

Norman Talbot (1936–2004)

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The name of Norman Talbot will be well known to readers of this *Journal* for his many contributions to it. These mostly expressed his enthusiasm for Morris's late prose romances, of which he was a constant champion. It is fitting that his last contribution, to the Summer 2003 edition, should have been a typically robust review of Richard Mathews' book *Fantasy*, which concluded with a tribute to Mathews as one of those who 'testify to the health of romance at a spiritual and ecological level (the more than human), at a social and familial level (the wholly and communally human), and at the level of self-discovery and self-achievement (the inwardly human)'. Talbot shared and promoted the same evaluations, both in his scholarly work and as a poet.

Norman Talbot was born into a working-class family in Suffolk and made his way through the English educational system on merit, taking his first degree at the University of Durham and his PhD at Leeds. He made his academic career in Australia, eventually becoming a Professor of English at the University of Newcastle, New South Wales, where he took particular pleasure in teaching courses on narrative – stories were for him a consistent source of delight. He retired in 1993 to continue and develop his literary interests. He and his wife Jean were much involved in the peace movement and with seeking justice for the successors of Australia's original inhabitants.

As far as Morris is concerned, Talbot saw him as a consistent socialist thinker. But he contended, against left-wing critics like E. P. Thompson who viewed the prose romances of Morris's last decade as the self-indulgencies of a man tired of politics, that in those romances Morris successfully combined his Socialism with stories of strong emotional appeal. This case he argued in many articles and in the two splendid editions he produced for the Thoemmes Press. The 1994 *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* is the finest and fullest edition so far produced of any of Morris's romances. In addition to the text, Talbot provided a twenty-one page Introduction, sixty pages of Notes, and a full Glossary. The story particularly interested him because of its female hero, a highly unusual presence in a traditionally conservative genre like romance. (It is consistent with his feminist sympathies that he was to go on to

draft a version of *The Sundering Flood* from the point of view of its female protagonist). His 1996 edition of the two romances *The Story of the Glittering Plain* and *Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair* was equally thorough and enthusiastic; the impressive Glossary shows exactly how attentive Talbot was to both the derivations and the nuances of words.

This is not surprising in a distinguished poet, who published eleven books of poetry, the first in 1968, the last in 2003. It is fitting that the 2003 volume, *Every Sonnet Tells a Story*, should begin with a sequence of twelve ‘Suffolk Sonnets’ which give a vivid sense of his childhood experiences, and then progress through ‘The Story-Tellers’ Convention’ to the final sequence, ‘New South Wales Sonnet-Forms’, which concludes fittingly with the religious poem ‘Ascension’: ‘The Jesus of seasons is hereby bought / from starry time by simple flowers’. Talbot also expressed his enthusiasm for Morris in poetry, first in the poem ‘A Moment for Morris and More’ (published in this *Journal* in 1988), and then in a revised version which he published in a pamphlet Centenary Tribute as ‘A Moment for Morris’. Here he links the figure of Morris with the life of the Thames:

Morris remains * the maker of margins,
 engraver all-grateful * of greensward as pattern,
 awakener of wall-space * & weaver of stories
 that time cannot take * Thames keeps only the shadow
 of these skimming oarsmen * on its upmost inches.

The poem concludes with a thought of ‘the kind days mankind * makes & was made for’. Talbot knew full well, as we all do, that those ‘kind days’ are not the usual experience of most of mankind today, but he allied himself with Morris in the attempt to create a world in which they would become so. It is sad to think that our conference in 2005 will take place without his exuberant and knowledgeable presence.