INTRODUCTION

I am assuming that most readers of this book will know of William Morris’s immense energy and his diverse achievements, so many we despair of even counting them, so relevant that we look to him for answers to our own problems. I shall therefore refrain from even an introductory summary of such matters. I am also assuming that fewer readers will know of the range and significance of Morris’s Icelandic writings – both translations and original works – so I shall survey them and then comment on the importance to Morris of Eiríkr Magnússon, an importance often overlooked. I shall conclude with a few remarks on the diction and style of their saga translations and on the six narratives in the present volume.

Morris’s interests in Northern lore found outlet in his earliest writings: in prose tales like ‘Lindenborg Pool’, that appeared in *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* (Morris, 1856); in short poems, based on Scandinavian ballads, written in the 1860s, but published much later, in *Poems by the Way* (Morris, 1891). References in ‘The Wind’ and ‘Rapunzel’, in *The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems* (Morris, 1858), indicate that Morris knew the most important saga translations of the preceding generation: the *Heimskringla* (Laing, 1848), *Gisli Saga*, and *Njala* (Dasent, 1861 and 1866). Moreover, in the work that established his reputation as one of
England’s premier poets, *The Earthly Paradise* (Morris, 1868–70), his descriptions of the Wanderers, ‘gentlemen and mariners of Norway’, reveal a broad knowledge of Norse myth and history, derived from works like Percy’s translation of Mallet’s *Northern Antiquities* (Percy, 1847), Thorpe’s *Northern Mythology* (Thorpe, 1851), and the Cottle (1797) and Thorpe (1866) translations of the Elder Edda.

Three of the poems in *The Earthly Paradise* are based on Icelandic sources. Two of them, ‘The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon’ and ‘The Wooing of Aslaug’, are derived from Thorpe’s *Northern Mythology*. The third, ‘The Lovers of Gudrun’, is a retelling of the tragic central story in *Laxdoella Saga*. Morris thought this poem ‘the most important thing I have written; the deeper I got into the old tale, the more interested I found myself’ (Kelvin, vol. 1, 1984, p. 82). He had got deeply into the old tale, one of the greatest of the Family sagas, with a remarkable Icelander, Eiríkr Magnússon, who — in his moving obituary (Magnússon, 1896) — recalled their first meeting in August of 1868: ‘with a cordial “come upstairs” [Morris] was off at a bound, I following until his study on the second floor was reached...his volubility of speech struck me no less than the extensive information he displayed about Iceland and Icelandic literature generally, acquired, of course, at second hand.’ But from that point on, Morris’s knowledge of Icelandic literature and of Iceland itself, all thanks to Magnússon, would be acquired at first hand, and therefore original poems like ‘The Lovers of Gudrun’ and his grand epic, *Sigurd the Volsung* (Morris, 1876), have an authenticity about them, a firm sense of character and place,
simply not present in the pre-Magnússon Northern writings. Morris no longer had to rely on abstracts or someone else's translations.

Magnússon and Morris began their own translations immediately, and in the next few years they completed an astonishing amount of work, especially when we consider that this was not a full-time endeavour for either of them. They met a few afternoons a week. They translated and published two of the three 'love stories' in the present volume, those of Gunnlaug and Frithiof, in 1869 and 1871, Laxdoela Saga in 1869 (never published); and in the same year they completed forty chapters of Egils Saga (May Morris, 1936), as well as yet another of the best-known Family sagas: Grettis Saga (Morris and Magnusson, 1869). The following year they completed Kormáks Saga (Morris and Magnusson, 1970), and also the Volsunga Saga, which included their translations of thirteen poems from the Elder Edda (Morris and Magnusson, 1870). Another five sagas – Hávardar, Bandamanna, Hoensa-Thóris, Eyrbyggja and Heitharvígja – were also translated in the early 1870s, but not published until twenty years later as the first two volumes of The Saga Library (Morris and Magnusson, 1890–1905). Parts of the Heimskringla (vols. 3–5) were also worked up in this early period. The sixth and final volume of The Saga Library, a massive compilation of background material and indexes to Snorri's histories was done by Magnusson alone. He also did the notes and indexes for all the earlier translations, and he helped Morris with the prefaces to each translation.

