

Colby



Colby Quarterly

Volume 2
Issue 14 *May*

Article 6

May 1950

Kelmscott Complete

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, series 2, no.14, May 1950, p.238-240

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

238 Colby Library Quarterly

KELMSCOTT COMPLETE

WILLIAM Morris is not among the authors whose books are listed on the preceding pages—an omission explained by the fact that in 1850 he was only sixteen years old. Shortly after the middle of the century he began composing poems and by 1856 they were getting into print in *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*. At Oxford he learned about Ruskin, whose teachings led Morris to read Marx's *Capital*, and in 1883 he joined the Democratic Federation, the first modern English Socialist organization. A few years later he was stimulated by reading Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, and in 1890 he wrote *News from Nowhere* to present his own views as to how to bring about a reduction of the pains of labor and of joyless poverty. In Morris's Utopia, men are happy in their work. Their surroundings are beautiful and healthful; the profit motive is gone, and everyone strives actively for the common good.

It was at this period in his life that Morris set about *doing* what he had been *preaching*. In 1888 he helped to organize the Guild of Arts and Crafts, and shortly thereafter chose printing as the craft in which he would henceforth specialize. He designed his own type, established the Kelmscott Press, and in 1891 began to issue the books which for the past sixty years have been the study and delight of the world. After Morris's death, Alfred W. Pollard (of the British Museum) remarked: "No other printer since printing began has ever produced such a series of books as the fifty-three which poured from the Kelmscott Press during those wonderful seven years, and no book that has ever been printed can be compared for richness of effect with the *Chaucer* which was the crowning achievement of the Press."

Even when one makes allowance for the affectionate exaggeration undoubtedly found in this comment, it is still true that "William Morris influenced the art of printing as no other man in modern times influenced it" (John C.

Colby Library Quarterly 239

Oswald, *A History of Printing*, 1928). In 1934 the Yale Library Associates observed the centenary of Morris's birth, and opened an exhibition of his books at a meeting which Carl P. Rollins addressed. He said: "Those of us who lived near to the time of Morris's activity have been stimulated and excited in a way perhaps not understandable today. It has given meaning to our work. It has encouraged whatever aspirations we have towards a better world to live in."

At the time of this Yale Exhibition, there was not a single specimen of the work of the Kelmscott Press in the Colby College Library. The reason is not hard to find. Mr. Peter Beilenson, of the well-known modern Peter Pauper Press, remarked in *A History of the Printed Book* (1938): "The wonderful books that came from the Kelmscott Press were necessarily so expensive that only the wealthy ever handled them." And, as Miss Ruth Granniss, long-time librarian of The Grolier Club in New York, observed in the *History* just quoted: "The books which Morris produced have become museum pieces, their prices prohibitive to the rank and file of readers."

In 1944 we were able to announce that the Colby College Library had at last acquired a specimen of Kelmscott work, and in the spring of that year the Library exhibited half a dozen examples of the various type-fonts and styles of binding that Morris designed. The Boston Colby Club, the Library Associates, a former librarian, and other friends and helpers, all put their shoulders to the Kelmscott wheel, and by the date when Morris had been dead fifty years—October, 1946—Colby was able to report the proud possession of thirty-three of the famous fifty-three issued by the Kelmscott Press.

Included in the Colby list was a copy of the famous *Chaucer*—it is still the only copy recorded in any Maine library. Of this *magnum opus* Morris printed 425 copies on paper and 13 on vellum. As libraries and collectors in ever-increasing numbers have sought for copies of this famous

240 Colby Library Quarterly

work, the price has become more and more "prohibitive." The original supply of 438 copies cannot last forever, and we are fortunate in having been able to obtain a copy for the Colby Library before the price passed the thousand-dollar mark. (Copies have brought as much as \$1500.)

And now, at this mid-century point, we have arrived at the happy goal of being able to announce that our **KELMSCOTT PRESS COLLECTION** is complete. Copies of all fifty-three books are now on the shelves in the Miller Library on Mayflower Hill. Among the latest arrivals are two very welcome acquisitions: a copy of *The Tale of King Florus* as translated by Morris himself and bearing his autograph signature; and a mint copy of Morris's *The Well at the World's End* bearing the autograph of his wife, the beautiful Jane Burden whom he married in 1859.

In announcing this completion of our collection of books from the Kelmscott Press, we can take pride in the fact that Colby students and their teachers are now and henceforth in a privileged position for the study of this important Victorian figure and the books which he produced. For the first time at Colby, the whole history of the Press can be followed; the evolution of Morris's ideas about bookmaking can be traced and illustrated; and without leaving Waterville one can study at the feet of the poet, artist, and craftsman who "influenced the art of printing as no other man in modern times influenced it." Moreover, Waterville is one of the very few places where this can be done. Here in New England, Harvard University and Dartmouth College alone rival Colby in the wealth of their Kelmscott Press collections. Harvard completed its file of the Kelmscott books only last year, and at latest report Dartmouth lacked only three titles. The fifty-three books at Colby constitute the only complete Kelmscott set in the State of Maine. On the Pacific Coast, the library of the University of California at Los Angeles has a complete Kelmscott Press file.