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Jón Halldórsson of Stóruvellir and his reading circle Readings in the farming community in Iceland around 1870

ÚLFAR BRAGASON¹

For many years now I have been studying the writings of Jón Halldórsson, along with documents about him and his family. Halldórsson was born in 1838 at Neslönd by Lake Mývatn in North Iceland. He worked as a farmhand at Grenjaðarstaður and Stóruvellir but emigrated to the United States in 1872. He was a farmer in Nebraska from 1875 until 1907, and died in Chicago in 1919. The fruit of my research includes a collection of Halldórsson's letters and articles, which I published in 2005 under the title *Atriði ævi minnar* (Aspects of My Life). Sources of this nature, such as diaries, memoirs, letters or notebooks, were termed "egodocuments" by Dutch historian Jacques Presser (Miller 1992:12). The story of Jón Halldórsson is one of many tales of Icelandic emigrants to America. Each life story is unique, but similar elements are to be found in all of them (see Wong 1991). Collectively, these biographies comprise the "Saga of the Icelandic Emigration" (cp. Bougue 1994:275). Halldórsson's case is more remarkable than most, as he was one of the first Icelanders to emigrate, rejecting the advice of leading Icelandic immigrants in the New World, and striking out on his own. My project, however, has proved time-consuming, as I have over time discovered far more writings by Halldórsson than I ever expected. As I have long since realised that Halldórsson was always writing, I have undertaken further searches for his writings, both in Iceland and in America. I have traced the descendants of Jón Halldórsson, who have taken a keen interest in my research and provided me with a wealth of documents on his life and their own. Among other

¹ Translated by Anna H. Yates

things I received from America a copy of a diary kept by Halldórsson over a five-year period from 1872 to 1877, and a text which I believe is the beginning of an autobiographical essay he intended to write and publish, but which he apparently never completed – unless the remainder might be lost.

In Iceland, far fewer letters from emigrants to the New World have been published than is the case in the other Nordic countries. Nonetheless, reading letters from America is “the most direct means we shall ever have of hearing immigrants no longer living describe what they experienced in life and how it affected them” (Barton 1993:144). These are among the best sources available from the grassroots, with all their advantages and faults. Research on America letters can thus be justified with reference to grassroots history, if that is necessary. In fact, similar ideas to those on which microhistorical research is grounded may be said to be the background to the words of Solveig Zempel in her foreword to a collection of Norwegian America letters. She writes:

Because the history of this period is so often told in terms of statistics and generalities, we must seek out other sources to help us find those individual personalities concealed within the mass and understand how individual immigrants perceived and experienced the process of migration, assimilation and acculturation. Reading the personal letters of immigrants of the period helps us to do this. (Zempel 1991:xi–xii)

In addition, interest in all forms of biographical material has been growing in recent decades in the field of literary studies. Thus many scholars, principally in France and the USA, have sought to explore the characteristics of accounts of one’s own life (see e.g. Olney 1980; Anderson 2001; Smith & Watson 2010).

A case study of the life of Jón Halldórsson thus takes account of both microhistory and literary studies of (auto)biographies. It is directed at, on the one hand, egodocuments about the life of Jón Halldórsson, a common man, focussing on his agency. On the other hand, the microhistorical investigation was never an end in itself, but represented an attempt to answer greater historical questions about the Icelandic emigration to America (cp. Szijártó 2013: 53). This article is thus a part of much bigger investigation, and is concerned with Jón Halldórsson’s reading circle before he left for America and readings in the farming community in Iceland around 1870.

