

SHEEP, VOLCANOES, AND INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT: MAPPING THE  
TWENTIETH-CENTURY ICELANDIC CONSCIOUSNESS  
THROUGH ART AND FICTION

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by

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“Maður er ekki sjálfstæður nema maður hafi hug til að standa einn.”  
(A man is not independent unless he has the courage to stand alone.)

-Halldór Laxness  
*Sjálfstætt fólk*



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## **Abstract**

The early 1900s marked a time of burgeoning nationalism and social upheaval in Iceland, which, consequently, brought about drastic changes in the nation's art and literature. After centuries of oppression under the Danish monarchy, the Icelandic people began fiercely advocating for their independence, until the country officially achieved its sovereignty in 1944. From this turbulent period of political reform emerged several prolific novelists, including Halldór Laxness and Gunnar Gunnarsson, whose compelling depictions of twentieth-century Icelandic cultural life still enjoy a wide readership in Iceland today. Iceland's severance from Denmark's repressive rule also signaled the formation of the nation's now thriving visual art scene, which has been lauded by contemporary critics and audiences across the world for its fearless experimentalism and playful originality. Beyond the island nation's desolate shores, however, few scholars have examined or published research about this pivotal point in Iceland's literary and artistic development. Thus, the purpose of this study is to begin educating people about Iceland's rich cultural history, to perform an interdisciplinary examination of the twentieth-century Icelandic national consciousness, to analyze how key historical events influenced Iceland's literary and artistic output, and to honor and preserve the legacies of several twentieth-century Icelandic authors and artists.

## Introduction

A stark volcanic island located in the northern Atlantic, Iceland possesses a fascinating cultural history that dates back to the ninth century, a time when rapacious Vikings roamed the seas, terrorizing and pillaging coastal Europe. Widely-disputed historical records suggest that Iceland was first inhabited by devout Irish monks, who left pagan Europe in search of an environment more conducive to their religious practices. Nevertheless, the most consequential settlers arrived around 874 A.D. Led by the fierce warlord Ingólfur Arnarson, who was exiled from Norway after a contentious blood feud, this small group of Viking settlers established what would one day become a proud industrialized nation of more than 300,000 residents. But the Icelandic people have withstood unspeakable hardships to achieve even the modest economic success they have enjoyed in recent history. Centuries of political strife, oppression at the hands of the Danish crown, and catastrophic environmental disasters have all marred their experience, forging them into a stoic, resilient, and fiercely patriotic people. Furthermore, perhaps no other culture has recorded the psychological strain of their adversity so prolifically and profoundly in their literature as the citizens of this Nordic nation. From the Icelandic sagas—epic poems and prose works about the tempestuous formation of Iceland’s social order—to the sardonic pastoral novels of Nobel laureate Halldór Laxness, literature holds the key to understanding the collective consciousness of these long-standing inhabitants of the North.

Over the past hundred years, Icelanders have also established a vibrant visual art scene, one characterized by “a strong, creative energy” that “makes each of the island’s roughly 300,000 inhabitants into two things: culture recipients and culture creators” (Schoen 7). From 1602 to 1786, the Danes imposed a crippling trade monopoly on the

Icelandic people, which forced them to live in abject poverty and inhibited them from developing a distinct visual culture. Once freed from the shackles of colonial rule, Icelanders swiftly made up for lost time. Public art now pervades the Icelandic landscape, for artists from Iceland and around the world, “such as Richard Serra, Claudio Parmiggiani, Jason Rhoades, Paul McCarthy [and] Yoko Ono retain a presence in Iceland through their works” (7). Throughout the twentieth century, Iceland, an island known for its desolate terrain and majestic natural beauty, also produced notable landscape painters, namely Þórarinn B. Þorláksson and Louisa Matthíasdóttir. These artists’ paintings not only present striking interpretations of the Icelandic landscape but also serve as a stunning visual record of Icelanders’ changing worldview during the 1900s. Þorláksson, a fervent Icelandic nationalist, espoused through his work that Icelandic art, in its highest form, was an idyllic depiction and reverential celebration of the nation’s natural beauty. Conversely, Matthíasdóttir’s use of vibrant colors traditionally associated with commercial art, as well as her insertion of the human figure (including herself) in the natural environment, represent the nation’s broader transformation from a communal society of farmers into an industrialized society of individuals. Therefore, both Þorláksson’s and Matthíasdóttir’s paintings are more than just charming illustrations of Iceland’s distinctive terrain; they are fascinating historical portraits of the Icelandic national consciousness in transition.

