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The Sagas and the Twenty-First Century

The Remaining Question of Bookprose

As one might expect, Franz Bäuml, with his interests in orality and literacy, has long followed the study of the Icelandic sagas. His famous review of Theodore M. Andersson in *Speculum* still serves as an elegant corrective, crystallizing core issues of a whole study and refocusing our attention on the centrality of the extant text.¹ A proponent of cross-disciplinary studies, Professor Bäuml has often discussed with me during sunny lunches outdoors in California the current trends and issues in saga studies. In light of this interest and to honor a long-time colleague and friend, I offer this essay exploring theoretical and historical roots of issues of continuing debate and dissension in the study of saga and society. To my mind, the field of saga studies has for too long been sidetracked by polemical argumentation. One way out is to expose to the light of day basic and sometimes forgotten presumptions underlying earlier stages of debate.

One powerful and learned branch of current saga studies, which could aptly be called "new-bookprose", would distance the traditions and history of Icelandic society and culture from the sagas. This mode of interpretation, which is a direct descendant of the older "bookprose" school of "literary" saga analysis,² all but rejects the oral connection and sees the sagas instead as pure literary invention. For the active new-bookprosisists, Iceland's family sagas are original, written creations of thirteenth-century authors, who, rather than drawing their storytelling art from older oral narratives, derived personal inspiration and generative force principally from knowledge of Latin and learned writings, especially church writings and hagiography. This view is

¹ Bäuml 1982

² Holtsmark 1959; Andersson 1964 reviews the literary aspects of the Icelandic school of bookprose. For a discussion of social and political aspects of early bookprose, in particular the influence of nationalism and the contest between urban intellectuals and the more traditional farmers, see Byock 1990-91. That the controversy continues to evoke interest is evidenced by the appearance of two collections of older articles pertinent to the debate: Baetke 1974 and Mundal 1974; see also Mundal 1975 and Byock 1982: 7-10. Mitchell 1991 provides in Chapter I an important overview of later views concerning orality.

admirably expressed in the 1992 modern Icelandic edition of *Egils saga*, a finely executed scholarly reconsideration of the manuscripts. The first page of the introduction to the edition combatively states that, contrary to previous assumptions, the saga is "a completely literary invention from the thirteenth century and that it will be treated as such here [in this introduction]".³

Staking claim to the newness and originality of this extreme bookprose position, the *Egils saga's* two editors leave little doubt as to their views. They state that unlike previous scholars, they will not consider the possibility that the poetry around which much of the prose saga is written, and which the medieval text attributes to its protagonist, the famous poet and warrior, Egill, might be authentic in part or even old. Instead, everything in the saga is assumed to be the invention of a thirteenth-century writer. Like offspring at odds with their parents, this new branch of bookprose takes as its chief opponent older bookprosists who, while stressing the written creativity of thirteenth-century authors, had also found a place for an older undefined oral contribution.⁴

"New-bookprose" is not only at odds with older forms of bookprose, but it is also contrary to the current socio-literary and socio-historical branches of saga analysis. These "socio-"approaches are purposefully interdisciplinary, enriched by the concepts of anthropology, social history, and oral theory. Such analyses explore the sagas within the context of change and continuity over centuries, appreciating both the literary temperament of the extant written texts and the oral traditional heritage. For this group, the family sagas are a broad-based series of social dramas, narratives with a strong ethnographic content whose production continued for more than one hundred years and which approached a true expression of folk life and experience. Composed in all parts of the country and highly diverse in their foci, these texts reflect different social and ethical outlooks, elements that make the sagas critically important to the modern student of oral narrative, social action, and cultural values.⁵ Within the context of societal plausibility, saga authors modeled tales on the intricacies of their island culture, blending social experience with contemporaneous written and oral traditions.

To a significant extent, the divergences in saga studies turn upon how the differing schools view the desirability of cross-disciplinary research. For scholars interested in issues of orality and/or socio-historical analysis, the

³ The Icelandic reads "Heilsteypt bókmenntaverk frá 13. öld og svo verður og gert hér" (Kristjánsson/Óskarsdóttir 1992: viii); Hafstað 1992 presents a similar view.

