

The name-landscape in the novel *Norðan við stríð* by Indriði G. Þorsteinsson

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Abstract

In building up the imaginary world of a fictional work, an author may use names in order to create the different characters that occur and the fictive world in which they are living. The onomasticon of the world of fiction and the onomasticon of the non-fictional world can both reflect the beliefs, ideals, sentiments, hopes and wishes of the name-givers and name-users. An illusion of reality can be achieved by placing the names belonging to the world of fiction close to the names of the real world. Names may also be used as social markers. This paper will discuss the name-landscape created by Indriði G. Þorsteinsson in his novel *Norðan við stríð* and illustrate how the author uses place-names, names of artefacts, trademark names and personal names as tools to create the imaginary world of the book.

Introduction

Norðan við stríð describes life in the small Icelandic town of Akureyri at the beginning of the Second World War. Denmark and Norway were occupied by Germans and the inhabitants of Akureyri suddenly found themselves forced to take part in international events, when British soldiers invaded Iceland. Indriði illustrates in an expressive way the cultural clash that arises when soldiers in fighting trim and ready for action arrive in a small, isolated and peaceful island community from a world at war. This situation of course results in problems and difficulties of several kinds. As a consequence a new type of society eventually takes shape in Iceland, a society which differs radically from the social system of Iceland before and up to the Second World War. This novel is an excellent description of this transition period between old and new social structure in Iceland as reflected in social life of Akureyri.

Place-names, artefact names, trademark names and personal names are all used as tools to describe the different persons that live in a fictive Akureyri and the fictional reality in which they are living. By placing the fictional name system as close as possible to the existing name system, in this case as close as possible to the name system of the town of Akureyri and its surroundings at the beginning of Second World War, the author succeeds in making a close connection to the reality he wishes to describe.

Place-names and artefact names

The fictive reality of the novel is firmly established in the world by the author's usage of names that are well established and in common use in the area. Names of streets in central Akureyri such as *Aðalstræti* and *Norðurgata* are used in the novel to describe where someone is or where something occurs. In the same manner the author uses the local names *Pollurinn*, *Eyrin* and *Brekkan*.

Place-names like *Ameríka*, *Evrópa* and *Aberdeen* also place the fiction in a well-known reality, and all readers feel that they are thoroughly at home and can easily find their way in the fictional representation of reality given in the novel.

For the same reason the author mentions names of some artefacts that are well-known to people in Akureyri, e.g. buildings like *Skáldkirkjan* [the church is connected with a certain Icelandic poet]. An important place in the novel is a small eating-house with the name *Fish and Chips*. This name, together with the place itself, may be an invention of the author. It

may also be the name of an existing eating-house in Akureyri in the period described in the novel. In any case the name is copied from the name of the many fish-and-chip shops in Britain. In the fictional as well as in the real Akureyri fish-and-chip shops were introduced and established during the period of the British occupation of Iceland with the British troops as the target group.

Trademark names

As social markers and as well-known things giving the soldiers far away from their own country a feeling of home, the author also uses names of brands of cigarettes much used in Britain [at least at that time]: *Players* and *May Blossom*, both standing for well-known cheap British cigarettes, and *Craven A*, which is a brand of superior quality. The whisky of good quality preferred by the commander of the British troops in Akureyri is named *Royal Northern Crea*. This name surely is a short form made by the author for the trademark *Lauder's Royal Northern Cream* (royalnortherncream.gif) in which the element *Royal* is a quality marker signifying that whisky thus named is of a very superior quality.

Also names like these help to place the novel into the real world of Akureyri in the period of the beginning of the Second World War. The author uses trademark names like *Craven A* and *Royal Northern Crea* as social markers indicating that the persons using these products are high up on the social ladder. Those names are used to illustrate the social status of the name-user and to indicate the social status the name-user dreams of and/or wants to pretend to have achieved.