As I noted above, his translation work inspired Morris to write what he considered – as have most of
his readers – his best narrative poems, ‘The Lovers of Gudrun’ and Sigurd the Volsung (Litzenberg, 1933; Ellison, 1972). The translations also led to a number of short poems that deserve to be better known, eg. two sonnets on Grettir and an ode, ‘To the Muse of the North’. The latter and one of the sonnets, now titled ‘To Grettir Asmundson’, he copied out in his own hand into A Book of Verse, a beautiful illustrated manuscript which he presented to Georgiana Burne-Jones for her birthday in 1870 (Morris, 1981). Morris’s firm and graceful calligraphy and the decorated borders, with their swirling green branches and bright flowers, do not soften the cold and austere themes of these Iceland poems. The Volsunga prologue also appears here; it opens with this command: ‘O, hearken, ye who speak the English Tongue/How in a waste land ages long ago/The very heart of the North bloomed into song.’ Morris’s large reputation as the author of The Earthly Paradise did cause many Victorian readers to ‘hearken’ to these saga translations and perhaps to wonder how such rich narratives could have grown in the wastes of Iceland a thousand years ago. Just after that great burst of translations – several sagas and a dozen Eddic poems in 1869 and 1870 alone – Morris travelled out to Iceland to ponder this mystery for himself. And also to give his wife, Janey, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti a chance to sort out their tangled lives. Anxieties about Janey and their future together are the basis for yet another Iceland poem written during this period (Ellison, 1972), interesting for its theme and also because of its attempts to imitate Eddic prosody. Two excellent poems were inspired by the 1871 journey to Iceland. Magnússon, again his
mentor, accompanied Morris by train to Edinburgh and then on a small steamer across the cold Atlantic to Iceland. Morris saw its dark southern coast early one July morning and tried to describe the landfall and his feelings. The result, ‘Iceland First Seen’ (Morris, 1891), is less interesting for images, eg. ‘toothed rocks’, ‘grinding ice’, and ‘hidden fire’ made hackneyed by the descriptions of former British visitors (Aho, 1993), than for the urgent questions it poses: ‘Ah! what came we forth for to see/That are hearts are so hot with desire?’ and ‘Why do we long to wend forth?’ [Is it to find out where] ‘lives the tale of the Northland of old/And the undying glory of dreams?’ An affirmative answer is suggested in the second poem, ‘Gunnar’s Howe Above the House at Lithend’. Gunnar, Njal’s stalwart friend, is said to be buried here, and Morris – stunned by the views from the green slopes of Hlidarendi – marvels at the power of the sagas, these tales ‘that bridge all the days that have been’.

‘Iceland First Seen’ was better known in Iceland than in England, since an Icelandic translation was published in 1872, the original not until 1891, in Poems by the Way. This happened because Magnússon was a friend of Jón Sigurdsson, the famed writer and politician, the tireless agitator for Icelandic independence. He was also an editor and so Magnússon sent him the two poems, and Sigurdsson liked ‘Iceland First Seen’. He had it translated and ‘Í Landsyn vid Íslind’ appeared in the next issue of Ný Félagsrit (Thorisson, 1872).

The correspondence between Magnússon and Sigurdsson is extensive, and often fascinating, because Magnússon was Sigurdsson’s eyes and ears in London,
passing on to him any information pertinent to their common quest to achieve independence for Iceland. One often gets a sense from these letters that Magnússon was an important player in big events, not merely the grammarian-librarian that appears in most Morris biographies (Landsbókasafn).

Just before the 1871 journey out to Iceland Magnússon had applied for a job at Cambridge, and in November he learned that he had won the position – there were seventy-eight applicants – of Under Librarian at the University. Morris had recommended him, writing that, ‘your natural gifts for books, your conscientious accuracy and capacity of research, and your extra-ordinary power and appetite for hard work; your scholarly qualities and passion for philology, and intimate knowledge of it... must always make you one of the most useful of men in a place of learning’ (Kelvin, vol. 1, p. 138). Morris was not exaggerating. Here is a survey of some of the publications that stemmed from Magnússon’s ‘passion for philology’.

After completing revisions of the Icelandic New Testament, work that had brought him from Iceland to London in 1862, Magnússon teamed up with another British Icelandophile, George E. J. Powell, to edit and translate Icelandic sagas and folktales, and to prepare an Icelandic dictionary. Work on the sagas and dictionary faltered, but two volumes of folktales, with impressive scholarly apparatus, were published as *Icelandic Legends* (Powell and Magnússon, 1864 and 1866). When he met Morris in 1868, he was amidst another large project, this time editing and translating a fourteenth-century Icelandic religious poem, a 100-stanza celebration of the Virgin Mary
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titled *Lilja [The Lily]* (Magnússon, 1870). This handsome edition, with facing-page English translations, includes in its introduction a clear explanation – one of the first to appear in English – of the ‘dróttkvætt’ verse forms that are sprinkled through most saga narratives, the ‘vísur’ that would beguile and frustrate Morris as he tried to capture both their meaning and form in the saga translations. He was quite successful at doing so and fortunate to have Magnússon, an expert on Icelandic verse forms, as his collaborator. A still more ambitious edition-translation was *Thómas saga erkibyskkupir* (Magnússon, 1875–83). This two-volume work, replete with a 150-page introduction, indexes and glossary, represents nineteenth-century Germanic philology at its most impressive. Magnússon, obviously, had had considerable experience, before meeting Morris, at translating Old Icelandic poetry and prose into English. And Magnússon also had the linguistic facility to translate literary English into Icelandic. Major examples are his renderings into Icelandic of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* (Magnússon, 1876) and Shakespeare’s *Tempest* (Magnússon, 1885). The latter was the first edition-translation of a Shakespeare play to appear in Iceland. These are only a few examples of Magnússon’s productivity. The bibliography compiled by his biographer (Einarsson, 1933) is divided into a dozen categories and runs to fourteen pages. Listed therein are hundreds of articles and reviews, written in Icelandic, Danish, German, and English, on a great variety of topics: Runic calendars, Viking ships and how they were navigated, the meaning of ‘Edda’, the significance of Othin’s wonderful horse, ‘Yggdrasill’, and so forth. There are
treatises on European banking, polemical editorials on Dano-Icelandic politics, essays on librarianship, some original poems. Such a vast body of work is impressive; Magnússon made his mark on Icelandic letters and Germanic philology.

