A History of Icelandic Literature

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After World War II, 1940-1956

**Historical background**

Unlike the first, the second World War had an immediate and incalculable effect upon Iceland and its literature.

This was owing to the Anglo-Saxon occupation of the country, first by the British (1940), then by the Americans (1941), the first breaking the neutrality of the country, the latter coming by invitation. The Icelanders, though neutral, sympathized with the allies and thanked God for being occupied by them rather than by the Germans or the Russians. They also were glad to contribute their mite toward the liberation of oppressed people, not least so their fellow-Scandinavians in Finland, Norway, and Denmark. As to their own safety and future there were facts not so reassuring, particularly the ratio during the war years between native and foreigner. There were probably two natives to one foreigner for the whole country but perhaps the reverse in Reykjavík, where one-third of the country's inhabitants were concentrated around the British military airport. As the Anglo-Saxons had money not only to buy all exportable produce but also to employ everyone, it is understandable that the country was thrown into a moral and economic turmoil the like of which it had never experienced. Before the war it was an austere, backward country, sunk in debt; after the war it was a country with a high standard of living and the simple life, which had characterized the nation as a whole, had inevitably succumbed to the processes of economic development. During the war bank accounts grew large in England and America, but there was an inflation which before the end of the decade had evened the score in foreign banks.

Important steps taken, even for the literature, during the decade were the proclamation of a Republic in Iceland on June 17, 1944 and the establishment of an American military air base in that country. The proclamation cut the last political ties with Denmark under a general
national rejoicing marred only by the realization of the fact that the old sister nation was still smarting under the heel of Hitler. Poets and writers joined in the jubilation and the nation was united as rarely before. But storm clouds and discord were not far off. Though the Americans, like the English, had promised to leave the country after the war (1945), they proved loath to leave the airport in Keflavik and proposed to rent it for 99 years. The Icelanders objected but gave the Americans the right to operate it as civilians for a few years (1946). But having joined the United Nations and the Atlantic Pact (1949)—with the proviso, however, of harboring no troops in peace time—the Icelanders, out of fear of Russia and no doubt in consideration of American business and money, reluctantly admitted an American garrison to Keflavik (1951). Though approved by the three democratic parties and the majority of the Althing, this whole development was not only opposed by the Communists (who might have welcomed a Russian garrison!) but also deplored by many loyal Icelandic nationalists who feared continued demoralization, perhaps even ultimate denationalization resulting from a protracted stay of a big foreign garrison in the country.

This has given a growing nationalist tinge to the youngest poets, even those who are not Communists. Some of them are also strongly pacifist, an attitude not too hard to understand in the members of an old neutral country. They feel that it is neither logical nor reasonable that the East and the West should prefer threatening each other, or actually destroying each other with atom bombs, rather than getting together and composing their differences at the conference table. In this the youth may be underestimating the Communist threat to freedom, but it is not forgotten by the older men (Kristján Albertsson, Tómas Guðmundsson, and Gunnar Gunnarsson) who are staunch supporters of the West.

*Boom in books*

The war boom released a veritable flood in publications. There were many editions in the Old Icelandic field, ranging from solid works to editions de luxe. Most important was a new popular edition designated to include all the old genres: Eddas, sagas, historical sagas, bishops' lives, mythical-heroic sagas (*fornaldar sögur*), romances of chivalry (*riddara sögur*), and fantastic adventure stories (*lygi sögur*). A Rimnélag, a society to publish *rimur* after 1600, was started, and Sir William A. Craigie compiled his monumental *Sýnisbók íslenskra rimna* (three volumes, 1952).
In the modern field old classics out of print and popular authors were published in collected editions, and writers could not satisfy the demands of the publishers some of whom, notably the Mæcenas Ragnar Jónsson, paid so well that the writers for the first time could live by their pen, even build themselves houses. Publications of folkloristic literature, historico-topographical writings, memoirs, and biographical works of reference went on apace. Two literary societies, the communist-nationalistic Mál og Menning and the co-operative and state-sponsored Menningarstjóður og Ðjóðvínafélagið, were reorganized so as to publish not only periodicals but also translations of foreign masterpieces, mostly novels. In 1955 a third society of this kind, Almenna bókafélagið, was founded by anticommunist lovers of Western democracy. The large and splendid literary periodical Helgafell (1942-46, 54——) was typical of the period. While Ritlist og myndlist, Lif og list, Menn og menntir, and Váki were more ephemeral, they were all, like Birtingur (1953——), mouthpieces of young writers and artists. Unfortunately there was, too, a growing number of trashy (sex, crime) periodicals, patterned on Anglo-Saxon models.

