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## History and the sagas: the effect of nationalism

JESSE L. BYOCK

No Germanic people, in fact no nation in Northern Europe, has a medieval literature which in originality and brilliance can be compared with the literature of the Icelanders from the first five centuries after the settlement period.

Sigurður Nordal (1931)<sup>1</sup>

The study of the Icelandic family sagas has for the past fifty years experienced an extraordinary development. These extensive medieval texts, filled with realistic descriptions of the private and public lives of farmers and their feuds, have been treated almost entirely as literary fictions. So deeply ingrained has this narrow approach to saga studies become that, until recently, the impact of social and historical research has scarcely been felt. Through a series of theoretical arguments advanced in the first half of the twentieth century, the validity of historical and social analysis of the texts was not simply denied; it was virtually banned. Of the numerous reasons for this curious state of affairs, I concentrate on what I see as a prime factor: the role of Icelandic nationalism (G. Karlsson 1980a, 1985, 1987), a forceful movement that has had a substantial influence in shaping both academic and popular views of the sagas (Halldórsson 1978; Sigurjónsson 1984; Byock 1985).

Considering the effect of nationalism upon the current tradition of family saga research leads to a concern extending beyond Iceland: the manner in which a dogmatically-embedded belief system rooted in political expediency can stunt intellectual growth in a whole field of study. In particular the recent history of saga studies shows how the politicization of a theoretical position profoundly influenced modern interpretations. The impact of Icelandic nationalism upon interpretation of the sagas is a small but fascinating chapter in the history of ideas, a

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<sup>1</sup> "The opening sentence to Sigurður Nordal's introductory essay, "Samhengið í Íslenskum bókmentum" (Continuity in Icelandic Literature), in *Íslensk lestrarbók*, an anthology of Icelandic literature used in Icelandic middle schools for several decades.

chapter in which a medieval narrative genre was redefined to serve twentieth-century aspirations.

A basic fact to remember in the following discussion is that Iceland did not gain its independence until 1944, and then by unilateral action during the German occupation of Denmark. Icelandic nationalistic feelings ran high in the decades immediately preceding and following the attainment of full statehood. Beginning in the early decades of the century, Iceland underwent a phase of therapeutic redefinition, which was largely the work of the country's new urban intellectuals. This experience allowed the emerging nation to cast off centuries of dependence upon the Danes and to take control of its own cultural past. Such a readjustment was unusual for Northern Europe in the period before World War I, and perhaps because of this has not been well-recognized. It was, however, seen in Central and Eastern Europe before the war and has repeatedly been witnessed in the post-colonial world; it is part of a process in which new states cast off the cultural history that justified foreign dominance (Chatterjee 1986).

In decolonializing their history, new states tend to follow a certain pattern. They construct perceptions of their past which are the obverse of those previously imposed upon them by the more 'cultured' colonial powers (Ferro 1984). Intuitively, the intellectuals and the academic leaders of developing metropolitan Reykjavík understood the need for change. Their island community was forced to consider its relationship with European culture without the Danes acting as intermediaries. Iceland, detaching itself from Denmark, had to find its own place in Europe's cultural landscape, and the sagas were to play a key role in this altered view.

As a body of literature the family sagas had the potential for redefinition. They exist as an anomaly among the other major groupings of medieval European texts. Neither folktales nor epics, they are also thoroughly different from chronicles or romances. Rather, the sagas are prose narratives, the form of which is intimately linked to the decentralized island society that created them, a society of settled pastoralists. The stories tell of quarrels erupting into violence, and of feuds being mediated through arbitration and legal methods of dispute resolution. Filled with intricate detail, the sagas present the most extensive description of a functioning medieval society found in any European source material from the Middle Ages, whether narrative, charter, or cartulary. In particular, the Icelandic texts center on personal crises arising from threats to a person's status, wealth, or honor. Repeatedly, ambitious individuals struggle for local standing. Unlike other contemporaneous medieval literatures, the family sagas offer a clear view of the 'little' people of history. Through the Icelandic narratives we enter into the *mentalité* of

the culture and perceive the culture and perceive the conditions of life on the farms. We learn of chieftains, large and small farmers, and women. We see people on the margins of society, such as farmhands and crofters, and we come to know a parent's love or dislike for his or her children. Equally important, through the discourse of participants we come to understand the underlying decision-making processes that bind Icelanders of all sorts into a cohesive body politic.

