

‘Blind Dislike of Anything New’. Culture and Change in Medical Literature in Eighteenth-Century Iceland

Bragi Þorgrímur Ólafsson, National and University Library of Iceland

Abstract: The first textbook on midwifery written in Icelandic was published in 1749. Its origins can be traced to several late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century European pioneers in obstetrics and anatomy, but despite this scientific background, reactions from readers were mixed, which demonstrates a culture of scepticism towards change and innovation in eighteenth-century Iceland.

Keywords: medical literature; midwifery; risk-aversion; book history; Iceland.

Recommended citation: Ólafsson, Bragi Þorgrímur, “Blind Dislike of Anything New.” Culture and Change in Medical Literature in Eighteenth-Century Iceland. *1700-tal: Nordic Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 21 (2024). 157–173. <https://doi.org/10.7557/4.7696>

Copyright: © 2024 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Introduction

In late January 1749, Halldór Brynjólfsson, bishop of Hólar bishopric in the northern part of Iceland (1692–1752), sat writing in his quarters.¹ He was in the last stages of publishing a small book titled “Sá nýi yfirsetukvennaskóli” (The New School for Midwives). Halldór knew that its publication was a milestone in Iceland’s 220-year-old print history as it was the first textbook on midwifery to be published in Icelandic. It was also one of the very few secular books printed in Iceland until the 1770s. The only available printing press, which almost exclusively printed religious material, was owned by the Church. Halldór was concerned that

¹ This essay is based on the 2006 edition of the book: Sá nýi yfirsetukvennaskóli: Balthazar Johann de Buchwald, Sá nýi yfirsetukvennaskóli eður stutt undirvísun um yfirsetukvennakúnstina. (Bragi Þorgrímur Ólafsson edited for publication and wrote an introduction (Hafnarfjörður: Söguspekingastifti, 2006)).

this book might have a mixed reception, as it openly discussed the nature of the female body at a time and age when such topics were not addressed in public. The book was based on contemporaneous research by various pioneers in health sciences in seventeenth-century and early eighteenth-century Europe but received a mixed reaction from its Icelandic readers. The present essay discusses the history of this book and how it reflects views towards change and innovation in eighteenth-century Iceland.²

Midwifery in Iceland until the Mid-eighteenth Century

The Church played a significant role in Icelandic society until the development of the modern state in the early 19th century. Not only did it attend to religious matters, but it also possessed Iceland's only printing press until the late 18th century, taught and monitored literacy, collected population data, managed health care, and attended to the sick.³ This included the education of midwives.

When the Reformation was implemented in Iceland in the 1550s, King Christian III (1503–1559) issued a new regulation for the church. It involved many aspects, including the education of aspiring midwives, which was limited to religious education.⁴ Emphasis was placed on spiritual well-being and care during pregnancy and birth rather than practical methods.⁵

A new regulation was published in the Danish realm in 1685.⁶ This regulation included a section on the education and role of midwives. It discussed the ideal characteristics of a midwife, as well as instructions on their education and how their appointment should be conducted. The regulation was analysed further in a manual for priests (Dominicale), which states that priests should remind pregnant women to acknowledge the blessing that God gave them for their pregnancy. They should also be reminded to beware of carelessness and accidents.

² On the history of the printing press in Iceland see f.ex: Böðvar Kvaran, *Auðlegð Íslendinga. Brot úr sögu íslenskrar bókaútgáfu og prentunar frá öndverðu fram á þessa öld* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1995).

³ See f.ex. Pétur Pétursson, *Church and Social Change. A Study of the Secularization Process in Iceland, 1830–1930* (Lund: Lunds Universitet, 1983).

⁴ On the history of midwifery in Iceland: Sigurjón Jónsson, *Ágrip af sögu ljósmæðrafræðslu og ljósmæðrastéttar á Íslandi* (Reykjavík: s.n., 1959); Erla Dóris Halldórsdóttir, *Fæðingarhjálp á Íslandi 1760-1880* [PhD dissertation] (2016); Þórunn Guðmundsdóttir, "Menntun og störf íslenskra ljósmæðra á 18. öld." *Vefnir* 3 (2003) <https://www.vefnir.is/grein/menntun-og-stoerf-islenskra-ljosmaedra-a-18-oeld>

⁵ *Diplomatarium Islandicum* X, pp. 153–154.

