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Icelandic Writers

Edited by
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This period was politically the most volatile for Iceland since the Reformation. The movement for independence proceeded slowly yet steadily throughout these hundred years, with the granting of limited home rule in 1874, the achievement of sovereign, independent status under the Danish Crown at the end of 1918, and the declaration of the Republic of Iceland on 17 June 1944. Except for labor unrest during the 1930s and the stationing of British and American troops in Iceland during World War II to prevent a Nazi German occupation with horrific consequences for Allied merchant convoys, this transition was peaceful.

In cultural and economic terms, Iceland made a transition from virtually medieval conditions to modern affluence in little more than a century. The apparatus of modernity–with concern for economic and social conditions, natural resources, health, and other ingredients of contemporary society–is in part a legacy from the "Fjölnismenn," who published articles on some of these topics, and in part because of Jón Sigurðsson *forseti* and other pragmatists whose agitation for sovereignty led to home rule with budgetary autonomy.

Rising affluence and, above all, a compelling curiosity led more Icelanders to travel abroad from the mid nineteenth century onward. A sojourn in Copenhagen was virtually obligatory, especially for Icelandic university students (until establishment of the University of Iceland in 1911), but no longer the sole destination for Icelandic poets and novelists. Einar Benediktsson, for example, was as nationalistic in his poetry of the landscape and life of Iceland as any Icelandic poet of his time: titles of his poems include "Íslandsljóð" (Poem for Iceland), "Á Njálsbúð" (At the Booth of Njáll), and "Minni Íslands" (Remembrance of Iceland). The anthology that records these poems–*Úrvalsljóð* (Selected Poems, 1940)–also includes such non-Icelandic topics in verse as "Kvöld í Róm" (Evening in Rome), "Kirkjan í Milano" (The Church in Milan), and "Spánarvín" (Spanish Wine), the opening lines of which are

> Háborgin Spánar rís stórleit og stök
> Yfir stormkaldri, víðri hæðaslóð.
> Við jökulfaldanna línhvítu lök
> Ber hún landsins dýrasta, heitasta blóð.
>
> (The high city of Spain looms roughhewn and lone
> Over a wide and storm-cold plateau.
> In glacial dress of linen white
> It bears the land's dearest, hottest blood.)

Two significant migrations of Icelanders occurred in the modern era. One was the emigration, from 1875 onward, of thousands of Icelanders–perhaps 20 percent of the population–in response to volcanic activity, severe weather, and want in the old country. As a result, net population growth in Iceland stagnated during the 1870s and even declined in the following decade before recovering a steady increase. The destination of most emigrants from Iceland was Manitoba, which today still has the largest ethnic Icelandic community outside of Iceland and which long sustained Icelandic-language newspapers, book production, and schooling. The second great migration was internal and marked a demographic revolution on the Icelandic landscape. This population shift, Stefán Einarsson notes, was largely a function of an improved fishing fleet, which could venture farther out to exploit deep-sea stocks: "Með þessum framförum við sjóinn fara bændur og sveitamenn að streyma til sjávarþorpanna" (With these developments at sea, farmers and rural people began to stream to the fishing villages). During the first two decades of the twentieth century, the population distribution changed from 80 percent rural and 20 percent village to fewer than 60 percent rural and more than 40 percent urban or village. Even more dramatic was the steady influx of Icelanders from coastal villages and farmsteads into the capital, Reykjavík, and its environs to seek employment and improvement. At its incorporation in 1786, according to *Hagskinna,* Reykjavík was a village of fewer than 200, and it still had fewer than 7,000 residents at the beginning of the twentieth century. Its population increased exponentially throughout the twentieth century to total more than 100,000 at the dawn of the twenty-first. By the end of the century and the millennium, the capital region was home to more than half of the population of some 283,000.

The settlement in Manitoba and other locations in North America produced important Icelandic-language poets, Stephan G. Stephansson and Jakobína Johnson among them, and several of these authors are represented in this volume. After more than a century in the multiethnic province of Manitoba, the Icelandic language has somewhat dissipated in strength, although active and proud Icelandic institutions remain, including an impressive book collection in the University of Manitoba Libraries.

The transformation of Iceland from a mainly rural to a chiefly urban society, with the fundamental contrasts that mark off a rural and frugal past from the modern, metropolitan materialism of Europe and North America, is one of the great tensions that Icelandic literature, particularly fiction, portrays. Other tensions include the continuing presence, under treaty, of a North Atlantic Treaty Organization base on the island; the incessant Icelandic desire to travel outside of Iceland; and the dominance of English-language media in the West. With urban modernism, many of the ills as well as the benefits of affluent society have come to Iceland. Icelandic authors have portrayed these societal

transformations unstintingly, and the literary movements of realism, neo-Romanticism, and symbolism have served as fitting vehicles to convey the unease of a modern, European but remarkably distinct nation where much has changed quickly in a short time.

Modern Icelandic Writers and the Scope of This Volume

This volume of the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* focuses on creators of the literature–chiefly poetry and fictional prose, but also theater–of Iceland from the Romantic movement onward. In so doing, the entries inevitably refer to the history and social conditions of Iceland during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The minuscule population of Iceland has, from the Middle Ages onward, offered an astonishing variety of literary production, perhaps never more so than when internal and external influences were concurrently active. Several literary genres and their authors, though alluded to in the entries or in the introduction, are outside the scope of this volume. The folk literature compiled by Jón Arnason, particularly his *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og æfintýri* (Icelandic Folk Tales and Fairy Tales, 1862–1864), served as an influential source for literary authors. The writing of *rímur,* which had arisen in the late Middle Ages, increased in popularity until the early twentieth century, although Jónas Hallgrímsson, writing in the fourth decade of the nineteenth century, was unsparing in his criticism of them. Genealogy, biography, translation, and travel literature increasingly left their marks on the literary landscape and on Icelanders' perception of their country and the world beyond it.

The entries for writers selected for inclusion in this volume demonstrate the development of Icelandic literature from Romanticism through realism and into the neo-Romanticism, symbolism, and other, Icelandic modernisms of the twentieth century. These Icelandic literary expressions include the predominance, during much of the twentieth century, of novels with themes deriving from Icelandic history and particularly from the *sveit* (Icelandic countryside), considerable experimentation with the short story, and a spectrum of developments in poetry.

In a large sense, realism in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Icelandic novels has endeavored to explain modern Icelandic existence by relying on elements–Icelandic history and the ethos of Icelandic country living–that resonate unambiguously for the population of the island. Authors such as Halldór Laxness, Gunnar Gunnarsson, and Jón Trausti have been particularly effective in cementing ties to Icelandic history and language through historical novels and *sveitasögur* (rural novels). Ólafur Jóhann Sigurðsson is one among many Icelandic writers whose prose has drawn inspiration from the attraction of Icelandic nature in opposition to the more unaesthetic effects of modern, mechanized development. Although modern Icelandic novelists have developed an absolutely contemporary, supple Icelandic idiom for their work, many of the rural novels have played, in modern and turbulent times, a role similar to that of the Icelandic family sagas in the culturally rich but socially volatile Commonwealth Era of Iceland during the High Middle Ages. Each form attempts to describe contemporary society through narratives that are essentially realistic. The narratives reflect not only difficult, often tragic, personal circumstances but also the backdrop of insidious societal changes. As Iceland adjusted to its increasing urbanization in the second half of the twentieth century, younger Icelandic novelists found in cityscapes, the inner mind, and the world beyond Iceland a rich assortment of settings for their intrinsically Icelandic narratives.

Alongside the novel, the modern Icelandic short story has had a rich life of its own. Its first practitioners in the nineteenth century included Romantic poet Jónas Hallgrímsson, and virtually every Icelandic writer of fiction has since contributed to this genre, often with whole volumes at a time. As Ástráður Eysteinsson and Þorvaldur Eysteinsson have pointed out in their "Modern Literature" in *Iceland: The Republic* (1994), the short story became, earlier than the novel, a chosen medium for examining the modern world. Women writers such as Hulda and Fríða Á. Sigurðardóttir have been important contributors to the genre, which has assessed frequently the feminine condition in the Icelandic context.

