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The Icелander in the Angloworld: Race and rethinking world order in the *fin de siècle* North

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Abstract

This article recovers the international thought of Jón Ólafsson—an Icelandic journalist, transatlantic migrant, and settler colonialist—to illuminate how visions of world order were articulated from the Northern European periphery at the *fin de siècle*. While scholars have emphasized the rise of Anglo-Saxonist ideas—particularly the notion of a racial-imperial union between the United States and Britain—as central to late nineteenth-century reimaginings of global politics, little attention has been paid to how such ideas were adapted beyond the English-speaking world itself. Tracing how Ólafsson reworked this paradigm for a transnational audience, the article argues that he expanded the imagined boundaries of the Angloworld through appeals to what he saw as Teutonic whiteness. The result was what might be termed a ‘Teutonisphere’: a vision of racial solidarity illustrating how great-power narratives were refracted, appropriated, and creatively reconfigured by intellectuals in peripheral regions. Cast as pristine exemplars of the Teutonic race, Icelanders were imagined as ideal agents to rejuvenate Anglo-Saxon colonization from the US frontier and Canadian prairies to the South African veldt.

Keywords: world order; Angloworld; social Darwinism; Teutonic race theory; world-making; Anglo-Saxonism

In 1874, Jón Ólafsson, a twenty-four-year-old Icelandic newspaper editor and liberal activist, approached US President Ulysses S. Grant with a bold proposal to settle Icelanders in the newly acquired territory of Alaska. Ólafsson envisioned Alaska as a site for ‘an Icelandic state’ within the US federal union. To Icelanders, Ólafsson explained that they would enjoy the ‘resurrection’ of ancient Icelandic liberties within the ‘imperial federation’ of the United States. Alaska, he claimed, was occupied only by Indigenous peoples, ‘savages’, who could be excluded from political representation. To President Grant, Ólafsson argued that Icelandic colonization would be a boon to the federal government, advancing the march of the ‘Teutonic race’ across the western hemisphere.¹ Grant agreed that it would be ‘desirable to have Alaska settled, if it can be done, by an industrious, hardy people, accustomed to a rigorous climate as the Icelanders are’.² Led by Ólafsson, a small delegation of Icelanders—sponsored by the Grant administration—landed on Kodiak Island aboard the USS *Portsmouth*, reporting back on the territory’s suitability and publishing a prospectus for potential settlers. The newspaper press in the United States and Britain predicted a bidding war between Canada and the United States for Icelanders, uniquely suited, it

¹Jón Ólafsson, *Alaska: Lýsing á landi og landskostum, ásamt skýrslu innar íslenzku sendinefndar. Um stofnun íslenzkrar nýlendu* (US Government Printing Office, 1875), 39, 46. All translations from Icelandic in this essay are by the author.

²Quoted in Thorstina Walters, *Modern Sagas: The Story of the Icelanders in North America* (North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1953). See also Jay L. Lalonde, ‘The Search for a Promised Land: Three Settlement Plans, Three Agents, and Three Handbooks for Icelandic Migrant-Settlers from 1875’, *Settler Colonial Studies* 14, no. 3 (2024): 314–40.

claimed, to colonizing Arctic regions inhospitable to other whites. According to the *London Evening Standard*, 'the importance to the United States [of the expedition] is very great' because 'that people, and that people only [Icelanders]', the paper declared, 'seem suited to the place [Alaska]', able to displace 'degraded natives' with a 'productive population'.³ Though Ólafsson lobbied Congress in spring 1875, any decision on the matter was postponed. As Ólafsson returned to Iceland, Canada, the Dominion government offering more generous inducements, became the primary destination for Icelandic migrants.⁴

While little came of the US-Icelandic Alaska scheme, it marked the beginning of Ólafsson's sustained engagement with what scholars have termed 'the Angloworld'—the *fin de siècle* discourse of imperial union between the United States and the British empire, grounded in a purportedly shared Anglo-Saxon racial identity. Scholars have shown that this debate drew participants from across the realms of Anglo-Saxon polity, but they have not explored how these ideas were taken up and reimagined beyond its boundaries.⁵ This article uses Ólafsson's writings as a lens for exploring the translation of Anglo-Saxonist thought beyond the Angloworld itself. It advances three interlocking arguments. First, I contend that Ólafsson introduced this debate—and the ideas of its leading protagonists—into a transnational Icelandic setting, spanning Icelandic-speaking communities in Canada, the United States, and Iceland proper. Second, I argue that Ólafsson embedded Angloworld thinking within a broader Darwinian narrative of global transformation: a shift from one egalitarian 'world system' organized around the principle of nationality and nation-states to a new hierarchical order dominated by large racial empires—namely, the Anglo-Saxon empire (in the United States and the British empire) and the Slavic empire (centred in Russia)—driven by the agency of trans-regional migration and settler colonialism. Third, Ólafsson sought to expand the racial boundaries of Anglo-Saxon empire to carve out a privileged place for smaller nations within the emerging order. Scholars have emphasized that Anglo-Saxonism rested on the racial tenets of Teutonism, which traced the alleged superiority of the Anglo-Saxons to inherited 'germs' from the forest-dwelling Teutons of ancient northern Germany and Scandinavia. Yet few have suggested that Teutonism was deployed in the present, a political programme encompassing other branches of the Teutonic race. This article shows that Ólafsson mobilized Teutonic racial ideology as a framework for geopolitical reordering—one that extended the imagined boundaries of the Angloworld on the grounds of supposedly Teutonic whiteness. What resulted might be termed 'the Teutonisphere': a vision of racial solidarity through which marginal nations like Icelanders could assert their place. By recovering Ólafsson's global

³'Alaska', *London Evening Standard*, 19 August 1875, 5.

⁴For recent works on Icelanders in North American settler colonial projects see, Ryan Eyford, *White Settler Reserve: New Iceland and the Colonization of the Canadian West* (University of British Columbia Press, 2016), 3–42; Laurie K. Bertram, *The Viking Immigrants: Icelandic North Americans* (University of Toronto Press, 2020), 32–5; Anne Brydon, 'Dreams and Claims: Icelandic-Aboriginal Interactions in Manitoba Interlake', *Journal of Canadian Studies* 36, no. 2 (2001): 164–90.

⁵'Anglo-world' was coined by Belich to describe 'politically divided but culturally and economically integrated inter-continental system' from 1783–1920. Bell applies it more narrowly to late nineteenth-century advocacy for Anglo-American political union. This essay focuses on this latter strand. James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Angloworld* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 5; Duncan Bell, *Dreamworlds of Race: Empire and the Utopian Destiny of Anglo-America* (Princeton University Press, 2020), 3–6. For accounts employing the concept of Anglosphere or Anglo-Saxonism, see Srđjan Vucetic, *The Anglosphere: The Genealogy of a Racialized Identity in International Relations* (Stanford University Press, 2011), 22–53; Paul Kramer, 'Empires, Exceptions, and Anglo-Saxons: Race and Rule between the British and United States Empires, 1880–1910', *Journal of American History* 88, no. 4 (2002): 1315–53. See also Penelope Edmonds, 'Canada and Australia: On Anglo-Saxon "Oceania", Transcolonial History, and an Interconnected Pacific World', in *Within and Without the Nation: Canadian History as Transnational History*, eds. Karen Dubinsky, Henry Yu, and Adele Perry (University of Toronto Press, 2016), 115–42.

thought, this article illuminates how the Northern European periphery became a site for articulating alternative visions of world order at the *fin de siècle*.⁶

In 1890, Ólafsson crossed the Atlantic for a second time, settling first in Winnipeg's burgeoning Icelandic community before relocating to Chicago, where he worked at the Newberry Library and engaged with Nordic immigrant circles.⁷ Upon his return to Iceland in 1897, Ólafsson assumed the editorship of *Skírnir*, the country's leading foreign affairs journal, published annually since 1827. While this article draws on the full breadth of Ólafsson's writings, particular emphasis is placed on his extended essays in *Skírnir* from 1897 to 1903, where he set out to discern the 'spirit' of 'the contemporary history of the world'. To do so, he drew extensively on leading advocates of Anglo-Saxon unity, namely W. T. Stead, James A. Froude, Edward A. Freeman, Cecil Rhodes, and Joseph Chamberlain. In extended essays on world politics—counting several hundred pages and accompanied by reference lists of international works—he gave pride of place to the major episodes in the shaping of Angloworld discourse, including the Venezuelan border crisis (1895–96), the Spanish-American War and the Anglo-Boer War in South Africa.⁸ To decipher the historical significance of these events, Ólafsson recast *Skírnir* as a venue for applying a 'scientific approach' to world affairs based on Darwin's theory of evolution.⁹

Ólafsson was thus a somewhat unlikely participant in the intellectual reshaping of world order during what Daniel Deudney has termed the 'global industrial period' at the end of the nineteenth century. Recent scholarship has emphasized that the transition from a world structured by empires to one dominated by nation-states was neither inevitable nor uncontested. Rather than unfolding in a linear progression, this shift was marked by rival world views and visions of international order, especially from the margins of the world polity.¹⁰ The *fin de siècle* was a moment of profound reimagination, as technological advances in transportation, communication, and warfare deepened global connectivity and intensified interactions across the planet. These developments seemed to mark the beginning of a new era in world affairs, promising both the means and the momentum for reordering global relations, particularly through new forms of territorialized imperialism that enclosed the vast interiors of continents in North America, Africa, and Asia within state boundaries. Among the various frameworks proposed by contemporary

⁶Teutonism was the belief that Anglo-Saxon superiority stemmed from ancient Teutonic/Germanic racial origins in northern Germany and Scandinavia. While Anglo-Saxons led, Germans and Scandinavians were seen as cognate branches—Scandinavians increasingly reimagined as purer embodiments of this lineage as anti-German sentiment rose. Bell, *Dreamworlds of Race*, 78–86; Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Harvard University Press, 1981), 9–24, 68–77. On related 'Aryanism', see Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2003).

