National Romanticism, 1830-1874

Foreign influence

The European tendencies ushering in the new Romanticism in Iceland were of two types: political and literary.

The political tendencies culminated in and spread from the French revolutions of 1789, 1830, and 1848. The first caused hardly a ripple in monarchistic Iceland; the second raised a romantic clamor for the rebirth of the Althing at Þingvellir; and during the third a deliberate realistic struggle was under way for an ever growing autonomy from Denmark. But throughout the period and, indeed, up to 1918, there was a never-failing current of nationalism, so that the patriotic song of the nineteenth century (and after) more nearly took the place of the religious poetry of the age of orthodoxy, not to speak of the bucolic poetry of Enlightenment, to which—with Eggert Ólafsson’s nationalistic emphasis—it was closely related.

The literary tendencies, which in Europe went under the name of Romanticism, sprang from diverse and scattered roots, but all had this in common: they were revolts against Neo-Classicism and Enlightenment, just as the French Revolution was a revolt against the enlightened French monarchy. Thus we see emotion take the place of reason, sentimentality replace the cold rules of etiquette, deep religious feeling oust the rationalistic free thinking. We find nature, idyllic or magnificent, picturesque and awe-inspiring, preferred to the urban scene or the civilized scenery, just as simple country life, even the life of “noble” savages is preferred to civilized life. Herewith goes the lure of faraway romantic countries, interest in oriental tales (The Arabian Nights) and oriental gardens (China).

For the first time since the Renaissance, medieval life and art was preferred to the present, and not only the European Middle Ages with its knights, castles, and the Catholic Church (in which many Romanti-

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cists took a last refuge), but also Celtic and Northern (i.e., Icelandic) antiquities (*Ossian* and *Edda*; cf. P. H. Mallet). Even English poets (Gray) drew on the Northern antiquities, and in Germany they were fused with Tacitus to form the national romantic reconstruction of the "urgermanic" times (Gerstenberg and especially Grimm). Simple folk tales and folk songs were hailed and collected as sources of national values (Herder), while ballads and fairy tales were cultivated as art forms (H. C. Andersen) as peculiarly apt forms for the unbridled romantic phantasy. The ambitions of the early Romanticists were often titanic (*Prometheus, Faust*), their melancholy, when thwarted, a Byronic *Weltenschmerz*. In general they yearned for the infinite and the absolute, preferring a quest to definite results. They sought variety of form or formlessness, their imagination was free, and their studied indifference—romantic irony—to their own work and to their readers superb.

In Germany the deep religious feeling of Klopstock’s *Messiah* and the growing appreciation of Northern antiquities were a sign of the change. But the real leaders of the movement in Germany were Herder, Goethe, and Schiller, though the two last named, especially Goethe, later turned to a new classicism in their appreciation of the noble simplicity and quiet greatness of Greek art. Since Goethe and Schiller, especially the latter, became the favorites of the Romanticists in Iceland, and since these all went through a good schooling in Homer at the Latin School of Bessastaðir, it was perhaps natural that the Romantic movement in Iceland should be remarkably free from its excesses in Germany.

When Henrik Steffens in 1802 started to lecture on Romanticism in Copenhagen, there was among his hearers not only the Danish poet Oehlenschläger, but also the young Icelander Bjarni Thorarensen. Both became the first and in some respects the best romantic poets of their native lands. In Iceland Bjarni remained a solitary voice in the wilderness until joined by the young *Fjölnismenn* of the 1830’s who, partly inspired by the late and embittered romantic poet Heine in Germany, undertook to spread the gospel of national Romanticism in Iceland.

**The leaders**

The leaders of Romanticism in Iceland were partly educators, partly politicians, and partly poets. Increased work in Icelandic (Old Norse) studies, the edition of the Eddas and the sagas, and growing admiration for them abroad, all combined to convince lay and learned alike of the great value of Icelandic as the classical language—the Latin—of the
North. Realizing this, the Latin School teachers at Bessastaðir in the twenties, notably Sveinbjörn Egilsson, forced their pupils to give immaculate Icelandic translations of the Latin and Greek classics, thus kindling in them love and admiration for their native tongue. The coming political and cultural leaders were all schooled by him and his colleagues.

The coming leaders were: the shortlived editor of Ármann á Alþingi (1829–32) Baldvin Einarsson (1801–33) and the editors of Fjölðir (1835–39, 1844–47) Tómas Sæmundsson (1807–41), Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807–45), Konráð Gíslason (1808–91), and Brynjólfur Pétursson (1810–51). Both Baldvin and Tómas were closer to the men of the Enlightenment in having the social, economic, and moral progress of their countrymen foremost at heart—and on an unusual tour of Europe (1832–34) Tómas gathered invaluable data of comparison on which to build his program of progress in Iceland. But they were also national romanticists in hailing the liberal ideas of 1830 and working for the rebirth of the Althing at Þingvellir, hoping to recreate its glorious past, conjured up in Jónas Hallgrimsson’s beautiful and stirring program poem. Jónas, a naturalist and poet, contributed the arts and sciences to Fjólðir, writing among other things a scathing attack on rímur from a purely esthetic point of view. Konráð Gíslason wrote a brilliant essay on the Icelandic language and set about purifying it from two centuries of Dano-German dross and its baroque style. This campaign for the purification of the language set an epoch of linguistic nationalism which lasted unchallenged for nearly a century. It continued up to the modernist period of the twentieth century, and its strength still persists.

But the greatest leader in the fight for liberalism and Icelandic autonomy was Jón Sigurðsson (1811–79). He was not really a romantic like the Fjölñismenn but a hard-headed realist, as symbolized by the fact that he wanted the new Althing in Reykjavik and not at Þingvellir. And his efforts were crowned with success: not only did he get the new Althing established in Reykjavik in 1845, but in 1874 the Danish king visited Iceland and brought it its first partly autonomous constitution as a millenary anniversary present. Jón Sigurðsson was not only a great statesman who gathered poets and politicians alike to his liberalistic periodical Ny Félagssrit (1841–73), but as a president of the Icelandic Literary Society and as an active member of the Arnamagnæan Foundation and the Society for Northern Antiquaries, he was really the most influential leader of Icelandic (Old Norse) studies during his life-
time, he himself editing sagas, a *Diplomatarium Islandicum*, and a new periodical devoted to the history of Iceland and Icelandic literature.

In Iceland, Jón Sigurðsson's political struggle gave rise to journalism pro and con; the newspapers were at first usually weeklies, and mostly published in Reykjavik, though shortly after the middle of the century they began to appear also in Akureyri and, much later, in other provincial towns.

**Icelandic studies**

There was an accelerated tempo in Icelandic (Old Norse) studies during the 1820's owing to such men as Rask, Rafn, Finnur Magnússon, and Sveinbjörn Egilsson.

Of the Romantic period two great scholars have already been mentioned: Konráð Gíslason and Jón Sigurðsson. After *Fjölínir*'s demise, Konráð Gíslason succeeded Finnur Magnússon as a professor of Old Icelandic (Old Norse) at the University and buried himself in lexicographical, grammatical, and skaldic studies, so exact in method that they became models for the following Realists. Only in his eclectic edition of *Njála* did Konráð remain true to the romantic principle of beauty.

A new and entirely romantic type of studies was the collection of Icelandic folk tales and folklore for their own sake. This was taken up by Jón Árnason (1819–88) and Magnús Grímsson (1825–60), both in Reykjavik, on the pattern of Grimm's fairy tales.

The rector of the Latin School in Reykjavik, Jón Dórkelsson (1822–1904) was also a grammarian, a skaldic commentator, and lexicographer. Eiríkur Jónsson (1822–99), lexicographer and editor, and Vilhjálmur Finsen (1823–92), justice of the Supreme Court and editor of *Grágás*, were both members of Jón Sigurðsson's circle in Copenhagen. So was, but to a lesser degree, Gísli Brynjúlfsson (1827–88), lecturer on Icelandic history and literature at the University and editor of the medieval romance *Tristram's saga*.

