

‘We who Cherish *Njáls saga*’: the Alþingi as Literary Patron

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Of the numerous editions, translations, and adaptations of *Njáls saga* produced in the past two hundred years, few volumes offer as fascinating an insight into the configuration and function of literary patronage as the 1944 Icelandic edition of Magnús Finnbogason. The peculiar context of this publication not only reveals the Icelanders’ legendary and archetypal attachment to their sagas; its history also reveals in a particularly striking way how the modern dissemination of even the most ancient literary texts may be motivated and affected by conflicting political and personal interests.

In an illuminating discussion of literary patrons, André Lefevere claims that the concept applies to ‘the powers [...] which help or hinder the writing, reading and rewriting of literature’ (Lefevere 1984, 227). Patronage, he continues, can be exerted by persons, groups of persons (a political party for instance), a social class, a royal court, publishers or the media; but often it operates by means of specific institutions, such as academies, bureaux of censorship, critical journals and the educational establishment.

In many instances it is not easy to identify the contribution of patrons to individual publications, but in the case of the 1944 Icelandic edition that influence was far from being disguised. On the opening page, readers were informed that the edition had been produced under the aegis of the Alþingi [the Icelandic parliament]. As further confirmation of the state’s involvement, we may note firstly that the saga was published by Bókaútgáfa Menningarsjóðs og Þjóðvinafélagsins, which was in part a governmental institution; secondly that it was printed by the state printing firm of Gutenberg.

I

According to Lefevere, patronage consists of three interactive elements—*ideology*, *economics*, and *status*, and in relation to the first of these Vilhjálmur Þ. Gíslason’s introduction spells out the purpose of the

1944 edition: 'It is essential now for [Icelandic] nationality and national development that the sagas should be thoroughly read and respected' (*Njáls saga* [hereafter *N.s.*] 1944, xvi).¹ In this context, Vilhjálmur adds that the edition was intended to have better 'qualifications' [skilyrði] for a wide circulation than those editions preceding it. Even though he concludes that the aim of the publication is both to open up the saga's 'wonderlands of life and art' [undralönd lífs og listar] to young readers and to give older readers an opportunity to experience its delights anew, the official ideology of the edition was not so much to gratify individual readers as to underpin and promote a sense of national identity and unity amongst the citizens of the Icelandic state.

Vilhjálmur's stress on the urgent need for the new edition ('It is essential now') probably refers to Iceland's declaration of independence from Denmark in 1944, and to the continued Allied occupation of Iceland, by then in its fourth year. Whilst the Allied military presence was generally regarded by the Icelanders as preferable to the alternative of German invasion, it was nevertheless understandable that the indigenous population should be concerned about 'national development' at a time when the nation was in daily contact with English-speaking troops (Björn Þorsteinsson 1991, 398–419).

Establishing the virtues of *Njáls saga* in ideological and nationalistic terms, Vilhjálmur Gíslason's introduction claims at the outset that the Icelandic family sagas in general were 'among the best and the most valuable resources of Icelandic culture' [meðal mestu og beztu verðmæta íslenzkrar menningar: *N.s.* 1944, v]. In that context, he refers to their subject-matter, narrative technique and vocabulary, and their lasting influence on a variety of readers; scholars and artists as well as the general public. *Njáls saga*, he continues, is the most voluminous, comprehensive, and 'in many ways the richest' [auðugust á margan hátt] of the family sagas. Its many surviving manuscripts, Vilhjálmur later notes, testified to the saga's popularity from the earliest times (*N.s.* xiii).

From Vilhjálmur's argument we may infer that the 1944 publication was intended and expected to maintain the beneficial influence of the sagas in an independent Iceland, and to help to secure the stability of a society which was in many ways at a cross-roads. Irrespective of the particular circumstances of 1944, the nation had made remarkable economic, social, and cultural changes since the turn of the century. In

1901 80% of Icelanders were living in rural areas, with 70% of the total work-force employed in agriculture. By 1940 only 35% of the inhabitants remained in the countryside; the rest had moved to coastal towns and villages. Most strikingly, in this period, Reykjavík had been transformed from a small town of 6,700 inhabitants (8.5% of the population in 1901) into something approaching a small city of almost 40,000 citizens (31.5% of the population in 1940; *Tölfræðihandbók* 1984, 7–33). In the face of these major changes, it is as if Vilhjálmur Þ. Gíslason sought to represent the publication of *Njáls saga* with the backing of the Alþingi as a source of cultural reassurance and stability. No matter how much the world turned and tumbled, the 1944 edition would help to ensure that the Icelanders could continue to read and respect their native cultural resources.

