THE VICTORIAN AND THE NORSEMAN

by Sally Magnusson

> "After all, then, this is only another book on Iceland. You thought it was going to be something new!"

With this whimsically defiant apology, G.G.W. Lock offered **The Home of the Eddas** to the Victorian public in 1879. To-day, when even the most fervid devotee of Icelandic culture has to admit to indulging in something of a bizarre minority interest, it is fascinating to discover that to an educated late-Victorian books, stories, essays, poems and even an undistinguished play or two, about Iceland and its literary heritage were indeed nothing new.

The Victorian enthusiasm for Norse literature encompassed a vast and varied area of interest. In the academic reaches, scholars like Frederick Metcalfe and George Stevens were engaged in painstaking research into Scandinavian history and lore. There too, philologists were discovering the linguistic treasures enshrined in Old Icelandic literature.

> "Mythology, laws, customs, literature, the names of places, and even the everyday vocabulary of life cannot be thoroughly understood except by comparison with those of the North as preserved in the language and literature of Iceland",

enthused Sir George Webbe Dasent in his Introduction to the first great **Icelandic–English Dictionary** in 1874. Dasent also provided the first English grammar-book of the Old Icelandic tongue in 1843. In yet another field of scholarship, Samuel Laing in 1844 and Guðbrandur Vigfússon and F.Y. Powell in 1878 produced major critical histories of Old Norse literature (Laing's being the first ever to be published in English).

Benefitting from all this scholarship, translators of Norse literature were tirelessly prolific, Dasent, Laing, Benjamin Thorpe, William Morris and Eiríkur Magnússon, Vigfússon and Powell, were

collectively responsible for producing English versions of the two Eddas, **Heimskringla**, the greatest Sagas, and much of the skaldic verse. Their work was supplemented by that of a host of less renowned translators. It is amazing to realize, as Karl Litzenberg has observed, that within the 62 years between the appearance of the first Icelandic grammar-book and the last Morris–Magnússon **Saga–Library** translation in 1905, "all the major documents of Old Icelandic literature – and many of the minor – had been given to Englishmen in their own language".

Many of the old stories were given a further airing in widely read collections like Thorpe's **Yuleside Stories** (1853), Dasent's **Popular Tales from the Norse** (1859), and Ruth Pitt's **The Tragedy of the Norse Gods** (1893). And the pages of Victorian periodicals fairly bristled over the years with essays inspired by Edda and Saga. "Legendary Lore of Iceland", "Iceland in the Year 1000", "On the Character of Old Northern Poetry", "Old Norse Mirror of Men and Manners", "The Ódin Religion" – these are just a handful of the subjects that prompted contributors to the **Westminster Review**, the **National Quarterly**, the **North British Review**, **Fraser's Magazine** and others to take up their pens.

Also clamouring for popular attention was the host of books inspired, like G.G.W. Lock's, by visits to the home of the Eddas and Sagas. The Bible-distributing Ebenezer Henderson, John Barrow, Lord Dufferin, Charles Forbes, Lord Garvagh, William Morris, and Mrs. Disney Leith are a few of the travellers who published accounts of their pilgrimages. From Mrs. Leith's sprightly chattiness to Henderson's more austere prose with its panoramic sweep and lavish peppering of quotations from Hebrew poetry, the literary quality of these works is varied but by no means negligible. Nor is the erudition. Modern Icelanders still cherish Henderson's **Iceland** for its sympathetic and scholarly account of Iceland's life and culture, past and present.

These intrepid travellers displayed the same tenacious spirit of enquiry as the pioneers of Norse scholarship, enduring all kinds of discomfort in order to find out for themselves what Iceland was like. Old Mrs. Disney Leith, for instance, a prolific authoress of novels about Aberdeenshire life (who had once, as

young Mary Gordon, been Swinburne's sweetheart), travelled to Iceland eighteen times between 1894 and 1914. There she had a dip in the Arctic at the age of seventy, and was seen to "canter across the wide Icelandic plains with all the zest of a girl", as the **Aberdeen Press and Journal** reported in 1926 in a tribute after her death.

But the layer of Norse activity most interesting, because most revealing, to one seeking to understand what the ethos of the Norsemen meant to the Victorians, is the imaginative literature. Men as diverse in opinion, temperament, and literary output as Thomas Carlyle, William Morris, and Matthew Arnold found inspiration in the Addas and Sagas for their own crusades to the Victorian people. Each discovered something there that he felt the modern age needed. And in communicating this, he remodelled the stuff of Norse literature in a way that expresses his own vision, his own perspectives, his own limitations, and an ethos shaped, not by the tenth or the thirteenth, but very distinctively by the nineteenth century.

