‘The North Begins Inside’:
Morris and Trollope in Iceland

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I
Morris’s biographers, from Mackail to MacCarthy, have agreed that his first visit to Iceland in 1871 played a crucial part in his life.1 Their accounts of this visit have differed over the years, according to their distance in time from the lives of Morris, his friends and family, the extent of their interest in the development of his political views, and the gradually emerging story of Jane Morris’s relationship with Rossetti. Morris’s state of mind on setting out has been variously described, but seems to have been compounded of a growing dissatisfaction and impatience with the materialism of modern European civilisation, anger at the divisiveness of English society, and a sense of despair, loss and emotional loneliness following the failure of his marriage. The latter is usually regarded as the principal reason for Morris’s readiness to leave England for an extended period in the summer of 1871, but he was also motivated by his love for the Icelandic sagas, which he had been translating with Eiríkr Magnússon. The trip was thus a chance to visit the landscape described in the sagas, but it also brought Morris into contact with a very different kind of society and aroused his admiration for the stoicism and courage of the Icelandic people, whose endurance of hardship made him ashamed of his own self-pity and morbidity. One of my reasons for returning to this episode is to re-emphasise its significance in Morris’s political and personal development. But I want also to take Iceland 1871 out of this familiar context and consider it in relation to Anthony Trollope’s account of the visit he made in June and July 1878, published later that year as How the “Mastiffs” Went to Iceland. The comparison with Trollope – in terms of literary sensibility, political outlook and general approach to another culture – will enable me, with the assistance of Louis MacNeice (from whom I take my title) and W. H. Auden, who visited Iceland in 1936, to resituate the episode in Morris’s life, experience and mental and emotional growth.2

II
The most immediate and striking characteristic of Morris’s 1871 journal is its detailed observations of the landscape, which is in no sense conventionally literary or romanticised. Although he is alert to the aesthetic qualities of such features as the contrasting colours of rock-strata, Morris is equally attentive to the processes by which those rocks were formed and how the modern landscape may be read as a record of geological upheavals in the distant past. He also becomes immersed in the landscape, and is conscious not only of what he sees, but also of what he
passes through: the succession of lava, shale, sand, pasture and ice-scree and how they feel underfoot. Iceland brought him into a very direct contact with mountains, of which he had previously seen very few and did not much like, and he was overwhelmed by their power, which at different times in his narrative seems to him grand or oppressive. Some of his lowest and most elevated moments occur when he is in the shadow of the vast ranges all around him.

His initial comments on Icelanders, however, were rather mixed: 'if I don’t malign them', he wrote to Louisa Baldwin on 16 July, ‘they seem to be the laziest set of ragamuffins that ever sunned themselves on a doorstep: how I sympathise with them'. Although he records a kind of comic understanding of the workers’ idleness, he is also making a serious point, for he was conscious of the price exacted by the Icelandic way of life, and the journal also notes encounters with drunken and hostile men. As Morris travelled upcountry, however, his perceptions changed, and although he continued to find Icelanders dreamy and lacking in drive, he took pleasure in the simplicity and slower pace of Icelandic society, and admired the inhabitants for their fortitude, cheerfulness and gentleness in coping with a harsh, inhospitable environment.

Morris thus ascribed to nineteenth-century Icelanders the saga virtues of stoicism and endurance. He found in them a strong sense of continuity with their past, a respect for tradition and a desire to act as preservers and transmitters of their heritage. Morris himself intensified this sense of continuity with the knowledge he brought to his journey. When Icelanders showed him precious objects from the past, for instance, he was often able to give a more accurate or detailed account of their age and provenance than their owners. In the Icelandic Journals, Morris reveals his sense of the Icelandic past largely by the way in which he maps on to its modern landscape the characters and events of the sagas, often in a strikingly dramatic fashion. Sometimes he will place an event from the sagas at one remove, by using such phrases as ‘it is said’ or ‘by tradition’: ‘below it in a hollow is a little mound called by tradition the tomb of Sámr, the dog whose dying howl warned Gunnar of the approach of his enemies’ (I 38). Elsewhere, he makes a more direct identification, so that whatever there might be of myth in the sagas takes on the certainty of history by its unequivocal topographical placing: ‘Bjorn the boaster of the Njála lived in one of three steads called the Mark on the south side of this grim valley, Kettle of that Ilk on another: and a little way north of it is Thórnólfsfell where Kari lived after marrying Njála’s daughter’ (I 44).

The landscape of the sagas, so vividly realised in the encounter between his imagination and that of their authors, was present before him, and what he had read, translated and absorbed was explicable in a new and more tangible manner. The vocabulary of ‘carl’, ‘carline’, ‘bonder’ ‘stead’ and ‘homemead’, which he uses in his journal with some relish, could be attached to real people and places.

