– Introduction –

> If you look at the map of Europe, you will see in its north-western corner lying just under the Arctic circle a large island . . .[1]

Why did William Morris want to go to the corner of the map? In 1871 he was thirty-seven years old, married to a famous beauty with whom he had two young daughters, a celebrated poet and co-owner of a flourishing design company. He had also just found his dream home – Kelmscott Manor on the Thames in Oxfordshire. Yet as he took possession of Kelmscott, he dispossessed himself and set off for Iceland. This was part of his complex response to the relationship between his wife, Janey, and his friend and mentor Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Morris took the house in joint tenancy with Rossetti, who promptly moved in for the summer with Janey and the girls. Morris himself stayed long enough only to oversee such things as the wallpaper.

By taking himself away Morris was perhaps acknowledging what could not be changed, including his own nature. This must have been a hard lesson for

1. The Early Literature of the North – Iceland, *The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris*, ed. Eugene D. LeMire (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969).

someone who believed it possible to realise the ideal worlds of his imagination. As a child growing up in what is now suburban east London, he had wandered Epping Forest on a pony wearing a suit of armour that his wealthy and indulgent parents had made for him. His impulse was to translate, formulate and realise, which requires a certain quiescence and plasticity from whatever and whoever is to hand.

Morris's biographer Fiona MacCarthy says that he 'was not given to introspection'.[2] His feelings, however mediated, retain their violence. They remain unprocessed. Everything in him was propelled outwards, from his moods to his famously unruly hair, and he saw himself as difficult to control. He found ways to defuse his effect, at school turning his rages into animal theatre for the entertainment of his friends. In Iceland, as at home, he plays on the comedy of himself, inviting mockery as a form of acceptance.

If he was looking for containment, Morris found it in the occluded nature of his marriage and his punitive friendship with Rossetti, who mocked and undermined him with a persistence that betrays serious admiration. Morris's departure for Iceland must have seemed dangerously impressive to Rossetti, whose caricature from this time portrays him as a bumbler in a punt being laughed at by fish he will clearly never catch.

Fiona MacCarthy observes that Morris 'was not one of the great Victorian travellers. But in the course of his lifetime he made two journeys that had an effect

2. Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris* (Faber & Faber, 1994).

on him out of all proportion to their actual duration.'[3] The first of these was a student walking tour of France, the second to Iceland. Morris was drawn there not only by the map but the sagas. His epic poem *The Earthly Paradise*, just published in four hefty volumes, was a tale of Norsemen sailing off in search of a perfect new world where no one grows old. He had also been learning Icelandic and collaborated on translations of the sagas with the Icelandic scholar Eiríkr Magnússon, who accompanied him on this trip.

There is surprisingly little said about the sagas in the journal. Instead Morris is continuously fixing the place in his mind while getting caught up in questions of travel, noting his reaction to the idea of leaving or arriving, hurry and delay, what it means to dread somewhere you've never been or to encounter the actuality of a long-held vision, and the ways in which travel feels good for you even as you can't wait to get home.

Morris's writing here is unlike anything else he produced. It has the shifting quality of natural speech, moving from playful to methodical to live-action, rhetorical to confiding. It sounds like someone talking to someone with whom he can be himself – which it was. The intended recipient was Georgie, wife of his friend and fellow artist Edward Burne-Jones. Morris had known her since she was a teenager and felt a strong affinity with this intense and brilliant woman. They were allies, too, in their endurance of marriages fractured by a more obviously glamorous other.

3. Ibid.

The journal proposes someone wonderfully able to live in the present for all his love of lost worlds. As the train pulls out of King's Cross, Morris fears having left something behind, perhaps himself – as if this were his subconscious intention. He sets himself up as a tourist, cheerfully noting his ungainliness and his propensity to get wrong what others manage perfectly well. There is much talk of scrambling and stumbling but rarely anything as dramatic as an actual fall.

Travelling with other people, even if you have known one another for years, requires a re-establishment of roles and relations. You are in each other's power. To be late or inexplicably out of sight, to be angry or anxious, affects everyone. There is no other room to withdraw to (even if there are other rooms); there is no front door by which to leave. Morris was travelling with an old friend, a recent acquaintance and a stranger. They all, Morris included, come off the page in the concentrated form that derives from the confinements of travel.

Charles Faulkner, mathematician, artist and engineer, had been a loyal companion since university days and a founding partner in the design firm. He is a light, teasing presence who kicks stones off a cliff path that induces terror in Morris. The first to be seasick, the last to get up and possessing 'no genius for cookery', Faulkner is the most even and undemanding of the group. He and Morris snigger like schoolboys: 'so small a joke moving our little minds in those waste places – owing to the fresh air, I suppose.'

