ICE AND FIRE! These two words depict Iceland set in northern seas with its glaciers, volcanoes, lava fields, geysers and hot springs. They are reflected in the Icelandic character, patient, persevering, phlegmatic, stubbornly enduring yet eloquent, musical and capable of explosive bursts of energy. The remoteness of the land has made its people self-reliant, freedom-loving and independent; its austerity has made them work hard and venture far afield. The early Vikings founded a prosperous settlement in Greenland and were the first white people to reach North America, “Markland” and “Vinland”.

Iceland has a glorious past. The first National Assembly or “Althing” met on a plain near Reykjavick in the year 930. Their golden age of poetry was in the 10th and 11th centuries when their skalds composed the Eddas and Sagas, but the tradition lingers. Illiteracy is almost unknown and the poet is revered. The population has never been large. The census of 1890 gave the total as 70,927. From 1872 to the end of the century at least 15,600, roughly one in six, emigrated to America, chiefly to Manitoba.

A group which had embraced Mormonism went to Utah in 1855, another to Brazil in 1863, a larger group under Pall Thorlakson went to Wisconsin. In 1873 a small group went to Ontario and was placed on homesteads at Rosseau in the Muskoka district. Another party went to Nova Scotia, but land selected for them was poor and almost all these settlers left the province. A majority of the Rosseau group, 385 in number, transferred to Kinmount, fifty miles north of Lindsay. Their leader was Sigtrygur Jonasson, a young man of energy and education. Life at Kinmount was hard but was made lighter by John Taylor who lived nearby as representative of the Shantymen’s Union sponsored by the British and Foreign Bible Society. He told Jonasson that the federal government was offering free land in Keewatin, the unorganized district north of the new province of Manitoba. Taylor went to Ottawa and spoke to the federal ministers on migration but they were dubious of the project. Lord Dufferin the Governor General of Canada who in 1856 had visited Iceland, was sympathetic and promised support. A meeting of the Kinmount group was held on June 30 after John Taylor’s return. It was decided to send a chosen few to spy out the land. Sigtrygur Jonasson, John Taylor and three others set out on July 2, 1875, and were joined by S. Christopherson of Wisconsin. They landed at Winnipeg on July 18, and after purchasing provisions were guided in a York boat by Joseph Monkman, the well known Metis of St. Peters. The six men approved the site, 36 miles in length, on the west side of Lake Winnipeg which now is between Gimli and Riverton, for these reasons: (1) There was a waterway from Winnipeg, (2) the land was reasonably good, (3) there were trees and streams and (4) the lake offered good fishing.

When the delegates returned to Kinmount a meeting was held and the great majority decided to migrate though it was late in the season. On their way to Collingwood they were joined by a party from Iceland. They crossed in an overcrowded steamer, then travelled from Duluth to Grand Forks in box cars. The editor of the Plaindealer, watching them embark on the sternwheeler “International”, wrote

![Figure 1](Betel Icelandic Old Folks Home, Gimli, Man.)
that they were "the finest group of emigrants he had seen" and the editor of the Winnipeg Free Press later re-echoed this. It was now mid-October and winter was not far off, but the band, 285 in number, decided to push on to found their own homes. In a York boat and six flatboats they drifted down the Red River, then were towed by the Hudson's Bay steamer "Colville" to Willow Point and spent the night of October 22 there. On the next day they started to build 30 log houses, one for each stove they owned! With cheerful enthusiasm they named their first settlement Gimli, "Home of the Gods". Other settlements were made further north at Lunde (Riverton) and on Big (Hecla) Island.

NEW ICELAND

The winter was long and exceptionally cold but in the summer the settlers were cheered with the arrival of "the big party," 1200 or more from Iceland. In September of that year, 1876, smallpox broke out, mild and undiagnosed at first, but then spreading and becoming virulent. An appeal for aid was made to Manitoba. Dr. Young and Dr. Lynch were sent out with vaccine and medical supplies. Dr. Young contracted the disease, Dr. Beddome and Dr. Baldwin came in to help, a hospital was set up at Gimli and quarantine was imposed at Netley Creek. By the end of the year the epidemic had subsided but it left over 100 dead.

