Icelandic Folk Tales or National Tales

This paper attempts to explain how the Icelandic tales called þjóðsögur came to have an added significance, beyond their 'folk' origins, as the nexus of a number of nationalistic movements in nineteenth-century Iceland. In particular, I shall discuss Jon Arnason's collection of tales called Islenzkar þjóðsögur og Æfintyri (Icelandic Folk Tales and Wonder Tales) which was compiled during a sixteen year period from 1845-1861. This collection may still be considered the major source for this type of literature.

During the following discussion one should keep in mind that the term 'þjóðsögur' has a range of meanings. 'þjóð' is translated as 'people' or 'nation' (Zoëga 1910, Jonsson 1927) and Cleasby, Vigfusson and Powell (1959) elaborate further.

> In quite modern times (the last 30 - 40 years) (1820-30) a whole crop of compounds with þjóð -- has been formed to express the sense of national; þjóð-rettr, þjóð-frelsi, þjóð-rettindi, þjóð-vili, þjóð-vinr, national rights, freedom, etc.

For the sake of readability I shall use the term 'folktales' to translate 'þjóðsögur', but one should keep in mind that in using the term 'folk' I wish to exploit the wider range of meaning implied by the English word 'people' or the German word 'Volk' which may refer to a nation state as well as the common folk. [1]

The important status of Jon Arnason's collection, especially the first volume of tales, in nineteenth and twentieth century Iceland at first seems unlikely because the tales are abstracted from any apparent context. They seem to add nothing new to the body of Icelandic literature either in terms of style or content. Einarsson sums up part of the situation stating:

> It should be noted that folktales, similar to the ones collected and published in the nineteenth century, are to be found from the earliest times in the literature, but never isolated as a specific genre (Einarsson 1948:4).

We might ask why people should bother collecting these tales if similar ones could be found in the literature already? I think this difficulty may be explained, but not resolved, by situating Jon Arnason's collection historically within the nationalist movements both in Iceland and Europe. The þjóðsögur might then be seen as deriving their importance not only because they are 'folk' tales but because they are 'national' tales.

Islenzkar þjóðsögur og Æfintyri was published in 1862-64 and was a product of the movement begun by the Grimm brothers which swept over Europe at the time. Jon Arnason is said to have been inspired by the Grimms' Kinder- und Hausmarchen and we may observe clear links with the German interest in folktales in the history of Jon Arnason's collection.

In 1812 the brothers Grimm published Kinder- und Hausmärchen maintaining that

> in these popular stories is concealed the pure and primitive mythology of the Teutons, which has been considered as lost forever (Taylor 1975:vii).

A similar type of thinking could also be found in England where Farrar, in 1870, spoke of the "immortal interest" of Icelandic, for

> in it alone are preserved those songs and legends ... which reveal to us the grand and striking mythology of our heathen ancestors ... from them alone can we learn of what

> stuff our heroic ancestors were made (Farrar 1870:98-99).

Thus the general European movement seems to have been motivated by an interest in "primitive and heathen" origins.

Following the Grimms' collection, The Danish Commission for the Preservation of Antiquities called for a collection of folktales from Iceland in 1817. No one took up this work, however, and the request was renewed in 1839 and 1845. It is possible that the Danes viewed these tales as holding the key to the Scandinavian past and, defining them as such, brought this approach to the folktales to the attention of the Icelanders.

In any case, independently of the Danish commission Magnus Grimsson and Jon Arnason agreed to begin a collection in 1845 after having read the Grimms' Kinder- und Hausmärchen.

Magnus Grimsson came from a poor family on Borgarfjord. His interests were in literature and natural science but he was forced to take orders in 1855 in order to earn a living. Many of the tales he collected were provided by schoolmates and by people from his home district (Einarsson 1948: 28-29). He died in 1860 and Jon Arnason continued the collection alone.

