
WILLIAM MORRIS AS AN INTERPRETER
OF OLD NORSE

By J. N. SWANNELL

A mild interest in Old Norse themes is not unusual among the poets and essayists of the nineteenth century: Carlyle, Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, Robert Buchanan, and others, all found a certain amount of inspiration in the Eddas or the sagas. But to them Old Norse was always an exotic, a convenient source of subjects for an occasional poem, a useful set of symbols for political or theological controversy; the Norse element is incidental, rather than significant. For William Morris, however, Old Norse literature was an overwhelming influence; it dominated him — obsessed him, one might say — for nearly thirty years. His most impressive original poems, *The Lovers of Gudrun* and *Sigurd the Volsung*, are taken direct from Norse originals; he devoted many hours of a busy life to translating a surprisingly large amount of Old Norse prose and verse; and his late prose romances, perhaps his most considerable achievement, grow naturally and inevitably out of his devotion to the sagas.

The influence of his Norse studies on his political development is less easy to estimate, but it is certain that in the "ethic of the north" he found a philosophy of life, a "religion of courage" as he called it, which gave him faith and inspiration when he needed them most.

Not that he was a Norse scholar in the modern sense of the word, though he learned to read the language easily and could speak a certain amount of modern Icelandic. He was certainly no philologist. He was, after all, a poet, a painter, a tapestry-maker, a designer, a dyer, a printer, a factory-owner, a shopkeeper, and a political agitator.

as well as a student of Old Norse, and at no time in his life did languages come to him easily. What he had above all, though, was a natural affinity with Old Norse literature, a unique sense of kinship with the Saga Age. Morris always had an instinctive knowledge of how things were made and used in the Middle Ages ("How Morris seems to know things, doesn't he?" said his friend Faulkner during their Oxford days), and in the same way he seems to know about the domestic details of the Viking Age — how the houses and booths were constructed, how the land was cultivated on an Icelandish farmstead, how the Viking ships were manoeuvred. He himself had something of the Viking chieftain's ability to turn his hand to anything.

William Morris — and this can be said of very few of us, even in this Society — would feel quite at home with Óláfr and his sons in Bergthór’s Knoll. In fact, in 1884 we find him complaining, in a lecture to the Secular Society of Leicester, of the "foolish rabbit warrens" of "our well to do homes", and longing for the Germanic hall, the "rational ancient way which was used from the time of Homer to past the time of Chaucer, a big hall, to wit, with a few chambers tacked on to it for sleeping or sulking in".

But this remarkable innate sympathy with Norse literature did not find full expression until 1868, when he began to study the Icelandish language. Before this date his medieval sympathies were more diffused. From early childhood the Middle Ages were as real to him as the present. He was absorbed by the history, the literature, and the art of medieval England, a period symbolised in his mind by the glories of Gothic architecture; but his medieval world is the world of Chaucer, Malory, and Froissart — what he was later to call the "maundering side of medievalism" — and it was in these authors, specially Malory and Froissart, that he found his inspiration for his first book of poems, The Defence of Guenevere, in 1858.

His first awareness of Old Norse literature, which later captivated him entirely, came in 1852, when Burne-Jones introduced him to Thorpe’s Northern Mythology. This stimulated his interest and encouraged him to look for other works on the same subject, and by 1868, the year of his meeting with Magnússon, he had acquired a very creditable knowledge of Norse matters. He had read Mallet's Northern Antiquities in the 1847 edition containing Scott's abstract of the Eyrbyggja Saga; he knew Lang's Heimskringla, and Dasent's translations of the Prose Edda, Njal's Saga, and Gisli's Saga; he had some idea of the Poetic Edda through the versions of Cotgrave, Herbert, and Thorpe; and he had also read some of the many travel books about Iceland which were being published in the fifties and sixties. All he lacked was first-hand knowledge of the Norse language.

