Reviews

Edited by Peter Faulkner


Whereas mention of Morris’s socialism was once almost taboo, discussion of his commitment to revolutionary socialism is now relatively commonplace in treatments of his political thought. Nevertheless, short, accessible studies of Morris’s politics are still difficult to find. Accounts which take Morris’s socialism as their main focus are still rarer. Hassan Mahamdallie’s short introduction does not underplay the significance of Morris’s literature or his designing but, forcefully asserting the link between these aspects of Morris’s work and his socialism, usefully fills a gap in the existing literature.

Mahamdallie’s book is structured around three essays, each fully referenced. The first traces Morris’s journey across the ‘river of fire’ and shows how his early disenchantment with the effects of industrial production and commerce shaped his decision to declare for socialism. The second follows Morris’s progress through the Social Democratic Federation to the Socialist League, and ends with a description of Bloody Sunday. The last section focuses on Morris’s socialist writings. A Dream of John Ball and News From Nowhere form the backbone for the discussion but Mahamdallie also examines some of Morris’s important essays, notably ‘Useful Work Versus Useless Toil’.

The first section is prefaced by a series of selections from Morris’s writings, each headed to highlight some of Mahamdallie’s central themes – war and imperialism, capitalism and the environment, sweatshop labour and the profit system. The collection closes with Morris’s ‘Chants for Socialists’. The book is illustrated with well-produced cartoons and photographs; it includes a list of links to Morris organisations and a short bibliography for further reading. The design is not only attractive but the organisation and selection of the material gives real weight to Morris’s words, captures the breadth of his talent and successfully makes even familiar ideas appear new and fresh.

Mahamdallie’s analysis draws on familiar sources: A. L. Morton, E.P. Thompson and Fiona MacCarthy, and it does not pretend to add to published scholarship. However, his evaluation of Morris’s socialism is both interesting and persuasive. His general claim is that Morris’s thought remains important in the modern
world. Morris's achievements, he argues, 'deserve to be rediscovered by a new generation of artists, activists and socialists', because if you could sum up Morris's message to the Victorian working class it would surely be 'Another world is possible' (p. 5). Morris was a utopian – in a creative and dynamic sense; Morris was a dreamer – who laboured actively to inspire; and Morris was a poet of 'exquisite despair' – who challenged existing configurations of power and dedicated his life to the revolutionary transformation of social, political and economic life.

Within this broad claim, Mahamdallie spotlights three areas of Morris's work for special consideration: his anti-imperialism, his critique of work in capitalism and his concern for the environment. The first theme, which runs through Mahamdallie's analysis and is clearly central to his assessment of Morris, paints Morris both as critic of colonialism and jingoism and a genuinely colour-blind campaigner for workers’ solidarity. Morris, Mahamdallie reminds us, championed the cause of migrant workers, acutely sensitive to the exploitation and discrimination they suffered. The second theme, Morris's treatment of work, is discussed in the last chapter of the book, largely through a reading of ‘Useful Work’. Mahamdallie does not explore fully the links between Morris's concept of labour in socialism and his understanding of art, but rightly argues that the idea of voluntary, creative labour was fundamental to his socialist vision. In his discussion of the third area, Morris's political ecology, Mahamdallie does link Morris's interest back to his art and suggests that his profound sense of the destructive power of industrial capitalism turned Morris into a pioneer: quoting John Bellamy Foster, one of the 'formative Green thinkers in the English context' (p. 88).

Mahamdallie is not so much interested in asserting Morris's relevance to modern socialist struggles, but the continuing resonance of his work. The claims are that there are parallels between nineteenth-century socialist struggles and the campaign for global justice and that problems which Morris's identified in Victorian Britain persist today, not that the approach Morris adopted towards their solution was always right. On the contrary, Mahamdallie identifies a number of strategic weaknesses in the positions Morris adopted: notably, the priority he attached to education over organisation, his anti-parliamentarianism and his suspicion of trade unions (pp. 94–6). These judgements are informed by a class analysis of nineteenth-century British politics which runs through all three chapters. One of the strengths of this analysis is that it encourages Mahamdallie to contextualise his treatment of Morris: the book successfully explains the development of the British trade union movement and the rise of the new unionism; discusses the economic crises which helped fuel them and examines important changes in industrial production, in colonisation and political reform. In addition, Morris's views are explored in relation to those of other leading activists: H.M. Hyndman and Eleanor Marx are the two most prominent. The disadvantage is that it encourages Mahamdallie to deliver some unnesse
sarily judgmental pronouncements about Morris’s politics. Some of these are hardly contestable. That Morris would have been a critic of New Labour, for example, is unlikely to excite much comment. That Morris would have given unqualified support to the Russian Revolution is perhaps more questionable and that he was certain that the road to socialism would involve the “dictatorship of the proletariat” (p. 50) is highly contentious. Mahamdallie’s desire to assess Morris’s politics with reference to the class analysis he prefers also encourages him to make claims about the orthodoxy of Morris’s Marxism which seem at times to be overly reductive and at other times distracting. For example, Mahamdallie’s treatment of medievalism in *A Dream of John Ball* is limited by the assumptions he reads into Morris’s understanding of historical materialism; and the discussion of Morris’s ecologism is nearly swamped by a largely irrelevant defence of Marx’s green credentials: the principal claim Mahamdallie wants to make about the pioneering vision of *News From Nowhere* is significantly undermined by the suggestion that Morris merely echoed Marx. (p. 88)

It would be misleading to suggest that Mahamdallie’s book is narrowly sectarian. Mahamdallie certainly follows Morton and Thompson in wanting to re-assert Morris’s commitment to revolutionary socialism and, chastising Morris for this toleration of the anarchists in the League, is quite open about the socialist legacy he wants to defend (the book builds on an article first published in *International Socialism*). But he resists the temptation to narrowly pigeonhole Morris by explicitly signing him up to a party political cause. Moreover, his ability to link the struggles of Victorian socialism to twenty-first century politics adds depth and richness to his account. His obvious enthusiasm for Morris and his knowledge of the period, its literature and politics also make the book highly readable. Although the language of class struggle demands a familiarity with socialist thought which newcomers to Morris studies might lack (and/or find unattractive), the picture of Morris’s socialism which Mahamdallie paints is highly appealing. And the attractiveness of the book should help him find a wide readership.

*Ruth Kinna*


The conflicting dictates of personal and collective fulfilment in class society produce many and complex effects. So much has been clear not only to Socialists over the last two centuries but in all major tendencies of Enlightenment thought. And few lives, surely, can be seen better to exemplify their problematical nature than
that of Robert Cunninghame Graham. Born to inherit the position of laird of an extensive though declining and perpetually struggling Scottish estate (owing to the intricacies of the Scottish class system a significantly ambiguous one, floating – in English terms – somewhere between aristocracy and gentry) he came to inhabit, for the most part of a long and exceptionally active life, that pantheon of traitors to their class which has contributed so much to the history of socialism, and which includes such diverse figures as Fidel Castro, Lenin, Mao Zedong and Clement Attlee.

Two factors – one experiential, the other intellectual – would seem mainly to have informed Graham’s path to revolutionary socialism: the life, struggles and solidarity of the Latin American gauchos whom he came to know initially during their years of decline when, as a youthful adventurer of eighteen, he sought to retrieve the family fortunes abroad; and later the thought and writing of William Morris. Together, they brought him to decades of ceaseless class-war activity – not only as the first declared Socialist in the UK House of Commons (though nominally a Liberal, selected via what now seems a bizarre combination of growing working-class consciousness and inherited deference) during the critical years 1884–9, but also as a militant supporter of Irish independence, of the match-girls and their famous strike, and of countless instances of working-class struggle in the London and Liverpool docks and elsewhere.

Anne Taylor attributes this exceptional activity – which when considered suggests him as combining elements of Byron, T.E. Lawrence (whom he knew), André Malraux and Tam Dalyell (to name but a few) – to an overriding sense of noblesse oblige. But this seems to me much too simple. True, Graham, in moments of exasperation, could vent his spleen upon the ‘cowardly’ working class; but these are at worst occasional irritations, shared with his friend George Bernard Shaw, who originated in the precarious world of the Dublin Protestant petty-bourgeoisie. Undoubtedly, aesthetics played a greater part in Graham’s world-view than in that of many socialists; he detested Texas for instance, but adored Mexico. When he had the opportunity to decorate a residence apart from his native and terminally crumbling Gartmore, as a friend of Whistler and Millais, and, as it seems of, everyone else, he did so in the light and airy style of the 1890’s avant-garde. Morris would have approved (and probably did).

