Icelandic Obituaries of William Morris

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When William Morris went on his expeditions to Iceland in 1871 and 1873 he made many personal friends in all ranks of society, from Jón Jónsson the saddler to Jón Sigurdsson the president of the Althing, as his Journals (Collected Works VIII) and his correspondence show. More, he found himself the target of observation and speculation, from people casually encountered at farms or on the road, as avid as any scrutiny he could turn on them and their customs. At Fjardarhorn in Hrutafjördur ("Ramfirth") for instance, a fascinated audience watched every movement:

Now was dinner served up, and we sat down to it with a close ring of men all round the tent’s mouth watching us, stooping down with their hands on their knees, and now and then dropping a sentence one to the other, such as “Now he’s supping the broth:” “What flesh is that?” and so on. (Journals p. 104)

On Morris’s second visit to Jón Jónsson’s lodging the observation seems reciprocal:

He lodges upstairs now in a queer little den marked off but by a principal unboarded from the badstofa in which latter were two women and two lads, one a remarkable looking boy enough who lies on the bed combing his hair; one of the women has a queer little baby on her lap and when it begins to howl she takes a little bag (of sugar) and gags it with said bag leaving the ends thereof sticking out of its mouth: a fine way for it can’t howl and is well content then. (Journals p. 199)

Yet Morris’s visits were of little importance to the Icelanders in general and passed unknown to most of those who did not see him in person. Even when in 1882 Morris threw his energy and influence into raising famine relief funds for Iceland as Treasurer of the Mansion House Committee, the greater part of the Icelanders’ grateful acknowledgement (and of the invective from those who opposed the Fund) naturally went to Eiríkr Magnusson, who personally undertook the onerous and risky task of distributing the relief supplies during the autumn storms around the coast of Iceland.

It might therefore have been expected that when William Morris died in October 1896, so long after his last direct involvement in Icelandic affairs, his death would have attracted little public notice in Iceland, where press coverage of foreign news was generally limited to the more extreme activities of the Kaiser or the Danish parliament. It might also be reasonably supposed that a country reckoned to have 78,000 inhabitants in 1900 could not support more than two or three newspapers at the outside.

In fact, not counting the religious press and many other special-interest publications, in 1896 Iceland was publishing eleven newspapers and three literary and cultural magazines, and of these, six newspapers and one magazine printed at least news of Morris’s death and in some cases substantial obituaries. This widespread interest is the more remarkable given the limited space in the newspapers: few ran to more than four folio sides per issue and some only to four quarto sides, so that foreign news especially
was given in very compressed form. It is enlightening to compare the three paragraphs devoted to Morris’s death in *Fjallkonan* (quoted below) with two other items under the same general headline of “Foreign News”. In full, they read

The Archbishop of Canterbury has died

and

Presidential elections are in progress in the United States, outcome not yet known.

No Icelandic paper in 1896 attempted daily publication; most appeared weekly, with occasional extra numbers when the news warranted it and occasional gaps if the editor was off sick. It may be that the failure of some newspapers to mention Morris’s death can be attributed to this – the editor of a Friday paper may not have wished to print what his particular rival, publishing on Mondays, had already reported.

Because ships from Britain and Scandinavia generally called at an East-coast port before going on to Reykjavík, the newly established newspaper *Bjarki*, published in the fishing port of Seydisfjördur, was the first to print the news of Morris’s death in a short but warmly appreciative paragraph in its third issue, 24th October 1896.

William Morris, one of the most famous poets of England, is reported to have died on the 3rd of this month. He travelled around Iceland, loved everything Icelandic, and chose material for his poetry from several of our sagas, such as Laxdaela, Völsunga etc. He was a great freedom-lover, a dedicated socialist and a most outstanding man.