⁷For biographies, see Gils Guðmundsson, *Ævintýramaður: Jón Ólafsson, ritstjóri* (Vaka-Helgafell, 1987); Hjörtur Pálsson, *Alaskafor Jóns Ólafssonar 1874* (Bókaútgáfa Menningarsjóðs, 1975).

⁸See Bell, *Dreamworlds of Race*, 23; Vucetic, *The Anglosphere*, 24.

⁹Though well known to Icelandic historians, Ólafsson's international thought, social Darwinism, and Anglo-Saxonist ideas remain largely unexplored. Scholarship has centred on his liberal politics, biography, and diaspora activities. Ingi Sigurðsson, *Erlendir straumar og islenzk viðhorf: Áhrif fjölpjóðlegra hugmyndastefna á Íslendinga, 1830–1918* (Háskólaútgáfan, 2006); Vilhelm Vilhelmsson, 'Jón Ólafsson ritstjóri og tilvistarkreppa frjálslyndisstefunnar um aldamótin 1900', *Skírnir* 192, no. 2 (2018): 449–72. Kristín Loftsdóttir has explored the ideas of race but does not note Ólafsson's contribution. Kristín Loftsdóttir, 'Shades of Otherness: Representations of Africa in 19th-Century Iceland', *Social Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (2008): 172–86; Kristín Loftsdóttir, 'Pure Manliness: The Colonial Project and Africa's Image in 19th Century Iceland', *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 16, no. 3 (2009): 271–93. Social Darwinism is seen as first introduced to Iceland through eugenics, starting in the early twentieth century, making Ólafsson an early and overlooked conduit. See Unnur B. Karlsdóttir, *Mannkynbætur: Hugmyndir um bætta kynstofna hérlendis og erlendis á 19. og 20. öld* (Sagnfræðistofnun, 1998).

¹⁰On the role of ideas and beliefs in how international and world orders are imagined and constructed, and the role of marginal actors, see Peter Jackson, William Mulligan, and Glenda Sluga, 'Introduction', in *Peacemaking and International Order after the First World War*, eds. Peter Jackson, William Mulligan, and Glenda Sluga (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 9–11; Or Rosenboim, *The Emergence of Globalism: Visions of World Order in Britain and the United States, 1939–1950* (Princeton University Press, 2017); Amitav Acharya, *Constructing Global Order: Agency and Change in World Politics* (University of Cambridge Press, 2018).

thinkers to transcend the constraints of the European state system, Anglo-Saxonism emerged as one of the most prominent—alongside other visions of world government, imperial federations, and regional alliances built around shared linguistic, national, religious, or racial identities.¹¹

What distinguished Ólafsson from better-known ‘global industrialists’ of the *fin de siècle* was a vision of transnational whiteness adapted to the needs of smaller nations. Angloworld discourse, for Ólafsson, offered a response to a vexing problem—the perceived failure of the ‘principle of nationality’, a product of the Revolutions of 1848 and the mid-century proliferation of nation-states. While that principle held that each nation should govern itself, Ólafsson believed that Darwinian evolutionary dynamics had shown that the capacity for civilization and self-government was not granted to all nations. This capacity, which he saw as materializing above all in the ability to settle the global frontiers, was purportedly reserved for certain subset of whites: the Anglo-Saxon descendants of the Teutons, who were locked in a worldwide struggle with Slavic Russia over the terms of the global enclosure. Within this reconfigured international landscape, Ólafsson articulated a survival strategy for smaller nations that went beyond the quest for a nation-state. Drawing on Teutonic racial theories, he elevated Icelanders and their Teutonic kin to a privileged position in the global racial hierarchy. Angloworld theorists had already positioned Iceland at the centre of their Teutonic origin story as the Anglo-Saxon’s ancient Greece—‘a living Pompeii’ where they could rediscover their past. Ólafsson went further, rendering the imagined boundaries of Teutonic whiteness politically explicit in the present. Led by the Anglo-Saxons, a federative empire of the Teutonic race would shield smaller nations from falling victim to alien races. In Ólafsson’s creative formulation, a pristine infusion of Teutonic blood from the High North would redeem an Angloworld that he saw as losing its racial edge, and advance the Anglo-Saxonist project of enclosing the global interiors, from the US frontier and the Canadian Prairies to the South African veldt.

This five-part article begins by tracing Ólafsson’s intellectual development, from his return to Iceland in 1875 through his North American travels in 1890–1897. The second section reconstructs his *Skírnir* essays (1897–1903), examining his critique of the nationality principle and adaptation of Angloworld discourse. The third turns to how Ólafsson paid particular attention to the fate of smaller nations outside the Anglosphere—centred on his analysis of the Anglo-Boer War as a pivotal historical moment. The final two sections examine how Ólafsson and others drew on Teutonic racial theories to expand the imagined boundaries of the Angloworld to encompass related Teutonic nations.

Entering the Angloworld

Ólafsson’s life unfolded at the crossroads of transnational migration, settler colonial expansion, and racial ideology in the late nineteenth century. He participated in many of the global industrial transformations he chronicled. Born in 1850 to a family of priests and officials in Fáskrúðsfjörður in the east of Iceland, Ólafsson was exposed early to international influences. He often joined his father, a local priest, at dinners with French naval officers and their European visitors. At thirteen, he was sent to Reykjavík’s Latin School—a training ground for Iceland’s elite—where he excelled as a poet and student editor before entering political debate. His trajectory soon diverged from that

¹¹Daniel Deudney, *Bounding Power: Republican Security Theory from the Polis to the Global Village* (Princeton University Press, 2007), 215–19; Daniel Deudney, G. John Ikenberry, and Karoline Postel-Vinay, eds., *Debating Worlds: Contested Narratives of Global Modernity and World Order* (Oxford University Press, 2023); Sebastian Conrad and Dominic Sachsenmaier, eds., *Competing Visions of World Order: Global Moments and Movements, 1880s–1930s* (Palgrave, 2007); Patrick O. Cohrs, *The New Atlantic Order: The Transformation of International Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2022); Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men’s Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 49–74.

of his peers, many of whom proceeded to Copenhagen for education in preparation for clerical or civil service careers.¹²

Two features of Ólafsson's early life stand out. On the one hand, his politics were unusually radical. Though Iceland remained under the Danish crown as part of a composite monarchy, the abolition of absolutism in Denmark in 1848 sparked a nationalist movement led by Jón Sigurðsson. The Danish authorities sought to fold Iceland into their new constitutional framework, but a constitutional assembly in 1851 ended in a stalemate after Icelandic delegates refused to accept the jurisdiction of the Danish parliament. As a result, Ólafsson came of age during a period of constitutional ambiguity, which persisted until Iceland's status was formally clarified through legislation in 1871 (*Stöðulögin*) and a constitution 1874 as a special province within the Danish state with legislative and juridical autonomy. Despite this, Icelandic nationalism remained moderate in both tone and tactics. Ólafsson disrupted that consensus in 1870 by publishing a poem in his own newspaper accusing the authorities in Iceland of 'slavish' deference to Denmark. Facing libel charges, he fled to Norway. After the charges were dropped, he returned, only to face further legal trouble after publishing a scathing article about Hilmar Finsen, the highest-ranking official in Iceland, contesting the 1871–1874 constitutional settlement. Convicted of libel, he was sentenced to either a hefty fine or one year in prison, and the newspaper's publication was banned. Unable to pay, he was smuggled out of the country by his brother, a well-known poet and member of parliament, and sailed to Britain, then onward to the United States.¹³

Second, Ólafsson's transnational mobility was quite unusual. While the educated elite received university education in Copenhagen, fewer ventured beyond Denmark, let alone Europe. Arriving in the United States in 1873, Ólafsson was among the first Icelandic migrants in North America, initially settling in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the locus of the nascent Icelandic community in North America. Within a year, he had spearheaded the Alaska colonization scheme, which brought him as far as Kodiak Island on the Pacific. Now recognized as the most prominent spokesman of North American emigration in Iceland, Ólafsson returned to Iceland in 1875, having negotiated his fine down to a third of the original amount—payable with his brother's help. Back in the eastern fjords, he resumed newspaper editing, with two intervening stays in Copenhagen, before being elected to parliament at thirty. He moved to Reykjavík, serving on both the city council and in the *Alþingi* while continuing his editorial work. In 1889, as Icelandic emigration to North America was at its height, he publicly defended emigration against its many critics in Iceland—a stance that ran counter to the prevailing nationalist sentiment. Once again, Ólafsson was found guilty of libel charges. But Icelanders in Canada rallied behind their champion, and, with a job offer in hand, Ólafsson once again left for North America, settling in Winnipeg, Canada, in 1890. There he edited both of the main Icelandic-language newspapers, initially *Lögberg* and then *Heimskringla*, launching a third, *Öldin*, in the meantime.¹⁴

In Canada, Ólafsson joined forces with another progenitor of Icelandic emigration, Sigtryggur Jónasson, who hired him as the editor of *Lögberg*, a liberal newspaper. At the same time as Ólafsson was exploring Alaska as an Icelandic colony in 1874, Jónasson, who was critical of the Alaska scheme, was appointed by the Canadian Dominion government to explore sites in Manitoba for an Icelandic settlement reserve. As Eyford has explained, starting in the 1870s, the Canadian government created such reserves, designated for European ethnic groups, as an integral part of its effort to colonize the Canadian Northwest. 'Desirable settlers' from Northern Europe would displace the Indigenous population as the basis of a transcontinental agricultural empire. Designating Icelanders as 'desirable', the Canadian authorities promised generous subsidies and the choice of a settlement reserve. Jónasson's delegation selected territory on the south-western

¹²Jón Ólafsson, 'Úr endurminningum ævintýramanns', *Iðunn* 1, no. 1 (1915): 50; Jón Ólafsson, 'Úr endurminningum ævintýramanns', *Iðunn* 1, no. 2 (1915): 152.