Two scholars, both friends of Jón Sigurðsson, were destined to lay the foundation of Icelandic studies in England: Guðbrandur Vigfusson (1827–89) and Eiríkur Magnússon (1833–1913). They became associated with Oxford and Cambridge respectively and perpetuated the rivalry of the two schools. Guðbrandur edited the monumental Old Icelandic-English dictionary, based on the collections of Cleasby (and Konráð Gíslason) in 1874. He also edited almost the entire body of
Old Icelandic poetry and prose in five huge collections, two of them in collaboration with York-Powell. Eiríkur translated a selection of Jón Árnason's Icelandic folk tales into English and collaborated with William Morris in translating the sagas into English.

**Literary genres**

In general it may be said that the literary genres of the preceding period survived, but with a great deal of different emphasis.

Since the romantic poets as a rule were genuinely religious in reaction to the rationalism of the Enlightenment, there are a number of excellent hymns dating from this period, especially when combined with the patriotic theme as in Matthías Jochumsson's great national anthem, 1874. He was the greatest hymn writer of the period. Of poets who specialized in hymn writing, the Rev. Helgi Hálfdanarson (1826-94) and the Rev. Valdimar Briem (1848-1930), later vice-bishop of Skálholt, were the most prolific and best. Related to the hymn writing was the philosophical poetry, first of its kind in Iceland, by Björn Gunnlaugsson (1788-1876) and Brynjólfur Jónsson frá Minnáúpi (1838-1914), but these men were better philosophers than poets.

*Rímur* flourished during the nineteenth century seemingly more than ever. Not only were the writers of this genre more numerous and more prolific than before—Magnús Magnússon (1763-1840), farmer and blacksmith, had 257 to his credit at death—but there were actually better poets than ever, counting such men as Sigurður Eiríksson Breiðfjörð (1798-1846) and Hjálmar Jónsson (Bólu-Hjálmar) (1796-1875) among their numbers. Moreover, it is generally agreed that Breiðfjörð's *Núna rímur* (a versified paraphrase of J. P. Florian's *Numa Pomfilius*, 1835) were the best *rímun* of all time. Yet, when Jónas Hallgrímsson reviewed Breiðfjörð's *Rímur af Tristrani og Indiönu in Fjölnir* in 1837, he dealt the whole genre such a staggering blow that it never really recovered from it. It was the skaldic diction with its turgid baroque mannerism and meaningless tags that here clashed head on with the utmost in classical simplicity: Jónas Hallgrímsson's ideal of beauty. And, unfortunately for the *rímun*, it was not in theory only, for there was also Jónas's own ethereal poetry to shame the poetasters. Thus the *rímun*, immune to moral and utilitarian attacks, were tottering from a rapier thrust to their artistic heart. It did not really help matters that Helgi Sigurðsson (1815-88) was working on the most voluminous *háttalykill* of all time, demonstrating twenty basic meters with over two
thousand variations (Bragfraði Íslenskra rimna [1888] 1891). Neither he nor others knew that the great variety of rimur meters had left their mark on some of the outstanding romantic poets of the North, among them, Oehlenschläger and Tegnér, and through them influenced world literature (Longfellow). It was left to the poets and scholars of the next period to revalue the rimur from a more sympathetic point of view. But then they could not be resuscitated because the public was becoming accustomed to new entertaining literature in the form of translated adventure, detective stories, and the new native novels.

The popular poetry of the Romantic period and after still decidedly made use of the rimur forms, though often coupled with Jónas Hallgrimsson’s demands for classical perfection. Popular poets turned out occasional verse, on the weather, on their horses or dogs, congratulations to newly-weds, and condolences at death. Also humorous and sarcastic epigrams were composed that vied with Pope’s couplets in pith and wit. The number of such poets was legion, but their great prophets were Bólu-Hjalmar and Páll Ólafsson.

The Romantic movement was essentially lyric, hence lyric poetry was both voluminous and variegated. The patriotism of the romantic poets was often tinged with religious fervor and most were, besides, devout Christians. The patriotic theme had three elements (all found in Eggert Ólafsson): admiration for the old heroic saga age with its manly virtues contrasted with present sloth; love of country, where Iceland was often contrasted with Denmark, and the simple country life with the demoralizing life of Copenhagen; and, finally, praise of the mother tongue. No one appreciated the educational values of the harsh country and its winter seasons as Bjarni Thorarensen, no one was as much at home in the heroic age as Grímur Thomsen with his ballads on figures from the sagas or from the Middle Ages. Both developed vigorous, manly styles. There was a growing body of topographical poetry singing the praises of certain districts and falling into two well defined types, though often mixed, one stressing the region’s history and its saga heroes, the other simply a nature description. Bjarni Thorarensen always used the former approach; Jónas Hallgrímsson was the chief early exponent of the other, and naturally so, since he was a poet-naturalist like Eggert Ólafsson and tended to reflect his spirit. Being the greatest representative of unadulterated classic beauty among the Romanticists, he sometimes painted brilliant, often geologically correct, canvasses of his landscapes, sometimes placed himself in the midst of nature among familiar flowers and
scenes, greeting them with the loving intimacy of a St. Francis. He could do the same with the birds, the farmer with his scythe, and the fisherman in his boat, and he was really the only one who succeeded in painting country life as attractive (which was Eggert Ólafsson's main concern). As Bjarni Thorarensen was the poet of rugged winter, Jónas was the songbird of summer. His comments on places that he visited were not like Eggert Ólafsson's but akin to those of Heine. All these nature themes were carried on and expanded by the later poets like Steingrímur Thorsteinsson and Matthías Jochumsson, the latter more akin to Bjarni and Gröndal, the former more an echo of Jónas. These later Romanticists were the first to sing of the waterfalls of Iceland, while already Eggert Ólafsson had made poetical commentaries on the volcanoes, the glaciers, and the geysers, thus enriching the poetical imagery of the Romanticists with these powerful contrasts.

The poetry in praise of the language ranges from Jónas Hallgrímsson's beautifully classical tribute Astkara ilhýra málið to Matthías Jochumsson's impassioned and profound hymn Tungan geymir í tinans straumi, cast fittingly in the venerable skaldic and Catholic hrynhent-Liljulag.

Very original love poetry was written by Bjarni Thorarensen and Jónas Hallgrimsson. Bjarni's was strangely ethereal and yet powerful with Eddic echoes, Jónas's was a classical expression of the sadness caused by lost love. Gisli Brynjúlfsson also wrote love laments, while Steingrímur Thorsteinsson, betrayed, hit back with a scathing denunciation.

Memorial poetry flourished as always, but was lifted to a rank of high poetry mainly by two of the romantic poets: Bjarni Thorarensen and Matthias Jochumsson. The former saw in his departed friends sturdy heroes, akin to the saga men and himself. The latter drew on such an enormous stock of human sympathy that he could lament the newborn babe as well as the great men of Iceland, past and present.

Of specifically romantic attitudes or themes, romantic irony was found in Jónas Hallgrímsson (from Heine) and Gröndal, the romantic melancholy (Weltenschmerz) in Grímur, Gisli Brynjúlfsson, and Kristján Jónsson Fjallaskáld. In general Gröndal was the most fullfledged romanticist of the lot in spite of his familiarity with the classics and not uncommon use of classical myth paraphernalia, often for humorous purposes. He even turned Catholic, in romantic fashion, though more out of necessity than conviction. He had the romantic phantasy and cultivated it in a high-flown, florid style. His romantic irony appeared
sometimes as indifference to his readers ("my task is composing, yours understanding"), partly as a reckless spurring of his Pegasus from the sublime heights of the starry heavens to the depths of low farce or parody, all in one poem. Indeed, his exuberant imagination, especially in his humorous poems, is his chief charm, though at his worst he may sink down to obscure twaddle. The wide range of his themes is also truly romantic: epic and rimur on the heroic fornaldar sagas, a dramatic poem on the twilight of the Gods, philosophic poems, poems on the titans Prometheus and Napoleon, a poem on the blue bird and golden eagle of Romanticism, mock heroics and mock idylls, poems on the infinite world and, finally, patriotic poems.

There is a parallelism between the early and late poets of Enlightenment and Romanticism in that the earlier poets translated little and the later a great deal, acting as cultural transmitters.

