



Reviews

Edited by Rosie Miles

John Aplin, ed., *The Letters of Philip Webb, Vol. I 1864-1887; Vol. II 1888-1898; Vol. III 1899-1902; Vol. IV 1903-1914* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 1456 pp., £475.00 hbk (set), ISBN 9781848934986.

W.R. Lethaby, in his biography of Philip Webb entitled *Philip Webb and his Work* (1935), opens by noting that Webb's active life 'covered the latter half of the nineteenth century – the mature Victorian epoch. He was little known, but that, as the spinster said, was "by choice"; few ever heard of him just because he was so great a man.'

These four volumes of Webb's letters open a door to this quiet, unassuming man. The letters that survive are all to friends or concerned with business; no family correspondence has been found except one early letter from his mother, marking his birthday in 1852, but what a wealth of correspondence is here. These are letters personal – to friends – and businesslike to clients, and the range of correspondents include the Howards, Charles and Kate Faulkner, Ruskin, Rossetti, and of course the Morris. In all Webb's kindness and decency shine through. Here he writes to Jane Morris following Rossetti's mental collapse in 1872: 'I have always taken a great interest in you, and none the less that time has tossed all of us about, and made us

play other parts than we set out on. I see that you play yours, well and truly under the changes, and I feel deeply sympathetic on that account – for, my old own tumbles are not so absorbing that I cannot attend to the tumbles of those who are wrapt about, with the pains of life which are not ignoble’ (I, p. 55).

In writing to Alexander Cassavetti, a client who has questioned the cost of alterations to his house in Addison Road, he offers the following: ‘I was rather annoyed on reading your letter received last night, not because it would seem as if it reflected on me, but rather that my explanations to you ~~must have been somewhat misleading~~ could not have been full enough or clear to you, & if that is the case I am really very sorry. It is not an uncommon thing, I assure you, for Architects’ clients to be surprised when the final accounts come in, as ’till that time, they have, as a rule, hardly realized the amount of things wh’ have been added to the contract, beyond those things (especially in an altered house) wh’ could not have been foreseen’ (I, p. 140). The crossings out and insertions in the draft reproduced here show the care he took in all he did. Would that we received such courteous correspondence from our builders these days.

Writing late in his life to W.R. Lethaby, who had become a close friend, he laments his old age and comments on the demise of his contemporaries: ‘I had thought that old and trustworthy friend, Norman Shaw, would have held out as long as myself – but No, and he had done good serious work, & could have done more if he had lingered longer’ (IV, p. 314). A few months later, also to Lethaby, he writes: ‘I’m somewhat down in the mouth now, from the discomfort of my memory having failed me, to keep company with my 84 or 85 years on this earth – if so be? There, I cannot write a letter – as you see, and so says your affectionate, Philip Webb’ (IV, p. 316).

Painstakingly tracked down and collected from various sources, these 1100 letters from 1864-1914 are a fascinating insight into the life of a quiet, generous man. Comprehensive footnotes give context to the correspondence and the index, always vital in collections of this sort, is full and helpful.

Penny Lyndon

Desna Greenhow, ed., *The Diary of Mary Watts 1887-1904: Victorian Progressive and Artistic Visionary* (London: Lund Humphries in association with the Watts Gallery, 2016), 264 pp., 18 illustrations in colour, 25 in black and white, £30.00, ISBN 9781848222014.

This attractive and informative book is the result of the painstaking work of Dr. Desna Greenhow, who managed in two years to read and transcribe the 300,000 words of Mary Watts’s diaries, which are here reduced to about one third. The extracts from the

diary seen as endpapers show the challenge of the task. From the succinct and informative Introduction we learn that the wedding of George Frederic Watts and Mary Fraser-Tytler took place on 20 November 1886, when Watts was sixty-nine and Mary thirty-six. Soon after, Watts suggested to Mary that she should keep a diary about their life together. 'It turned out to be', in the editor's words, 'a cementing element in their relationship, and a fascinating document in its own right' (p. 9). In these pages we come to see the events of the couple's life together. They lived at first in Watts's Little Holland House in Kensington and then, as winters in unhealthily foggy London became increasingly difficult, spent two winters in the country with their friends Andrew and May Hitchins in their house near Compton in Surrey. They then decided to build for themselves nearby a house they called 'Limnerslease', designed by the architect Ernest George. The diary shows both the intimacy of the relationship and the couple's sociability and philanthropy, as well as the industriousness of Watts (usually referred to by May as 'Signor') and his encouragement of May in developing her creative talents.