The poetry of the twentieth century has undergone several struggles involving the use of meter and imagery. *Fornyrðislag* and other traditional meters of Old Icelandic were still the standard in the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. Snorri Hjartarson, whose poetry spanned much of the latter half of the twentieth century, was exemplary of modern Icelandic poets who respected both traditional form and the imperative of modernism. Steinn Steinarr and later the "atómskáld" (atom poets) were both controversial and innovative in features of style and content. However, a certain fidelity to the heritage of Icelandic prosody and language seems to have persisted among serious Icelandic poets. This fidelity is in good measure a transmission from such poets as Jónas Hallgrímsson, Matthías Jochumsson, Hulda, and Einar Benediktsson, all distinct voices in the cultural awakening that accompanied the rise of Icelandic nationalism in the nineteenth century. Yet, Jónas Hallgrímsson himself wrote the first known sonnet in Icelandic, and prominent Icelandic poets since Jónas have not been shy about experimentation.

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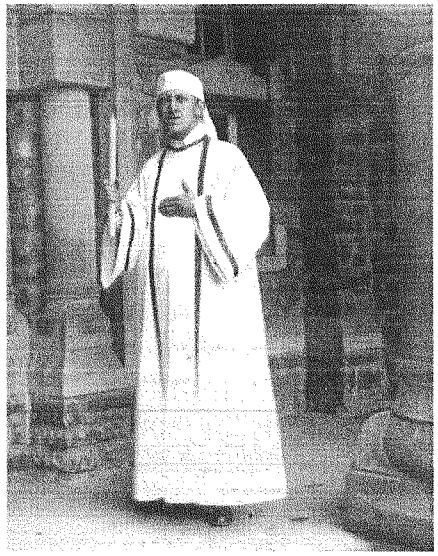
Voltaire, *Birtingur* (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1945);
Gunnar Gunnarsson, *Frá blindhúsum* (Reykjavík: Landnáma, 1948);
Gunnar Gunnarsson, *Vikivaki* (Reykjavík: Landnáma, 1948);
Ernest Hemingway, *Veisla í farángrinum* (Akureyri: Prentverk Odds Björnssonar, 1966).

Halldór Laxness is both an international author and a thoroughly Icelandic author. He wrote almost exclusively in Icelandic, took his subject matter from the realities of Icelandic society and history, and produced a body of work deeply rooted in the Icelandic epic tradition. At the same time, his work has universal appeal. "Heimurinn er einmitt hér, á Óseyri við Axlarfjörð" (The world is right here, at Óseyri in Axlarfjörður), he remarks in one of his first novels, *Salka Valka* (Salka Valka, 1931, 1932; translated from Danish into English as *Salka Valka: A Novel of Iceland,* 1936), which takes place in a poverty-stricken fishing village in one of the most remote areas of the country near the Arctic Circle. A major theme in the work of Halldór Laxness is the conflict of nationality–how to belong to one's own country and the whole world at the same time.

Sigríður Halldórsdóttir and Guðjón Helgason, Halldór Laxness's parents (Collection of the family of Halldór Laxness; from Ólafur Ragnarsson and Valgerður Benediktsdóttir, eds., Lífsmyndir skálds: æviferill Halldórs Laxness í myndum og máli, *1992; Suzzallo Library, University of Washington)*

Halldór Laxness was extraordinarily prolific and versatile as a writer. During his long career he published more than sixty books, representing many genres–novels, short stories, poetry, plays, and autobiographical sketches and memoirs. He was no less productive as a cultural commentator and wrote many



Halldór Laxness in his baptism clothes on 6 January 1923 at the Benedictine monastery St. Maurice de Clervaux, Luxembourg, where he wrote his novel Undir Helgahnúk *(1924), about two Icelanders who become friends while studying in Copenhagen (Collection of the family of Halldór Laxness; from Ólafur Ragnarsson and Valgerður Benediktsdóttir, eds.,* Lífsmyndir skálds: æviferill Halldórs Laxness í myndum og máli, *1992; Suzzallo Library, University of Washington)*

published in 1964, Halldór calls *Barn náttúrunnar* his best book, because it preserves the sounds of childhood. It was his farewell to this period of his life.

Without waiting for his novel to come out, Halldór sailed to Copenhagen in the summer of 1919. There he rented a room and put his calling card on the door: "Halldór frá Laxnesi. Poëta." This first trip abroad, which lasted less than a year, is described in the third volume of his memoirs, *Úngur eg var* (Young Was I, 1976). Immersing himself in literature, philosophy, and religious questions, he was captivated by the Swedish modernist August Strindberg and by the Chinese mystic Lao-tzu.

About this time several Icelandic writers were making names for themselves in Denmark, writing in Danish. They included Jóhann Sigurjónsson, Guðmundur Kamban, and Gunnar Gunnarsson, all born in the 1880s. Halldór perhaps aspired to joining the group, for he soon tried his hand at writing short stories in Danish. Three of them were published in the respected newspaper *Berlingske Tidende:* "Den tusindaarige Islænding" (The Thousand-Year Icelander, 19 October 1919), "Thordur i Kalfakot" (Thordur at Kalfakot, 20 February 1920), and "Digteren og Zeus" (The Poet and Zeus, 2 May 1920). The stories were later published in Icelandic in the author's first volume of short stories, *Nokkrar sögur* (A Few Stories, 1923). As its title suggests, "Den tusindaarige Islænding" depicts the archetypal Icelander and his struggle with the forces of nature. The protagonist is Helgi, a farmhand who lives by the heroic code of the Icelandic sagas and believes in the pagan gods. His opposite is the cosmopolitan artist Heiðbæs, who comes to the farm to paint. When a volcano erupts following a massive earthquake, the frightened artist is intent on fleeing, while Helgi fearlessly rushes out to rescue the livestock. The young woman, who is being courted by both men, no longer has any doubt about which one to choose. "Thordur i Kalfakot" is about a poor farmer who struggles to survive on a remote patch of barren land and turns to rustling sheep to feed his starving children. Unlike the thousand-year Icelander, Thordur is defeated not only by the forces of nature but also by a hostile society. The story is Halldór's first to portray the Icelandic subsistence farmer, a subject that he wrestled with for decades. "Digteren og Zeus" concerns an Icelandic poet living abroad and his most trusted friend, a dog named Zeus. In his preface to the second edition of *Nokkrar sögur,* published in the collection *Pættir* (Stories, 1954), Halldór dismisses these early stories, saying that in those days he could write a whole story in the length of time it would now take him to write one sentence, for he had not yet learned the art of striking out words.

When Halldór returned to Iceland early in the summer of 1920, he seems to have already given up the idea of writing in Danish. The scholar and poet Sigurður Nordal was being hailed for his story "Hel" (The Goddess of Death), which had appeared the previous year in *Fornar ástir* (Ancient Passions), a collection of Nordal's short stories. Written in a fragmentary, lyrical prose style, the story concerns a young man who ventures out into the world to find himself but then returns home as an old man to face his death. Nordal's poetic use of language in "Hel" apparently demonstrated to the young writer new possibilities. In paying tribute to Nordal's literary genius many years later, he acknowledges that "Hel" was a turning point for him—for a young Icelander to think of writing in Danish suddenly seemed absurd when there was a chance of writing such fine Icelandic.

The year following Halldór's return from Denmark in 1920 is the subject of the fourth and last volume of his memoirs, *Grikklandsárið* (The Year in Greece,

1980)—a somewhat misleading title, as Halldór had never gone to Greece but had only dreamed of doing so. For most of this time he lived at home with his family at Laxnes in addition to pursuing his studies and frequenting the coffeehouses in Reykjavík. In the autumn he accepted a position as a tutor on a farm in Hornafjörður in southeastern Iceland, in those days one of the most isolated regions of the country. The children of the household turned out to be generally older than he was, and he had ample time for reading and writing. While there he worked on a long novel titled "Salt jarðar" (The Salt of the Earth), but he never finished it, and the manuscript is now lost.