The earliest Romanticists (Bjarni and Jónas) translated some poems by Ossian, Schiller, Oehlenschläger, and Heine, which were obviously their favorites, though a few others were also represented (including Tegnér, Chamisso, and Goethe). The next generation (Gröndal, Grímur, Gísli Brynjúlfsson) discovered Goethe and the English poets, especially Byron, but also Shelley, Burns, Moore, even Shakespeare. But the greatest translators among the Romanticists were Steingrimur Thorsteinsson and Matthías Jochumsson, both almost outliving the following age of Realism. Both translated Shakespeare, Byron, Burns, Tennyson, Goethe, Schiller, Heine, Chamisso, Uhland, Tegnér, Topelius, Wergeland, and Björnson. To these Matthías added Shelley, Poe, Longfellow, Runeberg, Snöisky, Fröding, Vinje, Ibsen, Lie, Grundtvig, Paludan-Müller, and Drachmann, thus joining hands, across Realism, with the great Neo-Romanticists of the North. This is not a complete but only a representative list.

Translations from the classics were done almost in inverse proportion to the above, mostly by the earlier Romanticists, especially Gröndal, who finished his father's translation of the Odyssey and did one of the Iliad himself, both in fornyrðislag, and Grímur Thomsen, who late in life did many translations from the ancient Greek classics.

The simple Eddic meters were much used by the early Romanticists, sometimes in pure form, sometimes in variations. Their impulse derived both from Jón Þorlákssson and a contemporary edition of the Edda. They were used in original compositions, as Bjarni's memorial poems, and translations of epics (Gröndal: Homer) or even of shorter pieces.
Thus Gísli Brynjúlfsson translated Byron's *Ocean* into Egill Skálld-Grímsson's measures, recognizing the fundamental similarity of the two poets of the sea. The skaldic meters were also used, not least by a later romanticist like Matthías Jochumsson, who was a master of *dróttkvætt* and *hrynhent*.

Of classical meters some were transmitted by the transmitters, notably Grímur Thomsen who increasingly used the original meters. Bjarni Thorarensen translated a few lines of Ovid and Martial into wooden hexameters and pentameters, a measure which Jónas Hallgrímsson was to handle with perfection in his patriotic song *Island farsælda frón*. Toward the middle of the century Steingrímur Thorsteinsson, following the example of Goethe's *Hermann und Dorothea*, wrote the mock-heroic *Redd-Hannesr ríma* in the same meter; he was followed by Gröndal in his "Þingvallaferð" (1878), and Matthías' "Ferð upp í Fljótshdalshérað" (1900). Of other classical forms becoming popular may be mentioned Horace's *Integer vitae*.

To elucidate the origin of all the new romantic meters would lead too far, but here may be mentioned: the sonnet, the *terza rima*, and Heine's quatrain, all employed to perfection by Jónas Hallgrímsson, and Byron's *ottava ríma* used by Gröndal in *Órvar-Oddsdrápa*.

The prose literature may be said to have started in earnest during the Romantic period, since the efforts of the previous periods since the Reformation were both scattered and remained unknown.

At the head of the prose genres may be placed the Icelandic folk tales, of which a few had already been written down by Árni Magnússon. Now, following Grimm, they were collected by Jón Arnason and his companion and published, a sample in 1852, the great collection (*Icelandic Póésy og æfintýri*) in 1862–64. They were expected to reveal the hidden springs of nationality and they became right away important in two ways: as models of genuine rural prose style to be used in conjunction with the saga style, and as themes to be drawn upon by the coming novelists and especially the romantic dramatists.

Beautiful essays, some of them on literary criticism, were written by Jónas Hallgrímsson, Konráð Gíslason, Jón Sigurðsson, Guðbrandur Vigfússon, and others.

Art fairy tales (*Kunstmärchen*) and ironic sketches were written by Jónas Hallgrímsson and Jón Þorleifsson (1825–60). Short stories were written by Jónas, Jón Thoroddsen, and Páll Sigurðsson (1839–87). Jónas also wrote the mock-heroic "Gamanbréf."
The old chivalrous *lygi sögur* were still strong enough to produce their last and brilliant offspring, Gröndal's *Heljarslóðarorusta*, written in 1859. The new novel was now really born, under Scott's auspices, in Jón Thoroddsen's *Píltur og stúlka* (Lad and Lass, 1850), a romantic-realistic rural tale. Thoroddsen was followed by Jón Þorleifsson (1825–60), writing *Úr hversdagslifinu* (From Everyday Life), and Páll Sigurðsson (1839–87), writing *Adalsteinn* (1879), both parsons and capable writers, though not up to Thoroddsen's standard. Finally, passing over a number of unsuccessful writers, two at least were quite popular, though hardly as good as the preceding: the carpenter Jón Jónsson Mýrdal (1825–99) with his *Mannamunur* (Different Men, 1872) and Mrs. Torfhildur Þorsteinsdóttir Hólm (1845–1918) with her many historical novels. She had the distinction not only to be the first woman novelist in Iceland but also to be the first to write on historical subjects, to wit, the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century bishops Brynjólfur Sveinsson (1882) and Jón Vidalg (1892–93). Torfhildur Hólm's career as a writer coincided with that of the Realists, whose philosophy and writings she shunned as immoral and was berated by them in turn. But her books were wholesome reading and were deservedly popular.

Finally, during the Romantic period the drama, connected with the Latin School in Reykjavik, then the only town of the country capable of raising an audience, came into its own. At first this scene was dominated by translations of the neo-classic humorists Molière and Holberg as well as of the romantic Danish playwrights, Hostrup (*Eventyr paa Podrejsen*), Heiberg (*Elverhøj*), and others, while Shakespeare, though admired and later translated, was never acted. But soon native playwrights began to try their hand: first Matthias Jochumsson, who at Christmas (1861–62) wrote *Útilegumennirnir* based on an Icelandic folk tale, but perhaps influenced by Schiller's *Die Räuber*. Later he wrote a vaudeville, an historical pageant, and, finally, the historical play *Jón Arason* (1900) more in the Shakespearean than the fashionable Ibsenian manner. This was natural for Matthias as a translator of *Macbeth* (1874), *Hamlet, Othello*, and *Romeo and Juliet* (1887), and, as a matter of fact, he remained a romanticist throughout the period of Realism. The same was true of the other romantic playwright, Indriði Einarsson, though his debut play, *Nýjársnöttin*, came as late as 1871 and though he tried his hand at a realistic problem drama with *Skipið sekkur* (1902). Otherwise he wrote on folk tale themes or history in the manner of the Romanticists, notably *Dansinn í Hruna* (1921). After that he translated fourteen plays of Shakespeare.
Sigurður Breiðfjörð

Sigurður Eiríksson Breiðfjörð (1798–1846) was the foremost rímur poet of the nineteenth century with a strong lyric vein, which endeared him not only to the public but also to fastidious poets. Born of poor parents in Breiðafjörður of the West, he could not afford Latin School, but was sent to Copenhagen to learn a cooper’s trade. In Denmark he learned to appreciate the poets of transition between Enlightenment and Romanticism, notably Baggesen. Back in Iceland (1818), he plied his trade in several places, married unhappily, became addicted to drink, but composed rímur and light poetry which won him many friends. In 1830 his friends sent him back to Copenhagen for a fresh start in life, which, however, failed. Instead, he became a cooper to the Royal Danish Merchant Company in Greenland, 1831–34. Here, in isolation, he wrote some of his best work, notably the celebrated Núma rímur, as well as a prose work on Greenland. Returning to Iceland, he had a brief reprieve of happiness with another wife before his death in misery in 1846.

Sigurður wrote over twenty-five cycles of rímur, of which fifteen were published, among them Núma rímur (1835, 1903, and 1937). The preface of Núma rímur shows that Sigurður had taken to heart the Enlightenment criticism of rímur, and that he really wanted to pour new wine into old bottles—and did so to some extent. Had he enjoyed the schooling and so acquired the taste of Jónas Hallgrímsson, he might have avoided the latter’s vicious attack on his Rímur af Tristrani og Indiönu in Fjölner, 1837. He could, to be sure, rest confident that the general public was on his side in the ensuing feud. Yet, being as much of a lyric poet as he was, he may deep down have felt the justification of this criticism. His collected poems, Ljóðasafn (I, 1951——), are being published.

