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The Lure of Iceland: the Northern Pilgrimages of Mary Gordon (Mrs. Disney Leith)

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Abstract:

The second half of the nineteenth century saw a surge in the number of literary tourists to Iceland inspired by English translations of the Viking sagas. Mary Gordon (Mrs. Disney Leith), one of the few visitors who spoke Icelandic, made eighteen visits between 1894 and the outbreak of the First World War. She was passionately involved in Icelandic history, poetry and culture and was an admirer of the Icelandic people, their values and their way of life. As a self-appointed cultural ambassador for her adopted homeland, Mary's writings about Iceland conveyed her enthusiasm for the country and its people to a variety of different audiences in Britain.

Keywords:

Mary Gordon; Mrs. Disney Leith; Iceland; William Morris; Swinburne; George Webbe Dasent; Viking; Sagas; Njal.

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‘Iceland is not a country for the mere tripper and holiday seeker – the tour is certainly not to be recommended to any one who is not in fairly robust health, a good sailor and able to enjoy riding. To those who have not these qualifications, the advantages will not outweigh the drawbacks; and if such go there, they, as a rule, only hang about Reykjavik, and see little of the real beauties of the country.’

Mary Gordon’s strictures against casual tourism in her *Three Visits to Iceland* (Leith A 108) were a reflection of Iceland’s increasing popularity as a tourist destination towards the close of the nineteenth century. The country’s fuming volcanoes and saga-strewn history exerted a compelling grip on the Victorian literary imagination. It was a country that at first sight seemed to differ dramatically from the homely landscape of Britain and was apparently alien in almost every way, but which on closer encounter revealed cultural and linguistic resonances that many Victorians found intriguing. Even more of a bonus, it was less than a thousand miles by sea from Edinburgh. No wonder that a succession of nineteenth century scholars, writers and artists made the Nordic expedition to Reykjavik and its hinterland.

Mary Charlotte Julia Gordon (1840-1926) came from a wealthy aristocratic background. She was the only child of Sir Henry Percy and Lady Mary Agnes Blanche Gordon. Her mother was a daughter of George Ashburnham, 3rd Earl of Ashburnham, and his second wife, Lady Charlotte Percy, sister of the 5th Duke of Northumberland and a daughter of the 1st Earl of Beverley. On her father’s side, membership of the upper ranks of society was more recent. Her paternal grandfather, General Sir James Willoughby Gordon, had hauled himself up the ranks of the military by making himself useful to those in power, acquiring a baronetcy and a fortune on the way. He was military secretary, first to Frederick, Duke of Kent (Queen Victoria’s father) when he was Commander-in-Chief in North America, and secondly to his brother Edward, Duke of York, before becoming Quarter Master-General to the army, a position of considerable influence.

Their son, Sir Henry Percy Gordon, was in many ways the antithesis of his father, showing no interest in joining the army. He had a meteoric academic career at Cambridge, where in 1827 he was Senior Wrangler – that is, he was awarded the highest marks among those taking mathematics – and was elected the first ever Honorary Fellow of Peterhouse. He practised as a barrister before retiring to cherish his estates in Aberdeenshire and on the Isle of Wight, where he was appointed Deputy Lieutenant. He passed on his knowledge of classical and modern languages and his love for music and painting to his beloved daughter and only child, Mary.

From her youth, Mary had been intrigued by Iceland’s history and culture. She was determined to go there herself but it was not until 1894 at the age of fifty-four that she made her first foray. By then she had taught herself Icelandic, written a short story rooted in Icelandic history and myth and was working on a translation of the



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Bishops' Sagas (Leith O, P). The time was right for her personal venture. She had fulfilled the conventional nineteenth century female responsibilities of marriage and bringing up her family of six children, now all young adults. Although unknown to the general public, as her books had been published anonymously, she was already the author of eleven works of domestic fiction (Powney and Mitchell) - much approved by Charlotte Yonge (70-1) - and a book of verse (Leith L). Her husband, General Robert William Disney Leith, twenty one years her senior, had died two years earlier at the age of seventy three. After the initial period of mourning, she was able to realise earlier ambitions.

In August 1894, this lively middle-aged widow fulfilled her life long dream and boarded the Danish mail steamer *SS Laura* at Granton dock, near Edinburgh, accompanied by one of her daughters, Edith, aged 23.¹ The other members of the family party were her two sons, both of whom had set out on a military career, following in the footsteps of their father, a war hero who had lost an arm in India leading the charge on 'The Bloody Bastion' at the siege of Mooltan in the Sikh wars.

The elder one, Alick (Alexander Henry), now 28, had scrambled through the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst, failing on the first occasion before eventually passing out.² He had been commissioned as a lieutenant in the Welch Regiment, seeing active service fighting against El Mahdi and the Dervish army in the Sudan. Alick had married Mildred Katherine Nicholson just over a year previously, in July 1893, and had resigned his army commission five months later on Christmas Day, probably to look after the family estates after his father's death. However, tragedy struck the following April when his new bride died shortly after giving birth to a daughter, named Mildred Katherine after her mother.³ For him, the Icelandic trip might well have been intended as something of a therapeutic vacation. The month before the family party embarked, Mary's younger son Disney (Robert Thomas Disney), named after his father, had passed out of Sandhurst, despite his conduct being recorded as 'Inattentive', 'Unpunctual' and 'Bad'.⁴ This northern expedition was a celebratory holiday before he embarked on a military career as a commissioned officer in an Indian regiment.

It was to be the first of Mary's eighteen journeys north to Iceland. Why did this wealthy widow want to leave her comfortable estates on the Isle of Wight and in Aberdeenshire to visit such a sparsely populated island that lacked the amenities considered to be part of civilised life at that time? Unlike Anthony Trollope and his 'Mastiffs', Caroline Alicia De Fonblanque and many other travellers to Iceland, Mary was not – in the words of Andrew Wawn (40) – one of those:

...day-trippers to old northern theme parks, interested only in the water chutes... but rather one of the others who sought first-hand contact with what they believed was their Viking-age heritage. It was those old northern values, after all, that, in the eyes of many Victorians, underpinned the best of Britain at home and abroad – imperial power, mercantile prosperity, technological progress, social stability and justice. What was more natural



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than to have books and travel help trace the roots of that prowess back to...the north Atlantic island where the legacy could still be heard in its linguistically purest form?

Iceland was an attractive destination not just for the adventurous tourist but for those whose imagination had been gripped by its history and culture, as well as its landscape. According to Ed Jackson, more than 100 accounts of Icelandic travel were published in English between 1750 and 1914. Interest had quickened markedly with the launch in 1861 of George Webbe Dasent's translation in two volumes of *The Story of Burnt Njal*.⁵ With its 200 page introductory essay, appendices and maps, it was in effect a compendium of Icelandic history, literature and culture. Publication was something of a literary event, as the book was widely and favourably reviewed (Wawn 142-182). Dasent was an enthusiastic Scandinavian scholar and translator who visited Iceland many times. His collaboration with the Icelandic poet Grímur Thomsen⁶ and the Scottish traveller Samuel Laing resulted in the eventual completion and publication of the first comprehensive and authoritative *Icelandic-English Dictionary*.⁷

Dasent's work inspired a number of enthusiastic readers to make the trip to Iceland. The artist Samuel Edmund Waller (1850-1903) attributed the inspiration for his journey to Dasent, writing 'It was "Burnt Njal" that was at the bottom of it. I had gone through Dr. Dasent's admirable version of the book with the very deepest interest, and was wild to visit the scene of such tremendous tragedy' (Waller 1). William Morris's account of his first expedition in 1871 includes a detailed exploration of the area in which the saga is set. Rider Haggard and W.G.Collingwood were among later visitors who were inspired by reading Dasent, while W.G.Lock's 1882 *Guide to Iceland* offered a suggested route 'Through "The Njal Country" ', with a ten page summary of the plot of Dasent's translation (Wawn 167).

