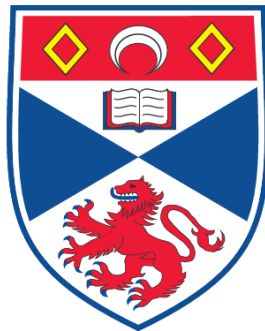


**WORDMONGERS
POST-MEDIEVAL SCRIBAL CULTURE AND THE CASE OF
SIGHVATUR GRÍMSSON**

Davíð Ólafsson

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
University of St. Andrews**



2009

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WORDMONGERS

POST-MEDIEVAL SCRIBAL CULTURE
AND THE CASE OF SIGHVATUR GRÍMSSON

Davíð Ólafsson

Supervisor: R.A. Houston

This thesis is submitted for the degree of PhD in the Department of Modern History,
School of History, University of St Andrews, 10 July 2008

I, David Olafsson, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 80.000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

I was admitted as a research student in September, 2004 and as a candidate for the degree of PhD in September 2004; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 2004 and 2008.

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'I'm a wordmonger by birth, a poet by preference, and a teacher by profession. Fishmongers catch fish, ironmongers reshape iron, wordmongers work with words. [...] I make my life, and livelihood, by speaking and writing words – and I'm proud to be called a wordmonger. So have been many others before me'.
(Marshall William Fishwick, *Popular Culture: Cavespace to Cyberspace* (New York, 1999), p. 31.

Til Línu og Áróru

Abstract

The subject matter of this thesis is manuscript and scribal culture in the age of print. Its first part explores the flourishing scholarship of post-medieval scribal culture in Europe and beyond over the past 25-30 years, as well as recent trends and turns in the historiography of printing and of literacy. These studies make a strong case for a radical revision of how these fundamental cultural phenomena should be viewed. As a part of the so-called cultural turn and postmodernist revisionism of the 1980s and 1990s, the new trend has been to reject the dichotomies of manuscript versus print and of literacy versus illiteracy in favour of more ambiguous and complex images where multiple media and modes of transmission and reception coexist and interact with each other.

The second part of the thesis deals with literary culture in nineteenth-century Iceland: both the general framework of the production, dissemination and consumption of texts, and the individual case of the farmer, fisherman and scribe Sighvatur Grímsson (1840-1930) and his cultural surroundings. Focussing on Sighvatur's life between 1840 and 1873, the thesis presents an argument about the function of the scribal medium within a poor, rural, and de-institutionalized society.

Central to the theoretical framework is a microhistorical approach and the juxtaposition of both narrow and wide scope, zooming from one individual protagonist out to his local surroundings and communities and further out to Icelandic scribal and literary culture as a whole. The scope of the thesis can be described in terms of four concentric circles: the individual, his intimate community, Icelandic society, and the wider European and global context during the 'post-Gutenbergian era'.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: SCRIBAL CULTURE IN THE AGE OF PRINT	7-22
---	------

PART ONE

POST-MEDIEVAL MANUSCRIPT CULTURE AND THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF TEXTS

1. HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE WRITTEN WORD	24-42
1.1. Introduction	
1.2. The cultural and social history of printing	
1.3. The historiography of literacy	
1.4. From literacy to reading experience	
1.5. Conclusion	
2. THE ENGLISH SCHOOL OF EARLY MODERN SCRIBAL STUDIES	43-61
2.1. Introduction	
2.2. English Renaissance poetry and the scribal medium	
2.3. Women's writings and manuscript culture	
2.4. The advent of social authorship	
2.5. Conclusion	
3. SCRIBAL STUDIES IN A SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT	62-81
3.1. Introduction	
3.2. Transmission of clandestine manuscripts	
3.3. Coexisting media in early modern Italy and Spain	
3.4. Beyond the Gutenberg hemisphere	
3.5. Conclusion	

PART TWO

EDUCATION, READERSHIP, AND SCRIBAL CULTURE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY ICELAND: THE CASE OF SIGHVATUR GRÍMSSON

4. THE HISTORY OF THE BOOK AND ITS USES IN ICELAND	83-104
4.1. Introduction	
4.2. Medieval literature	
4.3. The history of printing and publication in Iceland 1530-1890	
4.4. Unpublished post-medieval texts	

4.5. Post-medieval scribal studies	
4.6. Conclusion	
5. EDUCATION, LITERACY, AND TEXTUAL CONSUMPTION IN ICELAND	105-123
5.1. Introduction	
5.2. Structures of schooling and levels of literacy in early modern and modern Iceland	
5.3. First-hand accounts and narratives of education and literary practices	
5.4. Scribal culture, oral literacy, and the <i>kvöldvaka</i>	
5.5. Conclusion	
6. EDUCATION IN A SCRIBAL COMMUNITY: AKRANES 1840-1859	124-139
6.1. Introduction	
6.2. Formal and informal schooling in Akranes	
6.3. The circuit of scribal texts	
6.4. Adolescence and self-education	
6.5. Conclusion	
7. THE COURSE OF AUTODIDACTISM: BREIÐAFJÖRÐUR 1861-1869	140-159
7.1. Introduction	
7.2. Scribal culture as an instrument of self-education	
7.3. Farm-labour as ‘secondary education’	
7.4. The master, the apprentice, and the textual community of Flatey	
7.5. Text circulation via communal reading sessions	
7.6. Conclusion	
8. THE ‘PEOPLES’ PRESS’: KALDRANANESHREPPUR 1869-1873	160-180
8.1. Introduction	
8.2. The making of the Hella book	
8.3. Two accounts of Jewish history	
8.4. Genealogical services	
8.5. The household economics of a community scribe	
8.6. Conclusion	
CONCLUSION: BEYOND THE GUTENBERG GALAXY	181-195
BIBLIOGRAPHY	196-220

Acknowledgements

At the end of this project there are, as always, people to thank. First I would like to thank my dear friend, mentor, and colleague Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon for his encouragement and support through the last decade or so. He has read and commented on this thesis at various stages, and been encouraging and constructive as always. *Takk fyrir allt.*

Another friend and colleague at the Reykjavík Academy, Viðar Hreinsson, read selected parts of the thesis and engaged in lengthy discussions with me on Icelandic literary culture. Dr. Ian Watson, also at the Reykjavík Academy, proofread the entire manuscript with great precision and understanding for its topic and has done his utmost to make it presentable.

Acknowledgements are also due to the Reykjavík Academy as a whole, which has served as a cocoon for my (and many others') scholarship over the last decade.

Last but not least I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Rab Houston, for enjoyable and informative collaboration throughout. His openness towards taking on this topic, his knowledge of various aspects of cultural history and not least his patience and tolerance, has made this a pleasant journey.

To my beloved travel companions, Lína and Áróra, I wish to say: 'You are my sunshine ...'. This is for you, with bottomless love.

Reykjavík, July 2008

Davið Ólafsson

INTRODUCTION

SCRIBAL CULTURE IN THE AGE OF PRINT

History of the book and post-medieval scribal culture

The initial idea for this doctoral dissertation developed from a suggestion made by myself and my fellow historian Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon in a paper published in 2002.¹ The argument was that popular scribes and lay scholars in nineteenth-century Iceland assumed the role of informal cultural institutions in a society virtually devoid of formal ones: printing presses and publishing houses, libraries and literary societies, schools and literary salons. ‘This discussion leads to the certain conclusion’, – we wrote at the end of the paper – ‘that the individual’s desire for education was not addressed only by the traditional formal institutions which we are used to conceptualize in modern scholarship’.² The alternative ‘institution’ presented there was an informal and amorphous group of popular scribes, lay scholars and poets which we dubbed ‘the people’s press’ or ‘barefoot historians’. We argued that their activity was largely responsible for the fact that ‘a substantial portion of the Icelandic peasantry took great pride in reading and writing and producing texts’, and urged further studies into the day-to-day practices of popular culture.

In this study I wanted, in a way, to put this hypothesis to the test, by studying one of these scribes closely and examining his life and work in the realm of everyday life, and in connection with the communities he lived in and the people he associated with. The remarkable life story of Sighvatur Grímsson had been at the back of my mind for some years when I began this study, ever since I first became aware of the recognized – but at the same time scantily studied – world of manuscript culture in post-medieval Iceland. My study of the phenomenon of diary writing in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Iceland had left me with a strong sense of vigorous popular literary practices, especially in the

¹ Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and Davíð Ólafsson, ‘Barefoot Historians’: Education in Iceland in the Modern Period’, in Klaus-Joachim Lorenzen-Schmidt and Bjørn Poulsen, eds, *Writing Peasants: Studies on Peasant Literacy in Early Modern Northern Europe* (Kerteminde, 2002), pp. 175-209.

² *Ibid.*, p. 201.

nineteenth century.³ This notion did not rise only from the rapidly spreading act of diary writing among commoners, but also of the diaries' content, which often revealed impressive details of other literary – and in particular scribal – activity.⁴ The most striking case, both in terms of its sheer extensiveness and the insight it brings into the popular literary culture of the era, was the diaries of peasant scribe Sighvatur Grímsson (1840-1930). These stretch over a 67-year period, between 1863 and 1930.⁵ After a string of minor studies of Sighvatur Grímsson between 1998 and 2004, I was convinced that a systematic investigation of his endeavours would offer unique insight.⁶

At the outset of my research I was convinced that the extensive persistence of manuscript culture in Iceland, so long after the advent of Gutenberg's movable-type printing, was exceptional and had, thus, little import for the wider scholarship of written communications other than as an odd exception. My survey into the recent literature in the fields of cultural and literary history and related subjects has, however, revealed that the view of the relations between different media in the early modern and modern era has been considerably revised. Scribal transmission of texts after the advent of movable-type print technology in Europe has come increasingly under the scrutiny of literary critics, cultural historians, and social bibliographers over the last quarter of a century. The advent of critical and coherent scholarship on the nature and meaning of post-medieval manuscript communications has followed the rise of other fields of socio-cultural history in the post-WWII era such as the history of literacy, the history of readership, social bibliography, and the history of the book (*l'histoire du livre*). The role of the scribal medium in creating, transmitting, and preserving literary culture has been re-evaluated in an endeavour that has, in some cases, transformed the established view of cultural and intellectual history.

³ Davíð Ólafsson, *Bækur lífsins: Íslenskar dagbækur og dagbókaskrif fyrr og nú* (unpublished master's thesis, University of Iceland, 1999).

⁴ This hidden world of popular literary culture had then recently been brought into focus by Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon with his monograph, *Menntun, ást og sorg: Einsögurannsókn á íslensku sveitasamfélagi 19. og 20. aldar* (Reykjavík, 1997), based on the lives of two brothers of humble origin around the turn of the twentieth century, and with a subsequent text edition of selected diary sections and other life writings: Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, ed, *Bræður á Ströndum: Dagbækur, ástarbréf, almenn bréf, sjálfsævisaga, minnisbækur og samtíningur frá 19. öld* (Reykjavík, 1997).

⁵ Lbs 2374-2377 4to. Sighvatur Grímsson's diaries 1863-1930. The first half of the diaries is in fact a fair copy, duplicated from his notations between 1863 and 1898. See Lbs 2322-2323 8vo and Lbs 2929-2331 8vo.

⁶ Davíð Ólafsson, "Skrifaður í köldum og óhentugum sjóbúðum ...": Sighvatur Grímsson Borgfirðingur og miðlun bókmennningar á Vestfjörðum á síðari hluta 19. aldar', *Ársrit Sögufélags Ísfirðinga*, 43 (2003), pp. 229-243.

This recent view of the co-relations between manuscript and print has its roots within the study of English renaissance literature in the late 1970s and early 1980s. By the mid-1990s, early modern manuscript studies had gained considerable status within English literary history, and have since been on the rise within studies of literary culture in other parts of Europe and beyond.⁷ Different genres, periods and social groups of scribes and readers have been put under the magnifying glass, but the collective conclusion from these studies has been that the advent of print by no means pushed scribal media aside in one swift move. The concepts of manuscript and scribal culture are, however, still generally associated with the pre-Gutenberg period, the middle ages of western historiography. This tendency is, to some extent at least, founded upon a specific view of history where one instance and one set of conditions follows another in a chain of historical epochs.

Sighvatur Grímsson was born into a poor fisherman's family in the village of Akranes in western Iceland in 1840. His father died when he was ten and after his mother passed away in 1859 Sighvatur left his home town at the age of nineteen. Sighvatur worked for a decade as a farm hand and fisherman in the area around the bay of Breiðafjörður before becoming a tenant farmer on a meagre croft called Klúka in the county of Strandasýsla in 1869. After four years on this farm, Sighvatur relocated with his family to the farm of Höfði in Dýrafjörður, where he lived as a farmer for the rest of his long life. He died there in 1930. Within this mundane, and in most ways typical, life course, Sighvatur lived a parallel life as a cultural institution of his own, an astonishingly productive scribe and lay scholar, a collector and distributor of printed as well as handwritten books, and a local 'poet laureate'.

Sighvatur Grímsson's papers are an extraordinary rich source of information on the nature of manuscript circulation in nineteenth-century Iceland and through him one can study all aspects of it. His extensive life writings form one fundamental set of sources: there is a short autobiography penned in 1893 as well as almost seven decades of diaries. A second main source is the archive of handwritten books and documents that he composed, copied, or compiled throughout his life and then bequeathed to the National Library of Iceland (NLI), totalling little short of 200 items. These primary sources offer

⁷ David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery, *An Introduction to Book History* (London and New York, 2005), p. 18.

a view of his elementary education as a child and the interplay between print culture and manuscript culture in the process. This view raises fundamental questions about the levels of literacy in a culture with three parallel modes of text transmission: oral, manuscript and print. Furthermore it suggests the crucial role of manuscript culture in self-education in a nearly school-less society, evident in Sighvatur's adolescent years and early twenties. As a more established scribe, Sighvatur took on various roles: he was a general supplier of texts in every form, a reader of sagas and reciter of *rímur*, a relentless collector of material to be lent for reading or copying, a scribe who was commissioned to transcribe and compile texts, a letter-writer, and an occasional poet.

The real subject matter of the study is, however, not the individual Sighvatur Grímsson as such, but more precisely his cultural surroundings – physical and textual – and the sets of connections between people and texts that it exposes. The focus is on the formation of a network or networks of scribal culture, where texts are written and read, collected and copied, borrowed and lent, bought and sold. In his paper on early modern manuscript networks and textual transactions, Jason Scott-Warren has described the difficulties that such an endeavour can encounter.⁸ The ‘fossils of scribal circulation’, as he puts it, or the manuscripts themselves, seldom offer any direct evidence of their past life, often not even the names of their writers or owners. Given these factors, Scott-Warren suggests two possible approaches: On the one hand, the scholar can study what seem to be interrelated manuscripts, and by using contextual evidence, can draw up a picture of their probable owners and of the interchange behind their existence. The second approach, adopted by Scott-Warren in his own study, is to focus on the exceptional manuscripts that do hold some information on their origin and transmission.⁹ The case of Sighvatur Grímsson and the documents from his life are most certainly of the latter kind. His diaries, though their daily entries are usually brief, give an invaluable account of his literary transactions, his scribal works for himself and others, his book lending and borrowing, and the part played by textual communications in nineteenth-century rural Iceland. Extant manuscripts written or collected by Sighvatur add more detailed information to that picture, not only by virtue of

⁸ Jason Scott-Warren, ‘Reconstructing Manuscript Networks: The Textual Transactions of Sir Stephan Powle’, in Alexandra Shepard and Phil Withington, eds, *Communities in Early Modern England. Network, Place, Rhetoric* (Manchester and New York, 2000), pp. 18-37.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

their existence but also via information about their writers, when they were written, who they were written for and the exemplars they were transcribed from.

Structure

This thesis has two main parts. Part One of this thesis has three chapters, all of them historiographical in nature rather than empirical. In its first chapter I discuss and assess recent trends and turns in the historiography of printing and of literacy that have made a strong case for a radical revision of how these fundamental phenomena of cultural history should be viewed. As a part of the so-called cultural turn and postmodernist revisionism of the 1980s and 1990s the new trend has been to reject the dichotomies of manuscript vs. print and of literacy vs. illiteracy in favour of more ambiguous and complex images where multiple media and modes of transmission and reception coexist and interact with each other. This general trend is subsequently linked with the rise in post-medieval manuscript studies in western historiography in chapter two.

Much of the contemporary scholarship on early modern and modern scribal culture has its origin within the field of English literary history and bibliography of the Renaissance and Restoration periods, with a key work being the late Harold Love's *Scribal Publication in Seventeenth Century England*, published in 1993. Collectively these studies had, by the mid 1990s, made a convincing case about how and to what extent texts were being transmitted in a handwritten fashion after the advent of print. These pioneering studies have since had an impact far beyond their temporal and spatial boundaries and have spawned other waves of scribal studies within literary history, book history, and the history of literacy. Examples of this, addressed in this chapter, are recent studies of scribal culture in colonial America, a revision of the conventional view of women's participation in literary culture, and the recent attention paid to the reading experience and the amalgamation of reading and writing in the process of the production of so-called commonplace books.

In chapter three I introduce and investigate several examples of recent studies of scribal practices in early modern continental Europe, notably France, Spain and Italy, and of scribal culture in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Japan and China. This examination reveals varying approaches to post-medieval scribal culture and the different genres disseminated in the scribal medium. While

European scholars have to a large extent focussed on the elite classes in societies, the Southeast Asian examples unearth popular scribal culture in an everyday-life context, in many ways akin to the Icelandic case documented in the second half of this thesis.

Overall, the objective of Part One is twofold. By exploring the flourishing scholarship of post-medieval scribal culture over the last 25-30 years, I make the general argument that widespread and culturally significant usage of scribal media in societies that had adopted movable-type printing was in no way unique to Iceland. In different shape and sizes, scribal culture has universally ‘survived’ alongside the printed medium of books, pamphlets, almanacs, newspapers and posters. Secondly, and more importantly, this first part supplies the theoretical framework, concepts and paradigms that are employed in the second part: the study of the farmer, fisherman and scribe Sighvatur Grímsson and the state of scribal culture in nineteenth-century Iceland.

Part Two comprises five main chapters. Chapter four covers the main trajectories of the history of the book in Iceland in four subsections. The first gives a brief account of medieval scribal culture, from Iceland’s settlement up to the advent of print in the sixteenth century, emphasizing the production of the literary genres and the canon that has formed the bedrock for a continuous literary tradition in the country. Its second section outlines the tenuous history of printing and publication in Iceland from its onset in 1530 into the late nineteenth century. The industry was, for most of that period, run by the Lutheran church and its bishoprics as an economically unsustainable agency for pious reading material. The first concerted attempt to promote secular printed material for the Icelandic market came with the rise of Enlightenment ideology in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, but market-oriented publication only started to make headway in the 1830s, and then only on a very small scale. The third section addresses the production of post-medieval secular writings, for the most part barred from the print culture of the time, and later largely shunned by modern scholars. Section four of this chapter addresses recent trends in Icelandic scholarship which have tended towards a more socio-cultural approach to post-medieval manuscript culture.

Chapter five is an empirical and historical overview of literacy and education in Iceland. Its first section runs through the structures of schooling from the Middle Ages to modern times, emphasising the fact that formal schooling on the primary level was practically unknown in Icelandic

society up to the second half of the nineteenth century, and unattainable for a large proportion of the population well into the twentieth. Secondary education, on the other hand, had had a formal and institutional configuration in the form of elitist Latin schools that supplied society with clergymen and officials and opened access to universities abroad, usually in Copenhagen. Primary education in the poor and primarily rural Iceland of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries consisted of a less institutionalized system of household education, delivered by adult members of each household under the supervision of parish ministers. The result of this, according to established historical studies, was near universal literacy in Iceland by the turn of the nineteenth century, but notably only in the ability to read. Writing ability, as discussed in chapter five, was not a main concern of the policy makers of the time.

Effective as this cooperation of individual households and secular and church authorities may have been in achieving an impressively high ratio of primary literary skills, it becomes clear to anyone who probes into the subject of nineteenth-century Icelandic literary practices that there were other forces affecting the general level of literacy. As the case of Sighvatur Grímsson shows, yet another level of education participated in shaping the popular culture of the period: an informal tradition of autodidacticism, to a great extent propelled by scribal circulation and related literary practices. This is addressed with a somewhat general scope in sections three and four of chapter five: first, by presenting some firsthand accounts and narratives of literacy and literary consumption in nineteenth-century Iceland, and secondly, by introducing the highly important, while informal, cultural institution of the *kvöldvaka* ('evening wake'), a forum within each household where literary texts and historical lore were communally presented and received.¹⁰

These two chapters on aspects of Icelandic cultural history have a dual purpose in this thesis: first, to establish some basic facts about literacy in Iceland, including its level and function, based on state-of-the-art studies; and secondly, to advocate a different approach to cultural history. One key difference is the emphasis on manuscript culture in early modern and modern Iceland, which has been largely ignored in modern scholarship. Another is the turn from a formal institutional viewpoint that

¹⁰ This cultural phenomenon is akin to the French *veillée*. See Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford, Ca., 1976), pp. 413-418.

places the general public as passive receivers, to a more grassroots perspective which emphasizes the active elements of literacy and the public's role in shaping the state of cultural affairs in a society.

The remaining three chapters are devoted to the study of the life of Sighvatur Grímsson from childhood up to his mid-thirties. These chapters cover three communities and three stages in the life of my protagonist and present an argument about the capacity and function of the scribal medium within a poor, rural, and de-institutionalized society. Throughout his life, Sighvatur was able to cultivate the literary culture of each community to expand his own knowledge and to build up expertise and an archive that, in return, would make his services available and sought after. As a skilled and untiring craftsman in the field of scribal dissemination, Sighvatur became in a sense a pillar of the local literary culture – a cultural institution if you will – but each community, with its widespread participation on different levels, was, in return, the type of environment required for people like him to thrive and advance.

Chapter six is set in the fishing and farming village of Akranes and the surrounding rural communities where Sighvatur Grímsson was born and raised. It deals with the relations between manuscript culture and primary education in nineteenth-century Iceland and suggests how scribal culture enhanced both the formal and informal education of children and adolescents. One of the chapter's main themes is the transition from passive, one-sided literacy (reading only/mainly) towards active, dual literacy (both reading and writing) and its interaction with weak print culture on the one hand and strong manuscript culture on the other. In an educational system which by and large relied on parents or other adult members of household to deliver instruction, much depended on the literary skills of the instructors. The limitations of this arrangement did not hinge on the simple dichotomy of parents being literate or illiterate, but on a wide-ranging spectrum of proficiency, as well as factors such as general attitudes, household means, the family's daily workload, etc. Another defining factor in such processes was, of course, the recipient of the instruction: particularly his or her aptitude, social and economical status and, as is apparent in many firsthand accounts, aspirations and determination. The third central character addressed in this chapter is the cultural environment, or to adopt the terminology of Harold Love, the *scribal community* surrounding the individual and his family. This is addressed on two levels, first by studying how a vivid community of scribal exchange would

encourage and directly contribute to a transition from passive towards active literacy, and second, by showing how the same cultural phenomenon could supply adolescents (mainly male) with what can be termed as ‘secondary education’ in the form of autodidacticism, after the traditional conclusion of their semiformal education at the age of confirmation.

The subject of self-education within a scribal community is also central in chapter seven, set in a cluster of communities in and around the bay of Breiðafjörður where Sighvatur Grímsson served as a farmhand over the ten years between 1859 and 1869. This chapter addresses how the grassroots cultural arrangement of scribal dissemination served as a forum for acquiring information and for furthering and expanding knowledge. The practice of writing itself, of compiling and commonplacing and, in some cases, comparing and thoroughly studying different transcripts, formed a lifelong path of self-education as well as a source of entertainment and emotional and aesthetic motivation. The same applied to other literary activities which were dependent on the scribally produced and disseminated material: reading, listening, discussing and commenting on its content. The focal point of this chapter is Sighvatur’s adolescence and early adulthood, a stage commonly seen as a period of preparation for one’s life’s work, and a stage which proved to be an extremely constructive time of self-education for him.

In 1869, after a decade of serving as farm servants, Sighvatur Grímsson and his wife Ragnhildur Brynjólfsdóttir became tenant farmers, living in a meagre cottage in the community of Kaldrananeshreppur in the county of Strandasýsla, where they stayed for four years. Despite their short time there and Sighvatur’s poverty and hardship throughout, this four-year period in a community of almost thirty farmsteads gives extensive evidence of literary activity within rural communities in the latter half of the nineteenth century. A close survey of Sighvatur Grímsson’s diaries, where he devotedly noted his literary endeavour, as well as the manuscripts that survive from this period reveals that more than half of the households participated actively in a dynamic scribal network, which is portrayed in chapter eight. Incontestably, this was to some degree fuelled by Sighvatur Grímsson’s unusual ability and enthusiasm to circulate texts, be it orally, scribally or in print, but it is equally evident that this would not have been so unless the soil was fertile. Rather than depicting an idiosyncratic collector and scribe, this enquiry is a broad account of a community where

reading material was much sought after and the means to acquire it were largely embedded within the sphere of scribal transmission. Sighvatur Grímsson's role as a communal scribe is thus the centre point of the analysis of the entire scribal community of Kaldrananeshreppur.

In my conclusion I point to the synergy between the two major parts of the thesis: the historiographical analysis of the state of the art in the field, and the case of Sighvatur Grímsson in Iceland. First I discuss the differences and commonalities between scribal culture in Iceland and in other countries, as presented in recent communication studies. Secondly, I place my study within the contemporary historiography of the written word as it has developed in the last decades. I acknowledge how my study relates to the qualitative turn in cultural history by focusing on the use of books, manuscripts and literacy in a close-range study, instead of sweeping generalizations about book production and literacy levels. The key viewpoint here is one of coexistence and cross-fertilization between the two formats of written texts rather than of a rivalry in which one form was challenged and swiftly eliminated by the other.

Microhistorical inquiry into macrohistorical questions

Adopting the cinematic metaphor suggested by Italian historian Gianna Pomata, this thesis offers a combination of *close-ups* and *long shots* of its subject matter.¹¹ With a wide angle lens, it observes and examines the rise of a new approach to studying early modern and modern scribal culture, and evaluates the mosaic-like picture that has emerged over the last two or three decades from diverse studies involving various countries, genres and periods. At more close range, it reports on an in-depth case study of scribal culture in nineteenth-century Iceland and evaluates its results in the light of the state of the art. The micro focus itself uses both a narrow and wide scope, zooming from an individual protagonist out to his local surroundings and communities and further out to Icelandic scribal and literary culture as a whole. The scope of the thesis can, thus, be described in the terms of four concentric circles: the individual, his intimate community, Icelandic society, and a wider European and global context during the 'post-Gutenberg era' that spans the early modern and modern periods.

¹¹ Gianna Pomata, 'Close-Ups and Long Shots: Combining Particular and General in Writing the Histories of Women and Men?', in Hans Medick and Anne-Charlott Trepp, eds, *Geschlechtergeschichte und Allgemeine Geschichte: Herausforderungen und Perspektiven* (Göttingen, 1998), pp. 101-124.

A common objection to the use of the case of Sighvatur Grímsson as a gateway to the popular culture of nineteenth-century Iceland is that he cannot be considered representative of people of his standing, or of the nation as a whole. While it not the intention here is not to present his case as a average, it is nevertheless important to recognize that his case history does shed light on much more than a single life story. In focussing on one individual to illuminate a historical phenomenon or function, my research draws fundamentally from the methods of microhistory, first developed in Italy in the 1970s. At its most fundamental level, the concept of microhistory (*microstoria* in Italian) denotes a small scale investigation of the past, most commonly built around one person, a few individuals, a small community or a single event.¹² The micro/macro relationship, between the ‘case’ and the wider picture, has been a matter of discussion and debate among historians in the last decades. The narrow-scope approach, which sees value in a self-determining study of a single individual or event as an alternative to sweeping historical generalizations, has been most fervently advocated by Icelandic historian Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon under the banner of singularization. But most advocates of the microhistorical approach have argued that its strength lies in the link between micro and macro.¹³ With his singularization approach, Magnússon takes a firm stand against what has been the conventional position on this issue, both among advocates of microhistory and sympathetic practitioners of more conventional social and cultural history. His argument, evangelical and uncompromising at times, is first and foremost a reminder to historians to be wary of metanarratives (or grand narratives), the predetermining categories and totalizing explanations of historiography.¹⁴

Both Giovanni Levi and Carlo Ginzburg, two of the instigators of the Italian *microstoria* movement, maintained that by altering the scale of observation historians would be able to unveil new aspects of the material under scrutiny, and furthermore ‘to draw far wider generalizations although the initial observations were made within relatively narrow dimensions and as experiments rather than

¹² See Giovanni Levi, ‘On Microhistory’, in Peter Burke, ed, *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (University Park, PA, 1991), pp. 93-113 and Carlo Ginzburg, ‘Microhistory: Two or Three Things I Know About It’, *Critical Inquiry*, 20 (1993), pp. 10-35.

¹³ Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, ‘*The Singularization of History: Social History and Microhistory within the Postmodern State of Knowledge*’, *Journal of Social History*, 36 (Spring 2003), pp. 701-735. For the more conventional argument, see Matti Peltonen, ‘Clues, Margins, and Monads: The Micro-Macro Link in Historical Research’, *History and Theory*, 40/3 (October 2001), pp. 347-359.

¹⁴ For criticism, see short essays by two American historians incorporated in Magnússon’s collection of essays; *Sögustríð: Greinar og frásagnir um hugmyndafræði* (Reykjavík, 2006): Peter N. Sterns, ‘Debates About Social History and its Scope’, pp. 17-21, and Harvey J. Graff, ‘History’s War of the Wor(l)ds’, pp. 475-481.

examples'.¹⁵ In his foreword to the English translation of his seminal book *The Cheese and the Worms*, Carlo Ginzburg addresses this connection between small-scale observation and large-scale conclusions in a similar manner, based on his experience of the case of a previously unknown sixteenth-century miller: 'Consequently, an investigation initially pivoting on an individual, moreover an apparently unusual one, ended by developing into a general hypothesis on the popular culture (more precisely, peasant culture) of preindustrial Europe, in the age marked by the spread of printing and the Protestant Reformation – and by the repression of the latter in Catholic countries'.¹⁶ Striking here is Ginzburg's statement that from the close investigation of his protagonist a general statement about a big issue may be derived, and not only in a local or Italian context, but in a large temporal and spatial frame; a general hypothesis about the popular culture of preindustrial Europe.

The reasoning behind these links between small-scale observation and wider hypothesis has been portrayed with the oxymoron 'normal exception', (It. *eccezionale normale*), coined by Italian historian Eduardo Grendi. It referred to exceptional documents that can turn out to be exceptionally normal, inasmuch as they reveal of what is hidden from view in other sources.¹⁷ In their joint paper 'The Name and the Game,' Ginzburg and fellow historian Carlo Poni assigned a twofold meaning to Grendi's concept. First they argue that even if an individual in pre-modern Europe became the subject of a criminal trial, it doesn't mean that he or she was necessarily untypical. Most trials concerned small transgressions, carried out by ordinary people. Second and more importantly, documents about truly exceptional cases can reveal muted or distorted aspects of life.¹⁸ Carlo Ginzburg described clearly how exceptional documents can lead to general assumptions, like in the case of his now famous protagonist Menocchio, in a recent interview:

¹⁵ Levi, 'On Microhistory', p. 98.

¹⁶ Carlo Ginzburg, 'Preface to the English Edition', in *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Baltimore, 1980), p. xii.

¹⁷ Eduardo Grendi coined the phrase in his article 'Micro-analisi e storia sociale', *Quaderni Storici* 35 (1977). Historian Paula Findlen has described Grendi's notion as 'the kind of unique documentation that gives us a privileged viewpoint from which to examine aspects of society that are not, in fact, extraordinary but shed light on widespread social practices and cultural belief systems'. Paula Findlen, 'The Two Cultures of Scholarship?', *Isis*, 96 (2005), pp. 233.

¹⁸ Carlo Ginzburg and Carlo Poni, 'The Name and the Game: Unequal Exchange and the Historical Marketplace', in Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero, eds, *Microhistory and the Lost People of Europe* (Baltimore, 1991), pp. 7-8.

The details of Menocchio's life are known to us only through the writings of the men who persecuted him. The court records are all we have. To be fair, they are remarkably detailed, but that is only because the judges were so astounded by what Menocchio had to say. Strangely, in Inquisition documents it is only when communication breaks down that real dialogue emerges. Menocchio's answers confused the judges. Or they were fascinated by them – it is not always easy to decide. Anyway, they suddenly began to ask real questions, questions which no longer presupposed standard answers. This allows us to glimpse a reality which, under different circumstances, would no longer be available to us. It is a strange situation for me as an historian – to understand that the Inquisitors' questions are my own questions; that we share the same sense of amazement, the same sort of relation to the interlocutor.¹⁹

For Ginzburg, the basis for his general hypothesis is not that Menocchio is so typical and average that he can represent the general public of sixteenth-century Italy or pre-industrial Europe, but on the contrary, as he argues later on, that Menocchio's obscurity gives the historian the chance to read (into) the culture that Menocchio was embedded in.

In a recent paper, American historian Lara Putnam seeks to integrate or join together the microhistorical method with the historical approach, established in recent years under the name 'Atlantic history' (or Transatlantic History), that views the Americas, Africa, and Europe as a single regional system throughout the early modern and modern periods.²⁰ In her paper, Lara Putnam outlines three links to be considered between fields of wide-ranging historical approach, in her case that of Atlantic history, and microhistory:

[F]irstly, in the significant role played in each by the 'telling example' that proves the existence of connections heretofore denied; secondly, in attempts to write prosopographical studies of specific cohorts whose lives crossed the Atlantic stage; thirdly, in Atlantic history's unspoken reliance on microhistorical methods to establish the spatial frame of reference and geographic unit of study for individual inquiries.²¹

While the main focus of this thesis is on one individual protagonist, it has strong prosopographical elements, as the investigation embraces a much wider group of people embedded in the same cultural system, some directly linked to the subject of the study and some not. If one replaces Atlantic history with the somewhat less distinct and defined field of post-medieval scribal studies, Putnam's statement

¹⁹ 'On the Dark Side of History: Carlo Ginzburg Talks to Trygve Riiser Gundersen', *Eurozine*.

<http://www.eurozine.com/article/2003-07-11-ginzburg-en.html>.

²⁰ Lara Putnam, 'To Study the Fragments/Whole: Microhistory and the Atlantic World', *Journal of Social History*, 39/3, (Spring 2006), pp. 615-630. On this emerging field of historical study, see Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours* (Cambridge, MA, 2005).

²¹ Putnam, 'To Study the Fragments/Whole', p. 616.

serves as a paradigm for this study. The fundamental methodological structure is just such an attempt to use microhistorical inquiry to answer macro-level questions, thus spanning the spectrum from personal encounters and individual life histories to a wide-ranging level that crosses national boundaries.

Another important aspect of the microhistorical approach is its defiance of the determinist models of historical explanation prevalent in economic and social history in the 1950s and 1960s. Like many other branches of the so-called new (cultural) history, it emphasized ‘the freedom of choice of ordinary people, their strategies, their capacity to exploit the inconsistencies or incoherencies of social and political systems, to find loopholes through which they can wriggle or interstices in which they can survive’.²² This study advocates and employs similar views towards history and the past, in that it favours a view of human agency as a fundamental force that shapes societies more than formal structures and systems, and looks to discern complexities and overlaps more than clear cuts between epochs, cultures and the terms of dichotomies.

Another newcomer on the stage of modern historiography, rooted in the 1970s and coming of age in the 1980s, was the history of the book (or book history).²³ Set at the intersection of analytical bibliography, the sociology of knowledge, literary history and cultural history, it aspired to offer an interdisciplinary and all-embracing approach to studying the function of written communications. This emerging scholarly field was, from its beginnings, thoroughly entwined with the history of printing and publication and the ensuing break with medieval manuscript culture, in accordance with the traditional view of the consequences of printing. Among the aims of this study, however, is to promote the subject of post-medieval scribal culture within a scholarly field that has hitherto mainly paid attention to the trajectories of print culture at the time. My approach is also interdisciplinary in the sense that the existing scholarship on early modern and modern scribal practices has to a large extent been produced within disciplines other than history, notably literary criticism, literary history, bibliography and cultural theory. This is, though, not a literary history in the sense that it is mostly apathetic towards the actual texts and their aesthetics. It is also not a history of ideas in the sense that it

²² Peter Burke, ‘Overture’, in Peter Burke, ed, *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (University Park, PA, 1992), p. 16.

²³ See Robert Darnton, ‘What is the History of Books?’, *Daedalus*, 111 (1982), pp. 65-83.

largely ignores the knowledge carried in the texts. Its focus is, instead, on the material aspect of literary culture and the transmission of historical/antiquarian and literary texts. In particular, it spotlights the practice of creating, distributing and consuming texts in a society where many different media were in use, and the (inter)active procedures of creating, transmitting, and preserving literary culture. Furthermore, this research is not aimed directly at the ‘internal’ experience and impact of reading material, but rather at mapping out the networks involved in the production, circulation and consumption of reading material in day-to-day life.

In my conclusion I will offer two models of explanation, drawn from my studies of Sighvatur Grímsson and of Icelandic scribal culture in the nineteenth century, and from the picture of enduring scribal transmission presented in recent studies from various countries. One model proposes a Venn diagram of three partly overlapping spheres representing oral, scribal and print cultures to replace the conventional model of consecutive epochs in which writing by hand replaced oral culture and the coming of printing expelled scribal culture. Rather than viewing textual communications in the traditional terms of separate spheres – oral, scribal and print – I will argue in this thesis that the three domains were intertwined and inseparable. The overlap can be between any two spheres (print and manuscript, manuscript and oral, or oral and print), or indeed, all three. The textual transference from one sphere to another followed various paths and it was by no means one-way. This formulation offers a ‘communication scheme’ to explain the modes of textual dissemination in early modern and modern societies. It incorporates scribes, readers and listeners, authors, owners, and suppliers of manuscripts as well as the agents of print culture presented in Robert Darnton’s influential formulation of a *communication circuit*.

The two-dimensional diagram proposed here gives, however, only a very superficial image of a system that obviously has more dimensions to it. In search of more fitting model, I have adopted the metaphor of ‘rhizome’, introduced by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari in the mid-1970s. The object of this conception was to oppose the conventional model of vertical and linear connections, which they termed ‘arborescent’, with a horizontal and trans-species connection, the rhizome, based on an analogy between societal phenomena and the botanical concept

of a decentralized root system.²⁴ I believe that this approach can be extremely helpful in comprehending and describing a communication system that was only partly set within the relatively restricted zone of print culture and was essentially de-centralized and non-hierarchical.

²⁴ The concept was first introduced by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Rhizome. Introduction* (Paris, 1976). It later became the introductory chapter in *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie 2. Mille Plateaux* (Paris, 1980), published in English translation as *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis, 1987).

PART ONE

**POST-MEDIEVAL MANUSCRIPT CULTURE
AND THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF TEXTS**

HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE WRITTEN WORD

1.1 Introduction

The history of literacy, the history of reading, the history of print, the culture of print, the history of the book, studies in readership, and the sociology of texts are but a few of the terms and notions that have been coined and implemented within the historiography of the written word during the twentieth century. Some approaches have focussed on the production and dissemination of texts, others on their reception and consumption. Some have been preoccupied with quantitative analysis, whether of literary skills on the receiving end or the products of book culture, while others have dug deep underneath the surface, either into a text or into the minds of its readers. These inquiries, as pointed out by Robert Darnton, have spanned ‘the ‘who’, the ‘what’, the ‘where’ and the ‘when’ questions’, and more recently ‘the more difficult ‘whys’ and ‘hows’’.¹

The once-dominant Marxist view of historical processes saw culture as ‘superstructure’, much less relevant than the economic base, and dismissed thus the *Kulturgeschichte* of Burckhardt and Huizinga.² ‘To be a Marxist historian of culture’ – Peter Burke notes – ‘is to live in a paradox if not a contradiction’.³ This attitude left the first half of the century with mainly quantitative economical studies of the production and consumption of books, and themes like the history of literacy were largely ignored by historians. It was in the 1960 that these barriers began to give in, in what Burke describes as a creative tension between ‘culturalism’ and ‘economism’.⁴ With a new generation of French historians, dissatisfied with the scientific approach of quantitative social history and its absence of human agency, came a cultural turn in western historiography, which drew its influences from cultural anthropology.

¹ Robert Darnton, ‘History of Reading’, in Peter Burke, ed, *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*. Second edition (Cambridge, 2001), p. 159.

² For this earlier phase of cultural history, see Michael Bentley, *Modern Historiography: An Introduction* (London and New York, 1999), pp. 53-61.

³ Peter Burke, *What is Cultural History?* (Cambridge, 2004), p. 24.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

It was on the crest of this wave that the impact of the printing press on the prevailing mindset, or *mentalité*, became the focus point in the works of scholars like Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin in the 1950s and Marshall McLuhan, Elizabeth Eisenstein and D. F. McKenzie in the 1960s and 1970s.⁵ The terms ‘print’ and ‘culture’ were knitted more firmly together in the works of Roger Chartier, Robert Darnton and others through the 1980s and the 1990s, in an international coming-of-age of the discipline of book history.⁶ What had started as a twig budding from the stem of the French *Annales* movement soon developed into a new interdisciplinary branch of scholarship, famously mapped out in Darnton’s essay ‘What is the History of Books?’⁷ There Darnton described the amalgamation of analytical bibliography, sociology of knowledge, literary history and cultural history as a new discipline in the making, under the heading ‘History of Books’. In his attempt to establish a more fixed framework for the new scholarly field, he suggested a general model for analysing how books were made, distributed, and used in early modern Europe. This model, known as the ‘communication circuit’, was built around the interaction between the key players who handled books on their route from the author to the reader, such as printers, shippers and booksellers. ‘Book history’, Darnton argued, ‘concerns each phase of this process and the process as a whole, in all its variations over space and time and in all its relations with other systems, economic, social, political, and cultural in the surrounding environment’.⁸ This is not to say that every student of book history should always exhaust every link of the circuit and every surrounding system it is embedded in; rather the circuit should rather be taken as a map of the realm of modern book history.

Over the last two decades, the direct link between book history and print culture has been seriously challenged, and so has the idea that the coming of print culture in early modern Europe was triumphant or even revolutionary. Recent studies of post-medieval manuscript culture have revealed how the scribal transmission of texts remained a vital aspect of many western European communities

⁵ See David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery, *An Introduction to Book History* (London and New York, 2005), pp. 7-27.

⁶ This cultural approach to printing is apparent in the titles of works like Roger Chartier, ed, *The Culture of Print: Power and the Uses of Print in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford, 1989).

⁷ Robert Darnton, ‘What is the History of Books?’, *Daedalus* 111 (1982), pp. 65-83. Subsequent references to this paper apply to a revised edition in David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery, eds, *The Book History Reader* (London and New York, 2002), pp. 9-26.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

throughout the early modern period and even into the nineteenth century. This revision of the view of the relations between manuscript and print got underway in the English-speaking world in the early 1980s, and has since spread to studies of literary culture in other parts of Europe and North America, as well as non-Western cultural spheres like Southeast Asia. These tides and turns in historical studies of the production, circulation and consumption of texts have in many ways transformed literacy studies in recent decades. A discipline that was for a time preoccupied with levels of literacy and quantitative measures has turned its attention towards what has been termed ‘reading experience’, and now in the last few years towards integrated studies of the history of reading on one side and the uses of writing on the other. This latest turn is central to a recent study by the Spanish historian Fernando Bouza, and Roger Chartier calls this the book’s most original feature: ‘the connection it makes between two histories too long kept separate: the history of the book and reading on the one side, and the history of the uses of writing on the other’.⁹ In this first chapter, I will review the main trajectories within the historiography of the written word in the last few decades and especially its qualitative turn towards close-range studies of individual literacy and the use of books and manuscripts and away from sweeping generalizations about book production and literacy levels.

1.2 The cultural and social history of printing

The publication of *L’Apparition du Livre* by Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin in 1958 is commonly recognised as a point of departure for a new sub-field of French historiography, *histoire du livre* or book history.¹⁰ As a product of the French *Annales* school its approach was first and foremost materialistic, focussing on the production and dissemination of objects. After seven chapters analysing material, technical, and economic aspects of the coming of the book it is in the last chapter, headed ‘The Book as a Force for Change’, that they approach ‘the role played by the new techniques in the revolutionary changes that took place during the period of the Renaissance and of the Reformation’.¹¹ What did printers print and what did readers read? How did this new and prolific technology change

⁹ Roger Chartier, ‘Foreword’, in Fernando Bouza, *Communication, Knowledge, and Memory in Early Modern Spain* (Philadelphia, 2004), p. x.

¹⁰ Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, *L’Apparition du Livre* (Paris, 1958). It was first published in English translation almost two decades later as *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing 1450-1800* (London, 1976).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

the supply and demand of texts and of genres? A key factor for Febvre and Martin is that the new realm of the (printed) book was fundamentally market-oriented, that ‘the printer and the bookseller worked above all and from the beginning for profit’.¹² This led at first, according to Febvre and Martin, to an increase in the circulation of already successful works that had been popular in manuscript form, pushing less popular works into oblivion. The first decades of the new epoch of print brought about ‘no sudden or radical transformation’ according to Febvre and Martin, ‘and contemporary culture hardly seems at first to have changed, at least as regards its general characteristics’.¹³ In the first half of the sixteenth century, however, the printed book gained ground against manuscript and its impact began to show. Febvre and Martin consider in this final chapter the impact of the print medium on three aspects of early modern cultural history during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: the spread of humanism, the Reformation and the development of modern European languages and the decline of Latin as a language of unified European culture. Their verdict is, in the simplest terms, that for those crucial aspects of European culture the existence of print was a powerful force for change, though (and this is important) just one of many forces behind the changes that occurred.

A few years later another influential work appeared on the wide-ranging influence of printing on modern culture: *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* by Canadian scholar Marshall McLuhan (1962).¹⁴ In this book, now valued for its ‘prophecy’ about the rise of digital media, McLuhan divided the history of human communications into four epochs: oral tribe culture, manuscript culture, print culture and the emerging electronic age. Each transition was, according to his thesis, initiated by a technological invention that revolutionised society and extinguished the previous culture. The invention of movable-type printing created both the ‘Gutenberg galaxy’ and the ‘Gutenberg man’, defined by the tools available. In *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, Marshall McLuhan argued that the impact of the invention of movable-type in the mid-fifteenth century was not merely technical (a faster, more productive, and more accurate process of book manufacturing), but that it dramatically affected the mentalities of early modern Europeans.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 249.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

¹⁴ Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto, 1962).

The proposal that the printed book was itself a force for change was adopted and sharpened by the American historian Elizabeth Eisenstein in the following years. Eisenstein first put forward her argument about the impact of print culture on the mentalities of early modern Europe in several articles, a few years after McLuhan's book, but her concept and the idea of a 'print revolution' became widely recognised in western scholarship after the publication of a massive two-volume book called *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* in 1979.¹⁵ At the beginning of her book, Eisenstein deems the late fifteenth-century transfer of the reproduction of written material 'from the copyist's desk to the printer's workshop' as an unacknowledged revolution.¹⁶ Eisenstein's model of the print revolution makes a sharp distinction between two dominant 'cultures': scribal culture (bookended by the invention of writing and the invention of movable type), and print culture (after Gutenberg's breakthrough). What was, in her opinion, missing from scholarship on the history of printing was not studies of print and of books, but a comprehensive evaluation of the impact of the advent of printing on every aspect of Western culture, and its modernization.

In the wake of these influential books, it became a consensus in the field that the history of human communication could be broken into three main phases by two revolutions, from oral to scribal and from scribal to print. In the eyes of scholars like Eisenstein, McLuhan, and Febvre and Martin, it was the coming of print that embodied the true communications revolution. Their book titles themselves speak volumes about the radical conversion their authors saw in the coming of print. The core of Eisenstein's argument lies in the title of her main work: that the printing press was an agent of change in early modern Europe, in the Renaissance, during the Reformation, and in the rise of modern science. For both McLuhan and Eisenstein it was the element of mass production and the fixedness of printed texts that altered the Western world so radically from the mid-fifteenth century on, in a way that amounted to a revolution. Elizabeth Eisenstein's hypothesis has proved both influential and long-lasting, and her status as a leading historian of print is perhaps best indicated by the amount of criticism aimed at her theory. Despite a growing corpus of studies of early modern and modern scribal

¹⁵ Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformation in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge and New York, 1979). For earlier presentations of her argument see for example Elizabeth Eisenstein, 'Some Conjectures about the Impact of Printing on Western Society', *Journal of Modern History* 40 (1968), pp. 1-58.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3. The first chapter of the book is headed 'The Unacknowledged Revolution'.

culture, the perception that print culture replaced manuscript culture without any considerable overlap is still widely held as true. It can hardly be denied that the advent of print around the mid-fifteenth century altered the cultural landscape of Europe, in some places immediately and others during the course of the following centuries. It is also commonly recognized that such a dramatic change in technology, in this case in the medium of the written word, is bound to have massive and influential consequences on the societies that employ it.

The most comprehensive revision of Eisenstein's theory of print culture can be found in two books published over the last decade. The 750-page debut work of Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* takes aim at some of the fundamental ideas of Eisenstein's book, notably fixity as an inherent element of printed texts and the impact of this fixity in defining print culture. He opens his book by arguing robustly against the fundamental idea that the qualities attributed to the book as an object are somehow and self-evidently associated with 'print culture', a link that he calls 'the point of departure for all current interpretations of print and its cultural consequences, and is the root from where the very concept of 'print culture' has grown.'¹⁷ This deterministic view, Johns argues, is 'substantially false' and 'probably the most powerful force resisting the acceptance of a truly historical understanding of print and any cultural consequences it may foster'.¹⁸

Elizabeth Eisenstein responded to the criticisms in Adrian Johns' book in an article published in the *American Historical Review* in 2002.¹⁹ She deals with three relevant areas of disagreement. The first one is the issue of the intrinsic character of the printing press. Though she says they share a belief in the importance of human agency, Eisenstein dismisses Johns' argument that the social changes were not the result of the technology as such, but rather a product of how people used the tools at hand; Eisenstein describes this as equivalent of the NRA's logic in saying that 'guns don't shoot people, people do'. The second point of disagreement revolves around the different geographical scope of the

¹⁷ Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago and London, 1998), p. 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Eisenstein, 'An Unacknowledged Revolution Revisited', *American Historical Review* 107/1 (2002), pp. 87-105. This essay was a part of AHR Forum: *How Revolutionary Was the Print Revolution?*, which comprised, in addition to Eisenstein's paper, a short introduction by Anthony Grafton, Johns' comeback 'How to Acknowledge a Revolution', and a final reply by Eisenstein.

two studies: seventeenth-century England (mostly London) for Johns versus a wider European scope in Eisenstein's work. The third disagreement is that Eisenstein sees a communications revolution taking off with Gutenberg's invention in the mid-fifteenth century, while Johns argues that it began only in the eighteenth or even the nineteenth century and then in the form of a 'discursive construct'.²⁰ It is especially the third point that is interesting in the context of this thesis: the 'narrative of the print revolution' and how has it been constructed and deconstructed through time. As becomes apparent from the Icelandic case study in Part Two, not only did a post-medieval manuscript tradition exist parallel and simultaneously with a print culture, but more interestingly, one sees that oral, manuscript, and print media were intertwined and interrelated in significant and complex ways.

The historical bibliographer David McKitterick conducts a similar re-evaluation of the fundamental aspects of print culture and the print revolution in early modern Europe in his 2003 book *Print, Manuscript and the Search for Order, 1450-1830*. There he argues against what he calls polarized thinking on the history of print and the supposedly clear distinction between the non-standardization of manuscripts and the standardization of print, and adds that Eisenstein's argument for the print revolution was largely structured around that distinction.²¹ According to McKitterick, the fixity was absolute neither in print nor manuscript, despite efforts and attempts towards that goal. Like Johns before him, McKitterick undermines the myth of the fixed printed text that altered the way people thought and ultimately gave us the whole process of modernization. The 'search for order' in his title has replaced the inherent fixity that Eisenstein argued to be the 'agent of change' of early modern Europe.

What McKitterick adds to the argument is the dimension of manuscripts in early modern literary culture and the relationship between print and manuscript, themes almost completely ignored by Adrian Johns. McKitterick downplays both the pace and impact of the advent of print, noting 'it was apparent from the mid-fifteenth century onwards, and perhaps especially to the generations born after about 1740, that innovations in printing were gradual; that both in its technical achievements and in its social (including religious and political) consequences it was not invariably appropriate to speak

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

²¹ David McKitterick, *Print, Manuscript and the Search for Order, 1450-1830* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 99.

about rapid transformation'.²² McKitterick draws from numerous recent studies that have challenged the sharp temporal division between the era of the manuscript and of the printed book and summarized the uses and purposes of handwriting in the Western world for centuries after the alleged 'print revolution':

For Hebrew, Greek and music, all requiring other printing materials that were not always readily available, or where demand was insufficient to justify them, the manuscript tradition lasted long after the invention of printing. Nineteenth-century Jewish communities in eastern Europe, Italy and Spain all made and used many of their books in manuscript. In Ireland, the manuscript tradition was for many purposes stronger than the printed until the late nineteenth century. In educational communities, whether in Europe or North America, the copying out of texts and habits of note-taking implied a continuing commitment to scribal culture alongside that of print. Across Europe, news was published in manuscript as well as in print in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Harold Love, Henry Woudhuysen, Peter Beal, Adam Fox, Margaret Ezell and others have all demonstrated the continuing vitality of manuscript tradition for the circulation of texts of all kinds in seventeenth-century England and, indeed, the new ways in which it was valued and employed. Whether one considers scribal texts or illumination and decoration, the boundary between manuscript and print is as untidy chronologically as it is commercially, materially or socially.²³

The entry of the manuscript into the field of early modern and modern cultural history has first and foremost taken place within literary history and to some extent the history of ideas, but has, strangely enough, only vaguely affected the history of the book.²⁴

1.3 The historiography of literacy

When the American social historian Harvey J. Graff wrote his introduction to the reader *Literacy and Social Development in the West* (1981), he portrayed the history of literacy as a relatively new and emergent field:

The revision and reorientation of literary studies, historical and contemporary, is a recent development. Systematic and critical research is not much more than a decade old. No syntheses or consensuses have appeared. Indeed, the nature of the subject – the variety, and difficulty, and incompleteness of the sources; the problems and complications of definitions and concepts; and the power of legacies and expectations – strongly suggest that inclusiveness and definitiveness will not soon be forthcoming.²⁵

²² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

²⁴ Margaret J. M. Ezell, 'The Laughing Tortoise: Speculations on Manuscript Sources and Women's Book History', *English Literary Renaissance* 38/2 (May 2008), pp. 335-336.

²⁵ Harvey J. Graff, 'Introduction', in Harvey J. Graff, ed, *Literacy and Social Development in the West: A Reader* (Cambridge, 1981), p. 5.

