‘An Icelandic Tale Re-told’:
William Morris’s
The Sundering Flood

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William Morris appears to us today as something of a Victorian Proteus. Poet, designer, craftsman, manufacturer, translator, political activist and printer, his early death at the age of sixty-two was attributed by one doctor to the fact of his ‘simply being William Morris, and having done more work than most ten men’. During the last years of his life, Morris almost entirely ceased to write poetry, returning to the literary form he found most congenial: that of the prose romance. Of these delightful tales, set in a world of morning freshness and glowing colour beloved by Yeats and C. S. Lewis, the most famous is the lengthy The Well at the World’s End (1896). However, the lesser known The Sundering Flood is more vigorously attractive in pace and tone, with less of the leisurely, decorative meandering which caused the Morris family to nickname The Well at the World’s End ‘The Interminable’ (XXIV: xiii). Morris’s The Sundering Flood was published posthumously by his own Kelmscott Press in 1897. It had been completed on 8 September 1896, shortly before the author’s death. Morris was so weak that the last few pages of the tale had to be dictated to his secretary Sydney Cockerell. Morris’s younger daughter May, who edited her father’s Collected Works, asserts that: ‘The idea of the Sundering Flood—two lovers divided by a great river—was taken from a modern Icelandic novel...’ (XXI: xii). While several critics have echoed Miss Morris’s statement in discussions of Morris’s literary work, none of them, to my knowledge, have made any attempt to discover the identity of this Icelandic novel. Intrigued by this apparent mystery, I sought the assistance of an Icelandic scholar. Mr Benedikt Benedikz of Birmingham University, to whom I am greatly indebted, suggested, in response to my enquiries, that the unidentified novel might be Jón Thoroddsen’s Pútur og Stúlka (1850) (Rev. ed. 1867). Mr Benedikz thought it ‘quite likely that Morris saw and read it in 1871 or 1873, or else got hold of it through Eirikur Magnússon’. Eirikur Magnússon was an Icelander who became Sub-Librarian at Cambridge. Morris first met him in 1868, and it was agreed that Magnússon should teach the author of The Earthly Paradise to read Icelandic. The two men, who became firm friends, collaborated on a number of translations of the Icelandic sagas, culminating in the four volume Saga Library (1891–1905). Morris made two journeys to Iceland in 1871 and 1873, the first in Magnússon’s company to see the actual place where the events chronicled in the sagas had been acted out. He was profoundly moved by the experience and came to love deeply the northern land and its indomitable people. It is
thus by no means surprising that he should have chosen to use the novel of a descen­
dant of the saga writers as the germ for one of his own tales.

_Piltur og Stúlka_, which was first published in Copenhagen in 1850, is a delightful
Romantic novel. The only English translation at present available is that by Arthur M.
Reeves (London: Sampson, Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1890), and is entitled
_Lad and Lass: A Story of Life in Iceland._ Jón Thoroddsen's story is set in a fertile
valley in eastern Iceland named Fairdale. Through the midst of this straight, green
valley there flows a 'deep but not over-broad glacier river'. This 'Fair-river' appears
to have been the ancestor of Morris's Sundering Flood, the Fairdale itself having
presumably served as the model for the upland dale in which Morris's romance opens.
The two farmsteads at the head of Fairdale are named Indridholl and Sigridtung, and
are situated almost opposite each other on different sides of the river. There is little
intercourse between the two farmsteads, for they are in different parishes, and the two
farmers are not especially good friends. Indridholl belongs to John, while Sigridtung,
which is Crown land, is farmed by the prosperous overseer Biarni. John and his wife
Ingebiorg have one son named Indrid, who appears to have been the model for
Morris's hero, Osberne. Indrid is turned ten when the novel opens, 'a handsome, well­
grown boy' who is believed to be 'stronger than other boys of his age'. He is sprightly
and clever beyond his years in everything except learning the catechism. Morris's
Osberne is an orphan, who lives with his grandparents on an isolated farm named
Wethermel in a country whose landscape closely resembles that of Iceland. When we
first meet him at the age of twelve, Osberne, like Indrid, is 'strong and bold, tall bright
and beauteous' (XXI: 6). Both Thorodddsen's and Morris's heroes have to tend the
sheep during the day, and, on one occasion, Indrid distinguishes himself by finding
and bringing back some sheep who have been lost. However, he is eclipsed by Morris's
Osberne, who displays precocious bravery by killing single-handed three wolves
which attack his grandfather's sheep.