### SAGAS AS SOURCES

This wealth of social detail might suggest that the sagas have been a treasure trove for social and historical research. On the contrary, since the mid-twentieth century historians, anthropologists, and other social scientists have, with a few notable exceptions, shied away from using the sagas as sources. Not until the early 1980s was a decided change evident; even so, today the socio-historical study of early Iceland and its sagas is still hobbled by older presumptions. The long-standing exclusion of the sagas from social and historical analysis is largely attributable to a series of theoretical obstacles erected by a group of Icelandic scholars. This group, rising to prominence in the first half of the twentieth century and now known as the 'Icelandic school', championed the 'bookprose' belief that the origin of the saga was written rather than oral (Andersson 1964; Scovazzi 1960; Hallberg 1962; Holtsmark 1959; Baetke 1974; Mundal 1977; Byock 1982, 1985). The intellectual roots of the Icelandic school reach back to the nineteenth-century German scholar Konrad Maurer but were freshly formulated by Björn M. Olsen (d. 1918), the University of Iceland's first professor of Icelandic language and literature. Under the leadership of Sigurður Nordal, who in 1921 succeeded Björn M. Olsen as professor of Icelandic literature at the recently established University of Iceland, the movement achieved full international momentum in the 1960s. Sigurður Nordal was a forceful leader with firm beliefs (Ólason 1984; G. Karlsson 1984; Skúlason 1984; Eyjólfsdóttir 1984; Valsson 1984). Nordal's views about the sagas were strongly reinforced by the writings of his students and fellow Icelandic scholars such as Einar Þ. Sveinsson and Jón Jóhannesson. Guided by Nordal, these scholars wrote the critical introductions to the *Íslensk fornrit* saga editions. The first volume of this new series, *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* (ÍF 2), was edited by Nordal in 1933, and publication of this standardized series continues today.

If we are to chart a new direction in the study of early Iceland and its texts—one that recognizes the literary aspects of the sagas and welcomes the work of historians, anthropologists, archaeologists, and sociolo-

gists—then we cannot simply ignore the prohibitions of the Icelandic school. Scholarship demands that we explore the reasons for the bookprosisists' injunction against using the sagas as historical source material. One of these reasons, I believe, is twentieth-century Icelandic nationalism.

Injunction is a strong term, but it is an accurate measure of the degree and the effect of the bookprosisists' 'hands off' message to social scientists. Sigurður Nordal, in fact, delivered a paper, "The Historical Element in the Icelandic Family Saga," in Glasgow in 1957 while he was Iceland's ambassador to Denmark. In this memorable address, Nordal addresses, surely with irony but perhaps also with a touch of sarcasm, the related issues of historical validity and the role of historians in the study of saga literature.

A modern historian will for several reasons tend to brush these sagas aside as historical records. He is generally suspicious of a long oral tradition, and the narrative will rather give him the impression of the art of a novelist than of the scrupulous dullness of a chronicler. Into the bargain, these sagas deal principally with private lives and affairs which do not belong to history in its proper sense, not even to the history of Iceland. The historian cuts the knot, and the last point alone would be sufficient to exempt him from further trouble. It is none of his business to study these sagas as literature, their origin, material, and making (S. Nordal 1957).

But what does Nordal mean by history? Certainly he does not think of history in a modern sociological sense. His statement is almost a classical formulation of institutional history, that is, history seen as a chronology of facts. In this older concept of history, human endeavor is understood through the actions of prominent individuals, the progress of governmental institutions, and the status of political structures. Conceived in this way, history ignores private life, which is inaccessible through facts alone. Instead, institutional history seizes on major events, follows the logic of chronology, and concentrates on the decisions and acts of the few who wield power.

Although institutional history has undoubtedly been useful in reconstructing the nature of social and governmental structures and the careers of outstanding individuals, it nonetheless ignores fundamental social and economic processes. It does not analyze the underlying forces governing the politics and culture of daily life. It is thus not surprising that history conceived in this way finds only a few facts of value in saga narratives and discards the rest of the text as fiction. In doing so, it precludes us from understanding the lives of a major portion of the population; it skips over the realistic details of daily life so abundant in the sagas and so

descriptive of the needs, the desires, and the emotions of ordinary people.

At this point there arises a difficult question which, to my knowledge, has not been asked in the modern study of Iceland. This distinction between fact and fiction, the one upon which the bookprosists placed so much weight, wasn't it always a bit too simple (cf. Meulengracht Sorensen, this volume)? In other words, why would the bookprosists accept the argument that the sagas with their accounts of private lives and affairs "do not belong to history in its proper sense, not even to the history of Iceland"? Surely, by 1957 Nordal's statement against historical interpretation of the sagas and his narrow focus on the veracity of historical events were more than a little conservative. In the late 1940s the effects of social history as an approach and anthropology as a discipline were already being widely felt. Much work in fields other than Icelandic studies had already analyzed the past in a way more enlightened than a history limited to the facts listed in a dry chronicle. Among scholars who did such work were well-known historians, anthropologists, and sociologists such as Max Weber, Karl Polanyi, Talcott Parsons, R. A. Tawney, Arnold Toynbee, Marc Bloch, and Lucien Febvre, to name a few.

