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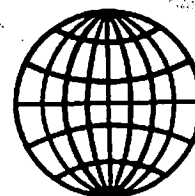
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Halldór Laxness

By PETER HALLBERG
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Translated by Rory McTurk



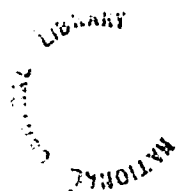
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Preface

As an Icelander and a member of a very small Scandinavian nation with an ancient and unique literary culture, Halldór Laxness has rather special qualifications as a writer. Throughout the period of his literary achievement, which has now continued for almost half a century, the Icelandic heritage has constantly been a living force in his work, contrasting or combining in various ways with his modernism and preoccupation with the problems of his time. The tension between the native and the foreign, the national and the cosmopolitan, has formed one of the fruitful contrasts which run through all his writing. I have therefore found it suitable to include a short introductory chapter giving a brief outline of the history of Iceland and its cultural tradition.

Today, at the age of sixty-five, Laxness is still a productive writer. What is more, his literary output, for all its continuity, reveals an unflagging interest in experimenting with new forms. Since 1955, when he received the Nobel Prize for his "vividly descriptive epic works, which have given new life to the great Icelandic art of storytelling"—to quote the reasons given by the Swedish Academy for its choice—he has especially concentrated his energies on writing plays of an extremely original and somewhat bizarre character. A brief but comprehensive assessment of his contribution may therefore be of a merely preliminary nature; surprising features may yet reveal themselves in works still unwritten. The literary historian awaits with especial eagerness a sequel to Laxness' memoirs as a writer; the part published so far, *Skáldatími* (A Writer's Schooling, 1963) covers approximately the period between the two World Wars.

The present study is to a large extent chronologically arranged, in the form of a series of chapters on each of the essential works—a plan which in some measure can be said to have Laxness' own approval, for he readily emphasizes that every literary work is a world in itself, obeying its own inherent

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laws. Three stages in his development may be fairly clearly distinguished. The first is characterized by his attempts as a young man to find his way among conceptions of life and literary trends in Europe after the First World War. It is a period of vehement and restless searching, which finds its artistic liberation in the cosmopolitan novel of ideas *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* (The Great Weaver from Kashmir, 1927). After a few years' stay in America, mostly at Los Angeles, from 1927 to 1929, Laxness began his long succession of novels with subjects drawn from the social life of Iceland, past and present. This stage, with *Gerpla* (The Happy Warriors, 1952), as its last great literary manifestation, is in part quite strongly colored by the writer's involvement in political and social life, and by his socialistic criticism of society. In his present phase, finally, which began around the time of the Nobel Prize award, his creative powers have, as already mentioned, been directed in no small measure towards the drama. But the novels and short stories written in these later years also differ in tone and spirit from his earlier epic works. They have become "de-ideologized" and have, on the whole, a more calmly retrospective and chronicle-like character; their relation to Icelandic tradition seems to be more free of tension, more conservative.

The three stages that I have outlined here are not, of course, separated by rigid dividing lines. On the contrary, as soon as one penetrates a little below the surface it becomes clear that they are closely linked and develop organically out of each other. Indeed, it could be maintained that *Vefarinn mikli*, the great work of Laxness' youth, contains *in nuce* almost everything that Laxness has later come to write, despite the fact that the book otherwise differs strongly—in setting, style, and choice of subject—from all his other novels. I hope that this unity amid variety, and this basic attitude lying behind what appear to be sudden turns and changes of thought will be clearly discernible in the form I have chosen for my own account of Halldór Laxness and his work.

PETER HALLBERG

Acknowledgments

The author and the translator are grateful to Mrs. Margaret Brittingham Callery, of Wilmington, Delaware; to Gylfi Gíslason, Icelandic Minister of Education, Reykjavík; to Dr. Per-Axel Hildeman of the Swedish Institute, Stockholm; and to The American-Scandinavian Foundation, New York, for generous financial grants. The translator is grateful to Dr. Finnbogi Guðmundsson for a generous loan of books from the National Library of Iceland, Reykjavík; to Magnus Magnusson, of Glasgow, for help and advice concerning some difficult words in *Heimsljós* and for invaluable help with the bibliographical lists; and to a number of friends and colleagues at the University of Lund, Sweden, for help with translation difficulties.

Translator's Note

All Icelandic words and proper names, whether ancient or modern, are given in Modern Icelandic spelling where they occur in the text—except in certain cases where Laxness' spelling is deliberately archaic (as in the title of his autobiographical manuscript *Heiman ek fór*, for instance, or in the book title *Eldur í Kaupinhafn*). Where the Icelandic name of a person or thing is interesting or important in itself, a short explanation of its meaning is given in brackets. In the rare cases where there are examples of Laxness' idiosyncratic spelling differing from normal modern usage, his own spelling has been used. For a detailed guide to the pronunciation and grammar of Modern Icelandic, the reader is referred to Stefán Einarsson's *Icelandic Grammar, Texts, Glossary* (Baltimore, 1949).

In translating the quotations I have been greatly assisted by the author's Swedish rendering of the original Icelandic, and have relied on these for my English versions of passages quoted from letters and from certain relatively "minor" works of Laxness, where I have not had access to the original. The existing English translations of Laxness' works, which are listed at the end of this book, have also been a great help to me, and I freely acknowledge my debt to them—even if the author and I have not always agreed with their interpretations.

The page reference after each quotation refers to the first Icelandic edition of the work in question.

R. W. MCTURK

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Chronology

- 1902 Halldór Guðjónsson is born April 23 in Reykjavík, Iceland, the son of the road construction foreman Guðjón Helgi Helgason, and his wife Sigríður Halldórsdóttir.
- 1905 The family moves to the farm of Laxnes in Mosfells-sveit, just northeast of Reykjavík, and takes up farming.
- 1919 Guðjón Helgi dies. Halldór breaks off his schooling in Reykjavík High School and travels abroad for the first time, primarily to Copenhagen. Publishes the short novel *Barn náttúrunnar* (Child of Nature) under the pen name of Halldór frá Laxnesi.
- 1921- Goes abroad again, and stays mainly in Germany and
- 1922 Austria, working on a "philosophical" book, never printed, called *Rauða kverið* (The Red Booklet).
- 1922- With the help of Johannes Jørgensen, the Danish writer
- 1923 and Catholic, Halldór is given a place as a guest at the Benedictine monastery of Saint Maurice de Clervaux in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, some time in November, 1922. Is baptized and confirmed in the Catholic faith by the Bishop of Luxembourg at a solemn Mass in the monastery church on January 6, 1922, and takes at his baptism the names Kiljan Marie Pierre. At the same time he adopts the family name of Laxness, after his father's farm, and this is later legalized by the Icelandic authorities. During his time in the monastery he keeps a diary, which is still preserved. Publishes in 1923 the collection of short stories *Nokkrar sögur* (Some Stories).
- 1924 Publishes the novel *Undir Helgahnúk* (Under the Holy Mountain). Works on the manuscript of his stylized autobiography, *Heiman ek fór* (From Home I Went), which is not published until 1952.
- 1925 Publishes the apologetic *Kaþólsk viðhorf* (From a Catholic Point of View). ✓
- 1927 Makes his "breakthrough" with the publication of his

