



## Share Your Ancestors

Text by Ian Watson Photo by Tempest Anderson

*Iceland's genealogy is nearly done. "Finishing" a whole nation's genealogy would be unthinkable in North America or Western Europe, where one looks back at previous centuries' populations as unencompassable, surging masses of migrating humanity. But, as so often, Iceland is a little different from some other parts of the world.*

You may have heard that Iceland has unusually good genealogical records dating all the way back to the saga age, and that Icelanders can trace their ancestry to the Vikings. The truth is a bit less romantic. The earliest detailed record of every single Icelander is the 1703 census. Most Icelandic church records date only from 1785. The majority of lines fade into the darkness of time as one tries to trace back through the 1600s. Most Icelanders who lived in the year 1600 did not leave a record of even their names for posterity. The only memories that survive are of the wealthy, learned, or notorious.

England, for example, has arguably better genealogical records than Iceland. English church records date back to the 1600s and sometimes the 1500s. Many more records of individual people survive from seventeenth-century England than from seventeenth-century Iceland. You can usually trace English ancestry back about a hundred years further than Icelandic ancestry before the lines begin to fade out.

There are a certain number of prominent Icelandic lineages which can be traced back to the 1600s to the settlement period. Just to take a wild guess, say one in every twenty Icelanders listed in the 1703 census has a traceable ancestor in the year 1000, and that the average Icelander today is twelve generations distant from the people in the 1703 census. Since every person has 4096 ancestors in his

twelfth generation back, that would mean that the average Icelander has about two hundred ancestors in the 1703 census whose lineages can be traced to the settlement age.

Here again, though, Icelanders are no more special than other western Europeans. Kings, dukes, and other prominent people are the only ones whose names and birthdates survive from medieval European history, just like Iceland's prominent settlement-age figures. Many Western Europeans could trace a few of their ancestral lines to these people. Probably the majority of current western Europeans are descended from Charlemagne, just as most living Icelanders are probably descended many times over from the settlers like Ingólfur Arnarson who first came to the island in the ninth century.

But there is something really special about Icelandic genealogy. Iceland is an island. Its population is small, closely related, and geographically constrained. Only in the past ten years has immigration surged, and before World War I there was very little immigration at all. When tracking any given group of Icelanders through time, fewer disappear for points unknown than when researching in other countries. It's hard for any Icelander to fall through the cracks. (This is arguably true not only genealogically, but also in modern-day social relations.) So for the period during which good records are available – the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries – just about all of the Icelanders who ever lived have been put into a database called Íslendingabók (The Book of Icelanders), which is largely the personal project of a man named Friðrik Skúlason.

**Friðrik Skúlason and Íslendingabók**  
Friðrik Skúlason is a software entrepreneur by trade and an amateur genealogist on his

own time. He is a specialist in computer viruses and for years his main product has been the anti-virus program F-PROT. His company, FRISK Software International, occupies a small building in downtown Reykjavík and employs perhaps a couple dozen people. In the early 1990s, when Skúlason was still working in systems administration for the University of Iceland, he created a genealogical database program called Espólin, and started adding Icelanders to it. Friðrik did well in the software business and built up a considerable personal library of Icelandic genealogical books.

In 1996, a controversial Icelandic neurologist, Kári Stefánsson, founded a company in Iceland called Decode Genetics. His idea was to combine Icelandic medical and genealogical records to zero in on the genetics of inherited disease. Decode Genetics needed comprehensive Icelandic genealogical records to make their business model work, so Kárasón turned to Skúlason. Together, their companies started a new venture called Íslendingabók. The goal was to build on Skúlason's software, his existing database, and his personal library. Decode, flush with venture capital, pumped enough money into Íslendingabók to hire twenty staff members and to push the number of individuals in the database towards its theoretical maximum. The staff worked systematically through Iceland's census and church records, published genealogies, and other sources. When they were done with the easy tasks, they tackled the problem cases and ultimately brought the number of entries in the database up to the current total of 740,000. This probably represents about half of all of the people who have ever lived in Iceland.

