‘What’s in a Name?’: Morris & Co.’s Stained Glass in Australia

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Morris & Co. made little attempt to capture an Australian market. The firm was attuned to its clientele and must have been aware that those Australians attracted to its home products came from the social ranks which made regular visits to England. On such trips they were happy to go on buying sprees and to arrange shipping of purchases home. This situation, considered together with small population size and prevalent taste (which ran either to classical or French modes), meant that to concentrate on an Australian market would have been economically unsound. In stained glass however the company did take advantage of the upsurge with the Great War of memorial windows and between May 1914 and June 1921 advertised fortnightly in the Sydney publication *The Church Standard*.

The earliest ads in *The Church Standard* were illustrated and remained unchanged for four years. Prospective customers were directed to the firm’s London shop and Merton Abbey works. In stained glass this was for Morris & Co. a standard practice for overseas ordering; at the Boston Foreign Fair of 1883 clients were likewise advised to send instructions to the company’s Oxford Street address. The most outstanding feature of the entire run of Sydney ads over seven years was the bold presentation of the names MORRIS and BURNE-JONES. The firm obviously believed that the popularity of its stained glass rested entirely upon the acknowledged reputations of the two men who had formalised its style. Yet initially it was felt necessary to expressly mention that Morris & Co. had no relation to any other firm using the name of Morris, and this was done with some good reason for the Australian market.

St. Augustine’s Anglican Church, Unley, South Australia dedicated a magnificent Morris & Co. East Window in June 1928. So impressed was the rector E. H. Fernie that he reported to his parishioners that he was anxious to see more stained glass in the church and in particular a West Window ‘by the same firm’. Yet when the West Window was ordered from Morris and Co. in May 1929 Fernie announced ‘with very great joy’ that such had been placed with the firm of William Morris & Son. The rector’s misquoting of the company name suggests that he was completely unaware of the reputations of the designers which featured so prominently in the Sydney advertisement. The English firm of Morris & Son is represented in South Australia with two windows, St. Stephen and St. Paul of c.1913, in Christ Church, Kadina, one of the towns developed to service a local mining industry. It is not possible to mistake these works for those of Morris & Co. Not only do they present a highly popular Gothic Revival style of stalwart figure with elaborate pedestal and canopy but in the lower left corner of the St. Paul the name Morris & Son appears with part of an address, ‘39 Kensington, London’.

Fernie’s misconception did not mean a general ignorance of Morris’s and Burne-
Janes’s work in Australia. However, those who did introduce the company’s products to this country usually did so following personal attendance at the Oxford Street shop or Merton Abbey works. Mining magnate George Brookman brought home three tapestries – an Adoration of the Magi (1902), David Instructing Solomon in the Building of the Temple (1903) and a small Flora – after being impressed by Morris & Co.’s exhibit at the 1900 Paris International Exhibition and subsequently visiting Merton Abbey. He also introduced the first Morris & Co. stained glass to mainland Australia, donating the Federation window of 1901 to the Adelaide Stock Exchange. The Barr Smith family decorated three substantial homes in Adelaide with Morris & Co. products between 1884 and 1903 and encouraged their children to do likewise. They organised such schemes during extended visits to Britain. And despite the fact that Christ Church Cathedral, Newcastle, New South Wales, boasts an impressive collection of nearly seventy Gothic Revival windows by C. E. Kempe & Co. it was also the recipient in 1906 of a large circular Dies Domini from Morris & Co. because parishioner Essie Wood was an ardent admirer of Burne-Jones’s work for the company. With her husband John she travelled to England expressly to acquire a window for the Cathedral to the artist’s design. However, the combined fame of Burne-Jones and Morris & Co. in producing the Dies Domini did not seem to impress anyone other than the Woods for some six decades. The window was not mentioned in the Cathedral’s Official Handbook until 1938 where it was described as being ‘designed by the celebrated artist Burne Jones’ and ‘executed by Watts of London’. This misconception continued until 1971 when finally the window’s manufacture was ascribed correctly to ‘William Morris and Co. of London’.

When Morris & Co. moved its showrooms to 17 George Street, Hanover Square, in 1917 it altered its ads in The Church Standard. The illustration was eliminated but the bold presentation of MORRIS and BURNE-JONES retained. The warning against other traders at the bottom of the ad was simply replaced by ‘Founded by William Morris the Poet’, suggesting that Morris’s literary works were enjoying renewed interest. It is likely that the firm’s advertising campaign acted as a reinforcement to the choice of the first Morris & Co. window for Sydney in 1919, a three-light version of Sts. Patrick, George and Andrew in All Saints Anglican Church, Hunters Hill. It was dedicated to Charles Manning and his two sons killed during the Great War. The church, completed in 1888, already contained a fine east window and several chancel and nave windows by the respected local firm of Lyon, Cottier & Co. These displayed a stolid Gothic Revival style in warm russet colours and are in complete contrast to the Morris & Co. work. Morris & Co.’s Catalogue of Designs listed the All Saints window on 2 January 1919 together with two others, a St. Paul and a Jonathan, designed for All Souls’ Anglican Church, St. Peters, South Australia. The noting of the three windows on the same date would seem not to be coincidental.²

