

True North



True North:  
Literary Translation in the Nordic Countries

Edited by

B.J. Epstein

**CAMBRIDGE**  
**SCHOLARS**  

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

True North: Literary Translation in the Nordic Countries,  
Edited by B.J. Epstein

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# INTRODUCTION

B.J. EPSTEIN

In London in 2008, the first Nordic Translation Conference took place. People came from all over the world to discuss the particular pleasures and challenges involved in translating from, to, and between the Nordic tongues. The conference was such a success that it led first to the publication of a book, *Northern Lights: Translation in the Nordic Countries*, and then to a second Nordic Translation Conference. The second gathering was in 2013 at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England, a city once known as Norvik to its Viking residents. This conference attracted even more people who were eager to attend workshops, readings, and talks on topics ranging from crime fiction to computer tools, translation quality to subtitling, stylistics to prepositions, relay translation to slang, and much more. Perhaps the enthusiastic response of attendees has in part been due to the current trend of “Nordicmania”; at the moment, it seems as though all things Nordic – food, design, lifestyle, music, politics and, of course, literature – are inspiring and exciting large swathes of the population. Hence, there is a clear need for more discussion of Nordic-specific subjects. The field of translation studies in particular has still not paid enough attention to the North, and this in turn has led to the present volume. Here, the focus is on literary translation, an area that is in real need of more analysis.

This book is divided into three main sections. These are, broadly titled, novels, children’s literature and other genres, although naturally there are connections and overlapping themes between the sections.

When it comes to relatively small languages, such as those of the Nordic countries, translation is vital, in terms of both the development of a country’s language and literature and also the dissemination of that literature abroad. *True North* begins with Martin Ringmar’s exploration of Iceland’s only Nobel Prize; he discusses the work of Icelandic authors Gunnar Gunnarsson, Kristmann Guðmundsson and Halldór Laxness and the role that translation played in the Nobel eventually being awarded to Laxness. Ringmar also suggests that choosing Laxness as the Icelandic winner had a major effect on other Icelandic authors and their writing.

From Laxness we move to another Nordic Nobel Prize-winning writer, Selma Lagerlöf. In their chapter, Elettra Carbone and Helena Forsås-Scott discuss Norvik Press's new series of English translations of Lagerlöf's books. They note that classics need to be re-translated approximately every fifty years, and their chapter analyses the Norvik Press's process, including topics such as the importance of "judging a book by its cover" and other peritextual elements. They offer a reminder that a translation is not about the text alone.

Staying in Sweden and also staying with the topic of non-textual elements, in the next chapter Anna-Lena Pihl explores the translation of Virginia Woolf's work from English to Swedish. Pihl writes about the reader's role, a subject often left out of explorations of translated literature. She also focuses on the particular challenge of literary allusions, and how translators might handle them when the source and target countries do not share a common culture.

Not sharing a culture or a language is even more present in regard to the issue of indirect, or relay, translation. In her chapter, Raila Hekkanen notes that indirect translation is often looked down upon as an inferior strategy, but in fact she finds that indirect translation can work well and can be a useful process, perhaps especially in the case of less-common language pairings, where there may not be many, or even any, trained translators.

The final chapter in the first section discusses the issue of translating between closely related languages. While one might believe that this is a simple matter, unlike the issue of relay translation among unrelated or distantly related tongues, this is an underresearched topic and a surprisingly challenging one, as Ulf Norberg and Ursula Stachl-Peier show. Norberg and Stachl-Peier employ dialect as a specific example of how translators between closely related languages may not understand all the connotations of the text and may therefore miss essential elements in their belief that the cultures and languages have more in common than they actually do.

The first chapter in the children's literature section continues the discussion of dialect by exploring its translation from American English to Swedish. Since B.J. Epstein analyses a text by Mark Twain that the author described as being for children and yet that is often read as being for adults, her chapter usefully serves as a bridge between the section on novels for adults and that on children's literature. Epstein finds that certain translatorial strategies have the effect of significantly transforming a text and thereby affecting the reader's understanding of it, and of a particular group of people.

Sara Van Meerbergen goes deeper into the issue of translating children's literature by exploring both metaphorical and actual images in texts for young readers. She looks at authors' and translators' child images, and how such images can change in translation, and also at how visual images in a text might take on new meanings in a different sociocultural context.

This discussion usefully leads on to a further analysis of the translation of images in children's literature and related issues regarding books for younger readers. Sara Van den Bossche and Charlotte Berry both look at Swedish author Astrid Lindgren's work in their chapters. Van den Bossche focuses on the recent edition of *Pippi Longstocking* and how Lauren Child's new illustrations provide a new version of Pippi for English-language readers. Nonetheless, Van den Bossche suggests that the cultural borders between Sweden and the UK are still closed.

Charlotte Berry then offers useful background to understanding how Astrid Lindgren, and other Nordic writers for children, initially got translated to English. Berry carried out archival research in order to explain who the key figures were in the move to translate Nordic children's authors in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, and what the process of creating an English-speaking readership for these rather different titles was like. This connects back to Van den Bossche's suggestion that perhaps the situation is different today. An interesting question to ponder is why.

In the last chapter in this section, Riitta Oittinen returns to Lauren Child and to child images. Oittinen uses her experience as both a scholar and a translator to discuss how she has translated Child's work from English to Finnish and how ideas of what a child is and what a text for a child should be have influenced her translations.

The final section in *True North* looks at a variety of genres, including drama, music, cookbooks, crime fiction, and sagas. Some of the issues discussed are genre-specific while others span generic divides. In her chapter, Janet Garton explores the re-translation of classics, relating back to the earlier discussion of Lagerlöf's work. In Garton's case, the work being re-translated is drama by Henrik Ibsen. Garton refers to specific issues in re-translation, such as register, colloquialisms, forms of address and expletives, but notes that these new translations too will most likely need to be updated in the future.

The next two chapters both look at the translation of songs. Karen Strand analyses how crooning became Swedish, using a particular case study of an English song that was adapted into a Swedish *schlager* hit. She shows how there are different types of song translation, literal and

thematic, and she also discusses the importance of the microphone to this field.

Annjo K. Greenall broadens this exploration by investigating how popular music has been translated from English to the three Scandinavian languages. Greenall takes a functionalist approach, focusing on why certain songs have been translated and the ways in which the reasons why affect how they are translated.

Like songs, cookbooks are often overlooked when it comes to discussions of literary texts. Yvonne Lindqvist begins to rectify this in her chapter, where she explains that, just like fiction, cookery writing includes expressive, descriptive language and is also frequently about the creation of a persona – in the case of food writing, this is the chef. Here Lindqvist's question is how this language and these characterisations can be translated.

Identity is also a key issue in Edel Porter's chapter. In her study of the translation of the *Heimskringla* sagas over a three-hundred-year period, Porter discusses how these translations played a role in constructing Norway as a country and in creating a sense of Norwegian as a culture and as a language. Translation here moves beyond the personal discussed in Lindqvist's chapter and into the realm of collective nation-building.

The final two chapters of the book also discuss nation-building of a sort, but in regard to crime fiction. Here the issue is how thrillers and their translations can influence the way readers see a particular country and its people. First Barry Forshaw gives an introduction to Nordic crime and argues that there are particular sociocultural elements, such as political commentary, that distinguish it from crime fiction in other countries.

Agnes Broomé then takes this idea further to consider how the translations of Nordic crime texts are given paratexts that are different from the ones the original works have. This, she believes, has the effect of linking books that do not otherwise have much in common and, on a larger scale, implying an exoticism and a common genre that is not in fact present. This perhaps leads non-Nordic readers to believe that the Nordic countries are more alike than they actually are, which is in fascinating contrast to Forshaw's discussion.

As is clear from the foregoing, the chapters in this book evidence a great range of subjects, but with some obvious links between them, such as particular translatorial challenges, translating for specific audiences or influencing audiences through translation, re-translation, the functions of translated texts, the ways in which translation can change a genre, the creation of identity through translation, and more.

While this volume is specifically on literary translation in the Nordic countries and the chapters are important in part because of their

contributions to Nordic studies, it is also worth mentioning that many of the theories proposed and findings discussed here are also relevant to the wider field of translation studies as well as to literary studies more generally. For example, indirect translation can occur between any pair of languages, and not just Finnish and English, and classics are translated and re-translated from any tongue, not simply Nordic ones. Likewise, novels, songs, children's books, plays, and many other types of literature are produced and translated around the globe. So the intention with this book is twofold: the examples explored in these pages deepen our understanding of translation from, to, and between the Nordic languages, but they also offer ideas that are of practical and theoretical interest beyond the North. It is certainly time for the world's growing Nordicmania to influence the field of translation studies and for translation to take its place as a relevant and essential issue in our understanding of the Northern countries, and the hope is that the varied chapters in this book contribute to these stimulating and critical conversations.



## CHAPTER I

‘DEN MAND VIL FORRAADE DIG’:  
MUTUAL TRANSLATORS  
AND NOBEL COMPETITORS –  
GUNNAR GUNNARSSON  
AND HALLDÓR LAXNESS,  
AND THE PRICE OF THE ICELANDIC  
NOBEL PRIZE

MARTIN RINGMAR

### Introduction

Having gained full sovereignty in 1918, Icelanders were eager to impress the world with their cultural achievements. Not least in literature, where a ‘social demand’ arose for a great contemporary writer who could match the medieval sagas and, perchance, obtain the Nobel Prize (cf. Sigurjónsson et al. 2006; Sigurjónsson 1984:28-40). To put it otherwise (with Bourdieu): A new position – ‘the position L.’ – was emerging on the budding Icelandic literary field.<sup>1</sup>

Professor Sigurður Nordal voiced the demand for a literary ‘genius’ thus in the magazine *Eimreiðin* (my translation, as is the case throughout unless otherwise noted):

[There are] those who want to pave the way for a new world savior, whenever it pleases him to be born. This is a beautiful ideal and one that well becomes those who hold Icelandic literature in esteem. They should

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<sup>1</sup> Bourdieu (1998) envisages a ‘position Flaubert’ on the emerging French literary field, labelled *a posteriori* after the successful pretender. Likewise, ‘the position L.’ is named after its eventual possessor (Laxness).

prepare the coming of the genius: provide him with a pure, rich and versatile tongue, imbue him with reverence for the arts from childhood on, and above all give him adequate challenges to overcome and abundant recognition, if he stands the trial. (1925:69)<sup>2</sup>

Likewise, another critic asserted two years later that ‘we will not receive a genius for free, without having to make an effort’ (Andrésson 1971:107).

Five potential pretenders for this ‘position L.’ were invited to the Nordic writers’ congress in Oslo in 1930. Now for the first time, Iceland participated with a proper delegation, headed by Gunnar Gunnarsson, who was an established writer in Denmark and widely translated (cf. Guðmundsson 2006:2002f.; Olgeirsson 2007:218f.). Kristmann Guðmundsson attended, naturally, as he lived in Norway, where he had published romantic short stories (*Islandsk kjærlighet [Icelandic Love]*, 1926) and four subsequent novels, the first translations of which were to appear. Although writing in foreign languages, both Gunnarsson and Guðmundsson nurtured an image as Icelandic writers and practically all their works were set in Iceland, exploiting Icelandic exoticism, as it were (cf. Jóhannsson 2000; Sigurjónsson et al. 2006:274).<sup>3</sup>

The popular poet Davíð Stefánsson was invited (but engaged elsewhere) and so was Þórbergur Þórðarson, whose genre-mixing *Bréf til Láru (A letter to Lára)*, 1924) had been a *succès de scandale* that earned him a reputation as an eccentric – and cost him two teaching jobs (Gunnarsson 2007:143ff.). He did not seem intent on a career as a writer of fiction, however, ‘even though he never doubted his own stylistic genius’ (Jóhannsson 2006:371). The youngest among the five, Halldór Laxness, was the *Wunderkind terrible* of Icelandic literature, whose achievements were remarkable even before he and the century had turned thirty. All those writing in Icelandic were as yet un-translated and on the whole unknown abroad.

