FROM GRÍMNISMÁL TO GRAFFITI:
THEMES AND APPROACHES IN 1000 YEARS OF ICELANDIC FOLKLORISTICS

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The Icelanders have always been fond of round numbers. Iceland was settled in 870, the land supposedly turned Christian in 1000, and plans existed for eradicating the use of nicotine completely by the year 2000. By the same means, I have chosen to give this lecture the subtitle "Themes and Approaches in 1000 Years of Icelandic Folkloristics" to emphasise what ought to be a well-known fact: that the Icelanders of the past, like most large-scale groups of emigrants, seem to have been folklorists by nature. Even in the early thirteenth century they seem to have stood apart from their neighbours for this very quality: As Saxo Grammaticus notes in the early thirteenth century, with a touch of his usual exaggeration: the Icelanders "devote all their time to improving our knowledge of others' deeds… they regard it a real pleasure to discover and commemorate the achievements of every nation; in their judgement, it is as elevating to discourse on the prowess of others as to display their own" (Saxo Grammaticus 1979, 5). The emphasis, however, should have been placed on the final two words. The mental collection of legends, poems, and anecdotes about *their own* past, *their* forebears and *their* earlier homelands, seems to have been not only a means of identity for the Icelanders, but also a means of underlining their roots and not least what they regarded as their noble ancestry. These were people who once fought alongside kings, and performed incomprehensible poems for them. The Icelandic interest in collecting - and hearing such material - isn't a mere classical legend. Today, I doubt if one can find many other countries of Iceland's size that are likely to produce annually the same number of personal autobiographies and collections of local legends composed by farmers, trawler captains, and teachers from the rural communities. And I very much doubt if there are many western nations that have the same amount of mental hard disks space dedicated to data-bases of genealogical material which often going back dozens of generations: sometimes as far as the last Catholic bishop, if not the settlement. And as the recent and correctly much debated Decode Genetic survey of Icelandic genes has recently indicated, most of this information which the Icelanders have regularly downloaded onto paper and pergament over the centuries seems to be surprisingly accurate – and surprisingly truthful.

In short, Icelandic folkloristics,(I) with reference to the collection and discussion of folkloristic material (beliefs, tales, customs and artefacts), must be seen as going back to the start of the settlement, and its recording in writing begins almost as soon as pen, ink and pergament appeared in the "shops" approximately eight hundred years ago. (The Icelanders also tend to go for novelties in a big way.) The Eddic poem, *Grímnismál*, collected in the early thirteenth century, is a good example of the sort of material that the early Icelanders had been keeping preserved inside their heads: it is a thoroughly heathen poem dealing with the world of the gods, presented in first person. As I have shown elsewhere (Gunnell 1995, 354-356), this work is probably one of the earliest recorded dramatic monologues in northern Europe, and must have its origin in some form of pagan ceremony (probably related to initiation) that existed over two hundred years before the recording, which seems to have been a near exact representation of the text as it was performed in about 1220 (another nice round number) (see also Gísli Sigurðsson 1998, xxxiv-xxxv). I have a feeling that when I use words like "heathen" and "pagan ceremony" I'm probably setting off alarm bells all round the room, and unfortunately, I have no time here to explain these points in any more detail. But they are beside my main point of discussion here, which is that the recording of *Grímnismál* and the other Eddic poems, almost certainly brought about by the writing of Snorri Sturluson's mythological *Prose Edda* in the early thirteenth century, probably formed part of the first deliberate collection of folkloristic material in northern Europe. It may well originate in the same wave of interest that inspired the recording of the material for the *Carmina Burana* in Germany and Adam de la Halle's carnivalistic drama *Le Jeu d'Adam* and France, but the Icelandic material has much deeper roots in the far past (and more surprisingly genuine pagan connotations) than either of these other works have. It also predates works like *The Decameron,* and *The Canterbury Tales* by about 140 years. The recording and remembering of *Grímnismál* reflects just one example of the expression of local identity by reference to the past that formed such an essential element of earlier Icelandic culture… and it certainly hasn't disappeared even today, as can be clearly seen from any examination of the speeches made by Icelandic presidents and prime ministers when shaking hands with foreign dignitaries abroad or celebrating national holidays. This is one