¹³Jón Jónsson, 'Um Jón Ólafsson', *Iðunn* 3, no. 1 (1917): 101–21; Þorsteinn Gíslason, 'Jón Ólafsson blaðamaður', *Iðunn* 5, no. 1 (1919): 50–74.

¹⁴Guðmundsson, *Ævintýramaður*, 54–76.

part of Lake Winnipeg to the north of the city of Winnipeg, which the government granted, rejecting the pre-existing claims of its Cree, Ojibwe, and Metis inhabitants to their homelands. As almost a quarter of Iceland's population moved to North America between 1870 and 1914, 'New Iceland' became a key destination.¹⁵ Ólafsson became a prominent public figure, prompting the establishment of the Icelandic Festival (*Íslendingadagurinn*) in 1890.¹⁶

Ólafsson's time in North America was pivotal to his intellectual evolution, shifting his outlook from Icelandic nationalism to an Anglo-Saxonist political vision. After returning in 1875, he began advocating for Iceland to model its institutions on those of the United States and the British settler empire. Rather than seeking full autonomy from Denmark, he focused on implementing British-style parliamentarism and looked to Canada as a constitutional model.¹⁷ At the same time, he sought to elevate Iceland's civilizational status through liberty and self-government. Deeply influenced by John Stuart Mill, he translated *On Liberty* into Icelandic in 1885 and promoted political education through lectures and publications.¹⁸ Among his more radical proposals was a constitutional amendment for a citizenship test, inspired by Mill and US state practices, which would determine eligibility not only to vote but also to marry and form households—with high scorers eligible for public office. He urged that Icelandic youth be educated using American textbooks at public expense.¹⁹

Ólafsson's second sojourn in North America marked another inflection point. While he remained committed to the principle of local self-government within a federal framework, his attention now turned more explicitly to race and evolutionary theory, refracted through debates over immigration, eugenics, tariffs, and even US–Canada unification. Charles Darwin replaced John Stuart Mill as his principal guide, especially through the writings of Darwin's interpreters. Thomas Huxley proved particularly influential, prompting Ólafsson to deliver lectures and essays on evolutionary theory. His newspaper *Öldin* published translations of Herbert Spencer, while imperial figures like Goldwin Smith, Cecil Rhodes, and W. T. Stead increasingly appeared in his writings, contributing to a world view more firmly rooted in racial and imperial hierarchies.²⁰

Writing in *Lögberg* and *Öldin*, Ólafsson reported on US and Canadian politics, affirming his preference for decentralized federalism and aligning with the Democratic Party in the United States and the Liberal Party in Canada. He advocated Anglo-Saxon unification, favouring US–Canada federation on the grounds that the American model better protected local autonomy. In travels across the US–Canadian border—from Manitoba and Gimli to the Dakotas, Wisconsin, and Utah—he praised Icelanders' capacity to assimilate into Anglo-Saxon culture, casting them as ideal settler subjects.²¹ Ólafsson's conception of Anglo-American unity increasingly took on a racialized form. He began referring to 'our nation' as including Americans, Canadians, and northern Europeans, warning that immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe was diluting its Anglo-Saxon character.²² Earlier immigrants from 'the best nations'—Britons, Germans, and Scandinavians—had settled open lands, he claimed, but the newer arrivals crowded into cities and undermined civic life. These migrants, he wrote, were 'human trash', calling for immigration

¹⁵Eyford, *White Settler Reserve*, 6. See also, Helgi Skúli Kjartansson og Steinþór Heiðarsson, *Framtíð handan hafs. Vesturfjarir frá Íslandi 1870–1914* (Háskólaútgáfan, 2003).

¹⁶It is still held annually. Jónas Þór and Terry Tergeesen, *Íslendingadagurinn: An Illustrated History* (The Icelandic Festival of Manitoba, 1989), 20–2.

¹⁷Helgi Skúli Kjartansson et al., *Þingræði á Íslandi: Samtíð og saga* (Forlagið, 2011).

¹⁸Jón Ólafsson, *Jafnræði og þekking: Nokkur stjórnfraðileg undirstöðu-atriði um réttan grundvöll sjálfstjórnar* (1880), 21–6; John Stuart Mill, *Um frelsið*, trans. Jón Ólafsson (Hið íslenska þjóðvinafélag, 1886).

¹⁹Ólafsson, *Jafnræði og þekking*, 21–6.

²⁰Jón Ólafsson, 'Breytiþróunar-lögmálið og uppruni líftegundanna. Alþýðleg framsetning', *Öldin*, 1 July 1893, 52–9; *Öldin*, 1 January 1894, 8–13; 'Huxley', *Öldin*, 1 July 1895, 98–101; 'Um líkamsbygginguna. Eftir Herbert Spencer', *Öldin*, 1 June 1894, 81–5.

²¹*Ibid.*; Jón Ólafsson, 'Frá Ameríku', *Sunnanfari*, 1 January 1898, 1–22.

²²For Canadian racial perceptions of Icelanders, see Eyford, *White Settler Reserve*, 22–43. For popular perceptions of Icelanders as Eskimos, see Bertram, *The Viking Immigrants*, 42–4.

restrictions to preserve what he termed ‘the noble home of liberty’.²³ His concern for the racial profile of Canada and the United States extended into support for eugenics. While he accepted the Darwinian principle that the strong would prevail, he also advocated state intervention: those with hereditary illness should be sterilized, and marriage regulated by public health boards.²⁴ His clear-cut racism did not translate into economic nationalism, however. He condemned tariffs for disrupting Anglo-American integration, encouraging urban industrialization and low-wage labour from Southern Europe rather than channelling Teutonic settlers to the frontier. For Ólafsson, the imperial mission was to settle ‘new interiors’ such as South Africa—not to absorb Europe’s urban poor.²⁵

Interrogating the Angloworld

Ólafsson returned permanently to Iceland in the spring of 1897 aboard the *Laura*, a Glasgow steamer. He assumed editorial control of *Skírnir*, the country’s leading foreign affairs journal. Published annually, *Skírnir* provided him with a platform to elaborate on world developments in the form of extended analytical essays. Given the proliferation of newspapers covering world events, Ólafsson insisted that *Skírnir* had to move beyond journalism or yearly summaries. To remain relevant, he argued, the journal needed a more rigorous and interpretive approach. He announced his intention to adopt a ‘scientific’ method for studying ‘the contemporary history of the world’. Central to this vision was Darwin’s theory of evolution, which Ólafsson praised as ‘the greatest intellectual achievement of the century’. Just as it had transformed the natural sciences, Darwinism, he believed, should be applied to history, sociology, and international politics. In *Skírnir*, he set out to ‘apply’ evolutionary theory as a conceptual tool for tracing the trajectory of global affairs.²⁶

Ólafsson’s timing was impeccable. Over the following six years, he closely engaged with contemporary debates about Anglo-American union, embedding them within a broader geopolitical analysis of world order. He drew on a wide array of sources advocating various forms of Anglo-Saxon condominium, including imperialists like Cecil Rhodes and Andrew Carnegie; political figures such as Joseph Chamberlain, Theodore Roosevelt, and William Gladstone; and scholars including James A. Froude, James Bryce, and Edward A. Freeman. Especially influential were the writings of journalist and editor W. T. Stead, along with key Anglophone periodicals like the *North American Review*, *Review of Reviews*, and *Fortnightly Review*.²⁷ Interpreting these sources through a Darwinian framework, Ólafsson depicted the patterns and actors of international order undergoing profound change through a struggle for survival in which stronger races and empires triumphed over weaker ones.²⁸ The established world of sovereign nation-states was, in his view, giving way to a new geopolitical order dominated by vast, transcontinental empires. While the former had been mostly European in scope and animated by normative ideals such as the equal right of nationalities to self-government, the emerging order was global, hierarchical, and governed by force. Crucially, these imperial blocs were not defined by shared nationality but by race. Where once many nations claimed sovereignty, global power was now increasingly

²³Óldin, 7 October 1891, 1–2; Ólafsson, ‘Frá Ameríku’, 1–22.

²⁴Óldin, 18 November 1891, 2–3.

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶Jón Ólafsson, ‘Tíðindi frá útlöndum 1901’, *Skírnir* 76 (1901): 30.

²⁷Jón Ólafsson, ‘Tíðindi frá útlöndum 1902’, *Skírnir* 77 (1902): 3–50; Jón Ólafsson, ‘Tíðindi frá útlöndum 1901’, *Skírnir* 76 (1901): 25–64; Jón Ólafsson, ‘Tíðindi frá útlöndum 1900’, *Skírnir* 75 (1900): 19–52; Jón Ólafsson, ‘Tíðindi frá útlöndum’, *Skírnir* 74 (1899): 24–69; Jón Ólafsson, ‘Tíðindi frá útlöndum 1898’, *Skírnir* 73 (1898): 20–68; Jón Ólafsson, ‘Frá öðrum löndum 1897’, *Skírnir* 72 (1897): 1–31; Jón Ólafsson, ‘Frá öðrum löndum’, *Skírnir* 71 (1896): 27–64.