⁶ *Lovsamling for Island I*, p. 442–457

Furthermore, midwives should care for both the rich and the poor, know how to comfort pregnant women and remind them that not all women are able to carry a child. The manual also included prayers to use during difficult childbirths. The women who became midwives were usually chosen by priests in each parish who were tasked with selecting worthy and God-fearing women for that role.⁷

Thus, the official education of midwives in Iceland until the late eighteenth century mainly consisted of using specific prayers for women in labor and showing good character. This religious approach was quite different from what was common in Europe, where practical textbooks on pregnancy and the birthing process were available, including *Complete Midwives Practice Enlarged* (1659) and *Directory for Midwives: Or a Guide for Women* (1656), as historian Þórunn Guðmundsdóttir has discussed.⁸

Origins of the Book

In the mid-eighteenth century, the bishop of the Hólar bishopric in the north of Iceland, Halldór Brynjólfsson, decided to strengthen the education of Icelandic midwives on modern, scientific grounds. For that purpose, he had a Danish textbook on midwifery translated: *Nye Jorde-Moder-Skole* by Balthazar Johann de Buchwald (1697–1763). It was published in Icelandic in 1749 under the title *Sá nýi yfirsetukvennaskóli* or *Yfirsetukvennaskólinn* for short (*The New School for Midwives*).⁹

Halldór laid out his reasons for the publication in the preface of the book: mainly that Icelandic midwives had limited knowledge of appropriate methods during difficult births.¹⁰ In this regard, he mentioned two midwives he was familiar with: one had delivered 300 babies by her admission but often had problems in complex situations. The other had delivered 70 babies but did not recognise the umbilical cord during a difficult birth. Halldór was present, as he recalls, and able to advise the midwife on the appropriate method, which he had read about in a book by alchemist Jean Pharamond Rhumelius (ca. 1600–1660). With this experience in mind, Halldór decided to publish a modern textbook for Icelandic midwives.¹¹

⁷ Acta comitorum generalium Islandiæ XII, pp. 561.

⁸ Þórunn Guðmundsdóttir, “Menntun og störf íslenskra ljósmæðra á 18. öld.” *Vefnir* 3 (2003) <https://www.vefnir.is/grein/menntun-og-stoerf-islenskra-ljosmaedra-a-18-oeld>

⁹ Balthazar Johann de Buchwald, *Sá nýi yfirsetukvennaskóli eður stutt undirvísun um yfirsetukvennakústina* (Hólar, 1749).

¹⁰ Balthazar Johann de Buchwald, *Sá nýi yfirsetukvennaskóli*, pp. 4v–8v.

¹¹ Professor Jón Steffensen (1905–1991) believed that there could be another reason for its publication. Jón assumed that Halldór published the book at the suggestion of Ludvig Harboe (1709–1783), a Danish priest sent to Iceland to study educational and religious matters

Author(s)

In the book's preface, Halldór credited its (supposed) author, Balthasar Johann de Buchwald (1697–1763) and his book, *Nye Jorde-Moder-Skole*, published in Denmark in 1725. Buchwald was a Danish physician and professor at the University of Copenhagen. After completing his doctorate in medicine in 1720, he travelled to Holland where he became fascinated by obstetrics through the well-known anatomists Henricks van Deventer (1651–1724) in The Hague and Frederiks Ruysch (1638–1731) in Amsterdam. Buchwald also worked with the German anatomist Lorenz Heister (1683–1758) and Dutch physician Herman Boerhaave (1668–1738).¹² All of them were pioneers in the fields of anatomy and obstetrics.¹³ Five years later, Buchwald became a physician on the islands of Låland and Falstur in Denmark and published the *Nye Jorde-Moder-Skole* at the encouragement of the authorities (Jordemoderkommissionen). In 1738, Buchwald accepted a professorship at the University of Copenhagen. One of his students was Bjarni Pálsson (1719–1779), Iceland's first Director General of Public Health.

Buchwald was, however, not the actual author of *Nye Jorde-Moder-Skole*, as the book is predominantly a translation of a Swedish textbook on midwifery by Johan von Hoorn (1662–1724).¹⁴ Hoorn gained experience and knowledge in obstetrics in Paris in 1687–1689 under the tutelage of François Mauriceau (1637–1709), Paul Portal (1630–1703) and Philippe Peu (1623–1707), who all became known for their contributions to anatomy and obstetrics.¹⁵ Hoorn observed a well-known midwife, Madame Allegrain, at work in the poor parts of Paris, where he gained valuable experience and knowledge. Hoorn completed his medical degree in Leiden in 1690, moved to Stockholm in 1692, and became a pioneer in childbirth and midwifery in Sweden.¹⁶

In 1697, Hoorn published the first Swedish textbook on midwifery, *Then svenska walöfwade jordegumman*. As the book was almost 400 pages, Hoorn found it too

in Iceland in 1741–1745. Jón argues that Harboe got Vigfús Jónsson, a priest in Hítardal (1706–1776), to translate the book from Danish (which Halldór used for his publication). Halldór does not mention Harboe in the preface of the book, and Jón believes that it is due to a personal dispute between them. Jón Steffensen, 'Bjarni Pálsson og samtíð hans.' *Andvari. Nýr flokkur* 85:2 (1960) pp. 106.

