

# **Book Review: *Føroysk bókmentasøga I- II***

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MALAN MARNERSDÓTTIR AND TURID SIGURÐARDÓTTIR: *Føroysk bókmentasøga I. NÁM* 2011. Pp. 689. ISBN 978-99918-2-086-6. *Føroysk bókmentasøga II. NÁM 2023. Pp. 768.* ISBN 978-99972-2-341-8.

With the publication of their *Føroysk bókmentasøga I-II*, Malan Marnersdóttir and Turid Sigurðardóttir have definitively filled a large gap in Faroese culture. This is the first work which examines Faroese literature in a broad European context, and it is also new in the fact that it employs a sociological approach to literature which is both flexible and precise enough to understand its subject matter in both its historical and its specifically Faroese character. This is partly because the authors have included other genres and other kinds of literature than the traditional ones, and partly because they have employed a social approach in describing both printed and orally transmitted works within the framework of the 'literary field'.

Chronologically the first volume covers more than a thousand years from Viking times to the end of the nineteenth century, an enormous span which is divided into five sections: The Middle Ages, pp. 19-81, The Age of Reason, pp. 83-105, The Enlightenment, pp. 107-202, Romanticism, pp. 205-310, and National Romanticism, pp. 313-584. The weighting of the different sections is significant and indicates the major problem in the composition of this first volume, which is that when Faroese literature develops into a considerable body of work, it is – due to its linguistic, cultural and political context – inevitably bound to develop its specific type of national romanticism. Thus almost half of the first volume is devoted to one single literary period.

Furthermore, the whole first volume could be said to represent national romanticism in that it constitutes a story of nationhood. This becomes clear from the fact that the authors place great emphasis on noting whenever Faroese literature takes an important step forward. The keyword here is 'first'. About Lucas Debes' *Færoe og Færoa reserata* (1673, English version 1676), for example, they note that it was 'tað fyrsta og týdingarmesta prentaða stórverkið um Føroyar' (the first and most significant printed work about the Faroes, I, p. 100). And about Jens Christian Djurhuus or Sjóvarbóndin we read that he 'man vera fyrsti høvundur, sum sjálfur skrifadi

yrkingar sínar á føroyskum' (is no doubt the first poet who wrote his poems in Faroese, p. 217).

Although the focus is unwaveringly on the national literature, the authors have at the same time striven to divest the writing of literary history of national myth-making. They have solved this difficult task brilliantly, first and foremost because they are painstaking researchers and excellent communicators of popular culture. However, the project is far from an easy one.

As their point of departure the authors have taken pains to situate Faroese literature in a Nordic context, and relate Nordic to European writing. Sensibly, the work dates the origins of Faroese literature proper to that period of the nineteenth century when the leap was made from magic formulae and dance songs to written poetry, drama and fiction. Faroese literature began when the Faroese people began to describe their country and discuss their internal affairs in Faroese.

Of decisive importance in this context was V.U. Hammershaimb's decision, under the influence of national romanticism, to introduce an etymologically based orthography, and his rejection, at once conservative and visionary, of the phonetically based spelling of other writers. It is interesting to note that this decision was taken at roughly the same time as Georg Brandes was insisting that contemporary literature should 'sætte problemer under debat' – i.e. debate contemporary social and cultural problems. For the Faroese, however, the central questions were about language and nationality. The discrepancy between these goals is apparent from the start of this project, and this inevitably becomes a problem. At times the authors have to stretch the definition of the various periods in order to get them to fit specifically Faroese circumstances.

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In the second volume it is gratifying to see that this imbalance has been eliminated. The authors have learnt from their experiences, and the object of their study has also shifted. Faroese literature became modern between 1900 and 1940.

It is during this period that the traditional agrarian way of life slowly developed into a modern fishing industry, and the barter economy became a

money-based economy. At the beginning of the twentieth century Faroese schoolchildren were taught in Danish, and vicars could be sanctioned if they were discovered to be preaching in Faroese. But at the start of the Second World War the balance of power shifted; this was marked by the deletion of the unpopular Paragraph 7 in the Education Act, which decreed that Danish should be the language of education. This was a shift which did not come about easily, but was the result of long and bitter internal and external battles.

The authors of this history have defined their subject matter as 'bókmentir og skáldskap, sum føroyingar hava skrifað á føroyskum og dønskum' (literature and poetry which Faroese people have written in Faroese and Danish, II, p.629). In this way they differentiate themselves markedly from their earliest predecessor, Christian Matras, whose national leanings resulted in him omitting from his *Føroysk bókmentasøga* (1935) the author William Heinesen, despite the fact that he had already established a significant reputation since his debut in 1921 with four volumes of poetry and a novel – for 'skilmarkingin av nýføroyskum bókmentum kravdi at tær voru á føroyskum' (the definition of modern Faroese literature demanded that it was written in the Faroese language, II, p. 416). Another important difference lies in the fact that Matras left out several contemporary writers such as Kristin í Geil, Poul F. Joensen (Pól F), Victor Danielsen and Olivar á Ryggi, figures to whom the new literary history fortunately gives due importance.

