

# Icelandic Economic History: A Historiographical Survey of the Last Century

## Economic history and the Icelandic history tradition

Economic history as an independent field of study is of fairly recent origin in Iceland, emerging only in the last quarter of the twentieth century with the increased specialisation and differentiation of the history profession.<sup>1</sup> With no separate economic history departments and in fact, only one general university, the University of Iceland in Reykjavík, it is not surprising that economic history has largely been in the hands of either historians educated within the broad church of history, non-professionals or scholars outside the history profession. Only in the last twenty years or so have specialist economic historians, educated abroad, entered the field and turned the subject into a distinct discipline.

The late development of economic history in Iceland has been circumscribed by the smallness and rudimentary specialisation of the history profession. Traditionally, academic history has mostly been confined to the University of Iceland, where for the greater part of the century the subject formed part of a programme of "Icelandic studies" (*Íslensk fræði*), together with Icelandic language and Icelandic literature. The University, founded in 1911, offered two degrees in Icelandic studies, a *mag. art.* degree, and from 1934 a *cand. mag.* degree, both of which concentrated on medieval and early modern Icelandic history. From 1952 onwards, students could combine Icelandic history, general history and an outside subject, but only in 1965 did history become a fully independent subject within the Faculty of Humanities, offering students a BA degree in history, including one or two other subjects. The *cand. mag.* degree was turned into an entirely postgraduate programme and eventually replaced by the MA degree in 1990. That same year the doctoral programme was introduced.<sup>2</sup>

The integration of history into the study of Icelandic literary culture in general had implications for the development of the discipline and shaped historians' re-

search interests and methodology. Working by and large in the philological tradition, academic historians were preoccupied with legal history of the late medieval and early modern period, in particular the rise and fall of the Old Icelandic "Commonwealth" (10th to 13th century). Four of the five tenured historians at the University between 1911–1951 were specialists in medieval and early modern history.<sup>3</sup> Under the influence of the political struggle for independence, starting in the 1840s and concluding with the establishment of a republic in 1944, the focus was untrivially on the history of the Icelandic nation, primarily the cultural, legal and political history of the medieval and early modern epochs. Teaching and research in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was insignificant, as indicated by the fact that the first general historical survey of the 19th century was not published until the 1950s; comparable works on the twentieth century first appeared in 2002.<sup>4</sup>

The marginal position of history within the University did not mean that the subject was of low standing in the national culture. On the contrary, history had a long and respectable lineage and its influence went far beyond the boundaries of academia. The subject was studied as much by people other than academic historians as by the professionals themselves for most of the twentieth century. Lay historians have shown great interest in local history, genealogy and biography, but they have also ventured into various aspects of social history, while a fair number of scholars in other disciplines have studied the history of their own discipline. A good example of a work of economic history of the former type is *Skútaútlín* (The age of schooner fisheries), a two-volume history of decked-vessel fisheries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by Gís Guðmundsson. The work *Ísland og dæis teknísku vaxningu gegnum tíðirne* (Iceland and its technological development through the ages), by the chief engineer at the State Engineering Office, Þorvald Krabbe, which was the first work of technological history in Iceland, is a prime example of the latter type.<sup>5</sup>

The discipline of history gained increasing currency with the struggle for political independence, not least since demands for Iceland's political autonomy were primarily grounded on legal and historical arguments. As history's social function became more important historians became preoccupied with new interpretations of Icelandic history in line with "national interests", in which the main theme was the age-old struggle between a nation and its foreign rulers. The nationalist interpretation of Icelandic history was not all bad for economic history. The political struggle stimulated historians' interest in Iceland's economic past with particular emphasis on its relations with Norway and Denmark, trade, transport, public finance and so on. One of the first generation of academic historians at the beginning of the twentieth century, Bogi Melsted, studied the maritime history of the Commonwealth 930–1262, and Jon J. Ádils, the first incumbent of the chair in Icelandic history at the University in 1911, published a balanced and richly

1 The article draws on the author's historiographical survey in *Sagnartíttun um hagsögu á 19. og 20. öld* (Economic History of the 19th and 20th centuries in Icelandic historiography), *Saga*, vol. XXXVIII, 2000, 161–186. This issue of *Saga* is devoted to various fields of Icelandic historiography.

2 The institutional development of history as a discipline is discussed in Sigurðsson, Ingi, 'The Professionalization of Icelandic Historical Writing, in *Nordic Historiography in the 20th Century*, eds. Frank Meyer & Jan Eivind Myhre. Tid og tanke, No. 5, Dept. of History, Oslo: University of Oslo 2000, 149–163.

3 Guðmundsson, Lofur, 'The Breakthrough of Social History in Icelandic Historiography, in *Nordic Historiography in the 20th Century*, eds. Frank Meyer & Jan Eivind Myhre. Tid og tanke No. 5, Dept. of History, Oslo: University of Oslo 2000, 266.

4 Kjartansson, Hægi Skuli, *Ísland á 20. öld*. Reykjavík: Sögufélag 2002.

5 Guðmundsson, Gís, *Skútaútlín* 1–II. Reykjavík: Bókafélagið Gullfjans Ó. Guðjónssonar 1944–46; Krabbe, Þorvald, *Ísland og dæis teknísku vaxningu gegnum tíðirne*. Copenhagen: Gyldendalske boghandel 1946.

documented history of the Danish monopoly trade in Iceland during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>6</sup>

## The rise of economic history 1920–1970

In the 1920s, historians were increasingly turning away from political history in favour of economic and cultural history, a shift which corresponds well with the international historiographical tendencies of the period, as reflected for example in the advent of the *Annales* school.<sup>7</sup> One of the early signs of this was a major work by the geologist Þorvaldur Þoroddsen, *Lýsing Íslands* (A description of Iceland), published between 1908 and 1922 in four volumes, two of which were devoted to the agricultural history of the nineteenth century.