The next year was not dogged with misfortune. A school, taught by a niece of John Taylor had 30 pupils at Gimli, a handwritten newspaper was circulated and verses were hung on trees as in the Forest of Arden. On September 14, 1877, the Governor-General and his party visited Gimli, inspected some farms, looked in at the homes and addressed the people. After mentioning that in some of the small houses he had seen libraries of 30 to 40 books, he said: "I trust you will continue to cherish for all time the heart stirring literature of your nation and that from generation to generation your little ones will continue to learn in your ancient Sagas that industry, energy, fortitude, perseverance and stubborn endurance have ever been the characteristics of the noble Icelandic race."

Just before his visit the first newspaper printed in Iceland appeared with the appropriate name Framfari or Progress. It lasted for four issues. Laws were drawn up and religious services were carried on by the Rev. Jon Bjarnson and the Rev. Pall Thorlakson. When Manitoba was enlarged in 1881, New Iceland was included in the province. Around 1882 there were migrations to Pembina County, North Dakota and in Manitoba to Winnipeg, Selkirk—where it was expected that the new railway would cross the Red River—Lundar, Arbog, Glenboro, Baldur, Swan River, Dauphin and Morden. Later settlements were established in Saskatchewan and Alberta.

THE SECOND GENERATION
It was not long before the second gen-

![Fig. 2.—Map of New Iceland.](image-url)
ishment began to make its mark in the professions, literature, music, art, government and sport. In 1885 the first Icelander graduated from the University of Manitoba and by 1930 there were over 150 graduates of Icelandic descent. Skuli Johnson, late professor of Classics in the University, was the Rhodes Scholar from Manitoba in 1909 and in the next year the Rhodes Scholar was Joseph T. Thorson who went on to become Dean of the Law School, Member of Parliament for Winnipeg South, Minister of National War Services, and since 1942 president of the Court of Exchequer.

Others who have won fame in the law are Thomas H. Johnson, Attorney General of Manitoba, Mr. Justice H. A. Bergman, "one of the best legal minds in Canada", chairman of the board of governors, University of Manitoba and two, happily still living, Walter J. Lindal, county court judge, and Senator G. S. Thorvaldson.

In art one may point to Emili Walters whose pictures hang in the galleries at Glasgow, Dublin, Finland, France, Iceland and Canada; in education to the chemist Thorberg Thorvaldson, D.Sc. of the University of Saskatchewan, Thorvaldure Johnson, Ph.D., plant pathologist in the University of Manitoba, T. J. Oleson, Professor of Mediaeval History in the University of Manitoba and the late Dean O. T. Anderson, United College, Winnipeg.

The outstanding living Arctic explorer is Manitoba-born Vilhjalmur Stefansson, LL.D. who lives in Manitoba. Many have made names in music as performers and teachers. In sport, the Icelandic Falcons of Winnipeg won the first Olympic hockey championship in 1921 and Tom Johnson of Baldur who plays with the Montreal Canadiens won the award in 1959 for the best defenceman in the National Hockey League.

Many Icelandic girls have graced the nursing profession. The first, and one of the best known, was the late Inga Johnson who after graduating from the Winnipeg General Hospital School of Nursing, in 1907, became assistant superintendent of that school, matron of No. 4 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station, winning British and Belgian decorations and finally became superintendent of Betel Old Folks Home at Gimli.

From 1904 to 1926 there was a professorship of Icelandic in Wesley College, Winnipeg, and in 1951 a fully endowed chair of Icelandic Language and Literature was set up in the University of Manitoba.

Icelandic Doctors

The first Icelander to graduate from Manitoba Medical College, now the faculty of medicine, University of Manitoba, was Olafur Stephenson (1864-1939) who graduated in 1895 and served with the Canadian Special Hospital at Ramsgate in the Great War, 1914-1918.

Outstanding as an obstetrician was Olafur Bjornson. He came with his parents to Gimli in 1876 when he was eight years old and in going down the Red River sat on the one trunk which held the family belongings. He was educated by his father and in public schools and graduated from

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Fig. 3.—Sketch map of Manitoba and Keewatin circa 1876 showing New Iceland and Gimli.
Manitoba Medical College in 1897. After
general practice he went to Chelsea Hos-
pital, London, and the Rotunda, Dublin,
in company with his close friend Brandur
Brandon. On his return to Winnipeg he
practised the safe and conservative methods
he had learned at the Rotunda and soon
was invited to teach obstetrics. He ex-
elled as a teacher with his command of
English, wisdom and humour. He pub-
lished little but his method of rotating
the posterior shoulder in deep arrest of
the head was praised by Professor Munro
Kerr in *Operative Midwifery*, 1937. He
became professor of obstetrics, retired in
1932 and died October 3, 1937, much
quoted and much beloved.

