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In the late 1950s, LDS bishop John Bearnson, of Utah, *left*, befriended Nobel Prize-winning novelist Halldór Laxness, providing him background information for his Mormon-themed novel, *Paradísarheimt*. Courtesy of Gljúfrasteinn (Halldór Laxness Museum), Mosfellsbær, Iceland.

Halldór Laxness and the Latter-day Saints

The Story behind the Novel *Paradísarheimt*

Fred E. Woods

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of Halldór Laxness's well-known novel *Paradísarheimt* (*Paradise Reclaimed*).¹ On the occasion of this anniversary, I wish to revisit this fine work and address some of the salient facts behind the fiction of Laxness's novel as well as his relationship with the Latter-day Saints. I approach this subject not as a literary scholar but as a historian of religion and immigration. I will briefly sketch the Icelandic Latter-day Saint experience and share biographical information on a few key figures as well as the historical background from which the book was framed. In addition, I will demonstrate that Laxness enjoyed a pleasant association with the Latter-day Saints and respected their lifestyle, though he approached the topic with a bit of irony and satire and took poetic license in his writing of this work.

LDS missionary work in Iceland commenced in 1851 but came to an abrupt halt on the eve of World War I, when Laxness was about twelve years old.² For the next six decades (1914–1974), there was no official, organized ecclesiastical unit in Iceland for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In the same year that Laxness won the Nobel Prize for literature (1955), Elder Spencer W. Kimball, a member of the LDS Church's Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, visited the Danish Mission and wrote a letter to Church President David O. McKay and his counselors, stating, "I wonder if further consideration should be given to the inclusion of this area [Iceland] in the Danish Mission because of the language, to be made an independent mission later if and when it is secure enough."³

Two years later, in mid-September 1957, Laxness came to the United States at the invitation of the American-Scandinavian Foundation. Though he was branded by some as a "notorious Communist" and people knew

he did not want an American base in Iceland, he still managed to say a few good things about America, even if they were only diplomatic expressions. Laxness and his wife, Auður, visited several American cities, including Salt Lake City, where they met a Mormon bishop named John Bearnson.⁴ Bearnson, who was associated with the American-Scandinavian

Fred E. Woods

I have studied Mormon immigration for many years now, but I became interested in Icelandic Mormon immigration only about ten years ago. My wife, after reading a newspaper article announcing the development of a museum exhibit in Hofsos, Iceland, on Latter-day Saint emigration, phoned me at work and told me that she had a feeling I should be involved. That prompting proved to be a blessing for the past decade.

I soon came upon the novel *Paradise Reclaimed* by Icelander Halldór Laxness, Nobel Prize winner for literature, and I also discovered that many Icelanders have become acquainted with Mormonism by reading this novel. It tells the story of an Icelandic Mormon convert immigrating to Utah in the nineteenth century in search of paradise and of his return to his native homeland in Iceland to find the paradise he was seeking. The book gave me a great launching pad to tell the facts behind the fiction: of about four hundred Icelandic converts who immigrated to Spanish Fork in the years 1855–1914, only a few returned home or left the Church. I have been blessed with opportunities to share this history on Iceland's national radio and television stations as well as through the courses on Mormon doctrine and history that I have taught at the University of Iceland the past two summers. In addition, I have given a number of lectures in several locations in the land of fire and ice. It has been a great conduit to clarify LDS history and doctrine and to share the wonderful relationship Halldór Laxness had with his Latter-day Saint friends in Utah.



Fred Woods in the library of Halldór Laxness, Halldór Laxness Museum, Mosfellsbær, Iceland. Courtesy Gerhard Guðnason

Foundation, had contacted Laxness via telegram to make arrangements for their initial meeting.⁵

Less than two months later, Laxness sent a letter to the Bearnsons thanking both John and his wife, Birdella, for their “generous hospitality,” noting that he was pleased to have met a Latter-day Saint who had the high standards that Bishop Bearnson possessed. Laxness warned that Bearnson “must be prepared to receive letters from me bye and bye, in which I shall be asking of you small services.” Laxness also noted, “As I told you, the struggle of the early Mormons has been intriguing me for a long time and if I ever should get down to writing a little novel about the Icelandic Mormons, some chapters must be placed in the Mormon state itself.”⁶

Not everything in the Mormon state pleased Laxness. In describing this Utah visit, Halldór Guðmundsson notes that though “the Mormons were very helpful,” Laxness “was not exactly enthusiastic in Utah: it did not sit well with him to spend a lot of time with people who offered neither coffee nor alcohol. Halldór always thought water an unofferable drink when people gathered.”⁷

Ambassador David B. Timmins Meets Laxness

The following year, Laxness would again come into contact with the Mormons, but this time it would be on his native soil. A twenty-eight-year-old Latter-day Saint named David B. Timmins arrived with his young family to work as the American consul at the U.S. embassy in Iceland. Consul Timmins later wrote, “When my wife and I arrived in Reykjavik, Iceland, with our two small sons in early 1958 for my posting to the U.S. Embassy there we immediately found ourselves to be objects of great interest because of the fact that we were Utahns and Mormons. We quickly learned that virtually everyone in Iceland has relatives in Utah—most in the Spanish Fork area.”⁸ Timmins further related, “We soon found ourselves invited to any number of receptions, where we were besieged with questions about Utah and the Church. And the local newspaper soon arrived to interview and photograph us and our three children [their third child was born after their arrival] for a front page article.”⁹ Soon thereafter, Timmins was told that the Lutheran bishop of Iceland, Ásmundur Guðmundsson, was teaching a comparative religion course at the University



David B. Timmins.
Courtesy Church History
Library



Ásmundur Guðmundsson, circa 1920. He served as Lutheran bishop of Iceland from 1954 to 1959. Courtesy National Museum of Iceland.

of Iceland and wanted him to discuss Mormon doctrine with his students.¹⁰ Timmins reported:

The Bishop, who proved to be a most distinguished and courteous gentleman, came to our home for a period of one night a week for six or eight weeks while we explored Mormon doctrine in detail, and in the process we became good friends. At the end of our relationship two years later when we were about to depart Iceland, he told me that he would be pleased to welcome Mormon missionaries back to Iceland (where they had not been for over a hundred years) because he felt we had a message which would improve the moral climate of his countrymen which he considered to be deteriorating.¹¹

Timmins was welcomed not only by this kindly bishop, but he and his wife were also invited to spend an evening in the country home of Halldór Laxness. Here in the Laxness home, the Timminses had the opportunity to mingle with other guests who were numbered among Iceland's aristocracy. During the course of the evening, Laxness invited Timmins privately into his library and related to him that Iceland's bishop had told Laxness about the Mormon from the embassy.¹² Timmins explains what followed:

It turned out that he was considering a Mormon theme for his next novel and had been put on to me by our mutual acquaintance the Bishop. We talked history and doctrine for about three hours, and at the end of the evening he asked my assistance in arranging contacts and interviews for his intended visit to Utah to gather background for his novel.

I thereupon wrote my father, W. Mont Timmins, a bishop, patriarch, and historian, who agreed to make further appointments and escort Mr. Laxness during his visit to Utah. I also wrote a couple of General Authority acquaintances. . . . Mr. Laxness made his trip, later informing me how courteously he'd been received and how delighted he was with his trip. While I'd by that time left Iceland for Harvard University, Mr. Laxness sent me an English language copy of his new book which he called *Paradise Regained* [sic].¹³

In an interview in spring 2008, Timmins noted additional things related to his visit to the Laxness home:

He had a nice two-story country estate. . . . Laxness invited us to the dinner party at his house. I had no idea why. . . . We got to Laxness's

house and were welcomed, and it was an English-speaking evening, I think in honor of us. . . . We had dinner, and we started visiting after dinner, and Laxness took me by the elbow and led me upstairs to his very lovely study and left my wife and the others downstairs to entertain themselves, which they did very well. He told me he wanted to learn more about Mormonism, that he was thinking about writing a novel about the Mormon experience in Iceland. I didn't tell him, but this was going to present some problems because this was the height of the Cold War, as I repeat again, it was after the McCarthy era, but just barely, and Washington took very seriously the provisions of the Immigration Act, which banned entry to the United States of Communists or Communist sympathizers, and we had a very deep, far-reaching, inquisitive, extensive Intelligence Program in Iceland because Iceland had been on the verge of turning Communist at an early stage of the Cold War. . . . At one point, Laxness, being the author of *An Independent People*, had demonstrated considerable sympathy with the Communist movement, which never emphasized the world Communist movement, but rather the independent Communist structure. I didn't know how we were going to get Laxness a visa and . . . we constantly had problems with visas. [Yet] there was a provision in the Immigration Law which said that "the Attorney General of the United States could for good and sufficient reasons, grant a waiver of this ban." I did . . . talk to Ambassador Muchio and we felt that this was a significant case and a worthy case to ask for a visa waiver for a petition to be approved, and so I wrote a telegram, and we sent it off to the state department for translation to the Attorney General, and in ten days or two weeks we got an approval.¹⁴

