The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. The Last Decade 1873-1882
Kelmscott to Birchington. Volume vi 1873-1874. Edited by William E. Freeden-
man, completed by Roger C. Lewis, Jane Cowan, Roger W. Peattie, Allan
Life and Page Life. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer with The Modern Humanities

I am glad to welcome the sixth volume of this magisterial work of
North American scholarship, finely produced by a distinguished Brit-
ish publisher. Its one colour illustration is the very fitting and striking
frontispiece of Jane Morris as Proserpine, of which eight versions were
painted in these two years (as the second Appendix explains in detail).
Rossetti spent the whole of 1873 and the first part of 1874 at Kelmscott
Manor in recuperation from his breakdown in July 1872, a good deal of
the time with 'the one necessary person', the phrase he used to identify
Jane Morris. Partly because of this, and partly because of the destruction
of Rossetti’s letters of this period to Jane, she is the missing correspond-
ent here. But there is plenty of interesting material in the volume, since Ros-
setti’s distance from London forced him into correspondence, as visiting
was so much more difficult. Thus we have numerous letters to Charles
Augustus Howell, his ill-chosen business partner, and others on practi-
cal arrangements to Treffry Dunn and T.G. Hake; business letters also to
patrons like George Rae, and F.R. Leyland; and more social ones to Fanny
Cornforth at Cheyne Walk; to his brother and his mother, and through
her to his sisters; and most engagingly to the two friends he continued to
write to when other relationships had broken down, Ford Madox Brown
and William Bell Scott.

Some of the letters here continue to show the vivacity that was so marked
in the earlier letters. Rossetti’s exasperation with Howell’s unrespon-
iveness and procrastination often produced what are for reader enjoyable
communications. For instance, a series of letters in March 1873 bear the
italicised superscription Hüffer’s Bloody Clock (to be continued in our
next), as Rossetti vainly attempts to induce Howell to send a long-overdue
wedding present to Hüffer the music critic. The brief letter dated 6 June
1873 neatly encapsulates a series of complaints about Howell’s failures
to communicate: ‘My dear Howell, Your habits as a correspondent are
most discouraging. A request for immediate answer is generally a signal
for total silence. What does it all mean? Have I offended you in any way?’
By June the following year Rossetti is becoming increasingly exasperated
with Howell, but he continues to employ him; he stated his view of the
relationship with generous exasperation on 31 December 1874: ‘As
regards our friendly relations, I have only to say that I consider you, after some
9 or 10 years’ intercourse, a very good-hearted fellow & a d—d bad
man of business.’

Rossetti writes regularly and affectionately to his mother; he is keen to
feed her interest in nature – though whether she would have enjoyed his
lengthy accounts of the exploits of Dizzy, the dog at the Manor named
after Disraeli, I am unsure. He tells her of various aspects of life at Kelms-
cott, beginning with a complaint on 2 January 1873: ‘...a dreadful man
in the neighbourhood, who has a beetroot-spirit factory, has established
a steam-whistle to call his workmen. This goes 7 times a day, beginning
at 5 AM, & is the dreariest of super- or subhuman sounds. It is a long way
off but still one hears it here much too distinctly to be pleasant.’ More
characteristic is a passage in a letter of 20 May 1873 inviting her to come
with his sisters to the Manor: ‘The apple blossom in our orchard has been
in full glory & is still delicious, and everything is most lovely. I shall try if
I can pack you a bouquet safely to Euston Square today, including wild
flowers – especially the yellow mary-buds (or marsh marigolds) which are
most splendid in the fields wherever the floods have been most persistent.
By the bye, I wrote a sonnet on Spring lately, & will copy it at the end of
this letter.’ He then mentions that The Athenaeum will soon be publishing
‘a little piece of mine’, ‘Sunset Wings’, which ‘is one I wrote when I first
came here, & embodies the habit of the starlings which quite amounts to a
local phenomenon & is most beautiful & interesting daily towards sunset
for months together in summer and autumn.’ Rossetti had sent the poem
to the editor on 9 May, commenting: ‘The habit of the starlings referred to
in them [the verses] quite amounts to a local phenomenon, & was entirely
new to me when I first took this house 2 years ago, at which time the verses were written. It was new to Morris also - a great rural observer - & might perhaps seem strange to some readers, but is very exactly described. The noise is, as said, just like the wheels at a water-mill, or (more prosaically) like a factory in full spin.'