But today – at least in England and America – he is known mainly for his work with Morris on the translations that culminated in *The Saga Library*. Its projected fifteen volumes were cut to five by Morris’s death, and thus with publication in 1905 of the aforementioned sixth volume, it appeared that Magnússon’s long and fruitful collaboration with Morris was over. But when May Morris started work on a collected edition of her father’s writings, she asked Magnússon for help, and he agreed, responding with characteristic energy and thoroughness. His reminiscences found their way into May’s introductions to volumes seven and eight of *The Collected Works of William Morris* (Morris, 1910–15), and Magnússon wrote ‘Additional Notes’ for the translations of *Grettis Saga* and the *Volsungasaga* that appeared in volume seven, as well as for the diaries that Morris kept while on the two journeys to Iceland, published for the first time in volume eight as *Journals of Travel in Iceland, 1871, 1873*. Similar notes that would have accompanied *Three Northern Love Stories*, in volume ten, were never published, ironically because of Magnússon’s energy and thoroughness.

Therein lies a story, but before telling it, I want to consider the Icelandic journals from the perspective of Magnússon looking back in 1910, preparing his notes, recalling that adventurous jaunt (Purkis, 1962) made in the summer of 1871.
Magnússon was the kind of leader few expeditions into the Icelandic outback have ever had. There were other tourists in Reykjavík that July, all planning treks, all looking for good horses, but Magnússon was able to get the choicest for the Morris party, and then he proved himself more adept with the horses and packs and gear than the two Icelanders hired to do such rough work. We see Magnússon lashing horses together to swim them across wild rivers, putting horseshoes on them, planning legs of the trip so that the horses have pasturage. Magnússon exhibits skills as a cook, a mender of pots, a nurse, an English teacher. He knows the contemporary and saga-age significance of every site, from the Faroes to the remotest valley in Iceland. He seems to know the head of every family and the importance and history of every farm. He's seen discoursing, talking politics with parish priests, with wealthy merchants and struggling farmers. Everywhere Magnússon is treated as a personage, the friend of the revered Jón Sigurdsson and also of Morris, this famous British skald he was now taking round to saga sites.

The footnotes Magnússon adds to the entries Morris had made forty years earlier are crisp and informative, revealing his scholarly and pedantic proclivities, correcting Morris’s spelling, designations and directions, and at one point contradicting him. In the text Morris has the horses tied together to traverse a narrow trail, but Magnússon recalls that ‘there was talk of doing this, but I prevented it; an accident happening to one of the ponies so tied together might drag the whole train over the precipice’ (p. 133; page numbers refer to volume seven of The Collected Works). He rarely draws attention to himself in this
way, passing by chances to explain his side when Morris’s text shows him out of sorts, or angry, or being ‘chaffed’. Once he tells us that an 18-year-old student whom Morris had thought a lively lad is ‘now a district physician at Stykkisholm in the west of Iceland’ (p. 63), as if to affirm that Morris’s judgement was correct regarding the student. It must have been pleasant for Magnússon, now in his seventies and with some memories of youthful promise not fulfilled, to add this note about Morris and the student. There are also thirty endnotes for the 1871 journey, and several of these are actually short essays, many of them on the more famous saga sites they pass. Once he says, ‘for further information, see Saga Library, VI’ (p. 241), thus getting in a plug for his own book. These short and learned discourses have an affable, easy air about them; he’s thinking of an audience who will share his and Morris’s interests in these topics. Once Magnússon presents a charming vignette:

Here Morris omits mentioning an incident unique in this journey. When he ‘was settled in his blankets’ he offered to tell us the Saga of Bjorn...the offer was accepted readily enough; and he told the whole saga in abridgement with remarkably few slips, ...And the audience was still awake when he finished. (p. 239)

Working with these diaries, conjuring up and recording such memories, adding substantive information to the record – Magnússon is once again collaborating with Morris.