Timmins's assignment as a U.S. diplomat in Iceland ended in 1960. Still, the catalytic events he experienced over a period of two brief years proved consequential to the reemergence of the LDS Church in Iceland, and he paved the way for Laxness not only to get his visa but also to launch his research in Utah. Timmins recalled that he told Halldór on the evening of the party, "I was sure my father [W. Mont Timmins], who was a bishop, and fairly well connected, could make appointments with leaders and the arrangements and what not." Timmins further noted: "And he did; he did. And Laxness was delighted with his [Utah] visit; he thought he'd been given red carpet treatment everywhere he went. . . . He was a good guy, and he was a seeker; he was looking for truth and he wasn't afraid to look into things."¹⁵

Laxness Visits Utah

Halldór was a truth seeker from the beginning. His own sacred and secular search had carried him "from country to country, from Catholicism to socialism and finally to renunciation. As a young convert to Catholicism, he had entered a Benedictine monastery in Luxembourg where for five years he wrestled to reconcile enormous spiritual and intellectual tensions."¹⁶

It appears that this inner quest led him to explore Utah in 1957 and 1959, though he had first entered the Latter-day Saints' "promised land" in the fall of 1927.¹⁷

On his first visit to the Mormon mecca, Halldór explained what appeared to be an amusing experience when he passed through U.S. Customs and was presented with a series of questions. One of these questions was "Are you a polygamist?" I, of course answered this 'No. . . .' Then I read the next question, which presented me for the first time with great difficulty: 'Are you in sympathy with polygamists?' To this day I haven't been able to solve this difficulty."¹⁸

Halldór also recounted how he was "confronted with the straight up-and-down, stern, and simple forms of the Mormon Temple of Salt Lake City, and the flat Tabernacle opposite made to look like the mouth of God."¹⁹ In addition, Laxness said that as he looked at the temple it brought back memories of his boyhood reading of the extended travels of "the little man [Eiríkur Ólafsson á Brúnum] through the kingdoms of the world in search of the Promised Land, and the still more hazardous adventures of his poor family who set off to join him later, all this was brought to my mind again, this time with a force of reality that did not leave me in peace for over thirty years."²⁰

Three decades after his initial visit, Laxness returned to Utah. Then two years later, following the additional groundwork that Timmins had laid, he returned to Utah for a third time.²¹ On this trip he was hosted by several Latter-day Saint families, including John Bearnson. Writing from Utah to Auður in a letter dated October 4, 1959, Halldór related, "Recently, I spent four days visiting Bearnson and spoke with the people in Spanish Fork, Provo and Springville, mostly of Icelandic origin, dozens of them, some of them I visited from morning to evening, each after another. I learned incredibly much and gained a tremendous amount of solid knowledge about Icelandic pioneering from first hand."²²

Shortly after his 1959 visit to Utah, Laxness wrote, "Bishop Jon [*sic*] Bearnson of Springville [*was*] my host there in the state." He further noted, "This kind-hearted man spared no pains to see that I was invited to stay in the Salt Lake Valley and even offered us wayfarers full disposal of his house for the duration of our stay."²³ Judge A. Sherman Christensen and his wife,



Laxness in his priestly attire at the monastery. Courtesy Halldór Laxness Museum.

Lois Bowen Christensen, a descendant of Icelandic immigrants, were also involved with hosting Laxness. In another letter written to Auður, Laxness noted that he had visited a federal judge whose wife was of Icelandic ancestry. Speaking of Judge Christensen and his wife, Laxness said, “They were extremely friendly and nice people, the wife was particularly attractive, like Icelandic people can be at their best. She is the third generation here. . . . It is unbelievable how Icelanders keep up their national roots even without knowing it. They stick together as Icelanders for many generations even though they have no Icelandic traditions to keep it up.”²⁴

Laxness wrote to Judge Christensen several years later, telling him that he was mailing an English copy of *Paradise Reclaimed* and noted that he was “writing into it a few personal words for your wife.” In addition, Laxness wrote, “I am keeping in thankful memory the visit at your home in 1959 and the long talk I had with you and your wife about Mormon personal history and related subjects. Your wife gave me some remarkable points about this, thus enriching my material for *Paradise Reclaimed* with substantial facts.” Halldór further noted, “The picture she gave me of some old Utah settlers of her family I pinned up over my desk while doing the final work on the book in Switzerland, and I think the Mormon house in my book has



The photo that inspired Laxness’s descriptions in *Paradise Reclaimed*. Pictured are Margarét Gísladóttir, Gísli Einarsson Bjarnason, Halldóra Arnadóttir, and Guðrun Halldórsdóttir. Courtesy Guðný Halldórsdóttir.

something to do with that wonderful picture; and very decidedly the pram in the picture is the one described in Paradise.”²⁵

Two and a half years later, the Christensens visited Laxness in his homeland, where their generosity was reciprocated.²⁶ Laxness publicly noted on another occasion that during his fall 1959 trip to Utah, “I was helped along with my research work by genial Mormons of all ranks, in Salt Lake City and Provo, in Springville and Spanish Fork.”²⁷ However, when he went to hear the Mormon Tabernacle Choir perform in Salt Lake City at the Tabernacle, he did not care for the selection of music, saying, “The program was rather poor, and I do not understand why so many tremendously good singers are being woken up at eight o’clock in the morning to weep ‘Londonderry Air’ and songs like that.”²⁸

In order to retain the memories of this trip and especially to collect information for his novel, Halldór kept a *minnisbók* (daily planner). Among other things, he had several pages containing what he called “Questions in Utah.”

1. On what points do Mormons consider the Mormon doctrine right where other religious doctrines are wrong? For instance baptism. In what way is baptism by immersion better than baptism by other methods? (Probably because practiced in the case of Christ?).
2. Is Mormonism the true Christian religion? Or is it nearer to the true Christian religion than other Christian beliefs. Or does not the Mormon religion claim to be Christian at all?
3. Which are the religious practices in Mormonism that are different from other general Christian practices? *Articles of Faith* by Talmage.
4. Which are the special Mormon terms for religious practices as f. inst. baptism, marriage, burial rites. The term ‘to seal’ used for marrying people. What is the special Mormon term for baptizing people who are dead? Called baptism for the dead.
5. Only 2% were allowed to practice it [polygamy]. What were the special reasons for polygamy? Are those arguments, now that polygamy has been given up, considered to be invalid? Or do they still hold true, although they are no longer the base of a practice? Or are they held in suspense? 1894 abolished.
6. How was jealousy kept away in the households where there were many wives?
7. Who is nearer to the heart of the Mormons, Joseph Smith or Jesus Christ?
8. What is the reason for Mormons being tea-totallers as far as coffee, tea or liquors go?
9. Organization of education within the Church.
10. Is it the true gospel?²⁹

In addition, Laxness made notations on a number of doctrinal issues, including the following:

1. Laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost: ~~healing of~~
2. Every male member leading a good life may have the priesthood. Holds such so long as he remains righteous.
3. Communion: called Sacrament. The broken Bread. Use water instead of wine.
4. Ordinances—compare to ordination, blessing, healing of the sick.
5. Believed there was an apostasy in Christianity from ca. 3rd century to the appearance of Joseph Smith. Therefore no prophet in this period. Whom do you consider the last Christian prophet before Joseph Smith entered the scene?³⁰

Furthermore, Laxness had information on the history of early Icelandic Mormons who settled in Spanish Fork, Utah, including the 1938 erection of the monument dedicated to the town's early Icelandic settlers. In addition, he made mention of "Vigdís Bjarnadóttir [*sic*] Holt doctor, nurse, mid-wife, jack of all trades . . . of the Bearson brothers." Halldór also included notes to remind him of what to gather from the Utah Genealogical Society:

Get from the Genealogical Society's files . . .

