Ernest Radford and the First Arts and Crafts Exhibition, 1888

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INTRODUCTION

Dollie and Ernest Radford were my paternal Grandparents. Early in 1983 I became custodian of their letters, books and other documents. They were poets and writers and active in the literary, artistic and socialist circles of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The archive also includes letters and papers of my father, Maitland Radford, who was a doctor in the public health service and a poet. At first my intention was simply to index the material in some way and then to prepare a chronological record of Dollie and Ernest’s lives.

I discovered from the letters that my Aunt Hester, Mairland’s sister, had sold Radford documents to the University of California Los Angeles in the early 1960s not long before she died. They were to be found in the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library which I visited with my husband for a single day in October 1983 while on a lecture tour in the USA. The treasure trove we found included two joint diaries (of which I obtained photocopies), notebooks, manuscripts of unpublished poems, tales and essays and copies of a novel called One Way of Love – An Idyll which was published in 1898 and of which I had no copy. It was clear I would have to go back to study the material and that I would have to raise the money to do so. Early in 1985 I obtained a grant from the British Association to cover the travel costs of returning to the Library but was not able to make the trip until October 1986.

The contrast between the early lives of Dollie and Ernest was great. Her background was insecure with hints of illegitimacy about her birth, a father whose occupation took him away to Canada and the
United States, a mother who died when she was ten, five younger siblings of whom four died in early childhood, constant moves from lodging to lodging, money worries and, as an adolescent and young adult, the unsettling effect on her own life and her sister’s of their father’s stormy relationship with Charlotte Younge whom he appears to have lived with, married, separated from and ‘remarried’. Ernest came from a respectable, non-conformist West Country background with the security that comes from having deep family roots in one town, Plymouth, and one countryside, Dartmoor. His father was a well-respected joint proprietor of a household store, Popham and Radford. Ernest moved home only once before leaving Plymouth altogether as an adult, and as one of ten brothers and sisters he enjoyed a secure childhood and adolescence with benevolent and comfortably-off parents.

So implausible was the first meeting between Ernest Radford and Dollie Maitland in the year 1880 that it reads almost like a page from consequences. In this parlour game the consequences of such an encounter are written down, step by ritual step, the sheet of paper being folded over after each entry, passed on for the next player to continue the tale and so on until it is finally opened up. One such page could read well: he was a disillusioned young barrister from Plymouth; she was an aspiring poet of twenty-two from Worcester; they met in the Reading Room of the British Museum; she said to him: you are my knight in shining armour; he said to her: I am not the marrying kind. The consequence was – they courted thereafter in Karl Marx’s sitting room, and married three years later at Sunbury-on-Thames; and sadly what the world might well have commented was – it will all end in tears.

The months of April and May 1888 can be seen as a turning point in Ernest’s life. Towards the end of May Dollie describes a trip from Worthing to Shoreham and its church, slipping in a reference to the job Ernest had applied for into her account of the day:

The churches all about are full of interest – late Norman work – towns very picturesque. Ernest went up to town to see about a ‘post’ –
Secretary to the Arts and Crafts Exhibition. Took the boy to have his hair cut.'

The 'post' was the recently-formed Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society which had decided to appoint a paid Secretary to organise its first exhibition in the autumn. Three names had been suggested: Ernest Radford, Aubrey Stewart and Gerald Horsley, an architect. Ernest was interviewed by the Finance Committee of the Society on 10 April and offered the job the next day at a salary of £150 plus a bonus 'contingent on the success of the exhibition'.

The Exhibition Society was a splinter group within the wider movement of architects and other art-workers at odds with the art establishment. The philosophy of the movement, inspired by the writings of John Ruskin and the example of William Morris, was unity in the arts. Its aim was not only to reform design but to restore creativity to the work process itself. The Industrial Revolution, with its division of labour, had debased design and turned the craftsman into a mere cog in the wheel of machinery. The reformers believed craftsmanship - the fusion of beauty and use - was being destroyed. In accordance with Ruskinian principles they wanted harmony between architect, designer and craftsman, respect for the intrinsic nature of materials, fitness for purpose in the design of objects and well-made goods of every kind made available to all levels of society.

Inspired by these beliefs, a group of free-thinking architects had in 1884 taken the initiative in forming the Art Workers' Guild, which included painters, sculptors, architects and craftsmen - illustrators, typographers and bookbinders. Morris, at this time focussing his energies on the Socialist cause, was not among the founders and was not elected a member until 1888. The aim of the Guild was actively to promote 'the Unity of all the Aesthetic Arts' and it was established in direct opposition to the Royal Academy, which refused to exhibit decorative art objects, and to the conservative Institute of British Architects, which rejected the approach of Guild architects like W. R. Lethaby and Gerald Horsley. By 1886 a minority group of Guild members, led by Walter Crane, the illustrator and designer, had recognised the need for the Guild to have closer contact with the public and had issued a programme for a National Exhibition of Arts. By the end of February 1887 the group was split between those who wanted to give priority to
challenging and reforming the Royal Academy, thus postponing a Combined Arts Exhibition indefinitely, and those who backed a tentative suggestion from the architect and metal-worker W. A. S. Benson that the decorative art section of the Guild might itself organise a winter exhibition. 4

This idea fired Walter Crane, a seasoned agitator and member of the Social Democratic Federation, into vigorous action. A working committee was formed with Crane as chairman, and in May a draft proposal was drawn up outlining the scheme for an exhibition society. The committee advocated an annual exhibition of the decorative arts which would show the artistic and inventive powers of designers and makers and illustrate the relation of the applied arts to different materials and uses, something that had not been attempted before. The Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, as it became known, continued with its original policies until at least the First World War, although it was not always able to hold exhibitions annually.

William Morris, although an inspirer of the movement, was sceptical about the financial viability of the first Exhibition in 1888 and in any case was convinced that such corporate effort would be futile in a capitalist society. He thought the Society’s campaign to credit by name the craftsman/maker of an exhibited work was a trivial one, arguing that it was not by printing lists of names in a catalogue that the status of the workman or the system of capitalist commerce would be altered. Nevertheless he gave the Society his support and talked on tapestry as part of a series of lectures by practitioners. 5

Ernest attended a meeting of the ‘Arts and Crafts’ Finance Committee on 23 May and its Selection Committee on 24 May. The following Sunday was spent happily at home, as he described:

In afternoon on River. Came back and found young Cockerell and his friend Blow – a young architect & good fellow who attended my lectures at Croydon. Emery Walker and his wife & Mrs. Grove. Then William Radford & his wife from Bexley (a first call). In evening D & I to call on Edward Rose and his wife at Bedford Park. A jolly day this – high tide and sunshine, tea in garden Hammock etc. all seasonable 6

Apart from committee meetings, the Exhibition Society did not take much of Ernest’s time to begin with. In mid-June he combined business with pleasure, spending a week in Plymouth officiating at the
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Cambridge Local Examinations. He stayed at his brother Charles' farm, West Axtown, greatly enjoying the company of his sister Ada and writing to Dollie of farm happenings, riding, sailing, billiards, tennis, visits to friends, a champagne and lobster supper and the possibility of buying Jaeger clothes at a discount for her at Popham and Radfords.

But as the year went on, Ernest became too busy with Arts and Crafts preparations to take a proper holiday. Instead he took short runs into the country on his bicycle, on one of which at the end of August he stopped with the Morries at Kelmscott Manor near Lechlade. He describes his trip in a letter to Dollie, giving her a blow-by-blow account of the route, the distances and the stops for teas, washes and clean boots. His descent upon the Morries was altogether successful. He found Morris and May and a friend, dropped into their supper, stopped two nights and had a trip up the river most of Sunday.7

A letter from Morris to his daughter Jenny, written on the same day, 28 August 1888, makes it clear that Ernest had not been expected:

We had a beautiful day on Sunday. We all went up the water along with Mr. Radford who suddenly turned up on Saturday on a bicycle, asking for lodging, having come over from Didcot through Wantage. The morning opened most lovely; we started at eleven, and by 12 were sheltering ourselves from a driving rain under Mr. Birchall's Yew-tree; then it cleared a little, and we got dinner close to where we dined so merrily, my dear, with Ellis, and by 2 the sun was hot and bright and the day straight on most lovely. We got out at the Round House, and walked nearly a mile up the canal which is really very pretty, the water without stream and clear and bright: it made me long for an expedition. Your mother & Crom and I went up to the Church afterwards over perilous ditch-bridges leaving Radford and May lazing by the boat ... [Emery] Walker ... duly came and walked on to meet us and fell in with us just as we were opening Buscott Lock. So we had a merry evening together ... 8

Ernest's letters to Dollie in Plymouth that summer speak of a busy social life, bicycle trips, preparation of lectures for his autumn series, as well as the mounting pressures of the Arts and Crafts exhibition due to open at the New Gallery in Regent Street on 29 September for the private view. At the beginning of the month he wrote to say that coming
down to Plymouth would make him too tired for his work. He was troubled that he had time only for 'mean little letters' and was urging Dollie to stay in Plymouth until things at home had returned to normal. In mid-September he was telling her he was going to get a clerk as the clerical side of the work was 'becoming unmanageable', but he believed 'the Exhibition will be in some ways a very important affair'. He told her that Crane had designed an invitation Card, and asked 'What will you wear on “private view” day? Saturday fortnight that will be'.

A few days later he wrote ‘on Monday the deluge’, presumably the arrival of the works for exhibition, and on the Monday itself he told Dollie:

Today the great scrimmage begins at the Gallery and there will be no peace at least until the end of the week. I should not mind the scrimmage if I had not to be writing the Catalogue all the time.

He survived the deluge but the pressure was beginning to tell:

We have had one great day and tolerably exciting it was. I have a skilled clerk working for me and have just written to engage another. If this thing can be done in time it shall be. I am sure the Exhibition will be good, but it is almost more than possible for it to be ready by the end of next week ... Somehow I can’t write you letters now. I am reduced to a machine with no thoughts but of business and very little time or strength for anything else.

With just over a week to go things sound more desperate but still under control:

I just have your letter. I wrote none yesterday. The work, and the confusion, and the many separate things I have to be thinking of are disheartening but I am holding on. I do not know whether it is possible to be ready in time, but if it can be done it shall be. I dined with [his brothers] George and Charles yesterday, and then being too tired to go back to work I rode home on the wheel. I have two clerks now and am to have a third today!

By the weekend before the opening the effort had taken its toll on Ernest, despite the third clerk. On the Monday he told Dollie:
I came to a dead end on Saturday night, and yesterday was spread out. I am better today and working hard. We are all in wild confusion. The Exhibition was ready in time but Ernest, after all his efforts, was not at the opening. Two days before the private view Dollie returned from Plymouth to find him prostrate at home instead of at the Gallery and on the day itself he went away to Plymouth and stayed with Charles at Axtown. Dollie deputised for him at the private view, Ernest having made arrangements for her comfortable transport there by carriage. The following day she wrote to him at length:

My dearest, I am hoping you are feeling better today: here it is beautifully bright and clear - east wind and sunshine. It must be splendid on the moor. I drove to the Exhibition yesterday in great style with Mrs. [Emery] Walker, and was delighted: some of the things are beautiful - those cartoons of Burne-Jones and his angels - that Peacock pavement and Morris's glass looked like jewels in the evening when the gallery was lighted. Mrs. Morris's embroideries are worth going to see alone I think. I shall spend a great deal of time there, it gave me a great impression of rich and splendid work. I was welcomed most kindly by Mrs. Crane, who made all sorts of anxious enquiries for you, next I was greeted by Walter Crane who was equally nice. I told him you had gone off, and he said he was delighted to hear it, and that you had worked splendidly for them and no wonder you were overdone. He was ever so kind and receiving everyone with much grace.

Then I met May Morris, and Mr. Morris who said he should have been so glad if you'd come to Kelmscott. He called out to me in a most anxious manner - 'I say, how's Radford - better I hope'. He seemed delighted with the Exhibition - had been there many hours Walker said. Mrs. Pennell was there - Burne-Jones - with his wife and daughter - Mr. and Mrs. Benson - Mr. and Mrs. Rose - Shaw - Mr. and Mrs. Hudson! Mr. Wedmore most polite to me - and heaps of people I didn't know - and many had come and gone before I got there. Clara and Herbert were there - also Nina [Marian] and Mr. Comyn. An elderly Gentleman (Shaw said he was an architect) walked into the fountain with much eclat. The tea department was rather a scramble, but we enjoyed getting it very much. Where were Mr. and Mrs. Stephens. Mr. Hudson was got up like a second-rate American, and Mrs. Hudson was
flounced in black with a tremendous hat. They were making themselves very much felt. Mrs. Walker said she enjoyed it very much—that all the most interesting people in London were present and what a delightful thing life would be if it were not for domestic servants etc. etc. She also said that Mr. Pennell was only 27 years—I have always thought him to be at least 39 or 40—and Mrs. Pennell years younger. 17

