CHAPTER II

HISTORY OF MORRIS'S OLD NORSE STUDY
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William Morris first became acquainted with Old Norse literature while he was a student at Oxford, in 1853. It was here that he met Edward Burne-Jones, who, in the course of time, lent him a set of Benjamin Thorpe's *Northern Mythology*. The influence of that work upon Morris cannot be measured by the mere fact that it contained materials which the poet subsequently used as sources for two or three tales of *The Earthly Paradise*. The first volume of *Northern Mythology* introduced Morris to the mythic stories concerning the Gods of the Norsemen, and to the tale of the Yolsungs; moreover, it interested him so much in the literature of the Scandinavian North that he later devoted a great share of his career to the reproduction in English of stories from that literature. Thorpe's paraphrases of the Old Norse mythology stuck in his mind; and when the young poet, after leaving Oxford, broke away from the Pre-Raphaelitism which is so apparent in his first

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volume of poems, it was to "Volsungary" that he turned.

The influence of Rossetti upon Morris has been often
discussed, and the conclusion generally reached is that it
was tremendous. But when one speaks of the influence of
Rossetti's poetry on Morris's poetry, it is often too easy
to associate "Rossettiism" with medievalism. "The Love of
the Middle Ages was born in him," Mackail says of Morris.
The medieval, in art and literature, had always fascinated
him. Before he came down to Oxford, he had already studied
Gothic architecture, and had read Scott's medieval novels;
and that the first and foremost characteristic of the great
majority of Morris's poems is their adherence to the medi-
val in story, form, or spirit, scarcely any student of the
poet's works will deny. But that all this medievalism, or
even a large part of it was owing to Rossetti's influence,
we cannot readily admit. It is not within the province of
this discussion to evaluate the influence of either Burne-
Jones or Rossetti upon William Morris; it should be mentioned,

2 The Defense of Guenevere and Other Poems, in Collected

3 A term of good-humoured derogation which Swinburne and
Burne-Jones applied to Morris's 'Scandinavianizing.'

4 See particularly in this connection, Heinrich Fundt,
Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Einfluss auf die Gedichte des Jungen

5 Mackail, op. cit., I, 10.
however, that although Burne-Jones was once sufficiently interested in Old Norse to possess Thorpe's *Northern Mythology*, his "feeling for the north ... sprang from no real root," and he soon gave up his Norse readings. It should be further added that Rossetti may have been annoyed by the fact that the young man to whom he was trying to teach the Pre-Raphaelite technique in both painting and poetry should cast aside the romantic aspects of his medieval interests and take up the heroic, - should barter the culture of Italy for that of Iceland. The greatness of the sagas became apparent to Morris in the late 1850's and 1860's. His liking for them was made of sterner stuff than was his temporary fancy for mysticism, stout knights and fair damsels. He saw another kind of romance lurking in the fells where Grettir slew Thorir Redbeard, on the banks of the Laxa where the ghost of Gudrun stalked nightly, in the moors where Bodli killed Kiartan and wept. Burne-Jones tried to understand it; Rossetti did not even make the attempt. Sir Edward confined his criticisms of Morris's growing Norse interest to humorous comments; he spoke of his friend's "passion for ice and snow and raw fish"; but once the literature of Iceland was a new-opened book to Morris, neither Burne-Jones nor

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Rossetti could "drag him to Italy again," literally or figuratively.

There is not much that may be said about Morris's reading in the Old Norse from the time of his Oxford days until he began his serious Icelandic study. But his slight acquaintance with Scandinavian mythology and folklore from Thorpe's book filled Morris with the desire to know more of it. After he left Oxford, and sometime before 1868, when he met Eiríkr Magnússon, who taught him the Old Icelandic language, he acquired a broader and more inclusive knowledge of Old Norse literature than he could have obtained from Thorpe alone.

The one person best fitted to discuss Morris's knowledge of Old Norse before he learned the language, was Eiríkr Magnússon himself, and fortunately he has done so. When Miss May Morris was preparing the definitive edition of her father's works, she asked Magnússon to write out his impressions of their work together. In the following statement, prepared for Miss Morris, he makes clear what he felt to be the scope of Morris's reading in translations from Old Norse before 1868:

With the Sagas of Burnt Njal and Gisli the Outlaw he was familiar from Sir George Dasent's translations.... [His] mind was already preoccupied with the grand types of the heroes (Sigurd and Volsung) and heroines (Brynhild, Gudrun) of the Elder Eddas. This work he was already familiar with from

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7 Ibid., p. 45.

8 Sir George Webbe Dasent, The Story of Burnt Njal, Edinburgh, 1861.

9 Sir George Webbe Dasent, The Story of Gisli the Outlaw, Edinburgh, 1866.
Benjamin Thorpe's translation.... He knew Cottle's... Mythic Songs of the Edda.¹⁰ He was quite familiar with Mallet's 'Northern Antiquities'¹¹ and Walter Scott's 'Abstract' of the Eyrbyggia-saga¹².... [and] from Bishop Finn Jonsson's 'Historia ecclesiastica Islandiae' he had mastered the main features of the general history of the country.¹³

In addition to these works, we know from the Scandinavian historical allusions which Morris used in poems written prior to his learning to read Old Norse, that he knew at least parts ¹⁴ of Laing's Heimskringla.

This, then, constituted the store of Old Norse learning which Morris acquired by himself. He had, in English translations, explored the mythology, the folk-lore, the history of the Scandinavian peoples. Such preparation was bound to make the literature of Old Iceland interesting, comprehensible, pleasant. But any further advance into the writings of the Northerners had to be made through the original. It was, of course, Eiríkr Magnusson who gave him the many

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¹⁰ A[mos] S. Cottle, [The Mythic Songs of the Edda] Icelandic Poetry, or the Edda of Snæmund Translated into English Verse, Bristol, 1797. This was the first English translation of the Edder Edda.

¹¹ P. H. Mallet, L'introduction a l'histoire de Danemarc par le chev. Mallet, Copenhagen, 1755-56. The introduction and various parts were translated by Thomas Percy as Northern Antiquities, London, 1770.

¹² Scott's abstract is found in Weber and Jamieson, Illustrations of Northern Antiquities, Edinburgh, 1814.

¹³ Quoted from Magnússon by May Morris, Collected Works, VII, Introduction, pp. xv-xvi.

