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# In Defence of Halliday Sparling

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The recent exhibition of the work of May Morris at the William Morris Gallery in Walthamstow, October 2017 to January 2018, has been accompanied by the publication of two important books: *May Morris: Arts and Crafts Designer* and *May Morris: Art and Life*.<sup>1</sup> In the former, Jan Marsh offers a short biographical account of May's life, in which Henry Halliday Sparling (1860-1924) makes a brief appearance as having married May in 1890 after a long engagement, separated from her in 1894, and been divorced from her in 1898. A somewhat fuller account is given in the other book, where Anna Mason argues that in accounts of May's marriage to Sparling: '[t]oo often May has been presented as a victim in this encounter [with Bernard Shaw], beguiled by the charismatic Shaw and driven in despair into the arms of the impecunious and untalented Sparling'.<sup>2</sup> Mason argues that 'Sparling has received a bad press and it has been assumed that May was simply on the rebound'.<sup>3</sup> The phrase 'on the rebound' deprives May of agency in a matter for which she must surely take some of the responsibility. Mason's view of Sparling is more positive: '[w]hilst he [Sparling] did not have the literary talent or charisma of Shaw, Sparling was a committed Socialist and an effective open-air speaker'; May's letters to friends during the 1880s 'reveal genuine affection between them' and she 'designed the cover for a deluxe second edition' of his 1887 anthology *Irish Minstrelsy*.<sup>4</sup>

A similar attitude to Mason's can be felt in Alan Crawford's recent article 'Her father's daughter', in which he writes of the evening lectures at Kelmscott House in the 1880s: 'George Bernard Shaw was among the lecturers and in 1885 a flirtatious friendship sprang up between him and May. But the following year she fell in love with a young journalist, Harry Sparling'; Crawford is not afraid to use romantic language about May's attitude to Sparling.<sup>5</sup> But the relationship was not destined to flourish. As Mason explains: '[a]fter a promising start to the marriage, Shaw

reappeared on the scene with his talent for causing trouble'; 'his romantic relationship with May was rekindled', and this led to the Sparlings' separation in 1894 and divorce in 1898.<sup>6</sup> I believe that Mason's judgement about the 'bad press' is valid, as seen even in the writings of distinguished Morris scholars, and in this article I should like to question the negative view of Sparling.

Most of the available information about Sparling concerns the period from 1885 to 1895; our knowledge of Sparling's earlier and later years remains sketchy. We are not even certain of his place of birth. According to Jan Marsh, he 'came from the district of Thorp in Essex, where his father was a farmer, but little is known of his career until the 1880s when he was in London, and, like Bernard Shaw, scratching a living from literary journalism and socialist agitation'.<sup>7</sup> Florence Boos gives a quite different location: '[t]he *Labour Annual* for 1895 lists Sparling as educated at Clifden, Connemara, "by historical studies drawn towards Socialism", and an advocate of total abstinence', who became involved in the socialist movement in London in 1885.<sup>8</sup> Norman Kelvin simply remarks that he 'worked in a city office until he became a socialist'.<sup>9</sup> In their edition of *The Collected Letters of Jane Morris*, Frank Sharp and Jan Marsh state, in relation to a letter of autumn 1885, that Sparling had 'supported himself as a journalist' before meeting William Morris.<sup>10</sup> When Sparling met Morris is not known; presumably Sparling attended a socialist meeting at Kelmscott House, and as a result became an enthusiastic disciple of Morris – as he remained until the end of his life. He was soon deeply involved in socialist politics, as in July 1885 J.L. Mahon resigned as secretary of the Socialist League, and Sparling took over the role.<sup>11</sup> Marsh informs us that Sparling told a correspondent in 1887 that, after taking on that responsibility, he 'spent most days working in the Reading Room of the British Museum, after calling in at the Socialist League office, where he returned in the evening to discharge his duties as secretary'.<sup>12</sup> From here on, Boos's account is similar to Marsh's: 'Sparling was a steady worker at Socialist League propaganda from 1885 to 1891, serving as League Council member 1885-88, secretary July 1885-December 1886, and subeditor under Morris of *Commonweal*, December 1886-May 1891'.<sup>13</sup>

Marsh quotes Shaw's later description of Sparling:

a tall slim immature man with a long thin neck on champagne bottle shoulders and not athletic. He was brave, kind, sincere and intellectual in his tastes and interests. Having apparently complete confidence in himself he had a quite unselfconscious pretentiousness which led his audiences and new acquaintances to expect more from him than he was able to give.<sup>14</sup>

It is impossible to know how accurate the final judgement is. Another verdict quoted

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by Marsh described Sparling more negatively as ‘an odd insignificant fellow who hung about on the fringes of adventurous and artistic societies, hoping that some day somebody would take notice of him’. Marsh writes that when May found that Shaw, to whom she was strongly attracted, was only flirting with her and was not going to propose marriage, she turned to Sparling: ‘[f]or all his evident weakness, Sparling at least offered sincere admiration and a clear commitment to the same ideals’. She adds, tendentiously in my view: ‘[l]ike her mother, therefore, May agreed to marry a man she did not love’. She nevertheless quotes Jane as having told Blunt in late 1888 that May was ‘quite absorbed with her love affair’.<sup>15</sup>

Fiona MacCarthy offers a slightly fuller account of Sparling at this time, though not a more favourable one:

[He was] a young Socialist struggling on the fringes of literary London. When not employed in the Farringdon Road offices [of the Socialist League], much of his time was spent in the British Museum Reading Room, on unspecified research. Sparling’s mixture of literary pretensions and class bitterness reminds one of Leonard Bast, the clerk in E.M. Forster’s *Howards End* (1910). Elizabeth Pennell heard him lecturing at Hammersmith ‘like a romantic schoolgirl’. All accounts of him make him sound a little helpless. He attempted to conceal his obvious social disadvantages behind a façade of cocksureness and knowingness.<sup>16</sup>

The comparison to the Edwardian clerk Leonard Bast is not particularly relevant, and it should be observed that Elizabeth Pennell was often over-acerbic in writing about the meetings she and her husband attended at Kelmscott House. For instance, she asserts that ‘as a rule, he [Morris] lost his temper and said nasty things’; one might accept that this happened on occasion, but surely not ‘as a rule’.<sup>17</sup>

As we have seen, Sparling took over from J.L. Mahon to become Secretary of the Socialist League in July 1885, and by the autumn of that year he was also editorial assistant to Morris at *The Commonweal*.<sup>18</sup> In February 1886 we find Morris writing to ‘[m]y dear Sparling’ about ‘Black Monday’, the occasion when 8,000 unemployed Londoners demonstrated in Trafalgar Square, and were addressed by John Burns and Henry Mayers Hyndman. When the crowd marched down Pall Mall and Piccadilly, the windows of several clubs were smashed and some shops were looted. To Sparling, Morris remarks, in an unusually excited tone: ‘[w]e have got to pull at the Collar now, my buck, I can tell you. Last night I recognize as an act of desperation, but we must bring it through.’<sup>19</sup> Boos adds to this:

[Sparling] was one of the SL speakers arrested on 8 February 1886 for alleged incendiary remarks ('bread or lead') at a Hyde Park demonstration. *Commonweal* indicates that he was a frequent speaker at meetings; as sub-editor he wrote numerous if rather wooden notes on current events, and his letters and comments indicate sympathy with Morris's role in League affairs. Although Thompson describes him as 'an unreliable ally', he seems to have voted as an anti-parliamentarian.<sup>20</sup>

Soon after this occurs the most dramatic, and perhaps unfortunate, event in Sparling's life: his engagement to May Morris in January 1887, already alluded to in my opening paragraph. The engagement was to last almost four years, nearly as long as the marriage itself. Our idea of the engagement is necessarily influenced by Bernard Shaw's much later account of what he termed the Mystic Betrothal between himself and May.<sup>21</sup> According to Shaw, this relationship implied no responsibility on his part to marry May, with whom he flirted – he was, he claims, too poor to offer her the kind of life that Morris's daughter was entitled to expect.<sup>22</sup> Then, according to Shaw, May became aware that there was no possibility of marriage to him and wrote to him accepting that there would be no proposal, but stating that they could remain 'friendly comrades': '[l]et us be comrades by all means – I salute you'. But then, according to Shaw, '[s]uddenly, to my utter stupefaction, and I suspect to that of Morris also, the beautiful daughter married one of the comrades'.<sup>23</sup> Actually, the marriage did not take place until June 1890; Shaw was characteristically more concerned to tell an exciting story than to get his facts right. For Shaw, May's behaviour was a betrayal of romance, but he nevertheless recognised some positive qualities in Sparling: 'he was a convinced Socialist and regular speaker for the Cause, and his character was blameless; so there was nothing to be done but accept the situation'.<sup>24</sup> The biographer of Shaw, Michael Holroyd, gives the following account:

The Mystic Betrothal, which Shaw declared did not interfere with 'my relations with other women', had not prevented her starting a relationship with another man. And what a man! Early in April 1886, following a lecture on 'The Unemployed', Shaw wrote in his diary: 'Came back with Sparling, who told me of the love affair between him and May Morris'.<sup>25</sup>

How are we to explain Holroyd's exclamation: '[a]nd what a man!?' Boos brings in some information more favourable to Sparling:

Both William and Jane were unenthusiastic about the marriage, perhaps in

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part on prudential grounds. Scheu's letters to Sparling in the IISH [International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam] express amused sympathy with the latter over Morris's reported disapproval of the match, assuring Sparling that Morris will surely come round.<sup>26</sup>

From this it is clear that Andreas Scheu (1844-1927), a fellow member of the Socialist League, had no doubt that Sparling would make a suitable son-in-law for Morris, whatever the Morrises themselves felt at the time.

Charles Harvey and Jon Press write, of the same period: 'Sparling was an intense young man on the extreme left of the socialist movement, a profound admirer of William Morris and, though highly intelligent, not especially talented' – a distinction that I do not find easy to understand.<sup>27</sup> MacCarthy gives an account of the early relationship of May and Sparling as colleagues in the Farringdon Road offices of the Socialist League: '[i]n such surroundings love had blossomed, and by April 1887 May was reporting, "We are among the brightest and most unsubstantial of clouds"'. But, for reasons that are not clear, May found it difficult to tell her parents. MacCarthy records that '[s]he wrote to Scheu of the "extreme terror" with which she had informed "first the father and then the mother of our 'folly'! Such a chicken-hearted creature I found myself to be"'. MacCarthy follows this with the statement that Morris tried to like and help Sparling, '[b]ut his comments on "Master Harry" tend to be a little slighting' – a statement that I am inclined to dispute. 'Morris evidently felt the tall, thin, immature Sparling, with his unattractive mixture of the pretentious and the ingratiating, was no substitute for Bernard Shaw whom he accepted as on his intellectual level; the sparring partner, almost the adoptive son'. MacCarthy then comments on Jane's attitude: 'Jane's woe at the engagement was patent. Sparling was the son of an Essex farmer, socially not so far above Jane's own relations. As well as Sparling's inexperience and charmlessness Jane's objection was a basic one of class.'<sup>28</sup> This is disputable in its assumption about Jane and class, as well as in attributing such negative characteristics to Sparling.

Many of the unflattering remarks about Sparling refer to his appearance. Janis Londraville records that Lily Yeats wrote in her Scrapbook: '[May] had just become engaged against all their [her parents'] wishes to a reporter, a freak to look at, very tall, no chin, and very large spectacles', and in another Notebook that Sparling was 'the queerest looking young man, very tall, thin, stooped [...]. Her people did not like the engagement.'<sup>29</sup> The photographs we have of Sparling hardly support suggestions of his oddity, and reveal what we may now see as deplorable prejudices about the importance of good looks. Sparling may have been tall and worn spectacles, but there is nothing odd about that. There are two photographs showing him and

May with two others; both of these are included by MacCarthy in her book, and I use the descriptions of them from her text. The first: ‘May on an outing with Henry Halliday Sparling [...]. Also in the party are Gustav Steffen, the Swedish sociologist and economist [...] and his wife Anna, regular attenders of the Socialist lectures at Kelmscott House.’ The second shows ‘May, her fiancé Henry Halliday Sparling, Emery Walker and Bernard Shaw in rehearsal for a Socialist League entertainment’. I see nothing strange about Sparling’s appearance in either of these. The same is true of two larger groups in which Sparling appears, in a photograph of the Hammersmith Branch of the Socialist League in the gardens of Kelmscott House, and in a Kelmscott Press group photograph of the early 1890s. In a much later photograph, taken by George Charles Beresford in 1919, now in the National Portrait Gallery, Sparling appears as an ordinary-looking man, with spectacles and a moustache – not unusual at the time.<sup>30</sup> Should the remark recorded by James Leatham, which he quotes to show Morris’s sense of humour, be accepted as applicable to Sparling? If so, how should we respond to it? It runs: ‘I once heard him [Morris] describe a young Socialist agitator, remarkable for audacity and instability, as having “less chin and more cheek than any man in the movement”. It so happened that the subject of this quip was really deficient in the feature usually associated with determination of character.’<sup>31</sup> The person who was the object of this quip is not named.

Marsh offers this comment on the engagement of May and Sparling:

It appears that May’s parents were not delighted by her engagement. Jane in particular seems to have opposed it: partly on the grounds that the young people had insufficient income [...] but probably partly also because she knew that Sparling was not May’s first choice.<sup>32</sup>

Jane was also aware that her friend Rosalind Howard’s daughter Mary was engaged to the brilliant academic Gilbert Murray, while Margaret Burne-Jones had recently married the successful scholar J.W. Mackail: ‘in this company May’s choice of life companion looked decidedly inferior’.<sup>33</sup> When in May 1886 *The Commonweal* became a weekly, edited by Morris, he was later joined by Sparling as sub-editor. MacCarthy presents him as less gifted than his predecessor, Edward Aveling, while making a disputable judgement about Morris’s attitude to the family:

Aveling relinquished the deputy editorship, to be replaced by Sparling, the son-in-law-to-be. Morris had an almost mystic belief in the extended family; in his stories his sons-in-law are always promising. But Aveling, whatever his

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personal faults, was a professional polemicist, a skilled and confident performer of powerful intellect. Sparling was not of the same caliber [...]. *Commonweal* was now too much of a family affair.<sup>34</sup>

On 5 June 1886 occurs the first mention of Sparling in May's correspondence; she was opposed to those in the Socialist League who wanted to provoke the police to arrest them; she persuaded Sparling 'to keep out of the business tonight [...] instead of joining in the "fun"'.<sup>35</sup> A letter from Morris to Watts-Dunton in December thanks him for promising to help 'my future son-in-law Sparling' to get 'some literary work', but it is not clear whether he did so.<sup>36</sup>

The engagement continued throughout 1887. In January there is one of the few letters from Morris to Sparling himself, concerning material for *The Commonweal*; it seems hurried but shows Morris's continuing interest in the publication (some details are elucidated by Kelvin):

Dallas *no* very feeble  
Glazier's poetry (?) not up to mark  
Kitz might go in as a letter though I dont much care for the controversy.  
Yet the S.D.F. are rather hard to bear.  
Ask Kitz if he wants his name to it.  
Shore no great harm no great good, stick it in if you please  
Bax promises article for next week. I can give you a column between Bismark  
& Caucus.<sup>37</sup>

On 7 February Morris told Jenny: 'Master Harry gave a good lecture last night but the audience was but small'. The intriguing title of the lecture was 'The Evolution of Cannibalism' but, disappointingly, no account of it seems to exist. Soon after, Morris told Jenny that, as May was away, he was seeing 'not much of Master Harry', but Harry had told Morris about some possible jobs he was seeking, including 'editing 2 books of collections of some sort'.<sup>38</sup> Morris's lengthy diary entry for 12 February concludes: 'Friday I went in the evening to finish the debate begun last week [at the Chiswick Club], on the class war: the room full. Sparling made a good speech; I didn't: the meeting having got very conversational by that time.' On 23 February Morris recorded: 'Sparling went down on Monday night to Reading to try to found a branch [...] but it was a dead failure'.<sup>39</sup> On 25 February Morris told Jenny that Sparling was editing Defoe's *Captain Singleton* for 'the very minute sum of £5', remarking that he must take whatever work he could get. The book was published in the Camelot Series by Walter Scott Publishing in London as *The Life, Adventures, and Piracies of the famous*

*Captain Singleton*, and is evidence of Sparling's industry; he was clearly trying to make a literary career for himself.<sup>40</sup> At the end of March Balfour, the Secretary of State for Ireland, put forward his Irish Coercion Bill, which provoked many protests. At one of these, in Hyde Park on 11 April, Sparling was one of the speakers, along with Shaw and Eleanor Marx.<sup>41</sup>

On a personal note, we find Morris telling Jenny on 14 April 1887 that 'May has gone with Sparling to exhibit that young man to your granny'.<sup>42</sup> Emma's response was positive: 'I thought the young gentleman very young [...] he seems good natured and gentle', while noting that 'May will be the ruling spirit'.<sup>43</sup> On 14 April Morris wrote to Bruce-Glasier in Glasgow about possible delegates for the Third Annual Conference of the Socialist League, saying: 'better not me: Sparling or Webb would do. I think this is important.' This is confirmed in a letter of Morris to Bruce-Glasier on 27 May, in which Morris expresses his concern over the matter. In the League, Morris was trying to form a centre group between the parliamentarians and the anarchists, and in June, Morris told Bruce-Glasier that things had gone reasonably well at the Annual Conference, while the editor's note gives the names of members elected to Council, including that of Sparling.<sup>44</sup> In June Morris wrote a formal recommendation for Sparling to James Bryce, MP, from Kelmscott House:

My dear Bryce/ A friend of mine is a candidate for the librarianship of the National Liberal Club. His name is H.H. Sparling: he has some literary attainments, and a really good knowledge of books, and is an enthusiastic person about them. He is a man of high principle and very industrious and painstaking, and (if that be a qualification for a librarian's post) remarkably good-tempered. It may be against him that he was secretary to the Socialist League for a year and a half; it ought not to be, as the position was a difficult one, & he did very well in it. I must add that owing to his having filled the office I know a good deal of him as I used to see him every day nearly, & still see a good deal of him.<sup>45</sup>

Boos suggests that this shows that 'Morris must have felt some goodwill toward his future son-in-law'.<sup>46</sup> Unless we are to accuse Morris of gross hypocrisy, the recommendation must surely show considerable confidence in Sparling's abilities.

Shaw's biographer Michael Holroyd expresses the view that in the spring of 1887 'Pakenham Beatty revealed the truth when he told Shaw: "You envy Sparling – you wish you were the happy man"', adding that '[t]he insignificance of Sparling amounted almost to an invitation to Shaw to supplant him'. This does not strike me as a fair comment. Holroyd quotes Shaw on his 'stupefaction' about the engagement,



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and tells us that '[h]e continued seeing the Sparlings, singing, playing the piano with May sometimes past midnight, as if nothing had happened'.<sup>47</sup> Jane viewed the affair with some impatience, writing to Rosalind Howard in June 1887:

May's love affair has not progressed since you saw the lovers. They are as much in love as ever, & no nearer marriage as far as one can see. May rightly insists on employment being found by her fiancé before she marries, and I strongly uphold her.<sup>48</sup>

A few weeks later Jane wrote again to Rosalind about May:

May is away at Kelmscott Manor alone learning cooking and how to live on a few shillings a week. She is bent on marrying without waiting till her future husband gets employment. I have said and done all I can to dissuade her but she is a fool and persists.<sup>49</sup>

The situation would take some time to resolve itself.

In another direction, on 13 October the Socialist League staged Morris's only dramatic work, *The Tables Turned; or, Nupkins Awakened* in the hall in Farringdon Road. In the list of dramatis personae, in which the actors are identified, May plays Mary Pinch, 'a labourer's wife, accused of theft', and Sparling plays Jack Freeman, 'a Socialist, accused of conspiracy, sedition, and obstruction of the highway'.<sup>50</sup> MacCarthy refers to 'the leading role of Jack Freeman, the fiery Socialist', and the part would surely not have been given to a man lacking presence and self-confidence.<sup>51</sup> The fact that the 'Socialist interlude' was to be performed on some twelve occasions in the coming months must have brought May and Sparling often together.<sup>52</sup> Political affairs turned fatally more serious later during the year, with the occurrence on 13 November of the violent events of what came to be known as Bloody Sunday. Sparling wrote about it in *The Commonweal* in what Thompson calls 'a fairly inoffensive parable', but in a letter to Morris, Shaw criticised the article as likely to lead to Sparling's imprisonment, which would serve no useful purpose.<sup>53</sup>

The year 1888 saw the continuation of the engagement. May and Sparling attended French classes at Kelmscott House with Mme. Cécile Desroches, who had fled France after the failed European revolutions of 1848, and Sparling continued his political activities, often paired with May.<sup>54</sup> In February, when the Irish politician Alexander Blain was released from prison, the League celebrated with tea-drinking. Morris told Jenny: 'May & Harry both did their part in serving', before 'May & Harry & I came away about 10 and we went & had supper at the Solferino & so home to

bed'. On 23 February, Morris told Jenny that all three of them had been busy at a large meeting concerned with Irish affairs, and that 'it was a very successful meeting, & went off much better than I expected. May & Harry and I went back home with the Radfords getting home pretty late.' The Radfords, Dollie (1858-1920) and Ernest (1857-1919), were admirers of Morris active in the Socialist League. Relations between Morris, May and Sparling seem to have been harmonious, and in April, Sparling took part with others in an open debate on socialism. The Fourth Annual Conference of the Socialist League took place in May. At the conference, the anarchists consolidated their influence within the League; the parliamentarians refused to stand for office and Sparling was re-elected to the Council with Philip Webb and Morris among others. On 16 August, Morris wrote to May, remarking that he was sorry to have missed 'Shaw and his insults to the country[side] in general and Kelmscott in particular'; he tells May to '[g]ive my love to Harry', before mentioning that Harry need not worry about *The Commonwealth* because '[w]e have plenty of copy'.<sup>55</sup> Kelvin comments that it is to be presumed that Shaw had been spending time with May and Sparling at the Manor. On 1 September Jane told Watts-Dunton, writing from the Manor in a tone I cannot find enthusiastic: 'Mr. Sparling has been here all this week, I fancy he will stay next too'.<sup>56</sup> Writing to Jenny on 14 September, Morris tells her about an outing he has had 'with your mother' through several villages including Alvescott: 'we picked up Harry at the station'. In a letter to May on 26 October, Morris remarked: 'I suppose Harry has told you how beautifully I kept my temper last Monday'; the reference was no doubt to a Council meeting.<sup>57</sup>

It was in November 1888 that Emery Walker gave the lecture at the Arts and Crafts Exhibition referred to by Sparling in 1924 as 'the first certain date in the history of the Kelmscott Press'.<sup>58</sup> This has become the generally accepted view. Harvey and Press argue that Sparling may have overstated its importance but William Peterson, in his lecture 'Virtual Partner' in 2015, agrees with Sparling, commenting that although 'really there was nothing substantively new to Morris in Walker's lecture, yet it seems to have struck him with the force of an almost supernatural revelation'.<sup>59</sup> Peterson attributes this to the fact that Walker illustrated his lecture with slides shown on the magic lantern showing considerably enlarged forms.

In December, Sparling wrote a preface to a pamphlet called *Men and Machinery*, whose subtitle reads 'Suggestive facts and figures urging national control of national powers of production'.<sup>60</sup> Thompson quotes a passage from near the end of the pamphlet:

A million of starving people, with another million on the verge of starvation, represent a potential of destructive force to measure which no dynamometer

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has yet been made, but which will, if suddenly liberated, assuredly and absolutely destroy every vestige of nineteenth-century civilization so-called; will destroy it more completely than time has destroyed the traces of the society of Nineveh, of Babylon, Greece and Rome, or even Mexico.

Thompson believes that the passage indicates that ‘there were men within the Socialist movement as well as without who could not shake off the bourgeois caricature of the proletarian revolution’.<sup>61</sup> To me it suggests Sparling’s urgent commitment. For Jane, the year ended gloomily. On 28 December she told Blunt: ‘[w]e have passed the least festive Xmas time I ever remember, Jenny is still at Malvern gaining health and as May is quite absorbed in her love affair, I thought we would not have any gaieties – a few very old friends called on Xmas: Day and that was all’.<sup>62</sup> In contrast, Morris’s letter to Jenny on 30 December is positive: the annual tea-party of the branch had been a success; ‘May and Harry had spent a long time in decorating the room, and it really looked very pretty. The green boughs looked so nice against the whitewashed walls, which are very clean now.’<sup>63</sup>

The engagement continued into 1889. On 12 February Jane wrote to Blunt: ‘May is not married yet, but I suppose the dreadful ceremony will have to take place before long. I don’t mind confessing that I hate parting with her.’<sup>64</sup> In fact, the wedding was not to take place until more than a year later. Sparling continued his political activities, speaking with others at a celebration of the Paris Commune in March.<sup>65</sup> According to Thompson, the Fifth Annual Conference proved to be ‘a meek and mild affair’, and the Morris group was reduced in numbers to ‘himself, Philip Webb, Sparling (an unreliable ally), and Sam Bullock and H.B. Tarleton of the Hammersmith Branch’.<sup>66</sup> Thompson gives no explanation of his dismissive description of Sparling, who continued to be a sub-editor of *The Commonweal*, now with David Nicoll. Sparling’s interest in contemporary drama is shown in his ‘Notes on News’ in *The Commonweal* for 13 July 1889:

Two announcements which were made last week are among the cheering ‘straws’ that show which way the social ‘wind’ is blowing; Ibsen’s ‘Pillars of Society’, literally translated by Mr. Wm. Archer, is to be performed at the Gaiety Theatre on Tuesday July 16th [...], and a play by Mr. Henry Arthur Jones called ‘The Middleman’, will be put on the stage in the autumn by Mr. E.S. Willard at the Shaftesbury. It is said to be a study of contemporary life on similar lines to the same writer’s striking production ‘Wealth’, now running at the Haymarket. Not world-shaking events in themselves, but how much they mean!<sup>67</sup>

He was evidently pleased by this evidence of radical topics being tackled on the stage.

The years 1889-90 are the dates given in *May Morris: Arts and Crafts Designer* for the attractive cot quilt *The Homestead and the Forest* designed by May. According to the book, the ‘delightful quilt’ was the result of ‘[a] collaboration between mother and daughter in the months leading up to May’s wedding’, and ‘was probably intended for a child of her own. It remained in May’s possession until the end of her life.’<sup>68</sup> This suggests that relations between Jane and May were good at the time, and is also poignant in reminding us that May was never to have children. We can only speculate as to why this was the case and whether the marriage would have fared better if there had been children. Marsh suggests that it might have done so:

It is as if May, who sought a normal marital relationship of mutual affection and physical passion, resulting no doubt in the children she would have liked to mother, represented a threat to Shaw, whereas Charlotte [Payne Townsend] offered a strange but successful deliverance. The Shaws’ marriage, it may be noted, was lifelong.<sup>69</sup>

It was also childless.

In May 1890 the anarcho-communists triumphed at the Sixth Annual Conference of the League, attended by only fourteen delegates. Morris and Sparling were forced to resign from the editorship of *The Commonwealth* to be replaced by Kitz and Nicholl.<sup>70</sup> Morris’s relations with May and Sparling remained friendly; in June he wrote about a celebration at the International Working Men’s Club: ‘I have given the tickets to Sparling and May: May says it will be all right about the Hammersmith choir’.<sup>71</sup> But private affairs were about to develop dramatically – the long-awaited wedding was to take place. On 13 June 1890, Jane wrote to Blunt: ‘I heard from May that she wished to be married this week instead of next – it has all been like a bad dream, but it must end sometime like all dreams – the wedding will be tomorrow (Saturday) and then May with her husband go to Kelmscott Manor for about a fortnight, during which period I hope to gain spirits and see my friends with something like cheerfulness. Will you be in town next week? If so please come.’<sup>72</sup> Jenny attended the wedding with her father, writing later to Sydney Cockerell: ‘I have never forgotten [...] our having to wait some time in a dismal little cell, where dearest father and I were witnesses’.<sup>73</sup> The couple were presented with a set of Scott’s novels and ‘a charming bookplate designed and printed by the comrades of the Socialist Society as a wedding gift, with the message “From the Branch to its Flower”’.<sup>74</sup> Marsh concludes gloomily that ‘[t]his seems to have been the single touch of romanticism in the whole affair’.<sup>75</sup> MacCarthy gives a factual account:

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In June 1890 May and Harry Sparling had finally been married, still to Janey's lamentations, at Fulham Register Office. It was Jenny who signed the register as a witness with her father and wrote later of the lugubrious proceedings, entailing a long wait in 'a dismal little cell'. At the time of the marriage Sparling was given paid employment by Morris, as secretary of the Kelmscott Press. A photograph of the Press includes May as well as Sparling, in a family group around Morris as proprietor.<sup>76</sup>

Philip Henderson's comment includes another reference to Sparling's appearance: 'May's marriage to the tall, thin, bird-like Halliday Sparling, one of the most ardent members of the Socialist League, was not of very long duration'.<sup>77</sup>

The couple's honeymoon took place at Kelmscott Manor. On 20 June Morris wrote to May from Hammersmith about the visit he was about to pay to the Manor; on the Sunday he would fish, 'and you could stand on the bank & chaff me'. Kelvin notes that Morris does not send his greetings to May's husband.<sup>78</sup> Not long after the marriage, in early 1891 Morris was working energetically on his last major undertaking, the Kelmscott Press, and the fact that he appointed Sparling as its paid secretary is evidence of confidence in him. The Sparlings went to live at 8 Hammersmith Terrace. Soon after, they invited Bernard Shaw, who claimed to be uncomfortable and unwell at home, to come and stay with them. Shaw later wrote his account of what happened; romance reasserted itself when he was invited to stay with the couple, in what he calls a *ménage à trois*. He comments: '[i]t was probably the happiest passage in our three lives'. However, it could not last; Shaw had either to consummate the Mystic Betrothal or vanish. He came to feel embarrassed by the part he was playing: '[t]o begin with, the legal husband was a friend whose conduct towards me had always been irreproachable. To be welcomed in his house and then steal his wife was revolting to my sense of honour and socially inexcusable [...]. So I did not argue about it. I vanished.'<sup>79</sup> It is evident that Shaw did not want to take on responsibility for the situation.

In June 1891 Sparling showed the breadth of his historical interests by publishing 'The Mariners of England before the Armada' in *The English Illustrated Magazine*.<sup>80</sup> On 4 August, Morris was greatly entertained by a letter from James Joynes, as his reply showed: 'I laughed so much at your letter to my business-man, that I had not strength enough to carry out my original intention of writing to you in character'. Kelvin suggests that this may be a reference to Sparling's post at the Press, but offers no view of the reason for Morris's amusement. On 23 September, Morris told Jenny: 'I am going to give a dinner party on Friday to Ellis, Phillis and Cuthbert [children of Ellis] and Harry'.<sup>81</sup> On a personal level, Jane told Blunt in October:

May has just called and I must say looks happier than formerly; so I will hope that she is happy in her own peculiar way. I heard this morning of another curious marriage [...]. It [young people's attitude to marriage] is all a mystery I shall never seek to unravel in future.<sup>82</sup>

In December Morris stayed with Jenny in Tunbridge Wells. May and Sparling came for Christmas and Jane wrote: 'they both looked almost robust before they went away'.<sup>83</sup>

Thompson saw the Kelmscott Press, in which Morris was becoming heavily and increasingly involved, as a relaxation from his political concerns.<sup>84</sup> He quotes Sparling, who wrote in 1924 that for Morris the Press was 'a personal experiment to see what could be done at his own expense in the way of producing a decent book'.<sup>85</sup> Thompson evidently valued the account given by Sparling about his time at the Press, as, in a discussion of Morris's 'remarkable intellectual and imaginative fertility', he quotes Sparling's description of Morris at work in his study.<sup>86</sup> The photograph at the start of the book, entitled simply 'William Morris', shows Morris at work in his study, and is by Sparling, with Walker as his technical assistant.<sup>87</sup> At the Press, Morris had confidence enough in Sparling to appoint him to prepare reprints of three works by William Caxton. *The Recuyell of the Histories of Troye* by Raoul Lefevre appeared on 24 November 1892, to be followed by Caxton's translation of *The History of Reynard the Foxe* on 25 January 1893 and *The History of Godefroy of Boloyne and of the Conquest of Jerusalem* by Guilelmus, Archbishop of Tyre, on 24 May 1893. Sparling recalled: 'Caxton's translation had a two-fold attraction for him: first and foremost as interesting story-books, and secondly as examples of strong and living, though rather formless, English; modern English in the making'. In addition, Sparling seems also to have been asked to edit an edition of Lord Berners' translation of Froissart's *Chronicles*, although the book was never produced. Sparling observed that 'Froissart stood alongside Chaucer in the very front rank of his [Morris's] cherished friends, and the Kelmscott Press *Froissart*, had it been completed as planned, would have challenged comparison – primacy, it may be – as a printed book with the *Chaucer* itself'.<sup>88</sup>

Morris's letters in 1892 indicate continuing closeness to the Sparlings. On 27 July he wrote to Jenny: 'Walker couldn't come to dinner yesterday, so I dined with the Ellises; May & Harry came through the door of communication [from next door] as we sat by the river after dinner. May seemed better I thought. They ('the Sparlings') are coming to dinner tonight along with Walker.' On 15 August, Morris told Jenny: 'I lectured last night (in our place) & May & Harry were with me at supper; I thought May looking much better.' On 29 August Morris wrote lyrically to Jenny: '[d]earest darling Child/ [...] Yesterday [...] I dined with May & Harry; and after dinner we

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sat out a doors & watched the tide going up & the boats going about'. On 5 September Morris told Jenny: '[y]esterday I went to Uncle Ned's in the morning & saw Crom; I then dined with May & Harry in company with Walker and Murray. Went to the Lecture in the evening where a Yankee spoke, and gave an amusing lecture concerning his native country to which he was nowise complimentary.'<sup>89</sup> From these letters and Shaw's *Diaries* we get the impression of a very lively and sociable group associated with Hammersmith, including Morris, the Sparlings, Emery Walker, Philip Webb and others, as well as Shaw, working harmoniously for the socialist cause. But the developing closeness between Shaw and May undermined this harmony in 1892.

In his comments on the events included in the third volume of *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, dealing with the relevant period, Kelvin remarks that, strikingly, they contain no references at all to the engagement or the marriage: he concludes that 'the probability is Morris committed to paper few or no words concerning May's relations with Sparling and Shaw'. He feels that Morris would have found it difficult to 'openly sympathise with Sparling, a somewhat hapless, devoted follower of himself, who had not been regarded with enthusiasm as a prospective son-in-law by either of May's parents'.<sup>90</sup> 'Hapless' – once again Sparling attracts a dismissive adjective. In his Introduction to the final volume of the *Collected Letters*, covering the years 1893-96, Kelvin finds the total absence of letters to May and of any material relating to her separation from Sparling even more difficult to account for. As a result, he thinks it 'impossible to conjecture what Morris's feelings were about the breakup [...]. One cannot even know his thoughts about the role of his friend Bernard Shaw – for friend Shaw had become.'<sup>91</sup> Kelvin makes no direct reference to Sparling, who seems to have received no letters from Morris at the time.

At the end of 1892 a party went down to Kelmscott Manor for Christmas. In December Jane wrote to Blunt rather amusingly about the arrangements for this:

Jenny writes me herself that she feels well and is extremely happy at spending a Xmas at Kelmscott Manor, she has never been there in mid-winter before, so the novelty may have something to do with the great pleasure, several friends are gone down to make a jovial party. I hope I shall not hear of any deaths from cold, as no preparations were made for a winter stay.<sup>92</sup>

Shaw recorded the visit in some detail, noting that '[t]he party at Kelmscott consisted of the Sparlings, myself, Morris, Jennie and Mary De Morgan'. On 22 December he recorded that 'Sparling and I went for a walk before dinner', while the routine was that 'Sparling and I work all day in the green room' and that after supper at half past seven 'we all go up to the tapestry room and play at "20 Questions"'. On 24

December: '[f]rost harder than before [...]. Took a walk with Sparling before dinner.'<sup>93</sup> Three days later Morris wrote to Joynes mentioning Shaw's pride in having kept his bedroom window open despite the cold.<sup>94</sup> May's much later account of the Christmas gathering, in 1936, makes no reference at all to her husband: '[f]ather and myself were spending Christmas with Shaw and one or two other friends. It was perfect winter weather, with the snow-laden trees glittering against a blue sky.'<sup>95</sup>

According to Holroyd, when Shaw's rooms in Fitzroy Square were being redecorated in late 1892, Shaw found the atmosphere there repulsive and moved in with the Sparlings, staying until January 1893. Holroyd notes perceptively that 'Shaw left [Hammersmith Terrace] less convincingly than Sparling. For, having gone, he often returned to Hammersmith, trying out his work, admiring her embroidery, reading poetry and playing all the evening with May.'<sup>96</sup> But in May 1893 Sparling put an end to the situation by leaving. Hesketh Pearson tells us:

Sparling [...] thought Shaw had betrayed him. He told Holbrook Jackson (from whom I had it) that after completely captivating his wife Shaw had suddenly disappeared, leaving behind him a desolated female who might have been an iceberg as far as her future relations with her husband went.<sup>97</sup>

Jane was distressed by the separation, as she told Blunt soon after it had taken place: 'I have been in a heart-broken condition. May's married life has come to an end, and although we always expected some catastrophe or other in that direction, the blow is no less heavy now it has come.' Jane wrote again two days later, giving the facts of the situation without judgement:

May's position is this, she has been seeing a good deal of a former lover, and made her husband's life a burden to him, he refuses to bear it any longer – she is still abroad, but when she comes back they will go different ways.<sup>98</sup>

Morris seems to have made no comment on the matter, and, as we have seen, remained on friendly terms with Shaw.

In June the bookseller Bernard Quaritch seems to have thought that Sparling had left the Kelmscott Press, and Morris wrote to correct him: '[y]ou are mistaken in supposing that there is any change in Mr. Sparling's position in regard to the Kelmscott Press'.<sup>99</sup> Kelvin can offer no explanation for Quaritch's assumption; Sparling was to stay at the Press for a further year. In August May and Shaw attended the International Socialist Workers' Conference in Zurich. According to Marsh, 'Sparling apparently believed that Shaw and May had slept together'.<sup>100</sup> There are



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numerous references to both Sparling and May in Shaw's *Diaries* during the 1890s, but they are uniformly brief and factual. The last referring to Sparling is for 12 January 1894: '*Fabian Semi-Public Meeting H.H. Sparling on "The Persistence of Classes under Collectivism"*'.<sup>101</sup> Shaw offers no opinion of the lecture, which seems not to have been published.

On the breakup of the marriage, Marsh's view is that 'one can only feel sympathy for May who, realising all too late that she had made a mistake in marrying Sparling, hoped to return to Shaw, her real and only love'.<sup>102</sup> Is there no room for sympathy with the rejected husband? Pearson quotes Shaw's view, which is actually more generous:

Of the particulars of the rupture I know nothing; but in the upshot he [Sparling] fled to the Continent, and eventually submitted chivalrously to being divorced as the guilty party, though the alternative was technically arranged for him. If I recollect aright, he married again, this time I hope more suitably, and lived as happily as he might until his death, which came sooner than an actuary would have predicted [...]. The beautiful one abolished him root and branch, resuming her famous maiden name, and, for all I could prove, abolished me too.<sup>103</sup>

Thus in June Sparling went to live in Paris, while May stayed at 8 Hammersmith Terrace. Sparling clearly could not remain at the Kelmscott Press, and so Morris had to replace him; he was fortunate in being able to appoint Sydney Cockerell to do so in July.

Later in life, May made no mention of her short-lived marriage, and erased her signature as May Sparling from the Kelmscott Manor visitors' book for 1892, 1893 and 1895, afterwards signing as May Morris.<sup>104</sup> Interestingly and rather surprisingly, Morris's diary for 18 August 1895 records: 'H[arry] and M[ay] & Steele to dinner and Balcarres showed him the books'.<sup>105</sup> Morris was considering buying a twelfth-century book and took the advice of the bibliophile Earl of Balcarres on the matter. Why Sparling and May should have been among the guests I am not sure; it would suggest that their separation was not acrimonious, of which there is some other evidence. A little later a photograph of the staff and friends of the Kelmscott Press, taken on 13 September 1895, includes Sparling, who was no longer working at the Press but was evidently still appreciated. In 1896 he returned from France to attend Morris's funeral, staying with the family at Kelmscott Manor. Marsh explains:

Harry Sparling returned to England for Morris's last days and funeral – a mark of his respect – and stayed for over a month, spent mostly at

Hammersmith Terrace. This suggests no reconciliation – May doubtless moved back to Kelmscott House to support and assist her mother – although it is evident that there was no ferocious animosity as a result of the separation; indeed, it appears that Sparling was staying at Kelmscott Manor in the period immediately before Morris’s death, and perhaps helped with the funeral arrangements. At the end of October he left the country, returning to Paris.<sup>106</sup>

Ironically, it is at the time of this generous piece of behaviour by Sparling that we encounter the blackest mark on his record: he was believed to have taken some unbound copies of the Kelmscott Press *Chaucer* and *Sigurd the Volsung* to Paris, and ‘he was later accused of stealing and selling’ them. The trustees did not resort to prosecution, and so perhaps the dishonesty was on a small scale. According to Marsh, ‘[h]e denied the charge rather unconvincingly, and the matter was not pursued. “I agree with you that whatever Sparling had has been turned into cash long since”, wrote F.S. Ellis to Cockerell the following year’. Meanwhile, a Trust had been established for the Morris estate; in Marsh’s view, ‘it protected Jenny [...] and protected May from any claim on her money by her husband’ – although there is no evidence that he wished to pursue any such claim. Marsh quotes Cockerell’s critical view of May as having ‘a dissatisfied attitude on life which interfered greatly with her happiness’, claiming that Sparling represented ‘a tiresome husband and a comfortable grievance’, which helped to justify her dissatisfaction. Marsh attributes this reflection to Cockerell’s ‘extremely buttoned-up personality’, asserting that May had ‘genuine difficulties and disappointments’.<sup>107</sup>

On returning from her visit with her mother to Blunt on his Egyptian estate in early 1897, May began divorce proceedings. Marsh notes: ‘[i]t was arranged with Sparling that she should present as the “deserted” wife, since to be the “guilty” party in a divorce action at the time was social death for a woman, even in progressive circles’.<sup>108</sup> In February 1898 the divorce took place. Sparling continued to be politically active. According to Boos, ‘[a]s late as April 1892 Sparling was listed in *Freedom* as lecturing for the Hammersmith Socialist Society, but he became a Fabian in the same year, and as Fabian delegate to a socialist Unemployed Organisation Committee argued against “irresponsible” relief to the unemployed’. The 1895 *Labour Annual* described him as ‘now chiefly occupied with historical development of the Socialist movement’, and in the 1897 *Labour Annual* he was still listed in the directory of ‘Social Reform Lecturers’. In 1912 he published a lecture to the Organisation Society on ‘Needs and Ideals’, and in 1914 contributed an essay to the thirtieth-year commemorative issue of *Justice*, in which he advocated more study of applications of science at SDF branch meetings.<sup>109</sup> Accounts of his last years are no clearer than

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those of his early life. H.W. Lee in *Social Democracy in Britain* (1935) states that Sparling ‘died in Pasadena, California, a few years ago’, while Kelvin writes: ‘[i]n the late nineties, he [Sparling] returned to office work, this time in a Paris financial house. On retiring, he went to California, then returned to France shortly before his death.’<sup>110</sup> Hesketh Pearson assures us that ‘Sparling’s second marriage, to a Scotswoman, was an extremely happy one’, though Sparling ‘never forgave Shaw for making it possible’.<sup>111</sup> The marriage certificate shows Elsie Agnes Stuart to have been born in Camberwell in 1877 and to have married Sparling in Brixton in February 1905; Sparling’s profession is given as journalist.<sup>112</sup>

Wherever he was at the end of his life, Sparling was able to write his book *The Kelmscott Press and William Morris Master-Craftsman*, his major contribution to Morris studies; it was published in 1924, the year of his death. The University of Reading have kindly made available to me the letters that Sparling wrote to Macmillan’s from two addresses in London between 15 February and 5 April 1924, and a final letter from France dated 2 August.<sup>113</sup> The London letters mostly concern the relationship with the Trustees and the financial side of the arrangement between Sparling and Macmillan’s; after some delay, they agreed on 2 April on a half-profit arrangement. The letter of 2 April expresses Sparling’s optimistic belief that the book will sell well, is likely to ‘overgo the 1400 of the first impression’ in England, and to do even better in the United States. On 11 March Sparling enclosed a revised version of the text, and insisted on the originality of his work:

I trust you will find that it is not merely improved but that it is less open than before to the charge that [it] is ‘founded upon’ the writings of Mr Cockerell or anyone else./ Even as it previously stood, it was wholly founded upon my own recollections of the Press and of William Morris as my friend and Master. What I took from Mr Cockerell were precise dates and definite figures for which memory was not an assured guide.

Sparling then tells how his experience at the Press until 1894 as ‘secretary, proof-reader, editor and general “handyman”’ gave him the knowledge on which the book is based. The last letter, from Angouleme (Charente) in France on 2 August, sadly reveals his failing health, but is enthusiastic about the illustrations:

Mr Emery Walker has been kind enough to send me duplicates of the illustrations submitted by him to you. With these I am sincerely delighted, and think that the photogravure of William Morris at his work table, the facsimiles of manuscripts written by him, as well as the exceedingly well-executed

reproductions of his designs, will very greatly increase the immediate demand for and the permanent sale of my book.

Instead of concluding with Sparling's dignified signature, this letter is uniquely signed in a less impressive hand with the added initials EAS.

*The Kelmscott Press and William Morris Master-Craftsman* was published by Macmillans in 1924, and reissued by William Dawson and Sons in 1975. In an epilogue to the first edition, the medievalist and friend of Sparling, Robert Steele (1860-1944), tells us that Sparling died 'suddenly and painlessly' while 'putting the last touches to the work', which was then seen through the press by Steele. The book is a credit to both men. Steele asserts that Sparling had long wanted to produce a work expressing his admiring memories of Morris, and that 'it was a crowning pleasure to him that he should at last have been able to give them to the public in a form not unworthy of their subject'. This suggests that the book had been written recently, which is confirmed by the opening words of Chapter VI, 'The Master-Printer': '[n]ow that nearly thirty years have gone by since the Kelmscott Press ended its work and passed into history'. This may well come as a surprise to readers who would, I think, assume from the way that it is written that the writing had taken place soon after the Press closed, perhaps based on notes taken while Sparling had been working at the Press. However, Steele asserts that 'the records of conversations with William Morris are not [...] founded on notes taken at the time', although he goes on to assert their authenticity: the book is 'accurate and complete, and the spirit and honesty with which it is written is some measure of the effect produced on everyone who came into contact with William Morris'.<sup>114</sup> It is certainly remarkable that Sparling fails to tell the reader that he left the Press in 1895; the impression given is that he was working there throughout the time covered. We can only assume that Cockerell kept him well supplied with information after he had taken over from Sparling at the Press.

In the Epilogue, Steele declares himself pleased that Sparling had been able to arrange with the Trustees to include the four items that make up its Appendix, 'A Note on his Aims in Founding the Kelmscott Press. By William Morris', 'A Short Description of the Kelmscott Press. By S.C. Cockerell', 'An Annotated List of the Books printed at the press. By S.C. Cockerell', and 'Various Lists, Leaflets and Announcements printed at the Kelmscott Press'. These certainly add to the value of the book. Sparling's Preface tells us not only of the work that he accomplished while working at the Press, but shows his diligence in having consulted, in addition to the Trustees and Sydney Cockerell, Robert Steele, C.T. Jacobi, Frank Colebrook, Messrs. Joseph Batchelor and Sons in relation to the paper used at the Press, and W.J. Turney and Co. in relation to the vellum. It is because of Sparling's conscientiousness about

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these details that the book is so often quoted by later scholars as an accurate source of information about the Press. Sparling concludes his preface by stating that he is pleased by the coincidence that he has written this preface on the ninetieth anniversary of Morris's birth at Walthamstow: 'Prosit omen!'.<sup>115</sup> It was not long after writing these words that Sparling died.

The book consists of eight chapters; it is organised chronologically, clearly written, and well illustrated in black and white. Each chapter combines factual information with lively reminiscences of the Master. In the first chapter, 'The Idea Takes Form', Sparling recalls how the idea of 'Americanized' spelling had once appealed to him, but that when he expressed his enthusiasm Morris accused him of 'damnable pedantry', 'unforgivable ignorance' and 'incurable stupidity and blindness'. But Morris also explained on one occasion that 'when a fellow damns your eyes, it only means, after all, that he disagrees with you for the moment'. In Sparling's account, also in the first chapter, Morris did not like the idea of an artist waiting for inspiration, commenting:

Waiting for inspiration, rushing things in reliance upon inspiration, and all the rest of it, are a lazy man's habits. Get the bones of the work well into your head, and the tools well into your hand, and get on with your job, and the inspiration will come to you – if you're worth a tinker's damn as an artist, that is!

The second chapter, 'Printing in 1888', is largely historical, and quotes Lethaby on the importance of 'pen-written characters'. It ends with the interesting observation that in an article in 1883 the publisher Kegan Paul had remarked how good it would be if 'some master of decorative art, like Mr William Morris, would take up printing'.<sup>116</sup>

Chapter III concerns 'Morris in 1888', in which Sparling maintains that what Morris most enjoyed was work for its own sake. Thus we hear that Thackeray Turner of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings once found Morris 'spotting' the background of a design with dots, and asked why he did not get an assistant to do that. Morris replied: '[d]o you think that I am such a fool, after having had the grind of doing the design, as to let another man have the fun of putting in the dots?'. We also learn that Morris could not stand sentimentality in any form: '[a] "twittering female", who thought she was pleasing him by professing to be "raised above the sordid cares" of her household by her absorption in music, provoked the rejoinder that "there is more art in a well-cooked and well-served dinner than in a dozen oratorios"; and an ecclesiastic who unctuously declared that he followed a saintly

example in being all things to all men, was told that what he really meant was readiness to be anything to any man'. We are amusingly told in the same chapter that Morris was well aware of the distinction between fact and fiction, and was annoyed by a letter from 'a fool of a German' asking for the historical sources for *The House of the Wolfings*: '[d]oesn't the fool realize [...] that it's a romance, a work of fiction – that it's all LIES! Hasn't the pedantic ass ever heard of creative imagination, or known an artist of any kind?'.<sup>117</sup>

Chapter V is entitled 'Preparation', and in it Sparling argues that Morris was extremely thorough in getting himself ready to print, involving himself well beforehand in detailed negotiations about fonts, paper, vellum and ink. In Chapter VI, we encounter 'The Master Printer'. Sparling quotes the pressman W.H. Hooper recalling the start of the Press:

When the type came in from the founders, he [Morris] was very anxious to help lay it in the cases; but not having served his time in the business, more often than not put the type into the wrong box. It was very amusing to hear him saying to himself: "There, bother it, in the wrong box again!" But he was perfectly good-humoured, and presently ran off and came back, bustling up the path – in my mind's eye I can see him now – without a hat, and with a bottle of wine under each arm, with which to drink the health of the Kelmscott Press.<sup>118</sup>

Sparling offers comments on the books by Caxton produced at the Press. Two – the *Golden Legend* and the *Order of Chivalry* – were edited by F.S. Ellis and 'were, as nearly as might be, textual and literal reproductions of Caxton's editions'. The three other books – the *Historyes of Troye*, *Reynard the Foxe* and *Godefrey of Boloyne* – were edited by Sparling and 'differently treated, as Morris wished them to be regarded as Kelmscott Press editions, and therefore to be amended where this was desirable. Caxton's text was to be taken as a basis, but not looked upon as archaeologically sacrosanct.'<sup>119</sup> We are told that one of the presses was taken to the New Gallery for the Arts and Crafts Exhibition in October-November 1893, at which copies of Morris's essay *Gothic Architecture* were 'printed in public, under the eyes of an interested and constantly renewed crowd, whose presence imposed a severe strain upon the pressman Collins's Celtic modesty'.<sup>120</sup> Sparling is keen to bring the scene to life.

Chapter VII, 'Books Printed', offers a thorough chronological account of the work of the Press, which of course included many of Morris's own books. In relation to *The Earthly Paradise* Sparling draws attention to a scholarly book about the poem by Dr. Julius Riegel entitled *Die Quellen von William Morris's Dichtung "The Earthly Paradise"*.

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According to Sparling, it was a book that not only pleased and amused Morris but ‘taught him a great deal about his stories that he had not known before’.<sup>121</sup> There is an entertaining reminiscence of Morris and his poem *Love is Enough*:

On one occasion [...] he electrified those present by snatching down the volume from his bookshelves, rapping upon it with a paper-knife, pointing to its title, and exclaiming: “There’s a lie for you, though ’twas I that told it! Love isn’t enough in itself; love and work - yes! Work and love, that’s the life of a man! Why, a fellow can’t even love decently unless he’s got work to do, and pulls his weight in the boat!”<sup>122</sup>

In the same chapter Sparling gives a lively if uncheckable account of the origins of *A Dream of John Ball*, which began publication in *The Commonweal* in November 1886:

A serial story, to steady the circulation of the *Commonweal*, was badly needed, and Morris asked one of his helpers to write one, suggesting Wat Tyler’s rebellion as a fitting theme. Puzzled and offended by a refusal on the ground of a lack of the epic faculty, he thundered out: “Epic faculty be hanged for a yarn! Confound it, man, you’ve *only* got to tell a *story*!” Whether his vexation acted as stimulus or no, the idea remained but a few days in the “backshop” before he turned up at the *Commonweal* office, one Wednesday morning, with a first instalment which was at once rushed into type. The rest of the story was written from week to week (1886-1887) as required [...]. In spite of, or because of, its propagandist motive [...] no other of Morris’s tales invests its dream-theme with such home-like verisimilitude. And the speech made by John Ball at the village cross is not only an outspoken proclamation of Morris’s personal creed but one of the finest pieces of English prose that have ever been written.<sup>123</sup>

I find this story plausible, and I am certainly in agreement with Sparling about the quality of John Ball’s speech.

The final chapter, ‘Achievement’, offers less in the way of entertainment or information, and more in the way of argument. In it, Sparling criticises Charles Ricketts and other ‘would-be modernists’ for thinking that in typography, the letter, having to be cast in metal, owes no allegiance to handwriting. Sparling makes high claims for the Press in its own terms, but also argues that there are things that the conscientious commercial printer can do even under present conditions: he will pay attention to the spread of two pages rather than the single page, he will do away with

headlines, which are ugly and unneeded, and he will draw his publishers' attention to the need for balance between letterpress and illustrations. Sparling is pleased that 'set after set' of the Press's books 'is finding a safe and accessible refuge in a library which is not a collector's book-museum, or the private playground of a cataloguer, but a veritable home of learning, opened hospitably to the student'. This reader would like to believe that this is often the case, as it certainly is at Kelmscott House. Sparling argues convincingly that Kelmscott Press books do not provide 'a model to be slavishly imitated' but rather 'a finger-post indicating the direction in which an advance may be made'.<sup>124</sup> The eloquent final paragraph will be quoted later in my conclusion.

The book was given a mixed review in the *Times Literary Supplement* in January 1925 by R.W. Chapman. Chapman begins with the assertion that '[a]s a picture of Morris the Printer this book makes a vivid impression'. However, he then takes a critical line: '[b]ut apart from its biographical interest, most students of typography will find this a profoundly depressing book' because it exhibits 'the pathos of dead enthusiasms'. Sparling wrote as an uncritical disciple with no opinions of his own. He merely reasserts Morris's views about printing, not seeing that 'in many things Morris was wrong – wrong as an antiquary, wrong as a practitioner'. The design of the book shows how mistaken many of Morris's practices were. These include the omission of headlines and of leading, and the provision of 'very little space between words'. Chapman finds the effect 'almost intolerably flat and monotonous' – not at all my experience. Chapman admits that Sparling's experience at the Press enabled him to write 'with great authority on its history' and that 'he spared no pains in verifying his facts, so that '[a]s a bibliographical record, his book will be of real and permanent value', which is enhanced by its inclusion of 'an elaborate appendix'.<sup>125</sup> The review thus shows an appreciation of Sparling's scholarly contribution, while its comments on the points of typographical design criticise Morris (and Sparling) from the perspective of 1924, not necessarily shared by us in 2018.

An early unfavourable comment on the book is in a letter from Emery Walker to N. L. McMinn on 13 February 1928: '[Cockerell's Note] gives the best account of his [Morris's] activities as a printer. A book by H. H. Sparling on the Kelmscott Press [...] has a reprint of the account; the book otherwise is not of much value.'<sup>126</sup> This judgement is surprising as Walker helped Sparling with the book, both in the proof-reading and the selection of the illustrations; he must have been disappointed with the result. Marsh calls *The Kelmscott Press and William Morris Master-Craftsman* 'a dullish book, of interest mainly to Morris scholars, containing a few good anecdotes about William Morris and nothing about May'.<sup>127</sup> This seems to me unreasonably negative – would we expect material about May? Gary Aho in *William Morris: A Reference Guide* gives some details about the book, stating that Sparling's contact with Morris means



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that ‘this study has significant details and important insights into WM’s achievements at the Kelmscott Press – and also some exaggerations: “as science must reckon with Darwin, so must art with Morris”’.<sup>128</sup> Rather similarly, in his *Bibliography of the Kelmscott Press*, William Peterson offers an account of the sources he has used, citing Sydney Cockerell as the chief source. He then writes:

Another history of the Press with special authority is *The Kelmscott Press and William Morris Master-Craftsman* (1924) by Halliday Sparling, who was (briefly) Morris’s son-in-law and the first Secretary of the Press. Though ampler than Cockerell’s treatment, Sparling’s book does not carry the same intellectual weight and is weakened by the author’s eagerness to demonstrate that he is ‘an eager and adoring disciple’ of Morris (as he phrases it in his preface).<sup>129</sup>

It was Sparling’s misfortune now to be contrasted with the scholarly and accurate Sydney Cockerell, as earlier he had been contrasted with the witty and vivacious Shaw. But do we have to consider Sparling’s admiration for Morris a limitation? Boos calls the book ‘an adulatory memoir’, adding that ‘the years with Morris may have been the best of his life, and if much of its commentary is derivative, Sparling’s own personal memories are lively and interesting’.<sup>130</sup> As indeed they are. The derivativeness of the ‘commentary’ presumably refers to the earlier account by Cockerell, but whatever its source this information surely strengthens the overall effect of the book.

Writing on the Kelmscott Press in Linda Parry’s 1996 book *William Morris*, published in association with the exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, John Dreyfus has similar reservations:

For help in various matters, Morris turned to his son-in-law, Henry Halliday Sparling, and gave him the title Secretary of the Kelmscott Press. Sparling was detested by his mother-in-law and not much liked by Sydney Cockerell who later took over his post and referred to Sparling as ‘a rather second-rate Socialist’. Morris and Sparling had been co-editors on *Commonweal*. Sparling edited three long Kelmscott editions published in 1892-3, but then resigned his position in July 1894 after his marriage to May Morris had collapsed./ Cockerell became a far more effective Secretary and a much closer friend to Morris. He was a deft administrator [...]. He also helped to improve the accuracy of its texts.<sup>131</sup>

On the accuracy of the texts, Peterson notes that these have been criticised, but this has been because scholars have found that they ‘fall short of the more exacting

modern editorial standards' rather than for failures of proof-reading for which Sparling might have been responsible.<sup>132</sup>

I shall conclude by quoting the final paragraph of Sparling's book:

When the world has tired of its Moloch-worship, of enthroning the machine as its god and ruler, of accepting a mechanicalized commercialism as its philosophy of life, of sacrificing the natural beauty of the earth to its greed, of wasting the accumulated riches due to the creative powers of Man in the past, and frustrating all that these powers might effect in the present, it will turn to William Morris as to its prophet and guide. In him it will find a wise teacher, whose knowledge was rooted in experience and verified by practice, a man who wrought out his ideals in every walk and relation of life, leaving an unparalleled example of high endeavour and noble achievement, and yet was at no point remote from the ordinary man. For the ordinary man, indeed, if he but seek to do good work within the limits of his own craft, understanding that through his work alone can he realize himself at his highest, and that if his work be done in fellowship, not only is his work ennobled but he himself along with it, there is no recorded life which affords the encouragement and inspiration to be found in that of William Morris.<sup>133</sup>

These are not the words of a helpless or hapless person.

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#### NOTES

1. *May Morris: Arts and Crafts Designer*, ed. by Anna Mason et al. (London: Thames and Hudson, 2017). (Afterwards Mason). *May Morris: Art & Life: New Perspectives*, ed. by Lyn Hulse (London: Friends of the William Morris Gallery, 2017). (Afterwards Hulse).
2. Hulse, p. 33.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 33. Mason may have taken the phrase 'on the rebound' from an article by Jan Marsh in which Marsh defended Jane's unsympathetic attitude to May's marriage on the grounds that 'Jane knew that May did not love her prospective husband, Harry Sparling, whom she seems to have picked up on the rebound from Bernard Shaw'. See Jan Marsh, 'The Defence of Janey', *JWMS*, 7: 3 (Autumn 1987), 18-22 (20). But it had been used already in 1966 by Stanley Weintraub as editor of *Bernard Shaw: The Diaries 1885-1897*, 2 vols (University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1986), II, p. 904: 'May's marriage, contracted only on the rebound from Shaw's declared aversion to matrimony, was now being eroded by his continuing presence'. Note for 7 February 1893. (Afterwards Weintraub).
4. Hulse, p. 34.
5. Alan Crawford, 'Her father's daughter', *Newsletter of the William Morris Gallery* (Winter 2018), p. 10.
6. Hulse, p. 35.
7. Jan Marsh, *Jane and May Morris: A Biographical Story, 1839-1938* (London: Pandora, 1986), p. 210. (Afterwards Marsh).
8. *William Morris's Socialist Diary*, ed. by Florence S. Boos, 2nd edn (Nottingham: Five Leaves Publications,

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- 2018), p. 161. (Afterwards Boos). Boos's edition of Morris's *Socialist Diary* first appeared in *History Workshop Journal* in 1982, and was published as a book by the Journeyman Press in 1985. The account of Sparling remains largely the same in the second edition except in what becomes a second paragraph, where reference is made to Scheu's 1886 letter to Sparling, to Morris's letter of recommendation for Sparling (7 June 1887) and to Jane's letter to Rosalind Howard (31 June 1887).
9. *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, ed. by Norman Kelvin, 4 vols in 5 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984-1996), II, p. 447, Note I. (Afterwards Kelvin).
  10. *The Collected Letters of Jane Morris*, ed. by Frank C. Sharp and Jan Marsh (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2012), p. 143. (Afterwards Sharp & Marsh).
  11. E.P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, rev. edn (London: Merlin Press, 1977), p. 438. (Afterwards Thompson).
  12. Marsh, p. 210.
  13. Boos, p. 161.
  14. Marsh, p. 210.
  15. *Ibid.*, pp. 210, 214.
  16. Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 525. (Afterwards MacCarthy).
  17. Elizabeth Pennell, *The Life and Letters of Joseph Pennell*, 2 vols (London: Ernest Benn, 1930), I, pp. 158-59.
  18. Sharp and Marsh, p. 143.
  19. Kelvin, II, p. 519. Morris gives a fuller account of these events to John Carruthers on 25 March. (See Kelvin, II, p. 534).
  20. Boos, p. 161. For Thompson's comment, see Thompson, p. 523. H.W. Lee gives a further account of 'Black Monday' in his *Social-Democracy in Britain* (London: The Social-Democratic Federation, 1935), pp. 110-12. (Afterwards Lee).
  21. G.B. Shaw, 'Morris as I knew him', in *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, ed. by May Morris, 2 vols (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1936), II, p. xxvii. (Afterwards AWS). Marsh's interesting reflections on Shaw's article are to be found in Marsh, p. 295.
  22. AWS, II, p. xxvii.
  23. *Ibid.*, p. xxix.
  24. *Ibid.*
  25. Michael Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw: The Search for Love, 1856-1898* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1988), p. 225. (Afterwards Holroyd).
  26. Boos, p. 161. In an email message from Florence Boos to the present author, dated 22 February 2018, Boos stated that 'Sparling's letters struck me as those of a competent and sincere, if not especially gifted, man'. This accords with my own impression of Sparling.
  27. Charles Harvey and Jon Press, *William Morris: Design and Enterprise in Victorian Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), p. 216. (Afterwards Harvey and Press).
  28. MacCarthy, p. 549.
  29. Janis Londraville, *On Poetry, Painting, and Politics: The Letters of May Morris and John Quinn* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1997), p. 194. (Afterwards Londraville).
  30. MacCarthy, no. 88, in the National Portrait Gallery; no. 101, in the Emery Walker Collection, The Wilson, Cheltenham; no. 102, in the Hammersmith and Fulham Archives; no. 109, in the National Portrait Gallery.
  31. James Leatham, *William Morris: Master of Many Crafts* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1994), p. 115.
  32. Marsh, p. 212.
  33. *Ibid.*, pp. 212-13.
  34. MacCarthy, pp. 553-54.
  35. Marsh, p. 206.

36. Kelvin, II, p. 602.
37. *Ibid.*, pp. 604-5.
38. *Ibid.*, pp. 613, 618.
39. Boos, pp. 74, 82.
40. Kelvin, II, p. 623.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 634.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 643.
43. Sharp and Marsh, p. 153. Emma Morris to Jenny, 19 April 1887. The letter is at the William Morris Gallery.
44. Kelvin, II, pp. 640, 660, 664.
45. *Ibid.*, pp. 665-66.
46. Boos, pp. 161-62.
47. Holroyd, p. 226.
48. Sharp and Marsh, p. 153.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 154.
50. William Morris, *The Tables Turned; or, Nupkins Awakened* (London: Office of 'The Commonweal', 1887), 32 pp.
51. MacCarthy p. 565.
52. See Pamela Bracken Wiens, 'The Reviews Are In: Reclaiming the Success of Morris's "Socialist Interlude"', *JWMS*, 9: 2 (Spring 1991), 16-21.
53. Thompson, p. 500.
54. Hulse, p. 34.
55. Kelvin, II, pp. 744, 748, 768, 786, 796.
56. Sharp and Marsh, p. 169.
57. Kelvin, II, pp. 820, 831.
58. Sparling, p. 8.
59. Harvey and Press, p. 216; William Peterson, *Virtual Partner* (London: The William Morris Society, 2015), pp. 4-5.
60. H. Halliday Sparling, *Men and Machinery* (printed and published by the author and sold by the Socialist League, December 1888).
61. Thompson, p. 292.
62. Sharp and Marsh, p. 174.
63. Kelvin, II, p. 847.
64. Sharp and Marsh, p. 179.
65. Kelvin, III, p. 46.
66. Thompson, p. 523.
67. H. Halliday Sparling, 'Notes on News', *Commonweal*, 5: 183 (13 July 1889), 217.
68. Mason, p. 118.
69. Marsh, p. 237.
70. Thompson, p. 566.
71. Kelvin, III, p. 163.
72. Sharp and Marsh, p. 206.
73. Quoted in Marsh, pp. 215-16.
74. The portrait bookplate by Walter Crane is reproduced in MacCarthy on p. 621.
75. Marsh, p. 216.
76. MacCarthy, p. 620.
77. Philip Henderson, *William Morris: His Life, Work and Friends* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1967), p. 298. (Afterwards Henderson).
78. Kelvin, III, p. 170.

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79. AWS, II, pp. xxx-xxxI.
  80. H. Halliday Sparling, 'The Mariners of England before the Armada', *The English Illustrated Magazine*, June 1891.
  81. Kelvin, III, pp. 333, 354.
  82. Sharp and Marsh, pp. 210-11.
  83. *Ibid.*, p. 226.
  84. Thompson, p. 583.
  85. H. Halliday Sparling, *The Kelmscott Press and William Morris Master-Craftsman* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1924), p. 77. (Afterwards Sparling, *The Kelmscott Press*).
  86. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
  87. Photograph 'William Morris', frontispiece to Sparling, *The Kelmscott Press*. On 21 November 2017 I received the following message from Clare Freestone at the National Portrait Gallery: 'Terence remembers the negatives as different from Emery Walker's and probably passed to Walker to copy for reproduction [...] so I think we can say that Sparling took the photographs, not as an assistant to Walker'.
  88. Sparling, *The Kelmscott Press*, pp. 109, 111.
  89. Kelvin, III, pp. 422, 431, 437, 440.
  90. *Ibid.*, p. xxix.
  91. *Ibid.*, IV, p. xxi.
  92. Sharp and Marsh, p. 238.
  93. Weintraub, I, pp. 883-84; II, p. 1005.
  94. Kelvin, IV, pp. 485-86.
  95. AWS, II, p. 601.
  96. Holroyd, p. 228.
  97. Hesketh Pearson, *Bernard Shaw* (London: Methuen and Co., 1961), p. 97. (Afterwards Pearson). Holbrook Jackson (1874-1948) was a prolific writer on cultural history; he published *The Eighteen Nineties* in 1913.
  98. Sharp and Marsh, pp. 252, 253.
  99. Kelvin, IV, p. 55.
  100. Marsh, p. 227.
  101. Weintraub, II, p. 1005.
  102. Marsh, p. 228.
  103. Pearson, p. 98.
  104. Henderson, pp. 298-99.
  105. Kelvin, IV, p. 304.
  106. Marsh, pp. 234-36.
  107. *Ibid.*, pp. 236, 238-40, 236.
  108. *Ibid.*, pp. 236-37.
  109. Boos, p. 162.
  110. Lee, p. 92; Kelvin, II, p. 447.
  111. Pearson, p. 98.
  112. The marriage was solemnised at the church of St. John the Evangelist, Brixton, London, on 21 February 1905.
  113. Correspondence between Sparling and Macmillan's in 1924, kindly made available to me by Tim Jerrome of the Museum of English Rural Life and Special Collections of the University of Reading. Individual letters are identified by their dates.
  114. Sparling, *The Kelmscott Press*, pp. 132, 72, 132.
  115. *Ibid.*, p. vi.
  116. *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 10, 23, 29.

117. *Ibid.*, pp. 36, 40, 50.
118. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
119. *Ibid.*, p. 84. Joseph Dunlap, *William Caxton and William Morris* (London: William Morris Society, 1964) brings out the parallels and the differences between the two great printers. He discusses the five books published by both Caxton and Morris, quoting freely from Sparling's account; he clearly feels no doubt as to its accuracy.
120. Sparling, *The Kelmscott Press*, p. 87.
121. *Ibid.*, p. 97.
122. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
123. *Ibid.*, pp. 103-4.
124. *Ibid.*, pp. 124-27, 129-30, 130.
125. *Times Literary Supplement*, 22 January 1925, issue 1201, p. 52.
126. I am grateful to William Peterson for letting me know of this judgement in an email of 17 April 2018.
127. Marsh, p. 283.
128. Gary Aho, *William Morris: A Reference Guide* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1985), p. 84.
129. William Peterson, *A Bibliography of the Kelmscott Press* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. xx.
130. Boos, p. 162.
131. John Dreyfus, 'The Kelmscott Press', in *William Morris*, ed. by Linda Parry (London: Philip Wilson Publishers in association with the Victoria and Albert Museum, 1996), p. 314.
132. Peterson, p. xxvi.
133. Sparling, p. 131.