Translations from the English went on at a quickened pace: Hemingway, A. Huxley, D. H. Lawrence, W. S. Maugham, Steinbeck, Erskine Caldwell, Sinclair Lewis, Saroyan, and many of the older generations.

Special war themes

Of special war themes one may mention fulminations against totalitarianism, black and red (Hagalin, Davíð, Tómas), protestations in defense of personal freedom and freedom of opinion, admiration for the heroism of Finland, Norway, and Denmark, often contrasted with the Icelandic fool's paradise. The demoralization of the occupation period (ástandið) is described in novels by Jóhannes úr Kötlum, Hagalin, Guðmundur Danielsson (a play), Kristmann Guðmundsson, Pórunn Magnússdóttir, Jón Björnsson, and, later, Ólafur Jóhann Sigurðsson, but nowhere as dramatically as in Halldór Kiljan Laxness' Atlantóstöðin (1948). Allowing for his communist point of view, there can be little doubt that the picture he draws of postwar society in Reykjavik, completely torn from its moorings by the avalanche of foreign gold, once more proving the Hávanadl-Sólarljóð adage "Margr verðr af aurum api" (Gold turns many a man into a fool), was only too true. Of these authors only Jóhannes, Pórunn, Ólafur Jóhann, and Laxness
were communistic, while the others were definitely anticomunist,
some having written essays in that vein (Gunnarsson and Hagalín)
and all uniting their efforts for personal freedom in Almenna bókafélagið,
1955.

Other tendencies

By making them well-to-do the war boom took the wind out of the
leftists' sails in various ways. Some felt very uneasy about it, like
Jóhannes úr Kötuml, until they could rally to the nationalist cause.

Laxness devoted most of the decade to writing historical novels,
steeping himself in sagas until he could produce his heroic tragedy,
Gerpla, from a pacifist point of view, but in unmistakable saga style.
Others, not leftists, were also busy writing sagas, though not attempting
the saga style, except to some extent Sigurjón Jónsson in his three sagas.
Brekkan's novel on Njála's evil genius, Hallgerður langbrók, was a love
story, while Kristmann Guðmundsson's novel on Völuspá's author was
a story describing inspiration and Irish and Greek mysteries. This was
not the only Irish influence noticeable during the decade.

In his historical novels Laxness occupied himself more and more
with form: every detail should be integrated with the whole; if it
does, it does not matter whether it is realistic or fantastic. Þórbergur
Dórdarson, Ólafur Jóh. Sigurðsson, Ásí úr Bæ, Agnar Dórdarson, and
Indriði G. Porsteinsson all experimented with style.

In poetry Steinn Steinarr led the experimentation in abstract style,
while Jón úr Vör wrote free verse without alliteration and rime, a form
frowned upon by traditionalists who pointed out that nothing like it had
been seen in Iceland since the Reformation hymns of inglorious memory.
Free verse to imitate the original meters was employed by Anonymus
(who of all people turned out to be Jóhannes úr Kötuml), translator of
T. S. Eliot and other modern or primitivist poets. But Snorri Hjartar­
sön experimented with (consonant) assonances and inrimes as no one
else, keeping the alliteration. Some of the younger poets like Jón
Jóhannesson and Einar Bragi Sigurðsson even attempted to match
Tómas Guðmundsson's polish in style.

In spite of the rejoicing of 1944, a spirit of frustration—though not
perhaps quite the despair of T. S. Eliot and Sartre—seemed to animate
some of the younger poets, following in the footsteps of Steinn Steinarr,
apostle of nihilistic despair. The term atómskáld, "atom poet" (coined
by Laxness in Atómstöðin ?) was used to designate, among the younger
poets, either those who employed untraditional free verse, or those—especially Hannes Sigússon and Sigfús Daðason—who resorted to darker metaphors or irrational conceits in their poetic diction. Elías Mar and others tried to combine the old and the new. He is usually quite clear.

