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Modern Nationalism and the Medieval Sagas

Jesse L. Byock

National consciousness is by no means a private affair. In most cases it is determined not only by what the group that is asserting a national identity thinks of itself but is also formed in response to the views of outsiders. External opinion has been especially important to the Scandinavians, whose largely agrarian societies lay until the late nineteenth century on the fringes of European cultural innovation. Despite *the* growth of industry and urbanization beginning in the early nineteenth century, Scandinavia remained stigmatized as a region of cultural backwardness until the early twentieth century.

Even Denmark, one of the most advanced of the Scandinavian states, long felt the scorn of critics. Albeit with a jaundiced eye, Friedrich Engels, writing to Karl Marx from Paris in 1846, said of the Danes:

I have in the most recent terrible past once again made my acquaintance with Denmark and the rest of the North. You would find it a beastly place. Better the smallest German than the greatest Dane! Such a miserable atmosphere of morality, guild-cliquishness and consciousness of social status exists nowhere else any more. The Dane thinks of Germany as a country one visits in order "to *keep* mistresses with whom one can squander one's wealth" (*Werke* 27: 71-72).¹

None too enthusiastic about the Danes, Engels also had thoughts on the Icelanders, a people who, like their medieval ancestors, lived in turf houses whose thick, grassy walls melted into the landscape:

The Icelander still speaks the very same language as the greasy Vikings of anno 900. He drinks fish-oil, lives in an earthen hut and breaks down when the atmosphere doesn't reek of rotten fish. I was many times tempted to be proud, that I am at least no Dane or even an Icelander but only a German.²

If Engels was harsh on the Danes and derided the well-known Icelandic affinity for cod liver oil, as a German he was not the only one to define his group through recourse to expressions of cultural superiority. Among the Scandinavian peoples themselves, claims for cultural superiority played a significant role in shaping the identity of the different emerging national groups. The Danes, armed with the delights of Copenhagen and the force of the monarchy, tended to look down upon the impoverished Icelanders as backward provincials. The latter, none too sure of their status within the Danish Kingdom, were keen to counter their reputation for rusticity. And here the seeds of a cultural clash were laid,

Nineteenth-century romanticism had a special interest in both the medieval world and primitive, untainted rural culture. As the nineteenth century progressed and turned into the early twentieth, the Danes fell more and more under the nostalgic spell, tending to look upon the Icelanders through increasingly romantic and patronizing eyes. In Iceland, however, as Gunnar Karlsson has pointed out, primitive country life was well into the twentieth century too close and constant a reality to have ever attracted many

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advocates ("Spjall um rómantik og þjóðernisstefnu" 452). A basic fact—and one older than nineteenth-century romanticism itself—is that those who most admire primitive rural life are almost certainly those who have never been bound to such circumstances. The sobering effects of subsistence agriculture and the attendant desire to participate in contemporaneous European cultural life deeply affected Iceland's emerging twentieth-century urban intellectuals.

As I discuss in this article,³ a dominant group among these intellectuals found in the family sagas (*Íslendinga sögur*) a solution to the long-troubling issue of an Icelandic self image. They reinterpreted the medieval texts in a manner which gave their new state historical evidence of a long record of high culture. The sagas, which had previously been understood to be the remnants of a flourishing folk-tradition of oral narration, were now elevated to the position of a written genre, the product of an extraordinary, late-medieval period of cultured literary creation. By changing the perception of the sagas, Icelandic nationalists advanced the relative cultural standing of her country among the Scandinavian states. This reinterpretation, however, if so important for an earlier generation, has left an unfortunate legacy. The Icelandic nationalists, in denying the sagas their roots in the oral compositional skills of a yeomanry, tied the origins of this form of insular prose story-telling far too closely to classical and medieval traditions of literature and learning.

