

SCOTTISH PLANS FOR THE ANNEXATION OF ICELAND 1785 – 1813

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1. Introduction

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries several high-ranking British gentlemen approached their government proposing that Britain take possession of Iceland, at that time a dependency of Denmark. Among them were two Scotsmen – the Honourable John Cochrane, a member of the Dundonald family, and the well-known mineralogist Sir George Steuart Mackenzie of Coul. This paper discusses the reasons for their interest in Iceland, the details of their proposals and the responses of the British government.¹

At the end of the eighteenth century, Britain had a long-standing history of interest in Iceland. The fishing-banks off Iceland had first attracted English seamen at the beginning of the fifteenth century. The Iceland cod fishery soon developed to the extent that it remained one of England's major fisheries until the 1650s. In addition to fishing, the English fishermen also traded extensively with the Icelanders. So extensive was the English presence during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries that historians generally refer to this period in Icelandic history as 'the English Era'. The Icelandic chronicles, the *Annals*, make occasional mention of Scottish and Irish fishermen as well.

Another indication of the early British interest in Iceland is that the Danish kings Christian II and Christian III, in times of financial straits, attempted to sell or pawn Iceland to the English crown; Henry VIII was thrice offered Iceland, but refused to be tempted (Thorsteinsson 1957–61, 67–101). Iceland thus failed to share the fate of Orkney and Shetland which were pledged by King Christian I in the 1460s and never redeemed.

British influence in Iceland, however, declined in the seventeenth century. In 1602 the king of Denmark introduced a trade monopoly in Iceland for the benefit of the nascent Danish merchant class. Illicit trading with the English continued, but was probably negligible by the eighteenth century when the Newfoundland fisheries had become a source of great prosperity for British fishermen.

In 1772 Sir Joseph Banks, following his celebrated *Endeavour* voyage with Captain Cook to the South Seas in 1768–71, led a scientific expedition to Iceland inspecting the geysers and climbing Mount Hekla, the most famous of Iceland's volcanoes

(Carter 1988, 104–12). Apart from that visit, Iceland aroused little interest in Britain in the eighteenth century until 1785 when the Hon. John Cochrane conceived the idea that it would be greatly to Britain's advantage to acquire Iceland, an idea he was to pursue right to his death in 1801.

Cochrane's papers on 'The Importance of Obtaining Possession of Iceland' are preserved in the National Library of Iceland (*Landsbokasafn Islands*, [hereafter Lbs] 424 fol.). They include lengthy memorials and letters addressed to Henry Dundas (Viscount Melville), when he was Secretary of War and Pitt's close friend and colleague. From these documents it emerges that in the late eighteenth century Denmark was prepared to enter into negotiations to cede Iceland (and the Faeroes) to Britain in exchange for a West Indian island. Further research in the Scottish Record Office, the Rigsarkivet [RA] in Copenhagen, the Public Record Office and British Library in London has turned up documents which suggest that what Cochrane wrote was substantially true. Moreover, they indicate that Pitt and Dundas, at Cochrane's suggestion, had seriously explored the possibility of annexing Iceland during a period of hostilities with Denmark in 1801.

2. 1785: The Honourable John Cochrane's Proposals

The Hon. John Hyndford Cochrane (1750–1801) was the fifth of thirteen sons of the eighth earl of Dundonald, eight of whom survived infancy (Cochrane 1983, 163–73). Unlike many of his famous brothers, John has not merited an entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, and the *Scots Peerage* simply notes Cochrane's position as deputy-commissary to the forces in North America in 1793, presumably his most important position (*Scots Peerage*, iii, 359–60).

Thus our knowledge of Cochrane's life is rather sketchy. 'A very fine young fellow' he went off to sea at the tender age of fourteen (SRO, GD 233/105/A, 13 June 1765, William Cochrane to the Earl of Dundonald). He embarked for the West Indies three years later aboard the vessel *True Love* (Edinburgh University Library, Laing MS, ii, 98.4, 31 March 1768, John Cochrane to the Countess of Dundonald). Subsequently, he travelled widely to India, Canada and South Africa, either in an official capacity or engaging in business and trade (e.g. SRO, GD 51/3/340/3, December 1793, memorial to the Court of Directors of the United East India Company; National Library of Scotland, Melville Papers 3835, 24 April 1796, Cochrane to Dundas). The Dundonald family enjoyed the patronage of the 'manager' of Scotland, Dundas,² (which is why most of the letters in the Cochrane Papers are addressed to him) and Cochrane was one of the many Scotsmen appointed by Dundas to the East India Company (Mitchison 1982, 344–5; SRO, GD 51/3/198, March 1786, examination of the different Plans proposed for the East India Company's Shipping). There Cochrane acquitted himself well, claiming merit for 'the great extension of the India trade from both Europe and India' (SRO, GD 51/4/340, 23 June 1796, Cochrane to Dundas). He was also author of a couple of pamphlets (Cochrane 1795; Cochrane 1983, 423–4). John Cochrane's life was thus a classic example of that of a younger son in continuous search of a livelihood, spurred on by economic necessity (Cochrane 1983, 148).