On a more uplifting note, he adds that the research of the preceding decade, the 1970s, had produced important and impressive results – many of them reproduced in the reader – and a bona fide field of study had been established. The reader stands as a testimony to the state of the art at the time of its publication. It contains the works of some of the most prominent ‘new historians’ of the time – people like Emanuel LeRoy Ladurie, Elizabeth Eisenstein, Natalie Zemon Davis, and François Furet and Jacques Ozouf – and studies on literacy in a range of countries: France, England, Germany and Sweden. The variety of topics relating to the key question of the relations between literacy and social change is also wide-ranging, stretching from orality to printing to schooling. So is the scope of observation, from the quantitative survey by David Cressy on levels of illiteracy in England from 1530 to 1730 to the qualitative approach of Margaret Spufford who ‘focuses on individual readers and writers, and seeks to understand their motivations and life course consequences’, as Graff notes in his introduction.²⁶

‘The most promising new approaches’ – Graff noted in the beginning of the 1980s – ‘are found in ethnographic studies of reading and writing in use, analysis of functional literacy requirements of jobs and socio-cultural activities, and re-conceptualizations of macro-relationships between literacy and social, economic, cultural, and political change’.²⁷ Graff returned to this point a few years later when he reflected, in a paper published in 1986, on the state of the historical study of literacy. He divided the historiography of the field in the second half of the twentieth century into three generations.²⁸ To the first generation he assigns the works of Carlo Cipolla, Lawrence Stone and Roger S. Schofield, who first argued that the subject was an important historical factor and undertook systematic examinations of the quantitative sources available to produce comprehensive outlines of the course of literacy over time.²⁹ The first wide-reaching account on the subject was a small but influential book: *Literacy and Development in the West*, published by the Italian historian Carlo

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10. See in the same compilation David Cressy, ‘Levels of illiteracy in England 1530-1730’, pp. 105-124; and Margaret Spufford, ‘First Steps in Literacy: The Reading and Writing Experiences of the Humblest Seventeenth-Century Spiritual Autobiographers’, pp. 125-150.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁸ Harvey J. Graff, ‘The History of Literacy: Toward the Third Generation’, *The Labyrinths of Literacy: Reflections on Literacy Past and Present* (London, New York, and Philadelphia, 1987), pp. 241-255.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 242. See Carlo Cipolla, *Literacy and Development in the West* (Harmondsworth, 1969); Lawrence Stone, ‘Literacy and Education in England, 1640-1900’, *Past and Present* 42 (1969), pp. 61-139; and R. S. Schofield, ‘The measurement of literacy in pre-industrial England’, in Jack Goody, ed, *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 311-325.

Cipolla in 1969. Cipolla's approach was, as the title clearly indicates, akin to that of Elizabeth Eisenstein's work: to link the development of literary matters to wider trends in western historiography. Cipolla presents vast amount of quantitative information about the levels of literacy across Europe and North America. He addresses the coming of mass literacy in the West as a crucial but neglected process of historical change, a transition from a traditional, custom-bound society to the technical civilisation of the printed word. With its wide geographical scope and innovative employment of sources, this book constituted a starting point for the new scholarship of the history of literacy.

The second generation was also portrayed to some degree in the reader *Literacy and Social Development in the West* and included François Furet and Jacques Ozouf, David Cressy, Egil Johanson and Graff himself, but also Kenneth A. Lockridge and Rab Houston.³⁰ Among its characteristics were an emphasis on more wide-ranging collection and more detailed exploration of quantitative records, usually but not always from signatory or census sources; more concern for the different levels of literacy, and in-depth inspections of the relations between literacy and more general economic, social and political developments, and institutions like the Church and the school system.³¹ Perhaps a summation of the work of this generation, as well as a bridge to the third, was Rab Houston's *Literacy in Early Modern Europe*, published in 1988.³² In the book, Houston presents 'a set of arguments about the place of literacy and education in social structures and social change in Europe between the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution'.³³ Its central theme is 'that while education expanded and literacy improved enormously during these three centuries, the impact was tempered by the attitudes and social structures that obtained in the different societies of early modern Europe'.³⁴ The book is roughly (but not formally) divided into two halves, representing its two pivots. The first

³⁰ François Furet and Jacques Ozouf, *Livre et Ecrire: L'Alphabetisation Française de Calvin à Jules Ferry* (Paris, 1977) (published in English translation as *Reading and Writing: Literacy in France from Calvin to Jules Ferry* (Cambridge, 1982)); David Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order* (Cambridge, 1980); Egil Johanson, *The History of Literacy in Sweden* (Umeå, 1977); Kenneth A. Lockridge, *Literacy in Colonial New England* (New York, 1974); R. A. Houston, 'Literacy and Society in the West, 1500-1800', *Social History* 8 (1983), pp. 269-293; and R. A. Houston, *Scottish Literacy and the Scottish Identity* (Cambridge, 1986).

³¹ Graff, 'The History of Literacy', pp. 242-243. Graff notes that other groups of historians have been dealing with related subjects, e.g. historians of the book, of printing and publishing, of popular culture and of oral culture.

³² R. A. Houston, *Literacy in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1988).

³³ *Ibid.*, p. vii.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. vii.

five chapters are on education and the remaining four on literacy and its uses. On a canvas covering practically the whole of Europe it treats these major subject matters in a thematic way, conveying their common features as well as different characteristics. The book was published in an extensively revised and updated second edition in 2002, taking account of many recent publications in the field over the preceding decade and a half. The subject had continued to expand in every direction; more studies were produced from more countries and societies, moving in new scholarly directions and using new methods.

‘The ‘third generation’ now awaits us’, Graff wrote in 1986, prophesising about the agendas and emphases of the next phase of historical literacy studies.³⁵ One of the tasks ahead was to put aside the ‘destructive dichotomies’ such as those between literate and illiterate, print and oral, and the like, ‘none of which are interpretively rich or complex enough to advance our understanding’.³⁶ Recent literacy studies in other disciplines suggested intriguing ideas for more interdisciplinary approaches in Graff’s view, especially the social-psychological works of Scribner and Cole and the ethnographies of the anthropologist and linguist Shirley Heath.³⁷ Graff presented several considerations for the third generation. One important step would be a critical examination of the conceptualization of literacy itself, partly under influence from anthropology and psychology, partly to avoid generalizations and sweeping explanations, because literacy only has meaning within specific contexts. Another important notion was the link between literacy and ‘the creation of meaning’, that is, the interaction between reader and text and the responses to writing and print.

Graff has himself become the most influential scholar of this third generation of historical literary studies in the 1980s and 1990s, through his two books published in 1987. One was *The Labyrinths of Literacy*, an assemblage of essays, previously published in scholarly journals between 1975 and 1986, that provides an extremely informative image of the coming of age of a historical field of study.³⁸ The second one, *The Legacies of Literacy*, is a wide ranging account of the development of

³⁵ Graff, ‘The History of Literacy’, p. 244.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

³⁷ See Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole, *The Psychology of Literacy* (Cambridge, MA, 1981) and Shirley Heath, *Ways with Words* (Cambridge, 1983).

³⁸ Harvey J. Graff, *The Labyrinths of Literacy: Reflections on Literacy Past and Present* (London, New York and Philadelphia, 1987). This collection was reissued in a revised and expanded edition in 1995.

literacy in the West, from its origins in ancient Greek and Rome, through the Middle Ages and the early modern and modern eras, and finally probing into the future.³⁹ Throughout his work, Graff stretches the complexities of what is behind the apparently simple concept of ‘literacy’ and promotes a critical view over any simplistic, sweeping and deterministic conceptions of it.

Until recently scholarly and popular conceptions of the value of the skills of reading or writing have almost universally followed normative assumptions and expectations of vague but powerful concomitants and effects presumed to accompany changes in the diffusion of literacy. For the last two centuries, they have been intertwined with post-Enlightenment, ‘liberal’ social theories and contemporary expectations of the role of literacy and schooling in socioeconomic development, social order and individual progress.⁴⁰

Graff termed this general understanding ‘The Literacy Myth’, and he argues that it can no longer serve as a model of explanation.⁴¹ The influential works of the late 1960s and the early 1970s – Cipolla’s book on literacy, the works of Eisenstein and McLuhan, and the work of Lawrence Stone and Jack Goody – were, according to Graff, all underpinned by the notion of change, progress and modernization. Most scholarship about literacy was governed by evolutionary underpinnings, where literacy, development, growth and progress are inseparably linked.⁴² Graff, however, rejects the hypothesis that phenomena like literacy and print culture were somehow inherently related to an equally self-evident modernization process.

The noticeable influences of what can only be termed as postmodernist views on Graff’s scholarship are clearly projected in a new introduction to the 1995 edition of *The Labyrinth of Literacy*. There Graff lists nine common conclusions from recent studies in the field, of which the second is:

Despite common notions to the contrary, literacy is *fundamentally complex* practically and theoretically, complicated and problematic conceptually and operationally. This recognition makes mockery of the simple dichotomies and ‘great divides’ that plague considerations of the subject, from literate versus illiterate, literate versus oral, print versus script, and so forth, ...⁴³

³⁹ Harvey J. Graff, *The Legacies of Literacy: Continuities and Contradictions in Western Culture and Society* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1987).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3. The term had been introduced a decade earlier in: Harvey J. Graff, *The Literacy Myth: Literacy and Social Structure in the Nineteenth-Century City* (New York and London, 1979).

⁴² Harvey J. Graff, ‘Reflections on the History of Literacy: Overview, Critique, and Proposals’, in *The Labyrinths of Literacy*, p. 27. Originally published in the journal *Humanities in Society* 4 (1981), pp. 303-333.

⁴³ Harvey J. Graff, ‘Introduction to the 1995 edition’, *The Labyrinths of Literacy: Reflections on Literacy Past and Present*. Revised and Expanded Edition (Pittsburgh, 1995), pp. xviii-xix.

This turn from dualism towards the endorsement of complexity forms the historiographical underpinning to this thesis and, in particular, its case study. One noticeable projection of this mind-set is a turn from ‘literacy’ to ‘readership’ or ‘reading experience’ that came to pass in the 1990s, emphasising agency over submissive objectivity and complexities over dichotomies.

1.4 From literacy to reading experience

In the same year that Harvey Graff addressed the third generation of historians of literacy, Robert Darnton suggested and predicted the ‘first steps into the history of reading’ in an essay with that name.⁴⁴ The history of reading, for Darnton, would be an ‘internal’ history of reading, complementing the ‘external’ history of reading supplied by historians of the book in preceding years, and asking the questions of why people read, what they read, how they read, and how they process what they read.⁴⁵ Such studies, probing into the practice of reading rather than the mere skills of doing so, and into the ‘engagement with a written or printed text – beyond the mere fact of possession’ have, during the last twenty years or so, been carried out under the banners of history of reading, readership and reading experience.⁴⁶

There are many overlaps between these two essays by Graff and Darnton and in a way it may be argued that the history of reading or readership or even reading experience has become the new label for the third or even fourth generation of literacy historians. Although this is not completely a new focus, and traces back at least to the 1950s, literacy studies have currently taken on a strong concern for the way texts were consumed and processed by the reader, rather than the production and dissemination of the items themselves.⁴⁷ The current of studies of books and literacy had divided, according to Darnton, into two main streams by the mid-1980s: micro- and macroanalytical studies.

⁴⁴ Robert Darnton, ‘First Steps into the History of Reading’, *Australian Journal of French Studies* 23 (1986), pp. 5-30. It was later reprinted as: ‘History of Reading’, in Peter Burke, ed, *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 157-186. All future references to this thesis apply to the second edition of this collection, published in 2001, which includes additional notes by Peter Burke on the development of the field between the two editions.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

⁴⁶ See the definition of ‘reading experience’ at www.open.ac.uk/Arts/RED/experience.htm.

⁴⁷ For earlier work in the field, see R. K. Webb, *The British Working Class Reader 1790-1848* (London, 1955) and Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* (Chicago, 1957).

The most prominent representatives of the macrohistorical approach are French social historians of the last decades – Henri-Jean Martin, François Furet, Robert Estivals and Frédéric Barbier – who have traced the evolution of reading habits from the sixteenth century to the present and presented a sweeping view of the major trends.⁴⁸ But as the wave of cliometrics and quantitative methods began to sink, these results seemed unsatisfying, as Darnton notes: ‘All this compiling and computing has provided some guidelines to reading habits, but the generalizations sometimes seem too general to be satisfying’.⁴⁹

Microhistorical analysis of reading in the second half of the 1970s added the question of what was read to the issue of who was able to read, according to Darnton. These studies, aimed at individual personal libraries, publisher’s subscription lists, and lending libraries, in the hope of being able to inspect more closely who read what, have been executed most actively by French historians but also to some degree in Germany. The problem with them in contrast with the methods of macro-analysis, Darnton notes, is that they project no general picture but are more like ‘a conspiracy of exceptions trying to dissolve rules’.⁵⁰ *The Cheese and the Worms* by the Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg, first published in Italy in 1976 and in an English translation four years later, is without a doubt the best-known and most influential qualitative inquiry into reading experience.⁵¹ The study, based on Inquisition documents of the case of a sixteenth-century miller and autodidact named Domenico Scandella and commonly called Menocchio, reveals not only that he had read a vast and varying amount of texts, but also the way he read, understood and interpreted these texts and actively formulated his world view from them. From what might be called creative misreading by the miller, Ginzburg draws a picture of the hidden popular culture that lay behind his (mis)understanding and of its interaction with dominant culture. But although the book proved to be immensely influential in bringing forth a wave of microhistorical research in Italy, around Europe, and in the United States, it did not spur a considerable number of case studies of reading experience and readership.

⁴⁸ Darnton, ‘History of Reading’, pp. 159-160.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁵¹ Carlo Ginzburg, *Il formaggio e i vermi: Il cosmo di un mugnaio del '500* (Turin, 1976). Published in English translation as: *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Baltimore, 1980).

Another scholar who employed the notion of ‘reading experience’ in the 1970s was English historian Margaret Spufford who, in 1979, published an article where she drew from seventeenth-century autobiographies, ‘written by men from the countryside from yeomen parentage or below, of childhood, education, the importance of literacy, and the importance that their religious convictions had for them’.⁵² Two years later, she used the term ‘readership’ in the subtitle of her book on the consumption of popular literature in the seventeenth century, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories*.⁵³ While Spufford’s work was relatively isolated in English historiography of the time, it had more kinship with the French trend of *l’histoire mentalité*, especially in her attempts to reconstruct the mental world of average readers.

Also on the microhistorical level asking the ‘how’ question was the influential work of the German scholar Rolf Engelsing who argued that a ‘reading revolution’ took place at the end of the eighteenth century, a result that aligned by and large with recent macroanalytical findings in the field.⁵⁴ A few years later the American historian David Hall independently described a similar transition in reading habits among the people of New England, but both authors have been criticised for a tendency to simplify a complicated process and for overemphasising the rift between the two modes.⁵⁵ These studies and others had by the mid-1980s provided the academic world with vast knowledge and understanding of what Darnton calls the institutional bases of reading.

Like Harvey J. Graff in his essay, Darnton has a handful of suggestions to offer the scholars of the field, many of them corresponding to Graff’s proposals. Darnton calls for ‘a strategy for understanding the inner process by which readers made sense of words’ and suggests two approaches, first by studying the assumptions underlying the act of reading in a given period and how it might

⁵² Margaret Spufford, ‘First Steps in Literacy: The Reading and Writing Experiences of the Humblest Seventeenth-Century Spiritual Autobiographers’, *Social History* 4 (1979), p. 407.

⁵³ Margaret Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories: Popular Fiction and its Readership in Seventeenth-Century England* (London, 1981). The first chapter of the book is titled ‘The mental world of the peasant reader’.

⁵⁴ Rolf Engelsing, *Analphabetentum und Lektüre: Zur Sozialgeschichte des Lesens in Deutschland zwischen feudaler und industrieller Gesellschaft* (Stuttgart, 1973). Engelsing argues for a turn from ‘intensive reading’ of a relatively small corpus of books to ‘extensive reading’ of a much wider array of material. See Darnton, *History of Reading*, pp. 164-165.

⁵⁵ See in particular Reinhard Wittmann, ‘Was there a Reading Revolution at the End of the Eighteenth Century?’, in Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, eds, *A History of Reading in the West* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 284-312.

differ from our modern views, and secondly by asking how reading was taught and learned.⁵⁶ Additionally Darnton suggests that historians should try to grasp the experience, if not of the great mass of readers, then at least by trying ‘to capture something of what reading meant for the few persons who left a record of it’.⁵⁷ His fourth suggestion concerns the adaptation of literary theory. ‘Whether they unearth deep structures or tear down systems of signs, critics have increasingly treated literature as an activity rather than an established body of texts. They insist that a book’s meaning is not fixed on its pages; it is construed by its readers’.⁵⁸ Darnton advocates a junction between literary theory and the history of the book, a dual strategy of textual analysis and empirical research. The fifth and final mode of analysis suggested by Darnton is rooted in analytical bibliography under the influence of New Zealander D. F. McKenzie. His emphasis on studying books as physical objects revealed how the ‘meaning’ of texts could vary depending on its format and its presentation.⁵⁹ This materialistic approach was part of McKenzie’s revision of the field of bibliography in the 1960s under the banner of *Sociology of Texts*, influenced by the advent of New Criticism, social history and other post-war trends in the human sciences.⁶⁰

Many of the approaches suggested by both Darnton and Graff in the mid-1980s have become new trends in the historiography of the written word in the two decades since. One mark of a certain turn from the ‘history of literacy’ to ‘the history of reading’ in the last years of the twentieth century was the publication of a collection of essays on the history of reading edited by Roger Chartier and Guglielmo Cavallo in 1999.⁶¹ Chartier himself was a leading figure in the scholarship of print culture and the history of reading in the 1990s when the two threads entwined.⁶² English scholarship of the

⁵⁶ Darnton, ‘History of Reading’, pp. 168-170.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 171-172.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

⁶⁰ Among McKenzie’s publications are ‘Printers of the Mind: Some Notes on Bibliographical Theories and Printing-House Practices’, *Studies in Bibliography* 22 (1969), pp. 1-75; ‘The Sociology of a Text: Orality, Literacy and Print in Early New Zealand’, *The Library*, series 6, vol. VI (December, 1984), pp. 333-365; and ‘Speech-Manuscript-Print’, *Library Chronicle of the University of Texas* 20/1-2 (1990), pp. 86-109. These and other papers of his have recently been published in an anthology of his work, Peter D. McDonald and Michael F. Suarez, S.J., eds, *Making Meaning: ‘Printers of the Mind’ and Other Essays* (Amherst and Boston, 2002).

⁶¹ Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, eds, *A History of Reading in the West* (Amherst, MA, 1999).

⁶² For some of his work on the subject, see Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France* (Princeton, 1987); ‘The Practical Impact of Writing’, in Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby, eds, *A History of Private Life*, vol. 3 (Cambridge, MA, 1989), pp. 111-159; ‘Texts, Printing, Reading’, in Lynn Hunt, ed, *The*

history of reading has in recent years taken a notable turn towards studies of the experience of reading, based on sources like diaries, commonplace books, marginalia and other accounts deriving from readers themselves. These studies often combine singular studies, based on individual diaries or commonplace books, and a large scale investigation in the form of the construction of a database of sources for reading experience from 1450-1945, launched at the Open University in 1996.⁶³ This is not only a sign of a new approach towards qualitative research based on personal accounts but also embodies the intertwining of reading and writing and thus of manuscript and print culture.

1.5 Conclusion

‘Deconstruction, social history and new bibliography have, along their various paths, led us to the reader,’ write the editors of *Reading, Society and Politics in Early Modern England* in their preface to this recent collection of essays, emphasising the interdisciplinary influence of the scholarly trends and turns of the last decades on what might collectively be termed cultural history.⁶⁴ This ‘reader’ has been dragged out of a shadowy existence as a passive recipient of fixed text and redefined as an agent who experienced and engaged with what he or she read. One important feature of this reassessment of literary consumption is the study of the reader as writer, from making comments in margins or diaries to constructing commonplace books, miscellanies and other transcripts, and choosing, reshuffling and altering their order and thus their meaning each time. The re-evaluation of post-medieval scribal practices – the socio-cultural uses of the handwritten medium in the time of printing – has added considerable prominence to this aspect and undermined simple dichotomies between literate and illiterate and between print and script. Whether in the form of ‘publication’ of literary work or ideas by

New Cultural History (Berkeley, 1989), pp. 154-175; and *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors and Libraries in Europe Between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford, 1994).

⁶³ www.open.ac.uk/Arts/RED. Reading experience is defined by these scholars as ‘a recorded engagement with a written or printed text – beyond the mere fact of possession’. Stephen Colclough, *Reading Experience 1700-1840: An Annotated Register of Sources for the History of Reading in the British Isles* (Reading, 2000). There the sources for reading experience are divided into seven categories: 1) commonplace books, notebooks, miscellanies, albums and scrapbooks; 2) diaries in manuscript; 3) published diaries; 4) autobiographies; 5) family papers and letter collections in manuscript; 6) published letter collections and 7) annotated books. For some recent collections of essays on the subject, see James Raven, Naomi Tadmor and Helen Small, eds, *The Practice and Representation of Reading in Britain 1500-1900* (Cambridge, 1996), and Bernadette Cunningham and Máire Kennedy, eds, *The Experience of Reading: Irish Historical Perspectives* (Dublin, 1999).

⁶⁴ Kevin Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker, ‘Introduction: Discovering the Renaissance Reader’, in *Reading, Society and Politics in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 2.

an author, transcripts made by others as an entrepreneurial endeavour, or the compilation of personal collections of texts, this calls attention to the opportunities that the reader/writer has to manipulate the textual mass.

It is clear from Darnton's defining paper on the history of the book, that he saw the emerging field as a synonym to the history of print culture. It is, he writes under the influence of the French *Annales* school and inspired by Eisenstein's initiative, 'the social and cultural history of communication by print ... because its purpose is to understand how ideas were transmitted through print and how exposure to the printed word affected the thought and behaviour of mankind during the last five hundred years'.⁶⁵ The model of the communication circuit laid out in the paper could, with minor adjustments, apply to all periods in the history of the printed book, but manuscript books and book illustrations were scrupulously excluded.⁶⁶ The bulk of studies of the proportion and scope of post-medieval scribal practices throughout the 1980s and especially the 1990s had, however, made its impact on the discipline when a new international journal on the subject, simply named *Book History*, was launched in 1998. 'Our field of play,' declared its editors in a manifesto-like introduction to the first issue, 'is the entire history of written communication: the creation, dissemination, and uses of script and print in any medium, including books, newspapers, periodicals, manuscripts, and ephemera. We will explore the social, cultural, and economic history of authorship, publishing, printing, the book arts, copyright, censorship, bookselling and distribution, libraries, literacy, literary criticism, reading habits, and reader response'.⁶⁷ From the time that was written, during the last decade or so, post-medieval manuscript culture has slowly been making its way into mainstream literary history and book history and allowing the discovery of previously unacknowledged dimensions of literary cultures. The space attributed to scribal media in the history of the book is, however, still temporally positioned within the Middle Ages to a large extent. This is palpably manifested in the structure of a recently published *Companion to the History of the Book* where the history of manuscript culture is divided into two periods, the former up to 1100 and the latter between 1100 and 1500, the implication being

⁶⁵ Darnton, 'What is the History of Books?', p. 9.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11. This model was rooted in the print culture of eighteenth-century France, where the production and publication of printed books was set in a context of banned texts, vibrant underground publications, book smuggling and the political and ideological upheaval of pre-revolution France.

⁶⁷ Ezra Greenspan and Jonathan Rose, 'An Introduction to Book History', *Book History* 1 (1998), p. 16.

that it was made obsolete by the Gutenberg revolution.⁶⁸ Despite this rather traditional structure, its editors claim that '[t]his *Companion* recognizes that book history involves a continuous interplay of orality, writing and print' and their approach thus typifies the rather ambiguous status of scribal culture within the history of the book:

Just as writing complemented rather than replaced orality, so too the manuscript culture did not vanish when printing arrived. Many collections of high-status verse circulated in Italy in the sixteenth century and in England in the seventeenth century in manuscript rather than be subject to the vulgar and commercial process of printing. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century readers often compiled handwritten commonplace books in which favourite verse and prose would be laboriously copied out to create an individualized anthology of texts. Writing is that vital dialogue between a published author and a reader (sometimes an exasperated one) which often take the form of handwritten notes and marks in the margins of a printed text.⁶⁹

This general view rests on a considerable corpus of recent studies in the fields of literary history, bibliography and book history that demonstrated the advent of a new scholarship of post-medieval scribal culture that is reviewed in the next two chapters. Chapter two is dedicated to what I call the 'English school', a handful of groundbreaking studies published in the 1990s resulting in what is now an established and thriving discipline, which explores the persistence of scribal culture and its cultural and social role in early modern and modern Britain and colonial America. The second of the two chapters is a literature review of the field of post-medieval scribal culture which addresses other European scribal cultures, e.g. France, Italy, and Spain, and scribal practices in Japan and China. The purpose is to lay the groundwork for my study of nineteenth-century scribal culture in Iceland and to challenge the common notion that the persistence of handwritten books in Icelandic culture was somehow unique, while recognising that it might have its own special features.

⁶⁸ Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose, eds, *A Companion to the History of the Book* (Oxford, 2007). A clear indication of periodization is given by the titles of chapters 13-15: 'The Triumph of the Codex: The Manuscript Book before 1100' by Michelle P. Brown, and 'Parchment and Paper: Manuscript Culture 1100-1500' by M. T. Clanchy and 'The Gutenberg Revolutions', by Lotte Hellinga.

⁶⁹ Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose, 'Introduction', in Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose, eds, *A Companion to the History of the Book* (Oxford, 2007), p. 5.

THE ENGLISH SCHOOL OF EARLY MODERN SCRIBAL STUDIES

2.1 Introduction

The view in which scribal and print culture dominated the centuries on either side of Gutenberg's invention of moveable type has been heavily challenged in the last quarter of a century, even though it remains unbeaten as the grand narrative of the historiography of written communications. The connection and interaction between handwritten and printed media in the first two centuries after Gutenberg's mid-fifteenth-century advance has been under particular scrutiny during the last decade by a loosely connected group of English-speaking scholars in the fields of cultural history, literary history and bibliography.¹ With their research and publications they have called into question what had been understood as a clear distinction between the two media and the idea of linear progress through a 'printing revolution' in which a new and advanced technique swiftly pushed an old and obsolete one aside.² Concurrently – either independently or under the influence of the English initiative – numerous students of other societies and cultures have come to the same fundamental conclusions: that the scribal medium continued to have a considerable role in early modern and modern societies after the introduction of printing.

The contemporary turn towards early modern and modern scribal studies took place within the fields of bibliography and literary history, and was, at this first stage at least, largely unaffected by trends in social and cultural history, the sociology of texts and book history. It had its roots in the 1970s, and first broke the surface with the publication of the first volume of the *Index of English*

¹ For an overview see two bibliographical essays by Noel J. Kinnamon: 'Recent Studies in Renaissance English Manuscripts', *English Literary Renaissance* 27 (1997), pp. 281-326, and 'Recent Studies in Renaissance English Manuscripts (1996-2006)', *English Literary Renaissance* 38/2 (2008), pp. 356-383.

² This is not to say that early modern manuscript circulation had been completely ignored before that time. Examples of earlier studies are: J.W. Saunders, 'From Manuscript to Print: A Note on the Circulation of Poetic Manuscripts in the Sixteenth Century', *Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society. Literary and Historical Section*, Vol. 6 (May 1951), pp. 507-528 and Alan MacColl, 'The Circulation of Donne's Poems in Manuscript', in A. J. Smith, ed, *John Donne: Essays in Celebration* (London, 1972), pp. 28-46.

Literary Manuscripts in 1980, edited by Peter Beal.³ Addressing the question of whether manuscript studies in the early modern period have a future, Beal noted recently: ‘In January 1974, when I began work on the *Index of English Literary Manuscripts*, this question would have had no meaning. Insofar as there was a discipline of ‘manuscript studies’ at all it was devoted purely to medieval manuscripts: i.e., in the academic fields of medieval studies, Paleography, and art history’.⁴ By simply cataloguing the literary manuscripts of Renaissance and Restoration England, Beal’s index brought into focus entire dimensions of early modern literary culture, as noted by one positive reviewer:

A whole book could be written on the evidence provided by the *Index* on the function of the professional scribe; on the distinction between manuscript miscellanies and commonplace books; on the prevalence of manuscript as the normal medium for both types of collection (the press only taking over the one and systematizing the latter a century and two centuries later); on the use of manuscripts by authors, both professional and amateur, by a nobleman, a poet or a priest; on the prevalence of different types of text in manuscript and print.⁵

As a further attempt to promote studies in this field, Beal launched (along with Jeremy Griffiths) a series of volumes that aimed at merging the newly discovered manuscript culture of the post-Gutenberg era with the established field of medieval manuscript studies, covering the entire period from 1100 to 1700.⁶ However it was Mary Hobbs, another of the contributors to both the *Index* and the first volume of the *English Manuscript Studies* series, who became the first scholar to publish a major monograph on early modern scribal culture in England in 1992.⁷

2.2 English Renaissance poetry and the scribal medium

Mary Hobbs’ 1992 book was the outcome of many years of work on the subject and partly based on her doctoral dissertation from 1973.⁸ Hobbs’s subject is a specific genus of handwritten books popular

³ Peter Beal, *Index of English Literary Manuscripts*. Volume I, 1450-1625 (London, 1980). It was followed by volume II, 1625-1700 (London, 1987-1993).

⁴ Peter Beal, ‘Introduction: Do Manuscript Studies in the Early Modern Period have a Future?’, *Shakespeare Studies* 32 (2004), p. 49.

⁵ Nicolas Barker, ‘Literary Manuscripts’, *The Book Collector* 29/4 (1980), p. 496, quoted in Peter Beal, ‘Introduction’, p. 50.

⁶ *English Manuscript Studies 1100-1700 I-XIII* (1989-2007).

⁷ Mary Hobbs, *Early Seventeenth-Century Verse Miscellany Manuscripts* (Aldershot, 1992). See also: Mary Hobbs, ‘Early Seventeenth-Century Verse Miscellanies and their Value for Textual Editors’, *English Manuscript Studies* 1 (1989), pp. 182-210.

⁸ Mary Hobbs, ‘An Edition of the Stoughton Manuscript (an Early Seventeenth Century Poetry Collection in Private Hands Connected with Henry King and Oxford) Seen in Relation to Other Contemporary Poetry and Song Collection’, (unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 1973).

in early seventeenth-century England: verse miscellanies. These handwritten anthologies were most often assembled by undergraduates at either Oxford or Cambridge or law students at the Inns of Court, but sometimes by men of other status.

In her work, Hobbs offers a revision of the established approach to early modern literary studies. On the matter of readership, she notes that '[t]he manuscript verse miscellanies show more accurately than the comparatively random printed editions of the time which poets and poems were popularly enjoyed'.⁹ On the one hand, Hobbs is entrenched in the traditional mindset of the twentieth-century editor of early modern poetry, engaged in the quest for an undistorted and 'original' text to print. She is, however, also taken with the history of how texts were disseminated in the seventeenth century, and the meaning of any changes they may have been subject to in the scribal process. She denounces the view that transcripts of verse should be disregarded as inaccurate or corrupted:

I have tried to show that this is often a false estimation. If an 'inaccurate' reading is shared even with one other manuscript, however carelessly it is copied, this may represent a different line of textual tradition which must be explored. Moreover, genuine inaccuracy also has its part to play if the same error is shared with other manuscripts, since this too will often define a group which belongs together.¹⁰

Hobbs also challenges the common claim of students of print culture that an imprint had inherent advantages over manuscript in matters of accuracy and fixity. She argues 'that the mere fact of publication in print, in what was more often than not a late and corrupt version of the poems, does not give the printed text greater authority than a carefully copied earlier manuscript version'.¹¹ From the modern editor's point of view, the earlier printed edition should be seen merely as just another 'transcript', a version among numerous other versions of the same text.

The next important step within the scholarship of early modern scribal culture is the 1993 monograph by Australian historian Harold Love, *Scribal Publication in Seventeenth Century England*.¹² This book was based on Love's studies in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, which had

⁹ Hobbs, *Early Seventeenth-Century*, p. 148.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

¹² Harold Love, *Scribal Publication in Seventeenth Century England* (Oxford, 1993). The book was later published in the United States as *The Culture and Commerce of Texts: Scribal Publication in Seventeenth Century England* (Amherst, 1998). All following references apply to the US edition.

originally been published in several journal articles.¹³ The book has become immensely influential in the field of early modern and modern scribal culture, both within the English-speaking world and beyond. Love's ambitious aim was to look beyond individual poets and single miscellanies and approach 'the culture of transmission within which the proliferation of copies took place'.¹⁴ This could, according to Love, be achieved by connecting many examples of texts transmitted in handwritten form after the advent of print and developing a coherent hypothesis. 'What is lacking to date', writes Love, 'has been an awareness that each of these things is a part of a larger phenomenon – scribal publication – which had a role in the culture and commerce of texts just as assured as that of print publication'.¹⁵ Love's aim with the book is to explore the nature of the phenomenon in general and to propose terms for further investigation.

In his introduction of the key concept of scribal publication, Harold Love makes a distinction between three main types, according to who was responsible for the production of the manuscript.¹⁶ The first category is 'author publication', where the author himself authorises and supervises the production and dissemination of transcripts. It was common practice to ensure a constrained and controlled distribution of texts, especially common among writers from the gentry and aristocracy. This was associated with exclusive coteries and the so-called 'stigma of print'; upper class poets saw publication in print as 'common' or even as a 'social disgrace'.¹⁷

More commercially orientated, and akin to the practices of both the newborn print industry and pre-print scriptoriums, was 'entrepreneurial publication'. This type of distribution, where texts were produced and circulated for gain by a scribe or a stationer was the most organized of the three modes, and its operation was subject to public demand rather than authorial control.¹⁸ When two or more copies of a text in the same non-authorial hand are preserved, they are likely to be the product of

¹³ See in particular Harold Love, 'Manuscript Versus Print in the Transmission of English Literature, 1600-1700', *Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand Bulletin* 9 (1985), pp. 95-107; 'Scribal Publication in Seventeenth Century England', *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society* 9/2 (1987), pp. 130-154; and 'Scribal Texts and Literary Communities: The Rochester Circle and Osborn b. 105', *Studies in Bibliography* 17 (1989), pp. 219-236.

¹⁴ Love, *The Culture and Commerce of Texts*, p. vii.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 46-83.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51. The concept 'stigma of print' was first coined in the mid-twentieth century by J.W. Saunders in, 'The Stigma of Print: A Note on the Social Bases of Tudor Poetry', *Essays in Criticism* 1/1 (January 1951), pp. 139-164.

¹⁸ Love, *The Culture and Commerce of Texts*, pp. 73-79.

entrepreneurial publication in some form, especially if they are of high quality. Satirical material and politically contentious writings were, according to Love, particularly likely to be distributed in a commercial manner by such unofficial publishers.

The third variety is what Love calls ‘user publication’, covering all types of non-commercial production of manuscripts. It most characteristically took the form of transcribing a certain text into a miscellany or a commonplace book for personal use. In spite of being attributed to the user, this act always involved a transaction between at least two individuals – the copyist and the provider of the exemplar – and was furthermore likely to lead to further transmission of the text in a chain of acts of publication. This mode of dissemination was thus usually practiced within a network of friends, neighbours or associates, but the precise nature of the network is often obscure because the miscellanies rarely record the receipt of an exemplar or its further transmission.¹⁹

This threefold definition of the concept of scribal publication makes it a rather open concept, almost a synonym with, or shorthand for, the production of handwritten reading material. This understanding is enhanced by the two ways of defining ‘publication’ as the transmission from private to public. One of these ways is a conventional ‘strong sense’ of the word ‘publication’, where a text is made publicly available. Love also recognizes a ‘weak sense’ where it is enough that a text ceases to be a private possession.²⁰ All three subcategories of scribal publication were to some degree present in the manuscript culture of other societies, including nineteenth-century Iceland, which gives the distinction broad analytical value.

The same goes with the second key concept coined by Harold Love, that of ‘scribal communities’. Manuscript transmission had, according to Love, the important function of ‘bonding groups of likeminded individuals into a community, sect or political faction with the exchange of texts in manuscript serving to nourish a shared set of values and to enrich personal allegiances’.²¹ Love argues that the routes by which handwritten texts travel from one person to another, based on a personal agreement between the original supplier, the copyist and the recipient, do not arise randomly

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 36. US scholar Margaret Ezell has, however, criticized the usage of the concept *scribal publication* on the grounds that it is somehow restricted to professional scribes reproducing ‘the appearance of print texts’.

See Margaret Ezell, *Social Authorship and the Advent of Print* (Baltimore and London, 1999), p. 22.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

but are more likely to coincide with pre-existing communities like a court, an extended family, a circle of friends, or a county. 'For groups such as these, bounded by the exchange of manuscripts, the term 'scribal community' is proposed', writes Love.²² These concepts of scribal publication and scribal communities can, in spite of a huge leap in time, space and social and economic conditions, be applied to nineteenth-century Iceland and its popular culture of manuscript circulation among farmers and fishermen in small rural communities.

In the wake of Love's seminal publication came two monographs which combined case studies with a more general survey of scribal transmission in Renaissance England. Following his first book, *John Donne: Coterie Poet*, published in 1986, Arthur Marotti became engaged in a study of some 250 manuscripts containing poetry from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that led to his second monograph, *Manuscript, Print, and the English Renaissance Lyric*, in 1995.²³ In the second book Marotti examines the publication of English lyric poetry of the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries in both manuscript and print and in particular the case of the Renaissance poet John Donne (1572–1631). Only a small fraction of his poetry was printed during his lifetime, with the great majority circulated in manuscript within a relatively narrow circuit.²⁴ The book investigates the interrelationship between manuscript and print publication in the shaping of the literary culture of early modern England, focusing on the material form in which the texts are found. This holistic approach to the transmission, reception and reproduction of a specific genre at a particular point in time and space, makes, in Marotti's opinion:

... the basis of a socioliterary history that unlike traditional literary history considers texts in their material specificity (rather than in their edited 'ideal' forms), attends to their reception and reproduction in a variety of social and historical circumstances (and not just in the context of the print publication process), and emphasizes an inchoate or developing definition of literature and

²² *Ibid.*, p. 180.

²³ Arthur F. Marotti, *John Donne: Coterie Poet* (Madison and London, 1986), and *Manuscript, Print and the English Renaissance Lyric* (Ithaca, 1995). The latter is largely based on articles and chapters previously published between 1989 and 1993. Marotti has since edited, along with Michael D. Bristol, *Print, Manuscripts and Performance* (Columbus, 2000) and written, with Harold Love, 'Manuscript Transmission and Circulation', in David Loewenstein and Janel Mueller, eds, *Cambridge History of Early Modern English Literature* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 55-80.

²⁴ See Ted-Larry Pebworth, 'John Donne, Coterie Poetry, and the Text as Performance', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 29/1 (Winter 1989), p. 61. According to Pebworth, only seven of Donne's poems were printed in his lifetime while nearly 200 are known to have been circulating in handwritten form.

authorship (rather than a stable definition based on alleged authorial ‘intentions’). Authorship, textuality and ‘literature’ itself all look different in this other framework.²⁵

Marotti is primarily interested in the process by which literature becomes institutionalized in relations with the two modes of textual transmission. By examining the scribal medium in the early modern period Marotti sees his work as supplementing the work of scholars who had since roughly the late 1970s studied the shaping of modern conceptions of textuality, authorship, and readership within the realm of early printing.²⁶

Verse poetry was, according to Marotti’s argument, the last of the literary genres to be incorporated into print culture, and to be circulated in anthologies, pamphlets, and other printed editions. He focuses on what he describes as ‘the historical moment in which the interaction of print culture with an overlapping manuscript culture shaped the institution of literature itself and the status of authors, texts, and readers within it’.²⁷ This moment occurred, according to Marotti, during the English Renaissance. Much literature continued to be written for manuscript circulation rather than for print, despite the widespread effects of the Gutenberg revolution. For more than a century and a half the two systems of publication coexisted.

This literary culture cannot be described accurately by looking only at the printed texts and their printed editions:

When lyrical poetry is largely occasional and bound to the context of its initial production and reception, manuscript miscellanies and verse anthologies give a better sense of the sociocultural functioning of such literary texts than printed editions do. Printed texts of lyric verse – something of an innovation and a matter also of printers’ fortuitous access to literary communications of restricted social groups and coteries – yield a distorted picture of literary history or of the place of literary texts in the life of the society that produced and consumed them. Manuscripts, on the other hand, better reveal the socioliterary dynamics of particular texts and the social history of literature. It took a relatively long time for anthologies and single-author editions of lyric poetry to become an established feature of print culture in England, and the manuscript system of transmission had a remarkable strength and durability through the first two centuries of English printing.²⁸

²⁵ Marotti, *Manuscript, Print*, p. xii.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. xii-xiii.

Much of the poetry of Renaissance England was occasional in nature and transmitted in manuscript to a restricted audience. Poems were often circulated within a specific social and institutional context: Universities, the Inns of Court, or a family. ‘The composition of lyric poems was part of social life’, Marotti argues, ‘associated with a variety of practices in polite and educated circles. Read aloud to live audiences or passed from hand to hand in single sheets, small booklets, quires, or pamphlets, verse typically found its way into manuscript commonplace books rather than into printed volumes ...’.²⁹ It was only later that it became subject to what he calls ‘the commodifying processes of print culture’.

The second important book in the field from 1996 is Henry Woudhuysen’s *Sir Philip Sidney and the Circulation of Manuscripts 1558-1640*.³⁰ The book is divided into two parts. The first part investigates the circulation of manuscripts between 1558-1640 in general, their authors and producers, the different types of literary manuscripts and the market for such publications. The second half, meanwhile, is a case study of the poet and writer Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586) and his status in the scribal culture of his time. In the first paragraph of his introduction Woudhuysen gives this description of his work and of the cultural field it addresses and its participants:

This is a book about manuscripts; about the men and women who wrote, read, bought, sold, presented, and received them. It is also a book about paper, pen and ink, and a book about those for whom writing by hand was a necessary and profitable part of their lives. Scribes, scribes, secretaries, copyists, amanuenses, writing-masters, public officials, private individuals, authors, poets, playwrights, antiquarians, lawyers, scholars, politicians, divines, merchants, new and second-hand booksellers, stationers, printers, and librarians all play a part in it. ... Some of the many people I discuss are famous, others will be familiar only to specialists, a few are comparatively unknown, and others, the great majority of scribes who produced manuscripts, cannot even be given names.³¹

Woudhuysen claims that studies of post-medieval manuscript culture had until recently been very limited, not only in England but in western literary and cultural history in general. Historians in certain fields have taken up an interest in the role of manuscript copying, such as legal historians, historians of science, and those studying the channels of news and parliamentary material. Historians of the book,

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³⁰ Henry R. Woudhuysen, *Sir Philip Sidney and the Circulation of Manuscripts 1558-1640* (Oxford, 1996).

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

however, had eschewed discussing the production and circulation of handwritten books, according to Woudhuysen.³²

In 1998, some twenty-five years after he began work on the *Index of English Literary Manuscripts* in 1974, Peter Beal closed the circle with his monograph *In Praise of Scribes: Manuscripts and their Makers in Seventeenth-Century England*. He begins by stating his aim with the book:

... my concern *is* to establish the importance of scribes in the early modern period: to recognize them as figures at the centre of civilized life, as men to be reckoned with, and as key agents in the process of written communication and literary transmission – as men every bit as vitally productive as printers and publishers, rather than the anonymous, shadowy, marginal figures who have traditionally been ignored.³³

Beal is in his book re-evaluating the connection and interaction between the two media of written texts, handwritten and printed, in the first two centuries after Gutenberg. Along with other scholars of this same school, he re-evaluates what had been viewed as a clear-cut distinction between the two media, as well as the idea of the linear progress of a ‘printing revolution’, where a new and advanced technique pushed an old and obsolete one swiftly aside.

The publication of these pioneering works in the mid-1990s has had a profound impact on literary and cultural history in the English speaking world. It has firmly established a new conception of the early modern literary system, a complete turnaround from 25-30 years earlier when, in Peter Beal’s words, ‘the notion that, in a post-Gutenberg era, manuscripts might still continue for centuries to play every bit as important a role in literary culture as printed books was utterly alien’.³⁴ This is apparent on at least three levels in the fields of literary history, book history and cultural history. First, we have seen a continuing stream of detailed studies of scribal culture and scribal publication and its products, most commonly within the field of literary history. These studies revolve around individual cases, social groups or entire cultures or nations. Secondly, there has been common acknowledgement

³² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³³ Peter Beal, *In Praise of Scribes: Manuscripts and their Makers in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1998), p. v. An earlier publication by Beal is ‘Notions in Garrison: The Seventeenth-Century Commonplace Book’, in W. Speed Hill, ed, *New Ways of Looking at Old Texts: Papers of the Renaissance English Text Society, 1985-1991* (Binghamton, NY, 1993), pp. 131-147.

³⁴ Beal, ‘Introduction’, p. 49.

of the persistent role played by handwritten material within the history of the book and its complex interrelationship with print culture. The understanding is now that the two modes (or sometimes three, including oral transmission) of textual transmission after the advent of print were not isolated from one another or simply rivals but intertwined in their daily use. The third change is the inclusion of scribal culture into general literary histories, incorporating obscure authors and ignored dimensions of the production, circulation and consumption of literature in the so-called 'age of print'.

2.3 Women's writings and manuscript culture

What has arguably become the largest and most vibrant section of studies of scribal transmission in particular are the studies and textual editions in the field associated with women's reading, writing and authorship in the English-speaking world.³⁵ This has been an extremely fruitful area of research, especially in the first years of the twenty-first century, and has resulted in a profound re-evaluation of women's participation in early modern literary history, as both producers and users.³⁶ A determining enterprise in this field, and something of an equivalent to Peter Beal's *Index* in opening new fields and kicking off new research, was the so-called 'Perdita project'.³⁷ It was a research scheme on early modern women's manuscripts, undertaken between 1997 and 2005 by a group of scholars at Nottingham Trent and Warwick Universities. At the core of the project is a web-based database of over 500 manuscript compilations in collections around the world, intended to be a research tool for historians and literary scholars. These manuscripts were produced during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and consist of poetry, religious writing, autobiographical material, cookery and medical recipes, and accounts.

³⁵ This turn is related to the advent of women's history, feminist theory, and gender studies in the last quarter of the twentieth century. See for example Joan W. Scott, 'Women's History', in Peter Burke, ed, *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*. Second edition (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 43-70.

³⁶ See for example: Victoria Burke, 'Women and Early Seventeenth-Century Manuscript Culture: Four Miscellanies', *The Seventeenth Century* 12 (1997), pp. 135-150; Jane Stevenson, 'Women, Writing, and Scribal Publication in the Sixteenth Century', *English Manuscript Studies, 1100-1700*, vol. 9 (2000), pp. 1-32; Jane Stevenson and Peter Davidson, eds, *Early Modern Woman Poets: An Anthology* (Oxford and New York, 2001); Anita Pacheco, ed, *A Companion to Early Modern Women's Writing* (Oxford, 2002); and Helen Ostovich, Elizabeth Sauer, and Melissa Smith, eds, *Reading Early Modern Women: An Anthology of Texts in Manuscript and Print, 1550-1700* (New York and London, 2004).

³⁷ See www.human.ntu.ac.uk/research/perdita. A forerunner to the project in emphasizing women's scribal culture in Early Modern England was an anthology of seventeenth-century women's verse, published in 1988: Germaine Greer et al., eds, *Kissing the Rod: An Anthology of Seventeenth-Century Women's Verse* (London, 1988).

Numerous publications have arisen directly from the project, most notably two collections of essays exemplifying some of the great variety of ways in which women participated in manuscript culture (published in 2002 and 2004) and an anthology of texts by fourteen women poets writing between 1589 and 1706 based solely on manuscript material (published in 2005).³⁸ These studies refute what has hitherto been widely believed; that women of early modern England either did not write or did not publish their work. The employment of the concept ‘scribal publication’ has revealed that many women writers circulated their works by hand, with friends copying and recopying poems, plays and novels from each other or with the help of professional scribes. Their work reached wide audiences and was collected and admired by both men and women.

An important novelty of the 2002 collection was that it moved the margins of the era of coexistence of scribal and print culture up to the end of the eighteenth century. In his introduction one of its editors, George Justice, states that at the end of the eighteenth century, scribal publication was still an alternative mode of publication and then adds: ‘Manuscript cultures always existed, but we need to learn how to look for them and rethink what it means when we find them. Women – and men – have continued since the eighteenth century to circulate manuscripts for pleasure, power, and social advancement’.³⁹ Studies deriving from the Perdita project have also contributed greatly to open out the societal scope of post-Gutenberg scribal studies, beyond the elitist and canonical approach to literary history focussing only on the major figures in the literary life of the era and the social circles formed at the universities and the Inns of Court. A prime example of this is a case study based on the commonplace book of one Ann Bowyer, in which Victoria Burke addresses what she calls reading and writing among the ‘middling sort’.⁴⁰ Ann Bowyer was the daughter of an urban craftsman in Coventry, who compiled a handwritten commonplace book in the first decade of the seventeenth century. ‘This manuscript’, Burke maintains ‘is one of very few clues which give us an insight into the life of this

³⁸ George L. Justice and Nathan Tinker, eds, *Women’s Writing and the Circulation of Ideas: Manuscript Publication in England 1550-1800* (Cambridge, 2002); Victoria E. Burke and Jonathan Gibson, eds, *Early Modern Women’s Manuscript Writing. Selected Essays of the Trinity/Trent Colloquium* (Hampshire and Burlington, 2004); and Jill Seal Millman and Gillian Wright, eds, *Early Modern Women’s Manuscript Poetry* (Manchester, 2005).

³⁹ George L. Justice, ‘Introduction’, in George L. Justice and Nathan Tinker, eds, *Women’s Writing and the Circulation of Ideas: Manuscript Production in England, 1500-1800* (Cambridge, 2002) pp. 15-16.

⁴⁰ Victoria Burke, ‘Ann Bowyer’s Commonplace Book (Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 51): Reading and Writing Among the ‘Middling Sort’’, *Early Modern Literary Studies* 6/3 (January, 2001), sections 1-28. <http://purl.oclc.org/emls/06-3/burkbowy.htm>.

young woman, and it is a remarkable window into her contacts with other people, her reading material, and what effect this reading had on her'.⁴¹ It offers thus insight into the scribal transmission of texts, as well as into the history of reading aligned with the shift towards reading experience.

The conjunction of the reconsideration of scribal practices in the early modern and modern period and the forceful exploration of women's literary history and readership has had a significant impact on the general history of literature and communications in England over the last two decades. Literary historian Margaret Ezell writes that '[s]uch recovery efforts to locate and document women's manuscript texts have revealed not only numerous new names for students of manuscript culture to investigate, but have also made it clear what a rich abundance of texts exists, written by women of the lower and middle classes as well as fine ladies'.⁴² This revision has clearly demonstrated how the direct equation of print and literary culture excluded a great proportion of literary agents and activity from what should be seen as a wide-ranging and multi-dimensional sphere of textual communications. Furthermore, it has made way for a more general revision in cultural and book history and thus supplemented the view of early modern manuscript culture presented by the pioneers in the field in the 1980s, as Margaret Ezell argues: 'They have drawn attention to the roles played by women in creating, preserving, and transmitting manuscript texts, outside of the conventional spaces of public social groups and commercial enterprises, thus inviting further work on the history of early modern authorship in general'.⁴³ The question is not only about women authors, in the conceptual meaning of an original maker of texts, but also how the compilation of a female reader/writer could be the means for creative expression in a society which in general did not value women's writing.

In her 1993 monograph *Writing Women's Literary History* Margaret Ezell argued that following the recovery of lost women writers and the subsequent re-evaluation of English literary history, a radical revision of the literary culture of the seventeenth century would be necessary.⁴⁴

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, section 1.

⁴² Margaret Ezell, 'Do Manuscript Studies Have a Future in Early Modern Women Studies?', *Shakespeare Studies* 32 (2004), p. 65.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁴⁴ Margaret J. M. Ezell, *Writing Women's Literary History* (Baltimore, 1994). Among her recent publications in the field are: 'Domestic Papers: Manuscript Culture and Early Modern Women's Life Writing', in Julie A. Eckerle and Michelle M. Dowd, eds, *Genre and Women's Life Writing in Early Modern England* (Aldershot, 2007), pp. 33-48 and 'The Laughing Tortoise: Speculations on Manuscript Sources and Women's Book History', *English Literary Renaissance* 38/2 (2008), pp. 331-355.

Rather than trying to incorporate women writers into the traditional frameworks of literary history we should get rid of the evolutionary models of history that had marginalized women who wrote. This fundamental revision of the elements of literary culture in the early modern era is the subject of her rather small but all the more powerful book *Social Authorship and the Advent of Print* (1999).

2.4 The advent of social authorship

Literary historian Max W. Thomas had, already in 1992, argued for a clear distinction between the textual procedure involved in early modern commonplace books and modern conceptions of authorship and writing.⁴⁵ Thomas claims that the notion of the author as an introspective, self-inspired creator, generally applied to the eighteenth century, had been retrospectively applied to previous periods as well. Opposing this view, Thomas calls attention to an epistemological structure in which reading and writing are constituent and inseparable elements in the conditions for the production and consumption of the poetic commonplace book. He suggests looking at the compiler of commonplace books in the Renaissance as ‘a paradigm for reading/writing practices’ and ‘not as someone who acts as a terminus; rather someone who channels the energies of poetic discourse and then reintroduces them into the cultural flow from whence they were written/read’.⁴⁶ Thomas made his observations when the first English Renaissance manuscript studies were emerging in the early 1980s, citing the early work of Arthur Marotti and Peter Beal.

By the end of the 1990s, such studies had made a considerable impact on English literary and cultural history and this gave Margaret Ezell grounds for re-evaluating one of the fundamental concepts of cultural history in her *Social Authorship and the Advent of Print*.⁴⁷ At the core of her argument is the concept of ‘social author’, a term which refers to writers who operated outside the emerging world of print and commercial scribal publication in early modern England. Ezell denounces what might be called ‘the supremacy of print culture’, implicit in Love’s notion of scribal publication. She argues that even though the subject of Love’s study is manuscript texts, ‘the focus of the analysis

⁴⁵ Max W. Thomas, ‘Reading and Writing the Renaissance Commonplace Book: A Question of Authorship?’, in Peter Jaszi and Martha Woodmansee, eds, *The Construction of Authorship: Textual Appropriation in Law and Literature* (Durham and London, 1994), pp. 401-415.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 415.

⁴⁷ Margaret J. M. Ezell, *Social Authorship and the Advent of Print* (Baltimore and London, 1999).

is largely in the context of print and its norms'.⁴⁸ By this, Ezell is referring to how manuscripts are seen by Love and others following his path as a proxy for print, employed by those who, for some reason or another, were shut out from the real thing.

The point made by Love, and Woudhuysen, about writers using script to circumvent censorship is perfectly correct, but the implications behind the terms of analysis is that we seek to understand the manuscript text by analyzing it for what it is *not*, that is, it is 'not print' because of the structures of power. The investigative starting point appears to be 'why didn't this author use print?' rather than 'what is this author attempting to do?'.⁴⁹

This is, in my opinion, an extremely important step in the development of early modern and modern scribal studies. The production, dissemination and consumption of handwritten material should be studied for what it is, rather than for what it is not. One aspect of viewing the production of modern manuscripts as 'manual print' is the reoccurring problem of editing and normalizing the products of scribal culture: who wrote what when, which manuscript holds the (most) original text and is the 'original' text the same as the 'final' text from the author's hand? The emphasis on the relationship of the manuscript to print culture and the process of editing texts for print publications, has long dominated early modern manuscript studies instead of seeking to describe the activities of the author and his or her manuscript before they are forever fixed in print. What has been left out of the recent studies of early modern literary culture, according to Ezell, is 'a sense of authorship and readers that existed independently from the conventions and the restrictions of print and commercial texts'.⁵⁰

This is directly linked to a second novelty in Ezell's study. She moves the focal point from the centres of English literary culture – London and the university cities – and approaches the situation of peripheral writers, both in a geographical and cultural sense. 'If one was a young poet living in the Welsh Marches in the 1690s, or a woman living almost anywhere outside London, what did it mean to be an 'author'?' – Ezell asks in her introduction.⁵¹ The absence of these groups from the print culture has been theorized but their alternative literary life has not been investigated. Her studies of literary life outside the cultural and political centre of London reveals that provincial authors and readers dealt

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

with the realities of print production and the marketing of books by creating and reproducing literary texts themselves, according to Ezell socially rather than commercially.

