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# William Morris, Eiríkur Magnússon, and Iceland: A Survey of Correspondence

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**I**N THE National Library of Iceland there are a number of letters from Morris to his friend and fellow translator of the sagas, Eiríkur Magnússon, and some members of his family.<sup>1</sup> Morris' biographers have emphasized the deep significance Iceland and its culture held for him, and Magnússon, the native Icelander who became Sub-Librarian at Cambridge, was the key to his experience of that country. It was through Magnússon that Morris learned Icelandic, through him that the poet's longstanding general interest in northern medieval literature achieved focus, and through him that Morris gained a first acquaintance with Iceland and the Icelandic people.

Years after it occurred, Magnússon described at length the meeting between himself and William Morris, in 1868: "I met [him] in the hall. With a manly shake of the hand he said: 'I'm glad to see you; come upstairs!' And with a bound he was upstairs and I after him until his study on the second floor was reached. A very lively conversation ensued on Icelandic matters, especially literature" (*CW*, VII, xv). In conversation, it developed that Morris had read a number of the sagas, and he impressed Magnússon with the depth of his understanding of them. They decided that Magnússon should teach the poet to read Icelandic, with lessons three times a week, concentrating on vocabulary rather than syntax: "Morris decided from the beginning to leave

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<sup>1</sup>The William Morris letters are in Lbs. 2188b, 4to. Portions of the letters written November 7, 1890, April 28 and April 29, 1891, and July 13, 1891 were published by May Morris in *William Morris, Artist, Writer, Socialist*, I, 459-460. I am grateful to Dr. Finnboði Guðmundsson, Head Librarian of the National Library of Iceland, and his colleagues for the kind help I received while at their institution. The project was financed through a University of Saskatchewan Principal's Humanities and Social Sciences Award, with additional aid from the Contingency Fund of the Dean of Arts and Sciences.

alone the irksome task of taking regular grammatical exercises. 'You be my grammar as we go along,' was the rule laid down by himself from the beginning" (CW, VII, xvii). After each lesson, Magnússon wrote out a literal translation of the material studied. Morris would then later rewrite it in his own style, and this was what was published. The first fruits of their labor appeared in 1869, *The Story of Grettir the Strong (Grettis saga)* as a separate volume, and "The Story of Gunnlaug the Worm-tongue" (*Gunnlaugs saga ormstunga*) published in the *Fortnightly Review*. Several other works came out soon after, *Völsunga saga* in 1870 and *The Story of Frithiof the Bold (Friþjófs saga frækna)* in 1871. The next work undertaken by the collaborators was a small collection entitled *Three Northern Love Stories*, including the already published *Gunnlaugs saga* and *Friþjófs saga*, and the newly translated *Story of Vighund the Fair (Vighundar saga)*. A number of shorter stories were also included in the volume, which was published in 1875.

Morris made two visits to Iceland, the first in 1871, accompanied by Magnússon. With them were C. J. Faulkner, a partner in the Morris firm, and W. H. Evans. Magnússon introduced the party to his country and its people, and the initial impression on Morris is evident from various sources. Magnússon's wife, Sigríður Einarsdóttir, who made the voyage with them, recalled their friend's enthusiasm as their ship neared the island: "It had been, he said, the dream of his life, to see Iceland, and to hear the ancient tongue in the old home."<sup>2</sup> Morris' enchantment with Iceland is further confirmed in his *Icelandic Journals*, and frequent references to the visit in later letters, as well as a return trip in 1873, attest to the depth of the impression he received.<sup>3</sup> He returned for the second visit in 1873, this time with Faulkner as a companion and hiring a relative of Magnússon's wife, Jón Jónsson í Hlíðarendakoti, as guide. The intensity of the earlier experience may have worn thin, or he may have been concerned with family problems which he had tried to leave at home. The *Journals* from this trip, at any rate, are fragmentary and unpolished, and there is a sense of detachment in them, occasionally of weariness.

<sup>2</sup>Sigríður Einarsdóttir, "William Morris' Home and Social Life," an unpublished lecture written after Morris' death, found in Lbs. 2191, 4to.

