

Rachel Leff and Rachel Longaker

IS281

Professor Maack

March 22, 2007

William Morris as Printer: A Historiographical Approach

Because of the extraordinary nature of his achievements as an artist and craftsman, writer and political activist, William Morris was a compelling biographical subject for writers even before his death in 1896. Fascination with him continues to the present day. We will compare different biographies of Morris and will focus on the significance of the founding of the Kelmscott Press and his work as printer. In writing a historiographical essay that examines the way different biographers view this aspect of his work and life, one can perhaps learn about the time in which he lived, the forces that were working on Morris and how Morris was or was not a product of his time.

In addition to looking at how historians have viewed Morris as a printer, we will examine the influence Morris's work exerted on printing. Of particular interest are the ways that historians of art and print have contextualized his influence. Some historians show his influence as revolutionary while others suggest that his influence has been overstated.

The chronological limits of the paper are 1888 to 1898, which spans from Morris's attendance at a lecture on printing by Emery Walker to the closing of Kelmscott

Press, two years after Morris's death. This period will be examined in terms of how various biographers have understood and contextualized his achievements at the Press as well as how historians have understood and contextualized his influence on print.

In looking at Morris as a biographical subject, we will focus on how biographers have depicted the years from 1888 to 1896 years as a critical time in his life. He was at the height of his fame and had enormous influence over the artistic and cultural milieu in which he lived. Was the impetus to found the Kelmscott Press a new direction for him, or was it part of a continuum? Different biographers bring their viewpoints to bear in how they see Morris's development as an important figure in print culture. In looking at his influence on the world of book design, the time frame will necessarily be after 1896, but will focus as much as possible only on his book work, not his larger body of design.

Research Questions

Biographical Historiography

1. How have different biographers viewed what influenced Morris's work as a printer?
2. How have different biographers depicted the story of the Kelmscott Press and Morris's motivations for beginning the enterprise?
3. What are some of the social and historical forces that played a role in Morris's enterprise with Kelmscott?

Design Influence

1. William Morris has exerted an enormous influence in the world of design.

What kind of influence did his work at Kelmscott Press have on the world of book design and fine printing?

2. How have historians viewed his influence? Do they believe it has been stronger in some time periods than others?

3. Have historians seen that certain schools have been interested in continuing his advancements? Have they seen others that have been opposed to his achievements?

Sources

Statement on Sources

The biographies written about Morris in the beginning of the twentieth century differ in their outlooks from those written almost a hundred years later. Notions of what is acceptable in a biography changed and this shifted the way Morris was treated. His official biographer, writing in 1899, decided that Morris's epilepsy was not a subject that should be public knowledge. A new openness became inevitable due to changing expectations of how a biography is meant to shed light on its subject. Where the personal suffering Morris experienced in his marriage is only referred to obliquely by his earlier biographers, it is completely out in the open by the time the end of the century comes around. As more sources such as previously undisclosed private letters became available, these materials helped biographers answer questions about Morris's marriage and gain insight into his thoughts and concerns. Distance also helps gain a more balanced perspective. Morris's commitment to socialism is seen more clearly as biographers move further away from the actual political upheaval of Britain in the 1880's.

A noticeable gap in the literature seems to be the treatment of Morris's wife, Jane or Janey. In most biographies she is portrayed in an unsympathetic light. She is seen as a beautiful woman who was lucky to have a man such as Morris fall in love with her, while remaining distant and indifferent to him. Her father was a stablehand, and instead of being grateful to Morris for elevating her to an affluent, privileged life, her behavior towards him seems aloof, capricious, even cruel. Some biographers have attempted to look more closely at the dynamic between Morris and Janey and seem sensitive to the notion that her role as Morris's wife might have been a burden, an advantage that came with psychological costs. A biography devoted to Janey's life would be interesting to read and it would shed more light on Morris as well.

While Morris has inspired many biographies that aim to capture the life and work of this larger-than-life figure, fewer historians have looked specifically at his influence on book design. Many histories of print mention Morris and his work at Kelmscott Press, but they are limited assessments. And where a larger investigation has been made into his work as a designer, the authors tend to offer a positive assessment. In other words, there are few works that take a truly critical approach to Morris's effect on printing. Given the highly ornate style he employed and the austere aesthetic that modernists adopted, one might think that a work from a modernist framework might offer a more scathing assessment of Kelmscott and its influence. No such works were located. Perhaps a reason for this is that those historians drawn to Morris tend to appreciate his work. Another reason may be that the works of Kelmscott were not seen as offering enough of a dominant influence to be specifically rebelled against by an opposing aesthetic.

Historical Biography

The first work we will analyze is J.W. Mackail's (1899) *The Life of William Morris* written a few years after Morris's death. Commissioned by Morris's family, Mackail's depiction is informed by the spirit of Romanticism that influenced so much of Victorian life writing and also typifies what the *Encyclopedia of Life Writing* describes as an Exemplary Life biography. Morris is seen as an extraordinary man whose life provides a model of focused activity and impressive accomplishment. Esther Meynell's (1947) *Portrait of William Morris* was written four decades later, after Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* heralded the arrival of a new approach in biographical writing. Meynell's portrait is informed by psychoanalysis in that it sees Morris as a contradictory figure, artistically blessed, yet privately dominated by conflicts that belied his public accomplishments. We will also look at three historical biographies, one written by the Marxist historian E.P. Thompson (1955) and two works by Charles Harvey and Jon Press (1991, 1996). Here we will consider how Morris is framed by different historical perspectives: a British 'New Left' Marxist in the 1950's and British social historians in the 1990's. Lastly, we will look at two literary biographies of Morris, Fiona MacCarthy's (1994) scholarly *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* and a recent article by Adela Spindler Roatcap (2003) that focuses on the *Kelmscott Chaucer*.