Both twentieth-century Icelandic literature and visual art were strongly influenced by the nation’s ancient saga tradition. Acclaimed as masterpieces of medieval European prose and revered like sacred manuscripts by many Icelanders, the Icelandic sagas have garnered more critical attention from academics than any other form of Icelandic

literature. The vivid descriptions of Viking exploits in these texts have largely constructed our knowledge of Northern life during the Middle Ages. For example, *Njál's Saga*, which is set during the early days of the Icelandic Commonwealth, is considered by literary scholars to be a superlative example of the saga tradition, telling the gripping story of astute official Njál and his kinship with the eminent warrior, Gunnar. The sweeping narrative contains meticulous genealogical records, extensive descriptions of Icelanders' democratic legal proceedings, and stories of vicious family disputes that rage across several generations. *Njál's Saga*, like many other Icelandic sagas, testifies that civilization, no matter how tenuous and hostile, can emerge even in an environment that seems unsuitable for habitation. For this reason and many others, the sagas have captivated and inspired the imaginations of not only literary scholars but also Icelandic writers and artists for quite some time.

However, this heavy emphasis on Iceland's ancient literature within the academic community has significantly downplayed the nation's contributions to contemporary fiction. Few modern readers outside Iceland would recognize the names of Halldór Laxness and Gunnar Gunnarsson, but these Icelandic novelists were, at the dawn of the twentieth-century, two of Europe's most influential literary figures, with well over 100 novels published between them. Both authors drew upon nostalgic and bleak memories of their homeland for inspiration. But the stories they tell are undoubtedly universal, containing insightful contemplations on the intellectual matters of the day, contemplations worthy of an international audience. In awarding Halldór Laxness the 1955 Nobel Prize for Literature, the Swedish Academy extolled Halldór Laxness' writings as a renewal of "the great narrative art of Iceland" (The Nobel Foundation). His

novels, which are laced with sharp social criticism, chronicle the plight of Icelanders at all levels of society, painting a vivid literary portrait of the nation's ongoing struggle for existence. Gunnar Gunnarsson was nominated for the Nobel Prize four times by the Swedish linguist, Adolf Noreen (The Nobel Foundation). In 1919, his breakthrough novel, *Guest the One-Eyed*, became the first book published by an Icelander to be adapted to film. Moreover, his critically-acclaimed novel *Seven Days' Darkness* beautifully articulates the philosophical tenets of the early 1900s. The story follows a virtuous doctor as he descends into demoralized madness during a harrowing Spanish flu outbreak in Iceland. This book—long out of print in English translation—posits searching questions about the wisdom of placing faith in mankind, at a time when the very seams of humanity were being torn apart by an international war.

Both novelists fashioned characters whose struggles and triumphs compare to those of the legendary protagonists described in the Icelandic sagas. However, when we examine these masterworks of modern Icelandic fiction, we are not just reading contemporary homages to an ancient literary tradition: we are catching a fascinating glimpse into the national consciousness of this resolute people and arriving at a clearer understanding of the entire human condition during the first half of the twentieth century. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis is to enable non-Icelanders to develop a clearer understanding of the nation's modern way of life, by surveying recent events in Iceland's history and describing how these occurrences, first, shaped the nation's literature and, second, affected its artistic production.

## A Brief History of Twentieth-Century Icelandic Literature

Gone are the years when I was young and still innocent except for original sin ... the years when adventures brought me experience without bitterness ... the years when my sympathy with all things living was uncritical and intense ... when God seemed to me a generous, friendly grandfather, the Devil a rather dangerous and moody but, on the whole, essentially stupid and harmless godfather ... the years when light was triumphant indeed, and all evil, all fear, could be turned aside by an *Our Father* or the sign of the cross, the years when in the morning I could but dimly foresee the evening, and sat safely in the shelter of a wall of sods playing with straw ... these indeed are the years that will never return. And it is not only the years that have passed. Many of those then living are now dead, others scattered to the winds; even their memory only peeps out intermittently, like stars between the breaks in a cloud-covered sky.

(Gunnarsson 1)

A confluence of domestic and foreign affairs greatly influenced Iceland's literature during the early twentieth century. On June 28, 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria was assassinated, igniting one of the deadliest conflicts in human history—World War I. However, in Halldór Laxness' novel *Sjálfstætt fólk (Independent People)*, the narrator begins the chapter “Þegar Ferdínand Var Skotinn” (“When Ferdinand Was Shot”) by praising this war as “perhaps the most bountiful blessing that God has sent our country since the Napoleonic Wars saved the nation from the consequences of the Great Eruption” (Laxness 373). As the story's protagonist Bjartur

