Fiona MacCarthy: A Tribute

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Biographer and design historian Fiona MacCarthy, president of The William Morris Society from 1993-95, died from myeloma on 29 February 2020, a month after her eightieth birthday. She once confessed to me that of all her biographical subjects, Morris was the one she truly loved, always, and for the Society her main achievements must be the 1994 *A Life for Our Time* and the 2014 National Portrait Gallery (NPG) exhibition on Morris's life and legacy, *Anarchy and Beauty*. Thanks to assiduous research, scrupulous scholarship and a smooth style, her books have deservedly become classics.

Her presidential predecessor Ray Watkinson described the landmark biography as a book 'on a fitting scale', in which 'Morris could be dealt with generously in all his range: and not only a larger factual account, but more inquiry, more speculation, more subtlety', all demanding 'more diligent effort' to present Morris in all his 'recurrently overlapping fields of work' with facts garnered from both standard and 'unexpected, improbable sources', obliging the biographer to 'miss nothing, but to find out, too, the limits of significance of every fragment seen in the kaleidoscope'.[1] Fiona herself, in *Telling the Tale of Topsy*, her talk at Kelmscott House, spoke of the process as 'whittling away at received opinion, listening, watching, reassessing, hoping to get closer to the way things really were'.[2] Attention to detail, coupled with attentiveness to nuance, are hallmarks of her writing, and MacCarthy on Morris will continue to dominate the field in our time, just as Mackail did previously.

Fiona's own life had curious resonances with that of her hero. Like Morris she was born into comfortable privilege, as great-granddaughter of Sir Robert MacAlpine, of concrete

construction fame, although also into war, as daughter of an Army officer killed in action, and granddaughter of a French baron. An unsettled childhood involved some time living in the Dorchester Hotel, built by MacAlpine, followed by education at Wycombe Abbey School and Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, with a gap year in the final cohort of debutantes, an experience she chronicled in the autobiographical *The Last Curtsey*, published in 2006. This revealed an acute self-reflexive critical sense tinged with nostalgia to lure the reader into the vanquished, if not quite vanished, era of Court presentations and Sloaney snobbery.

Briefly married into a 'county' family, she escaped into journalism with the glossy magazine *House and Garden*, where she progressed into lifestyle features and then, in 1963, became design correspondent of the *Guardian*. Interviews with celebrities from Alvar Aalto to David Hockney nurtured her interest in contemporary arts. And then in another echo of Morris, meeting and marriage with tableware designer David Mellor led her to intense commitment to fine craftsmanship and heritage protection. There followed the renovation of Broomhall in Sheffield as workshop and home, and to the creation in Hathersage of the Round Building, based on a former gasworks (hence the shape), as domestic and business base. Like Morris and Co., the Mellor firm chose high quality, modest scale and benign management as its values. A memorable visit there, hosted by Fiona and son Corin, marked the Society's AGM in 2016.

Another notable event, too popular to fit into the Coach House, was her talk in 2012 on Burne-Jones, later published by the Society as *Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris: A Great Victorian Friendship* (2012). I first got to know her when I had written the first attempt to present Janey Morris, and Fiona was amassing facts on Topsy; we shared some source puzzles together. She was surprisingly diffident about her intellectual status, as if lacking academic credentials, and while researching – and even more so while writing – her books, she inhabited a sort of hermit-cave, to defeat distractions, and as a result could sometimes seem rather aloof, although always friendly and helpful to other Morrisians. As Peter Faulkner writes, her warm personality, allied to her insight and desire to make Morris's work better known, were great assets; in addition, she 'was an admirable cultural critic, combining fine scholarship with democratic idealism', and had the literary skill to share both.[3] If ever tempted, she resisted invitations to become a public figure or celebrity author; demands of that kind were one reason for stepping down from the presidency.

An outstanding biographer of cultural figures over the past quarter-century, who also championed contemporary design and craft, Fiona MacCarthy's chief subjects were all artist-makers with utopian dreams. Her other books connected to Morris in various ways. The first was *The Simple Life* (1981), an affectionate and clear-sighted account of C.R. Ashbee's endeavour to move his team of skilled craft workers from the East End to the Cotswolds, as Morris had previously hoped to do before settling on Merton. Sculptor, Catholic convert and commune-leader *Eric Gill* (1989) proved more challenging, as MacCarthy discovered through reading his diaries. Was it possible to reconcile the 'basic contradictions between precept and practice' of the creator of such aesthetically pleasing art and graphic work with the abusive, patriarchal exploiter?[4] Listing the sexual activities perpetrated by a devout man, who habitually wore a girdle of chastity, through successive adulteries, incest and bestiality, she calmly noted that though none were especially horrifying, their occurrence in an ordered and pious household was 'alarming'.[5] So too was the realisation that Gill's previous biographers

had suppressed these facts to present a saintly, charismatic artist. The book was attacked from both sides: Gill's family and supporters protested against the revelations, whilst others were angry that the behaviour was not forcefully condemned. MacCarthy refused to allow moral indictment to cancel admiration: Gill remained 'a great artist-craftsman'.[6] So, despite his short fuse and brusque manner, the non-saintly but admirable designer, employer, husband, father and political leader Morris was a very welcome new hero.

Prior to *Anarchy and Beauty*, she curated a Byron exhibition at the NPG to accompany her biography *Byron: Life and Legend* (2002); though admired, this proved less popular than *A Life for Our Time* – a sign of the times, perhaps. Morris swung back into prominence with *Anarchy and Beauty*, where Fiona worked actively with the NPG exhibition teams and the director Sandy Nairne, himself an avowed Morrisian, choosing at an early stage to expand its scope from Morris and immediate followers to include others working in his spirit of 'art for the people' through to the Festival of Britain and new towns. This went further, to cover current makers such as ceramicist Edmund de Waal, who became a close friend. Peter Funnell, the in-house curator, writes that Fiona regarded Morris as first and foremost a political figure, who embodied progressive social ideas with artistic and personal integrity, adding that he also felt the exhibition was both personal to Fiona's ideals and 'very timely in the middle of Cameronian austerity and a distinct lack of national vision and aspiration'.[7] Following this, and the death of David Mellor, she embarked on what proved her last doorstop project, the life story of Walter Gropius, *Visionary Founder of the Bauhaus* (2019) and godfather of Modern design. This rounded up what she saw as the key developments of the late-industrial era, her own significant participation in its history, and thus her own professional career.

NOTES

1. For Ray Watkinson's review, see *JWMS*, 11: 2 (Spring 1995), 38-42 (38-39).
2. See Fiona MacCarthy, *Telling the Tale of Topsy* (London: The William Morris Society, 1996), p. 10.
3. Email correspondence from Peter Faulkner, 29 April 2020.
4. Fiona MacCarthy, *Eric Gill* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. x.
5. *Ibid*., p. xi.
6. *Ibid*., p. ix.
7. Personal communication to the author.