The immediacy of Morris’s apprehension of this heroic past made sharper and more depressing the contrast with the modern world, for he believed that since the days of the sagas life had shrunk and taken on a kind or insignificance: ‘... what littleness and helplessness has taken the place of the old passion and violence that had place here once’ (I 84). He shared this feeling with other nineteenth-century writers, like Carlyle, Dickens, Tennyson and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who either questioned the possibility of heroism in modern life or simply lamented its
loss. Morris certainly presents himself in a non-heroic light: in those passages where he dramatises his own behaviour, he emerges as a clown-like and comic figure – the ‘Topsy goes to Iceland’ of Burne-Jones’s affectionate sketches [Figures 1]. He swaggers about in his newly-acquired breeches and boots, he loses a pannikin, he struggles up a narrow steep path, and in a characteristically ad hoc piece of packing he stuffs his slippers in his pockets and loses one, which a guide goes to considerable trouble to retrieve (II 21, 26, 106, 128-9). Such moments, however, can readily modulate into a more profound and less comic mode of self-criticism. He was angry with himself for his ‘lâchesse’ (an interesting lapse into French) in giving up on the exploration of a deep cave, and remarks on his own ‘milksopishness’ when he and Faulkner, who was afflicted with short sight, fell behind on a difficult ride (II 67, 69). Faulkner, it seems, had an excuse, but Morris had none. Towards the end of the trip Morris quarrelled with Faulkner in the middle of the night; they laughed about it the next day, but it is one of the few passages of verbatim conversation recorded in the journal and clearly made an impression on Morris. Such moments, when Morris appears impatient, cowardly, petulant or self-absorbed, are rare, but they give insight not only into the tensions that inevitably arise when a small group of people are thrown together in difficult conditions, but also into Morris’s troubled state of mind.

The other important dimension of Morris’s self-presentation – and one of which he was perhaps only partly conscious – lies in his account of his periods of melancholy. He often had mixed feelings about the harsh and desolate terrain, and was usually glad to leave after a few days at one site. But he was also excited by the awe-inspiring qualities of the landscape and reminds himself that ‘this is what I came out for to see, and highly satisfactory I find it, nor today did it depress me at all’ (II 62). At Hjardarholt, he was able to recognise and analyse his feelings:

... 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. (II 84)

Morris’s sense of being dependent on his own slender resources is very apparent in this passage. He must survive on what he can find within himself and in the sagas, themselves speaking of a world long dead.

In the last part of the journey, as he became more homesick but was also mindful of what he might find at home, the moments of gloom occurred more often. He was depressed by news of fever at Reykjavik, and apologises for his low spirits, which he attributes to the weather and the landscape; but then adds, as he watches snow fall on the mountains, ‘a sort of pang shot through me of how far away I was and shut in, which was not altogether a pain either, the adventure seemed so worthy’ (II 118). This sequence of responses – a lapse into melancholy, self-reproof for indulging his unhappiness, followed by a summoning up of positive feelings – is characteristic of the journal and of Morris’s sense of the self-testing he was undergoing.
Figure 1(a). 'William Morris on horseback in Iceland'. Caricature by Edward Burne-Jones.

Figure 1(b). 'William Morris climbing a mountain in Iceland'. Caricature by Edward Burne-Jones.
Elsewhere, Morris seems to be less conscious of the journal’s undertow of melancholy. Sunsets, for instance, always capture his attention for more than aesthetic reasons:

... I saw the sun sink behind the farthest ness of Breidufjördur as if it had been pulled down, and the colour faded slowly out of the mountains, but all the western sky was covered with rippling golden clouds, the clear green showing between them: and hours afterwards, just as we were going to bed, the dark clouds had a ripple of red on them and the green sky was grown greener still. I was much impressed by my walk and being alone. (If 98)

The setting sun is a central trope of Victorian writing, of course, indicative of melancholy, a journey to a distant world from which there is no return or death. Furthermore, nineteenth century solar mythology, which, as Amanda Hodgson has shown, is manifest in Morris’s work, naturally employed sunsets to express a fear of the future, or as an image for the end of the life of the world.5 His 16 July letter to Louisa Baldwin alludes to this sense of having come to a horizon beyond which there lies nothing more: ‘Strange you would think it if you had been sailing along the coast of Iceland, as I have been, and seen the end of the world rising out of the sea’ (Li 143). These metaphors for Morris’s low spirits (as opposed to his direct discussions of such moods) are very important. At the same time as being
one of his most sustained pieces of descriptive prose, offering a rare insight into his day to day activities over two months, the 1871 journal is highly introspective. There is a constant play between the external and the internal, the objective and the subjective, and throughout the journal there is a consciousness that both distances and observes itself and yet saturates the text, as Morris’s feelings are projected on to or reflected in the landscape. Sometimes, his response to the landscape can come to his rescue, as at Thingvellir, by calling forth inner resources, however fragile they may seem: ‘Once again that thin thread of insight and imagination which comes so seldom to us, and is such a joy when it comes, did not fail me at the first sight of the greatest marvel and most storied place of Iceland’ (I J 131). And as he departed from Iceland the country again seemed to answer to his mood: ‘the last I saw of Iceland was but the shadows of the rocks dimly looming through the mist ... and soon even the shadows of the rocks faded into the mist, and I had seen the last of Iceland’ (I J 143). The verbal repetitions and decelerating rhythms of these words embody the author’s state of mind.