Is there another, more fundamental reason for the injunctions of the Icelandic school than just its blanket commitment to literary interpretation? Again, the answer is nationalism. Although the subject is a big one that goes well beyond the parameters of this essay, we can nevertheless focus here on a crucial element: consideration of the political climate at a time when the bookprosists' position was being formulated. It was in an atmosphere of urbanization and emerging nationhood that the Icelandic school put forward its distinction between history and literature. For its believers, determination of the origin of the sagas was more than simply an obscure academic question.

## THE NATIONALISTIC MOVEMENT

The late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century in Iceland were marked by intense agitation for independence from Denmark. The island had not been independent since the end of the Commonwealth in 1262-1264; it was first ruled by the Norwegians and then, after 1380, by the Danes. The Danes have had a bad press in Iceland, not least because their rule was intimately connected in the minds of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Icelandic nationalists with one of the worst periods in Icelandic history, the last two decades of the eighteenth century. To compound matters, this was also a period of dynastic, political, and economic instability in Denmark. In part the often callous Danish

treatment of Iceland in these decades can be attributed to the turmoil and declining economy that Denmark experienced throughout the era of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars. In Iceland in the 1780s volcanic eruptions deposited ash over a wide area which in turn caused the death of livestock; this calamity, plus a period of unusually cold weather, led to a famine in which one-fifth of the population perished. By 1800 the total population of Iceland, a land mass equal to two-thirds the size of England and Scotland together, was only 47,000. Adding to the troubles of this period were the policies of the oppressive Danish trade monopoly. Established in 1602, it had by the mid-eighteenth century become so unresponsive to Iceland's needs that during the famine year of 1784 the island was required to export food.<sup>2</sup>

It was in the years following this troubled period that the sagas began to play a role in shaping the Icelandic national consciousness. The poverty, hardship, and decline that Icelanders were suffering stood in sharp contrast to the prosperous life pictured in the old texts (G. Karlsson 1987).<sup>3</sup> The sagas, which had always been read in manuscript, were becoming available in inexpensive editions in the nineteenth century. They portrayed the past as a life of noble independence replete with feasts, trading ships, and fine gifts—a time when upstanding Icelanders met with and received respect from royalty of ancient Scandinavia and the British Isles. Comparison with the past was a common pastime among nineteenth-century Icelanders. Underlying the sense of national decline and impoverishment was the knowledge that only in the 1870s did the island's population finally surpass the 70,000 mark believed to have been the total in the period of Iceland's medieval independence. In Icelandic eyes, the reality of conditions under Danish suzerainty contrasted sharply with the 'Golden Age of the Icelanders' (*Gullöld Íslendinga*), as the medieval period came to be called.<sup>4</sup>

The ethos of suffering and survival developed through the experience of overcoming disaster became a unifying factor in Iceland. Despite the

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<sup>2</sup>Despite such examples, the Danish monopoly may not have been as repressive (especially when one considers the other choices available) as the nineteenth- and twentieth-century nationalists assumed it to be. Nevertheless, trade policies instituted in Copenhagen continued to hinder Iceland's economic development until well into the nineteenth century.

<sup>3</sup> Gunnar Karlsson's writings on the historical background to Icelandic nationalism are some of the most perceptive work on the subject. I am indebted to him for his analyses and for our many discussions of Icelandic history.

<sup>4</sup> *Gullöld Íslendinga* (J. Jónsson 1906) was the title of a highly popular history from the first decade of the twentieth century.

popularity of becoming an independent people (*sjálfstæð þjóð*), change came slowly. Economic factors were again a major reason for delay. The Danish trading monopoly, though formally terminated in 1787, was strong enough to continue its hegemony. Not until 1854 were the last restrictions abolished, giving Icelanders the same foreign trade rights as the Danes (Gunnarsson 1983). Notwithstanding the resulting freer access to trade, few Icelandic merchants were able to compete effectively with their Danish counterparts until the end of the nineteenth century. And underlying the persistence of Danish hegemony was the crushing poverty of the population, consisting principally of poor farmers and rural laborers. The relatively few well-off farmers, of decidedly modest means, did not constitute a privileged aristocratic elite. In the first half of the nineteenth century, ninety percent of the population of 50,000 lived by pursuing 'primitive' animal husbandry, with only seasonal small-scale fishing. There was no middle class, indeed there was no place for one.

