Reviews

Edited by Rosie Miles


*The Last Utopians* consists of four essays on Edward Bellamy, William Morris, Edward Carpenter and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, whose utopias are respectively characterised as orderly, artful, homogenic and motherly. The four writers are interconnected: Morris wrote *News from Nowhere* as a riposte to Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*; Carpenter and Morris were both involved in Hyndman’s Social Democratic Federation and both supported its periodical *Justice*; Gilman was an early supporter of the Nationalist Party that sprang from Bellamy’s book, met Morris when she spoke at Kelmscott House and became a lifelong friend of May Morris. Robertson describes the tradition that the four exemplify, and indeed helped to create, as having four key elements. First, there is a commitment to economic equality, or what Morris called equality of condition. Second, patriarchal relations and family forms are called into question, with support for women’s independence (and in Carpenter’s case celebration of same-sex relationships). Third, there is a strong environmental theme. Fourth, all manifest
what Robertson calls a ‘progressive spirituality’ that ‘regards the divine as immanent within humans and the natural world’ (p. 242).

Each of the four main essays is forty to fifty pages long, and they sit between a brief contextual chapter and a discussion of some examples of contemporary utopianism. This structure could risk both superficiality because of the relative brevity of each chapter, and discontinuity. In fact, both dangers are avoided, as the common themes and connections between the writers, and their overlapping milieux, lend coherence to the overall narrative. The book is aimed less at historical, literary or utopian scholars than at a wider public, whom Robertson seeks to convince of the merits of utopian thinking. It deserves to succeed in this because it is beautifully written, with clarity, elegance and a complete lack of pomposity. It also has much to say to more specialist readers (as well as being a thoroughly enjoyable read). It is bound together by a distinctive approach that seems drawn from Morris’s own claim, quoted by Robertson, that ‘[t]he only safe way of reading a utopia is to consider it as the expression of the temperament of its author’ (p. 79). Each chapter, then, is a narrative of a life, demonstrating that the protagonist’s individual temperament and struggles to find their place and voice in the world (perhaps especially acute for Carpenter and Gilman) fed into their utopian vision and political engagements. Thus we learn, for example, that Bellamy was not only a frustrated military man, but that his ‘extreme reticence and apparent agoraphobia’ contributed to the enclosed experience of Julian West in Looking Backward (p. 56). Morris, says Robertson, ‘crafted his very personality into a dismissal of the world as it is’ (p. 79). Carpenter’s struggle, besides seeking an environmentally-friendly socialism, was to find a way of being in the world as a homosexual in a context where the category did not exist, and to argue for and live out different forms of masculinity and relationship. Indeed, Carpenter argued that Urnings (as he called them) were the vanguard of change because of their capacity for non-hierarchical relationships. Gilman, as is better known, came to her views about the central importance of women’s participation in the public sphere through her own difficulties – most notably the constraining effects of marriage and motherhood, but also the problematic nature of a series of relationships with women and men.

The various arguments made by the four protagonists about the nature of the good society, and the vicissitudes of their political involvements in its pursuit, are cogently presented, accompanied by both affirmation and critique. In that sense, this is a very skilful account. Yet these are not exactly brief intellectual biographies. They are, perhaps, existential biographies. Thus Robertson’s approach, without stinting on cognitive and structural matters, foregrounds the element of existential quest in utopian longing and speculation. The fourth theme he identifies, that of ‘progressive spirituality’, is rarely discussed elsewhere in relation to socialist and feminist
utopianism, notwithstanding occasional references to socialism itself as a religion. This is a post-Christian, non-theistic spirituality – perhaps what has elsewhere been described as the perennial philosophy – that believes in the unity of all things and the possibility of individual access to this ground of unity. A particular manifestation of this in the late nineteenth century was Theosophy, a syncretic system claiming that all religions are directed to the same end, the unity of mankind, and contain only partial truths.