The upsurge in economic history, however, was largely confined to earlier history – Icelandic historians at the time were staunch medievalists – and closely linked to a single individual, Þorkell Jóhannesson. He was the first historian to specialise in the field of economic history and make a name for it. His mag. art. dissertation of 1927 on late medieval agricultural history led to several important publications in the following years,<sup>8</sup> and for the next three decades he was to be the most prolific scholar in the field, gaining himself a professorship in history at the University in 1944 which he held until his death in 1960. In 1930 he wrote a programmatic essay identifying the most urgent tasks and research agendas in Icelandic economic history. Under the strong influence of currents in the other Nordic countries, especially Sweden, he stressed the importance of studying the fast-disappearing cultural heritage of “the old peasant society”, cultural artefacts, archaeological remains, place names, folklore, but above all economic change in the agrarian society.<sup>9</sup> Most of Jóhannesson’s works focused on the late medieval period, such as his doctoral thesis, *Die Stellung der freien Arbeiter in Island*, and eighteenth and nineteenth century trade and industrial history.<sup>10</sup>

Publications in the field of economic history grew in number in the following decades. New fields of research were opened up, such as the agricultural history of regions and localities with emphasis on settlement and landholdings. A professor of law, Ólafur Lárusson, published a survey article in 1929 which has be-

come a classic text, tracing the long-term evolution of settlement patterns and the rise of cottage farming. Business history was another area which experienced a surge in growth, but this consisted overwhelmingly of lay historians writing celebratory histories of public institutions, co-operatives and private firms which had reached a respectable age. Of more substance were studies of whole industries and industrial organisations which became almost a definitional aspect of economic history in the following decades. Typical works in this vein were Þorkell Jóhannesson’s comprehensive work, *Bírnáðarsamtök á Íslandi 1837–1937* (Farmers’ organisations in Iceland 1837–1937), on the agricultural societies and *Alþingi og auðunnálin* (The Icelandic parliament and industry) on industrial policy. Matthias Þórðarson’s work on the herring fisheries, Vilhjálmur Gíslason’s idiosyncratic historical survey of Icelandic fishermen and Gísli Guðmundsson’s voluminous study of the decked-vessel fisheries laid the groundwork for the history of the most important sector of the Icelandic economy.<sup>11</sup> In 1943, the manufacturing industries “got their history book” with the publication of a two-volume work edited by Guðmundur Finnþogason.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, no general works were published in the field of trade history, partly no doubt because of the deep split in the industry itself between the co-operative movement and the private commercial sector, which meant that there was no unified body to commission the work on its history.

## Upheavals in the 1970s

The 1950s and early 1960s look rather pale in comparison with the burgeoning interest and publishing activity in the previous decades, in spite of the fact that Þorkell Jóhannesson occupied his throne as one of the two professors of history until his death in 1960. Teaching and research at the University was tradition-bound, and the profession was still preoccupied with medieval and early modern history. The slowdown may, however, partly be explained by the amount of energy devoted by academic historians to the writing of a multi-volume general survey of Icelandic history, in which economic history was of no small significance.<sup>13</sup>

By 1970, a change in the history profession was clearly under way, following a well-known international pattern with a time-lag of about 5–10 years. The number of history students at the University was rising in line with the expansion of university education in the late 1960s, no doubt stimulated by the introduction of the BA degree in history in 1965. The average annual production of final degrees (BA and cand.mag./MA degrees) doubled from about seven during the 1960s to fourteen in the 1970s and the 1980s (Table 1). More students were also seeking education abroad, especially at postgraduate level, a feature which was becoming

6 Melsted, Boge Th., *Ferðir, siglingar og samgöngur milli Íslands og annara landa á dögum Þjóðveldisins* [Travel, sailing and communication between Iceland and other countries during the Old Icelandic Commonwealth], *Söfn til sögu Íslands* IV, Copenhagen: HÍð íslenska bókmenntafélag 1912–1914; Aðils, Jon I., *Eiríkurverzlunin Dana á Íslandi 1602–1787* [The Danish monopoly trade in Iceland, 1602–1787], Reykjavík: Verzlunarráð Íslands 1919. Also published in Danish, see *Den danske Monopolihandel på Island 1602–1787*, Copenhagen: Dansk-Islandsk Samfund 1926–1927.

7 Burke, Peter, *History and Social Theory*, Cambridge: Polity Press 1992, 11–17.

8 Jóhannesson, Þorkell, *Um atvinnu- og fátágl íslendinga á 14. og 15. öld* [The economy of Iceland in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries], *Vika* II 1928, 17–53; and *Plagan milda 1402–1404* [The Great Plague, 1402–1404], *Skrinnir*, vol. 102, 1928, 73–105.

9 Jóhannesson, Þorkell, *Um rannsóknir í íslenskri menningar- og atvinnuögu* [On research in Icelandic cultural and economic history], *Samvinnan*, vol. XXIV, 1930, 26–59.

