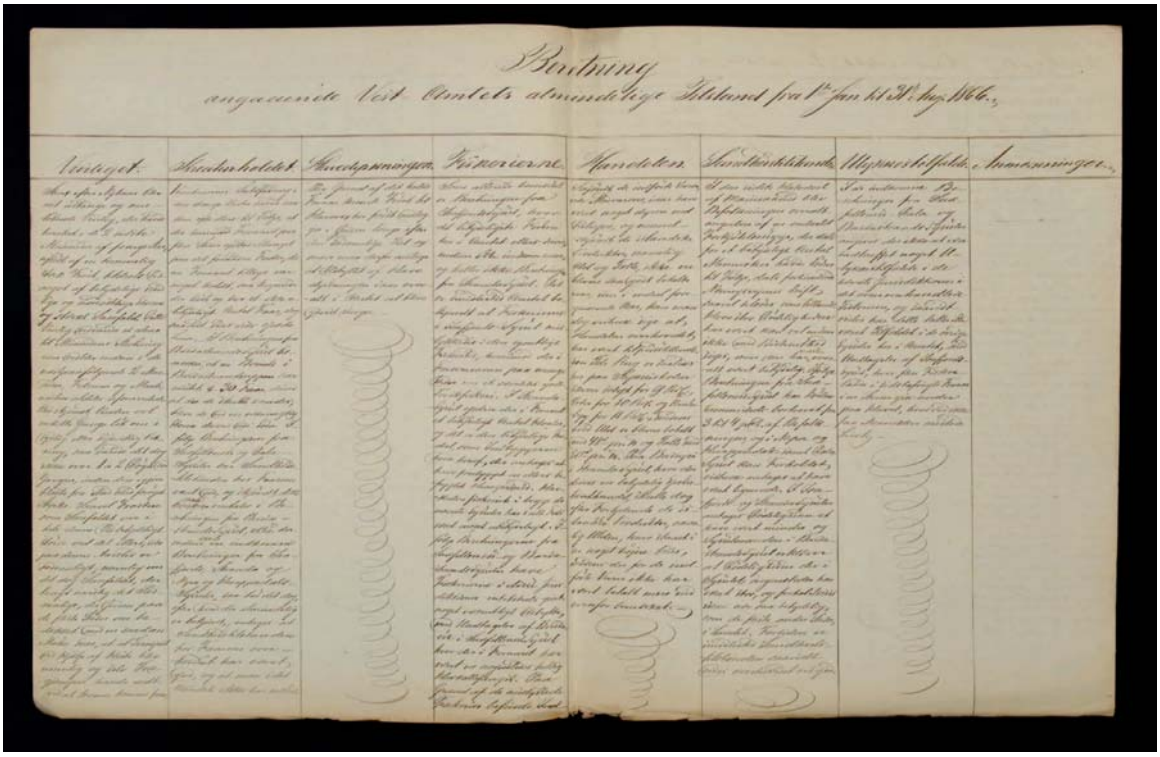

Figure 2. The photograph shows the front of a letter dated 18 October 1866 signed (on the back) by the District Governor or *Amtmaður* for the western district, Bergur Thorberg (1829-1886). He was appointed *Landshöfðingi*, Governor General of Iceland, in 1882. The heading of the letter reads in translation: *Report regarding the Western District's General Condition from 1 January to 31 August 1866*. The headings of the letter read, from left to right: *Veirliget* ("the weather"); *Kreaturholdet* ("the livestock"); *Havedyrkningen* ("horticulture"); *Fiskerierne* ("the fisheries"); *Handelen* ("trade"); *Sundhedstilstanden* ("state of health"); *Ulykkestilfælde* ("accidents"); *Anmærkninger* ("notes"). The beginning of the section on "weather" is translated at the start of this paper. The photograph is published by kind permission of *Þjóðskjalasfn Íslands* (the National Archives of Iceland).

The origin of the term *Sýsla* as it was used on Iceland may be traced back primarily to the events of the years 1262-64 when Iceland became part of the Norwegian kingdom. Subsequently, according to the late-thirteenth century Icelandic code of laws, commonly called *Jónsbók*[iii], Iceland was divided into 12 jurisdictional regions. These were known literally as "things"; the Icelandic word is *þing*, often translated as an "assembly" or "meeting" and referring both to the event and the place where it occurred. The word *Sýsla* is to be found in *Jónsbók* (33, 325) in the meaning of an administrative region, but was not generally used in this way until the middle of the sixteenth century when the administrative system was reorganized after the Reformation (Þorsteinsson 1972). Thus, around this time, the name of the districts changed from *þing* to *sýsla* and the man who represented the king in a certain jurisdictional region came to be known as a *sýslumaður* (Þórarinsson 1994). The title *sýslumaður* is also to be found in *Jónsbók* (Laxness: 84).

