
Continuity? The Icelandic Sagas in Post-Medieval Times

Jón Karl Helgason

In 1945, the first year of Iceland's independence after almost 700 years of Norwegian and later Danish rule, the writer Halldór Kiljan Laxness wrote his classic article 'Notes on the Sagas' ('Minnisgreinar um fornsögur'). In this work, Laxness airs his views on the early Icelandic sagas, with special emphasis on *Njáls saga*. He asks literary scholars not to be annoyed with him or to regard him as a trespasser in their field; his simple plea is that, as an Icelandic writer, he 'cannot exist without constantly thinking about the old books' (Laxness 1946: 9).

Laxness was in fact thinking quite a bit about 'the old books' in the 1940s, as he was not only responsible for certain controversial modern-spelling editions of several sagas that came out at the time, but was also working on his novel *Iceland's Bell* (*Íslandsklukkan*). One of the main characters in this historical novel is the seventeenth-century manuscript collector Arnas Arnæus – alias Árni Magnússon (1663–1730) – a figure who makes his first appearance in the third chapter, looking for pages of vellum from valuable manuscripts in the farmhouse home of the central character, Jón Hreggviðsson.

Iceland's Bell, like Laxness's 'Notes on the Sagas', deals in part with the Icelanders' reception of the ancient literature. No sooner has Arnæus entered Jón Hreggviðsson's poor abode than the farmer starts to praise the saga heroes. Unfortunately, he says, the household has only a few books and nobody there really knows how to read except his mother. From her, however, Jón Hreggviðsson has learned:

all the necessary sagas, ballads, and old genealogies, and he claimed to be descended from Haraldur Hilditönn, the Danish king, on his father's side. He said that he would never forget such excellent ancients as Gunnar of Hlíðarendi, King Pontus, and Örvar-Oddur, who were twelve ells high and could have lived to be three hundred years old if they hadn't run into any trouble, and that if he had such a book he would send it immediately and for free to the king and his counts, to prove to them that there had indeed once been real men in Iceland. On the other hand, he reckoned, it was hardly due

to impenitence that the Icelanders were now fallen into misery, because when had Gunnar of Hlíðarendi ever done penance? Never. (Laxness 1943: 37–8; Laxness 2003: 20)

In these few lines, Laxness gives a good idea of the role the sagas may have played in the lives of the common people in Iceland in earlier times. First of all, they supplied them with suitable role models; second, they provided them with a noble ancestry; and third, they offered a Golden Age of the past as a counter to contemporary miseries. The premise for all these points seems to be a firm belief in the historicity of the sagas, in spite of their no more than flickering verisimilitude.

Laxness addresses the same points in his 'Notes on the Sagas'. In his conclusion, he states that throughout its 'long dark ages' the Icelandic nation practically owed its survival to this ancient literature: 'This gift was its life-line, its life in death. The confidence in the hero who lets neither injuries nor death upset him and does not know how to surrender – this belief in manhood was our religion.' And Laxness (1946: 65–6) continues: 'When we were at the height of our humiliation the ancient sagas still stated that we were heroes and of royal lineage. The ancient sagas were our invincible fortress and it is on their account that we are an independent nation today.' At the same time, Laxness thought it was high time for the independent Icelandic nation to abandon its belief in the historicity of the sagas; in fact one of his main purposes in writing the article was to argue that the sagas were great works of fiction rather than factual history.

Laxness was not the first Icelander to undermine the historicity of the sagas in this period, but what makes his claims particularly interesting is the status he himself has since acquired within the canon of Icelandic literature. More will be said about his status in the conclusion to this chapter, the main purpose of which, however, is to look at other sources revealing the popular reception of the saga literature in Iceland in post-medieval times. As in Laxness's article, the focus will be placed on the reception of *Njáls saga*, since much of what can be said about this renowned work applies to the corpus of Icelandic sagas as a whole. In addition, reference will be made to two surveys of which records are preserved in the Icelandic National Museum, and in which two groups of Icelanders (the first born in 1850–1900, the second in 1900–30) answered questionnaires regarding the impact the sagas had had on their lives and ideas. The first survey was conducted by the Danish scholar Holger Kjær in the 1920s and the second by the Icelandic National Museum in 1994.¹

Heroic Literature

During their initial 300 years, after which they were first written down, the sagas circulated within Iceland mainly orally and in the form of transcripts. The contemporary documentation of how these texts were utilized between 1300 and 1600 is scarce, but as Pálsson has convincingly illustrated, we may suppose that semi-public

readings of family sagas and various forms of non-secular literature were a favourite pastime on Icelandic farms in this period. In support of his case, Pálsson quotes a passage from an account written in Latin by the Reverend (later Bishop) Oddur Einarsson in 1590, describing the hospitality of Icelandic farmers: 'The concern that even farmers have for their guests is so great that nothing they think might offer entertainment is neglected. Sometimes they grab the storybooks of the homestead and, in a clear voice, read for several hours sagas of various people and other ancient texts of interest' (Pálsson 1962: 35). This tradition of reading, which continued into the twentieth century, reveals how the typical Icelandic audience of the ancient sagas initially received these narratives in oral form. And just as individual scribes rewrote the manuscripts they were transcribing – adding and omitting words, sentences, verses and even passages – so one can imagine that each reading (or performance) of a particular manuscript would be different from another.

Regarding the manuscript tradition, it is interesting to note how some of the scribes even felt the urge to curse the enemies of saga heroes such as Gunnarr Hámundarson and Njáll Þorgeirsson in *Njáls saga*. For example, in one fifteenth-century manuscript of *Njáls saga*, notable for its additional comments, the scribe refers to Gunnarr's killers as 'bastards' and to Mǫrðr Valgarðsson, who plots Gunnarr's death and may be seen as partly responsible for the burning of Njáll's farm at Bergþórshváll, as an 'infamous moron' (cf. Sveinsson 1953: 18–19). Comments of this sort, alien to the detached style of the saga, can be regarded as a belated literary revenge for the death of individual saga characters, but they testify more generally to the tendency of the Icelandic audience to think about the saga plot in terms of heroes and villains.