Indeed, without the presence of a manuscript literary culture ... a provincial area that relied solely on print for its intellectual and literary circulation would be stagnant: when speaking of the intellectual and literary culture of a provincial community, it is essential to remember how much of it was based on the exchange of manuscripts, how much the reader's experience of literary culture was transmitted through manuscript copy, not print.⁵²

Printing and formal publication were not unknown outside the cultural capitals of London and the university towns but they produced mostly religious, didactic materials in the later part of the seventeenth century and the early eighteenth century. An examination of the output of provincial booksellers and printers reveals that literary authors were not too overwhelmed by the new media. It was the local ministers and physicians who made the most use of print in the provinces while the poets continued to rely on the 'social system of authorship', which, according to Ezell, 'had the advantages of being controlled by the author and his or her friends, of being much cheaper than printing, and of providing an ongoing source of literary and intellectual capital, even if not bringing in any commercial benefits'.⁵³

By linking the term 'author' with the product of a printed book and the act of formal publishing, great segments of literary activity are ignored, especially those on social or geographical peripheries. The path of formal publication in printed form was not the only one available, acceptable or chosen. In the introduction, she describes her approach as a study of 'the material conditions of being an author' in a society where print was taking over from manuscript as a dominant mode of transmission (seventeenth-century England).⁵⁴ Instead of asking who was printing and who was purchasing she likes to study who was writing and who was reading. She argues that to see the whole picture we have to step beyond of the cultural centres and the world of print, to study literary practices in local communities, and to integrate 'social, manuscript authorship practices with the history of

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 104-105.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

commercial print authorship'.⁵⁵ Her argument for a broader conception of the practice of authorship includes various modes of collaborative writing and methods of publication that are an extremely important theoretical basis for a study of nineteenth-century manuscript culture in Iceland where the bulk of the texts circulating were without known authors, some centuries old, others more recent. Some texts were loosely translated, other adapted. Some had been travelling back and forth between oral and written transmission, most of them changing little by little with every transcript, sometimes shortened, sometimes added to. Such texts can easily be transformed into other texts, maybe in another genre, for example from a folktale to a ballad or from a ballad to a story, and all of a sudden they might have an author's name attached to them, or have dropped one. The association between text and author in this culture is thus very weak and by no means central. The reconsideration of scribal culture has thus blurred or even eliminated the boundaries between author and reader. 'Just the act of commonplacing transformed readers into authors', Stephen B. Dobranski argues, 'for it required a process of selecting, transcribing, and organizing that resulted in a 'personal construction of meaning'.⁵⁶ This understanding of commonplacing in Renaissance England in fact applies to all manuscript literary culture, an area to which the fixed order attributed – rightly or wrongly – to the culture of print does not apply.

2.5 Conclusion

English studies of early modern and modern scribal practices have, during the last quarter of a century, developed from obscurity to prominence. Simultaneously they have turned from the traditional, fundamentally literary-historical emphasis on individual authors and their work, towards studying the socio-cultural function of the production, circulation and consumption of manuscripts, under the influence of the book history tradition. The five pioneering studies published in the field in the 1990s by Mary Hobbs (1992), Harold Love (1993), Arthur Marotti (1995), Henry Woudhuysen (1996) and Peter Beal (1998) have many common characteristics. They all revolve around the literary culture of the upper classes in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, their poetry, tales and other prose

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2. For a recent deployment of these ideas in North American scholarship see Angela Vietto, *Women and Authorship in Revolutionary America* (Aldershot, 2005).

⁵⁶ Stephen B. Dobranski, *Readers and Authorship in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 55-56.

writing, and how these were in many cases circulating in handwritten form for the first century and a half after the advent of print. They all, at some level, probe into the political landscape of the time, with its continual threat of censorship and other hindrances to free expression. Some of them are presented as case studies to a greater or lesser degree while all aim at presenting a coherent impression of a hitherto obscure or ill-defined cultural phenomenon. A common feature in most of them is a focus on a distinct aspect of the whole spectrum of the textual realm, namely contemporary literature (mainly poetry) and its circulation via the medium of handwriting. This choice of subject leads to a strong analogy between the handwritten book and its printed counterpart. The texts are works by known authors, disseminated to readers via institutions of production, dissemination and consumption. The intermediaries between the scribe – taking the place of the printer in the print model – and the reader were in many cases the same as in Robert Darnton's communication circuit: binders, paper suppliers, peddlers, smugglers, etc. The systems surrounding the operation of the circuit are also the same: economic and social conjuncture, intellectual influences and publicity and political and legal sanctions. This approach thus runs into the same problem as Darnton's view on print culture: it over-emphasizes the status of the author as an inherent focus of literary culture and overlooks the aspect of survival suggested by Adams and Barker as an expansion to Darnton's model.⁵⁷ Books and the text they contained were not thrown away after use, like a discarded newspaper, but had a long and prosperous life of peer-to-peer exchange as they were read and re-read, lent, re-sold, inherited, copied and used as a source and inspiration for other texts, quite independently of the will or intentions of their original author/editor/scribe/printer.

This new account of early modern scribal culture has, in the very recent years, been canonized within the general literary history and book history of early modern England.⁵⁸ The gradual transformation from manuscript to print culture in early modern literary history and the sizeable and

⁵⁷ Thomas Adams, and Nicolas Barker, 'A New Model for the Study of the Book', in *A Potencie of Life: Books in Society: The Clark Lectures, 1986-1987* (London, 1993), pp. 5-43.

⁵⁸ See for example in the field of literary history: Arthur Marotti and Harold Love, 'Manuscript Transmission and Circulation', in David Loewenstein and Janel Mueller, eds, *Cambridge History of Early Modern English Literature* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 55-80. In the field of the history of the book, a similar trend can be seen in: John Barnard, D. F. McKenzie, and Maureen Bell, eds, *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*. Volume IV, 1557-1695 (Cambridge, 2002), especially its second section, 'Oral Traditions and Scribal Culture' (pp. 97-137), written by Harold Love, Peter Beal, and Mary Chan.

significant role of handwritten reading material in English literary culture during the Renaissance and the Restoration have become matters of common consensus within the scholarship of bibliography, literary history and cultural history and status. As Marotti and Love write:

The pen of the scribe scratched on regardless of the first creakings of the wooden press. Increasing literacy, the outcome of a modernising business and administrative order, fuelled an expansion of both systems of production: it was not a matter of the new one expanding at the expense of the old. Instead, each came to meet particular needs. While the press dealt best with longer texts and those required in large numbers, shorter ones directed at specialised readerships remained the preserve of the pen.⁵⁹

In their synopsis, Marotti and Love cement the two common notions on English Renaissance manuscript culture that were presented in the studies discussed earlier. The first is that this culture primarily involved the production, circulation and consumption of occasional poetry along with cases of dramatic and prose texts. Secondly, they emphasize that the extant manuscripts were by and large associated with specific circles, including universities, the court, and the Inns of Court but also aristocratic and middle-class households and their scribal networks and communities.

With the wave of studies into women's scribal culture and Margaret Ezell's approach to the locality of scribal culture and authorship, the scope of our view of post-Gutenbergian scribal culture has become wider, both in social space and time. Its focus has moved from the centres of culture and power to their peripheries, and the time frame has been stretched into the eighteenth century. The new image of the cultural landscape of early modern England that has emerged has been described by Sabrina Baron:⁶⁰

Midway through the seventeenth century and beyond, print and manuscript were equally viable and relevant modes of dissemination, not just for literary texts as Arthur Marotti, Henry Woudhuysen, and Harold Love have shown, and not just as a coterie phenomenon, but for political information relevant to most classes across the social spectrum of early seventeenth-century England. There is no evidence that print carried more influence on the formation of public opinion than did manuscript as at least one modern historian has insisted. Indeed, the early modern evidence quite often points to the opposite conclusion: much of the rhetoric about print and its function in the period were negative rather than positive. Suspicion of print endured through the age of the handpress, and manuscript retained a cachet.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Marotti and Love, 'Manuscript Transmission', p. 55.

⁶⁰ Sabrina Baron, 'The Guises of Dissemination in Early Seventeenth-Century England: News in Manuscript and Print', in Brendan Dooley and Sabrina Baron, eds, *The Politics of Information in Early Modern Europe* (London and New York, 2001), pp. 41-56.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

Studies of the scribal culture of Renaissance poetry still constitute by far the most detailed and comprehensive scholarship in the field of post-Gutenberg manuscript culture. The usage of the scribal medium among the fast-growing body of literate middle- and lower-class people in the eighteenth and nineteenth century is meanwhile an almost completely ignored subject within literary history and the history of communications in England. A number of studies which have emerged in recent years in numerous countries, from Continental Europe to Japan, have however brought to light the diversity of post-medieval scribal culture in terms of genres, periods and the status of agents. In this way the tapestry of early modern scribal culture has become denser and more comprehensive and has added considerably to our record of broader cultural history. The Icelandic case presented in the second half of this thesis has yet another dimension to contribute to this body of scholarship by offering a detailed close-range analysis of a popular manuscript culture which stretched into – and in fact blossomed in – the second half of the nineteenth century.

CHAPTER THREE

SCRIBAL STUDIES IN A SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT

3.1 Introduction

The subject of enduring scribal culture beyond the advent of print has, in the wake of the 'English school' of early modern manuscript studies, also been explored in other European countries and beyond. The review of some of these studies presented in this chapter adds new dimensions to the portrait of post-medieval manuscript culture by bringing new genres, a wider time frame, and a broader range of agents into the picture. The purpose of this chapter is primarily to strengthen the general synthesis of the rise of post-medieval scribal studies within the larger realms of literary history, cultural history, and the history of the book and to underline the common features and distinctive characteristics of early modern and modern scribal culture as they are represented in various studies.

This review looks at studies in three European countries (France, Italy, and Spain) and two Asian countries (Japan and China). Despite different conditions and approaches, all these studies argue in one way or another that the early modern and modern textual culture was not only driven by the advent of print, but that the existence of alternative media for ideas and expression must be acknowledged. These works suggest that the revision of our view of the cultural role of handwriting in the early modern and modern eras has just begun. Although certain genres, social groups, and eras have been well studied, vast sections of the continent of scribal culture are still unexplored. This is especially true for the latter period, between 1750 and 1900, when literacy and most importantly the ability to write became increasingly common among the general population.

3.2 Transmission of clandestine manuscripts

Almost concurrently with the rise of early modern manuscript studies in English literary and cultural history, there has been a strong trend in French historiography towards studies of the role of handwritten dissemination of texts in the early modern period. Among the first indicators of this was a

collection of conference papers published in 1993.¹ It focussed on texts circulating in manuscript in eighteenth-century France: student lecture notes, unprintable heterodox texts, transcripts of rare printed books, and *Les nouvelles à la main* or handwritten gazettes.² Three years later, the French journal *XVIIe siècle* designated a special issue to the theme of *Les usages du manuscrit*, containing 12 papers, ranging from the writings of Jansenists and Jesuits to juvenile memoirs and handwritten sources on women's history.³ The most recent and comprehensive account of the subject, concerned with the general features of the coexistence of scribal and print media in early modern France, is François Moureau's monograph *La plume et la plomb*, published in 2006. It argues at lengths for the significance of underground scribal circulation in the pre-revolutionary era.⁴

This revived interest in early modern script has, as in England, had an impact on general literary history and book history in France in the last decade or two. In his introduction to a collection of papers addressing *The Book and Text in France, 1400-1600*, Adrian Armstrong claims that manuscript use in the first decades after the advent of print in France in 1470 has been either neglected or considered as a subject on its own, rather than in relation to the new medium of print.⁵ This reflects, in Armstrong's view, a conventional partition between periods and subjects within literary and book history, where medievalists are concerned with manuscripts while early modern scholars work with printed material. By choosing the time frame from 1400 to 1600, Armstrong's book emphasizes continuity in book production rather than a swift rupture. 'Manuscripts not only influenced the appearance of early printed books,' Armstrong claims, 'they also coexisted with them, resisting throughout Renaissance culture and beyond as an alternative mode of transmission for material which, for commercial, ideological, or aesthetic reasons, was not printed'.⁶ In a similar vein, historian Susan Broomhall has adopted the concept of 'scribal publication' in her approach to women's writing in

¹ François Moureau, ed, *De bonne main: La communication manuscrite au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris and Oxford, 1993).

² See a short review of the collection: W. H. Barber, '[Review] François Moureau (ed.), *De bonne main. La communication manuscrite au XVIIIe siècle*', *French Studies* XLIX/2 (1995), p. 199.

³ *XVIIe siècle* 192, 48/3. *Les usages du manuscrit* (1996).

⁴ François Moureau, *La plume et le plomb: Espaces de l'imprimé et du manuscrit au siècle des Lumières* (Paris, 2006).

⁵ Adrian Armstrong, 'Introduction', *Book and Text in France, 1400-1600: Poetry on the Page* (Aldershot, 2007), p. 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

fifteenth- and sixteenth-century France, as much of it was only disseminated in multiple manuscript copies.⁷

Despite this apparent variety in the use of scribal media in early modern France from the sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth, the bulk of subsequent studies in the field have been connected with the political and cultural history of pre-revolutionary France. While the English studies have predominantly revolved around Renaissance and Restoration poetry of the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries (sometimes bringing in aspects of the religious and political environment of the time), their French counterparts have primarily been engaged with the philosophical and political writings that circulated in manuscript in the eighteenth century. By focusing on the production and diffusion of clandestine texts, these scholars have revised the history of ideas and their circulation in the age of the Enlightenment.⁸ In her chapter on informal networks in a recently published *Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, Ann Thomson gives account of what is now generally recognised as the function of underground, or clandestine, philosophy in Europe:

The existence of a considerable body of mainly eighteenth-century philosophical manuscripts in a large number of libraries throughout Europe, but particularly in France, was first studied in the first years of this [twentieth] century. The most recent list contains around 150 separate items, some of them found in many different libraries. These manuscripts, many of which also exist in semi-clandestine published editions, are the tangible evidence of a circulation of ideas in parallel and undercover networks throughout much of Europe during this period. They raise numerous problems concerning their authorship, distribution, and readership, which remain generally unsolved. They also give rise to questions about the circulation of ideas in general during the period and the reasons necessitating this sort of distribution.⁹

The label ‘clandestine philosophical manuscripts’ (*manuscrits philosophiques clandestins*) refers in this context to specific type of texts within a specific time frame: namely subversive and often anti-religious philosophy of the eighteenth century. Its existence was more or less confined to the upper crust of society, but defied both geographical and political boundaries. The buyers and readers of this underground literature were, paradoxically, close to the centre of power: courtiers, army officers,

⁷ Susan Broomhall, *Women and the Book Trade in Sixteenth-Century France* (Aldershot, 2002), pp. 4-5.

⁸ The most dynamic venue for these studies has been a scholarly journal dedicated to underground philosophical literature of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, *Le lettre clandestine*, launched in 1992. Among leading scholars in the field are Antony McKenna, Miguel Benitez, and Alain Mothu.

⁹ Ann Thomson, ‘Informal networks’, in Knud Haakonssen, ed, *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 121.

diplomats, and officials, and occasionally literate persons of middling status. These books circulated between societal centres and cosmopolitan circles, according to historian Jonathan Israel, passing from one country to another concealed in diplomatic bags and changing hands in capital cities and commercial centres like Amsterdam and Hamburg.¹⁰

Another paradox, arriving from this literature's illegitimacy, is between the recognition and anonymity of its writers:

Motives for writing, as distinct from trafficking in, such texts might encompass thirst for renown within these rarefied cosmopolitan circles but can scarcely have included a desire for profit. ... The foremost writers of clandestine philosophical texts were mostly men whose commitment to illicit philosophy remained hidden from the authorities and wider public, though they enjoyed appreciable reputations as scholars in other fields.¹¹

The core of the Radical Enlightenment was, according to Israel, an intellectually coherent body of ideas that he divides into two main categories: Spinozitic ideas, or those deriving from and referring directly to the works of Spinoza, and secondly the ideas in a group of texts with a strong philosophical kinship with Spinoza's work but no direct references to it.¹² Due to its heterodox nature, the existence of this block of ideas depended predominantly on scribal dissemination. One example of this genre that survives in numerous copies is *Traité des Trois Imposteurs* (a.k.a. *L'Esprit de Spinoza*), thought to have been written in the 1680s and preserved in around 200 copies from the first half of the eighteenth century. Despite being of little philosophical significance as such, according to Israel, it was 'the most ubiquitous and influential of the clandestine manuscripts throughout Europe as far afield as Stockholm, St Petersburg, Poland, and Hungary'.¹³ Considerable numbers of clandestine philosophical manuscripts produced and copied between 1680 and 1750 are preserved in European archives, notably in France, the Netherlands, and Germany, but also Scandinavia, Britain, east-central Europe, and Italy. This was a textual tapestry, according to Israel: 'Not only was this output generated by many different authors, professing divergent philosophies in disparate styles, there was also a

¹⁰ Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford, 2001), p. 686. See also by the same author: *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752* (Oxford, 2006).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 686.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 691.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 690, table 2, and p. 695. The number of extant copies of the other 'top 20' texts ranges from 10 to 100.

marked tendency to concoct collages, interpolating, borrowing, and mixing ingredients from diverse authors and traditions in a single text'.¹⁴

In recent years, this emphasis on clandestine texts has had an impact of studies on English manuscript culture and broadened its scope. An example of this is Justin Champion's study of the case of the Irish-born 'freethinker' John Toland (1670-1722) and his relationship to the production, function and consumption of manuscripts. Champion has attempted to build a bridge between the 'French school' of intensive studies into clandestine literature, and the 'English school' that is occupied with the socio-cultural function of early modern scribal culture.¹⁵ He remarks that:

Perhaps one of the most significant suggestions of Love's work, in particular, is to treat the scribal work as an object of sociological significance as much as an intellectual statement. The manuscript performs a connecting role in a system of sociability, bringing writers, scribes, readers, and the idea into a form of ideological community. Scribally circulated texts could be conceived of as 'a group possession' produced and read within (perhaps) specific institutional settings (legal inns, musical circles, political nexi like the Court or parliamentary connections). The circulation of scribal texts was a process whereby distinct control might be exercised over the conditions of access to the text: as there might be specific sites of reading, so might there be prescribed communities of readers. Just like the printed book, the manuscript was a bearer and signifier of a series of inscribed social relationships.¹⁶

A second point that Champion draws from the English scribal studies is their acknowledgement of the complicated relationship between manuscript and printed editions of texts and their reconsideration of the concept of 'publication', no longer assuming a simple trajectory from manuscript to print. This leads Champion to study manuscript and print as two coexisting forms of publication in the case of John Toland, with each serving its own purpose and obeying its own law.¹⁷ Champion's issue of interest in this case study is the hermeneutic question of whether the material form shaped the 'social meaning' of a text. This study and its emphasis on scribal dissemination of clandestine texts represents a certain cross-fertilization between two schools of post-medieval manuscript studies, the French and the English.¹⁸

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 685.

¹⁵ Justin Champion, 'Manuscripts of Mine Abroad'. John Toland and the Circulation of Ideas, 1700-1722', *Eighteenth Century Ireland* 14 (1999), pp. 9-36.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁸ These influences are apparent in recent studies of English literary history. See Thomas Cogswell, 'Underground Verse and the Transformation of Early Stuart Political Culture', *Huntington Library Quarterly*:

3.3 Coexisting media in early modern Italy and Spain

The manuscript culture of the early modern period in Italy and Spain has, over the last decade, caught the attention of scholars of literature and cultural history, following the trends of English and French scholarship. Literary historian Brian Richardson has in his work dealt with the coexistence of handwriting and print in Early Modern Italy.¹⁹ Movable type was introduced to Italy less than two decades after Gutenberg had mastered the technology and it had, by the end of the fifteenth century, reached nearly eighty cities and towns in Italy. Richardson sees this swift advent of print as a part of a developmental process in the field of bookmaking as it was largely based on foundations laid in the late Middle Ages when the market of manuscripts was evolving.²⁰ Furthermore Richardson maintains that the circulation of books in manuscript by no means came to an end once printing had become established in the late fifteenth century, though it certainly declined.²¹

This persistence of scribal practices and the coexistence of the two methods of textual circulation became the topic of a journal article published by Richardson in 2004.²² Here his temporal scope has been moved forward, from the late fifteenth century to the sixteenth century, and Richardson maintains that the scribal medium still had an important part to play at that time, alongside the growing print industry.²³ This aspect of early modern literary culture has, he says, been neglected in Italian scholarship, which has traditionally been more occupied with the texts themselves than the cultural context in which they were transmitted.²⁴ Richardson's approach to the literary culture of

Studies in English and American History and Literature 60/3 (1999), pp. 303-326; Harold Love, *English Clandestine Satire 1660-1702* (Oxford, 2002); David Colclough's *Freedom of Speech in Early Stuart England* (Cambridge, 2005) (in particular its last chapter; 'A Very Paschal Fit for Rome': Freedom of Speech and Manuscript Culture', pp. 196-250); and Katrin Ettenhuber, 'The Best Help God's People Have'. Manuscript Culture and the Construction of Anti-Calvinist Communities in Seventeenth-Century England', *The Seventeenth Century* XXII/2 (Autumn 2007), pp. 260-282.

¹⁹ His publications on the history of the book in Renaissance Italy include two monographs: Brian Richardson, *Print Culture in Renaissance Italy: The Editor and the Vernacular Text, 1470-1600* (Cambridge and New York, 1994) and *Printing, Writers and Readers in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge, 1999). On the more specific aspects of the subject, see: 'The Debate on Printing in Renaissance Italy', *La Bibliografia* 100 (1998), pp. 135-155 and most recently 'Print or Pen? Modes of Written Publication in Sixteenth-Century Italy', *Italian Studies* 59 (2004), 39-64. Richardson is currently working on a large research project on the three modes of circulation of literature in Renaissance Italy under the working title *Pen, Voice and Print: The Circulation of Literature in Sixteenth-Century Italian Society*. See <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/italian/penvoiceprint.htm>.

²⁰ Richardson, *Printing, Writers and Readers*, p. ix.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²² Richardson, 'Print or pen?', pp. 39-64.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

Renaissance Italy draws heavily from Harold Love's works and in particular his distinction between the three main types of scribal publication: 'author publication', 'entrepreneurial publication', and 'user publication'. Richardson applies these to the case of Renaissance Italy and makes a further distinction within the last category between non-commercial transcripts made for someone else and those made solely for the scribe himself.²⁵

The first question addressed by Richardson is that of why a sixteenth-century Italian publisher would prefer the mode of print (or the mode of handwriting) when distributing a text. The advantages of print publication are usually considered self-evident: speed, efficiency, fixity and the potential breadth of dissemination. But print also had shortcomings which benefited the manuscript medium. What has been called 'the stigma of print' in Tudor England was, according to Richardson, also in force in Italy where 'print could be seen as socially and intellectually demeaning in comparison with the traditional method of publication', notably among upper-class writers and in particular women.²⁶ The advantages of scribal publication were mostly related to its small scale and its sense of close communication between the like-minded. This sense of belonging to an in-group made handwritten books well suited to integrating literature into the conduct of social and political relationships, in which manuscripts were unique and valued gifts. Yet another advantage, related to the ones above, was the possibility to revise a text when creating a scribal edition.

Connected to the social aspect of manuscript transmission, but also to the malleability, as it has been called, of the handwritten text, was the potential for users to participate in the process of transmission. When transcribing a work, users could adapt or add variants to texts; they could write responses; and, just as an author could combine and order individual compositions in a certain way, so recipients too could organize texts in a personalized anthology.²⁷

Certain genres and types of writing were particular foci of scribal publication in early modern Italy. As in England it was lyrical poetry foremost, addressed to a specific person and therefore commonly passed on as a gift. A second field where scribal media maintained their role was the circulation of news. Historical or political writings, especially if they were of primarily local interest, circulated in handwriting, as did texts of a politically or religiously clandestine nature. The best known example of

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 41. See Love, *The Culture*, pp. 46-83, esp. p. 47.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

this is Niccolò Machiavelli, one of several major authors of the first half of the sixteenth century whose literary reputation was largely based on scribal circulation. Most of his works, including *Il Principe*, were initially created with scribal publication in mind, according to Richardson.²⁸ This decision can largely be traced to its unusual and explosive subject matter; publishing it to a wider audience might have restrained him in his writing and taken the edge off his criticism. Moreover, Richardson claims, the limited reach of scribal circulation might nonetheless have satisfied his goal to reach a certain group of readers in Rome and Florence.

At the end of his paper ‘Pen or print?’, Richardson suggests the continuing role of scribal publication in Italian literary culture beyond the sixteenth century by referring to Siena as a city with a thriving manuscript culture in the second half of the sixteenth century.²⁹ The most recent major output in the field represents, however, the further development of a socio-cultural approach to the multifaceted nature of communications in early modern Italy. In his 2007 monograph *Information and Communication in Venice: Rethinking Early Modern Politics*, historian Filippo De Vivo investigates the political uses of different forms of communication – oral, manuscript, and printed – in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.³⁰ In a study ranging from censorship and propaganda to printed pamphlets, graffiti, spies’ reports and rumours De Vivo challenges the boundaries of traditional political history beyond the patrician elite and involves the wider population, from humble clerks and foreign spies to notaries, artisans, barbers, and prostitutes.

In the last few years, the cultural history of the early modern era has been a flourishing area within Spanish historiography and according to historian James S. Amelang ‘[t]he history of the practices associated with the written word is by far the most buoyant field within the broader cultural history of the early modern era’.³¹ This cultural turn stems, in Amelang’s opinion, partly from the long-established strength of the history of the book in Spanish historiography. It combines traditional

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

³⁰ Filippo De Vivo, *Information and Communication in Venice: Rethinking Early Modern Politics* (Oxford, 2007). For some of his earlier work, see: ‘Paolo Sarpi and the Uses of Information in Seventeenth-Century Venice’, in Joad Raymond, ed, *News and Networks in Seventeenth-Century Britain and Europe* (London, 2006), pp. 35-50.

³¹ James S. Amelang, ‘Early Modern Spanish Cultural History: One Opinion’, *History Compass* 4/1 (2006), p. 166.

palaeography and the history of printing with the more recent theme of the social history of books and texts. An essential part of this new view has been a recognition of scribal media's role in early modern cultural and social history.

Historian Fernando Bouza has, over the last decade, studied and written about diverse modes of communication and their reception in early modern Spain: oral, writing, print, and images.³² These are the central theme of his monograph, *Corre manuscrito*, where he examines the production, consumption and circulation of manuscripts in the Iberian world in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.³³ In a similar vein as the scholars of English and French literary and cultural history before him, Bouza describes how the coming of the printing press led to differing functional specializations for handwriting and print, rather than an immediate takeover by print media.³⁴ And as in the cases of English Renaissance poetry and French (and European) clandestine philosophy, the scribal medium was primarily maintained among the upper classes of Spanish society, as summarized in a review by Carmen Peraita:

Manuscripts played a role in fashioning an aristocratic ethos, a distinguished culture eager to differentiate itself from the non-aristocratic *letrado* world. They functioned as objects of distinction, overtly more valuable than printed books, which, many perceived, were available to almost anybody ... Borrowing, exchanging and giving away manuscripts as precious gifts were frequent practices, which in addition to entailing a gesture of Ciceronian and friendly liberality, had a clear aristocratic, courtly dimension.³⁵

One of Bouza's subjects is the dissemination of already-printed texts in manuscript. He uses an example of a book of advice aimed at aristocrats, of which only one printed copy is preserved, but several handwritten copies. He argues that in such cases, the text had a double educational function deriving from the impact of the text itself on one hand and the act of copying it on the other.

³² Among Bouza's works are *Corre manuscrito: Una historia cultural del Siglo de Oro* (Madrid, 2001); *Palabra e imagen en la corte: Cultura oral y visual de la nobleza en el Siglo de Oro* (Madrid, 2003); and *Communication, Knowledge and Memory in Early Modern Spain* (Philadelphia, 2004).

³³ This summary is chiefly based on two short accounts available in English of Bouza's scholarship: Roger Chartier, 'Foreword', in Fernando Bouza, *Communication, Knowledge and Memory in Early Modern Spain* (Philadelphia, 2004), pp. i-xvi, and Carmen Peraita, '[Review] Fernando Bouza, *Corre manuscrito: Una historia cultural del Siglo de Oro*', *Variants. The Journal of the European Society for Textual Scholarship* 2/3. *Reading Notes* (2004), pp. 344-349.

³⁴ Peraita, 'Fernando Bouza', p. 345. 'With the rise of the printing press, manuscripts specialized in functions that clearly differentiated the scripted artefact from the typographic objects; obviously, manuscripts satisfied a desire for reserved writing, for secrecy'.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 346.

Bouza's studies show that for the early modern consumer of texts, manuscript editions had advantages over printed books, similar to those reported in previously cited studies. One was that copying allowed adaptations and alterations to fulfil the varying needs of different readers and different times. Genealogical texts were thus, for example, more widely circulated in manuscript than in print.³⁶ Avoidance of censorship was another factor in favour of manuscript dissemination and controlled circulation of scribally published material gave authors more freedom of expression in their writing. This was the case for writings with politically or religiously heterodox content, literature hostile to the monarch, and satirical compositions, all of which were circulated primarily in script. Yet another advantage was the capacity of the scribal media to react quickly to demand. This was also the case apparent with the circulation of news, both via correspondence and handwritten newspapers, as Peraita notes in her review:

Writing letters to inform of the latest events, making possible a prompt circulation of news, was a crucial script practice at Iberian courts. The manuscript form allowed court *novedades* to be easily and constantly rewritten. Moreover, scripted works enjoyed a reputation of non-commercial interest, which increased its credibility in opposition to the printed, commercially oriented text. Spontaneity and veracity were deemed a characteristic dimension of manuscript writing, to the extent that gazettes resorted to the strategy of presenting news as scripted texts. Printed news tended to be fashioned as originally handwritten papers, trying to achieve higher credibility for the product as well as to transmit an image of urgency.³⁷

All these findings correspond more or less to what the extensive studies of the dissemination of Renaissance poetry in England and pre-revolutionary philosophical and political writings in France have revealed about the duality of the early modern textual world and the function and occupation of each domain.

Fernando Bouza sets forth his argument against the general claim that the advent of printing had immediately resulted in the demise of the manuscript in early modern Spain in his first major publication in English, *Communication, Knowledge and Memory in Early Modern Spain*, published in 2004. Bouza formulates his argument around a concept of communication in the Spanish Golden Age that brings together speech, images, and written texts, all serving the same objective: the will to know

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 347.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 348. For the circulation of handwritten news in early modern Europe and its relations with its printed counterpart in Europe, see Brendan Dooley and Sabrina Baron, eds, *The Politics of Information in Early Modern Europe* (London and New York, 2001).

and create memory.³⁸ In his foreword to the book Roger Chartier describes the greatest originality of the study as how it makes a connection between two spheres of cultural history that had hitherto been separate: the history of reading on the one hand, and the history of the uses of writing on the other.³⁹ Within this cultural state, ‘manuscript composition constituted the essential instrument for the intellectual technique of the commonplace, which in literate settings, governed both reading and writing’, according to Chartier’s forewords.⁴⁰

Another prominent figure in this renewal of Spanish cultural history is Antonio Castillo Gómez, author and editor of numerous books on *cultura escrita* and the director of several research projects in the field over the last decade.⁴¹ A characteristic central to Castillo’s scholarship and that of his co-workers is an emphasis on ordinary people in Spanish cultural history and the day-to-day function of literacy and books. Like Bouza’s studies, Castillo’s is mostly set within the so-called golden age of Spanish history, including the time of Cervantes and the reign of Philip II. In his latest publication, *Entre la pluma y la pared*, Castillo addresses the constant presence of writing in daily life during the reign of Phillip II (1556-1598), a time when the scribal medium became an essential tool in everyday life, in bureaucratic as well as cultural realms.⁴²

The term social history of scribal culture (*La historia social de la cultura escrita*) has come into frequent use in Spanish studies of post-medieval manuscripts. This approach is outlined in an introduction of the bi-annual journal *Cultura Escrita y Sociedad* (‘Scribal culture and society’), first issued in 2005:

The journal *Cultura Escrita & Sociedad* appears in response to the recent flourishing of studies of the social practices of written culture in both the past and the present. Unlike other publications which centre on the book world or on the technical aspects of writing, *Cultura Escrita & Sociedad* plans to focus its scientific and editorial attention on what is known as the

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

³⁹ Chartier, ‘Foreword’, p. x.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

⁴¹ See for example his monographs *Escrituras y escribientes: Prácticas de la cultura escrita en una ciudad del Renacimiento* (Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 1997) and *Entre la pluma y la pared: Una historia social de la escritura en los Siglos de Oro* (Madrid, 2006); and the edited collections *Historia de la cultura escrita* (Gijón, 2001) and *Cultura escrita y clases subalternas: Una Mirada española* (Oíartzun, 2001). He is furthermore editor of the journal *Cultura Escrita y Sociedad* (2005-).

⁴² Antonio Castillo Gómez, *Entre la pluma y la pared: Una historia social de la escritura en los Siglos de Oro* (Madrid, 2006).

social history of written culture, understood as the intersection between the social history of writing on the one hand, and the history of books and reading on the other.⁴³

This approach endorses studies into the functions and uses of writing; of the conditions of acquisition of texts and the modes of their circulation, and their networks, comprising women as well as men, and the illiterate as well as the literate. The Spanish school of post-medieval scribal studies that has come into being over the last decade is thus a sign of a significant merger between manuscript studies and the sort of socio-cultural accent that the history of the book has applied to print culture.⁴⁴

3.4 Beyond the Gutenberg hemisphere

Book historian Peter F. Kornicki has in recent years studied manuscript culture as an important part of the more general history of the book in Japan during the so-called Edo period (1600-1868).⁴⁵ Although Kornicki acknowledges a handful of other scholars who have studied the endurance of manuscript culture in the seventeenth, eighteenth and even the nineteenth century, he argues that the larger picture has hitherto been overshadowed by the grand narrative of print history.⁴⁶ One explanation for this is, according to Kornicki, that most studies of the history of the book have been based on the collections of the major university libraries in Japan and that they usually hold little evidence of the vibrant scribal culture of the era. Such sources must be sought out in local libraries and archives.

As in the European historiography of book culture, the terminology is a certain giveaway of how the relations between manuscript and print have been seen in Japan. Just as western book-historians speak of post-medieval book history as print culture, their Japanese counterparts use the word *shuppan bunka* ('publishing culture') when referring to the production of books from the beginning of the Edo period.⁴⁷ The result in both cases is a marginalisation of manuscript culture, either overlooked completely or viewed as the remains of a dated and dying culture. This conception

⁴³ 'Revista *Cultura Escrita & Sociedad*: Presentación/Presentation'.

http://www.siece.es/siece/revista/revista_presentacion.html. (Accessed 19.4.2008).

⁴⁴ See a 2004 PhD dissertation from Universidad de Cantabria: Maria del Carmen Rubalcaba Pérez, 'Prácticas de cultura escrita: aproximaciones y realidades. Provincia de Santander, s. XIX', http://www.tdr.cesca.es/TDR-0309105-131443/index_cs.html. (Accessed 19.4.2008).

⁴⁵ Peter F. Kornicki, *The Book in Japan: A Cultural History from the Beginnings to the Nineteenth Century* (Leiden, 1998), pp. 78-111 and 'Manuscript, not Print: Scribal Culture in the Edo Period', *Journal of Japanese Studies* 32/1 (2006), pp. 23-52.

⁴⁶ Kornicki, 'Manuscript, not Print', p. 26.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

has, in Kornicki's view, 'led us into a serious misprision of book production in the Edo period, both because it was by no means the fate of all books to be 'published' and, more important, because manuscript production continued to thrive, even to the point that scribal publication can rightly be said to have lasted up to the middle of the nineteenth century'.⁴⁸ Kornicki's original contribution is to extend into the Edo period an image of duality that had already been considered as a truism for the earlier Kamakura and Muromachi periods, when Chinese (and Buddhist) books were almost exclusively distributed in print, while books in Japanese circulated in manuscript.

But what kinds of texts were written and re-written in Japan in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries? Kornicki divides handwritten material into two main categories, according to their motives and audience: private manuscripts and public manuscripts. 'Private' manuscripts were those produced with no intent of circulation but rather for the sake of devotion, artistic endeavour, or study. 'Public' manuscripts, according to Kornicki, were produced for circulation, sometimes for financial gain.⁴⁹ Private manuscripts survive in vast quantities and varieties in Japanese archives. These include documents of debts, taxation, rural administration, mercantile transactions, and other forms of social transactions that were frequently bound together and preserved as legal records and precedents. Other accounts of a less utilitarian nature are also preserved in abundance: accounts of journeys, personal poetry collections, and commonplace books or note books filled with lengthy extracts copied out for future references. An example of such commonplace books mentioned by Kornicki is a multi-volume compilation produced by members of one humble rural family in the early nineteenth century that contains extracts from various classic books that were available in printed editions. 'Whether or not the family owned copies of any of these,' Kornicki notes 'the extracts provide a valuable record of the availability of books even in rural districts, and the tastes of a rural reader'.⁵⁰ Some other manuscripts of this sort seem to be complete transcripts of texts already printed. Kornicki gives numerous suggestions for the reasons behind such practices, from religious devotion and artistic creativity to scribal parsimony and the rarity of the particular text.⁵¹ Some scribal copies of

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

secular literature were unique acts of calligraphy and decoration of exquisite quality. Such luxury editions are often referred to as ‘bridal books’. But much more frequent was the production of more ordinary copies for everyday uses. As in European societies, scribal production was used to disseminate forbidden texts in Japan and yet again this arrangement developed as an interaction between the two media. Kornicki gives an example of a book that had been published legally in 1786, but banned a few years later. Even though it was banned, a certain number of copies were by then in readers’ hands and the text continued to spread via handwritten copies made from the printed ones.⁵²

Public manuscripts, the second main category in Kornicki’s account, are those designed for some form of circulation: as a gift, an item of inheritance, or as a commodity. This class of manuscripts is less internally varied than that of private manuscripts, and comprises three categories: books of limited local interest, illicit books, and news. Kornicki identifies four motives for the creation of public manuscripts and the choice of media: the preservation and transmission of knowledge, the restriction of access to texts, local demand, and censorship. The first one, ‘[w]riting to preserve and transmit accumulated knowledge, even without any likelihood of seeing the results printed,’ seems to have been a widespread practice by the nineteenth century, even in rural communities.⁵³ Examples of this were farming manuals, testaments of rural autodidacts, and other types of moral and practical guidance to be passed on to the next generation. Interestingly, Kornicki categorizes such family transcripts as public manuscripts, rather than private, as it was not ‘a purely personal text’ but rather one made for the purpose of transmission within the family and as part of its traditions.⁵⁴

By restrictions to access, Kornicki is referring to the intentions of the author or the distributor to keep the dissemination of a certain text under control. These internal restrictions, as opposed to censorship that is employed by an external force, made manuscript an obvious choice for the diffusion of certain kind of texts.

This consideration applies particularly to a species of manuscript that appears at first sight to partake of the personal and private, namely manuscripts that recorded the hidden, or secret traditions, of various scientific, artistic, or performance-related pursuits, such as medicine,

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

cuisine, and flower arrangements. To publish in such cases was obviously to undermine the secrecy of the knowledge in question, and therefore to endanger its economic potential, so it seems obvious that these manuscripts must have been not only private but also secret.⁵⁵

This type of scribal publication thus aimed at distributing certain texts, but only among a certain group of people. But as one may expect, the fences did not always hold and these texts often gained a wider circulation than intended.

The issue of local interest and a small market is an important factor for the relations between print and script. Commercial printing was then, as it is now, dependent on having enough buyers to bring in an acceptable return. Strictly local relevance can limit a text's potential market, for example in the case of local history and topography. But the economics of provincial publication are not a sufficient explanation for the vigorous creation of manuscripts in this category. Accounts of local topography and history were not only issues of antiquarian interest but had practical importance for issues of legitimacy and social order, such as farmers' loyalty to a *shogun*.

Like many other early modern societies, Edo Japan applied various restraints to publications and the media which made scribal dissemination an important channel for banned or censored texts. This is the only category of public manuscripts that were commoditised in the manner Harold Love terms entrepreneurial (scribal) publication. A significant testimony to both the extent of censorship and the widespread distribution of illegal manuscripts is *Kinsho mokuroku*, a catalogue of banned books compiled by the booksellers' guild of Kyoto in 1771 that included illicit manuscripts as well as printed books that peddlers were advised not to sell. This list reveals not only that a large quantity of illicit reading material was circulating in Kyoto in the seventeenth century, but more surprisingly 'that these banned books were as likely to be found in the hands of a farmer as in the hands of a daimyo [feudal ruler], and that none of them sought to conceal the fact ...'.⁵⁶ Though clandestine literature could be regarded as dangerous due to its political, scandalous or sensual nature, it circulated in an enormous range and in large quantities. Kornicki synthesises his findings near the end of his essay:

Manuscripts were produced in abundance throughout the Edo period, it is clear, in spite of the proliferation of print, but this cannot be dismissed simply as the survival of outdated practices.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

Nor should it necessarily be supposed that the profusion of manuscripts indicates that the publishing industry was unable to meet the demand for printed books, or that printed books were hard to come by in rural areas. In the case of *hiden* texts, of local-interest books and illicit books, print and scribal traditions were complementary rather than in competition. In the case of manuscript copies of printed books, poor supply of printed copies may in some areas and at some times be the reason, but parsimony and the difficulty of acquiring copies of rare items were just as likely explanations.⁵⁷

Most extant manuscripts from rural areas are from the early nineteenth century, a period when access to printed books had become relatively easy in remote and sparsely populated areas. It is thus difficult to identify a direct correlation between the supply of printed material and the degree of manuscript use in the case of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rural Japan. ‘The important point,’ Kornicki reasons, ‘is that manuscripts continued to serve a purpose, or rather purposes, and they were purposes that, far from being threatened by print, complemented it’.⁵⁸ Kornicki emphasizes in his conclusions that manuscript ownership in rural areas was the norm rather than the exception, and some households owned little else. The production of manuscript books in Edo period Japan thus substantially contributed to supplying the ‘reading nation’ with material. This material was created in various ways. Primarily it was made from a borrowed copy, printed or handwritten. Manuscripts were not only lent from one individual or household to another, but also by commercially run libraries that handled manuscripts as well as printed books. The predominant flow of books in the Edo period was from the centres to the rural peripheries, and manuscripts, particularly manuscript copies of printed books, perpetuated the flow. Exceptions to this were texts of purely local interest or relevance. Recent studies of rural book ownership and their social functions have, according to Kornicki, acknowledged the surprising range and depth of some rural collections. But at the same time, they have completely overlooked the role of handwritten material and its substantial contribution to rural book ownership, in ways significantly different than the contribution of centralised print production.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 43-44.

Studies into the book history of early modern and modern China have revealed a somewhat similar pattern to that in Japan. In the mid-1980s, historian James Hayes made a case for the role of the specialist scribe in traditional Chinese society of the late imperial era:⁵⁹

The manuscript production to be found in the villages and its long coexistence and perpetuation side by side with printed books, in some places replacing and substituting for them, is evidence for the uniformity of the Chinese cultural heritage and for how highly its written basis was valued, how widely it spread, and how deeply it penetrated.⁶⁰

The results of Haynes' studies bring to light, in his opinion, a new understanding of the cultural circulation system of rural China and the nature of Chinese society in the nineteenth century and even earlier. Hayes detected in his studies three main types of books and manuscripts available to village families in nineteenth-century Hong Kong. The first group comprises twelve sub-categories, such as genealogical records, almanacs, guides to letter writing and contract making, ballads, popular poetry and prose narratives to name a few.⁶¹ Although much of this material had been printed and was available in that format, a good deal of it was also used through handwritten copies. These categories suggest that the use of writing was wide-ranging and common in the day-to-day lives of rural people up to the end of the Ch'ing era. The second main type, handwritten material produced by and for so-called 'specialists', involves the dissemination and practice of special knowledge of a traditional and sometimes occult nature in fields like *feng shui*, divination and fortune telling, charms and social rites and protocol.⁶² The third type comprises written material that provides the cultural and social context to daily life. Here Hayes is referring to often-unnoticed everyday uses of writing, like shop signs, occasional poetry scribbled down on notes, bills and public announcements.

The coexistence and interaction between handwritten reading material and printed books in early modern and modern China has been studied to a considerable extent over the last years, as the

⁵⁹ See James Hayes, 'Popular Culture in Late Ch'ing China: Printed Books and Manuscripts from the Hong Kong Region', *Journal of the Hong Kong Library Association* 7 (1983), pp. 57-83, and 'Specialists and Written Materials in the Village World', in David Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan, and Evelyn S. Rawski, eds, *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley, 1985), pp. 75-111.

⁶⁰ Hayes, 'Specialists and Written Materials', pp. 110. The scene of Hayes' case study is the small market centre of Tsuen Wan and its surrounding villages in the western part of the so-called New Territories of Hong Kong in the last phase of the Ch'ing era, ending in 1911. The term 'specialists', as noted in the preface of the book, refers to various groups that had and used the ability to write, like teachers and scribes who functioned as intermediaries between the literary culture and the illiterate masses.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 78-79.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 92-103.

recently published *Printing and Book Culture in Late Imperial China* shows.⁶³ There Cynthia Brokaw notes in her introductory chapter that Chinese book culture remained very much an imprint *and* a manuscript culture through the whole late imperial period, both because of the sense of prestige and value associated with the art of calligraphy and the economic necessity of producing books by hand due to poverty.⁶⁴ In both these cases, China and Japan, scholars have attempted to look at the circulation of texts in a narrow, grassroots context, rather than the sweeping, centralised context of traditional cultural and literary history. A viewpoint like this, brought from the history of everyday life to literacy, book history or literary history, is bound to produce a very different image of each field.

3.5 Conclusion

In a recent paper on manuscript circulation published in 2000, English historian Jason Scott-Warren notes that the phenomenon of enduring scribal culture in the early modern period ‘was probably pan-European, but there appears as yet to be nothing in Continental scholarship to rival the surge of interest witnessed in British, American and Australian studies’.⁶⁵ The first speculation within this quote been confirmed by recent publications and ongoing research on early modern and modern scribal culture, and in consequence the second one no longer applies, though the English-speaking world still boasts the most substantial body of scholarship in the field. The surge of post-medieval scribal studies has spread from England to Continental Europe and South-East Asia, and has also reached regions that have not been addressed here, such as Colonial America, the Middle East, and the Ottoman Empire, where scholars have observed the enduring role and multiple uses of the manuscript transmission of texts after the introduction of movable type.⁶⁶ These scholars have vigorously argued

⁶³ Cynthia J. Brokaw and Kai-wing Chow, eds, *Printing and Book Culture in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley, 2005). See in particular: Cynthia J. Brokaw, ‘On the History of the Book in China’, pp. 3-54 and Joseph McDermott, ‘The Ascendance of the Imprint in China’, pp. 55-104.

⁶⁴ Brokaw, ‘On the History of the Book in China’, p. 16.

⁶⁵ Jason Scott-Warren, ‘Reconstructing Manuscript Networks: The Textual Transactions of Sir Stephen Powle’, in Alexandra Shepard and Phil Withington, eds, *Communities in Early Modern England: Network, Place, Rhetoric* (Manchester and New York, 2000), p. 18.

⁶⁶ See for example Hugh Amory and David D. Hall, eds, *A History of the Book in America, Volume One. The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, 2000); Catherine La Courreye Blecki and Karin A. Wulf, eds, *Milcah Martha Moore's Book. A Commonplace Book from Revolutionary America* (University Park, PA, 2003); Mushdin Mahdi, ‘From the Manuscript Age to the Age of Printed Books’, in George N. Atiyen, ed, *The Book in the Islamic World: The Written Word and Communication in the Middle East* (Albany, NY, 1995), pp. 1-17; Geoffrey Roper, ‘Fāris al-Shidyāq and the Transition from Scribal to Print Culture in the Middle East’, in George N. Atiyen, ed, *The Book in the Islamic World: The Written Word and Communication in the Middle*

for the coexistence of the two media in textual production, transmission and consumption, and rejected the widely accepted narrative in which print promptly replaced the scribal medium in a revolution-like shift.

France, Spain and Italy, all addressed in this chapter, are, like England, countries that adopted Gutenberg's printing technique both swiftly and enthusiastically at the end of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth. Though these countries already had developed sophisticated circuits of textual transmission via professional scribes and scriptoria, this arrival rightly constituted a revolution in the production and circulation of written texts. What recent studies have unearthed, however, is that the previous manner of textual circulation, or 'publishing' if you will, did not disappear instantly after the advent of this new technology but continued to have an important function in a cultural structure of two (or more) media. It has been convincingly argued that for certain periods, groups, and genres, handwriting became and remained a more favourable media than print, either due to a deliberate preference or because of economic and socio-cultural conditions. Despite boasting a continuous print history exceeding Europe's by centuries, South-East Asia also cultivated a thriving scribal culture into the nineteenth and even the twentieth century. Scholars of Edo Japan and late-imperial China have investigated this scribal culture and its interrelation with everyday popular culture.

These diverse studies of various corners of the world and of time periods as much as five hundred years apart, from the first decades after the development of movable type into the age of telephone and radio, are all part of a widespread re-evaluation of the nature of the production, dissemination and consumption of texts in the early modern and modern periods. According to the grand narrative of modernization, Gutenberg's invention raised one of the pillars that modern societies rest upon and was one of the defining moments that separates the Middle Ages from the (early) modern period. The slow and inaccurate production of books by hand was succeeded by productive and precise mechanism in what often is regarded as the greatest 'information revolution'. The study of the practice of manuscript reading and writing and the production and circulation of handwritten texts

East (Albany, NY, 1995), pp. 209-231; Orlin Sabev, *First Ottoman Journey in the World of Printed Books (1726-1746): A Reassessment* (Sofia, 2004); and Orlin Sabev, 'Private Book Collections in Ottoman Sofia, 1671-1833', *Balkan Studies* (2003), pp. 34-82.

in post-medieval societies is a relatively new field which challenges this grand narrative. The common core of the numerous studies addressed here is to suggest that the printing revolution might neither have been as swift, as linear nor as predestined as usually thought. The social, cultural and economic settings of each case may have varied, as well as the processes of change, but all cultures studied have one essential feature in common and that is a lengthy coexistence of print and handwriting and a set of complex interactions between them.

PART TWO

EDUCATION, READERSHIP, AND SCRIBAL CULTURE IN NINETEENTH CENTURY ICELAND: THE CASE OF SIGHVATUR GRÍMSSON

THE HISTORY OF THE BOOK AND ITS USES IN ICELAND

4.1 Introduction

The two following chapters deal with two central notions about Icelandic cultural history that have been presented in twentieth-century scholarship and constitute the backbone of the ‘saga nation’ myth that is itself central to Icelanders’ national(istic) self-image. One is the idea of a golden age of Icelandic medieval literature, imposingly represented in both the surviving texts and their material artefacts, the vellum manuscripts. The second notion, the subject of chapter five, is the idea that Iceland had achieved near universal literacy by the end of the eighteenth century, commonly attributed to two somewhat contradictory factors: an unbroken secular literary tradition stemming from medieval literature, and a eighteenth-century literacy campaign by the Danish state and the Lutheran church under the banner of Pietism.

Icelandic literary history from its beginnings up to the mid-twentieth century is traditionally divided into three main phases. The first is the period of the medieval sagas, romances and chronicles, and skaldic and Eddaic poetry that constitute the ‘golden age’ of Icelandic literature, set roughly between 1100 and 1400. The ‘canon’ of this era includes the forty Icelandic family sagas; chronicles like *Landnámabók*, *Íslendingabók* and *Heimskringla*, that represent Nordic and early Icelandic history; and the poems collectively known as *Eddukvæði* (the ‘Poetic Edda’), derived from a small thirteenth-century vellum book, *Codex Regius*, which give unparalleled insight into Norse mythology and Germanic heroic legends.¹ The second phase, the early modern era, is commonly regarded as of somewhat less grandeur and abundance. Nevertheless, a canon of early modern literature in Iceland has emerged, comprising poetry, history, annals, autobiographies and travel books.² The third phase

¹ For a recent overview of Icelandic medieval literature, see Vésteinn Ólason and Sverrir Tómasson, ‘The Middle Ages’, in Daisy Neijmann, ed, *A History of Icelandic Literature*. Histories of Scandinavian Literature, Vol. 5 (Lincoln and London, 2006), pp. 1-173. Ólason writes on ‘Old Icelandic Poetry’ on pp. 1-63, and Tómasson on ‘Old Icelandic Prose’, pp. 64-173.

² See Margrét Eggertsdóttir, ‘From Reformation to Enlightenment’, in Daisy Neijmann, ed, *A History of Icelandic Literature*. Histories of Scandinavian Literature, Vol. 5 (Lincoln and London, 2006), pp. 174-250.

begins with the advent of modern literature and literary systems in the early nineteenth century. This grand narrative of literary and cultural history is firmly embedded in a wider cultural-political narrative of the Icelandic quest for independence, with its three stages: the ‘golden age’ of saga writing under sovereignty, the enduring ‘dark ages’ under foreign rule, and the national-romantic ‘restoration period’ of the nineteenth century.

Each of these chapters has four sub-sections, addressing important aspects of the trajectories of scribal and print culture in Icelandic history from medieval to modern times on the one hand, and the structures and levels of literacy on the other. In the first I will discuss Iceland’s medieval literary culture and emphasize its importance in laying the foundation of early modern and modern literary culture. The next section explores the history of printing and publication in Iceland, from its outset in the sixteenth century up to the beginning of the twentieth. The third part of this chapter approaches the largely ignored sphere of ‘scribal publication’ in early modern and modern Iceland from a literary-historical point of view while the fourth and final section discusses recent scholarly interest in the multiple uses of the scribal medium in Iceland during this same period. The aim of this wide-ranging review is to set the stage for my study of the case of Sighvatur Grímsson.

4.2 Medieval literature

The Latin alphabet is thought to have been adopted in Iceland in the eleventh century, over a century after Iceland’s settlement. Its advent is usually associated with the adoption of Christianity around the year 1000. But it is clear that the history of the written word in Iceland has from the earliest times involved both religious and secular work. The primary subjects of the earliest Icelandic writings were, according to the unidentified twelfth-century author of the so-called *First Grammatical Treatise* (*Fyrsta málfræðiritgerðin*), law, religious translations, historical lore, and genealogy, a claim supported by the oldest surviving Icelandic manuscripts and other contemporary sources.³ With the thirteenth century came a rapid growth in the composition and transmission of prose texts: semi-historical and semi-literary narratives that are now divided into various genres, according to content and style. The main categories of medieval Icelandic prose literature are five, as given by literary

³ Ólafur Halldórsson, ‘Skrifaðar bækur’, in Frosti F. Jóhannesson, ed, *Íslensk þjóðmenning VI. Munnmenntir og bókmenning* (Reykjavík, 1989), pp. 60-68.

historian Sverrir Tómasson: 1) kings' sagas; 2) national histories and pseudo-histories; 3) Icelandic family sagas; 4) chivalric sagas; and 5) legendary sagas.⁴

The most prestigious genre of Old Norse medieval literature is the corpus of Icelandic family sagas, 40 stories thought to have been written by anonymous authors some two or three centuries after the time the events are supposed to have taken place. The oldest of them was composed somewhere between 1220 and 1240.⁵ Oxford scholar Heather O'Donoghue defines the family sagas with three adjectives: native, secular and naturalistic, differentiating them from other kinds of medieval Icelandic sagas.⁶ Among the recurring themes of these sagas are feuds between families and chieftains, escalating spirals of killing and revenge, the clash between honour and friendship, the transition from heathen culture to a Christian one, and the end of the Viking era.

