Reviews

A Victorian Household by Shirley Nicholson, based on the Diaries of Marion Sambourne.

Visitors to 18 Stafford Terrace in Kensington, the late-Victorian house preserved intact
and opened to the public in 1980 under the auspices of the Victorian Society, tend to edge
carefully around the furniture and ornaments, feeling the rooms made small by the dense
furnishings and dim, encumbered interiors. But the house contains today, Shirley
Nicholson assures us, but a fraction of the original contents, just as her account of the
owners, Marion and Linley Sambourne — he the celebrated Punch cartoonist — quotes
only selectively from the diaries kept each day from the early 1880s, relentlessly recording
menus and movements, dress and dinners out.

It is the stuff of social history, the fabric woven from uneventful lives, a smooth
bourgeois pattern with only a few rough threads — a brother’s bankruptcy, a sister’s
disgrace and divorce (inadequate amends being made much later to her children) and a
son’s lazy, life-wasting self-indulgence, which neither parent seemed able to arrest.
Luckily their daughter married money and in due course became grandmother to Lord
Snowdon, whose son Viscount Linley bears his great-great-grandfather’s name.

Like the diaries of Jeannette Marshall, Marion Sambourne’s daily entries throw into
relief the artistic and social distinction of the Morris and Burne-Jones families, who
occupied a similar position in the social scale but who surely led much more interesting
lives. The Sambournes were too easily impressed by wealth and titles. In 1890 they were
invited on a Baltic cruise by Vernon Watney the brewer, visiting Stockholm, St Petersburg
and Copenhagen, where Linley, annihilated by boredom, suddenly insisted on returning
home by rail. Virtually the only political events mentioned by Marion — except for the
Crawford-Dilke divorce case — were the mass demonstrations of 1886-7. “Monster
meeting in Trafalgar Square — dreadful damage to property”, she noted, unable to
venture out the next day “on account of fog and afraid of riots”. Bloody Sunday was
summarised as “Riots. 4000 military out, 200 wounded, awful row”.

Her daughter Maud became, as she was educated to be, a charming snob. Exhilarated
by the luxury of Buscot Park — electric light in all rooms — she was unimpressed by a visit
to Kelmscott Manor, made “with the object of calling on the great William Morris”, who
was not there. (It was August 1896 and Morris was away on the sea journey that failed to
prolong his life). However, “his daughter was there and showed us over the place. The
house is lovely for its oldness but oh! so so artistic and grubby. The tea was laid out in
barbaric fashion with a loaf on the table and a dirty jam pot that had been broken open
through the paper at the top and the spoon looked too sticky to touch. We did not accept
the tea but sat in a row in the plain painfully plain dining room and stared at Miss Morris
and wondered why she dressed in such a sloppy way with no stays.”

Happily, May Morris had better manners than her unexpected young caller.

Jan Marsh
"From generation to generation the idea of nationalising the land has been kept alive among the people. A hundred years ago, Thomas Spence of Newcastle formulated a complete scheme to bring about this result through the action of parishes and municipalities. This pamphlet I reprinted at a penny last year." So wrote H.M. Hyndman in the chapter "The Future" of his *Historical Basis of Socialism* (p. 448), the Preface of which is dated from Portland Place, London, November 8 1883. The pamphlet was "The Meridian Sun of Liberty, or the Whole Rights of Man displayed" published in 1795, and containing the outline of this parochial scheme in the text of Spence's lecture given in 1775 to the little Philosophical Society of Newcastle, of which he and Thomas Bewick (admired by Philip Webb), the painter John Collier and the radical preacher James Murray were members. Hyndman had found the pamphlet in his researches in the British Museum, was urged to reprint it by Henry George—and did so in 1882. In that same year, the fourteen year-old T.U.C. passed a resolution in favour of land-nationalisation, as did the Northumbrian Miners.

At the beginning of 1883, William Morris, after attending some of Hyndman's meetings, joined his Democratic Federation on the explicit understanding that it was about to declare itself a Socialist body; which in May it duly did, and Morris became its first treasurer, throwing himself into every aspect of its new propaganda. Between his joining in January, and the publication of Hyndman's new book in November, Morris spent much time in discussion with Hyndman, and read Marx's *Capital* with delight. Something of their discussion made its way into "The Historical Basis", for in the same chapter in which he refers to Spence, Hyndman writes: "How by combination and cooperation, by the planting of garden ground, by the erection of common kitchens, baths, halls of recreation, reading rooms, splendid buildings and surroundings might be created rivalling in beauty the monasteries of the middle ages or the palaces of Moorish Spain, I will leave to my friend William Morris to depict—only saying that here imagination may proceed on the sure footing of what has been accomplished in many countries by communal effort, and may be done again. Theory and practice, imagination and reality, blend together when men have such engines of construction as they possess today." (pp. 454-5). Here surely is the germ of what appeared in the pages of *Commonweal* from January 11 to October 4, 1890 as *News from Nowhere*. There can be little doubt that Morris's utopia of many egalitarian communes linked in a great federation, with the stark contrasts of town and country wiped out along with social distinctions and the pollution of the factory system, owes a debt to Spence's vision of two hundred years earlier. And his own dealings, as a Director of the Devon Great Consolidated Copper Mines, with their powerful landlord, the Duke of Bedford, must have underlined his sympathies with older ideas of the tyranny of feudal land-ownership.

