

THE ART NOUVEAU BOOK DESIGNS OF TALWIN MORRIS

Lyle Ford

TALWIN MORRIS worked as a book designer from 1893 to 1911, the year of his death. Immersed in the Glasgow Style, he created a body of graphic design uniquely situated between the decline of blind-stamped Victorian publishers' bindings and the appearance of the now ubiquitous dust jacket. Born in 1865 in Winchester, England, Morris moved to Glasgow in 1893 to become the art director for the publisher Blackie & Son. As of 1898, he also designed books for Blackie & Son's subsidiary, Gresham Publishing. In both publishing houses, Morris designed "publishers' bindings," identical book covers manufactured in mass quantities rather than one-of-a-kind books.

During his tenure as Art Director he befriended Charles Rennie Mackintosh and other proponents of the Glasgow Style, a particularly Scottish expression of Art Nouveau. One of Mackintosh's better known buildings, Hill House, designed for Walter Blackie, came about due to Morris' influence (MacLeod 90). He introduced Mackintosh to Walter Blackie and championed his work.

Morris also commissioned book designs from Mackintosh and from a number of other artists in the Glasgow Style circle. His designs also reflected many of the stylistic forms and symbols found in the others' works. Those forms draw on natural shapes such as roses, plants and feathers, but Morris also used linear and architectural motifs in his designs. This combination of natural and linear elements typifies late Art Nouveau in general and the Glasgow Style in particular.

Blackie & Son sold popular books, including children's books, school texts, theological and philosophical works, popular novels, and poetry. They also published science texts, dictionaries, and encyclopedias. Gresham Publishing sold popular material in addition to reference texts and manuals, chiefly on a subscription basis (Blackie 44). Both publishers were important suppliers to book purchasers in Great Britain.

Literacy grew at an unprecedented rate during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries due in large part to compulsory, free education in the United Kingdom. The Education Acts of 1870 in England and Wales and of 1872 in Scotland made elementary schooling compulsory for all children and created a massive demand for readers and other textbooks. Blackie & Son tooled up to supply this market, as did nearly every other publisher in Great Britain. Blackie & Son "shrewdly continued to make money in the book business, stimulating, refocusing, and catering to the

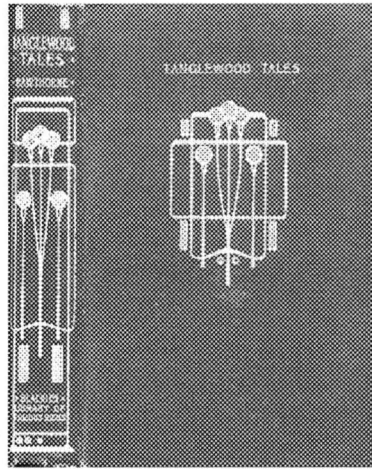
needs of generations of customers right through the end of the nineteenth century, and indeed almost to the end of the twentieth” (Hancher 177).

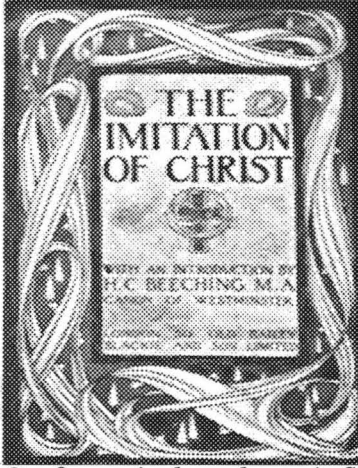
By the time Talwin Morris joined the publishing world, Great Britain had enjoyed more than twenty years of compulsory elementary education. The now-literate masses demanded plentiful and cheap reading material, and Blackie & Son aimed to provide it, just as they had supplied the schools with textbooks. Improvements in papermaking, printing and binding technology meant that publishers could produce large numbers of books and sell them at lower prices. When Blackie & Son hired Morris as Art Director, they aimed to make their books stand out for an increasingly voracious book-buying public that had many options for book purchases.

Morris worked during a very dynamic period of book design. When he began, there were two main streams of book design influencing publishers: the historicism of the private press movement and the aesthetics of art nouveau (Lewis 9). Both approaches emphasized blind stamped designs, differing in their imagery if not their implementation. Bookbinding technology permitted increasingly elaborate and colourful designs, and Morris, along with his contemporaries, took advantage of the possibilities as they developed. By the late 1880s, binding technology allowed for the reliable use of coloured inks on cloth bindings (McLean 11). Many of Morris’s designs incorporate different colours and bolder shapes, reflecting ongoing improvements in binding craft. Book covers represent an almost ideal stage for Art Nouveau graphic design since “Art Nouveau expresses itself in the surface” (Schmutzler 29). In other words, perspective and depth do not typify the style, and blind stamping affords little opportunity to create anything other than a surface design.

Morris worked during the revolution in printing brought about by the theories and typographic work of another, more famous Morris: William. “Timed providentially with the upsurge of a new young reading public with money and leisure, renewed interest in the graphic arts was sparked by [William] Morris’s writings and work” (Steinberg 63).

William Morris’s writing and printing efforts served to revive interest in the physical appearance of books. As book production became more mechanized, William Morris led a resistance to increased homogeneity





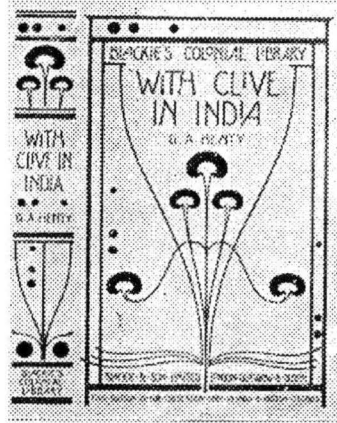
of cased books and the reading public responded. William Morris's designs became part of popular culture. William Morris decried the loss of craft and beauty in modern book production and he printed elaborate, handcrafted books for a "small audience of educated collectors" (Comparato 62). His books were beyond the reach of the mass reading public, but his theories and the Arts and Crafts movement he inspired served to influence the public taste. Talwin Morris developed as a designer during the Arts and Crafts period, and was influenced by its themes. He applied the precepts of the Arts and Crafts movement, coupled with the stylistic elements of Scottish Art Nouveau, in his work for Glasgow publishers. As J. R. Taylor writes, Morris was able to "bypass the difficult area of rigid middle-class, middle-brow, conventional taste and get straight through to a mass audience" (127). By this reckoning, Talwin Morris emerges as a major arbiter of public taste as well as a graphic designer of prodigious output.

A passage in the book *Blackie and Son 1809-1959: A Short History of the Firm* by Agnes Blackie offers an intriguing way to view Talwin Morris' contribution to graphic design history. In this book, written by a descendant of the men who hired Morris as art director, we read of a particular influence he had on Blackie & Son:

[...] the appointment in 1892 of a disciple of *art nouveau*, Talwin Morris, as head of the art department, had tangible effect, not only on the design of book covers, but on the appearance of the office at 17 Stanhope Street. Alterations carried out by Talwin Morris included two handsome swing doors at the entrance, strongly in the idiom of *art nouveau*, but blending well with the Victorian neo-classicism of the building [...] (Blackie 43)

We can read Morris's doors as an elegant metaphor of the position he occupied in book history. Coming along at the end of Victorian historicism, Talwin Morris applied Art Nouveau aesthetics to an everyday commodity that enjoyed great popularity. The book buying public viewed Blackie & Son's books as handsome, desirable objects quite apart from

their contents prior to Morris's arrival. Before Morris, the books presented standard late Victorian imagery designed to appeal to a wide audience. Morris's role was to incrementally change the stylistic appearance of the books while maintaining their marketability. Prior to becoming a book designer, Morris had trained and worked briefly as an architect in England. Incidentally, a number of Art Nouveau practitioners received training as architects. Artists such as Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Aubrey Beardsley both worked at one time or another in the field. Talwin Morris's training prepared him for a career in functional, attractive design. While the function of book design plays a primarily commercial role, it is significant that Morris continued to focus on a marriage of form and function in his second career.

