

# Fire and Ice: Clashing Visions of Iceland in the Travel Narratives of Morris and Burton

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Thomas Carlyle once described Iceland as “a wild gleaming beauty in summertime ... like the waste chaotic battlefield of Frost and Fire.”<sup>1</sup> These qualities may be used to suggest the remarkable contrast between two larger-than-life Victorian personalities, the celebrated explorer, Sir Richard Burton, and the famed man of arts and letters, William Morris. The contrast between these two men of prolific insight and energy – one the translator of the warm, erotic tales of the East and the other of the cold, love-lorn tales of the North – is perhaps nowhere better demonstrated than in their travel narratives of Iceland, documents revealing widely divergent opinions of a majestic land of glaciers and geysers.

By 1872, William Morris was not personally acquainted with Richard Francis Burton. In May of that year, however, Morris had written his friend and collaborator on Icelandic translation, Eiríkr Magnússon, with the hope “you will smash Burton when you do fall on him. He is one of the curses of our humbugging society now-a-days.”<sup>2</sup> Later that year, on 4 November, Morris again wrote Magnusson, “I am curious to see what that humbug Burton has to say about Iceland”<sup>3</sup>.

Morris was referring to an early version of Burton’s characteristically effusive observations on “unexplored territory,” this time made from a summer sulfur-mining expedition. Burton’s account appeared in the *Morning Standard* from October through November of 1872 and was expanded and published in 1875 in two veritable tomes entitled *Ultima Thule; or, A Summer in Iceland*, a likely allusion to the imperialistic line from Book I of Vergil’s *Georgics*, a prophecy that tribute would be brought to Caesar from “the ends of the earth.” Burton’s extended commentary on Iceland – teeming with charts, tables, illustrations, footnotes and maps – was greeted by a lukewarm reading public, although it was reviewed rather favorably in *The Edinburgh Review* in 1876.<sup>4</sup> After a second – and much shorter – trip to Iceland in the summer of 1875, Burton completed the manuscript of another book, *Iceland Revisited*, but this second book found no publishers.<sup>5</sup>

Morris had good reason to be curious about Burton’s “version” of Iceland. During the previous summer he had himself visited that island for the first time, following a flurry of activity translating “the Great Story of the North,” a work he had described in the Preface to his 1870 translation of the *Volsunga Saga* as “that which should be to all our race what the tale of Troy was to the Greeks.”<sup>6</sup> Morris had been “mining” for an emotional and literary past – not sulfur – in Iceland, and his explorations were recorded in a much more humble form than Burton’s, and to a much different

audience, in a private journal he later gave to his friend Georgiana Burne-Jones. It remained unpublished until after his death.

These two texts, because so discrepant, offer intriguing examples of Victorian travel narratives and their rhetorical negotiations within a larger climate of exploration and expansion, the kind of narratives that have only relatively recently come into the mainstream of cultural criticism and critique. Travel literature can in fact be recognized as the quintessential mouthpiece for what cultural critics like Michael Cotsell identify as “the tensions of distance and displacement” that particularly affected middle-class Victorians.<sup>7</sup> These two versions of Iceland offer contrasting aspects of Victorian subjectivity, one establishing the sovereignty of the English ego, the other – in the words of Deirdre David – “widening individual perspective”<sup>8</sup> and expanding the sense of the individual’s place in human community. Burton’s *Ultima Thule* and Morris’s *Iceland Journals*, are vastly different – Burton’s encyclopedic, cataloguing, and critical; Morris’s modest, contemplative, and commendatory.

