Editorial

On 3 January 1891, William Morris sent a letter to William Bowden, a retired master printer, whom Morris invited to join him in 'the little typographical adventure I am planning'.[1] Morris had been contemplating this new venture since at least 1889, though various reports suggest that the initial spark of inspiration came after Morris had heard Emery Walker deliver his lecture 'Letterpress Printing' in November 1888.[2] Just over two years later, on 12 January 1891, Morris took a cottage at No. 16 Upper Mall, Hammersmith, to house what would go on to become the Kelmscott Press, and an Albion hand-press was installed shortly thereafter. So began an 'adventure' that occupies an important place in the history of the printed book.

As Nicholas Frankel writes in a recent discussion of the Press's long-lasting cultural significance, the fifty-three books published at the Kelmscott Press between 1891 and 1898 'represented nothing less than a total reconceptualization of the Western printed book, from the paper, ink, fonts, and woodblocks used in printing to the principles governing the arrangement of pages and the organization of workers responsible for bringing the author's vision into material existence'.[3] Even as Morris sought to revive the Gothic textures and typographical style of fifteenth-century books, his choices about *what* to print at the Kelmscott Press remind us that 'his eye was fixed firmly on his own historical moment'.[4] Morris printed fine editions of many of his own works, including *The Story of the Glittering Plain* (1891), *Poems by the Way* (1891), *News from Nowhere* (1893), *The Wood Beyond the World* (1894) and *The Earthly Paradise* (1896). He also printed new editions of works by several contemporaries, including Alfred Tennyson's *Maud: A Monodrama* (1893), Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Ballads and Narrative Poems* (1893) and Algernon Charles Swinburne's *Atalanta in Calydon: A Tragedy* (1894), in addition to selected works by an older generation of Romantic poets (Keats, Shelley and Coleridge, but not Wordsworth or Byron).

Reaching further back in time, Morris and his collaborators at the Press also published new editions of old books such as Sulxan-Saba Orbeliani's *Book of Wisdom and Lies* (1894), Girolamo Savonarola's *Epistola de Contemptu Mundi* (1894) and, most notably, a magisterial edition of *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (1896), described by Edward Burne-Jones as 'something like a cathedral to stroll through and linger, a kind of pocket Chartres in fact'.[5] Yet this was no mere antiquarianism on Morris's part because, as Frankel aptly explains, 'a "new printing" of a familiar work was effectively a new critical interpretation of it, unleashing possibilities that had previously remained latent or invisible'.[6] Even when Morris does not make this work of interpretation explicit – as he does with his Preface to the 1893 edition of Thomas More's *Utopia*, for example – the very form and exquisite materiality of the Kelmscott books constitutes a forthright statement of intent.

Morris set out his aims in founding the Press in the following terms: 'I began printing books with the hope of producing some which would have a definite claim to beauty, while at the same time they should be easy to read and should not dazzle the eye, or trouble the intellect of the reader by eccentricities of form in the letters'.[7] Elsewhere, in his 1893 lecture 'The Ideal Book', he argued that 'whatever the subject matter of a book may be, and however bare it may be of decoration, it can still be a work of art, if the type be good and attention be paid to its general arrangement'.[8] He lamented, however, that 'we of this age generally produce ugly books', which he took to be a sign of 'something like malice'.[9] One need only think of the poor print quality of the books published by the various print-on-demand micro-publishers that have sprung up in recent years to get a sense of how commercial imperatives militate against craft and beauty in printing. As with so many of Morris's multifarious activities, he clearly thought of the Kelmscott Press as a simultaneously aesthetic and political endeavour: his attempt to reinvigorate a tradition of fine printing, and to think about the book as an aesthetic object, necessarily led him into conflict with the commercial publishing techniques of late-Victorian Britain.

This project was not without its contradictions. As William S. Peterson has written, the Press's many fine books were 'intended to symbolize a protest against the ethos of Victorian industrial capitalism', but they were, at the same time, an example of 'conspicuous consumption' given 'all their opulent splendour'.[10] The American economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen voiced this critique in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), where he argued that the fine-press book, 'if it is beautiful, must also at the same time be costly', suggesting that 'the canon of taste under which the designer works is a canon formed under the surveillance of the law of conspicuous waste'.[11] The 'economic place of artistic book-making' is fixed, according to Veblen, by the 'fact that these more elegant books are, at their best, printed in limited editions', thereby lending 'pecuniary distinction to [the] consumer'.[12] The irony of this 'improbable transmutation' was not lost on Morris, as Peterson points out.[13] Indeed, Morris based his critique of the contradictory 'position of art in this epoch' on the recognition that '[i]t is helpless and crippled amidst the sea of utilitarian brutality'.[14] Elaborating on this view, he explained in 'The Socialist Ideal' (1891) that '[a] rich man may have a house full of pictures, and beautiful books, and furniture and so forth; but as soon as he steps out into the streets he is again in the midst of ugliness to which he must blunt his senses, or be miserable if he really cares about art'.[15] Mindful of the socially compromised nature of apolitical aestheticism, Morris clearly did not found the Kelmscott Press so that a small number of rich people could create aesthetic enclaves by ornamenting their houses with beautiful books; on the contrary, he hoped to stem the tide of 'utilitarian brutality' in a way that was continuous with his lifelong revolt against shoddiness.

