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Culture and the Constitution of the Icelandic in the 19th and 20th Centuries

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Tilkall Íslendinga til sjálfstjórnar þegar danska ríkið var að þróast frá fjölbjóða konungsstjórn til einsleits þjóðríkis byggði á tilfinningu fyrir einstæðum menningararfi þjóðarinnar. Tunga og bókmenntaarfur miðalda voru kjarninn í þeirri menningarlegu sjálfsmynd sem skapaði grunn draumsins um íslenskt þjóðríki. En þótt tunga og bókmenntir væru álitnar undirstöður íslenskrar menningar sáu Íslendingar þegar fram kom á tuttugustu öldina að þá skorti sitthvað á menningarsviðinu í samanburði við önnur lönd; tónlistar-, leiklistar- og myndlistarlíf var t.a.m. fremur fábrotið á Íslandi miðað við það sem tíðkaðist í borgum nágrannalandanna. Áhugi innlendra stjórnvalda á listum var vakinn á þriðja áratug aldarinnar og kom hann m.a. fram í stofnun sjóða eins og Menningarsjóðs árið 1928. Þennan áhuga má tengja sjálfsmyndarsköpun þjóðarinnar og vilja fyrimanna til að lyfta menningarástandi landsmanna. Sömuleiðis kom áhuginn skýrt fram á Alþingishátíðinni á Þingvöllum árið 1930, en við undirbúning hennar var kappkostað við að treysta stóðir listmenningar í landinu til að sýna jafnt íbúum landsins sem erlendum áhorfendum að á Íslandi þrífist öflug listmenning og Íslendingar hefðu þar með menningarlegar forsendur þess að fylla hóp sjálfstæðra þjóðríkja. Í samtengingu menningar og kröfunnar um pólitíska sjálfstjórn skipaði sagnritun sérstaka stöðu, sem vekjandi afl til að fera sönnur á nauðsyn þess og réttmæti að Íslendingar öðludust sjálfstæðan sess í samfélagi þjóðanna. Þjóðbundinn söguskilningur mótaði bæði ímynd Íslands alþjóðlega, sem 'sögu-eyjunnar', sem og sjálfskilning landsmanna, jafnt stjórnmálamanna, listamanna og fræðimanna. Á síðustu áratugum hefur aftur á móti fjarad undan nálgun að fortíðinni, en við endurskoðun á eldri sagnritun hafa sagnfræðingar leitast við að beita samanburði og alþjóðlega viðurkenndum sjónarhornum á sögu lands og þjóðar.

In the course of the 19th century, Icelandic politics developed in the context of European nationalism. The ubiquitous theme of political discourse centred on relations with (and within) the Danish state, emphasising what united Icelanders and what divided them from other subjects of the Danish king. This political development was instigated by growing claims of political integration whereby the multi-ethnic Danish monarchy was to coalesce into a more homogeneous nation-state. The Icelandic elite resisted this effort from the beginning, defending the country's distinctive status and legal structures. Through a slow political process, lasting nearly a century, proclama-

tions of Icelandic nationality gradually developed towards appeals for full independence. That Iceland would eventually become successful in this endeavour, becoming a sovereign state in union with Denmark in 1918, and establishing an independent republic in 1944, was far from certain or self-evident. At the turn of the 20th century, the country was among the most economically-deprived regions of Europe, with a total population of less than 80,000 in 1901¹. For this reason, even the staunchest supporters of the Icelandic cause in Denmark derided the Icelandic nationalists for what sounded to them like mere utopian delusions².

Sentiments about the distinctive nature of Icelandic culture were at the core of Icelandic claims to nationhood. The population of this remote North Atlantic island spoke a distinct language and possessed a large corpus of medieval literature of significant cultural value, in particular the so-called family sagas and eddic poetry. The language and literary heritage became the cornerstones for the political 'struggle for independence', placing Icelandic historiography into a very specific context. For much of the 20th century it was an integral part of the nationalistic discourse as popular history and school textbooks reflected the political climate of unbleached patriotism. The role of history was to support the nationalist claim of cultural continuity between the 'golden age' of the Saga period and modern Iceland, proving on the one hand that the Icelandic nation of the present had inherited the genius of the medieval Icelanders, and on the other that the struggle for freedom had been the theme of Icelandic history from the beginning.

The most distinctive feature in Icelandic historiography for the past 20 years has been a radical re-evaluation of its inherent nationalistic slant. Inspired by the writings of scholars like Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner³, several Icelandic historians became interested in approaching modern Icelandic history from a comparative angle, interpreting the emergence of the Icelandic state as an ideological affair rather than fulfilment of a historical dream⁴. This reassessment has included examinations of how references to culture figured in the identity politics of the emerging state, or how history became employed in political statements rationalising national independence. Here, we want to outline the complex interaction between cultural politics and the constitution of Icelandic national identity in twentieth-century Iceland, where admiration for the past and a yearning for modernity have pulled both artists and academics in two directions.

