Edmund New’s ‘Diary of a visit to Kelmscott Manor House’

by David Cox

In October 1895 the ageing William Morris entertained at Kelmscott Manor a young man, then hardly known and today scarcely remembered, who was soon to be one of England’s best-loved illustrators of books: Morris’ disciples will know him as the illustrator of Mackail.

Edmund Hort New was born at Evesham, Worcestershire, in December 1871. At the age of fourteen he went as a pupil to the Birmingham Municipal School of Art and studied under E. R. Taylor and A. J. Gaskin, eventually becoming a teacher there himself. His natural gifts as a draughtsman in pen-and-ink developed rapidly, and on leaving the School in 1895 he was already in full possession of his powers. He had contributed to The English Illustrated Magazine and was presumably attracting some attention by his work on topographical subjects when he received his first commissions from John Lane of the Bodley Head. The most important of these was for Le Gallienne’s handsome edition of The Compleat Angler, which appeared in parts from 1896 to 1897 and in book form in the latter year. This work was warmly received by the public and put Edmund New in the first rank of contemporary illustrators. In the years that followed he adorned a succession of books with illustrations of consistent beauty. His industry was remarkable: between 1896 and 1914 he illustrated over fifty books, some of them containing more than two hundred illustrations and hardly any fewer than a dozen. In the same busy years he designed large numbers of book-plates and embarked on a project that was to fill the remainder of his life and try his powers to their natural limits.

Essential aspects of his work, which was almost wholly given
to landscape and old buildings, are great accuracy of line and a love of fine detail that was, like Ruskin's, quite literally religious. The format of illustrations and book-plates proved too small for the fulfilment of these capacities and inclinations and in 1905 he left Evesham, his birthplace, to take lodgings in Oxford: he had formed the idea of producing a series of large-scale prints of the Oxford colleges, to repeat in modern times the monumental achievement of Loggan's *Oxonia illustrata*. Renouncing almost any further work of illustration, he pursued this aim with complete devotion, yet had barely finished at his death in 1931. The published prints were photo-engraved by Emery Walker Limited from his ink drawings and show each college from an oblique aerial viewpoint, uniting the aesthetic virtues of elevation and the documentary ones of plan. Each drawing was constructed over months and years from many careful measurements and pencil sketches, these often made perforce from lonely rooftop vantage points or in busy streets below; yet, with all their virtuosity, the *New Loggan* prints are not academic studies, thwarted in spirit by too much labour in execution. Two saving qualities have made them pleasing and vivacious: firstly, New always chose his viewpoint with special care and, by sensitive use of inscriptive and heraldic ornament, saw to it that the disposition of the masses was itself harmonious; secondly, he peopled every street and open place with lively figures. Towns­men of all conditions are portrayed in movement, while cabs, carts, bicycles and bathchairs rattle by: for Edmund New the grave old monuments dream on amidst a cheerful rude humanity.

In character he was modest, deeply religious, scrupulous and patient in everything: as F. L. Griggs once put it, his was 'a life and a life's work of rare unity'. He was erudite in speech and articulated with conspicuous precision; his library was minutely annotated and some of his outdoor sketches bear beside their date the very time of day when they were made; he lived alone in the same dingy lodgings he had taken in 1905, without regretting the luxuries denied him by a modest income and a diabetic diet. Yet he was anything but the glum recluse such ways might reasonably suggest. He joined the Society of Friends and their belief was perfectly expressed in his instinctive kindness and many selfless deeds. A lover of the countryside, old buildings, poetry and books, he would study anything of good report and see in it God's glory. Professor Gilbert Murray wrote that Edmund New was by temperament 'half artist and
half saint': no better phrase sums up this gentle soul who knew
the beauty of holiness and reverenced the holiness of beauty.

Edmund New's nephew, Mr Nevill H. New, has kindly
allowed me to reproduce here the text of a manuscript now in
his possession: it is written in New's hand on two sheets of
notepaper folded to make four leaves, and is headed *Diary of a
visit to Kelmscott Manor House. October 1895.*

The document is mainly self-explanatory, but a few of its
allusions need comment. At the time of his visit New was work­
ing on *The Compleat Angler* at Waltham Cross. His main object
at Kelmscott was originally, it seems, the joint preparation with
William Morris of an illustrated article on the Great Coxwell
tithe barn for *The Quest*, a short-lived periodical printed by the
Birmingham Guild of Handicrafts. The actual fruit of their
meeting, Morris's article on the Manor House, was published in
*The Quest*, no. 4 (November 1895), pp. 4–14, with two illustra­
tions by New and a frontispiece by C. M. Gere; it is entitled
'Gossip about an Old House on the Upper Thames' and dated 25
October 1895. The article was reprinted without the illustrations
in May Morris' *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, vol. i
(1936), pp. 364–7. New was evidently keen to record Morris' opin­ion of his Birmingham colleagues, Gaskin and Gere, and of
Tennyson, his favourite poet. Walter Crane's work emerges
none too well from the discussion: his illustrations for *The
Story of the Glittering Plain*, printed at the Kelmscott Press in
1894, had clearly disappointed Morris, and it was surely Crane's
work on the plays, in an edition of 1893–4, which prompted the
remarks on Shakespeare.