Another key genre in the literary world of medieval Iceland is the so-called legendary saga (*fornaldarsögur norðurlanda*). In terms of literary value these sagas are customarily held in less esteem than the family sagas. They recount tales, often fantastic, of people and events that took place in northern Europe before and around the time of Iceland's settlement. They are thought to have been written a little later than the family sagas, roughly between 1250 and 1650.⁷ The genre was defined and given its name in the nineteenth century by the Danish scholar Carl Christian Rafn with his anthology.⁸ In spite of Rafn's attention and even though they form one of the major categories of Old Norse literature, legendary sagas have until recent years remained on the margins of studies in the field.⁹

Translated and indigenous chivalric sagas (*riddarasögur*) have long occupied the lowest status in the literary hierarchy among those who controlled the printing industry as well as modern scholars. They had, however, a wide readership, as Matthew J. Driscoll has noted: of the extant indigenous

⁴ Tómasson, 'Old Icelandic Prose', p. 75.

⁵ For a recent comprehensive English edition of the corpus see: Viðar Hreinsson, general ed, *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders, including 49 tales*. Vol. 1-5 (Reykjavík, 1997). Close to the family sagas in style and content is a comparable number of shorter episodes called *Íslendingaþættir* ('Icelandic family tales'). Due to their kinship with the sagas, the tales are included in this comprehensive English edition.

⁶ Heather O'Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Short Introduction* (Malden MA, Oxford and Carlton Victoria, 2004), pp. 22-23.

⁷ Tómasson, 'Old Icelandic Prose', p. 146.

⁸ *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda: Eptir gömlum handritum utgefnar af C.C. Rafn I-III* (Copenhagen, 1829-1830).

⁹ See Torfi Tulinius, *The Matter of the North: The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth-Century Iceland* (Odense, 2002), p. 11.

chivalric sagas 'over half are preserved in forty manuscripts or more, and two, *Mágus saga* and *Jarlmanns saga og Hermanns* are found in over seventy manuscripts, making them arguably the most popular sagas of their – or any – type'.¹⁰ The corpus of chivalric sagas is much more loosely defined than that of the legendary sagas. A *Bibliography of Old Norse-Icelandic Romances* lists 53 chivalric sagas composed or translated in Iceland in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The extent and nature of romances composed in Iceland in the early modern period is both unlisted and mostly unstudied.¹¹

Central within the genre of historical and pseudo-historical writing in medieval Iceland are the chronicles *Íslendingabók* (the 'Book of Icelanders'), written by Ari 'the learned' Þorgilsson around 1120, and *Landnáma* (the 'Book of Settlements'), a string of genealogical accounts and family narratives of Iceland's first settlers.¹² Other historical accounts are the thirteenth-century *Kristni saga*, recounting the advent of Christianization in Iceland, and *Íslendinga saga*, by Sturla Þórðarson (1214-1284). The latter is a part of *Sturlunga saga*, a collection of twelfth- and thirteenth-century sagas that, along with a small number of other historical narratives, are collectively called contemporary sagas.¹³ Also relegated to the category of historical and pseudo-historical medieval writings in Iceland were biographies of religious figures and leaders (bishops, saints, and apostles), medieval annals, and translated pseudo-historical works on the Greeks, Romans, etc.¹⁴

The fifth genre is the so-called kings' sagas: biographies of ancient (and sometimes even mythical) Nordic kings as well as contemporary rulers. This genre was pioneered by the Icelandic medieval chroniclers of the twelfth century, and reached its pinnacle with Snorri Sturluson's

¹⁰ Matthew J. Driscoll, *The Unwashed Children of Eve: The Production, Dissemination and Reception of Popular Literature in Post-Reformation Iceland* (Enfield Lock, 1997), p. 4. The vast majority of these transcripts are post-medieval paper manuscripts, the greater proportion written in the nineteenth century.

¹¹ Marianne E. Kalinke and P. M. Mitchell, *Bibliography of Old Norse-Icelandic Romances* (Ithaca and London, 1985), p. ix. Confusingly the term 'romances' is used both in reference to *riddarasögur* alone and to *riddarasögur* and *fornaldarsögur* collectively. Adding to the perplexity is the ancient term *lygisögur* ('lie sagas'), applied to both genres. See Matthew J. Driscoll, 'Late Prose Fiction (lygisögur)', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* (London, 2005), pp. 190-204, and Jürg Glauser, 'Romance (Translated Riddarasögur)', in Rory McTurk, *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* (London, 2005), pp. 372-387.

¹² Tómasson, 'Old Icelandic Prose', p. 79.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 84-88.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 88-98.

Heimskringla ('Orb of the world'), a chronicle of Norse kings written around 1230. It fell into decline shortly after.¹⁵

It is clear from the extant medieval literature and from its authors' self-referential testimonies that literary culture had firmly taken root in Iceland long before the advent of print in the first half of the sixteenth century. Both religious and secular texts were written, copied, disseminated, read and heard via the medium of handwritten books. Documents were recorded and letters written. Earlier texts were transcribed, compiled, broken up, altered and edited and new material was added to the tapestry of medieval literary culture, which was unacquainted with the concepts of copyright, plagiarism and textual fixity. Despite what the grand narrative in the print revolution of early modern Europe would suggest, this entrenched manuscript culture by no means gave way with the emergence of print.

Indeed medieval Icelandic texts continued to be disseminated and consumed for centuries after their original composition, transmitted from generation to generation via scribal transcripts and communal reading out loud. This happened despite the fact that they were rarely published in print until the nineteenth century or later, and thus were mainly dependant on scribal circulation. As well, the vast quantity of narratives from the first centuries of Icelandic settlement and its North European pre-history that had been put into form prose during the late Middle Ages became the fodder for an emerging genre of narrative poetry, called *rímur*, that blossomed from the fourteenth century onwards. As has become apparent in recent studies, the saga genres of the medieval period also enjoyed an afterlife in the form of romances and sagas during the early modern and modern periods. As other and traditionally less-esteemed genres (post-medieval romances, legendary sagas and proto-novels) have escaped from the shadow of the medieval family sagas, the conventional narrative of Icelandic literary history, namely that there was an extensive gap in the production of Icelandic prose literature between the late thirteenth century and the advent of the modern novel, has come under revision in recent years.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 98-122.

4.3 The history of printing and publication in Iceland 1530-1890

The advent and course of print culture in Iceland, from the first half of the sixteenth century up to the end of the nineteenth, is an important backdrop to any analysis of scribal culture during the same period. This story reveals how strong a grip the Lutheran church had over the medium of print: printing was almost exclusively employed in the service of the church during its first 250 years in Iceland, while secular texts continued to be disseminated primarily in handwritten form. It is also evident that socio-economic circumstances were unfavourable for commercial publication in a small and sparsely populated rural market. Under such circumstances, the scribal medium proved much more functional for supplying reading material than the printing press.¹⁶ And rather than gradually fading away shortly after the arrival of print, scribal practices expanded with the increase in general literacy throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The first printing press in Iceland was established around 1530, under the supremacy of Jón Arason, the country's last medieval Catholic bishop at Hólar in northern Iceland.¹⁷ The oldest preserved book printed in Iceland was, however, produced only after the Reformation, around 1550, and for the next 250 years all publishing in the country took place on a single press, serving the Protestant publishing agenda and operated variously at the two bishoprics at Hólar and Skálholt.¹⁸

The Lutheran bishop Guðbrandur Þorláksson (1541-1627) was beyond doubt the most prolific publisher of early modern Iceland. More than 100 titles appeared during his long reign between 1571 and 1627.¹⁹ His ambitious aim was to supply both the clergy and the public with appropriate religious texts, an aim embodied most elaborately in the first complete edition of the Bible in Icelandic (*Guðbrandsbiblíja*), issued in 1584.²⁰ Among his other influential publications were a new collection of

¹⁶ Halldór Hermannsson, *Icelandic Books of the Sixteenth Century*. *Islandica* 9 (Ithaca, NY, 1913) and *Icelandic Books of the Seventeenth Century*. *Islandica* 14 (Ithaca, NY, 1922); Steingrímur Jónsson, 'Prentaðar bækur', in Frosti F. Jóhannesson, ed, *Íslensk þjóðmenning VI: Munnmenntir og bókmennning* (Reykjavík, 1989), pp. 91-115; Ingi Rúnar Eðvarðsson, *Prent eflir mennt: Saga bókagerðar frá upphafi til síðari hluta 20. aldar*. Safn til iðnsögu Íslendinga VIII (Reykjavík, 1994); Böðvar Kvaran, *Auðlegð Íslendinga: Brot úr sögu íslenzkrar bókaútgáfu og prentunar frá öndverðu fram á þessa öld* (Reykjavík, 1995); and Einar Gunnar Pétursson, 'Bókaútgáfa á biskupsstólum', in Gunnar Kristjánsson and Óskar Guðmundsson, eds, *Saga biskupsstólanna: Skálholt 950 ára – 2006 – Hólar 900 ára* (Akureyri, 2006), pp. 568-605.

¹⁷ Kvaran, *Auðlegð Íslendinga*, pp. 44-45.

¹⁸ Hermannsson, *Icelandic Books of the Sixteenth Century*, p. vii.

¹⁹ See Haraldur Sigurðsson, 'Fjögurra alda afmæli bókagerðar Guðbrands Þorlákssonar biskups 1575-1975', *Árbók Landsbókasafns Íslands 1975* (1976), p. 52.

²⁰ Kvaran, *Auðlegð Íslendinga*, pp. 50-54.

psalms (*Ein ný psalma bok*) in 1589 and a common sermon-songbook (*Graduale* or ‘Grallari’) in 1594, both widely used into the nineteenth century. These publications had a dual purpose: to reform and standardize pious singing in Icelandic churches and households, and to replace the preposterous, violent, lustful, and tasteless worldly poetry circulating among the Icelandic public with more appropriate material.²¹ Though the bulk of the books published by Guðbrandur were of a religious nature, he was also responsible for the first secular text printed in Iceland in 1578, a legal code known as *Jónsbók* which originally came into effect in the late thirteenth century.²² It had by then been reproduced extensively in handwritten editions for some three hundred years and, paradoxically, continued to be hand-copied throughout the early modern period, despite Guðbrandur’s edition and two reprints in 1580 and 1620.²³

The first decades of printing and publication in Iceland hardly amount to a media revolution of any kind. Only 42 preserved titles are known to have been printed in Iceland between 1534 and 1600, and seven more titles in Icelandic or by Icelandic authors were published abroad.²⁴ All except four of the extant titles were religious material, intended to spread the newly implemented Lutheran creed and reshape the religious (and sometimes literary) practices of the nation. With its small and limited output, this first period of printing and publishing history in Iceland serves as an overture for the remaining early modern era. From this relatively early advent of print rose, thus, not an extensive and vibrant commercial market of printed books, but a centralized and one-tracked trade, devoted to a single cause.

The seventeenth century in Icelandic book history began as the sixteenth had ended, with a stream of religious publications emanating from the bishopric at Hólar. It became, however, clear in this period that bishop Guðbrandur Þorláksson had a leaning towards secular learning, despite his

²¹ Hermannsson, *Icelandic Books of the Sixteenth Century*, pp. 38-39. The same ideology was behind the publication of *Ein ný vísnabók* (‘A New Poetry-book’) in the year 1612, with which Bishop Guðbrandur Þorláksson attempted to replace and renovate the main genres of secular poetry with religiously based and morally constructive poems.

²² *Lögbók Íslendinga* (Hólar, 1578). Its full title reveals that the book was printed on the request and initiative of lawman Jón Jónsson.

²³ Már Jónsson, ‘Inngangur’, in *Jónsbók: Lögbók Íslendinga hver samþykkt var á Alþingi 1281 og endurnýjuð um miðja 14. öld en fyrst prentuð árið 1578*. Sýnisbók íslenskrar alþýðumenningar 8 (Reykjavík, 2004), pp. 24-27.

²⁴ Hermannsson, *Icelandic Books of the Sixteenth Century*, p. xii. In addition to these, Halldór Hermannsson notes eighteen publications which have not survived but are mentioned in other documents. The majority of these references are, according to Hermannsson, too vague to confirm their existence.

often harsh words towards some types of popular literature. He had himself been educated in Copenhagen and inspired by the European Renaissance and Humanism. One outbreak of this inclination was when Guðbrandur hired a young scholar, Arngrímur Jónsson (1568-1648), to respond to what he saw as widespread misconceptions about Iceland and Icelanders in European literature of the sixteenth century by publishing historical and geographical accounts of Iceland.²⁵ These editions were, however, elitist and primarily aimed at European (including Icelandic) scholars, rather than general readers in Iceland.

After Guðbrandur Þorláksson's death in 1627 the printing press was run by his grandson and successor Þorlákur Skúlason for almost three decades without producing any secular texts.²⁶ His counterpart at Skálholt bishopric, Brynjólfur Sveinsson, had sought permission to print and publish religious as well as secular medieval texts, but due to fierce protest from the bishop at Hólar the permit was not granted.²⁷ Ironically it was Þorlákur Skúlason's son, Þórður Þorláksson, bishop at Skálholt from 1674, who was responsible for the publication of the first works of medieval literature at the end of the 1680s, forty years after his father had blocked earlier attempts by Brynjólfur Sveinsson. Four medieval chronicles and one contemporary account were printed in Skálholt between 1688 and 1690.²⁸ While this initiative was intended to meet the growing demand for historical lore in print, this did not mean – as the bishop assured his readers in the preface of *Landnáma* – that he would dedicate himself to antiquarian publishing at the cost of devotional material. The great majority of the over 60 titles issued during Þórður Þorláksson's 11-year tenure were of a religious nature.²⁹ His temporal venture thus did not mark the beginning of a secular publishing program; only a handful of the approximately 250 titles printed in Iceland (or Icelandic texts issued outside Iceland) in the seventeenth century were non-religious in content.³⁰

²⁵ The first of these was a small booklet in Latin titled *Brevis commentarius de Islandia*, published in Copenhagen in 1593, follow by a comprehensive account of Icelandic history called *Crymogæa*, published in Hamburg in 1609.

²⁶ Kvaran, *Auðlegð Íslendinga*, p. 71.

²⁷ Hermannsson, *Icelandic Books of the Seventeenth Century*, p. vii.

²⁸ These were the medieval *Landnámabók*, *Íslendingabók*, *Kristni saga* and Arngrímur Jónsson's *Gronlandia edur Grænlandssaga* in 1688 and a two-volume edition of *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* in 1689-1890. See: Kvaran, *Auðlegð Íslendinga*, pp. 77-78.

²⁹ Hermannsson, *Icelandic Books of the Seventeenth Century*, p. 62.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

The print industry in Iceland continued to be focussed on religious material throughout most of the eighteenth century. By mid-century, though, Icelandic readers were exposed to new kinds of printed material with the publication of twelve of the shorter Icelandic family sagas in two volumes, and of two translated chapbooks akin to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (*Robinsonades*).³¹ The initiative and financial backing in both cases came not from the church or the bishop at Hólar but from a secular official, Björn Markússon, who had in 1754 been appointed overseer of the diocese after the death of Bishop Halldór Brynjólfsson.³² In the preface to 'Nokkrir margfróðir söguþættir', Björn Markússon maintained that the market for religious books was satiated at the moment and unsold stacks were lying at the bishopric, and that further output in that field would only do further harm to the printing house. Rather than let the press stand idle, he had decided to publish sagas to inform and entertain his countrymen.³³

As in the seventeenth century, Björn Markússon's enterprise did not manage to impel a sustained trend towards the publication of fictional or historical texts, but the church-run printing and publishing industry was entering its last phase. When a group of laymen acquired permission to print secular texts alongside the church-run press at Hólar in the 1770s, the modern commercial publication of secular books began to put down roots in Iceland. The bishop at Hólar retained the exclusive rights to print religious material, but for the first time there were two printing presses operating at the same time in Iceland. However, even then, the growing conditions were extremely harsh and advancement slow. This new printing press, on the island of Hrappsey off the western coast of Iceland, was in operation for a little over twenty years and published 83 titles during that period, most of them with secular content.³⁴ Its publishing policy had two main threads which were intertwined. One was an emphasis on practical content, characteristic of the Enlightenment era: the press issued books and pamphlets on fundamental subjects of civil society, like law and politics, and texts aimed at educating

³¹ The two saga-volumes are *Agiætar Fornmanna Sögur* and *Nokkrir marg-fróðir sögu-þættir Íslendinga*. The two chapbooks have the joint heading: *Þess Svenska Gustav Landskrona og þess engelska Bertholds faabreitilegar Robinsons, edur Liifs og ævesögur*. On the latter publication, see Svanhildur Gunnarsdóttir, 'Þýddir reyfarar á íslenskum bókamarkaði um miðja 18. öld', *Ritmennt* 8 (2003), pp. 79-92.

³² Kvaran, *Auðlegð Íslendinga*, p. 90. A new bishop, Gísli Magnússon, was appointed in 1755 but Björn held the financial authority over the bishopric and what seems to have been full control over the printing press up to 1765.

³³ Gunnarsdóttir, 'Þýddir reyfarar', p. 89.

³⁴ On the history of the Hrappsey press, see Kvaran, *Auðlegð Íslendinga*, pp. 99-109.

the average farmer on agriculture and household management.³⁵ The other main thread of book production at Hrappsey was popular literature, exemplified by eight *rímur* cycles by early modern and modern poets and two sagas, one medieval and one contemporary, published between 1777 and 1784.³⁶

This spurt in the publication of popular literature was, however, cut short in 1794, when the Hrappsey press came under the control of an Enlightenment learned society, called Landsuppfræðingafélagið, and moved to the manor of Leirárgarðar in southwestern Iceland.³⁷ The press at Hólar was shut down shortly after and merged with the one at Leirárgarðar. Once again there was only one printing press operating in the country, this time under secular control, as church domination was replaced by the hegemony of Enlightenment ideology. The Enlightenment was personified by Iceland's chief judge Magnús Stephensen, who was unsympathetic towards popular literature, to say the least.³⁸

Magnús Stephensen ruled as an 'enlightened monarch' over printing and publication in Iceland for thirty years, until the press came under the command of his son, Ólafur Stephensen, in 1831. Ólafur did not share his father's loathing for popular literature and thus a brief period of *rímur*-publication began again, although the only example of prose literature published in his time was a reprint of an earlier publication of *Njáls saga* in 1844.³⁹ In that same year, 1844, the printing press was moved to Reykjavík, which was at that time gradually growing into its role as Iceland's capital, and was given official institutional status and an appropriate name, *Prentsmiðja landsins* ('The National Press'). The press would continue in this form until it was sold to the printer who operated it in 1876, and during that period it could sometimes be hard for independent publishers to get access to, as its

³⁵ A prime example is: Björn Halldórsson, *Atli edr Raadagiördir Yngismañs um Bwnad sinn* (Hrappsey, 1780), a book of instructions for young farmers. Among other publishing novelties from that time were the first journal published in Iceland, *Íslandske Maanedstidender* (1773-1776), a monthly gazette published in Danish and principally aimed at a Danish market, and the first reading primer issued independently from Luther's *Catechism*: Gunnar Pálsson, *Ljtid wngt Stöfunar Barn* (Hrappsey, 1782).

³⁶ See Kvaran, *Auðlegð Íslendinga*, pp. 102-105. *Úlfars rímur sterka* by Þorlákur Guðbrandsson Vídalín (ca. 1672-1707) was in 1775 the first secular *rímur* cycle to be issued in print in Iceland. The two sagas were the family saga *Egils saga* and the newly composed *Ármanns saga* by magistrate Halldór Jakobsson.

³⁷ On Icelandic Enlightenment societies and their publications, see: Helgi Magnússon, 'Fræðafélög og bókaútgáfa', in Ingi Sigurðsson, ed, *Upplýsingin á Íslandi: Tíu ritgerðir*. (Reykjavík, 1990), pp. 183-215.

³⁸ Ingi Sigurðsson, *Hugmyndaheimur Magnúsar Stephensen* (Reykjavík, 1996), pp. 133-135.

³⁹ Ten *rímur* cycles were printed in Viðey between 1829 and 1844, most of them by contemporary poets like Sigurður Breiðfjörð (1798-1848).

capacity was low and official publications had priority. The events of 1844 can, nevertheless, be seen as the much belated starting point of an urban, market-oriented print culture. A second printing press was founded in Akureyri, the largest town in northern Iceland, in 1853, and in its first years a third of all published books in Iceland were printed there.⁴⁰ In the last quarter of the century, small printing presses were founded in other parts of the country, making way for a printing culture in its modern sense by the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century.⁴¹

The publication of saga literature in popular editions aimed at a wide audience did not become a substantial enterprise until the very end of the nineteenth century. The bulk of the Icelandic family sagas were unavailable in popular editions until publisher and bookseller Sigurður Kristjánsson launched his series in affordable ‘pocket’ editions around 1890.⁴² These editions became immensely popular among Icelandic readers, initial print runs were as large as 4000 copies, and the most popular titles had been printed in 10,000 copies when Sigurður Kristjánsson retired in 1929.⁴³ Of the other types of saga literature, only a small fraction was available in affordable editions before 1890.⁴⁴ Alongside the growing output of traditional literature in popular editions came what Loftur Guttormsson has termed *nýju bókmenntirnar* (‘the new literature’).⁴⁵ The bulk of secular publishing in Icelandic, between 1850 and 1880 consisted of informative popular books on various subjects and fields (natural sciences, humanities, economics, and politics) published in a post-Enlightenment and nationalistic spirit in order to inform and educate the male middle class within the existing social and cultural structure, in other words, Iceland’s farmers. The period also saw the coming of modern literature, including the first Icelandic modern novelists and romantic and later naturalistic poets, as well as a considerable rise in the publication of both national and local periodicals and journals.

⁴⁰ Kvaran, *Auðlegð Íslendinga*, pp. 183-190.

⁴¹ Guttormsson, ‘Framleiðsla og dreifing’, pp. 46-48.

⁴² Kvaran, *Auðlegð Íslendinga*, pp. 178-179 and 262-264.

⁴³ Gils Guðmundsson, ‘Sigurður Kristjánsson bóksali og bókaútgefandi’, in *Þeir settu svip á öldina*. Íslenskir athafnamenn I (Reykjavík, 1987), pp. 226-227.

⁴⁴ Four chivalric romances, issued in a single volume in Reykjavík in 1852, were the first sagas of the genre to be printed in Iceland, followed by two romances published for the Icelandic market in Copenhagen in 1859 and ten more in Reykjavík between 1857 and 1886. Legendary sagas were not published for an Icelandic audience for decades after C. C Rafn’s comprehensive edition in 1829-1830. The first popular editions of the genre were *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda* (Reykjavík, 1885-1889), edited by Valdimar Ásmundsson and published by Sigurður Kristjánsson.

⁴⁵ Loftur Guttormsson, ‘Leshættir og bókmenning’, in Loftur Guttormsson and Ingi Sigurðsson, eds, *Alþjóðmenning á Íslandi 1830-1930: Ritað mál, menntun og félagshreyfingar* (Reykjavík, 2003), pp. 204-208.

The late maturity of Icelandic print culture and the virtual lack of a (printed) book market until the second half of the nineteenth century is one of the most distinctive characteristics of Iceland's early modern and modern cultural history. It is obvious to anyone who looks into Icelandic book history that the general western model of a 'print revolution' set off by Gutenberg's invention of moveable type does not apply there. This is not because the technology or equipment was lacking – the first printing press was set up less than 100 years after Gutenberg's invention – and certainly not because literary culture was held in low esteem. The most commonly cited explanation is that print culture was imported, and for most of the early modern period controlled, by the church and almost exclusively employed in its service. The new medium was used to promote the Christian faith in accordance with the Lutheran doctrine of a direct association between God and his flock, and was, with few exceptions, limited to that function. Other aspects of literary culture were neglected. Texts qualified for publication on ideological grounds, and the socio-economic circumstances of a scantily populated and extremely poor rural community of 40-60,000 people did not favour commercial publication in print. A second main characteristic of the history of Icelandic textual communications, parallel to the faltering development of printing and formal publication, is the persistent and in fact escalating prevalence of scribal publication throughout the early modern and modern period. The dynamic and wide-ranging usage of the scribal medium in post-Gutenbergian Iceland manifested itself in the production and dissemination of both medieval literary heritage and contemporary texts (poetry, prose, historical lore, law, natural history, geography etc.). These activities have, by and large, been ignored and overlooked by scholars of Icelandic literary studies and cultural history.

4.4 Unpublished post-medieval texts⁴⁶

Judging only from the history of printing and publication in Iceland, one might assume the supply of reading material to have been very limited. In fact the canon of medieval literature continued to circulate among new generations of readers and audience via transcripts until it became available in affordable printed editions around the end of the nineteenth century. The enduring scribal tradition of

⁴⁶ The term 'unpublished' is used here to refer to early modern and modern texts that were not published in print in their own time and have either never been published at all, or published only some decades or centuries after their original composition and then usually in scholarly editions.

early modern and modern Iceland involved, however, more than the transmission of traditional medieval texts. The vast variety of texts and genres circulating in the early modern and modern eras represented a literary culture far wider and larger than both the medieval canon or the limited output of Iceland's printing presses would suggest.

The myth of an almost complete stop in the production of Icelandic prose literature from the late fourteenth century up to modern times has been challenged recently, particularly by Matthew J. Driscoll, who has concluded from the large number of surviving post-Reformation romances that saga production in Iceland was 'every bit as great in the eighteenth century as it was in the thirteenth'.⁴⁷ The main genres of medieval saga literature did, to some extent, have an 'afterlife' in the form of those early modern and modern compositions that were loyal to earlier traditions. A small number of post-medieval texts have been classified as 'later family sagas'; they were written in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and well into the nineteenth century.⁴⁸ Much more tellingly, Icelanders continued to write romances by the hundreds (both chivalric sagas and legendary sagas) way past their heyday in the Middle Ages and even as far as into the twentieth century, though there has not been much general recognition of this extensive activity. This is not all new knowledge. Literary historian Stefán Einarsson claimed half a century ago that the chivalric tales composed in Iceland numbered no fewer than 265, including both medieval and modern compositions.⁴⁹ Decades later, Matthew J. Driscoll adds that 'if all the works to which the term 'romance' can be applied are included, the total rises to easily four times that'.⁵⁰ The overwhelming majority of these post-medieval sagas have never been published in print, neither in scholarly nor popular editions, and its mass looms as the 'dark matter' of Icelandic literary history.

The established status of Jón Thoroddsen's *Piltur og stúlka* (1850) as the first Icelandic novel has, in recent years, been undermined by studies of earlier unpublished texts. The late-eighteenth

⁴⁷ Driscoll, *The Unwashed Children*, p. vii.

⁴⁸ Tómasson, *Old Icelandic Prose*, pp. 138-139. Eleven sagas and one Icelandic family tale fall into this category, according to the database www.saganet.is. Some of these sagas were included in a comprehensive edition of the genre in 1946 whose editor argues that, as they are written in the spirit and style of the family saga, the anthology would not be complete without them. See Guðni Jónsson, 'Formáli', *Íslendingasögur I* (Reykjavík, 1946), pp. xxvi-xxvii.

⁴⁹ Stefán Einarsson, *A History of Icelandic Literature* (New York, 1957), p. 165.

⁵⁰ Driscoll, *The Unwashed Children*, p. 1.

century works of Eiríkur Laxdal (1743-1816) were little known and only preserved in manuscript at the end of the twentieth century when they became the subject of a study by Anna María Þorsteinsdóttir, who has successfully argued for their novelistic elements and characteristics.⁵¹ The works of pastors Jón Bjarnason (1721-1785) and Jón Oddson Hjaltalín (1749-1835), according to literary historian Margrét Eggertsdóttir, also ‘show a certain evolution in the direction of the novel’.⁵² Jón Bjarnason is known to have written the ‘Robinsonade’ *Sagan af Parmes Loðinbirni* in the second half of the eighteenth century, while ten original stories are attributed to Jón Hjaltalín, making him among the most prolific writers in Icelandic literary history, albeit almost completely forgotten until recent years.⁵³ The prose work of Eiríkur Laxdal, Jón Bjarnason and Jón Oddson Hjaltalín forms, thus, in some sense, a bridge between the tradition of romances and the modern novel.⁵⁴

Romances and proto-novels aside, the bulk of early modern secular prose was in the form of antiquarian and historical material of various kinds, narratives of recent occurrences, travel books and autobiographies. The growing interest in history was manifested itself in the revival of annals-writing in the first half of the seventeenth century, after a more than 200-year standstill. Bishop Oddur Einarsson at Skálholt commissioned parish minister Jón Egilsson to write the so-called *Biskupaannáll* (‘Bishops’ annals’) in 1605, and autodidact Björn Jónsson at Skarðsá wrote *Skarðsárannáll* in the 1630s, commissioned by Bishop Þorlákur Skúlason at Hólar. Despite having such powerful patrons, neither of these accounts was published in print until decades or centuries later, but both enjoyed considerable circulation in manuscript form.⁵⁵ The so-called *Tyrkjarán* (the ‘Turkish Raid’) of 1627, an incursion by North African corsairs on the islands of Vestmannaeyjar off Iceland’s southern coast and on communities in Berufjörður on the eastern coast, resulted in the abduction of more than three

⁵¹ See María Anna Þorsteinsdóttir, *Tveggja heima sýn: Saga Ólafs Þórhallasonar og Þjóðsögurnar*. Studia Islandica 53 (Reykjavík, 1996). The two extant stories by Eiríkur Laxdal have recently been edited by Anna María Þorsteinsdóttir and writer Þorsteinn Antonsson: *Saga Ólafs Þórhallasonar: Álfasagan mikla: Skáldsaga frá 18. öld* (Reykjavík, 1987) and *Ólandssaga* (Reykjavík, 2006).

⁵² Eggertsdóttir, ‘From Reformation’, p. 241.

⁵³ On Parmes’ saga see Þorfinnur Skúlason, *Loðnir lófar og loðinn Björn: Sagan af Parmes Loðinbirni í menningarsögulegu samhengi 18. aldar* (unpublished master’s thesis, University of Iceland, 2004). The writings of Jón Hjaltalín have over the last decade and a half been studied by Matthew J. Driscoll. See most recently his edition of four of Jón Hjaltalín’s stories: Jón Oddsson Hjaltalín, *Fjórar sögur frá hendi Jóns Oddssonar Hjaltalín*. Rit Árnastofnunar 66 (Reykjavík, 2006).

⁵⁴ Eggertsdóttir, ‘From Reformation to Enlightenment’, p. 245.

⁵⁵ The same goes for Pastor Jón Halldórsson’s extensive historical account of the church and Christianity in Iceland, written in the early eighteenth century but only published two centuries later. See Jón Halldórsson, *Biskupasögur Jóns prófasts Halldórssonar í Hítardal I-II* (Reykjavík, 1903-1915).

hundred inhabitants. This traumatic event spawned a considerable body of written accounts which were circulated solely in handwritten form up to the mid-nineteenth century.⁵⁶ Many more of the most interesting and best-known prose texts of the period are of an autobiographical nature and narrate exceptional experiences. These include the *Reisubók* ('Travelogue') of Jón Ólafsson 'traveller to India', written around 1660, Jón Magnússon's *Píslarsaga* ('A Story Of Sufferings') from around the same time, and later the autobiography of Jón Steingrímsson, written in the 1780s. None of these became available in print until the early twentieth century.⁵⁷

The dissemination of Icelandic poetry varied by genre. Religious poetry (psalms, hymns, and devout verse) stood a chance of being published. Popular secular genres, meanwhile, were systematically excluded from print media well into the eighteenth century. Despite its advantaged access to print media, religious poetry was in fact largely circulated in handwritten form and, in some cases, concurrently in both media. The biggest name in Iceland's early modern cultural history is that of poet and pastor Hallgrímur Pétursson, author of *Passíusálmarnir* ('The Passion Hymns'). Despite 83 issues in print from 1666 to date, they are preserved in over 30 handwritten transcripts. An anthology of some of Hallgrímur's other works, commonly known as *Hallgrímskver*, was first printed in Hólar in 1755 and repeatedly reissued. Despite this extensive publication, hundreds of manuscripts preserved in the National Library of Iceland hold examples of Hallgrímur Pétursson's works, including his *rímur* and other secular poetry.⁵⁸ The Reformation fostered three prolific hymnists and poets among the first generation of Lutheran pastors: Ólafur Jónsson from Sandar, Einar Sigurðsson

⁵⁶ Eggertsdóttir, 'From Reformation', pp. 218-219. See also Þorsteinn Helgason, *Stórtíðinda frásögn. Heimildir og sagnaritun um Tyrkjaránið á Íslandi árið 1627* (unpublished master's thesis, University of Iceland, 1996). The most important accounts are *Frásögn Kláusar Eyjólfssonar* written in July 1627, Pastor Ólafur Egilsson's *Reisubók* ('Travel-book'; he was among those enslaved), and *Tyrkjaráns saga* by the chronicler Björn Jónssonar at Skarðsá. The *Reisubók* was first published in Copenhagen in the 1740s and in Icelandic in 1852, and *Tyrkjaráns saga* was first issued in Reykjavík in 1866. The account of Kláus Eyjólfsson has, however, never been published in print.

⁵⁷ These works were first published in print as Jón Ólafsson, *Ævisaga Jóns Ólafssonar Indíafara samin af honum sjálfum* (1661) (Copenhagen, 1908-1909); Jón Magnússon, *Píslarsaga Síra Jóns Magnússonar* (Copenhagen, 1914); and Jón Steingrímsson, *Æfisaga Jóns prófasts Steingrímssonar* (Reykjavík, 1913-1916). A similar story applies to two travel accounts reaching all the way to China, also from the eighteenth century: *Viðferlissaga* by Eiríkur Björnssonar, written in 1768 but first published in 2007, and the *Ferðasaga* by Árni Magnússon from Geitastekkur, issued in 1945. See Steinunn Inga Óttarsdóttir, 'Þetta er ei annað en eins manns sjóferðaskrif.' Um tvær ferðasögur frá 18. öld', *Skírnir* 175 (Spring 2001), pp. 7-32.

⁵⁸ See Hallgrímur Pétursson, *Ljóðmæli*. I, 1-1,3. Eds, Margrét Eggertsdóttir, Kristján Eiríksson and Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir (Reykjavík, 2000-2005). This comprehensive scholarly publication of Hallgrímur Pétursson's works is planned to number eight volumes.

from Heydalir and Jón Þorsteinsson from Vestmannaeyjar. Although some of their work was published in print at the time, the majority has remained unpublished and yet circulated widely in manuscript throughout the early modern and modern period. Large quantities of transcripts of hymns and other spiritual poetry from the eighteenth century suggest that such texts were immensely popular and that even in the genres which had dominated the print media, scribal dissemination was an option that was in full flower alongside the printing press.⁵⁹

The biggest literary genre of the early modern period was *rímur*, long epic poems typically reciting the adventures of ancient champions and warriors. Just over 1000 cycles from this long period are preserved and some 300 more are known to have existed from other sources. To date, only a fraction of the extant *rímur* cycles have been published.⁶⁰ The bulk of them are preserved in one or more handwritten copies, autographs and/or transcripts, many of them numbering in the tens. The *rímur* and other poetry of Guðmundur Bergþórsson (1656-1705) is preserved in more than 400 manuscripts, and the work of the most productive poet of the next generation, Árni Böðvarsson (1713-1776), is preserved in a little under 300 manuscripts. Sigurður Breiðfjörð's poems from the first half of the nineteenth century are preserved in about 250 manuscripts from the nineteenth century. This extensive scribal circulation happened despite the fact that these poets were among the few whose works were published in the last quarter of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century.

Moving beyond literary and historical genres, recent studies have revealed considerable scribal dissemination of more practical texts. It is an interesting paradox that the first secular text that was printed in Iceland, the legal code *Jónsbók* (1578), is also the secular text that is preserved in the greatest number of handwritten transcripts. These transcripts, notably, date not only from before the printed edition but also from throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and to some degree from the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries.⁶¹ Historian Örn Hrafnkelsson has studied the

⁵⁹ Eggertsdóttir, 'From Reformation', p. 239. For recent anthologies of two of these poets, see: Einar Sigurðsson, *Ljóðmæli*. Rit Árnastofnunar 68. Eds, Jón Samsonarson and Kristján Eiríksson (Reykjavík, 2007), and Ólafur Jónsson, *Í höndum þinum minn herra Guð hefur þú teiknað mig: Brot úr sálum og kvæðum séra Ólafs Jónssonar á Söndum í Dýrafirði*. Ed, Kári Bjarnason (Reykjavík, 2006).

⁶⁰ For the most comprehensive overview of the genre see Finnur Sigmundsson, *Rímnatal I-II* (Reykjavík, 1966). A rough survey reveals that around 15% of the *rímur* cycles noted in Finnur Sigmundsson's *Rímnatal* had been printed by the year 1900.

⁶¹ Már Jónsson, 'Inngangur', *Jónsbók lögbók Íslendinga hver samþykkt var á Alþingi 1281 og endurnýjuð um miðja 14. öld en fyrst prentuð árið 1578* (Reykjavík, 2004), pp. 26-27. This is somewhat consistent with what

circulation of medical books in Iceland, which were disseminated and used in primarily handwritten form throughout the early modern period and into the nineteenth century.⁶² Yet another extensive form of writing that existed almost exclusively within the realm of scribal culture are personal writings of all sorts (diaries and annotated almanacs, correspondence, and to some extent autobiographical writings) which boomed in the eighteenth and especially the nineteenth century.⁶³

This wide range of texts that were produced, disseminated, and are now preserved in manuscript form indicates a strong degree of continuity in the scribal tradition from late medieval times through beyond the advent of printing. Scribal publication in early modern Iceland consisted of much more than an enduring tradition of copying the golden-age literature and chronicles of medieval Iceland. This scribal activity in early modern and modern Iceland – both the continuous reproduction of medieval literature and the lively creation and circulation of contemporary texts – has been largely ignored within the fields of literary history, cultural history and book history. There are, however, important exceptions to this within the last decade of scholarly work on Icelandic cultural history.

4.5 Post-medieval scribal studies

Here I will review three developments that represent a new outlook on post-medieval scribal culture in Iceland. The first is the literary-historical reassessment of the texts produced in Iceland after the ‘golden age’ of saga writing, most notably in the works of Matthew J. Driscoll, who has called attention to the quantities of prose-literature produced in post-medieval Iceland, as discussed earlier in this chapter. This new approach towards the commonly overlooked products of early modern prose literature has drawn attention to other aspects of the vigorous manuscript culture of the nineteenth

has been termed ‘the manuscript tradition’ in legal history, which claims that the role of scribal publication in the field remained essential at least up to 1800. See: David Seipp, ‘Law’s Many Bodies, and the Manuscript Tradition in English Legal History’, *The Journal of Legal History* 25 (2004), pp. 74-83.

⁶² Örn Hrafnkelsson, ‘Lækningahandrit og prentaðir lækningatextar’, 2. *íslenska sögubíngið 2002. Ráðstefnurit I* (Reykjavík, 2002), pp. 186-192. See also a register of medical manuscripts preserved in The National Library of Iceland: Jón Ólafur Ísberg and Örn Hrafnkelsson, ‘Fyrst skal maður byrja að telja tungl ...’: *Skrá um lækningahandrit Landsbókasafns Íslands – Háskólabókasafns* (Kópavogur, 1996).

⁶³ See Davíð Ólafsson, *Bækur lífsins: Íslenskar dagbækur og dagbókaskrif fyrir og nú* (unpublished master’s thesis, University of Iceland, 1999), and Kári Bjarnason, ‘Sjálff handrita: Drög að skrá um sjálfsævisögur í handritum’, in Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, *Fortíðardraumar: Sjálfsbókmenntir á Íslandi*. Sýnisbók íslenskrar alþýðumenningar 9 (Reykjavík, 2004), pp. 405-411.

century, including the transmission of medieval literature throughout the early modern and modern period.⁶⁴

Second, and closely related, has been a changing attitude towards the cultural practices of scribal dissemination of texts. Among literary historians, bibliographers and philologists, the products of post-medieval scribal dissemination were by and large dismissed as secondary remnants of a vibrant medieval culture and the extant transcripts were deemed as 'secondary' and thus useless. This view has in recent years been challenged by a turn in textual editions of traditional literature that has been labelled 'new philology'.⁶⁵ Its rather abrupt appearance around 1990 marked a clear turning point in the history of medieval textual studies by arguing that instability (variance) is a fundamental feature of scribally transmitted literature, and that the philologist, rather than trying to bring order to this chaos, should celebrate it. According to Driscoll, the new philology has the following essential characteristics:

- Literary works do not exist independently of their material embodiments, and the physical form of the text is an integral part of its meaning; one needs therefore to look at the whole book, and the relationships between the text and such features as form and layout, illumination, rubrics and other paratextual features, and, not least, the surrounding texts.
- These physical objects came into being through a series of processes in which a (potentially large) number of people were involved; and they came into being at particular times, in particular places and for particular purposes, all of which were socially, economically and intellectually determined; these factors influence the form the text takes and are thus also part of its meaning.

⁶⁴ See Matthew J. Driscoll, 'Traditionality and Antiquarianism in the Post-Reformation *lygisaga*', in Andrew Wawn, ed, *Northern Antiquity. The Post-Medieval Reception of Edda and Saga* (Enfield Lock, 1994), pp. 83-100 and Jürg Glauser, 'The End of the Saga. Text, Tradition and Transmission in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Iceland', in Andrew Wawn, ed, *Northern Antiquity. The Post-Medieval Reception of Edda and Saga* (Enfield Lock, 1994), pp. 101-141.

⁶⁵ The coming of the 'new philology' is associated with Bernard Cerquiglini's book, *Éloge de la variante: Histoire critique de la philologie* (Paris, 1989) (English translation; *In praise of the variant: A critical history of philology* (Baltimore, 1999)) and the publication of a theme issue of the journal *Speculum* 65 (1990), including especially Stephen G. Nichols, 'Philology in a Manuscript Culture', pp. 1-10 and Siegfried Wenzel, 'Reflections on (New) Philology', pp. 11-18. On the usage of the term in an Icelandic context, see: Anna Mette Hansen, 'The Icelandic *Lucidarius*. Traditional and New Philology', <http://www.arts.usyd.edu.au/departs/medieval/saga/pdf/118-hansen.pdf> (consulted 29 March 2008), pp. 118-125; Kirsten Wolf, 'Old Norse – New Philology', *Scandinavian Studies* 65 (1993), pp. 338-348; and Matthew J. Driscoll, 'The Words on the Page: Thoughts on Philology, Old and New', <http://www.staff.hum.ku.dk/mjd/words.html> (consulted 29 March 2008).

- These physical objects continued to exist through time, and were disseminated and consumed in ways which were also socially, economically and intellectually determined, and of which they bear traces.⁶⁶

Rather than always seeking the ‘best’ manuscripts for establishing the text in question, the new philology seeks to study what manuscripts, whether early or late, can tell us about the processes of literary production, dissemination and reception. This approach is to some degree the offspring of the developments within Anglo-American bibliography which culminated in Don McKenzie’s *Sociology of Texts*, the coming of age of book history, and other recent trends in cultural studies during the 1970s and 1980s.

In an Icelandic context, the new philology has its converse in what Driscoll labels the ‘Arnarnagnæan school’, attributed to a powerhouse in the field in the former half of the twentieth century, Jón Helgason (1899-1986), professor of Old Norse at the University of Copenhagen from 1929 to 1969. While Helgason criticised his predecessor Professor Finnur Jónsson for dismissing younger manuscripts as ‘worthless’ in the context of preparing textual editions, often without having actually examined them, his concerns were simply to ensure that manuscripts with textual-critical value were not overlooked. Secondary manuscripts that had derived from other still-extant copies, or that were clearly corrupt texts, were still dismissed as being without philological value. This view remains strong, in Driscoll’s opinion. None of the numerous Old Norse-Icelandic text editions produced in the last 75 years or so have, Driscoll maintains, taken the artefacts themselves and the social, economic and intellectual contexts of their production, dissemination and reception, sufficiently into account to be called ‘new philological’, with one exception.⁶⁷

The third trend that has contributed to a new outlook on post-medieval scribal culture in Iceland has arisen within the field of socio-cultural history in the past decade, more specifically within the study of the booming manuscript culture of the nineteenth century. A handful of minor studies of this subject were carried out in the latter half of the twentieth century, generally by curators and

⁶⁶ Driscoll, ‘The Words on the Page’.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* The exception is Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir’s edition and intensive study of *Úlfhams saga* (Reykjavík, 2001).

archivists.⁶⁸ A new and more theoretically based wave began in the mid-1990s with Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon's studies of the popular culture of nineteenth-century Iceland, in particular his microhistorical study of the literary enthusiasm of two brothers from a humble background, who lived in a poor rural community in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁶⁹ There Magnússon argues that the traditional literature of *rímur* and sagas, whether in oral, written or printed form, played a crucial part in the psychological welfare of children growing up in a society with high infant mortality and where manual labour was required from an early age. This emotional need for comfort and moral guidance was, according to Magnússon, an important force in the intense pursuit of education and knowledge seen in the life stories of the two brothers, and of many others who became almost obsessed with collecting, copying and writing manuscripts.⁷⁰ A significant aspect of Magnússon's inquiry into the subject was the launch of a new series of text editions, called *Sýnisbók íslenskrar alþýðumenningar* ('Anthology of Icelandic popular culture') that was intended to present examples of the multiple varieties of writing in early modern and modern Iceland.⁷¹

⁶⁸ See for example: Finnboði Guðmundsson. 'Nokkurar sögur ... í hjáverkum uppskrifaðar', *Árbók Landsbókassafns Íslands 1965* 22 (1966), pp. 146-152 and Grímur M. Helgason, 'Jón Jónsson í Simbakoti og handrit hans', *Árbók Landsbókassafns Íslands 1986. Nýr flokkur* 12 (1988), pp. 58-64.

⁶⁹ Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, *Menntun, ást og sorg: Einsögurannsókn á íslensku sveitasamfélagi nítjándu og tuttugustu aldar*. Sagnfræðirannsóknir 13 (Reykjavík, 1997). Prior to that were his 1993 doctoral thesis: *The Continuity of Everyday Life: Popular Culture in Iceland 1850-1940*, (unpublished PhD thesis, Carnegie Mellon University, 1993) and some of its results published in Icelandic as 'Alþýðumenning á Íslandi 1850-1940', in Guðmundur Hálfðanarson and Svanur Kristjánsson, eds, *Íslensk þjóðfélagsþróun 1880-1990: Ritgerðir* (Reykjavík, 1993), pp. 265-320. In the next few years came: "'Jeg er 479 dögum yngri en Nilli', Dagbækur og daglegt líf Halldórs Jónssonar frá Miðdalsgröf', *Skírnir* 169 (fall 1995), pp. 309-347; and 'Magnús og mýtan', in *Kraftbirtingarhljómur Guðdómsins. Dagbók, sjálfsævisaga, bréf og kvæði Magnúsar Hj. Magnússonar, skáldsins á Þróm*. Sýnisbók íslenskrar alþýðumenningar 2 (Reykjavík, 1998), pp. 11-89.

⁷⁰ In his English summary of *Menntun, ást og sorg*, Magnússon notes on the two brothers: 'It is argued in this book that they got their emotional outlet through their writing and their desire for education', p. 292. Later he adds, more generally speaking: '[I]nstead of becoming introvert and deprived of all pleasures in life, people in the nineteenth century turned to education which gave them a form and a focus for their emotions', p. 293.

⁷¹ Thirteen volumes have now been issued. Particularly relevant are Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, ed, *Bræður af Ströndum: Dagbækur, ástarbréf, almenn bréf, sjálfsævisaga, minnisbækur og samtíningur frá 19. öld*. Sýnisbók íslenskrar alþýðumenningar (Reykjavík, 1997); Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, ed, *Kraftbirtingarhljómur Guðdómsins: Dagbók, sjálfsævisaga, bréf og kvæði Magnúsar Hj. Magnússonar, skáldsins á Þróm*. Sýnisbók íslenskrar alþýðumenningar 2 (Reykjavík, 1998); Erna Sverrisdóttir, *Orð af eldi: Bréfasamband Ólafar Sigurðardóttur á Hlöðum og Þorsteins Erlingssonar á árunum 1883-1914*. Sýnisbók Íslenskrar alþýðumenningar 4; and Davíð Ólafsson and Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, eds, *Burt og meir en bærjarleið: Dagbækur og persónuleg skrif Vesturheimsfara á síðari hluta 19. aldar*. Sýnisbók íslenskrar alþýðumenningar 5 (Reykjavík, 2001).

My first studies in this field were of diaries and diary writing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, presented in my MA thesis and subsequent papers.⁷² The insights from this work into the use of writing skills by the literate public in the nineteenth century led to further studies of other aspects of scribal practices and, in particular, the case of Sighvatur Grímsson.⁷³ These studies have dealt extensively with the meaning of literacy for the general public, how it was made use of, and the role of manuscripts in the literary culture of the nineteenth century. They have challenged the dominant emphasis on the official framework of formal education and print publication in Icelandic scholarship. In a joint paper with Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, we suggested that the collectors and scribes of the nineteenth century played a leading role in popular literary culture in Iceland, serving as ‘informal institutions’ in the absence of virtually all formal cultural institutions.⁷⁴

Several other studies from the last decade have also focused strongly on the role of manuscripts in the literary culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A session on book history at the Second Icelandic Historical Congress in 2002, for example, consisted of four papers which revolved around the interplay between the scribal and print media in early modern and modern Iceland.⁷⁵ The latest embodiment of the growing interest in post-medieval scribal practices and their relations with print culture can be found in a recent collection of papers on popular culture in Iceland 1830-1930 in 2004, although this is not its main focus point.⁷⁶ The enduring coexistence and the

⁷² Davíð Ólafsson, ‘Dagbækur í handritadeild Landsbókasafns’, *Ritmennt. Ársrit Landsbókasafns Íslands – Háskólabókasafns* 3 (1998), pp. 109-131 and ‘Að skrá sína eigin tilveru. Dagbækur, heimsmynd og sjálfmynd á 18. og 19. öld’, *Einsagan – Ólíkar leiðir: Átta ritgerðir og eitt myndlistarverk* (Reykjavík, 1998), pp. 51-88. See also my study of diaries and other firsthand narratives of Icelandic immigrants in North America: ‘Í frásögur færandi. Vesturhemsferðir í persónulegum heimildum’, *Burt – og meir en bæjarleið: Dagbækur og persónuleg skrif Vesturhemsfara á síðari hluta 19. aldar*. Sýnisbók íslenskrar alþýðumenningar 5 (Reykjavík, 2001), pp. 71-128.

⁷³ Davíð Ólafsson, ‘Að ætla sér bækur með penna: Miðlun Íslendingasagna á 19. öld í handritum og prentuðum bókum’, in *2. íslenska söguþingið 2002: Ráðstefnurit I* (Reykjavík, 2002), pp. 193-211; ‘Skrifaðar í köldum og óhentugum sjóbúðum ...’: Sighvatur Grímsson og miðlun bókmenningar á Vestfjörðum á síðari hluta 19. aldar’, *Ársrit Sögufélags Ísfirðinga* 43 (2003), pp. 229-243; and ‘Handritasamfélag og textaheimur í Kaldrananeshreppi á Ströndum, in *Þriðja íslenska söguþingið 18.-21. maí 2006* (Reykjavík, 2007), pp. 448-457.

⁷⁴ Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and Davíð Ólafsson, ‘Barefoot Historians’. Education in Iceland in the Modern Period’, in Klaus-Joachim Lorenzen-Schmidt and Bjørn Poulsen, eds, *Writing Peasant: Studies on Peasant Literacy in Early Modern Northern Europe* (Kerteminde, 2002), pp. 175-209.

⁷⁵ See *2. íslenska söguþingið 2002. Ráðstefnurit I* (Reykjavík, 2002), Þorsteinn Helgason, ‘Samspil handrits og prents: Nokkrar tilgátur’, pp. 170-185; Örn Hrafnkelsson, ‘Lækningahandrit og prentaðir lækningatextar’, pp. 186-192; Davíð Ólafsson, ‘Að ætla sér bækur með penna’, pp. 193-211; and Steingrímur Jónsson, ‘Hvað er bóksaga?’, pp. 212-220.

⁷⁶ Loftur Guttormsson and Ingi Sigurðsson, eds, *Alþýðumenning á Íslandi 1830-1930* (Reykjavík, 2003). See in particular Loftur Guttormsson, ‘Framleiðsla og dreifing ritaðs máls’, pp. 37-65; Eiríkur Þormóðsson,

complicated interplay between the media is indisputably a fundamental characteristic of early modern and modern literary culture in Iceland, whether we look at the production, the dissemination or the consumption of texts.

4.6 Conclusion

Interestingly, it was the nineteenth century that saw both the peak of the scribal tradition and the rise of secular and market-oriented print culture. Both trends rested upon the democratisation of literacy during the late eighteenth century and the country's strong literary heritage, enhanced by romantic and nationalistic ideology. Although the main subject of this study is manuscript culture in nineteenth-century Iceland, the history of print and printed books plays an important role in the literary world under scrutiny. For a good part of the nineteenth century, from roughly 1830 up to around 1880, one might say that the two media played an equally important role in the dissemination and consumption of literary and historical texts in Icelandic society. For decades and centuries before that period, print culture had mostly been constrained by the clerical authorities and by unfavourable socio-economic conditions. By the end of the nineteenth century, the balance had tipped the other way. Manual transcripts finally became obsolete at the beginning of the twentieth century, more than 400 years after Gutenberg's invention.

Graphically, this process can be viewed as two lines of rise and decline, crossing around the mid-nineteenth century. The history of the two written media in nineteenth-century Iceland should not be seen as an opposition between official and popular cultures or elite and underground literature but as intertwined and in some sense complimentary stories. Both handwritten and printed books contributed at some point to the literary experience of every Icelander, from those whose contact was limited to the bare necessities of Lutheran liturgy to the lifelong obsession with books and texts of people like Sighvatur Grímsson. During this period, the coexistence of the two media strengthened both, and, as will be argued here, was a driving force in the steady increase in literacy in Iceland during the long nineteenth century.

¹'Handskrifuð blöð', pp. 67-90; and Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, 'Af bréfaskrifum kvenna á 19. öld', pp. 247-267.

EDUCATION, LITERACY, AND TEXTUAL CONSUMPTION IN ICELAND

5.1 Introduction

This chapter, like the preceding one, addresses some of the key issues in Icelandic cultural history that are relevant to the case of Sighvatur Grímsson. It not only reports on the state of the art in the field, but also proposes some alternative approaches to the established ones. The first section describes the structures of schooling and education in early modern and modern Iceland, including both its formal, institutional features and informal grassroots aspects. Iceland was practically a society without formal schooling until the last decades of the nineteenth century, but had, notably, achieved near universal literacy (if the term is defined as the ability to read) a century before that. The established narrative asserts that an effective system of household instruction, promoted and endorsed by the combined effort of church and state, was the key to this success. This general level of literacy and its limitations, in particular the imbalance between reading and writing ability, is also a subject of this section. The studies which have reviewed literacy in early modern and modern Iceland have mostly focussed on official agency from above, be it under the banner of Pietism or the Enlightenment, and have taken a quantitative approach towards literacy. In the second main section of this chapter I juxtapose this outlook with some first-hand accounts of the acquisition of literacy that reveal some of the complexities of both literacy and individual agency.

The third main section of this chapter addresses the crucial tradition of the *kvöldvaka* as a forum for education and information, as well as entertainment. As the locus for the bulk of Iceland's literary consumption and, in all likelihood, a good deal of the production of handwritten reading material, the *kvöldvaka* is central to our understanding of the function of scribal culture in nineteenth-century Iceland.