LANGUAGE, HISTORY AND CULTURE

'History has never been a fetter on the ankles of Icelanders, but only a source of energy', claimed Ásgeir Ásgeirsson, then Speaker of the Icelandic parliament, *Alþingi*, but later the second president of the Icelandic republic. The occasion for these words was the millennial celebration of *Alþingi* in 1930. It is commonly claimed in Iceland that the modern parliament is a direct continuation of the medieval assembly which gathered every year from around 930 to the end of the 18th century at the so-called Assembly Plains (*Þingvellir*) to the northeast of Reykjavík⁵. 'Our history and literature have

boosted our reputation and popularity among the best men abroad,' Ásgeirsson continued, emphasising how the literary culture of the nation and its history had opened the road for Icelanders into the wider world – that is, the memory of a medieval golden age, preserved in the Icelandic language and the literary treasures of the past, legitimised the present status of Iceland as a sovereign nation, and was the foundation for the future Icelandic society⁶.

The central place of history and literature in the formation of Icelandic national identity and state power influenced both Icelandic cultural policy and historiography through much of the 20th century. History was not regarded as an objective or critical science, but rather as a political tool, linking medieval Iceland with modern times. Culture was, in the same manner, always ranked on the basis of its relation to national history. Literature was the Icelandic cultural field *par excellence*, because it was in literature that Icelanders had excelled in the past, and the general opinion was that future cultural products had to reflect that legacy.

Jónas Jónsson from Hrífla was one of the most influential politicians of early 20th-century Iceland and author of textbooks on Icelandic history. These textbooks monopolised Icelandic elementary-school curricula from the time of the First World War until the late 1960s. Jónsson theorised the relationship with the past in an introduction to a survey of the history of 19th-century Iceland. The role of historians, he wrote, was primarily to feed politicians, teachers and writers with historical facts, which they would then 'transform into organic history or fiction.' In this manner, history would "captivate the minds of the young and link the spiritual life of every new generation with earlier periods of the nation". This historical literature must heed the traditions of Icelandic historiography, which had been formed through centuries of experience. He maintained that: "The Icelandic nation has formed its own historical style, with the practice of exact history, and this style is so perfect that it is fully comparable with the works of the most brilliant masters of the large nations of the present"⁷.

In this view, history was simply one piece in the mosaic of Icelandic culture, thoroughly rooted in the past and with the primary purpose of solidifying the national compact in the present. Its role was to distinguish Icelanders from others, not only through contrasting their history to the history of other nations, but also through using the distinctive narrative methods and techniques developed in Iceland through centuries of literary practice. History was, thus, an integral part of Icelandic culture, not an imported activity based on European ideas.

ART AND GOVERNMENT

While literary heritage was central to Icelandic nationalism, other forms of artistic expression held a much more subdued place in this discourse. Indeed, music, theatre, painting and sculpture had, at the end of the 19th century, still to be invented as sources of national distinction, seen as they were as an essential component of a mature and complete nation. Only after the turn of the 20th century did politicians and other com-

Fig. 1
A part of
millenni

mentators start to appreciate the role that art could play in reinforcing national unity and enhancing the cultural identity of the Icelandic population. The role of governmental institutions in linking art and the nation, however, remained quite insignificant until the 1920s. The most effective gesture was perhaps the few grants and scholarships parliament awarded annually to Icelandic artists and students studying abroad. After completing their studies, they returned home to produce images that visualised romantic attitudes towards Icelandic nature, both drawing on and readily feeding into, the nationalistic spirit of the times⁸.

The introduction of art into nationalist discourse, and subsequently into the political sphere, made art a governmental undertaking in the sense that it became a part of mechanisms directed at influencing the values and behaviour of the population. Government, to use Foucault's dictum, has to do with the 'conduct of conduct'⁹ – the word 'conduct' referring to direction or guidance of some sort, but also to morals, how one conducts oneself in a certain manner to fit into a particular situation¹⁰. This does not mean that direct ideological links were forged between the nation-state and the arts, but rather that governing bodies with nationalistic agendas began to invest in the cultural capital related to art and artistic produce. Thus the 1920s saw several public initiatives (from both government and parliament) to improve the conditions of artists and promote the dissemination of artwork to the public. The establishment of the National Theatre Trust in 1923, the Cultural Council and the Cultural Fund in 1928, and the National Radio in 1930, are examples of the enhanced governmental interest in the arts in the years following the First World War. To this list the millennial celebrations at Þingvellir in 1930 should be added. The celebrations had lasting significance for the cultural field in Iceland, linking art and nation, though perhaps not quite to the extent one eager commentator anticipated two years prior to the event: "No stone should be left unturned, so that the millennial celebrations, directly and indirectly, may serve our nation as a powerful energiser for centuries to come"¹¹.

At this point in time, governmental interest in culture (and in the arts in particular) by way of the nationalist agenda can be seen as having both an internal and an external character. It was directed at the local population on the one hand and to the community of nations on the other. This became evident in the preparations of the millennial celebrations. In an influential lecture given in 1926, a noted intellectual, Guðmundur Finnbogason, director of the Icelandic National Library, told his audience that the coming celebrations would be a day of judgement for the Icelandic nation: "Whatever we do to mark this event, the national celebrations will be a judgement day in the sense that delegations from many nations will attend, invited or not, to examine our conduct and make their judgements"¹². But, Finnbogason stressed that "the celebrations commemorating the millennium of our parliament and our state should first and foremost be a day of judgement when we pass verdicts on ourselves [as a people], we should use it to put ourselves to the test in every aspect, to make it clear to ourselves and thus to all, what our nation has been in centuries past, what it is presently, and what it can amount to"¹³. This dual rationale can be interpreted, as historian Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir

does in a recent article, as a bid to enhance the self-esteem of the emerging nation. On the one hand, Kristjánsdóttir points out, Icelanders were seeking international recognition attesting the eminence of their young state, but on the other, the celebrations were meant “to enhance the self-confidence of the population by persuading the nation of its intrinsic worth”¹⁴.