side of the Icelandic cultural coin (the nostalgic side depicting the national guardian spirits described in a saga). The other side of the coin (the side depicting a fish: which has little to do with biology and much more to do with money and exports, a medium of exchange with other countries) is represented by the other form of semiotic expression that I mention in my main title: spray-can graffiti. The New York- and Amsterdam- rooted graffiti found all over the walls of modern Reykjavík is an expression of another aspect of Icelandic folk culture that has been of equal importance from the start, even though it may well have now gained the upper hand in post-modern Iceland. In simple terms, graffiti is an expression of the regular, and deliberate (if subconscious) attempts made by Icelanders to adopt international identity and belonging, and avoid the associations of the local. In order to understand the Icelandic people and their culture, both of these forms of folkloristic expression need examination: the anxious hanging on to roots, and the simultaneous desperate search for wider international acceptance and belonging. One might say that Icelandic folklore has concentrated on the former, with good reason. However, as I will point out later, it is clear that we also need to start examining the latter in greater detail: while Iceland is a highly valuable for folkloristics as a *reliktområden* and an isolated community trying to maintain identity under foreign rule, it is also a useful area for examining how modern mass media culture is regularly adopted and adapted by an island community that has what might be termed as a fiercely strong national identity rooted in the past… at least in official terms. You will note, though, that when I talk about study I stress the word "*also*" . While we need to move into the present, we shouldn't forget there is still a great deal of work to do on the culture of Iceland's past, and not least on the way this culture and this image was created.

What I mean to do in this lecture is give a brief summary of the developments, themes, influences and approaches adopted in Icelandic folkloristics of the past, and offer some indication of the directions I feel that we will be taking in the future.

To start at the beginning, I should stress (as others have done before me) that while Snorri Sturluson might well have instigated the collection of the Eddic poems, he cannot be regarded as the real forefather of Icelandic folkloristics. That accolade must be given to Ari Þorgilsson the Wise, who wrote *Íslendingabók*, and in all likelihood also composed most of the first draft of *Landnámabók*, the Icelandic Book of Settlements in the late eleventh, or early twelfth century. *Landnámabók,* as most of you will know, is quite unique for its time. Like Tacitus' *Germania* and, the work of Giraldus Cambrensis, and the ecclesiastical histories written by Rimbert, Adam of Bremen, and Bede, it borrows from oral accounts to do with the near past. On the other hand, unlike Tacitus, Rimbert and Adam, the collector of the oral accounts contained in *Landnámabók* was a pure insider who not only understood the local language, and but also the context within which the accounts had thrived. Furthermore, unlike Giraldus, Bede, and the other ecclesiastical historians, Ari does not seem to have been interested in following foreign models. He avoids fitting his material into the pattern of classical history encouraged by educational establishments (something Saxo, Snorri and Geoffrey of Monmouth were very adept at doing), preferring to give what he saw as an accurate account of the local tales told about the settlers of Iceland by their descendants. In *Landnámabók*, we find a number of valuable accounts concerning sacrifice and other pagan religious customs, and some of the earliest legends about Scandinavian supernatural beings such as the *nykken*, the *marmennill*, and other nature spirits, in addition to several slightly more complex motifs found in later migratory legends, such as the sacrifice of meat to waterfalls, the finding of a site for a religious building (by floating timber or using the instinct of domestic animals), and the use of metal and/or fire to mark out, or win over, a piece of "wild" territory for human habitation (see for example Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1994). Like the best of folklorists, Ari is not concerned with stating a case, more with simply presenting the material he has in front of him. As he writes himself with regard to *Íslendingabók*, "En hvatki es nu sagt es i fræðum þessum, þa er skylt at hafa þat heldr er sannara reynist": "whatever is now stated in this history, one is duty bound to prefer that which proves to be more true" (see Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999, 182, where the correct wording is given for the first time). In other words, Ari has gone out of his way to present the truth as he knows it, but encourages readers, or listeners, to always trust any other more trustworthy facts that they happen to come across.

Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*, written about a century later, reflects the same interest in collecting folklore, and is equally important, but must always be taken somewhat cautiously. Snorri was very much a man of his time, a Christian scholar, and an excellent writer, classically educated in the international manner of the thirteenth century. Rather than merely repeating the facts and poems that he had in front of him, he was very much into "cutting and pasting", removing those facts that were politically incorrect (like Óðinn's self sacrifice on the tree), and squeezing others into the theoretical patterns proposed by his time. Thus the Æsir god Óðinn became a human sorcerer king of "Æsia" with roots in the area around Troy (see both the *Prose Edda* and *Ynglinga saga*).

These two works, *Snorra Edda* and *Landnámabók* (which directly or indirectly set the path for the collection of the Eddic poems, and the writing of the Icelandic family sagas and the legendary fornaldarsögur during the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries) mark the beginning of Icelandic folkloristic studies, and emphasise the amount of material available on the mental hard disks of twelfth and thirteenth century Iceland. It was clearly a very exciting time in folkloristic terms: as the settlers came to Iceland they brought with them not only the deeply rooted legends and myths they had known in their earlier environments, but also other new legends and traditions many of them had picked up (along with their wives and slaves (II)) en-route during their brief stays in the British Isles and Ireland. On arrival in Iceland, all of these previously comparatively stable, and religiously-based traditions and stories, now freed from the continual confirmation of their earlier local environment, and often contradicted by the tales told and beliefs held by the "foreigners" living "next door", were brought back into the fluent, ever creative oral tradition. It was an extremely fertile environment for stories and beliefs, similar to the situation among emigrants in North America and Canada in the nineteenth century. It is thus extremely unlikely that we can ever regard Snorri's *Prose Edda* as the Bible of the Old Norse world. Far from it. It is essentially a composite, slightly uncomfortable, mosaic composed of disintegrating jigsaw pieces taken from a large number of similar, but often sharply differing, ancient mythical jigsaw puzzles. This doesn't make it any less valuable as a folkloristic work, or less worthy as a grand literary achievement, but it does make it less trustworthy as a factual record of beliefs. There is still a great deal of work to do in the field of early Icelandic belief and folk tradition, filtering away the dated scholarship and theory that have often distorted images in the past, and getting back to the actual written sources and the solid archaeological evidence that supports them.

I've kept to the early years with good reason. They represent the basis for the present. Ari, the home-grown scholar, and Snorri, the globe-trotting scholar with a background in international learning, reflect the two different key schools of learning that have intertwined and at times conflicted throughout the history of Icelandic folkloristics. It is primarily thanks to the former, however, that we have as much early Icelandic folkloristic material as we do. After the time of Snorri Sturluson, even though the sagas contain a great deal of sporadic folkloristic material to do with thirteenth-century concepts of earlier customs, beliefs and legends (but only if they are of direct value to the main story-line), no further real *studies* of Icelandic folklore or folk tradition appeared until the eighteenth century. The weather worsened and the island made itself a colony. Farmers, however, went on recording *rímur*, poems and sagas for themselves by the hundred, and we are lucky enough to have home-educated, interested parties like Jón Guðmundsson the Learned (1574-1658), Eiríkur Laxdal (1743-1816 (III)), and Jón Ólafsson frá Grunnavík (1705-1779) in the isolated western fjords of Iceland, who collected (in an often uncritical fashion, and mainly for themselves) reams of valuable material based on oral accounts, poems, beliefs, customs and such like. Much of this material still needs to be sifted through.