*Parish
Rauða*

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- novel *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* (The Great Weaver from Kashmir). ✓
- 1927- Travels in Canada and the United States, studies the ✓
- 1929 cinema world in Los Angeles, and becomes acquainted with Upton Sinclair. ✓
- 1929 Publishes *Alþýðubókin* (The Book of the People), a collection of radical essays, which marks a decisive readjustment of his interests from religious to social problems. ✓
- 1930 Marries Ingibjörg (Inga) Einarsdóttir. Publishes *Kvæðakver* (Poems), his only collection of poems to date. ✓
- 1931 Publishes *Þú vínviður hreini* (O Thou Pure Vine), the first part of the novel about Salka Valka, the fishergirl. ✓
- 1932 Publishes *Fuglinn í fjörunni* (The Bird on the Beach), the second and final part of the novel about Salka Valka. Travels in the autumn in the Soviet Union. ✓
- 1933 Publishes *Í Austurvegi* (Going East), an eyewitness account of his journey to the Soviet Union, and the collection of short stories *Fótatak manna* (Steps of Men). ✓
- 1934 Publishes the first part of the novel *Sjálfstætt fólk* (Independent People), and the play *Straumrof* (Short Circuit). ✓
- 1935 Publishes the second and final part of the novel *Sjálfstætt fólk*. ✓
- 1937 Publishes *Ljós heimsins* (The Light of the World), the first part of the novel tetralogy—later known as *Heimsljós* (World Light)—about Ólafur Kárasón, the parish pauper and folk poet; and the collection of essays *Dagleið á fjöllum* (A Day's Journey in the Mountains). ✓
- 1937- Travels during the winter months in the Soviet Union. ✓
- 1938 Publishes *Gerska æfintýrið* (The Russian Adventure), an account of his travels in the Soviet Union, and *Höll sumarlandsins* (The Palace of the Summerland), the second part of the novel tetralogy about Ólafur Kárasón. ✓
- 1939 Publishes *Hús skáldsins* (The House of the Poet), the third part of the Ólafur Kárasón tetralogy. ✓
- 1940 Is divorced from Ingibjörg Einarsdóttir. Publishes *Fegurð himinsins* (The Beauty of the Skies), the final part of the Ólafur Kárasón tetralogy. ✓

Chronology

- 1941 Publishes *Vopnin kvödd*, a translation of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). ✓
- 1942 Publishes the collection of short stories *Sjö töframenn* (Seven Enchanters), and *Vettvangur dagsins* (The Contemporary Scene), a collection of essays and articles. ✓
- 1943 Publishes *Íslandsklukkan* (Iceland's Bell), the first part of a trilogy of novels. ✓
- 1944 Publishes *Híð ljósa man* (The Bright Maid), the second part of the novel trilogy. ✓
- 1945 Marries Auður Sveinsdóttir. Moves into Gljúfrasteinn, his villa in the neighborhood of Laxnes, his parents' farm, and publishes *Birtingur*, a translation of Voltaire's *Candide*. ✓
- 1946 Publishes *Eldur í Kaupinhafn* (Fire in Copenhagen), the final part of the novel trilogy, and *Sjálfsgæðir hlutir* (Obvious Things), a collection of essays and articles. ✓
- 1948 Publishes the novel *Atómstöðin* (The Atom Station). ✓
- 1950 Publishes *Reisubókarkorn* (A Little Diary of Travels), a collection of essays and articles, and the play *Snæfríður Islandssól* (Snæfríður, Iceland's Sun), which is based on the novel trilogy of 1943-46. ✓
- 1952 Publishes *Heiman eg fór* (From Home I Went), the autobiographical manuscript of 1924, and the novel *Gerpla* (The Happy Warriors). ✓
- 1954 Publishes the play *Silfurtúnglið* (The Silver Moon). ✓
- 1955 Publishes *Dagur í senn* (A Day at a Time), a collection of articles and speeches. Is awarded the year's Nobel Prize for Literature. ✓
- 1957 Publishes the novel *Brekkukotsannáll* (The Fish can Sing). ✓
- 1957- Makes a world tour, visiting the United States, China, and ✓
- 1958 India. ✓
- 1959 Publishes *Gjörningabók* (Documents), a collection of articles and speeches. ✓
- 1960 Publishes the novel *Paradísarheimt* (Paradise Reclaimed). ✓
- 1961 Publishes the play *Strompleikurinn* (The Chimney Play). ✓
- 1962 Publishes the play *Þrjónastofan Sólín* (The Knitting Workshop called "The Sun"). ✓
- 1963 Publishes the book of memoirs *Skáldatími* (A Writer's Schooling). ✓

- 1964 Publishes the collection of short stories *Sjöstafakverið* (The Book of Seven Signs).
- 1965 Publishes *Upphaf mannúðarstefnu* (The Beginning of Humanism), a collection of essays and articles.
- 1966 Publishes the play *Dúfnaveislan* (The Pigeon Banquet), and *Veisla í farángrium*, a translation of Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* (1964).
- 1967 Publishes *Íslendingaspjall* (An Essay on Icelanders), a short account of the author's special experiences as an Icelandic writer and primarily conceived as a complement to *Skáldatími* (A Writer's Schooling), the book of memoirs published in 1963.
- 1968 Publishes the novel *Kristnihald undir Jökli* (Christianity in Snæfellsnes).
- 1968 Publishes *Svavar Guðnason*, an essay in Danish, with illustrations, on a modern Icelandic painter (= Vor Tids Kunst. 67. Gyldendal, Copenhagen).
- 1969 Publishes *Vínlandspúnktar* (Some Remarks on Vinland), four essays on Old Icelandic matters. ✓
- 1970 Publishes *Innansveitarkronika* (A Parish Chronicle), a story from the author's home district, Mosfellssveit.

