

The Kelmscott Press: An Album from the Nineties

by Colin Franklin

WILLIAM MORRIS was not vulgar in selling fine products successfully, though it is surprising that he of all people achieved this for thirty years of busy trading. There was always the embarrassing difference between medieval villagers for whom in his heart he was designing, and the rich few who were able to buy his designs. But there were ways to argue round that and he did sell the glass, paper, carpets, furniture and cretons which his company produced or designed through all the booms and slumps of his Victorian life. A mixture of hard work and commerce was near to the heart of what he urged and believed. These days it would be fair to call it crafty.

Morris' success was not predictable, or imitable. As a printer, for instance, it was not merely the excitement of limited editions. These had been a common device of publishers before him; and after, Cobden-Sanderson had trouble in selling his Doves Press books – fixing the size of editions by a guess at likely sales, rather than the proper limit for a pressman of artistic temperament. The print number of the later Doves books went down to 150, simply because Cobden-Sanderson was finding he could not sell more. But it is startling to learn that from its early years the Kelmscott Press was recognised for outstanding work which would endure and bear comparison for all time with the finest which printers had ever created. A look at some reviews and trade catalogues of the nineties pasted carefully into an album by a collector at that time, makes this quite clear.

Morris died in October 1896 and the Press closed two years later when the designs and plans on which he was working had been carried out. Buxton Forman's obituary notice gives the tone of opinion.

'Many of his own fourth-period books appeared first in this sumptuous form, and now, as he lies at peace in the quiet little Oxfordshire village

which gives his press its name, the fortunate possessors of the great folio Chaucer edited by his old friend Frederick Ellis and beautified by the lovely pictures of his older friend Edward Burne-Jones, whom he playfully called "the Baronet", are turning in wonder the pages of the noblest book ever printed'.

And as the Chaucer had only appeared in that year, any publisher – even posthumously – would be glad about such a splendid phrase for quoting.

The Kelmscott Press was granted a sense of occasion and of greatness in its own time. A catalogue issued by Tregaskis of High Holborn in 1895 has a black-letter headline for a copy of *The Story of the Glittering Plain* in its 1891 edition, 'First book Printed by William Morris'. And the price there is six guineas, or three times its price of issue four years before. Leightons in 1896 have a list headed Kelmscott Press Publications with the sub-head 'All out of Print and Scarce'. It was unfair of them, though, to say of the little Savonarola volume produced for Fairfax Murray, that there were 'only 100 copies privately printed'. The numbers were 150 paper, and six vellum.

One week after the death of Morris there appeared under *Random Thoughts* some which were well informed and far from random, in the local paper at Kidderminster. The Mayor of that town was a book collector called Tomkinson, whose son put together in 1929 an invaluable Bibliography of Modern Presses, which is still the standard work. One suspects that bibliographer Tomkinson signing himself Jaques had the *Random Thoughts* that week, and wrote about his father's copy of the Kelmscott Chaucer which had been lent to the local museum.

This book is a triumph of the printer's art, and, in its own style, has been pronounced to be, beyond dispute, the finest ever issued. William Morris has proved by the products of his Kelmscott Press, that modern artists and craftsmen can meet the printers of the fifteenth century on their own ground, and beat them easily. Not Wynkyn de Worde in England, nor Shoeffler in Germany, nor any printer of Italy, France, or Spain in the "golden age" of the art, ever turned out so rich a page of type. Nor is this all: it is even said that the decorative borders of Rotdolt at Venice, or of the Zainers at Ulm and Augsburg, are poor in comparison with those of Morris.

In April 1898, when the last two books of the Press were issued, the *Saturday Review* judges that 'though the Kelmscott Press is now a matter of history, its influence on the modern making of books lives, penetrates further every day, and helps

in some degree to redeem this age from being an apotheosis of the "Cheap and Nasty" in craftsmanship'. *The Times Review of Literature* had a lofty sentence about the whole matter in its notice of the Vale Press book by Ricketts and Lucien Pissarro which appeared in 1898, 'De la Typographie et de l'Harmonie de la Page Imprimée. William Morris et son Influence sur les Arts et Metiers'.

M. Pissarro's view of this particular phase in its application to the production of artistic letterpress and ornamentation, and his estimate of its power to indelibly stamp the art of the future in this respect, may be like the baseless fabric of a vision, but it is, notwithstanding, a valuable contribution to present-day criticism, which is distinctly eulogistic of the Kelmscott School and its founder.

And the most distinct eulogy comes from Germany, where in 1898 the *Bucherfreund* has nine pages with reproductions from Kelmscott Press books.

A time will come when all those who knew William Morris, the man, will be no more. The powerful movement in industrial art which he called forth by his example and energy will pass away. His artistic methods will give place to other fashions, and his poetry, like that of the pre-Raphaelite school, will remain known only to the student; but his books, the creations of the Kelmscott Press, will remain—a living force, the most finished of all he has willed and created, the most perfect expression of his mighty artistic individuality.

