Guðni Th. Jóhannesson is a historian who takes his own discipline to task in this occasionally sardonic critique of the role that historians have and haven’t played in the lead-up to the crash. He urges them to tell their stories to the people, or others will fill in the void with whatever version of history is politically expedient at the moment.

Chronological turning points can create artificial water-sheds. Still, the start of the new millennium seemed to herald new and exciting times within the historical profession in Iceland. Icelandic historiography in the postwar period had generally been marked by caution, empiricism, and conservatism (Ingvarsdóttir 1996) with only sporadic individual cases of revisionism, radicalism, and challenging conclusions. Furthermore, historical writings on the whole had been nationalistic, a trend that began in the mid-nineteenth century when Icelandic intellectuals and political representatives started to call for increased rights within the Danish kingdom (Hálfdanarson 1995, 66–67).

At the risk of oversimplification, the history of Iceland can be divided into three periods of rise, decline, and rise again. First there was the “glorious age” when the island was settled in the ninth century by Norse farmers and Vikings who had acquired fame and fortune through raids and pillage. Fleeing tyranny in Norway, they founded a free republic, discovered new lands farther westward, and later composed the sagas, that world-renowned literary treasure. Alas, civil strife
in the thirteenth century led to the loss of independence. Centuries of decline and misery followed under Norwegian and, later, Danish oppression. Only in the nineteenth century did the nation “wake up,” led by the national hero Jón Sigurðsson and other brilliant individuals. The struggle for independence had begun, culminating in full independence on June 17, 1944, Sigurðsson’s birthdate.

NEW MILLENNIUM, NEW BEGINNINGS?

By the last two decades of the twentieth century, this version of the past had definitely changed. New directions in the history profession of the Western world found their way into the community of Icelandic historians. First, social history became more popular at the expense of political history and its focus on “great men.” Thus, the poor masses of tenants and laborers emerged from the shadow of prominent settlers, chieftains, clergy, and officials. Later on, postmodern, gender, and other progressive approaches to history reached Iceland. New recruits joined the history department at the University of Iceland. The Reykjavík Academy, founded in 1997, gave shelter and strength to a growing number of independent young researchers. More public conferences and lectures began to receive media attention, in particular a popular series of biweekly lunchtime events organized by the Association of Icelandic Historians (Magnússon 2007, 52–53).

Most notably, a thorough revision of the nationalistic version of Icelandic history seemed complete. “The struggle for Iceland’s independence is over,” University of Iceland–based historian Guðmundur Hálfdanarson said in 1995, paraphrasing François Furet’s famous comment from 1978 that the French Revolution had long since ended (Hálfdanarson 1995, 67). To progressive historians, this revision was a positive development. It represented diversity, theoretical strength, international influences, and critical approaches.

As a graduate student of history at the University of Iceland, I remember reading Hálfdanarson’s statement with fascination. In 1997 I completed my master’s thesis. Shortly afterward, I took part in the inaugural History Congress in Iceland and noticed the spirit of revision and enthusiasm for new research. In his opening speech, President Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, a former professor of political science at the university, praised the nearly one hundred participants—including the large majority of professional and active historians in the country—for this new approach. Half-jokingly, he recalled how a teacher had “corrected” an essay of his in high school on Hannes Hafstein, Iceland’s first minister, who took office in 1904, by turning the word godmenni
(idol) into góðmenni (kind man). Thankfully, such an uncritical and nationalistic understanding of history was now a thing of the past, Grímsson (1997, 16) claimed at the time.

ASSAULT

The turn of the millennium also seemed to mark a watershed in fields other than history. In 1991 a new center-right coalition, led by Davíð Oddsson, chairman of the conservative Independence Party, began a large-scale campaign of economic liberalization and privatization. The process culminated in the privatization of state-run banks that almost immediately ballooned in size, opening branches or subsidiaries in various European countries.

Those international endeavors were part of a greater, rapid internationalization of the Icelandic economy. Icelandic companies soon made international headlines. Most prominent were entrepreneurs like Jón Ásgeir Jóhannesson and Björgólfur Thor Björgólfsson, the first Icelander to appear on *Forbes* magazine’s list of the world’s wealthiest people (Jóhannesson 2009b, 70, 203).