The external and the internal factors – gaining the respect of other nations and enhancing the confidence of the local population as a nation – were of course interlinked aspects of the same objective. To be an independent and sophisticated nation of equal standing to other ‘cultured nations’ was the yardstick of success in this context. Foreign recognition was to boost the self-assurance of the nation, just as national confidence was to promote international acknowledgement. The two dimensions had, however, very different aims in terms of government. The immediate aim of the external focus was concerned with international politics and the severing of the remaining ties linking Iceland to the Danish state. The internal dimension is, conversely, better understood as a reforming agenda meant to improve society. As sociologists Mitchell Dean and Tony Bennett have emphasised, governance, at least in its modern liberal form, is a deeply ethical enterprise and as such is related to an idea of self-government of the individual, presuming a society of “autonomous person[s] capable of monitoring and regulating various aspects of their own conduct”¹⁵. Therefore, governing does involve “the development of new forms of social management and regulation ... by creating frameworks in which individuals will voluntarily regulate their own behaviour to achieve specific social ends”¹⁶.

The millennial celebrations can be seen as a part of such a managerial framework through which autonomous individuals could act. As Finnbogason’s battle cry to the Icelandic nation indicates, the festivities were not simply to be an objective portrayal of the current state of the nation. Indeed the lecture suggested that the event also played a significant role in generating what it was to illustrate. Reflecting on his observation that the celebrations would be a self-examination of the capacities of the nation, Finnbogason, who was educated as a psychologist, urged that people would individually set themselves objectives for their personal development: “such objectives sharpen the alertness and increase the effort [of individuals] which are the prerequisites for progress, which again generates happiness [...] 1930 *will* be a day of judgement for our nation. Would it not be ample motivation for each and every Icelander to set himself a goal he will strive to achieve before this great day will dawn [...]?”¹⁷ Finnbogason thus saw the preparations and the actual celebrations as an opportunity for collectively motivated improvements of the conduct of each and every member of the population, enhancing the moral fabric and cultural standing of the national community.

But what role were the arts to play in this enterprise? As indicated above, art entered into the governmental realm in Iceland by way of the nationalist discourse as late as the 1920s. By that time, local politicians were starting to discover the arts as a premium vehicle for gaining respect and acknowledgement from the standard-setting ‘cultured nations’. Among these nations (which presumably included Iceland’s most important

neighbours, Denmark and England), the political and social value of art for the nationalist discourse had long since been recognised. In 19th-century England, for instance, influential cultural reformers like Henry Cole and John Ruskin had stressed that art “represented a social necessity ... that no nation [could] neglect ... without endangering its intellectual existence”¹⁸. Thus the logic behind the Icelandic politicians’ sudden interest in art in the 1920s was linked to the aspirations of Iceland to join the community of fully independent and cultured nations. Such a nation must be seen as possessing national art, including competent artists and art institutions, of comparable nature to what was found in other ‘civilised’ countries. This was, for example, one of the main reasons Jakob Möller, then member of the Icelandic parliament and later a cabinet minister, mentioned when arguing for the building of a state-run National Theatre. “It would be difficult”, he claimed in parliament in 1923, “for the Icelandic nation to retain the full respect of other cultured nations, if theatre would be ignored. A noted foreigner”, he concluded, “a great friend of ours [i.e. of the Icelandic nation], said in a letter to an acquaintance of mine a few years back, that it would be quite impossible for him to respect a nation that did not possess the zeal and the national ambition to build a theatre”¹⁹.

THE MILLENNIAL CELEBRATIONS AND THE ARTS

The impending ‘judgement day’ played a vital role in the increased political interest in art in the late 1920s. In 1928, speaking on the proposed establishment of the Cultural Council, the aforementioned Jónas Jónsson from Hrifla (then one of three members of the Icelandic cabinet as well as a member of the committee organising the festival) saw the establishment of these bodies in the context of the need to enhance the cultural life of the country, in part at least to impress the foreigners who would attend the millennial celebrations. Contemplating how the foreign delegates should be received in 1930, Jónsson explained to Alþingi: “The Art of our countrymen must be among the things that first spring to mind. Of course we are not capable of astounding our guests with what we can show them, but at least we can convince them that here lives a nation who can be considered as demonstrating promise on the road to cultural maturity”. We may not be there, but we need to make an effort to show the world that we are on the right track!²⁰

