

LITERATURE

Icelandic Literature is in some respects unique in the world literature. It is almost as old as the nation that created it and covers a longer period than any other literature in any modern European language. It is recorded in a tongue which has changed so little from that spoken by the settlers a millennium ago, that any child can understand the oldest Icelandic writings almost as easily as if they had been written yesterday. It forms a connected whole where one thing arises out of another as naturally as boughs, branches, and leaves spring from a tree; and though in form more strict than other literatures, it has always been the property of the common people, who have made no small contribution to it. It is strictly national, but at the same time it is a 'look-out hill' where all Teutonic nations must make a halt to understand their own origin and character. — This literature, though created by Europe's most isolated and most northerly nation, Europe's smallest and sparsest nation, has nevertheless its significant voice in the great world choir of letters.

Only a very brief sketch of the whole field has been attempted in the following pages.

POETRY

The earliest kind of Icelandic literature is poetry. It had already made some progress in Norway by the time the settlers emigrated to Iceland; but in Iceland it soon reached a high and peculiar stage of development, and has never died out during subsequent centuries. Old-Icelandic poetry falls under two heads: the *Eddic lays* and the *Court poetry*. The bulk of the Eddic lays are of uncertain age, but it is generally supposed that most of what has been preserved, dates from between 850 and 1050, and more particularly from the latter