

## A Shred of Biography of Jørgen Jørgensen

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### I

Is there any innocent blood crying for vengeance against me? Have I shed the blood of a fellow creature? Have I enriched myself to the detriment of a single individual? Have I caused a single person to be confined for being opposed in principles to me?

This, or something like it, was what Jørgen Jørgensen said when he tried to defend what had done, to those who were no longer willing to listen – and that was a lot of people – almost everyone.

In Iceland we called him Jörundur, the Dog-Day King, and he is in his way the only king we have ever had. Yet his name was really just Jørgen Jørgensen, which is pretty much like being called John Smith – or nothing at all.

Jørgen was born in Copenhagen on 29 March 1780, in the days of King Christian VII, who corresponded with Voltaire, but was mentally unstable. At that time Copenhagen was our capital too, and Christian VII was our king. George III of England was mad, as well. Nothing but mad kings on offer.

This is the opening passage of my latest novel, *Hundadagar* or *Dog Days*. It is about this man, Jørgen Jørgensen, or Jörundur the Dog-Day King. It actually deals with various other people as well, recounting the story of a certain period from a certain viewpoint, but he is the main character: Jørgen Jørgensen, the first Dane who sailed around the world and called both in Iceland and Tasmania, so far as anyone noticed. In his youth he rebelled against all discipline, and was sent to sea at the age of fourteen on an English collier, where he spent the next four years and got to know English culture and ideas.

As I write these words I am putting the finishing touches to the book. I have placed the last full stop. But I don't intend to describe it – my novel – here, as authors are as a rule not the best people to describe their own books. And they can't necessarily do so, since novels are generally written in order to describe

what cannot be described. That, we may say, is the nature of the novel. It cannot be described in detail – because theories of fiction become obsolete even faster than novels themselves. A novel is a journey into the unknown, a research project whose findings cannot be predicted in advance. And then there is the question of whether a novel is a novel, when the truth is as unbelievable as it is.

And that was what Jørgen Jørgensen's life was like. His journey lay into the unknown, and the conclusions of his life are many and diverse. Jørgensen is as mysterious as a novel. He might have said, like the Existentialists: *To do is to be*. He often got off to a good start, but then things fell apart. He somehow always found himself back at square one.

His story began in Copenhagen in 1780, and ended in Tasmania in 1841. Between those two dates was an extraordinary life in extraordinary times, times of upheaval: discoveries of new lands, the Enlightenment, revolution, war. The modern world – urban society – was in its birth-throes.

From England, Jørgensen went to southern Africa at the age of 18. He sailed the seas, sometimes even as a buccaneer, travelling to South America and in due course yet farther – to the South Seas, Australia, Tasmania. He served there in the English navy; and in 1804 he set off aboard the whaler *Alexander*, heading for Europe.

The fantastic journey took two years. The ship called at Tahiti and other places, and in 1806 Jørgensen arrived in London with two Tahitians in tow, whom he placed in the custody of Sir Joseph Banks. When Jørgensen returned to Copenhagen after an absence of twelve years, he was given a warm welcome. But in 1807 the English besieged Copenhagen, and things started to go wrong. Compelled to take part in sea battles against the English fleet, Jørgensen found himself taken prisoner. Thus, when he took part in the coup d'état in Iceland and became our king for a couple of months he was, strictly speaking, a prisoner of war held by the English.

He went on to spend time in English jails and gambling dens, and worked as a writer until he was sent to spy for England in mainland Europe in 1815–17. He was a witness to many historic events – some he claimed to have seen, while in other cases he truly did. When he returned to England his prospects were bright, in so many different fields. But after that he contrived to make such a mess of his life that in 1826 he was transported as a convict to Tasmania – his death sentence having been commuted to transportation for life. And thus our hero had come full circle, and was back at one of his starting-points, the starting-point of the settler. And there he would remain for the rest of his life.