Personal names

Men's names and women's names, forenames as well as bynames, patronymics and surnames, are used most consciously with the aim of characterizing the different men and women one meets in the novel. One fact especially worth calling attention to is that not every person is given a name by the author. Several persons are in fact anonymous. Compare Debus 2002, especially p. 84 f. Among the characters without a name is one of the leading characters in the novel and a very important one at that – the editor of the communist paper – who is throughout the novel called *The Editor*. One might say that the author has chosen other (perhaps more elaborate) means to distinguish him than giving him a name. What those means are – well, they are yet to be found. However, several of the leading characters are anonymous when they first appear in the novel. They are then mentioned by using their occupational title, e.g. *the commander* or *the fighter pilot*. Many of those are not given a name until they meet with an overwhelming and fateful situation, which will have great influence on their future personal life. For instance, it is only when the British commander is introduced to Halla Falkon by her husband on one fateful evening that he is given a name – *Robert Graves*. It should be noted that Halla Falkon and Robert Graves, already on this first occasion, are described as mutually attracted and are later to become a couple. The Norwegian pilot is likewise nameless until he meets the Icelandic girl Lilja with whom he falls in love. Those persons are then elevated from the anonymous mass and given a name. To use the terminology from Debus (above) this may be looked upon as Akzentuierung used as a contrary to Anonymisierung. So most leading persons are sooner or later furnished with a name by the author. The same also applies to minor or subordinate characters who nevertheless have some importance for the story.

The fictional world of the novel is connected to the historical background and to the reality by mentioning some well-known public persons by name, e.g. *Stalín*, *Roosevelt* and *Mannerheim*. Without a name, that is anonymous, are mostly such persons as can be regarded as minor characters mainly or only functioning as subordinate or ornamental figures. Most persons belonging to this more or less anonymous group are identified by their occupational

title or by names which could be regarded as representative of their country (and as on the border of functioning as appellatives), like *Bill*, *Bob*, *Harry* and *Jimmy* and are mentioned more or less *en passant*. Those names rather underline the anonymity of those minor characters who serve as illustrations of the troops of the occupying power in Iceland. Usually however it is only when a person in one way or another is elevated from the anonymous mass that the author gives him/her a name.

Forenames

As a symbol of old Iceland, the extinction of which is described in the novel, the author has created an old woman with the symbolical name *Ísfold*. She dies at the beginning of the novel and is mourned by only a small number among the elderly inhabitants of Akureyri. Her name *Ísfold* is created from the poetical designation *Ísfold* (*Ísafold*) for Iceland. *Ísfold* is recorded from 1845 and from 1910 onwards and *Ísafold* from the end of the nineteenth century. The names are borne by a small number of women. See further NÍ: 330, 331.

Among forenames used by the author to establish the nationality of the name-bearer one can, in addition to the above-mentioned names of British soldiers, mention the forename of the Norwegian fighter pilot – *Per*, considered by the author as a typical Norwegian name. In support of this one might add that according to NPL: 231 this name was very popular in Norway from about 1920 up to about 1975. Furthermore, on a ranking list of all men's names in Norway between 1940 and 1964 the name *Per* was ranked as number two. *Per* is not found in NÍ, so this name is not especially well established in Iceland.

Several forenames are used to reflect the character of the name-bearer. Examples are the women's names *Halla* and *Lilja*. *Halla* is an old Icelandic name probably a short form for names like *Hallbera*, *Halldora*, and *Hallveig*, see further NÍ: 273f., Janzén (1947:61, 105) and Lind (1905–1915:453f.). The name *Halla* is found e.g. in *Látnámabók* and in *Íslendingasögur* and was in general use in Iceland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The name became popular once more during the twentieth century. It is not unlikely that the author, when using the name *Halla* for his character in this novel, was thinking of *Halla* in *Sagan af Fjalla-Eyvindi*, where the rich widow *Halla* follows the outlaw Eyvindur into the wilds of Iceland. This story was very popular in Iceland and became known and popular in all the Nordic countries through the play *Bjærg-Ejvind og hans hustru* [*Bjærg-Ejvind and his wife*], written by the Icelander Jóhann Sigurjónsson, adapted for the screen in 1918 [by Victor Sjöström]. Both the women are passionate in their love and they both follow the men they love – *Halla* of the Icelandic saga out into outlawry and *Halla* of our novel her first love from Canada out to Iceland and her second love out into a world of war.

The forename *Lilja* is borne by a young maid, like *Halla* one of the important female characters of the book. The name contains the Icelandic plant designation *lilja* (Eng. *lily*). According to NÍ: 383 occasional name-bearers of the name *Lilja* occur in Iceland in 1646 and the name became popular there from about 1840. An important background to the popularity of the name in Iceland is supposed to be the poem *Lilja* from about 1350 by Eysteinn Ásgrímsson. The author has surely chosen the name *Lilja* in order to emphasize that the name-bearer is pure and innocent just like the lily of folklore. The author illustrates this trait on several occasions, as in the following words to *Lilja* by her boyfriend: »Púritani [...] fallegi púritaninn minn» (*Norðan við stríð*:212; in English translation: Puritan [...] my beautiful puritan).

