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NATIONAL HISTORY, RESISTANCE, AND CULTURAL ENCLOSURE IN *ICELAND'S BELL*

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Colonialism

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literary heritage

sagas

Iceland offers a combination of spectacular natural beauty and Viking history that has made it a popular destination for tourists. The island, which has a population of under 350,000, was visited by almost 700,000 tourists in 2021, according to the Icelandic Tourist Board, and tourism accounts for nearly 50 per cent of the country's total export revenue (OECD). The island's Viking heritage, recorded in the medieval sagas and eddas, is central to Icelandic cultural and national identity and has played an important role in attracting tourists. However, the history of the saga manuscripts as material cultural artefacts is also tied to Iceland's history as a Danish colony. They were originally collected and stored in Copenhagen in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and only partly returned to Iceland in 1971, almost two decades after Iceland gained independence from Denmark. The history of the saga texts is the subject of Halldór Laxness's novel Iceland's Bell, *published in three volumes from 1943 to 1946 at the height of the Icelandic independence movement. Through a discussion of the novel, this essay will show that the Icelandic sagas, both as tangible and intangible cultural artefacts, are central to Laxness's*

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articulation of a cultural nationalism that is resistant to Danish colonial domination. It will suggest that not only is Iceland's Bell *a novel concerned with the material history of the sagas, but that this history is intricately linked with the island's seven centuries of colonial domination by the Kingdom of Denmark. It is thus a consciously anti-colonial novel that portrays the violence, in both cultural and material terms, of Danish rule in Iceland and aligns cultural enclosure with colonial domination.*

Introduction: the sagas and the politics of independence

This essay discusses the role of the Icelandic sagas in the literary works of Halldór Laxness and considers their significance to his articulation of independence in the context of Danish colonialism. Belonging to the Nordic region of Europe, Iceland is not commonly thought of as a postcolonial nation, nor is its history as a colony central to the country's international public image.[1] However, along with its neighbours, Greenland and the Faroe Islands, Iceland was part of the Danish Empire (in union with Norway until 1814), which at its height also held colonial possessions in Africa, South-East Asia, and the Caribbean. This essay will focus on Laxness's historical novel *Iceland's Bell*, which is set during the reigns of King Frederik III of Denmark and Norway (1648–1670) and his successors Christian V (1670–1699) and Frederik IV (1699–1730). This is a historical period known for heightened oppression and cultural degradation of the Icelandic people, when the ancient Icelandic parliamentary assembly, the *alþingi*, was abolished, a tightly controlled trade monopoly impoverished the people, and many of the medieval saga manuscripts, foundational to Icelandic cultural identity, were lost.

The novel was published in three parts between 1943 and 1946, overlapping with the final stage of Iceland's independence movement. At the start of World War II, after Denmark was invaded by German forces, Iceland became occupied first by the British army and then the United States in 1941. During this time contact between Denmark and Iceland was limited, which meant the Icelandic government was given greater freedom to self-rule. At the start of 1944, the Icelandic parliament took advantage of the lapse in contact with Copenhagen and voted unanimously to end the 1918 Act of Union, which had given Iceland nominal independence as a sovereign state within *Rigsfællesskabet* (the Danish Commonwealth) (Hálfdanarson 2000). Following a successful public referendum in May of the same year, Iceland was declared an independent republic, putting an end to almost seven centuries of foreign rule.

As a public intellectual, Halldór Laxness played an active role in the independence movement and was deeply concerned with the role of Icelandic

1 Along with the other Nordic nations, Iceland brands itself as a social-democratic egalitarian nation, an image which is solidified by reports such as the *Global Peace Index* (Institute for Economics and Peace 2023) and the United Nations' *World Happiness Report* (Helliwell et al. 2021), which ranked Iceland first and third respectively in 2023.

culture in the articulation of independence. Indeed, while working on *Iceland's Bell* in the 1940s, Laxness was also involved with another cultural project: the publication of five medieval Icelandic sagas with updated orthography to make them more accessible to contemporary Icelandic readers (Crocker 2019; Eysteinsson 2019). The project turned out to be politically contentious and resulted in several court cases for Laxness and his publishing partners. A politician even attempted to block the first volume, the *Laxdæla saga*, from being published in 1941, by proposing legislation that gave the Icelandic government exclusive power to grant publishing rights for literary works composed before 1400 (Crocker 2019). The bill passed into law in 1942 and when Laxness defied it and published his edition of the *Hrafnkels saga*, he was charged with breaking the law and sentenced to pay a fine or face prison time (Crocker 2019).

Although Laxness was eventually acquitted of the charge and the law was abolished after being deemed unconstitutional for violating the freedom of the press (Crocker 2019), the episode highlights the lasting significance of Iceland's medieval saga literature as a "crucial and constitutive element of modern Icelandic culture and identity" (Crocker 2019, 122). Indeed, in his chapter "The Emergence of Nationalism in Iceland" (1995), Gunnar Karlsson suggests that the saga tradition was instrumental in the formation of a specifically Icelandic national identity that materialized autonomously and relatively early compared to other European countries. According to Karlsson, the strength of Icelandic nationalism in the eighteenth century, which spurred on the pursuit of political independence from Denmark, was rooted in the literary and cultural heritage of the sagas because they "preserved [the] medieval tradition of a golden age" (49). The "golden age" he refers to is the period from the earliest settlement of the island in the ninth century until 1262 when Iceland became part of the Kingdom of Norway (Talmor 2010). This is also known as the Icelandic commonwealth era, when a constitution agreed upon in 930 made the country "an autonomous political construct", the so-called Icelandic Freestate, governed by the *alþingi* (Hastrup 1990, 71–72). Unlike elsewhere in Europe at the time, Iceland was not governed by a king and legal disputes were settled at the annual meeting of the *alþingi* which took place at Þingvellir in southwestern Iceland until 1798.[2] The dealings of the *alþingi* are an important part of the Icelandic sagas, making them a historical source for the political history of Iceland, and Þingvellir, now a national park and popular tourist destination, continues to be central to the "Icelandic memory-scapes" (Halink 2014, 215).

