William Morris’ Funeral

by William E. Fredeman

Tuesday, October 6, 1896, was a storm day throughout England, and in the region of Lechlade, in the Thames valley, the winds and rain were unseasonably violent. For at least two observers, the storm, confirming Ruskin’s principle of the pathetic fallacy, was nature’s boisterous and saga-like accompaniment to William Morris’ departure from this ‘Earthly Paradise’:

As we never associated William Morris with fine weather, rather taking him to be a pilot poet lent by the Vikings to steer us from the Doldrums in which we now lie all becalmed in smoke to some Valhalla of his own creation beyond the world’s end, it seemed appropriate that on his burial-day the rain descended and the wind blew half a gale from the north-west. (p. 389)

Morris died, after several months of ‘general organic degeneration’, at Kelmscott House, Hammersmith, on Saturday, October 3, 1896. He died, Mackail says, ‘quietly and without visible suffering’ (II, 335). Three days later, his body, accompanied by sundry mourners, was taken by train to Lechlade and interred in the churchyard at Kelmscott in a short and simple ceremony, wholly devoid of the ‘pomp of organized mourning’ (II, 348). Considering the distance from London, the inconvenience of travel, and the weather, the funeral, for all its simplicity, was well attended:

Artists and authors, archaeologists, with men of letters, Academicians, the pulpit, stage, the Press, the statesmen, craftsmen, and artificers,


2 It is an amusing inconsistency that Mackail, describing the storm, says that it ‘raged with great violence over the whole country, with furious south-westerly gales . . .’
whether of books, or of pictures, or idlers, all otherwise engaged... The Guilds were absent, with the Trades-Unions and the craftsmen, the hammermen, the weavers, matchmakers, and those for whom he worked and thought. (p. 389)

Of the several descriptions of the funeral, the best known is that by R. B. Cunninghame-Graham, published as one of three articles on Morris in the *Saturday Review* and entitled 'With the North-West Wind'. Cunninghame-Graham's account is rhapsodic and metaphorical—a conscious piece of 'fine writing', contrived by a literary Hudson desperately searching for the purple passage. Within these impressionistic limitations, however, it is successful. For him, the essential Morris is the primitive Viking, the elemental medieval spirit whose vision and integrity are only parodied by the gloom of Paddington Station, were the cortège formed. He decries the absence of the Guilds and Trades-Unions among the mourners, and he is lightly satirical about the Russian Nihilists, Polish Jews, and 'Comrades' with whom he spent the journey to Oxford. The response from Morris' university city was to him a great, but predictable, disappointment:

So we reached Oxford, and found upon the platform no representatives of that Trades-Union there to greet us, and no undergraduates to throng the station, standing silently to watch the poet's funeral... [it was the Long Vacation] The ancient seat of pedantry, where they manufacture prigs as fast as butchers in Chicago "hurtle hogs", was all unmoved. Sleeping the sleep of the self-satisfied were dons and masters and the crew of those who, if they chance once in a century to have a man of genius amongst them, are all ashamed of him... (p. 389)

Only when the cortège reached Lechlade did the ceremony, for Cunninghame-Graham, seem 'fitted for the man': 'the most striking figure of our times'. Clearly, the rustic simplicity of Kelmscott and of its villagers provided a setting compatible with Morris' own ideals:

No red-faced men in shabby black to stagger with the coffin to the hearse, but in their place four countrymen in moleskin bore the body

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3 Besides the families of Morris and Burne-Jones, among those present were: H. Virtue Tebbs, Sydney Cockerell, F. S. Ellis, Cunninghame-Graham, Walter Crane, W. B. Richmond and his wife, and T. Armstrong. Philip Webb, Emery Walker, and Mary De Morgan must also have been present, along with many others.
to an open haycart, all festooned with vines, with alder and with
Chronicle... Through Lechlade, with its Tudor Church, its gabled houses
roofed with Winford slates all overgrown with houseleek, and with lichens,
and with the stalks of wallflower and valerian projecting from the chinks,
we took our way. (p. 389)

His descriptions of the village, the cart (‘with a yellow body
and bright red wheels [which] was prepared in the morning to
carry the coffin from Lechlade station’, II, 348—see Arthur
Hughes’ drawing), the villagers (all of whom turned out for the
services), and especially the church, are invaluable as first-hand
impressions of the details of Morris’ funeral, details which are
unavailable in Mackail or other contemporary sources:

Inside the church was decorated for a harvest festival, the lamps all
wreathed with ears of oats and barley, whilst round the font and in the
porch lay pumpkins, carrots, and sheaves of corn—a harvest festival
such as he himself perhaps had planned, not thinking he himself would
be the chiepest first fruit. (p. 390)

What finally detracts from Cunninghame-Graham’s account of
Morris’ funeral is the calculated ‘literariness’ of it all. It is a set
piece, an exercise for an audience, and it is modelled to a form.
When he is being merely descriptive, his impressions have not a
spontaneity but a freshness that is compelling; but the burden of
sentimentalism, cloying throughout, becomes overwhelmingly
obtrusive in the dramatic climax and vitiates the entire
performance:

Standing amongst the wet grass of the graves, artists and Socialists, with
friends, relations, and the casual spectators, a group of yokels faced us,
gaping at nothing, after the fashion of themselves and of their animals.
And then I fancied for a moment that the strong oak coffin, with its
wrought-iron handles and pall of Anatolia velvet, was opened, and I
saw the waxen face and features of the dead man circled by his beard, and
in his shroud his hands upon his breast, looking like some old Viking
in his sleep, beside the body of his favourite horse, at the opening of
some mound in Scandinavia.
So dust to dust fell idly on my ears, and in its stead a vision of the Eng.
land which he dreamed of filled my mind. The little church grew brighter,
looking as it were filled with the spirit of a fuller faith embodied in an
ampier ritual.
John Ball stood by the grave, with him a band of archers all in Lincoln
Green, birds twittered in the trees, and in the air the scent of apple-
blossom and white hawthorn hung. All was much fairer than I had ever
seen the country look, fair with a fairness that was never seen in England
but by the poet, and yet a fairness with which he laboured to induce it.
Once more the mist descended, and my sight grew dimmer; the England of the Fellowship was gone, John Ball had vanished, and with him the archers, and in their place remained the knot of countrymen, plough-galled and bent with toil; the little church turned greyer, as if a reformation had passed over it. I looked again, the bluff bold kindly face had faded into the north-west wind. (p. 390)

Eastside House
Kew Green
Nov 25-96

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A description of Morris’ funeral of quite a different sort is that recently uncovered in a letter from the painter Arthur Hughes4 to Alice Boyd of Penkill Castle.5 Hughes, who had been closely attached to William Bell Scott during the painter-poet’s lifetime, undertook, on Scott’s death in 1890, to keep Alice current on his own and their mutual friends’ activities in London. It was an act of kindness, not of charity, and the extant letters from Hughes to Miss Boyd (57 in all)6 reveal Hughes (about whom little is known factually) as a man of intense human sensibility; kind, witty, and possessed of a genuine but not self-deprecatory humility. He was also an astute participator in the life around him and an observer and recorder of unusual dimensions. He had lived in and through the phenomenon of Pre-Raphaelitism, and his real ties, apart from his family, were like Alice Boyd’s, with a nostalgically remembered past.

His description, which forms only half of his letter to Miss

4 Arthur Hughes (1832-1915) was closely associated with Pre-Raphaelite enterprises from the early 1850’s. He is best known for his pictures ‘April Love’, ‘The Eve of St. Agnes’, and ‘The Knight of the Sun’ and for his illustrations for books by Allingham, Thomas Hughes, and George MacDonald.

5 Alice Boyd (1825-1897) was for over forty years the close friend and associate of William Bell Scott. A painter herself, she shared Scott’s interests and his life. Scott spent most of his time out of London at Penkill Castle, near Girvan, in Ayrshire, Scotland, and he retired there in June 1885. Scott died 22 November 1890, aged 79.

6 Most of these letters are in the Special Collections of the University of British Columbia Library, Vancouver, B.C., Canada; the remainder belong to Miss Courtney-Boyd of Penkill.
Boyd, was written on November 25, 1896, nearly two months after Morris' funeral. Clearly, he was as touched emotionally by the event as was Cunninghame-Graham, but he had no pressures of propinquitous publication to satisfy; and his was an audience of one, who required no sentimental propaganda to crystallize her memory of Morris. He is sharing with a friend the demise of a friend whom both knew and regarded, and any temptation to dramatize the emotional situation is in part obviated by the distance in time—the 'recollection in tranquility'—separating the event from the account. The charm of Hughes' narrative lies partly in the casualness with which he introduces the subject and partly in the context of living experience which surrounds it, a relief which precludes stylization.