Rather Graham’s political choices would seem to have been the consequence of a rational awareness of the extent of suffering world wide, and its causes. His condemnations of the latter were rarely couched in terms of moral denunciation (a welcome rarity in an age when progressive thinking in Britain was largely dominated by adaptations of Ruskin and Carlyle), but rather turned on contempt for the incompetence and stupidity of the ruling class. (In this connection the author gives us an intriguing and moving account of Graham’s boyhood relationship with his step-grandfather Admiral Katon, whose tales of life aboard ship,
and of the necessary interdependence of all ranks, also affected him profoundly.

The 1880s may in retrospect be seen as the most significant decade of Graham’s remarkably active life. Though not actually a Marxist (like Morris, he eventually read *Capital* in French translation, and met Engels, to their mutual admiration, after Marx’s death), he was informed by Morris (the men of whose Icelandic Sagas he felt had much in common with his *gauchos*) and by the writings of Hyndman and the Social Democratic Federation. On entry into Parliament, it never occurred to him to moderate his views; one wonders at the tolerance of his fellow Liberal MPs (many of them still traditional Whigs) of his ‘class war’ parliamentary declaration – a tolerance, alas, less generally to be observed some one hundred and twenty years later.

The crucial moment of Graham’s career – as indeed of British class politics and society during the later nineteenth century – was to be ‘Bloody Sunday’ of November 1887; the repression of a mass working class demonstration against the imprisonment and alleged torture of an Irish MP, O’Brien, but also against unemployment and government inactivity in an acutely fractious decade. It is tempting to see the event as emblematic of British left-wing activities in both their positive and negative aspects. Certainly it focused the awareness of masses of workers in preparation for the struggles of decades ahead. Severely beaten by the police (to which circumstance, his later supposed eccentricity was often to be attributed), he was rewarded, together with John Burns, with six weeks in Pentonville; a sentence oddly termed ‘lenient’ by Ms Taylor (He subsequently had his tailor make up a convict’s uniform, complete with arrows, and wore it on his return to Parliament).

His friends on the Left come out of the confrontation with, perhaps, less credit; Shaw later recounted, with characteristically exuberant self-denigration, that he had not so much fled the police as ‘skedaddled’, and had not stopped running until he reached that perennial sanctuary of progressives, Hampstead Heath; Morris, for once not present, confined himself, in one of his less glorious moments, to the gloomy prognostication to Graham awaiting trial, that ‘an English prison is torture, and is meant to be so.’ (Though characteristically, Morris was shortly afterwards to express his deep regret at his relative inactivity in the whole affair).

Graham would seem – after not being re-elected in 1889, and at least until 1914 – to have maintained generally cordial and often productive relations with leading political figures to the left of Toryism, from Ben Tillett to Sir Edward Grey. But it is perhaps in his parliamentary period that his most significant interventions were made. His general position was in many ways similar to that later taken by Jean Jaurès and Rosa Luxemburg, a refusal to counterpose reform to revolution, and an assertion of the necessity of the one as a stimulus to the other.
Thus – as the first advocate in Parliament of nationalisation of the mines – he could articulate a penetrating critique of the generation among the workers of an ideology hostile to their interests which precedes Gramsci; his fervent opposition to Bradlaugh’s radical individualism and his advocacy of the Eight Hours Bill, tended to confront, on behalf of the workers, a situation where working-class self-activity was as yet insufficiently developed. And yet – in radical opposition to Morris as to the viability of Parliament as an institution – he was as committed to the notion of the cultural transformation of art, for and by the people – as the mentor with whom he so often disagreed.

Graham was a consequential internationalist; in 1889 he presided over the congress in Paris from which developed the Second International. His last major activity as a Socialist was in opposing war in 1914, and in calling – together with Jaurès, Luxemburg and Keir Hardie – for international general strikes. Yet only a few months later – the dislocation of the code by which he had lived here becomes only too evident – he was, with the rank of colonel, in Uruguay buying horses for the British army. The enterprise reads like a grisly parody of his youthful adventures on the pampas; as the last point of a parabola in which the agent has moved from definition as an individual to recognition of the need for collective subjectivity, and subsequently to acquiescence in the forces of oppression.

Graham’s later politics constitute a depressing litany of the Right – loathing of conscientious objectors and the Russian revolution, complicity in a Scottish nationalist politics considerably infused with reactionary and even Fascist tendencies. Only his penultimate publication of 1933, a lengthy denunciation of Paraguayan dictator Francisco Lopez and his regime, might seem to weigh heavily in the balance against accommodated reaction. And yet, whilst it would plainly be over-simple to separate the politician Graham of pre-1914 from the significant writer of the inter-war years, Ms Taylor’s account suggests, as far as the later period is concerned, a body of narration whose logic, largely concerned with Latin American experience and memory, remains inherently progressive. It certainly seems more substantial than the mere picturesqueness of Graham’s Arabian ‘Greenmantle phase’ as she terms it, with its origins in his involvement, even before 1914, in the murky operation of imperialist rivalry.

It is perhaps to be regretted that Ms Taylor does not consider Graham’s writings – fictional, historical, (semi)-autobiographical – more fully. In this domain, indeed, she shows herself less critically acute than Cedric Watts & Laurence Davies in their Cunningham Graham: a Critical Biography (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979), yet she is also capable of critical insights of great pertinence. Her evocation of the men of the S.D.F. counter-demonstration to the Lord Mayor’s Show in ‘flat caps and shabby bowlers … no one would have dreamed of going bare-headed’, is informed with a generous sympathy appropriate to the best instincts of her subject. Otherwise, whilst noting Graham’s fluency in Scots, she penetrates
the heart of his complications in stressing his difficulties in writing 'the authentic
to writing 'the authentic
voice of working men ... [his] uneasy representation of their speech.' And her account of the loss of discursive power between his elegy for Morris of 1898 and 
that for Keir Hardie of 1915 is powerful and irrefutable.

On the subject of Graham's relationships with women – quite as intriguing and extraordinary as his travel and political experiences – her accounts are 
less focused. His marriage – over decades a semi-detached relationship – was evidently one of true, if unorthodox companionship founded on a mutual propensity for melodrama and Graham's attraction to women not to be trifled with. Gabrielle de la Balmondière (née Caroline Horsfall in Masham, Yorks), it is suggested, married Graham under a false name, after a hidden pregnancy and a brief career in prostitution (though the latter allegation is unjustifiably and somewhat implausibly based only on a story written by Graham himself twenty years after her death). His serial philandering during their period of separation is more believably and briefly referred to; of Gabrielle's extra-marital relationships, we only hear that the radical journalist W.T. Stead 'came on' to her strongly whilst Graham was in jail, but with an outcome which remains unknown.

The couple's periods spent together in the great house of Gartmore on the Lake of Menteith (inland from Stirling), were like nothing so much, it appears, as a Molière comedy, with financial doom perpetually threatening, and Gabrielle – as convinced a revolutionary as her husband – throwing tantrums in the uncertain foreign accent she adopted for most of her life, and beating her Spanish servant and occasional travelling companion, the aptly named Peregrina. But her burial on the Isle of Inchmahome in the Lake gives quite an alternative inflection; with Graham and the old gravedigger rowing the coffin over the lake and together rolling the stone from the grave in the ruined chapel, the scene – the most striking in the whole book – could be straight out of Scott or Stendhal; the culmination of a shared lifestyle, Romantic in much more than the commonplace usage.

Despite some of the criticisms which I have noted, this is a work of fascinating erudition. Ms Taylor has, in addition to the more foreseeable sources, trawled not only through the press of various provincial localities but also through mountains of Scottish legal documents – and contrived to bring their significance alive. Even her occasional digressions – on the Countess Harley Teleki's trip to Egypt, on H.G. Macdonell's report on the Plate Republics, or on Mrs Beeton's opinions on the treatment of typhus – are generally intriguing. Above all, this biography leaves us with an unforgettable realisation of a man who believed that life should be fun – and that such a condition should be available to all.

John E. Coombes

Paul Delany has written a detailed and sympathetic account of the largely unhappy life of the novelist George Gissing (1857–1903). It is a remarkable story. Born in Wakefield, the eldest son of a successful pharmacist who became a leading figure in local Liberal politics, Gissing was an academically gifted boy and young man, who won a scholarship to Owens College in Manchester. A promising career was cut short as the result of his falling in love with Nell Harrison, a seventeen-year-old prostitute from nearby Shropshire with what would now be seen as a serious drink problem. In order to keep Nell in funds, Gissing resorted to stealing from his fellow-students, was caught, and sentenced to one month in prison with hard labour. After this start, life was likely to be difficult. Soon after leaving prison, he went to America, but found the people he met too loud and ‘hopelessly vulgar’, and soon returned to England. He settled in London, trying to make a living by writing and private teaching as described in his novel *New Grub Street*, and brought Nell to London so that they could marry and live together. Nell proved incapable of overcoming her alcoholism to become the companion Gissing hoped to make of her; the relationship became increasingly painful to them both. Much of their married life was spent apart, and Nell died in grim poverty in Lower Marsh early in 1888.