¹⁴ Samuel Laing, The Heimskringla, or Chronicle of the Kings of Norway, London, 1844. See below, Part II, Chapter II, for such allusions.
profitable lessons that he needed in order to read the language.

II

The literature of Old Iceland found its most important fostering in nineteenth century England in the works of five men: Sir George Webbe Dasent, Gudbrand Vigfusson and Frederick York Powell, Eiríkr Magnússon and William Morris. If the union of the Icelandic temperament with the British had produced a successful literary instrument in the case of Vigfusson and Powell, the collaboration of Morris and Magnússon was crowned with even greater success, and bore more fruit for English literature; for Morris, after reading and translating the sagas for some seven years, guided throughout by Magnússon, was then prepared to convert a vast quantity of the literature he had assimilated into original channels. The intrinsic value of the hours of study which Morris and Magnússon spent together was that it enabled Morris to read Old Icelandic, and to collaborate with Magnússon in published translations. But not only did this labor produce versions of Old Norse sagas which could be read by Englishmen, it also gave to Morris a rich possession,—the mastery of virtually a whole foreign literature,—the greatest single impetus and inspiration of his whole literary career. There is no need to dwell upon the fact that Morris made more use of his Old Norse than of any body of
literature to which he turned his attention: Sigurd the Volsung is sufficient evidence that his most sustained work was born of the Northern influence, while a mere counting of pages will demonstrate what share of his literary interest was dedicated to Icelandic literature.

Whether it was the robust Viking appearance and character of Morris himself that drew Magnússon to him, or whether it was Magnússon’s desire to associate himself with one of the first contemporary poets of England, one can hardly say. The attraction of Magnússon for Morris, however, is more easily discovered. The great Óuirikr (who liked to call himself the Son of Magnus the Son of Berg, retaining the Icelandic significance of his name) held, in his knowledge of the Old Norse language and literature, the key to a treasury of noble stories and grand themes. Magnússon’s private knowledge and wisdom were first causes of their collaboration but the solidifying factor was doubtless his personality, which was at all times sympathetic to Morris’s. The picture which Magnússon draws of Morris and himself at work, is a fine and an interesting one: it is the portrait of two men bound together by an affection for a great literature. Seldom using

15 About a third of the total bulk of Morris’s literary production was entirely from Norse material in the form of translation, and adaptation. In another third, the late Prose Romances, the Icelandic influence is quite apparent. The remainder is made up of poems on various subjects, essays, treatises on handicraft, art, socialism, translations from the Greek, Latin, Old English, Old French, Danish, and miscellaneous short narratives. The focal-point of his literary interest seems at once to be very evidently in the Old Norse matter.
The early translations were as follows: The Story of Grettir the Strong, The Story of the Volsungs and Niblung, The Story of Gudrun the Wormtongue, The Story of Frithiof the Bold, The Story of Viglund the Fair, The Tale of Thorstein Staffsmitten, The Tale of Rolf the Foll, The Tale of Nogni and Hedin, The Lay of Christine, The Son’s Sorrow, and various Eddie Lays. These were all published in the period 1869-1875. See Part I, Chapter I, above.
Saga background and tradition. In the latter group, he used not the story, but the spirit of the Old Icelandic literature; he reconstructed, in a series of pseudo-sagas, imaginary Germanic settlements, the customs, geography, and people of which, despite their obvious European location, are decidedly those of the sagas. Where the incest of Sigmund and Signy, the grief of Gudrun, the dilemma of Gunnar fill the pages of Sigurd the Volsung, the holmgang, the blood-brotherhood, the Viking sturdiness of character cover those, for example, of the House of the Wolfings.

But it makes little difference here exactly what Morris took from the Old Norse in one story, or what he used in another; the basic fact is still the same: Einirikr Magnusson led him through what were to him almost hitherto unexplored regions in literature. Here and there, perhaps, Morris stumbled over some stone, the tracings on which were familiar to him from his memory of Dasent or Thorpe; or perhaps Sigurd's love for Brynhild took on a new aspect when seen through the eyes, and heard from the lips, of an Islander in its original beauty.

The actual time which they spent on the early translations, all of which were published before 1875, was but two years, 1868-1870. This being the case, the reader will observe that most of the real translating must have been done by Magnusson, for in a little over two years, Morris, who could not read Old Norse when he started, ostensibly produced three thick volumes of published translations. It is not to detract from the im-
portance of Morris as a translator that these facts are brought to notice, but to show that the method of translation which Morris and Magnússon developed was designed for speed in two directions: toward rapid and prolific production, and toward acquainting Morris as quickly as possible with the literature he so earnestly longed to own. It was a system which threw 18 the burden of labor upon the teacher. The success of the method, as is evinced by the quality of the early translations 19 and adaptations, and by the accuracy and completeness of the later translations, was immediate and permanent, and may be taken as a convincing record of industry and versatility of the student, and the inspiration and ability of the teacher.

III

Eiríkr Magnússon came to England in 1862; he was a native of Iceland, but he acclimated himself quickly to his adopted country. Almost immediately he set about popularizing the literature of his fatherland among a people who were just be-

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18 The method of translation, Morris and Magnússon's study together, and the commentary upon their productions follows below.

19 To the list of early translations, page 27 note 17 above, may be added the original works which Morris wrote, in this period, basing his stories upon Norse sources. They are chiefly The Lovers of Gudrun, generally conceded to be the most important tale in The Earthly Paradise, adapted from the Laxdala Saga, and Sigurd the Volsung, reconstructed from the Völsunga Saga and the Ægir Lays dealing with the Volsungs and Nibelungs.

20 I.e., The Saga Library.
coming alive to its strength and beauty. Although he lived in England for half a century, held a position in the Library at Cambridge, lectured at Trinity, and was an appointed editor for the Rolls Series, Englishmen have not seen fit to record his services in any place of honor. His life is not included in The Dictionary of National Biography, though that of his countryman, Gudbrand Vigfusson, is there. The man who endowed one of the major nineteenth century English poets with the rich material which greatly advanced that poet's reputation, has scarcely been recognized in the biographical literature of the country to which he emigrated, and to broadening the humane letters of which he so generously contributed. One searches in vain through the lexicons of English men of letters for Eiríkr Magnússon's name. Even most Scandinavian biographical dictionaries, probably because of his long absence from the country of his birth, have not given him the recognition he deserves. But from the evidence of the work he was engaged in, from his relationship with Morris, and from an

21. Who's Who, The D.N.B., Chambers' Encyclopedia of English Literature, Lippincott's Pronouncing Biographical Dictionary, Phillipp's Dictionary of Biographical Reference, Chambers' Biographical Dictionary, as well as other less important works of like nature, all fail to list Magnússon's name. Moreover, the Reader's Guide contains no mention of any article chronicling his death in 1915, while various books on Cambridge curricula, studies, history, libraries, etc., are equally lacking in any notice of Magnússon's activities at the University. Morris's biographers also seemed to know or care astonishingly little about Magnússon. A biography, to be published on the hundredth anniversary of his birth (1933), is at present being written by Stefan Einarsson, in America.
(exceedingly small) amount of written biography, his life may be pieced together with acceptable, if not adequate, results.

