



**Address**  
**by**  
**the President of Iceland**  
**Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson**  
**at the opening of the exhibition**  
**"Islandglocke – zum 100.**  
**Geburtstag von Halldór Laxness"**  
**Zentralbibliothek der Stadtbibliothek**  
**Cologne**  
**4 December 2002**

The life of a writer – the fate of a nation; poetry and stories – identity and the basis of our existence. Texts and words which are intrinsic to understanding the challenge and privilege of being Icelanders. A cosmopolitan and the poet of his nation.

Such are the thoughts that run through our minds when we wrestle with how to interpret Halldór Kiljan Laxness. Yet this task is virtually impossible. His scope and diversity defy straightforward description. More than any other person he became synonymous with the main intellectual movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the greatest period of upheaval in the history of humankind.

As a young man he became a Catholic although nearly all his nation was Protestant, he devoted himself to religion in a European cloister, left the world of worship for adventures in America, tried his luck in Hollywood and became radicalised by the poverty he saw around him. Laxness returned to Iceland as a socialist and campaigned for social justice, supported the political struggle of the Communists, visited the Soviet Union and wrote glorified accounts of events and developments during the times of Stalin, a part of his life he later dealt with in a frank, open and mercilessly honest way. His books reflected the struggle of ordinary people, farmers and fishermen, in times of poverty, the years of the Great Depression. He re-created the Iceland of past centuries to celebrate newly won independence, became inspired by the campaign against nuclear weapons and against the militarisation of the Cold War, immersed himself in the contemplations of those who sought to interpret

the essence of the human spirit, what it means to be a man in a world full of injustice and conflicts, how one can acquire a true understanding of the purpose of our lives.

When Halldór Kiljan Laxness died at the age of 95 in 1998 his long journey had come to symbolize the turbulent upheavals of the twentieth century, the ideological struggles, the two World Wars, the transformation from poverty to prosperity, the deadly conflict of the Cold War, the tension between the arms race and peace, between oppression and freedom, terror and justice.

In his literary masterpieces he gave the Icelandic nation a new sense of being and provided the world with a deep insight into how to preserve our humanity in times of struggle and desperation, how to be true to oneself when revolutions and conflicts seem to tear everything apart.

We were indeed fortunate to have in his works such guides to our understanding of the twentieth century and to be endowed with such profound lessons for the journey which the new century has brought about, a journey into the new world which now dominates our countries and regions.

Halldór Laxness always had strong links with Germany. He first visited this country in 1921 at the age of 19, and returned frequently in the following decades. For the first part of the 1930s German publishers were quite interested in his writings, and resumed their interest after the World War. Laxness' works appeared in both parts of Germany, and it is worth recalling the important part played by Bruno Kress and his meticulous translations. A German TV station filmed two of Laxness' books under the direction of Rolf Hädrich, *The Fish Can Sing* and *Paradise Reclaimed* – the former in quite close collaboration with the author himself who in fact even joined the cast to act the role of the bishop of Iceland.

Halldór Laxness' works were given a new lease of life in Germany in 1988 when Steidl, at the instigation of the respected translator and scholar Hubert Seelow, announced an impressive relaunch of the Icelandic Nobel laureate's books in new or revised translations.

The great honour that Germany has shown Laxness was clearly shown during his centenary when Steidl presented its 11-volume *Werkausgabe* of Laxness and also by the fact that Chancellor Gerhard Schröder delivered an address at the opening of an Icelandic cultural week in Berlin on the anniversary of the author's birth. Earlier this year, Steidl also published a book by the Icelandic scholar and publisher Halldór Guðmundsson, a sharp and lively account of Halldór Laxness'

life and work which has already gained much-deserved attention and will hopefully attract many new readers to the Icelandic Nobel laureate's unique and enchanting world of fiction.

The exhibition which opens here today gives us an opportunity to ponder the rich life led by this remarkable author, how his life reflects the turmoil of the century which has just drawn to a close.

I hope that the exhibition will bring pleasure, joy and enlightenment to our friends here in Cologne and elsewhere in Germany, and I hereby declare the exhibition open.