Despite the difficulties of his life, Gissing succeeded in publishing *Workers in the Dawn* (1880), *The Unclassed* (1884), *Demos* (1885), *Thyrza* (1887) and *The Nether World* (1889), all conveying a sense of the grimness of lower-class life in contemporary London. They were received with some critical respect, but the financial returns were poor. Fortunately, Gissing was supported by the Positivist thinker Frederic Harrison, whose sons he taught privately. The circumstances of his life remained difficult. With a kind of sad inevitability, on the death of Nell, Gissing turned to another unstable working-class woman, Edith Underwood, marriage to whom was to prove equally unfortunate and unhappy; two sons were born to the couple, the elder of whom was brought up by Gissing’s two unmarried sisters, the younger on a farm in Cornwall, after his mother had been diagnosed as insane and sent to a private asylum. Gissing was not close to either of them, but managed to ensure a public-school education for them at Gresham’s. Somehow he managed to keep his literary career going, and established positive relations with a number of his fellow writers, including Meredith, Hardy, James, Conrad and, most intimately, H.G. Wells; he also had a number of supportive middle-class women friends.

Gissing’s third significant relationship was with a Frenchwoman of this class,
Gabrielle Fleury, who admired and translated some of his work. Although this was a happier relationship in many ways, the fact that they could not marry forced Gissing to live in France, which he did not really enjoy, especially as he found his wife’s invalid mother unsympathetic and dictatorial. His later novels included *New Grub Street* (1891), *The Odd Women* (1893), dealing sympathetically with the problems of women’s lives in and reissued by Virago in 1980, and *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1903), in which a middle-aged writer withdraws from London to live happily and alone in the Devon countryside, away from the miseries of the city. He also wrote book on Dickens in 1898 and a travel book, *By the Ionian Sea*, in 1901. He died of pneumonia near St. Jean Pied-de-Port at the early age of 46, having embarked on *Veranilda*, an ambitious historical novel about the late Roman Empire (he had long been an admirer of Gibbon).

In his thoughtful book on Dickens, Gissing remarks that Dickens was a middle-class Radical whose undoubted sympathy for the sufferings of the poor did not make him think that they were capable of creating a better future for themselves; in this sense, Gissing emphatically denied that Dickens was a democrat. For Dickens, no believer in political solutions to social problems, the only hope lay in a renewed Christian philanthropy, shown in the novels through such figures as the Cheeryble brothers and John Jarndyce. Since Gissing did not believe in Christianity, and was highly critical of his sisters’ conventional piety, his political view was even bleaker than Dickens’s. He was sharply aware from his own experience of the sufferings of the poor, but came to believe that they were an inevitable part of the modern human condition; perhaps too the poor were able to find pleasure in activities like public-house drinking that would have been objectionable to the more sensitive and fastidious. But he had no time at all for conventional society. Thus he denounced the Queen’s Golden Jubilee as ‘the most gigantic organized exhibition of fatuity, vulgarity and blatant blackguardism on record’ (quoted p.128) – a description Morris would surely have enjoyed.

Gissing regretted Morris’s decision to become active in politics, which he saw – rather as Burne-Jones did – as an error likely to bring Morris down into the lower depths of confusion and unhappiness. Delany tells us that he admired ‘both Morris’s poetry and the values of the Arts and Crafts movement’ (p. 91), though he gives no evidence for the latter evaluation. In a letter he stated with apparent sympathy that ‘Younger men (like W. Morris) are turning from artistic work to social agitation, just because they fear that art will be crushed out of the world as things are’. (quoted p. 91) But a little later he told his brother, ‘I grieve to see Morris in the companionship of the Secular Review, and of men like Ingersoll and the rest. It is deplorable. I confess I get more and more aristocratic in my leanings, and cannot excuse faults of manner in consideration of the end.’ (quoted p. 92) So in September 1885, he expressed his indignation over Morris’s having allowed himself to get into the position of being charged in court with
assaulting a policeman: ‘alas, what the devil is such a man doing in that galley? It is painful to me beyond expression. Why cannot he write poetry in the shade? He will inevitably coarsen himself in the company of ruffians.’ (quoted p. 93)

Gissing’s disagreement with Morris found expression in the novel Demos, A Story of English Socialism in 1885. Indeed, Delany claims interestingly that ‘Gissing’s explicitly political phase, beginning with Demos, can be framed as a debate with William Morris’. (p. 91) In Delany’s view, Morris, ‘possessed by a dream of fellowship with the workers’, saw them ‘as types rather than individuals’, while Gissing, being well aware of ‘the mixture of characters to be found in the slums’ and concerned to distinguish between the worthy and the unworthy poor, had an ‘eye for difference that enlivens his brilliant account of the socialist meeting in chapter 6 of Demos.’ (p. 92) The account of the meeting is grimly satirical, and perhaps does not do justice to the seriousness of these occasions. While writing the book, Gissing attended a meeting of the Socialist League in what he called the ‘shed’ next to Kelmscott House in November 1885. He does not seem to have recorded the speaker or the subject, but was evidently greatly taken by May, then aged twenty-three, whom he described vividly: ‘There was Miss Morris – the secretary of the Branch – talking familiarly with working men. She is astonishingly handsome, pure Greek profile, with hair short on her neck; wore a long fur-trimmed cloak, and Tam O’Shanter cap of velvet. Unmistakably like her mother, – the origin of Rossetti’s best type.’ (p. 94) (It would appear that Gissing was not personally acquainted with any of the Morris family).

He later introduced an idealised May as a character in the novel, in the person of Stella Westlake. She is the wife rather than daughter of the wealthy socialist who is often seen as a Morris figure – though it seems to me that Mr. Westlake, a gentle idealist and writer, is much more like Harrison than Morris. The beautiful and dreamy Mrs. Westlake is presented as a kind of distant Muse of the socialists, not at all the light in which Gissing had seen May at the Socialist League meeting. Delany quotes a remarkable passage about Mrs. Westlake: ‘The white swan’s down at her throat – she was perfectly attired – made the skin above resemble rich-hued marble, and indeed to gaze at her long was to be impressed as by the sad loveliness of a supreme work of art’. (quoted p. 94) Politically, as Delany says, ‘Gissing mistrusted alliances between aspiring workers and conscience-stricken middle-class intellectuals’ (p. 95) and he conveys his mistrust in Demos. But this can hardly be said to be the novel’s main concern. Mr. Westlake ends the novel as serenely as he enters it, while the reader’s attention is directed for the most part to the story of Richard Mutimer.

Mutimer is a young working-class London socialist of considerable potential, who unexpectedly inherits a large sum of money. He decides to use the money to further the socialist cause by developing an industrial colony in a beautiful valley in the Midlands, following the example of Robert Owen. However, he gradu-
ally moves away from his early ideals; he marries an upper-middle-class young woman, Adela Waltham (who wrongly believes that she has been betrayed by Hubert Eldon, an admirer of her own class); becomes impatient with the failure of his industrial colony; and asserts himself in the socialist movement in increasingly arrogant ways. By this time, somewhat melodramatically, a new will has been discovered, restoring the property to Eldon, for whom it was originally intended. This leads to an interesting argument between the Adela and Hubert about what should happen when the industrial colony is abandoned. Adela asks Hubert whether he could not arrange for it to continue, providing necessary work for those who have moved there. He refuses: ‘I will replant the orchards and mark out the fields as before’. (Ch. XXVI) To Adela’s question, ‘Then you think grass and trees of more importance than human lives?’ Hubert replies, ‘I had rather say that I see no value in human lives in a world from which grass and trees have vanished … The ruling motive of my life is the love of beautiful things …’ At this stage in the novel the argument is left unresolved, but Hubert soon exerts his power. The workers are offered a month’s wages, and told that they may ‘inhabit their present abodes for a fortnight. After that they no longer had right of tenancy’. (Ch. XIX) The valley is restored to its former beauty; if Gissing may be seen as something of an environmentalist in his concern here, he is at the aesthetic end of environmentalism. Adela returns to Hubert, and the last words of the novel assure us that with him ‘she had achieved her womanhood’.