By 1868, too, his contemporary reputation as a poet had been well established by The Life and Death of Jason and the first volume of the Earthly Paradise. It must be admitted, however, that in spite of Morris’s intensive reading of books about Old Norse, and his knowledge of the literature in translation, there is very little that is intrinsically Norse about any of his early poems. There is dear evidence of his reading, here and there, but the Norse references are no more than ornament or local colour. The general effect is always medieval and romantic, rather than heroic. The only poems of this period which seem to promise us more are The Woosling of Swanhild, published after Morris’s death, and The Fostering of Aisling, published in Part IV of the Earthly Paradise in December, 1870, though written before the autumn of

4. See Steffán Einarsson, "Eiríkr Magnússon and his Saga Translations", Scandinavian Studies and Notes, XIII (1934); and Karl Littgenberg, The Scandinavians and the Vikings (University of Michigan Contributions in Modern Philology, no. 3; April 1947).
r868. The substance of both poems Morris took from Thorpe’s Northern Mythology.

Swanhild, which runs to well over a thousand lines, was never finished; the story is taken as far as Randver’s meeting with Swanhild, and no further. Morris turns it into a leisurely, ornate story, heavy with impending doom, but entirely romantic in tone, and he probably abandoned it once he had acquired some knowledge of the original Norse texts. Aslaug, on the other hand, is a complete poem, the last attempt of William Morris to recreate a Norse atmosphere from secondary sources. Morris’s version is successful enough as a poem, but its qualities are those of the earlier tales of the Earthly Paradise, not those of the sagas — though it is true that the Aslaug episode of Ragnar’s Saga is, even in the original, unusually romantic in tone. The Fostering of Aslaug, in short, is much the sort of poem Morris’s readers would expect. There are not many Norse stories which could slip, almost unnoticed, into the Earthly Paradise, as this one does.

And so Morris might have continued. But in 1868 came his meeting with “a real Icelander”, Eirikr Magnusson, and from this time onwards Morris was to find his inspiration not in abstracts and translations but in the original Norse texts.8

Magnússon had been in England since 1862, and now, after five or six years of frustrating and unsatisfactory collaboration with George Powell— a curious foreshadowing of the later partnership with Morris — he found an enthusiasm for Icelandic literature which equalled his own. Certainly, no teacher could have hoped for a more eager pupil; to Morris, as his daughter tells us, it was a wonderful moment: “a poet’s entering into possession of a new world, only partly his till now.” 9

Magnússon, for his part was struck by Morris’s remarkable appreciation of the spirit of Norse literature: “he entered into the spirit of it”, he says, “not with the pre-occupied mind of the foreigner, but with the intuition of an uncommonly wide-awake native”.9

In this atmosphere of mutual understanding and sympathy they agreed to meet three times a week to read Icelandic together, and these lessons were well established by October, 1868. Morris, though, was not the man to submit to the discipline of grammar and syntax, and Magnússon, obviously pained by this disregard of the academic proprieties, yet swept away, as always, by Morris’s overwhelming personality, gives a vivid description of their first lesson:10

“I suggested we had better start with some grammar. ‘No, I can’t be bothered with grammar; have no time for it. You be my grammar as we translate. I want the literature, I must have the story. I mean to amuse myself . . .’

Almost immediately he is insisting on trying for himself:

‘But, look here, I see through it all, let me try and translate’. Off he started, translated, blundered, laughed; but still, he saw through it all with an intuition that fairly took me aback . . . in this way the best of the sagas were run through, at daily sitting, generally covering three hours, already before I left London for Cambridge in 1871”.

The method they adopted at this early stage seems to have suited them both, and they kept to it during the many years they worked together: after they had gone through the day’s task, Magnússon would write out a literal translation at home and give it to Morris the next time they met, leaving Morris to prepare a final version for publication. And this method gave quick results. Their translation of Gunnlaug’s Saga was finished in two weeks and published in the Fortnightly Review in January 1869, by which time Grettir’s Saga was ready for the press.

