

KELMSCOTT CHAUCER IN A
WONDERFUL BINDING BY ANNIE
S. MACDONALD OF THE GUILD OF
WOMEN BINDERS



Bruce Marshall Rare Books
Foyers, 20 Gretton Road, Gotherington,
Cheltenham, Glos. GL52
9QU, England, UK
Tel: +44 (0)1242 672997
e-mail: info@marshallrarebooks.com
website: www.marshallrarebooks.com

THE WORKS OF GEOFFREY CHAUCER NOW NEWLY IMPRINTED



EDITED BY F.S. ELLIS, THE KELMSCOTT PRESS,
UPPER MALL, HAMMERSMITH, 1896.

ONE OF 425 COPIES ON PAPER, OF A TOTAL EDITION
OF 438 (13 ON VELLUM). LARGE FOLIO, 43.2 X
29.8 X 6.6 CM; PP. [4] + IV 556. WITH 87 WOOD-
ENGRAVED ILLUSTRATIONS BY EDWARD BURNE-
JONES, ORNAMENTAL WOODCUT TITLE, BORDERS AND
INITIALS.

CONTEMPORARY MODELLED NATURAL GOATSKIN, BY
ANNIE S. MACDONALD, SIGNED ON LOWER COVER
“BINDER A.S.M. | J.W.P. | 1899”, UPPER COVER
WITH LARGE INSET RELIEF PANEL DEPICTING IMAGES
AFTER THE BURNE-JONES WOOD-ENGRAVINGS AND
THE FLORAL AND FOLIATE SCROLLED WOODCUT
BORDERS, RELIEF LETTERING TO UPPER COVER AND
SPINE, ROUGH EDGES GILT.

THIS SPLENDID BINDING DESIGNED AND MODELLED BY
ANNIE S. MACDONALD OF THE GUILD OF WOMEN
BINDERS WAS EXECUTED FOR JOHN WILLIAM PEASE
IN 1899. PEASE JOINTLY OWNED A BANK THAT
BECAME PART OF LLOYDS IN 1903.

IT WAS IN THE EARLY 1890S THAT ANNIE
MACDONALD AND SOME OF HER ARTS AND CRAFTS
FRIENDS DECIDED TO LEARN ARTISTIC BOOKBINDING.
THEY HAD NO FORMAL TEACHER BUT WALTER B.

BLAIKIE OF THE PUBLISHERS A. & J. CONSTABLE LET THEM USE HIS WORKSHOPS AFTER HOURS WHERE THEY LEARNT
FROM HIS FOREMAN.

FROM 1895 TWO OF CONSTABLE’S WORKMEN, A FINISHER AND A FORWARDER, TAUGHT THE GROUP OF WOMEN. ANNIE
MACDONALD INVENTED THE TECHNIQUE OF MODELLING THE LEATHER AND SHE TAUGHT THIS TO OTHERS WHO WERE
INTERESTED. INITIALLY THE GROUP WAS KNOWN AS THE EDINBURGH ARTS AND CRAFTS CLUB. SHE LATER INSPIRED
FRANK KARSLAKE TO START THE GUILD OF WOMEN BINDERS AS AN OUTLET FOR WOMEN BINDERS WHO LIVED OUTSIDE
LONDON.

ANNIE MACDONALD’S PROCESS OF MODELLING THE GOATSKIN INVOLVED NEITHER CUTTING NOR RAISING THE
LEATHER TO RELIEF. THE MODELLING WAS DONE AFTER THE BOOK ITSELF WAS COVERED IN GOATSKIN. SHE TRIED
VARIOUS TYPES OF LEATHER BUT FOUND THAT THE NATURAL GOATSKIN, BEFORE ANY CURING PROCESSES, COULD BE
MOULDED AS SHE DESIRED. USING GLUE RATHER THAN PASTE TO COVER THE BOOKS, THE LEATHER WAS A PALE IVORY
WHEN COMPLETED, WHICH DEVELOPED INTO A RICHER BROWN ONCE AGED. SHE WOULD TRACE THE DESIGN ONTO THE
DAMPENED LEATHER, MOULDING THE RELIEF DESIGN. ANNIE MACDONALD PRODUCED OVER FIFTY DESIGNS BUT HER
GREATEST WORK IS THIS - ONE OF THE FINEST BINDINGS EVER TO APPEAR ON A KELMSCOTT CHAUCER.



