

grown fools enough to be proud of, but which the old Saxon Chronicler lamented, not without reason: since surely it was one of the causes that made the brilliant victory at Stamford Bridge of no account; that broke the wedge-array at Hastings, and laid Harald the Hapless the last king of the English in a forgotten grave at Waltham Abbey amidst the streams of Lea River.

THE EARLY LITERATURE OF THE NORTH—ICELAND¹

If you look at the map of Europe, you will see in its north-western corner lying just under the Arctic circle a large island considerably bigger than Ireland. If you were to take ship and go there you would find it a country very remarkable in aspect, little more than a desert, yet the most romantic of all deserts even to look at: a huge volcanic mass still liable to eruptions of mud, ashes, and lava, and which in the middle of the 18[th] century was the scene of the most tremendous outpour of lava that history records. Anyone travelling there I think would be apt to hope, if he knew nothing of its history, that its terrific and melancholy beauty might have once been illumined by a history worthy of its strangeness: nor would he hope in vain: for the island I am speaking of is called Iceland.

¹ The text of this lecture is taken from B.M. Add. MS. 45331(6), which is entirely in Morris's hand on paper bearing an 1880 watermark.

Although Morris lectured on Icelandic literature as early as 1884 (see Appendix I, 9-14-84), internal evidence and newspaper reports make it quite certain that the text given here was first delivered in the lecture hall at Kelmscott House, Hammersmith, on Oct. 9, 1887 (see Appendix I, 10-9-87 and Appendix II, item 113). It seems quite possible that Morris had considered publishing this lecture as one of the Kelmscott Press works. The first page was actually printed off in the Golden Type, but there is no indication that the rest of the lecture was ever done. The first page is reproduced in *Collected Works*, XV, facing xvi.

It is a country of no account whatever commercially: the whole centre of the island being high above the level of the sea is a desert indeed, partly glacier, partly rough rock and black volcanic sand, the moraines I suppose of ancient glaciers across which the wind sweeps with a fury unknown in these islands forbidding any vegetation to rise above a few inches from the ground unless there is some special defense against it: here and there in favoured spots (I am speaking of these deserts) a little short grass grows, sweet on the hill slopes, on the low ground boggy and sour, dominated by that most grievously melancholy of all plants the cotton rush: elsewhere is nothing save moss, sea-pink, stone-crop (pretty flowers these last), and above all a dwarf willow which keeps on growing and dying, the bleached stems of the perished parts looking like white bones on the black soil (sprengi-sand). It is not a thirsty desert however; every valley almost has water in it and huge rivers rush toward the sea from the glaciers, turbid and white with the grinding of the ice, cleaving for themselves the most fantastic channels amid the blocks of lava and basalt. Awful looking are these Icelandic wastes, yet beautiful to a man with eyes and heart, and perhaps on the whole the healthiest spot in the world.

Round the sea coasts and along the rivers near it lives what population the island can support about 60,000: the grass sweet enough on the slopes there if they get any sun on them; sheep are bred everywhere, well-knit little beasts with a surprising power of jumping, and produce a fine, silky wool valuable enough if there were but more of them: cows also can be fed, but in many places not many, and also in some places, the chief wealth of the island sturdy little ponies, a good few of whom are natural pacers, and very agreeable beasts to ride: and consequently no Icelander walks a mile if he can help it. As you go down one of the long valleys, which always has a river through it you see on the hill-side a patch of emerald green and some low gabled sheds almost like grey tents rising from it: this is a homestead with its surrounding tún or home mead where the sheep are penned in the winter. I must not go into a description of modern Icelandic life, so I will only tell you that these homesteads are very populous, and more than one family commonly lives in each including possibly paupers, and (it used to be) sometimes criminals. Of the

people there is little to be said save praise: they are kind, hospitable, and honest, and have no class of degradation at any rate, and don't take kindly to bullying: they are quick-witted, very talkative when they get over their first shyness, and mostly well-educated as things go: a friendly and refined people in short: implacably exploited by the Danish and Scotch dealers who sell them their necessaries and poor little comforts but otherwise, as I said a mere drop of water in the commercial ocean. But the interest in them which their hard life and the courage and good temper with which they take it cannot fail to awaken in every man of good will, is enormously increased when we bethink us of what these good-fellows really are: they are the representatives, a little mingled with Irish blood, of the Gothic family of the great Germanic race: their forefathers fled before 'the violence of kings and scoundrels,' as they worded it, to save their free tribal customs for a while in that romantic desert, and of their indomitable courage and strong individuality it befell that the rugged volcanic mass has become the casket which has preserved the records of the traditions and religion of the Gothic tribes, and collaterally of the Teutonic also; the instrument of this preservation is the language of their fathers, which is still current amongst them almost intact; the shepherd boy on the hill-side, the fisherman in the firth still chant the songs that preserve the religion of the Germanic race, and the most illiterate are absolutely familiar with the whole of the rich literature of their country, and know more of the Haralds and the Olafs of the tenth and eleventh centuries than most of our 'cultivated' persons know of Oliver Cromwell or William Pitt. Therefore I look upon these poor people with a peculiar affection and their country is to me a Holy Land.

I must tell you now briefly how these people cognate to our own dominant race got to their Isle of Refuge, and then say a little of the character of their literature, but really only as a kind of introduction to the subject.

