Emotional Experience and Microhistory

Emotional Experience and Microhistory explores the life and death of Magnús Hj. Magnússon through his diary, poetry and other writing, showing how best to use the methods of microhistory to address complicated historical situations.

The book deals with the many faces of microhistory and applies its methodology to the life of the Icelandic destitute pauper poet Magnús Hj. Magnússon (1873–1916). Having left his foster home at the age of 19 in 1892, he lived a peripatetic existence in an unstinting struggle with poor health, together with a ceaseless quest for a space to pursue writing and scholarship in accord with his dreams. He produced and accumulated a huge quantity of sources (autobiography, diary, poems, reflections) which are termed by the author as “egodocuments”. The book demonstrates how these egodocuments can be applied systematically, revealing unexpected perspectives on his life and demonstrating how integration of diverse sources can open up new perspectives on complex and difficult subjects. In so doing, the author offers an understanding both of how Magnússon’s story has been told, and how it can give insight into such matters as gender relations and sexual life, and the history of emotions.

Highlighting how the historiographical development of modern scholarship has shaped scholars’ ideas about egodocuments and microhistory around the world, the book is of great use and interest to scholars of microhistory, social and cultural modern history, literary theory, anthropology and ethnology.

Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon is Professor of Cultural History and chair of the Department of History at the University of Iceland. He is also chair of the Center for Microhistorical Research. His latest books in English are *What is Microhistory? Theory and Practice* (2013) co-authored with István M. Szi-jártó, and *Minor Knowledge and Microhistory* (2017), co-authored with Davíð Ólafsson. He is the founder and an editor of the book series “The Anthology of Icelandic Popular Culture” (Sýnisbók íslenskrar alþýðumenninnar) and also co-editor with István M. Szi-jártó of the series “Microhistories,” published by Routledge.

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Emotional Experience and Microhistory

A Life Story of a Destitute Pauper
Poet in the 19th Century

Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon

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Part I

The *normal exception* and stories from the people

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1 Creating a story

To the farm of Fótur under the mountain Fótarfótur, in *Heimsljós* (World Light) by Nobel Prize-winning Icelandic novelist Halldór Kiljan Laxness, came a pauper named Jósep as a long-term resident. Before long he had bonded with the protagonist of the story, Ólafur Kárason Ljósvíkingur (i.e. from Ljósavík), who was a pauper too. Initially Jósep was skeptical; he had difficulty believing that anyone would “turn towards him in good faith”, as it is put in the novel. But in due course Jósep shared his story:

Anyway, he had no regrets about having made the acquaintance of poets. Some men became rich and had fine progeny and retired with dignity in their old age – but they had never made the acquaintance of poets. What was their life worth?

“I have seen all my seven children die; the earth took some, the sea took the others; some were fully grown, some died in childhood. And I have lost their mother, and all my closest relatives, and I myself had to give up my farm and go on the parish after living in the same croft for forty years – but what does that matter? I had Guðmundur Grímsson of Grunnavík for a friend. At any time I was ready to lead my only cow out of the barn and take it to him if he needed it, even if it meant depriving my own children of their sustenance. If I had the chance of living my whole life over again and having all my seven children alive, but doing without the friendship of Guðmundur Grímsson of Grunnavík, I would not accept it. Guðmundur Grímsson of Grunnavík is a master and a sage. He is undoubtedly the greatest living master and sage in Scandinavia.”¹

This narrative is true. It did not happen in reality, but it is true in the sense that it is evocative of the mindset of people who grew up within the same peasant culture in which Laxness places his story. That is not to say that everyone thought as old Jósep did, or perceived reality in the same

1 Halldór Kiljan Laxness, *World Light*, trans. from the Icelandic by Magnús Magnússon (New York: Vintage International, 2002), pp. 45–46.

