
Jenny Morris in her Own Voice: Letters to Sydney Cockerell, 1897-99

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Jane Alice Morris (1861-1934), always known as Jenny, makes only intermittent appearances in the corpus of Morris scholarship. That William Morris's elder daughter struggled with epilepsy for the whole of her adult life, that she spent large parts of her time as a boarder in a succession of private homes accompanied always by a nurse-companion, that consultation with doctors, and explorations of places where she might be better cared for, was an accompaniment to the lives of both her parents and a drain in different ways on their own health – all this is well-known. Well-accepted, too, is the love William had for his daughter and the effort he made to be with her whenever he could and to write to her when he could not. There can be no doubt that Jenny treasured his letters and preserved them with care. They have served as a key resource for establishing the chronology of his life and documenting the challenges of his many projects. Not one of Jenny's letters to her father, however, has ever come to light. Nor does it seem that letters to her mother or to her sister May were preserved by the family. There are scattered and indirect clues as to her life, her interests and her temperament in letters that family and close friends wrote to each other and occasionally also to her. But finding the authentic voice of Jenny the woman through her own written word today is not entirely impossible. Several examples are illustrated below before turning to a more extended correspondence which has survived.

One fragment survives from the summer of 1891, when William and Jenny went to France, visiting many of the places that Morris had first seen as a young man. Already, in a letter to Jane, dated 8 August 1891, William had spoken of Jenny's keen interest in all that she was seeing.¹ Then, writing to Philip Webb from Beauvais, William reported that Jenny was enjoying herself hugely, and proving hard to pull away from explorations of church architecture. Jenny, at this point thirty years old, added a post-script to Webb, whom she had known from her childhood:

Dear Mr Webb/ All the lovely places & buildings which I am now seeing for the first time have brought thoughts of you to me, when you & Father & our other friends were making your first journeys in France, and have made me wish to write a line of remembrance & love to you. I can't be finding them less beautiful & noble than you did first, though you knew more about them./ With best love from Jenny Morris²

Eight days later found William writing again to Webb following a visit to Laon Cathedral. He was doubtful that Jenny would include a note since she was still 'busy looking with all her eyes'. She did do so, however, commenting: '[s]orry I am to leave Laon, in spite of the destroyers [...] to see the link between us & the makers of such beauty roughly broken & to be able to do nothing about it is too much'.³ Another fragment is the full text of a formal and carefully composed thank you letter written by her in 1896. Jenny and her mother had lunched with the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne in February and, five months on, when his work was published, and clearly with a vivid memory of the visit, she wrote:

Dear Mr Swinburne/ Since you were so kind as to read to my Mother & to me that lovely part of the Tale of Balen, I have been looking forward for it to come out & wanted to tell you with what delight I finished reading it about a week ago. Father took it with him to Folkestone so I didn't get hold of it to read till more than a month after it was published. Forgive me for thanking you for writing it & especially for that lovely dedication./ Yours affectionately/ Jenny Morris⁴

An altogether different mood had been suggested by a brief entry in the Kelmscott Manor Visitors' Book a little earlier the same year, during what was to be William's last visit to the Manor. Jenny had been urged to write her name. She did so, but added: 'under protest. I am not a visitor at home.'⁵

Alongside some scattered examples such as these, however, a set of Jenny's letters can be found in the British Library.⁶ The letters form an exchange of correspondence with Sydney Cockerell covering a period of just over two years between summer 1897 and autumn 1899 and are the focus of discussion in this article.⁷ Jenny wrote on average twice a month between these dates. She would often follow a letter from Sydney with a reply within a day or two of its receipt. She had to wait rather longer for a response, but the delay was never much more than ten days. Times when there were several letters from him without any record of ones from her tended to coincide

with episodes of illness on her part, though she makes very little of her epilepsy in what she writes. The records show a total of forty-one letters by Jenny (including one postcard) and thirty-nine from Sydney.

Jenny's letters are informal, slipping breathlessly between topics in a clear, forward-sloping hand, often with no obvious paragraph breaks. By comparison, Sydney's, in his miniscule and neat handwriting, appear to be more carefully crafted and controlled. Both write in a light tone of the day to day, the trips they have made, the state of the weather, the changing flora and fauna during the year, and the news from and especially the health of family and friends. There is an occasional joke recorded by one or other of them and an exchange of gifts. From time to time, Sydney sends books and once or twice adds a specific suggestion of what it might interest Jenny to do. There is warmth and a simple intimacy on both sides. There is evidence of Jenny's intelligence, of learning from her father and of her own strong character. And yet it is not, and perhaps could not be, a correspondence between equals – a point to be discussed further later.

This correspondence begins less than a year after William's death, a period that found Sydney with new responsibilities as an executor of the Will and trustee of family monies, including funds set aside for the continuing care of Jenny. Much work was involved. There was the question of what was to happen to the Firm, where William had instructed trustees Jane, Sydney and friend and publisher F. S. Ellis to make decisions. There was the Kelmscott Press, where Sydney had been acting as secretary. This was to be wound up, but not before finishing a schedule of publications under Sydney's direction. There were commemorative activities. Most notably J. W. Mackail was working on the first and authorised biography, prompting searches for materials and questions about the voluminous documentation of William Morris's work.⁸ There was also to be an exhibition in New Gallery.⁹ Questions of what should and should not be included necessitated frequent correspondence with William's widow Jane as well as with others. Books had to be to be sold or dispersed appropriately, and decisions taken on many other matters concerning the family. Settling financial arrangements for Jenny and for the income that would support Jane and May were only part of this work. As the recent publication of Jane's correspondence reveals, she turned to Sydney for advice and for practical help on a very regular basis.¹⁰ Furthermore, with no other regular source of income of his own, midway through the two-year period of the correspondence an arrangement was made that Sydney should work as assistant to Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, and there is some reflection of his new responsibilities in his letters to Jenny. In this context, the amount of attention Sydney chose to give to Jenny in this period is quite remarkable.

Decisions about Jenny and her care now fell largely to her mother. Jane had fled

to Egypt for the winter after William's death, leaving Jenny in London, in the care of Mrs. Grove, sister of longstanding family friend Cormell Price, relying on him for news of her daughter.¹¹ Back at Kelmscott, a new period commenced. July 1897 found mother and daughter, along with a nurse-companion and servants, enjoying the peace and quiet of the Manor.¹² Jane was fast coming to a decision to end the lease on Kelmscott House in London, and to spend summers at Kelmscott, winters on the south coast and perhaps to find a base in London – rooms where both she, Jenny and Jenny's nurse-companion could be accommodated. Once the decision to give up Kelmscott House was taken, there were matters to be decided of what should be left, what come to Kelmscott Manor and what be given to friends. Jobs for various workers and servants were another concern. Often unwell herself and grieving, Jane immersed herself in these practical matters, relying on Sydney to advise and take necessary action in London. Alongside this were questions of who should have copies of which Kelmscott Press books, and how Morris's literary works should be assembled and compiled.¹³ It would be surprising if Jane kept these issues completely from Jenny, but just how much Jane chose to draw Jenny in cannot be known.

Sydney's letters to Jenny give little hint of the challenges that business matters were presenting for him. There are no appeals to her for an opinion on the issues he and Jane were facing. What then does Jenny's own correspondence with Sydney reveal of the woman herself? At this point she was aged thirty-five. Sydney was six years her junior. In the first place, Jenny was by no means unaware of others or lacking in insight. She was certainly aware how busy Sydney was and keen not to be a burden. Early in this letter series she wrote: 'You understand of course that I don't write for letters from you when you are so busy just now, but to give myself something of the pleasure of gossiping...' (11 August 1897). The next month found her urging him again not to worry about feeling that he must always acknowledge her letters (23 September 1897). A few months on, one of his letters gave a hint that he was struggling to keep his paperwork in proportion given his suggestion that he might henceforth write to Jenny every other Sunday. She was quick to read between the lines and to chide him in reply: 'please don't tie yourself down to write on any particular day' (14 March 1898).

Jenny's self-acknowledged 'gossiping' gave glimpses of daily life at Kelmscott Manor during this period – encouraging the village children to pick blackberries in order to make jam, taking walks, noticing changes in the garden, entertaining the well-known illustrator, E. H. New, who was making pictures of the Manor for inclusion in the upcoming Morris biography, and other visitors as time went on. Her commitment to the Manor and love of it shines through these stories. But the memory of William was never far from the minds of both Jenny and her mother, and, by

October 1897, knowing that the anniversary of William's death would be on her mind, Sydney wrote urging her to remember William's achievements and to think of the gain not the loss of his life. Her reply was a poignant one, acknowledging her own distress but concerned too about her mother: '[b]elieve me I *do* keep the memory of his doings by me & think of the gain but what saddens me is that though I have my mother she has only me, who can be so little to her, though I try all I can to help her' (4 October 1897).¹⁴

Concern about her mother's health, that of her sister May, and that of others is a thread that runs through a great many of Jenny's letters. She clearly wants to help in any way she can. She speaks of reading to her mother (21 November 1897); it cuts down on her own reading and her walks as well as letter writing, but she gives this reading aloud priority and considers that she does it well. She sympathises with May's suffering from rheumatism (22 December 1897) and is very aware of the amount of work her sister takes on, hoping, for example, during the summer of 1898, that May would come to Kelmscott for a real rest (7 June 1898).¹⁵ More testimony of Jenny's concern for others emerges in this period from Sara Anderson, assistant to Burne-Jones, who had been drafted in to help pack possessions as the London home in Hammersmith was being closed down. The two women had quickly made friends and although no Jenny letters appear to have survived, there are two from Sara to her. These reveal that Jenny had confided in Sara about her feelings of sadness and loss remembering her father at every turn at Kelmscott Manor, and that she was missing Sydney her 'brother-friend' too. With Jenny back at the Manor, Sara sent her the news: 'I packed up your books which I hope were all right', she said. She went on: 'I miss my Jenny running about and attending to the comfort of everybody'.¹⁶

But there is more to Jenny than her concern for others. While she is already known to have been an avid reader, Sara's letters offer testimony to Jenny's store of knowledge and the range of her interests at this time. Jenny had recommended at least one book to her new friend, who recognised Jenny's much wider knowledge and spoke of the friendship helping to mend her own education. Interestingly too, in a postcard of 19 July 1897 that starts her series of letters to Sydney, Jenny had bemoaned a lack of reading matter at Rottingdean, country home of the Burne-Jones family, where she was then staying. All she had found to read there was what she considered a rather poor Welsh grammar.

There are references to a number of books in the correspondence with Sydney. He was sending her copies of her father's works as they were published by the Kelmscott Press and giving or lending other books too. She enjoyed Samuel Smiles's biography of the naturalist Thomas Edward, picking up, as perhaps Sydney had intended, on its lessons of perseverance in face of adversity (8 January 1898).¹⁷ There

is mention of a book by Robert Ball on astronomy, a Christmas present from her nurse-companion Vera Roberts and of a zoological volume lent by Sydney.¹⁸ She had clearly been challenged by the technical details of the astronomy book observing the following month that it went ‘as far in that science as I am likely to be carried’ (4 February 1898). Her recall at times is impressive. Sydney, for example, had written of a visit to Botley in Hampshire; Jenny’s reply linked it to her own reading long ago of the life of William Cobbett (31 August 1898). She also mentions Chappell’s carols, suggesting music as another area of interest.¹⁹ She had made use, too, of her copy of Gerard – a reference book much used by her father, for identifying flowers while out walking.²⁰ She bemoaned that she did not have it with her during the winter stay with her mother at Lyme Regis (4 February 1898). Sydney’s response was to recommend buying the book *Flowers of the Field*, and perhaps drying plants, making a collection and comparing Lyme Regis with Kelmescott. Although the comparison was not immediately possible given an imminent return to Kelmescott, Jenny quickly bought the book and made a start on reading it (26 February 1898).

All this is to suggest that Jenny, who had shown much academic promise during her teenage years, was still pursuing a wide range of intellectual interests during her thirties when well enough to do so. Both parents left her with a legacy of knowledge and skills. It is known, for example, that she worked with her mother on embroideries, including pieces of exhibition quality.²¹ There is evidence in these letters of her high standards. At one point, for example, she sent Sydney a piece of embroidery, with a later, rather caustic comment about the quality of work of others:

We were very pleased to hear that that you liked the piece of embroidery, though I wish that ’twas I who had done the grounding, for believe me, it would have been better done, & it was given in a hurry some years ago to someone else to do, & the whole thing would have looked better.

(31 August 1898)²²

At other points, Jenny comments on matters of printing. In December 1897, for example, she refers to a long talk with printer Emery Walker on his visit to her and her mother at Lyme Regis. They had discussed the Kelmescott Press, and she had expressed her pleasure concerning use of German woodcuts.²³ Later, she regrets the absence of a colophon for a new printed book (25 May 1898) and elsewhere tells of her surprise at how well the Golden Type looks (7 June 1898). Current affairs are rarely mentioned in either Sydney’s letters or hers. She makes a point, however, on 4 November 1897, of noting when the daily papers come at Lyme (not until lunchtime) and a line penned in 1899 about the impending intervention in what would be called

the Boer War suggests that she had awareness of the history of contemporary conflicts, something that might cause a reader to hark back to legacies of her father's thinking on foreign affairs: 'I shall be very glad if folk make sure that war is not going to happen with South Africa for it will be long before England can wipe out old scores on that continent' (27 September 1899). Sydney's letters to Jenny, and indeed the letters of others to her, sometimes have the air of being written, if not to a child, then to someone not fully adult. Yet the content of this correspondence suggest an adult intelligence, a lively interest in affairs around her and a person aware of the needs of others and anxious to play a part. Contemporary understandings of epilepsy were no doubt a factor here, a point discussed more fully towards the end of this paper.

Jane was aware of Jenny's need for stimulation and time, for example, in London where there were old friends to see and things to do. With winters at Lyme Regis, visits to Rottingdean and London, there certainly was travel in this period. Jenny loved nothing more, however, than to be out walking in the countryside. Jane had penned a particularly memorable phrase back in 1891 about Jenny and her father 'like two great babes' walking in the Surrey hills.²⁴ Physically rather stronger than those around her, Jenny's letters at this time offer plenty of evidence of walks enjoyed with her mother and with her nurse-companion. Writing from Rottingdean, where at one point she was staying with the Burne-Jones family, she comments of her nurse-companion: 'Vera Roberts finds the hills more tiring than I do' (11 October 1898).²⁵

Although Kelmscott was her special love, wherever she went Jenny was keen to explore, understand and try to describe the area. Geography, geology, botany and architecture were all within her purview. She was acutely aware of William's skills in this respect. 'In half a dozen words,' she said in a letter of 4 October 1897, 'Father would make one see a place exactly'. But her own observational skills had been honed and developed by her father and by the frequent questioning of him that can be inferred from his responses to her. Lyme Regis was a new experience for Jenny in 1897. Having given Sydney a detailed account of a route she had taken walking out of the town, she continued, very much in Morris-like tones:

[...] seeing a church at Up Lyme Vera Roberts & I went to have a look at it (it was as well we couldn't get in). The tower was just look-at-able, the W door had a beautiful archway of the end of the 14th cent: but the rest of the church was abominably restored & they were still at work destroying the porch. There is no architecture anywhere here about – partly, I suppose because of the want of fine stone [found] in Oxon and Gloucestershire, for the Blue Lias spoils the look of everything.²⁶

(10 November 1897)

A week and more later, there was another memorable walk and another telling commentary:

the 18th was lovely & Vera & I walked uphill out of the town E. towards Charmouth, a little village 2 miles off. The views were one of the most beautiful around here, for the Dorset side of Lyme is finer decidedly than the S. Devon country-side. As we were looking over Charmouth all the hill country to the N. & E. was magnificent to look at, & I saw two barrows. I was sure they were such by their shape [...].

(21 November 1897)

And in the letter of December that year where she had reported discussions with Emery Walker, she also spoke of walking on The Cobb at Lyme Regis and watching the waves break. Making reference to photographs which must have been from her father's travels many years before, she invoked an image of these waves 'rising the height of an Icelandic geyser'.²⁷

Jenny's eagerness to know and understand the history of the countryside and its architecture is evidenced in a further and remarkable letter to Sydney, then holidaying with May and with family friend and publisher Emery Walker in *Les Anderlys* on the Seine in Northern France. This was not a place with which Jenny was at all familiar. But William Morris's daughter was not fazed by her ignorance, embarking on her own research as well as commenting, as so often, on the weather and underlining that she was not one simply for a stroll in fair weather:

I helped myself out by looking at a map of 1150 (I have a very good historical atlas), being on a very small scale. Château Gaillard looked very close – were you at all near it? near enough to see I mean? The country must be beautiful, as May's Pcard informed me, especially with so many of those great horse-shoe curves as the map showed me. I pity you all for the bad weather you had for to be kept indoors in an inn is terrible; one cannot read all the time; though I don't think I ever came upon a day so wet or bad as to prevent one from getting out into the open air for a little while at least. Anyhow, I think you justified in complaining of the weather if you wished, & even in daring to do so to this stern weather prophet.²⁸

There are shades of her father in Jenny's attention to place and in the recourse to an ancient map, part of the family book collection. She takes a genuine delight, it seems,

in the doings of others and in dealing so often with simple pleasures – a turn in the garden, spotting the arrival of spring flowers in the meadow, or picking fruit for jam.

Events in the village of Kelmscott were a concern for both Jenny and her mother as they had been for William. Summer 1898 saw posters advertising the sale of the inn and adjacent cottages. Jenny told Sydney: ‘it made us jump with terror, in case they do some horrible pulling down and rebuilding’ (21 July 1898). If Jenny was despondent or embittered by the restrictions of her own life, it does not emerge in these letters. There is a rare hint of annoyance in a letter sent to Sydney from London. Staying with Mrs. Grove and sister, Jenny wished she could go out when she liked, and did not have always to wait until it was convenient (4 February 1899). But her exclamation of frustration was quickly followed by an appreciation of the commitments of others: ‘naturally I can’t always expect Mrs Grove & her sister to accompany me when I wish to go & see my friends, for they have their own affairs to see after’ (4 February 1899). The biggest stated frustration in this series of letters, however, and one that emerges several times, is the impossibility of doing something Jenny had so enjoyed in her younger days, namely rowing on the river. The comment comes in one case as part of an account written clearly with Sydney’s amusement in mind. Some people she classes as ‘house-seers’ had arrived at the Manor:

I find that Mother is personally conducting them, so I am flying to Miss Stavely’s room, as I am not as well groomed as I should be for strangers. I have been called down to tea in the garden & found some pleasant friends of the Mackails, two Eton masters, one with a charming lately-married wife, & a nice lad, her brother, taking a couple of days boating down the Thames to Oxford before the holidays. Oh Sydney, how I envied them getting into their boat & making off down the river on this lovely sunny evening! For the water was in very good & weedless condition, & I would fain have taken a pair of sculls in my hands: not very like in these days.²⁹

(14 July 1899)

It was not that as a woman still fairly young, she was no longer capable of rowing, it was, as she said on another occasion, that such a course of action would have frightened her mother and given her much too much worry (6 July 1898).

A more serious emotional outburst came over the reading of a draft of Mackail’s biography of Morris: ‘Oh Sydney, what a wretched thing a biography is for those who know the subject even when well written & well illustrated as this of J Mackail will be! Forgive my writing to you just at this time, for I too feel depressed enough’ (23 September 1897). It is likely that Jenny was agreeing with the feeling that Sydney,

Jane and others were privately beginning to share that the biography was going to have limitations, in part, as Jane was later to put it in a letter to Sydney, because Mackail was ‘not an artist in feeling’.³⁰ Being reminded of her father at every turn at Kelmscott, however, it was probably unavoidable that the draft would make painful reading for Jenny.

Turning away from Jenny’s own words, the preparation of the biography also provoked a set of exchanges that reveal something of the complex stance of family members and close friends towards her and towards her epilepsy. Clearly, no biographer could do without the multitude of letters that William wrote to Jenny during his lifetime. But what was to be said about the reasons for their production and what reference was to be made concerning Jenny’s illness? With a wider public audience how was she to be treated? Would it be better to erase all mention of epilepsy from the account or at least to say as little as possible? It was William’s close friend and publisher F.S. Ellis who had suggested direct reference might upset Jenny, a view supported by Philip Webb. The text was now at a final stage. Jane, having seen the opinions of the others, wrote to Sydney on 23 February 1899:

I also strongly objected at first to the illness being mentioned at all and then after reflection, I consented, of course if I had believed for a moment that Jenny herself would mind I should have refused – now as you all think there is a chance of her being vexed I give in entirely to general opinion and have written to J.W.M. begging him to cancel the sheet if printed, and to say less about the illness generally.³¹

There is no record that anyone recommended asking Jenny about how her illness should be treated and the above excerpt does seem to suggest that the conversations were undertaken without direct reference to Jenny herself.

Many years later, as Sydney Cockerell was preparing for a collection of his own correspondence to be published, he faced a related dilemma.³² What was he to do about the letters from Jenny that he held? Both Jenny and her sister had recently died. Who might advise him now? He sent the letters to Margaret Mackail for comment. As Margaret Burne-Jones she and her brother Philip had grown up with Jenny and May, and as Margaret Mackail she had perhaps been party to the agonising over what should and should not be said about Jenny’s illness in the biography written by her husband. On reading the letters he sent she exclaimed:

oh dear, how deeply, tragically touching to those who know! & such emanations of her beloved father. I don’t want to keep them, nor to destroy

them, nor to read them again - - - because of the pain which can't do good. But I am grateful to you for letting me see them: they are lacerating in their simplicity. She was a great creature: how good that you were able to give her some happiness. I suppose they are 'over simple' for the world at large. I love her more than ever for reading them. Thank you.³³

Her letter went on immediately to consider a letter from another correspondent where Sydney had also asked for an opinion about suitability for publication. Here she argued it was right to publish and '[o]ne need have no feeling of invasion of privacy'.

These exchanges offer perhaps the strongest available clues as to the absence of letters in Jenny's voice and the absence, too, of so much else to do with Jenny – of records that would give more than the merest glimpse of the doctors consulted and remedies tried, the places she stayed, the terms of her tenancies, and the details of the engagement of nurse-companions, for example, of whom there were quite a number over the years. Two interrelated factors seem to have been at work, to do with how epilepsy was interpreted and understood in both lay and medical circles at the time and to do with the family's response and that of their friends to this.

Epilepsy is a neurological disorder in which sudden surges of electrical activity in the brain can bring uncontrolled body movements and strange, inhuman sounding vocalisations which can be quite terrifying to witness. There is no obvious warning for an observer and quick action can be needed to maintain an airway and to ensure that sources of physical injury are removed. Modern anti-epileptic drugs make seizures a rare experience and today's sufferers can, in the main, lead full lives. Historically, however, a very strong stigma surrounded epilepsy. Sufferers were regarded with fear and suspicion, assumed sometimes to be possessed by spirits and often seen as mentally defective or morally degenerate.³⁴ Such ideas were still prevalent in late nineteenth-century Britain where Victorian virtues of strong moral character and hard work all too often dismissed lunatics, alcoholics, the poor and others as lacking in self-control, a burden on society and a threat to social order. Segregation and incarceration seemed the only answers. Research had begun to be undertaken by the time of Jenny's diagnosis in 1871.³⁵ Anti-convulsant but seriously brain-dulling bromides, however, remained the main treatment on offer. Triggers for a seizure were not understood and old stigmatising ideas remained present not only in wider society but also in the medical profession.

In this context, all that a well-placed and concerned middle-class family could do was to search out medical practitioners who were starting to specialise in the field and protect the sufferer as best they could from anything that they or their doctors thought could contribute to an episode of illness. The options were to care for an epileptic

family member at home, employing one or more nurses given the constant vigilance that had to be maintained lest a seizure should occur, or to send the person away to an environment that might be more conducive to recovery.

Both options occurred for Jenny. Periods at home were followed by repeated efforts to try to provide quiet environments, kindly carers and perhaps weather conditions that might suit her better and reduce the frequency of seizures. Jane's letters, in particular, show moments of misplaced hope that a cure was around the corner. 'What a mystery such an illness is! I feel angry at not being able to penetrate it', she exclaimed in frustration at one point in an 1890 letter to Blunt.³⁶ There were times when for her own health Jane needed to be apart from Jenny and at least at one point William, too, had become ill following a particularly dramatic seizure.³⁷ Jenny was loved and cared for by the family, but, in their protection of her, there was understandably an element of protecting themselves and gaining some respite from constant vigilance. Jenny's condition was no secret from their circle of friends and close associates, Sydney Cockerell included, and they took their cue from the need to support, to keep exchanges light and to say and do nothing that might perhaps provoke an emotional outburst or an episode of illness. Jenny was by no means entirely shut away and there was recognition on Jane's part that her daughter at times needed company and stimulation. But there could be reluctance also to expose Jenny to a wider public gaze than was necessary. Much later, in 1909, for example, there was a question of receiving a man being sent to Kelmscott to collect books. This was unsatisfactory to Jane who explained that at this time 'it is too painful for Jenny to be exposed to strangers'.³⁸

The consequence of all this was that a protective cloak surrounded Jenny so that it was impossible to see her apart from her illness. Periods when she was well were welcomed but were always seen as provisional – the possibility of a return to seizures was never far from anyone's mind and coloured the ways in which others engaged with her. Conspiring to keep her away from anything that might be challenging or upsetting was both cossetting and constricting; it constructed a limited world in which she could develop her talents. The period covered by this correspondence includes time in which she was particularly well. Indeed, she wrote in mid-1898 that she had never been so well as during the last year, although 'I can't feel it matters very much these days' (31 August 1898). In practice, she was not without bouts of illness during this time and was to continue to have a variable experience with her illness over the next decade and more as, for example, her mother's letters during the early 1900s testify.

Family and friends had had high hopes of Jenny in her childhood; she had seemed

set to become one of the new breed of university women.³⁹ It was tragic indeed that her illness put an end to this, and that there were periods when she was too ill to pursue any interests or to engage effectively with others. Norman Kelvin, editor of the 151 letters William wrote to her during the twenty years between 1876 and 1896, concluded that Jenny lived a life fashioned by her father that was otherwise empty.⁴⁰ Jan Marsh, writing of Jane and her sister May, emphasises her periods of good health, seeing the sadness of someone ‘pushed back into the life of the idle, protected, disregarded middle-class girl’.⁴¹ Fiona MaCarthy echoes the point, making a direct but again passing reference to her letters during this period.⁴² What can a closer examination of these letters add to such assessments? Was a period showing wide interests, sensitivity to others, love of the countryside and more a truly exceptional moment? It is very clear that Jenny’s condition with its acute epileptic episodes caused heartache for the family during William’s lifetime. Good times and bad followed at Kelmscott when she was living with Jane. The toll on her mother of Jenny’s variable state was extreme, and Jane’s letters of the time make painful reading. During the years after Jane’s death, Jenny’s own frustrations would sometimes come to the fore. Despite some good times of engagement with May, her health caused great concern and distress to her sister, and it clearly deteriorated markedly in her later years.⁴³ It may still be possible to uncover more across a wider span of her life about what she was able to achieve. Yet if one were to follow William’s maxim, in his lecture on ‘Useless Work versus Useless Toil’ (1884), that ‘the one course which will certainly make life happy in the face of all accidents and troubles is to take a pleasurable interest in all the details of life’, then the evidence of her letters for this limited time at least, suggests that Jenny Morris was an exemplar.⁴⁴

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NOTES

1. *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, ed. by Norman Kelvin, 4 vols in 5 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984-96), III, p. 334. (Afterwards Kelvin). William wrote that Jenny bought a jug as a present for her mother in Abbeville; he added that she ‘is enjoying everything to the full, and is very good and dear’.
2. *Ibid.*, III, p. 338, n.14.
3. *Ibid.*, III, p. 349, n.14. Laon Cathedral was under heavy restoration at the time and the work that had been done incensed father as well as daughter. See Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (London: Faber, 1994), p. 626. (Afterwards MacCarthy).
4. *The Collected Letters of Jane Morris*, ed. by Frank C. Sharp and Jan Marsh (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2012), p. 266. (Afterwards Sharp and Marsh). The text of Jenny’s letter is reproduced in a footnote appended to one of Jane’s letters to Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, the original being held in the Berg Collection, New York Public Library. It is clear from her comments to Blunt that Jane too thought the new work very good, though Swinburne’s mode of declaiming it was not to her taste.

5. The entry in the Kelmscott Manor Visitors' Book shows Jenny's presence 29 April to 11 May 1896. British Library Add. MS 45412.
6. See British Library Add. MS 52739. Letters from this collection that are cited in the text are shown by date only. Two further letters for the period have been traced and reference to both of them is made in the text.
7. Sydney Carlyle Cockerell (1867-1962) was the son of a coal merchant, but his first love was the world of art. Introduced to Morris before he was aged twenty, by 1892 he had left the family business and had quickly become a trusted and indispensable assistant to Morris himself. He was at Morris's side in his mentor's last days. His immense knowledge and his lifelong love of ancient manuscripts and book collecting helped him gain the post of Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge in 1908, and he was knighted for his achievements in 1934. In her letter of 16 August 1898 to him, Jenny comments that theirs has been a friendship for six years now – correctly dating it back to 1892.
8. J. W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, 2 vols (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1899). Mackail's marriage to Margaret Burne-Jones in 1887 would have brought him into the close circle of the Burne-Jones and Morris families.
9. The New Gallery Exhibition showing works by Rossetti and by Morris was to be arranged by Burne-Jones.
10. Sharp and Marsh, pp. 287-369.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 284.
12. As Jane wrote to Theodore Watts Dunton on 29 July 1897: 'I am alone with Jenny and a nurse companion and the quiet is good for a time for both of us. We could not bear much talk.' Sharp and Marsh, p. 294.
13. Jane 'was a careful preliminary editor of Morris's literary manuscripts, with a view to a collected edition of his poetic works'. Sharp and Marsh, p. 287.
14. Sadness continued into 1898. The second summer at Kelmscott after William's death saw the death of two others from their close family circle. Edward Burne-Jones died on 16 June and Kate Faulkner passed away on 5 July. Jane wrote to Cormell Price on 18 July 1898 that Jenny was well and often tearful, 'but really she is brave and tries her best to bear up during these sad times'. Sharp and Marsh, p. 315.
15. Fritillaries grow at Kelmscott and at one point Jenny told Sydney that she sent some to May, commenting that 'the dear child was grateful' (25 May 1898).
16. Sara Anderson to Jenny Morris, July 1897 and n.d. British Library Add. MS 45346. It is likely that the term 'brother-friend' is Jenny's but it is not altogether clear from Sara's letter if this is so. The quotation comes from the second, undated, letter.
17. The book Jenny read was Samuel Smiles's, *Life of a Scotch Naturalist, Thomas Edward: Associate of the Linnaean Society* (London: Murray 1876), possibly in a later edition. Edward gained late recognition for the discovery of many specimens of crustacea in the Moray Firth, both new to the area and new to science. Ill-health, however, prevented further outdoor research, and he ended his life pursuing his initial trade of shoemaker. It is a story of immense hard work and scientific achievement in the face of poverty, and of assistance to others. It would seem that here, perhaps, Sydney was urging Jenny to do more with her life.
18. Sir Robert Stawell Ball, FRS (1840-1913), was a major figure in Victorian astronomy and a great populariser of his subject. In 1886, following the widespread success of his book *The Story of the Heavens, etc.* (London: Cassell and Co., 1885), which was to continue to run to multiple editions, he was knighted for services to science and education. In her letter of 4 February 1898, Jenny refers to a later related publication which also won broad acclaim and ran to multiple editions, *The Story of the Sun, etc.* (London: Cassell and Co., 1893).
19. Many years later, in a letter to Sydney Cockerell, dated 26 March 1906, Jane refers to Jenny 'working on her music'. Sharp and Marsh, p. 394.

