

# Bound in crimson morocco

*Margaret Horton*

'I would not, I think, have become a calligrapher but for William Morris.'<sup>1</sup> Alfred Fairbank, 'scholar penman', never tired of telling how, as a young clerk in Chatham Dockyard, he used to walk to and from his home in Gillingham with his friend and colleague, F. Primmer. Twelve years older than Alfred, a 'William Morris Socialist', this interesting man (of whom we would like to know more) would hold forth at length on Morris's character, views and writings, not forgetting his manuscript and illuminating skills, for at that time the Civil Service examination included handwriting (of the copperplate derivation but, as in the 19th Century court and papal offices, required to be both fast and legible).<sup>2</sup> Later, when Primmer moved to the Admiralty in London, followed by Alfred, the two enthusiasts would visit the Victoria and Albert Museum in their lunch hour; there Alfred had his first sight of manuscripts by Morris, Graily Hewitt, and perhaps more importantly, Palatino.

In 1920 Alfred read Edward Johnston's *Writing, Illuminating and Lettering*. 'His destiny was sealed.' In his spare time he attended the Central School, where his teachers were Graily Hewitt and Lawrence Christie and he was in touch with Johnston himself, an awe-inspiring but delightfully eccentric figure: 'one did not talk but only listened'. 'In calligraphy one must show sweet reasonableness and Johnston might well have taken as his motto the advice in Ecclesiasticus, "Let reason go before every enterprise".' (Alfred was so fond of repeating this that it became a student slogan.) Morris was an acknowledged source of inspiration: 'The first person to revive the art of writing and illumination, as he revived so many other arts, on the lines established by the ancient masters. Several books are in existence exquisitely written and decorated by him.'<sup>3</sup>

Alfred often spoke with pleasure of his association in the early days with Bridges, De La Mare, Cockerell, St. John Hornby, and particularly of his 13-year collaboration with Louise Powell (producing the lovely and original '*Comus*', now in New York). It was during the exciting between-the-wars years that new friends were made and influences consolidated. Alfred remembered with affection the '*Ascham Society*': Geoffrey Tillotson, John Butts, James Wardrop, C. M. Lamb, Joseph Compton, who 'met for a meal and discussed such matters as Italic, Italic Writing Masters, and pens'. I think it was about this time, through Geoffrey Tillotson, that we first met Alfred. I remember the excitement, round 1934, over the wooden reconstruction handpress at the Department of English, University College, a fascinating experiment which delighted Alfred.

It must have been about this time that May Morris allowed Alfred to borrow for several years one of Morris's treasures, a volume 'bound in old crimson morocco in the eighteenth century' and containing four Renaissance Writing Manuals. Alfred

writes: 'The revival of the italic hand of the Italian Renaissance began when William Morris . . . was engaged in making a number of what he called "painted books".'<sup>4</sup> This was during the period 1870 to 1875. Morris bought a volume . . . made up of Ugo da Carpi's version of *La Operina*, Arrighi's *Il Modo*, G. A. Tagliente's *Opera che insegna a scrivere*, and Sigismundo Fanti's *Thesaurus*. (This had come back to May via Emery Walker and Sotheby's sale.) It now seems probable that the much-discussed slide of Arrighi at Emery Walker's famous lecture, 15 November 1888, was photographed from this manuscript with Morris's consent.<sup>5</sup>

Oscar Wilde—'He exhibited a page of the copy book of the great Vincentino that was greeted with a round of spontaneous applause'. No wonder May adds: 'Father was very much excited' at 'seeing this enlarged'.<sup>6</sup> Alfred points out that Morris studied this manuscript attentively.<sup>7</sup> This is evident from the fascinating page of trial script during his experiments with 'painted books', 'when he was 36–41 years of age, working hard at the *Horace*, now in the Bodleian Library'. He wrote 'as if talking to himself:

"Let us try, this is not right. Good but rather 'shaky. Somewhat of a puzzle to know how to set about it. In between pointed and round". He tries a fast and very sloped cursive and comments, "a good piece of work is not to be done with a very broad-nibbed pen upon vellum with only common ink".

Then he wrote a slower and more careful italic and included in his trial the name of Arrighi and of his second manual. . .'. Alfred however came to the conclusion that Morris's calligraphy was influenced more by Tagliente than Arrighi, and though he is critical of Morris's penmanship he approves, as he must, Morris's 'fresh eyes and rough vigour'.

Praises have been showered and honours given to Alfred Fairbanks's mighty 'opus'<sup>8</sup>. 'A compulsive abecedarian', as he called himself, he poured forth over the years an unending stream of calligraphy and lettering, type designs (including the important '*Bembo Italic*'), published works, articles, exemplars, letters, advice, encouragement and calligraphic wisdom. His letters, exquisitely written, simple, useful and kind, flew about like butterflies. (Coming home after a short absence he found seventy to answer.) His researches, made possible by a Leverhulme Scholarship, were wide and diligent. He delighted particularly in his discovery, at Cambridge, of 'a nest of calligraphic nightingales' around Cheke and Ascham; samples of the 'superb' San Vito in Paris. He wrote in 1965,

'Today I found yet another San Vito MS and a place I cd. get a pot of tea. No wonder a thunderstorm followed on.'; and of such instances, among many, as 'an illuminated book by Arrighi in the Royal Collection, British Museum: "in its red velvet cover with its fringe of gold threads. . ." thinking, 'Oh, it's got a beard', and exclaiming, 'Why, it's Arrighi'.