Despite their problems, the Icelanders did have a number of advantages. They managed over the centuries to hold onto their language, culture, and literacy. These elements were put to good use in the mid-nineteenth century, when the political situation began to change. In 1845 the Alþing, which had been disbanded in 1800, was reestablished in Reykjavík as an advisory body. At the same time revolutionary stirrings in Denmark aided the Icelandic cause. In 1848 the king renounced absolutism, although for a while there was no diminution of royal authority in Iceland. New ideas, however, were taking hold among Icelandic intellectuals, particularly among those who lived in Copenhagen. A prominent force in the Icelandic awakening was the influence of the German philosophers Johann Gottfried Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt (G. Karlsson 1980a). In particular, Herder's views encouraged the nationalistic searchings of Icelandic students and intellectuals in Copenhagen in the 1830s, giving the Icelanders a theoretical explanation of why life had been better during Iceland's medieval independence. According to Herder, a nation controlled by foreigners, with foreign institutions imposed upon it, was bound to stagnate. Progress for a nation was based upon the freedom to develop its national spirit without hindrance. Iceland was poor, because it was not free. As the sagas, with their prosperous farmers and chieftains, showed, the quality of life was markedly different when Iceland was free.

Although such concepts helped to stir nationalism among Icelandic intellectuals, they also revealed a philosophical split that was to divide Icelanders for the next hundred years and which ended with the victorious ascendancy of the bookprosists in the 1930s. The division between the two groups, the traditionalists and the futurists, centered on different conceptions of the model for the new Iceland. For the tradition-

alists, the new Iceland was to resemble the medieval past. It was conceived in a national romantic light that idealized Iceland's past freedom and traditional rural culture as witnessed by the sagas. For the futurists, the model was a new urban culture, with refined middle-class tastes and values. The schism already existed between the *fjölnismenn* and Jón Sigurðsson's party. This division deepened in the debate over reestablishment of the Alþing in the 1840s. The traditionalists, who included Tómas Sæmundsson and Þorleifur Repp, put their faith in the sagas. They argued in accordance with national romantic views not only for reestablishing the Alþing at Þingvellir but also for investing it with many of the Alþing's traditional features. The other group, led by Jón Sigurðsson, was victorious in arguing for Reykjavík as the seat of government. Sigurðsson and his colleagues looked to the future, foreseeing a modern parliament in an urban-centered society. As the futurists under Jón Sigurðsson took control of the movement for independence, their vision for Iceland had to compete with that of the Danes.

And here some background to the diplomatic relationship between Iceland and Denmark is useful in order to illustrate the determination of the Icelanders to obtain free status in the face of the Danish view that Iceland, as an underdeveloped country, was in need of continued guidance. The Danes never executed any Icelanders during the Icelandic independence struggle. In fact, despite the sometimes shrill rhetoric of Icelandic speeches, the long Icelandic struggle for independence was an exercise in decorum. The Danes were not really a bad lot, but they were stubborn and very persistent. Seeing themselves not as colonial masters but as helpful big brothers, they tended to look down their noses at the Icelanders, whom they patronized with quaint respect for their rustic, yeoman virtues. However generous the Danes became—and they had become generous by the late nineteenth century when Iceland's upkeep cost the Danish treasury more than it earned from the island—they won relatively few friends. On the contrary, the Icelandic independence movement became more determined as the nineteenth century wore on. Led first by Jón Sigurðsson, Iceland's nationalists were constantly dissatisfied and remained uncompromising in their desire for a free Iceland, whereas the Danes were convinced of the wisdom of finding an accommodation. The independence struggle (*sjálfstæðisbaráttan*, as it came to be called) was not fought in a vacuum, for Denmark was simultaneously undergoing the change from a central to a constitutional monarchy. Thus the Danish position on Iceland's quest for independence often depended upon whether the liberals or conservatives were in power.

Denmark's disastrous war with Prussia in 1864 engendered a highly nationalistic sentiment among Danes during the following years. It is

within this context that the Danish parliament in 1871 passed the King's Law on the Status of Iceland. The law defined Iceland as an inseparable part of the Danish realm, although giving the island's people some special national rights. The Icelanders, who had not been consulted, refused to accept formally the Status Law as valid, yet operated under its provisions. In particular they accepted the subsidies from the Danish treasury. In 1874, to celebrate the millennium of Iceland's founding, the Danish king gave the island a new constitution, but this too was unsatisfactory to the Icelandic nationalists. It allowed Denmark to retain significant control through veto power, leaving the Alþing weak. A new separate ministry for Iceland was established, but the Danish minister of justice handled Icelandic affairs as a sideline.

