EIRÍKR MAGNÚSSON AND HIS SAGA-TRANSLATIONS

"The most imposing figures in the history of Norse scholarship in England are the Icelanders Eiríkr Magnússon and Guðbrandr Vigfús. Magnússon was the better philologist, but he was less productive than Vigfús and his collaborator [York-Powell], except indirectly; his influence on William Morris was of great importance."

The above statement of Professor E. V. Gordon expresses well enough the general view now current on the activities of the two Icelandic scholars. The following notes, concerned with Magnússon only, are not intended to alter the above judgment to any considerable extent, but simply to fill it in, so to speak, and serve as sidelights for those who are working on the interesting literary relationships involved in Magnússon's and Morris' joint translations from the Icelandic and the latter's famous poems based upon this Icelandic material. What I propose to give is first some account of Magnússon's work before he met Morris, then some sidelights on their collaborations, and finally a few contemporary appraisals of Magnússon's own achievements in the field of translations, and of his personality. As far as the collaboration of Morris and Magnússon is concerned I am chiefly indebted to Mackail's Life of William Morris (1899) and The collected works of William Morris, but otherwise my material is chiefly drawn from unpublished letters and papers of Magnússon, Morris and G. E. J. Powell. Most of these letters, which were given to me as they came out of Magnússon's waste-basket by his sole heir Miss Sigríður Gunnarsson, Reykjavík, are now in the Landsbókasafn (National Library) Reykjavík, but the copy I have of Magnússon's letters to Powell I owe to the kindness of Professor André Barbier of University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, Wales, where the originals are kept.

I may add that most of this material also is incorporated in

1 An Introduction to Old Norse, p. lxxix.
an Icelandic Life of Eiríkr Magnússon which came out in Reykjavík last November.  

Although it is not my purpose here to tell the rather romantic story of Magnússon's early life, it should be noted that he was the son of a poor, but very energetic, minister at Berufjörður in the East of Iceland, where he was born February 1, 1833. A few years later his father moved to a neighboring parish at Stöðvarfjörður, and here the boy grew up until he was 16 years of age. Then he was sent to school in Reykjavík. He graduated from this school or college (Latínskóli) in 1856, and from the School of Theology (Prestaskóli) in 1859. But instead of taking holy orders and returning to his parish of birth as a minister, fate would have it so that he was sent to London to supervise the printing of the Icelandic New Testament which was being published there by the British and Foreign Bible Society. This was in 1862—a year after the publication of Dasent's 3 famous translation of Njáls saga, and it looks as if Iceland and its literature was beginning to attract attention in certain literary circles in England.  

It is noteworthy that whereas there seem to be no travel books on Iceland published in England between 1840 and 1850, the next 15 years bring no less than eleven works of that description, among which we must especially note Lord Dufferin's Letters from High Latitudes (in 1857). Of others we may notice C. S. Forbes' Iceland (in 1860), F. Metcalfe's The Oxonian in Iceland (in 1861 along with two other books that year), and S. Baring-Gould's Iceland (in 1863). Whatever the reason, Iceland certainly seems to have been "the thing to do" in these years, and no doubt Dufferin's and Dasent's books added a fresh and strong impulse to this interest.  

Now the important thing for us to note is that in 1862 a young and wealthy country squire from Nant-Eos, Wales, Mr.


On Sir George Webbe Dasent see H. Hermannsson's article in Skírnir 93 (1919), pp. 117-140. It is interesting to note that Dasent travelled in Iceland during the summers 1861 and 1862, in both cases accompanied by the poet Dr. Grímur Thomsen.
George Ernest John Powell⁴ had been caught in this “craze” to such an extent that he resolved to make a tour of Iceland himself. He was not with Dasent, but it is very likely that he met Magnússon already in Iceland, and it is certain that they were fellow-travellers on the boat carrying both to England.