Take Carlyle, for instance. In an essay on the Norse god, Ódin, in **On Heroes and Hero-Worship** (1840), he protests that the sceptical age of mechanical thought ushered in by the Enlightenment has dissected and explained away everything that was once an object of reverent wonder. The insights of the imagination, he argues, are needed as a corrective to the materialistic presuppositions of empirical science. And what better exponents of imaginative insight than the pagan Norsemen, whose religion is celebrated in the **Eddas**?

> "What we now lecture of as Science, they wondered at, and fell down before, as Religion. .... The power of **Fire**, or **Flame**, for instance, which we designate by some trivial chemical name, thereby hiding the essential of wonder that dwells in it as in all things, is with these old Northmen, Loke, a most swift subtle **Demon**, of the brood of the Jotuns."

Carlyle's account of the origin of primitive religion is basically an elaboration of that offered by Snorri Sturluson in the

Prose Edda. But nothing could be further in spirit. Snorri's description of how a primitive man's marvelling at the inexplicable wonders of the universe will inspire deification of the natural forces, is the dry rationalizing of a Christian scholar anxious to ensure that the stories be understood as pagan myths. His chief point about these early worshipers is that

> "they understood everything in a material sense, however, since they had not been given spiritual understanding".

But Carlyle argues that intuitive spiritual insight is just what the pagan Norsemen did have. And the visionary fervour with which he recommends it to his countrymen is far removed from the business-like air with which Snorri dismisses it:

> "To the wild deep-hearted man all was yet new, not veiled under names or formulas; it stood naked, flashing-in on him there, beautiful, awful, unspeakable. Nature was to this man, what to the Thinker and Prophet it forever is, preternatural."

The religion of the Norsemen, whatever it was really like, has emerged from distillation in Carlyle's imagination as the emblem of the religion-without-dogma he was preaching to his contemporaries. In an age when many felt that the solid pillars of orthodox Christianity were being disconcertingly eroded by scientists and Higher Biblical critics, Carlyle had a message for them: believe, as your fore-fathers did, in the spirit the dogmas once supported, worship the miraculous in Nature and the god-like in the highest form of Man the Hero.

And here Carlyle produces from the **Eddas** just the man he needs: Ódin, first in the pantheon, god of poetry and Lord of the Slain. The Ódinic cult, Carlyle speculates, must have originated in a real man, the man who first articulated the infant Norse thought opening itself on the universe, "a Hero, of worth immeasurable; admiration for whom, transcending the known bounds became adoration". As he considers how this man came to be thought a god, and effluence of "wuotan", furious Force,

Carlyle breathes into the Eddic Ódin in a personality and dynamism emanating from a poetic vision all Carlyle's own:

> "with all men reverently admiring him; with his own wild soul full of noble ardours and affections, or whirlwind chaotic darkness and glorious new light, a divine Universe bursting all into godlike beauty round him, and no man to whom the like ever had befallen, what could he think himself to be? 'Wuotan?' All men answered, 'Wuotan!'"

Carlyle's imagination has a field-day. The complex, enigmatic, rather sinister Ódin of the **Eddas** is transmuted in the surging rhetoric into the ideal Great Man – Poet-Prophet sensitive to the mysteries of the universe, and firm-willed man of action, saviour of his people. "Discerning with his wild flashing eyes what to do, with his wild lion-heart daring and doing it", Ódin becomes a didactic tool, emblem of the strong inspired leader Carlyle felt his age needed; While Ódin's Norse worshippers, these "strong sons of Nature", are a lesson in admiring, trusting, unquestioning obedience.

But the free play of fancy that subserves the didactic thrust of the essay should not blind us to the astonishingly profound scholarship Carlyle displays, considering that in the late 1830s Norse studies were still in their infancy.

He rejects, for instance, the theory ultimately derived from Snorri and still prevalent among eighteenth and some early nineteenth century scholars, that Ódin had been the leader of a migration of barbarian Scythians from Asia into Scandinavia. He admits that there is no evidence for a historical Ódin whatsoever, arguing merely, for his own purposes, that the Ódinic cult must have been inspired by **someone**, at some time.

It is thrilling also, to find Carlyle recognising so early that the Norse **Eddas** represent "not one coherent System of Thought; but properly the summation of several successive systems"; and, with equally fine insight, understanding that the **Eddas** embody only a poetic shadow of the living religion, that they celebrate,

rather than reflect, the old faith:

> "The Norse Faith, I can well suppose, like other Faiths, was most active while it lay mainly in the silent state, and had not yet much to say about itself, much less to sing. .....
>
> "But they were comparatively an idle adjunct of the matter, men who as it were but toyed with the matter, these later Skalds; and it is **their** songs chiefly that survive."