5.2 Structures of schooling and levels of literacy in early modern and modern Iceland

Iceland was, by the mid-nineteenth century, still a society virtually without a formal elementary schooling system. The only enduring educational institutions throughout the early modern and modern eras were the grammar schools operated to prepare future church ministers and officials for their positions or for further studies. The church had been the main operator of educational institutions in Iceland from the Middle Ages up to the end of the eighteenth century, when the schools run at the bishoprics of Skálholt and Hólar were closed.¹ From that time on only one grammar school operated in Iceland, independently from the church: first as Hólavallaskóli in Reykjavík for two decades (1786-1805), then as Bessastaðaskóli at Álftanes peninsula between 1805 and 1846, and then again in Reykjavík as Lærði skólinn.² A school for priests was established in Reykjavík in 1847, and several secondary schools were set up in the last quarter of the nineteenth century to provide specific types of instruction: agricultural schools, a teachers' school and women's schools.

Elementary schools in Iceland were few and short-lived up to the mid-nineteenth century and the construction of a comprehensive schooling system was slow and sporadic well into the twentieth century. By the year 1874 there were seven primary schools in operation in Iceland, the oldest of them founded in the seaside village of Stokkseyri in 1852. By the end of the century a few other regular schools were being run, most of them in fishing villages and towns, but youngsters in the rural areas were at best educated by peripatetic teachers, or during a short stay at the local pastor's home.³ Household instruction was the dominant form of primary education throughout most of the nineteenth century. After the passage of new educational legislation in 1880, peripatetic schooling (*farkennsla*) became common. It was carried out by self-taught or formally trained teachers for a short period of time at each farm, and was a solution custom-made for the social structure of the time. It endured well

¹ On the history of the two bishoprics and their schools, see: Óskar Guðmundsson and Gunnar Kristjánsson, eds, *Saga biskupsstólanna: Skálholt 950 ára - 2006 - Hólar 900 ára* (Akureyri, 2006). For the transition from church-run schools to secular 'classicist' schools see Loftur Guttormsson, 'Fræðslumál', in Ingi Sigurðsson, ed, *Upplýsingin á Íslandi: Tíu ritgerðir* (Reykjavík, 1990), pp. 162-164.

² For the history of these consecutive institutions see: Heimir Þorleifsson, ed, *Saga Reykjavíkurskóla – Historia Scholæ Reykjavicensis* (Reykjavík, 1975-1984), vol. 1-4.

³ Árni Daniel Júlíusson, *Skólinn við ströndina: Saga Barnaskólans á Eyrarbakka og Stokkseyri 1852-2002* (Árborg, 2003). On the role of pastors in the informal educational system of the nineteenth century, see Pétur Pétursson, *Church and Social Change: A Study of the Secularization Process in Iceland 1830-1930* (Lund, 1983), pp. 33-98.

into the twentieth century in many rural areas, despite a new set of laws in 1907 calling for four years of mandatory education for all children.⁴

The institutional structure of literacy in early modern Iceland is marked by several crucial turning points involving ideologies and regulations. The first and the largest was the Lutheran Reformation in the mid-sixteenth century. Despite no longer being considered a holy sacrament by Martin Luther, confirmation continued to be a crucial declaration of faith and religious knowledge in Protestant life. A fundamental tenet in the Lutheran doctrine was that every individual should be able to approach the word of God directly. A prerequisite for this was that people be able to read, and that pious texts be available in the vernacular. This last requirement applied not only to the Bible but also and more importantly to suitable reading material for the public and in particular children. Martin Luther himself had penned a simple manual of questions and elucidations that became the syllabus for mandatory religious instruction in Northern Europe through the coming centuries. *The Small Catechism*, generally known in Iceland as *Kverið* ('*The Quire*'), was first published in Iceland in 1562 and from the year 1575 general knowledge of its content became the formal requirement for confirmation in Iceland. This rooted into place a system of religious education in which a certain degree of literacy came as a by-product.

Indeed, a royal edict from 1635 on the instruction of children does not address literacy as a distinct skill or goal; it says only that children should study the Catechism. For the following century the result in Iceland was what has been called *religious literacy*, or the ability to 'read' a text that one is familiar with, which is something of a hybrid between reading and reciting from memory.⁵ It was not until an act on 'household discipline' (*Tilskipun um húsagann*) was issued in 1746 that reading skills were legally required of all children before confirmation.⁶ This wide-ranging decree was a direct result of the rise of the religious movement known as Pietism in the Danish kingdom, and of an

⁴ See Loftur Guttormsson, 'Farskólalald í sextíu ár (1890-1950): Nokkrir meginrættir', *Uppeldi og menntun* 1/1 (1992), pp. 207-222, and Ingólfur Á. Jóhannesson, *Menntakerfi í mótun: Barna- og unglingsfræðslan á Íslandi 1908-1958* (Reykjavík, 1984).

⁵ Loftur Guttormsson, 'The Development of Popular Religious Literacy in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', *Scandinavian Journal of History* 15/1 (1990), p. 8. There he writes that '... the concept of religious literacy as used here refers to the capacity to read familiar texts in print – associating letters with words, and reading aloud'.

⁶ Loftur Guttormsson, 'Læsi', in Frosti F. Jóhannesson, ed., *Íslensk þjóðmenning 6. Munnmenntir og bókmennning* (Reykjavík, 1989), pp. 127-128.

extensive survey and suggestions by a special envoy to Iceland, Ludvig Harboe, in the early 1740s.⁷ In another royal decree, addressed to the bishop of Skálholt in 1790, reading ability was recognized as a skill independent from religious instruction. Children, according to the decree, were to be taught to read between the age of five and seven, before beginning their preparation for confirmation by studying the *Small Catechism*. This document served as Iceland's educational statute for almost a century until new laws on education were passed in 1880 that mentioned writing and arithmetic as basic skills for the first time.⁸

The Pietist literacy campaign of the mid-eighteenth century aimed only at spreading the capacity to read; writing ability was not considered to be essential for people's salvation. The belated Enlightenment ideology that followed Pietism carried with it a much broader attitude towards the value of education for people's lives, apparent not least in its attitudes towards writing, which was seen as being of wide practical use for the common man.⁹ Among the most illuminating testimonies on the status of primary education in early modern Iceland is an essay titled *Hagþenkir*, written by a young scholar, Jón Ólafsson of Grunnavík (1705–1779).¹⁰ In its first section, on primary education, he suggests that parents should begin to teach their children to read by the age of six or seven, and that this should be followed by writing instruction a little later, so that by the age of ten or eleven, children should have gained comprehensive skills in literacy.¹¹ Despite these ambitious aims, little was done to extend the level of literacy from the religious literacy standard until the new laws on education were passed in 1880. Printed material for teaching writing was practically unavailable up to the last decades of the nineteenth century, and when it was obtainable, its purchase was not a likely priority for poor households.¹² A common outcome, as many autobiographical sources recount, was that children sought

⁷ The Pietist movement is traditionally said to have reached its height between the late seventeenth and the mid-eighteenth centuries. In the case of Iceland, however, this happened a bit later, namely around and after the mid-eighteenth century. The Age of Enlightenment in Iceland, similarly, took place somewhat later than in the rest of Europe: roughly between 1750 and 1830.

⁸ Guttormsson, 'Læsi', pp. 136-137.

⁹ Guttormsson, 'Fræðslumál', p. 174.

¹⁰ The essay was first published in print in a scholarly edition at the end of the twentieth century: Jón Ólafsson, *Hagþenkir JS 83 fol.* Ed. Þórunn Sigurðardóttir (Reykjavík, 1996).

¹¹ Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, 'Barnshugur við bók. Um uppeldishugmyndir Jóns Ólafssonar', *Vefnir* (2003), pp. 5-8. <http://vefnir.bok.hi.is/2003/AG.PDF>.

¹² Guttormsson, 'Læsi', pp. 138-139.

out handwritten letters to copy from, often on their own initiative, and learned to write by themselves under extremely primitive conditions.

Literacy, education and childhood only became a proper subject of historical study in Iceland in the 1980s, when historian and sociologist Loftur Guttormsson approached the field under the influence of the French *Annales* movement.¹³ Literacy in the early modern and modern periods had, prior to that, only been dealt with in a handful of semi-scholarly surveys, most of them dealing with eighteenth-century literacy levels and the impact of the act of 1746. The most influential of these was Hallgrímur Hallgrímsson's inquiry into the development of reading ability in the eighteenth century, published in 1925. This study was based on a comparison between Ludvig Harboe's records of the status of literary education in the 1740s and church registers from the last decade of the eighteenth century.¹⁴ His main conclusion, that by 1740 nearly half of the Icelandic population was able to read and that by around 1790 probably around 90% could read, has not been challenged to this date. The same goes for his explanation that this great change, in a short period, was mostly a result of the devoted work of Iceland's pastors, who acted determinedly in the spirit of Harboe's recommendations throughout the latter half of the eighteenth century.¹⁵

At the same time as Hallgrímur Hallgrímsson's work came out, historian Páll Eggert Ólason published the last volume of his hefty work *Menn og menntir siðskiptaaldar*, in which he speculated on the level of literacy in Iceland during the Age of Reformation. He argued that writing skills had been 'remarkably common' in the sixteenth century.¹⁶ For half a century after these two books came out nothing else was published in the field of the history of literacy in Iceland, with the exception of a short article on literacy in the Middle Ages, issued in 1944.¹⁷ The silence was finally broken by the

¹³ Among Guttormsson's publications in these fields are: 'Ísland: Læsefærdighed og folkeuddannelse 1540-1800', *Nordiska historikermötet (Jyväskylä 1981)*. Mötesrapport 3: *Läskunnighet och folkbildning före folkskoleväsendet* (Jyväskylä, 1981), pp. 123-191; *Bernska, ungdomur og uppeldi á einveldisöld. Tilraun til félagslegrar og lýðfræðilegrar greiningar*. Ritsafn Sagnfræðistofnunar 10 (Reykjavík, 1983); 'Uppeldi og samfélag á Íslandi á upplýsingaöld: Samantekt á rannsóknarniðurstöðum', *Saga* 26 (1988), pp. 7-41; 'Pietism and the Definition of Childhood: Evidence from Eighteenth-century Iceland', *History of Education* 20 (1991), pp. 27-35.

¹⁴ Hallgrímur Hallgrímsson, *Íslensk alþýðumenntun á 18. öld* (Reykjavík, 1925).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

¹⁶ Páll Eggert Ólason, *Menn og menntir siðskiptaaldarinnar á Íslandi*. Vol. 4. *Rithöfundar* (Reykjavík, 1926), p. 19.

¹⁷ Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, 'Lestrarkunnátta Íslendinga í fornöld', *Skirnir* 118 (1944), pp. 194-197.

American sociologist Richard F. Tomasson who studied the state of literacy in contemporary Iceland and its historical context, using Hallgrímsson's results as his main source for early modern Iceland.¹⁸

Loftur Guttormsson has attempted, in a similar vein as Hallgrímur Hallgrímsson, to evaluate the level of reading ability before the Pietist literacy campaign by studying the oldest Catechism registers available, from the period between 1748 and 1763.¹⁹ He concludes, from comparing the level of literacy in different age groups, that reading ability had grown relatively steadily during the period 1680-1740.²⁰ These results confirm, to a degree, Hallgrímsson's estimate that almost half the population was able to read at the onset of the Pietist literacy campaign. It indicates, nonetheless, that the level of literacy was already rising steadily in the last quarter of the seventeenth century. Again Guttormsson argues that this was due to growing pressure from above for increasing popular knowledge and better understanding of Christianity, manifested in increasing output of religious books and an emphasis on actual reading and understanding rather than reciting a familiar text largely or fully from memory.²¹

The Icelandic language has no single word that denotes the word literacy in English. Instead it uses two distinct pairs of concepts: *læsi/læs* (ability/able to read) and *skriftarkunnátta/skrifandi* (ability/able to write). The development of these two components of literacy from the Reformation to the twentieth century was not completely parallel. The development of reading ability in Iceland has been studied to a much greater degree than the ability to write.²² It was not until the new education act was passed in 1880 that the ability to write became a subject for regular inspection by priests and was tracked in the same way as reading ability had been from the mid-eighteenth century. Up to that time, sources for quantitative research on the level of writing skills in Iceland are very limited.

Important exceptions to this general lack of data are the responses to a 70-item questionnaire on various aspects of Icelandic society, sent by the Copenhagen-based Icelandic Literary Society to

¹⁸ Richard F. Tomasson, 'The Literacy of the Icelanders', *Scandinavian Studies* 47/1 (1975), pp. 66-93.

¹⁹ Guttormsson, 'Læsi', pp. 119-144.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 132-133.

²² Guttormsson, 'The Development', pp. 8-9.

every parish minister in the country in the 1840s.²³ Two questions addressed the issue of writing skills directly: no. 59: ‘How many in the parish can write?’, and no. 60: ‘The age and gender of those who cannot write?’ In 1983 Icelandic ethnologist Ögmundur Helgason published a short article where he analysed the answers to these particular questions from the fourteen parishes of the county of Skagafjarðarsýsla in northern Iceland.²⁴ Most of the replies are short, ambiguous and worked in general terms, and frequently state how hard it is to define the concept of writing ability and to decide who is able to write and who is not. Even when they provide actual figures, it is hard to see what groups are taken into account and what standards the evaluation is based on. As an example, the minister of the parishes of Glaumbær and Viðimýri reported in 1842 that out of just over 400 inhabitants, 75 men and 16 women might be considered able to write, but he added that it was getting more common for young people to learn this skill. According to parish registers, cited by Ögmundur Helgason, there were 265 adults in the two parishes, 126 men and 139 women. He thus suggests that nearly 60% of adult men and 11.5% of women were able to write to some extent.²⁵

Based on these ambiguous testimonies Helgason summarizes the general picture from the parish reports from the county of Skagafjarðarsýsla as one in which the older generation was rarely able to write while younger people were considerably better skilled. It is clear, he emphasises, that at that time there was no direct link between reading ability and the writing ability, as closely connected as these two are in the mind of the modern observer. There was furthermore a considerable gap between men and women.²⁶ Results from other parts of the country give roughly the same picture. The most precise figures came from the pastor of the adjacent parishes of Eyvindahólar, Steinar and Skógar in the southern county of Rangárvallasýsla. According to his account 85 persons in the three parishes were able to write, while 123 men and 202 women were unable to write. Overall, a little fewer than 20% of all inhabitants were able to write.²⁷ This corresponds to the countrywide estimate

²³ The accounts for all counties have been published, one by one, over the last fifty years, the last one in 2005: Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir and Björk Ingimundardóttir, eds, *Mýra- og Borgarfjarðarsýslur: Sýslu- og sóknalýsingar Hins íslenska bókmenntafélags 1839-1873* (Reykjavík, 2005).

²⁴ Ögmundur Helgason, ‘Skriftarkunnátta í Skagafjarðarprófastsdæmi um 1840’, *Skagfirðingabók* 12 (1983), pp. 110-120.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 116. This ratio is considerably higher than in other parishes, and one likely explanation is that the pastors had defined younger people as ‘adults’ than Helgason did in his article.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

²⁷ See Guttormsson, ‘Læsi’, pp. 137-140.

made by Loftur Guttormsson, based on a cursory investigation of the answers to the questionnaires, that a quarter to a third of adult men were able to write and somewhere around 10% of women.²⁸ But as both Helgason and Guttormsson have pointed out, building a reliable image of writing ability in Iceland around the mid-nineteenth century from these vague testimonies is highly problematic.

The great gap between reading and writing ability at the beginning of the nineteenth century is a fundamental feature of the history of literacy in Iceland. This gap would, however, be practically closed by the end of that same century. How, and under what circumstances this happened in Iceland is best documented in two kinds of sources from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the products of Iceland's flourishing manuscript culture, which are preserved in archives by the thousands, and the many surviving autobiographies, memoirs, and other narratives from the period, both printed and unpublished.

5.3 First-hand accounts and narratives of education and literary practices

Characteristic of Loftur Guttormsson's scholarship on literacy, education and childhood in Iceland has been a focus on the agency of formal institutions like the church and national and local authorities, and of ideologies like Pietism, the Enlightenment and secularisation. His studies have employed three main approaches. First, they have explored the formal surroundings of literacy and literary culture, the legal and regulatory framework, the educational system, and official debate and discourse on the subject. Secondly, they have analysed the quantitative sources available on the development of literacy, such as church registers and questionnaires. Thirdly, these studies to some extent juxtapose this quantitative information with qualitative sources, especially first-hand testimony from autobiographies, letters and diaries, that reflect the experience and views of the people involved, both those who acted from above as well as those on the receiving end of textual material. In Guttormsson's view, the role of the church and its output of religious literature from the Reformation to the beginning of the twentieth century was the strongest force in the development of literacy, especially reading ability, in Iceland up to the point when the processes of secularization and modernization transformed Icelandic literary culture into its twentieth-century shape. Recent studies of the literary culture of

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

nineteenth-century Iceland have, in contrast, focused more extensively on the receiving end: the meaning of literacy for the general public and how it was made use of in everyday life. The active involvement by members of the general public in literature and textual endeavours that is apparent in the manuscript culture of the nineteenth century calls into question the idea that official actors' work can sufficiently account for the development of literacy in Iceland.²⁹

First-hand accounts and narratives of nineteenth-century Icelandic educational and literary practices usually mention certain common themes. The most prominent one is the almost total lack of organized education aside from the institution of household education and the exclusive secondary school at Bessastaðir and later in Reykjavík. A second theme is the general incapacity of parents and guardians to provide anything more than the minimum level of instruction required by the authorities, i.e. the ability to read and a fundamental knowledge and understanding of Christianity. This is often associated with a lack of parental interest in literary matters and, in some cases, outright hostility towards any such endeavour. A third theme, common to many narratives, is the general insufficiency of printed secular reading material, often compensated for by using handwritten books. The fourth and final characteristic of these accounts is that they show a strong drive by the narrator/protagonist to acquire literary skills and education despite these obstacles. This struggle was usually carried out with pen and paper and the reward was the ability to write.

Written accounts of the cultural and social environment surrounding literacy and the attitudes towards learning in Iceland may be roughly divided into three groups. The first and largest deals with what was probably the greatest hurdle for young people who wanted to learn more than to read from the Catechism: the lack of literary skill among their parents. This condition was often combined with a lack of understanding from parents as well as narrow economic means. At the same time it is apparent that the ability to read various forms of texts as well as the act of collecting and copying them was much appreciated for its entertainment value during the *kvöldvaka*. These accounts often tell of how

²⁹ See in particular Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and Davíð Ólafsson, "Barefoot Historians": Education in Iceland in the Modern Period", in Klaus-Joachim Lorenzen-Schmidt and Bjørn Poulsen, eds, *Writing Peasants: Studies on Peasant Literacy in Early Modern Northern Europe* (Kerteminde, 2002), pp. 175-209. See also Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, *Menntun, ást og sorg: Einsögurannsókn á íslensku sveitasamfélagi níjándu og tuttugustu aldar*. Sagnfræðirannsóknir 13 (Reykjavík, 1997), pp. 265-286.

children sought instruction from farmhands, neighbours or travelling guests or managed to get their hands on printed and handwritten material to study and copy.

One of the oldest accounts of this kind is the autobiography of Gísli Konráðsson (1787-1877), a lay scholar and farmer, who writes of his childhood at the turn of the nineteenth century. His parents were run-of-the-mill farmers in the county of Skagafjarðarsýsla in Northern Iceland, devoid of any formal education. Primary education within the household seems to have been the responsibility of his mother, who was, according to Gísli's account, barely able to read the Lutheran prayer book and thus unable to satisfy the young boy's desire for books.³⁰ Gísli was only taught how to recognize printed type. He subsequently taught himself to read handwriting and to scribble a little. The ability to read handwritten texts soon became valuable to Gísli, for he could free himself from dreary wool work in the evenings by reading stories and poetry aloud, which was much appreciated by his mother. Gísli makes no mention of his father's views on education or his level of literacy, but does note that his father asked two literate farmers nearby for handwritten books to help Gísli with his writing skills and general learning.³¹

In his autobiography, Gísli also recalls his scribal activities. At the age of 17, he spent his first fishing season on the Álftanes peninsula in southwestern Iceland. There he became acquainted with Eyjólfur Jónsson, the farmer at Skógtjörn, from whom he was able to borrow many stories, mostly chivalric sagas. Gísli, in return, copied the eighteenth-century proto-novel *Parmes saga loðinbjarnar* for Eyjólfur as well as the pseudo-historical *Trójumanna saga* for himself.³² During the following summer and until the beginning of the next fishing season Gísli stayed at home and copied sagas for his stepfather, Gottskálf Egilsson, who was a keen collector of handwritten books.³³ Gísli's reputation as a skilled scribe spread and grew and he later became a renowned chronicler and poet, and the

³⁰ Gísli Konráðsson, *Æfisaga Gísla Konráðssonar ens fróða skrásett af sjálfum honum*. Sögurit 8 (Reykjavík, 1911-1914), pp. 27-28. Gísli applies a common term, 'varla bænabókarfær', to designate a minimum level of knowledge to describe his mother's level of literacy.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 53.

producer of the largest individual collection of manuscripts preserved in the National Library of Iceland.³⁴

The pursuit of writing instruction beyond the confines of the household is also a central theme in the story of Sigurður Kristjánsson (1854-1952), who later became a bookseller in Reykjavík and a pioneer in publishing popular editions of Icelandic family sagas around the turn of the twentieth century. He depicts his childhood home on the farm of Ölvískross in Hnappadalur around 1860, where he was raised by his grandmother's sister from the age of six, as good and God-fearing. The level of education, however, was low.³⁵ No instruction beyond the minimum required level was available at home. No one in the household was able to write, and no books were available except a plenary religious textbook.³⁶ But the farm was not isolated and among its many visitors were literate men who were able to help the boy attain the skills he yearned for. Among them was a farmer and scribe named Elías Sigurðsson, from the nearby farm of Straumfjarðartunga, who copied and collected handwritten books that he lent to Sigurður.³⁷ So that the boy could make use of them, the farmer taught him to read handwriting, which was fairly different from the blackletter typeface he knew from his textbook. Later on, Sigurður taught himself to write by copying from these manuscripts, sometimes with a quill pen but sometimes by writing on ice with a stick.³⁸

The impact of individuals on the level and practice of literacy within a particular community is illuminated by the memoirs of farmer Árne Sigurðsson, who grew up in Breiðdalur, in eastern Iceland, around the mid-nineteenth century. He recalls that he knew of only four farmers who were unable to write, two of whom were not fluent readers either. Some other farmers wrote well and legibly.³⁹ This

³⁴ Ögmundur Helgason, 'Handritasafn Landsbókasafns 150 ára, 1846-1996', *Ritmennt* 2 (1997), p. 19.

³⁵ Gils Guðmundsson, 'Sigurður Kristjánsson bóksali og bókaútgefandi', *Þeir settu svip á öldina*. Íslenskir athafnamenn 1 (Reykjavík, 1987), p. 219.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 220. The book in question is Nicolai Edinger Balle, *Lærdóms-Bók í Evangelískum kristilegum Trúarbrögðum, handa Unglíngum*, first issued in Leirárgarðar in 1796. Balle's textbook contained, among other things, Luther's *Small Catechism*, and was issued 27 times, between 1796 and 1882.

³⁷ At least three manuscripts preserved in the National Library of Iceland are linked with Elías Sigurðsson, two of them written by him: Lbs 3397 8vo: Miscellany of poetry and prose in an unknown hand, in the possession of Elías Sigurðsson in 1858; Lbs 2941 4to: Compilation of sagas and chronicles transcribed by Elías Sigurðsson; and Lbs 2316 4to: Compilation of sagas and poetry written by Elías Sigurðsson in 1850.

³⁸ An extant example of Sigurður Kristjánsson's adolescent writing is the last section of a compilation of poems from 1868, when he was 14 years old. Lbs 3909 8vo: Compilation of rimur and other poetry, mostly transcribed by an unknown hand around mid nineteenth century.

³⁹ Árne Sigurðsson, 'Í Breiðdal fyrir 60 árum (1849-1857)', in Jón Helgason and Stefán Einarsson, eds, *Breiðdæla: Drög til sögu Breiðdals* (Reykjavík, 1948), p. 116.

high level of writing ability was partly attributable to the initiative of the parish priest, but even more to the *hreppstjóri* (community administrator) who was a skilful scribe and supplied his neighbours with handwritten alphabets and manuscripts to copy from. Árni also notes in his reflections that the bulk of circulating reading material – family sagas, sagas of Norse kings, *fornaldarsögur norðurlanda*, and an abundance of romances – was handwritten.⁴⁰ This statement is backed up by a handful of handwritten miscellanies from Breiðdalur which are preserved in the National Library of Iceland and testify to a vivid scribal culture in the district.⁴¹

There are also many firsthand reports of cynical or hostile attitudes towards education within peasant families. One example involves the reflections of a popular poet, Jón Jónatansson, who grew up in western Iceland around 1830. In his memoirs he says that he received no instruction in writing and had no writing implements other than a stick and icy water in which to practice writing the letters from an ABC book that he had acquired. When his parents found out what he was doing, he was harshly reminded that this was an improper activity. He adds that it was the same with everything he wanted to learn in his life.⁴² Practicing writing on ice or snow seems to have been common in the second half of the nineteenth century and was often – like in Jón Jónatansson’s case – accompanied by the folk belief that by doing so one was writing messages to the devil.

It can be assumed that negative attitudes towards literary education among the public were much more commonly expressed towards girls than boys in nineteenth-century Iceland. Only a few mistresses were able to write in Breiðdalur at the time referred to in Árni Sigurðsson’s testimony, and they did not encourage their daughters to master the skill as much as they did their sons.⁴³ Even for girls from the higher levels of society, like the daughters of priests and officials, it was not considered suitable to learn more than the bare necessities of book learning. Much more emphasis was laid on

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 113-114.

⁴¹ See for example Lbs 4652 4to: Miscellany written in 1859 by Stígur Þorvaldsson; Lbs 4656 4to: Miscellany written in 1855 and 1860 by Stígur Þorvaldsson, Sigfús Stefánsson, and Bjarni Ásmundarson; Lbs 4655 4to: Miscellany written in 1860-1866 by Magnús Bjarnasson; and Lbs 3936 4to: Miscellany written in 1880-1883 by Jón Björnsson.

⁴² Lbs 2287 8vo: ‘Ævisaga Jóns Jónatanssonar, í firstu af honum sjálfum söfnuð og skrifuð’, p. 12. Jón Jónatansson’s autobiography.

⁴³ Sigurðsson, ‘Í Breiðdal’, p. 116.

domestic virtues like sewing and cooking.⁴⁴ Ólöf Sigurðardóttir (1857-1933), who later became a prominent poet, gives an interesting account of how she and her siblings surpassed their parents' level of literacy when they were growing up in the 1860s. Her mother was illiterate and her father able to read but not write, but Ólöf states that she and her siblings all learned to write entirely by themselves, except for one of her brothers, who received two weeks of instruction from the parish pastor and was for that greatly envied by the others.⁴⁵

The third category of reports comes from nineteenth-century children who enjoyed a generally positive attitude towards education in their homes and were able to obtain instruction beyond the basics of reading and Christianity. Erlendur Guðmundsson, a farmer's son born in 1863 in northern Iceland, writes in his autobiography that his father was a good scribe, 'so that few of his times and status did better', while his mother could read any kind of print or script, but was practically incapable of writing. It was his father who taught him to read and those first steps toward literacy were, as with many other autobiographers, difficult ones because of the dreary religious material used.⁴⁶ Writing instruction was much more pleasant for Erlendur. His father wrote out an alphabet and a few lines of poetry for him to copy and he also practiced by himself, copying names and addresses from old envelopes. In his autobiography Erlendur Guðmundsson refers frequently to his parents' positive attitude towards education and literature and says that he transcribed every handwritten text he could get his hands on. He became one of the many who made good use of the ability to write throughout his life: to educate himself, to collect literature and to express his thoughts, and finally, as an old man, to write his own life story.

What all these accounts have in common is their emphasis on informal education and handwritten material. They reveal the tension between the inadequate formal educational structure, conflicting attitudes towards learning in society, and the strength of individuals' pursuit of knowledge and entertainment. Indeed the spread of the ability to write and its multiple uses among the Icelandic

⁴⁴ See for example Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, 'Af bréfaskriftum kvenna á 19. öld', in Loftur Guttormsson and Ingi Sigurðsson, eds, *Alþýðumennning á Íslandi 1830-1930: Ritað mál, menntun og félagsshreyfingar*. Sagnfræðirannsóknir 18 (Reykjavík, 2003), pp. 247-268.

⁴⁵ Ólöf Sigurðardóttir, 'Bernskuheimili mitt', *Eimreiðin* (1906), p. 108. Cited in Guttormsson, 'Læsi', p. 138.

⁴⁶ Erlendur Guðmundsson, *Heima og heiman: Skrifað fyrir Kvöldvökufélagið NEMO á Gimli 1932* (Reykjavík, 2002), p. 47.

public took place without much institutional input until the new law on primary education was passed in 1880. The quest for literary skills was, of course, far from universal among nineteenth-century Icelanders, but it was nevertheless a forceful current in everyday Icelandic culture.

5.4 Scribal culture, oral literacy, and the *kvöldvaka*

At the core of the popular culture of nineteenth-century Iceland was the *kvöldvaka* (evening wake) with its *sagnaskemmtun* ('saga entertainment') and *vökulestur* ('wake-reading'), a custom generally thought to be as old in Icelandic society as literary culture itself.⁴⁷ It was arguably the single most important cultural 'institution' in rural Iceland: a forum for entertainment, information and, to some extent, religious practice. The arrangement was custom-made for a sparsely populated and decentralized community where the rural household was the basic unit. The *kvöldvaka* was a forum where different media met and merged in oral reading. Texts were presented to the audience orally from handwritten and later printed sources, and frequently discussed or otherwise interacted with. The setting of the *kvöldvaka* made illiterate people participants in the literary culture of the time, a process called 'reoralisation' by the sociolinguist Konstanze Jungbluth in her study of rural eighteenth-century Catalonia.⁴⁸

The earliest detailed and broad account of the practices of *kvöldvaka* dates from the eighteenth century. It is part of a thorough portrayal of Icelandic culture and nature based on an expedition by two Icelandic scientists, Eggert Ólafsson and Bjarni Pálsson, around Iceland between 1752 and 1757.⁴⁹ The geology and customs of each county are depicted in a separate chapter and in the one on the county of Kjósarsýsla in south-western Iceland the author, Eggert Ólafsson, describes what he calls the 'most sensible and useful pastime': '[W]hen the light has been lit, a capable teenager, or a visitor is asked to read aloud. If the head of household loves saga-reading he will borrow enough sagas from his

⁴⁷ Definitive studies of the tradition are: Hermann Pálsson, *Sagnaskemmtun Íslendinga* (Reykjavík, 1962) and Magnús Gíslason's doctoral dissertation *Kvällsvaka: En isländsk kulturtradition belyst genom studier i bondebefolkningens vardagsliv och miljö under senare hälften av 1800-talet och början av 1900-talet* (Uppsala and Stockholm, 1977).

⁴⁸ Konstanze Jungbluth, 'Die Praxis der Reoralisierung: Zur Funktion des Boten im ländlichen Katalonien des 18. Jahrhunderts', *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 27, 108 (December 1997), pp. 87-107. Its English abstract reads: 'The act of reading aloud and interpreting at the same time characterizes the messenger/nuntius as an important person building a bridge between the alphabetized and the non-alphabetized parts of the semi-oral society'.

⁴⁹ Eggert Ólafsson, *Ferðabók Eggerts Ólafssonar og Bjarna Pálssonar um ferðir þeirra á Íslandi árin 1752-1757*. Third edition (Reykjavík, 1978). The book itself is attributed to Eggert Ólafsson alone.

neighbours and other acquaintances to last the whole winter'.⁵⁰ In his account of the county of Dalasýsla and the western fjords, he notes that '[m]any farmers are so fond of stories, both old and new, some become copyists and make their living from copying the stories ...'.⁵¹ The observation that scribes and the scribal medium were central to the availability of sufficient reading material is the key here. Also important were fluent readers, especially of old manuscripts, or proficient performers of *rímur*.⁵² As a general observation, the author of the *Ferðabók* states that saga-reading had been in decline during the previous century, mostly due to diminishing interest among the better off and the learned. But among the general public it was still – and would remain – the primary form of entertainment in Iceland.

Just over a half a century later, a Scottish pastor and envoy of the British and Foreign Bible Society, Ebenezer Henderson, described his encounter with the custom in an account of his stay in Iceland during the winter of 1814-15. At dusk all the members of the household would take their place in the common room called the *baðstofa*, Henderson observes, and attend to their indoor tasks, most commonly wool work: spinning, carding, and knitting. One of the family would read from whatever old sagas or histories were available. 'Being but badly supplied with printed books,' Henderson remarks, 'the Icelanders are under the necessity of copying such as they can get the loan of'.⁵³ According to Henderson, this need to (re)produce books and reading material manually accounted for the 'fact' that most of them could write 'equally in beauty to that of the ablest writing masters in other parts of Europe'. He also observed that the role of the audience in the *kvöldvaka* was all but passive:

The reader is frequently interrupted, either by the head, or by some of the more intelligent members of the family, who make remarks on various parts of the story, and propose questions, with a view to exercise the ingenuity of the children and servants. In some houses the sagas are repeated by such as have got them by heart; and instances are not uncommon of itinerating historians, who gain a livelihood during the winter, by staying at different farms till they have exhausted their stock of literary knowledge.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 28: 'En eftir að ljós er kveikt, er vel læs unglíngur eða aðkomumaður látinn lesa hátt. Ef húsbóndinn ann sögulestri, fær hann svo margar sögur að láni hjá nágrönnum sínum og öðrum góðkunningjum, að þær endast allan veturinn'.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 270. 'Margir bændur unna svo sögum, bæði gömlum og nýjum, að meðal þeirra eru afritarar, sem lifa af því að afrita sögurnar ...'.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 204. Here Ólafsson explains that good readers were particularly welcome in seasonal fishing stations where saga reading and *rímur*-chanting was much practised.

⁵³ Ebenezer Henderson, *Iceland: Or The Journal Of A Residence In That Island, During The Years 1814 And 1815* (Edinburgh, 1819), p. 283.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 284.

Henderson's account, despite some romanticised exaggerations, gives a fairly plausible image of the status and procedure of household literacy in the first half of the nineteenth century, one that is also supported by numerous first-hand accounts.⁵⁵

In his 1934 book on popular culture in nineteenth-century Iceland – a combination of ethnological survey and first-hand reportage – pastor and ethnologist Jónas Jónasson confirms that it was still customary in the second half of the nineteenth century to read stories or chant *rímur* in the evenings after people had sat down to work. Most common were the family sagas, the sagas of the Norwegian kings, the legendary sagas and then the chivalric sagas, of which an immeasurable quantity existed.⁵⁶ Jónasson – like Eggert Ólafsson before him in his *Ferðabók* – notes a certain level of professionalization, adding that some Icelanders made their living by writing *rímur* and sagas and then travelling from farm to farm to entertain people.⁵⁷

According to Jónasson it was shortly after 1880 that the practice of communal saga reading began to decline and at the time he wrote his book, shortly before his death in 1918, it had largely given way to private reading. Modern reading, he claims, had been separated from indoor manual labour and involved contemporary publications that circulated from reading societies and libraries.⁵⁸ But a somewhat contradictory view comes from a recent study of popular reading societies in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, which has revealed that the contemporary literature that circulated from farm to farm via reading societies was commonly consumed in a similar way as the more traditional literature some decades earlier. This was especially noticeable during the heyday of reading societies after 1890, and ethnologist Jón Jónsson has recently argued that their libraries contributed greatly to the endurance of the *kvöldvaka* tradition around the turn of the twentieth century.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ See Jón Karl Helgason, *Hetjan og höfundurinn: Brot úr íslenskri menningarsögu* (Reykjavík, 1998), pp. 32-41, and Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, *Sjálfsögur: Minni, minningar og saga: Sýnisbók íslenskrar alþýðumenningar* 11 (Reykjavík, 2005), pp. 83-87.

⁵⁶ Jónas Jónasson, *Íslenzkir þjóðhættir*. Third edition (Reykjavík, 1961), p. 246.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

⁵⁹ See Jón Jónsson, 'Lestrarfélög fyrir almenning', in Loftur Guttormsson and Ingi Sigurðsson, eds, *Alþýðumenning á Íslandi 1830-1930: Ritað mál, menntun og félagshreyfingar* (Reykjavík, 2003), p. 181.

To a question on the substance of popular entertainment (number 58) in the questionnaire sent out by the Icelandic literary society during the 1840s, there seems to have been only one answer: Saga-reading and rímur-chanting. Loftur Guttormsson has, despite this, argued in his recent writings on reading practices in nineteenth-century Iceland that saga-reading was far from universal in the sense that it was not practised on every farm throughout the entire winter. The questionnaire answers are too vague in his opinion – using phrases like ‘in some places’ and ‘on some farmsteads’ – to support such a general assumption.⁶⁰ Autobiographies from the latter half of the century give, on the other hand, a picture of much more prevalent practice and most of them describe it as a regular routine.⁶¹ This debate about whether the custom of the *kvöldvaka* and household reading was frequent, common, or close to universal is, in my opinion, not significant. It was widespread enough to be recognized in most observers’ accounts as the principal pastime of the era, one by and large fuelled by handwritten material.

In his studies of the transmission of later Icelandic romances or *lygisögur*, Matthew J. Driscoll has reflected on the production aspect of the literary practices within the *kvöldvaka*: ‘[I]f the *kvöldvaka* was the context in which the *lygisögur* were consumed’, Driscoll says, ‘it is also the context in which they were produced. Although most of the descriptions concentrate on the reading of saga manuscripts, it seems clear that the writing and copying of them must have taken place then, too’.⁶² By the seventeenth century it became more common for scribes to describe themselves, and the time and place of writing, either on a title page or in colophon. From such notations Driscoll has drawn the following profile of those who copied romances:

Most of those who can be identified appear to be of similar social background. They were simple farmers, the majority of them tenants, on medium-sized farms. If they were involved in public life it was only on a local level, as *hreppstjórar*. Where it has been possible to determine household size they are most frequently members, often heads, of households numbering over ten, well above the national average. In age they range from about sixteen or seventeen to over

⁶⁰ Loftur Guttormsson, ‘Lestrarhættir og bókmenning’, pp. 195-214, in Loftur Guttormsson and Ingi Sigurðsson, eds, *Alþýðumenning á Íslandi 1830-1930: Ritað mál, menntun og félagshreyfingar*. Sagnfræðirannsóknir 18 (Reykjavík, 2003), pp. 199-200.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

⁶² Matthew J. Driscoll, ‘The Oral, the Written, and the In-Between: Textual Instability in the Post-Reformation Lygisaga’, in Hildegard L.C. Tristram, ed, *(Re)Oralisierung. ScriptOralia*, 84 (Tübingen, 1996), p. 134.

eighty – copying manuscripts was clearly a lifetime pursuit. There are a few clergymen, but the majority had no formal education.⁶³

This profile of the average copyist of sagas as a ‘mid-range’ tenant farmer, active during the winter months, is, in most parts consistent with what I have found in my previous studies and the picture that emerges from my study of Sighvatur Grímsson. Copying was, by and large, an occupation of average farmers, rather than scholars and officials, but also of farmhands and the occasional free labourer, especially as active literacy spread among the general public.

The dates given in the manuscripts that Driscoll studied reveal that the process of copying took place by and large between October and April, and most intensively in the months of December and January, in proportion to the scantiness of daylight and the duration of the *kvöldvaka*.⁶⁴ Driscoll also notes how many of the extant romance manuscripts carry direct references to the practice of the *kvöldvaka* in headings, implying both its production and consumption as well and its entertaining and educating value.⁶⁵ While the formal institution of household schooling was fundamentally supported by and built around the products of print culture, in particular the official canon of religious readings, the informal institution of the *kvöldvaka* was supported by the scribal dissemination of secular, though to some extent also pious, texts and their oral-literal presentation. The two pillars of popular literary culture in nineteenth-century Iceland – the circulation of scribal transcripts and the oral presentation of literature at home in the evenings – were the platform for lifelong self-education among the general public in a society practically devoid of institutionalized education.

5.5 Conclusion

The structures and levels of literary activity in early modern and modern Iceland have been the subject of lively scholarly study over the last two decades or so. Despite being commonly recognized as a key feature of Icelandic literary culture in the era, the vivacious and multifaceted usage of scribal media

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁶⁵ See for example Lbs 2787 8vo: ‘Ein skjemtileg Sögu Bok Innihaldandi nøkrar Sögur til dægra stittjngar a kvöldumm j heima husumm og frodleikur þeim sem eptir taka vilja samann sett og skrifud af Finni Gyslasini 1872’. Driscoll translates the title as ‘An entertaining book containing a few sagas to pass the time in the evening at home and for the edification of those willing to listen, compiled and written by Finnur Gíslason in 1872’. See Driscoll, ‘The Oral’, p. 133.

that blossomed as popular literacy spread has been overlooked and understudied. Little is known about its actual meaning and magnitude, about its interaction with educational processes, or its complex relations with other coexisting media. The nature of individual agency and individuals' opportunities to obtain or produce reading material in a culture where scribal media were strong has been understudied as well, resulting in a very limited view of the operation of literary culture during the early modern and modern eras.

The following three chapters pursue a micro-level study of the themes that have been addressed here: the organization of literacy and primary education, autodidactic endeavours, scribal networking, and household literary practices. These chapters test the argument that popular scribes and lay scholars in nineteenth-century Iceland assumed the role of informal cultural institutions in a society virtually devoid of formal ones like printing presses and publishing houses, libraries and literary societies, schools and literary salons. They do so by studying one of these scribes closely and examining his life and work in the realm of everyday life, and in the context of the communities he lived in and the people he associated with. Importantly, this study not only focuses on his impact as a cultural figure and a supplier of texts, but also on the earlier scribes who contributed to his professional coming of age. The case of Sighvatur Grímsson thus invites us to become acquainted with an informal and wide-ranging web of popular scribes, lay scholars and poets who were active in reading and writing, collecting, producing, and disseminating texts amidst the day-to-day realities of Icelandic popular culture.

CHAPTER SIX

EDUCATION IN A SCRIBAL COMMUNITY: AKRANES 1840-1859

6.1 Introduction

This first of three chapters focused on Sighvatur Grímsson explores the issue of primary education in scribal culture and the opportunity it offered for furthering the level of education beyond the minimum required by the authorities at the time. Sighvatur's efforts at broadening his skills and knowledge in literary matters are documented in his short autobiography and in a handful of extant manuscripts from his early years. In this chapter, these testimonials are put into context with other evidence of the literary culture in the small fishing village of Akranes where he spent most of his childhood and adolescent years.

Sighvatur received his first schooling at home from his parents, under the supervision of the parish minister, as was common among the general public throughout most of the nineteenth century. The process generally began with basic reading lessons by the age of five or six and was formally concluded with confirmation around the age of thirteen. But Sighvatur was, from an early age, drawn to books and texts of a historical and literary nature, which at the time circulated largely in handwritten copies. Through a process of self-education, young Sighvatur was able to amass greater and wider skills and knowledge than was expected or called for by the authorities or by society as a whole. In this achievement, Sighvatur was by no means typical of young people of his status, but he was not an abnormal isolated case either. He was, throughout his life, firmly set within networks of like-minded people. His case illuminates the pathways of the informal educational system in nineteenth-century Iceland, which were closely intertwined with the pathways of scribal communication.

The autodidactic element of scribal culture as a forum for self- (or self-initiated) education appears to have been one of the main driving forces behind the vigorous literary culture of the era. Self-education means that learning need not be limited to the traditional time periods or settings of formal education, and can be seen as a life-long endeavour. This chapter is, however, mainly occupied

with Sighvatur's childhood and adolescent years, from his first lessons up to the time when he embarked on the active pursuit, processing and representation of knowledge, and with the role of scribal culture in these endeavours.

6.2 Formal and informal schooling in Akranes

In his regional history of the county of Borgarfjarðarsýsla, of which the hamlet Akranes is a part of, local historian Kristleifur Þorsteinsson (1861-1952) gives an account of literary culture in the district, partly based on his own experience.¹ In broad outline it is consistent with the personal narratives cited earlier; for children up to the age of confirmation it was considered sufficient to learn to read and to know the Catechism, and up to 1870 it was rare that children were able to write on their confirmation day. By that age though, most enquiring boys had begun their pursuit of writing skills, armed with quills or old pens, raven blood or homemade ink, or simply scribbling with a stick on ice or some other yielding surface. Some got hold of sample alphabets from scribes while others copied old letters and envelopes, which usually resulted in inconsistent calligraphy.

A permanent school was first established in Akranes in 1880. Prior to that, primary education was the responsibility of parents or other household members or, in some cases, was delivered semi-formally outside the household over a limited period. The parish minister at Akranes around the turn of the twentieth century, Jón Sveinsson, gave an account of the state of education in the village during the second half of the nineteenth century in a short essay published in the educational journal *Skólablaðið* in 1913:

By the middle of the last century [i.e. the nineteenth] there was little culture at Akranes and instruction for youth was scant, as was the case in other seaside villages. The households were solely responsible, along with the parish minister, for the education of children for confirmation. From 1850 to 1880, Sigurður Lynge (d. 1881) took a good number of children for tutoring and instructed them in reading and Christianity and a bit of writing and arithmetic.²

¹ Kristleifur Þorsteinsson, *Héraðssaga Borgarfjarðar* (Reykjavík, 1935-1938), p. 364.

² Jón Sveinsson. 'Drög til skólasögu I. Akranes', *Skólablaðið* 7/4 (1913), pp. 68-72. 'Um miðja öldina sem leið var menning alþýðu lítil á Akranesi og lítið um uppfræðing æskulýðs, líkt og annarsstaðar í sjóplássum. Heimilin voru þá ein ásamt presti um fræðslu barna til fermingar. Eftir 1850 og fram undir 1880 tók Sigurður Lynge, (d. 1881) allmörg börn til kennslu og kenndi þeim lestur og kristindóm, og lítið eitt í skrift og reikningi'. A short-lived school was operated in Akranes during the winter of 1876-1877 in rented housing before a permanent school was launched in 1880. See also Stefán Hjálmarsson, *Skóli í 100 ár: Skólahaald á Akranesi 1880-1980* (Akranes, 1987), pp. 23-24.

Sigurður Lyngje was a fisherman at Akranes who had received a solid household education in his youth and drew on his skills as a local scribe who served his community by writing and transcribing texts, big or small. One of his customs was to copy yearly almanacs at the end of each year which he sold to his neighbours.³ Lyngje's private manuscripts reflect extensive study and scholarly work, most of it involving scribally produced texts.⁴ Furthermore, he served as a teacher in his community for decades and instructed around 15 children at a time at his home.⁵ Nothing suggests, however, that Sighvatur Grímsson ever attended Sigurður Lyngje's school, though it is evident from his diaries that he was acquainted with the family. It is likely that the fee was prohibitive for Sighvatur's parents.

The key source of information on Sighvatur's primary education and early literary activities is the short autobiography he wrote (using the third person) in his early fifties.⁶ There Sighvatur concisely describes how he, at the age of seven, learned to recognise the letters of the alphabet and to connect them into syllables and words at his mother's knee:

In his youth, Sighvatur got accustomed to practicing his reading with printed books as was common then, but he actually never received any instruction in reading Latin type, because his mother, though she was sharp-witted and knew many things by heart, could not read that typeface. The way the teaching proceeded was that first he was shown the letters of the old *Sjöorðabók* by bishop Jón Víðalín, and it went well at first, but the second time, Sighvatur did not recognise the first letter in the second word and received a slap from his mother. But it was the first and last slap because after that he memorized all the letters and could read the book fluently after a fortnight. This was just before Christmas 1847, and after the New Year he got hold of one sheet from *Alþingistíðindi* in Latin type, and started then to compare the letters with his *Sjöorðabók* and to find those which were most similar, and in this way was able to guess the identity of the letters for which he found no match in the older text. In this way he gradually deciphered the sheet and could read Latin type fluently by springtime.⁷

³ Lbs 1973 8vo: Sigurður Lyngje's diaries 1836-1881. Sigurður made at least nine almanacs for his neighbours in 1841, according to his diaries. Several manuscripts now preserved in NLI are associated with his name.

⁴ See Guðmundur Hjaltason, 'Sigurður Lyngje', *Óðinn* 10/3 (1914-1915), pp. 22-24.

⁵ Lúðvík Kristjánsson, 'Minnisblöð Sigurðar Lyngje á Akranesi', *Árbók Landsbókasafns Íslands: Nýr flokkur* 15 (1989), pp. 14-16.

⁶ Lbs 3623 8vo: Sighvatur Grímsson's autobiography written in 1892. Autograph, written in the third person. It was first published in 1965 as 'Æviágrip Sighvats Grímssonar Borgfirðings fram til 27. des. 1892 eftir sjálfan hann', *Árbók Landsbókasafns Íslands* 1964, 21 (1965), pp. 91-99.

⁷ *Ibid.*, [pp. 1-2]. 'Í æsku vandist Sighvatur við að læra bóklestur á prentaðar bækur, sem þá var tíðt, en þó fékk hann enga tilsögn að lesa latínuprent, því móðir hans, sem þó var skarpgefúð og kunní afar mikið utan bókar – kunní ekki að lesa það prent, en þannig var kenslunni varið, að fyrst var honum sýnt letur á Sjöorða bókinni gömlu, eftir biskup Jón Víðalín, og gekk það allvel í fyrsta sinn; en þegar til kom í öðru sinni, þá mundi Sighvatur ekki fyrsta stafinn í öðru orðinu, og fékk hann þá kinnhest hjá móður sinni, en það var sá fyrsti og síðasti, því eftir það mundi hann alla stafina, og gat lesið bókina viðstöðulaust eftir hálfan mánuð. Þetta var fyrir júl 1847, en eftir Nýárið barst honum í höndur ein opna úr alþingistíðindum með latínuprenti, og fór hann þá að bera sig að bera þá stafi saman við Sjöorða bókina sína og leita uppi, hverir líkastir vóru, og gat þannig gizkað á, hverir þeir stafir vóru, sem hann fann engan líkan í eldra prentinu. Þannig smám saman komst hann út úr blaðinu og gat lesið latínustýl um vorið viðstöðu laust'.

This packed paragraph reveals many interesting aspects of the procedures and priorities of household education at the time. The first is that young Sighvatur was primarily taught to recognise and read print type, despite the poor availability of printed material. This, and the choice of *Sjöorðabók*, an eighteenth-century compilation of Christian sermons that had been one of the most prevalent religious books in Icelandic homes for decades, represents the priority on what has been termed ‘religious literacy’, i.e. the capacity to plough through a familiar (religious) text.⁸ Danish historian Thomas Munck has argued that

in Denmark (as elsewhere in Europe) the campaign for improvements in basic reading skills in the early eighteenth century initially was driven almost entirely by religious concerns: even minimal reading skills could improve the ability of parishioners (women as well as men) to recall and recite the various commentaries on Luther’s Catechism on which all congregational devotion was based. Reading in that sense was a means of helping memorization – and of consolidating uniformity – rather than a route to independent learning.⁹

This heavy emphasis ‘from above’ on the pious purpose of literacy thus disregarded the literary sphere of scribal culture, whether in the form of consumption (reading) or (re)production (writing) of secular material, entertainment or information.

Secondly, Sighvatur’s description makes it apparent how ambiguous and multi-layered the concept of literacy was at that time, and how the progress of Sighvatur’s learning was affected by the level of literacy within the household. By the mid-nineteenth century, when Sighvatur was growing up, there were two kinds of typefaces to be found in Icelandic books, the outgoing blackletter or Fraktur typefaces and the increasingly used Latin or Antiqua typefaces. The transition to Antiqua was taking place in these years, and the changeover could disrupt the continuity of literacy established in blackletter type. Sighvatur’s mother, born at the turn of the nineteenth century and accustomed to the older typeface, was unable to read Latin print and taught her son to read blackletter type by the use of the eighteenth-century *Sjöorðabók*, an approach which necessarily limited his access to reading matter.

⁸ Loftur Guttormsson, ‘The Development of Popular Religious Literacy in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries’, *Scandinavian Journal of History* 15/1 (1990), p. 8. The book referred to as *Sjöorðabók* is Jón Vídalín, *Síð Predikaner wt af þeim Síð Orðvm Drottens Vors Jesu Christi, er han talade síjdarst a Krossenum* (Hólar, 1716). After this first edition, the book was reprinted four times, in 1731, 1745, 1753 and 1832.

⁹ Thomas Munck, ‘Literacy, Educational Reform and the Use of Print in Eighteenth-Century Denmark’, *European History Quarterly* 34 (2004), pp. 275-276.

Alþingistíðindi ('Parliamentary Minutes') was in fact the first publication to be produced fully in Antiqua in Iceland, printed at the renovated and relocated Landsprentsmiðjan in Reykjavík in 1845. Icelandic texts in Latin typefaces printed in Copenhagen had been available since the early nineteenth century.¹⁰ In the same year, the issue of multiple typeface literacy was addressed in an article in the journal *Fjölnir*. The anonymous writer strongly advocated the full employment of Latin type and the comparable handwritten script, as it was time-consuming and confusing to learn to read and write in more than one style.¹¹

Thirdly, and as a consequence of the conditions described above, it was in fact up to Sighvatur himself to bring these literary skills to the next level, not only in terms of writing skill but also of other levels of reading. The first step was, according to Sighvatur's narrative, to compare the Gothic type of the *Sjóorðabók* with a sample of Latin type in the form of a sheet from the *Alþingistíðindi*. With this method he learned, by his own account, to read all printed books within a few months. Printed secular texts were, however, still rare and hard for the general public to get, but as a substitute, it was common for handwritten books to be made, borrowed or lent to be read or copied. So the next step in Sighvatur's journey towards full literacy was to become proficient at reading manuscripts, a task even more complex than reading printed matter. Their quality and age varied vastly, and the types and styles of handwriting depended on the age of the manuscript and varied from one writer to another. Reading ability in the mid-nineteenth century thus had many facets, because there were so many different styles of print and writing.

This issue of multi-layered literacy had been addressed a century earlier in Jón Ólafsson's pedagogical proposal *Hagþenkir*, which suggests that children should be introduced to at least three types of lettering in their primary education. To be able to read various types of handwriting as well as printed matter, he recommends that the teaching of reading include a range of typefaces and that the same approach be used in subsequent writing instruction.¹² Jón Ólafsson put his ideas into practice in a handwritten textbook in the mid-eighteenth century, containing twelve stories written in three different

¹⁰ Þorsteinn Þorsteinsson, 'Þættir úr letursögu', an appendix to Ingi Rúnar Eðvaldsson, *Prent eflir mennt: Saga bókgæðar frá upphafi til síðari hluta 20. aldar* (Reykjavík, 1994), p. 507.

¹¹ 'Um latínuletrið', *Fjölnir* (1845), p. 29. The article echoes and cites earlier writings of the Danish scholar Rasmus Christian Rask in his *Lestrarkver handa heldri manna börnum* (Copenhagen, 1830).

¹² Jón Ólafsson, *Hagþenkir JS 83 fol.* Edited by Þórunn Sigurðardóttir (Reykjavík, 1996), pp. 13 and 16.

letter types. Made for his young niece at the age of eight or nine, it is thought to be the oldest extant compilation of this kind expressly put together for educational purposes.¹³

It is evident, however, that Jón Ólafsson's idealistic proposals were not realistic for the vast majority of households at the time, nor were they any more workable by the mid-nineteenth century when Sighvatur Grímsson learned to read. Parents and guardians were rarely skilled at such instruction and the time and effort allotted to education was usually scarce. In any case, Sighvatur himself took the initiative to expand his reading and writing abilities over the next years, step by step:

The following winter he got the *Rímur af Eiríki víðförla* transcribed by the poet Lýður Jónsson, and then he used the same approach of comparing it with the printed version, and made good progress. Using that method, he took every handwritten book he could lay his hands on, and by the time he was eleven years old there was no manuscript, however cryptic and opaque, that he could not read without hesitation¹⁴

Such multilevel literacy was crucial for anyone seeking access to the world of secular literature and historical writing in mid-nineteenth-century Iceland and Sighvatur seemingly had good access to handwritten books of different ages and styles. Sighvatur's ability to read fluently from any kind of print or typescript earned him the position of 'household reader', which gave him the opportunity to become acquainted with even more material.