In 1932, a broad ‘Icelandic Week’ in Stockholm offered Iceland an opportunity to show off in various artistic fields (including traditional wrestling, *glíma*). Four of the above writers attended, i.e. all except Þórbergur Þórðarson. By the end of the decade, Laxness had been translated to some extent (unlike Stefánsson and Þórðarson) but both

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<sup>2</sup> Adjacent to Nordal’s article in *Eimreiðin*, there is an expressionist poem by a writer in his early 20s named Halldór Kiljan Laxness...

<sup>3</sup> I.e. the Icelanders were repeating, a generation later, what Bjørnson, Lie and other Norwegians had done with their ‘Bondefortællinger’ (farmstead stories). They were seen as ‘den friske Vind fra Sagæen’ (the fresh breeze from the Saga Island), which brought ‘fresh blood to the Danish literature’, as one critic put it (Bukdahl 1945:227).



Gunnarsson and Guðmundsson were far ahead of him internationally, as shown in Table 1:

| Writer            | Foreign translations | Reprints | Languages | Translations into Icel. |
|-------------------|----------------------|----------|-----------|-------------------------|
| Gunnar Gunnarsson | 39                   | 8        | 11        | 2                       |
| Kristmann         | 45                   | 10       | 12        | 5                       |
| Guðmundsson       |                      |          |           |                         |
| Halldór Laxness   | 9                    | 0        | 6         | n. a.                   |

**Table 1. Translations of novels by Gunnarsson, Guðmundsson and Laxness 1930-39 (Main source: [www.gegnir.is](http://www.gegnir.is))**

When Laxness was finally translated and introduced, Gunnarsson and Guðmundsson served as points of reference; the blurb of the Swedish translation of *Salka Valka* is a good example:

[Laxness's] novel 'Salka Valka' [...] has all at once put him among the foremost representatives of Icelandic literature and made him worthy of being mentioned together with Gudmundur Kamban, Kristmann Guðmundsson and Gunnar Gunnarsson. (Laxness 1936:n.p.)

## War and Post-War

Incidentally, both Gunnarsson and Guðmundsson moved home to Iceland at the end of the 1930s, intent on re-establishing themselves as writers in Icelandic. Whatever mix of reasons made them return, we may here assume that they, once well-established abroad, sensed that competing for 'the position L.' required – apart from writing in Icelandic – their physical presence in Iceland.

Perhaps it also demanded epic novels? With *Salka Valka* (1931-32) and subsequent novels, Halldór Laxness abandoned modernism for a more traditional narrative, but without losing his provocative edge (cf. Eysteinnsson 2006:420; Jóhannsson 2006:384). By 1940, Davíð Stefánsson had published his first novel and Þórbergur Þórðarson likewise two autobiographical novels – challenges noticed by Laxness.<sup>4</sup> All in all,

<sup>4</sup> In 1940, Sigurður Nordal reviewed both Stefánsson's novel *Sólon Islandus* and Laxness's *World Light* under the heading 'Two great novels'; this was obviously one novel too many for Laxness's taste, who, even 25 years later, commented surlily on having been coupled together with a poet making his debut as a novelist (Guðmundsson 2004:450).

David Stefánsson probably had a wider domestic readership than Laxness, who was a well-known and controversial personality, for sure, but ‘for years a general silence has reigned in papers and magazines concerning his books’ (Nordal 1940:370).

The Second World War would change the set-up totally, both in Iceland and abroad. British and American troops brought work and wealth and the Icelandic economy flourished, including publishing (cf. Hálfðanarson 2011; Eysteinnsson 2006:404).<sup>5</sup> As voyages abroad were impossible – and foreign royalties running dry – writers focussed on the domestic market, where the industrialist-cum-publisher Ragnar Jónsson appeared as the main Maecenas of literature and of the arts in general (Helgason 2009; Sigurjónsson et al. 2006:439ff).<sup>6</sup> And the output was impressive, not least from Laxness, who by and by became the main protagonist of ‘the drama that may be called “Icelandic literary life”’ (Eysteinnsson 1999:15).

In the post-war world, previous structures and connections often proved non-existent or irrelevant (or even an encumbrance like Gunnarsson’s success in Nazi-Germany in the 1930s). While Gunnar Gunnarsson and (especially) Kristmann Guðmundsson gradually fell into oblivion abroad, Laxness seemed more in line with the new times as his international fame was growing and translations gradually forthcoming (although the Icelandic language remained an obstacle).<sup>7</sup> By this stage, Laxness served as a point of reference, much to the annoyance of Gunnarsson:

The press reception [of *Skepp på himlen* (*Ships in the sky*)] seems to be characterised [by] the well-known literary comparison mania; as a rule,

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<sup>5</sup> Inflated labour wages during the war made obsolete Gunnarsson’s plan to establish himself as a country squire in eastern Iceland; perhaps he also overestimated his capacity to influence Reykjavik from a distance. In 1948 he moved to the capital and the estate Skriðuklaustur is now a cultural centre dedicated to Gunnarsson’s memory.

<sup>6</sup> Ragnar Jónsson (‘Ragnar í Smára’) was the owner of the margarine factory *Smári*. Given the tiny Icelandic population (approximately 120,000 inhabitants in 1940), the means to support ‘quality literature’ could not be accumulated by pulp fiction and popular weeklies – the way Bonniers did in Sweden, say – but had to come from some other source, e.g. a margarine business. Hence the hackneyed phrase about margarine being ‘the lubricant of Icelandic cultural life’.

<sup>7</sup> Kristmann Guðmundsson seems indeed to be ‘completely forgotten in Norway’ (Jóhannsson 2006:375), witness one single republication in Norwegian since 1940 (a novel in 1950). As for Gunnarsson, he has fared somewhat better and seen some fifteen (re)publications in Danish up to 1980 (but since then nothing).

HKL [Laxness] is present. The competition thus established is rarely to my advantage. (letter to Stellan Arvidson 9/1 1955, Lbs.)<sup>8</sup>

Perceiving the growing shadow thrown by Laxness, the competitors developed defensive attitudes: ‘But I am outside. There is my place, as it has always been. Laxness will be ‘the only Icelander’ not only there [abroad]; he almost is it here too!’ (Gunnarsson to Arvidson 30/5 1950, Lbs.)<sup>9</sup> Or they struck an attitude of moral superiority, claiming to be incapable of promoting themselves – i.e. unlike Laxness –, sometimes while doing this very thing. Þórbergur Þórðarson, for instance, sent Gunnar Gunnarsson a novel in hopes of a Danish translation:

What I wanted to ask you to do for me is to give me your opinion on whether it would be possible to translate the book [*Íslenskur aðall (Icelandic Aristocracy)*] into Danish and [...] to find a publisher for it. As for me, I am totally useless at such activities that concern promoting myself in the world [...]. (letter 24/8 1938, quoted in Gunnarsson 2009:44)

Similarly, Davíð Stefánsson wanted the Swedish Academy to read an article about him in a Swedish magazine: ‘It would be a good thing if some of the eighteen [of the Swedish Academy] would read your article – couldn’t the editors send them the issue? [...] I’m totally hopeless at promoting myself [...]’ (letter to Anna Osterman 23/2 1954, in Olgeirsson 2007:397).

Or they even nourished ‘conspiracy theories’; witness Davíð Stefánsson’s repeated references to the pro-Laxness ‘diffusion team’ (*útbreiðsluliðið*): ‘People tend to hide everybody, except the *one* [Laxness] – he is Iceland, he is its light and fortune!’ (ibid.; italics original). Gunnar Gunnarsson, too, saw an organised campaign in favour of Laxness: ‘Iceland’s ambassador in Stockholm, Professor Jón Helgason at Copenhagen University, (fellow-travellers), the communists [...] and very probably important forces within Iceland’s University are now working for a Nobel Prize to Laxness’ (letter to Arvidson 30/5 1950, in Jóhannsson 2011:509). By the same token, Kristmann Guðmundsson (1961:257) claimed that he had dissuaded a Czech professor from nominating him at the end of the 1930s, because Icelandic left-wing intellectuals had already decided which Icelander would get the Nobel Prize (viz. Laxness).

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<sup>8</sup> ‘Pressemotagelsen synes at være noget præget [af] den kendte litterære Sammenligningssyge, HKL optræder jævnlig. Den Konkurrence, der saaledes etableres falder sjældent ud til min Fordel [...]’

<sup>9</sup> ‘Men jeg er udenfor. Der er ogsaa min Plads og har alle Dage været. Laxness bliver ikke bare “ende islánning” der; han er det snart sagt ogsaa her!’

Contrary to Gunnarsson, Kristmann Guðmundsson had a wide post-war production in Icelandic, of which next to nothing has been translated. His later novels probably had limited appeal abroad, but Guðmundsson saw machinations by Icelandic communists behind their poor fortune. One single post-war novel has been translated (into Danish in 1946) and according to Guðmundsson (1962:83) the translator intentionally ruined the book, taking the cue from Icelandic communists in Copenhagen. Other translators suddenly abandoned working on his books without any explanation, etc. (1962:147f.). Furthermore, Guðmundsson accused communists within the Icelandic Post of stealing his correspondence with foreign publishers during fifteen years (1962:84). This is a preposterous accusation if only because such activity could not have remained undiscovered in the close-knit Icelandic society for any length of time. Guðmundsson here clings to cold-war clichés about communists secretly manipulating the entire cultural life, thus hugely inflating their subversive potential. Not surprisingly, the communist daily *Þjóðviljinn* diagnosed him with paranoia (13/5 1955).<sup>10</sup>

Whatever the foundation for these accusations, it is more plausible to assume that Guðmundsson, who had been widely translated (and well-off) in the 1930s while writing in Norwegian, had difficulties accepting that his later books written in Icelandic (an added obstacle to translation) failed to arouse interest abroad. Blaming the communists made the change of fortune easier to endure.

## Why Laxness?

Conspiracies or not, Laxness eventually received the Nobel Prize in 1955; ‘a historic moment, the result of a relentless struggle’ (Helgason 2009:9). It could be argued – and it has been (such as by Aðalsteinsdóttir 2006) – that he was the most worthy among the possible Icelandic candidates, simply ‘the best’. This is a valid argument, but intrinsic literary qualities are not enough, especially not when it comes to international diffusion and translation. ‘Translatability’ aside, factors such as cultural, economic and social capital matter, as well as the balance between domestic and foreign ‘investments’ (linguistic, social, etc.). Halldór Laxness, for one thing, certainly had linguistic and social competences that enabled him to connect with important and useful people. And although having ‘moved home’ in 1930, he spent almost as much time abroad as in Iceland,

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<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that communists, or other political groupings, did not try to put forward ‘their own’ whenever they could. But other ties – literary taste, kinship, etc. – mattered and could at times run counter to political loyalties (cf. Bergmann 2000).

meeting publishers, translators and the press and attending writers' conferences, etc. (Guðmundsson 2004: passim).

As for their backgrounds, the five writers mentioned all grew up in the countryside and although Laxness's family was by no means rich, it was marginally – but crucially – better off than those of Gunnarsson, Þórðarson, and Guðmundsson (Davíð Stefánsson's family, on the other hand, was fairly well-to-do). This meant that the young Halldór was sheltered from any serious farm work (towards which he showed little inclination) and that he could be sent to grammar school in Reykjavík.

