

An Old House Amongst New Folk

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“O me! O me! How I love the earth, and the seasons, and weather, and all things that deal with it, and all that grows out of it — as this has done!”¹

So Morris extolled Kelmscott in *News from Nowhere*, through the guise of Ellen. The latter was the medium whereby Morris could express the relationship of the “old house amongst new folk”: could express what Kelmscott meant in his life, how it concentrated his thoughts, why its existence should be fostered.

According to Esther Meynell, to Morris a house, particularly an old one, was a “visible entity, something that had a life of its own”.² Certainly a house did present a “visible entity”:

you come face to face with a mass of grey walls and pearly grey roofs which makes the House,³

yet it held not “a life of its own”. Mackail claimed that for Morris “the House Beautiful represented the visible form of life itself”⁴; Morris himself saw it as “the child of the man-inhabited earth, the expression of the life of man thereon”⁵, 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.⁶

In Ellen’s words: “The earth and the growth of it and the life of it! If I could but say or show how I love it!”⁷

Kelmscott encased, nurtured, radiated the combined vibrance of nature and mankind in harmony; it was “a piece of nature”; it “added to the natural beauty of the earth instead of marring it”⁸; it was “the growth of the very soil of the country; the outcome of many centuries of thought”.⁹ It was not important to Morris for simply personal reasons — for the joys and sorrows which he would experience there. He believed that architecture bore

... witness to the development of man’s ideas, to the continuity of history, ... telling us what were the aspirations of men passed away, but also what we may hope for in the time to come.¹⁰

In his lecture on the Gothic Revival [I], he elaborated this concept:

... it has a homeliness and love of life which makes it pleasant and human ... it is not its super-imposed defects that make it lovable but the tradition still lingering in it which has remained from the times of art which produced work at once logical and beautiful.¹¹

Ellen summarised all these thoughts of Morris on the “making” of Kelmscott:

“Yes, friend, this is what I came out for to see; this many-gabled old house built by the simple country-folk of the long-past times, regardless of all the turmoil that was going on in cities and courts, ... It seems to me as if it had waited for these happy days, and held in it the gathered crumbs of happiness of the confused and turbulent past.”¹²

Morris did not advocate retention of the old without thought to maintenance. While buildings should be “instructive relics” they should also be used, thus being preserved.¹³

In such fashion did Kelmscott survive “amongst new folk”:

Everywhere there was but little furniture, and that only the most necessary, and of the simplest forms. The extravagant love of ornament which I had noted in this people elsewhere seemed here to have given place to the feeling that the house itself and its associations was the ornament of the country life amidst which it had been left stranded from old times, and that to re-ornament it would but take away its use as a piece of natural beauty.¹⁴

Roderick Marshall envisaged Kelmscott as “a rectangular mandala”¹⁵ — the valance poem ‘For the Bed’ at Kelmscott conjured for him an image of the “personified bed, heart of the personified house”, which together with the natural surroundings provided “the elements of an unbelievable assuagement, the beloved source of many ‘epochs of rest’ which continually freshened the springs of life.”¹⁶ In fact, these elements were not simply components of “an unbelievable assuagement” — they were assumed to be the desirable components of life for all:

I think I may assume that, on the one hand, there is nobody ... so abnormally made as not to take a pleasure in green fields, and trees, and rivers, and mountains, the beings, human and otherwise, that inhabit those scenes, and in a word, the general beauty and incident of nature: and that, on the other, we all of us find human intercourse necessary to us.¹⁷

In *News*, the people had become “eager about all the goings on in the fields and woods and downs”.¹⁸ At Kelmscott, Morris was to partake often of “a good stout wrestle with the forces of nature”¹⁹, when “The wind’s on the wold ... and Thames runs chill”:²⁰

My hands are still somewhat stiff with my work on the river — Lord! How cold it blew.

... the wind right in our teeth and the eddies going like a Japanese tea-tray: I must say it was delightful: ... please the pigs, I will have a sail on the floods to-morrow.²¹

On the river trip to Kelmscott in *News*, Dick replied to the old man at Runnymede, “I should like it, ... What a jolly sail one would get about here on the floods on a bright frosty January morning!”²² And as Dick appreciated Guest’s feeling for the wintry flooded Thames, so Ellen could envisage the summery upper Thames:

“O the beautiful fields!” she said; “I had no idea of the charm of a very small river like this. The smallness of the scale of everything, the short reaches, and the speedy change of the banks, give one a feeling of going somewhere, of coming to something strange, a feeling of adventure which I have not felt in bigger waters.”

I looked up at her delightedly; for her voice, saying the very thing which I was thinking, was like a caress to me ...²³

That caress would carry to “the lichened wall” of Kelmscott, which *had* “grown up out of the soil”, was “like a natural growth of the meadow”²⁴, and

... You know my faith, and how I feel I have no sort of right to revenge myself for any of my private troubles on the kind earth: and here I feel her kindness very specially and am bound not to meet it with a long face. ²⁵

The “kind earth” — parent of Kelmscott — also personified. Yet this was no abstract, ethereal form of literary licence. Morris always alluded to practical real human involvement with the earth.

I turned a little to my right, and through the hawthorn sprays and long shoots of the wild roses could see the flat country spreading out far away under the sun of the calm evening, till something that might be called hills with a look of sheep-

pastures about them bounded it with a soft blue line. Before me, the elm-boughs still hid most of what houses there might be in this river-side dwelling of men.²⁶ For him even the garden was not simply a vagrancy of Nature, should not “imitate either the wilfulness or the wildness of Nature”.²⁷ At Kelmscott, Giles’s gardening skills constantly delighted him²⁸, so that the garden always succeeded in being “a part of the house, yet at least the clothes of it”.²⁹

My companion gave a sigh of pleased surprise and enjoyment; nor did I wonder, for the garden between the wall and the house was redolent of the June flowers, and the roses were rolling over one another with that delicious super-abundance of small well-tended gardens which at first sight takes away all thought from the beholder save that of beauty.³⁰

And that garden could be extended:

... the fields were everywhere treated as a garden made for the pleasure as well as the livelihood of all.³¹

Likewise Nature’s contributions were not empty of human communion — of man’s “half-anxious sense of the delight of meadow and acre and wood and river”.³² Morris’s keen observations, lovingly related in so many letters from Kelmscott,³³ are succinctly summarised in *News*:

The blackbirds were singing their loudest, the doves were cooing on the roof-ridge, the rooks in the high elm-trees beyond were garrulous among the young leaves, and the swifts wheeled whining about the gables. And the house itself was a fit guardian for all the beauty of this heart of summer.³⁴

The “beloved source of many ‘epochs of rest’” was in fact that source which would render concrete Morris’s socialist feelings, that source where he “...scarce dare move/Lest earth and its love/Should fade away/Ere the full of the day.”³⁵ He fervently craved the “living in beautiful places” for all — “I mean the sort of beauty which would be attainable by all, if people could but begin to long for it.” To “lift the standard of revolt” he had earlier wished he could do more than “mere constant private grumbling and occasional public speaking”.³⁶ Now Ellen indicates the way, as her

last mournful look seemed to say, “Go on living while you may, striving, with whatsoever pain and labour needs must be, to build up little by little the new day of fellowship, and rest, and happiness.”³⁷

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