



Obituary

Asa Briggs (1921-2016)

Peter Faulkner

The William Morris Society has been consistently fortunate with those who have served as its Presidents. The first three, Sir Sydney Cockerell (born 1867), Stanley Morison (born 1889) and Sir Basil Blackwell (born 1889) were distinguished elder statesmen. The fourth President, Asa Briggs, was of a younger generation, born in 1921. He was educated at Keithley Boys' Grammar School and Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge. After serving in Intelligence at Bletchley Park at the end of the war, he became a Fellow of Worcester College, Oxford, and was University Reader in Recent Social and Economic History from 1950 to 1955. He then became Professor of Modern History at Leeds (1955-61), publishing *Victorian People* in 1955, and *The Age of Improvement, 1783-1967* and *Chartist Studies* in 1959, authoritative books which established him as a major social historian of the Victorian period.

Moving to the new University of Sussex in 1961, he served successively as Professor of History (1961-76), Dean of the School of Social Studies (1961-65), Pro Vice-Chancellor (1961-67), and Vice-Chancellor (1967-76). While at Sussex, he began his five-volume *History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom* (1961-95) and published *Victorian Cities* in 1963.

Briggs returned to Oxford in 1976 to become Provost of Worcester College, retiring in 1991. He received many academic honours, served as Chancellor of the Open University from 1979 to 1994 and as president of the Workers' Educational Association for nine years, and became a Life Peer in 1976 as Baron Briggs of Lewes in the County of East Sussex, where he lived at the end of his life.

It was in 1978, while he was Provost of Worcester College, that Briggs became President of the Society, serving until 1991. He had joined the Society in 1958, having been commissioned by Penguin to edit a selection of Morris's works – at that time, it should be noted, not particularly well-known – for the Penguin English Library. The book, entitled *William Morris: Selected Writings and Designs*, was published in 1962. It contains six sections, Prologue, Romance, Commitment, Socialism, Utopia and Epilogue, together with an illustrated supplement by Graeme Shankland. This featured twenty-four well-chosen illustrations, necessarily in black-and-white, covering the range of Morris's design activities, with illuminating commentary by Shankland. The only Morris anthology available at the time was G.D.H. Cole's fine selection published in hardback by the Nonesuch Press for the centenary in 1934 and reissued in 1948. Briggs's selection, a Pelican Original, priced seven shillings and sixpence, clearly aimed at a wider public; it was in paperback, with an attractive cover based on the Honeysuckle chintz. Briggs's Introduction is succinct and intelligent, arguing that there were three possible responses to Victorian society available to a man like Morris: cynicism, escape and commitment; Morris chose commitment. Briggs's political argument brings us into the early 1960s when he writes that Morris's writings 'provide the materials for a critique of twentieth-century Socialism (and Communism) as much as for a critique of nineteenth-century capitalism'.¹ The fifth section of the book, called Utopia, consists of the first eighteen chapters of *News from Nowhere*, followed by a summary of Chapters Nineteen to Thirty-two, and the reflections about dream and vision with which the book concludes. It was a good selection and sold well, but the shortened form of *News from Nowhere* attracted criticism. Eventually, in 1993, Penguin Books brought out *News from Nowhere and Other Writings*, edited by Clive Wilmer, another good selection, and a good deal longer (430 pages as against 309), but one lacking the visual material which demonstrated the breadth of Morris's achievement in the 1962 book.

Briggs also opened the travelling exhibition, organised in 1961 to celebrate the founding of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co., when it moved from the Victoria and Albert Museum to Bradford. He gave the Kelmscott Lecture in 1983 on 'William Morris in London', a lecture greatly admired by those who heard it, but it was unfortunately never published and no text of it has been discovered. During his period as President he showed his energy and scholarship by publishing *Victorian Cities* in 1963, *Marks & Spencer Ltd: A Centenary History* in 1984, and the final volume of his trilogy on aspects of the Victorian period, *Victorian Things* in 1988. He was one of those who wrote to the Charity Commission asking it to reconsider its decision when it ruled for the Kelmscott House Trust against the Society about the sale of Kelmscott House in 1981. In 1984, when the future of Kelmscott House became a contentious issue, Briggs spoke at the official Inquiry in support of the Greater London Council's proposal for the establishment of a William Morris Museum. Despite his efforts and those of the Society's committee, the proposal was turned down on planning grounds. In 1987 Briggs's good humour was challenged when the cake provided for the Morris birthday celebration at Worcester College by the college pastry-cook turned out to celebrate Oxford's other William Morris: the elaborate cake was topped with a toy motor-car. Fortunately Briggs was a diplomat as well as a scholar. Indeed, he came to think that a highlight of his Presidency was the Society's visit to Oxford.

The Society was very active in celebrating the centenary of *News from Nowhere* in 1990.

Briggs lectured on the book in Toronto at a conference organised by The William Morris Society of Canada, which was celebrating its tenth anniversary. I had the pleasure of meeting Asa and Lady Briggs on this occasion, as they and I were staying with the hospitable Enid MacLachlan. I remember him as small, voluble, knowledgeable, energetic, unpretentious in a north-country way and consistently genial – a particularly appropriate President for The William Morris Society. The *News from Nowhere* celebrations in Oxfordshire took the form of activities, many involving children, which culminated in an exhibition on ‘*News for Nowhere* and the English Countryside’ in the Morris Memorial Hall in Kelmscott. This was opened by Briggs, along with Alison Kemp of the Society for the Preservation of Rural England. One of Briggs’s treasured possessions was a tapestry prepared by the children in Kelmscott and given to him when he left Oxford. A very busy man, Briggs resigned the Presidency in 1991, having proved an excellent servant of the Society, although, surprisingly, he never contributed to the Society’s *Journal*. It was part of his democratic outlook that he felt that the Society should not become too academic, and he eagerly supported Morris’s view of the importance of the ‘lesser arts’.

NOTES

1. William Morris, *News from Nowhere and Selected Writings and Designs*, ed. by Asa Briggs, with a supplement by Graeme Shankland (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), p. 17.