10 Jóhannesson, Þorkell, *Die Stellung der freien Arbeiter in Island bis zur Mitte des 16. Jahrhunderts*, Copenhagen: Levin & Munksgaard 1933; and *Bírnáðarsamtök á Íslandi 1837–1937*, Aldurminning I, Reykjavík: Bírnáðarfélag Íslands 1937; and *Alþingi og auðunnálin: Landbúnaður og tilleggsmtl. Höfðþjátr*, Saga Alþingis IV, Reykjavík: Alþingissegunshénd 1948.

11 Þórðarson, Matthias, *Síðarsaga Íslands* [The history of the Icelandic herring fisheries], Copenhagen: Sildareinikasala Íslands 1930; Gíslason, Vilhjálmur P., *Sjómannasaga* [Fishermen: A history], Reykjavík: Ísafold 1945; Guðmundsson, Stívaldinn.

12 *Þéttasaga Íslands I–II* [History of the Icelandic manufacturing industry], ed. Guðmundur Finnþogason, Reykjavík: Þéttarannalfélagið í Reykjavík 1943.

13 See Jon Jóhannesson’s two volume *Íslendinga saga*, Reykjavík: Almenna bókafélagið 1956–1958, and even more the multi-volume *Saga Íslandinga*, Reykjavík: Menntamálaráð og Þjóðvinnufélag 1942–1958.

**Table 1** Dissertations in BA and MA degrees at the University of Iceland, 1952–2000

	Dissertations in history		Dissertations in economic history		
	Total No.	MA degree No.	Total %	MA degree %	BA degree %
1952–1960	10	4	20	25	17
1961–1970	68	11	57	21	45
1971–1980	138	26	112	27	31
1981–1990	141	34	107	32	58
1991–2000	248	35	213	15	26

Note: Author's own figures. Historical demography is not included.

more prominent in university education in general.<sup>14</sup> The growth of student population was accompanied by an enlargement of and greater specialisation within the history profession. The number of tenured teaching staff increased from two in 1960 to five in 1970 and by the end of the century had risen to eleven. In contrast to the earlier generations, who were educated at the University of Iceland or the University of Copenhagen, the educational background of historians in the last quarter of the century was more versatile and consequently their theoretical and methodological approaches were more heterogeneous. Of the eleven tenured department staff at the end of the century, four had taken their doctoral degrees at the University of Iceland (although all of them had studied for longer or shorter periods abroad), four in Britain, two in Sweden and one in the United States.

Simultaneously, the history discipline in general was changing in many different ways. There was a clear shift away from traditional narrative political history and history of personalities. The study of politics during the independence struggle was rapidly falling out of fashion during the 1970s, once it had ceased to be a burning political issue and nationalist sentiments were consequently on the wane. Instead, social and economic history of the modern and contemporary epoch became popular, although the boundaries between the economic and the social and cultural were often unclear. This was especially true of studies of living conditions of different social groups and classes, living standards in a broad sense, and regional history.

These changes were also reflected in the history department at the University. Professor Ólafur Hansson gave courses in general economic history for several years at the end of the 1960s. Professors Bergsteinn Jónsson and Jón Guðnason were appointed to the department, both of them with great interest in nineteenth and twentieth century economic history. Their teaching and research influenced students' choices of topics for final theses in the following two decades. Bergsteinn Jónsson's biography of Tyggvi Gunnarsson (1835–1917), an entrepreneur, bank director and a prominent politician during the independence struggle, led him to

further studies of the modernisation of fisheries and banking during the nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup> Jón Guðnason, who also published a voluminous biography of another prominent politician of the same period, Skúli Þróróddsen, did research on the modernisation of industries and infrastructure, as well as examining the social conditions of the rising working class.<sup>16</sup> He gave courses on nineteenth and twentieth century agricultural history and twentieth century economic history. Several non-tenured lecturers also made significant contribution to economic history in the late 1970s and the 1980s, among them Björn Teisson and Helgi Skúli Kjartansson.

Greater interest in social and economic history was no doubt linked with the radicalism of the late 1960s and the 1970s and a stronger appeal of 'the economic interpretation of history', albeit without much reference to Marxism. Interest in economic processes and class-based history was growing, but only in a very few cases, such as Magnús S. Magnússon's *Labour in Transition*, on the effects of industrialisation on the social and economic conditions of the working class, were the analytical tools of Marxism explicitly used.<sup>17</sup> The influence of the social sciences was increasingly felt, although not so much through the use of general theories of social and economic change, for economic history continued to be firmly empirical and source-directed. However, historians increasingly borrowed themes and quantitative methodology from the social sciences to analyse various economic and social structures. New ways of investigating economic history were most clearly visible in two fast-growing research areas where more sophisticated methods and analyses were developing with the use of quantitative sources and techniques and theoretical constructions borrowed from the social sciences.

The first area was the agricultural history of modern and early modern society, focusing on settlement patterns and land-ownership. Björn Lárusson's massive study of size and ownership of land and tenure practices in early modern Iceland, *The Old Icelandic Land Registers*, is an early example of this kind of research and directed the attention of several students and young scholars to this area. This led to a number of local and regional studies.<sup>18</sup> So did the ambitious Nordic project on farm desertion and land colonisation (Det nordiske ødegårdsprojekt) initiated in 1968 with the participation of three young Icelandic historians, each of them embarking on detailed regional studies. Arni Indriðsson examined the district of Skagaförður in North Iceland, Ólafur Ásgeirsson parts of the Snæfellsnes peninsula.