The mood of the atom poets is probably nowhere better formulated than in Sigfús Daðason’s passage: “I do not ask for peace of soul, placed as I am in the midst between heaven and hell, new and old, East and West, between difficult and easy things, between what I have to do myself and what others, now gone, have done for me; no, that would be asking too much. But I pray that I might be given relief from the emptiness of soul, the indifference and numbness which does not see the light, does not feel the water, sense the earth, and I ask that I be given surcease from such a day as now has passed towards evening, over an empty April sky.” Related feelings are the pathological suffering of Jóhann Pétursson and the T. S. Eliot-like loneliness of Thor Vilhjálmsson.

After all this fumbling frustration it is really heartening to see the rising nationalism and love of country in poets like the brothers Þóroddur and Heiðrekur Guðmundsson as well as in those of the patriotic anthology Svo frjáls vertu módir (As Free Be You Mother, 1954) from the last decade, published on the tenth anniversary of the Republic. Still, several of these poems lack the direct approach so common in the (anti-Danish) patriotic poetry of the preceding century. Just as Gerpla clothes her satire in historical symbolism, so some of this poetry is allusive or parabolic rather than outspoken. Is this an influence from the Nazi occupation of Norway and Denmark or fear of America? Or are the writers following in Kafka’s footsteps?

**Poets, novelists, and playwrights after 1940**

It is convenient to list here the poets, novelists, and playwrights—most but not all of them young—making their debut after 1940, though some of them have been mentioned before. All are promising writers, though it is, of course, difficult to predict their future.

In the forties appeared: the humorist Kristinn Pétursson (1914——); the prolific traditional Kristján Einarsson frá Djúpalæk (1916——); the romantic Þorsteinn Valdimarsson (1918——); the tradition-loving sons of Guðmundur Friðjónnsson á Sandi, Þóroddur (1906——) and Heiðrekur (1910——). The new composer of rimur Sveinbjörn Beinteins-
son (1924—) was hailed as a renewer of that old art by no less an authority than Sir William A. Craigie. Íngölfur Kristjánsson (1919—) and the philosophical Gunnar Dal (pen name for Halldór Sigurðsson, 1924—) were both traditional and romantic.

The atom poets belong mainly to the fifties, though Stefán Hörður Grímsson (1920—) and Hannes Sigfússson (1922—), the Icelandic T. S. Eliot, started in 1946 and 1949. They were followed by Thor Vilhjálmsgsson (1925—) Sigfús Daðason (1928—), and Jón Óskar (1921—), all students of postwar Paris and deeply influenced by French or Romance literatures (Sartre, Paul Eluard, Camus, and the Spanish-American Pablo Neruda) in form and matter, especially the first two. Einar Bragi (Sigurðsson) (1921—) and Elías Mar (1924—) stood with one foot in the old tradition, while the older poets Jón Jóhannesson (1904—) and Ólafur Jóhann Sigurðsson (1918—) had both feet planted in it. Mainly traditional, too, is the youngest, Hannes Pétursson (1931—) who looks like a major poet.

An anthology of the poets, Ljóð ungra skálda 1944–54 was published by Magnus Ægisirsson in 1954, his last work. By that time the revolters against rime and alliteration were already in the majority.

