Reviews


On the face of it, there is not much to like about Ernest Belfort Bax. The emotionally stunted product of a repressed and repressive middle-class Victorian family, he grew up to be uncaring towards his wife and children, a confirmed misogynist and, worse still, a male chauvinist who purported to stand for socialist equality. Bax appears to have been an anti-semite (p. 106), was detached from the workers he claimed to support (p. 94), opposed Bolshevism in 1917 on the nationalist grounds that it would harm the war effort (in 1916 he had joined Hyndman’s National Socialist Party), and, with a degree of hypocrisy not uncommon amongst capitalist politicians in times of war, he defended workers’ participation in the Great Slaughter of 1914–18 while spending most of the war years bathing in the southern French sun at his second home in Nice. In addition to all this, Bax was a pretty awful orator (p. 38) and, in the view of this writer, was a convoluted and philosophically abstruse writer. When he died he was described in most newspaper obituaries as ‘The Father of British Socialism’. (p. 137) These days it is to be doubted whether Bax would last ten minutes within any respectable socialist gathering.

Ernest Belfort Bax was born in 1854, twenty years after Morris. His childhood was lonely and religiously oppressive and he was educated at home. When he was ten the family moved to Hampstead and it was in the years after that that he became friendly with a young medical student called William Boulting who was later to become an authority on medieval and Renaissance Italy. Perhaps it was this friendship, which was to last into adulthood, which enabled Bax to share some of Morris’s medieval passion. Certainly Morris would not have been enthused by Bax’s artistic love for music: he was an accomplished composer and pianist, the music critic for *The Star* newspaper and the uncle of the eminent composer, Arnold Bax. In fact, it was his musical education which took Bax to Stuttgart in Germany in 1875 where he planned to study musical composition but ended up encountering Hegelian philosophy. His fascination with the Hegelian dialectic, together with the dramatic effect of the Paris Commune of 1871 in unleashing liberationary emotions in this repressed young man, prepared him for the ideas of Marxian socialism, based as they were upon a dialectical sense of history and the many lessons of the Commune. Bax joined the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) in June 1882 after having met with Hyndman the previous autumn. It was Bax who persuaded Morris to join the SDF and engage in the socialist propaganda.

What was the relationship between Bax and Morris? From the start they attended open-air meetings together, with Morris on the platform and Bax not. In 1883 they both joined the Executive Committee of the SDF and in December of 1884 they both left the SDF to form the Socialist League. The two men collaborated on an article in *Commonweal* in September 1885 entitled ‘What’s To Be Done’ (so much friendlier than the Lenin title) and a year later they both wrote the League’s Manifesto – the finest declaration of unadulterated socialism of the last century. In 1886–7 the two men again collaborated, this time on a series of articles entitled ‘Socialism From The
Root Up’, later revised and published as Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome. As with the Manifesto, any reader who is familiar with the imaginativeness and vivacity of Morris’s style will have no difficulty spotting the Hegelian-formulated Bax contributions. Bax left the League three years sooner than Morris (in 1887) and returned to the SDF where he seems to have dismissed his earlier criticism of Hyndman’s opportunism.

Bax and Morris worked hard and well together, but they were very different types (despite coming from the same class: both men had independent incomes.) Bax understood Marxian economics and explained the theory to Morris. Indeed, Bax was the first person to expound the ideas of Marx in Britain and attribute them to the German revolutionary. In 1879 he wrote an article which was published in Modern Thought which won much praise for Bax from Marx himself. (p. 22) (Marx had no such praise for Hyndman who had outlined his ideas from Capital without mentioning Marx.) Morris regarded Bax as the philosopher of the socialist movement in Britain – in much the same way as Marx had regarded Dietzgen. Morris’s dependence upon Bax’s Marxist understanding has been undoubtedly exaggerated, both by the former’s intellectual modesty and by those who have sought to prove that Morris was not really a Marxist. Without doubt, Bax did much to bring Marx’s ideas to a British audience and was unique in his circle for his fluency in reading German. But there is a good case to be argued for Morris as a far more consistent Marxist theorist than Bax.

Bax’s neo-Hegelian interpretation of Marx represented an important attempt – ignored at the price of theoretical vulgarity – to save the materialist conception of history from economic reductionism. But in pursuing this interpretation Bax tended to regress the theory to a pre-Marxian idealism of the will. Linked to this criticism of Bax’s philosophical idealism (which cannot here be elaborated) was his strategic inclination towards vanguardism, derived in great part from a romanticised view of the French Revolution and an excessive praise for the historic role of Marat. Bax wrote five books on French revolutionary history (two of them on Marat) and the lessons he drew from them made him a Jacobin, a Blanquist, a revolutionary elitist. Writing of the 1789 Revolution, Bax supported the ‘active minority’ who had to ‘terrorise ... the majority.’ In the 1871 Commune what the ‘situation demanded’, asserted Bax, was a ‘strong dictatorship.’ (p. 101) Cowley is right to draw attention to Bax’s ‘minority revolutionary politics’ (p. 109), the legacy of which has been so utterly disastrous.

In chapter 4 Cowley gives an explicit account of Bax’s sexist prejudices. As author of The Fraud of Feminism and The Legal Subjection of Men, Bax held as justification for his position the fear that if women were equal with men they would vote to give sex privilege to their gender, a vote which they could easily win if suffrage were universal because there are more of ‘them’ than ‘us’. He opposed the 1881 Married Women’s Property Act which ended the legal position whereby women were their husband’s property; he was a founder member of the Anti-Suffrage League in 1908; and he lamented the passage in 1820 of the Act which had abolished flogging for female criminals. It is a matter of virtual certainty that the crudely sexist sentiment attributed to Morris by Bax was an invention. (p. 86) That this kind of contemptible nonsense was allowed to be expressed within the socialist movement reflects something less healthy than tolerance – more like indifference to such matters as freedom for women workers. With the singular exception of Eleanor Marx, whom
Bax refused to debate with when challenged, there was an ominous silence on the subject of the incompatibility between Bax’s claim to be a socialist and his contempt for women. But maybe, as Cowley hints, it was put down to harmless eccentricity. Worse still, however, was the fact that Bax’s misogyny was not merely ‘theoretical’, but resulted in a badly neglected family: a first wife who died of nervous exhaustion after bearing seven children in nine years and then being sent away to a home; children who met with a combination of parental neglect and authoritarian regimentation from Bax; and a second wife whom he appears to have treated as a pet.

Part of the growing up of socialists in our own times has been the realisation that the personal is political. (Would Morris have still been a good socialist if he had chained his wife to the bedpost in response to her unfaithfulness?) John Cowley has written a valuable account of this under-examined character in the Morris circle, but its weakness is in its failure to evaluate the meanings of paper commitments and personal betrayals. Cowley writes that “Whatever criticism may be made of his life and writings, the single-mindedness with which he committed himself to the cause cannot be doubted. Throughout the next forty-five years of his life (after 1881) he was never to retreat from his newfound view of history and goal of a socialist transformation of the world.” (p. 24) By 1926, when he died, Bax did not retreat from the cause of humanity only if one excludes from humanity women, German conscripts and his own kids.

Stephen Coleman

Eco-Socialism: From Deep Ecology to Social Justice by David Pepper.

William Morris – Rot und Grün is the title of a new book in German about Morris’s thought. (It will be reviewed in our next issue.) But what is ‘red’ and what is ‘green’, and in what ways might these colours converge? David Pepper, a principal lecturer in Geography at Oxford Brookes University, addresses himself to this important question:

This book tries to help the cause of eco-socialist politics by describing and explaining the forms of socialism – particularly Marxist socialism – and anarchism on which they must be based. It highlights and clarifies many of the differences between socialism and anarchism in order to suggest the agenda for any future political discourse which wants to close the gap and create eco-socialism as a more vital force. (p. 3)

In his endeavour to bring a ‘red’ perspective to a highly visionary but theoretically impoverished ‘green movement’, Pepper regards Morris as a key channel. M. Ryle and Paddy O’Sullivan have made earlier attempts to illuminate Morris’s ecological vision and Pepper acknowledges his debt to them. He argues with great cogency and simplicity of style that Morris ‘explained “green” themes like simple lifestyles, harmony with nature, the inherent wastefulness of the market, and, above all, the need for “useful work versus useless toil” (1885) that would produce useful and beautiful products, mental and physical pleasure, and a revival of creativity.’ (p. 62) Pepper acknowledges the Marxist basis of Morris’s environmental thinking and, in a fine analysis of the relationship between socialist theory and ecology, he argues for an eco-socialist fusion of red and green based upon Morris’s vision.
This fusion involves two highly stimulating projects. The first is to save ‘green thinking’ from the naive individual-consumerism and the metaphysical Gaia-nonsense which in the past has driven the “deep ecologists’ into a ghetto of mystical impotence. Pepper warns against giving insufficient attention “to the need to instigate changes in the mode of material production and to how they can be effected; in the light of the powerful vested interests in capitalism which resist them.” (p. 142) Deep ecology’s post-modernist rejection of ‘meta-theory’ and its guilt-based tendency to see the individual as somehow the cause rather than the victim of environmental breakdown is well refuted.

Secondly, in examining in some detail Morris’s News From Nowhere together with Kropotkin’s Fields, Factories and Workshops Tomorrow (of 1889), Pepper resists the long-standing, and perhaps obsolete, rigid dichotomy between communist and anarchist objectives. He contends that in both works ‘we find anarcho-communist principles translated into landscapes and socio-economic detail that are similar to the green landscapes.’ (p. 177) While not ignoring the long-rehearsed strategic differences between socialists and anarchists, Pepper, coming afresh to both traditions from an ecological background, is able to recognise that the common vision is more important for now than the tactical divergences. Pepper’s ‘eco-socialist’ support for what he interestingly refers to as ‘an anarcho-socialist society’ might just be making a contribution to our battered political vocabulary which will offer strength to future meanings and actions.