attests, combat abroad sent agricultural “prices ... soaring everywhere” (374), lifting destitute Icelandic farmers into the middle class and allowing “those who were in debt ... opportunities of incurring greater debts” (380). Energized by this newfound economic “prosperity,” Icelanders “sent their children to be educated,” “increased their livestock,” and expanded their farmhouses until “the passion for building exceeded the bounds of good sense” (380). Even Bjartur, a stubbornly independent man, compromises his ideals and takes out a loan “on exceptionally liberal terms” (421) to construct a larger farmstead. But this betrayal of his core principles of fiscal autonomy leads to the tale’s central tragedy. When the war ends in 1918, the market for Icelandic wool, which largely fueled Bjartur’s financial success, falls sharply, to the point that “no consumer in the world would degrade himself by touching Icelandic sheep” (458). Burdened by debts he can no longer repay, Bjartur auctions off his farm for a pittance. The story then concludes as he reconciles with Asta Solilja, the foster daughter he alienates in his futile attempts to maintain his illusory status as a self-sufficient farmer. *Independent People* depicts how World War I heralded a rare period of economic stability for mainland Icelanders and subsequently describes how the war’s resolution ushered in yet another era of scarcity and uncertainty, uncertainty that has left an indelible imprint not only on the Icelandic consciousness but also on the nation’s literature.

In *Seven Days’ Darkness*, Gunnar Gunnarsson, who resided in Denmark during World War I, offers an even bleaker depiction of the psychological injuries this war inflicted on Icelanders. Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson explains that *Seven Days’ Darkness* is a story “of a genesis reversed...where the world of the eminent doctor Grímur Elliðagrímur collapses bit by bit in the course of seven days...”, and “his fall is triggered by a battle of

wits and beliefs with an old acquaintance, the nihilist philosopher Páll Einarsson” (361).

A nearby volcano erupts, shrouding Reykjavík in ash and darkness, setting the stage whereon the gloomy psychological drama between these two Icelanders takes place.

Grímur, whose “one ambition is to succor wretched humanity” (Gunnarsson 23),

overextends himself as one of Reykjavík’s only doctors during the Spanish flu epidemic, which ravaged the nation’s capital in 1918. Physically and mentally exhausted, the

physician falls prey to Einarsson’s inexplicably vicious attempts to undermine his trust in

his wife, Vigdis. Vigdis is a compassionate woman, who encourages and upholds

Grímur’s faith in humanity. But her unusual affection for and unexplained past with Páll

Einarsson awakens suspicion of infidelity within Grímur. Their relationship gradually

deteriorates, and the novel culminates with Grímur walking in on the two during an

innocent, but unanticipated, late-night visit. His shattered trust in Vigdis, coupled with his

overwhelming fatigue, sends him spiraling into madness. Jóhannsson offers this

assessment to explain the cause of Grímur’s psychological disintegration:

Páll has lost faith in good and evil and has substituted for these concepts those of the strong and the weak. The weak are those who have faith in something, be it God, morality, or simply the goodness of others. Their faith, according to Páll, makes them dependent on something other than themselves, and when that is taken away from them, their weakness reveals itself, a philosophical stance quite obviously based on the contemporary reading of Nietzsche and his theories of the superman (Jóhannsson 362).

Jóhannsson further asserts that *Seven Days' Darkness* “confirms the collapse of moral as well as religious values” (362) during the early 1900s, that Grímur’s demise signals a broader dissolution of faith in both our fellow man and in God. Gunnarsson’s feelings on the war are perhaps even more poignantly articulated in his existential novel *Livets Strand*, or in English translation, *The Shore of Life*:

I did not bleed on the outside; neither cuts nor bruises could be found on my body...no, the insane frenzy of war inflicted wounds of another nature on me. My soul resembled burned soil, defiled with foul heaps of corpses; each emptied field reminded me of ground ploughed with gunfire, polluted by freshly mutilated human bodies. I bleed on the inside” (Jóhannsson 349-350).

Laxness and Gunnarsson were clearly deeply affected by the violence and turmoil of World War I. Their literary works address more than just the insular matters of an island nation cut off from the rest of the world. They serve as a powerful testament to the far-reaching devastation of this execrable conflict, verifying contemporary Icelandic fiction’s relevance to both the study of both national consciousness and the human condition.

## Survival

Icelanders have also had to cope with the vagaries of their homeland's turbulent weather and harsh landscape since their arrival in 874 A.D. For example, Lakagígar, a once-violent volcano located in Southern Iceland, erupted for an eight-month period between 1783-1784, killing 10,000 Icelanders—roughly one in five—and eradicating over fifty percent of the nation's livestock (Stone 1278). The plumes of ash spewing from the volcano's fissures contained deadly amounts of hydrofluoric acid, which poisoned the food supply and polluted the drinking water (1278). Years of famine, known as the Mist Hardships, followed, and this lack of sustenance drove Icelanders to extreme measures to survive. Plant roots became feasts, puffins choice meat, and as Halldór Laxness recalls “my grandmother's foster mother lived through the fires of Skaftá [Laki]... and had to lay shoe leather on the table for her family to eat” (Hallberg 24). But Laki represents just one battle in the Icelandic people's ceaseless war against the forces of nature, a war deeply embedded in the nation's consciousness and literature. The year in which the events of *Seven Days' Darkness* occur, 1918, brought about two pertinent natural disasters: an influenza pandemic and the Katla eruption.