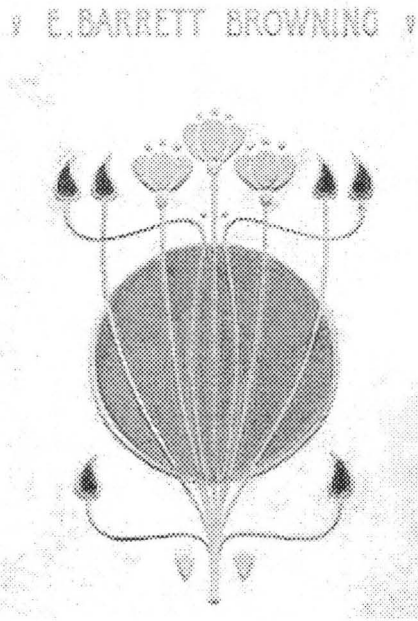


By 1900, Art Nouveau was the dominant influence on books in England (Lewis 19) and, by extension, on books published by Blackie & Son given the importance of the English market. This influence was not to outlive Talwin Morris by many years: “By the first World War the movement had petered out” (Lewis 150). The book-buying public turned against the perceived decadence of Art Nouveau after the trial of Oscar Wilde (Taylor 120) and the style began to lose its lustre. Blackie & Son and Gresham both outlived the fading of Art Nouveau's primacy, continuing on into the present day in the case of Blackie & Son. Blackie & Son continued to reuse certain elements of Morris' designs on their juvenile titles for several years after his death, thus demonstrating the lasting popularity of his designs.

In conclusion, the book cover designs of Talwin Morris may be viewed as an important signifier of the popularity of Art Nouveau as well as its relationship to commercial activity. While the natural elements within Morris' designs appear to resist the rise of machine production, the implementation of the designs themselves relied upon improvements in binding technology. Talwin Morris's designs celebrate the potential of bookbinding technology by using it to create attractive, inspiring and, ultimately, humanising imagery.

Works Cited

- Blackie, Agnes, A.C. *Blackie and Son 1809-1959: A Short History of the Firm*. Glasgow: Blackie and son, [1959].
- Comparato, Frank E. *Books for the Millions: A History of the Men Whose Methods and Machines Packaged the Printed Word*. Harrisburg, Pa.: Stackpole, 1971.
- Hancher, Michael. "Gazing at the Imperial Dictionary." *Book History* 1(1998): 155-77.
- Lewis, John N. C. *The Twentieth Century Book, Its Illustration and Design*. [New York]: Reinhold, 1967.
- McLean, Ruari. *Victorian Publishers' Book-Bindings in Cloth and Leather*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973.
- MacLeod, R. *Charles Rennie Mackintosh: Architect and Artist*. London: Collins, 1983.
- Schmutzler, Robert. *Art Nouveau*. New York: Abrams, 1962.
- Steinberg, S. H. *Five Hundred Years of Printing*. Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin Books, 1961.
- Taylor, John R. *The Art Nouveau Book in Britain*. London: Methuen, 1966.
-



Lyle Ford joined the staff of the Donald W. Craik Engineering Library, University of Manitoba in October 1998 where he is Electronic Reference Services Librarian. Along with the standard duties of providing reference services to users of the library and collection development in certain engineering subject areas, this position is responsible for the continuing development of the library's electronic programs to meet the information needs of library users. He earned his Bachelor of Arts (Advanced) and Master of Arts in English from the University of Manitoba, and a Master of Library and Information Studies from the University of Alberta.