



---

## Reviews

Edited by Peter Faulkner

---

---

Florence Boos, *History and Poetics in the Early Writings of William Morris, 1855-1870* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2015), 322 pp., 23 b&w figures, 17 colour plates, £72.00 hbk, ISBN 9780814212899.

This is a substantial and impressive work by a leading Morris critic, confirming and expanding our knowledge of Morris's achievement in the first half of his life. The short introductory chapter 'If I Can' succinctly draws attention to three attitudes which underlie Morris's 'persistent desire to create an *ethical* framework for his artistic and literary endeavors' (p. 2): the first is his early and unVictorian rejection of formal religion; the second is his awareness of the significant part played by strife in the world of political action and his sympathy with those who suffer as a result; and the third is his historicism, which makes him 'the most consistently "historicist" of the major Victorian poets' (p. 7). Boos develops this final point by an account of the work of Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), described as 'the principal nineteenth-century theorist of empathetic historicism' (p. 8). Dilthey is discussed at some length, not because Morris read him, but because of the closeness Boos sees in their ideas. No-one can doubt the depth of Morris's preoccupation with history, but I am not sure that the

---

discussion of Dilthey expanded my understanding of Morris's attitude. However, Boos's preparedness to introduce a thinker not usually encountered in studies of Morris is evidence of her energetic pursuit of new material, which enlivens her narrative.

Subsequent chapters follow Morris's career chronologically. 'From Antecedents to "Oxford Brotherhood"' starts with the family background, and ends by celebrating the importance to Morris of the fellowship in which he participated as an undergraduate at Oxford; this is familiar territory, but Boos brings out clearly the specific importance to Morris in particular of three very different men: Edward Burne-Jones, the artist; Charles Faulkner, the mathematician and administrator; and Cormell Price, who is said to have devoted his energies from the early 1860s to 'reformist pedagogy' (p. 65) as head of the United Services College. Boos concludes by emphasising that this Oxford Brotherhood was 'a network of several highly gifted individuals, rather than two "geniuses" and some peripheral satellites' (p. 67), and that Morris was deeply aware, throughout his life, of how much he owed to these friends.

In 'Morris's Earliest Poems: Preparation for *The Defence of Guenevere*', Boos argues convincingly against the idea that Morris's first volume 'arose by spontaneous generation' (p. 69) – he had already written a number of interesting poems. Boos has worked on some of Morris's very early poems that Morris sent to his older sister Emma from Oxford, including the seventeen not known to Mackail, and so is in a position to give a full account of what happened in the early years. But whether these poems are best seen as preparatory to Morris's first volume is not obvious. From the early poetry, we move on to the early non-fictional prose in "'The Many Shadows of Amiens": Morris's Early Essays'. Before coming to the essays, Boos argues that we can see in them a pre-adumbration of the four 'regulative principles' that animated the outlook expounded in later writings: a Ruskinian belief in the importance of pleasure in labour; insistence on the need for simplicity in life; belief in the importance of craft and architecture as 'repositories of memory and history'; and 'the conviction that humans must live in respectful harmony with the transcendent beauty of nature' (p. 99). It is not clear to me whether the perception of transcendence is attributed to Morris, in view of the insistence on his rejection of religion. However, Boos goes on to draw attention to 'the near rhapsodic quality' of the accounts given to his mother of his 1855 journey to Northern France; she quotes what she calls 'an epiphanic moment of near van-Gogh-like intensity' (p. 109). Morris was the chief contributor to *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* in 1856, and two of his contributions took the form of essays on aesthetic topics: 'Death the Avenger, Death the Friend' was an appreciative response to two woodcuts by Alfred Rethel (1816-59), conveying his sense

of their ‘emotional intensity’ (p. 113), and the other, ‘Churches of North France: The Shadows of Amiens’, conveys an equally intense response to the great cathedral and ends with his ‘prolonged leave-taking’ (p. 123) and a moving valediction.

From the essays we move on to the early Prose Romances, eight of which Morris contributed to *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, with Boos concentrating illuminatingly on what she identifies as their ‘Interlocking Dream Structures’. Five receive Boos’s attention, from ‘The Story of the Unknown Church’, through ‘A Dream’, ‘Gertha’s Lovers’, ‘Svend and His Brethren’, to the elaborate ‘The Hollow Land’. This last story is convincingly shown to have ‘the most attractive ending of these early tales, carefully prepared for through Florian’s prolonged tribulations and moral education [...]. As in the other prose tales, the hero’s outward and inner life has progressed through a series of temporally disconnected symbolic frames’ (p. 158). Boos has skilfully demonstrated how this is managed by the young Morris. No mention is made of the one story with a nineteenth-century setting, ‘Frank’s Sealed Letter’. This is usually considered a failure and perhaps to have led Morris to recognise that his imagination was unsuited to fictional realism. In 1872 he tried again to write in the realist mode, in the work called by Penelope Fitzgerald *The Novel on Blue Paper*, but he gave up, and the work remained unpublished until 1982.

Following Morris’s own development, Boos now returns to poetry, with two chapters on *The Defence of Guenevere*, showing that the volume contains much work of equal sophistication to that shown in the Romances. The first chapter considers the sources on which Morris drew, especially Tennyson, Robert Browning, D.G. Rossetti, Edgar Allan Poe and “Owen Meredith” – the pseudonym of Robert Bulwer-Lytton, whose ‘Malorian Poems’ are compared to Morris’s ‘The Earl’s Return’. The presence of Owen Meredith in this group is surprising, but Boos – who has already written on the relationship of the two poets – presents a strong case. The second *Guenevere* chapter is concerned, appropriately, with the ‘Gender Polarities’ of the volume. Here Boos calls on the ideas of the twentieth-century Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre in his *Critique of Everyday Life*, first published in French in 1947, in particular to Lefebvre’s idea of the ‘moment’, a passionate mental state that shapes ‘specific forms for human aspiration’ (p. 199), and shows how many occurrences in the poems constitute ‘moments’ of this kind. She also links ‘The Defence’ with the later *The Pilgrims of Hope*, in which we encounter another trapped woman threatened with death. Boos’s overall view, which sounds very twenty-first century (though valid) is that ‘[e]arly and late, Morris came out fairly well in the spectrum of mid-Victorian literary debates about “the” nature and role of women’ (p. 229).