In the autumn of 1921 Halldór again set out to see the world, traveling around Europe and spending most of his time in Germany and Austria. At Innsbruck he wrote a philosophical book titled "Rauða kverið" (The Red Booklet), written in red ink and clearly influenced by Strindberg. The book was not published until several decades later when most of it was incorporated into *Heiman eg fór.* Evidently, Halldór's ultimate destination on this trip was America, perhaps with the idea of settling there. To that end he applied to the Canadian authorities for a permit to reside in Saskatchewan, where he intended to work on a relative's farm. Apparently his application was either lost or processed too late, for when Halldór arrived in New York in the spring of 1922, he was promptly sent back to Europe on the same ship that brought him. During the return voyage he wrote the short story "Júdít Lvoff," published in *Nokkrar sögur.* In his preface to the second edition in *Pættir,* he says that the story shows a clear dovetailing of certain characteristics that stayed with him over time. He is obviously referring to the conflict between Iceland and the outside world, the Icelander and the cosmopolitan. The story is narrated by a writer who, as an Icelander and a man of the world, mediates between these two realms. The title character is a wild and exotic young Russian woman who comes to Iceland and seduces an innocent, hardworking farmer's son. She leaves the country, promising to come back, but then marries a rich American businessman and settles in America. In this story Iceland is poor and primitive, but genuine and true. Foreign countries are superficial, treacherous, and rich. In the end the American businessman offers to introduce the writer to his friends in Hollywood.

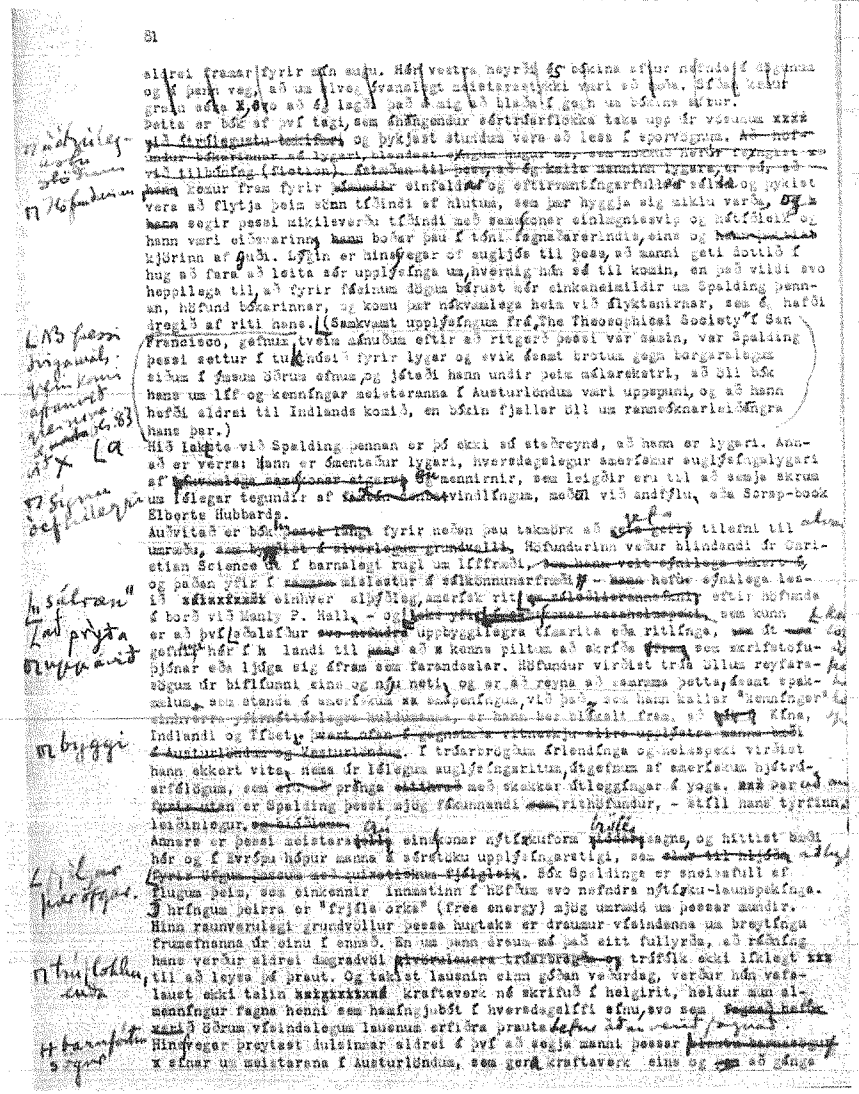
Back in Europe, Halldór stayed several months in Denmark, mainly on the island of Bornholm. There he met a young Icelandic woman, Málfríður Jónsdóttir, and in April 1923 had a child, María Halldórsdóttir. The news that he was to become a father came as a great shock to Halldór and was one of the factors in his decision to enter a monastery. With the help of the Danish writer and Catholic Johannes Jørgensen, he was admitted to the Benedictine monastery of St. Maurice de Clervaux in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg toward the end of 1922. In January 1923 he was baptized a Catholic by the bishop of Luxembourg and adopted the name of the Irish martyr Kilian (missionary bishop beheaded at Würzburg, circa 689). Halldór then called himself Halldór Kiljan Laxness, publishing his books under this name until 1963, when he dropped the Kiljan moniker.

In the monastery Halldór kept a diary, which he published sixty-five years later, along with a prologue and an epilogue, as *Dagar hjá múnkum* (Days with Monks, 1987), his final book. In the diary he describes his daily activities, which consisted of reading and writing, regular prayers, and theological discussions with the masters of the novices. The Gregorian chants impressed him most of all.

In the monastery Halldór wrote the novel *Undir Helgahnúk* (Under the Holy Mountain, 1924), which tells the story of Snjólfur and Kjartan, two Icelanders who become friends while studying in Copenhagen. Snjólfur marries an American widow and moves with her to Canada, whereas Kjartan returns to Iceland and becomes a country parson after marrying an Icelandic woman who has grown up in Copenhagen. Many years later, after the death of his wife, Snjólfur moves back to Iceland with his young daughter, Áslaug, and takes up farming the land at Kjartan's parsonage. Kjartan's wife, a sensitive, artistic woman who can no longer bear the isolation of rural life, commits suicide. The story then shifts to Adi, Kjartan's son, who has his mother's artistic bent as well as a longing to see the world and become a great man, and to Áslaug, who feels that she has been taken away from a beautiful country and brought to "þetta ljóta land . . . á öfugum stað á jörðinni" (this ugly country . . . on the wrong side of the earth).

In October 1923 Halldór left the monastery, committed to becoming a Catholic theologian and devoting his life to God. After a sojourn in England, where he stayed for some months in Jesuit and Carthusian monasteries, he returned to Iceland early in 1924. "Það var gott að koma aftur heim" (It was good to come back home), he concludes in *Dagar hjá múnkum.*

In England, Halldór started a draft of *Heiman eg fór,* which he finished in Iceland in 1924 but did not publish until 1952. Subtitled *Sjálfsmynd æskumanns* (A Self-Portrait of a Young Man), a pointed allusion to James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), one of the pioneering works of European modernism, *Heiman eg fór* has clear autobiographical elements. Halldór rejects all that is traditional and preaches modern times. Icelanders would be better off,



Corrected typescript for Halldór Laxness's controversial collection Alþýðubókin *(1929), radical socialist essays written near the end of his stay in California from 1927 to 1929 (from Ólafur Ragnarsson,* Halldór Laxness: líf í skáldskap, *2002; Fiske Icelandic Collection, John M. Olin Library, Cornell University)*

Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír was a breakthrough for Halldór Laxness as an author, and along with Þórbergur Þórðarson's *Bréf til Láru,* the novel is regarded as the harbinger of modernism in Icelandic literature. Yet, in its day it received mixed reviews, and its author was accused of writing everything from rubbish to obscenity. A different opinion was expressed by the critic Kristján Albertsson in his laudatory review in the periodical *Vaka* in 1927, and his opening words have become proverbial in Icelandic literature: "Loksins, loksins, tilkomumikið skáldverk sem rís eins og hamraborg upp úr flatnesku íslenzkrar ljóða–og sagnagerðar síðustu ára! Ísland hefur eignast nýtt stórskáld–" (At last, at last, an impressive literary work that rises up like a monolith from the flatness of Icelandic poetry and fiction of recent years! Iceland has gained a new bard–).

