

# *My Life as a Book Collector*

ROBERT COUPE shares lessons learned, bridges burned and other acquiring wisdom from 40 years on the trail of WILLIAM MORRIS and his Kelmscott Press.

WHEN I GAVE my collection of books by and about William Morris to Simon Fraser University, Eric Swanick, then head of Special Collections and Rare Books at the W.A.C. Bennett Library, asked me if I would write a piece about my career as a collector. I told him I thought the idea was very self-indulgent, so naturally I leapt at the chance.

It all began in 1964, the semicentenary of World War I. As in this centenary year [2015], we saw an outpouring in various media of products and information related to the war. I made a modest contribution to encourage the entrepreneurs who risked their all to oblige an unappreciative public. I bought a book called *Up the Line to Death: The War Poets, 1914–1918* (Methuen, 1964), an anthology of poetry by soldiers who served in that war. It included two or three poems by Charles Hamilton Sorley, whom I had never heard of before. For me, his poems conveyed the horror of the warfare of that time more vividly even than those of Wilfred Owen, and I determined that I wanted a copy of his collected works, *Marlborough and Other Poems* (Cambridge, 1916).

The book had been out of print for 32 years, so I wrote to a couple of people in the U.K. who were proud to call themselves second-hand book dealers (these days it's "Give me 'antiquarian' or give me bankruptcy"). I asked them to look out for a copy for me. Eighteen months later I heard from one of them, Deighton, Bell of Cambridge, offering a reprint copy for 30 shillings. I bought it. Six weeks after that, the other dealer offered a first edition for a quarter of the amount I had paid. Unlike the canny investor with his cost-averaging ploys, I didn't buy it.

What has all this got to do with William Morris? In those days, at least to an outsider like me, the second-hand book trade was a genteel profession, the sort of establishment captured a few years later in Helene Hanff's novel

*84 Charing Cross Road* (Grossman, 1970). It came as no surprise that Deighton, Bell kept me on its mailing list. When a catalogue arrived, I would glance through it and then dutifully find a place for it. I might be making these periodic contributions to the circular filing cabinet today except for two events, minor in themselves, which combined to make a collector of me.

Sometime about 1972 I read Philip Henderson's book *William Morris: His Life, Work and Friends* (Thames & Hudson, 1967). This biography described the amount and quality of Morris's achievements, and it made a lasting impression. The second event occurred two or three years later when yet another catalogue arrived from Deighton. It listed a newly published book from the Rampant Lions Press, *The Story of Cupid and Psyche*, by William Morris. It described the book in glowing terms, along the lines of "a latter-day Kelmscott Press large quarto, printed on the same kind of paper and using blocks cut by Morris for the illustrations." They were giving away a standard copy for £60 and a deluxe one for a mere £120. I still had a vestige of common sense at that point and so I bought the standard copy. (But then, maybe I never had any. When the deluxe version became a necessity in my life a decade later, I had to pay five times as much—\$1,100.)

I did read my acquisition, however, which I suspect is more than can be said for most collectors. I even found a typographical error—"kneck" for "neck." The discovery so pleased me that I boasted of my observation to an older huntsman of fine ink on fine paper. Speaking from the Olympian heights reached by years spent co-habiting with Golden Cockerels, Doves, Black Swans and Woolly Whales, he opined that one does not buy such books for accurate typesetting but for the overall layout, binding and the like.

Accepting that credo, I suppose the limit to

error is reached only when the text becomes incomprehensible. Which brings to mind the old claim that a roomful of chimpanzees each with a typewriter will eventually produce *Hamlet* word for word. One feels they may generate some gibberish along the way.

I might not have bought any more Morris books except for another chance event. I was attending a professional conference in San Francisco, I think in 1976, staying at the St. Francis Hotel. This fine old pile occupies much of a city block, the main entrance on a plaza, with a side entrance round the corner onto a small street that seemed of no distinction until I noticed "J B Howell's Rare Books" over a door directly opposite. I went in and bought my first Kelmscott Press book, the two-volume *Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair* (1895), for \$300.

