News from Iceland

by Hugh Bushell

Morris' Journals of Travel in Iceland, unlike most of his other writings, have been published in full only in the Collected Works of which but 1050 copies were printed. Consequently these Journals are probably not as well known as they deserve to be for they throw an interesting sidelight on Morris' fascination for Old Norse literature and on the personality of a man who is thought of as an artist, a poet, a socialist and the rest, rather than as a traveller; and whose personality is, in any case, so elusive.

Morris visited Iceland twice: the first time, for six weeks, in 1871, in the company of Eiríkr Magnússon, whose native land it was, Charles Faulkner, who was drawn to the party simply by his attachment to Morris, and by his belief that a spell of open-air life would improve his health (it failed to do so: he even had a few days' illness on the way), and W. H. Evans, a recent acquaintance 'guiltless of all knowledge of Snorri or Gudrun or the Sturlungs' who joined the party for the fishing and shooting to be had in Iceland and was content to fall in with the plans of the other three. The second journey, in 1873, covered a longer and more arduous route than the first, lasted two whole months, and was undertaken by Morris and Faulkner alone.

Morris had never before kept a diary; but he felt the first journey to be of such great significance (to himself) that he recorded the events and impressions of each day in the battered and in places illegible notebooks which are now in the British Museum. Shortly before going on the second journey he revised the diary and copied it, giving the transcript to Lady Burne-Jones. Mackail says that he at one time thought of publishing it, but he never realized the idea. The diary of the second journey remained un-revised and uncompleted, and was published by May Morris 'almost as it stands'. The beginning of it is as fully written as the first diary, but after Dettifoss, the furthest point on the route, the account becomes day by day more abbreviated and allusive - 'A(kreyri) - busy - merchant, sorb trees: chaffer - hotel - me like Wapping - dull day, cold, no rain.' - and finally breaks off.
The valley of the Markfleet looking west from Thórsmörk. Morris in his Journal noted the ‘queer isolated rock or pike sticking out of the plain’ (Collected Works vol. VIII 53).

The Icelandic Journals have a more personal tone than most of Morris' other works. They are written, in the first instance, for himself alone; and even in the revised version of the first diary, he has no clear idea of the public for which he is writing—or whether, indeed, he is writing for any public at all apart from Lady Burne-Jones—so he allows his thoughts to flow naturally. Much space is, of course, taken up by minor details of camp-life: what the weather was like (a major topic when one is living in the open), who cooked the supper, whether the way was rough or smooth; but these are all part of the story. Other details are more revealing: Morris mentions his homesickness more than once, as if he were rather ashamed of it (he was completely without news of his family in the newly-discovered Kelmscott all the time that he was in Iceland); chance remarks here and there suggest that there was little sympathy between Morris, the poet and visionary, and Evans, the army-officer; and there are many humorous passages, relating the antics of intoxicated Icelanders, the behaviour of ponies when they get out of control, and, best of all, the
furious midnight quarrel between Morris and Faulkner as to who had been snoring the loudest (Collected Works, vol. VIII, p. 156).

The main theme of the Journals, however, is the landscape. Morris is undoubtedly a good delineator of landscape: he has the power of imagination and extreme sensitiveness to colour which enable him to re-create it in prose with an often startling vividness. He notes the blackness of the jagged mountains against a leaden sky (they really are black), the frequent red and brown scars, scorched into them by volcanic burning in past centuries, the strange formations of solidified basalt and the ‘wild seas of lava tossing up into great spires and ridges’, the steely blue of the sky and of distant mountain-ranges when the sun is out—a far more intense colour than is ever seen in England, the gentler scenery of Waterdale, Laxdale, and the fjords in the north-west, and the long white expanses above the mountains in the distance—are they cloudcaps or glaciers?

The landscape through which the party travels brings to Morris’ mind the scenes and characters in literature which are traditionally ascribed to it. He conjures up the feud between Njal and Gunnar at Bergþórhvoll, the events of Grettis-saga in Þorisdalur—‘certainly the sight of it threw a new light on the way in which the story-teller meant his tale to be looked on’—Snorri Sturluson and Ari, the historians, and the tales of Laxdale and Snæfellsnes. The last pilgrimage-place was Pingvellir, where the party spent three days. This wide, flat valley is more steeped in history than anywhere else in the country. Morris felt this profoundly and called it ‘the greatest marvel and most storied place in Iceland.’