In Powell Magnússon found a friend and Mæcenas who was to have the greatest influence on his life for some time to come. Powell was not only a great traveller in the true English fashion, now taking up his abode in France, now in Germany, now spending a winter in Algiers, now making a summer tour of Scandinavia and Russia. He was a great lover of music and art as well, collecting paintings and pictures of every description (and not always genuine!) for an Art Museum which he was planning to give to his beloved native Wales. Last but not least Powell was greatly interested in literature; he wrote some poetry himself and was on good terms with such a prominent poet of the younger generation as Swinburne, although he had not made his acquaintance at the time we are now speaking about.⁵

It was not long before Magnússon’s enthusiasm for the Icelandic literature had made a perfect convert of Powell, and already in the autumn of 1862 they had embarked upon their first literary enterprise: a translation of the best tales in Íslenskar þjóðsögur og æfintýri (I) by Jón Árnason, then fresh from the printer in Leipzig. The translation appeared in a handsome volume profusely illustrated. A second volume of these translations (from the second vol. of J. Árnason’s þjóðsögur og

⁴ This Powell was born Febr. 10. 1842, the son of Colonel W. Th. R. Powell of an old stock of landed gentry in Wales. Cf. Bernhard Burke, A Genealogical and Heraldic History of the Landed Gentry of Great Britain and Ireland, 5th Ed. 1871 vol. II. 1118. Thus Powell is only twenty years when he goes to Iceland. He seems to have died in 1882.

⁵ According to Edmund Gosse (The Life of A. Ch. Swinburne (1927) p. 146) Swinburne met Powell towards the close of the year 1865. After that, Powell “continued to be for several years Swinburne’s close companion and confidant.” On Swinburne’s stay with Powell in September 1866 we get an interesting sidelight in Powell’s letter to Magnússon dated Pennllwyn, Aberystwyth, Nov. 4th, 1866: “. . . Swinburne has just left me after a fortnights stay. He was delighted with Wales and would doubtless have been more so could he have viewed through less tipsy eyes.”
\(\textit{afintýri}\) came in 1866, it was furnished with notes and an introductory essay by Magnússon.6

This was however only the beginning of their intended literary career. The next move was to be the publication of an Icelandic-English Dictionary, based on the two then existing dictionaries of Old Icelandic: S. Egilsson’s \textit{Lexicon Poeticum} and E. Jónsson’s \textit{Oldnordisk Ordbog}, the first having appeared in 1860, the latter in 1863. To be sure, plans were then already afoot for the publication of Cleasby’s dictionary, and the companions knew about them, vaguely at least, but they professed the greatest distrust in the materialization of these plans, and accordingly set out to fill the gap themselves. This was not to be any original lexicographical enterprise, but simply a translation of the existing dictionaries, and so it was fortunate for all concerned that the work never went further than to the MS stage. Magnússon worked on this project, financed by Powell, during the winter 1863–1864 which he spent in France, but already the next summer it is evident from his letters that he realized the work had to be given up, although he probably continued it well into the year 1865.

But although a failure, still the labor was not wholly lost. For Magnússon himself it must have been a good training for what was to constitute some of his most important work: the translation of Icelandic classics into English.