Watts's two best artist friends were Frederic Leighton and Edward Burne-Jones, who both appear frequently in these pages, along with Georgiana Burne-Jones. Watts's fine 1871 portrait of Leighton is reproduced in colour, while Burne-Jones is shown in a powerful full-page undated photograph by Frederic Hollyer, the photographer (who was well known to the couple). Leighton's conversational powers greatly impressed Mary; for 25 February 1891 we read: '[n]o fog in his mind! When he talks he reminds me of exquisitely skilful piano playing. The management of words is so deft, so exactly right, no false note, & swift as thought is swift' (p. 67) – though she thought less highly of his paintings. Of the Burne-Jones exhibition, we read on 25 January 1893: 'she [Georgie] must be very glad & proud to see such a lifework spread out before her & yet it does not represent much more than half, nothing of the glass windows, which Signor thinks his greatest work, for he made that art, nothing like it having gone before' (pp. 114-15). Others who appear here include Canon Samuel Barnett, Walter Crane (whose 1891 portrait is shown in colour), Millais (whose 1871 portrait is also reproduced), Holman Hunt, Meredith, Gertrude Jekyll, Conrad Dressler, Cecil Rhodes and the Holidays, with Thomas Hardy and Oscar Wilde on the margins: a remarkable collection! Ruskin does not appear in person, but his work is admired, although Watts saw Ruskin's temperament as very different from his own. When the couple were in Egypt, the entry for 3 February 1887 tells of their seeing the 'marvellous' temple of Karnak, about which Watts observed that 'there was something in the line of the cheek of the Sphinx which touched him more'. Jane adds: '[t]here Ruskin & he differ, for Ruskin finds more beauty in everything else. To the lines of the human form he is blind' (pp. 21-22).

The Wattses were not intimate with Morris, so references to him are sparse. But

they are also full of interest. In the first, for 2 March 1891, the couple are visited by Morris's friend Mrs. Aglaia Coronio, 'who was very delightful as usual, full of bright thoughts':

She was telling us about Morris & his wonderful quick sight & length of memory. He drew her one day the whole & complete design & the pattern of the carpet in H. Hunt's picture *The Awakened Conscience*, & he had not seen it for twenty years. She had just seen it & she said it was all correct, though not the woman's head. They had some discussion about it so she took the drawing to H. Hunt, who said it was the most wonderful bit of memory as he had repainted the head ten years ago.

Aglaia also taught Mary Rossetti's comic poem about Valentine Prinsep:

There is a creator called God,
Whose creations are sometimes most odd,
I maintain & I shall
That a creature called Val
Reflects little credit on God.

(pp. 67-68)

The next reference to Morris is on 7 April 1893, and is her most critical remark, suggesting that Morris's work somehow failed to be truly democratic:

Signor & I were talking this morning of the loss of beauty, which seems almost inevitable in all forward movements now, but we need that spirit to be more universal, democratic. Burne-Jones, tho' a priest of the Temple of Beauty, speaks to the cultured. Morris also, & these democrats are not practical. I have always felt that Morris should have had a shop of common things, beautiful in form and colour.

(p. 124)

The entry for 12 June 1893 records a visit by Henry James and a discussion with Watts. The latter's 1870 portrait of Morris (now in the National Portrait Gallery; not reproduced here) pleased James most: '[h]e says a face passed through the mind of Signor comes out like a better self'. In her *Portrait Catalogue*, quoted in a footnote, Mary calls Morris: '[p]oet and author in prose. Great artist of decoration. A man of extraordinary power and no less extraordinary energy' (p. 131).

The final group of references to Morris occur in relation to his death. On Friday 2 October 1896:

Morris released from his sufferings. Mrs Holiday told me yesterday that he had all his life had a great fear of death. In these last days he had allowed himself to think 'there might be a place where I would wander about again'.
(p. 164)

It is interesting to place this comment of Kate Holiday, the wife of the designer Henry Holiday and herself Morris's favourite embroiderer, in the context of other accounts of Morris's last days. Two days later, on the Sunday, the Wattses went to visit the Burne-Joneses at the Grange:

We went out, after a fine interval, to the Grange. We knew there were sad hearts there, & we found them both in. They were touched at my darling's going to them. They know it is so seldom that he is moved to leave his work.

They are very good. Georgie is determined to be brave, but to both it is the cutting off of just such a friend as Leighton was to Signor, even perhaps a more unbroken intercourse, for every Sunday of the year he breakfasted with them.