I have said before in this room that a kind of native feudalism developed of itself in Norway as in England:² a certain number of

²The reference here is to the lecture *The Birth of Feudalism in Scandinavia*, which was scheduled for delivery at the lecture hall, Kelmescott House, Hammer-smith, on Oct. 3, 1886 (see Appendix I, 10-3-86).

the old tribal chiefs yielded, generally very sullenly, to the claims of the overlord, but the bolder spirits could not stomach it and resisted King Harald Fairhair, with whom indeed history in the North begins, with all their might: this resistance culminated in a great battle of Hafrsfiorð (Goat-firth) on the Norway coast in which the king was triumphant, and the malcontent chiefs had to submit or seek their fortunes elsewhere: Russia, Normandy, England, Ireland, the islands of Scotland felt the effects for good and for evil of the emigration which followed: but where the Norsemen settled themselves amongst important populations whom their desperate courage had overcome, as notably in Normandy, they gradually mingled with the native population and soon lost their language and traditions. With the settlers in Iceland it was different: the land was uninhabited, they brought with them their tribal customs and traditions and kept them for long together with their language: this of course was the deliberate intention of the emigrants: the chief who fled before 'kings and scoundrels' as we are told the pillars of his high-seat on which Thor, the favourite God of the North was carved, and when they neared the land threw them overboard for the wind and tide to carry: then when he landed the chief went along the coast till he found the spot 'where Thor was come aland.' And there once more the home was founded, the chief claiming the land he needed by going around it with fire:³ of course many adventurers came out who had no such pretensions to leadership as these besides the freemen and freedmen who went out with the chief and his thralls

³ Commenting on the practice of throwing the pillars of the highseat overboard "to see where Thor was come aland," G. W. Dasent says in his introduction to *The Story of Burnt Njal* (I, 59-60): "See the Eyrbyggja Saga, where Thorolf Mostrarskegg tosses his pillars, on which the image of Thor was carved, overboard, off Reykjaness, and follows them to Hofsvogr (Templevoe), in the Breiðfjörbr (Broadfirth). It sometimes happened, that the pillars were not easily found, in that case a temporary abode was chosen, while the pillars were sought for. The search often lasted long; thus Ingolf, the first of all the settlers, only found his pillars after three whole years had passed; Lodmund again after three years; Hrollaugr in one; Thord Skeggi, not until he had hunted for them for ten or fifteen years." For a more detailed account of Ingolf's coming to Iceland, see Dasent's "The Norsemen in Iceland," in *Oxford Essays* (London, 1858), pp. 178-9. This essay (p. 180) also contains a detailed account of the practice of claiming land by riding around it with a burning brand.

many of whom he freed and gave land to on his coming to the new country; all these would form a kind of following to the chief, who presently on settling formed a priesthood as it was called and undertook the necessary religious rites and the care and guardianship of the thingstead, the place of meeting, over which he presided, and which was what would now be called the seat of government, the parliament, and the law court of the district: there about the middle of June all the freemen of the district met, and quarrels were prosecuted or arranged, fines imposed, and offenses taken note of and dealt with, all in the open air; no court being allowed to be held within doors or on cultivated ground (ne en akri nè engi).⁴ All this sounds very systematic and orderly; and indeed in many of the sagas, whereof more hereafter, there is a great deal of law-quibbling of course always founded on custom and precedent. One thing you must remember however, that though our present Society is founded on a state of things very like this, this state of things was really so very different from ours in spite of our using the same words as our forefathers, that many people find it a difficulty even in conceiving of it. Political society was not yet founded; personal relations between men were what was considered and not territorial: when a priest or chief moved as sometimes happened, many of his thing-men accompanied him, there was no political territorial unit to which loyalty was exacted. Crime in our sense of the word was not taken cognizance of: violence was an offense not against a state but against a person: protection of person or goods had to be sought from the blood relations who were bound to proceed against the injurer: payment of the fines imposed by the courts [was]⁵ enforced by the relations, the gens, of the injured man, the offender having that protection formally withdrawn from him: he was made an outlaw as the phrase goes; that is those that held the feud against him could kill him without incurring any responsibility of fine or of having a legal feud raised against [them]. The morality of the time was enforced purely by public opinion, a shabby or

⁴ The phrase translated means "neither in the plowed field nor the meadow." For Morris's imaginative re-creation of such a folk-mote of an early Gothic tribe, see *The Roots of the Mountains* (*Collected Works*, XV, 273-92).

⁵ The MS reads "were."

treacherous action was looked upon as something quite different from a legal offense, condemnation for which latter involving no kind of disgrace: and even when a man slew his enemy in a just quarrel he had to pay for him; though where the wrong was flagrant he could kill him at a less expense than otherwise (Gunnar).⁶ All this you must understand was not mere private war and revenge and consequent confusion but simply a different system to our politico-territorial system, and was based as I said on the equal personal rights of all freedmen: you must remember that this society was an exact model of that which obtained in Norway and the rest of Scandinavia before the emigration; and also that the incomplete Feudality introduced by Harald Fairhair by no means entirely superseded it there.