Hjálmur Jónsson frá Bölu

Hjálmur Jónsson frá Bölu (Bölu-Hjálmar, 1796–1875), was born in Eyjafjörður but spent most of his miserable crofter’s life in Skagafjörður, both districts of the North. He was happily married and had seven children, but his life was an unrelenting struggle against harsh nature and the callous indifference of more prosperous brethren. To be sure, his lot was no worse than that of many other fellow sufferers, but he was different, being endowed with a poet’s sensitivity, the temper of a Viking, and Icelandic word artistry at its best. The result was a unique figure in Icelandic folk poetry. For Hjálmar was not only a strong
realist in a romantic age, depicting Eggert Ólafsson’s and Bjarni Thorarensen’s glorious Mountain Queen (i.e. Iceland) as a pitiful old lady, nay, almost a bony hag, and yet with filial love, and he was not only a master of invective whose satire could vie with the strongest of the Reformation and Renaissance periods, but he was also a great master of poetic imagery of a sort that might have delighted Donne and the modern poets. Thus in his personal satires he almost always would follow his enemies beyond the grave. In spite of his poverty and lack of formal schooling, Hjálmar was a well-read man in Icelandic (even Danish) literature and had a small library of books and manuscripts. He collected genealogies and folklore and mastered all the old Icelandic meters as well as the rimur forms. He was also a wood carver of sorts. Altogether, he was among the greatest folk poets that Iceland has had. His Ljóðmali (Poems) were first published in 1879 and again several times after that. His collected poems in two volumes came in 1915–19, his collected works, poems, rimur and prose, Ritsafn (I–V in 1949), were published by Finnur Sigmundsson.

Bjarni Thorarensen

Bjarni Vigfússon Thorarensen (1786–1841), the scion of a prominent family, son of a prefect, was born in Brautarholt near Reykjavik but grew up at Hlídarendi in Fljótshlíð, the home of Njála’s most romantic hero, Gunnar. Tutored mostly at home, the brilliant and precocious boy entered the University at fifteen and completed his law study at twenty. After serving in government offices in Copenhagen, he became a deputy justice (1811) and justice of the Supreme Court in Reykjavik (1817). He held this office almost continually up to 1833, when he was made governor of North and East Iceland, residing in the North (Móðruvellir) to his death. In Reykjavik he also twice served as a temporary governor general of Iceland. This career bespeaks an unusually gifted man.

As a boy in the magnificent Njála country, Bjarni received lasting impressions of saga and nature, and learned how to make verse. In Copenhagen he listened to Henrik Steffens’ lectures inaugurating Romanticism in Denmark. The pedestrian utilitarianism of the enlightened bourgeoisie was swept away by enthusiasm for geniality and mysticism. Oehlenschläger in Denmark, Schiller in Germany, both apostles of Romanticism, became Bjarni’s favorites. The native Eddic poetry, in which Bjarni steeped himself, was a most potent influence, but he also learned from Jón Þorláksson (the use of fornyrðislag) and Eggert Ólafr-
son (the archaistic tendency). The stay in Copenhagen matured his poetry: in Eldgamlu Isafold (Ancient Iceland), due to become a cherished national song of Iceland, he sang his homesickness, contrasting the Danish flat lands with the magnificent mountains at home.

Back in Iceland Bjarni was sure to clash with the cosmopolitan, rationalistic, humanitarian, and pedestrian, yet great, leader of Enlightenment, Magnús Stephensen, the chairman of the Supreme Court. For Bjarni was the very opposite: nationalistic, orthodox, antihumanitarian, and genial. This naturally marked their co-laborations, if not exactly collaboration, in the court, but found little expression in Bjarni’s poetry. His antihumanitarianism and antiliberalism did not make for popularity in his time or after, but his conservative nationalism made him join hands with the young national-liberals, who in the eighteen-forties began to demand the resurrection of the Althing. And the high quality of his poetry, though small in amount, soon gave him undisputed sway in the literary world.

Already in Copenhagen Bjarni had seen his native land as a nurse of stern, manly virtues. This is nowhere better expressed than in Pú nafnknúna landið (You Renowned Land) where he considers the challenge of frost and fire, poverty and isolation, praying that the harsh country may forever protect its people from the softening and depraving influences of civilization—or else sink in the deep sea. A remarkable prayer by a man whose parents, though personally well off, had lived through the terrors and famine following the eruption near Skaftá. It was in keeping with his heroic spirit to write a eulogy of winter, in the garb of a splendid northern knight, locking earth in his iron embrace. This heroic spirit, born of Bjarni’s familiarity with Edda and saga, also marked most of his nature poetry: he could not, for instance, praise his native Fljótsdalshljóð without constant reference to the saga heroes. He could also personify his native district or his country as a lady, Fjallkonan (The Mountain Lady), a trait borrowed from neo-classic poetic inventory and first employed by Eggert Ólafsson. But Bjarni’s use of this symbol may have had deeper personal meaning, for he was extremely attached to his mother and, through quirks of fate, was kept from marrying until he was thirty-four years of age. He had in his youth translated some fullblooded love poetry by Catullus and Ovid, his later love poetry was partly passionate, partly bantering verse on the rejected lover, but in his most original love poem “Sigrúnarljóð” inspired by Oehlenschläger and the Edda, he projects his love beyond earth and death into
the ethereal interstellar spaces—a truly transcendental but by no means fully Platonic love poem.

That Bjarni should write good memorial poetry could be expected from his sincere and deep faith and his eye for heroic measures in man. But a genius only could have made his poems rank with Egill Skallagrímsson’s “Sonatorrek” and Hallgrímur Pétursson’s funeral dirge. He wrote them in different meters—one was cast in the German romantic ballad form—but his best were written in the simple Eddic fornýrðislag, sometimes mixed with ljóðahátír. Justly famous are his memorial poems on Sæmundur Magnússon Hólm and Oddur Hjaltalin. The first-named was a man who, much like Bjarni himself, did not follow the beaten path and so earned the displeasure if not hatred of the mocking conformists. This crowd is depicted in bold imagery as a caravan moving to life’s last stage, or a school of herring pursued by bigger and bigger fish into the jaws of the whale. The poem on the latter contains the often quoted warning to those who allow themselves to be carried downstream in life’s current, not to blame the salmon running upstream and jumping the cascades.

Bjarni Thorarensen’s poems, Kvaði, were first published in 1847, but a definitive edition in two volumes, Ljóðmali, was first done by Jón Helgason in 1935.

Jónas Hallgrímsson

Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807–1845), descended from a family of poets, the son of Jón Þorlákssson’s chaplain, was born at Hraun in Öxnadalur (Eyjafjörður). He was nine when his father drowned, a loss that affected him deeply. At Bessastaðir (1823–29), guided by the remarkable teachers there, he became steeped in classics, ancient and Old Icelandic, and read a little Ossian. At the University (1832) he began with law, but soon turned to natural history (science) and literature, reading Schiller, Tieck, and especially Heine. With a group of schoolmates he started the periodical Fjölnir (1835–47) which brought forth his programmatic nationalistic-liberal poetry, translations from German romantic and liberal writers, and his scathing criticism of the old rimur poetry, from a strictly artistic point of view. What the review could not accomplish—to reform the taste for lyric poetry in Iceland—Jónas’ own poetry amply did.

As a scientist Jónas began his explorations in Iceland in 1837. He continued his travels (1839–42) in spite of ill health, collecting a good
deal of material toward a geographical description of Iceland. He kept working on this in Denmark until his premature death in 1845. His friends devoted the last volume of *Fjölnir* (1847) to his unpublished writings and brought out at the same time, a first edition of his *Ljóðmæli* (Poems). His complete works, *Rit* (Works, 1929–37), were finally published in five volumes by Matthías Dórrarson.

Romanticism in Germany and Denmark, the wave of liberalism caused by the July revolution in 1830, and the nationalism in Eggert Ólafsson's *Poems* (1832) all combined to mould Jónas. He himself contributed his acute observation of nature, love of his land in its sunny moods, and a keen—almost classical—sense of beauty. Drawing a glorious picture of the ever beautiful land and contrasting the bustling life of the heroic saga age and its Althing with the present lethargy and the ruins at Þingvellir, he made "Island" into a ringing appeal to the slumbering people. The resplendent summer nature, in beautiful word pictures attained by no one before Jónas, was even more to the fore in the magnificent placid "Gunnarshólmi" (Gunnar's Islet), describing a famous incident from *Njála*, one of the very few passages in the sagas where a feeling for nature is in evidence. The whole is cast in new Italian terzines of interlaced rime, concluding with two stanzas in ottava rima.

