

# Iceland and Kelmscott

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Roderick Marshall, in *William Morris and his Earthly Paradises*,<sup>1</sup> summarised, romantically, the generally-accepted impressions of Morris's involvement with Iceland and Kelmscott. He compared the 'paradise' of Kelmscott with the Icelandic 'anti-paradise of fire and ice'. Iceland was 'the landscape of hell'; it was epitomised by 'the gigantic chaos, the mournfulness, the dreadful wastes'. What could such a vision possibly have in common with the 'heaven on earth', the 'harbour of refuge' that was 'sweet and innocent' Kelmscott? Apparently nothing. The grouping together by writers of 'Kelmscott' and 'Iceland', for discussion in one or successive chapters, has not meant that any common bond has been examined. Such arrangement has been based purely on chronology, with Morris's discovery of both in 1871.

Iceland was not simply 'the wilderness' where Morris sought inner 'courage' to face the personal dilemmas of his life. John Purkis, in *The Icelandic Jaunt*,<sup>2</sup> referred like all to this 'wilderness' and quest, yet also he gleaned from the *Journals*<sup>3</sup> something of what Morris had seen but others have not. Purkis ascribed to the second journey of 1873 'new attitudes in the imagery and scenic descriptions':

... This time he notices the fertility of the country rather than its desolation and the similes refer to the earth and its life; ...

These observations were not confined to the second journey. Essentially Morris had recorded them in the first *Journal* and they were really only 'rounded off' in the second.

On Monday 17 July 1871, only eleven days after leaving London for the first Icelandic journey, Morris relates the following as part of the day's travel towards camp at Bolavellir:

... Most strange and awful the country looked ... a doleful land at first ...; varied though by a bank of sweet grass here and there full of flowers, and little willowy grey-leaved plants I can't name: till at last we come to our first river ...; it is wonderfully clear and its flowery green lips seemed quite beautiful. ... On thence ... to a stead named Holmr; ... with its grey wooden gables facing south, its turf walls, and sloping bright green home-field with *its* smooth turf wall: there the bonder and his folk were haymaking, ...

The next morning he was up 'at about nine', the night's sleep having been disturbed by 'the strangeness and excitement' which included such 'queer noises' as 'the wild song of the plovers'. In these descriptions stand elements which recur throughout both *Journals* and which unite Morris's response to Iceland and Kelmscott.

First, there are the pastures, flowers and plants. Even before Morris had disembarked from the 'Diana' he had noted the 'green of the pastures'. Throughout the first Icelandic journey, it is with delicacy and perception that he describes the bright blue gentian, white clover, crowberries, wild heartsease, milk-wort, meadow-sweet, cranesbill, buttercups, sweet grass, ferns and heath berries. To Jenny and May he sent from Reykjavik 'some wild thyme I plucked this morning in the fields close by here'. Near the shores of Ramfirth he 'picked a horned poppy (yellow)', the first of its kind he had seen in Iceland. And even in 'the wilderness' he perceived the 'tufts of sea-pink, and bladder campion scattered about . . . and . . . a dwarf willow'. On the way to Reykholt, he found upon reaching what appeared to be bare lava 'a good deal of heather and other herbaceous plants growing in its crannies, especially one beautiful plant with olive-shaped leaves and bright red berries'.

Morris delighted in Iceland's birch-groves. Towards the end of the first journey, near White-water, they 'grew fair and ungnarled'; yet even at the beginning of that journey, near Lithend, they had been no less appreciated, being 'very close set together and all tasselled with blossom and smell most deliciously in the hot day, and the grass in the little valley is deep and flowery'.

The second Icelandic journey reiterates these 'small wonders'. For example, camping on the Battle Holm at Thingvellir, Morris and Faulkner went 'on to the Logberg' where Morris noted how 'it was unmown now and the grass was high in it and quite full of flowers, Loki's purse (money-rattle), buttercups, milkwort, white clover, cranesbill, one or two alpine flowers I can't name, and a most lovely little dark blue gentian'; and during the 'fishing expedition' when camped at Grímsstaour, the 'little island' on the lake was described as 'all grown over with birch and willow, two or three quite big birches standing above the others'.