The final chapter is called ‘After *The Defence*: A More Authentic “Medievalism”’. After a thorough discussion of the early reception of *Guenevere*, which was generally

---

dismissive, Boos points out that Morris was not put off altogether from writing poetry, although he was busy too with work for the Firm as well as with a young family. Between 1858 and 1867 – the date of publication of his next major poem, *The Life and Death of Jason* – Morris wrote a number of poems, considered here in four groups, in which he experimented with drama, the sonnet, the short lyric and blank verse. In the first category Boos discusses ‘Scenes From the Fall of Troy’, which she calls ‘an eclectic and rather erudite compilation based on several antecedents’ but ‘nonetheless completely untainted by *The Defence’s* “obscurity”’ (p. 354) – a quality deplored by several critics. Boos thinks well of the poem, and offers several possible explanations of Morris’s not completing it. She then has a section entitled ‘Personal Sonnets and Lyrics’, dealing with the highly personal poems written at the time, often concerned with ‘loneliness or estrangement’ (p. 263). Next she points out that Morris, who had been considering writing a long poem to consist of a number of parts, started writing a Prologue as early 1859; this was to become ‘The Wanderers’ and Boos gives a full account of the sources on which its early versions drew. She then considers early drafts of the tales from *The Earthly Paradise*. Her conclusion is that the nine years between *Guenevere* and *Jason* was ‘a little-noticed period of poetic refinement and germination’ (p. 282) which enabled the poems of *The Earthly Paradise* to extend beyond the range of the earlier poetry into greater complexities, providing ‘new topics for exploration and new modes of approach’, leading towards *Sigurd the Volsung*, *The House of the Wolfings*, *A Dream of John Ball* and *The Pilgrims of Hope* – Boos has never accepted the view of some earlier critics that *The Defence of Guenevere* contains the most dramatic and powerful of Morris’s poetic work. An Appendix on ‘Malory’s Guinevere and Morris’s Guenevere’ considers the difficult question of the relation between Launcelot as King Arthur’s knight and as the lover of Guenevere, concluding that ‘Morris’s recapitulation of Malory’s studious ambiguation was [...] deliberate’ (p. 292). This Appendix might perhaps have been attached to the chapter on *The Defence*.

This scholarly book then offers the reader a Bibliography in four sections, beginning with a most interesting list of works in English probably read by Morris before 1870, showing what an energetic reader he was; the other three sections are on ‘Biography and Background Material’, ‘Editions of the William Morris Archive’ (available online), ‘Criticism’, ‘Manuscripts’ and ‘Reviews’. We are then given an ‘Index of Morris’s Works Cited’, followed by the ‘General Index’ – I am not sure why these are separated. A surprising aspect of the book is that, although the cover shows Morris’s painting *La Belle Yseult*, which is also reproduced with other visual material, it – like several other visual images – seems to receive no discussion in the text; certainly it is absent from the indices. However, with as distinguished a critic as Boos, even those of us who think we know Morris’s early work well will find that there is a

great deal more to know and then to incorporate into an overall understanding of Morris's achievement. She has offered a valuable and illuminating account of the period she specifies, and her writing can rise to eloquence, as when she describes Morris dying as 'an ardent master-mason in the great cathedral of nature and secular humanism' (p. 129).

**Peter Faulkner**

---

Phillippa Bennett, *Wonderlands: The Last Romances of William Morris* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2015), 230 pp., 5 colour illustrations, £60.00 hbk, ISBN 9783034309301.

Phillippa Bennett's analysis of Morris's work is structured by two claims: that Morris considered the ability to wonder a fundamental need, 'a primary and instinctive way of inhabiting the earth and of interacting with others', and that his late prose romances (*The Story of the Glittering Plain*, *The Wood Beyond the World*, *Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair*, *The Well at the World's End*, *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* and *The Sundering Flood*) were the 'most compelling expression' of this conviction (p. 3). Documenting the mixed but predominantly luke-warm reviews that Morris's stories have generated, Bennett argues that their re-evaluation opens up new vistas onto his work. Read as 'a radical response to nineteenth-century politics, culture and society' (p. 10), these narratives illuminate Morris's most pressing and abiding concerns – with the body, with landscape and environment, architecture and politics – and the critical power of Morris's ideas, both then and now. For Bennett, the key to their reinstatement lies in the recognition that wonder is their 'defining feature' (p. 2). Accordingly, readers assumed to have neglected or ignored these tales are not presented with a précis of their content, for what is important in Bennett's analysis is the concept that the tales collectively flesh out, rather than their literary or creative merit. This interweaving of story-telling and wonder is central to Bennett's thesis and it frees her to counter critiques of the naivety, simplicity, optimism, otherworldliness or abstruse language of the romances by arguing that these features reflected an intention that has been widely misunderstood. In the conclusion to her Introduction she writes:

[...] in his last romances, Morris makes his final and most evocative protest against the diminishment of wonder in human life. Indeed his protagonists' receptivity to and pursuit of wonder constitutes the primary momentum of these stories, and it is a momentum which always brings both the protagonists and ourselves as readers more richly and actively into the world, rather than offering us a way out of it. It is thus through a renewed understanding and

---

appreciation of the last romances that we can see how the world might become a little less ‘un-Morris’.

