

# Edmund Penning-Rowsell (1913–2002)

## Ray Watkinson

The person who could best have written a memorial for Edmund Penning-Rowsell was John Kay, who recently, much too young, died himself. In the earliest days of the Society John worked on the presentation of our first exhibition: 'The Typographical Adventure of William Morris'. He was thus very close to our first committee of which Eddie was a founding member. Eddie was one of those pioneers who, meeting at Red House, brought us into being; the others were John Brandon-Jones, Nikolaus Pevsner and Robin Page-Arnot. Last survivor of that group, Eddie died, aged 88, on 4 March 2002.

I had always taken him to be some years my senior, but we were much of an age. He was born in 1913, a week too early to share Morris's birthday; I, nine months less one day after him. So we passed parallel lives through the just-gone century, and although domestically far apart we were shaped by the same historic forces. The Wall Street Crash of 1929 produced a devastating effect in Britain: three million out of work and the bankruptcy of thousands of businesses, large and small. One such bankruptcy was of Eddie's family's business, leading to his abrupt leaving of Marlborough College where he had been at school. Now that the logical progression to Oxford was impossible he had to seek work, which he found in Fleet Street working as a journalist on the *Morning Post*. Whether his years at Marlborough made Eddie the dedicated Morrisian he became I never asked, but events in the 1930s such as the Spanish Civil War certainly moved him far more to the Left. In 1937 Eddie married Meg Wintringham, sister of Tom, a journalist friend who had been sent to Spain in 1936 to report on the precarious beginnings of the Spanish Republic.

He then moved into publishing, working for Fred Muller. After WWII, during which he worked for engineering firm Plessey, he returned to Fred Muller then moved to Batsford. In the early 1960s he was working for Studio Vista, the book publishing extension of Gleeson White's seminal art magazine *The Studio*; the publisher was in the throes of change, one of which put Eddie in the Chief Editor's chair. At that time Barbara Morris was an assistant in Peter Floud's Circulation Department at the V&A and Eddie invited her to write a book on Morris as a designer. Barbara declined and I was approached, and so began a new and close relationship between us. We would meet sometimes in his office, sometimes in his extraordinary room at the back of the Russell Hotel – as long and narrow as a tunnel in a pyramid. We ate and drank and talked about Morris, my research and his anxious wish for the book. This place was his *pied à Londres*. Friday sent him home to his lovely grey stone house in Woodstock and wife Meg. His anxiety for the book on Morris was not just because under his English squire exuberance he was modest and nervous, but because publishing is a place of tremors as was

made plain when, at the point of exchanging contracts he came back from summer vacation to a curt dismissal. Editor's projects come and go with individuals and the Morris project died until revived by David Herbert in 1965.

By this time Eddie had become President of the Wine Society and it was in the service of wine – above all the wines of Bordeaux – that he spent the latter half of his life. While editing the *Journal of the William Morris Society* I had hopes of getting Eddie to write us an article on Morris and wine, tempting him with a quote from Mackail: “It was the most beautiful sight in the world,” says one of the old friends of Red House days, “To see Morris coming up from the cellar before dinner, beaming with joy, his hands full of bottles of wine and others tucked inside his arms”. This can only have come from Philip Webb, a more refined wine lover than Morris, as May tells us in her 1936 account of life at 26 Queen Square. The article was never written, to our loss. Claret was for Eddie the king (or queen) of wines. I doubt his approving of Keats, one of Morris's early loves, peppering his tongue to enhance its drinking.

It was not actually until we were both 50 that I really met Eddie, and by then we had sat through five years of Morris Society committees. He was a faithful attender, although committee meetings after a working day in publishing were not his best-loved evening's pleasure. The last time I spoke with Eddie was also at a Morris Society meeting, long after he had ceased to serve on the committee, at a Kelmscott Lecture. He appeared lively and erect, in typical good tweed, red rose in button hole. The very last time I heard from him was I guess about his 80th birthday. Out of the blue I had a letter in his non-even anti-calligraphic hand to say that he and his wife would be near at hand in Sussex for a couple of days. He had never seen that earliest of the Firm's commissions in the church of St Michael and All Angels and they would be very happy if I could show them round, which I was delighted to do. In this very early Bodley church made of austere rough red brick every member of the young Firm but Rossetti had worked on decoration and glass, including the splendid four-light window in which Morris and Madox Brown had shared archangels.