²⁸On defining international order see Jackson, Mulligan, and Sluga, ‘Introduction’, 2–11.

consolidated within the racialized empires of the Anglo-Saxons (embodied by the British empire and the United States) and the Slavs (represented by the Russian empire).²⁹

Ólafsson attributed the emergence of a new world order to the failure of ‘the principle of nationality’. In his view, this marked a decisive rupture with the early nineteenth century, a period when no single power dominated global population, wealth, or influence.³⁰ Subsequent decades witnessed the political awakening of nations and the proliferation of nation-states, with the 1848 Revolutions serving as the high-water mark of ‘the national idea’, or ‘the consciousness of the rights of nations, the smaller as much as the larger’ to govern themselves within an ethnically bounded polity. The ‘nationality principle’, Ólafsson admitted, had been a religious idea for himself and many of his contemporaries who came of age in the wake of the 1848 Revolutions. Though many movements suffered initial setbacks, most European nations had, within several decades, achieved parliamentary forms of government.³¹

But Ólafsson believed that this vision of continental Europe united under the principle of nationality had already been irreparably eroded by new evolutionary dynamics. What had seemed ‘a once religious idea’ was now, he argued, little more than ‘a nice superstition’, rendered ‘obsolete’ by the harsh realities of global competition.³² He dismissed the ‘Latin nations’ of Europe—Italy, Spain, and Portugal—as ‘dying states’ in ‘steep decline’. Even France, once a great power, was losing ground and, in his view, falling increasingly under Russian influence—along with Austria, Hungary, the Balkans, and the Ottoman empire. The fate of Greece, placed under direct financial supervision by the dominant powers, prefigured what he believed awaited other ‘disorderly states’ like Italy and Spain. Although Ólafsson initially placed hope in a resurgent Germany, he quickly reversed course. Germany’s industrial strength would no doubt continue to grow, but he concluded that it, too, was in decline as a ‘world power’.³³

In several *Skírnir* essays, Ólafsson explained that ‘recent experience has shown that there are no small difficulties involved in governing nations without calamity when representative assemblies tie the hands of rulers’. Newly enfranchised publics, he argued, had ‘not been capable of handling the responsibility of governing within the bounds of reason’. In some countries, the executive was re-establishing absolutist powers. Elsewhere, parliaments produced budget deficits, infringed civil liberties, and failed to promote industry and culture. Majorities oppressed minorities, while capital and labour corrupted decision-making. In France, Austria, and Hungary, legislative paralysis threatened national survival. Across Europe, nations either empowered authoritarian leaders or fragmented their votes to the point of governmental collapse. Marking the fiftieth anniversary of the 1848 Revolutions, Ólafsson lamented that ‘it becomes clearer by the day that the ability of the people to participate in their own government had not lived up to the hopes’.³⁴

For Ólafsson, Anglo-Saxonism offered an answer to why Europeans, despite achieving self-government, lagged behind Britain and the United States in power and civilizational development. He traced modern self-rule to the French Revolution’s ideal of universal equality—‘a totally new idea’ in 1789. But while the Revolution promised political rights for all, Ólafsson argued this was factually mistaken: not all were equally capable of self-government. Democracy was not a natural right, according to this argument, but a civilizational achievement requiring education, culture, and historical development. Without these foundations, democratic forms produced dysfunction and elite manipulation. He pointed to Bonapartism as a case in point. Many nations, he warned, had blindly copied Anglo-Saxon constitutions—products of long organic evolution—without adapting them to their own political maturity.³⁵

²⁹Ólafsson, ‘Frá öðrum löndum 1897’, 21–3; ‘Tíðindi frá útlöndum 1898’, 22–5.

³⁰Ólafsson, ‘Tíðindi frá útlöndum 1900’, 25.

³¹Ólafsson, ‘Tíðindi frá útlöndum 1901’, 32.

³²*Ibid.*, 32, 37.

³³Ólafsson, ‘Frá öðrum löndum 1897’, 12, 5–14.

³⁴Ólafsson, ‘Tíðindi frá útlöndum 1898’, 21; ‘Frá öðrum löndum 1897’, 18.

³⁵Ólafsson, *Jafnræði og þekking*, 3–18.

Like many ‘global industrialists’ of his time, then, Ólafsson believed the European state-system had become obsolete. But for him, the core problem was not simply its anarchical structure amid growing, technologically driven global interdependence.³⁶ Rather, European nations had failed the civilizational test: they had proven unable to reconcile democratic representation with responsible governance and personal liberty, or to cultivate industry, commerce, education, and culture—let alone pursue effective colonial expansion. By the 1890s, Ólafsson increasingly linked the capacity for liberty and civilization to a specific racial heritage. In his view, only a handful of nations—primarily the Anglo-Saxons and the Nordic peoples—possessed the qualities necessary for self-government. Even the Germans and Danes fell short. Liberty and self-government, he concluded, was not a universal political form, but one rooted in racial difference.³⁷

For Ólafsson, the inability to settle territories beyond Europe was the clearest marker of national decline. As a distinct modality of imperial expansion, settler colonialism, distinct from empires of alien rule like British India, stood at the heart of his geopolitical analysis. It was supposedly the crucible where liberty and civilization advanced through the displacement of Indigenous peoples and the founding of self-governing, racially defined societies across the globe.³⁸ In an era of steamships, telegraphs, and railroads, settler colonialism tested a nation’s civilizational capacity. In this, he echoed Angloworld thinkers, who reimagined settler colonies as key laboratories of imperial modernity.³⁹ Ólafsson’s account of Germany illustrates how closely settler colonial capacity was linked with geopolitical status. Lacking new European territories, its future depended on colonial expansion. Ólafsson initially believed German settlers would overpower Indigenous populations in Africa and South America, but soon judged Germany’s effort a failure as its colonies remained unprofitable and its bureaucracy too costly. Germans had no stomach for the work of settling distant territories—with the exception of soldiers and bureaucrats, spreading tyranny rather than liberty and civilization. To resolve the tension with his Teutonic ideals, Ólafsson claimed modern Germans had deviated from their racial heritage—rendering them ‘not yet capable of liberty’.⁴⁰

With the decline of the nation-state model, Ólafsson envisioned a world divided between two dominant racial empires. These rival formations—the land-based Slavic empire and the sea-based Anglo-Saxon one—were engaged in a global contest to ‘divide up the world’. To dramatize this land versus sea bifurcation of global power, which was only becoming integral to geopolitical analysis in this period,⁴¹ Ólafsson drew on the medieval Icelandic *Orkneyingasaga*, which recounts the Norse settlement of the Orkney Islands. He invoked the mythic figures of Nór and Gór, brothers who searched for their lost sister, Góí. Nór journeyed by land, while Gór became a sea-king, claiming territory along coastlines and across oceans. In Ólafsson’s analogy, the Slavs inherited the path of Nór, expanding across the Eurasian landmass, while the Anglo-Saxons followed Gór’s legacy, asserting dominance over continents and islands through maritime power.⁴²

The Anglo-Saxons, in Ólafsson’s view, constituted the world’s pre-eminent power. Their dominion spanned more territory and encompassed more people than any other empire, extending across the entire Western Hemisphere (North and South America), the Southern

³⁶See Deudney, *Bounding Power*, 215.

³⁷Ólafsson, ‘Tíðindi frá útlöndum 1902’, 8–11.

³⁸On settler colonialism, see Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2010); Caroline Elkins and Susan Pedersen, ‘Settler Colonialism’, in *Settler Colonialism in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Caroline Elkins and Susan Pedersen (Routledge, 2005), 1–20.

³⁹Duncan Bell, *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (Princeton University Press, 2020), 32–47.

⁴⁰Ólafsson, ‘Frá öðrum löndum 1897’; Ólafsson, ‘Tíðindi frá útlöndum 1898’, 21; Ólafsson, ‘Tíðindi frá útlöndum 1900’, 26. On modern Germans’ lack of Teutonic credentials, see Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860–1914* (Allen & Unwin, 1980).

⁴¹See Mackinder, Halford, ‘The Geographical Pivot of History’, *The Geographical Journal* 23, no. 4 (1904): 421–37.

⁴²Ólafsson, ‘Tíðindi frá útlöndum 1898’, 21–2, 41.

Hemisphere (including Australia and most of Africa ‘from Cairo to the Cape’), and the Indian subcontinent. The United States had entered what Ólafsson described as the ‘global game of chess’ among the great powers through its occupation of the Philippines, marking its expansion into South-East Asia.⁴³ If the Anglo-Saxons constituted the vanguard of ‘world civilization’, the Slavs, in Ólafsson’s account, were ‘half-civilized’ brutes (or ‘half-monsters’). The Anglo-Saxons, divided between the United States and Britain, embodied liberty, education, and self-government. In contrast, the Slavs, consolidated within the sprawling Russian empire, posed their greatest threat. While the Anglo-Saxons had developed what Ólafsson called the freest political systems in history, the Slavs remained under the autocratic rule of the tsars. Ólafsson made this claim despite noting that only 60 million of the 400 million subjects of Britain lived under government of their own consent. The great majority were ‘coloured’ peoples who did not have any share in their government. In a language invoking Kipling’s ‘white man burden’, which he cited in other contexts, it was ‘a heavy burden for the white 60 million to govern the 340 million’ who Ólafsson did not deem capable of self-government.⁴⁴

Ólafsson was not the first to introduce Anglo-Saxonist ideas into Icelandic intellectual life. His predecessor as editor of *Skírnir*, Jón Stefánsson, also expressed admiration for the expansionist vision of the Anglo-Saxon world. While completing a PhD in English literature at the University of Copenhagen, Stefánsson engaged extensively with leading proponents of imperial federation. In 1888, he highlighted the growing popularity of schemes like the Imperial Federation League, which promoted the political unification of Britain and its settler colonies ‘across all the oceans’. Writing in the *North American Review* the following year, Stefánsson endorsed Gladstone’s vision of a *universitas hominum*—a global commonwealth morally and intellectually led by the Anglo-Saxons. He situated Gladstone’s work alongside J. R. Seeley’s *Expansion of England*, James A. Froude’s *Oceana*, and Charles Dilke’s *Greater Britain*, ultimately rejecting Dilke’s fear that this ‘enormous state’ was destined for collapse. Yet Stefánsson wrote mainly about Britain and its settler colonies, and did not entertain ideas about the place of Iceland or the Nordic nations within the Anglo-American sphere.⁴⁵

By contrast, Ólafsson’s analysis fully embraced the central tenets of *fin-de-siècle* Angloworld discourse, advancing one of its most ambitious expressions of Anglo-Saxon unity. The idea of a unified Anglo-America was far from self-evident. Since the fracturing of the British empire in North America, relations between the United States and Britain had long been marked by tension. Historians have shown that this animosity began to ease in the final decades of the nineteenth century, giving way to new visions of transatlantic cooperation.⁴⁶ More recently, scholars such as Duncan Bell have examined the intellectual foundations of these shifts, emphasizing how ideas of Anglo-American rapprochement were often framed in racial or linguistic terms, imagining a global order led by a united Anglo-Saxon people.⁴⁷

Ólafsson placed particular emphasis on the racial fraternity of Britons and Americans, portraying them as ‘racial brethren’ bound by common blood, language, institutions, and culture.⁴⁸ This sense of shared racial identity lay at the heart of Angloworld thought. Yet within this discourse, thinkers disagreed about how far integration should go. Some advanced minimalist proposals for enhanced political and economic cooperation; others called for formal geopolitical alliances. The most ambitious advocated for a transatlantic federation—either through shared

⁴³*Ibid.*, 21–2; ‘Tíðindi frá útlöndum 1900’, 55.