She dwells upon the thought of his life, accomplishing so much, fulfilling so much, work she believes has never been half recognised which will go on living. She says 'he is not dead', & that is true.

(p. 164)

The Wattses went to see the exhibition in honour of Morris put on at the New Gallery, as recorded in the entry for 6 October. The exhibition prompted Watts to say: '[a] great art revival. Morris, Gilbert, & Burne-Jones have shaped it, I suppose that is not too much to say.' The exhibition was closed on 6 October for Morris's funeral at Kelmscott, while the Wattses went on to Regent Street: '[a] wreath of laurel lay upon the case holding the splendid [Kelmscott Press] books, & on it a sonnet in Walter Crane's writing. Touching, beautiful words, a life's monument to the great dead. Thro' a storm of wind and pelting rain he is being laid to rest at Kelmscott today' (p. 165). That was the case, though it is difficult to see how Mary could have known of it at the time. Perhaps she was making use of the information in the entry for 7 October:

Georgie Burne-Jones here, who gave us a touching account of dear Morris's funeral. His coffin was met at the station by a waggoner & his wain, the cart

just trimmed with vines & flowers by one of the young men in his works! All simple. He was laid to rest under the green sod. A wild wet day for it, the rain just stopping for those ten minutes by the grave side.

(p. 165)

The Wattses' concern for the poor and unfortunate was deep and genuine, based on what they both saw as the importance of the spiritual. On 20 February 1893 he told Mary: 'the older I get the more I am aware that the only reality that exists is the spiritual' (p. 119). On 12 October 1896, Mary remarks, on reading the recent novel *The Children of the Ghetto* (1892) by the Jewish writer Israel Zangwill, 'every book of the kind that I read now makes me feel certain that we are moving on towards a universal creed' (p. 166). This type of spirituality meant that, when the village of Compton needed a new cemetery, Mary persuaded Watts that they should build a Cemetery Chapel on the site. She would design and decorate it, running a class for local people to help in the making of the terracotta tiles she wanted to use on the exterior, and setting up the Compton Pottery; the exterior was completed successfully in 1898. Mary also took responsibility for the decoration of the circular interior, for which she designed relief panels in gesso, showing angels and the Tree of Life; she again made use of the talents of the local community. (There is a fine colour photograph showing the remarkable quality of the decoration). It was fortunately almost complete when Watts died in 1904, and the Chapel has become the building for which, along with the Gallery itself, visitors come today. In her note to the final entry in the diary, Dr. Greenhow tells us how active Mary remained in Compton until her death, which did not take place until 1938. Hers was a remarkable achievement, and admiration for her can only be increased by the publication of this excellent book.

Peter Faulkner

Sally Goldsmith, *Thirteen Acres: John Ruskin and the Totley Communists* (York: Guild of St. George, 2017), iv + 96 pp., £12.00 pbk, ISBN 9780993200991.

One of the many memorable features of Fiona MacCarthy's biography of Morris is her decision to include places, and voyages to those places, in her list of reference notes, alongside more conventional literary and historical sources. MacCarthy's decision is apt, not least because a strong sense of place was so crucial to Morris's understanding of the world through which he moved. From Iceland to Epping Forest, MacCarthy's biography is, in part, a story of many journeys. At a more localised

level, Sally Goldsmith repeats MacCarthy's gesture towards place consciousness in this illuminating and engaging pamphlet, informing readers at the outset that she lives at 'the very edge of Sheffield' in view of 'a stone eighteenth-century farmhouse, known as St. George's Farm' (p. 1), which also happens to be the primary object of her discussion. This seemingly coincidental connection has clearly borne fruit, for Goldsmith, in an enduring interest and research project.

Utopia comes in many forms. Textual manifestations of the utopian genre belong to the same broad structure of feeling as intentional communities and back-to-the-land communes. During the late 1870s, John Ruskin outlined his plans to inaugurate a utopian project of the latter kind under the auspices of the Guild of St. George, originally established by Ruskin during 1871, and formally constituted with its present name during 1878. By 1880, the Guild had acquired five pieces of property, including: a group of cottages overlooking the Mawddach estuary in Barmouth, north Wales; a stretch of woodland and orchard near Bewdley in Worcestershire; a small museum at Walkley, near Sheffield; and St. George's Farm, near Totley (sometimes referred to by Ruskin as Abbeydale or Mickley). In this short pamphlet, published by the Guild's latter-day incarnation in the form of a charitable Education Trust, Goldsmith re-examines the history of Ruskin's attempt to settle a group of labourers on the farm near Totley which was, at the time, a small village on the outskirts of Sheffield composed mainly of 'agricultural labourers, farmers, ganister miners, scythe and file grinders' (p. 11) – inauspicious terrain for the realisation of the good life.