Design Influence

Sources from across a wide period will be consulted to determine how Morris's impact on book design over the last century has been assessed by historians. Sparling (1924) writes an overly enthusiastic and ultimately out-dated assessment of Morris's work as a printer. Steinberg (1995), originally written in 1955, places Morris in the context of the history of print and offers a much more critical assessment of his endeavors. Briggs (1957) offers a more tempered if ultimately laudatory assessment.

McLean (1959) writes from the perspective of book design and places Morris as the main progenitor of a resurgence of design principles in an era of degradation whose influence should not be underestimated. Thompson (1977) takes a critical art historical approach by taking a well-documented closer look at Morris and the Arts and Crafts book, which, she feels, has not been clearly understood or appreciated as a distinct art form. Peterson (1991) sets out to offer a critical study of Kelmscott, looking closely at the legacy of the Press. And Eckert, writing about Morris's influence on bookmaking in Germany, offers a social and political perspective about why Morris was influential at specific times in Germany in the last century.

Historical Background

Fiona MacCarthy's (2004) entry in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography designates Morris as a designer, author, and visionary socialist. As a designer, Morris is most famous for being the father of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Since his youth, he had been drawn to medieval culture and an idealization of England's past. Reacting against the dehumanizing aspects of industrialization in Victorian Britain, the movement was meant to inspire a revolution in aesthetics and design, emphasizing beauty and the art of handmade crafts. Some biographers see the enormous success of Arts and Crafts as an example of Morris as a practical man of action. The son of a successful financier, he was able to make his artistic vision translate into successful design and later a printing business.

Morris's poetry and the books he printed at the Kelmscott Press were inspired by medieval legends and romances. After leaving Oxford, Morris circulated among the Pre-Raphaelites (the Italian Renaissance painter Raphael was their ideal), a group of artists who

sought to express a highly romantic style of painting and writing. They were also drawn to themes associated with medieval art and Arthurian legends. A few years older than Morris, the Pre-Raphaelite poet and painter Dante Rossetti was significant in Morris's personal and professional life, urging Morris to become a painter and writer.

A few biographers believe that Morris's artistic endeavors and his work in design were a natural springboard for his commitment to socialist ideals. Inspired by Marx's writings and the revolutionary climate in Britain, Morris became a socialist in the 1880's. He was aware of the irony that he was the head of a profit-making design company, Morris & Co., and that most of what he created was only enjoyed by the middle and upper classes. Towards the end of his life, he was disheartened by the idea that the social justice he envisioned was not going to be realized during his lifetime.

William Morris began printing in earnest after attending a lecture delivered by Emery Walker in 1888. Morris had already shown an interest in medieval manuscript culture, both in terms of the content of early English works and in terms of the design elements of illumination. The quality of printing at this time was very low.

Industrialization had touched all aspects of printing, from the mechanization of presses to lower quality wood-based paper to lower quality inks. As Morris had rebelled against industrialized production in so many other areas, he also rebelled in the arena of print. The rebellion took the form of Kelmscott Press, which he founded in 1891. The Press printed 53 books.

Morris designed, had punched by hand, and utilized three new type faces: Golden, Troy, and Chaucer. He employed hand presses and hand carved wood plates for illustrations. For the works made at Kelmscott, he chose fine quality handmade paper and

vellum. Further, he looked to the early modern period and even the Middle Ages for design inspiration for layout, margins, illumination, rubrication, and type face.

Presentation of Contextual Background

Historical Biography

William Morris's artistic gifts were not confined to one area of expression. It is fitting that biographical writings about him exist in many genres. There are portraits of him as a poet, a socialist, a "Victorian Rebel", a "Pagan Prophet", a "Medievalist and Revolutionary." In this paper we will look at six biographical works about Morris that typify four genres of biography: Exemplary Life, "New Biography", Historical, and Literary. In analyzing these depictions of the same subject's life using different genres, we will also look at how the notion of biographical writing has developed and changed over time.

When measured next to history, biography has often been considered the lesser craft. In *Writing Lives: Principia Biographica*, Leon Edel (1989) states that:

The writing of lives is a department of history and is closely related to the discoveries of history. It can claim the same skills. No lives are led outside history or society; they take place in human time. No biography is complete unless it reveals the individual within history, within an ethos and a social complex (4).

A critical overview of biographical writing is outlined in the *Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms* (2001). Early nineteenth century Romantic writers, with their notion of the primacy of the individual's subjective experience, were influential in transforming many forms of writing, especially those that focused on individual lives. In late eighteenth century England, many factors contributed to the popularity of biographical writing:

With empiricism, Protestantism, and capitalism fueling a new interest in the individual's effort to wrest meaning and success from his or her encounters with the external world, biography flourished... (110).

An influential work written in 1841 was Thomas Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* which advocated for histories that recounted the feats of "great men." Carlyle believed that holding up esteemed men as models to be emulated served to improve society. During the late nineteenth century, biographies continued for the most part to recount life events, focusing on a man's accomplishments and successes. Biographies of women were rare. After World War I there was a backlash against Victorian values. The human experience was seen as complicated and fraught with conflict, both inner and outer. The influence of Freud's ideas was also significant in this shift. The biographer Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians*, published in 1918, is seen as heralding an important change in that it depicted notable figures as being complex and contradictory. By making his subjects come alive by imposing his own imaginative and interpretive gifts on their life stories, Strachey gave biographical writing artistic expression. A gifted biographer in her own right, Virginia Woolf hailed Strachey's work in her 1927 essay "The New Biography".

In his essay on Paul Otlet, W. Boyd Rayward discusses the art of biographical writing:

...the biography represents an attempt at the imaginative recreation of a life in its times. Because of the creative identification of its author with the lives of individuals, it has emotional and dramatic force... (10).

Corroborating this, Leon Edel (1989) writes that: "The relation of the biographer to the subject is the very core of the biographical enterprise" (4). We will be examining how individual biographers approach Morris from their respective frameworks. Some of the biographers have sought to revise earlier depictions of Morris which they characterize as clouded by previous biographers' prejudices and shortcomings. Certain biographers reveal an awareness of how their

treatment of Morris may be located in the literature and express their theoretical perspectives explicitly.

J. W. Mackail's *The Life of William Morris* adheres to the Victorian notion that the telling of a life means the recounting of important events, naming a succession of achievements and showing how the central figure overcomes certain setbacks. John William Mackail was an Oxford professor and classical scholar. His biography of Morris is informed by the spirit of Romanticism that influenced so much of Victorian life writing, and typifies what the *Encyclopedia of Life Writing* describes as an Exemplary Life biography. For Mackail, Morris was a genius, a unique being. But his life also offers lessons and a model for character in that Morris was an artist, but he was hardworking and forthright. He had come from a privileged background and he loved beautiful things, but he was manly because he worked with his hands and was able to inspire others with his confidence and vision.

There is a sense that Mackail is determined to give the reader a portrayal of Morris that is almost exclusively positive. This could be due to his Victorian perspective of what a biography of an important man like Morris should be like and it could be due to the fact that he was Edward Burne-Jones' son-in-law (MacCarthy, 1994). He had met Morris during his final years and was designated as his official biographer by the family. Mackail was allowed to see many of Morris's personal papers and was embraced by Morris's circle. Perhaps he felt intensely privileged to have such access and this translated into a sense of protectiveness about his subject. Mackail writes beautifully and there is a wonderful sense of graciousness that is refreshing to a modern sensibility.

Mackail was not sympathetic to Morris's socialism. According to E. P. Thompson (1955), Mackail saw Morris as an artist and designer who had briefly been seduced by

revolutionary socialism and then had come back to his senses at the end of his life. Mackail does depict Morris's interest in the Kelmscott Press as a turning away from failed political involvement. In writing about his work as a printer, Mackail also connects Morris's interest in printing to his love of medievalism and his devotion to working in skilled crafts. In his view, the Kelmscott Press was another expression of Morris's restless genius finding a mode of expression. Mackail's biography succeeds in that it is a vast compilation of facts about Morris's comings and goings, supported by his personal letters and corroborated by close friends and family. But because of the emphasis on Morris as a kind of superhuman figure, the book does not help us truly understand him as a man.

Esther Meynell's *Portrait of William Morris*, written in 1947, has more to offer in terms of understanding what Morris was thinking about and experiencing during the latter part of his life. However, in contrast to Mackail's work, Meynell's biography lays too little emphasis on factual evidence. She assumes the role of omniscient narrator, providing insights and comments about Morris's inner life. The style of Meynell's portrayal is summed up in the

Encyclopedia of Life Writing's (2001) description of the post-World War I "New Biography":

All depict their subjects in terms of some pattern of behavior or underlying motivation that they can neither control nor fully understand. In all, the biographer plays a newly vital role as synthesizer and interpreter – as artist, in other words, turning biographical data into a dramatically appealing and aesthetically coherent portrait (650).

Meynell's work is in some ways a more sophisticated extension of Mackail's biography. She sees Morris as a sensitive artist who had a "Gothic" (203) nature. For her, his artistic expressions in their varied forms were fed by a personality that was volatile and necessarily self-protective. Morris is an artist first and she believes that his interest in printing came from his desire to have his book *The House of the Wolfings* printed in what he felt was a suitable type. She

also sees it as being inspired by the intense friendship between Morris and Edward Burne-Jones. Their friendship and artistic collaboration is depicted as the central relationship of Morris's life. The Kelmscott Press printed books that both he and Morris loved and revered and Morris was galvanized by committing to a new form of work and discovery. Like Mackail, she has little faith in Morris's socialism. In throwing himself into his work at the Press where he collaborated such a great deal with Burne-Jones (who had been alienated by Morris's revolutionary socialism), he was returning to his original self. Without irony, Meynell writes:

There is something enchantingly simple and right about it all...And as the Press grew Morris imbued his workmen with much of his own spirit – as he worked side by side with them he had no need to preach Socialist doctrines to them (207).

Though she sees him as a complicated man, she admires Morris's ability to be productive and hearty, even in the face of disappointments. Though he became seriously ill with diabetes soon after the Press was established, Meynell holds up his desire to remain active as exemplary. Her biography of Morris is more interested in psychology than Mackail's, but it nonetheless seems outdated.

Among biographical works on Morris, the book that is mentioned almost as often as Mackail's, is E.P. Thompson's (1955) *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*. Thompson stresses that he is not writing a biography of Morris, but "a study" (7). Writing from the perspective of a Marxist historian, he views Morris's political and artistic achievements in the light of a revolt against industrialism begun by the Romantics, which then became a commitment to socialism.