In Iceland, Burton was not confronting the non-Westernized cultures of West Africa or the Punjab. Nonetheless, his rhetorical gestures in and toward Iceland are characterized by his own “colonizing discourse,” a discourse David Spurr recognizes in his 1993 book, *The Rhetoric of Empire*, as “a kind of repertoire ... of tropes, conceptual categories, and logical operations ... [negotiating around a] landscape in which relations of power manifest themselves.”<sup>9</sup> As in most recent considerations of imperialism and of colonial discourse, I utilize the concept broadly. Spurr’s general definition of imperialism as “a set of relations between two different cultures; one fast-moving, technologically advanced and economically powerful; the other slow-moving and without advanced technology or a complex economy”<sup>10</sup> applies appropriately to Burton’s relation to Iceland. Burton never loses sight of this essential difference between England and Iceland, nor of the relationships of commercial power existing between them. Iceland – like the southern regions he was sent by the British government to investigate under the aegis of the East India Company – was a region to explore for the purpose of controlling a land through its natural resources.

In *Ultima Thule*, we find Burton once again the self-proclaimed “representative of his nation,”<sup>11</sup> the Englishman subordinating all that he surveys to the power of his “life-long habit of observation”<sup>12</sup> and his position as an official “of the most powerful imperialist nation in the world.”<sup>13</sup> In Morris’s two *Journals* of his trips to Iceland we often find, by contrast, a record of Morris as a novice traveler, blundering, bellowing, and blustering his way through a land in which he is continually thunderstruck.

It is among other things their differing points of comparison that account for the contrasting perspectives of their narratives. Burton’s trip to Iceland was little more than a footnote in his global wanderings. By 1872, he had lived and traveled extensively in India, Africa, the Middle East, and South America. For Burton every vista, far and near, was measured against his own memories of previous travels. He describes the famous volcano, Hekla, for example, as “only a commonplace heap, half the height of Hermon, and a mere pygmy compared with the Andine peaks.”<sup>14</sup> Later, he describes the Kleifavatn – or “cliff-water” – in Western Iceland as “a lake of intensely gloomy shore” that immediately brings to mind regions in warmer climes:

The dark waters, ending south in a swamp, were lashed by the wind into mimic waves, and the shores were grisly masses, standing and fallen ... I could not but

remember the Lake of Hums, so similar, and yet so different, under the glowing Syrian sky; the picturesque contrasts of cultivation and desert contrasting with the lava-bound water, and the memory-haunted stream which once found a mouth at Rome – [followed by yet another erudite allusion, a Latin quotation].<sup>15</sup>

Burton's view of Iceland is established via the sovereignty of his own ego, through the medium of his status as a privileged English explorer and "man of the world," though he mockingly – and quite ironically – deflates that image in one passage, a kind of confessional disclaimer in which he notes that "[t]hose who have seen much of the world make themselves unintelligible and unpleasant (myself alas!) by drawing parallels between scenes unknown or unfamiliar to their Public."<sup>16</sup>

Iceland was by contrast, a centerpiece of Morris's middle life, the culmination of his immersion in Northern saga. When later trying to capture the spirit of Morris's literary appeal, C.S. Lewis cited "that Northernness,"<sup>17</sup> he was perhaps approximating the Victorians' sensibility towards the Arctic sublime,<sup>18</sup> a response of awe in the presence of the starkness and stillness of raw, icy regions. Burton, on the other hand, had never been enamoured of northern climes and grew up, according to his most recent biographer, not unlike the "gypsy" his physical appearance suggested, in parts of southern Europe – mainly in France and Italy. Particularly in his youth, Burton had considered even England a cold, northern place. Writing after a school holiday from Oxford, where he briefly studied as a young man, Burton wrote, "How melancholy when on our way to the chill dolorous North!"<sup>19</sup>

Years later, in Iceland, Burton seemed intent upon taming a northernness he could neither appreciate nor understand through the sheer exhaustion of his subject. Almost the entire first volume of *Ultima Thule* is a carefully classified system of notes on everything from political organization to natural zoology and from physical geography to physical anthropology. In all categories Burton applies similar habits of surveillance. Everything in nature is commodified, turned into an object through Burton's schema of classification. People, too, become "specimens" described on a scale from best to worst.<sup>20</sup> Even in a "westernized" context, Burton's habit of classification falls within that colonizing "realm of discourse ... [that] performs [a] policing function, assigning positions, regulating groups, and enforcing boundaries."<sup>21</sup> Despite this ponderous and pedantic detail, Burton was performing his official, bureaucratic role in Iceland and his written record of it is little more than what one bibliographer describes as "a typical Burton travel account" in two volumes.<sup>22</sup> Burton had no real *interest* in that cold northern land, so near an Arctic terrain already mapped, charted, and contained.<sup>23</sup>

