

# Ruskin Art Club

*founded 1888*

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[www.RuskinArtClub.org](http://www.RuskinArtClub.org)

## **Ruskin Art Club (Founded 1888)**

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*“We seek in the arts, in Nature, and in the mysterious power of beauty, the instruments not only of personal transformation, but, in the spirit of John Ruskin, of the transformation of the physical, social, and cultural landscape of our world.”*

- Ruskin Art Club

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### **FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: GABRIEL MEYER**

#### **“A Season of Fruitfulness”**

The poet John Keats famously describes autumn as “the season of mists and mellow fruitfulness/Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;”Conspiring with him how to load and bless/ . . . and fill all fruit with ripeness to the core; . . .”(“To Autumn”).

The Ruskin Art Club has enjoyed a particularly fruitful Fall Season, with major presentations on Ruskin and women (September), life lessons discovered in Ruskin’s *Elements of Drawing* (October), and Philip Hoare’s insightful tour of the Victorian master’s provocative 1858 lecture, “The Work of Iron in Nature, Art, and Policy” (November). These presentations and study sessions are available for viewing on our YouTube channel – [www.ruskinartclub.org](http://www.ruskinartclub.org).

Two additional events deserve special notice: the Ruskin Art Club was represented, for the first time, at **USC’s 18th annual Archives**



*Dinah Birch at the Ruskin Lecture*



*18th annual Archives Bazaar at USC*

**Bazaar at Doheny Library** on Saturday, October 28 and we hosted our first-ever members and friends’ orientation session, along with holiday party, at Telescope Studio in downtown LA on Saturday, December 2. The Archives Bazaar, which showcases LA historical archives and local historical societies and their collections, provided us with a chance to introduce ourselves to other local historical associations, feature samples of our remarkable early Los Angeles memorabilia, and acquaint young people and students with the vitality of our mission and Ruskin’s relevance to 21st-century concerns.

**The members and friends’ orientation session** arose out of member suggestions that we put together an informal briefing on basic Ruskin and the history/mission of the Ruskin Art Club from time to time. The event included the screening of a short film on Ruskin’s life and work, sharings from board members, a group discussion – and a party! We’re open to doing these orientation sessions once or twice a year if there’s sufficient interest (sign-ups).

Among other new projects, the Ruskin Art Club will shortly launch regular **podcasts**, which will be available on YouTube.

These will expand the club’s outreach to the general public and, among other benefits, provide us with opportunities to interview our speakers and presenters and explore their insights at greater depth and in an informal atmosphere.



*Ruskin Art Club’s Booth at the Archives Bazaar*

**“A Season of Fruitfulness” by Gabriel Meyer — Continued**

This issue of our newsletter is larger than any we’ve published in the past because we wished to accommodate the full text of Paul Dawson’s fascinating article, especially commissioned for our newsletter, on the career of Ruskin’s printer/publisher George Allen and the private press movement which was such a dynamic feature of his time. I had the pleasure of hearing Paul lecture on this subject some years ago at a Ruskin conference on the Roycroft campus in East Aurora, New York, and he graciously agreed to develop the lecture as an article for our Fall/Winter newsletter. Paul’s presentation highlights Ruskin’s role as mentor to youthful craftsmen and the remarkable collaborative projects which grew out of those relationships. Enjoy!

***Gabriel Meyer is the Executive Director of the Ruskin Art Club of Los Angeles***

**REMEMBERING GEORGE LANDOW: 1940-2023**



The great Ruskin scholar and founder of The Victorian Web, George Landow, died May 31, 2023, of prostate cancer. I was fortunate to encounter his seminal study, *The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin* (Princeton University Press, 1971) early in my explorations of Ruskin. Between Landow, Robert Hewison, and John Rosenberg, I was set on the royal road of Ruskin studies. Interestingly, two of these giants, Landow and Rosenberg, were American, as was their contemporary, the great Ruskin scholar Van Akin Burd, who died in 2015 at the age of 101 (see the tribute to Burd on our YouTube page). Landow’s most enduring work, without a doubt, was his creation of the world-renowned The Victorian Web, an unmatched source of information not only on Ruskin and his works but the whole Victorian literary and scientific world of which he was a part. Landow incorporated the website as a foundation and charitable organization, thus ensuring his legacy and its future: [www.victorianweb.org](http://www.victorianweb.org). –Ed.

# THE BOOK BEAUTIFUL

## JOHN RUSKIN, WILLIAM MORRIS, GEORGE ALLEN

### THE PRIVATE PRESS MOVEMENT

Paul Dawson

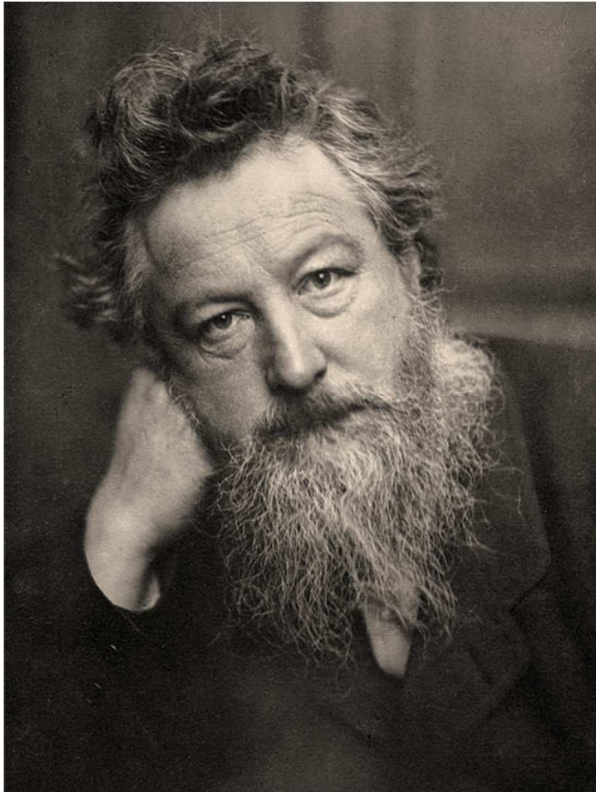


**“Fine Art is that in which the hand, the head,  
and the heart of man go together.”**

John Ruskin, *The Two Paths*, lecture two ‘The Unity of Art,’ 1859.

There are three main characters in this story. John Ruskin and William Morris are the more familiar names, and the third, lesser-known name is that of George Allen. You might recognise him as the publisher of John Ruskin in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, or as incorporated into the imprint of the publishing company George Allen & Unwin which survives into this century.

Although Allen worked alongside John Ruskin for forty-six years, right up to Ruskin’s death, virtually nothing has been written about him. Even Ruskin’s biographers, without exception, have overlooked the significance of Allen’s presence in Ruskin’s working life and merely relegated him to the footnotes. These pages will look at just three of the of the many ways in which Allen supported Ruskin throughout their association: the financial security his publishing work gave Ruskin; the importance of his contribution towards making Ruskin’s writings accessible to a wider readership, and significantly, the bringing of the high design of the Art Press to the working man’s bookshelves. All three are valid and significant reasons to bring this modest man into the story of the Private Press Movement. We will look further at Allen’s life shortly, but we will start with the name foremost in the Private Press Movement, William Morris.



**William Morris** (left) was born in 1834. His father was a successful city stockbroker, and the family home was Woodford Hall, a Palladian mansion in the Epping Forest in Essex, surrounded by ancient woodland. There, the young Morris enjoyed a privileged childhood playing among forest glades or riding his pony. Private schooling was followed by a place at Marlborough College, and then on to Oxford.

Morris was just thirteen when his father died, leaving a considerable financial legacy that would keep him comfortably for life. The family moved from the opulence of Woodford Hall to the more modest Water House at Walthamstow, recognisable today as the home of the William Morris Gallery.

In 1853 at Exeter College, Oxford, Morris ‘discovered’ Ruskin, most specially and significantly in the second volume of *The Stones of Venice*: in the chapter titled ‘The Nature of Gothic.’ Captured by Ruskin’s ‘word-spell’, made up of wonderful descriptions of art and architecture but punctured by tales of the plight of the craftsmen on the ground, Morris would go on to spend much of his life trying to establish a society where the dignity of work was recognised, and that artists, craftsmen, and tradesmen were no longer separated – or separable – from one another.



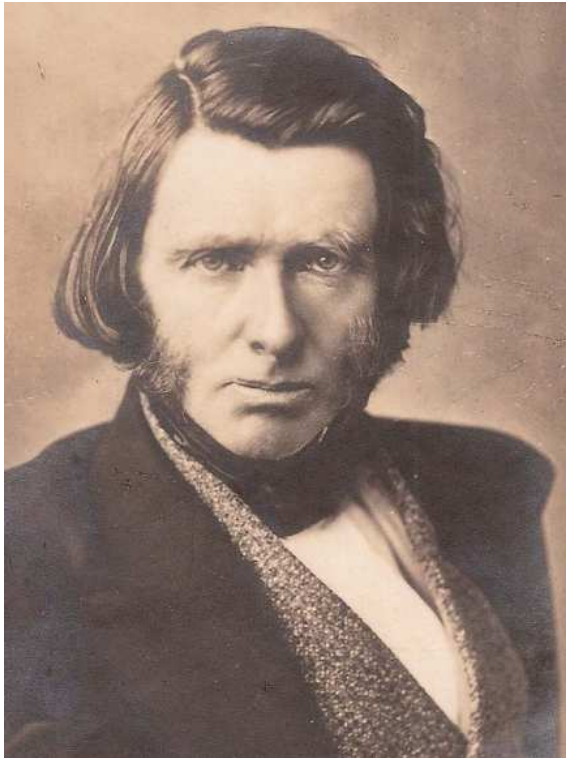
▲ Woodford Hall, a Palladian mansion in the Epping Forest

▼ William Morris Gallery, Water House, Walthamstow.



After Oxford, Morris joined the drawing office of architect George Street (1821-81), where he met the architect Philip Webb (1831-1915) who would become his business partner and life-long friend. Morris left paid employment in order to immerse himself in painting; stained glass creations; poetry and sculpture and he experimented with embroidery and wall hangings. He visited France to study architecture in the company of Webb and on returning home used his considerable wealth to commission Webb to build him a new home in Bexleyheath, Kent. It was built in a medieval style with furnishings to match and known as *Red House*, and now in the care of the National Trust. The energy that went into designing and making the furnishings for Red House were the seeds that in 1861 would become the decorative arts business known initially as *Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Company: Fine Art Workmen in Painting, Carving, Furniture and Metals*. As will be seen, George Allen could well

have been one of that company. Morris’s mentor through his teaching at Oxford and through his writings was John Ruskin.