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20. John Gerard's *Herball* was first published in 1597. Running to over 1500 pages, and lavishly illustrated with woodcuts, it gave stories of known flowers of the period and the 'vertues' of herbs. A 1633 edition updated and corrected the original, covering 2850 plants, and had 2700 illustrations. Sydney at one point in the correspondence mentioned that he had himself acquired a sixteenth-century version of Gerard, contemporary colouring lowering the price and bringing it within his reach.
 21. The William Morris Gallery holds the *Honeysuckle* embroidery, designed by William Morris and worked by Jane Morris and Jenny. The Gallery also holds an embroidered book bag described as designed by May Morris and embroidered by Jenny. The *Honeysuckle* embroidery was exhibited at the first Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society in 1888. See *Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society: Catalogue of the First Exhibition* (London: Chiswick Press, 1888). Other clear attributions to Jenny shown in the catalogues of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society include a William Morris portière, worked with Jane in 1888, a cushion designed by May Morris and worked by Jenny and Maude Deacon in 1893, and items in a case of embroidery, bead necklaces and jewellery by both May and Jenny in 1899, the period of this correspondence. Jenny also appears in a photo gallery of embroideresses for Morris and Co. See Linda Parry, *William Morris Textiles* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983), p. 33.
 22. A further suggestion that Jenny was carrying out some embroidery at this time comes in a rather enigmatic postscript to a letter to Sydney of 2 June 1899: 'I hope my sewing proves what I meant it to!'
 23. Jenny Morris to Sydney Cockerell, 16 December 1897. Literary and Historical Manuscripts, Bound, Cockerell3, Morgan Library, New York. Catalogue reference available online: <<http://corsair.themorgan.org/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?BBID=126296>> [accessed 28 July 2017].
 24. Sharp and Marsh, p. 218.
 25. Jenny also talks of a walk at Kelmscott with her aunt Bessie Burden, commenting that her aunt was afraid of cows and saying that she would rather walk alone (11 August 1897).
 26. Blue Lias is a geological formation of limestone and shale found, among other places, around the cliffs of Lyme Regis and Charmouth. It is famous for fossils laid down in the Jurassic era. Blue Lias was used for stone building in churches and elsewhere, and today can be found made into jewellery and ornaments. Jenny was aware of Sydney's knowledge of shells and fossils and there are other references to shells in the correspondence. As a very young man Sydney had written to Ruskin on the shell collection he was making.
 27. See note 23.
 28. Jenny Morris to Sydney Cockerell, 31 August 1897. NAL/MSL/1967/697/8. Chateau Gaillard was developed into a major fortification by Richard I between 1196 and 1198. If Jenny's map was indeed as early as 1150, she was identifying the site rather than the castle itself.
 29. Miss Stavely and, as already mentioned in this correspondence, Vera Roberts were nurse-companions in this period. While it is hard to track the precise dates of employment of Jenny's companions, Miss Stavely was still on the scene in 1904, and mentioned at this point as being ill. See Sharp and Marsh, p. 379.
 30. *Ibid.*, p. 325.
 31. *Ibid.*, p. 323.
 32. *Friends of a Lifetime: Letters to Sydney Carlyle Cockerell*, ed. by Viola Meynell (London: Jonathan Cape 1940). No letters from Jenny Morris are included in this volume.
 33. Margaret Mackail to Sydney Cockerell, 26 March 1940. NAL/MSL/1957/696-697. Three days later, Sydney wrote in his diary that he made a few small amendments before the manuscript went to the printer. This would suggest that he had already made up his mind not to include any of Jenny's letters before sending them to Margaret Mackail. See British Library Add. MS 52678. It seems very likely that this is the same set of letters as the ones under discussion here, but no directly corroborating evidence has been found.
 34. For more on the medical history of this field see M.J. Eadie and P.F. Bladin, *A Disease Once Sacred: A*

- History of the Medical Understanding of Epilepsy* (Eastleigh: John Libbey, 2001). Brian Refford is also conducting research for a book, provisionally entitled *Degenerates, Lunatics and Idiots: Social Class and Epileptology in Victorian Britain*. See also Brian Refford, 'Degenerates and Idiots: Social Class and Epileptology in Victorian Britain – Project Outline', paper presented at the History Research Forum, Lehigh University, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, 2010, available online: <www.academia.edu/1688653/Degenerates_and_Idiots_Social_Class_and_Epileptology_in_Victorian_Britain> [accessed 28 July 2017].
35. The National Hospital for the Paralysed and Epileptic was opened in Queen Square, London in 1860, giving opportunities for research and inpatient care for deserving cases introduced by subscribers to the hospital. A few years later, the Morris family moved into premises very close by, at 26 Queen's Square, and lived there from 1865-72. The Morris workshops continued there until 1881.
 36. Sharp and Marsh, p. 206.
 37. Jane described this dramatic episode in detail in a letter to Wilfrid Blunt in February of 1891, and later attributed William's subsequent illness to the shock of events. Sharp and Marsh, pp. 214, 216. Both Jenny and William were well enough that summer, however, for the trip to France mentioned at the outset of this paper.
 38. Sharp and Marsh, p. 429. Jenny had been particularly unwell at this time, however, as an earlier letter revealed. See Sharp and Marsh, p. 428.
 39. MacCarthy, p. 368; Jan Marsh, *Jane and May Morris: A Biographical Story, 1839-1938* (London: Pandora 1986), pp. 138-39. (Afterwards Marsh).
 40. Norman Kelvin, *Letters as Biography and Autobiography: Morris's Letters to Jane and Jenny Morris* (London: The William Morris Society 1999), see especially pp. 6-9.
 41. Marsh, p. 143. Marsh's biography of Jane and May Morris remains a valuable source of material about Jenny and its nuanced account of the significance of her epilepsy both for Jenny and for family members (pp. 142-44) makes passing acknowledgement of Jenny's correspondence as evidence of her continuing mental capacity.
 42. MacCarthy similarly writes of Jenny's diagnosis meaning 'relegation to the margins of society and, even in that enlightened social stratum, [being] treated as a liability, a semi-imbecile' (MacCarthy, p. 36). She makes a slightly more direct reference to the letters under discussion here, commenting that '[s]ome of her letters written in her thirties are still wonderfully lucid, shot through with the strange candour of the invalid'.
 43. For an account of May's time in managing the care of Jenny after their mother's death in 1914, and what it reveals about Jenny and about their relationship, see Rowan Bain, 'A Tale of Two Sisters: May and Jenny Morris', in *May Morris: Art & Life – New Perspectives*, ed. by Lynn Hulse (London: Friends of the William Morris Gallery, 2017), pp. 42-55.
 44. *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. May Morris, 24 vols (London: Longmans Green and Company, 1910-1915), XXIII, p. 108.