The Iceland journeys and the late Romances

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The two journeys William Morris made to Iceland in 1871 and 1873 remained especially significant to him throughout his life. We have plenty of evidence for this, from himself and others. At the very end of Morris's life, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt wrote in his diary, 'He talked much about his Iceland journey, as he often does, and has a sick man's fancy to go there again'.¹ In a long letter to Mrs Coronio, of 25 November 1872, Morris states his intention of going to Iceland again the following year and says of his previous year's expedition, 'I know clearer now perhaps than then what a blessing and help last year's journey was to me; what horrors it saved me from'.² This is usually interpreted as referring to the difficulties of his relationship with his wife, and if this is so, as seems most probable, it would indicate another reason for the great importance of Iceland to him, apart from the tremendous impression its landscape and literature made on him in themselves. He wrote in his diary with a sense of triumph as the ship he was travelling in lay off the coast of Iceland, 'So I have seen Iceland at last'.³ In his entry for 22 July 1871 he wrote,

'surely it was what I "came out for to see", yet for the moment I felt cowed, and as if I should never get back again: yet with that came a feeling of exaltation too' (VIII, 54).
However terrifying, this experience was something he had longed for and revelled in undergoing. When he was sure he would not return to Iceland again, he wrote to Mrs Coronio,

‘Do you know I feel as if a definite space of my life had passed away now I have seen Iceland for the last time: as I looked up at Charles’ Wain tonight all my travel there seemed to come back on me, made solemn and elevated, in one moment, till my heart swelled with the wonder of it: surely I have gained a great deal and it was no idle whim that drew me there, but a true instinct for what I needed’ (Letters, p. 59).

Any reader of Morris’s Journals of Travel in Iceland 1871–1873 (VIII) will be struck by the importance of the whole experience to Morris, and the impossibility that he should ever forget it; as he said himself, ‘it was a most memorable first sight of the wilderness’ (VIII, 76). But as well as these clear statements, there are in Morris’s letters many references to Iceland, showing that it continued to be memorable for him. In a letter to Mrs Coronio from Cumberland in August 1874, he says ‘We had a long drive yesterday all along the border, and I sniffed the smell of the moors and felt in Iceland again’ (Letters, p. 63). In the following year, writing to his wife describing a fishing trip on the flooded Thames, he says ‘I must say it was delightful: almost as good as Iceland on a small scale’ (Letters, p. 73). On arriving in Ireland by sea in 1877 he wrote to Mrs Burne-Jones ‘it looked very like Iceland and quite touched my hard heart’ (Letters, p. 95). In 1887 he wrote to his daughter Jenny, describing a Socialist lecture tour in Scotland, and said ‘You know one has about 20 minutes sea from Fife across the firth to Granton, whence of old time I set sail for Iceland’ (Letters, p. 270). There are other references like these; Iceland was not only impressive at the time, it remained in his mind and heart to the extent of colouring even such trivial remarks as those quoted.

Many writers have commented on the effect Morris’s Icelandic experience had on his descriptive writing in the later prose romances. In the middle of a straightforward description of the 1871 journey, Mackail says,

‘Six cold days of rain and bitter wind among “the horrible black mountains of the waste” including an exploration of the great cave of Surts-hellir, impressed Morris’s imagination with a sense of the terror of the land which never quite left him, and which reappears vividly in his descriptions of the mountain journeys in “The Glittering Plain” and “The Well at the World’s End”.’

Alfred Noyes makes the same point in many of the same words about
the same two romances. Montague Weekley quotes a passage from *The Story of the Glittering Plain* which I shall be considering in a little more detail later on, with just one sentence of comment: ‘In “The Story of the Glittering Plain” Morris draws on his memories of Iceland for this landscape’. May Morris says about *The Well at the World’s End*,

‘he [Morris] has made full use of his rich remembrances . . . in the splendid picture of the volcanic desert and the Wall of the World, in which one can recognize an epitome of many a moment of keen emotion that the terrible Icelandic deserts aroused in him’ (XVIII, xxi).

She comments again, about *The Sundering Flood*,

‘the description of the sheer cliffs and the black water in my father’s own tale take one back to the early days of Icelandic travel when the first sight of volcanic mountain heights seemed as much to overwhelm him with their terror as to move him by the majesty of their untrodden mysteries’ (XXI, xi).

The link between Morris’s Icelandic journeys and the later prose romances has been noted by other writers too, but I have not seen any detailed analysis.

