

Honouring the Past, Building for the Future

New acquisitions and public access make the Colbeck collection
a living institution, GREGORY MACKIE writes.

THE UBC LIBRARY'S Rare Books and Special Collections has been buzzing with anticipation and activity for the past two years, in advance of a landmark commemoration. This year marks the 50th anniversary of UBC's acquisition in 1967 of one of its largest and most prestigious collections, the Norman Colbeck Collection of 19th-century and Edwardian poetry and *belles lettres*. The university sees the Colbeck collection as an enormously rich—but underutilized—resource for the scholarly study and appreciation of English-language literary culture and artistic and intellectual movements in the years from roughly 1850 to 1930. Looking towards the future, the library has begun collecting materials that build on the established areas of strength represented by the Colbeck collection, thereby reinforcing the research infrastructure represented by a collection with a long history at UBC—itself a relatively young institution that marked its centenary in 2015.

As part of UBC's effort to honour that history, and the central role played by the late William E. (Dick) Fredeman of UBC's Department of English in bringing the Colbeck collection to Vancouver, the university has also pursued items formerly part of Fredeman's personal collection. An eminent Victorianist, Fredeman was a noted scholar and bibliographer of the Pre-Raphaelites and an editor of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's letters. His collection of Victorian literature and Pre-Raphaelite art was vast, and for many years occupied a two-storey private library in his house on the University Endowment Lands, adjacent to UBC's Point Grey campus.

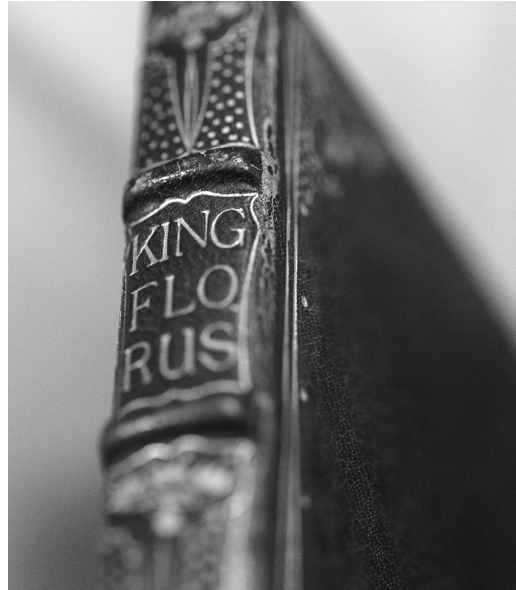
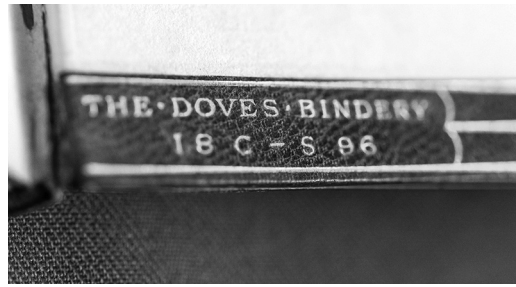
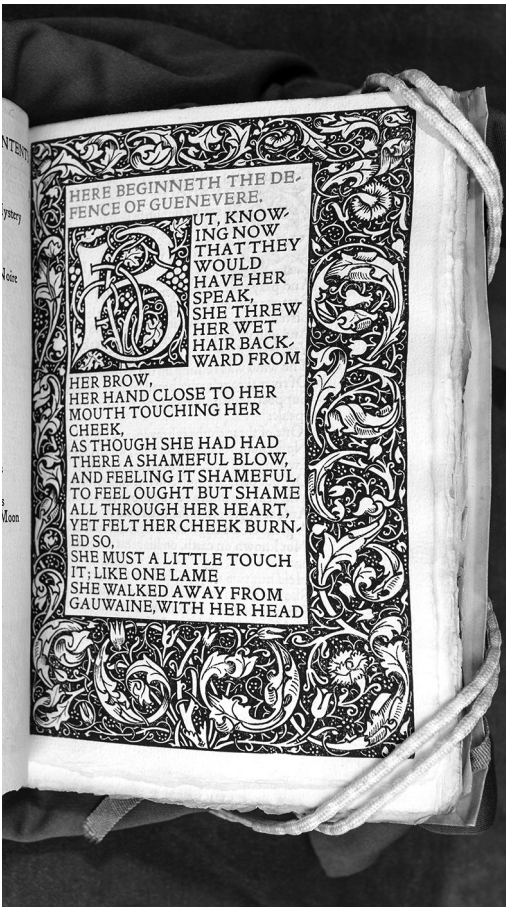
Dick Fredeman, the professor, and Norman Colbeck, the antiquarian book dealer, had many overlapping areas of specialization in their collecting priorities, including an abiding love for the Pre-Raphaelites and for the book arts of the