With the texts of the Grettis Saga and Volsunga translations, it might have been similar, but
Magnússon offered so many corrections and emendations, ones he wanted placed directly into the text rather than appended, that Cockerell and the other executors — full of careful advice for May — became concerned. If she started altering the texts of these translations, polishing out errors, misinterpretations, and improprieties, what might she be expected to do with Morris’s translations of Beowulf and Homer? Magnússon was thus allowed to add only a few dozen notes to the two translations, while he had obviously thought that his work on these texts should be much more extensive. He complained to May; she wrote to Cockerell. He replies: ‘Thank you for your letter about Magnússon. What a tiresome person he is... He is quite capable of attacking us in print’ (British Library). Evidently things had come to a head, for shortly afterward Magnússon writes May a vituperative letter, talking about proofs he’s returning to her: ‘Your ruthless rejection from the text of my emendations I must remonstrate against ... [it] proves that you consider I have nothing to do with that text.’ Then, in what is factually and morally if not legally true, he asserts that the ‘texts of these saga works are mine; the style of them your father’s. All index work on them and all notes are mine.’

Magnússon had every right to be proud of such work, for the indexes and notes to all of the translations are models of precise and exhaustive scholarship. And Magnússon’s anger grows:

When I look upon your father’s life and see that if he had never known me, there would have been in existence none of the three volumes I have been called upon to revise, no Sigurd the Volsung, no Lovers of Gudrun, no Saga Library; no material
advantage accruing to the estate of William Morris from this source of income, can you wonder at my sorrow at finding after all, my plain incontestable right in dispute between me and the daughter of William Morris? (Landsbókasafn)

Always somewhat irascible and now at the end of his life physically weak and financially strapped, Magnússon lashed out here in rather unbecoming fashion. But what he says is true. I include these passages and the summary of Magnússon’s considerable achievements in this Introduction because he has rarely been given his full due in the mainstream of Morris commentary and criticism. Even those authors who treat the Icelandic materials fully tend to slight Magnússon, centering their discussions on Morris’s style or on general themes that can be twisted into their own interpretations of Morris’s politics and personal life.

May Morris herself, in a small and perhaps unintentional way, contributed to this diminution of Magnússon. In her two-volume supplement to The Collected Works, written more than twenty years after Magnússon’s death, she at any rate gets in the last word. In rehashing the collaborators’ methods, she asserts that her father turned Magnússon’s ‘unconsidered journalesque into a language more worthy of the subject’ (Morris, 1936, p. 455). To paste such a label onto Magnússon’s style seems strange, since in her introduction to volume seven of The Collected Works, she had presented Magnússon talking of Morris’s regard for ‘the simple dignity of style of the Icelandic saga’, adding that Morris found it ‘intolerable to have to read an Icelandic saga rendered into the dominant literary dialect of the day – the
English newspaper language’ (May Morris, 1973, vol. 1, p.181). Perhaps she had forgotten that, but ‘journalesen’ doesn’t fit Magnússon’s English anywhere, even when he’s writing newspaper articles. His own pre-Morris translations of Icelandic poetry and prose have an archaic, dusty quality to them.

The non-journalistic – defiantly non-contemporary – style of the Morris-Magnússon translations has drawn fire from the beginning (Swannell, 1961). In that sixth and final volume of The Saga Library, Magnússon answers a sneering allusion to translators who use ‘Pseudo-Middle-English’ words (Vigfússon and Powell, 1883, vol. 1, p. cxv) in typically combative fashion: ‘It is a strange piece of impertinence to hint at “Psuedo [Magnússon’s emphasis] Middle-English” scholarship in a man who, in a sense, might be said to be a living edition of all that was best in Middle-English literature’ (Magnússon, 1905, p. 8). Since Morris had been reading border ballads all his life, had inhaled Chaucer and Malory and Froissart at Oxford – and evidently forgotten none of it – the phrase ‘living edition’ is certainly apt. And in all of the translations, archaic words are easy to spot, but are they bogus? An ardent and sensible defender of the Morris-Magnússon translations – in the minority over the years – surveyed the pairs’ earliest translations in order to answer this question (Litzenburg, 1937). Among the texts he examined are the first five narratives in the present volume: ‘The Story of Gunnlaug the Worm-Tongue and Raven the Skald’ (hereafter GnS), ‘The Story of Frithiof the Bold’ (FrS), ‘The Story of Viglund the Fair’ (VgS), ‘The Tale of Hogni and Hedinn’ (HH), and ‘The Tale of Roi the
Fool’ (RF). In the following I italicize the medieval word in each instance, identifying the part of speech, adding a gloss if necessary and sometimes the Icelandic original.

From GnS: ‘clave the head’ (p. 45) past of ‘cleave’. ‘dight am I’ (p. 37) adj. ‘ready, prepared’. ‘rich of fee’ (p. 7) noun ‘cattle, possessions’; Icelandic: ‘audigr at fé’. ‘thou wast holpen’ (p. 18) past. part. of ‘help’. ‘he was of lovesome countenance’ (p. 13) adj. ‘that rede is not to be’ (p. 17) noun ‘counsel, decision’; Icelandic: ‘rád’.

