

Editorial – Peter Faulkner: a critical appreciation

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With this issue we celebrate the contribution to William Morris studies, and the eightieth birthday, of our friend, comrade, and mentor, Peter Faulkner. The volume contains a range of articles which I hope reflects at least some of Peter's own interests, and Morris's; the book (Morris and the 'demise' of printing', Jan Marsh), the theatre (Morris as playwright [not a phrase one reads every day], Jo George), utopia ('*News from Nowhere* in recent criticism' revisited, Tony Pinkney), the prose romances (The Dream, Image, Vision, Wizardry, and Erotic in Morris's work, Norman Kelvin), education (Morris on Useful Learning versus 'Useless Toil', Phillippa Bennett), landscape (Morris, George Borrow and Edward Thomas, John Purkis), and design and the SPAB (Charles Winston and the development of Conservative Restoration, Jim Cheshire). Perhaps only the poems, of which Peter has of course edited his own selection,¹ are missing from this list.

Although Peter retired from editing this *Journal* in 1996, he has continued looking after the Reviews, for which I am extremely grateful, as no doubt were my predecessors. In this issue we therefore also carry reviews of a novel about Morris in Iceland, of *Illustrated Editions of the Works of William Morris in English*, and of *The Road Not Taken. How Britain Narrowly Missed a Revolution*. Other reviews then follow of books on *Rossetti: Painter and Poet*, on the Pre-Raphaelites as Victorian *avant-garde*, on the early Pre-Raphaelite publication *The Germ*, and on Pre-Raphaelite stained glass. Last, John Purkis discusses recollections of collecting Morris books, and of Kelmscott Manor, at the turn of the twentieth century.

Peter has, of course, published very extensively indeed in these pages on 'the life and times of William Morris' – for example on Morris at Kelmscott, Morris and Oscar Wilde, Morris and Swinburne, Morris and the Two Cultures, Morris and the Working Men's College, and Morris and Yeats; on *News from Nowhere* in recent criticism (see Tony Pinkney, this volume p. 30), Pevsner's Morris, Rossetti at Kelmscott, Ruskin and Morris, on the African socialist Léopold Senghor and

Morris, of the story of Alcestis in Morris and Ted Hughes, and on Morris and the *Scrutiny* Tradition, as well as upwards of fifty reviews, obituaries and editorials. Then there are his Kelmscott Lectures on *William Morris and Eric Gill*, *Wilfrid Scawen Blunt and the Morrises*, and *William Morris and the Idea of England*.² In other publications, he has discussed Morris's poetry from Guenevere to *Sigurd*, and 'Goldilocks' and the Late Romances.

However, Peter is not just interested in Morris, and the British Library Catalogue lists books on *William Morris and W.B. Yeats*, *Yeats and the Irish Eighteenth Century*, *Humanism in the English novel*, *Robert Bage*, *Modernism*, *Angus Wilson*, *Yeats: The Tower and The Winding Stair*, and his editions of Morris's *Early romances in prose and verse*, of *Jane Morris to Wilfrid Scawen Blunt*, of *Hopes and Fears for Art and Signs of Change*, John Bruce Glasier's *William Morris and the early days of the socialist movement*, *Arts and crafts essays*, *Anna St. Ives*, Robert Bage's *Hermesprong, or, Man as he is not*, *The picture of Dorian Gray*, *The works of G.K. Chesterton*, and *The white man's burdens: an anthology of British poetry of the Empire* (with Chris Brooks), as well as *A Victorian Reader*, and of course *William Morris: Centenary Essays* (with Peter Preston). He has also published articles on Auden as 'Scrutineer', on Ford Maddox Ford as craftsman and romantic, on Newbolt and Kipling, on William Cowper and the poetry of Empire (all in *Durham University Journal*), Walter Scott as editor of (Robert) Bage, and Wilfrid Scawen Blunt's first visit to Kelmscott Manor (in *Notes and Queries*), as well as others on African literature, Carlyle's letters to Charles Redwood, Ezra Pound and the Pre-Raphaelites, Virginia Woolf and Modernism, and several other articles on Yeats.³