In the epilogue to the second edition of *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* in 1948, Halldór noted that when he finished the novel, he had written his way through Christian dogma and let go of it. Shortly after returning in 1926, he spent six months in the eastern part of Iceland collecting material for another book because he wanted to "re-do" Steinn Elliði in the guise of an Icelandic farmer, as he says in *Skáldatími.* He also published a series of critical newspaper articles about poverty in the rural areas of Iceland. They included "Raflýsing sveitanna" (The Electrification of Rural Areas), in which he argues that electricity could be brought to an entire district for the money that is wasted on one good-for-nothing scoundrel of a parson.

With *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* Halldór was also finished with Europe and made plans for another trip to America. In May 1927 he again crossed the Atlantic, this time sailing from Glasgow to Montreal. That summer he stayed among Icelandic Canadians in Manitoba, visiting Icelandic settlements, delivering lectures, and reading from his works. This period produced one of his most celebrated short stories, "Nýja Ísland" (translated as "New Iceland" in *Seven Icelandic Short Stories,* 1960), which first appeared in the Icelandic Canadian newspaper *Heimskringla* on 19 October 1927 and was later reprinted in the short-story collection *Fótatak manna: sjö þættir* (People's Footsteps: Seven Stories, 1933). It tells the story of an Icelandic farmer who leaves his farm in Iceland with his wife and four children and settles in New Iceland. However, his dream of a better life is soon shattered: he is forced to take a backbreaking job digging ditches; two of his children die in an epidemic; the land proves to be too poor to cultivate; and the family is split apart. The story, a variation on the theme of the Icelandic subsistence farmer, was met with disapproval by Icelandic Canadians, who did not appreciate being described as destitute pioneers.

The real purpose of Halldór's trip to America was to make his way to Los Angeles, the center of the motion-picture industry, which became his destination in late fall of 1927. In a letter written to a friend shortly after his arrival, he described his surroundings this way: "Hollywood. Goldwin Studios. Laski Studios. Universal Film. The Movies. Movie actors. Movie Stars. The movie game." He went on to say that he had assumed the name Hall d'Or "in movie circles" and was finishing an essay on "cinematography and creative art," which he intended to submit to the ten largest newspapers in the world. This essay was never published, however, and nothing came of the lecture he was contemplating "on the Spirit of the Nordic Classics" and "the dramatic value of the Sagas." Around the same time Halldór drafted script treatments in English for two screenplays–"Kari Karan," from his Danish short story "Digteren og Zeus" of 1920, and "Woman in Pants" or "The Icelandic Whip," which later became the foundation for his novel *Salka Valka.* With his exotic descriptions of life in the Far North, Halldór intended to make his mark in Hollywood, much as Icelandic writers had done in Denmark. According to the treatment for "Kari Karan," the characters are "rude, naive and primitive," driven by "uncultivated passions," and the dog Zeus is renamed "Viking." For a time M-G-M seemed interested in a movie about Salka Valka, the "woman in pants," but the project never materialized.

In California, Halldór became a socialist, not so much from reading socialist tracts as from watching the homeless in the parks, as he says in *Alþýðubókin* (The People's Book, 1929), a collection of radical essays on social and cultural issues that he wrote near the end of his stay. He took an interest in the sociological novel and devoured the works of Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, and Upton Sinclair. He even took the initiative of writing to Sinclair, and a friendship developed, which Halldór recounts in detail in *Skáldatími.* But it was the work of Ernest Hemingway that impressed Halldór most, especially the author's unfailing ability to whet the concept of love with the concept of death, as he says in the preface to his translation of *A Farewell to Arms* (*Vopnin kvödd,* 1941).

For a time, Halldór mulled over the possibility of writing in English, and his letters home about his future plans reveal a deep conflict between Icelandic and English, the novel and the movie. After his motion-picture projects fell through, Halldór tried to market *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* in the United States and spent much time translating it into English, with the help of his friend Magnús Á. Árnason, an artist living in San Francisco.

Halldór Laxness and his first wife, Ingibjörg Einarsdóttir, 1935 (photograph by Leikfelag Reykjavikur; from Ólafur Ragnarsson and Valgerður Benediktsdóttir, eds., Lífsmyndir skálds: æviferill Halldórs Laxness í myndum og máli, *1992; Suzzallo Library, University of Washington)*

her daughter and takes them in, a move that gains him Sigurlína's domestic and sexual services. But it is the daughter he desires, and after an attempt to rape her, he disappears, leaving Sigurlína pregnant. Salka Valka rebels by renouncing her sex: "Ég vil ekki sjá að vera stelpa. Ég skal aldrei verða kvenmaður eins og hún mamma" (I won't be a girl, I will never, never become a woman–like Mother), she says to her friend Arnaldur, an educated young man who has taught her to read. To make the point, she wears trousers and bobs her hair. Sigurlína, on the other hand, finds refuge in the Salvation Army, especially in the hymn "O Thou Pure Vine," which becomes her talisman until she finally drowns herself.

Arnaldur goes away to Reykjavík to study but returns many years later as a socialist agitator. By now Salka Valka is financially independent–she owns a cottage and has a share in a fishing boat. A brief but passionate love affair develops between them, and Salka Valka provides the impoverished Arnaldur with food and spending money. He succeeds in organizing a strike in the village and in driving out the merchant, but he is too weak-willed to see the revolution through. Steinþór returns, now rich, after a stay in America, the land of Arnaldur's dreams. When Arnaldur gets his chance to go to California, Salka Valka gives him all her money for the journey. The story ends as he sails away while she watches from the shore, alone among the winter birds, a symbol of Iceland and nature.

The initial reaction to *Salka Valka* was ambivalence, even among socialists, who felt that it was inconsistent with a key doctrine of social realism–to create heroic literature for the working class. One of Iceland's leading socialists, Einar Olgeirsson, complained that

Halldór's depiction of the labor movement was too much of a caricature. In his article "Skáld á leið til sósíalismans" (Writers on Their Way to Socialism), published in the periodical *Réttur* in 1932, Einar took Halldór to task for showing only poverty, not the power of the people to overcome it, and dismissed any possibility for the novel to become the heroic epic of the Icelandic working class.

Nevertheless, to find descriptions of the lower classes in Icelandic literature was a rarity at the time, as Halldór points out in a 1938 essay commemorating the writer Einar Kvaran–later reprinted in *Vettvángur dagsins* (The Day's Arena, 1942). In Halldór's view, Kvaran's most significant contribution as a novelist was the emphasis he placed on the value of the human. When Kvaran was young, Halldór explains, to go so far as to turn wretches and paupers into the heroes of a novel was a revolutionary position in fiction. The authors of the Icelandic sagas, Halldór says, took no notice of the common people–the downtrodden are not mentioned, and human worth is measured in heroic exploits. In contrast, Einar Kvaran's best characters are poor and defenseless, indicating his deep conviction that the human being is by nature a poor and helpless creature in the world.