From FrS: ‘brake their backs’ (p. 66) past of ‘break’. ‘drank his bridal’ (p. 66) noun ‘wedding’; Icelandic: ‘drekka brúdlaup’. ‘eld is deep in my eyes’ (p. 75) noun ‘age’; Icelandic: ‘elli í augu mér’. ‘as ever erst’ (p. 79) adv. ‘first’. ‘salt are our eyne’ (p. 59) noun, pl. of ‘eye’. ‘more to me is...grace than...grame’ (p. 53) noun ‘anger’. ‘goodly mantle well shapen for him’ (p. 53) past part. of ‘shape’.

From VgS: ‘waxed somewhat adrad’ (p. 93) adj. ‘afraid’. ‘aright must we arede us’ (p. 120) verb. ‘counsel’; Icelandic: ‘rétt til ráða’. ‘ferryboat all fordone’ (p. 122) adj. ‘destroyed’. ‘asked what they hight’ (p. 84) verb. ‘were named’; Icelandic: ‘het’. ‘whether she were lieve or loth’ (p. 116) adj. ‘willing’; Icelandic: ‘ljúft eda leitt’. ‘had great scathe thereby’ (p. 96) noun ‘harm’; Icelandic: ‘skada’. ‘lie under...thraldom’ (p. 81) noun ‘slavery’; Icelandic: ‘thraeldóm’.

From HH: ‘began to grow a-cold’ (p. 128) adj. ‘he betook himself’ (p. 128) verb, with reflexive ‘when these things betid’ (p. 130) verb ‘happen’. ‘carle had to wife carline’ (p. 128) noun. ‘great covetise ran into his heart’ (p. 130).
From RF: ‘grievously bestead’ (p. 145) adj. ‘afflicted’. ‘deemed it good chaffer’ (p. 142) noun ‘trade’. ‘flit away the lading’ (p. 143) verb ‘carry’; Icelandic: ‘flytja’. ‘him seemed he had never seen’ (p. 145) verb, with reflexive. ‘soothly he had’ (p. 143) adv. ‘truly’.

Some of the italicized words above might appear to have been invented, but each one of them appears in Chaucer’s works. So, while they can be called archaic or labelled ‘Wardour Street’ English, they are not ‘pseudo-Middle-English words. Litzenberg found only eighteen neologisms in the early translations, and these were fairly transparent, like ‘bedrifed’ (GnS, p. 43), made by analogy from ‘bespattered’, and the like.

Morris exploited his rich word-hoard, thereby dropping a medieval veil onto what after all were medieval texts. Often the effect is positive, or at least benign, as in ‘holpen’, ‘brake’, ‘shapen’, ‘adrad’, ‘foredone’, ‘scathe’, ‘thraldom’, ‘a-cold’. Others are more problematic. Take, for instance, ‘fee’, which Morris liked because of its correspondence to the Icelandic ‘fé’, but the modern English form doesn’t have the same semantic field as its cognate; it suggests money received for services rendered, rather than sheep. But Morris took a special delight in such cognates, and so ‘fee’ occurs throughout the translations, and always the archaic ‘rede’ stands in for ‘rád’, ‘hight’ for ‘hét’, and the like. Sometimes the context helps one determine the meaning, but when Morris comes up with a compound like ‘lode-tugger’, meaning ‘guide’, because he admired the phonetic correspondence it had to the Icelandic ‘leidtogi’, he seems almost self-indulgent. He’s allowing his delight
to cloud meaning for most of his readers. And when he translates ‘búr’ – an Icelandic shed – as ‘bower’, again because they’re cognates, Arthurian courtyards rather than Icelandic farmsteads come to mind (Aho, 1982). The ‘thees’ and ‘thous’ and the 2nd and 3rd person markers, ‘-est’ and ‘-eth’, have similar effects and have drawn the ire of critics who argue (sometimes incorrectly) that the Icelandic of the sagas did not carry a load of nostalgia for the past, that modern translators should aim for ‘equivalent effects’, and the like (Quirk, 1955).

Morris’s use of Chaucerian diction can be attacked or defended. His use of adverbials and subordinating conjunctions, the key words that in English direct meaning across clausal boundaries, is another matter. Morris’s repertory of such connecting words is impressive: ‘hereover’, ‘sithence’, ‘thereto’, ‘thereunto’, ‘therewithal’, ‘thitherto’, ‘thitherward’, ‘whenso’, ‘wherefore’, ‘whereto’, ‘whereunder’, ‘whereunto’, ‘withal’, ‘whiles’, and so forth. (See VgS, p. 75, for a ‘whereas’ and ‘wherefore’ confrontation.)