The Kalmar Union, effected in 1397, united Norway with Denmark and Sweden. At that time, Iceland, Greenland and the Faroes were still regarded politically as part of Norway. In 1523 the Union came to an end, but some elements remained until 1536 when the Danish Privy Council unilaterally declared Norway to be a Danish province. Although

Norway kept some separate institutions, Iceland, Greenland and the Faroes came directly under the Danish Crown. Although it was only in 1814, with the Treaty of Kiel, that Iceland became formally subject to Denmark, in practice, Danish administration was directly imposed on Iceland in 1662 with the initiation of the Danish Absolute Monarchy. At that time, for administrative purposes, the Danish kingdom became divided into separate districts, each called an *Amt*. Iceland in entirety was considered to be one "Amt". The "Amt" was to have a Governor or *Stiftamtmaður* in charge of it. The first appointed *Stiftamtmaður* over Iceland was the five-year-old illegitimate son of King Christian V, Ulrik Christian Gyldenløve. As he was clearly unable to perform his appointed duties, another official was required to do this (Laxness: 38). He was termed an *Amtmaður* and was first appointed in 1688. This title may be translated as "District" or "Deputy Governor". The *Stiftamtmaður* was the highest representative of the King on Iceland.

Figure 3. Rock formations at Arnastapi on the Snæfellsnes peninsula, near the location of the seat of the former Governors of Iceland for the Western District[iv].

In 1770, the *Amt* of Iceland was divided in two, with the southern and western areas now comprising one *Amt*, and the northern and eastern regions another. Later, in 1787, the former was also divided in two in order to create a separate southern and western *Amt* resulting in three in total. The District Governor for the north and east traditionally lived at Möðruvellir in the Hörgárdalur valley in Eyjafjarðarsýsla (see Figures 1 and 5). After a fire there in 1874, the seat of the District Governor was moved to Akureyri. The District Governor for the western district was usually based either at Arnarstapi or Stykkishólmur on the Snaefellsnes peninsula. Prior to 1770, the Governors rarely visited Iceland. After that time, they were generally resident, and also held the title of District Governor for the south. They were then based at Bessastaðir on Álftanes close to Reykjavík (the current

residence of Icelandic presidents) or else lived in Reykjavík, or nearby, in particular on the island of Viðey. In 1873, the position of *Stiftamtmaður* was eliminated and replaced by the *Landshöfðingja* who was now to be the highest-ranking representative of the Danish King on Iceland. This title also may be translated as "Governor" but will be referred to here as "Governor General" in order to avoid confusion. The last *Stiftamtmaður* became the new *Landshöfðingja*. The position of *Amtmaður* was kept until home rule was established in 1904.

Figure 4. This photograph shows Bessastaðir, former seat of the Governors of Iceland, in the centre distance, as seen from the Reykjavík shore.

Most of the Governors of Iceland were Danish, but many of the District Governors were Icelandic. Under the authority of the Governors and the District Governors were the *Sýslumenn*, or "Sheriffs". For the most part, one *sýslumaður* held jurisdiction over one county or district (*Sýsla*), but there were exceptions to this. Thus, for example, Gullbringja and Kjós districts were together generally the responsibility of one sheriff. The Sheriffs were almost all Icelandic, and they were the main representative of the law in the districts. They collected the taxes and other monies due to the King, kept an eye on how trade was going, and tried to make sure that items were weighed and measured correctly (Laxness: 85). They were supposed to attend the *Alþing*, the National Assembly, every year. They sometimes failed in this duty, however; the journey could be long and arduous and the Sheriffs frequently stated that they could not afford it. Another heavy burden for them was having to look after the "criminals" (*sakamenn*) or, as they are sometimes named, *delinquenta*, for a period of time. The Sheriffs were also required to bring them to the *Alþing* at their own expense. Hard times in the mid- to late-eighteenth century meant that stealing increased greatly and the Sheriffs had to spend

even more time keeping order (Ogilvie 1982). This was the context of the building of a prison in Reykjavik. It was built during the years 1761 to 1771 and used as such to 1816[v].

Figure 5. Möðruvellir in Hörgárdalur. After a fire in 1874, the seat of the District Governor for the North and East moved to Akureyri.