Mutimer’s story moves to a disastrous conclusion. His defiance of some of the most aggressive of his fellow-socialists at an acrimonious meeting culminates in a powerfully described riot, in which Mutimer is killed by a rock thrown from the violent mob. Mutimer is not treated without sympathy as he tries to cope with life in circumstances for which he is totally unprepared, but it is implied that his working-class background makes him an unsuitable husband for a lady. Moreover, the country vicar, Mr. Wyvern, who appears as the voice of mature reflection – he had once been a kind of socialist, but is now older and wiser – expresses the view that the poor are no unhappier than the rich: ‘Go along the poorest street in the East End of London, and you will hear as much laughter, witness as much gaiety, as in any thoroughfare of the West … A being of superior intelligence regarding humanity with an eye of perfect understanding would discover that life was enjoyed every bit as much in the slum as in the palace’. (Ch. XXIX) Delany comments reasonably that this argument ‘doesn’t take into account that the poor could be better fed and housed and still have their old enjoyments’. (p. 96) Since this book is a biography, Delany sees it as his responsibility to try to convey an accurate idea of Gissing’s views rather than to support or contest them. His final comment on Demos is that ‘Gissing was not writing a treatise, but a novel; he wanted to show how different people lived out their political beliefs, and to understand his own position in the political arena. He still felt pity for those
crushed by the world... But his own solution had to be some kind of escape, begin-
ning with psychic detachment from the worldly struggle.’ (p. 98) He particularly
and justifiably praises the description of Manor Park cemetery, where one of the
working-class characters is buried, as ‘one of Gissing’s great set-pieces’. (p. 98)
This biography (which contains a splendidly detailed index) enables
us to see quite how necessary it was for the in-many-ways-unfortunate Giss-
ing to seek detachment rather than commitment, though we can only won-
der about the price that his
unction may have paid for this. In his Introduction,
Delany quotes the remark of George Orwell in 1946 that Gissing was ‘perhaps
the best novelist England has produced’. (quoted p. ix) This is hardly a claim
to gain much support today, and Delany himself does not try to make
it. Instead he gives a full and sympathetic account of a man whose ‘obsess-
siveness and emotional rigidity limited the use he could make of his remark-
able intelligence.’ (p. xi) Gissing’s story can be seen as an example of just how
wasteful late-nineteenth-century society could be of its human potential.

Peter Faulkner

1–59213–922–1, $25.95.

This volume is misleadingly titled since it collects seven articles on different top-
ics, first published between 1978 and 1995, but they do include a two-part ‘Issues
in the Historiography of Communism’. Michael E. Brown is a sociologist, not
an historian, and no fewer than four items first appeared in a journal, *Socialism
and Democracy*, of which he was co-founder ‘more than twenty years ago’ (p. vii).
He is still living the Cold War – ‘the American hegemonistic project called “the
Cold War”’ (p. 97) – by which he is obsessed, and the only Communist Party he
is concerned with is, disappointingly, the CPUSA. More particularly it is Theo-
dore Draper and his pioneering *The Roots of American Communism* (1957) which
monopolise his attention. Brown ‘theorizes’ or ‘conceptualizes’ anything and
everything – and does he love placing words within inverted commas! His favour-
ite, other than ‘theory’, is ‘immanent’, his publisher remarking that he ‘develops
the idea of history as an immanent feature of human activities…. .’

Brown reprints a short piece on *Society against the State* (1977), the impor-
tant survey of the statelessness of the Amerindians by the French anarchist
anthropologist, Pierre Clastres. He is unpredictably generous in his assess-
ment, presumably originally a review, apparently attracted like some other con-
temporary Marxists to anarchist utopianism (for me an alarming tendency).
Morris is never mentioned by Brown and the chapter most likely to interest readers of this journal is ‘History and History’s Problem’, devoted to E.P. Thompson’s ‘The Crime of Anonymity’. Although Thompson wrote nothing finer, this essay is not widely known since it was included in the collective volume, *Albion’s Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England* (1975) and has never been reprinted other than (and then regrettably without the lengthy appendix, ‘A Sampler of Letters’) in *The Essential E.P. Thompson* (New York: The New Press, 2001), edited by Dorothy Thompson. (This revealing selection extracts from *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* ‘The “Anti-Scrape”’, ‘The River of Fire’ and naturally the great 1976 Postscript.) Yet Brown’s analysis of ‘The Crime of Anonymity’ cannot be recommended. He fusses for pages over Thompson’s third paragraph and finally turns at similar length to the concluding paragraph. He has little feel for the history of the period, 1750–1830, and mistakes the *London Gazette*, from which Thompson draws the texts of most of his anonymous, threatening letters, for a newspaper. He admires Thompson as a great historian, but is uneasy with the exuberance of his writing. He not unreasonably claims Thompson as a founder of ‘cultural studies’ and even more reasonably dwells on the congruence between sociology and Thompson’s kind of social history, but is seemingly unaware of Thompsonian contempt for cultural studies and rejection of the discipline of sociology. He does, though, note unhappily Thompson’s assault in ‘The Poverty of Theory’ on Louis Althusser and the Althusserians. If Thompson himself had been the reviewer of this book he would surely have thundered against French theory as ‘conceptualized’ by Brown.

Brown cites the final sentences of ‘The Crime of Anonymity’:

> It would now seem, Richard Cobb tells us, that half the valets of pre-Revolutionary Paris, who followed the nobility servilely through the suave salons, were nourishing in their reveries anticipations of the guillotine falling upon the white and powdered necks about them. But, if the guillotine had never been set up, the reveries of these valets would remain unknown. And historians would be able to write of the deference, or even consensus, of the ancien régime. The deference of eighteenth-century England may have been something like that, and these letters its reveries.

‘This’, according to Brown, ‘seems more precise and focused, less moralizing, and somehow more epistemological than Thompson’s earlier self-evaluation’ – in the hugely admired passage from the preface to *The Making of the English Working Class*:

> I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the ‘obsolete’ hand-loom weaver, the ‘utopian’ artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of
posterity. Their crafts and traditions may have been (dying. Their hos-
tility to the new industrialism may have been backward-looking. Their
communitarian ideals may have been) fantasies. Their insurrectionary
conspiracies may have been foolhardy. But they lived through these
times of acute social disturbance, and we did not. Their aspirations were
valid in terms of their own experience; and, if they were casualties of his-
tory, they remain, condemned in their own lives, as casualties.

Brown comments further:
Thompson sought to inculcate in his reader the sense that these stock-
ingers, croppers, and weavers were human and lived society as we are and
do. But his own passion overwhelmed the effort … (pp. 61–2)

What indeed would Thompson have made of all this, complete with Brown’s
bungling butchery of his resplendent prose?

David Goodway


This is an impressively wide-ranging, well-documented and intellectually
demanding book, whose ‘cast list’ reads as a *tour de force* of Western thought, from
the late eighteenth century to the present day. Here are Isaiah Berlin, Edmund
Burke, Thomas Carlyle, Milton Friedman, Friedrich Hayek, William Hazlitt,
David Hume, Immanuel Kant, John Maynard Keynes (*et père* John Neville),
Thomas Kuhn, Thomas Malthus (although here, curiously, indicated only by
his second name, Robert), Alfred Marshall, Friedrich Nietzsche, David Ricardo,
Lionel Robbins, Joseph Schumpeter, Adam Smith (of course), C.P. Snow, and
Ludwig Wittgenstein, with walk-on parts for everyone from Aristotle to Mary
Wollstonecraft. The main characters are, however, Jeremy Bentham, Samuel
Taylor Coleridge, John Stuart Mill, and William Wordsworth (in his early, radic-
al *Lyrical Ballads* incarnation), and the main thesis is to use to the Romantics’
(mainly Coleridge’s) critique of utilitarianism in order to develop a new kind of
economics, as sometime embarked upon, but apparently never fully realised, by
Mill, ‘the principle (*sic*) protagonist’ (p. 31). As the subtitle suggests, the main
way such change might be effected is by introduction into economics of the
romantic sensibility, and in particular imagination, in order to counter the bale-
ful influence of utilitarianism, and its over-preoccupation with quantification,
commodification, and above all mechanism.

The world is presently divided into two types of economic animal: *Homo economicus*, the archetypal, Gradgrind, ‘economic man’ who deals only in facts, prices, costs and static equilibrium, and who is motivated only by self-interest, and *Homo sociologicus*, the creature of societal rules, roles and norms, who is strongly committed to the collective and the communal above the individual, but who is therefore the stiffer of creativity. Consequently, the main response to the current economic crisis is to call for *H. sociologicus* to rein in the wilder excesses of *H. economicus* by greater regulation. But what the author proposes is recognition of a third species (or in fact a third variety of the human psyche), *Homo romanticus*, the Romantic Economist of the title, who acknowledges both necessity and desire, who seeks to reconcile creativity with efficiency, and who employs imagination in order to transcend the restrictions of the utilitarian calculus (recognise anyone?). Finally, what is then proposed, is a merging of these three subspecies in order to develop a new kind of economics – another ‘Third Way’ – in which capitalism is reformed in order more fully to incorporate all three aspects of ‘human nature’. In this way, it is claimed, it will be rendered more humane, sustainable and caring, but also more creative and innovative, and will identify even more ways of creating new and undreamed of sources of wealth, but in ways which recognise the true nature of human beings, and of the modern, dynamic economy.

