

# Dark Days in Hammersmith: Lily Yeats and the Morrisises

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Two interesting recent books have appeared making use of the scrapbooks of Lily Yeats, now in the collection of Michael Butler Yeats, the poet's son. Gifford Lewis's *The Yeats Sisters and the Cuala* (Irish Academic Press, 1994) gives a thorough and thoughtful account of the sisters, Elizabeth, who became the typographer of the Cuala Press, and Lily, the embroiderer and designer, and of their joint contribution to the Arts & Crafts movement in Ireland.<sup>1</sup> William M. Murphy's *Family Secrets: William Butler Yeats and His Relations* (Syracuse University Press, 1995) follows on from his fine biography of John Butler Yeats, *Prodigal Father* (1979), focussing here on the sisters and on Jack the painter, in relation (often stressful) to their more famous brother.

Both books are highly interesting in their own right. But they also provide, through Lily, a very unusual, and sombre, view of the Morrisises in the 1890s, of which students of Morris should be aware. Thus the rest of this article will be devoted to this material. The story begins in September 1888, with the sisters attending French classes at Kelmscott House, walking both ways from and to Bedford Park because they could not afford the tram. (Their gifted father was a total failure in earning money for the family). By then – from the spring of 1887 – their brother William was a regular visitor to the House, where he met many political and artistic celebrities. The families became friendly; the Yeatses attended a party in December at which May sang to the guitar, Morris read from *Huckleberry Finn*, and Elizabeth partnered Morris in a country dance, the Sir Roger, in which the two “*always came out ahead*” because of his quickness. (Murphy p.67; subsequent quotations are from this source unless otherwise indicated: Elizabeth kept a diary from 6 September 1888 to 24 May 1889, in which this is recorded). As a result of this friendship, May had invited Lily to help her in the embroidery business; she was to go every day “from ten till dinner-time” to learn the craft. Elizabeth recorded in November: “I think it is with the idea of making some money. I hope it may succeed. At any rate it is very kind of Miss Morris.” (p.67) At first things went well. For Saturday 10 December, Elizabeth recorded:

This is a red letter day, for today *Lily* earned her first money. Miss Morris paid her *ten shillings* for her week's embroidery. We all tell her we mean now to be very civil to her, as Miss Morris says she can earn ten shillings and may earn more every week. (p.68)

Lily's earnings went up, reaching 17 shillings in January 1889. Elizabeth attempted some work herself at home, but found it tedious:

Began some background embroidery for Miss Morris on Wednesday. It is an immense screen. When it will be finished I can't tell, terribly monotonous work, the one stitch and colour all the time. (2 March 1889; p.68)

Her more patient sister Lily was to work for May for six, increasingly stressful, years which she recorded in the section of her scrapbook titled 'My Six Years I spent with May Morris'. (This is the source of the following quotations from both books unless otherwise indicated; since no dates are given from the manuscript, I am following the order in which they are quoted). At first the work was done in the family home, from ten until six:

I worked in the Morris dining room in Kelmscott House – a beautiful room with three large portraits of Mrs Morris by Rossetti and a drawing called 'Pomona'. At the end of the room was a large window looking into the garden and on the wall facing the fireplace was a Persian carpet hanging on the wall. Across the window was a plain oak unpolished and unstained table at which I worked. May very seldom did any work, just used to look at mine. One day a tall woman in a drab dressing gown and slippers with her beautiful hair in disorder shuffled into the room and smiled vaguely in my direction and shuffled out again. I thought her ugly, her skin very sallow and coarse. This was my first sight of Mrs Morris. (Lewis p.29)

Nevertheless, Lily enjoyed the work, and meeting the interesting people who came to lunch while she was there. But she found the family atmosphere increasingly oppressive. There was tension over May's attachment to Halliday Sparling, whom Lily described as "a freak to look at, very tall, no chin, and very large spectacles", his appearance contrasting with Morris's "fine head and shoulders", unfortunately set on "much too short" a body. (Murphy p.65) Lily found Jane unapproachable:

She never spoke and always seemed unhappy. She liked to be surrounded by people easy to talk to and flattering and admiring, and instead she was surrounded by cranks and freaks and bad tempers, people who never looked at her. (p.70)

From Lily's point of view, it was an unhappy household:

I used to have lunch every day with the Morrises – Mr Morris talked all the time, all the rest were silent, May in a sullen silence ... It was not at all a happy house, fear of Morris's violent temper and May's bad one being felt all through the house.

Nevertheless, she was still on good enough terms with the family to be asked by Morris to stay at Kelmscott House as a chaperone when both he and Jane were away in February 1890: when she agreed, "he went away laughing, saying, 'What a joke if May does not want you'." (p.70)

In June 1890 May married Sparling, and they moved to 8, Hammersmith Terrace, which became, in Fiona MacCarthy's words, "the main outpost of Morris and Co. embroidery ... Morris paid a daily visit ... The embroiderers, who wore uniform white cotton overalls, were allowed into May's dining room to eat their lunch".<sup>2</sup> Lily found May a strict employer, and called her – in her scrapbook – the Gorgon. No time was allowed off for illness; anyone arriving late had to make up the time in her lunch-hour; two weeks' paid holiday were provided, but Lily always took an extra week at her own expense to spend longer in Sligo. Lily regretted the move away from Kelmscott House:

The work as long as it was in Kelmscott House was very pleasant, the beautiful room and coming and going of interesting people – Bernard Shaw, Cunninghame