<sup>15</sup> Jónsson, Bergsteinn, *Aðdragandi bankastofnunar í Reykjavík* [The establishment of a banking institution in Reykjavík], in *Reykjavík miðöld bjólfis*, ed. Helgi Þorláksson. Reykjavík: Sögufélag 1978, 98–115; and *Skjalumabilið í sögu Reykjavíkur* [The Scholastic fisheries era in the history of Reykjavík], in *Reykjavík 1700 átt.*, ed. Helgi Þorláksson. Reykjavík: Sögufélag 1974, 159–174.

<sup>16</sup> Guðnason, Jón, *Kenningin íslendinga 1–5* [Icelandic technology and industry], Reykjavík: Bókala studenta 1974, 7–5; and *Græsla verkkaups í peningum. Þróun sjálfsæðisparáttu íslensks verkafólks* [Money payments of wages. A chapter in the independence struggle of the Icelandic working class], *Saga*, vol. XXIII, 1985, 7–57.

<sup>17</sup> See Magnússon, Magnús S., *Iceland in Transition: Labour and Socio-economic Change before 1940*. Skrifur uđgávna av Ekonomísk-historiska förenigen, vol. XIV. Lund 1985.

<sup>18</sup> Lárusson, Björn, *The Old Icelandic Land Registers*. Skrifur uđvina av Ekonomísk-historiska förenigen, 7. Lund 1967. As a professor of economic history at Lund University in Sweden, Lárusson continued this research on land holdings and other themes in Icelandic agricultural history, see for example *Íslands jorðabok under fornaustrællid* [Icelandic land registers during pre-industrial times]. Skrifur uđvina av Ekonomísk-historiska förenigen, vol. XXXV. Lund 1982.

<sup>14</sup> The proportion of students at university level studying abroad has been about one third of the total student population in the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. See *Hagshimna: Sögufélag högskúlar um Ísland* [Icelandic Historical Statistics], ed. Guðmundur Jónsson & Magnús S. Magnússon. Reykjavík: Statistics Iceland 1977, 861.

sula in the West and Björn Teitsson the district of Suður-píngeyjarsýsla in the North-east, the last-mentioned producing one of the most interesting outcome of this research with his longitudinal study of settlements, land ownership and land tenures in the district 1703-1930.<sup>19</sup>

Another project, conceived within the framework of regional and agricultural history around 1980, was an interdisciplinary study by a group of Icelandic historians and geologists of the so-called "Famine of the Haze" in 1783-85, when around a quarter of the population died in a famine following one of the biggest volcanic eruptions in Iceland. The six historians who contributed to the project carried out studies of the devastating consequences of the eruption on the population and economy of Iceland, presenting more precise data on the scale and scope of the catastrophe than had previously been available and examining the public response to it.<sup>20</sup>

Demographic history was another research field which came to prominence in the 1970s. Like agricultural history, this field of research was stimulated by a Nordic project, in this case the Nordic Emigration Research Project, which was launched in 1970-1971. Professor Þorhallur Vilmundarson headed the small Icelandic team consisting of himself and two history students who worked on data collection and registration, and wrote their cand. mag. theses in this field. Jónius H. Kristinsson examined emigration to America from the area of Vopnafjörður in the North-East, one of the first studies of its kind, which was later incorporated in the final project report.<sup>21</sup> Kristinsson followed up his thesis with a unique compilation of "a record of Icelandic emigrants to America", containing the names of all known emigrants, their age, occupation, domicile in Iceland, port of departure and destination.<sup>22</sup> Helgi Skúli Kjartansson made many of the most important contributions to Icelandic demographic history in the 1970s and 1980s. His voluminous cand. mag. thesis from 1976 is still the most comprehensive demographic study of emigration to America.<sup>23</sup> This study was followed by publications on various aspects of Icelandic emigration history, patterns, phases and rates of emigration and the

causal factors at work.<sup>24</sup> Kjartansson also pioneered the study of internal migration and urbanisation history, publishing several key articles in the 1970s.<sup>25</sup>

The new economic and social history not only broke new ground as far as subject and technique were concerned but was also slowly advancing new interpretations which challenged in various ways the dominant nationalist interpretation of Icelandic history. This was especially pronounced in studies of eighteenth and nineteenth century social groups and classes, e.g. paupers and servants, crofters and tenant farmers, written mostly by young, radical historians who were critical of the nationalist consensus "ideology", in which the old society was portrayed more or less as an egalitarian, classless society of peasants. According to this traditional interpretation the greatest obstacles to "progress" were perceived to be harsh natural conditions and the Danish rulers in an unholy alliance with the Danish merchant class dominating Icelandic foreign trade. In the new historical writings, internal contradictions and exploitation were identified and explored, and a different understanding was presented of the economic and social ideas of the nationalist movement. The latter's commitment to economic and social modernisation was questioned by directing attention to the conservative policies of the Icelandic parliament (*Alþingi*) and its reluctance to adopt a more liberal stance in the social and economic spheres. Gísli Agústi Gunnlaugsson studied the nineteenth century social legislation and demonstrated its function in regulating settlement, family formation and labour allocation in the interest of the farming community.<sup>26</sup> The author of this article examined the economic and social conditions of the servant class in the nineteenth century, arguing that the regulation of labour through labour bondage and other control mechanisms retarded urbanisation and labour specialisation.<sup>27</sup> The effects of land laws and tenure practices on agricultural modernisation also became an area of active research.<sup>28</sup> As far as the eighteenth century was concerned, Gísli Gunnarsson argued in an influential book on the monopoly trade that the interests of the dominant elite of landown-