And just occasionally there are revealing passages where he pauses to reflect in a more general way on his experiences and impressions in Iceland. They perhaps answer, indirectly, the question which he asks himself several times, both in the Journals and in Iceland First Seen: ‘What came we forth to see?’ and they also throw light on that curiously provocative statement of Mackail’s which, however, is left in mid-air without an answer: ‘The journey through Iceland in the summer of 1871 had, both before and after its occurrence, an importance in Morris’ life which can hardly be over-estimated and which, even to those who knew him well, was not wholly intelligible.’ Here is what Morris wrote at Herdholt, where the party had spent two days before leaving Laxdale: ‘Just think, though, what a mournful place this is—Iceland I mean—setting aside the pleasure of one’s animal life there:
the fresh air, the riding and rough life, and feeling of adventure — how every place and name marks the death of its short-lived eagerness and glory; and withal so little is the life changed in some ways: Olaf Peacock went about Summer and Winter after his live-stock, and saw to his hay-making and fishing just as this little peak-nosed parson does . . . But Lord! what littleness and helplessness has taken the place of the old passion and violence that had place here once — and all is unforgotten; so that one has no power to pass it by unnoticed: yet that must be something of a reward for the old life of the land, and I don’t think their life now is more unworthy than most people’s elsewhere, and they are happy enough by seeming. Yet it is an awful place: set aside the hope that the unseen sea gives you here, and the strange threatening change of the blue spiky mountains beyond the firth, and the rest seems emptiness and nothing else: a piece of turf under your feet and the sky overhead, that’s all; whatever solace your life is to have here must come out of yourself or these old stories, not over hopeful themselves.’

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The four members of the Society who set out in July in search of this ‘northern’ spirit in Morris, have recently returned from Iceland. Mackail remarks that the novelty and the hardships of a journey to Iceland in his day (1899) are considerably less than they were in 1871; to-day, of course, they are smaller still. We travelled by Land Rover, an easier and lazier means of transport than Morris’ train of 28 ponies, which, however, enabled us to cover in a month what he covered in 2½ months — all of his first route and part of his second. We did have one day on ponies, as well, riding up into the mountains from Geysir (the subject of much exaggerated abuse from Morris for being something of a tourist attraction, even in his day). He calls this section of the route ‘much the roughest road I have met with in Iceland,’ and indeed, even to-day, it is no road at all: the dotted line on the map indicates only that it is possible to get through that way, nothing more, and it is essential to have a guide. So we asked Sigurður, the farmer from the nearby Hankadalur, to be our guide. He consented, and we discovered that by a strange coincidence he was the grandson of ‘Sigurðr the bonder of Hawkdale’ who had acted as Morris’ guide 90 years ago.

To-day there are of course regular motor-roads in Iceland, but
the surfaces are not metalled, and they would be judged very poor by European standards. An additional hazard is that most of the available maps of the country are out of date; so that a track which may have been marked as 'passable in Summer' in 1932 is now practically impassable (the main road, did the map but show it, is perhaps just over the hill). We therefore found that on several occasions we had to improve the track with spades and crowbars before the Land Rover could get through—we comforted ourselves with Ruskin's precedent—and once we got fairly and squarely stuck in a river. A safe wide road now leads round the cliff of Búlandshöfði of which Morris was so terrified (‘... about which I had been feeling serious these two days, and had pretty much made up my mind for the worst’). It has only recently been finished, however, and not far away is still in the process of being built. The bulldozers were working on it when we arrived, and seeing us making our way over the uneven land, one of them came over to us and ploughed a road specially for us through the grass and scrub. We waved a cheery ‘Thank you’; but a few moments later we found ourselves skidding and sliding down the loose earth on the other side of the incline. So the bulldozer, this time a little impatient of the helpless English Land Rover, came thundering over to us again, and actually shovelled us to rights with its enormous metal pusher.

But to return to Morris. One interesting fact we did discover, which is probably not generally realised, is that, whatever the vicissitudes of fashion in England, his name is very well known in Iceland and always has been. Even among the humbler people that we met it served as a useful introduction and ice-breaker. And although with some the response was of the mild sort which implies familiarity with the name only, with many others it was one of genuine interest. He is remembered there chiefly as ‘a great English poet’, and for having been interested in Iceland; but many other reasons are given too—that he translated the sagas into English, that *Iceland First Seen* was translated into Icelandic, that he was mentioned in Icelandic poems, that he did much for the Icelandic Famine Relief Fund in the '80s, even that ‘we learn about him at school’. But it was Professor Sigurður Nordal's answer (to a question we became very used to asking) which, I think, went to the root of the matter. ‘You see’, he said, ‘so little happens in Iceland.’ This was even truer in 1871 than it is today: Iceland was a remote farming-community with negligible com-
munications, little visited by foreigners except the Danes, and the fact that four men from the important country of Britain should come specially to explore it, was news in itself. Added to this, the knowledge that Morris had a considerable reputation in his own country must have enhanced the story—perhaps it had even preceded him to Iceland through Magnússon—and thus the legend sprang up.

William Morris is a good person to go to Iceland with: his imagination and feeling for the place makes one's experiences much richer than they would otherwise have been. And so we arrived back in England, none too pleased with this enforced 'return to civilization'. We must place on record our gratitude, both to the Society as a body, and to the many individuals to whom we are indebted, for all the help so generously given to us. And we like to think that, had Morris known that four members of the Society named after him were going to Iceland, with his Journals for a guide, ninety years afterwards, he might himself have been a little amused.

*The valley of the Markfleet from the south side looking north-west. The three figures are Richard Haxworth, Anthony Wilson, and Hugh Bushell.*