

# The Green Borders of William Morris

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In the recent exhibition of Kelmscott Press books held by the University of Melbourne Library, we were treated to many examples of borders designed by William Morris. Some of these borders are repeats, but all draw on Morris's extensive repertoire of 'conventionalised' organic forms. Having spent some time studying the concept of nature in the work of Morris, it was these 'green' borders which attracted my attention at the exhibition, and in this short paper I would like to outline some of the sources for these borders and also to suggest that we can draw parallels between these and the so-called "green" contours of Morris's social thought. Thus, in providing a contextual scenario for Morris's work at the Kelmscott Press, I wish to address not only the narrower, flowering and organic, "green" borders of his "typographical adventure" but the wider "green" perimeters of his social thought.

Many have indicated how the sources for the decorative borders Morris produced for the Kelmscott Press are complex and various: that Morris drew on both his own collection of medieval and renaissance manuscripts and publications as well as those at the Bodleian and British Libraries.<sup>1</sup> He also drew on his own observation of natural forms in the gardens and the landscape around him and on his own earlier 'conventionalizing' of natural forms in pattern design.<sup>2</sup> Thus one can recognise aspects of the Kelmscott borders in Morris's wallpapers, fabrics and tapestries, and in descriptions of the gar-

dens of the eponymous Kelmscott House and Manor. It is not, however, my intention to explore these similarities here. I do feel, however, that it is useful to look briefly at two other sources for the borders produced by

Morris at the Kelmscott Press: his doodles or marginalia, and his calligraphic manuscripts.

As Morris wrote or revised his poetry he frequently sketched flowers and foliage in the margins of his paper.



Frontispiece and first page of *The Wood Beyond the World*; the Kelmscott Press, May 1894; the border and text by William Morris, the illustration of the Maid by Edward Burne-Jones.

These can be seen in abundance in the Morris papers kept at the British Library, especially among his work on the stories for *The Earthly Paradise*, and the lecture notes made for and during the hundreds of socialist and other public meetings and lectures he gave, chaired and attended. In a manuscript page from "Bellerophon in Lycia" of 1869, we see clumps of daisies or primroses, posies and sprays of what might be jasmine, vine leaves and a corner of trellis work.<sup>3</sup> On Morris's card for a lecture on socialism in 1889, his notes have been crowded out by floral and

architectural doodles; and, in a later page that Morris made at a meeting of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in 1892, we can see twisting, sinuous, verdant forms that bear an obvious resemblance to border designs for the Kelmscott *Chaucer*, which he would begin in the following year.<sup>4</sup> Thus at a very basic level, the life brought to the margins of Morris's text, can be seen to be of a "green" nature.

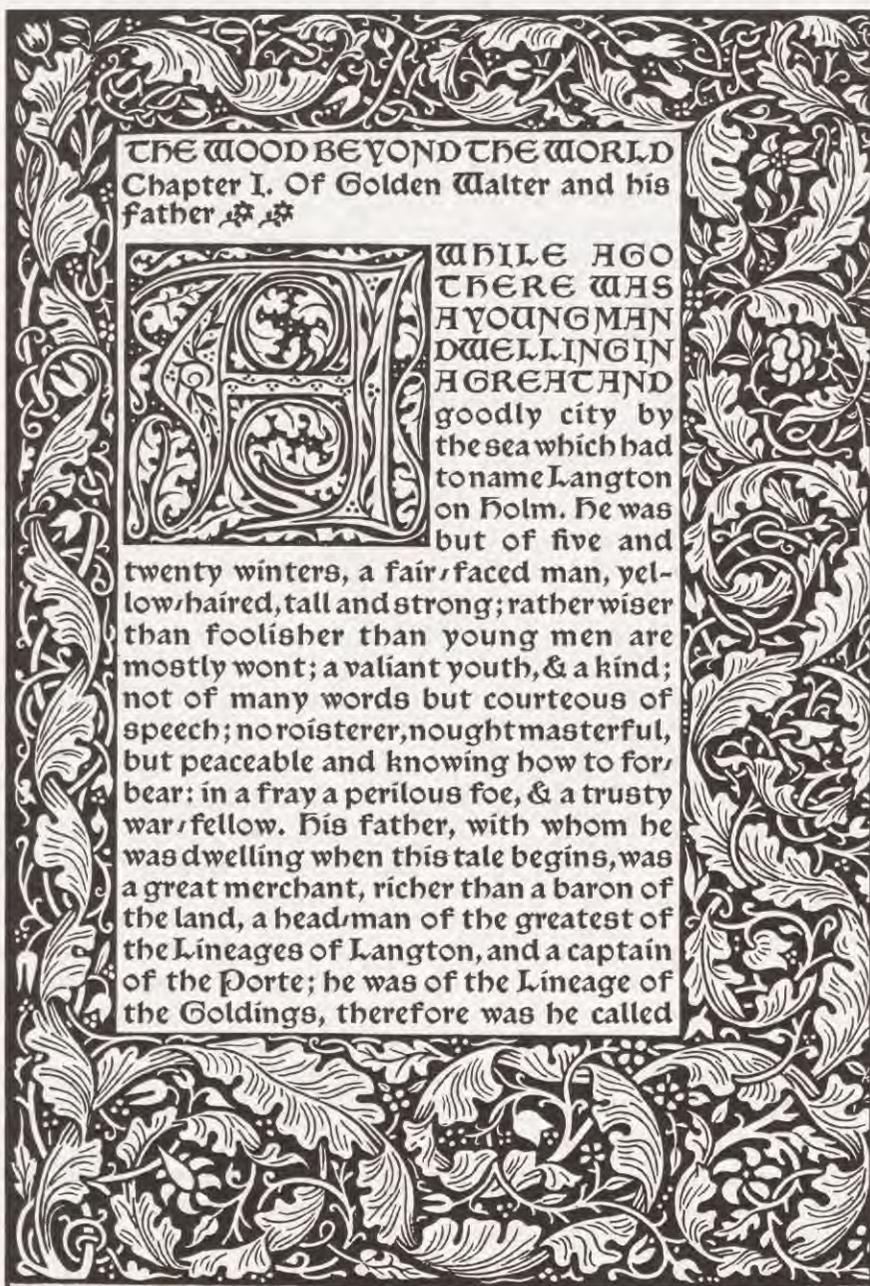
These random patternings also point to the more formal decorated borders he drew while working on over 1500 pages of calligraphy, mainly in the 1870s, and

which also provide an important source for the later Kelmscott borders. If we examine Morris's earliest calligraphic work, it is possible to see that from the first his pages show vitality, understanding of colour and pleasure in the decorative qualities of natural forms. As he became more proficient, growth and movement become a more important part of his decorative schemes, with isolated clumps or sprays of plants and flowers replaced by verdant foliage that seems to "spring from the soil".<sup>5</sup>

In *A Book of Verse*, completed for Georgiana Burne-Jones in 1870, the frontispiece is almost entirely covered by green leaves, and green growth, emanating from the borders, pervades all the pages of poetry which Morris decorated. Though the verse itself is often pensive, the foliage, fruit, flowers, and vines are full of vitality. Similarly, in a manuscript version of the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, which Morris concentrated upon in 1872, the foliate borders almost engulf the roman letters in the centre. Some have remarked that this treatment of fruit and flowers was "an admirable adaptation of an almost Pre-Raphaelite naturalism to the methods and limits of ornamental design", and Morris's daughter, May, claimed that each flower in its design was different and identifiable.<sup>6</sup>

Later borders of the manuscripts produced by Morris, however, are bolder and point even more directly towards the stylised patterns of the Kelmscott Press. This can be seen in the blue and green acanthus leaves of the incomplete *Odes of Horace* and of the *Aeneid of Virgil*, where delicate stems and foliage are replaced by bold growth. In this respect one can see in Morris's last calligraphic manuscripts of 1875, the "vigorous acanthus ... triumph over the less assertive willow".<sup>7</sup>

Morris ceased his calligraphic activities in 1875, and it was not until he set up the Kelmscott Press in 1891 that he again worked on ornamental borders (though he was decorating the margins of his notes and manuscripts as mentioned earlier). It has been estimated that in the next six years he produced over



six hundred mainly foliate designs – comprising borders and initials, title-pages, inscriptions and printer’s marks – and it is to these that I shall now turn to take one last look at Morris’s page borders.