19 A survey of the Icelandic research was published in Teitsson, Björn & Stefánsson, Magnús, *Íslandsk óðegarðsfróskningur* [Icelandic Research in Land Description], in *Nesjónaleið Jarfræðingavísitíki*. *Dei nordiske ødegådsprosjekt 1*. Copenhagen 1972, 113-148. The final report of the project appeared in 1981, cf. Gissel, Svend et al., *Desertion and Land Colonization in the Nordic Countries, 1300-1600*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell 1981; see also Teitsson, Björn, *Eigarnáttal og áttal á jörðum í Suður-píngeyjarsýslu 1703-1930* [Ownership and tenure of land in the district of Suður-píngeyjarsýsla 1703-1930]. Sagfræðisáttáráttir 7. Reykjavík: Institute of History, University of Iceland 1973.

20 *Skafarældar 1783-1784: Ríggæðri og heimildir* [The volcanic eruption Skafarældar 1783-1784: Es-says and sources]. Reykjavík: Mál og menning 1984.

21 Kristinsson, Jónius H., *Vesturheimsfærðir úr Vopnafirði og aðdragandi þeirra* [Emigration to North America from Vopnafjörður and events leading up to it]. Cand. mag. thesis in history, University of Iceland 1972; *Nordic Population Mobility: Comparative Studies of Selected Parishes in the Nordic Countries 1850-1900*, ed. Bo Kronborg & Thomas Nilsson & Andres A. Swalesen. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget 1977.

22 Kristinsson, Jónius H., *Vesturfaraskrá 1870-1914* [A Record of Emigrants from Iceland to America 1870-1914]. Reykjavík: Institute of History, University of Iceland 1983.

23 Kjartansson, Helgi Skúli, *Vesturfari af Íslandi* [North American Emigration from Iceland]. Cand. mag. thesis in history, University of Iceland 1976.

24 Kjartansson, Helgi Skúli, *The Onset of Emigration from Iceland, in Nordic Population Mobility*, 87-93; and *Emigrant Rates and Emigration from Iceland to North America, 1874-1893*, *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, vol. XXVIII, 1980:1, 53-71; and Icelandic Migration, in *European Expansion and Migration: Essays on the Intercontinental Migration from Africa, Asia, and Europe*, ed. P. C. Emmer & M. Wöhrner. New York: Berg 1972.

25 Kjartansson, Helgi Skúli, *Pólkæðumningar til Reykjavíkur 1850-1930* [Migration to Reykjavík, 1850-1930], in *Reykjavík í 1100 ár*, 255-284; and *Vöxkur og myndun þéttbýlis á Íslandi 1890-1915* [The urbanisation process in Iceland, 1890-1915], *Saga*, vol. XVI, 1978, 151-174.

26 Gunnlaugsson, Gísli Agústi, *Family and Household in Iceland 1801-1930: Studies in the Relationship between Demographic and Socio-economic Development, Social Legislation and Family and Household Structures*. Uppsala: Uppsala University 1988.

27 Jónsson, Guðmundur, *Vinnuhjóni á 19. öld* [Servants in the 19th Century]. *Rit safn Sagfræðisíofunnar* 5. Reykjavík: Institute of History, University of Iceland 1981.

28 Halldarsson, Guðmundur, *Alkoma leigulíða 1800-1857* [The living standards of tenant farmers 1800-1857]. B.A. thesis in history, University of Iceland 1980; Þrygnjólfsson, Erlingur, *Bægr er ótt þú situr að Hlyja: Afturgangur á búferlafélagum íslenskra bænda á 19. öld* [The burden of moving house: A study of peasant migration in Iceland in the 19th Century]. Cand. mag. thesis in history, University of Iceland 1983; Jónsson, Guðmundur, *Institutional Change in Icelandic Agriculture, 1780-1940*, *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, vol. XXI, 1993:2, 101-128.

ers and fee-holders went hand in hand with Danish government policy and the Danish merchant class, the two forming "a specific symbiosis of mutual interest".<sup>29</sup> In historical studies addressing the general question of 'obstacles' to economic growth and development, this shift of focus from harsh natural conditions and the political regime of the Danish Crown to domestic social relations, institutions, and social and economic policies represents one of the most important changes in the ways in which Icelandic historians have looked at their economic past. Although the nationalist stance has lost ground, the debate continues on a number of larger questions, such as the effects of labour bondage on the allocation of labour and urbanised market economy, and the question of the nationalist movement's commitment to the modernisation of the economy.