In *Iceland's Bell*, written on the cusp of Iceland's secession from the Kingdom of Denmark, Laxness shows the continued political significance of the sagas through a retelling of their "rediscovery" by Árni Magnússon (1663–1730). Magnússon, fictionalized in the novel as Arnas Arnæus, was an Icelandic nobleman tasked by the Danish royal antiquarian, Thomas

2 Although subject to the authority of the Danish legal system, the *alþingi* continued to be at the heart of Icelandic public life until it was abolished in 1800 by royal decree. Following an era of political impotence which gave rise to the

modern Icelandic independence movement, the *alþingi* was eventually restored in 1843, but moved to its current location in Reykjavík (Halink 2014).

Bartholin, with recovering the saga manuscripts and transferring them for preservation in Copenhagen (Hafsteinsson 2019). This extraction of "cultural valuables", with the assumption that they needed to be "protected in the face of a fading culture", highlights that in cultural terms Iceland was subject to colonialist practices much like those taking place in colonies elsewhere (Hafsteinsson 2019, 56). Despite this, Iceland and Icelandic literature are still rarely included in English-speaking postcolonial studies and there are still debates within Icelandic studies as to whether the relationship between Denmark and Iceland is best thought of as one of dependence or colonialism (Hafsteinsson 2019).[3] Denmark also tends to be excluded from the debates on European imperialism, despite contributing to the ideological and material production of Europe as the global centre and profiting from it (Jensen and Loftsdóttir 2012).

As some of the only literature composed during "the […] medieval phase of Nordic history" (Árnason and Wittrock 2012, 229), the Icelandic sagas have been foundational source texts for the cultural identity of the entire Nordic region, which explains the long-standing interest in the Icelandic sagas across Scandinavia. Indeed, when the first part of *Iceland's Bell* was published in 1943, the saga manuscripts recovered by Magnússon, known as the Arnamagnæan collection, were still being stored exclusively in Copenhagen. Even after national independence in 1918 and secession from the Kingdom of Denmark in 1944, it took until the 1960s for the Danish government to agree to return some of the sagas to Iceland. Between 1971 and 1997 around half were returned, and they are still stored jointly at the Arnamagnæan Institute in Copenhagen and the Árni Magnússon Institute in Reykjavík (Talmor 2010). The contest over where the sagas belong continues today, as was illustrated when, in 2019, Iceland's Culture and Education Minister, Lilja Alfreðsdóttir, made headlines when she sought to have more of the collection returned to Iceland. The sagas are now an important part of the Icelandic cultural heritage industry, which, alongside the island's natural beauty, attracted over two million visitors to the island in 2019 (Icelandic Tourist Board 2023). They are therefore an essential component in "the touristic production of ethnicity" that often takes place in former colonies (Phillips and Steiner 1999, 4). The saga stories, as well as the manuscripts themselves, are thus not just objects of national cultural significance but commodities that play a significant role in the Icelandic economy, and it is precisely this mutability of the sagas as cultural products that Laxness recognizes and politicizes in *Iceland's Bell*.

The political significance of the sagas for Iceland's journey to independence is captured with salience in an article by Laxness, written in 1944, in the socialist newspaper *Þjóðviljinn* (Will of the People). In it, he directly addresses King Christian X of Denmark (1912–1947), warning him not to interfere with the outcome of the referendum and reminding him that the

3 It should be noted that this essay refers primarily to articles written in English and that there are numerous publications in Icelandic that discuss Laxness as a postcolonial author. However, unless translated, the access to these articles tends to be restricted to scholars or speakers of Icelandic and they have therefore had limited impact on international postcolonial scholarship.

"Icelandic people have a good memory" and that "[t]his memory has long been the strongest weapon of the Saga people" (Laxness 1944, 3). Laxness's reference to the "saga people" not only creates a connection between modern Icelanders and the kingless people of the commonwealth era, but also suggests that the collective national memory of this time, preserved in the sagas, is a "weapon" in the fight for independence. Laxness follows the warning to the King with a warning aimed at the Icelandic people not to forget that the King represents "the institution that spent five hundred years flogging, starving, exploiting, and executing Icelanders" (3).[4] This would have served as a timely reminder to the Icelandic people of the historical violence of Danish colonial rule at a time when Denmark had begun to devolve power to home rule governments and was rebranding its influence in the North Atlantic as benign and paternalistic.

This essay will argue that in *Iceland's Bell* Laxness similarly presents the extraction of the medieval saga manuscripts by Árni Magnússon (Arnas Arnæus in the novel) as a form of cultural domination and enclosure, a history that is imbued with significance in the context of Iceland's moment of political independence. In the first instance, it will show that although Arnas's intention in the novel is to collect and preserve the sagas so that "for all eternity […] learned men of the world could be sure that once upon a time there lived in Iceland folk to be reckoned with" (Laxness 2003, 19),[5] this constitutes an act of colonial collecting that effectively dispossesses the Icelandic people of the saga texts, making them available only to scholars and the elite in Copenhagen for the next two centuries. The second part of this essay will continue to show how Laxness represents the enclosure of the Icelandic medieval literature in class terms. It will focus on the novel's second protagonist, Jón Hreggviðsson, who is accused of murdering the King's hangman at the start of the story. Jón, an impoverished and unpleasant farmer, is unknowingly in possession of six pages from the *Skálda*, "the most beautiful poems in the northern hemisphere" (*IB*, 25), thereby linking him to Arnas, a nobleman, and raising questions about who really "owns" the sagas. Jón's attempt to prove his innocence and escape execution takes him on a journey through Europe to Denmark, where he eventually receives a pardon from the King; a story arc that echoes Laxness's own court cases in the 1940s but also the complex lawsuits and heroic journeys typical of the sagas.