Two ships, the *Botnía* and the *Willemoes*, docked in Reykjavík's harbor on October 18, 1918. Unbeknownst to them, several crewmembers from both vessels were infected with the deadly Spanish flu virus. According to pubmed.gov, “the spread of the illness was extremely rapid” and “within six weeks, close to 500 individuals had died.” The highest mortality rate occurred amongst some of Iceland's most vulnerable citizens: young children and the elderly. The narrator of *Seven Days' Darkness*, Jon Oddson, must watch helplessly as his friend Anna, a pure-hearted little girl with unshakeable faith in

God, succumbs to the disease's ravaging effects. Coffin after coffin is filled, and toward the novel's conclusion, Jon, in a lugubrious state of philosophical contemplation, wearily determines that "in a little while all of us who now breathe will no longer breathe...and then all memory of us also will have faded, all memory of our sufferings and our joys, quenched by Death and by Time, Death's inheritor" (293). Halldór Laxness also references this disastrous Spanish flu epidemic in his novels. Consider the following excerpt from his first major work, *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* (*The Great Weaver from Kashmir*):

"Diljá. I don't understand why you're taking this so hard. I haven't seen you cry in many years. Imagine how painful it is for me to see you crying, when I've always turned to you for happiness. You who fill everything around you with lighthearted sunshine laughter! When I see you crying, it reminds me of the winter of the plague, the day that I walked behind you in your father's funeral train. You were only fourteen then and you cried all the way to the churchyard, and I thought about how I was always going to be so good to you after that. I haven't seen you cry since then."

Finally she looked up with tear-filled eyes. She recalled that raw, cold November day in 1918, when she was left with nothing else in the Lord's entire wide world to love. The sob in her breast had been stifled. (Laxness 32)

In this passage, the novel's protagonist, Steinn Elliði, tries to console his lover, Diljá, who is sad that Steinn is leaving Iceland to go live in a monastery in Italy. "The plague" Steinn refers to is the Spanish flu epidemic, which extinguished so many lives in

1918. Without a clear understanding of Icelandic history, though, the meaning and emotional impact of this passage cannot be fully discerned.

On October 12, 1918, only a week before the Spanish flu was introduced to the Icelandic populace, one of the island's most active volcanoes, Katla, stirred from its slumber, showering Reykjavík with a cloud of ash and soot. Throughout *Seven Days' Darkness*, Katla's "red column of fire" looms above the horizon like "an evil manifestation, the senseless evidence of a baseless wrath" (145). In the novel, nature's merciless fury becomes a harrowing symbol of a world devoid of Providence, a world bereft of meaning and beauty. Although he lived in Denmark during the Spanish flu outbreak and Katla eruption, Gunnar Gunnarsson remained keenly attuned to the plight of his people, which is evidenced by the setting of *Seven Days' Darkness*. And both Gunnarsson and Laxness invoke these true stories about Icelanders' adversity in their works to offer masterful, accurate, and tragic discernments of the state of humanity during this pivotal moment in history.

***Self-Portrait in Landscape: Louisa Matthiasdóttir as Visual Chronicler of the  
Twentieth-Century Icelandic Consciousness***

The Icelandic artist Louisa Matthiasdóttir revolutionized landscape painting during the early twentieth century, a time when Icelanders were abandoning their dreary lives as indigent farmers and moving to Reykjavík in search of jobs and economic prosperity. Matthiasdóttir openly embraced foreign trends of painterly expression while rejecting the conservative philosophies of renowned Icelandic painters like Jóhannes Kjarval and þórarinn Þorláksson, who believed that Icelandic landscape paintings should serve as a patriotic celebration of the nation's natural beauty. Matthiasdóttir abstracted her forms, used fully-saturated colors, incorporated human figures into her scenery, and moved to New York City to cultivate and exhibit her talents. Consequently, she was the first painter to successfully reconcile Icelanders' patriotic admiration for their homeland's environment with American and European Modernist aesthetics. Even more significant is that Louisa Matthiasdóttir's works depict a fundamental shift in the twentieth-century Icelandic national consciousness. Her vibrant color schemes and her insertion of the human figure within the natural environment represent Iceland's transformation from a quiescent agrarian community into an individualistic capitalist society, making Matthiasdóttir's paintings a remarkable visual archive of the Icelandic national consciousness in transition.