Jon Arnason, the son of a parson in Skagafjord, was appointed the librarian of the national library in 1848 but was not paid for his work until 1881 and he had to support himself by other jobs. Originally he was to provide a collection of poems, rhyme and superstition. In 1852 he published Islenzk Æfintyri (Icelandic Wonder Tales) which was well received, but the public was still slow to contribute to the collection.

In 1858 Konrad Maurer, a German, travelled through Iceland collecting tales and published Isländisches Volkssagen der Gegenwart. It was the appearance of this book and Maurer's offer to find a publisher in Leipzig for Jon Arnason and Magnus Grimsson's collection of tales which gave impetus to the collection.

> In 1858 Jon Arnason composed an appeal in which he enumerated all the kinds of folklore he wished to know about and to have recorded. He sent it to over 40 people and was soon receiving tales and other items in a steadily increasing stream (Sveinsson 1971:38).

In the three years that followed this appeal Jon Arnason received twice as much material as during the previous fourteen years (Einarsson 1948:29). He modelled the organization of his material on that of Maurer. For example, Jon Arnason used the same section headings as those provided by Maurer: I. Mythische Sagen/Goðfræðissögur; II. Spuksagen/Draugasögur; III. Zaubersagen/Galdrasögur; and IV. Natursagen/Natturusögur. Jon Arnason dropped some of the subdivisions used by Maurer which did not apply, such as Maurer's section called Götter (Sveinsson 1971: 40), and it appears that the fit between the Icelandic material and the German categories is somewhat strained.[2]

Neither Jon nor Magnus could afford to travel around the country and so they mainly relied on manuscript contributions. It appears to have been common to write tales down and aside from the tales contained in the earlier saga literature, some of the manuscripts predate Jon Arnason's decision to begin the collection.[3]

It therefore seems appropriate to approach these tales as a body of literature within a literary tradition rather than merely as a transcript of oral tales. In the nineteenth century virtually all Icelanders were

literate and the folktales were written in a style not different from saga style.[4] Possibly this is only due to the folktale style being shaped from reading the sagas but Simpson also raises the point that the prose narrative style of the sagas harmonizes with "all that is most vigorous, direct, and swift moving in oral story-telling" (Simpson 1972:11). She concludes:

> This harmony is no accident; the sagas themselves, though literary works, sprang from a culture where oral story-telling flourished, and were influenced by its techniques (Simpson 1972:11).

In this case the concepts of an oral and a literary tradition have become completely entangled to the point that they can no longer be distinguished. To say that one is patterned after the other is to go in circles, but it is worth noting some of the factors which contributed to the situation in which the sagas and folktales were identified with one another. The saga style which dates back to the thirteenth century was constantly on hand because the sagas themselves were published and the high rate of literacy in Iceland following the Reformation meant that its influence was potentially very wide. Literacy and literary style, therefore, combined to produce the possibility of a nationally recognizable continuity with Iceland's past.

The situation in the nineteenth century demands the recognition that written communication is of primary importance in understanding the Icelandic context of the tales. Speech is secondary because writing serves as the means of communication not only between speakers separated by geographical space, but also by time (Haugen 1966:53). In the case of Jon Arnason's collection, it is clear that these tales assumed new significance as the modern national literature of Iceland, not as the transcripts of her oral tradition.

Jon Arnason's collection of tales included two types. þjóðsögur, meaning people's tales, are accounts of supposedly real events. The names, places and approximate dates of these occurrences are given in detail and if this information is not known, this is also stated.

The other major group is æfintyri, meaning adventure tales or wonder tales. These tales are recognized as being completely fictional. They are not associated with specific persons, places or times. Æfintyri correspond to what Stith Thompson calls Märchen which is

> a tale of some length involving a succession of motifs or episodes. It moves in an unreal world without definite locality or definite characters and is filled with the marvellous (Thompson 1946:8).

Similarly, þjóðsögur correspond to what Thompson calls Sage:

> This form of tale purports to be an account of an extraordinary happening believed to have actually occurred. ... They are nearly always simple in structure, usually containing but a single narrative motif (Thompson 1946:8-9).