If the sagas became a literature in the service of twentieth-century national aspirations, how did this come about? The answer is that the sagas had already been seized upon from the very beginning of the Icelandic nationalistic movement in the nineteenth century as clear evidence of a national identity. The presence of an expansive corpus of texts such as the sagas was a significant factor in distinguishing the Icelanders, separating them from other discrete, but non-independent, Nordic groups within Scandinavia who had no comparable evidence of cultural history. These groups, if we move past the truly disenfranchised ethnic minorities such as the Saami and the Greenlanders,⁴ include the Faroese who scarcely underwent a national awakening before the turn of the twentieth century and the former Danish-speaking population of Skáne. The latter, although a part of the Swedish kingdom for only a few centuries, never seriously sought independence.

From the beginning of the nationalistic movement, the sagas provided the island population with an historical past as well as a measure of self respect. Iceland's Nobel laureate Halldór Laxness offers insight into the Icelanders' view of themselves and the influence of these texts at the time of Engels' letter. At the opening to his 1960 novel *Paradisarheimt* (Paradise Reclaimed), we find this introspective statement:

In the early days of Christian Williamsson (The Danish King Christian IX, 1863-1906), who was the third last foreign king to wield power here in Iceland.... Icelanders were said to be the poorest people in Europe, just as their fathers and grandfathers and great-grandfathers had been, all the way back to the earliest settlers; hut they were convinced that long centuries ago there had been a Golden Age in Iceland, when Icelanders had not been mere farmers and fishermen as they were now, but royal born heroes and poets who owned weapons, gold, and ships.
(7)

If Laxness treats such yearning with a characteristic touch of good-natured irony, others took the matter more seriously. Particularly in the 1920s and 1930s, positions with nationalistic overtones had become more strident than just a few decades earlier. At this time, the leading Icelandic literary scholar and later diplomat, Sigurður Nordal, took up the cause of having the sagas recognized as the work of well-educated medieval men of letters. For Nordal these narratives were far more than folk traditions. Rather the sagas were a critical element of national self-consciousness, cultural artifacts upon which vital comparisons of the relative worth of a people could be based. The underlying issue of status can be perceived throughout Nordal's writings, as for example in the opening statement to his essay, "Continuity in Icelandic Literature" (Samhengið í Íslenzkum bókmentum):

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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. (*Íslenzk lestrarbók* ix)

This essay appeared as the introduction and principal commentary to *Íslenzk lestrarbók*, an anthology of Icelandic literature that was used in most Icelandic middle schools for decades. Such essays and their claims had a vast influence upon the people of the emerging Icelandic state. They also had a decisive influence upon the modern interpretation of the sagas and remain in many circles canonical presumptions of saga studies. The rub is that such views continue to inhibit one of the most exciting new areas of saga research—the comparative analysis of saga and society.

Considering the effect of nationalism upon the current tradition of family saga research⁵ leads to a concern extending beyond Iceland: the manner in which a dogmatically embedded belief system rooted in political expediency can stunt criticism in a whole field of study. Those who followed in the footsteps of the Icelandic nationalists, tracing the origin of the prose sagas to the epics and romances of continental Europe, have seen the importance of their position diminish as the need for nationalistic interpretation has faded.⁶ In its wake, we are beginning to see a more balanced body of criticism; one that treats the medieval texts in light of the island society that created and used them, rather than as products of a society in need of redefinition. Awareness of the indigenous aspects of the sagas, including the demands of the audience, is crucial to analysis of these texts as Preben Meulengracht Sorensen notes:

The background [for unity in Icelandic narrative tradition] can be sought in the social community of the Icelandic farm where the story may have been cultivated evening after evening for centuries. Here no special milieu sprang up as in cloisters and episcopal residences, or at the court of [the Norwegian king] Hákon Hákonarson in the thirteenth century. Icelandic saga tradition never became isolated from the common population. All were present in the listening audience, farmers and farmhands, women and men, learned people and illiterates. (*Saga og samfund* 123)

Icelandic nationalistic feelings ran high in the decades immediately preceding and following the attainment of full statehood in 1944. 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 II, which is why the readjustment 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 a cultural history that justified foreign dominance (Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*).

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, *The Use and Abuse of History*). Intuitively, the intellectuals and the academic leaders of developing metropolitan Reykjavík understood the call 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. As an extensive body of literature with stories about most of the major fjord and valley regions of the country, the family sagas offered the potential for redefinition. In part this is because they do not easily fit standard categorizations. Neither folktales nor epics, they are also thoroughly different from chronicles or romances. Rather, the sagas are a prose narration, the form of which is intimately linked to the decentralized island society of settled pastoralists that created them. The stories tell of quarrels erupting into

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violence, and of feuds being mediated through arbitration and through legal methods of dispute resolution on both regional and national levels.

Filled with intricate detail, the family sagas are a register of the basic values of medieval Iceland's conservative rural society. In particular, the stories center on personal crises, and unlike other contemporaneous medieval literatures, they offer a clear view of the "little" people of history. Through the Icelandic narratives we enter into the mentality of 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. Together the sagas portray the operation of normative codes and illuminate the choices faced by individuals to a degree unmatched by any body of medieval charters or cartularies.

Here then is a splendid body of texts for the study of literature and society (Sørensen, *Saga og samfund*, and J. L. Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*). The stumbling block is that a long-standing theoretical exclusion of the sagas from social and historical analysis remains partially in force. These exclusionary views were raised by the group of scholars, now known as the "Icelandic school." This urban group rose to prominence in the first half of the twentieth century and championed "bookprose," the belief that the saga was a late written invention rather than the product of an oral tradition. The intellectual roots of the Icelandic school can be traced to the ideas of the nineteenth-century German scholar Konrad Maurer. The concepts were then significantly reformulated by Björn M. Olsen, who in 1911 became the first professor of Icelandic language and literature at the new University of Iceland. The force, however, behind the bookprose was Sigurður Nordal.⁷ In 1921, Nordal succeeded Björn M. Olsen as professor, and under his guidance the movement achieved full international momentum in the 1960s and 1970s.

Nordal was a forceful leader with firm beliefs and his views about the sagas were strongly reinforced by the writings of his students and fellow Icelandic scholars such as Einar Ol Sveinsson and Jón Jóhannesson.⁸ Influenced by Nordal's views, these scholars wrote the critical introductions to the *Íslensk fornrit* saga editions. The first volume of this new series, *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* (1933), was edited by Nordal. From a philological point of view these editions are indisputably a crucial contribution to the study of the sagas, providing critics with excellent, standardized, and trustworthy texts. From the viewpoint of the study of literature and society, however, we can be more circumspect about the *fornrit* investigations. The major social or historical aspect within the often long introductions is the search for the anonymous authors of the medieval texts, a subjective enterprise that builds from one supposition to the next, creating a hierarchy of great authors and serving to establish a canon of texts.

This hierarchy and canon remain intact today. If we are to chart a successful new direction in the study of early Iceland and its texts, then we need to come to grips with the theories of the Icelandic school, especially with their prohibitions. Of particular importance is an understanding of the bookprose injunction against using the sagas as historical source material. Injunction is a strong term, but it is an accurate measure of the degree and the effect of the bookprose's "hands off" message to anyone with social/historical interests. Sigurður Nordal 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, surely with irony, but perhaps also with a touch of sarcasm, treats 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

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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. (*Historical Element* 14)

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 the private life of the majority of people. 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. 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 ignores 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.

But this distinction between fact and fiction, the one upon which the bookprosisists placed so much weight—wasn't it always a bit too simple? In other words, why would the bookprosisists 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 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 led in-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 LeFebvre, 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 article, we can nevertheless focus here on a crucial element: consideration of the political climate at a time when the bookprosisists' 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 latter part of the nineteenth century 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 Free State 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 Icelanders with one of the worst periods in Icelandic history, the last two decades of the eighteenth century. 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 in the era preceding *the* French revolution and continuing through 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.⁹

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It was in the years following this troubled period that the sagas began to play an expanded role in shaping an Icelandic national/political consciousness. Icelanders had earlier derived ethnic pride and cultural identity from the old stories, but in the decades following the French Revolution, the medieval texts assumed a new political meaning. As the nineteenth century advanced, the sagas provided documentation for a political self-awareness, one that combined cultural, governmental, and economic goals. Iceland's poverty, hardship, and decline continued well into the nineteenth century and stood in sharp contrast to the prosperous life depicted in the old texts. The sagas, which were read in manuscript, were becoming available in inexpensive editions in the nineteenth century. As Laxness notes, 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 period of the medieval Free State came to be called.¹⁰

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 Althing, 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 (Karlsson "Icelandic Nationalism" 81). 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. If Iceland was poor, it was 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 independent.

