

# Soldiers and Other Monsters

## The Allied Occupation in Icelandic Fiction

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ABSTRACT: Wars and arms long remained a foreign phenomenon in Iceland until the country was occupied by Allied forces during WWII. Although the occupation was a “friendly” one and the army brought unprecedented wealth to the country, the presence of a foreign military was objectionable and distressing to many. Literature, historiography, and scholarship on the occupation have long been obsessed with the so-called *ástandskonan* (woman fraternizing with soldiers), the perceived incarnation of an invaded and polluted nation. This article examines the response of Icelandic fiction writers to the occupation through the figure of the soldier instead. A focus on fictional representations of the soldier enables us to see how writers imagine the occupation and its consequences for the nation, its culture, and, not least, for an injured sense of manhood.

RÉSUMÉ : Les guerres et les armes demeurèrent de longue date un phénomène étranger en Islande, jusqu'à ce que le pays soit occupé par les forces alliées pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Bien que l'occupation ait été « amicale » et que l'armée ait apporté une richesse sans précédent au pays, la présence d'une armée étrangère était importune et éprouvante pour beaucoup. La littérature, l'historiographie et les études de l'occupation ont longtemps été obsédées par la soi-disant *ástandskonan* (la femme fraternisant avec des soldats), l'incarnation perçue d'une nation envahie et polluée. Cet article examine la réponse des auteurs de fiction islandais à l'occupation plutôt à travers la figure du soldat. L'accent mis sur les représentations fictives du soldat nous permet de voir comment les auteurs imaginent l'occupation et ses conséquences pour la nation, sa culture, et, non des moindres, un sens de la virilité blessée.

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Iceland was occupied by British forces on 10 May 1940 to prevent the island from falling into Nazi hands. The Icelandic authorities were aware of these plans, but neutrality was a key element in Icelandic foreign policy. When the occupation became a fact in the early hours of that May morning, it was therefore formally opposed by the government as a violation of Icelandic sovereignty, even though, in practice, the authorities knew that it had become inevitable at that stage and that there was little they could do about it.

The occupation constituted a watershed in Icelandic history. It was the first time that Iceland was involved in a war: it had no army and no military tradition. While Iceland was still a part of the Danish realm, the responsibility for its defence officially lay with the Danish authorities, although it was Iceland's location in the North Atlantic ocean on the European periphery that had, for the most part, protected it from foreign aggression.<sup>1</sup> War was thus something most Icelanders considered an alien phenomenon: something profoundly un-Icelandic that happened elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Suddenly, however, it was no longer just elsewhere: Iceland had been drawn into a world war. Two hundred and thirty Icelanders lost their lives to the war—most of them at sea, some abroad, a few even in concentration camps. Soldiers lost their lives here as well. The British were, for the most part, replaced by American soldiers in 1941.

When the British army brought the Second World War to Iceland's doorstep, Icelandic society changed almost overnight. There was profound shock at being confronted with an alien military force. Many found the sight of armed foreign soldiers walking around the Reykjavik streets and crowding buses with their bayonets deeply disturbing and feared that an Allied army presence would in fact make Iceland a target. But there was also excitement: the army brought work, money, opportunities, and it opened the floodgates of modernity, consumer goods, mass entertainment. Foreigners, who had always been few and far between, now virtually outnumbered the locals in Reykjavik. This aspect of the war was often referred to as an *ævintýri*, an exciting adventure that offered unprecedented possibilities for people who had never known opportunity of any kind, only poverty and drudgery.

Considering the fact that the Allied occupation of Iceland marks a sea change in Icelandic history, it has received remarkably little attention in Icelandic historiography. In his chapter on Iceland in *Nordic Narratives of the Second World War*, the historian Guðmundur Hálfðanarson suggests that the main reason for this lack of attention is that it does not fit into the Icelandic national narrative, which relies on a view of Icelandic history in which the centuries under Danish rule represent an era of poverty and humiliation resulting from foreign oppression. This national narrative places Icelandic identity firmly in the position of the small, put-upon, peaceful, defenceless nation that constantly has to guard itself against foreign aggression. As Hálfðanarson puts it:

Since the beginning of the so-called struggle for independence in the nineteenth century, historians and political commentators have stressed the adverse effects of foreign rule on both the economy and culture. Only through full sovereignty of the Icelandic state and the preservation of their national culture, or so the story goes, could Icelanders establish a prosperous society.  
(80)

Icelandic war and postwar prosperity are of course proof of the very opposite.

As a result, the war years in Iceland have only tended to be briefly discussed in official histories and are barely commemorated in public ways at all. Where this does happen, the war is presented as a foreign event of which Icelanders are entirely innocent, while any discussion of Iceland during the Second World War focuses on the economic boom, the modernization of Icelandic society, and the relations between soldiers and Icelandic women (Neijmann and Guðmundsdóttir; Neijmann 2014). Work by scholars such as Hálfðanarson shows that this is now beginning to change, but only very gradually. Certainly the kind of critical revision that has been taking place in other European countries in recent decades, where tidy, simplified narratives of World War II constructed during the early postwar years are challenged, has not yet happened in Iceland.

Often it is literature we need to turn to in order to find what historiography won't tell us: the complexity of individual experiences and emotions, memories silenced by official versions of history, alternative or "unspeakable" stories. However, literature can also be instrumental in the construction of public memory and forgetting, by giving narrative shape to confusing, uncontainable experiences, creating discursive order out of chaos, and providing convenient explanations and justifications to protect a national sense of self against profoundly unsettling anxieties in the face of a perceived overwhelming threat. This raises the question what Icelandic literature can tell us about responses to the Second World War and whether it fills in the gaps left by Icelandic historiography in this respect.

