

Burne-Jones and the Dissolution of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co

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Peter Faulkner's thoughtful and kindly review of my biography *Charles Fairfax Murray: The Unknown Pre-Raphaelite* in the *Journal* 14:2 (Spring 2001) prompts me to address his reservations concerning my account of Burne-Jones's exit from Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. and the reconstitution of the firm as Morris & Co. In essence, I believe Burne-Jones to have been a prime mover in the dissolution, and not simply the sympathetic friend whose dearest wish was to distance himself from the acrimony.

This, I realise, does not accord with received wisdom. Penelope Fitzgerald does not mention the subject.¹ Fiona MacCarthy says that 'In March 1875 Morris finally agreed to pay £1000 of compensation each to Rossetti, Brown and Marshall. Burne-Jones, and Faulkner waived their claim to payment. Webb too disclaimed his payment. . . .'² I hesitated before questioning so deeply informed and meticulous a researcher. My reasons lie in two key letters.

The first belonged to Charles Fairfax Murray; aside from his personal letters from Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones and others – a thousand or more – he collected more than a thousand other als. which passed between the later Pre-Raphaelites, including Theodore Watts's papers concerning the dissolution. Among these was a letter from Burne-Jones to Dante Rossetti, n.d. 1874, which includes these lines: 'I don't think you one bit understand the footing we are on in this business – my wanting to leave the Firm has of course nothing to do with driving other members out of it, but I must have my fair share and for this purpose the property of the Firm must be realised'. This cannot, I believe, be misconstrued. Whether or not he finally declined to take the compensation (which seems to me unlikely in view of his financial situation at the time) it is clear that he wanted the Firm to be dissolved.

There are in the Fitzwilliam, Cambridge, typed transcripts – bound and labelled as to their origin and purpose – all of the letters that Georgiana, Lady Burne-Jones borrowed from friends when she was writing the *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*.³ The letter I quote is among them, the original borrowed from Fairfax Murray; her letter of thanks is in the John Rylands collection. It is certain that Georgiana was fully aware of her husband's position in 1874. Instead, she wrote deftly: 'Edward, Faulkner and Webb finally agreed that their legal claim did not to them represent the justice of their case, and they only wished to be released from responsibility. . . .'⁴ No mention here of compensation, nor of Edward Burne-Jones's principled refusal, as surely there would have been.

Taken together with other well-known omissions, such as the absence of the year 1868 from the *Memorials*, this in my view rules her out of contention as a wholly reliable primary source; and with her Mackail who advised her, and who later admitted the sensitivities of the task.

My second primary source is a letter from May Morris to Sydney Carlyle Cockerell, dated 11 May 1938. Writing from Kelmscott she asks his advice on whether or not she should consent to the publication of certain letters 'written to Theodore Watts on the break-up of the Firm. It was in quite late years that Fairfax Murray told me all about it, and how it was principally EB-J, anxious for himself, who wanted to clear out. I, naïve in my belief in the Morris-Burne-Jones friendship being perfect on both sides, was shocked at hearing the facts, but realized that W.M. however hurt would never want gossip-mongers to pick up anything in the future, and always took care to write nothing that might go counter to Mackail's statements'.⁵ This letter is in the Hammersmith & Fulham Borough Historical Archive in Talgarth Road.

There may, of course, be other primary sources that shed further light on my contention (or tend to disprove it) and I should be glad to hear of them.

The friendship between Burne-Jones and Morris ran very deep; it did not require that they were in complete and constant harmony. The Zambaco affair might well have destroyed a lesser fellowship. Their political standpoints were fundamentally different, as were their social aspirations. They agreed on the Eastern Question and disagreed on baronetcies. Burne-Jones seems never to have truly bridged the conceptual chasm between hand craft and fine art, as the comments in his Work Books, also in the Fitzwilliam, demonstrate.

In the matter of the dissolution of the Firm, Burne-Jones was better placed than most to see that Morris could no longer continue to fund it and he was frightened of being drawn in. The beatification of Burne-Jones that began with his death serves, I feel, only to obscure the strength of their relationship.

NOTES

- 1 Penelope Fitzgerald, *Edward Burne-Jones* (London: Michael Joseph, 1975 [rev. 1997]).
- 2 Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (London: Faber & Faber, 1994), p. 342.
- 3 Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan & Co., 1904).
- 4 *Memorials*, II, p. 52.
- 5 J. W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1899).