

Connecting to the Viking Heart

Written by Arden Jackson



I made a surprising discovery of coincidences and unraveled an interesting multi-layered connection between Laura Goodman Salverson and my Irish grandfather George Alexander Jackson when I opened his Autograph Book from the time of WWI. On this, the 100th Anniversary of that war, I am enchanted and curious about the constant pervasive energy of the spirit of the Viking Heart which not only propels us to survive, but to prevail and succeed. On the nineteenth of May in 1915, a married twenty-five year old Icelandic immigrant's daughter, Laura Goodman Salverson wrote two entries in the autograph book of her twenty-one year old unmarried boarder, and son of Irish immigrants, George Alexander Jackson. Ninety-nine years later, I opened the fragile leather bound book belonging to my grandfather, and discovered this unexpected connection between my inherited ethnic influences. As I read and acknowledged the signature of a celebrated Icelandic-Canadian author, I realized that this captured moment had more meaning for me than it appeared at first glance. There was something really special about this artifact that gave it greater significance than a simple gesture of friendship and respect between landlord and tenant. When these words were penned, it was a point in time of interconnection and departure for these two young adults. The bigger story of their independent personal and professional lives, as I knew it, was just beginning.

My grandfather was a very interesting fellow with three distinctive Icelandic Canadian connections. Firstly, in 1915 he was boarding at Laura Goodman Salverson's house. She was married to her husband George at the time my grandfather lived with them, and they would have had their only son named George too in the following year. Secondly, one of his acquaintances of Icelandic heritage in the Telegraph business was Sir William Stevenson 'The Man called Intrepid', with whom he learned Morse Code at the time, and who became the head of British Intelligence operations in the United States during the Second World War when Iceland was a secret meeting place for Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt. And the third connection is through his son, George Crandon Jackson, my father, who married an Icelandic Canadian in 1954, Margret Sigvaldason, my mother from Riverton, Manitoba.

Visual, touchable and relevant history is a powerful thing for me and I enjoy the tangible as well as the spiritual connections to the people who formed and continue to influence the fabric of my life. My curiosity was inspired, and I pulled out my grandfather's copy of *The Viking Heart*, by Salverson and checked the publishing date against this autograph entry. The book was published in 1923. Surely years of practicing her craft had already been in progress when my grandfather was at her home. She died in 1970, and he in 1979, so I couldn't ask them about what was going on in their lives in 1915, however from anecdotal information I know that he said later of her, with fondness, that "Suppers were often late because Mrs. Salverson was so engrossed in writing."

It is an unusual custom today to ask someone to sign your autograph book, however I think of it as early twentieth century social media, equivalent to what we may consider 'posting on a person's Facebook page'. What is different is that the tangible paper based writing in the autograph emotes more than simple text in digital space could ever do. As I read the quotations

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written in the book, I was intrigued by the cursive script of Laura, and the depth of the darkness of blue ink that faded in the words as the pen ran out of ink and was dipped again to finish the entry, and then signed and dated by her. I thought about what the world was like when these people's lives and interests intersected. Certainly their cultural backgrounds, urban and rural communities and upbringing had been quite different, and yet, here they were connecting cultures and creating friendship.

Upon reflection, 1915 seems to mark a point in time when individuals with unique differences in ethnicities, up-bringsings, loyalties and influences were part of a new group of first generation immigrant children. They were brought up in an environment of unanticipated, unpredictable and unfolding dynamic change, however, with entirely different cultural backgrounds, success parameters and rules of engagement. I speculate that they touched each other's lives as proud, intelligent, responsible, ambitious, driven, politically, socially and morally conscious Canadians born in Canada; ready to launch and prepare the way for the rest of us.

Pioneer children's life stories are full of inspiring accomplishment. They were where they were as a result of the herculean efforts of their parents to create new home-places for their families, despite all odds. I feel I know something about their challenges, struggles, losses, and poignant joys because of Laura's award winning writing and my family's stories. I think it must be that their personalities were forged with faith, strength, resilient initiative taking, literary richness and a fire in the core of their being.