⁴ See for example, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1962. Earlier, Olsen (1937-1939) gave considerable attention to the oral stage of saga telling. Olsen stressed native innovation and the importance of indigenous traditions.

study of Iceland's sagas is incomplete or impossible without concern for the nature, causes, and the processes which formed and motivated Icelandic culture.⁶ From the start, Iceland was a somewhat unusual European society. It was an entirely rural culture group that, without towns or even villages, was thinly spread on a huge but isolated land mass far out in the North Atlantic (Iceland is two thirds the size of England and Scotland combined). Its most original cultural expression, the family sagas, are unlike other contemporaneous European literatures. They are not folktales, epics, romances, or chronicles, but mostly realistic prose stories written in the vernacular about everyday issues and crises of the island dwellers. These consciously inward-looking texts about farmers and chieftains at fisticuffs provided each new generation with a vehicle of social memory.⁷

For many, the study of saga and society calls out for cross-disciplinary analysis. Medieval studies finds strength in an awareness, which took root in the decades between the two world wars, that traditional scholarly divisions may at times be too confining for modern analysis. Marc Bloch wrote of this problem in the late 1930s:

Though the artificial conception of man's activities which prompts us to carve up the creature of flesh and blood into the phantoms *homo oeconomicus*, *philosophicus*, *juridicus* is doubtless necessary, it is tolerable only if we refuse to be deceived by it. (Bloch 1966:I.59)

While such a broadened approach was unorthodox in the late 1930s when Marc Bloch advocated change, that is no longer the case. The traditional disciplines retain their vigor and individual sense of direction, but the appreciation of the medieval period has undergone a subtle, essential modification. Today, far more than in the past, there is a willingness to avoid the pitfalls of adherence to methodologies that reinforce disciplinary barriers. The interplay of research among otherwise separate academic interests provides solutions not only to problems common to more than one discipline but also to questions internal to each.

If the state of contemporary saga scholarship were examined in light of the goals of medieval studies, it is clear the results would expose the healing of old wounds. The progress achieved in understanding the nature, causes, and processes of saga texts has been remarkable. Recent years have witness-

⁵ Beginning in the 1980s, Scandinavian scholars have reviewed changes in saga studies through a series of influential review articles: Ólason 1984, Hallberg 1985, and Thorláksson 1987.

⁶ Byock 1984-1985

⁷ Social memory is both as a process and a concept; see Fentress/Wickham 1992, who explore the cultural uses of the historical past in a variety of western cultures; as concerns the saga see pp. 134 and 163-172. See also Wickham 1995 and Byock 1995; Amason 1991 offers an Icelandic reaction to such views, discussing the sagas in light of Icelandic custom and philosophical concepts.

sed significant advances in our understanding of literary issues of style and form, as well as the intellectual and aesthetic values expressed through saga prose.

The answer to the related question of what progress has been made in recent decades toward a better understanding of the nature, causes, and processes underlying the interplay between society and saga is somewhat different. Multi-disciplinary questionings of the fundamental social, cultural, and economic realities during the formative tenth to twelfth centuries only began in earnest around 1980 and a distinct view of the family sagas is still emerging. Nevertheless it is clear that this group sees the oral, written, and social components of the extant sagas as intertwined in narratives exploring success and failure within the drama of Icelandic social life.

The difference between the socio-historical approach that sees the sagas rooted in an early oral culture and new-bookprose, which ignores the oral past, is hard to reconcile. Yet little here is new, because in many ways new-bookprose is a direct outgrowth of older concepts of history, oral transmission, and written literature formulated by the earlier "Icelandic school" of bookprose in the first half of the twentieth century. Let's now look at these concepts. In reviewing most aspects of the bookprose's position, one notes that members of the Icelandic school have issued many statements of theory, and this is because each saga is approached as a unique artistic creation. Much like the earlier discussed introduction to the 1992 edition of *Egils saga*, the preferred medium of bookprose discourse has been the monograph. In particular, there are the often long introductions to the individual sagas in the critical *Íslenzk fornrit* saga editions.⁸ Concentration on individual texts has not only made the concept of bookprose elusive but is such a distinguishing feature of the theory that one prominent member of the Icelandic school, Einar Ól. Sveinsson, has gone to the curious length of denying that bookprose is a theory:

The bookprose theory is not in the first place a theory, not in the first place a doctrine, but rather an attempt to follow the tracks from the known to the unknown without prejudice, to pass with the help of experience and probability from one point to the other. (1958: 7f.)