Most important, however, for the purposes of this paper is the fact that Cochrane had significant contact with Denmark, of which, as already mentioned, Iceland was a dependency (Rigsarkivet [RA], Privatarkiver, Schimmelmannske Papirer [Schimmelmann Papers], box 26, 23 June 1778, extract of letter from Consul Anker to Count Schimmelmann). As early as 1777 he was interested in establishing commercial relations between Tranquebar, the major Danish East Indian colony (situated south of Madras), and the Danish West Indies, even adopting Danish citizenship for the purpose (Rasch 1967, 18). The following year (1778) he moved to Denmark where, according to the eminent Danish historian Edvard Holm, Cochrane played a leading role in strengthening diplomatic ties between Denmark and England (Holm 1906, v, 300–301; Schimmelmann Papers, box 26, 23 June 1778, extracts of letters from Anker and Cochrane). Relations had been strained after Christian VII's divorce from Caroline Matilda, sister of George III, and had not improved with British attacks on neutral Danish merchantmen during the first years of the American War of Independence. According to Peter Anker, the Danish consul in London who was also involved in this Anglo-Danish *rapprochement*, Cochrane had worked with 'untiring diligence' and with some success (Schimmelmann Papers, box 26, 23 June 1778, Anker to Schimmelmann). Consequently, Cochrane had ready access to the leading members of the Danish government, believing himself to enjoy in particular the friendship of the minister of trade and finance, Count Ernst Schimmelmann, the leader of Denmark's economic policy (e.g. Schimmelmann Papers, box 24, 18 September 1785, Cochrane to Schimmelmann).

Subsequent to Cochrane's dealings with Denmark we find him in Quebec as paymaster-general to the British forces at the height of the American war in 1779 (Cochrane 1983, 164–71). Returning to Scotland in July 1784, he joined forces with his eldest brother Archibald, the ninth earl of Dundonald, a renowned industrial chemist, who had discovered how to extract and distil tar from coal. After being granted a parliamentary patent, the British Tar Company was founded and chemical works were erected on the Dundonald estate at Culross in Fife, where there were large coal deposits (Schimmelmann Papers, box 24, 18 September 1785, Cochrane to Schimmelmann). The chemical process required large amounts of brimstone. Sulphur was available in Iceland and that is what initially aroused Cochrane's interest in the island.

In the 1780s Iceland was in a serious economic state. A massive volcanic eruption (with the largest lava flow in recorded world history) had extensively destroyed vegetation with enormous losses of livestock. In February 1785 the Danish administration appointed a special commission to find ways to deal with the disastrous situation in the island. The chairman was none other than the Minister of Finance Count Schimmelmann, Cochrane's friend. As 75% of the sheep, the basis for farming in Iceland, had been killed, it is not surprising to find Schimmelmann ordering the Danish consul in London to enquire whether the British government would permit the exportation of Scottish sheep to Iceland to replenish the stocks (Lbs. 424 fol.; Schimmelmann Papers, box 26, 15 February, 22 February and 4 March 1785, Anker to Schimmelmann).

According to Cochrane, now looking after the Dundonald business from the London end (Draft of biography of the 9th Earl of Dundonald, SRO, GD 233/114), Consul Anker, his close friend from 1778 'with whom I lived on the most intimate footing' had approached him for his opinion on the sheep exportation scheme (Lbs. 424 fol.). Cochrane now had a brilliant idea. Here was a ready solution to his own problem of acquiring cheap sulphur for the Dundonald chemical works in Scotland. He suggested to Anker that ships carrying sheep would sail from Scotland with a ballast of coal (from the Dundonald mines) returning with sulphur. This trading arrangement would be both more convenient and cheaper for the Dundonalds than obtaining sulphur from Italy. Moreover, transporting the sheep would be an expensive business and this would reduce the cost of the voyage.

An application to the British authorities for the mass exportation of sheep from Iceland, however, proved unsuccessful (Schimmelmänn Papers, box 24, 22 February and 4 March 1785, Anker to Schimmelmänn; box 24, 18 September 1785, Cochrane to Schimmelmänn). At this time the policy of the British government was to protect the British wool trade from all possible foreign competition. Nevertheless, Cochrane was not deterred. He again approached Schimmelmänn, now proposing a straightforward coal-sulphur trade between Scotland and Iceland. The chemical works would need many hundreds of tons a year and he felt the 'wretched' inhabitants of Iceland would welcome the coal to 'warm them' as well as the chance of employment involved in digging the sulphur. All in all this seemed like a worthwhile project. Cochrane believed a beneficial trade would not 'in any way be prejudicial to the Danish trade in Iceland' (Schimmelmänn Papers, box 24, 18 September 1785, Cochrane to Schimmelmänn).

There is no evidence that the Danish government showed interest in Cochrane's trade proposal. Perhaps Cochrane's proposal was not sufficiently tempting for Denmark to break the trade monopoly in Iceland. Cochrane, however, was intent on obtaining the Iceland sulphur, so he had to find other ways.