More evidence for this claim will be presented below, but one should bear in mind that it is quite possible that more ironic attitudes towards the saga heroes circulated within the society of these early times, particularly among women (cf. Kress 1996: 101–34). However, the evidence for such views is scarce; the most typical theme in the popular reception of the saga in Iceland in earlier times is found in sentences like the following from *Njáls saga*, ch. 77: 'The slaying of Gunnar was spoken badly of in all parts of the land, and his death brought great sorrow to many' (Hreinsson et al. 1997: III, 90). The same view is reiterated within the saga in a skaldic verse ascribed to Þorkell Elfaraskáld, a thirteenth-century poet whose identity is unknown outside this reference. According to this testimony, Gunnarr showed great daring as he defended himself, wounding 16 and killing two (ibid.). Predating the oldest manuscripts of *Njáls saga*, this verse serves as a verification of the foregoing prose account of the hero's defence. It suggests that years before the first written version of the saga came into existence, medieval Icelanders had found Gunnarr's death remarkable, and his skill in arms a praiseworthy quality.

A number of other poems referring to the sagas have been preserved from the early period of the sagas' reception, most notably those belonging to the genre of hero-poems, in which male characters from diverse sagas and romances are glorified in poetic form, one verse generally being devoted to each hero. One such hero-poem,

composed by Bergsteinn Þorvaldsson and dating from the second half of the sixteenth century, may serve as an example. Here, two characters from *Njáls saga* – Kári Sölmundarson and Skarpheðinn Njálsson – are briefly portrayed, alongside Roland and about 20 other heroes known to the Icelandic public at the time, either through prose narratives or through the versified narrative form of *rímur* (see chapter 12). Kári is specifically praised for avenging those who died in the burning at Bergþórshvöll: ‘on behalf of his burned best kinsfolk / he sent farmers to hell’ (cf. Helgason, Egilsson and Einarsson 2001). Another similar example from the eighteenth century is a poem called ‘Skarpheðinn’s Axe’, composed by Páll Vídalín in the metre and style of a skaldic verse, in which the masculine power of Skarpheðinn Njálsson is glorified. Even as late as 1931, Kári S. Sölmundarson composed a traditional hero-poem of almost 80 stanzas, calling Gunnarr Hámundarson a ‘valiant gentleman’ and Skarpheðinn Njálsson ‘sturdy’, while praising his own namesake, Kári Sölmundarson, for his skill at arms (ibid.).

Up until the late nineteenth century, almost all the written poetry in Iceland was composed by male poets. A notable exception is the work of Steinunn Finnsdóttir. Born just before the middle of the seventeenth century, she is the first woman in Icelandic literary history known to have left us with a considerable corpus of poems, including at least one traditional hero-poem. As Kristjánsdóttir (1998) has pointed out, Steinunn Finnsdóttir, unlike the male poets, often expresses a humorous and even ironic attitude towards the saga heroes. For instance, she seems to have a detached view of the heroes of *Njáls saga*: when she praises them she does so by referring to the views of others: ‘One could hear that no hero / had a greater ability to fight’, she says about Gunnarr Hámundarson, without really stating whether she agrees. In her conclusions, furthermore, she states that she is happy to acknowledge that the saga ends with Christian forgiveness and compensation (cf. Helgason, Egilsson and Einarsson 2001).

Ólason (1989: 209) claims that the traditional emphasis on the sagas as heroic literature played a vital role in the life of the Icelandic nation in earlier times, in particular between 1300 and 1550. In that period the heroes served as role-models, encouraging men to become stronger, not only for when their chieftains needed them as troops but also, and perhaps even more importantly, in their daily conflict with the harsh nature of Iceland. The central figure of *Iceland’s Bell*, Jón Hreggviðsson, reflects a fictional personification of this view, but how far did it fit in with the realities of nineteenth-century Icelandic farms? The HK survey certainly supports Ólason’s view, suggesting that the sagas continued to strengthen the spirit of the male (and perhaps also the female) population of Iceland into the twentieth century. A man born in 1889 recalls the literature that was read aloud at the nightly gatherings in his childhood home in western Iceland:

The main readings were the ancient sagas about Icelandic heroes and strong men, and the *rímur* were romances about valiant men and beautiful women . . . And I know that the stories about Gunnarr and Egill and Grettir filled many Icelandic men with energy.

And I know too that the stories about Bergþóra, Helga the daughter of the jarl, and Auðr, the wife of Gísli Súrsson, have served many good women as role-models. (HK 45: 407)

Another man from northern Iceland, born in 1852, states that the literature of the Golden Age undoubtedly inspired some people, at least, with 'heroism and bravery' (HK 12: 108). A third, born in southern Iceland in 1857, makes a similar claim, adding: 'I don't think the fighting-spirit in the sagas had a negative influence . . . ; indeed it inspired us and made us more ambitious in our daily work; it was a conflict that we wanted to win' (HK 13: 121).

More generally, however, it seems that the greatest impact that sagas had was on the younger generation. A man born in 1892 in northern Iceland states that toys were scarce in his youth, but that sometimes skilful adults would carve little human and animal figures out of wood: 'The children often gave these wooden people various names, in particular names drawn from the old literature, and with them, they acted out certain scenes from the sagas' (HK 35: 319–20). It was also common for boys to take on the roles of certain saga heroes and imitate their fights. Another man from northern Iceland, born in 1898, writes about this tradition: 'One was Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi, another one was Grettir, the third Skarpheðinn, and so on. Each had his own "sword" which would be the shaft of a broken rake. You needed to break the "sword" of your enemy to win' (HK 24: 199).

