

**THE SAGA LIBRARY:
DONE INTO ENGLISH OUT
OF THE ICELANDIC, VOL.I**

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EIRIKR MAGNUSSON & WILLIAM MORRIS

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THE SAGA LIBRARY.

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Twenty-five copies, all of which are numbered.*

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THE SAGA LIBRARY.

VOL. I.

THE STORY OF HOWARD THE HALL.
THE STORY OF THE BANDED MEN.
THE STORY OF HEN THORIR.

DONE INTO ENGLISH
OUT OF THE ICELANDIC.

BY
WILLIAM MORRIS
AND
EIRÍKR MAGNÚSSON.

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PREFACE.

AS the series of tales and histories to be published under the title of the SAGA LIBRARY is addressed to the whole reading public, and not only to students of Scandinavian history, folk-lore, and language, the translators think it well to say a few words about Icelandic literature in general before dealing with the three stories contained in this volume.

Although Iceland is a barren northern island, of savagely wild, though to the eye that sees, beautiful scenery, the inhabitants of it neither are nor were savages cut off from the spirit and energy of the great progressive races. They are, rather, a specially intellectual family of one of the most active of those races, to whom fate, which has deprived them of so much, has allotted the honourable task of preserving the record of the thoughts, the aspirations, and the imaginations of their earliest ancestors: their language, which they have kept scarcely altered since the thirteenth century, is akin to our own. Their ancient laws, of which they have full record, were nearly the same as those under which the freemen of Kent and Wessex

32254

p. 186

The Saga of the Volsung

lived, while the greatest of all Englishmen, Alfred, was yet above ground.

Still more, while over the greater part of Europe at least, all knowledge of their *historical* past has faded from the memory of the people, and the last vestiges of their pre-historical memories are rapidly disappearing, in Iceland every homestead, one may almost say every field, has its well-remembered history, while the earlier folk-lore is embedded in that history, and no peasant, however poor his surroundings may be, is ignorant of the traditions of his country, or dull to them; so that a journey in Iceland to the traveller read in its ancient literature is a continual illustration, freely and eagerly offered, of the books which contain the intimate history of its ancient folk.

Iceland has been peopled since the ninth century of our era by men of the Gothic branch of the great Teutonic race: the first settlers there were of the best families of Norway, men of bold and independent spirit, who could not brook what they deemed the oppression of the early form of feudality forced upon the free men of the tribes at the time when Harold Hair-fair was winning his way to the sole sovereignty of Norway.

Defeated in a great battle off the coast of Norway, these men left their country with their families and household gods, taking with them as a matter of course, besides their religion, the legends, the customary law, and the language of their race. Those of them who made their way to Iceland found an uninhabited country there, so that all these ancestral possessions escaped the speedy obliteration.

tion which befell them in the hands of (we must think) their less fortunate brethren who settled themselves in countries (Normandy, for instance) where they were but a handful amongst people of a more developed civilization, who had gained their position by passing through the mill of the Roman tyranny.

The race of which these warlike exiles formed a specially noble part had an inborn genius for poetry and the dramatic presentation of events; and their language, probably as a consequence, had great capacities for the expression of action; but these essentials for the task above-mentioned were doubtless quickened amongst the settlers in Iceland by the energy which the struggle for life in a rough climate and barren land forced upon brave and generous, if somewhat masterful men, and the long rest of the northern winter gave them the opportunity of leisure for the development of their historical gifts.

Under these conditions it was but natural that the freemen of Iceland should have retained the memory of the mythology and hero-tales of the Gothic tribes; but, moreover, the poetic life and instinct which made Iceland the treasure-house of the mythology of the whole Teutonic race, did not stop there. The dwellers in Iceland had still abundant intercourse with the mother-country in various ways, as also with other lands in the north of Europe, including the British isles. There was carrying of wares backward and forward; and it was a kind of custom for young men of the great families to follow their fortunes and make a repu-