<sup>3</sup>In a postscript to one of the two letters to Eiríkur Magnússon, in Lbs. 2187a, 4to, dated April 4, 1872, Faulkner says that "a second visit to Iceland looms in the distance." This is early news of plans which were realized over a year later. Sometime after November 28, 1872, Magnússon wrote to Sira Sigurður Gunnarsson, at Ass í Fellum, that Morris was trying to persuade him to make another journey to Iceland (Lbs. 2181, 4to). Magnússon sent Jón Sigurðsson a letter on January 9, 1873, remarking that Morris had already packed up and was ready to go (Lbs. 2180, 4to).

After his visits to the country, Morris came to be involved in the welfare of the Icelanders in several ways. In 1875, Iceland suffered one of its major volcanic tragedies of the century when a mountain in the east erupted, covering a large portion of the area with ash. The resulting famine caused the death of much livestock, and many families were forced to leave their farms. Morris helped to form a relief committee with the Lord Mayor as its chairman, and *The Times* and the *Scotsman* carried several letters by Magnússon describing conditions in Iceland that summer. The committee succeeded in collecting £ 1857, with which Magnússon bought fodder and other necessities, delivering all himself to his homeland.<sup>4</sup> Later, in 1882, having experienced harsh weather both winter and summer for two years, people in northern Iceland became aware of the possibility of another famine. Magnússon and Morris again set to work, organizing the Mansion House Relief Committee, which was only partially successful in the face of opposition from people who questioned, first, the existence or danger of a famine and, second, the wisdom with which the collected funds were employed. The Morris letters from this period show the sympathy with which the poet handled the awkward situation.

In the 1890's, Morris and Magnússon undertook their monumental task of producing *The Saga Library*, a series of translations of Icelandic sagas "addressed to the whole reading public, and not only to students of Scandinavian history, folklore, and language."<sup>5</sup> In the first volume were "The Story of Howard the Halt" (*Hávarðar saga*), "The Story of the Banded Men" (*Bandamanna saga*) and "The Story of Hen Thorir" (*Hænsaþoris saga*). The second volume contained "The Story of The Ere-dwellers" (*Eyrbyggja saga*) and "The Story of the Heath-Slayings" (*Heiðarvíga saga*). The rest of the *Library* was devoted to *Heimskringla*, a history of the kings of Norway, comprising three volumes, the last published in 1895, to which Magnússon added a fourth, made up of commentary and notes, in 1905, nearly ten years after Morris' death.

## I

Perhaps of greatest interest in the Morris letters are the frequent references to the progress of various saga translations and their publication. The earliest published work mentioned is *Three Northern Love Stories*, translations of sagas in whose plots there were romantic motivating factors. There were plans for a new edition when Morris wrote Magnússon on November 7, 1890:

<sup>4</sup>Stefán Einarsson, *Saga Eiríks Magnússonar í Cambridge* (Reykjavík, 1933), pp. 212-217.

<sup>5</sup>William Morris and Eiríkur Magnússon, translators, *The Saga Library*, I (London, 1891), Preface, v.

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I enclose with much pleasure a Cheque for £10. Your account of the agreement between us is quite correct. Only you know we are thinking of breaking up the vol: of Three Northern Love Stories, as to get the stories into more suitable gatherings; this will however not involve any loss in money, as no doubt Q will keep to the spirit of his agreement.

Morris later in the letter suggested translations either of *Heiðarvígja saga* or of *Gísla saga* and *Víga-Glúms saga* as companions to *Gunnlaugs saga*, which was apparently to be separated from the rest of the *Love Stories*. It is possible that the two projected resulting volumes were meant to form part of *The Saga Library*, but no evidence of this has been found. The plan which Morris mentioned here was never realized; the *Love Stories* appeared again in 1901, published by Longmans, Green and Co. rather than by Q, who was B. Quaritch, of the Chiswick Press.

Subsequent letters deal with matters related to *The Saga Library* itself. In one, dated December 16, 1890, Morris mentions a published defense of the literary value of the material: "I suppose you saw Saturday's P. M. G. and also my correction of the writer's blunder. The article was meant well, but was not too learned." He refers to a review of the first volume of the *Library* in *The Pall Mall Gazette* (December 13, 1890, p. 2), which contained some less than complimentary remarks about the quality of the Icelandic sagas:

There is next to no great spiritual passion to be found in them; or, if there is, it lies beneath the surface, and only the poet of another age and nation can bring it out. No death-grips of emotion, no tragedy deeper than blood, no aims higher than victory, no struggles with fate, as in the Greek; no overwhelming sense of the domination of divine powers, as in the Hebrew.