As to the manners of these early settlers they were naturally exceedingly simple, yet not lacking in dignity: contrary to the absurd feeling of the feudal or hierarchical period manual labour was far from being considered a disgrace: the mythical heroes have often nearly as much fame given them for their skill as weapon-smiths as for their fighting qualities; it was necessary of course for a northman to understand sailing a ship, and the sweeps on board their long-ships or fighting craft were not manned by slaves but by the fighting men themselves; all this is perhaps a matter of course, but in addition the greatest men lent a hand in ordinary field and house work, pretty much as they do in the Homeric poems: one chief is working in his hay-field at a crisis of his fortune;⁸ another is mending a gate,⁹ a third sowing

⁶ The note "Gunnar" could refer either to a situation in the *Grettis Saga* (*Collected Works*, VII, 60-63) depicting the settlement made with King Svein for Grettir's slaying of a man named Gunnar, or to a similar settlement by Gunnar Hamundson in *The Story of Burnt Njal*. See Dasent, I, 210-13.

⁷ A portion of the MS is illegible here.

⁸ The reference is to King Sigurd Syr, whose story is told in the *Heimskringla*. See the translation by William Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon, *The Heimskringla*, 4 vols. ("The Saga Library"; London, 1893-1905).

⁹ Arnkel Gopi, son of Thorolf Haltfoot, is the man who was "nailing together the boards of his outer door" when he was attacked by one of his enemies. The tale is told in the *Eyrbyggja Saga*, which was translated by Morris and Magnússon as *The Story of the Ere-Dwellers* ("The Sage Library"; London, 1892). The incident mentioned above is related in II, 94-5.

his corn, his cloak and sword laid by in a corner of the field:¹⁰ another is a great house builder, another a ship builder:¹¹ one chief says to his brother one eventful morning: there's the calf to be killed and the Viking to be fought. Which of us shall kill the calf and which shall fight the Viking?¹²

The position of women was good in this society, the married couple being pretty much on an equality: there are many stories told of women divorcing themselves for some insult or offense, a blow being considered enough excuse. I am bound to say too that the women claimed and obtained immunity for responsibility of their violence on the score of their being 'weak women' in a way which would offend our comrade Bax seriously.¹³

Self-restraint was a virtue sure to be thought much of among a people whose religion was practically courage: in all the stories of the north failure is never reckoned as a disgrace, but it is reckoned a disgrace not to bear it with equanimity, and to wear one's heart on one's sleeve is not well thought of. Tears are not common in Northern stories though they sometimes come in curiously as in the case of Slaying Glum, of whom it is told that when some one of his exploits was at hand he was apt to have a sudden access of weeping, the tears rattling on the floor like hailstones; this of course was involuntary and purely physical.¹⁴ For the rest I repeat self restraint of all kinds is a necessary virtue before a man can claim any respect in the Northern stories. Grettir coming

¹⁰ In *The Story of Burnt Njal*, Gunnar Hamundson was sowing his corn when Otkell ran him down. See G. W. Dasent (tr.), *The Story of Burnt Njal*, I, 169-71.

¹¹ References to house-and-ship-building are so numerous in Icelandic literature that it is difficult to identify the specific persons being referred to here. One possibility for the ship-builder is Thorberg Shave-Hewer, spoken of in the *Heimskringla* ("The Saga Library," I, 343).

¹² The source of this reference remains unknown.

¹³ E. Belfort Bax was one of the mainstays of the Socialist League, having left the Social Democratic Federation with Morris on the occasion of the split in 1884. A philosopher of some note, his militant anti-feminist attitude led him into a number of well-publicized verbal battles with such leading feminine socialists as Annie Besant and Eleanor Marx-Aveling. For a digest of his views on the position of women, see his *Reminiscences and Reflexions* (London, Ltd., 1918), pp. 163, 196-200, 269-74.

¹⁴ See Gudbrand Vigfusson and York Powell (trs.), "The Story of Battle Glum," in *Origines Islandicæ* (Oxford, 1905), II, 472.

home from abroad learns as soon as he sets foot on shore that his father is dead, his eldest brother slain, and he himself outlawed, and changes countenance in no wise.¹⁵ Ingiald of the Wells when he hears of the death of Njal falls down in a faint and the blood gushes out of his ears and nose; when he comes to himself he reproaches himself for behaving like a weak woman.¹⁶ Another chief after a battle sits down to have his breeches drawn off; the thrall pulls and pulls and they won't come: truly says he you sons of Snorri may well be thought great dandies if you wear your breeches so tight. The chief bids him feel up his thigh, and lo there is a broken arrow-shaft nailing his breeches to him, of which he scorned to complain.¹⁷ The tales of heroes very often begin with the young man coming to a strange place and being apparently loutish, stupid, and slothful, lying raking in the ashes, the butt of everybody's scorn and especially of some loud-mouthed braggart, till at last the time for action comes, the cinder-raker rises like a God, the braggart's head spins off, and the hero is made manifest by his deeds. 'Many a man lies hid within himself,' says their proverb.¹⁸

Nevertheless a hard and grasping side to the character of the heroes is not uncommon, and this especially in money matters, which contrasts disagreeably enough with the heroes of Arab romance: something at least may here be put down to the harshness of the northern climate and the hard fight for life there; and after all a good deal to the love of realism which distinguishes the tellers of the stories themselves. Yet there are plenty of examples of generosity and magnanimity too; e.g. the dealings between the

¹⁵ See *The Grettis Saga* (*Collected Works*, VII, 112).