¹² Dansk Biografisk Lexikon III (Köbenhavn: Gyldendalske Boghandels Forlag, 1889), p. 219. Jón Steffensen, 'Læknanám Bjarna Pálssonar landlæknis.' *Læknablaðið* 44:2 (1960), p. 68.

¹³ Irving S. Cutter and Henry R. Viets, *A Short History of Midwifery* (London: W.B. Saunders, 1964).

¹⁴ Gordon Norrie, *Det danske jordemodervæsens historie* (s.n. 1935), p. 39.

¹⁵ Irving S. Cutter and Henry R. Viets, *A Short History of Midwifery*, pp. 222–223.

¹⁶ *Nordisk familiebok. Konversationslexikon och realencyclopædi* 11 (Stockholm: Gossler-Harris, 1909), col. 1086–1088.

detailed for ordinary people and published an abridged edition in 1715 under the title *The twenne gudfruchtige ... Siphra och Pua*.¹⁷ A second edition was issued in 1719, which Buchwald translated into Danish in 1725 and then published in Icelandic in 1749. Thus, there is a direct connection between the *Yfirsetukvennskólinn*, published in Hólar in 1749, and *Then svenska walöfwade jordegumman*, published in Sweden in 1697.

Where Are the Women?

It is worth noting that despite the subject matter of *Yfirsetukvennskólinn*, women are not at the forefront in its formal publication history. Educated men in official positions put their mark on the book; doctors, priests, bishops, and professors. However, the book is based on the birth experience of women that Hoorn (and Buchwald, to some extent) studied at the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth. Thus, Madame Allegrain and her experience in the poor parts of Paris undoubtedly had an impact on the book's subject. It should be noted that women at the time had limited access to discussions on medicine and health in schools, academic publications, and lectures.¹⁸ It was not until more than a century after the publication of *Yfirsetukvennskólinn* that the idea of women's rights began to have an impact in the public field. Scientific knowledge of the female reproductive system was scarce at the time of the book's writing, and the birth process was even considered to be mostly outside the scope of health sciences until the early nineteenth century.¹⁹ There are exceptions, however: Justine Diettrich (1636–1705) wrote *Die Kgl. Preußische und Chur-Brandenburgische Hof-Wehemuttera*, a book on midwifery in German published in 1690. This book influenced von Hoorn, as illustrated recently in *Onaturlig födelse* by Tove Paulsson Holmberg.²⁰

Halldór's Ideas

Halldór completed the dedication and preface of *Yfirsetukvennskólinn* at the end of January 1749. He wrote highly of midwives and stated that their profession requires wisdom, skill and kindness towards infants and mothers, although it is

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ See f.ex. Ártöl og áfangar í sögu íslenskra kvenna. Ritstjórar Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir og Guðrún Dís Jónatansdóttir (Reykjavík: Kvennasögusafn Íslands, 1998).

¹⁹ Irvine Loudon, 'Childbirth.' in *Western Medicine. An Illustrated History*. Edited by Irvine Loudon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) p. 206.

²⁰ Tove Paulsson Holmberg, *Onaturlig födelse: Johan von Hoorn och det obstetriska dilemmaet 1680-1730* (Lund: Lunds universitet, 2017)

also a challenging occupation, as there are always at least two lives that rest in the hands of midwives at every birth: that of the mother and the child. Halldór cited the Bible as a sign of the importance of their work and referred to the story of the Hebrew midwives Sifra and Pua in the Old Testament. They ignored official orders to kill Israeli children at birth, and therefore, their names are ‘...among the most promising ones listed in the scriptures’, as Halldór wrote.²¹

Halldór also addressed his fears that the book might receive a mixed reception because of Icelanders’ generally negative attitude towards changes. He feared people might cling to previous knowledge and find no reason to employ new methods and practices. Such scepticism was a common theme in Iceland at that time.²² In fact, mistrust towards scientific medical methods vs. folk medicine was quite common, for example, in Finland, as illustrated in Saara-Maija Kontturi’s work.²³ Halldór argued that it would be a loss for the whole country if intelligent midwives would dismiss the book entirely. He pointed out that various women in history had received education on their own accord and felt that if Icelandic women had the benefit of an organised, formal education, they could be compared to many notable women scholars on the continent, such as ‘Schurmann’, which was probably a reference to Anna Maria van Schurmann (1607–1678), a well-known Dutch scholar and women’s rights advocate who studied art, literature, theology, law and knew many languages. This reflection by Halldór is probably one of the first to appear in print in Iceland on the possibilities of formal education for women.

