Reviews


This is a clearly organised and well written account of the Yeats sisters, Lolly and Lily, giving a sympathetic view of their achievements at Dun Emer and Cuala in the light of the position of women in their lifetimes. It differs from two overlapping books of which I wrote earlier (in *The Journal of Autumn* 1995) in giving a more sympathetic account of Lolly, usually presented as the ‘difficult’ sister by contrast with the quieter Lily. The early chapters describe the Yeats family in London, and Lily’s time as an embroideress working with May Morris, and I was interested to see whether this account would prove more or less sombre than those I found in the earlier books.

On balance I think Hardwick’s account is slightly less sombre, although this is partly because she never quotes directly from either sister and so the reader is dependent on more distant summaries. She also gives one detail not mentioned elsewhere, to the effect that in November 1888 May loaned a copy of *Anna Karenina* to the sisters, and that Lolly ‘was made uneasy by a heroine whom she at once admired and yet criticized for her adultery. Both Lily and Lolly had a very conventional view of marriage which May Morris did not share’ (p. 63). As in the earlier accounts, Lily is said to have enjoyed her work while it was done at Kelmscott House (from when she started in December 1888 to the summer of 1890), though Hardwick does argue that the actual work of embroidering was largely of a mechanical kind, and that Lily was given no encouragement to learn to design: ‘For although Morris had originally believed that an embroideress should participate in the design of the work she was to do and have some scope for creativity and individuality in the choice of colours and materials, the sheer volume and variety of work being turned out by the embroidery department in the late 1880s and 1890s effectively prevented this ideal being carried out in practice’ (pp. 65–6). She suggest that May would have found the Irishness of the sisters politically congenial – though the quotation she gives to show Jane’s supposed Irish sympathies at the time was not written until 1913. At Kelmscott House, Lily is said to have ‘developed a taste and eye’ for the ‘fabrics and colours’ that Morris favoured (p. 67).

By the spring of 1890, however, Hardwick tells us that May’s temper was fraying: ‘Lily blamed everything on May, but it is clear that she did not understand or have any sympathy for the reasons behind May’s increasing irritation and bad temper’ (p. 75). Hardwick suggests that May was jealous of the interest Bernard Shaw was taking in Florence Farr – at this time an embroiderer too – and so insisted on marrying Halliday Sparling despite her parents’ lack of enthusiasm: ‘She determined to marry Sparling to spite Shaw’. Meanwhile, she ‘worked off her feelings on the embroiderers’ (p. 76). Certainly Lily found things increasingly difficult, particularly after the business was moved to 8 Hammersmith Terrace, May and her husband’s new home, where Lily missed the sociable lunch-hours of Kelmscott House. ‘She found the house smaller and darker, and there were fewer interesting visitors’ (p. 77). It was at this time that May undertook one of her most celebrated pieces of embroidery, the hangings for Morris’s bed at Kelmscott Manor. It would seem, however, that the work
brought little pleasure to Lily. We are told that ‘she worked on this for two and a half weeks and found the work more tedious than usual’ (p. 77). She was also apparently aware that the pay she was now receiving as a skilled embroiderer – £1.35p a week – reasonable in itself, was less than she would have been paid at the Royal School of Needlework. Another reference to the Manor bed-hangings tells us that it forced Lily and May together more at a time when Lily was referring to May in her diary as ‘the Gorgon’, and that ‘Each of the hangings represented three months of intense work’ (p. 84). Hardwick then attempts to answer the question why Lily took such a strong dislike to May at this time. She is inclined to defend May as far as she reasonably can, stressing how much emotional disturbance she was experiencing as a result of Shaw’s having joined the household at Hammersmith Terrace and Sparling’s protests ‘about what was going on’ (p. 84). Her final view is that May’s behaviour must have shocked the conventional Yeats sisters – Lolly was ‘reminded of Anna Karenina’ and her mixed response to its central character – so that ‘although she does not refer to the affair between May and Shaw in her description of the time she spent working for the Morrises, Lily’s extreme hostility must be accounted for, at least in part, by her disapproval of the goings on at 8 Hammersmith Terrace’ (p. 85). The ‘must’ strikes me as rather strong, but Hardwick’s overall account shows her fair-mindedness in trying to see all round the unhappy situation from which Lily was finally to withdraw in April 1894. It is perhaps something of an irony that she was to go on at Dun Emer and Cuala to become a leading woman worker and embroiderer in the Irish Arts and Crafts movement: Hardwick has a brief Appendix entitled ‘Some comments on Lily’s embroidery’ drawing attention to the quality of her work. Lolly, of course, became the printer and publisher of her brother’s and other mainly Irish books at Dun Emer and the Cuala, and if we are looking for a positive note amid these less than happy affairs, we can remark that this was done with the help and advice of ‘“the universal Samaritan” as Emery Walker was affectionately nicknamed’ (p. 121).

