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“Bitter enemy” of the State: The American Political and Literary Reception of Halldór Laxness

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When Halldór Laxness won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1955, *The Harvard Crimson* published an article about the trouble the staff writers faced as they attempted to locate a scholar on campus who could speak knowledgeably about the Icelandic writer’s oeuvre. After consulting multiple professors, they found only one who even recognized Laxness’s name.¹ Yet, in August of 1946, Laxness’s *Independent People* had been chosen as the Book of the Month Club selection and hailed as “epical” by famed literary critic Henry Seidel Canby.² How did such a celebrated writer move from Canby’s canonization to virtual obscurity in less than a decade? Only by procuring an interview with fellow Nobel Laureate Ernest Hemingway were staff at the *Crimson* able to discover a hint as to the roots of Laxness’s erasure. Hailing Laxness as “one of the most outstanding and least recognized” authors of the era, Hemingway did not hesitate to declare his unequivocal support for the radical novelist: “I don’t care about his politics one bit.”³

Certainly, the student reporters would have discovered a few more of Laxness’s allies had they turned to the American literary Left, a contingent who did care about the Icelandic author’s politics and maintained their interest in his proletarian novels and his political views even as he disappeared from American public consciousness. In 1953, Joseph North, the editor of *The Daily Worker*, wrote an extensive article about Laxness’s novels when he was a contender for the Nobel Prize that year. In the article “The Nobel Award Jury Bypassed the Greater Man,” North derides the committee’s decision to grant the award to Winston Churchill over Laxness. He summarizes Laxness’s provocative, political novel *The Atom Station* (a work not even published in the United States at the time) and praises how it portrays “when our Pentagon took over, when the battleships and the bulldozers arrived in this peaceful country that never had

an army, and the bases were built for World War III."⁴ Like Hemingway, North laments that this author of "international renown" remains "virtually unknown to the American public."⁵ He ultimately concludes that the selection of the prize is simply "a literary judgment determined by the values of a cold war."⁶

Such "values" undoubtedly shaped the perception and reception of Laxness in the United States during a transitional and tense political period. Recovering the story of Laxness's literary suppression provides new insights into transnational Cold War cultural history with implications that extend beyond the writer himself. Known primarily for his epic novels that capture the social landscape of Iceland, Halldór Laxness (1902–1998) had a creative connection to the US before achieving literary fame. He lived in Hollywood in the 1920s; he was influenced by American authors, such as Theodore Dreiser, Upton Sinclair, Sherwood Anderson, and Sinclair Lewis; and the idea of America features prominently in some of his most iconic works, including *Salka Valka*, *Independent People*, and *The Atom Station*. Yet, few scholars in the field of American studies have investigated Laxness's fraught relationship with the United States or contextualized this literary conflict as a political and ideological one rooted in the Cold War and Iceland's contested entry into NATO in 1949, which spurred historic protests in Reykjavík. As the American military outpost in Keflavík became a site of controversy and contestation in Iceland, Laxness wrote both nonfiction and fiction that articulated his opposition to the airbase and militarism more broadly. This article offers a bilateral reading of this controversy, examining Laxness's works (some of which have never been translated into English) alongside his literary and political reception in the United States through American newspapers and government documents featuring newly recovered archives that provide evidence that the US government monitored Laxness during his visits in the late 1950s.

A Farewell to Arms

In February of 1941, Laxness completed a translation of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* as *Vopnin kvödd* during World War II, a conflict that had a far more immediate and intimate impact on his own country than the one that served as the setting for Frederic Henry and Catherine Barkley's love affair.⁷ On April 9, 1940, Germany invaded Denmark, and in the subsequent month, the British Royal Navy and the Royal Marines arrived on the shores of Iceland. This occupation of Iceland first by British (1940) and then American troops (1941) marked a political and cultural turning point for both Iceland and the United States. American military intervention of this scale signified a more serious commitment to the war months before the December attack on Pearl Harbor, which marked the official entry of the US into the war. Iceland utilized this newfound power position strategically, to fully split from Denmark and finalize an independence agenda that began in the nineteenth century.⁸ In May of 1944, Iceland approved a referendum with 99.5 percent in support of cutting all ties with Denmark and 98.5 percent in favor of implementing an Icelandic constitution, and on June 17,

1944 (less than two weeks after D-Day), the country became a wholly independent nation.⁹

However, the occupation of Iceland by the Allies and the enduring presence of US troops in the country in the aftermath of the war transformed the spatial relationship between Iceland and the United States, creating a “contact zone” as the United States moved from the periphery to the center of Icelandic political and cultural debates.¹⁰ Valur Ingimundarson and Benedikt Gröndal have described the unique challenges the United States faced attempting to incorporate Iceland into a military alliance.¹¹ Reluctance and even rebellion are frequent themes.¹² Emphasizing Iceland’s active role within its political negotiations with the United States, Ingimundarson builds upon Geir Lundestad’s analysis of the geopolitics between the US and Western Europe as a form of “empire by invitation” while also highlighting the specific differences within an Icelandic context.¹³ As Ingimundarson contends, the relationship between Iceland and the United States in the postwar era “never involved a bargaining dichotomy based on hegemony and exploitation, on the one hand, and submission and victimization, on the other.”¹⁴ Even as Icelanders expressed resistance to the American military, Icelandic politicians actively and successfully negotiated for Marshall Plan Aid from the US government and, according to Gunnar Karlsson, “managed to secure for Iceland almost twice as much direct help per capita as any other country.”¹⁵

