Tradition and Revolt Between the World Wars, 1918–1940

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Historical background

Though Iceland reached the goal of her national romantic strivings after World War I, the effect was not one of national unity, but rather a dispersal of interests fostered by different political groups. One might have thought that the ancient and still numerous farmers (57 per cent of the population) might have started to rule the country. Instead, there was first a conservative party governed by the numerically few but comparatively wealthy and powerful fish producers and merchants of the towns, while the town workers were just beginning to feel themselves as a social class apart from the others. In the twenties Jónas Jónsson frá Hríflu, a Pingeying, one of the ablest journalists of the country, succeeded with the help of youth leagues and co-operatives to organize the farmers into a party that could take over the government, though only with the help of a labor party which was to grow stronger during the great depression of the thirties. There was a great national romantic celebration of the millenary of the Althing in 1930, after which the depression set in with full force and with it the rise of a new leftist party, the Communists. Though smaller than the labor party, they were more vocal, enjoying the leadership of the keenest intellectuals of the day, hence exerting strong influence on young writers. By 1940 only 30 per cent of the population remained as farmers; the rest was in the towns—in industry (21 per cent), fisheries (16 per cent), communications (9 per cent), commerce (7 per cent), or government service (6 per cent).

Direct influence of World War I upon the writings of the period 1914–30 was apparently slight. It helped Einar Benediktsson’s speculations, but hardly his poetry; the speculations scandalized Einar H.
Kvaran. Yet, the shock was registered in Gunnarsson's problem novels, perhaps also in the pervasive anxiety of the young lyric poets immediately after 1918, unless this anxiety is rather derivable from the romantic Weltschmerz as described by Þórbergur Pórdarson, fashionable among the budding poets already before the war. But this brooding grew to a culmination in Laxness' Vefarinn mikli (1927). The opposite extreme, an abandonment to the temptation of worldly joys and worldly experience, noticeable in Nordal's "Hel," Davið Stefánsson's new poetry, and Kristmann Guðmundsson's novels, may also have been a kind of war psychosis, though it is paralleled in the gay nineties in other lands.

**Traditional literary tendencies**

During the twenties and thirties the traditions of the preceding neoromantic period were carried forward or intensified by some of the poets or writers, while others broke completely with them, usually turning socialist in thought, sometimes revolutionary in style.

Of the traditionalists there were at least three groups. There was first the group of progressive idealists led by Einar H. Kvaran. The pure poet Jakob J. Smári was close to it, likewise Einar's son, Ragnar Kvaran, a critic, and the young Axel Thorsteinsson, a novelist; while Elinborg Lárusdóttir, a very prolific and popular novelist, joined the group in the thirties.

A second group was that of conservative nationalists. Already during the war some, like Bjarni Jónsson frá Vogi and Árni Pálsson, had reacted against the cosmopolitan culture of Kvaran (e.g., family names) as well as the foreign exploitation of Icelandic waterfalls. During the twenties and after, Guðmundur Finnbogason and Sigurður Nordal strove for a deeper analysis of the national character, stressed the continuum of the literary tradition (rímar), and put a new emphasis on rustic cultural values. Nordal found Kvaran's spiritualistic art faded, but held up as patterns of the rustic culture Guðmundur Friðjónsson, the poetesses Theódóra Thoroddsen (1863-1953) and Ólina and Herdis Andrésdóttir (twins: 1858-1935, 1858-1939), but above all the Canadian giant Stephan G. Stephansson. Three more women could be added: Ólaf Sigurðardóttir á Hlöðum (1857-1933), poetess; Kristín Sigfúsdóttir (1876-1953), playwright; and Hulda. Some of the young poets were partly attracted to this group: Hagalin, Davið Stefánsson, Jón Magnússon, and Jóhannes úr Kötulum. During the thirties Guðmundur Ingi Kristjánsson (1907——) became the farming poet par
excellence, a new Eggert Ólafsson. Several of these writers, as well as professional collectors like Sigmúð Sigfússon (1855–1935), were interested in folk poetry, folk tales, and folklore; others, like Björn O. Björnsson, in topographical-historical studies (1930—).

Two poets—Jakob Thorarensen and Órn Arnarson (Magnús Stefánsson)—were both nationalistic in outlook but more realistic than the above group; Órn was also nearer to the socialists.

The watchword of the third group was: live fully and give free expression to your feelings whether sadness or joy, hate or love, seriousness or humor. These individualist poets, revolting against the Victorian prudery of the nineteenth century and shying instinctively from the intellectual poetry of Einar Benediktsson, were later branded as bourgeois by the socialist writers. They often were admirers of the fin de siècle poetry of France, England, and Scandinavia. Thus Nordal had studied Walter Pater, probably his “New Cyrenaicism,” before he drew Álfur á Vindhæli (1919), the first typical character of this sort, sketched in purple lyrical prose. The individualistic point of view was intensified in Laxness’ Vefarinn mikli (1927), and varied in Kristmann Guðmundsson’s novels—while the short stories of Þórir Bergsson (Þorsteinn Jónsson) and Davíð Þorvaldsson (1901–1932) are much more subdued psychological studies. The leading poets of the group, Stefán frá Hvitadal and Davíð Stefánsson, were followed by the melancholy romantics Sigúrður Grímsson (1896—), Jóhann Jónsson, Magnús Ásgeirsson, and Tómas Guðmundsson. Richard Beck, Guðmundur Frímann (1903—), Kjartan Gíslason frá Mosfelli (1902—), Vílhljálmur Guðmundsson frá Skáholti (1907—), and Guðfinna Jónsdóttir frá Hörmrum (1899–1946) were all related to this group. Likewise to some extent the great poet Jón Helgason, who did not publish his serious poetry until 1939. Since Kristján Albertsson (1897—) was the first to proclaim the greatness of Vefarinn mikli, he may be considered the critic of this group, though he was probably more closely connected with Kvarán’s and Kamban’s cosmopolitanism.

Revolters in style and thought

The fourth group comprises those who revolted in style and thought. There were only two revolters in style, both connected with the literary coterie of Unuhús; in fact, Þórbergur Þórðarson’s life had actually been saved by the kindly Maecenas Erlandur Guðmundsson, master of Unuhús, when Þórbergur was a starving youngster just before World
War I. During the war, Þórbergur had reacted against the romantic erotic effusions of his fellow poets, parodying them and filling stately skaldic meters with futuristic nonsense. In 1924 he published Bréf til Láru to preach his newfound socialism, where the form proved even more important than the message, for he did here precisely what Shaw had done for the English of the nineties: introduced the gentle art of shocking. He broke several taboos, showed no delicacy in praising himself, but also no lack of humor whether dealing with himself or others. When he chose he was a master of classical prose, but he had no scruples against admitting foreign words or involved constructions of the German-Danish baroque time (ca. 1600–1800) for grotesque or burlesque effect. Here was then the first real breach against the purist style which had reigned supreme since Fjölnir. Halldór Guðjónsson (Kiljan Laxness), the younger of the two style renovators, had been thrown into the maelstrom of postwar Europe (notably Germany) with Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as beacons on the shore, but Strindberg and Johannes Jórgensen at the tiller. For a while he reached a safe haven in a Catholic monastery in Luxembourg, whence he sent home surrealist poetry and gathered material for the great autobiographical novel recording his mental development, “a witch-brew of ideas presented in a stylistic furioso” (Peter Hallberg), Vesfarinn mikli frá Kasmir (1927). I have long thought that this work was marked by the chaos of German Expressionism; at any rate it has the abandon advocated by André Breton, the master of French Surrealism. It created a sensation in Iceland and was hailed by Kristján Albertsson as the epoch-making work it really was. In the future, Laxness was always in the vanguard of the stylistic development, but he was followed in the thirties by the much older Kamban who tried to write seventeenth-century style in a period novel, and by the younger Hagalin, who tried to fuse certain characteristics of old folks’ talk in Vestfirðir and Magister Jón Vídalín’s preaching into a new style.

Turning now from style to thought, we can say that the Catholic Church made one more convert: Stefán frá Hvítadal. Otherwise the trend among all was to socialism, which now for the first time had natural soil among the poor workers of the towns. In many ways the attitude of the new writers resembled that of the Realists of the eighties: they wrote social satires in the hope of improving the world. And as far as they grounded their satire in native conditions, they might be called neo-realists, though insofar as they built their hopes on the Russian Utopia, they might be charged with Romanticism.
In Denmark Kamban wrote dramas critical of Western culture up to 1927. In Iceland the budding socialism was criticized by Jón Trausti (1918) and advocated with moderation by Hagalín (1927). But the first to proclaim socialism in a fierce attack on the present order was Sigurjón Jónsson (1888——) in a two-volume novel (1922–24), which, though genuinely indignant, had the bad luck to be overshadowed by Þórbergur Pórdarson's brilliant Bréf til Lárú (1924). With Alþýðubókin (1929) Laxness, just back from Upton Sinclair's California, joined the socialist bandwagon and was followed by Gunnar Benediktsson, one of the best critics of the cause.

During the thirties—the depression—Sigurður Einarsson opened the decade with his programmatic Hammer and Sickle (1930), while some old and almost all young writers rallied to the banner of Kristinn E. Andrésson (1901——) and his periodical Rauðir pennar (1935–1938). The first convert, the national romantic poet Jóhannes úr Kötlum (1932), was followed by the novelists Gunnar M(agnús) Magnúss (1898——), Stefán Jónsson (1905——), Sigurður Benediktsson Gröndal (1903——), Halldór Stefánsson, Ólafur Jóhann Sigurðsson, and Guðmundur Danielsson, who soon broke away from the group. There followed the poets Guðmundur Böðvarsson, farmer; Steinn Steinarr (Áðalsteinn Kristmundsson), bohemian; and Jón (Jónsson) úr Vör, poor villager, who all have remained more or less faithful to the socialist gospel, though the two last-named, especially Steinn Steinarr, turned to a new experimental formalism and intensified introspection during the forties. Not leftist, though starting in the thirties, were the novelists Elínborg Lárusdóttir (1891——), Þórunn Magnúsdóttir, and Sigurður Helgason. Snorri Hjartarson wrote a novel in Norwegian (1934); he was to become one of the finest poets of the forties.

Icelandic studies

In the interwar period, Icelandic studies were represented in Reykjavik by Sigurður Nordal, professor of literature (1918–1945); Alexander Jóhannesson (1888——), professor of language (1915——), a prolific historian of language and an etymologist; Páll Eggert Ólason (1883–1949), professor of history (1921–29), a prolific bibliographer (catalogue of the manuscript collections of the National Library, 1918–1937), author of fundamental studies on the Reformation period and the nineteenth century (Jón Sigurðsson), history of Iceland in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and an Icelandic biographical lexi-
TRADITION AND REVOLT BETWEEN THE WORLD WARS

Barði Guðmundsson (1900-57), professor of history (1930-31) and archivist, a brilliant but erratic scholar; Árni Pálsson (1878-1952) professor of history (1931-43), more celebrated as a wit and essayist than as a scholar.

Of scholars not connected with the University the great schoolman Sigurður Guðmundsson (1878-1949), headmaster of the school at Akureyri, wrote many penetrating studies of Icelandic literary figures, old and modern. Guðbrandur Jónsson (1888-1953), son of Þórður Jóhannesson (forni), specialized in Catholic studies, wrote an antiquarian description of the Cathedral at Hólar and a life of the last Catholic bishop, Dr. Helgi P. Briem (1902—) wrote on Iceland's Independence 1809.