The influence of these journeys on the romances can be shown by the close parallels that exist both in subject matter and actual wording between the romances and his journals. Such a parallel also occurs with one of his lectures, *The Early Literature of the North—Iceland*, which was first delivered in the lecture hall at Kelmscott House, Hammersmith, on 9 October 1887.7 In the second paragraph occurs this passage:

Here and there in favoured spots (I am speaking of these deserts) a little short grass grows, sweet on the hill slopes, on the low ground boggy and sour, dominated by that most grievously melancholy of all plants the cotton rush: elsewhere is nothing save moss, sea-pink, stone-crop (pretty flowers these last), and above all a dwarf willow which keeps on growing and dying, the bleached stems of the perished parts looking like white bones on the black soil (sprengi sand). It is not a thirsty desert however; every valley almost has water in it and huge rivers rush towards the sea from the glaciers, turbid and white with the grinding of the ice, cleaving for themselves the most fantastic channels amid the blocks of lava and basalt.

In *The Roots of the Mountains* the hero, Goldmane, comes in his travels to a similar landscape:

a marvellously rough mountain-neck, whiles mere black sand cumbered with scattered rocks and stones, whiles beset with mires grown over with
the cottony mire-grass; here and there a little scanty grass growing; otherwhere nought but dwarf willow ever dying, ever growing, mingled with moss or red-blossomed sengreen; and all blending together into mere desolation (XV, 99–101).

A scene very much the same is described in *The Story of the Glittering Plain* as part of the Isle of Ransom (this is the passage that was quoted by Montague Weekley):

>a wilderness of black sand and stones and ice-borne rocks, with here and there a little grass growing in the hollows, and here and there a dreary mire where the white-tufted rushes shook in the wind, and here and there stretches of moss blended with red-blossomed sengreen; and otherwhere nought but the wind-bitten creeping willow clinging to the black sand, with a white bleached stick and a leaf or two, and again a stick and a leaf (XIV, 228).

The similarities between these passages are striking and obvious—the growing and dying willow, black sand, moss, cotton rush or grass, a little grass, and, less immediately obvious, the stonecrop. Sengreen is an old word for stonecrop, and thus it seems clear that Morris has deliberately used this obsolete word to support the archaic, olden-times flavour of the story. But the similarities go further than this. The phrase ‘here and there a little grass’ occurs in all three passages, the grass being qualified by the word ‘short’ in the lecture and ‘scanty’ in the *Roots* passage. The phrase ‘elsewhere is nothing save’ from the lecture is replaced in both the romance passages by the more archaic ‘otherwhere nought but’. The ‘dwarf willow which keeps on growing and dying’ becomes in the *Roots* passage ‘dwarf willow ever dying, ever growing’—another archaizing touch. The dying and growing characteristic of the willow is not mentioned in the *Glittering Plain* description, but it does echo ‘the bleached stems’ in ‘a white bleached stick’. The ‘black sand’ in the romance passages is actually ‘black soil’ in the lecture, but the word ‘sand’ has presumably come from the explanatory bracketed phrase (sprengi sand). It is as though Morris wrote the descriptions in the two romances with the text of the lecture lying before him, purposely altering it in style to make it more suitable for tale-telling as he conceived it. His archaisms in language have often been criticized but this kind of detail shows how carefully he sought them and how deliberately he could switch from one style to another. It seems to me that he enjoyed it. He really wanted to call the stonecrop ‘sengreen’. *The Roots of the Mountains* has another phrase paralleled in the passage from the lecture: ‘the said river was no drain from the snowfields white and thick with the grinding of the ice’ (XV, 1). This
shows the same kind of mixture of similarities and slight alterations as we saw in the longer passages.

*The Roots of the Mountains* and *The Story of the Glittering Plain* were published in 1890 and 1891—nearly twenty years after Morris’s first visit to Iceland. How serious, then, can the suggested picture be, of Morris re-using his own words? May Morris says in her introduction to the *Journals* that her father finished transcribing his notes on the first journey in 1873, just before starting on the second, the account of which, she says, is printed directly from the unfinished diary (VIII, xxxiv). So after 1873 Morris possibly did not look at these diaries again, for they were first printed for the Collected Works as Volume VIII which was published in 1911. Morris did not dwell on finished work; his daughter says of him, ‘Work finished was done with: he did not linger over it or nurse it: the work before him at the moment was the thing that lived and mattered’ (IX, xxi). But the lecture was delivered in October 1887 and according to Mackail *The Roots of the Mountains* was begun on 29 January 1889, which brings the two much closer together (II, 229). In a footnote on page 179 of *The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris*, Eugene Le Mire brings them even closer. He says, ‘It seems quite possible that Morris had considered publishing this lecture as one of the Kelmscott Press works. The first page was actually printed off in the Golden Type’. The Golden Type was nearly finished by the end of 1890, and *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, the first book to be completed at the Kelmscott Press, was printed in it. It is possible that the first page of the *Early Literature of the North* (reproduced in *Collected Works* XV, facing page xvi) was done as a sample or exercise, and if so, then all three works may have been receiving Morris’s attention together. In any case, apart from these suppositions which cannot be proved, Morris’s continued love for Iceland would presumably be sufficient to render the landscapes vivid to him again as he wrote of them.