CHAPTER 1

The Icelandic Background

I Early History and Literature

THE origin and history of Iceland as a nation are so unique as to give the Icelanders an exceptional position among the peoples of Scandinavia. The remote island in the North Atlantic was colonized by Scandinavians—by far the greater part of them, from Norway—in the decades just before and after the year 900. The first settler is reported to have been Ingólfur Arnarson, who took up his abode in 874 at the site of the country's present capital, Reykjavík—which derives its name, "Smoky Bay," from the steam coming from the hot springs in that area.

The story of the settlement (Icel. *landnám*) is told in the remarkable *Landnámabók* (Book of Settlements), which is thought to have been compiled in the twelfth century. It gives a systematic account of the settlement along the coast and inwards from the coast to the glens and valleys round the whole island; more than 3,000 people and 1,400 places are mentioned in connection with the colonization of Iceland. The extensive genealogies in this work are quite often obscured by the confused myth and legend of ancient times, but to Icelanders the book has been of enormous importance in strengthening their feelings of national self-esteem and solidarity.

In the new society some organization was of course needed to handle the general affairs of the community. Thus in the year 930 the Icelandic General Assembly (*alþingi*) was established, with its meeting place at Þingvellir by the country's largest lake, Þingvallavatn. The *alþingi* met annually in June. Its foremost official was the Lawspeaker (*lögsögumaður*), who was chosen for a period of three years, had to know the code of laws by heart, and also had to recite them in their entirety, at meetings of the

alþingi, during his three-year term of office; for at that time the laws were not yet written down and had to be preserved in memory.

In founding the *alþingi* the Icelanders had created a legislative and judicial authority, but no administrative or executive one. This strange feature has left its mark on the many descriptions of legal disputes and acts of vengeance in the Sagas of Icelanders. If a plaintiff managed to secure the conviction of his opponent, it was his own business to see the sentence carried out. The frequent result of this, of course, was that power and strength became the deciding factors. The lack of a central administrative and executive authority was to show itself fatal to Iceland's continuance as an independent state. In the long run it undermined powers of resistance both to internal disintegration and to external pressures.

The hundred years from the origin of the *alþingi* until 1030 are sometimes called the "Saga Age" (*söguöld*) in the history of Iceland; for during those years the events related in such Icelandic Family Sagas as *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, *Laxdæla saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Njáls saga* and *Grettis saga Asmundarsonar*—to name just a few of the greatest and best known—are supposed to have taken place. These suggestively realistic and carefully localized narratives were earlier regarded, both in Iceland and elsewhere, as true stories taken from life. More recently, however, scholars have been able to show that, to a large extent at least, the sagas are not so much historical documents as remarkable works of fiction.

However this may be, the *söguöld* was, in reality too, a time of greatness for Iceland. The sons of the settlers showed the same bold spirit of discovery as their fathers. In 982 the Icelanders made their way to Greenland and founded an Icelandic settlement there. Leifur Eiríksson, a son of the first European to settle in Greenland, was driven off course on a sea voyage in the year 1000 and landed on a foreign coast, which he called Vinland. This was America—which was thus discovered by an Icelandic seafarer nearly 500 years before Columbus. As is well known, the description given of Vinland in the Icelandic sagas has aroused great interest not only among students of literature, but also among archeologists, geographers, and cartographers.

The year 1000 was also an important milestone in the internal history of Iceland in that Christianity was then adopted, by decree of the *alþingi*, as the official religion of the country. In its earliest days the Icelandic church differed greatly from its Catholic mother church in Europe. It was far from having the independent position of a kind of state within the state, with legislative and judicial authority in its own affairs. In Iceland the church never gained the same firm hold on the people as it did in other countries. Yet no real gulf arose, either, between the ordinary people and the clergy, between layman and cleric. This is one aspect of the strikingly democratic nature of the Icelandic social system which has been preserved to the present day.

The Icelandic Commonwealth consisted of independent farmers who, in theory at least, were each other's equals. No formal class distinction existed among them, and no privileged nobility ever arose in Iceland. The very precondition for such a development—a monarch surrounded by a court, an official hierarchy, and an army—was also lacking.

Nevertheless, the balance of power originally shared by the local chieftains gradually became unhinged; a local chieftain (*goði*) represented, within his sphere of dominion (*goðorð*), both secular and—before the introduction of Christianity—religious authority. A few great families succeeded independently in gaining domination in different parts of the country, and waged with each other a violent struggle for supremacy. This period of unrest, which lasted from the middle of the twelfth century to the fall of the Icelandic Commonwealth in the year 1262, is known as the Age of the Sturlungs (*Sturlungaöld*) after one of the leading families. The most famous representative of this family, which is named after Sturla, its founding father, was the chieftain and historian Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241).

Iceland now paid the price of having no national government. From the very beginning the kings of Norway had had designs on Iceland and had made a number of attempts to gain control of the island. In medieval Europe a nation with no head of state was evidently regarded as something of an anomaly. A cardinal visiting Norway in the middle of the thirteenth century found it "unseemly" that Iceland "was not subject to a king, like all other countries in the world." In their mutual struggles

Icelandic chieftains now began to look to the Norwegian king for support against each other, and to refer the final decision in these conflicts to him. Finally, the Icelanders had to swear allegiance to King Hákon Hákonarson and were made to pay taxes to the crown of Norway (1262–64).

Thus the Icelandic Commonwealth came to an end. The feuds of the Age of the Sturlungs give ample evidence of ruthless self-assertion, low cunning, and cruelty. But this period of unrest in the history of Iceland, when the freedom of the nation was lost, was accompanied by a unique efflorescence of literature. *Sturlunga saga*, the sternly realistic chronicle of contemporary history, was written by men who in many cases had themselves played an active part in the events there described. The principal author of the work was Sturla Þórðarson (1214–84), a nephew of Snorri Sturluson. But writers also turned to the past, and gave historical accounts of the kings and jarls of Norway and Denmark. Snorri's *Heimskringla*, which dates from around 1230, stands out as the great crowning achievement of this historical genre. The most original contributions to the art of prose, however, are undoubtedly the above-mentioned Family Sagas or Sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*), in which anonymous Icelandic authors cause their forefathers from the *söguöld* to rise up again in all the changing scenes of life, from its small everyday anxieties to its great tragic conflicts. It was also during this period, the thirteenth century, that the old Norse poems of gods and heroes, the so-called "Eddic" poems, were collected and written down in Iceland.