Now, in Malcolm Chase's short, admirably written and deeply researched book, we have access to one of the streams of thought that moulded Morris's view of the good society, and how to achieve it.

Ray Watkinson
Linda Parry, Textiles of the Arts & Crafts Movement.

The summer of 1988 has seen the opening of two exhibitions to commemorate the centenary of the foundation of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society. The Victoria & Albert Museum's exhibition, Textiles of the Arts & Crafts Movement, opened on 23 June and continued until 4 September. At the Knapp Gallery, Regent's Park, The Society of Designer-Craftsmen, formerly the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, held a show of contemporary work by some of their members from 6 to 30 July. Both exhibitions pay tribute to Morris. In British Designer-Craftsmen 1988 one sees the legacy of the Arts and Crafts movement, and of Morris in particular, in the high quality of the materials used and in the integrity of design in evidence throughout the exhibition. This debt was given formal acknowledgement in the form of a silver medallion designed by Leslie Durbin, commissioned and subsidized by Goldsmith’s Hall, and awarded to Alan Peters, the furniture-maker, at the opening of the exhibition; this had a profile portrait of Morris on one side and on the other a crane in relief, a reference to Walter Crane, the first President of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society.

It was heartening to see the influence of the Arts and Crafts movement still alive today before visiting the Victoria & Albert Museum’s exhibition of textiles produced by the movement. This is the work of Linda Parry, whose book, Textiles of the Arts and Crafts Movement, was published in June to complement the exhibition; both are based on textiles shown at the Arts and Crafts Exhibitions between 1899 and 1916. She is able in her book to give a far broader perspective on the Arts and Crafts movement than is possible within the context of the exhibition; a great merit of this book is its lucid exposition of the artistic and industrial background of the movement. But perhaps its most fascinating aspect is the chapter on designers, manufacturers, and shops in which she examines the commercial side of the movement; without the successful interplay between manufacturer and designer which she describes it would have been impossible for the Arts and Crafts movement to exist as it did or be as influential as it was. Her examination of the textiles exhibited by the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society between 1888 and 1916 shows that the movement's best textiles were produced in these relatively few, densely-packed years but that its influence both in Britain and on the Continent was immeasurable. Altogether this book succeeds in bringing order and coherence to a complex and disparate aesthetic phenomenon, the effects of which continue today. The value of this book is greatly enhanced by its catalogue of designers, craftsmen, institutions, and firms and by its excellent plates, which convey the richness and subtlety of colour so characteristic of Arts and Crafts movement textiles.

Christine Poulson
W.B. Yeats designated Morris “The Happiest of Poets” (Essays and Introductions, 1902) in contrast to Rossetti who delighted in an imagined ideal, desiring “a world of essences, of unmixed powers, of impossible purities” while Morris sought perfection but of the kind which is “a perfect fullness of natural life, of an Earthly Paradise” resulting from the complete expression of human energy and vitality. Morris’s Wanderers “follow a dream indeed, but a dream of natural happiness.” Dr. Tompkins’s study supports Yeats’s comments, despite the fact that for a long period of his life Morris experienced personal unhappiness; this book shows that he continually strove to overcome it by pursuing his “dream” of earthly happiness in exercising his formidable array of skills, not least in poetry. She includes both the early and later romances, some of which, following a medieval tradition, combine verse and prose. She is very aware of Morris’s supreme achievements as socialist and designer, and often uses both activities to illuminate the poetry but, as she remarks in the conclusion to her substantial and rewarding book, the study of Morris’s poetry is necessary to bring our picture of him into focus.

From the time of its first publication Morris’s poetry has been criticised for its escapism. The Saturday Review (20 November 1858) on The Defence of Guenevere complained that Morris had wasted his considerable powers by deserting the true principle of art: concern “with the living world of men.” A modern critic writes of The Earthly Paradise: “The poems were meant to allow their readers to escape from “greater” London ... Their popularity suggests that they succeeded.” (Peter Stansky, William Morris, Oxford, 1983, pp. 46-7). But Dr. Tompkins perceptively, and with a light touch, draws out the biographical significance of Morris’s poetry. She shows how closely he identifies himself with The Earthly Paradise in “L’Envoi” to the poem, and how important this work of the imagination was to Morris at the time. She also stresses that he changed and developed, and sees signs of this in his later poetry. In one of her illuminating metaphors she says of the later romances that they are not simply the fruit of Morris’s leisure but “the product of inner necessity, breaking the crowded and troubled surface of daily life.” (p. 278) She rejects attempts to force socialist meanings on the early poetry, but considers it as a continual expression of Morris’s struggle to objectify his personal distresses and fears, and to channel his energies into a positive response to life by means of his beloved story-telling and picture-making.