The commotion about the musical performance at Þingvellir is a telling example of the role the festivities played in generating a field of artistic competence in Iceland. In 1927, the Germany-based Jóns Leifs, probably the most accomplished Icelandic conductor and composer at the time, who had travelled to Iceland the previous year with a German orchestra, offered the organising committee his services in bringing to Iceland ‘a specially selected orchestra’ to perform at the millennial celebrations. The indignant committee unanimously declined the offer, stating that it would be quite unacceptable “that a foreign orchestra would administer the concerts at this Icelandic national commemoration”²¹. Subsequently, however, it became evident that some of the Icelan-

dic performing artists did not measure up to requirements. Hardly any prior experience existed for performing ensemble music, and thus the musicians originally chosen by the specially appointed musical director of the celebrations were completely incapable of mastering the prescribed pieces. Efforts were made to improve the competence of the Icelandic musicians by bringing music teachers and conductors from abroad in aid of the orchestra. Ironically, as the concerts were intended to portray the promising level of the national culture and its autonomy from other ‘cultured nations’, the organising committee ended up hiring several Danish musicians to play in the orchestra in order to ensure the quality of the musical performances at Þingvellir²². Though the orchestra had ended up being partly ‘foreign’, the music was composed by local composers and, importantly, in a style compatible with respectable European music of the time. The concerts thus functioned as a testimony, at least to the locals, that Icelandic music was of the same nature, and even quality, as the music of the ‘cultured nations’. Furthermore, the event attracted much needed musical talent to the country, contributing to a growing musical interest and an expanding musical scene. The establishment of the Reykjavík Music School in the autumn of 1930, the first of its kind in the country, can be directly linked to the celebrations of the preceding summer.

Another important episode at Þingvellir was ‘The election of the Law-speaker at Alþingi in 930’, or what was termed ‘an historical representation’ of the first sitting of the medieval parliament²³. Two distinguished professors from the University of Iceland had been appointed by the organising committee to formulate an historically plausible reconstruction of events. The play opened with 37 men in colourful archaic Viking-looking costumes, with long beards glued on their chins, striding across the assumed location of the ancient parliament, and then reciting the prescribed texts. The intent was obviously in all earnest to link together the sitting of the modern Alþingi and its glorified ancient precursor at the ‘sacred site’. As was repeatedly emphasised in the many historically-informed speeches held by notables at Þingvellir, the glory of old was seen to translate into the future of the emerging Icelandic state. But the purpose of the performance was missed by many spectators, in part because they were not able to hear what went on. Even members of the organising committee had to admit that the staging was a disappointment²⁴.

Reports of the play in the daily newspaper, *Morgunblaðið*, were indecisive, as one of its reporters claimed that it “had been a great success”, while another complained that conditions for the spectators had been poor, and that “many of them left dissatisfied”²⁵. The only Icelandic newspaper to make more than a passing remark on the piece was *Vísir*, mocking both the play and the actors. Conversely, the performance received a more generous – if mixed – coverage in the Danish press, the newspapers recounting in detail the events of the celebrations. All the major dailies reported on the ‘historical representation’. The correspondent of the liberal *Politiken* was, like his colleague at *Vísir*, far from content with the piece, claiming that the performance had been utterly ludicrous, “in sharp contrast with the day before when nature itself was permitted to speak, and the sagas’ thousand years became alive”²⁶. The reporter of the conservative

Fig. 2
Four ‘Viking chieftains’
celebrations at Þingvellir

paper *Berlingske Tidende* was, on the other hand, quite impressed. He thought that the play was “beautifully arranged” and that during the performance he had momentarily felt transposed to the olden times of the sagas²⁷.

The attention that the ‘historical representation’ received in the Danish press needs to be seen in light of the cultural profile that Iceland and Icelandic culture had attained in Denmark in the preceding decades. As the literary historian, Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson, has shown, Icelandic authors living in Denmark and writing in Danish during the first decades of the 20th century became increasingly assessed by Danish critics on the basis of their nationality. Being natives of the ‘Saga-island’ they were expected to utilise historical references in their literature because modern topics were not thought to be appropriate for Icelandic writers. Applying Edward Said’s notion of orientalism in this context, Jóhannsson draws attention to how Iceland figured as the primitive/ancient/closer-to-nature partner to the civilised/modern/culturally mature Denmark. The reception of Icelandic authors writing in Denmark in the interwar years and later was thus viewed from the perspective that Icelanders had a special relation to the past by way of the medieval scripts, and, an even more direct relation to nature, with the volcanoes and glaciers having moulded the national character and ideas²⁸. The amateurish performance of ‘The election of the Law-speaker at Alþingi in 930’ obviously fitted this image of archaic culture, the play receiving considerably more media coverage than the musical performances that were more in line with professional European artistic standards. While the music testified to the sameness of the international guests, the ‘historical representation’ fed into an image of otherness, archaic and unsophisticated.

The millennial celebrations were an international media success, with around 200 foreign reporters attending the festivities at Þingvellir, and other foreign guests estimated to have been in the thousands. The celebrations made the news around the world, most reports drawing a predominantly favourable picture of Icelandic culture²⁹. Assessing the success of the event later that summer, Jónas Jónsson wrote in the local newspaper “Tíminn” that “What Icelanders are even more concerned with than the impressions foreign guests have of the festivities themselves, is their impression of the country, the nation and its future prospects. And in this respect the judgements of the guests are almost unanimous in a way that must hearten the national ambition of Icelanders”³⁰.