1. Loftur Jónsson (Halldóra Arnason, wife)
2. Gísli Bjarnason—Halldóra Árnadóttir 1st wife, Mara (?) (2nd wife) all children & progeny
3. Samuel Bjarnason family
4. Magnus Bjarnason—? (1st wife) ? (2nd wife) Guðný Erasmusdóttir (3rd wife?)
5. Vigdís Björnsdóttir Holt³¹

Laxness also mentioned LDS Church organizations such as the Sunday School and the Mutual Improvement Association established for the Mormon youth. In addition, he made this general assessment concerning the intellectual nature of the Saints: "I am not impressed with how the intelligence of the Mormons could have ended up being so little, for it is not very great. I do admire, on the other hand, their ignorance. However mistaken, their ignorance has caused to lift them. I consider their ignorance to be greater, for it has taken them farther than their wisdom."³²

This evaluation is followed by a brief comment that later would become a part of the story of *Paradísarheimt*: "Þjóðrekur gives Steinar money . . . to go west [to] Utah." And Laxness further makes the notation "brick layer Mormon in Spanish Fork in Utah."³³

Plot Elements of *Paradísarheimt*

After several months of gathering information in Utah, Laxness returned to Iceland and developed the plot of his Mormon-based novel: An Icelandic farmer named Steinar has desires of having his family obtain a promised land. Steinar initially thinks to obtain such a land by giving a special pony to a Danish king who visits Iceland in 1874. Instead of the anticipated land, Steinar receives only autographed photographs that he decides to trade for four needles.

Steinar is later assured by a Latter-day Saint missionary, Bishop Þjóðrekur, that the promised land he seeks is in Utah. Thus, Steinar sets out for the Mormon mecca in the western United States. After arriving in Utah, he does not fully assimilate, and during his absence from his Icelandic homeland, his family suffers physically and economically. Later his wife dies traveling to Utah, but his children finally arrive in the promised land, assuming that by this time their father has passed away. Steinar returns to Iceland as a missionary and in due course ends up back at his humble farm. The book concludes with Steinar laying stones to repair the wall surrounding his old farm. As he is doing so, a stranger passes by.

“Who are you?” asked the traveller. The other replied, “I am the man who reclaimed Paradise after it had been lost, and gave it to his children.” “What is such a man doing here?” asked the passer-by. “I have found the truth, and the land in which it lives. . . . But now the most important thing is to build up this wall again.”³⁴

Biographical and Historical Facts behind the Fiction

As noted, the plot of the novel is based considerably on the life and writings of Eiríkur Ólafsson á Brúnum (1823–1900), who is depicted as Steinar in the text. Eiríkur Ólafsson was born in 1823 in Steinar, Rangarvalla County. He married Runhildur Runólfsdóttir, and they joined the LDS Church in 1881. A few months later, they left Iceland with their daughter Ingeveldur and grandson Þorbjörn as part of a group of twenty-two converts.³⁵

From Eiríkur’s own account, we know the following about his departure from Iceland:

On the evening of the 8th of July, 1881, I went on board the ship *Camoens*, a horse transport ship of Kökkels, after I, with some effort, a scuffle, and some tribulation of soul and body, was made to protect my grandson, of 14 months old, before 10 sturdy men of Reykjavík, who intended to attack my daughter and tear the child from her bosom at the command of the child’s father, who then wished to be such, but



Eiríkur Ólafsson á Brúnum, 1876, the Icelandic Mormon immigrant on whom *Paradise Reclaimed* is based. Courtesy National Museum of Iceland.

would not acknowledge the boy when newborn. I saw then no way to protect the child from this mob, except I prayed God, as I had the sense to do, to make it so, that they did not obtain the child, and he heard my prayer concerning this, so that she came on board with the child and to this place, who is now very hopeful.³⁶

The Utah-bound Icelanders steamed their way to Granton, Scotland, and then to Liverpool before embarking on July 16 on a Guion Line steam vessel known as the *Nevada*. They reached New York on July 28 and Salt Lake City on August 8.³⁷ On the day of their arrival, the Salt Lake City Latter-day Saint *Deseret Evening News* reported the following:

From Iceland. A company of Saints numbering 21, all told, arrived in this city last evening from Iceland. The company left Iceland on the 8th of July and came by way of Granton, (Scotland), Liverpool and New York, crossing



Camoens, the ship on which Eiríkur Ólafsson á Brúnum left Iceland in July 1881. This photo was taken in 1888. Courtesy National Museum of Iceland.

the ocean in the steamship “Nevada”. Twins were born July 20, 1881 two days before arriving in New York, to the wife of Halldur B. Jonsson, namely Halldur Atlantic and Victoria Nevada. One sister died on the overland route and was buried at North Platte. Brother John Eyvindson, President of the company, remained behind to attend to the funeral. Brother Jacob B. Johnson, returning missionary, brought the company on to this city, and they proceeded to Spanish Fork to-day.³⁸

The one sister who died along the way was Eiríkur’s wife, Runhildur, who was buried in North Platte, Nebraska.³⁹ The following year Eiríkur left Utah on a self-appointed mission to Iceland. He returned to Utah in 1883 and remained in Spanish Fork for a decade. However, he returned to Iceland, remarried, and became disaffected from the LDS faith; he died in 1900.⁴⁰

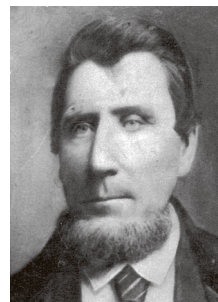
Þórður Diðriksson, the Mormon Bishop

Following Runhildur’s death, Eiríkur’s daughter Ingeveldur and her infant son Thorbjorn (Þorbjörn Þorvaldsson) continued with the 1881 Mormon company to Utah, where they stayed with the Thordur Didriksson (Þórður Diðriksson) family in Spanish Fork. Eiríkur joined them three weeks later.⁴¹ Diðriksson is the Mormon bishop in *Paradise Reclaimed*, Bishop Þjóðrekur.⁴² Þórður, born in 1828, converted to Mormonism in Iceland in February 1855 and left Liverpool for Utah on December 12, 1855, on the ship *John J. Boyd*.⁴³ Soon after arriving in Utah, Þórður’s family was very helpful to native Icelanders, who faced a sudden transition in assimilating into the American settlement of Spanish Fork in the mid-nineteenth century.⁴⁴

In 1875, Diðriksson and Samúel Bjarnason, who had previously immigrated to Utah, were called to proselyte in their Icelandic homeland for one year. Although they did not baptize anyone during this time, they established many friendships, and several Icelanders immigrated with them to Utah, where they arrived in the fall of 1876, having concluded their mission.⁴⁵ Just three years later, Diðriksson wrote the first known missionary tract in Icelandic, a 186-page work titled *Aðvörunar og sannleiksraust* (A Voice of Warning and Truth), which proved to be a useful missionary tool in Iceland during the next century.⁴⁶



Þórður Diðriksson.
Courtesy Fred L.
Dedrickson.



Samúel Bjarnason.
Courtesy Icelandic
Association of Utah.

Byron Geslison's Meeting with Halldór Laxness

A copy of this missionary tract would be given to Laxness as a gift when the Geslison family, a Mormon family of Icelandic descent from Spanish Fork, Utah, was sent to reopen missionary work in Iceland. Byron Geslison, his wife, Melva, and their twin sons, David and Daniel, arrived in Iceland in 1975 and later met Halldór at his country home in Iceland. In an interview I held with Byron Geslison and his son David in winter 2000, they reflected on this meeting a quarter of a century earlier. Byron recalled, "We drove out there, he had a summer home, . . . and we knocked on the door. He had been to Utah. And [when we] told him who it was and he invited me in, and I unveiled this book and took it out and handed it to him, he says, 'Oh! I've been looking for 40 years for a copy of that book.'"⁴⁷



Byron and Melva Geslison. Courtesy Daniel Geslison.

It pleased Byron that Laxness was so thrilled to get a copy of the tract. Laxness said, "How can I pay you?"

Geslison responded, "Well, I brought it for you and I don't expect any pay. I am doing it out of good will and I'm glad to give it to you."

Halldór replied, "Oh, well I'm so thrilled to get this. This is the most well written book that I have ever seen. This man is a great writer, and he gets it to your heart."

