Finnur Jónsson, editor of everything

Finnur Jónsson (1858-1934), the most prominent Icelandic philologist of his day, was born in Akureyri, a small town in the north of Iceland, but raised in Reykjavík, the capital, then a town of only some 2000 inhabitants. Finnur was the second child and oldest son of Jón Jónsson Borgfirðingur (1826-1912), a man of humble means but a keen bibliophile.1 Jón, the illegitimate son of a serving girl, was entirely self-educated. He worked at various jobs, serving as an apprentice with the printer Einar Pórðarson in Reykjavík, also travelling round Iceland and selling books for him, and later learning bookbinding with Erlendur Ólafsson in Kaupangur, near Akureyri. He then worked as a bookbinder and book-seller in Akureyri, also publishing a number of books himself. Among these were several sets of rimur2 by Sigurður Breiðfjörð (1798-1846), the foremost rimur-poet of the 19th century. He later wrote a 60-page essay on Breiðfjörð, Stutt æfiminning Sigurðar Breiðar-jardar skálds [A short biography of the poet Sigurður Breiðfjörð], printed in Reykjavík in 1879. In 1865 the family moved south to Reykjavík, where Jón took up the position of police constable (lögregluþjónn), which he held until his retirement in 1888.

Jón Borgfirðingur lived for books, and he amassed a significant collection of books and manuscripts. He also wrote and published at his own expense a Söguågrip um prentsmiðjur og prentara á Íslandi [A short history of presses and printers in Iceland], the first such study of printing in Iceland.3 The book did not sell well, and was largely ignored in Iceland.4 The only review of it to appear was by Theodor Möbius in Germany. It did however attract the attention of Thomas Lidderdale, librarian at the British Museum,5 who contacted Jón in 1869 and asked him to provide him with bibliographical information on all the books and pamphlets printed in Reykjavík and Akureyri. This he did, compiling in his spare time over the following winter a list of some 600 titles. Lidderdale was impressed

1 Traditionally, Icelanders do not have family names, but it the latter part of the 19th century there was a policy, later reversed, of encouraging people to adopt them. Jón initially took the name Borgfjörð, later changing it to Borgfirðingur (meaning simply ‘someone from Borgarfjörður’); Jón’s first-born child, Finnur’s older sister Guðrún (b. 1856), retained the form Borgfjörð; her memoirs, Minningar, were published in 1947. Finnur explains his reasons for not using the family name in his autobiography (Ævisgaga Finns Jónssonar, 30).
2 Rímur (lit. ‘rhymes’) are long metrical romances in complex metres, the earliest examples of which are from the late middle ages. Disparaged by the church and intellectual élite, they remained popular among ordinary people until the beginning of the 20th century.
3 Finnur’s younger brother Klemens (b. 1862) published a book on the same subject, Fjögur hundruð ára saga prentlistarinnar á Íslandi, in 1930.
4 Jón J. Áðils, “Jón Borgfirðingur”, 10; According to Finnur, however, the book “seldist upp á fremur skömmum tíma” (Ævisaga Finns Jónssonar, 31).
5 According to Guðrún Borgfjörð (Minnigar, 43) it was Jón Sigurðsson, the Icelandic scholar and statesman, who brought the book to Lidderdale’s attention. Jón Borgfirðingur was a lifelong supporter of Jón Sigurðsson’s independence movement, and the two men knew each other well.
with the work, and asked Jón for a similar list of books printed at the presses in Hrappsey, Beitistaðir and Leirárgarðar. Jón was also contacted by other foreign scholars in search of information on Icelandic books. As Jón J. Aðils noted in his obituary of Jón: “Pað mun víst mega telja einsdaemi í bókmentasögu heimsins, að erlendir fræðimenn snuí sér til fátæks almúgamanns um úrlausn á bókfræðismálefnum, en þar til er því að svara, að Jón Borgfirðingur var þá oðfað allra manna bezt að sér hér á landi í þeirri grein” (It must certainly be unique in the history of world literature that foreign scholars turn to a poor common man for help with bibliographical questions, but here it must be said that Jón Borgfirðingur was without doubt the foremost authority in Iceland in this area).6

In his autobiography, published posthumously in 1936, Finnur, while acknowledging his father’s achievements – his Söguágríp um prentsmiðjur is described as “goð kver og fróðlegt á sínum tíma” (a good little book and informative for its time) and the Stutt æfiminning Sigurðar Breiðfjarðar skálds as “það besta, sem enn hefur verið skrifað um Sigurð” (the best that has yet been written about Sigurður)7 – is on the whole rather cool toward him. He was, he says, “mjög fáskiftinn á heimilinu og gaf sig lítt að okkur börnunum, nema helst Klemens, sem honum þótti víst vænst um. Hann las eða skrifaði einatt, þegar hann var heima, þ.e. í frístundum sínum” (very distant, and paid little attention to us children, apart perhaps from Klemens, of whom he was clearly fondest. He read or wrote constantly when he was at home, that is, in his spare time).8 Finnur is, on the other hand, unreserved in his praise for his mother, Anna Guðrún Eiríksdóttir (1828-1881), calling her a “hetja” (hero).9 “Móður mín var alt í einu,” he says: “góð kona, góð eiginkona, góð húsmóðir” (My mother was evertything at once, a good woman, a good wife, a good housewife). And then he adds: “Alt hið besta, sem í mjer er, tel jeg arf frá henni” (All the best that is in me, I believe I have got from her).10

Acutely aware of his own lack of formal education, Jón Borgfirðingur saw to it that his four sons attended the Latin School in Reykjavík – this was, indeed, the principal reason behind the family’s move south. Finnur, the eldest son, completed his studies there in 1878, matriculating later that same year at the University of Copenhagen. Initially his subject was classical philology, and he studied under J. N. Madvig (1804-1886), J. L. Ussing (1820-1905) and M. Cl. Gertz (1844-1929). But under the influence of Prof. Konráð Gíslason (1808-1891), a fellow Icelander, he developed an interest in Old Norse, in particular skaldic poetry. He finished the first part of his degree in just four years, rather than the usual seven, as that was the extent of the funding available to him, obtaining the degree of candidatus philologiae in 1883, and successfully defended his doctoral dissertation,
Kritiske studier over en del af de ældste norske og islandske skjaldekvad [Critical studies of some of the earliest Norwegian and Icelandic skaldic poetry], the following year.11