Peter Faulkner.

In the winter of 1909–10 May Morris lectured in North America on her father’s work. In New York, she stayed with the feminist writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and fell in love with lawyer John Quinn, better known to posterity as patron of art and literature, collector of pictures and manuscripts, and friend to Yeats and Joyce. They went sleigh-riding in Central Park, she sat for a portrait bust he commissioned, and in her cabin on the return voyage he arranged a farewell bottle of champagne. He must also have made some avowals, for nine months later she lamented that he would not let her mention the affair to her mother, for ‘it would give her so much
pleasure to know that at last I had the happiness of loving and being loved.' She joked too, of wishing she had brought a baby back from America – even though she was forty-eight.

Quinn was thirty-nine and so fully absorbed in profession and public affairs that the holiday romance was over as soon as she left. This interesting book edited by Janis Londraville consists of May’s surviving letters to Quinn (by no means all – one wonders what happened to the others) and Quinn’s copies of his own, as dictated to a succession of stenographers, usually to catch a departing transatlantic liner. Quinn’s for the most part are dull; how can he have been a romantic companion even on a sleigh-ride? May’s are more interesting, as she describes her day-to-day life at Hammersmith and Kelmscott, working on her father’s Collected Works for Longman’s, visiting the Post-Impressionist exhibition, having her ankle groped during a performance of Yeats’s Countess Cathleen, and civilian life and privation during the darker days of World War I. Quinn writes about his busyness as head of a large law practice, and his intention to sell his Morris MSS to Henry Huntington, of the eponymous library – evidently unaware of how hurtful this would be to May. Her needy appeals for affection are embarrassing, for such were never meant to be published, but her prose style is exceptionally and naturally fine, with no writing for effect, and is a continuing pleasure to read.

One Sunday evening in 1910 three friends from the Women’s Guild of Arts came to lunch, talking of the Post-Impressionists and new ideas about teaching art students, all ‘delighted to meet each other, in this impromptu way. You know I theoretically don’t seek out the society of women particularly, but I must say, it was as fine a little knot of women with an all-round, not self-centred, view of the arts as you could meet anywhere; all comely well-grown creatures, bubbling with vitality and good-humour. Anyway, it is a pleasure to meet women who know their work and are not playing at art. One of them stayed behind and with my little secretary had an absurd supper with me of sandwiches and various fruits. Being women, of course (!) they did not spot the fact that the wine was the best part of the fare, being good of its kind though unpretentious…’

Much the same might be said of May herself, who has not generally had a sympathetic press. Perhaps she was too unpretentious, unself-centred. Quinn, on the other hand … is not a pleasure to read.

Jan Marsh.
The authors of this wide-ranging book are well known to students of Morris for their authoritative and illuminating account of Morris's business activities in *William Morris. Design and Enterprise in Victorian Britain* (1991). The present book cannot be expected to break as much new ground as its predecessor, but it is one of the most interesting – and best produced – products of the centenary year. As its subtitle suggests, it ranges more widely over Morris's working career, by no means restricting itself to his business life. It opens with an account of Morris and his Biographers, and

Some of this material will be familiar to readers of this *Journal*, where early versions of chapters 2 and 8 originally appeared. But set in the context of the book, they read perhaps more illuminatingly. Harvey and Press have also put students of Morris further in their debt by reprinting in full two important documents, George Wardle’s ‘Memorials’, and Morris and Company’s catalogue for the Boston Foreign Fair of 1883, also prepared by Wardle. The catalogue is a fascinating document, organised in such a way as to take one around the exhibition and lead one to appreciate the qualities of design and material in each of the six rooms devoted to the Company’s work. Harvey and Press describe the catalogue as ‘possibly the most important document on Morris (and Morris & Co.) never to appear in print’ (p. xii), and it is certainly good to have it made available here. The ‘Memorials’, written in 1897 at the request of Mackail, are even more interesting, ending with the heartfelt tribute: ‘No-one having worked for Mr. Morris could willingly have joined any other workshop or, having passed through any other, would have given up Mr. Morris’s for that’ (p. 111). As the authors remark, the ‘Memorials’ have rightly been quoted a good deal by biographers from Mackail onwards, but it is an advance to have them here in full in an accurately transcribed version.

The authors of course know their Morris well, and initially from an unusual perspective, so that the book is continuously interesting, and well worth reading alongside other accounts of Morris’s life and achievement. One of their unusual emphases is on the Kelmscott Press as being ‘not an indulgence of Morris’s last years but ... another well-run and profitable business’ (p. xii). As with any other book on Morris, the reader will not always find himself in agreement. The account of Morris’s biographers is generally judicious, with an unusually kind word for Halliday Sparling, but it repeats the accepted view that it was Robin Page-Arnot who first challenged the ‘Morris myth’ in 1934 by asserting Morris’s Marxism; this is to ignore, as many – with the notable exception of Gary Aho – have done. Middleton Murry’s two 1932 articles in the *Adelphi* and his account of Morris, ‘a far more revolutionary socialist than has appeared in this country since his death’, in *The Great Victorians* in the same year. I was also slightly disturbed by the praise given to the first edition of E. P. Thompson’s great political biography. It may indeed be more ‘exciting and challenging’ that the more ‘measured’ 1976 edition, as asserted here (p. 10), but it seems all too bland to ignore its suggestion that Stalin’s Soviet Union was embodying the ideals of Morris’s Nowhere, as Thompson came to see.

However, I have no wish to end on a critical note about a book from which I learned a good deal, and which is written with a strong sense of Morris as a worker and actor in the historical world of the later nineteenth century, however much he hated that world. The final emphasis of the book on Morris’s commitment to the making of an earthly paradise for all of humanity is refreshing in our cynical times, and we must surely agree with Harvey and Press’s conclusion about Socialism in the post-
Communist world, that 'the ideals of men such as Morris still provide the humanity and moral insight that should re-establish the good name of an essentially decent and idealistic creed' (p. 233).

Peter Faulkner.

This is a book that cries out to be rewritten. It has some attractive features, but is marred by certain faults of style, emphasis and omission.

The ‘Shire Lifelines’ series, of which this illustrated biography by Richard Tames is one, constitutes a very reasonably priced little library covering some key figures in Britain’s cultural history. A splendidly broad and material concept of culture informs the publisher’s choice and their authors’ treatment of their subjects. Tames’ contribution to the series (written in 1972 and since reprinted) succeeds in giving the reader a fairly good account of Morris’s busy life, along with an impression of his achievements and the context in which they were made.

Particularly interesting and informative are the passages dealing with The Firm (pp. 15–20), Anti-Scrape (pp. 29–32), and the way in which Morris’s involvement in these projects led very naturally – for so passionate and thorough-going a thinker and doer as Morris – to his entry into revolutionary socialism (pp. 33–38). Here Tames writes seriously and with judgement. In other places, regrettably, he permits himself some snap opinions and/or flippant language. Thus he disposes of the Pre-Raphaelites and their ‘narcissism and futility’ pretty smartly; similarly with Morris’s ‘nostalgic’ view of medieval times, and his ‘refuge’ in Icelandic sagas and other epics. Surely there is a sufficient body of work available, including articles in our Journal, to suggest and support a more dynamic interpretation of the oppositional and utopian and constructive use to which Morris put his study of the past. Recent biographies should also lead to a more rounded interpretation of the importance and influence on Morris of his family and friends, as a counterweight to the more frivolous aspects of life with Topsy with which Tames regales us.

The question arises: who is the book intended for? As my co-reviewer, our subject’s namesake, remarks, Tames assumes rather too much of a reader who is unversed in nineteenth century cultural history, omitting in places to give helpful background information:

* ... the book assumes you know too much about Morris’s friends; it mentions names without making clear who the people are. He says ‘[I] articled myself to G. E. Street ... who was practising in Oxford’; who was G. E. Street, what was he practising?

* ... it quotes things that different people said but doesn’t always say who said it and there are no notes or references.

And for those who are keen to get out and about and see examples of Morris’s work for themselves, there is a need for the ‘Finding Out’ section on p. 47 to be expanded, so as to constitute a representative gazetteer of places to visit.

In matters of style, too, as well as content, the author shows too little consideration for his readers, or potential readers. As the younger William Morris argues, Tames runs the unnecessary risk of putting the book beyond the scope of some users in
schools, where there is a growing interest that calls to be met with good, accessible resources:

* ... the language is very flowery – ‘This exaggerated rejection of contemporary society ultimately led the Pre-Raphaelites into narcissism and futility’. What does that mean? I don’t think most of my friends would be able to work it out and it would just put them off reading any more.

* I don’t think it would be good for kids in primary school.

* ... the ideas don’t always follow on, for instance the first section ends with The Firm but the last paragraph is a quote from Morris about Ladies’ dress. If I did that in English, I'd get told off.

The book is generously illustrated, in black and white except for the rather poor use of colour on the front cover, which gives a small – too small – glimpse of Morris’s ‘Lodden’ design:

* ... the cover’s not very attractive, it’s dull and doesn’t make you want to read the book. The frame’s all wrong and the way it’s set out doesn’t make his designs look very good.

Tames’ selection of illustrations is interesting, but misses some opportunities to demonstrate details of Morris’s wide range of accomplishments, and thus give more substance to the book’s summing up (pp. 42–43).

Now is the time for the publishers to consider preparing a revised edition, to enable this ‘Shire Lifeline’ to complement and stand comparison with the recently published Pitkin Guide, a richly illustrated booklet which demonstrates the sorts of virtues that this reader, for one, is arguing for.

David Betteridge & William Morris.

For those who have read Fiona MacCarthy's biography of Morris, *Telling the Tale of Topsy* will be a fascinating postscript; for those who have not, it will be an invitation to do so. This is a very lively and entertaining account of the work of the biographer. She discusses the social and literary constraints which prevented earlier writers, like Mackail, from dealing frankly with some crucial aspects of Morris's life, in particular his marriage and his socialism. She goes on to write absorbingly of her own experience as Morris's biographer, 'whittling away at received opinion, listening, watching, reassessing, hoping to get closer to the way things really were.' She comes across as a kind of literary detective, sifting evidence, weighing possibilities, always on the track of her subject. She describes how her sense of the landscape of Morris's life developed, some figures, such as Webb, some places, such as Leek, looming larger than one might have expected. It is intriguing to be invited behind the scenes and also rather touching to learn that the final letters in the correspondence between Webb and Morris can still move her to tears. It is this blending of empathy with objectivity that allowed MacCarthy's biography to do justice to the towering and many-sided figure of Morris. This little booklet answers many of the questions one would like to ask her about how her book was researched and written.

Christine Poulson.

Last year, while we were celebrating the life of William Morris on the occasion of the centenary of his death, among many supplements to that celebration – some good, some deplorable – Julia Ionides took occasion to republish her great great uncle’s *Memories* in facsimile: with a brief Foreword by Mary Lago and an Afterword by herself – with annotations and nine or ten illustrations not in the original but which help us into the family, so to speak. The *Memories* were printed in Paris in 1925: the facsimile element is simple and easy on the eye, the new parts, printed thinly in a sans serif type, are not, useful though they are.

Ionides was a painter of the good amateur order, had lived in Paris in the 1850s with Whistler, Du Maurier and Poynter – whose portrait drawing of him faces the title page. In his prosperous days he was a good patron of Morris and Company, as were most of the clan – a patronage very helpful in spreading the taste for their new-style furnishings. A few months before his death he began to dictate these *Memories* and they have long been the often unacknowledged source of amusing or revealing anecdotes. It is useful to have the book in circulation with its additions, setting much in contexts which otherwise, at so late a date, we might well miss.

Ray Watkinson.