The situation remained unsettled until 1901, when a liberal government came to power in Denmark. In 1904 it granted Iceland home rule, under whose terms an Icelandic minister for domestic affairs was to be appointed by the Alþing and was to reside in Reykjavik. The Icelandic nationalists, however, were still not satisfied. In 1918 Denmark was in a quandary. With Germany defeated in World War I, the Danes saw an opportunity to retrieve some of the Danish-speaking parts of Schleswig, which had been seized by Germany after the Danish defeat in 1864. In view of their own arguments for self-determination of the Danish-speaking population of Schleswig, the Danes could hardly deny Iceland's aspirations. As a result, Denmark repealed the old Status Law in 1918 and granted Iceland a new status of union with Denmark.

Under the new law, called the Act of Union of 1918 (*Sambandslögin* 1918), the island officially became the Kingdom of Iceland (*Konungsríkið Ísland*) in 1918 (Ól. Jóhannesson 1960). It was a separate state in a personal union with the king of Denmark. Internally the country became autonomous; externally Copenhagen continued to manage Iceland's affairs. The 1918 law also specified that either country could terminate the agreement after twenty-five years. On paper at least the Icelandic nationalists would seem to have finally achieved their goal, but the matter is not that simple. Like many of the earlier laws, the Act of Union did not settle the matter. It did not satisfy the nationalists' desire for total independence, a desire that became stronger as Iceland underwent a new period of cultural adjustment.

A profound change came to the once almost entirely rural society toward the end of the nineteenth century, when towns began to grow. In 1880 Iceland had only three townships whose inhabitants together numbered 3,630, and that was only five percent of the population. Urbanization had progressed rapidly by 1920, when seven townships with 29,000 inhabitants accounted for thirty-one percent of the population

(Nordal & Kristinsson 1967; Guðmundsson 1987).<sup>5</sup> Yet despite urban growth, the island remained largely rural inhabited by farmers and fishermen. Reykjavik, the country's administrative and commercial center whose population would grow from approximately 6,000 in 1900 to 30,000 in 1930, was proud of its new university, founded in 1911. The new urban intellectuals strove not only for national self-determination but also for liberation from the centuries-old stereotype of Icelanders as coarse farmers. The Danes strengthened the Icelanders' desire for liberation from the stereotype by patronizing them as too impoverished, culturally and economically, to manage a fully independent state.

### THE SAGAS AND NATIONALISM

In this climate, nationalism spilled over into analyses of the national treasure, the family sagas, which were undeniably Icelandic. The problem facing Icelandic intellectuals was how to lift the sagas from their status as traditions of unlettered storytellers and elevate them to the front rank of world literature. In his famous monograph *Hrafnkatla*, written in 1940 and translated into English in 1956, Nordal leaves little doubt about his views:

It seems quite natural to believe, almost without any demonstration, that *Hrafnkatla* was the work of a single author whose purpose was not to narrate a true story but to compose a work of fiction; a man who, endowed with a powerful imagination, literary virtuosity, and a knowledge of men, was sustained by one of the most powerful literary movements in recorded history (S. Nordal 1940).

As part of his analysis of *Hrafnkels saga*, Nordal defines its narrative art as "the technique of a branch of fiction which is rarer than either the novel or the short story."

Not only literary scholars among the bookprosists but also historians were stirred by Nordal's claims. Jón Jóhannesson, Iceland's rising medieval historian, who became professor of history in 1950, was Nordal's student and a firm member of the Icelandic school. In his 1950 introduction to the *Íslensk fornrit* edition (ÍF 11) of *Austfirðinga sögur* (The Sagas of the East Fjords), Jóhannesson wrote a critical analysis of *Hrafnkels saga*, the saga which was affectionately called *Hrafnkatla*, and

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<sup>5</sup>Focusing on literary development, Halldór Guðmundsson (1987) provides a penetrating analysis of the cultural forces at work in Iceland and in Reykjavik during the first decades of the twentieth century.

which was to become the bellwether of the new anti-historical view.<sup>6</sup> Referring to Nordal's study of the saga also called *Hrafnkatla*, Jóhannesson wrote:

More has been written about *Hrafnkels saga* than about any other saga from the East Fjords.... The most notable study which has appeared about the saga is *Hrafnkatla* by Sigurður Nordal, in which he comes to the conclusion that the saga is a novel (*skáldsaga*), composed shortly before 1300 by a wise and highly-learned man. Previously, all had been of the view that the saga was based on a traditional story.... Nordal's conclusion is thoroughly well supported, and one cannot but agree that it is secure and unshakable in all of its main attributes. His essay completely revolutionizes the old view of this particular saga, but not only this. It marks a turning point in the history of research and understanding of the Icelandic sagas in general.... If this saga should be, despite appearances to the contrary, a novel, composed by the person who first wrote it down, as Nordal has concluded, then the belief must diminish that other sagas, which are longer and more difficult to memorize, have at some time been orally told as whole entities. From here on my analysis will be highly supported by Nordal's study.

