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On Collecting William Morris

Ask any book collector when he or she first started to collect and you will be asking for the most remarkable bit of instant recall. Few things will stick so truly in a collector's mind as the "when" of first collecting a now-favorite subject.

For me, collecting William Morris was an especially pleasant experience, for I started my collection within 20 miles of Morris' country home, Kelmscott Manor near Lechlade in Oxfordshire. I had known about Morris, mainly his achievements in printing, from a course taken in graduate school at the University of Wisconsin Library School. The course was called "History of Books and Libraries," and it was taught by a most remarkable teacher and human being, Rachel K. Schenk. It was Miss Schenk who first opened the world of fine, privately printed books to me and taught me to know and appreciate the work of Morris, Cobden-Sanderson, Walker, and others connected with the revival of printing.

My records show the first Morris book I ever purchased was a fragment of the 1896 Kelmscott edition of *The Earthly Paradise*. I bought it seventy years after publication, while working in Oxford as an exchange librarian. The book is only a part of Volume III, but the price of \$12.60 seemed a steep one on my librarian's take-home pay of \$50 per week. But I wanted that book, for I recall distinctly that tucked within the pages of the rebound fragment of Volume III of *The Earthly Paradise* (a book I had no interest in at the time) was another piece of Kelmscott printing, one signature only of *A Note by William Morris on His Founding of the Kelmscott Press*. I knew nothing, or next to nothing about Morris' poetry, but I did know that I was interested in his printing. I recall my joy when, returning to our small North Oxford flat, I found this essay by Morris to be not only a jewel of fine printing, but also an enjoyable essay on his philosophy of printing.

During my year in Oxford, spanning June of 1966 to July of 1967, my professional life as a senior lending librarian at the Oxford City Library and the location of the ancient city library, near the corner of The High and St. Aldates Street, left me ample time during the lunch hour to haunt and hunt the various new and used bookshops. The Turl Cash Bookshop (now, I am sorry to say, defunct because of unsafe beams) was the nearest to the library and was my first stop. I was also within easy reach of Blackwell's Antiquarian Shop on Ship Street. All of my early training and background and appreciation of private-press books and most of my early knowledge of Kelmscott Press books was learned by closely examining books in the antiquarian department.

I still have in my library a copy of Blackwell's Catalogue 814, "Private Press Books," on which I first cut my teeth. I took this catalogue to the public library and slowly and meticulously checked each item in the Private Press section against the printed sale records in the *Book Auction Record*. The notes resulted in comments such as these: "This item mentioned in D. McMurtrie's *The Book*," in reference to an early Ashendene Press item; or "Oxford: Most truly private press in England," referring to the Daniel Press. The Doves Press brought forth two quotes: "Perfection in composition, press work" and "Cobden-Sanderson tossed type into Thames." Tossing things into the Thames became a fad thing, so much so that my remark for the Vale Press of Charles Ricketts was "The punches and matrices were thrown into the Thames as well."

This catalogue, dated 1965, listed eight Kelmscott Press items and my notes on these were rather short; I am a bit disappointed in finding this old catalogue so devoid of early gems of wisdom regarding Morris. My entire note on the Kelmscott Press read "Golden type. Paper's watermark, flower, perch or apple."

Some of the prices in this catalogue and the changes in prices might be indicative both of world inflation and continued interest in Morris and press books. For example, in 1965

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MacKail's *Biblio Innocentium* was priced at L31.10 (or about \$87, since the pound was then \$2.80). A recent Los Angeles price for this book was \$700. Morris' own *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* was priced then at L55 (or \$154). A recent Toronto price was \$500. Rossetti's two Kelmscott volumes, *Ballads and Narrative Poems* and *Sonnets & Lyrical Poems* were priced at L47.10 each or about \$263 for the two. Recently I found these two volumes priced at \$1,000. These changes in prices are all the more remarkable since we are comparing prices and changes after only 16 years.

I was also a frequent visitor to other bookshops in Oxford as well. Thornton's on Broad Street (which, for you science-fiction buffs, was the early training ground of Brian Aldis, who wrote a delightful, though nonscience-fiction book—*Brightfont Diaries*—about his days as a bookseller) was one of my favorite places. Such a favorite, I must add, because to me the people at this shop seemed to know little about the going prices of books I was interested in. I remember with joy finding *Love's Graduate* by John Webster, printed at the Daniel Press, priced at L3.10. The same copy was at Blackwell's for L11 and *Book Auction Record* had recorded a sale during the 64-65 auction season for L7.00. I also remember, with some satisfaction, buying Partington's study of Thomas J. Wise in *The Original Cloth*, subtitled *The Life and Record of the Forger of the Nineteenth Century Pamphlets* for \$3.75, a book I recently saw listed for \$48.