On another level the success of the celebrations (at least in terms of general interest in the arts) was the integration of music and the visual arts into the mesh of nationalist discourse. Only after the celebrations could it be convincingly claimed that such forms of artistic output were integral to the national character. In 1933, Jón Leifs could seriously link what he saw as the nation’s somewhat unfulfilled potential in the artistic field to the prestigious stature language and literary heritage held in the country. Speaking on the state-owned national radio he emphasised: “Dear countrymen! Do not forget that it is the arts, and only them, that can justify the existence of Icelanders as a distinct nation – our tongue and literature of course being the ancient and obvious foundation”³¹. Writing three years after the festival, Leifs identified a dual rationale, identical to the one Finnbogason had described earlier, in pinpointing the importance of the

millennial celebrations for Icelanders. Discussing the social role that the arts played in enhancing moral education and the cultural standing of the nation, the arts supplanted the place the celebrations occupied in Finnbogason's lecture. On the one hand, Leifs maintained that art was the window through which the world gazed upon the nation and, on the other, that it was a source and measure of the population's moral and cultural health: "Cultivation of the arts is not only of central importance in our relations to other nations, but simultaneously a vital internal affair, and the only reliable criterion to the value of our culture is, in future as it has been in the past, the view of the external world"³².

HOW TO BE MODERN?

Leifs's comments can be interpreted as an attempt to associate the arts with the prestige of literature and language in Icelandic cultural life. As medieval literature was usually considered to be the only cultural contribution of the nation worth mentioning, it was at the same time regarded as the real justification of its existence and separate status. Other artistic genres had to be tied to the medieval heritage in order to be recognised as truly Icelandic. This association was tenuous at best because, aside from the literary heritage, there was no other distinctive artistic tradition in Iceland that could be interpreted or invented in order to serve the nationalistic purposes. In fact, resistance to change and devotion to the past had always been regarded as the main merit of Icelandic culture. This was clearly reflected in the commonly held perception of the Icelandic language as a relic of bygone times. The modern Icelandic language was supposed to be more or less identical to the Old Norse of the Middle Ages, and thus ancient Germanic culture had supposedly been preserved in its pristine form in this remote periphery of Europe.

This idea about Iceland and its culture was fairly common in 19th and 20th-century Europe³³, and this reinforced the belief in the role of literary culture and language in Icelandic politics. What mattered most in Iceland was Denmark's attitude towards their culture, because the political future of the country depended, to a large degree, on the reception of their political demands in Copenhagen. As it turned out, even Danish politicians like the influential liberal-nationalist Orla Lehmann (who was no particular friend of Icelandic separatism) used the alleged Icelandic cultural conservatism as an argument for a special treatment of the dependency in the north. "When I described them [the Icelanders] as an image of our forefathers", Lehmann stated in parliamentary debates on the first constitution of Iceland in 1869:

then this is the expression of veneration, which has its justification in the appreciation for what all the Nordic people owe them for faithfully preserving the remnants of the past, from which we all must obtain our future hope. I admit to harbouring this veneration and I confess that without it I would in all honesty not know what would move us to acknowledge, or to put it more correctly, to offer Iceland a status in the state, to which it would be difficult to find any parallels³⁴.

Fig. 3
The official logo
1930. The shield
rugged lava con-
against the daw-
of the event, *A*
celebrations), i
the image.

This is a standard theme when Icelandic culture is discussed abroad. Thus, it formed one of the main arguments for granting the Icelandic writer Halldór Laxness the Nobel Prize in literature in 1955. At times it sounded as if the prize was being given to the Icelandic medieval literati Snorri Sturluson, or to the unknown authors of the Icelandic sagas, rather than to Laxness himself. When Professor Elias Wessén presented the prize on the behalf of the Swedish Academy, he evoked the image of the medieval literature and its importance for Icelandic identity. “Iceland is the original home of the narrative art in the Nordic countries”, he maintained, and as most of the literary production in medieval Iceland was anonymous, treasures such as the family sagas “were the fruits of the artistic talent and independent creative genius of a whole nation”. In the field of literature, the nation spoke in a collective voice rather than as individual authors who happened to be Icelandic³⁵. Laxness, in his response, complied dutifully to Wessén’s clichés. “It is a great privilege”, the Nobel laureate told the distinguished guests in Stockholm’s City Hall, “to be born and raised in a country where the nation has been imbued with the spirit of literature for centuries, and possesses therefore great literary treasures from the days of old”³⁶.

In Iceland, the arts were caught up in this discourse of literary heritage. In Icelandic self-perception, the present was not only shaped by the past, but it was also to be an imitation, faithful reproduction, or improvisation of ancient cultural themes. But at the same time, modernity lured Icelanders in the same manner that it had tempted everyone else in the world. Thus, for a nation which wanted to be taken seriously, it did not suffice to rehash old literary traditions, or to speak an uncorrupted medieval language. National theatre, orchestra, and art museums were all signs of maturity, and they had to be operated according to common European standards. The question was, then, how to preserve distinctive cultural traditions at the same time as the foreign was imitated? This dilemma had haunted the 19th-century Icelandic poets, as even those who admired the medieval heritage the most, including the romantic nationalist Jónas Hallgrímsson, oscillated between using antiquated meters and poetic styles, harking back to the medieval golden age, and common European patterns³⁷. In the words of Professor Sigurður Nordal, one of the two authors of the historical play shown at Þingvellir in 1930, Icelandic culture had to find the middle-way between opening itself to foreign influences and being turned “into a patriotic cow stall, into which no foreign ray of light can penetrate...”³⁸.