This traditional view of the sagas as heroic seems to have weakened considerably in the twentieth century. The change can be noted when one compares the HK survey (made up of testimonies of people born between 1850 and 1900) with the INM survey (testimonies of people born between 1900 and 1930). Certainly, in the latter group the traditional views can still be found. A man born in northwestern Iceland in 1908 states, for example, that he started to read the Icelandic family sagas at the age of 8, and considers it likely that these texts made people adore the heroes, 'but at the same time they encouraged you to be honest, and a man of your word' (INM 11403). A few also fondly recall the role-playing games, but others describe the saga heroes in negative terms. A woman from northwestern Iceland, born in 1920, criticizes the violent nature of these games and points out that the violence inspired by the sagas contradicted the religious upbringing of children (INM 11298). She does not degrade the sagas directly, but another woman, from Reykjavík and born in 1913, certainly does, stating that 'I never read the old sagas; I found them ugly and boring' (INM 11251). Other women make similar claims.

It is possible that Icelandic men and women have always had somewhat different attitudes towards the sagas. A woman born in western Iceland in 1906 says, for instance, that the ancient literature most certainly influenced the world-view of her brothers, but not her own (INM 11359). On the other hand, it is interesting to find how many Icelandic men born between 1900 and 1930 claim to be untouched by the sagas, some of them agreeing with the aforementioned female opinion that the sagas are boring and even had a bad influence on the young. A man from northwestern

Iceland, born in 1905, states: 'I did not particularly enjoy reading the family sagas. I had a hard time figuring out all their complex genealogy, and from early on I disliked all the killings described in them' (INM 11323). Another man from northern Iceland, born in 1927, seems to be fully aware of the possible negative side-effects of saga reading but is nevertheless happy to acknowledge their influence on himself: 'Heroes such as Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi and Kári Sölmundarson became my role-models... I think the family sagas toughened me up for confronting the realities of life; they made me a better Icelander, but perhaps also more harsh-tempered' (INM 11930).

Returning to the poetic tradition, it is interesting to note that traditional heroic poetry inspired by the sagas is harder to find in the works of twentieth-century Icelandic poets than in the literature of previous generations. This transition towards a more critical and even ironic view could be located somewhere in the period between 1882, when the poet and politician-to-be Hannes Hafstein published his poem 'Skarphéðinn in the Burning' ('Skarphéðinn í brennunni'), and 1937, when the modernist poet Steinarr Steinarr published another poem with the same title. Hafstein belonged to a group of Icelandic literary realists and was accordingly critical of the way in which earlier poets had idealized the Golden Age described in the sagas. None the less, he found that the description of Skarphéðinn Njálsson's death in *Njáls saga* presented a supreme image of masculinity (Helgason, Egilsson and Einarsson 2001). Steinarr's approach, however, was very different, even though in his poem he follows the testimony of the saga rather closely. In Steinarr's poem, Skarphéðinn speaks in the first person:

It is a lie, what they say.
I did try to escape,
I did try to escape, in the paralyzed terror
Of a dying man.

But there was no way out.

And I could hear you whisper:
Let him die.
What is it to us?
It is not our fault!

You should be thankful!
That I didn't escape. (ibid.)

Symbolically, this poem describes not only the last moments of Skarphéðinn Njálsson but also the end of the heroic saga tradition in Icelandic literature. As Ólason (1989: 227) has argued, Halldór Laxness directly confronted that tradition in his novel *Independent People* (*Sjálfstætt fólk*), which was published in two parts, in 1934 and 1935. Laxness later ridiculed it in his saga pastiche *The Happy Warriors* (*Gerpla*), published in 1952.

The Moral Lessons of the Golden Age

Alongside the worship of the masculine qualities of the saga heroes, another, very different tradition flourished in Iceland, in which more general educational and ethical questions were at stake. Pálsson (1962: 143–55), quoting various Icelandic prose works from the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries, has shown that this tradition is as old as the sagas themselves, but it should be sufficient to open the present discussion with examples from several books written in Latin by Arngrímur Jónsson (1568–1648). Arngrímur's patron was his cousin, Bishop Guðbrandur Þorláksson, one of the pioneers of Icelandic printing, renowned for publishing (and partly translating) the first Icelandic edition of the Bible in 1584. Agitated by several inaccurate and unflattering descriptions of Iceland published in Europe in the sixteenth century, Guðbrandur urged Arngrímur to write his earliest work, *A Short Account of Iceland* (*Brevis commentarius de Islandia*; Ionam 1593). This was followed by three other books relating to the history of Iceland, most significantly *Crymogæa, or The History of Iceland in Three Books* (*Crymogæa, sive rerum Islandicarum libri III*, 1609).

Eager to portray the cultivation of his nation in both the past and the present, Arngrímur Jónsson frequently refers in his books to characters and incidents from the family sagas. In *A Short Account of Iceland*, for instance, he rewrites *Njáls saga's* characterization of the peacemaker Njáll Þorgeirsson, highlighting the saga's description of Njáll's final hour:

[When Njáll] saw death approaching, he said: 'No one can escape their destiny', meaning, 'This is according to God's will. But I put all my hope and faith in Christ, and trust that even though our base bodies will suffer the same fate as all mortal flesh and will be devoured by the flames of the enemy, God will not let us [i.e. himself and his wife] burn in the eternal fire.' With these words on his lips he died in the fire in the year of 1010, with his wife and son . . . ; his words would be worthy of any of God's children and gave him the utmost comfort in his bitter death-struggle. (Ionam 1593: 53)

It is not known for certain which version of the saga Arngrímur was citing, for in the preserved manuscripts, Njáll's final words are not given in the first person. We are told only that Njáll and his wife Bergþóra 'crossed themselves and the boy and turned their souls over to God's hands' (Hreinsson et al. 1997: III, 156). Arngrímur's rendering of these lines, on the other hand, certainly fits his broader ideological purpose, since he is trying to illustrate how 'advanced' the Christian faith in Iceland already was just a few years after the acceptance of Christianity.

This theme of Christianity resurfaces several times within the reception of *Njáls saga* in the following centuries. In her hero-poem, already quoted, Steinunn Finnsdóttir favours those characters of the saga who display compassion and forgiveness.