Two other books by Peter are probably among those best known to Morrisians; *William Morris: the critical heritage* (1973), and *Against the age: an introduction to William Morris* (1980).⁴ In the first, Peter compiled a wide range of contemporary reviews of Morris's work, arranged chronologically, which, in those pre-internet days, must have been a considerable task. And even though today we might well be able to use the web to find many of these sources, the book is full of unexpected gems, in the shape of contemporary views of Morris which other authors do not always cite. Thus more familiar reviews of given works appear alongside those which are less familiar, and consulting the book often produces a delightful serendipity. As explained in the Introduction, the Victorian period was in many ways the golden age of reviewing, but reviewers tended to concentrate mainly on poetry and the novel, so that Morris's later romances and lectures received less attention. However, the student of Morris's political ideas will still find interesting reviews of *Hopes and Fears for Art*, *Signs of Change*, *A Dream of John Ball* (rather short!), and of course, *News from Nowhere*. There are also tributes to Morris by Robert Blatchford, Kropotkin (apparently, in those days, Kropotkine), and Walter Crane.

In her review of *Hopes and Fears*, Ellen Simcox (*Fortnightly Review*, June 1882), gives an early lie to the old canard that Morris abhorred technology ('Mr Morris refrains from any general denunciation of machinery'), and to the idea that he approved of 'art for art's sake' ('the objects of his confirmed distrust and disbelief'), but thought instead that 'art must either be popular, ... or it must cease to exist' – a sentiment for which nowadays (although Peter himself might not agree) there is surely an even stronger case than in Morris's time.⁵ *Signs of Change* was reviewed in the *Saturday Review* (19 May, 1888), a publication Peter describes as 'thoroughly hostile to Morris's new political commitment' (to socialism). It is interesting to note that the anonymous reviewer believes that 'under the system of competition, the evils which Mr. Morris would abolish by Socialism are gradually curing themselves', although on the previous page, he (?) also notes that 'action taken by the state through armies of inspectors ... enforces ... better competition' which leads to excellence as well as the vileness Morris describes. Clearly the great god of the free market about whom we have had to listen so much this last thirty years was also operating in those days, although apparently, then as now, he needed regulating in order to make him behave. Shorn of logical argument, the reviewer resorts to that other old Spencerian myth, of 'human nature' ('antagonism is the way of the world') to try to substantiate his (?) case, although, as discussed in these pages in an earlier issue, in scientific terms there is no such thing.⁶

In the *Academy* of 23 May 1891, Lionel Johnson began his review of *News from Nowhere* with a description of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* ('a book of an ugliness so gross and vulgarity so pestilent that it deserved the bonfire and the hangman ...') in the light of which my recent comparison of it to James Lovelock's *Revenge of Gaia*, or Morris's original dubbing of it as a 'cockney paradise', may, like Cunninghame Graham, be 'too bloody politeful'. Johnson goes on to castigate Morris for his Aristotelean approach ('a long life of virtuous activity'), which he clearly finds too proletarian for his own lofty, Platonic lights, and for not explaining what happened during the 'period of transition' to the revolutionary society of Nowhere. However, it may be that Morris's metaphysics, were they to have existed, which they did not, would have been more Epicurean than Aristotelean: 'let us go back to the sources of "sanity" ... the motherhood of the earth ...', and that humanity 'alone takes double pleasure in (its) life upon earth, a pleasure of the mind and of the senses'.⁷

Maurice Hewlett's review (*National Review*, August 1891) is perhaps more familiar, in that it was Hewlett who described *News from Nowhere* as 'not an earthly, but an earthy paradise'. He too takes a Platonic view, and he too uses the 'human nature' argument, stating that Morris has exaggerated its dependence upon environment. However, a number of Hewlett's statements lead me to wonder just how closely he read the book; for example that Nowhere involves the 'free

exchange of husbands and wives' (which makes it sound like 1960s suburbia), that this is one of 'the attributes of the new State' (Is there a 'state' in Nowhere?), that the people of Nowhere are now *Italian* (his emphasis; this about a book by a man who hated the Renaissance and who revered the values of the Viking North), that 'a great Nature-worship has set in' (where?), and that the extent of jurisdiction of the 'folk-moot' is not explained. (It is!) However, what really gets Hewlett's (Arcadian?) goat is 'free love', and in Nowhere, 'Beauty receives the definition of the *hareem*', and that in this 'Neo-Epicurean' utopia, 'a race of fleshly perfection' will seek satisfaction 'by indulging the appetites of its grosser parts'. He concludes that (Mr Morris) 'must (he really must) read history'.⁸ But perhaps he (Mr Hewlett) should (he really should) have read the book – at least more carefully.