Thus this classification seems to be based primarily on whether the tale is viewed as fiction or non-fiction since many of the motifs may be found in both types. Although the folktales are all purported to be true, some aspects no longer seem to be considered as important as others, if they are believed at all. Thus most if not all of the stories about magic and trolls are set in the past, usually around the sixteenth and seventeenth

centuries. However many of the stories about the dead and elves are set in the nineteenth century and some are about a person's own experiences or those of his parents. We can see this process continuing into the present as well. The dead still seem to occupy an important place in Icelandic life, but the place of elves has diminished in importance, although elf knolls are still respected.[5]

The Icelandic folktales are a valuable source of historical information about Icelandic life. They often give detailed information about the places and people which in some cases can be checked against available records.

Jon Arnason's collection was published with an introduction by the scholar, Guðbrandur Vigfusson, who later came to Oxford. In Vigfusson's introduction it is clear that he considers the collection as literature which he almost immediately links with Icelandic nationalism.

> The nation, therefore, which does nothing but remember, must be looked on as dead, as petrified, as no longer to be numbered among the living and acting. These stories will show that Icelanders are not so utterly deprived of mental life as to be unable to replace old with new, and add to their literary treasure heap. Many of them are of quite modern origin, and will not suffer from a comparison with those of older date (Powell and Magnusson, trans., 1864:8).

It is worth noting in this quote that Vigfusson states that a vigorous nation must develop its contemporary literature, yet in the Icelandic case the criterion of contemporary literary worth is to be found in the classic sagas.

The collection was translated by Powell and Magnusson in 1964 under the title Icelandic Legends and in their introduction they refer to the tales as 'national' tales rather than folktales.

Jon Sigurðsson, the first president of Iceland, made similar comments about these tales. He explicitly invokes the link with the past which these tales seem to provide as he exhorts the new nation to future efforts. He acknowledges that "Iceland shall rise up and flourish as before" and Icelanders should not despise or neglect their folktales (Nordal 1924:167).

From the above comments by Icelanders during the period when Jon Arnason's collection was published we can see that the tales were associated with the developing idea of an independent nation. The status of these folktales in Iceland may be more clearly understood by situating the collection in a more general political, economic and literary context. Politically we may observe an increasing nationalism in Iceland. In 1800 Iceland had probably reached a low ebb as a nation when the Al-ping was abolished by the order of the king of Denmark. Iceland's economy was nearly destroyed by the effects of the Danish trade monopoly and the population was at its lowest point due to eruptions, plagues and famine in the eighteenth century. At the beginning of the nineteenth century the Napoleonic wars disrupted the Danish trade monopoly and the Icelandic economy picked up. It continued to improve even after the trade monopoly was reinstated in 1816, but it was with the effects of the French Revolutions of 1789, 1830 and 1848 that real interest was awakened in the idea of Iceland as a nation-state.

The nationalist movement which resulted achieved the reinstatement of the Al-ping in 1843 in Reykjavik (Gjerset:309-375 passim). Under the guidance of Jon Sigurðsson Icelanders then began agitating for the abolition of all restrictions on trade and in 1854 a bill, releasing Iceland from trade restrictions, became law. Commerce, especially with England, became profitable at this time.

Even after these successes, agitation continued toward self-government which led to such comments as those of Richard Burton:

> All Icelanders ... learn the three R's to say nothing of the fourth R(evolution). (Burton 1875:155).

In 1874 Iceland was presented with its first partly autonomous constitution from Denmark and Jon Sigurðsson became the first president.

It was the literary men who defined and shaped Icelandic nationalism in following the literary and linguistic movements which had begun in Europe. In the nineteenth century the Rationalistic Spirit gave way to romanticism. In Iceland this meant that prose authors began turning away from the Dano-German style which had filtered into post-Reformation religous works and which was taken up in the history and philosophy of Magnus Stephensen. Instead the romanticist authors in Iceland modelled their style on that of the sagas; drawing on the heroic days of old.