The letters provide evidence of Rossetti's concern for his sisters. He often worries about Christina's health, and he wonders, sympathetically, about Maria's decision, in September 1873, to join the All Souls' Sisterhood. His brother William is used as an advisor on literary matters and as the source of the occasional loan - 'tin' is always in short supply - but when William announces his engagement to Lucy Madox Brown, Rossetti responds on 10 July 1873 with fraternal affection: 'You will not doubt how heartily I rejoice in your engagement to Lucy. I really believe there is not in the whole of our circle a woman on whose excellence all of us could place such perfect reliance or of whom we should feel so sure that she would make you happy. Both your mother & Brown are I am sure absolutely delighted with the prospect. Will you give Lucy my sincere love, & say I wish I were worthier to be her brother and yours.' He agrees to come to the smaller of the two events arranged to celebrate the marriage, the wedding breakfast on 31 March 1874, which was attended by the Brown and Rossetti families, and by the Morrises and Burne-Joneses. (There is an informative Note on the event.) This was the occasion on which Morris grumbled, in a letter to Louisa Baldwin, about lacking the courage to refuse to attend the wedding of two people, neither of whom he actually liked. Rossetti wrote briefly to Howell about the breakfast on 3 April 1874: 'He [William] and bride cool as cucumbers.' One wonders what he had expected. Rossetti's agreement to attend on this occasion contrasts with his polite and witty way of declining a wedding invitation from John Westland Marston on 18 June 1873: 'It is years since I began to feel decidedly more like the Ancient Mariner than the Wedding Guest...'

Fanny Cornforth remained in London at Cheyne Walk, and was given strict instructions not to come to Kelmscott. Usually addressed as 'Good old Elephant', and sent a number of elephant cartoons, Fanny was nevertheless the object of Rossetti's sympathetic concern, as he tried to organise her life from a distance, sending a string of small cheques to her, together with much, often peremptory, advice. But it is to 'Dear good Fan' that
he writes on 25 January 1873, sending her some snowdrops and expressing what may be seen as his neurotic sense of insecurity: 'When I needed money in the summer, not one friend who had capital came forward to offer me any, though I would have done so in a like case not only for my intimate friends but for any friend who needed it. All they did was to stand aloof while I sold my property much under its value.' However unfair and self-pitying this is, Rossetti was entitled to proclaim his own generosity. This is shown in the number of thoughtful letters he wrote to writers who asked him to comment on their work.

The numerous, though often short, letters to Ford Madox Brown show Rossetti at his most relaxed. Brown’s friendship became increasingly important to Rossetti as contacts with other friends declined – there are no letters here to Burne-Jones, Swinburne is no longer congenial, and the recently imprisoned Simeon Solomon is made the butt of a joke in dubious taste in a letter of 6 August 1873. Rossetti often teases Brown for his poor handwriting, his untidiness and his vagueness in some matters, but he consistently supports him in the problems of his professional career and, most movingly, when his young son Oliver (Nolly) dies in November 1874 soon after visiting Kelmscott and publishing a precocious novel.

To William Bell Scott in Newcastle – ‘My dear Scottus’ – Rossetti writes a number of informative and friendly letters. On 31 August 1873 he begins, ‘Your handwriting was a treat after so long an interval’, and goes on to discuss the difficulties that both are encountering in their work. He then refers positively to the news of his brother William’s engagement to Lucy Madox Brown, and asks Scott for more information about ‘the rise & progress of the event out there’ – Scott had been in the party on holiday in Italy during which the proposal had occurred. Scott is also told about the recent visit to the Manor of Mrs Rossetti and Christina: ‘My mummy used to trot about after wild flowers & was as pleased with everything as a baby or an angel, – once or twice took my daily walk with me too! Christina improved inconceivably. They enjoyed the boating beyond belief, & George [Hake, who was also staying at the Manor] gets greater and greater at it.’ Rossetti’s letter for 9 October 1873 criticises an unidentified ballad by Scott as lacking in ‘intonation & finish’ and belonging to ‘a much more modern & usual class of thing than your best ones.’ He emphasises his constant sense of the precariousness of his finances, remarking of his
reputation as a painter that 'I have arrived at an age when one ceases to be interesting without ever having got recognised by the public.' He ends, less self-concernedly, 'I am glad to hear that you have not been quite chiselled as to the examinership. Certainly they seemed ready to rob you, but they have not done it for once.' This is one of the few occasions when one is surprised to find no annotation of the reference.

As far as relations with the Morris family are concerned, we find many examples of Rossetti's concern for Jane's health and well-being. In this context, it is somewhat disconcerting to find him writing to Howell, on 9 January 1873, 'Two things are wanted for the Moocow in its new house.' - the Note simply says: 'A pet name for JM.' A good deal of trouble is taken to help Jane with the furnishing of the house and garden at Turnham Green. But a remark to Brown on 7 June suggests a personal tension with Morris: 'Please do not suggest his [Morris's] coming down with you on Tuesday (when I hope to see you) as it's a bore showing him one's work, & not to do so is awkward.' It would be interesting to know why Rossetti considered it a bore. The summer of 1873 seems to have been particularly happy for Rossetti, with the arrival of 'Janey and the babes' in July. A little later, on 6 August, he asks Howell to 'go to some special sweetstuff shop (there is a great one in Oxford street near the Princess's Theatre) & send some down for the kids.' On 10 August he tells Fanny: 'I have been painting from little May Morris who is so lovely and has so much expression that it would be easy to paint her as a grown up woman. My picture for Graham has two heads of her in it, painted for angels...' (A Note identifies the painting as 'La Ghirlandata'). Rossetti refers to this painting also in writing to his mother on 13 September: 'Little May Morris appears twice in the picture, as a couple of angels. She has become a most lovely model, but her health is a constant subject of anxiety.' It would seem that Rossetti extended his concerns for Jane's health to her younger daughter. Of Janey, Rossetti writes to Brown on 28 October: 'She has been & is so unwell as to make me most anxious... I still keep hoping she may soon be well enough to come here again, but I am, as I say, most anxious. She writes regularly, or I could not stay away.'

On 23 February 1874 Rossetti writes affectionately to his mother about her visit the previous summer, and tells her, 'Today the little Morris girls collected all the flowers we could find in the garden – no very choice
gleaning – and they were sent on to you... The children were quite sorry afterwards that they had omitted to send you some branches of the palm-willow with its furry buds not yet as yellow as they will be. The gum-cistus you planted thrives but of course is very gradual in growth.' He also refers to the 'Triple Rose' – a painting 'with 3 heads of lovely little May Morris'. In March there was much concern over the disappearance of a dress made by Jane for Rossetti to use in a painting; the 'hamper' in which it was packed had been broken into while it was in transit by rail from Paddington to Lechlade. But he tells Dunn on 11 March that it would be better to drop the matter rather than 'incommode' Jane or himself about it.

There is little reference to the Morrices in the succeeding months, but a good deal about Kelmscott Manor. On 9 April Rossetti writes a businesslike letter to the agent with his quarter's rent, and offering (with no mention of Morris) to take a lease for 7 or 14 years 'conditionally on my obtaining whenever needed the use of the outbuilding before in question', for which he would be prepared to pay 'a small additional rent if required'. The outbuilding would be adapted to become a studio, which 'would add materially to the value of the property.' On 23 April he was regretting that his mother had not chosen to come to Kelmscott when leaving London with his sisters. 'The weather is divine here now & everything lovely:' But the idyll – if it was one – was not to last. As students of Morris know, Morris had already written to Rossetti, on 16 April, threatening to withdraw from his part of the tenancy – 'I am both too poor &, by compulsion of poverty, too busy to be able to use it much in any case'.

However, Rossetti remained at the Manor well into the summer, although by 26 June he was telling Watts-Dunton, 'I am increasingly anxious to get housed nearer London, though still with country walks available quite close at hand', and letters to Dunn show him looking at some houses on Rossetti's behalf. These letters were of course written before the events of mid-July which led to Rossetti's permanent departure from Kelmscott. According to Jan Marsh in her 1999 Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Painter and Poet, 'Walking on the river-bank, he passed some local anglers and, as by the Tay, he heard insults. Angrily, he rounded on them, full of abuse and challenge. George intervened, but the damage was done, as accounts of the outburst began to circulate in the village'. (p.481) This dramatic event, surprisingly, makes no impact in the correspondence. On
11 July Rossetti is hoping for a visit from Brown, to join Leyland, Watts and Howell at the Manor, but on 15 July he writes briefly to Howell: 'I am obliged to put off Sandys after all – being unexpectedly called to London. I shall try to see both him & you there if I stay at all. Don't tell people I am coming, as I don't want to be besieged.' The Note remarks, 'In fact, DGR never returned to Kelmscott'.

There is some change of manner in the following letters, written from London – though this is not obvious, as addresses are given in this edition only when they appear on the letters. These post-Kelmscott letters are briefer, perhaps less relaxed, and largely concerned with practical arrangements. Nevertheless, they remain coherent and purposive. And we see Rossetti in a positive light as he tries to bring a resolution to the conflict between Morris and Brown over the reorganisation of the Firm.

On 21 October he writes at length to Brown on the matter, trying to arrange a meeting between the three of them to ‘talk the matter over’. He tells Brown: ‘I have said both to you & to Morris that I consider his proceeding sudden & arbitrary.’ But he then goes on to give an account of the development of the Firm which is sympathetic to Morris’s point of view, concluding: ‘I think if Morris had come to us in a friendly spirit of appeal & said “The business will only yield a fair income for one man & no more – ought not that man to be myself who have no other resources?” We as friends might probably on consideration have answered Yes.’ Brown, worried by the serious illness of his son Oliver – he was to die on 4 November – was in no mood to compromise. Rossetti continued to seek a solution, writing to the lawyer Watts-Dunton on 21 October about a visit to Morris and a meeting of the partners. On 22 October Rossetti writes affectionately to Brown about Oliver’s illness, and concludes: ‘There is a call for a Firm meeting on 23rd. Having made up my mind as to my own course, & put Top pretty well in possession of it, I don’t know that it is any use my attending.’ A brief note to Morris on 25 October acknowledges receipt of the minutes of the recent meeting and accepts the idea of appointing ‘assessors’, but insists that ‘I don’t see any object in my coming to the meeting on the 4th.’ There is an unexpected additional remark: ‘I have been making a pattern for a new colouring of the marigold paper & will send it with remarks.’ This seems surprisingly supportive of Morris – or at least the Firm – in the context of controversy. On 3 November
Rossetti apologises to his mother for deferring a visit to her, 'as I have just got a note to say how important it is for me to be at the shop meeting, & Brown & Marshall will be coming down here for a previous discussion of matters'. But the death of Oliver Madox Brown put such matter in the background. Rossetti wrote tenderly to Brown on 6 November about the death, concluding, 'My dear Friend, may you find help in yourself, for elsewhere it is vain to seek it.' He also wrote the sonnet 'Untimely Lost', published in *The Athenæum* for 21 November. Rossetti's support for Brown was unstinting, and it is pleasant to read in a letter to Hake of 20 December, 'I saw Brown last Sunday – on the point of going next morning to Manchester to deliver his 2 lectures – a task which I hope may have helped to rouse him, though indeed he has borne up most wonderfully all along.' In the same letter Rossetti gives two good reasons for having moved from Kelmscott back to London 'for the winter'; this is due 'partly to increased calls for rapid runs to town which became inconvenient, & partly to the necessity of attending personally to the replica of my large picture here now...

On the evidence of the material quoted here, Roger C. Lewis bases an Appendix entitled 'Rossetti's Relations with the Morrices 1868–75'. He argues that the reasons for Rossetti's sudden departure from the Manor 'are more complicated than the usual sources indicate' (p.583), including 'non-pathological factors' (p.585) such as his awareness of Jane's anxieties about him, and her own attitude. In Lewis's view, 'she was too fond of respectability and security to risk an open break with her husband in order to live permanently with Rossetti.' (p.585) Rossetti, we are told, was also finding that 'Kelmscott itself was beginning to grate on him'. Lewis's conclusion runs contrary to the accepted accounts as he argues that 'his return to London in mid-July may have been less a result of his lapsing back into insanity, as Scott and Doughty claimed, than a suitable moment, while Janey was away on holiday, to make the break he had probably been contemplating for some time.' (pp.585–6) Scott and Doughty are not the only scholars to have emphasised Rossetti's instability at this stage. But Lewis's argument is certainly a stimulus to the reader to look again at the events at Kelmscott in July 1874.

Reference has already been made to the second Appendix, which attempts to explain the very complicated matter of 'The Oil Versions of
Rossetti's Proserpine'. Appendix 3, 'Monna Innominata. Alexa Wilding', is a surprising conclusion to the volume. In it, Allan and Page Life offer the most detailed biography of Rossetti's model so far published, and a defence of her against the condescension of some of those who have previously written about her. However good the Lifes' scholarship may be, I was surprised to find this rather specialised material here; I hope that it will receive the attention it deserves.

However, the general significance of these letters for me was to show that Rossetti, at this stage in his life, could still at times be a lively, intelligent and entertaining correspondent, whose articulacy somehow survived in a period of great psychological strain.

Peter Faulkner