Eiríkr (Eiríkur) Magnússon was born February 1, 1833, at Berufjörð, on the east coast of Iceland. As the son of Pastor Magnús Bergsson, and Vilborg Eiríksdatter, he came by his name in the true saga style, taking the "Eiríkr" from his maternal grandfather, his surname from his father. He was educated for theology at the Latin School in Reykjavík, ostensibly to follow in the footsteps of his father. Although he did not devote a lifetime to the church, he was able to use his religious training when he edited the revised Icelandic Bible in the years 1856-66, a project financed by the English Bible Society. His trip to England in 1862, in connection with this enterprise, determined the future of his career, for he spent practically all the rest of his life at Cambridge.

In 1871, while he and Morris were concluding the work on their early translations, he received an Under-Librarianship at Cambridge University; he accepted in 1893, an appointment as Recognized University Lecturer. From 1871 until 1910,

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22 The actual authorities for Magnusson's life are: An article by Kristian Kålund in C. F. Bricka's Danske Biografisk Lexicon (København, 1897), XI, 57, which apparently furnishes all later biographies with the facts concerning the Iceland's early life; 2. The International Encyclopedia, based on the above; 3. Illustreret Norsk Konversations Leksikon, Kristiania, 1912; 4. Nordisk Familjebok, Stockholm, 1912; and 5. Allibone's Dictionary of Authors (Kirk's Supplement), London, 1912.
he remained at Cambridge in an official capacity, lecturing at Trinity College on Icelandic subjects, and retaining at the same time his interest in library methods. In 1893 he was awarded a gold medal by the Paris Société des Inventeurs for conceiving and developing a plan for a library "which could be expanded indefinitely," and in 1896, Cambridge University paid tribute to his scholarship by granting him the Honorary degree of Master of the Arts.

During many of the years in which he was associated with Morris, Magnusson lived at Cambridge, where Morris visited him, upon occasion, to continue the Icelandic studies they had begun in London in 1868. Magnusson never became as famous a scholar as Vigfússon, whose name must be placed alongside those of Thórmod Torfason (Torfæus), Arni Magnusson (Magnús), Ole Worm (Wormius) and Finnur Jónsson, when the great Icelandic scholars of all time are to be considered. His literary success in England was made possible chiefly through the work upon which he and Morris collaborated, but he also published several other books in England which are of signifi-


24. It is interesting to note, in passing, that all these men (Vigfússon and Finnur Jónsson in particular) aside from being critics, editors, and emenders, were also philologists; Eiríkr Magnusson was certainly not a "practicing philologist," and although he was well acquainted with the history of the language development of the Scandinavian tongues, his writings on Icelandic literature were historical and critical rather than philological.
cance. The Icelandische Legends, which he and George E. J. Powell translated, is still the best English version of these stories to be found. His matricial translation of Lilja demonstrates clearly his command of English (eight years after he came to England), while his commission to translate and edit the Icelandische Life of Thomas Becket for the Rolls Series is evidence of the reputation he had achieved by 1875.

Magnússon's principal occupation in England seems to have been that of literary missionary. He, like Vigfússon, wanted Englishmen to know and understand the literature of his country. But where Vigfússon, in company with Frederick York Powell, formed a definite plan on which to work, and made comprehensive and concerted efforts to put all of the important Icelandische literature into English, Magnússon shifted from one branch


28 In the Prolegomena to their edition of the Sturlunga Saga (London, 1878), p. ccix, Vigfússon and Powell, in summing up what is needed to further the study of Icelandische literature in England, enumerate the volumes which should be published. Among these are "a corpus poeticae..." and a group of major, minor, religious, historical and land-settling sagas. Their later works, Corpus Poeticum Boreale, Oxford, 1883, and Origines Islandicae, Oxford, 1905, show how they followed at least a part of their own recommended procedure.
of the material to another, editing and translating (largely with Morris) such diverse pieces as religious poems, romances, major and minor sagas, legends, and Eddic poems.

Aside from his work with Morris and his professional duties at Cambridge, Magnusson found a large amount of time and interest to lavish upon the Viking Society for Northern Research, an organization devoted to the furtherance of Icelandic studies in England. He often attended the Society's meetings, contributed to discussion, and on a few occasions read papers himself. Among these are his short essay on famous swords in the sagas, which appeared in the Saga Book, and his Notes on Shipbuilding, published in the monograph series of the Viking Society.

IV

In view of his interest in the dissemination of his country's literature in England, we can easily understand that when Magnusson was invited to meet Morris, he accepted the invitation with eagerness. He was doubtless not acquainted with the fact that Morris was becoming deeply interested in Old Norse literature, but he certainly knew who the poet was. It is even probable that he, Magnusson, had heard Morris's name before he left Iceland, for the Anglo-Icelandic inter-


30 Eiríkr Magnusson, Notes on Shipbuilding, and Nautical Terms of Old in the North, a paper read before the Viking Club Society for Northern Research, London, 1906.
communication brought about by such men as Jón Thórkelin and Jón Hjáltalin, had helped to spread the fame of English men of letters in Iceland, as well as to develop the study of Icelandic literature in England. Indeed, it was only a few years after the meeting of Morris and Magnússon that the English poet was addressed as "the Skald" by an Icelandic bonder. Magnússon's official connection with the Icelandic Bible project had possibly made him known to Morris. At all events, when Morris said he would like to know "a real Iceland,er," he was referring directly to Magnússon.