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 bookprostitutes in the 1930s. The division between the two groups, the traditionalists and the futurists, centered on different conceptions of the new Iceland. For the traditionalists, especially the early nineteenth-century group called *the fjölnismenn*, the new Iceland was to resemble the medieval past. It was conceived in a national romantic light that idealized Iceland's past freedom and medieval culture as witnessed by the sagas. For the futurists, the model was a new urban culture, with refined middle-class tastes and values. This division deepened in the debate over reestablishment of the Althing in the 1840s. The traditionalists argued not only for reestablishing the Althing at Thingvellir but also for investing it with many of the Althing's traditional features. The other group, led by Jón Sigurðsson, argued for Reykjavík as the seat of government. Sigurðsson and his colleagues looked to the future, foreseeing a modern parliament in an urban-centered society. The futurists won, but as they took control of the movement for independence, their vision for Iceland had to compete with that of the Danes.

In this climate, nationalism spilled over into analyses of the national treasure, the family sagas. The problem facing Icelandic intellectuals was how to lift the sagas from their

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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. (57)

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" (55).

Not only literary scholars among the bookprostitutes but also historians were stirred by Nordal's claims. Jon 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 of *Austfirðinga sögur* (The Sagas of the East Fjords), Jóhannesson wrote a critical analysis of *Hrafnkels saga*. This saga, affectionately called *Hrafnkatla*, was to become the bellwether of the new anti-historical view.¹¹ Referring to Nordal's study of the saga, titled also *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. (*Austfirðinga sögur*) xxxix-xl)

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 bookprostitutes' position. His two-volume history of Iceland remains a standard reference book for factual information about Iceland's governmental institutions, chronology, and events. There is in this book, however, almost no attempt to investigate private lives. In tracing the genealogy of institutions, Jóhannesson generally ignores the sociological bent of modern history. He 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.

But was Jón Jóhannesson aware of the limitations thrust upon him by adherence to the theories of his teachers? The answer, at least in his unguarded moments seems to be, yes, he was aware of problems. In 1986 Ulnas Kristjánsson recounted the following anecdote from his student days in the 1940s:

When Jon Jóhannesson, professor of history at the University of Iceland, was busily teaching me and Hermann Pálsson the legal history of the Alþingi, he made us carefully cross out all of Einar Arnórsson's references to the sagas on the grounds that they were untrustworthy sources.¹² And in 1956 On Jóhannesson published his own work on Iceland's early history in which he followed the same course and mentioned almost none of the events recounted in the *Íslendinga sögur* (family

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sagas), just as if they had never taken place. Yet, Jon Jóhannesson was far from being extreme in his views. Shortly after his history appeared, I asked him whether he believed that the sagas were pure fiction. "No, not at all," he answered, "I just don't know what to do with them."—And this is still the situation today. Icelandic historians treat the sagas as if they did not exist. ("The Roots of the Sagas" 187)

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. 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" (*Hrafnkatla* 55).

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 and saw the sagas as local history. 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" (*Norsk-Islandske kultur- og sprogforhold* 141). 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 Reykjavik. Halidór Laxness playfully touches on this element of division among Icelanders in *Atómstöðin t n* (*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" (58-59).

The bookprosists, and Nordal in particular, were at odds, culturally and politically, with both leftist radicals, such as Laxness, and Icelandic traditionalists." 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: "I am not a historian and it makes no difference to the history of Iceland whether *Hrafnkatla* is a reliable historical source or not" (5). 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. (57)

The bookprosists were able to take such a stand because, as part of a new urban milieu, they were moving apart culturally from the farmers. Many members of the Icelandic school were educated in Copenhagen, frequently moving back and forth between the Danish capital and Reykjavik. 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. Rather, 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

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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 (written by Icelanders) offered a historical past.