It was not until the seventeenth century that this remarkable literature became known in the other Scandinavian countries. Then it aroused great interest, primarily in being regarded as history. Here were new vistas to stir the imagination, opening out onto an ancient Scandinavian past, previously unknown—an age of heroic deeds, of saga and song. Classical Icelandic literature thus became a powerful stimulus to Scandinavians in strengthening their feelings of self-awareness as members of the Northern nations, and has frequently provided writers of later times with subject matter and inspiration. Examples from the Romantic period are Adam Oehlenschläger (1779–1850) in Denmark and Esaias Tegnér (1782–1846) in Sweden; while later in

the nineteenth century, Longfellow (1807–82) in America and William Morris (1834–96) in England translated and interpreted in their own way certain poems and sagas from early Icelandic literature.

Above all, however, this Golden Age of literature acquired a national and cultural importance for the Icelandic people themselves—an importance which can hardly be overestimated. In the following dark centuries of poverty and foreign rule in Iceland people could seek comfort and self-confidence in the sagas which told of their forefathers' exploits and glorious lives. For the fact remained that mighty champions such as Egill Skallagrímsson and Gunnar of Hlíðarendi, a man of wisdom such as Njáll, and beautiful women such as Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir and Helga the Fair had lived and been active here in Iceland and nowhere else. Icelandic people still lived and moved, every day, in the surroundings which formed the setting for the sagas; they were well acquainted with the names and geographical features of the places where the events related in the sagas were supposed to have happened. In such places both imagination and longing could call forth with ease the shades of the past.

Thus the classical literature of medieval Iceland has undoubtedly been of moral significance in the Icelandic people's struggle for existence. But it has also left its mark, in a decisive way, on the Icelandic language and literary tradition, as can still be seen today. In the prose of the sagas the written language was fixed earlier in Iceland than elsewhere in the North in such a way as to provide a linguistic standard. This—together, perhaps, with certain other factors such as the geographical isolation of the country—has undoubtedly contributed to the fact that modern Icelandic has preserved the structure and vocabulary originally characteristic of Old Norse, and has done so incomparably better than any of the other Scandinavian languages. Thus an Icelandic child who has learned to read can without much difficulty read the classical sagas in the language in which they were written in the thirteenth century—provided, of course, that the varied orthography of the manuscripts is modernized. It is easy to understand the importance of this unique linguistic continuity for the Icelandic sense of closeness to the past.

But the sagas have also provided a literary and stylistic standard. With their tersely matter-of-fact prose style and powerfully effective dialogue they formed perfect models for Icelandic storytellers of later times. Not only in prose but also in poetry has the power of the tradition given ample evidence of its continued strength. Icelandic poets still make frequent use of the alliteration and internal rhyme which formed an essential feature of Old Norse poetry. It is characteristic that when Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Klopstock's *Messias* were translated into Icelandic at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Icelandic versions of these poems were written in the *fornyrðislag*, one of the ancient metrical forms of the Eddic poems.² If Icelandic authors have sometimes regarded this overwhelmingly powerful native tradition as restrictive, as a hindrance to literary regeneration, we can well understand their attitude. In his short book of memoirs, *Islendingaspjall* (An Essay on Icelanders, 1967), Laxness has described, with his customary sharpness of emphasis, the profound extent to which the Icelandic "School of Literature," with its strict rules, has become second nature to his countrymen, and how "the standard set by the Golden Age" still dominates today the literary opinions of the public as well as of the critics. It is not to be wondered at if "such poor wretches as myself and people like me, engaged in the laborious work of writing books, often feel downhearted in this country; any ordinary simpleton can prove beyond dispute that we are worse writers of prose than the men who fashioned *Njáls saga* or *Hrafnkels saga* or *Heimskringla*; and similarly, that as poets we have declined considerably since the tenth century, when the poet of *Völuspá* stood beneath this vast sky of Iceland and could not spell his name."³

Thus even for the modern Icelandic author the great literature of the Middle Ages is to a large extent a living heritage of which, whether consciously or unconsciously, he is always half-critically aware. The native tradition and foreign literary trends are continually being confronted and balanced with each other. This process is strikingly reflected in various stages of Laxness' development as a writer, and we shall later have reason to return to the treatment he gives it.

II The Struggle for Independence

After the fall of the Commonwealth, Iceland had greater difficulty in keeping economically and culturally apace with the other Scandinavian countries. Shipping and foreign trade, which were, of course, a condition of life for Iceland, deteriorated considerably, and the Icelanders became more isolated than ever before. From the year 1380, when Norway was united with Denmark in a personal union, Iceland was brought more and more completely under the power of the Danish crown. When the Reformation was established in Denmark, the king wished that Iceland, too, should acknowledge it. He met with stubborn resistance, however, especially from one of Iceland's two bishops, Jón Arason of Hólar (1484-1550). This warlike prelate was taken prisoner and beheaded, together with two of his sons, without legal proceedings. Jón Arason has become, through his death, something of a martyr, an Icelandic national hero. His struggle was directed not only against Protestantism but also against Danish bureaucracy and arbitrary rule. The Reformation meant in Iceland, as it did elsewhere, that the power of the king was strengthened; and when in 1660 the Danish king made his rule supreme, the Icelanders also had to accept him as their absolute ruler. The result of this was that Iceland's autonomy grew weaker and weaker. The *alþingi* was but a shadow of what it had been.

Economically, the Icelanders were especially hard pressed by the Danish trade monopoly. In accordance with contemporary custom the king gave the merchants in certain Danish towns the sole and exclusive right to trade with Iceland, and tariffs were fixed for both foreign and Icelandic products. For example, the Icelanders needed grain, wood, iron, and hemp, in exchange for which they could provide, among other things, split cod, train oil, and woolen goods. In practice, however, this could hardly be described as trade on an equal footing. The Danish merchants who had control of the shipping lines to and from Iceland gained through lack of competition an overwhelming advantage over the islanders, whom they treated as recipients of charitable maintenance.