His next idea was to facilitate the sulphur trade by simply transferring Iceland from the Crown of Denmark to that of Britain. How was this transfer to be accomplished? Cochrane and Anker decided that an exchange of territory would be the best method, their choice falling on a small West Indian island, *Crab Island*, that Cochrane was probably familiar with from his West Indies days and that the Danes had long been interested in acquiring.

In the eighteenth century an island in the West Indies was the most prized colonial possession and most of the maritime nations of western Europe had a stake there. During the eighteenth century the Danes had managed to gain possession of three of the Virgin Islands: St John, St Thomas and St Croix (Hornby 1980). Crab Island³ is the next island to the west of the three Danish West Indian islands, between St Thomas and Puerto Rico. At this point in time – the late eighteenth century – Crab Island was still uncolonised. In 1688 the Danes had actually staked a claim there, but the opposition of Spain and Britain had forced them to abandon their colonial aspirations regarding that island (Hornby 1980, 69–70, 114).

Anker approached his government with this idea and Count Schimmelmänn

subsequently authorised his consul to sound out the British government, the Danish position being:

That the King of Denmark would cede to Great Britain the Sovereignty of Iceland and the Ferro Islands . . . and that Great Britain should cede to Denmark her claim to the Island called Crab Island near St Croix in the West Indies, and also if required give her aid and assistance to obtain the same grant from the Court of Spain.

If Britain's attitude proved favourable Count Reventlow, the Danish minister in London and Schimmelmann's brother-in-law, would formally initiate talks (Lbs. 424 fol.).⁴

Though we only have Cochrane's word for the above statement an examination of the historical situation certainly supports it. At the end of the American War of Independence in 1783, Denmark suffered a severe recession and Iceland, as already described, was in a critical economic state. The situation was in fact so desperate that the Danish government, considering Iceland uninhabitable, had even contemplated, in the winter of 1783–4, transporting all forty thousand of their Iceland subjects to Jutland. Therefore, exchanging Iceland for a supposedly profitable West Indian island would have been regarded as an attractive solution to some of the problems facing the Danish administration.

There can thus be little doubt about the Danish interest in the offer, especially as their other three West Indian islands had proved extremely valuable during the American War of Independence, when the Danish carrying trade had made huge profits. Moreover, Count Schimmelmann, as the largest plantation owner in the Danish West Indies, had a direct personal interest in the area (*Dansk Biografisk Leksikon*, xiii, 91–2).

But was Britain prepared to relinquish its claim to Crab Island in exchange for Iceland? To interest Dundas in this project Cochrane had obviously to convince him of the benefits Iceland would bring to the British Crown, a subject repeatedly discussed by Cochrane in his many memorials to Dundas.⁵

Cochrane placed major emphasis on the multiple advantages the Icelandic cod fishery offered Britain in comparison to the Newfoundland fishery, not least the superior quality of the Iceland cod which Britain could then supply 'to the rest of the world'. He stressed the necessity of laying 'the foundation of a Fishery nearer home' which would render Britain 'independent of these revolutions which must take place on the other side of the Atlantic'. Cochrane professed himself worried by the growing number of 'sedentary' fishermen all along the Canadian coast, ready to supply the European market with salted fish in competition with British fishermen (here Cochrane was probably responding to the fact that Dundas had been against the Scottish emigration to Canada in 1782–3). Cochrane assured Dundas that British seamen would 'never . . . think of settling in Iceland'. Thus the Iceland fishery – under British rule – would be carried on in British-built vessels, navigated by British seamen, dressed in British clothing and fed by British produce.

Iceland had other resources besides cod, salmon for instance, described as 'a fish more suitable to the palate of the people of this country than any other fish' which did not require an expensive sauce, 'a little vinegar' sufficing to dress it. Not surprisingly, Cochrane enclosed at one point a description of the 'inexhaustible' sulphur mines in Northern Iceland (Lbs. 424 fol.). A further attraction was that Iceland could be used as a penal colony instead of the distant Botany Bay. The convicts could be employed as fishermen and would thus know a useful trade upon their release. Under British protection and 'supported with the capital and industry of British merchants' Iceland would become a flourishing colony. Last but certainly not least, the Icelandic fisheries would be useful training grounds for seamen ready to man the Royal Navy in times of war (Lbs. 424 fol.).

To gain support for their plan, Anker and Cochrane went to see Sir Joseph Banks, the recently elected President of the Royal Society, and the acknowledged expert on Iceland. After 'a very long conversation . . . on the subject' Banks promised his support for two reasons; it was both 'a great national object' and a humanitarian enterprise, as 'the wretched inhabitants . . . would be rendered happy and rich by their connection with Great Britain' (Lbs. 424 fol.; British Library, Add. MS 33978, 28 September and 2 December 1785, Anker to Banks). Banks was to echo similar sentiments throughout his life.

