

Reviews

David Mabb, with essays by Caroline Arscott and Steve Edwards, *William Morris* (Manchester: Whitworth Art Gallery, 2004), 75 pp., £7.50 + £1.50 p&p, ISBN 09032 61537.

This catalogue accompanies ‘William Morris: “Ministering to the Swinish Luxury of the Rich”’, an exhibition staged by the contemporary artist David Mabb at Manchester’s Whitworth Art Gallery (until 23 December 2004). While covering paintings and installations shown by Mabb, the volume also develops and extends the exhibition’s principal themes. This is achieved primarily through the inclusion of two lengthy essays on the subject of utopia: the first by Steve Edwards and the second by Caroline Arscott.

As with so many publications in this area, an attempt is made to match presentation and subject-matter by employing one of Morris’s typefaces. In this case, ‘True Golden’ is used. And yet such details are rather misleading when considered in isolation. They do nothing to convey the sheer oddity of this brightly coloured offering. The front cover combines Morrisian typography with a peculiar, air-brushed application of the red used in the marginalia to Kelmscott editions. The design ethic in evidence on the front cover has been employed consistently throughout. Severe shades of brown, violet, and red take turns to combine with white in colouring the text and the series of strange and distorted patterns that run down the margins. At the back of the book, we are informed that Kapitza is responsible for the ‘visual concept and design’, and that the graphics were ‘digitally adapted from original William Morris designs’. Motifs familiar from *Acanthus* and *Garden Tulip* are indeed relied upon in places, though the graphics reject the rhythm, symmetry and restfulness characteristic of Morris’s best pattern work.

Mabb’s intention was clearly never to revive an authentic Morrisian aesthetic. One must therefore ask whether the design succeeds on its own terms, either as a quirky homage, or as an attempt to shock the

eyes with a view to prompting productive speculation. The latter programme is certainly in evidence in the photographed exhibits, as well as in the foreword by Jennifer Harris, in which she explains that the 'project is a hybrid creature which "wobbles" the boundaries between an exhibition of historical artefacts and a contemporary art installation, a display without a clear narrative voice which leaves the visitor uncertain about the status of the spectacle on offer' (p. 7).

Perhaps the most striking example of a work that attempts to 'wobble boundaries' is Mabb's *Rodchenko Production Suit made from William Morris 'Fruit' fabric* (pp. 44–45). This piece is shown suspended above a gallery staircase on a coat hanger. One is struck first by its iconoclastic overtones. *Fruit*, after all, is a pattern one might more ordinarily see hanging in the former home of some wealthy Arts and Crafts patron. There is also an undeniable sense of aesthetic indiscretion. While Morris's designs were always tailored to their final use, we see here a pattern intended for the adornment of a flat surface employed in a context where folds and rounded edges interrupt its built-in telos. The juxtaposition is thus singularly unfitting, even when one registers the social meanings that attach to the exhibit.

While such 'indiscretions' may be taken as part of the artistic scheme, this display is also problematic in an unplanned way. Morris's own self-image was not so far removed from the 'artist as engineer' outlook that Mabb's Soviet era boiler suit seems calculated to evoke. He himself wore a similar garment, which he knew as his working smock. This garment was kept deliberately plain and unpatterned. Although Mabb may well have intended to play on the tension between Morris's trade in patterns and his own preference for a simple whitewashed aesthetic, the use of an extraneous design from the Soviet era invites the unfortunate and unfair inference that Morris could not have appreciated the irony.

Other works by Mabb include the two oil and fabric paintings, *Head of a Peasant* (p. 50) and *Modern Men's Shop* (p. 51). The first sees Morris's *Garden Tulip* repeat-pattern weaving its way across Kazimir Malevich's constructivist landscape of peasants working in the shadow of aircraft. *Modern Men's Shop* applies a similar technique, this time superimposing *Bird & Anemone* on to the consumerist spectacle of a shop window full of men's business attire. Neither work manages to offer much beyond a confusing and trite juxtaposition of aestheticist

Victoriana and modernist angst.

