Editorial

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As this is my first issue as editor, I should introduce myself—if not to members of long standing who may remember William Morris and News from Nowhere (WM & NfN) then at least to those who have joined since 1990. I should also perhaps explain how a scientist became interested in William Morris, a man not normally associated with science, in the public mind at least. Peter Faulkner wrote in a recent Newsletter (Summer 2007) that it seems particularly appropriate for the Society now to appoint an editor with an environmental background, and I suppose that this is indeed something which I can bring to the Journal which it has not really experienced before to any great extent.

I was a member of the first cohort of British undergraduates to study Environmental Science, at what is now called Lancaster University, when it opened in 1964. Environmental Science, at least at Lancaster, was the brainchild of Gordon Manley, the distinguished climate historian who wrote occasional articles on weather for The Guardian. Dissatisfied with what was then happening to academic geography (fragmentation into sub-disciplines; a pre-occupation with space as opposed to time), Manley decided to try to establish a new subject which sought to transcend discipline boundaries, and to bring together not just the natural sciences, but also, eventually, technology, the social sciences, and the humanities. That said, the people who taught me, including Manley, were mainly geographers.

I then moved from Lancaster to Coleraine (University of Ulster), where a group led by another geographer, Frank Oldfield, was instrumental in developing an emerging methodology for reconstructing recent human impact upon nature, using information buried in the sediments of freshwater lakes: in that case Lough Neagh, the large, shallow lake whose drain-
age basin occupies most of the northeast corner of Ireland. These were also the early days of environmentalism, although, at the time, it was called ‘conservation’, and we were aware of a need, and succeeded, I believe, to some extent, in making our scientific work ‘relevant’ to wider society. However, this was also the time of ‘Civil Rights’ in Northern Ireland, an experience which emphasised that whilst science may identify the problems, it is politics which produces the solutions (or lack of them), and, usually, economics the cause.

Eventually, via short stays at Durham, and Wolverhampton, I ended up, as it turned out, at Plymouth, where the first Environmental Science degree in the old UK Polytechnic sector had already established an international reputation. Its designers had recognised that, as human beings are free agents, the ‘solutions’ to environmental problems lie, not in the ‘hard’ (or even the natural sciences), but in the ‘soft’ sciences and the humanities. Therefore, unlike most of its competitors, but like almost all of its many imitators, this degree already contained, in 1973, substantial elements of economics, politics and sociology. During the late 1970s, we appointed Tim O’Riordan as one of our external examiners, and from him I learned that natural scientists can also speak and write about these ‘soft’ issues, without losing any scientific rigour. Which finally brings me to Morris.

Like many of my generation, I had come to Morris via his designs, which somehow resonated with the psychedelic culture of the late 1960s. I well remember seeing the cover of Asa Briggs’s edition of William Morris: selected writings and designs, which featured a version of the ‘Honeysuckle’ chintz, in the Devizes branch of W.H. Smith, and being instantly struck that it looked very like some of the designs used on the textiles and posters of that time. Most of what I read in this volume initially went over my head – in those days, for people from my background, ‘socialism’ meant the Labour Party - but the designs, and also the images, even the example of the font which Morris designed for the Kelmscott Press, seemed to offer possibilities beyond the modernist, utilitarian world of the 1960s, and of contact with an older ‘counter-culture’.

At Wolverhampton, in typical polytechnic fashion, I was required to teach students from the sciences, the arts and the humanities. Searching for a topic for a seminar on ‘solutions’ to environmental problems for
a student whose other major was English, I hit on $NfN$. I asked her to
examine the 'utopian' themes in the novel, and describe the ways in which
Morris turned his ideas about economics and politics into practical sugges-
tions for everyday living. And very well she did it, too. I did not feel
ready to lecture on Morris myself until the 1980s, when my own 'soften-
ing' process finally gave me the confidence to begin to teach environment-
alism, and eventually environmental philosophy and ethics, to science
students. This experience eventually gave rise to $WM \& NfN$, much of the
ideological input to which came from Stephen Coleman.

I spent the decade following $WM \& NfN$ in what turned out to be
a fruitless pursuit of European Union Framework V research money,
although I did get to see some wonderful Central European cities, and
some of the art which few of us had had the chance to see before, owing
to the Cold War.7 As for the last five years or so, whilst I still enjoyed
teaching, and interacting with students, I finally reached the stage where
I could no longer even pretend to participate in the Orwellian farce which
is currently played out daily in UK higher education. Also, most of the
innovative aspirations, ideas and principles from the 1960s and 1970s,
on which interdisciplinary programmes such as Environmental Science
are based, had been destroyed in the utilitarian holocaust which swept
through UK universities during the 1980s. Clearly it was time to go. One
of the last 'useful' things I did in academic life was to help establish the
MSc in Holistic Science at Schumacher College, Dartington.

In any case, over the past two decades or so, the world had turned
green, slowly at first, but recently at what I, as a long term profession-
al prophet of doom and disaster, find an alarming pace. For example,
I was recently given, on my way into a local builders' merchant's, a dis-
course on the relationship between wet summers in Western Europe,
and the El Niño/La Niña phenomenon in the Pacific Ocean. On my
way out, the same man, clearly on his afternoon tea break, told me he
thought that 'all these biofuels are a bad idea as well—they just take up land
which could be used to grow food, and they only give off carbon dioxide
and water, same as petrol, so what's the sense?'

And he was correct, was he not? Recently it has been reported that, in
Mexico, the price of maize flour has risen sharply, leading to food riots,
owing to diversion of 20% of the US maize crop into production of bio-
fuels. In Italy, a ‘pasta strike’ has been proposed, in order to protest about the rising price of wheat flour. Similarly, it now seems that the former EU milk lake and butter mountain have been eliminated, almost ‘at a stroke’, by the new interest on the part of the population of China, in dairy products.\(^8\) Meanwhile, the food which many of us feed our children is full of substances designed not to increase its nutritional value, but to lengthen the time such products can remain on supermarket shelves, increasing the opportunity to generate profits, despite the fact that that it has been known for years that many of them cause great harm to young minds and bodies.\(^9\)

It has, of course, been said many times before (for this is the essence of the man), but with the recent onset of widespread greening, the life, work and ideas of William Morris have never been more relevant than they are today. Morris did not just think that we should only have things in our houses which we know to be useful, or think to be beautiful. He also invented the idea of alternative technology, and knew that products which were made to last would also consume less energy, generate less pollution and produce less waste. Furthermore, he identified the key role of Work, and of ‘local production for local need’ (and not for the market), in eliminating surplus value – and hence waste and pollution.\(^10\) He also observed the continued globalisation of capital, and correctly identified its effects – the production of vast amounts of trash on one continent, and its sale at vastly inflated profits on another\(^11\) – although today the process as he saw it is reversed, with the trash mostly being produced in Asia, and sold in Europe and North America. Meanwhile, much of the increasingly expensive food being consumed in Europe and North America, is more and more being grown in Africa, a notoriously food starved continent. Morris also knew that additives are seldom introduced into food in the interests of the consumer, and his opinion on such matters was characteristically pithy and direct – ‘Adulteration laws are only needed in a society of thieves’.\(^12\)

In addition, in *News from Nowhere*, he examined in some detail the ways in which the problem of economic scarcity,\(^13\) as defined by the Classical Economists, and perpetuated today by NeoDarwinists (the link being Malthus), can also be overcome, again by ‘local production for local need’. An ecological society therefore does not need to be an authoritarian
dystopia, but can be both green, democratic and free—a possibility which has escaped too many in the past and present green movement, including Professor Lovelock.14

One of the great strengths of JWMS, to my mind, is its eclectic subject matter, which clearly reflects Morris's own enormous range of interests. As to whether a scientist can successfully edit a journal whose content consists mainly of articles on literature, history, politics and design—this will be a stern test of the interdisciplinary philosophy on which I staked (rather recklessly, as it turned out) my academic career. For example, in this issue we print articles by Richard Frith on Morris's early Froissartian poems, by Ann MacEwen on Ernest and Dollie Radford and their relationships with Morris, Edward Aveling, and Eleanor Marx, by Jan Marsh on a pump at Tottenham Green which bears strong similarities to the well at Red House, and a review of volume of the collected letters of D.G. Rossetti. However, we also carry an article by Lorna Parker on Sir Arthur Church, a scientist, and his links to the early Arts and Crafts movement, and two reviews of books on landscape and environment, so there are hopes, as well fears, for my time as editor. Sadly, we also include an obituary of Dawn Morris, who did a great deal of work for the Society over many years, especially in the Sheffield area, and whom I noticed as one of its most prominent and active members when I first joined in about 1990.

I am also not a little in awe of some of my predecessors—Ray Watkinson, Peter Faulkner, Nick Salmon—but if I can measure up amongst such company, I shall feel I have not done too badly. I would like to thank Rosie Miles for helping me to achieve what I hope has been a smooth transition from her excellent editorship. All four of the articles printed here were originally submitted during her tenure, so that, in one sense, this issue and its contents (but not any errors which may have crept in) are partly hers. I would also like to thank Peter Faulkner for his gentle and courteous guidance during the early weeks of my appointment.
NOTES


6 Those were indeed the days.


13 The idea that, given the choice, human beings will always choose to maximise consumption, owing to their innate selfishness.