That the British government showed at least some interest in the proposals is evidenced by a report from the British embassy in Copenhagen to the Foreign Office, discussing Iceland's prospects as a British colony. The despatch, dated 22 November 1785 and written in cypher, stated the following:

. . . it was lately in Agitation to evacuate the Island of Iceland, and to transplant the People to the different Quarters of the Danish Dominions. Owing to bad Management and a destructive Monopoly, it has been for a long Time a heavy Burthen to this Country; but under the British Government it might soon become a valuable Colony (Public Record Office [PRO], F.O. 22/7, 22 November 1785, Johnstone to Fraser).

These arguments, however, appear to have failed to convince the Cabinet. Dundas was almost certainly aware of the poor economic state of Iceland. He had actually dined with Joseph Banks in Scotland on the latter's return from his Iceland voyage in 1772 (Carter 1988, 114). It is safe to assume Iceland had figured in their conversation and that Banks had painted a somewhat gloomy picture of the situation of the Icelanders. In September 1783 Charles James Fox, the Foreign Secretary, had been informed of the 'violent Eruption' and 'the dismal . . . Devastations' in Iceland (PRO, F.O. 22/8, 9 September 1783, Elliot to Fox), which, coupled with the above report, will not have encouraged the British government to give up its claim to a potentially lucrative West Indian island for the uncertain prospects of the 'heavy Burthen' of Iceland. Dundas, especially, was noted for his interest in the West Indies (Matheson 1933, 216).

Cochrane had placed the greatest emphasis on the value of the Iceland fisheries in comparison to those of Newfoundland. But in the eighteenth century the

Newfoundland fisheries' exports increased more than tenfold while Icelandic fish exports showed 'stagnation and decline' (Gunnarsson 1983, 73). To the British ministers, Iceland would not have been the attraction it was to the sulphur-hungry Cochrane.

Nor for that matter does it appear that the Danes pressed the business. In September 1786 the British ambassador in Copenhagen reported to the then Foreign Secretary, the Marquess of Carmarthen, that because of 'the almost unprecedented state of distress in the Danish Finances' the Danish government might 'be induced to alienate some of its foreign Possessions'. He, however, added that 'they are not yet prepared to specify, with accuracy, either what they mean to offer, or what they expect in return' (PRO, F.O. 22/8, 10 September 1786, Elliot to Carmarthen). It is tempting to believe that the 'foreign Possessions' mentioned were Iceland and the Faeroes. While Iceland was in a disastrous state in 1784–5, the temptation to exchange it for a possibly profitable west Indian island must have been strong. But Iceland was soon on the road to recovery and was thus of value again. In 1786 the director of the Royal Iceland Trade, Carl Pontoppidan, wrote that the loss of the traditional Iceland trade would entail heavy losses in shipping and employment (Gunnarsson 1983, 161). It seems to have been the case that for Denmark its ancient dependency, Iceland, was a possession worth having when the going was good.

Thus, it appears that these tentative negotiations never really got off the ground and were abandoned. However, Cochrane persevered and managed to revive the general idea later in life, as will now be discussed.

3. 1796–1801: Further Plans for the Annexation of Iceland

From 1796 to 1801 Cochrane continued in his attempts to interest Dundas, now Secretary of War, in the possession of Iceland. The Culross estate had been sold in 1793, so there was no longer any need for Icelandic sulphur. By this time Cochrane was in his late forties and seeking a prestigious position in society – for instance the governorship of Iceland in the event of a British annexation of the island.

In 1796 Cochrane offered his services to Dundas to arrange the acquisition of Iceland, 'a Plan of the utmost consequence and which I entreat you not to neglect', asserting he could do so if authorised 'on very advantageous terms' through his Danish connections (SRO, GD 51/4/340, 23 June 1796, Cochrane to Dundas). The following year he told his youngest brother Andrew Cochrane-Johnstone, the newly-appointed governor of Dominica, that Iceland's value to Britain was 'inestimable'. He hoped 'to God Mr Dundas . . . [would] keep Iceland in view . . . I recommend secrecy to be observed. Remember I am to be *Earl of Iceland* or *Baron Mount Hekla*!' (Lbs. 424 fol., 17 May 1797, Cochrane to Andrew Cochrane-Johnstone).

In November 1799 Cochrane pointed out to Dundas that when the Revolutionary wars were over the thousands of British sailors, enlisted in the Royal Navy, could obtain employment in the Iceland fisheries. Otherwise he was afraid they might emigrate to America 'or what is more to be dreaded, engage in the French merchant service'. Cochrane claimed that the Danes were more interested in an exchange between Iceland and the Duchy of Saxe-Lauenburg, one of George III's Hanoverian

possessions, than in a West Indian island. Cochrane enclosed a short account of the Duchy, with the comment it could not be 'of great consequence' (Lbs. 424 fol., 23 November 1799, Cochrane to Dundas). Nothing further has been found of this proposal though Saxe-Lauenburg bordered onto Schleswig-Holstein and the Danes would certainly have been interested in acquiring it. In fact they did, but not until 1815 after the Congress of Vienna.