Thompson was among the 'New Left' historians in post-war Britain. According to the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Thompson left the Communist party in protest after the Soviet Union invaded Hungary. He added a new introduction to his work on Morris in 1977

and admitted that his perspective in 1955 had been infused with a restrictive Marxist orthodoxy. It is clear that Thompson sees Morris as an artist who embraces his destiny when he awakens to revolutionary socialism. His book is a combination of well-documented sources and his own interpretation of Morris's life and contributions. He contends that Mackail is not sympathetic with Morris's political beliefs and thus his biography does not serve to illuminate Morris's significance.

Thompson also believes that Morris embraced the Kelmscott Press because of the failures of his socialist ideals in reality. He presents him as an ailing man who has lost his political battles and is turning to art as a refuge:

Morris now had no thought of reforming the world through his art, and little thought of reforming contemporary printing and book production. Indeed, he did not seek to justify his pleasure in any way. The Press was simply a source of delight and relaxation, in which his craft as a designer and his craft as a writer both found expression (673).

Unlike Mackail and Meynell, Thompson does not see an artist who has triumphed and returned home. The documentation that Thompson gathered from Morris's letters and information about his involvement in socialist activities was considerable. Because Thompson contends that Morris was active in promoting his socialist ideals until close to the end of his life, he sees Morris's work as a printer not as a total retreat, but as a way to sustain and comfort himself during a time of discouragement.

Two other biographies that examine Morris's life in a historical context are *William Morris: Design and Enterprise in Victorian Britain* and *Art, Enterprise, and Ethics: The Life and Works of William Morris*, both by Charles Harvey and Jon Press (1991, 1996). Both writers also teach business and administration at universities in Britain. Their works on Morris focus on some of the economic and historical influences affecting Morris and Kelmscott and Morris as an

entrepreneur. Their interpretations of Morris and the Kelmscott Press are vastly different from Thompson's. For Harvey and Press, Kelmscott was a business venture. Like the Firm and Morris & Co., it was also creatively gratifying. In *William Morris: Design and Enterprise in Victorian Britain*, they write:

The Press might be taken as a unification of all his life stood for; a reconciliation of the literary and intellectual with the visual and artistic; of the practical with the idealistic; of the past with the present. (205)

Harvey and Press argue that his success in business held together the various interests in his life. In examining business records from the Firm and Morris & Co., what they find is that Morris was shrewd when he needed to be and he was guided by principles of fairness. They also propose that Morris had a formula for commercial success that he utilized when he ran Morris & Co. and he repeated this formula when he established the Press. They delineate the parts of the process that made Morris's ventures so successful: the idea, the research, a mastery of techniques, then targeting production for a specific market.

Fiona MacCarthy's (1994) *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* is built on a combination of rigorous scholarship and her own interpretative gifts. MacCarthy's work encompasses more than just Morris's achievements as a writer, but it follows the model of the literary biography. MacCarthy has also written biographies of Eric Gill, Stanley Spencer, and most recently, Lord Byron. In her biography of Morris she is interested in showing how his work reveals the primary concerns of his life experience. MacCarthy's gift as a biographer is to pierce through the span of time and bring the reader a full sense of Morris, combining the wealth of Mackail's details with a contemporary sensibility. She is unabashed in her fascination with Morris and yet her curiosity and admiration do not cloud her assessment of him.

MacCarthy's book discusses many of the domestic details that entangled and engrossed Morris while he was working on the Press. She paints a picture of Morris as a paternal figure, who while ailing himself, was trying to take care of Janey and his daughter Jenny who were also in poor health. At the Press he is also depicted as a paternal manager and boss. MacCarthy brings the Press to life as a real place where Morris worked, oversaw, and fretted. She sees Kelmscott similarly to Harvey and Press. For her, it represented a combination of Morris's "pragmatic and romantic" nature (214). She also believes that Morris saw Kelmscott as a business venture, yet it also fulfilled him personally.

Adela Spindler Roatcap (2003) writes about Morris with a much narrower focus, as her article discusses Morris during the five years that he was working on the *Kelmscott Chaucer*. It is an attempt to take a snapshot of him as his life is drawing to a close. It is a good example of a literary biography in that Roatcap tries to give the reader a portrait of him at the end of his days, engaged in perfecting what she considers his highest achievement: "The *Chaucer* was meant as the culmination of his life's work" (23). Roatcap depicts Morris as an artist who experiences his work in a sensual way. She refers to W. R. Lethaby, a family friend, and the way he describes Morris's pleasure in drawing, in this case letters for fonts he is designing. Lethaby is quoted as saying that "... 'It was to express this sensuous pleasure that he used to say that all good designing was felt in the stomach' "(23). Roatcap wants to encourage the notion of Morris as a vital though ailing man, still viscerally connected to his work.

Roatcap stresses the importance of Morris's friendship with Burne-Jones. She believes that the Kelmscott Press was a culmination of their artistic friendship which had formed at the beginning of their Oxford days. Both had loved Chaucer and read his works together when they

were younger. Their work at Kelmscott, especially with the *Kelmscott Chaucer* was the collaboration of two old friends, fulfilling their respective artistic purposes.

Design Influence

Most historians of print do not shy away from placing William Morris as a leading figure in the history of print and book design. Some offer a celebratory assessment of Morris's achievements at the Kelmscott Press, while others ultimately see these books as design failures; but whether they assess his influence as direct or indirect, few deny its power.