The best example of this kind, however, is a seventeenth-century poem by the Reverend Bjarni Gissurarson, called 'Some Noblemen in *Njáls saga*' ('Um göfugmenni nokkur í Njálu'). This contrasts with traditional hero-poems in concentrating on those characters of the saga that converted to Christianity. The first stanza, for instance, is devoted to Njáll and reads like a rhymed paraphrase of the chapter from *A Short Account of Iceland*, quoted above (Helgason, Egilsson and Einarsson 2001).

It is particularly interesting to read the testimonies of the HK survey from this point of view. Icelanders born in the latter half of the nineteenth century do not seem to have adored their heathen saga heroes blindly, but rather to have been inspired by the sagas to discuss fundamental ethical questions. A man born in northern Iceland in 1861 claims that discussions of such questions commonly followed readings from individual sagas:

Both the older and younger members of the audience paid close attention to what was being read, and at intervals people would talk about the subject; they would often have different opinions, and when the sagas were being read people favoured different characters. Some people even made excuses for the evil deeds and flaws described in the sagas and tried to argue that this was inevitable, while others contradicted them, and often there was heated debate. This discussion would sharpen our [the children's] sense of the personalities of individual characters; we could see how they wove their thread of destiny towards fame and valour, happiness and success, or towards disgrace and a fall, life or death. My heart was burning and my eyes were often filled with tears of happiness or sorrow. (HK 1: 5–6)

It is also noted that in their role-playing games, children would at times follow those ethics that Bjarni Gissurarson had favoured in his poem. A man from northern Iceland, born in 1854, writes: 'We boys wanted very much to be like the noble-minded saga-heroes. We held the highest respect for those heroes that showed mercy to their enemies, and we acted out their roles' (HK 19: 166). These testimonies can be confirmed by the research of the historian Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon. Referring primarily to autobiographical writings, Magnússon claims (1995: 66) that even though the Protestant church exercised a strong cultural influence on the Icelandic rural community of the nineteenth century, its teaching was neither very attractive nor comprehensible to children. On the contrary, the church and its morality, along with the harsh living conditions of the time, suppressed children emotionally. Autobiographies of people born in the latter half of the nineteenth century suggest that the children found more accessible role-models in the sagas than they found in church.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, various changes brought an end to the tradition of the nightly readings of sagas on the Icelandic farms. A greater variety of literature, social development and technical progress (notably the radio) all had an effect in this respect. A few of those Icelanders who took part in the HK survey mention these changes. One man from northern Iceland, born in 1852, writes in his testimony from 1924:

People hardly read the literature of our Golden Age any more. It is hard to find young people these days that are familiar with the family sagas, for instance; what you can say is that the public is to a large extent reading pulp-fiction and rubbish. The old literature has kept our language and culture alive, but if we neglect it our nationality is at risk. (HK 12:109)

Icelanders born in the period 1900 to 1930 confirm the decreasing importance of the ancient literature. More than 60 per cent of the people claim that the sagas have had little or no influence on their views. The rest see themselves rather as exceptional cases. They too are often fully aware of the fact that some people find the family sagas morally suspect. A man from northwestern Iceland, born in 1917, says that he had started to read the sagas at the age of 10. He then adds:

These were the thrillers of the time; the plots kept my interest awake. The feuds and the bloody fights were exciting. The hero, the champion, was elevated in a gleam of fame. Most often, according to the saga, he was also more honourable than the villain. I don't remember ever feeling bad about those who lost, were cut into pieces or crippled from their injuries. And I am afraid I never thought about the surviving relatives, women, children or parents in their old age. I didn't doubt the historicity of the sagas; in my view their testimony was more or less accurate. I recognized that the difference between homicide in the saga-age and killing in our own times could be explained by reference to different religions and morals. I probably got that idea from people who were older and wiser than I. (INM 12262)

The most important aspect of the sagas discussed by those Icelanders born between 1900 and 1930 in the INM survey leads us back to the writings of Arngrímur Jónsson. Benediktsson (1957: 31–81) has claimed that it is in Arngrímur's works that the saga period was initially defined as a Golden Age in Icelandic history. This is particularly evident in his *Crymogæa*. Here Arngrímur's use of saga literature is even more substantial than it is in *A Short Account of Iceland*, with the genealogy and deeds of individual saga characters being used as a substitute for those descriptions of royal lineage and international warfare that are found in similar histories of other countries. One of Arngrímur's aims with the book is to provide his countrymen with a past comparable to the glorious past of other European nations, but at the same time he regrets the current state of affairs in Iceland.

Similar attitudes can be detected in some of the poems already quoted. In his 'Some Noblemen in *Njáls saga*', for instance, Bjarni Gissurarson regrets that Njáll's equals would be hard to find among seventeenth-century Icelanders. Most commonly, however, the poets would follow Arngrímur Jónsson in comparing the poor contemporary state of the economy, nature and society with the more impressive state of affairs in the saga period. Hallgrímur Pétursson's 'State of the Times' ('Aldarháttur') and Eggert Ólafsson's 'Iceland' ('Ísland'), composed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries respectively, are cases in point, but as far as the poetry inspired by *Njáls saga*

is concerned, 'Fljótshlíð', composed by Bjarni Thorarensen in 1821, must be the best example of this approach:

Now Fljótshlíð,
Once considered
So very beautiful
Has become a wet turf,
Its feet, once standing
On green pastures,
Is now covered
In mountain mud.

From his high cairn
Gunnarr views this area,
Once delightful,
Now colourless,
And he regrets
That he returned
To have his black bones
Buried in this place of stones.