The proportion of troops to civilians during World War II played a profound role in the perceptions of the US military’s presence in Iceland. In 1941, sixty thousand American troops occupied a nation of approximately 120,000 people.¹⁶ According to Ingimundarson, the opposition to the military base came primarily from two different fronts: “the growing nationalist sentiments” on the Right and the Socialist Party, which in July 1942 received 16.2 percent of the vote.¹⁷ Karlsson highlights the deeper ideological tensions that undergirded this conflict between Iceland and the United States, noting that the American factions had a difficult time understanding that, for Iceland, “neutrality and defencelessness were an essential part of the national self-image, closely connected to the image of independence.”¹⁸

In 1946, just as *Independent People* was released in the US and chosen as a Book of the Month Club selection, the base issue intensified when the US requested extended access to Keflavík for military use. Laxness spoke out publicly about the base, expressing concern about the increasing political and cultural influence of the United States over the country. As the proposal for extending access to the base came to a vote, Laxness published articles that critiqued the presence of the US forces in the country and called out Icelandic politicians for their complicity with the US government.¹⁹

On September 22, 1946, less than two weeks before the impending vote on the base, protests erupted in Iceland. In an article titled “Icelandic Leaders Imperiled by Mob,” *The New York Times* reports how “[c]rowds attacked the Mayor of Reykjavík and threatened Prime Minister Olafur Thors ... in a Communist-inspired demonstration protesting the proposed Icelandic-United States agreement on the future of the air

bases.”²⁰ Published in the left-wing newspaper *Þjóðviljinn* (The Will of the People) the day after the protest, Laxness’s article “Samningurinn táknað uppgjöf sjálfstæðis Íslands” (“The Agreement Signifies the Surrender of Iceland’s Independence”) articulates its main argument through the title itself.²¹ The sacredness of Icelandic independence from Denmark was a common theme in Laxness’s work during this period, an argument that appealed to diverse political factions.

Another mass action was staged in the days leading up to the vote, a strike organized by the trade unions and reported in the *New York Herald Tribune* as a “24-Hour General Walkout.”²² Laxness continued to write in dialogue with the demonstrations. His article “We Are Not Impressed,” published on October 2, 1946, directly confronts the US, using English in the title but not the body of the text. Opening with a sharp jab in the first line, he constructs a collective voice of resistance that challenges the hierarchy between large and small nations: “Vér Íslendingar erum of smáir til að bera virðingu fyrir stórveldum” (“We Icelanders are too small to hold respect for superpowers”).²³ As he argues against capitulation to US demands, Laxness also (once again) emphasizes Iceland’s newly affirmed independence and directly rebukes Icelandic politicians, particularly Ólafur Thors, the prime minister at the time.²⁴

As the vote approached, Laxness’s rhetoric intensified. In an article published in *Þjóðviljinn*, on the day before the October 5th vote, he pronounces forceful words of warning to the members of parliament:

Eitt er víst, íslensk saga mun ekki gleyma nöfnum þeirra manna sem með áfellsdóm aldanna yfir höfði sér ætla í dag eða á morgun að segja já við þessum höfuðglæp.²⁵

One thing is certain: Icelandic history will not forget the names of those men who, with the harsh judgment of the ages over their heads, intend today or tomorrow to vote yes for this capital crime.

Despite these individual and collective arguments against the airbase, the Icelandic government voted to permit limited access, and thus, the agreement represented to many a forfeiture of neutrality. Although this did not grant the US military unfettered and permanent access to the base, some Icelanders, including Laxness, perceived the pact as an affront to Icelandic independence and an invitation for future military encroachment. As Sigurður A. Magnússon explains, “To many Icelanders this merely meant changing the clothes of army personnel.”²⁶

The American government, however, wanted more control over the airfield and interpreted this compromise as a concession on their end. Though the Americans were permitted to ground planes, the administration of the facility would no longer be managed by the US military but by American civilians. In an article in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* published on October 26, 1946, Arthur Veysey describes this agreement as an American withdrawal and exodus through the imagery of the title, “U.S. Hauls Down

Flag at Base in Iceland.”²⁷ Veysey reports the details of the compromise, highlighting the influence of the political Left in the decision: “The United States retains limited privileges in Iceland against the will of many of the 130,000 people who live on this largely barren, Ohio sized island. Communists contend that if submitted to a public vote, the Americans would be thrown off.”²⁸ One day later, Veysey turned directly to Laxness’s role in the controversy. In an article titled “Iceland’s Red Author Loud in Attacks on U.S.,” Veysey underscores the prominence of Laxness in the battle over the base: “[T]he voice of Laxness was among those raised most frequently and most viciously.”²⁹ Branding Laxness as “[o]ne of the bitterest Icelandic foes of the United States,” Veysey accuses the “Communist” novelist of leading the rhetorical campaign against the base.³⁰ Although Veysey begins the article by crediting the US for the economic success of Laxness’s *Independent People*, he concludes by insulting Laxness and his novel: “It got little sale among Icelanders, who considered it drivel.”³¹

Atómstöðin (The Atom Station)

Yet, Laxness did not concede politically or literarily; the capitulation of a newly independent Iceland to a foreign military power continued to trouble the writer, who perceived the alliance as an opening for further intrusion. Peter Hallberg contends that Laxness’s novel *Atómstöðin (The Atom Station)* originated in the aftermath of this conflict over Keflavík, “shortly after the decision of the alþingi came into effect.”³² Published in 1948, a year before Iceland joined NATO, the novel was prescient, voicing suspicion about Iceland’s move toward a Cold War economic and military alliance with the United States in its portrayal of the doddering prime minister, who publicly declares his desire “to sell” Iceland to the Americans. Reflecting this political friction and constructing a historical narrative of the period, the novel also participates in a tradition of what Jesper Gulddal identifies as Cold War “literary anti-Americanism.”³³

