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"The Private Voice of May Morris"

Jeanne Robert Foster, early twentieth century poet, editor, and playwright, was companion to American lawyer John Quinn—patron of Yeats, Synge, Ford, and Pound, to name only four—during the last years of Quinn's life. In the mid 1960's, she met Richard Londrville, who was working on his dissertation on the plays of W. B. Yeats. The two became fast friends, and Mrs. Foster invited him to examine some of the papers she had collected during her years with Quinn.¹ Before she died in 1970, she gave Londrville part of her collection, and over the years he has been editing and publishing portions of it.²

Among Mrs. Foster's papers was a packet of five yellowed letters from May Morris to John Quinn written between 1910 and 1917. Mrs. Foster, who catalogued Quinn's papers for the New York Public Library after he died, had held out these as she had several others pieces of correspondence between Quinn and well-known literary figures of the time.³

In the five letters, May expressed her love for Quinn and shared with him her innermost thoughts. Dr. Jan Marsh's book, *Jane and May Morris: A Biographical Story*, made no mention of Quinn.⁴ The love of May's life was, according to historians, George Bernard Shaw. Ben Reid's biography of Quinn, *The Man from New York: John Quinn and his Friends*, mentions that Quinn and May had met in New York City in late 1909 through a mutual acquaintance, Mrs. Ester Pissarro, the daughter-in-law of French impressionist painter Camille Pissarro.⁵ May Morris was attractive and intelligent and the daughter of one of Quinn's favorite authors. It is hardly surprising, then, that he would want to take advantage of an opportunity to spend time with her. During May's visit to New York, they were constantly together at Quinn's apartment, and when May finally left for her tour of Canada and the West, Quinn used his contacts in various cities to make certain that May was well received and, as Reid says,

"cosseted."⁶

In 1909 May was beginning the task of preparing her father's writings for publication. When May asked Quinn to advise her on the format and the selection of poems to be included in Morris's *Collected Works*, Quinn no doubt saw an opportunity to play a special role. May's correspondence with him, begun early in 1910 after May's return to England, suggests that Quinn enjoyed playing the part of advisor, patron, and friend to the daughter of one of the leading artists and socialists of the Victorian period. He was an artist manque, always doing what he could to get closer to the world of the literati, even though he seemed to lack the intuitive eye for artistic production himself. He had a few years earlier given Yeats and Synge money for their ventures and would later help to support some of the best artists and writers of the the early twentieth century, including Joyce, Eliot, Conrad, Brancusi, and Braque.⁷

The correspondence Quinn and May shared is filled with May's frustrations about the confusion resulting from trying to sort out the enormous amount of material her father had left, about the difficult decisions she had to make in piecing together various fragments of his poetry,⁸ and about interfering advice she was receiving from well-meaning but troublesome friends. Quinn was a major source of support though all of the difficulties. He proofread and edited May's introductions, and he loaned her several of Morris's original manuscripts, which he had begun collecting in 1907.⁹

Unfortunately for May, Quinn was not interested in a permanent romantic relationship. After May left New York, Quinn's interest turned to Dorothy Coates, a young school teacher who had been his mistress before May Morris ever arrived on the scene. Quinn continued to write to May for eight years, but if he had once fallen in love with her in only several months' time, he fell out of love just as quickly. His affair with