After Sighvatur had learned to read printed and handwritten texts, he began to want to learn to write. In the autobiography he notes that he could not get any instruction in writing at home, and though many people lived at Akranes, there was no one who could offer any help by teaching him.¹⁵ His mother, like most women of her generation, was probably not able to write herself. Sighvatur's parents had apparently separated, formally or informally, when he was still young and his father was thus mostly absent in his upbringing. Writing utensils were also hard to obtain, but Sighvatur started to collect scrap paper (such as used envelopes) and materials for ink-making, and to whet quills to write with. He also tried to get hold of used and blunt steel pens, which he sharpened. Sighvatur obtained

¹³ Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, 'Barnshugur við bók: Um uppeldishugmyndir Jóns Ólafssonar', *Vefnir* (2003), pp. 2-3. <http://vefnir.bok.hi.is/2003/AG.PDF>.

¹⁴ Lbs 3623 8vo, [p. 2]. 'Veturinn eftir fékk hann Eiríks Rímur víðförla, með hönd Lýðs skálds Jónssonar, og hafði hann þá hið sama ráð, að bera saman við prentið, og vannst það vel. Þannig tók hann hverja skrifaða bók eftir aðra, sem hann á náði, – og þegar hann var 11 ára gl. kom engin sú skrudda fyrir, hversu rambundin og mórauð sem var, að hann ekki læsi víðstöðu laust ...'.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, [p. 2].

writing samples from various people, including an alphabet of capital letters from the teacher and scribe Sigurður Lyngre, mentioned earlier. But since he fashioned his letters using a wide assortment of models and entirely without instruction, his handwriting became rather incoherent and imperfect.¹⁶

Sighvatur Grímsson's description of the circumstances of his learning to read and write is somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand he maintains that no one was willing or able to teach him to write, but at the same time it seems to have been relatively easy for him to obtain handwritten material, to teach himself to read different handwriting styles by comparing them with printed texts, and finally, to teach himself to write. All of Sighvatur Grímsson's efforts at acquiring literacy in this poor fishing and farming community were marked by these two conflicting conditions. On the one hand the community and his family were unable to provide more than the mere basics of reading and Christian knowledge and Iceland's formal educational system was still centred around home schooling under the supervision of the parish priest. On the other hand it is evident from Sighvatur's narrative and other sources that there were other, informal routes to knowledge through popular literary culture and especially manuscript culture. There were forums for informal education (both basic and more advanced), reading material was widely distributed, and, at its best, there was true intellectual community on a scholarly level involving a two-way association with formal academia. These contradictions of Sighvatur Grímsson's youth are, to some extent, a fair description of the cultural landscape of the society as a whole in the nineteenth century and are echoed by numerous other contemporary narratives and extant scribal material. As the formal structure of literary culture – household-based education and the miniscule supply of secular printed books – failed to fulfil the increasing demand for reading material, there developed a grassroots system based on scribal communications.

6.3 The circuit of scribal texts

Sighvatur's description of his early autodidactic endeavours gives insight into the local availability of handwritten texts as well as their place in society more generally. He notes how he made use of a transcript of the *Rímur af Eiríki víðförla* by Guðmundur Bergþórsson, in the hand of local poet and

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, [pp. 2-3].

scribe Lýður Jónsson (1800-1876), to help extend his reading ability from print type to script. In this first interaction with manuscript culture, Sighvatur tapped into two large veins of post-medieval scribal publication and circulation.

The poet Guðmundur Bergþórsson (1657–1705) is one of the most productive and best known literary figures of the early modern period in Iceland, with at least thirteen *rímur*-cycles attributed to his name, including the longest extant work in the genre: *Olgeirs rímur danska*.¹⁷ Aside from numerous *rímur*, Guðmundur Bergþórsson penned vast quantities of additional poetry: from obituary poems and other occasional verse to the philosophical piece *Heimspekingaskóli* ('School of Philosophers'). This unique poem of 152 stanzas is divided into 18 chapters, each dedicated to one concept such as time, God, man, soul, consciousness, and modesty. It is largely based on a Danish book, *Collegium Philosophorum* by Hans Hanssøn Skonning, first published in 1636 and translated into Icelandic prose sometime around the mid-seventeenth century.¹⁸ Guðmundur Bergþórsson's poetry circulated entirely via oral and scribal media in his lifetime. The poem *Heimspekingaskóli* was the first of his works to be published, eighty years after his death, and examples of his poetry were published on a few further occasions in the nineteenth century.¹⁹ Guðmundur Bergþórsson's popularity and wide-ranging circulation as a scribal author, both during and beyond his lifetime, is manifested in over 400 manuscripts preserved in NLI that contain his poetry. The poem *Heimspekingaskóli* survives in nearly 70 different transcripts, dating from both before and after its original publication. Similarly the poem *Vinaspegill* survives in 55 copies. The *Rímur af Eiriki víðförla* used by Sighvatur to enhance his reading ability has, like the vast majority of Guðmundur Bergþórsson's poetry, never been published in print, but exists in 35 transcripts in the NLI. Like other scribes and literary enthusiasts of his time, Sighvatur collected and copied a good deal of Guðmundur Bergþórsson's poetry throughout his life.²⁰

¹⁷ Guðmundur Bergþórsson, *Olgeirs rímur danska*. Eds, Finnur Sigmundsson and Björn Karel Þórolfsson (Reykjavík, 1947). On the poet, see Finnur Sigmundsson, 'Guðmundur Bergþórsson skáld', in Jón Guðnason, ed, *Merkir Íslendingar: Nýr flokkur*, vol. 5 (Reykjavík, 1966), pp. 75-87.

¹⁸ Jón Samsonarson, 'Heimild að Heimspekingaskóla', in *Afmælisrit Jóns Helgasonar 30. júní 1969* (Reykjavík, 1969), pp. 109-117. See Hans Hanssøn Skonning, *Collegium Philosophorum* (Aarhus, 1636).

¹⁹ Guðmundur Bergþórsson, *Agiætur Kvedlingur sem nefnest Heimsspekinga-Skoole. Sundurskiptur i Atiaan Greiner. Kvedenn af Sál. Gudmunde Bergþórssyne* (Hrappsey, 1785).

²⁰ Lbs 2344 4to: 'Safn af Rímum, kvæðum, vísnum og ýmsum ljóðmælum eptir ýmsa höfunda samantínd á Klúku í Bjarnarfirði frá 1871 til vordaga 1873 af Sighvati Grímssyni Borgfirðingi'. This compilation of poetry and

The second contributor to the transcript of the *Rímur af Eiriki víðförla* that Sighvatur used was the person who copied it, Lýður Jónsson (1800-1876), a poet and scribe who spent most of his life in Akranes. Although completely obscure in the standard modern view of literary history, Lýður seems to have been both a well known and widely read poet in his time. Twenty *rímur*-cycles are attributed to him, according to Finnur Sigmundsson's descriptive catalogue of *rímur*, *Rímnatal*.²¹ Most of them are short and were composed as contemporary lampoons, rather than in the traditional style of lengthy heroic or fantastic narratives. Lýður was among hundreds of popular poets of the nineteenth century whose work circulated almost entirely through scribal and oral transmission.²² At least 80 manuscripts preserved in the NLI are directly associated with Lýður Jónsson's name in one way or another. The greater part are transcripts of one or more of his *rímur* or poems, and have been dated to anywhere between 1825 and 1925. This vast number indicates extensive circulation way beyond any local boundaries. A second grouping encompasses autograph works by Lýður Jónsson as well as a handful of transcripts by him of other peoples' work. His case is thus an example of how scribal transmission served contemporary poetry in the nineteenth century, and it sheds light on the scribal community at Akranes around the mid-nineteenth century, when Sighvatur Grímsson was growing up.

The poetry of Lýður Jónsson was apparently central in Sighvatur Grímsson's upbringing, and he continued to collect and copy it throughout his life. This is especially apparent in a notation on Sighvatur's transcript (from the early 1890s) of the lampoon *Álfhildar ríma*, originally composed by Lýður Jónsson in 1857. Sighvatur made his transcript from an autograph which was missing its first page, but he was nevertheless able to reconstruct the first ten stanzas of the poem from memory, noting: 'I memorized them when the *ríma* first began to circulate at Skipaskagi [Akranes], but the actual beginning, the *mansöngur* [prelude], I have forgotten'.²³ Another example of transmission between oral and scribal media in the same manuscript is a verse by Lýður Jónsson that Sighvatur says

verse written in 1871-1873 includes four of Guðmundur's *rímur* and poems. See also Lbs 2322 4to: Anthology of *rímur* by Guðmundur Bergþórsson and Snorri Björnsson written in 1882-1889 by Sighvatur Grímsson.

²¹ Finnur Sigmundsson, *Rímnatal II* (Reykjavík, 1966), p. 102.

²² One of Lýður Jónsson's works was, however, published in print in his lifetime: the poem *Grábróðir* was printed in the journal *Norðri* in 1857 and later reissued as an addendum to another *rímur*-cycle: Árni Sigurðsson, *Rímur af Sigurði fót og Ásmundi Húnakongi* (Akureyri, 1858).

²³ Lbs 2289 4to: 'Hít'. Compilation of assorted poetry, copied and assembled by Sighvatur Grímsson 1891-1892. 'Skrifuð hér eftir eiginhandarriti skáldsins, en vantar framan af eitt blað, líklega 10 erindi, en fyrstu erindin, sem hér eru, hefi ég skrifað eftir minni minni, því eg lærði þau þegar ríman komst fyrst á gang á Skipaskaga, en sjálfu upphafinu, mansöngnum hefi ég gleymt'.

he learned directly from the poet as a young boy.²⁴ Several other verses by Lýður Jónsson are also included, copied from assorted local transcripts and autograph manuscripts, as well as poetry by others copied from manuscripts in Lýður's hand.

This same manuscript compilation from the early 1890s also contains several other indicators of the vibrant cultural environment at Akranes four decades earlier and of the status of popular poetry in everyday life at the time. In the compilation, Sighvatur revisits the cultural scenes of his childhood and adolescent years, his own early compositions and transcripts, his father's poetry, and some of the local poetry that formed the backdrop of daily life during his upbringing. Among the texts that Sighvatur transcribes into his miscellany are *Hestavísur*, by one Kristín Ólafsdóttir from Dalsmynni in Norðurárdalur, from an earlier transcript he made in 1852 when he was 11 years old. A little younger is a poem composed by Sighvatur in memory of local farmer Halldór Halldórsson at Grund at his funeral in 1853.²⁵

Several other local poets in and around Akranes are also represented in the miscellany. For example there are two poems by Hrómundur Eiríksson, copied by Sighvatur from earlier transcripts which he made in his mid-teens based on oral recital by his mother and his uncle.²⁶ The miscellany also includes poetry by Jón Jóhannsson from Leirárgarðar, Jóhannes Jónsson from Bakkabær in Akranes, and Jón Ísleifsson from Krosshús in Akranes, in all cases copied from autographs.²⁷ Yet another compilation that reflects the literary dynamism at Akranes in this period is a collection of *ljóðabréf* (verse-letters) amassed by Sighvatur Grímsson in spring 1890 from various older transcripts, including several items dating from mid-century.²⁸

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.* On the former verse Sighvatur notes: 'Kvæðið skrifði eg upp 1856 eptir minni Guðmundar Einarssonar, föðurbróður míns, en var þá hvergi til ritað og hafði hann lært það af höfundinum'. On the second he notes: 'Skrifaðar 1857 eptir minni móður minnar, Guðrúnar Sighvatsdóttur.' Hrómundur Eiríksson (1780-1830) was a poet and farmer at Kalmansvík in Borgarfjörður and Miðhús in Mýrar.

²⁷ *Ibid.*: 'Meyarboð orkt af Jóni Jóhannssyni á Leyrárgörðum, skopkveðlingur til manns sem gekk illa út, orkt um eða eptir 1840. Skrifað hér eptir eiginhandriti höf.'; 'Vísur til stúlku orktar af Jóhannesi Jónssyni í Bakkabæ á Akranesi um 1856 eptir eigin handriti'; and 'Formannavísur á Skipaskaga veturinn 1852, orktar af Jóni Ísleifssyni í Krosshúsi á Skipaskaga. Skrifað eptir eiginhandriti höf.'

²⁸ Lbs 2291 4to: A compilation of *hrakningarímur* and verse letters collected and transcribed by Sighvatur Grímsson 1890-1891. The term 'verse letter' refers to a specific form of poetry that was, as the name indicates, a hybrid between occasional poetry and regular correspondence. For a recent account on the phenomenon in English literary history, see chapter four, 'The Verse Letter', in David Fairer, *English Poetry of the Eighteenth Century, 1700-1799* (London, 2003), pp. 60-78.

Sighvatur Grímsson began, in 1865, to bring together his poetry in an orderly manner in an anthology he called *Syrpa* ('Medley'), that ultimately grew into three packed volumes of almost 1000 pages.²⁹ Its first segment reveals how Sighvatur was, from his early teens, an active participant in the custom of everyday poetry composition that was characteristic of the period. The oldest verse in the anthology is from 1853, when Sighvatur was in his twelfth year, and is a verse-letter to a friend named Jón Stefánsson at Fellsendi in Dalasýsla county. From spring 1856, however, the collection testifies to the relentless recording of Sighvatur's life through verse: an alternative form of autobiography or chronicle-making which recording events trivial and remarkable alike. An embodiment of the close relations between poetry and daily life is the tradition of *formannavísur*, a poetic genre recording all the captains or foremen of boats operated from a given fishing station. During his time as a farm labourer Sighvatur produced similar verse in other fishing stations, first during his stay at the station of Brunnar in Hvallátrar (or Látrar) in spring 1862, and again in 1866.³⁰ It is not known if these verses were widely circulated among the residents of the station, but when Sighvatur composed another set of *Formannavísur* when serving in the fishing station of Bolungarvík three years later his diary shows that he made several copies on demand in the following years, at least three in 1865 and two in 1866.³¹ None of these copies seems to be extant but at least one transcript made by another scribe is preserved, written by a teenager named Hálfðan Jónsson at Bakki in Hnífsdalur sometime before his early death in 1870.³² More personal are, for example, two obituary poems, one in memory of Sighvatur's teenage girlfriend, Júlíanna Margrét Jónsdóttir (1840-1858), the second commemorating his mother after her death in spring 1859.

A large portion of the poetry in Sighvatur's collection was, in fact, composed for others, and in their names, on various occasions. Examples of this are proposals in verse like the one of 43 stanzas made for Ólafur 'the big' Ólafsson and addressed to Péturína Regína Rist, and verse-letters like the one

²⁹ Lbs 2325 8vo: 'Syrpa', vol. I-III. Anthology of Sighvatur Grímsson's poetry. Autograph.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. I. The 1862 poem has recently been published in a local historical journal: Sighvatur Grímsson, 'Formannavísur á Látrum og Brunnum 1862 eftir Sighvat Gr. Borgfirðing', *Árbók Barðastrandarsýslu* (2002), pp. 126-127. Sighvatur composed another set of *formannavísur* at Brunnar in Hvallátrar in spring 1866, according to his diary for 26 May 1866.

³¹ Lbs 2374 4to: Sighvatur Grímsson's diary 1863-1880. 11 December 1864, 17 May 1865, 11 June 1865, 20 June 1865, 9 September 1866, and 26 December 1866. According to his autobiography, it was in 1865 that Sighvatur composed the 'Formannavísur úr Bolungarvík', but other sources, including his diary, suggest it was a year earlier.

³² Lbs 4062 8vo: Compilation of poetry, written in several hands 1862-1875.

composed for Magnús Jónsson at Garðhús and addressed to his brother, both in 1856. Indications of Sighvatur's status as a communal 'poet laureate' in Akranes and later in other communities are wedding poems such as one for the couple Jón Guðlaugsson and Margrét Magnúsdóttir (1856). All this indicates indisputably how Sighvatur, from an early age, drew upon a vibrant literary environment that was predominantly driven by oral and scribal transmission.

6.4 Adolescence and self-education

Sighvatur continued to live with his mother in Akranes after his father's death in 1851, occupied with wool work and other crafts throughout the winters. During the summers he was sent to the nearby county of Dalasýsla, where he served as a shepherd and later a farm hand involved in hay-making and other everyday farm work. During his later adolescent years Sighvatur worked as a fisherman in Akranes and thus became prepared for all the major aspects of labouring, and later heading a household, in a farming and fishing community. Simultaneously, his interest in literature and history grew and in the evenings he read aloud sagas that he had procured for other members of the household, as was commonly the role of teenagers keen on books.

In a short and rather opaque paragraph in his autobiography, Sighvatur notes that during his time in Akranes he had begun to transcribe some family sagas for himself when he was able to borrow them, 'but at the time only a few copies were available, and only in old editions, some of which he transcribed'.³³ In this short passage, Sighvatur may be referring to some of the oldest writings in his collection: three sagas and one shorter tale transcribed by him at the age of eighteen at his home in Hreppsúð in Akranes. *Finnboga saga ramma* was, according to Sighvatur's endnotes, completed on 18 April 1859, followed by *Orms þáttur Stórolfssonar* on 2 May, *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfjfls* three days later, and though the last one, *Fóstbræðra saga*, is undated, it is likely to have been transcribed during the same stretch of time.³⁴ Unlike most of Sighvatur's later transcripts, this group includes no details about the originals, where he got them, or if they were in manuscript or print. None of these four sagas had then been printed in Iceland, but both *Fóstbræðra saga* and *Finnboga saga ramma* had

³³ Lbs 3623 8vo, [p. 3]. '... en þá voru ekki til af þeim nema örfá eintök, og hinar eldri útgáfur, sem hann skrifaði sumar upp'.

³⁴ Lbs 2312 8vo: Compilation of sagas and poetry written in 1859-1865 by Sighvatur Grímsson.

already been published in Denmark. Though Sighvatur states that the sagas were hard to obtain in his small home village, many of them were circulating around the country in handwritten transcripts. From the number of preserved transcripts of the four sagas and tales in the National Library of Iceland, it may be assumed that *Orms þáttur Stórolfssonar* was the hardest to obtain as only one other nineteenth-century transcript of this short tale of 15 pages is preserved in its archives. More widespread were *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*, preserved in 43 copies in NLI, of which 22 are from the nineteenth century, and *Finnboga saga ramma*, preserved in 36 transcripts, 20 of them from the nineteenth century. *Fóstbræðra saga*, considerably longer than the others, is preserved in 12 transcripts from the nineteenth century, some of them made by academic scholars in Copenhagen.³⁵

Transcripts by Sighvatur with earlier dates can be found in a miscellany of several *rímur* cycles and other writings from the mid-1850s.³⁶ Its first cycle, *Rímur af Gesti og Gnatus*, was completed on 20 November 1856, shortly before Sighvatur's sixteenth birthday. It was followed by *Rímur af Ármanni*, finished two months later, on 18 January 1857, and the third, *Rímur af Sigurði turnara* on 17 November 1858. All these three *rímur* were composed between 1811 and 1826 by farmer and carpenter Magnús Jónsson (1763-1840), one of the most productive poets of his time and an industrious scribe.³⁷ His *Rímur af Sigurði turnara*, composed in 1811, survives in three autographs and 23 nineteenth-century transcripts, and the manuscripts that contain his poetry number little short of 150.

Following the three *rímur*-cycles by Magnús Jónsson is a transcript of the seventeenth-century poem *Heimspekingaskóli* (*School of Philosophers*) by Guðmundur Bergþórsson, concluded on 29 November 1858. Whether Sighvatur made his transcript from a printed or handwritten exemplar is not clear, but the poem's continued life in both media sheds light on the educating aspect of popular literary culture. Other examples of historical writing in verse form are two wide-ranging accounts,

³⁵ Davíð Ólafsson, 'Að ætla sér bækur með penna: Miðlun Íslandingasagna á 19. öld í handritum og prentuðum bókum', in 2. *Íslenska sögubingid 2002. Ráðstefnurit I* (Reykjavík, 2002),

³⁶ JS 435 8vo: 'Rýmna bók Innihaldandi Rímur Eptir Íms Skáld; Nefnilega Magnús sál. Jónsson. Skrifuð árið 1856 af Sighvati Grímssyni [name written in runes] Á Akranesi Borgarfjarðar sísu'. A compilation of various texts written in 1856 by Sighvatur Grímsson.

³⁷ All in all 22 *rímur* cycles are attributed to Magnús Jónsson and many of them are preserved in numerous transcripts. Only two have been published in print: *Rímur af Bernótusi Borneyjarkappa ortar 1823 af Magnúsi Jónssyni* (Reykjavík, 1854); and *Rímur af Gríshildi góðu eptir gömlu handriti* (Reykjavík, 1910).

Guðmundur Erlendsson's *Einvaldsóður* from the seventeenth century, and *Stjórnaróður* by Gísli Konráðsson from the mid-nineteenth century. Both are examples of how the compilation and dissemination of knowledge in Iceland was adapted to the dominant oral and scribal media.³⁸

An even more impressive testimonial to the educational aspect of scribal culture in early modern and modern Iceland is the last part of Sighvatur's adolescent miscellany, a just over 70-page section with the heading *Fræðibók skrifuð eptir Handarriti Prestsins sjera Snorra sál. Björnssonar á Húsafelli* ('Book of knowledge, transcribed from a manuscript by the late Pastor Snorri Björnsson from Húsafell').³⁹ Snorri's book, now preserved in NLI, was in the 1850s in the possession of a grandson of the scribe, Snorri Jakobsson, a farmer at Klettur in Borgarfjörður, not far from Akranes, and it is most likely that Sighvatur had borrowed it from him.⁴⁰ Despite the seemingly transparent heading of Sighvatur's transcript, it is somewhat misleading and is in fact descriptive of only some parts of the section. The reason is that Sighvatur copied only selected parts of Snorri's book, he combined it with texts from other manuscripts, and he clearly rearranged its content to some degree.

Sighvatur's book of knowledge is divided into four parts. The first three of them belong to the field of natural sciences while the fourth is historiographical. Parts one and two, on fish species around Iceland (both freshwater and oceanic), and on land animals and birds, correspond to Snorri Björnsson's manuscript, but in the third part Sighvatur has rearranged the subchapters considerably. The fourth part is headed 'Some kind of a narrative of the discovery of Iceland and its chronology up to the Middle Ages', and is a vivid testimony of how Sighvatur dismantled and reconstructed the earlier compilation.⁴¹ The clearest sign of this is in its first part, where he adds in the second half of a section from Snorri's book, while relocating the first half, on islands around Iceland, into a more fitting context at the end of the third part, with other accounts of natural history. The short historical account in the second half is, meanwhile combined with a listing of Icelandic lawmen since the establishment of the office and registers of all the bishops of Hólar and Skálholt, to which Sighvatur

³⁸ *Einvaldsóður* has never been published in print but Gísli Konráðsson's poet was printed in the mid-nineteenth century: *Stjórnaróður: Sex flokkar kveðinn 1853 af Gísla Konráðssyni* (Akureyri, 1858).

³⁹ JS 435 8vo.

⁴⁰ In a biographical account of Snorri Björnsson, Sighvatur writes that he had once seen this manuscript in the possession of Snorri Jakobsson in 1855. Sighvatur Grímsson, 'Snorri Björnsson prestur á Húsafelli', in *Merkir Íslendingar I. Nýr flokkur* (Reykjavík, 1962), p. 87.

⁴¹ JS 435 8vo. Its Icelandic title is 'Nökkurs konar Frásögn umm fund Íslands og tímatal alt fram á Miðaldir'.

adds the names of recent bishops in Laugarnes in Reykjavík since the merging and transference of the bishoprics in 1800. These segments were chosen from a wider range of similar listings and rearranged. Among the sections Sighvatur left out are records of Danish and Norwegian kings and a short account of the Danish king Fróði. Following these four parts in Sighvatur's book is a transcript of a sixteenth-century essay on runes and their origin, written by the renowned annalist and autodidact Björn Jónsson at Skarðsá in 1642 and titled *Nokkuð lítið samtak um rúnir* ('One short essay on runes').⁴² This text is not in Snorri Björnsson's book and its source has not been identified, and though several transcripts are preserved in NLI, none of them has any obvious relation with Sighvatur.

The original creation of Snorri Björnsson's 'book of knowledge' is itself another vivid example of how the scribal reproduction of texts can be placed somewhere between transcript and composition. This unique and discordant compilation drew its material from various sources, Icelandic and foreign, and offers a fascinating insight into the scribal library of the eighteenth century and the process of scribal reproduction, as noted by historian Þórunn Valdimarsdóttir.⁴³ Among its intriguing texts is Snorri's transcript of an Icelandic translation of a seventeenth-century Dutch edition of a popular costume and natural history book, made by Pastor Einar Ólafsson (1677-1721) at Staður in Aðalvík around the turn of the eighteenth century.⁴⁴ When it comes to local natural history, Snorri draws upon a key work of early modern Icelandic natural history, Jón 'the learned' Guðmundsson's 'Ein stutt undirréttung um Íslands aðskiljanlegar náttúru', in a process that is more akin to authorship than transcript, in Þórunn Valdimarsdóttir's description.⁴⁵ Sighvatur Grímsson's transcription of Snorri Björnsson's manuscript was thus very much in the tradition of scribal transmission, a process which challenges modern(ist) views of authorship and fixed texts.

⁴² Björn Jónsson's best known work is *Skarðsárannáll*, a key source on the history of Iceland between 1400 and 1646, published in print in 1774. His piece on runes has not yet been published.

⁴³ Þórunn Valdimarsdóttir, *Snorri á Húsafell: Saga frá 18. öld* (Reykjavík, 1989), p. 295.

⁴⁴ Per Nyland and Jan van Hextor, *Het Schouw-Toneel der Aertsche Schepselen, Afbeeldende allerhande Menschen, Beesten, Vogelen, Visschen, &c.* (Amsterdam, 1671-1672). Einar Ólafsson also translated the sixteenth-century geographical account *Theatrum orbis terrarum* by Abraham Ortelius and a seventeenth-century Danish travelogue by one Fredrik Bolling. None of these translations have been published in print.

⁴⁵ Valdimarsdóttir, *Snorri á Húsafelli*, p. 307. The text was first published in the early twentieth century: Jón Guðmundsson, *Ein stutt undirréttung um Íslands aðskiljanlegar náttúru eftir Jón Guðmundsson lærða*. *Islandica XV*. Edited by Halldór Hermannsson (New York, 1924).

6.5 Conclusion

Sighvatur Grímsson left his birthplace in Akranes for good and became fully employed as a farmhand at the farm of Hlíð in Norðurárdalur in spring 1859, shortly after his mother had passed away. There he spent one year and comments in his autobiography that he was never able to look inside a book during that time due to the demanding work.⁴⁶ In the following spring (1860) he transferred from Hlíð to Leysingjastaðir in Hvammsveit, but relocated again after one year's service, this time to the island of Sviðnar in Breiðafjörður. In his autobiography Sighvatur gives this portrait of himself as a young man in the year 1861:

Now he owned nothing but a change of clothes for daily use and a few books, could write letters about as well as the average person then, had learned to calculate almanacs in his twelfth year and knew it well, understood Danish well (spoken), which he had heard a lot at Akranes at springtime when merchants came to trade, and had also often been to Reykjavík. In addition to this he had obtained some of the Icelandic sagas, volumes 1-9 of the *Yearbooks*, and the complete *Sturlunga* chronicles, and had read a lot of other various material.⁴⁷

During his childhood and adolescent years at Akranes, Sighvatur Grímsson had tried his utmost to acquire skills and education within the cultural environment of his time. At this point in his life, around the age of twenty, Sighvatur wanted to be autonomous (*'sjálfs sins maður'*) and free so that he would be able to devote himself to books, but saw no way to make this a reality.⁴⁸ Autonomous status in nineteenth-century Iceland was usually associated with becoming a farmer and head of a household as the status of free labourer was more or less unknown until the end of the nineteenth century. The aim of spending all his free time and means on books might have seemed farfetched for Sighvatur, and he had still few years to go as a farmhand and a fisherman before he was able to make that step. The decade that Sighvatur Grímsson served as a farmhand around the Breiðafjörður area was to become a period of extended self-education.

⁴⁶ Lbs 3623 8vo, [pp. 3-4].

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, [p. 5]. 'Hann átti nú ekkert til nema aðeins skiptaföt til daglegrar brúknar, og fáeinar bækur, Gat skrifað sendi bréf nokkurn veginn, eftir því sem þá gjörðist með alþýðu, hafði lært Fingrarímið á 12 árinu, og kunni það ágætlega, skildi vel Dönsku (talaða), sem hann hafði vanist á Akranesi á vorinn, þegar lausakaupmenn komu þar til verslunar og hafði auk þess oft komið í Reykjavík. Þar með hafði hann eignast nokkuð af Íslendinga sögum, Árbækurnar 1-9 deild og Sturlungu alla og hafði lesið allmikið af ýmsu'.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, [p. 5].

THE COURSE OF AUTODIDACTISM: BREIDAFJÖRÐUR 1861-1868

7.1 Introduction

The life course of Sighvatur Grímsson followed, in broad terms, the normative paths defined by the social and economic structure of nineteenth-century Iceland. He officially became a farmhand in his nineteenth year, shortly after his mother's death, and served in this capacity at various households for nearly a decade. He was in his late twenties when he married and became a tenant farmer at a small farmstead in the county of Strandasýsla. This chapter focuses on the farm labour period in Sighvatur's life and in particular on his literary endeavour during that time. A more general question that arises is if the phase of household service that was almost compulsory for young men and women functioned in some sense as a forum for 'secondary education' in literary matters, just as it was an apprenticeship in farming and household management.

In the first section of this chapter I will discuss how material circulating in manuscript in Iceland was seen variously as having educational value, entertainment value, or both, an assessment that was often made in manuscript headings and title pages. Its second section deals with norms of the life course, the idea of the farm labour period and its social and economic function. The third section deals with a defining aspect of Sighvatur Grímsson's coming-of-age as a scribe and lay scholar: his relationship with the aged poet and historian Gísli Konráðsson during his time as farmhand on the island of Flatey between 1862 and 1868. The final section emphasizes the importance of communal evening reading sessions in the education and entertainment of nineteenth-century Icelanders and the role of handwritten material in this process. The core subject of this chapter is thus the potential and possibilities for self-education within the literary culture of nineteenth-century Iceland.

7.2 Scribal culture as an instrument of self-education

The general perception that handwritten books were good ways to both educate and inform manifests itself in the headings and titles of numerous manuscript miscellanies, notably from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These descriptive headings commonly pair knowledge with entertainment as two sides of the same coin. A fine example of this is a hefty compilation of family sagas, thought to have been written in the first half of the eighteenth century, by two unidentified hands.¹ Not only does the title indicate aspirations towards entertainment and education alike ('til fróðleiks og skemmtunar'), but it also refers to the studious public ('námsfúsum almúga') as a target group. Another example, this one from the first half of the nineteenth century, involves a miscellany of edifying texts presented 'for the legitimate entertainment of those who are fond of stories, old lore, and good examples'.² It aims, as the heading states, to 'educate the young but please the old.'

A miscellany compiled between 1845 and 1853 is presented by its scribe, Björn Jónsson at Bæjarstaðir, as 'a small collection designed for diversion and education', and is accompanied by a poetic stanza:

Education receives praise,
from most people,
we should also value amusement,
it brings great satisfaction.³

The stanza implies that entertainment value was perhaps not always appreciated on a par with informative value, an attitude also echoed by the scribe of a mid-nineteenth-century miscellany who noted on its title page: 'A few small stories for the pleasure of those who love stories. Others should

¹ AM 928 4to: 'Merkileg sögubók af ýmsum fornmönnum Íslands til fróðleiks og skemmtunar námsfúsum almúga'. Compilation of sagas written in two hands in the early eighteenth century.

² Lbs 3625 4to: 'Nokkrar fornmannanna fróðlegar sögur, samanteknar, uppskrifaðar og út gefnar til leyfilegrar skemmtunar fyrir þá sem elska sögur, gamlan fróðleik og góð dæmi. Iðkanir mennta unga, en gleðja gamla'. Compilation of sagas written in the early nineteenth century. Mostly in one hand.

³ ÍB 161 8vo: 'Einn lítill samtíningur til dægrastyttingar og fróðleiks'. Compilation of various texts written in 1845-1853 by Björn Jónsson.

Lærdómsmenntin ber lofið
hjá lýðum flestum,
unna skemmt eigum líka,
ánægju hún veitir ríka.

not look at them'.⁴ Other headings, however, emphasise entertainment value unashamedly, including at least two extant miscellanies which have the heading *Skemmtunarbók* ('A Book of Enjoyment').⁵

These two qualities, of knowledge and entertainment, that were attributed to popular literature in early modern and modern Iceland are essential for understanding the function of popular culture in the period. The bulk of literature circulating in verse or prose form, whether in print or manuscript, was considered to be essentially historical or antiquarian. It preserved knowledge of previous generations in the country from the settlement onwards, and of the nation's ancestors in Northern Europe, as well as historical accounts of various ancient civilisations: Gothic, Greek, Roman, Persian, etc.⁶ This meant that the historical and antiquarian aspect of a given text and its claim to truthfulness was central in the minds of the many critics of popular literature. While some texts were considered both factual and morally acceptable, others were condemned as implausible, preposterous, and corrupting. The distinction between 'legitimate' and 'improper' entertainment manifests itself in the title of a book of six short family sagas published in 1756, *Nockrer marg-frooder sögu-þættir Íslendinga*, which describes the stories as 'very informative' and designed for 'legitimate entertainment and passing the time'.⁷ While the family sagas were commonly considered to be truthful accounts of events and the lives of individuals and families from the first centuries of Iceland's settlement, the legendary sagas and romances earned a negative label as fabricated and fantastic.⁸ Labels like *lygisögur* and *skröksögur*, combined with terms like *smekkleysa* (bad taste) and *ljótleiki* (ugliness) were the core of elitist criticism of popular literature in the late eighteenth and the

⁴ Lbs 2147 8vo: 'Fáeinar smásögur ætlaðar þeim til gamans er sögur elska enn hinir ættu þær ei að sjá. Selst arkið 6 skildinga. Saman skrifadar árið 1847 af S. Jóhannessyni'. Compilation of various texts written in 1847 by Sigurður Jóhannesson.

⁵ Lbs 2165 8vo: 'Skemmtunarbók'. Compilation of various texts written in four hands between 1775 and 1825. ÍB 590 8vo: 'Skemmtunarbók, innihaldandi ýmislegt til skemmtunar og léttilegrar dægurstyttingar sem er þetta: ...'. Compilation of various texts written in 1854-1855 by Jón Sigurðsson from Steinar.

⁶ Examples of this are pseudo-historical accounts like *Alexanders saga*, *Breta sögur*, *Gyðinga saga*, *Rómverja saga*, and *Trójumanna saga*. This is also strikingly apparent in the genre of early modern and modern *rímur*, where the subject matter is frequently drawn from ancient chronicles from faraway lands.

⁷ *Nockrer Marg-Frooder Sögu-Þættir Íslendinga: Til Leifelegrar Skemtunar og Dægra-Stíttningar þessa Lands Innbyggjurum aa Prent settir ad Forlage hr. Vice-Løgmannsins Biørns Marcussenar* (Hólar, 1756).

⁸ Jürg Glauser, 'The End of the Saga: Text, Tradition and Transmission in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Iceland', in Andrew Wawn, ed, *Northern Antiquity: The Post-Medieval Reception of Edda and Saga* (Enfield Lock, 1994), p. 117: '... a sharp distinction was drawn between respectable (and historical) Íslendingasögur and the disreputable legendary and chivalric sagas which were rejected because of their fictional (and often fantastic) elements'.

nineteenth centuries, forming a thread that continued from Pietism through the Enlightenment and into the era of romantic nationalism.

The essential pathway for producing and disseminating this kind of knowledge and learning, legitimate or not, lay through the realm of scribal culture, due to the scarce output of secular literature in print up to the second half of the nineteenth century. The system of scribally based education practised in early modern and modern Iceland, especially given the steep rise in popular literacy during the nineteenth century, was an efficient alternative to formal secondary education, which was only available to a few. It is evident that the body of scribally transmitted texts was in every way much larger and more extensive than the one available in print at the time. Combined with the tradition of the *kvöldvaka* and of household reading, this meant that a wide-ranging textual world was open to a large part of the population: not only to those who transcribed texts or read them, but also to listeners who in some cases were themselves illiterate. The scribal sphere, with its process of interactive literacy, was also an operational forum for those who were willing and able to engage fully with the work of composing and compiling, duplicating and disseminating texts. In the case of Sighvatur Grímsson, self-education via scribal activity succeeded and supplemented his primary household education at as early as the age of seven, and remained a life-enduring quest. A defining phase in this process, however, was the period he spent as a farmhand and fisherman during his twenties, in and around the bay of Breiðafjörður, and his virtual apprenticeship to the elderly popular scholar, poet and scribe Gísli Konráðsson.

7.3 Farm labour as a ‘secondary education’

For a thousand years, from its settlement up to the end of the nineteenth century, Iceland was predominantly a rural peasant society with a relatively static social and demographic structure. In the nineteenth century the population consisted of two main classes: farmers of varying status and means, and servants or farm labourers. In 1850 around 60% of the nation belonged to the farming class (this includes their children), but this large group was very layered, ranging from a small group of well-off landowners to peasants who lived in poverty, struggling to maintain themselves on poor farmland and with meagre livestock, and often failing. The proportion of servants was relatively steady throughout

the nineteenth century: around a quarter of the inhabitants at any given time.⁹ Pre-modern Iceland had specific institutions which maintained and reproduced its social and economical order. One of the most important of these was the so-called *vistarband*, a set of laws which compelled any adult person who was not a master of a household (owner or tenant) to be hired as a farmhand on annual contracts.¹⁰ This arrangement, formally abolished in 1893, was still in full force around 1860 and had then recently been reinforced by a total ban on boarders and free labour.

The normative life course at the time, as mapped by historian Gísli Ágúst Gunnlaugsson, comprised four or five stages, depending on if the individual got married or not.¹¹ The first phase lasted up to the age of seven; the next covered late childhood and adolescence between the age of 7 and 16, years which were commonly spent as part of the workforce within the parental home. The next life phase generally spanned from the mid-teens up to the late twenties or early thirties, when young men and women alike would serve as domestic servants or farmhands on the basis of a yearly contract. Around the age of thirty the average young person would either marry and become the head of a household, usually as a tenant farmer, or endure as a farm labourer or household servant throughout their life. Aged servants would commonly spend the last phase of their life as paupers, while heads of household would either retire with relatives or, more commonly, continue to run their household throughout their life.

It was a common perception throughout the nineteenth century that the sizable group of farmhands and domestic servants in Icelandic was not a ‘class’ or ‘rank’, but rather group of people occupying a temporary life stage between childhood and adulthood. The idealistic outlook was that long and faithful service as a farmhand would be the best preparation for becoming a farmer or the mistress of a household, and that this arrangement equally served the interests of the farmers/mistresses in waiting, the existing heads of household, and the society as a whole.

⁹ Guðmundur Jónsson, *Vinnuhjú á 19. öld*. Ritsafn Sagnfræðistofnunar 5 (Reykjavík, 1979), p. 11. Figure 1. These numbers are proportions of the entire population and children are assigned to the group from which their support derives. If we only look at adults, 15 years and older, generally 35-40% of the adult population were servants at any given time during the nineteenth century, and it can be concluded that the vast majority of young people between the age of 15 and 30 spent a longer or shorter period as a servant.

¹⁰ On the ‘vistarband’ see *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23, and Gísli Gunnarsson, *Upp er boðið Ísland: Einokunarverslun og íslenskt samfélag 1602-1787* (Reykjavík, 1987), pp. 32-38.

¹¹ Gísli Ágúst Gunnlaugsson, *Family and Household in Iceland 1801-1930: Studies in the Relationship Between Demographic and Socio-economic Development, Social Legislation and Family and Household Structures*. *Studia Historica Upsaliensia* 154 (Uppsala, 1988), p. 63, Figure II.1.

Occupational and social status was thus principally linked to two entwined factors, access to farmland and marital status. The population in Iceland was limited by the available and usable farmland, and the number of farms and households remained relatively steady (8750 farms and just under 60,000 inhabitants in the mid-nineteenth century).¹²

Historian Guðmundur Hálfðanarson has argued that the status of household service was, in fact, generally regarded as a period of apprenticeship for future heads of household that would separate the sheep from the goats. Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon has argued that a microhistorical view of the life of a single individual (or a few individuals) would reveal a much more complex picture and more varied scope of potentials within the relatively narrow framework of a traditional society. His thorough studies based on firsthand accounts like diaries and autobiographies have, in any case, unearthed evidence of a wider spectrum for alternative paths than a generalizing demographic approach would suggest.¹³

This view is very much appropriate for the case of Sighvatur Grímsson. He was firmly set on the normative path from childhood to adulthood via an apprenticeship period in farm labour, but at the same time he sought alternative paths because of his literary inclinations. Based on the 1850 Icelandic census, Guðmundur Hálfðanarson maintains that the upbringing of children and adolescents was thoroughly intertwined with Iceland's systems of production, and that becoming a farmer was not so much a matter of choice as a step on a more or less predetermined route. The fact that there was close to no organised schooling for children and adolescents during the nineteenth century indicates, according to Hálfðanarson, the priorities of societal construction in Iceland. It was considered much more important to prepare children and adolescents for their life work through service, in which they would learn farm work, diligence, and obedience under strong discipline, rather than to let them study from books in a school.¹⁴ What is missing from this picture is individuals' response to the situation Hálfðanarson rightly describes, i.e. the incompatibility between the current state of Icelandic

¹² Guðmundur Jónsson and Magnús S. Magnússon, *Hagskinna: Sögulegar hagtölur um Ísland* (Reykjavík, 1997), p. 49, Table 2.1, and p. 138, Table 2.16.

¹³ Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, 'Félagssagan fyrir og nú', in Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir and Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, eds, *Einsagan – ólíkar leiðir: Átta ritgerðir og eitt myndlistarverk* (Reykjavík, 1998), p. 36.

¹⁴ Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, 'Íslensk þjóðfélagsþróun á 19. öld', in Guðmundur Hálfðanarson and Svanur Kristjánsson, eds, *Íslensk þjóðfélagsþróun 1880-1990: Ritgerðir* (Reykjavík, 1993), p. 18.

educational affairs and the emerging modern ideal of institutionalized education. The hypothesis put forth here is that the flourishing scribal culture in nineteenth-century Iceland was in fact a consequence of this quandary, just as household education before confirmation was an efficient way of fulfilling formal educational requirements in a sparsely populated and poor rural society. Scribal culture served not only as a route for textual transmission but also as an important forum for (self)-education, and for a certain level of expertise and craftsmanship. It played a considerable role in the primary education of children before the age of confirmation, as emphasized in an earlier chapter, but its importance really grew when an adolescent wanted to obtain skills beyond the mandatory minimum. Just as the phase of farm service has been dubbed a practical ‘comprehensive education’ for farmers-to-be, it will be argued that during the same life-stage scribal culture could serve as a forum for ‘secondary literary education’ for those who wanted it.

Sighvatur’s aspiration to become self-sufficient and free was realized several years later, insofar as he became a tenant farmer on a smallholding in the county of Strandasýsla, after serving as a labourer on land and at sea around the Breiðafjörður area throughout most of the 1860s. There is little indication in Sighvatur’s writings that he ever contemplated the possibility that he might be able to obtain formal education or lamented not having the opportunity to do so. Despite considerable class division and elitism in educational matters, it was not unknown for proficient young men of humble background to be offered an opportunity to attend the Latin school, from where they could move up to the University of Copenhagen.¹⁵ This was, however, not the path which Sighvatur would follow, despite his obvious aptitude in matters of the book. His ‘school’, rather, was the vigorous scribal community of the Breiðafjörður area in western Iceland, and in particular the renowned lay historian, poet, and scribe Gísli Konráðsson.

¹⁵ As an indicator of this, 36% of church ministers and 32% of officials in 1850 were sons of farmers, according to Hálfðanarson in ‘Íslensk þjóðfélagsþróun’, p. 14, Figure 1. Hálfðanarson himself interprets these numbers as a sign of strong barriers between classes and a tendency for the ruling class (officials and clergymen) to reproduce itself.

7.4 The master, the apprentice, and the textual community of Flatey

After spending his first two years as a servant at the farms of Hlíð and Leysingjastaðir in the county of Dalasýsla, without much interaction with literary matters, Sighvatur relocated to a small cluster of islands called Sviðnar in the bay of Breiðafjörður in early summer 1861. After serving a year there he moved on to the largest inhabited island in the area, Flatey, a hamlet-like community of roughly 60 inhabitants, including a local merchant, a public library, a vibrant cultural society and a handful of literary enthusiasts.¹⁶ His new masters occupied two farmsteads, one on the island and the other at Skálmanesmúli (or Múli for short) on Barðaströnd, the north shore of Breiðafjörður. Like all their servants, Sighvatur worked at both places during the five years he served his masters, as well as spending substantial time in remote fishing stations each year. The years Sighvatur spent in and around the bay of Breiðafjörður turned out to be a defining period of his life. There he met a young female servant, a foster-daughter of his masters in Flatey named Ragnhildur Brynjólfsdóttir (1844-1931), whom he married in 1865, and there he became acquainted with the renowned lay scholar and poet, Gísli Konráðsson, who became his mentor in literary matters over the next decade.

Despite an age difference of more than half a century, the relationship between the two autodidacts was one of close friendship as well as shared passion for literature, history, and knowledge. In his autobiography, Sighvatur expresses clearly to what degree their acquaintance changed his potential to acquire and study historical and literature and how he became Gísli's apprentice in a semi-academic way:

It was in these years that he became fully acquainted with Gísli Konráðsson, who lent him one manuscript after another, as fast as Sighvatur could copy them, and taught him and guided in every way, and it was as if a new world opened up for Sighvatur when he became acquainted with Gísli. And though Sighvatur was a servant and had little time, he devotedly used every free moment, both day and night, to copy Gísli's stories and books of historical lore. Every day off that he had in Flatey, they spent together, from morning to evening, and though Gísli was a very joyful man into his old age, he was often very sad when they had to part and expressed this often. It was like this for all the years that they were acquainted: Sighvatur had open access to the great treasures of his studies, to Gísli's great delight. And when Sighvatur was out at the

¹⁶ On the activity of the *Flateyjar framfarastofnun* (literally 'The Flatey Advancement Institution') see Lilja Harðardóttir, 'Framfarastofnunin í Flatey', in Sigrún Klara Hannesdóttir and Guðrún Pálsdóttir, eds, *Sál aldanna: Safn greina um bókasöfn og skyld efni* (Reykjavík, 1997), pp. 37-48. The most extensive account of the cultural milieu in and around Breiðafjörður in the mid-nineteenth century is Lúðvík Kristjánsson's three-volume work *Vestlendingar* (Reykjavík, 1953-1960).

fishing stations he collected all that he could obtain for Gísli: various events, old and new, accounts of accidents, additions to genealogies, etc.¹⁷

It can be assumed from this passage and from extant manuscripts from this period that their scribal relations had several aspects or levels. First, their relationship gave Sighvatur access to a unique collection of handwritten texts to copy from in order to build up his own collection. Secondly, Sighvatur acted as an assistant to Gísli, collected material for him, and, in some instances, copied material for him. A case in point involves abstracts from *synodalia* that were apparently collected and copied by Sighvatur for Gísli around 1860: in them, Sighvatur addresses Gísli directly when he notes that this was all he could find on the subject in a certain manuscript.¹⁸ Thirdly, Sighvatur was able to learn the methods and procedures of scribal transmission from his experienced master, whether directly via instructions or through his work. This applied equally to the material aspect of scribal work, i.e. the craft of writing texts and producing handwritten books; to the approach and attitudes towards textual procedure ('lay philology'); and to mastery of the wide range of subject matter involved in nineteenth-century Icelandic manuscript culture, including poetry, sagas, accounts of local history, biographical writings, and genealogy.

As a young farmhand, lacking money or exchangeable goods, Sighvatur Grímsson had two primary means of acquiring reading material to further his self-education and satisfy his enthusiasm for literature and historical lore. One was to borrow books, handwritten and printed. The second was to transcribe and compile in his personal archive texts from handwritten, printed, or oral sources. Acquaintance with Gísli Konráðsson and access to his vast collection of handwritten texts gave Sighvatur Grímsson an unparalleled opportunity to acquire rare texts in both these ways, and thus to

¹⁷ Lbs 3623 8vo: Sighvatur Grímsson's autobiography, [p. 7]. 'Nú var það á þessum árum að hann var komin í fullkomin kynni við Gísli Konráðsson, sem ljeði honum hvert handritið á fætur öðru, eftir því sem Sighvatr gat yfir komist að afrita, og fræddi hann og leiðbeindi á allar lundir, enda var sem nýr heimur opnaðist fyrir Sighvati þegar hann komst í kynni við Gísli. Og þótt Sighvatur væri vinnumaðr og hefði litla tíma, þá notaði hann hverja stund sem mest mátti verða, bæði nætr og daga, til að afrita sögr Gísli og fræði rit. Hvern helgi dag, sem hann var í Flatey, voru þeir saman frá morgni til kvelds, og þótt Gísli væri hinn mesti gleðimaður fram á hin háu elliár sín, þá var honum oft mikið angur að, þegar þeir urðu að skilja, og lét hann það oft í ljósi. Þannig voru öll þau ár, sem þeir höfðu kynni saman, að Sighvatr hafði þar jafnan opinn hinn mikla fræði fésjóð, og var það Gísli hin mesta ánægja, og þegar Sighvatur var við róðra í útverum, safnaði hann öllu því, er hann á náði, fyrir Gísli, viðburðum ymsum, yngri og eldri, slisförum, viðaukum til ætta o.s.fr.?'

¹⁸ Lbs 1123 4to: Compilation of annals, biographies, verse, etc., written in three hands in the nineteenth century. Including 'Útdrættir úr prestastefnudómum', a five-page extract from *synodalia* between 1788 and 1819 in the hand of Sighvatur Grímsson.

expand his historical knowledge and literary horizon. Copying and assembling texts from various sources and media was an important aspect of Sighvatur's ever-increasing literary practices throughout his twenties and a prerequisite for his role as a mediator of texts via reading, lending, or commissioned transcripts. A handful of transcripts thought to be from around 1860 survive, along with other indications of literary activity from the years before Sighvatur began to keep a regular diary in 1863. Most of them are connected in some way or another to Gísli Konráðsson. Direct evidence of Sighvatur acquiring texts from other sources is scarce before 1863, but judging from his later activities it is likely that he had tapped every source available.¹⁹

Aside from his short autobiography, two major sources document Sighvatur Grímsson's literary activity from 1863 onwards. One is the body of surviving manuscripts composed or collected by him, often including the date and place of composition and at its best containing short endnotes on their source. Secondly, Sighvatur Grímsson's diaries give us access to a detailed and extensive account of his literary activities throughout his adult life. Entries reporting reading and writing are scarce and scattered at first, but soon grow into what can be assumed to be a nearly comprehensive report of his acquisition of books, his reading and his writing.

Both Sighvatur's diary and manuscripts confirm the extent to which Gísli Konráðsson's manuscript collection became the fundamental resource for his transcripts. Their relationship constituted a central part of Sighvatur Grímsson's self-education. The immediate impact of their encounter is attested by Sighvatur's composition of a *rímur*-cycle, *Skáld-Helga rímur*, in the winter of 1861-1862, based on a prose narrative borrowed from Gísli Konráðsson.²⁰ Sighvatur had produced occasional poetry from an early age, as mentioned in an earlier chapter, and had in some sense

¹⁹ Lbs 2285 4to: 'Amlóði'. Compilation of various texts written by Sighvatur Grímsson in 1892-1895. It includes, for example, three folk tales that Sighvatur had originally penned down from an oral presentation in Breiðafjörður in autumn 1862.

²⁰ Lbs 3623 8vo, [p. 6]. Sighvatur's *Skáld-Helga rímur* are only preserved in his autograph manuscript, which was unknown to Finnur Sigmundsson when he made his *Rímnatal*. Matthew J. Driscoll has commented on the transference between the two forms: 'The fact that *rímur*, themselves based on prose sagas, could be taken and turned back into prose sagas – and that prose sagas that in main bear no mark of having been so composed – demonstrates not only the existence of a mechanism for deriving texts, or 'discourses', from 'stories', but also suggests that the people who were involved in the production of these are unlikely to have regarded them as 'fixed'. Matthew J. Driscoll, 'The Oral, the Written, and the In-Between: Textual Instability in the Post-Reformation Lygisaga', in Hildegard L.C. Tristram, ed, *(Re)Oralisierung. ScriptOralia*, 84 (Tübingen, 1996), p. 151.

recorded his life in verse throughout his late teens and early twenties.²¹ His composition of *Skáld-Helga rímur* is, in contrast, one of his first attempts to compose something of wider significance, within the living tradition of communicating and reproducing Icelandic and Nordic literary heritage. In addition to being representative of the endurance of the *rímur*-tradition in the second half of the nineteenth century, this composition is a particularly fascinating example of how texts and themes could transform and remodel themselves within the spheres of scribal and oral transmission. The tale of Skáld-Helgi ('Helgi the poet') is thought to have been first composed in prose form in the eleventh century, in all likelihood after circulating orally for some time. This medieval text is now lost, but its content survived in the (older) *Skáld-Helga rímur*, dating from the fifteenth century. Then, in the early 1820s, Gísli Konráðsson composed a new prose version of the story of Skáld-Helgi, based on the medieval *rímur*.²²

Sighvatur not only turned the tale of Skáld-Helgi into metrical form but he transcribed the saga as well. This transcript of *Skáld-Helga saga* became the opening text in a 700-page tome of almost thirty family sagas and tales, legendary sagas, modern sagas, and *rímur*, which Sighvatur compiled between 1861 and 1867.²³ Though the transcript itself is not dated in the manuscript, it was apparently started on 1 October 1861, judging from the heading on the front page.²⁴ This hefty miscellany stands as an impressive testimony to Sighvatur's relentless quest for literary and historical material to copy and collect, and evidence of the rich resources he could tap into. Furthermore this compilation, and especially the short but informative endnotes attached to most of the texts, gives vivid insight into the process behind its creation and the cultural milieu that this took place in.

²¹ See Lbs 2325 8vo: 'Syrpa', vol. I-III. Anthology of Sighvatur Grímsson's poetry. Autograph.

²² Gísli Konráðsson's *Skáld-Helga saga* is preserved in four transcripts, including Sighvatur's. It was first published in Reykjavík in 1897: *Sagan af Skáld-Helga* (Reykjavík, 1897).

²³ Lbs 2328 4to: 'Íslendingasögur. Eftir bestu handritum, mjög óvída til, frá fornöld. Skrifaðar í köldum og óhentugum sjó[búðum] með allar í landlegum en endaðar í Flatey á Breiðafirði 1867 af [Sighvatur Grímsson's name in runes] 1. október 1861-13. desember 1867'. Compilation of sagas written in 1861-1867 by Sighvatur Grímsson. Another example of an original composition by Gísli Konráðsson that was copied by Sighvatur from an autograph was *Hellismanna saga*, reproduced from a single-text volume in 8vo between 20 November and 6 December 1865, also in this same compilation.

²⁴ This dating is supported by an endnote to another transcript Sighvatur made for a fellow lay scholar, Jón Borgfirðingur, in 1885. There Sighvatur notes: 'Skáld Helga sögu skrifaði eg fyrst veturinn 1861 eftir handriti Gísla Konráðssonar, á þeirri bók var brot af Þorsteins sögu Síðu-Hallssonar og margir þættir af Íslendingum'. Lbs 13.11. 2000: 'Þrjár íslenskar fornsögur. Hafa aldrei verið prentaðar. Skrifaðar á Höfða í Dýrafirði, veturinn 1885 fyrir herra Jón Borgfirðing lögregluþjón í Reykjavík'. Compilation of three sagas written in 1885 by Sighvatur Grímsson.