II

In the discussions and debates which led up to this state-sponsored edition of *Njáls saga*, its supporters in the Alþingi did not draw particular attention to the views which later found expression in Vilhjálmur Gíslason's introduction. In the statement accompanying the original proposal its three principal supporters, Helgi Jónasson, Ingólfur Jónsson and Sveinbjörn Högnason, refer to the saga as 'one of the most wonderful works of art' [eitthvert hið dásamlegasta listaverk] ever to have been written in the Icelandic language, in terms of style, subject-matter, and narrative force (Alþingi 1943–1946, A:803). Nowhere in the rest of their submission, however, is the proposed edition linked to Iceland's declaration of independence, or to any possible threat from Anglo-Saxon cultural influence, or to general social and economic developments. The state edition, its advocates claim, is to be seen more as a response to another proposed edition of *Njáls saga*.

As summarised in their statement, the background to the whole affair was a complex one. In the autumn of 1941 the publisher Ragnar Jónsson had announced his plan to publish an edition of *Laxdæla saga* in modern Icelandic spelling; this at a time when the long-accepted custom had been to print editions of medieval Icelandic texts in the so-called 'standardised ancient spelling' [samræmd stafsetning forn]. Ragnar's proposed edition met with opposition, first expressed in several newspaper articles and eventually resulting in a law (nr. 127, 9 Dec. 1941), which granted to the Icelandic state the copyright for all Icelandic texts written before 1400 (Alþingi 1942, A:56–57). Individuals interested in publishing editions of these works now needed to apply for authorisation to the minister of education. Before this law came into operation, Ragnar and his collabora-

¹All translations from Icelandic are my own. Lengthy original quotations are cited in the footnotes; shorter ones in parentheses within the main text: 'Það er nú nauðsynjamál þjóðernis og þjóðarþroska, að sögurnar séu vel lesnar og vel virtar.'

tors—his co-publisher Stefán Ögmundsson and the prospective editor Halldór Kiljan Laxness—had been able to publish their edition of *Laxdæla saga*. However, in August 1942, they confronted and challenged the new law by publishing *Hrafnkels saga* in a modern spelling edition, without obtaining the now necessary permission. As a result they were prosecuted and convicted: each of them was sentenced to either a fine of 1000 krónur or a prison sentence of 45 days. They immediately appealed against the sentence on the grounds that it violated constitutional provisions relating to the freedom of the press (*Hæstiréttur* 1943, 237–244).

While the case was being heard in the superior court, in the early spring of 1943, the Alþingi had to vote on further proposed legislation which sought to invalidate the 1941 copyright law (Alþingi 1943–1946, C:168–220). Before producing its report, the commission appointed to discuss this proposal sought academic advice; they consulted the professors of Icelandic studies at the University of Iceland. These were Sigurður Nordal, professor of Icelandic literature, Árni Pálsson, professor of Icelandic history, and Björn Guðfinnsson, associate professor of Icelandic linguistics. Together, these scholars wrote a report, claiming that even though it was desirable to protect old texts from potential damage and distortion in new editions, the copyright laws themselves were in many ways imperfect. They also indicated that examination of Laxness's edition of *Laxdæla saga* had revealed serious flaws. The editor had modernised some of its vocabulary, had omitted old words and inserted new ones at various points in the text, and had omitted or reorganised sentences or even whole chapters from his source edition. All these changes, the professors concluded, had distorted the substance and character of the saga (Alþingi 1943–1946, A:719–720). On 2 April, the Alþingi agreed to postpone revisions of the copyright law on the grounds that the government was then in the midst of preparing a comprehensive *corpus juris* addressing questions of artistic and literary copyright in Iceland. But the Alþingi also resolved that the revised law should have the power to prevent publication of 'distorted' [afbakaðar] editions of Iceland's early literature (Alþingi 1943–1946, A:764).

The following week, Ragnar Jónsson and Halldór Laxness announced that they were preparing a new modern-spelling edition of *Njáls saga*, having obtained the required authorisation from the minister of education, Einar Arnórsson. It was in response to this announcement that the three members of the lower house of the Alþingi put together a proposal for the state edition of the saga, submitting it for discussion on 9 April. Drawing on the unfavourable comments which Laxness's edition of *Laxdæla saga* had received from the university professors, the three members argued in their statement that Laxness's *Njáls saga* edition

would be similarly and seriously impaired. Hence the need for state involvement:

We, who cherish *Njáls saga*, want to ensure by this parliamentary proposal that the people [of Iceland] have the chance of owning the saga in an inexpensive, good quality edition, free from the fingerprints of those who want to drag everything into the gutter and who will not spare even our most valuable works of art, such as *Njála*, from that fate. (Alþingi, 1943–1946, A:803)²

The agenda of those responsible for the proposal seems clear. They wanted the Alþingi to assume the role of a literary patron and to hinder, rather than to help, the 'reading and rewriting of literature', to borrow André Lefevere's phrase. Their fundamental aim was to prevent (or, as they saw it, to protect) the Icelandic nation from reading Laxness's version of *Njáls saga*.