Some of the novelists were rooted in the old farm culture: the retired housewife Guðrún Arnadóttir frá Lundi (1887—) and Jón Björnsson (1907—), returned from Denmark, where he had made his debut in the thirties. Both were prolific, she writing romantically about farmer heroes within her long memory, he novels on historical or present-day themes. Oddny Guðmundsdóttir (1908—) also wrote farm life stories. Þórhallur Bjarnason (1908—) and Jón Thorarensen (1902—) both wrote romantically about life in old fishing stations, the first in Vestfjarðir, the second on Reykjanes; both were, besides, busy collectors of folklore. Two men growing up in poverty and want in fishing villages wrote about their experiences: Vilhjálmur S. Vilhjálmsgsson (1903—) of Eyrarbakki, a history of the workers’ movement there, and Óskar Ádalstein Guðjónsson (1919—) of Ísafjörður about the depression there. Jóhann J. E. Kúld (1902—) described his dangerous sailor’s life during the war, while Æstgeir Ólafsson (pen name Æsi i Bæ, 1914—) wrote a hardboiled story of a fisherman’s life in Vestmannaeyjar, and Guðmundur J. Gislason (1925—) described one summer of herring fishing in Siglufjörður. Of others may still be mentioned: the prolific girls’ novelist Ragnheiður Jónsdóttir (1895—); the artistic short story writer Svanhildur Þorsteinsdóttir (Þorsteinn Erlingsson’s
daughter, 1904—); the humoristic short story writer Kristján Bender (1915—); the Dostoevskian Jóhann Pétursson (1918—); Stefán Júlíusson (pen name Sveinn Auðunn Sveinsson, 1915—), whose first novel gave a student's impression of the United States, the only one of the many students who went to America during the war to attempt that, hence rather interesting for Americans. Thor Vilhjálmsnsson (1925—) did not do the same for France, though his sketches and prose poems were saturated with Sartre's Paris atmosphere.

Most promising novelists of the youngest generation are Agnar Þórðarson (1917—) and Elías Mar (1924—) both born and brought up in Reykjavik. Elías has written several novels and short stories as well as some poetry; his story about a misguided youth in Reykjavik stands out among his writings. Agnar has several unpublished plays and two novels to his credit; the novels are written with psychological insight and quite mature workmanship. The first describes high life in Reykjavik, the second a Hamlet-like figure who attempts a revolt against the general demoralization. Promising, too, seem the most recent to make their appearance, Hannes Sigfússon, also a poet, and Indriði G. Þorsteínsson.

Two Icelanders made their debut with novels in Denmark during the war, Þorsteinn Stefánsson (1912—), whose novel about a fjord in the East of Iceland won him the H. C. Andersen medal for 1943, and the poet and lecturer Bjarni M. Gíslason with a philosophical novel in the spirit of Grundtvig and the Danish "Folk High Schools."

During the forties the best plays written were Gullná hliðið by Davið Stefánsson and Uppstigning by Sigurður Nordal, his first play. Other notable plays were Halldór K. Laxness' Snæfríður Islandssöl (1950) and Jón Arason by Tryggvi Sveinbjörnsson (published in Modern Scandinavian Plays, 1954, by The American-Scandinavian Foundation), both given at the opening of the National Theater in 1950.

One would have expected that this opening of the National Theater, as well as the demand of the State Broadcasting (since 1930) for short plays would serve as a stimulus to younger playwrights. Actually there have been a number of playlets written though not usually published. Yet the only promising playwright to appear was Jakob Jónsson with his Sex leikrit (1948).
Icelandic studies—1940 and after

At the University in Reykjavik Einar Ól. Sveinsson, having just published his book on the Sturlung Age (1940), succeeded Nordal as a professor of the Old Icelandic literature (1945), while Steingrimur J. Þorsteinsson (1911—) took over the Modern Icelandic literature (1945). Having written the most profound book of the decade, *Islenzk menning* (I, 1942), Nordal remained a professor without teaching duties until in 1951 he was made Minister of Iceland in Copenhagen. Björn Guðfinnsson (1905–50) joined the faculty as a professor of the modern language in 1941; he wrote a monumental study of the dialects. He was succeeded by Halldór Halldórsson (1911—). In 1945 Jón Jóhannesson (1900–57), co-editor of *Sturlunga saga* (1949), was made a second professor of history, while Dórkell Jóhannesson (1895—) in 1944 had succeeded Árni Pállsson as first professor of the subject. Of the large *Saga Islendinga* Dórkell covered the period 1750–1830 while Jónas Jónsson, the erstwhile premier and political leader, wrote of the period 1830–74. After the war Jakob Benediktsson was made the editor of a modern Icelandic dictionary (1550—) sponsored by the University. Not connected with the University were four communist intellectuals, the historians Einar Olgeirsson and Björn Þorsteinsson who wrote about the Old Icelandic Commonwealth, Kristinn E. Andrésson, covering the literary history 1918–1948, and Gunnar Benediktsson who wrote partly about the Sturlungs, partly the history of the country 1940–49. Gunnar M. Magnússon wrote a factual and somewhat annalistic history of the war in Iceland from a more objective point of view.

