

MR. WILLIAM MORRIS ON ICELAND.

Yesterday evening, at Kelmscott House, Hammersmith, Mr. William Morris gave as a kind of introduction to a most important subject—the Poetry and Sagas of the North—a description of the strange romantic desert of Iceland, and of the early Norse settlers there. The uninhabited wastes of the interior, not thirsty deserts, but well-watered valleys, could not, he said, but be beautiful to a man with eyes and heart. Around the sea coast and along the rivers the valleys produce scanty grass and some beautiful flowers, and along these rivers and facing the sea there lives what population there is. On the slopes the sheep, which produce a valuable fine silk wool, are bred, but the chief wealth of the island consists of the most sturdy little ponies. On the hillsides little patches of emerald green may be seen, and by these stand the homesteads and the pens for the sheep in winter. These homesteads are very populous, more than one family living in each. The people Mr. Morris found to be kind, hospitable, and honest, quick-witted, and talkative when they get over their first shyness, friendly and refined, in spite of their extreme poverty. Endowed with indomitable courage and strong individuality, they have preserved the religion, customs, and language of their forefathers.

When the Norsemen settled in Iceland they did not found a political or territorial society. Their relations were purely personal. Crime, in our sense

of the word, was not taken cognizance of. Morality was enforced purely by public opinion, and condemnation for a legal offence involved no kind of disgrace. There was no private ear, and still less any feeling of private revenge. Manual labour was far from being considered a disgrace, and heroes would lend a hand in the field and housework. Self-restraint was a necessary virtue among such a people. "Many a man lies hid within himself," says one of their proverbs. The heroes as business-men were very tight-fisted. This might be due to the harsh climate or perhaps to the love of realism which distinguishes the tellers of the stories. But there are plenty of instances of generosity too. They were not above using the weapons of deceit, but only as weapons of war. It was considered a disgrace to brag, or to blacken the fame of an enemy. The position of women was good. The Icelandic literature has preserved for us the literature and religion which was largely common to all the Germanic tribes. The gods were the reflection of the worshippers. A god might have long life, but he was not immortal; he was under the same fate as mankind. Man alive could not conceive of his ending. When he left the earth he would go on with his training and fight as he did on the earth. In conclusion, Mr. Morris said he looked upon the Icelanders with a peculiar affection, and to him their country was a Holy Land.