III

For a fuller understanding of the Alþingi's sensitivity to the publication of unauthorised saga editions, it is helpful to examine the second of the three features which Lefevere identifies as constitutive elements in literary patronage—*economics*. In his definition, this element usually involves the writer (whether translator, editor, or whatever) enjoying some form of financial support from the patron; but in the case of *Njáls saga* there are other factors involved. In his 1944 introduction, Vilhjálmur Þ. Gíslason does not make direct reference to the economic aspects of the state edition, but it is interesting to note the kind of imagery in which his references to the sagas are expressed. We read of sagas as 'resources' [verðmæti], and of *Njáls saga* as the 'richest' [auðugust] of these resources. In employing these formulaic metaphors,³ Vilhjálmur echoes the proponents' statement, in which the saga is referred to as one of the 'most valuable' [dýrmætustu] works of Icelandic art.

This imagery of value or wealth was more fully developed in a speech

² 'Vér, sem Njálu unnum, viljum með þessari þingsályktun sjá svo um, að þjóðinni gefist kostur á að eignast hana í ódýrri og vandaðri útgáfu, þar sem ekki finnst fingraför þeirra manna, sem allt vilja draga niður í sorpið og jafnvel þyrna ekki okkar dýrmætustu listaverkum eins og Njálu frá þeim örlögum.'

³ In this period, the saga was also referred to as the most splendid pearl of Icelandic literature (Þorkell Jóhannesson 1942, 89).

by one of the bill's three sponsors, Helgi Jónasson:

We Icelanders have to admit that we are poor and few in number and we do not enjoy much material wealth, but we do have one asset, our old literature. It must be almost without parallel that a small nation such as ours should possess the kind of pearls beyond price which our ancient literature represents. (Alþingi 1943–1946, D:191)⁴

For this reason, Helgi continued, it was a delicate matter when any editor sought to change the language or the subject matter of a saga. He went on to criticise certain aspects of Laxness's edition of *Laxdæla saga*: not only had the text of the saga been distorted, but the whole book had been badly printed on poor quality paper. It was obvious, he concluded, that the publication of *Laxdæla saga* had been undertaken for profit and not for the worthier purpose of 'increasing the value' [auka gildi] of Icelandic literature (Alþingi 1943–1946, D:192).

From Helgi Jónasson's argument, we observe that the cultural 'value' of the sagas was expected to be at least preserved, if not enriched, through the scholarly and presentational quality of any new published edition. Furthermore, if the sagas were to assume the role of national cultural treasures, that wealth had to be widely and equally distributed. Laxness's project was seen as violating both of these principles, comprising both a bad text and a poorly produced edition, with the whole enterprise driven by the desire to make a profit. Under state sponsorship, in contrast, individuals could not gain privileged access to Iceland's precious ancient literary heritage, either as profit-making publishers (dragging the sagas 'into the gutter'), or as members of that group who could afford to buy an edition which exhibited the appropriate editorial and production standards. The nation as a whole would benefit from the state-sponsored edition; readers would be purchasing a literary 'pearl beyond price', expertly edited and produced, for the lowest possible price.

The point also needs to be made that by recommending that *Njáls saga* be published by Menningarsjóður and Þjóðvinafélagið, the Alþingi was consciously plugging into an established system of subscribers or members (Alþingi 1943–1946, A:803). The subscription arrangement had been established by the publishing board of Menningarsjóður in 1940; members would receive seven books annually in return for a modest subscription of 10 krónur. This offer proved so popular, that by the end

⁴Pað mun nú svo með okkur Íslendinga, að við erum fátækir og fámennir, og við eigum lítinn veraldarauð, en við eigum einn auð, það eru fornþókmennir okkar. Pað mun vera nær eins dæmi að svo fámenn þjóð sem við erum eigi slíka gimsteina sem fornritin eru.'

of the first year the number of subscribers was sufficiently large to allow the company to print twelve thousand copies of each of these seven books—apparently a record in the history of Icelandic publishing (Gils Guðmundsson 1985, 91). For a country of 120,000 citizens, it meant that the publications of Bókaútgáfa Menningarsjóðs og Þjóðvinafélagsins entered a significant proportion of Icelandic homes. Distributed in this way, the state edition of *Njáls saga* would indeed have better 'qualifications' [skilyrði], to recall Vilhjálmur Þ. Gíslason's term, for its circulation than any previous edition.