Ruskin first announced the idea in his series of monthly letters *Fors Clavigera: Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain* (1871-84), and initially professed himself content that 'here is at last a little piece of England given into the English workman's hand, and heaven's' (p. 25). However, Ruskin's relations with the farm's labourers soon soured, as their communist ideals and aspirations proved markedly at odds with his paternalistic aims. Besides Ruskin, Goldsmith's cast of characters includes the poet and simple lifer, Edward Carpenter, two Sheffield Quakers, Henry Swan and Edwin Priest, the Christian socialist and republican William Harrison Riley, and Ruskin's gardener, David Downs, who were all, in different ways, and for different lengths of time, involved in the project at St. George's Farm. Ruskin had appointed Swan as the curator of the nearby St. George's Museum in Walkley, and Swan played an important role in introducing Ruskin to a group of workers who attended a series of mutual improvement classes at Isaac Ironside's Sheffield Hall of Science, and declared themselves to be communists.

Of the nine men (including Priest) who signed an agreement to work on the farm in June 1877, Joseph Daniels was a joiner, Frederick Williams was a stone mason, John Maloy was very probably a bootmaker, W. Skelton Hunter was a surgical

instrument maker, Henry Fellows was a stove-grate fitter, Ebenezer Richardson was an engine fitter, Joseph Sharp was an ex-Chartist and harp player and Henry Richardson was a fork manufacturer. This group of skilled artisans, most of whom were accompanied by their wives and dependent children, decided to engage in cooperative labour on the land, partly, it seems, from political conviction, but they were '[h]ardly a promising lot in terms of farming and gardening' (p. 37). Goldsmith also gives particularly prominent attention to Mrs M.A. Maloy, who published a testimony of her experience of the farm – painting Ruskin in an especially negative light – in *Commonweal* during 1889, towards the end of Morris's tenure as editor. Maloy's article was one of a series of articles published in *Commonweal*, as part of a discussion of the farm's history that had been sparked by Carpenter's obituary of Joseph Sharp, entitled 'A Minstrel Communist'. Other correspondents included William Harrison Riley, George Sturt and John Greenwood. This correspondence suggests the extent to which small-scale utopian experiments, such as that practised at St. George's Farm, formed part of the Socialist League's internal culture of debate and strategic deliberation.

In retelling the story of the Topley communists, Goldsmith also brings to bear her own lived experience of participating in 'a frugal utopia a thousand feet up on the bleakest moors near Huddersfield, together with twelve other adults, plus children, goats and chickens' (p. 1). It can be especially difficult to recover the history of such ephemeral and often fractious, short-lived experiments because, as Goldsmith acknowledges, 'history is written by unreliable narrators' (pp. 2-3), a category in which she freely includes herself. As she puts it – partly as a speculative comment on the history of St. George's Farm, and partly as a reflection on her own lived experience – '[d]iffering aims, different ideas of how to organise work and money, tensions around expected levels of input, as well as personality clashes, can be a volatile mixture' (p. 47). The early days of St. George's Farm were certainly rocky, though it eventually came under the tenancy of George Pearson and his family, who, along with John Furniss and his family, made a reasonable success of both St. George's Farm and the nearby Moorhay Farm, which both families 'ran [...] collectively' (p. 78). These two families were, according to Carpenter, 'a less voluble and more practical body of Communists' (p. 81).

Given the relative paucity of textual traces, the task of piecing together a coherent narrative of the farm's development and dissolution is not an easy one. Several scholars, including W.H.G. Armytage, Stuart Eagles and Jan Marsh, have contributed to our understanding of this history. Most recently, Mark Frost's *The Lost Companions and John Ruskin's Guild of St George: A Revisionary History* (2014) has done much to challenge foregoing assumptions about the role of various key participants in the

farm, particularly William Harrison Riley and Henry Swan. Goldsmith makes clear at a number of points that her pamphlet is heavily reliant on Frost's research, especially his discovery of a number of new archival sources, transcripts of which Frost generously shared with Goldsmith for the purposes of her study. Goldsmith's proximity to the major landmarks of the story she narrates makes this a lively and appealing rendition of (mostly) familiar material, and she draws on the Carpenter Collection held in the Sheffield Archives, which contains some illuminating correspondence relating to the farm.

Owen Holland