The first scientifically collected folk legends are those which the manuscript collector Árni Magnússon (1663-1730) had gathered for him along with other accounts in the late seventeenth, early eighteenth century. While Árni himself as a man of the enlightenment had little real interest in this material (which after his death proceeded to gather dust in København until the mid nineteenth century), the correct, and objective recording approach he demanded seems to have been ahead of its time (Sigurður Nordal 1971, I, xxiii-xxiv, and Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1989, 237-238). Other learned (and possibly one-sided) glimpses into ethnological detail about the lifestyle of Icelanders in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries are provided by first of all, Bishop Oddur Einarsson's *Qualiscunque descriptio Islandiæ* (*Íslandslýsing*) written in 1588-89, and then Arngrímur Jónsson the Learned's (1568-1648) slightly more detailed and much more widely-read description on the country, *Crymogea* (1609). The latter work was deliberately designed to contradict the exaggerated accounts concerning the barbaric ways of the Icelandic people that were being circulated by English and German authors of the time, and among other things provided us with the first real information about the names of certain Icelandic folk dances, games and sports. Almost two hundred years later, in 1772, two Icelandic students in København, Eggert Ólafsson and Bjarni Pálsson, published *Reise igjennom Island* (1772), a wide-ranging scientific report on the country, its nature and inhabitants, which had been commissioned by the Danish king. This ethnological and biological study contains among other things valuable information about food production, life-style, clothing, housing, and forms of entertainment, although there must always be some question about whether the regional differences suggested are as clear cut as Eggert and Bjarni make out. In the case of all three of these books, however, one must always remember the particular purposes for which they were written, and the fact that their authors were either ecclesiastical officials (Oddur) or based at centres of learning (Arngrímur being the headmaster of the Hólar cathedral school, and Eggert and Bjarni in København). All are tinged with the usual puritanical and "enlightened" dislike and distrust of all things darkly papist and paganly superstitious. And when it comes down to it, the same thing applies to the first real collections of Icelandic folk tales

carried out by Jón Árnason, Magnús Grímsson and Konrad Maurer in the mid-nineteenth century, partly as a response to the appearance of the collections published by the Grimms and Thiele in 1812-1815, and 1817. (Interestingly enough these men seem to have had strangely little awareness of the Norwegian collections of Asbjörnsen and Moe from 1841-44, and 1845-48).

As Sigurður Nordal has emphasised (Sigurður Nordal 1971, I, xxvi-xxvii), the fear of causing trouble by placing the spotlight on the superstitions that the church in Iceland was trying desperately to eradicate is particularly evident in the first, tentative collection of Icelandic legends (*Íslenzk Æfintýri*) published by Magnús Grímsson (1825-1860) and Jón Árnason (1819-1888) in 1852. This little volume carefully avoided any tales of *huldufólk* or ghosts that might be seen as actually having a basis in reality, just as it lacked any unduly frivolous wonder tales (in spite of its title). And in spite of the fact that the later two volumes published by Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og Æfintýri*, I-II (1862-64: following Konrad Maurer's *Islandische Volkssagen* from 1860), were much more wide ranging, it should be noted that they were meant to include a disclaimer from Jón stressing that he, for one, did not believe any of the tales contained in the book (Sigurður Nordal 1971, I, xlviii). We still have a great deal of work to do on the content of these original collections (and the material that was rejected which was later published in an additional four volumes between 1954 and 1961), especially as regards the representative nature and distribution of the material that they contain, and the national image that they present. Our planned digital folk legend database which I will mention later will be of great help in this regard.

It is worth noting in passing, however, that *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og Æfintýri* would probably never have come about had it not been for the encouragement of two foreigners (George Stephens who published a list of folkloristic material that needed collecting in the Journal of Det Kongelige Nordiske Oldskrift-Selskab in July 1845; and then particularly Konrad Maurer [1823-1902] who visited Iceland for six months in 1858, providing encouragement for Jón Árnason and collecting his own material from storytellers around the country); and then two Icelanders based abroad in Copenhagen, Guðbrandur Vigfússon (1827-1889), and Iceland's national hero of the fight for independence Jón Sigurðsson (1811-1879), both of whom had met and befriended Maurer during his earlier stay in Denmark in 1856. Interestingly enough, the difficulties surrounding the publication (in Leipzig) of the two-volume work, which have been examined in particular by Ögmundur Helgason (in an unpublished lecture) and Ólína Þorvarðardóttir (1998), emphasise the conflict I mentioned earlier between the home-educated, non-university scholar (Jón Árnason) who actually organised and carried out the donkey-work of collecting and writing up alongside a full-time job at the National Library, and the foreign-based scholars (Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Jón Sigurðsson) who were master-minding the project several days away in another country. While Jón Árnason had his ear firmly pressed to the Icelandic ground and his eye on the post-box, the latter pair seem to have been more interested in the theoretical framework and marketing reception of the work. They were also somewhat distrustful of the literary capabilities and lack of restraint of the collector: they appear to have deliberately dropped Jón Árnason's introduction and postscript in favour of their own, blaming the postal service for its late arrival. Few projects could have benefited more from the advent of e-mail.