Unlike Bjarni, Jónas did not consistently see Iceland in connection with the heroic saga age: on the contrary he most often saw it from a naturalist's point of view. Thus "Skjaldbreiður" is nearly as good geology as it is magnificent poetry, and no one but Jónas could have elaborated on the vast vistas from the summit of Hekla as he did in the poem celebrating the French scientist and explorer, Paul Gaimard. In another type of nature poetry Jónas commented, in the manner of Heine, on places visited by him; these poems are often short, pithy, and personal. A third type of Jónas' nature poetry is represented by *Fifilbrekkja gróin grund* or "Dalvisur" (Valley Verses). This is really a hymn, worthy of St. Francis, in praise of the most common manifestations of Icelandic nature, the poet's bosom friends, realistically observed and treated with loving care and piety. Related to this are his poems on birds or animals: the "little golden plover," the "white ptarmigan," and the "gray sparrow," though these poems are really tragedies in miniature.

Valuing Eggert Ólafsson as highly as he did, it was natural for Jónas to pay him tribute in an unusually elaborate and weighty poem "Huldljóð" (Ode to the Fairy). And he was trailing his master's footsteps,
when he drew the sensitive picture of the proud farmer at his haymaking ("Sláttuvisur") and the happy fisherman on the sea ("Formannsvisur"). The utilitarian spirit of the Enlightenment was here kept, but in an ennobled form.

The tragedy in Jónas' life—the loss of his father, the loss of a sweet-heart to another man, his failing health and spirit—found expression in some poignantly beautiful poetry, like the exquisite and sad "Ferðalok" (Journey's End). But his friendship and conviviality gave the nation some of its most cherished festive songs, like "Visur Íslandinga" (Verses for Icelanders—Hvað er svo glatt), the merry Nú er vetur úr bæ (Now is Winter Away), and the even merrier Bellmannian "Borðsálsmur" (Table Hymn).

Like Jón Þorláksson and Bjarni Thorarensen, Jónas employed all the Old Icelandic meters, not least so the simpler ones. Of classical meters he used the hexameter and pentameter, of romantic meters the Italian terzines, the ottava rima, and the sonnet as well as the Spanish redondilla. From the German Romanticists he got several meters, notably the Heine quatrain. In translations he often adapted into fornyrðislag. His form excelled in classic simplicity, was limpid and musical, polished to a high degree. With him began a new era in Icelandic lyric form: Where Bjarni Thorarensen was rough, manly, and archaic, Jónas was polished, beautifully limpid, and modern in diction.

Jónas and his comrades loved to strike an “absurd comical” tone, usually quite burlesque, in their talk and private letters. It was a reflection of their romantic irony, their romantic revolt against their world. Some of Jónas' poetry is marked by this—poetry that he himself probably would not have published but is quite good sui generis.

Though the origins of the novel now can be traced to the Enlightenment period, it is still true that Jónas' short stories, sketches, and Kunstmärchen were the first published in Icelandic (Fjölnir, 1847).

"Grasaferð" (Gathering Iceland Moss), an idyl in bright summer landscape and limpid prose, was a worthy originator of the short story. Its motifs were popular with the coming playwrights.

Two fairy tales were imitated or adapted from H. C. Andersen's tales about animals or animated objects, one modeled on an unknown German romantic tale.

The few satirical skits are reminiscent of Heine, but "Gamanbréf til kunningja" (A Letter of Fun to Friends) was a highly amusing mock-heroic description of Queen Victoria's state visit to France in 1843. The
style of this letter influenced Gröndal when he wrote his *Heljarslóðarusta*.

**Jón Thoroddsen**

Jón Þórðarson Thoroddsen (1818–68) has rightly been called the father of the modern Icelandic novel; there is no evidence that he knew anything of earlier attempts of the kind (Laxdal), except the short stories of Jónas Hallgrímsson. He was born at Reykhólar in Bæðastrandarsýsla of the Northwest. Having studied with private tutors and at Bessastaðir Latin School (1837–40), he became a tutor at a parsonage in Eyjafjörður, was engaged to the parson's daughter, and had a child by her. Next year he went to Copenhagen to study law, but his fiancée had the mishap to meet another man and was given to him on the wrong assumption that Jón would have nothing to do with her. It is said that Jón's letter of reconciliation reached her just after the wedding. This was the bitter romance out of which Jón fashioned both of his love stories, and it definitely did not help his law studies, but may explain the gay abandon of his Bellmannian drinking songs from this period. In 1845 he was joined by another hapless lover, Gísli Brynjúlfsson. The two collaborated on the liberal periodical *Norðurfari* (a sheaf of poems, *Snót* [1850] was done with another collaborator), and Gísli seems to have inspired his friend to read English literature, notably Scott. No doubt he also aided and abetted Thoroddsen's urge to write novels, and thus the first Icelandic novel, *Píltur og stúlk* (Lad and Lass) was written in 1848–49 and published in 1850, the year Jón Thoroddsen left for Iceland to become an acting prefect of his native district, Bæðastrandarsýsla. Residing in Flatey on Breiðafjörður, he joined a circle of unusually alert and cultured men who had invited the most learned autodidact of the time, Gísli Konráðsson, pupil of Jón Espólín, and father of Konráð Gíslason, to stay with them and work on his many manuscripts. Jón realized that there was plenty of material if ever he was to buckle down to writing “a national epic” in Scott's sense. He made one abortive attempt to write it in Copenhagen in 1854, where he had returned to finish his law studies. But though he never finished the novel *Maður og kona* (Man and Wife), on which he worked intermittently from his return to Iceland until his death as a prefect of Borgarfjörður in 1868, it was really a great success amply fulfilling his fondest hopes.

*Píltur og stúlk* (Lad and Lass, 1850) is an idyl of a country boy and
girl whose love is thwarted by complications, but finally are united. As characters, the lovers are too good to be really interesting; fortunately they are cast with others of a vastly different stamp, among which there is a country gossip and a niggardly farmer who both have become proverbial in Iceland. Likewise, idyllic shepherd scenes alternate with lively brawls at the fall round-ups of sheep, and, finally, we are introduced to the merry school life at Bessastaðir and to the half-Danish rabble in Reykjavik, already satirized by Sigurður Pétursson.

Maður og kona (Man and Wife, 1876) has a romantic plot and lovers that differ little from the earlier novel. But it has also a vast array of comic characters and much interesting folklore, which the author had had ample opportunity to observe during his long career as a magistrate. Belief in ghosts and magic had been endemic in the Northwest since the days of the plague-ridden parson Jón Magnússon. Here it is represented by an old bedridden crone. The heroic spirit of sagas and rímir has its representative in a giant farmer, old-fashioned and gullible, while that of the Bible is upheld by a much quoting deacon, who suffers inglorious defeat at the hands of the philistine farmer. The small society is ruled by a bland but avaricious and intriguing parson whose household is adorned by several odd characters including a half-witted fool.

Jón Thoroddsen’s style was as fresh as his characters. Its basis was the ordinary rural talk and narrative, as represented in the folk tales and fairy tales, as well as the style of the sagas. Thoroddsen was, moreover, a master of parody and burlesque and could use for that purpose, not only the chancery and the sermon styles, but also the saga style and even Sveinbjörn Egilsson’s Homeric style. His language was pure and rich.

Although Jón Thoroddsen is not known especially for his poems, his patriotic and nature songs have a lyric quality that recalls Jónas Hallgrímsson. They have remained very popular. Still his drinking songs and parodies are probably more original.

Jón Thoroddsen’s poems (Kvæði) were first published in 1871, then in 1919. Steingrímur J. Órsteinsson wrote an excellent study on the novelist, Jón Thoroddsen og skáldsögur hans (I-II, 1943), and published the prose works Skáldsögur (I-II, 1942).