Contrary to the international trend, economic history continued to expand in Iceland in the 1980s, a decade during which the subject came of age as a distinct discipline with its own research agenda and trained economic historians. The appointment of the first doctor in economic history at the University of Iceland, Sweish-educated Gísli Gunnarsson, as a part-time lecturer from 1982, then a lecturer in 1987, was a boost to the discipline, especially the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. With more expertise and specialisation, economic history gradually moved away from mainstream history and closer to economics and other social sciences in terms of approaches and techniques. More sophisticated methods and techniques were adopted, although economic history did not have any significant impact. Theoretical constructions of various kinds were used more explicitly, particularly in the broader topics of macroeconomic analysis and economic development. Sigríus Jónsson applied the staple thesis and the theory of export-led growth convincingly in his study of the rise of the modern fishing industry.<sup>30</sup> Gísli Gunnarsson and, more explicitly, Þráinn Eggertsson analysed fundamental behaviour and structures in 'peasant society' within the framework of theories of risk and risk aversion.<sup>31</sup> Inspired by Alexander Gerschenkron's 'economic backwardness' thesis, Guðmundur Jónsson studied the role of the state in the Icelandic economy between 1870 and 1930.<sup>32</sup> In historical demography, Lofur Guðtomsson, Gísli Agústi Gunnlaugsson and Gísli Gunnarsson carried out studies of migration, infant mortality and fertility, as well as of family size and composition, under the influence of the Cambridge Group in England and other leaders in the field.<sup>33</sup>

29 Gunnarsson, Gísli, *Monopoly Trade and Economic Stagnation: Studies in the Foreign Trade of Iceland 1602-1787*. Skriftefni útgivna av Ekonomísk-historiska Föreningen, 38. Lund 1983, 176. A revised edition was published in Icelandic in 1987, *Upp er boðið fadlandi: Efnahagsvæðing og íslenskt samfélag 1602-1787* [Iceland on the auction block: Monopoly trade and Icelandic society 1602-1787]. Reykjavík, Bókafélagið Órn & Öryggur 1987.

30 Jónsson, Sigríus, *The Development of the Icelandic Fishing Industry 1900-1940 and its Regional Implications*. Reykjavík: The Economic Development Institute 1981, and *Sjálfstjórnunur Íslandinga á trettíngt öld* [Icelandic fisheries in the 20<sup>th</sup> century]. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntarélag 1984.

31 Eggertsson, Þráinn, Sources of Risk, Institutions of Survival, and a Game against Nature in Pre-modern Iceland, *Explorations in Economic History*, vol. 35:1, 1998, 1-30; Gunnarsson, Gísli, *Upp er boðið fadlandi*, 250-256.

32 Jónsson, Guðmundur, The State and the Icelandic Economy, 1870-1930. Ph.D. thesis in economic history, London School of Economics and Political Science 1991.

33 Guðtomsson, Lofur, Barnaeði, umþarnaðauði, og viðkoma á Íslandi 1750-1860 [Childraising, infant mortality and fertility in Iceland 1750-1860], in *Alþjóð og orð: Afmælisrit helgð Matthías*

Not only did the scope of economic history widen during the 1980s: research also started to pay attention to the twentieth century! Among the most important works were studies of industrialisation and modernisation, such as Sigríus Jónsson's previously mentioned work on the fisheries during the twentieth century, in which he argues that the development of an export sector played a crucial role in economic growth and development. In *Labour in Transition* Magnús S. Magnússon takes a more traditional stance, emphasising the crucial importance of technology transfer and capital formation in opening possibilities for developing new social structures. In a highly original study of economic ideologies during a phase of rapid industrialisation between 1900 and 1940, Ólafur Ásgeirsson argues that the greatest ideological tension was between urban and rural communities rather than employers and workers.

An important impetus was lent to the boom in economic history during the 1980s by the increasing number of young historians entering the field. As Table 1 shows, the proportion of final dissertations in economic history reached a peak in the 1980s at nearly one third of all dissertations. The most prominent research area continued to be industrial studies (whaling, foreign trade, fishing industry, metal industry, woollen industry), some of them impressive works of scholarship.<sup>34</sup> There was also growing interest in women's economic history, economic ideologies and the making of economic policy.

## Contrasting trends in the 1990s

The 1990s were characterised by contrasting trends in the way economic history developed as a subject-area. The subject gained little from the great inflow of students to the history department from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s; in fact, the number of final dissertations in economic history dropped slightly compared with the preceding decade, while subjects like gender, family, culture, identities and nationality became very popular. Cultural history in a wide sense was 'in', economic history was fast becoming 'out'. This rapid shift of interest among history students reflects not only larger changes in culture and society in line with international trends, it is also the result of the changing balance between the sexes within the student population in recent decades. The number of women as a proportion of all graduates in history rose from 26 per cent in the 1980s to 41 per cent in the 1990s. Women have shown keen interest in subjects like cultural history, gender history, family history, health and education, while political history and even more economic history have had much less appeal.

*Jónasyni*. Reykjavík: Mál og menning 1983, 137-170; Gunnlaugsson, Family and Household; Gunnlaugsson, Gísli Agústi, *Réttisfjöldi- og byggingarþróun 1880-1990*, in *Íslenskt þjóðfélagsþróun 1880-1990*; Rígerðin [Economic development of Iceland 1880-1990], eds. Guðmundur Halldórsson and Svanur Kristjánsson. Reykjavík: Institute of History and Institute of Social Sciences, University of Iceland 1993, 75-111; Gunnarsson, Gísli, *Fertility and Nuptiality in Iceland's Demographic History*, Meddelande från Ekonomisk-historiska institutionen, Lund Universitet nr. 17. Lund: University of Lund, Department of Economic History, 1980; Guðtomsson, Lofur & Halldórsson, Guðmundur & Garðarsdóttir, Ólöf, *Umþarna- og barnaðauði á Íslandi 1771-1950*: Notkætar rannsóknarráðgjöfdir [Child and Infant Child Mortality in Iceland 1771-1950: Results of Research], *Söga*, vol. XXXIX, 2001, 51-107.

