

Parliament, sagas and the twentieth century

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Sagas as the property of the nation

At the end of 1941 Iceland's parliament, the Althing, passed a law stipulating that the Icelandic state had the exclusive right to publish Old Icelandic literature, i.e. works written before 1400. The law was based on the idea that this literature, like the fishing grounds around Iceland, is the common property of the entire nation, and the proprietary right to it should be vested in the state on behalf of the citizens. However, this did not imply that the state alone should handle all the publication of the literary heritage. Just as the Ministry of Fisheries is in charge of allocating quotas to fishing vessel operators, the Ministry of Education should authorize the private publication of individual works, on condition that it adhered to a particular orthography, the "standardized old spelling." The law also stipulated that The Old Icelandic Texts Society (*Hið íslenska fornritafélag*) had unlimited authorization to publish this literature.

It may seem surprising that Iceland's parliament was pondering the publication and spelling of medieval literature at this time. World War II was raging, Iceland was under foreign military occupation and the future of the crown union with Denmark was uncertain. Society was in the process of transformation. The economy was recovering after the depression of the 1930s, but cultural life was in upheaval, partly as a result of stronger foreign influences and rapid urbanization. Such turmoil created anxieties about the future of Icelandic culture. There was a broad consensus on the need to preserve native traditions and establish continuity between past and future, the rural and the urban. But the best way to establish such a continuity was fiercely disputed.

Legislation granting the state the exclusive right to the sagas was one aspect of this conflict. Not only did it provoke fierce clashes in parliament, but the first and only court action brought on the basis of it ended with the Supreme Court ruling that the law was unconstitutional. At face value it appeared to be an issue of protecting national

Left: They found Hoskuld slain. Illustration by Þorvaldur Skúlason in Halldór Laxness' edition of *Njal's Saga*, 1945.



Halldór Laxness.

treasures – no one should treat the sagas exactly as he or she pleases. Essentially, however, it hinged upon conflicting attitudes towards the literary heritage, political control over culture and one of Iceland's most controversial authors at the time, Halldór Laxness.

Sacred sagas

The reason the controversial law was passed in December 1941 was that, two months previously, a newspaper had reported that publisher Ragnar Jónsson intended to produce an abridged version of *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* with modern spelling, and had commissioned Halldór Laxness to undertake the task. It had been the custom for some time then to publish the old literature with a spelling which was supposed to resemble the orthography of the oldest manuscripts and had been standardized by Icelandic and foreign scholars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Among the differences were vowel spellings – thus modern *ö* was written either *ø* or *o* in the old spelling, and *æ* either as *æ* or *æ*; word forms, such as *ek* and *ok* for *ég* (I) and *og* (and), and endings, with *maður* (man) written *maðr*.

Ragnar Jónsson's plan produced a fierce reaction, at first in the newspapers and later in parliament. The express aim of the law granting the state the exclusive right to publish the sagas was to prevent the announced edition of *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*. However, Ragnar Jónsson, Halldór Laxness and printer Stefn Ögmundsson were quick off the mark and managed to publish the saga before the law was passed by parliament. A year later they published *The Saga of Hrafnkel Frey's Godi* (*Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*), this time in defiance of the law, and were sentenced by a lower court to pay a fine or serve forty-five days imprisonment. They appealed on the grounds that the law on which the sentence was based was in breach of the constitutional freedom of expression in writing. While the case was being heard by the Supreme Court in the spring of 1943 they managed to obtain permission from Einar Arnórsson, the then Minister of Education (and Halldór Laxness' ex-father-in-law), to publish *Njal's Saga*. This time parliament responded with a resolution recommending that the state-run publishing division of the Cultural Fund and "Friends of Iceland" (*Þjóðvinafélagið*) should publish its own edition of the saga. The aim was to sabotage Halldór Laxness' pending edition.