Initially, like so many Australian churches, All Souls’ had no stained glass windows. Sometime in 1917 the St. Paul and Jonathan were ordered jointly and privately from Morris & Co. by two parishioners – Mrs Bagot and Mrs Sucking. In style the windows were executed as a pair and face each other on opposite sides of the nave. Morris & Co. notified the church by June 1918 that the windows were ready for shipment but delayed ‘for want of permission from
the Government and it was another year before they sat in a packing case in the church awaiting installation. Unlike his counterpart at St. Augustine’s, Unley, the rector of All Souls’, W. G. M. Murphy, knew exactly who was responsible for the windows and following the unveiling on 6 July 1919 he informed all that ‘The church has been enriched with two very beautiful memorial windows, from the studio of Morris & Co., Merton Abbey, Surrey.’

Mrs Sucking and an unmarried daughter had moved to Sydney to live in August 1916, yet she obviously maintained her friendship with Mrs Bagot, resulting in the shared ordering of the two South Australian windows. She may also have been on friendly terms with Mrs Manning in Sydney, and the last death, of young Charles Manning, may have caused the three women to honour their dead. Competition in advertising at the time in The Church Standard was offered to Morris & Co. by the Gothic Revival traditionalists Heaton, Butler & Bayne and Jones & Willis, and their styles, while compatible with that of Lyon, Cottier & Co., would have been totally incongruous in the Byzantine All Souls’. Thus compatibility with architectural style may well have swayed the choice to Morris & Co.

Just why imported stained glass was often preferred to the local product in Australia is apparent from the Rev. Murphy’s attitude. In costing a £30 imported window, Murphy assessed additional expenses at £20 for freight, insurance and customs dues but asserted that local manufacturers were charging around £50 for a similar item so that it was ‘worth while going to London straight away’. He held a low opinion of the quality of the local product and believed there was ‘no greater horror in church adornment than cheap and inferior glass’. His ultimate goal was ‘that the glass in All Souls’ will be all supplied by the same firm, so uniformity in design and quality will be assured’.

The prospect alone of the Suckling and Bagot windows inspired Murphy and he ordered a St. Michael in memory of young parishioners Fred Bassett and John Gordon who both died in 1917. Before the arrival of this window the Wendt family donated in 1919 Dearle’s three-light War window in memory of their youngest son Kenneth, unique for its personalisation in the centre light of the young soldier in uniform and battalion colours of the Australian Tenth Battalion. When the St. Michael arrived Murphy reiterated that the window had come from ‘the world-famous studio’ of Morris & Co. but added ‘and is probably the work of Mr. Dearle (who designed the Wendt Window)’.

The figure of St. Michael was originally designed by Burne-Jones in 1874 for the multi-light west window of Calcutta Cathedral and in 1893 appeared again with company in the multi-light chancel east window of Albion Congregational Church, Ashton-under-Lyne, Lancs. The Bassett-Gordon window in All Souls’ would appear to be the only other example of this St. Michael and the only time it was presented as a single light. In his dealings with Morris & Co. Murphy had corresponded with Dearle alone. The notion that Dearle was the author of the St. Michael design would have been reinforced by a letter received by Murphy some three months after the dedication of the window, wherein Dearle explained that the figures representing the souls were symbols not to be viewed as realistic, and revealed that the window ‘was much admired by many’ who had seen it during production at Merton Abbey. The last Morris & Co. window in Australia was
Peace of 1939, installed in All Souls’ in the transept chapel opposite that displaying War and in memory of H. K. Wendt who died in February 1938. It is virtually the same as the original 1920 Dearle design for St. Bartholomew’s, Wilmslow.

The Rev. Murphy insisted that stained glass windows adorned Anglican churches as a tradition uniting past and present and that only in churches would memorials be respected and maintained, those in secular buildings eventually being resented and removed. However, his stand was not solely based on the spiritual; his real pleasure in the appearance of the Wendt War window surely recognised the very grounds which Morris fixed for his company’s output: ‘I sometimes prayed that our church might have some work of art which would be peculiarly precious and would attract people here by its beauty, and that prayer was granted’.8

NOTES
2 For dates from Morris & Co.’s Catalogue of Designs, and cross-referencing with original designs, I am indebted to A. Charles Sewter’s The Stained Glass of William Morris and His Circle, (New Haven: Yale University Press 1974-75).
3 All Souls’ Parish Magazine, XVII, 10, (June 1918).
4 ibid., XVIII, 10, (July 1919).
5 ibid., XVII, 7, (March 1918).
6 ibid., XXII, 2, (March 1924).
7 ibid., XXIII, 4, (June 1924).
8 ibid., XX, 2, (December 1920).