Despite these advantages, however, individual speakers in the Alþingi found various faults with the whole plan. According to the proposal, the government was called upon to 'encourage' [greiða fyrir] Menningarsjóður and Þjóðvinafélagið to publish a good popular edition of *Njáls saga* (Alþingi 1943–1946, A:803). Questions were soon raised about the government's authority for such interventions in the decisions of the publishing board. Although the board had been appointed by the Alþingi and included several of its members, Bókaútgáfa Menningarsjóðs og Þjóðvinafélagsins was supposedly responsible for its own operations. It certainly ought not to be subject to government interference, argued the minister of education, Einar Arnórsson, who had authorised Laxness's edition of *Njáls saga*. If, however, governmental 'encouragement' merely involved granting Menningarsjóður og Þjóðvinafélagið the required authorisation for publishing the saga, Einar added, that would hardly be a problem (Alþingi 1943–1946, D:193).

As a second concern, Barði Guðmundsson pointed out that Fornritafélagið [Early Icelandic Text Society], which had started to publish scholarly editions of sagas ten years earlier, also had plans to publish a new edition of *Njáls saga* (Alþingi 1943–1946, D:196). Its editions were subsidised by the state and sufficiently well respected for the 1941 copyright law uniquely to exempt the society from having to apply for permission to publish Icelandic works written before 1400 (Alþingi 1942, A:57). In addition to his duties in the Alþingi, Barði Guðmundsson was Iceland's chief national archivist; he said that he could not support the proposed state edition since it would involve Fornritafélagið in a huge financial loss on its own *Njáls saga* edition. Thirdly, Sigfús Sigurhjártarson stressed that a satisfactory popular edition of *Njáls saga* was already in circulation. It could be found in most Icelandic homes and was available in the bookshops for a modest price. In Sigfús's view, this edition already represented just the alternative to Laxness which the parliament sought to establish (Alþingi 1943–1946, D:199).

In his response to these and other criticisms, Helgi Jónasson explained that governmental 'encouragement' certainly included Einar Arnórsson's authorisation of the state edition, but could also extend into other areas.

He noted, for instance, that war-time conditions made supplies of paper difficult to obtain, whilst the printing presses themselves were so busy that it took a long time to have anything published at all. In all these matters the government's support could be helpful. As for Fornritafélagið, Helgi Jónasson said that its president was not opposed to the state edition. It would be a long time before its own proposed edition of *Njáls saga* was published because one particular manuscript, which the editor wanted to consult, was inaccessible in German-occupied Copenhagen. Helgi went on to read a statement signed by ten of the seventeen members of the other chamber of the Alþingi, in which they voiced their support for the proposed edition of *Bókaútgáfa Menningarsjóðs og Þjóðvinafélagsins*. Additionally, they expressed their willingness to increase the grant which Fornritafélagið received from the state as compensation for any possible loss which the society might suffer from the state edition of *Njáls saga* (Alþingi 1943–1946, D:196–197).

It is clear from this discussion that some very unusual economical conditions were to attend the publication of the state sponsored publication of *Njáls saga*. There seemed not to have been a particular public demand for the edition, and the capacity of the war-time printing industry was in any case severely limited. On the premise that cultural values had priority over market forces, not to mention shortage of raw materials, government involvement was expected to bestow important economic privileges on the new edition. It might also, Helgi Jónasson indirectly acknowledged, prove damaging (with any luck) to the profitability of the proposed Laxness edition (Alþingi 1943–1946, D:215).

IV

In this attempt to analyse the ideology and the economics of the Alþingi's patronage of a saga edition, we have seen that it was expected to operate, to an important degree, in a rather defensive way. The fundamental motive behind the government's support was not so much that Icelanders should buy and read the state edition, but rather that they should not buy or read Laxness's edition. This same pattern of priorities surfaces again when we try to define the *status* of the Alþingi as a literary patron. The point was not primarily that the Alþingi should be sponsoring the publication of sagas; but that Halldór Laxness and his patrons should not be doing so, on the grounds that they lacked sufficient authority.

This does not mean that the advocates of the state edition neglected to assert their right of interference in literary matters. Helgi Jónasson and his followers clearly represented themselves as the elected representatives of the Icelandic voters. Helgi said, for instance, that whilst the Minister

of Education, Einar Arnórsson, had not broken any laws in authorising Laxness's edition of *Njáls saga*, he had nevertheless consciously defied the will of parliament and—'I venture to assert' [þori ég að fullyrða]—the will of the great majority of Icelanders. In his conclusion, Helgi claimed that the proposed state edition would represent *Njáls saga* 'as we wish to have it and as the nation wishes to have it' [eins og við viljum hafa hana og eins og þjóðin vill hafa hana: Alþingi 1943–1946, D:192–193]. The main thrust of Helgi Jónasson's argument was, however, systematically to question Laxness's status as a saga editor. In analysing this strategy, we need to look again at the written submission of the three university professors which dealt both with the 1941 copyright law and Laxness's edition of *Laxdæla saga*. Their comments had been reviewed by parliament only a week before, when the proposal for the invalidation of the copyright law was rejected.