Overseer Biarni of Sigridtung has three children, but his favourite is the younger girl
Sigrid, who is named after her paternal grandmother. Sigrid appears to have been the
model for Morris's heroine Elfhild, who lives at Hartshaw Knolls, on the opposite
bank of the Sundering Flood to Wethermel. Sigrid's close resemblance to her grand­
mother does not endear her to her mother Ingveld, who is rather harsh with the girl.
Elfhild, an orphan, receives worse treatment from her only surviving relatives. Her
two aunts are 'somewhat hard with the child and right careless of her . . .' (XXI: 45).
One day, in Sigrid's ninth year, it is decided that she is to mind her father's flock during
the day. She is somewhat apprehensive, especially when Gudrun the maid tells her not
to be afraid of the fairies in the valley. Left alone, Sigrid exhausts herself with weeping
and falls asleep only to dream 'that a man clad all in white came to her, and stroking
her eyes, said, “Jesus comforts good little children who weep”'. There seems to be no
particular religious significance in this, though. Thorodddsen was not a Christian of
orthodox faith, while for William Morris, a self-confessed atheist, Christianity was
simply a beautiful mythology. Despite the presence in _The Sundering Flood_ of all the
trappings of medieval Christianity, there is no sense that Morris's hero and heroine
have any deep religious convictions. Though Osberne, like Morris himself, is deeply
moved by the beauty of a great church, his emotion is aroused solely by the aesthetic
appeal of the building. To Osberne and Elfhild the dwarfs and the guardian spirit
Steelhead, who help them when they are sick, unhappy, or in trouble, are far more real than the promises of any priest. Morris has effectively de-Christianised *Piltur og Stúlka*.

When she has in some measure regained her courage, Sigrid looks about her. She is near to the river ‘which at this point was not broad, but flowed between two jutting crags’. Looking across the water, Sigrid is startled to see the figure of a boy. On the following day she sees the figure again. Walking out upon the projecting cliff, she stands looking across the river till Indrid (for it is he) sees her and a conversation begins. In *The Sundering Flood* the first meeting between the hero and heroine occurs in a very similar manner. Osberne, on the eastern bank of the river, sees Elfhild emerge from a cave in the cliff-side on the river’s western bank. The two children make their way to the Bight of the Cloven Knoll; the point at which the Sundering Flood is narrowest, and begin, like Indrid and Sigrid, to question one another. After this initial encounter, Indrid and Sigrid meet and converse with each other every day throughout the summer. When summer ends, however, and the sheep no longer require shepherding, the two children’s meetings cease and, when their next encounter takes place at the end of the following summer, they are both on the same side of the Fair-river. Morris’s hero and heroine, however, continue to meet at the Bight of the Cloven Knoll through both summer and winter for five years. As they approach adulthood, their enforced separation becomes daily more irksome to them but they can see no prospect of physically meeting, for the Sundering Flood is far wider and deeper than the Fair-river. The latter can be forded at some places in the valley and freezes over in winter, but the Sundering Flood never freezes, and is impassable to all ‘save the fowl flying’ (XXI: 5). Although the river is no serious barrier to Thoroddsen’s characters, they are nevertheless kept apart by numerous perversities of fate. Indeed, when, as man and woman, they are finally united, Indrid is moved to exclaim: ‘... I cannot for the moment understand how it is that the Fates have always contrived to separate us from each other, and to drive us farther and farther asunder ...’

When Indrid comes to manhood, he is so remarkably well-developed, both mentally and physically, that he is thought to have few equals in the neighbourhood. The same may be said of Morris’s Osberne but, because he is a hero of romance rather than the protagonist of a realistic novel, Osberne’s prodigious strength is magical in source. It is given to him by his guardian spirit, the mysterious Steelhead. Sigrid grows into a lovely young woman with a graceful figure and exceptionally beautiful hair. She also possesses ‘greater conversational powers than most women; her voice was clear and mellow; and she was withal a clever, self-possessed lass’. Morris’s Elfhild, as befits a heroine of romance, is described in a more idealized fashion:

She was that day clad all in black, without any adornment, and her hair was knit up as a crown about her beauteous head, which sat upon her shoulders as the swan upon the billow: her hair . . . was now brown mingled with gold, as though the sun were within it . . . her eyes were blue-grey and lustrous, her cheeks a little hollow, but the jaw was truly wrought, and fine and clear, and her chin firm and lovely carven; her lips not very full, but red and lovely, her nose straight and fine. (XXI: 112)