During the early part of this year they also worked at the

8 Eirikr Magnússson’s accounts of his meeting with Morris and their subsequent collaboration are to be found in the preface to Works, VII, and the preface to The Saga Library, VI (1905).
9 Stefán Einarsson, loc. cit.
10 Works, VII xv.
Laxdale Saga, and though their version was never published, Morris's verse re-telling of part of the saga was completed by July and published, as The Lovers of Gudrun, in the third part of the Earthly Paradise (December 1869).

Imperfect though it may be, judged as a reconstruction of the Saga Age, The Lovers of Gudrun is a tremendous advance on Aslaug. Those modern readers who turn to Gudrun after the saga itself may be distracted by the limpid verses, the occasional lushness of description, the Pre-Raphaelite wanness of the heroine; but to an audience conditioned, as we say nowadays, to these characteristics, the change of atmosphere was significant and starting. In spite of its faults Gudrun has an intensity and a firmness of outline which are new to the Earthly Paradise, as though the poet has at last emerged from a world of dreams; his characters are sharply etched; there is something, certainly something, of the starkness of saga narrative.

When Gudrun appeared, Morris and Magnusson were hard at work translating the Volsunga Saga, "which quite throws all the other stories into the shade", as Morris writes to Swinburne in December 1869.11 Morris had not been particularly impressed with the saga when Magnusson first drew his attention to it — it was "rather of the monstrous order",12 he told his wife — but he soon began to write of it in superlatives, and when the translation was published, in 1870, the saga of the Volsungs is described, in Morris's introductory verses, as "the best tale pity ever wrought", and, in the Translators' Preface, "the Great Story of the North, which should be to all our race what the Tale of Troy was to Greeks".

An original poem which may belong to this period is entitled, rather pretentiously, Of the Wooing of Halliorm the Strong, A story from the Landssettling Book of Iceland

Chapter XXX, and it is indeed based, very freely, on the grim little incident in Landnámabók in which Halliorm kills his wife Hallgerd and is himself slain by Snegbjorn. May Morris implies that this is a poem of the seventies (it was not published until Poems by the Way in 1891),13 but the treatment of the story is quite unlike Norse narrative; it is a kind of medieval ballad, quite pleasing, but very "literary" and romantic. I see nothing in it to suggest that it is later than the meeting with Magnusson. The title is impressive, but it so happens that the story is told in one of Blackwell's supplementary chapters in the 1847 edition of Mallet, with a footnote giving a reference to Landnámabók, ii, 30. Morris can hardly have missed it, especially as the moral which Blackwell draws from it (that ladies who are allowed too much liberty are apt "to let their passions get the upper hand, and lead them into scrapes which they sometimes have occasion to repent of") would have annoyed him very much.

Whatever date we may assign to Halliorm, there can be no doubt that Morris had by 1870 surrendered himself whole-heartedly, with the passionate intensity which characterised all his enthusiasms, to the spell of Old Norse literature. And then, in 1871, came the supreme experience: the first of his two visits to Iceland, with Magnusson and two other friends. His Journals14 convey something of the deep emotion with which he found himself, at last, in the land of Njál and Grettir. The expeditions had their lighter moments, but to Morris they were essentially pilgrimages to a holy land. This was his spiritual home: "the touch of Iceland", as Mackail puts it,15 "was something that stirred him with an almost sacramental solemnity"; or, as Morris himself wrote after the second visit in 1873, "it was no idle whim that drew me there, but a true instinct for what I needed".16 For

11 Letters, 31.
12 Works, V xvi.
13 Works, IX.
14 Works, VIII.
15 Mackail, op. cit., p 304.
16 Letters, 59.
the rest of his life this "terrible and tragic, but beautiful land" was never far from his thoughts. The memory occurs and reoccurs in his letters and in his conversation, in his lectures and articles on politics and art, and in the long prose romances which were the solace of his last years.