More interesting are those exhibits which investigate the meaning of Morris's designs in new contexts. Mabb is clearly fascinated by the concept of the 'sample' as employed by Morris the businessman. On one page of the catalogue, a wall hung with strips of *Willow Bough* in different colour-ways is disrupted by the insertion of framed samples of the same pattern. There is also a marked emphasis on the infinite reproducibility of Morris's work: wallpaper produced by Morris & Company, before and after the founder's death, hangs alongside papers produced more recently by Sanderson. On another wall, 14 framed samples of Morris's most famous patterns appear against blocks of colour, apparently applied using paint manufactured for use by Sanderson. Both exhibits bring Morris-derived objects into conflict. The imperious repeat-pattern is unnaturally confined and frustrated by aesthetic objects outside the frame. Elsewhere, artefacts from Morris's time as a socialist activist are exhibited. A banner of the Hammersmith Socialist Society hangs on the wall (described erroneously in the catalogue as a 'Hammersmith Socialist League' banner). Inside several glass cases there are arranged political pamphlets, wallpaper samples, Kelmscott books and design treatises. On another wall, the *Pomona* and *Flora* silk tapestries sit strangely against more clean blocks of colour. The aim throughout seems to be to denaturalise the processes of curation, whilst commenting on the stark obsolescence of these once lively and politically engaged artefacts.

Perhaps most indicative of this agenda is the presence of a tall case that contains 'A selection of contemporary "heritage" products from the 1990s and early 2000s using designs by William Morris' (pp. 56–57). Inside there is a *Willow Bough* wastepaper basket, a Morris box of tissues and a *News from Nowhere* tea towel, as well as a tray, a cushion and an oven glove similarly adorned. No one seriously interested in Morris could fail to recognise the absurdity of such items when considered in the context of his mature political and aesthetic beliefs. Mabb's exhibition might lead us to note some continuity between Morris's own need to compromise in servicing 'the swinish luxury of the rich' and the reality of the 'heritage' merchandising machine. But the message falls flat, first because it is obvious, and second because it is somewhat po-faced. How many people require this satirical-scientific arrangement of objects to appreciate the unfortunate ten-

sion between the integrity of a legacy and its uncontrolled uses?

The two essays included in this catalogue also deserve comment. 'The Colonisation of Utopia' by Steve Edwards represents a wide-ranging and politically strident defence of the Morrisian utopia against what he sees as its capitalist and Marxist rivals and detractors. Although Morris's "infantile disorder" of ultra-leftism' (p. 24) does not escape criticism, the author of *News from Nowhere* attracts praise for 'combining the pastoral utopia with an emphasis on labour' (p. 26). Caroline Arscott's article follows a familiar pattern of attacks on E. P. Thompson's political downgrading of the 'ornamental aspects of Morris's designs' (p. 64). She analyses Morris's fascination with the 'dance of the wodehouses' which he found depicted on a manuscript of Froissart's *Chronicles*, reaching the conclusion that 'the idea of the penetration of flesh by ornamental vegetation in those dancing green men' (p. 68) expresses the will to defy and celebrate the binary relations between plant and animal. Both essays are a little wilful and eccentric in their frames of reference, but each nevertheless reaches interesting conclusions.

A new attempt to interpret Morris's work critically in the context of contemporary British life is always to be welcomed. The efforts to which Mabb and the Whitworth Gallery have gone demonstrate a sincere and laudable wish to advance this cause. They have attracted sponsorship from such prestigious bodies as the Arts Council and the Arts and Humanities Research Board. And they have made efforts to secure the involvement of Sanderson and the Little Greene Paint Company. But a celebration which assumes the virtues of 're-presentation' without justifying them rigorously; or which deliberately flouts established aesthetic principles without supplying something meaningful in their place, can achieve little in exploring the peculiar challenges faced by artists who feel they must come to terms with society in order to make a living. All the same, this catalogue undoubtedly has something to offer readers who are interested in the continuing development of Morris's reputation.

Marcus Waithe

Christopher Menz, with a forward by Ron Radford, *Morris & Co* (Art Gallery of South Australia, 2002), 187 pp., \$55 Aust. hbk, 135 colour illustrations, ISBN 07308 30292.

The Barr Smith family of Adelaide, South Australia, were the richest and most enthusiastic of all Morris & Company's many clients. The earliest known mention of their interest is 1884, the date of a note sent by Robert Barr Smith from London to his decorators in Adelaide in which he specifies the use of Morris & Co. items. From that time until the late 1920s, when Morris patterns were no longer in fashion in Britain, the family continued to decorate their homes and stock their cupboards with Morris & Co. products.

Robert Barr Smith and his wife Joanna were married in Melbourne in 1856, moving shortly later to Adelaide. It was a fruitful match in many senses. They produced thirteen children, seven of whom survived into adulthood. Joanna's father was partner in the Elder shipping line. Robert too had interests in shipping but also in merchandising, farming and mining. By the late nineteenth century he was described as the richest man in Australia and on his death in 1915 he left an estate valued at \$1,800,000 – an enormous sum now as well as then.

Three generations of the Barr Smith family shopped at Morris & Co. and the decoration and furnishing of at least seven Barr Smith family residences is the main subject of this book. Simply titled *Morris & Co.* (no doubt to meet the popular market for general Morris home-style publications) the book contains general historical information on the firm and a range of its furnishings illustrated by items used in Australian homes, most of which are now in Australian public collections. In this respect *Morris & Co.* is misleading for it is neither comprehensive in its cover of Morris & Co. products nor has it anything new to say about the firm and its development although this is explained well. However, what more than redeems the publication from being just another beautiful decoration book is Christopher Menz's incisive and very important new research on patronage in Australia. His first findings were published in the catalogue for the exhibition *Morris & Company, Pre-Raphaelites and the Arts and Crafts Movement in South Australia* shown at the Art Gallery of South Australia in 1994. With this later publication, he produces further evidence through newly discovered treasures (including subsequent

acquisitions by the Art Gallery) but also more insight into the people involved through his research in the intervening years. A period of research in the Morris & Co. Archives at the Huntington Museum, Library and Art Gallery in Pasadena, California has also provided interesting new findings on late stained-glass production.

The chapter 'Morris & Co. in Adelaide' and the following appendices gives a detailed summary of Morris & Co. patrons. Included are George Brookman, the Rymill brothers, Leonard and Isobella Bakewell and Dr and Mrs Poulton, but pride of place is left exclusively for the Barr Smith family. Details are given of the three houses lived in by Robert and Joanna (Torrens Park, Auchendarroch and 40 Angus Street) and those of some of their children (Wairoa, Birksgate, Brougham Place) and grandchildren (St Margaret's, Park Terrace). All were completely or partly furnished by Morris & Co. The quantity of items purchased was enormous. Existing contemporary photographs from Torrens Park and Auchendarroch show for instance that all visible furnishings, wallpapers, textile furnishings, carpets, furniture, embroideries and tiles were by the firm. Additional domestic items sometimes came from other manufacturers but these were usually closely related to Morris & Co. through their design or method of retail (sold through the London shop). For instance, In the 1890s Joanna ordered over 800 pieces of table glass from Powell & Sons.

Their homes were not the Barr Smiths' only concern when showing their admiration for Morris's work: Robert Barr Smith also purchased several Kelmscott Press books (four are now in the South Australia State Library) and Tom, his eldest son, ordered expensive hand-knotted Hammersmith carpets for the Adelaide Club in the 1920s. A sister, Erlistoun Mitchell, became a notable embroiderer, and a number of her panels (all worked over the firm's prepared and marked grounds) have survived.

For my tastes the book is rather over-designed, catering specifically for the modern interior design audience. On the whole the illustrations are numerous and excellent but some are misleading. A few items of furniture are posed in stage sets with carpets and wallpapers to provide context, and five double- or triple- page fold-outs provide large illustrations of two tapestries (one is a detail, with a much-reduced version of the whole), two carpets and an embroidered panel. In only two examples, the Pomona tapestry and the embroidery, do the enlarged

details show the texture of the works, so this was an opportunity missed and it is difficult to understand why such features were included. Advanced publicity for the book described these illustrations as pullouts ('beautiful enough to be framed') but even at a fairly modest price of \$55 Australian dollars it is unlikely that any owners will want to deface their copies in this way. It will be interesting to see whether these features encourage or discourage many from buying what is a well-researched and -written volume. Let's hope it is the former, for it is a fascinating and notable addition to existing Morris scholarship.

