



**Revisiting Nordic Colonialism:
A Journey in Time and Space**
by Elva Björg Einarsdóttir & Jo Tore Berg

Act 1: Iceland, March 24 – April 16, 2006

We would like to invite you on a journey to revisit Nordic colonialism. We would like to invite you to travel with us, together with us, for some parts of the journey we took revisiting Nordic colonialism in Reykjavik from March 24 – 28, 2006. A journey that took place both in time and space exploring the past and present of Nordic colonialism. It is an important journey, not only for understanding the past, but also for understanding present day relations within the Nordic region and beyond.

We started our journey in Reykjavik, Iceland, which is indeed an interesting place to start this project. Iceland is a former colony and gained its full independence from Denmark in 1944. While receiving aid for some time after the Second World War, Iceland is now on the other side of the table, aiding former colonies in Africa, Asia and Latin America through development cooperation. Lately, many Icelandic companies have also invested abroad. In Denmark, the former colonial master of Iceland, this has attracted a great deal of attention and well-known companies have been taken over by investors from the former colony. Even *Magasin du Nord*, the shopping mall in the heart of Copenhagen, was bought by Icelanders. It is also interesting to follow the discussion about the Icelandic economy and the Icelandic banks and view it in terms of Nordic colonialism. Iceland is therefore an exciting place to start our journey, connecting the past and present, mixing up the identities of the colonizers and the colonized.

Join the Greenlandic Forces. The people of Greenland have decided that in order to defend their country, they must invade the world. By using advanced but locally adjusted military technology, such as the Extended Range Multiple Launch Kayak System, Greenland has taken over Denmark and created the United States of Greenland, promising freedom and happiness to the new citizens. After securing Denmark, the Greenlandic military is about to invade the rest of the world.

This scenario – the Greenlandic military propaganda, high tech equipment and the invasion of Denmark – is a proposition by Inuk Silis Høegh & Asmund Havsteen-Mikkelsen, rather than a memory of the past. It was quite absurd since it did not fit with our images of Greenland. But then on second thought, why is it absurd? Why does it make more sense that Denmark is the master and Greenland the colony, and not the other way around? When revisiting Nordic colonialism, past and present, it is important not to take anything for granted. We have to look at the structures of power that are embedded in the relations within the Nordic region as well as beyond. Ívar Jónsson told us in his lecture that 95% of all import and nearly all export from Greenland go via Denmark. This tells us that there are strong economic structures binding Greenland to Denmark, structures that have a colonial origin.

Moving on to Sweden, Mikela Lundahl invited us onboard a sailing ship, in fact onboard two sailing ships, one a replica of the other. In the 18th century, the ship sailed to China to trade and brought riches home to the owners of the Swedish East India Company, their names honoured by many a street name and official building in Gothenburg. On one return journey from China, the ship sank outside Gothenburg with all its treasures. The story of the ship does not end here, however. In the year of 2005, a sailing ship left the harbour in Gothenburg and started a voyage around the globe to end in China. The East Indiaman ship “Götheborg” is a replica of the old ship, but as Lundahl pointed out, the mission of the ship is interpreted quite differently from its colonial mission of the past. Today, the ship is allegedly sailing the seven seas to create links between people, and it will end up in China to emphasise the good trade relations between Sweden and China. According to Lundahl, the ship is even seen as underlining Sweden’s non-colonial past in the official discourse. Gone are the colonial structures that the old ship benefited from and took part in. Gone are the colonial aspirations of the rulers of Sweden. Lundahl stated that the project of making a replica and sailing it to China has created very little criticism in Sweden and the colonial aspect of it has been missing; it has even been used to emphasise the opposite.

The title of the workshop was *Revisiting Nordic Colonialism: Local Amnesia – Global Impact*. If you suffer from amnesia, you have troubles remembering the past. Normally this is not a wishful situation, but it seems that when looking at the Nordic colonial past, it is useful to view the forgetting as an active process. The past is adjusted to the present in order to fit with the present day agendas. In the case of the ship, the forgetfulness of those aspects of the past that do not

accord with the present day image of Sweden is interesting and it involves a silencing of the colonial world order and its structures, which have benefited us and may still benefit us today. At the time, the Swedish East India Company was one of the most profitable in Sweden and the ship brought home great wealth, which was invested in Sweden. Let us go on shore and go for a walk in Brunnsparken in Gothenburg. There, you can literally walk on the goods brought back from China. Bits and pieces of broken porcelain from China have been recovered from the sunken ship and used to make a floor mosaic. Our lives are built on structures of the past in more than one way.