Morris's Icelandic Journals serve a very different function from that of "policing" his terrain. In fact, their very private rather than public purpose is highlighted by a quality which is both emotional and confessional. Fiona MacCarthy has recently described Morris's first journal in terms of its intended audience, his close personal friend Georgiana Burne-Jones. "[W]ritten with a sympathetic female reader in his mind," she writes, "[t]he journal has a wonderful immediacy, consisting not just in its conventional traveller's descriptions of the passing scene ... Its peculiar quality arises from the sub-text, revealing the responses he kept from his fellow travellers, emotions that in a sense subverted the male camaraderie, whole networks of private apprehensions and joys."<sup>24</sup>

Morris's descriptions in both Journals defy the bombastic and rhetorical. Even the descriptions of massive formations are simple and concrete. The pass at Hellisskar, for example, is "a great plain of black and grey sand, grey rocks sticking up out of it."<sup>25</sup> He neither compares, nor classifies, but instead artfully designs the landscape he discovers in Iceland. Amid the greyness at Hellisskar, for example, he describes the "tufts of sea pink, and bladder campion scattered about here and there, and a strange plant, a dwarf willow, that grows in these waters only, a few sprays of long, green leaves wreathing about as it were a tangle of bare roots, white and blanched like bones."<sup>26</sup> In descriptions such as these, Morris evokes the ordered patterns of his wall-papers or fabrics.

Even in their characteristic methods of surveillance, Burton and Morris took very different physical postures toward Iceland. In *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992), Mary Louise Pratt considers scenic descriptions in travel narratives in terms of visual mastery, an activity whereby the traveler takes a posture of ownership or overlordship towards the physical landscape. The result in this kind of "imperial stylistics" is often sweeping panoramas or promontory descriptions in which the viewer/explorer becomes "the monarch of all he surveys."<sup>27</sup>

In Iceland Burton verbally postured as the "painter" of broad tableaux, standing above while describing scenes below, much as he had done in his narratives of African exploration.<sup>28</sup> After reaching the Bitruhals, an area of Iceland standing some 2000 feet above sea level, for example, Burton begins, "Through the reel and dance of the morning air we looked *down* upon Breidalsvik; the Broad Dale is parted into a northern and southern feature by ... a great spine of trap, and the nearest section is split by three large perpendicular Gjas,"<sup>29</sup> and he follows with a comprehensive mastery of detail that ends in telescopic description of a stream bank full of yellow poppies.<sup>30</sup> Morris, by contrast, characteristically gazes *up* at scenes in Iceland, as when he peers up at the Thorsmark on his first visit:

... I sat down as soon as I was clear of the wood on the bare shale of the steep slope that overlooked the valley, and turned to the mountain that rose over the bounding wall of rock, the same scarped flat-topped mountain I have spoken of before.<sup>31</sup>

Ultimately these two travel narratives can be compared for the resonating effects on their producers. Burton's Icelandic excursions – his only exploration of cold, Northern climes – made no impact on his continued support of an expansionist policy, although as Burton's biographer, Edward Rice, is careful to point out, Burton would continue to be critical of the internal management of that policy. Burton's intentions in writing *Ultima Thule* were clearly patronizing and paternalistic. In his Preface, he stated that the main object of the book was "to advocate the development of the island," development accomplished on at least one point under the imperialistic auspices of British capitalism.<sup>32</sup> "I hold three measures to be absolutely necessary," he wrote, "the first is the working of the sulphur deposits – not to mention the silica – now in English hands; the second, a systematic reform of the primitive means and appliances with which the islanders labour in their gold mines, the fisheries; and thirdly, the extension of the emigrating movement, now become a prime need when the population is denser than in any period in its thousand-year history."<sup>33</sup>