**John Ruskin** is seen here at the height of his powers in a photograph by Elliot & Fry dated 1869. He looks directly at the lens with confidence, almost as if in defiance. Never one to accept the *status quo*, he would continually strive to learn, teach and improve upon all that he saw as evil in society and bad in art. Such radical views attract controversy, and in turn, ridicule. He suffered, as a man ahead of his time, and although the world is finally waking up to the truth behind much of his teaching, even now strange myths survive, such as the ridiculous interpretation given of him in the otherwise very good 2014 film *Mr Turner*<sup>1</sup>. Ruskin was *not* a foppish, stuttering and effeminate dandy who wore brown suits and ridiculously oversized bows at his neck as the film portrayed him. This was a man whose opinion of an artist exhibiting at the Royal Academy could make or break that man's career and who, incidentally, wore for almost every day of his life a dark Victorian frock coat with an Oxford Blue stock at his neck. John Ruskin was a confident and charismatic speaker whose name would fill the biggest lecture hall in any city, as the following facts will witness.



▲ The Ruskin family home in Denmark Hill, London, where he grew up and wrote or revised several of his earlier books.

▼ Brantwood, Ruskin's Lake District home of later years, set against the Coniston fells and overlooking Coniston Water.



John Ruskin was, from 1850, one of the best-known names in the land. He came from a comfortable, moderately wealthy background, and as a young Oxford graduate, he had written the book that launched his fame: *Modern Painters*. That one book would develop into a five-volume work that influenced young and aspiring artists and question the values of the art 'establishment'. In 1849 *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* further advanced his reputation and by the mid-1850s another ongoing work, *The Stones of Venice*, not only looked at architecture but at the value of craftsmen and their labour.

These were, and still are, among the most influential works on art ever written, and passages of Ruskin's teaching from these books formed the foundation stones upon which the Arts & Crafts movement was built.

It is not easy to explain the degree of success and celebrity that surrounded John Ruskin in an age where the newspaper and perhaps an engraved portrait were the only means of conveying the man. When he returned to his Oxford professorship in later years, the college lecture hall was full to overflowing and crowds were still continuing to gather outside. There

was so much pushing and shoving that a serious breach of the peace was feared and the lecture was hastily relocated to the only hall in Oxford big enough for such a crowd – the Sheldonian Theatre – which was strictly, until then, only used for college ceremonials. This had never happened before.

A long procession with Ruskin at the head wound through the narrow streets of Oxford from the College of Corpus Christie to the Sheldonian in Broad Street. Behind Ruskin were a few students carrying some of his Turner paintings, in their frames, that he would use as visual aids to his theme. Immediately behind were the university governors and dons, then were the ‘good and the great’ of Oxford Society. Following them were members of the local art and literary societies and their guests, then the college students, right down to the fee-paying public and the hangers-on and ‘street urchins’ who just saw a procession and wanted to join in. Such was the celebrity of John Ruskin. In an age of so little visual technology it is remarkable that he and his face, his name, his teaching, his opinions and his writings were incredibly well-known in a way hardly experienced before.



**George Allen**'s background was completely different. In this 1895 portrait by Fred Yates, we see a successful businessman, well-respected and with a fine reputation in the publishing trade. He is wearing a smart business suit, looking relaxed and assured. Beneath is shown his early home that reflects his humble beginning. He was born in 1832 at the Robin Hood Inn<sup>2</sup> in Newark, Nottinghamshire, where his father was the tenant landlord. The family moved from there to the George Inn, Derbyshire in 1838, a bigger business on a busy north-south/east-west crossroads. A coaching inn at such a busy crossroads meant long hours and hard work but could be a very profitable business, and this was the environment where George Allen spent his early years. In 1848 the young George, in his seventeenth year, moved to London where he was apprenticed as a joiner and cabinet-maker. By 1854 he had become an accomplished tradesman involved in several significant projects fitting out new and grand houses that included Dorchester House in Park lane, now the site of the Dorchester Hotel. He was at the time ‘walking out’ with a young lady named Anne Hobbs who happened to be the personal maid of Mrs Ruskin senior, mother of the celebrated author. Ruskin was at that time a voluntary teacher in the evening Art Class at the London Working Men’s College, set up to give young men an opportunity to build upon whatever rudimentary education they had managed to acquire, and like hundreds of other young men, George Allen enrolled. While there is little doubt that it *was* in order to improve his education, it was also a way to see and hear this great celebrity who also happened to be the son of his lady-friend’s employer, and it was far better than queuing and paying for a ticket to hear him. And in the art class there was direct contact as the great man interacted directly with you in the classroom.



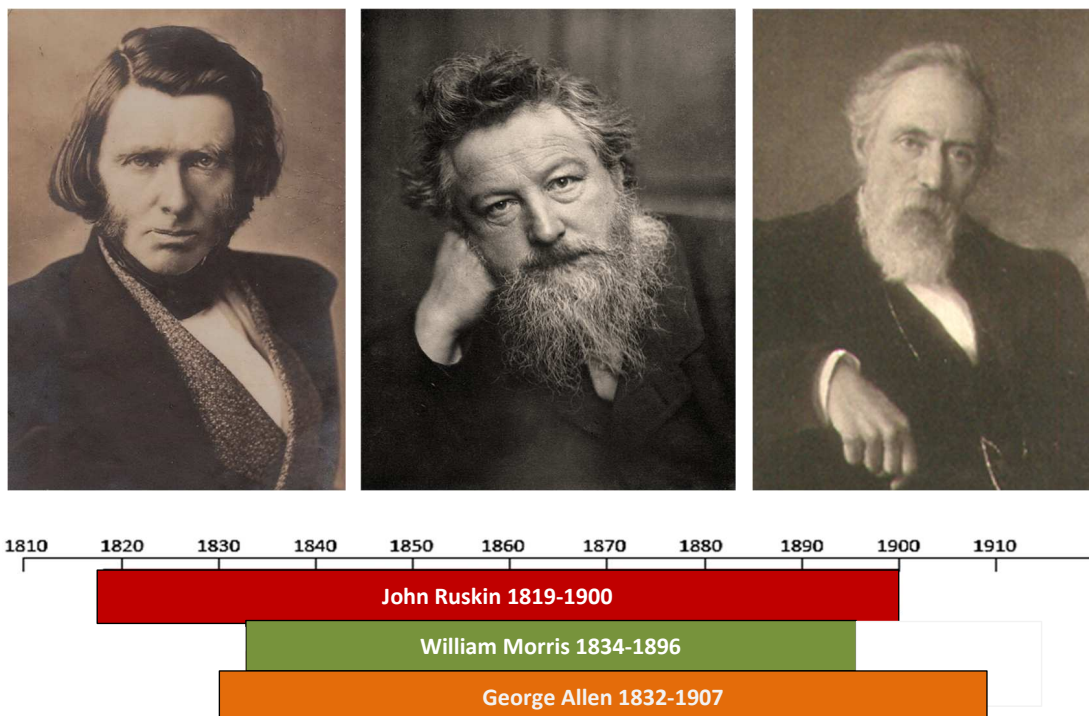
▲ Allen’s birthplace, the Robin Hood Inn at Newark, Nottinghamshire.

Ruskin saw something special in George Allen’s skills, so besides going to the classes to learn and to improve his drawing skills, Allen also attended on other occasions to assist Ruskin in the drawing classes. George and Anne’s marriage followed at the end of 1856, and they were offered the Gate House of the Ruskin family home at Denmark Hill. Early in 1857 Ruskin offered Allen a full-time job

as his assistant. He would be a part secretary, engraver, drawing master, copyist, and in time, become the agent for Ruskin's books – and eventually, Ruskin's publisher.

Allen's work with Ruskin on cataloguing the Turner Bequest at The National Gallery, the years spent in Switzerland with Ruskin learning about the local geology and the significant mineral collection Allen built up during his lifetime are not our subject here, but we *do* need to know that with his fine reputation for woodworking and joinery preceding him, Allen was invited to invited join William Morris in his proposed arts & crafts business, with Allen offered the role overseeing the production in the furniture department. Allen had become friendly with Pre-Raphaelite artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti who also took occasional classes at the Working Men's College, and it was he who put Allen's name forward to Morris. While this would have given Allen the opportunity to influence the design and manufacturing within the company, it would have been a considerable risk. Morris was then a young man two-years his junior and with no previous business experience, and without the benefit of hindsight there was no guarantee of the personal reputations to be made or the eventual impact of the arts & crafts movement. Had he joined Morris, Allen might have been more well-known a century later, but it is doubtful whether he would have enjoyed the security and lifestyle which he achieved by remaining with Ruskin.

Now we have our three characters, shown with a timeline that makes clear their respective ages:



**John Ruskin** is the senior figure in all respects; age; reputation; experience; well-travelled since childhood; a best-selling author, and with adequate wealth to pursue his writing and philanthropic teaching.

**William Morris** need never have worked. He had wealth enough to live a full and extravagant life if he had wished but on reading Ruskin, he began his quest to establish a society where artist, craftsman, and tradesman were offered equal respect. By nature, he was impulsive. He approached each new interest with vigour and enthusiasm and used his independent means to finance it.

**George Allen** was a working-class artisan who had built upon his rudimentary education and had the great fortune to be one of Ruskin's protégées. Of them all, he was the one who worked longest

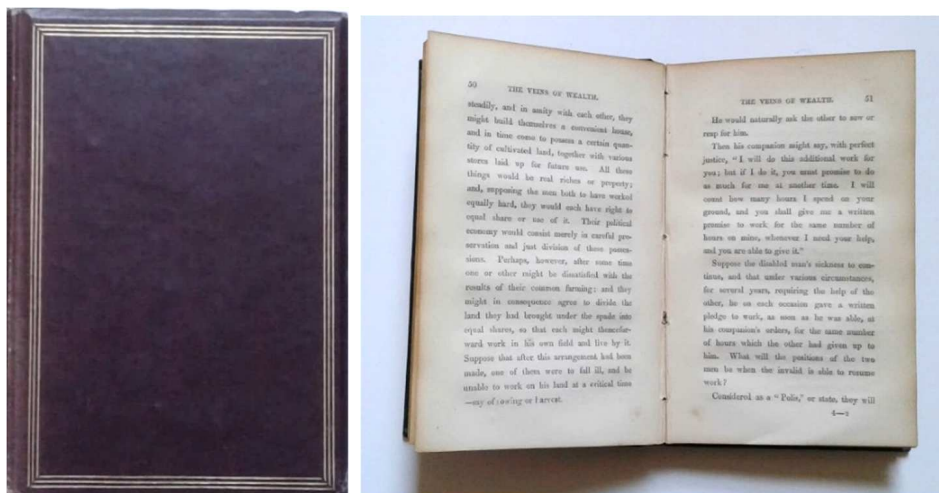


for, and was the most personally connected with, Ruskin and because of his closeness to the Ruskin family and to John Ruskin, the Victorian class divide was occasionally lowered as he became a trusted confidante. His working-class background gave him a sound and practical view on life, which would prove to be of great value to Ruskin in later years. As you see, Allen outlived both Morris and Ruskin.