Here the editors of Íslenzk fornrit (1933—) under the leadership of Sigurður Nordal may fittingly be mentioned. Nordal started the series with Egils saga in 1933. Björg Karelsdóttir (1892—) had written a monumental study of rímur before 1600 and had done some editing in Copenhagen; he edited Vestfjörðinga sögur. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1899—) had written on fairy tales (Märchenvarianten) and a literary study on Njálalaga (1933) and was to write a monumental study of the Sturlung Age (1940); he edited Laxdæla, Njálalaga (1954) and others. Guðni Jónsson was a prolific writer on several matters; he edited Grettis saga and others. Björg Sigfússon (1905—) edited Ljósveitninga saga and others. Bjarni Ádalbjarnarson (1908-1953) wrote a fundamental work on the kings' sagas (1936) and edited Heimskringla (1941—).

In Scandinavia, Icelandic studies were represented by Jón Helgason (1899—), first professor of Old Icelandic in Oslo (1926-27), then in Copenhagen (1929—), also a curator of the Arnamagnaean Collection and a prolific and painstaking editor; Sigfús Blöndal (1874-1950) taught Modern Icelandic (1931-46). Jakob Benediktsson (1907—), a classical scholar, edited Icelandic Renaissance Latin writings, collaborated on an Old Icelandic dictionary sponsored by the Arnamagnaean Foundation, and became after World War II editor-in-chief of a modern Icelandic dictionary sponsored by the University of Iceland in Reykjavik.

In America Stefán Einarsson (1897—) began teaching Old Icelandic at The Johns Hopkins University in 1927 and has since then published books on Icelandic language and literature, especially of the modern period. Richard Beck (1897—) began teaching Icelandic at the University of North Dakota in 1929, and has since then been an extremely prolific writer and lecturer on Modern Icelandic literature and literary figures, and also an editor of several American-Icelandic poets.
Sigurður Eggerz

Sigurður Pétursson Eggerz (1875–1945), was born in Hrútafjörður in the Northwest, of a family of parsons and lawyers, and studied law in Copenhagen (1895–1903), where he joined Jóhann Sigurjónsson’s circle. In Iceland his political career took him to the highest position in the land, and prevented his writing until his sixties.

He published Sýnir (Visions, 1934), essays, short stories, speeches and poems, all in a strong lyric vein, similar to the prose poem. His plays, Pað logar yfir jöklinum (Fire over the Glacier, 1937) and Lik­kistusmiðurinn (The Coffin Maker, 1938), are dramas of great ideals and tempestuous passions, akin to but surpassing in fervor the romantic Danish-Icelandic plays. A third play, Pála (1942), was more subdued in tone. In these plays there is an expressionistic tendency to suppress individualizing detail and exaggerate the emotions that make his dramas unusual in Icelandic literature, though Gunnarsson’s Dyret med glorien (The Animal with the Halo, 1922) is of a similar cast.

Magnús Stefánsson

Magnús Stefánsson (pen name Örn Arnarsson, 1884–1942) was born near Langanes in the Northeast, of poor parents in a time of near famine. Toward the end of his life in a hospital in Hafnarfjörður, in one of his finest poems, he paid a sensitive and beautiful tribute to his mother guiding his first steps of life. The Icelandic home (baðstofa) recital of rímur and sagas staked out his road as a poet; that road led him through a high school and a teachers’ college (Reykjavík, 1909) and, finally, through a self-imposed course in foreign languages and literatures (Scandinavian, English, and German). Yet, except for one year, which he did not enjoy, he did not become a teacher but alternated clerical work in winter with manual work (fishing, road-building) in summer. His youthful love, “Ásrún,” was to become a bittersweet memory only, for he remained a bachelor with not a little of the vagabond in him: traveling on foot all over his native land, collecting stones, plants, and impressions for memorable poems.

His ambition to become a poet was coupled with an unusually keen self-criticism. It was not until 1920 that he published a few poems in Eimreiðin, but their success was such that he was moved to publish his Illgresi (Weeds) in 1924, a slim volume. After his death, it was published (1942) with additions and a sketch of his life by Bjarni Adal­bjarnarson. The poems remain uniformly of a high quality.
Considering his origins and life it was small wonder that the poet should turn to satire of the existing order in revolt against an inhuman God and malevolent, hypocritical, and superficial men. Yet his instrument was more often irony and whimsicality than direct satire. He was too complete a man himself to see only one side of life, and he found not a few heroes worthy of his praise. So the thoroughly Icelandic "Sheriff Sigurður," embodiment of the saga-spirit, so the famous fisherman type, "Stjáni blái," and so, finally, the berserk sailor-politician Oddur sterki, in whose honor the poet composed a rollicking cycle of rimur (1938).

There are more good poems about sailors, sailing, and the sea, like the poem "Hrafnistumenn," the official song of the Icelandic seamen.

As befits a satirist he has also left many biting epigrams; but in general his outlook mellowed with the years and with his poetical success.

**Þorsteinn Jónsson**

Þorsteinn Jónsson (pen name Þórir Bergsson, 1885——) was born in Hvammur, Norðurárdalur, in the West, the son of a clergyman, who gave his son a solid home education. Poor health compelled him to take a position as a clerk, first in a post office, later in a bank in Reykjavik. As early as 1912 he published a short story, but his first collection, Sögur (Stories) came in 1939. It was followed by a novel, Vegir og vegleysur (Ways and No Ways, 1941), Nýjar sögur (New Stories, 1944), a volume of poems (1947), more short stories, Hinn gamli Adam (The Old Adam, 1947), and the novel Hvítsandar (White Sands, 1949).

Þorsteinn Jónsson is always a competent short story writer and some of his stories are excellent. His lack of political bias and his interest in character studies, as well as in his art, range him squarely with the neoromanticists. He does not have the humor of Jakob Thorarensen or the social satire of Halldór Stefánsson. In some of his fiction (e.g., the first novel) there are echoes of Hamsun, lover of nature and admirer of women, but Þorsteinn Jónsson lacks Hamsun’s humor and is quieter in tone.

Though character development or description is his main interest, he can also describe situations and moods; cf. the horror story "Í Giljar­reitum." His post-World War II stories differ in no way from his earlier production, and they have no nationalistic bias, though they describe inevitable incidents.
Jakob Thorarensen

Jakob Jakobsson Thorarensen (1886—) was born in Húnavatns-sýsla of a family of poets (Bjarni Thorarensen) and scholars. He grew up in Hrútafjörður and Reykjarfjörður, Strandir, and was early formed by that harsh and rugged nature to a stern manliness. One of his grandfathers told him stories of the brave shark fishermen he was to celebrate in a memorable poem, the other one became his pattern as a man of action and strong personality. As a youth Jakob Thorarensen worked on a farm or, sometimes, as a fisherman; but when he was nineteen he went to Reykjavik, where for a long time he plied his trade as a carpenter or house-builder. Within a short time he had a home and a good and growing private library in which he could improve his unschooled but intellectually curious mind. But though he gradually gained the use of foreign languages and traveled to Scandinavia (cf. his poem “Sogn”) he was primarily influenced by the native literary tradition within which his kinsman Bjarni Thorarensen and Grímur Thomsen matched his manliness, while Einar Benediktsson may have inspired his philosophical approach.

Jakob Thorarensen was a prolific author who published more than a dozen volumes. He made his debut with Snæljós (Snow Blink, 1914), a collection of poems which was followed by three others before the series was broken by Fleygar stundir (Winged Hours, 1929), the first of four volumes of short stories. His collected works, entitled Svalt og bjart (Cool and Bright), were published in 1946. Since then one more volume of poems and two of short stories have appeared. Jakob Thorarensen was an intellectual rather than a lyric poet.

Whether he wrote poetry or prose Jakob Thorarensen was a realist, a lover of a rugged landscape, clear and cool northern skies and, in general, the sterner side of Icelandic nature. He admired strong and flawless characters whether of the saga age or of the present. Conversely, he had no use for laggards or braggarts, whiners or hypocrites. He would portray his characters in short but deft narrative sketches, often with friendly humor, yet not infrequently with biting irony. But in spite of his satirical bent he was not a socialist, like his fellow-realist Magnús Stefánsson (Örn Arnarson), being apparently too much of an individualist for that. As a philosopher he was in general resigned to life as it came, but was not always averse to kicking against fate and God, when he felt in the mood.

His short stories were among the best written at the time, marked by
the same deftness in character drawing, the same keen eye for life's multifarious, yet everyday, problems, the same humor and irony, as the poems.

Sigurður Nordal

Sigurður Jóhannesson Nordal (1886— ) was born and brought up in Vatnsdalur in the North, of a stock of poets and scholars; he studied Icelandic philology at the University of Copenhagen, writing a thesis on the sources of Snorri's Olafs saga helga (1914). After an interval in Germany and Oxford, where he studied psychology and philosophy, he returned to Iceland to lecture on these subjects and take over the chair of Old Icelandic Literature at the University of Iceland (1918). This he kept in one way or another until, in 1951, he became the Minister of Iceland in Denmark. His works on Snorri Sturluson (1920) and Völuspa (1923) at once revealed his stature—W. P. Ker compared his essays with those of Saint-Beuve—and made him a popular lecturer in Scandinavia, even in America, where he held the Charles Eliot Norton professorship of poetry at Harvard 1931–32. Later, universities of Scandinavia and Great Britain, among them Oxford, vied with each other in giving him honorary degrees.

Though Nordal's thesis was strictly philological, he was no dry-as-dust scholar: indeed, he had already buried himself in the literature of the fin de siècle (Pater, Maeterlinck, Baudelaire) and composed poetry both in verse and prose. His exquisite prose poem "He!" (The Goddess of Death) in Fornar ástir (Old Loves, 1919) was not only unique in Icelandic literature, but made the book the best of the year. It is the study of a Don Juan, Álfur frá Vindhæli, who like a butterfly flits from flower to flower, savoring all the sensation of the world without ever wanting to shoulder the responsibilities of life. After death Nordal gives him amnesia and turns him over to his first love, who, like Solveig in Peer Gynt, always had treasured him in memory. Here is the same appetite for life and hedonism which are characteristic of the great lyric poets of the twenties, notably Davíð Stefánsson. That they were a self-portrait of the young Nordal was obvious, and equally obviously they represented a phase in his life or dreams which he wanted to renounce—to a degree—when he became a scholar. Yet, only to a degree! He treated the same problem, posed by many choices or one, facing every individual, in his lectures on "Centripetal and Centrifugal Personality" (1918), advocating the Golden Mean, a synthesis of the two. As to his own work, he
vowed that from now on he would not publish anything where his scholarship and his poetic vision were not integrated to the best of his ability. This sounded like and was meant to be a challenge to Finnur Jónsson’s narrow philological point of view.