(Helgason, Egilsson and Einarsson 2001)

In this period, however, one can also see signs appearing of a new and more politically motivated use of the saga. Influenced by the philosophy of Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803) and general political developments in Europe, Icelandic students and intellectuals in Copenhagen developed the idea that their country also deserved to be given independence; in fact, it was seen as a prerequisite for the nation to experience once again the Golden Age described in the saga literature. A key figure in the creation of this conception was the poet Jónas Hallgrímsson, who found the inspiration for his 1838 poem 'Gunnarr's Holm' ('Gunnarrshólmi') in a chapter of *Njáls saga* where Gunnarr Hámundarson makes a speech about the 'lovely... hillside' of Fljótshlíð. Already explored in a poem by the Reverend Gunnar Pálsson in the middle of the eighteenth century (cf. Johannessen 1958: 25–35), the scene reveals the hero's strong affection for nature and his home. In Jónas Hallgrímsson's poem, however, Gunnarr's decision to stay in Iceland, rather than accept a sentence of outlawry, is interpreted for the first time as an optimum symbol of Icelandic patriotism. The poet rephrases Gunnarr's speech from the saga, stressing his romantic, yet somewhat practical, sense of beauty:

'Never before has Iceland seemed so fair,
the fields so golden, roses in such glory,
such crowds of sheep and cattle everywhere!
Here will I live, here die – in youth or hoary
hapless old age – as God decrees. Good-bye,

brother and friend.' Thus Gunnar's gallant story.
 For Gunnar felt it nobler far to die
 than flee and leave his native shores behind him,
 even though foes, inflamed with hate and sly,
 were forging links of death in which to bind him.
 His story still can make the heart beat high.
 (Ringler 2002: 137–8)

By the middle of the twentieth century, Gunnar's 'return' had become so fully accepted by the Icelanders as a patriotic gesture that the scene – and thereby the saga which contained it – had begun to acquire the status of a national emblem, encompassing the Icelandic character as a whole. Johannessen (1958: 167) sums up the case in his study of the poetic tradition of *Njáls saga*: 'If you mention *Njáls saga*, everybody knows what you mean. And "lovely is the hillside" has only one meaning: the deepest and the truest patriotism you can imagine.'

One further stepping-stone in this development is apparent in the public lectures of the Icelandic historian Jón Jónsson that were published in two volumes in 1903 and 1906 under the titles of *Icelandic Nationality* (*Íslenskt þjóðerni*) and *The Golden Age of the Icelanders* (*Gullöld Íslendinga*). In these books, Jón Jónsson uses the sagas to exemplify how advanced the life of the Icelanders was before the nation became subject to Norwegian and later Danish foreign rule. He sees the colonial period from 1262 as a dark age in Icelandic history, but suggests that since 1750 the nation has been experiencing a national awakening that will finally result in complete independence from Denmark. Jón Jónsson's (1903: 256) basic views regarding the connection between the Golden Age and the prosperous future are summed up in the following statement from *Icelandic Nationality*: 'What the nation was once, it can hopefully become again.'

Only a few of those Icelanders who took part in the HK survey express similar sentiments, referring to the sagas as a literature belonging to the Golden Age. One man, born in southern Iceland in 1857, certainly writes in this spirit:

The beauty of nature where majesty and elegance go hand in hand, tenderness and ruthlessness, scenes both lovely and sublime, all of these made an impression on us and empowered us, they kindled our love for our homes and our country. And this is no wonder, as we would often hear the poems of the poets that we loved so dearly. The reading of the sagas had the same effect and was combined with the voices of nature. Right in front of us we could see the mountain of Þríhyrningur, the Fljótshlíð ridge and the Eyjafjöll glacier, all reminding us of Gunnar and Njáll, and at the same time of freedom and fame, but also its antithesis, the poverty and enslavement of the present.
 (HK 13: 121)

Such views are more commonly expressed in the INM survey. Those Icelanders, born between 1900 and 1930, who acknowledge the positive influence of the sagas on their youth often glorify their nationality. Unlike the earlier poets, however, they

hardly ever talk about the poor contemporary state of affairs. A man born in Reykjavík in 1914 gives the following answer to the question, 'Have the sagas influenced your basic views of life?': 'Yes, most certainly. Primarily [they have] made me proud to be an Icelander, equal to anyone else' (INM 11250). Another man, born in Reykjavík in 1916, says he had not read the sagas himself in his youth but that his father had always had them close at hand: he 'told me a lot of these tales, and it made an impact. They turned me into a great Icelander, and made me hate the Danes!' (INM 11406). The most interesting testimony, however, comes from a man born in western Iceland in 1924:

Influenced my basic views of life? It's hard to say. I have always had the sense that I am nothing other than an Icelander, and indeed no more of a European than I'm a human being, but I'm not sure that this is especially because of the sagas . . . Their influence on society at large, however, was twofold: they were the source of the language and they justified our striving for recognition as a nation. (INM 11872)

These words echo those of Halldór Laxness in his 'Notes on the Sagas', where he says that it was on account of the sagas that Icelanders were 'an independent nation today'.

History or Fiction?

The premise for the public admiration of the Golden Age was the firm belief that the sagas were historically reliable, that is, that the nation had indeed experienced the glorious time described by the sagas. This seems to have been a general belief among the Icelanders from an early stage. Voices critical of this opinion are once again hard to find. The best-known is that of the manuscript collector Árni Magnússon, who specifically chastised the saga authors for elevating the Icelanders and their merits, 'as if they were superior to all other nations. The author of *Njáls saga* has been especially impudent in this respect' (Þorkelsson 1889: 786). Similar views became common among certain foreign saga scholars in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, although many of them did not see the questionable historicity of the sagas in negative terms. They instead defined this literature rather as being the artistic composition of great writers.

In Iceland, however, belief in the factual historicity of the family sagas continued to prevail for some time. One of the signs of this was the extensive archaeological research carried out in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries on the basis of individual sagas. Particularly prominent was the approach to some of the *Njáls saga* sites taken by Sigurður Vigfússon under the auspices of the Icelandic Archaeological Society. This work resulted in the publication of a number of articles on the issue and even in a scientific investigation of certain mysterious white chemicals that were found at the site of Bergþórshvoll. On the basis of the reference made in *Njáls saga's* account of the burning to the women trying to put out the fire with whey (ch. 129),

these white chemicals were believed to be ‘the remains of Bergþóra’s “skyr” [whey], or in other words preserved remains of milk products that had been prepared at Bergþórshvoll in the year in which Njáll and his sons were burnt, according to the saga’ (Storch 1887: 3). The chemicals were not unambiguously identified, but in a published report by the Danish chemist Vilhelm Storch it was admitted that they might be remains of a milk-product of some sort, most probably ‘cheese, which has been prepared from sour milk’ (ibid.: 22). The purpose of this investigation, like most of the archaeological research inspired by *Njáls saga*, was to verify the testimony of the narrative ‘scientifically’.