This seems obvious enough when we consider the many other parallels between his journals and the late Prose Romances, with no intervening lecture to carry his memory closer. In *The Roots of the Mountains*, once out of Burgdale itself most of the landscape seems to come straight from Iceland. The ‘rough mountain-neck’, mentioned in the earlier passage quoted from this tale, is crossed by the hero as he is travelling to a secret valley in the mountains where live the People of the Wolf with whom he hopes his own tribe will make alliance. The valley in the story is called Shadowy Vale and is described in this passage:

"..."
There lay below him a long narrow vale quite plain at the bottom, walled on the further side as on the hither by sheer rocks of black stone. The plain was grown over with grass, but he could see no tree therein: a deep river, dark and green, ran through the vale, sometimes through its midmost, sometimes lapping the further rock-wall: and he thought indeed that on many a day in the year the sun would never shine on that valley (XV, 100–101).

On Tuesday, 1 August 1871, Morris wrote in his diary about a dale which must surely have been the original of this:

It grew very narrow as we went on, and the cliffs very steep and not less than six hundred feet high, I should think; the bottom of it was filled but for a few narrow grassy slopes going down from the cliffs, with a deep green river: huge buttresses ran into it here and there nearly stopping it at times, and making a place that could seldom see the sun: this is the next dale to Forsaeludalr, Shadydale, of the Gretla, and they say is just like it (VIII, 88).

The narrowness, the steepness, the depth and colour of the river, the lack of sun, are all there, and the name is clearly taken from the next dale that 'is just like it'.

Later on in the tale, Goldmane climbs out of Shadowy Vale through a steep, narrow pass with many others:

And as the flood thundered below, so above them roared the ceaseless thunder of the wind of the pass, that blew exceeding fierce down that strait place (XV, 306).

On Sunday, 13 August 1871, Morris himself had climbed a similar pass and heard such a noise:

All the while as we went, the noise of the wind about us, entangled in the ridges and peaks of the cliffs, was not less than of loud and continuous thunder; it was a wonder of a day, and most exciting (VIII, 128).

The wonder and excitement he felt must have impressed this experience on him so that he used it in *The Roots of the Mountains*.

He was also excited and impressed by noticing a change in the direction of flow of a stream as an indication of progress in a journey:

I stopped by a considerable stream to drink after we had ridden some hours, and felt a thrill of pride as a traveller, and a strange sensation, as I noted and cried out that it was running north: all other streams we had seen in Iceland having had their course south or south-west (VIII, 87–88).

He used this experience in *The Roots of the Mountains*: 46
At last they came to where the flows that trickled through the mires drew together into a stream, so that men could see it running; and thereon some of the Woodlanders cried out joyously that the waters were running north; and then all knew that they were drawing nigh to Silverdale (XV, 311).

He used it again in *The Wood beyond the World*, and the parallel here is even closer, for Walter, the hero of the tale, notices the change in direction because, like Morris, he has stopped to drink:

So eager was he to drink, that at first he heeded nought else; but when his thirst was fully quenched his eyes caught sight of the stream which flowed from the well, and he gave a shout, for lo! it was running south (XVII, 25).

The incident is only a small detail in either tale, but seems as if Morris was so struck by it that he had to use it.

In *The Roots of the Mountains*, after Goldmane and his companions had left the pass, they came to gentler slopes:

And beyond these western slopes could men see a low peak spreading down on all sides to the plain, till it was like to a bossed shield, and the name of it was Shield-broad (XV, 307).

This name and the description occur in Morris’s diary entry for 29 July 1871:

As we ride on, we see ahead and to our left the wide spreading cone of Skialobreið (Broad-shield) which is in fact just like a round shield with a boss (VIII, 76).

It is interesting to note that while Morris gives the more usual form of English translation in the diary, with the adjective first, he simply anglicizes the name for the tale, thereby achieving the same slightly romantic, archaic effect he gets from saying ‘bossed shield’ instead of ‘a round shield with a boss’.