His brilliant book on Snorri Sturluson (1920) was the first sample of this synthesis, showing Snorri as a writer and chieftain, a tragic bi-polarity in his life, and sketching the development of the sagas as a function of two great interests: truth seeking and entertainment. The introduction to Völuspá made this difficult Eddic classic speak directly to a modern audience. Great influence on contemporary writers was exerted by his essay on the continuity in Icelandic Literature in *Islenzk lestrarbók 1400–1900* (Icelandic Anthology, 1924). In this he emphasized the role of the rimur as a conserver of language, poetic diction, and metrical practices (the old Germanic alliterative verse), and saw the history of Icelandic literature as a fruitful struggle between foreign influence and national inheritance. This nationalistic stand involved him in literary controversy during the late twenties when he took a stand for the farm culture of Þingeyjarsýsla but against the weak spiritualistic-humanitarian attitudes of Einar H. Kvaran and frowned on the contemporary “fads of Europe,” represented by Laxness’ Catholic Vefarinn mikli. Neither did he trust the radical socialists, but fortunately for him, some of them, notably the youth leader and critic Kristinn Andrésson (1901——), carried on his nationalism in the thirties and forties. In the thirties Nordal and his disciples, notably Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, were busy at work on the new literary edition of the sagas: *Islenzk fornrit*. Nordal published Egils saga (1933) and a few others, besides being the leader of the whole enterprise (there are now thirteen volumes; Njáls saga has been published by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson). In these editions, in general following Bédier’s methods, he tried to lay the foundation of a new criticism of the sagas, as they have been preserved to us. Though not denying the importance of oral tradition, he sees the sagas mostly as written works, products of real authors, not scribes, and he demonstrates their place in the development after the kings’ sagas, mostly during the thirteenth century, the Sturlung Age. A survey of these views is found in his “Sagalitteraturen” in *Nordisk Kultur*, 1953.

Already as a young man abroad, notably in Oxford, Nordal was prodded by the inferiority complex of a member of a small nation to make clear to himself what, if anything, in the cultural tradition of this isolated and insignificant people was worth telling about abroad and
devoting a lifetime of work to at home. He soon came to the conclusion that not only the Eddas and the sagas had intrinsic value, but also the way this old literature had become, so to speak, the very bread on which the people as a whole had survived during long centuries of famine and depressions, up to the rebirth in the nineteenth century. With this in mind he wrote his Harvard lectures, and in the late thirties he resumed the work, planning to write a three-volume book *Islenzk menning* (Icelandic Culture) for the literary society Mál og Menning. Actually the first volume, appearing in 1942, exceeded even the fondest hopes of his admirers. It was an epoch-making study of Icelandic culture and its institutions from the beginning up to the thirteenth century. As by-products of his studies, Nordal wrote a number of essays on the leading Icelandic poets, like Egill Skallagrímsson, Grímr Thómsen, Þórsteinn Erlingsson, Stephan G. Stephansson, and others. These essays were collected in *Áfangar I–II* (Stages, 1943–44), while *Lif og dødi* (Life and Death, 1940) are philosophical radio talks, and *Uppstigning* (Resurrection, 1946) is a Pirandellian play of revolt against the confines of a small town.

**Stefán Sigurðsson frá Hvitadal**

Stefán Sigurðsson frá Hvitadal (1887–1933) was born at Hólnavík in the Northwest, but grew up on farms, one of them Hvitadalur in the same vicinity. An attempt to learn the printer’s trade failed because of ill health which dogged him all his life. The years 1912–16 were spent in Norway, working, sight-seeing, and suffering in a sanatorium. Back in his home district he married and had a large family, but died prematurely. When in Reykjavik he was a member of the Unhúshús coterie.

His first poems *Söngvar forúmunnins* (The Wanderer’s Song, 1918, second edition 1919) struck a new note in Icelandic poetry and became a literary event. In Norway he had learned much of Ibsen, Per Sivle and especially Wildenvey; he had adapted their verse forms to suit his own personal expression, after which they became the rage of young poets in Iceland. His poetry was perhaps more personal than any heard before in Iceland. In it he poured out his love to the fair sex, his love of nature, summer, and spring in strains that were doubly poignant because one could always sense the threat of ever-impending death. Naturally sorrow and sad laments find their place in the poems, too, but rejoicing of youth, and praise of life are really dominant, for the poet was a man at heart. Few could express the perhaps somewhat
reckless but perfectly natural aspirations of youth as he did in "Hjartarím" (Heart Rime). But however reckless and worldly the young lover could be—as testified by some of his love poems or his praise of women—there was in him also a deep strain of spirituality which rang out the church bells in "Aðfangadagskvöld jóla 1912" (Christmas Eve), brilliant in form and profound in feeling.

With this first book Stefan rose to undreamed heights in the firmament of Icelandic poets. In his second book, Ödur einyrkjans (The Song of the Lone Cotter, 1921), he had already passed the zenith, although the book in general is fine. He has now become an earthbound tiller of the soil and makes a genuine effort to fuse poetry and his work, but cannot avoid clashing with the earlier dreamer and wanderer. The old themes are still there, but lack the first freshness; to compensate he turns to folklore and fairy tales.

It was the religious note which was to grow to the exclusion of most other things in his future poetry. Like Laxness, another member of the Unuhús coterie, Stefán frá Hvítaodal became a Catholic in 1923, though his friend, Þórbúrgur Þorðarson, always doubted the sincerity of his conversion. His next work was Heilög kirkja (Holy Church, 1924), a sonorous hrynhenda, a praise poem, in the tradition of Lilja. Of his next book, Helsingjar (Geese, 1927), he devoted about half to Catholic religious poetry, while the rest was on traditional worldly subjects, the two outstanding poems being in praise of women and poets. Anno Domini 1930 was occasioned by the millenary of the Althing; it was posthumously published (1933). A collected edition of his poems (Ljódmæli) with an introduction by the poet Tómas Guðmundsson was published in 1945.

Sigurjón Jónsson

Sigurjón Jónsson (1888——) was born in Reykjavik, but grew up in extreme poverty in Húsavík of the North. After a short schooling he became a bank clerk in Reykjavik. Here he met the writers of the Unuhús coterie, and, like others of that group, developed from a romantic idealist and theosophist into a socialist and satirical writer. Though by no means the best of that group, he had the distinction of being the first. Having started with some highly romantic fairy tales and poems, which gained him a parody by Þórbúrgur Þorðarson, Sigurjón unleashed his biting satire on Reykjavik during and after World War I in Silkikjólar og vaðmálsbuxur (Silk Gowns and Homespun Pants, 1922) and Glæi-
mennska (Dandyism, 1924). After that Sigurjón lapsed into silence, not broken until his retirement from the bank. Then—after 1945—he came back with epigrams, short stories and fairy tales, some of which contained his best writing, also a revised edition of *Silkikjólar*, and some mediocre plays. But most surprising of the late works was *Ingvöldur Fögurkinn* (1951–52), based on *Svarfdæla saga*, written in a very individualistic way, with saga style, modern style, lyric passages, verse and fairy tale style all mixed. This would seem to be an inauspicious undertaking, but somehow the author manages to succeed, and the work compares favorably with other sagas in modern garb, if one excepts Laxness’ *Gerpla*. And, due to his theosophist background, he interprets Old Icelandic sorcery better than most other imitators of the sagas. Two more “sagas” from his pen are *Gaukur Trandílsson* (1953) and *Helga Bárðardóttir* (1955).

**Jakob J. Smári**

Jakob Jóhannesson Smári (1889——) was born at Sauðafell in Míðdalir in the West, the son of a parson who was a philologist of note and of a verse-making family. He studied Old Icelandic philology at the University of Copenhagen (M.A. 1914), and later became a teacher of Icelandic language and literature in the Gymnasium of Reykjavík. He wrote textbooks on grammar (notably syntax), essays on cultural and literary subjects, and was a busy reviewer of books.

Smári published three volumes of poetry: *Kaldavermsl* (1920), *Handan storms og straunum* (Beyond Storms and Currents, 1936), and *Undir söl að sjá* (Looking toward Sunset, 1939), the titles all significant of his poetic tendency. The first means a spring that runs cool in summer, warm in winter, a symbol of his deep and steadily flowing poetic vein. For Smári is always a personal lyric poet *par excellence*, whether he writes love poems or descriptions of nature—usually in its quieter and mellower moods—nay, even when he describes the most bitter winter. He is in reality a mystic who readily identifies himself not only with fellow-humans and animals, but also with the whole of nature and any facet of it. Fundamentally this is the attitude of the Symbolists and Neo-Romanticists, and Einar Benediktsson is another fine example, but the difference between him and Smári is that between the raging waterfall and the smooth-flowing spring or the quiet pond that mirrors eternity in its waters. Besides, Einar Benediktsson is more intellectual, Smári more personal. Smári is a great master of form and likes to employ the
sonnet, but also many other meters, not all of them simple, though his form is almost always smooth and flawless. His familiarity with oriental wisdom (theosophy) and spiritualism has visibly enhanced his search for eternal values, but though he acknowledges his indebtedness to socialism (acquired in Denmark), the poems that testify to this are very few. His poetry is all beyond the storms and stresses of this world, for he is no fighter but a dreamer, a dreamer to whom the glorious Icelandic sunsets become the gates of eternity.

**Dórborgur Dórdarson**

Dórborgur Dórdarson (1889——) was born in Suðursveit, a remote district in the Southeast. As a farm boy he desired to become a sailor; the sailor aspired to learning and, though he found no favor in elementary schools, he was fortunate enough to be able to study Icelandic language and literature at the University of Reykjavik (1913–18), and to ease his bohemian hunger at the hospitable table of Erlendur Guðmundsson of Unuhúsi (1913). This house was frequented by many poetic aspirants, among them Dórborgur’s friend Stefán frá Hvitadal, who already was finding a perfect voice for the emotions of the time in erotic, melancholy, but simple strains. Dórborgur, originally an admirer and imitator of Einar Benediktsson, was converted to the simple lyric, but reacted with parodies both to his first mentor’s skaldic style and to his present friends’ erotic effusions. Specimens of his futuristic, Heinesque poetry were published as early as 1914 and 1915, but united and expanded in Hvitir hrafnar (White Ravens, 1922), the title a parody of Davíð Stefánsson’s Svartar fjáðrir (Black Feathers).

In 1917 Dórborgur Dórdarson buried himself in the study of oriental philosophy, theosophy and spiritualism, practicing yoga with considerable success. He described this rebirth in “Ljós úr austri” (Ex oriente lux, 1919), the first in a row of brilliant personal essays. Sincerely attracted by the theosophic ideal of brotherhood of men, he was soon disillusioned, when he felt that they did nothing to attain it, and so he turned to the study of socialism. This study bore an unexpectedly fine fruit in his next book: Bréf til Láru (Letter to Laura, 1924).

The book was intended to be a manifesto of socialism, and it contained sharp attacks on the existing order, not least the Protestant and the Catholic churches, as well as theosophists and spiritualists—for hypocrisy and easy-going life—for the author had no quarrel with Christ’s teachings, nor did he doubt the existence of life after death. This matter was
embedded in a picturesque frame of personal essays and sketches, anecdotes, and tales quite often autobiographical, always humorous, frequently at his own expense. And it was written in a brilliant style, paradoxical and shocking to the Victorian code of decency and common sense. These qualities made it a milestone in the development of literature and prose style, paving the way for Laxness, Kamban and Hagalin to leave the puristic classical style behind.