The three poorer writers-to-be had to start working at a tender age and they all had difficulties obtaining secondary education; Gunnarsson and Kristmann Guðmundsson studied at 'folk high-schools' in Denmark and Norway, respectively, and at their own expense (Jóhannsson 2011; Guðmundsson 1959, 1960). Laxness, having dropped out of grammar school, had a free (in several senses) two-year education within Catholic institutions in Luxembourg and England, which gave him a specific cultural capital and an edge on his competitors: 'To my luck, I escaped the Scandinavian education that characterised us Icelanders. I only spent six months in Denmark in my youth' (Johannessen 2000:173).<sup>11</sup>

Gunnar Gunnarsson went directly to Denmark from eastern Iceland at the age of eighteen, without even having visited Reykjavík (Jóhannsson 2011:44). As a consequence, he did not form early friendships with the future elite at the grammar school the way Laxness and Davíð Stefánsson did, nor with the bohemia around Erlendur Sveinsson in the legendary *Unuhús*, where both Laxness and Þórbergur Þórðarson were central figures.

For Gunnarsson, establishing himself as a writer in Denmark meant years of hardship and sacrifices, including, of course, the sacrifice of his native language: 'I'm forced to write in Danish in order to survive. I won't return to Iceland until I have won a name and reputation for myself' (letter to Sumarliði Halldórsson 13/6 1910, in Guðmundsson 2006:70). It seems that Laxness's slightly more favourable starting point allowed him to develop a relaxed attitude towards material needs; he was confident they would be taken care of – as indeed they were – while he was making a long-time investment in an oeuvre in Icelandic (cf. Guðmundsson 2004:114).<sup>12</sup> In 1930, he wrote to Gunnarsson:

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<sup>11</sup> Laxness here underrates his time in Denmark as a youth, which adds up to almost a year and a half before his 25<sup>th</sup> birthday (cf. Guðmundsson 2004: passim).

<sup>12</sup> Laxness was probably then the only full-time literary writer in Icelandic; both Stefánsson and Þórðarson, for instance, made a living partly from other, 'ordinary' jobs (Sigurjónsson et al. 2006:442).

I can't be bothered to write in Danish, and I have fairly decent conditions of living here in Iceland at present. Foreign languages have never tempted me, not even those that I knew better than Danish and that were more likely to bring victory.<sup>13</sup> (12/8 1930, Lbs.)

This is not altogether accurate. Ten years earlier, Laxness had written short stories and started on a novel in Danish and at the time he had seen Icelanders writing in Danish as examples to be followed (Guðmundsson 2004:76). By 1930, however, he sensed that the 'position L.' required writing in Icelandic.

The contrast between the two writers is striking; the young, gifted, and happy-go-lucky Laxness versus the older Gunnarsson, serious (a bit rigid even), whose position was the result of a relentless struggle. Hence Laxness's easy-going attitude may well have struck Gunnarsson as frivolous, as in the following two letters from Laxness:

As for me, I have (relatively) unlimited time at my disposal, luckily enough, and I work only when I take a rest from idling. / [...] one is just eternally broke as you know (although not worse than that one could not take a trip two or three times around the globe if need be) [...]. (10/2 and 19/5 1930, Lbs.)<sup>14</sup>

Translation is a central topic of their early correspondence, with Laxness hoping that Gunnarsson will translate him into Danish:

Firstly, you are the only person, who could possibly translate *Salka Valka* [part I] into Danish, and secondly, it is fairly certain that it would be published in Denmark without problems if translated by you, and this ought to mean good business for both of us. It is becoming a vital necessity for me to be published in another language. (15/7 1931, in Jóhannsson 2011:302)

Gunnarsson did indeed translate *Salka Valka* in 1934, which proved an important milestone in its author's career as his first ever book-size translation, not least since it provided a source text for further translations.

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<sup>13</sup> '[...] en á dönsku nenni ég ekki að skrifa, enda hef ég allsæmileg lífsskilyrði hér heima sem stendur. Útlend mál hafa aldrei freistað mín, jafnvel ekki þau, sem ég kundi betur en dönsku og vænlegri vóru til sigurs.'

<sup>14</sup> 'Það stendur svo vel á fyrir mér, að ég hef (relatíft séð) ótakmörkuðum tíma yfir að ráða og vinn þegar ég er að hvíla mig frá slæpingi.' / '[...] maður er bara eilíflega blankur eins og þér vitið (þó náttúrlega ekki svo að maður komist ekki tvisvar-þrisvar sinnum kríng um hnöttinn ef á liggur) [...]'

In fact, for two decades this Danish version was the main vehicle for the novel's international diffusion (cf. Ringmar forthcoming).

In the 1940s, Laxness paid back these efforts by translating some of Gunnarsson's novels into Icelandic, and on the occasion of Laxness's 40<sup>th</sup> birthday, Gunnarsson extolled his younger colleague:

In all likelihood, his major works still lie in front of him. Hopes are attached to him that must not be frustrated. He has already achieved an important oeuvre, which will keep his name in special honour as long as the Icelandic tongue is spoken. [...] His realm will be expanded yet, at home and abroad. (1942:223)

In this Gunnar Gunnarsson proved prophetic.

### **The Nobel Prize**

Sweden is crucial with regard to the Nobel Prize and here both Gunnarsson and Laxness had a well-connected introducer/translator in Stellan Arvidson and Peter Hallberg, respectively. However, as Arvidson's main career was in education and politics, he had limited time available for promoting Gunnarsson; Hallberg, on the other hand, managed to make Laxness an essential part of his academic trajectory. It is telling that the first part of Hallberg's Laxness-monograph was conveniently published in 1954, while Arvidson's on Gunnar Gunnarsson appeared '*post festum*' in 1960, after years of delay.<sup>15</sup>

This notwithstanding, Arvidson was the main force behind a minor Gunnarsson-revival in Sweden in the 1950s, aiming at the Nobel Prize:

When I heard [...] that Laxness had been nominated to the Nobel Prize and as I found it unreasonable that the first literary Nobel Prize, which befalls Iceland, should disregard you, I have approached some of the members of