While most scholars acknowledge the political import of *Atómstöðin*, they offer differing perspectives on its interpretation and literary merit. Stefán Einarsson suggests that the novel reflects a certain widespread “demoralization of the occupation period.”³⁴ Highlighting the novel’s radical force, Hallberg likens it to a “spear thrown with the warrior intention of wounding and killing—if indeed we should not rather compare it with a bomb.”³⁵ Despite his acknowledgment of the novel’s political power, he does not view it as a propagandistic message or as “a kind of roman à clef,” although many of the characters are based on real individuals, including the prime minister Ólafur Thors.³⁶ Noting the novel’s absurdist tendencies that flout the conventions of social realism, Ástráður Eysteinnsson categorizes it as “the exemplary Reykjavík novel,” distinct from so many Icelandic novels centered on the rural experience.³⁷ Sigurður A. Magnússon argues that the strength of *Atómstöðin* lies in its political precision and its sharp rendering of economic and military power brokering:

The Atom Station went far beyond all the vague and foggy rigamaroles about the evils of war, occupation and pecuniary

obsessions of an innocent society, and instead made a frontal attack on the very heart of the matter: the stationing of foreign soldiers on Icelandic soil in peacetime, the manipulations behind the scenes to get Iceland into a military alliance with America (which materialized in NATO a year later), the total corruption and subservience of Icelandic politicians, and so on.³⁸

Locating the novel within the political climate of the Cold War, Giuliano D'Amico also foregrounds "its relevance as a postcolonial narrative" where the United States supplants Denmark as a "neo-colonial" power in the aftermath of World War II.³⁹ He argues that this novel "portrays the starting point of a network of power relations and economic-ideological positions that arose in postwar Iceland and developed throughout the twentieth century."⁴⁰ Through his satirical portrayal of the Icelandic-American military alliance, Laxness allegorizes the concept of "empire by invitation," intersecting themes of intimacy and invasion, where the domestic sphere becomes the site of military intrusion and economic interchange.⁴¹

The novel revolves around Ugla, a woman from the North who travels south to Reykjavík to work in the residence of Búi Árland, a member of parliament, and his wife, who is only identified by her title, Madam. Although the novel is a political satire, the protagonist Ugla is not an ideologue, nor does she simply ventriloquize Laxness's views; instead, she is an observant narrator representing the rural gaze. Simultaneously naïve and wise, she offers spontaneous and perspicacious commentary on society as she moves through alien spaces in Reykjavík, from Communist meetings to the bohemian apartment of her music teacher, the organist. As a domestic worker for an MP and his family, a connection that allows Ugla insider access to covert political information, she gains intimate access to and confidential knowledge about the political debates at the center of Icelandic society. As she encounters the various conflicting factions in Icelandic society, Ugla observes and interrogates the politics and power relationships of everyday experience with a critical eye informed by her class position and her rural background, both of which grant her an outsider perspective in the city. Blending satire and sincerity, Ugla's quest for autonomy and liberation intersects with the transnational conflicts over cultural identity and national independence.

An ideological battle between Ugla and Madam plays out in the domestic sphere, mirroring larger conflicts in Iceland as a whole. As Ugla tries to understand the political and societal hierarchies, she becomes acquainted with some local Communists, and her curiosity about their ideas unleashes fury in Madam. A caricature of wealth and privilege, Madam is a character whose politics are inextricably linked to her material conditions, and she grows particularly concerned about Ugla's possible descent into communism, even threatening to fire her. She brutally interrogates Ugla about her whereabouts, digging for any information that might connect her to the

Communist Party. Ugly's experience of anti-Communist persecution in the home reflects a turn in Icelandic politics toward integration into the Western Bloc. By staging an anti-Communist probe in the home, Madam becomes the voice of the conservative Icelandic establishment in the domestic sphere, policing the boundaries around thought and action. Madam acts as a quasi special agent in the home, prying into Ugly's personal life and threatening to fire her if she attends left-wing meetings.

As a domestic worker in a residence that doubles as a site for secret political soirées, Ugly also witnesses the inner workings of geopolitics, catching glimpses of conversations (which often take place at night and under the influence of alcohol) between Icelandic politicians, American ambassadors, and military leaders. One of Ugly's earliest jobs is simply to open the door for the Americans, a symbolic gesture that invites "empire" into the home. As Laxness describes the Americans through Ugly's gaze, he emphasizes how they disarm her with a hospitable charm:

Annar var digur maður í herforingjabúningi, hitt lánngur maður almúgaklæddur. Ég hafði gert ráð fyrir þeir litu ekki á mig, þvísíður þeir óhreinkuðu sig á að heilsa, en það var þá öðru nær, þessir menn voru alúðin sjálf og það var einsog þeir hefðu hitt gamla vinkonu. Þeir brostu ljúflega og sögðu einhver lifandi ósköp og annar klappaði mér á bakið.

One was a portly man in a general's uniform, the other a tall man in plain clothes. I had assumed they wouldn't look at me, much less defile themselves by greeting me, but it was quite the opposite; these men were affability itself, and it was as if they had met an old friend. They smiled warmly, spoke a great deal, and one clapped me on the back.