⁴⁴Ólafsson, ‘Frá öðrum löndum 1897’, 3; ‘Tíðindi frá útlöndum 1900’, 25–6.

⁴⁵See Jón Stefánsson in *Skírnir* 65 (1891): 22; *Skírnir* 63 (1889): 32; *Skírnir* 62 (1888): 18–22.

⁴⁶See Stuart Anderson, *Race and Rapprochement: Anglo-Saxonism and Anglo-American Relations, 1895–1904* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1981); Iestyn Adams, *Brothers across the Ocean* (I. B. Tauris, 2005); Bradford Perkins, *The Great Rapprochement: England and the United States, 1895–1914* (Atheneum, 1968); R. G. Neale, *Great Britain and United States Expansion 1898–1900* (Michigan State University Press, 1966).

⁴⁷Bell, *Dreamworlds of Race*, 4.

⁴⁸‘Tíðindi frá útlöndum 1898’, 20–1; ‘Tíðindi frá útlöndum 1900’, 25.

citizenship or outright political unification. Moderate advocates included Thomas A. Freeman, Theodore Roosevelt, Joseph Chamberlain, Arthur Balfour, and Charles Dilke, while more radical integrationists such as Andrew Carnegie, Cecil Rhodes, and W. T. Stead envisioned a fully merged Anglo-Saxon empire.⁴⁹

Ólafsson aligned himself firmly with the latter vision, predicting not only formal unification, but insisting it was essential to 'the future of the world for global progress'. 'A formal merger into one empire in due course, even sooner than most realize', was a precondition for Britons and Americans to fulfil their destiny as 'the omnipotent supnation of the world'.⁵⁰ For Ólafsson, recent events had accelerated this process. The Venezuelan border crisis had demonstrated the value of Anglo-American arbitration under a shared legal framework. The Spanish-American War had drawn them even closer, with Britain's implicit support helping secure US victory by threatening any power that sought to aid Spain with full-blown support for the United States in return. Their unification was good news because 'in their hands lies the future of world-civilization and human progress'. In the aftermath, joint commissions worked to resolve remaining disputes between the two powers in Canada, Newfoundland, and Alaska. Yet this merger would not take the form of the United States rejoining the British empire. Like W. T. Stead, Ólafsson believed that Britain and its settler colonies would enter the US federal system, which had become the political, economic, and even cultural centre of the Anglo-Saxon world.⁵¹

Ólafsson was also more pessimistic than many of his Anglophone contemporaries about the consequences of such a union. He harboured no illusions that Anglo-Saxon racial unity would bring lasting peace.⁵² On the contrary, the union was, in his eyes, a necessary bulwark against the inevitable advance of the so-called 'Slavic brutes', whose rise supposedly posed a civilizational threat. The Slavs were poised to rise to challenge the Anglo-Saxons through their control over vast portions of the Eurasian continent. Russia's construction of a transcontinental railway had enabled the settlement of fertile Eurasian lands—mirroring the Anglo-Saxon colonization of North America. While Ólafsson was puzzled by Russia's ability for settler colonization—after all, they had neither the liberty or civilization he deemed necessary—he concluded that Russian settlers would soon press into the Asian steppes, Mongolia, and China, competing directly with Anglo-Saxon expansion in India and the Pacific. If the Anglo-Saxons were the most educated and economically advanced race, the Slavs, Ólafsson warned, commanded the largest armies—whose mobility, now enhanced by railways, would further their geopolitical ascent. Russia's growing influence in the Balkans, its domination of France, and its designs on Austria, Germany, and the collapsing Ottoman empire, positioned it to claim the 'corpse of the dying man'. Against this backdrop, in his view, only a unified Anglo-Saxon polity could hope to preserve civilization and liberty in the coming global contest.⁵³

Smaller nations and racial empires

While Ólafsson echoed many of the key ideas advanced by proponents of Anglo-Saxon unity, he also departed from them in crucial ways—most notably by foregrounding the precarious fate of smaller nations within the emerging world order. His account can be read as a reflection on the ways in which the great powers were increasingly overwhelming and determining the destinies of weaker nations. Ólafsson wove recent international events—such as the Venezuelan border dispute, Greco-Turkish War of 1897, the Anglo-Egyptian War of 1882, the Spanish-American War, and the Anglo-Boer War—into a broad Darwinian narrative of global transformation. These

⁴⁹Bell, *Dreamworlds of Race*, 2–4.

⁵⁰Ólafsson, 'Tíðindi frá útlöndum 1901', 31–2.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 31–2. See W. T. Stead, *The Americanization of the World* (H. Markley, 1902).

⁵²Bell, *Dreamworlds of Race*, 4–8.

⁵³Ólafsson, 'Frá öðrum löndum 1897', 3; 'Tíðindi frá útlöndum 1900', 25–6.

episodes illustrated the accelerating transition from a world of many nations to a few racial empires. For Ólafsson, they provided stark evidence of how the great powers were subjugating weaker nations to their will—whether through US interventions in Latin America and the Philippines, British imperial expansion in Africa, or British and Russian encroachments in Europe.

Taken together, these developments raised ‘grave concerns’ about ‘the future of smaller and less powerful nations of the world’. In his view, the escalation of the international struggle for survival was progressively ‘eras[ing] the borders of states and nationalities’. As ‘the struggle for existence is becoming high pitched’, he argued, ‘the smaller nations’ were no longer ‘viable as independent nations’.⁵⁴ No rights or laws could protect them against brute force, ‘the only force that truly governs the world today’.⁵⁵ Even larger ‘European nations’, such as Italy and Spain, were becoming ‘the client of one of the two great empires’ while others faced the prospect of being ‘completely effaced’.⁵⁶ In this emerging geopolitical landscape, the continued existence of smaller nations would depend not on legal guarantees but on ‘the mere grace of the great powers’.⁵⁷ Ólafsson favourably quoted W. T. Stead’s assessment in the wake of the Greco-Turkish War that the great powers would act as ‘world policemen’ that ‘no nation [would] dare to disobey’.⁵⁸

The Anglo-Boer War, which raged in South Africa from 1899 to 1902, tied together Ólafsson’s concerns about the fate of smaller nations with the necessity of the settler colonial march of the Anglo-Saxon race. Ólafsson drew on newspaper reports and works such as Froude’s *Oceana*, Doyle’s *The Great Boer War*, and Bryce’s *Impressions of South Africa*. For Ólafsson, the conflict served as a laboratory for observing how small nations were crushed beneath larger racial formations, and how they might adapt.⁵⁹

Ólafsson’s views on the Anglo-Boer War were marked by a deep paradox. On the one hand, he saw South Africa as the next hotspot in the global clash of imperial expansion. By the 1890s, his geopolitical gaze had shifted decisively toward the Southern Hemisphere. With the North American frontier enclosed, Ólafsson deemed it imperative that Africa become the next great arena for Anglo-Saxon settler colonialism. The alternative—unchecked urban population growth and allegedly ‘inferior’ immigration in North American cities—risked leaving vast world regions open to conquest by rival powers. In this context, Ólafsson expressed support for Cecil Rhodes—whom he described as ‘a great man’ and ‘the Napoleon of South Africa’—and endorsed his vision of creating a United States of South Africa under Anglo-Saxon domination. Through the chartered British South Africa Company, Rhodes had already secured much of the territory stretching from Cape Colony to Lake Tanganyika—a region larger than the British Isles combined. Ólafsson highlighted Rhodes’s vision of creating an empire of self-governing settler states in Southern Africa, federated under British imperial leadership, and ultimately integrated into a broader Angloworld. In this light, he portrayed the conquest of the Boer republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State as both inevitable and desirable. The completion of the Cape-to-Cairo railway would, in his view, cement British hegemony over the continent and ensure its alignment with Anglo-Saxon global leadership.⁶⁰

Yet on the other hand, Ólafsson’s sympathies in the Boer War lay firmly with the Boers themselves. Consistent with his broader political instincts—evident also in his writings on US and Canadian politics, where he typically sided with states and provinces against federal overreach—he framed the conflict as a struggle against metropolitan encroachment on the rights of white settler self-government. For Ólafsson, the Boers were Europeans of unimpeachable racial pedigree.

⁵⁴ Ólafsson, ‘Tíðindi frá útlöndum 1901’, 31.

⁵⁵ Ólafsson, ‘Tíðindi frá útlöndum 1899’, 27.

⁵⁶ Ólafsson, ‘Tíðindi frá útlöndum 1898’, 22.

⁵⁷ Ólafsson, ‘Tíðindi frá útlöndum 1900’, 25. ‘Tíðindi frá útlöndum 1899’, 27.

⁵⁸ Ólafsson, ‘Frá öðrum löndum 1897’, 9.

⁵⁹ Ólafsson, ‘Frá öðrum löndum 1896’, 7, 33–43; ‘Frá öðrum löndum 1897’, 9; Ólafsson, ‘Tíðindi frá útlöndum 1899’; Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Great Boer War* (Smith, Elder and Co., 1900).

⁶⁰ Ólafsson, ‘Frá öðrum löndum 1896’, 36; ‘Tíðindi frá útlöndum 1899’, 28–58.