That view of pre-Raphaelite poetry may be wild, but the opinion of Morris' printing is still quite tenable.

Where merit was so widely recognised, collectors and booksellers crowded into the ground. Morris' death was like the end of a test match when enthusiasts dash over for stumps and autographs. The hint was quickly dropped, that Kelmscott books would be a sound investment. Jaques wrote quite accurately in the *Kidderminster Shuttle*

It is needless to say that the Kidderminster Museum is not itself rich enough to purchase a work of this class: though it would not be a bad commercial investment to acquire a copy of Morris' Chaucer, for in a few years it will realise ten times its cost price.

Our surprise now is this instant perception that something great had been produced. *The Times Review of Literature* in April, 1898 declared that 'The works issued from the Kelmscott

Press have already proved to be the best literary investment of modern times'.

Perhaps the most endearing appeal to collectors, less brash than these phrases about fine investment which seem always to be prepared by the vulgar for the vulgar, comes in a catalogue from Robson, the bookseller of Coventry Street, Piccadilly. It is fascinating to find, in May 1896, assumptions about 'the hurry of modern life', when horses brought books to Coventry Street, and there was no point in looking at the sky for aeroplanes.

Owing to the limited number of these books issued, many of which are already out of print, they have, or will undoubtedly soon, become of great rarity and value. The quaintness and beauty of their decorations, the old-world appearance of paper and type, cannot but have a fascination for the collector, who amidst the hurry of modern life wishes sometimes to withdraw 'From the madding crowd' and revel in the society of the silent friends he is able, by the enthusiastic genius of the creator of this series of books, to gather round him.

Though far the commonest friend in these books is Morris himself, not generally remembered for his silence.

With so much sound advice one could now feel mildly cross, perhaps, that one's grandfathers did nothing about it. Times were so easy and taxes low, they could well have afforded. Prices, in spite of these clever predictions, stayed most temptingly low; but collectors are probably more excited by competition when the prices have risen. Looking through all the catalogues and cuttings, it would have been terribly easy to buy. Why ever didn't they think of it?

There were signs of rise, but nothing to alarm. Tregaskis in 1895 offered Morris' *Poems By the Way*, the second book from the Press, for four pounds fifteen shillings and it had been issued at two guineas. Elkin Mathews in the same year was asking three pounds, and at Sotheby in 1898 it went for six pounds ten shillings. Shakespeare's *Poems*, a well loved and rare volume though as many as five hundred were printed, was marked at fifty shillings in the Tregaskis list, 1895, and three guineas by Elkin Mathews. Frank Hollings in 1897 was asking five pounds. The published price had been twenty-five shillings. A manuscript list from a salesman in Elkin Mathews, dated March 1898, had *News From Nowhere* at four pounds fifteen shillings, and three years earlier the same shop had asked only two pounds eighteen. Keats's *Poems* showed the strongest public attention. Issued at

thirty shillings, Frank Hollings was asking nine pounds ten shillings in 1897, and at the Sotheby sale next year it fetched twelve pounds.

The Chaucer in spite of recognition, showed no such rise in proportion. Its price from the Press was twenty guineas. Elkin Mathews asked thirty-five pounds in 1898, but that was high. Leighton's had wanted thirty pounds in its year of issue, and that too seems excessive. Tregaskis had it at twenty pounds in 1898, which looks like a bargain, and in the April sale at Sotheby's in that year it fetched twenty-eight pounds, seventeen shillings and sixpence—only a little more than twice as much as the Keats. Its value in 1966 was about six or seven hundred pounds.

Collectors seem to have been slow in snapping up the few copies printed on vellum. Remembering that some books had as few as six vellum copies, it is slightly surprising to find Sotheran in 1897 offering a vellum set of Kelmscott books, though of course they may have been carefully collecting it and several at that date had still to be issued from the Press. Their price for the whole set was six hundred and fifty pounds. That is an offer my grandfathers might have noticed. And if one missed that, the other could yet have seen a printed note from the Press, quoting the same price, in July 1897, sounding even more attractive; for there we learn that 'The Chaucer has been bound in white stamped pigskin at the Doves Bindery, under Mr. Cobden-Sanderson's direction, from a design by William Morris'.

If one grandfather or the other had enjoyed that small red specimen of Kelmscott printing, the advertisement for the vellum set, he might have been caught by item 692 in the Tregaskis list of May 1898. He could then have cabled his order for 'The last of the Kelmscott Printing Office. Demy Folio Albion Iron Press, made by Hopkinson and Cope, purchased by William Morris for taking proofs of the Kelmscott Press publications, and used from the first for that purpose and for printing the leaflets'. His for thirty guineas. I should be enjoying a pleasant apprenticeship now, clumsily producing some leaflets which could yet carry the ghost of faint interest by association.