Skialobreið in Iceland and Shield-broad in *The Roots of the Mountains* are both extinct volcanoes, surrounded by lava. Morris’s Icelandic journals are full of descriptions of lava, with different types noted in great detail. Much of his time in Iceland was spent travelling across or within sight of great areas of lava. In two of his tales the characters have to cross lava as he did. In *The Roots of the Mountains* it is called ‘the molten rock-sea’ (XV, 307) and in *The Well at the World’s End* it is ‘the great sea of rock molten in the ancient earth fires’ (XIX, 36). In *Roots* the journey takes two hours, but in *Well* it lasts for five days. In both tales Morris uses a phenomenon he had noted about the Icelandic
lava—the lava flow piling up into a wall round an area of soft ground that has stopped it. He writes of

waves of lava running through a cleft of it a mountain and down its side and stopping suddenly like the edge of a surf out in the valley (VIII, 118).

Another time he describes this sudden stop in more detail:

Off the lava again . . . and again on to it where it seems to have been stopped by the soft ground; then round the foot of a grassy down to a pretty little nook once, where the lava flowing down the valley between the two downs has made an island of grass . . . then again another stream of lava that passes by us and breaks on the lake-strand where . . . the church . . . yet stands in an island surrounded by it (VIII, 229).

In *Roots* he says:

the tumbled hedge of rock round about the green plain by the river was where the said rock-sea had been stayed by meeting with soft ground and had heaped itself up round about the green-sward (XV, 307).

In *Well* Ralph, Ursula and the sage come to ‘a little grassy plain or isle in the rock-sea’ (XIX, 38) and also see a place where the lava ‘thrust out into the green shore below the fell and otherwhile drew back from it as it had cooled ages ago’ (XIX, 37). There are many descriptions of the lava in the journals using sea epithets, and referring to islands in it and the characteristic sudden stopping or turning.

In describing the lava in *Well*, in one place Morris uses an idea that had obviously come to him when looking at the original place in Iceland, but enlarges on the imaginative side of it more. He says in the tale:

The rocks were not so smooth and shining and orderly, but rose up in confused heaps all clotted together by the burning, like to clinkers out of some monstrous forge of the earth-giants (XIX, 40).

In the diary he writes:

It was the strangest place this lava, all tossed up into hills and fantastically twisted ridges . . . it was indeed ‘clinkers’ of the monstrous furnace, no less (VIII, 126).

For the story, he removed those apologetic inverted commas round clinkers and made the implied image overt. A furnace must have someone to stoke it, but to follow the idea to its obvious conclusion (giants) would be out of place in a travel journal, though not in a romantic tale. It is interesting too that in the tale he always writes of ‘earth fires’ and not ‘volcanoes’, and of ‘rock-sea’ instead of ‘lava’. This
is true also of *Roots*. The words he does not use presumably had for him too geological and modern a flavour for his tales.

Morris often described the mountains of Iceland as ‘horrible’ and ‘terrible’. A feature he particularly disliked so much impressed him that he used it in three of the romances. It was a narrow cleft in the mountains that he described as a street:

You would see a horrible winding street with stupendous straight rocks for houses on either side (VIII, 53).

He mentions this again later in the diary:

A dreadful lonely place, quite flat amid its bounding cliffs which are rent here and there into those dreadful streets I told you of first in Thorsmark (VIII, 113).

In *Roots*, such a street leads out of Shadowy Vale: ‘At the north end there was as it were a dreary street of rocks’ (XV, 101). In *Well*, the Great Mountains which bar Ralph’s way have ‘awful clefts like long streets in the city of the giants who wrought the world’ (XIX, 35–36).

Later on Ralph and Ursula have to go through a narrow pass:

In a little while the rocks of the pass closed about them leaving but a way so narrow that they could see a glimmer of the stars above them.... They seemed to be wending a straight-walled prison without an end (XIX, 44).

The word ‘street’ itself is not mentioned in the second passage, but it was clearly those streets in Iceland Morris had in mind. The third romance in which they are used is *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* and it is Birdalone’s adventure in the Black Valley of the Greywethers which gives an opportunity for Icelandic scenery in a tale which is mostly set in forest and lake land. When Birdalone first sees the Black Valley, she looks into it from the top of a knoll:

Thence they could look into that dale and see how it winded away up toward the mountains like to a dismal street (XX, 148).

The path by which she eventually leaves the valley is similar:

Before them was a cleft that narrowed speedily...., then it narrowed no more but was as a dismal street of the straitest (XX, 170).

Birdalone and Ralph and Ursula are in danger and afraid when in these streets, a circumstance that suits well with Morris’s original feeling about them.