He traced their lineage to Teutonic peoples who had migrated to the Netherlands, and from there to South Africa in search of freedom from Spanish Habsburg tyranny. Once in Africa, they had, in his account, swiftly established control over Indigenous populations. The Boers were later joined by French Huguenots—whom Ólafsson praised as ‘the best stock available in France’. While this diluted their strictly Teutonic profile, the shared bond of Protestant religion facilitated their integration, producing what Ólafsson regarded as noble experiments in white settler self-government. He further traced a long history of British interference, charting repeated episodes of imperial encroachment from the eighteenth century onward, and the Boer migrations deeper into the South African interior as they sought to preserve their autonomy against expanding British rule.⁶¹

Ólafsson was sharply critical of British interference in the self-governing Boer republics, focusing above all on the abolition of slavery after 1833. He justified the Boers’ reliance on enslaved labour as suited to the African climate and Africans’ alleged aptitude for hard work. Within their ‘democratic republics’, he defended Boer exclusion of Africans from citizenship and supported restrictions on immigrant voting rights. Echoing Froude, Ólafsson condemned Britain for siding with Africans and casting the Boers as ‘tyrants and robbers’. He argued that abolition had been imposed too abruptly, disrupting a supposedly benevolent system where, he claimed, slaves were apparently treated well and non-enslaved Africans remained subject to beneficial control. British policy, he contended, had derailed the ‘civilization’ of Africans under white rule, oppressing what he called ‘the most dutiful settlers in recorded history’.⁶²

Ólafsson attributed the immediate causes of the Boer War, which broke out in 1899, to escalating British imperial encroachments. He explained that the Boers had sought to preserve their national character and republican institutions by excluding both Africans and ‘foreigners’ of European descent from political rights. While Europeans enjoyed full legal protections—denied to Africans—they were barred from voting until after eleven years of residence. This exclusion, Ólafsson argued, was crucial because the Transvaal and Orange Free State were witnessing a massive influx of foreigners, particularly Britons drawn by the prospect of exploiting local natural resources. Moreover, while the Boers remained an agricultural people, trade and industry in the towns was largely controlled by the British. Excluding foreigners from political representation thus served to prevent the Boers from being demographically and politically overwhelmed within their own state. In Ólafsson’s view, these population movements were not merely spontaneous, but part of a deliberate British strategy of imperial expansion. Backed by the British government and Cecil Rhodes’s South Africa Company, thousands of English settlers migrated into the Transvaal and soon began demanding full citizenship rights.⁶³

The Boers, led by President Paul Kruger, protested that granting such rights would quickly give the English a political majority, strip the Boers of control over their republic, and pave the way for British annexation. Ólafsson sympathized with the Boer position, portraying their efforts to preserve national autonomy as both legitimate and necessary. However, under pressure from the British government and Rhodes’s company, demands for English suffrage continued to mount. When negotiations with the Kruger government collapsed, the South Africa Company and English settler leaders in the Transvaal incited a rebellion. The Company intended to provoke a crackdown that could then be used as a pretext for full-scale British intervention. Although the Boers succeeded in pushing back British forces initially, the Company and British settlers continued to agitate for immediate suffrage—fuelling tensions that soon erupted into all-out war by the end of 1899.⁶⁴

Through the Boers’ spirited resistance to British imperial forces, Ólafsson believed that their national character had been vindicated. Yet even a ‘civilized’ nation, he concluded, could not

⁶¹Ólafsson, ‘Frá öðrum löndum 1896’, 36; ‘Tíðindi frá útlöndum 1899’, 28–58.

⁶²Ólafsson, ‘Tíðindi frá útlöndum 1900’, 28–35; ‘Tíðindi frá útlöndum 1899’, 28–58.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 47.

⁶⁴Ólafsson, ‘Tíðindi frá útlöndum 1900’, 28–34; ‘Tíðindi frá útlöndum 1899’, 28–58.

ultimately defend itself against imperial encroachment in the new age of technological innovation. Like many Angloworld thinkers, Ólafsson was deeply fascinated by the accelerating transformations in transportation, communication, and warfare—forces he saw as key drivers of imperial unification and expansion. Railways, steamships, and telegraph cables had compressed space and time: in practical terms, he observed, Pretoria and Reykjavík were now closer to London than many towns within their own respective countries. Such technological developments rendered resistance by smaller nations increasingly futile.⁶⁵

Despite his sympathy for the Boers, Ólafsson ultimately judged British victory to be morally justified. Just as he narrated the broader geopolitical shift from a world of nations to one of empires in evolutionary terms, so too did he apply this logic to morality itself. Drawing on evolutionary theorists such as Thomas Huxley, Ólafsson argued that morality and human values were contingent—historically conditioned rather than rooted in universal truths.⁶⁶ In earlier times, the right of small nationalities like the Boers to self-determination might have represented the highest moral law. But the Darwinian struggle for survival had revealed new imperatives: the integration of smaller nations into larger racial empires was now the path of progress. To act morally, in this new evolutionary age, meant accepting the necessity of Anglo-Saxon expansion as a civilizational force. Ólafsson did, however, fault British methods, not their ultimate goal. He argued that a more enlightened approach—offering the Boers equal terms and the same benefits as other settler colonies—would likely have led them to voluntary union.⁶⁷

Expanding the Angloworld

If the rights of smaller nationalities could no longer stand in the way of Anglo-Saxon domination, Ólafsson argued, they had to adopt new survival strategies. In this emerging world order, smaller nations would need to ‘inculcate themselves with wisdom, composure and self-denial in their intercourse with the great powers’.⁶⁸ Their best strategy, he contended, was to ‘perceive, before it is too late, which one of the powers it would be better to belong to, and retain some autonomy’.⁶⁹ This required abandoning the national lens in favour of a racial one. Related peoples, Ólafsson urged, should willingly subordinate themselves to larger racial-political units: ‘Related nationalities must combine and merge into larger entities if the nations are to survive in the struggle for existence.’ The alternatives were to ‘disappear as free federative members into larger states—or become the prey and conquest of alien races’. Only ‘the nations which understand this fact and have the wisdom and energy to accept it will have a future; the other will not’.⁷⁰

To advance the case that Icelanders—and the Scandinavian peoples more broadly—should merge with the Anglo-Saxons, Ólafsson drew on the categories of contemporary Teutonic race theorists, particularly Edward A. Freeman, Regius Professor of History at the University of Oxford. Freeman, a leading proponent of Teutonic racial theory, divided humanity into distinct racial formations and attributed differences in civilization, wealth, and power to their innate characteristics. Citing Freeman approvingly, Ólafsson reported that ‘the white races’, or ‘Aryans’, were uniquely capable of civilization. In contrast, the ‘coloured races’ were deemed as ‘inferior species’, though he acknowledged distinctions among them. The ‘yellow peoples’ of East Asia, especially the Japanese, were the best among the non-white races, while Africans were allegedly the lowest.⁷¹ Building on mid-century Anglo-Saxonist thought, Freeman’s ‘comparative politics’ entailed tracing the institutional and civilizational variations among the descendants of the

⁶⁵Ólafsson, ‘Tiðindi frá útlöndum 1900’, 16–21.

⁶⁶Bell, *Dreamworlds of Race*, 167–9.

⁶⁷Ólafsson, ‘Tiðindi frá útlöndum 1901’, 32, 32–43; ‘Tiðindi frá útlöndum 1900’, 25–6.

⁶⁸Ólafsson, ‘Tiðindi frá útlöndum 1901’, 31.

⁶⁹Ólafsson, ‘Tiðindi frá útlöndum 1898’, 22.

⁷⁰Ólafsson, ‘Tiðindi frá útlöndum 1901’, 31.

⁷¹Ólafsson, ‘Tiðindi frá útlöndum 1902’, 8–11.

broader Aryan race. In Freeman's hierarchy, the Greeks and Romans had once been supreme, but in the modern age, the Teutons—encompassing the Anglo-Saxons and their Germanic kin—had assumed this mantle of racial and civilizational leadership.⁷²

A key reason for Anglo-Saxon superiority, according to Freeman—and embraced by Ólafsson—was the alleged purity of their Teutonic bloodline. As Teutons migrated from Germany and Scandinavia across Europe, their bloodlines became diluted; in Britain, Freeman argued, Teutonic stock largely displaced pre-existing populations. The English—and their American descendants—thus embodied the purest Teutonic lineage.⁷³ Geography reinforced this: Britain's insularity protected its Teutonic inhabitants from the racial and cultural degradations of continental kin. Environmental factors were consistently intertwined with inherent racial traits: 'insular' Teutons had avoided both blood mixing and the corrupting influence of Latin law, religion, and language. Finally, Freeman saw Christianization timing as decisive. Early conversion exposed continental Teutons to Latin culture, while the later conversion of the Anglo-Saxons allowed them to consolidate their language, legal system, and customs first—preserving their Teutonic integrity. 'The English,' Freeman concluded, 'are more purely Teutonic than our kinsfolk of the mainland'—and thus superior in civilization and self-government.⁷⁴

Scholars have shown how ideas about Anglo-Saxon origins, evolution, and character were deeply rooted in a theory of Teutonic supremacy. British and American intellectuals placed this racial narrative at the heart of emerging disciplines such as political science and history.⁷⁵ The Teutonic 'seed' was said to have spread from German forests and Scandinavian rocks to England, and then across the Atlantic via English settlers in the United States. A transatlantic network of Teutonist thinkers traced this legacy in American institutions and theorized affinities among nations based on shared Teutonic ancestry. Though geographically insular, the English were imagined to form a broader racial community with Scandinavians and the Dutch—'our bone and our flesh; their blood is our blood'. Freeman, in particular, saw this Dutch-Scandinavian connection as evidence that Anglo-Americans belonged to a distinct Teutonic lineage, not a general Aryan family. Within this imagined hierarchy of Teutonic kinship, modern Germans, 'the least brother Teuton', ranked below Scandinavians due to greater racial mixing and cultural 'contamination' via Roman influences.⁷⁶

Freeman himself did not explicitly address it, but his framework—grading Teutonic peoples by racial purity based on geography and historical timing—was particularly well suited to accommodate Iceland. More than any other country outside the Angloworld proper, Iceland occupied a unique place in this imagined community of Teutonic world-makers—a point that has not been sufficiently recognized. Crucially, James Bryce, a close friend and disciple of Freeman, helped elevate Iceland within this intellectual constellation. Often described as 'the doyen of Anglo-American intellectuals', Bryce was a leading figure in transatlantic thought and second only to Freeman in popularizing Teutonic ideas.⁷⁷ As Regius Professor of Law at the University of Cambridge, historian, cabinet minister, and diplomat, Bryce saw it as his mission to strengthen the

⁷²Reginald Horsman, 'Origins of Racial Anglo-Saxonism in Great Britain before 1850', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 37, no. 3 (1976): 387–410; Lake and Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line*, 50–7; Duncan Bell, 'Alter Orbis: E. A. Freeman on Empire and Racial Destiny', in *Making History: Edward Augustus Freeman and Victorian Cultural Politics*, eds. Jon Conlin and Alex Bremner (Oxford University Press, 2015), 1–14.

