History of Icelandic Prose writers.

Bjarni Benediktsson – Stjórnmál – Utanríkisráðherra – Utanríkismál – Saga íslenskra skálda – Skáld – Watson Kirkconnell – Acadia University – The Journal of English and German Philology - 1949

Tekið af vef Borgarskjalasafnsins

bjarnibenediktsson.is

Einkaskjalasafn nr. 360
Stjórnmálamaðurinn
Askja 2-10, Örk 8

ACADIA UNIVERSITY
WOLFVILLE, NOVA SCOTIA

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

Printed Matter

Hon. Bjarni Benediktsson,
ráðherra,
Eiríksgötu 19,
Reykjavík,
Iceland.


With compliments.

WATSON KIRKCONNELL

WOLFVILLE, N. S.

PRESIDENT, ACADIA UNIVERSITY

Reprinted from THE JOURNAL OF ENGLISH AND GERMAN PHILOLOGY
Vol. XLVIII, No. 3, July, 1949

HISTORY OF ICELANDIC PROSE WRITERS, 1800–1940. By Stefán Einarsson. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1948. Pp. 269. Cloth bound, $4.00; Paper bound, $3.50.

THIS VALUABLE book breaks new ground in its survey of the past one hundred and forty years of Icelandic prose, especially in the field of belles lettres. No comparable volume exists, and the importance of its literary history is the measure of an extensive literature that has been hitherto largely unknown to the world of scholarship outside of the Scandinavian countries. Professor Einarsson has laid under tribute the large Icelandic collection in the Cornell University Library and has rendered his work all the more authoritative by including the findings of the latest scholarly publications in Iceland itself, notably the researches of Steingrímur J. Þorsteinsson on the beginnings of the Icelandic novel, the new appreciation of Eirikur frá Brúnum by V. Þ. Gíslason, and the study of folklore and folk tales by E. Ó. Sveinsson.

The first chapter looks briefly back over the earlier prose literature of Iceland: the oral saga tradition committed to writing in the 12th century, the romances that followed in the 13th and succeeding centuries, the pious but heavy hand of the Reformation in the 16th century, the somewhat sterile erudition of the 17th century, and the Enlightenment of the 18th.

Mr. Einarsson's *terminus a quo* is 1800, and chapters II, III and IV deal with the beginnings of 19th century literature, especially in prose fiction and the drama. Chapters V and VI describe the new mobilizing of the intellectual life of the nation, through a rediscovery of its legacy of language and literature from the past and through the stimulus of such men as the Danish linguist Rasmus Christian Rask, the editors of *Fjölnir*, and the greatest personality of his time, Jón Sigurðsson. Chapter VII traces the fructifying influence on the new literature of the collecting and study of Icelandic folk tales.

With chapters VIII and IX, Romanticism is in full swing in the novel (Jónas Hallgrímsson, Benedikt Sveinbjarnarson Gröndal, Jón Thoroddsen, Magnús Grímsson, Jón Þorleifsson, Páll Sigurðsson, Jón Mýrdal, Guðmundur Hjaltason and Torfhildur Hólm) and the drama (Matthías Jochumsson and Indriði Einarsson). The next two chapters record a reaction of realism, especially associated with a group of Icelandic students in Copenhagen who launched the periodical *Verðandi* in 1882, and taking shape in the work of Gestur Pálsson and "Þorgils Gjallandi."

Almost half the book is taken up by chapters XII to XIV, presenting the full flood of modern nationalism since 1900 in a complex blending of currents, idealistic and realistic, literatures of the Soul and of the Soil, stimulated (with a time-lag) by most of the movements of Europe yet deeply based in the

traditions of the island itself. Among the scores of authors surveyed here, emphasis is given to Einar Hjörleifsson Kvaran, Guðmundur Friðjónsson, Jón Trausti, Gunnar Gunnarsson, Guðmundur Finnbogason, and Sigurður Nordal.