(p. 33)

Bennett affirms Morris’s intentions by setting a number of sympathetic interpretative accounts of his work alongside pertinent phrases in the stories and comments drawn from some of his letters and other published work. However, she does not then attempt to develop a concept of wonder by abstracting directly from his writing. The three-dimensional framework for the analysis, which distinguishes a wonderer from wonderful and wondering, is adapted from a discussion of Edmund Husserl (p. 6). Martin Heidegger, Josef Pieper, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Zygmunt Bauman and Ernst Bloch (pp. 78, 97, 143, 175) are some of the other philosophers Bennett uses to investigate Morris’s conception of wonder. This approach focuses attention on some important aspects of Morris’s work: his interest in the ordinary or everyday; the role he assigned to artistic practice as a form of communication; the value he attached to imagination as a force for creative transformation; his utopianism. At the same time, it tends to encourage a slippage between the re-interpretation or re-evaluation of the romances as stories of wonder and the examination of wonder as a vital theme of Morris’s work. The claim that Bennett wants to make about the special value of the romances as exemplary expressions of Morris’s idea is weakened by the possibility that the analysis of wonder might just as well have been achieved by applying these philosophical approaches to his poetry, his journalism or his essays. Indeed, the book shows how the multiple meanings of wonder are embedded across the range of Morris’s work, spanning his pre-socialist days to his retirement from the Socialist League. It is noticeable that the parameters for the discussion of some of the book’s major themes are established without reference to the prose romances at all: pointing to a shared language of wonder that links Morris to Rachel Carson and the defence of the wild, Bennett draws on observations about *News from Nowhere* and a rich discussion of Morris’s impressions of Iceland to frame the second chapter, on the topography of wonder (pp. 57-58).

In the first chapter Bennett demonstrates the full value of the conceptual analysis and her flair for revealing the sensuality and imagery of Morris’s writing. This chapter discusses Morris’s aesthetics and politics to explore ideas of the body, well-being, human animality and sexuality. It captures both the deep distress underpinning his critique of capitalism and his confidence in socialism’s remedial power. The insights that wonder brings to the interpretation of Morris’s work are also demonstrated by Bennett’s treatment of the continuities of his thought. This argument is advanced at different points within each of the chapters and it also runs throughout the book.

Concerned to explode ‘clichéd’ myths that Morris was ‘a nostalgic medievalist’ who hankered for the return of ‘benign [...] feudalism’ (pp. 80, 91), Bennett is nevertheless impelled to correct Bernard Shaw’s and E.P. Thompson’s well-known appraisals of the romances as examples of his recidivist Pre-Raphaelite tendencies (p. 138). Morris had a sophisticated idea of social dynamics, to borrow Bax’s language, but this did not inhibit him from celebrating the Gothic and the ‘nobility’ of the communal ways of life he associated with it (pp. 104, 129). Bennett’s discussion of the Kelmscott Press and her inclusion of illustrations taken from the romances emphasise the potency of this emotional connection to the past and the political inspiration Morris drew from it. The influence of Wordsworth and Coleridge that she detects in Morris’s work similarly closes the gap between the Romantics and Late Romantics that critics of Pre-Raphaelitism typically invoke when sandwiching Morris’s revolutionary politics between the phases of his apparently languid writings (pp. 74-78).

How far wonder helps Bennett develop these arguments is difficult to judge because the concept appears so elastic. The ‘human capacity for wonder’ emerges as an ‘essential attribute in the instigation of social as well as personal change’ (p. 141). Equally, Morris used wonder to expose the ‘follies and the horrors’ of capitalism and it was Morris’s ‘own willingness to wonder that first led him to join the Socialist movement’ (p. 143). Perhaps inevitably, the flexibility of the concept tends to undermine its explanatory value. Moreover, the stretching sometimes suggests tighter or more straightforward affinities between Morris and his contemporaries than more differentiated analysis sustains. Bennett locates Morris firmly in Marxist, socialist traditions but wonder also points to his convergence with Georges Sorel – tricky to locate within Marxism – and the anarchist Peter Kropotkin (pp. 84, 159, 165). While Bennett’s acknowledgement of the diverse influences active on Morris is a real strength of her analysis, wonder does not help her develop the point. Rather than capturing the complexity of Morris’s communism, wonder tends to homogenise these divergent currents. Thus it supports a generalised theory of revolution which Kropotkin, Sorel, Marx, Engels and H.M. Hyndman seemingly shared (pp. 163-65).

While wonder triggers a number of valuable insights it also limits Bennett’s investigations. She seems reluctant to push the analysis of sexuality to scrutinise Morris’s more conventional castings of women and she is inclined to adopt his focus on the manly when discussing art production (p. 97). Wonder reinforces the revolutionary nature of Morris’s socialism but also softens the edges of the critique. Bennett’s account abounds with references to Morris’s anti-capitalism, but wonder is less well-suited to the examination of exploitation, repression or political corruption than it is to the discussion of their transcendence. In the architecture of wonder, vision is a major theme. Wonder shows that nineteenth-century capitalism had ‘failed to

---

offer a vision of life inclusive and generous enough to produce its own vital and relevant architecture' (p. 131) – as if Morris might have contemplated a reformed version that included such a vision. This is not what Bennett means, but the language of wonder inclines in this direction. Wonder covers Morris's disappointments and despair, but not his expressions of anger, frustration and disgust.

It's difficult to imagine how the application of any single concept can fully illuminate Morris's work, given its breadth and depth. Nevertheless, by drawing our attention to wonder, Bennett undoubtedly brings out the magical qualities of Morris's socialism. Whether or not wonder defines Morris's romances or provides the best lens to view his work in the round, her enthusiasm for these stories is infectious and fans of these last works will delight in her reminders of the exploits of Birdalone, Ralph, Ursula, Hallblithe and the rest. The case she makes for their restoration to a central place in Morris scholarship is compelling and her pioneering thematic discussion demonstrates the real potential for their continued analysis.

### **Ruth Kinna**

---

Simon Dentith, *Nineteenth-Century British Literature Then and Now: Reading with Hindsight* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 182 pp., £95.00 hbk, ISBN 9781472418852.