Eiríkr Magnússon was an Icelandic linguist and theologian. He was no schoolboy and while he greatly respected Morris's capacity to learn the language as well as the sagas, he also later provided corrective footnotes to the journal, showing Morris to have been slapdash on occasion: 'Surtr is the God of fire (soot, *cocknice*, sutt)' appends Morris. Magnússon adds: 'Surt means Swart; he was a demon not the god of fire.' While Morris is enjoying a wallow in the bath of the thirteenth-century poet Snorri, which he describes as being cemented with bitumen, Magnússon qualifies the experience: 'For "bitumen" read silicious sinter (*islandice* "hveragrjót"). Bitumen does not exist in the country and was not an article of import in Snorri's time.'

The stranger was W. H. Evans, an army officer who had planned a trip of his own but joined up with Faulkner and Morris in order to share resources. Evans is pedantically precise about the size of the boat, whereas Morris just blanches at the idea that something so small could get him to Iceland safely. He studies the map deeply, and is furious when he can't get a fire to light. Morris is happy to give up and eat tinned beef. He never laughs at Morris and Faulkner's jokes, and only seems amused when he has outwitted somebody or something, even a river or tent.

While both Faulkner and Evans become badly ill, Morris suffers only a day's stomach-ache, which he blames on nerves. He frets, loses things and tumbles off his horse, but is resilient. Perhaps this is partly why Burne-Jones drew him to look like risen dough:

outwardly at least, he is always bouncing back. He is terrified when they come to ford the first river and have to swim the horses, only for this quickly to become routine. After a moment of melancholy or anxiety, he puffs up his prose:

> However whatever forebodings and sentimental desires I may have, I have to indulge them over the kitchen fire and under its shiny black rafters, for the others are hungry, and Evans's ptarmigan are waiting a stroke of my art.

Morris was heroic in his vision, energy and determination, but not particularly macho. He cooks and sews, and is happy to admit that he is prone to losing his head and easily scared (at least when it comes to physical rather than emotional danger). He dreads an imminent journey through a steep narrow pass, and readily declares himself not up to it: 'I didn't really think it dangerous for capable people, but I distrusted my head sorely . . . I thought of something like walking across the third-floor joists of a half-finished house.'

The pleasure in small things that comes to most of us through travel is innate in Morris. He is enthralled by the epic aspects of the adventure but as pleased by a fine pony, a good joke or a clearing sky. When he loses a strap for a pan and so loses the pan, he misses its tinkle. He is on the look-out for Norsemen but cannot resist nailing one of their hosts as 'the ideal parson of the modern northern novelette'. He's happy, as at school, to cast himself as the butt of a joke, and cheerfully admits that others are better at riding, shooting and fishing. He declares himself 'ingeniously useless',

a term he applies to Icelandic locks, and rather enjoys the fact that the others dismiss him when it comes to repacking boxes or putting up tents. He was serious, however, about his role as company cook, and had practised in London, rigging up a barbecue in the Burne-Jones's Fulham back garden and concocting recipes for stew. He notes every significant meal along with every significant mountain.

As a schoolboy, Morris liked to make nets, which he used to trap fish and birds. This was also his way of learning about the world, casting his eye and grasping surface rather than essence. He liked to capture form and reproduce it as line. Even a song is depicted in terms of texture and shape. His focus on construction, design and decoration informed the manner in which he formulated this new world of Iceland: graphic, geometric, diagrammatic. Perhaps this is how he dealt with emotions, which would make his wife all the more inclined towards the sinuously emotional Rossetti.

Morris's manner lends itself to confident perceptions open to instant revision, so what we get is description in action. His visual distillations combine with his excitement, open-mindedness and mobility when looking for the perfect descriptive phrase. He compares water to water – a lake is 'green like a cold sea' – and is quick to express solid as liquid and to find movement in what is still: 'the whole tumbled sea of peaks'. He reports their approach to Thingvellir, home of the first parliament, like a sports commentator as mountains accelerate towards him, a lake flashes in

and out of view, and the land sinks and winds and runs away. The containment of a lake does not appeal: 'if all lakes are as I fancy melancholy, just think of an Icelandic one!' He likes action and flow, rivers and seas, nowheres and elsewheres. One of his best-known novels is called *News from Nowhere* (1890).

This journal is the borderless writing of someone so caught up in describing that they set aside the dignity of their subject as well as that of their prose, and so we have a 'dribbling glacier' and 'great rubbish heaps of sand'. If you have been to Iceland you will understand how hard a place it is to convey and you will find that Morris has done it for you. What it feels like, for instance, to stand close to an erupting geysir: 'as though someone had struck the hollow earth underneath us half-a-dozen times'. Or the water that is so clear you can't see it's there and in the next pool, 'the horrible blue and green depths'. His eye is conditioned by his early passion for medieval churches: he looks into the mountains and sees columns, pillars, minsters and porches. The caves on a cliff-face are 'the hellmouths in thirteenth-century illuminations'. Being the modern type, Morris is unperturbed by hellmouths themselves.

Unlike Morris's poetry, the journal is not constrained by an idea of style. His language here has grain and grip. He writes in solid paragraphs full of (to borrow from his geysirs) 'bright clear bubbling holes'. His sentences are upholstered with colons and semicolons and take a very long time to approach a full stop.