May Morris implies that the source of the Black Valley of the
Greywethers itself is Stonehenge (XVIII, Introduction), and certainly 'the grey stones . . . drawn all around it in ordered rings' suggests this, while the 'great stones' further down the valley 'which looked as if they had once been set in some kind of order' sound more like Avebury (XX, 164, 148). But though the Black Valley is something like these monuments, it is Stonehenge and Avebury transported to an Icelandic setting. Birdalone goes to the Black Valley because of a story that the big stones—the Greywethers—can be waked and asked for a gift, and the Black Knight she meets there tells her that 'the dale's end is the only one due place where the Greywethers can be rightly waked' (XX, 165). It is therefore the heart of the valley where mystery and awe are concentrated. As Birdalone and the knight approach, it is described thus:

They seemed to be drawing nigh to the head of the dale, and the burgs and the rocks were before them all round it as a wall . . . . Came they then to a level space of greensward clear of the grey stones, which were drawn all around it in ordered rings, so that it was as some doom-ring of an ancient people (XX, 164).

Morris came to such a place in Iceland:

We ride into a bight of this valley, where the black cliffs fell back into a semicircle, leaving a quite flat place, grass-grown right up to the feet of the perpendicular cliffs; it impresses itself on my memory as a peculiarly solemn place, and is the gate of the wilderness through which we shall be going (VIII, 75).

It may be noted that Birdalone says of the Black Valley on first sight, 'meseemeth it is as the gate of the mountains' (XX, 149). Not only does the Black Valley resemble the Icelandic one in physical characteristics—a flat grassy place surrounded by a wall of cliffs—but there is also the awesomeness of the head of the Black Valley as perhaps the place where the stones can be waked, matching with Morris's specific mention of solemnity in the diary. This evidence of unusual feeling links up with the way excitement, wonder and so on are mentioned in connection with other places used as settings in the romances.

Iceland is above all a mountainous land, and journeys through 'the horrible black mountains of the waste' (VIII, 79) described in greater or less detail come into all of Morris's later prose romances, except The House of the Wolfings, and, since this story is set entirely in thick forest land and clearings in it, and the action, in the form of Roman invaders, comes to the protagonists, rather than their having to set out to seek adventure, there is no chance for mountain or desert description. Burgdale, in The Roots of the Mountains is surrounded by mountainous
country which the dale-dwellers have to cross to reach both their friends and their foes. The Land of Living Men in *The Story of the Glittering Plain* is also surrounded by mountain wastes barring Hallblithe’s way as he tries to get out. The Isle of Ransom too, in this tale, has great black rocks and cliffs. Birdalone’s venture into the Black Valley takes her into mountains, if only for a short while, and Golden Walter, in *The Wood beyond the World* has to cross a mountain range both entering and returning from the Wood. The Sundering Flood in the tale of that name rises in great mountains and is edged on either side with huge steep cliffs.

But it is in *The Well at the World’s End* that mountains, and recognizably Icelandic mountains too, play the biggest part. Ralph’s way to the Well lies through a huge range of mountains, and his first sight of them is described like this:

> It was a bright sunny day and the air very clear, and as they rode Ralph said: ‘Quite clear is the sky, and yet one cloud there is far in the offing; but this is strange about it, though I have been watching it this half hour, and looking to see the rack come up from that quarter, yet it changes not at all. I never saw the like of this cloud.’

> Said the minstrel: ‘Yea, fair sir, and of this cloud I must tell thee that it will change no more till the bones of the earth are tumbled together. Forsoth this is no cloud, but the topmost head of the mountain ridge which men call the Wall of the World: and if ever thou come close up to the said Wall, that shall fear thee, I deem, however fearless thou be’ (XVIII, 285).

A sufficiently awe-inspiring introduction—but as Ralph travels nearer to the mountains such references and descriptions become more awful—both ominous and inspiring. Ralph wakes one morning and sees again what he takes for clouds:

> but presently his eyes cleared and he saw that what he had taken for clouds was a huge wall of mountains, black and terrible, that rose up sharp and clear into the morning air (XVIII, 303).

The Captain of the Guard, Otter, then says to him, ‘thou hast seen them this morn, even if ye die ere nightfall’—a kind of ‘See Naples and die’ exclamation. Otter then continues with conjectures on the terrible nature of the mountains, ending with:

> This is my thought, that all we of these parts should be milder men and of better conditions if yonder terrible wall were away. It is as if we were thralls of the great mountains (XVIII, 304).

He leaves Ralph with the suggestion that perhaps these mountains are
not of this world at all, for when Ralph says to him, 'Thou sayest that none alive among you have seen the Wall of the World?', he replies, 'None alive . . . forsooth what the dead may see, that is another question'. Nearer yet they travelled

over the ridge of the valley, and came full upon the terrible sight of the Great Mountains and the sea of woodland lay before them, swelling and falling, and swelling again, till it broke grey against the dark blue of the mountain wall (XVIII, 331).

Morris keeps up this gradual crescendo in size and terror:

Thence he saw again from time to time the huge wall of the mountains rising up into the air like a great black cloud that would swallow up the sky (XIX, 9).

