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An issue Devoted to the Work of William Morris

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

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In 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. 1 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

1 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. Finnbogi 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.

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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, Magnússson 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 ormtungu) published in the Fortnightly Review. Several other works came out soon after, Völungen saga in 1870 and The Story of Frithiof the Bold (Fríðþófs saga franka) 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 Fríðþófs saga, and the newly translated Story of Víðlund the Fair (Víðlandar 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 Magnússson. With them were C. J. Faulkner, a partner in the Morris firm, and W. H. Evans. Magnússson introduced the party to his country and its people, and the initial impression on Morris is evident from various sources. Magnússson’s wife, Sigurður 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.” 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. He returned for the second visit in 1873, this time with Faulkner as a companion and hiring a relative of Magnússson’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.

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 Magnússson describing conditions in Iceland that summer. The committee succeeded in collecting £1857, with which Magnússson bought fodder and other necessities, delivering all himself to his homeland. 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. Magnússson 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 Magnússson 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.” In the first volume were “The Story of Howard the Halit” (Hávarðar saga), “The Story of the Banded Men” (Bandaðanna saga) and “The Story of Hen Thorri” (Hans-Ásor saga). The second volume contained “The Story of The Ere-dwellers” (Eyrbyggja saga) and “The Story of the Heath-Slayings” (Heiðargöng 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 Magnússson added a fourth, made up of commentary and notes, in 1905, nearly ten years after Morris’ death.

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 Magnússson on November 7, 1890:

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3. In a postscript to one of the two letters to Eiríkur Magnússson, 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. Sometimes after November 28, 1872, Magnússon wrote to Sir Sigurður Gunnarsson, at Keselton, 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. 2189, 4to).


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 roll 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 Heiðarvíga saga or of Glaða saga and Viga-Glums 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 Arngson’s folk tales were translated not by Sir G. W. Dasent, but by my friend, Mr. Kirkur Magnusson, 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 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 Heiðarvíga saga, Morris expressed doubts on November 7, 1890, about the latter (which he called Herða Saga):

As to the addition to Eyr: 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 Heiðarvíga saga, and Morris commented on the translation of tryggill 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 more 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 top. 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 broils (from cups) & thae came to the ‘place 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 vísur, 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, 1891 [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 Heiðarvíga 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 Magnusson, 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 Thorguns, who I really think excellent. The Gudlif 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 Magnusson took Morris’ advice.6

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.

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 visor 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 & have which are right. Dares I only know as the adjective in question: but there may be a substantive with the meaning you mention. 8

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

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

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8"Pulwyke" for *Pulvik* and "to-tare" are found in *Pulwyke*, *The Saga Library*, V (London, 1895), 376.
of Vigfúsó’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 Vigfúsó, 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 sarcastically. I think, I should try to publish nothing till the Committee put forth their official account of 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, 1883[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: mean time 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 Vigfúsó for his disloyalty. Although Vigfúsó 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.

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 Silfimn brothers, may have come close to the truth in their case: “Finally I beg to assure Messers Silfinn 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 Vigfúsó and Dr. Jón Hjaltaín, Surgeon General of Iceland and director of a newly founded medical school in the area.

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9 A note in the Scotsman (September 21, p. 2), from “The Pacha” on a conversation he had overheard while abroad the Camoez, 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 mountaineer to Iceland, October 7 (p. 10), indicates the Consul’s views were at one time more sympathetic to the plight of the Icelanders than had become the time of his brother’s published letters.

10 For a list of some of the letters and articles of Eiríkur Magnússon on the subject, see Einarsdóttir, Sage, 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. Matthias Jochumsen, 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 anarchical and irresponsible 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 indenitable property of individuals." 11

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. 12

11 Matthias Jochumsen, "Víðjúðmur Morris 1834-1896," Einnreiðin, 29 (1923), pp. 261-289: That the idea for this article had formed much earlier is seen in a letter from Fíljúfur Magnússon to Matthias, 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 Skíðir 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 Skíðir, as seems to have been originally planned, the article in Einnreiðin, sixteen years after Magnússon's letter was written, must be an outgrowth of the original intention.


Such observations are probably related to Morris' general interest in the socio-economic history of northern Europe suggested by the title of his non-extend 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 ósland: 13

By the way, I do not think we ought to translate ósland 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 viceroy: all other holders had to pay service directly or indirectly to the King. Was not this the very tenure which Fair-hair 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 Ósland 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 chiefs 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 Hlíðarendakot, whom he first met on the 1871 visit. Morris then described him as a "working man, a sadler 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" (VII, 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" (VII, 50).

Magnússon chose Jón as Morris' guide for the 1873 journey when he himself was unable to go along, and poet and sadler 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 his kinship'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..." 13

LeMire, p. 258.
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. 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)

14See note 3, above.
15Jochumsson, p. 235: "...drink the sea" is a reference to a trick played on Ægir by Óðinn and Loki, who challenged the god to empty a drinking horn the other end of which, unknown to Ægir, was in the sea. See Snorri Sturluson, Edda Snorra Sturlusona, ed. Gústur Gíslason (Aksuzyri, 1954), pp. 69-76.