Halldór's next novel, *Sjálfstætt fólk,* originally published in two volumes with the subtitle *Hetjusaga* (A Heroic Tale), is an ironic answer to both the socialists' demand for heroic literature for the working class and the heroic ideal of the Icelandic saga tradition. The novel takes place in the first part of the twentieth century among small farmers on the remote and barren moors in the east, an area of the country that most Icelanders had abandoned in the migration period. Like *Markens grøde* (The Growth of the Soil), Knut Hamsun's idyllic novel of 1917 to which *Sjálfstætt fólk* is to some extent a response, the story centers on a pioneer trying to work his land. Bjartur–short for Guðbjartur and meaning "bright" or "fair"–has managed to purchase a small patch of moorland from the bailiff after working for him eighteen years as a farmhand. The property has been abandoned for more than a century and reputedly carries a curse, which Bjartur scorns. The moldering ruin of the old farmstead has been used as winter quarters for sheep and is thus dubbed "Veturhús" (Winterhouses). Bjartur rebuilds it from sod and rock and renames it "Sumarhús" (Summerhouses). Now an independent man, he moves in with his new bride, Rósa (who is pregnant by the bailiff's son), and his dog, a horse, and twenty-five sheep.

Fanatically devoted to his sheep, Bjartur puts their welfare above all else, even people. This "independent" life is too much for Rósa–she dies in childbirth, alone in the cold hut in midwinter while Bjartur is off in the mountains searching for a missing sheep. He returns to find that the dog has kept alive Rósa's infant daughter, whom he names Ásta Sóllilja (literally, Beloved Sun Lily) and rears as his own child. Bjartur soon acquires a second wife, Finna, accompanied by her elderly mother, Hallbera. Over the years Finna gives birth to three sons who live beyond infancy. Verging on starvation, the household ekes out an existence, despite Bjartur's tyranny as a harsh taskmaster who requires everyone to be as independent as he is. He even slaughters the milk cow so that the small store of hay available will go to his precious sheep–an act that so traumatizes Finna that she languishes and dies.

Gradually Bjartur's actions turn all his children against him, and he loses them one by one. Ásta Sóllilja is the one he loves most, and yet he sends her packing when she becomes pregnant by her tubercular tutor. To avenge his mother's death, the oldest son kills his father's sheep and then vanishes in a blizzard. The youngest son is sent to America to be brought up by his maternal uncles and there becomes a singer. When the middle son tells his father that he, too, wants to go to America to make something of himself in the world rather than take over the property as his father wishes, Bjartur snorts, "Ég vil ekki heyra neitt um neinn helvítis heim, þykist þú vera að tala um einhvern heim? Hvað er heimur? Þetta er heimurinn, heimurinn hann er hér, Sumarhús, jörðin mín, það er heimurinn" (What the devil do you think you know about any damned world? What is a world? This is a world, the world is here, Summerhouses, my land, my farm is the world)–words that recall a similar remark about the universality of the fishing village in *Salka Valka.* When the story draws to a close, Bjartur is bankrupted by a collapse in livestock prices and unable to repay a bank loan that he had intended to use for building a new house. His property is sold at auction, and as a result, the bailiff gets back his Winterhouses for a low price. Bjartur, however, clings fiercely to his ideal of independence. Instead of joining the laborers in the coastal village as his son has done, he chooses to work a new piece of land, this time a deserted plot farther inland on the heath. Before setting off, he goes to the village and finds his beloved Ásta Sóllilja, who, destitute and dying of consumption, is living alone with her two small children. He takes them with him, along with a horse, a dog, and old Hallbera, now in her nineties and complaining that "allir fá að deyja, nema ég" (everyone manages to die except me). As they make their way north like pilgrims, the scene takes on an almost mythic significance: "Þau voru einsog lángferðafólk sem tekur sig upp úr lélegum næturstað á heiði. Það var heiði lífsins" (They were like people on a long journey leaving a poor night-lodging on the heath. It was the heath of

Halldór's three novels of social realism from the Depression years stemmed from the contemporary realities of poverty and class division. In the next decade, Icelandic society was transformed by sweeping change, and his work took a new turn. With the occupation of Iceland by first British and then United States forces beginning in May 1940 and the establishment of a foreign military base, employment surged and economic conditions improved. In 1944 Iceland ended its union with Denmark and reestablished itself as a republic after almost seven centuries of foreign rule. These events generated intense debates among Icelanders about their national identity and their autonomy as a nation among other nations. In his renowned 1942 essay "Höfundurinn og verk hans" (The Writer and His Works), published in *Vettvángur dagsins,* Halldór says that the value of Iceland's literary heritage lies in its expression of the Zeitgeist of each era, with both national and universal significance. Citing examples from Iceland's literary canon, he argues that all good literature is both national and international–for the simple reason that people, especially nowadays, are no longer national but rather as international as the birds. A good book written in China is written for Iceland.

The essay shows Halldór's growing interest in an Icelandic literary heritage that he wants to bring closer to his own time in a kind of synthesis of the old and the new. With perhaps this aim, in the early 1940s he published his own editions of several Icelandic sagas with modern orthography, replacing the normalized (but archaic) spelling system. As he explains in the preface to his edition of *Laxdæla saga,* which appeared in 1941, his intention is to show readers that the language of the Icelandic sagas is essentially the same as the language the readers use themselves. This edition was censored by the authorities, and the Icelandic Parliament immediately passed a law that banned publication of the Old Icelandic texts with anything other than the normalized spelling. When Halldór forged ahead with an edition of *Hrafnkatla* in 1942, also with modern spelling, the Ministry of Justice brought charges against him. After protracted legal proceedings, Halldór was acquitted, and the orthography law was ruled a violation of a constitutional provision guaranteeing freedom of the press.

Although Halldór advocated standard modern spelling for the sagas, the spelling that he used in his fiction was far from standard. In the late 1930s he invented his own idiosyncratic spelling, which adhered more closely to pronunciation than the mandated system, and he used it in all his work thereafter, including republished versions of earlier works. This arcane orthography, which gives his works a distinctive and even strange look on the printed page, is a characteristic of his style that is lost in translation.

While he was publishing his editions of the sagas, Halldór was also at work on a lengthy article titled "Minnisgreinar um fornsögur" (Notes on the Sagas), published in *Sjálfsagðir hlutir* (Things Taken for Granted, 1946). In it he rejects the accepted view of the Icelandic sagas as historical accounts and argues that they are fictionalized accounts that succeed in bending history to the narrative truth of the works. He praises their objective, concise style, in which not a single word is superfluous, and concludes, directly contradicting his statements from the 1920s, that an Icelandic author cannot get along without the old books. Halldór's interest in Old Icelandic literature thus grew not merely from patriotic feeling but also out of his search for new narrative techniques.

In 1942 Halldór published *Sjö töframenn: þættir* (Seven Magicians), a collection of short stories written mainly in the 1930s except for "Temúdsjín snýr heim" (Temúdsjín Returns Home), which dates from 1941 and was Halldór's last short story for more than twenty years. Set in the Far East, the story is about Genghis Khan discovering Taoism and shows the first emergence of the mysticism of Lao-tzu and the *Tao Te Ching* (circa 206 B.C.–A.D. 220) that was to characterize all of Halldór's later works. In a 1942 essay, "Bókin um veginn" (The Book about the Way), published in *Sjálfsagðir hlutir,* Halldór discusses the abiding influence of the *Tao Te Ching* in his life and work. He also remarks on the stillness of Taoism that is exemplified in the simplicity of the sentences in the book, which he deems, in their musicality and directness, the most perfect in all of world literature. Halldór's deep interest in such diverse works as the *Tao Te Ching* and the Icelandic sagas is significant, for both are marked by detachment and objectivity in style, with the laconic speech of the sagas corresponding to the subtle aphorisms of Tao. From these complementary sources Halldór synthesized a highly creative style that typifies his subsequent fiction.