The arrival of the Jón Árnason and Magnús Grímsson's collection of folk tales opened the flood gates to a century of folk tale collection and publication in Iceland, most of it produced by other inspired locally-educated scholars like Ólafur Daviðsson (with others, *Huld* 1890-1898; alone *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur* 1895; published in complete form 1945); Hannes Þorsteinsson (*Huld* and *Sagnaþættir Þjóðólfs*, I-III, 1900-1910); Jón Þorkelsson (*Huld* and *Þjóðsögur og munnmæli*, 1899); Valdimar Ásmundsson (and séra Jón Guðnason) (*Huld* and *Sagnaþáttum Fjallkonunnar* 1953), Helgi Guðmundsson (*Vestfirzkar sagnir* and *Vestfirzkar þjóðsögur* I-II, 1933-45); Þorsteinn M. Jónsson (*Gríma hin nýja*:1964-1965); and most particularly Sigfús Sigfússon (1855-1935), the Evald Tang Kristensen of the Icelandic scene who published a total of sixteen volumes of material from the isolated eastern fjord area (*Íslenzkar þjóð-sögur og sagnir*), between 1923 and 1938 (his entire collection was published as a whole in eleven volumes in 1984-1993). (This is just the tip of the iceberg which annually grows in size with each so-called "Christmas book flood": on these collections, see and Steindór Steindórsson frá Hlöðum 1964; Sigurður Nordal 1971, I, xliii; Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1989; and Gísli Sigurðsson 1996).

The amount of raw folk tale material available in Iceland is somewhat awe-inspiring, and not least because Iceland still operates no complete folk tale archive, and few of these legends, anecdotes and wonder tales were ever classified or indexed in accordance with any standardised system. Anyone who wants to find all the variants of a particular motif or legend type has simply had to read all the volumes from start to finish. That is only the start. In addition to this there are numerous unprinted manuscripts scattered across a whole range of libraries and local

archives. Matters are of course even worse for the foreign scholar that does not speak Icelandic. Only a very small percentage of this material has ever been translated into any other language, and most of that which has been translated originates in the main original two-volume collection published by Jón Árnason. For this reason, very few of you here at this conference will have any real idea of the near untouched gold mine of folk legend material available in Iceland. Nonetheless, as the Tony Blair election theme went, "things can only get better", and as I will stress in a moment, with the help of the University of Iceland and the Icelandic Science Council the situation I have described seems to be coming towards an end.

Nonetheless, if we go back to the start of the last century: while folk tale collections went on piling up with little or no critical commentary (it must be remembered that in the early twentieth century, there was no body in Iceland equipped to carry such out critical work), the field of *ethnology* was gifted with the appearance of Jónas Jónasson frá Hrafnagili (1856-1918) a locally-educated and highly motivated parish priest from the north of Iceland, who had already published his collection of folk tales, *Þjóðtrú og þjóðsögur* (with Oddur Björnsson)*,* in1908. Jónas was an avid collector of ethnological information, and in 1934, after his death, a taste of his enormous collection of material on Icelandic rural life, working methods, and tradition appeared in the book *Íslenzkir þjóðhættir*. This work, still central for Icelandic folkloristic study, has been republished in Icelandic several times (1934; 1945; 1961). On the other hand, it has never been translated, or published in the complete form it deserves: a great deal of Jónas' notes are still lying dormant in the manuscript of the Icelandic National Library waiting for a postgraduate student to take them up. Like many of his predecessors in the field of folklore collection, Jónas did not have the benefit of studying abroad, but unlike most of them he was unique in the way he endeavoured to make up for this by extensive reading of foreign works on folklore, and direct written contact with foreign scholars in the field, something that enabled him to undertake a number of valuable comparative studies. It is with good reason that he has been dubbed the father of modern Icelandic folkloristics.

