Views of Reykjavik

Here is Morris's description of Reykjavik, compared with that of Sabine Baring Gould of 1863 and Lord Dufferin's of 1856. The plan of the town is from the latter's book—a piece of book-making as Morris calls it, not liking Baring Gould's rather flippant tone: all the same, its illustrations, from Baring Gould's drawings, are admirable.

Friday, July 14th. At Reykjavik in the house of Maria Einar's-döttir.

Up at nine and on deck to find that we were just off Reykjaness round which we turn the corner into Faxafirth, the bay in which Reykjavik lies: it was a fine bright day, but rather cold. We were some time getting up the firth as the wind was now against us; but at last we sighted Reykjavik and were soon able to see what it was to be like: the shores of the bay are flat and dull except that towards the northwest rise two great mountains, Akrafjall and Esja, of the haystack shape so common here, and black striped with green in colour; as we went on we saw another range of hills to the east, not very high but characteristic in shape, a jagged wall, with a pyramid rising amidst them; they are bare, and browner than the others, and come from the lava in fact. The town now lying ahead is a commonplace-looking little town of wood principally; but there are pretty-looking homesteads on some of the islands off it, and the bright green of their home-meads is a great relief to us after all the grey of the sea, and the ice-hills. At last we come to anchor and the boats pull off to us and the flags are run up to the flagstaffs of the stores on shore, and to the masts of the craft in the harbour. A little after dinner we go ashore and land in a street of little low wooden houses, pitched, and with white sash frames; the streets of black volcanic sand; little ragged gardens about some of the houses growing potatoes, cabbages, and huge stems of angelica: not a very attractive place, yet not very bad, better than a north-country town in England. Magnússon takes us to our lodging, a very clean room in one of the little wooden houses, which stands back from the road in its potato and angelica garden, with a hayfield, where they are at work now at the back.

from William Morris's Iceland Journal (1871)
Collected Works Vol VIII, pp 22–23

Reykjavik is a jumble of wooden shanties, pitched down wherever the builder listed. Some of the houses are painted white, the majority black, one has broken out in green shutters, another is daubed over with orange. The roofs are also of wood, and coloured black or grey. The town lies between the sea and a fresh-water lake full of reeds and wild-fowl; it is in the shape of a rude parallelogram, facing the sea on one side, showing its back to the lake on the other; the other sides rise up the slopes of hills from three to four hundred feet high, the one crowned by a windmill, the other by the Roman Catholic mission.

Near the lake is a square, or market-place, covered with turf, the cathedral forming the most conspicuous object in it. At right angles is the French consulate and apothecary's shop combined.
There are but two streets, and these are hardly worthy of the name. One leads from the jetty to the inn, and is called the Athalstræti, or High Street; in it live the agent for the steamer and the printer. The second starts from this street, and terminates at a bridge crossing a brook, which flows from the lake into the sea. In this thoroughfare live the sheriff (Landvogt) and Professor Pjétur Pjétursson, head of the theological seminary. The sea-front is occupied by a line of merchant stores. The moment that the main thoroughfares are quitted, the stench emitted from the smaller houses becomes insupportable. Decayed fish, offal, filth of every description, is tossed anywhere for the rain to wash away, or for the passer-by to trample into the ground.

As you approach the shore, you are very much reminded of the west coast of Scotland, except that everything is more intense, the atmosphere clearer, the light more vivid, the air more bracing, the hills steeper, loftier, more tormented, as the French say, and more gaunt; while between their base and the sea stretches a dirty greenish slope, patched with houses which, themselves both roof and walls, are of a mouldy green, as if some long-since inhabited country had been fished up out of the bottom of the sea.

The effects of light and shadow are the purest I ever saw, the contrasts of colour most astonishing—one square front of a mountain jutting out in a blaze of gold against the flank of another, dyed of the darkest purple, while up against the azure sky beyond rise peaks of glittering snow and ice. The snow, however, beyond, serving as an ornamental fringe to the distance, plays but a very poor part at this season of the year in Iceland. While I write, the thermometer is above 70°. Last night we remained playing at chess on deck till bedtime, without thinking of calling for coats, and my people live in their shirt sleeves, and—astonishment at the climate.
Notwithstanding that its site, as I mentioned in my last letter, was determined by auspices not less divine than those of Rome or Athens, Reykjavik is not so fine a city as either, though its public buildings may be thought to be in better repair. In fact, the town consists of a collection of wooden sheds, one story high, rising here and there into a gable end of greater pretensions, built along the lava beach, and flanked at either end by a suburb of turf huts.

On every side of it extends a desolate plain of lava that once must have boiled up red-hot from some distant gateway of hell, and fallen hissing into the sea. No tree or bush relieves the dreariness of the landscape, and the mountains are too distant to serve as a background to the buildings; but before the door of each merchant’s house facing the sea there flies a gay little pennon; and as you walk along the silent streets, whose dust no carriage-wheel has ever desecrated, the rows of flower-pots that peep out of the windows, between curtains of white muslin, at once convince you that, notwithstanding their unpretending appearance, within each dwelling reign the elegance and comfort of a woman-tended home.

_from Letters from High Latitudes Lord Dufferin and Ava, pp 25 & 29_