Laxness then asked Byron, "Your people don't like me very much, do they?"⁴⁸

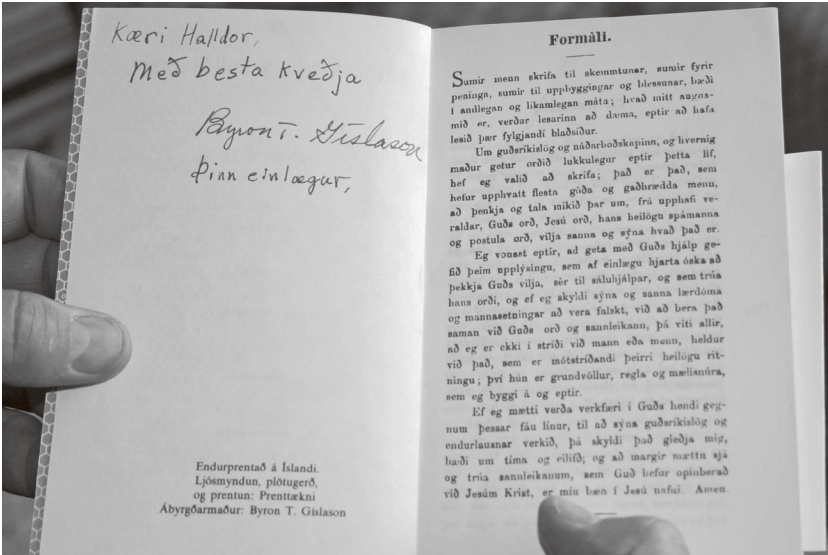
Geslison replied, "Well, some of them do, and some of them maybe don't, but we wondered about you because there are some critical things in there [*Paradise Reclaimed*] that are not true."

Laxness said, "You know, we writers have a poetic license. You know that I didn't mean all those things I said in there that weren't complimentary to you."

Byron said, "Well, I wondered about that. I'm glad to hear that from your lips."

Laxness concluded, "Well, I know that it wasn't all true, but I did it with my poetic, political license."⁴⁹

Evidence reveals that for some time Laxness had been troubled by the reception of the book among the Utah Mormon community. For example,



The author holding the book given to Laxness by Byron Geslison. Courtesy Gerhard Guðnason.

he wrote in a letter to his esteemed Latter-day Saint friend Judge A. Sherman Christensen, “I had the book sent in English to some of my distinguished Mormon friends and acquaintances in Utah, among whom John Bearnson in Springville and Mr. Christansen the Superintendent of the Genealogical Society, who both of them were very helpful to me in my research work.” Yet, Halldór noted, “To my great regret, I have not had a word from any of them, so I think they must be cross with me and this makes me sorry. I thought my book was completely free from malice towards Mormons. . . . Of course it is a book by a Gentile, but a friendly one, I hope.”⁵⁰

Why Laxness Wrote the Book and How He Defined a Promised Land

Shortly after *Paradísarheimt* was released in 1960, an interview with Halldór regarding the novel was published in the Icelandic newspaper *Morgunblaðið*. When asked, “What was the impetus for writing about this subject?” Laxness answered,

Well, nothing else than that the motif has intrigued me since I visited Utah for the first time as a young man thirty years ago. I had read the account of Eiríkur á Brúnum, whose personal prophet was Thordur Didriksson. This is an alluding poetic subject about paradise and the millennial kingdom: it invites one’s thoughts to it. Yes, I have actually always found it intriguing since I first learned about it, and I’ve often pondered

it without doing anything further. Some subjects follow one about for a long time yet are never written, others one completes at once.⁵¹

Two years later, in 1962, in conjunction with the publication of the English version *Paradise Reclaimed*, Halldór wrote an eight-page pamphlet called *The Origins of "Paradise Reclaimed,"* in which he explained the book's genesis and underlying idea. Here he again addressed the question of why he wrote the book: "Many readers have asked what could have moved me, a man from faraway parts, born and bred in Iceland, to write a novel with the center of its plot laid in Utah." He answered, "It is all very simple. Many of us are to some extent believers in a Promised Land where truth and happiness shall prevail forever; and even if we do not believe it ourselves, we think it is wonderful when other people do so."⁵²

Concerning the concept of a promised land, Laxness continued: "This wonderland is not primarily of a geographical nature, although it might coincide with a geographical location."⁵³ Commenting on this statement, Professor Steven Sondrup of BYU has written, "What must be particularly noted is Laxness's explicit divorce of the Promised Land from geographical considerations. . . . Laxness rejected the concept of an ideal being linked too intimately to topology, geography. . . . Paradise is an ideal but not an ideal place."⁵⁴

This statement is most interesting in light of the Mormon definition of Zion, in which Zion is understood to extend beyond the limits of a geographic location to include not only the state (or place) in which one lives but also the state (or inner life) of an individual. In Latter-day Saint scripture Zion is "the pure in heart."⁵⁵ It is defined as a people of "one heart and one mind . . . [who dwell] in righteousness; and . . . no poor among them."⁵⁶

Several Laxness scholars, including Þórður Einarsson, have suggested that Laxness was portraying himself more than he was Eiríkur in his work. Einarsson felt that Halldór was saying in his own way that in whatever concerns the truth and a millennial kingdom, it is the person of man, his personality and what he does to others and his environment, which is of most worth. This has some similarity to the Mormon concept of Zion.⁵⁷ As BYU Professor George S. Tate notes, "Laxness is not writing a biography of Eiríkur á Brúnum or a story specifically about the Mormons. *Paradise Reclaimed* is at once personal and universal. There is something of Laxness in Steinar, something of his own spiritual or ideological odyssey that has taken him from monasticism, to socialism, to his present renunciation and mistrust of ideologies and dogmas."⁵⁸

Concerning the relationship of Zion to the paradise of the novel's title, Sondrup explains, "Not too long after Steinar [Eiríkur á Brúnum] would have returned to Iceland [1891], the Mormon concept of Zion began to

evolve and become more comprehensive.” Further, “once the continued existence of the church was no longer seriously in question and a center was secure, the admonition to emigrate to Utah—to gather to Zion in a literal and geographical sense—was replaced with the [counsel] to stay at home and establish Zion throughout the world.”⁵⁹

Laxness Praises the Life of the Latter-day Saints in Several Interviews

Whether Halldór was observing the Mormons in Iceland or in Utah, several statements he made both before and after the publication of *Paradísarheimt* in 1960 and the English *Paradise Reclaimed* in 1962 seem to demonstrate that he was impressed with the model of Zion that Latter-day Saints were trying to create at home and abroad. Hints of his admiration are apparent as early as 1957 when his novel *Brekkukotsannáll* (*The Fish Can Sing*) was published. Laxness’s narrator describes a woman fleeing Iceland whose passage to the United States was paid by the Mormons: “And indeed I know for a fact that amongst them are to be found some of the finest people in America.”⁶⁰ Before *Paradísarheimt* was published, Laxness wrote that the Utah Mormon “community life seems to be directed to an upbringing, culminating in a wholesome and pure life.”⁶¹ In another article, he noted that the “remarkable” Utah kingdom had “achieved a status that makes the Mormons one of the most sterling and exemplary of America’s many prominent ethnic groups.”⁶²

Soon after *Paradísarheimt* was released three years later, Halldór noted in an interview with *Morgunblaðið*, “I didn’t think I would write a novel about the Mormons, but their attractive life enchanted me so much, and out of some inner reason which I don’t understand, I began collecting materials and information for this book.”⁶³ In this same discussion he was asked, “And what do you yourself think of the truth of the Mormons, Halldór?” He responded, “If it is true that the truth is concealed in living well, then the Mormons have come closer to the truth than most men. They lead exceptionally beautiful and healthy lives, not merely in a moral sense, but in general. They live in a very agreeable society.”⁶⁴

In a later interview, a decade after *Paradísarheimt* was released, Laxness told Randi Bratteli, journalist wife of the Norwegian prime minister, “I was once interested in the Mormons and traveled twice to Utah. I have also written a book about them called *Paradise Reclaimed*. . . . Unfortunately there are no Mormons in Iceland, I would gladly have supported them.”⁶⁵ Finally, in the pamphlet *The Origins of “Paradise Reclaimed,”* Halldór wrote, “In case these lines should reach any of my Utah friends, I want to express my gratitude to them with my apologies for what to them must look like

childish superficiality in recording things with which they are conversant.” He further noted, “All the same I hope that not only the Mormons, but also other readers who in their fashion believe in the Promised Land, and might even have found it, shall not be doubtful of my intentions.”⁶⁶

Laxness enjoyed a warm friendship with several Mormon families in Utah and ultimately respected their lifestyle. After decades of correspondence, the last letter in the Laxness file of incoming correspondence from his dear friend Bishop Bearson represents the general feeling shared by a number of Latter-day Saints in the Icelandic Utah community. By way of invitation to return to Utah, Bearson told Laxness, “The door is wide and always open.”⁶⁷ Laxness’s daughter Guðný recalled the feelings Laxness had for the Latter-day Saints: “My father was always very positive towards the Mormons and Utah.”⁶⁸

Though he took poetic license with the setting and characterization of *Paradísarheimt*, Laxness admired the Mormon culture, especially the ideals of hard work and community building as the Saints sought to create a new Zion and a new paradise. Laxness, like his Latter-day Saint friends, celebrated these ideals of hard work and community as he made his own quest to reclaim paradise.