Of his books he greatly valued, for their widespread influence, his *Book of Scripts*, his *Handwriting Manual* in its succeeding editions, and, in collaboration with his friend Berthold Wolpe, the beautiful and exciting *Renaissance Handwriting*.

In 1955 Alfred retired from the Admiralty to live in Brighton and work at the College of Art as lecturer and adviser. Until 1966 his tall figure, stooping a little from years of

calligraphy, could be seen on special days moving punctually and deliberately up the hill to the Teacher Training Department, in his hand a net bag holding some precious book or manuscript to share with the class. His sayings and axioms became apocryphal: 'Handwriting is a system of movements involving touch'; 'Handwriting is a dance of the pen'; 'A model (to learn from) is the beginning of an unknown personal journey' (William Morris would have liked that); 'To write quickly and clearly calls for a reconciliation of discipline and freedom'; a favourite quotation from Ascham: 'Good writing and good learning go together.' When thanked at the end of a long morning's work (as for instance in November 1959: 'I gave your class quite a lot to think about: numerals, pagination, double letters, slope, movement, and giving letters the space they need to express themselves' . . .) he would bend his long length and give his quiet smile, saying, 'Glad to be of assistance'. Nothing was too small to be absorbed into his purposes—'set a sprat to catch a lobster', he used to say. In 1959 he wrote, 'Don't think about yr critics' (a visiting team who wanted to abolish italic teaching). 'If I had listened to mine my life wd. have been a failure. You know what you are doing.'

In 1952 the *Society for Italic Handwriting* started its 'mushroom growth'; the Sussex Branch followed, with enthusiastic meetings; at one of these on 31 May 1958, Alfred spoke on 'William Morris and After'. We heard for the first time May's 'charming domestic picture' of Morris writing: 'the fascinating vellum, the quills from goose and crow, the delicate brushes and the fragile glitter of gold leaf'. 'We saw on the screen examples of the calligraphy of Morris from the two Omar Khayyams, the *Horace* at the Bodleian, and a page of experimental writing.'<sup>9</sup> Committee meetings were held at Alfred's home, 27 Granville Road, Hove. Through the green door with its large letterbox (the first thing Alfred demanded for his new house) we would be shown first into the sitting room, a simple room of underwater colours featuring an arched alcove accentuated by wallpaper of Morris's 'Willow Boughs' pattern—then into the neat study, walls lined with specimens of calligraphy and type design, Johnston's staggeringly lovely quotation from Plato over the mantelpiece, whereon were arranged a number of tiny treasures, Egyptian and Greek figurines, Roman coins, Wedgwood and Tassie seals. Alfred loved Mozart and Vivaldi, the faces of his pansies in his small garden, the faces of his grandchildren round the Christmas tree. He used to go on an annual pilgrimage to Ditchling Beacon to find a certain bee orchid.

Morris said, 'What's the use of ugly writing being done? . . . You understand that handsome writing we like and many people will write their books out when they make them. . . . I am interested in writing, being myself a fair writer.'<sup>10</sup> Alfred spent his whole life on this: at his Memorial Service his best friend said, 'Not only was he one of the finest calligraphers of our time but there was given to him that rare chance to turn a personal activity into something far-reaching. . . . He eventually turned his scriptorium into a world-wide movement for the reform of handwriting.'

A. S. Osley adds: 'Whereas Walker, Johnston and others . . . had realised the need for handwriting reform, and had thought of the 16th Century manuals as possible guides, Fairbank solved the problem of developing a practical system for contemporary handwriting. He drew on the models of Tagliente and Lucas. Perhaps it is in this way that the old crimson volume has exercised its most profound effect.'<sup>11</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *The Journal of the William Morris Society*, Winter 1971. Note on contributors.

<sup>2</sup> See the charming account by Jack Cole in *Calligraphy and Palaeography*, Essays presented to Alfred Fairbank on his 70th Birthday, ed. by A.S. Osley, 1965.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Johnston, *Writing, Illuminating and Lettering*: note p. 204.

<sup>4</sup> A. Fairbank: *A Story of Handwriting*, 1970.

<sup>5</sup> See Ray Watkinson: 'A Cornerstone of Modern Typography', in *William Morris and Kelmscott*, 1981, and A. S. Osley: 'The Kelmscott Manor Volume of Italian Writing Books', *Antiquarian Journal*, 1984, plate LXiv (b).

<sup>6</sup> John Dreyfus, 'Emery Walker: A Victorian Champion of Chancery Italic', in *Calligraphy and Palaeography*, 1965.

<sup>7</sup> *The Journal of the William Morris Society*, Winter, 1971.

<sup>8</sup> See Ruari Maclean, *Essay in Calligraphy and Palaeography*, and A. S. Osley's affectionate and informative tribute in *Society for Italic Handwriting Journal*, Summer 1982, devoted entirely to Alfred's achievement.

<sup>9</sup> As reported by Stanley Godman, *Society for Italic Handwriting Journal* Autumn, 1958.

<sup>10</sup> *News from Nowhere*.

<sup>11</sup> A. S. Osley, *Antiquarian Journal* 1984. 'A fine piece of Fairbank's writing' is now fittingly kept at Kelmscott.