The parliamentary resolution on an official edition of *Njal's Saga* was tabled by MPs Helgi Jónasson, Ingólfur Jónsson and Sveinbjörn Helgason. In a report accompanying their proposal they said: "As admirers of *Njal's Saga*, we aim with this parliamentary resolution to ensure that the nation has the opportunity to acquire it in an inexpensive, quality edition, unbesmirched by those who wish to drag everything down into the gutter and who do not spare even our most

precious works of art such as *Njal's Saga* from such a fate." The imagery suggests they are condemning an act of gross defilement or the profanation of holy relics. Similar ideas lay behind the legislation on the sagas which, when it was passed in 1941, was described by Minister of Finance Jakob Möller as being presented by people "who regard the old literature as something sacred which must not be debased."

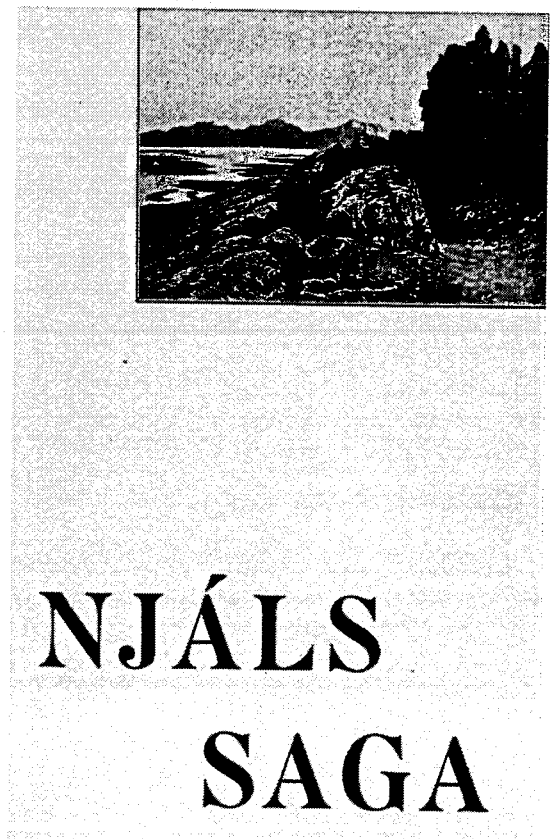
Precious sagas

When the Cultural Fund and Friends of Iceland published the official edition of *Njal's Saga* in 1944, the year the Republic of Iceland was established, Vilhjálmur Þ. Gíslason wrote in his introduction that the Sagas of Icelanders were "among the greatest and most precious relics of Icelandic culture," and of these, *Njal's Saga* was not only the largest and most comprehensive but also "the richest in many ways." These words echo the speeches of the MPs who proposed the resolution on the saga publication, in particular Helgi Jónasson. "The point about us Icelanders," he said, "is that we are poor and few in number, and we have little worldly wealth, but we have one treasure, namely our old literature. It is almost unexampled for a nation as small as ours to own such jewels as the old literature." Imagery of this kind has long typified cultural dialogue in Iceland and takes such forms as the fossilized concepts of "the literary heritage" and "cultural value."

On the same occasion Helgi Jónasson criticized Halldór Laxness' edition of *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* for being badly printed on poor quality paper. "It is obvious," he said, "that this was done to make money, and not to enhance the value of Icelandic literature." There seem to be two underlying notions here. Firstly, it is implied that it is unnatural if individuals make money from the property of the nation such as the old literature. This point, which is reminiscent of criticism of the fishing quota system today, had also surfaced when parliament debated the 1941 legislation and Jakob Möller described one of its aims as ensuring "that the old literature will not be disfigured for commercial purposes."

Secondly, Helgi Jónasson also implies that saga editions should preferably reflect what treasures these books are. In this context it is interesting to note that when Laxness' edition of *Njal's Saga* appeared in 1945, publisher Ragnar Jónsson stated "that no expense would be spared to produce an edition of the highest possible quality," as Laxness phrased it in his postscript. The work is exceptionally large, with quality binding and lavish illustrations. Laxness underlines that in this respect the publication was supposed to pay tribute to the ancient manuscripts, which were certainly expensive to produce and are still considered priceless treasures. Ragnar Jónsson clearly did not intend to open himself to criticism for "devaluing" *Njal's Saga*.