In 1864, three years after the appearance of *Burnt Njal*, which Mary thought 'beautifully translated' (Leith H 7), her Iceland-based story, "Hvit the Fosterling", appeared anonymously in Charlotte Yonge's *Monthly Packet* (Leith K). It was not based on any personal experience of the island - she had to wait another thirty years for that. In the meantime, as well as being stimulated by Dasent's work, she had read the expansive account of Iceland's geology, topology, history and culture written by Sabine Baring-Gould, the eccentric Anglo-Catholic clergyman and hymnologist whose "Onward, Christian Soldiers" and "Now the Day is Over" still flourish in the twenty first century.⁸ Baring-Gould had been fascinated by the rugged, dramatic, volcanic landscape when, as a 28 year old, he rode across Iceland in 1862 in the interval between his graduation and marriage. Like many other travellers, he was impressed with the high standards of literacy among the general population, with many Lutheran pastors able to read Greek, Hebrew and Latin.

An enthusiasm for Icelandic literature and culture was one of the passions Mary shared with her cousin, Swinburne.⁹ In a letter to the editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, he included *Burnt Njal* in his list of the hundred finest books (Lang v5



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134) and considered Dasent's 1866 translation of *Gisli the Outlaw* 'more beautiful and delightful than I can say' (Lang v1 148). Rather romantically, he thought his own surname had a Scandinavian origin.¹⁰ The common interest of the two cousins was part of what Andrew Wawn describes as the Victorian obsession with the Vikings, manifested in the Viking Club, or Society for Northern Research, with discussions and lectures on the sagas, stone carvings and much else. For example, Mary's paper on Icelandic church architecture was read at one of the Club's meetings and published in its proceedings (Leith D). Some club members even adopted Viking nicknames for themselves (Wawn 8).

While she shared with many others this fascination with Iceland's geology, geography and culture, there was one particular aspect of the island's history that Mary was almost certainly unique in finding of compelling interest. This was the Icelandic Catholic Church, which had been extinguished in a wave of violence by the sixteenth century Lutheran reformation, imported from Denmark. She perceived this lost and almost forgotten "true church" as a rightful precursor of her own high church Anglo-Catholicism in its embodiment of the direct, uninterrupted succession of bishops tracing back to the Apostles and its emphasis on the sacraments. She revered the last Catholic Bishop of Hólar, executed together with two of his sons at Skálholt in 1550, the subject of her poem "The Bell of Holar" (Leith L 47).

On board the *Laura*

Since 1884, the 1,000 ton steamship *SS Laura* had been plying regularly between Copenhagen, Granton or Leith (the Firth of Forth ports near Edinburgh), the Faroe Islands and on to Iceland, carrying mail, coal and supplies on the journey out and pony-sized Icelandic horses on the return. She had room for up to 46 passengers in first class, including Mary and members of her family, and 44 in second.

The Disney Leiths' 900 mile journey to Reykjavik was to take six days. Mary used the time well. On the first morning after weighing anchor at Granton, she took a sea-water bath heated by a steam pipe from the engine. Like many Victorian travellers, she sketched and painted, although Edith stayed firmly in their cabin when the swell increased. Mary exulted in her spell in the bows in moderately high seas, finding 'the sensation is delightful beyond words. The boat is swinging pretty well and the wind keen; the grey waves curdling and scooping below' (Leith A 7).

The journey through the Pentland Firth round the north of Scotland and on through the north Atlantic could be downright dangerous. On 31 January 1881, the 700 ton *SS Phoenix*, on her way to Iceland with coal and general cargo, sprang a leak and was wrecked at Faxe Fjord, near Reykjavik, with the loss of one crew member (Thorsen 131). Only six years before Mary's first voyage, the 800 ton steam-and-sail *SS Copeland*, on the homeward run from Iceland to the Firth of Forth, ran aground in fog at Langston Point on the island of Stroma, between the Scottish mainland and the



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Orkneys, and eventually sank in deep water. She was carrying a crew of 30 and 10 passengers, including Rider Haggard. All were saved. Of the 482 Icelandic horses on board – destined to work deep underground as pit ponies in Britain’s coal mines – 360 swam ashore, though Rider Haggard’s own pony, Hekla, was drowned. One of the crew, a petty officer, had been so frightened by the first impact of the ship on the rocks that he had rushed to the spirit room on board and got so drunk that he was not discovered until the following day. His desperate shouts from the wreck were heard from a boat carrying Rider Haggard and the other passengers and crew from Stroma to the safety of the mainland. There were other shipwrecks along the route. On 17 February 1913, the *SS Vesta* ran aground near Hnífsdalur in a snowstorm. The engine room was flooded and passengers and crew were taken ashore (Thorsen 239). Indeed, the *Laura* herself would eventually suffer a similar fate. She made 204 trips to Iceland during her 28 years of service, but on 16 March 1910 she hit the rocks at Skagaströnd on the north coast of Iceland and was wrecked. All the passengers and crew were saved (Thorsen 187).

Halfway between Scotland and Iceland, the *Laura* reached the Danish Faroe Islands, calling at Transvik, Tórshavn - the capital, even though it had a population of less than 100 - and Klaksvík, the second largest settlement. Mary thought Klaksvík was very quaint, with houses looking as trim as if they had been taken out of a German toy box. Mary was struck by the grandeur of the remarkable Faroese scenery:

Great deep green hillsides, with horizontal strata of dull reddish-grey rock, in terrace after terrace; some hills quite pyramidal in shape; they get closer and closer till you steam through a land-locked lake calm as a millpond (Leith A 13).

The Faroes proved an immense success with the Disney Leith family and provided a regular stopover on subsequent Icelandic visits. Three days later, early in the morning, Mary was in raptures at her first glimpse of Iceland:

...there on our right, as we steamed laboriously rolling along, lay ICELAND! the great glorious length of varied coast, the vast white plateau of the Myrdalls Jokull just catching the early sunlight, the rich deeply-indented lower cliffs and headlands and peninsulas – countless in number, infinite in variety of form – sleeping in shadow; a clear soft sky, broken by the lightest summer clouds, framing the view; the sea in front, rolling and tumbling in long grey leaden waves. Yes, there it was, the dream of my life, the desire of my eyes – familiar through long years of loving imagination; there it was in the very deed (Leith A 16).

Mary had read much about the island’s scenery in Dasent’s *The Story of Burnt Njal* and Sabine Baring-Gould’s account of his travels, but the reality surpassed her anticipation. Almost as an omen, a day later, on the eve of their arrival at Reykjavik, the Aurora Borealis lit the night sky - ‘the most glorious sight...one great long winding streamer, like a glorified pennant, right over our heads...the most wonderful and impressive scene’ (Leith A 20). The island was larger than expected and was



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certainly much bigger than their familiar Isle of Wight – indeed, it is one third larger than Scotland. From their first sighting, it had taken the *Laura* twenty two hours to steam along the south coast to Reykjavik.

Iceland at last

In those days a small settlement compared with today's city, Reykjavik was easy to walk around and the party found the Icelanders gentle and courteous. One of their fellow passengers on the *Laura*, Sigurdur Pálsson, who became a lasting friend, helped them to find a guide and to hire ponies. Their recommended Hotel Island (Iceland) was simple and clean. The street gutters smelled a little, but no more than in some Scottish towns, according to Mary. Back in the 1850s, Lord Dufferin (12) had described Reykjavik as a collection of wooden sheds, one storey high and with a suburb of turf huts, on every side a desolate plain of lava. A decade later, Samuel Waller (35) had taken a similarly dim view of the little town - 'the open drains; the utter absence of trees and foliage; and the powerful smells; - all tend to make one feel disappointed'. By the 1890s, however, there were some stone buildings, including the small Lutheran cathedral, the Dómkirkjan, that Mary considered 'very ugly', and the Althing-House, the Parliament building. Attending a session, Mary was put in mind of 'meetings of the Representative Church Council (Episcopal) in Scotland, and the sort of rough-looking but sterling honest men who attend them as lay representatives' (Leith A 25). This was the successor to the historic meetings of the Althing at Thingvellir, which, from AD 930 onwards, was one of the first – if not the very first – collective law-making and law-enforcement assemblies in the world. It continued with limited functions after Iceland came under Danish rule in 1380, until its abolition by Denmark in 1800. It was reconstituted as a consultative assembly in 1845, moving to Reykjavik, and given limited legislative powers over domestic matters in 1874.¹¹

The highlights of this first excursion included the national library and the museum, which had, to Mary's High Church delight, a large collection of pre-Reformation church vestments – even an altar-cloth 'which looked as if it might have been the veritable one presented by Bishop Kloeng in the eleventh century.' Throughout this early stage of her Icelandic encounter, Mary (Leith A passim) made constant comparisons with the familiar in Scotland – street signs similar to those in Aberdeen, 'rain thickly like a soft Scotch mist', a girl with 'quite an Aberdeenshire type of face', a wall like 'a regular Scotch stone dyke', the hills round Reykjavik 'like an infinite series of Grampians'. The weather resembled 'a glorified Scotch climate; warm, intensely pure and clean air, but without the parching feeling you often find, in Aberdeenshire'. Indeed, 'The country seemed all so very Scotch in character, quite homely, only so vast'.



