
The Society of Antiquaries, the present owners of Kelmscott Manor, announced plans for a full archaeological, historical and ecological survey of the landscape around the house in 1996. The survey became known as ‘The Kelmscott Landscape Project’ and its findings were presented at a weekend conference in Oxford in May 2003, entitled *News from Somewhere: William Morris and the Kelmscott Landscape*. The papers from that conference are the foundation of this fascinating book, where experts from a wide range of disciplines – environmental archaeology, historical ecology, architecture, local history, design and conservation – observe the development of William Morris’s mythic Kelmscott from prehistory to contemporary tourist attraction. The geometry of the book, beginning with a broad picture of the structure of the landscape and its ancient and modern history, funnels towards the Manor in a steadily narrowing perspective, via the church, population surveys, the enclosure at the end of the eighteenth century, model farms and the members of the Morris family themselves, finally taking in the minutiae of building conservation.

In his introduction to the project, Tom Hassall quotes W.G. Hoskins’ description of ‘a new kind of history’, one requiring ‘a combination of documentary research and of fieldwork, of laborious scrambling on foot wherever the trail may lead. … There is no part of England, however unpromising it may appear at first sight, that is not full of questions for
those who have a sense of the past.' (p.1) Aerial photographs of Kelmscott, used to great effect in the early chapters of this book, display: ancient crop marks; circular enclosures – possibly the ‘evesdrip gullies’ (p.16) of circular houses; prints of medieval strip farming; lost roads, ancient ditches, and evidence of places of worship as tribes gathered at the confluence of rivers and buried their dead on the uplands. ‘Time depth’ is evident from the crop marks as activities were reorganised and remodelled. (p. 20) The importance of the river itself to prehistories of the Thames valley is emphasised (p. 27) and it soon becomes clear that the ‘idyllic countryside of William Morris’s time was almost entirely artificial, the creation of millennia of human activity’. (p. 30) Many of the species of wild flowers in the hay meadows, so beloved by Morris, have now largely disappeared as the result of ‘ploughing and re-seeding, fertilizer application and herbicide use’. (p. 35)

Morris is continually brought into the story, particularly through News from Nowhere, whose climax takes place at Kelmscott and epitomises his ‘love of the countryside, landscape and field archaeology’. His studies of prehistoric monuments – ‘laborious scrambling’ – began at Marlborough and he loved dreaming up the landscape of medieval England. (p. 5) Conservation became an important complementary activity to his passion for the historic landscape and its architecture, and in 1877 he founded the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, which was to cooperate with the Commons Preservation Society and the National Trust. The importance of Kelmscott Manor to the development of Morris’s work and thought is emphasised. The Manor has also inspired and fascinated subsequent enthusiasts, including Dick Dufty, John Betjeman, and Geoffrey Grigson, who described Kelmscott as ‘an emotional centre of England’. (p. 10)

Morris’s own influence on the village landscape from 1871, ‘informed by his idealized views of Kelmscott and of rural society, was conservative and extremely limited’. (p. 53) His lasting memorials are those erected by Jane and May Morris – the Memorial Cottages built by Jane in his memory (1902), the Manor Cottages put up by May in memory of her mother (1914) and the Memorial Hall (1934). Morris bribed Hobbs, a local farmer, with £10 to thatch his farm buildings, not realising that Hobbs became renowned for developing intensive, semi-mechanized
stock-rearing and dairying at Kelmscott – the antithesis of the timeless rural idyll that Morris thought he was inhabiting.’ (p. 54) Another contradiction is highlighted in a report on Kelmscott Church for the SPAB, possibly written by Morris himself, in which the writer describes the dismantled Georgian box pews and the bell-cote as having ‘no architectural value whatever’ while the new roof was ‘solid and unpretentious’, thus displaying fine anti-Georgian prejudice and conveniently disregarding the hallowed principle of conserving the architectural contributions of preceding centuries. (p. 56)