III

Compared with Trollope and with many other writers and artists of his time, Morris was an inexperienced traveller. He made about twenty trips outside the British Isles, two of them to Iceland and the remainder to continental Europe, mostly France. His knowledge of that country was confined to its northern parts – apart from Chartres he never travelled further south than Paris – for it was here and in the neighbouring Belgium that he could visit and revisit the Gothic architecture which had so profound an effect on him in 1854 and 1855. He went to Italy twice: to Florence with Burne-Jones in 1873, and to Genoa, Venice, Padua and Verona with his family in 1878. He visited Switzerland and Germany on honeymoon in 1859 and returned to Germany for an extended stay at Bad Ems in 1869. He certainly does not seem to have assumed that he would make a foreign journey every year; it was quite common for two or three years to elapse between foreign trips, and on two occasions, between 1859 and 1866 and 1883 and 1889, the intervals were rather longer. His longest sojourns outside England were the nine weeks at Bad Ems, the two Iceland trips, each of about two months, and his six-week honeymoon. Jane, with or without their daughters, sometimes travelled abroad without him.

Although Trollope’s reputation is largely as a chronicler of English provincial and political life in his Barchester and Palliser series, these best-known of Trollope’s novels give little hint of the fact that their author was a considerable traveller, visiting more continents and countries than most of his literary contemporaries – more than Dickens, George Eliot or Thackeray, for instance, and certainly more than William Morris. Trollope’s Icelandic journey in 1878 proved to be the last of his expeditions to take him beyond the European destinations of most Victorian middle-class travellers. He had already undertaken several prolonged trips, some on Post Office business, and others to visit his family or gather material for books. He had spent much of the 1840s and 1850s in Ireland, where his earliest novels, published in the late 1840s, are set. In 1858
he went on business to Egypt, visited the Holy Land and came home via Malta, Gibraltar and Spain. Later that year he was sent to the West Indies, where he stayed until June 1859; while from August 1861 until March 1862 he was in America, where he returned in 1868. In 1871 he visited his son in Melbourne, and then spent most of 1872 travelling in the Antipodes, before returning home via the United States. He was in Australia again in 1875, going out via Brindisi, the Suez Canal and Ceylon, and in 1877-8 he made a visit to South Africa. This list excludes his many shorter trips to continental Europe, which he visited almost every year when he was not travelling further afield. He was, therefore, quite accustomed to spending months at a time away from England, and in 1871-2 his absence lasted for eighteen months.

These travel histories highlight the very different experiences of 'abroad' that Morris and Trollope brought to Iceland. When Morris comments on ‘that great excitement, the first sight of a new land’ (IJ 14), he can only compare the coastline of Iceland with that of northern France. Although Trollope felt that he had done ‘something memorable’ in reaching Iceland and was impatient to go ashore, his initial reaction lacks the energy and passion of Morris’s. For Morris, that first sight of land will have been utterly foreign and strange at the same time as being – because of his inwardness with the sagas and his knowledge of Icelandic – reassuringly familiar. So while Trollope records a friendly argument among his fellow-travellers about the difference between glaciers and fields of snow, Morris, with Magnússon’s help, is identifying the home of Flossi the Burner, the location of the Hall of the Side and Ingolf’s first landing place in 870.

For Trollope, then, the expedition to Iceland was a welcome opportunity to add another country to his list, and to go to the far north, after making several trips to the southern hemisphere. He had been back from South Africa for less than six months and was clearly somewhat embarrassed at setting out again so soon. ‘I shall never dare to look you in the face again’, he wrote to his friend Ellen Robinson, ‘I am going to Iceland! Last year it was South Africa. Does it not sound like – “Greenland’s rocky mountains and Afric’s sultry plains.” You’ll think I am no better than a hymn. Hymn or not, he could not resist the invitation to go to Iceland, not for sagas or adventure, says a recent biographer, ‘but because it was another place to see and a wealthy friend was prepared to take him there in the comfort that wealth brings with it’. The trip was organised by John Burns, later Lord Inverclyde and chairman of Cunard, with whom Trollope had been friends for several years. Burns had use of the yacht Mastiff before it went into service with the Post Office. The boat was large and luxuriously appointed, and the sixteen members of the party (five women and eleven men) enjoyed considerable comfort in the care of over thirty crew and servants. The title of Trollope’s account of the trip – *How the “Mastiffs” went to Iceland* – suggests the spirit in which the journey was undertaken. For the purposes of the trip the guests formed themselves into a club, ‘The Mastiffs’, and enjoyed many of the pleasures of club life, from food and drink to games of cards and chess.

At about the time he set out for Iceland Trollope told another friend, ‘I suppose I shall continue to go somewhere, till I take the Great Journey on some nearly approaching day. I do not much care how soon I may start’. One of Trollope’s most recent biographers, Victoria Glendinning, quotes this remark parenthetically,
without comment. Yet it strikes a gloomy and somewhat weary note: Trollope was sixty-three; he had written millions of words, accomplished a great deal of administrative work and travelled many miles; just over four years later he would be dead. A melancholy tone is not uncommon in Victorian writing, and is often conveyed through the metaphor of travel and the final Great Journey. Tennyson’s Ulysses, for whom ‘all experience is an arch wherethro’ Gleams that untravel’d world, whose margin fades/ For ever and for ever when I move’, is one example of this feeling. Trollope, however, rarely expressed such ideas: the mystical and the introspective are outside his usual range. His Autobiography reveals that when he visited places and wrote books about them, he was more concerned to offer an accurate account of the geography, topography, institutions and culture of the societies he visited, rather than with the life-changing experiences they offered him. What he took from a place cannot be said to have had many profound effects on the nature of his work or the development of his imagination.