4 The normal exception

way as he. The relationship with reality is primarily indirect, in this way: many people went through appalling mental torment at that time, when it was not unusual to see one's family, friends and relatives die in the prime of life. The narrative is set just after the middle of the 19th century, when infant mortality in Iceland was, for instance, around 35%.²

Narratives of such life experience abound in Icelandic egodocuments; and a surprising aspect is that at the same time the writers were keenly seeking out material to read and copy – on a larger scale than one might have expected in 19th-century conditions.³ The most unlikely people appear to have been willing to sacrifice almost anything in order to be able to nourish their minds on materials that lifted them above their day-to-day toil.⁴ Jósep is in effect an extreme example of the kind of people who have been the subjects of research in microhistory: a reflection of Ólafur Kárasón *Ljósvíkingur* himself – the protagonist of Laxness' *World Light* – and hence also of the model for that character, peasant scholar Magnús Hj. Magnússon from the West Fjords, as manifested in his diaries.⁵ Magnús' diaries and his life will be one of the main focuses of this book. We shall explore the story of his life primarily in this book, which will address his tribulations specifically – and Magnús' life was both well-documented and dramatic.

“From when I was in my ninth year, and all the time until 1896, I felt that the countenance of God was open to me everywhere; it was as if I heard *all* of nature echo the sound of divine revelation, and I myself was part of that flood of voices, it seemed to me. Yet I felt that my part was so small in all that glory”,⁶ writes Magnús Hj. Magnússon in his unpublished autobiography, which he started to write on 12 January 1914. And many who are familiar with Laxness' writings will find those words reminiscent of a passage of *World Light*:

2 Ólöf Garðarsdóttir, *Saving the Child: Regional, Cultural and Social Aspects of the Infant Mortality Decline in Iceland, 1770–1920* (Umeå: Umeå University Press, 2002), pp. 49–105.

3 Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, “From Children's Point of View: Childhood in Nineteenth Century Iceland”, *Journal of Social History* 29 (Winter 1995), pp. 295–323; Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, *The Continuity of Everyday Life: Popular Culture in Iceland 1850–1940*, Ph.D. dissertation, Carnegie Mellon University, USA, 1993; Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, *Menntun, ást og sorg: Einsögurannsókn á íslensku sveitasamfélagi 19. og 20. aldar* [Education, Love and Grief: A Microhistorical Study of Rural Society in Iceland in the 19th and 20th Centuries], Sagnfræðirannsóknir 13 (Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands og Háskólaútgáfan, 1997).

4 Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and Davíð Ólafsson, *Minor Knowledge and Microhistory: Manuscript Culture in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2017).

5 See my discussion of Magnús in: Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, ed., *Kraftbirtingarhljómur Guðdómsins: Dagbók, sjálfsævisaga, bréf og kvæði Magnúsar Hj. Magnússonar skáldsins á Þrómi* [The Sound of Divine Revelation], Sýnisbók íslenskrar alþýðumenningar 2 (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1998).

6 Lbs 2238 4to – *Æfisaga Magnúsar Hjaltasonar. Ritun af sjálfum honum. Byrjuð á Suðureyri í Súgandafirði, 12. janúar 1914.* [The Autobiography of Magnús Hjaltason].

6 The normal exception

He was not quite nine years old, in fact, when he first began to have spiritual experiences. He would be standing down by the bay, perhaps, in the early days of spring, or up on the headland to the west of the bay where there was a mound with a rich green tussock on top, or perhaps up on the hill above the homefield when the grass was high and ready for mowing. Then suddenly he felt he saw God's image open before him. He felt the deity reveal itself in Nature in an inexpressible music, the sonic revelation of the deity; and before he knew it he himself had become a trembling voice in a celestial chorus of glory. His soul seemed to be rising out of his body like frothing milk brimming over the edge of a basin; it was as if his soul were flowing into an unfathomable ocean of higher life, beyond words, beyond all perception, his body suffused by some surging light that was beyond all light. Sighing, he became aware of his own insignificance in the midst of this infinite chorus of glory and radiance; his whole consciousness dissolved into one sacred, tearful yearning to be allowed to be one with the Highest and be no longer any part of himself.⁷

Laxness indisputably makes good use of the material he has from Magnús, with masterful use of key words and concepts to intensify the effect of these thoughts, so that the reader senses the powerful impressions of both – Ólafur Kárasón and Magnús Hj. Magnússon.

