

# A Harmonious Work of Art

## The William Morris Collection in the University of Melbourne Library

by **Merete Smith,**

Curator, Rare Books, the University of Melbourne Library

**T**he University of Melbourne Library has a magnificent collection of Kelmscott Press books, donated by Dr. Orde Poynton. How the collection came to be in the Library, and some reasons why it forms such a special part of the Library's collection are the subjects of this paper.

It is one of the strongest Kelmscott Press collections in Australia and unique in containing several copies of many titles. This makes the collection particularly valuable to printing historians, as this makes it possible to trace the printing process in detail.

Many of the books were exhibited as part of the Morris exhibition held in the University Gallery from 2 September to 11 October 1996.<sup>1</sup> The exhibition represented a collaboration between the Gallery, the Department of Fine Arts Department and Rare Books at the University Library.<sup>2</sup>

During the five and a half years of its existence the Kelmscott Press published 54 books, an impressive output for any private press. William Morris (1834-1896) came to printing late in life after a long and successful career spanning a multitude of other arts and crafts. The first Kelmscott Press book was not published until 1891.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, printing and book production were matters of the utmost importance to Morris.

The University of Melbourne Library is fortunate to hold an impressive collection of books published by the Kelmscott Press. Of the 54 titles, the University Library holds 40, 26 of which have two or more copies with binding or other variants.

This collection has been built up largely from the generous donation of Dr. J. Orde Poynton, who has celebrated his 90th birthday during this centenary year of Morris' death. Whereas this Kelmscott Press donation would suffice to give lasting fame to any book collector, the Poynton donation spans much more. It started with a gift of 850 volumes and 50 paintings, drawings and prints. These were given to the University in 1958, and arrived in the Library in 1959 to transform completely the fairly insignificant Rare Book collection of the Library and eventually make it one of the foremost collections of its kind in the country. Since 1958 a large number of "installments" of the Poynton Collection have arrived. For many years the arrival of Poynton donations was an annual event. The number of books donated each year varied - with, for instance, 8,000 books arriving in 1971, 570 in 1986 - but the condition

of the books was invariably the best possible. The Poynton Collection now consists of close to 15,000 volumes in a multiplicity of areas.

Dr. Poynton's interest in William Morris started early; he read his first Kelmscott Press book, *The Well at the World's End* in the beautiful library of Marlborough College where he was educated.<sup>4</sup> William Morris had been to that same school between 1848 and 1851, but appears to have been much less happy there than the young Orde Poynton was in the early decades of the 20th century. Dr. Poynton does not know whether the book was personally donated by Morris or not, but the experience fostered his interest.

Dr. John Orde Poynton was born on the 9th April 1906 in London and educated at Marlborough College, Caius College Cambridge and Charing Cross Hospital, and those three institutions



Kelmscott Press titles on display at the exhibition of Morris's work held at the University Gallery (from the collections of the University of Melbourne Library). Photo: Michael Silver

have continued to show in his collecting interests in various ways (for instance a London Collection and a small but significant Cambridge Collection). After a position as Senior Resident Medical Officer at the Charing Cross Hospital, Dr. Poynton served as Health Officer, Research Officer and Pathologist in various appointments around Malaya and in the British Army until 1946. He lived in Adelaide from 1947 to 1962 where he was Lecturer at the University Medical School and from 1950 to 1961, Director of the Institute of Medical and Veterinary Science. From 1962 to 1974 Dr. Poynton was Consulting Bibliographer at the University of Melbourne from where he received an Honorary LL.D. in 1977. He is now living in retirement on the Mornington Peninsula.

Dr. Poynton inherited from his father a lifelong interest in the study and collection of rare books and prints, but the astonishing book collection was largely built up by Dr. Poynton in Australia after the Second World War. An earlier large Poynton collection of books which existed in London before the war was largely destroyed in the Blitz.

Apart from the Kelmscott Press books, Dr. Poynton's gifts have included a Second Folio Shakespeare,<sup>5</sup> a "Nuremberg Chronicle" - one of the most lavishly illustrated books of the 15th Century,<sup>6</sup> about 3,400 volumes of Greek and Latin Classics covering the history of printing from the 15th century to the 19th century, several thousand first and early editions of major English authors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and a large collection of modern private press books and limited and first editions of 20th century writers. As well as the Kelmscott Press books the private press collection includes substantial holdings of, for instance, Ashendene, Golden Cockerel, Vale and Essex House Press books. Morris books predating the Kelmscott Press venture are also well

represented. The Scott Collection of approximately 2,500 volumes, all by and about Sir Walter Scott ranks amongst the best Scott collections in the world, and Dr. Poynton also donated significant collections of other English authors, notably Laurence Sterne and Lord Byron. The focus of the collection as a whole is on book production, printing and book art and illustration, and the Kelmscott Collection is therefore very central to understanding it as a whole.



Dr Orde Poynton, portrait by Ivor Hele, 1950 (oil on composition board)

William Morris the artist and book designer was highly un-fashionable in the decades after the Second World War. Dr. Poynton strongly believed then that Kelmscott Press Books were under-priced and would appreciate in value. A year or so after Dr. Poynton's first donation had arrived in the Baillieu Library (October 1960), he gave a talk about William Morris and the Kelmscott Press to University staff which was published in *The Australian Library Journal*, October 1961. The talk reads as freshly today as ever, and the key point which Dr. Poynton makes is that,

"Whether [Morris] appeals to our taste today or not, [he] was a great

designer and he brought his great knowledge of, and skill in, design to bear on every page that was printed".<sup>7</sup>

Dr. Poynton's interest has not just been in the book as an object, but also in Morris as a poet and story-teller. In his paper, Dr. Poynton expressed admiration for Morris' "superb but slightly mannered style ... in the tradition of Chaucer", and his firm belief that "a revival [of Morris authorship] will come and his place in English Literature be firmly established".<sup>8</sup>

His preferred Morris stories in 1960 were *The Well at the World's End* and secondly *The Roots of the Mountains*,<sup>9</sup> which was never published by the Kelmscott Press but for which Morris designed a superb chinz floral binding. In a recent letter Dr. Poynton again states his admiration for *The Roots of the Mountains* as one of Morris's prime achievements.<sup>10</sup>

The first part of Dr. Poynton's prediction has come true, but whilst the 1996 birthday celebrations and the Morris Home Page on the World Wide Web testifies to the revival of Morris as an artist, his authorship is still waiting for a re-evaluation.

The majority of the Kelmscott Press books in the collection were given in the first donation in 1958-59. All are in the finest possible condition, as is characteristic of the Poynton Collection as a whole - and as any book collector knows, for fine printing the condition is vital. A shabby copy of a "valuable" book may be worth next to nothing.

Amongst the books in the 1958/59 donation, packed with the utmost care by Dr. Poynton into transfusion bottle cartons and transported in University vehicles from Adelaide, were 29 Kelmscott Press books and five pieces of Kelmscott ephemera, but unfortunately the records do not allow us to estab-

KELMSCOTT PRESS, UPPER  
MALL, HAMMERSMITH.

June 1st, 1896.

Note. This is the Golden type.

This is the Troy type.

This is the Chaucer type.



Secretary:  
S. C. Cockerell, Kelmscott Press, Upper Mall,  
Hammersmith, London, W., to whom all  
letters should be addressed.

Left:  
Advertisement  
sheet of the  
Kelmscott Press,  
including exam-  
ples of the Press  
typefaces

Below: The fron-  
tispiece of *A  
Dream of John  
Ball* by William  
Morris, the  
Kelmscott Press,  
1892. The illustra-  
tion is by Edward  
Burne-Jones.

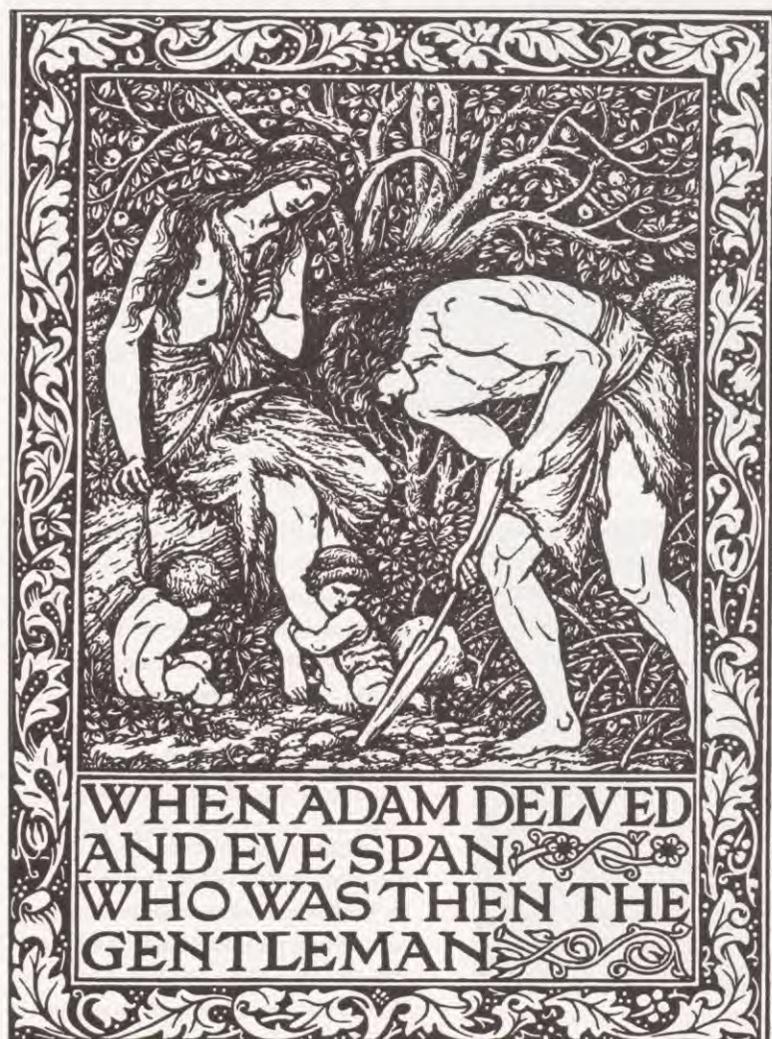
lish the titles easily. However, Kelmscott Press books have been included in almost all Poynton donations since the first one, including the last major donation in 1993 of 100 books which contained a unique copy of William Morris' *Poems by the Way* (Kelmscott Press, 1891) bound in vellum stained indigo.

Whilst Dr. Poynton's generosity to the University of Melbourne has been almost unbelievable, he has also donated Kelmscott Press books to both The National Gallery of Victoria (1980) and more recently to the Australian National Gallery in Canberra which now has an outstanding Poynton Collection.

The recent exhibition in the University Gallery celebrated the centenary of the death of William Morris. It showed how intimately his book design was linked to the rest of his designs in wallpapers, textiles and other forms.

Some very special books from the Poynton collection were exhibited, amongst them:

- The first book off the press, William Morris's *The Story of the Glittering Plain* (Kelmscott Press, 1891), printed in black ink only.
- William Morris *Poems by the Way*, (Kelmscott Press, 1891), the first book printed in two colours, black and red ink.
- *Laudes Beatae Mariae Virginis*, (Kelmscott Press, 1896), the first book printed in three colours, black, red and blue ink.
- William Morris *Poems by the Way* (Kelmscott Press, 1891) this volume bound in vellum stained indigo. As an experiment, Morris stained the bindings of a few copies of *Poems by the Way*. They were not intended for sale but were for Morris and his friends.
- Coleridge's *Poems* (Kelmscott Press, 1896) with the original bill of sale from Kelmscott Press to Miss Florence L. C. Curtis (the book has her book plate). Signed by Sydney Cockerell, Secretary of the Press and dated 1st April 1896.