It was with great sadness that I learnt of the death of Simon Dentith in November 2014. He was a friend and champion of both research and teaching in English and Victorian Studies. I knew him both from the British Association of Victorian Studies, of which he was President from 2006 to 2009, and the now-lost English Subject Centre (ESC). Indeed, one of my distinct memories of Simon is his presence at an event organised by the ESC on 'Teaching the Victorian Novel' and I remember him shaking his leonine head of hair and worrying at the all-too-easy elision that (mostly young, mostly female) students would make between themselves and (say) Jane Eyre or Dorothea Brooke. This slippage from then to now, and the question of how we read the Victorians from a twenty-first-century perspective, is one of the animating principles of this, his final book. In the Preface Dentith states his two main concerns: the first is how do we read nineteenth-century texts when 'a whole social and political history [has] unrolled since they were written' (p. vii)? The second issue, which is related, is that the inevitable unrolling of history means we know a great deal (more) now that the Victorians could not comprehend themselves. Dentith questions whether reading with hindsight brings a threat to 'the authenticity [...] of the knowledge or feelings that were available to the original actors' (p. viii).

Chapter One sets out the book's theoretical stall, suggesting that the term 'Victorian' itself is one constructed through hindsight. Dentith is interested in how we

have continually to negotiate the ‘suggestive play of continuity and difference’ (p. 7) between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries. There is a danger that reading with hindsight contains a certain arrogance in relation to how we read the Victorians, as exemplified by Lytton Strachey: we know more and we know better. Dentith uses Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* (1960) and Ricoeur’s *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004) as his touchstones in wanting to hold on to ‘the otherness of the historical horizon’ (p. 13) rather than have this otherness assimilated into our more contemporary preoccupations with the Victorians that focus on sexuality, class and feminism. He also notes his own interest in the relations between nineteenth-century liberalism and neo-liberalism, as well as late Victorian utopianism and our own situation of ecological crisis. If there is a phrase that sums up Dentith’s main concern in this work it is found at the end of Chapter One when he says he desires ‘to historicise reception history’ (p. 18), seeking to ground reception history in the social history which underpins it.

Chapter Two focuses on the gap between the nineteenth century and now, as memoirs such as Alisdair Gray’s *A Book of Prefaces* (2000) and John Lucas’s *The Good That We Do* (2001) will become impossible in the future as the connection back to the Victorians through lived memory is lost. Pretty much none of us can now have that active memorial relationship to the nineteenth century. Dentith suggests that the Victorian narrative of (and belief in) progress, not least through educational betterment, has also been undermined and challenged in recent years. Although many facets of the man-made cityscapes of Victorian Britain are now lost to us, Dentith also cites natural landscapes that are vanished, such as Hardy’s Egdon Heath.

Chapter Three, on *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), focuses on the issue that appeared to be worrying Simon at the English Subject Centre event cited above. He notes that:

a version of liberal feminism has, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, established itself as a kind of common sense. The central narrative of this [involves] the heroine emerg[ing] from a repressive background to establish or realise her own successful identity [...].

(p. 48)

It strikes me that this is one of the reasons why so many Victorian fictions which contain some version or other of this narrative retain such appeal today. It is almost *de rigeur* for filmic and televisual adaptations of Victorian texts now to tell this story too. But the all-too-easy elision bothers Dentith and he reminds us that both Eliot’s novel and *Jane Eyre* also involve renunciation for their female characters. This is probably one of the greatest dangers that the book highlights: namely, the loss of otherness associated with Victorian women’s struggles at a particular moment in time

---

for greater rights, freedom and autonomous subjectivity. From a feminist perspective, the fact that it is still all too easy to identify strongly with Maggie Tulliver as a young woman today is surely an indictment of inequalities that remain in our contemporary culture.

If I gloss over Chapters Four and Five – on Dickens’s *David Copperfield* (1850) and Trollope’s *Phineas Finn* (1869) and *Phineas Redux* (1874) – it is only to spend more time on Chapters Six and Seven, which will be of particular interest to readers of this *Journal* in their focus on Ruskin and Morris. Dentith heads this section of the book by noting how both men ‘suggest equally complex relations to current concerns, and [...] challenge too easy an assimilation to our present preoccupations’ (p. 101). In Chapter Six, “‘The things that lead to life’: Ruskin and use-value’, Dentith focuses on Ruskin’s major assault on the political economy of his day, *Unto This Last* (1860), and in particular considers the question of value. Ruskin’s awareness that capitalism tends ‘to undermine affective social relationships and substitute[s] purely economic relations for them’ (p. 103) has been picked up recently by Richard Bronk in *The Romantic Economist* (2009), although Dentith is critical of Ruskin ultimately being reductively ‘recruited for management advice’ (p. 204). This chapter is long and sustained, taking in both John Stuart Mill and Marx in the discussion of Ruskin’s focus on intrinsic value outside of economic exchange, and it ultimately ends up with a consideration of how Ruskin’s writings have been appropriated for and by contemporary environmental concerns (for example, in ‘The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century’).

Chapter Seven, ‘Utopia under the sign of hindsight’, focuses its wide-ranging consideration of Morris through, at its core, readings of *News from Nowhere* (*NfN*). Dentith is aware that utopian writing can be especially ‘vulnerable to the knowingness provided by the backward glance’ (p. 123), although he also reminds us that in reading Morris with hindsight we are also reading Morris’s own ‘multiple acts of hindsight’ (p. 128) as he reinterprets and selectively uses a version of the medieval. The chapter is impressive in its awareness of how projections through time permeate Morris’s intention in *NfN*: after all, the original context of the work was to inspire struggling members of the Socialist League to look up from the immediate struggle and ‘be inspired by the view at the far horizon’ (p. 130). But the future that *NfN* imagines is also inherently bound up with the actions of the present, in that the novel does not allow Guest ultimately to remain in an achieved, more appealing future.