Although the same border appeared in the first five books, as the Press developed Morris produced a range of full, three-quarter, half, quarter and corner borders. These were numbered and recorded in his “bloomer book”, which can now be seen at the Bodleian Library. Most consist of formal floral and vine patterns in white against a black background, but there are also hints of the organic flowers and foliage of earlier designs. Many have argued that verdant growth is the essential force one finds in all of Morris’s patterns, and I believe we do find something of this “green” growth in the Kelmscott borders.<sup>8</sup> The first secretary of the Press, Henry Halliday Sparling, noted that Morris “kept [the borders] alive ... by growing the pattern, bit by bit, solving the turns and twists as he came to them”, and the borders often look as if they could go on growing.<sup>9</sup> In this respect, we can find hints of the flowers and foliage familiar from the fabric and wallpaper designs. There are reworkings or suggestions of “Acanthus”, “Rose”, “Poppy”, “Marigold”, “Borage”, “Fritillary” and even the grand movement of the river chintzes: “Wey”, “Wandle”, “Cray” and “Evenlode”. These can be seen in the borders to *The Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye*, *The History of Reynard the Foxe*, the wonderful frontispieces to works such as *The Wood Beyond the World* (complete with woodbine and meadow-sweet bound Maid by Burne-Jones), the famous image of Morris’s haven of rest encased in vine and acanthus for the Kelmscott *News From Nowhere*, or a rose rimmed tale from the *Works of Chaucer*.

The lively presence on the page of these borders, however, has provoked much debate about whether they call too much attention to themselves. Not everyone appreciates, as Burne-Jones did, being “snugly cased in the borders and buttressed up by the vast

initials”.<sup>10</sup> Many have complained that the borders are distracting. It is, however, necessary to recognise that the borders’ physical richness help to make the Kelmscott Press books an important cultural presence in the 1890s. Thus, although the books may be revivalist or backward looking in their typographical inspiration, they are also richly suggestive and forward looking in their desire to make an active statement. In this respect, Morris’s “typographical adventure” was, as Bill Peterson has suggested, not merely a simplistic idealisation of the medieval world but a protest against the psychological and social disintegration produced by modernity. It spoke not only about typography and book design, but about how we ought to live.<sup>11</sup> With this in mind, I shall now move on and examine the contexts for Morris’s wider “green” thought.

By the second half of the 19th century, the English industrial landscape had become a source of shame to the Victorians, both as a physical existence and as a symbol of morality.<sup>12</sup> Morris himself wrote:

Not only are London and our other great commercial cities mere masses of sordidness, filth, and squalor, embroidered with patches of pompous and vulgar hideousness, no less revolting to the eye and the mind when one knows what it means: not only have whole counties of England, and the heavens that hang over them, disappeared beneath a crust of unutterable grime, but the disease, which ... would seem to be a love of dirt and ugliness for its own sake, spreads all over the country, and every little market-town seizes the opportunity to imitate, as far as it can, the majesty of the hell of London and Manchester.<sup>13</sup>

A significant part of the reform movement that attempted to address these conditions was that organised around the idea of open-spaces. As early as 1833, national discussion on the question of beauty and relaxation in the urban environment had begun with the report of the Select Committee on Public Walks. A public park and com-

mons preservation movement subsequently developed that focused attention on the inadequacy of the urban environment, the need for improvement and the ideal of the *rus in urbe*. By the latter half of the century groups organised around these principles included the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association, Octavia Hill’s Kyrle Society, and the Commons Preservation Society. All, as James Bryce of the Selborne Society expressed it, attempted “to defend nature against those plagues and pests which sought to worry her out of existence”.<sup>14</sup>

At an immediate and practical level, Morris gained some hope from these organisations springing up around him. Previously he had written:

The struggles of mankind for many ages had produced nothing but this sordid, aimless, ugly confusion; the immediate future seemed to me likely to intensify all the present evils by sweeping away the last survivals of the days before the dull squalor of civilization had settled down on the world. This was a was a bad look-out indeed, and ... especially so to a man of my disposition ... with a deep love of the earth and the life on it, and a passion for the history of the past of mankind. Think of it! Was it all to end in a counting-house on the top of a cinder-heap, with Podsnap’s drawing-room in the offing, and a Whig committee dealing out champagne to the rich and margarine to the poor in such convenient proportions as would make all men contented together, though the pleasure of the eyes was gone from the world, and the place of Homer was to be taken by Huxley.<sup>15</sup>