Morris, who had commented in the early pages of the Preface to Volume I of *The Saga Library* on the literary quality of the sagas, answered restrainedly in the December 15 issue of the *Gazette* (p. 2), pointing out two of the critic's factual errors, neither related to the critical substance of the review:

Sir,—Will you allow me to correct an error in your notice of the Saga Library. Jon Arnason's folk tales were translated not by Sir G. W. Dasent, but by my friend, Mr. Eiríkur Magnússon, helped by Mr. George E. T. [sic] Powell. Moreover, I should not like it to be thought that I consider the Icelanders "ungrateful" to me (whatever that may mean.) I believe that I am estimated rather above than below my deserts by the people of that country, where nature is so rugged, and man so kind and hospitable.

In correspondence about Volume II of *The Saga Library*, Morris showed concern with content and the problems of translation. Although it was originally intended to include, as it eventually did, *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Heiðarvígja saga*, Morris expressed doubts on November 7, 1890, about the latter (which he called *Herða Saga*):

As to the addition to Eyrb: perhaps we shall find *Herða Saga* over long; so we had better wait till we have the first sheet or two of *Ey*: back from the printers. I am going through the *Herða Saga* and find it interesting but very tough perhaps because I am rusty. I think I should have read it over with you before I got to the translation.

By April 28, 1891, sheets had been corrected for *Eyrbyggja saga* and part of *Heiðarvígja saga*, and Morris commented on the translation of *trygill* as "trencher" in the second work:

I have sent the corrected sheets for revise. I have accepted all your alterations except in one or two places where it was a matter of style only. By the way 'trencher' in English is a mere flat square board on which the carver put slices of flesh meat; and which would not hold any liquid. I have seen the blue-coat-school boys eating off them when I was a little boy & noticed their devices (with much interest) for banking up a little gravy with a potato toft. It seems *our* forefathers when they had flesh meat, usually boiled it with dough-puddings. They ate the puddings first to dull the edge of appetite; then supped the brewis (from cups) & then came to the 'piece de resistance.' This was the custom in country places almost in my young days.

The virtual impossibility of creating English translations of the complex court verses, called *visur*, led Morris to complain on several occasions. In the same letter, he added, "I have nothing left of the Heath-Slayings but the 'Wolfs-tail' in the shape of the last few pp which include 3 *visur*, the terror of which has hitherto stayed me but which I will tackle at once." His November 7 letter of the previous year suggests the trepidation with which he had viewed the task for Volume II: "As to the *visur*, I will do my best; only I must say I look forward to the job with little short of anguish; for truly sometimes they are really *un-translatable*." On April 29, 189[1], Morris' frustration over the problem reached its peak: "I agree that we ought to make the *visur* literal if we *can* but sometimes I *can't* to keep it verse at the same time. However with your help I may manage." However difficult it may have been to produce them, the resultant renderings of these *visur* seem no more remarkable than any of the others.

Occasional points of difference arose between the two men. Continuing in the April 29 letter on the subject of translations, perhaps on the prose material of *Heiðarvígja saga*, Morris said, "As to the other work I don't think I have ever altered the *sense*, at any rate I didn't intend to. And you see I am responsible for the style, which certainly ought to be homogeneous. Perhaps a word or two from me would explain this to you." Morris also differed with his collaborator on the matter of commentary by Magnússon, presumably in the Preface, critical of certain characters and episodes in *Eyrbyggja saga*. Responding to his friend's observations, Morris wrote on July 13, 1891,

I think you will if not agree with me, at least see the force of my objection to slating the Sagaman for Thorgunna, who I really think excellent. The Gudleif episode, if not historical literally, (as of course it is not) is in a sense historical, as you yourself remark, in showing the impression the Vineland voyages had made on men. Also it is one of the finest things in the Saga, and I don't think we ought to let people suppose we grumble at it.

