

Morris and Cobden-Sanderson

by John Randle

THOMAS James Cobden-Sanderson moved his bindery to The Nook, Upper Mall, Hammersmith on 20 March 1893, partly because he wanted to expand it into a proper workshop where he could employ staff, and partly because he would then be

within striking distance of the Kelmscott Press. It was, in fact, Janey Morris who ten years earlier had first put the idea of becoming a bookbinder into his head, and when the Doves Bindery was established at The Nook, William Morris leased a couple of rooms for the Kelmscott Press.

Cobden-Sanderson took up bookbinding in 1883 at the age of 42. He had left Oxford without a degree because he disagreed with the 'competitive system', and in 1870 'I allowed myself to be called to the Bar, by way of stop-gap, and to stay enquiries as to what I was doing. In 1883 I abandoned the Bar to become a manual labourer'.

Throughout most of his life Cobden-Sanderson kept a Journal, published in an edited form by his son Richard in 1926. Though largely concerned with the 'spiritual development' of their author, *The Journals* also refer to more everyday matters, including his friends, amongst whom were the Morrises. The first reference to them was made on 24 June 1883, with what must have been one of the most fruitful suggestions that Janey Morris ever made.

Yesterday afternoon we called at the Morrises, and in the evening supped with the William Richmonds, where we again saw the Morrises. I was talking to Mrs Morris after supper, and saying how anxious I was to use my hands - 'Then why don't you learn bookbinding?' she said. 'That would add an Art to our little community, and we would work together. I should like', she continued, 'to do some little embroideries for books, and 'I would do so for you.' Shall bookbinding, then, be my trade?

On 4 July he recorded that 'The Morrises were much interested to hear what I was doing, and May thought it much nicer than being a barrister. And so do I.'

Approval was not however universal. Lady Russell (the Russells were lifelong friends of Cobden-Sanderson, and in 1918 he helped to put up bail for 'Bertie') wrote thus, a reminder of the upper classes' horror of trade practice.

I heard of your bookbinding, but I own with regret. With an education such as yours I should like better to hear that you were employing your mind on something which others of less cultivated intellects could not do. I can, however, well understand the interest of being brought into contact with a class of human beings of whom we know little except by the articles they produce.

As it turned out, the Doves Bindery and T. J. Cobden-Sanderson produced bindings unsurpassed of their kind - one

only hopes somebody passed on the knowledge to Lady Russell. A glance at a Doves binding, or Doves Press book, shows how different Cobden-Sanderson's idea of the 'book beautiful' was to Morris's. Elegance and restraint were the keynotes, in contrast to Morris's bombastic style. Cobden-Sanderson confessed that to begin with, after moving to the Upper Mall,

'I fought shy of Morris and his ideas. I had first to develop my own ... I may here mention that though we have not done much binding for the Kelmscott Press, we have done a great deal of mending, re-binding and re-covering for the library of early-printed books which Morris is collecting.'

The Journals record that on 18 March 1885, Cobden-Sanderson and Morris had lunch together at Rules:

He [Morris] began to talk about my prices. Premised that 'people would go to the cheapest market', and almost as if he approved; thought my work too costly; bookbinding should be 'rough'; did not want to multiply the minor arts(!); went so far as to suggest that some machinery should be invented to bind books.

Perhaps it was because such words had been uttered by none other than William Morris that they were still worrying Cobden-Sanderson twelve months later:

It amused me at the time... How could he object to high prices for work done? Surely he ought to uphold it on principle, as certainly he had appeared to us always to do so in practice...

It occurred to me that the difference between his work (not his own handiwork) and mine was that he had regard rather to the joy and use of *having*, and I rather to the joy and use of *doing*. I should like indeed to emphasise this distinction, and so far as I, even I—*pace* Morris—may have any influence, to do the very thing he objected to, namely, just to multiply the lesser arts and to show people how beautiful life may be, life spent upon them...

Having rather than *doing* is not a characteristic of Morris that is emphasised today—nevertheless, it was noted by a friend and contemporary.