But although Morris might regret that T. H. Huxley could re-envision “man’s place in nature”, it was the work of the early environmental groups, often inspired and supported by natural science, which provided an early impetus for Morris to move into the public sphere. In 1877 he established the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in order to prevent over-zealous restorers from destroying England’s

historic past, and as a result of common interests, and many common members, this society co-operated closely with broader environmental organisations.<sup>16</sup>

Alongside the call for more open spaces, another facet of Victorian concern for the environment was that pertaining to immediate working conditions. Agitation and reform on this front contributed to the emergence of the various projects of the paternalistic model factory and village builders, such as Robert Owen's New Lanark, W. H. Lever's Port Sunlight, the Bournville village of the Cadbury brothers, and also the alternative communities of the Chartists, the Ruskinian guilds, and later "back-to-the land-ers".<sup>17</sup> Certainly many of the ideas of these groups and movements coloured and informed Morris's imagining of "greener" landscapes: of "A Factory as it Might Be", of the utopia envisaged in *News From Nowhere*, and, somewhat more problematically, of the conditions at his own Morris & Co. workshops at Merton Abbey.

It is necessary to recognise, even though I do not have space to fully explore it here, that the crucial factor of Morris's "green" visions - of his 'factory as it might be' (though not of his own workshops at Merton Abbey) was the eradication of the division of labour. Thus when people evoke Morris in the context of the 'green' movement, they are invoking an analysis informed by the problems of nineteenth-century urban-industrial capitalism, rather than an explicit concern for nature *per se*. That is, we should not think of Morris in the context of those who believe that environmental crises

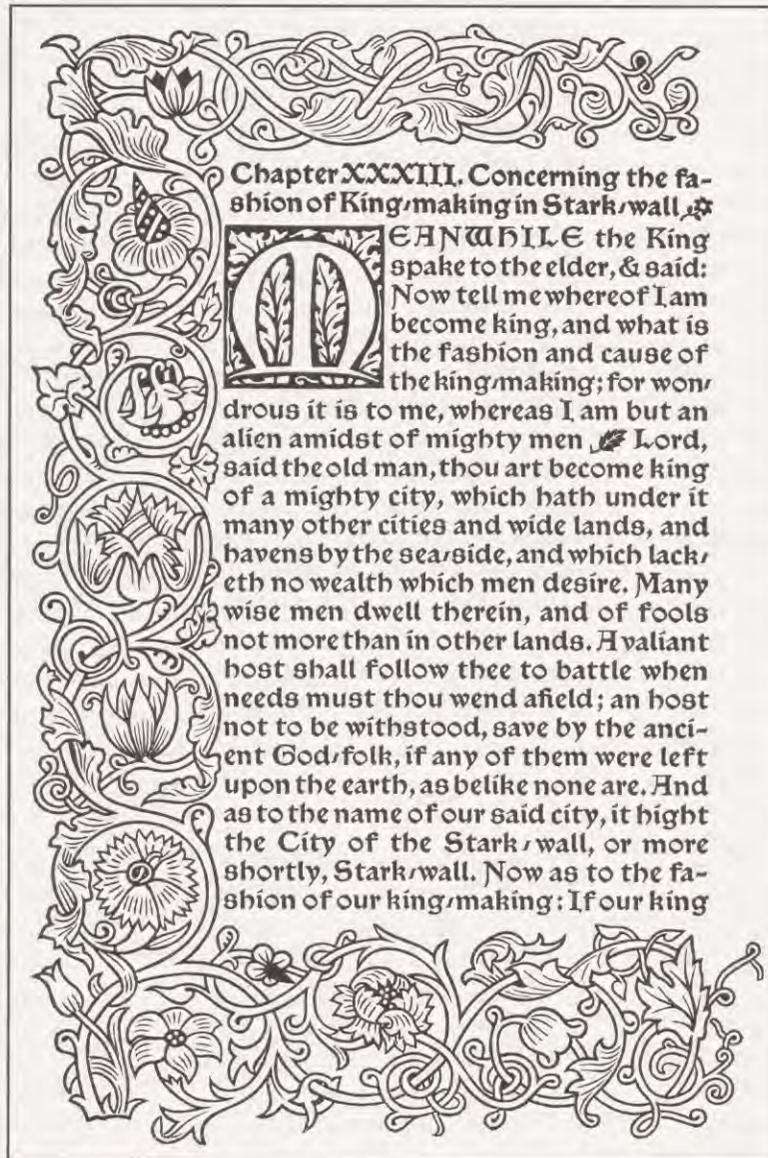
can be adequately dealt with within current socio-political and cultural arenas, but in the context of those who explicitly question and reject many of these arenas. Of course the most obvious context for Morris in this respect is his socialism, and, as the physical object of work, nature was a key term in the formulation

