

Peter Preston (1944–2011)

Peter Faulkner

My most vivid memories of Peter – and I am sure this is true for many others who knew him – are of him as a genial host. He had a great talent for bringing people together in a warm and friendly atmosphere, whether on a small or a large scale, as Chair of the Society’s committee or convivially presiding over meetings concerned with Morrisian matters. John Purkis remarks that ‘he had a notable “presence” in a way that many academics don’t. And he ran the show. It was like meeting Mr Vincent Crummies, the actor manager in *Nicholas Nickleby*, who “received Nicholas with an inclination of the head, something between the courtesy of a Roman emperor and the nod of a pot companion” and immediately gave him a job to do’. There was indeed always something generously Dickensian about Peter. He played a leading part in the Society’s last three conferences, at Ruskin College, Oxford, in 1990, at Exeter College, Oxford, in 1996, and at Royal Holloway in 2005, when he and his fellow-organisers Phillippa Bennett, Ruth Levitas and Rosie Miles had the difficult task of building up the right Morrisian spirit in the wake of the London bombings which took place on the conference’s opening day. I have clear memories of him at all three events, both as a lecturer and as a vigorous and enthusiastic conversationalist at table or in common rooms. It is relevant that his second academic post – the first was as a WEA Tutor Organiser – involved a residential centre – he was Warden of Lincoln Adult Education Centre, of the University of Nottingham, from 1973 to 1980.

The William Morris Society has benefitted greatly from the services of people from the democratic world of adult education, and Peter was one of these. By a nice coincidence, it was in Hammersmith that Peter was born, on 25th February 1944. He went to school in London, and read English at the University of Nottingham. He married Barbara in 1966, and took a Certificate of Education at the University of Sussex; he wrote an MA dissertation on Charles Dickens. In 1980 the family – Rebecca, born in 1972, and Ben, born in 1976 – moved to Nottingham, and Peter became first a Lecturer and then a Senior Lecturer in the Continuing Education Department of the University. Teaching in Nottingham, and with a strong interest in the relation between literature and place, Peter became involved with the establishment of the D.H. Lawrence Centre in

1991. His energy, enthusiasm and organising abilities ensured a successful career, culminating in his becoming Head of School and Director of Continuing Education in 2003; he retired in 2005, but continued with many activities – from 2008 to 2011 he was Chair of the Board of Writing for the East Midlands.

All this is said without mentioning his commitment to Morris, which dated back to 1980. In that year Dick Smith, another distinguished servant of the Morris cause, who was Librarian at the University of Nottingham, became Hon. Sec. of the Society, and he encouraged Peter's interest in Morris. Thus in 1982 Peter worked with Dick and Ray Watkinson to organise a successful Morris weekend with the Extra-Mural Department of Nottingham University; from this there developed the East Midlands Study Group – by far the most successful of the Society's groups outside London – and Peter's increasing involvement in the Society. So in 1987, when Dick Smith stepped down from the post of Hon. Sec. due to ill-health, he was succeeded by Peter, who had been co-opted onto the committee the previous year, and taken over the editorship of the Newsletter from Lionel Young in January. Peter ceased to be Hon. Sec. in 1990, and was succeeded by John Purkis, and in 1993 Lionel Young took over the Newsletter from Peter. The centenary year, 1996, saw a fine range of Morris activities, including the conference at Exeter College, Oxford, for which Peter concentrated on arranging the remarkably varied programme of lectures and visits. He also co-edited the *William Morris Centenary Essays*, and concluded his part of the Introduction with words that retain their value for us today: 'Variety, equality and freedom are high on the current political agenda, and in a society where art and culture are all too readily commodified, and where the vigilance that liberty demands of us is still necessary, the courage and commitment of Morris's lifelong endeavour offers a sustaining hope'.

Peter had worked hard to bring together the Society and the Trustees of Kelmescott House, but in 1998 the Kelmescott House Trust decided not to back the proposals from the Joint Working Party on uniting the Society and the Trust. In a letter at the time, Peter wrote sadly: 'It seems as though every time we think we have dealt with the issue it comes back to haunt us'. However, he was not a person to give up on an idea he believed in, and he supported the moves which led to the termination of the separate existence of the Trust. These were controversial matters, and it is more pleasant to record that in November 2003 Peter brought together a number of his interests in the Kelmescott Lecture, published in 2007 as *Dreaming London: the Future City in Morris and Others*. Again, Peter sees Morris as a source of sustaining hope: 'For us, reading *News from Nowhere*, a century after its composition and at least a century before it is set, that hope should be sustaining, for our children and their children and all the generations to come'. He had become Chair of the Society in 2005, serving in that capacity until 2008, and strongly supported our near-neighbours, the Emery Walker Trust; it is good

to be able to record that the Trust is endowing a three-year course of lectures in Peter's memory. A man who enjoyed playing an active role, he was Chair again from 2009 to 2011, when he was succeeded by Ruth Levitas. He presided over the AGM in May, so that its members were shocked indeed to hear of his death from pancreatic cancer only five months after that event. As Martin Crick has shown in his recent *History of the Society*, it has been fortunate in the quality of those who have come forward to lead it throughout the fifty years of its existence. Of these leaders, Peter Preston was one of the most vigorous and purposive, and he will be much missed. At the memorial service in Nottingham celebrating his life, those present were delighted to hear that Peter was famous for comic songs and in particular singing the 'Lonely Pterodactyl' to his children. If we cannot have the pleasure of listening to that performance, we can still hear his voice in his many publications, and I conclude with a list of these in recognition of his scholarly range and to encourage members to seek them out and be reminded of a remarkable and wide-ranging scholar:

- 1989 co-editor of *D.H. Lawrence in the Modern World*, Macmillan
- 1993 co-editor, *The Literature of Place*, Macmillan
- 1993 co-editor, *Raymond Williams: Education, Politics and Letters*, St. Martin's Press
- 1994 co-editor, *Writing the City*, Routledge
- 1994 *A D.H. Lawrence Chronology*, St. Martin's Press
- 1995 Introduction and Notes to the Wordsworth Classics edition of Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*
- 1995 co-editor *Literature in Adult Education: Reflections on Practice*, Department of Adult Education, Nottingham University
- 1996 Introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of Lawrence, *Mr Noon*
- 1997 editor, Everyman edition of Arnold Bennett *Anna of the Five Towns*
- 1999 co-editor, *William Morris Centenary Essays*, University of Exeter Press.
- 2000 Introduction and Notes to *The Voyage and Other Stories* by Katherine Mansfield, Naples, Loffredo Editore
- 2002 Introduction and Notes to the Wordsworth Classics edition of Dickens, *Little Dorrit*
- 2007 *Dreaming London: the Future City in Morris and Others*, The William Morris Society
- 2011 *Working with Lawrence: Texts, Places, Contexts*, Critical, Cultural and Communications Press, Nottingham. 2011. This book includes a full bibliography of Peter's publications on Lawrence.

Peter was also the author of numerous scholarly articles, particularly in *The Journal of the D.H. Lawrence Society* and *Etudes lawrenciennes*.