The Letter involved Dórbergur in a fierce controversy with the representatives of church and capital, during which he wrote perhaps his most brilliant essay, "Eldvígslan" (Initiation by Fire, 1925), in answer to a letter of Kristján Albertsson, the best young capitalistic critic at the time. No less brilliant was the autobiographical "Lifandi kristindómur og ég" (Living Christianity and I, 1929).

As a university student, Dórbergur Órðarson seemed predestined to become a student of national culture, and so he did, though he debunked the farm culture in Letter to Laura. He collected dialectal words and folk tales, published in Gráskínna 1928–36. Both were as fit exercises for his scientific meticulousness as they were appealing to his almost gullible mysticism.

From theosophical brotherhood and socialism there was only a step to internationalism and Esperanto, which he embraced in 1925. He taught it, wrote it, and espoused its cause in Allþjóðamál og múlleysur (International Language and Lesser Tongues, 1933). In 1934 Dórbergur Órðarson visited Russia and wrote about it the ironical Rauða hættan (The Red Scare, 1935). At the same time he wrote a newspaper column against the Nazis which earned him a fine from the Supreme Court, at Hitler's request.

The unusually loud personal note present in all Dórbergur Órðarson's work first prompted him to publish a sheaf of letters (1933) and finally resulted in a resolve to write his autobiography, unlike Gunnarsson, with names unchanged and with the fullest exercise of truthfulness he could master. It appeared as Islenskur aðall (Icelandic Nobility, 1938) and Ojvítin I-II (The All-Too-Wise or The Eccentric, 1940–41), covering the period 1909–1913, from the time he left the fishing smack until he entered the gates of Unuhús. Though realistically written and claiming to tell nothing but the truth, it is no less a highly imaginative novel. It is full of eccentric personalities, odd happenings, and comic scenes. It is not only the story of the diffident lover, romantic dreamer, the sarcastic cynic, and the fumbling philosopher, Dórbergur Órðarson
himself, but also a canvas of the age on which move budding celebrities like the poet Stefán frá Hvitadal and the future royal secretary Tryggvi Sveinbjörnsson, beside a host of minor figures, all intensely alive.

Having written that much about himself, he paused to write two spiritistic books, but after that he assumed the role of Boswell to write the memoirs of an old parson in six volumes, *Efisaga Arna Pórarínssonar* I–IV (1945–50). Wagging tongues said that here the fastest liar in Iceland had met the most gullible scribe, but, however that may be, the work is as unique in Icelandic literature as Boswell’s *Dr. Johnson* is in English, and there is no doubt that the scribe attempts to transfer his author—stories, tall tales, miracles, prejudices, superstitions, and personal style—with the utmost fidelity to the pages of the book. That he has succeeded in this is unquestioned.

From the exciting octogenarian, Dórbergur turned his keen observation to the life of a baby, a niece in the family born in 1943, to which he has devoted two volumes called *Sálurinn um blómíð* (The Hymn about the Flower, 1954–1955), a fascinating book written from the point of view of the child—with baby-talk and all.

**Gunnar Benediktsson**

Gunnar Benediktsson (1892—) was born in Austur-Skaftafells­sýsla, of farmer and parson stock. He served as a pastor in Saurbær, Eyjafjörður, 1920–31, but then resigned and turned socialist, living in Reykjavík, Eyrarbakki, and, at present, Hveragerði, the artist colony.

Gunnar Benediktsson wrote several novels and one play, to expose the rotten social order of his time, but most of them lack the spark of living art. Having more intellectual powers than imagination, he is at his best in his lectures and essays. He is not only the keenest intellect among the socialists, but one of the outstanding essayists of the country. His *Æfisaga Jesús frá Nazaret* (Life of Jesus, 1930) interpreted Jesus as a revolutionary leader. His essays were published in the collections *Sýn mér trú þína af verkunum* (Show Me Your Faith by Your Deeds, 1936), *Skilningstré gðógs og ills* (The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, 1939), *Sókninn mikla, um Finnagaldur* (The Great Attack; about Finn Sorcery, 1940), and *Hinn gamli Adam í oss* (Old Adam in Us, 1944). His last works are *Saga þín er saga vor* (Your History is Our History, 1952), a history of Iceland during and after World War II, and *Ísland hefur jarl* (Iceland Has an Earl, 1954), interesting comments on the Sturlung Age.
These essays contain the best history of ideas in Iceland during the first third of the century, fine profiles of contemporaries and associates, literary criticism and reactions to world events—all from the Marxist point of view. The style is classical and ironical, but lacks the whimsicality of Órbergur Órðarson and the capricious conceits of H. K. Laxness.

Halldór Stefánsson

Halldór Stefánsson (1892—) was born in the East and grew up in Eskifjörður, the son of a local postmaster. As a bank clerk in Reykjavík he published his first short story in 1921, and his first collection of short stories, *I fáum dráttum* (In Few Strokes, 1930), was partly written during a vacation in Berlin. Four more volumes followed, all containing short stories, excepting *Innan sviga* (Within Parentheses, 1945), a short novel. A last volume (1950) also contained some short plays.

Halldór Stefánsson was interested in three things: the fate of the underprivileged and poor, peculiar and psychologically interesting individuals, and methods of short story telling. Because of his first interest he belongs with the socialistic group of writers, though this tendency is by no means always present. In reality he is more interested in the individual than in his society. The last preoccupation has turned him into one of the most decided experimentalists in short story writing. His stories have usually a characteristic firm structure. This firmness also extends to his style, which is often humorous and ironic, sometimes punning. Of his short stories, “Death on the Third Floor,” the punning “Réttur” (“Right” = “Course of Food”) and “Dream for Sale” may be mentioned. The last-named describes the impact of World War II on an Icelandic character, while “England Expects Every Man to Do His Duty” tells the story of an English private in Iceland. But “Hernaðarsarga blinda mannsins” (The Blind Man’s Warfare) is a masterpiece, perhaps his best.

Davíð Stefánsson

Davíð Stefánsson (1895—) was born at Fagriskógur, Eyjafjörður, in the North, his father a farmer and member of the Althing, his mother a sister of Ólafur Davíðsson, the prolific folklorist. He first went to school at Akureyri, but his studies were interrupted by ill health so that he did not graduate from the Gymnasium in Reykjavík until 1919. He made a great many journeys abroad. He was for a long time a
librarian in Akureyri (1925–52) and was, besides, a lover and collector of books, as some of his poems show.

Dávið Stefánsson was to become the chief romantic poet of the twenties (and thirties), a most popular poet of his time and the most prolific one. He was to achieve what the early neo-romantics like Hulda and Guðmundur Guðmundsson had striven for—a complete realization of the personal lyric poetry giving an uninhibited expression to his changing moods of love and hate, hope and despair, exultation and sadness. Though many of his contemporaries had striven for the same full scale of emotional poetry and would readily imitate him, only Stefán Sigurðsson frá Hvitadál had acquired the new tone before him, and his poetry remained more limited in form and themes. But both he and Dávið Stefánsson avoided the essentially skaldic forms of Einar Benediktsson and turned to the simpler forms of foreign and native poetry, Dávið Stefánsson to the folk-song (ballad) forms that he had learned from the great collection of his uncle Ólafur Davíðsson (Íslenzkar gátur, skemtanir, víkivakar, og þulur, 1887–1903) at his mother’s knee.

Dávið Stefánsson was not quite unknown when he published Svartar fjóðrir (Black Feathers, 1919), but it was a resounding success, admired by young and old alike; by the first for the fiery emotions, by the latter for the ennobled folk-song forms. It won him a stipend to see Italy, celebrated in many poems of his next collection, Kveði (Poems, 1922). There followed Kveðjur (Greetings, 1924) and Ný kveði (New Poems, 1929), all four united in a collected edition, 1930. In the thirties there appeared Í byggðum (Among Human Habitations, 1933) and Að nörðan (From the North, 1936), then after a longer pause Ný kveðabók (New Poems, 1947), his last one. No doubt, his very best work is to be found in these poems, though not all of them could be of equal worth.

Love poetry, sensual or spiritual, exulting or sad, native or Italian, naturally predominates in the earlier volumes, which also contain most of the folklore and folk song themes, even these shifting from light or humorous to ominous and threatening moods and horror stories, like the exotic “Abba-Labba-Lá.” Often there is “a deep undercurrent of heartache and sadness” (R. Beck) as in the lullaby to his mother “Mamma ætlar að sofna” (Mother is Going to Sleep). In others, inescapable destiny is lamented in symbolic poems like “Krummi” (The Raven), while pioneers like “Myndhöggvarinn” (The Sculptor) often receive his praise. His travels inspire poems imbued with longing for the faraway romantic countries (útþrát) and his nes-
talgia for home, as well as descriptions of sights seen. Thus his first train ride is turned into a symbol of the course of life. After 1924 a note of social satire is increasingly heard, and he may have gone to Russia to take a look at that land of promise (before 1929), but without being much impressed except, perhaps, by the vodka. He does write the famous eulogy on "Konan sem kyndir ofninn minn" (The Woman Who Keeps my Stove Burning), and in the volume dating from the depression year of 1933 his reformatory zeal against capitalism and Church is at its greatest, though never toeing the communist line. At home he lamented the flight of the farmer to the cities and the growing bureaucracy. His last volume of poems (1947) contains his reactions to the war at home and abroad, showing his hatred of planned totalitarianism and his admiration for Norway—also his disillusion at the quick rearmament.

It is impossible to trace all his themes, but something must be said of his humorous and whimsical tales in verse, of which "My John's Soul" is justly famous and has furthermore inspired him to write his best play, the equally delightfully humorous and whimsical Gullna hlíðið (The Golden Gate, 1941). As early as 1926 Davíð Stefánsson had written an unsuccessful play, but The Golden Gate was eminently successful not only in Reykjavik but in Oslo and Edinburgh as well. After that he wrote Vopn Guðanna (The Weapons of the Gods, 1944) on the oriental tale of Josaphat and Barlaam and Landið glevymda (The Forgotten Land, 1953) about the Greenland missionary, Hans Egede. Almost as popular as The Golden Gate was his historical-realistic symbolic novel, Sólon Islandus (I–II, 1940), the story of an Icelandic vagabond of the nineteenth century. It is a truly Icelandic tragedy, the life of an ambitious, artistic dreamer with no means to realize his ambition, or to develop his talents which might have borne fruit in a bigger nation. Thus elucidated, Sólon becomes a significant figure in Icelandic fiction, comparable to the Norwegian Peer Gynt.

Jón Magnússon

Jón Magnússon (1896–1944) was born in Borgarfjörður of poor parents, but grew up with his mother in the historic Þingvallasveit. For many years he lived in Reykjavik as a cooper; later he became the owner of a furniture store. He was self-educated and a great book lover.