There were indeed some sceptical voices in Iceland by then also, but it is interesting that those who questioned individual points in *Njáls saga*, for instance, seemed to believe, none the less, that it was possible to infer the true account of Gunnarr, Njáll and other saga characters ‘behind’ the preserved narrative. In 1839, the poet Sigurður Breiðfjörð published a poem in defence of Hallgerðr Høskuldsdóttir, the wife of Gunnarr Hámundarson of Hlíðarendi. Within the poetic tradition, Hallgerðr had generally been held to be responsible for her husband’s death, since in the saga she refuses to give him strands of her hair to make a bow-string in his fatal hour (ch. 77). Breiðfjörð, on the other hand, doubted whether one could make bow-strings from human hair and suggested that some malicious person must have fabricated the scene to belittle Hallgerðr (Helgason, Egilsson and Einarsson 2001).

Even more remarkable examples of this search for the ‘true story’ of *Njáls saga* were the dreams of Hermann Jónasson, which he introduced to the Icelandic public in a lecture in February 1912 and published a few months later. Jónasson opened his lecture by relating various prophetic dreams he had dreamed from an early age, dreams that enabled him to locate lost sheep and save himself and fellow travellers from danger. Having established his credibility as an oracle, he then described how Ketill Sigfússon of Mörk, one of the characters of *Njáls saga*, had visited him in a dream in 1893 to rectify the narrative of the saga. Early in their conversation, Ketill said he knew that Jónasson doubted the reliability of specific scenes in *Njáls saga*. Ketill said that some of that mistrust was justified, but stated that in other instances, the preserved text was historically truthful. His main concern was to reveal how the story of Høskuldr Þráinsson Hvítanessgoði – originally a separate saga, according to the dream – came to be falsified in the preserved version of *Njáls saga*. At this point, Jónasson noted, the dream became a mixture of Ketill’s voice, recounting the saga of Høskuldr word for word, and a vision of the events described. When the telling was over, six hours or 30 pages later, Ketill asked Jónasson (1912: 80) to publish this original version: ‘otherwise some people will continue to believe a fabrication, while others will dispute the validity of the saga as a whole because they sense that some of its points must be faulty’.

The HK survey seems to confirm the general belief of nineteenth-century Icelanders in the historicity of the sagas. One man born in northeastern Iceland in 1852 speaks for many others when he says that in his youth people were used to listening, at nightly gatherings on the farm, to readings from the Icelandic family sagas, the

legendary sagas, the sagas of the Norwegian kings, 'and other historical works' (HK 12: 107). The testimonies of certain other people suggest furthermore that the public conceived of the sagas not only as factual histories but also as having the more general character of encyclopedias. A man born in northeastern Iceland in 1883 says that he gleaned various kinds of information about Iceland from the sagas, 'for instance from those chapters describing people's travel. It was my first geographical knowledge' (HK 28: 248–9). Similar views are expressed by a woman from western Iceland, born in 1920, who participated in the INM survey. She claims that the reading of the sagas prepared young people for further studies (INM 11582).

More generally, the INM survey testifies that in the twentieth century the sagas gradually became a part of the curriculum in the developing Icelandic school system. A man from Reykjavík, born in 1916, has an illuminating story to tell:

My sister Valgerður was in the Women's College [Kvennaskóli], studying for exams. Our nephew, Eggert, was the farmer at Mýrar; he was both intelligent and widely read. He stayed at our house in Bankastræti. He asks Valgerður what she is reading. She says she is reading *Njáls saga*, and that she is not enjoying it. He then offers to tell her its story, which would make her life much easier. She accepts his good offer and from then on she says she knows *Njáls saga*. And in the exam she excelled with her knowledge of the saga. (INM 11406)

Another man participating in the INM survey, born in western Iceland in 1930, claims that when he was young, children generally would not read the sagas as they thought that they knew 'the main points regarding characters and events from the history of Iceland written by Jónas Jónsson'. The man is referring to an influential textbook, *The History of Iceland for Children (Íslandssaga banda börnum)* by Jónas Jónsson, which was originally published in 1915 and used in elementary schools into the 1980s. In some respects, the book is a simplified version of Jón Jónsson's *The Golden Age of Iceland*, since the Icelandic family sagas form Jónas Jónsson's primary sources for the 'saga age'. 'Never since then,' writes Jónas Jónsson, 'have so many excellent people, men and women alike, lived in Iceland. However, all too seldom did their human qualities walk hand in hand with blessedness.' Accordingly, Jónas Jónsson (1915: 57) finds this period both 'admirable and sad'. Yet he does not ask his young readers to doubt the testimony of the sagas; indeed, a large part of his work consists of summary biographies of major saga characters, in the manner of Arngrímur Jónsson's *Crymogæa*.

This development, though, was not to everyone's liking. A man from northeastern Iceland, taking part in the HK survey, wrote in 1929 that the nightly readings of the sagas on the Icelandic farms ensured that young people would get 'a firm knowledge of history and the human character, very different from the "summarized learning" that characterizes the elementary schools of the present' (HK 28: 251). One senses here a class difference between the conservative older generation on the one hand and, on the other, the younger generation of intellectuals who were in charge of the

developing public school system. This class difference in generations can also be sensed in the writings of those Icelandic literary scholars who were influenced by foreign ideas in the first part of the twentieth century. Instructive here are the words of Björn M. Ólsen (1937–9: 43), the first professor of Icelandic studies at the University of Iceland, who claimed in the 1920s that some of his countrymen found it ‘near blasphemous to question the historical value of our sagas. They feel that the sagas are denigrated if anything in them can be doubted.’ Ólsen himself was of a different cast of mind. Influenced by the Swiss saga scholar and translator Andreas Heusler, Ólsen approached the sagas specifically from an aesthetic viewpoint. As time passed, an increasingly large proportion of the general population began sharing the doubts expressed by Ólsen and Laxness about the historical accuracy of the sagas. Symbolic in this context are the words of one woman, born in western Iceland in 1920, who claimed in the INM survey that the family sagas were ‘fictional, violent stories that were of no use to anyone and have no significance for me whatsoever’ (INM 11362).