In the final part of the essay, I will suggest that Laxness's politicization of the material history of the sagas in *Iceland's Bell* can itself be interpreted as an act of enclosure in that it constitutes an attempt to formally bind together the glorious past of the Icelandic free state and the "most dismal periods of Iceland's history, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" (Crocker 2019, 124), to spur on the last stage of the country's independence journey. However, unlike the extraction of the saga manuscripts from Iceland by

4 My translation from the original: "Christian R. má ekki gleyma því að Íslendingar hafa got minni. Þetta minni hefur löngum verið sterkasta voþn sagnþjóðarinnar. Vér vitum vel að í skeyti sínu talar Christian R. ekki fyrir hönd Dana, heldur þeirrar stofnunar í Danmörku, sem hefur húðstríkt, svelt, arðrænt og liflátið Íslendinga I fimm hundruð ár" (1944, 3): Christian R. should not forget that the Icelandic people have a good memory. This memory has long been the strongest weapon of the Saga people. We know full well that Christian R. does not speak for the Danes; rather, he speaks as the representative of the Danish institution that spent five hundred years flogging, starving, exploiting and executing Icelanders.

5 Hereafter referred to in the text as *IB*.

Árni Magnússon, this act of enclosure seeks to counter the social and cultural divisions caused by colonial domination. My interpretation of cultural enclosure in this essay therefore seeks, to use Pascale Casanova's phrasing, to reconcile the supposed antinomy between "internal criticism which looks no further than texts themselves […], and external criticism, which describes the historical conditions under which texts are produced" (2004, 4–5) in order to explore the representation of colonial domination in Laxness's work.

"No one owns anything unless he has letters for it": letters, law, and colonial domination in Iceland

Iceland's Bell is set at a point in Icelandic history when the material and cultural effects of Danish rule had a significant impact on the Icelandic people. In economic terms it was at the height of the trade monopoly, which lasted from 1602 to 1786 and restricted trade to favour Danish merchants, impoverishing Icelanders and causing regular famines. Politically, this was also a period when the powers of the ancient *alþingi* had been reduced to those of a regional court of law after the introduction of absolutism in Denmark in 1660, which centralized and consolidated power under the Danish King. It left Iceland

> Isolated at the confines of Europe, [and] after the loss of its navy it was neglected and exploited […] The merchants grew rich by buying cheap and selling dear these products, while refusing the Icelanders necessities for their very survival like rope indispensable for farming and fishing. (Talmor 2010, 622)

The trade monopoly, which stifled economic development for centuries, along with the repressive system of law that left ordinary Icelanders powerless and put the Danes in a position of political and cultural authority, are given centre stage in Laxness's novel. It is in this context of social and economic degradation that Laxness explores the cultural implication of Danish colonial rule.

The novel is split into three parts, "Iceland's Bell", "The Fair Maiden", and "The Fire of Copenhagen", which cover about 40 years of events between the late 1600s and the Fire of Copenhagen in 1728. The novel has three protagonists, the peasant-farmer, Jón Hreggviðsson; Arnas Arnæus, an Icelandic nobleman and scholar, who as well as advising the King is on a quest to collect and preserve the Icelandic sagas; and the noblewoman Lady Snæfríður, "the flower of maidens" (*IB*, 18) and daughter of the island's highest legal authority, Magistrate Eydalín. Like Arnas, who is based on

the saga collector Árni Magnússon, Jón and Snæfríður are also loosely based on real historical figures: Snæfriður is likely based on Þódís Jónsdóttir, whose rumoured affair with Magnússon caused a scandal and extensive legal case at the time, and there was also a real farmer called Jón Hreggviðsson who was accused of killing the King's hangman in 1683 and acquitted of the crime in 1715 (Roughton 2003, 407). Not only are the historical details of the novel drawn from legal documentation, but the novel itself is structured around a series of interconnected lawsuits and permeated with legal documents, including contracts, agreements, and letters of authority. Throughout the novel, these letters and documents assign and demarcate legal and political power and give a physical form to the often opaque structures of colonial rule.

The novel opens by staging a debate about who really "owns" Iceland and in doing so draws attention to the connection between cultural enclosure and colonial violence. It starts with the removal of a valuable artefact, Iceland's "one national treasure" (*IB*, 3), the bell hung "at the gable end of the courthouse at Þingvellir by Öxará" (*IB*, 3), the site of the ancient Icelandic parliament:

> One year when the king decreed that the people of Iceland were to relinquish all of their brass and copper so that Copenhagen could be rebuilt following the war, men were sent to fetch the ancient bell. (*IB*, 3)

The cutting down of "the bell of Iceland" at the start of the novel introduces the connection between the extraction of cultural objects and the political domination of the island by the Kingdom of Denmark – an act of violence legitimized by the legal power of the King. By setting the scene at the ancient site of the *alþingi*, the political and legal centre of Iceland in the commonwealth era, and a location that is also frequently mentioned in the Icelandic sagas themselves, the opening scene also points to the deeply political nature of national cultural artefacts.