6 The title of the translations is \textit{Icelandic Legends}. Collected by Jón Árnason. Translated by George E. J. Powell and Eiríkur Magnússon, London: Bentley (Second series: Longman & Green) 1864–1866. The second vol. has only a frontispiece (Fjallkonan), but the first vol. has 28 illustrations, which Magnússon says cost Powell some £400, and from a letter of Powell’s to Magnússon (Jan. 16, 1863) it appears that he tried to enlist the services of the famous French artist Gustave Doré, but apparently without success. The translations seem to have been well received by critics (according to Magnússon’s letter to J. Sigurðsson Apr. 5, 1864, and cf. \textit{The Spectator} Apr. 2, 1864 vol. 37: 395–396, and Sept. 22, 1866, vol. 39: 1059–60) but they do not seem to have sold well. According to Magnússon’s letter to Powell, May 28, 1867, a certain M. Laboulay of Paris “has been translating and inserting into the \textit{Journal des Débats} some of our Icelandic Legends translated from our volume,” and later on, Powell himself was working on a French translation “of a large portion of the legends—most of the first series and many from the second,” but this translation, intended for “private circulation” never was published (cf. Powell’s letter to Magnússon, Etré-tât, Jan. 1. 1869).
And we find him in fact already at work on this as early as the year 1863 for then he writes Jón Sigurðsson (Dec. 19.) "I expect the Saga of Hóvarðr Ísfirðingr soon to appear in English, I have translated it since I came from home [Magnússon had been in Iceland during the summer with the quaker missionary Isaac Sharp] and Powell is now polishing it." Probably it needed a good deal of polishing, for it never emerged from their factory although they worked on it repeatedly and speak of it as almost ready for print both in 1869 and 1870.7

This was not the only translation planned by the companions. As early as Febr. 16, 1865 Magnússon, then in Leipzig, writes to Powell, then in Algiers: "What do you say to the idea of my translating one of the best Icelandic Sagas, Egils saga, in my leisure hours into English that you may have something beside your musical writing to amuse yourself with till the MS of the Dictionary is so forward as to give you constant employment?" Furthermore we learn from a letter of Magnússon's to Steingrímur Thorsteinsson (Paris, March 9, 1866, Lbs. 1704, 4 to) that he was then busy translating Egils saga, having finished about one half of the whole. In the letter he gives as a specimen three verses from the saga, viz., "Nú's hersis hefnd," etc., "Dát mælti mín móðir," etc., and "Farið hefik blóðgum brandi" etc. Probably now nothing is left of the translation except these verses and the beginning up to chapter nine on a quarto MS, now in the Landsbókasafn, Reykjavík (Lbs. 409, fol.).

A few references to this work we find in Magnússon's letters to Powell: London, June 8, 1866 "we cannot have [Egils saga] ready by Christmas" and London, May 28, 1867 "The Egils saga progresses well, only its poetry is a very hard stuff to mould. I shall however get over it in some not very distant future;" furthermore in Powell's letter to Magnússon, Etretát Jan. 1, 1869 "Egill will require no end of revision and correction." It is obvious from these references that the saga had been translated probably in its entirety; but nothing more is heard of it, save a line in one of Magnússon's letters to J. Sigurðsson (unfortunately I have lost the date), where he says that both sagas are in Powell's hands and he has not heard from him about them for quite a while.

7 Cf. letters from Powell to Magnússon: March 12, 1867, July 1869, Apr. 12, 1870, and Sept. 9, 1870; from Magnússon to Powell July 9, 1869.
These are, then, the only saga translations which we know that Magnússon has done before he met Morris. We may just mention here that in the summer of 1866 Magnússon and Powell translated a selected number of idylls and epigrams from the Swedish-Finnish poet Runeberg, whom Magnússon admired intensely. These translations, in Powell's handwriting, still exist, the MS (in the Landsbókasafn 425, fol.) entitled: "Translations from Runebergs Poem's (Powell and Magnússon) under the pseudonym of George Eric. Intended for publication Nov. 1866."

What was the reason for Magnússon's and Powell's unproductivity? Although both undoubtedly were to blame, yet Powell's was probably the greater fault. He seems to have been far too vacillating and inconstant to be able to buckle down to hard and concentrated work. His interest and enthusiasm in the beginning were undoubtedly great, and both the youthful collaborators seem to have had perhaps somewhat childish visions of literary greatness dawning upon them in due time as a reward for their work. It was in this first rush of enthusiasm that the Icelandic Legends were brought out. But the Dictionary project was a failure, and the Saga translations were conceived after the tide had turned. In his letter of July 9, 1869 Magnússon refers to Powell's "deplorable resolution to renounce literature for ever more" and whets him on to work, probably in vain.