Hughes was, however, an accomplished letter-writer. Devoid of affectation and artificiality, he succeeds in fusing—at least in his letters to Miss Boyd—information, wit, and charm with that painter's eye which vivifies his descriptions and constitutes the principal adornment of his writing. His letter on Morris' funeral consists of two parts, both descriptive tableaux: the first deals with 'Audrey's Toilet' and the young goat-model; the second with the ceremony surrounding the burial of Morris. The details of each tableau are carefully worked into a precise and visual representation of the whole. Perhaps more astounding is the fact that juxtaposed the tableaux are not incongruous; the two are in balanced relief, as if, somehow, art itself possesses that melding synthesis which harmonizes life and death and which transcends despair by virtue of its continuity, realizing in the unity of the two a kind of Yeatsian 'gaity'. The letter follows:

Dear Miss Boyd,

Many thanks for your letter. I just wanted that for a fillip. I had intended to write to you again just after my last, for I wanted to tell you about the funeral of dear Morris, which I went to, and was glad I did, but things came in the way, and lately I have been very seedy and so,

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7 Hughes' punctuation is especially erratic. In fact, it is frequently impossible to distinguish commas, dashes, and periods. I have tried to interpret his punctuation according to the intended meaning and the context of a given sentence. Errors in spelling have been silently corrected; deletions and insertions have not been indicated in the running text or in notes; in this letter they are infrequent and they do not seem particularly relevant to the text.

8 5 October 1896, informing Miss Boyd of Morris' death.
as usual!! We are very sorry to hear of your being so unwell. I am sure you were bad, when you admit so much, who never were a grumbler. I think this sad low Autumn time is more depressing than it usually is. I have been wretched—with cough and phlegm to an extent that frightens us. It seemed as if it must mean something much more serious. But I too, am like you, beginning to see daylight again; and am able to do a little work in just the middle of the day. My painting room is a very nice little one, but it is at the far end of my garden and while unwell it is far indeed—but I am painting a subject of Audrey again in the Forest of Arden, and I think of calling it ‘Audrey’s Toilet’—for she stands by a little stream, arranging her red hair, floating about her bare neck—she having cast off her shepherdess smock for a wash: her feet too are bare, her sabots & smock & crook lie beside on the grass, and heather grows about in which two very young goats are having high jinks with her straw hat, one biting its edge and dislocating the rings of plait, the other jumping over it in great appreciation of the game. Audrey with a lazy smile also enjoying it. This necessitated a young live goat, and that is how I got my cold. Did you ever keep one as a pet? They are delightful little creatures in their way, and such awful sitters that they drive one mad at first until one understands them a little. I got mine a month ago from a man at Wandsworth, and having bought him, wondered he did not arrive, so I went over there, and they said he had started with it in a sack! and the creature cried so, that everyone he met insisted that he had a child in the sack, and he had to put it down and show that it was a goat—so he at last got tired of it and went back home with it. Then I made the suggestion of a man with a donkey cart to bring it, and in a day or two we were at lunch—and there tho’ the window we saw a perfectly lovely picture—a coster’s donkey barrow—the coster driving and behind him at the back, a round wicker bushel measure, and sitting in it the little kid holding its head up and looking so bright, and just like a fine lady in her carriage. When he led it thro the house to the little house I had arranged for it in the garden, it had a beautiful cord of plaited straw round its neck and a couple of yards length, so gipsy like and pretty, but the little thing is so like a baby—bleats fearfully when I leave it and after a lot of that scolds with a temper that is so very human. It was the taking up this subject with a background I made long ago in Yorkshire that seemed to keep me at home this autumn—and as Agnes had been here in the summer and Emily lately stayed up with her for a couple of months we hardly felt it needful to go up to her—and so I did not get to you. I did not know you were looking for me, or it would have been harder to take up the picture.