It is the King's executioner and emissary, Sirgurður Snorrason, who has been charged with the job of removing the bell. He is accompanied by Jón Hreggviðsson, who has been awaiting sentencing for stealing fishing rope in the prison at Bessastaðir, the Danish headquarters in Iceland. However, when they arrive to cut down the bell, they are confronted by an old man, who protests the act:

> "This bell – it has always belonged to this country."
> "Who has the letters to prove it?" asked the hangman.
> "My father was born here on Bláskógaheiði," said the old man.
> "No one owns anything unless he has letters for it," said the king's hangman.

> "I believe that it says in the old books," said the old man, "that when the Norwegians arrived in this empty land, they found this bell in a cave by the sea, along with a cross that's now lost."
> "My letter is from the king, I say!" said the hangman. (*IB*, 5)

In this short exchange between the old man and the King's hangman, power is equated with the word of the King, objectified in the form of a letter of authority, and it becomes clear that those without letters are powerless. Whereas Sirgurður Snorrason refers to the authority of his "letter from the King", the old man refers to "the old books", the sagas which record the discovery of the bell by Iceland's earliest settlers, to legitimize his claim that the bell belongs to the country. The hangman's authority, legally decreed in "letters", is thus a direct confrontation to the legitimacy of ancient memory recorded in the sagas. The opening of the novel thereby introduces a conflict between the new and the old: the system of law enforced by the absolutist monarchy of Denmark versus the ancient authority of the *alþingi*, enshrined in the sagas.

There is clearly allegorical figuration at work in the image of the bell, which seems to represent the Icelandic nation itself: at the time the novel is set the bell has been "cracked for many years" (*IB*, 3), but like the glorious past of the early Icelandic republic it is remembered as having once had a "clearer chime" (*IB*, 3). The story of the bell introduces an allegorical system used by Laxness throughout the novel to connect the past with the present, in order to mobilize the nation's history of colonial domination to support the journey to national independence in the twentieth century. The scene ends with Jón cutting down the bell, and the executioner breaking it to pieces with a sledgehammer on the steps of the courthouse. It is a deeply symbolic moment that suggests the violence of Danish colonial rule in Iceland is linked with the extraction and, in this case, destruction of cultural artefacts.

If the bell offers the first example of a national allegory in the novel, this allegorization is extended to Jón himself, whose story becomes representative of the experience of ordinary Icelanders and the centuries of "flogging, starving, exploiting, and executing" that they experienced during Danish colonial rule. Jón's story offers a material counterpart to the cultural violence introduced by the cutting of the bell. We are introduced to this almost straight away in the novel, when Jón is accused of murdering the King's hangman, sentenced to execution, and imprisoned until the next meeting of the *alþingi* in the Spring, where he will be allowed to appeal the district court's judgement. During his imprisonment, Jón's mother travels across southern Iceland by boat and on foot, to beg for his release, and the description of her journey paints a bleak picture of Iceland at this time. On her journey

she encounters "[a]ll sorts of folk […] forced to spend their lives in search for sustenance", including

> One family […] from out east in Rangárvellir, a man and his wife and five children; they were on their way to their kinfolk south in Leira in the hope of fish. One of the children was at death's door. They reported that the carcasses of itinerant vagrants lay scattered before men's doors throughout the entire countryside to the east. Nineteen thieves had been branded at Rangárvellir in the winter and one hanged. (*IB*, 40)

Her journey across southern Iceland depicts a society where poverty, starvation, and suffering are widespread, and in doing so puts Jón's original crime of stealing a length of fishing rope into context. It highlights another form of colonial violence: the legal system, which criminalizes, punishes, and executes Icelanders.

With help from Snæfriður, Jón manages to escape Iceland, before his execution, onboard an illegal Dutch trading ship. He makes his way across northern continental Europe to Copenhagen where he eventually receives a royal pardon. Jón then returns to Iceland with his own letter from the King, clearing his name of murder. However, instead of freeing Jón, by suggesting that his trial was unfairly conducted and declaring the verdict void, the letter implicates him in a further, more complex legal case, overseen by Arnæus against the country's jurists. To Jón, the letter has brought him nothing but bad luck, and in a moment of irony and rare self-pity he explains that "the only thing that's been weighing me down all these years are the letters" (*IB*, 189), and even with a letter from the King "[a] commoner never knows whether he owns the head he's got on his shoulders" (*IB*, 188). Letters are thus essential in determining who owns what, but as Jón's statement above illustrates, this is socially determined, and to the poor Icelanders the court cases of the elite change very little in their daily lives.

The removal of Iceland's bell at the start of the novel thus introduces the idea of "ownership" as an essential component of colonial domination, but this idea is revisited once more towards the end of the novel. During a lavish feast at one of the King's palaces in Denmark Arnas is introduced to a German courtier who informs him the King has offered to sell Iceland. To prove it, the merchant shows Arnas a letter from the King inviting several wealthy merchants from Hamburg to buy the island for "five barrels of gold, to be paid to Our Royal treasury upon the occasion of the signing of the contract" (*IB*, 304). The merchant explains that the rents from the Icelandic trade have been used "to subsidize the court's entertainments", but "now the cow has been milked down to its blood, and famine is on the rise in Iceland", the King wants to sell it (*IB*, 304). The merchant's letter makes the violence of the Danish trade monopoly in Iceland clear: to

extract wealth from Iceland to Denmark to the devastation of the Icelandic people. However, the idea of selling Iceland also makes reference to a particular characteristic of the Danish administration of its colonies: the fact that almost all of the other Danish colonies were indeed sold. The first former Danish territory to be sold was Estonia in 1347 (Bregnsbo et al. 2008), and with "the loss of its status as a midsized player in Europe in the wake of the Napoleonic wars" Denmark gradually gave up its overseas tropical possessions: in the 1840s Tranquebar and the Gold Coast were sold to the British, and in 1917 the Virgin Islands were sold to the United States (Jensen 2009, 168). Like the other important letters in the novel, the significance of the merchant's letter is clear: it shows that Iceland is no longer automatically the land of the Icelandic people, but, like the bell, with the right documentation it can be commodified and sold to the highest bidder.