In 1868, Morris had continued his study of Old Icelandic literature after his early perusal of the English versions of the Edda mentioned above. His Arthurian poems, the Jason material, and a great share of The Earthly Paradise had been written. He had finished with using stories from Middle English and antiquity for original poetry, and now, as he was completing The Earthly Paradise, he added, to a group of stories from classical and medieval literature, two based upon the new material which later overshadowed all of his other sources. The Fostering of Aslaug, and The Lovers of Gudrun are among...

34 Regarding a third tale, East of the Sun, see above, Chapter I.
the first poems Morris wrote which are founded definitely upon Norse stories. So, as Chaucer may have sounded his "exquisite ave atque vale" to French and Italian life in the Prologue to The Canterbury Tales, looking forward with expectancy to the English life from which he was to recreate his Pilgrims, Morris, intermingling nearly all of the literatures he ever drew upon, created a literary garland in The Earthly Paradise, and plucked its flowers from many fields. It was a farewell gift to the old, a teething-token to the new. The interest in Old Norse which Morris had evinced earlier was increased and expanded by his own adaptations of the English versions (from Thorpe) of the Aslaug and Swanhild stories: Magnusson crystallized the interest, made it a permanent and glorious experience for the poet. The finest poem in The Earthly Paradise, The Lovers of Gudrun, is the first actual story which Morris adapted from Old Icelandic prose (with no English medium) into his own poetry.

It was Warrington Taylor, a business partner of Morris's rather than a literary man, who was responsible for introducing Magnusson to Morris. Magnusson tells the story in the biographical sketch he wrote for Miss Morris:

35 When a Norse child cut its first teeth, family friends gave it a teething token [tannfæli] to commemorate its expectation of long life.
I spent an evening at Mr. Taylor's, who had much to
tell of your father.... He felt certain that the
Saga literature of Iceland would greatly interest
him.\(^{36}\)

This was in the autumn of 1868, and after the meeting had been
arranged, Magnusson further relates:

I met your father in the hall. With a manly shake
of the hand, he said: 'I'm glad to see you; come
upstairs....' A very animated conversation ensued
on Icelandic matters, especially literature.\(^{37}\)

There has been not a little confusion as to whether the
year in which Morris began his study of the Old Icelandic
language was 1868 or 1869. Mackail seems to suggest 1869 as
the probable date, and is clearly in error in so doing. Miss
Morris adds evidence from a daughter's memory to help fix the
date. "It was in 1868, in the fall of the year, that my father
began to turn his attention to the study of Icelandic language
and literature."\(^{39}\)

In spite of the fact that Magnusson says elsewhere that
"Our acquaintance began first in August, 1869" the date must
be established as August, 1868. Miss Morris's "fall," and
Magnusson's twice-mentioned "August," make it fairly certain

\(^{37}\) Ibid., p. xv.
\(^{38}\) "The beginning of Morris's Icelandic studies can be definite-
ly fixed in this year [1869?]. It coincides with what might be
called the final extinction of Rossetti's influence over him as

\(^{40}\) Saga Library, VI, Preface, p. xii.
that Morris and Magnússon met during the latter part of either 1868 or 1869. The date of publication of the first saga they translated together, *The Story of Gunnlaug the Wormtongue*, which appeared in *The Fortnightly Review* for January, 1869, proves beyond question that their meeting occurred the previous autumn. There is only one reason for being so particular about this date: when it is fixed at 1868, it shows clearly that the first Icelandic tale in *The Earthly Paradise* (*The Fostering of Aslaug*), was written before Morris knew the Old Norse language, and that *The Lovers of Gudrun* was written afterward. The difference in quality between these two poems is a striking example of the effect which studying Old Norse literature in the original had upon Morris as a creative artist.

On this particular August evening, then, in 1868, the friendship which lasted twenty-seven years began. Like that of Vígbússon and Powell, it was an ideal combination of one person who had the will to know with another who had the ability to teach. If it had not been for the learning, the kindness, the national pride of Vígbússon and Magnússon, English literature would be less rich by some fifteen important volumes.

Magnússon was well impressed with Morris’s attitude toward Old Icelandic. Where an ordinary person would have thrown up his hands in horror at the very mention of the Icelandic language, thinking it to be some primitive accumulation of glottal catches and gutteral *rs*, inter-mixed with a
goodly sprinkling of unpronounceable consonants, Morris calmly went about learning the language as rapidly as possible. He startled Magnusson with his ability to fathom the meanings of words which were apparently very obscure. He continued to read and study with Magnusson until he was able to get on alone. He sometimes went down to Cambridge to speak Icelandic with Magnusson and his friends, after 1871. The result was that he finally became so proficient that he was able to converse in their own tongue with the natives of Iceland during his two journeys to that country. This ultimate command of the language is perhaps not so great an accomplishment as it might seem to be, for it must be confessed that Morris’s proficiency in Icelandic was of very doubtful quality until after his Völunga Saga translation was published, in 1870; and it might be said that anyone with ordinary intelligence could at least read in Icelandic, after studying two or three years with a man of Magnusson’s knowledge. On the other hand, it must be remembered that Morris was by no means giving his whole time to this study. Travel, other writings, and the manifold activities connected with his business were also occupying his waking hours from 1868 until he published Sigurd the Volsung in 1876. The qualifying factor here again is the combination of Morris’s phenomenal insight with Magnusson’s immeasurable help. Regardless of how inaccurately his pupil translated, or how seldom they studied together, Magnusson
was convinced of Morris's sincere appreciation of his country's literature. The critical statements which Morris made about the handling of characters in *Njála* and the heroic greatness of Sigurd, led Magnusson to believe that in Morris he had discovered an Englishman with not merely a casual interest in the literature of the Norsemen. Furthermore, Morris carried to his study not the passing curiosity of a foreigner who desires to learn something for the purpose of discovering whether there is anything to it after all, but he felt and acted like an Icelander when Icelandic matters were under consideration. From certain anecdotes related by his friends, we may judge that Morris probably looked and acted more like a Viking than anyone Magnusson had ever met in England, and so, in speaking with Morris it was not hard for the Icelander to think that he was conversing with a countryman. He says:

> From the very first day that I began to work with William Morris on Icelandic literature, the thing that struck me most was this, that he entered into the spirit of it not with the pre-occupied mind of a foreigner, but with the intuition of an uncommonly wide-awake native.