Born to a middle class family in Reykjavík, Iceland, Louisa Matthiasdóttir emerged as one of Scandinavia's most esteemed and beloved visual artists during the twentieth century. She exhibited an aptitude for painting at an early age, prompting her parents to enroll her in private drawing lessons and, later, to send her off to Copenhagen

for more rigorous formal training. While studying commercial art in Denmark, her instructors and the Danish public swiftly took notice of her keen eye for composition and distinctive interpretations of landscapes, villages, and people. Her watercolors, with their fluid brushstrokes and charmingly simplistic depictions of Icelandic peasant life, landed on the front pages of popular Danish newspapers like *Politiken*, which earned her quite a distinguished reputation for a young art student. Eventually she chose to immigrate to America and establish herself in New York City, further honing her painting technique under the tutelage of renowned abstract expressionist, Hans Hoffman. Her expansive travels and submersion in the Modernist aesthetics of both Europe and the United States enabled her to become one of the first Icelandic artists to convey through painting, her homeland's values, heritage, and unique scenery to a broader international audience. A trailblazer of contemporary Icelandic art, she has without question secured her place as a visionary figure in twentieth-century Icelandic, American and European art history.

Matthiasdóttir's career began during a pivotal moment in Iceland's economic and cultural development. After World War II, demand for Icelandic commodities skyrocketed. As a result, the island nation gradually transformed from a bleak, frozen wasteland, whose quality of life was comparable to a third world nation, to a burgeoning capitalist society, capable of sustaining a comfortable way of life for its inhabitants. Furthermore, Iceland was on the verge of declaring independence from the kingdom of Denmark after centuries of oppressive colonial rule; this liberation gave birth to a powerful streak of nationalism, for many Icelanders were passionately seeking to define what unified and distinguished them as a people. This patriotic fervor manifested itself in numerous art forms, most notably in Icelandic landscape painting. However, some

Icelanders who held conservative views about their homeland's shifting mores "worried about the fate of their small country's unique character in the maelstrom of a fast growing international urban culture" (Perl 18). That is, they were deeply concerned that their country's rich cultural heritage would be destroyed by what they perceived as, the "morass of corruption" (18) inherent within industrialized societies. However, progressive figures like Iceland's most revered contemporary writer Halldór Laxness openly embraced and promoted foreign trends in literature and art, stoking generational tensions that permeated every aspect of Icelandic cultural life.

Before Matthíasdóttir rose to prominence, an entrenched hegemony of traditionalists dominated the burgeoning Icelandic art scene. These painters perpetuated the idyllic vision of Iceland as an agrarian society by creating "reverent landscape paintings, featuring some of Iceland's most famous natural attractions" (20). Two artists who championed this ideology—Jóhannes Kjarval and Þórarinn Þorláksson—used their work principally to celebrate "the inherent beauty of the multifaceted landscape of their motherland" (20). Kjarval's *Summer Night at Þingvellir* (top) and Þorláksson's *A Summer Night, Þingvellir* (bottom) perfectly exemplify this idealistic philosophy.



Kjarval's *Summer Night at Þingvellir* is a quintessential early twentieth-century Icelandic painting in that it glorifies the nation's environment, while displaying no signs of civilization or urban contamination. Applying thick, bold brushstrokes, Kjarval illustrates a valley full of mossy hillocks, a valley divided by a glacial stream and illuminated by a radiant yellow sun. Although Kjarval does not attempt to craft in this painting a photorealistic portrayal of the scenery around him, he also does not deviate from the local colors of his subject matter, respecting the intrinsic beauty within Iceland's inimitable terrain. Similarly, Þorláksson's *A Summer Night, Þingvellir* depicts, with lifelike precision, two ponies grazing in a quiet valley in southern Iceland, as two vacant farmhouses rest atop hillocks in the background. The starkness of the dreary sky and masterful rendering of atmospheric perspective lend this painting a pensive, almost otherworldly quality, an atmosphere that both mystifies and idealizes the Icelandic countryside. It is both artists' romanticized view of the natural world that Matthíasdóttir would later address, challenge, and reinvent in her own work.

Matthíasdóttir became a revolutionary figure in the art of Icelandic landscape painting not because she vehemently rejected her predecessors' idealistic perspectives, or had an aversion for Icelanders who vocalized their patriotism through art. In fact, her paintings possess and communicate affection for her nationality akin to that of Kjarval and Þorláksson. Instead, she made the first endeavor to reconcile Icelanders' profound admiration for their homeland with the Modernist aesthetics to which she was constantly exposed during her travels abroad. Consider her later paintings *Self-Portrait in Landscape* (top) and *Reykjavík Harbour* (bottom).