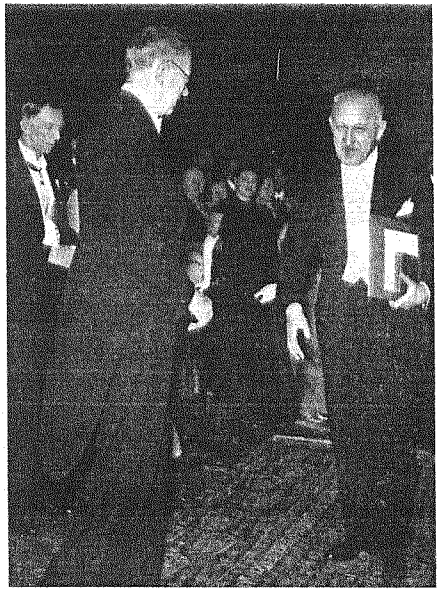
His next major work was the trilogy consisting of *Íslandsklukkan* (Iceland's Bell, 1943), *Hið ljósa man* (1944; The Fair Maiden, 1944), and *Eldur í Kaupinhafn* (Fire in Copenhagen, 1946), republished in one volume as *Íslandsklukkan* in 1952 (translated as *Iceland's Bell,* 2003). *Íslandsklukkan* is an historical novel, set in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, based on historical and legal records and written in the antiquated language of the period. It focuses upon three main characters: the poor farmer Jón Hreggviðsson, who is sentenced to death for killing the king's henchman; Arnas Arnæus, a figure modeled on the Icelandic scholar and manuscript collector Árni Magnússon; and Snæfríður Eydalín, daughter of the local magistrate and the sister-in-law of the bishop of Skálholt. Þingvellir, where the story begins and ends, is the focal point of events, and

other important settings include the bishopric at Skálholt and Copenhagen, places that are also important in Icelandic history.

Íslandsklukkan provides an accurate picture of the political and social conditions in Iceland during one of the most degrading periods in the history of the nation. It opens with a scene at Þingvellir, where the king's henchman has arrived to oversee the destruction of an ancient bell that has hung from the gable of the old courthouse as long as anyone can remember. Over the protests of an old man whose family has lived in the vicinity for generations, Jón Hreggviðsson is commanded to smash the venerable bell, which is then shipped to Denmark in pieces. Þingvellir is also the setting in which the henchman flogs Jón Hreggviðsson as punishment for composing sly verses that lampooned His Majesty while destroying the bell. Jón accompanies him home, and the following morning the henchman is found dead in the bogs.

To some extent Jón Hreggviðsson resembles Bjartur of *Sjálfstætt fólk: hetjusaga*–crusty, intrepid, clever at versifying, and enthralled by the saga heroes. The paths of Jón and Arnas cross when Arnas comes to Jón's poor cottage and discovers, in Jón's mother's bedstead, some sheets from a precious vellum manuscript of ancient poetry that he has been seeking for many years. Arnas realizes that his calling lies in sacrificing himself to rescue the old books from oblivion, which in his view embody the soul of Iceland, so he forsakes Snæfríður, the woman he loves, and marries a rich, elderly, crippled Danish widow. After Jón has been sentenced to death and is awaiting execution at Þingvellir, his mother walks to Skálholt and appeals to Snæfríður for help. Snæfríður manages to free Jón and sends him to Arnas in Copenhagen for protection, along with both a message telling Arnas that she understands his sacrifice and a ring as a token of her affection. Through Arnas's assistance, Jón is acquitted, and the corruption of Snæfríður's father, the magistrate, is exposed. For a time, Snæfríður and Arnas foresee a common future in their vision of the Promised Land, a motif that appears frequently in Halldór's works, but nothing comes of their dreams, and the novel ends apocalyptically with the great Copenhagen fire, which consumes Arnas's manuscripts. The only manuscript that escapes destruction is the one that once belonged to the poor old woman, Jón Hreggviðsson's mother.

In accord with Halldór's principle of artistic representation, formulated in an interview about the first two volumes of the trilogy in the newpaper *Þjóðviljinn* on 23 December 1944, the characters' thoughts and feelings are reflected in their speech and physical reactions, and the action does not take place "í sálarfylgsnum" (in the soul's hideaways). Although the narration itself is objective, Halldór makes use of literary allusions, parables, and aphorisms. The language is often highly lyrical, with descriptions of nature reflecting characters' mental and emotional states, especially those kindled by Snæfríður, whose beauty and worthiness have earned her the epithet Íslandssól (Iceland's Sun). Of the three protagonists, Snæfríður is the only one whose name bears no relation to that of the historical counterpart, in this case, Þórdís Jónsdóttir. Rather, she is named for the Snæfríður of Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla* who so bewitched Harald Fairhair that he neglected his kingdom. The novel also alludes to her as "hið ljósa man" (the fair maiden) of the Eddic poem "Hávamál" and describes her as a "huldukona" (hidden woman) out of folktales or a Valkyrie from heroic poetry. Like many other women in Halldór's works, Snæfríður has a remoteness that suggests she does not quite belong to society. In the end Snæfríður Íslandssól, dressed in black and riding a black horse, disappears into the landscape as a sublime symbol of Iceland.



Halldór Laxness receiving the Nobel Prize in literature, 10 December 1955 (from Peter Hallberg, Skaldens hus: Laxness' diktning från Salka Valka till Gerpla, *1956; Doe & Moffitt Libraries, University of California at Berkeley)*

Íslandsklukkan was a gift from the author to his nation at a turning point in its history. His stage adaptation of the novel, published in 1950 as *Snæfríður Íslandssól,* was one of three Icelandic plays that had their debut at the new National Theater (Þjóðleikhúsið) in Reykjavík when it opened in October of that year.

While Halldór was at work on *Íslandsklukkan,* he met Auður Sveinsdóttir, and they were married at Christmas in 1945. They moved into a new home near Gljúfrasteinn (which means Canyon Rock) in Mosfellssveit, close to his childhood home, a move that fulfilled Halldór's long-standing dream of building a house on this spot. He named the house for the nearby rock, and it was his home for the remainder of his life. Two daughters, Sigríður Halldórsdóttir and Guðný Halldórsdóttir, were born in 1951 and 1954, respectively.

When World War II ended, Iceland entered into an agreement with the United States permitting American forces to maintain the military base at Keflavík and to install radar stations around the country. Many Icelanders feared that this foreign presence would threaten the newfound independence of the nation, and the agreement precipitated heated protests over this "sale." One of the most influential opponents of the agreement was Halldór Laxness, who blasted it as treason in a series of articles that appeared in the fall of 1946 and were reprinted in 1950 in *Reisubókarkorn.* (A Travelogue).

The controversy inspired his 1948 novel *Atómstöðin* (translated as *The Atom Station,* 1961), the title of which refers to an occupied Iceland that harbors atomic weapons. A social and political satire with dark humor, ~~this work is the first of Halldór's novels written in the~~ first person. It is no coincidence that Ugla, the narrator and protagonist, is a young woman from the country who has come to Reykjavík to learn to play the organ. Thus, she represents the opposite of the urban corruption that she witnesses as a maid in a well-to-do bourgeois household, where the man of the house, an influential member of Parliament and the conservative party, hosts secret political meetings for planning the "sale" of the country. In contrast, the organist's house, where Ugla takes her lessons, is open to all of society's outsiders–artists, prostitutes, and assorted freaks with no political clout. The organist is the first of Halldór's characters to represent a mystic type that can be linked with Taoism. An altruist who sells his house to help a friend, he speaks in paradoxes, understands all and forgives all, and is broad-minded and unflappable. The novel ends with Ugla standing alone in the middle of town holding a bouquet of flowers from the organist's house. The flowers are important as a symbol of eternal life. (The novel was originally titled "Blómin ófeigu" [The Flowers Everlasting].)