Title page of the Cultural Fund's edition of *Njal's Saga*, 1947.



LAXDÆLA SAGA

HALLDÓR KILJAN LAXNESS
GAF ÚT

MEÐ LÖGSKIPADRI STAFSETNINGU
ISLENZKA RÍKISINS

REYKJAVÍK 1941
RAGNAR JÓNSSON, STEFÁN ÖGMUNDSSON

Title page of Laxness' edition of *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, 1941.

This aspect of the attitude towards old literature in the twentieth century overlaps with the campaign for the return of the manuscripts themselves from Denmark. That process was an extension of the campaign for independence; it hinged upon Iceland's rights to its cultural crown jewels.

Sagas as local stories

In the debate on the old literature act, Þorsteinn Þorsteinsson, district magistrate in Dalasýsla, gave his opinion of Halldór Laxness' newly published edition of *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*. "The district with which I am associated has now had the misfortune to see its main saga, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, published with new-fangled spelling, without introduction, index or notes, and more or less disfigured in all respects," he said, and voiced his support for the State's exclusive right to publication so that other districts would not end up "in the same gutter." His argument highlights the way that although the saga corpus was regarded as the property of the nation, individual districts had a special claim upon the sagas connected with them.

It may be worth pointing out that the three MPs who tabled the proposal for an official edition of *Njal's Saga* in 1943 all lived in Rangárvallasýsla district, where the saga is set. Helgi Jónasson was district physician at Stórolfshvöll in Fljótshlíð, Sveinbjörn Högnason was a clergyman at Breiðabólstaður in Fljótshlíð, and Ingólfur Jónsson lived at Hella in Rangárvellir. Helgi Jónasson and Ingólfur Jónsson represented the district in parliament, and Sveinbjörn Högnason West Skaffafell. Although it was never said in so many words, a probable explanation for their involvement in the matter was the interests of their constituents and neighbours.

However, the matter hinges no less on the historicity of the Sagas of Icelanders; among the criticisms that the MPs levelled against Halldór Laxness was distorting the sagas as historical sources. Þorsteinn Þorsteinsson regretted various omissions from Laxness' *Saga of the People of Laxardal* including "family ties and places of residence. I think this is inappropriate and I do not consider this the proper way to treat old and classical authorities." Helgi Jónasson voiced a similar view in 1943 and pointed out that the genealogies in the Sagas were necessary for understanding why the characters of the sagas feuded.

Helgi Jónasson himself lived at Stórolfshvöll in Fljótshlíð. A genealogy in chapter nineteen in the unabridged version of *Njal's Saga* relates that a certain Storolf Haengsson (presumably from Stórolfshvöll) was the great-grandfather of Gunnar of Hlidarendi - he was the father of Hrafnhild, who was the mother of Gunnar's father Hamund. Helgi Jónasson from Stórolfshvöll was presumably loath to see this information omitted from the official editions.