• Morris's *A Dream of John Ball* (Kelmscott Press, 1892). The frontispiece is by Edward Burne-Jones.

and not least -

• Morris's *The Earthly Paradise* (Kelmscott Press, 1896), a presentation copy from William Morris to Georgiana Burne-Jones, "To Georgie from Will, August 24th 1896".

The Kelmscott Press Collection is one of the key parts in the vast mesh of interrelated collections donated by Dr. Poynton to the University of Melbourne Library. As William Morris became fascinated by the process of book designing, so did Dr. Poynton. William Morris created the Kelmscott Press, Dr. Poynton created a vast collection celebrating the printed book, its production and illustration, the development of the book, particularly the illustrated book as "a harmonious work of art" as Morris expressed it.

The importance of the books to the history of Morris's art is becoming increasingly important. The centenary of his death has been marked widely by exhibitions which have all placed the books centrally. The Melbourne exhibition clearly demonstrated the links in design between the books and Morris's other work.

One of the 15 titles not held by the University of Melbourne Library is the Kelmscott *Chaucer*. This huge book is generally considered the crowning achievement of the Press.<sup>11</sup> It would, of course, be extremely valuable for the University to have a complete collection of Kelmscott Press books. It may well be possible to achieve this over a number of years but it will only occur with help from the Friends of the Baillieu Library and other interested donors following in the footsteps of Dr. Poynton. ♦

## Notes

- 1 William Morris: *Romantic to Revolutionary 1834-1896*. University Gallery, the University of Melbourne Museum of Art, 2 September-11 October 1996. This paper is an edited version of a talk given by Merete Smith at a Symposium on William Morris at The University of Melbourne on Saturday 14th September 1996.
- 2 Thanks is owing in particular to Caroline Downer, a postgraduate student of Fine Arts, Museum Studies at the University of Melbourne who spent part of her required practicum period helping to prepare the book part of the exhibition.
- 3 William Morris. *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, 1891.
- 4 Orde Poynton. The Kelmscott Press of William Morris (An informal address given in the Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne, on 24 October 1960.) *The Australian Library Journal*, October 1961 p. 175-181.
- 5 *The Works of William Shakespeare*. London : Tho. Cotes for Robert Allot, 1632.
- 6 Hartmann Schedel. *Liber Chronicarum*. Nuremberg : Anton Koberger, 1493.
- 7 *The Australian Library Journal*, October 1961, p. 176.
- 8 Ibid. p. 176.
- 9 William Morris. *The Roots of the Mountains*. London : Reeves and Turner, 1890. One Poynton copy is an inscribed presentation copy from William Morris to Belfort Box. The inscription is dated Dec. 15th 1889, that is, before the book was published.
- 10 Private communication, Dr. O. Poynton (1996).
- 11 The Kelmscott Press titles which are not in the Library's collections are (Numbers in brackets refer to William Peterson. The Kelmscott Press. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).  
William Caxton. *The History of Reynard the Foxe*, 1892. (Peterson A10).  
William Morris. *News from Nowhere*, 1892 (Peterson A12).  
Dante Gabriel Rossetti. *Sonnets and Lyrical Poems*, 1894. (Peterson A20a).  
William Morris. *The Tale of King Florus and the Fair Jehane*, 1893. (Peterson A21).  
William Morris. *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, 1894. (Peterson A22).  
Percy Bysshe Shelley. *The Poetical Works*, 3 vols., 1894-1895. (Peterson A29).  
Girolamo Savonarola. *Epistola de Contemptu Mundi*, 1894. (Peterson A31).  
William Morris and A. J. Wyatt (trans.) *The Tale of Beowulf*, 1895. (Peterson A32).  
William Morris. *Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair*, 1895. (Peterson A35).  
Dante Gabriel Rossetti. *Hand and Soul*, 1895. (Peterson A36).  
Robert Herrick. *Poems chosen out of the Works of ...*, 1896. (Peterson A37).  
Geoffrey Chaucer. *The Works*, 1896. (Peterson A49).  
"Two Trial Pages of the Projected Edition" of Lord Berners' *Translation of Froissart's Chronicles*, 1897. (Peterson A46).  
William Morris. *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs*, 1898. (Peterson A50).