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<sup>15</sup> Even in 1954, Gunnarsson's Icelandic publisher Ragnar Jónsson had promised a substantial advance for the monograph, but it was not forthcoming and Arvidson feared a delay: 'This would be deplorable in several ways, not least considering the Nobel Prize. It was my hope that the book could be available in due time this autumn so that it could be distributed to the members of the Academy before the laureate is chosen' (letter to Gunnarsson 1/1 1955, Lbs.). ('Det vore beklagligt i många avseenden, inte minst med tanke på Nobelpriset. Min förhoppning var, att boken skulle kunna föreligga i så god tid på hösten, att den kunde utdelas till akademiens ledamöter i tid innan nobelpristagaren utses.').

the Swedish Academy and pointed this out. (letter to Gunnarsson 30/7 1950, Lbs.)<sup>16</sup>

Three years later, with Swedish translations of Gunnarsson forthcoming, Arvidson still had his purpose fixed:

The tactic will be that if Iceland is now to win its first Nobel Prize, Laxness, who alone has been mentioned in the press, may not be the only candidate. The main task was to have the prize to Iceland postponed until your name has become topical and the entire [novel] *Kyrkan på berget* has been published. The final result of this action one cannot know, of course. (letter to Gunnarsson 28/11 1954, Lbs.)<sup>17</sup>

Arvidson observed, however, that there was at present a ‘Laxness-boom’ in Sweden, alluding, no doubt, to the Swedish screen version of *Salka Valka*, which opened on November 15 1954.

Indeed, contrary to Gunnarsson, Laxness had an important and growing readership in Sweden, not least within the labour movement, and his short stories or (serialised) novels were frequently published in leftist weeklies such as *Folket i Bild* or *Vi* or the communist daily *Ny Dag*. Several up-coming intellectuals like Artur Lundkvist, Per Wästberg, and Sara Lidman also expressed their enthusiasm for Laxness.<sup>18</sup> This did not necessarily endear him to the elderly gentlemen of the Swedish Academy but it created a certain pressure on them, making them consider to give him the prize to get him ‘out of the picture’ (Dag Hammarskjöld to Sten Selander 15/10 1955, KB/DH).

In Iceland, too, expectations were growing. Even if Laxness was probably seen as the most plausible Icelandic laureate, he was still, as a ‘fellow traveller’, unpalatable to the country’s ‘officialdom’ as well as to a substantial part of the public, who either disliked his politics or his books or both (cf. Guðmundsson 2004:604ff.).

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<sup>16</sup> ‘Då jag hörde [...] att Laxness föreslagits till nobelpriset och då jag fann det orimligt, att det första litterära nobelpris, som går till Island, skulle gå dig förbi, har jag vänt mig till vissa av Svenska akademiens ledamöter och påpekat detta.’

<sup>17</sup> ‘Taktiken är den, att om Island nu skall få sitt första nobelpris, så kan inte Laxness, som ensam har nämnts i pressdiskussionen, ensam få komma i fråga. Huvuduppgiften var att få Islands-priset uppskjutet, tills ditt namn blivit aktuellt och *Kyrkan på berget* i dess helhet ligger på bordet. Hur aktionen slutligen utfaller vet man ju inte.’

<sup>18</sup> Sara Lidman, who had discovered Laxness in 1951, wrote to him in admiration: ‘Your works are placed between Dostoyevsky and the Bible on my shelf’ (quoted in Holm 1998:140).



With Laxness, the epic novel had replaced traditional poetry as the central genre of Icelandic literature (Eysteinnsson 1999:15). Davíð Stefánsson sensed this, of course, but although yet un-translated, he still nurtured hopes:

[...] if it so happened that your compatriots [i.e. the Swedish Academy] should want to honour Iceland and Icelandic literature, then it is my opinion [...] that the novel does not merit the honour alone, but also the poem. For this reason, *two* could be a possibility [i.e. a divided prize]. (letter to Osterman 6/7 1953, in Olgeirsson 2007:396, italics orig.)

(Too?) much has been written in Iceland about the Nobel Prize going to Laxness in 1955. One dispute concerns the claim that the ‘pro-Laxness lobby’ had managed – in the nick of time – to prevent a divided prize to Gunnarsson and Laxness by sending the Swedish academy a telegram. The evidence for this is anecdotal and emanates from Gunnarsson himself and his family. Whether a telegram was ever sent is uncertain, but it is clear from other sources that it would have had no influence on the decision process (cf. Lönnroth 2006, and Selander’s letters to Hammarskjöld, KB/DH). On the other hand, it is obvious that several leading Icelandic intellectuals, such as Sigurður Nordal and Jón Helgason, preferred Laxness and had nominated him repeatedly.<sup>19</sup>

Gunnar Gunnarsson was nominated for the prize in 1918, 1921 and 1922, and in 1955 and on the first two occasions he was favourably evaluated (Svensén 2001, vol. I:400, vol. II:6; cf. Guðmundsson 2004:544). Laxness was nominated each year from 1948 onwards. In 1955, the preparatory three-member committee actually suggested a division between Laxness and Gunnarsson and this is the nearest the latter ever came the coveted prize. The idea was rejected by the Academy *in pleno*, however, and although few members seem to have been particularly enthusiastic about Laxness, he was chosen in the end.