Stephen Coleman


Florence Boos is a leading figure in the group of American literary critics who have encouraged us to discover the pleasure of reading Morris’s longer poems, and in particular The Earthly Paradise. English critics, for the most part, have preferred Morris’s more dramatic early poems (not that these are underrated by Boos). Clive Wilmer, for example, in his new edition of News from Nowhere and Other Writings remarks in his Introduction that The Earthly Paradise “may strike the modern reader as prolix, over-decorative and escapist.” (p. ix) Boos’s project is to show that there is much more going on in the poem than such dismissive remarks imply, and indeed more than the Victorian critics who praised the work (sometimes for the qualities that Wilmer deprecates) also realised. For her it is “not ... an escapist work, but one of the major achievements of Morris’ life, the focus of intense literary and emotional concentration for almost a decade, and an attempt to find historical meaning in literature of grief, shared memory, and renewal”. (p. 5)

Her publishers have allowed Boos ample scope to develop her argument – although they have certainly not helped by producing the twenty-five well-chosen illustrations in shades of grey which often suggest an intrusive mist. The book has two introductory chapters taking us up to 1870, then Part I ‘The Frame’ (dealing with the Apology and the monthly lyrics, together with the evolution of the ‘Wanderers’ Prologue’), Part II ‘The Serial Pattern of the Tales’ (which includes the Epilogue and L’Envoi), Part III ‘Studies of Representative Tales’ (including Jason), then a ‘Conclusion, and a Second Envoi’. This is followed by three Appendices, the first surveying twentieth-
century criticism of the poem, and finding more positive responses in Carole Silver, Amanda Hodgson and J.M. Tompkins, the second reprinting ‘The Story of Dorothea’ (written for the poem but not finally included in it or published in Morris’s lifetime), and the third dealing with the writing of ‘The Hill of Venus’ and reprinting an excerpt from an early draft describing the hero’s responses shortly after he awakens in the cave of Venus. There is also a ‘Chronology of Composition and Publication from 1858 to 1873’ (with its heading in too small a type-size), a ‘Selected Bibliography’ set out in seven sections, and two thorough Indices. This is undoubtedly the most thorough work to have been published on The Earthly Paradise, and the reader is left respecting Boos’s extensive scholarship and generous enthusiasm.

Perhaps Boos’s most challenging contention is that the poem should indeed be read and thought about as a unity, with the tales interacting with the frame in complex and illuminating ways. The tales themselves, it is suggested, point by the end towards the belief that “Heroic love can be created within the self, without the aid or favor of fate”, (p. 366) and that to create such love is a moral imperative whatever its reception. By the end of the cycle, the Wanderers achieve “a tempered acceptance of the death they had fled.” (p. 367) Boos argues that this attitude has parallels with ancient Stoicism, so that it is wrong to believe that Morris failed to achieve any kind of ethical or social insight in the course of the poem. At this stage, it is suggested, Morris’s world-view is characterised by a “tempered meliorism”, which is contrasted, rather surprisingly, with “the more Christian and conventional optimism expressed in the work of his contemporaries Tennyson, Browning, and Hopkins.” (p. 372) No doubt the Christian world-view itself can be construed as basically optimistic, but neither Tennyson’s nor Hopkins’ version of it seems to me remarkable for “conventional optimism.” However, Boos argues persuasively that we can see in The Earthly Paradise a serious attempt by Morris to confront, rather than avoid, basic questions about human life. There may not yet be much evidence of the hopefulness that would lead Morris to commit himself to Socialism, but there is a developing sense of human community: “no one achieves an earthly paradise, but our efforts may bind us together, enlarge our identity, and ensure mutual understanding.” (p. 372) This view, a kind of Stoic humanism, gives unity and purpose to the poem when it is seen as a whole.

This is well argued and, if accepted, would win for the poem more respect than it has customarily received in the twentieth century. If I am not totally convinced, perhaps this is simply because I have a preference for lyrical and dramatic poetry over narrative, from which I find it hard to free myself. Certainly the contrary arguments are set out here with clarity and logic. George Eliot wrote to John Blackwood in 1868 from the Black Forest: “We take Morris’s poem into the woods with us and read it aloud greedily, looking to see how much more there is in store for us. If ever you have an idle afternoon, bestow it on The Earthly Paradise.” Should the modern reader want to come to terms with the poem in the most serious sense, he or she would be well advised to take Florence Boos’ book along too.

Peter Faulkner

This new Penguin selection of writings by Morris replaces the previous edition introduced by Asa Briggs and differs from it in three main ways. Firstly, the new volume is not illustrated; there are no Morris designs in this paperback. Secondly, Wilmer provides twenty-three pages of very useful, scholarly Notes on the writings included, as well as contributing a highly cogent and accessible forty-one page introduction to Morris’s life and ideas. Thirdly, unlike the previous Penguin edition in which News From Nowhere was published only in an abridged form – an atrocious publishing decision – the current edition gives readers Morris’s great utopian romance without any cuts. Clive Wilmer and Penguin have done much to bring Morris to the attention of a broader reading public, both in Britain and North America (where the book is on sale.)

Stephen Coleman