Informal Education

Until well into the 19th century, there were no schools in Iceland for the common people of Iceland. Davíð Ólafsson has, however, maintained that, in the study of literacy in Iceland, insufficient attention has been paid to “the juxtaposition of weak formal literacy institutions and half-heartedly implemented policies on the one hand and strong grassroots literacy practices on the other. Iceland was a country with weak institutional literacies and strong vernacular literacies” (Davíð Ólafsson 2012:66). Jón Halldórsson never went to school. The only formal education open to him was that prescribed by a royal edict of 1790 on instruction in reading and Christianity: pastors were required to monitor the instruction of children and youngsters, and young people were not accepted for confirmation in the church (normally at the age of about 14) unless they had mastered the *Shorter Catechism*. This was all the learning required of the peasantry, but males, at least, were keen to add the skills of writing and arithmetic. Teaching of these subjects was mandated by the 1880 “Act on the Instruction of Children in Writing and Arithmetic” (Loftur Guttormsson 1989:128–141; see also Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and Davíð Ólafsson 2002:187–90). In all probability Halldórsson acquired writing skills on his own initiative at an early age: when he was growing up in the region of Lake Mývatn there was on every farm “someone who knew how to write – either a man or a woman – and in some cases two, three or more,” according to the local pastor (Björn Hróarsson 1994:126). He also learned to do arithmetic, as witness his diary and letters. But Jón Halldórsson was well aware that his education was wanting. In a letter to his friend Benedikt Jónsson of Auðnir (dated on June 5 1887) he refers to himself as a “neglected child” of Iceland, mentioning that he had not even succeeded in completing his training as a saddler, when he went to America at the age of 34. In the traditional agrarian society of the early 19th century, children and youngsters learned farming skills and animal husbandry by working alongside their elders, and to many people that was satisfactory education (Edelstein 1987:373–77).

Verse, oral narratives, manuscripts and books were the principal sources of additional learning and entertainment. Jón Halldórsson’s grandfather, Gamalíel Halldórsson of Haganes, was renowned for his versifying skills, and his father in turn is reported to have had a way with words (Erlingur Friðjónsson 1959:137–39; Jón Halldórsson 2005:167–70). Few books

were published, and they were beyond the means of most people. In the early 19th century the majority of books to be found in most homes were devotional in nature. A study of books owned by people in East Húnavatns-sýsla, north Iceland, in 1800–1830 – based on probate records – revealed that fewer than one in ten of the books were on secular subjects (Sólrún Jensdóttir 1974–77). But with the Enlightenment in the latter half of the 18th century, the church gradually lost its dominant position in printing in Iceland, and more diverse reading material became available. The major innovation was the advent of periodicals and newspapers, as these addressed secular and political issues (Loftur Guttormsson 1989:143). When Jón Halldórsson's maternal grandmother, Guðrún Jónsdóttir, died in 1834, there were a little over twenty books at the farm of Kálfaströnd by Lake Mývatn, according to probate records (*Skiptabók dánarbúa í Þingeyjarsýslu XI. C. 7:156–170*). Most of them were religious in nature. But there is no reference to any manuscripts. Guðrún Jónsdóttir's son is quoted as saying that his father, Tómas Jónsson, had not been a great reader, but had read the periodical *Skírnir*, as well as saga literature – and remembered what he read (Finnur Sigmundsson 1961:419). This account suggests that Halldórsson's maternal family had such reading material as was accessible to the common people of Iceland (Loftur Guttormsson 2002:406–408). Reading of manuscripts and books did not, however, provide only entertainment and learning. Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon has argued that:

in their search for relief both from daily pressures and from moral authority, Icelandic children turned to education. Education provided them with an opportunity to distance themselves from the everyday drudgery of their working lives. Furthermore, children found comfort in and identified with themes found in literature, an integral part of the 19th century Icelandic educational process and popular culture. This empathy with literature developed because of the unique structure of Icelandic production and work methods. In other words, the interaction between work and education was crucial for children's overall growth and maturity. (Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and Davíð Ólafsson 2002:181)

Verse and narrative thus provided some kind of emotional relief, in the harsh conditions in which young Icelanders grew up.

