

The Collected Letters of William Morris

Volume I

edited by Norman Kelvin

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Before we reach the Introduction, Norman Kelvin has led us through the history, scope and sources of this long-awaited volume: has at the outset described the principled editorial practices scrupulously followed—offering a model well worth study. These preliminary pages show clearly what have been his considerations in the more than fifteen years of patient work that have brought together all known survivors of Morris's letter-writing, from that first-known to sister Emma from the Marlborough College schoolboy of 1848, to the end of days in 1896. Well over 2,000 letters and part-letters survive, and are now printed here or will appear in the two further volumes promised which will bring us to the end of this memorable life: with some large gaps, certainly, where it is reasonable to suppose that letters, notably to Janey in early days; to Georgie Burne-Jones, to Rossetti, to Madox Brown, have been destroyed or lost. That such letters did exist is clear from the tantalising scraps that thread Mackail's text, largely supplied by Georgie or Crom Price: These fragments, often no more than half a sentence, all appear, some newly dated or in more complete form. That there are few letters to Rossetti or to Madox Brown is sufficiently accounted for by the changed and strained relations that developed after 1868, as Janey and Rossetti became lovers, as Morris Marshall Faulkner & Co. was wound up and replaced by Morris & Co., to Madox Brown's outrage and a lapse in friendship that lasted nearly a decade. In both cases, any letters surviving the hands of either would come into those of William Rossetti, and that would sufficiently account for their disappearance.

Scholars will find here meticulously set out the locations, sources, provenance of all the material. Acknowledgements to colleagues, curators, librarians, friends—and some who from being interested strangers became, in the long editorial process, friends also: and to a patient and supportive family, are complete, concise, and generous. In this Norman Kelvin shows a sense of being not, mechanically, an editor only, but the director of a large collective enterprise, collating, sifting material with a guiding awareness of the writer of the letters we are now to share. His sensitivity to the material stretches to all aspects of Morris's ever-widening interests and his developing place in the world in which he moved—emphatically the *world*, in the sense in which Morris felt the world, as 'the field of folk', the continuing stream of our life; and in this presentation the footnotes fill out the life of this man and his world, setting the letters in the great web of human and historic context.

The Introduction is a cool and lucid essay, written with elegance and with effective sympathy for the whole man. If the term 'architecture' or its cognate

'architectonic' (not one of Morris's own!) be used as a touchstone, symbolic of that order which in all things Morris so loved and so needed, it will easily be seen how justly Kelvin applies it. If the earliest feeling for romantic gothic ruins leads the boy through the mediaeval world, it is not only into romance that he walks, but into that architecture of the life of humankind that is history: if the romance of Tristram and Iseult betrays the young man into a marriage sown with inevitable griefs and disappointment, so the chivalric pattern which dictated it is supplanted by a view of sexual equality, mutual respect, loving freedom—a view of familial relations which also extends to children as having no less claim than their elders on personal respect—as is set out in the letter to Charley Faulkner of October 1886—which will appear in the second volume.

But of course architecture in its simple acceptance is a dominant love of Morris's life, and Kelvin points out that not only does it outpace as a topic all else but socialism, but it produces many of the finest letters and raises some of those to Webb with whom he has shared this love since 1856, to a more-than-usual freedom and ease. It is sensitively related on the one hand to Morris's many creative concerns, and on the other to love and friendship. It was a sure perception that opened the Introduction with this theme.

This volume closes with the letters of December 1880, with sixteen years to go. At this time, while Morris had made an entry into politics through the Eastern Question Association, and had after nearly a decade of earnest reading and discussion come to his settled socialist conviction, he had not yet found any body so committed to that cause and so organised as to begin to make any public mark. He had met Hyndman a year before this, who was then in early days of bringing together, as also were George Warr and other Positivists, for that very end, such radical groups and individuals, middleclass and workingclass alike, as believed, like Hyndman, like Morris himself, that only socialism could solve the sordid complex of social, moral, economic and, for Morris, artistic problems thrown up by industrial capitalism. Hyndman aimed at a body that should do more than study a theoretical socialism; that should define itself in political action and agitation and become a serious force for change. But this body did not emerge until 1882–3, as the Democratic, then Social Democratic Federation, which Morris promptly joined.

There are thus no political letters such as we shall encounter in Volumes II and III. Morris's politics until then lie within the scope of the EQA and, longer term, the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. In 1880 it was the latter that gave Morris his field of public action and influence; and the letters in these latter pages bear out what the Editor says about the greater ease and expansiveness Morris shows when writing on architectural matters. At the same time, as the two daughters grow up, and the pains of 1868–74 recede, letters to Janey, Jenny and May show him much more in a family light.

Of his relationships with women; with Janey; with Georgie Burne-Jones; with Aglaia Coronio; and his careful love of his two daughters, sick Jenny of course

especially, Kelvin has much that is shrewd and understanding to say, built on the new material that has become available during the years in which he has, so to speak, grown into Morris's life. In his thoughts on Janey, he has widened from the simplistic image of the bored unloving wife falling into love with the more romantic friend, Rossetti—to a perception of Janey as a real person, about whom there is clearly much more yet to know: no mere languid ikon, but a person who, though the marriage fell apart in one essential, was worthy of Morris's love for her. Doomed to disappointment though that was from the start, it was no folly: nor are we to feel that she undervalued the man she could not love with the romantic passion that he—and Rossetti—felt for her. She begins here to be looked at also as a mother, terrified of Jenny's illness; and the fictional Morris, supposedly insensitive to others, emerges as a man who did indeed feel for others, but dared not often speak what he felt. In one letter to Aglaia Coronio of 1873 (p. 178) when the torments and tumults of 1868–1874 ('the stormy years') have died down, a sentence like this casts a light here.

'Yes truly letters are very unsatisfactory; they would do very well if one could write them at our best times; but continually one has to sit down to them dull and cold and worried, with the thoughts all slipping away from us, till the sheet is filled up with trivialities—as this one will be, I fear—only there is something about the look of the writing of anyone one is fond of that is familiar and dear and saves one from utter disappointment (sic), and one feels that the stiff awkward sentences all about little or nothing still have something of soul in them.'

This introduction shows none of the ridiculous inclination to take sides in the matter of the Morris's personal relationships or to engage in any polemic: it offers, as it should, balanced and candid comment on a man. Where conclusions are impossible or debatable, no false pictures are drawn. All is done that can be done with this material to help us to know and understand. No view of Morris is imposed; but this is far from meaning that Kelvin has no feeling for Morris. On the contrary, this composed language, this careful exposition of what, new and old, the letters in this extended form now offer us, is also a vehicle of love and respect which leaves all free to come to their own conclusions.

Ray Watkinson