The copyright law stated that the minister of education *could* authorise editions of Icelandic works written before 1400 to follow 'standardised ancient spelling' [samræmdri stafsetningu fornri: Alþingi 1942, A:57]. In their written submission the university professors opposed this attempt to impose such a system of 'standardised' spelling since no such system, they claimed, could ever represent exactly the forms and sounds of the ancient language. Indeed, they argued, the modern spelling sanctioned by law from 1929 (and which Laxness had used in his editions) was in some respects 'closer to the originals' [nær upprunanum] than the system used in the scholarly editions of Fornritafélagið. Secondly, in the context of their criticism of Laxness's edition of *Laxdæla saga*, the university men emphasised that old Icelandic texts had undergone a variety of changes in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Some of these changes had led to improvements in particular texts; younger versions of some sagas were quite properly chosen for publication rather than older ones. The quality of an edition could rest as much on aesthetic merit as on fidelity to some supposed 'original' text. Doubts were expressed as to the qualifications and capacity of the ministry of education to make judgements about which editorial changes to old saga texts would or would not endanger the nation's cultural or linguistic health. They concluded:

If it is considered necessary to supervise the publication of older works of literature, as many people tend to feel, it seems more natural that such works should be placed in the hands of scholars and writers appointed for that task, whose knowledge and taste can be trusted. (Alþingi 1943–1946, A:720)⁵

⁵Þyki nauðsynlegt að hafa eftirlit með útgáfu eldri rita, svo sem margir munu telja, virðist næst lagi, að það sé í höndum fræðimanna og rithöfunda, sem til þess væru kvaddir og treysta mætti að þekkingu og smekkvísi.

Supporting the proposal for the state edition, Helgi Jónasson diplomatically avoided direct quotation from these ambiguous paragraphs in the scholars' report. It seems, however, that his approach to the *Njáls saga* case was determined by these very comments. Firstly, he admitted in his introductory speech that the system of spelling in saga editions was a matter of individual taste. Secondly, avoiding any detailed discussion of Laxness's editorial agenda, he argued that Laxness, distinguished writer that he was, simply could not be trusted. Helgi quoted a statement published in an Icelandic newspaper in the early autumn of 1941, in which Laxness had claimed that the only proposed change in his forthcoming edition of *Laxdæla saga* was to modernise the spelling. In view of the fact that Laxness's editorial interventions had been rather more wide-ranging, Helgi argued that Laxness's claims could not be relied on. Citing the negative verdict which the university scholars had reached, he went on to suggest that Laxness's aesthetic taste could not be trusted either. Finally, he referred to the ruling of the lower courts over Laxness's edition of *Hrafnkels saga*, implying that the novelist's character was not beyond reproach. According to the university professors, the editing of old texts should be left to established experts, scholars and writers. Helgi Jónasson's strategy, in short, was to undermine Laxness's authority and to claim that he was bound to 'deform' [skrumskæla] *Njáls saga* (Alþingi 1943–1946, D:191–193)

V

Thus far I have described how the Alþingi sought to regulate the editing and dissemination of early Icelandic literature during the Second World War years. Noting that the lower house passed the proposal for a state edition of *Njáls saga*, I have sought to identify (in the original statement of the three proponents, and also in the speeches of Helgi Jónasson) the rationale behind this proposed publication. This rationale, we have seen, contradicted the thrust of Vilhjálmur Þ. Gíslason's introduction to the published edition. There are, however, additional strands in this complex debate which have not yet been discussed.

First of all, it seems to be of some consequence that the three members of the Alþingi who were officially responsible for the proposal all lived in the district of Rangárvallasýsla, in which a substantial part of *Njáls saga* takes place. Helgi Jónasson, from Stórolfshvoll in Fljótshlíð, and Ingólfur Jónsson, who lived in the small town of Hella, were the two elected representatives of Rangárvallasýsla, while Sveinbjörn Högnason, although representing the neighbouring district of Vestur-Skaftafellssýsla, was a clergyman in Rangárvallasýsla, living at Breiðabólstaður in Fljótshlíð (Alþingi 1943–1946, C:916).