When Konráð Gíslason retired as Professor of Nordic Languages (Professor i nordiske sprog) in 1886, his chair was taken over by Ludvig Wimmer (1839-1920), who had been docent in the same subject since 1876. The following year, 1887, Wimmer’s position was in turn filled by Finnur Jónsson. Initially, the fact that Finnur was an Icelander didn't appear to make any difference to his academic career, and in 1896 the faculty recommended that he be promoted to Professor extraordinarius,12 which he was two years later. When Wimmer retired in 1910 it would have been natural for Finnur to succeed him as Professor of Nordic Languages, something Wimmer himself supported, but by then the political situation had changed. Although the study of Old Norse had been at the heart of nordisk filologi since its inception as a subject at the university in 1845 – with the appointment of N. M. Petersen (1791-1862) as the first Professor of Nordic Languages – it had come increasingly to be felt that the study of (modern) Danish should be the subject’s principal focus, in keeping with greater emphasis on Danish language teaching in secondary schools following the school reform in 1903. It was argued, therefore, that the incumbent of a professorship in Nordic languages – effectively a professorship in Danish – should be a Dane and native-speaker of Danish (“en Dansk Mand, der beherskede det danske Sprog”).13 While recognising that Finnur was academically the best qualified candidate for the job, the Faculty nevertheless recommended that the chair go to Verner Dahlerup (1859-1938). The ministry of culture agreed, but the minister himself, Jacob Appel, who supported Finnur, took no action, and in the end both men were made ‘ordinary’ professors, Verner Dahlerup, as Professor of Nordic Languages, from the 1st of March, Finnur Jónsson, as Professor of Nordic Philology (Professor i nordisk filologi), from the 1st of April 1911.14 Finnur remained in the position until 1928, when, having reached the age of 70, he retired.

Finnur Jónsson’s principal contribution to Old Norse philology was in the area of scholarly editing, and he produced over a career spanning some five decades editions, often more than one, of an extraordinarily large number of works. There were, for example, five editions of the Poetic Edda (1888-1890, 1891, 1896, 1905 and 1932), four of the Younger or Prose Edda, attributed to Snorri Sturluson (1900, 1907, 1924 and 1931), three of

11 Finnur mentions his determination to finish his studies as quickly as possible in his autobiography: Ævisaga Finns Jónssonar, 41; the speed with which he completed his studies is also mentioned by, among others, Jón Helgson, “Mindeord”, 138-139, Halldór Halldórsson, “Aldarminning”, 10-11, and Magnús Fjalldal, “Greatness and limitations”, 329-330.
12 Those who had the rank of professor but were not incumbents of a specific chair, and hence not members of the university’s Konsistorium, were known as professores extraordinarii.
13 Cited in Larsen, Professoratet, 196.
14 Larsen, Professoratet, 193-201.
Landnámabók [The Book of Settlements] in its various recensions (1900, 1921, 1925) and two of Íslendingabók [The Book of the Icelanders] (1887 and 1930); there were critical editions of the Kings’ saga compilations Heimskringla (1893-1901), also attributed to Snorri, Fagrskinna (1902-1903), Eirspenill (1916) and Morkinskinna (1932), as well as editions of some twenty of the Icelandic family sagas (Íslendingasögur), among them three editions of Egils saga Skallagrímssonar (1886-1888, 1894 and 1924).

In editorial matters Finnur took a number of different approaches, depending chiefly on the nature of the material’s transmission, i.e. how it had come down to us, and the audience for which the edition was intended. Few Old Norse-Icelandic works have survived unscathed in good, medieval manuscripts, but for those that have, or those that are preserved in what appear to be reliable post-medieval copies of now lost medieval manuscripts, Finnur would tend to base his editions on them alone – even where other manuscripts exist – and reproduce the text diplomatically, i.e. retaining features of the original such as orthography, punctuation, capitalisation and so on.

As an example of this type, we can take the edition Finnur produced of the Codex Regius of the Poetic Edda with Ludvig Wimmer, Håndskriftet Nr. 2365 4to gl. kgl. Samling på det store kgl. bibliothek i København (Codex regius af den ældre Edda) i fototypisk og diplomatisk gengivelse, published in 1891. This contains, as the title indicates, a facsimile reproduction of the original 13th-century manuscript – the only extant source for most of the poems it contains – with a full diplomatic transcription on the facing page, arranged so that the recto pages of the facsimile are on the right, and the verso pages on the left.

Where a work is preserved in multiple witnesses, all at some remove from the purported original and none on the face if it better than any other, Finnur would generally pick what he perceived to be the best text and supply variants from other witnesses ‘of importance’ (af betydning) in a variant apparatus. In such cases he would tend to normalise the text, partially or fully, to one or another standard,15 which he also did in editions intended for the general public.

According to Finnur, the founding of the Samfund til Udgivelse af gammel nordisk Litteratur (STUAGNL) [Society for the publication of Old Norse texts] in 1879, under whose auspices he published 15 text editions, introduced a new period in Old Norse-Icelandic editorial history, in that texts were now edited in a modern critical way (“på en moderne kritisk made”), i.e. according the Lachmannian or stemmatic method,16 where the surviving witnesses were carefully examined and valued, and the original text was as far as possible reconstituted (“håndskrifterne nøje undersøges og værdsættes, og den

---

15 On types and degrees of normalisation see my chapter in Dansk editionshistorie (forthcoming).
16 The stemmatic or genealogical method is associated with the German scholar Karl Lachmann (1793-1851); the standard introduction to the method is Paul Maas, Textual Criticism; Paolo Trovato’s recent book, Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lachmann’s Method, can also be recommended. For criticism of the method, see my article “The Words on the Page”.