It was, however, a further duty of the Sheriffs that is of particular interest here. The *Stiftamtmaður*, or the *Amtmaður* as his representative, was required to send the Danish government annual reports on the economy of the country (Laxness: 38). In order to adequately fulfil this duty, the *sýslumaður* in each district of Iceland was, in turn, charged with the task of drawing up a report on conditions in the district for which he was responsible. From the early 1700s, these reports were usually written annually. From around 1780, they were written more frequently, often two to three times per year. The different sheriffs interpreted this duty in different ways; some wrote comparatively briefly; others gave fuller accounts. On the whole, the letters from the nineteenth century contain far more detail than those of the eighteenth.

These letters written by the Sheriffs were usually in Danish, occasionally in Icelandic, often in Gothic script, and they are all in manuscript form. They are located in the National Archives of Iceland (*Þjóðskjalasafn Íslands*) in Reykjavík. An example of a typical letter is shown in Figure 2. An extract from the account of the weather, *Veirliget*, for this year of 1866 forms the epigraph to this paper. The letters contain information on weather and climate, other environmental conditions, fishing catches, the growth of grass and the hay harvest, health and diseases, trade, and other items of interest. Letters arrived from Denmark to Iceland with trading and other vessels, usually in early summer, and were sent to Denmark and elsewhere when the ships departed, usually in September. In order to place the letters in perspective, a short excursion on the location, climate, history, and economy of Iceland follows below.

Iceland: Location, Climate, Settlement History

Iceland's central location in the North Atlantic means that the island has a very interesting and variable climate. The country lies at the intersection of cold Polar and mild Atlantic air and ocean currents, and this makes its climate very changeable. The effect of the relatively warm Irminger current makes human habitation possible, even though the island is marginal for agriculture. An important feature of Iceland's climate is the sea ice which drifts from East Greenland on cold marine currents and affects the coasts, especially the north of Iceland (Ogilvie and Jónsdóttir 2000; Ogilvie and Jónsson 2001). The island is also subject to volcanic activity (Demarée and Ogilvie, 2001). The climate of Iceland has a profound influence on all aspects of the country's economy and society (Ogilvie 2001; Ogilvie and McGovern 2000).

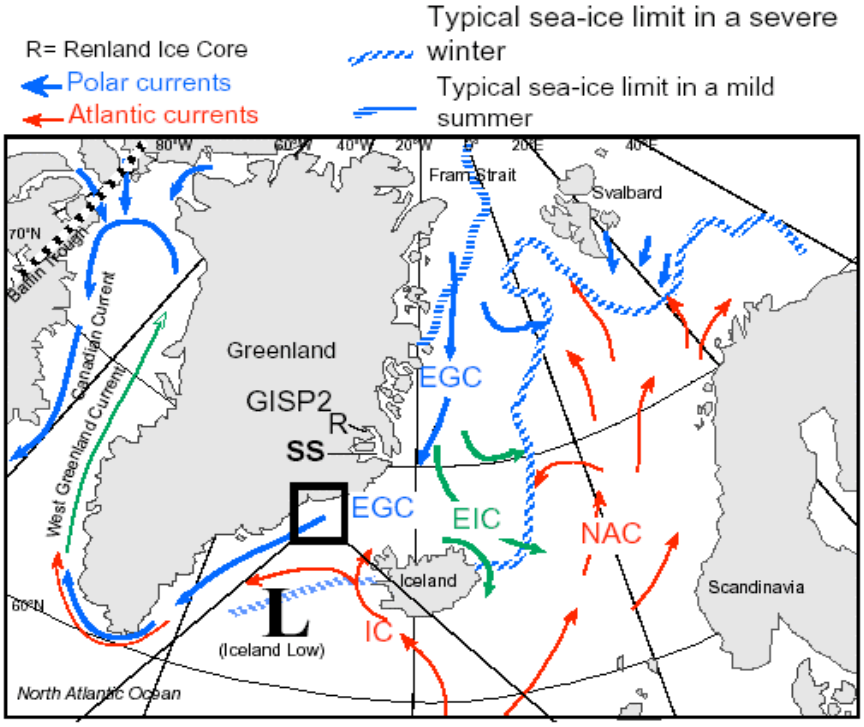

Figure 6. This diagram shows surface currents around Iceland and also the positition of the sea-ice edge in a winter with severe sea ice as well as a summer with mild sea-ice condtions. It also shows several study sites (Ogilvie *et al*., 2000) including that of the GISP2 ice core. SS = Scoresby Sund; EGC = East Greenland Current; IC = Irminger Current; EIC = East Irminger Current; NAC = Norwegian Atlantic Current. The diagram has been modified after Hurdle, 1986.