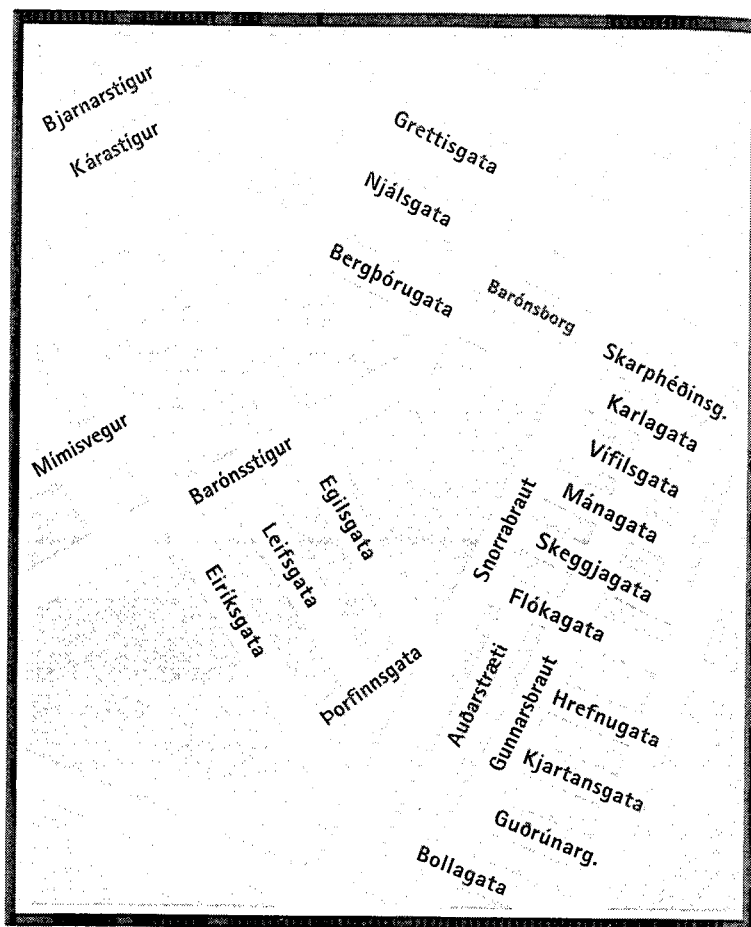


The opening of Búi Kristjánsson's comic strip based on *Egil's Saga*, from *Zeta* 2/1 (2001).

Sagas as public property

The attitudes expressed here are typical of the standpoint towards the sagas that Icelanders held in the first half of the twentieth century. Halldór Laxness' publications in the 1940s clashed with these views in various ways. Firstly, Laxness felt that if the Sagas of Icelanders were to retain their value in the modern age, they would need to be made as accessible to the public as possible. He aired this view as early as 1935 in a short newspaper article prompted by the recent publication of *Egil's Saga* and *The Saga of the People of Eyri* by The Old Icelandic

The district of Reykjavik with streets named after saga heroes. In the first half of the twentieth century many street names were taken from the sagas, sometimes arranged to represent their plots. From Njal's Saga, Skarphedin's street runs southeast to his parents Bergthora and Njal. The location of Barónsborg playschool between the couple recalls the burning scene in which they meet their deaths in bed, with their grandson Thord Karason between them. Gunnar's road intersects Skarphedin's and to the west is an allusion to the episode involving Kari and Bjorn from Mork in the last part of the saga. Similarly, the plot of The Saga of the People of Laxardal can be traced along Aud's street to those of Bolli, Gudrun, Kjartan and Hrefna. The street layout reflects the love affairs in the saga, with Gudrun situated between Bolli and Kjartan. The streets southwest of Skarphedin's street are named after Kari, Vifil, Mani and Skeggi, all figures from the district claimed by the first settler of Iceland (and Reykjavik), Ingolf Arnarson. Flókagata is named after Raven-Floki, discoverer of Iceland.



Texts Society. Laxness protested against Icelandic scholars using the standardized old spelling in their publications, which he described as an act of hostility towards the sagas, serving only to repel ordinary readers.

On this point, some MPs shared Laxness' views and opposed the old literature act. One was Magnús Jónsson, a professor of theology at the University of Iceland, who considered it unwise to publish the sagas with standardized ancient spelling, since this perpetuated the fallacy that medieval and modern Icelandic were two different languages. "This must not be handled like a drug that can only be obtained with a prescription," he said in a parliamentary debate in 1941.

Two years later, a similar viewpoint was expressed by Sigfús Sigurhjártarson, who advocated publishing the sagas and re-creating them as diversely as possible. Scholars had to have their academic editions with old spelling and detailed introductions, but the general public also needed quality editions in modern Icelandic and children needed anthologies of key passages from the main sagas. Other art forms would follow in their wake, he claimed: "Our poets and com-

posers will later create immortal works from the Sagas of Icelanders. ... We shall have paintings of Kolskegg and Gunnar going their separate ways, and other memorable scenes from the saga [*Njal's Saga*]. ... Sculptors will also appear on the scene and commit the saga to metal and stone."