In his Autobiography, published posthumously in 1883, Trollope makes no reference to his visit to Iceland; his memoir of the trip was privately printed, so it does not even figure in his account of his career earnings from his books. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Trollope’s biographers accord the trip no special significance in his life, and that many mention it only in passing. I do not wish to make too much of a remark in one letter, but I think its very rarity makes it interesting, particularly as Iceland proved to be the last of Trollope’s remote destinations; after going there, he contented himself with Europe.

IV

Trollope’s account of Iceland is measured and good-humoured, and on the whole he liked Icelandic people and was impressed by what he saw of their culture. He was particularly struck by the emphasis on education, the excellent schools and the Latin College, the 100% literacy rate and the love of reading – the population of 90,000 sustained five newspapers, and there was an Icelandic translation of Macbeth. Altogether it was ‘a condition of things which even yet we ought to envy in parts of Great Britain’ (MI 22). He was also pleased to note that Icelanders wanted ‘those thousand little articles of comfort which a civilised community uses every day almost without knowing it’, but was surprised to find that, given the volume of imports needed to satisfy this demand, there was no commercial bank in Reykjavik (MI 23). He found the people ‘healthy and comely’; he learned that they suffered from heart disease and consumption, but points out that these conditions are known in other countries. In the article on Iceland that he wrote for the Fortnightly Review Trollope even used the country as an example for a tentative theory of the relativity of cultural values:

We are apt to think in London that we are the very centre and navel of the world . . . but in so thinking we are led too frequently to believe that the people who are distant from us . . . must also be very much behind us indeed. There
are those Icelanders, with almost perpetual night during a great portion of the year, without a tree, living in holes for protection against the snow . . . But . . . I did not think the people whom I saw to be at all unfortunate, and certainly in no degree barbarous . . . I found . . . a mode of life very much removed, indeed, from barbarism.¹³

In spite of his admiration for the Icelanders and their way of life, there is nevertheless something cool and detached about Trollope’s account. He was, of course, writing his narrative for a coterie audience under the patronage of a wealthy individual, and this determined to a large extent the tone and content of the book, its sometimes heavy-handed jocularity and its coded references to group in-jokes. Nevertheless, it is clear that in many essential respects Trollope and his companions remained external to Iceland, even if we bear in mind the relative brevity of their visit. From almost the moment they sighted land they were identifying its potential as a holiday site, and taking an early opportunity to bathe in the clear, calm waters off Reykjavik. And on those waters they remained for most of their stay, living on a little piece of Scotland moored in Reykjavik harbour. Most of their food was brought with them from Scotland and prepared by Burns’s cook. The party ate no Icelandic food apart from curds, cream, milk and biscuits and wine. They spent only two or three nights on Icelandic soil, on an expedition to Thingvellir and the Geysirs, when sixty-five ponies accompanied the party, two for each of the sixteen guests and the remainder ridden by guides and servants or laden with food, tents and other belongings. The servants, including a cook, rode on ahead so that tents, hot tea and meals awaited the party at agreed stopping places. On their way out the ladies slept in the parish church at Thingvellir and the gentlemen in tents pitched in the churchyard; on the way back the weather was bad, so the whole party slept in the church, the ladies clustering round the communion table and the gentlemen occupying a nave aisle. Rugged adventure was never the plan for the trip, and under the circumstances Trollope, the oldest member of the party and weighing sixteen stone, did very well; but the contrast with the arrangements for Morris’s tour is very striking.

Trollope reports that when the ‘Mastiffs’ first landed in Reykjavik, they ‘swarmed’ ashore (MI 18), and he uses this word, or ‘streamed’, to describe their arrival at a number of locations. There is no doubt something facetious in this choice of words, but ‘swarmed’, in particular, has a slightly menacing association; bees swarm, often threateningly, and it is as if the members of the party were eager to alight on Iceland and extract from it what they could. Modern cultural geographers use the term ‘honeypots’ to describe popular visitor attractions and there is something of that feeling in Trollope’s pages. Certainly the party was avid for retail opportunities, and although at one point Trollope calls purchasing a ‘frivolous’ pursuit (MI 24), it is clear that he and his companions went ‘to work’ on it with a rare determination and thoroughness. Even on St. Kilda, where the Mastiff made a brief stop, they were keen to purchase such limited goods as the islanders had to offer, and they walked up the single street, buying stockings, birds’ eggs and coarse wool. In Thorshavn in the Faroe Islands, another of their stops en route, the shops were open late at night and were eagerly patronised by Trollope and his companions. One young Faroese woman obligingly donated her
laces for a new pair of shoes purchased by one of the 'Mastiffs'. 'How strange it was', Trollope concludes his chapter on the Faroes, with the acquisitiveness of the true tourist, 'to have seen a whole new country since tea-time' (MI 17).