To hear Morris ask to be allowed to translate alone almost immediately after they had begun their first lesson, and then to listen to him stumble through a short saga, missing the con-
struction almost entirely, mis-translating, halting here and there, pronouncing a word to see if its sound would indicate its meaning, but with all his errors actually approximating the correct sense of the passage, must have been gratifying to Magnússon, though certainly astonishing if he remembered at the same time his own first disheartening struggles with English.

Morris proved to be such an apt scholar at the beginning, that he was penalized for his avidity by not being able to translate grammatically, or with self-assurance, until three or four years later. As a conscientious teacher, and hoping in this way that Morris could best and most efficiently acquire a rapid reading knowledge of the language, Magnússon suggested that they undertake to discover the intricacies of Norse grammar. But Morris's impatience would not permit anything so slow and impeding to come between him and the translation; he wanted the story, and he wanted it without delay. "No, I can't be bothered with grammar," Magnússon quotes him as saying, "have no time for it. You be my grammar as we translate. I want the literature, I must have the story." Elsewhere Magnússon explains Morris's desire to progress with undue speed, and at the same time tells us why this system did not break down completely, how Morris was able at length, in spite of his over-eagerness for the story, to learn a suf-

43 Ibid., p. xiii.
ficiency of those things which he considered useless and re-
tarding: grammar, syntax, accidence:

With the endless calls upon his time, it was prac-
tically impossible for him to give himself leisure
for acquiring by heart the by no means easy acci-
dence of the language, and, as for the syntax, it
did not exist, written in any language accessible
to him. I therefore did my best to bring home to
him, as we went on translating, the etymology, the
grammar, and the peculiarities of the syntax.44

It can only be added that Magnusson was a good "grammar,"
for the parts of the Saga Library which Morris later trans-
lated unaided show a remarkable faithfulness to the text.
The practicability of this method is, of course, its greatest
virtue; but if the student had shown less natural ability than
Morris, and the teacher less tolerance, the system might well
have collapsed. It is not possible, for instance, to imagine
Powell and Vígrísson translating in this manner. Vígrísson,
strong-willed, somewhat impatient, spoke his wise and accurate
criticisms on Norse literature, while Powell, hanging on his
every word, put them on paper.

Perhaps Morris should not be taken too greatly to task be-
cause of his inordinate passion for the story, and his casting
sound language method to the winds, for after all he had little
interest in the Icelandic language for its own sake. It was a
medium, a tool with which he could pry from otherwise-inacces-
sible recesses the unmined riches of Norse literature. He was

44 Quoted by May Morris, Collected Works, VII, Introduction,
p. xvii.
not at this time trying to increase his vocabulary with new words from foreign sources, nor to add the reputation of a philologist to that of a poet and craftsman. He was searching for materials, story materials, and any obstacle, such as grammar, had to be jumped with as little effort and waste of time as was practicable.

It is not necessary to point out that between Magnússon and Morris it was the person who should have had the learner's humility who actually directed the procedure. He, Morris, knew what he needed, and he got it. This will explain, in part, the tremendous amount of work which Morris accomplished in his life-time. He ferreted out essentials immediately, whether in literature or in craftsmanship, and started to practice the art before another artist would have understood its elements. That he re-discovered, and worked successfully at half a dozen forgotten and difficult Medieval crafts, then taught them to others, is likewise an illustration of his persistence in tearing aside the curtains of mystery and beholding the idol without a series of unnecessary salaams.

The frequency of Morris's meetings for study with Magnússon varied with the calls of other affairs upon the poet. In general, it may be said that they worked over Old Icelandic together whenever it was convenient, sometimes daily, other times

45 The "convenience" depended more upon Morris than upon Magnússon.
thrice weekly, from autumn, 1868 till mid-year, 1871. We have no evidence that they continued their formal reading (for Morris's instruction) after 1873, when Morris made his last recorded trip to Cambridge for this purpose, but from Magnusson's statements concerning the progress of the Saga Library translations, we know that they continued to confer together, and may infer that until Morris was able to work alone, Magnusson guided him.

Besides the Grettir, Volsung, and Gunnlaug translations, and the others which were published under the joint authorship of Magnusson and Morris before 1875, the two collaborators read many other sagas during these years: The Laxdala, Eyrbyggja, and some others, the titles of which are not known. "In this way [Morris blundering through the original without knowing much grammar] the best of the sagas were run through ... before I left ... for Cambridge in 1871." Thus does Magnusson describe the accomplishment of Morris and himself during the early period of their association.

46 See Introduction to Saga Library, I, and Introduction to VI, passim.
47 The italics are mine.
48 Saga Library, VI, Preface, p. xiv.
49 Magnusson's knowledge of Old Icelandic literature, and his catholicity of taste will allow us to infer that by "best of the sagas" he perhaps meant the five greater. (Grettir, Laxdala, Eyrbyggja, Njála, Egils), of which Njála was not translated for publication, and Egils Saga was never finished, though a part of a translation in Morris's hand still exists. Grettir the Strong appeared alone; the Laxdala was adapted into The Lovers of Gudrun, and The Saga of the Fre-dwellers was published in Volume II of the Saga Library. Other Saga Library translations may have been begun at this time: Bandamanna, Hoensa Thors, Havarba Saga, Heimskringla, etc.
So, by a highly unorthodox but still a satisfactory approach, Morris learned to read Old Icelandic. He translated haltingly, depending upon the appearance and sound of the words for their meanings; and his etymology, in many cases, was a law unto itself. But he wanted to learn the stories. In his actual published translations, he tried to reproduce the spirit of saga-times by translating the Norse into archaized modern English. The deficiencies of his translations are due as much to his too meticulous care in using archaic and obsolete words to recreate the flavor of times long gone, as they are to his impatience for the narrative itself.

Since William Morris was a man of considerable means, and because he was interested in books for their own sake, as well as for the substance they contained, he accumulated a vast and important library, and in doing so he did not slight his "Old Norse wing," but collected a finely balanced group of texts and critical works in the Old Icelandic field. For the assembling of such a collection, there was no more propitious time during his life than this, while he was studying with Magnusson, whose advice was that of a friend and scholar. It is more than probable that the year 1866 saw the first real attempt on the poet's part to build up his Icelandic library, though even before he knew Magnusson he owned at least a few translations of Icelandic documents. Miss May Morris, in her Introduction to

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50 This aspect of translation is discussed in Part II, Chapter I.
the fourth volume of her father's *Collected Works*, relates
that when she and her sister were children, William Morris
provided them with a shelf of books to which they were always
allowed free access. And among a small number of books which
Morris hoped his daughters would read he placed five which
were Scandinavian in subject-matter, and three of these were
distinctly Icelandic. Beside *Assop's Fables* and *Lamb's Tales*
*From Shakespeare* were placed Hans Christian Andersen's *Fairy
Stories*, Benjamin Thorpe's *Yuletide Stories*, his *Northern Myth-
ology*, Eirikr Magnússon and G. E. J. Powell's *Icelandic Legends*,
and Annie Keary's *Heroes of Asgard*.