Basil Blackwell described life at Kelmscott Manor in May Morris’s time as being on two planes, homeliness below, while ‘upstairs, one passed into a shrine dedicated to the memory of “my Father”, with the frozen stillness of a museum’. (p. 132) In 1910, May wrote to John Quinn that ‘he [Morris] is here constantly … I never lose the sense of it’. (p. 131) Her will specified that the Manor should be preserved intact: ‘that no modern innovations, improvements, or installations be put in or made to the House in view of its age and its historic interest as a Home of the late William Morris as it is in the same condition as when he left it’. (p. 131) However, as Jonathan Howard makes clear (pp. 131-145), when the house became her permanent home in 1923, after thirty two years as a holiday house, May put in motion a programme of limited modernisation and refurbishment. When the Manor passed into the hands of the University of Oxford, and thence to The Society of Antiquaries, after her death, the need to provide private accommodation for tenants, with bathrooms, electric light and heating made changes inevitable, but many were undertaken with insufficient attention to conservation principles or appropriate sensitivity to retaining decorations and furnishings from Morris’s time in situ. A screen from the earliest part of the house was moved; partition walls in the Green Room and the Tapestry Room were taken away and new windows installed, the main staircase was stripped and the colour in the ‘Green’ Room changed to white. (p. 136) One of the bedrooms was papered with a number of different Morris papers to interest visitors and Jane’s bedroom was repapered in ‘Willow Bough’ when it was originally hung with ‘Small Stem’ and her bed with ‘Large Stem’. (p. 144) The Society of Antiquaries discovered the building ‘in a near terminal state of decay’ and — another paradox here — although Morris had appreciated the
traditional materials and techniques involved in the construction of the Manor, its ‘abnormally poor construction’ necessitated a huge amount of structural repair, including stripping the roof, rebuilding the southern gable wall and chimney, lifting floors and addressing problems of damp and insect infestation. (pp.136–7) Plans on pages 138 and 139 reveal just how many changes occurred after 1939, and it becomes clear that there is no room untinkered, and certainly some which Morris would find almost unrecognisable. The restoration of the Manor gardens since 1993 has been far more sensitive and the approach to the conservation of the landscape itself has become enlightened. The West Oxfordshire Local Plan is promoting traditional practices of flood-plain management and planting of meadow and river margins with wildflowers and native trees, willow, alder and black poplar.

This study makes a most interesting read and the expertise used in researching it could be applied usefully to other sites of literary or artistic interest – one imagines that the industrial archaeology of the Haworth area for instance would provide fascinating results.

Diana Andrews


It seems fair to say that while the pervasiveness of biological science, particularly evolutionary theory, in Victorian Britain, and its influence on literature, have been readily mapped, the impact of biology on architecture and design has not been explored. William Taylor’s interdisciplinary book The Vital Landscape aims to help fill this gap by establishing parallels between developments in biological science and the history of the built environment. As Taylor, a historian of architecture and design, points out in the Introduction, The Vital Landscape explores ‘the influence of biological or life science on architecture and landscape gardening in nineteenth-century Britain.’ (p. 11). Focusing on glasshouses,
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garden cemeteries, and domestic and botanical gardens, Taylor seeks to show that ideas in the 'life sciences', such as ecology, zoology, botany, evolutionary theory, physiology and psychology, were readily translated into architecture and design. However, for the reasons I shall explain more fully further down, he does not always succeed in demonstrating this influence persuasively.

Let me begin with the content of the book. It comprises seven chapters: 'Primitive Huts and Wild Gardens', 'Vegetables in Forcing-Houses', 'Humans in Glasshouses', 'The Vital Landscape', 'Elemental Existence', 'Patterns on the Landscape', 'Characterizing Life at Home' and 'Memory and the Garden Cemetery'. The first two chapters largely focus on pre-nineteenth-century ideas of humanity's uniqueness, perceived superiority over nature and emerging ideas of the environment. Taylor shows how humanity's belief in its uniqueness and superiority gradually gave way to a more enlightened and scientific understanding of human interaction with its organic and inorganic surroundings. Intriguingly, Taylor identifies instances where writers were largely unaware of the idea of an environment, and of relating oneself to the immediate surroundings, and others where something like it begins to appear. He argues that while Renaissance architects such as Leon Battista Alberti or Antonio Filarete did not anticipate the idea of an environment in the modern sense of the word, Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755) was informed by what nowadays could be called environmental awareness. At various intervals, Rousseau ponders on climatic conditions in different places and the ways in which geographical variations in soils, climates, and seasons, must have introduced some differences in people's manner of living.

In his third chapter, Taylor discusses the glasshouse and its importance as a major precursor to environmental awareness. The idea that the glasshouse is closely connected to the rise of the word 'environment' is not entirely new; Jonathan Bate, among others, has commented on this link in his book *The Song of the Earth* (2000). However, while Bate focuses more on the history of the glasshouse in the context of empire, Taylor elaborates on the glasshouse in the context of an emerging environmental awareness, and this is where the main strength of *The Vital Landscape* lies. Taylor describes the multi-faceted uses of the glasshouse, which went beyond its conventional agricultural purpose. He convincingly shows
that the nineteenth-century glasshouse, seen as an ‘analogue’ of nature, provided a microcosm for contriving landscapes in one confined space which brought together organic processes and functional architectural forms. Focusing on the example of the architect John Claudius Loudon (1783–1843), Taylor shows that his curvilinear glasshouses, such as the Palm House at Bicton in Devon, provided a context for thinking how human beings and their culture might be accommodated to their living and non-living surroundings. The glasshouse was instrumental in establishing environmental awareness and, according to Taylor, ‘helped the British public envisage alternative worlds and ways of living’ (p. xv).

Chapters four to six concentrate on the popularisation of science, its application in the Victorian home, and an increasing understanding of one’s home as habitat. Parallel to the life sciences describing the natural world as a system of relationships formed between species and between organisms and their surroundings, architecture began incorporating reflections on the dependencies between human beings and their habitat. Taylor offers some examples of efforts to design the house and garden to conform to the way nature worked, and describes at length how achievements in the life sciences, and a closer attention to nature’s fundamental elements of air, earth, and water, particularly in the home, helped the Victorians understand the conditions in which they lived. Loudon’s book, for example, published in 1838, contained a plan for determining the desirability of homes relative to their position alongside streets as they were commonly set out in towns and suburbs. Loudon’s sketch of this plan, which is one of numerous helpful illustrations in Taylor’s book, shows the possible positions of the houses and gardens most favourable to the admission of the sun throughout the year. Telling prospective home-owners the species best planted in some areas and not in others, the plan was a useful tool for Victorian homebuyers, helping them to imagine advantages and pitfalls of new abodes. Key to the purposes of Taylor’s book, the Suburban Gardener and Villa Companion emphasised the importance of the immediate surroundings: if neighbourhoods were surrounded by dusty roads or a smoky atmosphere, a careful choice of a building lot would matter little. Here Taylor convincingly argues that Loudon may not have held an environmentalist’s viewpoint per se, but he helped pave the way for developing environmental awareness in the pri
vate domain. Much like Loudon’s book, Cuthbert Johnson’s Our House and Garden: What We See, and What We Do Not See In Them (1864) had a strong effect on popularising the idea of the environment. Johnson, a prolific commentator on agriculture and home economics, invites his readers to embrace biology and the natural sciences in order to explain everyday organic and inorganic occurrences in the home. As Taylor argues, in an urban context, where the vicissitudes of the city’s climate, smoke and dirt had a visible impact on people’s lives, there was an increasing awareness of industry’s tendency to change the quality of people’s surroundings, and it is here that the pertinence of the word ‘environment’ becomes obvious.

Chapter seven then discusses the garden cemetery reform movement of the 1830s and 1840s, in which reformers, trying to address the effect of the morass of decaying corpses lying beneath cities such as London and Glasgow, called for new modes of burial. As Taylor emphasises, it was also hoped that if tombs and epitaphs were dispersed among botanical specimens systematically labelled and arranged, the cemetery would become a means for promoting civil obedience, inviting reflection and personal remembrance. They were intended, as Taylor argues, ‘to be beneficial to the population as a whole, not solely to philosophers and aesthetes.’ (p. 180). Taylor concentrates on Loudon and his book On the Laying Out, Planting, and Managing of Cemeteries; and on the Improvement of Churchyards (1843), in which he presented a ‘Design for Laying Out and Planting a Cemetery on Hilly Ground’. As the sketch reveals, Loudon’s design was informed by an acute environmental awareness. Garden cemeteries, according to Loudon, should not include too many trees forming belts and clumps, as this prohibited the free movement of air and the drying effects of the sun, both essential to countering the effects of putrefaction (p. 190). It seems remarkable, from an ecological perspective, that Loudon’s primary aim was to return the remains of the dead to the earth from which they had sprung, whilst improving moral feeling was secondary (p. 187).

Given the centrality of these themes to Morris’s work, it will come as a disappointment to the reader of this Journal that he is mentioned only three times, and rather fleetingly. The first reference we find in Chapter 5, in the context of organic design. Taylor emphasises that frequently the forms of organic nature were studied and imitated as a way of achieving a
closer bond with the natural world, which is evident in nineteenth-century visual culture. To substantiate his argument, Taylor cites Gottfried Semper’s *The Four Elements of Architecture and Other Writings*, published in 1815, Owen Jones’s monumental *Grammar of Ornament*, published in 1856, and ‘the works of Arts and Crafts practitioners such as William Morris’ (p. 124). The next reference to Morris is only five pages further on, in the context of nature writing, where Morris is given a place among those writers ‘who sustained the imaginative exploration of nature with numerous fictional settings’ (p. 129). Taylor mentions works of fiction such as Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* (1883), Rider Haggard’s *People of the Mist* (1894), H.G. Wells’s *Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), and Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Lost World* (1912) as examples of nature writing which were very similar, in their author’s attention to detail, and close description of island forms and environs, to Darwin’s account of his voyages on the Beagle between 1832 and 1836. When it comes to Morris, Taylor surprisingly does not mention the more celebrated *News from Nowhere*, but Morris’s final novel, *The Sundering Flood* (1897), as an example of writing about rivers and valleys which proved ‘serviceable as models of a bountiful and contiguous nature’ (p. 129). The third reference to Morris we find in the context of Taylor’s discussion of Robert Kerr’s *The Gentleman’s House*, published in 1864. Taylor briefly acknowledges Morris, together with Augustus Pugin, and Ebenezer Howard, as being among the ‘great proponents of nineteenth-century design’ (p. 153) before turning his attention to Kerr and *The Gentleman’s House*. Kerr’s book is important to Taylor’s main argument that the natural sciences had an impact on architecture mainly because it urged designers to consider the interdependence of rooms and exterior spaces. He illustrates his point by focusing on the ground plan of the Manor of West Shandon in Dumbartonshire, completed one year before the publication of *The Gentleman’s House*. The positioning of the rooms, which Kerr likens to a ‘rabbit-warren’ (Taylor suggests that Kerr intended the term as complimentary) where ‘you can get from anywhere to everywhere at a jump’ (p. 156), ensures an organic unity of spatial experience which was paramount. Two years before the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel coined the term ‘ecology’, *The Gentleman’s House* was informed by a heightened degree of environmental awareness.

As I have already indicated, Taylor’s account does not always convince.
It might be unfair to criticise Taylor for not mentioning Morris more often, but surely someone with such a strong interest in the organic and architecture as Morris should have played a stronger role in the book. As I have argued in my PhD thesis, *Early Green Narratives and the Rise of Bioregionalism* (2004), the principle of organic unity between house and garden, between interior and exterior, can also be applied to Kelmscott Manor and garden. While Taylor convincingly argues that attitudes to nature in the nineteenth century are ‘notable not for the reason that people began to think differently about the environment, but that they began to think imaginatively about the environment at all’ (p. 14), it seems odd that in *The Vital Landscape* there is no mention of the organic and environmentally-friendly society as described in *Nowhere*, or any hint of Morris’s ideas on the integration of town and country. It is also surprising that Taylor does not mention Ebenezer Howard’s garden cities. Howard’s plan of a new era of decentralisation, in which he envisaged several clusters of towns, linked to each other and to a larger Centre City by a circular canal leading to a Central Park, seems central to the ideas outlined in *The Vital Landscape*.

More troubling, perhaps, is Taylor’s tendency to be very general and unspecific at times. For example, he argues that ‘Developments in science, particularly biology, gave philosophers and social reformers reason to believe that living beings were influenced by where and how they lived.’ (p. 98). While I do not question the validity of his argument, it would be desirable to see extracts from scientific theory which support this claim. Which developments does he mean exactly? Similarly, Taylor argues that ‘Contemporary appraisals of the influence of biology on nineteenth-century design cite many instances of the organic in architecture’ (p. 124). Again, one would wish to be given concrete examples of these ‘many instances’. Much in the same vein, Taylor discusses at length how achievements in the life sciences helped the Victorians understand the conditions ‘in the home’, but he never critically examines this monolithic term ‘home’ and omits to mention the fact that what he is addressing is the bourgeois home. Surely the large majority of industrial workers only took a peripheral interest in, say, how many spores there were in one cubic metre of air in the home? Unfortunately, *The Vital Landscape* is pervaded by these general and vague comments. Contrary to what Taylor promises
in the Introduction, there is only little evidence from biological theory that would make clear the direct impact of the ‘life sciences’ on architecture and design.

There are also instances when one must question Taylor’s assertions. In his third chapter, for example, he seems overoptimistic when arguing that ‘The appeal to science not only helped residents of Britain’s cities adapt to their surroundings. It led them to become more valued, productive and creative members of society as well.’ (p. 94). If Taylor’s arguments are correct, why was there such widespread poverty and unemployment at the end of the nineteenth century? Here Taylor’s description sounds more like a description of society of Nowhere in Morris’s novel, but not that of their Victorian counterparts. Similarly, at times he seems to draw rash conclusions to serve his own ends. On page 147, for example, Taylor cites a lengthy passage from Johnson’s Our House and Garden and argues that it ‘conceptualised the house and the garden as a contiguous whole – an environment in which human beings need to position themselves’. (p. 147). However, this claim is not supported by the quotation, and this overinterpretation is, unfortunately, characteristic of The Vital Landscape.

I do not wish, however, to end my review on a too critical note, since the merits of Taylor’s book outweigh its limitations. The Vital Landscape is an intriguing book in which Taylor argues – not always convincingly – that the imperative to think about the environment in a methodical way, to imitate or improve it, had a fundamental impact on architecture and design and was, at the same time, an important catalyst for social change. Considering Loudon and the glasshouse from a distinctly environmental point of view, The Vital Landscape is an important addition to existing research, following on from Nikolaus Pevsner’s Pioneers of Modern Design (1936), and Melanie Simo’s Loudon and the Landscape (1988). Taylor incorporates a plethora of illustrations in order to substantiate his arguments, and also establishes a welcome sense of continuity by making comparisons between the nineteenth-century glasshouses and contemporary examples, such as the Eden Project in Cornwall, completed in 2001. Although Morris is mentioned only three times, the reader may take solace from the fact that Taylor addresses themes central to Morris’s interests and ideas. Owing to its interdisciplinary approach, The Vital Landscape should appeal not only to historians of design and architecture,
landscape gardeners, and biologists, but also to those interested, or working, in English, Ecocriticism, and the History of Science and Ideas.

*Martin Delveaux.*


*I am glad to welcome* the sixth volume of this magisterial work of North American scholarship, finely produced by a distinguished British publisher. Its one colour illustration is the very fitting and striking frontispiece of Jane Morris as Proserpine, of which eight versions were painted in these two years (as the second Appendix explains in detail).

Rossetti spent the whole of 1873 and the first part of 1874 at Kelmscott Manor in recuperation from his breakdown in July 1872, a good deal of the time with ‘the one necessary person’, the phrase he used to identify Jane Morris. Partly because of this, and partly because of the destruction of Rossetti’s letters of this period to Jane, she is the missing correspondent here. But there is plenty of interesting material in the volume, since Rossetti’s distance from London forced him into correspondence, as visiting was so much more difficult. Thus we have numerous letters to Charles Augustus Howell, his ill-chosen business partner, and others on practical arrangements to Treffry Dunn and T.G. Hake; business letters also to patrons like George Rae, and F.R. Leyland; and more social ones to Fanny Cornforth at Cheyne Walk; to his brother and his mother, and through her to his sisters; and most engagingly to the two friends he continued to write to when other relationships had broken down, Ford Madox Brown and William Bell Scott.

Some of the letters here continue to show the vivacity that was so marked in the earlier letters. Rossetti’s exasperation with Howell’s unresponsiveness and procrastination often produced what are for reader enjoyable communications. For instance, a series of letters in March 1873 bear the
italicised superscription Hüffer's Bloody Clock (to be continued in our next), as Rossetti vainly attempts to induce Howell to send a long-overdue wedding present to Hüffer the music critic. The brief letter dated 6 June 1873 neatly encapsulates a series of complaints about Howell’s failures to communicate: ‘My dear Howell, Your habits as a correspondent are most discouraging. A request for immediate answer is generally a signal for total silence. What does it all mean? Have I offended you in any way?’ By June the following year Rossetti is becoming increasingly exasperated with Howell, but he continues to employ him; he stated his view of the relationship with generous exasperation on 31 December 1874: ‘As regards our friendly relations, I have only to say that I consider you, after some 9 or 10 years’ intercourse, a very good-hearted fellow & a d—d bad man of business.’

Rossetti writes regularly and affectionately to his mother; he is keen to feed her interest in nature – though whether she would have enjoyed his lengthy accounts of the exploits of Dizzy, the dog at the Manor named after Disraeli, I am unsure. He tells her of various aspects of life at Kems- scott, beginning with a complaint on 2 January 1873: ‘...a dreadful man in the neighbourhood, who has a beetroot-spirit factory, has established a steam-whistle to call his workmen. This goes 7 times a day, beginning at 5 AM, & is the dreariest of super- or subhuman sounds. It is a long way off but still one hears it here much too distinctly to be pleasant.’ More characteristic is a passage in a letter of 20 May 1873 inviting her to come with his sisters to the Manor: ‘The apple blossom in our orchard has been in full glory & is still delicious, and everything is most lovely. I shall try if I can pack you a bouquet safely to Euston Square today, including wild flowers – especially the yellow mary-buds (or marsh marigolds) which are most splendid in the fields wherever the floods have been most persistent. By the bye, I wrote a sonnet on Spring lately, & will copy it at the end of this letter.’ He then mentions that The Athenaeum will soon be publishing ‘a little piece of mine’, ‘Sunset Wings’, which ‘is one I wrote when I first came here, & embodies the habit of the starlings which quite amounts to a local phenomenon & is most beautiful & interesting daily towards sunset for months together in summer and autumn.’ Rossetti had sent the poem to the editor on 9 May, commenting: ‘The habit of the starlings referred to in them [the verses] quite amounts to a local phenomenon, & was entirely
new to me when I first took this house 2 years ago, at which time the verses were written. It was new to Morris also – a great rural observer – & might perhaps seem strange to some readers, but is very exactly described. The noise is, as said, just like the wheels at a water-mill, or (more prosaically) like a factory in full spin.'

The letters provide evidence of Rossetti's concern for his sisters. He often worries about Christina's health, and he wonders, sympathetically, about Maria's decision, in September 1873, to join the All Souls' Sisterhood. His brother William is used as an advisor on literary matters and as the source of the occasional loan – 'tin' is always in short supply – but when William announces his engagement to Lucy Madox Brown, Rossetti responds on 10 July 1873 with fraternal affection: 'You will not doubt how heartily I rejoice in your engagement to Lucy. I really believe there is not in the whole of our circle a woman on whose excellence all of us could place such perfect reliance or of whom we should feel so sure that she would make you happy. Both your mother & Brown are I am sure absolutely delighted with the prospect. Will you give Lucy my sincere love, & say I wish I were worthier to be her brother and yours.' He agrees to come to the smaller of the two events arranged to celebrate the marriage, the wedding breakfast on 31 March 1874, which was attended by the Brown and Rossetti families, and by the Morrises and Burne-Joneses. (There is an informative Note on the event.) This was the occasion on which Morris grumbled, in a letter to Louisa Baldwin, about lacking the courage to refuse to attend the wedding of two people, neither of whom he actually liked. Rossetti wrote briefly to Howell about the breakfast on 3 April 1874: 'He [William] and bride cool as cucumbers.' One wonders what he had expected. Rossetti's agreement to attend on this occasion contrasts with his polite and witty way of declining a wedding invitation from John Westland Marston on 18 June 1873: 'It is years since I began to feel decidedly more like the Ancient Mariner than the Wedding Guest...'

Fanny Cornforth remained in London at Cheyne Walk, and was given strict instructions not to come to Kelmscott. Usually addressed as 'Good old Elephant', and sent a number of elephant cartoons, Fanny was nevertheless the object of Rossetti's sympathetic concern, as he tried to organise her life from a distance, sending a string of small cheques to her, together with much, often peremptory, advice. But it is to 'Dear good Fan' that
he writes on 25 January 1873, sending her some snowdrops and expressing what may be seen as his neurotic sense of insecurity: 'When I needed money in the summer, not one friend who had capital came forward to offer me any, though I would have done so in a like case not only for my intimate friends but for any friend who needed it. All they did was to stand aloof while I sold my property much under its value.' However unfair and self-pitying this is, Rossetti was entitled to proclaim his own generosity. This is shown in the number of thoughtful letters he wrote to writers who asked him to comment on their work.

The numerous, though often short, letters to Ford Madox Brown show Rossetti at his most relaxed. Brown's friendship became increasingly important to Rossetti as contacts with other friends declined – there are no letters here to Burne-Jones, Swinburne is no longer congenial, and the recently imprisoned Simeon Solomon is made the butt of a joke in dubious taste in a letter of 6 August 1873. Rossetti often teases Brown for his poor handwriting, his untidiness and his vagueness in some matters, but he consistently supports him in the problems of his professional career and, most movingly, when his young son Oliver (Nolly) dies in November 1874 soon after visiting Kelmscott and publishing a precocious novel.

To William Bell Scott in Newcastle – 'My dear Scottus' – Rossetti writes a number of informative and friendly letters. On 31 August 1873 he begins, 'Your handwriting was a treat after so long an interval', and goes on to discuss the difficulties that both are encountering in their work. He then refers positively to the news of his brother William's engagement to Lucy Madox Brown, and asks Scott for more information about 'the rise & progress of the event out there' – Scott had been in the party on holiday in Italy during which the proposal had occurred. Scott is also told about the recent visit to the Manor of Mrs Rossetti and Christina: 'My mummy used to trot about after wild flowers & was as pleased with everything as a baby or an angel, – once or twice took my daily walk with me too! Christina improved inconceivably. They enjoyed the boating beyond belief, & George [Hake, who was also staying at the Manor] gets greater and greater at it.' Rossetti's letter for 9 October 1873 criticises an unidentified ballad by Scott as lacking in 'intonation & finish' and belonging to 'a much more modern & usual class of thing than your best ones.' He emphasises his constant sense of the precariousness of his finances, remarking of his
reputation as a painter that ‘I have arrived at an age when one ceases to be interesting without ever having got recognised by the public.’ He ends, less self-concernedly, ‘I am glad to hear that you have not been quite chiselled as to the examinership. Certainly they seemed ready to rob you, but they have not done it for once’ This is one of the few occasions when one is surprised to find no annotation of the reference.