creation of the industrial city. Capitalist industrialism, with its voracious appetite for the environment as resource and dumping ground, had entrenched the city's alienation from nature and rationalised urban culture's psychotic habits. Morris complained:

It is profit which draws men into enormous unmanageable aggregations called towns ... Which crowds them up when they are there into quarters without gardens or open spaces, profit which won't take the most ordinary precautions against wrapping a whole district in a cloud of sulphurous smoke; which turns beautiful rivers into filthy sewers... Cuts down the pleasant trees among the houses, pulls down ancient and venerable buildings for the money that a few square yards of London dirt will fetch; blackens rivers, hides the sun and poisons the air with smoke and worse...<sup>18</sup>

Profit also divided labour, and in Morris's terms not only did this "expropriate" the people from the land but it also pitted 'man against man' in quantitatively competitive rather than qualitatively co-operative work which destroyed individual creativity. It is necessary to acknowledge in this respect Morris's debt to other socialistic thinkers such as John Ruskin, Robert Owen, Charles Fourier, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Peter Kropotkin and Edward Carpenter.

Nevertheless, there is an important extent to which Morris's importance lies in the fact that he places more emphasis on the desire for 'a reasonable share in the beauty of the earth' as the right of



Page 242 of *The Wood Beyond the World* by William Morris, shows the organic character of his flower and foliage border designs.

of Marxian political economy, and in Morris's imagining of more appropriate relationships between human industry and the environment.

Following Marx, it was the profit motive Morris blamed for the damage done to the environment, especially its

everyone, rather than the necessity of the overcoming of nature at any cost.<sup>19</sup> And, with nature acting as a guide to the conception of the object, to the materials used to make it, to the fashion in which it was made, to the environment in which it was made, and to the relationships which ensued when it was made, Morris developed a culture of nature in which he imagined that human labour:

... will make our streets as beautiful as the woods, as elevating as the mountain-sides: it will be a pleasure and a rest, and not a weight upon the spirits to come from the open country into a town ... All the works of man that we live amongst and handle will be in harmony with nature...<sup>20</sup>

This, then, is the context in which I believe we should view the environmental or 'green' Morris, a version that has been particularly visible of late.<sup>21</sup> One of the three keynote speeches delivered at the William Morris Centenary Conference in Oxford suggested that Morris was in all his theories a "green" and that they "echoed" deep ecological, eco-spiritualist and eco-feminist theorists.<sup>22</sup> While I recognise some of the ways in which comparisons can be helpful, I do not believe that we can invoke eco-centrism, eco-feminism, and eco-spiritualism as dominant features of Morris's thought. Clearly, although Morris acknowledged the interdependent character of human relationships with the rest of nature, he is anthropocentric, unequivocally stating, rightly or wrongly, that humanity was nature's crowning achievement. Nor did he believe that patriarchy or androcentrism is the main constituent that sanctions the oppression of nature, though he did address many of the issues of nineteenth-century socialist feminists. Nor is eco-spiritualism a feature of his thought. Though there are parallels between nature-centred native American spiritualism and elements of some of the societies imagined by Morris, generally I see more of an earthy, sensuous materiality in Morris's work than a sense of awe and reverence in the face of nature. Surely, if we have to think of Morris as eco-anything, it should be as an "eco-

or "green" socialist, that is in terms of an ecological awareness framed within a language of equality and social justice. In other words, before one makes the move to claim Morris as an early "green", we need to consider that many "greens" claim to be motivated first and foremost by concerns for the eco-system. And when this is the case, and when it is stated that the significance of "green" thought is that it decentres the human being, we have to acknowledge that Morris - though he seeks a substantial paradigm shift in relations between nature and human industry - clearly does not do this.

