

# Romantic Realities

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All of Morris's Romances, E.P. Thompson believed, "move in a vague medieval setting, peculiar to Morris's imagination." However, he did concede that "this world of dreams" was, in fact, "pictured with realistic detail".<sup>1</sup> *The Well at the World's End* is representative and there are two deep influences which pervade it – Kelmscott and Iceland.

May Morris sets the beginning of *The Well* at "the very door of Kelmscott Manor transformed".<sup>2</sup> (The book's title but not its theme was taken from "an old Scottish ballad"<sup>3</sup>). The association of the Manor with the High House at Upmeads is questioned by Charlotte Oberg as being "fanciful in the extreme",<sup>4</sup> the only similarity between the two being in their grey exteriors. But what, in fact, constituted Kelmscott? It was never simply 'a building': it was always encompassed by those features with which Morris first described Upmeads – the "meadows and acres, the woods and fair streams, and the little hills". (Bk I, Ch.1) Morris in fact attributed the making of Kelmscott Manor partly to "half-anxious sense of the delight of meadow and acre and wood and river".<sup>5</sup> And from the south window of the Manor's 'tapestry room' you could "catch a glimpse of the Thames clover meadows and the pretty little elm-crowned hill over in Berkshire".<sup>6</sup> Upmeads also boasts "fair little halls" interspersed occasionally with a "manor-house" and with "many a goodly church", just as to the north-east of Kelmscott village Morris had noted the "string of pretty inland villages."<sup>7</sup> Was it an accidental naming of the Priory of "St. John's by the Bridge"? and what of the "Want-way" which lay "four furlongs from the House" in "an ingle of the river...amongst very fair meadows" where "the land sloped gently up towards the hill country and the unseen mountains on the north"? (Bk I, Ch. 1). In a letter we read:

I got out on the road yesterday with Walter, & got nearly as far as the Want-ways...<sup>8</sup> When Ralph and Ursula return to Upmeads at the end of the book it is to the "old familiar fields" and the "fair meads", with the "kine" wandering about "the dewy grass" and the "orchard". (Bk IV, Chs. 29 and 31)

Here is Morris writing in a letter:

...Here everything is as beautiful as it can be: ... the grass well grown and well coloured; the apple-blossom plentifuler than we have ever had it here.<sup>9</sup>

And while there are no analogies with the "great doors" and the "long hall", is there any mistaking the chamber "well and goodly dight with hangings and a fair and glorious bed"? (Bk IV, Ch. 31).

In Mackail's words:

The walls of it are hung with tapestry of about 1600, ... they make the walls a very pleasant background for the living people who haunt the room; and, in spite of the designer, they give an air of romance to the room which nothing else would quite do.<sup>10</sup>

Because apparently vague, descriptions such as "old familiar fields" might seem inadequate to advance as evidence of Morris's intentions; when viewed together with his letters and other writings they seem to fall felicitously into place.

Oberg considered as most important an identification of Morris's quest with that of *The Well's* hero Ralph, rather than an alliance between homes, but thought that Kelmscott "had come to be the center of Morris's world", and pronounced its status as "a personally symbolic focus for the earth, home of mankind."<sup>11</sup>

Morris wrote

It has come to be to me the type of the pleasant places of the earth, and of the homes of harmless simple people not overburdened with the intricacies of life; and as others love the race of man through their lovers or their children, so I love the earth through that small space of it.<sup>12</sup>

In *The Well* Morris simply stated of Ralph that "forsooth he loved the whole house and all that dwelt there." (Bk I, Ch. 2)

May highlighted *The Well's* opening descriptions which closely placed "our home between river and upland, with the ford at the corner";<sup>13</sup> she identified Wulstead as Faringdon with qualities of Burford superimposed, the Wood Debateable as "the ancient Forest of Wychwood" and Ralph's first meeting with the Champion of the Dry Tree as occurring "outside Uffington Church". She recalled having sat "above the ancient grass fosse of Bear Castle and looked down, as he (Ralph) did, over the rich valley and the melting blue beyond it: our eyes wandering from landmark to landmark and trying to make out the familiar group of elms amongst which lie the grey gables of our home". Higham-on-the-Way she thought "may be Old Sarum", but from the Wood Perilous onward "we begin to enter into unexplored country".<sup>14</sup>

May also acknowledged "the splendid picture of the volcanic desert and the Wall of the World" as recognisably "an epitome of many a moment of keen emotion that the terrible Icelandic deserts aroused in him."<sup>15</sup> Past the Valley of the Dry Tree Ralph and Ursula come upon

a fair little river...winding about exceedingly, ... its waters were crystal-clear, though its sands were black: and the pink-blossomed willow-herb was growing abundantly on the sandy shores.

