Nothing but landscape and sentiment

Margaret Fleming

In April 1854 Harry Macdonald, Georgie’s elder brother, came up to Oxford to join his old friend Ted Jones (Edward Burne-Jones), who showed him the ropes. He wrote to his father: ‘I have been on some very jolly walks, as to Iffley, Cumnor and Godstow. At Godstow is buried fair Rosamund: and Jones is delighted at having found proof, in Miss Strickland’s Queens of England, that she was not the improper person report makes her, but was totally ignorant of the king’s marriage. I hope its true. I know I stood on her grave the other evening.’

This robust approach to local history may explain why Jones preferred to go there alone in future; but all the Set went out to Godstow, for on the bank opposite the Abbey ruins lay ‘the celebrated Trout House of Mr. William Lipscombe, inn-keeper’, where, during the painting of the Union murals in the summer of 1857, Morris was despatched by Rossetti to draw ‘Stunner’ Lipscombe, one of the landlord’s seven daughters.

Meanwhile Harry, that blithe cuckoo in the Macdonald nest, indolent, sociable and fond of sport, spent much of his time at the gymnasium of Archibald Maclaren, the only man who could rouse his interest, so much so that he wished to share it with his sisters. In 1857 he wrote home: ‘Morris will kindly take down a pair of small clubs for Alice to use, and even for Georgie. ... Morris or Ted can show them the proper exercises.’ Comical as it may sound, it demonstrates what a pioneer Maclaren was in physical education, and also Harry’s genuine concern for his sisters’ health, ‘our Pale-faces’ as he called them. In the summers of 1857 and 1858 Georgie and her sisters were kindly invited to stay by Mrs. Maclaren, when they met Peggy Talboys, her sister, who later became engaged to Harry. Their father, John Talboys, was Printer to the University and a colleague of Thomas Combe, the patron of Hunt and Millais, and it was probably through him that they ‘got permission to look at the Pre-Raphaelite pictures in the house of Mr. Combe, the Head of the Clarendon Press’.
The commercial and professional townspeople had wide artistic interests and mixed more with the University than they did later on, for at that time only Professors and Heads of Houses were allowed to marry, so that the Fellows were glad to widen the scope of their social activities by accepting hospitality outside the Colleges. There was still some of the freer spirit of the Age of Reason in Oxford,—indeed both Philip Webb and Jane Morris carried this simplicity with them right through the Victorian era.

The wives had varied independent interests: Mrs. Maclaren, a fine classical scholar, founded Summer Fields school, while Mrs. Jeune, wife of the Master of Pembroke and former Headmaster of King Edward's Birmingham, wrote in her diary: 'a great ball was given last night by some of the Christ Church undergraduates to Mrs. Liddell (wife of the Dean, and mother of Lewis Carroll's 'Alice'). The Vice-Chancellor signalled his disapprobation of it, but little I fancy does she care for VC or any other authority.' In addition to these activities a great deal of charitable work was done, unobtrusive but effective, and the names recorded in the hospital and school archives are those of both Town and Gown. Among the most active were Mrs. Acland and Mrs. Combe, the latter, according to Millais 'though still young, was the foster-mother of the whole parish'.

The parish was St. Paul's in West Oxford, where G. E. Street was at work in 1856 on St. Paul's Industrial School for Combe; both High Churchmen, they shared an interest in church music. In the same year
Combe bought the Mill and Mill House at Wolvercote, just along the road from Godstow. The attractive old house was approached from the back, which faced on to Mill Street; the front was separated from the Godstow-Wytham road by a garden and orchard, but the villagers used the garden as a short cut to the Mill, so Combe, by now Churchwarden of St. Peter's, Wolvercote, persuaded the Parish Council to stop up the foot path 'as it was a great nuisance'.

In February 1858 Morris became engaged to Jane Burden, and although there is no record of where she spent the time until their marriage, it would appear that she remained in the locality. In her introduction to her father's Works May Morris says: 'the portrait of my mother is a little pencil drawing done in 1858—in the Oxford courting days. My mother says it was a study for "La Belle Iseult".' Furthermore, Morris provides his own evidence in his unfinished novel (edited by Penelope Fitzgerald as Novel on Blue Paper). When he sent it to Louie Baldwin he
said ‘Tis nothing but landscape and sentiment’, but it appears to have been drawn from real life.

The landscape bears a striking resemblance to that around Godstow and Wolvercote: Scorton Chase is Port Meadow, the Battle Meads are Oxhay and Picksey Meads, and the Rose Inn—with its allusion to Fair Rosamund—a little low slate-roofed house . . . (which) stood at the brink of a wide pool below the lock, on a sloppy, willowy piece of land is the Trout. Leasor Farm, approached by a road to the back door, which leads through a central passage to the front of the house which gives on ‘to a grass plot with flowers all round, and beyond an orchard bound by the high road and a great untidy hedge’ is an exact description of the Mill House.