If Magnússon could have done the work without any help—except the pecuniary one—all would have been well, for he was a sure though rather slow worker. But in spite of his great linguistic ability he felt himself handicapped by the language. And so when not only Powell's collaboration was lagging, but also his purse strings were tightened (as it seems through unforeseen pecuniary difficulties, for Powell's kindness and liberality seem to have known no other limits) Magnússon had willingly to divert his energy to other channels in order to live. And so we find him now turning to scholarly work on his own hook, he began working on the edition of the poem Lilja in December 1866 although it was not published until 1870.8

It was also during this time that his attention was turned to editing the *Thómas saga erkbiskups* as letters from 1869 show. This work he carried out alone, and we shall later see the contemporary scholarly opinion upon the style of his translations.

But fortunately for Magnússon and the Icelandic sagas he was now to meet the ideal collaborator in William Morris.

Magnússon has twice told the story of their first meeting, viz., first in an obituary notice on Morris in the *Cambridge Review*, Nov. 26, 1896, reprinted in the *Saga Library*, vol. 6, xi-xvi, and secondly in a letter published by Miss May Morris in the Introduction to *The Story of Grettir the Strong* etc. = Vol. 7 of the *Collected Works of William Morris*, 1911.

When Magnússon says (*Saga Library* 6, xii): “Our acquaintance began first in August 1869” this is a lapsus of memory as may be seen both from Mackail’s account (*Life of W. Morris*, vol. 1, p. 200 ff) and also from a letter of Magnússon’s to J. Sigurðsson, dated July 26, 1868 after their first meeting. Mackail tells us that the first saga they read together was *Eyrbyggja saga*,10 but Magnússon says it was *Gunnlaugs saga*. However that may be, it is certain that he does not mention *Eyrbyggja saga* in a letter of Jan. 21, 1869 to Powell. As that letter records Magnússon’s early impressions of Morris it is not without interest and so I shall quote pertinent passages from it:

“In the last *Fortnightly Review* appeared *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* or the Saga of Gunnlaug the Wormtongue by E. Mag[nús]son and William Morris11… We are publishing now ‘Grettir’s Saga’ or the Story of Grettir the Strong. A lengthy one, and in many places a pretty and peculiar saga. Morris is the greatest glutton of work I ever knew. I had the sad news this afternoon that he must be off tonight to Rome with a friend of his who is out of sorts, he came here himself to announce the sudden mishap, so in the meanwhile I have to conduct the edi-

10 That translation was at any rate older than Apr. 1871. See Mackail I. p. 278.
tion of Grettir's Saga to which I am now writing the preface. It will be a rather handsome volume. And a map is being made to it in a mediaeval sort of style which I have traced and Morris decorated. Then there is going to preface the whole volume a Sonnet of Morris' with an Icelandic translation by me in the heroic metre of the olden Saga time. Then follows a long introduction and after the saga a list of proverbs occurring in it and an index of great completeness. But I suppose a month will pass by yet ere ever it be out.

It is a pity that you don't know Morris, he is as good a fellow as ever I met, with tastes very much like yours, only he is a pre-
raphaelite in his views about art, yet with a very good judge-
ment. I hope you will make a point of getting acquainted with him when next you come to London. He is the sincerest of men and his powers as a poet are of a very wide range. He has in the lapse of three months mastered the language (Icelandic) in a marvellous degree and his convictions as to the literary merit of the Icelandic sagas are very strong and decided. He is now preparing the second volume of the "Earthly Paradise." He writes usually 120 lines of his work, a day, yet with a constantly sustained vigour and freshness. I am sure he would receive you exceedingly kindly for I have so often mentioned your highly gifted self to him—and all who take an interest in Northern lore are born friends of his, irrespective of everything else. He is be-
side a Welshman like yourself."

On their method of work in these early translations Magnú-
sson remarks: "We went together over the day's task as carefully as the eager-mindedness of the pupil to acquire the story would allow. I afterwards wrote out at home a literal translation of it and handed it to him at our next lesson. With this before him Morris wrote down at his leisure his own version in his own style which ultimately did service as a printers copy." (Collected Works of WM 7. xvij.)

The next sagas to be read and translated were Völsunga saga and Laxdæla saga. The latter never was published, but Morris utilized its theme in his poem "The Lovers of Gudrun." That Magnússon's literal translation was not thrown away we may infer from his own answer to Thorstein B. Veblen when the
latter in 1890 offered his translation of the saga for publication in the Saga Library. Magnússon declined the offer "for our own translation is now over 18 years old as the first edition of Morris' 'Lovers of Gudrun' testifies, being based on that translation" (Oct. 25, 1890).

The Völsunga saga, translated by Magnússon during the summer 1869 and studied by Morris along with most of the heroic lays in the Edda during the following winter, was published in May 1870. The beginning of Magnússon's translation is still preserved in the Landsbókasafn (405, fol.); comparison shows that Morris has altered it considerably. The poems from the Edda incorporated in this volume are: "Helga kviða Hundiingsbana I," "Reginsmál," "Fáfnismál," "Sigdrífumál," "Sigurðar kviða en skamma," "Brot af Sigurðar kviðu," "Goðrúnar kviða I," "Helreið Brynhildar," "Goðrúnar kviða II (en forna)," "Atlakviða," "Goðrúnarhvöt," "Hamðismál," and "Oddrúnargrátur."

Some of Magnússon's translations of these poems are still preserved (in the Landsbókasafn 407, fol.); thus "Grípisspá," "Brot af Sigurðar kviðu," "Sigdrífumál," "Sigurðar kviða en skamma," and "Hamðismál." They are all in imitative metre, but comparison shows again that Morris has changed them greatly. It is also clear from a letter that in 1871 Magnússon approached a publisher and offered him a translation of the Edda Lays, but this may have been a feeler only. However, in a letter of Nov. 28 (1874 the year is not written out but seems certain from facts referred to) Morris definitively says that he is going to publish the Edda some day or other.

It was in the year 1871 that Magnússon got his first permanent appointment as a sub-librarian at the University Library at Cambridge. That, however, did not hinder the collaborators from working on. Their next publication was the Three Northern Love Stories published in June 1875; it contained Gunlaugs saga, Friðþjófs saga (previously appearing in the periodical Dark Blue I. London 1871, pp. 42–58, 176–182), and Viglundar saga vana, with some additional þættir or short stories (cf. Mackail's Life of WM I. 300).

The Viglundar saga together with Hænsna-Þóris saga,
Bandamanna saga, and Hávarðar saga seem to have been done before or in the early winter months of 1873–1874 (cf. Mackail I. 298–299), and as early as 1872 they had begun work on Heimskringla, although it did not appear until much later in the Saga Library. From letters by R. B. Anderson of Madison University, Wisconsin (Sept. 20, and Nov. 16, 1875) to Magnússon it appears that he and Morris also had planned a publication of Egils saga, which never came out.

After 1875 no translation comes from the workshop of the collaborators until the Saga Library was launched in 1890. The first volume brought Hávarðar saga, Bandamanna saga and Hœnsna-Þóris saga; the second Eyrbyggja saga and Heidarvíga saga, and the third contained the beginning of Heimskringla, the rest of which was to appear in vols. four and five after Morris’ death in 1896, to be followed ultimately by a sixth volume (in 1905) of introduction and voluminous indexes to Heimskringla, done exclusively by Magnússon.

But for Morris’ premature death we should probably have had a translation of the Eddas following Heimskringla. I have already mentioned their early work upon the Elder Edda. I find no mention of it after Morris’ letter of 1874.