In what is best described as hagiography, Sparling's *Kelmscott Press and William Morris Master-Craftsman*, written in 1924, looks uncritically at the effect Kelmscott Press had on printing. As he writes in his preface, "To be mentioned in connexion with the Kelmscott Press or with William Morris is, in so far and in my eyes, to be immortalized..." (vi). He cites three main achievements of Morris's Press. First, it resulted in the beautiful editions Kelmscott produced. Second, this model has been extensively followed. And third, he started a revolution in printing that "will in the end affect the whole of the western world, and has already affected a great part of it" (116). It should be noted that Sparling was Morris's son-in-law and had at one time been a Secretary of Kelmscott Press (Peterson 1991, p. 7).

By looking back to the first days of the printing press and re-capturing the art involved in printing, including type faces, paper, and vellum, and by re-introducing design principles and the importance of beauty in a time of degradation of quality in printing, Morris's influence transcends the books he himself created. Sparling by no

means agrees with critics of Morris's style, but voices their concerns that the economic considerations of a commercial printer preclude the use of the hand press and fine handmade materials. But the author maintains that Morris's focus on design and quality rejuvenated the commercial trade, and brought new life to the private press movement.

To fully illustrate Sparling's adoration, I will quote at length:

When the world has tired of its Moloch-worship, as enthroning the machine as its god and ruler, of accepting a mechanicalized [sic] commercialism as its philosophy of life, of sacrificing the natural beauty of the earth to its greed, of wasting the accumulated riches due to the creative powers of Man in the past, and frustrating all that these powers might effect in the present, it will turn to Morris as its prophet and guide (131).

Romanticism clearly influenced by Marxist theory underscore Sparling's hagiographical treatment of Morris's design influence.

In a history of printing originally published in 1955, Steinberg (1996) asserts that the history of printing underlies most other historical phenomena; trends in the history of politics, religion, and science, to name a few, are inextricably bound to the history of printing. While he does not posit a theoretical perspective, he does offer a great deal of credence to the economic history of printing. Further, he traces a progression in the history of print, even if it is not fully accurate to state that he has a *progressive* view of print history.

Steinberg treats Morris as an important figure in the history of printing, but is ultimately disparaging of the achievements of Kelmscott. Two great influences on book design Steinberg attributes to Morris are the treatment of two facing pages of a book as a single design element, and the importance of design unity between ink, paper, and type face. But, like other historians, Steinberg finds Morris's greatest achievement in the

influence he had on other private presses, who in turn affected the print and design of commercial presses.

In the vein of his "progressive" perspective, Steinberg ultimately finds that Morris was not really a revolutionary in printing, and did not directly progress the trade. He looked back to the Middle Ages not as an historian but as a romantic. Steinberg's economic perspective comes to the fore when he ultimately critiques Morris for aspiring to "the enlightenment of the few by providing them with choice specimens of what a perfect book should be like" (157). His focus on quality was unrealistic: the fine quality handmade paper he used was impractical, and his call for only the finest materials was too costly to be useful to the commercial trade.

Shedding some of the overt worship evident in Sparling's work, Briggs (1957) writes about Morris's design influence in the introduction to an exhibit of Kelmscott books organized by The William Morris Society in London in 1957. Given where the essay is published, it is not surprising that his treatment of Morris is laudatory; nonetheless, it is a useful distillation of Morris's influence on printing. While Briggs does mention that one can debate whether Morris's actual designs had a lasting effect on the history of printing, he points to three results of Morris's work at Kelmscott. First, it was of great inspiration in the flourishing of the private press movement of the 20th century. Second, it stimulated improved standards in commercial typography. Third, it re-kindled an interest in and appreciation of manuscript culture, specifically in terms of illumination and calligraphy.

Writing in 1959, McLean's *Modern Book Design* posits that the design of a book is an essential part of the experience of a book; the designer is in service to author and

reader, but can have a large effect on the way the reader encounters the text. While McLean does not offer a specific theoretical framework for his work, it might be accurate to describe the theoretical perspective as *aesthetic*: he is interested not in the social, economic, or political dimensions, for example, of book design, but rather the aesthetic dimension.

To set the stage for his discussion of Morris's impact on book design, the author describes the decline in the quality of printing and book design in nineteenth century England. Although there were fine printers working throughout this period, they were the exception rather than the rule. As the Industrial Revolution charged through England, most of the processes involved in printing became mechanized, which brought with it a rapid increase in the amount of books published, but also diminished their quality, in terms of paper, ink, type faces, and design aesthetics in general.

It was out of this milieu that William Morris emerged as a printer. Interested in showing how a book should be a thing of beauty, Morris looked back to the Middle Ages as well as the early days of the printing press for inspiration. McLean outlines Morris's involvements with printing throughout his life, which culminates in his founding of the Kelmscott Press in 1891, which he describes as "his greatest artistic achievement" (7). Interestingly, however, McLean does not believe that Morris's design aesthetic, with its heavy medieval influences and high price tags, bore significant influence in the 20th century. His influence is seen rather in page layout, specifically in choosing margins and in viewing two facing pages as one single design element, as well as in a renewed interest in the quality of paper, ink, and bindings—all elements that were greatly diminished in the early days of mass production. And while Morris's style was copied in mass produced

books, these editions were not his important impact. Rather, his impact was a renewed interest in quality and in fine editions produced by private presses. Discounting the impact of copies of Morris's style underscores McLean's *aesthetic* perspective; an economic or social perspective might have found more value in this fact.

In *American Book Design and William Morris*, Thompson (1977) looks closely at fine printing in America for about a decade starting in 1891 and presents Morris as a revolutionary figure. While her focus is on his influence in America, she draws a direct line back to the activities at Kelmscott as well as Morris's ideas about and ideals for the book. She sets out three basic premises for her book. First, she looks closely at the effect Morris had on American printers, especially on commercial printers; sometimes they directly identify his influence and sometimes it is evident in their work if not their words. Second, she sets out to clearly define the Arts and Crafts book as a distinct style in the history of bookmaking. Third, she distinguishes between the Arts and Crafts book and other concurrent styles; Art Nouveau and Aesthetic books are distinctly different styles from the Arts and Crafts book.

Thompson's work is a critical one. She draws sharp distinction between styles that have been erroneously grouped together or confused. By closely documenting Morris's distinct style, and the distinct style of Arts and Crafts books that drew inspiration from his work, she clarifies and elevates this particular form of bookmaking and book design. She draws a vivid picture of mainstream nineteenth century printing in both England and America, with its stress on production at the expense of quality. But she also clearly identifies the ways in which this was challenged, most vocally by William Morris.

Further, she offers a wealth of commentary, positive and negative, about Morris's movement by his contemporaries, especially among American publishers.

Morris's direct influence was strong among American publishers during this period, but this direct influence waned quickly. It is common among critics to call these books design failures, citing a resurgence in an interest in early printing as its primary contribution. But Thompson disagrees. It is inaccurate to dismiss the aesthetic achievements of the Arts and Crafts book. Further, even if the specific aesthetics of the style fell out of favor, it had lasting and profound effects on commercial printing. The focus on style and even the role of book designer in the book production process can be traced directly back to this movement and to Morris specifically. The consideration of the quality of materials in bookmaking also stems from this movement.

Peterson (1991) presents a comprehensive history of the Kelmscott Press, and a detailed look at the legacy of the Press. Because Morris is such a mythical figure, Peterson asserts that it is sometimes difficult to find a balanced study of the man. Despite the enormous amount of influence Morris has exerted on the history of print, only one other full history of Kelmscott Press was available until the publication of Peterson's book—and that book was the glowing, uncritical history written by Sparling. Aspiring to a more balanced view, Peterson's framework for his work is to be equivocal and critical, while taking a closer look at details and opinions that Sparling had glossed over or ignored entirely.

In a very well-documented chapter on the legacy of Kelmscott, Peterson presents a detailed progression of design choices of private presses in England in the first decades of the twentieth century, highlighting Doves and Ashendene. Even as Morris's direct

influence waned, his influence was still felt in less overt ways, like the emergence of higher-quality paper in special editions produced by the Oxford and Cambridge University Presses, and the revival of gothic-style fonts.

Between the Wars, printing in England flourished, and at this time, finer quality editions and new type faces were produced; but the publishers in this period were committed to modern technology and did not acknowledge an inspiration from Morris. In fact, up through the 1930s it was this embracing of technology and its design aesthetics that most injured Morris's reputation at the time. Those who wished to maintain a positive view of Morris looked to his ideas about honoring the nature of materials, interpreting this as an endorsement of their design principles and minimizing if not fully ignoring his critique of machine-made goods.

While Morris's influence on the history of print can be debated, Peterson, like most authors on the subject, suggests that his influence on the private press movement cannot be contested. But for Peterson, the real value of Morris, the true reason his printed work still has allure, is because of the questions it poses about technology and its threat to culture. He sees Kelmscott as more of a eulogy to book culture than the start of a new tradition.

Writing about Morris's impact on printing and book design in Germany, Eckert (1995) offers a social and political perspective. Although Morris was barely heard of in Germany until after his death, his aesthetic sensibilities were embraced soon after. Eckert offers citations of the various exhibitions of Kelmscott books and other Morris works in Germany from the first in 1905 to a planned exhibit at the Gutenberg Museum in 1996.

Early private presses in Germany, like Einhorn Press, specifically cited Morris as inspiration in terms of book design, and the Ernst-Ludwig Press took a cue from Morris with its embrace of gothic type face. The directors of the Janus Press went to London to study Morris's designs and emulated them back in Germany in 1904, exerting a large design effect on commercial printing in Germany at that time. But this design aesthetic waned quickly. Citing social and political factors, including a suspicion toward Morris's personal political views, Eckert asserts that a more austere aesthetic took hold by 1911, even with a brief resurgence of interest in Morris in 1934 with the centenary of his birth. It wasn't until the 1950s that Morris's book design aesthetics were again in vogue in Germany, which Eckert links to Germany coming out of the cultural isolation of the Nazi era.

Conclusions

Biographical Historiography

Morris's personal life during his work at the Kelmscott Press was characterized by loss. His health was failing, his mother passed away, his daughter Jenny was progressively becoming more ill, and his relationship with his wife remained in an uncomfortable limbo. Despite this, Morris was able to surmount his personal difficulties and the works he produced at the Press are extraordinary achievements in fine press printing. In keeping with his personality and a good sense of self-preservation, he threw himself into new work, a new mode of creative expression for him, and the results were extraordinary. Biographers disagree about whether it was because of or in spite of personal setbacks that Morris embraced his work at Kelmscott. What is most touching in reading about Morris's life, is his constant loyalty to human ingenuity and innate

longing for beauty and dignity in work. It allowed him to persevere near the end of his life and to transcend disappointment with creative achievement.