In America Kristján Karlsson (1922—) succeeded Halldór Hermannsson as a curator at Cornell in 1948 and was in turn succeeded by Jóhann Hannesson (1919—), a promising scholar, in 1952, while Finnbogi Guðmundsson (1924—) took over the newly established chair of Icelandic literature and language at the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada.

Dóroddur Guðmundsson

Dóroddur Guðmundsson (1904—) was born at Sandur in the North, son of the poet-farmer Guðmundur Friðjónsson. He attended rural schools and teachers colleges in Iceland, Norway, Denmark, and Sweden and has been a teacher, since 1948, in Hafnarfjörður. He wrote *Skýjadrans* (Cloud Dance, 1943), short stories, *Villiðflug* (Wild Flight, 1946), *Anganþeyr* (Fragrant Thaw, 1952), and *Sefajjóll* (Summits of the
Spirit, 1954), poems filled with a quiet pathos for traditional values and nostalgia for the country and his old home. Obviously he carries on the heritage of his father though he does not imitate his form. Even better than his short stories and poems is the biography of his father: Guðmundur Friðjónsson (1950), really a great work, where the obvious filial piety does not interfere with the author's frankness and sense of justice. The picture he draws of the crowded farm—there were twelve children—is unforgettable.

To an increasing extent, Þóróddur Guðmundsson's volumes of poetry carried translations from English (Scotch and Irish) poetry. This interest resulted in a visit to these countries, described in Ur Vesturvegi (From the British Isles, 1953), by which he was deeply impressed.

Jakob Jónsson

Jakob Jónsson (1904——) was born at Hof, Álftafjörður, and grew up in the village of Djúpivogur in the East. The son of a parson, he in turn became a parson at Djúpivogur, Wynyard, Saskatchewan, Canada (1938–39) and Reykjavík. He wrote his first play for his congregation at Wynyard. His two first plays, especially Öldur (Waves) were idyls from his home village. Tyrkja-Gutta, the most ambitious one and perhaps his best, deals with the famous Hallgrímur Péðursson's notorious wife, a returned slave from Algiers. Hamarrinn (The Hammer) castigates the demoralization during and after World War II. Of his short radio plays, Barrabas was the best. These and other plays, published as Sex leikrit (Six Plays, 1948), make Jakob Jónsson one of the more promising of the younger playwrights, the only one to specialize in that genre.

Apart from the plays, Jakob has also published Í kirkju og utan (In and Outside of Church, 1949), a collection of essays and speeches in which he opposed the Atlantic Pact and advocated continuation of Iceland's neutral status.

Snorri Hjartarson

Snorri Hjartarson (1906——) was born in Borgarfjörður in the West of well-to-do parents who would have put him through the Gymnasium in Reykjavík but for his poor health. He started early to write poetry, but gave it up for a spell while studying art (expressionistic painting) in Copenhagen and Oslo. In Norway he wrote the novel Hölt flyver ravnen (High Soars the Raven, 1934) about an artist's dilemma between love
and work. Shortly afterwards he returned to Iceland (1936). After some lean years he got a job at the Public Library in Reykjavik, becoming its chief librarian in 1943. A year later he published his *Kvæði* (Poems, 1944), all written during World War II, 1940–44. It was a remarkable debut book, more significant than any other since Laxness' *Kvæðakver*. There was hardly a trace of the war in it; it was an intensely personal hymn of praise to his motherland, a moving confession of his joy at being back home, and exultation over the fact that he had at last found himself in his poetry, confident about his future course. This is clear from many passages in his poetry, but most magnificently expressed in the final poem, “Páð kallar þrá” (Yearning Calls), explaining his yearning back to the mountain of his childhood, whose spirits summon him to “work and duty, / Defiant: Trust the everlasting rocks / Dwell by the anvil: blacksmith, metal, fire / And forge in truth unbreak­ / If not a sword, then golden odes on shields!” (Magnús Á. Árnason's translation.)