But in 1884 Magnússon has translated at least some of “Hávamál” (Hávam. 1–32 in Landsbókasafn 1855. 4to). An Icelandic friend of his, Mr. B. S. Þórarinsson, Reykjavik, who visited Cambridge in the summer 1893 relates that he was then busy translating the Eddas and remarks that he kept as his chief guide a Swedish translation of the Elder Edda12. And next fall (Sept. 26, 1894) Magnússon writes to Mr. Þórarinsson. “This has been a busy summer for me. I have finished preparing both the Eddas for print, they fill three thick volumes.” These “volumes” I actually found among Magnússon’s papers, as one big folio MS of 317 pages, containing a translation of Samundar Edda on the 231 first pages, the rest of the MS is filled with “Gylfaginning” and the prose tales from “Skáldskaparmál,” the verses being omitted. Finally there is a translation of “Sólar-

12 This was probably Goedecke’s translation, by Magnússon considered to be the best translation of the Elder Edda in existence. Cf. Norðlingur 1879, VII nr. 41–42.
ljóð" without paginal numbers, it looks as if there had been some hesitation about including it in the work.

The translation is very close, almost literal. The original meter is often observed, but often it is disregarded and the translation is then almost prosaic. Marginal notes to difficult passages, in which Magnússon sometimes expressly asks for somebody else's opinion on his interpretation, make it obvious that this MS was to be Morris' basis for a translation—presumably to appear in the Saga Library.

We see thus that the Eddas were to be translated in a way similar to the one adopted by the collaborators for Heimskringla vols. 2–3. as explained by Magnússon in the Preface, Saga Library vol. 6. p. vii. That explanation, however, is a little too summary, and Magnússon has himself at some time been thinking of publishing a more detailed account of it as the following statement, found among his papers, shows:

"Among the literary remains of William Morris the MS on which the second and the third vols. of Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla (being the fourth and fifth vols of the Saga Library) are based, forms a particularly safe, indeed an indispensable basis whereon the future criticism of the great man's relation to old northern literature is to be based.

The MS, extending to 800 pages, comprises the ten sagas of the Kings of Norway which cover a period of 163 years, from the accession of Olaf the Holy to the reign of King Magnus Erlingsson.

The interest of this record of Morris' literary activity lies in the method adopted by him for the purpose of putting his own stamp on the style of the translation of Snorri Sturluson's work.

He has gone over the translation of E. Magnússon and changed it throughout into his own style where he deemed fit, and the 412 poetical quotations, consisting of eightline-stanzas or half stanzas are all in his own handwriting and embody Magnússon's prose renderings of the involved poetry practically word for word."

With this I also found a photograph of two pages of the MS in question bearing the paginal numbers 2 and 3 and containing the end of chapter 4, and the beginning of chapter 5 of Ólafs saga helga. It corresponds entirely to Magnússon's description.
We may be sure from Magnússon's words that this valuable MS was not to be thrown away, and this is corroborated by Miss Gunnarsson's testimony. She told me that Magnússon had kept the MS of Heimskringla under lock and key in his bank at Cambridge. Somehow, after the death of Mr. and Mrs. Magnússon, the MS was not returned to her, and she did not know what had become of it. Fortunately it has not been altogether lost, for a portion of it has turned up in America and is now being utilized by a student of Morris for the very purpose of which Magnússon speaks above.18

Until this study appears very little can be said about the share of each collaborator in the work which is not already known to scholars.

But it is not, perhaps, superfluous to point out that Magnússon was an extremely conscientious translator himself. His greatest concern was to give as literal a translation as possible, and consequently his translations often suffered from a certain stiffness due to an excessive adherence to the original. This principle of literalness in translating he not only practised himself in all his own translations, whether English (Lilja, Thómas saga and King Fialar by Runeberg, his latest work: 1912) or Icelandic (För Pilgrímsins = Pilgrim's Progress by Bunyan, Stormrinn =