Why did Iceland ascend so quickly on the international scene? Why were Icelanders blessed with an “economic miracle” in the opening years of the new millennium? Naturally, the proponents of public policy offered political and economic explanations, but history seemed to provide an unequivocal answer as well. By the late 1990s, the growing internationalization of the economy had been given the label útrás, a word denoting a sudden assault that resonated with the Viking era (Helgason 2006). The modern English interpretation of this term is best translated as “expansion,” but one that implies assault. The entrepreneurs were often called útrásarvíkingar—Venture Vikings, also translated as Business Vikings—and they attempted to live up to this image of the brave, fearless, and adventurous voyagers and warriors (Loftsdóttir 2009, 127–131).

The growing tourist industry in Iceland was even more eager to highlight the “Viking past” and the literary treasure of the sagas (Kjartansdóttir 2011, 466–471). But historians were more hesitant and increasingly unhappy. “The question is rarely asked whether they [the Vikings] were not simply the terrorists of their time,” medieval specialist Helgi Þorláksson pointed out at the third History Congress in 2006 (Þorláksson 2007, 323). Likewise, archeologists and other academics shook their heads over the tourist-oriented “Saga Centers” (Stefánsdóttir and Sigurðardóttir 2007).

Political and business leaders were constructing a particularly positive view of history despite the spirit of revisionism in the historians’ ranks. And if the
“Viking nonsense” was not enough, to quote an apocryphal historian in the first years of the new millennium, memories of “great men” like Jón Sigurðsson and Hannes Hafstein were very much alive in the minds of the political elite. Apparently, the struggle for Iceland’s independence was not over at all.

THE “DISCOVERY OF AMERICA”

Arguably, the main battles over the uses of Iceland’s history occurred on four separate occasions—in 2000, 2004, 2006, and 2008. In 2000 a replica of a Viking ship set sail from Iceland to New York to celebrate the Norse discovery of North America. In Washington the Smithsonian Institution opened an exhibition and published a book on Viking voyages (Fitzhugh and Ward 2000), which justly portrayed the Norse journeys as true feats of navigation, individual resilience, and courage. Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, at an Icelandic American Chamber of Commerce luncheon, President Grímsson made his own connections with the past. Delivering a perfect example of the nationalistic history he had criticized at the History Congress three years before, the president described how Icelanders should strive to “excel like our ancestors, poets and pioneers, dreamers and discoverers, and bring our entrepreneurial spirit to explore the world” (Grímsson 2000, 6).

More than a decade later, I learned that a scholar in the president’s entourage was heard saying, “I did not write this, I did not write this.” Some historians were certainly dismayed at the uncritical tone of the speech (Magnússon 2007, 129). More generally, they complained about what they considered the hype and exaggeration that marked the celebrations (Björnsdóttir 2001).

In 2000 Iceland also celebrated the 1,000th anniversary of the adoption of Christianity. Again, critically minded historians lamented the commemorative speeches. On the other hand, the academic community had been crucial in producing a four-volume history of Christianity in Iceland. Yet as one of the contributors later opined, the extensive and expensive tomes were barely promoted, so “nobody knew about it” (Valdimarsdóttir 2013, 64).

Finally, in 2000 the National Centre for Cultural Heritage opened in Reykjavík. Aimed at locals and tourists alike, the center displayed the sagas and other medieval manuscripts prominently and dedicated separate rooms to Hannes Hafstein and Jón Sigurðsson, the nation’s two founding leaders, as Prime Minister Oddsson described them at the opening ceremonies (Oddsson 2000). Again, historians were quick to find fault with the state-run commemoration, an allegedly outdated version of history no credible historian could countenance (Rastrick 2000).
“GREAT MEN” RETURN

