The Stillmans and the Morrices

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That Janey Morris and Marie Stillman enjoyed a warm friendship is well known. Moreover, a closeness between the various members of the Morris and Stillman families is suggested by a number of sources, not least the letters written by Janey to Wilfrid Scawen Blunt and recently published by Peter Faulkner. Evidence of further links is supplied by an article published in an American journal in the last years of the nineteenth century, and by some unpublished letters, now in a private collection, written by members of the Stillman family between the years 1884 to 1892.

The branch of the Stillman family with which we are concerned consisted of William James Stillman, his wife Marie, three daughters and a son. The two eldest daughters, Lisa and Bella, were the offspring of William's first marriage, to Laura Mack, which had lasted from 1860 until her suicide in 1869. A son from this marriage, John Ruskin or Russie, had died aged 13 in 1875. William had married Marie Spartali in 1871, and their daughter Euphrosyne or Effie was born the following year, followed by Michael (often called Mico). A second son, Jimmy, died in infancy.

In 1875, William's work as a reporter took him and his family to Florence, which was to remain their base for the next eleven years. Contact with the Morrices was maintained through Marie's frequent visits to London, and, on one occasion, in July 1881, by Janey's visit to Italy. Lisa's decision to follow in her mother's footsteps and become an artist brought her back to London to study, and in August 1881 we find the young painter amongst the party making the second boat trip from London to Kelmscott. Around the same time, she made a drawing of William Morris, as she later recalled in an interview published in an American journal. A characteristic view of Morris emerges through the somewhat laboured reportage:

Mr. William Morris ... sat for one of her first portraits. This was to be in black and white, for an American magazine, and Miss Stillman, who was then about seventeen, had procured a cheerful assent from Mr. Morris to the proposal that she should come and draw him while he worked. For some time the portrait progressed excellently; but then came an unfortunate morning when, to the despair of the young artist, all likeness seemed to vanish. Mr. Morris, who was hard at work composing, strode the room pipe in mouth, gesticulating, or sat at his desk writing and pondering. At last Miss Stillman's despair resulted in a burst of tears!

Mr Morris regarded her in astonishment and perplexity, uncertain of procedure. Then, hearing a cry of "Violets!" in the street, he rushed to the window, demanded a bunch, felt in his pocket, found he had no money, and asked Miss Stillman to lend him threepence. With this he paid for the violets and presented them to her. He quite forgot to return her the loan - that was a detail - but his remedy for feminine distress had been effectual. Miss Stillman was laughing heartily.
That Lisa remained close to the Morris circle is shown by later references in the letters and by her involvement in such projects as Walter Crane’s tableau of ‘The Art of Italy’, devised for the Institute of Painters in Water Colour in 1885. She appeared in the tableau alongside W.A.S. Benson and various members of the Crane family. Marie attended a rehearsal, and described the event in somewhat disparaging fashion in a letter to Bella and Effie, written from the Spartali family home in Clapham: “Mr. Crane’s frame is a Renaissance triptych so” – here she included a diagrammatic sketch showing figures and three arches labelled ‘Venice’, ‘Florence’, and ‘Rome’ – “with the figures inside and a few outside: there are too many people for the beautiful scenery to be seen and Lisa’s head is only above the others and very little of her dress will be seen”.

Around this time, the Morrises lent Kelmscott Manor to Marie and William, to give them a short holiday in the country with Michael. Two letters written from Kelmscott, again by Marie to Bella and Effie, then both still at school, show that the beauty of the old manor house was not lost on the Stillmans. The letters are headed only ‘Kelsmsscot Manor Sunday night’, but the description of the countryside places them around May and the announcement in one of William de Morgan’s impending marriage to Evelyn Pickering enables us to date them to the years 1884-6.

The first begins with an apology:

Dearest children, we are very sorry we shall none of us be with you for the concert but it was scarcely worth while to leave this lovely place a week earlier and it would have cost us much money too remaining in town. We are coming up on the 14th and going away a few days later but our plans are not yet properly made and I will write and tell you when we know. I hope you will get the flowers Tuesday morning and that they will be fresh and please you. Effie was right about the forget me nots. We gathered them along the river and I cut all the flowers just before post time. Are not the white moss roses sweet. How I do wish you could see this old place. It is simply perfection. The field beyond the garden is full of elder trees in full flower and the scent of the blossom and the new mown hay fills the house. It is most delicious ...