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Woods has been doing research in Iceland for the past decade and thus far has written the following works on the history of the Icelandic Saints: *Fire on Ice: The Story of Icelandic Latter-day Saints at Home and Abroad* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2005), translated into Icelandic by Friðrik Rafn Guðmundsson and published as *Eldur á ís: Saga hinna íslensku Síðari daga heilögu heima og að heiman* (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2007); “Andrew Jensen’s Illustrated Journey to Iceland, the Land of Fire and Ice, August 1911,” *BYU Studies* 47, no. 4 (2008): 101–16; “Icelandic [LDS] Conversion & Emigration: A Sesquicentennial Sketch,” in *Regional Studies in Church History: Europe*, vol. 4, ed. Donald Q. Cannon and Brent L. Top (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2003), 1–22; “Fire on Ice: The Conversion and Life of Gudmundur Gudmundsson,” *BYU Studies* 39, no. 2 (2000): 57–72.

Most of his publications have been in the area of Mormon emigration and immigration in the nineteenth century by sail, rail, and trail. This past spring he launched a new website, “Mormon Migration,” designed and hosted by the Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, which contains a compilation of much of his research on this topic for the past fifteen years: <http://lib.byu.edu/mormonmigration/>. Fred is married to JoAnna Merrill; they have five children and three granddaughters.

1. The Icelandic version of the novel was published in Reykjavík in 1960 and the English translation in 1962.

2. Halldór Laxness was born on April 23, 1902, and died on February 8, 1998. On the history of the Icelandic Latter-day Saints, see the works by Fred E. Woods, listed on page 63.

3. Marius A. Christensen, “History of the Danish Mission of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1850–1964” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1966), 131. In a talk titled “Icelandic Settlement in Utah 100 Years Old,” given in 1955 at the centennial anniversary of the Icelandic settlement in Spanish Fork, Utah, Petur Eggerz, an ambassador of Iceland, stated, “Two years ago Utah’s Genealogical Society sent welcome representatives to Iceland. They took microfilms of all books and documents in possession of the National Archives in Iceland.” Thus, the microfilming of these records in 1953 may also be viewed as part of the preparation for Iceland to again receive missionaries.

4. Halldór Guðmundsson, *The Islander: A Biography of Halldór Laxness*, trans. Philip Roughton (London: Maclehorse Press, 2008), 380–81. Guðmundsson’s biography first appeared under the title *Halldór Laxness: ÆVISAGA* (Reykjavík: JPV ÚTGÁFA, 2004). This is the finest biography written about this gifted Icelandic author. For an excellent overview of Laxness’s life, see Helga Kress, “Halldór Laxness,” trans. Alison Tartt, in *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Icelandic Writers*, vol. 293, ed. Patrick J. Stevens (Detroit: Thompson and Gale, 2004), 125–49.

5. John Y. Bearnson to Halldór Laxness, telegram, October 15, 1957, Correspondence of Halldór Laxness, National and University Library of Iceland, Reykjavík. A letter written by Bearnson to Laxness three months later further reveals that Bearnson was very involved with providing sources for Halldór’s research. Bearnson notes, “Regarding Church books, I am today mailing to your address in Iceland, two books which are considered the ‘Standard Works of our Church.’ . . . I think this will perhaps give you the information of which you desired and if you need other books let me know and I will try to procure them.” John Y. Bearnson to Halldór Laxness, January 13, 1958, Correspondence of Halldór Laxness. Laxness sent a letter back to Bearnson about two months later, thanking him for “the great gift you made me of the two Sacred Books of your religion, which are going to be of great use to me in studying the Spiritual background of Utah.” Halldór Laxness to John Y. Bearnson, March 27, 1958, Correspondence of Halldór Laxness. Bearnson wrote another letter to Halldór and Auður and again mentioned, “If you desire any information about Utah and the L.D.S. Faith, just write and I will try to supply it for you.” John Y. Bearnson to Halldór Laxness, May 14, 1958, Correspondence of Halldór Laxness.

6. Halldór Laxness to John Y. Bearnson, December 4, 1957, Correspondence of Halldór Laxness.

7. Guðmundsson, *Islander*, 381.

8. David B. Timmins, "The Second Beginning of the Church in Iceland," unpublished three-page document in the possession of the author, 1. The author wishes to express appreciation to Clark T. Thorstenson, who later served as the Icelandic consul to the western United States, for allowing him to have a copy of this manuscript. In a manuscript in the files of the LDS Branch in the Reykjavik region, the first entry to a written Church record since the closure of the mission in 1914 was on May 3, 1959. The entry for that day states: "Kenneth Fowles, Elder, 'presiding and conducting' First meeting held in Reykjavik at the home of Brother and Sister Timmins. Bro. Timmins is listed as employed at the American Embassy." Donald R. Knight, comp., "A Brief History of the Icelandic Branch," 1. The second entry, dated May 6, 1959, notes, "Wednesday evening meeting at Keflavik Naval Air Station. The pattern was [s]et for regular Sunday and Wednesday meetings which continued unbroken until 2 Nov 1960. During this time attendance at the meetings ranged from 3 to 12." Page two of this thirteen-page document, dated September 16, 1972, indicates that Knight compiled these assorted notes.

9. Timmins, "Second Beginning of the Church in Iceland," 1.

10. Ásmundur Guðmundsson was appointed bishop of Iceland in 1954 and served until 1959, when he turned seventy years old and therefore was required by Icelandic law to retire from this office. Michael Fell, *And Some Fell into Good Soil: A History of Christianity in Iceland*, American University Studies, series 7, Theology and Religion, vol. 201 (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 319, 352.

11. Timmins, "Second Beginning of the Church in Iceland," 1. Timmins was incorrect that missionaries had been away from Iceland for a hundred years; it had been sixty.

12. Apparently, not long after Timmins made contact with Laxness, Halldór wrote a letter to John Y. Bearnson in which he noted, "Your American consul in Reykjavik Mr. David Timmins, is a Mormon, we see him and his wife occasionally, and he has been to my place, an extremely nice couple, as I think many Mormons are." Halldór Laxness to John Y. Bearnson, June 29, 1959, Correspondence of Halldór Laxness. Bearnson responded with a letter to Laxness three weeks later: "My brother . . . knows David Timmins mother real well. He told me that he worked in the U.S. Consulate in Reykjavik, when he was here on his visit." John Y. Bearnson to Halldór Laxness, July 18, 1959, Correspondence of Halldór Laxness. This suggests that Laxness had already written Bearnson soon after Timmins had spent the evening in the Laxness summer home.

13. Timmins, "Second Beginning of the Church in Iceland," 2. It seems strange that Timmins was apparently unaware that Laxness had visited Salt Lake City less than two years earlier. It is not certain if Halldór withheld this information from Timmins or if Timmins just did not remember it. If Halldór did not mention the visit, perhaps it was because of his paranoia due to his Communist branding or because he thought it might be possible that Timmins would supply additional contacts.

14. David B. Timmins, interview with the author, April 3, 2008.

15. Timmins, interview.

16. George S. Tate, "Halldór Laxness, the Mormons and the Promised Land," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 11 (Summer 1978): 25; at

Halldór's instigation this article subsequently appeared, translated by Jóhann S. Hanneson, as "Halldór Laxness, Mormónarnir og fyrirheitna Landið," in *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins*, May 5, 1979, 1–5, 14–15. Throughout this paper I have relied on the prior research and translations, some not previously published, of my colleague George S. Tate, professor of humanities and comparative literature at Brigham Young University. Tate interviewed Halldór at the novelist's home while he was a Fulbright student in Iceland in 1971–72 and sent Laxness the *Dialogue* article when it appeared. See also Tate's "Eldorado and the Garden in Laxness' *Paradísarheimt*," *Scripta Islandica* 36 (1985): 21–34.

17. Peter Hallberg, in his book *Halldór Laxness*, trans. Rory McTurk (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1971), points out that "as late as the spring of 1927 he was able to explain in a controversial newspaper article on the subject of *Vefarinn mikli*, that 'among the many conceptions of life which are put forward in my book, I personally favor one alone, namely the Catholic'" (57). Laxness traveled by train from western Canada to California, via Salt Lake City, with his wealthy friend Halldór Halldórsson. Guðmundsson, *Islander*, 132–33.

18. Matthías Johannessen, "Þér eruð kannski orðinn kaþólskur aftur? Spjallað við Halldór Kiljan Laxness við útkomu skáldsögunnar *Paradísarheimt*," *Morgunblaðið*, July 23, 1960, 9 (translated by George S. Tate); Tate, "Halldór Laxness," 27.