Ernest was delighted with this informative and gossipy letter ‘with its very good account of the private view’, and told Dollie he’d had one from Crane, whose account was as cheerful as hers. 18 In other letters Dollie refers to reviews of the Exhibition in the Pall Mall Gazette and the Daily News and wonders where Shaw’s article was; she says that sandwich-men were promenading Regent Street with notices of the Arts and Crafts, with Ernest’s name and Walter Crane’s name in great prominence. 19 Crane’s account of the private view has not survived, but an earlier letter of condolence to Ernest has:

We are all very sorry to hear of your illness. I am afraid you have been overdoing it in our service, at a time too when you were not strong. Do not worry, however, we shall pull through I think. Cam and Beck [?] are helping and we have got the West and North Galleries numbered and the Catalogue is well in hand. Mr. Massey has worked admirably.

We are sorry to lose your excellent services of course, but you must take a rest, and not think of doing anything until you really feel better. Every member of the Committee joins me in regret and in best wishes for your recovery. 20

Ernest spent just over a week in Devon, during which he was well enough to cycle from Bude to Axtown, stopping the night at Launceston. He went straight back to work at the Gallery on his return and in mid-October commented in his diary:

Our Exhibition has been opened a fortnight. It appears to be a thoroughly successful adventure. Artists and Public are pleased alike. We shall not trouble our guarantors at all I hope. 21

He went on to say that he had met Oscar Wilde in the New Gallery and found him ‘both pleasant and businesslike (didn’t expect either)’. 22

The Builder gave the Exhibition a favourable review, saying that it represented the views of a sect, but that the amount of beauty and vari-
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ety in the work exhibited said a great deal for the talent and artistic feeling of those involved:

Twenty-five years ago, such an exhibition as this — so full of fine colour and outline, and so devoid of anything which can be regarded as vulgar, or in bad taste, would have been impossible.

A series of lectures and demonstrations were given by practitioners while the exhibition was on. They were open to the public, with a reduction in the entrance fee for workers in arts and crafts. Morris, whose firm was well represented with furniture, fabrics, carpets and embroideries, talked on tapestry.

Dollie described another event:

Nov 15th ... Nora, Ethel and I up, in great haste, to the Arts and Crafts to meet Ernest and hear Mr. Walker's lecture on printing. Dinner at Blanchards first. Audience very appreciative and select. Mr. Morris, Burne-Jones, Oscar Wylde [sic], Sanderson, Benson, Mr. and Mrs. Crane (in easy chairs in the first row!) Mr. Pennell (in much excitement and turmoil of spirit), Shaw, etc. etc. Home late—invited to sup at the Morries, but we got to their home before they did, and came away again — the hour being late.

Soon after, Dollie went with Ada to hear Cobden-Sanderson lecture on book-binding. 'A very interesting lecture and audience'. She had met him at the exhibition some weeks before and had commented that he was very polite and pleasant: 'he has a quaint air — like a little old woman'. The day after, Dollie and Ada 'took the Boy [aged four] to the Arts and Crafts. He was much excited and interested; especially at having his dinner there'.

The only other reference Dollie made at this time to the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society concerned something she called The Sign Riots. It would seem that committee members who had successfully weathered the pressures of creating a large and acclaimed exhibition with over 500 exhibits and a large number of visitors, now managed to fall out over the disappearance of a sign-board. She comments in characteristic style:

Nov. 19th ... Ernest detained concerning the Sign Riots —
Said Halle and Carr to Walter Crane,
You'll never see that sign again,
Said Walter Crane to Halle and Carr,
I'll tell you what I think you are,
Said Mrs Crane - But what's the use,
Her words I cannot reproduce,
Said the joyful public anyhow –
The Arts and Crafts have had a row –
The board has gone – come Carr and Halle
We’re waiting round that Sign to rally etc. etc.29

A week later she records ‘...Exciting committee meeting at the Arts and Crafts – re the Sign-board’.30

NOTES

Ernest Radford (1857–1919) was a barrister, poet, art critic, member of the Socialist League and secretary to the Rhymers’ Club. His published poetry includes Old and New (1895) and also appeared in The Book of the Rhymers’ Club (1892) and The Second Book of the Rhymers’ Club (1894). The Chiswick Press printed the catalogue for the first Arts and Crafts Exhibition, and amongst its essays was one by Morris on ‘Textiles’. In 1892 Ernest suffered a breakdown from which he never entirely recovered.