In spite of hard work, his mind was always occupied with poetry, and he wrote five volumes of it before his premature death. He started with
Bláskógur (Blue Forests, 1925), inspired by ardent love for his home, the beautiful Þingvallavæt, and he ended with Jörðin græn (Green Earth, 1945), a symbolic tribute to the Icelandic mother earth. Jón was an unusually warm personality, as the glint in his eyes would tell, and his warm heart burned with a quiet flame in all his poetry, whether he dealt with the blessed green earth, the flocks of sheep and the playing spring lambs (Hjarðir, Flocks, 1929), or with his fellow-countrymen—from orphans, who he felt were his special brothers and sisters, to his favorite poets. Yet, there was one breed of man whom he singled out for special treatment; indeed, he wrote a whole book in honor of one of them, Björn á Reyðarfelli (1938). These were the men who, resisting the flood tide of movement from the country to the town, had clung to the upland farms and given their lives to keep them as human habitations in spite of hard natural conditions and the tendency of their children to forsake this heritage for a less rigorous existence. When a man like that died, Iceland’s stature had been lowered one man’s length, as the poet remarked about one of these cotters. Jón saw in their faithful struggle and in their unrelenting manhood a symbol of the thousand-year-old struggle for survival of the nation itself and the chief hope for its future. In this he joined hands with most of the national-romanticists of the twenties, Guðmundur Friðjónsson, Nordal, his brother-in-law Davíð Stefánsson, and others. For though Jón lived in Reykjavik, his roots remained in Þingvallavæt.

Jóhann Jónsson

Jóhann Jónsson (1896–1932), born in Snæfellsnes in the West, died prematurely in Leipzig, Germany, after studying at the Gymnasium in Reykjavik and the Universities of Leipzig and Berlin.

At school in Reykjavik (1917–20) he made a great impression on his fellow-poets as being the most gifted of the group, and the few poems that survive from that period sustain fully that judgment. To be sure, he shared his fellow-poets’ gloomy, sad mood, but in his case it had a genuine, personal cause, since he was ill and partly crippled. His experiment in free verse was better than anything attempted in that genre at the time; witness his poems: “Hvað er klukkan . . . ?” (What time is it . . . ?), “Ljóð” (Poem), and “Söknuður” (Sorrow). Jóhann composed “Sorrow” when his fatal tuberculosis knocked on the door for the second time. It is thus, in a way, a death poem, a poignant lament over his irrevocably lost poetry and life.
His Kvaði og ritgerðir (Poems and Essays, 1952) were published by his friend and fellow-poet Halldór Kiljan Laxness.

**Sigurður Einarsson**

Sigurður Einarsson (1898—) was born in Fljótshlið—the Njála country—of good farm stock with interest in literature, but grew up in Vestmannaeyjar as a fisherman. He graduated in theology from the University of Iceland in 1926 and had after that a chequered and colorful career as a parson, educator, politician, radio commentator, lecturer, essayist, and professor of theology. At present he is pastor at Holt undir Eyjafjöllum.

He published three volumes of poetry: Hamar og sigð (Hammer and Sickle, 1930), as the name indicates, exclusively socialistic poems; Yndi undaðsstunda (Hours of Bliss, 1952) and Undir stjörnum og sól (Under Stars and Sun, 1953). Though the first volume is frankly propaganda, the poems are not without literary merit, notably the beautiful “Sorda­vala.” The second volume contains love poetry and manly comments like “Hann er kaldur með köflum” (It Is Quite Often Cold), also interesting thumbnail sketches of his friends and fellow-poets Halldór Kiljan Laxness and Tómas Guðmundsson. His most notable essays are found in Líðandi stund (Passing Hour, 1938). He has also written books on education, modern orthodox theology, and personal history from a cultural point of view.

Finally Sigurður has written the play Fyrir kónungsins mekt (By the Power of the King, 1954), dealing with the oath-taking at Kópavogur, July 28, 1662, when the Icelanders by threat of weapons lost the last vestiges of their freedom to the Danish monarch. It is a fine play in verse—with modern overtones.

**Guðmundur G. Hagalin**

Guðmundur Gísason Hagalin (1898—) was born in Arnarfjörður in the Northwest of a stubborn race fostered by the barren country and the wild though productive sea. At home he alternated fishing and reading; in Reykjavík he entered the Gymnasium (1917) only to decide against study. Instead he took up journalism for the conservatives in the East (Seyðisfjörður, 1920–23), but soon turned socialistic. After traveling and lecturing in Norway (1924–27), he was appointed a librarian in Þaðafjörður, a position he kept until 1946 when he moved to Reykjavík to devote himself to writing. In Þaðafjörður he was also active in all kinds of municipal and political tasks.
Hagalin is a prolific author, having to his credit fourteen volumes of short stories, eight novels, three biographies, his own autobiography in four volumes so far, a play and a volume of essays, though many remain unpublished. His collected works (Ritsafn, 1948— ) are being published.

Hagalin got his start in the melancholy lyric period at the end of World War I, his first stories showing interest in strange, warped personalities, his (only) poems having a melancholy folk-tale tinge. But he soon found his field in short stories and novels describing the life of the fishermen of his native Vestfirðir with broad humor and gusto. He wrote “Hefndir” (Vengeance, 1923) under the influence of the sagas and Nietzsche, but the main early influence was that of Hamsun, resulting in a romantic-nationalistic primitivism, seen in his first novel (1924)—where the new generation is found vitiated when compared with the old—as well as in the dramatic sagalike novelette “Páttur af Neshólabráðrum” (The Tale of the Brothers at Neshólar, 1925). In 1927 Hagalin professed socialism with his Brennumenn (Firebrands) and has since remained a social democrat, but his heart was with the rugged individualists of the old order, as his primitivistic folk of “Mannleg náttúra” (Human Nature, 1929) show. During the thirties Hagalin, like Kamban and Laxness, gave up the classical puristic style of his early works (perhaps to some extent inspired by Faulkner) for one more earthy and smelling of the sea. In this rough and robust dialect, assumed in order to depict the primitive character, as he saw it close to the soil, he wrote several short stories and the novels Kristrún í Hamravík (1933) and Sturla í Vogum (two volumes, 1938). The first pictures an old woman in an isolated cottage facing the Arctic, a poor widow, yet perfectly content and self-contained, a master of her small world, fearing neither God nor man. The latter describes a farmer, rugged, individualistic, in his development toward a social consciousness that finds outlet in practical co-operation with his fellow men. During the thirties Hagalin also wrote two excellent adventurous biographies: of a shark-fisherman and a skipper. These, first of their kind, were soon imitated.

During and after World War II Hagalin wrote, apart from a lot of short stories, Blitt latur veröldin (The Lure of the World, 1943), a description of an adolescent in development; Konungurinn á Kálfskinni (The King at Kálfskinn, 1945); and Módir Island (Mother Iceland, 1945). The first is an ambitious novel in the Kristrún í Hamravík style,
depicting fascism in miniature in an old folks’ home in Ísafjörður. 
Mother Iceland describes war conditions in Reykjavik and its demoralizing effects. The style and tenor of these two books have been much criticized, not only by the leftist critics whom Hagalin attacked in his essays *Gróður og sandfok* (Growth and Sand Storms, 1943), but also by others.

Hagalin is now writing his autobiography, of which four volumes have appeared to date: *Ég veit ekki betur* (I Know No Better, 1951); *Sjö voru sólir á lofti* (Seven Suns Aloft, 1952); *Ilmur lögðina daga* (Perfume of Days Bygone, 1953); and *Hér er kominn Hoffinn* (Here Hoffinn is Come, 1954), full of facts, life and humor.

**Jóhannes Jónasson úr Kötlum**

Jóhannes Jónasson úr Kötlum (pen name Anonymus, 1899——) was born in Dalir in the West—the country of Laxdæla saga—of poor cotters. He became a teacher (1921), first at home, later in Reykjavik, but has for many years devoted himself to literary pursuits and lives now in Hveragerði.

As a youth he was a fervent national-romantic member of the Youth League, a patriotic and progressive organization, but the depression of the thirties converted him into an ardent socialist, and so he has remained, in spite of his romantic attachment to the soil. He has been a very prolific writer: by 1951 he had published eight volumes of poetry and three novels, not counting juvenile books. His collected poems, *Ljóðasafn*, appeared in 1949.

The two first volumes of his poetry, *Bí, bí og blaka* (Sleep, Baby, Sleep, 1926) and *Alfiirnar kvaka* (The Swans Are Singing, 1929) were mostly traditional and romantic in theme, containing not only love, nature lyrics, and folk songs, but also another “Háttalykill” (Clavis Poetica). But the poem “Ef ég segjé þér allt” (If I Told You All) shows his social consciousness awakening to the misery and oppression around him.

And though he next was to vie with Einar Benediktsson and Davíð Stefánsson in eulogizing the millenary of the Althing, his next books, *Ég lét sem ég sofi* (I Pretend Sleeping, 1932) and *Samt mun ég vaka* (Yet I Will Stay Awake, 1935) mark his complete conversion to communism. In his satires of the bankrupt capitalistic world and his preaching of the new social gospel, his style gains in force but loses in lyric quality. The first volume contains the realistic-humorous yet sympathetic portrayal of his father (“Karl faðir minn”), a fine poem; in the second
appears the poem “Frelsi” (Freedom), which was featured in the first volume of Raudir pennar (Red Pens, 1935), of which periodical he was one of the founders. One of the poems berates the horrors of the Nazis. Others are in the old lyric and personal strain, like “Lind fyrir vestan” (A Fountain in the West).

In Hrimzhvita m6dir (The Ruine White Mother, 1937) he surveys the history of his beloved country from a socialistic point of view. Here is a beautiful lyric in honor of Jónas Hallgrímsson, but the poet succeeds best in the poem “Þegnar þagnarinnar” (Thanes of Silence), a tribute to the nameless common man in Iceland. Hart er í heimi (Woe Is in the World, 1939) is largely devoted to the disturbing antidemocratic signs of war, but also contains a love-hymn to the soil: “Ástarkvæði til molderinnar”—and the heroic saga of an Icelandic horse, “Stjörnufákur” (Star Steed) that comes to a tragic end in an English coal mine.

During and just after World War II he published two collections of poems: Eiliffar snáblóm (Eternity’s Flower, 1940) and Söl tér sortna (Sun Turns Black, 1945). Both contain poems reflecting his attitudes toward the warring parties, especially his sympathy with Norway and Denmark; also his distrust of England. Both, notably the first, are rich in lyrics, personal or in praise of his beloved soil. The latter contains important autobiographical poems in several of which he gives himself an ironical whipping for having lost his voice as a poet just when he had gotten a house and the nation had given him a poet’s stipend. He does not feel at ease after the political victory of the Communists; he feels that he himself should have fought with his hands rather than through his poetry.

But if he lacked a cause to fight for, he found one when the Americans began their attempts to get bases in Iceland. As early as 1934 the poet made an unsuccessful attempt to write a novel. The next, Verndar-englarnir (The Protecting Angels, 1943), his reaction against the English occupation, suffered perhaps from its very actuality, but the trilogy Dauðsmannsey (Dead Man’s Island, 1949), Siglingin mikla (The Great Voyage, 1950), and Frelsisálfan (The Continent of Liberty, 1952), about famine-stricken Icelanders of the 1880’s and their voyage to the promised land of America shows that he is really also a good novelist.

In the fifties Jóhannes úr Kötlum first published two volumes of poetry, Sölseyjarkveði (Sun Island Poems, 1952) and Hlið hins himneska fríðar (The Portals of Heavenly Peace, 1953), both in his old manner, patriotic and pacifist. But after two years he broke the silence.
with *Sjödägra* (Seven Days' Mountain, 1955), poetry in an entirely new key, less tendentious but of a more exquisite lyric beauty than he had ever before achieved. At the same time he revealed that he was the "Anonymus" who in 1948 had done *Annarlegar tungur* (Strange Tongues), translations in imitative non-alliterative meters, including names like Edith Sitwell, T. S. Eliot, Carl Sandburg, E. E. Cummings, and Walt Whitman. Obviously his experimentation had borne fruit in his own poetry.