The details of romantic economics, as Bronk describes them, will appeal to greens, but not to Marxists, or to any other kind of Enlightenment thinker, in that the local, the regional, and the national are valued over and above the international. Because of the importance of history, language and culture, one of the key lessons of romantic economics is that there is no ‘universal pattern’ (p. 86), ‘no universally applicable answers to the practical or ethical problems of life’. (p. 94). Such ideas found their way into Romanticism mainly via Coleridge in England, and Goethe in Central Europe, both of whom were strongly influenced by the now neglected Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803), a writer whose work is described by Clarence Glacken, in that wonderful book *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*, as ‘a glorious sunset’ (p. 543) on the ancient view of nature now largely replaced by modernity. And this perhaps may indicate a flaw in the author’s own arguments, in that the main cast-list of the book (as indicated above) consists mainly of conservative writers such as Burke, Carlyle, Hume, Malthus, Schumpeter and Smith, and that for his key romantic ideas, he has consulted mainly the ‘Lake’ school of English Romanticism (Coleridge, Southey, Wordsworth), whereas had he given more emphasis to the ‘Cockneys’ (Blake, Hazlitt, Keats, Shelley) he might have obtained a different answer.

However, there is another, newer source of romantic economics, one which would probably have appealed to Coleridge, namely the ‘New Biology’ of Complexity Theory, which sees nature (and now, it seems, the economy) not as a system
which works by achieving the inherently manageable static equilibrium on which even the most sophisticated modern economic models – including the ‘post Neo-Classical Endogenous Growth Theory’ (transl. ‘something for nothing’) beloved of our current Prime Minister – are based, but as a dynamic, creative system operating ‘at the edge of chaos’, and possessing ‘emergent’ properties which cannot be predicted from those of their components. Such systems are more like living organisms, are inherently unpredictable, and therefore, despite all attempts so far, unmanageable, as many economists are currently learning, mainly at our expense. But herein perhaps lies a second flaw in the argument, for whereas there is some discussion of the applicability of Complexity Theory to economics (but Fritjof Capra does it much better in The Hidden Connections), there is precious little about the applicability or otherwise to the Earth of an economic system (however caring, imaginative and sensitive) which would still operate on the basis of limitless growth in a complex and inherently unpredictable finite nature. Also, although there is some discussion of those ‘incommensurable values’ which utilitarianism fails to comprehend, there is a general failure to distinguish between value, which is something an item possesses, and values, which are abstract ideas developed by humans. Thus, we all may hold inherently incommensurable values, but these may or may not concern the value or otherwise of commodities, services, or (another thing about which the book says nothing) of nature itself.

Therefore, although the book does consider the implications of Complexity Theory for economics, the implications of even a reformed capitalism for complex nature are ignored. In this respect, it remains true to its aims – to reform capitalism so that it takes account of new economic and ecological ideas; but as someone once remarked, the idea is not just to interpret the world, but to change it. Also, a more creative capitalism is surely potentially even more of a threat to humanity and to nature than the old kind, were that possible. Therefore, although much is made of Schumpeter’s ‘creative destruction’ as a model for romantic economics, what capitalism, creative or otherwise, actually destroys, are people’s lives, the self-reliant communities they once lived in, the stable, traditional societies they came from, and vast swathes of the surrounding nature, all in pursuit of flexibility, creativity and innovation. Count me out.

Last, a couple of editorial gripes. Although the book is impressively documented – of nearly four hundred pages, nigh on eighty are devoted to end-notes and references (an editor’s dream!) – and large sections of it, including a whole chapter, are devoted to John Stuart Mill, nowhere is there any mention of Harriet Taylor, even though it is she who is most often associated with the least utilitarian aspects of Mill’s writings. Second, as a scientist, I would, in future, be grateful if people from an arts/humanities background are going to use Linnaeus’s binomial taxonomic system – to which I have no objection – they use it properly. Thus, the correct taxonomic name for our species is not
homo sapiens (or even Homo Sapiens as the BBC loves to put it), but Homo sapiens, and the terms Homo economicus, Homo sociologicus and Homo romanticus should have appeared in that form throughout the book, and they do not. If it was good enough for the Baron von Linné, it’s good enough for the rest of us.

There is, as you may by now have guessed, no mention of ‘our dear Morris’ in this book, although that may be fair enough, as it deals mainly with the early Romantic response to utilitarianism and the rest of the Enlightenment. There is only passing reference to Marx, who was apparently ‘mistaken’ about the tendency of capital to eliminate local and national differences. As indicated, some of Morris's early mentors – the Carlyle of Past and Present – do receive a mention, as does Ruskin and his ‘chemical’ (organic?) critique of utilitarianism in Unto this Last, but, by and large, this book deals with that epoch of romanticism all trace of which Morris left behind when he crossed the river of Wre. And this, as ever, comes to the nub of what I would say to the author of such a book, which is, that if you really want to understand what to do about modern capitalism and its inherent unpredictability, and what it does to human lives, human cultures, and to nature, then ‘Have a read of News from Nowhere!’

Patrick O’Sullivan


A book of little over two hundred pages called Contemporary Craft immediately sets itself a difficult task: the diversity and complexity of contemporary craft practice is a broad topic. Racz is interested in craft ‘that is the outcome of particular ideologies and lifestyles’ (p. 1) and bases her analysis on two areas of craft practice – ‘traditional utilitarian craft’ and ‘cutting-edge craft’.

The book is structured around a series of contrasts and parallels between urban and rural craft and the craft traditions of England and America. English craft is seen as having its roots in the ideas and work of William Morris and the development of these ideas through figures such as William Lethaby and Philip Webb. Racz’s brief account of craft inspired by English rural life jumps from Eric Gill to the revival of interest in craft during the 1970s, which supports her earlier statement that ‘it was not until the 1970s that crafts began to gain an important voice in England.’ (p.8) She follows this sketch with brief discussions of makers whom she sees as working within the Morris tradition such as potters at Winchcombe pottery in Somerset and Hart Gold and Silversmiths who make objects in The Old Silk mill at Chipping Camden, inspired by the work of C. R. Ashbee. Her discussion of Winchcombe includes a brief
analysis of a jug made by Mike Finch: she then builds on this with an account of certain potters working within this tradition who see repetitive throwing as a meditative activity, which she links to ideas connected to phenomenology and tacit knowledge. This may sound a bit overwhelming but is in fact done very skilfully and her analysis throughout the book is pertinent and well informed.

Racz finds an interesting parallel to English rural craft in the ‘artisan tradition’ in Western Massachusetts, where she sees the three most important influences as the Shakers, the early settlers, and the English Arts and Crafts movement. The countryside was still a crucial influence but the ways in which it was perceived were, according to the author, more diverse than the pervasive myths of the ‘cosy English countryside’. Instead ‘rugged individualism in the face of adversity’ (p. 37) became a defining idea of what it meant to be American and importantly ‘whereas the myths in England were developed by an educated elite, those in America have grown from the socially more egalitarian basis of the family farm and an economy sustained through those units’. (p. 37) The idea that craft arose in this way is apparently echoed in contemporary attitudes: ‘all Americans realize the central role that useful craft had in transforming the wilderness into the civilization that they recognize’. (pp. 37–8)

Urban craft in England is represented by the generation of makers which followed Bernard Leach. Racz discusses the influence of European modernism on makers such as the silversmith Michael Rowe, and examines the contradictions in the production of hand-made objects which seem to embody a machine aesthetic. This strand of recent English craft is portrayed as linked to architecture and the urban environment, a decisive shift from the earlier tradition and its preoccupation with the countryside. The other theme she detects in contemporary English craft is the idea of the flâneur, and the development of this stream of thought in Walter Benjamin, the Cubists and Dada. These influences are seen as important in the work of both Lucy Casson and Grayson Perry, both of whom use imagery plucked from urban settings in their work. Her use of Perry is symptomatic of a work which is not concerned with definitions of craft: although his work is often craft-based, the sphere within which he operates is definitely fine art – after all, he won the Turner prize not the Jerwood.

The author’s knowledge of contemporary and recent makers is impressive and readers are likely to come across objects which are both fascinating and unfamiliar. A spectacular example is Jan Yager’s Rainbow’s End Collar made from crack cocaine caps and insulin syringes found on the street, which draws ironically upon Native American traditions for its design. Equally captivating and much more beautiful (in a conventional sense) is Jennifer Trask’s Wunderkammer Necklace which combines traditional jewellery materials with shed snakeskin and dragonfly wings which the maker found in the Hudson River valley where she lives.