In Iceland's case, however, several significant 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 bookprostitists 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 separating 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. In addition to the information contained within the sagas, their past was amply documented in extant medieval historical writings such as *The Book of the Icelanders* and *The Book of Settlements* (*Landnámabók* and *Íslendingabók*).

Germany's defeat in World War I proved to be a turning point in Icelandic history. Although the Danes had remained neutral during the war, they saw an opportunity in 1918 to retrieve some of the Danish-speaking parts of Schleswig, which had been seized by Prussia following the Danish defeat in 1864. In advancing arguments for the self-determination of the Danish-speaking population of Schleswig, the Danes could hardly deny Icelandic aspirations. In 1918 Denmark granted Iceland the status of union, with the result that Iceland gained complete internal autonomy. Under this arrangement the Danish king remained head of state and the island's foreign affairs continued to be conducted by Copenhagen. Officially, the country became the Kingdom of Iceland (Konungsríkið Ísland) (Ólafur Jóhannesson, *Stjórnskipun Íslands* 34). The Act of Union of 1918 specified that either country could terminate the agreement after twenty-five years.

If not completely sovereign, the Icelanders had at least won a significant victory. No longer did they have to fight for legitimacy with an occupying power, and after 1918 there was a gradual but distinct shift in emphasis within Icelandic writings. Nationalistic arguments were now directed less at convincing the Danes that the country was ready to stand completely alone, than in reassuring the Icelanders themselves. To be sure, there was still considerable, and perhaps in some quarters even growing, anti-Danish feeling. The documents of the period, however, readily display a 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 cost, 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) was established only in 1929, that is after the external *siálfstæðisbaráttan* was over. The name of this new party was itself a play on two meanings: the independence of the state and the independence of the individual. This naming and the title of Laxness' major novel, *Sjálfstætt fólk* (*Independent People*), extolling the virtues of the nation and subjecting the nationalistic sentiment to sometimes bitter introspection, are just two among a flood of indications

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that after 1918 the struggle for independence became a highly personal matter – one of choice and adaption, 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 of 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. (*Íslensk alþýðumentun á 18 öld* 85)

To such yearnings for cultural maturity the Icelandic School provided tangible solutions. They did not create the environment of national redefinition of the desires and hopes that accompanied it, but they were prepared to make the most of the situation. The bookproseists stepped forward as 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 on-going process of state building.

And prestige was needed, since the Icelandic School chose a particularly challenging task. Unlike the charge that is often placed upon academics in emerging nations, the bookproseists were 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 that the oral past of northern peoples being preserved amidst the noble farmers of the most backward and isolated part of Scandinavia? Such patronizing Scandinavian 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. And here genre distinctions acquired political interpretations. The Icelanders were prepared to share the king's sagas about Norway and Denmark as the Icelandic contribution to the Pan-Scandinavian past. Eddic and Skaldic poetry, with the 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 bókmentir*] 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 or entirely Icelandic thread. (*Íslensk lestrarbók*, xiv)

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

In many ways the world 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. In the process social and historical aspects of the literature were denied, a development that explains the prominence of the fact-fiction dichotomy in bookprose writings. Since the effects of bookprose are still very much with us today, the least that can be said is that much remains open to reconsideration.

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Notes

¹ I thank Prof. Christian Soe for helping me find this reference and referring me to his "Denmark and Deutschland," *Nordeuropa* 1.3 (1991).

² The Swedes and Norwegians also enter into Engels' observations. "The Swede despises the Dane as 'Germanized,' and degenerate, garrulous, and effeminate – the Norwegian looks at the Frenchified Swede and his condescending aristocracy and is glad that in Norway the same stupid peasant-economy still dominates as in the time of old Canute. He holds the Icelander even more *en canaille*."

³ I think the editors of the *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* for inviting me to take part in the section of essays on European nationalism.. This article has been adapted from a more anthropologically oriented paper prepared for a conference on society and sagas held at the University of Iceland in June 1991.