The settlement of Iceland began in the last decades of the ninth century (Vésteinsson 1998). At that time, the settlers brought with them a farming economy based on animal husbandry with sheep, pigs, cattle and horses as the main domestic animals. Although barley was grown during the first few centuries after settlement, the climate, on the whole, has not been suitable for grain-growing. An economic transition took place some time around AD 1150 to 1200 with the cessation of the raising of pigs, and a greater

emphasis on sheep rather than cattle (Ogilvie *et al*. 2005). The origins of this transition were undoubtedly partly the result of climatic conditions as pigs require a relatively mild climate, and cattle consume far more grass and hay than sheep. From the end of the Commonwealth Period in Iceland, until the mid-twentieth century brought prosperity and a high standard of living, the population of Iceland can only be described as extremely poor. There were mitigating factors, however. In comparison with peasant classes in other parts of Europe, Icelandic farmers enjoyed some measure of freedom. The population varied from around 30,000 to 50,000, with declines in population frequently coinciding with famine years. There were no towns or villages to speak of until the end of the nineteenth century when Reykjavik began to take form. Instead there were isolated farmsteads with a few fishing stations on the coasts. The large majority of the inhabitants were tenants of the Danish King or the Church. As animal husbandry formed the lynchpin of the Icelandic economy it was the grass and hay for the livestock that has traditionally been the most important crop in Iceland. The grass for the hay crop came from two sources: the homefield (*tún*) close to the farm, and from outlying pastures. The reaping of the grass was by hand, and was a continuous process, from early July to late September. Hay-making was often a difficult and laborious task undertaken by all able-bodied members of the community. If there was insufficient hay for winter fodder, then domestic animals could die, and the human population, in turn, could be subject to famine and death. This chain of events occurred many times in Iceland's history.

Iceland in the Nineteenth Century

The nineteenth century began with a difficult legacy from the past. Severe years and famines occurred in the mid- to late-eighteenth century, and these, compounded with the major volcanic eruption of Lakagígar in 1784, together with difficult economic conditions, meant a large loss of life amongst both humans and domestic animals (Ogilvie 1986; Demarée and Ogilvie 2001). In 1703, the first census taken showed a population of 50,358. In 1801 it had dropped to 47,852 (*Hagskinna Íslands* 1997). The nineteenth century was undoubtedly a time of great change in Iceland. Although many aspects remained very similar to those of previous centuries, it was also a time that contained the seeds of the developments that were to come with the twentieth century. It was during the nineteenth century that nationalism grew in Iceland and the *sjalfstæðisbarátta*, the "struggle for independence" resulted in the granting of home rule from Denmark in 1905 and the establishment of a free republic in 1944. In the meantime, Iceland in the nineteenth century was relatively untouched by the urbanization and industrialization that characterised much of the rest of Europe, and the Icelandic economy remained very limited, with a major focus on farming. However, the industrial revolution in Europe did have effects in Iceland. From 1855, free trade was established in Iceland and this brought about better conditions. This, in turn, caused the Icelanders to increase their foreign trade and to produce more goods for sale, including both fish and meat products. The standard of living improved somewhat, and by 1870 the population had reached 70,000 (Nordal and Kristinsson: 85). However, most people still lived on farms in rural districts, and towns were virtually non-existent. In the last quarter of the century, changes occurred more rapidly; in particular, fishing increased and the traditional Icelandic emphasis on farming instead of fishing began to give way before a new

economic way of life where fishing became the basis of the economy. There was a move away from the rural districts, and, by 1900, Reykjavik had a population of 6,000 (Nordal and Kristinsson: 86). A little over one hundred years before, in 1786, when Reykjavik received its municipal charter, it had a total of 167 inhabitants. These many changes that occurred during the nineteenth century are reflected in the letters of the Sheriffs and District Governors of Iceland.

Environmental Images of Iceland from the Letters of the Sheriffs and District Governors

The images of Iceland presented by the Sheriffs' letters show a country where life was a constant struggle. Success meant survival, not much more, and failure could mean death. The letters often begin with a statement to the effect that conditions in the country, "Landets Tilstand", are very difficult. The letters reflect the economic as well as the natural world. The letters usually begin with an account of the weather over the past year, giving descriptions of each season. Sometimes these are very detailed and sometimes even include quantitative meteorological observations. In addition, examples are given of perceptions of economic activities in an environmental context; in particular, the all-important grass crop and hay harvest, as well as fisheries catches (see Figure 5). The letters illustrate just how central the weather was to the lives of people living in Iceland in past centuries. Descriptions of other aspects of the environment such as volcanic eruptions, glacial phenomena and floods also occur. Several examples of these are given below, as well as examples of descriptions of individual seasons, and the perceived impacts on the farming and fishing communities. This discussion of the environmental images of Iceland through the eyes of the Sheriffs begins with an extract from a letter written by Gunnlaugur Pétursson Blöndahl (1834-1884) giving details of the autumn of 1867.