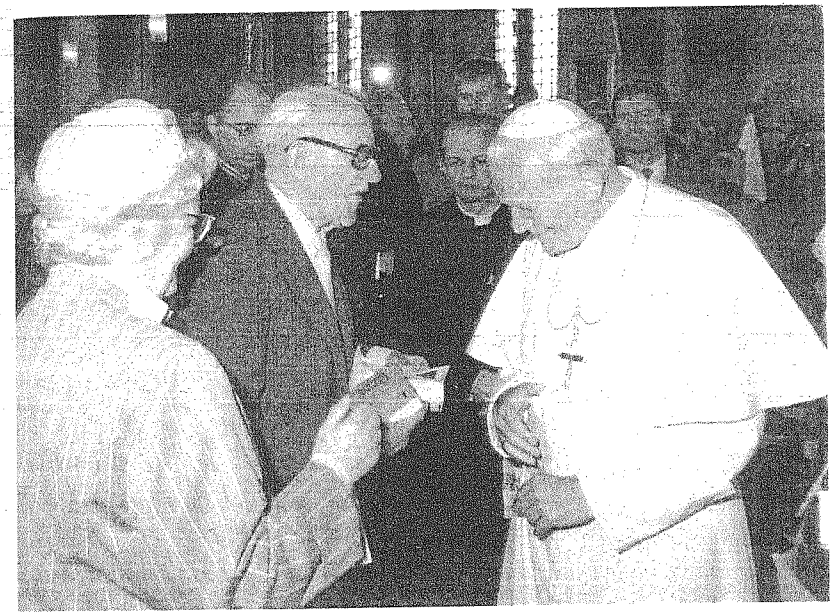
In his next novel, *Gerpla* (Heroica), published in 1952 (translated as *The Happy Warriors,* 1958), Halldór takes his material from the saga age of the tenth and eleventh centuries. Both the style and the plot are based upon the Old Icelandic sagas, in particular the anonymous *Fóstbræðra saga* (Saga of the Sworn Brothers) and *Ólafs saga helga* (Saga of Saint Olaf) by Snorri Sturluson. In a 1972 interview published in *Skeggræður gegnum tíðina* (Discussions through Time), Halldór said that his aim was to create an archaized work of art for modern readers, a work that deals with people who, down through the ages, have always sought some universal truth as their sovereign. In the same interview, Halldór revealed that he had planned to write *Gerpla* in modern Icelandic but then realized that it would be laughable to use modern language to write about the sphere of classic literature.

As the title indicates, the novel is about *garpar* (heroes). Like a scribe, the narrator constantly cites his sources, both written and oral, in telling the story of the sworn brothers Þormóður Bessason and Þorgeir Hávarsson. With grotesque imagery, the narrator recounts what the two believe to be their heroic exploits, but in the eyes of everyone else, the two are misfits and troublemakers. The novel portrays them as a comic, quixotic pair–one a foppish poet and womanizer, the other a brawny fighter and misogynist who is afraid of women. *Gerpla* parodies the idealized view of heroes as depicted in the Icelandic sagas, drawing parallels between the atrocities of King Olaf and those of Hitler and Stalin. As a tragicomedy, *Gerpla* deals with illusions and those ideals that breed them. Þormóður ~~sacrifices~~ everything for the chance to recite his lay "Heroica" before the king, then admits that he can no longer recall it.

Gerpla was poorly received by some Icelanders, who took it to be a gibe at the Icelandic sagas. However, certain elements of the sagas can be viewed as parodic, and with *Gerpla,* Halldór simply elaborated on this aspect of his models. But Halldór was reluctant to acknowledge the humor in *Gerpla.* When readers found it amusing, he professed surprise and disdain, insisting that it was his most sorrowful book.

In 1955 Halldór Laxness was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature for, in the words of the Swedish Academy, his "vivid epic power, which has renewed the great narrative art of Iceland." In his acceptance speech of 10 December, Halldór emphasized his debt to the literary heritage of his native country, in particular to the old Icelandic storytellers who created the classics and were as much a part of Iceland as its landscape.

In the opinion of Halldór's biographer, Peter Hallberg, the Nobel Prize–and the accompanying public recognition that suddenly transformed Halldór into



Auður Sveinsdóttir and Halldór Laxness meeting Pope John Paul II, 1989 (photograph by Arturo Marie, The Vatican; from Ólafur Ragnarsson and Valgerður Benediktsdóttir, eds., Lífsmyndir skálds: æviferill Halldórs Laxness í myndum og máli, *1992; Suzzallo Library, University of Washington)*

a cultural ambassador for Iceland on the world stage–had a debilitating effect on his writing, a view echoed by many others, especially leftists. His new fame aside, Halldór's career did take a sharp turn at this time, more likely a result of his disillusionment with socialism and a growing skepticism toward all ideologies and dogmas. In his 1962 essay "Persónulegar minnisgreinar um skáldsögur og leikrit" (Personal Memoranda on Novels and Plays), published in *Upphaf mannúðarstefnu* (The Origins of Humanism, 1965), he objects to what he calls the "alheimsresept" (universal recipe) in literature. The role of literature is not to preach morality, he says, for the author is no more upright than the reader, but rather to show facts. The basis of fiction and its chief advantage, he believes, are that fiction is by nature a chronicle, and the author pretends to transform past events into a written narrative, turning human facts into a book. The problem, he says, is having to function as both chronicler and fabulist–that is, to record events and invent them at the same time.

Brekkukotsannáll (The Annals of Brekkukot, 1957; translated as *The Fish Can Sing,* 1966) is Halldór's first novel after he received the Nobel Prize. Like *Atómstöðin,* it is told in the first person and resembles its predecessor in other respects. The narrator, or "annalist," is a young man named Álfgrímur who recounts his years growing up in Reykjavík around 1900. The narration blends together two perspectives–that of the child as he experiences events and that of the adult reflecting on them much later. An orphan, Álfgrímur lives with an elderly couple, whom he calls his grandmother and grandfather, in the cottage Brekkukot, where his mother gave birth to him before boarding a ship to America. Much like the organist's house in *Atómstöðin,* Brekkukot is a free boardinghouse for all, with no strings attached, and in the spirit of Tao, tolerance and harmony prevail. For Álfgrímur, Brekkukot is the paradise of his youth, and he remains there until the end of the novel, when he goes abroad to study.

Álfgrímur dreams of becoming a singer. Following in the footsteps of his idol, the mysterious Garðar Hólm, Álfgrímur launches his career in the cemetery, where he sings at the funerals of vagrants and other unidentified persons. Garðar Hólm lives abroad and is

a famous "world singer" in the eyes of Icelanders, but gradually Álfgrímur discovers that Garðar Hólm is a charlatan and a fraud, a singer who cannot sing, a motif that also runs through the short story "Lily" and the play *Silfurtúnglið: sjónleikur í fjórum páttum* (The Silver Moon) from 1954, in which Lóa bungles her lullaby when she sings onstage in front of an audience rather than for her child.

Extended discussions of literature and art recur throughout *Brekkukotsannáll.* Just as the poet in *Heimsljós* fails in his attempts to capture beauty, the singer Álfgrímur tries to achieve the one pure note, but it is always out of reach. He learns to play the organ and also takes singing lessons until the onset of puberty, for in the world of Halldór's novels, song in its purest form belongs to the domain of children and women, beings who are closest to nature. Thus, Álfgrímur is no more successful in mastering the pure note than Garðar Hólm, and the story hints that Álfgrímur has become a writer instead and can perhaps be seen as the author's alter ego. In fact, many details of the novel directly parallel aspects of Halldór's life as depicted in his memoirs. The grandmother figure is similar to Halldór's own grandmother, with the same opinions and the same manner of speaking. The old clock whose ticking so preoccupies Álfgrímur and that symbolizes eternity in the novel is the same one that belonged to his great-aunt and provided the subject of his first published article.

In October 1957 Halldór spent several months traveling in the United States and several Asian countries, lecturing at various public cultural institutions. He also visited Taoist monks in China and Mormons of Icelandic descent in Utah. In *Skáldatími* he recounts a 1927 visit to Salt Lake City, where he was reminded of a travelogue he had read in his boyhood by an Icelander named Eiríkur frá Brúnum, who converted to Mormonism and immigrated to Utah in the late 1800s. The story of the immigrant's travels, published in two books as *Lítil ferðasaga* (A Little Travelogue) in 1878 and 1882, is the impetus behind Halldor's next novel, *Paradísarheimt* (1960; translated as *Paradise Reclaimed,* 1962). In "The Origins of Paradise Reclaimed," an essay accompanying the special United States edition of the novel, Halldór says that he was at work on the book for thirty years because the central idea refused to come into focus. The truth is, he says, that "to write successfully about the Promised Land, you must have sought and found it in your own life. . . . You must have made the pilgrimage yourself. . . . You go groping along through a jungle of ideas, which it would take volumes to describe, sometimes you get into blind alleys, at other times you are stuck in bottomless quicksand and saved by a miracle–until finally you find yourself in a small place . . . that somehow looks like the old home. Was it the same garden from which you started? It seems so, but it is not." The person who goes away, Halldór says, returns as a different kind of person.

