

Neijmann, Daisy, ed. 2006. *A History of Icelandic Literature*. General editor: Sven H. Rossel. *Histories of Scandinavian Literature*. 5. Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press in cooperation with The American-Scandinavian Foundation. xii + 730. ISBN: 978-0-8032-3346-1.

“At last, at last...” This is how critic Kristján Albertsson began his famous praise of Halldór Laxness’ novel *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* [*The Great Weaver from Kashmir*] in 1927. It is tempting to recycle—once more—these words, in the context of the fifth volume of the Scandinavian literary history that University of Nebraska Press and the American-Scandinavian Foundation started to publish in 1993. That year the Danish and the Norwegian volumes were released, three years later the Swedish volume appeared and in 1998 the fourth volume, devoted to the literature of Finland, saw the light of day. But it took the Icelandic literary history, originally under the editorship of Patricia Conroy, eight more years to materialize. Apparently, some authors did not turn in the chapters they had been assigned to write, and for a while the whole project came to a standstill, but due to Helga Kress’ encouragement Daisy Neijmann took up the editorial responsibilities and finished this challenging task in 2006, “against all odds” (vii). In its final form, the book is divided into eleven chapters written by fourteen scholars, all of whom are natives of Iceland, except for Neijmann herself, who writes a fine chapter on Icelandic-Canadian literature.

The fifth volume is certainly valuable as it completes the ambitious original design of the series, but it also marks a new phase in the representation of Icelandic literature abroad. Half a century has passed since the publication of Stefán Einarsson’s *A History of Icelandic Literature* in 1957, the only comprehensive study previously written in English. In a recent article, Neijmann has pointed out how Einarsson’s work was heavily influenced by nationalistic ideology, which was for instance apparent in his over-emphasis on medieval texts (almost half of his book is devoted to the Middle Ages) and in his disapproval of modernistic trends in Iceland’s contemporary literature. This, Neijmann (2006 70) claims, was typical of Icelandic literary historiography at this time, where “formal experimentation and the development of an urban literature, [was] dismissed as ‘foreign’, ‘corrupt’ and ‘un-natural’”. In her own work, there is a better balance between different periods and a more positive attitude towards the advent of modernism. But that does not necessarily mean that the modern scholars have completely freed themselves from earlier nationalistic concerns.

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The first chapter, in which Vésteinn Ólason writes on Old Icelandic poetry and Sverrir Tómasson on Old Icelandic prose, is still comparatively long, covering about one fourth of the volume. In the spirit of many earlier Icelandic scholars, such as Sigurður Nordal, Ólason emphasizes at the outset that Icelandic literature “was unlike any other European literature of the High Middle Ages” (2). His concise, well-structured discussion reveals, nonetheless, how the native poetic tradition—even the peculiar narrative poetry of *rímur*—was often shaped by foreign influences. Sverrir Tómasson in turn takes up the theme of foreign influences, challenging the conception of Nordal and his followers, and explicating how medieval Icelandic historiographers and saga-authors “employed methods that were similar to those of their counterparts abroad” (73). Tómasson is also refreshingly critical of traditional genre categories, but at times, in particular in his treatment of *Sturlunga Saga* and the Kings’ Sagas, his analysis becomes quite detailed, assuming considerable prior knowledge on the part of the reader.

In chapter two, “From Reformation to Enlightenment,” Margrét Eggertsdóttir deals with a period that the nationalistic ideology traditionally regarded as a “dark age” in Icelandic history and culture. Building on valuable recent research, including her own ground-breaking research of the baroque-poet Hallgrímur Pétursson, Eggertsdóttir provides an analysis that avoids this bias. She writes an interesting summary of the diverse works in question, a great number of which only circulated in manuscripts. Like Tómasson, she traces how “themes and ideas that were prominent in neighboring countries” (175) influenced Icelandic authors in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries and she is attentive to the important role that the church and its printing presses played in the development of the Icelandic literary system at this time. One misses here, however, a more active dialogue with earlier scholars, a dialogue similar to that found in the following chapter, “From Romanticism to Realism”, in which Þórir Óskarsson writes on the literature of the nineteenth century. Óskarsson discloses, as many scholars have done before him, how the ideas of Romanticism reached Iceland primarily from Germany and Denmark, but his depiction of the domestic literary development is more intricate than that in earlier studies. To describe the different stages of this development he employs a number of concepts: Romanticism (1807-1830), National Romanticism and Poetic Realism (1830-1843), Romantisme (1843-1848) and finally Idealism (1848-1882). And he partially substantiates his analysis by providing a revealing summary of the aesthetic debates of important Icelandic nineteenth-century authors. Óskarsson also puts the literary production of the period in a broad social and political perspective, highlighting the importance of literary societies, magazines and translated works.