⁷³Thomas G. Dyer, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Idea of Race* (Louisiana State University Press, 1980).

⁷⁴Edward A. Freeman, 'Alter Orbis', in *Historical Essays* (MacMillan and Co., 1892), 234.

⁷⁵Jessica Blatt, *Race and the Making of American Political Science* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), ch. 1; Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (Cambridge University Press, 1991); Peter Mandler, *The English National Character: The History of an Idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair* (Yale University Press, 2006), 86–9; Oded Y. Steinberg, *Race, Nation, History: Anglo-German Thought in the Victorian Era* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 21–49.

⁷⁶C. J. W. Parker, 'The Failure of Liberal Racism: The Racial Ideas of E. A. Freeman', *Historical Journal* 24, no. 4 (1981): 825–46. For Carlyle, see Horsman, 'Origins of Racial Anglo-Saxonism in Great Britain before 1850', 400.

⁷⁷Georgios Giannakopoulos, '"Make Britain Great Again": Anglo-American Thought and World Politics in the Age of Empires', *Modern Intellectual History* 15, no. 2 (2018): 593–606.

Anglo-American bond. He was an important source of intellectual authority for other advocates of Anglo-Saxon and Teutonic unity.⁷⁸ His influential 1888 work, *The American Commonwealth*, presented American law and institutions as direct descendants of British precedents—carrying forward the Teutonic seeds of liberty and self-government into the New World.⁷⁹ While foreign observers had long viewed Icelanders through a negative lens—as stagnant and only quasi-civilized prior to the nineteenth century, a view that persisted in Canadian discourse after the onset of transatlantic Icelandic migration—perceptions began to shift in the latter half of the century.⁸⁰ Increasing attention to Iceland’s medieval past allowed theorists like Bryce to grant Iceland a privileged role within the Teutonic success story—now re-articulated in explicitly racial terms.⁸¹

Before culminating in the US Constitution, Bryce traced the westward march of Teutonic institutions through a significant layover in Iceland. Alongside a small circle of Icelandophiles in London, Bryce maintained a lifelong fascination with Iceland—especially its historical literature. This interest culminated in a visit in 1872, during which he toured the country extensively, climbed notable mountains such as *Hekla*, and, by some accounts, learned to read the sagas in Icelandic. Following this visit, Bryce highlighted medieval Icelandic institutions in his major works, presenting the republic as a complementary case to the United States and proof of the Teutonic capacity for self-government. Bryce also collaborated with the Icelandic scholar Jón Stefánsson, who had moved to London after editing *Skírnir*, and explicitly acknowledged Stefánsson’s assistance in *Studies in History and Jurisprudence*.⁸²

Iceland was more than an intriguing case within this racialized imagination. Drawing on Freeman’s racial-environmental synthesis, Bryce believed it provided a second ‘insular’ example of Teutonic development alongside England, thanks to its extreme geographical isolation. No foreign races or Roman legal traditions reached its shores; Christianity was adopted even later after Teutonic institutions had taken root. The Norse who settled Iceland—Bryce and Ólafsson largely ignored the substantial Irish and Scottish component⁸³—encountered no Indigenous or rival European populations. Icelanders thus escaped any dilution of Teutonic blood, making them, by some accounts, an even purer specimen than the English in bloodline, language, and institutions. Through its medieval sagas and political institutions, Iceland was portrayed as proof that the Teutonic race could achieve the highest forms of civilization, producing ‘a Constitution unlike any other’—a precursor to the US Constitution, deliberately crafted by free men to secure order and justice. Bryce concluded, it should be seen as the world’s first written constitution.⁸⁴

With the Stefánsson’s aid, Bryce helped shift the imagined boundaries of Teutonic whiteness within the emerging Anglo-American condominium. Like mid-century Anglo-Saxonists such as Thomas Carlyle and Charles Kingsley, Bryce located the cradle of Teutonic civilization not in Germany but in Scandinavia. In this vision, Iceland offered its purest embodiment—a site where Teutons could observe their racial and civilizational genius in its original form. Bryce claimed that Britons and Icelanders were linked by ‘bonds of blood’ arguably purer than those connecting

⁷⁸Bell, *Dreamworlds of Race*, 57.

⁷⁹James Bryce, *American Commonwealth* (John D. Morris and Company, 1906).

⁸⁰On views of Icelanders in Canada as stagnated and backwards, see Eyford, *White Settler Reserve*, 27–37; Bertram, “Eskimo” Immigrants and Colonial Soldiers: Icelandic Immigrants and the North-West Resistance, 1885’, *Canadian Historical Review* 99, no. 1 (2018): 63–97.

⁸¹Sumarliði Ísleifsson, ‘Icelandic National Images in the 19th and 20th Centuries’, in *Images of the North, Histories, Identities, Ideas*, ed. Sverrir Jakobsson (Rodopi, 2009), 149–58; Heidi Hansson, ‘Between Nostalgia and Modernity: Competing Discourses in Travel Writing about the Nordic North’, in *Iceland and Images of the North*, ed. Sumarliði Ísleifsson (University of Québec Press, 2011), 255–82.

⁸²James Bryce, *Studies in History and Jurisprudence* (Clarendon Press, 1903), x.

⁸³Gunnar Karlsson, *The History of Iceland* (University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 35.

⁸⁴James Bryce, ‘Impressions of Iceland’, in *Memories of Travel* (MacMillan and Co., 1923), 1–44; Bryce, *Studies in History and Jurisprudence*, 312–58.

Britons to Germans. Having visited Icelandic settlements in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Manitoba, he further argued that Icelanders—like other Scandinavians—‘Americanise even more readily’ than Germans.⁸⁵ In a widely circulated lecture, reprinted in *Smithsonian Magazine*, Stefánsson likewise portrayed Iceland as geologically part of Britain and Icelanders and Britons as the purest surviving examples of the Teutonic race.⁸⁶ The Icelandic and English languages and literary traditions, he contended, were more closely related than either was to German.⁸⁷ Iceland was, in the words of Stefánsson’s mentor William Morris, ‘the Greece of the North’.⁸⁸ Echoing this, Stefánsson claimed that ‘the geographical isolation of Iceland, instead of relegating her to oblivion, has given her an opportunity to play a part on the stage of history as an asylum for the old institutions, faith, and customs of the Teutonic race’. It was an integral element in Teutonic myth-making: ‘a living Pompeii where the northern races can read their past’.⁸⁹

Teutonic world-making

Once we recognize that the boundaries of the Angloworld were never entirely fixed, it becomes less surprising that its proponents occasionally envisioned incorporating the Nordic countries into their broader rapprochement agendas.⁹⁰ It is perhaps more notable that so few Anglo-Americanists articulated an explicit vision for expanding the Angloworld into a wider ‘Teutonisphere’, notwithstanding widespread anti-German sentiment.⁹¹ In most cases, the theory of Teutonic origins served primarily to reinforce notions of unity (and alleged superiority) between the Anglo-Saxons of Britain and the United States, rather than to advocate for a comprehensive Teutonic programme. Where broader appeals were made on the basis of Teutonic identity, they were framed in terms of cultural ‘friendship’ or geopolitical ‘alliance’ within the international system of sovereign states rather than the restructuring of world order itself. Dilke thus argued that ‘our true alliance is . . . with our brothers in America, and our kinsmen in Germany and Scandinavia’. In 1899, Chamberlain called for ‘a new Triple Alliance of the Teutonic race’, linking Britain, the United States, and Germany. John W. Burgess, in diplomatic terms, proposed a ‘tripartite alliance’ among ‘all the Teutonic powers’, encompassing Britain, the United States, Germany, and ‘the peoples of northern Europe’. Rhodes believed that ‘the whole of humanity would be best served if the Teutonic peoples were brought nearer together’, a vision he sought to advance through the establishment of the Rhodes Scholarships at the University of Oxford. H. G. Wells articulated an even broader horizon, suggesting that a unified federation of Britain and the United States might ‘conceivably’ include the Scandinavian countries—though he did not elaborate further.⁹²

By contrast, Ólafsson articulated an expanded Teutonic vision in explicit terms. He argued that the Anglo-Saxons should ‘unite and rule the world, and join with Germany and other Teutonic peoples because they belonged to the same race’.⁹³ He identified manifestations of the Teutonic

⁸⁵Bryce, ‘Impressions of Iceland’, 1–44; Bryce, *American Commonwealth*, 42; Bryce translated in Jón Stefánsson, ‘Yfirlit yfir málefni Íslands í útlendum blöðum og ritum’, *Skírnir* 62 (1888): 84; *Öldin*, 13 January 1892, 15, 1; Blatt, *Race and the Making of American Political Science*; Dyer, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Idea of Race*.

⁸⁶Jón Stefánsson, ‘Iceland: Its History and Inhabitants’, in *Annual Report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution for the Year Ending June 30, 1906* (Government Printing Office, 1907), 275, 284–5.