4
oprindelige tekst søges så vidt muligt restitueret"). The stemmatic method had been introduced into Danish textual scholarship largely through Nicolai Madvig, who had been instrumental in developing it; the first stemmata to appear in an edition of an Old Norse text are found in Guðbrandur Vigfússon’s introduction to his and Jón Sigurðsson’s Biskupa sögor from 1856-1858, while the first ‘proper’ use of the stemmatic method is usually regarded as being the 1883 STUAGNL edition of Fljótsdæla saga by Finnur’s colleague Kristian Kålund, who that same year had been appointed Librarian of the Arnamagnæan Manuscript Collection. Although Finnur’s editorial practice had much in common with the stemmatic method he did not adhere to it consistently. Several of the stemmata in his editions appear to have been made afterwards, on the basis of the edited text, rather than the other way round, and he rarely went as far as reconstructing the archetype – the hypothetical ancestor of the surviving witnesses – being extremely reluctant, other than in cases of obvious error, to introduce readings from different witnesses, even where stemmatological investigation indicated that these readings were better, i.e. more original, than those in his base text. And he was completely opposed to emendation through conjecture as a way getting back to the original. In his autobiography he explains this:

Finnur’s assessment of his predecessor’s editorial method is well justified, as Konráð famously incorporated those variants into his text that he thought sounded best, with no concern for how the texts from which they were taken were related to each other or to his

17 Finnur Jónsson, Udsigt over den norsk-islandske filologis historie, 44.
18 See my chapter in Dansk editionshistorie (forthcoming).
19 Finnur Jónsson, Ævisaga Finns Jónssonar, 171.
base text.20 But even when he had done an analysis of the surviving witnesses – which Finnur generally did, albeit rarely as conscientiously as he should have – he still held back from mixing readings. As he explains in the introduction to his edition of Hrólfs saga kraka from 1904:

> Teksten er […] aftrykt efter A [sc. AM 9 fol.], dog således, at den på sine steder er rettet efter de andre håndskrifter, hvor dette fandtes at være nødvendigt. Herom giver noterne fuldstændige oplysninger. Det er meget muligt, at forskellige fra de andre hdskrr. anførte læsemåder er bedre og oprindeligere end i A, men jeg har dog anset det for rigtigst intet at ændre, da man her meget let kunde begå vilkårligheder og enhver konsekvens er umulig. (The text is taken from A [AM 9 fol.] though in such a way that various emendations have been made according to [readings in] the other manuscripts where this was felt to be necessary. Full information on this is provided in the notes. It is quite possible that some of the readings from the other manuscripts given [in the apparatus] are better and more original than in A, but I have nevertheless thought it most correct not to emend, as one could here very easily be guilty of arbitrariness, and any semblance of consistency is impossible.)21

In general, Finnur believed implicitly that in their original form, the works he was editing had been logical and well formed, and that their current corrupt state was the result of clumsy copyists and ignorant or malevolent redactors.22 As was said, however, he did not see it as his job to reconstruct that perfect but now lost original on the basis of the corrupt surviving witnesses. An exception to this, and a rather extreme one, was his treatment of the text in his editions of the Poetic Edda, starting with the first one, Eddalieder. 

> Altnordische gedichte mythologischen und heroischen Inhalts, published by Niemeyer in Halle in 1888-1890.

> Although never a great one for theory, Finnur had while still a student at university embraced the system for early Germanic poetic metres devised by the German Junggrammatiker Eduard Sievers (1850-1932). Sievers argued that each line of verse essentially consisted of two lifts and two drops (lifts occurring in ‘heavy’, i.e. stressed, syllables); the various possible arrangements of these lifts and drops within the line resulted in five basic types.23 Since a significant number of lines of Eddic verse, as preserved, failed to conform to these rules, they needed either to be amended – through the removal of ‘unnecessary’ words, elision of vowels etc. – or dismissed as inauthentic. Finnur’s strict adherence to Sievers’s scheme resulted in him making an excessively large

---

20 For a defence of Konráð Gíslason’s Njál saga edition see Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir’s recent article “Konráð Gíslason og Njálutgáfan mikla”.
22 Ármann Jakobsson, “Den kluntede afskriver”.
23 Eduard Sievers, Proben einer metrischen Herstellung der Eddalieder; Allgermanische Metrik.
number – by any standard – of editorial interventions, and declaring a large number of stanzas to be later interpolations. Among the hardest hit was the poem *Grímnismál*, of whose 54 preserved stanzas Finnur pronounced 28 to be spurious; he includes them in the edition, but in brackets. In his 1905 edition of the Edda, *Sæmundar-Edda. Eddukvæði*, published in Reykjavik as part of the series of cheap, popular editions of Old Norse-Icelandic texts issued by bookseller Sigurður Kristjánsson (1854-1952), the extensive emendations of the previous editions remained in place, and the stanzas deemed inauthentic were distinguished from authentic ones by being printed in a smaller font. This was the first Icelandic-language edition of the Edda, intended for a popular audience; as Jónas Kristjánsson comments in his book *Eddas and Sagas*, “It was regrettable that the eddic poems first became generally known to twentieth-century Icelanders in this doctored form”.

Finnur remained a firm believer in Sievers’s metrical system long after everyone else had distanced themselves from it to a greater or lesser extent. In the introduction to his final edition of the Poetic Edda, *De gamle Eddadigte*, published in 1932 – the same year as Sievers died – he says outright that “[p]å E. Sievers’ gamle metriske system tror jeg endnu fuldt ud” (I still believe completely in E. Sievers’s old metrical system). Despite his claims that in the new edition he has not used the system quite as “radically” (“så radikalt”) as in the previous editions, it can be hard to spot the difference. A number of ‘unnecessary’ words have indeed been reinstated, but the same number of stanzas in *Grímnismál*, for example, retain the designation “uægte” (inauthentic).