As was mentioned earlier, relations between Icelandic women and foreign soldiers, known in Iceland as the *ástand* or "situation," dominate historical accounts of the occupation. When we look at literary works that deal with Iceland during the Second World War, it quickly becomes clear that they constitute an even more prominent theme in Icelandic literature, bordering on obsession. In his discussion of two Icelandic occupation novels, Kristinn Kristjánsson remarked in 1984 that it often seemed as if nothing else happened in Iceland during the war years, and he concludes his analysis by suggesting that women provided a convenient scapegoat for a national sense of resentment and guilt, as they were a far easier target than the army. It is therefore neither surprising nor unwarranted that what little scholarly attention Icelandic occupation literature has received has dealt exclusively with the representation of women.<sup>3</sup> As necessary and revealing as these studies of the so-called *ástandskona* [situation woman] have

been, however, I think the time has now come to widen our focus, to see what more Icelandic fiction can tell us about Icelandic responses to World War II and the occupation. In this article I discuss representations of the wartime occupation in Icelandic fiction and examine how the presence of a large foreign army was adopted into the Icelandic literary imagination.<sup>4</sup> I focus my discussion on the figure of the soldier as the personification of the occupation: the embodiment of war and military might, a focus of attraction and revulsion, and, not least, an alien presence.

## The Soldier

Little could have appeared as aggressively foreign, or Other, in Iceland during the 1940s as the figure of the soldier, a symbol of an invading and occupying military force: his arms, his uniform, his behaviour based on military protocol—all of these and more would have been profoundly and utterly alien to the small Icelandic community, which was only just beginning to emerge out of five centuries of social and economic isolation and stagnation. The predicament of turning into literary narrative the overwhelming magnitude and unprecedented atrocities of a modern war, which, in Marina MacKay's words, "managed to turn into a battleground everything it touched" (1), proved challenging enough for writers from belligerent countries with a tradition of war literature behind them. How did Icelandic authors deal with this challenge of giving literary shape, voice, and meaning to an occupying army force—and what do their attempts tell us about the ways in which Icelanders made sense of it?

Remarkably, the author of the first novel about the occupation, *Verndarenglarnir* (1943) [The Guardian Angels] by Jóhannes úr Kötlum, features a returning Icelandic soldier as one of the main protagonists, in an attempt to convey the terrible reality of war to a readership for whom war lacks all reality. The author clearly bases his protagonist on the experiences of an Icelander who went to fight in the Spanish Civil War and whose memoirs had been published, thus bringing the war experience home.<sup>5</sup> In the novel, the farmer's son Haraldur returns a wounded man, both physically and mentally, suffering from survivor's guilt, being the only one of his regiment and his friends to survive after having been betrayed by the British authorities. Haraldur's behaviour displays all the characteristics of what we would nowadays call trauma, obsessed by events too profoundly shocking to integrate into his memory and his sense of self, including the fact that being a soldier has made him a killer.<sup>6</sup> As a soldier, Haraldur's character is clearly meant to show that war is not an attractive adventure but a very brutal and bloody business that only leads to destruction and is alien to the Icelandic self.

The novel also features British soldiers, including a detailed description of the occupation of Iceland on the morning of the 10th of May 1940. Their portrayal

in this novel is characteristic of most portrayals of the occupying army in Icelandic fiction, which may be summarized as follows. Disembarking from large foreign ships is a faceless, nameless presence, which is described with the focus firmly on those aspects most unfamiliar to Icelanders: its uniformity, its “automated” (disciplined and controlled) behaviour, and the carrying of arms. For some, primarily women and children, the sight is an attractive and exciting one in its exoticness and its promise of change in a largely static, isolated, uneventful society. For the large majority of authors, however, this view is condemned as childish, unpatriotic, and dangerously naive. For them, the army is symbolic of an act of aggression against Iceland and a sign of imperialist power violating the rights of small, peaceful nations. In *Verndarenglarnir*, for instance, the soldiers are described as tin soldiers behaving like mindless automatons, which immediately reduces them to toys and machinery (46–47). Other descriptions focus on uniforms and military paraphernalia such as decorations, helmets (often referred to as “steel pots”), weapons, and boots. Many novels and stories include an account of the local streets filling with endless rows of marching soldiers, the noise of their steel boots, and of orders being shouted. The general reaction among the local population in these descriptions is one of utter bafflement and incredulity at the entire spectacle.

Once the occupation is a fact and the army has installed itself in tents, public buildings, and, later, barracks, it remains a presence hovering in the background in literary texts that focus on the effects of the occupation on Icelandic characters exclusively. Here, we find general references to soldiers at best, and, if any individuals are featured at all, they are defined by their uniforms or positions and are referred to by their military titles rather than names: “the major,” “the lieutenant,” “the commander,” “the officer”—or sometimes, quite simply, “the soldier.” And just as titles replace names, the military uniform seems to erase individual looks, for there are very few descriptions of personal looks. Significantly, when looks are described, they tend to focus on features that these fictional soldiers all seem to share: they are almost invariably “dark” (*dökkt/svart hár, dökkur yfirlitum*), they often have moustaches, they have a curved nose and sharp, even steel-like facial features. If we consider these general characterizations, it would seem that the soldiers are, first and foremost, described in terms which emphasize their status as “other” from the Icelandic self: uniformed, dark men associated with steel who either give or obey orders and lack all individuality. While this is in itself not an unlikely portrayal of soldiers, I would suggest that, in an Icelandic context, more can be read into this. In a society that is characterized by individuality, denying that individuality may be regarded as an act of resistance, a refusal to recognize its armed occupiers as fellow human beings and see them instead as representatives of an alien, anonymous force.

## A Threatened Masculinity

Deflating the power of the occupying army and its representatives certainly is a common strategy in occupation fiction. Several texts emphasize the fact that most of the weapons brought by the British are in fact useless or even fake, as in Indriði G. Þorsteinsson's novel *Norðan við stríð* (1971) [*North of War* 1981], where a painted telephone pole is meant to convince the enemy that it is in fact an anti-aircraft gun (195), and where even the troop commander himself refers to the invading army as "a group of ambassadors wearing boots" (1981,13). In Elías Mar's highly ironic short story, "Átökin um Skólavörðuholt" (1950) [The Fight over Skólavörðuholt], the British are referred to as an "unarmed" nation and their barbed wire, fortresses built with sandbags, and guns as make-belief (22). In these texts, the soldiers are disarmed as a fake and the war as a game played by imperial powers. "The more sandbags and barbed wire, the more real the war becomes," as the narrator in *North of War* puts it (23). In Þorgeir Þorgeirsson's tale "Toni frændi" (1974) [Uncle Toni], American soldiers are exposed as the cowards that they are when the narrator's uncle, a giant of a man with a fat face, false teeth, and a heart of gold, suddenly appears in the doorway of the family's wartime home, which the soldiers had invaded believing there to be only women and children inside:

Sá herstyrkur sem var um þær mundir að sigrast á Hitler og Mússólíni, ... , hann riðlaðist og flúði undan Tona frænda mínum án þess að Toni segði aukatekið orð eða blakaði hendi við neinum.