In *Self-Portrait in Landscape*, Matthiasdóttir inserts herself into the foreground of an abstracted Icelandic fjord. Geometric sheep graze in the background as Matthiasdóttir, with her hands in her pockets, stares back at viewers with light-hearted self-assurance. Unlike the traditionalists, Matthiasdóttir boldly introduces the human figure to the art of landscape painting, signaling a new focus on the individual's relationship with the natural world. Moreover, Matthiasdóttir's color palette differs dramatically from her contemporaries. Drawing on her training as a commercial artist, she employed fully-saturated, astringent color schemes to lift her scenery out of the bleak milieu of pre-industrialized Icelandic society and offer a more optimistic outlook on the future of her newly-industrialized nation. *Reykjavík Harbour, 1981*, a composition rich in striking navy blues and complementary color schemes, contrasts a contemporary fishing port with a majestic Icelandic mountain, perfectly illustrating the emergent coexistence between Iceland's nascent modernity and its ancient nature. In essence, Matthiasdóttir's work provides not only a fresh visual interpretation of the Icelandic landscape but also a fascinating historical record of Iceland's current events throughout the twentieth century.

Louisa Matthiasdóttir's endearing paintings give viewers of all nationalities a glimpse into the shifting national consciousness of this resilient, yet isolated Scandinavian culture. If the study of national consciousness is the study of the shared values, ideals and experiences that unify a people, then her paintings hold the key to unlocking and understanding what defined these long-standing inhabitants of the North throughout the 1900s. Her innovative inclusion of the human figure in her landscapes suggests a nation evolving from a collective of isolated, destitute farmers into a thriving populace of self-sufficient individuals. Her stark contrasts between the modern and the

ancient, the urban and the rural, the man-made and the natural, suggest a culture that is technologically advanced, yet firmly rooted in ancient traditions and reverent toward the power of nature. By endeavoring to comprehend the nature of consciousness through the study of artists like Louisa Matthiasdóttir, we learn about more than just the insular matters of a remote island nation: we learn about the human condition, our capacity for change, and our ability to emerge from dismal circumstances to become stronger, more resilient people.

## Conclusion

Iceland is a small nation, but its contributions to twentieth-century literature and art are vast and noteworthy. Although the Atlantic Ocean separates Iceland from continental Europe, miles of open sea could not spare the country from the economic turbulence and philosophical chaos brought about by World War I and World War II. The tragic stories of Bjartur of Summerhouses and Grímur Elliðagrímur convey just how far the effects of this political unrest spread, and, to this day, both Laxness's and Gunnarsson's poignant novels about human suffering and the vicissitudes of life still resonate, not only with the residents of this secluded nation but also with the rest of the world. Most people cannot directly empathize with Icelanders' thousand years of adversity, but stories like *Independent People* contain powerful narratives about love, tragedy, and mankind's longing for stability in an unstable world—experiences to which all human beings, irrespective of origin, can relate. They also celebrate the fortitude of the human spirit and our ability to withstand, and ultimately overcome, excruciating hardships. Thus, by paying closer critical attention to twentieth-century Icelandic fiction in general, literary scholars can develop a clearer picture of the human condition: a stirring portrait of resilience and resolve.

The Icelandic art scene is fueled by a vivacious creative energy, which repeatedly manifests itself through the art of landscape painting. From the tranquil landscapes of Þórarinn Þorláksson to the brilliant sceneries of Louisa Matthíasdóttir, Icelandic landscape paintings provide viewers with a perceptive glimpse into the evolving Icelandic national consciousness. During the early twentieth century, Þorláksson sought to preserve "Iceland's true image" (Perl 20) in his work by creating idealistic and realistic

depictions of the Icelandic countryside. By abstracting hillocks, pastures, and human figures, Matthiasdóttir imbued each of her works with a distinct contemporary quality, reconciling Icelanders' ancient oral history and admiration for traditional landscape painting with Modernist modes of visual expression. Her paintings exude a presence that is simultaneously real and surreal, archaic yet wholly demonstrative of Icelanders' present-day artistic sensibility, solidifying her position as one of the nation's foremost contemporary artists. Although these painters and novelists hail from one of the most desolate places in the world, their works are rich with insights into the dynamic human experience, making them a valuable historical record deserving of further scholarly exploration.

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**FULBRIGHT PERSONAL STATEMENT**  
**Elliott Brandsma—Iceland—Language and Literature**

When I was seventeen-years old, I bought a copy of Icelandic singer Björk's sixth studio album *Medúlla*, a purchase that unexpectedly altered the course of my academic career. After downloading the CD onto my iPod, I remember sprawling out on my bed, closing my eyes, and immersing myself in the record's outlandish beats and experimental sounds. However, as I listened to the album's fourth track "Vökuró"—a somber melody sung entirely in Icelandic—I was instantly captivated by the poetic beauty and metrical intricacy of the Icelandic lyrics. Within days of hearing the song, I ordered a *Teach Yourself Icelandic* curriculum, determined to master this language that had so inexplicably captured my imagination. Since I was a Texas resident with no prior experience learning Nordic languages, my initial attempts at pronouncing lengthy Icelandic words sounded more like "Tex-landic" than Icelandic. Still, I devoted many hours after school to completing grammar drills and reciting texts, until I achieved a basic level of spoken and written proficiency. This interest in Icelandic has since blossomed into a fervent passion for researching the nation's rich cultural history and unique literary tradition.