The study of Old Norse literature continued after the visits to Iceland. In 1875 came the publication of Three Northern Love Stories, containing Gunnlaug, Frithiof, Viglund, and a number of short tales. Other translations made in the seventies were not published until twenty years later, but Morris had been occupied for some time with an original poem which was to re-tell, for his own age, the great story of the Volsungs. He had been tempted by the idea as early as December 1869, when he had written to Professor Charles Eliot Norton: "I had it in my head to write an epic of it, but though I still hanker after it, I see clearly it would be foolish, for no verse could render the best parts of it, and it would only be a letter and tamer version of a thing already existing." Nevertheless, some five years later he set to work, encouraged by Magnusson, and Sigurd the Volsung was published towards the end of 1876. Morris omits the Ærmundreihn-Swanhild episode, but, this apart, attempts a comprehensive treatment of the whole Nibelung legend, drawing on the Edda poems as well as the Volsung Saga (though he abandons his Old Norse authorities at the end of his poem in favour of the Nibelungenlied version of the death of Sigurd's murderers).

To Morris these legends were in a very real sense a part of English tradition; he was much influenced by writers like Laing and the Howitts, who (as some contemporary reviewers complained) stressed the importance of our Scandinavian heritage by belittling our Anglo-Saxon ancestors. Morris felt it his duty, therefore, to restore this lost heritage to his English readers. Yet the atmosphere which he evokes in Sigurd is not that of the sagas, or even of Norse epic verse; it reminds one rather of Old English epic, of Beowulf. There is the same leisured dignity of narrative; the poet is always ready to pause for long descriptions or to dwell on the moral implications of his theme; it is the long paragraph which predominates, not the pregnant, strophic arrangement of Old Norse verse. As in Beowulf, the emphasis is on the stately splendour of the Germanic court; the lofty halls adorned with gold, the precious swords and ancient coats of mail which gleam on the warriors as they unlock their store of words in formal discourse. The Morris translation of Beowulf is almost unreadable, but it is perhaps to be regretted that Morris did not attempt a version of Beowulf on the lines of Sigurd the Volsung. Be that as it may, this vast poem is something unique in nineteenth-century literature; Morris has perhaps attempted the impossible, but it is difficult to name any other poet of his day who could have equalled his achievement.

After 1876 Morris became increasingly involved in political controversy, and though he continued to read and translate Old Norse nothing was published for the next fifteen years. Then in 1890 came the collaboration with the publisher Bernard Quaritch which resulted in the Saga Library. In July of that year Morris writes: "I have undertaken to get out some of the sagas I have been about. Quaritch is exceedingly anxious to get hold of me, and received with enthusiasm a proposal to publish a Saga Library." Fifteen volumes were originally planned, but only six appeared: Volume I (Howard the Halt, The Banded Men, Hen-Thorir) in 1891, Volume II (Eredwethes) in 1892, Volume III (Heimskringla Part I) in 1893, Volume IV (Heimskringla Part II) in 1894, and Volume V (Heimskringla Part III) in 1895. Volume VI (notes, indexes, genealogical tables, etc.) was the work of Magnusson, and did not appear until 1895.

**Letters, 58.**

**Letters, 52.**

**Mackail, op. cit. II 260.**
The Saga Library represents the work of Morris and Magnússon over several years. The Eredwells must have been finished before April 1871, since Mackail tells us that Morris had made an illuminated copy of it by that date.\(^{20}\) Howard the Halt, The Banned Men, and Heim-Thorir belong to the early seventies, for Morris made a copy of them in 1874, when he was working at calligraphy and illumination.\(^{21}\) As for Heimskringla, we know from Morris's letters that he was working on it in 1873.\(^{22}\) and his daughter May tells us that "a painted book of the first fifty-five chapters" was one of his holiday tasks for that year.\(^{23}\) (Ynglinga Saga, in the Saga Library translation, actually contains fifty-five chapters.) The translation clearly continued for several years, for May Morris, elsewhere, quotes short passages from St Olaf's Saga (Saga Library Vol. IV) and from the Saga of Harald Hardrada (Saga Library Vol. V), and says they are translations of the "late eighties."\(^{24}\) So it would seem that the actual translations were more or less complete when The Saga Library was planned, and only needed to be carefully revised and prepared for the press.