A famous admirer, far off in the South Seas and eagerly awaiting the next volume of the Saga Library, wrote to Morris about such connecters:

I have long been in your debt, Master, ...and deep in your debt for many poems that I shall never forget, and for Sigurd before all, and now you have plunged me beyond payment by the Saga Library. And so now, true to human nature, I come back and bark at your heels.

For surely, Master, that tongue that we write, and that you have illustrated so nobly, is yet alive. She has her rights and laws, and is our mother, our queen, and our instrument. Now in that living
tongue _where_ has one sense, _whereas_ another ... through the two volumes [of _The Saga Library_], which is all that has yet reached me of this entrancing publication, _whereas_ is made to figure for _where_.

For the love of God, my dear and honoured Morris, use _where_, and let us know _whereas_ we are, wherefore our gratitude shall grow, whereby you shall be the more honoured wherever men love clear language, whereas now, although we honour, we are troubled.

In another letter, also written in the early 1890s, Robert Louis Stevenson said 'I love the sagas; I wish there were 9,000 of them. Talk about realism!', and he wrote a story based on an incident in _Eyrbyggja Saga_ (Simpson, 1971). What seems significant here, beyond the delightful manner of Stevenson’s barking – too many critics have snarled – is the extent of the influence and reach of Morris and Magnússon’s _Saga Library_ volumes; coming out as they did at the end of the century and at a high point of Victorian interest in Vikings (Wawn, 1992), they did as much to increase general knowledge of Iceland as had the translations of Sir George Webbe Dasent back in the 1860s.

Magnússon’s defence of Morris’s Middle-English diction appeared in the final volume of _The Saga Library_. In it he reprinted his 1896 obituary article, a moving tribute to Morris. The volume itself is likewise a tribute to Morris and to the literature they both loved. And to philology. Never before (perhaps not since) have Snorri’s histories of the Norwegian kings been so richly and thoroughly described. An 80-page biography of Snorri is followed by 515 pages of indexes and 13 genealogical tables, a few of which
fold out into prodigious proportions. This is the
achievement, not the partial and truncated editing
work he did for May Morris, that should have capped
the long collaboration of Morris and Magnússon on
matters Icelandic.

They began that collaboration with the first
narrative in the present volume, making it through
GnS in just a few weeks; the translation was published
in the *Fortnightly Review* in January of 1869. Before
it was gathered together with the other five narratives
and published in 1875 as *Three Northern Love
Stories*, it was extensively revised. Comparing the
1869 and 1875 versions, we can gain a few hints
about Morris’s attitudes towards the saga’s clear prose
and the knotted verses embedded in it and also some
ideas about the directions his narrative style might
take in the future.

In the GnS revisions, I found 232 changes in the
prose text – about six per page – some of them
interesting. And each one of the twenty-three verses
was drastically overhauled, changed from simple
eight-line stanzas with four octosyllabic couplets into
surprisingly successful attempts to imitate
‘dröttkvætt’ verses, the most complicated in
Germanic prosody.

Let us consider first the prose changes. These often
move in the direction of sharper images: ‘somewhat
on in years’ becomes ‘stricken in years’ (p. 8); ‘came
blood’ becomes ‘oozed blood’. The new forms might
have an archaic flavour as well, as when ‘dealt blows’
becomes ‘smote’ (p. 41), and when ‘asked for silence’
becomes ‘craved silence’ (p. 37). In the revised text,
there are a number of new compounds: ‘ugly’
becomes ‘ill-favoured’ (p. 7), ‘ugly nose’ becomes
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'ugly-nosed' (p. 13), 'sailor' becomes seafarer' (p. 46), 'the wound on his head' becomes 'his head-wound' (p. 44) and 'had just taken' is turned into 'had new-taken' (p. 30), while 'leave it to Rafn to settle the matter himself' becomes 'give self-doom to Raven' (p. 32). A few of these, like 'new-taken' are awkward, but the others are effective.

There are several instances when words of French origin (italicized below) are replaced by words from Germanic stock: 'a profitless dream' becomes 'a dream of no mark' (p. 9); 'tunic and white leggings' becomes 'kirtle and white hose-leggings' (p. 19); 'mightily evil of semblance' becomes 'right evil to deal with' (p. 22); 'no secrecy' becomes 'nought hidden' (p. 29), 'most numerous Thing' becomes 'most thronged Thing' (p.38), and 'silent' becomes 'heavy of mood' (p. 41). Such changes reflect Morris's long-held prejudices against the French and the language, stories, institutions, attitudes that they brought across the English Channel in 1066:

Duke William brought, in fact, his Normandy into England, which was thereby changed from a Teutonic people (Old Norse 'theod'), with the tribal-customary law still in use among them, into a province of Romanized Feudal Europe, a piece of France, in short. ...[England] missed forever in her laws, and still more in her language and literature, the chance of developing into a great homogeneous Teutonic people. (Morris, 1888, p. 58)