Finally, there are the tributes to Morris, including perhaps the most familiar, by Robert Blatchford (*Clarion*, October 1896; 'I cannot help feeling that it does not matter what goes into the Clarion this week ...'), although it is interesting to read that the text usually quoted is a paraphrase of a much more extensive passage. I am not sure I agree with Blatchford that Morris would have been happy in the company of Raleigh or Drake; the latter a notorious pirate and slaver. Surely 'the pikes at Leyden', or Cromwell's Ironsides, were more Morris's style?⁹ Kropotkin, I note, while describing *News from Nowhere*, as is well known, as 'perhaps the most thoroughly and deeply Anarchistic conception of future society that has ever been written ... a wonderful personification of the good practical sense of *collective* action', (emphasis original) does not confine himself to politics, but writes of Morris that

As a poet, he stood quite alone in modern poetry. Amidst the whining and morbid poets of our own time, who are plunged into self-analysis and self-complaint, ... he was almost the only poet of the joys of life the joys which (humanity) finds in the conquest of freedom, in the full exercise of (its) powers, in work the work of ... hands and ... brain.¹⁰

This passage does not read, to me anyway, as a description of an ancestor of Modernism. Kropotkin also explains why Morris, an upholder of the *Scandinavian* spirit, was not understood by people such as Johnson and Hewlett, who had been brought up in the Classical tradition.

Edward Carpenter (*Freedom*, December 1896) wrote that Morris 'hated with a good loyal hatred all insincerity; but most he hated, and with his very soul, the ugliness and meanness of modern life. I believe that this was the great inspiring hatred of his life'. This statement is not so very different from Morris's own famous remark that 'Apart from the desire to produce beautiful things, the leading passion of my life has been and is hatred of modern civilization'. Carpenter also explains that Morris's 'chief recreation was ... another kind of work. He could

not understand that form of pleasure which consist in loafing your days away at a watering place'. Last, his tribute to Morris stands at least with that of Blatchford, if not above it:

To hundreds and thousands of unknown toilers and workers by land and sea, and all over the earth, he was and is the object of a real love; and it is at least some poor consolation that, if in the old form we miss him, still in the hearts of men and women thus multiplied his image moves and lives, and will live.¹¹

It reminds me, I think, of Barbara Castle, who, perhaps on *Desert Island Discs*, described how when she was a girl, even in homes where people could afford few books, if any, copies of the same two volumes were almost always to be found; *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, and *News from Nowhere*.

Walter Crane (*Progressive Review*, November 1896) maintained that (*pace* Engels' well known remark to Laura Lafargue), 'there is no greater mistake than to think of William Morris as a sentimentalist'. Instead, Morris's intensely practical knowledge gave exceptional advantages in solving social and economic questions. Thus, *Nowhere*, with its rejection of Bellamy's 'mechanistic' socialism in favour of the organic, its emphasis on the countryside rather than the city, and its thesis that if you 'settle the economic question and you settle all other questions', is a 'perfectly practicable utopia', in which life is 'remarkably wholesome, human and sane and pleasurable'. And 'if wholesome, human and sane and pleasurable lives are not possible to the greater part of humanity under existing institutions, so much the worse for these institutions'.¹²