HISTORY AND MODERNITY – THE DECLINE OF THE NATIONAL NARRATIVE

Historiographical development in Iceland mirrors what has been said about the role of culture in the constitution of the Icelandic. Inevitably, history played a large role in Icelandic cultural life, as the strong emphasis on medieval heritage directed attention, almost automatically, to the past. Moreover, Icelandic nationalists used historical arguments very effectively in their fight for what they claimed to be Icelandic rights, searching for historical precedents on which to base their calls first for political autonomy, and later, for full independence. But at the same time as this placed history on a pedes-

tal in Iceland, it also restricted its scope and the development of new research themes. First, to many, the main purpose of writing history was to prove that Icelandic society had reached its pinnacle when the nation had been free from foreign control, and that it had degenerated greatly under the rule of Norwegian and Danish kings. This attitude was, for example, behind a historical exhibition in Reykjavík in 1944, celebrating the foundation of the Icelandic republic. In a volume describing the various events of the so-called ‘Year of the Republic’, the socialist politician Einar Olgeirsson wrote that the role of this exhibition was to “keep the legacy of the fight [for liberty] alive, to make the strive and struggle of past generations for freedom a central part in the life and consciousness of coming generations”³⁹.

Second, the language and style of history was to be patriotic if it was not to succumb to foreign imitations; that is, it was to be based on narrative patterns that corresponded to traditional history-writing in Iceland. Icelandic history, Jónas Jónsson wrote, “cannot ... be a collection of dry facts, or a playground for authors attempting to further vague utopian ideas ... The History of Icelanders should never be anything but a textbook for the nation, where generation upon generation can perceive their forefathers like silhouettes on a screen, and this is the only way that the nation can preserve the correct faith in its merit...”⁴⁰.

But as important as these ideas were during the first half of the 20th century, or at the time when the Icelandic modern nation-state was constituted, they have declined in recent years. Thus, most Icelandic authors and poets have abandoned the traditional literary patterns, and historians have adopted the latest fashions of international scholarship rather than adhering to ‘Icelandic’ narrative styles. In part, this reflects the fact that the struggle for independence is over, and therefore there is not the same need to stress the difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’ as before. It is also, in part, a sign of a new version of the division between ‘us’ and the world – increasingly, nature is replacing culture as the predominant symbol of the Icelandic, both in the eyes of Icelanders themselves and the few foreign commentators who have an opinion on the matter. It is not yet clear how this paradigm shift in the history of Icelandic culture will change the historiography of Icelandic culture, but it opens the field for reinterpretations and reappraisals.

NOTES

- ¹ G. Jónsson - M. S. Magnússon (eds.), *Hagskinna. Icelandic Historical Statistics*, Reykjavík 1997, p. 49.
- ² See for example, G. Brandes, *Amagers Løsrivelse*, “Politiken”, 16 Decemeber 1906, and *Amagers Flag*, “Politiken”, 22 December 1906.
- ³ See in particular B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London 1983 and E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford 1983.
- ⁴ See for example G. Hálfðanarson, *Social Distinctions and National Unity: On Politics of Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Iceland*, “History of European Ideas”, 21, 6, 1995, pp. 763-779; *Iceland: A Peaceful Secession*, “Scandinavian Journal of History”, 25, 2000, pp. 87-100.
- ⁵ On this historical vision of Alþingi, see ‘Althingi’, an information brochure on the homepage of the parliament, <<http://www.althingi.is/pdf/enska.pdf>>, accessed 8 February 2006.