The emphasis in the book is firmly on crafts since the 1960s, but careful
attention is paid to the roots of the tradition from the late nineteenth century to the First World War. Whilst this is useful it does leave something of a gap during the mid twentieth century: in effect the author jumps from Arts and Crafts to Postmodernism without discussing the makers of the modernist tradition in any detail. Admittedly this is not the subject of the book, but does make the narrative a little unbalanced. Another way the book is perhaps a little too simplistic is in its opposition between the ‘vernacular’ craft and urban craft. One of the interesting complexities of mid twentieth-century craft is its importance within British modernism – for example some studio pottery of the 1930s and 1940s can be comfortably considered both vernacular and modern. A similar tendency can be seen in the Arts and Crafts movement: both Morris & Co. and the Guild of Handicraft produced some objects which were sophisticated and urbane and others which were earthy and vernacular.

The concise nature of this book could be considered both a strength and a weakness. The author’s ability to condense a series of very complex situations into succinct chapters is impressive but this does make for a rather dense read and at times there are passages where the reader might feel the need to have read most of the books in the intimidating bibliography in order to obtain a good grasp of what she is really getting at. In similar vein, thirty-six pages of notes and bibliography is arguably excessive in a short book. Both of these issues point to the fact that this is less of a survey of contemporary craft than an attempt to pick out key themes illustrated by specific case studies. Within these parameters the book is very successful and will provide many interested in contemporary craft with a framework through which to approach this complex subject.

The book is light and pleasing in its production values but the absence of colour illustrations is frustrating, though perhaps no surprise in a relatively inexpensive volume. The author discusses many objects which are not illustrated at all. I achieved some consolation by reading the book in conjunction with Google image search: many of the absent relevant images can be viewed on the Internet. The writing is lively and erudite. An enthusiasm for the subject and a conviction that contemporary craft is both significant and beneficial pervades the book allowing Racz to claim that craft is ‘arguably now more important than at any time since the industrial revolution.’

Jim Cheshire

This dense but scholarly tome provides a refreshingly new approach to a subject variably covered by a wide range of publications. The author is honorary professor at the School of World Art Studies & Museology at the University of East Anglia, Norwich. He is a respected and well-published historian of nineteenth-century architecture whose research has always balanced traditional studies of the arts with an overview of contemporary life, nowadays defined rather grandly as ‘design and material culture’. This book departs from many previous studies on the history of domestic decoration by concentrating on the development of interior design in its widest sense, not through specific styles, periods or types of furnishing, but judged through the work and words of the main exponents – the architects, designers and makers who led the way, and how these were interpreted and presented by the retailer and consumer.

Concentrating on western décor from the 1800s to the mid 1890s, revivalism is the recurring theme throughout the many pages of the book. However, there is an initial warning that images can often deceive, especially when studying an age in which technology provided for the first time a mass of illustrations – photographs, colour prints, advertisements and printed matter of all types – most of which were distorted or ‘interpreted’ not by the designers but those with a vested interest – producers, retailers and consumers. The author believes that a more reliable indication comes from a rounded study of contemporary written accounts and it is from this that a ‘new, more abstract terminology of form and colour, light and dark’ for the period was identified. This approach is not new. Literature and sociological aspects of society have been an important part of the study of design for decades, but the range of sources used in this book and the author’s elucidation make this an important publication. For the purposes of the Journal, William Morris plays a contributory role in the book as one of the most devoted revivalists of his day (the concept of Red House is described here as ‘relaxed medievalism’). However it was as ‘a new type of designer-guru’ as promulgated through his lectures, that Muthesius believes his greatest influence as a decorator was felt.

Muthesius freely admits that he is not the first to attempt a history of interior design in the west, yet his approach is different. The most comprehensive accounts to date are Mario Praz’s *An Illustrated History of Interior Design; Pompeii to Art Nouveau* (1964) and Peter Thornton’s *Authentic Décor, The Domestic Interior 1620–1920* (1984). Both evolved a standard of comparative scholarship using a wide international range of images. In Praz’s case his overriding interests were literary, whereas Thornton, as a curator and furniture historian, based his conclusions on the visual, dismissing as gross exaggeration the theory that images distort history. Both books covered a much longer period of time than the nineteenth century but were wide-ranging in their view of the west, surveying large tranches of Europe and North America.

Muthesius is more selective in his choice of countries and it is this aspect of
the book which is most valuable but also problematic. The book is rich in new material concerning German and Austrian interiors in particular, and goes a considerable way to make amends for a general ignorance of historical design in these countries by other parts of Europe, the inevitable yet regrettable result of twentieth-century political conflict and warfare. The overwhelming influence of German and Austrian design on the Modern Movement is now internationally acknowledged, but still little is known in non-German speaking countries about what happened there before the opening of the Wiener Werkstatte and the setting up of the Bauhaus in Weimar, for instance. Recent museum exhibitions and publications on nineteenth-century styles (including historicism, Art Nouveau and the Arts and Crafts Movement) have included the work of German-speaking countries, yet a rounded and comprehensive look at how a large and powerful section of Europe lived during the major part of the nineteenth century has been largely ignored until now.

A definition of the qualities which made up the perfect nineteenth-century home and the terminology used to describe these, plays a significant part in the author’s discourses. ‘The Poetic Home’ of the title was a popular nineteenth-century catchphrase which tantalisingly suggested the importance of both character and atmosphere, but comfort was the most enduring quality. A comparison of the English word with *gemutlich*, the nearest equivalent in German, show how much more complex yet expressive the latter is, encompassing cosiness and amiability at the same time. Furthermore, other German terms for the domestic such as *gesamtkunstwerk*, which describes a totally designed interior, have nowadays slipped into the international vocabulary of the design historian in preference to a much longer explanation.

Whereas an extensive survey of nineteenth-century German interior design is fascinating and much needed and the range of illustrations superb, the book falls short of its aim to cover the West as a whole and this proves its weakest point. The claim that much common ground is shared in the decoration of western homes is certainly true, as is the supposition that from the 1890s a more widely accepted global style was developing, but it was frequently the less common, more novel features of international design that had the greatest impact overall. Whilst French design clearly dominated fashionable Europe until the last quarter of the century, it is Britain and particularly Germany which dominate his book. There is little or no consideration of Russia, Scandinavian or the Mediterranean countries, for instance, and very little on developments in North America. A rough count of illustrations in the first quarter of the book is revealing as thirty-four are devoted to Germany, twenty-six to Britain, twenty-four to France, five to the US and one is Austrian.

Minor quibbles concern the frequent use of inverted commas around many well-used words such as ‘art’, ‘design’ and ‘poetic’ in the early chapters of the
book. Although correctly signifying a definition, or use of the word in a different context, these are so numerous that they distract from what would be a good read. This also applies to manufactured expressions such as ‘a hierarchy of decorum’ and ‘the materiality of textiles’. Their meaning usually becomes clear on a second reading but they lack finesse in a book in which definition is paramount and have neither the clarity nor effectiveness which was intended. Despite these minor criticisms, the book provides not only an important new contribution to scholarship on nineteenth-century interior design but is thought provoking and challenging in its methodology. It will be a significant addition to the shelves of anyone interested in nineteenth-century design, not just interiors.

Linda Parry


Addressing a challengingly wide remit, this attractive publication investigates a range of international schemes surrounding the common theme of the power of decoration within a constructed space. Craft can be read as utopian, decorative and feminine, but it can also be controlling, in that it can define the space which it locates. In roughly chronological order, well-known arts-and-crafts historians, including Annette Carruthers, Elizabeth Cumming, Jim Cheshire and Tanya Harrod consider the role played by decoration within the constructed interior. The theories of Owen Jones are convincingly used in order to demonstrate ways in which nineteenth-century design reformers and architects considered the importance of connecting craft, interior design and architectural space: ‘Decorative Arts arise from, and should properly be attendant upon, Architecture.’ (p. 1) By the mid century, the case was being made that craft should be involved with architecture from the outset. A particular scheme selected for comment was the effect of technology on crafts exhibited at the Great Exhibition of 1851. Gottfried Semper and Le Corbusier held similar views, believing that craft and interior design were analogous to ornament.

John Potvin’s chapter explores the introduction of the Turkish bath into Britain during the 1850s, arguing that interior design is seen alongside the way in which male culture interacts within this space. Functional yet luxurious, the Jermyn Street Turkish bath is taken as a case study for representing the epitome of truly Oriental-styled design. Designed and executed by the architect G. Somers Clarke, it offered an ‘authentic’ experience of exoticism,
prompted by the recent Great Exhibition which had highlighted oriental ornamentation in design. The bath’s functionalism was nevertheless dictated by an aesthetic principle, that it should be a ‘thing of beauty’. Surface decoration included tiles, mosaics and marbles, while Persian and Turkish carpets and starry stained-glass windows added to the overall effect of the exotic.