In Reykjavik there was more to choose from, and Trollope gives an amusing but telling description of their first shopping expedition:

... as we had ladies with us we very soon found ourselves in the jewellers' shops, - for Reykjavik has jewellers' shops. Old silver ornaments, silvered belts and filigree work, all of which had probably come some years ago from Denmark, and some of which had possibly come from Birmingham, was there for sale, - and were sold. Each 'Mastiff' wanted some token to take home to England, and the tokens were for the most part taken home in the shape of these ornaments. And we were frequent at the shop of a certain saddler who sold leather sachels and whips for riding. Every 'Mastiff', male and female, required a whip and a sachel, - for had it not been appointed for us that we were to ride up to the Geysers; and how could we ride unknown ponies unless armed with whips, and how could we endure to be separated from our baggage, as must be the case, unless provided with some means of carrying our most needed little treasures? We emptied the shop of whips and sachels, and left the saddler, I should hope, happy in his mind. (MI 20)

The emphasis here is on possessions - 'tokens to take home', whatever their provenance, the pain of being separated from their baggage, and the purchase of satchels to store their 'most needed little treasures' - and on how the party buys everything that is on offer. A couple of days later, when the party picnicked on an island celebrated for its eider ducks, a similar incident occurred. They visited the proprietor's house, where they 'immediately went to work and bought all the silver ornaments'. 'The Icelanders', Trollope goes on, 'were, without exception, very nice, but they seemed to like English gold. Why the ornaments were there, displayed before us on a large piano, I could not understand. But there they were, and we bought them instantly' (MI 25). This is a neat summing-up of the relationship involved in any commercial transaction, but is particularly applicable to the situation between resident and tourist: goods are offered and purchased and are taken away as tokens of having travelled and of having acquired some part of the place visited. For comic purposes, this passage may be deliberately disingenuous, but surely both the host and the members of the party knew exactly why the ornaments were being displayed, and the visitors responded exactly as their host hoped they would, no doubt leaving him as happy as the saddler in Reykjavik. Morris was shown a number of valuable objects in Iceland, some of which he bought, but he purchased them in the spirit of the collector-connoisseur, and in full understanding of the background and significance. He had no difficulty in determining which objects came from Denmark and which from Birmingham, and certainly did not indulge in the buying for the sake of it, the indiscriminate shop-stripping of the 'Mastiffs'.

The party's long excursion took them first to Thingvellir, which Trollope calls 'a wonderful place, very picturesque, worthy, in itself, of a journey. Taken as whole it was perhaps of all that we saw in Iceland the most worth seeing' (MI 33).
After the comparative barrenness of Reykjavik he was delighted to see wild flowers, and in an uncharacteristic moment of poetry writes of the rifts in the rocks ‘at the bottom of which there is dark, black, deep water, most mysterious, almost infernal to be looked upon’ (MI 34). Yet on the whole his description of the place is very dry and uninflected. Compared with Morris he shows little historical empathy for what the place represents in terms of government and continuity, or its symbolic status as the cradle of northern democracy: ‘That such meetings were held there cannot, I think, be doubted; but the Parliament was, probably, rather judicial than legislative. Decisions of the Supreme Court were given before a frequent assembly by the wise ones seated upon a rock’ (MI 34). He regarded it, in other words, not as a site where open discussions took place, but where judgements were handed down. For Morris, on the other hand, it was not only ‘the heart and centre of the old Icelandic Commonwealth’, but was still ‘the heart of Iceland’: its power and significance were both historical and current. At Thingvellir Morris’s party reencountered two Cambridge men who had travelled with them in the boat from England and were now staying in the priest’s house. When Morris came across them dodging about in the ruins with their hunting rifles, trying to conceal what they were doing from the local priest, he was very angry. These ‘fools ran like skirmishers down by the wall . . . pursued I must say by my indignant scorn, which was not voiceless’; ‘the undying respectability that these gentlemen had carried out to Iceland’, he adds, ‘really did strike me at the time’ (IJ 139). Apart from anything else, their ludicrous gunplay, which sounded ‘like the bombardment of a town’ among the echoing cliffs, will have seemed to Morris like an act of sacrilege.

On the next leg of the journey Trollope was equally grudging about the Geysirs. Although they were ‘a sight to see’, he knew in advance that they were inferior to those in New Zealand – not least because they lacked excavated pools for bathers, so Iceland also fell short in its provision of tourist facilities (MI 38-9). Trollope found ‘the spot itself wanting of beauty or prettiness’, with ‘a weird, black, ill-omened look . . . curious . . . but not beautiful’ (MI 41). The Great Geysir, in spite of some threatening bubbling, sulkily refused to erupt during the twenty-four hours that the party stayed in the area, but the second Geysir, Strokkr, having been fed with turf and dirt, obligingly regurgitated the lot to a satisfying height of sixty feet. Mrs Burns’s sketch of the event shows the party, nicely dressed and tastefully arranged in orderly groups, politely watching the spectacle [Figure 2]. The next day, the ladies of the party amused themselves by washing their smalls in one of the cleaner pools, though one of them observed that ‘should it be her fate to follow out the profession of a washerwoman during the remainder of her life, she would prefer to be supplied with an ordinary washing-tub and stool’ (MI 41).