Kelmscott's pastures, flowers and plants were to be portrayed with the same intuition and affection which permeated the Icelandic descriptions. Morris noted the seasonal changes of the meadows around Kelmscott, from the grass of March 'as grey as grey' to the 'mediaeval picture' created by the deep green grass of April; and he noted the complementary changes in the trees, particularly the elms. But, as in Iceland, his sharpness of perception and tenderness of phrase gained full expression with any mention of flowers: crocuses, winter aconite, yellow jasmine, snowdrops, violets, primrose, hepatica ('which I used to love so when I was quite a small boy'), buttercups, tulips, blue and white bluebells, anemones, heartsease, Iceland poppies, raspberries, sweet sultans, scabious, hollyhocks ('O so tall'), strawberries, roses ('a pale sweet-briar blossom among the scarlet hips . . . I am sure I never saw before'), pink martagon lilies, daphne, daffodils, hyacinths, crown imperials, wallflowers. These descriptions were not confined to the products of the tended garden, but encompassed situations which allow for comparison with Icelandic memories:

. . . Altogether a very pleasant river to travel on, the bank being still very beautiful with flowers; the long purples, and willow-herb, and that strong-coloured yellow flower very close and buttony, are the great show: but there is a very pretty dark blue flower, I think mug-wort, mixed with all that, besides the purple blossom of the house-mint and mouse-ear and here and there a bit of meadow-sweet belated. . . .

Connected with the natural environment was bird-life. Throughout the *Journals* Morris not only noted the presence of birds in Iceland but also their characteristics and habits: the sea birds, sweeping about or hovering over a cleared home-mead, 'filling the air with their shrill cries', even appearing 'like great masses of white flowers' on grassy slopes; the thrushes or redwings in the birch-groves, 'flitting about' and 'twittering'; the plovers 'twittering and screaming' around a gerfalcon; the swans, 'with their broods', 'trumpeting', 'gliding'; the eider-ducks, with their 'young broods', some carried on parents' backs 'as they pitched . . . like heavy craft', swimming about 'with their tails up' or 'splashing about in high glee'; the 'handsome' eider-drakes contrasting with 'dull-brown and dowdy' females by their 'gleaming white breasts'; the huge eagle 'free and on the wing . . . the curves of his flight . . . with every pen of his wings clear against the sky . . .'; the ravens, 'stuffing themselves with fish-guts', 'crying out and croaking', 'sweeping round', 'making a sad noise', greeting and accompanying the travellers.

At Kelmscott, Morris's perception of bird-life was as in Iceland. Not only did he appreciate their physical traits, but also he observed and set down endearingly their distinctive behavioural patterns: the rooks that 'never stop all day long', 'very musical' with their 'parliament-noise', yet when bullied by someone reduced to only 'six nests, so that we haven't got the proper volume of sound from them'; in the twilight, the stint or summer snipe 'crying about us and flitting from under the bank and across the stream: such a clean-made, neat-feathered, light grey little chap he is, with a wild musical little note like all the moor-haunting birds'; the herons, 'stalking about the field in the gravest manner', squawking, or 'sailing overhead'; the kingfishers, 'very busy', fishing, or talking to themselves; the owl who came 'sailing along' and suddenly turned 'head over heels and down in the grass' hunting a mouse; the moor-hens and blue-tits killed by the severe winter frosts; the blackbirds who woke him early and who were often the 'chief fruit' of the garden or making a 'sit-down meal' of the gooseberries—together with the rooks they provided with their 'music' 'a great consolation' for Morris on his last trip to Kelmscott; plovers, 'squawking away, and making believe that they had no nest close at hand'; the bullfinches, 'fat pretty dears' who 'sing a little short song very sweetly'; the 'squealing' swallows and the hawk 'hanging in the wind overhead'; the many 'amusing' starlings who collected 'in great flocks about sunset' and made 'such a noise' before roosting time; the cuckoo, only heard 'about 7AM'; the robins, 'hopping and singing all about the garden'; the fieldfares, Norwegian winter birds, 'chattering all about the berry trees'.

There was also fish. Most notable in Iceland were the trout and char. Morris intricately noted the characteristics of the latter:

. . . The Icelandic char . . . is a strange looking fish, purple-black on the back of him, getting lighter and greener down the sides, and speckled with grey spots, and then his belly orange-chrome as if laid on with a house-painter's brush: and the fins are dark grey bordered with white. . . .

Morris savoured the opportunities for fishing afforded on both Icelandic journeys. Early on the first trip he fished near Melr in a 'little bright river' which was 'of the very clearest water' and caught 'two fine trout'. On the second journey, the streams

and fishing adventures were described in equally endearing terms. His joy is amply described in this episode on the way to Grímsstaoir, which involved the river Laxsá:

. . . we came to the arm of a swift clear river running among the lava with grass-grown banks and holms amongst it . . . Charley and I stayed behind to fish according to agreement, and so spent the afternoon happily enough in the bright sun, I catching big trout enough for us to live upon for two days: the only drawback was the midges that swarmed incredibly. . . .

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other sorts of fresh water fish in Iceland; but as these are the nicest and most delicate we have in Denmark, I thought them worth notice, and of great consequence to Iceland.

### CHAP. LXXII.

#### *Concerning Snakes.*

**N**O snakes of any kind are to be met with throughout the whole island\*.

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Morris held a passion for fishing from boyhood. It was not until he found Kelmscott, however, that he was afforded endless opportunities to angle on the river he most loved. As Mackail<sup>4</sup> said of Morris at Kelmscott:

. . . it was his delight at all times of the year, and in all weathers, to escape from London for a day's fishing. . . .