Finnur’s greatest editorial achievement, arguably, was his *Den norsk-islandske Skjaldedigtning* [Norse-Icelandic skaldic poetry] (1912-1915), an edition of the complete corpus of skaldic poetry from the earliest times till 1400. Skaldic poetry is notoriously difficult for a number of reasons, most obviously its convoluted syntax and complex use of kensings (periphrastic compound expressions) and *heiti* (poetic synonyms). No less complex is the way in which it has been transmitted to us: in bits and pieces, rarely more than a stanza at a time, embedded within other texts, principally the kings’ sagas (*konungasögur*), family sagas (*Íslendingasögur*) and mythical-heroic or legendary sagas (*fornaldarsögur*), and in poetic treatises such as Snorri’s *Prose Edda*, all of which had to be painstakingly pieced together in order to come up with a coherent whole – which then could be edited. As was frequently commented on when the edition appeared, it seemed inconceivable that one man could achieve such a feat.

*Skjaldedigtingen* was published in four volumes, two, called A1 and A2, with diplomatic texts, generally taken from a single witness, with variant readings from other witnesses deemed to be of value in an apparatus, and two more, B1 and B2, with

---

24 Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and sagas*, 34.
normalised, reconstructed texts – what Finnur thought the originals must have been like –
accompanied by rearrangements of the Old Norse texts in prose order (as an aid to
understanding) and translations into modern Danish. While the diplomatic texts of the A
volumes were largely reliable, the reconstructed texts of the B volumes left much to be
desired, being frequently based on readings which were uncritically accepted and
incorporating many editorial emendations for which there was no justification. Many of
his interpretations of the skaldic verses were criticised, in particular for the way in way he
often disregarded ordinary word order thereby to produce a meaning far from obvious.
Sustained attack came from Swedish scholar Ernst A. Kock in a series of Notationes
norœnæ, published in 28 volumes over a period of 21 years (1923-1944). These concerned
principally the interpretation; in general Kock accepted Finnur’s arrangements of the texts
etc.

Along with this, Finnur published a dictionary of the poetic vocabulary, Lexicon
poeticum (1913-1916, 2nd ed. 1931), which, although described on the title-page as a revised
edition of the dictionary of the same name compiled by Sveinbjörn Egilsson (1791-1852), is
more than that, with a good deal of new material and definitions in Danish rather than
Latin. Unfortunately, Finnur’s questionable editorial emendations were taken over
wholesale in the Lexicon, thus diminishing its value. Despite the barrage of criticism,
much of it clearly well founded, when the second edition of the Lexicon appeared in 1931 it
contained no substantial changes. Unfortunately, this was entirely typical for Finnur
Jónsson: once he had formed an opinion, he rarely saw any reason to revise it.26

Despite their shortcomings, Skjaldedigtningen and the Lexicon poeticum created the
scholarly basis upon which all subsequent research into skaldic poetry has rested. Both
will now presumably be superseded by the new edition, Skaldic poetry of the Scandinavian
middle ages, edited by Margaret Clunies Ross et al., currently nearing completion, and a
new dictionary of the poetic vocabulary created by Tarrin Wills.

In his autobiography, Finnur Jónsson says that the total number of his publications was
around 250, for which reason, he says, he can hardly be accused of having been idle
(“iðjulaus”).27 At least a quarter of these were text editions.

It is clear that without Finnur a large number of works would have remained
unedited and thus unknown and unavailable to scholars and readers – indeed, some of his
editions are still the only ones extant – but there are very few which could not have been
better. Finnur had an enormous amount of material to get through, and he was not always

26 Ernst Kock sent Finnur copies of his Notationes norrœnæ as they came out. Finnur clearly read the first one,
as he has underlined passages and added comments in the margin of his copy, but on the cover of the
second, most of the pages of which remained uncut, he has written “Les ekki þetta bull. F.J.” (Won’t read
this rubbish. F.J.); see Halldór Halldórsson, “Aldarminning”, 17.
27 Ævisaga Finns Jónssonar, 169. Finnur Sigmundsson’s “Finnur Jónsson: Ritaskrá” lists at least double that
number, over 500 publications, including reviews, short notices etc.
prepared to give sufficient time to working out the relationships between the surviving witnesses of the works he edited, and their relative importance. He was in particular quick to dismiss manuscripts, especially younger ones, as without textual critical value (“uden tekstkritisk værdi”), manuscripts which later scholars have discovered to be very valuable indeed. In general, Finnur Jónsson’s editions are best when they are based on a single manuscript, or where the tradition is fairly straightforward. Editions such as Hauksbók (1892-1896, co-edited with Eiríkur Jónsson), Heimskringla (1893-1901), Fagrskinna (1902-1903) and Eirspennill (1916) left little to be desired; most, however, have now been superseded.

The publishing of Old Norse texts in the second half of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th was to a great extent in the hands of several learned societies in Denmark. As Professor i nordisk filologi at the university of Copenhagen, Finnur was involved, often as secretary or president, in all these societies: he was a member of Det kongelige nordiske Oldskriftselskabs Oldskriftafdeling [The Literary Section of the Royal Society of Northern Antiquaries] from 1891, of Samfund til Udgivelse af gammel nordisk Litteratur [Society for the Publication of Old Norse Literature] from 1895, and of the Arnamagnæan Commission from 1905. And he published with them all: six editions each for Oldskriftselskabet and the Arnamagnæan Commission and no fewer than 15 for STUAGNL, by far the largest number by any one person. He also produced three editions for the Copenhagen chapter of Hið íslenzka bókmenntafélag [The Icelandic Literature Society], and produced various editions outside Scandinavia, including four for the distinguished series Altnordische Saga-Bibliothek, published in Halle an der Saale, Germany.