When Morris's library of books and manuscripts went under
the hammer at Sotheby's on Monday, December 5, 1898, one of
the most remarkable private collections ever assembled in England
was broken up. Fortunately the manuscripts, incunabulae, and
the more valuable items were later acquired for the Pierpont
Morgan Library of New York; but the rest of the books, Old
French, Latin, Old and Middle English, German, Scandinavian,

51 May Morris, *Collected Works of William Morris*, IV, Intro-
duction, p. xviii.

52 Morris scholars may be grateful to Sotheby's for issuing a
complete and descriptive catalogue of the sale: *Catalogue of a
Portion of the Valuable Manuscripts*, Early Printed Books, etc.,
of the Late William Morris, of Kelmscott House, Hammersmith,
Which Will Be Sold by Auction by Messrs. Sotheby, Wilkinson, and
Hodge, etc., on Monday, the 5th of December, 1898, and Five Follow-
ing Days, etc., London, 1898.
first editions, ancient and modern, and many other miscellaneous volumes, had been sold to Mr. Richard Bennett, who in turn sold them to Sotheby's for the auction. There were 1215 parcels in the sale, most parcels being made up of one book, or one set. The proceeds from the sale were over ten thousand pounds which will give some idea of the value of the collection. We shall have no reason to examine all the titles in this catalogue of sale, for only the Scandinavian books are pertinent to the subject in hand. But to demonstrate the wide variety and value of the library, leave must be taken to cite a few titles.

The vellum manuscript, Aretinus (Leonardus) Historia Fiorentina libri XII (277 lines) [c.1450] was listed as being "very finely written in a very neat Roman letter, by an Italian scribe...illuminated initial...the letter in gold...contemporary Venetian ornamental binding...metal bosses...four clasps." On the next page is found The Storye of the most noble and Worthy Kynge Arthure, [etc.] [translated by Sir Thomas Malory], newly imprynted...Wylliam Copland, 1557. It is described as follows: "Of this EXTREMELY RARE EDITION only one perfect copy is said to be known, which was Dent's, afterwards Perkins's, bought by Benzoni in 1873 for 120 pounds and afterwards in 1875 sold for 94 pounds." The Biblia Icelandica, had er ell Heilog Ritning

53 Sotheby's Catalogue, item 131, p. 13.
54 Ibid., item 136, p. 14.
utlogd a Normannu, 1584, "The first edition of the Bible in
Icelandic, Very Rare," was among a collection of many fine
Bibles, including The Gouden Bible, a Norman-French Bible manu-
script of 1250, and Koburger's Second Latin Bible of 1477.
Other important items were the Wynkyn de Worde edition of
Trevisa's translation of Higden's Polychronicon, 1495, several
Caxton books, a fourth folio Shakespeare, a 1587 Holinshed, the
1583 Oger le Dannois, and the 1520 Summa Theologiae of Thomas
Aquinas.

Among these valuable books and manuscripts, there is also
a fine collection of Scandinavian literature, most of it Ice-
landic. A selected list from this branch of Morris's library,
and which may well have served as his working library, will show,
in part, the diversity of this specialized collection. The fol-
lowing twenty-five books and sets cover nearly every phase of
Icelandic literature.

2. Sir George Dasent's translation of Snorri's Edda.
6. Ari's Landnamabók, in Icelandic and Latin.
9. Sir George Webbe Dasent's translation of Rask's
Icelandic Grammar.

55 Ibid., item 185, p. 20.
56 A bibliography of the Scandinavian books in this collec-
tion will be found in Appendix A.
57 Complete bibliographical references for each of the short
titles mentioned here are collected in Appendix A.
10. Sir George Webbe Dasent's translation of The Saga of Burnt Njál.
13. Peter Erasmus Müller's Sagabibliothek.
14. The Íslandinga Sögur. 58
15. The Húskap Sögur.
16. The Grágás, in Icelandic and Latin.
17. Björn of Skardsa's Annaler.
18. The Sturlunga Saga.
21. Sir George Dasent's Gisli the Outlaw.
22. C. R. Unger's Færeyingar Saga.
23. Vígrafsson and Mobius's Fornsögur.

This list is comprehensive. From Ari's Landnamabók, one of the oldest historical and genealogical documents ever written in Icelandic, through the Sturlunga Saga, which unfolds the dying heroic age of Iceland, to the Riddarasögur, typifying the decadence of Old Icelandic literature, Morris may well have obtained a thorough knowledge of Old Icelandic literature in all its historical phases. Mythology and folk-lore are covered by items 1 to 5; history and genealogy in 6, 8, 17, and 18; the greater sagas in 10 to 14; language in 9; miscellaneous minor sagas in 6, 7, 14, 21, 22, 23; poetry in 5 and 19; religious sagas in 15; laws in 16; romances in 19; and sagas chiefly of foreign influence in 24 and 25. Although there is no way of knowing at what date Morris acquired the various

58 This set contained some translation slips and notes, and was apparently used by Morris as a work-book.
books in this list, we have definite evidence of his use of over half of them. We may assume from the vast amount of Icelandic literature that he ultimately became acquainted with, that various other books helped to give him the information which he of necessity must have obtained from many sources.

The Icelandic Legends was one of the books he gave his children to read. From Snorri's Edda, the second part (Skaldskaparmál), he translated the shorter tale concerning the eternal strife in Hogni and Hedin, and appended it to his translation (in Three Northern Love Stories) of the longer Hogni and Hedin, the Old Norse text of which he found in the Flateyjarbók.