While Burton believed that *he* could make a significant impact on Iceland (expressed most explicitly through the proposal of these three measures), Morris found that

Iceland had made an impact on *him*. On 22 July 1871, while gazing *up* at the mountains of Thorsmark, he describes his unique epiphany:

I could see its whole dismal length now, crowned with overhanging glaciers ... Below was the flat black plain space of the valley, and all about it every kind of distortion and disruption, and the labyrinth of the furious brimstone-laden Markfleet winding amidst it lay between us and anything like smoothness: surely it was what I “came out for to see,” yet at the moment I felt cowed, and as if I should never get back again: yet with that came a feeling of exaltation too, and I seemed to understand how people under all disadvantages should find their imaginations kindle amid such scenes.<sup>34</sup>

That icy, small northern island with its poverty and desolate terrain helped inch Morris even further away from support of British colonial policy. His later backing of the Eastern Question Association (1876-1878) and of Irish Home Rule (1885-1896) were at least an indirect result of his Icelandic journeys. Morris’s “vision of a non-exploitive, non-imperialist world,” recognized and extolled by cultural critics like Patrick Brantlinger in his *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism* (1988),<sup>35</sup> may very well have begun in Iceland.<sup>36</sup> Icelandic scenes had helped Morris, as Deirdre David recognizes foreign scenes had other Victorians, to “widen [his] individual perspective ... and [to] create greater sympathetic understanding of the wider world.”<sup>37</sup> For Morris, widening of perspective was wrought through an important diminishment of the self, and as Frederick Kirchoff has already argued, that sense of a “diminished self” occurred in the face of what Morris viewed as Iceland’s geographical grandeur and isolation.<sup>38</sup>

Morris returned from Iceland with a strong sense of public duty to his own world. He subsequently renewed his youthful conviction of the need to challenge British society to change and ultimately to promote social revolution. E.P. Thompson eloquently evaluated Iceland’s impact on Morris:

[I]n the early 1870s, the years of his despair ... new strength came to him, not from his work, ... nor from new friendships, ... nor from any experience in his everyday life. He drew this strength, as it seemed, from the energies and aspirations of a poor people in a barren northern island ... There can be few more striking examples of the regenerative resources of culture than this renewal of courage and of faith in humanity which was blown from Iceland to William Morris.<sup>39</sup>

Morris himself explained, “In 1871 I went to Iceland with Mr. Magnússon, and apart from my pleasure in seeing that romantic desert, I learned one lesson there, thoroughly I hope, that the most grinding poverty is a trifling evil compared with the inequality of classes.”<sup>40</sup> Iceland remained throughout Morris’s life the “place that open[ed] itself to the realities of otherness.”<sup>41</sup> It was in geographical fact, one of those “border regions” Spurr addresses in the final chapter of his book on colonial discourse, a place that “define[s] the outer limits of Western European culture ... in such places it is possible to live both in and beyond the West.”<sup>42</sup> In that transcendence, Morris was allowed his vision of a ‘new world order.’

It is easy to fall under the biographical spell of both Sir Richard Burton and William Morris. Both men were in some respects “Renaissance men,” accomplishing in their respective fields more than several men in one lifetime. It has been my purpose here,