**Jón Helgason**

Jón Helgason (1899—) was born in Borgarfjörður in the West; he studied old Icelandic philology at the University of Copenhagen and wrote a thesis on Jón Ólafsson (amansens of Árni Magnússon) for the University of Iceland in 1926. After that he first became a professor of Icelandic language and literature at the University of Oslo, Norway, then (1927) the librarian of the Arnamagnaean Collection in Copenhagen and (1929)—after Finnur Jónsson—professor of Old Icelandic language and literature at the University of Copenhagen. Like his predecessor, Jón Helgason was especially active as an editor of the manuscript treasures of the Arnamagnaean Collection. But he has also written a literary history of the Old Norse-Icelandic literature: *Norrönn litteraturhistorie* (1934) and *Norges og Islands digtning* (The Poetry of Norway and Iceland, in *Nordisk Kultur*, 1953) besides many other things.

A perfectionist as scholar and editor, Jón Helgason's task often was to weed out uncritical theories and assumptions, rather than to advance theories of his own. As a poet, his perfectionist attitude early made him into a sharp-tongued satirist, though often his humor could be more genial, and student-like, not infrequently cast in parodies of form from the different periods of Icelandic literature, all of which he commanded with equal ease. That he wrote serious poetry as well no one knew until he published *Úr landsuðri* (From the South East, 1939, 2nd enlarged edition 1948), revealing himself as one of the great lyric poets of the present. In his early days in the Arnamagnaean Collection there were moments when the poet could feel life calling and tempting him with something greener than the dust of the library, cf. "Lestin brunar . . ." (The Train Rushes . . .). Mostly, however, it is devotion to his work, to his beloved collection, and to the far-away homeland which finds eloquent expression in his poetry, though nowhere more magnificently
A HISTORY OF ICELANDIC LITERATURE

than in his great poem “Í Arnasafi” (In the Arnamagnaean Collection). Here he dwells, half-dreaming, contrasting the street noises outside with the “swift and perpetual flow of the ages” inside the walls. His eyes roam over the volumes, records of thousands, the strong heathen classics and the meek Christian spirituals. He sees the authors stepping out of their works and watching him write—all animated by that strange urge for study and writing which also drives him on. Time will come when all that he has left for posterity “will be found on a few yellowed pages.” Destruction and time trumpet their threatening memento mori, not only for him who is now alive, but also for his beloved ward, the dead-yet-living collection:

Letters must fade and the finest of bindings go rotten;
Fame won today will so soon be completely forgotten.
Gordian knots we may tie which old Time then will sever;
Tombstones will crumble, inscriptions will vanish forever.

(Mrs. Mekkin Perkins’ translation)

In view of the significance of the Arnamagnaean Collection for Icelandic culture and of the nation’s love for its treasures, nowhere more poignantly expressed than in Jón Helgason’s poem, it is no wonder that the Icelanders are trying hard to get it back home.

Jón Helgason writes anguished poetry about the flight of time and the mutability of all things; he laments his exile and writes strong poems about the harsh but fascinating face of Icelandic nature—which, like the giant of Lómagnúpur, summons everyone of her sons in a cold and deep voice, back home.

Magnús Asgeirsson

Magnús Ásgeirsson (1901-1955) was born at Reykir in Borgarfjörður in the West. He studied Icelandic philology at the University in Reykjavik, and was for a long time a clerk and journalist, during World War II a co-editor of Helgafell and a librarian in Hafnarfjörður.

Magnús Ásgeirsson was the greatest translator of his generation, publishing six volumes of translations, Þýdd ljóð, 1928-41. From these a book of selections was published in 1946, introduced by Snorri Hjartarson, and this was followed by a seventh volume of translations Meðan sprengjurnar falla (While the Bombs Fall, 1945). He has translated hundreds of poems by more than one hundred authors, mostly of Scandinavia, particularly of Sweden. Next in order are poets of the United
States, Germany, and England. His favorites are Gustaf Fröding, Hjalmar Gullberg, Karin Boye of Sweden, Nordahl Grieg of Norway, who spent some time in Iceland during World War II, and Edgar Lee Masters and Carl Sandburg of the United States.

Magnús Asgeirsson's selections testify to his socialistic outlook but show little interest in modernistic form. T. S. Eliot is conspicuously absent. Yet, by his inclusion of the Swede Artur Lundkvist as well as Edgar Lee Masters and Carl Sandburg, he has given young Icelandic poets a taste of modernism which did not fail to have an effect (e.g., Jón úr Vör).

Magnús Asgeirsson's last work was an anthology of young poets, *Ljóð ungra skálda 1944–54* (1954) by twenty authors, with a brief introduction. He died in the summer of 1955.

**Tómas Guðmundsson**

Tómas Guðmundsson (1901——) was born at Efri-Brú, Grimsnes, in the South on the great and beautiful river Sog. Graduating from the University of Reykjavík as a lawyer, he practised for a while and was then for many years employed in the State Office of Statistics (1928–1943). He was a co-editor of *Helgafell* (1943–46, 1954), a literary periodical of note, and has for many years been connected with musical comedy in Reykjavík.

Tómas belonged to a generation that burst out in plaintive romantic lyric immediately after World War I, he himself being one of sixteen college poets whom he later celebrated in verse. He was perhaps the purest representative of the group in the dreamily romantic and highly polished verses that he published in *Við sundin blá* (*At the Blue Sounds*, 1924). But the times were not opportune for dreams, and the poet’s voice was silenced for years. When he found his voice again in *Fagra veröld* (*Fair World*, 1933), his interest had shifted from the romantic future to the romantic past, the memories of his beloved college days, described now with wistful sadness, now with whimsical humor. His sense of beauty was the same, but he found beauty now more often in the familiar haunts and everyday occurrences, though the far away had not altogether lost its lure. Witness the gem “Japanskít ljóð” (*Japanese Poem*). He now sang the beauty of Reykjavík, first among Icelandic poets, echoing the dreams and heartaches of its youth, mirroring its tranquil summer nights, the splendor of its sky, but also its bustling activity, the ships in the harbor, and, at times, the humorous straits
of its dignified citizens. What was most important: his form and
diction had gained a newborn perfect, almost colloquial simplicity, not
unlike that won by Jónas Hallgrímsson nearly a century ago.

These poems were hailed with enthusiasm, three editions being called
for in two years. The grateful city sent its eulogist on a tour of the
Mediterranean countries, the romantic splendors of which inspired a
good many of the poems in Stjörnur vorsins (Stars of Spring, 1940),
though most of them continued the old themes on wine and women, so
surprisingly alike in Sudan and Grímsnes. There were student songs,
bits of whimsical autobiography, and humorous—often slightly irrever­ent—remarks about God and his good, if not quite perfect, world. And
there was still the ability, if not quite as potent as of old, to dream
Aladdin-like of wonderful romantic palaces, and retain the dream, at
least in the poet's mind, a wonderful instance being the much admired
and purely lyric "Þjóðvisa" (Folk song).

Tómas Guðmundsson's Fljótíð helga (The Holy River, 1950) was
written during and after World War II and unmistakably so, though
the poet, mastering both feeling and form, succeeded in talking in a
dignified, subdued tone about the burning outrage of the time. For
though, like his friend on the river, the beautiful and self-centered
phalarope philosopher, the poet would much rather turn his sensitive
eyes and ears from the ominous din of war, life pays him an urgent
visit ("Heimsókn"), and he can ignore neither the cries of his
Scandinavian brethren nor the menace to personal freedom, his most
prized heritage, whether stemming from black shirts or red (cf. "Að
Ashildarmýri"). To this extent, then, the cataclysm tore him from his
ivy tower; otherwise he remained the same, brooding increasingly on
the sad mutability of beauty and youth, the brooding like a heavy ground
swell under the rippling surface of his brilliant wit or whimsicality or
his polished placid form. Fljúgandi blóm (Flying Flowers, 1952) is a
selection from Tómas Guðmundsson's poetry; a collected edition,
Ljóðasafn, appeared in 1953.

Dávð Porvaldsson

Dávð Porvaldsson (1901–32) was born at Akureyri in the North, the
son of a merchant. He studied literature at the Sorbonne in Paris, but
in 1929 was compelled to go home sick with tuberculosis, which shortly
after caused his untimely death.

Like Jóhann Gunnar Sigurðsson and Jóhann Jónsson, Dávð was
TRADITION AND REVOLT BETWEEN THE WORLD WARS

highly regarded by his schoolmates and his short stories, collected in Björn formaður . . . (Björn the Foreman. . . , 1929) and Kalviðir (Withered Branches, 1930) were very promising, though not great. His descriptions of the less fortunate and the sick were excellent, and he wielded a keen psychological analysis.

Halldór Kiljan Laxness

Halldór Guðjónsson Kiljan Laxness (1902——) was born in Reykjavík but brought up at Laxnes, a farm in the neighborhood. His parents were farmers. Of the younger generation of Icelandic writers, he was the greatest and most consistently modernistic. Like no one else, he represented the youthful urban population of Reykjavik, cut loose from its thousand-year-old-farm moorings, searching vigorously for a new mode of living among the possibilities of the post-World War I world. He received his first impulse in the lyric and national-romantic atmosphere of the early 1920’s, publishing his book (1919) under Hamsun’s influence, when seventeen, but he soon plunged himself into introspection, philosophy, and religion, following the example of Johannes Jørgensen, Strindberg, and Sigrid Undset.

As a youth he steeped himself in Expressionism in Germany, in Catholicism in a monastery in Luxembourg, and in Surrealism in France (1924–26), after which he went to Iceland, Canada, and California (1927–30) to fortify himself in a communism which since then has served him as a leading hypothesis, not shaken by several visits to Russia. He returned to Iceland in 1930 and wrote his books there, or wherever his travels might take him, for he is a confirmed globe-trotter. He has lived, since World War II, in Gljúfrasteinn, Mosfellssveit.

Halldór Kiljan Laxness is a very prolific author; he has now, not counting translations (Gunnarsson, Hemingway, Voltaire), over thirty books to his credit: seventeen volumes of novels, nine volumes of essays, three of short stories, three plays, and one volume of poetry.

From his Catholic period date Undir Helgahmítk (Under the Holy Mountain, 1924) and Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmir (The Great Weaver from Casmir, 1927). The latter book looms as a milestone of a new age in the Icelandic novel; it was expressionistic and autobiographical, a true picture of the turmoil in the author’s mind, written in a style marked by free and uninhibited eloquence. In it he reduced the ideal of the Church, as he understood it, ad absurdum. Having returned to Iceland from California, where he tried to write for the films, he aired his
socialistic views in a book of brilliant burlesque and satirical essays, *Alþýðubókin* (The Book of the People, 1929), one of a long series in which he discussed his many travel impressions (Russia, western Europe, South America), unburdened himself of socialistic satire and propaganda, and wrote of the literature and the arts, essays of prime importance to an understanding of his own art.