- ⁶ M. Jónsson, *Alþingishátíðin 1930*, Reykjavík 1943, pp. 158-172.
- ⁷ J. Jónsson, *Formáli*, in *Saga Íslands*, vol. 8, *Tímabilið 1830-1874. Fjölnismenn og Jón Sigurðsson*, Reykjavík 1955, pp. xv and xix.
- ⁸ Á. Helgason, *Landnám listagyðjunnar. Íslensk myndlist og þjóðernisbyggja*, “Sagnir”, 13, 1992, pp. 68-73.
- ⁹ M. Foucault, *The Subject and Power*, in H.L. Dreyfus - P. Rabinow (eds.), *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd edition, Chicago 1983, pp. 219-222; See also M. Foucault, *Governmentality*, in G. Burchell et al. (eds.), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, London 1991, pp. 87-104.
- ¹⁰ M. Dean, *Governmentality. Power and Rule in Modern Society*, London 1999, p. 10.
- ¹¹ Jóhannes úr Kötlum, *Alþingishátíðin 1930*, “Íðunn”, 12, 1928, p. 206.
- ¹² Finnbogason uses the dramatic word ‘dómsdagur’ (Doomsday or Day of Judgement) without the usual biblical reference – that is, meaning simply the day when a verdict is passed.
- ¹³ G. Finnbogason, 1930, “Andvari”, 51, 1926, pp. 13-14.
- ¹⁴ R. Kristjánsdóttir, ‘1930 – ár fangaðar?’ *Kvennaslóðir. Rit til heiðurs Sigriði Th. Erlendsdóttur sagnfræðingi*, Reykjavík 2001, p. 430; See also S. Matthíasdóttir, *Hinn sanni Íslendingur. Þjóðerni, kyngervi og vald á Íslandi 1900-1930*, Reykjavík 2004, p. 162.
- ¹⁵ Dean, *Governmentality* cit., p. 12.
- ¹⁶ T. Bennett, *Culture. A Reformer’s Science*, London 1998, p. 110.
- ¹⁷ Finnbogason, 1930 cit., p. 26.
- ¹⁸ A. Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, vol. 4, London 1962, p. 107.
- ¹⁹ *Alþingistíðindi*. [Parliamentary minutes] 1923 B, col. 1600-1601.
- ²⁰ *Alþingistíðindi*. [Parliamentary minutes] 1928 A, col. 2252.
- ²¹ Jónsson, *Alþingishátíðin 1930* cit., p. 30; NAI [National Archives of Iceland] Ýmis skjalasöfn opinberra stofnana. 12 Alþingishátíðin 1930, box 7, Gjörðabók Alþingishátíðarnefndar 1926-1930, 26. September 1927, p. 31.
- ²² Á.H. Ingólfsson, *Hetjur styrkar standa. Þjóðbúið Jóns Leifs og Alþingishátíðin 1930*, “Saga”, 2, 2002, pp. 197-198.
- ²³ Guðmundsson, *Handbók Alþingishátíðarinnar 1930* cit., pp. 64-67, pp. 95-97.
- ²⁴ Jónsson, *Alþingishátíðin 1930* cit., p. 255.
- ²⁵ *Morgunblaðið* 28 June 1930.
- ²⁶ “Politiken”, 28 June 1930.
- ²⁷ *Berlingske Tidende* 28 June 1930.
- ²⁸ J.Y. Jóhannsson, “Jöklen Storm svaledede den kulturtrætte Danmarks Pande”. *Um fyrstu viðtökur dansk-íslenskra bókmennta í Danmörku*, “Skírnir”, 2001, 175, p. 43 and *passim*; See also *Scandinavian Orientalism. The Reception of Danish-Icelandic Literature 1905-1950*, in M. Marnersdóttir - J. Cramer (eds.), *Nordisk litteratur og mentalitet.*, Tórshavn 2000, pp. 254-261.
- ²⁹ Jónsson, *Alþingishátíðin 1930* cit., p. 126. Reporters had been invited not individually, but by a general letter from the prime minister 11 March 1930.
- ³⁰ J. Jónsson, *Eftir hátíðina*, “Tíminn”, 16 August 1930.
- ³¹ J. Leifs, ‘Kveðj’, “Íðunn”, 17, 1933, p. 103.
- ³² J. Leifs, *Íslensk mentastefna*, “Íðunn”, 19, 1936, p. 99.
- ³³ Ó. Bjarnason, *Þegar Íslendingar urðu forfedur Þjóðverja*, “Skírnir”, 173, 1999, pp. 53-88; See also A. Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians. Inventing the Old North in the 19th-Century Britain*, Cambridge 2000.
- ³⁴ O. Lehmann, ‘Ordførerens Gjensvar’, in O. Lehmann (ed.), *Den islandske Forfatings sag i Landstinget 1868-69*, Copenhagen 1869, pp. 51-52; See also *Fedrelandet*, 27 January 1870 and 17 May 1871.

- ³⁵ E. Wessén, *Ræða baldin á Nóbels hátíðinni í Hjómlistarhöllinni í Stokkholmi*, “Tímarit Máls og menningar”, 16, 1, 1956, p. 14.
- ³⁶ H. Laxness, *Ræða baldin á Nóbels hátíðinni í Stokkholmsráðhúsi 10. desember 1955*, “Tímarit Máls og menningar”, 16, 1, 1956, p. 10.
- ³⁷ S.Y. Egilsson, *Arfur og umbylting. Rannsókn á íslenskri rómantík*, Reykjavík 1999, pp. 57-78 and P. Valsson, *Íslensk endurreisn*, in H. Guðmundsson (ed.), *Íslensk bókmenntasaga*, vol. 3, Reykjavík 1996, pp. 316-317.
- ³⁸ S. Nordal, *Sambengið í íslenskum bókmenntum. Inngangur að Íslenskri lestrabók*, in S. Nordal, *Sambengið og samtíð*, vol. 1, Reykjavík 1996, pp. 34-35 (Originally written in 1924).
- ³⁹ E. Olgeirsson, *Sögusýningin*, in *Lýðveldishátíðin 1944*, Reykjavík 1945, p. 386.
- ⁴⁰ Jónsson, *Formáli* cit., p. xv.

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SOURCES

The following reflections on the nature and role of Icelandic historiography are taken from Jónas Jónsson's introduction to the eighth volume of *Saga Íslendinga* (The History of Icelanders) which came out in 1955. This multi-volume survey of Icelandic history was to serve as the official version of Icelandic history from the settlement to 1918, funded and organised by the state. Jónas Jónsson was instrumental in arranging this work, and wrote the volume on the period from 1830 to 1874, or the period covering the emerging nationalist struggle in Iceland. Jónsson's views on historiography and the role of history are symptomatic of nationalistic attitudes toward history and writing of history in Iceland during the years following the Second World War, emphasising the importance of maintaining the connection between medieval Icelandic culture and the present.