Among those Icelanders who sought to create better conditions for their countrymen was Árni Magnússon (1663-1730), a civil

servant and professor in Copenhagen. Together with another Icelandic he made an exhaustive analysis of the situation in Iceland, compiled a highly detailed rent roll of the Icelandic farms, listing their resources and profits, and examined the work of the courts, etc. But Arni Magnússon was above all a learned collector of manuscripts who has done more than anyone else to trace and gather into safekeeping the ancient Icelandic vellums which are the visible result of his forefathers' literary efforts. He left his treasure hoard of books and manuscripts to the University of Copenhagen, where they have been kept under the name of the Arnarnagmæne Collection. By a decree, however, of the Danish Parliament, which was confirmed by the Danish Supreme Court in 1966, these unique manuscripts are now to be restored to their land of origin; and thus has been settled, once and for all, a matter of long and heated dispute between Danes and Icelanders.

In one of his works of fiction, the trilogy of novels which began with *Íslandsklukkan* (Iceland's Bell, 1943), Laxness has made use of many features drawn from Arni Magnússon's life as a patriot and collector of manuscripts, and has brought to life, with great artistry, the Icelandic world of the times in which he lived.

In the early nineteenth century liberal movements began to assert themselves in different parts of Europe; various oppressed nations and minority groups raised the demand for freedom. These ideas gave new life and energy to the Icelandic struggle for national independence. A few young Icelanders in Copenhagen, among them Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807-45), one of Iceland's finest lyrical poets, became energetic propagandists for the reestablishment of the *alþingi*. A forceful spokesman was found in Jón Sigurðsson (1811-79), who for forty years was Iceland's leading politician—"Iceland's shield and sword," as he has been called. Thus between 1843 and 1845 the *alþingi* was reestablished, but at first only as an advisory body. In 1854 the last vestiges of the earlier trade monopoly were finally removed, and the Icelanders were able to establish trade relations where it best suited them to do so. Thus the ice was broken, both on the political and the economic level. The hundred years which followed tell the story of how Iceland gradually advanced towards its long-sought goal of full national autonomy.

At the thousand-year anniversary of the settlement, which was celebrated in 1874, King Christian IX visited Iceland—the first official royal visit to Iceland in the history of the country—and introduced then a new constitution, which among other things gave the *alþingi* joint legislative power with the crown and control of the country's finances. Just over twenty-five years later, in 1903, the special office of Minister for Icelandic Affairs was established in Reykjavík; and by the Union Act of 1918, finally, the independence of Iceland was fully recognized. Only the king of the two countries and the Danish administration of foreign affairs still remained as reminders of Iceland's earlier state of dependence. In 1944 the final step was taken: on June 17—the anniversary of Jón Sigurðsson's birth and now the country's National Day—Iceland was proclaimed a Republic at Þingvellir, the meeting place for the *alþingi* of the ancient Commonwealth. The country had then had a foreign head of state for well-nigh seven hundred years.

It is clear that in *Íslandsklukkan* Laxness has been inspired by political events in Iceland at the time of writing, by the exultation accompanying the birth of the new Republic—the completely independent state so eagerly desired for so long, and now a reality. In his description of a past age, with its sufferings, its spirit of resistance and the people's yearning for an indigenous culture, the novel is sustained by a profound national fervor with direct appeal to the author's Icelandic contemporaries. The work may be seen as a kind of inventory of the native Icelandic heritage, a magnificent synthesis of what is essential in the Icelandic character, as the author himself has experienced it.

III The Modern Writer's Background

The political liberation of Iceland has run parallel with a corresponding development in economic and social spheres. The past fifty years or so have probably meant speedier and more drastic material changes for Iceland than for most other European countries. At the turn of the century the built-up areas or "towns" contained 13 per cent of the island's total population, which was then 78,500; and in 1945 the population of the towns had risen to 55 per cent of a total population of 130,500. In 1900 the capital city of Reykjavík had only 6,500 inhabitants; in 1965 the figure had risen to 78,000, that is, to

about 40 per cent of a population of almost 194,000 people. In Iceland the essential precondition for these changes, which are so typical of the times, has been the development of the fisheries to a level of large-scale production, and the vigorous industry and trade which have grown up around them. Iceland has emerged today as a modern welfare state which is not strikingly different from the other Scandinavian countries.

Laxness himself, being more or less a contemporary in age with the present century, has lived through this revolutionary development which is also reflected, in many different ways, in his work. The novel *Brekkukotsannáll* (The Fish can Sing, 1957), gives a pleasantly humorous description of the idyllic environment of Reykjavík at the time of his childhood. In direct contrast to this stands *Atómstöðin* (The Atom Station, 1948), which is set in the same Reykjavík at the end of the Second World War: a hectic metropolis in a newly created Republic, placed only a few years earlier in the midst of international communications and drawn into events of great political importance.

In an autobiographical fragment dating from 1924, called *Heiman ek fór* (From Home I Went) and not published until much later (1952), Laxness has described his grandmother as he remembers her from the days of his childhood. He emphasizes strongly the archaic qualities of this old Icelandic woman, her links with the past and with all that is most profoundly native to Iceland and its people. It is a document of great cultural-historical interest, and merits lengthy quotation in that it throws light on how the writer has experienced the situation in which he finds himself as an Icelander and modern man of the twentieth century:

At every opportunity I point out—and always with noble pride—that I knelt at the feet of the eighteenth century to receive my upbringing. My maternal grandmother was born during that half of the nineteenth century which carries all the distinctive features of the previous century, and grew up among those members of the population who might be described as fragments broken from the rock of distant ages. My grandmother's foster-mother lived through the fires of Skaftá [the volcanic eruption of Laki in 1783, Iceland's most severe eruption in historical times], and had to lay shoe leather on the table for her family to eat. A woman who has dealt out shoe

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leather at meals must surely inculcate in her children rules of life quite different from those encouraged nowadays. My grandmother brought me up and taught me many rules of life which she had gleaned from her foster-mother. ✓

My grandmother was an eighteenth-century person and did not know a thing about what went on in the nineteenth century, either in politics or science. . . . No wonder, then, that the news of twentieth-century events seemed as vague, passing fancies in her eyes, and moved her little. . . . Our telephone was now installed and was placed in a room next door to hers. But even though this strange contraption rang noisily and continually in her ear throughout the remaining years of her life, she died heartily convinced that the telephone was nothing but humbug. No notice should ever be taken of news which came from the telephone. If anyone tried to explain the telephone to her, she simply laughed at his attempts; she just could not be bothered to waste words on these fantasies, she said, and began to talk about something else. ✓

It was from this unusual woman that the boy Halldór received his first impression of Icelandic saga and song:

But it was my grandmother who brought me up as a child, and I am proud of my good fortune in having been brought up by a woman who, of all the women I have known, was the least dependent on the fashions and spirit of the times. She sang me ancient songs before I could talk, told me stories from heathen times and sang me cradle songs from the Catholic era . . .