Dr. Tompkins rightly concentrates on the narrative element in Morris’s poems, and in much Victorian poetry, associating Morris’s treatment of narrative with his craftsman’s appetite for form, for example in the use of different narrative angles in The Defence of Guenevere (and, she could have added, The Pilgrims of Hope). She considers the compulsion to read to the end which Morris achieves in many tales of The Earthly Paradise by evolving a narrative style which many, more impatient, modern readers find dull. But she is not idolatrous; she judges subject and form mismatched in some of the stories, notably “Pygmalion and the Image” and “The Story of Acontius and Cydippe” “where Morris’s choice has pitched on an anecdote which proves incapable of development, and the tale is filled out with idle comings and goings and repetitive laments.” (p. 135) In handling the narrative themes Dr. Tompkins insists on the living continuity of Morris’s work, for example, that the love triangle, a woman loved by two
men, which Morris found in medieval sources, recurs in his work but is developed, not simply repeated. An instance is the new Icelandic influence on the theme in the two-part tale of Bellerophon in *The Earthly Paradise*: “He is the young man who gets over his troubles, forgives himself and others, and learns fortitude by accepting and making the best of what life brings him, including the imperfect nature of his fellow-men.” (p. 192)

Walter, in “The Hill of Venus”, helps establish the significant pattern of the poem by providing a complete contrast and “exemplifies the state which Morris most dreaded, imprisonment in his own hurt mind and sensibility, with everything outside it unreal” (p. 200) – a protest against escapism rather than an invitation to indulge it.

An important aspect of Morris’s imaginative life, which Dr. Tompkins sees as the primary subject of her book, is a sense of history which came to include contemporary striving for a better society. That history for Morris is living, organic and, more important, created by those alive in the present, is stressed by Dr. Tompkins’s concluding remarks on *News from Nowhere*. Far from being an idealistic yearning for a medieval never-never land, “The Epoch of Rest is not presented as permanent. It has been achieved by men and can be lost by them.” (p. 319) The tension between the possibility of achievement and that of loss gives Morris’s imaginings their impact, even as the bright fellowship of Nowhere, at the end of the book, fades into the servility and degradation of a contemporary village, Kelmscott, yet retains its challenge and allure.

Dr. Tompkins’s book was twenty years in the writing, from its first inception, and draws on a long lifetime’s familiarity with Morris’s work and with Victorian poetry. She died, aged eighty-nine, before the book was published. Her friend Mrs Patricia Fowles undertook the task of overseeing the book’s passage from manuscript to finished copies, helped correct the proofs and compiled the index. In her preface Dr. Tompkins regrets that she was unable to work on Morris’s manuscripts and regards this as a bad omission; she also refuses to assess the language of the poems, insisting that this is the concern of a language specialist. Possibly the book is over long and sometimes repetitive. There is no bibliography. It is ill-served by its dust-jacket on which Morris’s face appears in a deathly and menacing guise suggesting an apparition at a séance. But the book has a “digested” quality, and its author’s sympathy with, and knowledge of, Victorian poetry, and her close and careful reading of Morris’s poems and romances, make her account of his evolution as a poet both convincing and enjoyable. With none of the trappings of “radical” criticism it succeeds in providing radical insights into a whole area of Morris’s work now generally neglected or misunderstood.

Sheila Smith

Dover Publications (published in the country by Constable) continue their interesting facsimile work with a republication of the 1894 Kelmscott edition of Morris's romance, with its 23 woodcuts by Walter Crane. The dimensions of the original are slightly reduced, and the chapter headings appear rather weakly in grey instead of the original red. The cover includes a coloured version of Crane's woodcut of the Fight of the Champions in the Hall of Revenge, in which the knights appear in pale blue. Despite the marked contrast between Dover's own mediocre typography and that of the text itself and the inevitable loss involved in modern methods of reproduction, this is an attractive book which gives the reader the chance to enter Morris's created world in terms closer to his own, and to see examples of Crane's art at its most vigorous and successful.

Peter Faulkner

*The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic Studies*
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This Inaugural – Anniversary issue is dedicated to the retiring editor, Francis Golffing, in celebration of ten years of valuable scholarship; the new editors are W.E. Fredeman and Ira B. Nadel of the Department of English at British Columbia. The success of *The Journal* must be an encouragement to all of us interested in Morris and his associates and impressive evidence of the good work being done in this area, particularly in the United States and Canada. The present issue contains two articles on Morris, by David Latham and Frederick Kirchhoff, as well as Ray Watkinson on Frederic Shields in Manchester; there is also a useful Cumulative Index. We are all indebted to Francis and Barbara Golffing, and wish *The Journal* continuing success.

Peter Faulkner