The long decision process can be followed in detail in the reports from Sten Selander to fellow academy-member Dag Hammarskjöld, who was

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<sup>19</sup> In September 1955, Professor Elias Wessén of the Swedish Academy inquired of Nordal and Helgason about their opinion on a shared prize (letter from Wessén to Nordal 23/9 1955, Stiftsbibl.). Both claimed Laxness alone merited the prize, although Nordal added some appreciative remarks about Gunnarsson (letter to Wessén 29/10 1955, Stiftsbibl.). To Helgason, Gunnarsson was above all a Danish writer and his recent book in Icelandic ‘pretentious trash’ (‘pekoral’; letter to Wessén 14/10 1955, Stiftsbibl.). It is remarkable that Nordal, at the time Iceland’s ambassador to Denmark, answered Wessén two days *after* the laureate was announced on October 27.

then UN Secretary-General. In February, Selander assumed the main candidates to be ‘Sholokhov, Kazantzakis and Laxness with Gunnarsson as a jolly-boat in Laxness’s wake’ (‘som en jolle i Laxness kölvatten’; letter 4/2 1955, KB/DH). In October, however, the Spanish poet Juan Ramón Jiménez – laureate in 1956 – led in the trial votes but could not obtain a majority. In order to solve the stalemate, the Secretary Anders Österling then pleaded all who did not consider Laxness ‘totally impossible’ to vote for him, which eventually gave him the required ten votes. Decidedly anti-Laxness, Selander deplored ‘the miserable outcome’ (‘den bedrövliga utgången’), adding that ‘[n]o laureate had hardly ever been received less enthusiastically within the Academy. Bo Bergman seems almost to be the only one who really likes his books; otherwise the general reaction is more like a relief that we now are rid of him for the future’ (19/11 1955, KB/DH).<sup>20</sup>

Fifty years afterwards, Halldór Guðmundsson (2005) speculates on what would have happened ‘if Gunnar Gunnarsson...’. According to Guðmundsson, a shared prize in 1955 would have made Gunnarsson’s final years less bitter and perhaps more fruitful in regard to original writing. Instead, he spent his last decades on a vast retranslation-project, (re)creating Icelandic ‘originals’ of his Danish oeuvre.

It is remarkable that Gunnarsson was not nominated between 1922 and 1955. Adding some counterfactual speculation, I think he would have stood a fair chance in the 1930s given his important works in the 20s and 30s, which were likely to appeal to the Academy as it was then (but less so in 1955).<sup>21</sup> One may assume Gunnarsson to be well on a level with, say, F.E. Sillanpää, who won the prize in 1939 (possibly with some unintended aid from Stalin). In relation to the prize, Gunnarsson’s in-between position proved a disadvantage; Icelanders entitled to nominate, like Sigurður

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<sup>20</sup> ‘Ingen nobelpristagare kan gärna ha omfattats med svalare känslor inom akademien. Bo Bergman tycks nästan vara den ende som verkligen tycker om hans böcker; eljest är den allmänna reaktionen närmast lättnad över att man är av med honom för framtiden.’

<sup>21</sup> In addition, a prize for Gunnarsson in the 1930s would almost certainly have ‘blocked’ a future prize to Laxness. There was a strong notion of ‘awarding Iceland’ (and its medieval literature), as indeed explicitly stated in the motivation for Laxness’s prize: ‘for his vivid epic power which has renewed the great narrative art of Iceland’

([http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1955/](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1955/); accessed 17/8 2013). Doing this once would suffice. Besides, the Academy was increasingly being criticised for having a Scandinavian bias and Laxness was the eighth, and so far the last, non-Swedish Scandinavian to receive the prize (cf. Espmark 2001:223).

Nordal, preferred someone writing in Icelandic, and Danes on the other hand were unlikely to nominate an Icelander. In fact, on all four occasions when Gunnarsson was nominated, it was by Swedes, not by Icelanders or Danes.<sup>22</sup>

The nomination in 1955 was by Stellan Arvidson, at the time chairman of the Swedish Writers' Association, with whom Gunnarsson corresponded for almost 50 years (cf. Jóhannsson 2011:433). The letters reveal the ageing Gunnarsson's growing bitterness towards Laxness and, in particular, towards Laxness's promoters. It seems that Gunnarsson kept brooding on the events of October 1955 and on the role played by Ragnar Jónsson, Gunnarsson's and Laxness's publisher:

But it struck me that Ragnar Jónsson, who in previous years had behaved like a special friend, and in whom I had confidence, had come to visit me on the Tuesday afternoon before the Thursday the prize is presented [i.e. announced] and had come to talk about possible candidates and I confided to him the [Swedish] Writers' Association's nomination of HKL and me, with a preference for me. Who knows what he was doing that evening and the day after? He had seemed to keep some distance from KHL [*sic!*], but he and his wife were invited to the festivity in Stockholm. [...] Since then there has been no doubt about which of us who possessed his 'friendship'. – Moreover, I will never forget when HKL had visited us for the first time at Fredsholm [in 1934] (I did for him what I could and where I could), how Franzisca said to me after he had gone: This man will betray you. (letter to Arvidson 28/4 1963, Lbs.)<sup>23</sup>

Again ten years later, Gunnarsson recalled that '[t]hen it all went the way it did, and I know a few things about what happened in the days before

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<sup>22</sup> Incidentally, this pattern was repeated with the two other early Icelandic nominees: Guðmundur Kamban, who wrote in Danish, was nominated by a Swedish professor in 1935, while Einar Kvaran, writing in Icelandic, was nominated by a compatriot in 1923 (Guðmundsson 2004:544).

<sup>23</sup> 'Men jeg kom i tanker om, at Ragnar Jónsson, som i aarene forinden havde optraadt som en særlig ven og som jeg viste fortrolighed, var kommet paa besøg tirsdag eftm. inden den torsdag, prisen uddeltes, havde ført mulige kandidater paa tale og jeg betroet ham forfatterforeningens indstilling av HKL og mig, med en præference for mig. Gad vidst hvad han har foretaget sig den aften og dagen efter? Han havde ladet noget kølig mod KHL [*sic!*], men var med kone indbudt til festen i Stockholm. [...] Siden har det ikke været nogen tvivl om, hvem af os der havde hans "venskab". – Lövrigt glemmer jeg aldrig, da HKL havde været hos os første gang paa Fredsholm (jeg gjorde jo for ham hvad jeg kunne og hvor jeg kunne), at Franzisca sagde til mig efter at han var gaaet: Den mand vil forraade dig.'