This complete dominance within the field was far from a good thing. Halldór Hermannsson (1878-1958), who in the period 1925-1926 had been employed as librarian of the Arnamagnæan Collection but had returned to his job with the Fiske Collection at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, as it seems because he found it impossible to work with Finnur, bemoaned this state of affairs in an obituary for his former colleague:

As an editor Finnur deservedly has been highly regarded, and it is probably in this field that he will be remembered longest. He was a good reader of old manuscripts and accurate recorder of texts and variants; this was also his favorite occupation, in fact it became, as it were, almost a passion with him. He sometimes issued new editions of texts where they were not needed, and where he added nothing new to the previous ones which sometimes were still in print […]. After having become chairman of the Arna-Magnaean Commission and Secretary of the Literary Section of the Royal Society of Northern Antiquaries, Finnur used these two institutions virtually as his private publishers; all works issued under their auspices for a period

---

29 P.M. Mitchell, Halldór Hermannsson, 23.
Although he edited texts of widely varying types, there were in fact several prominent genres for which he had little time. Apart from *Alexanders saga* (1925), a 13th-century translation of Walter of Châtillon’s *Alexandreis*, he produced no editions of any of the many other Old Norse-Icelandic translations and adaptations of Latin pseudo-historical works, or of the dozen or so translations of French chivalric romances, most of them originally Norwegian but chiefly preserved solely in Icelandic manuscripts. The religious literature, such as the many saints’ lives (*heilagramannasögur*), homilies and so on, the bulk of them also translated from Latin, were not of interest to him – presumably owing to his avowed atheism – and he had nothing to do with any of them, apart from a single edition of the manuscript AM 623 4to, a collection of six hagiographic texts copied in the 13th century, of interest, presumably, only because it appears to be a copy of a much older exemplar. *Hrólfs saga kraka* (1904) was similarly the only one of the 35 or so mythical-heroic or legendary sagas (*fornaldarsögur*) to have been edited by him, and he steered totally clear of the highly popular indigenous Icelandic romances – the so-called *lygisögur*, or “lying sagas”, at least three dozen of which survive from the late medieval period – and was correspondingly disparaging of them in his multi-volume literary history. 31

There was however one genre for which Finnur – in contrast to most other Old Norse-Icelandic scholars – appears to have had a particular fondness: these were the exceedingly popular metrical romances known as *rímur*, whose importance for the cultural and linguistic history of Iceland over the centuries he felt could not be overestimated. 32

His first publication on *rímur*, written when he was still a student, was “Um Skíðarímu”, published in 1885. The article lists all the variant readings, *vis-à-vis* the printed editions of Konrad Maurer, 33 in a manuscript of the text he himself copied “þegar jeg var barn, eptir óðru handriti sem jeg nú man ekkert um, hvorki um aldur þess né hönd” (when I was a child, from another manuscript about which I now remember nothing, neither its age nor its script); 34 although he doesn’t say so, this manuscript was presumably one of the many

---

30 Halldór Hermannsson, “Finnur Jónsson”, 474.
33 Konrad Maurer, *Die Skída-ríma*.
34 Finnur Jónsson, “Um Skíðarímu”, 136.
manuscripts in his father’s collection. His first rímur-edition, *Fernir fornislenkir rímnaflokkar* [Four Old Icelandic rímr] came out in 1896 and was dedicated to his father, “Rímnavininum Jóni Borgfirðing” (Jón Borgfirðingur, friend of the rímr). This was followed by an edition of *Bjarkarímur*, published with *Hrólf’s saga kraka* in 1904, and finally *Rímnasafn*, which appeared between 1905 and 1922, a collection of 32 rímur-cycles from the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries – nearly half of those surviving from the period. As with his edition of the skaldic corpus, this was also accompanied by a dictionary, still the only one of its kind – and greatly in need of replacement. In his autobiography Finnur comments on his commitment to rímr:


[Of the rímr not much had been published […]. It was clear as day to me that here was material that needed to be published, and that it was necessary to edit all the rímr, at least the oldest ones, that is to say rímr that were composed before 1500. I proposed that the Samfund [STUAGNL] should publish a complete edition of these rímr. Curiously, [Kristian] Kálund did not seem to be well disposed toward this literary genre, but it was agreed to publish them ‘weather permitting’, i.e. when there was nothing else ready to fill the quota, which proved often to be the case. The whole collection, as I had envisaged it, came out in 14 fascicles over the period 1905 to 1922, 17 years, almost a fascicle a year. Now it remains to published the rest, a collection of rímr from the 16th century or up to the Reformation. That must be done by someone other than me. These rímr are of tremendous importance, not just for the sake of their subject matter, but rather and more importantly for the language of that time.]

*Rímnasafn*, as was said, contained texts of 32 separate rímr cycles, including the four originally included in *Fernir fornislenkir rímnaflokkar*. But an edition of the entire corpus of pre-1600 rímr would comprise nearly 80 cycles, the vast majority of them never
previously published. Finnur recognised that this was an enormous undertaking – too much even for the man who thought he could edit everything.

In addition to his editorial activities Finnur Jónsson also produced a series of works of a literary-historical nature, foremost among them his multi-volume *Den oldnorske og oldislandske Litteraturts Historie* [The history of Old Norwegian and Old Icelandic Literature], published between 1894 and 1902. A monumental work, nearly 1800 pages in all, it was the first general survey of Old Norse-Icelandic literature in any language. As with the skaldic edition, this was recognised as an enormous task for any one man to have undertaken: to summarise and discuss all surviving works in the corpus of Old Norse-Icelandic literature and the problems associated with them – typically regarding their authorship, age and transmission – as well as everything that had ever been written on them. And like the skaldic edition, the *Litteraturhistorie* was from the outset the object of some criticism, among other things for the precision with which he dated the various works (the Eddic poem *Völuspá* to ca. 935, for example), his insistence that the better a saga is the older it is likely to be – and that the best sagas had to have been written in the 12th century – and the way in which the question of foreign (i.e. continental European) influence on Old Norse-Icelandic literature was treated – or rather not treated, Finnur being of the opinion that there simply was no connection between the two traditions. In his autobiography he categorically states that he had intentionally ignored this question: “Jeg neita því líka, að íslenskur skáldskapur og söguntilbúníngur standi í nokkuru sambandi við fræði annara Evrópuþjóða. Þar voru engar beinar fyrirmyndir” (I also deny that Icelandic poetry and saga-writing have any relation to the literature of other nations of Europe; there were no direct models).