Is there anything wrong with forgetting the past? In a powerful work by Maryam Jafri at the exhibition, the past and present are compared. Imagine a text stating the good intentions of British troops in Iraq, “not as conquerors or enemies, but as liberators.” When we read the text, we felt we had just read something similar in the newspaper, but the text was from 1917, another year in which Iraq was supposedly liberated. Sometimes history seems to repeat itself.

We are at Thingvellir on the third day of the workshop. There is arguing at Lögrétta, the ancient court of Icelanders, once more, but this time the issue is not the law, but history – what is the history of this place? The Icelanders argue fiercely and very few “foreigners” dare to enter the clash but stand aside abiding the end of it – it is very cold. How can it be that a nation of Icelanders cannot agree about their own history – can’t they remember it?

When we enter the bus, people feel compelled to grasp the microphone and lecture on the history, their own view of it and about the lake, Thingvallavatn – “one of the clearest in the world.” We, Icelanders, have always been the clearest, cleanest, most literate and cultural and so on, per capita at least. That is the image we have and woe to those, who try to change it. It shakes us, though, when our propaganda-guide, the artist Ósk Vilhjálmsdóttir, voices her concerns about the environmental catastrophes that are happening in the highlands, as she speaks. The constructions made on Icelandic soil by Alcoa, the world’s biggest aluminum producer, can be seen as colonialism, where the government of Iceland actively takes part in harnessing nature, controlling it and maximizing the gains to be had from it – capitalism is venerated. Huge industrial complexes are to be built that will bring work and prosperity as never seen before – but how long will it last and who will work there? The Icelanders of the east see possibilities in selling their houses to foreign work crews and moving to Reykjavik themselves. The “clean” Iceland has to add to its quota of pollution. Where is the clean image

now? These facts keep us occupied for some time, grinding the soul – but what can we do? We cannot ignore the profits and the “positive” effect on the communities. We decide to forget it – or at least to ignore large parts of it – as we are among the worst demonstrators in the world and let ourselves be led as lambs to the slaughter; one more thing that we are outstanding at. It is only artists and the educated from Reykjavik that can afford the luxury of facing the problem – it isn’t their problem, the people in the east claim.

We end the trip at Gullfoss, one of the tokens of Iceland that we show with pride to everyone, who visits us. This waterfall leaves no one untouched, it has a mystique that is reflected in the rainbows that surround it on sunny days and in the power of it – so great that the earth literally shakes around you. Early in the 20th century, the government saw this power and wondered about ways to harness it – maximizing the profits of the land. That the waterfall exists today is thanks to one woman, Sigríður Tomasdóttir in Brattiholt, who fought the advanced plans to build a dam at Gullfoss. Ósk points out that in a way it would be preferable to dam up Gullfoss, as so many have already seen it, when so few have seen the awesome beauty of the highlands, and no one will have a chance to do so after September of 2006 when they will be flooded.

At national holidays, the government praises this waterfall and the woman who foiled the planned dam – the same government is now damming up the highlands with unforeseen consequences. While Ósk’s guiding goes on, we think about the exhibition and her paintings there. They are markedly grey and lifeless; the people are lifeless with frozen smiles on their faces, they are dressed in lifeless colours of brown, dark blue and grey. Their handshakes are frozen – they look more like robots or mannequins than people. Even the background is lifeless, except for the American flag, which appears as a contrast to the lifeless people. In a way the people remind you of the mud that will be the hallmark of the harnessed highlands singing praise to short term profits and closed minds. What can we say then about the American flag?

We started our journey in Reykjavik revisiting Nordic colonialism. On our journey, we made many side trips and stopped a lot to reflect and discuss issues that we encountered. We invited you to travel with us for some parts of the journey that we took. We looked at the relations between colonies and masters in the West Nordic region followed by a Greenlandic invasion of Denmark. Mikela Lundahl took us on a voyage to tell us about how the past is interpreted and presented in the present. Before we left for the sightseeing trip on the

third day, we were curious and wondering how visiting these tourist sights would have anything to do with revisiting Nordic colonialism. The trip told us much about ourselves, about how we remember history. The trip made us connect past and present, and we were caught by the idea of looking at the projects taking place in the interior of Iceland as a kind of colonialism of the highlands.

Act 1 is finished, now it is up to you to take the journey further by revisiting the Nordic colonial past and present from other aspects and contexts. We hope you will have a safe, but challenging journey.