H.K. [Laxness] got it [the Nobel Prize] – and I can only say: you are welcome to it!’ (letter to Arvidson 9/1 1973, Lbs.).<sup>24</sup>

### Where Have All the Letters Gone?

Gunnar Gunnarsson was reputed for keeping documents in meticulous order.<sup>25</sup> Hence it is remarkable that the entire correspondence with Laxness is missing in the archive in Reykjavik (Lbs.). That is, the originals are missing. There are copies made by a researcher, who returned the originals to Gunnarsson on the 24<sup>th</sup> of October 1975, i.e. a month before the latter’s death. It is tempting to imagine the dying Gunnarsson putting the letters from Laxness into the fire with trembling hands. But this is a fantasy, of course. We do not know what happened to the letters.

Nor will we ever know with certainty if Franzisca Gunnarsson on meeting Laxness for the first time really predicted that he would ‘betray’ her husband. If so, it is difficult to agree with her. Both Laxness and Gunnarsson were ambitious men who tended to see other people as means for their own ends, perhaps a necessity given the obstacles they had to overcome. They also made mutual use of each other, as translators for instance; Gunnarsson crucially translated and introduced Laxness in Denmark and Laxness’s translations facilitated Gunnarsson’s re-establishment in Iceland. Still, as far as can be judged, neither behaved treacherously towards the other.

Concerning Gunnarsson’s self-retranslations, it is a common view in Iceland that they are inferior to the previous ones, especially Laxness’s. Only two translation-pairs have been compared thoroughly, indicating that Gunnarsson conscientiously kept a distance from Laxness’s versions (Helgason 1997) while borrowing heavily from other translators’ versions (Eysteinnsson 2008; cf. also Birgisdóttir 1999; Jóhannsson 2011:454-465). As for Gunnarsson’s magnum opus, *Fjallkirkjan* (*Ships in the Sky*), the author’s version replaced Laxness’s in 1973 but in 1997 Gunnarsson’s heirs accepted a republication of Laxness’s translation (and again in 2011). The other major novel that Laxness translated, *Vikivaki* (the name of a traditional Icelandic dance), has not been published in Icelandic since 1982 (in Gunnarsson’s self-translation), so it is an open question which version will prevail.

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<sup>24</sup> ‘Siden gik det som det gik, og jeg véd en del om hvad der skete i dagene før H.K. fik den – og kan kun sige vel bekomme!’

<sup>25</sup> Gunnarsson kept, for instance, the manuscript of his *Salka Valka*-translation for 30 years, which made possible the first ever *in extenso* publication in 1966 (Ringmar forthcoming).

## Conclusion

Of the five Icelandic writers invited to Oslo in 1930, four were present in Stockholm in 1932, of whom three were translated in the 1930s. In October 1955, two were still a possibility but in December ‘the *one*’ got the prize. Ever since there has been no doubt as to who is ‘the great Icelandic writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’ (= ‘the position of Laxness’).

The struggle for posthumous reputation continues, however, including biographies, museums, translations etc. As shown in Table 2 below, Laxness is still comfortably ahead of the others concerning publishing at home and abroad; in addition, his museum is strategically located just outside Reykjavik.

If the importance of international recognition is inversely related to the size of a nation, Iceland is indeed a strong case in point. It is by far the smallest nation ever to have received a literary Nobel Prize and arguably no other prize has stirred more domestic discussion than Laxness’s in 1955 (not least when measured over time). There was, for instance, an outburst of articles in 2005-6 in connection with its 50 years’ anniversary, including one by the writer Jón Kalman Stefánsson, who claimed that the shadow thrown by Laxness exists in people’s minds alone: ‘the radiance [of the Nobel Prize] blinded us, and it is perhaps only today that we are beginning to recover and to discern the true landscape of Icelandic literature’ (2006:n.p.).

In 1925, Sigurður Nordal exhorted his compatriots to pave the way for a genius. And Iceland got its genius and it got its prize, but at a price. Not only did the Nobel Prize cause inevitable collateral damage to the losers, in particular to Gunnar Gunnarsson, but it seems to have magnified Laxness out of all proportion, as argued by Jón Kalman Stefánsson (2006, and by Eysteinnsson 1999). In that sense, a shared prize in 1955 – or a pre-war prize to Gunnarsson alone – would not necessarily have been a matter of regret. Prize or no prize, Laxness would still have been *the* outstanding novelist of contemporary Icelandic. No small achievement that.

| Writer                          | Translations<br>1980-2012 <sup>26</sup> | Republications<br>in Icelandic<br>2000-2013 | Museum                          | Recent important<br>biographies<br>(500-800 pp.) | Languages in<br>Wikipedia <sup>27</sup> |
|---------------------------------|---|---|---------------------------------|--|---|
| Davíð S.<br>(1895-1964)         | --                                      | 3   | Davíðshús,<br>Akureyri          | Olgeirsson 2007                                  | 6                                       |
| Gunnar G.<br>(1889-1975)        | 8                                       | 5   | Skriðuklaustur,<br>east Iceland | Jóhannsson 2011                                  | 15                                      |
| Halldór<br>Laxness<br>(1902-98) | 174                                     | 28  | Gljúfrasteinn,<br>Reykjavík     | Guðmundsson<br>2004 <sup>28</sup>                | 61                                      |
| Kristmann G.<br>(1901-83)       | 1                                       | 2   | --                              | --   | 5                                       |
| Þórbergur Þ.<br>(1888-1974)     | 3                                       | 4   | Þórbergssetur,<br>southeast     | Gunnarsson 2007,<br>2009                         | 13                                      |

**Table 2. Posthumous reputation: *Dómur um dauðan hvern* ('The glory of the great dead')**

<sup>26</sup> The figures include reprints but not Icelandic translations of Gunnarsson's and Guðmundsson's works. Source: www.gegnir.is.

<sup>27</sup> The search was conducted 21/3 2013. Note that there is no Wikipedia article on Kristmann Guðmundsson in Norwegian.

<sup>28</sup> Guðmundsson's Laxness-biography has been translated into Danish, English, German, and Swedish (the other biographies in the table have not been translated so far).