4. 1801: Cochrane's Proposal for a Military Annexation of Iceland

Due to the question of neutral rights, Anglo-Danish relations became increasingly hostile during the summer of 1800. In December Denmark, Russia, Prussia and Sweden formed the League of Armed Neutrality, a direct threat to British naval supremacy. The Pitt Cabinet reacted swiftly, ordering retaliatory attacks against the northern powers. The measures against Denmark came thick and fast. On 14 January 1801 an embargo was laid on Danish ships in British ports. That same day instructions were issued to the commander of the Leeward Islands to take possession of St Thomas, St Croix and St John. Two days later orders were issued to seize the Danish settlements in India. And finally preparations were begun for sending a naval expedition to Denmark and the Baltic under Nelson. It was at this point, on 20 January 1801, that Dundas received what was probably the final letter from John Cochrane concerning the annexation of Iceland.

The difficulty until now, claimed Cochrane, had been to reach an agreement regarding the value of Iceland as the Danish ministers had not been in favour of dismembering the Danish kingdom without some substantial return. Now, however, the state of hostilities between Britain and Denmark made a military conquest of the island possible. 'A few troops and ships of war' would suffice, as he told Dundas, and the Icelanders would doubtless surrender at once 'without bloodshed'. The cold climate was a slight problem but officers who had served in Canada would be well qualified to lead the military expedition, and as to the troops themselves 'Scotsmen [were] to be preferred as the climate will agree with them' (Lbs. 424 fol., 20 January 1801, Cochrane to Dundas).

Even though orders had been given about a week earlier to seize the Danish colonies in the East and West Indies, Dundas now apparently decided to consider Cochrane's proposal for the military conquest of Iceland and the Faeroes. This may be deduced from the existence of a lengthy memorandum entitled *Remarks concerning Iceland*, written by Sir Joseph Banks and dated 30 January 1801 – ten days after Dundas received Cochrane's letter. In this memorandum, Banks lends his support to the idea that Iceland be annexed to the British Crown (Hermannsson 1928, 25–30).

It is clear from the wording of this memorandum that it was written for a minister, probably for Dundas, the Secretary of War. Thus, before coming to a decision on Cochrane's proposal Dundas appears to have been sufficiently interested to seek Banks' opinion. In the event of annexation the Cabinet would understandably need further information and advice on Iceland and Banks was virtually the only Englishman to have any first-hand knowledge of the island.⁶

It is interesting to note that Dundas, before the seizure of the Danish territories in India, had similarly sought information about local conditions and the extent of the Danish trade in India from a London merchant, David Scott, familiar with the Danish settlements there (Feldbaek 1969, 208). Incidentally, Scott and Cochrane were friends (SRO, GD 51/4/340, 23 June 1796, Cochrane to Dundas). The British government was thus clearly contemplating seizing Iceland – and the Faeroes – as a further act of retaliation against recalcitrant Denmark.

Banks' memorandum touched on many of the points Cochrane had made in his memorials. He also described in general terms how he had found Iceland in 1772, saying that 'all ranks appeared unhappy and would . . . be much rejoiced in a change of masters that promised them any portion of liberty'. Banks wrote: 'if it should be thought expedient to seize upon Iceland, either as an object of exchange in the case of a peace, or with intentions to annex it permanently to the Crown of the United Kingdom', a force of five hundred men would be sufficient to 'subdue the island without striking a blow', the Icelanders being 'mild, inoffensive & very timid'.

Banks found little of immediate economic benefit to Britain. Unlike Cochrane he felt the Iceland fisheries could not compete with those of Newfoundland. He agreed that large quantities of fish could be caught, but remarked that salted fish had 'never been a favourite food of the English', and also failed to share Cochrane's enthusiasm for the sulphur mines, doubting that the Iceland sulphur could rival the Italian. Despite this negative opinion of Iceland's resources, Banks managed to advance several reasons for advocating its annexation. It would add to the prestige of England; conquering Iceland and the Faeroes, England would have annexed 'all the respectable islands in northern Europe', which would be 'a proud pre-eminence for the British Isles'. It would be a benevolent gesture; emancipating the poor natives from an 'Egyptian bondage', i.e. the Danes. He agreed with Cochrane on some of the long-term economic advantages: plenty of sailors for the Royal Navy, and control of the potentially important cod and herring fisheries. Thus Banks was in favour of 'the conquest of Iceland', as it would subject the Danes to 'a considerable political humiliation in the eyes of Europe' and would in the future benefit England's trade, revenues and nautical strength (BL, Add. MS 38356, ff. 39–48, 30 January 1801).

The Pitt government, however, failed to take the advice proffered by John Cochrane and Sir Joseph Banks. There is no evidence that it took any tangible steps towards the annexation of Iceland, even though in 1813 Andrew Cochrane-Johnstone was to tell the current Secretary of War, Earl Bathurst, that both Pitt and Dundas had been 'fully impressed with the importance of possessing Iceland . . . ' (PRO, W.O. 1/1129, 11 September 1813, Cochrane-Johnstone to Bathurst). Banks' report had considered the advantages of a British annexation in the light of a humanitarian gesture and a question of enhanced status and prestige. The British statesmen were perhaps more interested in economic benefits, which Banks had emphasised could only be long term. There was clearly no hesitation regarding the seizure of the economically lucrative Danish colonies in the Caribbean and India, but what was the point of saddling Britain with Iceland in 1801?

Another factor could have been the timing of the affair. Banks' memorandum,

written at the very end of January, would have reached the government at a very awkward political time. At the beginning of February, Pitt resigned over the question of Catholic Emancipation. It is thus clear that the Banks' *Remarks concerning Iceland* would have been available for Cabinet consideration in the midst of a government crisis. When the new Addington government was finally completed on 14 March, the threat of the Armed Neutrals was almost over. Nelson proceeded to Copenhagen, where the Danes were decisively beaten on 2 April. The League of Armed Neutrality was dissolved. The occupied Danish colonies were returned. Britain and Denmark were again at peace and thus a British annexation of Iceland no longer an option.

The Hon. John Cochrane died in November 1801, two months after the deaths of his wife and infant son, without achieving his ambition of becoming Earl of Iceland (*Gentleman's Magazine*, lxxi, 1059). He was motivated by self-interest, first by the hopes of acquiring sulphur for the Dundonald chemical works in Scotland and later by gaining fit employment – the governorship of the island with an imposing title. His many efforts to have Iceland annexed to the British Crown were unsuccessful. The government admittedly showed some interest during the period of hostilities in 1801, but as a retaliatory measure only.

Before we turn to Mackenzie, it is necessary to sketch in the historical background during the intervening years between Cochrane's death in 1801 and Mackenzie's first proposal in 1809. The Revolutionary Wars merged into the Napoleonic Wars. In 1807, after the British bombardment of Copenhagen, Denmark entered into an alliance with Napoleon. As in 1801, the Danish colonies in the West Indies and India were promptly seized and the British government again showed interest in annexing Iceland. Lord Hawkesbury, the Home Secretary, officially requested his friend Sir Joseph Banks to gather all the information he could about the current situation in Iceland 'with a view of ascertaining whether . . . Iceland could be secured to His Majesty, at least during the continuance of the present war' (Natural History Museum, Dawson Turner Collections XVII, 29 November 1807, Hawkesbury to Banks). Banks frequently communicated with British ministers during 1807–9, presenting detailed plans for the conquest of Iceland, but the government never took any steps to carry them out.

5. 1809–13: Sir George Steuart Mackenzie's Proposals for the Annexation of Iceland

In the spring of 1809 Sir George Steuart Mackenzie, Scottish baronet and mineralogist, also became an advocate of a British annexation of Iceland. Initially he shared Cochrane's enthusiasm for a military conquest. However, modifying his tactics, he attempted in 1813 to arrange a temporary British takeover of the island with the tacit approval of the Danes.

Mackenzie was noted for his discovery that diamonds were a pure form of carbon, making 'free use of his mother's jewels' in his experiments (*Dictionary of National Biography*, xii, 593–4). His interest in Iceland had been aroused when he befriended a young Icelandic medical student, Olafur Loftsson (Mackenzie 1811, viii–ix), who was travelling on an Icelandic merchant-ship captured by a British warship during

the hostilities of 1807 after the bombardment of Copenhagen, and taken to Stornoway. Loptsson had assured Mackenzie that the Danish government had 'long neglected the island, and kept the inhabitants in great distress'. Mackenzie, like Cochrane earlier, now approached Banks for support, feeling it was 'very desirable for our gracious King to take [Iceland] . . . under his protection'. Some of the island's produce were 'sources of great wealth'. According to Loptsson the Icelanders would 'most gladly place themselves under the care of our sovereign'. Mackenzie had written to Lord Castlereagh, the Secretary for War, proposing that 'a sloop of war shall be sent to take possession'.⁷ He was willing to go to Iceland on a fact-finding mission and like Cochrane had 'hinted' that he would be 'thankful to be employed as governor'. He hoped Banks would 'have the goodness to second my application to Lord Castlereagh, by waiting on his Lordship' at the earliest opportunity (Natural History Museum [NHM], Botany Library, Banks Correspondence, 20 May 1809, Mackenzie to Banks).

Mackenzie's interest in going to Iceland was primarily scientific, and he asked Banks more than once to see Castlereagh to influence him 'in the cause'. There is nothing to suggest that Mackenzie knew of Banks' plans sent to the government in 1801 and 1807. They appear, in other words, to have reached the same conclusion, i.e. the desirability of a British annexation of Iceland, independently. Given Banks' position as the accepted British authority on Iceland and his influence in society, it was natural for the Scottish baronet to approach him. Moreover, Mackenzie, a fellow of the Royal Society, was acquainted with Banks (Carter 1988, 466–7).

Banks told Mackenzie he had already given the government 'the best information' on the situation in Iceland, and in spite of numerous conversations with the King's ministers, had not managed to convince them of the necessity of annexing the island (NHM, Banks Correspondence, Undated May 1809, Banks to Mackenzie). The government did not accept Mackenzie's invitation in 1809, just as it had refused Banks' and Cochrane's before.