Against the Age, elegantly organised around Morris's celebrated letter to Andreas Scheu,¹³ continues the tendency begun in the *Critical Heritage* for including the unexpected and the less known. Various myths about Morris – that he was basically a conservative thinker; that he would have nothing to do with machinery; that he is in any way the intellectual ancestor of modernism – are again questioned. Thus Peter explains that Morris's early poetry does not idealise the Middle Ages, but 'reanimates' what was 'exquisite and rare' about them. Neither does Morris's concept of the medieval paradigm of work ignore the 'grievous material oppression' of those times. Similarly, it is the universal belief in the need to make a profit which means that machinery is used (as today with computers) only to increase production, not to lessen labour. And Nikolaus Pevsner's suggestion that 'Morris laid the foundation of the modern style; with Gropius its character was ultimately determined' is – rightly I think – also questioned. Surely no style which substitutes the artificial and the synthetic for the natural, machines and ultimately computers for human labour, and, most of all, the city for the countryside, can be said to owe any intellectual debt to Morris?¹⁴

Morris's poetry is said to be best read aloud, even though this probably did not happen at the time, and as far as *Sigurd the Volsung* is concerned, I can personally

testify that for someone normally too impatient to read lengthy Victorian narrative poetry, this is correct. An interesting juxtaposition of Morris's political ideas and his poetry is the late poem 'Mine and thine' from *Poems by the Way* (1891), translated apparently from medieval Flemish.

Yea, God well counseled for our wealth
 Gave all this fleeting worldly wealth
 A common heritage to all
 That men might feed them therewithal,
 And clothe their limbs, and shoe their feet
 And live a simple life and sweet
 But now so rageth greediness
 That each desireth nothing less
 Than all the world, and all his own;
 And all for him and him alone

Though the poem is medieval in origin, its sentiments are twenty-first century in their relevance. Included in the same collection is bleak section of *The Pilgrims of Hope* (1885), which, for a man sometimes said to be uncomfortable when writing about 'the woman question', reads not unlike some of the criticisms of bourgeois marriage developed by feminists during the 1970s:

Prudence begets her thousands;
 'good is a housekeepers life,
 So shall I sell my body
 That I may be matron and wife.'
 'And I shall endure foul wedlock
 And bear the children of need.'
 Some are there born of hate,
 many the children of greed.¹⁵

Lest all this should begin to read like hagiography, let me illustrate a few instances where I disagree with Peter. For example, surely only someone as charitable as he could write that Rossetti's motives for encouraging Jane Burden to accept 'the reticent and awkward' Morris 'should not ... be interpreted without sympathy'. Less flippantly, I am not sure I agree with Peter that Morris is 'at his least convincing in his suggestion (in *News from Nowhere*) that a large population (*ca* 40 million) could be sustained in a society whose economic methods are small scale and labour intensive'.¹⁶ For example, Morris's contemporary Prince Kropotkin, a man with more science than Morris, and who had done the relevant calculations regarding the relative efficiency of extensive and intensive agriculture, wrote

There is not one nation in the world which, being armed with the present powers of agriculture, could not grow on its cultivable area all the food and most of the raw materials derived from agriculture which are required for its population, even if the requirements of that population were rapidly increased as they certainly ought to be. Taking the powers of man over the land and over the forces of nature—such as they are at the present day—we can maintain that two to three inhabitants to each cultivable acre of land would not yet be too much. But neither in this densely populated country nor in Belgium are we yet in such numbers. In this country we have, roughly speaking, one acre of the cultivable area per inhabitant.¹⁷

Nor do I sympathise entirely with Morris when he suggested to Georgie Burne-Jones that introducing a profit-sharing scheme into ‘the Firm’ was a less valuable contribution to socialism than ‘the furthering of the great principle’. £16 per annum, which is what he calculated such a bonus might be, may not have seemed much to him, but 6/8d per week may well have made a difference to many Victorian working people. However, Morris was a good employer, allowed flexible working hours, and paid above the going rate. ‘No one, having worked for Mr Morris would willingly have joined any other workshop’.¹⁸

In any case, I feel I may have been less than just to Peter when I omitted *Against the Age* from what thus turns out to have indeed been a ‘partial’ review of the development of modern ideas of ‘Morris the Green’.¹⁹ For example, even in his Preface, he writes

As long as our industrial society continues to perplex us with such problems as pollution, delinquency, commercial acquisitiveness and violence, so long we will stand in need of Morris’s vision of a society of equals in which every man and woman finds proper fulfillment

and in his conclusions

With the dwindling of the world’s natural resources and an increasing sense that ‘small is beautiful’ we may soon be abandoning the assumption that industrial growth is the highest good.