Jón Halldórsson appears to have been unusually conscious of his lack of learning and educational opportunities, because he associated with other young men who had a better chance to pursue an education (see Sigfús Magnússon 1983:208–209). Employment on a farm – especially

a large and prosperous one – was at that time a route to learning and growth (Guðmundur Hálfðanarson 1993:43). Halldórsson found his first opportunity when employed on the estate of the Grenjaðarstaður vicarage. The parish was served at that time by Rev. Jón Jónsson and his son Rev. Magnús Jónsson, both renowned for their learning. There were many books in various languages at the vicarage, many of them on theological subjects; earlier in his career Rev. Jón Jónsson had been a teacher at the cathedral school at Hólar. His son Magnús Jónsson had an interest in healing and medicine (homeopathy), and owned a number of books on such subjects. Their library also included most of the recent Icelandic publications (Sigfús Magnússon, Lbs). Rev. Magnús Jónsson readily lent books to those who were eager to learn, and Halldórsson benefited from his generosity. From Grenjaðarstaður Halldórsson went to work on the large estate of Stóruvellir for farmer Jón Benediktsson, who had trained as a saddler in Copenhagen. He too was a bibliophile, who bought everything that was published in Icelandic (Jón Halldórsson 2005:153; Jón Sigurðsson [1953]:56). Jón intended to train as a saddler under his master's tutelage, but his responsibilities on the farm made this impossible, as his letters reveal.

In their book *Local Literacies: Reading and Writing in One Community*, David Barton and Mary Hamilton identify areas of everyday life where reading and writing are of central importance. These areas are 1) organising life, 2) personal communication, 3) private leisure, 4) documenting life, 5) sense making, and 6) social participation (Barton and Hamilton 1998:247–251; see also Davíð Ólafsson 2012). Available sources show that Jón Halldórsson applied his literacy skills in all these areas: he wrote notes and letters, read for both enjoyment and information, composed verse, kept a diary, wrote down information about the Icelandic settlement in Nebraska, recorded memories of his youth, and was a member of a reading society and a book club.

Reading Societies

During the 19th century, some interest arose in Iceland in establishing reading societies to subscribe to newspapers and periodicals, and to exchange books, both in Icelandic and other languages – mostly Scandinavian languages, as these were most likely to be mastered by the com-

mon people (Jón Jónsson 2003; see also Jóhannes Sigfinnsson 1958; Áskell Sigurjónsson 1971). Jón Halldórsson was a member of the reading society of the Helgastaðir parish from its inception in 1861. At the outset the society was presented with the library of the pastor of Helgastaðir, a total of about 120 volumes, including the major periodicals published in Icelandic, as well as collections of sagas. Two other founding members contributed books to the society's library. The society subscribed to the books published by *Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag* (the Icelandic Literary Society), and to the political periodical *Ný félagsrit*. It also purchased newspapers, which were passed around among the membership (Áskell Sigurjónsson 1971).

The intelligentsia had great faith in the educational and informative value of reading books, and in the formation of groups and organisations as being conducive to the social and political development of the rural population (Loftur Guttormsson 1990:181–182). Jón Halldórsson, shared this view. In his letters he often refers to reading books and newspapers. While his children's schooling was of great importance to him, he was obviously of the opinion that self-education and practical work experience could provide a good start in life. At any rate Halldórsson was sceptical of the theoretical teaching of agriculture, unless it was grounded in the latest practical knowledge (Jón Halldórsson 2005:133–134).

In an essay Farmer Benedikt Jónsson of Auðnir wrote, as an example of the educational value of reading, that he, Jón Halldórsson, Sigfús Magnússon of Grenjaðarstaður and Magnús Þórarinnsson of Halldórsstaðir in Laxárdalur had joined forces in 1862 to acquire foreign books, with the assistance and guidance of Rev. Magnús Jónsson of Grenjaðarstaður who himself purchased books direct from abroad, such as the first books of Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and Henrik Ibsen. They bought, for instance, Alexander von Humboldt's *Kosmos*, Benedikt Jónsson reported. In addition to the men named above, Sigurður Jónsson, son of the parliamentarian Jón Sigurðsson of Gautlönd, contributed to the process of gaining access to books: they did not only buy books, but they also borrowed volumes from owners of extensive libraries. The books were not only in Scandinavian languages, but also in German and English (see Sveinn Skorri Höskuldsson 1970:40–47). Many of the works were fiction and light reading – and no doubt this was the source of Halldórsson's observation many years later in a letter, that his uncle felt that his time was not well spent in reading Danish novels (Jón Halldórsson 2005:154). Among the books read by Jón Halldórsson (probably in Danish translation)

was *Tom Jones* by the British writer Henry Fielding. In addition to reading, the friends took an interest in music, as witness Halldórsson's letters to Benedikt Jónsson in the years before he emigrated to America. Further, the letters mention leisure pursuits, social events, dancing and drama, as well as expressing the way Halldórsson missed the company and conversation of his friends in the north. This shows that among them was some form of reading community.

In Icelandic rural homes in the 19th century, someone would read aloud in the evenings from Scripture, periodicals or saga literature. The choice of reading was generally determined by the master of the household – and it was he who doled out oil for a light to read by (Gísli Ágúst Gunnlaugsson 1997:55–61). Jón Halldórsson and his circle escaped this household authority by joining forces to acquire and read books. Their solitary reading must have served to sharpen and mould their self-image, and the same may be said of their correspondence. Because they were able to write, they could communicate when separated, in different communities, regions and countries; put their own thoughts into writing, get to know themselves and write about themselves (Loftur Guttormsson 2002:410–413).

Social Movements

According to historian Gunnar Karlsson book-learning preceded social movements in the Þingeyjarsýsla district (Gunnar Karlsson 1977: 366–376). Emigration to the New World in the latter half of the 19th century was disproportionately high from this region and – despite what opponents of emigration maintained – it must be deemed likely that the emigrants had acquired information about the New World, and done their best to prepare (Úlfar Bragason 2009). Sigfús Magnússon reported in his memoirs that parliamentarian Einar Ásmundsson of Nes had acquired various publications with information about America and geographical works in both Danish and German, which were passed from hand to hand round about (Sigfús Magnússon 1983:209–210). Jón Halldórsson and his reading circle passed German dictionaries from one to another (Sveinn Skorri Höskuldsson 1970:42), and Sigurður Jónsson attended an English course. It is highly likely that Jón Halldórsson did so too.

In 1827 the periodical *Klausturpósturinn* reported on America and in

1821–27 the Icelandic Literary Society had published a book of geography which included information about North America, accompanied by maps. These publications were a part of the library of the Helgastaðir reading society (Áskell Sigurjónsson 1971). In addition, travel books about America, and stories by American writer James Fenimore Cooper, were well known. And some homes had a lexicon (encyclopaedia) of information on a variety of subjects, no doubt including America (Sveinn Skorri Höskuldsson 1970:40–47). Halldórsson and his fellow-readers who were contemplating emigration must have read such literature. Hence they had access to information about the location of the United States, the principal employment sectors, the people and the government. And they must also have been aware that resourceful individuals could do well for themselves in the New World.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the periodical *Skírnir* started including America in its annual news review. From 1855, it reported on the rise and prosperity of the New World. After 1863 there was even more coverage of the USA: the Civil War, party politics, and conflict between Congress and the president. In 1867 the periodical reported:

Our publication has often reported on the extraordinary rise and growth of the United States, how settlements have been established in this huge territory, new populous states – no smaller in size than the largest states of our own continent – being added, large cities with the biggest buildings and all the modern amenities, constructed in the briefest time where before there was wilderness, or a scattering of pioneers' cabins, and so on. And such reports from here will go on for a long time yet. The population of the United States now exceeds 35½ million people; and, despite all the loss of life in the [civil] war, it has risen by 4½ million since 1860. Three years from now, in 1870, the population is expected to reach 40 million, and that is predicted to double by the turn of the century, to approach 100 million. That is not unlikely to be proved true, for the flow of people to America from all continents is constantly increasing. [...] But it is neither the wide open spaces, nor the population, that gives America its advantage over other countries – but that here lives the freest, most diligent and wealthiest nation on earth. (Eiríkur Jónsson 1867:169–170)