In February 2004 Iceland commemorated the century since it had gained home rule from Denmark and Hannes Hafstein had assumed his role as the first minister. As part of the festivities, an editorial committee sought contributors among academics, journalists, and others to compile a tome on all of Iceland’s prime ministers to date. Most controversially, Prime Minister Oddsson, an admirer, composed a flattering piece on Hannes Hafstein (Oddsson 2004). The prime minister was no friend of the most prominent Venture Vikings and never alluded to any bond between them and the past. Instead, he raised historians’ ire with his old-fashioned admiration of leaders like Hafstein, whom he labeled the driving force for progress and prosperity. I also gladly accepted an offer to contribute a piece about a prime minister who had figured largely in my thesis. By this time, I had completed my archive-based examination of fishing disputes in the North Atlantic after World War II. It was less patriotic and one-sided than many accounts of these conflicts.

I had secured a postdoctoral position at the University of Iceland and became head of the Association of Icelandic Historians. Our group held a symposium, hoping to gain media attention for the book. At the event a couple of history students with strong links to the Reykjavík Academy, by then a bastion of progressive thought in the history community, condemned the work for its archaic idolization of “great men” and pitiful attempts to produce a glorified version of the recent past (Pétursson 2004). In an equally fiery response, the editor defended the book, saying the aim had been to produce an entertaining work in which readers could find basic information about the nation’s past leaders; there could be nothing sinister about that (Guðnason 2004).

Caught in the crossfire, I tried to sympathize with both, arguing that while the work was definitely old-fashioned, historians must not forget to distribute the fruits of their research and write in a lively style for the general reader. Furthermore, I argued that, if anything, academic historians could be censured for having avoided the project since it included not a single member of the University of Iceland’s department of history. The book sold well and met with generally positive reviews outside of academic circles (Guðni Jóhannesson 2004).

“ICELANDIC VENTURES”

By 2006 the economic success story was still running at full tilt. Icelanders disregarded warnings from abroad about excess, hazard, and overheating as envy or the foreigners’ failure to understand the daring mentality of these
descendants of Vikings and voyagers (Sigurjónsson, Schwartzkopf, and Arnardóttir 2011, 167–79).

In the first half of the year, expansion or útrás was the theme of the still-popular Association of Icelandic Historians lunchtime lectures. When President Grímsson accepted my request to deliver the opening address, it guaranteed public attention to the entire series. Confident and optimistic, Grímsson attributed the unquestionable success of Icelandic entrepreneurs to “the Icelandic character” and the joint heritage of individualism, strong leaders, solidarity, daring, trust, honor, and poetic skills. “The achievers of our own day are frequently judged by these standards, and we look upon them as the heirs to a tradition that goes all the way back to the time of the first pioneer settlers in Iceland” (Grímsson 2006, 7).

This was the classic, nationalistic Grímsson, and a far cry from the more progressive speaker I had heard at the first Historical Congress in 1997. My colleagues in the audience were aghast. Indeed, in just a few hours Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, a driving force behind the founding of the Reykjavík Academy, published an online riposte mocking the notion that Iceland’s “neo-capitalistic entrepreneurs” shared some admirable traits with glorified Vikings, voyagers, and poets of the past (Magnússon 2006, n.p.).

Here we had another clash between a statesperson and historians. The differences are personified in President Grímsson and Prime Minister Oddsson, who may have been bitter political enemies but who shared the vision that history was meant to unite the nation and highlight the past achievements of “great men.” Historians were not of one mind, and those years were marked by heated theoretical debates. Still, one overriding issue united them: history should not be used this way.

“THIS IS WHAT THE PEOPLE THINK”

In early 2007 I obtained a nontenured position at Reykjavík University, a small private institution that was thriving in these years of economic expansion. A year later, an official task force delivered a detailed report, under the leadership of Reykjavík University rector Svafa Grönfeldt, to enhance the image of Iceland abroad. The task force based its findings on responses from a number of 100-strong focus groups, concluding that Icelanders envisaged themselves as proud, courageous, resilient, smart, unpredictable, undisciplined, independent, and free. Moreover, they believed that the original settlers had shared these characteristics, which had then been carried from one generation to another, through struggles with nature and foreign oppressors,
until Icelanders managed to build one of the most successful states on earth (Forsætisráðuneytið 2008).

