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**Association of Open University Graduates
Europe**

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Welcome to a New Year with AOUG in Europe.

January and February always seem to go by at a great rate of knots. A new year has begun and before I know where I am it is March. Needless to say, in this part of Europe, those months have a variety of bad weather with the occasional sunny day to cheer us up. On a recent visit to England and Wales, I left Normandy which had suffered a small fall of snow, to arrive at Portsmouth in wonderful sunshine. I thought that the further north you go, the colder it should get but global warming has quite another idea! I hope that wherever you are, you are enjoying the first signs of spring. Our lawn, which for most keen gardeners would be classified as a mixture of field and lawn, has decided to become a flower lawn! There are primroses, snowdrops and an abundance of buttercups and very pretty it looks too.



Just a quick reminder about the Association of Open University Graduates AGM/Social Weekend which takes place in Caernarfon, North Wales from 8th to 10th May 2015. I know that we already have some members from Europe attending, so I do hope that a few more of you can find the time to come and join us. I missed last year due to ill health and I really did miss meeting up with so many old friends. I have some catching up to do!

In the last Newsletter I told you that the AOUG Foundation for Education Award was given, for the first time, to an Open University graduate in Europe. Eva Condoul from Portugal was the recipient but owing to the distance I was unable to present the award personally. Eva's husband Nyssken Roberto did the honours and the photograph below was taken by her daughter Rokhaya-Maria, the daughter who had had so many health problems.



Congratulations Eva and good luck with your future Open University studies. You can read more about this in the next edition of OMEGA.

Once again, the AOUG Foundation for Education Awards will be made this year. If you know of any recent Open University graduate who has achieved his/her degree, regardless of having overcome some adversity over and above that of the average student, please notify AOUG on aoug@open.ac.uk. Full details can be found on the AOUG web site, www.aoug.org.uk, under New Graduate Awards Application.

Several of you have contacted me about how much you enjoy reading the articles from other members. In this edition we have a wonderful article from Colleen Petursson, a member who lives in Iceland. I am sure that you will enjoy reading about how Christmas is celebrated there and also the background to the structure of life in Iceland. Colleen has recently been in hospital but is now back at home. Get well soon Colleen and thanks for the article.

“Gledilegt nytt ar” A very happy New Year.

How time flies, it doesn't seem long since our daughter Katrin and husband Alister visited us for a ten day Christmas holiday with their two children Orri Sigþór (11) and Matthías Smári (6). They live in Reykjavik, and had travelled by car to Akureyri, where my husband Sigthor and I live. The journey took about six hours as travelling was difficult owing to driving snow and high winds, the journey involves driving over two mountain passes.

The day Katrin and family arrived here in Akureyri on December 23 is called “Thorlaxsmessa” (Mass of Saint Thorlakur) which is the beginning of Christmas in Iceland, it is celebrated by having a meal of fermented skate (kaest skata), melted lamb's fat, potatoes and mashed swedes! Thorlakur Thorhallsson the Holy was a Bishop in Skalholt and died on the 23rd of December 1193. Skalholt, during Catholic times was the Bishopry of the South of Iceland. Holar was the Bishopry of the North. Everyone tucked in and ate with relish after their long journey from Reykjavik. No one seemed to object to the strong urine-like odour from the fish! Some people eat salted cod instead of or as well as the skate. The main Icelandic Christmas meal is usually celebrated on the 24th of December, when most Icelanders dress in their best clothes, which are often purchased for this occasion. The main Christmas meal usually starts at 6 p.m. There is considerable variation

in the customary meal. Probably the most common now is smoked pork or lamb with boiled or caramelised potatoes, white or brown sauce and tinned peas, red cabbage and pickled cucumber etc. Ptarmigan (Icelandic: rjúpa) is a popular game bird in Iceland. In households where the husband is a keen ptarmigan catcher, this is most likely the Christmas dinner. Turkey is becoming more popular as a Christmas meal in Iceland.



A ptarmigan in winter clothing

Following the Christmas meal on the 24th the presents which are kept under the Christmas tree, are opened and many families go to Midnight Mass later on. The State religion is the Evangelical Lutheran Church, which about eighty per cent of the people belong to. Icelanders, however, are not great Church goers and do not usually go to Church as a regular practice on a Sunday. They do go to church on the big church festivals, Christmas and Easter.

Religious instructions before Confirmation is always taught to children at the age of thirteen to fourteen years old by the local priest. This is organised by the local church. Weddings, Confirmations, and Funerals are in many cases huge occasions in Iceland. The churches are packed for these services, followed by expensive meals. Hallgrímskirkja in Reykjavík holds a Nine Lessons and Carol service just before Christmas for the English speaking people and all are invited to the British Embassy for mince pies and mulled wine after the service.