The author of this paragraph and editor of *Bjarki* was the poet Thorsteinn Erlingsson (1858-1914), himself Iceland’s first declared socialist. He had been brought up at Hlidarendakot (“Lithend-cot”) under the wing of Morris’s guide Jón Jónsson the saddler, and was probably the “remarkable looking boy” described by Morris in the above quotation from the *Journals*. Too shy to talk to the visitors then, he introduced himself to Eiríkr Magnússon in 1882 when the latter came to Reykjavik with the famine relief supplies, and corresponded with him for years after about literature and politics, though Morris’s name appears in none of the surviving letters (Lbs 404 folio and 2185b 4to).

Four days later the news had reached Reykjavík. The old-established twice-weekly paper *Isafold* gave only a brief notice of the death in its issue of 28th October:

William Morris, the English poet and apostle of economic equality, died at his home in London on the 3rd inst., a little over 60 (born 24th March 1834). He was a great friend of Iceland and had been involved in the publication of English translations of our ancient sagas, together with Eiríkr Magnússon.

On the same day, however, Valdimar Ásmundarson, editor of the weekly *Fjallkonan* as well as of several sagas, printed a more substantial obituary.

The second-ranking English poet, William Morris, died 3rd October, born 24th March 1834. He was a great friend of Icelandic literature, as is widely known, and in recent years had begun to publish Sagas of Icelanders and of the Kings of Norway in English translation, in collaboration with Eiríkr Magnússon M.A. Their series is called “Saga Library” and five volumes of it have appeared: 1. Howard the Halt, The Banded Men and Hen-Thorir; 2. The Ere-dwellers and The Heathslayings; 3-5. Heimskringla (which is to be five volumes in all). Earlier the collaborators had published English translations of Grettir’s Saga, the Saga of Gunnlaug Wormtongue, Frithiof the Bold and others. Morris has written many novels and composed many poems.

He was also a powerful socialist and no small support to the English socialist party
(the more so because he was a very rich man) although he had various different ideas on the matter from the general run of socialists, for he was always a man who thought and acted independently. ²

Morris made a journey around Iceland many years ago, and was known to many people here. The English have lost one of their most remarkable men, and indeed their papers are heaping praise upon him.

The editor of Thjóðólfr, publishing his weekly paper two days later, evidently felt that Morris’s death had lost its news value and so gave it far less space:

William Morris has died, the English poet who travelled around this country in 1871 and 1873. He was a most delightful man and entered into a special relationship with Iceland and our ancient literature. Together with our fellow-countryman Eiríkr Magnússon he published several English translations of our classic sagas.

The news by now had reached the far northwest of Iceland, where Thjóðvikinn ungi was being published in the trading-station of Isafjörður to fill the political gap left by the suspension of publication of Thjóðvikinn in Reykjavík. Today this a staunchly left-wing paper, but the tone of the paragraph suggests that its readers ninety years ago were not expected to know much about socialism:

On 10th inst. there died at his home in Hammersmith one of the more outstanding Englishmen, the poet William Morris. He was born in Walthamstow, near London, 24th March 1834, and he leaves behind him quite a lot of novels and various other writings. Amongst other things he, with our fellow-countryman Eiríkr Magnússon M.A., has put into English Grettir’s Saga, Völsunga, Frithiof the Bold and still more of our ancient sagas. In politics Morris was a member of the “socialist” party, and the leaders of that party often held their meetings at his house.

For more considered obituaries of Morris Icelandic readers had to wait some time. There are two such major appreciations, both by men who had known Morris personally and whose memories of him reflect the magnetic attraction he had for people of quite different characters.