Decode had some modest successes, but has also become entangled in legal, ethical, and political battles. Their hopes for a comprehensive marriage of medical and genea-

logical records have been thwarted by privacy concerns, the refusal by some Icelanders' to release their medical data, and the problem that Icelanders call "rangfeðrun": the fact that people's recorded fathers are not always their genetic fathers. (This matters little when one is constructing a family tree as a hobby, but a lot when inherited disease is at issue.) With Decode's business fortunes shaky, funding to Íslendingabók has been cut. Friðrik is now down to two staff members who are kept busy in a book-lined office in the basement of his company's building. They add new births to the database, process corrections sent in by users and, when they have time, work on improving the existing family trees, particularly the eighteenth-century ones.

Íslendingabók is connected to the net ([www.islendingabok.is](http://www.islendingabok.is)), and any Icelander can sign up for a free username and password. Many have and find Íslendingabók fun to use, despite the fact that they are not allowed to see everything in it. If you have a password, you are allowed to see a list of all other Icelanders' names and birthdates. You can view full information on everyone who shares a great-grandparent with you. You can also ask the computer to find out whether you have a common ancestor with any given Icelander – if you do, the computer will show you the lines of descent to both people. And you can see all information on individuals born before 1700, including their full ancestral charts. One way Icelanders commonly use Íslendingabók is to see how closely prospective boyfriends or girlfriends are related to them or if they are related to notable Icelandic persons, such as Björk or the Prime Minister. Another is simply to find out about people's families and to answer the Icelandic question of "hverra manna ert þú" – "who are your people?"

Between the online Icelandic tele-

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phone book, the National Registry (open to anyone with an Icelandic bank account), the online index of Icelandic newspaper obituaries, and Íslendingabók, it is possible to find out a lot about peoples' families in Iceland. This generally accepted lack of privacy stuns Americans in particular, many of whom live in fear that someone might find out their mother's maiden name. (See my article on personal identification numbers in Iceland in this magazine – Issue 14, 2005.)

### Genealogy Moves Onto the Internet

Genealogy is not only an Icelandic national pastime; it's also one of the most popular hobbies in North America and Britain. While much research is still done in libraries using books and microfilm, the Internet has revolutionised the field and research material is increasingly moving online. Online material is divided into two types. There are original records which have been transcribed, scanned, or indexed, such as census rolls and birth certificates. Then there are compiled genealogies – family trees that someone else has already put together by going through the original records. The 1703 Icelandic census is an example of an original record that has been transcribed and placed online. Íslendingabók is an example of online compiled genealogy.

Although Íslendingabók is online, only Icelanders qualify for access. Even they may not see all of it. Non-Icelanders, even Americans and Canadians researching their Icelandic ancestors, are not allowed in. Skúlason's transcriptions of the primary sources – Icelandic censuses, church records and the like – are not publicly available either.

Íslendingabók is not the only large online Icelandic genealogy database. Hálfðan Helgason, a retired engineer who has made a hobby of genealogy since he was a teenager, maintains a database of 520,000 individuals (accessible via [www.halfdan.is/aett](http://www.halfdan.is/aett)), but you need a user name and password from Helgason to get in). The database is not as complete as Íslendingabók, but it's not small either. Hálfðan takes care of all the updating. The search interface is multilingual and once you are in there are no restrictions on whose data you can see.

When asked, Skúlason and Helgason both explain the middle road they have had to steer between making their databases too open to the public and making them too restricted. Hálfðan's database is housed on a small server which is not powerful enough to cope with unlimited access. If either database was released publicly, Friðrik or Hálfðan would have to get a clear legal opinion on what kind of pruning would be necessary so that the disclosure of information on living people would not run afoul of Iceland's data protection laws. Even if genealogy is more of a hobby than a business, it doesn't feel right to give away years of hard-earned work for free. At the same time, both of them are proud of their work and want to see people benefit from it. Their dilemma echoes a debate with in the field of genealogical research.