Figure 7. Sea ice off the northern coast of Iceland.

> *During the first days of September the weather was calm and favourable. However, during the rest of the month there were lasting severe storms from the north and northeast with cold and night frost. During all of October the weather was mainly unsteady with alternating storms and rains. During the last days of this month a severe frost occurred with snows and continual strong northeasterly winds. This weather lasted almost unbroken to the last days of November when the weather again became milder with southerly winds and rain, so that the snow, for the most part, thawed*. Extract from letter written by Gunnlaugur Pétursson Blöndahl, dated 31 December 1867, Barðarstrandarsýsla.

It was the winter season, however, that was often crucial for the well-being of both people and animals.

> *The winter so far has been very severe and unpleasant for this district. At the end of September, and occasionally in October, foggy weather occurred with sleet and easterly winds. The earth thus eventually became covered with a thick and hard crust of ice, impenetrable to horses as well as sheep from early in November (1824) to 6 January (1825) when the first winter thaw occurred. This lasted a week and melted the ice layer. Now we have frost and snow again, with northwesterly storms…In a sudden and raging snowstorm on 6 December, three people lost their lives, and sheep were also lost in various places*. Extract from letter written by Sheriff Þórður Björnsson, dated 22 January 1825, Garður, Suður-Þingeyjarsýsla.

This letter, written by Þórður Björnsson (1766-1834) in Suður-Þingeyjarsýsla in northeastern Iceland, highlights the changeable nature of the weather and describes a situation that is especially dangerous for the livestock: a succession of freezes and thaws. This renders the ground virtually impenetrable to the animals, and they need to be given supplementary fodder. The real danger of sudden snowstorms is illustrated by the fact that three people lost their lives as well as a number of sheep. Stories abound of people who died in blizzards as they were going from one farm building to another; a sudden severe snowstorm could make it impossible to see anything at all.

> *This spring was everywhere in the north, and, as far as I know, in the east too, among the colder ones, although not actually severe. However, some people, especially in Húnavatn and Skagafjörður, did lose a considerable number of their sheep, especially the so-called year-old sheep (gemlingur)…After the cold spring, the air began to get milder in the beginning of June. The weather became very dry up to around mid July*. Extract from letter written by District Governor Stefán Þórarinsson, dated 9 September 1820, Möðruvellir, Eyjafjarðarsýsla.

A severe spring season could be potentially even more hazardous for the livestock than a severe winter, as it would mean an additional period of time with little new grass. The sheep were also more vulnerable then as lambing occurred in late spring/early summer. The writer of the letter quoted above, Stefán Þórarinsson (1831-1892) was District Governor in the northern and eastern districts from 1783 to 1823 (Ólason: 340).

> *…From St Hans day (24 June) there was continual dry weather. It was also dry throughout August. After that the weather became more damp with southerly winds to mid October*. Extract from letter written by Sheriff Jónas Scheving, dated 31 December 1816, Leirá, Borgarfjarðarsýsla.

Figure 8. Sheep being rounded up to be taken to summer pastures in June 2007.

The letter from Sheriff Jónas Scheving (1770-1831) in Borgarfjord district in the west of Iceland describes a dry summer in that area in 1816. Unusually dry or unusually wet weather during the summer could both negatively impact the grass growth and harvest. The year 1816 is of special interest as it has become known as the "Year Without A Summer" (Stommel and Stommel 1979). The very cold weather that year in many parts of the world was caused by the eruption of the volcano Tambora in Indonesia in April 1815. The weather in Iceland in 1816 was not of an extreme nature, but it was severe in most parts (Ogilvie 1992).

Very cold years did undoubtedly play a part in social stress which manifested itself in the desertion of farms, begging and petty crime. When the livestock died for lack of food, it could happen that human beings also died. Such problems were not widespread in 1816, however, and just one district, Snæfellsnessýsla, reported difficulties of this kind.