The writer goes on to discuss public schooling, reading, education and the press, buildings, mechanisation both civil and military, and railroads spanning the entire continent. Finally he discusses the outstanding qualities of the Americans, and expresses the view that it will probably come to pass that America “would become a centre of the fine arts, scholarship, agriculture and good governance, and from it would shine new rays of faith,

science and arts, to light up the whole world” (Eiríkur Jónsson 1867:171). Thus ideas are expressed here about freedom, education and progress in the United States of America, which many Icelandic emigrants took to heart (see Rögnvaldur Pétursson 1933:78).

A Self-made man

While it would be a mistake to read Jón Halldórsson’s letters from America as evidence of the shared experience of Icelandic emigrants, they may be read as one case of the experience and ideas of an emigrant. His ideas about the possibilities offered in America may have taken shape even before he left north Iceland, and they may have been derived from one or more books. When he was a student in Copenhagen, parliamentarian Jón Sigurðsson – who would go on to lead the Icelanders’ campaign for self-determination – made the first Icelandic translation of *Bogtrykkeren Benjamin Franklins Liv og Levnet* by the Danish clergyman J. W. Marckmann. The book was based on Franklin’s autobiography. Jón Sigurðsson’s translation was published in 1839. In his foreword he writes that the life of Franklin sets a good example to be followed:

Of the printer Franklin, one of the most remarkable men of whom stories are told: he had neither rank nor wealth to sustain him at the outset, but he won both by his own efforts, and became a leader of his nation both in knowledge and diligence; the nation owes its freedom largely to him – along with all the good things which have arisen from that. And in addition all mankind owes him a great debt of gratitude, and his name will be honoured as long as the world shall survive. (Jón Sigurðsson 1839: iv–v)

The book was republished in 1910. Editor Tryggvi Gunnarsson, who was three years older than Jón Halldórsson and, like him, from Þingeyjarsýsla district, had been among those who lent books to Halldórsson and his reading circle. He wrote: “When I was young I read the biography, and it has been dear to my heart ever since; I felt it was one of the best stories I had the opportunity to read. It is educational reading for all, especially young men, who wish to take Franklin as their model” (Tryggvi Gunnarsson 1910:3). Halldórsson and his reading circle were an intellectual fellowship who wanted to improve itself through reading, such as Benjamin Franklin described in his autobiography. They do not,

admittedly, mention Franklin by name in their letters: but his name was so closely identified with American freedoms that it is more than likely that they knew about him and had read his life story. It has been pointed out that Franklin's autobiography was intended to set an example for others: that Franklin had shaped himself into the image of the self-made man (Sayre 1980:156–58). The *Life of Benjamin Franklin* may thus be the example on which Jón Halldórsson based his new life, when he set out to make his way in the New World. That will be the subject of the book I am writing about Halldórsson's settlement in the United States.

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Summary

Jón Halldórsson (1838–1919) was born at Neslönd by Lake Mývatn, North Iceland. He was a farm hand at Grenjaðarstaður and Stóruvellir, North Iceland, before he emigrated to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1872. He settled in Nebraska in 1875 as a farmer. Jón Halldórsson died in Chicago in 1919. Jón Halldórsson had

no formal education but he was an ardent reader. As a farm hand at the Grenjaðarstaður vicarage he had access to the pastor's library. He also became a member of the local reading society. Furthermore he and his closest male friends formed a reading circle, borrowed books from bookish men in the neighbourhood, and ordered books from Copenhagen. The article deals with Halldórsson's informal education, his and his reading circle, the subject of their readings and reading experience, based on information derived from their personal correspondence.

Keywords: informal education, readings, private libraries, reading society

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