In his introduction, Finnur described his *Litteraturhistorie* as “et kritisk rydningsarbejde” (a piece of critical land-clearing), recognising, as it seemed, that a work of this kind would could only ever be provisional. Nevertheless, despite the many criticisms and corrections that had been made after its appearance, a second edition, brought out in 1920-1924, included only minor revisions.

Finnur also produced two literary histories in Icelandic, one, *Ágrip af bókmenntasögu Íslands* I-II, published in 1891-1892, before the big *Litteraturhistorie*, while the other, *Bókmenntasaga Íslandinga fram undir siðabót* I-II, appeared in 1904-1905, or just after it. There was also an abridged Danish version, *Den islandske litteraturs historie, tilligemed den oldnorske*, published in 1907. All were designed for popular audiences, and all suffer from the same shortcomings as the longer history.

---

35 Finnur Sigmundsson, *Rímnatal*, identifies 78 cycles from the period before 1600; on these rímur see Björn Karel Þórólfsson: *Rímur fyrir 1600*.
36 Ævisaga Finns Jónssonar, 157.
In addition to these, Finnur produced a large number of articles, both in Danish and Icelandic, on various subjects: individual poems and sagas, Norse mythology, runic inscriptions, the Norse settlements in Greenland, Icelandic historical linguistics, Icelandic place names, Icelandic proverbs and the history of Old Norse-Icelandic textual criticism. He also wrote a (very poor) biography of Árni Magnússon, and, as has been mentioned, an autobiography, which exists in both an Icelandic and a Danish version.37

In the autobiography, Finnur proudly states that he is a “no-nonsense” sort of person. Eschewing all forms of religious practice, he was a self-proclaimed atheist, and as a firm believer in common sense, he had no time for bold theories or speculation.38 Facts were facts and needed only to be established. He also lacked any aesthetic sense, as he himself readily admitted, and his literary historical works have been criticised for offering no assessments whatsoever of the quality of the literary works discussed. In his rather critical obituary of Finnur, Halldór Hermannsson expresses his doubt that “of his own free will he ever went to a theatrical performance, art exhibition, concert, or the like”, or even that he “ever read a book merely for the beauty of its style or of its contents”.39

Like most Icelanders, Finnur Jónsson believed unreservedly in the historicity of the sagas – and would, he said, continue to do so until forced to lay down his pen,40 a statement Jón Helgason described as having “et stænk af patriotisme” (a hint of patriotism).41 But while certainly not without patriotic feelings vis-à-vis his native land, he was not an automatic defender of all things Icelandic. In his literary history, for example, he put forward the view that, with some few exceptions, the Eddic poems were Norwegian in origin rather than Icelandic; this was based principally on the references to flora, fauna and natural features in the landscape which were more in keeping with Norway, he argued, than Iceland. This led to a lengthy and somewhat acrimonious exchange with Björn M. Ólsen (1850-1919), later the first professor of Icelandic at the University of Iceland, in Tímarit bókmenntafélags in 1895.42

This was only one of many academic squabbles in which Finnur became engaged. He had a long-running quarrel with Norwegian philologist Sophus Bugge (1833-1907), who argued that Old Norse mythology was a product of the Viking Age, a misunderstood mixture of classical and Christian beliefs which reached the north via the British Isles. Finnur was able to show that references in the earliest skaldic poetry, which pre-dated the

---

37 The two are quite different. The first two chapters from the Danish version were printed in Islandsk Aarbog 1934, shortly after Finnur’s death. The Icelandic version appeared two years later, edited by Jón Helgason. It is essentially complete, although a chapter entitled “Trúin” (Religion), listed in the table of contents, appears to have been removed from the manuscript.

38 Finnur Jónsson, Ævisaga Finns Jónssonar, 169-171.


40 Finnur Jónsson, Norsk-islandske kultur- og sprogfør hold, 141:“Sagaernes historiske troværdighed — hvor ‘stol’ dette end lyder — vil jeg hævde og forsøre til jeg tvinges til at nedlægge min pen.”

41 Jón Helgason, “Mindeord”, 159.

42 See Simon Halink’s chapter in the present volume.
Viking Age, indicated that the essentially the same mythology as we know from later sources must already have been in place. Bugge countered with a book questioning the authenticity of the poems Finnur cited on linguistic grounds, arguments which Finnur was able to refute. Several years later, Bugge’s son Alexander (1870-1929) adduced arguments in favour of significant Celtic influence on Old Norse-Icelandic language and literature which were also strongly opposed by Finnur, who believed Old Norse-Icelandic culture to be largely autochthonous and sharply criticised these studies, especially in his book *Norsk-isländsk kultur- og sprogforhold* [Norse-Icelandic cultural and linguistic relations], published in 1921.

An article by Finnur on Icelandic farm names, “Bæjanöfn á Íslandi”, published in *Safn til sögu Íslands* IV (1907-1915), also led to a heated exchange with an Icelandic scholar named Hannes Þorsteinsson. Finnur, unlike most Icelanders, had almost no experience of Icelandic rural life, having been raised entirely in towns, first in Akureyri and then in Reykjavík; at the age of 20 he went to Copenhagen, and rarely returned to Iceland after that. Thus he had little or no feeling for the landscape or rural culture, and expressed distrust of folkloristic methods.\(^{43}\) Several of the interpretations of Iceland farm names in Finnur’s article, based solely on written sources, were questioned in an article published in *Árbók hins íslenzka Fornleifafjelags* in 1923 by Hannes Þorsteinsson, whose interpretations were based on first-hand observation. Finnur answered with another article the following year, to which Hannes responded in the same issue.\(^{44}\)

In politics Finnur professed to be a liberal, adducing as evidence that he was a regular reader of the Danish newspaper *Politiken* and a supporter of the then newly founded Radikale Venstre, the Social Liberal Party. He was never politically active in Denmark, however. As regards Iceland he was a staunch supporter of Home Rule, but did not play a particularly active role there either, other than in writing various articles on the matter in the Danish, and to a lesser extent Icelandic, press, principally in the years 1901-1902. In 1904 he was encouraged to stand for parliament for Eyjafjörður, after his brother Klemens, who had been MP for that district, became *landritari* (ministerial secretary, an office created in 1904 and held by Klemens until it was abolished in 1917) and could therefore no longer serve as MP; the idea being that Finnur could take his place. He did stand, but was not returned.\(^{45}\) Thus ended his short-lived political career.