> *Great lack of food among inhabitants, People pressed by beggars from here and also from other districts. The majority of the district's populace have already got into debt at the trading places in previous years, and have scraped together all that they could in order to pay. So now they have to give all the best fish to the merchants and have little left for themselves except for flatfish and cod's heads. This is poor winter provision, particularly on the coast among the poor fishermen*

> *who do not earn sufficient during the summer to buy other necessary foodstuffs from the farmers, and who therefore live in the greatest misery*. Extract from letter written by Sheriff Sigurður Guðlaugsson, dated 18 February 1817, Gröf, Snæfellsnessýsla.

The lack of food may be attributed to adverse economic trading conditions as well as climate. Elsewhere in this letter, the Sheriff states that the trading places were very poorly supplied with corn wares and other imported foodstuffs. However, the fishing, of great importance in this district, largely failed this year, but this was due to direct climate impacts. The Sheriff, Sigurður Guðlaugsson (1764-1840) noted that "although there should have been fishing in the latter part of the winter months, the severe frost and layers of ice far out to sea, frequently prevented the fishermen from getting out to sea for many days on end". As Snæfellsnes and other nearby areas were important fishing centres, they attracted people whose inland sources of food had failed.

As well as the sea freezing off the western coasts as in the example above, another climatic phenomenon which affects Iceland is the sea ice which drifts to its shores on the East Greenland Current (see Figures 6, 7 and 9). The causes of the presence of ice are complex, but sea ice off Iceland is usually associated with very cold weather. The ice most commonly reaches the northwest, north and east of Iceland. It is rare for it to reach the southern coasts. The advent of the ice was mostly feared as it brought cold and hunger in its wake. The image of the ice undoubtedly conjured up fear and it was personified as a dreaded enemy (Ogilvie 1995).

> *...the winter was among the best, but the spring was very cold, especially after the sea ice, which lay here for some time, had embraced the coasts. In the similarly cold summer, the grass growth was thus very poor. The hay harvest, which began in mid August, was hindered by frost, fog and cold chills as well as much snow on occasion, especially around 18 August and again on 19 to 26 September. It was also difficult to harvest the hay in the constant and severe rain in late September and early October...In the spring the inhabitants caught several sharks, and in the autumn a considerable number of cod and halibut…However, on 19 October the fishing stopped due to encroaching drift ice. The two whales washed up in the jurisdictional areas of Broddanes and Bær by the sea ice in June, helped much in preventing hunger deaths in the dearth at that time*. Extract from letter written by Sheriff Jón Jónsson, dated 3 January 1816, Bær, Hrútafirði, Strandasýsla.

This further example from the year 1816 written by Sheriff Jón Jónsson (1747-1831) in the western fjords area gives an interesting description of the nature of the ice, which often brought fog as well as cold temperatures. It illustrates the negative impacts of the ice, including the disruption of fishing. It frequently also prevented trading vessels from landing and bringing vital goods. However, the ice could, on occasion, also have some favourable impacts. In this case, two whales were washed ashore in the ice and this extra food supply was a great help at a time of famine.

