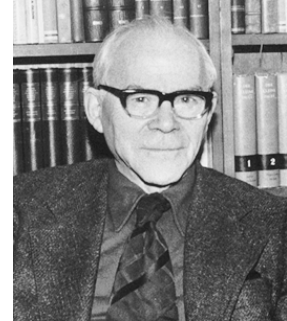


Jakob Benediktsson (1907–1999)

It is difficult to imagine Icelandic studies without Jakob Benediktsson, whose small physical stature belied a man of giant intellect. He had been the “grand old man” to several generations of students and scholars, and I suppose we somehow thought he would go on forever — always there with his ready advice and warm growl.

To me he seemed, to twist a phrase, a master of all trades and jack of none: a classicist, a linguist, a lexicographer, a literary historian, an editor, a translator — he excelled in all these fields. But being a man of precision and modesty, he would probably have described himself simply as a philologist, since it was in classical philology that he received his first training. And if one takes the word at face value, as ‘one who loves words’, it might indeed serve well to describe Jakob’s many-faceted career.



Love of words was certainly ingrained in his family, farmers of meager means who lived at Fjall in Skagafjörður. Jakob was encouraged to study by his parents, but since there was no school in the district and the family could not afford to send him away to school, he studied primarily on his own, assisted by the local clergymen. Despite receiving little in way of formal tuition, he graduated with distinction from the Reykjavík grammar school and was awarded a scholarship for further studies. These he pursued at the University of Copenhagen where he read classics, gaining his degree in 1932. He then became an assistant to Professor Christian Blinkenberg in editing the Greek inscriptions that had been found in Lindos — a collaboration which was the source of many stories, not all of them entirely serious. Soon, however, at the instigation of Professor Jón Helgason, Jakob turned his attention to Icelandic Neo-Latin literature and subsequently received a doctorate for his work on the seventeenth-century Icelandic humanist Arngrímur Jónsson hinn lærði. But he did not limit himself to the study of Latin works, as his numerous editions and studies of vernacular Icelandic literature, both medieval and of later periods, attest. Jakob was a superb editor, as those many scholars who have used his *Íslendingabók* or *Landnámabók* will know. The hallmarks of his editions are clarity, organization, and sound judgment. The introductions are clear and concise, with all relevant material carefully sifted and clearly presented, with no ink wasted on redundant information or nebulous theories. Few Icelandic scholars can match the lucidity of his prose style.

Jakob had married the archaeologist Grethe Kyhl in 1936, and the couple remained in Copenhagen until after the Second World War, returning in 1946 to Iceland, where Jakob directed the publishing house Mál og menning for two years, before becoming director of the Icelandic dictionary project at the University of Iceland (*Orðabók Háskólans*), a post which he was to hold for nearly thirty years until his retirement in 1977. During his latter years in Copenhagen he had worked on the *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*, which is still being compiled under the auspices of the Arnarnaganaean Commission, and it fell to him to shape the work of the *Orðabók Háskólans*, which takes up where the *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* leaves off, at the year 1540. He set to that task with characteristic diligence. Alongside his job at the dictionary, Jakob continued to contribute to other fields of Icelandic scholarship and to cultural life in a broader sense (for example, he helped establish regular chamber music concerts in Reykjavík). He was much sought after as a speaker at conferences and colloquia and taught for years at the university as well as serving there as an examiner, while at the same time maintaining an active involvement in Mál og menning, not least as editor of its literary journal, *Tímarit Máls og menningar*. He was a skilful translator who translated both from and into

Icelandic — he was, among other things, responsible for the translation of many of Halldór Laxness's novels into Danish, often in collaboration with his wife. And one should not neglect to mention the significant part he played as one of the editors of *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder*. His learning spanned an extraordinary breadth — he concerned himself with Icelandic literature from its beginnings to the present and with works written in Latin as well as in the vernacular; his approaches included everything from paleography to history to recent literary theory, and his contribution greatly influenced the way many of these disciplines developed within Icelandic studies.

Jakob enjoyed two decades of scholarly activity after he retired from the dictionary, and he remained in good health almost till the end. Among other projects, Jakob edited an Icelandic dictionary of literary terms, translated Arngrímur Jónsson's *Crymogaea* into Icelandic, and participated in the work of a group of Nordic scholars interested in Neo-Latin literature.

Those of us who had the good fortune to know this remarkable man recognize what a privilege it was. For he was perhaps the last of a kind — a true polymath and an outstanding philologist whose love for words never seemed to diminish. The last time I saw him he was, as usual, reading a host of new books — his only complaint was that his failing eyesight prevented him from reading two pages at a time, as had always been his habit.

The loss of his slender figure from our ranks leaves a huge gap — one it will be very hard to fill.

Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir