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In the very first issue of this Journal, published during 1961, John Purkis gestured towards some of the pitfalls that might face a publication such as this one:

first, mere historiography – the exploration of pleasant nineteenth-century by-ways and the accumulation of trivial information; this easy toil is a self-deceiving way of avoiding the bigger issues which Morris had the courage to face, and which are clearly there on the pages of his well-known writings: second, fragmentation – owing to the specialist trainings forced upon us by modern education, we tend to be only too competent (more competent than Morris?) to discuss one small aspect of Morris’s work […] – like certain climbers we scrabble about among the foothills, demonstrating our agility on this or that difficult piece of rock-face, and appear not to see the mountain which is staring us in the face.¹

Despite the unyielding march of time, these issues remain remarkably pertinent to Morris studies during the early decades of the twenty-first century – a conjuncture that is characterised by a period of renewed capitalist crisis, with the attendant consequences of widespread unemployment and precarity, impending climate catastrophe and an intensifying process of inter-imperialist rivalry, conflict and war. In a situation such as the one in which we find ourselves, anyone with a serious interest in Morris’s manifold legacies must legitimately question whether his corpus is to be regarded simply as an object of historical curiosity, tending towards the antiquarian and curatorial (‘mere historiography’), or whether it should be approached as a resource of critique in the present. The question, were it to be posed in such a manner, would almost answer itself in the asking: ‘[t]he remedy is more activity of a contemporary relevance’.² The dichotomy between historical curiosity and present-oriented critique, however, is not quite as stark as my above formulation suggests. The contrapuntal nature of Morris’s historical imagination should alert us to this much at least.

Purkis’s presentist impulse strikes a chord with some recent interventions into the field of Victorian studies. For example, the opening sentence of the ‘Manifesto of the V21 Collective’, produced by a group of predominantly US-based academics, reads as follows: ‘Victorian Studies has fallen prey to positivist historicism: a mode of inquiry that aims to do little more than exhaustively describe, preserve, and display the past. Among its symptoms are a fetishization of the archival; an aspiration to definitively map the DNA of the period; an attempt to reconstruct the past wie es eigentlich gewesen [as it actually happened]; an endless accumulation of mere information’.³ One target, here, is the nineteenth-century

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German historian Leopold von Ranke’s dictum about the source-based approach to historical research, a method which Walter Benjamin once criticised as the ‘strongest narcotic of the [nineteenth] century’. The V21 Manifesto, polemical in its purpose, urges a reorientation of critical attention towards theory and the politics of form. This does not imply an amnesiac abandonment of history; rather, it encourages more theoretical self-consciousness on the critic’s part about the uses to which history can be put. This might, in turn, help to consolidate ‘awareness that our interest in the [Victorian] period is motivated by certain features of our own moment. In finance, resource mining, globalization, imperialism, liberalism, and many other vectors, we are Victorian, inhabiting, advancing, and resisting the world they made.’

Benjamin articulated a related critique of historicism in his essay ‘On the Concept of History’ (also translated as ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’). Benjamin identified his critique, unpublished during his lifetime, with the practice of historical materialism. As Benjamin put it, writing against the background of fascism’s rising tide in 1940: ‘[t]he historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not in transition, but in which time takes a stand [einsteh] and has come to a standstill. For this notion defines the very present in which he himself is writing. Historicism offers the “eternal” image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past.’ The present, Benjamin reminds us, must be conceived as history, even as we simultaneously arrest history in striving to acknowledge the radically contingent, open and unfinished character of that present.

It is with such concerns in mind that the present issue of the Journal plays host to a symposium-in-print on Kristin Ross’s recent book Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune (2015), itself motivated by a Benjaminian attempt to assert the Commune’s contemporary political relevance. In a period of resurgent crisis of pan-European identity, it is an apt moment to revisit episodes in the history of the continent during which concerns about social stability and fragmentation have loomed large. The Commune, in particular, represents a moment in which counter-movements experimented with new strategies of organisation and resistance in order to confront new pressures and challenges. The emergence of the Paris Commune in the wake of the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71 disturbed the established order of rival nation-states in proposing a vision of international, working-class solidarity that cut across national boundaries. The Commune lasted for a mere seventy-two days, during which time a workers’ insurrection and occupation of the city created the nucleus of an alternative form of social organisation. Its brutal suppression cast a long shadow over fin de siècle Europe.

Ross approaches the subject by way of the idea of luxury. The presence of a heavily moralised discourse of luxury in Morris’s milieu is evidenced in the work of the Belgian economist Emile de Laveleye, whose 1886 book on the topic was published in English translation in 1891. He commented that ‘[t]he philosophers of old times and the fathers of the Church alike condemned luxury in the strongest terms, and they were right in doing so. It is pernicious to the individual, and fatal to society.’ More recently, Christopher J. Berry’s wide-ranging history of the concept, which deals at length with the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century intellectual context, encompassing the contributions of David Hume, Adam Smith, Karl Marx and others, has drawn attention to ways in which the ‘debate over
the status of luxury’ is bound up with ‘a fundamental fault-line in European thinking’.8

In this issue, three scholars of Morris, each of whom is distinguished by notable and valued research in her or his own right, take up such concerns in reflecting on the central arguments of Ross’s book, and on what such arguments might mean for contemporary understanding and criticism of Morris. Elizabeth Carolyn Miller examines Ross’s reconstruction of the potential for an eco-socialist supersession of capitalism, whilst Matthew Beaumont draws out some of the Benjaminian threads in Ross’s argument. Michelle Weinroth, meanwhile, questions the extent to which Ross’s focus on the Communard political imaginary underestimates the salience of a more traditional Marxist critique of political economy. Weinroth also accentuates some of the differences between Morris’s and Ross’s interpretations of the Commune, particularly with regard to its tragic demise.

The present issue opens with an obituary of the renowned historian, Asa Briggs, who served as the Society’s President between 1978 and 1991. Celia Lewis’s article rereads some of Morris’s early Froissart poems in dialogue with Benjamin’s reflections on history, persuasively establishing filiations and connections between these two differently situated thinkers. The latest instalment of David and Sheila Latham’s biennial bibliography is also included in this issue.

Owen Holland
Editor

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2. Ibid.
5. ‘Manifesto of the V21 Collective’.
Obituary
Asa Briggs (1921-2016)

Peter Faulkner

The William Morris Society has been consistently fortunate with those who have served as its Presidents. The first three, Sir Sydney Cockerell (born 1867), Stanley Morison (born 1889) and Sir Basil Blackwell (born 1889) were distinguished elder statesmen. The fourth President, Asa Briggs, was of a younger generation, born in 1921. He was educated at Keithley Boys’ Grammar School and Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge. After serving in Intelligence at Bletchley Park at the end of the war, he became a Fellow of Worcester College, Oxford, and was University Reader in Recent Social and Economic History from 1950 to 1955. He then became Professor of Modern History at Leeds (1955-61), publishing Victorian People in 1955, and The Age of Improvement, 1783-1967 and Chartist Studies in 1959, authoritative books which established him as a major social historian of the Victorian period.

Moving to the new University of Sussex in 1961, he served successively as Professor of History (1961-76), Dean of the School of Social Studies (1961-65), Pro Vice-Chancellor (1961-67), and Vice-Chancellor (1967-76). While at Sussex, he began his five-volume History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom (1961-95) and published Victorian Cities in 1963.

Briggs returned to Oxford in 1976 to become Provost of Worcester College, retiring in 1991. He received many academic honours, served as Chancellor of the Open University from 1979 to 1994 and as president of the Workers’ Educational Association for nine years, and became a Life Peer in 1976 as Baron Briggs of Lewes in the County of East Sussex, where he lived at the end of his life.
It was in 1978, while he was Provost of Worcester College, that Briggs became President of the Society, serving until 1991. He had joined the Society in 1958, having been commissioned by Penguin to edit a selection of Morris's works – at that time, it should be noted, not particularly well-known – for the Penguin English Library. The book, entitled William Morris: Selected Writings and Designs, was published in 1962. It contains six sections, Prologue, Romance, Commitment, Socialism, Utopia and Epilogue, together with an illustrated supplement by Graeme Shankland. This featured twenty-four well-chosen illustrations, necessarily in black-and-white, covering the range of Morris's design activities, with illuminating commentary by Shankland. The only Morris anthology available at the time was G.D.H. Cole's fine selection published in hardback by the Nonesuch Press for the centenary in 1934 and reissued in 1948. Briggs's selection, a Pelican Original, priced seven shillings and sixpence, clearly aimed at a wider public; it was in paperback, with an attractive cover based on the Honeysuckle chintz. Briggs's Introduction is succinct and intelligent, arguing that there were three possible responses to Victorian society available to a man like Morris: cynicism, escape and commitment; Morris chose commitment. Briggs's political argument brings us into the early 1960s when he writes that Morris's writings 'provide the materials for a critique of twentieth-century Socialism (and Communism) as much as for a critique of nineteenth-century capitalism'. The fifth section of the book, called Utopia, consists of the first eighteen chapters of News from Nowhere, followed by a summary of Chapters Nineteen to Thirty-two, and the reflections about dream and vision with which the book concludes. It was a good selection and sold well, but the shortened form of News from Nowhere attracted criticism. Eventually, in 1993, Penguin Books brought out News from Nowhere and Other Writings, edited by Clive Wilmer, another good selection, and a good deal longer (430 pages as against 309), but one lacking the visual material which demonstrated the breadth of Morris’s achievement in the 1962 book.

Briggs also opened the travelling exhibition, organised in 1961 to celebrate the founding of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co., when it moved from the Victoria and Albert Museum to Bradford. He gave the Kelmscott Lecture in 1983 on ‘William Morris in London’, a lecture greatly admired by those who heard it, but it was unfortunately never published and no text of it has been discovered. During his period as President he showed his energy and scholarship by publishing Victorian Cities in 1963, Marks & Spencer Ltd: A Centenary History in 1984, and the final volume of his trilogy on aspects of the Victorian period, Victorian Things in 1988. He was one of those who wrote to the Charity Commission asking it to reconsider its decision when it ruled for the Kelmscott House Trust against the Society about the sale of Kelmscott House in 1981. In 1984, when the future of Kelmscott House became a contentious issue, Briggs spoke at the official Inquiry in support of the Greater London Council’s proposal for the establishment of a William Morris Museum. Despite his efforts and those of the Society’s committee, the proposal was turned down on planning grounds. In 1987 Briggs’s good humour was challenged when the cake provided for the Morris birthday celebration at Worcester College by the college pastry-cook turned out to celebrate Oxford’s other William Morris: the elaborate cake was topped with a toy motor-car. Fortunately Briggs was a diplomat as well as a scholar. Indeed, he came to think that a highlight of his Presidency was the Society’s visit to Oxford.

The Society was very active in celebrating the centenary of News from Nowhere in 1990.
Briggs lectured on the book in Toronto at a conference organised by The William Morris Society of Canada, which was celebrating its tenth anniversary. I had the pleasure of meeting Asa and Lady Briggs on this occasion, as they and I were staying with the hospitable Enid MacLachlan. I remember him as small, voluble, knowledgeable, energetic, unpretentious in a north-country way and consistently genial – a particularly appropriate President for The William Morris Society. The News from Nowhere celebrations in Oxfordshire took the form of activities, many involving children, which culminated in an exhibition on ‘News for Nowhere and the English Countryside’ in the Morris Memorial Hall in Kelmscott. This was opened by Briggs, along with Alison Kemp of the Society for the Preservation of Rural England. One of Briggs’s treasured possessions was a tapestry prepared by the children in Kelmscott and given to him when he left Oxford. A very busy man, Briggs resigned the Presidency in 1991, having proved an excellent servant of the Society, although, surprisingly, he never contributed to the Society’s Journal. It was part of his democratic outlook that he felt that the Society should not become too academic, and he eagerly supported Morris’s view of the importance of the ‘lesser arts’.

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Readers of William Morris’s political writings, especially those attentive to the milieu of late-nineteenth-century socialism in which he was writing, will have noted the influence of the Paris Commune of 1871 on Morris’s thought. Memorialised annually by London’s socialists, perhaps most vividly in Walter Crane’s oft-reprinted 1888 cartoon ‘Vive La Commune!’ (see Figure 1), the Commune in its actual existence, as well as in its brutal suppression, haunted the British socialist movement like a ghost. That this ghost was still, somehow, vibrantly alive for decades following the Bloody Week that brought an end to the Commune in May 1871, and that it remains so today, is the argument of Kristin Ross’s fascinating new study Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune. Ross sets out to show the potency of the Commune’s political imaginary for our own contemporary moment, and frames her study with the observation that ‘the way people live now under the contemporary form of capitalism […] bears more than a passing resemblance to the working conditions of the laborers and artisans of the nineteenth century who made the Commune’. Given the exponential rise in income inequality that we have seen in recent decades, ‘[t]he world of the Communards is in fact much closer to us than is the world of our parents’ (p. 3). Her
book seeks not only to describe the ‘political imaginary’ of the Commune – an imaginary premised, she argues, on the concept of ‘communal luxury’, a phrase she takes from the Federation of Artists’ Manifesto of April 1871 – but to show how this imaginary could and should inspire and expand our own political horizons today.

The Paris Commune was in effect for only seventy-two days in one barricaded city. In Ross’s expansive reading, however, the Commune as event extends well beyond these temporal and spatial perimeters. It is thus that Ross grants William Morris, who never set foot in the Commune proper, a starring role in the story of Communal Luxury. Morris, like the Communards, ‘was less interested in art than in creating and expanding the conditions for art’ (p. 62), and Ross aims to correct Morris scholarship that has ‘refrain[ed] from grounding’ Morris’s political and aesthetic thought ‘in its historical relationship’ with the Commune (p. 7). Of course, Morris was not in Paris during that spring of 1871 but was about to embark on his first journey to Iceland. Simultaneously, Ross points out, Peter Kropotkin (who had yet to meet Morris) was setting out to explore Finland. What the two men concluded during that summer of 1871 synchronised with the animating spirit of the Commune in Paris: ‘[i]t is worth noting the striking resemblance of Kropotkin’s experience in Finland in the summer of 1871 with that of his future friend and comrade, William Morris, traversing Iceland those same months on the back of a donkey. […] The lesson Finland imparts to Kropotkin is a great deal like the lesson Morris learned in Iceland’ (pp. 69-70). Morris and Kropotkin recognise, Ross says, a ‘communal luxury’ in the pre-commercialised peasant communities of Iceland and Finland: a simplicity and plenitude that is socially equitable as well as individually satisfying, devoid of the bourgeois habits of waste and mindless consumption that have taken hold in commercial societies along with their counterparts, desperate poverty and need. Although Morris’s diaries record few comments about the Commune as it was unfolding, Ross points to evidence that his experience of Icelandic culture was, in fact, shaped by the recent event of the Commune: ‘[w]alking in Snæfellsnes, Iceland in mid-July 1871, Morris is reminded by the loose stones on the edges of the lava fields, of “a half-ruined Paris barricade”’ (p. 69).

This last point touches on what Morris scholars will encounter as one of the most important arguments of the book: namely, that Ross endeavours to rescue Morris as a political thinker from the charge of idealist impracticality, of head-in-the-clouds utopian romanticism. Such a charge has been levelled at him at least as far back as Friedrich Engels, who privately described Morris during the 1880s as ‘a pure sentimental dreamer’ and as ‘hopelessly muddle-headed’? Ross’s book suggests that Morris’s vision of the achievement of communism without the institutions of the state was not a castle in the clouds dreamed up from nowhere; nor, she argues, was
the anarchist communism of Élisée Reclus or Peter Kropotkin. All of these thinkers, in her reading, were writing in the face of a praxis, a moment, an event: the Paris Commune. It was an event so pivotal, in Ross’s analysis, that it transformed even Karl Marx’s view of the role of the state within communism. During the twelve years that Marx lived after the Commune, Ross writes, he became increasingly interested in ‘primitive agrarian communualism’ in Russia and other parts of the world, in intellectual response to the Commune: ‘the most significant and direct effect that the Commune’s alternative ways of organizing social and economic life had on Marx was to make the actual existence of alternative, non-capitalist societies outside Europe more visible’ (p. 82).

On one level, then, the book serves to vindicate the Paris Commune in terms of its ‘actual existence’, not just its ideals. This departs from the tendency among Morris’s contemporary socialists rather to ‘wring [their] hands over the opportunities lost’ in the Commune, as Ernest Belfort Bax put it in an 1886 review of Eleanor Marx’s translation of Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray’s *History of the Commune of 1871*. In her Introduction to the translation, Marx herself gave due historical weight to the Commune as ‘the first attempt of the proletariat to govern itself’. Morris, however, along with co-authors Bax and Victor Dave in an 1886 pamphlet entitled *A Short Account of the Commune of Paris of 1871*, presented the Commune rather as a failure of parliamentarianism more than a success of autonomous collectivism:

> The Commune, to speak with all respect, committed the mistake of supposing it possible to legalise its position. They did not act as if they clearly saw that they were in revolt against the corrupt society of the present, and accordingly they wasted precious time and opportunity in what may be called parliamentary *pros* and *cons*, instead of applying themselves to organising their splendid fighting material into a serious army.

In Ross’s reading, however, Morris was more impressed by the Commune as praxis than this quotation would suggest. Indeed, her book presents Morris as a political thinker who was not just dreamily imagining impracticable utopias, but whose politics were developing – like the politics of Karl Marx and others – in response to real events on the ground at this time, especially the Commune:

> What unites and cross-pollinates thinkers like Morris, Marx, Reclus, Kropotkin, and others in the wake of the Commune, regardless of the political labels each might have chosen for himself, is a vision of social transformation predicated on a large voluntary federation of free associations existing at the
local level. In this sense we can speak of the development, in the wake of the Paris Commune’s freeing itself from the power and authority of the State, of a new vision of revolution based on communal autonomy and the loose federation or association of these autonomous units.

(p. 111)

*News from Nowhere* (1890) is perhaps the work in which we can most obviously see how the Commune influenced Morris just as Ross claims. The socialist future depicted in *News from Nowhere* indeed consists of a ‘voluntary federation of free associations existing at the local level’, brought about by a ‘vision of revolution based on communal autonomy’. The long chapter ‘How the Change Came’, for example, describes in tactical detail the militant revolution that brought Nowhere to this stage, and was clearly influenced by Morris’s close study of the Commune.\(^6\)

Ross argues that the destruction of the Vendôme Column, the Communards’ act of ‘spectacular demolition’ in Paris, ‘is revisioned speculatively’ in the utopian future of *News from Nowhere*, where Trafalgar Square is transformed into an apricot orchard (p. 60). Morris wrote even more directly about the Commune in *The Pilgrims of Hope*, his serial epic poem of the Commune originally printed in the *Commonweal* in 1885-86, and in his article ‘Why We Celebrate the Commune of Paris’, which ran in the *Commonweal* on 19 March 1887. After the Commune, the London socialist movement had been enlarged and invigorated by an influx of political refugees from Paris since, as Ross remarks, ‘England and Switzerland refused to extradite political exiles and, in so doing, became the primary sites for refugees and fellow travelers to gather, to continue the political work of the Commune, and to elaborate together its thought’ (p. 92). In ‘Why We Celebrate the Commune of Paris’, Morris puts forth a view of the Commune as event and history that anticipates the presentist approach taken by Ross:

I have heard it said, and by good Socialists too, that it is a mistake to commemorate a defeat; but it seems to me that this means looking not at this event only, but at all history in too narrow a way. The Commune of Paris is but one link in the struggle which has gone on through all history of the oppressed against the oppressors; and without all the defeats of past times we should now have no hope of the final victory.\(^7\)

So much did the London movement take this idea to heart that every year in March the Socialist League and other socialist and anarchist groups would commemorate and memorialise the Commune, to the extent that the annual celebration became
tantamount to a new holiday in the alternative culture of radical London.

While these London events do not receive more than glancing attention in Ross’s study, they are part of the long shadow that she sees the Commune casting prior to and well beyond its seventy-two days. Ross takes the view that ‘if we begin with the state, we end with the state’ (p. 14), and thus begins her study instead with the reunions, associations and clubs in pre-Commune France that ‘created and instilled the idea – well before the fact – of a social commune’ (p. 14). The spirit of these groups spilled into post-Commune London, too, along with the exiled Communards. A young Olive Garnett, to take one example, describes in her diary attending a commemorative celebration organised by London anarchists at the South Place Institute: ‘[i]t was a very interesting gathering, the hall was crammed’. Twelve speakers took the platform, Garnett writes, including Kropotkin as well as Louise Michel, the ‘Red Virgin’ of the Commune, who gave a ‘poetical speech in French’, translated by Kropotkin. The event ended with a rendition of the ‘Marseillaise’. In the pages of the Commonweal, Morris’s socialist newspaper, we find numerous references to celebrations of this kind, such as a notice in the 10 March 1888 issue of an upcoming celebration of the Commune’s anniversary. ‘Songs for the Celebration’ appeared on 16 March 1889, providing lyrics so that readers could join the singing at ‘The Celebration of the Eighteenth Anniversary of the Paris Commune’. The songs included two British and two French: ‘All for the Cause’ by William Morris, ‘When the People Have their Own Again’ by H. Halliday Sparling, ‘La Carmagnole’ and ‘Marseillaise’. These annual celebrations to mark the Commune’s anniversary brought exiles from Paris into regular political communion with British socialists, corresponding with Ross’s argument that the transnational socialist and anarchist community produced by the exile of the Communards itself ‘belongs to the political praxis of the Commune’ and ‘make[s] up the relational web the event produced’ (p. 93).

One of the most exciting and unexpected angles of Ross’s book, however, is the way in which she finds the early roots of eco-socialism and an ecological critique of capitalism within the Commune and within the ‘relational web’ that the Commune produced. In her discussion of Kropotkin’s journey to Finland, for example, Ross describes his work as a geographer and suggests that the discoveries of this trip enabled him to see human social and economic arrangements in terms of their instability as well as their inextricability with the earth and with natural processes: ‘[a]s if in fast motion, he watches as vast geologic eras succeed each other as all the strata of an immense expanse of Russia and Europe open themselves up to reveal the history of glacial movement, climate change, and the development over centuries of the drought-prone regions of the south’ (p. 68). Ross develops, too, a convincing
Figure 1: Walter Crane, ‘Vive La Commune!’, printed on fine paper for framing, distributed as a supplement to Commonweal, 4:115 (24 March 1888).
connection between Kropotkin and Élisée Reclus, two anti-state communists whose communism emerged, in part, from the far-reaching vistas of geography. Their work as geographers enabled them to see the vast and ever-shifting range of ways by which human society interacts with the land – by which human society is, indeed, co-produced by the land – and to imagine how humans might interact with the land in the future. Geographers study space, Ross writes, and the spatial analysis of culture ‘introduces non-human differences and agendas into the mix: the geological makeup of the earth, climate, the existence of other species. Space forces a confrontation with – or accommodation to – the non-human world’ (p. 136). Part of what Reclus and Kropotkin learn from the non-human world is that that which seems fixed is, in reality, utterly mutable, and they absorb this as a political lesson. Morris comes to similar ecological conclusions, Ross suggests, from his own spatial analysis of the aesthetic and the built environment.

Ross goes further, however, beyond Kropotkin, Morris and Reclus, to identify in our current moment of ecological crisis – a crisis produced by capitalist accumulation and exchange – an urgent, collective yearning toward the ideals of communal luxury and autonomous collectivism at the heart of the Commune’s political imaginary. She suggests, indeed, that the Commune’s history will ‘appeal to contemporary readers not just in its prescient understanding of the anti-ecological nature of capitalism, but in the refreshingly uncompromising nature of that understanding’ (p. 139). Far from reading the Commune as overly invested in legalising their position with respect to the state, as Bax did in 1886, Ross argues rather that ‘there was no question for any of them of reform or of a piecemeal solution. Nature’s repair could only come about through the complete dismantling of international commerce and the capitalist system’ (p. 139). This last point is one that has become increasingly impossible to deny in recent years, and is now being made by a wide range of critics of capitalism, from Naomi Klein to Pope Francis. Jason Moore’s important new work of eco-theory, Capitalism and the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital (2015), persuasively argues, indeed, that capitalist civilisation ‘does not have an ecological regime; it is an ecological regime’, one that has now ‘exhausted the historical relation that enabled it to appropriate the work of nature with such extraordinary and unprecedented power’.10 Faced with a historically anomalous rise of atmospheric greenhouse gases in the years since the industrial revolution – a metric that so clearly refutes capitalism’s narrative of unending global progress – we find ourselves newly drawn, like Morris, to what Ross calls ‘non-growth-driven cultures’ (p. 74). Ultimately, this is what the term ‘communal luxury’ affords us at this critical historical juncture: a sense of abundance without accumulation, waste and unevenness.

And yet, given the degree of unevenness into which capitalism has led us, what
are the stakes and risks of reanimating a Communal vision of a ‘decentralized world’ characterised by ‘regional self-sufficiency’ (p. 141), such as we see at the conclusion of Ross’s book? For if regional decentralisation still seemed feasible as an eco-socialist platform in 1871, it seems more problematic today given the concentration of pollution and other environmental dangers in impoverished regions, and given the accelerating drumbeat of regional and planetary environmental catastrophes associated with climate change. Environmental crisis has taught us relationality; it has taught us, as John Bellamy Foster puts it in *Marx’s Ecology*, that ‘[a]n ecological community and its environment must therefore be seen as a dialectical whole’. And yet, under centuries of capitalism, the borders of ‘ecological community’ have been annihilated to the extent that it is now difficult to conceive of this dialectical whole at any scale smaller than the planet itself. Perhaps one means by which Ross might address this problem of scale would be to connect the Communal vision of self-sufficiency forward with what Arturo Escobar calls ‘subaltern strategies of localization by communities and social movements’ among indigenous peoples in so-called ‘developing’ regions. One might profitably read the history of the Commune in conjunction with the history of such recent regional movements for environmental justice, although Ross does not get to these ‘liberation ecologies’ here.

*Communal Luxury* succeeds, nevertheless, as a crisp and convincing argument to connect the moment of the Paris Commune to our own moment – economically, ecologically and politically. While the book unquestionably uses broad strokes and wears its scholarship lightly, its accessibility and availability as a political resource (due, in no small part, to its short length) would have been compromised by a fussier approach. Ross’s magnificent and moving title – *Communal Luxury* – encapsulates and celebrates an essential concept that animated the work of the Communards, as well as the work of William Morris, and continues, thanks to Ross’s study, to inspire today.

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6. Other critics have made this point. See, for example, David Leopold, ‘Introduction’, in William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, ed. by David Leopold (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. xxvii. See also,
J.B. Wright, “‘The Valiant Dead’: William Morris and the Paris Commune of 1871’, JWMS, 13:2 (Spring 1999), 34-38.
9. Ibid.
A

t the end of a cheerful letter to Janey written from a trading station in Iceland on 11 August 1871, William Morris mentioned in passing both ‘that an Icelandic bog is not good riding, and that the loose stones on the edge of a lava-field is [sic] like my idea of a half-ruined Paris barricade’. 1

In Communal Luxury, Kristin Ross’s superbly inventive and suggestive book about the impact of the Paris Commune on the late nineteenth-century political imagination, she cites this casual, speculative comment. It is a comment which evokes the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary events that had taken place in the French capital during the spring of that same year, because in spite of its apparent insignificance it is, from the perspective of the mid-1880s, when Morris celebrated the Commune’s living memory in numerous ways, pregnant with meaning. She points out that ‘Morris, who, during the 1880s would become Britain’s most vigorous and creative supporter of the memory of the Paris Commune, did not appear to register the event as it was occurring that spring nor note any immediate personal reactions beyond this hallucinatory vision of the vestiges of struggle inscribed in the natural landscape of a country of interest to him mostly because it was “a country of no account whatever commercially”’ (p. 69). 2 But she implies nonetheless that it is in some sense an anticipation of his future political commitments. In Morris’s sketch of the loose stones there is, it might be said, an incandescent hint of his later revolutionary imagination – as if these boulders, instead of being cold and inert, secretly burn like lava in the petrified field.

The third chapter of Ross’s book, the one from which this anecdote is taken, concerns what she calls ‘The Literature of the North’. With characteristic energy and originality, it excavates the fascination, first, that Finland held for Peter Kropotkin, then that Iceland, and in particular medieval Iceland, held for two of the other great
libertarian socialists of the period, namely Morris and Élisée Reclus. Ross is deliberately forgiving of Reclus’s and Morris’s shared tendency to idealise the extent to which the ancient Icelandic polity escaped the despotic excesses of European feudalism. This is because she values their attempt to uncover what, in the title of the succeeding chapter, she refers to (in an evocative phrase from a novel by Ignazio Silone) as ‘the seeds beneath the snow’. These are the germinal signs of some alternative future buried beneath the weight of a frigid, reified history. ‘What is important’, she urges, ‘is to recognize in Morris’s and Reclus’s fascination with medieval Iceland their way of going about decentralizing the flow of history’ (p. 74). Or, perhaps, returning to the past in order to unblock or free up its frozen forms, and so make some more emancipative history, like an irresistible stream of lava, flow once more.

In their different ways, according to Ross, both Morris and Reclus staged ‘encounters in [their] own moment with actually embodied aspects of the past, stranded or land-locked, as it were, but still sporadically perceptible’ (p. 74). Here is a politics of anachronism, where the past is not an inert remnant in the present but a contradictory and dynamic part of the dialectical relationship between present and future. In an 1884 lecture on ‘Art and Labour’ quoted by Ross in a footnote, Morris emphasises that he felt compelled to ‘turn back to past times, and even times a very long while passed’; and adds: ‘I do so with the distinct purpose of showing you where lies the hope for the future, and not in mere empty regret for the days which can never come again’ (p. 75). In light of this dialectical conception of history, Morris’s image from Iceland juxtaposing those loose stones on the edge of a lava field with the rubble of a barricade on a Parisian street – effortlessly and unselfconsciously forcing a collision between the ancient and the modern, the rural and the urban, the natural and the cultural – has a quality that, irresistibly, seems Benjaminian. For Morris’s letter to Janey, in a formulation from the ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, effectively ‘seize[s] hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger’. It charges the past with ‘the time of the now’ and ‘blast[s] open the continuum of history’. ³

‘Historical materialism’, Benjamin explains in the sixth of the ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, which comprise a polemic against the gradualist historiography that remained during the late 1930s one of the legacies of the Second International, ‘wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to a man singled out by history at a moment of danger’. He insists, furthermore, that ‘[o]nly that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins’. ⁴ As a revolutionary socialist, Morris later became acutely conscious of the fact that, to put
it in terms of a cliché, it is the victors who write history; and that, in this official version of history, the victims are indeed far from safe even in death. It is in part for this reason that during the 1880s and 1890s he actively commemorated the Paris Commune—which culminated after two months in the massacre of as many as thirty thousand working-class people—as ‘the foundation-stone of the new world that is to be’. Morris recognised that to focus on its destruction merely as ‘the greatest tragedy of modern times’, a status on which he nonetheless insisted, was to capitulate to ‘the bourgeois legend of it as history’, as he put it in an article for *Commonweal* in 1889. It was to consign the Communards, albeit with lamentation, to those ‘hecatombs sacrificed to the bourgeois god, Mammon’ built by the ‘conquerors’. Instead, it was the duty of revolutionaries both to memorialise and to attempt to materialise its utopian promise, which he summarised quite simply in a letter written that same year as ‘the abolition of class society’.

Morris evidently understood, to cite Benjamin’s ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ again, that ‘every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably’; and, more strikingly still, that ‘in every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it’. But this is something that Ross, too, understands. Her previous book on the politics and poetics of the Paris Commune, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (1989), had already amply indicated this. It was a bold reclamation of Arthur Rimbaud, whom she re-embedded in the context of 1871, at the same time the nineteenth-century socialist movement’s *annus mirabilis* and its *annus horribilis*. And it contained several references to Benjamin, in particular the Benjamin of the essays on Baudelaire and Surrealism. The strength of *Communal Luxury*, for its part, at least for readers of this *Journal*, lies in the combativeness and perceptiveness with which, in the spirit of the ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, it wrests not only the Paris Commune from the conformism that has always threatened to confine it to an almost unimaginable past but also, though less explicitly, William Morris.

After all, Morris has always been dangerously susceptible to attempts to appropriate his life and work to ‘bourgeois legend’. It is a point that no longer needs to be laboured. In 1934, the centenary of Morris’s birth, Robin Page Arnot complained of the ‘bourgeois myth’ that entailed the ‘sanctification of him as a “harmless saint”’. In Ross’s book, in contrast to the intellectually disorganised artist beloved by the heritage industry, Morris re-emerges alongside Kropotkin, Reclus and others as an activist strenuously and resourcefully and imaginatively thinking through the immediate and long-term political implications of the struggles of his time. ‘If Reclus and Morris’, she writes, ‘are sometimes thought of as wooly or unsystematic
thinkers, it is because they insisted upon looking on thinking as creating and building a context where ideas might be both productive and immediately effective in their moment’ (p. 7). She thus boldly seizes Morris for the purposes of the present instead of simply locking him into the past.

At one point in her Introduction, Ross declares that she has not been ‘concerned with weighing the Commune’s successes or failures, nor with ascertaining in any direct way the lessons it might have provided or might continue to provide’, not least because, as she admits, it is not clear to her ‘that the past actually gives lessons’. Ross is right, the past does not give lessons; as she recognises, it has to be seized, wrested and stolen. But she affirms instead that, ‘like Walter Benjamin’, she believes ‘that there are moments when a particular event or struggle enters vividly into the figurability of the present’; and that this is true of the Commune in the first ten or fifteen years of the twenty-first century, an epoch distinguished, in the aftermath both of revolutions in the Middle East and protests in the United States against Wall Street’s regime, by what she calls ‘the figure and phenomenology of the encampment or occupation’ (p. 2). Her book brings Morris, too, alongside Kropotkin, Reclus and other libertarians of the time, into the figurability of the present. Ross argues for instance, in an implicit polemic against the current politics of higher education, that ‘the extreme do-it-yourself-ism of Morris, the propensity he showed to learn every aspect of the skills and techniques used from the Middle Ages to the present in the art of fabric dyeing, for example, is itself a reaction against the kind of siloizing of skills and knowledges then getting underway in the universities of the era’ (p. 136).

Benjamin is, then, probably the major methodological influence on Ross’s book (though the theoretical influence of Henri Lefebvre and other materialist analysts of the politics of space is also apparent). Her attempt to grasp the ‘political imaginary’ of the Paris Commune involves interrupting and undermining the continuum of history sponsored by bourgeois historiography. But, as distinct from The Emergence of Social Space, Benjamin’s friend Ernst Bloch, the Frankfurt School’s philosopher of the future, is also a notable presence in Communal Luxury, albeit one that is openly acknowledged only in a couple of places. In the first of these references, Ross cites Bloch’s Heritage of Our Times, specifically his ‘observation that there is no time in national history, only space’ (p. 17). In the second, more significant one, which occurs in the course of her discussion of Morris and Reclus in ‘The Literature of the North’, she writes that the privileged status they accorded to pre-capitalist societies such as medieval Iceland positions them as ‘“anticipatory designs”, “novae”; in the words of Ernst Bloch, or “exemplary suggestions” to borrow a phrase from Peter Linebaugh’ (p. 75). Although these brief, fairly generic quotations from Bloch are apparently mediated by an article by Florence Boos, they nonetheless go to the core of both
Morris’s and Ross’s re-appropriation of the Paris Commune.

The Commune in effect functioned for the late nineteenth-century revolutionary movement as what Bloch, in *The Principle of Hope*, calls a ‘concrete utopia’, ‘a methodical organ for the New; an objective aggregate state of what is coming up’. It was in these terms, I think, that Morris valued the Commune when he distilled from the tragedy in which it was finally engulfed a pure residue of militant hope. At one point in the ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, to return for a moment to this text, Benjamin makes an interesting distinction between what he calls ‘enslaved ancestors’ and ‘liberated grandchildren’. He complains that Social Democracy, with its gradualist and reformist historiography, ‘thought fit to assign the working class the role of the redeemer of future generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength’. Against this orthodox position, Benjamin argues that ‘[t]his training made the working class forget its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice’, and insists that these revolutionary qualities can instead only be ‘nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren’. Bloch tried to develop a revolutionary philosophy that sought to evade both the ‘abstract utopianism’ of the Social Democrats, which was at once fatalistic and excessively optimistic, and the potentially pessimistic politics of Benjamin’s position. His contention, so to speak, was that the image of liberated grandchildren is as necessary as that of enslaved ancestors for nourishing revolutionary energies.

The Paris Commune itself might be summarised as the first historical event in which – however momentary the glimpse – the prospect of the liberated grandchildren of the working class was opened up as a material possibility. It embodied a concrete utopia. Morris recognised this, as both *The Pilgrims of Hope* and *News from Nowhere*, in their different ways, affirm; and as the public celebrations of the Commune that he attended annually from the mid-1880s attest. Ross recognises it too. Her book is dedicated to recovering, often movingly, the ‘utopian function’ of the Commune, as Bloch might have put it. In distinctly Benjaminian mode, Bloch explains that this ‘utopian function tears the concerns of human culture away from [the] idle bed of contemplation: it thus opens up, on truly attained summits, the ideologically unobstructed view of the content of human hope’. In contrast to the static object of bourgeois historiography, relegated to the late nineteenth century, Ross’s Paris Commune emerges as a constellation of unfulfilled promises that impinge on the present.

At the end of the letter Morris sent from Iceland that I cited in the opening paragraph of this piece, he moves directly from the image of ‘the loose stones on the edge of a lava-field’, which he notes remind him ‘of a half-ruined Paris barricade’, to a brief, longing evocation, in the sentence or so before he signs off, of ‘the sweet fresh
garden at Kelmscott’, which he confesses to imagining often with Janey ‘and the little ones in it’.  

Here is a dialectical image that might be said to sum up what I have called Morris’s politics of anachronism. The loose stones that conjure up the insurrectionary barricade lie along the border not only of a lava-field, but also of the garden that he loved. As ever with Morris, militant politics are inseparable from a pastoral vision. In this sense, these sentences constitute a momentary anticipation of News from Nowhere almost twenty years before it appeared. It is as if during the early 1870s, indirectly under the spell of the Paris Commune, Morris was already inchoately and no doubt unconsciously struggling to articulate the different, perhaps contradictory aspects of his revolutionary imagination, which Bloch might have characterised as its warm and cold currents.

NOTES

2. All references to Communal Luxury will appear in parentheses in the body of the article.
4. Ibid., p. 257.
6. Kelvin, Ill, p. 45.
Reclaiming the Commune, Reclaiming William Morris … Again

Michelle Weinroth

Few books today engage seriously with the political astuteness and revolutionary precocity of Morris’s lectures on the lesser arts. Fewer still bear Morris’s floral designs on their dust jacket in any purposeful relation to Morris himself or indeed to the theoretical underpinnings of his artisanal oeuvre. His wallpaper patterns feature most often as alluring décor and little else. Kristin Ross’s *Communal Luxury*, an evocation of the political imaginary of the Paris Commune, breaks with this instrumental practice. The book’s cover is a reworking of Morris’s celebrated 1876 *Pimpernel* pattern. Digitally modified and prised from its original chromatic scheme of vegetable hues, the motif, in its new incarnation, sits awash in turquoise blue against a scarcely perceptible black canvas. Seen up close, the design is strangely suggestive of the book’s goal: to conjure and animate the Paris Commune’s *dream* of an egalitarian social order.

Remarkably, Ross grants Morris’s 1870s and early 1880s reflections on art and labour more than a bit part in this re-enactment of the Communards’ utopia. Sporadic references to his political philosophy of craft might thus be said to justify the use of his wallpaper aesthetic as a graphic overture to a text that gives Communard artisans pride of place: shoemakers, box-makers, fabric designers, potters, etc. But there are more compelling reasons for this aesthetic appropriation, discernible in the non-naturalistic and otherworldly tint invested in the jacket’s illustrative image – an image that offers the reader a first glimpse into *Communal Luxury*’s libidinal depths.

Steeped in a bluish light, the book’s reproduction of Morris’s wallpaper design evokes a nocturnal fantasia, a site of unbridled dream work where the spatio-temporal markers of quotidian life are abolished, and memories of the past enter ‘vividly into the figurability of the present’ (p. 2).¹ A sense of genuine déjà-vu characterises the origins of *Communal Luxury*. For in 2011, as the Occupy movement spread across the
world, the embers of the Paris Commune were re-ignited in Ross’s mind. Despite decades of controversy and suppression, the meteoric episode of 1871 re-entered her vision as a hope-filled illumination of anarchist collectivism, embodied in the iconic image and ‘phenomenology of the encampment’ (p. 2).

Ross’s memories are clearly the fount of her 2015 book. But they are more than inspirational impulses. Crystallising into a rhizomatic pattern, and reflecting her perception of time’s passage (p. 3), they also define her narrative method – one closer, it would seem, to the fictive operations of Morris’s political and medievalist romances than to any standard chronicling of an historical event. As such, one must ask whether Verso’s classification of Communal Luxury as history is truly accurate; or whether this book, which deliberately eludes easy generic classification, belongs in some liminal zone of critical and creative discourse. Ross’s work straddles two distinct epistemological universes and thus forecloses any swift engagement with its arguments, particularly with those that touch on Morris’s thought. No discussion of Ross’s claims can materialise effectively without some preliminary hermeneutical effort. I feel, therefore, compelled to grasp her book first for what it is, and only then to trace the political and conceptual filiations that link it both truly and falsely to Morris’s revolutionary vision. Such is the aim of my intervention.

Communal Luxury, I suggest, is a utopian romance, dressed in the apparel of an unorthodox history of ideas, and sutured with a series of conceptual categories drawn from the works of Arthur Rimbaud, Karl Marx, William Morris, Henri Lefebvre and an array of nineteenth-century anarchists. The book dons an air of spontaneous ‘bricolage’, reminiscent of the Paris barricades – a cobbling together of sundry materials (in this case, diverse discourses and disciplines) – and emblematic of the Communards’ inventive insurgency and spontaneous political praxis. Yet, Ross’s evocative eclecticism is a surface look; beneath it lies a consciously wrought design, governed by her celebration of the Commune’s principal achievements in feminism, progressive education, the lesser arts and internationalism. These are the constitutive elements of her utopian romance, and, as Morris writes of all utopias, they reflect their author’s temper.2

Communal Luxury is also a multi-dimensional spatial history that contests the imperialist politics of space enshrined in Paris’s nineteenth-century cityscape, as well as the colonising power of official political narratives that have reconstructed the 1871 moment with ideological intent. If it is inexorably caught in the interstices of the Commune’s legacy, the book nonetheless seeks a discursive space apart. Ross wrests the Commune’s narrative from the grip of (what she deems to be) two dominant historiographical institutions, redrawing its political cartography, and shifting attention away from spatial symbols of the state, such as the Hôtel de Ville, to sites of
Communal self-affirmation, such as the Place de la Corderie (p. 20). On autonomous discursive ground, she affirms the Commune’s ‘working existence’ (p. 12) against prevailing legacies that either swept its merits under the wave of a Third Empire nationalism, or, by her account, assimilated it, through Marxist readings, to a story of tragic defeat.

Ross’s disengagement from mainstream retrospectives – for example, ‘official state communist history’ and ‘national French republican history’ (p. 4) – is of a piece with her refusal to address the Commune’s military conjuncture, the prematurity of the Communard occupation, its ensuing fate and the emerging lessons for posterity. She thus directs the reader’s gaze away from the massacre and circumvents the controversy over an historical event that buttressed the ideological foundations of two contrasting monuments of history-making. Thus, while Third Empire Republican writings excoriated the Commune, maligning its advocates as heinous insurgents, certain socialist retrospectives invoked the atrocities of 1871 as a cautionary tale, a heuristic commentary on the Commune’s failings and aborted efforts.³ Ross, however, not only disengages from these readings, but devises a new approach to telling the tale. The event, she writes, ‘belongs to another kind of history’, described by Arlette Farge as ‘untimely, ironic, irregular, disruptive’ (p. 37). In deploying a literary style that explicitly unsettles the literary conventions in which these histories are held intact, Ross seeks to dismantle (at least rhetorically) both the institution of history writing as well as the academy of belles lettres, and not least the use of Aristotelian tragedy in framing the Commune’s legacy (p. 91).

The book’s five chapters both conjure and flout Aristotle’s poetics of classical drama. Communal Luxury is thus a five-act tragedy turned on its head (a composite romance, replete with mise-en-abîmes, self-mirroring episodes of utopian possibility, parables for our times) with unities of time, place and action dissolved, and tragic dimensions expelled. The Commune’s drama is staged here as a ‘grand refus’, as resistance to the institutions of high art (literary and visual) and as a release reminiscent of Arthur Rimbaud’s poem, ‘The Drunken Boat’. Like the Communard poet, who unshackled his verse from the fetters of Parnassian poetry, Ross unmors her writing from the authority of certain historiographies and their centripetal (i.e. hegemonic) power.

And yet, Communal Luxury is not a discourse of unbridled passions, but an elaborate manifesto conceived with a deliberate political aesthetic. Indeed, Ross suppresses the tragic dimensions of 1871 lest these thwart her project of recasting the Commune’s narrative as a ‘triumph of political and social imagination’.⁴ In this, she affirms the Commune’s intensity and, out of its brevity, extracts its afterlife (its survie), prolonging its duration, its temporal but also political magnitude. With this strategy, she extols the Commune’s
singular merits, casting her subject – a confluence of political actors and affiliated supporters – in a romantic light, and editing out the narrative’s blood-soaked ending.

This cinematically crafted narration is of a piece with Ross’s objective, not merely to enliven the story of the Commune, but to mobilise it across time and space, and thus to magnify the Communards’ achievements. With a series of vignettes, she propels us centrifugally out of 1871 Paris, to London, Switzerland and the farther reaches of Iceland, Finland and Russia. Yet what appears on this book’s discursive screen is in fact a projection of Ross’s own vision, a phantom of her desire, lit up by an external subject: the Communards themselves and their fellow travellers. Seen thus, Communal Luxury turns out to be the political imaginary of Kristin Ross, saturated with the aspirations of her unsung heroes: the anarchists, geographers, lyrical and decorative artists of nineteenth-century Europe. As her preferred poet, Rimbaud, might say: ‘je est un autre’. Communal Luxury, then, is not only a utopian romance, the delineation of a political imaginary, but a self-reflexive one, whose cinematic character is revealed through the eye of a camera obscura as an optical inversion. Ross’s intense identification with the Paris revolutionaries and their international affiliates is central to this phenomenological reversal. She discloses this empathy in her opening claim that both she and the Communards ‘have given the name “communal luxury” to the Commune’ (p. 1). Implicit, here, is a gesture of solidarity, a synchronic collaboration with her nineteenth-century subjects. Implicit here, too, is a Morrisian-like journey through time in which a narrating hero steps into a remote past, yet (as Ross would have it) one strangely closer to our times than our parents’ generation ever was to us. Like the Victorian Dreamer of Morris’s A Dream of John Ball, who joins the fourteenth-century peasant revolt with visceral fraternity and political fellowship, so Ross’s empathy with the Communards and their self-affirming spirit, her choice, along with theirs, to ascribe the expression ‘communal luxury’ to the Commune, simulates a convergence of disparate epochs, in which she and her fellow rebels meet on the imaginary turf of a utopian fiction.

To be sure, Ross’s book reads as intellectual history; but its deeper workings are those of an artful documentary, ruled by a subversive aesthetic logic. And it is this discrepancy between surface form (an historical treatise predicated on a ‘rational’ hermeneutic) and creative content (an historical portrait predicated on a symbolic or analogical mode of reasoning) that raises concerns about her work’s truth-value, or, at least, how we might fully understand it. For Ross’s critical discourse involves what Terry Eagleton has described elsewhere as an ‘alchemical reading of arcane connections’, an analytical method that rather weakens her more factually documented and plausibly argued claims. Indeed if her kaleidoscopic style of
narration appeals at first, it loses its lustre as the reader encounters problems of cogency, imperceptible at first blush.

The French use the expression ‘faux-amis’ to signify an arresting but illusory resemblance between two objects or ideas. Such a seductive but loose affinity is central to Ross’s persuasive syntax. Threading together a series of bold interpretations, she sutures fragments of Morris’s epistolary remarks and editorial comments to her book’s overall tapestry. Doubtless, Morris and the rebels of 1871 share an ensemble of political ideals (pp. 60-62): their vindication of the lesser arts, their views on a non-authoritarian pedagogy, their diversely expressed rejection of the capitalist division of labour and their resistance to the bourgeois state, etc. But Morris’s revolutionary thought cannot be readily stitched into the Communard cloth short of creating conceptual tangles. I shall attempt to unravel three of these knots, enmeshed as they are in Ross’s utopian paradigm: ‘communal luxury’.

Coined by Eugène Pottier, the expression ‘communal luxury’ is drawn from the last line of the Federation of Artists’ Manifesto of April 1871: ‘[w]e will work cooperatively toward our regeneration, the birth of communal luxury, future splendours and the Universal Republic’ (p. 39). Ross reads it as the starting point of a utopian ideal: a collective reorganisation of public space, one of the communal activities achieved through a transformation of ‘the aesthetic coordinates of the entire community’ so that beauty might flourish in public spaces, not just in privatised spheres (p. 58). This would lead to the integration of art into everyday life and ultimately achieve ‘equality in abundance’ (p. 63), where the earth’s resources would be shared and managed cooperatively. These, on the surface, are precisely the achievements of Morris’s Nowhere, a fictive remapping of nineteenth-century London, designed to embrace the art of a future people. Here, social and natural environments are sites of humanly crafted and cultivated public beauty, but also of communalism and egalitarian distribution of aesthetic wealth – art made public, quotidian, democratic and, indeed, participatory. The Nowherian topos, we might say, is the literary expression of Morris’s political desire just as ‘communal luxury’ is the utopia set forth by the Federation of Artists’ Manifesto.

But the affinity is deceptive. For where Ross depicts the Communard artists’ inauguration of their utopia, the start of a process of social revolution effected through a clearing of imperialist urban space – specifically the renowned destruction of the Vendôme Column that occurred on 16 May 1871 – and this in default of any economic change (the Bank of France was left intact), Morris’s Nowhere reflects the mature stage of a highly elaborate and extensive social revolution involving the elimination of private property and exchange value.8 There the ground is cleared of its capitalist matrix as an a priori condition of social transformation; for only a
universally extended political economy of cooperative and unalienated labour can yield a terrain conducive to communalism. It is not an aesthetic of space (for example, imperialist architecture), but a condition of work that must first be altered; and with that alteration, a reconstituted environment of shared wealth and universally enjoyed creativity ensues, following a lengthy period of revitalised sensibility.

Despite these differences, Ross tethers Morris’s views to her own perspective, arguing in the spirit of geographer Élisée Reclus that the demolition of the Vendôme Column was an imposing and unsurpassed sign of the times (p. 60) and that Morris’s 1887 comments in ‘Socialism from the Root Up’ echo this sentiment. True, for him, the spectacular event harboured more than paltry significance; it was an important gesture of anti-imperialist defiance and revealed the Communards’ determination ‘to hold no parley with the old jingo legends’. But it is doubtful that he would have construed it as anything more than one episode in a larger spectrum of struggle where the final goal would be habitation (how we might live), not occupation (how we might resist) or how we might destroy all traces of the imperial past in a ‘fire of joy’ (p. 59). If pressed, Morris would have read the redesigning of Paris as a purely affective and cathartic dimension of social change, largely ineffectual if dissociated from the military and economic conjuncture of 1871. Seen thus, the act of toppling the Vendôme Column pales beside a thoroughgoing Morrisian programme of revolution – at once libidinal, political and economic. Ross’s literary hermeneutic, however, obscures this crucial difference, as in the following passage:

No one could appreciate more how the dead furniture of imperialism weighs on the minds of the living than that champion of the lesser arts and ‘poet-upholsterer’ […], William Morris. He was to prove it in his 1890 novel, News from Nowhere. There the Communards’ symbolic act of spectacular demolition is revisioned speculatively by transforming Trafalgar Square, cleansed of its own imperialist monumentality, the statue to Admiral Nelson, into an apricot orchard. In this symbolic revisioning both the Place Vendôme and Trafalgar Square, replete with their aesthetics of nationalistic and timeless monumentality, become supra-national space, as the imperialist organization of abstract space is transformed into an orchard. Morris, in effect, is tearing down the Vendôme Column once again, several years after it had been painstakingly rebuilt in Paris.

(p. 60)

Fusing a version of Marx’s celebrated lines from The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte with her phrase ‘the dead furniture of imperialism’ – a phrase that recalls
the artisanal Morris and his depiction of the Vendôme Column as a ‘base piece of Napoleonic upholstery’ – Ross combines two conceptual strands in one: a Marxian refusal of encrusted tradition, with its damaging psychic burden, together with Morris’s politics of the lesser arts. The entwined threads are suggestive of the Commune’s principal features: its political break with an imperial past and indictment of a state-supported elite culture. But this dexterous intertwining of Morris, Marx and the Communards results in a misleading conclusion that the Marxian Morris fully identifies with the Communards’ unilateral clearance of state architecture and that this purging process is a pivotal catalyst in the creation of communal wealth, or, if you like, of Nowherian bounty.

The misconception arises from a semantic but politically crucial ambiguity. Ross’s expression ‘the dead furniture of imperialism’ is figurative; it refers to the state’s outmoded apparatuses and institutions, its bureaucratic infrastructure and ‘systemic’ character. Indeed, it is in this vein that Morris would grasp the phrase. But Ross’s ensuing discussion – a comparison of the destruction of the Vendôme Column to the evacuation of the Nelson statue from Trafalgar Square in News from Nowhere – is governed by the idea of ‘imperialist furniture’, understood as bricks and mortar, ‘furnishings’ of an imperialistic metropolis, statues and monuments to be torn down, and burned in pyrrhic ecstasy – not the state’s administrative bodies (p. 59). Clearly, Morris’s Nowhere and Ross’s vision of communal luxury diverge on the matter of revolution: the first uproots a system wholesale, the second jettisons some of that system’s dead wood, but not the system itself.

If semantic ambiguities blur this distinction, Ross’s equation of the demolished Vendôme Column with the disappearance in Nowhere of the Nelson statue from what was once Trafalgar Square obscures the difference even more. Here, Ross conflates the historic significance of the demolition of the Vendôme Column with the fate of the Nelson statue, as if these events were both suggestive of the same type and extent of social change. The toppling of the Napoleonic statue acquires the comprehensive magnitude of a wholesale Morrisian revolution, thanks to a forced analogy with the Nelson monument. Morris, by Ross’s account, ‘revisioned the spectacular demolition of the Vendôme Column within the pages of News from Nowhere by transforming Trafalgar Square, cleansed of its own imperialist monumentality, the statue to Admiral Nelson, into an apricot orchard’ (p. 60).

To be sure, Morris’s utopian romance reconceives Trafalgar Square as a site of organic bounty. But nowhere is the fictive societal transformation described as a symbolic flattening of monuments. Clearances are effected judiciously with sustained reverence for the architecture of past epochs: a part of Westminster Abbey is preserved for its interior beauty as are the pre-commercial edifices of Oxford.
is there any suggestion that the disappearance of the Nelson statue is an explicit echo of the Communards’ deconstructive act. The imperialist monument remains unnamed and referred to parenthetically as one of several unprepossessing bronze statues. Indeed, there is no evidence that Morris actively chose to ‘revision’ the Communards’ architectural blow to the Parisian column. The abolition of Trafalgar Square, involving the inevitable (though un-narrated) tearing down of the Nelson statue, and the square’s conversion into an orchard is but one unspecified moment in society’s wholesale reconstitution. For Morris’s projected revolution entails not only a surface alteration of the cityscape, a felling of imperialist monuments, but successive stages of economic and political change aimed at shattering the cornerstones of capitalist thinking and the institutions of capitalism itself.

According to Ross, however, the Commune’s virtue resides in its break with such economism. She rejects the view that the Communards’ failure to seize the Bank of France was an egregious error. That ‘failure’, she writes, was ‘balanced by their accomplishments in […] the realm of political desire rather than need’. However, as Eagleton has it, if the Commune’s libidinal economy was an ‘enduring triumph’, it was ‘also its downfall. For no political revolution, whatever libidinal attractions it offers to contemporary Western critics, will ever succeed unless it manages to penetrate the heart of capital, and overthrow its long superseded sway.’ Ross’s insistence that we perceive the fate of the Commune exclusively through the prism of the political imaginary, rather than through the political economy, explains why her appropriated title ‘communal luxury’ can scarcely be entwined with Morrisian thought. This is the second of three strands that begs unravelling.

In his lecture, ‘Art and Socialism’, Morris makes reference to the term ‘luxury’ no fewer than six times and, this, invariably to mean the excessive waste generated by a system of commerce, driven by ceaselessly rising rates of human toil, a frantic pursuit of profit and the degradation of civilization to a sham and inequitably divided prosperity. To Morris, luxury, being the plague bred by commercial war, is exhibited in ‘dull adjuncts to unmeaning pomp’, as he put it in ‘The Lesser Arts’; but it also secures a whole regime of degrading social practices under the aegis of competition: ‘men and women making Nothing with terrible and inhuman toil which deadens the soul and shortens mere animal life itself. All these are the slaves of what is called luxury, which in the modern sense of the word comprises a mass of sham wealth […] and enslaves not only the poor people who are compelled to work at its production, but also the foolish and not over happy people who buy it to harass themselves with encumbrance.’

Against this, Morris urges ‘association’, communalism against competitive individualism, creative labour against wasteful drudgery. Luxury is the name he assigns extravagance, with its simulacra of beauty and material hoarding, the dark
side of which is dearth. In short, it reflects a deleterious condition of asymmetry, emerging as theft (private property), on one side, and slavery (privation), on the other; and within or betwixt these two extremes, communal wealth finds no home. Ross, by contrast, conflates communal wealth with ‘communal luxury’, defining the latter as ‘equality in abundance’; in this, she seeks to rescue Pottier’s coinage from being construed as ‘senseless luxury’ (p. 63), from what Morris called ‘the swinish luxury of the rich’. Yet, the categories of ‘abundance’ and ‘luxury’ are not synonymous, and unless the reference is to an elite of equals, ‘equality in luxury’ is aporetic. At best, ‘communal luxury’ is a premature revolutionary slogan, and the sign of a political imaginary yet to be nuanced and enriched by posterity’s self-critical strivings.

In the context of nineteenth-century Parisian culture, where both architecture and the production of fineries defined a world of opulence and elegant fashion, the Federation of Artists’ use of the term ‘luxury’ would seem to reveal a residual attachment to, or emulation of, affluent beauty. The expression ‘communal luxury’ suggests an internalised (albeit modified) capitalist utopia, not an abolition of economic disparity. By contrast, Morris’s call for the complete eradication of luxury reflects the depth and breadth of his radical agenda: to transcend not only the chasm between elitist art and artisanal craft, but the egregious inequity of the capital/labour relation as such – one affecting the entire human race. On his logic, the seizure of wealth must coincide with the debunking of privilege; conditions of excess (i.e. profit and accumulation) must be supplanted by a universal access to society’s resources, for equality, not luxury, guarantees abundance; and abundance, in its myriad forms, is both the basis and goal of a salutary commonweal.

None of these distinctions between a Morrisian politics of the future and the Commune’s political imaginary, however, should discount Morris’s reverence for, and appreciation of, the Communards’ efforts. In his 1887 Commonweal article, ‘Why we Celebrate the Commune’, Morris seeks to rescue the significant import of the Communard venture from a torrent of bourgeois lies, ‘hypocritical concealments, and false deductions’. Like Ross, he elevates the merits of the Paris rebels above a cacophony of carping commentaries and heralds their uprising as a parable for future political actors. Yet, Morris and Ross differ in their rhetoric and interpretative approach, most notably in respect to the question of tragic defeat, the dark side of ‘communal luxury’. This is the third of three knots that begs disentangling.

Unlike Ross, who refuses to frame the Commune as tragedy, Morris confronts it squarely, yet without damaging the Communards’ legacy. Rather than eschew the reality of the massacre and generate a triumphal portrait of the Commune’s working existence, he evokes the event with enthusiasm and intelligence, with reasoned hope. Neither does he succumb to the wilful suppression of the Commune’s vitality by the
bourgeois press, nor does he exaggerate the Communards’ accomplishments. If he declares that the Commune was ‘the greatest tragedy of modern times’, he also insists that it does not portend apocalypse. It is a ‘temporarily unsuccessful cause’ (my italics), the ground upon which socialists should refuse to admit the possibility of ultimate defeat. ‘I have heard it said, and by good Socialists too, that it is a mistake to commemorate defeat; but it seems to me that this means looking not at this event only, but at all history in too narrow a way. The Commune is but one link in the struggle which has gone through all history of the oppressed against the oppressors; and without all the defeats of past times we should now have no hope of the final victory.’

As an editor of a socialist newspaper, Morris’s rhetorical style was clearly shaped by the imperative to inspire and boost morale; but, significantly, the tone of his Commonweal editorials contrasts, often markedly, with that of his serialised fictions. His long poem, The Pilgrims of Hope, is a far more ambiguous and wistful rendering of the Commune than his commemorative tribute of March 1887, and often prefigures the tenor of his later, more nuanced, public statements. Indeed, if, early that year, Morris invoked Communard heroism to embolden his fellow socialists, by November of 1887, the devastating massacre of Bloody Sunday dampened the rousing pitch of his rhetoric. The human cost of insurgency, unorganised in the face of law and order, was too great to countenance let alone justify. The Pilgrims of Hope already foreshadows this sentiment in 1885. Between 1886 and 1887, Morris’s urgings to his comrades (fictively expressed in A Dream of John Ball) would be further tempered; the path of revolution, he announced, would be daunting, strewn with pitfalls. Such was the lesson imparted by the Victorian Dreamer to John Ball. Liberation from serfdom would yield slavery in new guise; dreams would be dashed, and new struggles would resume. Still, Morris mined redemptive possibility in the depths of every defeat, and this because he allowed for time, however convoluted in its unfolding, however fitful in its human dramas, to foster the necessary maturation of social consciousness and historical opportunity for veritable social change.

Ross does not share this subtle and non-linear; but nonetheless processual view of history. She sees the diachronic approach to time as ‘the privileged category of the dialectician’. Hers is a combative response to traditional Marxist theorists who, she argues, neglected the politics of space. But the latter (spatial) paradigm and source of her critical method comes with a price; it casts her book as both a synchronic and non-synchronous history, bereft of a sharply delineated historical panorama in default of which distinct moments in time are telescoped, and different political vantage points are sewn into an insufficiently differentiated weave of intellectual filiations.
by scepticism or refutation. This, too, is the stuff of Morris’s utopian romance, where the governing rules of realism are eclipsed. But whereas News from Nowhere announces its literary code explicitly, underscoring its oneiric frame, Communal Luxury avoids full self-disclosure. It leaves us in a bluish subaqueous world, unable to discern between the real and the imagined, between the facticity of history and an artful tale of revolution, forever caught in the crosshairs of political controversy.

NOTES
1. All page references to Communal Luxury will appear in parentheses in the body of the article.
6. The expression ‘communal luxury’ was used by the Federation of Artists as a motto. But according to Gonzalo J. Sanchez, ‘[t]he Fédération was an initiative under the Commune, not of the Commune. This difference […] has led to much historical misinformation.’ See Organizing Independence: The Artists’ Federation of the Paris Commune and its Legacy 1871-1889 (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), p. 49. Indeed, the Commune’s political imaginary was not monolithic and cannot, therefore, be subsumed under the expression ‘communal luxury’, as Ross’s book would have us believe.
8. The destruction of this Napoleonic edifice was regarded as a symbol of Communard internationalism.
15. CW, XXII, p. 4; ibid., XXIII, p. 195.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.

(Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’)

[...] see how white
The skull is, loose within the coif! He fought
A good fight, maybe, ere he was slain quite.

(William Morris, ‘Concerning Geffray Teste Noire’)

Although time, language, culture and attitudes toward artistic creation divide William Morris and Walter Benjamin, the writers shared an awareness of the individual’s vulnerability to the chance circumstances of time and place, a position that intensifies in the context of war. Benjamin’s death offers a tragic embodiment of that experience: after having successfully fled to the Spanish border from Nazi-controlled France, Benjamin took his own life, convinced that he was trapped even in spite of the fact that he held an American entry visa in his pocket. The quotation above from the
‘Theses’, Benjamin’s last and arguably ‘most important late statement on historical questions’, offers a provocative philosophical space from which to examine the history-based poems in Morris’s *The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems* (1858).\(^1\)

Although the two thinkers’ attitudes towards modernity may have differed profoundly – with Morris condemning the mechanical reproduction that modern technological advancement allowed and Benjamin lauding the possibility that mechanical reproduction might liberate art from the ‘aura’ of ritual and worship – Benjamin’s awareness of the tenuous nature of human life in any present moment evokes the tenor of Morris’s Froissart poems. ‘However real the continuity of history’, Morris cautioned, ‘[artists] must recognize the enormous gulf between that period and the present’.\(^2\) Readily acknowledging the distance between the historical past and the present moment, Morris would likely have agreed with Benjamin’s claim that true knowledge of the conditions of the past was unattainable.\(^3\) Thus, Morris’s focus on the disjuncture between individual experience and reported history finds a kindred impulse in Benjamin’s later preoccupation with ‘the discrete historical moment in its singularity’.\(^4\)

The intellectual concerns of both writers reflected a socio-historical aesthetic tradition that recognises the role of the imagination in attempts to resurrect forgotten history. While at Oxford, Morris’s reading of Thomas Carlyle’s *Past and Present* (1843) introduced him to a condemnation of capitalist society for its rejection of human values that ‘won a response from Marx, and remained indelibly printed upon William Morris’s consciousness’.\(^5\) Yet *Past and Present* also exposed the poet to a spirit of inquiry that accessed the past by envisioning the reality of medieval lives – for example, the imagined lives and concerns of the monks in St. Edmundsbury Abbey. As cultural theorists, both Morris and Benjamin were part of a philosophical tradition that recognised the value of the materials of past existence – be they edifices, artefacts, texts or poetic images – in constructing a more accurate record of history. For Benjamin, the gap between the past and the present – a gulf hidden by the myth of a traditional history written by the victors – could be bridged by engaging with works of art or cultural products ‘in which past ages have deposited their collective dreams and longings, their aspirations for a better life, aspirations which adverse historical conditions have heretofore frustrated’.\(^6\) In other words, as Benjamin argued in ‘Theory of Art Criticism’, a work of art may contain ‘a power to provide us with the experience of truth otherwise inaccessible to us’.\(^7\)

Despite the fact that Morris’s medieval history poems offer a nineteenth-century reconstruction of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century life rather than genuine medieval artefacts, his poetic imagination took inspiration in part from what Victorians considered to be a ‘true’ medieval historical account, Jean Froissart’s *Chronicles*. Within
that medieval framework, Morris’s poems voice the difficulty of accessing the past in their envisioning of individual lives and experiences that have been long buried or ignored. Indeed, Morris’s 1858 commitment to evoke in his poetry the grim material reality of the fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century world that his Defence characters inhabit is consonant with Benjamin’s concern for the forgotten past. With Benjamin’s ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ in mind, this essay focuses on the temporally and spatially-bound images created by Morris in his Froissart poems to express the characters’ troubled relationship with those ‘Who make this history’ (‘Sir Peter Harpdon’s End’, ll. 744-48). Ultimately, I wish in this analysis to sound the poems’ recognition that individual experiences, especially those steeped in violence, cannot be entirely known through reported history.

Scholars have long noted ways in which the poems in the Defence of Guenevere volume problematise the Victorian concept of heroism by exposing war’s brutality and by rejecting the impulse to sentimentalise the medieval past. Acknowledging this move toward authenticity, Ingrid Hanson confirms that Morris’s response to violence, like that of many Victorian poets, was complex and imaginative rather than monolithic: ‘in turning to the past’, she notes, Morris ‘suggests the failures of the present’. Yet Hanson also observes that Morris’s work as a whole ‘can be understood in its diachronic relation to the history of ideas as well as its synchronic relation to the preoccupations of its own time’. Positing the relevance to Morris’s poetry of the work of twentieth-century thinkers Georges Bataille, René Girard and Elaine Scarry on war, sacrifice, violence and pain, Hanson draws those writers’ ideas into her examination of Morris’s depictions of violence. And yet, the concern evoked specifically by Morris’s use of Froissart’s writing also anticipates Walter Benjamin’s later preoccupation with forgotten historical moments. In the Froissart poems, violence threatens to destroy both individuals and any record of their experiences; thus, central to the poems’ historical impulse is a represented disjunction between individual experience and reported history. This aspect of Morris’s history poems – the firm grounding of his characters in isolated and overlooked moments of a ‘true’ historical context and his focused representation of the ‘horrible immediacy’ of that world – merits further consideration.

The online William Morris Archive version of The Defence of Guenevere, edited by Margaret Lourie, notes Morris’s reference to events in medieval history that span from 1250 up to 1453. Within that contextual framework, Morris’s attentiveness to verifiable historical events or people and, paradoxically, his creation of imagined personal experiences reflect a humanistic drive towards authenticity realised in the violent content of the Froissart poems. In this analysis I will examine how the collection’s title poem prepares Morris’s reader for the history poems that follow,
before exploring the paradoxical issues that rise to the surface in the three Froissart poems most concerned with reported history: ‘Sir Peter Harpdon’s End’, ‘Concerning Geffray Teste Noir’ and ‘The Haystack in the Floods’.

*The Defence of Guenevere’s* focus on its title character in the volume’s initial poem later resonates in the Froissart poems as it bears down on the issue of the flaws inherent in second-person historical accounts. From the beginning of his collection, Morris destabilises his reader’s expectations by evoking a well-known and immediately identifiable fictional character, and then presenting an ‘unknown’ Guenevere who tells her own story – one we might not expect. Through the queen’s self-analysis, Morris invites his readers to consider the troubling prospect of falsely reported narratives. Various scholars have observed that Guenevere sets the tone for the volume by subverting notions of truth and challenging her audience’s moral assumptions. For example, Jonathan Freeman notes that Morris’s ‘Defence of Guenevere’ appropriates the Arthurian legend to subversive ends; Anthony H. Harrison, with reference to Michel Foucault’s *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), pushes that analysis further by suggesting that Morris’s title poem counters Victorian notions of manliness ‘by making Guenevere a genuine heroine’, a move which also challenges Victorian assumptions regarding Christian virtue, chivalry and sexuality. Karen Herbert records ways in which the poems’ dialogic structure and content expose a disjuncture between individual and public interpretations of experience: through their speech, memory and imagination, Morris’s characters ‘move tentatively toward’ Herbert Marcuse’s concept of a multi-dimensional society.15 Ultimately, Herbert sees Guenevere’s monologue in Morris’s *Defence* as ‘[encapsulating] the volume’s overall focus on mythical and linguistic incompatibility’.16 All three of these analyses take note of the challenges Morris’s Guenevere offers both to fictional characters within the poem and to contemporary readers.

In fact, Guenevere’s monologue also raises the issue of historical inaccuracy by representing a character that questions the reliability of official reports that are accepted as truth.17 Although the setting of King Arthur’s court does not offer a ‘real’ historical moment, the Guenevere-Launcelot affair is central to the fictional history of what is arguably the most significant of British legends. By depicting a scene that is not represented in Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur* (1485) and by offering Guenevere the opportunity to speak in her own defence to the knights that have accused her of treason, Morris alerts us to the existence of untold stories. Without ever explicitly admitting that she is guilty of adultery or excusing herself, Guenevere confronts her judges with her personal version of events and evidence of her accusers’ hypocrisy. Her dramatic monologue points to paradoxes in both her situation and in her accusers’ assertions.
Morris’s Guenevere makes it clear, for example, that in comparison to the love and affection she feels for Launcelot, her legal, contractual marriage to Arthur holds little value. Virginia Hale and Catherine Stevenson remind us that within the context of a medieval court and the tradition of courtly love, Guenevere’s love for Launcelot would have required no defence: her situation simply mirrors a cultural incoherency as she is ethically trapped between the church (and its state-governed legal contract of marriage) and courtly love, a value system that privileges love over legality. As Florence Boos notes, ‘Malory’s characters knew the facts, and were constrained by an arbitrary law to identify adultery with “treason”’. However, Morris’s medieval text ‘[upholds] a defensible sense in which Guenevere was otherwise “loyal” to her husband’. Consistent with this attitude, as Carole Silver has observed, the notes in the version of Malory’s text used by Morris – Southey’s edition – would have encouraged Morris to see Guenevere as a true lover, not as an adulteress.

In that spirit, Morris’s Guenevere emphasises the subjective and context-dependent nature of reality, noting three times that she alone can know the truth regarding her relationship with Launcelot and imbuing her claim with spiritual import: ‘Whatever happened on through all those years,/ God knows I speak truth’ (ll. 47-48, 143-44, 284-85). Her statement reminds us of the fact that the ‘truth’ about what has happened in her life has not been nor can ever be entirely grasped objectively. More generally, as Karen Herbert has noted, the poem highlights the discrepancy between personal experience and public report. This leads to the second issue raised by the queen’s monologue: citing evidence that the accusers who have reported her action as a criminal offence are themselves both treasonous and hypocritical, Guenevere alludes to incidents in the Morte when knights wrongly accused her of treachery though they themselves were guilty. Those allusions to falsely reported past events cast doubt on the legitimacy of the knights’ present indictment and imply that the veracity of reported events – often accepted as history – may be flawed in any number of instances. History reported from the perspective of those who have established the terms of judgment will naturally show bias.

As Walter Benjamin would later write in his ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, the practitioners of historical materialism may share a similar frustration given their opposition to ‘the adherents of historicism [who] actually empathize […] with the victor’. Admittedly, Benjamin wrote the above lines in a desperate moment. As Michael W. Jennings reminds us, the German philosopher composed them while ‘in flight before the Nazi war machine’ at a time when it seemed clear that the Nazis would win, that their worst crimes would be accepted with impunity, and that many individual ‘histories’ would be forever lost. Yet significantly, the moment in Guenevere’s story that Morris has chosen to represent is precisely the instant in which
she is most vulnerable – and desperate.

Morris, of course, magnifies the ostensible powerlessness of his poem’s subject by virtue of the fact that the central figure is a woman. In this same vein of understanding, Jonathan Freedman suggests that Morris was more interested in power than he was in truth, but clearly the two were inextricably intertwined. Freedman writes that:

In Morris’ hands, what Guenevere reminds the Victorian audience – and a twentieth-century one as well – is that narratives such as Guenevere’s are always written from the point of view of Gauaine; that history is not a value-neutral set of facts or even a privileged set of myths expressing universal truths, but a trial, a contestation, a clash of interpretations which the more socially powerful always wins.  

Though Guenevere opens her monologue with a recognition that it takes ‘but little skill/ To talk of well-known things past now and dead’ (ll. 11-12), her monologue emphasises the fact that things seemingly ‘well-known’ may not have been accurately known or truthfully reported. Nonetheless, the accepted interpretation of past events haunts Guenevere’s present existence with the threat of violent death since her accusers – corrupt though they may be – intend to burn her at the stake for treason. Although Guenevere’s situation in the poem is menacing, her legendary history is so well known that readers must know she will escape a brutal death: Launcelot will come to her rescue.

In contrast, the characters placed in Morris’s history-based poems are not so lucky. Carole Silver has described the distinction between the groups of Morris’s fiction and history poems in similar terms: ‘[t]o move from the works inspired by Malory to those derived from Froissart is to travel from a mythic realm of romance to a world of the grimmest reality’. As Silver observes, ‘Froissart provides a frame of reference wherein Morris’s poems become fully plausible’. Moreover, though Morris’s poems are inspired by the writings of a medieval historian, they also depict moments in time that are not reported in those accounts.

At least six of the thirty poems in Morris’s Defence collection were inspired by Lord Berner’s translation of Froissart’s Chronicles and focus on events that, in Froissart’s narrative, are claimed to have taken place during the Hundred Years’ War. These poems are collectively distinct from the Arthurian poems in that their historical frame of reference within a war-torn country offers a realistic setting for heroism. The contrast created by the juxtaposition is vital, for the situations of Morris’s Froissart characters widen the gap between the Victorian (or indeed any) heroic ideal and
medieval material reality as good people who behave heroically are tortured, killed or forgotten. In analyses of these poems, scholars have noted Morris’s grasp on the brutality of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and the relevance of those observations to the poet’s contemporary world. Yet Morris’s Froissart poems reach beyond their critique of war’s brutality past and present.

By illustrating the effects of violence on individual lives and gesturing toward the inadequacies of reported history, the poems construct what Benjamin would later recognise as a meaningful focus on the marginal or minor historical event. As Benjamin noted, ‘[a] chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history’. A historian may fail to record individual tragedies, but Morris, as is evident in his Froissart poems, seeks to rectify history’s omissions. To an extent, the dramatic monologues crafted by Morris reflect the Victorian poetic focus on historical figures exemplified in works such as Robert Browning’s ‘Andrea del Sarto’ and ‘Fra Lippo Lippi’. Like those works, The Defence of Guenevere offers a codicil to history by fashioning the untold stories of ‘minor’ historical figures. Morris’s innovation lies in the poetic contrast he sets up between an idealised myth and the real violence of personal loss ignored in a historian’s narration of major events.

In ‘Sir Peter Harpdon’s End’, the song sung at the end of the poem is not about the ‘real’ character, Sir Peter, whom the reader has witnessed suffer and die heroically. Rather, the song represents the story of a legendary hero, Sir Lancelot, as history. Sir Peter’s story is ostensibly forgotten, and his lover, Lady Alice, is left in despair. Despite Alice’s hope that when many years have passed, songs will be made of her and her lover Sir Peter, that never happens – with the exception of Morris’s ‘song’, a poem that reflects the violent anonymit into which the love (and lives) of people like Sir Peter and Lady Alice sink.

The action of ‘Sir Peter Harpdon’s End’ takes place during 1377, or thereabouts, when England was losing ground in Western France. In real life, Sir Bertrand de Guesclin, Constable of France, and Sir Oliver de Clisson began attacking castles still held by those sympathetic to the English cause. In Morris’s poem, Sir Peter, a Gascon knight fighting on the side of the English, is said to be the nephew of Sir John Harpdon, a well-known English knight who actually existed. Through the fictional Sir Peter’s allusions to actual events, Morris allows the reader to place him in a precise historical framework: November 1377 (ll. 36-37). As the poem begins, Sir Peter is fighting a hopeless battle, defending a castle with crumbling walls from the French. He notes: ‘Edward the prince lies underneath the ground;/ Edward the king is dead; at Westminster/ The carvers smooth the curls of his long beard./ Everything goes to
rack – eh! and we too’ (ll. 44-46), yet despite that admission, Peter will not accept defeat. His motivation for fighting a losing battle is both that he likes ‘the straining game/ Of striving well to hold up things that fall’ (ll. 220-21) and that he hopes to win renown for his courage and loyalty. When Sir Peter’s cousin Lambert, who is allied with the French, comes to seek a truce, Peter compares his own situation to the story of Troy, asserting:

…] men will talk, you know,
(We talk of Hector, dead so long ago)
When I am dead, of how this Peter clung
To what he thought the right; of how he died,
Perchance, at last, doing some desperate deed
Few men would care do now […]
(ll. 211-16)

The reference to Homer’s Iliad reveals both Peter’s heroic ambition and his belief that his moral integrity and courage will not be forgotten by history. During the parley Lambert treacherously tries to murder Sir Peter, but Peter captures him. The poem emphasises Lambert’s wickedness through his own admission of sin and corruption, yet rather than have Lambert killed, Peter has Lambert’s ears cut off to mark him as a traitor. Then the tide of the war turns: within twenty lines, Peter has been taken prisoner by Lambert, Guesclin and Clisson. When Sir Peter begs for his life, Guesclin tells him that he must die because of what he has had done to Lambert’s ears. Thus, the mercy Sir Peter granted is not returned. Moreover, before the heroic knight is hanged like a common criminal, Lambert tortures him psychologically, describing how his hanging corpse will blacken, and mimicking his lady, Alice de la Barde, from whom Peter cannot receive his only last wish, a parting kiss. The brutality depicted in the poem goes beyond the time and place of Sir Peter’s death; it dwells in the fact that the treacherous liar goes free, while he who has been loyal, honourable and heroic is cruelly abused, then executed.

The last third of ‘Sir Peter Harpdon’s End’ offers an often untold story of war’s effects: the poem depicts Alice de la Barde’s reaction to the news of her lover’s execution. Alice is waiting anxiously for her lover, Sir Peter Harpdon, when a squire sent by Clisson interrupts her reveries to tell her that Peter fought the good fight, and died a noble death. Faced with Sir Peter’s end, Lady Alice first denies his death, allowing herself to think that the squire is jesting; then, after the squire leaves, she grows angry at Guesclin, imagining how she would murder him in vengeance if she were a man. Bargaining with herself (‘Suppose this had not happen’d after all?’ (l.
she leans out of the window to watch for additional reports. From outside, Alice hears a song about Launcelot and Galahad. She reflects that those singing should be singing of Sir Peter, a noble knight who failed despite his strength and courage. Therein lies the point. Just as Sir Peter did earlier, Alice wonders if anyone will ever write a song about her and Sir Peter. Morris answers the question by having the poem ‘Sir Peter Harpdon’s End’ conclude with a song of Sir Launcelot. Thus, embedded within the historical context of the poem, the experience of a legendary hero is immortalised rather than the ‘real’ experience of Sir Peter and Alice.

With reference to the Holy Grail, the song incites listeners to sing Launcelot’s praises yet ‘again’ and to pray for the poet who ‘made this history’/ Cunning and fairly’ (ll. 748-49); here, too, Sir Peter’s true act of heroism and his unjust death are ignored. Of course, one might assert that the poet himself, Morris, is the hero for having attempted to redress an historical omission. Yet such a claim would shift our attention from what would seem to be the poem’s aim: the juxtaposition of the Launcelot myth with the grim story of Peter and Alice reveals a clear distinction between the romanticisation of fictional heroes and the material reality of the Middle Ages. In other words, the poem gestures at the fictionalised world of heroism and its distance from both history as reported and trauma as experienced. Through this contrast, the poem alerts the reader to the prior existence of heroic individuals who were crushed by hostile historical circumstances and ignored or forgotten by the official Chronicles of history.

In the poem ‘Concerning Geffray Teste Noire’, the Hundred Years’ War is once again used as a setting for challenging reported history through the representation of individual violence and forgotten lives. Morris names the narrator as John of Castel Neuf, whom Froissart calls Chatell Neufe in the Chronicles (2: 446). Castel Neuf recounts his personal experience in a failed attempt to reconstruct the violent end of two unknown individuals. The backdrop for the dramatic monologue is Froissart’s description of the fight against Geffray Teste Noire, the actual leader of an outlaw group who pretended to be English so that he could freely pillage French towns. In Morris’s poem, John of Castel Neuf tells his audience – a young man named Alleyne – what happened to him long ago, and asks Alleyne to relay the story to the Canon of Chimay, otherwise known as Froissart.

The narrator recalls that while waiting in a forest to attack Geffray, he discovered two skeletons. From the physical remains of the bodies, he pieced together a narrative account in which a knight and his lady were ambushed by bandits, and tried unsuccessfully to escape. In what he admits was a reverie that lasted hours, the narrator went so far as to envision the lovers at a tournament and to fall in love with the imagined woman’s face. Remarkably, as the reader may realise, the skeletons of
the unknown victims served as a canvas onto which John of Castel Neuf projected his own romantic fantasies, constructing a narrative for which there was hardly any evidence.

When the signal from his leader interrupted his thoughts, Castel Neuf charged out of the wood with the other knights in the vain hope of killing Geffray Teste Noire. Ironically, Castel Neuf’s violent, offensive attack as described places him in a position similar to the outlaws who he supposes attacked the knight and the lady about whose skeletons he has just fantasised. Believing he need only examine the skeletons for their story to ‘[come] out clear without a flaw’ (l. 120), Castel Neuf asserts the victims were ‘waylaid’ or ambushed (l. 121), and even imagines that the unknown knight ‘knew not she was dead/ Thought her but fainted from her broken wrist’ (ll. 129-30). Whoever the victims were, the fact that their bodily remains serve the fantasies of a person ignorant of their true story might seem another level of violation against them. Castel Neuf tells Alleyne that Froissart ‘knoweth [Geffray] is dead by now’ (l. 190), but that Froissart does not know the story of the lady and the knight. Then he suggests Alleyne tell Froissart the story of the two lovers and offers to show his listener the chapel in his new castle where he has buried the two skeletons and commissioned two stone effigies to adorn their tomb.

Has Castel Neuf done the putative lovers honourable service, or has he simply used them to sentimentalise a violent act? He is not a character we necessarily condemn: his admission that at only age fifteen he had ‘joy’ helping to slaughter those responsible for the bloody Jacquerie rebellion is somewhat balanced by the physical revulsion he experienced immediately afterwards, when directly confronted with the carnage of war (ll. 13-16). Yet his immediate shift in the next line to a romantic description of the found skeleton he assumes is female – ‘An arrow had gone through her tender throat’ (l. 17) – adds another layer of ambivalence. In any case, although Castel Neuf has memorialised what he assumes to be the remains of unknown lovers, their story does not make it into Froissart’s official history. Morris’s invention of Castel Neuf’s anecdote along with the warrior’s overt reference to the Chronicles draws our attention to the vulnerability of individuals to chance circumstances in times of war, the elusive quality of the past, and, in any case, the incapacity of historical record to capture it.

The poem ‘Concerning Geffray Teste Noire’ calls attention to the uncertain truth of reported history not only with its mention of an actual fourteenth-century chronicler, Froissart, but by focusing on a narrative that was never told by him; indeed, a narrative that could only be partially reconstructed from forensic evidence and imagination. The narrator’s monologue also foregrounds an unjust and inescapable irony: while the violent bandit Geffray eventually died at home in his bed, the
unknown lovers died violently, their bodies left to rot in the forest. Geffray’s story makes it into Froissart’s *Chronicles*; the tale of the murdered lovers does not. The events in the most notable and most violent of the Froissart poems, ‘The Haystack in the Floods’, take place around the time of the 1356 victory of the English over the French at Poictiers. The historical irony of the poem is acute: the English characters Jehane and her lover Robert are victors of a war; yet because of a chance turn of events, they become its victims. In the first stanza of the 160-line poem, Morris offers a foreshadowing that the lives of the two lovers will be lost even though their country has triumphed:

Had she come all the way for this  
To part at last without a kiss?  
Yea, had she borne the dirt and rain  
That her own eyes might see him slain  
Beside the haystack in the floods?  

(ll. 1-5)

While riding toward sanctuary at the Gascon border, Jehane and Robert are captured by Godmar, a character we can identify as Godmar du Fay, a cruel and powerful French Baron who fought against Edward III. The poem is narrated from Jehane’s point of view: she identifies Godmar as a traitor; he is a ‘Judas’ who still flies pennons depicting the British red lion even though he has sided with the French. Jehane’s lover, Robert, makes a heroic attempt to fight, but fails; he is outnumbered, his own men betray him, and he and Jehane fall easily into Godmar’s hands. Godmar demands that Jehane make an unacceptable choice: either she must become his lover (thus desecrating her love for Robert), or he will kill Robert. The figure of Jehane stands in contrast to Morris’s earlier depiction of the mythical Guenevere: both females are put to trial by powerful men; both are made the focal point of the poem; both are seemingly given the chance to determine their own fate through speech. Like the mythical Guenevere, Jehane is trapped in a paradoxical situation, yet Morris has drawn crucial distinctions between Jehane’s situation and that of the fictional queen. No lover is waiting in the wings to rescue Jehane. In fact, her only potential rescuer is about to be executed before her eyes. Jehane’s only options are to give her lover a death-sentence, or to degrade their love by promising to be his enemy’s lover, in which case Godmar (already characterised as a traitor) may still kill Robert. Another critical distinction Morris offers in the two poems is that of the temporal difference between fiction or myth and reality: in ‘The Defence of Guenevere’, the reader is given the impression that the heroine can stall
for time through speech for as long as is necessary to secure her rescuer’s arrival. Jehane, however, is not only trapped by her enemy, she is imprisoned by ‘real’ time, granted only an hour to choose between her lover’s death and her prostitution to Godmar. Her reflection earlier in the poem, ‘Would God that this next hour were past!’ (l. 59), marks her realistic assessment of the horror that she will endure despite the fact that she and Robert are on the ‘winning’ side of a war.

Although Jehane is a creation of Morris’s imagination, he evokes through her experience a realistic temporal and physical framework. His poem might be likened to a reconstructed historical narrative that Benjamin would have appreciated, a narrative that, as Jennings notes, ‘[eschews] the sort of truth claims that speak from traditional historical narratives, replacing them with the hope that truth might arise from the often violent collision of a past that has been recuperated in bits and pieces and a present badly in need of insight into what has been’.39

When Godmar suggests that he may rape Jehane all the same once Robert is dead, she responds by threatening to strangle Godmar in his sleep (ll. 91-93). Then she attempts to console herself with the thought of suicide by starvation, but Godmar intervenes, stating ominously that if she refuses his advances he will take her to Paris and to Chatelet prison where he will ‘tell/ All that [he knows]’ (ll. 102-3). When Jehane protests that any stories he might tell are ‘foul lies’ (l. 103) Godmar reminds her that in Paris his lies about her will be accepted as truth. He paints a vivid picture of how his report will be received: the population will cry out for Jehane’s death, and she will be burned or drowned for being a witch. Despite her protest, Jehane realises that the judges and the public will accept Godmar’s lies as truth. Morris’s reader knows this too, as at the first sight of Godmar she foresaw her violent end:

The court at Paris; those six men;  
The gratings of the Chatelet;  
The swift Seine on some rainy day  
Like this, and people standing by;  
And laughing, while my weak hands try  
To recollect how strong men swim.  
(ll. 51-56)

In fact, Jehane’s imaginings of what will happen to her when she arrives in Paris may be kinder than the reality of history. According to Veronica Kennedy, the hands of suspected witches were bound hand to ankle – left to right and right to left – which would make swimming nearly impossible. Survival in the water meant death on the shore, as being able to float was proof of witchery; death by drowning, on the other
hand, indicated innocence. Thus, in what we may project to be the ‘second fitte’ of the poem, Jehane will again be ‘hemmed in’ (l. 95) between two unviable options.

Jehane’s lucidity indicates that she is neither a witch nor mad. Godmar, on the other hand, may well be. At the end of the hour she rejects Godmar – thus sentencing Robert to death. When Robert tries unsuccessfully to kiss Jehane, Godmar beheads him on the spot. Within the historical frame of the poem, Godmar’s inhuman brutality is credible; just as war provides the opportunity for heroism in traditional heroic narratives, Godmar’s marginal political position during a time of war gives him license for sadism. He is doubly dangerous as a traitor whose ambitions have failed; theoretically, he should be at Robert’s mercy since the British have won the war; but as events have trapped Jehane and Robert in French territory, the power roles have been inverted. The heroic characters in the poem are tortured and die (or will soon die) after having suffered humiliating deaths; the traitor escapes scot-free. Jehane’s nightmarish situation raises the troubling issue of historical perspective, for there is a horrific contradiction between what Jehane and the reader know to be true, and what Godmar will report as the truth in Paris. Through the characters of Robert, Jehane and Godmar – the victimised and the victor – Morris offers his readers a credible historical situation in which the murder of a courageous hero will not be avenged, lies will be represented as truth to an official court and an innocent woman will be executed.

The implication of personal narratives inspired by a historical chronicle but not reported therein is enormous. By telling stories which would by their nature have been forgotten, Morris breaks with proponents of historicism, whom Benjamin criticised because their ‘empathy’ rests with the victor. In many ways, Morris’s focus on material reality in his history-based poems is not only consistent with his socialist views; it aligns with the precepts of Benjaminian historical materialism. Though the Froissart poems centre on individual experience, one of their themes is the dichotomy between history as experienced and history as reported. The troubling narratives the poems recount challenge the Victorian obsession with heroism by embedding fictional characters in the real historical context and violence of the Hundred Years’ War. In that world, the characters that readers are invited to admire and respect for their honour, fidelity or heroism are either brutalised or suffer ignominious deaths. That Jehane, Castel Neuf’s imaginary lovers and Sir Peter are not based on real historical figures renders their individual stories more universal. Unlike Godmar, Geffray and Guesclin – historical figures that Froissart names in his Chronicles – Jehane, Robert, Castel Neuf’s murdered lovers and Sir Peter might be every man and every woman whose life is crushed by historical events, and whose tragic heroism falls outside of history’s reported scope. In a sense, Morris writes the unwritten story that,
paradoxically, cannot be written. However, by basing the poems loosely on Jean Froissart’s fourteenth-century *Chronicles*, Morris encodes a desire to do what Benjamin later identified as ‘[brushing] history against the grain’.42

The Victorian desire for heroic narratives manifested itself in obsessions with both history – see, for example, the numerous editions of Edward Shepherd Creasy’s *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World: From Marathon to Waterloo* (1851) – and the fictional works of Malory and Tennyson. As Morris believed Froissart’s *Chronicles* to be a historical source, one might argue that his poems based on that volume simply ‘fictionalise history’. Yet, ultimately, the *Defence* volume offers two seemingly opposing gestures: a historicising of fiction through poetic narrative and a fictionalising of history. As we have seen, the title poem registering Guenevere’s personal defense undercuts the reader’s narrative assumptions by focusing on the fragile and subjective nature of truth and the likely existence of untold stories. History, too, is a potential narrative, written, as Benjamin’s ‘Theses’ remind us, by the victors. Morris’s ‘historical’ Froissart poems force the reader to contemplate, via the experiences of fictional characters, the personal horrors of the Hundred Years’ War; indeed, the brutality of all wars. By interspersing history-based, heretofore untold narratives throughout a volume of poems built otherwise on the national Arthurian myth, Morris’s *Defence of Guenevere* collection would seem to relegate all of traditional history, including some of its most widely-accepted heroic narratives, to a domain of dubious truth if not of fiction. The poems of William Morris remind us that imaginative art may reveal a more accurate sense of reality than historical report, thanks to the poet’s ability to encode the emotional and moral patterns of human experience into the untold story.

NOTES


10. Ibid., p. xiii.

11. The theories of Bataille, Girard and Scarry, more than Walter Benjamin’s philosophical-legalistic examination of the purposes and results of violence in ‘Critique of Violence’ (1921), offer a phenomenological means of understanding Morris’s visionary use of violence.


16. Ibid., p. 325.

17. Both Jonathan Freedman and Antony H. Harrison observe that Morris, like other Victorian poets, appropriates the discourse of Victorian medievalism to his own ends. Freedman and Harrison note that Morris’s purpose in usurping Arthurian discourse is to challenge and subvert cultural expectations and conventions. Yet Freedman and Harrison neglect the significance of the Froissart poems, poems inspired by actual history that Morris scattered throughout the Defence volume. Freedman, p. 236; Harrison, p. 221.


20 Ibid.


22. Ibid., p. 314.

23. Ibid., p. 19. Hale and Stevenson make this point as well (Hale and Stevenson, p. 173). See also, Thomas Malory, The Byrth, Lyf, and Actes of King Arthur: Of his Noble Kynghtes of the Rounde Table, theyr Mervellos Enquestes and Adventures, Thachyeugn of the Sanc Greal; and in the end le Morte DARTHUR, with the Dolours Deth and Departying out of thys Wardle of them al, with an introduction by Robert Southey, 2 vols (London: Printed from Caxton’s edition, 1485, for Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, by T. Davison, 1817), II, p. 400. Her allusion to poisoning (l. 149) recalls the poisoned apple incident from Malory’s ‘Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guenevere’, in which the knights accuse Guenevere of having poisoned the apple that led to Sir Patryse’s death. In Malory’s story, the knights’
misrepresentation of the truth put the Queen’s life in jeopardy. In the Morte, the incident is resolved when Launcelot champions Guenevere’s innocence by defeating her accuser, and when the Lady Nynye reveals that the poisoning has resulted not from the queen’s actions, but from treachery among the knights (Malory, II, p. 620). Nonetheless, because a story was incorrectly reported, a queen was nearly put to death.


26. Freedman, p. 244.

27. Interestingly, Andrew Lang compared Morris’s ‘unrivalled sense of what was most exquisite and rare in the life of the Middle Ages’ with Froissart’s ‘superficial pages’. Andrew Lang, ‘The Poetry of William Morris’, Contemporary Review, XLII (August 1882), 200-17 (202).


29. Ibid.


33. Silver contests Frank J. J. Davies’s assertion that Sir Peter is Sir John Harpenden or Harpendon. Silver, pp. 198-99, note 41.

34. Froissart, II, p. 446

35. Froissart,V, pp. 80-112.

36. Silver suggests that the poem ‘emphasized the connections between the capacity for romantic passion and the brutality [Morris] finds characteristic of the Middle Ages’. Silver, p. 38.

37. Froissart, V, pp. 254-57. The violent scene pieced together by Morris’s Castel Neuf is embedded in another story of brutality – his attack on Geffray’s men – which may also, one has the impression, be neglected in reported history.

38. Silver, p. 35.


41. Benjamin, p. 258.

42. Ibid., p. 259.
William Morris: An Annotated Bibliography
2012–2013

David and Sheila Latham

This bibliography is the seventeenth instalment of a biennial feature of *The Journal*. We give each original entry a brief annotation meant to describe its subject rather than evaluate its argument. Although we exclude book reviews, we include reviews of exhibitions as a record of temporal events.

We have arranged the bibliography into six subject categories appended by an author index. Part I includes new editions, reprints, and translations of Morris’s own publications, arranged alphabetically by title. Part II includes books, pamphlets, articles, exhibition catalogues, and dissertations about Morris, arranged alphabetically by author within each of the following five categories:

- **General**: 17 - 47
- **Literature**: 48 - 81
- **Decorative Arts**: 82 - 118
- **Book Design**: 119 - 131
- **Politics**: 132 - 151

The General category includes biographical surveys and miscellaneous details as well as studies that bridge two or more subjects. The Author Index provides an alphabetical order as an alternative means for searching through the 151 items of the bibliography. Though we still believe that each of Morris’s interests is best understood in the context of his whole life’s work, we hope that the subject categories and author index will save the impatient specialist from having to browse through descriptions of woven tapestries in search of critiques of ‘The Haystack in the Floods’.

With the rising costs of inter-library loan services and personal travel, we would appreciate receiving copies of publications. They can be sent to us at 42 Belmont Street, Toronto, Ontario M5R 1P8, or by e-mail attachment to dlatham@yorku.ca.
PART I: WORKS BY MORRIS


   A Galician translation of Morris’s 1889 prose romance *A Tale of the House of the Wolfings*.

   An Italian translation of two of Morris’s political lectures: ‘How We Live and How We Might Live’ and ‘Useful Work v. Useless Toil’.


   This fine-press, limited-edition book (forty-five copies) presents a selection of Imogen Cunningham’s photographs paired with poetry and prose by Morris, whom she explains inspired her work.

   A French translation of Morris’s 1897 prose romance *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*.

   A new Italian translation of Morris’s 1891 *News from Nowhere* includes introductory comments on the pun in the title and on Morris anticipating a consumer society for which unlimited growth will homogenise our world.

   A handy pocket-size collection of Morris’s political verse includes his *Chants for
Socialists, his agnostic ‘Apology’ from *The Earthly Paradise*, and his prose essay ‘How I Became a Socialist’.


   Anxious to print his first Kelmscott Press book, Morris wrote to George Campfield on 16 February 1891 about re-cutting two decorative initials for *The Glittering Plain*.


   A French translation of volume one of Morris’s 1896 prose romance *The Well at the World’s End*.


   A French translation of volume two of Morris’s 1896 prose romance *The Well at the World’s End*.


   This hybrid paperback of the 1894 Kelmscott Press edition includes Walter Crane’s illustrations and Morris’s initials, but with a Garamond font.


   A Romanian translation of Morris’s 1891 utopian romance *News from Nowhere*.


   In a four-page letter dated ‘Nov. 24’, Morris recommends rescinding the workhouse restrictions for out-of-door relief, though such palliatives will not improve the sham system; he concludes: ‘you can make any use of this letter you please’.
PART II: PUBLICATIONS ABOUT MORRIS

GENERAL


Among the most radical theorists of education, Morris argues in his political lectures for alternatives that are relevant to our twenty-first-century debates.


As a director for five years of the largest copper and arsenic supplier in Europe, Morris gained first-hand experience with corporate enterprise which would later fuel his persuasive critiques of capitalism in his political lectures.


A review of the newly revamped William Morris Gallery in London as it re-opens to the public after a £5 million overhaul.


The stages of Morris’s life as a painter, poet, designer, socialist, printer, and prose-romance author show a Ruskinian respect for the details of nature.


Peter is well remembered for his dedication to the Morris Society as chair of the Committee, editor of the Newsletter, and organiser of the East Midlands Study Group, as well as his career as a Senior Lecturer at the University of Nottingham.


The story of Morris’s marriage with Jane and Jane’s affair with Rossetti is told in the context of the marriages of Rossetti with Elizabeth Siddal, of Edward and Georgiana Burne-Jones, and of Euphemia Gray with Ruskin and with Millais.
The Art Fund of Great Britain has awarded the Museum of the Year prize to the William Morris Gallery ‘for highlighting innovative and creative ways to bring objects and collections to life’.
Peter Locke (1929-2012) was an architect who helped rescue Kelmscott Manor for the Society of Antiquaries.
Published to coincide with the reopening of the William Morris Gallery in 2012, this guide ‘tells the story of Morris’s life and work through fifty key objects from the Gallery’s collection, made by Morris and his close friends and family’.
Of the 188 publications annotated, 14 are works by Morris, 49 are general concerns about Morris, 42 are about his literature, 52 are about his decorative arts, 11 are about his book designs, and 20 are about his politics.
Review of the September 2012-January 2013 ‘Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde’ exhibition at the Tate Britain, London, comments on the artists’ circle that gathered around Morris’s Red House, highlights the work of women artists, and discusses Morris’s revolutionary politics and belief in art for people of all classes.
A survey of the lives of Morris and Burne-Jones indicates how they inspired each other’s work despite differences in the class of their families, their interests in Gothic architecture or in late-medieval painting, and in associating with craftsmen and socialists or with high society. Burne-Jones may have felt some resentment of Morris’s wealth and talent, but his combining Morris’s features with his own in his depiction of King Arthur in Avalon suggests the depth of their enduring partnership.
A laudatory portrait of Morris as a creative genius praises the renovated William Morris Gallery as a ‘jewel’ of museums.
The Art Fund of Great Britain has awarded the Museum of the Year prize to the William Morris Gallery.