With two items one has a collection, so why stop there? During that same trip I contacted the recently established dealership of Randall & Windle. The Windle half offered me another Kelmscott Press book, this one printed on vellum. He explained that with books as rare as the one before me, he could not really assign a price: it was beyond such mundane considerations. However, he did manage the impossible, and at \$6,000 it was too rare for me. I had three open beaks in the home nest with owners attached ranging in age from one to five years, and they needed the occasional worm thrust down their gullets.

In retrospect, that price does not seem unreasonable for the market at the time. While other dealers looked askance at what they regarded as imaginative pricing, R&W became an accepted part of the San Francisco book scene. This didn't stop Windle from stirring up mud in the pond, to the chagrin of envious colleagues and collectors (including myself), when in the 2000s he orchestrated the sale of the enormous Sanford Berger collection of Morris material to the Huntington Library in California.

**HUNTING WITH THE BOOK AS GUN**  
Targets below the stratosphere still beckoned. Later in my collecting career nothing less than a large paper copy of Buxton Forman's *Books of William Morris* (1897) inscribed by the author

to his son would do. However, I started with a newly issued facsimile reprint the Holland Press produced in 1976. I had no qualms about annotating it and ticking each item in its pristine pages as I added it to my bookshelves. Indeed, only when the patina of 30 years had made the book collectible in itself did I bother to protect the dust jacket, by then badly worn and torn.

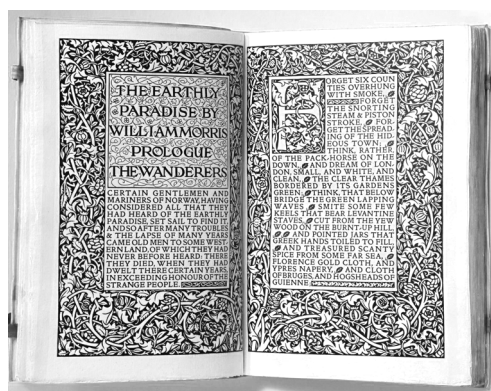
In brief, I hunted with the book as gun. Up until the 1990s, when online listing came along, one had six ways of obtaining books. I never had the stomach to beg, borrow or steal, which limited my options to three. I made the most of them. I visited bookshops in Victoria and Greater Vancouver; I wrote to dealers in the U.K. and U.S. for catalogues and direct quotations of their stock; and I attended antiquarian book fairs.

On the one occasion when I commissioned a dealer to bid for me at an auction, on his assurance "I will use all my wiles to get the book," he continued to bid once he reached my limit, going on to buy it himself. He later offered it in one of his catalogues for twice the sum he paid for it. The genteel profession I had known began to seem a little less genteel.

I never found very much in the shops of dealers in B.C. However, the colourful nature of their personalities made up for this paucity. One was a genial Irishman whom I already knew from our common membership in the BC Mountaineering Club. He was always a good companion on climbs, though we would not always see him in camp on overnight trips. He liked to set up a high camp with one or two buddies, one of whom would be a bottle of the poteen.

Climbing and collecting intersected in another shop when I found a copy of *The Earthly Paradise* with the bookplate of Robie Reid. I knew the name only as that of a local mountain and discovered from the book that Reid was one of B.C.'s early judges. Those judges had a knack of taking over mountains. We have mountains named for Judge Howay and the infamous "Hanging Judge" Begbie too. They were less literate; at least I never found a book with their bookplates. Perhaps they preferred painting or were better at hanging than drawing and quartoing.

Bill Hoffer was the most unforgettable of this octavo of booksellers in Vancouver. He was a tall



The Earthly Paradise by William Morris, Vol. 1.  
(The National Gallery of Victoria,  
Australia, photo)

thin dark man who had a cigarette so constantly between his fingers one felt he must have been born like that. He was the one dealer in the earlier days who stocked the more unusual Morris material, though by that time I had largely bought what I wanted. A near exception occurred when he offered me a set of *The Earthly Paradise*, published in 12 small volumes by Longmans, Green & Co. in 1905. It is probably the most charming of all the trade editions. Hoffer wanted \$300.