---

\(^{43}\) Halldór Hermannsson, “Finnur Jónsson “, 475

\(^{44}\) Hannes Porsteinsson’s article in response was “Rannsókn og leiðrjettingar á nokkrum bæjanöfnum á Íslandi”, to which Finnur responded in an article called “Nokkur orð um íslenzk bæjanöfn”; this was followed by an answer from Hannes, “Kvittun til dr. Finns Jónssonar”.

\(^{45}\) On Finnur’s involvement in Icelandic politics see *Ævisaga Finns Jónsson*, 107-126.
Despite his alleged liberal leanings, Finnur was in fact deeply conservative in most matters and could, in the words of Halldór Hermannsson, “generally […] be counted upon to be sceptical of, or directly opposed to, all innovations in theory and practice”.

Surprisingly perhaps, given this deep-seated conservatism, he was a supporter of Icelandic spelling reform, promoting at one point an orthography for modern Icelandic where words were spelt in a way that reflected their pronunciation, rather than their etymology. In an article called “Íslensk rjettritun” in the newspaper Ísafold he argued that “hin einasta rjettritunaregla ætti að vera sú, að rita eftir framburði manna nú á dógum” (the only rule of orthography should be to spell in accordance with the pronunciation of people today). He ends the article by saying: “Ísafold að tala á augað ekki að láta sjer þikja firir að sjá það, sem eiranan þikir sjer ekki misboðið að heira. Þetta er aðal-[eða: einka] reglan í rjettritun, hvers lans, sem vera skal.” (In general, the eye should not allow itself to object to seeing that which the ear does not find it offensive to hear. That should be the main [or only] rule in the orthography of any country). This was one of many points on which Finnur Jónsson and Benedikt Sveinbjarnarson Gröndal (1826-1907) disagreed. Gröndal mentions Finnur’s support for orthographic reform in his memoirs Dægradvöl, saying that in his opinion it should not be the ordinary people who tell the educated people how to write, but rather the other way round.

Finnur and Benedikt Gröndal seem to have had a long-running quarrel regarding, among other things, to what extent the Eddic poems should be regarded as Icelandic. Finnur was of the opinion that one should not allow nationalism to distort one’s critical perspective on literary works, and argued, as was mentioned above, that the original ‘home’ of the Eddic poems was Norway, as could plainly be seen from the descriptions of very un-Icelandic mountains and forests contained in them. He relegated Iceland’s role to merely being the place where these literary works were written down, but not composed, thus siding with the so-called Norwegian school of Rudolf Keyser (1803-1864) and Per Andreas Munch (1810-1863). This irked Gröndal, who in his Dægradvöl (p. 136, fn1) says of the work of Munch and Keyser that it was “tilraun til að svipta okkur fornritunum, eins og Finnur Jónsson hefur reynt til síðar með Eddukviðurnar” (an attempt to snatch away from us the old sagas, as Finnur Jónsson has of late tried to do with the Eddic lays). He continues in a footnote: “Kenning F. Jónssonar um þetta í Bókmenntasögu Íslands (og Norðurlanda) er svo barnaleg og heimskuleg að henni er naumast svarandi” (The theory of F. Jónsson concerning this [the Eddic poems] in his History of Icelandic (and Nordic) literature is so childish and idiotic that one can hardly respond to it). Finnur wrote an extremely negative (and rather bizarre) article on Gröndal in a Festschrift published in honour of his 80th birthday in 1906, accusing him of having isolated himself from

---

46 Halldór Hermannsson, “Finnur Jónsson”, 479.
47 Finnur Jónsson, “Íslensk rjettritun”, Ísafold 31.08.1889, p. 278.
48 Benedikt Gröndal, Dægradvöl, 224-225.
developments in philology by virtue of having lived in Iceland for 30 years, where such developments were unknown. The whole article seems to be an attempt to criticise Gröndal for being overly patriotic:

Það er ættjörðin, sem hefur dregið hann, laðað hug hans. […] En ekki þekki jeg, held jeg, neina sál, er ættjörðin fyllir við hvert tækifæri sem er svo mjög sem sál B. Grs. Það er næstum sama, á hvaða efni hann byrjar að yrkja um — hann kemst að landinu sínu, jökulum þess og döulum, fjöllum og fossum, hlíðum og hjöllum, og um fram alt að hinu fagra litla blómi, eyrarósinni, upphalda-blóminu hans, sem verður hjá honum ímynd alls hins fríða og fagra, og þó bljúga og litilþæga.

It is the native land that has called him, beckoning his soul. But I don’t think I know of any soul which is filled with the native land so much as that of B. Gr. It is almost inconsequential on what subject he begins to write – he soon gets to his country, its glaciers and valleys, mountains and waterfalls, hillsides and cliffs, and above all to the pretty little flower, the arctic river beauty, his favourite flower, which becomes with him the image of all that is beautiful and fair, and yet meek and modest.49

Finnur Jónsson was clearly not an easy man to get along with; he was constantly engaged in academic tiffs with a large number of scholars, and never developed any sort of following among his students. “Although personally affable and on the whole popular”, writes Halldór Hermannsson, “Finnur was not an inspiring teacher. […] He did not form a school, or gather pupils around him. […] Occasionally students came from other countries to study with him, but as a rule they did not stay more than a semester or so.”50

Apart from stay comments like these, there exist few portraits of Finnur Jónsson the man. Even his sister Guðrún’s memoirs divulge little about Finnur as a person – apart from the unsurprising revelation that although he took her to all the balls while he was at the Latin school in Reykjavík, he himself “never danced a step”.51 One such portrait comes from Guðmundur Arnlaugsson, Rektor of Menntaskólinn við Hamrahlíð, in an article entitled “Stúdentalíf í Höfn fyrir 60 árum – Minningarbrot” [Student life in Copenhagen 60 years ago – Fragments of recollections], published in 1995. Guðmundur explains how, in 1933-34, he, a first-year student at the University of Copenhagen, and his fellow student and roommate Klemens Tryggvason, Finnur’s great-nephew, dined every Wednesday at Nyvej 4 in Frederiksberg with Finnur, Finnur’s wife Emma, née Heraczek, and her unmarried sister, who lived close by.