The comments which remain in the Preface on these subjects seem fairly innocuous, and presumably Magnússon took Morris' advice.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>*Saga Library*, II (London, 1892), Preface, xxviii-xxxii.

In Volume III of *The Saga Library* came the first portion of *Heimskringla*, a work which had at least been started many years before. Writing to Magnússon on May 23, 1873, Morris said, "I am wanting badly to get on with some of the translations, Heimskringla for example, and shall ask your help therein." Although a letter to Mrs. Coronio dated February 11, 1873 (*Letters*, p. 53), expresses confidence that "one of these days my Heimskringla will be an important work," the former letter probably contains the earliest reference to the project.

In his Preface to Volume VI of *The Saga Library*, the commentary to the three volumes of *Heimskringla*, Magnússon described their method of approach to the translations:

The work on it was divided between Morris and myself in the following manner: Having read together the sagas contained in the first three volumes, Morris wrote out the translation and I collated his MS. with the original. For the last two volumes of the Heimskringla the process was reversed, I doing the translation, he the collation; the style, too, he emended throughout in accordance with his own ideal.<sup>7</sup>

That Morris found the latter method cumbersome can be seen in a letter from 1891 or 1892 where he discusses problems with the second volume of *Heimskringla*:

I have looked at the *visur* in the portion of the Olaf the Holy which you sent me, and I have tried a piece; but I find I cannot get on at all without the *ordo verborum* & dead literal trans: like you have given. You see your verses are in a different style and even metre to mine, and yet having read them the metre and style won't get out of one's head, and prevent me from writing the things in *my* way.

In one of the last letters concerned with *The Saga Library*, written August 1, 1895, Morris again discussed a *visa*, this time apparently because Magnússon had questioned some of the words used by the poet:

I will look at the *visa* in question. The only occurrence of *Pulwyke* that I know is at Windermere; a brother of mine lived in a little bight of the lake which had that name. I have some doubts about *tare* but it is used in modern poetry: the analogy is with such forms as brake & spake & drave which are right. Deme I only know as the adjective in question: but there *may* be a substantive with the meaning you mention.<sup>8</sup>

One sees Magnússon's influence on Morris at its strongest in the letters dealing with translation.

## II

The establishment of the Mansion House Relief Committee to raise a fund for helping the Icelanders through a difficult period brought on by cold

<sup>7</sup>*Saga Library*, VI (London, 1905), Preface, vii.

<sup>8</sup>"Pulwyke" for *Pilavik* and "to-tare" are found in *visa* 226, in the third volume of *Heimskringla*, *The Saga Library*, V (London, 1895), 376.

summers was announced in *The Times* of London on August 17, 1882 (p. 5). This was the committee proposed by Morris in a letter to Magnússon's wife dated July 27 [1882]:

I am grieved indeed to hear that things are no better in Iceland: I shall be back in town next Tuesday morning & shall be happy to do anything to help. The first step will be to appoint a Committee and with an Hon: Sec: & Treasurer to whom subscriptions can be sent; I should think you would have no difficulty in getting together a very influential Committee: as a matter of course I will be on the Committee & will if you can't get a better name (as you could do) take the office of Treasurer: Also if you please I will write to any of the papers: in fact I will draft a letter at once but will not send it till I hear from you what has been done: you may put my name for £10 pro: temp: meanwhile.

Then if there is time I don't doubt that the Lord Mayor would take the chair at a meeting at the Mansion House if you have got a good Committee together. Then as much as possible should be done by getting the papers to insert little paragraphs (ready cut & dried) they cost nothing and do much more than advertisements.

Mind, get as large a committee together as possible for the names sake; 2 or 3 will do the *work* if you have a good Hon: Sec:

Please let me know what names you have got & tell me anything you want me to do: I think you should write to everybody you know and ask for help at once.

On September 2, 1882, Morris wrote a letter which is extant now only in a fragment but which dealt with the preliminaries of sending provisions to Iceland. It had been decided that Magnússon should go to Iceland to see to the distribution of supplies, and would thus need to meet with the Committee and with merchants who would handle the shipping. Morris' diplomatic guidance at this point is typical of his handling of the whole affair:

I thought it better to delay answering your letter till I could see Ellis, who except Storer is the only other active member of the Committee in London, so that there might be no hitch at the meeting: he agreed with me that it is most desirable that you should go: so I think you ought if possible to be present at the meeting ~~of~~ on Monday week so that you may produce some sort of scheme & be prepared to answer all questions.