So, yes, it is indeed ‘Morris’s concern for the *human* (my emphasis) environment’ which makes his lectures, particularly ‘The Lesser Arts’ or ‘Art under Plutocracy’, ‘Useful work versus useless toil’, and ‘How we live and how we might live’, so relevant today. To me, these early references to Morris’s greenness are more convincing than those by Jack Lindsay or A.L. Morton, both of which have always struck me as somewhat opportunistic.²⁰

And re-reading his letter to Louisa Baldwin of 26 March 1874, one feels tempted to hazard that it may have been about the time of his fortieth birthday that

Morris eventually turned 'green'. For example

Surely if people lived five hundred years instead of three score and ten they would find some better way of living than in such a sordid loathsome place, but now it seems to be nobody's business to try to better things . . . but look, suppose people lived in little communities among gardens and green fields, so that you could be in the country in five minutes' walk, and had few wants, almost no furniture for instance, and no servants, and studied the (difficult) arts of life, and finding out what they really wanted; then I think one might hope civilisation had begun.²¹

If so, this would imply that Morris had already become a proto-green before he became a socialist, and therefore that he did not bring Marxism to the green movement so much as bring greenness to Marxism (although it is taking a while to 'stick').

So it is indeed his idyllic feeling for the English countryside which sets Morris in sharp contrast to those who believed that industrial development was in itself a human good. Unfortunately, it was his political differences with the Fabians which led to his emphasis on the importance of environmental quality being replaced historically by an ethos which valued *material* economic progress above everything else.²² If correct, this also probably goes a long way towards explaining why the British labour movement still finds it so difficult to go green – even though for forty years now, it has been the obvious political direction for it to go.

Three aspects of *News from Nowhere* thus epitomise Morris's political ethos – 'the pervasive sense of equality', 'the quality of the environment', and an attitude of mind which places highest value on the ordinary experiences of life; a 'delight in the life of the world'. But there is also the 'problem' likewise highlighted by the *Saturday Review*'s review of *A Dream of John Ball*; of whether a revolution might defeat its own ends (according to Peter, 'the most pertinent question which can be directed at a Marxist'): "Competition develops its opposite – Socialism". And would not Socialism develop its [own] opposite – Capitalism?' Or as Ellen puts it, in *News from Nowhere*:

Who knows? happy as we are, times may alter; we may be bitten with some impulse towards change, and many things may seem too wonderful for us to resist, too exciting not to catch at, if we do not know that they are but phases of what has been before; and withal ruinous deceitful, and sordid.

Peter then acknowledges that 'Once the dialectical process of history has been accepted, the Marxist can only move out of it by the metaphysical decision to decree the end of history'. However, *both* questions date from a time when we assumed that infinite material progress could take place on a finite planet,

whereas now we know this can never be. Physics therefore trumps metaphysics; hence once again the importance of Morris to the green movement, were it but to acknowledge it.²³

Since becoming editor of this *Journal*, I have benefited greatly from Peter's invaluable advice and guidance, much of it expressed in emails written in the style of (pre-electronic) letters, and I know that my predecessor received many of the same. All of these, indeed all of Peter's communications, are expressed with a kind of old-world courtesy now rarely encountered. A friend of mine (now sadly gone to the Elysian Fields) used to greet anyone who had done him a service with the slogan, 'You're a gentleman, sir! And a scholar!' In the presenting these essays to Peter, I would modify that statement in only one way: 'You're a scholar, sir! And a gentleman!'

