The Topsaic Tapestries and Penkill Castle

Jan Marsh

Penkill Castle near Girvan in Ayrshire was the home of Alice Boyd and William Bell Scott, fellow artists and friends of the Pre-Raphaelite circle. After their deaths (in 1897 and 1890 respectively) its interior furnishings survived almost intact in a sort of ‘sleeping beauty’ manner until 1992 when most of the moveable items were dispersed following the sale of the property. Among these were some needlework wall-hangings designed by William Morris the existence of which – like that of the great Red Lion Square chairs – long remained unknown.

Morris and Scott first met in the late 1850s through their common acquaintance with Dante Gabriel Rossetti. By this date Morris had abandoned architecture in favour of art but was beginning to be known as a poet and author of medieval-style tales, which Scott read and admired in 1856 in the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, shortly before Rossetti, Morris, Burne-Jones and the rest began painting their famous Arthurian murals in the Oxford University debating chamber. Scott was invited to join this ‘jovial campaign’, but declined, being otherwise occupied, with his own sequence of historical pictures for Sir Charles and Lady Trevelyan at Wallington in Northumberland, and by his duties as principal of the government School of Design in Newcastle. Here in 1859 he met Alice Boyd, who was to become his lifelong companion in a virtual ménage à trois with Mrs Scott. Before moving there permanently in 1864, he went to London once or twice a year to see friends and exhibitions. In 1861 he visited the Morrises at Red House, as he later described:

The only thing you saw from a distance was an immense red-tiled, steep and high roof; and the only room I remember was the dining room or hall, which seemed to occupy the whole area of the mansion. It has a fixed settle all round the walls, a curious music-gallery entered by a stair outside the room, breaking out high upon the gable, and no furniture but a long table of oak reaching nearly from end to end. This vast empty hall was painted coarsely in bands of wild foliage over both wall and ceiling. The adornment had a novel, not to say startling character, but if one had been told it was the South Sea Island style of thing one could have easily believed such to be the case, so bizarre was the execution.¹

Scott’s memory made an amalgam of various rooms, but the impact, at once innovative and primitive, of the Red House interior decoration and furnishing is clear.

Famously, Rossetti referred to Red House as ‘the Towers of Topsy’. Scott said it was built in the style of the thirteenth century. With its great wooden staircase, wall decorations and painted furniture, Morris’s home was envisioned in the
manner of a late-medieval dwelling. This fortuitously linked it with Penkill Castle, a genuine late-medieval building, which Scott visited for the first time in this same year, 1861, when the atmosphere of Red House was fresh in his mind.

Four miles from the coast on a ridge of the Carrick Hills, Penkill was originally a square defensive pele tower, built or re-built in the sixteenth century, with ground-floor stabling and three rooms above. Later a similar wing was added on the north side, linked by a circular staircase tower in the angle, but all was in a ruinous condition when inherited in the 1850s by Alice Boyd's brother Spencer, the latest laird of Penkill. Spencer Boyd was a woodcarver and antiquarian, who began to restore the fabric and re-furnish the castle with old oak furniture, armour and tapestries, aiming to re-create an authentically archaic interior. When Spencer died suddenly in 1865, Alice and Scott continued the restoration, turning Penkill into a summer residence, where they generally lingered until the first frosts.

Scott developed his interest in mural art with an ambitious scheme ascending the restored and enlarged circular stairway, which illustrated *The Kingis Quair*, the fifteenth century poem written by James I of Scotland while imprisoned in England. The mural was completed by 1868, although both the spiral space and damp condition of the walls caused problems, and the work has seriously deteriorated. Though stylistically distinct, it must share its inspiration not only with the Oxford Union murals but also with the *Sire Dregravaunt* sequence done in the summer of 1860 by Burne-Jones in the Red House drawing room, below the gallery described by Scott.

Elsewhere at Penkill other mural decoration recalls Scott's account of 'bands of wild foliage' on the walls and ceiling at Red House, in the shape of walls adorned with painted orange trees, window embrasures with scenes from Romance, and a vine-leaf trellis covering the main bedchamber. There are also occasional stencil motifs reminiscent of those at Red House. All is done in a consciously amateur manner and it is evident that no professional decorators were employed.