In establishing its understanding of the sagas as creative literature, Icelandic bookprose gave particular emphasis to the distinction between fact and fiction. The logical implication of such a black and white distinction is

⁸ *Íslenzk fornrit*, the standard Old Icelandic edition of the family sagas, is edited by Icelandic scholars; the individual volumes, which began appearing in 1933, are published by Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, Reykjavík. For classic statements of Icelandic bookprose see: Nordal 1953: 180-273, Nordal 1957, and Sveinsson 1971.

clear, if not a bit simple: fact is history and fiction is literature. The intent in stressing this differentiation had, as we shall see, little to do with curiosity about historical fact. Rather, in applying the logic of strict opposition, the bookprosists hoped to show that, as fiction and not as fact, the sagas were the expression of educated writers. Given the clarity of this goal, it is easy to see why, if other concepts of the theory were allowed to remain elusive, the determination of the sagas' factual reliability was not.

In keeping with this fact/fiction distinction, a basic tenet of the bookprose theory, and one that was aggressively advanced was the assumption that, as a developed literature, the sagas were no longer to be confused with less sophisticated oral histories or folk sagas. The bookprosists' purpose was to free the sagas from the older view of the freeprosists, the believers in the oral saga, that these tales were a traditional form of maintaining historical lore. Here the arguments of Sigurður Nordal, the leader of the bookprosists at mid-century, were the driving force. He writes of the artistry of the author of *Hrafnkels saga*:

The insight into the characters' development, acutely revealing their hidden depths, is far in advance of the disjointed and simple portrayals of character in the folk sagas and oral tales. The subject-matter which has been selected for the story has been so artistically disposed and is employed so economically that the reader feels that he has been allowed to read a full biography, though, actually he has been offered a single chapter in a life. (1958: 55)

Ruling out the sagas as a lower form of culture, the bookprosists were able to posit that Iceland's narratives were, instead, a single innovative development in world literature, and this was heady stuff for one of the poorest, least urbanized nations in Europe still under the partial yoke of Danish colonial control.⁹ Continuing his analysis of *Hrafnkels saga*, Nordal writes:

So much is poured into that one chapter that all the principal qualities and fortunes of the major and minor characters are clearly presented. This is the technique of a branch of fiction which is rarer than either the novel or the short story. What an interesting separate study it would be to compare the excellences of the saga with the technique of some of the most famous works in this genre, for example, Kleist's *Michael Kohlhaas*. I believe it would then become clearer, when the

⁹ Iceland, which had been a possession of the Danish Crown since the late fourteenth century, received internal independence or autonomy in 1918. The country's foreign affairs, however, remained largely under Danish control until the beginning of the second world war. In 1944 Iceland declared full independence, ending the King of Denmark's reign as King of Iceland. Karlsson 1985, 1987, and 1995, writes lucidly about Icelandic nationalism and the *sjálfstæðibáratta*, the Icelandic struggle for independence. See also Byock 1990-91.

arguments for and against each work had been thoroughly sifted that *Hrafnkatla* is one of the most completely developed "short novels" in world literature. (1958: 55)

In recognizing the creative excellence of these tales, Nordal penetrated to the heart of the sagas' timeless appeal. Not only did he argue that the artistry of the sagas centered on the complex dynamic of human interrelationships but held it as a given that deserved the full attention of modern literary analysis. Yet in his struggle to establish what is essentially correct, Nordal carried the logic of the fact/fiction dichotomy to an extreme, and history became a weapon in the bookprose arsenal. For new-bookprose, it has remained a weapon, principally against orality, rather than as in modern literary criticism becoming an important analytical tool.

The uncompromising position of the mid-twentieth-century bookprosisists was aided by concepts of history exposed by many contemporaneous Scandinavian historians. This was a time of documentary history and not social history. Early in the twentieth century, Scandinavian historians had begun implementing a strict source criticism in order to settle outstanding issues in Scandinavia's medieval chronology. In 1911, the Swedish historian Lauritz Weibull spearheaded this movement with a series of critical studies (1911a and 1911b),¹⁰ Weibull called into serious question a number of historical sources previously presumed reliable, among them the family sagas. Weibull argued against the historical veracity of the sagas and stressed the primacy of the oldest material, chief among which was Adam of Bremen's dry chronicle. In the face of mounting concern over the reliability of saga sources, history for the oldest Norse period was rigorously limited to verifiable factual material. In the following discussion we will see that for a time in saga studies, history and the issue of orality became inextricably connected. That the issues had come to have a bitter and sometimes emotional side can be judged from the famous statement by one of the major Icelandic opponents to bookprose, Finnur Jónsson: "I will maintain and defend the sagas' historic trustworthiness — no matter how 'grand' that may sound — until I am forced to lay down my pen" (1923: 141).