¹⁶ Morris is in error in ascribing this reaction to Ingeald of the Wells, who was wounded by Flosi immediately after the burning of Njal. The situation described by Morris is translated by Dasent (*The Story of Burnt Njal*, II, 195-6) as follows: "Thorhall Asgrim's son was so startled when he was told that his foster-father Njal was dead, and that he had been burnt in his house, that he swelled all over, and a stream of blood burst out of both his ears, and could not be staunched, and he fell into a swoon, and then it was staunched. After that he stood up, and said he had behaved like a coward. . . ."

¹⁷ This anecdote is told of Thorod Thorbrandsson, one of the personages in *The Story of the Ere-Dwellers* ("The Saga Library," II, 128-9).

¹⁸ See *The Grettis Saga* (*Collected Works*, VII, 170).

two friends Gunnar and Njal in the noble story of Burnt Njal are matchless for manly and farsighted friendliness in the midst of the most trying surroundings. The end of the same story recounts how Kari, wrecked on the coast near where his great enemy Flosi dwells, walks straight up to the house and into the hall where Flosi is sitting and greets him, Flosi returns the greeting of the unarmed, solitary man, embraces him, and the feud is at end.¹⁹ Or take the story of Ingimund the Old the chief of Waterdale: Ingimund harbours an ill-conditioned scoundrel who is neither to hold or to bind: one day a messenger comes to tell him that this rascal is quarrelling with his sons down by the river: Ingimund who is blind as well as old rides down there led by a little lad, and upbraids the rascal who in turn throws his spear across the water and decamps: Ingimund turns away and home: as the boy helps him off his horse he thinks the old man slow to dismount and says to him 'you're stiff today, father.' Old men are used to be so, says Ingimund: the boy leads him into the hall and Ingimund sits down in the high seat; it begins to get dusk: the boy says shall we light up: no says Ingimund not yet: so there he sits till it gets quite dark, and at last the son comes in, and as he walks toward the high seat stumbles and saves himself with his hand, and feels that it is wet from the floor: he has a terrible inkling; cries out for a light, and when it comes to his hand is stained red, and there sits his father Ingimund dead in the high seat, the shaft of the scoundrel's spear hidden under his cloak: he had hidden his wound and died in the dark to keep the affair from his son until the scoundrel who slew him and whom he had heaped with benefits before should have time to escape pursuit.²⁰

The sequel of the story is too tragic and not to be told: Ingimund had two freedmen to whom he had given land and when the news of his death came to one of them he drew his 'sax' or short sword and saying, if Ingimund is dead the world is not good for me, he stabbed himself mortally, and before he died pulled out the weapon and giving it to the messenger said take this to so

¹⁹ See Dasent, *The Story of Burnt Njal*, II, 346-9.

²⁰ The story told here comes from the *Vatnsdaela Saga* (Vigfusson and Powell, trs., *Origines Islandicae*, II, 275-314).

and so the other freedman, and tell him what you have seen: and so died; and when the messenger gave the sax to the other he followed his example at once.

Again it must be admitted that our Norsemen were not above using the weapons of deceit in their struggles for life and fortune: but when they do so it is as an act of war: compare the curious passage in the XIII book of the *Odyssey* where Athene, a Goddess, is delighted with Odysseus for telling her an intricate series of lies;²¹ which indeed he is always doing, and cannot even resist the temptation of one last lie at the expense of his poor old father, which from my modern point of view I really think was too bad: again in book XIX Autolycus, Odysseus' mother's father, is spoken of as outdoing all men 'in thievery and skill in swearing,' clearly with approval,²² of which cases again remember that in the Homeric literature and in the Norse it was peace within the gens or tribe and war always outside it; a lie or deceit therefore was like an ambush in war. Anyhow though the Northman would lie to his enemy like old Slaying Glum who, skillful in oaths like Autolycus, swore himself off in court by a grammatical quibble,²³ yet he would not lie to his friend and still less to himself—which latter is the modern method and the parent of all falseness. The Northman considered it disgraceful to brag, to make more than enough of a victory gained and still more to blacken the fame of a conquered enemy, which no doubt his instinct showed him was the stupidest of slanders, since if your enemy is an incompetent coward, the less is your glory if you beat him, and the more your shame if he beats you.

Icelandic literature as I have hinted has preserved for us the religious mythology which was largely common to all the Germanic tribes: it is really much akin to that of the classical peoples: but as was likely to be from the simplicity of the people the Gods are more obviously than in other mythologies the reflexion of their worshippers: good-tempered and placable though as fierce as you please, with no liking for or indeed endurance of servility

²¹ See the *Collected Works*, XIII, 192-4.

²² In his own published translation, Morris (*Collected Works*, XIII, 287) renders this passage as: "in thievish sleight, and shift of oaths. . . ."