The notion of "selling the country" illuminates the inseparability of the colonialist project from capitalism itself, an idea Laxness returns to in his subsequent novel, *The Atom Station* (1948). *The Atom Station* is a political satire critiquing the 1946 Keflavík agreement, which allowed the US military to build an airbase on the island. In the novel, Laxness suggests that the agreement, made almost immediately after the country achieved its final separation from the Kingdom of Denmark, amounted to "selling out" the country's independence. A speech by the Prime Minister in the novel makes clear that there is a new threat to Icelandic independence on the horizon:

> "Why do I want to sell the country?" said the Prime Minister. "Because my conscience tells me to," he said. […] What is Iceland for the Icelanders? Nothing. Only the West matters for the North. We live for the West; we die for the West; one West. Small nation? – dirt. The East shall be wiped out. The dollar shall stand. (Laxness 2003, 61)

Across the two works, Laxness draws a direct line between the colonial domination of the past and the capitalist imperialism that would emerge later in the twentieth century. In doing so he further complicates the symbolic significance of the sagas as they increasingly serve as cultural commodities, mere symbols of Icelandic independence and resistance to colonial oppression. In *Iceland's Bell*, on the one hand, Arnas's collecting of the manuscripts constitutes an attempt to preserve what remains of the saga texts, an essential component of Icelandic culture and national identity, from the ravages of colonial rule, but on the other, Laxness also shows it to be an act of cultural enclosure, one that adheres to the "cultural authority" of the colonizer and, just like the removal of the bell to rebuild Copenhagen, further deprives ordinary Icelanders of their cultural artefacts (Hafsteinsson 2019, 53).

Cultural authority, class, and resistance: the sagas as tangible and intangible cultural products

In an essay on Danish colonialism and Icelandic architecture, Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson suggested that Danish "cultural authority" played a particularly important role in the colonial relationship between Denmark and Iceland (2019, 53). Exploring the impact of colonial thought on discourses around Icelandic vernacular architecture in the nineteenth century, Hafsteinsson shows that leading public intellectuals such as Sigurður Guðmundsson (1833–1874) were critical of Danish colonial rule whilst simultaneously being influenced by colonialist ideas. Guðmundsson was a visual artist who played a central role in the cultural and socio-political debates about Icelandic independence and in the creation of national symbols such as the Icelandic national costume. He also began a collection of folklore and material artefacts that would later become the National Museum of Iceland. Despite his interest in collecting and preserving objects of national significance, Guðmundsson was dismissive of the predominant vernacular architectural style in the nineteenth century, the turf house, describing it as an emblem of "Icelandic putridity" (quoted in Hafsteinsson 2019, 53), and he saw its existence as evidence of the degeneration of Icelandic culture and society under Danish colonial rule. Instead, he advocated for the adoption of Danish and European building styles and reinforcing "Danish colonial norms" and "cultural authority" despite being deeply critical of Danish rule and its impact on Icelandic culture and society (Hafsteinsson 2019, 66). Through the example of Sigurður Guðmundsson, Hafsteinsson shows that although ideas about the preservation and construction of Icelandic national culture were closely related to the independence movement, they were simultaneously shaped by colonialist thought that reasserted Danish and European culture as superior to that of Iceland. I want to suggest that this contradictory combination of anti-colonial critique alongside a veneration of Danish and European cultural norms is also captured in Laxness's engagement with the sagas in *Iceland's Bell*.

Early in the novel, Laxness illustrates the influence of Danish cultural authority on the desire to collect and preserve the medieval saga manuscripts. We are first introduced to Arnas in the farmstead of Jón Hreggviðsson, who is recovering in bed from a hangover and from his public flogging by the executioner for his theft of a piece of fishing rope two days before. We learn that Arnas has come to the farm to search for remnants of the medieval manuscripts as Jón's grandfather was a bookbinder who "had worked on old books until the day he died" (*IB*, 20). Arnas is introduced to Jón by the priest from the local church as "the right-hand man of our most Gracious Sire and Hereditary King, Assessor and Professor at the University of Copenhagen" (*IB*, 18) and later as "the true pride of our poor land amongst the

nations" (*IB*, 19). The honour of having such a visitor is pressed upon Jón and his family, making clear the vast difference in their social stations. The priest explains to Jón that Arnas has come to

> purchase any and all tatters of writing, whether on parchment or paper: old scrolls scraps, anything resembling a letter or a book that was decaying now in all haste in the keeping of the destitute and wretched inhabitants of this miserable land. These people, he said, no longer had any understanding of such things, due to the ill-effects of starvation and other types of divine punishment suffered by impenitent folk who are ungrateful for Christ. The assessor, said the priest, would find for these poor scraps of books a place of refuge in his own great mansion in the city of Copenhagen, to be stored for all eternity so that learned men of the world could be sure that once upon a time there lived in Iceland folk to be reckoned with, men such as Gunnar of Hlíðarendi and the farmer Njáll. (*IB*, 19)

The priest's explanation of Arnas's project suggests that the Icelanders have so declined in their present moment that they no longer bear any resemblance to their ancestors, the heroes of the sagas; they are so starved and degraded that they have lost the understanding of what these texts mean, and that they must therefore be preserved elsewhere. It is significant also that the priest makes reference to characters from *Njáll's saga*. This saga tells the story of a series of blood feuds and ensuing legal cases that span over several decades, much like the court case which surrounds Jón in the novel. Gunnar of Hlíðarendi, one the protagonists of *Njáll's saga*, is also mentioned several times in the novel, often as an example of the heroic character of the people of the Icelandic commonwealth. The priest clearly lays the blame for this decline of Icelandic culture on the Icelanders themselves, and in suggesting it is their impenitence that has led to their degradation, he fails to see the connection between the people's destitution and starvation and the Danish authorities in charge.