Veblen added another criticism, however, in questioning the very utility of the Kelmscott books *as books*. For Veblen, the products of 'latter-day artistic book-making generally', and Kelmscott Press books in particular, were 'less convenient for use than the books turned out with a view to serviceability alone'.[16] Anyone who has visited a specialist library in order to sit down and actually read the Kelmscott *Chaucer* might well be able to empathise with Veblen's sentiment, but this is to risk reproducing the narrowly utilitarian calculus that Morris set out to challenge. Much of the best recent critical writing on the Kelmscott Press has tackled Veblen's criticisms head-on. Michelle Weinroth, for example, argues that the 'immersive

experience' of reading Kelmscott books involves a 'hermeneutic at once disorienting and enriching', inviting the reader 'to think and see on multiple levels', while simultaneously disclosing 'the book's material three-dimensionality'.[17] Weinroth also answers Veblen's other charge in arguing that the very 'unaffordability' of Kelmscott books is 'precisely the sign of their anomalous status within capitalism', which, in turn, allows them to 'embody the impossible actualization of [Morris's socialist] ideals under capitalism – the impossibility of realizing quality-based, non-exploitative, and universally shareable beauty under a system of plutocracy'.[18] In this sense, the Kelmscott books, which are luxuriously expensive and rare commodities, nevertheless participate in the 'dialectic of beauty and utility' that animated all of Morris's creative and political endeavours.[19]

Weinroth is one of a number of recent critics who view the Kelmscott Press as a complex continuation of Morris's decade of intense political activism during the 1880s, seeing the Press as an '*outgrowth* and *conversion* of Socialist League propaganda into a medium of *unprecedented* education'.[20] Elizabeth Carolyn Miller similarly suggests that the Kelmscott books were an extension of Morris's socialist politics, and that they formed part of a broader 'struggle against utilitarianism, which Morris saw as a by-product of capitalism, not a corollary of socialism'.[21] In this sense, the lavish, finely-made Kelmscott books are part of an 'anticapitalist counterculture' for Miller, who views them as quasi-utopian 'artifacts from the future, material and aesthetic reminders that after the revolution labor and production would no longer be the alienating, repetitive industrial enterprise that mechanized mass print so neatly symbolized'.[22] Weinroth writes in similar terms, suggesting that the Press was 'a hub of collaborative print production' offering a 'utopian model that prefigures what could be secured under propitious conditions – equality, cooperation, and universally gratifying creative praxis'.[23] One might think of the Kelmscott books, in this light, as material manifestations of the hope and fellowship that William Guest carries back with him from Nowhere to nineteenth-century London, or gifts from a post-capitalist future that has yet to be realised.

This special issue of *The Journal of William Morris Studies* celebrates the one hundred and thirtieth anniversary of the Kelmscott Press, and the one hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary of the Kelmscott *Chaucer*, with a range of contributions that consider different aspects of the Press and its multiple legacies. Lorraine Janzen-Kooistra discusses the persistence of print in a digital age, and reflects on the possibilities for digital remediation of fine-press works in the context of her editorship of the *Yellow Nineties 2.0* website, offering a timely reminder that 'books, too, were once experimental new media' (p. 8). Drawing on Lars Spuybroek's concept of sympathy, Kooistra also explores the ways in which a Gothic ontology, indebted to Ruskin, connects the ethic of medieval craft that Morris practised at the Kelmscott Press to contemporary departures in the digital humanities. William Peterson, meanwhile, persuasively reconstructs the Press's nineteenth-century contexts by examining several 'pre-Morrisian attempts to revive the dormant arts of the book' (p. 27) associated with the work of William Bulmer, Thomas Frognall Dibdin, William Pickering and Charles Whittingham. Peterson offers a fascinating account of the Press's (mostly unacknowledged) precursors, and concludes with a striking discussion of Morris's 'heavy (and pioneering) reliance on Emery Walker's photography', which, as he points out, clearly signals 'an

acknowledgment of the modern world rather than a nostalgic attempt to revisit the distant past' (p. 33). Simon Loxley picks up this thread with a full-length discussion of Walker's achievements in the field of typography and type design at the Kelmscott Press, as well as the Doves Press and the Ashendene Press. Walker was, as Loxley comments, 'a great self-educator', whose lecture, 'Letterpress Printing', delivered at the Arts and Craft Exhibition Society in 1888, 'seemingly managed to kickstart a whole movement' (p. 38).