Finally, Halldór considered the danger of the book falling into the hands of ‘...ungodly men, whose tongues are inflamed by hell ... with foul vile lust and vain words...’²⁴ Halldór obviously felt that the book was quite open about women’s private parts and emphasised that those who would misinterpret its content should be severely punished. He thoroughly refers to many passages in the Bible where punishment is mentioned, f.ex. the story of Hymeneus and Alexander which renounced their faith in God and were delivered to Satan as a punishment, and the story of Jezebel which persuaded King Ahab to worship pagan gods and lost her life as a result.²⁵ However, Halldór believed the book was so carefully prepared that no one would be offended by its content.

²¹ Balthazar Johann de Buchwald, *Sá nýi yfirsetukvennaskóli*, p. 3r–3v.

²² See f. ex: Gunnar Halldórsson, Jón Ólafur Ísberg, Theodóra Þ. Kristinsdóttir, ‘Íhaldssemi og framfarahugmyndir fyrr á tímum.’ *Saga* 27 (1989), pp. 137–151.

²³ Saara-Maija Kontturi, *Lääkärikunnan synty. Suomen lääkärit n. 1750–1850* (Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä, 2021).

²⁴ Balthazar Johann de Buchwald, *Sá nýi yfirsetukvennaskóli*, pp. 7r.

²⁵ Balthazar Johann de Buchwald, *Sá nýi yfirsetukvennaskóli*, p. 7v.

Yfirsetukvennaskólinn is divided into two parts: The first part of the book deals with natural births, while the second deals with high-risk births and interventions. Each part contains short sections where questions and answers are presented.

Reception

Twelve years after the publication of *Yfirsetukvennaskólinn* (1761), the newly appointed Director General of Public Health in Iceland, Bjarni Pálsson (1719–1779), began to organise modern educational reform for midwives.²⁶ Bjarni's letter of appointment (May 19, 1760) includes a chapter on the education of midwives:

“For our dear citizens in Iceland to benefit from good and well-educated midwives and save many lives, the Director General must admit, as soon as possible, one or more moral women and provide them with adequate training in the art of midwifery and ... examine some of those who are already practising midwives, and educate them about the issues that are the most common, difficult births, rotations, etc.”²⁷

The Danish midwife Margrethe Katrine Magnussen was appointed to educate aspiring midwives. To prepare for her arrival, Bjarni had an advertisement read out in churches in Álftanes, Seltjarnarnes and Reykjavík. People were reassured that even though Margrethe was a foreigner, there was nothing to fear as she was able to train and adequately understand Icelandic midwives. Margrethe came to Iceland in the spring of 1761 with her husband, Icelandic blacksmith Benedikt Magnússon.

In May of the same year, Bjarni wrote a letter to Gísli Magnússon (1712–1779), Bishop of Hólar, where he mentioned that he had discussed the essential aspects of midwifery with several midwives. He found that their skills were somewhat lacking and believed that the reason was that few midwives owned or had read *Yfirsetukvennaskólinn* ‘... which is a good book, and apparently indispensable to them, as the *Catechismus*.’ He adds that he has heard rumours that many copies of the book were still unsold at Hólar and asks Gísli to make sure that at least one copy of the book would be available in each parish and that Gísli should instruct midwives to buy the book ‘...for the necessary practice and a guide in their difficult work...’, especially since the book is inexpensive. Bjarni also wrote that some midwives ‘hate and despise the book...’ but that this attitude changes when they must deal

²⁶ On the history of public health in Iceland, see: Jón Ólafur Ísberg, *Líf og lækningar. Íslensk heilbrigðissaga* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 2005).

²⁷ *Lovsamling for Island III*, pp. 415.

with difficult births and seek information on appropriate methods.²⁸ Gísli replied to the letter in July and wrote that he had encouraged people to study the book, but ‘many people have made more fun than serious attempts to heed my recommendations’.²⁹

In the fall of the same year, Bjarni wrote a letter to prefect (stiftamtmaður) Otto von Rantzau (1719–1768), in which he described his disappointment that few midwives owned or had read *Yfirsætukvennaskólinn* and blamed it on ‘...crazy shyness and a blind dislike of anything new...’³⁰ Bjarni wrote, however, that most midwives willingly accept instructions and that he was not surprised that women who had not received any formal education would be sceptical of new ideas and techniques.