This leads us to the comparatively recent institution of official collection and registration of folkloristic material in Iceland, and the development of academic teaching in folkloristics. Both areas owe much to what I stressed at the start of this lecture about all earlier Icelanders being subconscious folklorists by nature, and to the fact that all four of the hallowed "godfathers" of Icelandic humanities during the middle of the last century (when Iceland had regained its independence and was setting up its own university, and developing its national library, national museum and national manuscript archive) had a deep interest in Icelandic folkloristics. The figures I am referring to are first of all the archaeologist, Kristján Eldjárn (1916-1982), who later became the Icelandic President after having run the National Museum and having set up its Ethnological Archive (or Þjóðháttadeild) under the direction of the Uppsala-educated ethnologist Þór Magnússon; next come the three figureheads of Icelandic literary studies in the middle of the century: Jón Helgason (1899-1986; based at the Arnamagnean Manuscript Institute in Copenhagen, who in addition to his work on Old Norse manuscripts also published a number of key collections of ballads); Sigurður Nordal (1886-1974; who published a collection of folk tales with the author Þorbergur Þorðarson in 1928-1936 [extended 1962], and other works on folk legends in addition to his other wide-ranging literary scholarship); and finally Einar Ólafur Sveinsson (1899-1984; who alongside his central work on Old Norse literature also found time to publish a type index of Icelandic wonder tales in German in 1920, write the first detailed analysis of Icelandic folk tales [*Um íslenskar þjóðsögur*, 1940] and edit a new extended edition of Jónas Jónasson's *Íslenzkar þjóðhættir* in 1934).

The sixties were clearly a ripe time for development: when Kristján Eldjárn moved to the presidency in 1968, Þór Magnússon took charge of the National Museum, his place in the Ethnological Archive being taken over by Árni Björnsson (Cand. Mag. from Reykjavík in Icelandic Studies, who had written a thesis on Icelandic Christmas traditions). The new Arnamagnean Manuscript Institute in Iceland, under the charge of Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, took on (amongst others) Jón Samsonarson (who had lectured in Copenhagen) whose first and central work *Kvæði og dansleikir* (1964) still serves as one of the two central works on Icelandic dances and dance songs from the time of the settlement until the early nineteenth century (for the other, see Vésteinn Ólason 1982). Another key development at the Árnastofnun in the later sixties was the employment of a full time collector of folk material, Hallfreður Örn Eiríksson (educated in Prague). Hallfreður's recordings of storytellers, singers, and *rímur* chants from Iceland and the Icelandic settlements of North America which were mainly carried out during the late sixties and seventies are particularly valuable. It might interest you to know that some of the American recordings are now available on the Árnastofnun web site (at http://www.am.hi.is/vesturislendin). A number of the folk songs have recently been issued on disc (*Raddir*/*Voices*: SMK 7). Ever since Damon Albarn, the lead singer of *Blur* and a renowned so-called "Iceland friend" announced on the radio in Amsterdam that this was his favourite record, the CD has become a best

seller at home and abroad. We are still waiting for a Hip-hop mix to appear of Puff Daddy rapping the *rímur* with an Icelandic farmer born at the end of the last century.

Collection was taking place in the seventies, as, as I said, material was piling up, but until this point, little had been done to educate students to deal with what had been gathered in the correct folkloristic context. In the university, everything was taken essentially from the viewpoint of text, and the same applied when the first tentative courses in Folkloristics (taught by Hallfreður Örn and Jón Samsónarsson accompanied by a number of other part-time lecturers, including Árni Björnsson and Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson) were offered by the Icelandic Department in the early nineteen eighties. The Faculty of Humanities nonetheless had little interest at the time (unfortunately) in developing the teaching of Folkloristics as an individual subject.