⁴ Both these groups were later to experience strong ethnic and nationalistic sentiment.

⁵ Some of the most perceptive writing on the background to Icelandic nationalism are Gunnar Karlsson's: "Icelandic Nationalism and the Inspiration of History" in *The Roots of Nationalism: Studies in Northern Europe*. Ed. Rosalind Mitchison (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers, 1980), pp. 77-89; "Spjall um romantic og þjóðernisstefnu," *Scandia* 53/1 (1987): 130-145. See also Óskar Halldórsson, "Íslenski skólinn of Hrafnkels saga," *Timarit máls og menningar* 39/3 (1978): 317-324, who early on commented on the Icelandic school's cultural politics (menningarpólitik); Árni Sigurjónsson, "Um hugmyndafræði Sigurðar Nordal," *Timarit máls og menningar* 45/1 (1984): 49-63, carries the inquiry further.

⁶ An example of bookprose carried to and extreme is Carol Clover, *The Medieval Saga* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), in which social factors are ignored and the origin of the sagas is attributed to the same classical and medieval intellectual impulses that created the French romances

⁷ *Timarit máls og menningar* 45/1 (1984) contains a series of wide-ranging articles devoted to commentary and analysis of Sigurður Nordal and his work: Vésteinn Ólason, "Bókmenntarýni Sigurðar Nordals," 5-18; Gunnar Karlsson, "Saga í þágu samtíðar," 19-27; Páll Skúlason, "Heimspækin og Sigurður Nordal," 29-36; Steinunn Eyjólfadóttir, "19 ára I vist hjá Sigurði Nordal," 37-47; Páll Valsson, "Leit að lífskilningi: Um Hel eftir Sigurð Nordal," 64-72; See also my "The Age of the Sturlungs," in *Continuity and Change: Political Institutions and Literary Monuments in the Middle Ages*, ed. Elisabeth Vestergaard (Odense: Odense University Press: 1986), 27-42.

⁸ Different aspects of the Icelandic school's bookprose concept, as well as views on the long debate in the first half of the twentieth century between bookprosists and freeprosists, believers in the oral origins of the sagas, have been reviewed by Theodore M. Andersson, *The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins: A Historical Survey*, and Marco Scovazzi, *La saga di Hrafnkell e il problema delle saghe islandesi*. See also Peter Hallberg, *The Icelandic Saga*, 49-69; Anne Holtmark, "Det nye syn på sagaene," 511-523; Jesse L. Byock, *Feud*, 7-10, and "Cultural Continuity, the Church, and the Concept of Independent Ages in Medieval Iceland," *Scandinavistik* 15/1 (1985): 1-14. Two collections of older articles pertinent to the debate are Walter Baetke, ed., *Die Isländersaga*; Else Mundal, ed., *Sagadebatt*. See also Else Mundal, "Til debatten om islendingasogene," *Mal og Minne* (1975): 105-126.

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⁹ Despite such actions, 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, to some extent trade policies instituted in Copenhagen continued to hinder Iceland's economic development until well into the nineteenth century.

¹⁰ *Gullöld Íslendinga* was the name of a popular history from the first decade of the twentieth century. Jón Aðils Jónsson, *Gullöld Íslendinga. Menning og lífshættir feðra vorra á söguöldinni. Alþýðufyrirlestrar með myndum*.

¹¹ It is worth noting that much of the bookprosisit use of *Hrafnkels saga* in its argumentation has an element of the "straw man" about it, since this particular saga is one of the few tales of Icelandic feud which cannot be taken as an example of the traditional saga narration. J. L. Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*, 201-204.

¹² Einar Arnórsson was an earlier professor at the University. Here Kristjánsson is referring to Arnórsson's, *Réttarsaga Alþingis* (1930), a legal history of the Althing.

¹³ The disputes, both cultural and political, erupted into a sometimes bitter series of newspaper articles and pamphlets in the 1920s. See Peter Hallberg, *Skaldens hus: Laxness dikning frdn Salka Valka till Gerpla* 29-31, and Arni Sigurjónsson, "Um hugmyndafræði," 55-57.

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