Why was I, a Texan with no Scandinavian heritage, so intrigued by the language and homeland of the legendary Vikings? The answer to this question, I believe, can be traced back to my childhood. Although I was born in Augsburg, Germany, the military transferred my family back to the United States when I was just one-year old. As I was growing up, my parents regularly showed me home videos of their travels across Germany, where they toured historical sites like *Linderhof* palace and *Neuschwanstein* castle. Watching these movies instilled an intense cultural curiosity within me, but I

never had the opportunity to return abroad during my youth. For years it remained unclear where I would go to satisfy my hunger for cross-cultural interaction. The moment Björk's booming voice resounded in my ears, I found my destination.

In August 2012, I stayed in Reykjavík, Iceland, for nine days. I was thousands of miles away from home, but I felt surprisingly comfortable in my new, albeit colder, environment. The Icelanders I met were delighted to discover that someone from Texas could knowledgeably discuss their contemporary literature and carry on a polite conversation with them in their native tongue. Oddly enough, my favorite part of the trip was not hiking up the magnificent *Sólheimajökull* glacier or taking a boat tour across the glistening *Jökulsárlón* glacial lagoon. Instead, I enjoyed my day-to-day activities the most—relaxing in the cozy café above the *Mál og Menning* bookstore; meeting and interacting with Icelanders; attempting to read Halldór Laxness' novels in the original Icelandic before bedtime; and eating a *hangikjöt* sandwich in downtown Reykjavík, while watching a Roger Federer tennis match being projected on a nearby building. I quickly became dissatisfied with my status as a tourist in Iceland. I wanted to stay longer so that I could develop a deeper understanding of the daily concerns and way of life of the Icelandic people. Serving as a scholar and ambassador in Iceland through the Fulbright program will be crucial to helping me achieve this objective.

After graduating with a double major in English and art next spring, I intend to dedicate my teaching career to promoting the study of Iceland's literature and language. I want to write a dissertation about the works of Halldór Laxness and a host of other twentieth-century Icelandic authors, earn a PhD in Scandinavian literature, and eventually secure a professorship in a Scandinavian Studies program. By teaching courses to

American students that focus on Iceland's vast cultural and literary history, I will accomplish my life's greatest mission—to continuously cultivate a spirit of amity, unity, and partnership between the American and Icelandic people.

**FULBRIGHT STATEMENT OF GRANT PURPOSE**  
**Elliott Brandsma—Iceland—Language and Literature**  
*Introducing Three 20<sup>th</sup> Century Icelandic Authors to the Modern English-Speaking Public*

The early 1900s marked a time of burgeoning nationalism and social upheaval in Iceland, which, consequently, brought about drastic changes in the nation's literature. After centuries of oppression under the Danish monarchy, the Icelandic people began fiercely advocating for their independence, until the country officially declared its sovereignty in 1944. From this turbulent period of political reform emerged a group of novelists, whose compelling depictions of twentieth-century Icelandic cultural life still enjoy a wide readership in Iceland today. However, beyond the nation's desolate shores, few scholars have examined or published research about this pivotal point in Iceland's literary history. The Icelandic author Gunnar Gunnarsson made significant contributions to world literature during the early 1900s, yet English translations of his diverse novels and poignant autobiography are currently out-of-print, complicating further research. Throughout his career, Þórbergur Þórðarson published many stirring accounts of late nineteenth-century Icelandic farm life, but a shortage of detailed biographical information about Þórðarson written in English prevents an international scholarly interest in his work from fully developing. Even the acclaimed novels of Halldór Laxness, who received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1955, remain largely unknown outside Iceland, especially to American readers.