Það væri rangt að segja að hermenn Roosevelts hafi hlaupið, þeir duttu hver um annan út úr húsinu og niður af tröppunum.  
(76)

[The power of the same army that was at that very time getting the better of Hitler and Mussolini ... here became disorganized and fled from my uncle Toni without him having to say a single word or make a single gesture.

It would be wrong to say that Roosevelt's soldiers had run—they toppled over each other, out of the house and down the steps.]<sup>7</sup>

In other words, while the British are powerless, the Americans are just cowards when it comes right down to it.

This last instance, of course, smacks of more than just a little "Icelandic masculinity restored" after the humiliation of having been occupied by a force of foreign men. This impression is reinforced by an earlier vignette in the same tale, where the American soldiers are shown to behave with colonial arrogance as they laugh and enjoy watching Icelandic youngsters pick up everything they throw away. Many critics who have written on gender and war have pointed out

that the defence of home and country constitutes an important part in traditional definitions of hegemonic masculinity.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in situations of conflict, the enemy, or Other, becomes a negative figure of the positive attributes of national masculine ideals. In the words of Joane Nagel: “hegemonic masculinity is enlisted in the service of defending the nation, and ‘enemy’ men and women are sexually constructed as simultaneously oversexed and undersexed Other men and promiscuous... women” (398).

This is exactly what we find so prominently reflected in Icelandic occupation fiction: the military power and aggression embodied by the occupying army is immediately sexualized by a male population that deeply felt its humiliation at having failed to protect its country from foreign invaders, who are now polluting the national body through their sexual relations with local women (Björnsdóttir 1989; Þorvaldsdóttir). This is exacerbated by the fact that war in the form of military occupation constitutes an invasion of the home. What is originally a place of private shelter becomes a place of public conflict, reverberating with moral ambiguities and civil tensions. In an address to the nation following the occupation, the Icelandic Prime Minister urged Icelanders to continue their daily lives and avoid contact with the occupying soldiers as much as possible, but otherwise to treat them with courtesy, as “guests.”<sup>9</sup> This advice encapsulates precisely the contradictions inherent in the occupation experience. In her discussion of French occupation narratives, Margaret Attack points to the difficulties involved in writing about this experience, what she calls the “strange situation of ‘not at peace, not at war,’” “both familiar and other,” where “nothing has changed and everything has changed,” and where the “guests” have imposed their presence with the force of military might (80).

The soldier as the embodiment of a sinister threat, a superior military might masking behind a smiling courtesy, makes an appearance in many narratives of the occupation. Most commonly, he appears in the guise of the older, married, sexually aggressive officer hiding behind a smart appearance, politeness, and generosity, in order to fool and seduce Icelandic girls half his age who end up deceived and pregnant. An example is the British officer in Einar Kristjánsson Freyr’s short story “Gjafir elskhuganna” (1955) [The Lovers’ Gifts], who in this way seduces the girl the main protagonist, Ásbjörn, fancies but with whom he has no chance. Early in the morning this officer, Benton, married with two children at home, sneaks out of the girl’s house like a thief in the night, quickly slipping into his role of military commander as an army unit marches past,

sveiflandi höndunum fram og aftur með lítið prik í hægri hendi. Lítið prik? Það er ekki rétt. Þetta er sproti af sama bergi sprotinn og veldissproti konungsins, táknað áhrif Bentons og völd í stjórn brezka heimsveldisins.  
(38)

[swinging his arms back and forth, with a small stick in his right hand. A small stick? That's not correct. This is a staff that originates from the same source as the king's royal sceptre, symbolizing Benton's influence and the influence and power of the British Empire.]

Thus the hypocrisy and moral corruption of imperial power is exposed. Ásbjörn's feelings of inferiority towards the soldiers is clear throughout the story, for instance as he watches one cheerily jumping over the fence across the road, a high fence which only the most agile of gymnasts could traverse in such a light manner, "laglegur maður..., dökkhærður og fínlegur. Hann er léttur í spori... Hann svífur áfram" [a handsome man... dark-haired and delicate. He is light on his feet... He almost floats] (28). Ásbjörn himself in comparison smells so badly of fermented meat that his landlady gives him a stern warning to clean up or leave. But then, as Ásbjörn resentfully observes: "Þessir hermenn, já, þeir hafa ekkert annað að gera en að sofa hjá stúlkum, pressa buxurnar sínar, burstu skóna sína og stökkva yfir hlið" [these soldiers, well they have nothing else to do than sleep with girls, press their trousers, shine their shoes, and jump over fences] (29).

Not all male characters are as easily intimidated as Ásbjörn or prepared simply to make a resentful retreat, however. Jón skósmiður ("the Cobbler"), the main protagonist in Theodór Friðriksson's novella of the same name (*Jón skósmiður* 1946), gives as good as he gets when Ragnhildur, the woman he fancies, is taken in by a British officer. He responds with a wonderfully humorous and sexually suggestive display of his very own staff of power:

Var það nú aðallega göngustafurinn hans, sem nokkrir gestir veittu eftirtekt. Handfangið var í laginu eins og hamar. Það var þungt – úr skíru silfri með fangamarkinu hans. Bretar gáfu stafnum auga. Það stælti hug skósmiðsins, og vildi hann sýna þeim, að hann væri engin drusla.... Hann bar stafinn hátt, eins og blikandi sverð, um leið og hann tróð sér út út forstofunni.  
(65–66)

[It was mostly his walking stick that some guests noticed. Its handle was shaped like a hammer. It was heavy – made from clear silver, containing his initials. The British looked at the stick. This hardened the cobbler's courage, and he wanted to show them that he was no worm.... He carried the stick high, like a glittering sword, as he walked out of the hall.]