The first real step forward occurred in 1979 when Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, who had recently (1979) finished his PhD in Uppsala on the acceptance of Christianity in Iceland,(IV) was invited to offer introductory courses on Folkloristics in the new and developing Faculty of Social Sciences as part of a general BA course dealing with Sociology, Political Science and Anthropology. There is little question among students and later part time staff alike, that Jón Hnefill should be given the sole credit for building up the teaching of Folkloristics as an academic subject in Iceland. In 1985, when the Sociology, Political Science and Anthropology became main BA subjects in their own right, Jón managed to ensure that Folkloristics was granted the status of a minor subsidiary subject. Five years later, as the number of students grew, Folkloristics became a main subject, Jón's own central teaching now being supported by a number of part time lecturers, such as the late Guðrún Bjartmarsdóttir, Águst O. Georgsson, Ögmundur Helgason, Ragnheiður Þórarinsdóttir, Gísli Sigurðsson, Ólína Þorvarðardóttir and myself. When Jón Hnefill retired in 1997, after being raised to the rank of Iceland's first Professor of Folkloristics, a total of approximately twenty students were aiming to finish BAs in the subject.

As I have said, Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson must take the credit for building up the subject, but at the same time it is important to note another revered figure that has to be thanked for setting the direction of both Jón's teaching, and the archival work at the National Museum instituted by Þór Magnússon (where a total of 97 questionnaires have now been sent out concerning life in rural areas, fishing villages and the larger ever- growing urban areas of Iceland). This figure the question is Dag Strömbäck (1900-1978), a close friend to both Sigurður Nordal and Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, and thus also an influential force on their essential work in the field of folkloristics and early religious matters. Strömbäck's influence is clear not only in the prolific range of articles and books on Old Norse religion and Icelandic legend, riddles and occasional verse written by his student, Jón Hnefill, but also in Jón's teaching and the courses he established: the stress on the comparative method, balanced argument and objectivity, and the emphasis on facts before theory and preconceived ideas (see Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1982; and Almqvist 1991). Strömbäck's fields of interest may have fallen out of favour in the minds of some modern folklorists, but in an age dominated by theory, his calm and analytic approach still has a great deal to teach us. I have no embarrassment is crediting his role in Iceland.

In short, one can say that over the last twenty five years, the key spheres of influence on folkloristics in Iceland seem to have moved from Copenhagen to the so-called Uppsala school, and then via Strömbäck to London and Dublin (where the other great modern father figure in Icelandic Folkloristics, Bo Almqvist is based). Through our students, like Valdimar Tr. Hafstein, who you will also hear lecture at this conference, links are now also being established with Berkeley in California. I would personally like to see further links established. I've been lucky enough over the last year to meet (albeit briefly) lecturers from Bergen, Helsinki, Tartu, Turku, Cork, Dublin, Stockholm and København. We were also extremely very grateful to receive material from all of your departments when we were reconsidering directions in 1998, and sent out enquiries about the subjects you are teaching, and booklists used. Contacts are highly necessary for us both as lecturers and students, and the students of an isolated island like Iceland are in particular need of hearing about what is going on in other countries. One of our most immediate hopes is to establish Erasmus and Nordplus links with many of your departments as soon as possible. We believe we have a lot to offer (including a number of introductory courses in English), but we also have a great deal to gain.