Consider the Scotland's People website ([scotlandspeople.gov.uk](http://scotlandspeople.gov.uk)), where practically all of Scotland's legally open birth, death, marriage, church, census, and probate records are available, fully indexed, from the comfort of your chair for a per-record fee; or Ancestry.com, a commercial site which costs about \$350 a year to join, which consolidates thousands of different kinds of records (primarily North American) on one site. For example, census records have been scanned, transcribed, and put into a searchable database which is linked to images of the original census page. There is also a section where people can search and submit compiled family trees – the results of their own research – although there is no guarantee of their accuracy, and they have not been compiled as carefully as Íslending-

The computer indexing of genealogical sources and printing of paper indexes was the first wave, making it all of a sudden much easier, quicker, and cheaper to find information about our ancestors. In the second wave, all this information moved online and, as Internet access penetrated to the average household, it became possible to research your family history without having to go to the library.

Collaborative online genealogy is likely to be the third wave. Imagine that we create a web page for each of our forebears. Each individual's web page contains their name and important dates, copies of photos and source documents, and links to spouses', parents', and children's sites. These pages are open to the public so that everyone can see, add to, and correct each others' work. In effect, this would be the Wikipedia of genealogy.

Many people have had this idea at the same time, and I have found at least ten different web sites which are trying to put it into practice one way or another ([gencircles.com](http://gencircles.com), [geneanet.org](http://geneanet.org), [mytrees.com](http://mytrees.com), [zoof.com](http://zoof.com), [geni.com](http://geni.com), [ancientfaces.com](http://ancientfaces.com), [deadfred.com](http://deadfred.com), [rodov-id.org](http://rodov-id.org), [wikitree.org](http://wikitree.org), [familypursuit.net](http://familypursuit.net), and [familylink.com](http://familylink.com)). There are, as well, a number of "virtual memorials" or "web cemeteries" on the Internet (such as [www.cemetery.org](http://www.cemetery.org) or [catless.ncl.ac.uk/vmg](http://catless.ncl.ac.uk/vmg)).

Not surprisingly, the Mormon Church has gotten interested in this idea. The church has supported genealogical research handsomely for decades, because Mormon theology encourages church members to research their family history. The church has decided to develop a collaborative project of its own, whose working title is New FamilySearch (see [labs.familysearch.org](http://labs.familysearch.org)). If it works well and catches on, New FamilySearch could blow the other ten start-up sites out of the water and become the world's standard collaborative genealogy site, just as Wikipedia has become the world's standard collaborative encyclopaedia. Harnessing the power of all the individual genealogists out there, it would create one mass Wiki-memorial, housed on the Mormon Church's servers in Utah.

Iceland may be the country best positioned in the world to take advantage of such a system. It's fascinating to see that Friðrik Skúlason and Hálfðan Helgason have already created thickly linked genealogical databases that try to cover the entire, limited, universe of Iceland. They have even put them on the web. They're just in a form that – for now at least – doesn't include photos and documents and lacks the participatory accessibility of a wiki.

There is one other person in Iceland who dreamed of a collaborative Icelandic genealogy site way back in the early 1990s and came very close to putting it into practice. His name is Magnús Gíslason and he is now the head of Unix systems administration for the University of Iceland's computing service. Right after the World Wide Web came into being, Magnús designed a web genealogy application called "w3aett." All the people in w3aett's database had their own web page. The web page listed each person's basic genealogical data, gave links to parents, children and spouses, and included a photograph. Submissions from the public were permitted, although in practice Magnús entered most of the information himself – 56,000 individuals. Magnús long since stopped developing the computer code, but the database is still on the web at [w3aett.rhi.hi.is](http://w3aett.rhi.hi.is) and he does still add to it now and then. Magnús deserves credit as one of the very first people in the world to develop a workable prototype of an Internet collaborative genealogy site designed to comprehensively cover an entire region. Magnús says, in fact, that if New FamilySearch wanted to copy his data they'd be welcome.