Á þessum heimili var allt í föstum skorðum, að koma þangað fannst mér eins og að komast í snertingu við líðna tíð. Í Kaupmannhöfn var venja að borða miðdegisverð um sexleytið, en hjá Finni Jónssyni var borðað klukkan fjögur eins og tíðkast hafði

49 Finnur Jónsson, “Benedikt Gröndal og fornfræði”, 68.
50 Halldór Hermannsson, “Finnur Jónsson”, 479.
51 Guðrún Borgfjörð, Minningar, 132: “aldrei dansaði Finnur eitt spor”.

16
In this household everything followed a strict routine. Going there seemed to me to be like coming into contact with times past. In Copenhagen it was usual to have dinner at six, but at Finnur’s they ate at four, as had been customary before the first world war. After the meal, the others rested for an hour or so and Klemens and I used the time to peruse a book (there were plenty to choose from) or went out for a walk to revive ourselves. After that coffee was served and then we played bridge with the sisters while Finnur engaged in his scholarly pursuits. He worked in the same room where we were playing, but didn’t let our chit-chat bother him. He worked standing up, at a tall writing desk, every once in a while looking something up in a book. He was exceptionally hardworking, and probably never stopped from the time he got up at eight in the morning until it was time for bed. But he always took time to chat with Klemens and me and tell us about the old days. [...] It was clear that he had firm opinions about individuals and issues, opinions to which he clung resolutely and would not renounce, but then he seemed to me straightforward and a man of integrity in all things.)

This sums up Finnur well: a man of strong opinions, which he was reluctant to change, exceptionally hardworking, old-fashioned, but essentially a man of integrity.

In his article, Guðmundur mentions that at that time, in 1934, Politiken had its 50th anniversary, in celebration of which any original subscribers still living were given free subscriptions – Finnur was among them, and proud to be so. He did not enjoy his free subscription for long, though, as he died later that year, of a cerebral haemorrhage, on the 30th of March, Good Friday.

His legacy is in some ways hard to assess: as the editor of an extraordinarily large number of works in nearly every literary genre, he laid the foundation for the study of Old Norse-Icelandic literature for generations to come. But nearly all of his editions have flaws

---

52 Guðmundur Arnlaugsson, “Stúdentalíf í Höfn fyrir 60 árum”, 15.
– most of them minor, some of them fatal – flaws which might have been avoided had he simply given himself more time. Even so, one can only agree with Halldór Halldórsson’s view, expressed on the centenary of Finnur’s birth, that “þetta er ekkert aðalatriði” (that’s not the main issue). What is the main issue is this: “Pað er allt annað og auðveldara að stunda íslensk fræði, eftir að þessara útgáfnar naut við” (it is quite another thing, and easier, to pursue Icelandic studies, having got these editions).53

As a long-term resident of Denmark who visited Iceland only rarely after moving to Copenhagen at the age of 20, Finnur, one might be tempted to think, must have had a complex relationship with his native land. I believe this was not the case, and that despite his many years abroad he remained essentially Icelandic. A staunch supporter of home-rule, a firm believer in the historicity of the sagas and the uniqueness of Icelandic literature in the world, untainted by foreign influences – these are the positions of the true Icelander. But his devotion to common sense prevented him from being blinded by his patriotism, as can be seen for example from his advocacy of a Norwegian origin for the bulk of the Eddic poems.

In 1909 Finnur announced that he would leave his personal library “til mit fædreland Island” (to my fatherland, Iceland), stipulating that it should go to the University of Iceland, should one be established, provided that Icelandic language, literature and history were among the subjects to be taught there.54 A university was established, just two years later, with Björn M. Ólsen, with whom Finnur had had an extended quarrel on the origin of the Edda, as the first professor of Icelandic and the university’s rector. After Finnur’s death, the library, which comprised some 7500 volumes, was moved to Reykjavik, increasing the size of the University Library by about a third.55 A more patriotic act is hard to imagine.

M. J. Driscoll
University of Copenhagen


54 Árbók Háskóla Íslands 1911-1912, 60.
Finnur Jónsson: Bibliography


Benedikt Gröndal, Dægradvöl, Reykjavík: Ársæll Árnason, 1923.


Finnur Jónsson, “Íslenzk rjetttritun”, Ísafold 31.08.1889, 278.


Finnur Jónsson, Údsigt over den norsk-islandske filologis historie, København: Universitetsbogtrykkeriet, 1918.


Finnur Jónsson, Ævisaga Finns Jónssonar eftir sjálfan hann, Kaupmannahófn: Híd íslenkska fræðafélag, 1936.
Finnur Jónsson & Ludvig Wimmer, *Haðskriftet Nr. 2365 4to gl. kgl. Samling på det store kgl. bibliothek i København (Codex regius af den ældre Edda) i fototypisk og diplomatisk gengivelse*, København: S.L. Møller, 1891


Hannes Þorsteinsson, “Rannsókn og leiðrjettingar á nokkrum bæjanöfnum á Íslandi”, *Árbók hins íslenzka Fornleifafélag* (1923), 1-96.


Jón Jónsson Aðils, “Jón Borgfirðingur”, *Skírnir* 87 (1913), 5-23.