Brandur J. Brandon (1874-1944) also
came with his parents from Iceland, but
they settled in North Dakota. He was
educated at Gustavus Adolphus College
and graduated from Manitoba Medical
College in 1900. For four years he prac-
tised at Edinburgh, N.D., then after post-
graduate study with his friend Bjornson,
he practised surgery in Winnipeg. From
1927 to 1934 he was Professor of Surgery
and on his retirement he was made
emeritus professor and the University of
Manitoba conferred on him the LL.D.
degree. When he travelled to Iceland in
1930 for the millenium of the Althing,
he was granted an honorary M.D. degree
by the University of Iceland and in 1935
the government of Iceland made him
Grand Knight Commander of the Royal
Icelandic Order of the Falcon. He took a
great interest in his church, the First Ic-
elandic Lutheran, and in the Old Folks
Home at Gimli. Imposing in figure and
gifted with oratory he was urged to enter
politics but declined. A paper on hydatid
disease, in which he had unrivalled ex-
perience, was written by him but not
published.

Jon Stefansson (1878-1936) graduated
from Manitoba Medical College and after
postgraduate work in London, Vienna and
Berlin became lecturer in clinical ophthal-
mology. He devised an operation for
glaucoma. Each year an ophthalmoscope
is awarded in his memory to the Manitoba
medical student ranking highest in oph-
thalmology.

**DOCTORS OF ICELANDIC DESCENT**

Baldur Olson (1888-1952) also graduated
from Manitoba Medical College, served in
both world wars, practised with Dr. Brand-
son and became widely known as a chest
surgeon. He was Lecturer in Medicine
from 1924 to 1932. He was appointed
Medical Director of the Great-West Life
Assurance Company in 1917 and retired
two years later.

August Blondal (1889-1948) was born
in Edinburgh, N.D., graduated from Mani-
toba Medical College, worked in the Royal
Maternity Samaritan Hospital, Glasgow,
and was Lecturer in Obstetrics, University
of Manitoba 1934-1948. He was also an
artist in many media, drew the design for
the crest of Manitoba Medical Association
and also two clever cartoons of Dr. H. M.
Speechly and Dr. E. W. Montgomery.

**LIVING DOCTORS OF ICELANDIC DESCENT**

In the living present, medical men and
women of Icelandic descent are con-
tributing to Canadian medicine. Foremost
is Paul H. T. Thorlakson, "Thor" to his
friends. The son of a distinguished Lu-
theran clergyman, he entered Manitoba
Medical College in September 1914. He
volunteered for overseas service at the end
of his second year and proceeded to Eng-
land as medical sergeant of the 223rd
Battalion. He was returned to Canada to
complete his medical education, served a
year as intern in the Winnipeg General
Hospital, another year in the Children's
Hospital and graduated M.D.,C.M. in
1919. After postgraduate training in sur-
gery in London and on the continent (1921-
22) he entered into partnership with the late
Dr. Neil John Maclean, a master surgeon,
to form the Maclean-Thorlakson Clinic in
1926. In 1940, Dr. Thorlakson founded the
Winnipeg Clinic. This group of 52 doctors
of which he is the director, includes all
the various specialties and is located in a
12 storey building.

By successive steps he rose to be surgeo-
in-chief, Winnipeg General Hospital and
Professor of Surgery, University of Mani-
toba, and since 1957, Professor Emeritus
of Surgery. In 1952 the University of Mani-
ICELAND'S GIFT TO CANADIAN MEDICINE

January 1961

Dr. Thorlakson has been keenly interested in medical education and research. In 1938 he was appointed to the first associate committee on medical research of the National Research Council and served for eight years under the chairmanship of the late Sir Frederick Banting. At a meeting of the medical committee of the National Research Council in 1944 he recommended the establishment of a western regional conference on medical research as a postwar project. The first meeting of this group was held under his chairmanship in Vancouver in February 1945. It has met successively in the four western provinces ever since the war, giving young medical scientists an opportunity to present their work annually. This conference has been a tremendous stimulant to more active medical research in the four western Canadian universities.