Matthias Jochumsson (1835-1920) was one (and arguably the best) of the three great poets of Iceland in his generation. He was also a somewhat free-thinking Lutheran clergyman, founder and first editor of the paper Thjóðólfr, and prolific and effective translator of Scandinavian, English and German literature into Icelandic, including several of Shakespeare’s plays. He was a fervent patriot (he composed Iceland’s national anthem) but not a political activist, which seems to be why Eiríkr Magnússon, that fiery advocate of Icelandic independence, severed what had been a warm friendship. In the obituary of William Morris which he wrote for the fortnightly paper Stefni (10.12.1896), published in the northern township of Akureyri where he was the pastor, Matthias reveals a poor memory for dates but a vivid recollection of his last meeting with the man he had once described in a letter to Magnússon as “that real-live, lion-like Welsh Völsung” (Bréf Matthíasar Jochumssonar p. 126; Akureyri 1935):

William Morris

As is well known, this great man has vanished from the stage of life. No more famous artist has visited our country in this century than he. Morris was long reckoned the third-ranking poet of England, and the second since Lord Tennyson died. The other is Algernon Swinburne, an extraordinary imaginative writer and full-blown radical. Neither he nor Morris cared for the social organization and political structures of their
fellow-countrymen and despised most of their conventional opinions in social, moral and religious matters. Morris however was more restrained in his approach, but determined and consistent.

I knew him first when he travelled here in 1867 with his friend Eiríkr Magnússon. Later I met him several times in London, in 1871, '73, '76 and '85, and several times visited his home. He always welcomed Icelanders very warmly. When I visited him last, in 1885, he had become famous as a leading Socialist. I was quite startled when I saw this bold, distinctive man again, he had changed so much in appearance. The raven-black flowing locks of the artist had turned white and his whole appearance was much more elderly; yet he was only just over 50.

He said he was living more economically than before and had only red wine on the table. He said he had a great deal of work to do for his friends, and in fact there was to be a private meeting held that very evening in his house, which was spacious and fitting for a great man. He asked me to stay until the last moment, unless I could come back and visit him again later. I had to leave the next day and therefore had to make that visit do, though I bitterly regretted not having more time with such a person.

Whoever saw Morris once, never forgot him afterwards.

I remember some details of our conversation. I asked: "Has Iceland a future?"

"I should hope so. You are not a degenerate nation yet!"

"I thought you English looked on us as village idiots."

"Take ten Englishmen at random and similarly ten Icelanders. Then let's examine the fellows, and you'll see that your countrymen outstrip ours in intelligence. You have learned to think, in your sparse population and poverty, better than our people in our crowds and surrounded by plenty; then you have long been a literate nation and your strength is founded on a marrow of books."

"What do we Icelanders need most? home rule? more and better fields of employment? improved communications? or better schools and education?"

"Why not all those things and more into the bargain?" says Morris, "but I would say that all these advancements, obvious as they are, are only half way to the cultural condition which the future demands."

"What do you call that cultural condition?"

"It's a national community built on common ownership."

Now I understood what he was getting at, and began to clear my throat as if I were at home: "You mean," I said, "Socialism?"

"Yes," said Morris, "and no nation under the sun should find it easier to introduce than you Icelanders. You have nothing to lose but crofters' cottages and hummocky fields, and those your local communities ought to buy up or inherit little by little, and then the problem would be solved, if you learn to consider one another's interests and are willing to listen to common sense and the laws of nature."

"How can this be brought about?"

"It's as easy as anything could be – here! look here!" And as he spoke he thrust at me a stack of papers and pamphlets, and at that moment the clock struck and my time was up.

Morris was one of those I parted from only with reluctance. I never saw him again. But when recently I read an article by the Rev. Gudmundur [Gudmundsson] of Gufudalur, I recalled the words of Morris as I have quoted them; his pamphlets I lost.
up north in Newcastle, but his words are now my own opinion, although I have not the gift and never have had of arguing it. Time will tell.

Countless younger poets are now competing for prominence in England, but it is uncertain that any of them will achieve the fame of Morris, because he was without doubt one of the greatest artists the English have had, and his craftsmanship, taste and enormous versatility claim kinship with the artists of the Renaissance. The arts, history, freedom and honour were what this great man lived by. His excellent poems and translations from our literature have done more for its fame and ours than the combined efforts of other foreigners in that direction. The name of Vilhjálmur Morris ought to be written in gold in the history of Iceland.