I had just got back from the U.K. where, days before, I had bought a set in better condition than his for just £30—the equivalent, after exchange, of \$52. I told him I had just bought this set. He asked how much I had paid. I told him, and saw him out of countenance for the first and only time. However, he forgave me, and we remained on as good terms as the competing interests of buyer and seller permit. (They do coincide on rare occasions. Twice a printer who operates his own private press sent me pieces he had printed, unasked. When I wanted to know how much I owed him, he gave me the choice of nothing or a billion dollars. Guess which I settled for.)

Hoffer had a sharp wit, and sometimes on entering his shop I would find him holding forth to a coterie of admirers on one topic or another. For some years in the 1980s and early 1990s, my interests turned away from Morris and I thought of selling my collection. I mentioned this to Hoffer one day, upon which a look of vulpine pleasure crossed his face. “Well,” he

purred, “we are here to solve problems created by books.” I was greatly impressed by this off-the-cuff remark and quoted it to another local dealer a few months later, also a jovial and witty man. “Ah,” he said. “He’s been working on that one for a year now. He’s got it right at last.”

#### THE SAME SMALL BUSH

Learning is the polite word for the mistakes I made in assembling my collection. I learned, for example, that one does not send a wants list to every major antiquarian book dealer in London simultaneously if one hopes to get service from any of them. All get discouraged when they find every colleague and competitor beating the same small bush. I learned, too, that one does not lightly turn down stuff from a dealer who has been funnelling great finds your way. One in Newcastle-on-Tyne had been doing just that. He wrote offering me the three volumes of *The Earthly Paradise* inscribed by Morris for a bargain price. I cavalierly declined them because not all three were the first edition. I never heard from him again.

I learned most from a dealer who never sold me a book. I knew him only as Drifffield. He may have given up dealing by the time he came to my notice through his book *Driff’s Guide to All the Second-Hand and Antiquarian Bookshops in Britain*. The book consists of Driff’s assessments of the bookshops using several criteria: the quality of the stock, the personality of the owner, and some less expected ones, such as the name of the shop and its opening hours. He was fond of acronyms. ETGOW stood for “easy to get on with,” while VE and NE were “very easy” and “not easy,” respectively. He coined pungent phrases. A shop with “the summer sickness” sold a lot of remaindered books, while one with “the roast beef of old England” dealt with books rebound in leather, often from the libraries of impoverished aristocrats.

On some shops his description ran to half a page. He dismissed the book village of Hay-on-Wye as “Way on high” and attributed the deficiencies of the director of a major shop to him “not being human.” He demolished the man without saying anything actually slanderous. A dealer in the Scottish Highlands whom he found aloof he portrayed in terms of climbing

a mountain, starting in the foothills before reaching the lofty recesses of the dealer's mind.

When visiting bookshops Driff travelled by train or bicycle since he did not drive. Hoffer volunteered himself as his chauffeur for one edition. Driff immortalized him as "the Israeli tank driver," probably the mildest of the insults they exchanged during their tour. Until my father's death in 1993 I visited the U.K. once a year and occasionally twice. During those visits I used *Driff's Guide* to scour all the bookshops I could reach and almost always agreed with his critique, whether favourable or scathing. The *Guide* is still worth reading for its entertainment value, though many of the shops it describes closed long ago.

#### BOOK FAIR FINDS

Antiquarian book fairs offered another way to find material by and about Morris. In the early years I found a lot of prizes, but the frequency fell as my collection got larger. Colin Franklin was an exhibitor in both London and California. He in particular had a knack of finding spectacular items, often beyond my price range. One year he showed a sketchbook filled with watercolours by Edward Burne-Jones. I didn't even ask the price. Another time he had a copy of the Rampant Lions Press edition of *The Story of Cupid and Psyche* I mentioned above. He had had this copy made up from extra sheets so that it was out of series, bound in snowy vellum, which hinted at the appearance of Kelmscott Press books when first issued. It was expensive and I did not buy it at the time. I regretted this later and wrote to ask if it were still available. He assured me it had "survived the fair," and another five inches of my shelf space was accounted for.