When the mountains are really close, he finds another image still:

Then were they face to face with the Great Mountains which now looked so huge that they seemed to fill all the world save the ground whereon they stood . . . there were great jutting nesses with straight-walled burgs at their topmost, and pyramids and pinnacles that no hand of man had fashioned . . . and high above all the undying snow that looked as if the sky had come down to the mountains and they were upholding it as a roof (XIX, 35-36).

Morris achieved these terrific effects by drawing on his Icelandic experiences, although one might with justification reverse this suggestion and say that the overwhelming nature of his impressions in Iceland forced him to embody them in his stories. We have already seen that many of the passages in his diaries which are echoed in the romances are ones where he comments on strangeness, wonder, excitement or terror. On 12 August 1871, he wrote of

a huge mass of black cliff with a wild sea of lava tossing up into great spires and ridges landward of it, and at the back of that mountains and mountains again (VIII, 125).

Previously on 29 July, he saw

a mass of jagged bare mountains, all beset with clouds, that, drifting away now and then show dreadful inaccessible ravines and closed up valleys with no trace of grass about them among the toothed peaks and rent walls; I think it was the most horrible sight of mountains I had the whole journey long (VIII, 77).

His frequent use of the words horrible, terrible, and awful to describe
the mountains in Iceland can be noted again here. On 13 August 1871 he writes of mountains rising higher still there into an awful crowd of wild shapes, cones and peaks, and inaccessible ledges (VIII, 127).

The idea of mountains as the end of the world, several times suggested in *Well*, was clearly in his mind on 29 July 1871 when he saw ‘the waste of Long Jokul that looks as if it ended the world’ (VIII, 76). Thoughts such as this, combined with sights of ‘the long wall of mountains that hedged it in’ (VIII, 88) and ‘a wide open country, lava-covered, grey and dismal, walled by a sweep of ink-black peaks and saw ridges’ (VIII, 230) must have been the origin of the Wall of the World. He remained full of wonder at the ‘terrible’ mountains even when seeing the same place a second time, as he wrote on 26 July 1873:

We had before us of course that terrible ice-capped wall I have told you of before: though I remembered it so well from last time my wonder at it had lost none of its freshness (VIII, 202).

He ended this paragraph by exclaiming, ‘ah, what an awful place!’; an evidence of the strong feeling which impressed Icelandic landscapes so permanently on his memory, that he was able to use them vividly in his romances years later, not just as settings but as important parts of the tale. The magic waters of the Well which bestowed greatly lengthened life and youth and happiness were a great prize, and their worth is emphasized by the terrible nature of the barriers Ralph and Ursula have to surmount before gaining their end—the maze of lava, the Wall of the World and the desert wastes. In *The Sundering Flood* the river is presented almost as a character in its own tale, and the terrible, perilous, fierce, awe-inspiring nature of this river that divides peoples, villages, lovers and has such an effect on the lives of those near it, does indeed as May Morris said in the introduction ‘take one back to the early days of Icelandic travel’ (XXI, xi).

Although it is clear enough from the detailed similarities shown in the romances and the diaries themselves how great the Icelandic influence on Morris’s romance landscapes is, there is an interesting piece of external evidence proving that the *Well* and Iceland were definitely in Morris’s mind together. The *Well* was begun in early 1892 and the following quotations are taken from Sydney Cockerell’s diary for that year (as quoted in Morris’s Collected Works, XIV, xxxi):

Sunday 7 August . . . . After supper . . . W.M. wrote some *Well at the World’s End*. 

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Tuesday 9 August In morning walked with W.M. . . . to Eaton Hastings . . . . Morris talked about Iceland as we walked.

Wednesday 19 October . . . I read proofs of the first 200 pages of The Well at the World's End which is now at length approaching completion.

That conversation about Iceland might quite well have coincided with Morris's writing the desert mountain journey chapters which occur in Book III. In any case, this is only a slight piece of evidence, but a pleasing one.

There is one more set of passages to be compared. On Morris's first journey to Iceland, the boat stopped at the Faroes for twelve hours and he recorded his impressions in a very long diary entry (VIII, 11–18). One of the things that struck him most about those islands was the lack of any beach, a feature he mentions four times in the one entry:

- The hills were not high, especially on one side as they sloped beachless into the clear but grey water (VIII, 11).
- All the islands whether sloping or sheer rocks, went right into the sea without a handsbreadth of beach anywhere (VIII, 14).
- And all this always without one inch of beach to be seen (VIII, 17).
- There was no beach below the wall, no foam breaking at its feet (VIII, 18).