You mustn't forget that Mr. Storer has already agreed to take charge of the goods out to *Borðeyri* so we must take care not in any way to wound his susceptibilities; and he seems to be withal a very good fellow.

You must forgive me for offering you a bit of advice, since I am now an old hand at organizing committees & the like, and know how easy it is to *chill* the public if any hitch occurs: it is absolutely necessary that whatever your feelings may be about the Merchants and the Danish Government, you should keep them to yourself; any smallest quarrel with either of these entities would ruin the present fund with the English Public, & would put a stopper on getting up anything similar in years to come. Try to wheedle the merchants into acting with you if possible.

Of course I agree with all the practical remarks in your letter; but don't quite understand your plan for gathering the horses: we must also on that point be very careful to do nothing that even looks like masterfulness, as you will be the agent of a body which is both foreign & private.

It would be a very good thing (indeed necessary) to get letters from important & if possible official persons in Iceland, such as Habstein, Thorberg, the Bishop: of course over here the parsons will be looked on as officials & of good authority.

I may as Treasurer ask you to be careful to ~~to~~ have your accounts drawn out very clearly.

I enclose a copy of the letter from the Iceland Trading Company which I think you have heard of.

Over the next few weeks, letters were concerned with problems of the project met when the merchants R. and W. Slimon claimed, in the *Scotsman*

(September 16, 1882, p. 9), that the reports of a famine in northern Iceland were grossly exaggerated. On September 29, *The Times* (p. 8), carried a similar message from Charles E. Paterson, brother to the British Consul for Iceland, Spence Paterson. According to a notice in *The Times* of the same date (p. 8), Magnússon had left for Iceland the day before on the *Lily* with £ 3000 worth of provisions intended for the affected areas. A subsequent notice in *The Times* (October 3, p. 6), announced that the Mansion House Relief Committee had held a meeting on October 2, deciding official information supported the existence of a famine and that they would await Magnússon's report of conditions on his return.

Morris, feeling awkward over having recruited the interest of men such as F. S. Ellis, wrote to him on September 29, "I repeat I am so vexed that you should have been let in for such worries—I am reminded of Swinburne's view of providence when he said that he never saw an old gentleman give sixpence to a beggar, but he was straightway run over by a bus" (*Letters*, p. 161).

With the event itself at a great distance and in an isolated land, anyone might have opinions on the state of things in Iceland, and *The Times* and the *Scotsman* carried several letters with divergent views during this period.<sup>9</sup> Guðbrandur Vigfússon, who, like Magnússon, had spent years in England and established himself there as an academic figure, was not on particularly good terms with his fellow countryman, since they had had some differences over scholarly matters. Vigfússon chose this moment to publish in *The Times* (October 13, p. 4) a lengthy discussion of the problem, ironically dubious of there being any famine in Iceland, suspicious of the motives of the perpetrators of such a rumor, and anxious lest the Icelander should lose his pride: "They are teaching my countrymen to beg and play the pauper and lose all sense of shame." Aside from his displeasure with "workhouse morality," Vigfússon saw another cause for apprehension: "Again, if it turns out, as I think, that there is no famine, men's hearts will be steeled against us, and some day, if (which God forbid) some calamity should befall us, we shall then cry out in vain." Sigríður Einarsdóttir seems to have favored a public rebuttal

of Vigfússon's attack, but Morris, in a letter written November 2, 1882, urged moderation and the wisdom of waiting for Magnússon's return, upon which the Mansion House Relief Committee could make a formal statement:

Having read your enclosure carefully, & thought over the matter, I can't help coming to the conclusion, in spite of my indignation with Vigfússon, that it would be better not to publish it: You see the public cannot be got to go into the wrong or right of what seems to them to partake of the nature of a personal quarrel, they only stand by & grin sardonically. I think, I should try to publish nothing till the Committee put forth their official account on Eiríkur's return.

Also to say the truth I don't think there is the least chance of the Times publishing it; especially now with parliament sitting.

Please take this as it is meant in friendly wise & excuse my differing from you.