NOTES

1. For a more extensive list, please go to http://www.morrisociety.org/publications/author_index.html (as accessed 3 April 2013).
2. Peter Faulkner, ed, *William Morris. Selected poems*, Manchester: Carcanet, 1992, 156 pp.
3. All in all, a range almost as eclectic as that of Morris!
4. Peter Faulkner, *William Morris: the critical heritage*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973, 465 pp. (Afterwards *CH*); *Against the age: an introduction to William Morris*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1980, 193 pp. (Afterwards *Against the Age*)
5. *CH*, p. 273, p. 275. As we know, Morris approved of machines which relieved drudgery, but liked them even better if they increased the pleasure of work in hand (James Redmond, ed, *William Morris. News from Nowhere*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Chapter XV, pp. 82–83; afterwards *NfN*).
6. *CH*, pp. 312, 311, 313; Patrick O'Sullivan, 'Editorial – Science under Plutocracy', *Journal of William Morris Studies*, XVIII, No. 2, (Summer 2009), pp. 3–14.
7. *CH*, p. 339; Patrick O'Sullivan, 'Editorial – Looking Forward', *Journal of William Morris Studies*, XIX, No. 1, (Winter 2010), pp. 3–8., *CH*, p. 324, 340, pp. 340–341.
8. *CH*, pp. 345, 346, 349, 352.
9. *CH*, pp. 390–391, p. 392; 'The Beauty of Life', 1880, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1882/hopes/chapters/chapter3.htm> (As accessed 4 April 2013); *CH*, p. 399,
10. *CH*, p. 400, p. 399.
11. *CH*, p. 401; 'How I became a socialist', in A.L. Morton, ed, *Political Writings*

- of *William Morris*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, p. 243; *CH*, p. 402, p. 403.
12. *CH*, p. 405. Yet another characterisation, if we need one, of the kind of utopia *News from Nowhere* may actually be to add to the list given in my own '¡Homenaje a Aragón! *News from Nowhere*, collectivisation and the sustainable future', *Journal of William Morris Studies*, XIX, No.3, (Winter 2011), pp. 93–111.
 13. To Andreas Scheu, 15 September 1883, in Norman Kelvin, *The Collected Letters of William Morris, Vol. II, 1881–1884*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987, p. 227–231.
 14. *Against the Age*, pp. 17, 24, 115, 116, 180.
 15. *Against the Age*, pp. 82, 161, 119. No public performances are promised, however.
 16. *Against the Age*, pp. 13, 141.
 17. Peter Kropotkin, *Fields Factories Workshops*, Chapter V, The possibilities of agriculture (Continued); http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/anarchist_archives/kropotkin/fieldsch5.html (as accessed 7 April 2013). Originally published London: Hutchinson, 1899, 315 pp. As the book was therefore published after his death, Morris may not have known of this work, but Kropotkin did attend meetings and speak at Kelmscott House, and there are records of Morris having a long talk, and spending the evening with him, on 24 and 25 March 1886, at a time when such matters were surely uppermost in both their minds (Nicholas Salmon with Derek Baker, *The William Morris Chronology*, Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996, p. 159).
 18. *Against the Age*, p. 117; Brit. Mus. Add. MSS 45350, as quoted by E.P. Thompson, pp. 321–322.
 19. Patrick O'Sullivan, 'Morris the Red, Morris the Green: a partial review', *Journal of William Morris Studies*, XIX, No. 3, (Winter 2011), pp. 22–38.
 20. *Against the Age*, pp. ix, 181, 100; Jack Lindsay, *William Morris. His life and work*, New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., 1975 (1979), pp. 382–383; 'Introduction', in A.L. Morton, ed, *The Political Writings of William Morris*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1979, pp. 27–28.
 21. *Against the Age*, p. 85.
 22. Raymond Williams, 'Socialism and Ecology' (1982), in Robin Gable, ed, *Resources of Hope. Culture, Democracy, Socialism*, London: Verso, 1989, pp. 210–226.
 23. *Against the Age*, pp. 134–136; p. 121; *NfN*, Chapter XXIX, pp. 167–168; *Against the Age*, p. 121. Interestingly, on p. 134 Peter names Morris's companion on his journey across London in *News from Nowhere* Chapters IV–VIII Richard Hammond, as opposed to the usual epithet 'Dick'. Those of us who look forward to end of fossil fuels, and therefore of 'petrolheads', are grateful for the second being the more normal use.