Faced with an academic quagmire of both opinion and personal reputation, Icelandic historians studying the middle ages accepted the bookprosisists' position and abandoned the family sagas.¹¹ It was a clean solution to the dilemma of sources. The historian's retreat from the sagas had a largely positive, through short-term effect. By leaving this single group of sagas, whose

¹⁰ These views inspired other bookprosisists. In particular the Dane, Paul V. Rubow 1928/1977 argued strongly that the sagas were indebted to European, especially French medieval culture

¹¹ Kristjánsson 1986: 187.

historical veracity had been so severely questioned, to quarreling literary critics, historians freed themselves to investigate the largely ignored later medieval centuries.

If the historian had little place in the bookprose view of the family saga, the theory did not completely deny that there was a historical aspect to these tales. Nordal notes that, while the sagas are not history, they also are not "sheer fiction." He points out that when we read the sagas, "we shall inevitably come against many traits which belong to the manner neither of the novel nor of the popular tale, and which must be included in compliance with 'something' other than art or entertainment" (1957: 15).

Nordal explains this "'something' other" in terms of the artistic inventiveness of the medieval author. In a complex argument, the critic declares that the historical element reveals "a bewildering duplicity of purpose," but interprets this duplicity only in terms of the absolutes of fact and fiction. The historical element becomes little more than a literary convention:

Fiction may be imbued with a truth to life which is equal to if not superior in value to any factual truth. But when the public demand not only human, but also historical reality, if they are to take a story and the message hidden behind the story seriously, they must have that reality too or at least the semblance of it. This consideration became one of the rules of the game, more or less difficult to obey, more or less conflicting with the pure art of storytelling, but all in all beneficial. (1957: 35)

A willingness to accept the bookprose's position on the family sagas can be seen in the work of Jón Jóhannesson. The most prominent Icelandic historian of the mid-century, Jóhannesson's usually thorough scholarship has until recently received wider attention than any other modern historian. His *Íslendinga saga* (*A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth*), published in 1956, has been translated into both Norwegian (1969) and English (1974), an occurrence rare for a book devoted entirely to Icelandic medieval history. Like so many of his Icelandic colleagues, Jóhannesson was also a literary man and a bookprose writer. As a younger colleague, he served with Sigurður Nordal and with the other members of the Icelandic school, including Einar Ól. Sveinsson, as an editor to the *fornrit* saga series.

In his introduction to *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* in the *fornrit* edition of sagas from the East Fjords, *Austfirðinga sögur* (1950), Jóhannesson refers to Nordal's essay on this saga entitled *Hrafnkatla* (1940), as "the most noteworthy work that has appeared about this saga," and a "monograph which has radically overturned the older view of the saga." For Jóhannesson, Nordal's argument that *Hrafnkels saga* was the product of the first writer who composed it was a turning point in saga studies. He pointed out that Nordal

showed that this compact saga, so easy to memorize and repeat ("auðvelt að muna hana og endursegja"), was not an accurate scribal transcription of an old or oral talc; thus, belief was seriously weakened in the oral origin of sagas which were longer and more difficult to memorize:

Nordal's conclusion is thoroughly well supported and one cannot but agree that it is secure and irrefutable in all of its main attributes. His essay completely revolutionizes the old view of this particular saga, but not only this. It marks a turning point in the history of research and understanding of the Icelandic sagas in general. If it is conceivable that any family saga could have been copied down unchanged, or at least little changed, from the teller's lips, this is the case with *Hrafnkels saga*, since it is so tightly formed and flawlessly shaped and so easily remembered and told. If this saga should be, despite appearances to the contrary, a novel, composed by the person who first wrote it down, as Nordal has concluded, then the belief must diminish that other sagas, which are longer and more difficult to memorize, have at some time been orally told as whole entities. From here on my analysis will be strongly supported by Nordal's study. (1950: xl)¹²

