On the binding of Kelmscott Press books

by Colin Franklin

MORRIS took such care to master each stage of the printing and fabric of a book in his Kelmscott Press days, that it is surprising how little he bothered about the binding. ‘The binding of the books in vellum and in half-holland was from the first done by J. and J. Leighton’, Sparling writes. He cared enough about it to rescue for himself, when vellum was used, the skins showing brown hair marks—but his treatment of the problem otherwise, bearing in mind his great fastidiousness and his ability to learn each craft he encountered, shows disrespect. Indeed there was enough in his life without troubling with techniques of what we would call packaging; and bindings may have looked to him rather as we see book-jackets. But the ancient art of book-binding should have appealed to him, and his neglect is surprising.

His printed slip in the first volume of the Golden Legend is well known: ‘If this book be bound the edges of the leaves should only be TRIMMED, not cut. In no case should the book be pressed, as that would destroy the “impression” of the type and thus injure the appearance of the printing’. The assumption behind this instruction is of course that the half-holland and paper board binding of this book was not meant to be permanent; that he supposed as earlier printers and publishers often had, that the man who bought the work would want to choose and commission a binding for his library. The point is taken further by a letter from Morris inserted loosely in my copy of the Golden Legend, written to Gilbert Redgrave, author of a book on Ratdolt. It is dated November 13th, from Kelmscott House, Upper Mall, Hammersmith, and a pencilled note gives the year 1892.

Dear Mr Redgrave,

Thank you for your letter and its criticisms. The proportions of page of print to paper seem to me right, & (granted
I think it would ruin them if the top margin were bigger either positively or relatively.

The absence of a line to the initials seemed to me to suit my designs; I do not profess merely to follow precedent, or to imitate Ratdolt. The arrangement of the half-title is designed: as the vols. are cut quite arbitrarily and I wished to show that.

There is a variation in the paper due to necessity: I do not think it a serious blemish: all the paper is made in the same deckle; but I got the paper made better and with less shrinkage after the 1st batch. The edges could be easily trimmed when the book is bound, so as to get more uniformity in the size. Of course the book is issued ‘done up’, and not bound: and under the circumstances it would have been a mistake I think to have trimmed the edges.

Thanking you again, I am, dear Mr Redgrave,

Yours very truly,

William Morris.

This book has recently been bound for me by Mr Anthony Gardner, and the task took him 137 hours. In a letter of July 1967 he wrote:

Just prior to coming away I made a start on your
GOLDEN LEGEND.

The spines had been rather viciously glued, and whether I pulled “dry”, or “damp” some splitting of outer folds had occurred, whch. will necessitate some neat guarding. And then, to my surprise, I found that the half-title leaves were the innermost of a 4 to gathering, both outer leaves of which were glued to the boards! . . . thus:

This necessitated soaking in very hot water in order to retrieve the half-title folds. Of course, neither Morris nor Cobden-Sanderson knew much about the finer sides of forwarding, but since the idea was that these “done up” (sic) vols. wld. be re-bound for wealthy buyers – witness the Note to the Binder who sold w. the books – I am surprised that they didn’t watch this point. . . and the gluing (ibid.).

By his lack of concern for the future of his books when they left his hands, Morris produced a problem which nobody can
solve. The easiest example is in the Chaucer, which was issued ‘done up’ with holland back and paper board; a thoroughly inadequate form of protection if that book is to be enjoyed and used. Certainly Morris, most practical of artists, never meant the books to be merely admired as physical objects. And the fact of life is, that if a binder gives it a sound binding and nips the pages safely and strongly, one can no longer see a double page; for the inner margins will be three-quarters lost. Most of the inner borders and decorations get hidden on pages where these occur. I have tested this in several copies including a recent fine binding by Sangorski and Sutcliffe, and an example of the Doves binding to Morris’ own design. Where the original half-holland remains, one can open the book and enjoy the double pages; but I would be frightened to handle it much or turn the leaves as a reader should. And if I have a sound strong book to hold, part of the plan is lost. The conclusion is that through too little thought about the problems of permanent binding, inner margins of Kelmscott Press books are inadequate.

To some extent, this criticism also holds for most of the Kelmscott books which have their original white vellum bindings. I do not know whether Morris would have described these as ‘done up’ and waiting for different treatment. More care and cost went into them certainly, and the tapes were specially woven by his firm, but they are not very strongly stitched or bound. The first books from the Press, with stiff vellum covers and clear nips at the spine which had to be made if anyone could open them to read at all, are still the easiest and soundest to use. The soft vellum Morris preferred later (Biblia Innocentium, 1892, was the last to be bound in stiff vellum) tends to get hard with age, though there are possible ways of treating it none of which I trust; and then one can only peep inside with cover opened at an angle less than forty-five degrees, without doing damage or hearing a ghastly crackle.

And a mystery in it all, for us, is those remarkable people ‘the collectors’. They will not have their Kelmscott books bound, one is told, though Cobden-Sanderson’s bindings take expensive books beyond all sensible limits. So we have ever grubbier copies of these superb works straying about the auction rooms and bookshops. I can imagine how splendid the shelves at Quaritch must have looked when the vellum was white, and the linen clean. There is something unpleasant in the collectors’ affection for fingered vellum and dirty linen. Morris would have despised it.