The speed at which the party moved during its brief expedition is also indicative of the kind of relationship its members had with the country. In Morris’s account the reader is constantly made aware of the difficulties of moving across the changing terrain: the discomfort of wading across rivers and streams, the crunch and pull of loose lava, the vertiginous perils of narrow mountain paths. Often the going was so hard that the party covered very few miles in a day; but they were in no hurry, since part of their object was to absorb and understand the landscape. Trollope’s narrative describes an ever-increasing rapidity. From the moment they
set out, he was struck by the speed at which they moved, compared with his experiences elsewhere:

I have generally found five miles an hour all through to be as much as would get itself accomplished. Here we made nearly seven... If there was a fault as to our too great pace, it rested altogether with three young ladies, who among the "Mastiffs" always led the way, driving on before them an, I must say, not unwilling young guide. Trotting was our usual pace, but trotting did not suffice for our fair equestrians. In the East and the West, in Syria and Central America, I have found it expected that I should never get out of a wretched amble... In Iceland I was going at very fair pace for fox hounds. (MI 32)

As they turned for home the young women, no doubt, like Trollope, used to hunting, took delight in riding their ponies as hard as they could, much to the alarm of John Burns. Moving quickly across the landscape, the party had little chance to absorb it, let alone to identify the locations of heroic events or to commune with the ancient world. By contrast, many of the most significant moments in Morris's narrative occur when he is not moving at all, when he leaves the camp and sits alone in contemplation of the landscape and sky, as at Thingvellir: '... I saw the others coming... so I set off again to the Hill of Laws and lay there a long while in the mossy grass, while the day grew fairer yet if it might be as it drew towards evening, and over the slopes of Armannsfell lay one of those (to me) unaccountable flat rainbows or mist bows' (I 138). In a passage like this the rainbow is not simply an observed meteorological phenomenon, but takes on its Biblical associations as a covenant or promise.

V

The material circumstances and organisation of the journeys undertaken by Morris and Trollope were entirely different. Trollope and his companions travelled as the guests of a wealthy patron, who paid for travel, food, horses and guides. They barely had to think about what they were to do next, for Burns had planned everything. The only occasions on which anyone did any 'work' were when, lagging far behind the servants, they brewed their own tea, when the ladies played at being washerwomen - and when they went shopping. Morris and his companions were much more intrepid. Although they had the services of excellent guides and the benefit of Magnússon’s expert knowledge, they subjected themselves to a much more gruelling experience. They erected their own tents, cooked much of their own food (sometimes catching it first) and were happy to enjoy Icelandic food. At Oddi, for instance, they were entertained by the Dean, and provided some plovers for roasting, but also ate smoked mutton, smoked salmon, anchovies, Holstein cheese and ewe-milk cheese, washed down with Bordeaux and Danish brandy (IJ 31). A glance at Morris’s itinerary shows how much more thoroughly he traversed Iceland and allowed himself to be absorbed by the country, in contrast to the well-trodden tourist routes followed by the ‘Mastiffs’ [Figure 3]. Trollope was on a luxury cruise, whereas Morris was on a pilgrimage, and where Trollope and his companions sought to appropriate the country,
adapting its resources to their own needs, Morris took it on its own terms and allowed it to use him at its will.

Trollope’s journey was also attended by much more ceremony than Morris’s: at times it seems as though the ‘Mastiffs’ were travelling as some kind of British delegation. The party was led by a wealthy landowner and businessman, who was accompanied by his wife and sons. There were two admirals, a naval captain, an army captain and a Member of Parliament, not to mention one of England’s richest novelists. One evening there was a dinner on board the Mastiff, at which Burns entertained the Governor and his deputy and their wives, the Bishop and his wife and daughter, the head of the Superior Court, the Rector and Inspector of the Latin College and the Sheriff of Reykjavik. Toasts were drunk to the Queen of England, the King of Denmark and the Governor, who replied in French, and the evening ended with the whole party on deck, singing ‘Auld Lang Syne’.

Sigridur Jonsdottir and Gudrun Knutsen attended the dinner as ‘two beautiful young ladies in Icelandic costume’ (MI 26). Trollope describes these costumes in some detail, but concludes that ‘in regard to personal grace’, the Bishop’s beautiful and accomplished daughter, ‘the divine Thora’, for whom several men in Burns’s party felt a tendresse, ‘did well to adopt the habits of the southern countries’ (MI 28). This preference for an adopted European style over a native Icelandic costume is an indication of Trollope’s fundamentally Eurocentric view of Iceland. This Eurocentricism, which runs just below the surface throughout Trollope’s narrative and is occasionally articulated very explicitly, is the mark of a kind of colonisation implicit in the style of travel undertaken by the ‘Mastiffs’. Many of Trollope’s own previous travels, of course, had been to countries and regions under British control, to a greater or lesser extent, and where English had either eliminated or been superimposed upon native tongues as the language of power. It is significant that when Trollope is writing about the warm reception given to the party by the Governor of Iceland, he asks, ‘Would a governor of ours in the West Indies have welcomed sixteen miscellaneous Danes as cordially?’ (MI 19). His analogy is very precise, in that he likens the Danish-appointed Governor, an embodiment of Iceland’s dependent status, to someone who similarly embodies British power in the West Indies. It is not surprising, therefore, that one of Trollope’s principal yardsticks for judging the degree of ‘civilisation’ in the places he visited, including St Kilda and the Faroes, is whether anyone speaks English. One of ‘the divine Thora’s’ key attractions is her command of English, whereas the Governor has to make do with French and the representatives of the College are reduced to attempting to communicate in Latin. Trollope displays no interest in the Gaelic spoken by the St Kildans or in Faroese or Icelandic. He spells ‘Geyser’ as in New Zealand, thus enabling him to make a pun – ‘second-class Geyzers’ – on the slang word ‘geezer’ (MI 40); he also writes of ‘Thingvalla’, lending it a slightly surrealistic association with Valhalla. In Morris, every accent is correctly placed, and he always writes ‘Geysir’ and ‘Thingvellir’.
It should by now be clear that, ultimately, what Morris and Trollope saw in Iceland and what they gained from the experience depended on what they took to the country and how open they were to its influence. Trollope travelled to Iceland because a friend asked him, because he enjoyed travelling, and perhaps because it was free. His reactions are those of a late middle-aged, liberally minded (though he may seem conservative to our eyes) retired civil servant and a highly accomplished and successful man of letters. He was interested in education, government, trade and economics. Morris travelled to Iceland out of a deep need, compounded of a love for the country, its language, history and literature and the immediate difficulties of his personal life: it was both a geographical exploration and period of self-discovery, a journey both in the physical world and to the depths of his own being.