Morris loved the Icelandic Family sagas, in part, because their heroes moved across a Northern Europe and through and around a British Isles still uncontaminated by any noxious French influences. Gunnlaug is
such a hero. He leaves Iceland, and after demonstrating in Norway just how venomous his tongue could be, he sails for England, where his poetry wins him royal friendship and a fine cloak – Ethelred’s Gift – that remains in the saga until its sad end, Helga plucking at the cloak as she dies. Gunnlaug was able to talk to rulers in both Scandinavian and British courts, not because he was bilingual, but because, as the saga writer explains, ‘in those days there was the same tongue in England as in Norway and Denmark; but the tongues changed when William the Bastard won England, for thenceforward French went current there, for he was of French kin’ (p. 21). The Icelandic epithet for William must have pleased Morris no end.

Before 1066, England and Iceland had much in common, particularly Germanic dialects that were mutually intelligible. When Morris chose English words that were cognate to the original Icelandic, perhaps he was hoping that his readers would somehow thereby sense that old association. Creased brows, however, rather than any such recognition have usually been the result. In the revision of GnS, there are several examples that show a tendency toward ‘Icelandicizing’ his saga style: ‘showiest’ becomes ‘sightliest’ (p. 15) because of the Icelandic ‘sjaligastr’; ‘all chestnuts’ becomes ‘all red of hue’ (p. 17) because of the Icelandic ‘raud at lit’, and ‘a fated thing had come to pass’ becomes ‘that must betide that drew towards’ (p. 40). This opaque utterance is built upon the final two words in the Icelandic clause – ‘enda vardi that fram at koma sem til dró.’ Morris is again amusing himself, again at the expense of clarity.

Morris complained several times in letters to Magnússon of the vexations Icelandic ‘vísur’ were
creating for him as they worked on the translations that would appear in *The Saga Library*. Determined to offer the meaning of the verses and to replicate their intricate prosody as well, Morris laboured on, often with success and always with Magnússon's advice and his literal translations at his elbow. Only a few critics have commented in any detail on this aspect of the Morris-Magnússon translations (Barribearu, 1983), and I lack the space to do them justice here, but I want to consider briefly the different renderings of one of Gunnlaug's biting verses - the first in the saga - in the 1869 translation and then in the 1875 revision. It occurs when a farmer - Gunnlaug has struck his horseboy - thinks the coin he's offered as recompense is not enough. Gunnlaug answers in verse; here's the 1869 version:

To this close-fist the right I gave
A new mark, grey of face to have;
O slow thy gold from thee to spit,
I bid thee long to look at it!
For thou shalt think it no good thing
If thou must tighten thy purse string,
Missing so much of deep-sea's sheen
As on this day thine eyes have seen.

Except for the 'gold from thee to spit' (perhaps a threat that he'll be struck in the mouth, just as the servant was), the meaning here is clear enough. The farmer is warned that he'd best accept the coin, or his purse will become the emptier of 'deep-sea's sheen' (gold). The jauntiness of the four-beat couplets suggests the scornful pride of Gunnlaug. Here's the revised version:

To this close-fist the right I gave
A new mark, grey of face to have;
O slow thy gold from thee to spit,
I bid thee long to look at it!
For thou shalt think it no good thing
If thou must tighten thy purse string,
Missing so much of deep-sea's sheen
As on this day thine eyes have seen.
Bade I the middling mighty
To have a mark of waves’ flame;
Giver of grey seas’ glitter,
This gift shalt thou shift with.
If the elf-sun of the waters
From out of purse thou lettest,
O waster of the worm’s bed,
Awaits thee sorrow later. (p. 16)

What is impressive here is that Morris has replicated most of the original’s structure: alliteration binds odd and even lines together – /m/ in lines 1 and 2; /g/ in lines 3 and 4; vowels in lines 5 and 6; /w/ in lines 7 and 8. Moreover, the even lines have the requisite interior full rhyme, perfect in lines 4 and 8, partial in 6 and a sight rhyme in 2, eg. ‘have’ and ‘wave’, 4: ‘gift’ and ‘shift’, 6: ‘out’ and ‘let-’, and 8: ‘-wait’ and ‘late-’. And the odd lines have, or make a stab at, another standard feature of ‘drottkvaett’ stanzas: interior half rhymes. In the original Icelandic, there’s an elaborate kenning for ‘gold’, one involving the kin of the Midgardormr, that is ‘serpents’ and then what they nest upon beneath the waters: ‘gold’; and Morris picks up on similar images in four of the eight lines. The overall meaning is far from clear, but that’s true of the original as well (Nordal and Jónsson, p. 63). Clarity was not the aim of skalds like Gunnlaug; they were praised for ingenuity, verbal facility, knowledge of the old lore and the ways they were able to fashion kennings from it. In these revised ‘vísur’ we can watch the Victorian skald matching wits with Gunnlaug and Raven.