After he returned from Iceland, Magnússon reported to the committee on December 11, and its members were reassured, according to a notice in *The Times*. (December 12, p. 9). In a letter of December 9, 188[2], misdated 1883, Morris sent word that he would be unable to attend this the most crucial of the Mansion House Relief Committee meetings:

I find to my dismay that the meeting on Monday is called for 12 o'clock: I cannot possibly be there, as I am going to Bournemouth today. I hope to see you in the evening: meantime if there is anything I can do of course I shall be glad to help.

Please excuse my regret to the meeting that I cannot be there.

On December 27, *The Times* (p. 6) printed an affidavit signed by over sixty men of importance in Iceland confirming the country's distress and admonishing Vigfússon for his disloyalty. Although Vigfússon replied on January 3 in *The Times* (p. 4), the public had by now tired of the controversy, as well as of the committee, and papers in Britain ceased to pay attention to the matter. However, letters from parties interested in the actual severity of the famine, and the handling of the relief funds, continued to appear in Icelandic newspapers through 1883 and into 1884, and one finds stray pieces of published correspondence on the disaster as late as 1908-1913.<sup>10</sup>

While it is difficult to fathom the motives of those who attempted to undermine the reputation of the Mansion House Relief Committee and its members, Eiríkur Magnússon, in a letter published in the *Scotsman* on September 20 (p. 8), in reply to the attack of the Slimon brothers, may have come close to the truth in their case: "Finally I beg to assure Messers Slimon that the relief is not intended to interfere with their trade, but to alleviate misery, and thereby indirectly to ensure the continuance of their trading transactions in the immediate future." More obscure, though, are the motivations of such men as Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Dr. Jón Hjaltalín, Surgeon General of Iceland and director of a newly founded medical school in the area

<sup>9</sup>A note in the *Scotsman* (September 21, p. 2), from "The Pacha" on a conversation he had overheard while aboard the *Camoens*, recently come from Iceland, is suggestive of the authoritative nature of the views of some participants in the controversy. Also of interest are the letter of G. W. Lock in the *Scotsman*, September 23 (p. 8), and Magnússon's hurried reply in the September 30 issue (p. 9). Lock's response to this appeared on October 4 (p. 5), and was answered by Magnússon (p. 3) in the October 5 edition. *The Times* (October 3, p. 10), carried a letter by T. G. Paterson, defending his brother, the British Consul. A letter by a recent visitor to Iceland, October 7 (p. 10), indicates the Consul's views were at one time more sympathetic to the plight of the Icelanders than they had become by the time of his brother's published letters.

<sup>10</sup>For a list of some of the letters and articles of Eiríkur Magnússon on the subject, see Einarsson, *Saga*, p. 335.

affected. That the hardship was in fact real and devastating there can be no doubt. The great influx of Icelanders into the United States and Canada in these years was occasioned largely by the difficult times upon which the home country had fallen.

## III

Though Morris' interest in the welfare of the Icelandic people found few direct outlets after the subsidence of the famine problems, sources indicate that it remained strong and came to be influenced by his later political philosophy. Matthías Jochumsson, the Icelandic poet and translator of Shakespeare, visited Morris on several occasions in England and gave accounts of some of their conversations in a biographical article published long after the Englishman's death. During a visit in 1885, Morris spoke of Iceland with the same enthusiasm he had always shown,

and soon steered the conversation towards those views in which he was then most interested. I will permit myself to set down from memory the main idea of what he said: "I don't expect you will preach our socialist doctrines in Iceland," he said, "but there is one thing related to them which I would like you to try to make understandable to your country, since it would most likely work." I asked what that might be. "It is this teaching," he said, "that every province or parish should acquire its real estate, taking a loan for it at first, and then move slowly until the parish has become the landlord and is self-supporting, since poor parishes are and become anarchic and resourceless if times turn bad. With laws the principle should be stated, preferably thus, that when a landowning man dies, the parish gets the purchase rights, if it wishes, to each farm that becomes vacant, provided it hasn't been legally designated for inheritance or division. The principle is this," said Morris, "that all farms and profitable enterprises in the communities and fishing towns should eventually become the public property of each parish, since, according to the laws of God, the land is the property of none or of all. All work, trades and movable possessions are, on the other hand, the indisputable property of individuals."<sup>11</sup>