The links between individual family sagas and inhabitants of certain parts of Iceland are based on the fact that most sagas take place in one particular district of the country. In some cases, as with *Laxdæla saga*, the narrative even derives its title from such a setting. During the 1941 discussions in the Alþingi on the proposed copyright law, which were triggered by Laxness's edition of *Laxdæla saga*, the importance of sagas' local links was clearly revealed by Þorsteinn Þorsteinsson, a *sýslumaður* [judge and revenue officer] of the Dalasýsla district. During the debate, he spoke in support of the copyright proposal:

The district with which I am involved has been struck by a disaster. Its major saga, *Laxdæla saga*, has been published in a 'modern' spelling edition, without introduction, index or explanatory notes; it is more or less deformed. I have no wish for other districts to be stuck in the same muddy stream and I think it is right to block it at its source. (Alþingi 1942, B:107)⁶

Þorsteinn stressed that the family sagas were 'ancient, classic' [forn, sígild] historical documents. Accordingly, he criticised Laxness for deleting from his *Laxdæla saga* edition detailed information about genealogies and places of residence. He concluded his brief speech by re-emphasising that the history of his district had been 'attacked' [ráðist á], and that he did not wish to see other districts suffer the same sad fate. Although the supporters of the state edition of *Njáls saga* did not present themselves so explicitly as spokesmen for their district, their eager collaboration suggests that they were initially fighting for the interests of their fellow Rangæingar, all residents of the region which is the principal location for *Njáls saga*.

In this context we ought to pay special attention to the arguments of Helgi Jónasson, who shared Þorsteinn Þorsteinsson's basic views on the nature of the sagas as historical documents. Helgi criticised Laxness's very poor (as he regarded it) preface, in which *Laxdæla saga* was characterised as being historically unreliable—a kind of 'fabrication' [*lygisaga*] (Alþingi 1943–1946, D:192). He also stressed that all the genealogies were indispensable for a proper understanding of the feuds in the sagas: 'The men of the past killed other men for family reasons and not for fun' [Fornmenn drápu menn vegna ættartengsla, en ekki að gamni sínu: Alþingi 1943–1946, D:197]. This remark is certainly valid

⁶Pað sýslufélag, sem ég er við riðinn, hefur nú orðið fyrir því óláni að fá meginsögu sína, *Laxdælu*, gefna út með nýmóðins stafsetningu, formála-, registurs- og skýringarlausa og alla meira eða minna skrumskælda, og ég segi fyrir mig, að ég vil ekki óska öðrum héruðum að lenda í sama foraðinu, og tel því rétt að stemma nú þegar á að ósi.'

for many scenes in the sagas, but it also needs to be understood that by no means all genealogies are important to the plot. For twentieth-century residents of a district, however, genealogies had an independent validity as links between living individuals or locations and the ancient saga narrative.

The genealogy of Gunnar Hámundarson from Hlíðarendi in Fljótshlíð (Ch. 19), one of the main characters of *Njáls saga*, is entirely representative of Helgi Jónasson's concerns. First, Gunnar's maternal lineage is outlined, revealing how he is related to Unnur Marðardóttir. Subsequent events in the saga are determined by Gunnar's service to Unnur and it is necessary for the reader to understand on what grounds she asks for his assistance when she has problems of her own. Gunnar's paternal lineage is then traced; he is the son of Hámundur Gunnarsson. Right at the end of the narrative this information will prove illuminating when Valgerður Þorbrandsdóttir, the daughter of Hámundur's sister, becomes involved in the plot (Ch. 148). The description of the rest of Gunnar's paternal line, by contrast, serves to explain elements in his character (as presented) rather than the course of events. Among his relatives are the law-speaker Hrafn Hængsson, suggesting that powerful intellectual qualities run in the family, and Ormur the Strong, indicating that correspondingly powerful physical qualities also run in the family. Finally, one branch of the family tree leads us to a particular place-name in Rangárvallasýsla: we are told that the farm Gunnarsholt derived its name from Gunnar's grandfather, Gunnar Baugsson. Although such knowledge does not in itself illuminate the narrative significantly, it was important knowledge—a notable historical fact—for the people of Rangárvallasýsla in the nineteen-forties, not least for those who lived at Gunnarsholt.

For a more immediate link between person and place we recall that Helgi Jónasson lived at Stórólfsvoll. According to the saga, Stórólfur Hængsson was the great-grandfather of Gunnar Hámundarson, being the brother of the law-speaker Hrafn Hængsson and the father of Ormur the Strong. Undoubtedly and unsurprisingly, Helgi Jónasson was not at all keen to have that topo-genealogical connection between himself and the mighty Gunnar of Hlíðarendi removed from *Njáls saga* in Laxness's edition. Indeed, Helgi's performance in parliament suggests that the twentieth-century chieftain from Stórólfsvoll had inherited some of the qualities of advocacy which characterised Stórólfur's brother, Hrafn Hængsson the law-speaker.

VI

Having suggested that the proposal for the state edition of *Njáls saga* initially served the atavistic interests of a specific geographical area and

its inhabitants, I feel obliged, finally, to underline the fact that opposition to the proposal in the Alþingi ran as much along political as geographical lines. The twelve 'no' voters in the lower house of the Alþingi included all the seven representatives of the Socialist coalition of Sameiningarflokkur alþýðu, Sósíalístaflokkur (SAS) (Alþingi 1943–1946, D:196, 220–222). Similarly, of the seven members of the upper house not to sign the statement in support of the proposal were the three representatives of SAS; one of them was Kristinn E. Andrússon, the man who had asked for the invalidation of the 1941 copyright law only few days before the Alþingi became preoccupied with *Njáls saga* (Alþingi 1943–1946, D:196).