however, to investigate the intriguing and resonating clash between their two very different accounts of Iceland. Their opposing positions on a scale of “colonial attitudes” are less that surprising. There is ample evidence in these Icelandic narratives of Morris’s more “humanitarian” and Burton’s more “authoritarian” views of that icy borderland. What we are left with, nonetheless, is Carlyle’s Iceland, that place where Burton’s fire and the Morris’s frost quite majestically clashed.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Quoted in James Morris, ed., *Icelandic Journals of William Morris*, Praeger, New York, 1969, p.xvi.
- <sup>2</sup> Norman Kelvin, ed., *The Collected Letters of William Morris* Vol. I., Princeton U.P., 1984, 159. (Letter 163).
- <sup>3</sup> *ibid.* 168. (Letter 175). See also Kelvin’s note to Letter 163; I, 159.
- <sup>4</sup> G. W. Dasent, ‘Iceland and Its Explorers,’ *The Edinburgh Review*. Vol. CXLIII, 1876, 114-128.
- <sup>5</sup> Bryan Farwell, *Burton: A Biography of Richard Francis Burton*, Viking, New York, 1988, p.318.
- <sup>6</sup> May Morris, ed., *The Collected Works of William Morris*. Vol. VII, Longmans, London, 1910, 286.
- <sup>7</sup> Michael Cotsell, ed., *Creditable Warriors*, Ashfield Press, London, 1990, p.19.
- <sup>8</sup> Deidre David, ‘Getting out of the Eel Jar’ in *Creditable Warriors*, p.258.
- <sup>9</sup> David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire*, Duke University Press, North Carolina, 1993, p.3.
- <sup>10</sup> *ibid.* p.6.
- <sup>11</sup> Quoted in Isabel Burton, *The Life of Captain Sir Richard F. Burton*, Chapman and Hall, London, 1893, Vol. II, 66.
- <sup>12</sup> Sir Richard Francis Burton, *Ultima Thule; or, A Summer in Iceland*, Vol. I, London, William P. Nimmo, 1875, xiii.
- <sup>13</sup> Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914*. Cornell U.P., New York, 1988, p.166.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ultima Thule*, I, 653.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ultima Thule*, II, 132.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ultima Thule*, I, i.
- <sup>17</sup> C.S. Lewis, ‘William Morris’ in *Rehabilitations and Other Essays*, Oxford U.P., London, 1939, p.37.
- <sup>18</sup> Chauncey Loomis, ‘The Arctic Sublime’ in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1977, pp.95-112.
- <sup>19</sup> Quoted in Edward Rice, *Captain Sir Richard Francis Burton*, Scribner’s, New York, 1990, p.18.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ultima Thule*, I, 132.
- <sup>21</sup> Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire*, p.63.
- <sup>22</sup> James Casada, *Sir Richard F. Burton: A Bibliographical Study*. Viking, New York, 1990, p.68. Fawn Brodie also comments on the general *ennui* of *Ultima Thule*, noting that “one has the impression that for the first time in his life Burton was writing simply to keep himself afloat” (See *The Devil Drives: A Life of Sir Richard Francis Burton*, Eyre and Spottiswoode, London, 1967, p.267).

- <sup>23</sup> According to David Spurr, without a genuine consciousness of interest no discourse is capable of resisting imperialism (See *The Rhetoric of Empire*, p.192).
- <sup>24</sup> Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Times* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), p.281.
- <sup>25</sup> Cited from James Morris, ed., *Icelandic Journals of William Morris*, Praeger, New York, 1969, p.75. Subsequent quotations are from this edition.
- <sup>26</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>27</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Acculturation*, Routledge, New York, 1992, p.204.
- <sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, pp.201-205.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ultima Thule*, II, 246-247.
- <sup>30</sup> *ibid.* II, 247.
- <sup>31</sup> *Icelandic Journals of William Morris*, p.54.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ultima Thule*, I, xiv.
- <sup>33</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>34</sup> *Icelandic Journals of William Morris*, p.54.
- <sup>35</sup> *Rule of Darkness*, p.16.
- <sup>36</sup> Edward Said has also remarked on Morris's opposition to imperialism, most notably in his *Culture and Imperialism*, Knopf, New York, 1993, p.241.
- <sup>37</sup> David in *Creditable Warriors*, p.258.
- <sup>38</sup> Frederick Kirchoff, *William Morris: The Construction of a Male Self, 1856-1872*, Ohio U.P., Athens, 1990, p.224.
- <sup>39</sup> E.P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, Pantheon, New York, 1976, p.176.
- <sup>40</sup> Kelvin, ed., *Collected Letters*, II, 229. (Letter 911).
- <sup>41</sup> Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire*, p.196.
- <sup>42</sup> *ibid.*