



Obituary

John Purkis (1933-2018)

Peter Faulkner

John Purkis joined The William Morris Society in 1959 when he was an organiser for the Workers' Educational Association in Nottingham; he later worked for the Open University. In this obituary I will refer to him as John rather than Purkis, as there was nothing formal in his manner, and we were good friends. John joined the committee in 1960 and was encouraged by Ronald Briggs to serve as lecture secretary; John believed this was partly because Briggs did not want the committee to be dominated by its Communist Party members, although Briggs denied this. When the Peter Floud Memorial Prize was established in 1961, John submitted an essay entitled 'The Icelandic Jaunt', which won the Prize, and was handsomely published by the Dolmen Press in Dublin; it was reissued in 1991. The essay was a result not of John's having visited Iceland, but of his having had to spend some time in hospital, where he read Morris's writings about Iceland with scholarly care. When *The Journal of the William Morris Society* was established in 1962, he submitted an article, 'What I expect from the Morris Society', in which he argued that the idea of Morris as a whole man must be respected and that over-specialisation was to be avoided. This has proved to be the ethos of the Society. Among the Society's activities during the 1960s, John remembered a garden party attended by the Prime Minister, Harold Wilson. (There is a photograph of this event in Martin Crick's *History of the William Morris Society*, a book to which I am much indebted for the information given in this obituary). John continued to be active in the Society throughout the 1970s, and in 1987 John and Hans Brill provided detailed notes for the Society's Whitsuntide tour of Northern France, which was followed

up with a similar event in 1988. This led, in the same year, to the publication of John's *Morris, Burne-Jones and French Gothic*. His other publications, over the years, included introductions to Wordsworth, George Eliot and Wilfred Owen, and two books on classical Greece: *Greek Civilization* in 1999 and *Understand Greek Civilization* in 2012.

In 1990 John took over from Peter Preston as Secretary, serving efficiently and courteously until 1993. He then became chair of the sub-committee set up to plan for the forthcoming centenary of Morris's death, with its full programme of events in 1996. He was always generous in his praise of other Morris stalwarts, remarking of Harold Smith, bibliophile and bookseller, that 'his catalogues were a joy to read and his conversation amazing to listen to' (p. 170). The last reference to John in Crick's *History* (p. 173) is appropriately amusing, and is based on a contribution by him to the *Newsletter* in 2005. It would seem that in 1961 Ronald Briggs encouraged members of the committee to borrow and look after items from the Society's collection. John chose selected prints of the Holy Grail tapestries, large items which he had to take back to Sawston, near Cambridge. On his way there, around 2 a.m., he suddenly felt the hand of the village policeman on his shoulder. He was severely questioned as to how he had come into possession of the prints, and it was some time before his innocence was accepted and he was allowed to go home. Arrangements in the Society at the time were casual, and it was not until around a quarter of a century later, about 1985, that he remembered that he had the prints on loan from the Society; he then returned them, although nobody seemed to know what they were. He remained on the committee during my time as Secretary from 1997 to 2006, playing an active and constructive part, and contributing jovially to conversations in the Dove. John was one of those who have helped to make The William Morris Society so lively and creative over the years.