It is also significant that in the discussion about the state edition, Halldór Laxness's editorial plans were consistently supported and defended by three members of SAS—Einar Olgeirsson, Áki Jakobsson, and Sigfús Sigurhjártarson—all of whom maintained that the proposal for the state edition was part of an elaborate political plot, devised by a member of the upper house of the parliament, Jónas Jónsson. Áki Jakobsson said that the purpose of the state edition was to 'persecute' [ofsækja] Halldór Laxness and also conceivably to denigrate the Socialist coalition (Alþingi 1943–1946, D:202). Einar Olgeirsson suggested that this tendency to limit people's freedom of action was no new phenomenon in Icelandic politics: Jónas Jónsson had, for example, recommended that Laxness's novels should be banned in Iceland on the grounds that they were full of Communist propaganda (Alþingi 1943–1946, D:204). Jónas had also drawn up a proposal, accepted by a majority vote in parliament, which would have prevented people with 'particular political opinions' [sérstakar pólitískar skoðanir], as Einar Olgeirsson expressed it, from being employed by the state or from enjoying state financial support (Alþingi 1943–1946, D:205). Finally, Sigfús Sigurhjártarson recalled that Jónas Jónsson, in an extended crusade against the Socialist party, had persuaded a majority of parliamentary members to support a statement claiming that it was disgraceful that they should have to share the parliamentary floor with SAS representatives (Alþingi 1943–1946, D:212). In the course of their speeches, the representatives of SAS referred to the advocates of the state edition as Jónas Jónsson's 'disciples' [lærisveinar], but two of the three proponents—Helgi Jónasson and Sveinbjörn Högnason—happened to be members of Framsóknarflokkurinn, the 'progressive' farmers party, in which Jónas Jónsson was a leading figure.⁷

⁷The third supporter, Ingólfur Jónsson, represented the conservative party, Sjálfstæðisflokkurinn. He did not speak in favour of the proposal during the debate; in fact, he left the debating chamber before the proposal came to a final vote (Alþingi 1943–1946, D:213, 220).

It is beyond the scope of this present paper to trace the twists and turns that the debate between the Socialists and their adversaries took in Iceland in the 1930s and 1940s (see Guðjón Friðriksson 1993). It must suffice to stress that ever since the foundation of the Icelandic Communist party in 1930, Jónas Jónsson had been one of the fiercest opponents of this 'dictatorial pest' [pest einræðisins], as he called it (Gils Guðmundsson 1985, 87). Exercising his power as minister of education in the early 1930s, he had, for instance, introduced measures whereby students who advocated Communist doctrines should be excluded from higher education; a few students were indeed expelled from schools as a result. The revival of publishing activities administered by the state's cultural fund, Menningarsjóður, and its cooperation with Þjóðvinafélagið (an independent cultural society) was, similarly, Jónas Jónsson's response to the success of Mál og menning, a literary society originally established in 1937 by a group of Socialists, mostly writers. It was under his leadership, that Bókaútgáfa Menningarsjóðs og Þjóðvinafélagsins adopted the subscription system used by Mál og menning, which by 1939 had already attracted some 5,000 members. One of Jónas Jónsson's declared aims was to balance the Communist propaganda which, he claimed, Mál og menning was distributing throughout Iceland with financial aid from Moscow.

On a number of occasions during this period there were confrontations between Jónas Jónsson and Halldór Laxness. Although not a registered member of SAS, Laxness was an outspoken Socialist, an admirer of Stalin's Soviet Union, one of the founders of Mál og menning, and an active member of its editorial board. For some time, he co-edited the journal *Tímarit Máls og menningar* with Kristinn E. Andrésson, who became a representative of SAS in the Alþingi in 1942. While Jónas Jónsson criticised Halldór Laxness for his political views and for writing 'perverted' anti-national novels that advocated Communism (Jónas Jónsson 1942b), Laxness attacked the publishing agenda of Bókaútgáfa Menningarsjóðs og Þjóðvinafélagsins. He also attacked Jónas personally for his editorial role in some of the books published by Menningarsjóður (Halldór Laxness 1941). Their quarrel also related to changes in the law during 1939 which entrusted to the cultural board of Menntamálaráð [Education Commission] responsibility for distributing the annual state grant to the arts. Previously, the distribution of such funds had been the responsibility of the Alþingi. As Menntamálaráð chairman and the man behind these changes, Jónas Jónsson was accused of wishing to persecute those artists who were not in sympathy with his aesthetic and political views. Before the first distribution of grants by Menntamálaráð, Jónas Jónsson clashed with Professor Sigurður Nordal over this matter; they also used the opportunity to abuse each other personally (Jónas Jónsson 1942a, 1942c). Jónas stated that Halldór Laxness had been one of the

radical writers disproportionately favoured in earlier disbursements by the Alþingi. As if to confirm this judgement, Menntamálaráð reduced Laxness's grant for 1940 from 5,000 to 1,800 krónur. Laxness's reaction was to use the money to establish a fund for the protection of 'the intellectual freedom of Icelandic writers' [andlegt frelsi íslenskra rithöfunda: Gils Guðmundsson 1985, 94].