While the Americans appear friendly on the surface, their comfort and ease within the home and their forwardness with Ugly reveal a presumptuous familiarity and a corresponding sense of entitlement. Rather than participating in the standard formalities that indicate respect for social boundaries, they hang up their own hats and offer cigarettes and gum to Ugly. After this chummy meeting in the vestibule, the two men go into an inner room in the home where business takes place:

Þegar ég bar þeim sódatvnið og glösin rétt á eftir voru þeir sestir ásamt húsbóndanum, með landkort fyrir framan sig, bæði af Íslandi og heiminum.⁴²

When I took the soda water and glasses in to them shortly thereafter, they were sitting together with their host, maps out in front of them, both of Iceland and the world.

The next day, Ugly learns about the consequences of this encounter as she inadvertently stumbles onto a protest. Trying to understand what’s happening in the city, she asks her Communist acquaintances about the demonstrations. One of them draws her attention to an article in the newspaper that outlines a potential military agreement, providing strategic access to a site in Iceland for American military use. Despite this leak to the press, the Prime Minister lies to the Icelanders and promises that he does not intend to yield to the US government.

Still, the Americans continue to visit the house and hold secret meetings behind doors that are shut tight and locked. The Americans are omnipresent caricatures in the narrative. They come and go in the inner vestibules and sanctums of the home in these covert meetings with the Prime Minister and his circle. After one particularly raucous late-night meeting, Ugly hears the Prime Minister express his true intentions in a drunken monologue:

Af hverju ég vil selja landið? sagði forsætisráðherrann. Af því samviska mín býður mér það, og hér lyfti ráðherran þrem hægrihandarfingrum. Hvað er Ísland fyrir Íslendinga. Ekkert. Vestrið eitt skiftir máli fyrir norðrið. Við lifum fyrir vestrið; við deyjum fyrir vestrið; eitt vestur. Smáriki—skítur. Austrið skal þurkast út. Dollarinn skal standa.⁴³

Why do I want to sell the country? said the Prime Minister. Because my conscience dictates it. And here, the minister raised three fingers on his right hand. What is Iceland for Icelanders? Nothing. The West is all that matters for the North. We live for the West. We die for the West. One West. Small nations—shit. The East will be obliterated. The dollar shall prevail.

Búi warns the prime minister to tone down his rhetoric, but he continues to rant and rave:

Þó þeir fleingi mig opinberlega á Austurvelli og fleygi mér til andskotans útúr ríkisstjórninni þá skal ég samt selja mitt land.⁴⁴

Even if they whip me in the public square at Austurvöllur and cast me out of the government straight to hell, I will still sell my own country.

As the situation in the country grows increasingly tense, Ugly faces her own challenges. After discovering she is pregnant, she returns to the North and gives birth to a daughter, Guðrún. Meanwhile, the plan “to sell” the country moves forward, exposing the hypocrisy of the Prime Minister. The politicians finalize the alliance with

the American military, not in a grand contested gesture, but rather casually in a vote that mirrors the real one in 1946. The politicians promise the electorate that Icelanders will be safe and reassure their constituents that they are not actually betraying the country but simply offering up “áníngarstaður fyrir útlenda góðgerðaflokka” (“a stopover for foreign relief agencies”).⁴⁵ In the novel’s final scene, Ugla, who has returned to Reykjavík, walks through the streets and clutches a bouquet, a gift from the organist, against her chest. Like many of the characters in Laxness’s earlier novels, Ugla remains suspended in hope for something, but in this novel, the answer is less obvious and the future more ominous. The specter of the atomic bomb looms over the future.

While the novel ends on a note of resignation, Laxness’s rhetoric remained politically charged. As he had anticipated, the presence of foreign troops expanded. The military alliance between Iceland and the US also solidified. One year after Laxness published the book, Iceland voted to join NATO on March 30, 1949, which prompted notorious protests in the city described in *The New York Times* as “Red Rioting.”⁴⁶ The article recounts the heightened tensions at the moment of the vote, creating a vivid picture of a chaotic scene: “A Communist mob, defying club-swinging police, hurled stones into the chambers of Parliament today while it was voting.”⁴⁷ The article also captures the intensity of the protestors and the violent means used to quell the demonstrators: “Police fired tear-gas guns and the crowd dispersed. When it began to reassemble, police raced patrol cars through the streets, throwing tear-gas bombs.”⁴⁸

After the publication of *The Atom Station*, Laxness continued to address the issue of the airbase and to critique the US military-industrial complex in his essays, occasionally published in English. In his 1953 piece, “An Iceland Voice,” he returns to the analogy of domestic incursion to describe the political relationship between the US and Iceland during and following World War II. Constructing an image of “empire by invitation,” Laxness deploys the language of an encroaching house guest to critique the geopolitical relationship between Iceland and the United States. He describes a relationship that begins with cordiality: “allied troops were invited as our guests for a limited time, and we treated them as such, opening our homes to them in primitive hospitality and fraternizing with them.”⁴⁹ Condemning the US military for overstaying their welcome, he describes the Cold War power shift: “The real occupation of Iceland begins after the war when American troops ceased to be our war guests.”⁵⁰ Laxness expands upon this analogy as he portrays the US as an intruder infiltrating and appropriating, not only the built environment but the natural resources: “However much you would like, you cannot get friendly with a foreigner who makes himself at home in your house, declaring that he loves you so much that here he is going to stay for good, making himself comfortable in your chair, walking about in your garden with an air as if it all belonged to him.”⁵¹ He contends that such an occupation “even if it is by consent of native politicians” creates a sense of disillusionment in the populace that “is a thoroughly depressing sight and a most tragic thing in the eyes of the ordinary citizen.”⁵²