In the summer of 1809, a British trading expedition to Iceland, on finding the Danish administration unwilling to permit their trade, seized power in the island. The Danish governor was arrested and Iceland was declared an independent country under the protection of Britain. This so-called 'Revolution' was ended two months later by the intervention of the Royal Navy. This event obliged the British government to state its official policy towards the Danish North Atlantic Islands for the duration of the Napoleonic wars. An Order-in-Council was issued in February 1810 in which the islands were *de facto* taken under British protection though the sovereignty of the king of Denmark was acknowledged. British trade was promoted and a consul was appointed, resident in Iceland, to watch over British commercial interests.

A couple of months later Mackenzie set off for Iceland on a scientific expedition. In October 1811 he published his *Travels in the Island of Iceland During the Summer of the Year 1810* to favourable reviews.⁸ He portrayed the Icelanders as desirous of coming under English rule and felt that Britain had a duty to take formal possession of the island, as the lot of the Icelanders would greatly improve 'under the fostering

care of a benevolent government'. Like Cochrane, he emphasised that the fisheries were 'exuberant and inexhaustible' and he believed the possession of Iceland would not prove 'too burdensome to England' (Mackenzie 1811, 271, 339).

The Order-in-Council had of course excluded the possibility of an annexation of Iceland. Mackenzie, however, continued to take an interest in Iceland, sending letters to the government regarding Icelandic affairs, while using the opportunity to indicate his disagreement with the government's decision 'not to take possession of Iceland (PRO, B.T. 1/64, 21 August 1811, Mackenzie to the Board of Trade).

In the winter of 1812–13 the Anglo-Danish conflict was entering its sixth year. Although Iceland now enjoyed the protection of Britain, the domestic situation was extremely difficult, prompting in the spring of 1813 the publication of a thirty-nine page pamphlet in London entitled: *Memoir on the Causes of the Present Distressed State of the Icelanders and the Easy and Certain Means of Permanently Bettering their Condition*. The author was anonymous, simply calling himself 'an Icelander' and the purpose of the pamphlet was to ask that Iceland be annexed by Britain. This publication had one notable result; it aroused in Sir George Mackenzie 'benevolent feelings towards the poor Icelanders to a pitch never before felt', and he decided to answer the call for help. As in 1809 he turned to Castlereagh, now Foreign Secretary, and offered to go to Iceland to effect the conquest. Mackenzie again sought Banks' support. He insisted his motives were purely humanitarian, refusing remuneration except for expenses. The whole operation would cost 'a mere trifle'. He made no mention this time of his hope of becoming governor, but confessed that he would be 'greatly disappointed' if someone else were sent to Iceland to carry out the annexation (Memorial Library, Rare Book Department, University of Wisconsin, Iceland, the Danish Colonies and the Polar Regions 1772–1818, Banks Letters (MS 3) [Wisconsin], 11 and 16 May 1813, Mackenzie to Banks).

Mackenzie managed to persuade Banks to resume an active role in Icelandic affairs. Banks subsequently sent the government yet another memorandum entitled: *Some Notes relative to the ancient State of Iceland, drawn up with a view to explain its importance as a Fishing Station at the present time, with comparative Statements relative to Newfoundland*. Banks was now in total agreement with Cochrane and may have been drawing upon some of his memorials, that Iceland offered 'the most important advantages as a fishing station'. With the right management the Iceland fisheries could presumably supply Catholic Europe with enough Lenten fish. The disadvantages of the Newfoundland fisheries were pointed out, Banks believing that inevitably and before long the United States would take them over.⁹ He also warned that the Iceland fishery, if well managed by some other nation, would 'soon become a very formidable rival to the United Kingdom' (NHM Dawson Turner Collection XVII, 140–156).

Later that year, Earl Bathurst, now War Secretary, received a lengthy letter from Andrew Cochrane-Johnstone (PRO, W.O. 1/1129, 11 September 1813), brother of the late John Cochrane. Andrew, after an exceptionally unsavoury career, was now a member of Parliament (Cochrane 1983, 180–7). In this letter Andrew suggested 'humbly . . . the policy of taking immediate possession of the island of Iceland in the name of his Britannic Majesty . . .' The memorial was almost entirely plagiarised

from his brother's and discussed the importance of the fisheries and sulphur mines of Iceland for Britain, and the benefits of a reciprocal trade. His main point was to compare, like Banks did, the Newfoundland and Iceland fisheries, much to the favour of the latter. There is little reason to suppose that Bathurst would have taken much notice of a letter from a notorious adventurer. But Banks' memorandum of the summer of 1813 and this letter may have been connected, as Banks was acquainted with the man (Carter 1988, 451). Probably, as his brother before him, Andrew Cochrane-Johnstone entertained hopes of a lucrative post in Iceland.