Jón's symbolic message to the British is clear: he is showing off his prowess and has no intention of coming out the lesser man. He then waits outside, and when Ragnhildur and the officer appear Jón again tries to outdo his rival, this time in a show of courtesy and dignity. Eventually, his posturing pays off. Jón however



is one of only a few protagonists whose manhood remains intact in Icelandic occupation fiction (Neijmann 2013).

In the short story “Her” (1968) [Army] by Steinar Sigurjónsson, the narrator, a young boy, watches a soldier smiling while cleaning his gun and asking him if he has a sister at home to whom the boy could take him:

Hev jú sister?  
 Jes.  
 Is sí bjútifúl?  
 Jes.  
 (37)

Another is going around town with his fly down and taking out his knife when people laugh at him, while yet another cruelly cuts a cat to death.<sup>10</sup> The boy calls the soldiers “strange” and “unpredictable” (37). Similarly, Harry Blumenthal in Indriði G. Þorsteinsson’s *Norðan við stríð* is a sexually obsessed soldier suffering from mental problems, while, in the same novel, an Icelandic farmer finds himself forced to complain to the army about his cow being sexually molested. Here, soldiers are clearly portrayed as the oversexed enemy described by Joane Nagel, made especially dangerous by a tendency toward perverse and violent behaviour. And yet the girls seem to find them irresistible in nearly all works of fiction. A rare exception is Steinar Sigurjónsson’s story “Minníng” (1968) [Memory], in which an unnamed woman recalls how, only fifteen years old, a forty-something soldier got her drunk against her will and forced himself on her while she was powerless to resist.

## Children and Fairytales

The point of view of the child is of course a particularly suitable one to convey a sense of inferiority, powerlessness, and fear, especially where these are not really socially acceptable emotions for male adults. In the short story “Toni frændi,” mentioned earlier, the narrator is also a young boy who remembers the threatening behaviour of drinking soldiers who invade his home one night in search of entertainment. The boy is so scared that he hides in the loft, while his mother clasps a hot poker, ready to strike. Dagný Kristjánsdóttir (2010) has suggested that this story in fact goes further than expressing mere humiliation and fear and describes the shock, even trauma, suffered by the Icelandic population in the face of military occupation and living with an armed foreign presence. In an untitled short story, the author Álfrún Gunnlaugsdóttir picks up this same theme from a certain distance in time: 1982. Here, the point of view is that of a little girl accompanying her mother on her way to get water from a well when they meet a soldier. He talks to them, but they do not understand him, what he

wants, or whether he poses a threat. The girl has no means of grasping the context of war; all she senses is her mother's fear. Consequently, while hypnotized by the gun the soldier carries, unaware of its potential danger, it is her mother's reaction that frightens her: forcefully pulling her daughter along as she runs home as fast as she can. The girl's complete lack of understanding of what is going on, her inability to understand and express her feelings and reactions—especially her fear—could easily be interpreted as symbolizing the reaction of Icelanders to being occupied by a military power and living with armed soldiers whose language, behaviour, and intentions they do not understand, both exuding a hypnotic attraction and inducing an inexpressible terror.<sup>11</sup>

Lack of a shared language can clearly aggravate an already tense situation, impeding understanding and increasing the barrier between the native and the military population. The foreignness of the army's looks and behaviour was compounded by its inability to make its reasons and intentions clear. The sheer overwhelming numbers of soldiers meant that for many Icelanders, their home environment had become almost unrecognizable. Ólafur Jóhann Sigurðsson vividly evokes this in the novel *Seiður og hélog* (1977) [Magic and Will-o'-the-wisp] as the narrator closes his eyes and recalls the landscape of the war years in Iceland:

Ég sé þúsundir breta og bandaríkjamanna, flugvélar og herskip, fallbyssur og vígi, sandpokahleðslur, gaddavírsgirðingar, tjaldbúðir, braggahverfi, varðturna, loftskystastengur, olúgeyma, nýstárlegar vinnuvélar, skrytna bíla... Þarna gengur skozk sveit í köflóttum pilsum og leikur á sekkjapípur... Þarna standa börn hjá gaddavírsgirðingu og horfa á hermenn ráðast á pokadruslur með brugðnum byssustingum. Það ýlir í blístrum víðsvegar um borgina, ljós slokkna, menn þyrpast niður í kjallara, í loftvarnarbyrgi, en gífurlegar skotdrunur kveða við í fjarska. Æfing? Árás? Kona biður guð að hjálpa sér, en talar um hárgreiðslu innan stundar, þegar skothríðin þagnar.  
(103)

[I see thousands of British and Americans, airplanes and military ships, cannons and fortifications, piles of sandbags, barbed-wire fences, tents, whole districts full of barracks, watch towers, radio masts, an oil container, strange new machines, weird cars... There goes a Scottish regiment in chequered skirts playing the bagpipes... Over there, children are standing by a barbed-wire fence and watch soldiers attack tattered bags with drawn bayonets. Across the city a howling, whistling sound, lights go off, people crouch in basements, in air-raid shelters, as the severe thundering of explosions resounds in the distance. An exercise? An attack? A woman asks God to help her and talks about a hair-do in the next instance as the firing stops.]

The narrator refers to this landscape in terms of the wondrous and strange, where everything is constantly changing and nothing is what it seems any longer,

calling it “haunted” and “illusionary,” and referring to the inhabitants in terms of supernatural beings (104, 295). Something similar happens in “Toni frændi,” where the military barracks in the distance are “eins og framandi heimur innan við rammlega girðingu. Yfirnáttúrulegustu farartæki gerðu sífellda umferð” [like an alien world within a sturdy fence. The most supernatural of vehicles would continuously drive about] (70-71), prompting the grandfather to observe that: “Það er, trúég, álfabyggð hérna uppmeð læknum” [I believe there are elves living over here by the stream] (71). Theodór Friðriksson’s Jón the Cobbler meanwhile refers to the spectacle of occupied Iceland as a “gömul galdrahríð” [old magical storm] (40). In these texts, Iceland becomes an otherworld, and the soldiers are directly likened to alien, supernatural beings in the landscape. Interestingly, elves have long been regarded as among the most Icelandic of supernatural beings, protectors of the land and traditional culture (Hafstein). Now, they have been replaced by American soldiers and their modern culture. This clearly reveals a sense of identity crisis, a threatened loss of self.