Thus, though we can perhaps talk of the "green" borders to Morris's life, as of the books made at the Kelmscott Press, we cannot move these borders to the centre and say that they constitute the text in its entirety. Though I believe that it is valuable to reclaim the contours of his thought which have been devalued in orthodox Marxist interpretation, or narrowed as they were co-opted into the history of the British Labour Party, or inoculated of all political meaning in order to make them suitable for more general aesthetic consumption, we can also dangerously overdo an alternative

"green" interpretation. Again, if we let the "green" borders dazzle us, we lose the centrality of the text, of the human story, which was always central to Morris. Ultimately I find many problems with the labelling of Morris as "green", believing that it is at times anachronistic, at times confusing, and provides patently false understandings of Morris's work when he is unproblematically co-opted into newly constructed histories of "green" thought in the west. Thus, while I believe that an exploration of the concept of nature in Morris's work can provide valuable perspectives on today's 'green' crises, that the concept of nature provides a way to see his work as a whole, and that this approach can save him from being seen merely as the "arty-crafty poetic upholsterer". Morris's "greenness" is something that should not cause a fundamental 'red to green' shift in studies of his life and thought. For me, the meaning of Morris in the year of his centenary should be tied unequivocally to issues of social equality and social justice, which entails, though is not formulated upon, a strong environmental awareness. ♦

## Notes

- 1 Anyone working on Morris and the Kelmscott Press has to acknowledge, as I do here, the work and influence of William S. Peterson in *The Kelmscott Press: A History of William Morris' Typographical Adventure*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991; and the group of essays edited by Paul Needham under the title *William Morris and the Art of the Book*, The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York: Oxford University Press, 1976.
- 2 In a lecture first delivered before the Working Men's College, London, December 10 1881, Morris spoke of this "conventionalizing of nature" as a treatment that "invents certain beautiful and natural forms, which, appealing to a reasonable and imaginative person, will remind him not only of

the part of nature which, to his mind at least they represent, but also of much that lies beyond that part". 'Some Hints on Pattern Designing', in "Lectures on Art and Industry", in *The Collected Works of William Morris* (hereafter CW), vol. XXII, ed. May Morris, London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1910-15, p. 181.

- 3 British Library, Add. MS 45,301, fol. 43.
- 4 Hendon Debating Society card: Barnet Libraries, Archives and Local Study Centre; sheet of doodles by Morris on Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings notepaper: Sanford and Helen Berger Collection. The linking of these designs to those used in the borders for the Kelmscott *Chaucer*

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- was made by Chris Miele for a panel at the recent "William Morris 1834-1896" exhibition held at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
- 5 Joseph Dunlap, "William Morris: Calligrapher", in *William Morris and the Art of the Book*, p. 51.
  - 6 J. W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, vol. I, (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1899), p. 279.
  - 7 Dunlap, "William Morris: Calligrapher", p. 68.
  - 8 John Hanna has argued that not recognising the growth motif in Morris's work (by hanging his curtains or wallpapers the wrong way, for example) is contrary to Morris's "art of environmental design". See John Hanna, "A New Art of Environmental Design", *Journal of the William Morris Society*, vol. VI, no. 4, Winter 1985-6, pp. 4-10.
  - 9 H. Halliday Sparling, *The Kelmscott Press and William Morris Master-Craftsman*, (London, Macmillan, 1924), p. 67.
  - 10 Edward Burne-Jones to Charles Eliot Norton, 1894; quoted in Peterson, *The Kelmscott Press*, p. 164.
  - 11 For this aspect of Peterson's eloquent analysis see especially pp. 4-8 of *The Kelmscott Press*. Fiona MacCarthy has also noted that the decorative borders create an alternative imaginary territory by "establishing connections with a half-recognised medieval landscape", and by "drawing the reader into a new world of strange visual juxtapositions", William Morris, *A Life for Our Time*, London, Faber, 1994, p. 619. In this sense the Kelmscott Press books echo the language of Morris's novels of this period, such as *The Wood Beyond the World*, *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* and *The Well at the World's End*. These works also map new terrain, explore new borders and boundaries of the environmental and topographical imagination, and even anticipate and influence further imaginings such as the "Middle Earth" of J. R. R. Tolkien, the woods beyond wardrobes of C. S. Lewis, and Ursula Le Guin's "Earthsea".
  - 12 For various reactions to 19th century industrial landscape, see, for example, Barrie Trinder, *The Making of the Industrial Landscape*, London, J. M. Dent, 1982; *Nature and Industrialisation*, ed. Alisdair Clayre, Oxford University Press for the Open University Press, 1977; Martin J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980*, Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981; Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1973; and *Culture and Society: Coleridge to Orwell*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1958.
  - 13 Morris, "Art Under Plutocracy" (1883), in *Lectures on Socialism*, in CW, vol. XXIII, pp. 170-171.
  - 14 James Bryce, *Nature Notes*, 11 (1900), pp. 107-109, quoted by John Ranlett, "Checking Nature's Desecration": Late-Victorian Environmental Organization", *Victorian Studies*, vol. XXVI, no. 2, Winter 1983, p. 197. See also Martin Gaskell, "Gardens for the Working Class: Victorian Practical Pleasure", *Victorian Studies*, vol. XXIII, no. 4, Summer 1980, pp. 479-501.
  - 15 Morris, "How I Became a Socialist" (1894), in *Lectures on Socialism*, CW, vol. XXIII, p. 279.
  - 16 In the 1880s the S. P. A. B. and the C. P. S. worked together to save the London Charterhouse, Staple Inn and Barnard's Inn. These links were still operational in 1947 when the Huxley commission on wild life conservation used the precedent of the ancient monuments act to justify the state protection of natural sites: "there is but a narrow gap", the commission argued, "between these and the [nature] reserves, which are both ancient monuments and living museums - a living embodiment of the past history of the land" (see Ranlett, *Checking Nature's Desecration*, pp. 479-501). On a more personal level, in the 1890s Morris was involved in campaigning against indiscriminate wood cutting and clearances in Epping Forest: championing the cause of the native hornbeams against "vile weeds like deodars and outlandish conifers", writing to the press "on behalf of the trees", visiting clearance sites to assess damage, and railing against the opinion of so-called experts. See Morris's letters to *The Daily Chronicle* of 1895 in *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, vol. IV, ed. Norman Kelvin, (Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 268-278.
  - 17 See, for example, Jan Marsh, *Back to the Land: The Pastoral Impulse in Victorian England from 1880 to 1914*, London, Quartet Books, 1982, and Dennis Hardy, *Alternative Communities in Nineteenth Century England*, London, Longmans, 1979.
  - 18 Morris, "How We Live and How We Might Live", in *Signs of Change*, CW, vol. XXIII, p. 22.
  - 19 Morris, "Art and the Beauty of the Earth" (1881), in *Lectures on Art and Industry*, CW, vol. XXII, p. 170.
  - 20 Morris, "The Lesser Arts", in *Hopes and Fears for Art*, CW, vol. XXII, p. 27.
  - 21 The current perception of Morris as in some ways fundamentally motivated by an environmental concern is not a recent thing. Many of the early biographies and studies recognised that nature was important to Morris, although Morris's "green" potential developed most rapidly in the seventies, subsequently inspiring a whole swag of authors to take Morris scholarship down the path from red to green. See for example: Nicholas Gould, "William Morris", *The Ecologist*, vol. IV, no. 6, July 1974, pp. 210-12; Jack Lindsay, *William Morris: His Life and Work*, London: Constable, 1975; Raymond Williams, "Socialism and Ecology", (1982), reprinted in *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism*, ed. Robin Gable, London: Verso, 1989; Peter C. Gould, *Early Green Politics: Back to Nature, Back to the Land, and Socialism in Britain 1880-1900*, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1988; various articles by Paddy O'Sullivan's in the *Journal of the William Morris Society: News From Nowhere: A Vision for Our Time*, ed. Stephen Coleman and O'Sullivan, Bideford: Green Books, 1990; Roger Simon, "William Morris: Pioneer of Green Socialism", *Greensocs*, no. 2, October 1995, pp. 5-7.
  - 22 Florence Boos, "Morris the Green", delivered at the William Morris Centenary Conference, Exeter College, Oxford, June 27 1996.