²³ See *Origines Islandicæ*, II, 434-5.

and no complaisance for cowardice or yielding, kind to their friends and hard to their foes, it must be said that the Norse Gods are distinctly *good-fellows*, and really about the best that mankind has made. In one point they are very specially a reflex of the men; that though [they] are long-lived they are not immortal, but lie under the same fate as mankind. The day is to come when the forces of evil that they have chained and repressed shall at last break loose, and the good and evil of man's age and the Gods who have ruled over it shall meet in mortal conflict at last, and after fierce battle destroy each other. It is for this great battle that all valiant men on earth are preparing, and when they leave the earth, and go to the halls of Odin, they still as of old have to go on with their training and fight and the semblance of fight is still their business in Valhall, the Hall of the War-Slain, as it was on earth. Before this great day of battle it will be evil days with the world: as the Vala sings in the great mythological poem the Vala's Foretelling:

Then Brethren shall battle
And be bane of each other
And the sons of one sister
Their kindred shall spill.
Hard times in the world then
And mighty the whoredom:
An axe age a sword age
The shields shall be cloven
A wind age a wolf age
Before the world waneth.²⁴

Says the writer of the prose Edda

The Fimbul winter the winter of horror, five winters with ne'er a summer between shall come before the Gloom of the Gods: men would have grown puny and weak-hearted all heroes and bold-hearts would have gone home to Odin to fight and to fall in the last battle of worldly good and evil. But man alive cannot conceive of his ending: a new world is to arise from the wrack of the old; the golden tables whereon Aesir played in the early days shall be found in the grass, the acres shall wax unsown, all

²⁴ For a complete text and translation see Vigfusson and Powell (eds. and trs.), "Wolospa Reconstructed," in *Corpus Poeticum Boreale* (Oxford, 1883), II, 621-41.

bale shall be bettered; Balder the bright God of peace and beauty, shall come back he who in the older days no weapon would hurt, so that he would stand up in the Gods' Hall and let all cast their spears at him unharmed, till at last the evil God Loki put in the hand of the blind God Hod a twig of mistletoe and the little crooked twig of the plant without root and without fruit cast fatefully from the hands of a blind God slew the pleasure and glory of God-home: he now shall come back and his slayer Hod with him and they shall dwell in the Golden Hall of Gimli and the world new-peopled shall be at peace.²⁵

Of course all this can be explained in various ways by various kinds of ingenuity: to some it even seems a mere reflex of Christianity: but it seems rather a paradox to maintain that one of the most vigorous branches of the most progressive race in the world could not have a mythology developed by themselves; and since the songs on which the mythology is based were collected by the men who had become Christians, the great collection even going by the name of a Christian priest, one Saemund, it would seem strange that if there were any Christianity in it there should be so little. To my mind it seems rather to be derived from and coloured by the same dualism which overlaid the ancient nature-worship of the Persians, and formed the very long-lived religion still maintained by the Parsees.

Anyhow it is very clearly the reflex of the lives and ethics of the northern peoples whose real religion was the worship of Courage: their morality is simple enough: strive to win fair fame is the one precept: says Havamal.

Waneth wealth, and fadeth friend
And we ourselves shall die
But fair fame dieth nevermore
If well ye come thereby.²⁶

Be it understood that this was not the worship of success; on the contrary success that came without valour was somewhat despised: says the sagaman, e.g.: "The Knigtlinga were very lucky

²⁵ For a modern translation of the Prose Edda, see Jean I. Young (tr.), *The Prose Edda* (Cambridge, 1943).

²⁶ The passage quoted is strophe 76. For a modern text and translation see D. E. Martin Clarke (ed. and tr.), *Havamal* (Cambridge, 1923).

men, but not very valorous.²⁷ Perhaps the serious consciousness of the final defeat of death made that mere success seem but poor to these men whereas the deeds done could no longer be touched by death. The practiced reader of a saga always knows when he is drawing near to the death of the hero; for the style heightens, the tale-teller remembers more poetry and a kind of halo seems to gild the presence of the man who is now about to make his fame safe forever.

I will now try briefly to give you an idea of what the Northern Literature consists of.

There are first the mythological songs preserved to us by the collectors of the 12th or 13th century of which the most complete is the Vala's Foretelling already mentioned besides which there are various poems containing stories of the Gods: The Lay of the Way-wearer telling in few but sublime words of Odin's journey to the underworld [to] bring back the slain Balder.²⁸ The Fetching of the Hammer telling of Thor's recovery of his wonderful Hammer from the giant land; a strange grotesque piece,²⁹ and others concerning the dealing of the Gods with the evil God Loki, and their final defeat of him till the day of the God's Gloom.³⁰ There is also a curious piece called the Lay of the High One, which is partly a mass of proverbial lore and partly a set of hints at magic.³¹ The Rigsmal is a curious poem telling of the visit of Heimdal one of the Gods to earth and his coming across the classes of man Earl, Carl, and Thrall.³²

These mythological poems form the first half of the songs of the Edda as the great collection of the early poems [is called] and I must say before I go further that a work the nominal scope of which is a treatise on poetic diction, attributed to Snorri Sturle-

²⁷ The "Knigtlinga" are "the sons of Cnut."

²⁸ The original title is *Baldrs Draumar*. For the full text and a translation, see *Corpus Poeticum Boreale*, I, 181-3.

²⁹ The original title is *Drymskviða*. For the text and a translation, see *ibid.*, I, 100-110.

³⁰ The original title is *Lokasenna*. For the text and a translation, see *ibid.*, I, 100-110.

