

Iceland's Bell

Íslandsklukkan

Presented by: Filip Kučeković

Halldór Kiljan Laxness was an Icelandic writer who received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1955, confirming his status as one of the major Icelandic, and indeed European, novelists. In his novels, the main character is often Iceland itself, the island nation that for most of its history was part of other Nordic kingdoms such as Denmark, and whose past was marked by colonial exploitation and the negative relationship between coloniser and colonised. For this reason, Laxness frequently draws on the tradition of indigenous Icelandic narrative techniques found in the old sagas to shape a nationally conscious literature in opposition to externally imposed themes and modes of storytelling.

Laxness's best-known novel is certainly Íslandsklukkan (Iceland's Bell), set in the eighteenth century during a time of major upheaval and instability in the relations between Iceland, Denmark, and Sweden. Íslandsklukkan is divided into three narratively interconnected parts, each focusing on one of the three key characters.

The first part of Íslandsklukkan tells the story of the farmer Jón Hreggviðsson, who is sentenced to forced labour for Danish noblemen for a minor theft. His first task is to remove the Icelandic bell from its tower so that the Danes can use it to finance their war with Sweden. Afterwards, Jón Hreggviðsson, the executioner, and the others who helped remove the bell become drunk and fall asleep, only to discover the next morning that the executioner has been murdered, for which Jón Hreggviðsson is accused. He is immediately sentenced to death, but an opportunity for escape is provided by the seventeen-year-old Snæfríður Íslandssól, the daughter of the judge who sentenced him. The remainder of the first part is a picaresque narrative in which Jón Hreggviðsson attempts to reach the Danish king to beg for a pardon from his death sentence. Forced to flee Iceland, he first goes to the Netherlands, then to Germany, and finally to Copenhagen. At each stop, he ends up in prison and must escape, and he is repeatedly renamed, for example, in Germany he is called Johann Reckwitz, ironically emphasising the marginalisation of his identity. At the end of the first part, Jón Hreggviðsson receives a royal pardon from the Danish king and returns to Iceland a free man.

The heroine of the second part, The Fair Maiden, is Snæfríður Íslandssól, the daughter of the Icelandic judge. Ten years after Jón Hreggviðsson's release, she is married to a drunkard who, in one of his drunken fits, loses and sells their estate. However, the local authorities return it to him to prevent it from falling into Danish hands. She is in love with the Danish philologist Arnas Arnaeus, hero of third part of the novel Fire in Copenhagen, whose obsessive task is the collection of old Icelandic manuscripts. He arrives in Iceland as an administrator sent by the Danish king after the king decides to sell Iceland to Hamburg merchants to finance the war with Sweden. The novel ends

with Arnaeus rejecting Snæfríður's love and remaining with a wife he does not love, but who enables him to pursue his philological work, and with a fire in Copenhagen that postpones the sale of Iceland, allowing the island to retain its colonial ruler.

Íslandsklukkan is a political novel by virtue of its exploration of the relationship between the Danes, the Danish administration, and the Icelanders – a relationship comparable to those of other, far more well-known colonial and imperial powers. It introduces themes of geopolitical relations and territorial exchanges in the eighteenth century, while also drawing on the indigenous Icelandic narrative form found in the old sagas, characterised by a somewhat restrained narrator who does not delve into the psychology or motivations of the characters, but instead almost mechanically conveys their words and describes their actions.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to ignore that the very Icelandic bell of the title is conspicuously absent from the novel. It appears only in the first chapter of the first part, when Jón Hreggviðsson and the royal executioner remove it, break it apart, and carry it away. An old man who tries to dissuade them points out that it is not a church or papal bell, but a bell belonging to the people. For centuries, the ringing of the Icelandic bell had constituted the community, gathering people around a sound that carried a message. From this perspective, it becomes clearer why the novel opens with the silence and muteness of the bell, which will be used to enable the expansionist wars of the colonial authorities. The narrator therefore attempts to fill that silence of the Icelandic bell with his own story about the bell, the Icelanders, and their lives.

However, Íslandsklukkan ultimately demonstrates that literature cannot serve as the foundation of a community in place of the bell. On the level of the plot, this is embodied in the peasant who must constantly move, fleeing from his pursuers and thereby severing his connection to the land on which he had lived, seeking peace far from where he began. Finally, at the end of the novel, Arnaeus's manuscripts perish in a fire, and the text once again reveals itself as a fragile construction that easily disappears and turns to ash.

What Íslandsklukkan tells its reader is that community is created through the absence of foundations – that is, upon the remnants left by the withdrawal and erasure of foundations. Much like the hollow void of the bell and the sound that calls people to gather, literature similarly shows how a political community, whether of enraged and exploited Icelanders or of any other people, is formed as an absence of foundations, as a lack of positive identity markers that would clearly distinguish those who belong from those who do not. Here, the literary text is merely a reminder that the bell was never the true reason for the existence of a political community.

LANGUAGE: Icelandic/Íslenska

CENSORSHIP STATUS: