

GRETTIR THE OUTLAW

A Story of Iceland - published by Blackie 1890 - with 6 full page illustrations by M. Zeno Diemar.

Produced in the format well known to collectors of G.A. Henty's books, with its 384 pages, this title was offered to the author's 'young readers' as a free translation of the Saga of Grettir the Strong, which he had first begun to read thirty years earlier as a schoolmaster learning Danish, in order to use an Icelandic grammar and dictionary. He had tried it out on his pupils, one of whom had recently reminded him, with the suggestion that he might publish it as a story for boys.

Baring-Could visited Iceland in 1861 and 1862, on holiday from Hurstpierpoint, the immediate literary result being *Iceland - Its Scenes and Sagas*, published in 1863,

The 'freedom' of the translation enabled SBG to reject some of the more fanciful and superstitious elements in the Saga, which he regarded as real but embellished history, and also to include a number of items of general interest to the English reader. Thus we learn that the Icelanders were descended from Norse nobles; that their country is one third larger than Ireland, though its population is entirely coastal, inhabiting one sixth of the total area, the remainder consisting of desert, icefields and volcanoes; and that Christianity was sanctioned by law in the year 1000 AD, shortly after Grettir's birth. The Saga of Grettir was written in the 13th century. A later account by two Icelandic clergymen of their investigation of some of the events in the Saga is held in the British Museum, and a translation of it is contained in SBG's *Curiosities of Olden Times* (see the chapter 'A Mysterious Vale'). Unlike Henty's sterling young heroes, with their qualities of integrity and honour, we learn that Grettir, though undoubtedly courageous, was 'a headstrong, wilful fellow'; and that 'these qualities, untamed in him, wrecked his whole life, and it may be said brought ruin and extinction on his family'. When he left home his father refused to give him a weapon, saying that 'it would be better he went without till he had learned to control his temper and keep a check on his hand'. This he never did, and his ventures and exploits increased in violence during the fifteen years of his exile, until his own death from axe wounds in 1031 in his early thirties.

The book is found in either green or red cloth. The cover picture is in green, buff and white (or red, pink and white) with white lettering for the title and author. The lettering on the spine is in gold. My reprint is undated, but inscribed 1903-4 on the flyleaf; the advertisements imply a date of issue of 1903. It was then published at three shillings (15p). Another Blackie format is red cloth with blind stamped decorated boards, and gilt lettering on the spine. It contains four attractive coloured illustrations by M. Mackinlay. Strangely, that called for in the list of illustrations for page 200 is found opposite page 192, though according to the plate itself destined for page 196; similarly, that called for page 168 is found opposite page 160, while the actual plate claims its place at page 174.

The short chapters and basic language, with plenty of action and little verbiage make it readily available to youngsters with modest reading skills. But -the blurb which describes it as 'irresistible ... a narrative of adventure of the most romantic kind', which 'no boy will be able to withstand ... ' goes a bit over the top!

[David Shacklock]

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