Though there is some free verse, many poems are cast in traditional forms—at first sight. On closer inspection one finds experimentation in them: unexpected rimes, lots of inrimes and assonances, even consonant assonances used instead of rimes. This technique—reminding one of an earlier Snorri’s *Húntatal*—is brilliantly employed in the leading poem of the collection: “Í Úlfdöllum” (In Wolf Dales): “Páð gist í óður / minn eyðiskög / er ófætt vor / bjó í kvistum,” with gisti: kvistum, óður: eyði-, skóg: bjó riming or assonating. This is verbal music of harmony and dissonance, but Snorri is no less a verbal painter than a musician, as his scale of color-adjec­tives shows. This persistent modulation of music and color makes the poems often not easy to read, but enhances their artistic value.

Snorri’s second book, *A Gnitaheiði* (On Gnitaheiði, 1952) is marked by the same formal qualities, though here are more very short, simple poems than in the first book. But whereas the first book was also a hymn to the Icelandic newborn independence, 1944, this book registers the poet’s sorrow and fears at seeing Iceland quickly being sucked into the maelstrom of international power politics—in poems like “Marz 1949,” “Í garðinum” (In the Garden), “Hamlet,” and others.

**Jón Björnsson**

Jón Björnsson (1907———) was born in Holt in Síða in the South, a farmer’s son. He studied in “folk high schools” in Norway (1929)
and Denmark (Askov, 1930) and lived in Copenhagen 1933–45. After World War II he returned to Reykjavik, and has lived there since.

During the thirties Jón Björnsson wrote a great number of short stories for popular magazines and newspapers in Denmark. In the period 1942–54 he wrote eight novels, the two first, *Jordens Magt* (The Earth’s Power, 1942) and *Slaegtens Ære* (Family Honor, 1944), in honor of rural life in Iceland. He came back to that subject in *Dagur fjagur prýðir veröld alla* (Beauteous Day Brightens the Whole World, 1950), dealing with the flight of the farmers to the towns aggravated by World War II. *Búddamyndin* (The Buddha Idol, 1948) describes an individualistic townsman who gets crushed between the millstones of society: the political parties. The rest of his novels are historical: *Kongens Ven* (The King’s Friend, 1946) deals with the fifteenth-century robber-bishop Jón Gerreksson, drowned like a dog by the provoked Icelanders; *Valtýr á grænuni tryjju* (Valtýr in the Green Coat, 1951) treats of an eighteenth-century judicial murder, while *Eldraunin* (The Fiery Test, 1952) deals with the age of witchcraft, with overtones from modern absolutisms and witch-hunting. *Bergljót* (1954) is a seventeenth-century novel ending with the country’s subjection to the absolute monarch in 1662, also with modern overtones.

**Jón Jónsson úr Vör**

Jón (Jónsson) úr Vör (1917—) was born in Patreksfjörður in the Northwest of poor parents. He grew up during the worst depression, but won independence during the last war boom and lives now in Fossvogur near Reykjavik. He made his debut with an interesting poem on a summer day in his village in *Raudir pennar* 1935. His first book *Íg ber að dyram* (I Knock at the Door, 1937) and *Stund milli striða* (A Moment between Wars, 1942) seemed not very significant, but with *Porfið* (The Village, 1946), he reverted to the village of his birth, describing it in free verse not unlike Edgar Lee Masters’ *Spoon River Anthology*, though not influenced by it but by Swedish leftist poets whose acquaintance the poet had first made in Magnús Ásgeirsson’s translations. The free verse form was, from now on, his special medium. The description of the half-starving fishing village and its humble figures was realistic, but not bitter; on the contrary, the poet, having left it behind, could recreate it from his memory with something like a romantic nostalgia for disappeared youth. It haunted him as bygone Reykjavík haunted Tómas Guðmundsson, and by the same token he was able to
invest it with a strange tranquil beauty in spite of its ugliness. The style was quiet and unobtrusive, matching the humble themes. The poet has published two more books: Með hljóðstaf (With Alliteration, 1951), where his two first volumes are partly reprinted, and Með örvalausum boga (With an Arrow-less Bow, 1951). These books contain impressions of his life in Reykjavik during the war, impressions from a visit to Scandinavia, and continuation of old themes. His poetry is endowed with the same quiet perfection as before, but the youthful enthusiasm of his first poems is now exchanged for a sceptical pessimism: he does not believe that the poor will ever inherit the land.