³¹ The reference is to the *Havamal* (see footnote 26, above).

³² The reference is to the *Rigsdula*. For a text and translation, see *Corpus Poeticum Boreale*, I, 234-42.

son the historian of the 13th century and known as the prose or Younger Edda, has preserved a good many of the legends of the Gods.³³ The second part of the poetic Edda may be called the Romantic part of it: and contains stories of the heroes mostly with a genealogical tendency. The great story of these is the Niblung Tale which to modern readers is better known through the ballad epic, so to call it of the German poets of the 14th century under the name of the Need of the Nibelungs; to my mind this splendid work is a literary deduction from the Norse Poems and is not founded on a special or German ancient tradition. However this story of the Nibelungs has grown, and following it up through all its fragmentary songs and variants I must unhesitatingly call it the noblest and in a sense the completest story yet made by man, embracing the highest range of tragedy; passion, love, duty, valour, honour, in strife with the blind force of fate, vanquished by it, but living again in death in the souls of all the generations according to the words which the Homeric poet puts into the mouth of King Alcinous: "But this thing the Gods have fashioned and have spun the Deathful Day For Men; that for men hereafter might be the tale and the lay."³⁴

Again these Romantic early poems are supplemented by a mass of prose literature which gather[s] up the remembrance of other poems in the 13th and 14th centuries. The most important, though scarcely the most artistic of these is the book called the Volsunga Saga which has preserved in a quasi-connected form the glorious story of the Nibelungs aforesaid.³⁵ Some record of the poems totally lost is preserved also in the dreary Latin of Saxo Grammaticus, a Danish Bishop of the 13th century,³⁶ and another writer or two notably Adam of Bremen:³⁷ one story in Saxo

³³ See footnote 25, above.

³⁴ See Book VIII of Morris's translation of *The Odyssey* (*Collected Works*, XIII, 117).

³⁵ See Morris and Magnússon's translation (*Collected Works*, VII, 283-396).

³⁶ The lost poems that have been reconstructed in the *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus include: *Hadding's saga*, *Froða saga*, *Hapar saga*, *Eiriks saga málsþaka*, *Friðleifs saga*, *Ala saga fraekna*, and *þorkels saga aðalfara*. See Stefan Einarsson, *A History of Icelandic Literature* (New York, 1957), p. 158.

³⁷ Adam of Bremen wrote the *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*, which reconstructs a number of the lost Icelandic poems. For a discussion of this work

most English-speaking people have heard of: it is about a chieftain who pretended to be mad in order to revenge his father; his name was *Amloji*; but you will know him better by the name of *Hamlet* a queer corruption which is due to weary old Saxo's dog-Latin in which he figures as Amlethus.

Leaving these romantic sagas for the present we now come to a very remarkable mass of literature, which is I think quite unparalleled, the historical sagas: these are wholly the work of the dwellers in that rugged desert isle of Iceland which I have told you of. They may be divided into the stories of Norway and incidentally of other parts of Scandinavia together with the Orkneys, the Faroes, and Greenland even on the one hand and on the other stories of various families and their feuds in Iceland itself: In order to account for the first of these, you must know that it was customary for Icelandic adventurers to take service especially in their younger years with the Scandinavian lords and kings on the mainland, including the Russian settlements and Gaeland and sometimes with the English kings, besides serving on occasion in the bodyguard of the Greek emperor at Constantinople (the Lions of Aegina).³⁸ From the memories of these men which they carried back to their kindred in Iceland, which were often enshrined in verses of various degrees of merit grew up historical traditions of the scenes in which they had played a part; these were collected in connected tales of the reigns of the Kings, the chief collection being attributed to Snorri Sturleson who wrote the Prose Edda, and being named after its first words the *Heimskringla*:³⁹ going through all the kings it begins with the confessedly mythical period and carries us down to the twelfth century. Snorri has been called the Herodotus of the North not inaptly as the history is told by way of anecdote as Herodotus tells his; but Snorri is far more personal and dramatic than the

and its relation to the history of Icelandic literature, see G. Turville-Petre, *The Origins of Icelandic Literature* (Oxford, 1953), pp. 72, 77, *passim*.

³⁸ G. W. Dasent (*The Story of Burnt Njal*, I, x) says, "Wherever he goes the Northman leaves his mark, and to this day the lions of the Acropolis are scored with the runes which tell of his triumph."

³⁹ See Morris and Magnússon's translation (footnote 8, above).

delightful old Ionian.⁴⁰ Every character that he tells us of lives and moves before us, nor does any particle of partiality obscure the clearness of the pictures that he shows us: how often have I lamented that our own history has lacked such a poet, for Snorri was no less than that. Froissart alone amongst the mediaeval chroniclers can be named along-side of him: but then Snorri tells in a dozen words what the Hainalter would take several hundred to tell, and that with a shrewdness and keen wit which pierces through the very bones and marrow of his subject.

I have said Snorri: but after all these once for all are the characteristics of the Icelandic prose stories; you may think that their subject matter is undignified or petty, but certainly whatever they have to tell of they can make it most vividly clear to us, they are in short the best tellers of tales that have ever lived, and stuffed full of the closest detail as their stories are they are never long-winded: they at least escape the reproach of the Lacedaemonians to the Ionian envoys; 'It is very pretty but since we have forgotten the beginning we don't know what the end is about.'