19. Shortly after Halldór returned from his 1959 visit to Utah, he described the impressive Salt Lake Tabernacle in greater detail. Among other things, he noted that Brigham Young had directed the erection of this edifice, which Laxness called "a great Ark of the Covenant or Tabernacle, the congregation house of the Mormons." Further, Halldór noted, "The Lord inspired [Brigham Young] with the wisdom that if good acoustics were to be achieved in the congregation house, so that the Lord might be suitably praised, then the hall should be built according to the same principle as man's inner mouth, from lips to gullet. He erected there one of the most astounding edifices in the world. The building is ca. 90 meters long, 50 meters wide and 25 meters high." Halldór Laxness, "Ævintýri um fyrirheitna landið," in *Gjörningabók* (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1959), 122–23 (translated by George S. Tate). This piece first appeared as a two-part illustrated cover article in successive issues of the magazine *Samvinnan*: part 1 in May 1958, 4–7, and part 2 in June 1958, 4–7; part 1 deals primarily with Mormon history, part 2 with Laxness's visit to Utah.

20. Halldór Laxness, *The Origins of "Paradise Reclaimed"* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1962), 5–6.

21. The fact that Laxness indeed made three trips to Utah and truly respected his Mormon friends is strengthened by a letter he wrote to a friend in New York, in which Halldór noted, "I went twice to Utah before starting the work, and for the third time, during the proceeding of the work, I stayed a month in Utah. Such an idea as belittling the Mormon case would never occur to me." Halldór Laxness to Julius Isaacs, April 24, 1978, extract via email correspondence from Halldór Guðmundsson. The author thanks Guðmundsson for reading this paper, providing useful advice, and kindly sharing this material and other letters from his Laxness files.

22. Halldór Laxness to Auður Laxness, October 4, 1959, in the possession of Halldór Guðmundsson. Guðmundsson provided excerpts and notes from this

letter as well as three others written by Halldór to Auður during the period of September 24 to October 4, 1959, which are cited several times in this article. Gratitude is also expressed to Gerhard Guðnason, who translated the excerpts and notes from each of these letters.

23. Laxness, “Ævintýri um fyrirheitna landið,” 121 (translated by George S. Tate). In anticipation of this 1959 visit, John Y. Bearnson sent a letter to Halldór in which he said, among other things, “We [meaning he and his wife, Birdella] will be delighted to see you when you come to Utah, in late August or early Sept. Remember the welcome mat is always out for you. You must let me know when you are to arrive here.” Bearnson to Laxness, July 18, 1959. In a letter dated December 2, 1959, Halldór thanked the Bearnsons for their “valuable help, friendliness and hospitality” during his Utah visit earlier that fall. In addition, he asked the Bearnsons to “please remember me to the wonderful people of Spanish Fork . . . and tell them how deeply I enjoyed their company, both privately and in their homes, and at the big gathering where they gave me the beautiful gifts.” Halldór Laxness to John Y. Bearnson, December 2, 1959, Correspondence of Halldór Laxness. In another letter written by Bearnson to the Laxness family later that same month, Bearnson responded to questions which Laxness had about doctrinal and historical issues in Mormon history. John Y. Bearnson to Halldór Laxness, December 29, 1959, Correspondence of Halldór Laxness. Several months later, Bearnson again responded to a question Halldór apparently had with reference to the geography of Utah. Bearnson gave a rather lengthy, detailed response and included in his remarks a note concerning where the early Icelanders settled in Spanish Fork. John Y. Bearnson to Halldór Laxness, March 8, 1960, Correspondence of Halldór Laxness.

24. Halldór Laxness to Auður Laxness, September 24, 1959, in the possession of Halldór Guðmundsson. It appears that at this time Laxness was unaware of the strong Icelandic traditions that were maintained in Utah during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Evidence of this may be seen in the annual celebration of Iceland Days, which commenced in 1897, and the Icelandic Association of Utah, which is still a very active organization. See Fred E. Woods, *Fire on Ice: The Story of Icelandic Latter-day Saints at Home and Abroad* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2005) 186–88.

25. Halldór Laxness to Judge A. Sherman Christensen, February 5, 1963, Correspondence of Halldór Laxness. The author recently received a copy of this photograph from Guðný Halldórsdóttir, a daughter of Halldór who lives in Iceland. On the back of the photo it states, “Dear Mr. Laxness—This is a copy of the picture in which you were interested in at our house on Wednesday. The home was one of many built in Spanish Fork, Utah, by Loftur Jonsson.” After identifying the individuals in the photograph, the writer then notes, “Good luck and God bless you in your present quest. Sincerely, Mrs. A. Sherman Christensen.”

26. Lois Bowen Christensen noted that on a trip with her husband to Iceland, they had “stopped off at the summer home of Haldor Kiljan Laxness and his sweet wife, Audur, where we were invited for dinner. . . . We had entertained Mr. Laxness at our home in Salt Lake when he was doing research for his new novel, *Paradise Reclaimed*. . . . We found these people to be sweet, modest, and humble, even though they are very famous.” Lois Bowen Christensen, “Icelandic Adventure” (Castle Valley, Utah: Featherweed, 1992), 18–19. The author thanks

Cris Coffey, daughter of A. Sherman and Lois Bowen Christensen, who at his request searched through her father's private journal to find the date of her parents' trip to Iceland and discovered that the visit to the Laxness summer home would have been in late August 1965. In a Christmas card sent by Lois later that year she wrote, "Dear friends—the Laxnesses—Sherman and I loved our visit in your beautiful home. You provided us with such delicious food and with such warm and happy companionship. . . . We think of you and talk of our experiences in Iceland very often." Lois B. Christensen to Halldór Laxness, Christmas card, 1965, Correspondence of Lois B. Christensen to Halldór Laxness, National and University Library of Iceland. On September 29, 1978, Lois sent another card to Halldór and Auður, thanking them for a necklace she had received via their daughter "Döna" (Guðný Halldórsdóttir). Lois writes further, "Next year I am to give a program in my Relief Society [LDS adult women's organization] on Iceland and I can think of nothing more special to show the ancient art of Iceland than this lovely necklace." Lois B. Christensen to Halldór Laxness, September 29, 1978, Correspondence of Lois B. Christensen to Halldór and Auður Laxness.

27. Laxness, *Origins of "Paradise Reclaimed,"* 8.

28. Halldór Laxness to Auður Laxness, September 27, 1959, in the possession of Halldór Guðmundsson.

29. Laxness, *Minnisbók*, National and University Library of Iceland. This daily planner does not generally have dates or page numbers. In addition, Laxness wrote entries in both Icelandic and English, and some of the planner is illegible. The author thanks BYU Icelandic instructor Darron S. Allred for translating Icelandic excerpts from this *minnisbók* for this article and for proofing the diacritical marks in this article. When Laxness returned from his trip, he continued to ask specific questions of both a historical and doctrinal nature. In a letter he wrote to Bearson shortly after he left Utah, Laxness asked, "In what direction from the hill where the Icelandic monument is placed (in Spanish Fork), was Þórður Diðriksson's bricklayer yard?" and "Who exactly are the so called Josephites?" and "Was land in Spanish Fork owned by the church or by individuals, or both, in the settlement day?" Halldór Laxness to John Y. Bearson, December 14, 1959, Correspondence of Halldór Laxness. The *minnisbók* and such questions as these, appearing in a number of letters, reflect the fact that Laxness conducted very careful research for his Mormon novel. Two weeks later, Bearson faithfully responded with detailed explanations for each of these three questions. Bearson to Laxness, December 29, 1959, Correspondence of Halldór Laxness.

30. Laxness, *Minnisbók*.

31. Laxness, *Minnisbók*. Laxness, "Ævintýri um fyrirheitna landið," 110–27, gives further evidence of Halldór's serious effort to understand the history of the Mormons.

32. Laxness, *Minnisbók*. This comment seems a bit strange inasmuch as one of his hosts was Judge A. Sherman Christensen, who no doubt had a very keen intellect. Christensen was a federal judge in the U.S. District Court for Utah from 1954 until his death in 1996. Wikipedia, "Albert Sherman Christensen," online at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert_Sherman_Christensen (accessed July 15, 2010).

33. Laxness, *Minnisbók*. In Halldór Laxness, *Paradise Reclaimed*, trans. Magnus Magnusson (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), the name Bishop Þjóðrekur first occurs on page 51, when Steinar asks the name of the Mormon missionary

who has been searching for converts in Iceland. The character Þjóðrekur is based on a historical figure named Þórður Diðriksson, an Icelandic Mormon convert, who will be discussed later in the text. Steinar, the central character in *Paradise Reclaimed*, is also based upon a historical figure, Eiríkur Ólafsson á Brúnum, as noted above.

