



SAGAS IN HANDWRITTEN AND PRINTED BOOKS IN 19TH CENTURY ICELAND

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BOOKS BEFORE AND BEYOND GUTENBERG

As soon as the Icelandic sagas were first written on vellum in the 13th and 14th century, enthusiastic readers began to copy and re-write them for their own use and for further distribution (Ólafur Halldórsson 84-86). Although little is known of the extent of this multiplication, it is evident that popular stories were copied and distributed across the country in considerable numbers shortly after they had been written. It is also clear that the tradition of copying and circulating manuscripts remained unbroken from the beginning of saga-writing in the middle ages, throughout the development of printing techniques in the 15th and 16th centuries, and all the way up to modern times.

In this paper I will focus on the duality of Icelandic book history in the 19th century, where printed books and manuscripts were thriving side by side, both being important and effective ways of distributing the written word. It will be argued that there was an interactive connection between increasing basic education at the time, increasing the supply of printed secular books, and the flourishing culture of manuscript writing in the 19th century. This resulted in an unusually fertile period in the literary culture of the common people in the latter half of the century, which is manifest in the great quantity of personal sources such as diaries, letters and autobiographies.

SAGAS IN PRINT

In the year 1891, Sigurður Kristjánsson, a bookseller in Reykjavík, began publishing a series of *The Sagas of Icelanders* in a low-priced and accessible form. The public embraced this publication because, until that time, ordinary Icelanders, farmers, peasants, labourers and fishermen, had not had many opportunities to purchase this literature in printed form (Gils Guðmundsson 226-227).

For more than 300 years, from the 16th to the middle of the 19th century, there was only one printing press in Iceland. It was, for all intents and purposes, under the direct control of the



church, located at either of two bishoprics, Skálholt or Hólar. Secular books were seldom printed there; among the few exceptions was the publication of two volumes containing 12 sagas of Icelanders, printed in Hólar in 1756. The clerical monopoly of printing was abolished in the year 1773 with the advent of the printing house in Hrappsey, the first one not controlled by the church. For just over a quarter of a century, there were two printing houses in the country until, in 1799, they were combined into one, under secular authority (Kvaran 100-106).

For a period of nearly nine decades, from 1756-1844, despite growing interest in secular books, only one saga was printed in Iceland; that was *Egils saga* or *Sagan af Egge Skallagríms Syne*, printed in Hrappsey in 1782. But from 1844-1884, ten Sagas of Icelanders were printed in Reykjavik and Akureyri, two of the slowly growing fishing- and trading towns. That leaves us with 17 sagas that were not available in print in Iceland until the end of the 19th century. Many of them were printed earlier in Denmark but those editions were rarely accessible to common Icelanders. Ordinary people in Iceland thus had limited access to ancient literature in print all through the 19th century.

There are two important exceptions to this, one from the mid-18th century and the other from the early 19th century. In the year 1756, twelve of the shorter family sagas were published in two volumes at the Hólar bishopric in northern Iceland, which held custody of Iceland's sole printing press. The collections *Agiætar Fornmanna Sögur eru aa þryck wtgengnar ad Forlage Hr. Vice-Løgmanssens Biørns Marcus sonar* (Excellent stories of ancient men) and *Nockrer marg-frooder søgu-þættir Islendinga til leifelegrar skemtunar og dægra-stittingar þessa lands innbyggjurum aa prent settir ad forlage hr. vice-løgmanssens Biørns Marcussonar* (Few informative tales of Icelanders) were printed in 1000 copies each. Within ten years, half of the stock had been sold and even though the slow sale was a disappointment to the publishers this was the first time that the literate public had an opportunity to acquire these sagas in print (Ólafur Pálmason xiv).

In the second case, 70 years later, we have, on the other hand, quite accurate information on how many people bought the books and who they were. The third volume of *Fornmannasögur* (Stories of Ancient Men), 12 volumes of stories of Nordic kings, published in Copenhagen in the years 1825-1837, contains a list of nearly 800 Icelandic subscribers, mostly farmers, but sometimes also lodgers, servants and fishermen and of course some officials and members of



the clergy. This is a considerable number in a country of 50.000 inhabitants and 4000 farms, and a strong sign of how popular this literature was in 19th century Iceland, not only with clerics and well-off farmers, but also among peasants and servants.

Little as we know on the extent and spreading of printed book in the early 19th century, this list of subscriptions shows us that there was indeed a market for this kind of literature in a peasant society lacking nearly all formal cultural institutions such as schools, libraries, book stores, etc. But the opportunities to buy these books in print were few; they were expensive and hard to get hold of. The people of this relatively large and sparsely populated country had to use other means to feed their hunger for sagas and other worldly reading material. Despite the fact that production of printed books grew considerably in the second half of the 19th century, distribution of printed material was still limited and in no way met the demands of the market in rural Iceland.