In 1943 Dr. Thorlakson was a moving spirit in the formation of the Manitoba Institute for the Advancement of Medical Education and Research, with a charter membership of 36, lay and medical, and became the first president. The Institute, approved by the Board of Governors and the Medical Faculty of the University of Manitoba, has contributed over $46,000.00 to medical education and research up to the present time. In 1957 the name was changed to the Winnipeg Clinic Research Institute.

To date Dr. Thorlakson has had over 40 scientific papers published in various medical periodicals in Canada and the United States. At the present time he is president of the Manitoba Council on Education and he was chairman of the first conference held at the University of Manitoba on February 27, 1960, at which Dr. Wilder Penfield was the principal speaker.

In 1939 King Christian X of Denmark and Iceland conferred upon Dr. Thorlakson the Knight Cross of the Order of the Falcon. In 1951, seven years after Iceland had once again become an independent republic, the president and government of Iceland conferred upon him the Commander Cross of the Order of the Falcon because of his services in helping to found the first endowed chair in a university of western Canada, the chair of Icelandic Language and Literature in the University of Manitoba.

Dr. Thorlakson followed the example of Dr. Brandson and became chairman of the
Board of Directors of the Betel Old Folks Home, Gimli. Under his leadership the Home has recently been renovated and enlarged to accommodate 100 residents and also provides a 24 bed infirmary.

An example of his remarkable foresight is seen in his organization of the Manitoba Medical Centre in 1943, approved by the Provincial Legislature in 1945. At present the Medical Centre contains the Winnipeg General Hospital, the Children’s Hospital, the Central Tuberculosis Hospital, the Women’s Pavilion, Medical and Dental Faculty Buildings, the Manitoba Cancer Foundation, nurses’ residences and residences for interns, the L. G. Bell House for married interns and the Medical Centre apartments for General Hospital staff. The new Rehabilitation Hospital has been started, a cancer hospital will be built, and a seven storey service building of the Winnipeg General Hospital is under construction. Dr. Thorlakson is the present chairman of the Manitoba Medical Centre Council.

Dr. Thorlakson’s interests are not limited to Canadian medicine. He is a Member of the Royal College of Surgeons of England, a Senior Fellow of the American Surgical Association, a senior member of the Western Surgical Society, a Fellow of the American College of Surgeons, of which he was governor, 1955-58, and a member of the executive committee of the Committee on Cancer. He has held many positions in the National Cancer Institute of Canada and was president of that organization in 1951-52. He is a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of Canada, member of the Canadian Association of Clinical Surgeons (western division), and President of the Medical Alumni Association of the Winnipeg General Hospital. In 1955-56 he was Honorary President of the University of Manitoba Alumni Association. In his spare time he interests himself through serving as chairman or member of committees dealing with postgraduate studies, Manitoba Medical Service, Manitoba Heart Foundation, the Committee on Rehabilitation and the 1950 National Flood Relief Committee.

Following in Dr. Thorlakson’s footsteps are his twin sons, Dr. Kenneth and Dr. Robert both M.D., Manitoba 1950, who are also members of the Winnipeg Clinic and hold the Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons of England.

George Johnson, M.D., Manitoba, 1950, was called in June 1958 from practice at Gimli to be Minister of Health and Public Welfare in the Roblin government. Since then he has introduced legislation which very recently won praise for his imagination and enthusiasm from the former premier, Douglas Campbell, now leader of the opposition.

To the Minister’s credit are:

1. Provision for free injection of Salk vaccine to all under 40 years of age and of a booster dose for school children. In 1959 the only deaths from poliomyelitis in Manitoba were those of two men, neither of whom had received Salk vaccine;

2. the Social Allowances Act which provides for government aid where need can be shown;

3. the Elderly Persons Housing Act whereby a housing project at the community level will receive government aid of one-third of the cost of construction.