34. Laxness, *Paradise Reclaimed*, 299.

35. David Ashby, *Icelanders Gather to Utah, 1854–1914* (Spanish Fork, Utah: Icelandic Association of Utah, 2008), 23. According to La Nora Allred, *The Icelanders of Utah* (Spanish Fork, Utah: Icelandic Association, 1998), 110, “[Ólafsson] was a rancher and also operated a restaurant in Reykjavík.” Vilhjálmur Gíslason, *Eiríkur á Brúnum* (Reykjavík: Ísafoldarprentsmiðja H.F., 1946), 7, notes that Eiríkur “was an industrious man and good farmer, when he was in the prime of life, a skillful craftsman and knew a thing or two about folktales and poetry, as well as being a good story teller. . . . [He] did not receive any education growing up apart from the usual confirmation lessons. Nevertheless, he was attentive and had a thirst for knowledge.” This passage was translated by Friðrik Rafn Guðmundsson.

36. Gíslason, *Eiríkur á Brúnum*, 116 (translated by Darron S. Allred); Ashby, *Icelanders Gather to Utah*, 123, identifies Þorbjörn’s father as Thorvaldur Björnsson, who was born October 18, 1833, and died January 30, 1922. Evidence strongly suggests that Thorvaldur, twenty-one years older than Ingeveldur Eiríksdóttir (1854–1930), is portrayed as Björn of Leirur in *Paradise Reclaimed*. According to Laxness’s novel, Thorvaldur fathered an illegitimate child via Ingeveldur, who is portrayed as Steina, the daughter of Steinar, in the story. The introduction to *Paradise Reclaimed* by Jane Smiley (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), states, “The other visitor was the agent Björn of Leirur: Björn of Leirur is loosely based on the historical character named Þorvaldur Björnsson (1833–1922), a farming magnate who lived at Þorvladseyvi at the roots of Eyiafjallajökull. He, too, became an entrepreneur, investing all his money in trawlers, but went bankrupt. He had no children by his wife, but had two children by Ingvald [Ingeveldur], the daughter of Eiríkur of Brúnar (the original of ‘Steinar of Hliðar’)” (301).

37. See <http://lib.byu.edu/mormonmigration>. Search for “Nevada, 1881.” Information on this database was compiled and edited by the author.

38. Cited in Manuscript History of the Iceland Mission, 28–29, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as Church History Library). Concerning events on their Atlantic voyage, see letter of John Eyvindson, in “Correspondence,” *Millennial Star* 43 (August 29, 1881): 554–55.

39. In his novel, Laxness has Steinar’s wife and family traveling to Utah after Steinar had already immigrated there. However, the facts assert that Eiríkur and his family traveled together until Runhildur’s untimely death. Ashby notes that she became sick and died on the way to Utah and is buried at North Platte, Nebraska (*Icelanders Gather to Utah*, 106).

40. Ashby, *Icelanders Gather to Utah*, 23–24. See also a biographical sketch of Eiríkur in Allred, *The Icelanders of Utah*, 110.

41. Ashby, *Icelanders Gather to Utah*, 60–61, notes that Ingeveldur Eiríkursdóttir met Jon Jonsson on the voyage over to America in 1881. They were married about four months later and had five children together. She died in 1930 at the age of seventy-six and is buried in the Spanish Fork Cemetery. In addition,

Ashby, 123, further notes that Þorbjörn Þorvaldsson remained in Spanish Fork, where he died in 1965.

42. On his visits to Utah in 1957 and in 1959, Laxness showed a keen interest in knowing more about Diðriksson, as can be evidenced in letters he wrote to John Y. Bearnson following each of these visits. See for example, Halldór Laxness to John Y. Bearnson, December 4, 1957, and September 16, 1959, Correspondence of Halldór Laxness.

43. On the Atlantic voyage from Liverpool to New York, Þórður was very sea-sick. He noted, "I often heard the emigrants ask if the Icelander was still alive and the usual answer was, 'It won't be long until he is gone,' and that answer made me wish I was out of the way so they wouldn't have to bother about nursing me any longer." "Autobiographical Sketch of Theodur Dedrickson" (Þórður Diðriksson), 2, Church History Library.

44. Andrew Jenson, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia: A Compilation of Biographical Sketches of Prominent Men and Women in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jenson History, 1901–36), 4:343. For voyage information on the vessel *John J. Boyd*, see Mormon Immigration Index CD. A note inserted apparently by an E. Iver in the "Autobiographical Sketch of Theodur Dedrickson," 7, points out that "the Dedrickson home was noted for its generous hospitality and there many of the emigrants were taken in and kept like family members until they could get settled." In Halldór Laxness, *Paradise Reclaimed*, 152, the author incorporates into his novel the idea that the Mormon bishop, based on the character of Diðriksson, was hospitable to the incoming Icelanders. Ashby, *Icelanders Gather to Utah*, 124–26, states that Diðriksson was born at Holmar, Kross, Rangarvalla County, and notes that he married Helga Jonsdottir in 1858. Ashby further notes, "Thordur homesteaded 160 acres on the east bench of Spanish Fork. He established an adobe yard which furnished materials for many homes in Spanish Fork. The adobes were made of mud and straw. Thordur was a leader among the Icelandic pioneers in Spanish Fork. He presided at many of their meetings. Many of the Icelandic emigrants that came to Spanish Fork found shelter and food under his roof. . . . Thordur died 9 September 1894 of diabetes."

45. A few of the nineteenth-century Icelanders who converted to Mormonism and immigrated to Utah reverted back to their Lutheran faith. One historical individual who appears in a key role in *Paradísarheimt* is "Reverend Runólfur," a Lutheran pastor. Runólfur Runólfsson was born in 1854, joined the LDS Church in 1874, and emigrated from Iceland to North Dakota in 1881. The following year he came to Utah, where he worked as an interpreter for men constructing the Salt Lake Temple. Here he entered polygamy and took a second wife. However, his first wife told him he had to choose between her and polygamy. As a result, Runólfur abandoned the Mormon faith and became the Lutheran pastor for the Icelandic congregation in Spanish Fork. He also served as a reverend in Seattle, Washington, and in Iceland, but he eventually returned to Spanish Fork, where he died in 1929. Ashby, *Icelanders Gather to Utah*, 106–7. My research assistant Mark J. Sanderson, in an unpublished paper titled "The Old Lutheran Church in Spanish Fork," 4, stated that "while several Icelanders left the LDS Church, they maintained close ties with LDS Icelanders and the Lutheran church became a community center for Icelanders." This close relationship has also been mentioned to the author by

a number of people who have Icelandic roots and who are currently members of the Icelandic Association of Utah. For information on the history of Lutherans in Utah, see Ronnie L. Stellhorn, "A History of the Lutheran Church in Utah" (master's thesis, Utah State University, 1975); see also Thomas Edgar Lyon, "Evangelical Protestant Missionary Activities in Mormon Dominated Areas: 1865–1900" (PhD diss., University of Utah, 1962), 221–30, on contact between Lutherans and Mormons throughout Utah during the late nineteenth century.

46. Referring to Diðriksson's tract, Einar Eiríksson, who wrote "Short History of the Iceland Mission" in 1912, noted, "I consider this book the best that has been published in the Iceland language on our religion." A copy of this work is housed in the Church History Department. Byron Geslison, who was called to reopen the Icelandic Mission in 1975, indicated that the missionaries still used Þórður's tract a century after it was written. Byron Geslison and his family, interviews by the author, winter 2000, Spanish Fork, Utah.

47. Byron Geslison and his family, interviews by the author. On another occasion, Byron Geslison wrote, "Halldór Kiljan Laxness . . . has received us several times and has much of our literature. He and his wife have offered to help us and there is a letter on file from him stating his desire to help us where he can." Byron T. Geslison, "Mission Report of Iceland: December, 1977," 17, in the possession of the author. In a letter to Bearnson, written from Hong Kong, December 4, 1957, Laxness reveals that he had been wanting the Diðriksson book for decades. He writes, "I was really happy to find and hold in my hands the book of Þórður Diðriksson, a bibliographical gem, not to be found in any collection of printed Icelandic books. Only I felt utterly distressed not to find time or convenience to read a single line in this book which I have been yearning for at least 30 years. . . . I should also be very happy if you could persuade the granddaughter of Þórður Diðriksson to send his valuable writings to a library which specializes in Icelandic books, like Landsbókasafn Islands." Laxness to Bearnson, December 4, 1957. On January 13, 1958, Bearnson replied to Halldór, "I will try to see some of the decedents [*sic*] of Thordur Didriksson . . . and see if something can be done to get them to put his writings in safe keeping." Bearnson further noted that he was going to try to get a microfilm copy of this book by Diðriksson which Laxness had wanted. Bearnson to Laxness, January 13, 1958.