His only contribution to poetry was the modernistic burlesque lyrics in *Kveðakver* (Poems, 1930), but though quite unpretentious from the poet’s point of view they, too, made an impression, though they were little imitated. He wrote two plays and several short stories, some of them truly distinguished, but his greatest contribution was his novels. Before and including *Vejarinn* they had been very much self-centered; after that the themes were taken from the life of his small nation, present or past, but written from his cosmopolitan point of view and endowed with universal significance. During the thirties he wrote three novels of many volumes each, all dealing with the present. The first, *Dú vinviður hreins* (1931) and *Fuglinn í fjörurni* (1932; English translation of both, *Salka Vala*, 1936), treated the small fishing village; the next, *Sjálfstætt fólk* (two volumes, 1934–35; English translation: *Independent People*, 1946), was about the poor farmer; and the third, *Ljós heimsins* (The Light of the World, four volumes, 1937–40), was about the poet of the people. These novels were conceived on a grand scale, the poor but energetic village girl and the independent cottage farmer emerging at the same time as heroes of monumental stature, individuals and symbols of their class. The poet, though anything but a hero, being the lowly subject and scapegoat of a cruel world, was no less grandly conceived as a symbol of the crucified spirit, forever rising in beauty as the light of this world.

To understand *Sjálfstætt fólk* one should read “Dagleið á fjöllum” (Day’s Journey in the Mountains), which gives the theme *in nuce*, while Laxness’ essay on the *Passi-nálar* of Hallgrímur Pétursson throws essential light not only on the hero of *Ljós heimsins*, Ólafur Ljósvíkingur, but also on the early eighteenth-century milieu in *Íslandsblómk*kkan. During the forties Laxness, with one exception, wrote novels about the past, first the three-volume novel *Íslandsblómk*kkan (Iceland’s Bell, 1943), *Hið ljósa man* (The Bright Maid, 1944), *Eldur i Kaupinhafn* (Fire in Copenhagen, 1946), about Árni Magnússon and his times, and finally *Gerpla* (Heroica, 1952) about the Old Icelandic heroes (*garpar* of
The early eighteenth-century novel tells how the Old Icelandic heroic spirit of freedom is conserved through an oppressive age by the combined efforts of the doggedly stubborn common man (Jón Hreggviðsson) and the enlightened and unselfish collector of the old manuscripts, Arnas Magnaeus. In Gerpla Laxness is back in the world of the heroic spirit, but instead of extolling it he shows its natural limits in comparison with Christianity and Eskimo culture, and turns the heroes, Órgeir Havarsson and Órmar Kolbrúnarskáld, into deeply tragic, quixotic figures. This “saga” is written in a surprisingly real saga-style, just as Íslámskluukkan partly imitates the early eighteenth-century baroque. The only modern book of the forties was Atómskölin (The Atom Station, 1948), describing the terrible demoralizing effects of the World War II boom in Iceland and written in protest against granting the Americans air bases in 1946. It was followed by a play, Silfurþungrilð (The Silver Moon, 1954), on the same theme.

In his novels on contemporary themes, Laxness created a new style, alternately lyrical and rationalistic, sympathetic and cynical, full of storms and stresses, that contrasted vividly with the classic puristic style of his predecessors and contemporaries. He also gave a perfect illusion of eighteenth-century and saga styles in his historical novels. He has been increasingly concerned with the architecture of his novels, admitting even fantastic elements if they suited his purpose, banning realistic details if they did not. By his standards, the novel should be a self-contained unit of its own. The strict formalism of his last novels contrasts vividly with the expressionistic abandon of Vefarinn. A fierce social criticism runs through all his novels, though less overt in the historical novels, and always subordinated to artistic demands. This satire has alienated readers at home and abroad, but all have been compelled to admire the brilliance of his style, his vigorous symbolism, the high poetic quality of his lyric vein, and the art with which he fuses characters and scenery into one vast panorama of intensified reality.

In his youth, while writing Vefarinn, he suffered from the inferiority complex of a small national, torn between love of his country and the lure of cosmopolitanism, but his historical novels, especially his modern saga, show to what extent he has now embraced the traditions of his native land, the land of Edda and saga. It was a significant gesture, when he emphasized this debt in his speech to the Swedish king, when receiving the Nobel prize for literature on December 10, 1955.
Kristmann Guðmundsson

Kristmann Guðmundsson (1902—) was born in Þverfell in Borgarfjörður in the West. His mother came of a family deeply rooted in the soil, his father was a temperamental rover. His youth was marred by lack of parental care, yet he grew up to be a healthy boy whose optimism and enterprising nature nothing could curb. Having been a jack of all trades, even a poet and a publisher of a periodical, he finally decided (1924) to go to Norway and become a writer. Two years later his debut book of short stories, Islandsk Kjærlighet (Icelandic Loves, 1926) was an immediate success. Since then he has written fifteen volumes of novels and a great many short stories, some published in Rítsafn (1952; VIII, 1954). His books have been more widely translated than those of any other Icelandic author (over thirty languages). He was seven times married: his first wife was a Norwegian, his last Icelandic. He lived in Oslo and Copenhagen up to 1938, when he returned to live in Reykjavík; since World War II he has lived in Hveragerði.

Kristmann Guðmundsson is a master of the modern romance. As no other Icelandic novelist he understands the psychology of love, especially young love, and describes it with an abandon which recalls David Stefánssons’s love lyrics, and a realism which nevertheless strikes one as ethereally romantic. In him the spiritual and physical aspects of love unite in harmony without the bad conscience that troubled the pre-World War I writers, like Kamban, who had to fight a struggle of emancipation from the ideology of Victorian love. Kristmann has somewhere told of his first love: a young girl he met at sixteen and knew for a short time only, but whose torch he carried forever after. He told a charming idyl like that in his debut book, expanded it in Den blå kyst (The Blue Coast, 1931), and varied it in Den første vår (The First Spring, 1933). Hvite netter (White Nights, 1934) describes the irresistible force that draws the poet from civilization back to the white nights of his youth and a childhood love, but also his disillusion. Armann og Vildis (1928) may reveal the author’s first disillusion in marriage, while Félagi kona (Comrade Wife, 1947) is a sort of a witch’s sabbath describing the deterioration of sex morality during World War II. In spite of all disillusion its moral is still: live and love to the fullest extent of your power. Next to love, character interests Kristmann most of all. This is evident in his family sagas: Brudekjolen (1927, English: The Bridal Gown, 1931); Livets Morgen (1929, English: Morning of Life, 1936); Sigmar (1930); Börn jarðar (Children of Earth, 1935); and Nátt-
tröllíð glöttir (The Night Troll Grins, 1943). Of these, the Morning of Life is perhaps best, incarnating once more, in the protagonists, the heroic ideal of the sagas. The sequel, Sigmar, was intended to show the shift from capitalism to socialism, but only the play of personalities, not ideologies, came through. Náttröllíð glöttir shows some of the author’s reactions on his return to Iceland.

He wrote three historical novels, two before, one after World War II: Det Hellige Fjell (The Holy Fell, 1932), describing the old Norse and Irish settlement of Snæfellsnes (where he grew up); Gjödjan og uxin (1937–38, English: Winged Citadel, 1940), a historical romance from pre-Greek Crete, full of allusions to modern psychoanalysis and pre-World War II politics—also considerably autobiographical. His last historical romance, Pókan rauða I–II (The Red Fog, 1950–52) deals with the author of Völuspá, the son of a Norse father and Irish mother, born in Breiðafjörður when Christianity is dawning on Iceland, and introduced to the ancient mysteries in Ireland and Greece. After that he takes an active part in the heroic enterprises of his homeland, but remains also a seer and a dreamer. Völuspá comes to him in a burst of inspiration on a quiet Icelandic summer morning. This book, like some of the author’s later works, shows that he is turning more and more to the mystic wellsprings of life. Moreover, it reveals influence both from Irish matter and Nordal’s Íslensk menning. In 1955 the author published the novelette Harmleikurinn á Austurbæ (The Tragedy at Austurbæ), laid in Norway; a volume of poetry, Kristmannskver; and the first volume of a history of world literature.

Guðmundur Frímann

Guðmundur Frímannsson Frímann (1903—–) was born in Húnavatnssýsla (in Langidalur) of farmers, studied art with Einar Jónsson the sculptor, but abandoned it as a career. After that he lived as a tradesman in Akureyri with art and writing as his hobby.

He made his debut with Náttotsalir (Night Suns, 1922), following it with Úlfablóð (Wolf Blood, 1933), under the pseudonym Álfr frá Klettastú. But it is with his last two books that he really made his mark: Störin syngur (The Sedge Sings, 1937) and Svört verða sölskin (Sun Will Darken, 1951). Here are nostalgic memories from the home of his youth, anguish and despair as in the beautiful poem “Blóm” (Flowers) about the lily-like falling snowflakes, but not unrelieved by hope of summer. Finally there are character sketches and memorials,
among them one on his mother, another on a luckless vagabond fellow-poet—both reflecting profound emotions.

Lárus Sigurbjörnsson

Lárus Sigurbjörnsson (1903—1973) was the son of an orthodox minister in Reykjavík and his wife, an authoress, and member of the Althing. He was to study at the University of Copenhagen, but turned to journalism and wrote short stories, published in 1925. In Reykjavík, he took an active part in theatrical activities at the Gymnasium and in the Dramatic Society, translating a number of plays and writing a few on his own account: Prír þættir (Three One-Acters, 1930) in the suggestive way of Arthur Schnitzler. But he has been even more active as a theatrical critic and historian, has published a bibliography on the subject, and is writing the history of the theater in Iceland. He was also, for a while, an archivist of the recently opened (1950) National Theater in Iceland.

Guðmundur Böðvarsson

Guðmundur Böðvarsson (1904—1976) was born at Kirkjuböð in Borgarfjarður in the West, and lives there still, a self-educated farmer. Yet, in spite of his days’ labor and his evenings’ weariness, he produced, between 1936 and 1952, five volumes of poetry, the first named Kysst mið söl (The Sun Kissed Me), the last Kristallinn í hylnum (The Crystal in the Pool). He is no Guðmundur Ingi eulogizing his Janel—though his land may be of the best in Iceland. Neither is he a Guðmundur Friðjónsson in revolt against harsh nature, singing his passive and active heroes a myopic praise—though one does find the farmer’s love of sun and spring and summer, and fertile fields; cf. the title of his first book. Actually he is more like Stephan G. Stephansson in outlook, if not in the tone of his poetry. Like Stephan he is a radical who echoes the romantic hopes and doubts of socialism in his poetry, though he feels he neither can nor does fight for it as he should. His anguish finds expression in the poem about the tired navigators who, finally, found no land (1936), his sympathy with the revolting Spaniards in “Spánskt kvæði frá 17. öld” (A Spanish Poem from the Seventeenth Century) and in the powerful symbolic war poems “Visurnar við hverfisteinnin árið 1936” (The Verses at the Whetstone, 1936) and “Smíðjuljóð” (The Poem of the Forge). In the same way he follows the fortunes of World War II and his country’s independence in 1944 and after, in dignified strains, full of striking, often original, symbolism,
perhaps as an interested spectator, but never a man of the ivory tower. He is deeply anxious about the new American garrison in the country. In 1950 he wrote an introduction to a collection of poems by an older fellow-poet from his home region: *Stolnar stundir* (Stolen Hours, 1950) by Halldór Helgason (1874——) who resembles him in outlook, both farmers, tillers of the soil.