Scott and Alice Boyd exhibited Morrisian tendencies in their liking for painted furniture, too; among Penkill's possessions until 1992 was a carved and painted oak coffer, decorated with three figures and a quotation from Proverbs: 'Better a dinner of herbs where love is, than a stalled ox and hatred therewith'. This loosely relates to a number of other pieces produced in the Morris circle in the late 1850s and early 1860s: the heavy painted chairs decorated by Morris and Rossetti for Red Lion Square (now in the Delaware Art Museum), the great settle whose painted door panels by Rossetti are in the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; the 'Chaucer' wardrobe painted by Burne-Jones for the Morrises (now in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford); the 'Kind and Cruel Ladies' cabinet painted by Burne-Jones (now in the V&A) and so on. There is also the built-in settle with its unfinished decoration in the Red House entrance hall.

In terms of wall-covering there were also similarities with Red House. Unrecorded until 1991, the dining-room at Penkill had one wall entirely covered with an original fabric of navy blue serge, embroidered in crewel wools with stylised flowers and motifs, worked in blanket and darning stitch, with couched stalks. Even cruder in execution, this strongly resembles the *Daisy* hangings designed by Morris around 1860 and embroidered on navy blue serge by Jane and her female companions for Red House, which were rediscovered in 1962 at Kelmscott Manor.
in five sections totalling 1.5 x 3.8m. The Penkill serge, loosely attached to battens on the roughcast walls of the pele tower, faded to khaki where it was exposed to the light, but in a few places survived in remarkably pristine form. As well as the piece on the main wall measuring approximately three by five metres, smaller sections hung over the windows and door. The motifs, mainly in red and white, were more thinly scattered than those of the Daisy, and we can presume it was worked by Alice Boyd during her sojourns at the castle; again, its technique is consciously rough and ready, as if stitched at speed.

Most notably of all, also at Penkill for many years, were some fabrics which Rossetti called ‘the Topsaic tapestries’ in allusion to Morris’s nickname, and which following the sale of the castle were put up for auction at Christies in 1994. Now known as the Qui bien aime embroidered hangings, two of the four existing panels are now in the William Morris Gallery, in Walthamstow, London, and two remain in private possession. These have been identified as early Morris products, but their exact date of origin is unclear.

The fabric was in place at Penkill by the late summer of 1868 when Rossetti saw it while staying with Alice and ‘Scotus’ (his nickname for Scott). In a letter to Alice of 17 November, after his return to London, Rossetti inquired whether some projected decoration had yet been completed: ‘I wonder has Scotus’ peppermint-and-mud tint been applied to the wall surrounding the Topsaic tapestries – I saw it standing in tempting profusion ready for use’.

Although not identical in style or workmanship, the Qui bien aime fabric from Penkill is comparable in execution to the If I Can hanging designed and partly worked by Morris himself in 1856-7, now surviving at Kelmscott Manor. In both, the linen ground is completely covered with flat stitching in crewel wool and the design comprises a regularly repeated motif and a short quotation, each derived from a medieval source. In the Penkill fabric, the full quotation is ‘Qui bien aime tard oublie’ (‘Who loves well forgets late’ or ‘Who loves best forgets last’) and the motif consists of a stylised fruit-laden tree and two herons taking flight. The inscription, in a ‘Gothic’ script similar to that used by Morris in his early calligraphy, is placed on a scroll around the trunk of the tree. As they survive today, the background stitching is in mottled pinks, the motifs in faded green, yellow, grey and white, the lettering in black.

The trees, scroll and bird motif are borrowed from ‘The Dance of Wodehouses’, a fifteenth century manuscript illustration in a copy of Froissart’s Chronicles in the British Museum, where such a design appears as a wall-covering alongside another that inspired the Daisy design. This source was a favourite with the Morris/Rossetti circle from at least 1858. However, according to Linda Parry, chemical analysis of the yarns in Qui bien aime has detected a synthetic violet dye which became available only in the early 1860s. Expert opinion had similarly identified the stitching of at least three embroiderers, ‘one far more competent than the others’. An array of yarns appears to have been used for the background field, which has faded in strips and patches not corresponding with exposure to light.