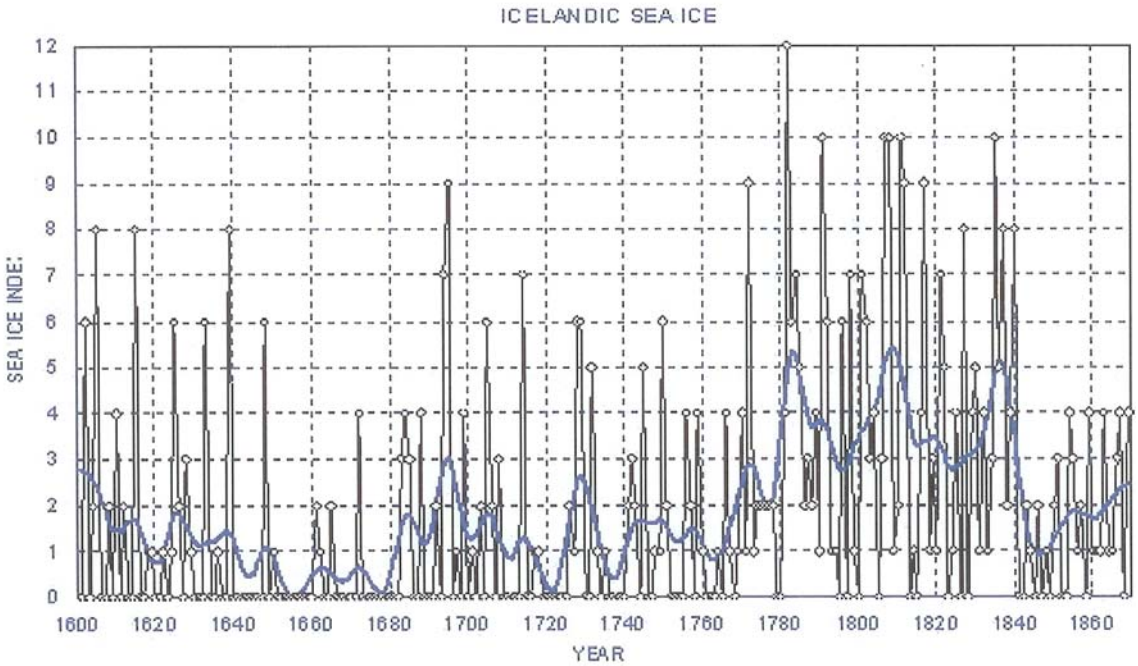

Figure 9. A sea-ice index for Iceland showing variations in the incidence of sea ice off the coasts during the period AD 1600-1870. The data used are from a variety of historical sources (Ogilvie, 1992; 2005). After ca. 1700, the main data source is the Sheriffs' letters.

A minor volcanic eruption also occurred in 1816. This is known from a letter written by Sheriff Lýður Guðmundsson (1728-1812) at Vík in Vestur-Skaftafellssýsla on 17 January 1817. According to this, the eruption began under Skaftafellsjökull (glacier) in the southeast some time in May. In June, the eruption was visible over 16 miles (24 km) away, with an enormous column of rising vapour. "This later divided itself into clouds, and caused a bitingly sharp, cold drought until the clouds finally dispersed, and fell as a malignant, cold, severe and lasting heavy rain." The eruption did not appear to have any serious effects, although the vegetable and hay crops were adversely affected. This Sheriff also reported flooding of the River Skeiðará on 17, 18 and 19 July. He described the river as "flowing out of the bowels of the Skaftafell glacier". The river now runs adjacent to the neighbouring Skeiðarárjökull. The discrepancy may be explained by the fact that the glaciers today are smaller and of a different shape than they were in the early nineteenth century. The Sheriff noted that the river flooded a large part of Skeiðarásandur (a stretch of sandy plain washed out from the glaciers) and cut off all passage over a much greater distance. The flood is likely to have been caused by ice melting during the volcanic eruption.

In the year 1831, there is another extremely interesting account from the neighbouring district of Austur-Skaftafellssýsla. The Governor at the time, Lorenz A. Krieger , noted the advance of the glacier Breiðamerkurjökull[vi], an outlet glacier of the great Vatnajökull which dominates the region. Having had an oral report from the local Sheriff, Magnús Stephensen, Krieger requested a written report, which the Sheriff provided. He noted that the glacier had been advancing for some time. In 1824, for example, he had been aware

of an area of pasture land which he says has now (1831) been completely covered by the glacier. He is concerned that soon the glacier will reach all the way to the sea.

> *If the glacier reaches the sea, I do not think one will be able to travel on foot. Even if it does not, then calving icebergs will make it impossible even by horse. As this will have considerable consequences for communication with the greater part of Austur-Skaftafellssýsla, I have not dared to omit giving my report concerning this natural phenomenon*. Extract from letter written by Sheriff Magnús Stephensen, dated 3 June, 1831, Höfðabrekka, Austur- Skaftafellssýsla.

One of the most severe winters of the nineteenth century occurred in 1880-1881. In fact, the period ensuing, to around 1888, has come to be known as the "Dire Years" (Ponzi, 1995). The letter below comes from the Húnavatn district in the north.

> *The extremely severe weather which began in earnest in the middle of November (1880) lasted until the beginning of April (1881). It was the general opinion, that no one now living had experienced such long-lasting and severe frost. This was frequently between 12 and 30 degrees Réamur and was often around 20 degrees. There was frequent fog due to the sea ice, and the bay of Húnaflói was full of sea ice. The spring was cold and dry and the grass growth was of the poorest quality. The summer was also cold and dry and there was also night frost*. Extract from letter written by Sheriff Lárus Blöndahl, dated 1 October 1881, Kornsá, Húnavatnsýsla.

Similar accounts of severity are found in the east.

> *The weather during this time (1 January to 30 September 1881) has been one of the most severe, with the most snow and frost that people remember. The sea ice came to the east before Christmas and lay fast to the coasts until the spring, filling all bays and fjords. The summer has been cold and wet, and hence with much damage to the grass*. Extract from letter written by Sheriff Einar Thorlacius, dated 1 October, 1881, Norður-Múlasýsla.