Her speech was pure and strong and never a note false as far as language was concerned. I have never known anything more authentically Icelandic than the language of this old woman. It was neither generally Nordic in quality like the folk tales, nor tinged with Latin influence like the writings of the Middle Ages, nor blended with Danish like the Icelandic in vogue at the time of the Reformation. It was the language of the culture, eight hundred years old, of the inland farms of Iceland, unspoiled and wonderful, imbued with the indefinable flavor of its origin, like a wild fruit.⁴

We may suspect that in the interests of gaining his artistic effect the writer has given this portrait a rather stronger element of archaism than his childhood really had. But even if this is so, the description undoubtedly tells us something of fundamental importance, not only about Laxness himself but about all Icelanders of his generation. It is sometimes said that in the

twentieth century Iceland has made a direct leap from the Middle Ages into modern times. This, of course, is an immense exaggeration. Implicit in the statement, however, is the undeniable truth that the rapid development into a modern society must have seemed especially dramatic in a small, homogeneous nation with a cultural tradition as strong and ancient as that of Iceland. To the Icelander conscious of his culture and its implications the meeting of the old and the new, of the native and the foreign, was full of problems, and will have acted as an incitement to self-examination, to a stock taking of his own national values. This situation is to a large extent reflected in Laxness' years of travel and inquiry as a young man, the period of orientation in postwar Europe, which found powerful literary expression in the novel *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* (The Great Weaver from Kashmir, 1927).

CHAPTER 2

Life in Europe. The Great Weaver from Kashmir

I From Hearth to Cloister

HALLDÓR Guðjónsson was born in Reykjavík on April 23, 1902, the son of foreman Guðjón Helgi Helgason and his wife, Sigríður Halldórsdóttir. He was evidently christened Halldór after his maternal grandfather; and in accordance with the ancient Scandinavian system of name giving, which still exists in Iceland, he was known as Guðjónsson (Son of Guðjón) after his father. Only as a grown man did he change this patronymic for the new family name of Laxness, by which he has become known.

When Halldór was three years old, his parents moved into the country to the farm of Laxnes in the district of Mosfellssveit, just northeast of Reykjavík, and became farming people. His father died in 1919 but his mother remained on the farm until the spring of 1928, when she returned to the capital. The writer-to-be thus spent a great part of his childhood in the country. Much later, in letters and elsewhere, he has himself described the environment of his youth; the portrait of his grandmother, drawn from his childhood memories, has already been quoted. He showed rather less enthusiasm for his duties on the farm, if we may believe his own description:

I was really rather a "nice boy" at home on the farm. I was a dual character—an ordinary errand boy and milk collector in the eyes of human beings, but a far from ordinary philosopher before God. I was what people call "lazy." From my earliest childhood I have loathed physical work, and I wormed my way out of all jobs that could possibly be avoided. I was just as skillful, too, at getting others to do the jobs I was supposed to do myself. I was ill-liked by the

CHAPTER 8

The Atom Station

I Traitors to Iceland

THE novel cycle *Islandsklukkan* caused a temporary abatement in the storm around its author's name and gave him something of the status of a national writer. Its historical subject, in which the ordinary people of Iceland recognized well-known episodes from the country's past, furnished Laxness with stirring symbols of the Icelandic struggle for freedom through the ages. It is true that scenes of incredible poverty and human degradation were also to be found there, and that in describing these the author showed his perception of the class antagonisms in Icelandic society. But such features were obscured by the perspective of time long past and did not necessarily shock the reader, as in the novels about Bjartur í Sumarhúsum or Ólafur Kárasón. *Islandsklukkan* had the quality of a gift from the writer to the entire nation on the threshold of a new epoch. It responded to his countrymen's fervent interest in the dissolution of the union with Denmark, and was made available to them at a time when they were animated by a spirit of national unity and enthusiasm seldom seen before or since. Laxness' dramatization of the novel, under the title of *Snæfriður Islandssól* (*Snæfriður*, Iceland's Sun) was also one of the three Icelandic plays with which the new National Theater in Reykjavik was inaugurated in April, 1950.

Even in *Islandsklukkan*, however, a kind of "discordant political note" could be heard. In the conversations between Uffelen of Hamburg and Arnas Arnæus a sensitive ear could catch an echo of the greatest question in Iceland's foreign affairs since the dissolution of the union—the request made by the United States for military bases on the strategically important island

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in time of peace as well as war. This request became public in the autumn of 1945, before Laxness had yet finalized *Eldur í Kaupinhafn*. Even if the Icelanders accepted the presence of foreign troops during the actual war years—having, of course, no military forces of their own—the situation became quite different once hostilities were ended. It had generally been expected or hoped that the foreigners would then gratefully acknowledge the loan of Iceland and depart. Instead, the United States made a formal request for permission to have control, for ninety-nine years, of the largest airfield and the most important naval base in the country.

This request gave rise to an atmosphere of agitation in Iceland. By June 17, 1944, the Icelanders had attained their eagerly coveted goal of becoming the sovereign rulers of their own soil. There seemed nothing attractive in the instant necessity of granting the use of their land to foreign military forces and thus actually acknowledging their dependence on a great world power—and not this time on a more evenly matched Scandinavian nation. Indeed, the solid opposition in Iceland brought about a certain reduction of the American request. After a dramatic vote on October 5, 1946—with thirty-two in favor and nineteen against—the *alþingi* granted the United States of America the right to have control of the airfield at Keflavik, some thirty miles southwest of Reykjavik, for a period of six and a half years—"for the fulfillment of the obligations assumed by the United States in connection with the occupation of Germany." This agreement has since been prolonged under the auspices of NATO, of which Iceland is a member.

Laxness' voice could also be heard in the general storm of protest surrounding the "base question" in Iceland. Characteristic of the keynote of agitation—the current blending of contempt and despair—is a speech he made in November, 1946. The writer speaks here of "the sorrow which has assailed us all and almost taken from us our power of speech, deprived us of the joy of being a nation, and inflicted on every Icelander an aching wound, so that we are no longer the same people." On October 5 thirty-two "miserable Icelanders," "just a few traitors" had succeeded in gambling away the nation's independence of June 17, 1944, and turned Iceland into "an American air base," in the eyes of both the world and the Icelandic people.