But I must tell you about Morris: I joined the train at Paddington, and a special portion was set apart there with a guard’s van with open doors on the platform side and closed doors on the other, which [had] a little window in, and on the other floor lay the plain unvarnished oaken coffin, with numerous large wreaths set on either side and at the head—the coffin

9 The present location of this picture is unknown to me.

10 Agnes and Emily are two of Hughes’ daughters; he had one other daughter and two sons.
foot toward us, looking in, and its head under the little window, in the closed doors at the other side—so it made exactly a miniature chapel! There filling the platform in front was a crowd of all sorts of socialist bodies, who came to take a last look and bring their wreaths, not a sign of an undertaker anywhere! Then we started and at Oxford let the main train go on, and our portion waited awhile and then away for Lechlade which seems to be on a branch. I was put with Mr. Tebbs for companion, and while the rain poured in torrents outside he beguiled the time with the usual flow: Then came Lechlade station and the little Van Chapel gave up its tenant, and there was another surprise, one of the pretty hay carts of that district was waiting it: with posts erected at each corner dressed with foliage—and strings across the top hung with vine leaves. The coffin was laid on it, and all the wreaths on it and about it, making one of the prettiest sights, and like a page out of one of his own stories—the rain falling always all the time. Then I was put with Walter Crane in a carriage for the three miles to the Church and I felt myself lucky. I have a sincere respect and great liking for him. There were many following—you will have seen the list—Jones & his wife, Mrs Morris and the daughters, Richmond and his wife, Mr Ellis, & Cockerell, Morris's secretary, and most of his people belonging to the Shop, and the Works, and the Press. Jones & Mrs Morris in chief place at church & grave and in train both families together. Mrs Morris very broken down, May bearing up well, but poor Jennie weeping piteously. Kelmscott church is very lovely, the simplest barn form with a tiny open arch belfry at one end very very rural on a flat damp land, with hills in view across the river, but we did not see the house—it lay beyond the church and

11 See the illustration which reproduces the drawing of the cart, included on the last page of Hughes' letter.

12 F. S. Ellis, the publisher.
only the families of Morris & Jones went there. Mr Ellis had arranged all very beautifully for us—to lunch at the Inn at Lechlade & so fill up the hours before the return train late in the afternoon. I forgot to say that T. Armstrong was there too. Mrs Morris & May have gone to Egypt with the Blunts for the winter I believe, and so ends that chapter; not that there ends the work that Morris has done, I believe. It was delightful to hear from Mr Ellis how he tried to preserve and make others preserve the old English beauties of Kelmscott, where the barns are thatched and the farms stone roofed with slabs of stone like immense tiles. Nowadays when roofs need renewing they substitute slates, & Morris grieved and begged and finally did their roofs for them, thatch or stone at his own cost! did the old church stone & lead, thus; so at last when roofs needed renewal he was looked to for them as a matter of course.

Poor Mrs Scott. I fear it is very like her to try & do without proper food taking. I hope you are more responsive to Dr Valentine’s wishes. With best remembrances to him & Margaret and the wife’s love, believe me,

affection yrs
Arthur Hughes

P.S. I hope you arc glad that Poynter is the President—I am.*

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13 Letitia Margery Scott (1813-1898) and William Bell Scott married in 1838. After Scott’s death in 1890, Letitia left Penkill Castle.

14 Dr Valentine attended Scott during his frequent illnesses, 1885-1890.

15 E. Margaret Courtney-Boyd, Alice Boyd’s niece who inherited Penkill in 1897; the sister of the present owner.

16 Sir Edward Poynter who became President of the Royal Academy on Sir John Everett Millais’ death in 1896.

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* Miss C. N. Hale-White has kindly consented to the publication of this letter from her grandfather. I should like to express my thanks to Miss E. M. Courtney-Boyd of Penkill Castle for permission to publish Arthur Hughes’ letter to her aunt, Alice Boyd. Miss Courtney-Boyd also kindly secured for me the photographs of the drawing from Hughes’ letter which is reproduced. Mr Leslie Cowan, a specialist on Arthur Hughes’ painting, has been more than generous in sharing with me information on Hughes’ life and art. This letter will be included in an edition of Hughes’ letters to Alice Boyd to be published in the Bulletin of the John Rylands Library in about a year’s time. I am grateful therefore to Mr Ronald Hall and to Dr Frank Taylor, both of the Rylands Library, for allowing me to publish this letter in The Journal of the William Morris Society.