## Monsters

The change of Iceland into an otherworld as a result of military occupation also underscores the idea of this period as an *ævintýri*, which in Icelandic refers not only to an “adventure” but also to a “fairytale.” And the image of the soldier as it appears in all of these occupation narratives is remarkably like that of the fairytale monster. In the realm of fairytales and fantasy, the monster is the sign of something aberrant and inhuman, something that transgresses boundaries and violates the natural order and is therefore associated with horror and violence. It is a threat to what is considered good and pure, overwhelmingly powerful, generally evil, and defined by grotesque excess. As such, it inspires both terror and disgust. It is the foe that must be defeated, the ultimate Other.<sup>12</sup> In Icelandic occupation fiction, the emphasis on the lack of individuality and humanity, the “dark” look, the association with arms and violence, and the unsatiable and perverse sexual appetite of the soldier all echo the characteristics of the classical monster.

If this suggestion seems rather melodramatic in the context of an occupation by what were after all “allied” forces, it is worth considering the generally accepted interpretation of one of the modern western world’s principal monsters, the vampire Dracula, as a product of imperialism and racism, a representation of late Victorian England’s deep-seated fears of an alien invasion of the home and of reverse colonization, and the embodiment of a horror fantasy “in which self-identities are invaded by and absorbed into the Other” (Gelder 1994, 12). As Geoffrey Wall explains: “Dracula’s theft of blood defiles the patrimony, disrupts the ordered exchange of women, property and names, dissolves the serene continuity of the imperial Anglo-Saxon race” (20). If we replace “Dracula” with

“the soldier,” “theft” with “pollution,” and “the imperial Anglo-Saxon race” with “the pure Icelandic nation,” we have, I would suggest, an uncannily accurate description of the anxiety that so obviously pervades Icelandic occupation fiction. Icelandic nationalist discourse of the early twentieth century was driven by the idea of Icelandic purity—cultural and biological: Unnur Birna Karlsdóttir has written on the influence of eugenics in nationalist writing and thought, while Inga Dóra Björnsdóttir (1998) and Sigríður Matthíasdóttir have analyzed the cultural meaning of purity and femininity in Icelandic nationalist discourse. The entire rationale for Icelandic independence was built on the idea that Icelanders, thanks to centuries of isolation, had been able to preserve a unique culture, bloodline, and national character directly connected to the settlement and fostered by the land. When a foreign army invaded the *Fjallkona* [mountain woman], the female incarnation of Iceland, at a time when traditional Icelandic pastoral society was already unravelling, Icelandic identity was seriously threatened, and profound anxieties of cultural and biological contamination took over. In seducing and liberating the nation’s women, the soldier, like Dracula, “carries a biological phantasy, a masculine nightmare of femininity, of the female body, out of control... violating the territories of the body, the home and the state” (Wall 20). A monster is born.

In the short story “Tilbury” by Þórarinn Eldjárn, published in 1981, the soldier literally becomes a monster. What is particularly interesting in this highly original re-imagined folktale is the type of monster that is chosen for this purpose, as it exposes this very “biological phantasy.” The British major Tilbury, who is widely rumoured to have a sexual relationship with the beautiful archdeacon’s daughter Guðrún Innness, turns out to be a *tilberi* (pronounced almost the same as “tilbury”), or “carrier,” an Icelandic folkloric creature created and nursed by women through the use of black magic. The purpose of this creature is to steal milk from other farmers’ ewes and cows and bring it to its creatress or “mother.” When it is inactive, it sucks blood from the inside of its mother’s upper thigh. On the surface, tales about these creatures contain a moral warning against greed and theft. However, as a perverted product of woman’s creative and reproductive power, the nature of the *tilberi* clearly reveals a deep-seated patriarchal fear of the female body and woman’s control over it. By making Guðrún’s alleged soldier-lover a *tilberi*, the author thus brings into focus the “masculine nightmare” of the pollution of the patrimony and a female body out of control underlying so much Icelandic wartime fiction. At the same time, the revelation of the British soldier as a *tilberi* completely subverts the idea of wartime social, economic, and cultural “contamination” by a foreign invader, as he turns out to be an entirely homegrown creature. And while, in creating a *tilberi* in order to amass wealth, Guðrún certainly is guilty of greed (and pays the price for it, for the creature kills her in the end), it is not just the women who receive the blame in this tale, for the men are all

working for the British army for the exact same reason: to make as much money from the wartime situation as possible.

## The Soldier's Perspective?

The question may arise at this point whether the soldiers themselves get a voice at all in Icelandic fiction of the occupation to tell their side of the story. There are indeed a number of literary works that feature the soldier's point of view. Halldór Stefánsson's short story even carries an English title: "England expects every man will do his duty" (1943). The story is told from the point of view of Tommy Atkins, a young farmworker who has just got engaged and managed to scrape together enough money to buy his own farm when England calls on all its young and able men to defend their country. Although inconvenient, Tommy responds when his country calls. Soon, however, grave doubts set in. In what way is he defending his country by being stationed in some miserable place overseas, which the Germans surely would never bother with anyway? Tommy thinks very little of Iceland and finds its people rather contemptible for allowing themselves to be occupied without resisting. He does not understand either why they are ordered to walk around armed everywhere—"sú glæpsamlega hugsun tók að ásækja hann að herstjórnin væri að leika skrípaleik á þessu eyðiskeri, í stað þess að beina geiri sínum að hjarta fjandmannsins" [the criminal thought even occurred to him that the army leadership was playing out a farce on this rock in the ocean—instead of aiming its force at the heart of the enemy] (336).

Clearly, the soldier's perspective here serves not as a counterpoint to the dominant view but as a projection, a narrative ploy to present a local position from a different, and more striking, angle. This impression is reinforced when Tommy expresses his contempt for the behaviour of Icelandic women towards the soldiers in terms similar to those used by Icelandic male protagonists: the women appear to regard the occupation as a stroke of luck and all the talk in the barracks is about how they provide the soldiers with many hours of delight.