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The party found it curious to be in a town like Reykjavik that was utterly without wheels except for small handcarts and barrows. With no proper roads on the island, people and goods were transported by the pony-sized Icelandic horses, sturdy and rather short for tall people like Mary's two sons. Icelandic horses are very hardy, strong and patient and have two unusual gaits in addition to the walk, trot and canter. The most commonly used is the 'tölt', a four-beat gait where the sequence of foot falls is the same as in walk, with at least one foot on the ground at any time. The rider is not bounced about in the saddle, making even long journeys over rough tracks relatively smooth and comfortable. The less frequently used 'sheið', or 'flying pace', is a bound or gallop, with the left fore and hind feet landing simultaneously, alternating with the right for and hind feet. As in a gallop, at times all four feet are off the ground. It needs an experienced rider to cope and is used only for short bursts of speed. The ponies carried everything - produce, building materials, harvest, people. They could cope with even heavy riders like Sabine Baring-Gould and William Morris. Visitors so appreciated their qualities that many bought one or more to take back home. Over the years Mary was to take several back to her estates in Aberdeenshire and on the Isle of Wight, both to ride and to draw a carriage - and even on occasion to bring in the harvest (Leith B).

In common with other travellers, Mary deplored the gross handling at Granton and Leith of the commercially exported ponies, 300 or more at a time, destined for use in the mines and in agriculture. It contrasted sharply with their quiet, gentle treatment by the Icelanders who, for economic reasons, sold surplus ones in the autumn to pay for feed in the winter. For many years, R & G Slimon, based on The Shore in Leith, imported thousands of ponies into the UK, paying the Icelanders in cash and breaking the previous Danish trade monopoly.

First explorations

The Disney Leiths were hardy travellers and Iceland was a big country to traverse by pony – roughly the size of the state of Ohio and five times the area of Wales. Its population of 80,000 was thinly scattered and Reykjavik was the only significant urban settlement. Ancient paths and tracks were unpaved and even frequently used routes, such as the one to Thingvellir, were only marked by cairns. There were many glacial rivers to cross on horseback or foot. Waller (100) wrote that on a single day's journey he had to cross more than 40 torrents, fast-flowing and dangerous. Fortunately, by the end of the nineteenth century, several substantial bridges had been built, such as the ones over the Ölfusá in 1891 and the Thjórsá in 1895, though the last glacial river was not bridged until 1974. The Fjallvegafélag association, founded in 1831, took care of mountain roads and the paths over moors and heaths, maintained the horse paths and set up cairns, as well as the occasional bothy or refuge hut where travellers could stay. Mostly, the Disney Leiths and other travellers camped, stayed as guests in farmhouses or parsonages, or slept in churches.



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Mary and her companions had high expectations of their first visit to Thingvellir, the historic home of the Althing, the legislative and judicial assembly. Their riding ponies were accompanied by two others carrying their baggage, slung either side, in the care of Sigurdur Pálsson. Writing on her return to her cousin Swinburne, Mary again drew a parallel with her native country - 'Riding over the moor is like a sort of endless Scotland, no trees and no cornfields, however but moor & moss & stones everywhere' (Meyers v3 75). Although their destination was only 32 miles away, their ride from Reykjavik took eight hours in thick mist and drenching rain before reaching Almannagjá, or All Men's Rift. It marks where the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates come apart, creating a natural chasm running several miles alongside a gigantic precipice overlooking the lava plain of Thingvellir valley.

Initially, Mary was disappointed in the famous venue, celebrated for its crucial role in Icelandic history and sagas. Rather than being vast and precipitous, 'it seemed like going down the steps at Carisbrooke Castle on the Isle of Wight with a reminiscence of the "Mither Tap" peak of Benachie, the Aberdeenshire range, but easier to walk down' (Leith A 33-4) Yet this was near where the battle took place between Njál's assassins and his avengers. Following in the hoofprints of many previous Icelandic travellers, the family splashed on their ponies through the shallow Oxará river, to the Thingvellir parsonage. There they stayed in simple and clean rooms and ate a supper of sea trout. Mary found the pastor of the church very shy, as he fled at the sight of visitors. However, the different generations of women in the pastor's family were friendly. Mary kept in touch with them over the years and watched the little baby, Ingun, grow up. She was 'really a nice clean looking child' who later featured in one of Mary's articles in the *Scottish Standard Bearer* (Leith F). Ingun was about the same age as Mildred, Mary's granddaughter and Alick's daughter, whose family nickname was Bay.

The weather initially made it difficult for outdoor sketching and photography. However, they managed to see inside the little Thingvellir church that had linen spread out across the pews to dry, a common practice in Iceland at the time. Disney celebrated his twenty first birthday and Alick took a photograph of the small naive painting on wood of the Last Supper above the altar:

The church is very small and very plain, but so neat and clean inside...not a very interesting church; and yet there is something very wonderful in the feeling of its being *there*, almost at the very spot where Christianity was 'law-taken' – *i.e.*, made the law of the land – and where the fine old bishops were chosen 'to fare' out and receive their Apostolic commission from some foreign archbishop. (Leith A 38-40)

Above the little church was the Lögberg (Hill of Laws), a long green rocky plain between the rifts - '...one of the most dramatic spots in Iceland' according to William Morris (170). It was here in the year 1000 AD that Thorgeir Thorkelsson, a pagan priest, was asked by the chieftains to avert civil war by mediating between paganism and Christianity - Irish Christian hermits were believed to have been in Iceland from the eighth century but pagan worship was common. It is said that after twenty fours



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hours meditation, he recommended Christianity. Pagan customs, including infanticide and idol worship, were abandoned. The Icelanders accepted Catholicism, which remained the national religion until the Lutheran Reformation of 1550. This understated early experience was pursued and developed by Mary for many years afterwards. Visiting Thingvellir the following year and enjoying the peaceful atmosphere of Althing, Mary's opinion was much more favourable (Leith A 84): 'I do not think it would be possible to describe the loveliness of this place in fine weather, such as we are now enjoying.'¹²

The rest of this first brief Icelandic trip was spent in Reykjavik, shopping for old souvenirs, sketching and painting, trying out her spoken Icelandic with local people while her two sons went fishing. By 22 August, the party was back on board the *Laura* for the return journey: Pálsson led Icelandic part-singing, and there was plenty of good conversation and guidance for further visits. Mary's party was able to point out her beloved Bennachie hills to the other passengers as they steamed past the familiar Aberdeenshire landscape. Pálsson had never before seen trees, cornfields or railways.

This first, taster visit had only involved eight days on Icelandic soil, limited to Reykjavik and the expedition to Thingvellir. However, it was enough to whet Mary's appetite for more. She was now able to speak and understand Icelandic well enough to converse with the Icelanders she met. Best of all, perhaps, she had found traces of the pre-Reformation Icelandic Catholic Church – 'Mercifully the Skalholt treasures are all in the Reykjavik Museum – waiting, may we not hope? for an *Icelandic* Catholic revival' (Leith A 60). Mary's mother, Lady Mary Gordon, wrote to her nephew Swinburne in November later in the year that 'Mun [Mary's family nickname] is just now crazy over Iceland' (Meyers v3 78-9). It was an obsession that led Mary back in 1895 and 1896 and the years beyond. The simplicity, even primitiveness, of rural Iceland did not discourage her; on the contrary, it stimulated her to plan more ambitious explorations of the saga-haunted hinterland, as William Morris and others had done.