Dealer catalogues were useful to me in learning both about Morris and the values of his works. Also valuable and informative were my visits to the antiquarian departments of various shops for my own continued learning about such things as points, condition, and inscribed copies. But the single book which proved most valuable to me was one I had to type myself, for I couldn't afford to buy it. That book was *Private Presses and Their Books* by Will Ransom, published by R. R. Bowker in New York in 1929. My copy proudly states on the verso of the title page: "Typewritten by the hand of John J. Walsdorf at Oxford, England, between November 26 and December 12, 1966." I did not type the last half of this book, which is a bibliographical listing of the work of various English and American private presses, but I did type the first 185 pages, plus a 10-page index. I carefully photocopied the illustrations in this book and tipped them in as well. I might add that I obtained this book through the Regional Lending Library system in England, from the headquarters in Bristol and, since the loan period was for two weeks, I had to spend most evenings at home typing. I shall never forget the look on my wife's face as I proceeded to spend hour after hour typing 185 pages from Ransom.

By typing these pages, I happened to retain many more names and facts than I normally would by simply reading a book once and taking a few notes. With Ransom under my belt, I was ready to collect. I had bought a few books (fine books, I might add), but without any real design or purpose. But in Ransom, and the typing out of the pages of Ransom, was born the idea of my collection. I noticed in Ransom not only the continued references to Morris in sections relating to presses often founded long after his death, but also, in the press bibliography, that numerous presses had printed something relating to Morris and fine printing.

And so, ever so slowly, the idea was formed to collect William Morris and private-press books by collecting private-press books by and about Morris. My plan was simple, but progress was slow. And before I really got into collecting Morris, I took the time to learn what I could firsthand about Morris and the environs in which he lived. I made a weekend trip to London where I visited the Hammersmith area of London and saw Morris' London home, called Kelmscott House. I also saw the home of Sir Emery

Walker, Morris' close friend, located nearby. Lastly, I had lunch at the Dove Tavern, reputed to be the 400-year-old coffeehouse from which T. J. Cobden-Sanderson got the name of his now-famous Doves Press.

I also paid a number of visits to Morris' country home, Kelmscott Manor, located some twenty miles southwest of Oxford near a small village called Lechlade. This visit was preceded by a side tour of Blackwell's Antiquarian Department. Here, in the usual brash manner of an American tourist, I put my case to the young man in charge of the department on a rainy, cool Saturday morning. I explained my interest in Morris and my inability to buy any of his Kelmscott press works. I then said that I was about to visit Morris' country home and before doing so, I wanted to show my wife a Kelmscott Press book so that we both might better appreciate the beauty and grandeur of this man's work. The shop assistant mumbled, "Jolly good," and disappeared out the door we had just entered. We heard him going up some stairs outside the shop and then heard his footsteps overhead. Presently, he returned, bringing with him not one, but three Kelmscott Press books. I am sorry to say I cannot remember any of the titles, but whatever they were, we were both soon justifiably impressed by the fine cream-colored paper, the jet-black ink, and early manuscript-type borders. I also was impressed by the assistant, who had just turned over \$1,000 or more worth of books for us to examine, saying only, "You can leave them on this table after you are finished looking." With this, he retired to a back room where, from the sounds that came forth, he spent his time typing future catalogue entries.

My trips to Kelmscott Manor were always enjoyable, especially after an American couple, Mr. and Mrs. Roderick Marshall, two retired professors from the English department of Brooklyn College, took over as live-in guardians of the house.

Kelmscott Manor was discovered in 1871 by Morris who was then looking for a retreat from London. He wrote: "I have been looking about for a house for the wife and kids and whither do you guess my eye is turned now? Kelmscott, a little village about two miles above Radcott Bridge—a heaven on earth; an old stone house like Water Eaton, and such a garden! Close down on the river, a boat house and all things handy. I am going down there again on Saturday with Rossetti and my wife; Rossetti because he thinks of sharing it with us if the thing looks likely." Things *did* look "likely" and the house was taken by Morris and Rossetti jointly. Morris wanted it as a summer house; Rossetti had plans of staying on permanently. The two men's personalities clashed, with Morris' wife, Jane, having a relationship with Rossetti that Morris found not to his liking. By 1874 Rossetti was out and Morris continued to use the home for the next 22 years until his death in 1896.

It is nearby at the Kelmscott village church that Morris was buried. The long, grey, sloped, almost roof-like single stone grave marker is carved on one side: "William Morris 1834-1896," "Jane Morris 1839-1914," and on the other, the names of their two daughters, "May Morris 1862-1938" and "Jane Alice Morris 1861-1935."