Following the exchange above, they do in fact find six pages from the *Skálda*, stuffed into the hay mattress of Jón's mother's bed. There is a deep sense of irony in the language used by Arnas and the priest when they discover the "wadded and hole-riddled parchment scraps" amongst the "garbage" (*IB*, 23) of the bed:

> The surface of the parchment was black and grimy, but one could easily discern the text there, written in a Gothic script. They became eager and reverential at once, handling these shriveled [*sic*] rags as carefully as if they were holding a skinless embryo, and muttering Latin words such as "pretiosissima," "theasaurus," and "cimelium." (*IB*, 24)

The value of these scraps of parchment is such, according to Arnas, that "it would not have been too much to trade landed estates for some of them" (*IB*, 22). However, when asked why she kept them, Jón's mother explains that she never threw anything away that might be useful, "least of all scraps of skin", for she had "enough trouble throughout her life trying to scrape together enough material to make shoes for all the feet in her house" (*IB*, 24). She further explains,

> It was a poor patch of parchment that wasn't useful for something during a hard year, when so many were forced to eat their shoes – even if it were nothing but a shoestring, it could still be stuck into the children's mouths for them to cut their teeth on. (*IB*, 24)

The exchange highlights a completely different idea of "value" for the nobility compared to the ordinary Icelandic people. For Jón's mother, their value resides in their usefulness as tangible material objects rather than as artefacts of cultural importance, and the idea they might be worth the same as "landed estates" does not even cross her mind. The scene is rife with such contradictions as the two opposite ends of Icelandic society meet in the living room of Jón's farm. Indeed, the very idea that pages from the *Skálda*, a collection of the "most beautiful poems in the northern hemisphere" (*IB*, 24), are discovered in the lowliest of places, the rubbish-filled mattress of Jón's mother, extends the theme of contradiction, but also serves the narrative function of tying the high and low elements of Icelandic society together, a connection that continues to be explored throughout the novel.

Although Laxness's retelling of Magnússon's "rediscovery" of the sagas deliberately brings together the high and the low of Icelandic society, they do not exist in harmony but are rather in a constant state of friction. For instance, when the priest suggests the Icelanders have lost their connection with the sagas, Jón replies that, although he "never read except when he was forced to do so", he had "learned from his mother all the necessary sagas, ballads, and old genealogies" (*IB*, 20). To Jón, the sagas are not lost, for he

> would never forget such excellent ancients as Gunnar of Hlíðarendi, King Pontus, and Örvar-Oddur, who were twelve ells high and could have lived to be three hundred years old if they hadn't run into any trouble, and if he had such a book he would send it immediately and for free to the king and his counts, to prove to them that there had indeed been real men in Iceland. (*IB*, 20)

Like the nobility, Jón is keen to showcase the glory of Iceland's past, but he contradicts the idea that the material degradation of the manuscripts is

synonymous with their status in Icelandic society. He thereby illustrates that they have an intangible form as well, in the memory of ordinary people.

Jón also counters the priest's derogatory remarks about the Icelanders' deprivation being due to divine punishment. Reminding the priest that Icelanders are the direct descendants of the saga heroes, Jón suggests that their decline could hardly be "due to impenitence […] because when had Gunnar of Hlíðarendi ever done penance? Never" (*IB*, 20). Instead, he suggests that the lack of fishing tackle, which is of course the cause of his own criminalization, "had done far more harm to the Icelanders than lack of penitence" (*IB*, 20). Jón's retort illustrates precisely Laxness's point in the *Þjóðviljinn* article mentioned above, that memory is indeed the "strongest weapon" of the Icelandic people, and although the manuscripts themselves have been lost or ruined, the saga stories have survived as an intangible form of cultural heritage for ordinary Icelanders reminding them of their once glorious past.

However, the sagas are also not the only cultural form in the novel. *The Elder Ballad of Pontus*, an epic poem sung by Jón, weaves in and out of the story, visibly disrupting the novel's prose. Unlike the "old books", *The Elder Ballad of Pontus* is not a precious artefact to be collected and preserved, but is, rather, Jón's personal, often base, ditty, and a mode of resistance against the violence to which he is subjected. Every time he is flogged, beaten, robbed, insulted, or imprisoned, he turns to *The Elder Ballad of Pontus*, which he adapts and alters to suit his circumstances and surroundings. Take this moment at the start of the novel when he is imprisoned in a dungeon, awaiting execution:

> There were no conveniences in this dungeon other than a narrow plank covered in sheepskin, a chamber pot, and a chopping block. A hefty ax [*sic*] lay on the chopping block and next to it was an earthen jug of water. The steward's lantern momentarily illuminated the scene – and then the men turned to leave. They climbed out of the hole, dragged the ladder up behind them, closed the shutters and drove the bars, then turned the keys in the locks. Afterwards everything went quiet. It was pitch-black; not a thing could be seen. Jón Hreggviðsson sang:
> "The soldier entreated and got his way
> A maid to lie in sport and play
> Increased our love as there we lay
> Increased our love as there we lay:
> – Though at first she answered 'nay'."
> Jón Hreggviðsson sat in prison and sang the *Elder Ballad of Pontus*, throughout the whole winter and on into summer. (*IB*, 29)

As well as being a distraction from the direct violence Jón endures, the ballad also offers an alternative cultural form to the sagas.