William Morris and the Icelandic Sagas

The explicit purpose of Morris's two expeditions in 1871 and 1873 had been to trace the geographical origins of the sagas with which he was so familiar. But Morris's motivation was more complex than that. He needed time away from his wife, Janey Morris, who was having an affair with his friend and business associate, Dante Gabriel Rossetti (Coote 85). Peter Preston's (25) assessment of his motives is that:

Morris travelled to Iceland out of a deep need, compounded out 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.



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There is no doubt that, in the words of his namesake, James Morris, he was fired ‘by a passionate involvement with the mystique of the North’ (Morris xv-xvi). In 1868, Morris had met Eiríkyr Magnússon, an Icelander who, for many years from 1862, held a Cambridge University post teaching and lecturing on Icelandic language, literature and culture. Morris developed his knowledge of Icelandic syntax and vocabulary through this first collaboration in translating *The Story of Grettir the Strong*, becoming sufficiently proficient even to understand not only Icelandic, but also Faroese. As their partnership developed, Magnússon translated the sagas into standard English which Morris then put into verse or poetic prose. The end product met with a mixed reception. Frederick York Powell,¹³ Regius Professor of History at Oxford and a considerable Icelandic scholar, contrasted Morris’s version of *Gisli the Outlaw* unfavourably with a verse-drama translation by the little known Beatrice Helen Barnby:

Morris is sentimental in Tennysonian fashion. For once, he does not dare to face the direct truth, he softens away the facts, he writes in the genteel spirit of the Idylls, misled by his master apparently; he makes a real mistake in his story-telling – a rare thing with him, and a thing almost incredible in his later work. (Elton 266-7)

Mary’s cousin and soul-mate, Swinburne, who was a friend and admirer of Morris, also held a poor opinion of his friend’s translation. He was scathing about ‘all this dashed and blank Volksungery which will end by eating up the splendid genius it has already overgrown and incrusting with Iceland moss’ (Lang v4 307). Even Eiríkyr Magnússon recognised that there were doubts about his collaborator’s contribution to the finished product - ‘His style is a subject on which there exists considerable diversity of opinion’ (Coote 87-8). Recent commentators have been no more kind. Stephen Coote comments that Morris’s artifice of adopting a medieval Viking flavour has much of the ‘irksome fake antique ancient language idioms...his style makes his translations exceptionally tedious’ while Andrew Wawn (259) refers to his ‘studied archaisms’. Nevertheless, the saga translations by Morris and Magnússon played a key role in introducing a compelling literary genre based in thirteenth century Iceland to expectant Victorian readers, many of whom were eager to absorb the sagas as a potent compound of history and myth.

Morris’s *Icelandic Journals* are a more lively read than his saga translations. They capture vividly the precarious and challenging natural beauty and surprises in spouting geysers, warm springs, marshes, chasms, mountains and glaciers. Mary and Swinburne were both familiar with Morris’s Icelandic publications (Leith A 19). Indeed, Swinburne and Morris were life-long friends and Swinburne was the delighted recipient of presentation copies of the hand-printed and beautifully typeset books produced by Morris’s Kelmscott press.¹⁴ Morris’s charming and tempting *Icelandic Journals* are so detailed that Mary could be under no illusions about the formidable challenges - and pleasures - of travelling in Iceland. Like most other nineteenth century visitors, Morris collated landscape with legend and literature. On his first expedition in 1871, with his collaborator Eiríkyr Magnússon and two friends,



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he was able to locate saga sites and identify historical artefacts such as church plate, embroidery and manuscripts. One unexpected outcome of this visit was a contribution to his political radicalization. He concluded that ‘the most grinding poverty is a trifling evil compared to the inequality of classes.’¹⁵

Morris’s first visit lasted seven weeks and involved gruelling cross-country expeditions. He returned a second time, two years later. For Mary, her first trip in 1894 was little more than a taster, lasting just over a week, with only one excursion outside Reykjavik, to Thingvellir. It would be difficult to find two people whose experience of life was more different, yet both reacted with sustained joy to the grim grandeur of the Icelandic landscape, with its austere palette of white, black and infinite shades of green and grey. Both became deeply involved in Icelandic literature and history and came away with a profound respect for the dignity and endurance of the Icelandic people, with their simple style of life. Mary returned home full of enthusiasm, writing rapturously to her cousin Swinburne

... to tell you a little about my trip at first hand! As it was simply the most maddening, perfect, satisfying & heart filling excursion I ever did or hope to do – not but what I hope to go again & again, & for longer than that little week of heavenliness *sandwiched* between two weeks of as perfect a [sea trip] ...

(Meyers v3 73).

Second Visit

For Mary, this short initial foray had given her an appetite which she indulged nearly every summer until 1914, with ever more ambitious cross-country treks, though her book provides a detailed account of only the first three visits. Her elder son Alick accompanied her on several future occasions. However, this first trip was to be her younger son Disney’s first and last visit to Iceland. Three months later, on 24 November 1894, he sailed from Southampton on the troopship *SS Dilwara* bound for India where, as a lieutenant in the 6th Bombay Cavalry, he died on 21 April 1898. He had caught enteric fever when on plague duty in Ambala. He is commemorated by an oak chancel screen and cross in the Scottish Episcopalian Church of St. Drostan, Inch, Aberdeenshire (Leith E).

In 1895, Mary set off on her second visit to Iceland with her youngest daughter, nineteen year old Elizabeth (‘Binkie’) and her eldest, Mary Levinia (‘M’), who was twenty six. They travelled in a state cabin on the *SS Botnia*, larger but, in Mary’s view, not quite so comfortable as the *Laura*. Mary was self assured and sociable, open and friendly, responding cheerfully to comments on her sketches by fellow passengers, taking every opportunity to practice her spoken Icelandic. On this and future visits, she renewed contact with previous acquaintances and over the years built up a friendly network, including some of the original *Laura* passengers and their families as well as new friends, especially some of Iceland’s leading poets.



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One of these was Grímur Thomsen, who lived just outside Reykjavik in a house ‘built of stone, and slated; quite unique for this country’ (Leith A 84). He had obtained his doctorate at Copenhagen University for a thesis on Byron, been Danish Consul in Paris, and was regarded as one of the greatest living *skalds* (poets). Mary found him most hospitable and a stimulating conversationalist and promised to send him a copy of the book containing translations of Icelandic verse that she was working on. Their meeting was the start of a lively – if brief - friendship conducted by correspondence. Thomsen later wrote that he was trying to re-establish contact with one of his old contacts, John Francis Campbell of Islay, the renowned Celtic scholar and folklore collector, but she had to convey the news that he had died at Cannes eleven years earlier.¹⁶ With this reply, Mary enclosed an illustrated book about the Isle of Wight, marking the passages about her own houses. In her last letter, she enclosed a pair of her hand knitted mittens as a gift for his wife and updated him with the progress of the Icelandic ponies she had brought back, expressing her relief that he had suffered no ill from the recent earthquake.¹⁷

It is not clear whether Grímur Thomsen ever read this last letter. It is dated 8 November 1896 and he died just nineteen days later. Nor do we know if he received and read Mary’s *Original Verses and Translations*. Among other poems she translated from the Icelandic is his “Out of the Courtyard”. Mary also includes a verse of her own celebrating their meeting the previous year, as well as some words in tribute to her ‘venerable and learned’ friend. A longer poem “In Memoriam Dr. Grimur Thomsen”, together with her obituary of her friend, is printed as a postscript in *Three Visits to Iceland* (Leith A 160-5). Thomsen’s house at Bessastadir, where she was welcomed so warmly, is now the official residence of the President of Iceland.