When we look at the four writers through this lens, we can see how they shared this pursuit of being at one with the world and how this contrasts with the feelings of being at odds with it that coloured their daily lives. Bellamy is most often read as a proponent of authoritarian, state-centred socialism (a judgment Robertson largely shares), yet his early essay on ‘The Religion of Solidarity’ makes its appearance in *Looking Backward* as a sermon on the new society. We also now know that the first Nationalist club and the manifesto of Nationalism were heavily dominated by Theosophists and Unitarians. The religious element in Bellamy was therefore critical to his early reception. Carpenter was a Cambridge don, ordained as young man into the Anglican Church, where his immediate superior was the erstwhile Christian Socialist Frederick Denison Maurice (himself a convert from Unitarianism). But he abandoned both Cambridge and the Church for Sheffield and a life as a market gardener. Carpenter’s influences included Walt Whitman and the Hindu sage Ramaswamy. He came to believe in a ‘cosmic consciousness’ (p. 167), which would heal the split between self and the world. Gilman wrestled with conventional religion and its androcentrism, eventually devoting a whole book to this. Morris went to Oxford, intending and expected to enter the Church, but after a journey through Northern France with Edward Burne-Jones he abandoned this in favour of a life dedicated to art. Morris refers in *News from Nowhere* to the new ‘religion of humanity’, and Old Hammond says that ‘the spirit of the new days, of our days, was to be delight in the life of the world’ (p. 118). That connection of the person to the wider and deeper life of the natural world is figured, of course, in the character of Ellen. Robertson does not, I think, push the spiritual element as far as one might in Morris’s case, but it seems to me to fit well with the Romantic and Transcendentalist ‘substitution’ of nature for God.

The final section of the book contains a series of instances of ‘partial’ utopias or prefigurative practices in the present day, around the themes of community, education (where Theosophy recurs through contemporary Steiner schools) and food production. Fascinating as these counter-cultural examples are, they seem to me to be predicated on a widespread but problematic assumption. Although Robertson partially defends the order envisioned by Bellamy in comparison with the vicissitudes
of life for the mass of the population in late nineteenth-century America, he repeats several times the charge of authoritarianism, and suggests this can no longer be read without conjuring the spectre of totalitarianism. The utopias of Morris and Carpenter are endorsed in part because of their affinity with Kropotkin’s communal anarchism. The group are deemed the ‘last’ utopians because the holistic, systemic nature of their envisaged transformations has been overwhelmed by dystopian fears and downright anti-utopian sentiments at least since the middle of the twentieth century. All that is left, then, is the prospect of partial utopias as people try to live out some aspect of betterment in their everyday lives.

I have two reservations about this position. One is an interpretive question in relation to Morris. In a study of this length it was not, of course, possible to engage with the voluminous literature on how News from Nowhere should be read, nor with all the details of Morris’s wider politics. But Robertson’s account does avoid emphasising Morris’s Marxism – possibly in order not to put off a United States audience. It also accepts the prevailing orthodoxy about Morris’s (and every right-thinking person’s) antipathy to the state. Yet the Manifesto of the Socialist League, which Morris wrote, asserts that ‘the land, the capital, the machinery, factories, workshops, stores, means of transit, mines, banking, all means of production and distribution of wealth, must be declared and treated as the common property of all’. I think there remains a real question about how News from Nowhere sits alongside Morris’s own practical politics and what is to be done. Secondly, the anti-statist ideology that is even more prevalent in the USA than in Britain leads to a false perception of the disappearance of these utopian themes from popular discourse after 1950. For this was the era, in Britain, of the building of the welfare state, a utopian project in its own right – and one which, with the disappearance of decent council housing, a welfare safety net and our National Health Service, some of us are fighting to defend. Bellamy was invoked in this project of protection from the cradle to the grave: when Looking Backward was republished in 1952, the Daily Herald greeted it as ‘A prophet reprinted – and he’s right so far’!

If we cast the net of utopianism wider than the field of literature, the understanding that systemic change is needed, on a global as well as on a national scale, is, I think, more widespread. It has been there in the feminist movement, and it is there now – especially – in the struggle against climate change. This is, of course, not to diminish the importance of the partial utopias Robertson discusses, nor their importance in sustaining a sensibility that life could be otherwise. For as he concludes: ‘what was true during the last utopians’ era is true today: visions of a transformed world, along with efforts to live out some portion of it in the here and now, are crucial to a better future’ (p. 271).

Ruth Levitas