Moreover, the conversations between Arthur and Clara sound as if Morris were recalling incidents that had remained in his memory. During the visit to Ruddywell Court, when Arthur and Clara walk through the Long Gallery and come upon an old suit of armour he asks her: ‘Wouldn’t you like to know all about the old fellow that wore it, Clara? How he went to and fro, and who the people were he was fond of?’ ‘Yes’ she said . . . ‘I’ve never seen any old books of that time, Arthur.’ There are some old chronicles at home’, he said. ‘I don’t know why I have never lent them to you . . . Besides, I wasn’t sure that you could read them easily without someone to help. Let me come over and read pieces to you this summer, out in the garden.’

Within a short distance of Godstow lie three 16th century manor houses, Water Eaton (which Morris recalled when he found Kelmscott), Wytham Abbey and Yarnton Manor. The third was then derelict, one wing only occupied as a farmhouse, but Wytham was just across the meadows from Godstow and very like the description of Ruddywell Court.

Did Morris and Jane visit the Combes at Wolvercote, did kind Mrs. Combe perhaps have her to stay to introduce her to the sort of life she would have to adapt to at Red House? New ways of housekeeping are hard to learn except by example, yet Jane’s always had the confidence which denotes practical experience of the work involved.

It is likely that she had been in service; Rossetti, writing to her in 1879 describes his new housemaid: ‘she herself went to service at 11. She is quite clever and capable . . . (and) will be 17 in September. It is difficult to think of such a kid as being only a year younger than your stately self when I first met you.’ (Jane was eighteen in October 1857.) There are several alternatives: she may have started at the Home Farm in Alvescote,
where her mother’s cousin, Mary Maisey, was maid to John and Mary Nalder; when their niece and nephew put up a stained glass window in their memory in Alvescote church, the work was carried out by Morris & Co.

She might also have worked at the Trout; the house adjoining it was used by the Lipscombes as their family home, and they called it Godstow House. They had a running battle with the Vicar of Wolvercote as to whether they were entitled to a pew in church. The vicar consulted the Earl of Abingdon, who owned the land. The Lipscombe family had been in the service of the Earls of Abingdon for three generations and were well established in the neighbourhood. Of William’s brothers, Henry had the Home Farm at Wytham, John kept the White Hart there, Frederick—whose wife came from the same village as Robert Burden—kept the Marquis of Granby in the Cornmarket in Oxford, and James was the Earl’s coachman. By 1851 his place was taken by William Burden, Robert’s second cousin, who lived with his family in Wytham. The village was famous for its strawberry teas, and visitors came up the river and moored at the Trout, ‘which was used as a landing-place by all who ply on the Isis’.

When in March 1859, G. P. Boyce rowed to Godstow with Crom, Faulkner and Jones ‘where we saw the “Stunner” (the future Mrs. William Morris)’, and a month later Hatch ‘saw the water-tilt: Morris, Faulkner & Co. at Godstow’, they would have used this mooring just below the Trout. There was a wide terrace in front of the inn which is where Boyce could have seen Jane, and it is possible she was staying out there before the wedding. It may explain why the marriage took place at St. Michael’s, Morris’s parish church, by licence, and not at St. Peter-in-the-East, the Burdens’ church in Holywell; for as Godstow was ex-parochial banns could not be called there.

When Morris sent his novel to Louie, he told her that when he showed it to Georgie she gave him ‘no hope’; in the context of the work itself this was surely because it evoked memories for her better left unrecalled. By 1872 all the bright promise of 1858 had faded; not only were both marriages in a state of crisis, but another embarrassment made it difficult for Georgie to return to Oxford. Harry, despite his tutors’ help and a settled career—he was the last undergraduate at Corpus eligible under the old Statutes to succeed automatically to a Fellowship if he got his degree—not only failed his Finals, but went out to New York to work for Peggy Talboys’ brother on the understanding that he would send for her when he had made his way. He never did.
To read the later chapters of the novel is to re-live the year of Morris's courtship of Jane among the river meadows of the Thames; with his strong feeling for the spirit of a locality it also contains a theme central to Morris's creative life: the delight in a simple, contented farmhouse life, the pleasure of returning in the evening to find the candles lit and the comfort and welcome of home, which Jane, despite their differences and absences, provided and understood.

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BIBLIOGRAPHICAL LIST

Margaret Dyne Jeune: *Diary of an Oxford Lady* 1843–62. The topographic references are from the Oxfordshire County Directories, and the information about Wytham Abbey is based on the article in *Country Life* 26.2.43.

*The illustrations to Margaret Fleming's article are taken from* The Book of the Thames, by Mr and Mrs S. C. Hall, serialised in the Art Journal (which Hall edited) from January to December, 1857: exactly contemporary with the painting of the Oxford Murals, they show many of the favourite spots—Godstow, Iffley, Radcot...