

Foreword

Folktales and fairy tales have been an integral part of the literature and oral tradition of Icelanders ever since the settlement of Iceland, and passed on “from mouth to mouth and from man to man” as Guðbrandur Vigfússon put it in his foreword to the first edition of the *Folktales of Jón Árnason* in 1862. Vigfússon writes: “These tales convey the world-view of the sagas and they permeate the best and most truthful among them.” At the time the Icelandic sagas were viewed as factual accounts of real events and people of life and blood. This was the Book Prose Theory.

In the second half of the 19th century Munich Professor Konrad Maurer advanced the view that the sagas should perhaps be seen as works of fiction rather than factual accounts. Their anonymous authors were not writers of annals but poets. The sagas, Maurer argued, had various characteristics of poetry rather than dry annals even if they might be rooted in old folklore. Therefore, it was not certain whether Njáll Thorgeirsson, Gunnar Hámundarson and Egill Skallagrímsson had ever existed. This is the core of the Free Prose Theory.

On a visit to Iceland in 1858, Maurer urged Jón Árnason and Pastor Magnús Grímsson to continue the compilation of folktales which they had commenced in 1845 and published in part in a small book in 1852. Maurer published his own collection of Icelandic folktales, *Isländische Volkssagen*, in Germany in 1860 and assisted with the publication of the *Folktales of Jón Árnason* in two volumes in 1862 and 1864, Magnús Grímsson having passed away in 1860.

The Icelandic sagas are remarkable accounts of the country’s history during the Commonwealth Age 930-1262 even if the erstwhile dominant Book Prose Theory gradually yielded to the Free Prose Theory. The portrayal of the manners of the age by the poets who wrote the sagas during 1200-1350 is, by and large, probably realistic whether the heroes and events described therein are fictional or not. The description of everyday life and world-view of the Commonwealth appears broadly correct. If we had only factual annals devoid of poetry from earlier times, we would know much less about our origins and history. Most readers find structured novels more entertaining than perfunctory annals. Poetry opens up doors and windows that mere historical accounts leave closed.

Similarly, modern historical writing must make use of both history and poetry in suitable proportions. History alone cannot give an adequate account of a nation’s life just as photographs or realistic paintings cannot convey a full understanding of landscapes or living creatures. For that we need varied methods, imaginative art. By some appropriate distortion of their prototypes, artists offer new visions, at times less blurred, of our world. Thus the beauty of Thingvellir, Iceland’s ancient site of parliament (Althingi),

is enhanced in the eyes of many Icelanders by the portrayal of its landscape offered by Jóhannes Kjarval, the national painter. Artists – realists, impressionists, expressionists, and others – fill the gaps in each other's works and thereby create a truer picture of what we see on our life's journey. This is why we choose to honor remarkable men and women by having their portraits painted or sculpted rather than by having them photographed.

Icelandic folktales, like the sagas, are important historical sources about the people who recounted and preserved the stories from generation to generation quite apart from the supernatural occurrences described therein. The folktales and the nation's history are interwoven much as the folksongs collected and published by Pastor Bjarni Thorsteinsson 1906-1909, another rich source of insight into national life and thought. Composers often seek to elevate and preserve poetry by setting it to music. Thus, in less than 20 years Franz Schubert composed 600 art songs to poems that otherwise might have been long forgotten. It is less common for painters to use their art to elevate prose except when illustrating books. A well-known example is the illustrations of the Icelandic sagas by the Norwegian painter Andreas Bloch. The sagas have also been illustrated by the Danish painter Johannes Larsen and by Gunnlaugur Scheving as well as various other Icelandic artists.

Painter Ásgrímur Jónsson took a different approach. Throughout his career he painted landscapes and illustrated folktales side by side, the first Icelandic artist to do so. Some of his folktale pictures are small drawings, others are large oil paintings.

And now another prodigious Icelandic folktale painter has entered the stage, dr. Guðni Harðarson, a biologist. This book features twenty reproductions of his magnificent paintings from the world of the folktales. Guðni Harðarson is living proof that science and art are sisters. He has devoted his professional career to scientific research under the auspices of the United Nations. In middle age, he turned to art alongside science in keeping with the rule that good sisters get along well. He has held private exhibitions of his works in several countries, including Austria, France, Iceland, Mexico, and the United States.

The folktale pictures of Guðni Harðarson are works of art that belong in the public domain, works that shed new light on the folktales and elevate them. It is hoped that these pictures will attract new readers at home and abroad to the heritage of Icelandic folktales and their part in the nation's history.

Thorvaldur Gylfason.