For now, Iceland is (as far as I know) the first country which has more or less finished the last three centuries of its genealogy. Icelandic genealogists deserve a lot of credit for their work. The next step may well be to put it all online in a fully accessible, and likely collaborative, format. Somewhere between the approaches of Friðrik Skúlason, Hálfðan Helgason, Magnús Gíslason, Scotland's People, Ancestry.com, FreeBMD and New FamilySearch possibly lies a new business model for putting Icelandic genealogy data online. Ideally, one wants a model which rewards the database's creators, encourages maintenance and expansion, and brings in enough money to run the

servers. One wants to allow public participation but to deter free-riding and vandalism. We surely want to memorialize our ancestors, organize our records of the past, open Icelandic data to non-Icelandic speakers, and help people enjoy the time travel and detective work of researching their family history.

### A Cemetery of Virtual Identities

We all know we won't live forever but, even if we don't admit it, we all wonder whether we will be remembered forever, or at least be part of something that continues forever. Genealogy, like cemeteries, books, and other monuments to peoples' lives, are ways in which we project peoples' lives across the ages.

People who lived in the 1500s, whose names don't survive in any records, are now forgotten and lost to our collective memory. We know they existed, but we know them like fish in the sea or stalks of wheat in a field, whose individual identities we never consider.

While many people these days recoil from the idea of being "just a number" in an identification system, the act of numbering someone – and bringing them into a database – is, oddly enough a way of giving them a name, an identity in the collective memory of humanity, a line in the Book of the Dead. That means – as long as that database and its numbering system persists -- a sort of eternal life, though in digital form now rather than in stone.

Indeed, we now grant individual identity – and thus the same kind of eternal existence in our databases and catalogues – to many other groups of things beyond humans. We have long labelled sheep and cattle, we now earmark our cats and dogs, and we tag polar bears and migrating birds. We assign numbers to books, cars, computers, and even sales orders, assuring that we can distinguish one individual from the next, and that these identities will be recoverable for a long time to come.

Genealogists rescue their ancestors from this same kind of oblivion. They extend the honour of inclusion among the known, the recorded, and the connected to a larger and larger group of people. Icelanders are truly special in having so comprehensively kept their forebears' identities safe from the crumbling of records and the weathering of gravestones.

While we are surely not going to stop physically remembering the past in archives and cemeteries, it looks more and more like memorializing our ancestors is another one of the things that is going to move online. Just as Google and Wikipedia have revolutionized the organization of written knowledge in a matter of a few years, it looks like collaboration on the web may soon revolutionize the way we keep track of our family history. If Iceland can find a way to take part, we will all feel proud when the world sees how well our history is preserved.

### Free, publicly accessible Icelandic genealogy databases

**[www.archives.is](http://www.archives.is)**  
1703 and 1835 censuses of Iceland in searchable format

**[www.gardur.is](http://www.gardur.is)**  
Database of all cemetery burials in Iceland

**[www.mbl.is/mm/gagnasafn/minningaleit.html](http://www.mbl.is/mm/gagnasafn/minningaleit.html)**  
Morgunblaðið obituaries 1986-present

**[timarit.is/mbl](http://timarit.is/mbl)**  
Morgunblaðið full text index and images, 1913-2000

**[www.halfdan.is](http://www.halfdan.is)**  
1816 census of Iceland in PDF format, plus many links to compiled genealogies online, Hálfðan Helgason's own online database (password needed), and advice in English on Icelandic genealogy research

**[w3aett.rhi.hi.is](http://w3aett.rhi.hi.is)**  
Largest publicly accessible compiled genealogy database in Iceland, created by Magnús Gíslason, but not actively maintained