Graham, Kropotkin, Graham Wallas, Emery Walker and lots of others, Morris nearly always in good heart and full of talk at lunch. At Kelmscott I was the only worker – at Hammersmith Terrace there were others – Florence Farr, Norma Borthwick, the Greek Phross Stefan – all good friends of mine but they soon more or less put their tempers out at May Morris and left. Finally I was alone with the young Board School girls – most of all I hated the muddy Thames flowing at the end of the little garden. (Lewis p.44)

According to Lily, May was not popular; on one occasion when a number of Morris's friends had gathered in her garden to watch the Oxford and Cambridge boat-race, they all gave reasons for leaving early, only to gather again without her at Emery Walker's nearby house. (Murphy p.71). Still, the Yeats household needed the money, and Lily's earnings grew by the end to 30 shillings a week. Her father evidently felt guilty over her exertions, writing to William in September 1892:

She is the only one in the house whose work is quite without intellectual interest, sewing away amid such depressing associations and in near neighbourhood to the bitter and half-crazed Mrs. Sparling. (p.71)

However, she carried on working with May, her most famous piece of work being in her contribution to the splendid hangings for Morris's bed at Kelmscott Manor, exhibited by May at the 1893 Arts & Crafts Exhibition. By April 1894 she had decided to resign, feeling concerned about her health. According to Murphy, May then wrote Lily what the elder Yeats considered "a malicious and impudent letter", to which he composed an indignant reply. Lily signed it, and never saw May again. (p.77) Thus the unfortunate relationship came to an end, just as May's marriage to Sparling finally broke down.

It was not, however, to be the last time that Lily would write about the Morrises; she evidently retained vivid memories of her time with them. When Morris died in 1896, Lily's father sent her an article about him, to which she replied:

how interested I was in the article on Morris's life. I worked the bed-curtains described there. I am sure May is lonely and sad in the house by the river and probably full of remorse for her share in the unhappy household. There never was any happy house life. How could there be with such ingredients. Jenny – her mind clouded by epilepsy – Mrs Morris taking refuge in bad health. I never knew if it was real or not, she was selfish and indolent. Then May's temper and his violent outbreaks. (Lewis pp. 112-3)

She used her skill at embroidery to work a fine jacket for the copy of the Kelmscott *Chaucer* that her brother William's friends gave him for his fortieth birthday in 1905. But her memories of working for May remained grim. In October 1910 she wrote to her father: "I never saw much sympathy between the members of the Morris household. There was always the barrier of uncontrolled bad temper between them." (Murphy p.65) In 1914 Lily wrote to her father about the death of Jane:

I see Mrs Morris is dead – so the poor old Gorgon May will have more money to save ... I remember Mrs Morris so well, lying on the sofa in the drawing room at Kelmscott – beautiful still but for her coarse skin the texture of an orange – she hardly ever spoke – with the impudence of youth I thought it was because she was

unsure of her grammar, now I think she just had nothing to say – she was curiously selfish I think and apart from all the household – when there was an outbreak of the Morris temper, she took to her bed – one evening I remember being asked by Morris to supper because I am sure there had been a family row and he wished for the company of an outsider – Mrs Morris had just gone to bed – he like a repentant child wishing to make his mother laugh and so forgive him, ran up and down the stairs with her dinner – a table napkin on his arm playing the waiter – he got her champagne and irritated May by his fuss and play. She I think smiled and forgave and he got quite happy and full of talk again. I hope she has left some of the Rossetti pictures to the Nation – she was born in 1840. (Lewis p.112)

As late as March 1932 she was writing to Ruth Lane-Poole about the pleasure it had been for her to get away to Sligo on holiday:

It was Paradise to get away from London and the workroom and May Morris's temper, even for only a fortnight, to the green peace. (Murphy p.70)

In November 1935 she was still recalling those years for Ruth:

May always had some inferior as a confidant in my day, a woman hairdresser who used to bring her vulgar gossip and tittle tattle about the Burne-Joneses, and all the people May disliked and was jealous of, which was all she knew. (p.408)

Despite her hostility, Lily had evidently continued to take an interest in May, as she went on to tell her correspondent that May was now “living with Lollo [Lobbo], known as ‘Daughter of the Plough’, wears knicker[bocker]s all the time, is quite uneducated and is very rough”. (p.408) The reminiscences continued into 1938, when she wrote to James Healey of May, “I used to call her ‘The Gorgon’”, although her overall tone was happier as she recalled the earlier days at Kelmscott House:

... I lunched with [the Morrises] and so met many interesting people. Bernard Shaw was one, then very hard up and doing musical criticism for a paper ... [He] came in like a refreshing breeze, with his brains and wit and easy Irish manners. The house was delightful. In the room I worked in were three fine Rossetti pictures. (Murphy p.406)

It is not easy for a reader used to taking a positive view of Morris and those associated with him to know how to respond to these largely negative accounts of the family. Can we dismiss Lily as simply an unhappy and unreliable witness? To do so would be to run counter to Murphy's consistent view of her as stable and fair-minded – “the mediator, the wit, the family anchor”. (p.160) Perhaps the truth of the matter is that May's unhappiness in these difficult years made her inconsiderate in her dealings with those she considered her subordinates, and that the Morris household, under the continual strain of Jenny's terrible illness, was a less happy place than we like to imagine. That is certainly the impression that I took away from Lily's reminiscences as encountered in these two interesting books.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Jan Marsh for drawing my attention to this book.

<sup>2</sup> Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (Faber 1994), 622-3.