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Icelandic Baroque

*Poetic Art and Erudition in the Works of Hallgrímur Pétursson*

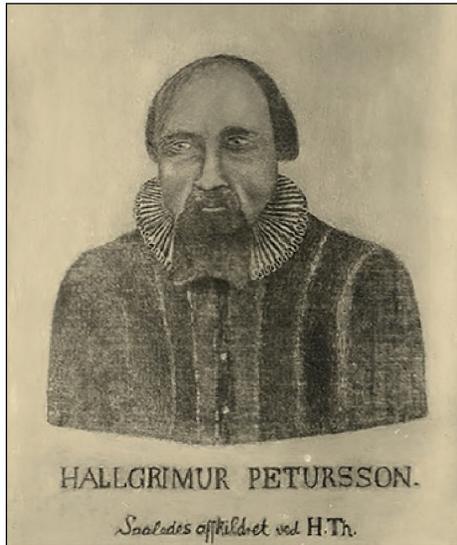
MARGRÉT EGGERTSDÓTTIR

TRANSLATED BY ANDREW WAWN



# *Icelandic Baroque*

Poetic Art and Erudition in the  
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ISLANDICA LVI

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## Preface

This book examines the work of one of Iceland's best-loved poets, Hallgrímur Pétursson (1614–1674), who has been called the country's national poet and its greatest-ever religious poet. Hallgrímur was a child of the seventeenth century, long regarded as the bleakest and least interesting period in Icelandic history. He is often presented as a shining but solitary light in an otherwise dark literary age. The present study seeks to cast its own fresh light on both poet and period.

Medieval Iceland's rich and innovative medieval literary culture and its remarkably high levels of manuscript production have long attracted scholarly attention from abroad, perhaps never more so than today. Indeed it is sometimes difficult to avoid giving the impression that little of literary significance happened in Iceland between the end of the Middle Ages and the present day, when several Icelandic novelists now enjoy world-wide popularity in translation.

Icelandic attitudes to the country's own history are the product of many influences. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Icelanders struggled tirelessly to achieve national independence from Denmark, motivated not least by their sense of a glorious medieval past, reinterpreted for current needs. They felt a special pride in recalling the post-870 settlement period when their freedom-loving ancestors would bend the knee to no foreign power. However, from the middle of the thirteenth century Iceland became subject to the Norwegian monarchy, and when, in turn, Norway became part of Denmark, so also did Iceland. After the 1550 Reformation in Iceland Danish power and influence increased steadily. This post-Reformation period has been represented as one of political and cultural decline dominated, as elsewhere in Scandinavia, by Lutheran orthodoxy. Its teachings informed so many aspects of the

church, education, scholarship, literature and the arts. However, recent scholarship has shown that such a monochrome and austere depiction of Icelandic cultural life is over-simplified to the point of distortion, for it was this same period that witnessed a reawakening of interest in medieval literature, as confirmed by the number of manuscripts copied; it saw art and music flourishing to a much greater extent than previously recognized; and, above all, it was the age of Hallgrímur Pétursson.

As noted earlier, Hallgrímur was not only the greatest poet of his day, but also one of the most revered and popular Icelandic poets of all time. Yet his fame was hard won. Early in life it was far from clear what would become of the young man, as he abandoned his studies in Iceland, set sail for Denmark, resumed his education, only to fall in love with a woman, sixteen years his senior, who had already been married in Iceland, before being seized by pirates and spirited away to North Africa. Quite apart from his poetry, the poet's adventurous life alone may well have helped to establish him as an iconic figure among the Icelandic public at large.

Hallgrímur seems to have begun composing poetry as a young man, and became a prolific and revered writer of both sacred and secular verse. We know that his *Passíúsálmar* were sung over Lent in virtually every household in Iceland during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and that his works were extensively copied and now survive in hundreds of manuscripts. During the twentieth century the custom developed of broadcasting the *Passíúsálmar* on Icelandic radio with the approach of Easter, and those same hymns remain widely read and sung today. Of no works by any of Hallgrímur's literary contemporaries can this be said.

The present study has two priorities. It aims to evaluate Hallgrímur's achievement as a poet in the light of European literary activity during his lifetime, notably in the two countries most closely linked to Iceland—Denmark and Germany. And it explores Hallgrímur's status as a poet within Icelandic literary tradition, not least his distinctive contributions to a wide variety of literary genres—satire, hymns, the poetry of transience and apocalypse, *rímur*, occasional verse and comic pieces; and also his prose meditations. Works by other European and Icelandic writers are cited for context and comparison.

*Icelandic Baroque* began life as *Barokkmeistarinn*, my doctoral dissertation at the University of Iceland in 2005. It may be said that the process of reexamination it has since undergone was stimulated initially by comments from my two examiners: Professor Jürg Glauser (University

of Basel and University of Zürich) and Professor Einar Sigurbjörnsson (University of Iceland). Since then I have also benefitted from many other responses, comments and suggestions.

In preparing the dissertation I drew extensively on earlier scholarship relating to Hallgrímur Pétursson, albeit sometimes using it as I sought to approach the poetry from a somewhat different direction. Among important studies in Icelandic may be named a two-volume work (1947) by the theologian Professor Magnús Jónsson; a study (1970) of the *Passíusálmar* by Professor Sigurður Nordal; and a more general book on Hallgrímur's hymns (1972) by Dr. Jakob Jónsson, a pastor at Hallgrímskirkja in Reykjavík. A further reference point was a controversial article (1942) on the *Passíusálmar* by Halldór Laxness. And though mine was the first Icelandic-language doctoral dissertation to treat the poet, a Danish dissertation by the Lutheran pastor Arne Møller was published in 1922. I am also very happy to mention two scholars for whose help during the preparation of my dissertation I am particularly grateful: Professor Wilhelm Friese (1924–2008; University of Tübingen) and Professor Vésteinn Ólason (University of Iceland).

Translating a book on Hallgrímur Pétursson into English offers its own challenges, not just because it seeks to present a literary-cultural world with which prospective readers may not be familiar; but also because so few of the works discussed are available in English translation. The present author is happy to acknowledge her good fortune in having been able to work on this project with Professor Andrew Wawn (University of Leeds). Our collaboration has created the opportunity further to revise and correct the original text, and I am very grateful not only for his work in translating the book but also for his having contributed significantly to the process of revision.

Lastly, this book has been translated and published with generous support from (in Iceland) Hagþenkir: Félag fræðirita og kennslugagna, and Bókmenntasjóður (now Miðstöð íslenskra bókmennta), and (in Sweden) Letterstedtska föreningen.

Margrét Eggertsdóttir

### Translator's Note

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In translating the book's verse quotations little attempt has been made to reproduce the intricacies of alliteration, rhyme, word order, and "elegant variation" that characterize seventeenth-century Icelandic verse. Effects that the highly inflected nature of the Icelandic language makes possible can rarely be recreated satisfactorily in a lightly inflected language such as English. However, where appropriate, elements of alliteration, archaism, and syntactic irregularity have been deployed to suggest the presence of more consistent and complex patterns in the original texts.

A. W.