From a theoretical viewpoint, Jóhannesson's stance is understandable. He was a firm practitioner of institutional history and was, in his writings, thoroughly committed to the fact/fiction distinction so fundamental to the bookprosists' position. His two-volume history of Iceland (J. Jóhannesson 1956, 1958) remains a standard and trusted reference book for factual information about Iceland's governmental institutions, chronology, and events. There is almost no attempt to investigate private lives, and in tracing the genealogy of institutions, Jóhannesson's history generally ignores the sociological bent of modern history. It neither analyzes how medieval Iceland functioned as a cohesive body politic nor considers fundamental aspects, such as how power was acquired and maintained in a society in which warfare was not an integral factor.

At the time that Nordal and Jóhannesson were writing, most people in Iceland, as well as those in other countries, considered the sagas to be the product of an oral tradition. For the bookprosists, providing the sagas with the new literary luster was more of an uphill battle than it might seem to us today. Icelanders can be divisive, and from the late Renaissance through the nineteenth century educated Icelanders had been of two

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<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that much of the use of *Hrafnkels saga* by bookprosists has an element of the 'straw man' about it, since this saga is one of the few tales of feud which cannot be taken as an example of traditional saga narration (Byock 1982:201-204).

minds about the sagas. Some, surely the majority, venerated the stories.<sup>7</sup> Others tended to look down on the sagas as crude, quasi-historical tales, hardly on a par with the great literary traditions of Europe. One scholarly eighteenth-century Icelander, Jón Ólafsson frá Grunnavík, disparaged the sagas as stories about "farmers at fisticuffs" (*bændur flugust á*) (Ólafsson 1740; Helgason 1926). By the twentieth century, however, perceptions of the sagas began to change among educated Icelanders. The view that the sagas were a written creation gained ascendancy, particularly among the urban population. The bookprosists carried this transformation to the extreme, with Nordal declaring in his analysis of *Hrafnkels saga* that "*Hrafnkatla* is one of the most completely developed 'short novels' in world literature" (S. Nordal 1940).

In espousing this view, the bookprosists found themselves at odds with traditional scholars such as Finnur Jónsson, professor of Icelandic at the University of Copenhagen, and with the conservative Icelandic *bændur*. These modern-day farmers, who habitually read the sagas, believed in the historical accuracy of the texts. Many of them lived on the farmsteads that still carried the names mentioned in the sagas. Jónsson, a major academic voice in his day, was prepared to battle head on against the new theory of literary invention. Feelings were running high in 1923 when he wrote, "I will uphold and defend the historical reliability of the sagas, however 'grand' this may sound, until I am forced to lay down my pen" (F. Jónsson 1923). Although farmers and other Icelandic traditionalists lost their chief academic spokesman in 1928, when Jónsson retired, they remained doubtful of the new ideas coming from Reykjavík. Halldór Laxness, who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1955, playfully touches on this element of division among Icelanders in *Atómstöðin* (*The Atom Station*), a 1948 novel which treats the tensions in Icelandic society at that time. His main character, a young woman who was brought to Reykjavik from the countryside to be a maid in a wealthy household, says, "I was taught never to believe a single word in the newspapers and nothing but what is found in the sagas" (Laxness 1961 [1948]).

The bookprosists, and Nordal in particular, were at odds, culturally and politically, with both leftist radicals, such as Laxness, and Icelandic traditionalists (Hallberg 1956; Sigurjónsson 1984). The bookprosists had a ready answer for the farmers and others who treated their sagas as history. In referring to *Hrafnkels saga* and the arguments surrounding the historicity of its text, Nordal wrote:

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<sup>7</sup> Among them were Icelandic scholars in Copenhagen such as Arngrímur Jónsson lærdi (the Learned) and Árni Magnússon.

I am not a historian and it makes no difference to the history of Iceland whether *Hrafnkatla* is a reliable historical source or not. Here it is sufficient to say that if, in the past, it has been ransacked for information about our ancient customs and civilization, it should in the future be used more circumspectly (S. Nordal 1940).