THE WORKS OF GEOFFREY CHAUCER NOW NEWLY IMPRINTED, PUBLISHED IN 1896,
IS THE TRIUMPH OF THE PRESS. ITS 87 WOOD-CUT ILLUSTRATIONS ARE BY EDWARD
BURNE-JONES, THE CELEBRATED VICTORIAN PAINTER, WHO WAS A LIFE-LONG FRIEND
OF MORRIS. THE ILLUSTRATIONS WERE ENGRAVED BY WILLIAM HARCOURT HOOPER
AND PRINTED IN BLACK, WITH SHOULDER AND SIDE TITLES. SOME LINES WERE PRINTED
IN RED, USING CHAUCER TYPE, WITH SOME TITLES IN TROY TYPE. THE WHOLE WAS
PRINTED ON BATCHELOR HANDMADE PAPER WATERMARKED: PERCH.

THE KELMSCOTT CHAUCER SET A NEW BENCHMARK FOR BOOK DESIGN AT THE END
OF THE 19TH CENTURY. IT WAS ALSO THE LAST GREAT PROJECT OF MORRIS’S LIFE,
BRINGING TOGETHER TWO OF HIS PASSIONS. FIRST, HIS LOVE OF MEDIEVAL LITERATURE,
WHICH INSPIRED THE SUBJECTS AND STYLE OF MUCH OF HIS OWN WRITING. SECOND,
HIS SOCIALIST PHILOSOPHY, WHICH LOOKED BACK TO A TIME BEFORE MECHANISATION
AND DIVISION OF LABOUR HAD DESTROYED, AS HE SAW IT, THE PERSONAL FULFILMENT
AND SOCIAL FUNCTION OF MEANINGFUL WORK.

THE BOOK WAS EXCEPTIONAL IN ITS AMBITIOUS NUMBER OF ILLUSTRATIONS AND RICH
DECORATIVE BORDERS. “IF WE LIVE TO FINISH IT,” BURNE-JONES WROTE, “IT WILL BE
LIKE A POCKET CATHEDRAL — SO FULL OF DESIGN AND I THINK MORRIS THE GREATEST
MASTER OF ORNAMENT IN THE WORLD.”

MORRIS AND BURNE-JONES WORKED ON THE BOOK FOR FOUR YEARS. EARLY IN 1892,
TWO TRIAL PAGES WERE SET IN ONE OF MORRIS’S TYPES, CALLED ‘TROY’. THE RESULTS
WERE NOT SATISFACTORY, THE PROBLEM BEING THE TYPE SIZE. A SMALLER VERSION OF
THE SAME DESIGN WAS CUT, AND CHRISTENED ‘CHAUCER’. MORRIS HAD INTENDED TO
BEGIN DESIGNS FOR THE DECORATIVE BORDERS IMMEDIATELY, BUT ILLNESS PREVENTED
HIM FROM STARTING UNTIL A YEAR LATER.



MEANWHILE, EDWARD BURNE-JONES SPENT EVERY SUNDAY ON THE BOOK'S 87 ILLUSTRATIONS, WORKING LONG HOURS IN FEAR THAT MORRIS MIGHT DIE BEFORE THE PROJECT WAS FINISHED. HIS PENCIL DRAWINGS WERE PAINTED OVER IN CHINESE WHITE AND INDIAN INK BY R. CATTERSON-SMITH, WHOSE INTERPRETIVE ROLE IS OFTEN OVERLOOKED. THE BLACK-AND-WHITE DESIGNS WERE THEN TRANSFERRED TO WOODEN BLOCKS AND ENGRAVED BY WILLIAM HARCOURT HOOPER.

ON SEEING THE FIRST COPY, BURNE-JONES WROTE: "WHEN MORRIS AND I WERE LITTLE CHAPS AT OXFORD, IF SUCH A BOOK HAD COME OUT THEN WE SHOULD HAVE JUST GONE OFF OUR HEADS, BUT WE HAVE MADE AT THE END OF OUR DAYS THE VERY THING WE WOULD HAVE MADE THEN IF WE COULD." BURNE-JONES PENNED A HUMOROUS CARTOON TO MARK THE OCCASION, SHOWING HIMSELF AND MORRIS EMBRACED BY THE GHOST OF CHAUCER, WHO PRONOUNCES A GRATEFUL BENEDICTION: "BLESS YE MY CHILDREN."

MARIANNE TIDCOMBE 'THE GUILD OF WOMEN BINDERS' PL.17, PP. 97-99; PETERSON A40