When comparing passages like these, it is necessary to bear in mind the circumstances and motivation that lie behind their creation. The Nobel Prize-winning novelist sits and works with his fabled diligence, writing one draft after another, constantly revising and polishing until the final proof is approved and the printing press takes over. The outcome is a text which is near-unparalleled for literary merit and imagination in the history of world literature in the 20th century.

Magnús kept a diary for 24 years, starting at the age of 19 in 1893. For most of his life he was a destitute pauper, sometimes a *lausamaður* (a semi-independent worker, not bound to a single master) or a *þurrabúðarmaður* (a cottar, or landless laborer), and occasionally a home school teacher. His life was harsh, from cradle to grave. While he was always a poor man, he enjoyed considerable freedom as a *lausamaður*, in comparison with many other people from the same social class. He also decided to write his autobiography, and in addition he collected various interesting information. There were not many drafts for his life story; life itself had absolute priority – and indeed life was often so precarious that the slightest setback could mean disaster and destitution. Magnús may have had the opportunity to rewrite his text once, filling in some of the detail in the narrative and clarifying certain elements – with the idea that he was writing for posterity. Magnús was rescuing from oblivion a story of poverty and injustice, along

7 Halldór Kiljan Laxness, *World Light*, pp. 10–11.

Figure 2 Cover of the book *Ljós heimsins* (in English *World Light*) by Halldór Kiljan Laxness

In the 1930s, about 15 years after the death of Magnús Hj. Magnússon, writer Halldór Kiljan Laxness published his novel *Ljós heimsins* (*World Light*), which is largely based upon Magnús' life story. He had made use of Magnús' diaries, and a remarkable amount of the content is reproduced, almost unchanged, in Laxness' novel. There is no doubt that Laxness made a thorough study of Magnús' life, his feelings and his character. Twenty years later (1956), an actual biography of Magnús was published by Gunnar M. Magnúss, a folk scholar from the same region of Iceland. A little more than 40 years after that book was published, in 1998 – the year of Laxness' death – I published a selection of Magnús' works, from his diaries and his autobiography. Now, after a little more than 20 years, this book is published in English by Routledge, new information having come to light about important aspects of the life of the protagonist. The book focuses on the emotional experience of Magnús Hj. and the people around him.

National and University Library of Iceland. Photographer: Helgi Bragason

with cultural heritage such as stories and rimes. Magnús' text must be judged in light of these factors; it embodies a man's feeling for life – the feeling of a man who has a lot to say – and a text which points to the way toward the kind of “emotional community” to which he belonged.⁸

Magnús' text, especially the elements relating to his emotionally fraught adventures, has previously been addressed by biographer Gunnar M. Magnúss in *Skáldið á Þröm* (The Poet from Þröm).⁹ The farm of Þröm was Magnús' last home. The book is a biography of Magnús, in which the author recounts the details of his life, making use of Magnús' many manuscripts. The principal flaw in Gunnar M. Magnúss' approach is a failure to differentiate clearly between his own narrative and Magnús' text; in places the reader loses sight of whether the biographer or his subject is speaking, and thus Gunnar's account of Magnús' often turbulent life sometimes fails to achieve the desired effect. Gunnar appears to have been too familiar with Magnús' life story – having known him well as a child – and the excitement and risk that typified Magnus' life is lost in the book.