In “Reflections of an Old Soviet Visitor,” another essay published in English the following year, Laxness is not so cryptic in his critiques of the US as he extends his derision beyond Iceland-US relations and unabashedly rebukes American politicians for using fear and anxiety as a means of controlling the American public:

What I detest in America is the perverted childishness of those hobgoblin American politicians who never get tired of beating the war drum through news agencies, press, and radio, continuously threatening someone somewhere with “total annihilation” or/and “instant massive retaliation” (!) by means of atomic power, if he does not do this or that according to the will of some stockbroker firm or trust or monopoly or other contemporary capitalist incarnations of the Godhead.⁵³

Such a critique reveals Laxness’s interest and investment in domestic American issues, a theme he personally came to experience while living in the US from 1927–29. With its fiery, prophetic tone, this piece shows similarities in style to the essays in Icelandic railing against American corporate greed that he composed in the US and published in the collection *Alþýðubókin* in 1929.⁵⁴

“A political thorn”

Unsurprisingly, Laxness’s views had consequences that affected his literary career in the United States. During the second Red Scare, the US enacted a strategy of domestic containment, policing the boundaries of political thought and behavior to control the spread of communism from within. While McCarthy’s notorious campaign fixated on containing the threat within and purging Communists from American public life, the scrutiny of Laxness was tied to the government’s concern about the spread of communism outside of American borders, and Laxness’s story illuminates the reaches and the limitations of transnational anti-Communist repression. Operating from outside of this repressive domestic institutional framework, Laxness had certain freedoms but also certain restraints—he could voice anti-American views through politically charged fiction and nonfiction for a wide audience in Iceland but struggled to be heard at all in the United States.

Laxness’s FBI file indicates that the government monitored his financials, particularly his relationship with the Book of the Month Club. In an internal document dated September 19, 1947, designated as Special Inquiry, the directive is clear:

Your Office should endeavor to discreetly ascertain the amount of money Laxness has received from the sale of his book in this country through the Book of the Month Club.

This information should be furnished to the Bureau promptly.⁵⁵

Chay Lemoine asserts that this was part of a smear campaign intending to decimate “the reputation of the writer in the eyes of the reading public both in Iceland and in the United States.”⁵⁶ Halldór Guðmundsson outlines the impetus behind this transnational probe into Laxness’s taxes. Through archival research, Guðmundsson discovered that William Trimble, an ambassador to Iceland, was perturbed that Laxness wanted to sponsor a subversive essay contest on the theme of the abdication of sovereignty.⁵⁷ Trimble teamed up with Independence Party leader and Foreign Minister Bjarni Benediktsson, and the two anti-Communist envoys attempted to gather inflammatory information on Laxness.⁵⁸ Of course, the date of this inquiry also aligns with one of Laxness’s most vocal periods, as he published passionate polemics in Icelandic left-wing newspapers, protesting the US military base as an affront to Icelandic sovereignty. His political outspokenness may have affected his relationship with his literary allies in the US as well; the pattern of press coverage shows a surge of interest in Laxness and his novel *Independent People* in the summer of 1946 that trickles off by the end of the year.

As the literary discussion of his work attenuated, the coverage of his politics increased. Although Laxness was a contender for the Nobel Prize in 1953, the most substantial article written about him in *The New York Times* that year focused entirely on his politics. In this piece titled “Icelanders Warm to Soviet Culture,” published just two weeks after Churchill received the prize, George Axelsson contends that “Moscow has expanded its propaganda organization in Iceland.”⁵⁹ Halldór Laxness is the only artist mentioned in the article by name, and Axelsson points out that he is the president of MÍR, the Icelandic-Soviet friendship society, and has traveled to the Soviet Union.⁶⁰ Axelsson also draws the reader’s attention to how the left-wing newspaper *Þjóðviljinn* (where Laxness published some of his most impassioned anti-American pieces) “has been increased from eight pages to twelve.”⁶¹

Tracking how Laxness’s 1955 Nobel Prize win was represented in the press also demonstrates how bias played out through political rhetoric, revealing both the implicit and explicit ways Laxness’s reputation was influenced by the climate of the Cold War. *The New York Daily News* pronounces Laxness’s win with one of the most inflammatory of headlines: “Nobel Award to U.S. Foe.”⁶² This piece not only acknowledges but underscores Laxness’s political opposition to the Icelandic-US military alliance: “He is a bitter enemy of the United States and NATO and supports Communist peace movements.”⁶³ The *Citizen-News*, a local newspaper out of Hollywood, Laxness’s old stomping grounds, offers one of the most colorful headlines that claims him and rejects him at once: “Nobel Prize Awarded to Ex-Hollywood Pinko.”⁶⁴ Even in a *New York Times* article, “Icelandic Novelist Wins Nobel Prize,” that avoids the incendiary language of other outlets, the piece takes the time to point out that Laxness

"spent considerable time in the Soviet Union in 1932, 1938, and 1953" and that he participates in "the Communist-sponsored peace movement."⁶⁵

The articles about Laxness that circulated in regional papers between October and December 1955 appear to be built from at least two distinct press releases, which were then adapted to serve local audiences or condensed to fit the space constraints of the papers. These stories frequently express a critical position on Laxness through biased headlines and an emphasis on the author's political leanings and personal and career failings. While some articles refer to him as "anti-American" and a "red," others target him with more neutral language, using terms such as "communist" or "left-wing," reflecting the gradation of anti-Communist sentiment during the period. Interestingly, some versions of the story highlight Laxness's two inauspicious journeys to the United States in the 1920s. For instance, the piece "Anti-US Author is Nobel Prize Winner" in the *Knoxville News-Sentinel* describes how Laxness once lived in the US but was forced to leave "after a public clamor against him."⁶⁶ An account in the *Daily Herald* from Provo, Utah, even includes an obscure anecdote about how Laxness was turned away at Ellis Island:

The author has been in hot water with U.S. immigration authorities. He first tried to enter the United States in 1922. Ordered back to Denmark, he embraced Catholicism and entered a Belgian monastery as a monk.... In 1927, Laxness was admitted to the United States and went to California where he wrote two articles denouncing the movies.⁶⁷

Published in December, articles based on the second press release foreground Laxness's rebelliousness, describing him as a "bad boy" and a "globetrotter" known for his "irreverence" while also criticizing his work as an inaccurate depiction of the Icelandic nation.⁶⁸

In turn, the left-wing press embraced Laxness's victory as a win for the proletariat. The November 27, 1955 headline in the *Sunday Worker* declares, "Nobel Prize Novelist, Laxness, Hailed by Workers, Artists" and features a picture of Laxness's "homecoming" to Iceland, where he is surrounded by a crowd of purported workers—a contrast to the opulent photos of the Nobel Prize Ceremony, which appeared in other papers.⁶⁹ Some on the Left alleged bias in the press coverage. In a column in *The Daily Worker*, Howard Fast laments the lack of fanfare following the pronouncement of Laxness's award:

I do not remember that the granting of the Nobel Prize for Literature was ever of such a small moment in these United States as with the latest award to Haldor [sic] Laxness, the Icelandic novelist. Hitherto, the normal practice was to make a great event of such an award in the world of literature. The

publisher would rush new editions into print and seek out untranslated works to accompany the books he had: book sections would print critical articles, and photographers would be dispatched to show the writer in his daily flesh and blood.⁷⁰

Fast specifically notes the dearth of coverage about Laxness in *The New York Times* column, “In and Out of Books,” a weekly feature covering news in the literature world.⁷¹

Professor Einar Haugen from the University of Wisconsin was one of the few voices from academia defending Laxness’s literary merit. In a newspaper article in *The Capital Times* published in November of 1955, he criticizes the media coverage of Laxness and argues that the politically charged response to his award overshadows what he believes to be a far more interesting story: “The real news is that a people of less than 160,000 inhabitants, and living in the most northerly county in the world, has fostered a man worthy of the highest literary award that can be given.”⁷² Like Fast, Haugen also calls attention to the scarcity of Laxness’s publications in the United States, acknowledging that the gap exists because “Laxness is regarded by American publishers as politically dangerous.”⁷³ Haugen does admit that “Laxness is a political thorn in the flesh of the West” but makes an argument for differentiating “between a man’s art and his propaganda,” stressing the caliber of Laxness’s novels, which he contends are “magnificent tributes to the freedom of the human spirit.”⁷⁴

Laxness remained a “political thorn” after he won the Nobel Prize, even as he attempted to reestablish his literary relationship with the United States. In fact, his achievements and global reputation made him dangerous enough for the US government to consider ways to defuse and even recuperate him. A declassified status report on Iceland by the OCB Working Group dated January 3, 1956 shows that the USIA strategized ways to deploy William Faulkner as a political and cultural counterweight to Laxness: “USIA studying means for exploiting Faulkner’s statement re. need for U.S. troops in Iceland, to counter writings by communist oriented Icelandic author Laxness.”⁷⁵ The document also outlines how the USIA devised covert tactics to steer Laxness away from communism by bolstering his career in the States:

Same dispatch from post outlines related problem of communist-oriented Iceland writer Laxness who was awarded 1955 Nobel literature prize and suggests consideration of attempting to modify Laxness’ orientation (a) through moderately cordial published references, plus a generous congratulation on award, by Faulkner, and (b) an invitation under private auspices for Laxness to visit U.S. USIA is considering both latter suggestions, second with State.⁷⁶

Laxness’s name also appears on a list of subversive organizations put out by the CIA based on research conducted in 1956; the document mentions the Icelandic-Soviet Cultural Society (MÍR), and Laxness is identified as president.⁷⁷ He is also listed in a 1957 document tracking members of the World Peace movement, which features numerical data, noting that the National Peace Committee in Iceland has a “strength of 8,300 signatures.”⁷⁸

In 1957, Laxness attempted to restore his relationship with the US by returning to the country for the first time since he left amid a “clamor.”⁷⁹ Recovered archives from Laxness’s alien file provide evidence that Laxness was surveilled during the two trips to the United States in 1957 and 1959—a return that was supposed to serve as a restoration of his literary relationship with the United States. When examined alongside his FBI file, these documents reveal that the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) conferred with its New York district offices, the Travel Control Branch, and the FBI in the days leading up to Laxness’s reentry and arrival to the United States. The first document, a letter by L. W. Williams of the INS dated August 9, 1957, outlines Laxness’s case for reentry into the US while also describing his political affiliations:

The applicant is reported to be a member of the Communist Party of Iceland and its front organizations, but he has recently reasserted his claim of being a left-wing socialist rather than a Communist. There are some indications that he might defect from the Communist Party.⁸⁰