34 Of the many works in this field only one will be mentioned here, Heimir Þorleifsson's *Sögu íslenskrar tegundarlegðir fram til 1917* [The History of the trawler fisheries in Iceland until 1917], *Sagnfræðiritannsóknir* 3, Reykjavík: Institute of History, University of Iceland 1974.

On the positive side, the institutional environment of the subject continued to develop and expand, and more economic historians entered the field. There are now three tenured teachers in the history department of the University of Iceland who have made economic history their main research field, each of them with a different educational background, research interests and research period. In addition to Gisli Gunnarsson, there is professor Helgi Þorláksson, a doctor in history from the University of Iceland and appointed in 1990. He has made late medieval economic history his main field of research, publishing extensively on trade, shipping and communication. Senior lecturer (*docent*) Guðmundur Jónsson, a Ph.D. in economic history from the LSE, came to the department in 1998 and his research field has mainly been macroeconomic development and state-economy relations from the late nineteenth century. Furthermore, Halldór Bjarnason, Ph.D. in economic history from the University of Glasgow, is a researcher at the Historical Institute, working on the trade history of Iceland.

Outside the University a small group of historians including Helgi Skúli Kjartansson at Iceland University of Education, Magnús S. Magnússon at Statistics Iceland and Jón Þ. Þór at the Icelandic Centre for Fisheries History Research are actively engaged in economic history along with others. Jón Þ. Þór holds the only research position outside the University;<sup>35</sup> Scholars in other disciplines have also made valuable contributions to economic history, including economists Jónas Haralz, Þráinn Eggertsson and Sigurður Snævarr, and the geographer Sigfús Jónsson.

In terms of publications produced, economic history has done fairly well in the 1990s. It must be admitted, however, that a considerable proportion of the publications are still commemorative histories of companies and institutions of varying quality. Some of the business histories, however, are of high quality, well-researched and with comparative aspects, such as the two-volume history of the salt-fish industry and the history of one of the leading fish sales organisations.<sup>36</sup>

Research activities have increasingly centred around major Icelandic and international projects, a development which has resulted in more ambitious works than before. At the beginning of the 1990s, Statistics Iceland launched a publication project on Icelandic historical statistics, concluding in 1997 with a massive publication, *Hagstíminna*, which has greatly enhanced historians' access to numerical data.<sup>37</sup> Jón Þ. Þór has for many years been studying long-term development of the fisheries within the framework of an international research and publication project, *The History of the Fisheries of the Northern Seas*. Guðmundur Jónsson has worked with economic historians in the other Nordic countries since 1994

on the construction of parallel national accounts with standardised measurements.<sup>38</sup> In 1999, five historians, Anna Agnarssdóttir, Gisli Gunnarsson, Guðmundur Jónsson, Halldór Bjarnason and Helgi Þorláksson, embarked on a project at the Institute of History with the aim of publishing a comprehensive two-volume work on the history of Icelandic foreign trade. Lastly, a large scale publication project on industrial history (*Saga til iðnsögu Íslands*) has been under way for many years, resulting in nearly 20 works on various branches and even trade unions within manufacturing industry.<sup>39</sup>

For many economic historians, the study of economic growth and its variance is the essence of the subject. It was not until the 1990s that growth accounting gained momentum, concentrating on estimating long-run economic growth and its components by extending the national accounts backwards from 1945 when the official accounts start. The first exercise of this kind was Gisli Blöndal's doctoral thesis of 1965, which was followed in 1992 by a work by another economist, Torfi Ásgeirsson, who published comprehensive and detailed estimates of GDP and other aggregates for the period 1901–1945.<sup>40</sup> In 1999, Guðmundur Jónsson published the results of his study in *Hagvæxtur og iðnvæðing*, offering improved estimates and more rigorously constructed national accounts covering all the major branches of industry for the period 1870–1945.<sup>41</sup>

Studies of living standards including aspects other than merely economic growth are rare but a number of important contributions have been made. In a survey article from 1987, Gisli Gunnarsson and Magnús S. Magnússon focus on a number of welfare indicators, such as development of real wages and demographic indicators.<sup>42</sup> In the 1940s and 1950s, the physician Jón Steffensen carried out interesting research into the relationship between food consumption and physical stature from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, the results of which are critically examined in Guðmundur Jónsson's longitudinal study of food consumption and nutrition from 1770–1940.<sup>43</sup>

38 See Christensen, Jørgen Peter & Hjerpe, Ritta & Kranz, Ole, *Nordic Historical National Accounts since the 1880s*, *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, vol. XLII, 1995:1, 30–52.

39 Including Guðmundsson, Magnús, *Ulf verður gull: Ulfarinnður íslendinga á síðri hluta 19. aldar og á 20. öld* [Turning wool to gold. The history of the woolen industry in Iceland since the late 19th century], *Sain til Iðnsögu Íslandinga II*, Reykjavík: HÍð íslenska bókmenntaflétt 1998.

40 Blöndal, Gisli, *The Development of Public Expenditure in Relation to National Income in Iceland*, Ph.D. thesis in economics, London School of Economics and Political Science 1965; *Þróðingarskiptingur 1901–1945* [National Accounts 1901–1945], *Þróðingarskiptingarsýsla* nr. 10, Reykjavík: National Economic Institute 1992; see also Gunnarsson, Guðmundur Örn, *The Economic Growth in Iceland 1901–1980: A Productivity Study*, Studia Oeconomica Uppsallensia 17, Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell International 1987.