Laura and George had undoubtedly both experienced first-hand the stuff of those pioneers who created homes for their families with tenacity and hard work. It was the time of the battle of Ypres WWI where 'In Flanders Fields' was written and Nellie McClung was visible and inspired by the women's rights movement in Manitoba, which became the first province to give the right to women to run for public office in 1916. There was opportunity for their generation to dream of a future beyond the limiting restrictions of surviving settlement and pioneering a new land.

Although the country was at war, Canada was connected successfully by railway and telegraph communication and booming with growth. It must have seemed that their individual dreams and aspirations could certainly be realized through goal setting and hard work.

Laura was born in Winnipeg in 1890, a daughter of Icelandic parents who came to Canada in 1887 to the developing west. The well-known exodus of thousands of Icelanders, starting in 1875 included Laura's and my ancestors leaving their homeland with the largest group settling in Manitoba. In her book *The Viking Heart*, no longer in print, Laura captures the experiences, difficulties and the importance of inherited culture for the fourteen hundred Icelandic Immigrants who came to Manitoba in 1876. She creates a vivid portrait of a family and their descendants. A woman worthy of greater recognition, and Icelandic Canadian novelist, she is known for winning the Governor-General's award twice, for *The Dark Weaver* in 1937 and for her autobiographical *Confessions of an Immigrant's Daughter* in 1939.

George was born at Union Point in 1894, near Aubigny, the son of an Irishman, Alexander Guinness Jackson who bought a section of land in southern Manitoba to become a farmer after working on building the Canadian Railway and the driving of 'The Last Spike' in 1885. My grandfather left home as a teenager and went to Winnipeg to work delivering telegrams. With a grade eight education and determination to create a life for himself off the farm, he applied his considerable technical and people skills to ultimately become the Manager of the Canadian National Telegraph in Winnipeg. He married my grandmother Susie Crandon from Warton, Ontario in Regina, Saskatchewan in 1916. They lived most of their married lives in Winnipeg and had three sons.

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I have a tin type photo of my great grandfather Alexander as a young man, lots of old farm photos and his sheared beaver 'great coat', which is likely well over 100 years old. I sneeze every time I rustle the flannel sheet covering it, and wonder if it's time to find it a new home instead of beside my winter coat in the front hall. There is a family legend that after coming to Manitoba, he wrote a letter to a sweetheart in Ireland to join him on the farm. Apparently the sweetheart's sister, Alice McVittie intercepted the letter and came instead. Surprisingly, he married her. My father, George Crandon Jackson told the story of his grandfather being proud to be one of the first customers at the bank at Portage and Main. He bought a Model T Ford, drove it once to Winnipeg and back, and then parked it in the shed and never drove it again. He helped to build the church at Union Point where he was buried, and the church and his family graves are still there. As children we would go there with my grandparents in the summer to cut the grass. The church and graveyard are now on a bit of tall grass prairie surrounded by highway.

Laura uses quotes at the beginning of every chapter in *The Viking Heart*, and her interest in study and developing her critical thinking skills is also evidenced through the entries in my grandfather's Autograph book. One entry is from Shakespeare's 'As You Like It': Act 2, Scene 1 The Forest of Arden.

"And this our life exempt from public haunt, finds tongues in trees, books in the running brook, sermons in stones, and good in everything".

It is a curious story in the way that it also connects to me that makes it interesting. The Icelandic Canadian connection is circuitous in relation to my grandfather, and the serendipitous connection through him, to author Laura Goodman Salverson, and also to Shakespeare.

I think it is an interesting coincidence that a long time before I was born, the Irishman and the Icelander were associating through the Forest of Arden. My name came from my mother's school friend Arden, so unrelated to that source. And that is interesting enough, however, when I went to see an open air theatre performance of 'As you like it', in Caledon, Ontario, I was stunned when the cast opened the show with a singing of Icelandic band 'Of Monsters and Men's' tune 'Slow and Steady'. It seemed appropriate that the circle of connection continue as my Vinarterta business had started when I took cake to an 'Of Monsters and Men' concert in Toronto.

Icelandic Canadian Club of Toronto President had organized the Toronto Icelandic Airwaves Concert at the El Macambo to include 'Of Monsters and Men'. The band arrived in Toronto having just signed a deal with Universal Records. We had dinner with the group that night too, and I was very impressed with them as musicians and people leaning into their brilliance. Their music was captivating and yet they seemed amazed and spellbound by their success through their hit song 'Little Talks'. Also at dinner with us that night was Dr. Laurie Bertram, the woman who wrote her PhD in History at University of Toronto on Icelandic Canadian Cultural History and Vinarterta. The event, and my cake sold out to the crowd that day, and I awoke in the moment to the idea of the potential of Vinarterta and have been sharing this embodiment of Icelandic North American culture, pure love and pioneering spirit, and shipping all over North America ever since.

