

Obituary: Norman Kelvin, 1924–1994

Peter Faulkner

The world of Morris scholarship lost one of its great figures with the death of Norman Kelvin in New York on 14 April 2014. Norman was born in Brooklyn in 1924 late in his parents' lives and attended the local public schools. His father was severely affected by the crash of 1929 and never financially recovered, so that Norman grew up well aware of the consequences of economic insecurity. Upon graduation from high school in 1942 he received a scholarship to Columbia College and attended until he entered the US Army in July 1943. He served in the Medical Corp as an X-ray technician at Schick General Hospital in Clinton, Iowa, and in the Philippines. He was discharged in March, 1946 and returned to Columbia, financed by the G.I. Bill of Rights. Norman's widow, Phyllis, to whom I am indebted for information about Norman's early life, remarks that Norman often said that it was while he was in the Army that he got to know America and Americans. His democratic interest in people of every kind was one of his marked characteristics.

When he returned to Columbia it was as a pre-medical student, but he quickly discovered that literature was what he wanted to study. He wrote short stories for the undergraduate literary journal, *The Columbia Review*, and served as its editor for a year. After graduation in 1948 he entered the Columbia University Graduate Program in English. Norman and Phyllis married in 1956 and had two daughters, Elizabeth and Jane. The dissertation topic for Norman's PhD was George Meredith, so that his first academic book, published in 1961 by Stanford University Press, was *A Troubled Eden: Nature and Society in the Works of George Meredith*. He was an enthusiastic teacher. As a graduate student he taught at Rutgers University in New Jersey and English as a Second Language at Columbia. He began teaching at The City College of New York in 1961 and remained there and at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York until he retired in 2006. He published articles and book reviews in various journals, as well as a survey anthology of English literature with several colleagues at the City College of New York, and a book on E.M. Forster in 1967. On a trip to England in the

same year, he came across some unpublished letters of William Morris in the British Library. He had been looking about for a new project and Morris's letters seemed like a possibility—and this certainly proved to be the case.

By Morrisians Norman will always be valued for his great work of scholarship, his edition of *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, which appeared in four volumes from Princeton University Press in 1984, 1987 and 1996. The volumes have been of enormous value to all those who have been involved in Morris studies; it was also the case that Norman was of the greatest help to younger scholars who sought his advice on their work. He came over to England every summer while working on this project, staying in Mecklenberg Square, and it was one of my summer pleasures to spend a day with him annually, talking of Morris and many other matters, including the British class system, of which he made me guiltily aware. He was a fine conversationalist, who liked to bring out his ideas while slowly wandering the streets, with no particular end in sight. All our conversations seemed to come to a premature end, but could fortunately be taken up again in the same liberal spirit the following year. He embodied the true spirit of academia, impressing my young children when on a visit to our house he proposed a toast, not to our selves, but to the Spirit of English Literature. Patricia and I had the pleasure of visiting Norman and Phyllis in their apartment in Riverside Drive in New York, and were given an engrossing tour of the cultural highlights of the area, including a production of an obscure play by Chekhov and an outstanding pizza restaurant.

It was a natural part of his work that Norman should write a number of perceptive articles about Morris. These include 'The Erotic in *News from Nowhere* and *The Well at the World's End*' 1976, 'The Morris Who Reads Us' in 1996; the Kelmscott Lecture for 1996, *Letters as Biography & Autobiography*; 'News from *Nowhere* and *The Spoils of Poynton*: Interiors and Exteriors', published in 1999; and an edited selection of Morris's political writings, *William Morris on Art and Socialism*, published in New York in 2000. In the same year, he wrote on 'H.D. and the World War I Years' in *Victorian Poetry*. I was delighted that Norman contributed to the issue of the *JWMS* that its editor kindly dedicated to me in Summer 2013. His wide-ranging contribution 'The Dream, Image, Vision, Wizardry, and Erotic in Morris's Work' contrasts the dream as a metaphor making possible the delivery of a socialist message in *John Ball* and *News from Nowhere* with dreams in the 'fantasy tales' as 'elements within the text'. He was clearly continuing to read Morris's fiction with attention and insight.

I was fortunate enough to have a correspondence by email with Norman during the last few years. He did not like the vocabulary of emails, preferring to call the messages that he sent to me *letters*. One of his interests was language, and in particular the differences between British and American usage, but our main topics were of course literary. Only near the end did he tell me about his experiences

as a medical orderly in the US army at the end of World War II; I had not realised that he was of an age to have served then. In a long lifetime I have met only a few people who have impressed me as so intelligent and humane as Norman Kelvin; it is a privilege to have known him.

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Some further words from Phyllis, Norman's widow: His greatest professional pleasure was when a former student became a colleague. Norman also wrote poetry throughout his life and several have been published in *Sewanee Review*. In high school Norman started to draw and paint and he continued to do so throughout his life.

Norman was never slow to show his daughters love and attention. Above all, he was honest with them, as he was with everyone. I think his legacy to them is his love of the book and of the search for knowledge.