Apparently, the “Viking spirit” still permeated the self-image of average Icelanders. Again, historians rose up in protest. The Association of Icelandic Historians, under new leadership, asserted that the mythical presentation of Iceland’s past reflected long-outdated views (Huijbens 2011, 569). At Reykjavik University I was on the receiving end of some friendly banter as the sole professional historian. “But this is simply what the people think,” Grönfeldt said. While I tried to maintain that no academic historian would portray the past this way, I could hardly refute that statement. Other academics later concurred that, among the general public, the traditional outlook prevailed (Ágústsson 2010, 91–96).

By 2008 it seemed clear that historians had lost the history wars. Tellingly, President Grímsson had never been so popular. Despite signs of impending economic danger, in August he was still busy explaining to the outside world how Icelanders had managed to construct one of the most prosperous societies on earth (Jóhannesson 2012). History remained an important part of that. But just a few weeks later, the whole thing collapsed.

POST-CRASH LESSONS

In the spring of 2009, a few months after the banking collapse, a new government report on Iceland’s standing in the world suggested that, while Iceland had to rectify the damage to its image, people should avoid previous allusions to Icelandic inherent superiority (Utanríkisráðuneytið 2009). A Working Group on Ethics that coordinated with a Parliament-appointed Special Investigation Committee to investigate the collapse of the Icelandic banks reached similar conclusions (Árnason, Nordal, and Ástgeirsdóttir 2010, 170–174). So did I, in early 2009 in a popular work that narrated the stunning events of the previous months in Iceland (Jóhannesson 2009b). Incidentally, it turned out to be my last published book during my stint at Reykjavík University. I became the victim of necessary cutbacks in the wake of new economic realities.

Pride comes before the fall. The hyped history of Iceland had not only been embarrassing in hindsight, it had been harmful at the time. In the words of historian Sumarliði Ísleifsson, “[t]he imagined superiority of Icelandic financiers in international business and ideas about the cultural significance of the nation proved to be influential in the way Icelandic businessmen conducted their affairs” (Ísleifsson 2011, 6).
Why had this happened? It would be easy to blame the Venture Vikings, statespersons, and the gullible public. Even so, historians should take a critical look at their own approach. It simply was not enough to find fault time and again with an outdated, glorified, nationalistic version of the past. Historians should have provided an enticing, readable, and entertaining alternative. In this they failed. They did not produce popular works on the Vikings, the settlement, or even the sagas, and when they did, they were not sufficiently promoted.

Likewise, the history of the collapse, its causes and consequences, must not be analyzed only in learned conference papers later published in little-known compilations. Vital as that effort is, the work must not end there. To be fair, we must consider limited funding and scarcity of professional posts. The academic system with its undue emphasis on publications in scholarly journals may also discourage staff to produce works for the general public. Nonetheless, in Iceland as elsewhere in the Western world, too many historians have turned inward and lost touch with the outside world. They have ignored the need to provide a receptive public with stories, with narrative. “Let’s avoid thinking so much about how to do things that we do not have time to do anything,” I wrote to my colleagues in 2005, adding the conviction that history was beautifully simple: “the art of telling stories.” Their response was overwhelmingly negative. They deemed theoretical debates vital and described history as a complex, academic field of study, so much more than simple narrative (Jóhannesson 2005, n.p.).

That is true, but not enough. The means are nothing without the end. “History is a branch of storytelling,” British historian David Starkey recently insisted (quoted in Mandler, Lang, and Vallance 2011, 26). “We need to remember the roots of discipline and keep telling stories,” said William Cronon, president of the American Historical Association (Walsh 2013, n.p.).

I could not agree more, just like I heartily applauded the assertion back in 1995 that the struggle for Iceland’s independence was over. That did not turn out to be true, partly because the historians only said so to each other. If they do not use their standing in the community to tell stories to people, others will dominate the stage. The results can be even more regrettable than the collapse of banks in Iceland in October 2008.