Design Influence

William Morris is consistently credited with being an influential figure in the history of the printed book. Some celebrate the design and aesthetics of his printed works. Others offer a more critical approach, even going so far as to assess them as design failures. But whether the judgment of his aesthetics is positive or negative, his influence in many key areas of book design is generally agreed upon. The areas where he exerted a lasting impact include the role of the book designer, basic principles of book design, the inspiration drawn by the private press movement, and an emphasis on quality materials. There are areas lacking in research on his influence on book design. For instance, few look at the social underpinnings and later implications of his design choices. Further, few look specifically at his work as something that is rebelled against. Scholarship on William Morris is vast, even while works that focus specifically on his work as a printer and its impact are a relatively small part of this body of work. There is more work to be done on this facet of Morris's legacy.

Biographical Chronology

- 1834:** William Morris is born at Elm House, Walthamstow, Essex
- 1848-51:** Attends Marlborough College
- 1850s:** Attends Oxford, where he meets Edward Burne-Jones
Meets Dante Rossetti and is introduced to the Pre-Raphaelites
Explores possible careers: clergy, architecture, poetry, and painting
First poetry is published
Marries Jane Burden in 1859
- 1860s:** Establishes The Firm in 1861; members include Morris, Rossetti,
Burne-Jones, painter Ford Madox Brown, architect Philip Webb
Morris begins creating his famous wallpapers
Daughters Jane (Jenny) and Mary (May) are born
- 1870s:** Leases Kelmscott Manor and shares the residence with Rossetti
The Firm is dissolved in 1875 and Morris and Co. is established
Arts and Crafts gains momentum as an aesthetic movement
Morris develops his own dyes and revives hand-weaving
- 1880s:** Joins the Democratic Federation, but breaks away to form the Socialist
League in 1884
- 1888:** Morris attends a lecture on printing by Emery Walker. This lecture
inspires him to undertake work in printing
- 1890s:** Morris leaves the Socialist League
- 1890-91:** Morris's Golden type is completed

- 1891:** Morris founds The Kelmscott Press, which prints his writings and reprints many English classics, especially early classics, most notably the *Kelmscott Chaucer*
- Kelmscott's first edition, *The Story of the Glittering Plain* by William Morris, is printed on May 8, 1891 (colophon dated April 4, 1891); 200 paper copies and 6 vellum copies
- 1892:** Morris's Troy type is completed
- Morris's Chaucer type is completed
- 1893:** Morris begins to design Kelmscott's edition of Chaucer
- 1896:** Kelmscott publishes *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* on June 26, 1896 (colophon dated May 8, 1896); 425 paper copies and 13 vellum copies
- Morris dies October 3, 1896
- 1898:** Kelmscott Press publishes its 53rd and last title, *A Note by William Morris on his Aims in Founding the Kelmscott Press together with a Short Description of the Press by S.C. Cockerell, and an Annotated List of the Books Printed thereat.*, on March 24, 1898 (colophon dated March 4, 1898); 525 paper copies and 12 vellum copies
- Kelmscott Press closes

Chronological Annotated Bibliography

Sources below with an asterisk (*) were cited in this paper.

Biographical Historiography

1899-1940:

* Mackail, J. W. *The Life of William Morris*. London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1899.

The official biography written about Morris a few years after his death, this book is an authoritative compilation of the events of Morris's life, but it is also a product of its own time and does not give the reader a wholly balanced view of Morris as a man.

Compton-Rickett, Arthur. *William Morris: A Study in Personality*. London: Herbert Jenkins, 1913.

This book attempts to apply psychology to Morris's life and character. It reveals more about biographical writings of the time than it does about the personality of William Morris.

Morris, May. "Reminiscences about My Father." *Philobiblon*. 7 (4) 1934, 169-172.

A work by May Morris that focuses on her father's friendship with Edward Burne-Jones and its importance in the establishment of the Kelmscott Press.

Eshleman, Lloyd W. *A Victorian Rebel: The Life of William Morris*. New York: Scribner's, 1940.

This biography takes artistic license and uses more imagination and invention than fact in attempting to evoke Morris's life. Simplistic in its outlook and agenda, the author ignores large parts of Morris's history and only emphasizes Morris's design work and political beliefs.

1945-1964:

Grennan, Margaret R. *William Morris: Medievalist and Revolutionary*. New York: King's Crown Press, 1945.

A work that is interested in the relationship between Morris's medievalism and his socialism. It is not specifically biographical but aspects of his life are discussed.

* Meynell, Esther. *Portrait of William Morris*. London: Chapman and Hall, 1947.

A biography that attempts to view Morris from a psychological perspective. The narrative style and author's insights seem dated by our standards but the portrait of Morris is sympathetic.

* Thompson, E.P. *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, Ltd., 1955.

Like Mackail's, Thompson's work is now part of the canon of important Morris biographies. Morris's political and artistic achievements are seen in the light of a revolt against industrialism begun by the Romantics, which then became a commitment to socialism.

Arnot, R. Page. *William Morris: The Man and the Myth*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1964.

Arnot writes from a Marxist perspective and wants to expose the myths about Morris that overlook his importance as a committed socialist.

1989-Present:

* Harvey, Charles and Press, Jon. *William Morris: Design and Enterprise in Victorian Britain*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991.

Written by British social historians, this work focuses on Morris's life and work as a businessman.

* MacCarthy, Fiona. *William Morris: A Life for Our Time*. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1994.

A comprehensive biography of Morris that is informed by scholarly research.

* Harvey, Charles and Press, Jon. *Art, Enterprise, and Ethics: The Life and Work of William Morris*. London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1996.

This work is interested in both the larger picture and the mundane details of Morris's work as an entrepreneur and designer.

* Roatcap, Adela Spindler. "Morris Designs Chaucer." *Letter Arts Review*. 18 (1) 2003, 22-29.