In the end, Tommy becomes drunk and loses all control of himself, going out into the street waving a pistol. He has been enlisted to fight a war, but there appears to be no fight: "Þetta var fábánalegt stríð og herstjórnin bandvitlaus. Ef hann fengi að ráða, skyldi verða vaðið beint inn í land óvinanna og þeir skotnir eins og hundar, í stað þess að vera að halda hernum á kvennafari norður á pól" [This was an idiotic war and the military leaders completely crazy. If he were in charge they would go straight into the enemies' country and shoot them like dogs, instead of having the army skirt-chasing here on the North Pole] (329). Finally he is shot down, his death as pointless as the war itself. The message is clear: even the soldiers themselves come to realize they are mere pawns in a crazy game of war without purpose. The army has no business being in Iceland, and, in

the end, the ordinary soldiers are as much a victim in this game as the Icelanders are. There is clearly sympathy here for the fate of the common soldier.

There is, however, no sympathy at all for Icelandic women. This contempt for women across national borders is a prominent feature in many texts that include the soldier's point of view. In the novel *Dansað í björtu* (1947) [Dancing by Daylight] by Sigurður B. Gröndal, entire chapters are devoted to the situation of the soldiers stationed in Iceland. The unnamed "major" consistently shows understanding for the predicament in which Iceland finds itself. He attempts to explain this to his men and repeatedly urges them to show dignity and respect, reminding them that they are the King's soldiers who have wives waiting for them at home, but they care little:

- Já, heima, heima – en við erum ekki heima, og heldur ekki í hernaði. Við erum í ævintýri, og við eigum að njóta þess á meðan er – við verðum sendir í eldinn fyrr eða seinna.  
(25)

[Yes, at home, at home – but we aren't at home, and neither are we engaged in warfare. We find ourselves in an adventure, and must enjoy it while we can – we will be thrown into the fire sooner or later.]

When the major points to the damage that they may be doing to Icelandic society with their womanizing, one of his officers retorts: "Óg í einlægni sagt, svona okkar á milli – hvað varðar mig um stelpuskjástur hér norður í ishafi!" [To be frank, and just between us, what do I care about wenches here in the frozen North!] (26). To them, Iceland is a paradise where they have a last chance to enjoy themselves before they enter the hell of the battlefield.

For the ordinary soldier, meanwhile, it is not quite so easy to get access to Icelandic girls. In the same novel, one soldier has to resort to stealing army goods to bribe Icelandic men so he can sleep with their sisters and daughters, something that the narrator excuses along with the material opportunism of Icelandic men:

Eiginlega gat [Nonni] ekki reiðzt Bobb; þegar litið var á framferði hans með góðgirni (en af henni átti Nonni mikið) var það auðskilið. Bobb vildi hafa sem mest út úr lífinu undir þessum kringumstæðum – og nákvæmlega það sama vildu þeir feðgarnir!  
(86)

[[Nonni] couldn't really be angry at Bob; when his behaviour was regarded with goodwill (and Nonni possessed much of that) it was easy to understand. Bob wanted to get as much as possible out of life under the current circumstances, and so did he and his father!]

Meanwhile, when Páll Jónsson and his friend in Ólafur Jóhann Sigurðsson's *Seiður og héliog* get drunk and want to beat up soldiers for stealing their girlfriends, the soldiers laugh and tell them that girls are only for officers (91), while the agile soldier in "Gjafir elskhuganna" has to resort to stealing underwear from an obliging washing line to give to his Icelandic girlfriend.

Eggert Hansson in the novel *Félagi kona* (1947) [Partner, Wife] by Kristmann Guðmundsson finds Iceland to be the very opposite of a paradise. He befriends a Canadian and an American officer because they constitute more cultured and interesting company than he is able to find in Reykjavik. Here, too, however, the soldiers' predicament is presented as an excuse for their behaviour:

Í höfuðborg Íslands söfnuðust tugir þúsunda af útlendum æskumönnum. Þeir vissu, að bráðlega yrði þeim skipað út í dauðann, og flýttu sér því að teygja af bikar lífsins, eins ört og frekast varð við komið. Og Reykjavík var björt og hlý. Í danssölunum biðu þeirra fegurstu konur heimsins,—kaldar og harðlyndar að vísu, en ungar, lífsþyrstar og töfrandi!  
(76)

[In Iceland's capital tens of thousands of foreign young men were gathered. They knew that soon they would be ordered to their deaths and rushed to swallow from the cup of life, as fast and best they could. And Reykjavik was bright and warm. In the dance halls the most beautiful women in the world awaited them—cold and hard-hearted, admittedly, but young, thirsting for life, and enchanting.]

Eggert and the two officers are united in their contempt for Icelandic women, whom they regard as completely heartless and opportunistic.

The strange situation in which the army finds itself in Iceland is also described sympathetically in *Norðan við stríð*, where the soldiers try to turn their barracks into homes by creating little gardens, concerned for their loved ones back home and eagerly awaiting post. The commanders realize that:

Það er ekkert helvítis grín að sitja með nærri fjögur þúsund manns á lófastórum bletti langt úti í ballarhafi, og ekki nokkra nazistablók að hafa fyrr en í Noregi. Auk þess öll hús full af eiginkonum og dætrum.  
(Þorsteinsson 205)

[It's no damn joke to be stuck with nearly four thousand men in a spot no larger than the palm of your hand far out in the Ocean of Nowhere, while the nearest Nazi bloke is in Norway and every house is filled with wives and daughters.]  
(56)

Any sexual relations between soldiers and Icelandic women in these works are blamed almost squarely on the uncontrollable lust of women. When Jón Falkon,

who has acted as interpreter and worked closely with the troop commander, finally invites the commander home, his wife practically throws herself at him, while another wife is described, disturbingly, as inviting and enjoying her rape by a soldier.<sup>13</sup> In a short story by the same author, called “Kona skósmiðsins” (1951) [The Cobbler’s Wife], all the young boys grow very fond of the soldiers, especially one they call Nikki, and they become incensed when he is “seduced” by the cobbler’s wife. When Nikki receives word shortly afterwards that his wife and children in London have died in a bombing, he shoots himself—dead not because of the war but because of the lust of an Icelandic woman.