The manor house itself is well worth a visit by anyone interested either in Morris or early pre-Raphaelite art. Rooms are highly decorated in wallpapers, tiles, and draperies manufactured by Morris and Company in the 1860s, 70s, and 80s. Walls are hung with paintings, drawings, and tapestries done by Rossetti, Burne-Jones, and Morris. The library contains a good selection of modern books relating to Morris, along with a fine collection of Kelmscott Press books, including the Kelmscott Chaucer.

My year in Oxford, which ended in June of 1967, came to a

close on two happy notes. During the spring of '67, I entered a nationwide essay contest sponsored by the Booksellers' Association and the Publishers' Association in conjunction with National Library Week. The contest was judged on the basis of the best list of 50 books which would be widely read and would influence men and women for generations to come. Accompanying the list was a 100-word essay on "What gives a book fresh appeal to successive generations?" This list, on rereading it, was fairly standard and the essay was not overly great either, but I was lucky enough to win second prize, which was £20 worth of book tokens. I can still identify some of the books I bought with my prize and two of them happened, by chance, to be published in 1967, and they are, today, considered to be the best modern books about Morris. The first, Paul Thompson's *The Work of William Morris*, is a study of Morris' work in architecture, furniture and furnishing, tiles and wallpaper, stained glass, book design, and writing. The other book, Philip Henderson's *William Morris, His Life, Work and Friends*, is today considered the most authoritative biography since J. W. MacKail's two-volume, standard biography, *The Life of William Morris*, was first published in 1899.

I would also like to point out two other titles, each very short booklets on Morris, each very inexpensive, under a dollar, yet each of which will give the reader a good, basic understanding of Morris. The first is also by Philip Henderson and it is part of the "Writers and Their Work" series entitled *William Morris*. The other is a new series called "Lifelines," and their third booklet, by Richard Tames, is entitled *William Morris: An Illustrated Life*. The same publisher, Shire Publications, Ltd., of Aylesbury, England, also has published "Lifelines 12," *An Illustrated Life of Burne-Jones*, friend and fellow worker of Morris.

My second happy note at the close of my year in Oxford occurred in May, just before I was about to take a short holiday in the Lake District and then depart for the United States. My doorbell rang late one evening and I went to the door to find a near neighbor Mr. H. G. Dixey there. It was already getting dark, and Mr. Dixey excused himself for calling so late, but he realized that I was soon off on a holiday and he wanted to give me a going-away present for he was not sure if he would see me again before I left for America. Mr. Dixey, a man in his late seventies at that time, handed me a book. In the dim light of a fading sunset I took a quick glance at it, noted it was a book by Morris printed in the now-familiar style of other Morris books printed shortly after his death by the Chiswick Press. This exhibition shows seven items printed by the Chiswick Press, and even then, in 1967, after collecting Morris in private press editions for less than a year, I could identify Chiswick Press items with a quick glance. I thanked Mr. Dixey, a retired school master and at that time the operator of England's longest-running private press, the Dixey Press, and returned to my flat. Only after he had left, and I had more time to look at the book in full light, did I realize my mistake. It was not a Chiswick Press book, but a Kelmscott Press book, Morris' own essay, *Gothic Architecture: A Lecture for the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society*.

You can well imagine my embarrassment both for the casual way in which I had accepted a relatively expensive book and also because of my stupidity in not looking at it more carefully when it was given to me. I also began to worry that, through some strange combination of age and lack of knowledge, Mr. Dixey did not realize the true value of this book.

The next day I wrote Mr. Dixey a note thanking him for the book, but adding that I could not consider keeping it for I feared he did not realize its true value, which in those days

was substantial both to me as a poorly paid librarian and to him as a man retired, in his late seventies, probably living on a small pension. Mr. Dixey wrote back a very kind note which indicated that although he was not aware the book was priced as high as it was, he was aware of its general value, and he felt that it would have more meaning to me than to him. He then added that it was their hope (his and his wife, Joan's) that the book would stay with me and always remind me of my year in Oxford.

I left England with a trunk full of books, 88 in all, the result of my first full year as a book collector. I had paid just over \$350 for these 88 books, an average of \$4 per volume. With that \$350 I had bought two Kelmscott Press items, and books from the following private presses: Golden Cockerel, Daniel, Stanton, Stanbrook Abbey, Gregynog, Golden Hind, Grabhorn, Shakespeare Head, The First Editions Club, and the Doves Press.

The second-most-expensive item, which was paid for partly by the prize from the essay contest, is the Doves Press edition of J. W. MacKail's essay: *William Morris: An Address Delivered the 11th of November, 1900 at Kelmscott House, Hammersmith, before the Hammersmith Socialist Society*. This had cost me \$35 (an item I see by a recent catalogue now being priced at \$250). This book was the third publication from the Doves Press and is a fine example both of the clarity and beauty of the Doves typeface and the impracticality of a vellum binding over light boards. The former results in a book easy to read, restful to the eye, and interesting for its simple typographical layout. The latter is damned for its inability to open easily and its tendency to become buckled.