Morris' thoughts in this conversation find echoes in "The Early Literature of the North-Iceland," a lecture given by him in 1887:

I may finish by saying a word on the present condition of Iceland: they have suffered very much there from bad seasons of late: but I cannot help thinking that in spite of that they could live very comfortably if they were to extinguish individualism there: the simplest form of co-operative commonwealth would suit their needs, and ought not to be hard to establish.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Matthías Jochumsson, "Vilhjálmur Morris 1834-1896," *Éimreiðin*, 29 (1923), pp. 261-289: That the idea for this article had formed much earlier is seen in a letter from Eiríkur Magnússon to Matthías, May 24, 1907, in Lbs. 2181, 4to: "It makes me glad that there are prospects of a biography of Morris from your hand. It will doubtless be appreciated, since the folk who read *Skirnir* are ignorant of how warm a heart Morris bore towards Iceland and its old literature. I have written as little as possible about Morris so far; the time doesn't seem to me to have come yet." Although such a biography never appeared in *Skirnir*, as seems to have been originally planned, the article in *Éimreiðin*, sixteen years after Magnússon's letter was written, must be an outgrowth of the original intention.

<sup>12</sup>William Morris, *The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris*, ed. Eugene D. LeMire (Detroit, 1969), pp. 179-198; see p. 198.

Such observations are probably related to Morris' general interest in the socio-economic history of northern Europe suggested by the title of his non-extant lecture, in 1886, on "The Birth of Feudalism in Scandinavia," as well as by his concern, in a letter from 1891 or 1892, over an accurate translation of *oðal*:<sup>13</sup>

By the way, I do not think we ought to translate *oðal* freehold: as I understand the matter; a freehold tenure belongs to the purely Feudal period and implies no individual free ownership under the King who was the owner of all as God's viceregent: all other holders had to pay service directly or indirectly to the King. Was not this the very tenure which that Fairhair had forced upon Norway. Of course I don't mean to say it runs on all fours with the later feudal holding; nor do I think the matter of tenures in the North (and in England also before the Conquest) is free from obscurity.

Of course in modern times the tenure has had no relation to the feudal freehold: copyhold is the only vestige of feudality in our tenure & it is fast disappearing. The *Oðal* land I suppose on the other hand to have been the tribal land which in the disintegration of tribal life which took place before Fair-hair's time had passed to the great lords and was held by them arbitrarily, much as the Highland Chieftains have held the clan-lands in Scotland since Dutch Bill's time: I think we had better use the word 'free' in any case which commits us to nothing.

## IV

A more personal sympathy with the less fortunate of Iceland is seen in Morris' lasting friendship with Jón í Hlíðarendakoti, whom he first met on the 1871 visit. Morris then described him as a "working man, a saddler only who lodged there [at Hlíðarendakot]: Magnússon introduced him to us as a connection of his wife's, though he afterwards told me he was a bastard, and a man deep in old lore: he was very shy but seemed a good fellow: he talked a little English" (VIII, 48). Jón was a self-taught man, and Morris must have admired his literary interests, noting that "There are plenty of books in [Jón's] case, Icelandic, German, Danish and English: the latter language he is very anxious to master. . . he puts two volumes of Chambers' Miscellany into his pocket, if by chance he may get a lesson out of Magnússon this day" (VIII, 50).

Magnússon chose Jón as Morris' guide for the 1873 journey when he himself was unable to go along, and poet and saddler became fast friends that summer. There was, in fact, correspondence between the two until Morris' death. Jón himself, despite his humble origins, was clearly not the sort of figure typically associated with the oppressed masses. Magnússon's wife, in her lecture on Morris, commented on her kinsman's appearance, which suggested strongly his proud Viking ancestry. Jón "stood about six feet three or four—large of limb—shoulders broad, as if made to move mountains—thick-set

<sup>13</sup>LeMire, p. 258.

neck surmounted by a colossal head, covered with a quantity of luxuriant fair hair—large fine face, and blue eyes." Sigríður described at length his intellectual aspirations:

The dream of his life had been to go to the Latin School at Reykjavík, but too poor to attempt that, he resolved to go to Reykjavík and learn some trade, which he did, apprenticing himself to a saddlemaker. He knew, being in Reykjavík, books were within reach, and there he would have the opportunity of coming in contact with the college students and other educated men, from whom he could always pick up something. His leisure hours were entirely spent in studying English, French and German. His historical knowledge was perfectly marvelous, and many of the college students heartily wished that their memory might serve them as well as Jóns during their examinations, for he never forgot a date or a deed in history worth remembering. Returning to the countryside, he had barely enough money to live and have a few books.