As far as relations with the Morris family are concerned, we find many examples of Rossetti’s concern for Jane’s health and well-being. In this context, it is somewhat disconcerting to find him writing to Howell, on 9 January 1873, ‘Two things are wanted for the Moocow in its new house.’ - the Note simply says: ‘A pet name for JM.’ A good deal of trouble is taken to help Jane with the furnishing of the house and garden at Turnham Green. But a remark to Brown on 7 June suggests a personal tension with Morris: ‘Please do not suggest his [Morris’s] coming down with you on Tuesday (when I hope to see you) as it’s a bore showing him one’s work, & not to do so is awkward.’ It would be interesting to know why Rossetti considered it a bore. The summer of 1873 seems to have been particularly happy for Rossetti, with the arrival of ‘Janey and the babes’ in July. A little later, on 6 August, he asks Howell to ‘go to some special sweetstuff shop (there is a great one in Oxford street near the Princess’s Theatre) & send some down for the kids.’ On 10 August he tells Fanny: ‘I have been painting from little May Morris who is so lovely and has so much expression that it would be easy to paint her as a grown up woman. My picture for Graham has two heads of her in it, painted for angels...’ (A Note identifies the painting as ‘La Ghirlandata’). Rossetti refers to this painting also in writing to his mother on 13 September: ‘Little May Morris appears twice in the picture, as a couple of angels. She has become a most lovely model, but her health is a constant subject of anxiety.’ It would seem that Rossetti extended his concerns for Jane’s health to her younger daughter. Of Janey, Rossetti writes to Brown on 28 October: ‘She has been & is so unwell as to make me most anxious... I still keep hoping she may soon be well enough to come here again, but I am, as I say, most anxious. She writes regularly, or I could not stay away.’

On 23 February 1874 Rossetti writes affectionately to his mother about her visit the previous summer, and tells her, ‘Today the little Morris girls collected all the flowers we could find in the garden – no very choice
gleaning—and they were sent on to you.... The children were quite sorry afterwards that they had omitted to send you some branches of the palm-willow with its furry buds not yet as yellow as they will be. The gum-cistus you planted thrives but of course is very gradual in growth.' He also refers to the 'Triple Rose'—a painting 'with 3 heads of lovely little May Morris'.

In March there was much concern over the disappearance of a dress made by Jane for Rossetti to use in a painting; the 'hamper' in which it was packed had been broken into while it was in transit by rail from Paddington to Lechlade. But he tells Dunn on 11 March that it would be better to drop the matter rather than 'incommode' Jane or himself about it.

There is little reference to the Morries in the succeeding months, but a good deal about Kelmscott Manor. On 9 April Rossetti writes a businesslike letter to the agent with his quarter's rent, and offering (with no mention of Morris) to take a lease for 7 or 14 years 'conditionally on my obtaining whenever needed the use of the outbuilding before in question', for which he would be prepared to pay 'a small additional rent if required'. The outbuilding would be adapted to become a studio, which 'would add materially to the value of the property.' On 23 April he was regretting that his mother had not chosen to come to Kelmscott when leaving London with his sisters. 'The weather is divine here now & everything lovely:' But the idyll—if it was one—was not to last. As students of Morris know, Morris had already written to Rossetti, on 16 April, threatening to withdraw from his part of the tenancy—'I am both too poor & by compulsion of poverty, too busy to be able to use it much in any case'.

However, Rossetti remained at the Manor well into the summer, although by 26 June he was telling Watts-Dunton, 'I am increasingly anxious to get housed nearer London, though still with country walks available quite close at hand', and letters to Dunn show him looking at some houses on Rossetti's behalf. These letters were of course written before the events of mid-July which led to Rossetti's permanent departure from Kelmscott. According to Jan Marsh in her 1999 Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Painter and Poet, 'Walking on the river-bank, he passed some local anglers and, as by the Tay, he heard insults. Angrily, he rounded on them, full of abuse and challenge. George intervened, but the damage was done, as accounts of the outburst began to circulate in the village'. (p.481) This dramatic event, surprisingly, makes no impact in the correspondence. On
11 July Rossetti is hoping for a visit from Brown, to join Leyland, Watts and Howell at the Manor, but on 15 July he writes briefly to Howell: 'I am obliged to put off Sandys after all—being unexpectedly called to London. I shall try to see both him & you there if I stay at all. Don't tell people I am coming, as I don't want to be besieged.' The Note remarks, 'In fact, DGR never returned to Kelmscott'.