These six handsome volumes are a pleasure to read and to handle. They are admirably printed, as one would expect, and the critical apparatus and explanatory notes, nearly all the work of Magnússon, are almost frighteningly elaborate and detailed. There could be no more fitting memorial to the twenty years of close collaboration between the two men; every volume expresses their sense of wonder and delight in the great stories of the north; to Morris and Magnússon the sagas are not "texts" but human documents, as real and as immediate as to-day's newspaper. The serenity is broken only by the bitterness of Magnússon's references to Vigfusson and Powell: Magnússon could never forgive those remarks in the Corpus Poeticum Boreale about "the affectation of archaism", "pseudo-Middle English", and "specious nullity of false phrasing".\(^{25}\)

Many other critics have commented unfavourably on Morris's style;\(^{26}\) it has been dismissed, often unread, as "Wardour Street English"; fashions in translation have changed, and Morris has suffered accordingly. Yet the archaisms of Morris's early poems are not particularly remarkable; they are to be found in all romantic poets. Those who condemn Morris as one who writ no English are judging him, whether they realise it or not, by the later prose romances, where we do find a special language, a vocabulary and syntax peculiar to Morris. This highly individual style may not be to everyone's taste, but it is something far removed from the "tushery" of second-rate historical fiction; it is a deliberate creation; it is in all essentials the style evolved by Morris and Magnússon in their translations from Old Norse. We find it, fully grown, in the first translation, Gunnlaug, and in all the sagas which follow. It is not really true to say, as C. S. Lewis does, that "Morris invented for his poems and perfected in his prose romances a language which has never at any period been spoken in England"; it is not found in The Defence of Guenevere or in the Earthly Paradise, or even in Sigurd the Volsung. In these poems we have only what may be called the usual, conventional archaisms: betide, brand, dight, eld, erewhile, whiles, wot, and the like. The language perfected in the prose romances, with its strange words and phrases — almost all of them disguised Norse words and idioms — is taken over bodily from the saga translations; it is a blend of Old Norse and the romantic archaisms taken from Chaucer, Malory, and Spenser, the common property of all poets. It is clear that Morris's joy in Norse literature extended to the very words and idioms of his originals, and he felt it his

duty to give something of this pleasure to his readers. This may be enthusiasm taken to excess, but the results are often vigorous and stimulating, particularly in the rendering of gnomic utterances and proverbs. Of course he goes too far; he became so skilful at this transmuting process that he sometimes forgets his readers and becomes unintelligible.

But why did he adopt this new and peculiar style? I suspect that it grew out of those first attempts at verbal translation which Magnússon describes in his preface to the sixth volume of the Saga Library. Morris was impatient to get at the story:

"Off he started, translated, blundered, laughed; but still he saw through it all with an intuition that fairly took me aback. Henceforth no time must be wasted on reading out the original. He must have the story as quickly as possible. The dialect of our translation was not the Queen's English, but it was helped towards penetrating into the thought of the old language. Thus, to give an example, leifot, a guide, became load-tugger (load = way, in load-star, load-stone; togi from toga to tag (on), one who leads on with a rope); kvænask (kvæna sik form kvæn = queen, woman) to bequeath one's self = to take a wife, etc. That such a method of acquiring the language should be a constant source of merriment, goes without saying."