He uses this feature in describing the Isle of Ransom in The Story of the Glittering Plain. As Hallblithe approaches the island he speaks to his companion:

- 'Big man, the longer I look, the less I can think how we are to come up on to yonder island; for I can see nought but a huge cliff, and great mountains rising beyond it.'
- 'Thou shalt the more wonder', said the alien, 'the nigher thou drawest thereto; for it is not because we are far away that thou canst see no beach or strand, or sloping of the land seaward, but because there is nought of all these things' (XIV, 221).

As they draw nearer to the island, the point is made again:

- And now the Isle of Ransom uphove huge before them, and coal-black and no beach and no haven was to be seen therein (XIV, 223).

Hallblithe actually comes to land by sailing through a cave 'high enough to let a round-ship go in with all her sails set' (XIV, 223). This also echoes what Morris saw in the Faroes, where, he says

- the coasts were most wonderful on either side; pierced rocks running out from the cliffs under which a brig might have sailed: caves that the water ran up into, how far we could not tell (VIII, 17).
The harbour in the Isle of Ransom is much like one in the Faroes that Morris described. When Hallblithe left the Isle of Ransom, this is what he saw:

There was no beach there, for the water was ten fathom deep close up to the lip of the land; but there was a great haven land-locked all but a narrow outgate betwixt the sheer black cliffs. Many a great ship might have lain in that haven (XIV, 242).

When he returns towards the end of the tale, the harbour is described again in similar terms:

So he hoisted sail again, and took the tiller, and steered right for the midmost of the gate between the rocks . . . his bark shot into the smoothness of the haven, and presently began to lose way; for all the wind was dead within that land-locked water . . . and as aforesaid there was no beach there, and the water was deep right up to the grassy lip of the land (XIV, 298–299).

The comparable passage from the diary runs:

At last we could see on ahead a narrow opening, so narrow that you could not imagine that we could sail out of it, and then soon the cliffs on our right gave back and showed a great land-locked bay almost like a lake, with green slopes all round it and a great mountain towering above them at its end, where lay the houses of a little town, Westmanna-haven; they tell us that the water is ten fathoms deep close up to the very shore in here, and that it is as it looks, a most magnificent harbour (VIII, 17).

The grassy slopes, the deep water close to shore, the land-locked bay, the measurement of depth, are all the same. Even the use of the word haven instead of harbour or bay could have been suggested to him by the name of the town, Westmanna-haven, and the town of Thorshaven where he first anchored.

Several times in the entry about the Faroes Morris declares himself unable to see why he found them so attractive. He writes of 'wild strange hills and narrow sounds that had something, I don't know what, of poetic and attractive about them', and says of Thorshaven, 'there was real beauty about the place of a kind I can't describe' (VIII, 12, 13). He and his companions walked across one island (Straumey) and he says 'I was most deeply impressed with it all yet can scarcely tell you why'. In the next paragraph after this he gives a tentative explanation connecting it with the lack of beach, 'and little thing as that seems, I suppose it is this which gives the air of romanticism to these strange islands'. It is clear now why he makes a lack of beaches such a feature of his strange island in *The Glittering Plain*. 
But he says more of his feeling for the Faroes: ‘it was like nothing I had ever seen, but strangely like my old imaginations of places for sea-wanderers to come to’. The mention of sea-wanderers inevitably recalls the Wanderers in *The Earthly Paradise* (published some time before he went to Iceland). There is no detailed or memorable description of the many places where the Wanderers in the Prologue to that poem made landfall, but perhaps Morris means he had thought of such a place as he was then seeing for the first time, but had been unable to describe it until he saw it with his bodily eyes. Possibly he already had the tale of *The Glittering Plain* in mind when he came to the Faroes, or perhaps only images of travellers arriving from the sea for various reasons, story-fragments of love or death or piracy accompanying them, but these islands seem to have incarnated for him an imaginative landscape he already knew well.