Íslendingar hafa að baki sér samfellda þúsund ára reynslu í söguritum, og á þeirri leið hefur þeim tekizt að verða virkur þátttakandi í heimsbókmenntunum. Íslensk sagnfræði hefur myndast og mótazt við þrotlausar endursagnir á heimilum og mannfundum. Gáfuð þjóð, sem ann sögu og temur sér list endursagnarinnar, skapar varanlegar bókmenntir. Hinn óþekkti höfundur leggur sitt lóð á vogarskálina. Hin snjöllu og hnitmiðudu samtöl í Íslendingasögum og Heimskringlu hafa verið að nokkru fullmótud, þegar þau voru bókfærd á bændabýlum eða í kaustrunum. Íslenska þjóðin hefur myndað sinn eigin sögustil með nákvæmri sögulegri ástundum, og þessi sögustill er svo fullkominn, að hann þolir algerlega samanburð við verk hinna snjöllustu meistara með stórþjóðum nútímans. Saga Íslendinga, sem nú er unnið að, getur ekki eftir eðli málsins verið kennslubók fyrir einn eða annan skóla. Ekki heldur safn þurra heimilda eða leikvöllur fyrir höfunda, sem reyna að koma á framfæri fjarrenum draumsjónakenningum um söguleg efni. Saga Íslendinga á aldrei að vera annað en lesbók þjóðarinnar, þar sem kynslóð eftir kynslóð sér forfedur sína og þeirra athafnir eins og skuggamyndir á tjaldi, og með þeim hatti einum er von um að þjóðin varðveiti rétta trú á gildi sínu. [...]

Það má segja, að í tíð núlifandi manna hafi rofnad fortjald þjóðlegrar menningar í tvo hluti. Annars vegar stendur hin verklega menning með miklum blóma, [...] Hins vegar vofir andleg brönnun yfir þjóðinni bæði í sögu og skáldskap. Andleg og verkleg menning verða að fylgjast að, ef ekki á að koma til slysa [...] Þegar Íslendingar glata bókmenntaþekkingunni, eru þeir hettir að vera þjóð, en hafa breytt í litlausan dropa í þjóðahafinu. [...]

Næst mun tímabært að vikja nokkrum orðum að tekni íslenskrar sagnaritunar. Þar er um þrjár mismunandi aðferðir að ræða. Fyrst vinnubrögð manna, sem eru bæði vísindamenn og listamenn. Þeir samræma heimildakönnun og mikla rithöfundarsnilld. Í öðru lagi fræðimenn, sem safna, skýra og gefa út heimildir. Í þriðja lagi rithöfunda og skáld, sem taka við heimildunum frá annalahöfundum og fræðimönnum og ummynda söguefnið, svo að það vekur varanlega eftirtekt og áhuga tilheyrenda og lesenda. Í fyrstu röð er Snorri Sturluson einn af þekktum og nafngreindum Íslendingum. Hjá honum getir sívakandi áhuga fyrir heimildum þeim, sem hann aflar sér og notar í undirstöðu sagnarita sinna, en jafnframt er ritsnilld hans og stílgáfa svo fullkomin, að rit hans eru ný og fersk fyrir hverja kynslóð, sem skilur íslenska tungu.

Icelanders have behind them one thousand years' continuous experience in writing history, and on that road they have become active participants in world literature. Icelandic history was produced and formed through ceaseless recitations in homes and at public meetings.

An intelligent nation, which reveres history and practises the art of recitation, creates enduring literature. The unknown author puts his weights on the scales. The brilliant and succinct dialogues in the Icelandic Sagas and the Orb of the World [this is a collection of 13th-century histories of Norwegian kings written by the Icelander Snorri Sturluson] have been more or less fully developed, when they were written down on farms or in monasteries. The Icelandic nation has formed its own historical style, with the practice of exact history, and this style is so perfect that it is fully comparable with the works of the most brilliant masters of the large nations of the present time. The History of Icelanders, which is now being written, cannot, by the nature of things, be a textbook for one particular school. It cannot either be a collection of dry facts, or a playground for authors attempting to further vague utopian ideas on historical subjects. The History of Icelanders should never be anything but a textbook for the nation, where generation upon generation can observe their forefathers like silhouettes on a screen, and this is the only way that the nation can preserve the correct faith in its merit, and that is the only way for the nation to have any hope to preserve the correct belief in its worth. [...]

One could say that during the existences of those now living, the curtains of the national culture have been torn into two parts. On the one hand, practical culture really flourishes [...] On the other, the nation faces intellectual decay both in history writing and literature. These two cultural forms, the intellectual and practical, have to go together, if disaster is to be averted [...] When Icelanders lose their knowledge of literature, they will not be a nation anymore and will change to a colourless drop in the sea of nations. [...]

Next, it is opportune to say something about the technique of Icelandic historiography. Here we have three different methods. First, there are those who are both scientists and artists. They combine the study of sources and great literary skills. Second, there are scholars who collect, explain, and edit sources. Third, there are writers and poets who receive the source material from the annalists and academics and transform the historical material, bringing it to the attention and evoking the interest of the listeners and readers. In the first category is Snorri Sturluson [the medieval scribe who wrote the Orb of the World and possibly Egils Saga], one of the best known Icelanders. In his works we sense a persistent interest in the sources he collected and uses as a base for his historical works, but at the same time his literary genius and art is so perfect that his literary works are as new for every generation who understands the Icelandic language.