The other major event on this second trip was a pilgrimage to Skálholt, the cradle of the Icelandic-Catholic church, where Mary’s hero, Catholic Bishop Jón Aranson of Holar, the last Catholic bishop, was executed on 7 November 1550, along with his two sons, for his resistance to the Danish king’s imposition of Lutheranism. Skálholt had been a major centre for learning since the national conversion from paganism to Christianity in AD 1000 and the inauguration of the first Catholic Bishop, Ísleifur Gissurarson. Iceland’s saint, Bishop Thorlak, had led the prayers in the elaborately decorated original church. An earthquake in the late eighteenth century destroyed the school and homes of over two hundred people.

The Disney Leiths stayed at the church farm. As Mary found out later, within ten years of her first visit the church had been reduced to a very poor state, a little wooden shanty, ‘Mean to a degree, ill-kept above the average, unused even on Sunday, except as a promiscuous storehouse...the sight is one to make angels weep.’ Alabaster slabs, monuments of seventeenth century Lutheran bishops, still survived under the church flooring and some slab fragments formed the doorstep. Mary was also shown:

a splendid chasuble of exquisite embroidery of Pre-reformation period, a silver casket for the sacred wafers and a very curious altar frontal; the super-frontal



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decoration being formed of silver plates, said to be from the girdle of Thorgunna in the “Eyrbyggja-saga”. (Leith D 371-2)

In 1912, Mary paid for a memorial stone to be erected over Bishop Aranson’s grave outside the church (Gudmundsen 36). The new church in Skálholt, inaugurated in 1963 as part of the millennial celebrations of the Episcopal See, is much larger and more imposing than its predecessor. The crypt exhibits items from previous and current excavations of the earlier centre of learning, with its library, dormitory and school, and there is a small museum that includes the alabaster slab monuments.

Third Visit

Mary returned to Iceland on the *Laura* in July 1896 with her daughter ‘Binkie’, who had accompanied her the previous year, and a young friend, ‘A.N.’¹⁸ The ship stopped as usual at the Faroes and Westman Islands where Mary caught up with friends made on previous visits. However, some of her fellow travellers were a brisk reminder that Iceland was no paradise island. One man told her that his father had set up a small leprosy hospital. There was a group of Roman Catholic Sisters of Mercy from Denmark on board who were planning to set up another one. Mary was disappointed the nuns were not Anglican ‘but I dare say they will be of great use’ (Leith A 117). Clearly, she was not one of those Anglo-Catholics tempted to follow Newman along his path to Rome.

Leprosy was pervasive throughout Iceland at that time – it was estimated that there were more than 200 cases - flourishing in conditions of malnutrition, poverty and overcrowding. The US consul in Copenhagen reported back to the State Department in Washington DC his anxiety that leprosy might be transmitted to the US by fishing vessels that called in at Iceland (Kirk and Ehlers). Subsistence living conditions encouraged many inhabitants to leave for North America, especially to ‘New Iceland’, a reserve for Icelandic immigrants established in 1875 on the south west shore of Lake Winnipeg in Manitoba. Migration necessitated agricultural as well as cultural changes for fishermen and farmers, who had migrated from a treeless land where it was almost impossible to grow cereal crops to an area of plentiful forests and fertile soil.

By the time of this third visit, Mary was proficient in the language, knew how to manage the hire of ponies and guides and how to trot and gallop over grassy pastures, stony paths, squashy moorland, bog and through deep and dangerous rivers in variable weathers. Where they could not stay in the better houses of Mary’s acquaintance, her party bivouacked in their tents, as can be seen from photographs taken on later visits in the early 1900s.¹⁹ There could be a limited diet (not always fresh) of salt fish, rice, bread and cheese sometimes with the addition of skyr, cream or fresh fish. Perhaps it is understandable that Anthony Trollope, one of the less hardy Victorian tourists, brought all his group’s provisions along with them from Scotland:



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‘I do not think that any one of our party ate a morsel of Icelandic food during our sojourn beyond curds, cream and milk – unless it might be a biscuit taken with a glass of wine’ (Trollope 21).

Mary’s party set out to revisit Thingvellir – ‘one of the most amusing journeys I ever made, or expect to make!’ It turned out to be a northern version of a desert caravan. Two men from the same hotel in Reykjavik accompanied Mary’s group, adding their twenty four ponies to Mary’s twelve, making a total of thirty six. There were ‘any number’ of guides. Each traveller had a riding pony and a spare: the rest were for luggage and supplies. The men had chartered one of the very few wheeled vehicles in Iceland, a crude four wheeled wagon with two long benches set wagonette-wise, ‘much like an Isle of Wight van minus the top’. Mary was scandalised to find the road being made through *Almannagjá* and the steep ascent levelled by blasting old rock.

Separating from their male fellow travellers, Mary and her two young companions covered many of the usual tourist sights after leaving Thingvellir: Raven Rift, round the foot of *Kalfstindar* peak to *Austurhlíð*. To the south of it, ‘opened out a great southern plain, green with a greenness unseen elsewhere, a soft transparent vernal-looking greenness highly difficult to paint!’ according to Mary’s artistic eye. When they got to the *Bruará*, surefooted ponies and riders crossed a small wooden bridge: ‘It was most bewildering, with the rapid rushing river swirling past with a deafening roar; yet the hardy, accustomed ponies are so surefooted and deliberate, that what on an ordinary horse would appear a impossible feat, seems to come quite naturally to them’ (Leith A 122-5). They arrived at *Austurhlíð* farm and stayed in a small detached cottage. The next morning, they rode on to the Great Geysir, where they waited for an hour for it to erupt – without success. The Geysir had behaved equally sullenly for Anthony Trollope and his sightseeing party of sixteen in 1878, who had travelled in a private yacht to Iceland from *Wemyss Bay* in the west of Scotland, delivering a single letter at the island of *St.Kilda* on the way. It did not erupt while his party was there, despite their dancing an incantation around the uncooperative vent, charmingly sketched by *Jemima Blackburn* (Fairley 187). There was no dancing for Mary’s group: they remounted for the two hour ride to *Gullfoss*, crossing the broad and deep river of *Tungufljót*. The water swirled above the ponies’ girths as they trampled sideways against the current. Safely across, the party cantered and trotted to the spectacular *Gullfoss* falls. They were dazzled by the grandeur of ‘the great fall as it foams through broken channels, through the dark rocks into one glorious volume of roaring water, from which the foam rises in clouds, and can be seen at a distance’. It is still possible to clamber down to the river bank where Mary made some sketches. Mary commented ‘I have never ridden through worse mud’ than the journey back to Thingvellir in drizzling rain. The latter was thronged with guests on their return – *Danes*, an Icelandic doctor, and an American lady. Instead of embarking on the *Laura* as expected, Mary and her companions made a leisurely return to Reykjavik and were able to attend



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evensong in the Cathedral to hear their friend Jón Helgason preach in a style 'full of life and fire' (Leith A 130). Being of the gentry, Mary was welcomed by the Governor's wife and later by the Danish Consul and his sister. Next, she was rowed across the Skerjafjordur fjord to Bessastadir, to be welcomed for dinner by Grimur Thomsen and his wife. This happy social evening was the last time the two friends, whose friendship was rooted in poetry, were to meet, as their host died later that year.

Mary had planned to sail back to Scotland on the *Laura*, which was due to leave on 2 August. However, she decided to postpone her return so that she and her companions – 'Njal-worshippers' – could explore the saga country to the south-east of Reykjavik. After stopping overnight at Selfoss, on the banks of the Ölfusá river, they reached Oddi, the centre of learning in southern Iceland in the Middle Ages, where they stayed at the parsonage – 'the best parsonage I have seen in Iceland, and the best lodging I have had ... quite like a well-appointed Scottish manse' – and 'talked a good deal about Njala' with the minister's wife. The following day, they pressed on with their saga quest, trotting across the 'Land-isles of Dasent's Burnt Njal' to Bergthórshvoll, almost unbearably evocative for Mary as the reputed site of Njál's homestead. This was where, according to the saga, Njál and his family and followers, some thirty in all, were besieged in 1011 by his blood-feud enemy Flosi and a hundred warriors. The assailants, having failed in a frontal assault, allowed the women, children and servants to leave, and then set the building on fire. Njál, his wife and sons, eleven in all, were burned to death. Kari, Njál's son-in-law, escaped, the only survivor. Mary was taken to see 'Karagrof – Kari's pit – the little hollow in which [he] extinguished his clothes, which were on fire. In former days it contained water; now it is simply a small grassy hollow, scarcely wider than a grave.' It was all a 'great thought' for Mary, who had 'loved Njal and his Story for so many years, and now at last have travelled over the country once so familiar to his wise and kindly eyes – to his old home and grave' (Leith A 140-3).

