

## Reviews

Stephen Coleman and Paddy O'Sullivan, *William Morris and News from Nowhere. A Vision for our Time*. Green Books, Hartland, Devon. pp.213. £8.95 pbk.

This is one of the most lively and wide-ranging studies of Morris's ideas to have appeared in recent years, and a worthy product of the centenary of *News from Nowhere's* first appearance in *Commonweal*. The editors are to be congratulated on having assembled nine essays which between them cover most of the central issues raised in the book, following a challenging Preface on the value of the human imagination as an instrument for social change, a useful Introduction covering the main events and achievements of Morris's life, and a helpful Synopsis of the events of the novel. The production by Green Books (using recycled paper) is of high quality, so that the book is a pleasure to hold and look at, as well as to read. Its price is also reasonable.

The main point of this review is to encourage members to buy themselves copies of this book, and to ensure that their local libraries do so too, and so I shall not go through all the articles here. Some are by writers already well known to Morris enthusiasts (like Ray Watkinson and Jan Marsh), others by writers less well known in Morris circles and yet proving equally knowledgeable and enthusiastic. Of the latter, Christopher Hampton is particularly successful in placing Morris within the English Utopian tradition, Stephen Coleman in indicating (in a particularly well-written piece) how *Nowhere* challenges conservative assumptions about human nature, Colin Ward in situating Morris in a tradition of architectural thought, Adam Buick in asserting the relevance and necessity of a steady-state economy, and Paddy O'Sullivan in indicating Morris's relevance to contemporary 'Green' thinking. Mark Pearson's piece on Morris, Webb and architecture could have done with more editing; it stands out from the rest of the volume in its use of an inelegant academic jargon which partly obscures its line of argument: how much insight is gained by calling 'nature' and 'tradition' "two complementary meta-languages"?

While most of the contributions are content to summarise, explicate, contextualise, and applaud, a few are more critical of the text, Marsh for its sexual politics and Crump in 'How the Change Came' for its over-optimistic view of both Trade Unions and the possibility of overcoming an entrenched bourgeoisie. Crump's article therefore emphasises one of the most urgent political issues that arises from the book. How is constructive political change to be brought about? Is it appropriate to dismiss (as Morris did) the constitutional channels of change, of which Parliament is the most obvious? Is the idea of revolution a relevant alternative today? Morris was undoubtedly right to insist that 'making Socialists' was necessary if social changes were to be anything more than short-term responses to particular problems. But how are Socialists to be made in a society whose comparative affluence conceals the sufferings of the under-class? Twentieth-century British Socialism has not yet found effective answers to these questions, as the last ten years have disturbingly shown. Are Crump's "communist dreamers" in a position to do so? This is a major question which this article actually encourages us to confront.

The level of accuracy in the text is high, though Rossetti (that trap for proof-readers) is twice misspelt, and O'Sullivan's pieces are short on page references. *Looking Backward* is twice said to have been "republished by Harmondsworth (1986)", though its place of recent publication is given in the fairly thorough Bibliography as London; the Bibliography also misspells Hodgson and Kirchhoff, and has misleading or inaccurate entries for Kelvin, Meier and Pevsner.

However, these are of small significance in relation to the wide range and engaging enthusiasm of these essays, which indicate once again that Morris's concerns are the central issues of our time. As Adam Buick cogently puts it, the establishment of the kind of society to which Morris consistently pointed is "not just a practical solution to the problem of how rationally to satisfy 'the common needs of mankind' but an urgent necessity if the human species is to survive in harmony with the rest of nature".

Peter Faulkner

Barry C. Johnson, editor, *Tea and Anarchy! The Bloomsbury Diary of Olive Garnett 1890-1893*. Bartlett's Press, 1989, 244pp.

Available from 39a Kildare Terrace, London W.2.

In 1890 Richard Garnett became Keeper of Printed Books at the British Museum, and moved with his family into a residence on the east side of the Museum, with its front door on Montague Street. Of the five children, Olive Rayne was the middle daughter, then aged eighteen, and on moving there she began to keep a detailed diary. Although she later destroyed over half of the diaries for the early part of the decade, there is plenty of very interesting unpublished material left, of which Barry Johnson here provides a generous selection – he tells us that it represents about half of the text, and he is careful to mark the omissions, which have been made on the grounds of likely interest to the reader. What we have is a lively human document, reminding us of an attractive way of life in advanced London circles at the end of the last century. It was a time when young women were beginning to receive a good education – Olive herself attended Queen's College in Harley Street from 1882 to 1889, and took a keen interest in the cultural life of London: many of the diary entries concern her reading and theatre-going. Olive was also in a world in which many of her acquaintances were involved in Radical politics, although she herself always seems detached and sceptical. In particular the young Rossettis (children of William Michael) were known as the Anarchists, and produced their amateurish magazine *The Torch* to further the cause. Olive was encouraged to provide entertaining contributions to lighten the overall tone. In particular she came to know several members of the Russian community in London, eventually the Kropotkins, the Volkhovskys, and the Stepniaks. Sergey Stepniak indeed became for the young Olive in those years both a literary mentor and a romantic ideal: a good deal of space is given to her feelings about that remarkable man.

The world described therefore has many similarities with that of Morris, although it also has its more conventional side, and is also more literary: the young Ford Madox Hueffer is one of the liveliest presences, and there is a moving account of a visit to the elderly Christina Rossetti: "Practically she has left the world already". Ford Madox Brown is a respected presence, bewildered by the worldliness of his grandsons. Morris himself appears at a meeting of the Friends of Russian Freedom in December 1891, unable to restrain himself after listening to the main speakers:

William Morris then sprang up & dashed into English Socialism, his voice rang out as he said that it was all very well to free Russia but were we not slaves ourselves, if Russia was in a mess, we were in a terrible mess, let enlightened people join hands & help each other, if we helped the Russian people, they must help us, & they were helping us, England was advancing, Socialism was gaining ground fast etc. Cries of question, Don't introduce English politics, no Socialism. You'll do the Cause more harm than good etc. etc. interrupted him all along but he persisted, crying out that if they going to free Russia they needn't make a slave of him, at which everyone laughed. He sat down protesting that he has said all he wanted to say. Spence Watson then moved a resolution...

Olive also met May Morris at the Stepniaks', finding her less beautiful than she had expected, "while recognizing in her of course a likeness to Rossetti's portrait of her mother". May is seen again at a concert of seventeenth-century music directed by Arnold Dolmetsch.

Olive comes out of these diaries as a level-headed and articulate young woman, occasionally given to self-doubt. Her relationship to the Rossetti children (who were only a few years younger than herself) shows her trying to temper their anarchism with common sense, and she is quite prepared to argue the point with Kropotkin. In April 1893 Olive includes an account of a visit to the new 'office' of *Commonweal* (by now, like the Socialist League, in Anarchist hands, and run by a young man named Cantwell):

The office is in a dirty little house in a dirty little mews off Gray's Inn Road ... a garret at the top of the house, reached by means of a ladder which Cantwell says he could push down on any bailiffs who came after him. The room was filthy & the rain comes in through the roof. Cantwell was sitting 'comping' ... There was a 'Socialist League' bookshelf & piles of pamphlets heaped everywhere ... "I felt that I could do such a lot of work there", said Helen [Rossetti].

A little later, in July, Helen Rossetti gives the diarist a lively account of being in the *Commonweal* office when a reporter from the Central News Agency comes to question Cantwell about the Anarchists and the forthcoming royal wedding. Cantwell alarms the reporter by drawing attention to some ginger beer bottles on the floor and remarking that "3d worth of explosive in a ginger beer bottle would form a bomb sufficient to blow up an entire building", and the reporter soon leaves. But Olive Garnett remarks sharply on the inconsistency of her Anarchist friends: "How can we distribute pamphlets & write them, recommending the use of bombs, while not intending to use them oneself?" On the evening of the wedding, Olive went into town to see the principal buildings lit up, and the diary shows her pleasure in recording snippets of conversation. A countryman replies to his wife, who wants to be taken down the Strand: "No Mary Anne ... I've been on my feet with you four mortal hours, & I've had enough, not while Britannia rules the seas will I take you into that crowd, so come along home, at once." Near the Mansion House, a foreigner addresses his wife: "Why do you speak to me like this. I tell you, in an affair like this, it is necessary to be quiet & keep the good nature."

I hope this will give some good sense of the liveliness and interest of these diaries, which Barry Johnson has brought to our attention in an attractively illustrated book. It is good to learn in the Introduction that he hopes to carry the publication of the diaries through to 1900, with an epilogue on the rest of the diarist's life. I look forward to hearing more from Olive Garnett.

Peter Faulkner