In chapters four and five, “From Realism to Neoromanticism” and “Realism and Revolt: Between the World Wars”, Guðni Elísson and Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson write respectively about the period from 1880 to 1918 and 1918 to 1940. While

both of these chapters are informative they lack the dynamic quality of chapter three. Elíasson's discussion of the impact of the Danish critic Georg Brandes on Icelandic Realism and Neo-Romanticism is sound, and his analysis of Nietzschean and decadent themes in early twentieth century poetry is very revealing. But one misses a detailed discussion of social and cultural developments in Iceland after the turn of the century and a more ample treatment of other literary concepts, such as Naturalism and Expressionism. Jóhannsson's text is similarly uneven. He devotes a considerable space to individual prose works by Gunnar Gunnarsson, Halldór Laxness and Þórbergur Þórðarson, participating in an ongoing debate, originated by Halldór Guðmundsson and Ástráður Eysteinnsson, about the beginning of Modernism in Icelandic prose literature. Similarly, Jóhannsson deals neatly with certain forerunners of Modernism in Icelandic poetry in the 1920s, but his discussion of the international and political context of Social Realism in Icelandic literature, in particular social realistic poetry in the 1930s, is quite limited.

Unlike the treatment of earlier periods, except for the Middle Ages, Icelandic poetry and prose from the latter half of the twentieth century are treated separately. As a consequence, the reader gets somewhat a fractional view of the development of the Icelandic literary market and system during this epoch. Eysteinn Þorvaldsson writes on poetry from 1940 to 2000, while Ástráður Eysteinnsson takes sole responsibility for prose literature from 1940 to 1980 and joint responsibility with Úlfhildur Dagsdóttir for prose literature since 1980. In neither of these chapters is there any sign of the negative attitude of earlier scholars towards "formal experimentation and the development of an urban literature". In particular, Eysteinnsson, in his comprehensive and passionate analysis, dramatises the development of the Icelandic novel as an extended struggle between the stale paradigms of realism and the belated (and indeed welcoming) influences of modernism. In the 1950s, he writes, "the genre still guarded itself against any major disruption, allowing little space for the sporadic attempts to incorporate signs of modernity into the very structure or narrative representation of the novel" (420–21). The eventual breakthrough, in his opinion, did not come until 1966 with Guðbergur Bergsson's *Tómas Jónsson metsölubók* [*Tómas Jónsson bestseller*]. It was a novel that, in Eysteinnsson's words,

helped unleash a wave that had been swelling up and was to leave the landscape of the Icelandic novel much altered. This revolution blew up the existing epic horizon of the novel, opened its form and structure, leaving no laws of tradition unquestioned.
(423)

Eysteinnsson's striking imagery of nature is unusual for the generally moderate style of the volume, but perhaps it reveals most clearly the general—and fairly nationalistic—sensitivity expressed by most of the scholars in this volume that

even though foreign literary and cultural “waves” have often “reached Icelandic shores” quite late, the best native writers have been as progressive and cosmopolitan as those of any other cultivated nation in Europe.

The structure of Stefán Einarsson’s literary history is encyclopaedic, in particular its latter half, which primarily consists of separate entries on individual authors. The design of the chapters in Neijmann’s book is generally much more flexible and dynamic, as most of the scholars divide their focus between authors, genres, themes and aesthetic influences. In most of the major chapters, the significant role of translation in the making and shaping of Icelandic literature is also acknowledged. Informative chapters on Theatre, written by Árni Ibsen and Hávar Sigurjónsson, Children’s Literature, written by Silja Aðalsteinsdóttir, and the female literary tradition, written by Helga Kress, additionally represent a much broader definition of the concept of Icelandic literature than the one developed by Einarsson in 1957. But perhaps it would have made better sense to incorporate discussion of these literatures within the chapters dealing with separate periods. Quite a few of the women that Helga Kress writes about are, for instance, also analysed elsewhere (the discussion of the Icelandic-Canadian female author Torfhildur Hólm is actually split up between Elísson, Kress and Neijmann). In the “thematic” chapters, as well as in the chapter written by Eysteinnsson and Dagsdóttir, the treatment of the last two decades of the twentieth century is too often lacking critical engagement. In the worst cases, the text reads too much like a collection of insignificant blurbs, suggesting that it is simply too early to try to formulate an objective literary history about recently published works by living authors that the scholars in many cases know personally. Nowhere is this as obvious as in Hávar Sigurjónsson’s treatment of *his own* plays, most of which were produced in the present century (584).

As far as the editorial work is concerned, it is difficult to know to what degree Neijmann’s hands were tied by Conroy’s earlier decisions and generally by the limited availability of knowledgeable scholars in each field. Some of the scholars are recycling here texts or parts of texts already published in Icelandic and one occasionally regrets that more effort has not been put into updating information and redirecting the rhetoric of exposition away from an implied native reader towards the actual readership for which the volume is intended. A few minor editorial details raise questions. For example, why is it that only medieval poetry is presented in both the original text and translation? Are translations of other texts more reliable? Similarly, why is the useful practice of supplying page numbers for cross references set aside in Þorvaldsson’s chapter on modern poetry, where some of these references are only pointing towards specific chapters? The index is detailed but not perfect (when I was looking for the name of Kristján Albertsson, who wrote the aforementioned review of *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*, I was directed to page 364 but the discussion in question is on page 373). But irrespective of such minor imperfections, *A History of Icelandic Literature* is a

long-awaited and extensive overview that will, no doubt, be valuable for non-Icelandic students and scholars in the relevant fields for the next few decades.

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REFERENCES

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