Grimur Thomsen

Grimur Órgrímsson Thomsen (1820–96) was born at Bessastaðir, the son of a jeweler and a business manager of the Latin School. At the
University in Copenhagen (1837) he studied esthetics, Hegelian philosophy, and modern European literatures, writing on contemporary French poetry (1843) and Lord Byron (1845), a pioneer work in Scandinavia that gained him not only an M.A. and Ph.D. but also a very unusual stipend to travel through the capitals of Europe (1847). His critical appreciation of H. C. Andersen, Runeberg, and Bjarni Thorarensen was instrumental in establishing the reputation of these poets in Denmark. Grímur Thomsen admired Fjölnismenn but kept aloof from Jón Sigurðsson, associating more than any of his countrymen with Pan-Scandinavian and Danish political leaders. These contacts gained him entrance into the Danish foreign service, in which he remained active until 1866. Resigning and returning to Iceland, he bought Bessastaðir, married, and dwelt there as a gentleman farmer up to his death.

Though Grímur contributed a poem to Fjölnir as early as 1844, his first slim Ljóðmæli (Poems) did not appear until he was sixty (1880). A second collection came in 1895; a second enlarged edition of the first volume and Rímur af Búa Andriðarsyni og Fríði Dofradóttur appeared in 1906; a collected edition in two volumes was published in 1934. Because of the late appearance of his poems and because of easily spotted formal faults, his poetry was slow in gaining acceptance, not to say popularity.

When Grímur began his career, Romanticism had lost its freshness and the poet was enmeshed in disillusionment and the Welt schmerz of Byronism. This line of thought is traceable from his first poem “Ólund” (Spleen, 1844) to the complaints voiced by him on his birthday in 1862, where he looks forward to a barren old age. He had crashed the golden gates of high society, but the gains were not commensurable with the efforts, judging by his masterful satire “Á Glæsvöllum” (At Glitter Fields, 1865). But having made his escape, chilled to the very marrow, he made a quick recovery in the more congenial atmosphere of his home at Bessastaðir. Here he soon found himself re-creating the heroic past of his nation, not in flashes like his predecessors, but in narrative form, probably less indebted to the old ballad form than to the modern art ballads of Schiller, Goethe, and Uhland. In these poems he revealed himself as a dramatic storyteller and a master of character drawing: his portraits of Halllór Snorrason and Hildigunnur lose nothing of their pristine saga vigor. But though he preferably drew his figures from Edda and saga, medieval story and legend, Germanic and Romance, were
also grist to his mill as shown by his gripping ballad on "Olifant." Even historic figures, Icelandic and European, served him as models, provided he found in them the sturdy, manly spirit of the heroic age. His ballads were usually not long, but he could write cycles on saga themes, longest of which was *Rímur af Búa*, . . . in several cantos, but not cast in *rímur* meters despite the name.

As a romanticist Grímur was drawn to the mystic side of Icelandic folklore, the ghost and the outlaw stories, as well as to the sterner aspects of Icelandic nature, forming as it were a fitting frame for these stories of horror. His poems on "Glámur," the ghost that Grettir fought, and "Sprengisandur," an inland desert road haunted in the popular imagination by outlaws, are cases in point.

In his earlier days Grímur translated or paraphrased Ossian, Milton, Byron, Runeberg, Oehlenschläger, La Fontaine, Schiller, and Goethe. At times he would adapt rather than translate, as for example, in his treatment of "Suomis säng" in "Landslag."

In his old age Grímur devoted himself to translating specimens from the ancient Greek lyric poets and tragedians. Apparently he felt equally at home among the ancients, as in his own Old Icelandic heroic age. He filled a gap which the translations of the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* had left open, but his translations, though good, never won the popularity of Homer in Iceland.

Grímur Thomsen did not have the facility of most Icelandic verse-makers and could commit elementary metrical blunders. Instead few were his equal as a master of style and diction, and this quality endeared him to fastidious and discriminating readers. He always strove for the *mot juste* and usually with success. And if he chose, he could write poems of exquisite musical quality like "Endurminningin" (Remembrance).

Still it was as the rough-hewn manly stylist that Grímur Thomsen was at his best, a worthy representative of the heroic age with whose figures he loved to converse and in the atmosphere of which he really felt at home.

*Benedikt Sveinbjarnarson Gröndal*

Benedikt Sveinbjarnarson Gröndal (1826–1907) was born at Bessastaðir, the son of Sveinbjörn Egilsson, who taught him to love the classics of his native country as well as those of Rome and Greece. In Copenhagen (1846–50) his extensive studies in natural history, poetry,
and philosophy led to no academic degree, but after seven barren years in Reykjavik, he returned to Copenhagen (1857), where he this time met a Catholic missionary, Father Étienne de Djunkowsky, who took him to Kevelaer, Germany and converted him to Catholicism (1859). Shortly after, while leading a carefree life at the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium, he wrote *Heljarslóðarorusta* (The Battle on Hell’s Fields) on Napoleon III’s victory at Solferino, January 25, 1859. In Copenhagen, after this Catholic interlude, he settled down to serious study of Old Icelandic philology (M.A., 1864), wrote on folklore and mythology, published the life and letters of his benefactor C. C. Rafn, and a key to his father’s *Lexicon Poeticum*. Later he started a periodical of his own (*Gefn*, 1870–74), writing on politics, economics, philology, antiquities, Icelandic geography and natural science—not to forget the poetry. From 1874 to 1883 he served as a teacher at the Latin School in Reykjavik; after that, his long life was divided between drinking, study of nature, drawing, and writing. He published seven volumes of poetry, including his *Kvæðabók* (1900); a collected edition of his works has just been published (*Rítsafn* I–V, 1948–54, by Gils Guðmundsson).

One might have expected the ornithologist Benedikt Gröndal to have sung hymns to the birds of Iceland, but the “Gullörn og bláfugl” (Golden Eagle and Blue Bird) that he actually eulogized were not of this world, but denizens of that romantic land of fancy where Gröndal’s soul loved to roam and gambol. Here, too, he found his lilies and roses, if he at all deigned to stroll the romantic meadow, but, as a matter of course, he much preferred mounting his winged Pegasus, soaring to a distant star, where he could watch the glistening show of aurora borealis and strum his golden harp as an accompaniment to the music of the spheres. In short, Gröndal was a fullblooded romanticist who, on the slightest provocation, would run riot, aided by his uncanny mastery of high-flown language, his paternal inheritance. At the best he shines in scintillating brilliance, a fiery comet among his dim planetary contemporaries; at his worst he sinks to mediocrity, and that, alas, altogether too often.

The poet was especially apt to fall into his grand romantic manner when writing on heroic Old Icelandic or Greek legends, e.g., *Örvar-Odds drápa* (1851), *Ragnarókkur* (Twilight of the Gods, 1868), and “Prometheus.” Or, even more so, when offering to the Muse of philosophy, the poem “Hugfró” (Peace of Mind), inspired by Alexander Humboldt’s *Kosmos*. This does not make easy reading in spite of the author’s
commentary. But Gröndal had simpler and more intimate strings on his lyre, which vibrated in his childhood memories “Æskan” (Youth), in his beautiful, patriotic “Vorvīsa” (Spring Song, 1859), and in occasional nature-loving moods.

Still Gröndal was greatest as a humorist in verse and prose, the poetic epistles to his comic muse Mrs. Sigríður Einarðóttir-Magnússon being of the best. On her birthday, March 17, 1855, he wrote to her a poem on a scroll twelve ells long, of one hundred stanzas in mock-heroic style featuring the Greek gods in the fashions of contemporary Reykjavik. Like Athena of old, Sigríður sprang from Zeus’ head. Another letter written from within the monastery walls of Kevelaer, entitled “Gaman og alvara” (Gay and Grave), ranges from sublime fancies to deliberate nonsense; among other things it contains Poe’s Murders in the Rue Morgue retold as a hymn parody. Comic too is the mock-heroic traveologue to Þingvellir (1878).