Linda Parry

David Latham, ed., *Haunted Texts: Studies in Pre-Raphaelitism*, (Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 2003), ix & 267pp., £35.00 hbk, 36 illus., ISBN 08020 36627.

Haunted Texts attempts to define Pre-Raphaelitism through a range of critical strategies and Pre-Raphaelite cultural forms (even as it acknowledges that the term is 'as undefinable as ever'). It is also a book written in honour of William E. Fredeman, with the contributions coming from colleagues, former students and editorial associates. A useful checklist of publications by Fredeman is included, a kind of fitting echo of his *Pre-Raphaelitism: A Bibliocritical Study* (1965).

The editor's opening chapter reviews Fredeman's career, before going on to contextualise Pre-Raphaelitism as a historical term and establish the main characteristics of Pre-Raphaelite poetry and painting. This is a detailed and useful discussion of Pre-Raphaelitism's interdisciplinary nature, although there are some repeated points and quotations.

The 'haunted texts' of the title refers both to the Pre-Raphaelite practice of revealing the eternal through the concrete details of mythology and to the 'abyss between the romantic ideal and the physical reality' – a pervasive sense of loss epitomised by William Morris's *The Defence of Guenevere* and which *Haunted Texts* itself seems unwittingly preoccupied with. Pre-Raphaelite poetry is also 'haunted' through figural palimpsest; the present world is marked by 'forces from the past and spirits of the dead'. This is pertinent with regard to Morris's imaginative worlds and to his interpretation of material culture and the built environment. It also resonates with Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poems. Jerome McGann, in a tantalisingly concise chapter, argues that Rossetti's concept of 'translation', and its poetic application, directly informed Ezra Pound's theory of translation. Through close readings of selected poems in Rossetti's translation of Dante's *Vita Nuova*, McGann argues that Rossetti aims for faithful, not literal, translation – a 'cultic' act which renders Dante meaningful in contemporary terms.

Through his translations of early Italian poets Rossetti may also, suggests E. Warwick Slinn, have learnt about seduction. Many critics have commented on the power of Rossetti's art to seduce: the woman

is foregrounded as a material, physical (silent) presence, yet she also suggests a spiritual otherness, an unattainability. Slinn takes this dynamic and applies it to Rossetti's *The House of Life*, which becomes an elegy for the loss of masculine desire, since the poet as a (male) speaking subject is defined by the condition of rapture for an idealised image he can never possess.

Three of the chapters focus on Pre-Raphaelite illustration, and to varying degrees discuss the interaction of image and text. They are each, too, concerned with the juxtaposition of the 'strange' and the 'homely'. Carolyn Hares-Stryker analyses Arthur Hughes's illustrations for children's books by George MacDonald, Thomas Hughes and Christina Rossetti as examples of the enchanting combination of 'fairy wings' and 'dark coils' that characterises Pre-Raphaelite romance. Hughes's illustrations allow readers to believe in the possibility of happy endings and the existence of the sacred in the ordinary.

Allan Life resurrects the neglected Arthur Boyd Houghton, contextualising him in relation to the Pre-Raphaelites and focusing on his illustrations for *The Thousand and One Nights*. Life delineates the subtle ways in which the visual interacts with the verbal, informed by psychoanalytic readings of fairy tales (although the discussion might have highlighted more the sense in which the illustrations are 'Pre-Raphaelite'). Nonetheless, this is a fascinating discussion of Houghton's Orientalism. Houghton was excited by the analogies between western and South Asian figurative and narrative traditions in art, and Life carefully analyses his use of motif and perspective.

Lorraine Janzen Kooistra is interested in the function of cross-dressing, costume, theatricality and masquerade in Aubrey Beardsley's art. The point that Beardsley's art disrupts gendered binary oppositions, thereby challenging the hierarchical distinctions of late Victorian society (and distorting the gendered conventions of a romanticised, chivalric middle ages), is not a new one. Masquerade, though, is paid closer attention: the artificiality of gender becomes a subject for art, not just a stylistic effect.