By 13 August Mary and her companions were back in Reykjavik, visiting friends there before boarding the *Botnia* the next day for the return journey to the Firth of Forth. It proved to be a timely departure. Less than two weeks later a major earthquake struck the whole Selfoss region that they had been visiting. Four more earthquakes occurred over the following two weeks. There was widespread damage to 3,700 farms and houses. The homeless children were gathered for shelter in the church and parsonage at Oddi. As an appendix to *Three Visits to Iceland*, Mary included her translation of a contemporary account of the disaster from the Icelandic weekly newspaper *Isafold*, with a moving description of the deaths of Arnbjörn Thórarinsson, and his wife, buried by the falling roof timbers of their own farm (Leith A 215-8).



Later Visits

Mary continued to visit Iceland year after year from 1899 onwards. In 1901, when she was sixty years old:

accompanied by one lady friend and her native conductor [Thorgrimur Gudmundsen], she rode across the Island from north to south, a distance of 300 miles. On that occasion she visited many of the most interesting scenes and “sagasteads”, and has since become acquainted with some of the most distinguished men of the country, as well as with their works.²⁰

From 1909 to 1914 she was accompanied by her beloved granddaughter, Mildred Katherine (‘Bay’). With Thorgrimur Gudmundsen as guide, her expeditions across the interior became increasingly adventurous. In 1911, Mary – now turned seventy – and Bay climbed Hekla, an active volcano fifteen hundred meters (five thousand feet) high. Cameras on their backs and ‘short rations’ in their bag, they climbed over rugged lumps of lava and the slippery snow-covered shoulders of the volcano, against a stiff wind as they got higher. Hot with the exercise and thirsty, they were cooled by frozen snow. The final leg of the climb was the hardest: up the steep sides of the crater and over loose stones and sand to the top. It had been worth it for the view and to see the inside of the crater. They slid back down the frozen slope. It was a formidable expedition, thirteen and a half hours in all, including five hours of scrambling and climbing. They arrived back ‘drenched and hungry, our boots knocked to pieces’, but with an understandable sense of achievement. Even today, Hekla remains a demanding ascent for experienced, well-equipped – and younger – hill-walkers (Leith J).

Many of Mary’s cross-country expeditions over the years focused on the simple, wooden Lutheran churches scattered thinly across the country. She wrote down her reflections on those she visited and offering assistance to some. A letter to Brynjólfur Jonsson, who translated some of her poems into Icelandic, indicates her willingness to contribute to any improvements to the church at Stórinúpur, which had suffered earthquake damage.²¹ The church at Sauerbaer was of particular interest to Mary. Not only did it hold a large collection of coloured altar and other vestments as well as a chasuble of ‘very curious old needlework’, but outside lay the grave of Hallgrimur Pétursson, a former pastor and contemporary of Milton, whose “New Year’s Psalm” Mary had translated (Leith M 141). Like many other churches in remote settlements, it has now fallen into disuse.²²

The churches of the period were modest, large enough to accommodate no more than about seventy people and often fewer, since the local communities were sparsely populated. As at Thingvellir, simple wooden pews were usually set either side of the aisle leading to the altar: in wet weather these were frequently used to dry linen or store fleeces, dried fish and hay. There were two or three windows on either side and sometimes a balcony at the back with additional seating and a small organ. A few retained the traditional turf roof.



Mary's detailed account of Icelandic churches was read to The Viking Club for Northern Research in 1905, at a meeting chaired by the Icelandic scholar, W.G.Collingwood (Leith D). She includes accounts of how treasures from small churches and other national valuables were gradually depleted, as the Danish rulers transferred them to Copenhagen. The poverty-stricken Icelanders sold others to travellers. For example, Baring Gould bought rare eighteenth and nineteenth century copies of the sagas from a poor farmer who wept at losing his treasures.²³ By the time of Mary's first visit in 1894 there was already a clear tourist trail to Iceland for relatively wealthy British and other European travellers, all of whom contributed to the export of Iceland's artifacts.

The Thingvellir Altarpiece

Despite being highly critical of this practice, Mary herself succumbed to a very old black-letter New Testament from a goldsmith as well as a horn spoon. Revisiting Thingvellir in 1899, she found that the wooden altarpiece, a painting on wood of the Last Supper, some two feet by three – which had been photographed by Alick on their first visit five years previously – was being discarded. She bought it for ten krone and took it back with her to the parish church of St.Peter's, Shorwell, at the gates of her Northcourt estate on the Isle of Wight. It was installed above the portable communion table that had been used by her grandfather, General Sir James Willoughby Gordon, on campaign with Wellington in the Peninsula War, and was dedicated to her younger son, who had died in India the year before, and who had celebrated his twenty-first birthday on the family's first visit to Thingvellir.

Surprisingly misdated as sixteenth century by the architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner (770), the altarpiece was in fact painted in 1834 by a local craftsman, Ofeigur Johnsson, in honour of a royal visit by Prince Frederik of Denmark. When the church at Thingvellir was being renovated in 1970, the then Director of the National Museum of Antiquities in Reykjavik approached the Icelandic-born but Scotland based Magnus Magnusson for help in locating the missing altarpiece.²⁴ With the aid of Mary's granddaughter, Mildred Katherine Leith (Bay), Magnusson was able to rediscover it in Shorwell parish church. After protracted negotiations between the ecclesiastical and civil authorities in Iceland and Britain, the altarpiece was reinstalled in the church at Thingvellir on 17 June 1974, Iceland's Independence Day, at a ceremony attended by the Prime at a ceremony attended by the Prime Minister and the Bishop of Reykjavik. A replica was provided for St.Peter's, Shorwell, with a brass plate inscribed with a dedication to Mary, and the whole episode was the subject of a film made by Magnus Magnusson shown in Britain on BBC Television (Magnusson 163-8).²⁵

The last of Mary's eighteen visits to Iceland was in 1914. She, her elder son Alick and her granddaughter Bay were in Reykjavik in early August, when Britain,



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France and Russia declared war on Germany and Austria-Hungary after Belgium had been invaded by Germany. They travelled home on the *SS Vesta*, which had carried them before on a number of occasions and which was back in service after running aground the previous year at Hnifsdalur, without loss of life. Flying the neutral Danish flag, the *Vesta* was escorted into the Firth of Forth by a British destroyer, presumably affording protection in the event of attack by a German submarine or surface raider.

Cultural Ambassador

Mary fell in love with Iceland from her first exhilarating sight of the island from the deck of the *Laura* in 1894. She loved its myth-entwined history, its landscapes, its language and – most of all – its people, with their dignity, courtesy and determination to maintain their way of life in the face of poverty and natural disasters. There were many echoes of her native Aberdeenshire, but sufficient differences to stimulate her literary and aesthetic imagination.

She saw herself as something of a cultural ambassador for her adopted homeland, involving her own children and grandchildren in the venture as companions in her treks across the island. Mary conveyed the characteristics of life in Iceland to a variety of different audiences in Britain. For armchair travellers, for example, she wrote *Three Visits to Iceland*, illustrated with photographs taken by her son Alick. For a ‘family’ audience, she wrote *Peeps at Many Lands – Iceland*, illustrated by her daughter, Maria Alice, and a number of articles in *The Scottish Standard Bearer*, one in conjunction with her granddaughter Bay, as well as shorter pieces in the local Aberdeenshire press. For horse lovers, she wrote in *The Stable* about her much loved pony-sized Icelandic horses, which she had brought back with her to her estates in Scotland and on the Isle of Wight. For academics immersed in studies of the history and culture of far northern Europe, she delivered to a learned society a paper on Icelandic church architecture.