Besides these King-Stories as they are called we have as I said the tales of family events or feuds in Iceland itself: these are very naturally the literature that the modern Icelander loves the most: almost all those patches of emerald green on the grey hill-side that I told you about are still identified as the spots where the ancient chieftains lived and fought and died: nay the spots where such and such events happened are still pointed out to the traveller by people who believe firmly in them, and in the long winter nights while the others mend their harness and carve and shape horn spoons and the women spin and card the wool some one reads to them the deeds of their forefathers, it may be on the very spots where their houses once stood.

Amongst the longer works of these Parish histories there are three which are at once the most artistic and the most admired by the people of the country. The story of Burnt Njal,⁴¹ The Story of

⁴⁰ The following words are deleted in the MS: "whose delightful book has filled our minds with the tales of the Greeks."

⁴¹ See G. W. Dasent's translation (footnote 2, above).

Grettir the Strong,⁴² and that of Egil the Son of Skallagrim:⁴³ Gisli the outlaw⁴⁴ and Gunnlaug the Wormtongue⁴⁵ bear off the bell, I think among the shorter tales: of all these I think Egil's Story is the most popular in Iceland: to us it would seem very rough and even ferocious in its manners; but it has the merit of containing three very fine poems traditionally the work of Egil himself: two out of the three are rhymed which is not usual in Icelandic poetry: they are in my opinion quite impossible to translate, so as to preserve any of their real merit. Another point of interest to us is that Egil's dealings were largely with England where he served King Aethelstane and was one of his Norse allies at the great battle of Brunanburgh. The Story of Grettir is intensely Icelandic; it is the tale of a valiant and physically strong man who was pursued by life-long ill-luck, and, being made an outlaw early in his career by the machinations of his enemies, sustained himself in those terrible wastes I was telling you of by dint of his indomitable courage and a kind of fierce generosity which makes him a very attractive character. But of all the domestic sagas that of Burnt Njal is certainly the finest: the characters amidst all their faults and even the crimes of some of them are on a high level of nobility and generosity quite unsurpassed in story: it perhaps adds to the interest of the tale that Njal himself the twin hero of the first part of the tale is not a warrior but plays the part throughout of the wise, kindly, and peacemaking neighbour: his warrior friend Gunnar is the darling of Icelandic history and so without more ado I will give you his portrait as drawn by the sagaman, which as far as his mental and moral qualities are concerned is fully borne out by the tale.⁴⁶

⁴² See Morris and Magnússon's translation (footnote 6, above).

⁴³ Egil Skalla-Grímsson (c. 910-990) has been called "by far the most important" of the Old Icelandic poets (see Einarsson, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-60). Morris's reference is to the *Egils Saga*. For a modern translation see E. R. Eddison (tr.), *Egils Saga* (Cambridge, 1930).

⁴⁴ The reference is to the *Gisla Saga*. See G. W. Dasent (tr.), *The Saga of Gisli the Outlaw* (London [1928]).

⁴⁵ See Morris and Magnússon's translation (*Collected Works*, X, 7-47).

⁴⁶ The MS here bears the notation "(quote)," omitting both the passage quoted and any indication of its source. The passage inserted is the description of Gunnar

There was a man whose name was Gunnar. He was one of Unna's kinsmen, and his mother's name was Rannveig. Gunnar's father was named Hamond. Gunnar Hamond's son dwelt in Lithend, in the Fleetlithe. He was a tall man in growth, and a strong man—best skilled in arms of all men. He could cut or thrust or shoot if he chose as well with his left as with his right hand, and he smote so swiftly with his sword, that three seemed to flash through the air at once. He was the best shot with the bow of all men, and never missed his mark. He could leap more than his own height, with all his war gear, and as far backwards as forwards. He could swim like a seal, and there was no game in which it was any good for any one to strive with him; and so it has been said that no man was his match. He was handsome of feature, and fair-skinned. His nose was straight, and a little turned up at the end. He was blue-eyed and bright-eyed, and ruddy-cheeked. His hair thick and of good hue, and hanging down in comely curls. The most courteous of men was he, of sturdy frame and strong will, bountiful and gentle, a fast friend, but hard to please when making them. He was wealthy in goods.

I am sorry to say that in this tale the women do not play an agreeable part, they are throughout the make-bates; and Hallgerð Long-Coat, Gunnar's wife and his ruin, has had many a curse laid on her grave down by the waters of the firth near to where the modern Reykjavik stands. Altogether I must say that the man who has read this tale and is not moved by it has no right to give an opinion on such matters.

The shorter story of Gunnlaug the Worm-Tongue is of much the same quality, but the passion of love plays an important part in it. Gisli the Outlaw is no worse except that it is shorter: its hero lives and falls much as Grettir.

There is another short story that of Howard the Halt which is wonderfully dramatic; it recounts the tale of an old man and the signal vengeance taken by him on a scoundrel who has murdered his son, a splendid and generous young man.⁴⁷ The Tale of the

in Dasent's translation (*The Story of Burnt Njal*, I, 59-60); this version was selected because it was the standard English translation in Morris's time and because, as has been seen before in these notes, Morris used it extensively.

⁴⁷ The original title is *Landnámabók*. See Morris and Magnússon's translation ("The Saga Library," I, 1-69).