May Morris says in one of the introductions to the *Collected Works* something interesting which has a bearing on this point. She is talking about the influence of mediaeval manuscripts and Morris’s own illuminating work on the descriptions of towns in his poems, and says, ‘one is tempted to say that the visualization of [them] is made up of three elements: of the poet’s vision, of the memory of places actually seen, and of the picture of them by the mediaeval artist’ (IX, xviii). Much of his successful description, not just that of towns, seems to depend on these three elements. They occur in the desert and mountain landscapes of the later prose romances as the tale in his own imagination, the Iceland and the Faroes that he actually saw, and the increased significance Icelandic landscape had for him by being the setting for the Saga literature he loved. It seems that he often linked landscape that had a real hold on him with a story, that it became increasingly real for him once he had made this literary association. In August 1855 he wrote a long, enthusiastic letter to Cornell Price from Normandy, full of admiration for the countryside he was travelling through: ‘it was all like the country in a beautiful dream, in a beautiful Romance such as might make a background to Chaucer’s Palamon and Arcite’ (*Letters*, p. 13). In 1878 when Morris was in Italy, he wrote of his first view of Lake Garda, associating it with stories in the same kind of way as he had done in France and the Faroes: ‘What a strange surprise it was when it suddenly broke upon me, with such beauty as I never expected to see: for a moment I really thought I had fallen asleep and was dreaming of some strange sea where everything had grown together in perfect accord with wild stories’. Later on the same journey, in a letter to Mrs Burne-Jones, he mentions seeing Lake Garda and links it with his earlier times in France:
Many times I think of the first time I ever went abroad, and to Rouen, and what a wonder of glory that was to me when I first came upon the front of the Cathedral rising above the flower-market. It scarcely happens to me like that now, at least not with man's work, though whiles it does with bits of the great world, like the Garda Lake the other day, or unexpected sudden sights of the mountains. Even the inside of St Mark's gave one rather deep satisfaction, and rest for the eyes, than that strange exaltation of spirits, which I remember of old in France, and which the mountains give me yet (Letters, p. 124).

One can feel this 'strange exaltation' bursting out of the letter of 1855 to Cormell Price. (1855 was actually his second journey to France, and second visit to Rouen, but though he had 'some kind of misgivings' about being disappointed, he says in the letter to Price, 'I wasn't a bit. O! what a place it is'.) When a place aroused such strong feeling in him, it took 'a great hold on his imagination' as May Morris said of 'the wonderful land about the foot of the Italian Alps' (XIV, xxv). It was then a place ready to be the setting for his own tales, but also already a place hallowed for him by association with the tales of others. Even in Iceland, where the whole country was already to him pre-eminently the land of the Sagas, he describes some caves he saw in the valley of the Markfleet as 'just like the hell-mouths in 13th century illuminations' (VIII, 53).

Another quality he saw in these places which really moved him was a kind of timelessness. In the letter to Cormell Price, quoted earlier, he describes the countryside on the road to Dreux:

The most beautiful fields I ever saw yet, looking as if they belonged to no man, as if they were planted not to be cut down in the end . . . but . . . that they might grow always among the trees . . . and they all looked as if they would grow there for ever, as if they had always grown there, without change of seasons, knowing no other time than the early August (Letters, p. 12).

He had the same feeling about a place in the Faroes:

A most beautiful and poetical place it looked to me, but more remote and melancholy than I can say, in spite of the flowers and grass and bright sun: it looked as if you might live for a hundred years before you would ever see ship sailing into the bay there; as if the old life of the saga-time had gone, and the modern life [had] never reached the place (VIII, 15).

There was also the feeling of having seen the place before, if only in imagination. He had it about the Faroes; he had it also about Kelmscott Manor: 'he said that he had dreamed of Kelmscott before he saw it in 57.
actuality’ (Henderson, *Life*, p. 148). When he visited Edington in 1889 he said it was ‘like one of my dream-churches’ (*Letters*, p. 314).

In the introduction to *The Well at the World’s End*, May Morris describes how the landscape near Upmeads is that around Kelmscott. She tells how her father would relate stories of what might have happened there as they walked on the downs and came to old earth works or the White Horse. She herself imagines part of the story as taking place in Burford:

A romance country indeed; standing at the top of Burford street ... it is not hard to ‘dream oneself into the story’ after the true child-fashion—to wait for the first sight of the gallant party that are riding down the hill and will in a moment appear round the willows and on the little grey bridge there. Ralph and his merchant-brother clattering into Whitwall, the Champions of the Dry Tree on some wild errand of their own (XVIII, xxv).

It is not hard to imagine Morris himself standing at the top of that street, seeing what May, years later, is imagining here. Perhaps he stood there with her, and told her snatches of the tale. When he first saw, and was so struck with, those beachless islands in the Faroes, did he perhaps tell himself part of Hallblithe’s story in some such way as this?

There are frequent mentions in the diaries of events and people from the Sagas connected with the places Morris was seeing. Possibly his heightened imagination, as witnessed by the many mentions of his own terror, awe, wonder or excitement, was also already associating these wastes and mountains with events and people of his own making. When he was actually writing his prose romances, and needed desert or mountain scenery as part of the story, he obviously seized on that he knew. We have seen already how it worked both ways with him. In the Faroes his imagination of sea-wanderers arriving found a real place for them to come to, while in his walks in the country with his children he clothed real places with imaginary stories. Iceland probably both clothed his formless imaginings and stimulated him to imagine more.

NOTES

to Morris's works will be to this edition, cited in the text by volume and page number only.

8 See the entries for Stonecrop and Sengreen in *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*.

*The maps are taken from Volume VIII of the Collected Works of William Morris.*