As I have already suggested, Morris’s biographers have assessed the significance of this episode in different ways, but two themes are common to most accounts. The first is summed up in a letter to Magnússon written soon after their return: ‘I found it has done me a great deal of good both mentally & bodily and increased my debt of gratitude to Iceland’ (11 September 1871, Li 147). About a month later he echoed these sentiments in a letter to Charles Eliot Norton: ‘it was all worth doing and has been of great service to me: I was getting nervous & depressed and very much wanted a rest, and I don’t think anything would have given me so complete a one – I came back extremely well and tough’ (19 October 1871, Li 152). It was for similar reasons than he planned a return to Iceland in 1873, as he told Aglaia Coronio: ‘I know there will be a kind of rest in it, let alone the help it will bring me for physical reasons: I know clearer now perhaps than then what a blessing & help last years journey was to me; or what horrors it saved me from’ (25 November 1872, Li 173).

The second theme of most biographical accounts of the Iceland trip is political, and derives from the letter Morris wrote to Andreas Scheu in 1883, ten years after his second journey: ‘I learned one lesson there, thoroughly I hope, that the most grinding poverty is a trifling evil compared with the inequality of classes’ (Li 229). In his journal and in the letters he wrote in the months after his return, he frequently praised the Icelandic people for their courage and contentment in spite of their hard lives. The main immediate lesson he seems to have drawn from the experience concerned the fortitude and lack of resentment he required to face his own personal difficulties: ‘Then the people’, he wrote in his letter to Norton, ‘lazy, dreamy, without enterprise or hope: awfully poor, and used to all kinds of privations – and with all that gentle, kind, intensely curious, full of their old lore ... and so contented and merry that one was quite ashamed of one’s grumbling life’ (Li 151-2). On his return from the 1873 trip he told Aglaia Coronio that ‘the glorious simplicity of the terrible & tragic, but beautiful land with its well remembered stories of brave men, killed all querulous feeling in me’ (14 September 1873, Li 198).

There is nothing here specifically about politics, and one of the political observations that Morris might have made, regarding Iceland’s status as a dependency of Denmark, he fails to pursue. Trollope was much more alert to this
issue, whereas Morris, eager to emphasise a sense of historical continuity, ignores or underplays this marked political difference between the Iceland of the sagas and the modern country. Yet those commentators who find in the Iceland trip the beginnings of Morris's active political life are surely right. As E. P. Thompson points out, the courage and self-reliance that Morris attained in Iceland could only have real validity in a country less materialistic and dominated by self-interest than nineteenth-century capitalist Britain. It is too glib to argue that Morris found in Iceland a classless society and decided to devote himself to the struggle for something similar in England. His campaign against the age was of long standing and he did not need to see Iceland to learn what was wrong with Britain. What changed in the 1870s was the nature of that campaign and of his personal activities. Already well-known as a poet, artist and craftsman, Morris set out to forge a new identity as a political activist, which would lead him to speak in halls and on street corners all over the country, to take part in demonstrations and to appear in court as a defendant. He had therefore to develop the inner resources to present himself to public view, to deal with hecklers and questioners, and to undertake the kind of grinding organisational work that was foreign to his creative and impatient nature. As E. P. Thompson puts it, he drew from Iceland 'a draught of courage and hope, which was the prelude for his entry into active political life in the later 1870s'.

The apparent absence of inequality in Iceland was only part of the story. Even Trollope, in his approving comments on Icelandic education, noted the lack of an upper class and a consequent absence of privilege: 'There is hardly in the island what can be called an upper class. There is no rich body, as there is with us, for whose special advantage luxurious schools and aristocratic universities can be maintained' (MI 22). For Morris, however, something more was involved, although Charles Harvey and Jon Press are sensible in their recent unwillingness to define too precisely what that something might have been. They write of 'a painful retreat from sterile goals, and the creation of new, dynamic ones' and believe that between 1869 and 1871 Morris underwent 'something of a conversion . . . not to any specific creed or system of beliefs . . . but to something at once more vague and more substantial', to which 'it is impossible to put a name', but which saw the end of Morris 'the self-absorbed, pure artist'.

But had that artist never existed, the new, politically active Morris could not have come into being, for Morris's first approach to Iceland was as a poet and translator. His attitude to the Icelandic language was hardly systematic: he was happy to let Magnússon act as his grammar book and to develop his poems from his friend's literal translations, thus emphasising his own creative role. This process, which involved a kind of re-imagining of the original material, lends his Icelandic translations, for all their faults, a kind of empathetic intensity and energy, which he found it easy to apply to the people and places he encountered in Iceland. He approached Iceland, and to some extent was received there, as a poet, and one who seemed, in translating the sagas, to have taken into himself something of their spirit.