Iceland had had no obligation whatever to meet the demands of the United States: "We lent our country to the Americans during the war, and they estimate the value of that loan at several billion dollars; in return they gave us military protection against the Fascists." With the so-called agreement of October 5 the United States Government had "made special friends and protégés of Icelandic quislings and thus shown scant respect for the Icelandic people." But that does not give the Icelanders any right to accuse the United States, "and for the American nation itself we entertain purely friendly feelings." The responsibility for what has happened must be laid entirely on "the thirty-two." In the summer of 1946 they had artfully contrived to get into the *alþingi* with false electoral promises; their first action when they met in the autumn was to betray their electors and surrender Iceland.¹

These political events, and sentiments such as these, form the background of the short novel *Atómstöðin* (The Atom Station, 1948). The hotly debated subject of yielding up the military bases in Iceland plays a prominent part in the book. According to a statement in the author's first draft of the work, the narrative is supposed to begin in the autumn of 1945—at the very time, in fact, when the American request came to the knowledge of the public. Laxness began to write his novel shortly after the decision of the *alþingi* came into effect on October 5, 1946. He takes the question of high politics connected with the base and couples it together with the grotesque complications surrounding the bringing home and burial of the body of Jónas Hallgrímsson, the national poet, which had lain at rest for a century in Copenhagen; for this memorable event happened to coincide with the hectic final stages in the *alþingi's* handling of the base question. The action of the leading politicians is given sarcastic comment in the novel, in the refrain: "Sell the country, dig up bones" (260).

II Uglu Falsdóttir and Others

Atómstöðin is presented in a rather unusual way. The entire narrative is placed in the mouth of Uglu Falsdóttir, a young country girl from northern Iceland, who comes to Reykjavík to learn to play the organ. This fictitious narrator can hardly be regarded as thoroughly true to life. Uglu's thoughts sometimes

seem improbably mature and artistically formulated. As a type, however, the girl from the north is realistically drawn. The Icelandic country people's traditional book knowledge and thirst for education are not mythical; and among the young people of the present day intellectual curiosity has found new aims and pursuits. When Uglu of Eystriðalur reflects on modern music and sculpture, she represents Iceland as it really is, albeit in a stylized way.

In order to earn her living in Reykjavík the girl from the north takes the post of domestic help in the house of Búi Arland, political economist, wholesale merchant, and member of Parliament. In his house she gains an insight into the life and mentality of the country's leading circles. But she also comes into contact with other aspects of life in the capital. At the house of her eccentric organ teacher, whom she visits in the evenings after her working hours, she is introduced to an environment in which thieves, harlots, police constables, and country parsons can meet together in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance. This new and strange world stands out in bold relief against the background of Uglu's isolated home valley.

Búi Arland is described as an intelligent and kindly representative of the upper middle class. He seems to be endowed with everything a human being can desire: good looks, the power to charm, education, and wealth. But his character is marked by a tired skepticism; he lacks faith in life. He awaits with equanimity the collapse of his social class and of its capitalistic culture. For a moment he can toy with the idea of starting a new life with the girl from the north, whom he calls his life's truth, and of running away with her to "Patagonia" (241-51). But these, of course, are fantasies which basically serve merely to underline his sense of rootlessness. And indeed, when it really comes to the point he continues to play the part imposed on him by his environment and position. In the last pages of the book we find him at the wretchedly attended funeral of the Beloved Son of the Nation, helping a few high-ranking mourners to carry the coffin containing the great poet's mortal remains, recently exhumed in Denmark. The procession is followed by jeering cries from the onlookers in the street about selling the country, digging up bones.

In Dr. Arland's wife and children Uglá is confronted by various aspects of middle-class culture in disintegration. The lady of the house is an egocentric hysteric who, in contrast to her husband, upholds her position and her class interests against supposed conspiracies in a manner both narrow-minded and cynically candid. She regards serious educational pursuits in women as being detrimental to true womanhood and as testifying, moreover, to "communism." "Look at me," she says to her servant, "I am qualified for university studies, but it doesn't show" (13).

According to the organist, the children of the family react to their environment in a manner wholly consistent with it: "One cannot get away from the fact that a thing which lies in salt water will soak up salt" (67). There is the eldest son, the university student, who is brought home one evening to his father's house, dead drunk and muddy, with vomit down his front. On another occasion he appears amid the luxury of his parents' home, hunched up in a miserable heap, with his cigarette smoldering between his lips and the whites of his eyes showing, as "a living picture of the despair current at the time, a refugee, homeless, at a hopeless station" (132). There is "Fruit-blood," as Uglá calls her, the recently confirmed daughter, who with a hazy look in her eye and a cigarette in a holder glides through the rooms of the house in the manner of a film star, plays the piano with nervous alternations between Chopin and wild jazz, digs her dark-lacquered nails deep into the servant girl's arm or else embraces her, bites her, and says "you devil" (138); who becomes pregnant by a married "Americanized jitterbug" (141) twice her own age, and is taken by her father to a doctor: "He drove iron things up inside me. He killed me. There were bloody scraps of something in the bowl" (175). There is the schoolboy who in the company of his cousin amuses himself by stealing fifty minks from a farm, killing a few of them and then letting the rest of the dangerous vermin loose.

But the author also shows, in an unforgettable way, the unsullied core of these stray young souls of the upper class. In the middle of an orgiastic party which the children have arranged in the absence of their parents, among drunken couples jitterbugging and slobbering over each other "in a general promiscuous mix-up" (141), amid patches of vomit and the roar of the amplifier, Uglá happens to look into a clothes closet

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with its door ajar. Inside, the two little mink thieves are squatting over a chess board opposite each other, at an infinite distance from all that is going on around them. They neither answer when Uglá addresses them nor look up, even though she stands for a long time at the door of the closet, watching them: "And at this sight I was once again filled with a sense of that security of life, that radiance of the mind's depths and those healing powers of the heart which no misfortune can reduce. For a time I contemplated the civilized calmness of the chess game amid the din from the American radio station and the four phonographs in various parts of the house, a few saxophones, and a drum; then I went up to my room, locked my door, and lay down to sleep" (142).

When the maiden Fruit-blood returns home from her abortion, still in a semi-dazed state, she finds comfort and security in the girl from the north, who watches at her bedside. Fruit-blood's affected attitude has left her; she becomes the child she is and asks to hear something about the country, about the lambs—"I saw twitches of weeping come into the girl's eyes; and then came tears. And he who weeps does not die; weeping is a sign of life: weep, and your life is worth something again. So I began to tell her about the lambs" (176).