Unlike today's culturally oriented investigations, which posit that the saga's realism is a reflection of basic social modeling, the bookprosists created a complex literary theory to explain saga realism. For them realism was a medieval invention, a consciously manipulated technique of prose writing in which the author made fiction sound plausible in response to demands of the medieval audience for an appearance of "historical reality." The goal of a saga author was to fashion a realistic-sounding tale through a combination of personal imagination and available traditions, whether oral or written. If the mixture of sources — imaginative and historical, written and oral — varied from saga to saga, the bookprosists always return to the literary skill and intent of the author. In the drive to disconnect the sagas from a pre-literate tradition of storytelling, bookprosists used much ink in explaining how a people could not have an oral tradition for telling of their past, yet had a continuity

¹² The Icelandic reads: "Niðurstaða Nordals er prýðilega rókstudd, og verður eigi betur sed en hún sé örugg og óhrekjanleg í Mum meginatriðum. Ritgerð hans byltir því gersamlega hinni gömlu skoðun á sögunni, og eigi nog með það. Han markar einnig tímamót í sögu rannsóknna og skilnings á íslenskum fornsögum yfirleitt. Ef hugsanlegt er, að nokkur Íslendinga saga hafi verið skráð óbreytt eða lítt breytt af vörum þjóðarinnar, þá er svo um Hrafnkels sögu sökum þess, hve hún er fast mótuð og heilstreyp, og því auðvelt að muna hana og endursegja. En ef han reynist samt sem áður skáldsaga, samin af þeim er fyrstur skráði hana, ems og Nordal hefir rókstutt, þá hlýtur að veikjast sú trú, að aðrar sögur, sem lengri eru og torveldara að muna, hafi nokkum líma verið sagðar í heilu lagi, í þeim mynd, sem þær hafa fengið á bókfellinu. Hér á eftir verður mjög stuðt við ritgerð Nordals."

of material culture sufficient to fill the needs of realistic literary invention. Perhaps people were just quiet or uninterested for several centuries:

Not only through their access to older written sources, but in certain ways too, the writers of the Family Sagas were better off than might be expected when describing times so long past. The changes in the social and material conditions, in housing, clothes, weapons, seaman-ship, and so on, were not very remarkable from the tenth to the thirteenth century, and obvious anachronism in such descriptions are rare. The writers were quite conscious of the distance in time, and they had a considerable historical sense. (Nordal 1957: 29)

At this point it might be useful to consider the context within which the bookprose argument was first offered and accepted. Favoring the bookprosisist line of argument was the fact that all sagas exist only in written form, and that there is only circumstantial evidence of an oral tale predating the earliest manuscripts. With this in mind, Einar 61. Sveinsson struck hard at his opponents, the freeprosisists:

It may seem strange, but sometimes it appears as though people overlook the fact that sagas, as we designate them, the written works, really exist, while the oral sources upon which they are supposed to be based, do not exist. We must not close our eyes to the danger, when we feel certain that one incident or another is derived from an oral tradition, that this may be only an illusion. (1958: 7)

The issue of strongest debate centered on the existence of the postulated oral saga. On either side of the dispute, however, there was little disagreement over what was meant by the "oral saga." At mid-century, for both freeprosisists and bookprosisists the concept of the oral saga was that of an essentially fixed text formed in a period relatively contemporaneous with the saga event. From this first time it was presumed to have been passed from generation to generation through memorization. The question we might ask ourselves is how did we ever get into this mess.

The answer is that the tone of the argument in the period before World War II was not set by the bookprosisists. Rather, it was set by their opponents, the freeprose advocates who, at times, aggressively attempted to prove the oral prehistory of the sagas by stressing the factual reliability of the tales. The logic of this approach was clear and paralleled the bookprosisists' attack on the historicity of the sagas. The freeprosisists postulated that if the sagas could be proved factually accurate, then they must have a strong oral prehistory. How else could historical tales survive from the original events across the illiterate tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries until written down. This position, binding together orality and historicity, was most persuasively argued by the Nor-

wegian folklorist, Knut Liestøl. In his highly influential *The Origin of the Icelandic Family Saga* (1930), he systematically employed contemporary folkloristic methodology to assess the reliability of the sagas. While Liestøl recognized both fact and fantasy in the tales, he nevertheless emphasized the ability of medieval man to memorize, from generation to generation, a historically accurate fixed text. His conclusion was that in both form and content much in the sagas was historically reliable:

A number of these [sagas] are doubtless historical; the main points of them may be true, and some of the speeches may even have been couched in the actual words recorded in the sagas; for there is no reason why such things should not be remembered quite as long as any other material, provided their form is sufficiently striking to impress itself upon the memory. (1930: 242)

