

William Morris and Ray Watkinson: Wood Engravers

Peter Lawrence

During Ray Watkinson's time as Editor of the *Journal of the William Morris Society* my company, Oxprint, and I had the job of designing and producing the *Journal* as well as other Kelmscott Lecture booklets. It was one of the most enjoyable experiences – being able to meet up with Ray ahead of every issue. On one occasion in the late 1980s, we got on to discussing Morris as a wood engraver.

Morris himself decided that he was not 'cut out' for wood engraving. Burne-Jones' cartoon of him shows tools scattered on the floor as the impatient Morris struggles with his temperament and the block [Fig. 1]. However, he only gave up after completing some 35 engravings in the mid-1860s – a not inconsiderable total. Characteristically, Morris wanted to experience first hand every craft which he planned to use – in this case in the ill-fated production of his own *Earthly Paradise* which he entrusted to the Chiswick Press.

In 1990 I told Ray that I was myself thinking of having a go at wood engraving. Out of the blue, with a note saying something like 'as long as you're serious about



Fig. 1. Edward Burne-Jones, *William Morris making a wood engraving for 'The Earthly Paradise'*, 1860s. British Museum.

it', came a parcel containing Ray's own engraving tools, ones he had made and used in the 1930s. They were wonderful objects in themselves, and it felt as if he was handing down a part of himself to me. 13 years later I am a member of the Society of Wood Engravers and exhibiting as much as my spare time permits.

In 1991 my wife and two young children arranged a surprise 40th birthday trip for me to Iceland (I thought that morning we were going to my mother-in-law's in Wales . . .). Four brilliant days even though I didn't have time to take a copy of Morris's route that Ray had given me. Some of my earliest engravings were thus on Icelandic themes.



Iceland



Head



Leif Eriksson



Puffin



Icelandic ponies



Thingvellir