However, all was not well. After some discussion of family matters, she continued:

Your father was very unwell all thro’ this week and I have been very anxious indeed and feel tired and worn from sleeplessness and worry. So sorrow pursues one even in this peaceful nook and tones down all ones enjoyment. I feel old and haggard again. I hate the thought of starting again on our wanderings and leaving this home like place. When oh when shall we have a home. It is all as much in the clouds as ever and I frequently lose heart ...

Mico races about after the chickens when lessons are over but he is very troublesome over his reading and writing and quite consumes me with rage and indignation ...

I hope dear children you won’t feel lonely on Tuesday. Remember how much better it is for us to be here. I do hate the town and the general scramble so much.

You very loving mama Marie.

The second letter begins:

Dear Girls, I am so glad you have been having a pleasant week and that the concert went off so well. We are leaving here tomorrow. I cannot tell you how sorry I am to be going: it is such a treat to have a large roomy house all to oneself and to do
as one likes and not to be hurried or flurried and not even to hear a train. The haymaking has been delicious. It is over now but the white lilies are just bursting into bloom in large clumps in the garden. Your father was in town for two days this week to see Mr Marshall and I had a very reassuring letter from him. Your father returned on Thursday here and we have since been out in the skiff several times. The banks of the river are bright with wild flowers, quite blue with forget me nots all along; it is rather difficult to get them or I should have sent you more ...

The letter then drifts into plans for the family's somewhat uncertain future.

With William's appointment as *The Times* Rome correspondent in 1886, the Stillmans' prospects brightened. Now at last the family had financial security. Bella and Lisa accompanied their parents to Italy, where Bella helped her father in his art historical research and Lisa continued her art studies under Antoine Hébert at the French Academy; the two younger children, Effie and Mico, continued their schooling in England. Marie, who thought Rome a poor substitute for Florence, also continued to spend much time in this country, an arrangement which resulted in a good number of letters travelling between the two countries. "I can't think what to get Margaret B.J. for her wedding present have you thought of anything? As soon as you do let me

1. "... the roughness of the sea..." Lisa's self-portrait caricature in a letter to Effie, headed 'In New York harbour - Thursday'. Lisa visited her American relations with her father in the early 1880s.
2. Grillino, the Stillmans' cat, drawn by Lisa in a letter to Effie from Rome dated 4 May 1888. "I took Grillino to the Costas (the family of the artist Giovanni Costa) and he was so happy and they love him so that I left him there. They say he is so exactly like me that they hardly miss me. I send you a few attempts at portraying him for you to judge of the likeness."

With acknowledgements to the British Museum.
know won’t you?”, begged Lisa in a letter to Effie of August 1888. Two months later, Bella wrote to her half-sister, who, along with her mother, was paying the Morrises a visit: “I forgot you will be at Kelmscott by now. Give my very dear love to Mrs Morris, and especially to Jenny, if she is there too”.9

The absence of Bella and Lisa from England during the late 1880s inevitably prevented personal contact with the Morris family, and Lisa’s unreliability as a correspondent meant that, for her at least, letter-writing was no substitute. From March to June 1889 she was in Athens with her father and Bella, and their return journey to Rome was made by way of Venice and the Italian Alps. It was during their stay at Pieve di Cadore near Cortina that Lisa received from Effie a complaint about the irregularity of her letters, which forced her to confess:

I manage my affairs badly and am always late for everything and have to hurry over whatever I do not leave undone, but it is a fact that I always manage to have no time for letter-writing. Until we left Athens, it was about a year since I had written any letters that were not absolutely necessary either to England or America. I had not written to the Richmonds, nor Morrises, nor Rawlinsons nor Gilders nor to any other of my many bosom friends ...10

However, news travelled through other sources. In November, back in Rome, the Stillmans were visited by Wilfrid Scawen Blunt who duly reported his impressions to Janey.11

The following summer, Lisa, once more living in England, stayed at Kelmscott for a week in September, and reported to Effie, now in Italy: “I have not seen Margaret’s beautiful Angela yet but Mamma says she is exactly like W Mackail ... Mrs Morris is looking very well and so is Jenny. Mr Morris is not here yet”.12

The next reference in the letters to the Morrises occurs in a letter in which Bella, “all upside down and mixed up”, announces that John Henry Middleton has asked her to marry him and that she has accepted him. Middleton was then 46 years old and had been a family friend for some years; he had also, since 1873, been a friend of the Morrises and had helped William Morris with his dyeing and weaving experiments. Bella wrote to her sisters from Frascati, where she was staying with her mother and father: “He (Middleton) has been sweeter and kinder than anything all the time he has been here, and I have liked him more than ever; but I did not think it meant anything — till this morning. He says it is a long time since he has felt so, and that last year when he rowed us up the river he could hardly keep from asking me; but he thought it would be wrong, because he is twenty years older than me. He was talking about me to Mrs Morris, and she advised him to come, and made him take courage. I am so glad. I should never have thought I could feel as I do”.13