Of course, the picture of this development given above has been simplified. Many of those who participated in the INM survey, for instance, make no mention of the sagas as being the most important literary influence in their youth, but rather focus on frequent readings from religious works. Others fail to make any great distinction between, on the one hand, what the sagas had to say about the achievements of their heroes and, on the other, contemporary discussions in the Reykjavík parliament, or the latest news from South Africa about the Boer War. Even so, it seems indisputable that in the first half of the twentieth century a growing class of Icelandic intellectuals and artists were busy redefining their cultural and literary heritage and its significance, as well as that of the saga heroes.

Conclusions

The social significance of the saga heroes in Iceland has been subject to considerable change over the centuries. In the present chapter, two major stages in that development have been outlined. Even in the thirteenth century, the hero had come to be defined by reference to his personal merits, most importantly his physical strength. It was in this tradition that Þorkell Elfaraskáld composed his verse about Gunnarr Hámundarson’s valiant last stand. Icelandic poets of every century since then have followed this lead, partly in order to strengthen the spirit of the Icelanders during periods of intense physical hardship. A similar approach is explicit in the works of Arngrímur Jónsson from around 1600. He also presents the period of the saga heroes as Iceland’s Golden Age. The Romantic poetry of Jónas Hallgrímsson implies that a new definition of the saga heroes in Iceland was evolving during the nineteenth century. According to Jónas Hallgrímsson, it was not enough to be physically or even mentally strong; you also had to love your native soil. The concept of the Golden Age was redefined in this period too: the times in which the sagas took place were now

perceived as being the epoch of political independence. Like most other Golden Ages, it also held out the promise of a new Golden Age, somewhere in the near future, this time featuring a politically independent Iceland.

These two sides of the saga hero were united during the first decades of the twentieth century within the popular Ungmennafélagshreyfing (Icelandic Youth Movement). The main emphasis was on physical training and competition in sports, but an underlying concern was to strengthen the patriotic sense of Icelandic youth. The Skarphéðinn Athletic Club (Íþróttasambandið Skarphéðinn), established in 1911, may be taken as the literary embodiment of this unity. Here, Skarphéðinn Njálsson of *Njáls saga* – ‘a big and strong man and a good fighter. He swam like a seal and was swift of foot’ (Hreinsson et al. 1997: III, 30) – was confirmed as the idol of young athletes in the counties of Árnessýsla and Rangárvallasýsla, which form the main setting of *Njáls saga*.

Halldór Laxness has been characterized above as one representative of a new generation of Icelanders who challenged the traditional celebration of the masculine saga heroes. An avid critic of romanticized heroes such as Gunnarr Hámundarson and Skarphéðinn Njálsson, he admired the sagas far more for their artistic qualities than for their sometimes violent ethics. In this respect Laxness was in agreement with Björn M. Ólsen and certain other contemporary Icelandic scholars – an unofficial group generally referred to as ‘the Icelandic School’ in saga studies. Traditionally, those Icelanders who had read *Njáls saga* and other family sagas as reliable narrative reflections of an oral tradition hardly envisioned the ‘original’ text as having been created by an individual author. The plot of the saga, they assumed, was a manifestation of the divine force that shapes history. Inspired by Ólsen and various foreign saga scholars, the members of the Icelandic School renounced this idea of a natural connection between sagas and reality. Instead, they referred to the sagas as human constructions. In his study of *Hrafnkels saga*, Sigurður Nordal (1940: 3) expressed among other things his conviction that the saga owed ‘its final cast and refinement’ to an author, implying the work of a smith or a craftsman. Nordal’s colleague Einar Ólafur Sveinsson (1943: 21) wrote similarly in his *At Njáll’s Booth: A Study of a Literary Masterpiece* (*Á Njálsbúð: bók um mikið listaverk*): ‘All things are made out of some substance, indeed there is no evidence of anyone, except the Lord Almighty, creating something out of nothing. Human originality is different; it can rather be compared to the art of transforming lead into gold. And that was something which the author of *Njáls saga* had mastered.’

In recent decades, scholars have pointed out how the ideas of the Icelandic School were in many ways a logical step towards the development of Icelandic nationalism in the twentieth century. According to Byock (1994: 181): ‘The literary basis of the sagas equipped Iceland with a cultural heritage worthy of its status as an independent nation.’ In particular, Byock outlines some of the premises for Nordal’s approach to the sagas. First, Nordal’s emphasis on the family sagas as works of thirteenth-century Icelandic authors, rather than as products of an oral tradition, can be seen as a response to the claims of some Danes, Norwegians and Swedes, who approached this literature

as a part of a common Scandinavian cultural heritage. Second, Byock suggests, the aim of the Icelandic School was to place the sagas, 'reinterpreted in the light of standard European concepts of literary development . . . among the artifacts of European high culture' (ibid.: 184). It is indeed significant that the members of the Icelandic School frequently compared the family sagas to the works of Dante, Shakespeare and Kleist. Sveinsson was particularly active with such comparisons, both in his *At Njáll's Booth* and in separate articles dealing with topics such as the similarities between Clytemnestra and Hallgerðr Høskuldsdóttir.