It is a distinction that not all the crusaders of Norse piety in the nineteenth century recognised.

There are, points in the essay where Carlyle's own philosophy and didactic purpose obstruct his vision, and a distorted image, as opposed to mere fanciful colouring in other parts, is the result. For instance, he attributes to the Norsemen sentiments that smack of German transcendentalism:

> "They seem to have seen, these brave Old Northmen, what meditation has taught all men in all ages. That this world is after all but a show, – a Phenomenon or appearance, no real thing."

In fact, as Carlyle would have realized just from a perusal of "Havamal" in the **Poetic Edda**, this world was so substantial a thing, so little of an ethereal dream, to the Viking, that his highest aim in life and greatest hope of immortality was to achieve a good name **in** the world and **from** the world. Although a tough fatalism prepared him to lose it bravely, life was very real to the Norseman. Carlyle's superscription, "We are not such stuff as Dreams are made of (sic)!", was not the most apt he could have chosen for the Norse philosophy.

Nor does he offer a happy explanation of how the worship of Odin as Lord of the Slain originated. Ódin, he suggests, "told his People the infinite importance of Valour", and they,

> "feeling a response it in their own hearts,
> believed this message of his, and thought it
> a message out of Heaven, and him a Divinity
> for telling it them".

No one can know for certain the origin of the concept of a Vălholl, to which Ódin brought those warriors who died with valour in battle to join his elite band. But it is obviously a poetic concept, and intellectual idea, probably born of an attempt to explain some of the arbitrariness and enigmas of death. Any speculation is fair, but Carlyle's critical acumen has definitely been deflected here by force of his didacticism. He has shunted his own message to the age right on top of the Norse edifice and squashed the latter out of recognition.

But where, at least, Carlyle's instinct was sure, was in his choice of god. Ódin was indeed the member of the pantheon best qualified for a Heroarchy; not because Ódin, the man, was the inspired "First Teacher and Captain", as Carlyle suggests; but because, as archaeological and literary evidence suggests, Ódin, the god, was worshipped primarily by an elite, and a ruling one at that. By, for instance, these autocratic monarchs, Harald Fine-Hair and Eirik Blood-Axe, who mercilessly centralised the government of Norway in the ninth and tenth centuries, and by those they patronised – footloose skalds and landless men without family ties. However, the men who left Norway to colonize Iceland rather than submit to a rule they considered tyrannous, worshipped Thór, Njöordr, and Freyr, if anything, rather than Ódin. These were the men whom William Morris held up for the emulation of the Victorians.

Morris felt a passionate sense of identity with these early Icelanders. And the Sagas which celebrate their lives captured and revitalized his imagination from the moment he began to study them:

> "The delightful freshness and independence of
> thought of them; the air of freedom which blows
> through them, their worship of courage (the

> great virtue of the human race), their utter unconventionality took my heart by storm."

They also took his pen by storm. No sooner had he begun the study of Old Norse with the Icelander Eiríkur Magnússon in 1868, than his own versions of the Sagas began to flow to the press. The emphasis on on "own". For these translations set the key of Morris's practice in all his Norse-inspired work: a re-shaping of, and an impressing something of his own onto, the Norse material – whether his linguistic principles, or his artistic temperament, or his Pre-Raphaelite background, or his social philosophy. A uniquely personalised substance emerges from the filter of Morris's imagination, just as it does from Carlyle's.

In the translations (on which he collaborated with Magnússon) Morris's personality might be expected to resign itself to some effacement in the interests of a faithful rendering of the text. But not for a minute! Heavily embossed with archaic diction, strange word-compounds, and tortuous twists of syntax, William Morris's translations stand out from other Victorian Saga-translations like filigree on a plain surface. Aiming to reproduce the medieval and Germanic spirit of the Sagas, he evolved a diction relying heavily on Middle English vocabulary and morphology, and on idioms than hug the Icelandic as closely as possible.