Benjamin Thorpe's Northern Mythology has already been referred to many times. In his Eddie Lays he used Bugge's Edda text for parts of his translations. Ari's Landnámabók is discussed in the Introduction to The Saga Library, Volume I, passim, as are the Grágás, the Sturlinga Saga, and the Biskupa Sögur, and with enough assurance to show what the writer of that Introduction had at least read them. Burnt Njál, the Gisli Saga, and the Heimskringla are works listed by Magnússon as among those which Morris knew in translation before he learned to read Old Norse. The Egils Saga he started to translate, and from the manuscript notes which he left in the second volume of his Íslendinga Sögur we can conclude that he not only read extensively in this set, but used it as a text for either his

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59 Morris wrote this particular part of the Introduction, (pp. v-xiii). See Magnússon's sketch of Morris's life, Saga Library, VI, Preface, p. vii.
study or his formal translation. "Annals," presumably
Bjorn's, are also mentioned once in the Introduction to the
first volume of the Saga Library, and are placed in the same
category as the Sturilunga Saga, the Biskupa Sögur, and the
Gragas, as [works] "that do not come within the scope of the
Saga Library." Of the other books in this list, no exact ev-
idence may be adduced from the translations or from the intro-
ductions to show Morris's use of them. We may be satisfied,
however, from what Magnusson says of Morris's general and de-
tailed knowledge of Old Norse, that he depended upon a group
of such standard and necessary works, as the twenty-five here
selected represent, for his deep researches into Old Icelandic
literature after Magnusson had taught him the rudiments of the
language.

The chief English translations of Icelandic documents
which were available in Morris's time are to be found in his
library, but there are at least five books written in English,
which are noticeably lacking: Mallet's Northern Antiquities,
in the translation by Percy, and Paul du Chaillu's work on

60 There is no way of knowing which sagas in this set were
worked over by Morris. The entry in Sotheby's Catalogue,
item 848, p. 84, is as follows: "Islendinga Sögur, [etc.]
Kopenhagen, 1843-47...some Ms. slips of translations and notes
by Wm. Morris in vol. II."

61 Cf. Saga Library, VI, Introduction, passim.

62 This is a work which nearly all Englishmen who were inter-
ested in Scandinavian perused. For its influence on Scott,
see Paul Lieder, Scott and Scandinavian Literature, in Smith
College Studies in Modern Languages, Vol. II, No. 1 (Northamp-
ton,[Mass.], 1920), pp. 8-57.
Viking civilization are two of them. With the former, Morris was acquainted, and with the latter he should have been, for its theories relative to the Scandinavian origin of the English people is a belief to which Morris gave some measure of credence. The other three of the five books which one would expect to discover in Morris's library were works upon which Gudbrand Vígrísson collaborated with either of two English scholars. The Morris copy of Corpus Pœticum Boreale, which Vígrísson and Powell edited, was sold at an Sotheby's auction, but it was unopened set. The Sturlunga Saga, edited by the same scholars, but with its comprehensive Prolegomena in English, and the Oxford Icelandic-English Dictionary, which Vígrísson compiled from Richard Cleasby's

63 Paul du Chaillu, The Viking Age, New York, 1889.

64 Morris considered the Völsunga material to be to "all our race" as the Troy story was to the Greeks. See Introduction to the Völsunga Saga, Collected Works, VII, and Mackail, op. cit., I, 330.

65 The Prolegomena occupies almost a third of the first volume of the Vígrísson-Powell edition of the Sturlunga Saga, Oxford, 1878. It is a compendious history and outline classification of the writings in Old Icelandic literature. It was written by Powell, "dictated across the table" by Vígrísson, and was the second (and best) of a series of such critical introductions written for Englishmen, the first being Samuel Laing's long commentary on the literature, history, religion, and customs, etc., of the Icelanders, printed in the first volume of his Chronicle of the Kings of Norway. Segregating the saga literature according to its various types, the Prolegomena offered to the English reader of the nineteenth century the most concise and accurate history of Old Norse literature that had been written.
slips (with additions of his own), were either never owned by Morris, or were not put up for sale. Since there was undoubtedly some professional jealousy between the Vigfusson-Powell camp and the Morris-Magnússon, there may be a petty reason which accounts for the lack of more Vigfusson-Powell titles in Morris's collection.

There is always the possibility that there were a few Norse books in Morris's possession which are not entered in Sotheby's Catalogue. From the formidable array of titles already at hand, however, it is obvious that Morris made distinct and systematic attempts to equip himself with a complete library of Old Icelandic literature, and its apparatus criticus; and although his incunables and manuscripts were the more

66 It is May Morris's recollection that all except the extremely valuable books and Mss. her father owned were put up for sale, and the Sotheby Catalogue title-page bears the legend, "A Portion of the Valuable Collection... of the Late Wm. Morris." See Introduction to Collected Works, XXIV, p. xx.

67 See Vigfusson and Powell's comments on the "Pseudo-Middle-English" of the Morris translations, Corpus Poeticum Boreale, I, Introduction, p. cxv, and Magnusson's answer thereto, Saga Library, VI, Preface and Introduction, passim (especially pp. viii-viii), as well as below, Part II, Chapter I, Section VI.

68 For the reason stated above, or because Sotheby's entries, in a few instances, are as follows: (Item) (376), (a). [Title]; (b). [Title]; (c). [Title]; and others—the "and others" referring either to another edition of the same work, or books covering the same field as items a,b, and c.

69 Reference here is made to the complete list of titles listed in Appendix A.
valuable part of his collection, there is a centrality about his Norse library which bespeaks the interest not of the random book-collector, but of the Icelandic scholar. It is therefore not hard to imagine that the broad range of the collection is in no small way owing to the advice and judgment of Eiríkr Magnússon.

VI

The exact distinction between the study of Old Norse, and actual progress toward published translation, in the Morris-Magnússon relationship, is difficult to make. In a sense, the study produced the translations, and the translations increased Morris’s knowledge of Old Norse matters. But the very definite translation-method which Magnússon and Morris evolved tended more toward accurate rendering than did the procedure whereby Morris simply stumbled through the saga as best he could. Since the very nature of Morris’s learning Old Norse was in a sense defective, the system by which he and Magnússon translated that group of sagas which started with Gunnlaugs Saga, [published in January, 1869], and ended with Three Northern Love Stories [published in 1875], had necessarily to be an effective one, and comparatively faultless. There is little doubt that it was. Magnússon said of it:

Our method of work was this: we went over the day’s task as carefully as the eager-mindedness of the pupil to acquire the story would allow. I afterwards wrote out at home a literal translation of it and handed it to him at our next lesson. With this before him Morris
wrote down at his leisure his own version in his own style, 70 which ultimately did service as printer's copy when the Saga was published. 71

The key-version to these various renderings was Magnússon's written translation; it was not hard for Morris to translate aloud, especially with Magnússon sitting beside him, correcting his errors, guiding his words. But still more important is this fact: it was even less difficult for Morris to compose his version with a written translation before him, a written translation made by a man to whom the literature of Iceland was native, and who had already given ample evidence of his command of English. The present writer submits that in the final analysis, the early [1868-71] translations (Gunnlaugs to Völsunga) of Morris and Magnússon, from the aspect of composition, amounted to this: Magnússon converted the Old Icelandic into literal English, Morris developed and improved the style. 74

70 The italics are mine.


72 See pp. 32-34, above.

73 There is no doubt that Morris and Magnússon worked more independently in The Saga Library work. See Saga Library, VI, Preface and Introduction, passim.