As it happens, a number of Icelandic artists had been following such a manifesto. Poets over the centuries had taken their subjects from the old literature and in the first half of the twentieth century painters, dramatists, novelists and composers drew upon the same source. In the latter half of the century other artists followed, including Halldór Laxness himself with his novel *The Happy Warriors*, in which he went even further in demythologizing the sagas.

Sagas as fiction

Laxness also campaigned fiercely against the "misunderstanding," as he called it, that the Sagas of Icelanders were historical works. He regarded them as fiction. This perspective is presented with an interesting analogy in the introduction to *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, in which Laxness compares the author to a gifted pianist: "It is as if the virtuoso spends a long while finding his way around the keyboard, and chances upon various melodies and fragments of tunes, some lofty, others mystical or capricious, but in a loose casual relationship with each other, sometimes even none, only occasionally striking a few contrapuntal notes from the main theme, which nonetheless covertly dominates his thoughts behind all the other themes, until it breaks forth in the second part of the work with unstoppable momentum, and captivates its creator completely."

Such descriptions irritated parliamentarians, in particular Jónas Jónsson from Hrífla who wondered whether Laxness would talk next about "the counterpoint in Gudrun Osvífsdóttir or Kjartan or Bolli." On the same occasion he criticized Laxness for implying that the saga was fictional: "This is tantamount to alleging that the whole of *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* is one big lie." In reply to this remark, Magnús Jónsson pointed out that Laxness' ideas were not without parallels: "Sigurður Nordal has demonstrated that *The Saga of Hrafnkel Frey's Godi* is fiction, and opinions are divided about how much of the Sagas of Icelanders is fiction and how much real events."

The fact of the matter is that Laxness' arguments conformed with those of the scholars who often go by the name of "the Icelandic school" in Old Icelandic studies, not least Sigurður Nordal and Einar Ól. Sveinsson. In contrast to those who regarded the sagas as historical works, products of oral tradition, the Icelandic school emphasized that they were the works of authors, the pinnacle of a unique form of literary creation in the late Middle Ages. These ideas gradually gained

supremacy in the saga dialogue in Iceland – interest shifted from the heroes of the sagas to their authors.

Sigurður Nordal gives a memorable description of this change in his study of *The Saga of Hrafnkel*, in which he points out that the Icelandic school's theory by no means diminishes the value of the sagas as national treasures: "In terms of nationalist ambition, it can be said that any breach that may be hewn into the renown of Saga Age warriors and men of strength has been filled by new heroes who hitherto have been hidden away in the shadows: the authors of the sagas. Do we lose anything by that exchange?"

Sagas as a political weapon

While the parliamentary debates in 1941 and 1943 reveal a number of key attitudes towards the sagas at that time, it must be pointed out that in its broadest sense this issue was political as much as literary. The chief opponents of the old literature act and the resolution to publish *Njal's Saga* were MPs of the Socialist Party. They argued that both these issues were engineered by one Progressive Party member, Jónas Jónsson from Hrífla, and that his motive was to discredit leftists, in particular the most prominent writer in their ranks, Halldór Laxness.

Jónas from Hrífla – who had in fact retold passages from the sagas himself in his perennial textbook on Icelandic history – stated in 1941 that the act had been passed in order to prevent "communists" from being able to publish the old literature in "slang" for the "rabble." "We can put up with various things from the communists, but not that," he said. In his powerful post as chairman of the Education Council, Jónas Jónsson had entertained the idea that the Cultural Fund should begin publishing the sagas for the general public and he was far from pleased when Halldór Laxness pipped him to the post. He and Laxness clashed over many questions at this time, including the Council's controversial stipends for Icelandic artists. Jónas Jónsson was hostile towards all proponents of "un-Icelandic" artistic movements and towards those who held political views that he did not approve of.