Jim Cheshire articulates the transformation of space through craft, particularly in relation to church furnishings and how the expanding range of products such as stained glass, encaustic tiles and embroidery transformed the nineteenth-century ecclesiastical interior. Between 1835 and 1875 alone, 3,765 Anglican churches were consecrated, having been either newly or substantially rebuilt, demonstrating the demand caused by economic growth and the rising popularity of the Oxford Movement. It was this movement which had a profound impact on the establishment of the Gothic Revival and corresponding interest in the medieval, pre-Reformation church. A.W.N. Pugin was at the forefront of the highly decorated interior, made possible by the wealth of Victorian England. Two specific Revival buildings examined in detail are St. Ethelreda’s Church, West Quantoxhead, Somerset, and All Saints, Nocton, Lincolnshire. Both examples illustrate ways in which survival of craft processes, either from specialist local makers, or from large manufacturers who could furnish an entire church, profoundly affected the decorative schemes of church interiors. A specific example of an ecclesiastical space is addressed by Joseph McBrinn when he examines the decoration of Belfast Anglican Cathedral. McBrinn argues that there is a gendered authorship at work in this space, although the significant contribution made by women has been obscured over time.

Melsetter House in Orkney, built during 1898–1901, is a relatively little-known Arts and Crafts house, yet it provides an excellent case study of ideas, architecture and decoration from a period when British design was the inspiration for the worldwide Arts and Crafts revival. Designed by William Richard Lethaby for Thomas and Theodosia Middlemore, Melsetter is a secular space which contains a wealth of symbolism. Annette Carruthers analyses both the functionality and the decoration of the building which Lethaby considered to be his best house. Based on Gothic principles, the layout and hierarchy of rooms is similar to that of Philip Webb’s Standen. The furniture was designed by Lethaby, or by Morris and Company, and many of the furnishings are products of the Morris business. May Morris visited Melsetter, assisting Theodosia Middlemore with dyeing and weaving the blue woollen curtains during the 1920s.

Theodosia Middlemore was also a skilled embroiderer, and had ordered several items from Morris and Company, including a dress panel, an alms bag and a door curtain. This curtain was in the Fruit Garden pattern, designed by May Morris, and is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum. Also in the house was the
Acanthus textile, designed by William Morris and embroidered by Jane Morris. On May’s visit in 1902 she commented on its ‘looking delightfully delicate and suitable’. (p. 67) Tapestries inspired by the Arthurian Legend also decorated this Scottish home, including Morris and Company’s The Ship. Carruthers compares its journey in the quest for the Holy Grail to the journey experienced by visitors to Melsetter over the often rough sea. Also displayed was the Verdure with Deer, adapted from the original design at Stanmore Hall, which Lethaby had worked on for Morris and Company. May wrote that Melsetter was ‘a very lovable place. And surely it is test of an architect’s genius; he built it for home life as well as for dignity’. (p. 70)

Carruthers also places Melsetter in context with other arts and crafts houses built around the same period, such as Baillie Scott’s Blackwell, and Voysey’s Broadleys and Moorcrag. Melsetter’s isolated location has resulted in limiting its influence, although Carruthers successfully demonstrates how Melsetter is worthy of study as an archetypal example of Arts and Crafts architecture and decoration, and the ways in which it epitomises Morris’s ideas on the value of the ‘beautiful house’ as the art work most to be longed for.

The decorative space of the Glaswegian tearoom is examined by Janice Helolland. Commissioned by businesswoman Kate Cranston, the Ingram Street Tea Rooms (1900) and the Willow Tea Rooms (1903) were designed by Charles Rennie Mackintosh in a collaborative scheme with Margaret Macdonald, who was responsible for the textured gesso panels. This was a time when gesso was not widely used, except by a few specialist artists, Kate Faulkner and Walter Crane among them. It was Margaret Macdonald who took the medium of gesso and supported its use through her beautiful line and intricately worked surface texture. These sum up the discreet luxury of the tearooms, resulting in a crafted space which evoked pleasure and defined taste within an intimate and ‘artistic’ environment.

Elizabeth Cumming continues a discussion of Scottish decorative schemes when she contemplates the relationship between the Arts-and-Crafts movement and Modernism within 1930s architecture. Her analysis posits Scottish architect Basil Spence as sensitively working with space and tradition as a ‘modernist/craft architect.’

Bridget Elliot’s chapter explores the connections between a Finnish folkloric past and an industrial American present which generated a form of decorative modernism. Elliot examines Saarinen House, designed by Eliel Saarinen in 1930, which incorporated objects designed and crafted by his whole family, thus conflating the domestic and the commercial. This collaboration is compared with Morris’s beliefs, and their shared anxiety that the separation of the arts and crafts would result in the trivialisation of the crafts. Saarinen House has been compared to the London studio houses built by Sir Frederic Leighton and Lawrence Alma-Tadema. It was Loja Saarinen who designed the traditionally Finnish textiles for the house,
going on to exhibit her rugs and carpets widely and producing them for architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright. Elliot examines the fabric decoration in particular, arguing that the prominence of textiles in Saarinen House speak of the links rather than the fissures between the Arts-and-Crafts movement and Modernism.

Tanya Harrod explores these same links in her discussion of twentieth-century studio ceramics, and wheel-thrown vessels in particular, when discussing the crafted space of the material object, and arguing that Pugin and Morris influenced the modernist potter. Le Corbusier, Paul Gauguin, and Henri Matisse were all involved with ceramics, but it was the English studio potters such as William Staite Murray, Bernard Leach, Katherine Pleydell-Bouverie and Michael Cardew, who pioneered ‘pure’ pottery often influenced by non-Western cultures. Tag Gronberg establishes a similar argument when examining interactions between Simon Starling’s contemporary installation Blue, Red, Green, Yellow, Djungel (2002) and the 1928 block printed textile ‘Aralia’ designed by the Viennese architect Josef Frank upon which Starling based his Djungel (Swedish for jungle). The ‘Aralia’ motif was based on a houseplant and became a popular expression of textile art, being used for furnishing and upholstery, and demonstrating the importance of textiles within modernism. Gronberg goes on to contrast Frank’s textile designs with those of other artists, including Klimt and Burne-Jones.

The crafting of interior space is examined by Penny Sparke when she discusses interior designs by the pioneer American interior decorator Elise de Wolfe as handmade artefacts. Cynthia Hammond considers the architectural plans of American urban planner and social activist Catherine Bauer, who believed in the reduction of ‘unnecessary’ ornament from interior surfaces as part of her socialist and utopian ideology. Her theories on modern public housing were indebted to the ideas of Robert Owen, Octavia Hill, John Ruskin and Ebenezer Howard, who all addressed the problem of how to house large numbers of people humanely. Both Bauer and de Wolfe designed with women users in mind, although catering for different classes; de Wolfe for upper-class clients, whilst Bauer considered spaces suited to ‘ordinary’ women, particularly in relation to functionality. De Wolfe’s crafted interiors embraced the ideals of Pugin, Ruskin and Morris, and the popularity of home-furnishing books which encouraged their readers to embrace sincerity and modernity when creating their own individual domestic space. Sandra Alfody also discusses the relationship between craft and architecture by focussing on the cooperation between artists and craftspeople. Finally, Amy Bogarty uses the artist-designed rooms at Toronto’s Gladstone Hotel in order to highlight the contribution of contemporary craft in public design. She argues that craft possesses the potential to change the atmosphere within an interior and, together with interior design, continues to change the way we perceive space, thereby playing a primary role in our lives.

Unfortunately, the high price of this publication is likely to deter students
and those with limited means. The lack of any colour illustrations is also typical of Ashgate publications and, although this book has obviously been produced to the highest standards, reliance on black-and-white images sometimes lets the authors down. However, the various responses to craft’s contribution to constructed space represented in this publication provide a valuable insight into historical and contemporary interactions between decoration and space. This collection of essays successfully articulates the ways in which craft can manipulate its relationship with the interior in order to form a unified whole.

Helen Elletson


Alton Towers means only one thing to most people – it is a theme park with accompanying ‘rides’ and childish distractions. But Alton Towers is really the name of the palatial country house which overshadows the gardens. Though it is one of the largest Gothic Revival buildings in existence, it now appears to be a sad ruin. In 1951 the house was stripped of saleable assets and left to decay. Michael Fisher has devoted a considerable amount of time to studying what remains, and describes the progress which has been made in recreating the appearance of the original building. He has found a large number of sketches and old photographs to illustrate his book.