Oddly, Gunnar M. Magnúss makes no reference at all in his book to Laxness' *World Light*, although it must have obvious to him, as to many others, that Laxness had made copious use of Magnús' diaries. And *Skáldið á Þröm* was published in 1956, shortly after Laxness had won the Nobel Prize for Literature! But in a interview in the magazine *Útvarpsblaðið* in 1951 Gunnar M. Magnúss gave the following account of Laxness' first acquaintance with Magnús' diaries:

Vilmundur, the Director of Public Health, had read a certain amount in the books he had owned [Vilmundur had acquired some of Magnús' books when he was Regional Physician at Ísafjörður, when they were auctioned off after his death along with other possessions] and perhaps more from that archive. One time when he met with Halldór Kiljan Laxness he pointed out the archive to him, and said: “Here you have the makings of a story.”

Kiljan [Laxness] followed his suggestion, started to read the archive, and that process ended with his writing his novel about the *Ljósvíkinger*, which is now well-known.¹⁰

Long before Halldór Kiljan Laxness and Gunnar M. Magnúss started to make use of Magnús' story and colorful life in their writing, another author, in the early 20th century, had observed how interesting a character

8 Barbara Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006). See discussions later in this book.

9 Gunnar M. Magnúss, *Skáldið á Þröm. Ævisaga Magnúsar Hj. Magnússonar* [The Poet from Þröm: A Biography] (Reykjavík: Íðunn, 1956).

10 “Ævisaga Ljósvíkingss” [A Biography of a Poet], *Útvarpsblaðið* 1:15 (1951), p. 7.

Magnús would be to write about. He was Sigurbjörn Sveinsson, a friend of Magnús and a fellow-writer, who is best known for his book *Bernskan* (Childhood), which was read by many Icelandic children well into the second half of the 20th century. In 1910–11, when Magnús was in jail in Reykjavík for the rape of a 14-year-old girl who was a former pupil (to which we shall return in the next part of the book), his friend Sigurbjörn made a point of visiting Magnús to cheer him up. In his diary Magnús writes about Sigurbjörn and their relationship:

he had it in mind to write a big novel, and he had already made a start; he talked of making me one of the main characters in the story – he said he found my life so “strange and interesting,” and so he wanted to describe my way of thinking, my life’s work and conditions of life, in so far as he could; and now he wanted my permission to do so. He also requested to borrow from me, for a fee, some of my diaries, in order to understand as well as possible my thinking at various times – but I could promise him nothing, as things stand.¹¹

Before long Magnús gave Sigurbjörn permission to borrow the diary, with the following words: “He was welcome to it, but I probably would not have lent it to anyone else.”¹² I do not know whether anything came of Sigurbjörn’s planned novel, but Magnús may have been a model for some character(s) in Sigurbjörn’s later writings. The inference is that from an early time Magnús’ life and his diaries intrigued people who had some knowledge of him – and that is far from surprising, as the reader will have a chance to judge in this book.

The diary comprises 4,351 pages of quarto, in fine handwriting and containing exhaustive details of his daily toils over these years, along with reflections and poetry. The diary is of interest, not only because Magnús maintained it so scrupulously and used it to record his opinions, attitudes and feelings for people and animals, but because it reflects a life course that was constantly strewn with thorns. Magnús stood, in a sense, on the cusp between the old world and the new. There are aspects of his life that recall manners and customs that must strike modern readers as inconceivable. Despite all his adversities, Magnús appears in his diaries as a man who had a powerful desire to live a healthy, normal life, but was prevented from attaining that objective due to the prejudice and indifference he encountered regarding people in poverty. Magnús’ unceasing efforts to live a life of dignity, recorded forthrightly in his diary, make this a document worth its weight in gold. Admittedly he made many mistakes and paid dearly for them, but that does not change the fact that he put great effort into living a life which could be viewed at first glance as morally decent and righteous.

