

May Morris and Miss Lobb in Iceland

Gudrun Jonsdottir

In December 1981 Mr J. B. Tooley, Senior Lecturer in Ealing College of Higher Education, kindly sent me a copy of an essay submitted by one of his National Extension College students in Iceland. He sent it for inclusion in the Kelmscott Manor archive, but it deserves wider publicity. So, with the permission of the author, I submit it for the Journal so that others may share her recollections.

I am grateful to Mrs J. Bunge of the Icelandic Embassy for the translation.

A. R. Dufty

I happened to read, in an imported copy of the *Sunday Times* of 31 May 1981, a reference to Kelmscott House, whereupon I closed my eyes for a moment, looking back nearly sixty years in time. It was summer and, deducing from other events, more easily dated, I find that it must have been in 1922. Two foreign ladies came riding up the lane leading to the manse where I lived with my parents. This was nothing new. Sixty years ago there were no hotels in the Icelandic countryside and foreigners—who then travelled by means of the Icelandic ponies as there were no motorcars—usually went to the nearest manse to ask for accommodation. Ministers, doctors and country judges were the only people likely to understand foreign languages and the ministers were easiest to approach, the doctors being too busy and the country judges less hospitable. Most of the travellers I had seen however, had been gentlemen and two ladies travelling alone were unusual.

The ladies were as unlike each other as any two people could be. One was rather small, slim and greyhaired. She changed for dinner into a skirt, jumper and cardigan, putting a row of shimmering yellowish-green beads around her throat. She talked quietly, did not laugh, but smiled softly, sat and painted flowers in watercolours and wrote down things in her notebook. Her name was Miss May Morris. The other lady was tall and rather fat with short, black hair that curled around her chubby face. She did not change for dinner except for putting on a different kind of trousers. She talked rather loudly and laughed often. Her name was Miss Lobb.

The ladies stayed at the manse for a few days and my father talked with them in a foreign language. I could hear that it was not Danish, but I could not understand a word of it. Then my father borrowed some horses from the neighbours and rode away with the ladies. When they came back again Miss Morris sat painting and Miss Lobb walked around and laughed. After a few days they said goodbye and rode away, this time to Reykjavík.



Westman Island, usually the first sight of Iceland for visitors from the rest of Europe.



Lying cod out to dry in the sun. Dried cod was the chief export of Iceland for many centuries. Photograph by Winifred Watkinson 1938.

In the autumn my father got word from the nearest village that packing cases addressed to him had come with the boat from Reykjavík. When these packing cases came to the manse I was on tenterhooks to see what they contained. Oh! There were books—all kinds of books—many of them with pictures of people, things and places, but they were all in a language which I could not read. There were also things for me in the boxes: watercolours and books with drawings, ready to be painted in. I had never seen anything like it. Then there was all the paper—every single book was wrapped in light-grey paper—and my father said that I could have all of it. What a joy for a girl who was always writing when there was any paper to be had.

Two years later the ladies came again. They stayed at the manse for a few days and then went on, riding through the district accompanied by my grandfather. Miss Morris continued to paint and write in her notebook, but this time she talked to me and I was able to understand a few words. She also taught me a game called ‘cat’s cradle’ which was much fun, but, not being mechanically minded, I soon forgot it again. She gave my mother a watercolour painting showing a mountain in the district of Saurbær where my mother was from. After the death of my mother in 1977 this painting was donated to the National Museum of Iceland.

Again the ladies returned to Reykjavík and then to England. There came letters from them, however, with foreign stamps, and several boxes full of books came with the boat before Christmas. I received more watercolours and books with drawings. The drawings were of strange birds and flowers I had never seen. Again, all the books were wrapped in grey paper which I got for my own use.

In 1929 the English ladies came for the last time. Miss Morris was much the same as I remembered her and so was Miss Lobb. I remember the last day when they were about to leave. The horses waited in front of the house and Miss Lobb was there laughing and joking. I was upstairs, standing at the window looking out when Miss Morris came to say goodbye. I had learned some English by then, but I was terribly shy and could only utter a few broken sentences. Miss Morris smiled, took my hand and held it for a moment saying goodbye. Then she went out, got up on her horse and rode away. I never saw her again. For Christmas I got a package from England with a book in it. It was George Eliot’s *Felix Holt* and on the fly-leaf was written: ‘To Gudrun Jonsdottir from May Morris.’ I still have that book.

William Morris travelled in Iceland at least twice. He was fascinated by the Icelandic Sagas and wrote poems about some of the characters in the *Laxdæla Saga*. This Saga is the history of the Dalasýsla district where my father was a minister for thirteen years. Miss Morris came to Iceland to see the places her father had described in his poems, capturing them in watercolours to look at in her home at Kelmscott Manor.

I knew that Miss Morris lived at Kelmscott Manor for I had seen the address often enough on envelopes when my father wrote to her. After his death I wanted to read the letters he had received from Miss Morris, but my brothers have taken over his effects and they have never found the time to look for these letters. The only thing I have is a photocopy of the visiting card which one of my brothers had picked up by chance and copied for me.

The books Miss Morris sent to my father are now scattered among the family and some of them even lost. But when I had learned English well enough for reading, these books were an 'open Sesame' to me, showing me a new world. There were poems: Byron, Keats, the Brownings, Shelley, Tennyson; anthologies and folklore; novels by Dickens, George Eliot, Walter Scott, Thomas Hardy and Thackeray; books with pictures of English country houses, the Royal Family, famous Generals, famous paintings and sculpture, and two editions of the *Britannica*.

So many memories are linked to the name Kelmscott—memories of years when the books Miss Morris had sent made my otherwise bleak life bearable—and memories of a lovely lady who was kind to a shy and awkward girl in an old Icelandic manse.

The references to books unspecified prompted mention in recent correspondence of the present-day value of productions of the Kelmscott Press; Gudrun Jonsdottin replied 'As I left home in 1937 and have not seen the books Miss Morris sent since then, except for Felix Hot and a few other accidentally mixed with my own when in storage at my brother's house, I would not know whether there were any such among them. The only books I have now which might be valuable are a few volumes of Dickens' Household Words.'

To complete the symmetry of a gentle and charming account the opportunity may here be taken to record, for the first time in print, that at Kelmscott Manor are six pieces of Icelandic carved woodwork and freen: two inscribed panels, a small dug-out box dated 1844 for weaving shuttles and rectangular box, both with sliding lids, a tankard and a casket with a hinged gabled top. The last is the significant piece, no doubt identifying this group, for it has an inscription in Icelandic which, translated, reads 'For Morris-daughter. Over the wide sea this small token of friendship offers thanks from Icelandic for your visit. May good fairies make you homewards journey safe.'

All the pieces were in the Kelmscott Manor sale in 1939 and on behalf of the buyer were returned to the Manor again in 1978.