W. H. Auden and Louis MacNeice's trip to Iceland in 1936 was apparently conducted in a very different spirit. It was one of Auden's whims and MacNeice had doubts about the whole enterprise. Their joint record, published in 1937 as
Letters from Iceland, is amazingly various, by turns camp, serious, comic, factual and fanciful. It includes serious advice for tourists, an anthology of quotations, ‘Sheaves from Sagaland’, with some mordant juxtapositions, a letter supposedly addressed by one schoolgirl to another, and a generous selection of photographs, some conventional, some taken at fascinatingly oblique angles. Much of the book is in verse, and it is a display, particularly on the part of Auden, of sheer poetic virtuosity. Auden’s ‘Letter to Lord Byron’, in which he adopts the stanza form of Byron’s Don Juan, is one of his finest works, but there are also fine verse letters by both poets, an eclogue by MacNeice and a jointly composed ‘Last Will and Testament’.

Auden and MacNeice knew Morris’s book, which they list in their bibliography, marking it with an asterisk as a special recommendation: Trollope’s book is also there, unasterisked. Morris is also mentioned twice in the text of the poems. In the first part of ‘Letter to Lord Byron’, Auden places himself in a tradition of Icelandic travellers, as a poor successor to his illustrious fore-runners:

... the steps I flounder in
Were worn by most distinguished boots of old.
Dasent and Morris and Lord Dufferin,
Hooker and men of that heroic mould
Welcome me icily into the fold.17

MacNeice, in ‘Letter to Graham and Anne Shephard’, takes a more robust view:

Yet further, if you can stand it, I will set forth
The obscure yet powerful ethics of Going North.
Morris did it before, dropping the frills and fuss,
Harps and arbours, Tristram and Theseus,
For a land of rocks and sagas. (LFI 32)

It is those ‘obscure yet powerful ethics’ and the desire to drop ‘frills and fuss’, that Harvey and Press are talking about: something indefinable yet immediately recognisable. This is not to say that MacNeice or Auden necessarily shared Morris’s love of the sagas. In his prose letter to Erika Mann, Auden tells her about Goering’s forthcoming visit to Iceland, and remarks, ‘The Nazis have a theory that Iceland is the cradle of the Germanic culture. Well, if they want a community like that of the sagas they are welcome to it. I love the sagas, but what a rotten society they describe, a society with only the gangster virtues’ (LFI 119). But even if they could not share Morris’s idealised view of saga heroicism and how it might survive in modern Iceland, Auden and MacNeice understood the ‘obscure’ impulses that took him there. ‘I feel as if a definite space in my life had passed away’, Morris told Aglaia Coronio after he returned from his 1873 visit, ‘now I have seen Iceland for the last time ... 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’ (14 September 1873, Li 198). The final poem in Letters from Iceland, MacNeice’s ‘Epilogue for W. H. Auden’, glosses that instinct, in a manner which, although it
does not mention Morris, seems to illuminate his feeling for Iceland, and the difference between his attitude and Trollope’s.

... the don in me set forth
How the landscape of the north
Had educed the saga style
Plodding forward mile by mile.

And the don in you replied
That the North begins inside,
Our ascetic guts require
Breathers from the Latin fire. (LFl 259)

Trollope was and remained an outsider to Iceland, who did no more than skim its surface; he might have been able to perceive some relationship between the sagas and their setting, but that is only part of the story, even for MacNeice the academic. As Auden the academic knew, ‘the obscure yet powerful ethics of Going North’ have a deeper source. Morris set out for Iceland with the spirit of Iceland already within him and both his record of his visit and the shape taken by his subsequent career speak of his crucial indwelling sense of northernness. He never lost the ‘Latin fire’, which might here represent his love and creation of beautiful objects; he never really acquired ‘ascetic guts’; but he was now ready to turn to new and more public fields of action.

NOTES


2 A further context in which both Morris and Trollope’s accounts can be considered is that of other British travellers to Iceland in the nineteenth century. See Lord Dufferin, Letters from High Latitudes (1857), Rev. Sabine Baring-Gould, Iceland, its Scenes and Sagas (1862) and Sir Richard Burton, Ultima Thule: or, A Summer in Iceland (1875). Both Morris and Trollope had read or were aware of these books.


4 See Morris’s journal entry for 4 August 1871: ‘The host showed us his antiquities; an old pewter askr [porringer], which he said belonged to Bishop Gúðbrand (d. 1627) and was at all events of his date; several good cups and spoons of silver, and a fine piece of embroidery with Scripture subjects worked in a circle, and an inscription, which Magnússon with some trouble made out: it looked like thirteenth-century work: but, I suppose, was eighteenth’, William


10 The most notable example of travel affecting his imaginative vision occurred after his long absence in 1872-3, when his re-entry into English life brought sharpened perceptions of the rapacious and unethical nature of English business practice, which in turn influenced his next major novel, *The Way We Live Now* (1875).


12 Trollope noted only cabbages growing in the gardens, but Morris also spotted potatoes and angelica, a grouping of which he became quite fond.