Dentith discusses *NfN*’s romantic critique of capitalism, pitching an alienated labour associated with industrialisation against a ‘nature’ which can facilitate ‘human nature in all its affective fullness’ and a ‘reconfigured imagination of the rural’ (p. 126). He discusses two recent assessments of the utopian tradition – Susan Buck-

Morss's *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* (2000) and David Harvey's *Spaces of Hope* (2000), noting how neither have anything to say about Morris because Morris's seeming rejection of the urban and modernity presents problems for the lived experience of the twentieth century. This is an issue that has also recently occupied Tony Pinkney. Dentith suggests that both Ruskin and Morris warn against 'a world finally exhausted by globalisation – by which is meant the extension of capitalist social relations to every last corner' (p. 128), and the invocation of nature as a counterbalance to the urban appearing (pace Fredric Jameson) as a form of mere nostalgia. The chapter also considers *NfN*'s (and Morris's) commitment to craft production and also inevitably the question of *NfN*'s (at least partially) problematic engagement with the position of women. Dentith notes, rightly, that 'still more than in the late nineteenth century, we live in a world of divided labour, and Morris's capacity to speak to that condition is a voice we can still hear' (p. 140), before turning once again to the question of ecological concerns. Here he is aware of the backlash against presentist readings of Morris that wish to co-opt him to the Green movement, such as Sara Wills's *The Greening of William Morris* (2005). On Wills's work Dentith writes 'this is not a mere debunking of contemporary scholarship, but rather an attempt to return to the original arguments and contexts of Morris's works, to recognise their difference from the eco-centred arguments of the present, and nevertheless to put them to work in the here and now' (p. 142). This latter quotation could be taken as summary of Dentith's case here for a responsible, historically aware criticism of nineteenth-century texts.

The book concludes with a chapter titled 'Writing with Hindsight: The Victorian Novel in Succeeding Centuries', focusing on novels of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that are set in the nineteenth century. The novel has always been Dentith's focus throughout his varied writings and he comments on how the novel's flexibility of form 'permits the action of hindsight to be realised or kept at bay by a wide variety of formal means, which turn especially on the multiple ways in which the distance between past and present is realised in the narration' (p. 145). Lurking over this chapter (and indeed perhaps the whole book), though only specifically addressed right at its end, is the question of the neo-Victorian. I say this with interest, having just created and taught an MA module on 'Neo-Victorianism: Writing the Victorians in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries'. I can confirm that there is an entire substantial sub-genre of Victorian Studies devoted to the critical issues raised by and in recent novels that look back to the nineteenth century. It is notable that Dentith seems keen to avoid the term 'neo-Victorian' for much of his book, even though his concerns are very relevant to neo-Victorian studies. He briefly discusses works such as John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), A.S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990) and

---

Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) – all of which have become veritable ‘classics’ of neo-Victorianism – alongside less-well-known works such as J.G. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973). Had it existed, Dentith would no doubt have included discussion of Tony Pinkney's long-awaited sequel to *News from Nowhere* (complete with modernity).

All in all this is a thoughtful and wide-ranging contribution to our continuing critical and creative questions into the twenty-first century as to how we read, write and engage with the Victorians. I am only sorry we won't be able to read more of Simon's thoughts on the Victorians, including Morris, in the future.

**Rosie Miles**

---

Piers J. Hale, *Political Descent: Malthus, Mutualism and the Politics of Evolution in Victorian England* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 442 pp., £34.00 hbk, ISBN 9780226108490.

The central message of this book – for Morrisians at least – is that the political ideas of the late-nineteenth-century ‘socialist revival’ in Britain, in which ‘our dear Morris’ was of course a principal player, are based on a misconception regarding the nature of biological evolution, and that these ideas are therefore invalid, if not just scientifically, then also in general.

The ‘misconception’ is that of the French naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, who in his *Philosophie Zoologique* (1809) put forward the idea that organisms evolve via ‘the inheritance of acquired characteristics’; that morphological changes induced in organisms by life experience (the giraffe's long neck, the blacksmith's heavy musculature) are passed on to their descendants, leading eventually to divergence of forms and thus to speciation. This theory is now discredited – how would such changes be transmitted to the gene pool? – but during the early nineteenth century, it not only influenced many scientists, including Darwin, but also (apparently) political radicals, such as William Godwin and Herbert Spencer, and those of the French Revolution, many of whom seized upon it as a scientific basis for believing that the creation of a new and more just society would lead not just to changes in ‘human nature’, but also in the (physical) ‘nature of humans’. These ideas were then passed down the radical heritage to the revolutionaries of late-nineteenth-century London, so that both Morris's strategy of ‘making socialists’, and Kropotkin's theory of evolution as ‘mutual aid’, are characterised as ‘Lamarckian’, i.e. lacking scientific basis, and therefore invalid.

I must confess that I read this story with astonishment! No-one, be they socialist, communist, Trotskyist, anarchist, or any combination of those labels to whom I have

spoken about such matters over the past fifty years, has ever indicated to me that they believed that establishment of a socialist society would lead to changes in the human genome. Changes in ‘human nature’, yes – what Morris described as ‘moral change’ – but in the genetic make-up of human beings? Surely not! Agreed Morris describes the people of Nowhere as especially large, healthy and handsome, but these traits are surely not genetic, but the results of cleaner air, cleaner water and improved diet? Hence the reason my sons are taller than me.

And yet, certain passages in *News from Nowhere*, primarily Old Hammond’s contention (Chapter Ten) that ‘making socialists’ will ‘take the sting out of heredity’ might indeed be read as if based on Lamarckism. And while we may think that Morris’s descriptions of working conditions under Victorian capitalism as inducing ‘real infirmity [...] making degradation of both mind and body’ refer only to the effects of environmental factors, he also writes of the middle class being ‘hereditarily afflicted [sic] with idleness’ (Chapter Six). Surely what Morris means here is that children brought up in an atmosphere of idleness would be prone to it themselves. Or did he really mean that such factors induced heritable traits? The author certainly argues that case, but elsewhere writes of Darwin being hooked on his own metaphors (acquired from Malthus and from Spencer) of ‘struggle’ and ‘survival’ (pp. 229-30). So whereas Darwin is given the benefit of the doubt where metaphor is concerned, Morris is not.