Behind these conflicts lay the belief on both sides that "control" over Icelandic culture – including the sagas – would bring control over the people of Iceland at the same time. It is a telling reflection of the political atmosphere at the time that both sides compared their adversaries with German Nazis. The Reverend Sveinbjörn Högnason, who proposed the official publication of *Njal's Saga* in 1943, said he knew "about one edition of the holy scriptures, which should not be emulated but Hitler's archbishop has permission to publish, in which the Sermon on the Mount is completely turned on its head." In the same way, presumably, Halldór Laxness would alter *Njal's Saga*. Two years previously, Socialist MP Einar Olgeirsson had compared the act

on the sagas to Nazi censorship: “The same kind of book burnings are to be made law here as those practised by Hitler. It is astonishing that this should be proposed to parliament.” He added that the only motivation was Jónas Jónsson’s animosity towards Halldór Laxness: “Our old literature must not be allowed into people’s homes except in Jónas Jónsson’s interpretation of it, as put forward in his history of Iceland.”

Sagas as a challenge

Various commentators have pointed out that Halldór Laxness’ position towards the old literature was persistently ambiguous: a combination of admiration and challenge. Steingrímur J. Þorsteinsson talks about Laxness’ “filial role” with regard to the old authors, the problem faced by “a man of outstanding accomplishments who has a world-famous parent.” Laxness was not alone in wrestling with this problem. In the first half of the twentieth century, many Icelandic artists pursued their “campaign for independence” through the creative reworking of material from the saga world. Suffice it to mention Jón Leifs’ *Saga Symphony* or the Cubist influences in Ásmundur Sveinsson’s sculpture *Sæmundur on the Seal’s Back*.

It is interesting to read Halldór Laxness’ remarks about the illustrations to his *Njal’s Saga*, which were by Gunnlaugur Scheving, Snorri Arinbjarnar and Þorvaldur Skúlason. “I feel convinced,” he wrote in his postscript, “that some of the drawings presented here for the first time will prove to be lasting artistic achievements, as respected as the immortal text they were created to serve.” A similar notion is found in an article by Kristinn E. Andrésson, one of the Socialist MPs, written to commemorate the seventh centenary of the death of Snorri Sturluson: “We can rejoice and delight in acknowledging, when we remember Snorri now, that Iceland today has achieved cultural triumphs fully worthy of the Saga Age.”

As the century wore on, this first generation of professional Icelandic artists assumed the paternal role that the old literature had played towards them in their own day. The sagas do not have as absolute a value for culture and everyday life in Iceland in the beginning of the twenty-first century as they had during World War II when there was a parliamentary majority for granting the state a legal copyright to them. More recent controversies over “natural property” have involved the fishing grounds around Iceland, natural resources in the highlands and information in medical records. Nonetheless the old literature still accompanies the Icelanders as they venture forth into the future, both in its own right and as an echo from the twentieth century. The national wrestling champion is awarded *Grettir’s Belt*; a district youth movement is named *Skarphéðinn*; *Lokastígur* is a street in Reykjavík; a trawler is named *Snorri Sturluson* RE 219; there is a

chocolate factory called *Freyja* and a brewery named after *Egill Skallagrímsson*; *Hótel Saga* is in Reykjavík; *Óðinn* is a coastguard vessel; The Saga Centre in Hvalsöllum is known as *Njálusetrið*, after *Njal's Saga*; the three fates *Urður, Verðandi og Skuld* (Past, Present and Future) have become a genetics company ... In this way, the medieval literature is still the property of the nation – a stock of wealth from which individuals, businesses and local communities reap dividends in their respective ways.

Left: Saga manuscript, AM 152 fol. Árni Magnússon Institute in Iceland..

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THE MANUSCRIPTS OF ICELAND

Editors: Gísli Sigurðsson and Vésteinn Ólason



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