... and on the further bank was there abundance of good grass. (Bk III, Ch. 19)

At the beginning of his first trip to Iceland, Morris related the leaving of Bergthorskknoll where he had "turned back once or twice to fix the place in my memory":

... a wide shallow 'white' river with black sands sweeping in a curve by the last of the mounds, with a strip of smooth and flowery turf running along its banks.<sup>16</sup>

May stated that the "idea" of the book "was taken from a modern Icelandic novel"<sup>17</sup>, and Morris's descriptions in his own tale indicate how much in his Icelandic travels sights of "volcanic mountain heights seemed as much to overwhelm him with their terror as to move him by the majesty of their untrodden mysteries."<sup>18</sup> The "glaring of the earth-fires" (Bk III, Ch. 9) was in remembrance of Morris's second Icelandic journey where he had been confronted with fall-out from "some eruption of the fire-mountains" and had been told of an earlier eruption which had lasted

about a fortnight, gushes of fire ten times or so an hour, so that the long nights were quite light with it, and the short days all dark with the smoke. No one knows where the crater was among the unreachable ice of the great Jökul.<sup>19</sup>

Oberg suggests that Morris wove the historically-rich downlands south-west of Kelmscott "into the setting of *The Well* to enrich its time perspectives", and those time perspectives she believed were reflected in an eastward journey "back through time" from "Christianized feudal system" to "despotic tyrannies...among terrible

mountains and desert wastes (inspired by the topography of Iceland)", the "Innocent People beyond the Wall of the World" and finally "unpeopled volcanic wastes before reaching the well."<sup>20</sup> On the journey towards the Great Mountains, the company of Ralph, Ursula and the Sage beheld from a distance

... great jutting nesses with straight-walled burls at their top-most, and pyramids and pinnacles that no hand of man had fashioned, and awful clefts like long streets in the city of the giants who wrought the world... (Bk III, Ch. 8)

This recalls Morris's memories of the valley of the Markfleet:

The great mountain-wall which closes up the valley with its jagged outlying teeth was right before us: often the wall would be cleft, and you would see a horrible winding street, with stupendous straight rocks for houses on either side.<sup>21</sup>

Yet among the landscapes in *The Well* "inspired by the topography of Iceland" Morris also presented images of Kelmscott not confined to the beginning or end of the journey in restricted "time perspectives". After leaving Goldburg Ralph describes how

presently his eyes cleared, and he saw that what he had taken for clouds was a huge wall of mountains, black and terrible, that rose up sharp and clear into the morning air... (Bk II, Ch. 35)

Soon after this he relates that

they had before them a shallow dale,

... It was well-grassed, and a little river ran through it, ... There were willows about the banks of the river, and in an angle of it stood a grange or homestead, with many roofs half hidden by clumps of tall old elm trees. Other houses there were in the vale; two or three cots, to wit, on the slope of the hither down, and some half-dozen about the homestead... (Bk II, Ch. 30)

Ralph and Ursula's sojourn in the Vale of Sweet Chestnuts during winter, taking "pleasure of the waters" in flood, ends in spring when

the grass began to grow...and the snowdrop had thrust up and blossomed, ... and blackbirds ceased not their song betwixt dawn and dusk... (Bk III, Ch. 12)

In the winter of 1876 Morris had written to Janey from Kelmscott:

I have been muddling about on the river and floods for exercise sake: ... the snowdrops are showing all about.<sup>22</sup>

In the spring of 1888 to Jenny:

As to the garden, it seems to me its chief fruit is – blackbirds.<sup>23</sup>

And in the summer of 1896 to Georgie

... though you think I don't like music, I assure you that the rooks and blackbirds have been a great consolation to me.<sup>24</sup>

Ultimately, for Oberg, the romances show "Morris's concern first and foremost" with "the life of this earth"<sup>25</sup> – in Morris's own words, "my love of the earth and worship of it"<sup>26</sup>; and Elizabeth Strode has suggested that "their choice of background and their heroes' response to their situation" conveys "the philosophy of life Morris developed from his ideas and experience".<sup>27</sup> They are, in Strode's words, organic works<sup>28</sup>, just like Kelmscott Manor itself, having "grown up out of the soil".<sup>29</sup>

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Thompson, E.P., *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, Merlin Press, London, 1977, pp. 679–80; 674; 680.
- <sup>2</sup> Morris, May, *The Introductions to The Collected Works of William Morris*, Oriole Editions, New York, 1973, p. 513.
- <sup>3</sup> Vallance, Aymer, *William Morris. His Art, His Writings and His Public Life*, Studio Editions, London, 1986, p. 371.
- <sup>4</sup> Oberg, Charlotte H., *A Pagan Prophet*, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, 1978, p. 119.
- <sup>5</sup> Mackail, J.W., *The Life of William Morris*, Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1899, Vol. I, p. 231.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.
- <sup>8</sup> Henderson, Philip, ed., *The Letters of William Morris*, Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1950, p. 381.
- <sup>9</sup> *Letters*, p. 382.
- <sup>10</sup> Mackail, Vol. I, p. 230.
- <sup>11</sup> Oberg, p. 118.
- <sup>12</sup> Mackail, Vol. I, p. 225.
- <sup>13</sup> Morris, May, p. 513.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 513–514, 515.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 515.
- <sup>16</sup> Mackail, Vol. I, p. 255.
- <sup>17</sup> See Helen Timo, 'An Icelandic Tale Re-told' in *JWMS VII*, 1 (Autumn 1986), 12–16.
- <sup>18</sup> Morris, May, p. 619.
- <sup>19</sup> Mackail, Vol. I, p. 298.
- <sup>20</sup> Oberg, pp. 119, 122.
- <sup>21</sup> Mackail, Vol. I, p. 256.
- <sup>22</sup> *Letters*, p. 73.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 297.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 382.
- <sup>25</sup> Oberg, p. 129.
- <sup>26</sup> Mackail, Vol. I, p. 224.
- <sup>27</sup> Strode, Elizabeth, 'Beginnings and Endings: William Morris's Later Prose Romances', in Peter Lewis, ed., *William Morris: Aspects of the Man and His Work*, Loughborough Victorian Studies Group, 1978, p. 51.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- <sup>29</sup> Mackail, Vol. I, p. 231.