Obituary: Lionel Young
1918 – 2009

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On 12 March 2006 I drove down to Dover in order to interview Lionel (Leo) Young as part of my research for a 50th anniversary history of the William Morris Society. I travelled with some trepidation, for in correspondence Lionel had made clear his opposition to any such history being written at this time. He feared that it would open up still recent wounds caused by the disputes over the future of Kelmscott House. Indeed I was warned by several past and current Committee members to expect some very forceful opinions. Moreover he firmly believed that any history of the Society should be dated from the formation of the Kelmscott Fellowship by May Morris and others in 1918, and not from 1955, in order to emphasise the links with Morris himself.

My fears were unfounded. Lionel and his partner Jenny welcomed me to their flat overlooking the sea on a beautifully sunny day, and after an excellent lunch Lionel and I spent several hours discussing his memories of the Society and his admiration for William Morris. Although still forthright in his opinion that the Committee had been wrong in its decisions concerning Kelmscott House, he clearly regretted the hostility which had developed. Occasionally too I caught a glimpse of the ‘political’ Lionel Young, Communist Party member and committed Socialist to the end. Lionel had spent considerable time preparing for my visit in order to assist my work. I came away with ten voluminous and meticulously organised files of correspondence, minutes and Society ephemera, which are a testament to the dedicated work Lionel did for the Society, and his considerable contribution to its development.

Lionel Young was born in London on 14 September 1918 at Endsleigh Gardens, Bloomsbury, the son of Walter James and Alice Mary Young. Walter was a member of the Independent Labour Party (ILP), and a conscientious objector during the First World War, imprisoned for his beliefs. He was also a Quaker and Lionel attended the Society of Friends boarding school at Saffron Walden in Essex, before going to work in the City. He enlisted in the Royal Air Force on 20 May 1940 and, although he never talked about his war experiences, was
clearly a man of exceptional courage. He flew some thirty-two combat missions as a gunner and wireless operator in Wellington bombers, and was decorated for bravery.

Whilst stationed at Calais in 1945, he met his future wife Marcelle. They were married in 1950 and had four sons. After the war, Lionel found employment with British European Airways at Heathrow Airport, working in the Engineering Base as an Administration Officer. He was fluent in French and German and therefore also undertook technical and commercial translations for them. A work colleague told him of an advertisement for a part-time position with the William Morris Society, and in October 1964 he was appointed as General Secretary to the Society, working fifteen hours per week assisting the then Secretary Ronald Briggs, and the Treasurer Freeman Bass.

Where and when Lionel first became interested in William Morris is unclear. It is not unreasonable to suppose that his father, as an ILP member, would have been very familiar with Morris’s work, and that he introduced his son to Morris. Lionel did tell me that he read News from Nowhere as a schoolboy and that it was the most important book he ever read. When he took up the post with the Society he was not a member, but he joined shortly thereafter. His initial active involvement lasted until he resigned in April 1969, ostensibly because he was increasingly burdened with work in his full-time employment and because he moved house to a location further from the office at Kew.

There is no doubt, however, that he had had a somewhat fraught working relationship with Ronald Briggs. Briggs had run the Society almost single-handedly since 1956, and was a forceful and strong-willed character. Lionel, similarly strong-willed, complained of being lectured to and felt that his opinions and suggestions were ignored. Furthermore, Briggs expected the same dedication to the Society which he himself demonstrated, leaving Lionel to remonstrate that his wages didn’t even cover the mileage involved in carrying out his duties. ‘You may’, Lionel told Briggs on one occasion, ‘simply wish to replace me with someone who is perhaps less opinionated and long in the tooth.’

Lionel remained an ordinary member of the Society for the next ten years; momentous years for the Society. In 1970 it was bequeathed Kelmscott House, William Morris’s London residence. The House however was in disrepair, and a separate Trust was set up in order to administer it, ostensibly under the control of the Committee. The Trust established a William Morris Centre there in 1975, providing fellowships and bursaries for visiting scholars, but was undercapitalised from the outset, and a financial crisis ensued which eventually caused the Trust to lease the majority of the house, leaving the Society with premises in the basement. The resulting furore led to the resignation of Briggs and other long-serving members of the Committee, and a legal battle which failed to regain control of the House for the Society.
The Committee which took office in May 1980 found a Society in disarray and in considerable financial difficulties. It also found itself without a treasurer, and Lionel Young stepped into the breach the following month. He was to hold the post for the next eleven years. Shortly after his appointment he retired from full-time employment at BEA, and although he worked for them and other firms on a part-time basis, he was able to devote considerable time and effort to the Society’s affairs. He worked assiduously and successfully to stabilise its finances, and there is no doubt that the Society owes him a massive debt of gratitude for the way in which he reorganised the finances and then controlled them with prudence and sound administration. He also flew to New York in 1980 in order to review arrangements with the US Society, which was seeking a measure of independence, and he was able to institute procedures to the benefit of both parties.

Whilst Lionel’s accounting skills were invaluable, his experience of management and committee procedures also served the Committee well, and he was responsible for drafting a new constitution. In 1990 personal difficulties forced him to tender his resignation, but the Society was unable to find a replacement and he continued in post until the tragic death of his wife in August 1991 made it impossible for him to carry on. The Society recognised his contribution by electing him a vice-president in February 1992. For his part Lionel felt that he owed a great deal to the Society and its members, particularly for the fellowship which he had experienced. ‘Had I never experienced that fellowship and contact with like-minded friends the future would seem black indeed’, he said at the time of his resignation. Happily a very long-time friend, Jenny Griffin, met up with Lionel on an increasingly frequent basis, and they set up home in Dover, spending sixteen contented years together. He also took the time to study Italian, passing his GCSE at the age of sixty-five.

That sense of fellowship which Lionel had enjoyed whilst working for the Society undoubtedly encouraged him to return to play an active role in its affairs within two years of his resignation. He became editor of the Newsletter in June 1993, a post he filled with distinction until April 1997. In March 1995 he became a Trustee of Kelmscott House, but it was in this role, sadly, that a breach with the Society occurred. After the legal battles of the early 1980s, relations between the Kelmscott House Trust and the Committee of the William Morris Society had gradually improved. The Society still hoped to regain control of the House but a change in the law in 1993 gave tenants the right to renew the lease indefinitely. This left the Society with little hope of acquiring the house, but in March 1996 the then tenant, the playwright Christopher Hampton, decided to sell the lease, and he gave the Society ‘first refusal’.

This led to divisions in the Committee. The majority felt that even attempting to raise the required funds was impractical. Others, including Lionel, thought that the Society should make every effort to regain control of the house. When
the lease was eventually sold to new tenants the bone of contention then became
the use to which the Society’s now considerable assets should be put. Lionel
wanted this money to be ring-fenced for use in the future to buy back the lease.
The majority however did not see this as either feasible or desirable, and they
eventually won the day, dissolving the Kelmscott House Trust in 2002. Lionel
was one of four Trustees who issued a pamphlet entitled *The Kelmscott House
Trust thrice wronged*. He had a strong emotional attachment to Morris, and hence
to Kelmscott House. ‘For us Morrisians’, he wrote, ‘Kelmscott House is not just
a building, a piece of property … (we) treasure the House and want it to be used
by the Society in the very long term.’ He became very hostile to the Committee
and the dispute caused him to sever a number of long-term friendships. However
his continued interest in and support for the Society’s activities was evident when
I spoke to him. He had been a pillar of strength during some very difficult years
for the Society, and when he resigned as treasurer in 1991 Ray Watkinson paid
tribute to him as ‘A true Morris man’. This would have pleased Lionel more than
anything.