48. When *Paradísarheimt* was published, it outsold every other book for the Christmas season of 1960 in Iceland. However, as in Utah, Laxness also had his critics in his homeland. Some liked the book while others did not. Some disliked the style and thought the novel was anticlimatic; others believed that Halldór left too many unresolved issues, and they puzzled over the apparent inconclusiveness of the ending. Hannes Hólmsteinn Gissurarson, *Laxness 1948–1998* (Reykjavík: Bókafélagið, 2005), 242; I am indebted to Friðrik Rafn Guðmundsson for translating this summary of critical responses for me.

Halldór Guðmundsson, author of *The Islander* (see endnote 4), wrote the following in an email to the author dated June 10, 2010:

"This study of Fred Woods about the relationship between Halldór and the Mormons is highly interesting not the least because it demonstrates well Halldór's approach to story writing. Even if it were not his intention to discuss the theology of the church of the Latter-day Saints, he didn't miss studying it thoroughly, along with the social life of Utah, without prejudice, and with sincere interest and

respect. He consulted with scholars and clergymen, visited the settings, and read books and essays—but in the end all facts . . . had to [be] swayed to the one desire Halldór never rejected—the desire to tell a good story.”

49. Tate, “Halldór Laxness,” 31, writes that “Mormon readers who are offended at the satiric aspects of Laxness’s portrait of Zion should understand that irony and satire are common to all his fiction, regardless of subject or setting, and are not simply marshalled out to undercut the Mormons.”

50. Halldór Laxness to Judge A. Sherman Christensen, February 5, 1963, Correspondence of Halldór Laxness.

51. Johannessen, “Þér eruð kannski orðinn kaþólskur aftur?” 9 (translated by George S. Tate).

52. Laxness, *Origins of “Paradise Reclaimed,”* 3.

53. Laxness, *Origins of “Paradise Reclaimed,”* 3.

54. Steven P. Sondrup, “Halldór Laxness and the Politics of Paradise,” International Symposium no. 10, International Research Center for Japanese Studies: Ideal Places in History—East and West—1995: 74, 79. See also Steven P. Sondrup, “*Paradísarheimt* and Utopian Aspirations,” in *Komparatísk als Humanwissenschaft: Festschrift zum 65*, ed. Monika Schmitz-Emans (Würzburg: Köninghausen and Neumann, 2008), 385–96. Sondrup, an LDS scholar and professor of comparative literature at Brigham Young University, has been editor of the journal *Scandinavian Studies* since 1990.

55. Doctrine and Covenants 97:21.

56. Moses 7:18. In Mormon theology, the term *Zion* is defined as both a righteous people and a place or a land designated for the Latter-day Saints to congregate. The Salt Lake Valley and other Mormon colonies throughout the American West became gathering places for the Saints from 1847 until the end of the nineteenth century. See A. D. Sorenson, “Zion,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 4:1624–26, for more information concerning the meaning of Zion.

57. Gissurarson, *Laxness 1948–1998*, 241 (translated by Friðrik Rafn Guðmundsson).

58. Tate, “Halldór Laxness,” 33.

59. Sondrup, “Halldór Laxness and the Politics of Paradise,” 79. At the close of the twentieth century, the LDS Church’s First Presidency counseled international converts “to remain in their homelands rather than immigrate to the United States.” “Remain in Homelands, Members Counseled,” *Church News*, published by *Deseret News*, December 11, 1999, 7.

60. Halldór Laxness, *The Fish Can Sing*, trans. Magnus Magnusson (London: Harville Press, 1966), 8, quoted in Tate, “Halldór Laxness,” 29.

61. Laxness, “Ævintýri um fyrirheitna landið,” 124 (translated by George S. Tate).

62. Halldór Laxness, “En amerikansk aabenbaring,” in *Gjörningabók* (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1959), 225 (translated by George S. Tate). This review essay, written in Danish, first appeared in *Politiken* (Copenhagen), June 2, 1958.

63. Johannessen, “Þér eruð kannski orðinn kaþólskur aftur?” 9 (translated by George S. Tate).

64. Johannessen, “Þér eruð kannski orðinn kaþólskur aftur?” 9 (translated by George S. Tate). David A. Ashby, “The Icelandic Settlement in Utah,” unpublished

paper written in 2003, 10, in possession of author, indicates that the Icelandic Association began to hold an annual Thorablot gathering in March 1998. There are currently two hundred and fifty LDS Church members listed in Iceland in two ecclesiastical units known as branches. *2009 Church Almanac* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 2009), 196. These branches are located in Reykjavík and Selfoss.

65. Halldór Laxness, interview by Randi Bratteli, *Arbeiderbladet* (Oslo), February 28, 1970 (translated by George S. Tate); Tate, "Halldór Laxness," 30. Shortly after this interview, Ray C. Johnson, a mission president stationed in Oslo, Norway, who supervised missionary work in Iceland, sent a letter to Laxness, indicating that he was aware of the interest Laxness apparently had in the Church when Laxness expressed this view in this interview with Mrs. Bratteli. Johnson also told Laxness, "There are some Mormons in Iceland, and church meetings are being held there. They are held under the direction of Capt. Bert V. Rhoton. He is an American-Air Corps Officer (Address: Box 52, Keflavik Airport, Keflavik, ICELAND). I am writing him and inviting him to get in touch with you." Ray C. Johnson to Halldór Laxness, March 16, 1970, Correspondence of Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to Halldór Laxness, National and University Library of Iceland. Laxness wrote back to Johnson just eight days later and thanked the mission president. Worried about the reception of *Paradise Reclaimed* among the Utah community, Halldór again noted, "I was told that some local Mormons, among them some of my friends in Spanish Fork and Provo, did not find my book rich enough in hero worship and glorification of the early Mormon settlers. This is the case with all local people when a stranger writes a book about their environment. . . . My very good friend in Salt Lake City, the Federal judge Sherman Christensen, wrote to me that there was nothing whatsoever objectionable to Mormons. . . . Since my Utah visits I have always been happy to see Mormons as guests at my home in Iceland. If you have found a mission in Iceland I shall be glad to recommend their endeavor to Icelanders, because I know from experience that Mormons are excellent people." Halldór Laxness to President Ray C. Johnson, March 24, 1970, Correspondence of Halldór Laxness.

66. Laxness, *Origins of "Paradise Reclaimed,"* 8.

67. John Y. Bearnson to Halldór and Auður Laxness, Christmas 1979, type-script, Correspondence of John Y. Bearnson to Halldór Laxness, National and University Library of Iceland. In this same letter, Bearnson thanked Laxness for his kindness shown to him and his wife, Birdella, during the time they served a mission to Iceland from about August 1977 to August 1978. In a 1978 Christmas letter, Bearnson also thanked Halldór and Auður for their kindness shown on this same mission and also noted, "Birdella often speaks of your visits to the Hospital." See John Y. Bearnson to Halldór and Auður Laxness, December 14, 1978, Correspondence of Halldór Laxness. In the 1979 Christmas letter, John Bearnson told Halldór and Auður, "Birdella has done very well with her broken hip." This appears to be the reason for the hospital visit Bearnson noted in his letter and why the Bearnsons served a mission to Iceland for only one year instead of eighteen months, the general time frame for most LDS missionary couples.

68. Guðný Halldórsdóttir, phone interview by the author, April 2, 2009. During the course of our conversation, Guðný further remarked that she visited Utah for the first time in the fall of 1979 in order to participate in a two-month film shoot of a documentary about *Paradísarheimt*. Guðný added that she found the

Mormons to be an “ordinary” and a “very nice people.” In a phone interview with the author on July 27, 2010, Guðný said that her father told her that “the Mormons were a blessed people. He was positive towards Mormons because they treated him so well. He had problems come to America because of the C.I.A. Through the Mormons he was helped in coming to the United States to do his research.” Guðmundsson, *Islander*, 459, notes, “In the summer of 1979 Rolf Hädrich started work on a version of a new television series based on *Paradise Reclaimed*. It was a huge production and the filming took place in Copenhagen, Iceland and Utah, where an entire set had been built for the town of Spanish Forks [*sic*]. Icelandic actors took the most important roles. Halldór did not participate, yet he and his son Einar took a car trip to a remote part of eastern Iceland to watch the shooting.”