One of the later fairs I attended yielded an even greater find. Early in my collecting I bought—from the Book Block in Connecticut, I think—a copy of the superior edition of *The Roots of the Mountains* (1889). Morris had supervised this publication and had copies bound in one of the cloth chintzes he had designed. The pattern came in either large or small variants. The copy I had from David Block had the more common large pattern of binding, but it had the bookplate of Henry Buxton Forman.

Twenty-five years later at a fair in New



Edmund H. New contributed illustrations for *Gossip about an Old House* (1895).

York, a dealer was selling two copies together, one bound in the chintz with the large pattern and the other in the small. The latter also carried Buxton Forman's bookplate. I managed to persuade the dealer to break his set and so reunited the two books that had taken separate paths for most of a century.

I bought nothing at a fair I attended in Boston a few years ago, but I still consider it one of the most worthwhile trips I took. For one thing, I met both Philip Bishop and Mark Samuels Lasner there for the first time. Lasner is a distinguished scholar of Morris and has a large Morris collection. Bishop is a dealer and also an authority on Thomas B. Mosher and the Mosher Press. I have maintained a correspondence with Bishop and he has helped me to locate one or two books I had long sought.

However, I went to Boston mainly to visit the Houghton Library of Harvard University. Its collection includes a book of poems by Morris that I had never seen. Its importance for me lay in its illustrations. As far back as the early 1980s, illustrated editions of Morris's work had engaged my interest. I even wrote Ray Watkinson, a British



scholar of Morris, about these in 1985. His reply discouraged me from doing anything more on the subject for at least a decade. Even in print I could hear his incredulity, “You mean a book about illustrations *not* under Morris’s control?”

He passed quickly on from such a distasteful topic to my name, which fascinated him much more. He claimed that it originated in two small Lancashire villages whose names I no longer remember. He may be right; my paternal forebears were living in Lancashire at least from the 1700s. This genealogical information was small consolation for the rest of the letter.

Visiting the Houghton Library, I examined the book in detail but found I still had time on my hands. I therefore wandered over to the adjacent Fogg Museum. There I found another reason to view the trip as worthwhile. One edition of a poem by Morris is illustrated with a photograph of a painting that I had been unable to identify. Visiting the Fogg cleared up the mystery: the painting, *Sir Galahad* by G.F. Watts, hung prominently in the main room.

#### NO BETTER DREAM

I took up the idea of writing about illustrated editions again in the 1990s. Of course, a book about illustration requires examples. Copyright had lapsed on many of the illustrations I wanted to use, but on others it had not. In particular, Michael Felmingham had printed a single poem by Morris at his Gazebo Press in 1969 that was illustrated by Barry Burman. For me, Burman’s work ranks among the best, if not the very best, ever created to enhance a text by Morris.

Thirty years after the book’s publication, I had no idea how to find either man. The book’s colophon gave Felmingham’s address, but I saw no point in trying that. Instead, I asked dealers and galleries up and down the U.K. for any information they might have. None knew anything. After a couple of years of this I even found one who suggested that I write to the old address. I thought, “How stupid can one get?”

I wrote anyway and got a charming response from a man who had clearly found his dream home and had no wish to look for a better dream. I later met Felmingham and he proved as charming as his letter. We have maintained a

correspondence to the present and I try to see him whenever I visit the U.K. He and Burman were friends of long standing and Burman agreed to inscribe a copy of the book for me. It still surprises me that he did, knowing now his appalling state of mind at the time. He committed suicide only a week later, the end of a life spent carrying the burden of bipolar disorder.

I did eventually write a book about illustrated editions of Morris’s works, which Oak Knoll and the British Library co-published in 2002. When I first broached the concept with John von Hoelle of Oak Knoll, he waxed enthusiastic about “a lovely book full of illustrations in colour.” By the time the book came out, the colourful rainbow had vanished in the storm of publishing economics. Oak Knoll limited colour to the dust jacket, almost as ephemeral as a rainbow itself.

The book received some flattering reviews and a single hostile one (one that I know of, anyway). Friends drew my attention to the former but may have shielded me from more of the latter. After all, what are friends for? To the creative writer the critic may be “the louse on the locks of literature.” However, a writer documenting factual material—as I set out to do—gains more from a critical reviewer. The one with whom I was blessed pointed out one or two minor factual errors and commented on the inadequacy of a biographical sketch of one of the illustrators. However, he limited his remarks to one chapter. If he read the whole book, he gave no sign. Rather, the tone of his review conjured an image of him as a small boy, the sort whose main pleasure consists of pulling the wings off flies.

In the five years after publication I found a significant number of books I would have included in my compilation had I known of them. Also, I was dissatisfied with the black and white reproduction of the original colour illustrations in the Oak Knoll edition. Of least importance, though still a factor, I wanted to correct inaccuracies such as those my reviewer had so enjoyed pointing out.

I therefore asked Oak Knoll if it would consider a second edition. They sent me an e-mail agreeing to this, but stipulating that I had to supply camera-ready copy. I rewrote the book, increasing its length by a third in the process, but as I was near to finishing it the financial crisis

of 2008 arrived. Oak Knoll promptly thought better of its offer, and I decided to self-publish. I was not willing to see 18 months of work wasted. The second edition came out in 2011.

I continued adding to my collection right up to the time I gave it to Simon Fraser University. Indeed, it was only in the final six months before the donation that I finally found a copy of one of the illustrated editions included in my book. It was identical to the copy in the Houghton Library that had necessitated my trip there some six or seven years before. My last major purchase, made six weeks before the transfer, was a facsimile reprint by the Folio Society of a calligraphic manuscript done by Morris of *The Odes of Horace*.

Now that I'm done, an alarming thought has struck me. Were you expecting something more along the lines of *Building a Book Collection for Dummies*? Well, be of good cheer: the methods I used to build my collection remain open to you. Indeed, I would recommend attending book fairs in particular. Book fairs provide the opportunity to meet dealers in person. If you can establish a good relationship with one or two dealers who have wide connections, they can put you in the way of outstanding books.

However, the Internet has effected fundamental changes in the last twenty years. Collectors now have access to shops around the world, and I for one have found some remarkable offerings. Abebooks.com allows one to monitor newly added books in a given category, enabling me to follow what came up on a daily basis if I wished. Online, one should not dither. Twice I did so and missed books for which I would have paid twice their price in retrospect. On another occasion I beat out a competitor by an hour for a Morris manuscript. I subsequently received an agonized plea through the dealer and I sold it on for what I had paid for it.

My collecting is not quite finished. Despite building my collection over the course of 40 years, I failed to find a few items I wanted. I keep looking; if I find them I shall buy them for the satisfaction of completeness. I'm not holding my breath on any of them, however. I did find my share of rarities, but there are some things one never does find.

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~ Robert Coupe, a retired dermatologist, developed an extensive collection of William Morris's illustrated works. He is the author of *Illustrated Editions of the Works of William Morris in English: A Descriptive Bibliography* (2002; 2011). He lives in Burnaby, B.C. This article is an adaptation of remarks originally delivered at Simon Fraser University on November 12, 2015.

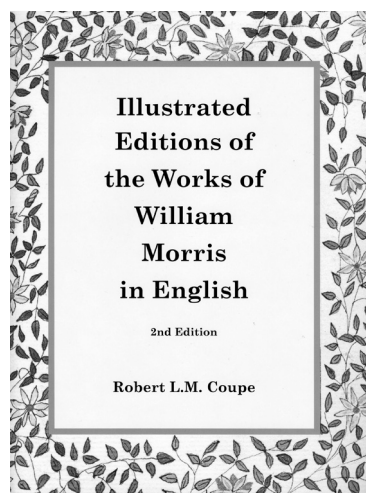
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BOOK REVIEW

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*Illustrated Editions of the Works of William Morris in English, 2nd ed.*

BY ROBERT L.M. COUPE  
(LONSDALE & YOUNG, 2011, \$70)



ROBERT COUPE HAS SHARED much of the background to this volume elsewhere in this issue. Coupe's own stories do a far better job of selling the volume than this small review could do.

Those who have had the experience of developing a bibliography and seeing such a work through the press will have a special appreciation for this second edition of *Illustrated Editions of the Works of William Morris in English*. A first edition, while an accomplishment, can't help but breed second thoughts. Could the