

Books in Bottles?

William Morris and the demise of printing

A BRIEF TRIBUTE TO THE REVIEWS EDITOR
(AND MUCH MORE) OF THE JWMS

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In 1893, William Morris predicted the end of the book, saying that ‘within fifty years printing books would be an extinct art – we should be carrying all our books about in bottles with patent stoppers. While there was still a chance, [we] should try and produce a few specimens of what was really good printing’.¹

He was at the time in the third year of the Kelmscott Press enterprise, and had been asked to speak on printing for the Arts & Crafts Exhibition Society. This talk ‘On the Printing of Books’ took place on 2 November 1893 at the New Gallery in Regent Street, where the current exhibition was being held, and was reported in the *Times* on 6 November. Morris, who was received with cheers at the beginning and the end of the lecture, ‘demonstrated by means of lantern slides the various stages which printing had passed through from the time of its invention until the third decade of the 16th century’ and concluded with illustrations from Caxton’s *Golden Legend* and *Historyes of Troy*, printed at the Kelmscott Press.²

When published, the lecture traced the origins of European printing with moveable metal type when ‘it was a matter of course that ... when the craftsmen took care that beautiful form should always be a part of their productions whatever they were, the forms of printed letters should be beautiful, and that their arrangement on the page should be reasonable and a help to the shapeliness of the letters themselves’.³ Decline followed steadily and especially, according to Morris, during the later eighteenth century, halted by some small signs of recovery ‘in the last fifty years’. An account of ‘best practice’ in regard to typefaces, typography, page design, leading and spacing, ornamentation and paper quality

set out Morris's printing principles, summarised at the close:

Therefore, granted well-designed type, due spacing of the lines and words, and proper position of the page on the paper, all books might be at least comely and well-looking; and if to these good qualities were added really beautiful ornament and pictures, printed books might once again illustrate to the full the position of our Society that a work of utility might be also a work of art, if we cared to make it so.⁴

The talk, or another version of it, was reported in the trade press on 6 December, where the remark about printing being an extinct art in the next fifty years was quoted.⁵ As this is not in the published version, it seems to have been an impromptu comment, maybe in response to an audience question.

Being at this moment deeply engaged in book production to his own rigorous specifications, Morris was speaking sarcastically, satirically, in defence of good quality design and printing. But what did he mean? What did he conceive of as 'books in bottles with patent stoppers'? There seems nothing else in his writings to elucidate this, but a very similar remark was reported a year later by Burne-Jones. In a letter, he wrote that Morris

... railed fiercely against the invention of printing and gave it a hundred years at most to come to an end. Already said he the magazines are driving books out of the field – presently newspapers will have killed magazines – then the telephone will come – bottles of talk – & the newspapers will be ended & that's a comfort – as a centipede eats a cockroach & a cockroach eats a bug – a hundred years will do it said he.⁶

Bottled books and talk? My guess is that the telephone allusion provides a clue, it being one of the newest technologies of the time. The other was the phonograph, graphophone and gramophone; variants on newly-developed devices for recording sound. By the early 1890s, these were on the market as primitive dictation machines and more widely as public amusements. Morris surely read about the phonograph and noted that two of the most celebrated recordings were of contemporary poets. He could have heard Browning in 1889 recite the opening of 'How they brought the good news from Ghent to Aix' (stumbling over the third line with 'I'm sorry but I can't remember me own verses')⁷ and Tennyson in 1890 recite from 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' and 'Maud' among other pieces – especially perhaps, since 'Maud' was among the Kelmscott Press titles in 1893. The potential for recorded books and 'talk' could have been evident.

Bottles 'with patent stoppers' – presumably those with sprung wires holding down glass or ceramic stoppers – suggest a release or start mechanism for the recorded voices, which would offer books and talks to customers, and thereby in due course eclipse printed texts. And perhaps the invocation of bottles for this

development came from the fact that phonograph recordings were made on wax cylinders which resembled jamjars or beer bottles without necks

To Morris, this prospect was evidently dystopian. He was prescient, however, because during the succeeding century, sound recording developed at speed and in many forms, including radio broadcasts, gramophone records, tape recordings, audio books, iPods and apps. I think perhaps that Morris the utopian thinker might have welcomed these as ‘bottles of talk’, since he always preferred his reading to be oral. But he would of course have disliked books or poems being read by others. It is surely sad to think that if he only had lived another twenty or thirty years, as he should have done, we might have possessed recordings of his own voice, delivering his own poems and speeches.

He would certainly also have been interested in present predictions and fears over the forthcoming ‘death of the book’, one hundred and twenty five years after his own prophecy. And I don’t think he would be impressed by the current offerings of ‘tablets of print’ in the kindle-style, whose aesthetic appeal to eye and hand is so lamentable. But technology is ever-advancing, and perhaps one day there will be virtual books where ‘a work of utility might be also a work of art’.

NOTES

1. Report of lecture ‘The Printing of a Book’ in *The Printers’ Register* – Supplement 6 Dec 1893, p.viii, quoted in William S. Peterson, *The Kelmscott Press: A History of William Morris’s Typographical Adventure*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, p.254.
2. ‘Mr William Morris on the Printing of Books’, *The Times*, 6 November 1893, p.4.
3. ‘Printing’, in May Morris, ed, *William Morris: Artist Writer Socialist*, Oxford: Blackwell 1936, vol.1, pp. 251–260.; see also <http://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1893/printing.htm>. May Morris mistakenly dated this lecture to 1888, confusing it with ‘On Letterpress Printing’ delivered to the first Arts & Crafts Exhibition by Emery Walker in November 1888, which is credited with inspiring Morris to establish the Kelmscott Press. His own lecture was delivered on 2 November 1893.
4. *Ibid.*
5. See n.1 above. I have as yet been unable to check the original text, as this supplement is missing from the copies of the *Printers’ Register* in the British Library and St Bride Printing Library.
6. Edward Burne-Jones to Helen Gaskell, 12 Nov 1894, BL Add Ms 54217 f. 338.
7. Edison recording available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYot5-WuAjE&feature=related>.