The effect of style and its relation to substance is explored by David Latham, who wonders how we might read Morris's wallpapers and fabrics as political texts. Morris's designs, often intertwining and/or repeating natural imagery, should be recognised, Latham argues, as an integral part of a socialist agenda, since they demonstrate the 're-root-

ing' of art in everyday life. Ornamental patterns, according to Morris, are meant to lead the mind outdoors. The successful pattern (a surface 'thicket wall' of planes which create the effect of an open field beyond) 'may invite us to dwell on the busy surface, or it may lure us to delve beyond the surface to the blank space beyond ... inspiring us to envision our dream'.

Bibliocritical and technological issues are raised in a couple of chapters. Roger Peattie, using diaries and letters, argues against the view that William Michael Rossetti, as the self-styled chronicler of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, exploited his family. J. Hillis Miller's chapter is a meditation on the ways in which new communications technologies are impacting on how scholars use the kind of materials collected by Fredeman (which are symbolic of the need to go back to originals). The means of access to the cultural signification embodied in Pre-Raphaelite texts (any text) is shifting. Hillis Miller pairs Whistler's painting *The Little White Girl* and Swinburne's poem 'Before the Mirror' as an example of how texts can be juxtaposed and read differently on screen.

The other chapters in this collection are more directly concerned with Fredeman's legacy, both a tribute to his scholarship and a candid assessment of the self-acknowledged 'inventor of Pre-Raphaelite studies'. A portrait emerges of a 'pirate' scholar whose ardent pursuit and 'omnivorous' collecting of Pre-Raphaelite materials contributed to the increasing knowledge about, and fashionability of, Pre-Raphaelitism since the 1950s. Ira B. Nadel gives an account of Fredeman's scholarly method, which was characterised by a scrupulous attention to detail. No doubt Fredeman would have alighted on the few unfortunate typos ('Zack' Zipes) in this book. Nadel acknowledges that Fredeman was particularly aggressive towards feminist criticism of Pre-Raphaelite texts, produced by what he unkindly termed 'feminist factories'. Readers might be pleased to note, though, that in his anecdotal account printed here of 'chasing' Pre-Raphaelite texts, Fredeman singles out *The Journal of the William Morris Society* as being of particular interest to the Pre-Raphaelite scholar.

The pursuit of Pre-Raphaelite projects was in a sense dependant on Fredeman's campus home and library, visited by friends and Pre-Raphaelite fans: 'a centre for Pre-Raphaelite industry, congenial hospitality, and eccentric antiquarianism'. Here was a 'strange' collection

of Victoriana – furniture, painting, books – made familiar; it ‘rooted the orphan’. It is this home, mentioned fleetingly, and the notion of home, which seems to haunt this text.

Inga Bryden

Angela Thirlwell, *William and Lucy: The Other Rossettis* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 377pp., £25.00, 130 illustrations, ISBN 03001 02003.

It was once reported to William Morris that Dante Gabriel Rossetti had ridiculed the story of the Volsungs on the grounds that no-one could take a serious interest in a character (presumably Regin) whose brother was a dragon; to which remark Morris responded that a dragon for a brother was better than a bloody fool. The 'fool' in question was William Michael Rossetti, art critic, literary editor, and Rossetti family historian, as well as full-time civil servant. William Rossetti (hereafter called 'William') is one of the two subjects of this joint biography, which proves to be a truly worthwhile undertaking by Angela Thirlwell.