A considerable proportion of the texts assembled by Sighvatur into this miscellany originated in Gísli Konráðsson's extensive collection. These include the Icelandic family tale *Þáttur af Gull-Ásu-Þórði*, completed on 1 October 1865. Sighvatur's transcript is accompanied by an endnote that reveals its lineage: he made the transcript from a copy Gísli made from an earlier transcript made by Pastor Teitur Jónsson from a 'Swedish' manuscript in Copenhagen.²⁵ A similar reference to a chain of earlier manuscripts can be found in Sighvatur's transcript of *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*, made in December 1865 from a manuscript that he borrowed from Gísli on the last day of October 1865.²⁶ There Sighvatur notes at the end that it was made from a transcript Gísli Konráðsson had made from a vellum manuscript. Here Sighvatur skips at least one link as Gísli had in fact copied it not directly from the vellum manuscript in question, but rather from a transcript made around the turn of the eighteenth century by one Ásgeir Jónsson from a vellum manuscript then in the Royal Danish Library but now lost.²⁷ Sighvatur copied several other texts from this manuscript throughout December of the same year and in one case, that of *Draumur Þorsteins Síðu-Hallssonar*, he notes that he had compared the manuscript with a recent print edition during the transcript.²⁸

Flatey is commonly considered to have been the hub of Icelandic literary culture around the mid-nineteenth century. At the core was a cultural society, the *Flateyjar framfarafélag*, with its extensive public library and an active and widely connected network of literature enthusiasts of varying status in Flatey and vicinity. This cultural milieu gave an average farmhand like Sighvatur Grímsson access to scholarly editions of the sagas and enabled him to bring them into scribal

²⁵ Lbs 2328 4to. Sighvatur writes in his endnote: 'Þessi þáttur er skrifaður eftir Exempl Dr. H Finnsen sem sra Teitur Jónsson hafði skrifað í Höfn eptir svensku exempl (eptir Gísla Konráðsson) og eptir hans exempl er þetta. Skrifarinn 1/10 1865 S[ighvatur] G[rímsson] Borgfirðingur'. There is, however, no reference to the transcript in Sighvatur's diaries. The majority of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century transcripts of the tale make similar references to Teitur Jónsson's transcript. Two transcripts of the tale in Gísli Konráðsson's hand are extant: Lbs 143 4to: *Nokkrar fornsögur Íslendinga. Í flýti uppritaðar að Skörðugili hinu nyrðra árum eftir Guðsburð MDCCCXXIII of haustið af Gísla Konráðssyni*; and Lbs 1422 4to.

²⁶ Lbs 2374 4to: Sighvatur Grímsson's diary 1863-1880: 31 October and 8 to 25 December 1865. Sighvatur returned the book on 13 January 1866.

²⁷ See Már Jónsson, *Árni Magnússon: Ævisaga* (Reykjavík 1998), pp. 66 and 161. Several other transcripts have, however, direct references to the oldest item, frequently in Latin; 'Ex membrana Bibliothecæ regiæ in 4to' or similar. The manuscript source that Sighvatur copied from is probably Lbs 1161 4to. According to Sighvatur's notes to the transcript, the texts were six in all; 'Þar er fyrst þetta brot, þar næst draumvitran Þorsteins, so Draumvitran Þorsteins Þorvarðarsonar [a.k.a. Kumlbúa þáttur], Saga Þorsteins tjaldstæðings, Saga Þorsteins hvíta, Bergbúa þáttur með útlagð[r]i kviðunni'. One of those, *Kumlbúa þáttur*, is, however, missing from both Sighvatur's miscellany and the presumed original.

²⁸ Lbs 2328 4to.

circulation by copying them for his private library. This applies to at least two family sagas, *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* and *Kormáks saga*, which Sighvatur added to his miscellany in fall 1865, copied from two separate Copenhagen editions that Sighvatur had borrowed from the local library weeks earlier.²⁹ Such transcripts from authoritative printed editions were, interestingly, not always copied straightforwardly from a single original. An example of this is Sighvatur's January 1867 transcription of *Gull-Þóris saga* from a scholarly edition by the German scholar Dr. Konrad Maurer, published in Leipzig in 1858.³⁰ At its end Sighvatur added two short passages, one taken from a recent scholarly journal article, the other from a paper manuscript.³¹ These amendments to what can only be described a state-of-the-art scholarly publication demonstrate the level of sophistication and learning in Sighvatur's scribal work, ignited by the vigorous cultural atmosphere of Flatey and its surroundings.

The source for the handwritten amendment to *Gull-Þóris saga* was a hefty volume of 26 sagas copied by the scholar Halldór Hjálmarsson (1745-1805), mostly directly from medieval vellum manuscripts extant in Copenhagen, including extensive philological annotations. The manuscript is attributed by Sighvatur to the collection of Bogi Benediktsson (1771-1849) from Staðarfell in the county of Dalasýsla, and it was at the time of copying in the possession of his son, Brynjólfur Benediktson, a merchant and landowner on Flatey.³² Sighvatur was able to borrow Halldór Hjálmarsson's manuscript through the good offices of one Jón Jónsson of Flatey, and he copied several other texts from it over the first months of 1867.³³ On the last day of January 1867, Sighvatur notes in his diary that he had borrowed a second compilation of sagas from Bogi Benediktsson's

²⁹ *Ibid.* See also Lbs 2374 4to: 17 September to 20 October 1865, and 20 October to 19 November 1865.

³⁰ Lbs 2374 4to: 15 January 1867. See Konrad Maurer, ed, *Die Gull-Þóris saga oder Þorskfirðinga saga* (Leipzig, 1858).

³¹ The source of the first addition, which forms a concluding section to the story, is in [Jón Sigurðsson], 'Um nokkrar Íslandingasögur', *Ný Félagsrit* 21 (1861), pp. 118-127. The reason why this was not included in Maurer's edition is that it had been scraped from the fundamental vellum manuscript used in the edition. The scholar Jón Sigurðsson had, however, been able to read it despite the palimpsest. For the source of the second addition see Lbs 355 4to: Miscellany of sagas mostly transcribed by Halldór Hjálmarsson around the turn of the nineteenth century.

³² Lbs 2328 4to. Sighvatur notes at the end of his transcript of *Hrafnkels þáttur Guðrúnarsonar* from the same source: 'Sagan er skrifuð eftir bók úr safni Boga á Staðarfelli nr. 3A með samtals 26 sögum á. Hana hef eg fengið léða fyrir góðfúsa velvild Jóns Jónssonar í Flatey'.

³³ *Ibid.* *Hrafnkels þáttur Guðrúnarsonar* (or *Sagan af Rafni Rútfirðingi*) was copied first, between 24 February and 3 March 1867, followed by *Þáttur af Þorgrimi Hallasyni og Kolgrimi* between 5 and 13 March, and then *Móðars þáttur*, *Auðunnar þáttur vestfirska* and a few other short tales before its last text, *Brands þáttur örva*, was completed on 9 April.

collection and that he had immediately started to transcribe from it as well.³⁴ The volume contained four texts written in the hands of Bogi Benediktsson himself and Gísli Konráðsson of these, Sighvatur copied two into his growing saga compilation. The former was *Hrana saga hrings*, in the hand of Gísli Konráðsson, which Sighvatur transcribed over the first week of February, followed by *Sagan af Þorsteini Geirnefjufóstra*, one of Gísli Konráðsson's original works but in the hand of Bogi Benediktsson, between 7 and 17 February. Of the 29 texts in the saga collection addressed here, twenty transcripts were made exclusively from other manuscripts. Five were made from printed sources only, and two were made from both printed and handwritten sources, while the sources of two texts have not been identified. This shows clearly how important the scribal medium was for the acquisition of reading material, and at the same time how the medium was used to disseminate texts that were already available in print.

The other major transcripts that Sighvatur Grímsson made during his farm-labour period were likewise mainly made from handwritten originals, acquired from various sources. On 14 January 1866 Sighvatur notes that he had copied most of *Eiríks saga rauða*.³⁵ This transcript of *Eiríks saga* was for some reason not added to the Lbs 2328 4to volume mentioned above, even though it was made in the same time, but seems to have been kept separate and has since been lost. Sighvatur made a second transcript of the saga in 1886 and jotted down in an endnote that the earlier one, which he then still had, had been made from a folio miscellany in the hand of affluent farmer and scribe Jón Egilsson from Vatnshorn in Haukadalur (1724-1807) which had been in the possession of Sighvatur's friend, Madame Katrín Þorvaldsdóttir of Hrapsey.³⁶ This folio miscellany of nearly 700 pages survives as a part of the Jón Sigurðsson collection, and includes 'many sagas and few romances', as Sighvatur

³⁴ Lbs 2374 4to: 31 January 1867. See also Lbs 2328 4to. At the end of *Hrana saga Hrings*, copied between 1 and 7 February, Sighvatur notes that it was copied from an exemplar from Bogi Benediktsson's collection but in the possession of Brynjólfur Benediktsson, containing *Knitlinga saga*, *Hrana saga*, *Þorsteins saga Geirnefjufóstra*, and *Þáttur Sigurðar slefu*. This volume is extant in NLI. Lbs 359 4to: A miscellany written by Bogi Benediktsson and Gísli Konráðsson.

³⁵ Lbs 2374 4to: 14 January 1866.

³⁶ Lbs 2330 4to: Compilation of various texts written in 1886-1891 by Sighvatur Grímsson. See endnote to Sighvatur Grímsson's transcript of *Eiríks saga rauða* 1886: 'Eiríks saga Rauða er hér skrifuð eptir afskrift, sem eg tók af stórri sögubók í arkarbroti með hönd Jóns fróða Egilssonar á Vatnshorni í Haukadal (teingdaföður Jóns sýslumanns Espólíns), veturinn 1865 [i.e. 1865-1866]. Sú bók mun nú vera í safni Jóns Árnasonar landsbókavarðar í Reykjavík en var áður eign frá Katrínar Þorvaldsdóttur úr Hrapsey, konu hans, á henni voru margar Íslandingasögur, og nokkrar riddarasögur'.

recalled in his 1886 endnotes, but also several historical and pseudo-historical accounts of varying provenance.³⁷

It was, however, not only the vibrant scribal community of Flatey that supplied him with material. For example, Sighvatur's presence at the fishing station of Rif on the Snæfellsnes peninsula from 11 February to the middle of May 1866 gave him the opportunity to add several items to his archive. The prelude to these transcripts took place on 2 April when Sighvatur acquired a collection of *rímur* from one Lárus Sigurðsson at Háarif on Snæfellsnes, thought to have been penned at some point after the mid-eighteenth century, which comprised, according to Sighvatur's diary entry, seven *rímur*-cycles.³⁸ This description is consistent with an extant folio volume in which all but one of the *rímur* are in the hand of poet Árne Bøðvarsson and four were composed by him.³⁹ Later that year, in November and December 1866, Sighvatur would transcribe two of these cycles for his own collection, first *Rímur af Haraldi Hringsbana* and then *Rímur af Grími Jarlssyni*.⁴⁰

The literary practices of Sighvatur Grímsson in the Breiðafjörður area in the 1860s were thus not merely about him absorbing as much learning as possible in a relentless quest for knowledge. He was very much a participant in a network of textual communications, mediated via various circuits, and involving print, manuscript, and as we will see, oral transmission.

7.5 Text circulation via communal reading sessions

Sighvatur Grímsson records in his autobiography that he had assumed the role of household reader at the *kvöldvaka* when he was an adolescent in Akranes, and the diary suggests that he continued in this role throughout his time as a farmhand in the 1860s. From the first entries at the beginning of 1863 to the spring of 1868 when his period as a farm servant came to an end, Sighvatur Grímsson's diaries suggest extensive participation in communal reading at evening wakes, not only within the household where he lived but also when he was away in fishing stations or stayed the night as a guest with

³⁷ JS 160 fol.: Compilation of sagas written in the last quarter of the eighteenth century by Jón Egilsson at Vatnshorn. In addition to the transcript of *Eiríks saga*, Sighvatur made use of the folio by reading at least eleven sagas and romances from it over a two-week period in January 1866.

³⁸ Lbs 2374 4to: 2 April 1866.

³⁹ See Lbs 192 fol.: Compilation of *rímur* written in eighteenth century by Árne Bøðvarsson.

⁴⁰ Lbs 2312 8vo: Miscellany of sagas and poetry written in 1859-1866 by Sighvatur Grímsson. The *rímur* and verses comprise the first half of the volume.

friends or neighbours.⁴¹ Over this period of just over five years, Sighvatur makes note of nearly 80 items which he read from handwritten or printed books, divided almost equally between medieval and contemporary (i.e. early modern or modern) texts. Almost half of the titles on the list (37) fall into the categories of Icelandic family sagas and tales. Other genres of medieval literature represented on Sighvatur's reading list are legendary sagas, romances, one king's tale, and chronicles like *Landnáma*, *Sturlunga*, and *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar*. Although the family sagas formed only one section of the broad literary spectrum of popular literature that was consumed at the evening wakes, it is evident that they were held in great favour by Sighvatur from an early age. This comes through in a comment he made about the reading material accessible in his childhood: 'Most of it was foreign stories, for nothing else was available, but early on his attention was drawn towards anything in anyway related to Iceland, however it was impossible to find a beam of light to shine on that yearning'.⁴² When Sighvatur writes rather apathetically about 'foreign' stories, it is likely that he is referring to two popular medieval genres: romances and legendary sagas. Somewhat in contrast to their general popularity in manuscript culture, these categories are nearly absent from the early reading and writing documented in his diaries.

Sighvatur's readings in this period between 1863 and 1868 were more or less set within the traditional *kvöldvaka* season, between October and April each winter, and they often seem to have taken place in short, dynamic stints. In the first quarter of the year 1863 Sighvatur notes that he read nine family sagas and tales. While it is not clear from the brief entries whether they were printed or handwritten or, indeed, if he owned the texts or had borrowed them, circumstances strongly suggest that these first readings were made from two printed volumes in his possession at the time. The first three of the sagas, *Valla-Ljóts saga*, *Vémundar saga og Víga-Skútu* (a.k.a. *Reykðæla saga*), and *Víga-Glúms saga*, read by Sighvatur on 27 and 29 January 1863, appear in this same order in the second

⁴¹ Due to the conciseness of the diary entries, one cannot say for sure whether Sighvatur read the texts silently and privately or aloud for a household audience, but it is in my opinion most probable that the readings were performed within the tradition of the *kvöldvaka*, either for the members of his household or others. It is also rarely noted in the entries whether the texts in question were handwritten or printed, but it is apparent that a substantial proportion of them were in manuscript, as was still common in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

⁴² Lbs 3623 8vo, [p. 3]. 'Mest voru það útlendar sögur, því annars var þá ekki kostur, en þó hneigðist hugur hans snemma að öllu því er snerti Ísland á einhvern hátt, en ómögulegt var að fá nokkra skímu sem gæti glæðt þá löngun'.

volume of a two-volume compilation published in Copenhagen in 1829 and 1830, suggesting that Sighvatur used it for his reading.⁴³ In February, Sighvatur read six more family sagas and tales which together constitute the first six texts in one of the two saga compilations published in Hólar in 1756.⁴⁴ The next sequence of evening-wake readings took place between early November 1863 and mid-January 1864, and here Sighvatur read 11 sagas and tales over a period of just over two months.⁴⁵ Despite the limited information given in the diary entries, it seems that these texts were also, by and large, read from printed books. One of those was a compilation of four sagas, published in Copenhagen in 1847; Sighvatur noted on 15 November that he had lent it to one Þorkell from Selsker, and that he had read three of its sagas during the preceding week.⁴⁶ Sighvatur read *Grettis saga* a second time from 13 to 20 November, *Njáls saga* on 2, 3, and 5 December, and the contemporary *Ármanns saga* on 18 December, all of them probably from eighteenth-century printed editions.⁴⁷ Similarly *Bárðar saga* and *Völsa þáttur*, both read on 21 December, and *Víglundar saga* on 22 December were probably read from an 1860 Copenhagen edition comprising five medieval texts.⁴⁸

The most intensive reading spell registered in Sighvatur Grímsson's diary stretches from early November 1865 to late January of the following year, and is packed with 32 titles: family sagas and shorter tales, a few legendary and chivalric sagas, some *rímur*-cycles, and a handful of post-medieval sagas. In contrast with the earlier period, this one gives evidence that handwritten material was in considerable use within the realm of reading out loud. One of the clearest examples of this is from a two-week period between 15 and 27 January 1866, when Sighvatur read 11 sagas and tales, in all probability from the 700-page folio eighteenth-century miscellany written by Jón Egilsson at

⁴³ *Íslendingasögur: Eptir Gömlum handritum útg. at tilhlutan Hins Konungliga norræna fornfræða félags 2* (Copenhagen, 1830). The content of this second volume is: *Ljósvefninga saga*, *Svarfdæla saga*, *Valla-Ljóts saga*, *Vémundar saga* og *Víga-Skútu*, and *Víga-Glúms saga*.

⁴⁴ *Nockrer marg-frooder sögu-þættir Íslendinga*. The six texts are: *Bandamanna saga*, *Sagan af Þorgrími príða* og *Víglundi* (*Víglundar saga*), *Ölkofra þáttur*, *Hávarðar saga*, *Þórðar saga Hreðu*, and the beginning of *Grettis saga*.

⁴⁵ Lbs 2374 4to: 8 November 1863 to 13 January 1864.

⁴⁶ *Íslendinga sögur 2* (Copenhagen 1847). This volume comprises: *Harðar saga og Hólmverja*, *Hænsa-Þóris saga*, *Sagan af Hrafni ok Gunnlaugi Ormstungu*, *Saga af Víga-Styr ok Heiðarvígum*, and *Kjalnesinga saga*. According to the diary Sighvatur read three of the sagas in November 1863. Sighvatur read the remaining saga, *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, over a month later, on 21 December but it is likely to have been from a different edition.

⁴⁷ *Nockrer marg-frooder sögu-þættir Íslendinga; Sagan af Niáli Þorgeirssyni og sonum hans útgefin efter gaumlum skinnbókum með konunglegu leyfi* (Copenhagen, 1772); and Halldór Jakobsson, *Ármanns saga* (Hrappsey, 1782).

⁴⁸ *Bárðarsaga Snæfellsáss*, *Víglundarsaga*, *Þórðar saga*, *Draumavitranir*, *Völsaþáttur* (Copenhagen, 1860).

Vatnshorn mentioned earlier in this chapter in connections with Sighvatur's transcript of *Eiríks saga rauða*.⁴⁹

Another example comes from July 1864 when Sighvatur noted in his diary that he had travelled with one Þórður Magnússon to his home at the farm of Borg in Skötufjörður and bought from him a handwritten volume of *Eyrbyggja saga* and other unidentified sagas.⁵⁰ A later reference to this manuscript reveals its content and origin: it was a miscellany of eight texts (two of them now lost) written by pastor Þórður Þorsteinssonar from Staður in Súgandafjörður, who was the grandfather of Þórður at Borg.⁵¹ There are no indications that Sighvatur copied the texts from this miscellany at the time but he read *Eyrbyggja* on 23 and 24 November 1865 and again on three dates around mid-December, followed by two shorter episodes from the same volume, *Grænlandinga þáttur* and the first section of *Færeyinga saga* (or *Sigmundar þáttur Brestirsonar*), on 19 December.⁵²

Though medieval literature and related genres formed the bulk of Sighvatur's reading material, he also read from other and more contemporary genres, mostly history and biographical writings, both handwritten and printed. His historical reading was for the most part drawn from Gísli Konráðsson's massive oeuvre of historical texts, e.g. *Flateyarsaga* (a local history of Flatey) and numerous individual biographical accounts like *Þáttur Eyjólfss og Péturs*, read in November 1866, and *Þáttur Grafar Jóns og Staðarmanna*, read in February 1867.⁵³ Examples of printed contemporary material, meanwhile, include a two-volume printed collection of Icelandic folklore and fairytales published in 1862-1864, an Icelandic world history textbook by one of the first university-trained Icelandic historians, Páll Melsteð, published in 1844, and the same author's medieval history

⁴⁹ JS 160 fol. The array of Sighvatur's readings over these two weeks is almost fully consistent with the contents of this hefty volume. Lbs 2374 4to: 15-27 January 1866.

⁵⁰ Lbs 2374 4to: 5 July 1864.

⁵¹ Lbs 2330 4to. Endnotes to his transcript of *Eyrbyggja saga*. The manuscript volume in question is Lbs 2314 4to: Compilation of various texts written by Þorsteinn Þórðarson at Staður in Súgandafjörður. It comprises in its current state six texts: *Esópusar saga*, *Færeyinga saga* [Sigmundar saga Brestirsonar], *Grænlandinga þáttur*, *Um Þórisdal*, *Hræðileg historia 1606*, and the poem *Ferðamansóður*. According to Sighvatur's list of books in his possession in 1878, at that time the miscellany also included two more texts, the family sagas *Hrólfs saga kraka* and *Eyrbyggja saga*. See Lbs 2321 8vo: 'Bækur sem eg á til og heima eru 15.5.'78'.

⁵² Lbs 2374 4to: November and December 1865.

⁵³ Gísli Konráðsson's *Flateyarsaga* has not been published but is preserved in autographs and transcripts. See Lbs 1770 4to: 'Flateyjar-þáttur ok Helgafells-ábóta. Autograph, ca. 1860. Some of the biographical tales were later published in popular editions, for example *Fjórdrápsmálið í Húnaþingi eða þáttur Eyjólfss og Péturs* (Ísafjörður, 1898) and *Þáttur Grafar-Jóns og Staðarmanna* (Eyrarbakki, 1912).

published in 1866.⁵⁴ Yet another example of printed historical material is what Sighvatur refers to in his diaries as *Árbækurnar* ('The Yearbooks'), annals of Icelandic history collected and composed by the magistrate Jón Espólin in the early nineteenth century and published in twelve volumes by the Icelandic Literary Society between 1821 and 1855.⁵⁵

These readings and others listed in Sighvatur Grímsson's diaries are evidence of a striking amount of autodidactic activity, which not only affected his own level of knowledge but also that of those who listened to him read. Furthermore, his reading was closely intertwined with the making of transcripts and the process of lending and borrowing books and manuscripts.

7.6 Conclusion

After a decade of intensive self-education within the fertile cultural milieu of the Breiðafjörður area, Sighvatur Grímsson had slowly but steadily adopted the role of semi-professional community scribe on Flatey and around the bay of Breiðafjörður. The scribal tasks he undertook for others during this period were usually minor ones such as writing correspondence, occasional poetry and the like for his neighbours and friends. There are, however, a few examples where he was commissioned for larger tasks, which signals growing professionalism or entrepreneurship. The first example of commissioned writing mentioned in Sighvatur Grímsson's diaries comes from January 1863, when he finished his transcript of *Fóstbræðra saga* and, a week later, received payment for it in the form of used and ragged clothes.⁵⁶ Shortly after Sighvatur left Múli and was employed at the farm of Hjallar in Gufudalssveit in 1867 he transcribed two family sagas for his neighbour, first *Gull-Dóris saga* in November and December 1867 and then *Gunnars saga Keldugrúpsfífls* in January 1867.⁵⁷ Such commissioned transcripts of larger and smaller texts were, however, to become a substantial part of Sighvatur Grímsson's livelihood. A close study of the scribal practices of Sighvatur Grímsson over the four years he spent in the district of Kaldrananeshreppur will, in addition to shedding light on his own scribal entrepreneurship, reveal the scribal networks that existed within the community.

⁵⁴ Lbs 2374 4to: December 1864 and December 1866. Jón Árnason, ed, *Íslenskar þjóðsögur og ævintýri* vol. 1-2 (Leipzig, 1862-1864); Páll Melsteð, *Ágrip af merkis atburðum Mannkyns Sögunnar* (Viðey, 1844); and *Miðaldasagan* (Reykjavík, 1866).

⁵⁵ Jón Espólin, *Íslands Árbækur í sögu-formi* 1-12 (Copenhagen, 1821-1855).

⁵⁶ Lbs 2374 4to: 18, 25 and 27 January 1863.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*: 25 November and 15 December 1867, and 14 and 22 January 1868.

Sighvatur Grímsson's period as a farm-labourer came to an end in the early summer of 1869. His dream of becoming a farmer and the head of a household came true, but the transition came without any sense of grandeur or esteem. What had been hard to reach earlier in the century became even tougher in the 1860s and 1870s due to a growing population within a social and economic structure that could not expand.⁵⁸ Sighvatur Grímsson arrived with his wife Ragnhildur Brynjólfsdóttir and their two young children at the farm called Klúka on 19 June 1869. They became tenant farmers, like the vast majority of farmers in the community and in the country, and theirs was one of the smallest farmsteads in the district. But breaking from the model, Sighvatur's vision was not to become a prosperous farmer in this farming community but to make space for his trade and passion. This turned out to be possible, not because the farm and stock earned him enough to support a growing family, but rather because it was so meagre that he had to make most of his livelihood from scribal work.

⁵⁸ See Hálfðanarson, 'Íslensk þjóðfélagsþróun', pp. 9-58.

‘THE PEOPLES’ PRESS’: KALDRANANESHREPPUR 1869-1873**8.1 Introduction**

The four years that Sighvatur Grímsson lived with his family on the farm Klúka in the community of Kaldrananeshreppur were in most ways extremely difficult. But at the same time it was a very busy period for Sighvatur in scribal matters. His autobiography gives this condensed portrayal of the time:

In the winter of 1869 he obtained a lease for the farm Klúka in Bjarnarfjörður in the county of Strandasýsla, from Magistrate Stefán Bjarnarson in Ísafjörður, and moved there with his wife and two children in the spring. There he lived for four years amidst strained circumstances and much discomfort in a harsh place and made his living mostly by writing for others. There he copied the Great History of Jews by the historian Josephus, on 846 pages in folio using very small letters, for Jón Guðmundsson from Hella, and received for it nearly 60 *dalir*. He also transcribed Bastholm’s Jewish history for Einar Gíslason, a carpenter from Sandnes, who fostered a child for him for a whole winter, the travelogue of Jón Indíafari and much more for various people, genealogy and various books, but little for himself ...¹

Here Sighvatur mentions some (but not all) of his major commissioned scribal tasks during this period, their purchasers and prices. He also makes more broad reference to other smaller tasks, and gives the general impression that he mostly made his living from writing, despite being first and foremost a farmer and fisherman. These commissioned transcripts are the focus of this chapter. They emphasise the community-based aspect of scribal dissemination in nineteenth-century Iceland. They draw attention to the scribe as well as his clients, the sources for the transcripts, the range of texts available and other aspects of local literary culture.

The viewpoint is, as before, Sighvatur Grímsson’s, mainly through the entries in his diary during this period. Despite the briefness of the daily entries, they provide evidence of a vigorous

¹ Lbs 3623 8vo: Sighvatur Grímsson’s autobiography, [p. 9]. ‘Um veturinn, 1869 fékk hann byggingarbréf fyrir Klúku í Bjarnarfirði í Strandasýslu, hjá Stefáni sýslumanni Bjarnarsyni á Ísafirði, og flutti sig þangað um vorið með konu sinni og börnum tveimur. Bjó hann þar í 4 ár, við lítil efni, og óhægð mikla í mesta harðindaplátsi og lifði mest af skrifum sínum fyrir ymsa. Þar afritaði hann hina miklu Gyðingasögu Jósephusar sagnaritara á 846 bls. Í arkarbroti, mjög smátt skrifaða, fyrir Jón bónda Guðmundsson á Helli og fékk fyrir nær 60 dali. Þá afritaði hann og Gyðingasögu Basthólms fyrir Einar smið Gíslason á Sandnesi, sem tók af honum barn heilan vetr, Ferðasögu Jóns Indíafara og margt fleyra fyrir ymsa, ættartölur og ymsar bækur, en fyrir sjálfan sig lítið ...’

exchange of manuscripts and printed material between Sighvatur Grímsson and various members of the community. This includes individuals, families and households, men, women and adolescents, well-off farmers, poor lodgers and farmhands. A close study of his diaries gives evidence of a vast interest in reading in most households, fuelled and fulfilled by Sighvatur's dynamic input. Furthermore it should be stressed here that the lending of manuscripts and printed books was by no means a one-way stream from Sighvatur to the community, and that the act of transcription could be the result of a series of transactions within a manuscript network.

8.2 The making of the Hella book

Some of the first major scribal tasks carried out by Sighvatur within his new community were commissioned by Jón Guðmundsson, a farmer and lay doctor from the nearby farm of Hella, during the winter of 1869-1870. The first instance of scribal exchange recorded in Sighvatur Grímsson's diary between himself and the household at Hella was when Sighvatur composed personal lineage charts for Jón and his wife Guðrún in November 1869.² A few days after he submitted the charts, Sighvatur noted that he had arrived at Hella to stay for a while and write. For the next six weeks he stayed with Jón and Guðrún's household, copying and reading a large and immensely intriguing body of texts.

Sighvatur's first and largest undertaking at Hella was a transcript of the seventeenth-century autobiography of Icelandic adventurer Jón Ólafsson (1593-1670). This Icelandic farmer's son joined the Danish navy as a young man and became a gunner in one of the first Danish expeditions to India after the foundation of the Danish East India Company in 1618. After serving more than a year as a guard at the Danish fort of Tranquebar in India, Jón Ólafsson returned to Copenhagen in 1625 and to Iceland the following spring where he became a farmer. The text of Jón Ólafsson's *Reisubók* comprises three parts. The first two were written by himself in his later years, but the last and shortest part is thought to have been written (or at least dictated) shortly after his death by his son. Prior to its

² Lbs 2374 4to: Sighvatur Grímsson's diary 1863-1880. 8-19 November 1869. The composition of such personal genealogical accounts was an important part of Sighvatur's scribal practices in Kaldrananeshreppur and will be addressed later in this chapter.

much belated publication in the first decade of the twentieth century, this unique narrative enjoyed considerable dissemination, as a number of surviving transcripts manifest.³

Sighvatur made a transcript of the *Reisubók* for Jón Guðmundsson at Hella between 23 November and 29 December 1869, filling about 350 folio pages. This transcript makes up the first and largest section of an extensive volume that Sighvatur produced for Jón Guðmundsson which has survived in private hands in Kaldrananeshreppur.⁴ Sighvatur does not make any mention of his source in his diary, but remarks in his endnote to the transcript that it was made from two manuscripts that seemingly both survive in the NLI. One was a quarto volume believed by some to be in the hand of pastor Þórður Þorsteinsson from Staður in Súgandafjörður, according to Sighvatur's annotations, though he himself argued that it was more likely to be Jón Ólafsson's autograph. This manuscript was, in all likelihood, in Sighvatur's possession at the time and was later among the manuscripts that he bequeathed to the NLI.⁵ As this volume held only the first two parts of the account, Sighvatur concluded the transcript using a folio volume containing various travelogues and other accounts. This was, in all probability, a compilation transcribed sometime during the 1780s by two hands (according to the NLI catalogues), one of them attributed to Hjálmar Þorsteinsson, the pastor in the nearby parish of Tröllatunga.⁶ Sighvatur, however, claimed in his endnote that the volume was in various hands and that Jón Ólafsson's *Reisubók* was in the hand of pastor Hjalti Jónsson from Staður in

³ It was first printed in Danish between 1905 and 1907 and in Icelandic in 1908-1909 as: Jón Ólafsson, *Æfisaga Jóns Ólafssonar Indíafara samín af honum sjálfum (1661)* (Copenhagen, 1908-1909). For information on extant transcripts, see Guðbrandur Jónsson, 'Formáli', in Jón Ólafsson, *Reisubók Jóns Ólafssonar Indíafara* (Reykjavík, 1946), pp. xvii-xx. According to his survey 15 more or less complete transcripts of the account have survived, along with an additional six excerpts and one Danish translation in archives in Iceland, Denmark and England. Additionally he had information on five or six transcripts that were supposed to have been in private possession around the turn of the twentieth century (p. xxii). Guðbrandur suggests that Jón probably transcribed his work several times himself and sold handwritten copies and that at least one autograph has survived (pp. xx-xxii).

⁴ Lbs 2374 4to: November and December 1869. The manuscript is the possession of Magnús Rafnsson at Bakki in Kaldrananeshreppur and I will refer with this initials: MR 1 fol. The volume's title page reads: 'Ferðamanasögur, frá 17du öld, Með ýmsu oðru fleiru. Bókin er hripuð upp eptir gömlum blöðum á Jólaföstunni 1869, en enduð í janúarbyrjun 1870. Fyrir Jón Guðmundsson Óðalsbónda á Helli'.

⁵ Lbs 2345 4to: 'Ferðasaga Jóns Ólafssonar Indíafara'. Transcript of Jón Ólafsson's *Reisubók*, part one and two, thought to be from around 1800. Its scribe is not identified in NLI's catalogues. With it is the beginning of Sighvatur Grímsson's transcript of the *Reisubók* without any dates or other information. This fragment is seemingly not made from the older manuscript.

⁶ JS 29 fol.: 'Nockrar Reisu sögur með fleiru froðlegu til dægrastyttingar safnað í eitt og innbundið 1808'. Compilation of travelogues and other texts written by two hands in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. The merger of its two sections is likely to be the result of its re-binding in 1808.

Steingrímsfjörður.⁷ Information from other manuscripts suggests that this volume was by the mid-nineteenth century at the farm of Valshamar in Geiradalur in the possession of the farmer Guðbrandur Hjálmarsson, the son of one of its scribes, Hjálmar Þorsteinsson.⁸ The whereabouts of the manuscript from Guðbrandur's death in 1862 up to the time it was bequeathed to Jón Sigurðsson's archive in Copenhagen is, however, not clear. But it is very possible that it fell into the hands of Guðbrandur's nephew, Sæmundur Björnsson, a farmer at Gautshamar in Kaldrananeshreppur, near both Hella and Klúka, and later into the possession of Sæmundur's widow Guðrún Bjarnadóttir after his death in 1864.

Sighvatur's transcript of Jón Ólafsson's account became the first in a series of readings and transcripts from this folio volume and other manuscripts. Most of the texts involved had a common theme: the exploration of the world and/or the interactions between Icelanders and people of distant countries. These activities included Sighvatur's reading aloud from the short travelogue of a young Icelandic carpenter, Ásgeir Sigurðsson, who travelled around Europe in the late seventeenth century, and later from two translated travel accounts, all from this same folio volume.⁹ The shorter of these two translated texts was a concise account of the travels of the Dane Fredrik Bolling to India in the seventeenth century, first published in Denmark in 1677. It was translated into Icelandic by pastor Einar Ólafsson (1647-1721) from Staður in Aðalvík a few decades later without ever being published in print, and is preserved in several transcripts from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁰ The second was an anonymous translation of a lengthy narrative by an adventurous German, Ernst Christoph Barchewitz, who was in the service of the Dutch East India Company at the beginning of the eighteenth century, which takes up over 220 pages in folio.¹¹ None of these accounts were transcribed by Sighvatur. He did, however, transcribe an Icelandic translation of the travelogue of the

⁷ MR 1 fol. Another lay scholar, Daði Nielsson (d. 1857), noted that the only the first half of the transcript was in the hand of Hjalti, but that it had been concluded by pastor Guðmundur Bjarnason at Árnes. See Jónsson, 'Formáli', p. xix.

⁸ Lbs 1119 4to: 'Ýmsra stuttra annála safn'. Compilation of annals in the hand of Gísli Konráðsson from 1852-1853, partly copied from JS 29 fol. See Jónsson, 'Formáli', p. xix.

⁹ Lbs 2374 4to: 22 December 1869 and 3 January 1870. This account was published in the journal *Blanda* in the 1930s: Ásgeir Sigurðsson, 'Ferðasaga Ásgeirs snikkara Siguðssonar frá 17. öld', *Blanda* 5 (1932-1935), pp. 1-21.

¹⁰ Fredrik Bolling, *Friderici Bollingii Oost-Indiske Reise-bog* (Copenhagen, 1678). Seven transcripts of the account from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are registered in the catalogues of the NLI.

¹¹ Ernst Christoph Barchewitz, *Allerneueste und wahrhaffte Ost-Indianische Reise-Beschreibung* (Chemnitz, 1730). JS 29 fol. seemingly holds the only extant copy of this translation.

Danish Navy captain Jens Munck who, in 1619, embarked on an expedition seeking the Northwest Passage to Asia, from Hudson Bay to the Pacific Ocean.¹² The Icelandic translation of Munck's account is preserved in a handful of transcripts in the National Library of Iceland, but has, like the other translations mentioned above, never been published. The existence and circulation of these accounts of adventurous and hazardous voyages to remote and exotic places is mostly unknown and unstudied in Icelandic scholarship.¹³ It is however evident that both indigenous and translated narrative of this kind had a substantial presence in the textual world of early modern and modern Iceland despite being, like the majority of secular texts, only available in handwritten form.¹⁴

Sighvatur added on 5 January two short accounts to the volume he was making for Jón Guðmundsson, both recounting the dramatic events known in Iceland as *Tyrkjaránið* ('the Turkish raid'). This occurred when two groups of North African corsairs from Algiers and Salé in Morocco abducted and enslaved around 400 Icelanders in 1627, primarily from the island of Vestmannaeyjar off the southern coast but also from Berufjörður in eastern Iceland.¹⁵ This unique event in Icelandic history is well documented in various contemporary narratives: annals, autobiographies and letters, written by eyewitnesses, as well as by some of the small fraction of victims who returned to Iceland.¹⁶ Sighvatur copied two of the shorter and lesser-known accounts into the volume he was composing for Jón Guðmundsson. One was a short autobiographical account by Jón Vestmann, who was among those captured, and the other was an eyewitness narrative of the raid in the eastern fjords written by some students at Skálholt a few months after the events.¹⁷

Sighvatur gives little information on his source for these accounts in his diary but it is nevertheless probable that they came from a miscellany that he dubbed *Hamarsbók stærri* ('the greater

¹² Jens Munck, *Navigatio septentrionalis* (Copenhagen, 1624).

¹³ An exception is Völundur Óskarsson, *Ferðir og fræði á lærdómsöld* (unpublished master's thesis, University of Iceland, 1996).

¹⁴ On travel books and scribal culture in Britain, see Zoë Kinsley, 'Considering the Manuscript Travelogue: The Journals of Dorothy Richardson (1761-1801)', *Prose Studies* 26/3 (December 2003), pp. 414-431.

¹⁵ On the events and their narratives see Þorsteinn Helgason, *Stórtíðinda frásögn. Heimildir og sagnaritun um Tyrkjaránið á Íslandi árið 1627* (unpublished master's thesis, University of Iceland, 1996), and 'Historical Narrative as Collective Therapy: The Case of the Turkish Raid in Iceland', *Scandinavian Journal of History* 22 (1997), pp. 275-289.

¹⁶ The primary accounts were first compiled and published by Jón Þorkelsson in *Tyrkjaránið á Íslandi* (Reykjavík, 1906-1909).

¹⁷ Lbs 2374 4to: 5 January 1870. On Jón Vestmann's life, see Björn K. Þórólfsson, 'Jón Vestmann', *Ársrit Hins íslenska fræðafélags í Kaupmannahöfn* 11 (1930), pp. 102-107.

Hamar-book’).¹⁸ *Hamarsbók stærri* is one of two volumes among Sighvatur’s collection preserved in NLI that take their name from the farm Gautshamar in Kaldrananeshreppur. It was written by pastor Hjálmar Þorsteinsson at Tröllatunga (the one who contributed to JS 29 fol.) and his son Björn Hjálmarsson in the early nineteenth century.¹⁹ Shortly after this session of reading and writing at Hella, Sighvatur notes in his diary that he had received two old handwritten storybooks from Gautshamar. It is almost certain that he is referring to these two and that they had earlier been lent to Hella to copy from.²⁰

One of the defining characteristics of scribal transmission is that handwritten books were rarely copied straightforwardly from start to finish or in a fixed order. Some texts from the original compilation were omitted at the same time as texts from other sources were added and their order was altered. This is apparent in Sighvatur’s production of the Hella book for Jón Guðmundsson. In addition to the main sources addressed above (the first *Reisubók* manuscript, the folio JS 29 fol., and *Hamarsbók stærri*), Sighvatur added three short historical accounts from other sources, slotted in between Jón Ólafsson’s account and the other minor texts he copied from JS 29 fol. The first of these three accounts was copied from two manuscripts from his old mentor and friend Gísli Konráðsson and the others were probably of the same origin.²¹

Over a period of six weeks, from November 1869 to January 1870, Sighvatur Grímsson transcribed nearly 500 folio pages for the farmer Jón Guðmundsson. He moreover read aloud extensively from handwritten books for the members of the household, bringing a wide-ranging vision of the world into its *baðstofa*. Sighvatur’s diary entries from the end of 1869 and the beginning of 1870 give rare insight into the role of a specific genre, namely seventeenth- and eighteenth-century travelogues, in nineteenth-century popular manuscript culture. The general conception that Icelanders’

¹⁸ Sighvatur used this same source when he transcribed both these accounts into his own miscellany more than two decades later. See Lbs 2285 4to: ‘Amlóði’. Compilation of various texts written by Sighvatur Grímsson in 1892-1895.

¹⁹ Lbs 2317 4to: ‘Hamarsbók minni’. Miscellany written in nineteenth century by Björn Hjálmarsson et al. and Lbs 2318 4to: ‘Hamarsbók stærri’. Miscellany written in nineteenth century by Hjálmar Þorsteinsson and Björn Hjálmarsson.

²⁰ Lbs 2374 4to: 17 February 1870. Guðrún Bjarnadóttir is identified as an owner of the manuscript in its marginalia.

²¹ MR 1 fol. The first one was ‘Dómur Orms lögmans Sturlusonar um landamerki Reykhóla’. The other two episodes were ‘Þáttur Hvanndals-Bjarna og bræðra hans’ by Gísli Konráðsson and ‘Ætt og æfi Jóns bónda Íslendinga’ by Björn Halldórsson from Sauðlauksdalur.

accessible reading material in the early modern and modern era was limited to sagas and *rímur* faces a serious challenge from this emerging picture.

8.3 Two accounts of Jewish history

The largest scribal task that Sighvatur assumed during the winter of 1870-1871 was his transcript of *Gyðingasaga* ('History of the Jews'), also commissioned by Jón Guðmundsson at Hella. This is the title of an obscure Icelandic translation of the works of the first century Jewish chronicler Flavius Josephus.²² Josephus's chronicles were among the most widely circulated texts of medieval and early modern Europe, first in the classical languages but later in the vernacular. Sections of Josephus's writings had been known to Icelandic readers since the Middle Ages via the thirteenth-century *Gyðinga saga*, written/translated by the abbot and later bishop Brandur Jónsson, and various narratives attributed to Josephus that circulated in Icelandic manuscripts throughout early modern Iceland.²³ The complete works of Flavius Josephus were, however, only translated into Icelandic by Gísli Konráðsson in the first half of the nineteenth century, from an earlier Danish translation that had been published in the mid-eighteenth century.²⁴

Sighvatur was commissioned by Jón Guðmundsson at Hella to copy this translation of Josephus's *Gyðingasaga* from three quarto volumes into one large folio in fall 1870.²⁵ The volumes had been borrowed from the island of Flatey, according to Sighvatur's diary, and were doubtless those still preserved in NBI, written in the hand of Gísli Konráðsson. Sighvatur Grímsson embarked on this assignment on 12 November 1870 and completed it almost four months later, resulting in a near 800-

²² Four texts are attributed to him: *The Jewish War*, *Antiquities of the Jews*, *Against Apion*, and *The Life*. See Flavius Josephus, *The Works of Josephus Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody, MA, 1987).

²³ This text has recently been published in a scholarly edition: Brandur Jónsson, *Gyðinga saga*. Edited by Kirsten Wolf. Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi. Rit 42 (Reykjavík, 1995).

²⁴ See Lbs 1141 4to: 'Iosephusar Flavius's Gyðinga Saga á Dönsku snúin af Griskri tungu ok aukin skýringargreinum af Andrésí Reyersyni sóknarpresti til Mós-safnaða í Vebjargarstípti á Jótlandi. Fyrri hluti (x þættir). Íslenskað uppkast. Hripað af Neyrðra Skörðugili veturinn MDCCCXXXI-II [1831-32] af [Gísli Konráðsson's name in runes]'; Lbs 1142 4to: 'Iosephusar Flavius's Gyðinga Saga á Dönsku snúin af Griskri tungu ok aukin skýringargreinum af Andrésí Reyersyni sóknarpresti til Mós-safnaða í Vebjargarstípti á Jótlandi. Annar hluti (x þættir). Íslenskað uppkast'; and Lbs 4517 4to: 'Íosephusar Flaviusar Styrjaldar saga Gyðinga og varnarrit öndverðt Apíóni. Úr Grísku snúid á dana tungu og aukið skýringargreinum af Andrésí Reierssyni sóknarpresti Mós-safnaðar í Vebjargastípti á Jótlandi. Íslenskað uppkast'. The Danish translation was *Flavii Josephi Jødiske Historie af det grædske Sprog oversat og med nogle Anmærkninger oplyst af Andreas Reyersen* (Copenhagen, 1750-1751).

²⁵ Lbs 2374 4to: 11 November and 18 December 1870.

page folio in very small and narrow script that is seemingly lost, or at least not held by any public archive.²⁶

Substantial knowledge of Jewish history was also available to enquiring nineteenth-century Icelandic readers through sources other than Josephus's works. A second account available to the farmers in Kaldrananeshreppur around 1870 was composed by pastor and writer Jón Oddsson Hjaltalín (1749-1835) in 1785. Jón Hjaltalín's prime source was a three-volume Danish account of the history of the Jews, published in the last quarter of the eighteenth century.²⁷ Its author, Christian Bastholm, was chaplain at the Danish Court and a productive author of religious books aimed at the general public. Jón Hjaltalín (1749-1835) had initially planned to translate Bastholm's work but ended up with an adaptation that was 'clearly far more than a simple translation'.²⁸ Sighvatur Grímsson was hired by carpenter and farmer Einar Gíslason from Sandnes in Kaldrananeshreppur to transcribe this text in September 1869 and copied the bulk of it over a two-week period between 11 and 28 October 1869. This time Sighvatur carried out the task at home at Klúka and the original manuscript was brought to him from Sandnes.²⁹ He gave it a fashionably inflated and informative heading:

A brief synopsis of the history of the Jews, from the beginning of the world up to the latter demolition of Jerusalem, in the year 4079 after the creation, taken from the Bible itself and Dr Christian Bastholm's History of the Jews in Danish, by the Reverend Jón Oddsson Hjaltalín late pastor at Breiðabólstaður and here recopied by commission of Einar Gíslason carpenter from Sandnes.³⁰

Sighvatur's transcript contains two prefaces by Jón Hjaltalín, both dated August 1785, and also a short account of the author and a subscript, both added by Sighvatur.³¹ In his postscript Sighvatur

²⁶ *Ibid.* The process of the transcript are recorded meticulously in Sighvatur's diary entries over this period.

²⁷ Christian Bastholm, *Den Jødiske Historie, fra Verdens Skabelse til Jerusalems sidste Ødelæggelse, med historiske, geographiske, chronologiske og critiske Oplysninger* 1-3 (Copenhagen, 1777-1782).

²⁸ See Matthew J. Driscoll, *The Unwashed Children of Eve: The Production, Dissemination and Reception of Popular Literature in Post-Reformation Iceland* (Enfield Lock, 1997), p. 92.

²⁹ Lbs 2374 4to: 21 August 1869. There he notes in his diary that a neighbouring farmer had brought him a book from Sandnes. This was most likely the *Gyðingasaga* that Sighvatur began to copy a month later.

³⁰ Lbs 2782 4to: 'Stutt innihald Giðinga sögu, alt frá upphafi veraldar, til Jerúsalemsborgar síðari eydileggingar, árid eftir heimsins sköpun 4079, útdregid af sjálfri Bibljíunni, og Dr Kristjáns Basthólms Júda sögu, á Dönsku, af síra Jóni Oddssyni Hjaltalín presti síðast á Breiðabólstað en nú síðast að niju upphripuð, að tilhlutan þjóðhagasmíðsins Einars Gíslasonar á Sandnesi 1869'. Apart from Sighvatur's transcript, this text has only survived in a fragmented autograph from the year 1819, preserved in a local archive (*Héraðsskjalasafn Dalasýslu*). See Driscoll, *The Unwashed Children*, p. 90.

³¹ Driscoll, *The Unwashed Children*, p. 78.

emphasizes what he sees as the cultural importance of such an enterprise. This praise, though, is not for himself, the scribe, but for the author/translator and for the transcript's commissioner:

I cannot conclude my transcript of this excellent book, without celebrating the author who has written the history of the ancient Jews in the Icelandic language. The book is at once a translation and an original composition; there are many things here that are not in the Bible, and these are all from the chronicler Josephus, whose writings were doubtlessly available to Pastor Jón Hjaltalín. The manuscript from which I have made my transcript is soon to be 90 years old, and it is a great wonder that it has not been printed long ago, but this is due to the blindness of some of those who own manuscripts, and leave them lying on a shelf for years or better yet, shut up in a box, so that no one knows that they were ever written. Yet again it should be mentioned how laudable it is, and admirable, when people either have others transcribe or themselves copy rare manuscripts; it greatly enhances the reputation of our country, and of our literature, to act as that man of genius has done who provided money to copy this entire book, but I am not to thank for that deed, for I would never have seen this book if he had not borrowed it from another and then had it copied.³²

As well as portraying Sighvatur's passion for the written word and his thoughts on printed and scribal transmission, this text gives some information on the manuscript that he copied from. It reveals that it was almost 90 years old, which dates it at close to the time of Jón Hjaltalín's original composition, and that Einar Gíslason at Sandnes had borrowed it to have it copied. Sighvatur seems not to have known who the owner was.

These two hefty accounts of the history of the Jews, both translated into Icelandic around 1800 without ever being published in print, are examples of the potential and ambition of the literary culture of the era. Jón Hjaltalín evidently had aspirations towards print publication of his *Gyðingasaga*, as revealed in his preface. It is, however, likely that the translation of Josephus's texts was made without any realistic expectation of it being printed in its entirety, although a short and apologetic preface by the translator shows he assumed it would be read.³³ The same applied doubtlessly to the translated and indigenous travelogues of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as well as narratives of the

³² Lbs 2782 4to: See Sighvatur's epilogue to his transcript of *Gyðingasaga*. 'Jeg git ekki endað að skrifa þetta mikla ágætisrit, so eg minnst ekki með virðingu höfundarins sem aldeilis einn hefir orðið til að Rita á Íslenzka tungu, fornsögu Giðinga. Bókin er bæði útlekking og frumrit, það er fjölda margt hér, sem maður hefir ekki í Bibljunni, enn það er allt frá Jósephus sagna skrifara hvors Rit Séra Jón Hjaltalín, hefir án efa haft. Handritið sem eg hefi Ritað eptir er senn orðið Nýrædt, og það er sérleg furða að ekki skuli laungu vera búíð að prenta það, enn það kémur af þeirri Blindni sem á sumum er sem eiga handrit, að þau eru látin liggja ár frá ári uppá hillu, og best þegar þau eru niðri í íláti, so enginn fær að vita þau hafi nokkurn tíma verið skrifuð. Enn aptur má géta þess hvorsu lofsvert og ágætt er, þegar menn láta aðra eða giöra sjálfir, að skrifa upp vand fenginn handrit, það er verulega aukin heiður lands vors með því, og Bókmennta vorra, eins og sá Snilldarmaður hefir gjört sem hefir kostað fje til að skrifa alla þessa bók og er það verk ekkert mér að þakka, því hana hefði ég aldrei sjeð, hefði hann ekki féngið hana annarstaðar að láni og síðan látið skrifa hana'.

³³ Driscoll, 'The Unwashed Children', p. 92. Lbs 1141 4to. See Gísli Konráðsson's preface to his translations.

Tyrkjarán. The fact that these texts were available and circulating among the nineteenth-century farming people of Kaldrananeshreppur, an undistinguished Icelandic rural community, suggests that the range of scribally circulated texts extended way beyond the sphere of sagas, romances and *rímur* commonly attributed to popular literary culture of the time.

8.4 Genealogical services

Genealogy (*ættvísi*) was – along with law, religious texts and history – among the key subjects of the earliest Icelandic writers, as contemporary reports confirm.³⁴ Knowledge of one's lineage was, like elsewhere in medieval Europe, important for ownership, birthrights, and political and social status, particularly within the Icelandic Commonwealth (930-1262) where kinship and clans were essential elements of governance.³⁵ With the advent of centralized power in the mid-thirteenth century the formal role of lineage declined to some degree as ownership of land and claims to positions of authority became firmly embedded in a system of kinship and in-law relations which lasted through the period when Iceland was part of the Norwegian and Danish kingdoms.³⁶ Genealogy was an important element of historical and antiquarian writing, and the historical/literary texts of the Late Middle Ages (the sagas and the chronicles) are filled with genealogical sequences that connect their protagonists with Iceland's first settlers and with various Nordic and to some extent Celtic ancestors.³⁷ Later, Icelandic genealogists would use these sources to trace the lineage of their contemporaries to Nordic kings, ancient Germanic mythical figures, the old heathen gods of *Ásatrú* and often all the way back to Adam and Eve.

Genealogy became separate from literature in early modern Iceland, and was primarily practised by the social and political elite to cement their position and power. But the greater part of the population held no property or power whatsoever. What kinship and knowledge of your intimate lineage could however offer was some kind of 'social security' in cases of widowhood, orphanage,

³⁴ Hreinn Benediktsson, *The First Grammatical Treatise* (Reykjavík, 1972).

³⁵ Chris Callow, 'Reconstructing the Past in Medieval Iceland', *Early Medieval Europe* 14/3 (2006), p. 300: 'It is undeniable that genealogy was important to medieval societies and to none more so than medieval Iceland'.

³⁶ On kinship and power in the Middle Ages in Iceland see for example Axel Kristinsson, 'Vensl og völd á 13. öld', in 2. *Íslenska söguþingið 30. Maí-1. júní 2002: Ráðstefnurit 1* (Reykjavík, 2002), pp. 308-317. On the early modern and modern periods, see for example Einar Hreinsson, *Nätverk og nepotism: Den regionala förvaltningen på Island 1770-1800* (Göteborg, 2003).

³⁷ Callow, 'Reconstructing the Past', p. 300.

sickness or poverty.³⁸ The practice of genealogy also changed with developments in literary culture. As with other literary activity, genealogy was democratized during the nineteenth century by the advent of the semi-professional genealogist (*ættfræðingur*). This craft of producing lineage charts was predominantly linked to the world of manuscript culture throughout the nineteenth century, although in some cases it broke its way into print culture.

The importance of genealogy is apparent in Sighvatur Grímsson's autobiography. Faithful to the tradition of the medieval sagas, which set the stage and introduced their characters by stating lineage, Sighvatur Grímsson opens his narration by tracing his ancestry:

His parents were poor crofters, Grímur Einarsson from Borgarhreppur and Guðrún, the daughter of Sighvatur – son of Jón, farmer at Bóndhóll in Borgarhreppur, who died aged eighty at Háfafell in Dalir, son of Guðbrandur – and Þórunn, daughter of Jón, son of Illugi. This family is widespread in the Dalir and Mýrar areas, directly linked to the lawman Gísli Þórðarson from Innrihólmur, to Loftur the rich from Möðruvellir, to Bjarni the rich, to the people of Reykjanes, to Bishop Jón Arason etc. Sighvatur and Þórunn had fifteen children and from them a vast family tree has stemmed. The lineage of Grímur Einarsson is completely unknown; his father drowned but Margrét, Grímur's mother, was the sister of Guðlaug, the third wife of Ásmundur from Elínarhöfði [at Akranes] from whom many are descended.³⁹

In this first section Sighvatur links himself with his birthplace Akranes, with the adjacent district of Borgarhreppur, and also to powerful and wealthy men of earlier centuries. The reference to 'the people of Reykjanes' links him directly to a clan of ninth-century settlers of Reykjanes in western Iceland, mentioned in the *Landnámabók*.⁴⁰ What comes, however, as a surprise is that despite the passion that Sighvatur had for genealogy and his decades of study in the field, he knew almost nothing of his father's lineage at the time of writing.