For Nordal a saga such as *Hrafnkels saga* could be the creative work only of a literate, highly educated author, not of a rude farmer but of an erudite, cosmopolitan exponent of an extraordinarily advanced culture. Almost as a warning to his opponents, Nordal argued against their pursuit of oral traditions and their elevation of the ordinary man to the status of sagaman:

Those who wish to maintain that it [*Hrafnkels saga*] follows the pattern of oral tradition must choose between these alternatives: either to turn a blind eye to the art of this saga, its technical skill and profound understanding, or else to alter completely the current conceptions about folktales and their limitations, about the concerns and psychology of ordinary people (S. Nordal 1940).

The bookprosists were able to take such a stand because, as the product of a new urban milieu, they were moving apart culturally from the farmers. Many of the Icelandic school's members were educated in Copenhagen, frequently moving back and forth between the Danish capital and Reykjavík. For them the sagas were not simply validations of national greatness, but evidence of cultural uniqueness. If they could be shown to be products of "one of the most powerful literary movements in recorded history," then the emerging Icelandic urban culture would no longer be a poor cousin of the Danes' culture. In fact, Iceland with its sagas would have reached a state of cultural sophistication centuries in advance of anything that the Danes achieved before the nineteenth century. The literary basis of the sagas equipped Iceland with a cultural heritage worthy of its status as an independent nation.

In turning to their narrative traditions, Icelandic intellectuals were following a well-established pattern: a similar development had occurred in several emerging northern European countries in the nineteenth century. In Germany for example, through the work of scholars such as the brothers Grimm, folktales and fairy tales were embraced as a national heritage that could be appreciated by a literate culture. Similar developments occurred in Finland with the Kalevala. In Norway, which gained its independence from Sweden in 1905, orally collected folktales provided a sense of national consciousness and the rediscovery of the kings' sagas offered a historical past.

In Iceland's case, however, several crucial differences separated it from the pattern of the previous nationalistic experiences in Northern Europe.

First the Icelanders were moving toward full independence in the twentieth century. Particularly after World War I, the nineteenth-century national romantic adoration of oral heritage was no longer flourishing. The bookprosisists were influenced by the intellectual currents of their own day. They wrested the sagas from their base within folk culture and reinterpreted their origin and nature in a manner compatible with contemporary literary criticism and their own urban environment.

A further difference distinguishing Icelandic experience from previous usages of folk traditions in emerging northern European states is that the Icelanders were not a fragmented people who needed to reconstruct a common historical past. Politically and historically they had always conceived of themselves as an island-wide, homogeneous entity. Their past was amply documented in extant medieval historical writings such as *The Book of the Icelanders* and *The Book of Settlements*. A related ingredient is that the Icelanders, having obtained internal sovereignty in 1918, no longer had to fight for legitimacy with an occupying power. After 1918 there is a gradual but distinct shift in emphasis within Icelandic writings. Nationalistic arguments are now directed less at convincing the Danes that the country is ready to stand completely alone than at reassuring the Icelanders themselves. To be sure, there is still considerable, and perhaps in some quarters even growing, anti-Danish feeling. The documents of the period, however, readily display a further conflicting sentiment: an underlying sense of unease with the coming actuality of abandoning the security of Denmark. This unease was to some degree countered by self-promotion and exaggeration.

In the face of virtually no new political opposition from the Danes after 1918, the drive for full independence became to a large degree a question of creating a new Icelandic self-image. That this was a process with emotional and psychological costs we saw earlier in the discussion of the farmers and their attachment to the sagas. As part of this process one of Iceland's major political parties, the *Sjálfstæðisflokkur* (the Independence Party) is established only in 1929, that is, after the external *sjálfstæðisbarátta* is over. The name of this new party is itself a play on two meanings: the independence of the state and the independence of the individual. This naming, and the title of Laxness's major novel *Sjálfstætt fólk* (*Independent People*, Laxness 1934-1935), extolling the virtues of the nation and subjecting the nationalistic sentiment to sometimes bitter irony, are just two among a flood of indications that after 1918 the struggle for independence became a highly personal matter--one of choice and adaptation, as different groups vied to define a new present as well as to create a new past.

