Morris and the Working Men’s College

Peter Faulkner

The Working Men’s College was founded by a group of Christian Socialists led by the Rev. F.D. Maurice in 1854, to supply a liberal education to London working men. As is well known, Ruskin and Rossetti were both associated with the College in its early years. Lowes Dickinson, another teacher of the early art classes there, recalled Ruskin respectfully in his contribution to the jubilee history of the College, published in 1904. Ruskin was ‘the distinguished and superior director’ of the drawing class, encouraging his pupils ‘to note and observe, to perceive, and not merely to see, the wonder and beauty of this mysterious universe into which we are born.’ Classes were also taken, we are told, by ‘Rossetti, Madox Brown, Stacy Marks, Cave Thomas, V. Prinsep, and Arthur Hughes,’ – although other commitments brought these to an end fairly soon. Dickinson himself went on teaching there for eleven or twelve years after Ruskin retired.

Another recollection is given by J.P. Emslie, who joined the drawing class in 1856. It was conducted by three teachers, Ruskin, Rossetti, and Lowes Dickinson. Ruskin taught the beginners, passing them on to Rossetti and Dickinson when they were ready to progress to ‘water-colour painting and figure-drawing from the life.’ Ruskin seems to have been a good teacher, ‘patient and indefatigable, [who] greatly interested himself in the development of whatever gift each particular pupil might possess.’ He was friendly, helpful, and modest, passing the students on to his colleagues with the remark, ‘I understand what is good and bad colour, but I wouldn’t undertake to teach it, and as to figure painting, it’s a thing that requires a lifetime of practice.’ By contrast, Rossetti liked ‘to show by example how to paint, throwing the pencil with apparent recklessness about the paper ...’ He was ‘tremendously popular with his pupils ... they regarded him personally with great affection.’ But he did not like his pupils to join any other classes which were not connected with art; when one of them took up the study of algebra, Rossetti ‘urged him to give it up, and asked him what use algebra could be to painting.’ Lowes Dickinson was the quietest of the group, but equally helpful. One of Emslie’s fellow students was George Allen, who became an engraver, and then the publisher of Ruskin’s works. It appears that Ford Madox Brown took over Rossetti’s class in 1858, and that his experience as a teacher showed in ‘the very systematic way in which he gave his instructions.’ Brown invited the students to his studio, and showed them ‘the then half-finished “Work” wherein we recognised the portrait of the Rev. F.D. Maurice, Principal of the College.’ On another occasion they also saw paintings by Rossetti and Holman Hunt there. The young Edward Burne-Jones came to be associated with Brown’s figure-drawing class. He was very enthusiastic, and friendly in his approach to the students, whom he treated as fellow-workers,
but, interestingly, he ‘objected to anything in the way of mere prettiness or artificiality.’ Emslie evidently remembered the days of those art-classes with great affection, in which all the teachers seem to have been included.

Morris, it will be noted, does not appear in these reminiscences; perhaps he realised that his somewhat impatient temperament was ill-suited to teaching, or perhaps he was simply too busy. At all events, it was not until the 1880’s that he seems to have had any direct dealings with the College. From that period the College possesses the manuscript letters which are transcribed here. They all refer to arrangements being made for Morris to lecture at the College; unfortunately, it is not clear to whom at the College they were addressed:

26, Queen Square,
Bloomsbury, London.

Nov. 19th 1880

Dear Sir,

I ask you a thousand pardons for not having answered your note before; the matter slipped my memory amongst the many things I have to do; but it was inexcusable on my part.

Before I say yes or no will you tell me what would be the latest really convenient date at which I could give the lecture. I have been writing more of this sort of thing lately than I could well spare the time for, & – am in consequence somewhat dry of matter, I fear: but perhaps I might get together a little information for the pupils on the subject of Persian Art, if I were not too much hurried.

I am Dear Sir
Your faithfully,

William Morris

26, Queen Square,
Bloomsbury, London

Nov. 22nd 1880

Dear Sir,

I am really very sorry but I find it will be impossible for me to lecture again so soon as the end of March as I already have an engagement in the beginning of the month.

I shall be happy however to do so later in the year if you can find a place for me.

I am Dear Sir
Yours faithfully,

William Morris
Dear Sir,

If the day is not taken I would prefer to give my lecture on Dec: 10th. Please say if this will suit.

I am Dear Sir

Yours truly

William Morris

Kelmscott House
Upper Mall, Hammersmith

Oct. 2nd

Dear Sir

I ask your pardon for not answering your letter before but I could not make up my mind as to my subject and am even now rather vague about it: however you may call it 'On the Art of Pattern-Designing' which title will leave me pretty free.

I am Dear Sir

Yours faithfully

William Morris

As Eugene Le Mire confirms, the lecture – one of Morris's finest – was delivered as 'Some Hints on Pattern Designing' on 10th December 1881 with Thomas Woolner in the chair. It does not seem to have been repeated, but it was reported in *The Architect* for 17th December 1881, printed in the Golden Type at the Chiswick Press in October 1899, and is included in the *Collected Works* XXII, 175-205.

The College file next includes a letter from Lawrence Debray, writing from Merton Abbey on 24th September 1884 to H.R. Jennings. On Morris's behalf, Debray, who worked for the Company, writes that 'Mr. Morris will not be able to attend your meeting on the 2nd Oct.' and that he regrets that 'his other engagements will not permit him to promise you a lecture at the Institute during the coming winter.' Evidently the College persisted in its request, however. The final letter refers to a lecture:
Dear Sir

All right I will come on Oct 10th. Subject ‘Socialism’. Will you kindly give me a reminder a day or two beforehand. 8. pm I suppose?

Yours truly

William Morris

The lecture was duly given, with Lowes Dickinson in the chair, at the College in Great Ormond Street, the third of the twelve occasions on which Dr. Le Mire records Morris as giving it.16 It is highly appropriate that Morris’s contact with the College should have ended with a lecture on this topic.

Notes

This article is the result of the holding of the Society’s Annual General Meeting for 1989 at the College, now in W.D. Caroë’s fine building in Crowndale Road, where the manuscripts were put on display for our benefit. We are very grateful to the College and the Deputy Warden, Jon Parry, for permission to publish the letters. We wish the College – now not restricted to men only – every success in the future.

2 Ibid, p.35.
5 Ibid, p.44.
6 Ibid, p.45.
7 Ibid, pp.45-6.
9 Ibid, p.49.
10 Ibid, p.50.
12 Ibid, p.52.
15 Le Mire, op.cit., pp.238 and 296.