Surnames

Surnames are in several cases used as markers showing that the name-bearers originate from or have been living for a long time in a country where the usage of surnames is different from the usage in Iceland. As an example can be mentioned the name *Falkon*, which is the

surname of both *Jón Falkon* and his wife *Halla Falkon*. Jón Falkon is a man of business. As he understands and speaks English it so happens that he begins to function as a sort of link between the inhabitants of Akureyri and the British commander of the occupation troops in the town. He is one of the really important characters of the novel. Jón Falkon comes from Iceland, he was in fact born there but emigrated to the Icelandic settlements in Canada, from where he later returned to Iceland and settled down in Akureyri. His forename *Jón* is a much used name in Iceland, see further NÍ: 343f.

The name *Falkon* was probably given the function of a surname when Jón was living as an immigrant in the Icelandic settlement in Canada. According to Bessason (1967:132f.) it was decreed at the time in Canada that Icelandic immigrants should not keep their Icelandic patronymics, which were regarded as surnames in Canada. So the Icelanders were required to take a surname in accordance with the Canadian usage. The author surely knew this. The name *Falkon* could be regarded one such surname. The name *Falcon*, which is the English equivalent to the Icelandic bird designation *fálki*, is found as an old English byname later used as a surname (Ewen, 1931:333). According to Janzén (1947: 45, 150) *fálki* is found as a byname about the year 1000 or later. Cf. Lind (1905–1915:263). *Fálki* and *Falcon* have positive connotations. A falcon is looked upon as a beautiful, strong and big bird, sometimes used as a symbol for Iceland. The bird designation *fálki*, that is, *falcon*, is found in the first element of the name of the Icelandic order *Fálkaorðan* and in the name of the Canadian ice hockey team *The Falcons*, an honoured name of the first Canadian ice hockey team to win the Olympic gold in 1920. Almost all the men playing in this team were Icelandic immigrants from parts of Canada where people from Iceland had settled, e.g. Winnipeg (Wikipedia, The Winnipeg Falcons).

The byname *Falcon* in an Icelandic form *Falkon* is thus a name which the author uses as an English-Canadian surname (Mr *Falkon*). Nothing however is said in the novel about if the name-users, consisting of Icelanders living in Akureyri, look upon the name of *Falkon* as an anglicised form of the Icelandic byname *Fálki*. In the fictional world of the author this may however be the case.

The name of the wife of Jón Falkon is *Halla Falkon*. She comes from one of the Icelandic settlements in Canada, met Jón Falkon when he was there and followed him as his wife to Iceland when he went back. According to Canadian usage she gave up her own surname and assumed that of her husband in connection with her marriage. This however is not in accordance with Icelandic usage. Married or not Icelandic women keep the same patronymic all their life. So the name *Falkon* attached to the name of Jón Falkon's wife *Halla* is a marker of Halla's coming from another country than Iceland, a country with a totally different surname system.

Final observation

Finally it should be pointed out that at least one of the leading characters is named after a person who was alive when our novel was written and published. The name of the British commander *Robert Graves* is surely given after the British poet *Robert Graves* who died in 1985.

Summing up

Place-names, artefact names, trademark names and personal names are all used very consciously to create a fictitious name-landscape with characters of different social standing. This may be seen as an interesting example of the use of proper names for character portrayal and for placing the imaginary world of a novel into a real geographical and historical world of a period described.

It seems that the author has chosen such names for his characters that to him seem typical of the period described in his work. The male forenames seem to reflect the nationality of the name-bearer, e.g. *Jón*, *Per*, *Harry* and *Jimmy*. The forenames of the women seem in many cases to be chosen in order to throw light upon the character of the name-bearer, e.g. *Halla* and *Lilja*. One name functions as a symbol – *Ísfold*.

Also the surnames, not least the surname systems of different countries, are used to describe the origin of different characters. In at least one case a surname is used to reflect the social standing of the bearer – *Falkon*. Finally at least one main character is named after another well-known – at least to the author – person, namely *Robert Graves*.

Of special interest is the author's use of what Debus (see above) calls Anonymisierung and Akzentuierung. This points towards further research.

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