late Victorian period. This connection between Pre-Raphaelitism and what William Morris would later call "the ideal book" is a natural one, considering how Pre-Raphaelites such as Rossetti, whose reputation rests on his achievements as a painter and illustrator as much as it does on his poetry, sought to unite the literary and visual arts. The Pre-Raphaelites' impact on subsequent literary and artistic movements, such as the Arts and Crafts movement, the Aesthetic movement, and the revival of fine printing, has been lasting and profound. The literature and book design of these Victorian movements are especially well represented in the Colbeck collection.

With these emphases in mind, UBC Rare Books and Special Collections has been actively seeking out items that supplement the Colbeck collection in roughly three areas: exemplars of the period's fine press and revival of printing movement(s), including Morris's Kelmscott Press; ephemera relating to late-19th- and early-20th-century printing and publishing, such as specimen pages from notable presses and publishers' prospectuses, all of which will be used for teaching and research; and finally material from the Fredeman collection that does not duplicate existing Colbeck holdings, with a particular emphasis on Victorian poetry and the Pre-Raphaelites. Many of these exciting new additions to UBC Library's holdings will be on display for the first time October 23 to December 20, 2017, at the exhibition commemorating the Colbeck collection's 50th anniversary.

SOME NOTABLE ACQUISITIONS

The library's most notable recent acquisition in this connection is the fabulous Slater-Gribbel-Schimmel copy of the Kelmscott *Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (1896), one of only 48 copies in white pigskin binding, which



Left: William Morris, *The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems* (1892).
 Top right and bottom right: William Morris, *The Tale of King Florus and the Fair Jehane* (1893).

Morris himself designed and which the Doves bindery produced. The acquisition took two years of fundraising to obtain. Since the *Chaucer* is really a story unto itself, I will first discuss some of UBC's other related acquisitions before returning to it later in this article.

The *Chaucer*, in point of fact, is far from the only Kelmscott title that has recently come to UBC. Inspired by the frontispiece image of Norman Colbeck "holding a Kelmscott volume" that appears in the second volume of *A Bookman's Catalogue*—the 1987 catalogue that has itself become an indispensable work of reference for scholars and bibliophiles—the library set out to increase its Kelmscott Press holdings with a view to future teaching by UBC's departments of English and Art History, Visual Art & Theory as well as the iSchool at UBC. Volumes acquired

include *Bibila Innocentium* (1892), a children's Bible compiled by J.W. Mackail, who was William Morris's first biographer and the son-in-law of his Pre-Raphaelite collaborator, the artist Edward Burne-Jones. One of the earliest Kelmscott titles, from an edition of 300 copies, it is bound in vellum and printed with decorated borders and initial capitals designed by Morris. Also secured: vellum-bound copies of Morris's own *Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems* (1892) and D.G. Rossetti's *Sonnets and Lyrical Poems* (1894). *The Tale of King Florus and the Fair Jehane* (1893), another Morris title issued by the Kelmscott Press, is a wonderful little book that comes to UBC in a Doves binding executed by T.J. Cobden-Sanderson and stamped with his initials.