As John Stirling discusses elsewhere in this issue, Morris could hardly have established the Kelmscott Press without the expert assistance of several friends and co-workers, pointing out that 'many of Morris's partners and associates of varying degrees remain equally neglected and lost from view unless they had forged particularly notable careers themselves' (p. 95). Focusing on one such figure, Marianne Tidcombe discusses the work of Thomas James Cobden-Sanderson, an artist and bookbinder who was another of Morris's important collaborators at the Press. Tidcombe draws widely on Cobden-Sanderson's *Journals* to offer a detailed account of his work for the Press, as well as his various agreements and disagreements with Morris: the article tells the story of 'their friendship and collaborations, while pointing out how they disagreed on the subject of printing' (p. 54).

David Mabb's recent work, *SOMEWHERE* (2017), creatively repurposes facsimile pages from the Kelmscott edition of *News from Nowhere* to produce an installation that revivifies Morris's utopian imagination by proposing (in a modernist spirit) that 'fragments and facsimiles […] can be appropriated from the past and repurposed for the future, that a new somewhere might be made possible, even if there appears nowhere but the night sky for a somewhere at present' (p. 89). Hannah Brown, meanwhile, reflects on her work as a bookbinder and offers an absorbingly meticulous account of the process of binding a copy of the Kelmscott edition of Morris's 1872 poem *Love is Enough*.

Writing about Morris's (known and relatively unknown) co-workers, John Stirling considers the collaborative nature of the Press and reflects on the 'absence of, and difficulty in constructing, history from below' (p. 103). Finally, Sarah Hardy thoughtfully explores a selection of Burne-Jones's illustrations for the Kelmscott *Chaucer*, arguing that 'Burne-Jones focused on works which express alternate realities – dreams, stories within stories, and allegorical quests – to create dynamic visual portals to other worlds' (p. 106). This issue also includes the latest instalment of David and Sheila Latham's biennial bibliography, delayed as a consequence of library closures consequent upon the ongoing pandemic.

Owen Holland
Editor

NOTES

1. *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, ed. by Norman Kelvin, 4 vols in 5 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984-96), III, p. 252. Kelvin notes that Morris's first reference to the Press in his correspondence is to be found in the letter to Frederick Startridge Ellis, dated 21 November 1889, where he writes that 'I really am thinking of turning printer myself in some small way' (*ibid.*, p. 124).

2. See, for example, May Morris's remarks in *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. by May Morris, 24 vols (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1910-15), XV, pp. xix-xxii. (Afterwards *CW*).

3. Nicholas Frankel, 'William Morris and the Kelmscott Press: Towards an Aesthetics of Environment', in *The Routledge Companion of William Morris*, ed. by Florence S. Boos (New York and London:

Routledge, 2021), pp. 501-22 (503). (Afterwards Frankel).

4. *Ibid.*, p. 501.

5. See Fiona McCarthy, *The Last Pre-Raphaelite: Edward Burne-Jones and the Victorian Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 431. See also Douglas E. Schoenherr, 'A Note on Burne-Jones's "Pocket Cathedral" and Ruskin', *JWMS*, 15: 4 (Summer 2004), 91-93.

6. Frankel, p. 516.

7. William Morris, 'A Note by William Morris on his Aims in Founding the Kelmscott Press', in *The Ideal Book: Essays and Lectures on the Arts of the Book by William Morris*, ed. by William S. Peterson (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982), p. 75.

8. Morris, 'The Ideal Book', in *ibid.*, p. 67.

9. *Ibid.*

10. William S. Peterson, *The Kelmscott Press: A History of William Morris's Typographical Adventure* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), p. 275. (Afterwards Peterson).

11. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (London: MacMillan, 1908), pp. 164-65. (Afterwards Veblen).

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 163-64.

13. Peterson, p. 275.

14. *CW*, XXIII, p. 260.

15. *Ibid.*, XXIII, p. 259.

16. Veblen, pp. 162-63.

17. Michelle Weinroth, 'Reinventing Socialist Education: William Morris's Kelmscott Press', *Socialist Studies/Études Socialistes*, 13: 1 (Spring 2018), 36-56 (48). (Afterwards Weinroth).

18. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

21. Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, *Slow Print: Literary Radicalism and Late Victorian Print Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), p. 55.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

23. Weinroth, p. 51.