They were married in December 1892, and a daughter Peggy was born the following year. The couple stayed at Kelmscott on several occasions, but sadly their married life was cut short by Middleton’s early death in 1896.14

The letters end in 1892, but we know that Lisa also made several visits to Kelmscott in the 1890s, where she drew Janey on at least two occasions.15 Marie also continued to be a welcome visitor. The last reference to Marie in Janey’s letters to Blunt occurs in 1905 and illustrates the two women’s continuing close friendship. Both were now widows. Janey wrote from Kelmscott: “I have had my dear friend Marie Stillman with me the last fortnight. She paints quietly in the garden making pretty portraits of different bits of it, and I read or work”.16
NOTES

I am grateful to Mr William Ritchie for allowing me to consult the unpublished letters quoted in this short article.


4 The article by Kathleen Waldron, entitled ‘Two American women artists’, concerns Lisa and Effie, who became a sculptor. I have not been able to identify the journal in which it appeared, but that it is American is evident from the spelling and that it dates from 1897-8 is revealed by the text. I am grateful to Mr William Ritchie for drawing this article to my attention. I have discussed Effie’s sculptural work in ‘Effie Stillman: sculptor and medallist’, The Medal, 14 (1988), pp.48-59.


6 Towards the end of the second letter Marie writes: ‘Miss Pickering also is going to marry Mr de Morgan who makes the lustre ware’. The engagement was announced in 1884 but the marriage did not take place until March 1887 (A.M.W. Stirling, William de Morgan and his wife (London, 1922), pp. 194-5).


8 Letter of 29 July 1888, headed ‘Sunday 29 July / S Felice di Circeo’, with a continuation of 4 August 1888, headed ‘Saturday’. Margaret Burne-Jones’s wedding took place on 4 September 1888.

9 Letter of 8 October 1888, headed ‘Monday Oct. 8th 44 Via Gregoriana / Rome’. Marie and Effie’s Kelmscott visit is recorded also in Janey’s letter to Wilfrid Scawen Blunt of 3 October 1888 (Faulkner, p. 19).

10 Letter of 17 August 1889, headed ‘Pieve di Cadore / 17 August’. It was not posted until the following month – from Florence!


12 Letter of 10 September 1890, headed ‘Kelmscott Manor / Lechlade / Oxon / Wednesday’. Burne-Jones’s grand-daughter Angela had been born in May 1890.

13 Letter of 28 September 1892, headed ‘Wednesday, 28 Sept / Perugia’. Middleton and Janey must have discussed the idea of his proposing during his visit to Kelmscott Manor of 8-19 August 1892, recorded in the Kelmscott visitors’ book (British Library, Add MSS. 45,412).

14 The following visits by Bella and Middleton to the Morrises are known to have taken place: March 1893 (Faulkner, p.79); 3 to 19 August 1893 (Kelmscott visitors’ book; Faulkner, p.81); June to July 1894, with Peggy (Kelmscott visitors’ book; Faulkner, p.88).
Lisa’s known visits in the 1890s: 9 to 17 September 1890 (Kelmscott visitors’ book); 21 August to 4 September 1893 (Kelmscott visitors’ book; Faulkner, p.81); 19 to 24 September 1898 (Kelmscott visitors’ book). In a letter to Blunt of 23 August 1893, Janey wrote: “Lisa began a drawing of me in the summerhouse, she did a very good one of me two years ago, it was not quite finished, but very like: now I hear she has lost it” (Faulkner, p.82).

Faulkner, p. 124. Marie’s known visits of the 1890s and 1900s: 18 to 20 September 1893 (Kelmscott visitors’ book; Faulkner, p.82); 11 to 16 September 1897 (Kelmscott visitors’ book); 13 October 1898 (Kelmscott visitors’ book); 16 August 1902 (Kelmscott visitors’ book); 11-27 July 1904 (Kelmscott visitors’ book – the last entry); August 1905 (Faulkner, p. 124). William retired from The Times in 1898, and he and Marie returned to live in Surrey, where Janey visited them in 1900 (Faulkner, p.117). William died the following year.