**Guðmundur Ingi Kristjánsson**

Guðmundur Ingi Kristjánsson (1907——) was born at Kirkjuböll in Önundarfjörður in the Northwest, the son of a farmer; he took over his father’s farm and lives there. He received inspiration from a folk school, the co-operative movement, and the Icelandic Youth League, all fanning his idealistic love of the soil. He wrote two volumes of poetry, *Sólstafr* (Sunbeams, 1938) and *Sólbráð* (Sun Thaw, 1945), on themes from rural life and work, in continuation of Eggert Ólafsson’s bucolic poetry but actually inspired by the Danish rural poet Jeppe Aakjær. Guðmundur Ingi Kristjánsson is practically the only poet-farmer who can sing of his soil, his sheep and cows, his hay and his work with genuine feeling, and if his simple form at times is not perfect, there is compensation in the sincere depth of expression.

**Bjarni M. Gislason**

Bjarni M. Gislason (1908——) was born in Tálknafjörður in the Northwest. A poor fisherman and sailor, he published a volume of promising poems in 1933 and went, after that, to Denmark, where he studied at Askov and came under the influence of the Danish critic Jørgen Bukdahl, on whom he wrote an essay in 1949. In Danish Bjarni M. Gislason published one more volume of poetry “in a pleasant, lyric strain, with the poet’s native Iceland as a recurrent theme.” (R. Beck) After World War II came *De gyldne Tavle* (The Golden Tablets I–III, 1944–5), a novel indicating the author’s spiritual origin from two sources: Christianity and the sagas. His essays and lectures on Icelandic literature and culture were published in three volumes—one of them on Iceland during the Anglo-Saxon occupation. His studies of literature were finally crystallized in *Islands Litteratur efter Sagatiden ca. 1400–1948*, a spirited, if not always quite reliable, synthesis which attempts to show the merging of the two forces, the native tradition and Christianity. In the modern period Bjarni M. Gislason takes a definitely anti-communistic stand, seemingly as a Christian social demo-
A History of Icelandic Literature

In 1946 he wrote a sketch of Iceland during World War II and in 1954 a spirited plea for the return of the manuscripts of the Arnamagnæan Collection to Iceland.

Aðalsteinn Kristmundsson

Aðalsteinn Kristmundsson (pen name Steinn Steinarr, 1908–) was born in Vestfirðir, but grew up in Dalir, the country of Stefán fra Hvítadal and Jóhannes úr Kötlum. He came to Reykjavik, a crippled youth, at the height of the depression, to strive and starve. Nothing seemed more natural for him than to join the Communists and the group around Raudír pennar. His first book, Rauður loginn brann (Red Burned the Flame, 1934), was dedicated to his comrades and espoused their cause in simple lyrics of a deep personal note. Yet, there were signs already in this first book of his that he was beginning to doubt the communistic gospel as well as anything else (cf. “Veruleiki,” Reality), and in the following book, Ljóð (Poems, 1937), he enthroned his own doubt and fell prey to speculations about himself and this world. But that second book also testified to his increased preoccupation with form; seemingly he had taken notice of at least some of the modernists abroad. Most of his poems were short, the diction simple, the form strict, designed to give a single idea a brilliant form. Among the finest poems one may mention “Sement,” “Marmari” (Marble), “Verdun,” “Vor” (Spring), and “Ekkert” (Nothing), an epitome of his nihilism. The same intellectual pessimism reigned in Spor í sandi (Tracks in the Sand, 1940), the title itself programmatic. Even here the poet excelled in expressing feelings of frustration, misery, and vanitas vanitatum. One must, indeed, go back to the seventeenth century and Hallgrímur Pétursson to match his interpretation of mutability and nothingness in “Ljóð” (Poem). But in spite of this dark despair, the poet was increasingly aware of his worth as an artist, feeling that he, even with his lame hand, had been able to roll a rock out of humanity’s path to intelligence; cf. “Chaplinvisan 1939.” As to his form, he usually strove to clothe a far-fetched, even metaphysical, thought in as narrow confines of form as possible, and frequently so that the main thought or point was reached only through devious paths, throwing, when reached, a sudden glow of illumination over the poem.

The theme of vanitas vanitatum ran with undiminished force through Ferð án fyrirheits (Journey without Promise, 1942), but here the poet’s
form had reached perfection. Though the poet here might slap his fellow countrymen or the "Imperium Britannicum" with felling irony, most of the poems were philosophical or metaphysical. Instances are "Til hinna dauðu" (To the Dead) and the famous "Í draumi sérhvers manns er fall hans falið" (In Every Man's Dream Lurks his Fall). There were also some abstract poems, like "Utan hringsins" (Outside the Ring); this genre was to increase in frequency after World War II.

After the war Steinn Steinarr traveled in Scandinavia, England, and France, probably reinforcing the impulses he had already received from modernists like Carl Sandburg, Artur Lundkvist, and the fyrtitalister in Sweden. He also learned from modern abstract painters to use geometrical forms in his poetry—a cone, a cube, a triangle—as well as colors. This abstractness marks his last cycle of poems: Timinn og vatnð (The Time and the Water, 1948), which carried Archibald MacLeish's motto: "A poem should not mean, but be." A selection from his poems 100 kveði (100 Poems, 1949) with some additional new ones was published in 1949.

**Guðmundur Danielsson**

Guðmundur Danielsson (1910—) was born in the rich southern lowlands, the son of a well-to-do farmer. He became a teacher (1934) and has practised that profession together with his writing.

After an indifferent sheaf of poems (1933) he made his debut with Bræðurnir í Grashaga (The Brothers of Grashagi, 1935), a broad and rich epic of the southern lowlands in rain and shine, peopled with robust characters, headstrong men and voluptuous women. A sympathy with the underdog and a somewhat Laxnessian style seemed to indicate a leftist writer, but the continuation, Ilmur daganna (The Perfume of the Days, 1936) turned out to be a genuine re-creation of the author's youth, with no such tendency, mirroring only the author's genuine love of life, especially love life and its varied manifestations.

The same was true of the next two books, Gegnum lystigardöinn (Through the Amusement Park, 1938), expressing the author's healthy reaction to the rootless towns, and A bókkum Bolafljóts (On the Banks of Bullock River, 1940), another broad epic of the South, this time built on a grandmother's tales about his ancestors. Next he wrote a trilogy, Af jörðu ertu kominn (From Earth) consisting of Eldur (Fire, 1941), Sandur (Sand, 1942) and Landið handan landsins (The Land beyond the Land, 1944), partly based on observations he had made as a teacher.
in Húnavatnssýsla, partly on material from his own South, especially
the spirited fight against the encroaching desert sands at Rangárvellir.
The composition was perhaps influenced by William Faulkner. Like all
his books this is full of memorable characters, like the pastor Gylfi in
Eldur and the poet Rögnvaldur of Landið, like the author himself a Don
Juan and a relentless romantic seeker of the land beyond the everyday,
the romantic Utopia. Two collections of short stories (1944 and 1955),
a play, which was an angry reaction to his countrymen’s dancing around
the war golden calf (1946), and another sheaf of poems, Kveðið á glugga
(Sung at the Window, 1946), marked only a pause in the production
of his novels. Of these he wrote two more, Mannspilin og ásinn (The
Face Cards and the Ace, 1948) and Í fjallskugganum (In the Shade of
the Mountain, 1950), both dealing with strong characters whose unruly
love trips them in their ruling passion: one hero’s desire for the fertile
soil, the other’s for his mountain kingdom. A third novel, Musteri Óttans
(Temple of Fear, 1953), deals with blackmail and fear, while his last
novel, Blindaingsteikur (Blind Man’s Bluff, 1955) tells a symbolic story
of aspirations out of the mists. It is one of his best, if not his best.

Finally, Guðmundur Danielsson has written two travel books, one,
A langferðaleiðum (On Long Voyage, 1948), describing his tour of
America in the summer of 1945, the other, Sumar í Súðurlöndum
(Summer in the South, 1950), describing a tour of Europe, notably
France and Italy, in 1948-49. His tour of America seems to have made
him a friend of the Anglo-Saxon world. Like Davíð Stefánsson and
Kristmann Guðmundsson, Guðmundur Danielsson is a hedonist
who receives with eager hands whatever life has to offer him, but who has
a streak of primitivism in him which makes him at times wilder than
any of his contemporaries, though his strong primitive characters may
remind one of Hagalin’s heroes. He is also an accomplished story-teller.

Ólafur Jóhann Sigurðsson

Ólafur Jóhann Sigurðsson (1918—), the son of a farmer, was born
on Álftanes near Reykjavík but brought up in beautiful but poverty-
stricken Grafningsur. Intent upon becoming a writer, the boy left home
at fifteen (1933) and eked out a meager living in Reykjavík by writing
juvenile stories, until he could publish his first novel, Skuggarnir af
baðnum (The Shadows of the Farm, 1936), his own story in Laxness’s
style, but with a tender individual quality which made it a notable first
book. This was during the worst depression years; he starved and
joined the radical circle of *Rauðir pennar* (1935). He told of this frustrated life in *Liggur vegurinn þangað?* (*Does the Road Lead There?*, 1940), written in Copenhagen (1936–7) in Hemingway's terse, hard style. Back home he lived again from hand to mouth, but managed to write a number of short stories, far from radical, though most of them were studies of the underprivileged or miserable; they were marked by an unusually careful workmanship and an uncanny insight into and ability to convey delicate shifts in moods of mind and nature. The boom of World War II improved his lot; he even managed a visit to Columbia University (1943–44), where he studied with Manuel Komroff, but seemingly with small effect on his writing. Just before, he had written his most ambitious work, the novel *Fjallið og draumurinn* (*The Mount and the Dream*, 1944), revealing in spots a lyric style in nature descriptions unsurpassed in beauty and richness. It was in reality a story of his old home region, the banks of the beautiful and beloved Sog, and of its people in weal and woe, purified through the distance of time, a book somewhat similar to Gunnar Gunnarsson's *The Church on the Mountain*. Its gallery of characters was marked by the fact that not only the heroes and heroines but also the most insignificant persons were treated with the same loving care. The continuation of this novel came as *Vorköld jörð* (*Spring Cool Earth*, 1951). After the war he wrote two collections of short stories, a couple of which were published in *The American Scandinavian Review*. One of them "The Padlock," is an excellent specimen of his quiet, unobtrusive art of the mood. This same mastery of mood is also shown in the novelette *Litiðriði jardarinnar* (*Earth Changing Color*, 1947), the story of a youthful love, where the somber fall turns into green summer in the mind of the sixteen year old boy, and *vice versa*, according to the blazing or dying of the flame of love in his heart. In his handling of the subtle moods, Ólafur Jóhann Sigurðsson sometimes reminds one of Katherine Mansfield or the Russian A. P. Chekhov.

Ólafur Jóhann Sigurðsson wrote *Nokkrar visur um veðrið og fleira* (*Some Verses about the Weather . . .*, 1952); these verses are marked by a quiet lyrical note akin to his lyric prose style. In 1955 two more books appeared: a volume of short stories, *A vegamótum* (*At Crossroads*) and the first part of a long novel, *Gangvirkið* (*The Clockwork*). In spite of outward calm, these books show the people at sharp crossroads and demonstrate what effect the war had on the human clockwork subjected to its stresses.