Although Williams notes that Laxness had been deemed “inadmissible” in the past, he supports the writer’s entry into the country based on the recommendation of the American Embassy in Iceland.⁸¹ That same day, Williams sent a teletype to the local district offices in New York with the following directive about Laxness’s impending arrival: “Advise FBI and chief investigations your district RE details order and aliens arrival and destination.”⁸² Information was then disseminated across departments about the writer’s impending arrival. On August 12, 1957, John L. Murff, District Director of the INS for New York, forwarded this teletype from Williams to the FBI, affirming that they would be “notified when and if the subject is admitted at this port.”⁸³ The handwritten comments on the teletype outline a plan that was devised by the INS, the FBI, or both (see Fig. 1). Composed in ink on the right side of the document and dated August 12, 1957, the surveillance directive offers the following notes:

Post local L/O

Notify FBI and local investigations and

return to Lookout officers⁸⁴

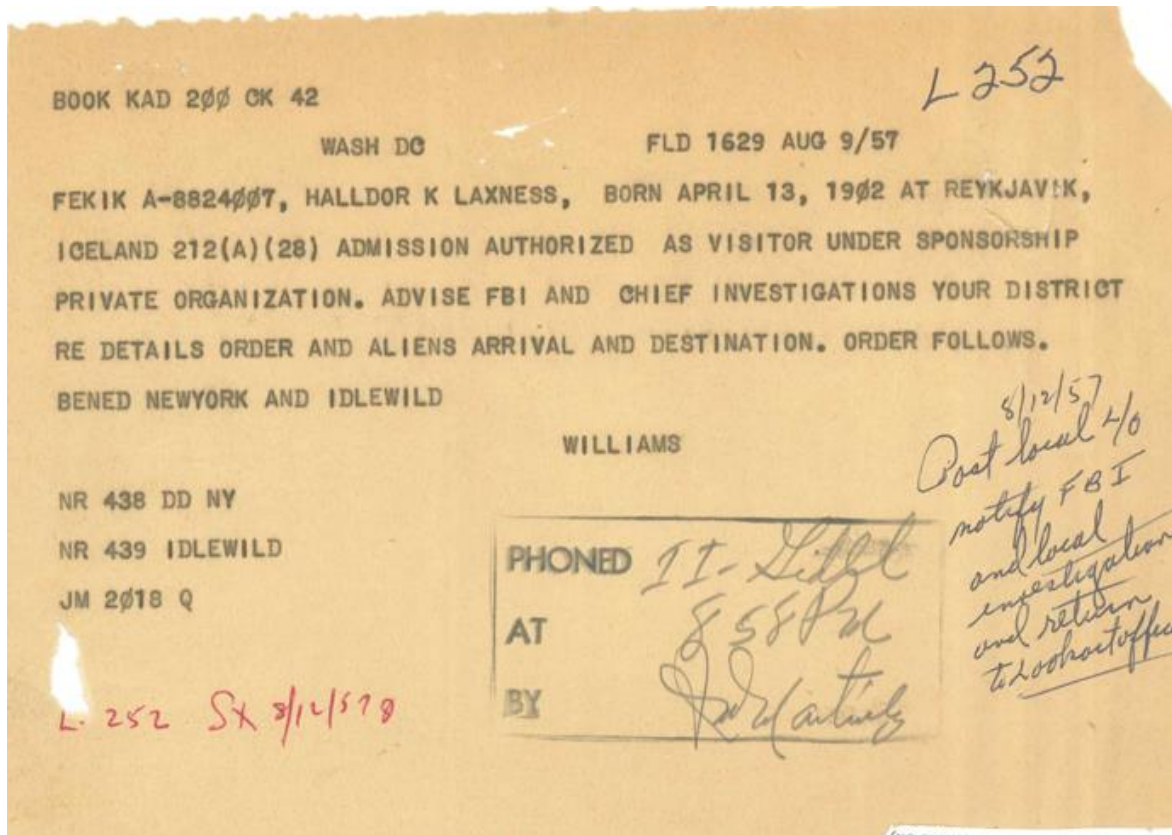


Figure 1. Teletype from L. W. Williams of the INS to the FBI, August 9, 1957. Records of the US Citizenship and Immigration Services, Record Group 566. National Archives at Kansas City.

Despite the covert surveillance, this return visit in 1957 served as the beginning of a literary, if not a political, détente for Laxness himself. According to Halldór Guðmundsson, this world trip included stops in China and the United States, where Laxness “traveled around like a head of state,” and he and his spouse “were constantly being entertained in America by professors and millionaires.”⁸⁵ In a 1957 speech before the American-Scandinavian Foundation, Laxness spoke with the composure and grace of a friendly cultural ambassador, stressing the importance of “[c]ultural partnership” and “friendship.”⁸⁶ He did not mention the contentious issue of the military base but instead praised the work of the ASF and underscored American literary influences on his own development as a writer. The American press also seized upon this trip as an opportunity to reinvent the image of the writer. In October of 1957, his visit was covered by Lewis Nichols for the “In and Out of Books” section of *The New York Times*, the column that had virtually ignored him in 1955 after he was awarded the Nobel Prize.⁸⁷ In his piece on the author, Nichols acknowledges the absence of Laxness’s publications in the United States while ignoring the elephant in the room: the anti-

Communist sentiment that constrained Laxness's literary reception.⁸⁸ In contradistinction from the articles published just two years earlier, Lewis refrains from mentioning the author's political leanings, rebranding the middle-aged author as "a ruddy well-set man of 55," who during his time in the US "lectured before California women's clubs."⁸⁹ Despite these attempts to co-opt and spruce up Laxness's image, a one-line article in the December 1957 *Hartford Courant* had no other raison d'être than to inform the public of Laxness's plans to travel to "Red China" during this same world tour.⁹⁰