There are two aspects of Mary’s involvement with Iceland, however, that deserve special emphasis. The first is her passionate nostalgic concern for the Icelandic Catholic Church, extinguished by the Lutheran reformation in 1550. This stemmed from her own deeply held, high church, Anglo-Catholic system of belief. Key constituent elements in this were the importance of the sacraments of confession and communion and the legitimacy conferred by the unbroken apostolic succession of bishops since the earliest Christian times. She hoped and prayed for the resurrection of the Icelandic Catholic Church with its own bench of bishops – not the Roman Catholic Church, but a national catholic church in membership of the Anglican Communion, alongside the Episcopalian Church of Scotland and the Church of England.



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This was her motivation for rescuing the Bishops' Sagas from near oblivion and translating them into English. She thought they presented 'a quaint, vivid, homely and realistic picture of the infant Church of Iceland, its struggles and its successes' (Leith P iii-iv) It was an enterprise in which she had at first thought of involving her cousin Swinburne by asking him to write a preface. Initially, she approached Swinburne's minder, Theodore Watts Dunton, to act as an intermediary, perhaps not wishing by a direct approach to put her cousin in an embarrassing position. In the event, she thought better of the idea and wrote the preface herself (Meyers v3 76). Her hopes for the revival of the Icelandic Catholic Church have, of course, remained unfulfilled, as Iceland, in common with the rest of northern Europe, has drifted steadily away from organized religion.

Secondly, Mary became intensely involved with past and contemporary Icelandic poetry. Several of her own poems were translated into Icelandic by Brynjólfur Jonsson, with whom she engaged in a correspondence in Icelandic between 1899 and 1909.²⁶ Her translation of the "New Year's Psalm" by Halgrímur Pétursson (1614-74) has already been mentioned. She also translated "Eldgamla Ísafold" (Ancient Iceland), Iceland's national anthem until 1918, by the romantic nationalist Bjarni Þórarinnsson (1786-1841), as well as later poems by Hannes Hafstein (1861-1922), Þorsteinn Gíslason (1867-1938) and her friend Grímur Thomsen (Leith M).

More ambitious was Mary's translation of "Gunnar's Holm", by Jónas Hallgrímsson (1797-1845), who according to Ringler was a leading figure in Iceland's cultural renaissance in the early nineteenth century as well as playing a seminal role in nurturing the country's national consciousness. This poem signalled a revolution in Icelandic poetry, both in its romantic vision and its technique, as it was the first deployment in Icelandic of the *terza rima* (aba bcb cdc...) and *ottava rima* (ab ab ab cc) rhyme schemes. Originally popularised by Boccaccio in the fourteenth century, they were most famously deployed by Dante in his *Divine Comedy*. Mary's translation of "Gunnar's Holm" was the first into English and shows a mastery of its technical complexity, despite her admission that 'It is hard for any translator to do justice to the poem' (Leith A 169-173). Like so much Icelandic literature, "Gunnar's Holm" is rooted in *Njál's Saga*. One of the main protagonists, Gunnar Hámundarsson, has been banished to Norway, along with his brother Kolskegg. Riding towards the place where they will board ship, they reach the gravel-strewn estuary of the Markar River, with its background of green hills and distant mountains. Gunnar is overcome by the beauty of his native land and cannot bear to leave it. He turns back from a life in exile, in the almost certain knowledge that this will lead to his death. Mary's translation is a vigorous interpretation of Hallgrímsson's portrayal of the impact of the landscape on Gunnar and the tragic resolution of his dilemma.

Among her own poems, her "Songs from the Sagas" ballad cycle stands out (Leith M 69). Here again, *Njál's Saga* is the primary inspiration. Indeed, Andrew Wawn (169-73) considers that the poem about Hallgeror's deadly



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revenge on her husband Thórvald for his savage assault on her ‘arguably deserves a place alongside William Morris’s “Gunnar’s Howe above the house of Lithen” as the two most arresting poems in English inspired by *Burnt Njal*.’ Mary’s “Queen Gunnhilda”, in which the evil queen is lured to Denmark by the prospect of marriage and left to die in a bog with ‘Only the wailing wind’ to answer her cries, is rated almost equally highly by Wawn.

Finale

For Mary, her visits to Iceland fulfilled a lifelong interest in Icelandic language, literature and culture. Inspired by Dasent’s *Burnt Njal* translation, she was able to associate the various sagas with their historical and geographical origins. In this she was not unique. Where she differed from most other nineteenth and twentieth century travellers was that her mastery of the language helped her, not only to make many life-long Icelandic friends, but also to pursue her fascination with the pre-Reformation Icelandic catholic church and her engagement with Icelandic poetry. After her first visit she had written to her cousin Swinburne ‘... in fact I never knew or realised before how the *lotus-eaters* felt, as if the place had got *hold* of you completely and you were oblivious to the outer world. I know it now’ (Meyers v3 73-6). From then on, Iceland had become Mary’s passion, a passion she shared with her family and her readers.

Afterword

The *SS Vesta*, in which Mary, Alick and Bay travelled back to Scotland on the outbreak of the Great War in August 1914, went on to have a turbulent future. On the night of 2 April 1916 she was moored in dock at Leith, when the port was bombed by the German Zeppelin airship *L14*, which had failed to locate the nearby naval base of Rosyth. Nine high explosive and eleven incendiary bombs were dropped. The *Vesta* herself was not hit, but there was extensive damage to commercial property nearby, including a major fire in a whisky warehouse. Two people were killed. The *L14* continued on to Edinburgh, dropping seventeen high explosive and seven incendiary bombs that killed eleven civilians and injured twenty three, and then returned unharmed to its base at Nordholz on the German North Sea coast. The *Vesta* had survived Scotland’s first ever air raid (Reid).

The following year, the *Vesta*, now on charter to the Icelandic government, was not so lucky. On 16 July 1917, sailing from Seydisfjord, near the eastern tip of Iceland, to Fleetwood (Lancashire, Great Britain) with a cargo of herring and wool, and flying the neutral Danish flag, she was torpedoed by the German submarine U-88 and sank within one minute (Thorsen 39). Five crew died, but the remainder reached shore in a lifeboat the next day. Commanded by Kapitanleutenant Schweiger, one of Germany’s U-boat aces, it was not long before the U-88 and her crew suffered a grisly



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reversal of fortune. Setting out on patrol on 1 September 1917, she hit a mine near Horns Reef, Jutland, and exploded. The captain and the entire crew were lost.

As the war took hold, Alick, who had rejoined the reserve militia as a Captain, progressed to become Lieutenant Colonel commanding the 3rd (Reserve) Battalion Gordon Highlanders, a training unit based in Aberdeen. In 1916, following a report of the House of Lords Committee of Privileges, he succeeded as the 5th Lord Burgh, a title that had been in abeyance since 1602. Though a member of the House of Lords, he did not play any public role in Britain's political life.

Having been the author of a number of anonymous novels, mostly published by small publishers and aimed at young people, Mary started to write over her own married name after her husband's death. In 1917, two events, both linked to her cherished cousin, Swinburne, saw her edge into the literary limelight. The first was the publication by Chatto & Windus, a leading London publisher, of a new edition of *The Children of the Chapel*, listing the two cousins as co-authors: the first edition of this historical novel had been published anonymously more than half a century previously. The second event, something of a literary occasion, was the appearance in book form of her memoir *The Boyhood of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, published simultaneously in London and New York.