As they survive, the Qui bien aime panels comprise two larger pieces measuring approximately 180 x 135cm and two thinner strips roughly the same height. They show signs of having been cut down and may originally have been part of a single piece six feet high and nearly fifteen feet wide. However, as Rossetti’s letter
refers to ‘tapestries’, by 1868 they presumably already consisted of more than one section. When rediscovered in 1991, the four panels were positioned on the walls and door-jambs in a passage connecting the original castle to the new hall designed by Scott. It would appear they were re-hung – and perhaps cut to size – in this location in 1885-6 when the new hall was built. Formerly – from at least 1868 – they hung elsewhere; perhaps on the walls of the ante-room linking the circular stair with the first-floor drawing room in the pele tower. Rossetti’s letter indicates their dusky red tones were to be complemented by ‘peppermint-and-mud’ paint on the walls – presumably above the dado and below the top rail or frieze (commonly a space about six feet in height). It is also possible that the fabric originally hung in the drawing room itself, as in its original state the ‘tapestry’ was evidently a splendid sight, fully in keeping with the archaic atmosphere of the reconstructed castle.

If the original placing of the hangings at Penkill is uncertain, their arrival there is even more so. From the limited information available, the ‘Topsaic tapestries’ were probably designed by Morris and produced by a small team of embroiderers not before ‘the early 1860s’ when the violet dye was introduced. The circumstances of their production are at present quite unknown. It is possible that, when Alice Boyd and Scott took over the re-furnishing of Penkill in 1865-6, they sought appropriate wall-coverings (paper not being practical on the uneven castle walls, even without the damp conditions) and turned to Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. (‘the Firm’), which from its foundation in 1861 advertised embroidery and wall-coverings among its products. However, although the period 1866-8 is the most plausible date for installation at Penkill, the Qui bien aime design and execution do not accord with anything else produced by the Firm in the late 1860s, when it was occupied with prestigious commissions at St James’s Palace and the South Kensington Museum. It would appear far more likely that Boyd and Scott acquired, by purchase or gift, an item of earlier manufacture.

Comparing Qui bien aime to If I Can, the Christie’s 1994 sale catalogue entry conjectured that stylistically the two were virtually contemporary, as the motifs and technique would indeed suggest; however, the later discovery of the violet dye indicates this cannot be the case. In her 1996 exhibition entry, Linda Parry notes that the Firm’s work on display at the 1862 International Exhibition included ‘antique-looking tapestry-hangings . . . effective in colour but of rude manufacture’. She further notes that the Firm’s hangings were priced at £3 per square yard.

Though Parry does not therefore identify these with Qui bien aime, the account she gives is an accurate description of their appearance, and it could be that the hangings shown at the International Exhibition remained with the Firm first in Red Lion Square and then in Queen Square until a new home in the shape of Penkill Castle presented itself a few years later. If so, Qui bien aime would have been produced in the early part of 1862, Morris employing a design that harked back to his first embroidery and commissioning a small team of stitchers, perhaps but not certainly including his wife Jane (who had her second child in March 1862 and was in any case at Red House). In view of the amount of work involved in such dense embroidering with an intricate repeating motif, if the Penkill pieces represent the whole of an originally single piece covering ten sq. yds., a price of
£300 does not seem unreasonable, although it would evidently have been a very large sum for a private customer.

Until more information about the Firm’s early productions and sales comes to light, we cannot know whether such an account of _Qui bien aime_ fits the facts. It is, however, also plausible to conjecture that Rossetti was responsible for the deal whereby the hangings travelled to Penkill, for as one of the partners in the Firm’s early years he was an active salesman for its products and services. He himself collected old furniture, fabrics and metalware – as shown in many descriptions of his house in Cheyne Walk, Chelsea – and at some stage he present an eighteenth century needlework picture showing Christ and the woman of Samaria to Alice Boyd. It is therefore easy to imagine him persuading her and Scott that the ‘Topsaic tapestries’ were just right for their castle walls.