The second entry she made is from Jeremy Taylor, D.D who was Chaplain to King Charles the First and Bishop in Ireland who was jailed twice for his views during civil war in the time of Cromwell. Laura writes: Dear Friend, and quotes Jeremy Taylor.

"Here is the wisdom of the contented man, to let God choose for Him. For when we have given up our wills to Him and stand in that station of the battle where our great General has placed us,

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our spirits must needs rest, while our conditions have, for their security, the power, the wisdom and the charity of God”.

The quote came from Taylor’s book, entitled *The Rules and Exercises of Holy Living in the 17th century*. It is subtitled: ‘In which are described the means and instruments of obtaining every virtue and the remedies against every vice and considerations serving to the resisting all temptations together with prayers containing the whole duty of a Christian, and the parts of devotion fitted to all occasions, and furnished for all necessities’.

I imagine the Autograph Book entry must have been written in response to a very deep conversation. Either referenced in seriousness or in jest, having answers to the most fundamental questions and strategies to attain perfect self-disciplined conduct may have been part of their similar personal quests. Certainly it was a nod to my grandfather’s Presbyterian faith.

I think that Laura and George understood the value of knowledge, strength of mind, strong character, and courage and perhaps talked about determination, will and conviction of the Viking Heart. Ready to sit at the feet of people who had been successful before, they may have keenly shared a desire to study those who could provide guidance, so that they could leverage the great giving love of their parents, and yet surpass the incessant struggle to accomplish their dreams. I believe they were both open eyed with personal experience of the realities of potential hardship, sending them ever higher in their quest and more steadfast in faith that they could reach and attain more.

I knew my grandfather to be a staunch Presbyterian Orangeman in The Black Lodge, active and passionate in his discussions on the subject. He made significant contributions to his community through volunteerism in his Church and in Kiwanis, attested by awards for decades of service. George was not able to enlist as a soldier due to the lack of a joint in one of his thumbs. He served through dedicating his life to his family and community and his career to the language of Morse Code and the Telegraph.

This son of pioneers was an incredibly proud Canadian, a gifted and articulate public speaker and encouraged discussion and debate about politics and amongst other things, supported women as respected equals. Sometimes I think his suggestion, which I didn’t follow, that I make it my intention to become a lawyer may have been a satisfying career choice. I lived with him while working in Winnipeg at the age of seventeen, and over tea and toast with grape jelly we would discuss and debate the issues of the day after the late evening news. His thoughtful openness, delight in always learning new things, commitment to helping others, serving with integrity, and applying natural talents to succeed became part of my standard for living.

In addition to strong skills of engagement with his intelligence, charisma, values, work ethic, and wit, he had a generosity, perceptiveness, smile, a chuckle and a love of laughter that I can still envision three dimensionally when I think of him. My grandfather had a sympathetic understanding of my mother’s Icelandic background and considerable admiration for my mother’s family too. The last time I went to Riverton, Manitoba with my grandfather to visit my Amma and Afi, Rosmon Arelius (Alli) and Anna (Eastman) Sigvaldason, his manner was so deeply respectful and caring that I felt honoured and proud to be in his presence. I felt as if we were visiting my royal family, and he made sure that we left with Mrs. Sigvaldason’s recipe for pickles, which he held in high regard.

I’m sure he would have absolutely loved Laura’s entries in his Autograph Book. I consider that Laura and he would have enjoyed many fantastic conversations, and she would have felt his support on her journey to shine a light of awareness on the importance of engaging literary

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exploration of immigration, women's issues, discrimination and war. And even more, I know he would have loved to sit at her table to chat about all these things today, the positive influence of her remarkable life achievements and the interesting and serendipitous connection to his granddaughter.

And so, it is through excited anticipation of more discoveries in every moment and the many-layered connections through family, friends, literature, music, history, food and culture that I continue to be enchanted, entertained and inspired.