Ballads, known in Icelandic as *rímur*, have a significant history in Icelandic cultural development and were the most common cultural form in Iceland after "the demise of saga-writing in the middle ages" (Karlsson 1995, 57). *Rímur*, Gunnar Karlsson explains, were long epic poems comprised of "material from old sagas and other histories", which "were made according to the same tradition, generation after generation, and century after century, without any real creative contribution, and sung to traditional monotonous melodies" (1995, 57). This suggests that the popularity of *rímur* after the late middle ages was a marker of the cultural stagnation that followed the great saga era; however, in the novel, *The Elder Ballad of Pontus* is the only literature which is actively being created, and that it belongs to Jón, rather than to the educated elite, seems to suggest that the ability to compose new Icelandic literature resides in the ordinary Icelandic people. Jón frequently makes reference to the saga heroes and myths in his *rímur*, showing a familiarity with the country's literature as part of his daily lived reality that is quite different to Arnas's desire to collect and preserve the ancient manuscripts. By offering an alternative form for remembering and preserving the saga stories, *The Elder Ballad of Pontus* thus also operates as a mode of resistance to the act of enclosure entailed in Arnas's collection of the saga manuscripts and to the wider cultural marginalization of Iceland in the long centuries after the end of the Icelandic commonwealth. It shows that although the "old books" had been reduced to "scraps", the stories of the sagas and eddas have survived, preserved in the oral culture of the common people.

However, despite this, Laxness does not fall prey to the simplistic romanticization of Iceland and its people. Jón, who is himself unsure of whether he did in fact murder the King's hangman, is not a particularly heroic character, and his *Elder Ballad of Pontus*, full of crude stories of sexual violence and war, rather than celebrating the Icelandic golden age, draws attention to the violence of the nation's past. The same can also be said for Arnas, who, despite his best intentions, ultimately aids the colonialist collection and enclosure of the saga texts. This refusal to romanticize the nation's past is emblematic of Laxness's complex and often dialectical nationalism across his works, which although rooted in critique of Danish colonialism, does not fall prey to nostalgia or simple glorification of the past. It is also worth noting that at the time of the novel's publication, in the mid to late 1940s, Laxness's project to republish the Icelandic sagas also put Laxness in a position of authority, operating as both translator and editor of the sagas and placing him at the "centre of reception and of distribution […] for Old Icelandic literature in the twentieth century" (Eysteinsson 2019, 138). In the 1950s Laxness would go on to engage even more directly with sagas in his novel *Gerpla* (translated into English as *Wayward Heroes*), a direct rewriting of the *Fóstbræðra saga*. Laxness's proximity to the sagas

thus exemplifies Eysteinsson's suggestion that the medieval saga literature provides "the existential foundation of Icelandic culture" (Eysteinsson 2019, 150). However, Eysteinsson also emphasizes that this relationship between Icelanders and their sagas is defined by a "nearness which is full of distance", one that requires an "activity of translation […] a search for meaning under the auspices of exile and anachronism" (2019, 150–151). This contradictory sense of proximity to the medieval saga literature and the constant endeavour to make them relevant and meaningful in the contemporary moment is also reflected in the dialectical tension of *Iceland's Bell* as a work of historical fiction.

Laxness and the postcolonial novel as (Dis)enclosure

In her recent book on the *Crisis and Coloniality at Europe's Margins: Creating Exotic Iceland* (2019), Kristín Loftsdóttir shows how the history of colonial oppression continues to shape Icelander's national identity in complex and often contradictory ways. Loftsdóttir also recognizes a duality in Icelandic national and cultural self-perception, which she connects to the particular historical experience of Icelanders as Europeans *and* colonial subjects. This, she suggests, results in a deep-rooted anxiety of "being associated with colonized and globally marginalized communities" (3), which has persisted in Icelandic society, even after the establishment of the republic in 1944, and which resurfaced recently in the public discussions that surrounded the 2008 financial crisis. In her introduction to the book, Loftsdóttir recalls the moment she found out Iceland's three main banks had failed:

> Somewhere in the shadows of my own mind, a plastic bag full of money in the hands of respectable businessmen at the bank probably signified the country's backwardness – after all, my mind had been shaped not only by my theoretical engagement in anthropology, but also by racialized European discourses of modernity and Africa's incompatibility with it. Only much later did I realize that I was far from the only one who slipped into this feeling: that Iceland was becoming *almost* like a non-Western country as it neared economic collapse. (Loftsdóttir 2019, 1; emphasis in original)

This jump to European colonialist stereotypes about what constitutes a "civilized" nation reveals the underlying logic of coloniality still in place in the present. Loftsdóttir suggests that in Iceland's case, this is the result of Iceland's ambiguous position as a former Danish colony and dependency "while also belonging with the Nordic countries and Northern Europe and being as such, associated with whiteness and a sense of 'proper' European-ness"

(2019, 3). This complex relationship between Icelanders' self-perception as colonial subjects and their location on the borders of Europe, I want to suggest, is also central to Laxness's politicized retelling of Árni Magnússon's story in *Iceland's Bell*.