Now Morris was passionately fond of old words, and particularly resented the Romance elements which had driven out so many of our native, Germanic words, the deplored the fact that we had not preserved our language "as the Germans have theirs".22 And it may well be that he saw in this rough, literal method of translating the solution to the difficult problem of rendering the saga into modern English. Magnússon's comment is interesting in this connection:23

"From the beginning Morris was strongly impressed by the simple dignity of style of the Icelandic sagas. There must be living many of his friends who heard him frequently denounce it as something intolerable to have read an Icelandic saga rendered into the dominant literary dialect of the day — the English newspaper language...this dignity of style cannot be reached by the Romance element in English. If it is to be

reached at all — and then only approximately — it must be by means of the Teutonic element in our speech — the nearest akin to the Icelandic...Morris's saga style is his own, the result of an endeavour by a scholar and a man of genius to bring about such harmony between the Teutonic element in English and the language of the Icelandic saga as the not very abundant means at his command would allow."

It is curiously ironic. This style was Morris's most treasured offering at the shrine of Old Norse literature, yet his translations are now more likely to repel the modern reader who tries to use them as a substitute for the originals. Yet they can give much pleasure to those who do read Old Norse, and they are much more readable than brief quotations would indicate. It is only fair to him to remember the kind of English he was reacting against: late-Victorian Latinized prose — "the English of our drawing rooms and leading articles...a wretched mongrel jargon that can scarcely be called English, or indeed language...the language of critics and 'superior persons'..."24

It is worth noting, at this point, that Morris was very insistent that Magnússon should not be robbed of his share of the credit for these translations. In a letter to the Athenaeum in 1879 he writes:25

"I have noticed that Mr Vigfusson, in his recently published Prolegomena to the Sturlunga Saga, speaks of me as the sole translator of the English version of the Grettis Saga and the Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu, omitting to mention the name of Mr Einir Magnusson, my collaborateur. As a matter of fact, when we set about these joint works I had just begun the study of Icelandic under Mr Magnusson's mastership, and my share in the translation was necessarily confined to helping in the search for the fittest English equivalents to the Icelandic words and phrases, to turning the translations of the 'vslur' into some sort of English verse, and to general revision in what might be called matters of taste: the rest of the work, including notes, and all critical remarks, was entirely due to Mr Magnusson's learning and industry...Mr Magnusson's responsibility and labour was, therefore, much greater than mine in these works, which if his pleasure in the labour was half as much as mine, it was great indeed!"
This would be a fair statement of the situation throughout their long collaboration, though, of course, Morris's knowledge of the language increased steadily. This fact is confirmed when we examine the manuscript of their translation of St Olaf's Saga. In this manuscript we can see how Magnússon's learning and industry serve as the raw material for Morris's finished product.

The left-hand pages of the manuscript book are usually left blank, and the right-hand pages contain the translation in Magnússon's neat, flowing hand-writing; Morris's corrections and emendations are written, between the lines or wherever there is room for them, in a bolder, more flamboyant script, usually perfectly readable. At times, though rarely, Magnússon's rendering is erased with such vigour that it is quite undecipherable. Sometimes whole sentences are rewritten, sometimes an individual word is altered, so that Morris's emendations form a continuous commentary on Magnússon's version, turning Magnússon's "unconsidered journalese" (May Morris's unsympathetic phrase) into "a language more worthy of the subject". And it is a remarkably thorough process; it is rare to find two continuous lines without some alteration.

It is clear that Morris is emending with the Old Norse by his side, for when Magnússon accidentally omits three and a half lines Morris, on the opposite blank page, inserts a translation of the missing words. On another blank left page Morris writes "what is auksis literally?" He notices, too, that Magnússon has used the wrong English word in one of the verses; "Thou didst champion the most valiant king" (brænst big vid); Morris writes: "to champion a man means, I think, to fight for him, not against him", and translates accordingly: "thou daredst the king most valiant".

A few, a very few, of Morris's emendations are corrections of Magnússon's spelling or grammar. I have noticed only about half a dozen misspelt words, so far, but "ye" and "you" seem to worry Magnússon a little, and he sometimes drops the second person singular in mid-sentence; Morris carefully corrects all these minor lapses.