Gröndal’s humoristic prose is even better than his poetry; here Heljarslóðarorusta (1861) stands supreme, written in sheer exuberance of spirit, a rollicking burlesque. In it modern history is cast in the form of medieval romance of chivalry: it is really the last lygi saga in Iceland, but unlike Don Quixote, it was not designed to criticize the genre, for Gröndal loved it, turning at least one cycle of rimur into a lygi saga (Sagan af Andra jarli), while he reversed the process with his favorite Göngu-Hrölf’s saga. Though denying it, he was really influenced by the manner of Jónas Hallgrímsson’s “Gamanbréf” when he wrote Heljar-slóðarorusta. His more Rabelaisian satire Póðar saga Geirmundssonar (1891) was not as good. Gröndal also wrote the Aristophanic farce Gandreiðin (The Witch Ride, 1866) as well as other playlets.

Finally, Gröndal wrote a great number of articles and essays on all the great variety of subjects that interested him. Not a few were fine instances of his whimsical wit and burlesque play and phantasy. Some were learned; others revealed his reactions to the changing winds of fashion. He was naturally opposed to the Realism of the eighties and he balked at Ibsen’s use of the sagas. His letters and his autobiography Døgradvöl (Passing the Time, 1923) are marked by the same whimsical temperament, though the last-named can be more serious in tone when he himself is concerned.

Gröndal wielded, undoubtedly, the most versatile pen of his age. Oldest of the three great figures of the second half of the nineteenth century—Gröndal, Steingrímur, and Matthias—he first achieved fame
and was, perhaps, the first to fade because of his romantic excesses, though he more than holds his own as a humorist. Apart from Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (translated, in part, with his father) in *fornyrðislag* and selections from the *Arabian Nights* in prose, he did little translating.

**Gísli Brynjúlfsson**

Gísli Brynjúlfsson (1827–1888) was born at Hólmar in the East of Iceland, the son of a parson, descended from Einar Sigurðsson. In Copenhagen (1845) he was to study law but became attracted by Icelandic studies and European literature (Byron). Disappointment in love turned him into an ardent love poet and left him in a state of mind vacillating between Byronic despondency ("Faraldur") and Viking-like activism. The revolts of the masses in Paris, Ireland, and Hungary against the tyrants of 1848 fired his imagination not only to sing their praises in his poetry, but even to tell his countrymen all about it in the two volumes of *Norðurfari* (1848–49) which he published, together with his friend Jón Thoroddsen, another law student and hapless lover. This experience turned Gísli into a social democrat, first among his countrymen, and it may explain why he did not always see eye to eye with the more conservative Jón Sigurðsson, though other reasons are usually adduced, perhaps rightly. In 1874 he became a lecturer on Icelandic history and literature at the University, keeping that post until his death. His *Ljóðmali* (Poems, 1891) never gained much popularity in Iceland.

His interesting and revealing *Dagbók í Höfn* (Diary in Copenhagen) was published in 1952.

**Páll Ólafsson**

Páll Ólafsson (1827–1905) was born in the East, the son of a parson; he had no formal education and lived mostly as a farmer and valued member of his community at Hallfreðarstaðir in the East. He was a romantic poet, an admirer of Jónas Hallgrimsson and the classical J. L. Runeberg; he also carried on the tradition of Bólú-Hjálmur and Sigurður Breiðfjörð but, perhaps, above all the school of humorous poetry in the East, going back to Stefán Ólafsson. His humorous epistles, unique in their art, belong to the same school. He was an unsurpassed master of the quatrain, but also used many other meters with equal ease. He sang of summer nature, praised his beloved wife (a rare theme with poets), his horses, and his strong "wine." His epigrams were unsurpassed for sarcasm and wit. In his poems, e.g., "Timinn" (Time), he could turn
similes from everyday life that would pass scrutiny from the modern metaphysical poets, though he has otherwise not the slightest trace of their baroque turbulence. Indeed, he was the greatest master of fluent form and as such emulated by Dörsteinn Erlingsson. His poems were published in two volumes (1899–1900) by his brother Jón Ólafsson (1850–1916), a poet, novelist, but above all a journalist. They were recently republished (1944) by his kinsman, the novelist Gunnar Gunnarsson.

Steingrimur Bjarnason Thorsteinsson (1831–1913), born at Arnarstapi, Snæfellsnes, the son of a governor and a bishop’s daughter, was early an avid reader and poet. Before leaving the Latin School in Reykjavík (1851) he had written a clever mock-heroic poem (Redd-Hannesar ríma) on rustic life in the classical measures of Goethe’s Hermann und Dorothea. At the University (1851–63) he studied classical philology and read extensively in the modern European literatures, Scandinavian, German, English, and French. The years 1863–72 he spent in Copenhagen writing some of his finest patriotic poetry in support of Jón Sigurðsson’s cause. In 1872 he returned to the Latin School in Reykjavík where he served first as a teacher then as a headmaster until his death at a ripe old age.

Steingrimur Thorsteinsson contributed his early poetry to Ný Félagsrit (1854) and the popular anthologies Svava (1860) and Svanhvit (1877). He edited the periodicals Ný sumargjöf (1859–65) and Iðunn (1884–89). His Ljóðmali (Poems) came in four editions, 1881–1925. They were finally edited by his son Axel Thorsteinsson.

Steingrimur’s lyric poetry, usually in good taste, sometimes distinguished, dealt with the themes of love, patriotism, and nature. Among his love lyrics there were many light poems depicting the happy lovers at play, e.g., “Draumur hjarsveinsins” (The Shepherd’s Dream), but his most deeply felt poem “Kveðja” (Farewell) was a bitter denunciation of the “fallen angel” who jilted him.

As a member of Jón Sigurðsson’s national-liberalistic circle in Copenhagen, Steingrimur contributed many poems in praise of his country and many eloquent exhortations urging his countrymen to fight for national emancipation and political liberty. These poems, often stirring songs breathing the spirit of freedom and sincere love of country, did not miss their mark, nor did they fail to endear the poet to his countrymen. They continued the romantic line of referring now to the past, now to the
nature of the country, but did not have Jónas Hallgrímsson’s freshness of approach.

Already as a youth, the poet was captivated by Icelandic nature in various moods and many seasons. As a mature man he loved to make excursions to the scenic haunts of his native district or into the vast and little known uplands. In singing his experiences in the open, his moods ranged from the exhilaration of the glacier mountain scenery “Háfjöllin” (The High Mountains), to the deep melancholy ocean shore “Víð hafið” (At the Ocean).

As a wise old man the poet grew less productive, more critical, and developed a sharp epigrammatic style.

In his translations Steingrimur was following the paths of Jón Þorláksson and Sveinbjörn Egilsson, aiming to enrich the native literature by foreign masterpieces in poetry and prose. Among these were: *The Arabian Nights*, Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, Tegnér’s *Axel*, and H. C. Andersen’s *Fairy Tales*. Here were also samples of the great lyric poets of the age: Ossian, Oehlenschläger, Wergeland, Björnson, Topelius, Tennyson, Byron, Burns, Petöfi, Chamisso, Heine, Goethe, and Schiller. The translations were usually made with taste, sometimes supreme skill. The title of *Kulturbringer* given the poet by the Austrian critic J. C. Poestion was thus amply justified.

With Benedikt Gröndal and Matthías Jochumsson our poet won popular acclaim as one of the three great national poets, þjóðskáld, of the second half of the nineteenth century. He was more classical than the other two, less genial and less romantic.

Matthías Jochumsson

Matthías Jochumsson (1835–1920) was born at Skógar in Þorska-fjörður of the Northwest, of fine farmer stock. Too poor to aspire to a higher education, the twenty-two-year-old youth went to Copenhagen to become a merchant. Instead, he buried himself in the study of languages, the *Edda*, and classical and modern literatures under the friendly guidance of Steingrimur Thorsteinsson. Later some friends helped him to a more formal education, enabling him to graduate from the Latin School in 1863 and the School of Theology in 1865. After that he served as parson of various places, one of them the historic parsonage at Oddi, except for a period (1874–80) that he edited the newspaper *Þjóðölfur*, and the last twenty years of his life when he held a government grant.
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in recognition of the fact that he was by common consent the poet laureate of the country. He edited another newspaper Lýður (1889–91) at Akureyri in the North. Here he lived over thirty years until his death at eighty-five immediately after his admiring countrymen had overwhelmed him with their loving esteem. Marrying three times, he lost two of his wives under circumstances that caused him great heartache. He was a great traveler, going abroad eleven times and making friends with significant men in many lands. He wrote spiritedly about his visits to America—the World Exposition in Chicago (1893)—and Denmark (1905).