The effects for which Morris was striving are strikingly illuminated by the stylistic emendations he made to the pedestrian, but fairly idiomatic drafts submitted by Magnusson. "Aware" is is emended to "ware", "much" to "mickle", "later" to "sithence", "councels" to "redes", and so on. "He kept out spies on his journeys," writes Magnússon; "he let bear spying on his way," emends Morris with a prim eye on the Norse construction. Magnusson's "message" is rejected in favour of "wordsending" (Old Norse "ordsending") and his "war" in favour of "unpeace" (ON "ǒfridr"). (It is interesting to note that in trying to reflect in English the exact sense of "ǒfridr" – absence of peace rather than presence of War in its modern sense, Morris in fact replaced a genuine Germanic word – derived from Old English "werre" – with one borrowed into English from the invidious Romance

tongue.)

Morris's translations do without doubt alter the nature of the original. It is only necessary to set his translation of **Gunnlaug's Saga** beside the Icelandic text to see how seriously Morris's style impairs the dramatic action. A comment which is terse in Icelandic is too often sluggish when transliterated exactly, as is shown by Morris's translation of "Porsteini var vel fagnat sem líkligt var" by "Good cheer was made Thorsteinn, as was like to be". A less scrupulously literal rendering – "As might be expected, Thorsteinn was given a good welcome" – slips easily into the narrative flow; Morris's version only impedes it. Dynamic dialogue often gets petrified to stilted formality by sheer weight of diction. Morris's " 'That rede is not be settled so hastily,' said Thorsteinn; and therewithall got on other talk", conveys no impression of the abruptness with which Thorsteinn sheers off a sensitive subject. The English needs to sound as blunt as the Icelandic – something like " 'That won't be settled so quickly,' answered Thorsteinn, and changed the subject".

It is the purity of his motives that makes the translations so fascinating. Morris fully intended a clear-sighted, impersonal fidelity to the word, spirit and texture of the original. But instead he only exposes – disarmingly, because he is so frank, so hopelessly indiscreet about it – what really did govern his rendering of the texts: his ideas of linguistic purity, his fondness for rich, ornate design (as seen in his textiles), his passionate regard for the culture of the English Middle Ages, and the related tendency to reach for the tools – linguistic, in this case – of the past when advocating and ideal for the present.

For, impelling all Morris's Norse-inspired work – translations, tales, poems, lectures – was the desire to share with his contemporaries the qualities of the Saga-ethos: resilient acceptance of life's hazards, defiance of personal suffering, unflinching defence of liberty. With this kind of crusading zeal behind it, however, it is hardly surprising that his work failed to escape what the great Norse critic W.P. Ker called "that touch of over-reflection and self-consciousness which checks the dramatic life and turns it into matter of edification or sentiment".

In **The Lovers of Gudrun,** a poetic retelling of part of **Laxdaela Saga,** which Morris published in the The Earthly Paradise in 1869, he produces just the kind of earnest rhetoric that Ker warned against. When Kjartan learns that his promised bride has wed another, Morris has him step to the front of the state, so to speak, to declaim the ethic of stoicism:

> "Now is the world clean changed for me
> In this last minute, yet indeed I see
> That still will it go on for all my pain;
> Come then, my sister, let us back again,
> I must meet folk, and face the life beyond.
> And, as I may, walk 'neath the dreadful bond
> Of ugly pain – such men our fathers were,
> Not lightly bowed by any weight of care."

In the Saga, on the other hand, we must read between the terse lines of the narrative to glean our insight into Kjartan's mind. We are told: "He now heard about Gudrun's marriage and showed no emotion at the news". The nearest we get to his "dreadful bond of ugly pain" is a snippet of reported gossip a few pages later: "I am told, Kjartan, that you have been rather reserved all winter, and people are saying that you are still yearning for Gudrun". The force of Kjartan's 'heroism', his silent endurance, is intensified by the restraint of the narration, the artfully dispassionate description of what he does and what men say. Morris's rhetorical statement only diffuses the force.

On page after page of the poem, Morris's own artistic temperament and his own vision modify the original Norse material. While **Laxdaela's** vixenish Gudrun is delineated solely by her grim actions and pregnant reticence, Morris's is a Pre-Raphaelite heroine with eyes "bluer than grey" and a neck which contrives to rise up "like an ivory tower" from delineated passions and graphic scene-painting, his fondness for medieval pagentry, his desire to emblazon the heroic ethic, all dictate a new form.