It is Morris, too, who decides the paragraphing. But the bulk of the emendations are definitely stylistic, designed to bring everything into conformity with the highly individual style Morris thought appropriate.

Some are very slight adjustments, like these, and are of no real importance:

Magnússon  King Olaf then
Morrison  Then sailed King Olaf
        sailed west
Magnússon  She was a most
Morrison  She was a woman most
        high-mettled woman
Magnússon  in the following
Morrison  next spring
        spring
Magnússon  swiftly
Morrison  speedily.

Then there are many words which Morris obviously considers essential to his style; they are favourite archaisms, many of them found in his earliest works. Magnússon sometimes remembers to use them, but often forgets, and Morris emends. Morris's word is the second of each pair in the following examples:

aware: ware; anything: ought; nothing: nought; much: mickle;
when: whenas; whenever: whenso; later: sitence; happened:
betel: went; fared; custom: wont; between: betewx; counsels:
redes: fields; acres; wealth: fee; get ready: dight (me); got: gat;
(they) thought: were minded; vowed (or accepted): yeassid.

Morris is very fond of "let" with the infinitive, and is always altering Magnússon's less archaic constructions, e.g.:

Magnússon  King Olaf had a
Morrison  King Olaf let dig a
    cut made
Magnússon  There King Olaf
Morrison  There let King Olaf do
    had a wall built
    a wall.
Sometimes the emendations replace individual words by English words and expressions more closely akin to Old Norse. Morris's word is again the second of each pair:

quarrels: harbour (herbergi); message: wordsending (ordsendi);
war: unpeace (ôfrið); men and women: carles and queans (karar
ok konun); council-chamber: Thing House (þinghús); door
keepers: doordwards (duræðir); funeral: corpse-tare (líþferi).

The results of this process are not always fortunate, and there can be no doubt that Magnússon's version is usually the more comprehensible. Morris's close watch on the Norse text has its disadvantages:

**Magnússon** he kept out spies
on his journeys

**Morris** he let bear spying on
his ways (bara nafins til fjara
hans)

**Magnússon** There also he had marked out building
ground

**Morris** There also he let mark
töfts (topir)

**Magnússon** plead this case

**Morris** to fit this case (eði
flytja)

**Magnússon** The Earl giveth
King Olaf his oath

**Morris** The earl winneth oath
to King Olaf (víðar eða)

**Magnússon** Ragnhild ... about to give birth to a
child

**Morris** ... should be lighter of
a child (skyldi léðir veðr)

**Magnússon** what loss of life we
have suffered

**Morris** what man-scathe we
have gotten

and then, by analogy, as it were:

**Magnússon** baneful to Christ-
ian faith

**Morris** wherein was Christ-
scate (chrístespell)

A particularly unsuccessful example of Morris sacrificing all to preserve a Norse idiom occurs when Magnússon writes: "Stein nowise kept himself tonguetied ... both in prose and poetry". Morris cannot resist the Norse sundrausum ordum ok samfösum, and alters the manuscript to: "in speech both loose and knitted up". By the time the text appears in print he has gone even further, and we read: "both in speech loose and in speech

upknitted".

Magnússon, of course, is perfectly in sympathy with Morris's principles of translation. His own style is fairly straightforward and not unattractive; it is slightly archaic,

and though he is concerned only with producing an intelligible and accurate translation, he often tries to meet Morris halfway, and regularly uses words like "few-
spoken" (jámðeir), and "a-many". But it is amusing to find that Morris is not always ready to accept Magnússon's attempts at morrisisms; Magnússon's ear was obviously not quite attuned. For example, Magnússon writes: "it is a wont of long standing that ..." which seems to have the genuine ring, but Morris alters it to: "it has long been that ..." On another occasion Magnússon produces: "the greater scathe in men" (mannasvæði), but Morris goes one better with: "the greatest man-scathe".