The Icelandic folktales collected by Jon Arnason provided examples of a rural prose style which was similar to the style found in the sagas of the thirteenth century. This stylistic similarity demonstrated the existence of a uniquely Icelandic culture and this became a motif running through nineteenth-century nationalism.[6] One result was a new national awareness of the Icelandic language. In 1830

> Konrað Gislason wrote a brilliant essay on the Icelandic language and set about purifying it from two centuries of Dano-German dross and its baroque style. This campaign for the purification of the language set an epoch of linguistic nationalism which lasted unchallenged for nearly a century. It continued up to the modernist period of the twentieth century, and its strength still persists (Einarsson 1957:222).

This movement to purify the language illustrates a linquistic awareness and a move toward prescriptive linguistics directed at establishing a 'correct' standard language which Haugen maintains was characteristic of the combination of nationalism and romanticism in many countries. Haugen generalizes that such a movement to purify the language generally "coincides with the rise of their countries to wealth and power" (Haugen 1966:57).

It was during this period in the nineteenth century that Icelandic literature gained new vitality and prose literature started in earnest. With respect to prose literature, Jon Arnason's Þjoðsögur og æfintyri was to occupy an extremely influential position which Einarsson describes as follows:

> At the head of the prose genres may be placed the Icelandic folktales. ... Following Grimm they were collected by Jon Arnason and his companion and published, a sample in 1852, the great collection

> (Islenzkar þjoðsögur og Æfintyri) in 1862-64. They were expected to reveal the hidden springs of nationality and they became right away important in two ways: as models of genuine rural prose style to be used in conjunction with saga style, and as themes to be drawn upon by the coming novelists and especially the romantic dramatists (Einarsson 1957:228).

Drama was a new literary form during this period and it drew most of its themes from Icelandic folktales and the sagas, although the plays based on the sagas generally failed.

> All attempts to recast either the poetry of the Edda or the prose of the sagas into modern drama have failed as ... Johann Sigurjonsson learned to his distress when he tried to dramatize Njall's Saga in his play Løgneren (The Liar, 1917). Even Henrik Ibsen's attempts to transfer themes from the old literature to the modern drama were among his less happy efforts: The Vikings of Helgeland (1858) and The Pretenders (1864). (Haugen 1967:3)

On the other hand, the most popular plays drew on national legends and folk lore, for example: Mattias Jochumsson's Utilegumennir (The Outlawed Men, 1861-62); Johann Sigurjonsson's Galdra-Loftur (Loftur the Magician, 1915); and Davi Stefansson's Gullna Hliðið (The Golden Gate, 1941).

This tendency to draw on folk themes seems to have been further encouraged after 1918 when Iceland was granted home rule by Denmark and

> writers like Davið Stefansson won themselves a great reputation as exponents of this first blossoming of a free nation (Haugen 1967:83).

Even radicals like Thorbergur Thorðarson and Halldor Laxness focused on the folklife of Iceland in their works.

Although Jon Arnason may have removed the Icelandic folktales from their dramatic context in the sagas and the pre-nineteenth century Icelandic literature, they in turn became the context, familiar to all Icelanders, in which newer forms of literature and feelings were presented.

A number of events and movements contributed to the new emphasis which was laid on the Icelandic folktales. The Napoleonic wars caused Denmark to loosen her hold on Iceland and economic prosperity increased. At the same time, the upheavals in eighteenth-century France had spread the idea of the free nation-state to Iceland just as they had to America and other countries. Icelandic nationalism was rewarded in the political field by the reinstatement of the Alþing in 1843, the end of the Danish trade monopoly in 1874, home rule in 1918, and finally, full independence in 1944. The increasing awareness of Icelandic as a national language, exemplified by Konrað Gislason's movement to purify Icelandic from foreign influence, may be traced from the early nineteenth century to the present day, paralleling the emergence of Iceland in the political field.