Laxness's mobilization of history in the novel can be productively explored in relation to György Lukács's discussion of historical realism in *The Historical Novel*. Lukács argues that a new historical consciousness emerged in Europe after the French Revolution, in which the past was no longer treated as mere "theme and costume" (Lukács 1963, 19), but "as the concrete precondition of the present" (21). He highlights the importance of realist historical novels to the imaginative project of nation building in the years following the Napoleonic wars, suggesting that by connecting past and present, and reconciling "memories […] of past greatness" with "moments of national dishonour" (Lukács 1963, 25), the realist historical novel was instrumental in constructing the cohesive sense of history needed to imagine a sovereign nation. We can see this reconciliation of the past with the present at work in Laxness's novel, and in his preface to the English edition of *The Historical Novel*, Lukács even suggested that *Iceland's Bell*, alongside Lampedusa's *The Leopard*, could be considered as "new important historical novels" which confirmed the principles of his thesis "in a positive direction" (Lukács 1963, 17).[6]

This urge to unite the contradictory elements of Icelandic's past and present and bind together the disparate and fragmented Icelandic society under Danish rule is clearly at work in *Iceland's Bell*. As we have seen, characters at opposite ends of the social spectrum are drawn together by the search for lost saga manuscripts, and the various court cases throughout the novel further enmesh and bind the characters to one another. Thus, the very form and structure of the novel gestures at an act of enclosure. In her essay on "Totality" (2019), Anna Kornbluh suggests that this urge to unify and enclose is inherent in the novel as a literary form. She argues that the history of the concept of totality is itself "coeval […] with the rise of the novel" (2019, 672). Drawing on Lukács, Kornbluh suggests that rather than an object of totality, the novel form is best understood as a method, principle, or theory of totality. She argues that

> [t]o theorize in terms of totality is not to produce some suffocating enclosure of false unity but rather to chart the historical process of the capitalist mode of production's foreclosure of other modes of production, and at the same time to resist that foreclosure by highlighting contradictions, by insisting on other possibilities, by complementing the chart of the past with hopes for the future. (Kornbluh 2019, 674–675)

The wider enclosing impulse of Laxness's novel itself can thus be understood as a form of resistance to the fragmentation caused by Danish colonial

6 Lukács would likely have come across Laxness's works, in German translation, in the literary journal *Sinn und Form*, to which both he and Laxness were regular contributors (Parker and Philpotts 2009). It is worth also noting here that at the time of writing *Iceland's Bell* Laxness was a radical socialist. He had visited the Soviet Union in 1932 and for much of the mid-twentieth century he adhered to a "Marxist political and aesthetic worldview" (Vilhjálmsson 2021, 443).

domination in Iceland, in that it accommodates, binds together anew, the contradictions and oppositions between high and low, oral and written, tangible and intangible social and cultural forms.

The idea of the novel as embodying a principle of totality, one defined by contradiction, can also help us reinterpret Fredric Jameson's controversial suggestion in "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" that texts from countries that cannot be "conceived as anthropologically independent or autonomous"

> necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society. (Jameson 1986, 68, 69; emphasis in original)

National allegory is, according to Jameson, the narrative response to the "crisis of representation" (1986, 81) caused by the violence of colonialism and imperialism in the peripheries. Where this has been misinterpreted and dismissed as a reduction of the content of non-Western literature to a simplistic allegorical figuration of the novel as the nation, Kornbluh's insistence on reading novels as theorizations of totality challenges the perception of allegory as a simplistic figurative system. We can indeed read *Iceland's Bell* as a realist national allegory, illustrated in its detailed exploration of "infrastructure, institutions, identities, ideologies" (Kornbluh 2019, 672), but it is an allegorical figuration defined by a dialectical interweaving of the contradictory aspects of Icelandic culture, society, and history.

The novel's articulation of resistance to political and cultural domination is thereby twofold: first, Jón's *Elder Ballad of Pontus*, which represents the intangible nature of the Icelandic sagas as cultural heritage, operates as a form of radical dis-enclosure from colonial domination in the novel. However, the novel itself, with its enclosing impulse to create a "bounded whole" (Levine 2015, 27) from the fragments of Icelandic society during "the darkest age of Iceland's history" (Talmor 2010, 622), also embodies a resistance to the political and cultural domination entailed in colonialism and the broader "contradicting unity" of capitalism itself (Kornbluh 2019, 674). It is thus a novel engaged in a continuous process of enclosure and dis-enclosure, and it is in this "field of contradiction" (Kornbluh 2019, 673), I want to suggest, that Laxness's articulation of anti-colonial resistance resides. Written and published in the years immediately before and after Iceland's secession from the Kingdom of Denmark, the novel's allegorization of the Icelandic saga history emphasizes the importance of culture in the political pursuit of national independence, in the radical process of decolonization, and for "genuinely emancipatory and transformative political work" (Levine 2015, 28).

Conclusion

In *Iceland's Bell* Laxness politicizes both the material history of the saga manuscripts and the stories they contain in order to make them relevant to his own historical moment: Iceland on the cusp of independence. Laxness thus provides an interpretation of the material history of the sagas, which can be seen as a counterpart to his broader attempt to reposition the sagas as central to contemporary Icelandic society in the 1940s. My reading of the novel has shown that for Laxness the reinvigoration of the sagas for contemporary Icelandic readers was a deeply political project and central to the journey to independence from Danish colonial rule. In relation to the notion of cultural enclosure, the novel offers several interpretative frames for understanding both the lasting impact of colonial domination and the politicization of culture that takes place in the process of articulating and pursuing national independence. It simultaneously positions the sagas as a form of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, as objects that can be collected, preserved, enclosed, whilst also offering them as part of a cultural mode of resistance against different forms of violence inherent in the colonialist project. Reading *Iceland's Bell* in terms of the notion of cultural enclosure has not only enabled a productive exploration of the Icelandic experience of colonial rule, but also emphasized the anti-colonialism that is central to Laxness's work.

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