These texts thus seem to indicate that even occupiers and occupied unite against a common greater enemy: woman. In patriarchy, a suspicion of and contempt for women creates a bond between men that exceeds all politics and nationalisms it seems.<sup>14</sup> Clearly, the anxieties embedded in these occupation texts are also importantly inspired by the threat that women’s freedom to negotiate their own lives, bodies, and natures poses to the patriarchal order, as well as to the body of the state and the home. Here, the monster is the liberated woman no longer under the control of men.

## A Woman’s Perspective

This raises the question how female authors represent the figure of the soldier. My research suggests that, in fact, the large majority of women authors stayed well clear of this explosive subject that could so easily be used against them. If any soldiers appear at all in their works, they are usually well in the background, while a few women authors are in fact quite as fierce in their condemnation of the occupation and of women who consort with soldiers as any male author.<sup>15</sup> When looking very closely, however, it is possible to find an occasional courageous attempt to try and redress the balance and to present a woman’s perspective, although these attempts largely fell on deaf ears. One example is the short story “Madaman” (1955) [Madam] by the author Svana Dún (nom de plume of Svanhildur Þorsteinsdóttir). The story is told from the perspective of a middle-aged woman who runs a café in Reykjavik, called “Madam” by her neighbours because of her appreciation for the finer things in life. Attractive and lively, she has nevertheless chosen to remain single, wanting more from life than the drudgery of domestic chores, and this has isolated her in the small, uniform Reykjavik community where every day is the same.

One day, however, an army of soldiers marches through the street, bringing change, opportunity, and colour to the dreariness of life in Reykjavik. The men react the same as they do in most occupation fiction, but in this instance their perspective is challenged. Contrary to what people claim, the soldiers are completely harmless. They are in fact extremely generous, courteous, and well-mannered. Now, everyone who wants to work has work, and there is enough



of everything: nicer clothes, better food, and more varied entertainment: “Aldrei hafði verið eins gaman að eiga heima í Reykjavík og þessa síðustu daga” [It had never been as much fun to live in Reykjavik as these past days] (100). For the main protagonist, who has an enterprising nature and appreciates the finer things, life is suddenly taking a turn for the better. In other texts written by men, the fact that, suddenly, women could earn their own money and even start their own business is portrayed as another humiliation to the position of men as providers and harshly condemned as unpatriotic opportunism. Here, however, it is shown in a completely different light: as the start of a new and better life. While the men stand to lose, the women only stand to gain.

Madam’s business thrives, but her gain is not only material. One day, a middle-aged officer steps into her shop, strong-looking, courteous, and attractive: exactly the type of soldier in fact who, in other texts, would be married at home but out to corrupt innocent Icelandic young girls. This officer, however, called Mr. Bult, has only honourable intentions. He provides good company, and for the first time in her life Madam is given flowers. He invites her out for dinner and dances, and here, again, we see the supposed corruption brought by the soldiers portrayed in a different light: it is in fact the Icelanders who don’t know how to handle the new wealth and opportunities that come with the army, which they, knowing neither moderation nor good manners, squander in abandon and excess. As Madam and her officer walk through Reykjavik in the moonlight, “gátu [þau] eins verið íslenski sjómaðurinn og stúlkan hans, sem könnuðu land framtíðarinnar. Jörðin, sem þau gengu á, var jörðin þeirra” [they could just easily have been a fisherman and his girl, exploring the land of the future. The earth on which they walked, it was theirs] (106). Borders, and the wars fought over them, become irrelevant. It is a British officer who gives Madam new life. From the female perspective, the army brings civilization and courtesy and creates a situation that liberates and empowers women.

## Twenty-first-century Challenges

The idea that the army was in fact a civilizing force re-occurs in a more recent novel set partly during the time of the occupation, this time written by a man. In *Grafarþögn* (2001) [*Silence of the Grave*, 2005] by the crime writer Arnaldur Indriðason, it is an American soldier who acts as the saviour of an Icelandic woman and her children suffering horrible physical and mental abuse at the hands of her Icelandic husband. The pattern has become reversed: it is now the Icelandic man who is the monster. Icelandic patriarchy and the national narrative—with its idealization of a rural past riddled with poverty and systemized cruelty towards those least able to defend themselves—are here exposed as engendering as much violence as any foreign aggressor. It is significant, I think, that this critical reversal occurs in a crime novel, a relatively new genre in Icelandic literature (Dagsdóttir

2006). It is also quite fitting that this story of abuse and the role of the soldier are revealed to the reader as a result of the accidental discovery of a skeleton—in the ground rather than the cupboard admittedly, but it underscores the process of digging up the occupation stories that were buried because they did not fit into the national narrative, as well as revealing the violent crime that the patriarchal system and the *ástand*-discourse perpetrated on Icelandic women.

*Grafarhögn* was published in 2001. Since then, not many authors have followed in Arnaldur Indriðason's footsteps to challenge established representations of the occupation, although Arnaldur Indriðason himself has revisited this period in the crime novel *Skuggasund* (2013) [*The Man from Manitoba*, forthcoming]. A younger writer, Sindri Freysson, has written two novels that deal with the occupation: *Flóttinn* (2004) [*On the Run*] and *Dóttir mæðra minna* (2009) [*My Mothers' Daughter*]. Both these novels admittedly present a different point of view: in *Flóttinn* that of a German spy on the run from the British army in Iceland and in *Dóttir mæðra minna* that of a young girl who is arrested by the British and imprisoned in London. Remarkably, however, neither challenges in any way the underlying nationalist narrative, which portrays the British army as a brutal imperialist foreign invasion force vis-à-vis the peaceful and innocent Icelandic nation. The one novelist who has since critically challenged Iceland's role in the Second World War, Hallgrímur Helgason in *Kona við 1000°* (2011) [*The Woman at 1000 Degrees*, forthcoming], has done so with such stunning force that it has, until now at least, not engendered the kind of debate one might have expected.<sup>16</sup> In this work, Icelandic twentieth-century history is retold from the point of view of an old, irreverent, dying woman who lived abroad for much of her life and thus views this history from an international perspective. She experiences the brutality of war first-hand, initially as the daughter of an Icelandic Nazi sympathizer in Denmark, then as an abandoned teenage refugee in Germany and Poland, eventually fleeing with her father to Argentina as outcasts during the years directly after the war. When she returns to Iceland, she finds an Americanized nation grown fat on war profiteering, full of itself, yet indulging in victimhood without having any real idea nor indeed interest in the devastating effects of the war.