Elfhild’s counterparts can be found in all Morris’s late romances.
Thoroddsen’s Indrid, conscious that his childhood friendship for Sigrid has grown into something deeper, persuades his mother Ingebiorg to broach the subject of a betrothal between himself and Sigrid to the girl’s mother. Ingveld, however, who is now a widow, declares that she will never consent to give Indrid her daughter’s hand. Instead, she attempts to wed Sigrid to the loutish Gudmund Hallason; the illegitimate son and heir of the wealthy miser Bard. Sigrid refuses to go through with the marriage ceremony and, to escape her mother’s reproaches, she departs for Reykjavik, where she becomes a companion and assistant to the wife of a prosperous Danish merchant. She also attracts the unwelcome attentions of a younger Danish merchant named Miller. When the disconsolate Indrid learns of her departure, he follows his childhood sweetheart to Reykjavik and, after numerous further complications in the plot, the lovers meet and, having made a mutual declaration of affection, return to the Fairdale to marry.

The fortunes of Osberne and Elfhild are somewhat different. Elfhild is kidnapped by the servants of a lustful chapman, and Osberne, ignorant of her whereabouts or her fate, and desperate at having lost her, leaves Wethermel in search of his love. He takes service under the rebel knight Sir Goderick of Longshaw, fighting with the latter on behalf of the guilds of the Lesser Crafts of the City of the Sundering Flood, who are oppressed by their tyrannous King and his friends. When the battle is won, and five long years have passed, Osberne begins to think of returning home and abandoning his search. It is then, when all hope appears to be lost, that he finds Elfhild in a little cot in the great Wood Masterless. She has been brought there by her faithful friend Dame Anna; an old woman skilled in natural magic.

On a day early in the spring following their marriage, Indrid takes his wife to a fair little glen which she does not at first recognize, but she soon recalled the spot when she looked across the river. There, directly before her eyes, were Elfhill and the slope where she had sat and watched the sheep in olden days. Indrid tells her that he plans to build them a farmstead on that very spot. This episode in Piltur og Stulka seems to have served as the model for Chapter Ixvi of The Sundering Flood. On the day following their return to Wethermel, Osberne and Elfhild, who do not need the rites of the Christian Church to sanctify the bonds of love that bind them together, go to their old meeting-place, the Bight of the Cloven Knoll. Elfhild looks across the river to the spot where she used to stand, just as Sigrid looks across the Fair-river to Elfhill. Morris’s lovers revisit the scene of their childhood and adolescent meetings not in spring, but on Midsummer Day, which, with its pagan associations, is a fitting time for the celebration of the love of this pair, beloved by the spirits of the earth.

In discussing Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair (1895), a prose romance which her father based on the thirteenth-century Lay of Havelock the Dane, May Morris observes that:

A friend was reminding me lately of what we had both heard my father say about the right way of re-telling an old romance: ‘Read it through’, he said, ‘then shut the book and write it out again as a new story for yourself’. A man might take what he liked from another, he said, provided that he made it his own. (XVII: xxxix)
Piltur og Stúlka is not an old romance but, nevertheless, The Sundering Flood is a fascinating illustration of Morris's theory on the right way of re-telling a tale.

NOTES

2 References throughout are to The Collected Works of William Morris, ed. and introd. May Morris (London: Longmans, 1910–15), and are given parenthetically in the text by volume and page number only. The Sundering Flood can be found in Volume XXI of the Collected Works.
3 The unique manuscript of The Sundering Flood from which the printed text was given is B. M. Add. MS. 45326. Folios 278–86 are in Cockerell's hand.
5 Letter received from Mr Benedikt Benedikz, 8 August 1978.
7 Thoroddsen, p. 3.
8 Thoroddsen, p. 7.
10 J. Bruce Glasier in his William Morris and the Early Days of the Socialist Movement (London: Longmans, 1921), reports Morris as saying during the course of one of their conversations: ‘... so far as I can discover from logical thinking, I am what is bluntly called an Atheist. I cannot see any real evidence of the existence of God or of immortality in the facts of the world ...’ (p. 171). Morris was generally reticent on the question of his religious beliefs, but there is abundant evidence that the words attributed to him by Glasier do broadly represent his personal convictions on the subject.
11 Thoroddsen, p. 16.
12 Thoroddsen, p. 200.
13 Thoroddsen, p. 43.