Though Matthias wrote verse as a boy, it was with the play Ótilegumennirir (The Outlaws, 1864, later called Skugga-Sveinn) that he won acclaim as a poet. It was significant as the first romantic play written in Iceland. Later he wrote a historical pageant, a vaudeville, and—his most ambitious undertaking in that genre—the historical play Jón Arason (1900) in the manner of Shakespeare, whose Macbeth, Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, and Othello he already had turned into lively Icelandic. He was a great translator—even greater and more prolific than Steingrimur—and, in addition to a vast number of poems, he did Tegner's Frithiofs saga, Byron's Manfred, and Ibsen's Brand.

His own lyric poems were first published in 1884, next in five volumes 1902–1906, a selection in 1915, and a complete one-volume edition (Ljómali) in 1936. He wrote a romantic epic on Grettis saga: Grettis ljóð (1897), an excellent autobiography: Sögukaflar af sjálfum mér (1922), and a huge amount of personal letters, published after his death: Bréf (1935).

His own lyric poetry ranged from profound or exultant hymns to humorous, even hilarious, verse, from patriotic eulogies of Iceland and its scenic or historic districts to cosmopolitan praise of other lands. He lived two celebrations: a national one, the millenary of Iceland in 1874 and the turn of the century, 1900, celebrating both in odes, hymns, and pageantry. He outlived two generations and paid all prominent personalities, friends and family, his final respects in commemorative poems, individualized to an unusual degree. His fine memorial to Dr. Guðbrandur Vigfússon in Oxford was one of his outstanding commemorative poems.

The genius of Matthias Jochumsson was at once broad and profound. The essence of his personality was, no doubt, anchored in a deep mystic experience, described in "Leiðsla" (Ecstasy), from which he drew his
inspiration. This gave him his optimistic trust in God and the love of his neighbor. But though secure, his religion was quite unconfessional and his searching spirit was in turn influenced by American Unitarianism, the "new" German theology and the Anglo-Saxon brand of theosophy and spiritualism. Abhorring the materialism and the atheism of the time, he sang the praise of God in some of the finest hymns of the Icelandic tongue, including the National Hymn, "Lofsöngur" (Hymn of Praise: Ö, Guð vors lands—God of our Land) of 1874. But though universally admired by the people, many of his unconventional hymns had to wait for the Icelandic hymnbook of 1945 to be admitted. Unlike most of his compatriots, he loved the nation more than the country and he was capable of voicing his distress and despair, nay, a scathing indictment, at nature's harshest treatment, e.g., in the famous poem "Hafisinn" (The Polar Ice), occasioned by its dread arrival in the spring of 1888. Similarly his indomitable spirit was excited to revolt against the overwhelming dread and dead force of Iceland's mightiest waterfall, Dettifoss. A child's tear, because alive, impressed him more.

Just as Matthias Jochumsson wrote fine obituary poetry, so he also excelled in commemorative poems on historical personages; his poems on Snorri Sturluson, Hallgrímur Pétursson, and Eggert Ólafsson being among the very best. They were marked by his ever ready sympathy and a fine sense for the dramatic representation, making them truly monumental. His command of the history, the literature, and the language of the country was phenomenal; he wielded skaldic and Eddic meters with equal ease as the modern measures of his translations, for example, of Shakespeare's blank verse. He wrote an inspired eulogy of the language in stately skaldic measures. The sagas and their personalities lived in him and, like Bjarni Thorarensen, he never sang the praise of a district without populating it with the heroes of old. Yet he was no blind admirer of the saga age; his sympathy with the suffering hero of the Christ type was probably more spontaneous.

Matthias enjoyed an everlasting buoyant spirit and fertile phantasy, somewhat reminiscent of Gröndal, of whom he had learned much as a young poet. But though he often was an inspired bard, he was seldom a consistently good artist. His poems were rarely without flashes of genius, but they could sink down to mediocrity in parts.

With Gröndal and Steingrimur Thorsteinsson, Matthias was considered one of the three great poets of the latter half of the nineteenth century. If his fame in the end eclipsed theirs it was not only because he
lived longest, but because he was a man and poet of truly great propor­
tions, worthy to carry on the double heritage of Iceland: the heathen
spirit of Egill Skalla-Grimsson and the Christian one of Hallgrímur
Pétursson.

Kristján Jónsson

Kristján Jónsson (1842–69) was born at Krossdalur in the North, a
farmer’s son, early orphaned and maltreated as a boy. Still he managed
to read much, even foreign languages, and write poetry, a fact which
 gained him entrance to the Latin School in Reykjavik in 1864. But
adversity had marked him: he had taken to drink, and disappointment in
love broke his spirit. He left school in 1868 and died a year later at the
age of twenty-six.

Admiring Gröndal’s high-flown romantic diction, Kristján used it to
advantage in his magnificent description of Dettifoss, a powerful water­
fall which he was the first to put on the literary map. Like others he
wrote patriotic poetry, and he could, at times, give free rein to his
 ebullient youthful spirit. But only on the surface. At heart he was sick
with melancholy and this, naturally, became the characteristic note of his
poetry: witness such poems as “Gröfin” (The Grave) and “Tárið”
(The Tear). And if Gröndal taught him ebullience, his master in melan­
choly was no less a personage than Lord Byron himself.

The world-weariness and melancholy found ready resonance in and
was heartily embraced by his poor and miserable countrymen. His
poems, Ljóðmæli, were first published in 1872 by his schoolmate Jón
Ólafsson, appearing after that in five editions, the last one in 1946.

Indriði Einarsson

Indriði Einarsson (1851–1939) was the first writer to devote himself
exclusively to playwriting. A native of Skagafjörður, graduating from
the Latin School in 1872, and from the University of Copenhagen as a
political economist in 1877, he became an expert on statistics and eco­
nomic affairs to the government of Iceland until he retired in 1918. He
worked much for the temperance movement in Iceland and was closely
associated with various dramatic undertakings in Reykjavik, being an
active member of its Dramatic Society from 1897 and tireless in his
efforts to establish a national theater, which, nevertheless, could not
open until after his death. Out of his big family came some of the most
distinguished actresses and actors in Iceland.
As an impressionable romantic youth, Indriði saw Matthias Jochumsson's *Útilegumennin* during his first winter at the Latin School. Six years later (1871) he wrote his first play, *Nýjársnóttin* (The New Year’s Eve) for the school boys to produce. It was based on a fairy tale out of Jón Árnason's collection, a favorite practice of the romantic playwrights, partly in imitation of their Danish colleagues (cf. Heiberg's *Elverhøj*). *Nýjársnóttin* became very popular, especially in a revised version (1907) in which the fairy world was fashioned after Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night’s Dream*. In his next play, *Hellismenn* (Cave Men, 1897) he drew on Jón Árnason's outlaw stories.

In Copenhagen (1872–77) Indriði came reluctantly under the sway of Realism and wrote, finally, one play in that manner: *Skipið sekkur* (The Ship Sinks, 1902). It was a problem play in the approved Ibsenian manner. Then, again emulating the Norwegians, he wrote the historical play *Sverð og bagall* (Sword and Crozier, 1899), the first of its kind in Iceland, based on an episode in *Sturlunga saga*, and, as the name indicates, depicting the struggle between heathen and Christian values. In this play Indriði succeeded even better than Ibsen and Björnson in striking the genuine saga tone.

Two more folk-tale plays were to follow, one mediocre, the other, *Dansinn i Hruna* (The Dance at Hruni, 1921), one of Indriði’s best. The Devil has built the church at Hruni for the old priest, stipulating one of his two sons, who now has taken over his father’s duties, as a reward. And so the son, to fulfil this destiny, dances in the church with the congregation on a Christmas eve until the church sinks. This, alone among Indriði's plays, is written in blank verse, to fit its Faustian theme.

After his retirement, Indriði wrote one more historical play and translated fourteen plays of Shakespeare in a form adapted to the scene; none of these have been printed. He also translated several Danish plays. He had the brilliant idea to tax the admission to the movies in order to build a national theater. The building of this had started before his death, but was not finished until after World War II, during which the British used the building as a warehouse.