Most people who have studied the Pre-Raphaelite movement will be aware of some elements of William's work, but the whole figure that emerges from Thirlwell's (very thorough) research proves to be rather more than the sum of those parts. Many will know, for example, that he wrote art criticism for the *Spectator* and the *Academy*, but not all will be conscious that he achieved the rare honour of having his work approved by Ruskin, who praised his 'peculiar power of arriving at *just* critical opinions' (p. 124), and recommended him to the American William Stillman to be the London art correspondent for Stillman's journal *The Crayon*. Still more remarkably, perhaps, William emerges as a man of genuinely avant-garde artistic tastes, who, as early as 1862, wrote in praise of Japanese prints, textiles, and ceramics, boldly challenging the conventional distinctions between fine and applied art. Again, many will be aware that William edited the P.R.B. journal *The Germ*, and, much later, produced collected editions of the works of his brother Dante Gabriel and sister Christina; but fewer will also know that he edited as many as twenty-one selections for Moxon's *Popular Poets* series, or that he was one of the very first champions of Whitman's poetry in any country (even if the selection from *Leaves of Grass* which he edited was cut ruthlessly to exclude anything likely to cause offence).

The range and depth of William's interests are highly impressive, especially when one considers that they were of necessity developed during such spare hours as were permitted by a full-time (and very suc-

cessful) career at the Inland Revenue. He was, moreover, a lifelong friend of members of the Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic movements as diverse as Swinburne and Holman Hunt, in addition to being his brother's trusted confidant. And yet the impression which he made on Morris seems to have been almost wholly negative; when invited to William's wedding, Morris complained to Louisa Baldwin: 'Sad grumbling, but do you know I have got to go to a wedding next Tuesday; to wit Lucy Brown and William Rossetti and it enrages me that I lack courage to say "I don't care for either of you and you neither of you care for me and I won't waste a day out of my precious life in grinning a company grin at you two old boobies"' (p. 226). In his attitude towards William, it seems Morris allowed his usually generous nature to be soured by his (quite understandable) antipathy towards Dante Gabriel.

William's bride, Lucy, is the other subject of this biography. Thirlwell's inclusion of her on equal terms is somewhat puzzling, for she and William are hardly figures of equal interest. Lucy was a (literally) second-generation Pre-Raphaelite artist, the daughter of Ford Madox Brown, but her contribution to the Pre-Raphaelite movement was certainly a minor one. Her artistic career proper lasted for only five years, from 1869 until her marriage in 1874, following which her time was divided between childrearing and frequent illness. Of the paintings that she did complete, only one, *Romeo and Juliet in the Tomb* (1870) is really impressive, despite Thirlwell's occasional special pleading on behalf of some of her other works. Lucy also seems to have been a less sympathetic character than the affable and mild-mannered William; she enjoyed uneasy relationships with many of those around her (notably Christina Rossetti), and finally, for unknown reasons, excluded her devoted husband from her will.

Thirlwell's decision to make Lucy the joint subject of her book is regrettable principally because it seems to have influenced her determination to eschew what she calls 'the biographic fallacy that a Life, or in this case, two Lives . . . can be artificially re-created as a fiction-like narrative' (p. 1). Lucy was fourteen years William's junior, but he survived her by a quarter-century; their lives were thus, as Thirlwell points out, 'not neatly co-ordinated', and a traditional, sequential narrative would inevitably have privileged William. Instead, Thirlwell has written a kind of meta-biography, a fairly self-

conscious, deliberately fragmentary series of themed chapters, focusing on either William ('Pre-Raphaelite', 'Man of Letters'), or Lucy ('Artist', 'The Patient'), or both ('Scenes from Family Life', 'Radicals'). But such a strategy would surely be better suited to more well-known subjects than these two 'other Rossetts'. With Lucy and (especially) William, one wants as much information as possible, and a 'fiction-like narrative', taking on as it does the shape of a life, is perhaps more accommodating to this requirement than are other approaches. I found myself wishing to know more about William's reaction to his brother's breakdown in 1872, or about his involvement (on Whistler's side) in the notorious Whistler-Ruskin libel trial of 1878; or even about his feelings concerning the First World War, which he lived to see in its entirety. When Thirlwell eventually does succumb to the 'biographic fallacy', in the last two chapters (on Lucy's life with tuberculosis and on William's declining years) the result is the most readable part of the book, finally giving a fascinating and engaging portrait of an unusually liberated Victorian marriage (both were agnostics and Shelleyites), and making Lucy a more human figure than she has hitherto appeared.

This is not, then, a flawless book. Nevertheless, Thirlwell has performed a valuable service in exploring a new corner of the well-mined seam of Pre-Raphaelite biography, and in shedding further light on the varieties of Victorian life. In particular, she deserves much credit for giving us a greatly improved understanding of William Rossetti, the source of so much of our knowledge of his remarkable family, and a man who was after all, perhaps, a better brother than a dragon might have made.

Richard Frith

Josceline Dimbleby, *A Profound Secret: May Gaskell, Her Daughter Amy, and Edward Burne-Jones* (London: Doubleday, 2004), 344 pp., £20.00 hbk, illus., ISBN 03856 03231.

Josceline Dimbleby had the good fortune to gain access to the correspondence between her great-grandmother, Helen Mary Gaskell, known as May, and Edward Burne-Jones, as well as having grown up to see in her father's house Burne-Jones's beautiful portrait of May's daughter Amy, said by her father to have died of a broken heart. The portrait is reproduced in its sombre colour in *A Profound Secret*. On the basis of the Burne-Jones letters and her own curiosity about the family, complemented by her dedication and energy, Dimbleby has produced this attractive and engaging book, which has already been widely reviewed and enjoyed. Her success is to have expanded the personal stories into an overall account of the lives and times of a remarkable, if not culturally or politically outstanding, family. Occasionally I felt that her editor might have advised Dimbleby to suppress her tendency to speculate where no firm information was available to her, but there is far more to enjoy than to criticise in this illuminating piece of social and cultural investigation.

The main focus is necessarily on the relationship between the ever-impressionable Burne-Jones and May Gaskell, whose sensitive features he drew so finely on several occasions. They first met in 1892, when May's friend Frances Graham – another of Burne-Jones's beautiful female friends – took her to the Grange to meet him. Dimbleby suggests that the unhappily married May's attraction for Burne-Jones was that he sensed in her 'a sadness calling for his compassion', and that she 'appeared to yearn for comfort and understanding as much as he felt he did himself' (p. 83). At all events, the relationship flourished and, in those days of an extraordinarily efficient postal service, Burne-Jones got into the habit of writing to her several times every day in his characteristically romantic terms; let the following example suffice: 'oh love of my innermost heart and life, what good is my love to you? You must tell me once a month at least that I make some difference to your life – for darling I am pouring all my soul at your feet' (p. 87). But he gradually came to realise that he could not transform her life, only perhaps help her to endure it, writing in 1897: 'snatch at anything that brings reprieve, that lightens the hour, and beguiles with some change,

however trifling – and don't think too long, or take solitary half-mad walks' (p. 139).

Dimbleby's account of the relationship brings out movingly the intense bond between Burne-Jones and Morris. While they were working on the Kelmscott *Chaucer*, Burne-Jones wrote to May: 'All the time Morris is designing his borders here on Sunday morning one hears his teeth almost gnashing – at least gnattering and grinding together – and so it was always I remember' (pp. 103–04). He commented to May on his friend and on Kelmscott House, which he seldom visited:

Of course I wish Morris was different in some ways – wish he had pretty manners and grace in his welcome – or even the simulation of it – but it couldn't be – he has to be what he is – and no one is like him or has been for hundreds of years – some Viking of old was like him – probably never again will such a being be. I come away from his house sadder always – all year through I see him here – and he seems more at home – is less constrained here, and more at ease – when I am there which is once in two years at most I come away gloomy and depressed – the house feels full of ghosts to me – a *Wuthering Heights* feeling about it all. (p.104)

But he did take May and Amy to tea there, and wrote afterwards in defence of his friend:

You said he wasn't clean – he is really underneath – but always pencils and ink and the day's messes in work stick to him, and like to get on him, and if anything has to be spilled to make up the necessary average of spilling, it spills on him. But he boils himself in tubs daily, and is very clean really ... He liked the ladies who called on him the other afternoon very much – that is tremendous – that is a conquest – he was pleased you noticed his teacup and said he liked you to laugh at it. (p.104)

There are moving references to Morris's final illness in 1896 when Morris was no longer able to visit the Grange: 'Yes – isn't it sad about the Sundays. Never any more – never even once again – I know now, and sad will be my comings and goings' (p. 141). He told May how impossible it was to give an accurate account of Morris's personality:

...if ever Morris says some fine thing, and says it with his Titanic simplicity, I say to myself, 'How I wish she had heard that, but how impossible to convey it in any other words or manner than his' – indeed when the tale is done no image of him at all can ever be made – to repeat only word for word his conversation would carry no impression of it – the moment of saying, the murmur, the march up and down the room that accompanies it, the rough gesture, the simplicity and faith of it – all incommunicable. And he must get out without a due record – that is certain ... And when he dies it will be like the going out of the sun. (p. 142)

On October 2nd: 'It is a dark day, almost a fog and cold, but go I must to Kelmscott House ... If I don't write, it means I can't write, can't write about other things, and can't write about that ... I doubt if he knew me when I went last' (p. 142). Soon after: '– one o'clock, a telegram just came and all is over' (p.143). Burne-Jones wrote to May about the funeral at Kelmscott:

The burial was as sweet and touching as Leighton's and Millais' were foolish – and the little wagon with its floor of moss and willow branches broke one's heart it was so beautiful, and of course there were no Kings there – the King was being buried, and there was no other left. (p. 143)

May wrote sensitively to her father about the importance of Morris to Burne-Jones:

It is hard to realise the suffering of dear BJ. There is a Holy of Holies in the heart of his art where no one went but Morris. It must have been a beautiful thing to listen to the talk of those two great ones every Sunday morning ... I went once with Amy to see Morris with Burne-Jones – he was gentle and kind – showed me his great treasure of illuminated books, and then sat down and talked with us – at one moment using the characters in Dickens as friends, perplexing me with his detailed knowledge of the most obscure, and twinkling with delight. Then suddenly teasing Burne-Jones, who purred under it and led him on with the delight of a parent showing off a child. Later came most wonderful stories of Norse tales – and told with such a rushing mighty power of words and humour that left one breathless. (p. 144)

May and Amy were away in Italy in early 1898, when Burne-Jones, who was to die later in the year, wrote that he was still missing Morris, as he tried out an improbable cure for his sadness. His thoughts seem to have gone back to the early days of the friendship that meant so much to both of them:

I read the book of Job last night but it sounded like splendid words and brought no comfort ... I thought lovingly how Morris one night sat up all night with me when I was unhappy and read Job to me – neither did it comfort me then. But how he used to sit up with me and read and talk in wild times – no one ever will again – it all came back so vividly last night. (p.161)

Morrisians will be moved by these parts of the book, but there is so much more to enjoy in it as a piece of social history. There is the moving account of the unsettled life and early death of Amy, and of her mother's devotion to her memory. There is May's own friendship with Sir Alfred Milner, and their correspondence both from his time in South Africa and later – she wrote a moving letter to him at the end of the Great War. There is May's great effort during those years in setting up the War Library to provide reading material for those in hospital, which expanded to be taken over by the Red Cross and eventually distributed over six million publications; May was awarded the CBE for this public service. And there is the story of the friendship which she began at the age of 82, with the American craftsman and Arts & Crafts enthusiast Loyd Haberly who – as I learned here – produced a copy of Robert Bridges' poem *Eros and Psyche* at the Gregynog Press, illustrated with woodcuts that Haberly produced from Burne-Jones's designs for 'Cupid and Psyche'. He found the elderly May 'beautiful and graciously Edwardian' in 1935, and her house 'a Pre-Raphaelite haven hung with Morris chintzes and Burne-Jones portraits of herself and a beautiful daughter who had died young' (p. 320), and was entranced by her stories of Burne-Jones and Morris. It was Haberly who was employed to bind May's precious Burne-Jones letters for her. He wrote her many letters and poems, and told her: 'You only, of all my friends who knew Morris, have given me the true clue through the shadowy mazes of his thousands of printed pages' (p. 322). The book is well produced and well illustrated – with the beautiful portrait of Amy on the

dusk-jacket, and blow-ups of a Burne-Jones letter with his lively sketches on the inside covers – and deserves its considerable success.

Peter Faulkner