Laxness, on the other hand, made different comparisons. In 1939, he wrote an article on Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi, this 'fictional character . . . whom Icelanders have been so fond of and who has played no insignificant role in shaping our personal identity – or giving us the wrong impression of who we are'. Laxness found Gunnarr's characterization to be a 'classic example of the Icelandic lack of realism' and pointed out the degree to which it had been inspired by unrealistic French romances. In this respect, he compared *Njáls saga* to a modern novel that would place a male film star from Hollywood on a small contemporary Icelandic farm: 'That a character of this kind is so admired by us can be explained by reference to the fact that it is a symbol of the Icelanders' wishful thinking' (Laxness 1942: 356–7).

In the following decades the popularity of Gunnarr and other saga heroes decreased, a growing emphasis being placed on the authors of the sagas. In later years, it has been furthermore suggested that Laxness has taken the place of the saga authors as the Icelandic national hero. Laxness's career, especially after he received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1955, was by many of his contemporaries interpreted as proof of an image of a new Icelandic cultural Golden Age of great artists in modern times. It seems fair to say that in the second half of the twentieth century, it was Laxness, rather than Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi, who was the most important figure in shaping Icelanders' national identity – 'or giving us the wrong impression of who we are'.

See also ARCHAEOLOGY; FAMILY SAGAS; GEOGRAPHY AND TRAVEL; LATE SECULAR POETRY; ORALITY AND LITERACY; METRE AND METRICS; POST-MEDIEVAL RECEPTION; ROMANCE; ROYAL BIOGRAPHY; SAGAS OF ICELANDIC PREHISTORY; SKALDIC POETRY; WOMEN IN OLD NORSE POETRY AND SAGAS.

NOTE

- 1 The Holger Kjær collection is here referred to as HK, followed by the number assigned to each informant, and then by a page number locating the informant's testimony in the collection as a whole. The Icelandic National Museum questionnaire is referred to as INM, followed by the number assigned to each informant in the archive of the Department of Ethnology at the museum.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Editions

- Helgason, Jón Karl, Egilsson, Sveinn Yngvi and Einarsson, Þórir Már (eds.) (2001) *Vefur Darraðar* (CD-ROM). Reykjavík.
- Hreinsson, Viðar, Cook, Robert, Gunnell, Terry, Kunz, Keneva and Scudder, Bernard (eds.) (1997) *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders, Including 49 Tales*. Reykjavík.

Secondary Literature

- Benediktsson, Jakob (1957) *Arngrímur Jónsson and His Works*. Copenhagen.
- Byock, Jesse L. (1988) *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London.
- Byock, Jesse L. (1994), 'Modern Nationalism and the Medieval Sagas.' In Andrew Wawn (ed.) *Northern Antiquity: The Post-Medieval Reception of Edda and Saga*. Enfield Lock, pp. 163–87.
- HK survey: answers to questions posed to Icelanders between 1927 and 1930 by Danish teacher Holger Kjær, preserved by the Department of Ethnology at the National Museum of Iceland.
- INM survey: answers to a questionnaire (no. 86, November 1994) about daily life in rural and urban areas in the twentieth century, sent by the Department of Ethnology to its informants in 1994, and preserved by the Department of Ethnology at the National Museum of Iceland.
- Ionam, Arngrímv (1593) *Brevis commentarius de Islandia*. Hafniæ.
- Johannessen, Matthías (1958) *Njála í íslenskum skáldskap*. Reykjavík.
- Jónasson, Hermann (1912) *Draumar*. Reykjavík.
- Jónsson, Jón (1903) *Íslenskt þjóðerni: Alþýðufyrirlesrar*. Reykjavík.
- Jónsson, Jónas (1915) *Íslandssaga banda börnum*, vol. I. Reykjavík.
- Kress, Helga (1996) *Fyrir dyrum fástru*. Reykjavík.
- Kristjánsdóttir, Bergljót Soffía (1998) "Egill lítt nam skilja...": Um kappkvæði Steinunnar Finnsdóttur.' *Skírnir* 172, 59–88.
- Laxness, Halldór (1942) 'Þjóðin, landið, guð. Raunsæishugleiðingar.' In *Vettvangur dagsins*. Reykjavík, pp. 355–64.
- Laxness, Halldór (1943) *Íslandsklukkan*. Reykjavík.
- Laxness, Halldór (1946) 'Minnisgreinar um fornsögur.' In *Sjálfsagðir blutir*. Reykjavík, pp. 9–66.
- Laxness, Halldór (2003) *Iceland's Bell*, transl. Philip Roughton, intro. Adam Haslett. New York.
- Magnússon, Sigurður Gylfi (1995) 'Siðferðilegar fyrirmyndir á 19. öld.' *Ný saga* 7, 57–72.
- Nordal, Sigurður (1940) *Hrafnkatla*. Reykjavík.
- Nordal, Sigurður (1958) *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða: A Study*, transl. R. George Thomas. Cardiff.
- Ólason, Vésteinn (1989) 'Bóksögur'. In Frosti F. Jóhannsson (ed.) *Íslensk þjóðmenning*, vol. IV: *Munnmenntir og bókmennning*. Reykjavík, pp. 161–227.
- Ólsen, Björn M. (1937–9). *Um Íslendingasögur*. Reykjavík.
- Pálsson, Hermann (1962) *Sagnaskemmtun Íslendinga*. Reykjavík.
- Ringler, Dick (2002) *Bard of Iceland: Jónas Hallgrímsson, Poet and Scientist*. Madison.
- Storch, Vilhelm (1887) *Kemiske og mikroskopiske Undersøgelser af et ejendommeligt Stof...* Copenhagen.
- Sveinsson, Einar Ólafur (1943) *Á Njálsbúð: bók um mikið listaverk*. Reykjavík.
- Sveinsson, Einar Ólafur (1953) *Studies in the Manuscript Tradition of Njáls saga* (Studia Islandica 13). Reykjavík.
- Sveinsson, Einar Ólafur (1971) *Njáls saga: A Literary Masterpiece*, transl. Paul Schach. Lincoln, NE.
- Porkelsson, Jón (1889). 'Om håndskrifterne af Njála.' In Konráð Gíslason and Eiríkur Jónsson (eds.) *Njála, udg. efter gamle håndskrifter*, vol. II. Copenhagen, pp. 647–783.