A letter from C. J. Faulkner to Eiríkur Magnússon, dated April 4, 1872, mentions sending a copy of Wood's *Natural History* to Jón in that year, and Sigríður Einarsdóttir said, in her lecture, that Morris "used to take great delight in selecting books, and other presents, that he thought would give Jón pleasure."<sup>14</sup> Several letters from Morris to Magnússon, one dated as late as January 12, 1896, refer to letters from Jón which the poet wanted translated.

From some points of view Jón Jónsson í Hlíðarendakoti is a centralizing symbol of Morris' interests in Iceland—the laborer struggling to better himself, and the Viking reincarnate. In 1876, Matthías Jochumsson once had dinner with the Morrises; afterwards, his host reminisced about his Iceland journeys, and the subject of his famous guide came up:

"When we came to Búðará undir Sandi," said Morris, "it was very hot, and men and horses were dead tired. And then I say þórr drink the sea when Jón the strong lay down flat by the river and gulped water until we thought it unbelievable."<sup>15</sup>

In this brief but vividly and affectionately recalled scene, the associations of modern Iceland with the medieval world of the sagas is made explicit, and it was surely in such associations that much of Iceland's attraction lay for Morris.

<sup>14</sup>See note 3, above.

<sup>15</sup>Jochumsson, p. 285: "þórr drink the sea" is a reference to a trick played on þórr by Útgarrð a-Loki, who challenged the god to empty a drinking horn the other end of which, unknown to þórr, was in the sea. See Snorri Sturluson, *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Akureyri, 1954), pp. 69-76.

## Illustration and Morris' "Ideal Book"

ALLAN R. LIFE



WILLIAM MORRIS' precise conception of book illustration is surprisingly difficult to determine. Early in his career, his interest in illustration was so typically Pre-Raphaelite that he intended specific passages of *The Earthly Paradise* to be printed with wood-engravings after Edward Burne-Jones, and he engraved most of the completed blocks for this abortive edition himself.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, Morris failed to articulate his view of illustration during the 1860's, when he probably had the fullest appreciation of the interpretative and creative aspects of this art form. By 1892, when he outlined his criteria for ideal illustration in a lecture to the Society of Arts on "The Woodcuts of Gothic Books," he had committed himself, in theory and in practice, to the principles he expounded a year later in "The Ideal Book."

Significantly, Morris' paper on "The Ideal Book," like his "Note . . . on His Aims in Founding the Kelmscott Press" (1895), largely ignores illustration. "However bare it may be of decoration," Morris declares, a book "can still be a work of art, if the type be good and attention be paid to its general arrangement" (*AWS*, I, 310). As he proceeds, it becomes clear that "decoration" in the broadest sense is not only unnecessary to an artistic book, but often threatens its very existence. In one characteristic pronouncement, Morris declares that "any book in which the page is properly put on the paper, is tolerable to look at, however poor the type may be—always so long as there is no 'ornament' which may spoil the whole thing" (*AWS*, I, 315). Only true ornament can enhance the ideal book, and to be ornamental a design

must form as much a part of the page as the type itself . . . and . . . it must submit to certain limitations, and become architectural; a mere black and white picture, however interesting it may be as a picture, may be far from an ornament in a book; while, on the other hand, a book ornamented with pictures that are suitable for that, and that only, may become a work of art second to none, save a fine building duly decorated, or a fine piece of literature. (*AWS*, I, 317-318)

<sup>1</sup>Joseph R. Dunlap gives a full account of this project in *The Book that Never Was* (New York, 1971). See also A. R. Dufty, "Introduction," *William Morris: "The Story of Cupid and Psyche," with illustrations designed by Edward Burne-Jones, mostly engraved on the wood by William Morris* (London, 1974).