The case against Kropotkin appears stronger, in that he sought to repudiate the competitive model of evolution advanced by Darwin in *On the Origin of Species* (1859), and, using a great deal of scientific data, including his own, argued that cooperation – ‘Mutual Aid’ – was a more significant factor in evolution than competition, and that the most successful species are those which cooperate in groups and not those which live as individuals. As for human evolution, Darwin, brought up a Whig, and instinctively a liberal, sought, in *The Descent of Man* (1874), to develop a more collaborative model for our own species, which he based, however (in line with Victorian *mores*), on the family, whereas Kropotkin possessed a wealth of anthropological data which showed that it was the group (the foraging ‘Band’) within which early humans cooperated and that in such societies the bourgeois nuclear family did not (and does not) exist.

The real villain of this piece, however, is not Lamarck, or Spencer, or even Thomas Henry Huxley (‘Darwin’s Bulldog’), the two last of whom are allocated lengthy accounts describing their own political use of evolutionary ideas, but, as just indicated, that old pessimist the Rev. Thomas Malthus and his Iron Law of Population, as propounded in *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), from whom, of course, Darwin did indeed obtain the idea of ‘the struggle for existence’. And it

---

seems that in nineteenth-century England (Britain?), whether people accepted the notion of Malthusian struggle or not strongly influenced their politics, with liberals emphasising the ‘naturalness’ of competition and the free market and ‘anti-Malthusian’ socialists stressing the evolutionary heritage of cooperation. This schism was expressed in late-nineteenth-century England via the anti-Parliamentary, ‘root up’ ideas of revolutionaries, such as Kropotkin and Morris, *vis à vis* those of the Fabians, who advocated ‘top down’ gradual reform via ‘parliamentary socialism’. (In fact it surely still exists today, in the form of a Malthusian, free-market New Labour as against the anti-Malthusian Corbynistas). One Fabian who most strongly opposed Morris was H.G. Wells, several of whose dystopias were apparently attempts to refute *News from Nowhere*.

All in all, this is a very interesting, if rather lengthy, book. It begins not with the nineteenth century, but the modern era, and not with a discussion of Malthus, Darwin et al., but of the twentieth-century argument between ‘selfish-gene’ Neo-Darwinists, such as Richard Dawkins and John Maynard-Smith, and V.C. Wynne-Edwards and his idea of ‘group selection’, which would not be too far from Kropotkin. At the end, this argument is revisited and brought up to date, although not quite, as I will explain below. Sadly, although erudite, the book is also rather clumsily edited, containing numerous errors, some of which (principle/principal, phosphorous [i.e. PO<sup>-2</sup>] not phosphorus) are no doubt down to Microsoft, but others (Oswald Moseley [*sic*], *Fons Calvigena* [*sic*], ‘gone [*sic*] extinct’, ‘different to’, ‘unique enough’, and H.G. Wells taking the ‘elevator’ to his classroom in the Normal School) surely to carelessness. Was Kropotkin imprisoned at Clairvaux, or Clairveaux? And was the originator of ‘emergent evolution’ Conway or Conwy Lloyd Morgan?

Less pardonably, both early humans and modern forager (‘hunter-gatherer’) peoples are referred to on at least nine occasions as ‘primitive’, and at least once as ‘savage’, words which Survival International have spent many years trying to get us not to use. There is also confusion between ‘morals’ (personal standards) and ‘morality’ (the standards of society, which is what is usually meant). Last, but by no means least, and not including quotes, the species *Homo sapiens* is referred to throughout this book (more than three hundred times, in fact) as ‘man’, ‘mankind’, ‘he’, ‘him’ and/or ‘his’, which is, I am afraid, in the twenty-first century, unacceptable.

To end where we began, did Morris base his political ideas on a discredited scientific theory, and does that mean that they, and socialism, are scientifically untenable? All I have space to say here is that in order to answer this question, other factors beyond those included in the author’s discussion surely need to be taken into account. For example, as explained some years ago by Fritjof Capra in *The Web of Life: A New Synthesis of Mind and Matter* (1996), many evolutionary biologists have long

recognised that Darwinian natural selection is too slow to account for those spectacular bursts of evolution which appear to punctuate the fossil record (e.g. in the wake of the mass extinction at the end of the Cretaceous, during which the dinosaurs are said to have perished). Those who study the ‘emergent’ properties of living systems are satisfied that evolution does not only take place via Darwinian natural selection, but also by direct exchange of DNA (between bacteria), and by symbiosis (i.e. it takes place at community level, not just species: hence the proliferation of organisms otherwise unknown to science preserved in the Burgess Shale so beloved of Stephen Jay Gould and the bursts of evolution following not only the Cretaceous mass extinction, but also those at the end of the Ordovician, Devonian, Permian and Triassic). Life may therefore not have evolved solely by competition, but, as Lynn Margulis put it, by ‘networking’, which again is surely what Kropotkin meant by ‘mutual aid’.

More recently, cell biologists have studied the evolutionary effects of *epigenetic factors* – that is, factors carried by cells from one generation to another, but located not in the genetic material making up the nucleus, but in the main body of the cell. These include enzymes whose role is to suppress, or turn on, particular (combinations of) genes, leading to morphological changes in offspring not necessarily shared by their parents. The action of epigenetic factors may therefore offer one explanation of the way in which evolutionary changes may indeed sometimes take place at faster rates than predicted by Darwinian mechanisms, which involve genetic inheritance, a much slower process.

Even more seductive is the possibility that some biochemical changes ‘switched on’ by epigenetic factors in the cells of one generation may actually be expressed in their immediate descendants (e.g. in the children and grandchildren of those women who were pregnant during the ‘Dutch Hunger’ of the winter of 1944-45, some of whom, depending on which trimester of their mothers’ pregnancy coincided with the ‘Hunger’, may in fact be smaller or larger than average, and less prone, or more so, to obesity and Type 1 diabetes). Such differences may indeed – astoundingly – be characteristics acquired as a result of their parents’ and grandparents’ life experience, and in that sense may indeed be truly ‘Lamarckian’, as Nessa Carey explains in *The Epigenetics Revolution: How Modern Biology is Rewriting Our Understanding of Genetics, Disease and Inheritance* (2012).