As a family we have kept our mainly British Christmas traditions and have our main Christmas meal on December the 25th. For many years we have always had the same meals, and start by eating lobster and salad on Christmas Eve and after the meal we prepare for our Christmas dinner and get everything ready for Christmas Day. We start the day by going to church on Christmas morning, then about 2pm we have our traditional turkey with all the trimmings, followed by Christmas pudding and mince pies. We had so many presents this year it took us a long time to open all our parcels. After lunch our two grandsons were very excited and couldn't wait to play in the deep snow in the garden, after all the excitement of playing with their presents, they dressed up in all their winter clothes and boots and went into the garden to build igloos and snow men and run down the slope on sledges. On Boxing Day everyone slept late so we decided to be more active and trooped off to the outdoor swimming pool, which is a ten minute walk from our house. The pool water is lovely and warm, everyone is required to take a hot shower without their costume before going into the water. It is not uncommon that people coming to Iceland try to dodge this requirement and are told in no uncertain terms that they cannot go into the pool unless they follow the rules. The end of the year and the beginning of a New Year is celebrated by large public bonfires and fireworks displays. Many households also have their own displays and the ships and trawlers in the harbour also have a massive show of fireworks at midnight. After midnight we had a glass of whisky followed by hot chocolate and whipped cream. After lunch on New Year's Day Katrin, Alistair and the boys went back to Reykjavík as the boys had to start school and their parents to go to work on January 2nd!



Matthias Smari, Colleen, Katrin and Orri Sigthor

A few facts about Iceland.

Iceland lies in the North Atlantic. The Arctic circle (66.6° north) skirts just north of the Icelandic mainland. The climate in Iceland is much milder than one might expect from its latitude because of the Gulf Stream. The population is only about three hundred and twenty thousand. The capital is Reykjavik and about half of the population lives in the capital area. Akureyri, where I live, has a population of about eighteen thousand people. Akureyri is by far the largest town in Iceland outside the capital area and is called the Capital of the North. It has business and cultural life well beyond what could be expected by its modest size. It has an International Airport, a university, university hospital, where I nursed until a few years ago. In and around Akureyri are four open air swimming pools and a large ski area. In June and into July it is light all night and in winter we often see the Northern Lights (Aurora Borealis). Iceland is green except in the mountainous areas inland, but wooded areas are rare. You can drive from Reykjavik to Akureyri (390 km) without seeing a tree. This is great for enjoying the views! Hot springs are common. They are interesting but the economic importance of the hot water areas is more important to the population, since over ninety per cent of the houses in Iceland are heated by this natural hot water. The super-hot areas are also used for electricity production. There are many active volcanoes in Iceland. One eruption has been going on for months now north of the largest glacier (Vatnajökull). This is in an uninhabited area so no-one is directly affected, but the gases sent off can be felt far afield including here in Akureyri.

The first snow can fall here in the North in late September and can last until late April or May, but this varies a lot. The natural hot water is used for heating greenhouses and growing of many types of salads, cucumbers, tomatoes and strawberries and vegetables is a thriving industry. Iceland is much more than self sufficient in food production.



In front of our house in January 2015

Fish products with aluminium and tourism are the largest export industries in Iceland but we are also self sufficient in farm products. The Icelandic lamb is well known for its quality. Iceland is a Republic, which has a directly elected President who is responsible for appointing the Prime Minister. It is not a member of the EU, but it is part of the European Economic Area (EEA). It is a founder member of NATO. The present government is a coalition of the Independence Party (a conservative party) and the Progressive Party (a centrist party with roots in the farming community and the Co-operative Movement). The Iceland Parliament (Althing) is the oldest parliament in the world. It was founded in 930 AD, about sixty years after the settlement of Iceland. Johanna Sigardardottir was elected as Prime Minister in 2009. She was the first openly lesbian woman Prime Minister. Her term ended in 2013. Iceland has one of the highest standards of living and gender equality in the world, legal drinking is twenty years of age, and alcohol can only be purchased from state owned alcohol stores.

The thirteen Yule Lads are the Icelandic Father Christmases who do things like stealing sausages and slam doors. Children put their shoes on the window sill to be filled for thirteen days before Christmas. They receive a small present if they have behaved well, otherwise they get a potato! We are now (January/Fabruary) in the pagan festival of Thorri, which starts in January and lasts for a month. Thorrablót consists of eating and drinking the old traditional food of rotten shark, singed sheep heads (the heads are split lengthwise and the brain removed), rams pickled testicles, pickled herring, dried fish, rye bread and lots of butter, all followed by ice cold Brennivín, “Black Death”, the Icelandic traditional spirit. School starts at the age of six but children mostly go to a nursery school before attending the primary school.



Singed sheep's head (svid)

Children are very independent here and mostly well behaved. The education standards are high, and examinations are carried out from Nursery School onwards. The school day starts at 8:15 and ends about 1 pm, but sports and recreational activities are after that. The children usually have school lunch and come home with homework to be done daily. Most are with their friends from nursery school and stay with the same children in a class and with the same teacher for the first three years. Compulsory education is to sixteen but those that want to go to university finish at 18-19.

I had hoped to come to Caernarfon in Wales in May, but unfortunately I am having an operation on my hip in March or April. I will end this Newsletter by wishing everyone a wonderful time in Wales. I hope to be able to come to the UK this summer, and hope to see you at another AOUG event.

Colleen Petursson.