41 Preliminary results from the Icelandic research are published in "The Gross Domestic Product of Iceland, 1870–1945", in *Nordiske Historiske Næjstættir*, *Artilikelsmting for Working My Solstrand* 13–15, november 1998, ed. Ola Honningdal Gryten, Bergen: Ragnþórslagar 1999, 7–25. The work was concluded with *Hagvæxtur og iðnvæðing: Þróðin landsfræðilega á Íslandi 1870–1945* [Economic growth and industrialisation: Iceland's GDP, 1870–1945], Sérni 3, Reykjavík: National Economic Institute 1999.

42 Gunnarsson, Gisli & Magnússon, Magnús S., *Leyndisstandarden på Ísland 1750–1914*, in *Leyndisstandarden i Norden 1750–1914* [Living Standards in Iceland 1750–1914], *Rapporter til den XX nordiske historikerkongres*, Rissafn Sagfræðisíðunnar 20, Reykjavík: Institute of History 1987.

43 Steffensen, Jón, *Um hlámsþæð íslendinga og orsakir til þreytinga á henni* [The height of Icelanders and causes of its change], in *Mennning og menningarmátt*, Reykjavík: Sögufélag 1975, 237–57.

35 See his survey *Ráttargull: Yfirniðyr sögu fiskveiða á Íslandi frá landnámsöld til stíttugaráttardar* [Gold from the waves: A survey of Icelandic fisheries from the Age of Settlement to the Age of the stern trawler], Reykjavík: Skerpla 1997.

36 Valdimarsson, Valdimar Unnar & Bjarnason, Halldór, *Saltfiskur í sögu þjóðar: Saga íslenskrar saltfiskfræðilegu og -veislu frá 18. öld til okkar daga* [Saltcod in the history of the Icelandic nation. The History of production and trade in salted fish from the 18th century to the Present], 2 vols. Reykjavík: HÍð íslenska bókmenntaflétt 1997; Einarsson, Hjalti & Hjaltaison, Jón & Hannibalsson, Ólafur, *Söluáttæðið* [Freezing Plants], 3 vols. Reykjavík: Söluáttæðið hradfyrstuhúsanna 1997.

37 *Hagstíminna: Sagurlegar hagfræðir um Ísland*, (also available on CD-ROM).

Although the accumulation of knowledge in the field has put historians in a better position to write general surveys of Icelandic modern economic history, there have been disappointingly few works of this kind. A survey article by Aðalgeir Kristjánsson and Gisli Ágúst Gunnlaugsson deals with the early nineteenth century economic development and the previously mentioned *Labour in Transition* by Magnús S. Magnússon covers many important aspects from the late 19th century to 1940. For the twentieth century, only two works fit into that category, Magnússon's quantitative treatment of main trends in the twentieth century and Sigurður Snævarr's *Hagfýsing Íslands* (An economic survey of Iceland).<sup>44</sup>

During the last quarter of a century economic history has grown significantly as an academic discipline as the result of an increase in its literature and in the number of historians contributing to it. It has undergone a process of professionalisation with the growth of a specialist body of knowledge, theories and methods offering new approaches and interpretations of the Icelandic past. In the last decade, however, economic history seems to have lost some of its appeal among the younger generation of historians, not because it has uncritically adopted the methods and approaches of econometric history, as some historians have explained its decline elsewhere, but because of new general historiographical tendencies which have worked to its disadvantage.<sup>45</sup> One of the strongest tendencies in recent years is the shift away from the study of the 'average man' and history of society to the study of the microscopic, the individual and his or her small world. Studies in cultural history with focus on gender, identities and citizenship have also proliferated in the last decade of the century. Economic historians need to become more aware of these currents to make connections with them, for they clearly need to chart a new course for the discipline, identifying fruitful areas and approaches in a quest for renewal.

Jónsson, Guðmundur, Changes in Food Consumption in Iceland ca. 1770-1940, in *Kulturn og hvarfsunir í Norðri 1750-1950*, eds. Johan Söderberg & Lars Magnusson. Helsinki: Finnish Historical Society 1997, 37-60.

44 Kristjánsson, Aðalgeir & Gunnlaugsson, Gisli Ágúst, Félagi- og hagþróun á fyrri hluta 19. aldar [Social and economic development of Iceland during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century], *Sögur*, vol. XXVIII, 1990, 7-62; Magnússon, Magnús S., *Iceland in Transition*, and *Efnahagsþróun á Íslandi 1880-1990* [Economic development in Iceland 1880-1990], in *Falensk þjóðfélagsþróun*, 112-214; Snævarr, Sigurður, *Hagfýsing Íslands* [An economic survey of Iceland], Reykjavík: Mál og menning 1993.

45 For recent international developments of the economic history discipline, I am drawing on Coleman, D. C., *History and the Economic Past: An Account of the Rise and Decline of Economic History in Britain*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1987; *The Future of Economic History*, ed. Alexander J. Field, Boston: Kluwer-Nijhoff Publishing 1987; Griffiths, Richard, In search of renewal: Contemporary economic history at a juncture, in *Melltem økonomi og historie*, ed. Lars Herlitz, Aalborg: Historiestudiet, Aalborg University 1998; Tilly, Richard, German economic history and Cliometrics: A selective survey of recent tendencies, *European Review of Economic History*, vol. 5, 2001, 151-187.