74 Observe Magnússon's use of the word "style," page 55, above. Morris seems to have been very particular that all their collaborative works were in his own style, for of the Saga Library translations, Magnússon also says, "The style, too, he emended throughout, in accordance with his own ideal." Saga Library, VI, Preface, p. vii.
The method thus devised achieved considerable success as far as production was concerned, and was also personally satisfactory to both Magnusson and Morris. On the latter score Magnusson says:

Our differences [of translation], what few there were, found always a speedy settlement in appeals to grammatical logic, to adducible illustrative passages or other linguistic evidence of mutually acknowledged weight.  

Magnusson's importance for the earliest works of collaborative composition cannot be denied. When we carefully weigh the fact that The Story of Gunnlaug was published only four months after Morris started to learn Icelandic, and that Grettir the Strong appeared four months after Gunnlaug, the value of the written translation which Magnusson made in each case must be considered paramount. And since The Völsunga Saga and the Eddic Lays followed closely upon the first two translations,

75 The Italics are mine.

76 Saga Library, VI, Preface, p. xiv. From what Magnusson says (see above, p. 41) concerning the manner in which Morris learned his Old Norse grammar and linguistics, the system of agreement mentioned (just above) could not have been in effect at a very early date in their association, for Magnusson has previously indicated that Morris's knowledge of grammar was not great.

77 Concerning these written versions, we have evidence that Morris used such documents prepared by Magnusson for the Gunnlaug Saga, for the Story of Grettir the Strong, for the Völsunga Saga, and the Eddic Lays. Magnusson's generalities regarding this method are to be taken, it would seem, to extend over the rest of the work in this period: Frithiof the Bold, Vígland the Fair, Roi the Fool, Hagni and Hedin, and Thorseinn the Staff-Smitten, and the two non-Eddic poems, The Lay of Christine, The Son's Sorrow. The first four, however, for which he states definitely that there were written versions in his hand, constitute the bulk of the early translations. See May Morris, Collected Works, VII, Introduction, p. xvi. (particularly), and passim, and Saga Library, VI, Preface, passim.
it is plausible that in these cases also Morris merely revised what Magnusson had translated.

The singularity of the whole arrangement is that Morris, who was supposed to be learning to read Old Icelandic, was at the same time producing some of the best translations of his career. It stands to good reason that Magnusson's share of the labor, and his responsibility in the translation proper, were greater than Morris's, while the genuine fruits of their efforts, regardless of who receives the credit for Grettir the Strong and the Völsunga Saga, were Morris's.

The specific contributions which this early reading with Magnusson made to English literature are not to be measured by the seven large volumes of translations to which Morris's

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78 It is fairly generally agreed that his Norse translations surpass his Aeneid and Odyssey; there is no doubt whatsoever as to their superiority over his Beowulf.

79 These two Sagas are the most formidable of all the translations in the 1868-1875 group.

80 Miss May Morris has nothing to add, at this late date, regarding the relations of her father and Magnusson. The writer is indebted to her for the following brief note, however, which is a commentary on their work by one who saw fragments of both Magnusson's "literal translations," and her father's copies thereof: "...Magnusson taught him Icelandic, and worked with him on the translations which my father put into his own language---interestingly nearer to the original than E.Ms's in the portions I have been able to see, [having some acquaintance with the Old Icelandic.]." From a letter, November 23, 1931. One cannot tell whether Miss Morris means nearer grammatically, or nearer in spirit.
name is attached as co-translator, but are to be found in
the original English works which Morris produced out of his
alliance with the Old Norse: *The Lovers of Gudrun, Sigurd*
the *Volsung*, the *Prose Romances*. When he came to write
these (and the first-named was published before *Three Northern Love Stories*), he approached them with a mind full of
the strength and invigorating power of a literature new to
him.

William Morris had a tremendous memory. A great part of
his ability in translation was due to his remembering what
Magnússon had told him. His recognition of the diverse and
difficult inflections of the Old Norse language, once he had
learned what they were, must have been made possible by this
prodigious memory, for never using a grammar, never studying
from a printed treatise on syntax or accidence, he had to re-
call, when he came to a vaguely familiar form, that it was a
"masculine-genitive-plural," or a "singular-preterite-sub-
junctive," because Magnússon had pointed out such a form a
page or two earlier, or even as far back as the previous les-
sion. When he revised the style in Magnússon's written ver-
sion of whatever saga was at hand, he put it (partly) into
the Middle English language, and as far as we can tell, with-
out any Middle English documents before him. It is needless
to add, if such intimate details as these remained in his
mind long after he had studied a piece of literature, that the story of any saga he read would become his permanent intellectual possession, once he had finished it. Magnússon relates an interesting episode illustrating the retentiveness of Morris's mind. One evening, during Morris's first trip to Iceland, in 1871, Magnússon and his fellow-travellers found time heavy on their hands, so Morris proceeded to amuse them by telling the short Saga of Björn. He swept through the whole narrative with the assurance and delight of a Saga-teller at the Thing, "only once hesitating about a personal name." This was even more remarkable to Magnússon because Morris had read the Saga only once. He did not merely paraphrase, he recited, word for word, the very language of the Saga-man. The accuracy of Gudrun, the true saga-spirit of Sigurd, are more comprehensible in the light of such information. An accomplishment of this sort, indicative of the mass of Icelandic matter which Morris at some time acquired, and the amazing way in which he assimilated it, must have repaid Magnússon for the rather officious and peremptory manner in which his pupil approached the literature of Old Iceland.