⁸⁷Jón Stefánsson, ‘Íslenzk áhrif á enskar bókmenntir’, *Tímarit Hins Íslenszka bókmentafélags* 12 (1891): 278.

⁸⁸James Bryce, ‘Preface’, in Jón Stefánsson, *Denmark and Sweden with Iceland and Finland* (G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1916), x–xi.

⁸⁹Stefánsson, ‘Iceland: Its History and Inhabitants’, 284, 294.

⁹⁰See Bell, *Dreamworlds of Race*, 248.

⁹¹Vucetic, *The Anglosphere*, 43.

⁹²Quoted in Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism*, 119, 389; Edward N. Saveth, *American Historians and European Immigrants* (Columbia University Press, 1948), 49; H. G. Wells, *Anticipations: Of the Reaction of Mechanical and Scientific Progress upon Human Life and Thought* (Chapman and Hall, 1902), 261.

⁹³Ólafsson, ‘Tíðindi frá útlöndum 1901’, 60.

race across the globe and advocated their formal unification under Anglo-Saxon leadership. The survival of smaller nations such as Iceland and Denmark, he insisted, depended on ‘merging into larger entities ... as free federative members’, lest they become the prey of ‘alien races’.⁹⁴ Ólafsson’s project was twofold. On the one hand, he sought to carve out a privileged place within this emerging racial-imperial order for nations he deemed racially worthy. He was not merely a theorist of these ideas but an active promoter of Icelandic emigration to North America—especially the United States—as a direct pathway into the Angloworld. He further proposed that Iceland itself should voluntarily align with Britain and the United States, claiming favourable treatment on the basis of Icelanders’ supposedly pure Teutonic heritage.⁹⁵

On the other hand, Ólafsson envisioned an active role for Icelanders in advancing the settler-colonial expansion of the Anglo-Saxon race and the subjugation of Indigenous peoples. Whereas Bryce and Stefánsson largely positioned Iceland as a cultural repository—a site where the ancient glories of the Angloworld were preserved—Ólafsson insisted that Iceland had a vital part to play in the unfolding imperial present. He followed Freeman and Bryce in combining a biological theory of race with a climatic theory of civilization. In this view, self-government and political liberty were inherently linked to geography: they flourished only within certain temperate climatic zones. By contrast, tyranny and slavery predominated in tropical regions, where an overabundance of natural resources supposedly bred habits of laziness and stagnation. In more temperate zones, survival required sustained effort, fostering industriousness, ingenuity, and inventiveness. The harsher the natural environment, the more spirited and self-reliant its people became. This translated, in Ólafsson’s view, into political capacities: the struggle against adversity cultivated the habits and character necessary for self-government.⁹⁶

After a millennium of isolation on the fringes of European civilization, Icelanders were not only of pure Teutonic stock but uniquely adapted to life in harsh northern environments. Ólafsson—and figures such as Ulysses S. Grant—had already singled out Icelanders as a privileged white population especially suited to settling Alaska. Similar arguments circulated in Canada, particularly in discussions surrounding the creation of ‘New Iceland’ in Manitoba. There, attracting Icelandic and other Scandinavian settlers was seen as desirable not only for their alleged racial integrity but for their alleged experience with agricultural labour in cold climates. These ideas reflected a broader mid-century shift in racial theory, in which a strong essentialism was combined with a revival of older environmentalist thinking. Inspired by the polygenesis thesis of separate racial origins—associated with figures like Louis Agassiz and Samuel Morton—it was argued that races were not universally adaptable but could only thrive within particular climatic zones without risking degeneration. In this framework, Icelanders—and northern Europeans more broadly—were seen as ideally suited to expanding the frontier of Anglo-Saxon settler colonialism into the world’s colder, less hospitable regions.⁹⁷

Through this framework, Ólafsson could position Icelanders not merely as custodians of a venerable Teutonic legacy, but as active agents of civilizational progress within the expanding Anglo-Saxon global order. He extended this vision beyond the northern frontiers of North America to confront a broader imperial dilemma: how to sustain white settler dominance in radically different climates. According to prevailing race-climate theories, northern peoples—Anglo-Saxons and their Teutonic kin—were inherently suited to temperate and sub-Arctic environments, but would struggle to maintain their racial vigour and cultural superiority in tropical regions. Without a continual influx of ‘fresh’ northern blood, settlers in such climates

⁹⁴*Ibid.*, 31.

⁹⁵Ólafsson, ‘Frá öðrum löndum 1897’, 24.

⁹⁶Ólafsson, ‘Tiðindi frá útlöndum 1902’, 10.

⁹⁷See Ann Fabian, *The Skull Collectors: Race, Science, and America’s Unburied Dead* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 112–15; Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 406; Mark Harrison, *Climates and Constitutions: Health, Race, Environment and British Imperialism in India, 1650–1830* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

risked degeneracy and loss of civilizational capacity.⁹⁸ Ólafsson directly engaged this challenge. He warned that as Anglo-Saxons expanded into Africa and South Asia, their racial qualities would inevitably erode under the combined pressures of tropical climates and proximity to Indigenous populations. Even with strict racial segregation, the mere environment would sap their energetic habits and capacity for self-government. In this context, Icelanders—and other Nordic settlers—offered a crucial resource: a population of hardy, racially pure northerners capable of reinforcing Anglo-Saxon colonial efforts where climatic adaptation was most difficult.⁹⁹

To maintain racial purity in the face of adverse environmental conditions, Ólafsson argued that Britain and the United States must cultivate a reservoir of untainted racial stock to periodically renew its colonial populations. Living in the north, Icelanders had been forged through ceaseless struggle against hostile sub-Arctic conditions, rendering them an ideal source of such racial vitality. Just as the Teutons had once regenerated a decaying post-Roman Europe, according to this story, so too would Icelanders help recharge the Teutonic race—expending their surplus population to counter the racial ‘corruption’ that would inevitably accompany expansion into the tropics and the Global South. Rather than risking degeneration through intermixture with Indigenous peoples or even with other Europeans deemed less racially pure, the Anglo-Saxon imperial project would draw upon Nordic reserves to continually replenish the colonization effort.¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

Jón Ólafsson offers a revealing case of how visions of world order were not only imagined, but actively reshaped, from the northern European periphery at the close of the nineteenth century—a period marked by intensified transatlantic migration, imperial consolidation, and the closing of global frontiers. Deeply embedded in these circulations himself, Ólafsson spent a decade in Canada and the United States, with additional sojourns in Norway, Denmark, and Scotland. He did not merely theorize global realignments but sought to enact them: as he envisioned an expanding ‘Teutonisphere’, he traversed the North Atlantic it encompassed; as he made claims about Icelanders’ role in colonizing the global frontiers, he actively promoted Icelandic emigration to North America and participated in the founding of Icelandic settlements in the Canadian Prairies and the North Pacific.

Far from simply echoing dominant narratives, Ólafsson globalized the discourse of what has been termed the Angloworld—typically seen as confined to Anglo-American linguistic and political bounds—and refashioned it to include Iceland and its Nordic neighbours. If calls to integrate the British empire and the United States rested on one conception of whiteness, namely Anglo-Saxonism, Ólafsson introduced another that exceeded the imaginative and jurisdictional boundaries of the Angloworld proper: Teutonic whiteness. Drawing on Teutonist racial theories, he portrayed Icelanders not as relics of the past, but as pristine carriers of Teutonic ‘germs’—equal to, or even surpassing, the Anglo-Saxons in racial integrity—and thus ideally suited to energize the next phase of global expansion. Scholars have shown that the Angloworld vision of a US–British federation was one of several *fin de siècle* proposals for transcending the European state system, alongside schemes for world government, imperial federations, and regional alliances based on shared identities. Ólafsson’s idea of a Teutonic federation belongs to this repertoire of responses to technological and geopolitical upheaval—one that was grounded in global circuits of mobility, migration, and empire. His writings reveal how great-power narratives were refracted and reconfigured by intellectuals on the margins seeking to imagine—and assert—their place in a shifting global order.

⁹⁸See Ann Fabian, *The Skull Collectors: Race, Science, and America’s Unburied Dead* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 112–15; Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 406; Mark Harrison, *Climates and Constitutions: Health, Race, Environment and British Imperialism in India, 1650–1830* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁹⁹Ólafsson, ‘Tíðindi frá útlöndum 1902’, 10; Ólafsson, *Alaska*, 37.

¹⁰⁰Ólafsson, *Alaska*, 40–2.

Settler colonialism was the world-making force that animated this vision. More than a simple modality of imperial governance, it was seen as the crucible in which the most capable nations became global empires, while others withered away—spaces of purported self-government and industry portrayed as planting shining models in ‘new’ territories that, in turn, were to yield expanding populations and civilizing humanity through the spread of free institutions. While this capacity was typically framed as the preserve of the Anglo-Saxons, Ólafsson argued that it was inherent to the larger Teutonic race. Thus, settler colonialization was the framework through which other Teutons were integrated into Anglo-Saxonist imperial projects, be it in Canadian Prairies or the South African veldt. After all, Ólafsson read the colonization of global frontiers as a reenactment of the westward migration of Teutonic tribes from northern Germany and Scandinavia through the North Atlantic islands (Britain, Iceland) and onward to North America. Within this imagined Teutonisphere, Icelanders were cast as ideal agents of colonization, a people forged by harsh environments, historically predisposed to self-rule, and capable of transplanting political and social institutions to frontier spaces. In North America, their alleged hardiness suited them for the rigours of Manitoba and Alaska; in southern Africa, it was their supposed racial pedigree that mattered. Crucially, Ólafsson viewed these imperial arenas not as isolated theatres, but as interconnected zones within an increasingly globalized world. According to the racial narratives he embraced, no group could sustain its integrity in tropical climates indefinitely. For Anglo-Saxon empire to continue expanding on a global scale, it would require continual replenishment from its racial source in the north. In this view, Iceland became not merely a symbolic origin point but an indispensable racial reservoir, bridging hemispheres to sustain Anglo-American expansion into the tropical interiors of Africa.

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