The cultural identity of the Icelandic people is deeply rooted in their literary tradition. Studying the lives of Laxness, Gunnarsson, and Þórðarson would enable non-Icelanders to develop a clearer understanding of the nation's modern way of life. With the help of the Fulbright Full Grant or the Fulbright/Icelandic Ministry of Education and Culture Grant, I would like to spend nine months in Iceland composing an English-

language introduction to these three novelists, in hopes of generating greater interest in their writings among the English-speaking public. To complete this project, I have recruited the help of Gúðný Dóra Gestsdóttir, the director of *Gljúfrasteinn*—Halldór Laxness museum (see letter of affiliation 1). I also intend to collaborate with the directorates of *Skriðuklaustur*, a Gunnar Gunnarsson museum in *Fljótisdalur* valley, and *Þórbergssetur*, a cultural center in *Suðursveit* established in Þórðarson's honor. While writing this book, I plan on concurrently enrolling in the University of Iceland's Practical Icelandic program to improve my speaking and writing abilities in the language. Jón Karl Helgason, a professor in this program, has already expressed interest in my studies and my project (see letter of affiliation 2). Earning a practical diploma in Icelandic and taking courses like "Icelandic Culture" will help me better adapt to the Icelandic community and prepare me for my future graduate studies in Icelandic literature at the University of Wisconsin—Madison.

The book I intend to write will be concise and accessible to readers who are completely unfamiliar with Iceland's contemporary literature. It will begin with a brief overview of the key historical events that shaped the Icelandic national consciousness during the early 1900s. This overview will be followed by three expository narratives describing each author's life and individual contribution to Icelandic fiction. To construct my historical portrait of Halldór Laxness, I will rely not only on textual research and input from scholars at the University of Iceland but also on individual accounts provided by surviving members of the Laxness family. Gúðný Gestsdóttir, who works closely with Laxness' relatives as the director of *Gljúfrasteinn*, has assured me that members of the family are willing to share their unique, personal insights into Halldór Laxness' life and

work. Similarly, I will gather historical research about Gunnar Gunnarsson and Þórbergur Þórðarson by exploring the archives of both authors' respective museums and conducting interviews with the experts who direct them. This comprehensive approach to researching and writing literary history will allow English speakers, who read my introduction, to develop a deep appreciation for these authors, both as writers and as people.

My project's timeline can be divided into two distinct stages: the research stage and the writing stage. My priority for the first four months will be compiling historical research for my book's historical overview and three biographical narratives. I will schedule meetings with my affiliates before coming to Iceland, so that I can begin expanding my knowledge of twentieth-century Icelandic literature right away. I will also rent a vehicle for several days at some point during the first few weeks of the grant period, so that I can drive to *Skriðuklaustur* and *Þórbergssetur* to conduct my interviews with the directorates before winter sets in. This opportunity to journey across Iceland's majestic landscape will not only allow me to gather vital historical research for my project but also provide ample inspiration for the writing process. I will start writing and revising my text during the final five months of my visit. Ideally, I will have completed the book by the end of my stay, but even if I have not, I still intend to coordinate a presentation of my research findings at *Gljúfrasteinn*, an event to which all of my fellow Fulbright scholars, my professors, and my newfound Icelandic friends will be invited.

I am uniquely qualified to take on this project because I have spent the majority of my undergraduate career preparing for an opportunity to study abroad in Iceland. I have taken two independent study courses that focused on twentieth-century Icelandic art and literature. In October 2011, I applied for a highly-competitive undergraduate research

grant offered by my school's Honors College, so that I could purchase rare scholarly texts to enhance my studies in Icelandic culture. I was surprised when I won a grant, but I was even more surprised to learn that the judges ranked my proposal first out of the twenty-eight applications received! Shortly thereafter, I published an article about twentieth-century Icelandic fiction at an undergraduate research conference hosted by my university. This article has since developed into my honors thesis, which I am writing this semester. In addition to my research credentials, I am also capable of quickly acquiring new languages. I have studied Icelandic independently for the past four years, taken five German courses, and served as a German tutor for my university's Department of Modern Languages. I am confident that, after residing in Iceland for several months, my writing and speaking abilities in Icelandic will dramatically improve.

As a Fulbright scholar to Iceland, I will also endeavor to be an active and enthusiastic participant in the Icelandic community. I might utilize my background as an art teacher to offer a free drawing class to Icelanders of all ages. Art is a universal language that presents unique opportunities to forge meaningful bonds with other people, irrespective of cultural differences. I could also offer free writing tutoring to university students who might be struggling in their English classes. I will be certified to teach English by the time my Fulbright begins, and I would enjoy helping Icelandic students find their voice and achieve academic success in writing.

Upon completing my Fulbright, I plan on earning my PhD in Scandinavian literature at the University of Wisconsin—Madison. The research I compile for my Fulbright project will not only serve as a foundation for my master's thesis and doctoral dissertation but will also be incorporated into my future instruction. As of now, I do not

have any formal training in a Scandinavian language, a requirement for acceptance into this graduate program. The department chair in Scandinavian literature at the University of Wisconsin, Dr. Susan Brantly, has informed me that studying Icelandic through the Fulbright program will satisfy this prerequisite, making a Fulbright essential to advancing my career goals. Moreover, by preserving the legacies of these Icelandic novelists, I will further the Fulbright program's vital and admirable mission of fostering mutual understanding between the United States and other nations.