A look at Morris during his last years as he was designing the *Kelmscott Chaucer*, the greatest achievement of his life's work, according to the author.

* MacCarthy, Fiona. 'Morris, William (1834-1896)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/19322>, accessed 22 Feb 2007]

MacCarthy's *DNB* entry gives an overview of Morris's life, the cultural and historical background of his times and his significance as an artist and thinker.

Design Influence

1896-1950:

Colebrook, Frank. *William Morris: Master Printer*. 1896. Council Bluffs, IA: Yellow Barn Press, 1990.

A reprint of a lecture delivered in 1896 by Frank Colebrook to the Printing School at the St. Bride Foundation Institute, London. It provides many details about work at Kelmscott as well as its influence.

* Sparling, H. Halliday. *The Kelmscott Press and William Morris Master Craftsman*. London: MacMillan and Co., 1924.

This work is an enthusiastic and uncritical, even hagiographical, account of Kelmscott Press written by one of its secretaries, who was also Morris's son-in-law.

1951-1980:

Ransom, Will, Ed. *Kelmscott, Doves and Ashendene*. Los Angeles, CA: The Typophiles, 1952.

This book contains several essays as well as the credos of these three private presses. It also includes an introductory essay on the private press tradition.

* William Morris Society. "Introduction." Briggs, R.C.H. *The Typographical Adventure of William Morris: An Exhibition Arranged by the William Morris Society 1957*. London: The William Morris Society, 1957. Pages 4-7.

This essay introduces the catalog of an exhibition of Kelmscott books presented by the William Morris Society in 1957. The essay offers an assessment of the work done at Kelmscott. The book also contains a full catalog of all items exhibited.

* McLean, Ruari. *Modern Book Design: From William Morris to the Present Day*. Fair Lawn, NJ: Essential Books, 1959.

This work is an examination of modern book design, starting with William Morris and addressing publishing in England and America through the 1950s. Both private and commercial printing are addressed.

Faulkner, Peter. *William Morris and Eric Gill*. London: The William Morris Society, 1975.

This slim volume looks at the ways in which William Morris influenced the printer Eric Gill, both in terms of ideas and craftsmanship.

* Thompson, Susan Otis. *American Book Design and William Morris*. New York and London: R.R. Bowker Company, 1977.

This is a book-length look at the influence Morris had on the world of printing and book design in America. Thompson specifically looks at the Arts and Crafts book as a distinct work of art to be distinguished from other fine hand printed books from the turn of the century and the decades after.

1981-Present:

* Peterson, William S. *The Kelmscott Press: A History of William Morris's Typographical Adventure*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

This is the second full-length history of Kelmscott Press, the first being that by Sparling. It is a well documented and thorough work of scholarship.

Greetham, DC. *Textual Scholarship: An Introduction*. New York: Garland Press, 1992, 258-62.

This is an introduction to bibliography, including chapters on how books are made, descriptive bibliography, and typography.

Pye, John William. *A Bibliography of American Editions of William Morris Published by Roberts Brothers Boston, 1867-1898*. Brockton, MA: John William Pye Rare Books, 1993.

Written by an antiquarian bookseller, this is a catalog of Morris works published in Boston, as well as some pirated editions.

Peterson, William S. "William Morris and His Types." *Serif: The Magazine of Type and Typography*. 1 (Fall 1995), 16-25.

This article looks at Morris's methods in designing his three type faces (Golden, Troy, and Chaucer).

*Eckert, Hans. "The Impact of Morris and the Kelmscott Press in Germany." *The Journal of the William Morris Society*. XI(2), Spring 1995, 20-23.

Eckert's essay looks at the influence that Morris and Kelmscott exerted on book arts in Germany, assessing this influence in terms of social and political factors.

* Steinberg, S.H. *Five Hundred Years of Printing*. Newcastle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 1996.

This is a history of printing from Gutenberg to the twentieth century, broken down by eras based on ways of production. It is a thorough overview of the technology. Morris is dealt with both directly and indirectly.

Baker, Lesley A. "The Kelmscott Press: To What Purpose?" *The Journal of the William Morris Society*. XII(2) Spring 1997, 36-38.

This article examines Morris's aims in founding Kelmscott Press.

Selborne, Joanna. *British Wood Engraved Book Illustration 1904-1940: A Break with Tradition*. New Castle, Del.: Oak Knoll Press, and London: British Library, 2001.

This is a history of British wood engravers and their art from 1904 to 1940. Reacting against predominant engraving practices of the nineteenth century, and taking inspiration from Morris, these engravers influenced British book arts.

Historiographical Sources

Aho, Gary L. *William Morris: A Reference Guide*, ed. Marilyn Gaull. Boston, MA: G.K. Hall & Co., 1985.

Belting, Hans. *Art History after Modernism*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Carrier, David. *Principles of Art History Writing*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991.

Edel, Leon. *Writing Lives: Principia Biographica*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1989.

Jolly, Margaretta. (Ed.). *Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms* (Vols. 1-2). London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2001.

Minor, Vernon Hyde. *Art History's History*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1994.

Pächt, Otto. *The Practice of Art History: Reflections on Method*. London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 1999.

Rayward, Boyd W. "The Case of Paul Otlet, Pioneer of Information Science, Internationalist, Visionary: Reflections on Biography." *Journal of Library and Information Science*. September 1991, 135-145.

Rule, John. 'Thompson, Edward Palmer (1924-1993)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, Sept 2004; online edition, Oct 2005 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/40259, accessed 7 March 2007]

Soussloff, Catherine M. *The Absolute Artist: The Historiography of a Concept*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.