Accounts such as this are to be found in the Sheriffs' reports from all over Iceland for the 1880s. For the year 1882, in a combined account for Snæfellsnes and Hnappadalssýsla in the west, some temperature measurements are given (although it may difficult to determine their accuracy). Although the Sheriff here emphases the severity, in most parts of Iceland this winter was not as harsh as 1881, but the spring and summer were very cold.

> *From the New Year to 1 April (1882) it must be called a severe time, mainly with frosts from minus 10 to minus 15 degrees Celsius. During March they were from minus 18 to minus 25. The weather then improved, but with the onset of May, the weather became cold again, and there was so much frost at night that all growth (of grass) was prevented*. Extract from letter written by Sheriff Sigurður Jónsson, dated 20 March 1882, Stykkishólmur, Snæfellsnessýsla.

The 1880s continued with several further cold years with sea ice. A succession of poor summers caused consecutive hay-crop failure. It was during the "Dire Years" that emigration to the United States and Canada reached a peak. Many people abandoned their homes and left Iceland. Beginning in 1883, over the next few years, approximately 1215 Icelanders, from a total population of 69,722 left the country to go to the US and Canada (Ponzi 1995). Iceland's last great subsistence famine occurred during the "Dire Years". During the twentieth century, the only comparable period of severe cold and sea ice occurred in the latter part of the 1960s (1965-1970) which are known as the "ice years". Icelanders had then long since ceased to have the same vulnerability to climatic conditions as they did in the nineteenth century and earlier.

Summary

The Sheriffs and District Governors of Iceland often complained in their letters that their circumstances were very difficult, and not significantly different from the populace at large. Sometimes they wrote letters to the Governor or the King of Denmark with requests of one kind or another to improve their lot. It frequently appears that the letters were not answered, or at least not for many years. Nevertheless, they continued to perform their duties, their complaints held in restraint, in spite of the hard life they often led. Clearly they must be applauded as both dedicated civil servants and meticulous observers of nature. A combination of a great respect for the written word together with an acute awareness of the importance of the natural world, especially the weather, seems to have produced in Iceland many such careful recorders of a variety of elements of climate and other natural phenomena. Such information is invaluable in constructing records of variations in past climate (Ogilvie 2005; Ogilvie and Jónsson 2001). The images of Iceland as seen through the eyes of the Sheriffs and District Governors show a land of cold, hunger, and sometimes misery. At the same time, there are shafts of sunlight, literally, as a mild winter or a successful hay harvest is recorded with evident pleasure. When they did their duty, year after year, recording events and situations that may, at times, have seemed commonplace and humdrum, they could have had no idea what a wealth of treasure they left behind for modern historians of climate and society in the form of the vivid images they so faithfully recorded.

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Key Words

Amtmaður; Iceland; Images; *Landshöfðingja*; Nineteenth Century; *Stiftamtmaður, Sýslumaður*.

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[i] All the letters quoted have been transcribed and translated from the original Danish and Icelandic by the author.

[ii] The origin of the word "Sheriff" comes from English "shire reeve". A sheriff may be described as the chief officer of a shire or county, to whom is entrusted the execution of the laws, the serving of judicial writs and processes, and the preservation of the peace. In England, sheriffs are appointed by the Crown. In the United States, sheriffs are elected by the legislature or by the citizens, or appointed and commissioned by the executive of the State. The office of sheriff in England, as traditionally in Iceland, is judicial and ministerial. In the United States, it is mainly ministerial. *Sýslumaður* could also be translated as "Magistrate" or "District Commissioner".

[iii] The Icelandic code of laws, commonly called "Jónsbók" was instituted by the *Alþing* or Parliament in 1281 and was named for its main author, Jón Einarsson. It is based on the law of King Magnús Hákonarson of Norway. The "Jónsbók" law was used in Iceland primarily until the introduction of absolutism in Denmark-Norway in 1662, but has not been completely superseded to this day.

[iv] All photographs are by the author except the photograph of sea ice which was taken by Ingibjörg Jónsdóttir and the photograph of the sheep round-up near Akureyri which was taken by Oddný Stella Snorradóttir.

[v] In 1819 it was converted to a dwelling house and used as such for many years, and also notably as an office for the Governor and later the Governor General. *Stjórnarráðshúsið*, as it is termed in Icelandic, is now the office of the Prime Minister.

[vi] The glacial lagoon formed by the melting of Breiðamerkurjökull in the present warm climatic regime has now become a tourist attraction.