So, when and how did these three men come to be involved with what we know today as the Art Press or the Private Press Movement, and when did it all begin? And what *defines* the Private Press? Where were its roots?



The first volume of Ruskin's *Modern Painters* had been modestly bound in plain black boards. In fact, George Smith of the publishing house of Smith, Elder & Company, was a family friend who had been persuaded to publish this undergraduate's first work and never expected that it would achieve such fame and success. Ruskin's following book, the *Seven Lamps of Architecture* was given a more elaborate cover with a design embossed into its dark brown cloth cover, and a few years later, with Ruskin's reputation assured, the three volumes of *The Stones of Venice* bore their richly deserved embossed covers with gilt blocking. But it is the plain, ordinary appearance of these smaller volumes comprised predominantly of text that that concern us here. If you feel the following images are the most boring you expected to see, then the point is made.



All published by Smith, Elder and Company, they were pretty much the commercial standard of the day. There were other authors whose work was published in more cheaply produced books than these with cramped, even narrower borders, so Ruskin was – if not satisfied, then accepting – of these results. But in 1871, when Ruskin had decided to take on the publication of his own books with George Allen acting as his agent, he decided to make some improvements. He wanted them to look better.

His plan was to republish them in a binding that would set them apart from his previous books, and to differentiate them from his former titles, and they were to be known as the *Collected Works*.



Even today, the books are stunning in appearance. The choice of binding material, a soft calf leather, is a deep, rich blue. Three parallel black embossed lines form a ‘box’ around the cover boards, front and back; within the rectangle of that box, two horizontal and two vertical bands of three lines each, spaced apart exactly as those making up the border, intersect to form a square in each corner. Central in each square is the black embossed shape of a leaf.

The spine has five raised bands to imitate the bindings of earlier times, and between each band is either the author’s name, the title, or a single embossed black leaf. All the edges are gilt. Further close attention to detail is apparent in the fabric head band that reinforces the spine. It could quite simply have been red or black, but it was woven in red, green and golden yellow as a perfect complement to the choice of the rich colouring of the endpapers.

**The page layout**, too, came under Ruskin’s attention. That Ruskin influenced the typography of his books is well known. There survive written accounts by Henry Jowett, the manager at Ruskin’s printer, Hazell, Watson & Viney, that concern not only the collected works series, but show how the principles were adapted into other individual titles afterwards with regard to page sizes, proportions /and importantly, the border widths.

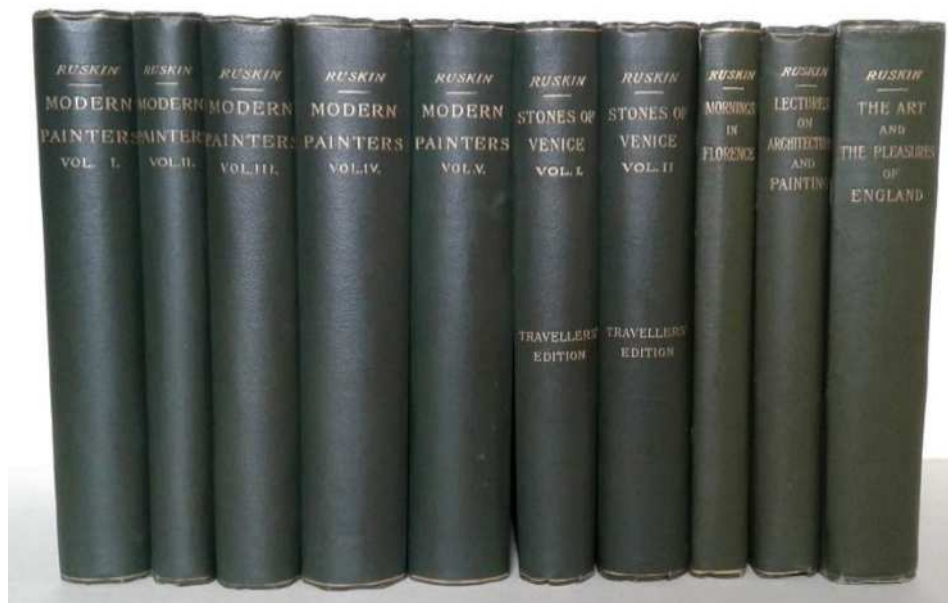
Then there was **the text**. In the *collected works* series, the space between each line of text is unusually generous. Although in this age our eyes may not be surprised, it was revelatory to his readers who were accustomed to a much tighter block of characters – and it was also much easier to read by lamp- or candle-light. Ruskin was also firm in his insistence that no word should be broken and hyphenated and he would re-write the sentence at the proofing stage to avoid such an occurrence. His views on the value of the ownership of books, too, are well known. Time and again he would uphold the view that if a man had to save his money and go without certain things in order to afford the purchase of a book, he would value that book the greater and read it more carefully.

He also held out against the idea of cheap editions, believing that cheapness implied lowering of standards, and would go against his other strong opinion that the book itself should be an object of quality that was respected not only for its content but for the craftsmanship inherent in its pages and binding. But there was a problem. Ruskin had also been campaigning for the improvement of social conditions for the working classes trapped in poverty. He was advocating free schools and libraries; fair rents and sanitary housing to replace the slum conditions; free medical care for the sick and the elderly; and pensions for the elderly from their parishes and high on his list: education.

The paradox of Ruskin's desire to reach the working man with his writings while insisting on such quality that would price them beyond their ownership was not lost on George Allen. It took a little time and subtle persuasion but in 1882, Ruskin acknowledged the changing times in a letter to Allen with the following words:

I quite see that the kind of people who are covering up the country between you and me with villas ten yards cube, set between gardens ten yards square, can't buy our blue books, but should have the offer of something.

The green covered books shown here and known as the *uniform edition* are well-loved by Ruskin's readers today. It is an indication of how successfully Allen achieved the task that one hundred and fifty years later many of those books survive with clear gilding, tight bindings and sound stitching; something only achieved with good quality paper and fine craftsmanship.



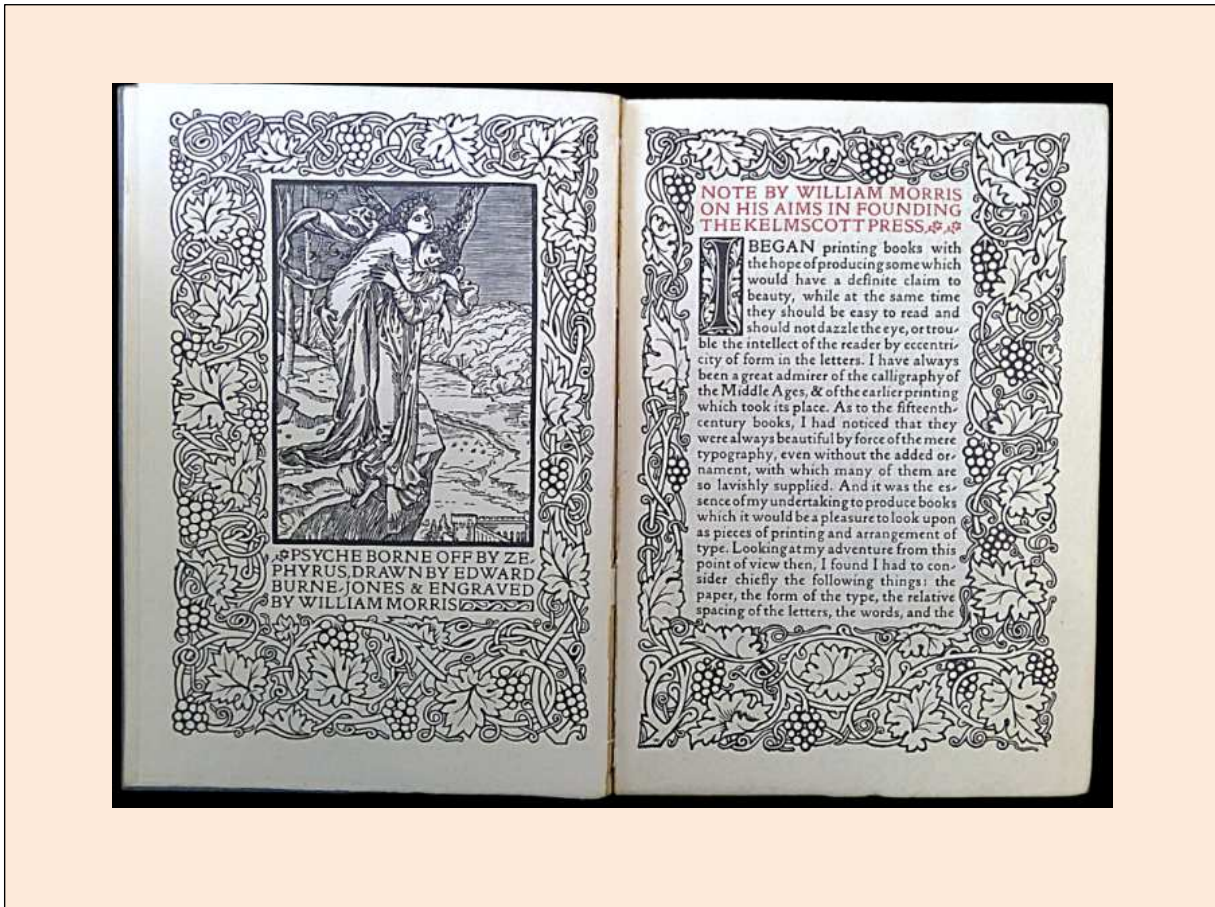
The *uniform edition* of Ruskin's works would exceed fifty titles over the next twenty years

Bookbinding was very much a hand craft at the time, and the last of the steps in the printing process to be automated. Almost timeless in design, the relationship of margins, text and spacing have more or less become the standard in the industry and are applied with little adaption in modern typography. It was a standard that would be readily picked up just a few years later with the private press movement.

As Allen continued the successful, profitable, publishing of Ruskin's books, William Morris, too, had been growing his own business producing arts & crafts-styled fabrics and furniture and all the *accoutrements* for a stylish home. Morris also indulged himself in a new interest, of folklore and legend, while also forming a passion for social reform through political activism. However, in 1888 his interests took a new direction after hearing a lecture on typography given in London by Emery Walker, a master engraver, printer and designer of type fonts. Morris was immediately drawn to this

new art form, and was swept away with the idea of creating beautiful books by using traditional methods. As Morris wrote:

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 should not dazzle the eye or trouble the intellect of the reader...