The immense number of manuscripts preserved in national and local archives throughout Iceland clearly indicates how people used their writing skills for communication and creation, collection and distribution. The vaults are filled with handwritten books, production and reproduction of literary and scholarly material such as traditional poetry and prose, rhymes, sagas and folktales, history and genealogy. Manuscripts were written and rewritten, and sometimes printed books were copied in the same manner and distributed as handwritten books. An important part of this manuscript culture, which we can call the peoples' press, is the copying and distribution of Icelandic medieval literature, stories of warriors and wise men, poets and politicians of the golden age of settlement and commonwealth.

MANUSCRIPTS

The Saga Net – a digital archive on Icelandic medieval literature, established by the Árni Magnússon Institute in Reykjavik, The Manuscript department of the National and University Library of Iceland and Cornell University in the United States was launched in 2001 (<http://www.sagnanet.is>). It contains digital pictures of every manuscript including Icelandic Family Sagas, as fragments or as a whole, and every printed version of the sagas before the year 1900, all in all, over 400.000 pages. The Saga Net and its search engines open up new possibilities to survey the nature and extent of this media, the handwritten book throughout Icelandic cultural history.



Roughly 200 manuscripts from the 19th century contain one or more family saga. Each saga exists in 10-50 transcripts, but the ratio between older and younger manuscripts is very variable from one saga to another. If we view the Icelandic sagas printed in the bishopric of Hólar in 1756, it becomes clear that very few 19th century transcripts of them are preserved. The two archives contain 34 copies of Þórðar saga Hreðu (The Saga of Thord Menace) but only two of them were written in the 19th century. Kjalnesingasaga (The Saga of the People of Kjalarnes) is also preserved in 34 transcripts, four of them from the 19th century. Gísla saga Súrssonar (Gísli Súrson's Saga) is only preserved in one transcript from the 19th century, that being made by the scholar Konráð Gíslason in Copenhagen in 1841. None of these twelve sagas are preserved in more than 6 copies from the 19th century.

Table 1. – Sagas of Icelanders printed in Iceland in the 18th century.

Saga	Manuscripts	19 th century manuscripts	First print in Iceland
Bard's Saga	18	4	<i>Few informative tales of Icelanders.</i> Hólar 1756
Gisli Surson's Saga	15	1	<i>Excellent stories of ancient men.</i> Hólar 1756
The Saga of Grettir the Strong	28	5	<i>Few informative tales of Icelanders.</i> Hólar 1756
The Saga of Hord and the People of Holm	20	3	<i>Excellent stories of ancient men.</i> Hólar 1756
The Saga of Havard of Isafjord	18	2	<i>Few informative tales of Icelanders.</i> Hólar 1756
The Saga of the People of Kjalarnes	34	4	<i>Excellent stories of ancient men.</i> Hólar 1756



The Saga of Ref the Sly	28	6	<i>Excellent stories of ancient men.</i> Hólar 1756
Killer-Glum's Saga	21	2	<i>Excellent stories of ancient men.</i> Hólar 1756
Viglund's Saga	20	3	<i>Few informative tales of Icelanders.</i> Hólar 1756
The Saga of Thord Menace	34	2	<i>Few informative tales of Icelanders.</i> Hólar 1756
Olkofri's Saga	17	5	<i>Few informative tales of Icelanders.</i> Hólar 1756
The Saga of the Confederates	13	4	<i>Few informative tales of Icelanders.</i> Hólar 1756
Egil's Saga	45	3	Sagan af Egle Skallagrims Syne. Hrappsey 1782

A totally different picture emerges if we look at the sagas that were not printed in Iceland until the late 19th century or later. Those sagas are, nearly without exception, preserved in numerous transcripts. *Heiðarvígasaga* (The Saga of the Slaying on the Heath), originally printed in Copenhagen 1829-1830 but printed in Iceland in 1899, is preserved in 27 copies from the 19th century, but the number of manuscripts containing this saga is 34 in all. 21 of a total of 36 transcripts of *Finnboga saga ramma* (The Saga of Finnbogi the Mighty) were written in the 19th century. It was first printed in Denmark in 1812 along with *Vatnsdæla saga* (The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal) and both were printed in Iceland nearly half a century later. The Árni Magnússon Institute and the National Library hold overall 44 transcripts of *Vatnsdæla saga* in all, 26 from 19th century.

The odd exception here is *Njála* (Njál's Saga): only one 19th century transcript preserved in the national library. In 1844 it was the first saga to be printed in Iceland for over 60 years and



only the second since the Hólar publication of 1756. The edition was in fact a reprint of an earlier version printed by Icelanders in Copenhagen in 1772. Both editions circulated to some extent among the literate population of Iceland.

Table 2. Sagas of Icelanders printed in Iceland after 1800.