We are dealing with a process of self-definition. Jon Arnason and Magnus Grimsson were part of the romanticist literary movement, inspired by the Grimms, which was widespread in nineteenth-century Europe but their collection of folktales almost inevitably became part of a

political movement. The tales themselves were admirably suited to the demands of Icelandic authors with a sense of national identity, being written in a language and style, and with a subject matter, distinguishable from Danish influence. The similarity of the style to that of the sagas allowed the definition of the Icelandic people, not only in opposition to the ruling Danes, but with reference to their own heroic past.

The fact that there was only one 'Latin School' in Iceland during this period seems to have resulted in a close knit intellectual community with interests in all aspects of Icelandic national life including the church, government, economics and literature. Jon Arnason, who attended Bessasta ir, appears to have had access to Jon Sigur sson's circle of friends, of which Gu brandur Vigfusson (who contributed to, and wrote the introduction for the collection) and Eirikur Magnusson (who translated it into English with Powell) are mentioned in this paper. Jon Sigur sson himself contributed several tales to the collection. In this group of men we can see a number of interests coming together in support of the collection but the group who attended the 'Latin School' were also the link of Iceland with nineteenth-century European thought. Whether the ruling Danes first suggested the role of this national literature or whether the idea was culled directly from European romanticism, it was this group which defined the coherence of "Iceland" by reference to folktales and saga. The definition had a certain authenticity in this case for two reasons. First, the 'Latin School' pupils were not set apart from the rest of the population as a different class; virtually all Icelanders were literate and open to the process of self-definition. Second, the similarity between folktale and saga style is marked; by referring to it the diachronic continuity and the synchronic coherence of the Icelandic 'people' could be seen as the same.

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Notes

1. Alexander Johannesson (1956) gives the following etymology of 'þjoð': f.„volf, leute" norw. dial. tjo, kjo n.„gesellschaft, volk" got. iuda, ags. peod, afries. thiode, as. thiod(a), mnd. det, ahd. diota, diot.

2. In particular, this may be noticed in the sections on Draugasögur (Tales of the Dead) and Galdrasögur (Tales of Magic). Since the different kinds of 'magic' in Iceland are so closely associated with dealings with the dead, both themes often appear in the tales in these sections and in some cases the criteria used to decide which tale should go in what section are not clear. We must also consider the possibility that the German categories may not have been completely translatable into the Icelandic context. For example, one of the subsections of the 'Tales of the Dead' is called 'Widerganger' by Maurer. Although Jon Arnason has translated this term as 'Apturgaungur', the tales in this section also refer to three other types of dead who walk again: útburðir, draugur, and vofa. Similar problems arise in the sections on 'magic'.

3. Approximately half of the tales are listed as coming from manuscript sources; a number date from the early eighteenth century. About 20% of all the elf stories come from the manuscripts of a farmer named Ólafur Sveinsson who lived near Reykjavík. Einarsson (1948) states that this manuscript dates from about 1830 and it was compiled in order to prove the existence of elves.

4. Simpson states that the features of oral style which may be found in the sagas are "abrupt shifts from the past to the present tense or from reported to direct speech, simplicity in clause and sentence structure, economy of adjectives and adverbs, and a general preference for concision and even dryness over elaboration and emotional explicitness" (1972:12). However it is difficult to talk about the Icelandic folktales or sagas in terms of oral style at all. In the first place, there is no oral style unaffected by written literature in Iceland because everyone is literate. Secondly, neither the sagas nor the folktales consistently display the features described above, and if we consider the differences between the oral styles of educated Americans and educated Englishmen, we can hardly take the view that these features are universal for all oral styles.

5. I was told this by Thor Whitehead and Guðrún Pétursdóttir.

6. Sveinsson emphasizes this point that national characteristics may be found in the style of the folktales: "Let us compare the story of Snow White and the story of Vilfriður-- it is the same tale-- or the stories of Cinderella and Mjaðveig Mánadóttir. It is no exaggeration to say that moving from the mid-European tales to the Icelandic versions is like moving from one world into another. ... The Icelandic versions are much franker" (1971:48).

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