Looking at Icelandic occupation fiction as a whole, it becomes clear that a particular narrative developed very quickly, which has dominated the literary representation of the war years in Iceland since. Rather than filling in the gaps left by historiography, this literary narrative obsessively focuses on the same issues: the changes brought by the occupation and soldiers' relations with Icelandic women, both of which are portrayed negatively. The representation of the soldier suggests profound anxieties underlying these texts. With the collapse of the traditional Icelandic pastoral society, a foreign army force marching in, and the floodgates opened to modernity and international consumer culture, the soldier becomes emblematic of a perceived overwhelming threat to everything Icelandic,

as well as to gender identities. Although officially a “friendly” occupation force, these literary occupation narratives reveal that it is in fact regarded as an enemy—but an enemy who cannot be fought, making the threat all the more acute. The ocean that had protected Iceland for so long has been crossed, and borders have been transgressed that should have been secure, leaving the *Fjallkona* completely defenceless against contamination. The soldier as enemy exposes Iceland’s concerns: anxieties about loss of manhood and loss of traditional culture and values, about the rise of women’s freedom, about pollution and degeneration. In short, it reveals a deep-seated fear of a loss of identity. The Icelandic literary imagination responds with a defence narrative that turns the fairytale of wealth and possibility into a horror story about a transgressing monster that invades and colonizes the home and pollutes the foundations of Icelandic culture and identity. In this horror story, women, liberated through contamination by the monster, become monsters themselves. In their attempt to re-establish the boundaries of Icelandic identity, Icelandic authors remain faithful to the national narrative with but very few exceptions, casting Icelanders in the role of innocent victims of foreign aggression despite the fact that the occupation brought Iceland unprecedented prosperity and thereby laid the foundation for the modern nation it is today.

With the American army base gone since 2006, critical revision of war narratives elsewhere in full swing, and the generation that lived the occupation reaching old age, it does seem that interest in alternative aspects of the war experience in Iceland is now starting to rise. At least a few Icelandic authors have shown themselves prepared to revisit the occupation from a different perspective, where a fear of the foreign as Other is turned on its head and the monster becomes the monster within—a platform for critical examinations of how to give meaning to an Icelandic sense of self as part of a global community.

#### NOTES

1. A notorious exception are the so-called Turkish Raids in 1627, when corsairs from North Africa raided three coastal areas in Eastern and Southern Iceland and captured close to 400 Icelanders to sell into slavery in Algiers.
2. The idea of pacifism as an inalienable part of the Icelandic self-image was strongly entertained by many, not least during the heyday of Icelandic nationalism in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and found striking expression in the heated and painful controversy in the Icelandic-Canadian community over Icelandic participation in the Canadian war effort during World War I, which also made its way into literature and culminated in Stephan G. Stephansson’s collection of anti-war poems, *Vígslóði* (1920) [“Pacifist Verses,” 1987]. For an illuminating discussion on this, and on the role of pacifism in Icelandic-Canadian cultural identity generally, see Gudsteins (2001). In recent decades, this view has come under closer critical scrutiny, however, and individual Icelandic participation in military efforts abroad has for

instance received more interest (see [http://www.internet.is/baldurs/islenskir\\_hermem.html](http://www.internet.is/baldurs/islenskir_hermem.html)).

3. See for instance Baldursdóttir; Bernharðsson; Björnsdóttir 1989; Helgadóttir; Kristjánisdóttir 2002; Steinþórsdóttir; Þorvaldsdóttir.
4. As a result of postwar developments, the U.S. petitioned for and was eventually allowed a military base in Iceland, which lasted until 2006. The decision to allow a continued foreign military presence was extremely controversial and split the nation for decades to come. Those opposed to the base considered it a continuation of the occupation. In this article, however, I focus exclusively on literary representations of the Allied (British and American) occupation during World War II and not on literature dealing with the postwar military presence.
5. At least five Icelanders went to fight in the International Brigade. The experiences of one of them, Hallgrímur Hallgrímsson, were published in newspapers and, later, in *Undir fána lýðveldisins* (1941).
6. An important aspect of war trauma is to encounter an alien part of the self, not least the part that kills others, thereby destroying the fantasy of the self as peace-time subject. Haraldur is among only a handful of Icelandic characters in occupation fiction who become soldiers and thus, by extension, killers; see also Stonebridge 197.
7. All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.
8. See for instance Goldstein; Horne; Matthíasdóttir; Nagel; Yuval Davis.
9. The official broadcast on 10 May 1940 by the then Prime Minister Hermann Jónasson can be accessed on the RÚV (Icelandic National Broadcasting Service) special website on the occupation: <http://servefir.ruv.is/her/hernam3.mp3>.
10. This particular event is also mentioned in the story “Ó Guð vors lands” by the same author. In the story “Kossinn” an American soldier strangles an Icelandic girl for pure sadistic pleasure (all in *Brotabrot*).
11. In Neijmann (2012) I use trauma theory to argue that Ólafur Jóhann Sigurðsson’s trilogy on Páll Jónsson, of which *Seiður og hélog* is the second part, can also be read as a trauma text.
12. I am grateful to my colleague Úlfhildur Dagsdóttir, Iceland’s foremost specialist in monsters as a literary and cultural phenomenon, whose informative lectures originally sparked this idea of the striking resemblance between the monster and the soldier in Icelandic occupation fiction, and who directed me to relevant scholarship. In my discussion on the monster, I rely on Asma; Carroll; Gelder; Glover; Wall; and *The Horror Reader* edited by Ken Gelder.
13. This scene has been analyzed by Kristinn Kristjánsson, Helga Kress, and Gerður Steinþórsdóttir.
14. See also Gill Plain’s discussion on patriarchy’s “basic cultural assumption of women’s unreliability” (168).
15. Examples are Þórunn Elfa Magnúsdóttir’s *Snorrabraut* 7 (1947) and Ragnheiður Jónsdóttir’s tetralogy on Þóra frá Hvammi (1954–64).
16. The novel did engender debate, indeed it was highly controversial when it came out, but not because of its representation of the war and the occupation. Rather, it was the

author's treatment of the main protagonist (a historical person) that was the focus of this debate.

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