Caroline (Dollie) Maitland (1858–1920) married Ernest in 1883. She was a friend of Eleanor Marx, Olive Schreiner and Edward Aveling, and both the Radfords are mentioned in memoirs by G. B. Shaw and H. G. Wells. Five years worth of correspondence also exist between Dollie and D. H. Lawrence. Also a member of the Socialist League, Dollie appears in the well-known 1887 photo of the Hammersmith Branch, seated between May and Jenny Morris. Recent scholarship has focussed on a re-appraisal of Dollie’s poetry: her published works include A Light Load (1891), Songs and Other Verses (1895) and Poems (1910) and three poems by her appeared in The Yellow Book. She also wrote several books for children. See Leanne Marie Richardson, ‘Naturally Radical: The Subversive Poetics of Dollie Radford’, Victorian Poetry 38: 1 (2000), pp. 109–24, and Ruth Livesey, ‘Dollie Radford and the Ethical Aesthetics of Fin-de-Siécle Poetry’, Victorian Literature and Culture 34 (2006), pp. 495–517.

36
Richardson writes of the Radfords that ‘Their actions, singly and as a couple, reveal their liberal views on class issues, on religion, on vegetarianism, on sexuality, on literature, and on the ultra-nationalist sentiment inspired by World War I’ (p. 121). A further article by Ann MacEwen on the Radfords will appear in JWMS 17: 3.

1 Ann MacEwen writes that this is a reference to her father, Maitland Radford, who at the time would have been four. The materials on which this article are based are in the collection of Ann MacEwen, grand-daughter of Dollie and Ernest Radford. Material quoted is from the diaries kept during this period (indicated as Diaries with dates) and from Letters (indicated by author and date). This quotation is from a letter from Dollie, late May 1888.

2 From the proceedings of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, held in the Manuscript Library of the V&A.

3 Ibid.

4 For the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society and its history, see Peter Stansky, Redesigning the World (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1985).

5 For Morris’s involvement with the Society, see Fiona MacCarthy, William Morris: A Life for Our Time (London: Faber & Faber, 1994), pp. 593–97. Subsequent references are to MacCarthy, Morris.

6 Letter [?] from Ernest, May 1888. See MacCarthy, Morris, p. 600, where she describes Sydney Cockerell and Detmar Blow as protégés of Ruskin who ‘gravitated to the Morris orbit’. William Radford was a second cousin of Ernest.

7 Letter from Ernest, 28 August 1888.


9 Letter from Ernest to Dollie, 6 September 1888.

10 Letter from Ernest to Dollie, 13 September 1888.

11 Letter from Ernest to Dollie, 15 September 1888.

12 Letter from Ernest to Dollie, 17 September 1888.

13 Letter from Ernest to Dollie, 18 September 1888.

14 Letter from Ernest to Dollie, 20 September 1888.

15 Letter from Ernest to Dollie, 24 September 1888.
16 Letter from Ernest to Dollie, 30 September 1888.
17 Letter from Dollie to Ernest, 30 September 1888. Mr & Mrs Stephens were the Radfords' landlords. For an account of the Exhibition see MacCarthy, *Morris*, p. 596.
18 Letter from Ernest to Dollie, 2 October 1888.
19 Letter from Dollie to Ernest, 6 October 1888.
20 Walter Crane to Ernest, 26 September 1888.
21 Ernest's diary, 13 October 1888.
23 *The Builder*, October 1888.
25 Dollie's diary, 15 November 1888.
26 Dollie's diary, 22 November 1888.
27 Dollie's diary, 27 November 1888.
28 Dollie's diary, 23 November 1888.
29 Dollie's diary, 19 November 1888. Joseph William Comyns Carr and Charles Halle had established the New Gallery in Regent Street (where the Exhibitions took place) in February 1888.
30 Dollie's diary, 27 November 1888.