In this ambience, the call for a reliant self-image permeates Icelandic writings, going far beyond the essays of the bookprose group. Consider

the following treatment of literacy, contained within an essay on the subject of education in the eighteenth century, written in 1925 by the librarian Hallgrímur Hallgrímsson. The section on eighteenth-century literacy starts with the subject period, quickly moves to a comparison of Icelanders as opposed to other Scandinavian national groups, and finishes with an exhortation to the current leaders of the country:

Around 1780-90, it is the Icelanders who become the most literate of all the [Scandinavian] peoples, This great advance is even more remarkable as no elementary schools existed here in this country. Such literacy is completely the work of the priests and the individual households. This cultural advancement among the Icelanders in the last part of the eighteenth century is a feat, which scarcely has its likeness elsewhere, and which shows best the very nature of the nation. The Icelandic common folk is intelligent and eager to learn, and if those who are to govern her, grow to a stature equal to their task, then there is no danger that the Icelanders will fail to occupy an honorable seat among the cultured nations of the world (Hallgrímsson 1925).

To such yearnings for cultural maturity the Icelandic School provided tangible solutions. They did not create the environment of national redefinition or the desires and hopes that accompanied it, but they were prepared to make the most of the situation. The bookprosists stepped forward as cultural leaders, harnessing the forces of their period to advance their particular interpretations. From their platform as spokesmen for the new University, they offered the prestige of scholarship to the ongoing process of cultural state building. And prestige was needed, since Nordal and his colleagues chose a particularly challenging task. Unlike the charge that is often placed upon academics in emerging nations, the Icelandic school was not concerned with proving who the Icelanders were as a people. The task that the Icelandic School set for itself was to repossess what had been taken from the nation. This need arose because Iceland's national literature had long since been claimed by mainland Scandinavians. In particular the Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians had for over a century incorporated the Old Icelandic texts into their own national heritages. In their school books, national histories, and literary studies, they treated Icelandic medieval writings, including the family sagas, as the product of a shared Scandinavian heritage of storytelling and collective history. For the mainland Scandinavians, the Icelandic texts were remnants of Viking traditions that were not created in Iceland but only recorded and preserved there by Norse emigrants.

Iceland's continued rural nature, with a large part of its population still living until World War II in turf houses, contributed to the maintenance of the old stereotype. What was more logical than the oral past of

northern peoples being preserved amidst the noble farmers of the most backward and isolated part of Scandinavia? Such patronizing romanticism, which saw 'the saga island' as a living relic of the Middle Ages, did not fit the cultural self-perception of Reykjavik's intellectuals. Their task was to recast the family sagas as exclusively Icelandic works. They were prepared to share the kings' sagas about Norway and Denmark as the Icelandic contribution to the pan-Scandinavian past. Eddic and Skaldic poetry, with their mythic and historic subject matter also could be shared, but the family sagas were, as Nordal wrote in 1931, a different matter:

The national literature [*þjóðlegar bókmenntir*] of the Icelanders before 1300 is divided into three parts, if one does not count the laws. Two (Eddic and Skaldic verse) are of common Scandinavian heritage, while one (the family sagas) is spun of entirely Icelandic thread (S. Nordal 1931).

In essence, Nordal and many of those who followed his leadership underwent an experience common today among western educated scholars from newly independent third-world countries. The members of the Icelandic School were trained in Euro-centric, cultural perceptions but remained committed to their native nationalism. Perhaps somewhat unconsciously, the bookprosisists set out to harmonize their nationalist goals to fit within the basic reality of the time: for Western society the history of small or distant peoples counts only in respect to how and when it touches upon the mainstream of European cultural or historical development. The sagas, newly reinterpreted in the light of standard European concepts of literary development, now took their seat among the artifacts of European high culture.

In many ways the work of the Icelandic school is a process of integrating Icelandic aspirations into a European context, while filtering out the influence of the Danes and the claims of other Scandinavians. The outcome was a theory of saga origins, in which the family sagas went from being the historical memory of all Scandinavia, including the farmers in Iceland, to becoming scarcely anyone's history—not even Iceland's before the thirteenth century. As the creative product of thirteenth-century Icelandic fiction writers, the sagas now belonged to Icelandic inventiveness alone, a position that explains the prominence of the fact-fiction dichotomy in bookprose writings. The Icelandic school, in redefining the sagas as the fruit of a late literary movement, reassessed the national heritage in a way that ultimately stunted its own cultural maturity.

#### A FUTURE DIRECTION

What do we achieve by freeing ourselves from exclusionary prejudices? The answer is a renewed study of medieval Iceland which puts the sagas back into the context of the medieval society that produced and used them. We are free then to explore the sagas within the framework of Iceland's rural society and to determine what role they played in that society. The two are, of course, complementary parts of the same dynamic, and I am confident that the coming years will observe all the possibilities that, individually and in combination, the historical, literary, and social disciplines can offer. To a degree our success in the future is dependent upon recognizing the barriers that in the recent past have kept us from widening our study in new and exploratory ways and have hindered us from treating the texts in a more innovative manner.