This well-annotated edition of more than 500 letters by Jane Morris indicates her committed interest and involvement in her husband’s work.

Having severed his ties with the Devon Great Consols copper mines by 1877, Morris gained experience as a director that influenced his socialism and ecological ideas, and the charge that there were arsenic emissions from his wallpapers is an ‘urban myth’.

Andrew Mehurg’s accusations in Part I are refuted in Part II, with O’Sullivan’s persuasive arguments repeated from his ‘Devon Great Consols and William Morris’ (see #33 above).

Morris anticipated E.F. Schumacher’s emphasis on local decentralisation, which the national government ignores when building wind turbines and solar photovoltaic arrays.

Jane was an active artist, an engaging conversationalist, a skilled household manager, and an unconventional personality whose relationships with her husband and her lovers were complex.

Morris’s playful and affectionate parenting style reflects his reading of Dickens’s novels.

The William Morris Gallery has reopened following a £5 million refurbishment.


George Borrow influenced Morris’s love of narrow, green roads through the countryside, and Morris’s love for them influenced Edward Thomas.


Twenty-five photographs taken by Frederick Evans during the 1880s trace a journey across the grounds of Kelmscott Manor that is almost identical to a fictional itinerary followed in *News from Nowhere*.


Morris developed in both his poetry, essays, and decorative arts a ‘reminiscent’ use of colour based on his political reappraisal of the Middle Ages as a ‘land of colours’, which he contrasts with the bleakness of his own industrial age.


John Dewey’s utopian conception of experience as an ‘outward-looking openness’ is similar to Morris’s utopian vision in terms of Dewey’s analysis of habit, coordinated action, and the craft of artful experience.


An explanation accompanies the script of a parodic exhibition – ‘An Elite Experience for Everyone: A Case Study Intervention at the William Morris Gallery, London’ – of a cup and satchel owned by Morris and a fake beard as examples of fetishised objects connected to famous people.


The wide influence of Morris’s views on ecology is explored in terms of today’s eco-villages which present low-impact settlements based on an ecological lifestyle.


The William Morris Gallery is among the ten finalists for the Art Fund Prize for museum of the year.


Not seen.
With no frontiers left for exploration, Morris, like Jules Verne and R.L. Stevenson, sought travels on water and visions of romance, starting with his two homes on the Thames and then his travels to Iceland.

**LITERATURE**
Morris’s linguistic experiments reflect the contradictions in such Victorian philologists as Max Müller, as Morris sought to denationalise English in his poetry and prose with an inclusive Adamic speech.
Due to differences ‘in the political context and outlook…, Morris’s Sigurd remains closer in spirit to the princely figure of Fáfnisbank in the medieval sources than does Wagner’s Siegfried’.
Morris rejected the hegemony of the novel in favour of the literary romance as a vehicle for expressing his political ideals.
The pastoral Thames invites us to ‘travel into the past’, leading us upriver towards an idyllic England unspoiled by change.
The calligraphic ‘Praise of Venus’ from *A Book of Verse*, wherein ‘striving … is intimately bound to ornament’, and the utopian *News from Nowhere*, wherein the surface appearance of women disrupts the peace, demonstrate how Morris politicises the relation of desire with the visual surface of order.
In comparison with Gissing’s New Grub Street, which ‘implicates its writer and readers in the process of creating satirical representations of a society from which
they cannot distance themselves’, Morris’s *News from Nowhere* employs satire ‘as a connective device, projecting onto a desired future a fictional dissolution of social, political and economic hierarchies’.

In his 1856 review of *Men and Women*, Morris divides Browning’s poems into four groups: ‘themes of art and music’; ‘belief and doubt’; ‘love-poems’; and, most influential for Morris, dramatic ‘action rather than thought’.

A study of the editorship and essays for *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* shows that Morris and William Fulford were the chief contributors to the surprising success of a student paper.

Following the conservative-radical aesthetics of Carlyle and Ruskin, Morris composed and designed *The Glittering Plain* to illustrate the Teutonic ideals of Old Icelandic culture as central to England’s rightful legacy.

Though Morris could not have seen performances of morality and mystery plays, he had access to library editions, so that his ‘Sir Galahad, A Christmas Mystery’, *Love Is Enough*, and *The Tables Turned* are steeped in the traditions of these medieval genres and the estates satires.

*News from Nowhere* is discussed with W.H. Hudson’s *A Crystal Age*, Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*, William Dean Howells’s Altrurian series, and H.G. Wells’s *A Modern Utopia* as critiques of capitalistic, mechanised, mass-market contemporary print-culture.

Morris invites nineteenth-century working-class readers to identify with the suffering of workers in John Ball’s Peasants’ Revolt of 1381, and by drawing upon tales of ritual self-sacrifice he invokes an aesthetic or emotional response
meant to unite and motivate the community.

60. ----. ‘Morris’s Late Style and the Irreconcilabilities of Desire.’ The Journal of William Morris Studies, 19 (Summer 2012): 74-84.

In terms of Edward Said’s notion of ‘late style’, Morris writes against the transgressions of gothic terrors to create prose romances that dramatise the simultaneous fulfilment and denial of ‘individual satisfaction and communal happiness’.


An analysis of The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems, Sigurd the Volsung, Chants for Socialists, A Dream of John Ball, Roots of the Mountains, and News from Nowhere reveals that Morris was committed to an ideal of violent battle, with combat paradoxically presented as ‘a renewing and regenerative force’. For Morris, it is not peace but violence which provides a ‘physical experiential basis for knowing’.


Dreams and wizardry intertwine with erotic love in Morris’s fantasy tales of the 1890s that conflate Norse sagas with medieval England.


Gardenia is the author’s new fictional utopia set in 2211, his variation of Morris’s Nowhere.


A brief overview of Morris’s early stories in The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine and poems in The Defence of Guenevere suggest his concerns as an eco-socialist, with characters coerced by economic and class imperatives.


Boldly emphasising ‘the otherness of Beowulf’, Morris’s translation is an uncompromising ‘experiment in literary medievalism’, with a pronounced ‘archaizing’.


Morris’s approach to communal life in News from Nowhere is compared with the experimental communes of Robert Owen, Marge Piercey’s He, She, It, and Gene
Roddenberry’s *Deep Space 9*.


Whereas utopias deny multiculturalism in favour of uniformity and isolation, Morris’s *News from Nowhere* includes conflict and difference where everyone is not happy but happier than the Victorians.


Morris’s ‘The Defence of Guenevere’ is included in a discussion of pedagogical approaches.


A comparison of Hudson’s *A Crystal Age* (1882) and Morris’s *News from Nowhere* suggests that the influences of Victorian discourses on evolutionary and feminist thought helped to engage readers intellectually, emotionally, and politically.


The middle of Morris’s *News from Nowhere* is suspended between a functioning new society and an unpromising past; however, contemporary readers’ awareness of the theories of Marx and Darwin would have provided them with an opportunity to construct a middle narrative.


In comparison with Chaucer, whose work is full of interruptions, ‘the relationship between text and image in [Morris’s] work creates an interrupted reading pattern that is analogous with his sense of the fluidity of the boundary between past and present’.


In *Love is Enough*, Morris deals with the challenge of the mid-line caesura by practising a subtle alliterative verse-form and introducing at the end of one line the chief alliterative letter of the next pair of lines.

73. Pieri, Giuliana. ‘The Myth of Psyche in the Work of D’Annunzio and Burne-Jones.’ In *Text and Image in Modern European Culture*. Ed. Natasha Grigorian,
Gabriele D’Annunzio’s ‘Psiche giacente (Da Burne-Jones)’, a poem from his Poema Paradisiaco, was inspired by a Burne-Jones drawing for Morris’s scene of Cupid first finding Psyche from ‘The Story of Cupid and Psyche’, a tale from The Earthly Paradise.

In writing his review of the Roberts Brothers edition of News from Nowhere, the author of Looking Backward may have influenced his own 1897 sequel, Equality, a less urban, less centralised vision of utopia.

News from Nowhere is a Ruskinian Gothic utopia dramatising the holistic vision of art, play, pleasure, and work, but as a rebuttal to Bellamy’s technological utopia, it looks back to the fissure between More’s Utopia and Bacon’s New Atlantis and forward to Kim Stanley Robinson’s Mars trilogy of the 1990s.

News from Nowhere is a ‘medieval bridge to the future’, a vision of an organic culture that rejects reliance on technological development.

Morris distances his poetry and fiction from his own modern world by setting them within medieval or classical contexts and narrating them with the ‘voices of others’, always with the radical ‘renovation of art’ as his goal.

Examples from Morris’s The Life and Death of Jason and The Earthly Paradise show that Tolkien learned from his reading of Morris how to embed different types of poetry into the larger scheme of his legendarium.

79. Ullal, Kathleen. “‘And my deeds shall be remembered, and my name that once was naught’: Regin’s Role in Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs.” The Journal of William Morris Studies, 19 (Summer 2012): 63-73.
Representing Morris’s interest in memory and history, Regin illustrates the role of ‘other’, giving voice to the losers who have been displaced by the victors in
the ‘battle’ of history.


Dreams led Morris to the depths of the psyche, but *The Defence of Guenevere* is not a dreamy medieval escape but an avant-garde volume of ‘starkly dramatic realism’; *The Earthly Paradise* is a postmodern poem ‘self-conscious and reflexive’ in its concern for the ‘pastness of the past’; and *Sigurd the Volsung* is a collaborative sequence of legends and myths at the root of northern culture, ‘the barbarous beginnings of our race’.


Morris’s ‘The Love of Alcestis’ tale from *The Earthly Paradise* influenced Browning’s *Balaustion’s Adventure* (1871), with Browning echoing passages by Morris but resisting Morris’s socialist views.

**DECORATIVE ARTS**


Nineteenth-century Canadian architecture and craftspeople knew and shared Morris’s support for the ‘harmonious fusion of craft, architecture, and design’.


Recent Marxists suggest replacing Marx’s mole metaphor for the working class with the slithering movement of snakes, an appropriate context for understanding ‘change, growth, and contestation’ as the foundation of Morris’s design theory exemplified in his *African Marigold* fabric (1876) and the paradigms of evolutionist biology in Darwin’s study of earthworms (1881).


Adapting Ovid’s story of a king’s transformation, Morris’s *The Woodpecker* tapestry engages ‘issues of meditation and mutation … within the context of discourse on evolution’ by Darwin and Spencer concerning the ‘triumphant emergence of becoming from being’, of psychical from physical.

decorative art. Its chapters are devoted to the ideal of the Middle Ages, Gothic art as a living art, the unity of the arts and the function of the machine, the happy worker and the aims of popular art, nature and pattern design, and the relation of his theories applied to his designs. In German.


Catalogue of the November 2013-March 2014 exhibition at the Museum Villa Stuck in Munich includes lavish illustrations of the rooms, staircases, and furnishings for the home Morris intended to be a ‘whole environment’, a ‘total work of art, as a setting for a different way of life’.


As the home Morris considered his earthly paradise, Red House is well illustrated here with its architectural designs, decorative stairwells, fireplaces, furniture, and embroideries.


Reviewing Juan A. Gaitán’s curatorship of the ‘Material Information’ 2012 exhibition at Bergen, Norway, Bull argues that Gaitán misreads Morris and is out of date in not recognising changes in studio ideals since the 1990s.


Long before Morris and Ruskin, Charles Winston’s 1847 study of Ancient Glass Paintings advocated preserving the medieval fabric of historic buildings rather than trying to improve them by stylistic restoration.


Perry’s ‘Walthamstow Tapestry’, displayed in the renovated William Morris Gallery, suggests a brutish view of the common people that could not be more different from Morris, who saw the urban poor as brutalised but redeemable.


This multilingual source-book of designs by Morris draws heavily upon the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

93. Dynna, Christer, and Juan A. Gaitán. ‘Om et Varslet Museumssingrep: Kuratoren Utdyper [Revisiting Industrial Realities within a Museum Context].’

Juan A. Gaitán, curator of the ‘Material Information’ 2012 exhibition at Bergen, Norway, explains that little has changed in art since Morris’s Arts and Crafts Movement despite changes in the conditions of labour and production.


The diverse decorative projects undertaken by the British artist Robert Anning Bell (1863-1933) in Liverpool show the influence of the ideals promoted by Pre-Raphaelite painters and by Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement.


Philadelphia architect William Lightfoot Price’s furniture, produced between 1901-06, demonstrates ‘his commitment to the Arts and Crafts philosophy in general and to Morris’s idea of a banded workshop in particular’.


On 1 May 2013 Christie’s (London) sold a late nineteenth-century embroidered hanging by May Morris and an embroidered bedspread (circa 1900) made by Morris & Co.


A study of the influence of molecular thinking on our perceptions of vital matter includes a discussion of Morris’s lectures on the organic principle of the ornamental.


Registered designs for wallpapers and textiles held at the National Archives, Kew, include designs by Morris that provide a rich resource for researchers.


Wallpapers like *Jasmine* and *Vine* and commissions like the Green Dining Room exemplify how Morris pursued the ideals of Pre-Raphaelitism by combining fine art and decorative art, with nature and medieval art as his two sources for beauty and the medieval guild as his model for collaborative production.


Morris’s Red House and Henry David Thoreau’s Walden retreat in
Massachusetts were inspired by the wish to escape the modern city, and both had a huge effect on modernist architecture.

This instructional craft book includes ten new projects for quilts and home accessories, plus fifty-five individual applique designs in Morris’s style.

As a photographer, Lady Clementine Hawarden ‘prefigures Morris’s call to simplify and beautify her home’, aesthetically re-presenting daily domestic life as creative work.

In *News from Nowhere* and his lecture on ‘Textile Fabrics’, Morris warns against imitating Japanese craftsmanship because of its limited political agency.

Bemoaning the emphasis on technology and digital sketches prepared by today’s laptop-carrying architects, McNee champions craft and humanism over perfection, using Red House as an example.

This lavishly illustrated coffee-table book reproduces images of Morris’s *Pomona* and *Angeli Laudantes* tapestries, the Morris chair designed by Webb, ceramic tiles, and several designs for wallpaper and textiles.

Morris and Richard Wagner are the progenitors of design theory as *gesamtkunstwerk*, ‘the total work of art’, the two sharing identical premises concerning socialism, the decay of art as a social crisis, and Arts and Crafts as a life-giving force.

Morris’s and Ruskin’s arguments for the revival of folk crafts influenced early twentieth-century art production in Europe, Japan, and India.

The William Morris *Heroines Screen* in three embroidered panels was created by
Morris and his sister-in-law in 1860.


   Windows designed by Burne-Jones and made by Morris and Co. have been returned to Gordon Chapel in Fochabers, Moray, near Scotland’s Gordon Castle.

   Morris’s forte was as a designer of household furnishings, establishing ‘The Firm of fine art workmen’.

   Morris’s utopian vision was a return to his humble collective experiment with the founding in 1861 of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co., which in turn was a retroactive inspiration for Hermann Muthesius, Walter Gropius, and Nikolaus Pevsner.

   Instructions and illustrations are provided for sewing projects, including slippers and toys, using printed fabrics designed by Morris.

   As design director of MRA Architecture and Interior Design, Srivastava selects items from the Victoria and Albert Museum’s permanent collection that inspire her, including Morris’s *Wreath* wallpaper (1876).

   Wallpapers by Morris are included in a discussion of wallpapers by such designers as Sonia Delaunay, Charles Burchfield, Alexander Calder, and Adolf Loos.

   This illustrated introduction to Morris’s designs for wallpapers, textiles, and books includes 359 illustrations (310 in colour).

   Wilde did not later reject Morris: he ‘perceives, and exploits a radical potential in his aesthetic and socialist thought that Morris himself could not endorse...
without abandoning the Ruskinian ethics to which he was committed’.

The focus is on Clayton and Bell, on Lavers, Barraud and Westlake, and on Heaton, Butler and Bayne, with less attention to Morris and Co. because A.C. Sewter’s two-volume catalogue raisonné (1974-75) is so thorough.

BOOK DESIGN


An exhibition of original woodcuts for the failed fine-press edition of The Earthly Paradise presented alongside the mass-market editions suggests that Morris and Burne-Jones’s first project was ‘the instigator in the founding of the Kelmscott Press’ twenty years later.

Morris’s influence on cloth bindings went far beyond the two covers he designed for Love Is Enough (1873) and an edition of The Earthly Paradise (1891).

The recent sale at Bloomsbury auctions of private-press books, prints, and drawings collected by Laurence Hodson (founder of the Essex House Press with C.R. Ashbee in 1898) included many items from the Kelmscott Press.

A brilliant designer for not only the decorative arts, Morris produced books for his Kelmscott Press that ‘had a huge influence on the appearance of printed matter of every kind’.