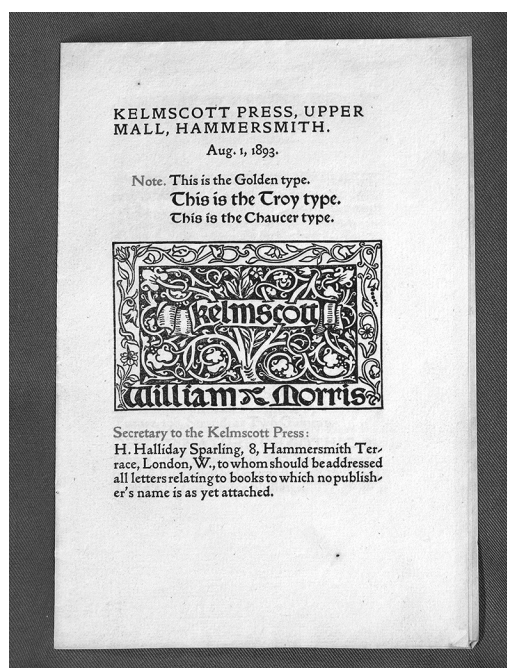
The history and practices of the press itself are also well represented among the Kelmscott

acquisitions, which include *A Note by William Morris on His Aims in Founding the Kelmscott Press* (1898), the final book issued by the press; several Kelmscott prospectuses dating from 1893–97; and some specimen pages from the second Kelmscott edition of Morris’s *Story of the Glittering Plain* (1894), a medieval-socialist fantasy novel with illustrations by Walter Crane. These specimen pages complement a recently acquired association copy of *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, inscribed by Morris to Frank Smith, a partner in the design firm Morris & Co. The library now holds the first and last Kelmscott books; *The Story of the Glittering Plain* also holds the distinction of being the only title the press published twice.

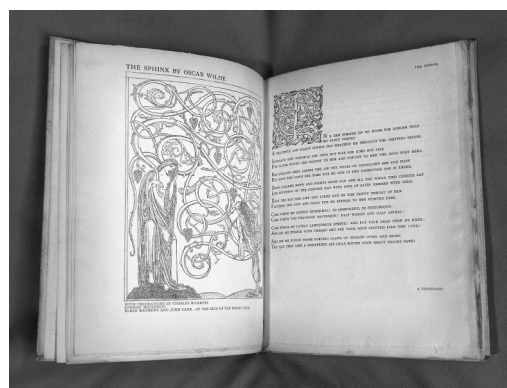
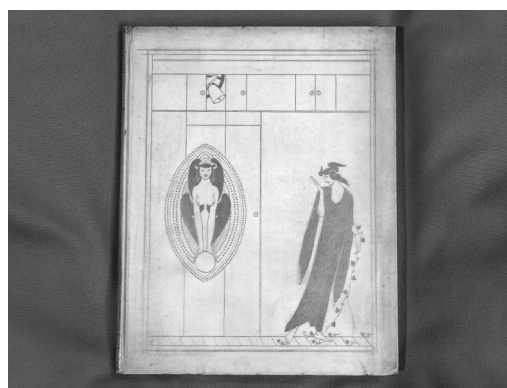
PAPER “TIME MACHINES”

As an academic working in the history of the book, I am perhaps most excited by the acquisition of the more ephemeral items, which include publishers’ catalogues, prospectuses, postal order forms and printed promotional material. They will afford students direct access to the business of book production by some of the firms most strongly associated with the fine press movement, such as the Kelmscott Press, the Doves Press, the Vale Press and the Bodley Head. They will help bring literary and book history materially to life. These items are paper “time machines” and so allow us to tell a book’s larger story by revealing the conditions of its production, pricing, distribution, and the material factors that determined its reception. Such fascinating items remind us of the complex interrelations between literary history and material culture.

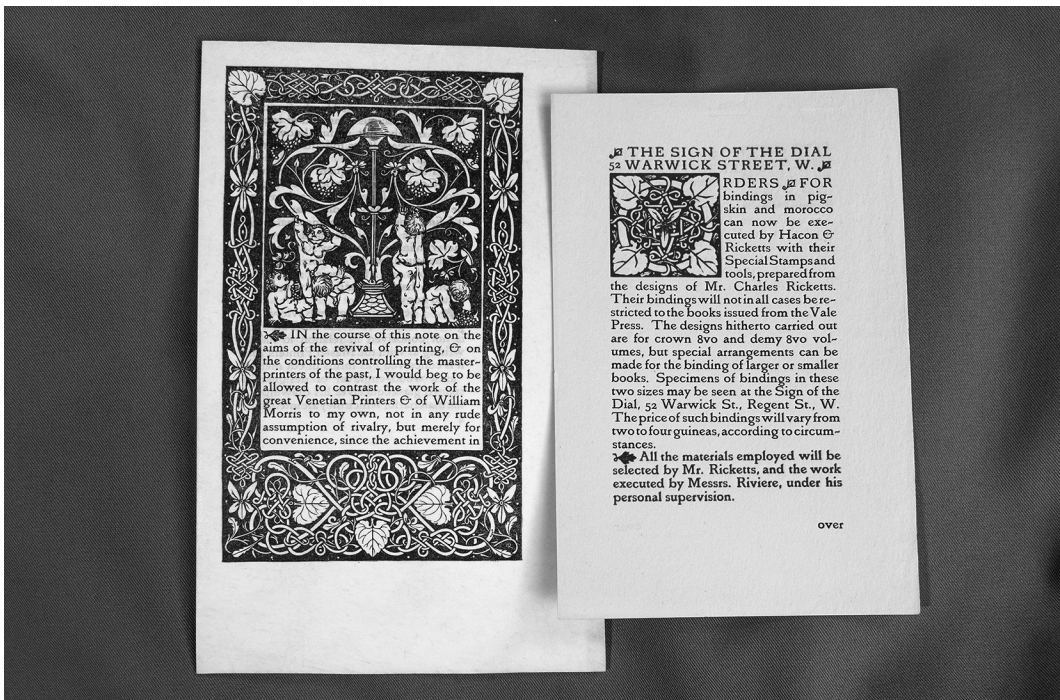
Several other newly acquired standout items merit attention. UBC was fortunate to obtain an immaculate copy of Oscar Wilde’s deliriously decadent poem *The Sphinx* (1894), published by the Bodley Head and bound in gilt-stamped vellum with designs by Wilde’s frequent collaborator in book design Charles Ricketts, founder of the Vale Press. Perhaps the most sumptuous of all *fin de siècle* books, *The Sphinx* takes the aspirations of decadence in book production to their utmost extent. One of only 250 copies, this is a title that was meant to be an instant rarity. It makes lavish use of paper and is exquisitely illustrated



William Morris, Catalogue of the Kelmscott Press (1893–1897).



Oscar Wilde, The Sphinx (1894).



Vale Press ephemera (1896–1904).

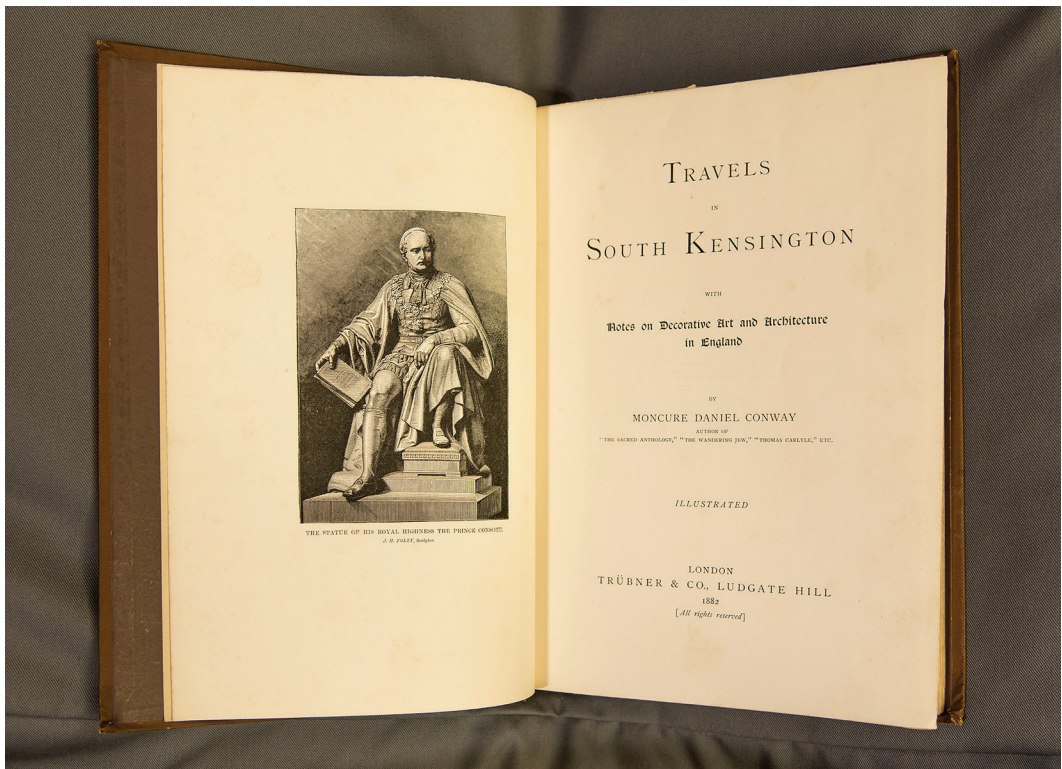
throughout with Ricketts’s line drawings. This edition of *The Sphinx* proves typographically innovative as well. The text of the poem is presented in all capitals, and the volume is printed in three colours (black, red and green).

Finally, the precursor to the Decadent movement, the Aesthetic movement, is represented among new acquisitions by Moncure Conway’s *Travels in South Kensington* (1882). Conway’s book is ostensibly an accounting of the results of the British design reform movements that followed in the wake of the 1851 Great Exhibition, but is more a quasi-anthropological investigation of the ideals and values that were taken up by those promoting a greater integration of art with life, from the founders of London’s South Kensington (now Victoria & Albert) Museum, such as design reformer Henry Cole, to the Pre-Raphaelites, to Arts and Crafts pioneers like William Morris and aesthetes such as Oscar Wilde.

The polymath Rossetti family is well represented in two spectacular new acquisitions. UBC now possesses a first edition copy of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s *Ballads and Sonnets* (1881) in a binding that he designed, with an original

manuscript of the poem “Parted Presence” inserted. This is a real treasure and adds to the library’s impressive holdings of Rossetti manuscripts, which even include an 1860s seance diary by William Michael Rossetti (1829–1919), the journalist and editor who, as the brother of Dante Gabriel and Christina Rossetti, was perhaps more than anyone else responsible for sustaining the mythology that had grown up around his two more famous siblings.

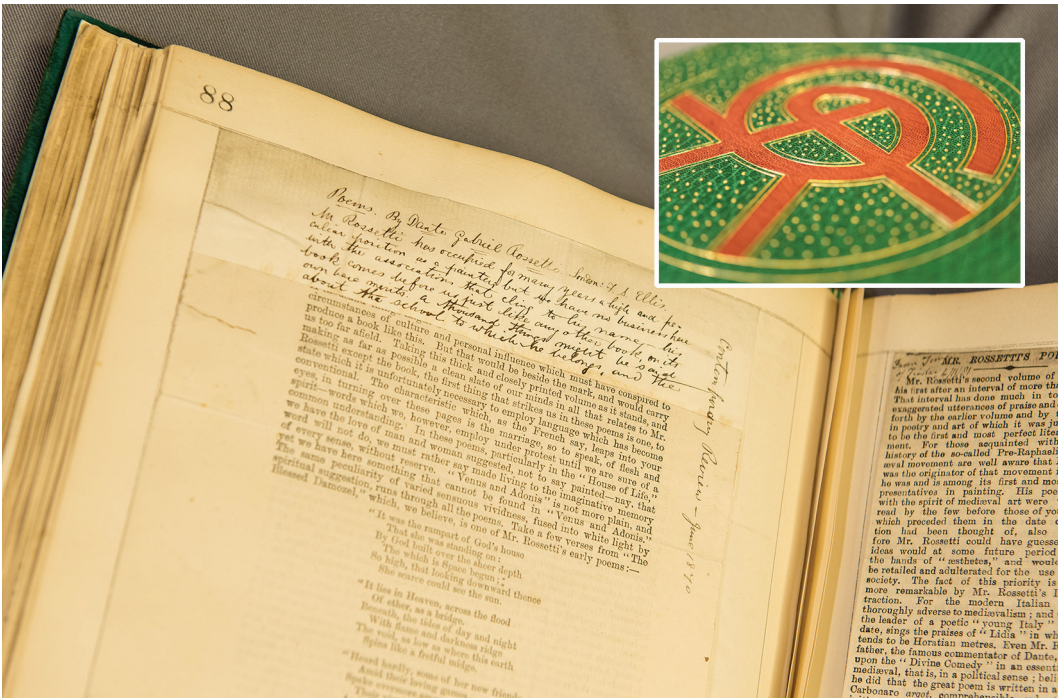
After the dispersal of the Fredeman collection, the library obtained a few special items that build on his legacy as a UBC scholar and collector. One of these is William Michael Rossetti’s vast and heavily annotated clipping book, which was given to Fredeman by William Michael Rossetti’s daughter. It contains decades of articles about the Rossettis and their artistic endeavours carefully culled from newspapers and magazines. William Michael Rossetti’s extensive marginalia can be found throughout the scrapbook. It is a unique archival item that will enable new research into the Pre-Raphaelites and their critical reception, and its arrival at UBC means it will be publicly accessible to scholars for the first time.



Moncure Daniel Conway, *Travels in South Kensington: with Notes on Decorative Art and Architecture in England* (1882).



Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Ballads and Sonnets* (1881).



Details from William Michael Rossetti's clipping book.

THE KELMSCOTT CHAUCER

When the poet William Butler Yeats, whose writings are well represented in the Colbeck collection, called the Kelmscott *Chaucer* “the most beautiful of all printed books,” he was not exaggerating. The *Chaucer* is indeed an extraordinary achievement in typography, printing, illustration and binding—in all the arts that comprise bookmaking. It is, in many ways, the supreme achievement of the Kelmscott Press’s founder, the Victorian polymath William Morris (1834–1896).

Although Morris described himself in his epic poem *The Earthly Paradise* as “the idle singer of an empty day,” he was in reality anything but idle. In addition to being a prolific writer in multiple genres, Morris was also a designer of furniture, textiles (he built his own looms to learn how to weave tapestries), stained glass, and wallpaper patterns; a book collector; a heritage activist; and a book designer, printer and typographer. He was also a successful businessman and an ardent socialist. When he died prematurely at the age of 62, many credited his death to overwork.

Morris’s last venture was the Kelmscott Press,

a private press he set up in Hammersmith, West London; the press takes its name from Morris’s 16th-century country house in Oxfordshire, Kelmscott Manor. The connection between all of Morris’s interests was his idealization of the past, especially, as we shall see, the Middle Ages. Morris, like many of his contemporaries, firmly rejected what he saw as the dehumanizing effects of Victorian industrial capitalism, effects that were aesthetic as much as they were economic and social. His critique of the factory system of production was articulated in practical terms by the rise of the Arts and Crafts movement, an attempt to revive medieval-style workshop production of goods by trained artisans whose labour was meant to reflect both individuality and taste.

The Arts and Crafts movement inspired designers and social reformers all over the world. Morris brought the Arts and Crafts ethos to book production in founding the Kelmscott Press in 1891 to bolster the revival of hand-press printing. Kelmscott books were crafted by hand in small print runs on handmade paper by unionized, well-paid workers. Morris designed the typefaces used by the press himself. In giving Kelmscott books a

look that was deliberately old-fashioned, Morris sought to emulate both early print and the medieval manuscript culture that flourished before the invention of movable type. He describes his objectives in *A Note by William Morris on His Aims in Founding the Kelmscott Press* (1898) as follows:

I began printing books with the hope of producing some which would have a definite claim to beauty, while at the same time they should be easy to read and not dazzle the eye, or trouble the intellect of the reader by eccentricity of form in the letters. I have always been a great admirer of the calligraphy of the Middle Ages, & of the earlier printing which took its place [. . .] And it was the essence of my undertaking to produce books which it would be a pleasure to look upon as pieces of printing and arrangements of type.

For Morris, books were not merely repositories of information. Indeed, his careful attention to the visual features of bookmaking attests to his belief that books could also be works of art in themselves. The Kelmscott *Chaucer* is just such a work of art and a spectacular fulfillment of the promise of “the ideal book.” The book’s illustrator, Morris’s friend Edward Burne-Jones, called it a “pocket cathedral.” Cathedrals—even pocket ones—don’t come cheap, of course, and the original 1896 price of £20 for one of 438 copies meant that the *Chaucer* was always meant to be a collector’s book. Contradicting Morris’s own principle that a book should not “dazzle the eye,” the *Chaucer* is not easy to read: it is, of course, in Middle English; the text is densely set; and decorations nearly overwhelm the page. Its every page, however, proves a labour of love, as Morris greatly revered the Middle English poet Geoffrey Chaucer. (Morris invented the literary genre of medieval fantasy decades before J.R.R. Tolkien penned *The Lord of the Rings*.) The Kelmscott Press was to be Morris’s last creative and commercial venture; he died shortly after the *Chaucer* was published. It had taken four years to plan and produce, and within two years of its release and Morris’s death, the press shut down.

The Kelmscott *Chaucer* not only serves as a capstone to the Colbeck collection; just as

important, it is part of the library’s, and the university’s, teaching mandate. Since it arrived on campus in August 2016, the *Chaucer* has become a magnet for public interest and engagement with the library, and the single most circulated item at Rare Books and Special Collections.

In a 2016 interview with the *Vancouver Sun* about UBC Library’s acquisition of a 13th-century Bible, Prof. Siân Echard, head of the university’s English department, described the value to students of “hands-on learning” with book-historical materials as a way of connecting with the literatures and cultures of the past.¹ As one of the prime exemplars of Victorian medievalism, the Kelmscott *Chaucer* affords UBC students the opportunity to make such connections twice over. In the first instance, the *Chaucer* connects them with the English-speaking world’s print culture at the end of the 19th century, and in the second, it also illuminates that period’s profound engagement with the even more distant past of the Middle Ages

This particular copy also speaks to students of the history and technology of print, as it comes with two rare proof sheets that are set in a different Morris-designed typeface and that are accompanied by Burne-Jones illustrations. These archival “extras” give students an otherwise impossible-to-visualize way of understanding the construction of the book as it was being assembled. Ultimately, it’s here as a resource *for students*, hundreds of whom have now experienced the involuntary sense of wonder this grand book generates. I’ve seen them gasp. It’s an art treasure for them and for the wider public of British Columbia. As UBC’s Latin motto puts it, *Tuum est* (It is yours). And that’s a sentiment of which William Morris would undoubtedly approve.

1. Mohamed Marwen Meddah, “UBC Students Will Get ‘Hands On’ Exposure to Medieval Manuscripts,” *The Vancouver Sun*, March 23, 2016.

.....
~ Gregory Mackie is an assistant professor of English at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, B.C., and curator of the exhibition *An Unmatched Devotion*.