Saga	Manuscripts	19th century manuscripts	First print in Iceland
The Saga of Bjorn the Champion of the Hítardal People	41	20	Reykjavík 1898
The Saga of Droplaug's sons	27	15	Reykjavík 1878
Eirik the Red's Saga	28	16	Reykjavík 1902
The Saga of the People of Eyri	45	14	Akureyri 1882
The Saga of Finnbogi the Mighty	36	21	Akureyri 1860
The Saga of the People of Fljótssdal	27	18	Reykjavík 1896
The Saga of the People of Floi	52	29	Reykjavík 1884
The Saga of the Sworn Brothers	31	12	Reykjavík 1899
The Saga of the Greenlanders	5	5	Reykjavík 1902



Gold-Thorir's Saga	33	23	Reykjavík 1878
The Saga of Gunnar the Fool of Keldugnup	43	22	Reykjavík 1959
The Saga of Gunnlaugs Serpent-Tongue	28	15	Reykjavík 1880
The Saga of Hallfred the Troublesome Poet	16	6	Reykjavík 1901
The Saga of Slaying on the Heath	34	27	Reykjavík 1899
The Saga of Hrafnkel Frey's Godi	36	17	Reykjavík 1893
Hen-Thorir's Saga	34	16	Reykjavík 1892
Kormak's Saga	30	18	Reykjavík 1893
The Saga of the People of Laxardal	54	19	Akureyri 1867
The Saga of the People of Ljosavatn	29	18	Reykjavík 1896
The Saga of the People of Reykjadal	22	14	Reykjavík 1896
The Saga of the People of Svarfadardal	33	14	Reykjavík 1898
Valla-Ljot's saga	28	13	Reykjavík 1898



The Saga of the people of Vatnsdal	44	26	Akureyri 1858
The Saga of the People of Vopnafjordur	34	23	Reykjavík 1898
The Saga of Thorstein the White	33	21	Reykjavík 1902
Thorsteins Síðu-Hallsson's Saga.	12	11	Reykjavík 1902
Njal's Saga	40	1	Viðey 1844

There is a very strong connection between the availability of sagas in print and the copying of manuscripts in 19th century Iceland. The connection appears to be in the manner that sagas that had been printed in Iceland in the 18th century were copied to a much lesser extent than those that were not printed until the end of the 19th century. In other words, the scribes of the 19th century first and foremost concentrated on collecting and distributing unprinted material. This is very clear if we compare *Table 1* and *Table 2*.

CONCLUSION

Icelanders are thought to have been generally literate around 1800 and, as the 19th century progressed, an increscent part of the general population acquired the ability to write, even though it was not a part of obligatory education until 1888. More and more people of the common classes had the capacity to copy sagas and poetry, collect historical knowledge, write letters and keep diaries. The golden age of Icelandic manuscript-culture lasted for a period of 100 years, from Pietism and Enlightenment up to the beginning of modernization in Icelandic society, with a general school system, book market, and urbanization. A poor peasant society, lacking every major cultural institution and infrastructure, found its own way of spreading the written word, by using the medieval method of copying by hand.



In the year 1892, when Halldór Jónsson, servant and later a tenant farmer in the western part of Iceland, was twenty-one years old, he owned 52 books (Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon 154). Among them were his manuscripts, personal diaries, poetry, genealogy and all kind of anthologies. His collection grew rapidly, and he owned 99 books at the beginning of the year 1896, including 34 manuscripts of a personal, historical and literary nature. Many of Halldór Jónsson's manuscripts are now preserved in the National Library: 15 volumes of poetry and 5 anthologies, along with letters and a short autobiography and his diaries dating from 1890 until the time of his death in 1912 (Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon 55-56).

Halldór Jónsson only owned a printed copy of one Saga in 1891: *Vatnsdæla saga*, printed in Akureyri in 1858. Among the 100 books he owned in 1897, there were eight Sagas of Icelanders and, in addition to this, he bought 16 sagas in one day at the end of 1899, all published by Sigurður Kristjánsson in the last decade (Bræður af Ströndum 240 and Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon 160-161). Despite being almost an obsessive scribe, Halldór Jónsson did not use his pen to write and copy Sagas of Icelanders. Cheap and accessible publications at the end of the 19th century seem finally to have made handwriting of the sagas obsolete in Icelandic culture.

In parallel with the increasing supply of secular literature, there was a definite change in mentality, characterized by more emphasis on personal expression in the utilisation of literacy. My research on diary writing in the 18th, 19th and 20th century has indicated this change in literary culture, from copying to creation, from general to singular, from public to private (Davíð Ólafsson 86).

The farm-labourer, Halldór Jónsson, is a representative of this new mentality at the turn of the century. Instead of copying the ancient heritage of sagas he focused on his own life through autobiography, diaries and correspondence, where introspection plays an important roll. In addition to this personal matter, Halldór Jónsson uses collective books of all kinds as tools of self-examination, by counting, listing, and recording the world around him in detail. Pen and paper were to him instruments for *practices of the self* rather than transcription and distribution of the literary heritage, as they were to older scribes.



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