Banded Men⁴⁸ is an exceedingly humorous account of another old man's triumph: this time by the exercise of his mother wit over a set of powerful but somewhat stupid chieftains who had got on the hip the gaffer's son, a man of the same quality as themselves. These are by no means the only sagas which show artistic qualities in the telling; but I think they are the best as to having a decided beginning, middle, and end.

The story of the dwellers at Ere is one of the most interesting of the pure chronicles.⁴⁹ The Lax-dalers' Story,⁵⁰ and that of Waterdalers⁵¹ are also very interesting the former containing a very touching and beautiful tale, but it is not done justice to by the detail of the story. The detail of the Ere-dwellers' tale is as good as may be.

Besides these traditional-historical sagas there are a few called in contempt by the Icelanders Skrok sagas, that is nonsense-tales; in other words fictions: one at least of these, the story of Viglund the Fair is a very graceful and charming novelette.⁵²

Besides all this and a good many lost sagas the names of which still remain the Icelanders did a certain amount of translation: one of the best histories of Thomas Beckett is in Icelandic:⁵³ the earliest form of the mediaeval tale of Tristram and Iseult is preserved in Icelandic:⁵⁴ and several mediaeval Romances were also rendered in that tongue. In ballad literature and purely oral tradition I don't think they are as rich as their kindred on the

⁴⁸ The original title is *Bandamanna Saga*. See Morris and Magnússon's translation (*ibid.*, I, 73-121).

⁴⁹ The original title is *Eyrbyggja Saga*. See Morris and Magnússon's translation, entitled *The Story of the Ere-Dwellers* (*ibid.*, II, 3-186).

⁵⁰ The original title is *Laxdaela Saga*. See Thorstein Veblen's translation, *The Laxdaela Saga* (New York, 1925). A poetic version of this saga, "The Lovers of Gudrun," was included by Morris in his *Earthly Paradise* (*Collected Works*, V, 251-395).

⁵¹ The original title is *Vatnsdaela Saga*. See the translation by Vigfusson and Powell (note 20, above).

⁵² See Morris and Magnússon's translation (*Collected Works*, X, 81-126).

⁵³ The original work, by Olafur Hvitaskáld, is entitled *Tómasardrápa* (See Einars-son, *op. cit.*, p. 71).

⁵⁴ The reference here is to ". . . *Tristrams saga*, which was translated into Norwegian as early as 1226 for King Hákon," (*ibid.*, p. 149).

mainland; but some very beautiful ballads remain: and there is a very interesting collection of oral stories published not many years ago. I should have mentioned the Song Chronicle of the Sturtings called sometimes the Great Saga which carries on the history of the country till it lost its old tribal liberties and fell into the clutch of the Norway kings in the 13th century.

After this there is little of literary excellence till quite modern times, though some volumes of annals, dry reading enough exist: a curious little vol[ume] called the Tyrkjárans Saga gives an account of the descent of the Algerine pirates on the island about 1630 and forms an interesting commentary on the state of Europe at that time.⁵⁵

I may finish by saying a word on the present condition of Iceland: they have suffered very much there from bad seasons of late.⁵⁶ but I cannot help thinking that in spite of that they could live there very comfortably if they were to extinguish individualism there: the simplest possible form of co-operative commonwealth would suit their needs, and ought not to be hard to establish; as there is no crime there, and no criminal class or class of degradation and education is universal: and unless by some special perversity should the question of politics stand in the way: the only persons who would be losers by it would be the present exploiters of this brave and kind people: and if these men were all shipped off to—well to Davy Jones, there would be many a dry eye at their departure. I speak of this from the sincere affection I have for the Icelandic people who treated me so kindly when I was among them, and who are the descendants, and no unworthy ones, of the bravest men and the best tale-tellers whom the world has ever bred.

⁵⁵ For further details on this saga, see *ibid.*, pp. 196-9.

⁵⁶ Morris himself had been very active on the Committee of the Iceland Famine Relief Fund in 1882 (see *Mackail*, II, 77-79).

[THE PRESENT OUTLOOK IN POLITICS]¹

It is] good to review the state of political parties from time to time and to try to get an idea of what our relations as socialists are to the general mass of political opinion, whether we are advancing, or retro[gressing], or standing still: in fact we cannot help speculating on the influence ordinary parties may have upon our movement and in what direction they are pushing us as to tactics in carrying on that movement: there are dangers as well as hopes for us in the welter of political life so that it behooves us to look at the prospect with as clear eyes as we can lest we fall into traps. Perhaps however some of you may say that unless to the eyes of an electioneering agent the prospect is so clear that it doesn't need thinking about or looking into closely: but then there will be more than one set of people who will think this, and the prospect will be very different to the

¹ The text of this lecture is taken from B.M. Add. MS. 45334(7), which is entirely in Morris's hand. Although the MS bears no title, references to "Bloody Sunday" indicate that it was written shortly after the Trafalgar Square riots of Nov. 13, 1887. This evidence combines with the reference to a socialist audience (p. 206) and detailed newspaper reports to definitely establish that the lecture was first delivered under the above title on Dec. 18, 1887 (see Appendix I, 12-18-87 and 1-8-88, and Appendix II, item 120).