The remaining obituarist was a generation younger than Morris and Matthías, an Icelandic scholar called Jón Stefánsson (1862-1952) who had written probably the first D. Phil. thesis ever on Browning, in Copenhagen in 1891. From 1893 onwards he made his home in London, where he taught part-time at King’s College and otherwise made his living by journalism and other writing. It was both as a literary critic and as a young man welcomed into Morris’s home that he wrote his appreciation of William Morris in the 1897 issue of the journal Eimreitind. The article was illustrated by a reproduction of G.F. Watts’s portrait of Morris at the age of 37 (see frontispiece to Collected Works, Vol. III).

William Morris (1834-1896)
Iceland has lost the man who raised the name of Iceland higher than any other foreigner. It is safe to say that William Morris loved the Icelandic language, sagas and nation more deeply than any other foreigner with the exception of Konrad Maurer. He was one of the leading poets of England in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and it will be long before the gap is filled which his death left in the ranks of Iceland’s friends.

Morris was the son of a rich merchant near London. He went to Oxford University and then devoted most of his time to the arts. He was one of a band of young men who wanted to bring a new spirit, the spirit of the Middle Ages, to the poetry and art of the English. They were called revolutionaries then, but later became famous, and as examples one can cite Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Ford Madox Brown, Burne-Jones and Holman Hunt. It was not long before Morris discovered that he could talk in verse as easily as in prose, and he then began to compose poetry. He had an extraordinary facility in composition and it would certainly not have seemed to him particularly difficult to compose Höfudlausn in one night, for he once wrote 800 lines of his Lovers of Gudrun after midnight and had finished them before daybreak.

Morris’s writings are these, in order of publication: [A list of thirteen major prose and verse works follows, with the titles given in English and Icelandic.]

In addition to these works Morris translated into verse the Aeneid of Virgil, the Odyssey and Beowulf and various texts from Old French.

Morris early made the acquaintance of our fellow-countryman Eiríkr Magnússon, and a great friendship developed between them. He opened for Morris the world of the Icelandic sagas, which enchanted him for the rest of his life. The two friends travelled around Iceland and examined the saga-sites. Indeed, it is plain from Morris’s Lovers of Gudrun that he had not forgotten the majestic landscapes which impressed him so much. The two have translated into English many of our sagas: Grettir the Strong (1869), Gunnlaug the Worm-tongue (in the journal Fortnightly
Review, 1869), Frithof the Bold, Gunnlaug and Viglund the Fair (1875), and The Ere-Dwellers, Howard the Halt, The Banded Men and Heimskringla in a saga-collection called The Saga Library which began to come out in 1891.

Since Morris's poetry strikes us Icelanders most strongly when it touches us most nearly, I shall comment on that aspect of his work. In The Earthly Paradise there are 24 stories in verse, two for each month. The story of Laxdaela saga is told in November and covers pp 336-526 of the work. It is given the title The Lovers of Gudrun; the story of Aslaug, daughter of Sigurd Fafnir's-bane, is told in December. Morris begins the story of Gudrun Oswif's daughter "Nigh where Laxriver meets the western sea". Guest interprets her dreams and meets Olaf Peacock and foretells the future of Kiartan and Bolli (whom Morris calls Bodli, to indicate the modern Icelandic pronunciation). Morris treats well for example the parting between Princess Ingibiorg and Kiartan, and the vengeful thoughts of Gudrun as she lies awake at night, unable to sleep. "Theim var ek verst, er ek unna mest" he expresses as "I did the worst to him I loved the most", and this is a good example of how closely he follows the saga. Oehlenschläger has twisted and distorted the saga in his play Kiartan and Gudrun, and Morris's success is incomparably higher. Yet there is a greater air of gloom and sense of tragedy about the characters in The Lovers of Gudrun than in Laxdaela saga.