Ten years later, in 1771, Bjarni was obviously still not fully satisfied with the reception of *Yfirsætukvennaskólinn*, as evident in his letter to prefect Lauritz Andreas Thodals (1718–1808) in July the same year, where he still believes there is a reason to encourage priests to ask midwives to read the book.³¹

Judging from Bjarni’s collection of letters, it can be assumed that *Yfirsætukvennaskólinn* had a relatively poor reception. It must be remembered that some of the older midwives were illiterate then, so they had little use for the book. Furthermore, the general attitude towards women’s private parts was coloured by the strict spirit of the times in moral matters, as Halldór points out in the preface of the book, and there was also a general suspicion or caution towards new methods and changes at the time – even until the latter part of the nineteenth century.

This scepticism was part of a common risk aversion, i.e. fear that any change might have harmful consequences. That attitude was shaped by a centuries-old experience of hard struggle for life in Iceland, which resulted in the general belief that risky innovations, in all their forms, were undesirable as they could lead to a catastrophe. This general scepticism of change and innovation was evident in most areas of Icelandic society, where social and class stability was emphasised. This attitude towards change survived up until the mid-nineteenth century.³²

However, it cannot be ruled out that some midwives read and used *Yfirsætukvennaskólinn*. Physician Sveinn Pálsson (1762–1840) wrote for example in his autobi-

²⁸ National Archives. Archive of the Director general of public health. Bjarni Pálsson. Letter no. 37. May 20, 1761.

²⁹ National Archives. Archive of the Director general of public health. Bjarni Pálsson. Letter no. 48. July 11, 1761.

³⁰ National Archives. Archive of the Director general of public health. Bjarni Pálsson. Letter no. 24. September 14, 1761.

³¹ Sigurjón Jónsson, Ágrip af sögu ljósmæðrafræðslu og ljósmæðrastéttar á Íslandi, p. 39.

³² See f.ex. Gísli Gunnarsson, Upp er boðið Ísaland. Einokunarverslun og íslenskt samfélag 1602–1787 (Reykjavík: Almenna bókafélagið, 1987).

ography that his mother, Guðrún Jónsdóttir (1732–1791), was ‘...generally regarded as an excellent midwife, as she knew Buchwald’s *Yfirsetukvennaskóli*, printed at Hólar in 1749 by heart.’³³ Someone also copied the book by hand, now preserved in the manuscript collection of the National and University Library of Iceland (Lbs 4900 8vo). Furthermore, midwives had no other printed book available for guidance for forty years, as the next book on the subject in Icelandic was not published until 1789.³⁴

Legacy

Although *Yfirsetukvennaskólinn* had a mixed reception at first, it marked a milestone as it was the first textbook on midwifery to be published in Icelandic. It has its roots in the first Swedish textbook on midwifery (1697), and its contents have undoubtedly been shaped by various significant pioneers in obstetrics and anatomy in Europe, as documented earlier, although some of its methods are not up to modern standards.³⁵ The book was published in the early years of Iceland’s modern public health system and is related to the office of the Director General of Public Health (founded in 1760) and the Icelandic midwifery profession. The book is also one of Iceland’s first publications on health and medicine. Icelandic historian Jón Espólin wrote in his annals on the history of Iceland in 1843 that, in retrospect, the publication of the book had been a sign of a new era of progress and things to come.³⁶

DR. BRAGI ÞORGRÍMUR ÓLAFSSON (b. 1976) is the director of the Manuscript Collection at the National and University Library of Iceland. His research interests are the history of the book and post-medieval manuscript culture.

³³ Sveinn Pálsson, ‘Sveinn Pálsson. Skráð af honum sjálfum.’ *Merkir Íslendingar. Ævisögur og minningargreinar III* (Reykjavík: Bókfellsútgáfan, 1949), p. 113.

³⁴ Matthias Saxthorp, *Stutt ágríp af yfirsetukvennafræðum* (Köbenhavn, 1789).

³⁵ Erla Dóris Halldórsdóttir, ‘Barnsarsótt á Íslandi á níttjándu öld.’ *Saga* 56:1 (2018) p. 81.

³⁶ Jón Espólin. *Íslands árbækur í sögu-formi X* (Köbenhavn, 1843), p. 18.