III The Organist and the Immortal Flowers

Uglá Falsdóttir acts as Búi Arland's foil; her natural anchorage in the real life of the people, and her uncorrupted sense of what is right stand in contrast to his melancholic nihilism. She is a sister to Salka Valka; these two country girls both embody the indestructible powers of the nation. Uglá has a healthy and "unblase" longing for education and independence. When she comes back to Reykjavik after giving birth to her child in Eystridalur during the summer she explains to Búi Arland that she wishes to "become a human being": "Neither an unpaid bondswoman like the wives of the poor nor a bought 'madame' like the wives of the rich; still less a paid mistress; nor the prisoner of a child which society refuses to acknowledge. A human being among human beings: I know that it is ludicrous, temptible, shameful, and revolutionary that a woman should not want to be some kind of slave girl or harlot. But that's how I'm made" (239).

Atómstöðin has the following dedication: "This book is written in memory of Erlendur í Unuhúsi (died February 13, 1947). To no one do I owe a greater debt of gratitude." In the character of the organist Laxness has immortalized certain essential qualities of this unusual man, Erlendur Guðmundsson of Unuhús (1892-1947), who from the very beginning of Laxness' literary career had not only been a support to him, but had also represented, in Laxness' view, an ideal of broadminded humanity. The author endows him with an inner freedom which seems to make him virtually independent of material things—one of those few "who use this world as if they used it not." The organist shows a kind of universal understanding for everything human and a quite unconventional, smiling objectivity in his view of people's actions.

The character of the organist is perhaps most beautifully and clearly revealed in an episode involving him and Ugly. After returning from the country, where she has spent the summer, she is given temporary accommodation at her teacher's house. The father of her child, a young ex-policeman, has ended up in prison after optimistically collecting orders and receiving payment for goods he had not yet obtained. A very large sum of money is needed to set him free. Once the organist is certain of the girl's loyalty to her child's father he hands her, without further ado, a large bundle of bank notes. While she is accepting this fortune, overwhelmed, he begins to cut the most beautiful flowers from among his potted plants and to arrange them in a bouquet. At their parting it comes to light that he has sold his house and intends to move:

"Where will you go?" I said.

"The same way as the flowers," he said.

"And the flowers?" I said. "Who will look after them?"

"Flowers are immortal," he said, and laughed. "You cut them in the autumn and they grow again in spring—somewhere" (273).

Shortly afterwards Ugly stands in the square and witnesses Búi Arland playing his part as a coffin bearer in the drama which centers around the remains of the Nation's Beloved Son. Sell the country, bury bones. "I looked around for the quickest way out of this square, pressed my bouquet of flowers closer

to me and started to run. What would life have been worth to me if there had not been these flowers?" (276).

The final meeting between the organist and Ugly testifies to the mysticism which in Laxness conflicts so peculiarly with his harshly rational view of society. In these key characters of the novel he has found expression for his faith in the future of man. The organist's flowers—these immortal flowers—in the arms of this girl from northern Iceland indicate the futility of every kind of treason against humanity; they are a symbol of life's indestructibility. Indeed, the author at one stage thought of giving this book the title of "Ódauðlegu blómin" or "Ófeigu blómin" (The Immortal Flowers, The Undying Flowers).²

IV *Atómstöðin and Reality*

Atómstöðin was undoubtedly a spear thrown with the warrior's intention of wounding and killing—if indeed we should not rather compare it with a bomb. Certain circles within Icelandic society were deeply offended by it, for all their attempts to see it as nothing but an uncontrolled outburst of fury, a *roman à clef*, and a political lampoon.

In spite of this, however, *Atómstöðin* in no way betrays any prejudiced kind of political inspiration or purpose. As far as we can judge, the atom station is, broadly speaking, the symbol of a certain disintegration or explosion of accustomed ideas and associations. The Reykjavík of the war years, with its trade boom and its hectic life of business and pleasure, offered a background favorable to all kinds of picturesque types and eccentricities. And indeed, *Atómstöðin* has a rich array of characters, some of which are exceedingly bizarre: the two "gods," for instance—Benjamin, "the atom poet," and Briljantín (Brilliantine), the father of the twins—or the spiritualist medium, Óli fígúra, the all of these the author has models in the external world, of which are more obvious than others. The very action of the book also has elements of fantasy—even though the author, as we have already indicated, perhaps keeps closer to real life in Iceland than may seem apparent to an outsider.

But photographic realism has certainly never been Laxness' main concern, and in spite of all its reminiscences of real people and events it would be absurd to regard *Atómstöðin* as a kind of *roman à clef*. The author is bent on presenting a synthesis,

an artistically intensified experience of things. His tendency towards bold stylization culminates sharply in this book, which thus acquires a fiercer rhythm than the broader narrative flow of the epic in *Síðlfstætt fólk* or *Íslandsklukkan*, for example. But this is exactly the way in which Laxness, with brilliant intuition, has captured the scattered and hectic features of the environment he wishes to describe.

CHAPTER 9

The Happy Warriors

I "The Ancient Books" and "the Hidden Sources"

WITH *Atómstöðin* Laxness had plunged directly into the Icelandic world of his own times. His next novel, *Gerpla* (The Happy Warriors), which was published in 1952, deals with Vikings of around the year 1000. It testifies in its own way to the contrasts and vigorous oscillations in his art; although in Iceland it is not unusual to find the old and the new in close and direct proximity to each other. In *Atómstöðin* Laxness had also given bold play to the contrast between modern Reykjavík and Uglá's native heath in northern Iceland. For the few farmers remaining in Eyrstrídalur the heroes of ancient Iceland are ever-living characters. These farmers see their own existence in the light of the *söguöld*.

For a long time past, the Icelandic sagas have acted as a stimulus for Scandinavian fiction, both in style and choice of subject. Iceland's own writers have, of course, been no exception to this. As a model of style the sagas must, for them, have a deeper meaning than for writers of other nations. This is primarily due to the fact that the Icelandic language itself has to such a remarkable degree preserved its link with the past. The Icelanders do not, as do other Scandinavians, have the feeling of moving in a linguistically foreign world when they read their medieval literature in its ancient linguistic form.

When Laxness followed in the footsteps of the saga writers with his *Gerpla* he did not go to work unprepared. He devoted four years to his new work from the time that he began it in Rome in the autumn of 1948. But the idea of writing something in the manner of *Gerpla* is probably older. *Íslandsklukkan*, indeed, may in some measure be regarded as a stopover on the road