

The Morris letters at Texas

by E. E. Stokes Jnr

THE University of Texas Library, one of the major repositories of primary materials in America, recently acquired the Charles Fairfax Murray correspondence, sold at Sotheby's on May 30, 1961. The correspondence consists of letters addressed to Murray over a period of fifty-one years, 1866 to 1917, by a distinguished list of persons, all of them prominent in the worlds of art and literature, and most of them associated closely with William Morris. Included are letters from Sir Edward Burne-Jones, Lady Burne-Jones, T. J. Cobden-Sanderson, Walter Crane, J. W. Mac-kail, Sir Emery Walker, and others. Of special interest to Morrisians are the letters from Morris himself, his wife Jane, and his daughter May.

At the request of the Honorary Secretary, I inspected the letters from the Morrises in July, 1962, as a representative of the Society. (The correspondence was by this time already catalogued.) Through the kindness of the Librarian of the Humani-

ties Research Centre, Mrs Ann Bowden, I was permitted to examine the letters in detail—indeed, to read every word of them. It was an exciting experience to handle original letters written by people I have admired greatly for many years.

The Morris letters comprise 111 items, all in original autograph. Forty-eight are by William Morris, ten are by Jane Morris, and the remaining fifty-three are by May Morris. The letters are mostly in a very good state of preservation—particularly May Morris' letters, some of which are accompanied by their original envelopes. In date they range from 1870 (William Morris' earliest letter) to 1917 (the final letter by May Morris). I encountered, on the whole, very few problems of legibility in reading straight through the letters. Morris' writing is clear enough, though he sometimes runs words together. Most of his letters are in black ink, but a few are in pencil. Jane Morris' hand gave me some trouble with decipherment in a few instances. May Morris, however, writes a beautiful hand—the best in the Morris family. Her characters are not only clearly legible but are an aesthetic delight as well.

In content, the letters make it amply clear that Murray was an intimate and affectionately-regarded friend of the Morris family. The many letters and notes inviting him to dinner, for visits etc. sufficiently demonstrate this. That Murray, as bibliophile, artist, art collector, and connoisseur, put his knowledge and taste as well as his valuable possessions at the disposal of the Morrises is equally clear. Morris' letters to Murray in Italy in 1874–75 reveal that Murray was acting as Morris' agent in purchasing vellum there. But for Murray's generosity in lending her manuscripts and first editions of her father's works (the bulk of Morris' private library having gone to the Pierpont Morgan collection in America), May Morris might have been unable to complete her task of compiling and editing Morris' *Collected Works* (1910–15). The role played by Murray in relation to the Morris family thus assumes considerable importance because of the existence of these letters.

A more detailed look at some of the letters may be of interest. Many of William Morris' earlier letters to Murray are quite short—little more than notes. In early 1874, however, begins the series of letters referred to above, written from Queen Square to Murray in Italy. Morris' chief concern in these letters is with giving Murray instructions about the purchase of vellum from a source

that Murray had discovered in Rome, and the posting of the vellum to England. (The vellum was for the illuminated manuscript of the *Aeneid* done by Morris, Burne-Jones, and Murray.) Other matters are touched upon in passing, however. In the very interesting letter of February 18, 1874, Morris specifies 'writing vellum' in a postscript. On March 9 he writes to Murray again, asking him to purchase skins of different sizes from an 'old woman' in Rome, expressing concern about the posting of them to England, and, with characteristic generosity, offering to pay for whatever vellum Murray wants for himself. Morris goes on to write about his daughters, Jenny and May.¹ In the letter of March 26 Morris acknowledges receipt of the first batch of vellum from Italy and asks Murray to order 50 sheets more of the small-size vellum. Admitting that he is '... somewhat of a muddler in epistolary composition . . .,' he repeats his whole order for vellum again.² Turning to other matters, Morris mentions that, 'early in February,' he had finished his Icelandic translations³ and reports that he is currently at work translating the Odes of Horace and designing letters, one for each ode. He includes a drawing of an ornament in the Italian style of about 1450. Striking a personal note toward the close, Morris mentions his fortieth birthday and his plans to take Jenny and May abroad in the summer. The letter of June 1 acknowledges receipt of more vellum.

Morris' letter of March 11, 1875, is chiefly taken up by his proposal that Murray decorate the six panels of the Morrises' sideboard (he offers Murray £10 apiece).⁴ He discusses the financial and other troubles besetting the partnership at this time (referring to them as a 'law business' to be settled), acknowledges receipt of still more vellum, and mentions that he is translating

¹ Morris' occasional references to Philip Webb in these letters are odd: one receives the impression that perhaps Webb and Murray didn't particularly get on.

² 1. '... all the woman has got in hand never minding whether it be thick or thin'. 2. 100 sheets of big vellum '(pretty much as it comes)'. 3. '50 sheets of the small as thin as may be ...'

³ 'I wrote a book (on paper confound it) of about 250 pp. translations of unpublished Icelandic stories with pretty letters to each chapter, which looked well on the whole.' The reference is to *Three Northern Love Stories*.

⁴ Morris enclosed (though it is not preserved with the letter) a full-size tracing of one of the panels.

Virgil. He promises to keep for Murray copies of the Virgil (a 'big paper copy'), of the Icelandic volume, and of a new edition of the *Guenevere*. A final example of the letters written to Murray in Italy in 1874-75 is the especially interesting letter of May 27, 1875. Morris acknowledges receipt of another batch of vellum and refers to the partnership and the settling of its legal difficulties.⁵ He discusses his work on the Virgil volume and asks Murray to do some of the pictures for it. The sideboard panels are mentioned again, and Morris makes a suggestion as to subjects ('the 4 Seasons & Sun & Moon'). Murray's mention in a letter of wanting some of Morris & Company's 'blue & green fine serge' is referred to - Morris offers to send him some as a gift. One of Morris' several references in this correspondence to 'the Master' is then made.⁶ Morris records a visit in company with 'the Master' and Faulkner to Oxford at Whitsuntide. They saw Ruskin, who was 'amusing, but refused to enter into our enthusiasm for the country & green meadows: said that there were too many butter cups & it was like poached eggs.' Morris also tells Murray that he had 'about a weeks' [*sic*] ride in Wales' with Faulkner 'last Easter' and goes on to say: 'The look of the country was so exactly what I had expected, that I was quite surprised, to make a bit of a bull.' After mentioning his family and discussing the publication of the volume of Icelandic stories,⁷ Morris writes: 'After all I have no news for you. I am up to the neck in turning out designs for papers, chintzes & carpets and trying to get the manufacturers to do them.' The letter closes: 'With best wishes for your welfare in your new estate,' a reference to Murray's recent marriage.⁸

After the 1874-75 series there is a chronological break in the correspondence. Morris writes Murray two letters from Venice,

⁵ Actually it had been dissolved on March 25 on this year.

⁶ I have been unable to make a positive identification of 'the Master'. However, after considerable searching in biographies of Morris and other works, I tentatively identify him as Philip Webb. Will a fellow Morrisian correct me if I am wrong?

⁷ Morris promises to send Murray an 'ordinary copy' to Italy and keep a 'big one' for him in England. Morris thinks that he has a 'big paper Guinevere of the new issue' for Murray.

⁸ Enclosed with this letter is a note to Murray from George Wardle about the sideboard panels. Wardle also congratulates Murray on his marriage. A drawing is included with the note.

the more interesting being the letter of April 29, 1878, written when Morris was suffering from an attack of gout. He writes, in part:

This [the Hotel de L'Univers] is a queer ramshackle old house: very cheap, but attendance bad: it has a nice platform of its own over the water: it is near the iron bridge (damn the iron bridge!) & beside the Academia. The Ducal Palace looks very different from what I imagined as to colour: I mean the diapered part of it: people paint it white & red; but I see the red is the faintest pink: this looks better than I expected.

Later the same year, on November 4, Morris writes to inform Murray that his translation of Virgil has been published that day. The letters are fewer in number and more widely separated in time thereafter. The letter of September 10, 1879, partly concerns a cartoon Murray had done. The first letter to Murray from Kelmscott House, Upper Mall, Hammersmith, is dated January 14, 1889. On May 18, 1891, Morris writes from Folkestone to acknowledge receipt of manuscripts of some early, unpublished poems of his sent by Murray.⁹ The letter of January 28, 1893, consists simply of the message: 'If you come in some time this afternoon or evening or tomorrow you can have your vellum copy of Reynard.' The final letter to Murray from Morris preserved in this collection is dated April 24, 1896, and concerns a book Morris was negotiating for with 'R.'¹⁰ The quite noticeable change in the handwriting of this letter from that of the earlier ones indicates that Morris wrote it when he was already weak from his mortal illness.

Our sampling of the letters from Jane and May Morris to Murray must necessarily be brief. Jane Morris' letters, only ten in number as preserved here, need not detain us long. Most of them are routine, polite notes from Kelmscott House and Kelmscott

⁹ The poems mentioned are as follows: 'Catherine', 'The Long Land', 'The Story of the Flower', an unnamed ballad, 'Malmsten', 'The Stepmother' (the last two being translations from Danish poems, probably ballads), 'St. Agnes Eve (?)' (a fragment), and 'The Edge of the Wilderness'. Murray sent them because Morris was planning the volume *Poems by the Way* at this time.

¹⁰ The date of this letter is not entirely legible, but I have dated it as indicated on the basis of the reference to 'R'. In April, 1896, Sydney Cockerell, acting as Morris' representative, purchased in Stuttgart for £900 a splendid twelfth-century English Bestiary from Rosenthal of Munich.

Manor, inviting Murray to visit or to dine, or acknowledging receipt of pictures, gifts, etc. Internal evidence indicates that a few of her letters, of incomplete date, were written before Morris' death, at least one of them being addressed to Murray in Rome. (1874-75? See above.) The letters bearing complete dates fall in the time-span 1901-08. Sydney Cockerell is mentioned in a note from Kelmscott Manor dated July 21, 1907, in which Jane expresses her pleasure that Murray has repurchased a 'Rossetti cup' formerly belonging to her and intends to place it in her possession once more. Receipt of the cup is acknowledged in Jane's letter of July 31, 1907.

May Morris' letters to Murray have an interest that rivals that of her father's, and they are also more numerous. In time they cover the thirty-year period from 1887 to 1917. Murray's personal intimacy with the Morris family emerges most clearly in May's letters, particularly those written while Morris was still alive. The intimate tone and friendly personal details reveal that Murray was held in real affection in the Morris household. Common interests figure prominently in the letters: art, literature, bibliophilism, book design. After 1900 a more 'businesslike' tone creeps in, when May is beginning to gather materials for her monumental collected edition of her father's works, though this involves no diminution of friendliness. She obviously depended heavily upon Murray's help in furthering her project: his memories of Pre-Raphaelite days, his friendly but frank criticism as her work on the edition progressed, and, most of all, his generosity in lending her manuscripts and first editions of Morris' works that might otherwise have been unobtainable. All these things emerge clearly in the letters. May's work on the collected edition reached a climax in 1910-11, and more of her letters to Murray are concentrated in these years than in any others. In fact, her letters do much to provide a running, almost day-to-day, account of her work of compiling and editing during its later stages.⁷ Some of her perplexities, textual and otherwise, are reflected. For example, in the letter of October 1, 1910, occurs a passage which may be relevant to problems connected with certain other nineteenth century editions:

¹¹ Examples are the letters of June 17, June 22, and June 24, 1910, which concern the text of *The Earthly Paradise* and May's request that Murray lend her his copy of the manuscript and of the first edition of this work.

Forman was a little ambiguous about Jason editions. Curiously enough. I sent him a copy of my paragraphs and he passed it, so to speak. But I have got it right now, I hope. I quite thought Father designed the '3 Ladies' block.

The letters written during October, 1910, reveal that Murray had been frankly criticizing May's introduction to *The Life and Death of Jason*. She takes the criticism well.

After 1911, May's letters are widely-spaced: the next two are dated March 9, 1913, and February 24, 1914, respectively. The second discusses her continuing work on the collected edition, pursued with the help of the Morris manuscripts lent her years before by Murray. The letter of March 29, 1914, is interesting. In it May mentions the Arts & Crafts show then at the Louvre in Paris and also discusses some painted glass figures of poets in the Common Room at Peterhouse, Cambridge. The letter ends on a somewhat sombre note: 'My book work will be done this year, and I shall have to be busy with embroidery or writing or something.' (Jane Morris had just died.) The letters of April 18 and April 23, 1914, are written from Paris, where she had gone about the 'Morris' room at the Arts & Crafts Show containing the Arthur Tapestries and May's painted wardrobe, among other treasures. The letter of February 1, 1915, still partly concerns May's work on the collected edition. Her last letter to Murray, and the final one in this collection, is dated January 2, 1917. (Murray died in 1919.) May appears in her letters as a woman of considerable wit, good humour, and intelligence.

How large a proportion of the letters addressed to Murray by the Morrises from 1870 to 1917 is preserved in this collection is not clear. It is certain that the collection lacks absolute completeness: Murray himself destroyed at least one of William Morris' letters.¹² Nevertheless, with a total of 111 items, the collection surely represents the bulk of the Morris-Murray correspondence during the forty-seven-year period. The correspondence is, moreover, largely unpublished. To my knowledge, only two of the letters have reached print, both in

¹² Murray to Cockerell, April 16, 1915: 'I destroyed an important letter of Morris', simply because I found that its purpose was *absolutely misunderstood* by an outsider—an intelligent outsider, but who didn't know Morris. *Friends of a Lifetime*, ed. Viola Meynell (London, 1940), p. 91.

excerpted form.¹³ The University of Texas has thus acquired a treasure trove for scholars of Morris, his work, and his times.

¹³ Excerpts from William Morris' letters of March 11, 1875, and May 27, 1875, appear in J. W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris* (2 v., London, 1899), i, pp. 319-20 (Oxford World's Classics Edition, 1950, i, pp. 328-9). The same excerpts are reprinted in *The Letters of William Morris to His Family and Friends*, ed. Philip Henderson (London, 1950), pp. 67 and 71.