However, the real point here is that, as in the ‘William Morris poisoned his customers with arsenic’ story, the argument itself is based on a misconception, which is that a species which has invented language and culture still needs to depend on genetics for transmission of evolutionary traits. Whereas it is of course the case that since at least 50,000, maybe 100,000 years ago, our species has indeed continued to

---

evolve genetically, but has relied overwhelmingly on information to transmit its (cultural) legacy, not genes. Any attempt to invalidate Kropotkin's thinking, or Morris's, on Darwinian grounds, seems therefore to me to be entirely beside the point.

**Patrick O'Sullivan**

---

Giles Waterfield, *The People's Galleries: Art Museums and Exhibitions in Britain 1800-1914* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 372 pp., 70 colour & 215 b/w illus, £45.00 hbk, ISBN 9780300209846.

Giles Waterfield's excellent book, *The People's Galleries: Art Museums and Exhibitions in Britain 1800-1914*, looks at a new type of art museum that arose during the second half of the nineteenth century: museums that would appeal to a popular audience. Inspired by a combination of civic pride, enthusiasm for education and a desire to improve standards of design among manufacturers and artisans, these galleries arose in London and in the great industrial cities of Britain. A permanent collection was not the main purpose of these new museums: many housed temporary exhibitions by local artists. Commendably, this new type of art museum was free and stayed open until late in the evening, enabling working people to enjoy the delights within their doors.

The author is clearly an expert on the history of museums in Great Britain. An independent curator and writer, Giles Waterfield is an Associate Lecturer at the Courtauld Institute of Art as well as the director of Royal Collection Studies. He was Director of Dulwich College Picture Gallery until 1996, when he left to concentrate on writing novels and researching and teaching on the history of museums. In 1991 he published *Palaces of Art: Art Galleries in Britain 1790-1990* and in 1998 organised an important exhibition, *Art Treasures of England: The Regional Collections* at the Royal Academy. It was this exhibition that brought the attention of the government to the plight of regional museums and led, for the first time, to them being assisted by a national system of grant funding.

*The People's Galleries* is a coffee-table sized book, well-illustrated and methodically divided into three sections. The first section, 'Britain and the Visual Arts', focuses on the predecessors of Victorian museums and the cultural and social context in which art museums developed in Britain. The second section, 'Creating the Art Museum in Victorian Britain', explores the establishment of the new type of museum that arose during the second half of the nineteenth century: their patrons and publics, the art they collected and its display, the role of temporary exhibitions and educational programmes and the buildings that housed these great institutions. The third section of the book is 'The Aftermath' in which Waterfield suggests that these art museums represented a bold experiment which passed with changing social attitudes, briefly

examines their later history and argues that after their short-term victories their success was partial and fleeting.

The title of the book is splendid: *The People's Galleries* conjures up Morris's heartfelt cry: 'I do not want art for a few any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few'. I knew very little about the history of museums in Great Britain before opening the pages of this enthralling book. I wrongly assumed that public museums, being such a wonderful idea, must always have existed. Wrong. In 1800 Britain possessed just one public museum: the British Museum. Thankfully, by 1900 there were hundreds of museums across the country. *The People's Galleries* pays particular attention to the development of this new type of museum in the regions, and the six civic galleries that were generally regarded as notably important: Birmingham, Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester and Nottingham. It is pleasing that the author looks beyond the nation's capital to the less well-studied smaller regional museums.

It is always gratifying to read a book where the author cares passionately about the subject matter. Wakefield clearly does, no more so than in the weighty middle section of the book. Many of these new museums were paid for through bequests by philanthropic, newly-rich liberal businessmen. Wakefield writes that education was a driving force behind the Victorian provisional museum and art gallery. They offered practical, artistic, intellectual and moral education through a variety of forms, with the public lecture and school museum visit being the only forms that flourish up to the present day. William Morris is briefly mentioned in this chapter on education in the Victorian gallery in reference to his early support for The Ancoats Museum in Manchester. Inspired by John Ruskin, the museum was founded by Thomas Horsfall (1844-1932), the son of a wealthy Manchester-based cotton manufacturer. His aim was to create an art museum that would alleviate the miserable dullness and emptiness of the life lived by a very large proportion of the inhabitants of Manchester. An innovative feature was the Mother's Room, intended for small children and their mothers. At first Morris believed this little museum could help break down the divisions between classes but he later became disillusioned, coming to regard it as manipulative and patronising.

Wakefield notes that women were, for the most part, excluded from positions of power in these new museums as was the case in national museums. Even after the Married Women's Property Act of 1882, giving married women greater control of their own property, there were relatively few significant women donors and collectors. The essential problem was that, in comparison to men, women seldom had access to the large sums of money required for active patronage. Lady Charlotte Guest (better known in museum circles as Charlotte Schreiber), who ran her husband's ironworks in Wales, was a remarkable exception, donating a notable collection of ceramics to

---

the South Kensington Museum. There was also a limited representation of women artists in the collections and, where they were represented, it was usually by works of a domestic nature or untroubling landscapes. Again, regrettably, very few women employees are recorded in museums until early in the twentieth century other than in the traditional subsidiary roles of typists and housemaids. We learn that this limited inclusion extended to the visitor: it was acceptable for a middle- or upper-class woman to be seen in a museum, under the ‘protection’ of a man or servant, even though such places might bring the visitor into circulation with ‘undesirables’. I would like to have known more about the visitor participation of working-class women.