The six narratives in the present volume represent a sort of pot-pourri of medieval Icelandic stories and
genres, one that must have delighted many Victorian
readers, giving them a taste of everything from the
hard bitten realism of the Family sagas to the vague
grandeur of Germanic myth.

In 1890, when further volumes in The Saga Library
were being discussed, Morris speaks of ‘breaking up
the volume of Three Northern Love Stories, so as to
get the stories into more suitable gatherings. ...I was
going to propose Gisli and Viga-Glum for Gunnlaug’s
companions’ (Lbs. 21884to). GnS would then have
been accompanied by two other well-known Family
sagas, or ‘Islendingarsogur’, narratives set in Iceland
around the year 1000 with characters and episodes
that appear in other Family sagas and in early
histories and genealogies. Another possibility might
have been to move GnS into a sub-group of four
narratives that have come to be called ‘skald sagas’,
especially since they had already translated two of
them, the sagas of Gunnlaug and Kormákr. But
Morris’s death prevented any such rearrangement,
and so we are left with these three very disparate
short sagas, all ‘love stories’, yes, but that’s about all
they have in common. That Morris himself
recognized their differences is apparent not only in the
wish for a ‘more suitable’ grouping, but also in his
brief characterizations of each of them in the Preface.
GnS ‘must be called an historical tale’ (note that it is
the only one of the six narratives accompanied by a
chronology), FrS is one of a ‘large class of romantic
stories’ that fall under the rubric ‘Fornaldarsogur’, or
‘sagas of ancient times’, tales set in indeterminate time
and in places where the heroes encounter magic and
marvels. Frithiof himself has to contend with witch-
wives who start ocean storms and ride on the backs of
whales. But he wins Ingeborg in the end. VgS, says Morris, is ‘confessedly nothing but a pure fiction’ that was composed as late as the fifteenth century. Its author knew the sagas, but when he says of the lovers that they were caught in the ‘fire of longing and the flame of desire’ (p. 154), we’re a long way from the spirit and rhetoric of the Family sagas. It’s not surprising that Morris’s archaic diction often works better in VgS than it does in GnS.

The three shorter tales that round out the collection are even more diverse. HH is an amplification of an episode in Snorri’s Edda, one in which the gods interfere, for their own selfish reasons, with the careers of mortals. RF is a Norse analogue of a folk tale that appears in several languages. Except for place names, there’s little in RF that reminds one of the North, or of Iceland. Such is definitely not the case with the last story in the collection. ‘The Tale of Thorsteinn Staff-Smitten’ features slighted honour, conflicting loyalties, and bloody revenge, and it is firmly set in saga-age Iceland. In its presentation of character and ordering of events, it is so typical of the rhetoric and structure of the Family sagas that it serves as a template for an important critical study of them (Andersson, 1967).

The ‘Tale of Thorsteinn’ has been translated into Danish, German, Swedish, Norwegian and Polish, and several times into English (Fry, 1980). It provides the basis for a fine novel by Allen French: The Story of Rolf and the Viking’s Bow (Boston, 1904). FrS was very well known in nineteenth-century England, largely due to the popularity of an 1825 Swedish retelling of the story by Esias Tegner. His version was translated into English several times, and when
Victorian interests in Vikings flourished in the latter decades of the nineteenth century Frithiof's adventures were familiar to all respectable Icelandophiles (Wawn, 1994). FrS has not been translated into English in the twentieth century. The Morris and Magnússon rendering of GnS marked its first translation into English, but it had drawn the close attention of two of the earliest British travellers to Iceland. The tragic tale of Gunnlaug and his fair Helga was dramatically summarized in the 'Preliminary Dissertation' Henry Holland wrote for his and Sir George Mackenzie's classic, *Travels in the Island of Iceland in 1810* (Mackenzie, 1812), and Mackenzie himself wrote a strange play, 'Helga and the Rival Minstrels' that enjoyed a very brief run in an Edinburgh theatre in 1812 (Wawn, 1982). GnS has been translated into English at least eight times in the twentieth century, most usefully by Quirk (1957), because it appears with the Icelandic original on facing pages and with a good introduction and notes. In its most recent appearance in English (Durrenberger, 1992), it is accompanied by a thorough structural analysis, as well as commentary on five previous translations. Because of the ways the Morris-Magnússon translation conveys cultural information, often because of the archaisms, it receives high marks.

It was with GnS that Morris and Magnússon began their long collaboration. Let me conclude by turning again to Magnússon's obituary article: 'I suggested we had better start with some grammar. "No, I can't be bothered with grammar; have no time for it. You be my grammar as we translate. I want the literature, I must have the story. I mean to amuse myself"'.
Intr oduction

(Magnússon, 1906). I hope that this introductory sketch has demonstrated that Morris's amusement led to a series of translations and original works of enduring importance. And I hope it has also shown that Magnússon was more than Morris's 'grammar'.

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