Chapter XV analyses at great length the "Leftist and Modernistic Writers" who attained prominence in the Twenties and Thirties; and their impact on the thinking and the literary style of Iceland is duly considered.

Not the least valuable part of the volume is that (Chapters XVI and XVII) in which he deals with the Icelandic writers of the Dispersion—those emigrants who have created an Icelandic colonial literature in Canada, the United States and Western Europe. The sheer bulk and excellence of this writing is not often realized, although the boys' stories of Jón Svensson (1857–1944) have achieved a world-wide reputation, and such Icelandic-Canadian writers as Stephan G. Stephansson (1853–1927) and Guttormur J. Guttormsson (b. 1878) have received the highest honours in Iceland itself. Other notable members of the group are Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason, Jóhannes P. Pálsson, Þorsteinn Þ. Þorsteinsson, Guðrun H. Finnsdóttir and (in English) Laura Goodman Salverson.

Most of the authors considered in this work were poets as well as prose-writers, and while their poetry is excluded by the terms of Professor Einarsson's subject, there is nevertheless a constant discreet reference to the full range of their literary interests.

Only two adverse criticisms can be levelled at an otherwise admirable volume.

The one is the large number of slips in spelling, and sometimes even in English idiom, that a final check by a native American scholar might have eliminated. Examples of solecisms are the unidiomatic use of the definite article (pp. 1, 2, 9, 21, 37, 54, 55, 57, etc.), the prepositional use of "as" where "like" is called for (pp. 35, 181, etc.), and even mistakes in English vocabulary, such as "economical" for "economic" (p. 7), "following" for "subsequent" (pp. 77, 100), "squelching" in the sense of "drinking greedily" (p. 38), "absolved" for "passed" (p. 42), "genial" for "congenial" (p. 43), "scene" for "stage" (p. 66), the obsolete use of "regiment" for "rule" (p. 67), and "furrowed" men instead of "wrinkled" men (p. 187). There is an occasional slip in translation, e.g. "antiquaries" for *Oldskrift* (p. 19), "bumblebee" for *hunangsflugur* (p. 36), and "Swan River" for *Alftavatn* (p. 232), but such errors are rare.

More serious, perhaps, is the mental astigmatism that seems to assume that all revolutionaries, whether literary or political, are virtuous, and all conservatives reprehensible. The bias is fatal in its treatment of the Communists—Gunnar Benediktsson, "one of the sincerest of men," whose "Marxian interpretation of history" is "the best history of ideas in Iceland"; Þorbergur Þordarson, who has "a strong moral sense" and "a courageous devotion to truth," being a man "seeking the naked truth alone"; and Halldór Kiljan Laxness, "ready to storm the strongholds of ignorance, superstition and vice in the name of sound common sense and civilization." Mr. Einarsson notes that Laxness visited Russia in the winter of 1932–33 and Þordarson in the summer of 1934. They could read in the Moscow daily press

of that period that death by shooting was a mandatory penalty for even petty theft (*Izvestia*, Aug. 8, 1932), that factory bosses had authority to reduce or cut off a worker's food (*Izvestia*, Dec. 5, 1932), that Andrey Vishinsky, as State Prosecutor, boasted publicly of having 700,000 OGPU-police operating in one-quarter of the districts of *one* Soviet republic (*Izvestia*, Aug. 3, 1933), that the families of citizens who fled abroad were to be sent to Siberia for from five to ten years (*Izvestia*, June 9, 1934), and that the police were given power to send any citizen to a convict labour camp for five years without trial (*Pravda*, July 11, 1934). In spite of such reading matter during their visits to Russia, Laxness and Þordarson continued to foul their own nest by vilifying the vastly freer, more prosperous and more humane civilization of their native Iceland as over against Stalin's slave empire, and Prof. Einarsson joins with them in looking hopefully forward to "a time when Laxness can describe an ideal communistic society in Iceland." To class such men as "realists" is a semantic absurdity. They are either gullible romanticists of the Left or the mendacious agents of an alien despotism.

WATSON KIRKCONNELL

Acadia University