Alton Lodge, Alton Abbey, Alton Towers – the changes of name illustrate the stages of growth. The original eighteenth-century house had been added to again and again. The word ‘abbey’, as in *Northanger Abbey*, simply means a gentleman’s residence, without being based on a former monastic ruin. Fonthill Abbey is mentioned by Fisher for comparison; though that possessed a famous tower, the fifteenth and sixteenth Earls of Shrewsbury outdid William Beckford in the ground plan and eventual size of their Abbey.

Fisher charts the progress of this enormous structure, and lists the architects who worked on the building before Pugin; he comments that they used ‘the Romantic “abbey style”, with a pronounced asymmetrical plan and skyline’. In their decorative schemes for the interior the Gothic features were often made of plaster, and did not have any structural function. ‘It was all “wedding-cake Gothic”,’ says Fisher, ‘i.e. decorative rather than structural, and as such it had more in common with eighteenth-century antecedents such as Strawberry Hill … than with the more archaeologically correct Gothic of
Pugin’. Now that the building is reduced to a bare state, recent photographs confirm this and show the plain stone walls without the plaster features.

Pugin arrived during the 1830s, and over a long period of time up to his death in 1852 he re-modelled portions of the existing structure in accordance with his vision of the medieval past and the Catholic future. The chapel was the most splendid of these creations. Fisher has been able to assemble a number of water-colours and early photographs which give some impression of the work. He also notes that Pugin’s work at Alton probably led to his commission to design the interior of the new Houses of Parliament.

In his last chapter Fisher reviews the slow degeneration of the Towers, and the virtual destruction of the interior. In 1857, following the death of the 17th Earl, who was the last of the Catholic dynasty, there was a sale of furniture, pictures, books, and other movable features. With the change of ownership in 1858 – the new owner was an Anglican – portions of the chapel’s furnishings were moved to other ecclesiastical buildings in the area. Though the house continued to be occupied, the gardens were already in use for ‘Monster Fetes’, equestrian events, illuminations and firework displays as early as the 1890s, and a succession of subsequent owners developed this idea.

During the Second World War and the remainder of the 1940s, the house was requisitioned by the Army. When I was doing my Army service in the 1950s I would occasionally meet officers who had been trained at Alton Towers, for which they had a baffled admiration. Some people blame the Army cadets for the state of the house in the early fifties, but it was actually W.S. Bagshaw & Sons, the firm which purchased the Towers in 1951, who were responsible for stripping out the entire building. They removed everything they could sell, including copper pipes, the lead from the roof and all the woodwork including the wall-panelling and the floorboards. Anything left was disposed of by the Potteries Demolition Company. Most of the structure then became a ruin. In 1958 the chapel was used to display a model railway, a tent being used to conceal the remains of Pugin’s decorative scheme.

The theme park continues to flourish. There have been many recent changes of ownership, and there is now an Alton Towers Heritage Committee, of which Fisher is a member. Though new rides have been constructed, planning permission has been given on condition that efforts should be made to restore some parts of the building. The work which has taken place is described in Fisher’s final chapter, which reviews developments since the previous edition of the book in 1999. Obviously the restorations are in no way comparable to what Pugin intended, but fragments of his designs have been discovered, and original features have been partially reconstructed.

Disciples of Morris will be interested to note that he visited Alton Towers during 1876, while he was working at Leek: he described it as ‘a gimcrack palace.
of Pugin’. There has always been a distinct opposition to Pugin, led by Ruskin, and his followers could be accused of neglecting Pugin’s work. I remember being told that Pugin was all stage-settings from beginning to end, and there was often religious animosity to take into account. Of course Pugin was already dead when Morris began to work, but the influence of the man and his ideals lived on; for example, you can see this in the buildings of G.E. Street, who trained Morris in his office. The 1994 exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum and the recent biography by Rosemary Hill have led to a more generous appreciation of Pugin’s life and designs. However much I admire Fisher’s devotion to his cause, and the amount of work he has done, it is not clear to me how far all this is going. I wonder how many of us would wish to see the restoration of Alton Towers in all its glory.

John Purkis


This is an important reference work which I have long wished for, albeit without any real expectation that it would ever be produced. For I have for many years used and cherished *Brasses* by J.S.M. Ward (Cambridge University Press, 1912) as my essential convenient source for reference relating to memorial brasses. *Brasses* remains a classic text, which in its day set new standards of clarity, and ease of reference, including both scholarly accounts of the brasses of successive historic periods, and also a gazetteer listing brasses of different types and descriptions with their respective locations. Most regrettably *Brasses* ends its consideration of the subject in 1773 with ‘The Last Brasses’ (*sic*) and is therefore of no assistance in considering the diversity of ‘modern’ brasses, a few of which are important art works, and many being of some historic and/or design interest.

The need for a guide to modern brasses has become all the more necessary owing to the wholly inadequate attention taken of these furnishings in the Buildings of England series (commonly referred to as the ‘Pevsner’ guides). The original editions for each county invariably eschew any reference to nineteenth or twentieth-century brasses in their accounts of church interiors. Even in the more recent bumper-size new editions this practice continues, with only a few exceptions for very special works. The publication of this ground-breaking guide not only at last provides a much needed reference work; it also does so in an exemplary manner.

The history of English monumental brasses did not, of course, end with the rare Georgian examples, as was contended by Ward. (Indeed, he surely would have appreciated this, although no doubt he considered late nineteenth-century examples not worthy of serious study, such was the state of general contempt that
Victorian art and design reached in the years immediately before the First World War. This new book traces the modern history of brasses in a highly informative and perceptive way, and includes two broad categories of works which are each of particular interest. The first relates to the brasses of the High Victorian period, from 1880 onwards, which can be considered as late expressions of the Gothic Revival. Here the book provides helpful accounts of the trade firms involved, as well as important information relating to the designers and engravers concerned. The second area of special interest includes the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century works directly influenced by Arts and Crafts designers and guilds, leading on to the revival in lettering design in the 1920’s. The book provides an excellent account of this work, with the section on ‘Craftsmen and Designers’ being especially illuminating, as well as including much original scholarship. The section on ‘The Tradition of Lettering’, which covers amongst others the leading work of Eric Gill and Edward Johnston, is a model of succinct communication.

The book also relates how as the twentieth century progressed, there was a decline both of the number of monuments and their quality. The Modern Movement had little perceptible influence on the design of monumental brasses, which from the 1930s onwards are generally lacking in innovation. Post Second World War brasses tend to be regressive in design, with a few notable exceptions. In this study, the flourishing of modern brass design and its subsequent decline are contextualised with reference to social and ecclesiological developments, tendencies in twentieth-century church architecture, and the changes in fashion for the use of memorials. Most important and helpful for the church visitor, the book includes a county-by-county checklist which, although not exhaustive, includes the most significant modern brasses and a large number of interesting examples.

There are two features of this book which I would particularly applaud. The first is the quality and choice of the very fine and abundant illustrations. Included are not only pertinently selected illustrations of brasses, but also other relevant images, including designs, and photographs of designers and craftsmen. The second is the compact size of this book, which is such as to fit easily into a haversack, or glove compartment.

I also have two points of criticism. One relates to the work of William Morris. On page 78 there is the claim that ‘William Morris almost certainly designed brasses’. So far as I have been able to ascertain there is no single example of a memorial brass with a definite attribution to Morris or for that matter to his Firm. (Nor have I been able to trace any reference to commissions for or involvement in memorial-brass design in the Morris correspondence, or any of his published writings.) However I would hasten to add that this unsubstantiated assertion regarding Morris’s involvement with brasses is totally untypical of this book,
where other statements of opinion are consistently evidence-based. I should also make it clear that a good account is given of the design philosophy and the influence of Morris.

My second criticism is that in the listings of notable brasses the locations of the memorials within greater churches are not always given. I discovered when field-testing the listings that it is sometimes difficult to find a modern brass memorial, particularly when it has been obscured by carpeting or furnishings. On another occasion, on a recent visit to Westminster Abbey, I found the superb Victorian brasses in the nave commemorating Sir Charles Barry (made by Hardman’s) and Sir George Gilbert Scott (designed by G.E. Street) hidden beneath a row of chairs. (I trust this was a temporary arrangement, as these brasses are located on what is usually the main processional route.) It is to be hoped that this book will reawaken interest in important brasses and thus help towards the prevention of such aberrations in future.

All in all, this is an excellent book which I would unreservedly recommend as important and highly informative reference work for everyone with a serious interest in ecclesiastical architecture and design in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Shuan Tyas are to be congratulated for undertaking such a worthwhile publishing project and the author on his achievement.

Joseph Mirwitch