A collector's progress is a slow trek, strewn with failure after failure as letters, cables, and telephone calls are answered with the all-too-familiar refrain: "Sorry, that is sold as well, sir."

My wife (and young son, too, with some prodding from her) looked at me with some worry in their eyes. Things that other people seemed to take so for granted and apparently found important, like two cars, riding lawn mowers, and boats, did not find their way to our door. Rather, a long line of catalogues, then books, and then invoices following close behind became our daily visitors.

A bit has to be said here regarding this vice of book collecting and the long-suffering distaff side of the family which has to put up with it. Books are a bane to the spouse of the one who collects them. Not only do they cost a good deal of money, but they are often old—sometimes falling apart—and always take up lots of room. And to top it all off, although the collector professes, "They are a good buy now," and "Wait until you see what it might cost next time," and "I can always sell them for more someday," that day, we know full well, will never come to the collector. Books are to be bought, catalogued, read, and then shelved. They are not, usually, to be sold. And as to their increasing value, the spouse soon learns that they hear only about the ones bought for \$10, and now listed for \$25 or \$30 in another dealer's catalogue. They never hear about the ones bought for \$65, and, found weeks later in another catalogue for \$40. And we pray that the collector has never been near a stockbroker, or he might start trying to average out his losses.

On a more serious note, I would like to pursue for just a bit the function of the private collector and his relationship with universities and scholarship. I am very grateful for the invitation to speak to you and show my collection. This, to me, is the proper use of private collections, and, more and more, libraries are tapping private sources for displays and lectures. An excellent case in point was the superb exhibition held at the Stanford University Art Gallery in 1975. Most

books in that exhibition came from the private library of Sanford Berger of Berkeley. There are many other famous private collections in America, such as the Stevenson collection of Norman Strouse in St. Helena, California, and the Hawthorn collection of Frazer-Clark in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.

The friendship and cooperation now present between university libraries and private collectors is most important because only in this way can private collections get a proper showing which will benefit large numbers of people. Few private collectors have the financial resources to properly display their books, yet their collections, often built up painstakingly over the years, might have started when "their" subject was unknown and unloved.

The importance of the private collector and the need for the cooperation with libraries is best illustrated in a letter I received from Carroll Coleman. Mr. Coleman is the owner of the Prairie Press of Iowa City, Iowa, and the person responsible for one of America's finest continuing presses. I find his work very worthwhile both from the standpoint of literary content and typographical excellence. I first contacted Mr. Coleman because I have and continue to collect the works of Wisconsin's most famous author, August Derleth. Derleth, as you know, is now most famous for his publications relating to fantasy and the early writings of H. P. Lovecraft. But starting as early as 1939 the Prairie Press published small books of Derleth's poetry.

I had written to Coleman about Derleth and to my letter he replied thusly:

I miss August a great deal. We did not see each other often, sometimes not even once a year, and most of our correspondence was brief, just notes about the books, for the most part. I was in awe of the volume of work he got through, in his writing, his publishing, correspondence, etc. He scheduled himself, worked himself very hard, and while not all of his books were top-notch, he produced a very fine body of work in general. I did not mean to make this so long, but memories of August crowd in upon me and as I said

before, these things may be of interest to you, but if you are a Derleth collector, no doubt you already know most of them. I should have kept all of his letters, but I'm not a very systematic person, and when I had to clear out my mother's house in Muscatine after she died, I simply had no place for many of the things I had stored in her attic—we have a very small house here—and had to throw away so many things I would have loved to have kept: letters, valuable files of magazines, such as *The Bookman*, *The American Mercury*, *The Inland Printer*. There were cards and letters from H. P. Lovecraft (these were from the 1920s long before I ever knew August or his own connection with Lovecraft) from H. L. Mencken, Sinclair Lewis, etc. It was heartbreaking to have to do this. I asked the library to take the things, but they work so slowly, and I had to clear the house.

And so, what would now be a very valuable collection of primary research material, letters from the likes of Lovecraft, Lewis, Mencken, and Derleth, are lost. Someone, somewhere, moved so slowly that a man, moving from one small town to another, had to throw away letters. Had but a relationship existed between a librarian and a printer/collector at that point in time, valuable literary materials would not have been lost.

In the lectures I give in connection with exhibits of my private collection I endeavor to foster a close relationship between libraries and collectors for the mutual benefit of both parties. Although allowing a private collection to travel around the country to be exhibited subjects the books in it to much wear and tear, I believe that the benefits to libraries and scholarship outweigh the physical harm done to the items. I will continue to encourage the close association of libraries and book collectors and urge that librarians and friends of libraries do the same.

John J. Walsdorf
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