The central problem though, as ever, is lack of staff and lack of finance. Kristján Eldjárn, Sigurður Nordal and Einar Ólafur Sveinsson have passed on, and now, fifteen years after Folkloristics began to be taught as a minor subject at the University of Iceland, there are still only three full-time government-paid positions related to Folkloristics in Iceland: the position of Ethnological Archivist at the National Museum at present held by Hallgerður Gísladóttir; the position held by Hallfreður Örn Eiríksson in the Arnamagnean Institute; and my own position at the University of

Iceland, which I inherited from Jón Hnefill in 1998, following Jón's retirement in 1997. As is apparent from what I have just said, Jón's chair was frozen for a year, during which time the funds allotted to the teaching of Folkloristics were diverted to other purposes (within the department of Anthropology and Folkloristics), causing a drop in the number of new students from around seventeen to seven. In other words, in an age where subject funding is based on student numbers, Folkloristics appeared to be condemned to extinction.

There is however, new light at the end of the tunnel: thanks to the support of the Faculty of Social Sciences, it has at last been possible to start providing a full array of courses again for our students. Through Cupertino with other departments and faculties, and not least because we have been able to offer several basic courses in English, student numbers (and thus future funding) are also on the rise: I have forty five students in my course on Old Norse Religion this term. Next term, John Lindow will be visiting us as a Fulbright lecturer. Meanwhile, two of our part time members of staff, Gísli Sigurðsson and Ólína Þorvarðardóttir are about to defend their doctoral theses on folkloristic topics (the relationship between the sagas and the oral tradition; and the seventeenth century witchhunts in the western fjords), and for the first time we have two students applying for grants to start MA studies in the field of Folkloristics. Interestingly enough, both are related to areas of modern folkloristics: one hopes to work on the first collection of urban legends, jokes and anecdotes recorded in Iceland, while the other means to analyse the present mumming traditions followed by children on Ash Wednesday in the main townships. At the same time, after a great deal of exhausting grant application work, both the Icelandic Science Council and the University of Iceland have agreed to started allotting funding to the creation of a new database containing information in both Icelandic and English on all the folk legends that have been recorded in Iceland. The first fruits of this work (carried out by myself and several of our students) should hopefully start appearing on the web early in 2001. We are certain it will be of great use not only to scholars and students at home and abroad, but also to local schools and those working in the growing tourist industry.

Co-operation on international projects is also growing. Another of our best ex-students, Jón Jónsson, one of the organisers of the new Reykjavíkur Akademían research centre, is representing Iceland in the joint Scandinavian project on Children's Folklore, for which he and his associates have already amassed a great deal of new material. Following on from my own research work on the dramatic and performance aspects of the Elder Edda (and later Scandinavian traditions), I have also been working closely with Carsten Bregenhöj in Finland on setting up a large international project concerning the joint recording, mapping and comparative and social analysis of all Scandinavian (and Baltic) disguise traditions past and present. We've already gathered together a team of all the main experts on the subject from all of the Scandinavian countries (as well as Estonia), new standardised questionnaires are being sent out, and (if we get funding from somewhere) we mean to produce a comprehensive book (and web-access to a data-base of records, photographs, and recordings) that should emphasise once and for all that the Scandinavians were not mere receivers of the dramatic impulse, sitting around waiting for a German or French mask to step off a boat; and that mumming and the field of performance are far from being out-dated taboo topics for folklorists.

It should be clear from what I have said that with the prospect of increased finance we are starting to move into necessarily new areas in both our research and our teaching in Iceland. Both students and lecturers are fully agreed that that the core instituted by Jon Hnefill (including the study of Old Norse religion and mythology) should remain the same. However, it is clear that the students also need to widen their horizons, and gain a greater understanding of the folk cultures of neighbouring countries (in our case, especially mainland Scandinavia and Ireland) in order to see their local world in an international perspective. (In many folkloristic works of the past, there has often been far too much simple focus on the local situation, and far too little understanding of foreign cultures.) There is also a great need for us to concentrate not only on the past but also the world view and momentary culture of the present, to realise that the Hollywood media of today is the legendary saga material of the past, and that in folkloristic terms the visual performance itself often has as much semiotic value as the recorded word. In other words, we are starting to realise that from the viewpoint of folkloristics, graffiti may well have as much value as *Grímnismál*. In Iceland, this is going to be no small acceptance, but it is the way into a future where the past may not be the guiding light, but a firm foundation for understanding the direction in which the road might lie.
14/03/00

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