Indeed, it mattered not to Morris if the weather were fair or foul; his pleasure in angling (for perch, chub or pike) could not be lessened. In November 1875 he wrote of daughter May:

. . . wouldn't she have liked to have been out on the flooded river with me, the wind right in our teeth and the eddies going like a Japanese tea-tray: I must say it was delightful: almost as good as Iceland on a small scale. . . .

The 'new attitudes' of imagery obvious in the *Journal* of the second Icelandic journey were the descriptions of farm animal-life: the 'little two year old bull' which 'bellowed at the horses'; the 'cocks and hens strutting about' and 'pigs also'; and the

\*this is the Chapter on Snakes in Horrebow's book on Iceland, quoted by Morris in *News from Nowhere* in his Chapter on Politics—facsimile from original English ed.

sheep and lambs, 'all most beautiful delicate little beasts' with 'timid eyes' and 'silky-haired with long crumpled horns'. It is apparent in the second *Journal* that, with his tenancy at Kelmscott, Morris had been able to rekindle the intimacy with animals of country-life which he had known in childhood: at Kelmscott he was able to pursue literary work with 'the rooks and the lambs both singing around me'; to complain to May of leaving Kelmscott when the 'hens are beginning to lay again'; and to recount with pride to Jenny the sale of 'ram lambs' listed as 'the Kelmscott flock, which sounds grand, doesn't it'.

The steads of Iceland, with their thick turf walls, like Kelmscott had 'grown up out of the soil and the lives of those that lived on it'. At Oddi, Morris noted how 'both walls and roof are just as green as the field they spring from', and at Gilsbakki the 'whole side and part of the gable and roof of the house . . . was covered with ox-eye daisies in full bloom'. At Bergthorsknoll the house, surrounded by 'an inner enclosure', echoes Kelmscott:

. . . the house was of turf of course, with wooden gables facing south, all doors very low, and the passages very dark: the parlour we went into was a little square room panelled with pine: there was a table in it, one chair, and several chests, more or less painted or ornamented, round the walls: . . . from the open door we could see the ladder that led up to the common sleeping and living room called the *baostöfa*, . . .

In *Gossip about an Old House*,<sup>5</sup> Morris wrote of Kelmscott:

. . . The house is built of well-laid rubble stone . . . the roofs are covered with the beautiful stone slates of the district, . . . elegantly-shaped gables . . . add much to the general beauty of the house. . . . Going under . . . a low door in the middle of the north wall, one comes into a curious passage or lobby. . . . The said lobby leads into what was once the great parlour . . . and is now panelled. . . . Going back to the little passage . . . one comes to the staircase, of a common Elizabethan pattern, . . . and so on to the first floor, which has the peculiarity of being without passages, so that you have to go from one room into another, to the confusion of some of our casual visitors, to whom a bed in the close neighbourhood of a sitting-room is a dire impropriety. . . .

Lastly, there are the haymakers. Morris's choice of words in reference to the Icelandic haymakers almost denies Mackail's claim that he was 'interested in things much more than people'. The 'folk' were never simply haymaking, and there were no descriptions of the process or the finished products. What Morris noted in the *Journals* was human contact, both visual ('the haymaking folk standing leaning on their rakes to watch us pass') and physical ('the goodman of Bathstead seeing us, comes up to meet us'). This recognition of the human involvement in haymaking (most lovingly recorded in *News from Nowhere*) appeared thus in a letter from Kelmscott to Georgiana Burne-Jones:

It has been a great pleasure to see man and maid so hard at work carrying at last. . . .

The bonder's house at Kalmanstunga, Morris found to be 'very poor looking, just

three heaps of turf', yet this growth 'out of the soil', encompassing a 'green sloping meadow and little bright stream running through it' displayed 'as in other places . . . a charm . . . that one would scarcely imagine could be attained to by such simple means'. Kelmscott exudes the same 'special charm', born from

. . . some thin thread of tradition, a half-anxious sense of the delight of meadow and acre and wood and river; a certain amount (not too much let us hope) of common sense, a liking for making materials serve one's turn, and perhaps at bottom some little grain of sentiment. . . .

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Compton Press, Tisbury, 1979.

<sup>2</sup> William Morris Society, 1962.

<sup>3</sup> *William Morris: Collected Works*, ed. May Morris: Longman 1910–1915, Volume VIII.

<sup>4</sup> *The Life of William Morris*, J.W. Mackail: Longman 1899.

<sup>5</sup> *Gossip about an Old House on the Upper Thames*. Included in *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, ed. May Morris: Basil Blackwell, 1936, Volume I.