



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 5 | Number 2 | Issue 18, Autumn

Article 8

10-15-1978

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Recommended Citation

Hasty, Mara (1978) "How the Isle of Ransom Reflects an Actual Icelandic Setting," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 5 : No. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol5/iss2/8>

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Mythcon 49

On the Shoulders of Giants

Atlanta, Georgia
July 20 - 23, 2018

How the Isle of Ransom Reflects an Actual Icelandic Setting

Abstract

Notes the resemblance between Morris's Isle of Ransom in *The Glittering Plain* and the actual geography, social structure, and climate of Iceland.

Additional Keywords

Iceland—Relation to William Morris; Morris, William. *The Story of the Glittering Plain*—Sources; Bonnie GoodKnight

HOW THE ISLE OF RANSOM REFLECTS AN ACTUAL ICELANDIC SETTING

by Mara Hasty

William Morris' *The Glittering Plain*, written in 1890, is set in a far distant time. The story begins at Cleveland-by-the-sea, located on the northwest coast of Europe, then moves to the Isle of Ransom, some distance away. (The Glittering Plain of the title is another scene of the romance's action.) A simple type of social life is depicted on the island, organized in independent tribes. This setting makes the story interesting, but only in one way is it very realistic--the way in which the Isle of Ransom reflects an actual Icelandic setting.*

One area of resemblance is in the social and economic life of the inhabitants. The Icelanders raise sheep (over fifty per cent of the people derive their livelihood from sheep and horses, and there are approximately 800,000 sheep on the island) and many farm (about thirty-five per cent of the Icelanders are involved in agriculture). Even though the inhabitants of the Isle of Ransom predominantly rob for their livelihood, one would expect that they are involved in sheep raising (since Hallblithe saw sheep on the island) and in agriculture in order to survive. Old Icelandic sagas show the people's lives as significantly determined by the rivalries of ruling chieftains. Similarly, the inhabitants of the Isle of Ransom are involved in tribal feuds. Houses on the fictional island also favor those on the real island; both are one story, having many of the same features--shut beds, buttery-screens, and clerestory windows.

A second way in which the Isle of Ransom reflects Iceland is in regard to land features. Iceland is highly elevated (an average of 2,000 feet above sea level), with many non-navigable rivers, a rugged coastline marked by cliffs and fjords, and volcanic mountains (it is one of the most volcanic areas of the world) resulting in widespread barrenness. Only twenty-five per cent of it is habitable. The Isle of Ransom is highly elevated too, judging from the fact that Hallblithe and Puny Fox see high cliffs and snow-

topped mountains as they approach the isle. No boat could exist "twixt the surf and the cliff on that grim land." Much of the island is evidently not fit for human settlement; it is called a "bare and waste" plain, "a world of stone."

Plant and animal life on the two isles is similar. In Iceland there are few animals except reindeer, the aforementioned sheep, horses, and some aquatic birds. Natural plants consist largely of heather, grass and some stunted trees. In comparison, Hallblithe when he first walked on the Isle of Ransom saw no animals, but later saw some sheep and horses. There was little vegetation save some moss, rushes and willows.

A fourth manner in which the Isle of Ransom conforms to Iceland is climate. Iceland has a comparatively moderate climate due to the Gulf Stream. There is high rainfall, and fogs are common. The Isle of Ransom too quite likely has a moderate climate, since we are told that after Hallblithe is deserted by the Puny Fox he fears death by starvation but never mentions cold as a killer.

William Morris, by using numerous ways to show that the Isle of Ransom and the actual island of Iceland are analogous, is quite successful in developing his fantasy in a realistic manner. He creates a story which is both easily understood and readily enjoyed by fantasy lovers.

*This paper was suggested by a brief comment in the introduction to the Newcastle Publishing Company (1973) edition of *The Glittering Plain* about the Isle of Ransom: "the scenery of this island, and the manner of life of the inhabitants, are like those of Iceland" (p.xiii). Aspects of this study are drawn from *Collier's Encyclopedia*, Volume 12, 1970 edition; *Encyclopedia Americana*, Volume 14, 1967 edition; and *The New Funk and Wagnall's Encyclopedia*, Volume 19, 1951 edition.