11 Lbs 2228 4to – The Diary of Magnús Hj. Magnússon: 4 February 1912.

12 Lbs 2228 4to – The Diary of Magnús Hj. Magnússon: 11 February 1912.

Figure 3 A self-portrait of Magnús Hj. Magnússon

“I know a man who is like this: He is nearly 70 inches tall, and quite thin for his height and rather narrow-waisted; he has long legs; a curved back; with high shoulders, with a neck of average length; with a small head; a fair mouth; with a largish nose, with a flat front or a disc on the front and a little kink in the middle. Rather heavy-browed, with light brows, grey-eyed, and with fine eyes – warm and bright. The tone of the face is usually rather white, but generally a fair color. He has a handsome face, is kindly and genial, and gentle-mannered, always kind and amiable and polite; is good at governing his temper, though he may occasionally fly into a rage, although it is hardly noticeable by others. He is quite drawn to women, though not obviously. He is an unusually sprightly walker, and quick in all his movements, but lacks stamina, which arises from his ill-health – although he is often surprisingly tenacious. – That man is: Magnús Hjaltason, who writes his name as Magnús Hj. Magnússon, since the summer of 1894. February 1898.” (*Lbs* 2216 4to – *The Diary of Magnús Hj. Magnússon: Afterword 1898*).

Ísafjörður Photo Archive no. 13192/1914. Photographer: Björn Pálsson

In childhood he had been raised in a foster family who received a stipend from the local authority for his keep, and his parents' poverty, along with his own ill-health and vulnerability, severely circumscribed his possibilities in life. The debt to the authorities, incurred in his youth as a pauper, followed him all his life; in later life he was refused permission to marry unless he settled the debt, which he was never able to do, and thus he lived “in sin” until death. He and his life-partner had six children,

of whom only two lived to adulthood, as we shall see in the second part of the book. Ironically enough, Magnús' most treasured possessions – his diaries – were sold at auction after this death, in order to partially repay the debt to the authorities. So Magnús' record of the people with whom he had dealings finished up in the hands of those very men – until it was rescued and placed in the safekeeping of the National Library.

Magnús wrote a brief autobiographical sketch of his early years, almost until the time that he began to keep his diary at the age of 19. Magnús feels that he has been guided by principles of truth in his writing, and he articulates this idea well in the foreword to his autobiography:

I have as a rule in my writing wished to ensure that *the side of truth should prevail*, and I hope that this will be taken into account when judging what I have written, while taking less account of the personalities in question. To tell a *false* story is anathema to me.¹³

Magnús ends the foreword with his hopes for reception of the autobiography:

In hope of some gratitude from people of later times, I thus carry on my journey towards the work of a writer, which is subject to difficulties of various kinds, and I pray that the hand of the Almighty may sustain me in my work.¹⁴

Magnús thus appears to assume that his autobiography will find a readership; both the diary and the autobiography must be viewed in the context that Magnús was embarking upon his campaign for redress for the ill-treatment he had suffered in his youth.

Halldór Kiljan Laxness made extensive use of Magnús' voluminous diaries in writing his famous novel. Guðmundur Grímsson of Grunnavík, the scholar so admired by the pauper Jósep (see pp. 000–000) in the novel, was a composite of two real-life peasant scholars, Sighvatur Grímsson of Borgarfjörður and Þórður Þórðarson of Grunnavík, who were friends and allies of Magnús Hj. The common factor shared by these three men, whose lives were reworked into Laxness' novel, was that they were all members of the class of people that historian Davíð Ólafsson and I have called

13 Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, *Kraftbirtingarhljómur Guðdómsins*; see Lbs 2238 4to – Æfisaga Magnúsar Hjaltasonar. Rituð af sjálfum honum. Byrjuð á Suðureyri í Ségandafrði, 12. janúar 1914. [The Autobiography of Magnús Hjaltason].

14 Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, *Kraftbirtingarhljómur Guðdómsins*; see Lbs 2238 4to – Æfisaga Magnúsar Hjaltasonar. Rituð af sjálfum honum. Byrjuð á Suðureyri í Ségandafrði, 12. janúar 1914. [The Autobiography of Magnús Hjaltason].