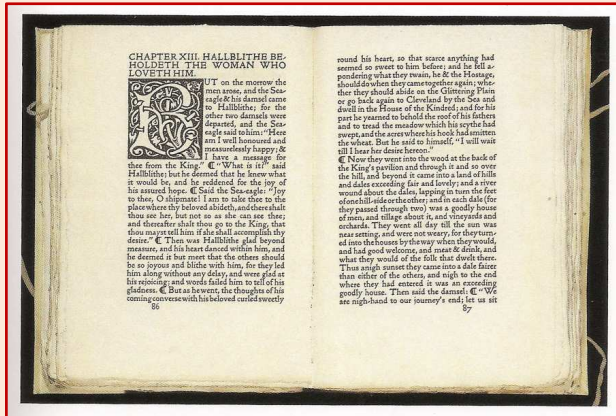


Morris threw himself into the design of pages and type fonts,<sup>3</sup> with consideration given to paper, the form of the type, the relative spacing of the letters, the words and lines and the position of the printed matter on the page – all echoing the things so important to Ruskin and being produced under George Allen. Thirty years had passed since Morris was the young business entrepreneur and Allen the master cabinet maker who declined an offer to join his firm, but Morris and Allen were now treading the same path: the designing and the making of the ‘book beautiful.’

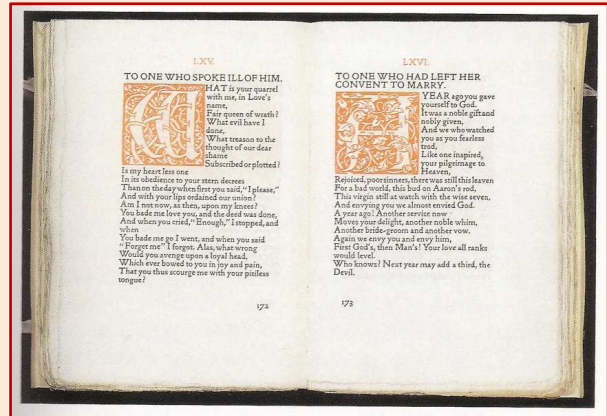
So, what *is* a private press?

Private Press – Art Press – whatever term is used in definition – their foundation is based on the value and beauty of traditional skills and methods as opposed to mass production techniques – the same spirit of the *arts & crafts* movement that was behind all that Morris produced. The Kelmscott Press was founded by William Morris and published its first book in 1891. It would go on to produce more than fifty books using traditional methods on hand-operated presses and on hand-made paper. The familiar design elements are well-known: the decorated initial letters; the text often framed in intricate floral borders; vellum bindings and ribbon ties, and the three type fonts that Morris designed and cut, *Golden*, *Troy*, and *Chaucer*.

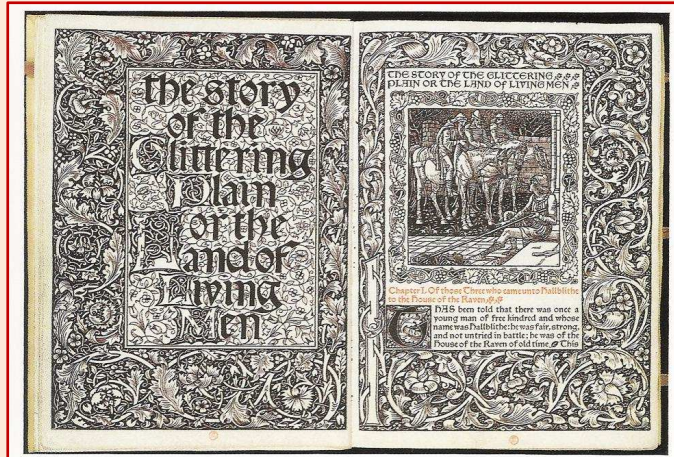
## The Kelmscott Press



*The Story of The Glittering Plain (1891)*



*The Love-Lyrics and Songs of Proteus (1892)*



*The Story of The Glittering Plain (1894) illustrated edition*



*News From Nowhere (1893)*

Morris's reputation and the loyal following of wealthy clients assured the sales of his limited-edition books, most sold by subscription before they were even printed. He was a rich man doing something he loved and not needing personal financial gain. Even so, his aim was to make the Kelmscott Press a viable business model. On the hand-operated printing press he managed print runs of two to three hundred copies for his titles, occasionally five hundred. Some print runs were much less. Consider the time taken to place each blank sheet on the press, draw the heavy handle toward you to lower the type, raise it and carefully remove the printed sheet and lay it on a drying rack. Once dry, each sheet must be carefully laid in the exact same position on the press 'bed' so the red initial letter or decoration will be perfectly 'registered' or fitted, in its place.

The beating heart of the print room at the Kelmscott Press was Morris's Albion Press. Made in England in by Hopkinson & Cope and officially known as the 'Improved Albion Press' it weighed more than two thousand pounds and stood seven feet tall. Two others would join it over the next few years.

Interestingly, the third Albion Press at Kelmscott survives and its history traced. First purchased by Morris in 1894, it was shipped to America in 1924 by the type designer Frederic Goudy for use in his 'Village Press' in Marlborough, New York. It would change hands four more times in New York State

until 2013, when it was purchased at auction for \$233,000 by the Rochester Institute of Technology's Graphic Arts Collection, where it joined a working collection of historical printing presses.<sup>4</sup>



The third Albion Press at Kelmscott, was purchased by William Morris in 1894 for £52.10s. It was made in England in 1891 by Hopkinson & Cope and officially known as the 'Improved Albion Press No. 6551'

For some of Morris's titles, he required a larger print run in order to reach a wider market. These titles were printed in more conventional, standard cloth-covered covers and for these Morris needed a commercial printer and a publisher with contacts in the book-selling marketplace. Although the majority of Morris's books credit the Kelmscott Press as publisher, this is not strictly true in the current meaning of the term and the liabilities a publisher has in law. For Morris, the publisher was a party willing to share the production and printing costs and bring the book to a finished and saleable item that provided a profit that the two parties could divide. A distributor was then required to take the book to market, something these days in the remit of the publisher. In the early days of Kelmscott, Morris made an arrangement with the London Bookseller and Publisher Bernard Quaritch to publish his books, with Reeves and Turner of London also selling a few of the titles.

In the early 1890s, Morris approached Allen to propose publication of a new edition of Ruskin's *Nature of Gothic*, that vital chapter from *The Stones of Venice* which had garnered strong sales as a stand-alone publication.

Published by George Allen in 1892, it bore all the Morris trademarks of handmade paper, Morris's own 'Golden' typeface and vellum covers with ribbon ties. The note on the final page states that the five hundred copies were printed and published by Morris at the Kelmscott Press.



Such collaborations outside of the Kelmscott Press should not come as a surprise. Morris had already found it necessary that his wallpaper often needed to be outsourced in order to meet demand, with Jeffery & Co. of Islington printing his designs, and the making of the wallpaper printing blocks outsourced to Barret's of Bethnal Green with Morris carefully watching over the quality.

Even Morris's type fonts utilised the photographic process where enlarged photographic prints were used to check and make necessary adaptations to the minutiae of the design, as was also done with some of his tapestry designs. Morris also used photography and photo-electrotype castings for the illuminated initial letters and borders, and called upon the Chiswick Press in London with their expertise with woodblocks to print some of his texts, using their own Albion Presses.

Morris stated that 'such machinery' (he could not bring himself to use the word 'mechanisation') 'would only be used where absolutely necessary, believing that it was 'allowing machines to be our masters and not our servants that so injures the beauty of life.'<sup>5</sup>

With the strong sales of the Kelmscott 'Nature of Gothic', Morris and Allen considered a further, matching volume: *Unto This Last*, but Allen balked at Morris's figures. Morris's side of the correspondence does not appear to have survived, but Allen's responses indicate a difference of opinion on what is probably Morris's cost, per copy, of producing the book, and its selling price. Allen wrote that "with the various expenses connected with the work, the profits would be too small to make it worth our while" (Allen's own words in January 1893) "[and] regarding the settling of the selling price, that of course is *my* affair." Allen was by then the guardian of Ruskin's copyright, and loyally defending, even aggressively, his master's interests. The implication here is that although Morris might not need a profit, the owner of the copyright certainly did.<sup>6</sup>

The project was put on hold and not completed in Morris's lifetime, but the relationship does not appear to have been marred by this disagreement. In 1895 Allen was commissioned to print and publish two of Morris's translations from the French, and the tone of the correspondence is very amicable. Both of the translations were well-printed with wide page margins and bound in a good but affordable cloth cover to be offered as a cheaper alternative to the superior Kelmscott version with its decorative flourishes and vellum bindings.

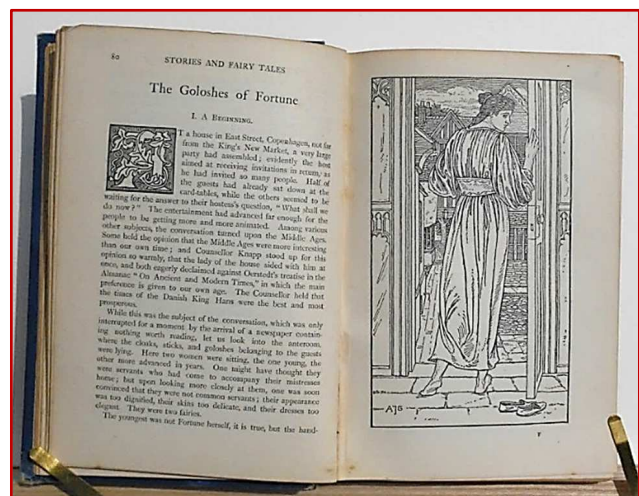
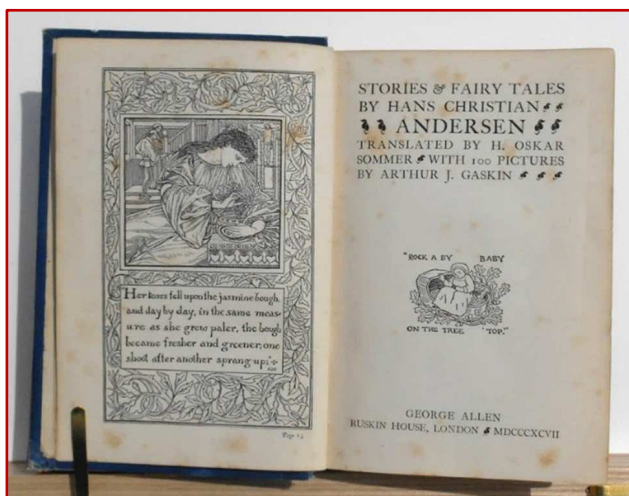
The criticism levelled against the grand *arts & crafts* principles is one of attainment, goods produced only for the wealthy in society, yet both men sought similar ideals regarding design and quality. The differentiating factor was price. Allen had already brought Ruskin's works to the working men's homes, and he had a clear vision: to provide them with other beautifully designed books, too.