The poem about Sigurd Fafnir's-bane (1877) is on a grand scale and stately, as befits the material. It is in four sections: I. Concerning Sigmund, the father of Sigurd. II. Regin (Sigurd is born, kills Fafnir and Regin, cuts the mail-coat from Brynhild on Hindfell – this last is described with incomparable artistry). III. Brynhild (her dream, Sigurd among the Niblungs, Gudrun, the riding of the Wavering Fire, the slaying of Sigurd, the release of Gudrun's grief, Brynhild's suicide on the pyre). IV. Gudrun (Atli, the slaying of the Niblungs, Gudrun's death). Morris often followed the rules of Icelandic alliteration in this work, and I take as an example this line describing Sigurd: "For they look on the might of his limbs and his waving locks they see."

It is truly remarkable how well he captures the kennings and the verbal artistry of the Edda poems and of Völsunga saga, and indeed he exerted himself to do so, because the material is the noblest any poet could have, and it will always be the highest test of a poet to handle it. Richard Wagner has likewise used the material of Völsunga in his great musical tetralogy about the Volsungs and Niblungs, and this will never grow old. In Poems by the Way there is a poem about Hallbiorn the Strong from the Book of Settlements, and another about Gunnar of Lithend. The poem "Iceland first seen" expresses Morris's love for the country.

In the latter part of his life Morris was a socialist and wrote much in verse and prose in support of those views. He was gifted in most of the arts, for he was poet, painter, printer – his Kelmscott Press printed costlier and more beautiful books than any other publishing house –, architect, tapestry-maker and more. He was unwilling that a single stone should be moved in beautiful old churches, but would cheerfully have had the entire clergy hanged.

I often attended meetings held at his house, and on one occasion a speaker referred to me as a Dane – he knew no better than that Iceland was Danish. Then Morris rose up in wrath and said that Denmark was not worthy to unloose the latchet of an Islander's shoe, let alone to oppress him, though this it was willing enough to do if it had the power. All the northern countries, and England too, were the spiritual colonies of
Iceland. I shall not repeat more of his vilification of the Danes, but the speaker said he had spoken in ignorance and begged forgiveness.

Morris was like an Icelandic farmer in appearance, a tough, strongly-built man, with touches of red in hair and beard, blue-eyed and with a piercing gaze. He was very informal in dress. He was a rich man, and left about a million króna. He owned a factory near London where tapestries were woven and various furnishings made which improved the taste of the English in interior decoration. He was a very charitable man and generous with money to the poor. Those who knew him best had the highest regard for him, but to some outsiders he appeared rather obstreperous; and indeed he never minced his words, whoever he had dealings with, and held his tongue about nothing of which he disapproved.

He leaves a wife and two daughters.

These news items and obituaries, taken together, show clearly that while the Icelanders tended to take a rather insular view of William Morris as primarily an apologist for Icelandic literature, some at least had a wider appreciation of his extraordinary range of achievement. Those who had known him personally held him in the warmest regard, and those to whom he was only a name nonetheless shared the view that his death was a loss to Iceland as much as to England.

NOTES
2 Lit. (proverbial) “He did not tie his pack-horse's load with the same knots as his fellow travellers.”
3 The Icelanders, being predominantly fair or red-haired, tend to describe any hair colour darker than mid-brown as black.
4 Konrad von Maurer (1823-1902), linguist, jurist, historian and enthusiast for Iceland, which he visited more than once. His publications were chiefly on the history and development of Norse and German law, but he also wrote a standard history of Iceland from the Settlement to the fall of the Republic.
5 Höfudlausn or “Head-ransom” was the poem reputedly composed in one night by the Icelander Egill Skallagrímsson while under house-arrest in York, in order to persuade his enemy King Eiríkr Bloodaxe not to execute him in the morning. Morris admired Egils saga and began a translation of it; the first thirty-nine chapters survive in an illuminated manuscript at Kelmscott Manor and were published by May Morris in William Morris: Artist Writer Socialist Vol. I.
6 Adam Gotlob Oehlenschläger (1779-1850), Danish Romantic poet and dramatist, who drew on Norse material, especially mythology, for many of his works.