18 I owe this interesting piece of news to Mr. Karl O. E. Anderson of Harvard University, who is the man working on the MS, and through his kindness and the courtesy of the present owner, Professor Paul R. Lieder of Smith College, Northampton, I am allowed to tell its history and describe it. It was given to Prof. Lieder by a friend who bought it at the booksellers Maggs Brothers in London. It contains The Story of Sigurd the Jerusalem-Farer, Eystein, and Olaf in the fifth volume of the Saga Library. As also is the case with my photographs the right-hand page is covered with Magnússon's literal translation, corrected and altered by Morris, and on the left hand page, left blank by Magnússon, Morris has written out his version of the stanzas, twenty-two in all. The work covers forty-nine folio leaves. Morris' alterations of Magnússon's prose are several hundreds in number. Still, counting the total number of words in a selected passage of the prose (on five MS pages corresponding to Saga Libr. vol. 5, pp. 247–250 ending with the words "slew there all the folk," and pages 267, chapter 19, to 270 concluding with the words "whereas he came to me") Mr. Anderson found that ca. 72% of them were Magnússon's. The percentage in the MS leaf photographed is even higher.
The Tempest by Shakespeare\textsuperscript{14}) but he also preached it in reviews and by word of mouth. I know of only one translation of his which is free, namely the Icelandic Legends, as the translators explain in the preface of the second volume (p. 9–10).

It is interesting to read the compliment paid to Dr. Dasent by the translators in that same preface. They quote him “as our great example” in apologizing for their archaisms. And when planning the Saga translations Magnússon writes to Powell: “I have been advised to pay a good heed to the language of these publications, as they will always be compared with that of Dasent’s Sagas, and his style is termed as a non plus ultra. His mastery is undoubtedly great, and I for one have always been an admirer of his style. It is said to be the very style of the time and that is saying a great deal.” (London, June 8th, 1866).

It was with these views and with his knowledge of Morris’ methods that he ventured upon the translation of the poem Lilja by Eysteinn Ásgrímsson, and the Thómas saga erkiðsups. These translations were, however, only meant to be parts of a scholarly edition of these works. Still they were done with his usual care, and generally he seems to have elicited high praise for them.

To translate the intricate verses of a poem like Lilja could have been no easy task, and, besides, one would hardly imagine that the contents would strike a sympathetic chord in the hearts of the Londoners of anno domini 1870. So we are not at all surprised to read the following judgment in The Illustrated London News, vol. 58. p. 138, Feb. 11, 1871:

“It is to be regretted that Icelandic poetry should . . . depend for beauty to a great extent upon characteristics which it is almost impossible to reproduce in English; for it is owing, probably, to that cause that the translation reads like something not much superior to what might have been accomplished by a poetical firm consisting of the late Dr. Watts, Sternhold and Hopkins, and Tate and Brady. . . . The poem itself, indeed, in its English form, cannot be very highly recommended; but

\textsuperscript{14} Magnússon’s edition of The Tempest, with an Icelandic translation, introduction and notes (Reykjavík, 1885) is the only edition of any of Shakespeare’s works to appear in Iceland.
the book...is valuable for the aid and instruction afforded by the editor."

But if this was, perhaps, the opinion of the average cultured individual, not to speak of the man in the street, there were others who certainly seem to have looked at it in a different way, judging by a review in *The Saturday Review*, vol. 31, pp. 278–280 March 4, 1871:

"It is hardly possible to speak too highly of the manner in which Mr. Magnússon has executed his task. He has acted the parts of textual critic, historian, lexicographer and poet, and has succeeded in all... In all this the excellence, correctness, and idomatic force of the editor's English are remarkable. It is rarely, indeed, that any peculiarity in the use of a word is observed, and if we did not know him to be a foreigner, we should certainly not detect the fact from his prose composition.

The poem is attended by an English verse translation on the opposite page which surprises by its extreme faithfulness, amounting often even to literality, at the same time that it reads as good English verse, pleasing in metre and rhyme, and possessing some of the indescribable charm of real old English of the Saxon kind. A few archaisms... might have been spared with advantage. . . ."