Allen had been using the Chiswick Press for some time on certain specialist titles. Also, the London-based Ballantyne Press, already printing Allen's general commercial catalogue, kept an Albion Press in their basement and had been meeting the exacting standards of The Vale Press.

Having established a good working relationship with his printers, in order to further develop his plan Allen now needed illustrators. As well as commissioning established names in illustrative work, Allen sought out new and rising talent. The shrewd business mind saw the cost benefits of employing younger men *and* women. Allen commissioned his artists, illustrators and translators without gender discrimination, something not commonplace in Victorian times. It is likely that these young people at the start of their careers were willing to work for less than experienced artisans while hoping that Allen's name and reputation would boost their fortunes. As it often turned out, many of them went on to enjoy long and successful careers.

Arthur Gaskin (1862-1928) (or A.J. Gaskin as he was later known) was one of Allen's first discoveries, and working in the style of Walter Crane. Discovered by Allen at the very start of his career when exhibiting at the 1893 *arts and crafts* exhibition in London, Gaskin would go on to become one of the most successful and sought-after nineteenth century illustrators, working for Morris at the Kelmscott Press, and from there to great success in a variety of craft formats. Gaskin's illustrations for *Hans Andersen's Fairy Tales* were a part of that 1893 student exhibition.



Bernard Sleight, a young wood engraver who was employed to undertake Gaskin's illustrations, would later record his first meeting with George Allen: 'I remember vividly meeting Allen at tea in Gaskin's studio; a rather severe, quick-spoken man with a grey beard and hair just turning. He was pleasant enough to such a youngster as myself, the rate of payment was arranged, and a monthly delivery of finished blocks. That he was John Ruskin's publisher I could not forget.'<sup>7</sup>



Equally innovative was *The Second Book of Nursery Rhymes* (1896). Allen commissioned Paul Woodroffe (1875-1945) when he was still a student at the Slade School of Fine Art. It used the wide spread of the opened pages to display wonderful borders around the music score on one side, with its appropriate illustration on the facing page. Woodroffe would go on to be a successful artist in stained glass as well as an illustrator, and would later design and make a set of windows for Lady Chapel of St Patrick's Cathedral in New York, but not before several other notable pieces of illustrative work for Allen.



Between 1895 and 1897 Allen published three legends from French folklore, a popular genre at the time, influenced in part by Morris's translations. The chosen illustrator was Fred Mason, a young man from the Birmingham Art School who Allen had first engaged on a smaller project in 1893. One of these titles, *The Huon of Bordeaux* is shown below on the upper left with Morris's *Glittering Plain* beneath as a style comparison.

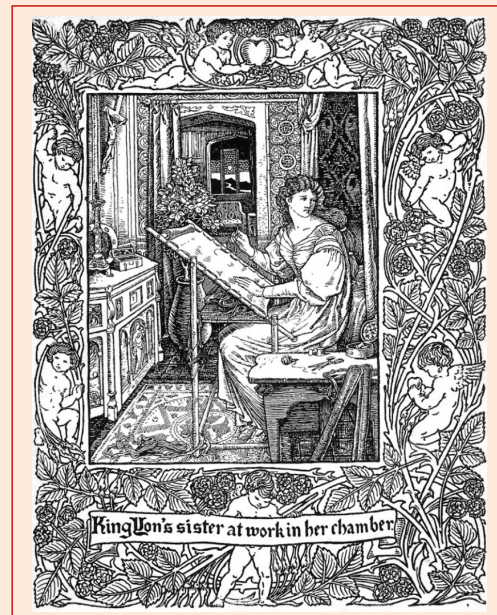
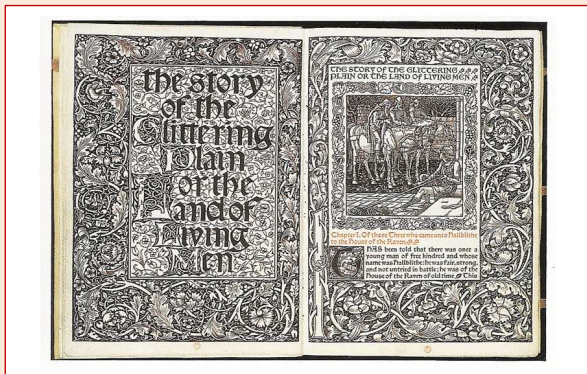
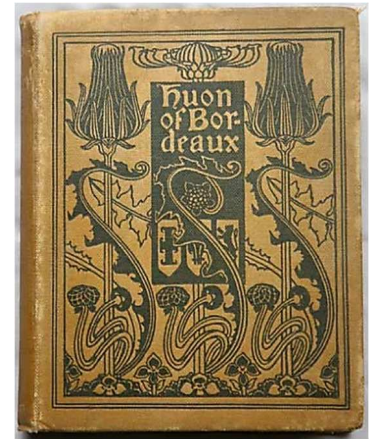
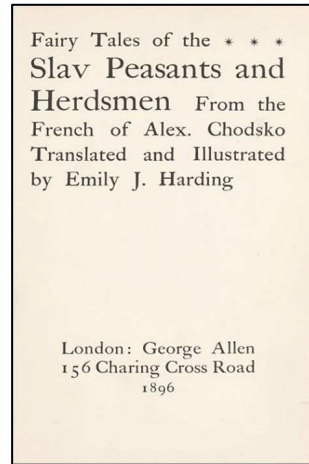
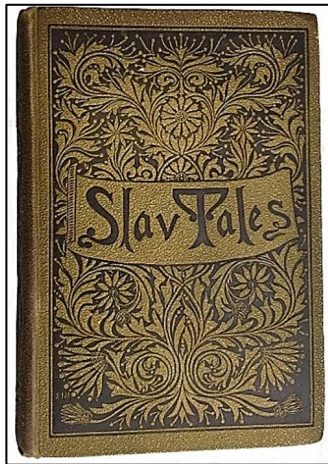


Illustration by Fred Mason for *Renaud of Montauban*, published by George Allen in 1897.

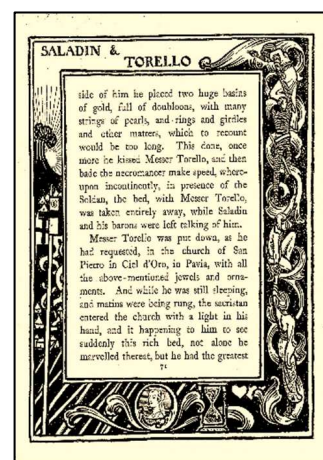
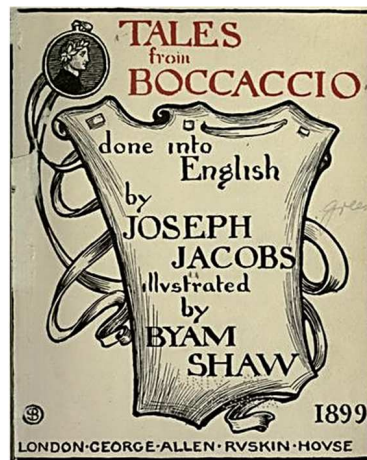
The translation from the French text is decorated with all the magnificent detail and quality of the Kelmscott Press, and was printed with The Ballantyne Press's Albion Press on hand-made paper and brought affordably to the marketplace by George Allen in a strikingly decorated cover (right). One thousand copies were printed, each book costing seven shillings and sixpence. Comparison with Morris's *Glittering Plain* (1894) on the previous page, show how similar in stylistic terms these books were, but with only 305 copies printed and bound in vellum, the cost was £20 – about 50 times that of Allen's editions. It is interesting to know that William Morris had copies of these books from Allen in his own library. Other illustrators emerged from the pool of young talent to work alongside experienced and well-known names. Emily J. Harding (1850-1940), also known as the women's suffrage activist Emily J.



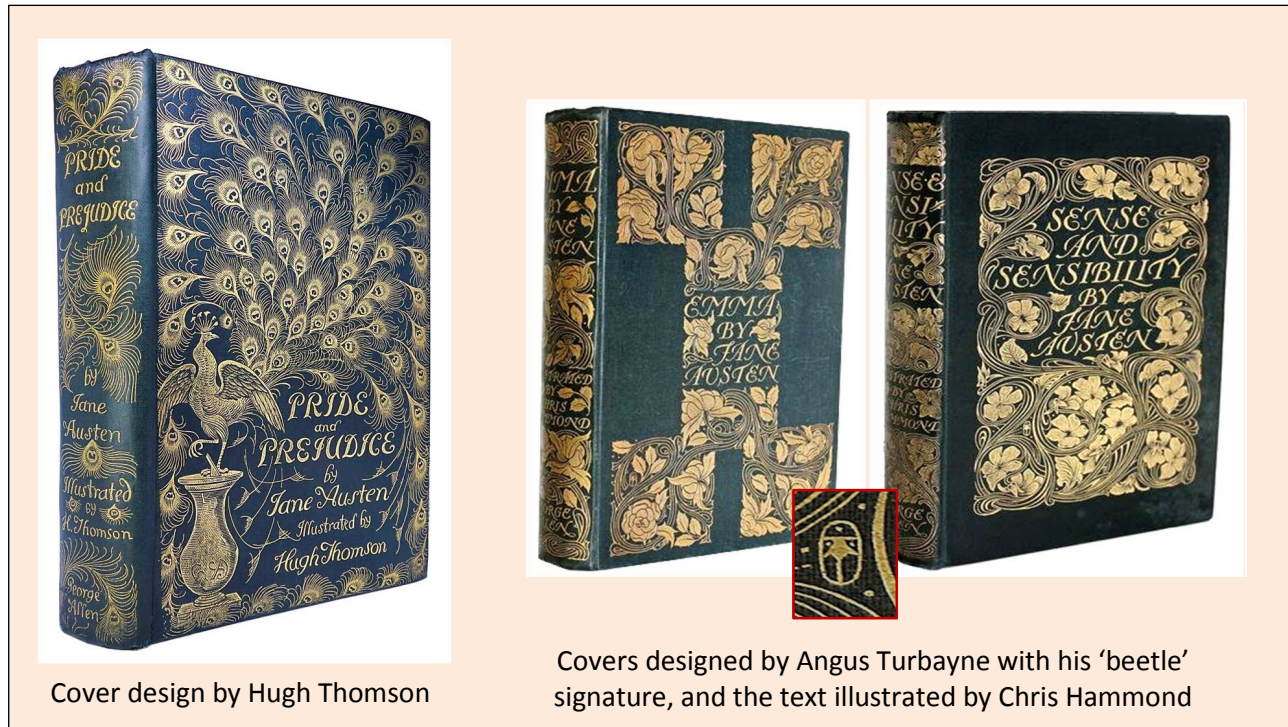
Harding-Andrews, provided cover and text illustrations, as well as the translation from the French, for George Allen with his *Fairy Tales of the Slav Peasants and Herdsmen* (1896) with its stunning cover of intricate black design on a grained golden cloth. The reflection from the cloth makes this a difficult subject to photograph and this image does not give due credit to the impact of the design.