The text is quite in keeping with New's character: it is full of
circumstantial detail and learned allusion and, though its general
effect is one of spontaneous composition, the manuscript gives
physical evidence that the grammar and punctuation were
revised; at the same time there are passages born of his vital
responsiveness to surroundings: a keen visual awareness made
keener by a love and knowledge of the past.

*Diary of a visit to Kelmscott Manor House. October 1895.*

October 8th. Tuesday.

I left Waltham Cross and travelled to London, Oxford, and from
thence to Lechlade by rail. I reached Lechlade station at half past 5 in
the afternoon and found Mr Morris's man (Giles) there with a
wagonette in which we drove to Kelmscott, a distance of 3½ miles.
Lechlade is a quaint market town and is picturesque; in the churchyard Shelley wrote one of his shorter poems. It was dark when we arrived at the old manor house; to reach it we had to drive through the village, at the end of which it stands, surrounded on three sides by a beautiful old walled-in garden and on the fourth bordered by the farmyard. I was welcomed by Mr and Miss Morris and was taken up to the Tapestry room where we found Mrs Morris, tall, stately, and beautiful and one needed not to be told that it was she whose face Rossetti loved to reproduce. Tea was prepared for me in the dining room below and Mr and Miss M. sat with me; we then adjourned to the tapestry room where Mr and Mrs Morris continued their game of draughts, their regular evening employment, and at intervals we conversed. We supped at half past seven. We retired before eleven. My bedroom led out of the tapestry room through a secret door and its dimensions were small. The only other door led through Mr Morris's room, so that no one could leave the room except by passing through his bedroom.

Wednesday, October 9.
We breakfasted at half past 8 o'clock. Mrs M. being an invalid does not come down until about half past 10. The morning was rainy [sic] and cold, and much rain had fallen in the night; we therefore decided not to drive to the Coxwell barn as we had intended, but that I should draw inside the house and Mr M. should write an article on it instead of on the barn. I therefore began a drawing in the Tapestry room which looks out on the front garden and is in the wing added about 1630; the rest of the house dating from 1570 or thereabouts. The room was used by D. G. Rossetti as a studio. The rain ceased and Mr, Miss M. and I had a walk in the fields which stretch level and low by the river. We found three wild roses in flower. After one o'clock lunch I continued my drawing in the Tapestry room and wrote letters after tea and carried them to the post box in the church wall. The village children were practising the chants and the church windows glowed through the darkness making a pleasant harmony of sound and colour. After dinner Mr M. and I sat and talked over his pipe and then joined the ladies and had some whist before going to bed.

Thursday, Oct. 10.
The morning broke bright and clear and after breakfast we strolled in the garden where many flowers still continue fresh and the apple trees are bright with fruit. I soon set to work again while Mr Morris was designing some cretonnes and Miss Morris knitted; Mrs M. joined us during the morning and continued embroidering a book cover on which she was engaged. Mr and Miss M. walked out in the fields and before lunch I took a walk about the garden, looking at the house from different points of view. I was at work indoors most of the afternoon and began a sketch of the back of the house from the field by the newly planted orchard. After tea I took my letters to post and walked towards Langford. We had a talk on Socialism after dinner and a good game of whist. Mr M. retired early as he had to leave first thing the following morning, and I sat up a bit and looked at the moonlight which lit up the front of the house in its mysterious way and poured through the heavy mullioned windows.
Friday. Oct. 11.
Mr Morris had gone when I came down to breakfast at 8. The morning was bright and pleasant, and I continued my work most of the morning, having a delightful walk along the river bank before lunch. I left almost directly after, being driven to Lechlade station and arriving at Evesham at 5.28.

Mr M. considers Batten the best modern illustrator; he thinks Gaskin a good stylist (and Gere too) but they lack Batten’s power of drawing though he has no style. Gere has more imagination than Gaskin but wants practice in drawing figures. Tennyson is essentially a lyric poet—he has not the gift of narration; the same is true of Spenser. Crane’s forte is children’s books; his illustrations to Mr M’s. book are poor in execution. He does not think his own books want illustrations for he describes his scenes so minutely and paints them so vividly that an illustration would rather limit than enlarge the reader’s conception. Shakespeare requires no illustrations. His plays would be best acted in a generalised costume, for though his characters are called by foreign and Ancient names they really belong to all time. Stead’s id. poets are probably supplying a real want and if books cannot be really well printed they may just as well be done thus and as cheaply as possible.