In January of 1941, Jónas Jónsson wrote a long article, published in his party's newspaper *Tíminn*, discussing the publishing policy of Bókaútgáfa Menningarsjóðs og Þjóðvinafélagsins. He referred to a recent survey indicating that the Icelandic family sagas were not to be found on the bookshelves of the majority of Icelandic homes. His sense was that the average person could not afford to buy the editions of Fornritafélagið, the only saga editions in print at this time. At nine krónur a volume they were too expensive; Jónas proposed that if the price could be lowered to five krónur Menningarsjóður would be happy to co-operate with Fornritafélagið and distribute the sagas through its subscriber network. If such an arrangement could not be established, Jónas concluded, Bókaútgáfa Menningarsjóðs og Þjóðvinafélagsins would have to address in some other way the urgent need for inexpensive editions of the family sagas (Jónas Jónsson 1941a). Apparently, some negotiations between Fornritafélagið and Menningarsjóður did take place (Alþingi 1942, B:87), but at the time when the debate on the state edition of *Njáls saga* began in 1943, these had resulted merely in the Menningarsjóður decision to begin publication of saga editions in full conformity with the interests of Fornritafélagið (Alþingi 1943–1946, D:196).

In the meantime, however, Ragnar Jónsson's announcement of Laxness's forthcoming edition of *Laxdæla saga* had upset Jónas Jónsson's plan. In a long article appearing in *Tíminn* in October 1941, Jónas condemned the proposed publication enterprise of the 'Communists':

There is no doubt that if the Icelandic Communists get the opportunity to publish the old literature, they will attempt to offend general taste and national sensibility in whichever way they believe will produce the best result on every occasion. (Jónas Jónsson 1941b)⁸

Jónas emphasised that Fornritafélagið and the Alþingi (through Menningarsjóður) were already employing qualified editors whose task was to increase the circulation of the sagas. 'Communist' intervention was, in his

⁸'Það er enginn vafi á, að ef kommúnistarnir íslenzku fá tækifæri til að gefa út fornritin, þá munu þeir freista að misbjóða smekk manna og þjóðernistilfinningu á þann hátt, sem þeir treysta sér til að framkvæma með mestum árangri á hverjum tíma.'

Icelandic at Menntaskóli Reykjavíkur. This powerful group ensured that the state edition of *Njáls saga* could not be accused, as Laxness's editions had been, of insufficient scholarly 'authority'. On the other hand, we may sense a continuing tendency to avoid responsibility for this controversial publication: Jónas Jónsson apparently asked his fellow party-members to ask the Alþingi to ask Bókaútgáfa Menningarsjóðs og Þjóðvinafélagsins to publish *Njáls saga*. The publishing-board had then asked a selected group of scholars to prepare the edition and they, in turn, had asked Magnús Finnbogason to become the editor.

In the state edition, *Njáls saga* is neither presented nor rejected as a reliable historical document, but it complies perfectly with the requirements of those who wanted to read it as the history of a particular district. In the middle of the introduction, a pull-out map of Rangárvallasýsla and its neighbouring district can be consulted, showing the geographical location of major farms and other sites mentioned in the saga (*N.s.* 1944, viii–ix). Interestingly, the position of Stórolfshvoll, the farm of Helgi Jónasson, is also shown on the map, even though the farm is quite irrelevant to the plot of the saga. Somewhat in keeping with the sense of *Njáls saga* as a national possession, a fold-out map of Iceland and a series of photographs from various saga-sites can also be found in the volume, linking Iceland's overall geography with the saga narrative. Explanatory notes and an index confirm that the saga is indeed more than a simple 'fabrication'.

Our inquiry into the patronage of the 1944 edition of *Njáls saga* has shown a discrepancy between the official ideology, suggested by Vilhjálmur Þ. Gíslason's introduction, and the complex motivations that led to its eventual publication. In his introduction, Vilhjálmur mentions the lively interest exhibited by the author of *Njáls saga* in law and legal procedures (*N.s.* 1944, vii). He is careful not to exhibit any such interest himself. His voice is impersonal and detached, almost as if seeking to conceal those political and personal controversies which had led to the Alþingi playing the improbable role of saga patron.

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