Despite this successful return trip to the United States, Laxness's politics remained a transnational security concern. In 1958, Mary Olmsted wrote a comprehensive analysis of "Communist penetration" in Iceland for *Foreign Affairs* that even references Laxness by name.⁹¹ Olmsted maintains that within an Icelandic context, the "Communists have devoted particular attention to the intellectuals and artists, and with notable success."⁹² She goes on to provide an in-depth discussion of Laxness and his politics:

One of the best known of the Icelandic intellectuals to turn in the direction of Communism is Halldor Kiljan Laxness, winner of the Nobel prize for literature, who has served as Althing candidate for the Communist Party and as president of the Icelandic-Russian cultural society in Reykjavík. Intellectual and artistic achievements are highly regarded in Iceland, and Halldor Kiljan Laxness, who occupies perhaps a similar position to that of Ernest Hemingway a decade or two ago, has been a useful instrument of Soviet penetration.⁹³

Although Olmsted believes that Iceland will continue to align with the United States, she cautions that, despite its "Westward orientation," the country remains vulnerable to Communist influence: "The balances of forces affecting the situation will shift from time to time, but it is likely that the Communist Party will continue to exert a significant influence in Icelandic politics."⁹⁴

Surveillance and scrutiny continued as Laxness prepared to enter the US again in 1959 for a research trip for his next novel. Prior to Laxness's trip to the United States, a letter composed by Irvin Shrode, the assistant commissioner of inspections, admits that the author is "inadmissible to the United States because of his reported membership in the Communist party of Iceland and its front organizations."⁹⁵ However, Shrode argues that Laxness should be permitted entry to the country to serve as a symbol of American liberty in contrast to the Soviet Union's restrictive policies:

it is believed such entries would emphasize the interest of the United States in assisting people to break away from

Communist associations, and as contrast to the illiberal treatment recently received when protesting to the USSR in connection with the Pasternak case.⁹⁶

This admission letter is a bit more interesting than the one from Laxness's trip in 1957 as it affirms the implementation of the recuperation plan detailed in 1956 and provides a motive for the concerted shift of position on the writer: a fear that Laxness could become the Pasternak of the West in the global imagination if he were banned from entry. By inviting Laxness back into the country, the US could juxtapose American openness with the suppressive measures enacted by the Soviet Union against 1958 Nobel recipient Boris Pasternak.

Despite Shrodes's assertion that Laxness was not a security threat, records show that the FBI was looped into communication upon the writer's arrival once again. A memo without letterhead dated September 14, 1959 directed to the FBI office in New York by Russel H. Danielson, chief of the seaport section, begins with the salutation "Gentlemen:" before it informs the G-men of the writer's advent with precise detail: "Subject alien arrived at the port of New York on the M/V Godafoss."⁹⁷ The memo even includes the exact address of Laxness's intended lodging: "Subject is destined to The Barclay Hotel, 111 East 48th Street, New York, N.Y."⁹⁸ This trip received far less media coverage. Local newspapers in Utah, for instance, highlight Laxness's literary background and describes his research plans with little attention to his controversial politics. In an article in *The Salt Lake Tribune*, he is described as "a distinguished visitor" who has "lived in many countries and gone through many changes of ideas."⁹⁹

These sanctioned admissions of Laxness into the country in the late 1950s aligned with a larger shift in the FBI's domestic anti-Communist strategy that moved away from the brash, public paranoid style of McCarthy and toward the more covert methods of COINTELPRO, a targeted counterintelligence program implemented in 1956 and focused specifically on infiltrating left-wing political organizations. Laxness was no longer at the center of radical politics in American society. For Laxness, the work that came out of his research in Utah also shows a movement away from the anti-American literary tendency. In *Paradísarheimt (Paradise Reclaimed)*, published in 1960 and partially set in the United States, Laxness turns to the theme of transnational migration. Through his portrayal of the naïve and hardworking Steinar, an immigrant to the US, Laxness writes an Icelandic protagonist into the mythos of the American frontier, juxtaposing the harsh conditions in rural Iceland with those of the American West, taking up earlier themes explored in short fiction works such as his 1929 story "Nýja Ísland." Yet, as his biographer Halldór Guðmundsson points out, "[i]t would be wrong to deduce from *Paradise Reclaimed* that Halldór had renounced all of his political opinions. He was as before opposed to the American military presence in Iceland."¹⁰⁰

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the American military base was no longer at the center of Icelandic political conversations. By the 1990s, neoliberalism had supplanted nationalism as the dominant discourse on the Icelandic Right, and the anti-

NATO movement on the Left had lost much of its fervor. Laxness became less controversial in the US as well, and his works began to return to the American bookshelves. With the republication of his epic novel, *Independent People*, as a Vintage International Edition in 1997, just one year before his death, Laxness’s American literary career finally ascended, prompting the subsequent republication of other Vintage editions: *World Light* (2002), *Paradise Reclaimed* (2002), *Under the Glacier* (2005), and *The Fish Can Sing* (2008). New translations in English also hit the American literary marketplace, including four by Philip Roughton: *Iceland’s Bell* (2003), *The Great Weaver from Kashmir* (2008), *Wayward Heroes* (2016), and *Salka Valka* (2022). In July of 2022, Salvatore Scibona of *The New Yorker* proclaimed this posthumous “rediscovery” of Laxness as a “continuing renaissance.”¹⁰¹ As the literary world now recovers Laxness, it is valuable to situate his erasure within a Cold War context bigger than the writer himself. The trajectory of Laxness’s recuperation parallels the fascinating and complex story of postwar Iceland—a newly independent and recalcitrant nation, ultimately integrated into Western hegemony, but not without a struggle, both literary and political.

Notes

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