Byam Shaw (1872-1919) studied at the Royal Academy from 1890, his young talent being noticed by Allen. In 1899 Shaw provided a striking cover design for George Allen's *Tales From Boccaccio*, by Giovanni Boccaccio, translated from the Italian by Joseph Jacobs. Shaw would go on to become one of the foremost illustrators of his time.



Allen used classic texts with an expired copyright for his series of ‘Masterpieces of English Fiction,’ all featuring gold decoration blocked onto the front covers and spines. He began with *Pride and Prejudice* in 1884, the first of what would become three Jane Austen titles. For this, he commissioned the established and popular illustrator Hugh Thomson who produced the stunning ‘peacock’ design cover along with the plates in the text. *Emma* followed in 1888, and *Sense and Sensibility* in 1899.



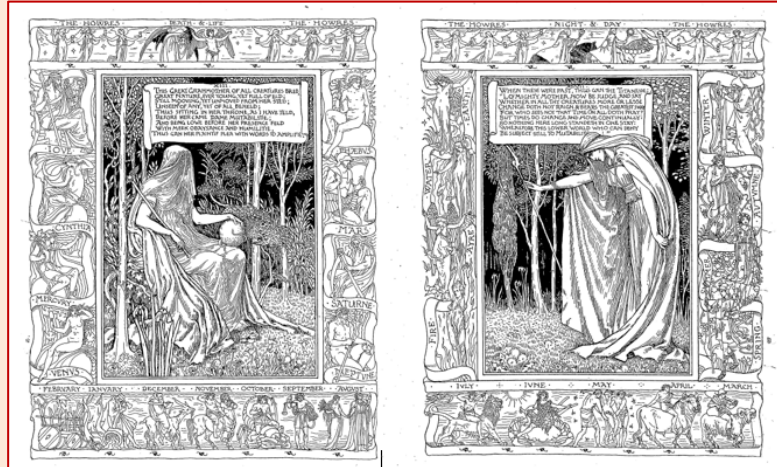
With Thomson in great demand, Allen approached Chris Hammond – full name Christiana – who had shortened her name in an attempt to hide her gender at a time when women artists were still struggling for commercial acceptance, to provide the plates in the text. For the covers of these two later titles Allen commissioned Albert Angus Turbayne (1866-1940), an American by birth who had come to work in England in 1890. His monogram of an overlapped A and T which was sometimes surrounded by an oval to create his famous ‘beetle’ monogram can be found woven into the cover design on the lower left corner of the swirling gold pattern on both *Emma* and *Sense and Sensibility*. The original cost of the titles in the *Masterpieces* series was a just six shillings. It is interesting to note that specialist collectors of bindings have for some time sought the Allen-Austen titles and those few that come to the market command strong prices, with the peacock design of *Pride and Prejudice* heading the list, with a fine example reaching into the thousands of pounds.

In 1892 Allen embarked on the first of two significant and exclusive projects with Walter Crane. Both would be limited edition works to be printed by the Chiswick Press on handmade paper and finely bound – *or* supplied unbound for the purchaser to add his own bespoke library binding, with advance subscriptions advised to ensure a copy. *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was published in 1894 in a limited edition of 650 copies, each numbered and signed by both Walter Crane and the engraver Duncan Dallas. That it bore



all the trademarks of Allen's well-established reputation with the limited editions of Ruskin titles almost guaranteed the success of this publication before ink had touched the paper.

With the supply having been eclipsed by the demand, Allen and Crane came together again almost immediately to plan what might be described as either / the greatest visual extravaganza of the illustrator's work, or alternatively / the customer's greatest vanity: *Faerie Queene*.



Proof sheet of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*



Allen's 8-page brochure on hand made paper included wood blocks produced for the book ►

**NOW COMPLETE. A NEW LIMITED EDITION**  
 With 231 Illustrations by WALTER CRANE  
 In Nineteen Parts: Large | Or Six Volumes in Cloth Box, Cover design in Post 4to, £9 19s. 6d. net. | red and gold, Art Canvas, gilt tops, £10 15s. net.

**SPENSER'S FAERIE QUEENE** WITH DESIGNS BY WALTER CRANE.

THE DESIGNS by MR. WALTER CRANE include, besides the Cover, a series of *NINETEEN* full-page Illustrations, *EXCEPT* half-page Canto Headings with Initials, and *THIRTYTHREE* Tail-pieces.

THE FULL-PAGE PICTURES—one to each Canto, illustrating one of the principal events—are set in ornamental borders depicting the subsidiary incidents and the allegorical characters, others being given in the Canto headings and tail-pieces. (*N.B.*—Some of the longer Cantos contain two full-page Illustrations.) Facsimiles of the Title-Pages and other Illustrations from the Editions of 1590, 1596, 1609, and 1611 are also given.

THE POEM is edited and collated, from the original editions, with Preface and Bibliography, by MR. THOMAS J. WISE, who has spared no pains to produce a text that shall be final.

THE WORK has been printed in the best manner, upon Arnold unbleached hand-made paper, specially prepared of a tint calculated to exhibit Mr. CRANE'S drawings to advantage.

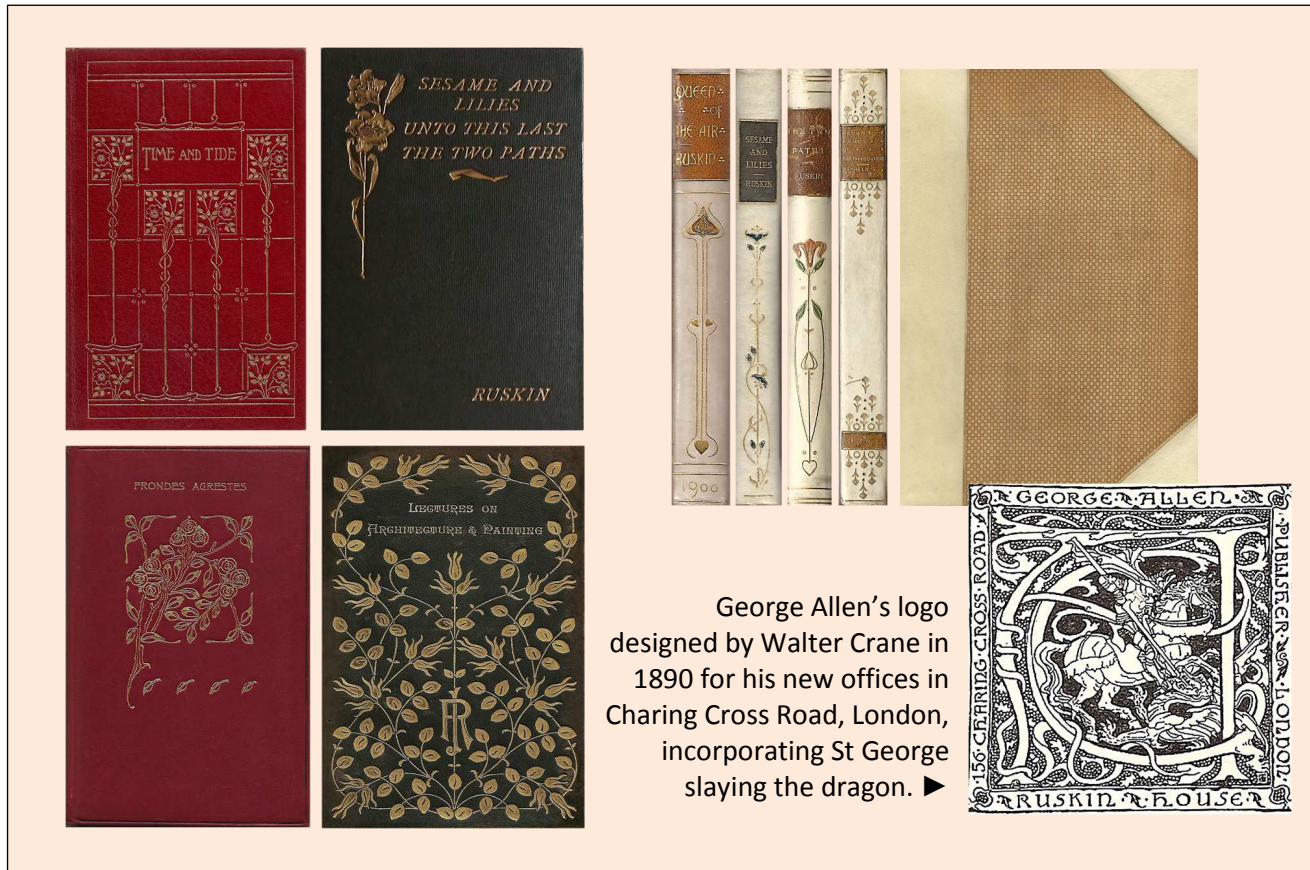
November, 1897.

LONDON: GEORGE ALLEN, 156, CHARING CROSS ROAD AND OF ALL BOOKSELLERS

It took three years to bring Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* to press, and considering the amount of work involved that time frame is, in itself, quite remarkable. The bold plan was to produce the entire print run unbound, leaving the subscribers to choose their own binding in such style or extravagance as they thought best suited their private libraries. Undoubtedly, this was the offer of more than just the ownership of an unashamedly lavish and expensive work. It was a statement of wealth and implication of taste. In addition to the sumptuous full-page plates, many of which formed double page spreads when the book was opened, there were decorated headpieces, tailpieces and title page borders. It came in nineteen paper-covered parts at nine and a half guineas, and one thousand copies were printed. Allen's advertisement described the work as having 231 illustrations of which 98 were full-page size; 80 canto headings; 53 tailpieces, besides the cover.

Unfortunately, there were not quite as many rich patrons prepared to subscribe this time, leaving a number of sets unsold. These remainders were bound into six volumes at a more affordable thirty-five shillings per volume for those customers who had neither the means or desire for a custom binding.

Alongside these two rare extravagances and the growing catalogue of affordable editions, the long list of Ruskin's titles was also invigorated by an arts and crafts-styled uplift.

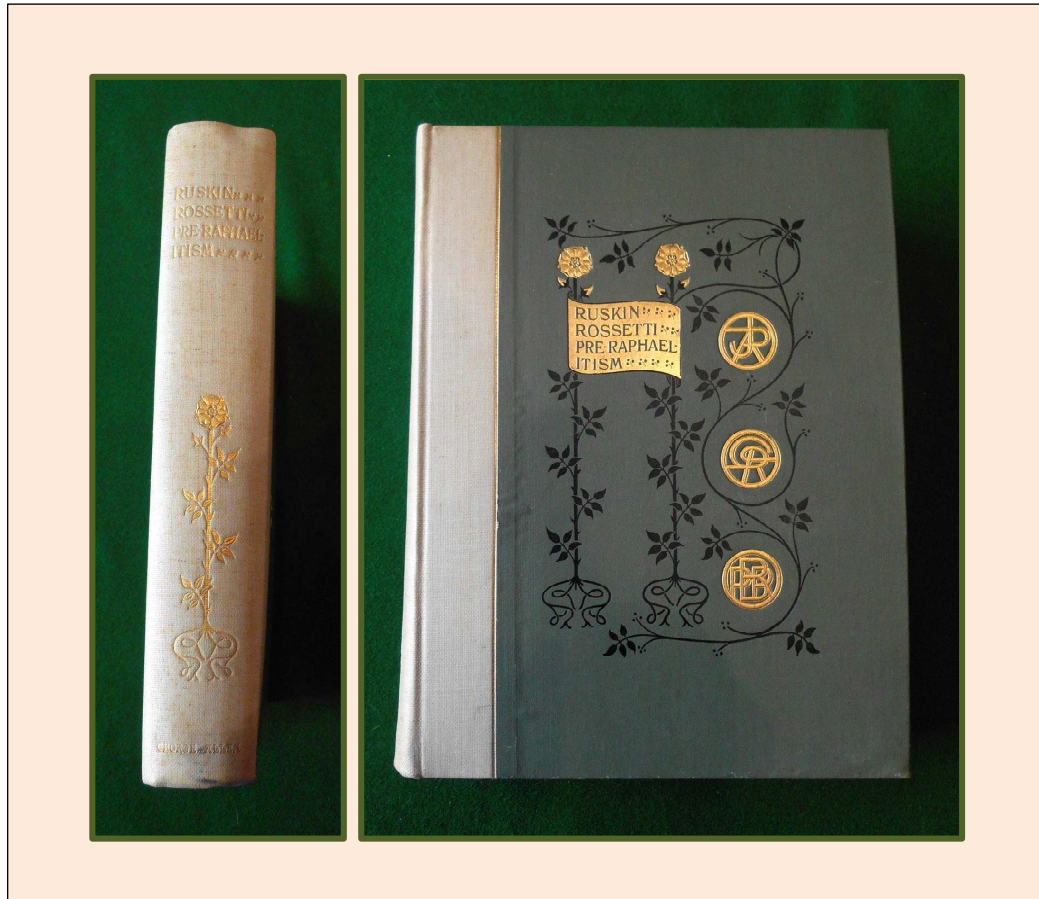


The internal pages of the standard Ruskin series, well-known for their typography and simple but readable layout, were dressed up in new covers. These covers do not have any design provenance or hidden initials and were probably the work of journeymen bookbinders, but I do have one pencil sketch of a design by Hugh Allen, George Allen's second son who inherited his father's gifts for drawing and engraving. It is so similar to the cover shown lower left that it might be the proposal for another in the series.

Twenty years earlier, Allen had been working at bringing down the cost to the working man but by now there was a new generation of literate readers who were in steady employment and were seeking something a little better, but still affordable. For just sixpence or so extra – depending upon which style you preferred – was a little bit of arts and crafts design and some gold blocking. So, however deep your pockets; whether you had the working man's humble shelf, the rising middle-class manager's bookcase or a gentleman's library, Allen could supply just what you requested. He offered a range of bindings in calf, morocco, and vellum; fully-bound, half-bound, or quarter-bound.

And if you wanted a custom binding with tooled edges to the finest and most sumptuous design, Allen could have it made up by the best bookbinders available.

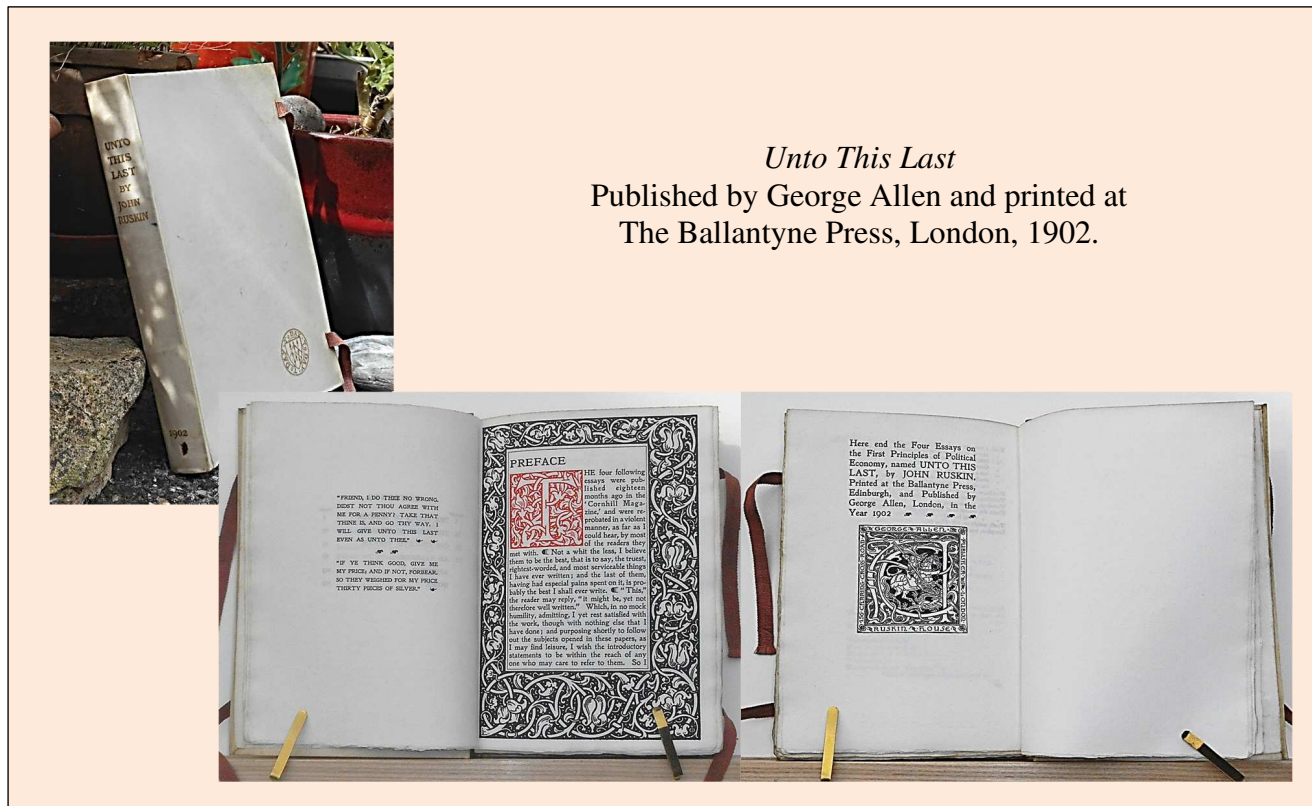
There is one other of Allen's covers worthy of special attention. The use of sumptuous and vibrant covers had reached its heady, sometimes gaudy, height in the last years of the nineteenth century and with the new century more restrained designs began to appear. This particular one of Allen's titles straddled this new age and I readily confess to it being one of my most-enjoyed of all Allen's designs.



*Ruskin: Rossetti: Pre-Raphaelitism: Papers 1854-1862* was edited by William Rossetti and published by George Allen in 1899. Admirable for its understated elegance, it is neither the deep red or rich blue popularised by many publishers at this time, nor is it bound in leather or vellum. In fact, it could be considered quite an 'ordinary' green, leaving the design to make the statement, but how it sparkles! The olive-green cloth cover is quarter-bound with a cream coloured buckram spine. On that spine, the title is blocked in gilt letters; on the front cover an art nouveau styled tendril in black entwines gilt blocked cartouches, and a simple horizontal scroll, gilt once more, allows the title to show through in the olive green of the cover background. One stroke more or less in the design would spoil its perfection; were the gold a little brighter it might shine a little less.

And once again, Allen considered his readers carefully. Two hundred 'premium' copies were printed on large handmade paper priced at 30 shillings, but simultaneously an edition on a smaller paper size using machine-made paper of good quality, and with attractive margins was made available at ten shillings and sixpence.

In 1902, two years after Ruskin's death and six years after Morris died, Allen *did* finally publish the stalled project of *Unto This Last*.



Like *The Nature of Gothic*, it was true to Kelmscott's style and quality; bound in vellum with ribbon ties and printed on hand-made paper in an edition of four hundred copies on the Albion Press. Side-by-side with Morris's *Nature of Gothic* there is nothing but the distance of ten years to tell them apart. That same year two companion volumes (exactly the same style and print run) were added, *Queen's Gardens* and *King's Treasuries* – the two essays that comprised Ruskin's all-time biggest selling title 'Sesame and Lilies.'

So, what *does* define a Private Press?

If the printing press, paper, font, binding and page layout are all but identical, is it defined only by the exclusivity of a short print run?

It is a harsh fact, that, of the private presses that were inspired by Morris, few lasted more than a handful of years. It was difficult to achieve the turnover and profit margin required to produce such specialised and costly books. Long-term survival was generally determined by having either a wealthy owner or sponsor, or by being supported from commercial publishing under the same roof. A brief summation of the life of a few of the better-known private presses makes this clear:

We know that the **Kelmscott Press** closed with the death of William Morris. It was not only his great talent and enthusiasm that was lost – it was also his funding. One of the Albion Presses went to Ashbee's Essex Press, along with printers and compositors.,

When the **Essex Press** left its London workshop to begin a community-styled existence in the country at Chipping Camden, in the Cotswolds, the press was used largely to produce the commune's own work. After several years of financial struggles, The Essex Press closed in 1910.

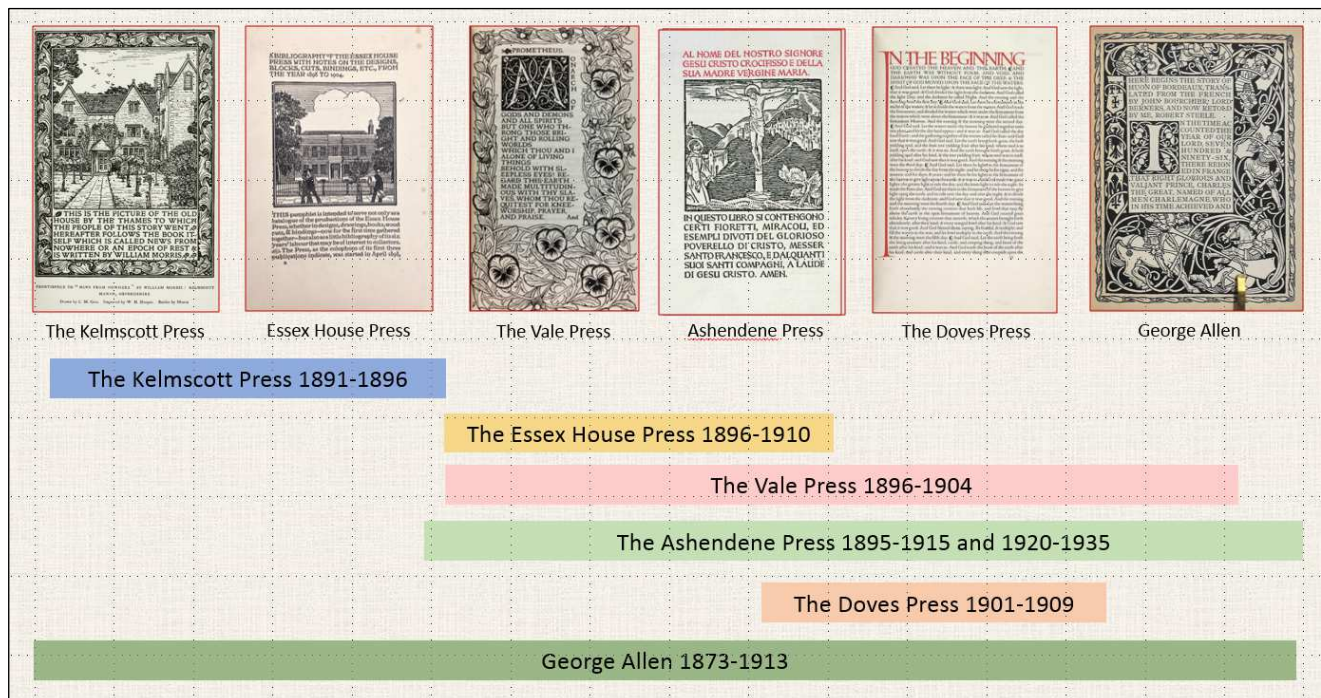
**The Vale Press** was founded in 1894 by Charles Ricketts, who designed the 'Vale' typeface, and Charles Shannon. It closed in 1904 following a fire and never re-opened. In its relatively short life it produced forty-six books, all printed at the Ballantyne Press in London on their Albion press.

**The Ashendene Press** was founded by the wealthy C.H. St. John Hornby, a partner in the national chain of bookshops on almost every railway station and on many high streets, W.H. Smith & Sons. Perhaps this is not a true comparison as Hornby set up his press to print for his family and friends, with only a few titles being sold by subscription. Self-funded, it ran from 1895 until 1935. Not a million miles away from the sentiments of his friend William Morris, Hornby wrote that ‘I have worked for my own pleasure and amusement without having to keep too strict an eye upon the cost.’

**The Doves Press** was founded in 1901 by T.J. Cobden-Sanderson and Emery Walker. Before that date Cobden-Sanderson, a friend of William Morris, had a book binding workshop that bound many of the Kelmscott Press books. The Walker / Cobden-Sanderson partnership was dissolved in 1909 but led to the infamous, protracted, and bitter, dispute involving the rights to the Doves’ Type. As part of the dissolution agreement, all rights to the Doves’ Type were to pass to Walker upon the death of Cobden-Sanderson. Instead of letting this happen, the matrices and type were thrown into the deep water of the River Thames beneath Hammersmith Bridge, just a short walk from the Press, by Cobden-Sanderson between 31 August 1916 and January 1917, reportedly taking 170 trips to the river in the dark of many nights.

**George Allen** never claimed to be part of the private or art press movement, and I do not make a claim for that today. It does, however, seem clear that *no* so-called private- or art- press was able to trade profitably on art-based products alone, unless subsidised by considerable wealth or by the commercial support from other, longer production runs, or ‘jobbing’ work. Even Morris only survived by having deep pockets.

The graphic below indicates the transience of their endeavours.





There is however, a strong case to make that it was Ruskin, in 1871, who indirectly began the art press movement, first with his ‘blue books’ and then with Allen’s *uniform editions*, all having a page layout and typography that set new, higher standards.

Until the end of his life, George Allen provided superb typographic standards to every work he published. Fine bindings for his wealthy customers sat comfortably alongside his tasteful mass-produced affordable books, and George Allen made for himself, and for Ruskin, a good living.

I shall give John Ruskin the last word. It comes from his book *The Two Paths*, Lecture Two: ‘The Unity of Art,’ 1859.

**“Fine art is that in which the hand, the head, and the heart of man go together.”**

## Ruskin, Morris, Allen: Hand, Head, and Heart

### Notes

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<sup>11</sup> *Mr Turner* was released in 2014. The film was written and directed by Mike Leigh.

<sup>2</sup> The Robin Hood Inn in, Newark, Nottingham, has survived against great odds. Situated in area scheduled for redevelopment, it sat empty and decaying for almost twenty years, even though it was registered as a protected building of historic interest. Conservationists fought in the courts of law to defend it from developers who purposely left it unprotected from the weather, hoping it would collapse and save the need for its demolition. It went through various appeal courts before eventually reaching government level where a compromise was found; the historic facade was to be conserved and merged into a new hotel constructed around it.

<sup>3</sup> Morris’s ‘Golden’ typeface is derived from *The Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine. It is a roman form based on the fonts used by Jacobus Rubeus in his 1476 printing of Leonardo of Arezzo’s *History of Florence* and in Nicolas Jenson’s *Pliny* of the same date. Morris created his ‘Golden’ type in 1891 using photography to enlarge the letters in Rubeus’s and Jenson’s incunabula.

<sup>4</sup> After Frederic Goudy the press was owned by Spencer Kellogg from 1932-1941, then the *Aires Press*, Eden, NY. Melbert Cary Jnr. was the next owner with his *Press of the Woolly Whale*, who bequeathed the press to his pressman George Van Vechten. From there it found its way to Ben and Elizabeth Lieberman, *Herity Press*, White Plains.

<sup>5</sup> Morris conceded this in a lecture delivered to the London Branch of the Socialist Democratic Federation at Kelmescott House on the 30<sup>th</sup> November 1884. The lecture was titled: *How We Live and How We Might Live*.

<sup>6</sup> By this time, thirty years have passed since Morris founded his business and more years than that since George Allen was the young carpenter taken on by Ruskin during which time, he had been agent and then publisher of Ruskin’s works. For the last few years Ruskin’s health had been rapidly failing and he had produced little new writing. All three, Morris Ruskin and Allen, were no longer young men. Ruskin had become regarded as the ageing bearded prophet living in seclusion in his Lake District home; Morris dividing his time between producing beautiful books and his socialist teaching, and Allen needing to find inventive ways to reprint Ruskin’s old works for a new audience while finding new authors for his catalogue. Allen needed to financially support the ailing Ruskin as well as his own family. This is the background behind that exchange.

<sup>9</sup> Bernard Sleight. *Wood Engraving Since Eighteen Eighty*. (London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, 1932), page 7.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

### JANUARY

#### “Pestilence and Reanimation: Ruskin on Renaissance Art”

with Prof. Jeremy Melius

*Saturday, January 13, 9am PDT*



*Bernardino Luini, Saint Catherine and Saint Agatha, Chiesa di San Maurizio al Monastero Maggiore, Milan.*

John Ruskin’s hostility towards Renaissance culture is well known. Denunciation of its pomp, scientism, and “enervated sensuality” gave moral urgency to the analysis of architecture in *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53), for instance, with its overwhelming narrative of social and spiritual decline. But when it came to the painting of Renaissance Italy, Ruskin found himself again and again of two minds. “Crushed to earth” by the achievements of several crucial artists—Tintoretto, Veronese, Titian (sometimes) in the 1840s and 50s; Botticelli, Carpaccio, and Bernardino Luini later in life—Ruskin couldn’t help but respond to their visionary force. This lecture explores key episodes in the critic’s developing conception of Renaissance painting: moments in which Ruskin had the courage to trust his own aesthetic responsiveness,

despite the misgivings expressed in his historical accounts. It does so in the hope of opening up our understanding of Ruskin’s attentiveness to works of visual representation, as staged in his writings and drawings, and of how that exemplary attentiveness might continue to inform our own.

**Jeremy Melius** is a historian of modern art and criticism who has published widely on figures such as John Ruskin, Walter Pater, Pablo Picasso, and Lee Bontecou. He is completing a book entitled *The Invention of Botticelli* and at work on another concerning Ruskin and the historical study of art. Currently a NOMIS Fellow at eikones – Center for the Theory and History of the Image, University of Basel, in January 2024 he begins a new role as lecturer in History of Art at the University of York.



## **FEBRUARY**

### **Ruskin Art Club Members' Study Sessions: "Of Queen's Treasuries" (*from Sesame and Lilies*)**

with Sara Atwood

*Saturday, February 3 & 10, 10-11:30am PDT, on Zoom*

### **Annual Ruskin Birthday Bash at the Telescope Studio**

#### **Downtown Arts District**

[in-person and Zoom]

with Allan Hon, cellist

*Sunday, February 11, 3-5pm PDT*

## **MARCH**

### **The Annual Ada Louise Huxtable Lecture on Architecture**

**(co-sponsored by the Getty Research Institute)**

#### **Ada Louise Huxtable Lecture Hall at The Getty Center (Brentwood)**

[in person and live-streamed]

with Prof. Valeria Casali

*Thursday, March 14, 7pm PDT*

## **APRIL**

### **Members' Study sessions: "Work" (*Crown of Wild Olive*) [on Zoom]**

*Saturdays, April 6 & 13, 10-11:30AM*

### **Lecture/presentation: Andre Chaves (printer) and Clinker Press**

**[on Zoom]**

*Thursday, April 11, 5-6:30pm*

Pay a visit to the **Ruskin Art Club** website!

**[www.ruskinartclub.org](http://www.ruskinartclub.org)**.

There you will find information and articles on the history of the Ruskin Art Club, biographical information and reading recommendations on John Ruskin, and background articles and Board of Directors' bios. Our resources page provides links to other Ruskin-oriented organizations and collections, along with an expanded library of recommended videos (art exhibitions, Ruskin-themed videos, and lectures), and we've added a unique page devoted to Ruskin's music. Our new and enlarged YouTube channel is an ever-expanding archive of recent lectures as well as videos of annual "Ruskin" lectures and other noteworthy events we've hosted in the past. By the way, when you catch up on a lecture you've missed or browse the channel, **be sure to subscribe!**

We've made it easier than ever to become a **Member** of the Ruskin Art Club, to **renew your membership online**, or to **donate** to the club. You can also register to attend an event on the Calendar page.

**Please tell us what you think of the changes and feel free to suggest improvements or additional features you'd like to see.**

**Contact us at our email address:**

**[info@ruskinartclub.org](mailto:info@ruskinartclub.org)**.