Among the most striking innovations in this extensive work is the thorough analysis of children's literature, religious writings (especially hymns) and translations. The inclusion of literature for children and young people reflects a new definition of literature which is broader than the traditional one, and the expert description of Faroese psalm-writing in the first half of the twentieth century provides a clear explanation of why statues of Jákup Dahl and Victor Danielsen have been erected in Vágur on Suduroy and in Fuglafjørður respectively. The inclusion of translated literature chimes with the international, globalized epoch we are living in today. But the authors' emphasis on the importance of translations also harmonizes with their efforts to show how Faroese literature is influenced by Nordic and other foreign writing, including European movements such as naturalism, realism, symbolism, vitalism and expressionism.

An innovation in literary history is the authors' consistent attempt to approach their task from a literary-sociological angle, by incorporating

literary production into a charting of the literary 'field', in accordance with the theories of Pierre Bourdieu (who is mentioned in Vol. II, p.13). In concrete terms this means that the reader is given clear and practical information about book publication, newspapers and journals, the education system and library provision, as well as the folk high school system, which during this period was a hothouse for many central Faroese authors, and contributed to making their production popular and national, at the same time as it became modern and multifaceted.

The account of Faroese literature in both Faroese and Danish falls into three main sections. The period 1900-14 is characterized by realism, naturalism and symbolism again. In 1915-29 it is particularly poetry in which traits of expressionism and vitalism predominate; and in the 1930s the psychological and realistic novel is pre-eminent, with the main works being Heðin Brú's two-volume novel of education about Høgni and William Heinesen's collective novel *Noatun*. Within each of the sections there is a relatively sharp distinction between the few significant names and the many lesser writers. To complement the overall composition there is a series of text boxes which provide helpful definitions of literary terms.

In general the authors have succeeded in grouping their material in a way which makes it easy to grasp. But overlaps are unavoidable, and on occasion the description of a literary movement spills over the borders of a period, as can be seen for example in the presentation of religious literature (II, pp. 167-220). In similar fashion the fine section on translations (II, pp. 386-409) covers the timeline of the whole work. On the other hand the division into three main periods means that the work of some authors is cut into two or even three chunks, which disturbs the continuity of the narrative.

Quantitatively the top scorers are Hans Andrias Djurhuus (64 pages in all), Heðin Brú (40 pages), William Heinesen (39), J.H.O. or Janus Djurhuus (34), Christian Matras (27), Christen Holm-Isaksen or Kristin í Geil (23), Mikkjal á Ryggi (23) and Rasmus Rasmussen or Regin í Líð (21). The marked prioritization of H.A. Djurhuus may come as a surprise, for although his literary activity is so intensive and his production in different genres is so broad that he is labelled 'virknasta og fjølbroyttasta føroyska skald í fyrru helft av tjugundu øld' (the most productive and varied Faroese writer in the first half of the twentieth century, II, p. 122), and although as a poet he has 'havt størri ávirkan á føroyskar bókmentir enn nakar annar yrkjari' (had

greater influence on Faroese literature than any other poet, *ibid.*), it nevertheless seems disproportionate to foreground him so much.

The account of each author follows a reasonably regular pattern. First comes a broad characterization, then the salient biographical details. After that there follows a presentation of a number of works, and where it is appropriate, thorough textual analyses, before it is rounded off by an instructive conclusion.

Finally I would like to applaud the authors' extremely sober discussion of the balance, or rather the tension, between Faroese and Danish as literary languages during this period. They report faithfully what contemporary Faroese writers said about William Heinesen's poetry – that his choice of language was a loss for Faroese poetry (II, p. 265) – but against this Malan Marnersdóttir opposes the following remarks: 'Hóast tað er á dønskum, hoyrir ritverk hansara til føroyska bókmentasøgu. Tað er ikki bara ein spurningur um at skriva á føroyskum, ið avger tann spurningin. Yrkingar og skaldsøgur eftir William Heinesen víðgera og lýsa føroysk víðurskipti skaldliga.' (Even if they are in Danish, his writings belong to Faroese literary history. It is not just the matter of writing in Faroese which is decisive. Poems and novels by William Heinesen give literary form to lived Faroese experience. II, pp. 252f.)

Carl Jóhan Jensen, a new writer from the twenty-first century, expresses the same sentiments when he announces that 'spenningurin millum tað danska og føroyska er ein positiv kraft í skaldskapinum hjá William Heinesen' (the tension between Danish and Faroese contexts is a positive force in William Heinesen's work, II, p. 267). So do the authors when they conclude the work by describing the language mixture in Jørgen-Franz Jacobsen's novel *Barbara* as a linguistic achievement which can explain the work's status as a classic.

It is made clear in *Føroysk bókmentasøga II* that Faroese children in the first half of the twentieth century should learn to love their country, nature and language, as well as acquiring the old virtues of hard work and thrift. The two authors of this work have definitely not shirked the hard work, but on the contrary demonstrated impressive diligence. And both volumes provide consistent evidence of their love for the country, nature and language.