4. the Home Care Polio Programme;

5. the establishment of a Directorate of Alternative Care with categorization of nursing homes to relieve the shortage of hospital beds, and covering the broad field of care of the elderly, the sick elderly, and the infirm elderly and chronically ill, from the acute hospital care stage through to home care;

6. the Northern Health Services Branch with headquarters at The Pas, with Dr. P. G. Lommerse D.P.H. as Director, having under him four nurses and sanitary officers.

7. In April 1960, a community development project was set up at Norway House and Camperville, Duck Bay, to assist Indians and Metis to find employment.

8. Manitoba’s Social Allowances Act provides for the basic necessities of health and the well-being of those in need. Anyone within the scope of the Act may obtain a Medicare certificate. The holder of such a certificate and the dependent members of the family are entitled to the serv-
ices of a doctor of their choice for office
and home calls. Care in hospital is pro-
vided through the Manitoba Hospital
Services Plan originated by the Manitoba
government.
Larus Sigurdson, M.D., Manitoba 1927,
M.A., Stanford 1928, is Associate Professor
of Anatomy in the University of Manitoba.
For 20 years he has been Corps Surgeon
of the St. John Ambulance Society. When
the Chair of Icelandic Language and Lit-
erature was set up in the University of
Manitoba he was a member of the founda-
tion committee.

Edward Johnson, M.D., Manitoba 1927,
is Provincial Psychiatrist and until re-
cently was superintendent of Selkirk
Mental Hospital. In 1953 he received
an award from the American Psychiatric
Association for special accomplishment in
administration. From 1958 to 1959 he was
President of the Manitoba Medical Associa-
tion.

Eyjolfur Johnson, M.D., Manitoba 1926,
F.R.C.S.(Edin.) practises general surgery
in Selkirk and was President of the Mani-
toba Medical Association, 1950-51.

H. T. Thorlakson, M.D., Manitoba 1926,
is practising ophthalmology in Seattle,
Washington.

K. I. Johnson, M.D., Manitoba 1937,
practises in Pine Falls and is known as a
cattle breeder. Recently he won the Gen-
eral Practitioner postgraduate award of-
fered by the Winnipeg Clinic Research
Institute.

Harold Blondal, B.Sc., E.E. 1939, M.D.,
1949, studied for a year with the Atomic
Energy Commission at Chalk River and
a year at the Royal Cancer Hospital, Lon-
don, then returned to serve as Lecturer
and Assistant Professor of Physiology and
Research at his alma mater. Recently he
moved to Montreal to do cancer research
with a leading pharmaceutical firm. He is
son of the late A. Blondal, M.D.

John Athalstein Bildfell, M.D., Mani-
toba, 1933, is known for his work with
the Eskimos. He is now in industrial medi-
cine in Montreal.

One of the veteran members of the
Manitoba Legislature is Stein Olafur
Thompson, M.D., Manitoba 1921, of River-
ton. He represented Gimli constituency
from 1945 to 1958, winning great respect.

Brandur Thomas Hermann Marteinsson,
M.D., B.Sc.(Med.) Manitoba 1921, prac-
tises general surgery in Vancouver, B.C.

Eggert Thomas Felsted, M.D., Mani-
toba 1944, is now practising as a radiologist
in Santa Barbara, California.

Two doctors are renowned for their
poetry. Sigurd Julius Johannesson 1867-
1958, not only carried on medical prac-
tice but was editor of the weekly news-
paper Logberg and wrote three volumes of
poems, many for children. In his presiden-
tial address to the Winnipeg Medical
Society, Dr. David Swartz included Dr.
Johanneson among the “medical truants”,
a distinguished group. Sevin Ericksson
Bjornson of Arbog and Winnipeg has
written fine poetry.

This list of doctors of Icelandic descent
is far from complete; it makes no mention
of many others who have given active
service and through “that best portion of
a good man’s life, his little nameless un-
remembered acts of kindness and of love”,
have gained the respect and affection of
their communities. Canadian medicine has
been enriched with the contributions of
the sturdy Icelandic race and their de-
sendants to the third generation.

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The sketch of Dr. P. H. T. Thorlakson is based
on the citation given by Dean Lennox Bell when
he presented Dr. Thorlakson for honorary mem-
bership in the Winnipeg Medical Society.

The map for reproduction in Fig. 3 was sup-
plied by courtesy of the Department of Surgery,
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of Manitoba.