This reads like flattery, but it was not a unique judgment. In the *Spectator*, vol. 44, pp. 925–926. July 29, 1871 we read this concerning the translation:

"Mr. Magnússon... has had the skill to furnish a translation which reproduces the original actually line by line, if not word for word, and yet reads as very racy English, dashed with some quaint words quite suitable to the age and the character of the poem. . . ."

To this remark about his poetical translation I shall only add one more statement concerning his translation of *Thómas saga erkiSkups* from George Warner's review in *The Academy* 1876, vol. 9 pp. 69–70. He says:

"To conclude, the somewhat archaistic style of Mr. Magnússon's English version suits itself well to the original, and, though not always consistently followed out, reads in general naturally enough."
These judgments by contemporary Englishmen must be enough to show the characteristics of Magnússon's own translations. They were not faultless, but they were faithful to the original. We can see by a remark in one of Morris' letters (dated Jan. 29, 1874) that Magnússon has been inculcating this principle of faithfulness: "I am deeply impressed with the necessity of making translations literal, only they must be in English idiom, and in undegraded English at the same time: hence in short all the difficulties of translation."

Finally we must not fail here to call attention to one factor which without any doubt is of great importance in explaining the influence—admittedly regretted by some of Morris' friends and biographers!—of Iceland and Icelandic literature upon Morris. This important factor is Magnússon's personality. Magnússon was no ordinary bookworm in spite of his love of books and his somewhat pedantic scholarship. He was a man of strong convictions for better or worse; his enthusiasm was contagious; his criticism scathing and malicious. He loved his friends and hated his foes. He had much of the temper of Egill Skallagrímsson who thanks Odin for being able to provoke his lurking foes to open fight. Thus in a way he was a living illustration of the literature he spent his life in propagating to the—all too often indifferent—Englishmen. There seems to be little doubt that he and Morris were kindred spirits, hence their mutual sympathy and success of collaboration. If Morris was impetuous and could rage like a Viking, Magnússon could do so none the less, but their relations never seem to have been otherwise than cordial in spite of their temper. Like Morris, Magnússon was a man of wide interests, not only in literature, but also in such prosaic things as politics and economics; he was a strong hand on the side of Jón Sigurðsson in the fight of freedom for Iceland, and he would fight on bitterly in the face of general public opposition to his principles.

In conclusion I shall quote the words of two English ladies who knew Magnússon well.

Miss May Morris wrote to me Nov. 3, 1925:

"I remember him well at Cambridge, a short stocky man with a full face, light hair and bushy moustache. He spoke Eng-
lish with the exquisite precision I have noticed in other cultivated people of your country. He used to sing Northern folk song with a big voice that nearly blew the roof off their little sitting room in Cambridge. I remember he walked up and down the room, Icelandic fashion, as he sung. His enthusiasm over the literary matter of Iceland knew no bonds of space or time: only the other day I met someone who knew him in Cambridge who said, if one met him in the street, one had only to mention something about the literature of the North, and there Magnússon would stand talking, regardless of time or weather. . . .”

This delightful informal sketch is well supplemented by the more careful phases of character delineation taken from a necrolog, (in The Cambridge Review, January 30, 1913) by the late Bertha S. Phillpotts, who knew Magnússon well, having been his pupil as well as a resident of Cambridge. She ends her article with the following lines:

“This combination of scholarship with sympathetic insight together with his vigorous personality made Mr. Magnússon an unforgettable teacher; though possibly his very qualities made his teaching a trial to those who were only bent upon success in examination. Mistranslation or grammatical inaccuracy he regarded with much the same horror as actual untruthfulness so that a pupil soon learned caution in these matters; but deeply interested as he was in the subtilities of language they were not his chief concern. He never failed to illustrate the manners and customs, the history, topography, and antiquities of the period with examples drawn from his capacious memory, nor to make his pupils share his own vivid human interest in the characters and fate of the personages in the story. A saga read with him remains in the memory as a living thing, and must always recall the enthusiasm for knowledge, the idealism, and the love of country which were characteristic of a unique personality.”

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