All of these proposals failed to find favour with the government. But Mackenzie was not one to give up. Iceland simply had to come under British rule – for its own good. Mackenzie decided to see whether the Danes would relinquish their hold on the island temporarily to permit the British government to take possession. Mackenzie set this fantastic and naive plan in motion by turning to the leading Danish merchant in Iceland H.P. Clausen, whose acquaintance he had made in Iceland in 1810 (Mackenzie 1811, 177), and asking him to act as his intermediary with the Danish government. Clausen was to discover whether the Danes would have any objections to England temporarily taking possession of Iceland, as this was the simplest way to help Iceland and save the people from famine (RA, Island og Faeroer, 24 September 1813, Departmentet for de udenlandske anliggender [D.f.u.a.] to King). The Icelanders would be supplied with provisions and their trade and agriculture improved, both entirely at the expense of the English! Mackenzie felt this plan would be to Denmark's advantage and would allow the British to carry out an unselfish and charitable act, as he put it, which was apparently what he envisaged as England's profit in this undertaking.

Mackenzie took care to point out that he was contacting Clausen in his private capacity and that he had absolutely no authorisation from the British government. He said he did not wish to hide from the Danes the fact that he had previously suggested to his government that it take possession of Iceland. He emphasised that he did not regard Iceland as of political importance, but only as an object of pity. Mackenzie claimed to be convinced that when the Danish government understood his arguments they would not oppose his plan. Once the Danes had accepted it, Clausen could bring the proposal to England and then Mackenzie believed the British government would at once take it into consideration (RA, Island og Faeroer, 2 July 1813, Mackenzie to Clausen).

Clausen did approach Rosenkrantz, the Danish Foreign Minister. They agreed that the plan seemed to be motivated entirely by Mackenzie's own wish to become governor of Iceland. Rosenkrantz realised that it would be impossible to prevent Iceland's occupation, if that was the intention. There seems to have been a nagging doubt that Mackenzie had some government backing (RA, Island og Faeroer, 25 September 1813, Clausen to Rosenkrantz).

Rosenkrantz discussed the question with King Frederik and told him that Denmark had no means of preventing what he called such 'a harmful enterprise', the only possibility was to get Clausen to convince the British government that it could derive no benefit from the annexation of Iceland (RA, Island og Faeroer, 24 September

1813, D.f.u.a. to King). Frederik himself had difficulty believing that Mackenzie personally had any hostile intention, as he had sent him his book on Iceland, but agreed that Clausen should go to England to try to prevent a British annexation of Iceland. It was stipulated that owing to the war he could not go in an official capacity, and he was directed to consult the Danish consul and, ironically, obtain Sir Joseph Banks' support (RA, Island og Faeroer, 1 October 1813, King to D.f.u.a. and 7 October 1813, Rosenkrantz to Clausen), whose role as protector of Iceland during the Napoleonic Wars was acknowledged by both Britons and Danes alike. When Clausen reached London he wrote to Banks, saying he was there with Frederik's consent, and that Rosenkrantz relied 'entirely . . . on the continuation of Sir Joseph Banks' generous support' regarding the inhabitants of the Danish North-Atlantic dependencies, hoping that peace would soon be re-established between the two countries (Wisconsin, 12 November 1813, Clausen to Banks). This was the end of the matter.

It seems clear, with hindsight, that as far as their North-Atlantic dependencies were concerned, the Danes had never much to fear from the British. After the war, however, King Frederik sent Mackenzie and Banks personal letters of thanks for helping his Icelandic subjects during the war. Mackenzie received two cases of books, while Banks received three including the *Flora Danica* (RA, Ges.Ark. London III, Indkomme Skrivelser fra D.f.u.a. 1814-17, 17 September 1817, Frederik VI to Mackenzie and Frederik VI to Banks). Thus, ironically, these two British gentlemen, who had energetically plotted to wrest Iceland from the Crown of Denmark during the Napoleonic Wars, were specifically rewarded by the grateful king of Denmark.

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NOTES

¹ These proposals are discussed in detail in Anna Agnarsdottir, 'Great Britain and Iceland 1800-1820' (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, London School of Economics, 1989).

² For example, 1 March 1797, Dundas to the ninth earl of Dundonald, SRO GD 233/111/Transcript 1797, where he says 'there is nothing in my Power, I would not do to assist you and your Family . . . I think I have given you some Proofs of it.'

³ Now called Vieques, and part of Puerto Rico.

- ⁴ Cochrane wrote that Anker had shown him the letter from Schimmelmann. 'These were the words or substance of the letter to my best recollection.'
- ⁵ Derived from various documents in Lbs. 424 fol. Cochrane's information on Iceland was generally accurate. His informant was the well-known Icelandic scholar Grimur Thorkelin. Thorkelin was the discoverer of *Beowulf* and had resided in Britain during the late 1780s, gaining a doctorate at the University of St Andrews. (Many of his papers are preserved at the University of Edinburgh.)
- ⁶ In 1789 John Thomas Stanley, heir to the wealthy baronetcy of Alderley in Cheshire, after two years of study at the University of Edinburgh, chartered a brig and set off from Leith to explore Iceland.
- ⁷ This letter does not seem to be extant.
- ⁸ A second edition was published in 1812. A cheap and revised edition was printed in 1842. See review: Robert Southey in the *Quarterly Review*, VII, 49–92. Excerpts appeared in the *Annual Register* of 1811.
- ⁹ At this point the United States and Britain were at war (the War of 1812).

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