We learn that visitor numbers to the exhibitions at the newly opened museums was staggering. In 1888, over a million people visited the Birmingham City Art Gallery – this was more than the whole population of the city, and the annual figures remained at well over half a million until 1900. In 1907, 800,000 visitors were recorded in Bradford with regular attendance of over 4,000 on Sundays, at a time when the city’s population was 280,000. Why were these new art galleries so popular? Wakefield believes that the Victorian passion for exhibitions, fired by the Great Exhibition of 1851, played a part, as did the ease and popularity of travelling by railway and the growing prosperity of many working people. There was a belief, shaped by city authorities in many of the industrial towns, that art and culture should be available to the working class. There is also the practical consideration that these galleries had far fewer competing factors in the mid-nineteenth century than in the twenty-first: there was no Facebook, no video games, no televised football matches, no on-line shopping or giant retail shopping parks, no cinema and no reality television. The galleries offered entertainment, a place to learn about beauty and an escape from the working world. The phenomenon of wild popularity lasted until around 1900, when visitor numbers started to recede: people had started to find other avenues of entertainment – by 1917 there were 4,500 cinema picture palaces across the country as well as more well-mannered music halls than in the past now offering clean, family entertainment. The regional galleries had also shifted in the nature of their exhibitions, turning away from popular entertainment to more avant-garde art. In 1910, the Brighton Art Gallery held an innovative exhibition, *Modern French Artists*, featuring 120 artists, many of them unknown in Britain, including Matisse, Vlaminck and Rouault.

*The People’s Galleries* is a fascinating, inspiring, well-researched and well-illustrated book made even more enjoyable by the passionate enthusiasm of its author. Art for All: yes please.

**Fiona Rose**

Devon Cox, *The Street of Wonderful Possibilities: Whistler, Wilde and Sargent in Tite Street* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2015), 288 pp., 100 colour & b&w illustrations, £25.00 hbk, ISBN 9780711236738.

In the early Victorian period the village of Chelsea was a left-over part of London, with a misty zone of mud along the riverside. In 1874 the Chelsea Embankment was opened, and a large area became available for gardens and amenities. The muddy side-lanes were turned into new streets; the one which linked the Royal Hospital Road to the Embankment was called Tite Street, after a well-known MP who had helped the borough to remodel the new district. Plots of land became available along the street, and the first person to rush forward and arrange to build a house was James McNeill Whistler. Whistler needed a studio-house and chose E.W. Godwin to be his architect.

In its original design the White House was a functional, almost 'modern', building with a large studio upstairs; the enormous green roof with its pronounced slope did not please the Metropolitan Board of Works. Its clean lines and lack of ornament were considered to be 'ugly and unsightly' (p. 36) and the architect was persuaded to include stone surrounds to the door and some sculpture. The interior of the house was designed as a unit, with yellow bricks round the fireplace, and the furniture was upholstered in pure yellow velvet. Godwin explained that 'the architect's work should not be confined to the mere bricks and mortar of a house. The decorator, the upholsterer, and the cabinet maker should be as much subject to the architect as the joiner, the plumber or the glazier' (p. 38). This was in the tradition of Pugin. But Whistler was what we would call a minimalist; a visitor noted that 'furniture was limited to the barest necessities and frequently, too few of those' (p. 38). There were never enough chairs for his famous Sunday breakfasts.

There was a sad ending to all this. Cox, always keen to tell a story, embarks on a description of the quarrel between Ruskin and Whistler. Sides were taken and we are told that 'William Rossetti suggested that the ageing critic had suffered from a mental collapse' (p. 56). The trial was a farce, and Whistler emerged victorious, but his damages were limited to one farthing. At first I felt that we were leaving the subject of Tite Street, but when Whistler realised that he had to pay the legal costs, in addition to the outstanding bills on his new house, he became desperate. The bailiffs lived in the house and Whistler employed them to wait at table. On the 9 May 1879 he was declared bankrupt. His life fell apart and all his possessions, including the White House, were sold. Finally he departed for Venice.

The next sections, which deal with the many different artists who flocked to colonise the street, are the most interesting part of the book. Whistler eventually

---

returned and took as his pupils Walter Sickert and Mortimer Menpes; both dressed like Whistler and imitated his style of painting, following him round Chelsea ‘like faithful puppies’ (p. 85). Of course, Sickert broke away at a later time, but Menpes, as the picture on p. 84, *A Little Shop in Chelsea*, demonstrates, learned how to use empty space, with the foggy sweetshop tucked away in the top half of his canvas. It is a credit to Cox that his picture research has been so extensive that even a minor artist like this is brought to life with both a photograph and a colour illustration of the work being displayed. Wilde had lived in Tite Street as a lodger from 1879 and on his marriage in 1884 he took over a terraced house on the west side of the street. He had been lecturing on the ‘House Beautiful’ in America and Whistler pointed out that he now had the opportunity ‘to show us one’ (p. 130).

Oscar was now ‘subdued, meditative, married’ (p. 132). From 1887 he was editor of *The Woman’s World* and went to his office in Fleet Street. His two sons were born in the house. Constance kept a visitors’ book, which was signed by William Morris. Cox is not really interested in this domestic life, and is itching to get on to the story of Wilde’s trial and downfall. In 1895 the house was abandoned and all the family’s personal effects were sold. John Singer Sargent moved into Tite Street in 1886 and stayed there until his death in 1925. ‘No. 31 Tite Street was not merely a home, it was also a virtual factory for portraits’ (p. 210). Cox illustrates his life with two cartoons by Max Beerbohm, showing the fashionable ladies queuing in the street and the social life which went on while he painted. Although this is really the ending of the story of fashionable Tite Street, Cox concludes by pointing out that Augustus John lived there from 1940 to 1950 and the book ends with his portrait *Field Marshal Lord Montgomery*.

Although this is a well-presented book, full of good stories and excellent illustrations, it takes a very old-fashioned approach to its subjects. Books about the Pre-Raphaelites used to be like this and the readers were entertained with jolly tales about their colourful personalities. But Tite Street backed on to Paradise Walk, one of the worst slums in London; as Cox points out, it was visible from Wilde’s house and Constance tried to help its inhabitants. As one who was taught by H.J. Dyos, who showed in *Victorian Suburb: A Study of the Growth of Camberwell* (1961) that urban history is worth doing well, I can only say that there is a lot more to be found out about a Victorian street than this book provides us with and that mere anecdote about ‘smart bohemians’ is not a substitute for art history.

**John Purkis**