Although Sighvatur Grímsson had become acquainted with genealogical practices in some form at an early age, it was probably only when he moved to Flatey and met Gísli Konráðsson that he

³⁸ On the social role of kinship in nineteenth-century Iceland, see for example Gísli Ágúst Gunnlaugsson and Ólöf Garðarsdóttir, 'Transition into widowhood: A life-course perspective on the household position of Icelandic widows at the beginning of the twentieth century', *Continuity and Change* 11/3 (1996), pp. 435-458.

³⁹ Lbs 3623 8vo, [p. 1]. 'Foreldrar hans voru fátæk þurrabúðarhjón, Grímur Einarsson, ættaðr úr Borgarhrepp, – og Guðrún, dóttir Sighvats bónda í Bóndhól í Borgarhrepp, Jónssonar er dó áttæður á Háfafelli í Dölum Guðbrandssonar, – og Þórunnar Jónsdóttur Illugasonar. Sú ætt er fjölmenn mjög um Dali og Mýrar, og liggir beint til Gísla lögmans Þórðarsonar á Innrahólmi; til Lopts ríka á Möðruvöllum, – til Bjarnar riddara ríka – til Reyknesinga, – til Jóns bys. Arasonar o.fl. o.fl. Þau Sighvatur og Þórunn áttu 15 börn, og er frá þeim komin fjölmenn ættþvisl. Ætt Gríms Einarss. er með öllu ókunnug; faðir hans drukknaði, en Margrét móðir Gríms var systir Guðlaugar, 3 konu Ásmundar í Elínarhöfða, sem fjölmenn ætt er frá komin'.

⁴⁰ Ari Þorgilsson, *Íslendingabók. Landnámabók. Íslensk fornrit I*. Edited by Jakob Benediktsson (Reykjavík, 1968), p. 163.

became involved in it as a serious enterprise. Genealogy was one of the fields that Gísli explored throughout his career, but it was always interwoven with his literary and historical work. When Sighvatur began to work as Gísli's apprentice and assistant he collected all the genealogical data he could get his hands on to add to Gísli's work, and simultaneously he began to build up his own genealogical database. Sighvatur Grímsson's genealogical writings can be divided into two major types. The first one involved the general collection of Icelandic genealogical information, from the time of settlement up to his own time. Several manuscripts of this type are preserved in his collections, either written by Sighvatur himself or collected by him. The largest of them is a comprehensive six-volume collection produced around the end of the century.⁴¹ This anthology was the result of decades of relentless compilation and analysis of genealogical information. Examples of this endeavour from his Klúka years are his 115-page transcript of *Eydalaætt* ('The lineage from Eydalir'), copied in February 1870, followed by two shorter lineages that were, according to the diary, copied into a 'draft genealogy book' but were later adjoined to his lineage omnibus.⁴²

Sighvatur's mounting genealogical collection was the base for his second type of work on the subject, personal ancestral lineage charts made for and commissioned by his friends and neighbours. On these charts, in an organized and schematic manner, Sighvatur would trace the ancestry of the purchaser (and usually their spouse) some centuries back, often to the settlement or beyond. Such charts were among Sighvatur's most sought-after scribal products while he lived in Kaldrananeshreppur. His diary entries from that four-year period give clear information about eighteen of them: eleven charts made for his neighbours in Kaldrananeshreppur, an additional five for people in a nearby district, and two lineage charts that Sighvatur had started to work on earlier and finished at Klúka.

⁴¹ Lbs 2265-2270 4to: Compilation of descending lineage-charts. Six volumes, written by Sighvatur Grímsson at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth.

⁴² Lbs 2374 4to: February 1870.

TABLE 1					
Personal lineage charts produced by Sighvatur Grímsson 1869-1873⁴³					
<i>Name</i>	<i>Status</i>	<i>Farm</i>	<i>Writing period</i>	<i>Size</i>	<i>Preserved</i>
*Jón Jónsson 'Geiteyingur'	Carpenter	Ísafjörður	13 September 1869	-	-
*Elías Ebenezerson	Farmer and overseer	Rauðamýri	31 October- 3 November 1869	-	-
Björn Gíslason	Farmhand	Kaldrananes	6-11 November 1869	-	Lbs 3626 8vo
Jón Guðmundsson and Guðrún Ingimundardóttir	Farmer and wife	Hella	10-18 November 1869, 15 March 1871	12 sheets	-
Guðmundína Kristjánsdóttir	Farmhand	Hella	2-3 February 1870	2½ sheets	-
Jón Guðmundsson and Ingibjörg Einarisdóttir	Farmer and wife	Kaldrananes	5-15 February 1870	-	-
**Einar Gíslason	Farmer	Sandnes	9 February 1870	-	-
Guðmundur Guðmundsson and Guðrún Benediktsdóttir	Farmer and wife	Drangsnes	3-16 March 1870	-	Lbs 10.1.1991
Björn Sæmundsson and Valdís Sæmundsdóttir	Son and daughter of the farmer	Gautshamar	11-12 April 1870	2¾ sheets	-
Árni Jónsson	Farmhand	Kaldrananes	1-2 November 1870	5 sheets	-
Björn Björnsson	Farmer	Asparvík	26 December 1870 - 9 March 1871	3½ sheets	-
*Eiríkur Arason	Farmer	Bergstaðir in Hrútafjörður	10-11 April 1871	3½ sheets	-
*Jakob Bjarnason	Free labourer	Illugastaðir in Hrútafjörður	11-13 April 1871	2¾ sheets	-
*Magnús Bjarnason	Farmer	Skálholtsvík in Bæjarhreppur	13 April 1871	-	-
Loftur Bjarnason and Anna Bjarnadóttir	Farmer and wife	Eyjar	27-28 April 1871	5 sheets, 80 pages in 8vo	-
*Jón Árnason and Ögn Árnadóttir	Farmer and mistress	Illugastaðir in Hrútafjörður	29 January- 3 February 1872	-	-
Sigurður Gíslason	Farmer	Bær	9 February 1872	1¼ sheets	-
*Ólafur Sigvaldason	Doctor	Bær in Króksfjörður	19 October 1872	-	-

* Located outside the district of Kaldrananeshreppur.

** Originally produced by Gísli Konráðsson but completed by Sighvatur Grímsson in 1870.

⁴³ Lbs 2374 4to: 1869-1872.

One of the striking things about this making of lineage charts, apart from the popularity of the product, is that they were made for farm labourers and small crofters as well as affluent farmers, and women as well as men. The first of these charts commissioned within the district was made for a young male servant at the farm of Kaldrananes named Björn Gíslason, in November 1869.⁴⁴ It is one of only two charts on the list that is preserved in NLI, bound with several short texts written by Björn himself in 1880, suggesting that he was himself involved in scribal work for private use.⁴⁵ A year later Sighvatur produced a lineage chart for another young servant in the district of Kaldrananeshreppur, the 22-year old Árni Jónsson, who was employed by one of the three households at the Kaldrananes farmstead.⁴⁶ The third servant who obtained a personal lineage chart from Sighvatur in that period was a young woman named Guðmundína Kristjánsdóttir, employed at Hella.⁴⁷ Women were commonly only included in these charts as the wives of the male recipient, but this is the one case where a single woman received an individual lineage.⁴⁸ It is likely that the making of this lineage was spurred by the composition of a large genealogical record for her masters at Hella, Jón Guðmundsson and Guðrún Ingimundardóttir, a few months earlier. These three examples suggest that the making of lineage charts was not exclusively dependent on strong economic or social status, occupation or gender but rather an individual interest in family history and perhaps the impetus of personal contact with Sighvatur.

At the higher end of the social and economic ladder of this farming society, people were affluent enough to afford more substantial genealogies. These were also the individuals in the district who were most likely to commission other large scribal tasks, and were involved in other aspects of literary exchange: the elite of the scribal community, in a sense. The most extensive of these assignments was the lineage of Jón Guðmundsson and Guðrún Ingimundardóttir at Hella, produced over a period of nine days in November 1869 on 12 sheets (almost 200 pages in octavo or 100 in

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*: 6-11 November 1869.

⁴⁵ Lbs 3626 8vo: Miscellany derived from Björn Gíslason, mostly written by him. The lineage composed and written by Sighvatur Grímsson is titled: 'Ætt Björns Gíslasonar yngismanns á Kaldrananesi rakin og skrifuð af Sighvati Grímssyni, lokið 8.11. 1869 að Klúku'.

⁴⁶ Lbs 2374 4to: 1-2 November 1870.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*: February 1870.

⁴⁸ In one case, Sighvatur composed lineage charts for siblings, Björn Sæmundsson and Valdís Sæmundsdóttir at Gautshamar.

quarto).⁴⁹ A lineage of this kind was, as well, the first writing assignment that Sighvatur undertook for the farmer Jón Guðmundsson at Kaldrananes, marking the beginning of an extensive literary exchange between Sighvatur and this family. This included Sighvatur's transcript of four *rímur*-cycles and two sagas into a now-lost quarto miscellany of 186 pages over a two-week period in early 1873.⁵⁰ It is, however, notable that Sighvatur did not make lineage charts for two of his biggest clients: the carpenter Einar Gíslason from Sandnes and the farmer and fisherman Björn Bjarnason from Bjarnarnes, who commissioned Sighvatur to transcribe a more than 500-page quarto volume from the early eighteenth century, from September to December 1871.⁵¹

In the wake of his work on lineage charts within Kaldrananeshreppur, Sighvatur Grímsson's reputation as a genealogist began to reach outside the borders of his community. Requests from neighbouring districts for four lineage charts that he made in spring 1871 are among the few examples of Sighvatur doing scribal work for someone outside Kaldrananeshreppur in these years.⁵² Sighvatur continued to produce these charts after he relocated to Dýrafjörður in 1873 and he composed six such charts between September and December 1873.

The diverse list of people who obtained personal lineage charts from Sighvatur Grímsson between 1869 and 1873 indicates strongly that although the size and grandeur of a scribal product might depend on the commissioner's economic capacity and social status, the ability to commission work was relatively open to those of any status, gender, means or education. Having a lineage chart made became a popular trend among the people of Kaldrananeshreppur as soon as Sighvatur Grímsson moved into the district in 1869, and the fashion spread to bordering districts. To what degree the people of Kaldrananeshreppur had access to this kind of genealogical service before and after Sighvatur's brief occupancy is not known, but the immense demand for it might suggest that this was a novel but perhaps not completely unknown phenomenon that gave them a new way to approach their history and heritage. This shows how scribal culture and scribal publication had, in spite of its

⁴⁹ Lbs 2374 4to: 10-18 November 1869.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*: 16 February to 1 March 1873.

⁵¹ The source that Sighvatur used is extant in NLI: Lbs 2319 4to: 'Sagna Fiiesiodur samansaankadur og tildregin af Biarna Peturssyne Skarde Skardsstönd'. Compilation of various texts written in two or three hands, including Bjarni Pétursson at Skað, between 1727 and 1729. Sighvatur's transcript was bequeathed to NLI on 11 July 1986 by Magnús Rafnsson of Kaldrananeshreppur.

⁵² Lbs 2374 4to: February to April 1871.

slowness, other sought-after qualities like flexibility, both towards literary trends and more importantly towards the personal needs of the recipient. The diverse status of the subjects suggests that lineage charts were not a status symbol for better-off farmers or landowners, let alone officials and members of the clergy. It is much more likely that lineage charts simply gave their owners a sense of history and continuity and linked them to the living heritage of traditional literature and chronicles circulating within the scribal and oral culture.

8.5 The household economics of a community scribe

These commissions benefited Sighvatur Grímsson in two ways. First it was immensely rewarding for a young man so fixated on literature and history to become engaged with texts like the accounts of Jewish history and the travelogues and life-writings mentioned earlier in this chapter. Secondly it is evident from both the autobiography and Sighvatur's diary how important this work was for the livelihood of the family. At the end of 1869 Sighvatur noted retrospectively in his diary: '[D]uring the winter I ran some errands and did a lot of writing for others and made most of our income from that', and he makes similar remarks in the following years.⁵³ When Sighvatur returned home to Klúka for Christmas on 23 December 1869, a month into his transcript of Jón Ólafsson's *Reisubók*, he brought meat, milk, grain, fish and three candles home with him from Hella, and at the end of the reading and writing session in early January he obtained more of the same.⁵⁴ Although Sighvatur seldom makes a direct connection in his diary entries between these goods and his writings it is fairly evident that he was getting paid in kind for the scribal work he was engaged in or had completed.

Sighvatur notes in his autobiography that he received nearly 60 *rikisdalir* from Jón at Hella for his transcript of Josephus's *Gyðingasaga*, roughly the equivalent of two years of wages for a male farmhand.⁵⁵ It is however clear from the diary that Sighvatur was in fact paid in kind, rather than money. Most of this was food: grain and rye, meat, fish, shark, bread and butter, but one payment was

⁵³ *Ibid.*: 31 December 1869: '... um veturinn var eg í ýmsum ferðum og skrifaði mikið fyrir aðra og lifðum við mest á því'. See also similar testimonies on 31 December 1870 and 31 December 1872.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*: 23 December 1869. See also 7 January 1870. Sighvatur also obtained a considerable amount of food from Hella on 10 November 1869, which was probably a down-payment for a lineage chart he was about to embark on, and then some more after he submitted it.

⁵⁵ Guðmundur Jónsson and Magnús Magnússon, *Hagskinna: Sögulegar hagtölur um Ísland* (Reykjavík, 1997), p. 606, table 12.2. This currency is the Danish *rigsdaler*, in force in Iceland up to 1875 when it was replaced with the *króna* at the rate of 2:1.

in the form of 24 sheets of writing paper.⁵⁶ Although the estimated 60 *rikisdalir* may be somewhat exaggerated, the quantity of goods that Sighvatur received from the Hella household over this period clearly shows how important a contribution such major scribal tasks made to the household economy.

There are only a few instances in which Sighvatur makes a direct link between a given task and a given payment in his diary. One of those is also one of the very few where Sighvatur gets paid in money rather than in kind. The farmhand Björn Gíslason from Kaldrananes paid Sighvatur 1 *rikisdalur* and 48 *skildingar* on 7 January 1870 for a lineage chart that Sighvatur had produced for him two months earlier.⁵⁷ Such conduct with money was uncommon at that time and the mode of payment is particularly surprising coming from a humble farmhand. It should, however, be noted that unlike the heads of households who commonly paid for Sighvatur's scribal assignments with food or other goods, farmhands did usually not have such commodities at hand to pay with. It is also possible that Sighvatur simply preferred to be paid in kind, given the fact that retailing and commerce was extremely underdeveloped in Iceland at the time. When Sighvatur made a substantial lineage chart for the well-off farmers at Eyjar, Loftur Bjarnason and Anna Bjarnadóttir, in April 1871 he was rewarded with 20 pounds of fish, whose value seems to have been close to what Björn Gíslason paid in cash.⁵⁸

The function of this exchange arrangement between scribal services and everyday goods and its significance for Sighvatur's household at Klúka becomes particularly clear in the records of a two-week period in March 1870. Sighvatur visited two neighbouring farms on 10 March, first Hella where he was supplied with corn and some meat and later Sandnes where he delivered a brand new *rimur* transcript and took away some meat and butter.⁵⁹ A few days later Sighvatur completed a genealogical chart for the farmers Guðmundur Guðmundsson and Guðrún Benediktsdóttir at Drangsnæs and composed and wrote out an obituary poem for the late Sæmundur Björnsson at Gautshamar.⁶⁰ After Sighvatur had completed both jobs he received fish and barley from Drangsnæs and some fish from

⁵⁶ Lbs 2374 4to: 19 November, 10 December, and 22 December 1870, 19 January, 2 February, 19 February, 4 March and 19 March 1871. 24 sheets of paper equals 192 pages in quarto or 384 pages in octavo.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*: 7 January 1870. 'Fékk 1 rd. 48 sk. fyrir ættartölu Björns Gíslasonar'. The amount equals roughly the wages for one and a half day's work during the hay harvest, according to Jónsson and Magnússon, *Hagskinna*, p. 604, Table 12.1.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*: 27-29 April 1871. For the price of salted fish in 1870 see Jónsson and Magnússon, *Hagskinna*, p. 622, Table 12.13.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*: 10 March 1870.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*: 16-17 March 1870.

Gautshamar, along with five issues of the journal *Skírnir*, on 21 March. Four days later, on 25 March, Sighvatur received some fish from Björn Bjarnason at Bjarnarnes. All these deliveries of food to Sighvatur were almost certainly direct or indirect reimbursement for his earlier scribal work. For Sighvatur's household they were vital input to the household economy during the roughest months of the year, late winter and early spring.

A more unusual form of bartering appears to be involved in Sighvatur's transcription of Jón Hjaltalín's *Gyðingasaga* for Einar Gíslason at Sandnes. After Sighvatur gave the transcript to Einar Gíslason at the end of October 1869 he received a small amount of goods: some corn, lard, fish heads and shark. Sighvatur also obtained food from Sandnes on two occasions in February 1870, but this may be related to other scribal tasks.⁶¹ In the section of his autobiography cited at the beginning of this chapter, Sighvatur says that Einar Gíslason had taken care of a child of his for a whole winter, suggesting it was some kind of payment or returned favour.⁶² The child did not stay with Einar until three years after the transcript, so even though Sighvatur links the two events together, taking care of Sighvatur's child should probably be seen more as a deed of friendship and goodwill, stemming from long-lasting literary relations, rather than direct payment for a specific task.⁶³ These relations included Sighvatur's dedication of two original *rímur* cycles to Einar Gíslason during the winter of 1872-1873, the winter that his child stayed at Sandnes. The first was *Rímur af Sneglu-Halla*, composed and written out for Einar in the fall of 1872; the second was *Rímur af Gunnlaugi Ormstungu og Skáld-Rafni*, also composed by Sighvatur in 1872 and 'presented by the author with all publishing rights to Einar Gíslason carpenter from Sandnes' at the end of the winter, in April 1873.⁶⁴

The importance of community alliances in nineteenth-century rural Iceland probably reached its peak in matters of child support and maintenance. Historian Gísli Ágúst Gunnlaugsson has determined from the 1870 census that 13.7% of the population under the age of 20 in the county of Árnessýsla in southern Iceland were foster children or paupers and that every fifth household included

⁶¹ *Ibid.*: 28 October 1869, 4 February and 17 February 1870.

⁶² Lbs 3623 8vo, [p. 9].

⁶³ Sighvatur and Ragnhildur had to put all their three children into foster care in 1872, after they lost a milking cow that had been available to the household. The oldest one, Sigríður, went to Sandnes.

⁶⁴ Lbs 3892 8vo: 'Rímur af Gunnlaugi Ormstungu og Skáld-Rafni orktar af Sighvati Grímssyni Borgfirðingi 1872 enn géfnar með fullum forlagsrétti þjóðsmiðnum Einari Gíslasyni á Sandnesi af höfundinum'. Sighvatur Grímsson's autograph of 'Rímur af Gunnlaugi Ormstungu og Skáld-Rafni', written in 1872.

a foster child.⁶⁵ A quick survey of the 1870 census suggests that the proportion of foster children in the district of Kaldrananeshreppur was considerably higher than that, or near 20%.⁶⁶ The conditions at Klúka in the summer of 1872 made alliances and goodwill exceptionally important for the family's well-being. They had, for the two prior years, had steady access to milk from a cow that had been brought to the household by a woman who was a lodger at Klúka. This access ended with the woman's departure in spring 1872. It was critical to secure the health and welfare of their three children, the youngest born in August that year.⁶⁷ Breastfeeding infants was at that time not common in Iceland and access to milk was thus among the greatest priorities for parents with young children.⁶⁸

Although Sighvatur Grímsson was listed as a farmer in the 1870 census he was first and foremost a professional scribe, practicing his self-developed profession among his fellow inhabitants in Kaldrananeshreppur. The farmstead itself was poor and hard to cultivate and Sighvatur's literary and historical aspirations were more of a priority for him than actual farming. The details of his exchanges with other households and individuals are shown in his diary entries from this period and concur with his autobiography in suggesting that most of the family income came from commissioned writings.

8.6 Conclusion

No sooner had Sighvatur Grímsson settled down in Kaldrananeshreppur than he assumed a manifold and wide-ranging role within the community's literary culture. Just as if he were a blacksmith, weaver, or any other craftsman, his services were sought after and employed by a large part of the community over the next four years. Aside from the highlights that have been discussed so far there were many smaller facets to Sighvatur's activities, such as book lending, reading aloud, and the literary work Sighvatur did for himself. The diary entries from this busy period show the scope of Sighvatur's literary interaction with the people in his community (and a few outside it). His activities, writings and

⁶⁵ Gísli Ágúst Gunnlaugsson, "Everyone's Been Good to Me, Especially the Dogs": Foster-children and Young Paupers in Nineteenth Century Southern Iceland', *Journal of Social History* 27/2 (Winter, 1993), p. 346.

⁶⁶ *Manntal á Íslandi 1870*. <http://www.skjalasafn.is/manntol>

⁶⁷ Lbs 2374 4to: 31 December 1872. See also Björn H. Jónsson, 'Saga Sighvats Grímssonar Borgfirðings', *Árbók Sögufélags Ísfirðinga* (1967), p. 150.

⁶⁸ On breastfeeding in early modern and modern Iceland see Ólöf Garðarsdóttir, *Saving the Child: Regional, Cultural and Socioeconomic Aspects of the Infant Mortality Decline in Iceland, 1820-1940* (Umeå, 2002).

transcripts ranged from single letters to multi-volume chronicles, lineage charts and occasional poetry, and the exchange of manuscripts and printed books between individuals, families and households, reading aloud and ballad chanting. The diary also unveils the connection between literary interaction and other kinds of exchange: of food, of other goods, of favours and of goodwill, signifying a high level of professionalization by Sighvatur.

‘Communities are brought into being through shared practices’, writes Jason Scott-Warren in his paper, *Reconstructing Manuscript Networks*, and he adds: ‘a manuscript community is a group of people who bond through the exchange of handwritten texts’.⁶⁹ This description of a manuscript community (or ‘scribal community’ in Harold Love’s terms) is a good fit for the extensive relations between scribes and their clients in nineteenth-century Iceland, between readers and their audiences, between lenders and borrowers of texts, between poets and compilers of verse, and between masters and their apprentices.⁷⁰ A scribal network can be seen as like running water: it is never the same from one moment to another. Even if we know little about literary practices in the district of Kaldrananes outside the period of Sighvatur Grímsson’s residence between 1869 and 1873, and in fact outside the circle of his own interactions, two general assumptions can be made. The first one is that even if Sighvatur was not a unique phenomenon in nineteenth-century Iceland, where popular literacy was on the rise and much of the demand was met by ‘scribal publication’ rather than by print, his contribution to the local literary community was extraordinarily powerful. He brought with him a substantial collection of manuscripts and printed books, the skill to read and transcribe them for others, and a devoted will to circulate these texts and to be introduced to new ones. The second point is that the community of Kaldrananeshreppur offered fertile soil for such activity. The demand for transcripts and original writings, poetry and book lending, both in manuscript and print is clearly evident in the daily notations of Sighvatur Grímsson’s diary. Over a period of four years Sighvatur served as a multifunctional ‘cultural institution’ within the district of Kaldrananeshreppur. As a craftsman,

⁶⁹ Jason Scott-Warren, ‘Reconstructing manuscript networks: The textual transactions of Sir Stephan Powle’, in Alexandra Shepard and Phil Withington, eds, *Communities in Early Modern England. Network, Place, Rhetoric* (Manchester and New York, 2000), p. 19

⁷⁰ Love proposes the term ‘scribal community’ for groups of like-minded individuals bounded by the exchange of manuscripts. Harold Love, *The Culture and Commerce of Texts: Scribal Publication in Seventeenth Century England* (Amherst, 1998), p. 180.

Sighvatur mastered his trade as a scribe and a lay scholar in a community with a vibrant literary network that embraced such skills.

This applies to all the communities in which Sighvatur was embedded in at different stages in his life, not least to his long stay in Mýrahreppur in Dýrafjörður (1873-1930), which has been consciously kept out of the scope of this thesis. In these last chapters I have emphasized recognising each manuscript community as existing within the boundaries of a formal community. It is however evident that prolific scribes and lay scholars like Gísli Konráðsson established a much wider network of scribal relations, and as Sighvatur Grímsson came of age as a lay historian his own circle expanded too, embracing not only local poets and lay scholars but also numerous formally educated scholars, both in Iceland and abroad. Although I have adopted here the terms ‘manuscript community’ and ‘scribal community’, all the communities I have described (Akranes, Flatey, and Kaldrananeshreppur) integrated printed material and oral or oral-literary media into scribal practices. The focus of this thesis has been the strong enduring position of scribal culture in the modern period but at the same time it emphasizes the coexistence of the three media in rural nineteenth-century Iceland. The case of Sighvatur Grímsson and the three communities demonstrates the richness and variety of nineteenth-century manuscript culture and the channels through which it worked: how one transcript grew from another, how they travelled from one individual or one household to another, and how they combined with printed material and oral culture in a vigorous textual network.

CONCLUSION

BEYOND THE GUTENBERG GALAXY

An alternative view to the history of books

The enduring existence of scribal culture in Iceland has been a well-recognized, but at the same time relatively little-studied phenomenon throughout the twentieth century. Half a century ago, Jón Helgason, professor of Icelandic at the University of Copenhagen, gave this account of the history of the book in Iceland in his popular textbook on Icelandic manuscripts; *Handritaspjall*:

Enter the sixteenth century and copying by hand became an obsolete book-making method in neighbouring countries. They were printed and could then be disseminated much more easily than before. But in this matter, as in many others, the Middle Ages continued to loom over Iceland. For sure, printing was introduced to the country, but it was monopolized by the Church ... But the stories that people wanted to read and hear read and the ballads they yearned to chant and hear chanted were not printed. People copied them in the medieval manner with infinite patience. The scale of production was greater than before, for paper had become common and it was cheaper than vellum, so more people could own books than before. This manner of text production continued through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and well into the nineteenth. Even after printed books became available, there still existed true medieval men who continued to reproduce books with their pen.¹

This portrayal, which is commonly assumed to reflect conditions in Iceland accurately, emphasizes two points. First it depicts Icelandic scribal practices of the early modern and modern era as archaic remnants of medieval practices, and secondly it suggests that Iceland was in this way exceptional in Europe and in the world.²

¹ Jón Helgason, *Handritaspjall* (Reykjavík, 1958), p. 8-9. 'Úr því að kemur fram á 16du öld verður það í nágrannalöndum Íslands úrelt starfsaðferð að skrifa upp bækur, þær voru prentaðar og dreifðust þannig meðal manna á miklu auðveldari hátt en fyrr. En í þessu efni, eins og ýmsum öðrum, héldu miðaldir áfram að grúfa yfir Íslandi. Að vísu kom prentverk inn í landið en kirkjuvaldið einokaði það ... En sögurnar sem fólkið vildi lesa og heyra lesnar, rímurnar sem það girnist að kveða og heyra kveðnar, voru ekki láttnar á prent. Menn skrifuðu þær upp á miðaldavísu af endalausri þolinmæði. Viðkoman var meiri en fyrr, því nú var pappír kominn til sögunnar, og hann var ódýrari en bókfellið; fleiri menn gátu eignast bækur en áður. Svona var skrifað og aftur skrifað á 17du öld og 18du og langt fram á hina 19du. Jafnvel eftir að sögur voru farnar að fást prentaðar voru uppi sannir miðaldamenn sem héldu áfram að æxla sér bækur með penna'.

² Helgason highlights the second point by noting that Icelanders were certainly more industrious in copying books by hand than most other nations, so much so that one must ask if they were not unique in the world in this practice. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

This state of affairs has been attributed to a string of cultural, social and economic factors in early modern and modern Iceland, which was a remote and isolated part of the Danish kingdom. The first is what is generally recognized as the exceptionally vibrant literary culture of medieval Iceland, especially between the eleventh and the fourteenth centuries. The literary and historical products of this period became the core of a textual heritage that was transmitted orally and scribally through the Middle Ages, the early modern period, and all the way up to the end of the nineteenth century. A second contributing factor, also recognized by Helgason, was the Lutheran Church's stronghold over the print industry throughout the early modern period. This meant that only a handful of secular books in Icelandic were in print up through the last quarter of the eighteenth century. The country's sole printing press, run variously Iceland's bishoprics in Hólar and Skálholt, was devoted to the objective of supplying households with religious literature.

The last factor generally acknowledged as a contributor to the persistence of scribal practices in Icelandic literary culture is the high level of literacy alleged to have existed throughout the early modern period, and the near universal literacy recorded among Icelanders from the late eighteenth century on. Combined with the embryonic state of print culture and the virtual lack of the cultural institutions usually associated with printed material during most of the nineteenth century, this spawned a popular culture of manuscript circulation, creation and consumption. At the same time as the learned and more affluent farmers gradually gained better access to printed books, the medium of handwritten books played an increasingly large part in the everyday life of the common people and their households.

All these explanations are in some sense true and are made use of to some degree in this study. What they have in common, however, is the presumption that this state of affairs was fundamentally unique among nations. They also rest on the fundamental assumption that the scribal practices of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are somehow ghosts of bygone times and represent a lack of what is supposed to be essential to the literary culture of that era: print culture and a commercial book market. In this thesis I argue against this view and maintain that the substantial sphere occupied by scribal culture in early modern and modern Iceland was neither exceptional in a European (or global) context, nor was it an anachronistic remnant of a medieval practice. It was rather

a substantial element of contemporary culture, and just as much so in the early sixteenth century as in the late nineteenth.

The main objectives of this study and its analysis of scribal practices in nineteenth-century Iceland have thus been twofold. First, I have aimed to place my study within a wave of scholarship that has turned its attention towards the usage of scribal media in the age of print. Recent approaches to the modern historiography of textual communications have, in the words of Harvey J. Graff, made ‘mockery of the simple dichotomies and ‘great divides’ that plague considerations of the subject, from literate versus illiterate, literate versus oral, print versus script, and so forth, ...’³ Secondly, I have sought to analyse the function of scribal culture on its own terms, leading to the conclusion that it was not so much a relic from pre-Gutenbergian times as a communication circuit custom-made for the specific needs of particular circumstances. The aim is to understand the manuscript medium for what it is, rather than as ‘not print’. The impact of this change of outlook has been clearly discerned by Fernando Bouza, who wrote:

That written, iconographic, and oral codes could be considered equally legitimate means of communication, used according to the necessities of circumstances rather than according to a preconceived hierarchy, allows us, furthermore, to reconstruct an arena of cultural dissemination in which the culture of the literate came into contact with that of the illiterate. We can thus overcome a traditional dichotomy in histories of the early modern period that completely closed off the realm of writing from that of oral and visual culture.⁴

This study follows Bouza’s call for the eradication of what he calls an anachronistic prejudice of contemporary historiography that has transformed the early modern period into the ‘initial stage of modernization, a prelude, anticipating and preparing the ground for our own contemporary age’.⁵ This thesis advocates studying the history of communications on its own terms, rather than endowing it with the preconception that the print revolution followed a normative and inevitable course.

The arena of cultural dissemination in nineteenth-century Iceland was, to use Bouza’s term, multi-dimensional in the same way as in Bouza’s depiction of early modern Spain. A close-range study of the everyday practices of textual culture reveals that the various instruments for the

³ Harvey J. Graff, ‘Introduction to the 1995 edition’, in *The Labyrinths of Literacy* (Pittsburgh, 1995), p. xix.

⁴ Fernando Bouza, *Communication, Knowledge, and Memory in Early Modern Spain*. Translated by Sonia López and Michael Agnew. Foreword by Roger Chartier (Philadelphia, 2004), p. 15.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

production, dissemination and consumption of texts (manuscript and print, oral pronouncements and reading aloud, and, to some extent, musical performance and illustrations) were employed in an intertwined way.

The overlapping domains of literary culture

In his highly influential book *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, published in 1962, Marshall McLuhan divided communications history into four phases: oral tribe culture, manuscript culture, print culture (or the Gutenberg galaxy) and the electronic age, which was then in its embryonic phase. He depicted them as consecutive, with an epoch beginning and ending with the advent of each new medium. Handwriting replaced oral culture, according to McLuhan's reasoning, the coming of printing did away with scribal culture and the digital revolution was about to abolish the Gutenberg galaxy. Influential studies by Elizabeth Eisenstein and Walter Ong cemented this simplistic model of the history of communications.⁶

This linear view of the consecutive phases of communications has to this day proved both influential and resilient. An example of this is the entry for *manuscript culture* found on the widely read web-based encyclopedia Wikipedia which opens: 'Manuscript culture refers to the development and use of the manuscript as a means of storing and disseminating information until the age of printing'.⁷ On the scholarly stage, this view has gradually been giving way in the last few years as a result of a range of individual studies and collective projects that have unearthed the endurance of scribal culture in the early modern and modern era. A good example of this new approach can be seen in *An Introduction to Book History* by David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery (2005). Its structure is fundamentally traditional, with chapters like 'From orality to literacy', and 'The coming of print'. At the same time the authors acknowledge 'how oral traditions were incorporated into early writing and manuscript culture' and the 'continuities between this manuscript culture and the coming of print'.⁸

⁶ Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto, 1962); Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge and New York, 1979); and Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York, 1982).

⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manuscript_culture.

⁸ David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery, *An Introduction to Book History* (London and New York, 2005), p. 17.

This overlap is, however, evidently seen as an insignificant one and only a minor modification to the grand narrative of the modernization process, in this case the advent of print and the modern book market. This thesis, however, proposes a much more radical revision of the relations between these modes of communication.

Rather than viewing the textual communications of nineteenth-century Iceland through the traditional analytic lens, which sees separate spheres – oral, scribal and print – I have demonstrated in this study how the three domains were intertwined and inseparable. At its most basic level, the literary culture of nineteenth-century Iceland can be represented by three overlapping circles (a Venn diagram) where each constitutes one of the main spheres of textual communication. The scheme can be applied to an individual, engaged in using each of the three media; to a specific text or genre concurrently transmitted via more than one medium; or to the literary community as a whole, concurrently employing different modes of communication. This offers a ‘communication scheme’ to explain the modes of textual dissemination in early modern and modern societies. It incorporates scribes, readers and listeners, authors, owners, and suppliers of manuscripts as well as the agents of print culture described in Robert Darnton’s concept of the communication circuit.

This is, as such, not a completely original proposition. Its earliest manifestation is to be found in D. F. McKenzie’s 1984 paper *The Sociology of a Text*:

Orality, literacy, and print can of course be so ordered as the primary, secondary and tertiary stages of a (perhaps misleading) progressive sequence in the history of civilization; and we may as bibliographers study them as distinct phases – each with its own ‘impact’ and forms of record – in the evaluation of western society. But we must also, I think, recognize more frankly the diverse nature of each of those stages and their persistive interaction.⁹

The field of bibliography must, he argues, expand by including oral and scribal modes of textual distribution and reception, and must study ‘not as much the history of the book as the sociology of texts’.¹⁰ McKenzie would later emphasize this argument in a paper published in 1990, ‘Speech –

⁹ D. F. McKenzie, ‘The Sociology of a Text: Orality, Literacy, and Print in Early New Zealand’, in David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery, eds, *The Book History Reader* (London and New York, 2006), p. 189.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

Manuscript – Print’, where he confronts the notion of ‘the impact of print’ and its implication that the advent of print had caused a major displacement of oral and manuscript communication.¹¹

Harvey J. Graff had already warned historians in the early 1980s that a teleological viewpoint or deterministic perspective in the history of communications, which was the epistemological underpinning for the influential works of McLuhan, Eisenstein and others, was ‘an unduly limiting and distorting one’.¹² Equally important to have in mind is Graff’s call to arms against the ‘tyranny of *conceptual dichotomies*’ that are often taken as *a priori* truths by the student of cultural history. ‘Few research areas suffer more from the obstruction to understanding that rigid dichotomizing represents than literacy studies’, Graff writes, and adds: ‘Consider the common phrases: literate *and* illiterate, written *and* oral, print *and* script and so on. None of these polar opposites usefully describes actual circumstances; all of them, in fact, preclude contextual understanding’.¹³

Historian Adam Fox has more recently addressed the relationship between the three modes of communication in his book *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500-1700*. He declares that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England ‘was a society in which the three media of speech, script, and print infused and interacted with each other in myriad ways’.¹⁴ This means that the different vehicles of transmission not only coexisted, but that texts could and did migrate promiscuously between them.

There was no necessary antithesis between oral and literate forms of communication and preservation; the one did not have to destroy or undermine the other. If anything, the written word tended to augment the spoken, reinventing it and making it anew, propagating its contents, heightening its exposure, and ensuring its continued vitality, albeit sometimes in different forms.¹⁵

This view is, in some sense, the latest phase in the trajectory of cultural history that extends from the first print-culture studies and the advent of the history of the book to the renewed attention given to

¹¹ D. F. McKenzie, ‘Speech – Manuscript – Print’, in Peter D. McDonald and Michael F. Suarez, S.J., ed, *Making Meaning: ‘Printers of the Mind’ and Other Essays* (Amherst and Boston, 2002), p. 238. The paper was first published in the journal *Library Chronicle of the University of Texas*, 20/1-2 (1990), pp. 86-109.

¹² Harvey J. Graff, ‘Reflections on the History of Literacy: Overview, Critique, and Proposals’, *Labyrinths of Literacy: Reflections on Literacy Past and Present* (Pittsburgh, 1995), p. 15. This paper was first published in the journal *Humanities in Society*, 4 (1981), pp. 303-333.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁴ Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500-1700* (Oxford, 2000), p. 5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

manuscript studies and finally to what can be termed a polymedia approach to the history of communications.¹⁶ The Spanish scholar Fernando Bouza has, in a similar vein, argued that in the case of early modern Spain there were several modes of ‘expressive, communicative, and recollective functions’: oral, visual/iconic, and written (comprising manuscript, print, and oral or private reading).¹⁷

The field of post-medieval scribal studies has, over the last three decades, been expanding in every dimension: spatially, from country to country; in time, from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries up to the nineteenth; by genres, from poetry to commonplace books, travel journals and recipes; and in the types of agents of scribal transmission, from the cultural elite to average readers and writers. With the spread of literacy during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a vast new constituency of readers and writers people opened up – the urban middle class and workers, farmers and rural workers, and not least of all women. This expanding literate population not only read what was handed down to them from above and in the form and context it was delivered, but also embarked on more creative tasks like copying, collecting, commonplacing and composing texts. Studies of phenomena such as commonplace books and marginalia have linked together the realms of manuscript and print and combined the two aspects of literacy (reading and writing) in exceptionally intriguing ways, showing how writing became a part of the process of reading.

The representativeness of a single example

At the core of this study is a detailed examination into the function and operation of scribal media in late nineteenth-century Iceland, using the case history of peasant scribe Sighvatur Grímsson as an example. This study of the life and literary work of this individual within three scribal communities between 1840 and 1873 has strengthened the view that manuscript culture played a substantial and often leading role in the literary and cultural practices of rural communities in nineteenth-century Iceland. Manuscript culture involved, in one way or another, a large number of participants: not only the scribes who created individual manuscripts and their commissioners and owners, but also the

¹⁶ Arthur F. Marotti, ‘The Interaction of Script, Print, and Voice in Early Modern England’ [Review essay], *CLIO* 33/4 (June, 2004), p. 427.

¹⁷ Bouza, *Communication*, p. 11.

copyists who transcribed from them, the readers who borrowed them, and last but not least those who heard stories read and ballads chanted from handwritten books.

Numerous examples from the case of Sighvatur Grímsson support the claims of McKenzie, Fox, Bouza and other advocates of what I call the polymedia approach to the history of communications. In broad and general terms it is clear from his diaries that the literary culture of the period was mediated almost even-handedly via both handwritten and printed books, the material in these books was in some cases drawn directly from oral transmission, and it was regularly transmitted orally through communal reading sessions. On a more detailed level it becomes apparent that there was a vivid cross-fertilization between the different media. Texts were obviously transferred from oral to scribal media, and from manuscript to print, but they were also transcribed from printed books into handwritten miscellanies, and some cases even suggest that texts were transferred from the scribal sphere into the oral and then back into the scribal realm.

To build boundaries between the realms of manuscript, print, and in some cases oral transmission is to misread the literary culture of nineteenth-century Iceland. The same goes for any attempts to make a clear-cut distinction between literate and illiterate Icelanders. There were many different levels of literacy in nineteenth-century Iceland, varying not only in terms of skill level but also in terms of the letterforms and media commanded. It was common, for example, for people to be able to read but not write, especially in the first half of the nineteenth century and among women throughout the century. Others were able to read handwriting but not print or vice versa, or to read a certain type of print or handwriting but not other types. It is also important to acknowledge that the consumption of reading material, and even its production, was not restricted to those who were (fully) literate. Texts were read aloud, enabling those that could not read (due to lack of skills or simply bad eyesight) to participate in literary culture. Illiterate people (especially women) ‘wrote’ letters by dictating to someone who was able to write or a skilled penman.

What the case of Sighvatur Grímsson offers is an extraordinary window on ‘manuscript communities’ or ‘manuscript networks’ in nineteenth-century rural society, made possible by sources – his diaries and his manuscript collection – that together hold vast information on the three pillars of manuscript culture: the scribe’s sources, the scribal work itself, and its further transmission. This

emerging view is by no means informed only by his case, however, or by what we know of Icelandic society of the late nineteenth century; rather, it draws support from many of the recent studies of post-medieval scribal culture that have come out over the last two decades. The life of Sighvatur Grímsson is, to some extent, represented here as an ‘extreme case’ rather than a ‘paradigmatic case’. It has, nevertheless, wider import for Icelandic cultural history and for the historiography of communications in general. On one level, despite the indisputable fact that Sighvatur Grímsson was in his fixation with the written word far from average at the time, the practice of copying texts by hand was clearly widespread among his contemporaries and, importantly, among people of just his status: small landowners, poor tenant farmers, and farm labourers. The same goes for his role in the circulation of printed books and his numerous minor scribal commissions, both personal and official. Secondly it should be clear that the use of Sighvatur Grímsson as an example does not imply that each household, every tenant farmer and every other farmhand was occupied in reading and writing manuscripts as part of a universal popular literary culture. The case of Sighvatur Grímsson is, however, representative of the opportunities that existed within the socio-cultural setting and at least one man’s reaction to its structure and function. Sighvatur Grímsson became a specialist or an artisan in the literary world, a cultural institution in his own right. His endeavours had a palpable impact on the people surrounding him: the local farmers and fishermen and other members of the households in his vicinity. Due to the common practice of communal reading and an active system of private book-lending, each book, handwritten or printed, would connect with numerous people and also with other books via transcripts and the assemblage of miscellanies. His clientele, so to speak, included young and old, men and women, rich and poor. The people he interacted with in the commune were emblematic of Icelandic society at the time, from rural church ministers to affluent farmers to poor peasants to farm labourers. These opportunities and responses to them were by no means Sighvatur’s alone. The surviving products of nineteenth-century manuscript culture as well as autobiographical and ethnographic writings give good evidence that scribal activity, from letter-writing to saga transcripts, was widespread among the rural population of nineteenth-century Iceland and the consumption of scribal creations through reading and listening by average people was even more widespread.

Despite the individualistic approach of this study, a crucial aspect of my argument is the point that Sighvatur Grímsson was not an isolated individual but a component of a larger socio-cultural unit. Through three spatially and temporally restricted enquiries, this study reveals communities where the active use of scribal media to produce, distribute and acquire reading material was an important element of people's cultural endeavours on a day-to-day basis. It is also evident that this practice was not detached from other textual media, print and oral, but integrated with them. By studying Sighvatur Grímsson's literary endeavours in the different scribal communities that he lived in, it becomes possible to shed light on the networking that make such a diffuse culture possible. Sighvatur Grímsson's diaries, which constitute the main primary source for this study, provide not only information on his own immense engagement with handwritten and printed text but on the exchange of reading material between numerous other individuals in his surroundings. These notations give exceptionally good information about the possession and circulation of reading material within the literary communities that Sighvatur Grímsson took part in, and weigh strongly against any notions that scribal circulation involved a simple and uniform group of texts drawn from a limited selection of printed material. It also bears out Stephen Colclough's warning about the narrow scope of studying catalogues from lending libraries:

The evidence of ownership recovered from library catalogues and probate inventories suggest that we also need to take in account books published outside Britain (especially those in languages other than English), volumes constructed or reproduced in manuscript, and texts from earlier periods that were either inherited or bought second hand.¹⁸

Whether we are studying the history of literacy (reading and/or writing), readership, or reading experience in early modern and modern Iceland, it is crucial to include both printed and written material. Writing by hand had become such a widespread and important feature of Icelandic society by the mid-nineteenth century that any inquiry into the era's culture which ignored it would be seriously flawed. Everything from personal correspondence and notations to public records and documentation was predominantly handwritten. So too were various records, carried out by heads of households, merchants, clerics, and officials. News circulated in handwritten form – in letters, flyers, and

¹⁸ Stephen Colclough, *Reading Experience, 1700-1840: An Annotated Register of Sources for the History of Reading in the British Isles* (Reading, 2000), p. iii.

handwritten newspapers – and literature, historical accounts and other texts were produced and reproduced in manuscript as well as in print. The production, circulation and consumption of these texts formed a decentralized and tangled web where texts trickled between formats: from oral to manuscript, from print to manuscript and so on. The enduring coexistence between the different media and their complicated interrelations are indisputably a fundamental characteristic of early modern and modern literary culture in Iceland, whether we look at the production, the dissemination, or the consumption of texts.

Scribal culture, rhizome, and hypertext

The concept of the “rhizome” has been employed in various fields of humanities and social sciences over the last few years – particularly within cultural studies, critical theory, and studies of digital media – to describe a view that is an alternative to the logical and linear thinking of modernity.¹⁹ Among the first to do so was the writer and scholar of semiotics, Umberto Eco, who adopted the concept shortly after it was launched, both in his bestselling novel *The Name of the Rose* and in his more scholarly writing.²⁰ In the discussion of encyclopedias in his book *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, Eco presents the labyrinth as a metaphor for understanding culture.²¹ In a chapter titled *The encyclopedia as labyrinth*, Eco mentions three types of labyrinths: the classical (linear) labyrinth of Crete, which leads to only one solution at its centre; the Manneristic maze with several choices, some of which lead to dead ends; and a third type, preferred by Eco, the net, a labyrinth in which you

¹⁹ The concept, addressed in the introduction to this study, was first coined by two French scholars in 1970s. See: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1987). For the recent employment of the concept, see for example Ramona Fernandez, *Imagining Literacy: Rhizomes of Knowledge in American Culture and Literature* (Austin, 2001); Simon O'Sullivan, ‘Cultural Studies as Rhizome – Rhizomes in Cultural Studies’, in Stefan Herbrechter, ed, *Critical Studies, Cultural Studies: Interdisciplinarity and Translation* (Amsterdam and New York, 2002), pp. 81-93; Charlie Gere, *Digital Culture* (London, 2002); David Greetham, ‘The Function of [Textual] Criticism at the Present Time’, in Raimonda Modiano, Leroy F. Searle, and Peter L. Shillingsburg, eds, *Text, Hypertext: Emerging Practices in Textual Studies* (Seattle, 2004); and George P. Landow, *Hypertext 3.0: Critical Theory and New Media in an Era of Globalization* (Baltimore, 2006), esp. pp. 58-61.

²⁰ The novel was published in Italian in 1980 under the title *Il nome della rosa*, but appeared in an English translation in 1983 as *The Name of the Rose*. In his ‘Postscript’ to the novel Eco writes: ‘The rhizome is so constructed that every path can be connected with every other one. It has no centre, no periphery, no exit, because it is potentially infinite’. Umberto Eco, ‘Postscript to the Name of the Rose’, in *The Name of the Rose* (New York, 1983), pp. 57.

²¹ Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington, 1984).

cannot make mistakes.²² This kind of network had, according to Eco, already been depicted in the image of the rhizome suggested by Deleuze and Guattari, which he describes as having the following characteristics:

(a) Every point of the rhizome can and must be connected with every other point. (b) There are no points or positions in a rhizome; there are only lines (this feature is doubtful: intersecting lines make points). (c) A rhizome can be broken off at any point and reconnected following one of its own lines. (d) The rhizome is antigenealogical. (e) The rhizome has its own outside with which it makes another rhizome; therefore, a rhizomatic whole has neither outside nor inside. (f) A rhizome is not a calque but an open chart which can be connected with something else in all of its dimensions; it is dismountable, reversible, and susceptible to continual modification. (g) A network of trees which open in every direction can create a rhizome (which seems to us equivalent to saying that a network of partial trees can be cut out artificially in every rhizome). (h) No one can provide a global description of the whole rhizome; not only because the rhizome is multidimensionally complicated, but also because its structure changes through the time; moreover, in a structure in which every node can be connected with every other node, there is also a possibility of contradictory inferences: ... (i) A structure that cannot be described *globally* can only be described as a potential sum of *local* descriptions. (j) In a structure without outside the describers can look at it only by the inside, ... at every node of it, no one can have the global vision of all its possibilities but only the local vision of the closest ones: every local description of the net is a *hypothesis*, subject to falsification, about its further course; in a rhizome blindness is the only way of seeing (locally), and thinking means to *grope one's way*.²³

The concept of the rhizome, as presented by Deleuze and Guattari, has been associated with other influential network theories within the humanities over the last decades. The most obvious is the rise of the concept of hypertext (or hypermedia), most commonly associated with the rise of contemporary digital media. The term was coined by American sociologist and philosopher Ted Nelson in 1965, who described a new form of electronic publication, but it was soon to be adopted by French post-structuralists like Roland Barthes who in his book *S/Z* described his ideal of 'texts composed of blocks of words (or images) linked electronically by multiple paths, chains or trails in an open-ended, perpetually unfinished textuality described by the terms *link*, *node*, *network*, *web*, and *path*'.²⁴ Similarly, Michel Foucault argued that books and texts are 'caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network'.²⁵ The view of intertextual

²² *Ibid.*, p. 81. See also Ramona Fernandez, *Imagining Literacy: Rhizomes of Knowledge in American Culture and Literature* (Austin, 2001), p. 59.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

²⁴ Landow, *Hypertext 3.0*, p. 2. See also Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris, 1970).

²⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London, 1972), p. 23. See also Landow, *Hypertext 3.0*, p. 2.

links became a consensus of literary criticism and cultural theory under the banner of post-structuralism and postmodernism.

Both the concepts of hypertext and the rhizome have been associated with the ascendant digital media of the last decades.²⁶ In the light of these studies scholars of communications have pointed out the resemblance between the processes of scribal and digital media. Among them is a group of Danish scholars who have proposed that the dominance of printed text has been merely a historical phase, dubbed the ‘Gutenberg Parenthesis’, that is now coming to an end.²⁷ On both sides of the parenthesis are systems of textuality fundamentally different from that of the print era with its sense of authorship and the originality of texts. This group of scholars led by literary critic Lars Ole Sauerberg (‘The Gutenberg Parenthesis Research Forum’) has issued a statement that has evolved over several years where they state:

Today, IT-conditioned textuality invites comparison with the textuality not only of the book but also of the manuscript. Recognising a text not as the final product in an edition of a mass-produced printed book, but as a never-stopping ongoing process – blog, wiki, etc. – owing its existence not to a specially privileged author but to the contributions of very many proximate but unseen hands, will have the greatest consequence for cognition generally. From the finished product of the book we are on the way to the never-finished, multi-originated, and multi-media shifting work in eternal progress.²⁸

One of the most innovative and direct comparisons between contemporary digital culture and early modern scribal culture is to be found in a recent paper by literary scholar Tatjana Chorney called ‘Interactive Reading, Early Modern Texts and Hypertext: A Lesson from the Past’.²⁹ Although the term hypertext is most commonly associated with the advent of digital media, Chorney chooses to approach the concept through the active stance of the reader in constructing the text.

²⁶ See for example: Landow, *Hypertext 3.0*, pp. 58-61.

²⁷ The term ‘Gutenberg Parenthesis’ was first coined by literary critic Lars Ole Sauerberg and later taken up by his colleague Tom Pettitt. See Tom Pettitt, ‘Before the Gutenberg Parenthesis: Elizabethan-American Compatibilities’, http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/mit5/papers/pettitt_plenary_gutenberg.pdf (accessed 8.4.2008).

²⁸ [Lars Ole Sauerberg et. al], ‘Position paper by The Gutenberg Parenthesis Research Forum, Institute for Literature, Media and Cultural Studies, University of Southern Denmark’, article 3, http://www.sdu.dk/Om_SDU/Institutter_centre/Ilkm_litteratur_kultur_og_medier/Forskning/Forskningsprojekt/Gutenberg_projekt/PositionPaper.aspx (accessed 8.4.2008). The difficulty with this approach, however, is that it rests heavily upon the traditional view of consecutive epochs dominated and even defined by one medium.

²⁹ Tatjana Chorney, ‘Interactive Reading, Early Modern Texts and Hypertext: A Lesson from the Past’, <http://www.academiccommons.org/commons/essay/early-modern-texts-and-hypertext> (accessed 8.4. 2008).

Although this shift in the position the reader in many ways arises from the new technology, the manner of active reading in which the reader is empowered to construct meaning and to change the 'original' text is at least as old as the early modern period. The Renaissance reader was accustomed to applying 'alien' texts to new purposes in a method of appropriative reading that was a consequence of the Renaissance technique of collecting commonplaces.³⁰

Chorney's field of study is principally English Renaissance poetry and in particular the works of John Donne. Her studies have revealed how frequently Donne's texts were interacted with in some way in the process of copying and compiling. Poems appear without any reference to an author, without a title, or with a new title. Poems were inserted in fragments that sometimes blend seamlessly into other texts, and, in some cases, were formally and conceptually reworked.³¹ Reading habits during the English Renaissance and in the contemporary hypertext environment of the Internet are, in Chorney's opinion, similar in four broad ways: '1. non-linearity; 2. a protean sense of text and its functions; 3. affinity with oral models of communication, and 4. a changing concept of authorship'.³² Readers in both cultural states have a threefold role: as a reader, copyist, and author. They are, thus, much more (inter)active than those who depend solely on fixed print media.

The network metaphor at the centre of today's digital media in words like *World Wide Web* and *Internet* is in many ways helpful in analyzing the function of scribal culture and its correlations with other media. The acknowledgement of textual media beyond the Gutenberg galaxy that these new media give allows us to deconstruct the central position of print culture that has dominated our views of the early modern and modern history of communications.³³ That the ideas of the rhizome and hypertext can be useful models of a cultural state of affairs is well apparent in the case of Sighvatur Grímsson. His scribal activity is set haphazardly within a 'cosmos' of three dimensions – temporal, spatial and textual – that make up the rhizome of scribal culture. Each act of manuscript transmission has links to an infinite number of others in a web of textual circulation; some are obvious, others traceable, but most of them are and will remain invisible. Sighvatur's singular case reveals an infinite

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ On digital media and cultural theory see for example: Marcel O'Gorman, *E-crit: Digital Media, Critical Theory and the Humanities* (Toronto, 2006).

range of connections between nodes, connections that constitute a network with endless possibilities of connecting with other networks. This rhizome has no beginning or end, no centre or peripheries, and no direction or position. Sighvatur's central position in this study is merely a matter of choice of viewpoint, a 'local description' in Umberto Eco's words, since 'no one can provide a global description of the whole rhizome'.³⁴

³⁴ Eco, *Semiotics*, p. 82.

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