Not all of the old freeprosists placed so much stress on the historical accuracy of the sagas. Some, such as Andreas Heusler (1913), emphasized the creative artistry of the scribe in transcribing the original oral model.¹³ Nevertheless, the common position of the freeprosists, as perceived by their contemporaries, was that the essence of the sagas resulted from a long and stable oral tradition. In 1956, Einar Ól. Sveinsson, who had emerged as a leader of the bookprosists, summarized the position of his opponents in a way that bound together orality, the concept of a fixed text, and factuality:

The advocates of the free-prose theory distinguish some of the larger sagas, and say that they are more literary than others; they allow for exceptions of one kind or another. With such reservation their doctrines may be described in this way: the sources of the sagas (i.e. of the preserved, written sagas) were complete oral stories of fixed form, fixed both in matter and in style. In general it is supposed that these complete oral stories corresponded exactly with the written sagas. It is supposed that they were commonly written down word for word, and it is stated plainly that the differences between a written saga and its oral source are no greater than the differences which two storytellers would make in telling the same tale; the alterations were no greater than any storyteller would permit himself. These oral stories, from which the written sagas were taken, are believed to have been learnt by heart by one storyteller from another, and finally, as already said,

¹³ Andersson (1964: 78-79) compares Heusler's position on this point with Sveinsson's. Earlier on p. 50, Andersson refers to Heusler's little heeded assertion that historicity does not occupy an integral position in the freeprose doctrine: "Wo eine Prüfung nicht gelingt, also in 99 Fällen von 100, da bleibt uns nichts, als die Glaubwürdigkeit auf sich beruhen zu lassen" (Heusler 1941: 213).

they were written down more or less word for word as one of the storytellers had told them. (1956)¹⁴

As events proved, the decisive element of bookprose argumentation was Nordal's astute realization that the connection between history and orality insisted upon by Liestøl and others was the Achilles heel of the freeprose theory. It was for this reason that Nordal devoted such an inordinate amount of space in his writings to what otherwise would be just another ancillary issue to his central position. At the same time, Nordal himself was aware that his own position had a fatal flaw; that is, his use of history was a viable argument only as long as orality remained bound to the concept of a fixed text.

By the early 1950s some of his opponents had begun to abandon the concept of a fixed text in favor of a more artistically creative oral saga. To this Nordal responded forcefully:

They [the freeproseists] have further modified their claims by laying greater stress on the popular origin of the Sagas than on their strict conformity to fact [...]. We must not, however, be misled by the protestation of the upholders of this theory that they are not concerned with historical truth, because after all it is impossible to contend for the fixity of oral tradition without adducing reliability as the main argument. (1957: 13)¹⁵

By defining orality within the strict conceptual boundaries of a fixed text, the bookproseists had at their disposal a powerful weapon. If they could demonstrate saga texts to be factually unreliable, then this alone, within the understanding of scholarship at mid-century, was sufficient to dispel belief in oral transmission. With this we have come to the heart of a presumption of doctrinal proportions that, for decades, virtually banished social and historical analysis from saga studies and which, today, forms a basic underpinning of new-bookprose. Yet, placing such dogged reliance on the fixed memorized text leaves bookprose, new or old, in a position of theoretical instability. It is simply a false premise to assume that because a saga is not factual, it is not oral. There is no logic to govern the assertion that the oral saga had to have been a fixed historical text. Creative storytelling is, of course, an old invention.

¹⁴ In much the same manner Nordal sums up his opponents' position: "The so-called 'freeprose theory' is based on the assumption of 'oral sagas', composed shortly after the events, thereupon transmitted almost verbally from generation to generation, and finally — also almost word for word as they were told — committed to vellum by the Saga-writers, who were supposed to have worked like trained collectors of folklore in modern times" (1957: 18).

¹⁵ Sveinsson questions the use of the term "free-prose" because, as he says, "[...] the free-prose theory does not in fact allow for a free oral tradition, but rather for one which is more or less fixed [...]" (1958: 7).

That scholarship itself is a historical process can be seen in the very success of the Icelandic school. Educated in the early decades of this century, the new-bookprosisists rose to their creative height in the 1930s. Only by the 1950s and 1960s did their central assumption of the sagas' literary origin gain general acceptance. If, as an outcome of the long and hard-fought battle to establish their theory, contemporary bookprosisists choose not to reappraise their thinking on history and oral transmission, then that is as much their problem as our task.

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