At the same time, let it be said, Morris does capture enough of the vigour of **Laxdaela Saga,** even a hint of its tautness, for his poem to stand out from the rarefied atmosphere of **The Earthly**

Paradise. And this disciplining yet vitalising influence of Old Norse literature on his art is even more marked in **Sigurd the Volsung** (1876), his epic retelling of the Nibelung story, woven with consistent artistry from the various threads of legend in the **Poetic Edda, Volsunga Saga,** and the German **Nibelungenlied.**

The poem is comprehensive, without sprawling. It exudes dignified ease, but can still pulsate with energy. The language is the mixture of Middle English, modern English, and German idiom that developed out of the Saga translations, but its sinews have been tightened. The archaic excesses have been restrained, and the Germanic vocabulary (often monosyllabic) lends a crude force to the diction. The metre is not the stropic measure of Eddic verse, but Morris wields the English hexameter with a flexibility that enables him to emulate in some degree the fullness and freedom of the unique Eddic line. Together, language and metre contribute to a supple narrative style which can accommodate both multiple image and crypitc dramatic statement.

But once again Morris has created something unmistakingly his own from the Norse sources. The style, though tauter than Gudrun, is still expansive enough for him to indulge in the passionate expressions of emotion, the leisurely descriptions, the limpid imagery and the vivid colours, in which his poetic imagination revelled.

What is even more interesting is that Morris has welded his own social vision into the poem, too. The jolly socialist idyll that he was to embody later in the utopian **News from Nowhere** is already being adumbrated here. There is the land of the Helper, for instance, where "merry men went bedward when their tide of toil was done". And there is the hero, Sigurd, whom Morris transforms into a social saviour, like Wagner's Siegfried and Carlyle's Ódin. Morris's Sigurd reflects both the unflinching resistance that is called for when tyranny threatens individual liberty, and the gentleness of Morris's ideal, mutually caring society.

"For peace I bear unto thee,
and to all the kings of the earth,

Who bear the sword aright,
and are crowned with the crown of worth;
But unpeace to the lords of evil,
and the battle and the death;
And the edge of the sword to the traitor,
and flame to the slanderous breath:
And I would that the loving were lived,
and I would that the weary should sleep,
And that man should hearken to man
and that he that soweth should reap."

Here, budding from the unlikely stalk of tough Norse heroic legend, is the social dream that was to define itself into a Socialist programme and become the vision of all the political writing of Morris's last twenty years. With less overt didacticism than Carlyle, but with just as zealous a crusading spirit. Morris was using Norse literature – and changing it in the process – to communicate his ideas and extol his ideals to the Victorians.

It is exactly what Matthew Arnold was doing, too, in "Balder Dead", his one contribution to the body of Norse-inspired literature. In the Preface to his Poems of 1853, Arnold had argued vigorously that the age needed a noble, inspiriting, loftily disinterested petry. And for subject-matter he looked (when he could tear himself away from the Greek classics) to the Norse **Eddas,** to the legend of Baldur.

But Arnold could not emulate the vitality and the raw force with which the poetic expression of the heroic ideal vibrates in the **Edda.** Instead the prevailing mood of "Balder Dead" is elegiac, weary, wistful. It is disseminated partily by the scattered epic similes, quite un-Norse in subject and spirit – images of helplessness and frustrated longing – which evoke a mood that prevails in defiance of noble speeches and bold action.

The most memorable lines of the poem are not the heroic rhetoric Carlyle's Odin, but Badler's haunting expression of his world-weariness in the passage, reminiscent of the elegiac cadences of "Dover Beach", beginning

"For I am long since weary of your storm
Of carnage . . . . ."

How telling it is, too, that in Arnold's poem the gentleness and wisdom that Snorri Sturluson ascribes to Baldur should find their expression in withdrawal and rejection of the world. Even Balder's vision of the new world which will rise from the ashes of the cataclysmic destruction at Ragnarok, "the doom of the gods", is overshadowed by the present, which begins to consume the future hope immediately it is articulated, eroding even the substantiality that a full poetic line might have afforded it:

"Such for the future is my hope; meanwhile,
I rest the thrall of Hela, and endure
Death, and the gloom which round me even now
Thickens, and to its inner gulph recalls."

Arnold aimed at providing and encouring the kind of poetry he felt the age needed, poetry that would, as he put it, "inspirit and rejoice the reader". But it was his own spiritual hunger, a despairing sense of loss and estrangement in the modern world (common to many of his contemporaries and succeeding generations), which fertilised his poetic imagination. Arnold's brief foray into the Norse world locates this tension.

Arnold's poem, like Carlyle's essay and Morris's renderings of the Sagas was inspired by the Norse culture which they all admired so much. But what makes these works so interesting is that they all reveal much more about the Victorian than about the Norseman.

THE POTENTIAL OF SHETLAND–MODEL HULLS FOR HIGH SPEEDS UNDER OAR AND SAIL

Ian A. Morrison

In this Society's special publication 'Scandinavian Shetland: An Ongoing Tradition?' and in an earlier paper (Christensen &