Politics was an area where the two men saw eye to eye. On 16 January 1884 *The Journals* read:

In the afternoon Morris came to see me... We and Annie [C-S's wife, daughter of Richard Cobden] had a long discussion on the prospects of the Democratic Federation [Morris joined in January 1883, and left two years later to start the Socialist League and edit the *Commonweal*] and on their conference the other night at Anderton's

Hotel [a once famous Fleet Street establishment, described as, 'in the 60's, heavy with the atmosphere of cut glass and potted palms . . . ancient waiters bearing tankards of beer on tin trays made their way noiselessly up and down the long passage that ran the full length of the hotel. On each side the patrons sat in basket chairs sipping their ale . . .]. We told him that we thought he ought to put his principles into practice in his own case, that his appeal would be much more powerful if he did so. He said he was in a corner and could not, that no one person could; that, to say the truth, he was a coward and feared to do so; that there was his wife, and the girls; and how could he put it upon them? . . . Dear old Morris, he would be much happier if he could put his ideas into practice.

And on 23 July 1884:

On Monday, Morris and the Hyndmans came to lunch with us, and I afterwards went with them to Hyde Park to take the opportunity of the Liberal demonstration to spread socialistic literature and to hold an open-air meeting. This last was a fiasco, being brought to an ignominious close by an ugly rush of the crowd . . . [This incident is described on page 264 of Philip Henderson's book 'William Morris, his Life, Work and Friends'.].

On 15 April 1884, Cobden-Sanderson wrote at Kelmscott Manor:

Annie and I are staying at Kelmscott. We came down with Morris. Jenny and Miss Irving on Thursday . . . second class, having a carriage to ourselves . . . A country bus met us at the station, we put our luggage inside . . . and Morris with the driver on the box. We drove through Lechlade, made famous by Shelley, and presently arrived at Kelmscott. The old house, grey and gabled, is seated close to, but not immediately upon, the river. The road pulls up at the house at a door in an ivy-covered wall. The door is open and we enter a little green garden of grass and bushes . . . We enter the house . . . into a low, white-washed room with a fire opposite, and low, square windows to right and left, which are east and west. On the table a clean white cloth, and tea. We passed through to rooms beyond on the ground floor and above, all spare of furniture, and having only what is necessary, strips of carpets etc. . . .

At Kelmscott we fared simply but well; read *Our Mutual Friend* aloud, and walked along the roads and across the fields in the mornings and afternoons . . . Outside were the clustered elms, immovable and speechless, growing silently through the years, and about them deepened the darkness . . .

Time passed. On 28 March 1891 Cobden-Sanderson recorded:

I found Mrs Morris very happy, for he was very much better. He was having his supper - oysters etc. When he finished, I went into his room, and found him sitting in a chair by the fire with a large silk handkerchief spread over his knees. He looked - despite his supper! -

a little empty, his clothes hanging somewhat loosely upon him. But he was cheery and hopeful, and fell to talking about the new book (*The Glittering Plain*) now in the course of printing at the Morris Press...

The Press has been set up in a little cottage opposite The Doves, and next door to Sussex House, and is worked by two compositors and one pressman – of course all by hand. I saw the new type, and the sheets, paper and vellum, already printed the *The Glittering Plain*.

And on 12 September 1896:

Morris is dying, slowly. It is an astonishing spectacle. He sits speechless, waiting for the end to come...

'But', he said to Mary de Morgan, 'but I cannot believe that I shall be annihilated.'

11 October 1896:

Morris is dead. He died on Saturday 3rd October at 11.30 in the morning. I last saw him alive in Rivercourt Road the preceding Monday... Morris in a bathchair, with a shawl across his shoulders, drawn by Sydney Cockerell, on his right hand his wife and daughter May, and on his left F. S. Ellis... I had never seen Morris in his chair before. It was a strange sensation to see the strong man so reduced. Yet he looked clear of complexion and ruddy red, and though he said not a word he yet lifted his gloved hand and waved me farewell...

Cobden-Sanderson noted as a postscript some time after Morris died:

[Dolmetsch] is making a clavichord for Margaret Mackail, and one was in the room just finished for Frank Harris. He needed it, Harris said, for his nerves! Dolmetsch, at the close of the evening, played on the virginal – the same virginal – the airs he had played to Morris a little before his death. Morris burst into tears, and asked why such music had not been played to him before...

When, in 1900, Cobden-Sanderson started the Doves Press, he employed 'with a superlative character' J. H. Mason as compositor. Mason recorded this last connection between Cobden-Sanderson and Morris:

It happened that I had a print of Watt's portrait of Morris. I brought it to the Press and pinned it up over the fireplace. C-S framed it, and it remained there so long as the Press remained at No. 1, The Terrace. I did not reclaim it, but left it behind me.