There is some change of manner in the following letters, written from London—though this is not obvious, as addresses are given in this edition only when they appear on the letters. These post-Kelmscott letters are briefer, perhaps less relaxed, and largely concerned with practical arrangements. Nevertheless, they remain coherent and purposive. And we see Rossetti in a positive light as he tries to bring a resolution to the conflict between Morris and Brown over the reorganisation of the Firm. On 21 October he writes at length to Brown on the matter, trying to arrange a meeting between the three of them to 'talk the matter over'. He tells Brown: 'I have said both to you & to Morris that I consider his proceeding sudden & arbitrary.' But he then goes on to give an account of the development of the Firm which is sympathetic to Morris's point of view, concluding: 'I think if Morris had come to us in a friendly spirit of appeal & said "The business will only yield a fair income for one man & no more — ought not that man to be myself who have no other resources?" We as friends might probably on consideration have answered Yes.' Brown, worried by the serious illness of his son Oliver—he was to die on 4 November—was in no mood to compromise. Rossetti continued to seek a solution, writing to the lawyer Watts-Dunton on 21 October about a visit to Morris and a meeting of the partners. On 22 October Rossetti writes affectionately to Brown about Oliver's illness, and concludes: 'There is a call for a Firm meeting on 23rd. Having made up my mind as to my own course, & put Top pretty well in possession of it, I don't know that it is any use my attending.' A brief note to Morris on 25 October acknowledges receipt of the minutes of the recent meeting and accepts the idea of appointing 'assessors', but insists that 'I don't see any object in my coming to the meeting on the 4th.' There is an unexpected additional remark: 'I have been making a pattern for a new colouring of the marigold paper & will send it with remarks.' This seems surprisingly supportive of Morris— or at least the Firm— in the context of controversy. On 3 November
Rossetti apologizes to his mother for deferring a visit to her, 'as I have just got a note to say how important it is for me to be at the shop meeting, & Brown & Marshall will be coming down here for a previous discussion of matters'. But the death of Oliver Madox Brown put such matter in the background. Rossetti wrote tenderly to Brown on 6 November about the death, concluding, 'My dear Friend, may you find help in yourself, for elsewhere it is vain to seek it.' He also wrote the sonnet 'Untimely Lost', published in The Athenaeum for 21 November. Rossetti's support for Brown was unstinting, and it is pleasant to read in a letter to Hake of 20 December, 'I saw Brown last Sunday – on the point of going next morning to Manchester to deliver his 2 lectures – a task which I hope may have helped to rouse him, though indeed he has borne up most wonderfully all along.' In the same letter Rossetti gives two good reasons for having moved from Kelmscott back to London 'for the winter'; this is due 'partly to increased calls for rapid runs to town which became inconvenient, & partly to the necessity of attending personally to the replica of my large picture here now...'

On the evidence of the material quoted here, Roger C. Lewis bases an Appendix entitled 'Rossetti's Relations with the Morries 1868–75'. He argues that the reasons for Rossetti's sudden departure from the Manor 'are more complicated than the usual sources indicate' (p.583), including 'non-pathological factors' (p.585) such as his awareness of Jane's anxieties about him, and her own attitude. In Lewis's view, 'she was too fond of respectability and security to risk an open break with her husband in order to live permanently with Rossetti.' (p.585) Rossetti, we are told, was also finding that 'Kelmscott itself was beginning to grate on him'. Lewis's conclusion runs contrary to the accepted accounts as he argues that 'his return to London in mid-July may have been less a result of his lapsing back into insanity, as Scott and Doughty claimed, than a suitable moment, while Janey was away on holiday, to make the break he had probably been contemplating for some time.' (pp.585–6) Scott and Doughty are not the only scholars to have emphasised Rossetti's instability at this stage. But Lewis's argument is certainly a stimulus to the reader to look again at the events at Kelmscott in July 1874.

Reference has already been made to the second Appendix, which attempts to explain the very complicated matter of 'The Oil Versions of
Rossetti’s Proserpine’. Appendix 3, ‘Monna Innominata. Alexa Wilding’, is a surprising conclusion to the volume. In it, Allan and Page Life offer the most detailed biography of Rossetti’s model so far published, and a defence of her against the condescension of some of those who have previously written about her. However good the Life’s scholarship may be, I was surprised to find this rather specialised material here; I hope that it will receive the attention it deserves.

However, the general significance of these letters for me was to show that Rossetti, at this stage in his life, could still at times be a lively, intelligent and entertaining correspondent, whose articulacy somehow survived in a period of great psychological strain.

Peter Faulkner