Mary's last book, *Northern Lights*, appeared in 1920 (Leith N). It is a valedictory volume of verse, paying nostalgic tribute to her beloved Iceland, which she knows she will never visit again, and includes an elegy to her dead younger son, Disney. Some of the poems were written at the time of her visits, others celebrate the friends she had made, such as the polymath Grimur Thomsen, her travelling companion and guide Thorgrimur Gudmundsen and the poet Steingrímur Thorsteinsson, translator of the Arabian Nights into Icelandic, who had died on 21 August 1913. She lived out her remaining years on her estates on the Isle of Wight and in Aberdeenshire, and was the focus of her ever growing family. She died on 12 February 1926 and was the subject of an obituary in *The Times* of London, quite a rarity for a woman in those days. There exists a photograph showing a lengthy funeral procession in the village of Shorwell on the Isle of Wight, headed by two bagpipers from the Gordon Highlanders.

Alick, who had gone with his mother on her first and last Icelandic expeditions, outlived her by a mere six months, dying on 19 August. Bay (Mildred Katherine), Alick's daughter and Mary's granddaughter, who had accompanied her grandmother to Iceland every summer between 1908 and 1914, went on to live an adventurous life as a thoroughly modern, twentieth century woman. She got her pilot's licence in August 1929 and flew solo at air displays and in air races in the 1930s. During the Second World War, she drove an ambulance in London with the volunteer American Ambulance Service, rescuing air raid casualties. She died aged 86 on 16 December 1980. The three generations – Mary Gordon, her son Alick and her



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granddaughter Bay – are all buried in the new cemetery at Shorwell on land donated by the Gordon family. The replica of the Thingvellir altarpiece remains displayed in St.Peter’s Church nearby, a visible link to Mary’s Icelandic expeditions and her love for the country, its culture and its people.

Checklist of Icelandiana by Mary Gordon (Mrs Disney Leith) 1840-1926

Travel

- A. Leith, Mrs. Disney. *Three Visits to Iceland Notes by Sea and Land*. With a translation from the Icelandic of “Gunnar’s Holm”, by Jónas Hallgrímsson. London: J.Masters, 1897.
- B. Leith, Mrs. Disney. “Iceland Ponies”. *The Stable* 4 Feb. 1899: 99-100.
- C. Leith, Mrs. Disney. “The Children of Lund”. *The Scottish Standard Bearer* Jul. 1904: 148-9.
- D. Leith, Mrs. Disney. “Notes on some Icelandic Churches”. *Saga-Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research*. IV, 1904-05: 365-380.
- E. Leith, Mrs. Disney. “A Visit to the Waterfalls of Southern Iceland.” Pt.I *The Scottish Standard Bearer* Jun. 1905: 136-7. Pt.2 *The Scottish Standard Bearer* Jul. 1905: 153-5.
- F. Leith, Mrs. Disney. “The Children of Thingvellir”. *The Scottish Standard Bearer* May 1906: 119-20.
- G. Leith, Mrs. Disney. “With Royalty at Thingvellir: the King of Denmark in Iceland”. *The Scottish Standard Bearer* Sep. 1908: 208-11.
- H. Leith, Mrs. Disney. *Peeps at many Lands Iceland*. London: Adam & Charles Black, 1908.
- I. Leith, Mrs. Disney. “Tryppa-Gisli: A Reykjavik Character”. *The Scottish Standard Bearer* Dec. 1911: 272.
- J. Leith, Mrs. Disney (intro.) and Mildred Katherine Leith. “Climb to the Crater of Hekla”. *The Scottish Standard Bearer* Feb. 1912: 41-2.

Fiction

- K. “Hvit the Fosterling”. *The Monthly Packet*. Feb. 1864: 179-212.

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Note that Icelandic place and proper names are given their accents. However, they do not always have these in book titles or quotations from works in English – for example Njál in the text, but *The Story of Burnt Njal* as the title of Dasent's book.

¹ On 20 April 1901 Mary's daughter Edith married Colonel Sir Thomas Algernon Earle 4th Bt., of Chiddingfold House, Surrey, becoming Lady Earle.

² RMAS 20160703-15-47-11.

³ The Hon. Mildred Katherine Leith (1894-1980). Her family nickname was 'Bay' and after her mother's death when she was a few days old she was brought up by her grandmother as if she was her own child. For an account of her adventurous life, see Turley, Raymond V. "Swinburne's Baby Kinswoman. An Appreciation of the Hon. Mildred Leith". *Hampshire* August 1982. Mary dedicated *Peeps at many Lands Iceland and Northern Lights and Other Verses* to her.

⁴ RMAS 20160703-15-44-10.

⁵ Sir George Webbe Dasent (1817-96). Assistant editor of *The Times*, Professor of English Literature and Modern History at King's College, London. He published many translations from Norse languages

⁶ Grimur Thomsen (1820-96). Icelandic diplomat, poet and man of letters. For his meeting and correspondence with Mary Gordon (Mrs. Disney Leith), see below.

⁷ Cleasby, Richard, and Gudbrand Vigfussen. *An Icelandic-English Dictionary with an introduction and life of Richard Cleasby by George Webbe Dasent*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1874.

⁸ Sabine Baring-Gould (1834-1924), High church Rector of Lew Trenchard, Devon: hymnologist and one of the first collectors of English folk songs. Author of more than 1,200 publications – fiction, folklore, travel and a sixteen volume *Lives of the Saints*.

⁹ For a detailed study of the relationship between Mary Gordon and her cousin Swinburne, see Mitchell and Powney.

¹⁰ Edmund Gosse conjectured that it derived from the Danish Svenbjörn, björn meaning bear (Meyers v3 3).



The Victorian

¹¹ Home rule was not granted to Iceland until 1904. In 1918, Iceland became a separate state under the Danish crown and finally achieved independence in 1944, while Denmark itself was still occupied by Germany.

¹² Almanagga and Thingvellir, including the old church, are now within the National Park and frequently packed with tourists in summer.

¹³ Frederick York Powell (1850-1904). Regius Professor of History at Oxford and co-author with Gudbrund Vigufsson of *An Icelandic Prose Reader with Notes, Grammar and Glossary*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1879.

¹⁴ Morris's Kelmscott Press published an edition of Swinburne's *Atalanta in Calydon*.

¹⁵ Morris, James. Introduction to William Morris *Icelandic Journals*, xxi. Wawn (276) expresses some scepticism about this, as the *Icelandic Journals* have no substantive references to poverty or its effect on the Icelandic people.

¹⁶ John Campbell of Islay – 'Long John of Islay' (1821-85). Linguist and prolific author, including *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* in 4 vols, bilingual Gaelic and English, Edinburgh: Edmondston and Douglas, 1860-62. In 1874-5 he travelled westwards round the world.

¹⁷ Letters from Mary Gordon (Mrs. Disney Leith) to Grimur Thomsen, 9 May 1896, from Northcourt, Isle of Wight, and 9 November 1896 from Westhall, Aberdeenshire. Landsbókasafn Islands 1839.

¹⁸ Possibly a relative of her son Alick's deceased wife, Mildred Katherine Nicholson.

¹⁹ Hartley Library, Univ. of Southampton. MS80.

²⁰ Beryl. "Mrs. Disney Leith". *The Scottish Standard Bearer* June 1905. 125-8.

²¹ Letter from Mary Gordon (Mrs Disney Leith) to Brynjofur Johnson, 28 January 1909, from Westhall, Aberdeenshire. Landsbokasafan Islands. 1706.

²² The church was built by Eyólfur Runolfsson, who died in 1930. His son was the foster father of Anna Margaret Sigurdróttir who in 2013 was nearly 80. She had lived in the house next to the church since she was 6 month old and in her words 'too old and weak to manage' to look after the church. She reported that her grandfather had handed the church over to the parish, who left it unattended, with only an occasional wedding taking plac. Personal communication September 2013, Saerbauer.

²³ Some of these are now in the British Museum.

²⁴ Magnus Magnusson (1929-2007). Icelandic national who lived in Scotland and worked in the UK as a writer, journalist and television presenter, hosting the BBC quiz programme *Mastermind* for 25 years. Translatpr of *Njals's Saga* (1960), *The Vinland Sagas* (1965) and *Laxdaele Saga* (1969) in the Penguin Classics series.

²⁵ Targett, C. "The altar piece goes home". *Isle of Wight Life*.

²⁶ Landsbókasafan Islands 1706.