Morris himself visited Penkill in 1888, at the height of his involvement in the Socialist cause, while addressing political meetings in Scotland. ‘The place is lovely’, he wrote to his daughter Jenny:

it lies on the hillside on a spit of ground with a beck running on each side just like Naworth [the home of the Earls of Carlisle in Cumbria]. From the tower you can see the great wide firth (of Clyde) Ailsa Craig plain to see, and the mountains of Arran lying in the distance: there were beautiful daffodils out in the woods, and more blackbirds than one could count.

Sadly for present purposes, however, if he and his hosts remarked on the newly-positioned hangings, now 25 years old, no record was committed to paper, and their existence remained unrecorded for another century. As with the re-discovered Red Lion Square chairs, the re-appearance of the ‘Topsaic tapestries’ helps to build a vivid picture of Morris’s early aims and inspirations in decorative art, and underline the outlandish impression made by the first productions of the Firm.

NOTES


3 Linda Parry (ed.), _William Morris_, (London: Philip Wilson 1996), No. M.6. It is not known whether the embroidered serge hanging remains _in situ_ at Penkill; in 1991 it was in a very dilapidated state. Following our visit there, Liz Woods and I prepared a brief, preliminary account of both this and the Topsaic pieces for the so-called quarterly journal of the ‘Penkill Foundation’ called the Order of the Owl, which was privately printed in the autumn of 1991 under the heading ‘Pilgrimage to Penkill’.

4 For further details see Christies London sale catalogue, 16 February 1994, lots
25-26 (described as two pieces 180 x 136.5 and 188 x 115.6 cm respectively), and William Morris, op. cit., No. M.5. (described as 180 x 136.5 cm). When I visited Penkill in 1991 (see note 3 above), four panels were in position: two larger pieces on the wall measuring approximately (sight) 180 x 135 cm and two smaller sections on facing door-jambs, measuring (sight) 180 x 45 cm. The William Morris Gallery now has one large piece 185 x 127.5 cm and one small 183.5 x 66.3 cm (dimensions include linen edges etc.).

5 O. Doughty and J. R. Wahl (eds.), The Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1965-7), II, pp. 675-6. ‘Tapestry’ was the incorrect term commonly applied to embroidered hangings in the 1860s, some years before Morris & Co. began weaving true tapestry.

6 I have as yet been unable to find the source of this quotation: Chaucer has been suggested but it must in fact be an old French romance, or some similar text.

7 See, for example, the unfinished leaf for The Iron Man (William Morris, op. cit., No. N.1.) or that containing two stanzas from Browning’s Paracelsus, c.1858-60 (now in the Huntingdon Library, USA).

8 Now British Library, Harleian MSS 4379-80.

9 William Morris, op. cit., No. M.5., where no more exact date for the dye’s introduction is provided.

10 See note 4 above. My original observations at Penkill in 1991 indicate two panels measuring approx. 180 x 135 cm loosely fitted to battens on the walls, and two roughly 180 x 45 cm nailed to the doorcase; all have since been taken down, removed and cleaned and it is not easy to identify the latter pair with the two smaller pieces as they currently appear.

11 Remark by Christopher Dresser in the Ecclesiologist 1862 (Vol. XX) quoted in William Morris, op. cit., No. M.5. Also exhibited were ‘some remarkable hangings of serge [with] simple patterns worked upon them . . . a very quaintly pleasing reproduction, in material, colour and pattern, of the kind of hangings which we find in homely old-fashioned houses’ (Clerical Journal, 8 May 1862, pp. 421-2, quoted in A. R. Dufty, Morris Embroideries: The Prototypes, [Society of Antiquaries 1984], p. 10). These may have been the Daisy fabrics, temporarily removed from the Red House, or the comparable Sunflower embroideries (now at Kelmscott Manor) in pale and dark green yarns, couched onto green serge; they cannot have been Qui bien aime, which is not on serge.

12 See Penkill house-sale, Christie’s, 15 December 1992, lot 25.