We may suspect that Magnússon is tiring at one place — or is it a gesture of protest at a surfeit of archaisms? "But the Swedes gainsay this", he writes, "and call it all
gammon (teljía hégóm) that any men were lost there". Morris primly emends to: "and reckon it vain that any
men were lost there". Such colloquialisms are very unusual. Magnússon does not often "use a word too
homerly ... which brings it down a little" (this is Morris's
criticism of a note in the text of the Saga). And I have noticed only two other examples, both duly amended by Morris: "Earl Hakon, who has now bolted out of the land" (amended to "fled"), and: "she takes this with exceeding
fuss" (amended to "mickle eagerness")

And so the process continues, page after page, until Magnússon's unambitious but very creditable prose is transformed — and in some places contorted — into the characteristic, highly criticised dialect of William Morris.

The verses of the Saga need special mention. Morris, like most of us, found them extremely difficult. "As to
the Visir", he writes to Magnússon, "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 ... I agree we ought to make the visur
literal, if we can, but sometimes I can't keep it verse at the same time. However, with your help I may manage".  

The solution meant more work for Magnússon. Whenever he comes to a verse he writes out the Norse text, in prose order, and, underneath, a literal word-by-word translation, with, very occasionally, an explanatory note. When Morris reaches the verse he writes out his own metrical translation on one of the blank pages of the manuscript, with surprisingly little correction or emendation, and erases Magnússon’s version. All Morris’s verses are numbered as he translates them, perhaps two or three together on the same page, so he writes “Insert A”, “Insert B”, etc. at the appropriate place in Magnússon’s translation, and passes on.

So there is nothing casual about this process. This manuscript is ample proof, if proof were needed, of the devotion of these two remarkable men to the language and literature of Iceland. Morris has been dismissed as a mere dilettante. He was much more than this. He did so many things well that his considerable achievement in this one narrow sphere can easily be overlooked. Without Magnússon, as he freely and publicly admitted, this achievement would have been impossible, but it can hardly be doubted that Morris was the driving force in their collaboration. Between them they introduced to English readers a vast amount of Old Norse prose and verse; Morris, with his reputation as a poet and craftsman, could reach a far wider audience than Magnússon, and in his lectures, and in his private conversations, he strove unceasingly to impart to his contemporaries something of his own feeling for Norse literature — not only because of its intrinsic qualities as pure literature, passionately though he admired those qualities, but because he found in it an attitude to life, a noble courage and steadfastness, which might serve as an example to his own time, and which gave him hope for the future.

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**ON TRANSLATION — I**

**A REVIEW BY IAN R. MAXWELL**

E VERY age looks for translations adapted to its own habits of speech; that is, to its own habits of thought. Thus the moderns are well served, and Proust loses little at the hands of Scott Moncrieff; but Homer must be content to know that the Odyssey holds its own with other novels in the Penguin series. (What Proust would lose if adapted to the minds of Achilles and Anticleia in a Hades Penguin there is fortunately no need to enquire.)

As for the Icelandic sagas, it is now generally held that they should be turned, as far as possible, into up-to-date English, partly on the (sandy) ground that they were modern to thirteenth-century Icelanders, and partly perhaps because our speech is thought to suit them better than our grandfathers’. So Bayrerschmidt implies in the preface to his version of Njál’s saga:

A new translation seems called for, since Dasent’s, though outstanding for its time, bears many earmarks of Victorian style (and prudence) less appropriate for rendering the realistic manner of Icelandic sagas.

There is of course no royal road for translators. They must consider their audience, their purpose, the nature of their original and their medium, not least their own tastes and talents; and each version may shed its own light. Let Lang, Leaf and Myers do their best with the English of Wardour Street, and Samuel Butler retort in the English of Tottenham Court Road. We may profit from both. Yet each method has its own merits and drawbacks; and these are worth weighing, especially in an age when it seems to be pretty generally agreed that only one method is right, or at least that one is definitely wrong.

Professor Schach’s readable and handsome version of