Figure 4 Manuscripts written by Magnús Hj.

The diary of Magnús Hj. Magnússon fills 4,351 pages of quarto, in fine handwriting and containing exhaustive details of his daily toils over these years, along with reflections and poetry. The diary is of interest, not only because Magnús maintained it so scrupulously and used it to record his opinions, attitudes and feelings for people and animals, but because it reflects a life course that was constantly strewn with thorns. Magnús wrote also a brief autobiographical sketch of his early years, almost until the time that he began to keep his diary at the age of 19. He composed verse all his life, and also compiled a range of interesting information gathered from others – either from oral accounts or copied from old manuscripts – some of them centuries old. The material he compiled in this way was wide-ranging, and opens an unusual perspective on the life of a poor man who had a passion for writing down everything he experienced and thought.

National and University Library of Iceland. Photographer: Helgi Bragason

“barefoot historians”.¹⁵ That group was much more numerous – for instance in the West Fjords region alone in the 19th century. In the early years of the 20th century Magnús Hj. Magnússon compiled a list of over 200 men and women whom he knew to have engaged in poetry and literary pursuits. The list includes a number of nationally renowned and recognized poets, as well as officials and clerics with a talent for verse; but the

15 Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and Davíð Ólafsson, “Barefoot Historians: Education in Iceland in the Modern Period”, in Klaus-Joachim Lorenzen-Schmidt and Bjørn Poulsen, eds., *Writing Peasant: Studies on Peasant Literacy in Early Modern Northern Europe* (Kerteminde: Landbohistorisk Selskab, 2002), pp. 175–209. See also Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and Davíð Ólafsson, *Minor Knowledge and Microhistory*, in which the relationship between the men is explored in detail.

majority of the poets and lay scholars were members of the numerous class of self-taught peasants who are, in part, the subject of this book. Magnús generally referred to such individuals in Icelandic as *skáldyrðingar*, a term that may be expressed in English as something like “poet-scholar”.¹⁶ The word *skáldyrðingur*, coined by Magnús, is an unusually potent neologism, embracing the pursuits of many of the people listed: they enthusiastically transcribed manuscripts, and in between times they wrote verse or collected poems – they had verse continually on their lips, like many others around them. The distinction generally drawn today between poets and writers on the one hand, and scholars on the other, does not play a big part in the mindset of people like Magnús Hj. Magnússon. He alone, for instance, left 11,000 poems and *rímur* (rimes). In other words, he wrote about three of these every day of his life – and many were long and complex! But his activity was far from unique in the West Fjords. Sighvatur Grímsson, for example, compiled biographies of all Iceland’s priests and clergy from the time of the settlement in the 9th century until the end of the 19th. The text, which is about 20,000 pages in length, is one of the most valued bases for genealogical research in Iceland.¹⁷ In addition Sighvatur kept a detailed diary for 67 years, in which he noted, among other things, all his literary activity and other notable events. Sighvatur was a farmer who lived most of his life in dire poverty on the farm of Höfði in Dýrafjörður in the West Fjords – the same region where Magnús spent almost all his life. These men formed an “emotional community” of a kind in the West Fjords – a community which provided those who needed it with a mental refuge – and also a tangible one, as a man like Magnús Hj. would often seek support from some other member of the group, as he knew that he would always be given shelter, at least for a time.

16 Lbs 2235 4to – Gríma: Skáld og hagyrðingar á Íslandi 1902–1903. [The Work of Magnús Hj. Magnússon].

17 See Davíð Ólafsson’s doctoral thesis: *Wordmongers: Post-Medieval Scribal Culture and the Case of Sighvatur Grímsson*, Ph.D. thesis, University of St Andrews, Scotland, 2008.

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Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon with scholar and former editor Kjartan Ólafsson, March 1998. Kjartan's roots are in Súgandafjörður, and he is very well-informed about life in the West Fjords in past and present.

Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon with Ásta S. Reynis, October 1998.

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