In *Paradísarheimt* the poor farmer Steinn Steinsson leaves his farm and family to seek Paradise, which he finds among the Mormons in Utah. Many years later he sends for his family, but his wife dies during the journey, and his children no longer know him. He returns to Iceland as a missionary but becomes disillusioned, for everything there has changed and no one listens to him. He roams the countryside until he suddenly finds himself standing before the ruins of his old farmstead, and he begins to restack the stones of the dilapidated rock wall.

Paradísarheimt, the story of the man searching for a promised land that he ultimately finds in his own backyard, where he began his quest, is perhaps an allegory of the author's own experience, an expression of his resignation and disappointment with a political ideology. But the novel can also be seen as a rendition of the Tao teaching that one should be content with one's home and delight in one's customs. *Paradísarheimt* was the last novel that Halldór wrote in the third person as well as his last for another eight years. In addition to the literary memoir *Skáldatími,* he published three plays during this hiatus from novel writing: *Strompleikurinn: gamanleikur í þrem þáttum* (The Chimney Play: A Comedy in Three Acts, 1961); *Prjónastofan Sólin: gamanleikur í þremur þáttum* (The Sun Knitting Shop, 1962); and *Dúfnaveislan: skemtunarleikur í fimm þáttum* (1966; translated as *The Pigeon Banquet,* 1973), which is based on a short story of the same name in the collection *Sjötafakverið* (1964; translated as *A Quire of Seven,* 1974). Halldór's plays are interesting experiments, mixing farce, satire, and allegory with influences from the theater of the absurd as well as the Epic Theater of Brecht, but they have never enjoyed the popularity of his novels. The plays adapted from the novels, however, are staged regularly in Iceland.

In his final novels–*Kristnihald undir Jökli* (1968; translated as *Christianity at Glacier,* 1972), *Innansveitarkronika* (A Local Chronicle, 1970), and *Guðsgjafaþula* (A Litany of God's Gifts, 1972)–Halldór continues to write in the first person but with a different approach. These works experiment with the limits of narrative objectivity. In *Atómstöðin* the narrator participates in the action as it unfolds and is the only authority for what is conveyed in the story. *Brekkukotsannáll* is similar, even though the narrator is an annalist telling about the past. In these last novels, anonymous narrators stand outside of the story that they are investigating, repeatedly citing historical or fictional sources as their authorities.

Halldór Laxness and Auður Sveinsdóttir in their library at Gljúfrasteinn (photograph by Magnus Hjorleifsson; from Ólafur Ragnarsson and Valgerður Benediktsdóttir, eds., Lífsmyndir skálds: æviferill Halldórs Laxness í myndum og máli, *1992; Suzzallo Library, University of Washington)*

In *Kristnihald undir Jökli* the bishop of Iceland sends a young theologian to a remote district in the western region to investigate and report on a pastor's activities. He has the right qualifications for the job because he knows shorthand and can operate a tape recorder. Although unnamed in the novel, he refers to himself as "the undersigned" or "Umbi" (short for "umboðsmaður biskups"–the bishop's emissary). Before Umbi departs, the bishop gives him a methodology to follow in preparing his reports. He is to learn from the tape and write as much as possible in the third person, describe what he sees and hears, but by no means verify anything or venture an opinion: "Töluð orð eru staðreynd útaf fyrir sig sönn og login" (Spoken words are facts in themselves, whether true or false).

Since this objective narrator is not entrusted to relate conversations, they are presented with no introduction, as if they are transcribed from the tape. Nevertheless, Umbi cannot avoid taking part in life at Glacier. Eventually, he merges with his story: he throws the report away when he meets the mysterious woman Úa, the pastor's wife, who ran off to America on her wedding day but has now returned decades later as if nothing had ever happened. Úa is the culmination of the eternal feminine, which is so pervasive in Halldór's works. Umbi describes her as the receptive, quiescent Mystic Female and Great Mother of the Tao. She is both the origin and the end, as ineffable as the Promised Land, beauty, and the pure musical note. When Úa offers Umbi a lift in her dilapidated Imperial, the road leads to a dead end, and Umbi asks where they are going. Her answer is enigmatic: "Hvert heldurðu elskan mín nema á heimsenda" (Where do you think, my love, except to the end of the world). But in the dense fog, Umbi loses sight of her as she disappears into nature, and her laughter echoes in the screech of the seabirds.

Innansveitarkronika is a mixture of a documentary novel and a legend about the restoration of the church at Mosfell in Halldór's parish in the Mosfell district.

The church was closed down in the late nineteenth century, and the old church bell that had vanished reappears in a miraculous way at the dedication of the new church almost one hundred years later. At the same time, the book is a chronicle of the Mosfell district, with its farmers and "hidden women," described in Tao terms as the place of origin that people never want to leave.

In *Guðsgjafaþula* the anonymous narrator is an eighteen-year-old Icelandic writer who has just arrived in Copenhagen, penniless and in trouble until he meets Íslandsbersi (Iceland's Bear), an Icelandic herring merchant who hires the young man to write his life story. The novel is about the writing of this biography–purportedly based on the best available sources, although most of them are fictitious–and the narrator constantly points out that his own story is not important. In an afterword Halldór characterizes *Guðsgjafaþula* as an essay novel, the same epithet that he gives his four little books of memories, as he calls them–*Í túninu heima,* 1975; *Úngur eg var,* 1976; *Sjömeistarasagan,* 1978; and *Grikklandsárið,* 1980–which are about his life up until the age of twenty. The similarity between these memoirs of his early years and his final novel, which likewise focuses on how a young writer gets his start, points out the connection. Halldór has come full circle and ends his career as a writer where he began it.

The 1990s were difficult years for Halldór Laxness. Suffering from progressive dementia, caused primarily by Alzheimer's disease, he was unable to continue writing. He also had to give up much else in his daily routine, such as the long walks around the neighboring heath and the fat cigar that had become his hallmark. Near the end of his life he was admitted to Reykjalundur, a rehabilitation center near his home; he died there on 8 February 1998 at the age of ninety-five. His funeral was held with great ceremony at the Catholic Dómskirkja Krists konungs (Cathedral of Christ the King) in Reykjavík. He was buried in the old graveyard of the beautifully situated and restored parish church at Mosfell, on a south-facing knoll that–as he describes it in *Innansveitarkronika*–"sánkar að sér meira sólskini en aðrir hólar" (gathers more sunshine than other knolls).

The span of Halldór Laxness's life was nearly commensurate with that of the twentieth century, as he was born soon after its beginning and died in its waning years. Thus, he was a mirror of the age, both reflecting the century and exercising a major influence on it, within the realm of Nordic culture and in the wider world. Simultaneously a successful Icelandic and international author, he was and continues to be an unequaled exemplar to those Icelandic writers who followed him. "Þetta er hægt. Ekkert þarf að hindra þig: ekki tungumálið, ekki fólksfæðin og söguefnin þau liggja í loftinu" (This is possible. Nothing has to hinder you: not the language, not the smallness of the nation, and [as for] the subject matter, it floats in the air). This characterization of Halldór Laxness's approach to writing by one of the most renowned novelists of the younger generation, Einar Már Guðmundsson, in an essay written in memory of Halldór Laxness for *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins* (21 April 2001), captures the uninhibited optimism that Halldór Laxness brought to the spirit of Icelandic literature.

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Papers:

Halldór Laxness's papers are located in the Handritadeild (Manuscript Department) of Landsbókasafn Íslands – Háskólabókasafn (National and University Library of Iceland).

Ásdís Egilsdóttir,
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