Morris is briefly included as influential with his calligraphy and illustrations for illuminated manuscripts.

Miller’s My Book House is ‘structured according to the [architectural] book-design principles developed by William Morris’, with volume 5 of this American series following ‘all the primary principles of Morris’s book layout’ for the Kelmscott Press.


In reports of Morris’s 1893 talk to the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, Morris is quoted as predicting that books will be replaced in fifty years by ‘bottles with patent stoppers’, like the new wax cylinders for phonographs.


Two chapters are devoted to a comparison of the capitalist mass-printing productions and the craftwork of private presses and radical weeklies, with the examples of A Dream of John Ball and News from Nowhere (as they appeared in Commonweal and in their Kelmscott Press editions) and examples of verses from Chants for Socialists.


Morris influenced the work of the Swedish book designer Akke Kumlien (1884-1949).


J.W. Northend (1855-1933), founder of the Sheffield printing company J.W. Northend Ltd., was a devoted follower of Morris’s standards for printing design.


Morris’s calligraphy, illuminated manuscripts, and Kelmscott Press editions are experiments in combining ‘graphic and discursive meanings with rhetorical and social dimensions’.

POLITICS


Since Morris attacked the ugliness and degeneracy of English cities, subsequent
urban theorists over the years have studied the poor hygiene and living conditions, the dehumanizing architecture, the commercial culture of advertising, and the efforts at conservation.

The catalogue of an art installation featuring hand-printed wallpapers by Emily Davidson describes the purpose to ‘depict women’s labour struggles during Morris’s time in order to critique the absence of these struggles from his work’.

Morris’s translation of two medieval Flemish poems as ‘Mine and Thine’ and his *Commonweal* columns on ‘The Revolt of Ghent’ show his interest in the medieval culture of Flanders as a socialist model.

Morris saw the wasteful organisation of labour in society as an example of inequities in a capitalist society that could be addressed and rectified through socialism.

Matthew Slocombe, director for the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, explains why he prefers the term ‘repair’ over the destructive process of ‘restoration’, and refers to SPAB’s commitment to Morris’s ideals and its origins in his radical politics.

137. Holland, Owen. ‘William Morris’s Utopian Optics.’ *Victorian Network* [online], 5.1 (Summer 2013): 44-64.
Morris secularises Thomas Carlyle’s metaphor of a spiritual optics with a visual rhetoric in his lectures and *Commonweal* columns that is opposed to the ‘narrowly empiricist’ focus of ‘practical socialists’, and then in *News from Nowhere* he reconceptualises the means to change the future.

Local perspective is crucial in *News from Nowhere*, as Morris’s socialism arose from his disgust with capitalism violating his local environment, while the mixed demographics of Bloomsbury exemplified the ‘moderating position between capitalism and labour’ and the need to decentralise London from a socio-spatial
value system.


Among the nineteenth-century debates over the terms of individualism and collectivism, Morris was reductive in his rejection of anarchism as an individualist doctrine antithetical to socialism.


William Cobbett’s radical books of the 1820s and 1830s provided Morris with examples of an indigenous socialism in the rural cottage-craft economy of fourteenth-century England.


A summary of News from Nowhere concludes that Morris’s holistic approach to the ‘connectedness of work, art, social relations, space, and human happiness’ is the ‘essence of the sociological imagination’.


Morris was a leading revolutionary who referenced values from the past in his cultural protest against the modern, industrial, capitalist civilization.


With the alternative societies envisioned in News from Nowhere and A Dream of John Ball, with the Arts and Crafts business practices of Morris and Co., with his understanding of architectural heritage exemplified through SPAB, and with his commitment to revolution advocated in different socialist parties, Morris lived a life that remains a model for how we might change an industrial world in conflict with its natural environment. If Morris returned today we might expect him to pursue his anti-Parliament principles at the level of local communities.


Not seen. The title may be translated as The Marxism of William Morris: The Idea behind the Arts and Crafts Movement.

145. ----. ‘William Morris’s Socialism and Marxism: Thoughts Underlying Arts &
Crafts Movements.’ Political Economy Quarterly, 50.3 (October 2013): 85-87. [In Japanese.]
Not seen.

In his review of Bellamy’s Looking Backward, Morris argued against the suggestion that increased mechanisation would translate into reduced hours of labour.

Rather than believing, as Ruskin and Morris did, that craft in itself can be liberating, Marx believed that control over one’s time is fundamental to the emancipation of labour.

Morris’s 1890 weekly series on ‘The Development of Modern Society’, outlining the ideals of Germanic tribal culture, and his ‘Notes on News’, with columns attacking T.H. Huxley’s ‘On the Natural Inequality of Men’, added rich contexts for his serialised News from Nowhere.

Morris’s radical ideals were not pursued in the ways that Ebenezer Howard had originally intended for his Garden City at Letchworth.

Recognising the need for human regulation, Morris sought ‘the development of alternatives to the justice administered by the state’, providing in News from Nowhere examples of ‘popular authority’ or ‘the law of the folk’.

Georgiana Burne-Jones immersed herself in the politics of preserving the rural character of Rottingdean by campaigning for election to the Parish Council and writing an Open Letter to the Electors of Rottingdean about Parish Councils with Morris’s approval despite his rejection of reforms as palliatives.
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This is a substantial and impressive work by a leading Morris critic, confirming and expanding our knowledge of Morris's achievement in the first half of his life. The short introductory chapter ‘If I Can’ succinctly draws attention to three attitudes which underlie Morris’s ‘persistent desire to create an ethical framework for his artistic and literary endeavors’ (p. 2): the first is his early and unVictorian rejection of formal religion; the second is his awareness of the significant part played by strife in the world of political action and his sympathy with those who suffer as a result; and the third is his historicism, which makes him ‘the most consistently “historicist” of the major Victorian poets’ (p. 7). Boos develops this final point by an account of the work of Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), described as ‘the principal nineteenth-century theorist of empathetic historicism’ (p. 8). Dilthey is discussed at some length, not because Morris read him, but because of the closeness Boos sees in their ideas. No-one can doubt the depth of Morris’s preoccupation with history, but I am not sure that the
discussion of Dilthey expanded my understanding of Morris’s attitude. However, Boos’s preparedness to introduce a thinker not usually encountered in studies of Morris is evidence of her energetic pursuit of new material, which enlivens her narrative.

Subsequent chapters follow Morris’s career chronologically. ‘From Antecedents to “Oxford Brotherhood”’ starts with the family background, and ends by celebrating the importance to Morris of the fellowship in which he participated as an undergraduate at Oxford; this is familiar territory, but Boos brings out clearly the specific importance to Morris in particular of three very different men: Edward Burne-Jones, the artist; Charles Faulkner, the mathematician and administrator; and Cormell Price, who is said to have devoted his energies from the early 1860s to ‘reformist pedagogy’ (p. 65) as head of the United Services College. Boos concludes by emphasising that this Oxford Brotherhood was ‘a network of several highly gifted individuals, rather than two “geniuses” and some peripheral satellites’ (p. 67), and that Morris was deeply aware, throughout his life, of how much he owed to these friends.

In ‘Morris’s Earliest Poems: Preparation for The Defence of Guenevere’, Boos argues convincingly against the idea that Morris’s first volume ‘arose by spontaneous generation’ (p. 69) – he had already written a number of interesting poems. Boos has worked on some of Morris’s very early poems that Morris sent to his older sister Emma from Oxford, including the seventeen not known to Mackail, and so is in a position to give a full account of what happened in the early years. But whether these poems are best seen as preparatory to Morris’s first volume is not obvious. From the early poetry, we move on to the early non-fictional prose in “The Many Shadows of Amiens”: Morris’s Early Essays’. Before coming to the essays, Boos argues that we can see in them a pre-adumbration of the four ‘regulative principles’ that animated the outlook expounded in later writings: a Ruskinian belief in the importance of pleasure in labour; insistence on the need for simplicity in life; belief in the importance of craft and architecture as ‘repositories of memory and history’; and ‘the conviction that humans must live in respectful harmony with the transcendent beauty of nature’ (p. 99). It is not clear to me whether the perception of transcendent beauty is attributed to Morris, in view of the insistence on his rejection of religion. However, Boos goes on to draw attention to ‘the near rhapsodic quality’ of the accounts given to his mother of his 1855 journey to Northern France; she quotes what she calls ‘an epiphanic moment of near van-Gogh-like intensity’ (p. 109). Morris was the chief contributor to The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine in 1856, and two of his contributions took the form of essays on aesthetic topics: ‘Death the Avenger, Death the Friend’ was an appreciative response to two woodcuts by Alfred Rethel (1816-59), conveying his sense
of their ‘emotional intensity’ (p. 113), and the other, ‘Churches of North France: The Shadows of Amiens’, conveys an equally intense response to the great cathedral and ends with his ‘prolonged leave-taking’ (p. 123) and a moving valediction.

From the essays we move on to the early Prose Romances, eight of which Morris contributed to The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine, with Boos concentrating illuminatingly on what she identifies as their ‘Interlocking Dream Structures’. Five receive Boos’s attention, from ‘The Story of the Unknown Church’, through ‘A Dream’, ‘Gertha’s Lovers’, ‘Svend and His Brethren’, to the elaborate ‘The Hollow Land’. This last story is convincingly shown to have ‘the most attractive ending of these early tales, carefully prepared for through Florian’s prolonged tribulations and moral education [...]. As in the other prose tales, the hero’s outward and inner life has progressed through a series of temporally disconnected symbolic frames’ (p. 158).

Boos has skilfully demonstrated how this is managed by the young Morris. No mention is made of the one story with a nineteenth-century setting, ‘Frank’s Sealed Letter’. This is usually considered a failure and perhaps to have led Morris to recognise that his imagination was unsuited to fictional realism. In 1872 he tried again to write in the realist mode, in the work called by Penelope Fitzgerald The Novel on Blue Paper, but he gave up, and the work remained unpublished until 1982.

Following Morris’s own development, Boos now returns to poetry, with two chapters on The Defence of Guenevere, showing that the volume contains much work of equal sophistication to that shown in the Romances. The first chapter considers the sources on which Morris drew, especially Tennyson, Robert Browning, D.G. Rossetti, Edgar Allan Poe and “Owen Meredith” – the pseudonym of Robert Bulwer-Lytton, whose ‘Malorian Poems’ are compared to Morris’s ‘The Earl’s Return’. The presence of Owen Meredith in this group is surprising, but Boos – who has already written on the relationship of the two poets – presents a strong case. The second Guenevere chapter is concerned, appropriately, with the ‘Gender Polarities’ of the volume. Here Boos calls on the ideas of the twentieth-century Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre in his Critique of Everyday Life, first published in French in 1947, in particular to Lefebvre’s idea of the ‘moment’, a passionate mental state that shapes ‘specific forms for human aspiration’ (p. 199), and shows how many occurrences in the poems constitute ‘moments’ of this kind. She also links ‘The Defence’ with the later The Pilgrims of Hope, in which we encounter another trapped woman threatened with death. Boos’s overall view, which sounds very twenty-first century (though valid) is that ‘[e]arly and late, Morris came out fairly well in the spectrum of mid-Victorian literary debates about “the” nature and role of women’ (p. 229).

The final chapter is called ‘After The Defence: A More Authentic “Medievalism”’. After a thorough discussion of the early reception of Guenevere, which was generally
dismissive, Boos points put that Morris was not put off altogether from writing poetry, although he was busy too with work for the Firm as well as with a young family. Between 1858 and 1867 – the date of publication of his next major poem, *The Life and Death of Jason* – Morris wrote a number of poems, considered here in four groups, in which he experimented with drama, the sonnet, the short lyric and blank verse. In the first category Boos discusses ‘Scenes From the Fall of Troy’, which she calls ‘an eclectic and rather erudite compilation based on several antecedents’ but ‘nonetheless completely untainted by *The Defence*’s “obscurity”’ (p. 354) – a quality deplored by several critics. Boos thinks well of the poem, and offers several possible explanations of Morris’s not completing it. She then has a section entitled ‘Personal Sonnets and Lyrics’, dealing with the highly personal poems written at the time, often concerned with ‘loneliness or estrangement’ (p. 263). Next she points out that Morris, who had been considering writing a long poem to consist of a number of parts, started writing a Prologue as early 1859; this was to become ‘The Wanderers’ and Boos gives a full account of the sources on which its early versions drew. She then considers early drafts of the tales from *The Earthly Paradise*. Her conclusion is that the nine years between *Guenevere* and *Jason* was ‘a little-noticed period of poetic refinement and germination’ (p. 282) which enabled the poems of *The Earthly Paradise* to extend beyond the range of the earlier poetry into greater complexities, providing ‘new topics for exploration and new modes of approach’, leading towards *Sigurd the Volsung, The House of the Wolfings, A Dream of John Ball and The Pilgrims of Hope* – Boos has never accepted the view of some earlier critics that *The Defence of Guenevere* contains the most dramatic and powerful of Morris’s poetic work. An Appendix on ‘Malory’s Guinevere and Morris’s Guenevere’ considers the difficult question of the relation between Launcelot as King Arthur’s knight and as the lover of Guenevere, concluding that ‘Morris’s recapitulation of Malory’s studious ambiguity was […] deliberate’ (p. 292). This Appendix might perhaps have been attached to the chapter on *The Defence*.

This scholarly book then offers the reader a Bibliography in four sections, beginning with a most interesting list of works in English probably read by Morris before 1870, showing what an energetic reader he was; the other three sections are on ‘Biography and Background Material’, ‘Editions of the William Morris Archive’ (available online), ‘Criticism’, ‘Manuscripts’ and ‘Reviews’. We are then given an ‘Index of Morris’s Works Cited’, followed by the ‘General Index’ – I am not sure why these are separated. A surprising aspect of the book is that, although the cover shows Morris’s painting *La Belle Yseult*, which is also reproduced with other visual material, it – like several other visual images – seems to receive no discussion in the text; certainly it is absent from the indices. However, with as distinguished a critic as Boos, even those of us who think we know Morris’s early work well will find that there is a
great deal more to know and then to incorporate into an overall understanding of Morris’s achievement. She has offered a valuable and illuminating account of the period she specifies, and her writing can rise to eloquence, as when she describes Morris dying as ‘an ardent master-mason in the great cathedral of nature and secular humanism’ (p. 129).

Peter Faulkner


Phillippa Bennett’s analysis of Morris’s work is structured by two claims: that Morris considered the ability to wonder a fundamental need, ‘a primary and instinctive way of inhabiting the earth and of interacting with others’, and that his late prose romances (*The Story of the Glittering Plain, The Wood Beyond the World, Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair, The Well at the World’s End, The Water of the Wondrous Isles* and *The Sundering Flood*) were the ‘most compelling expression’ of this conviction (p. 3). Documenting the mixed but predominantly lukewarm reviews that Morris’s stories have generated, Bennett argues that their re-evaluation opens up new vistas onto his work. Read as ‘a radical response to nineteenth-century politics, culture and society’ (p. 10), these narratives illuminate Morris’s most pressing and abiding concerns – with the body, with landscape and environment, architecture and politics – and the critical power of Morris’s ideas, both then and now. For Bennett, the key to their reinstatement lies in the recognition that wonder is their ‘defining feature’ (p. 2). Accordingly, readers assumed to have neglected or ignored these tales are not presented with a précis of their content, for what is important in Bennett’s analysis is the concept that the tales collectively flesh out, rather than their literary or creative merit. This interweaving of story-telling and wonder is central to Bennett’s thesis and it frees her to counter critiques of the naïveté, simplicity, optimism, otherworldliness or abstruse language of the romances by arguing that these features reflected an intention that has been widely misunderstood. In the conclusion to her Introduction she writes:

[…] in his last romances, Morris makes his final and most evocative protest against the diminishment of wonder in human life. Indeed his protagonists’ receptivity to and pursuit of wonder constitutes the primary momentum of these stories, and it is a momentum which always brings both the protagonists and ourselves as readers more richly and actively into the world, rather than offering us a way out of it. It is thus through a renewed understanding and
appreciation of the last romances that we can see how the world might become a little less ‘un-Morris’.

Bennett affirms Morris’s intentions by setting a number of sympathetic interpretative accounts of his work alongside pertinent phrases in the stories and comments drawn from some of his letters and other published work. However, she does not then attempt to develop a concept of wonder by abstracting directly from his writing. The three-dimensional framework for the analysis, which distinguishes a wonderer from wonderful and wondering, is adapted from a discussion of Edmund Husserl (p. 6). Martin Heidegger, Josef Pieper, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Zygmunt Bauman and Ernst Bloch (pp. 78, 97, 143, 175) are some of the other philosophers Bennett uses to investigate Morris’s conception of wonder. This approach focuses attention on some important aspects of Morris’s work: his interest in the ordinary or everyday; the role he assigned to artistic practice as a form of communication; the value he attached to imagination as a force for creative transformation; his utopianism. At the same time, it tends to encourage a slippage between the re-interpretation or re-evaluation of the romances as stories of wonder and the examination of wonder as a vital theme of Morris’s work. The claim that Bennett wants to make about the special value of the romances as exemplary expressions of Morris’s idea is weakened by the possibility that the analysis of wonder might just as well have been achieved by applying these philosophical approaches to his poetry, his journalism or his essays. Indeed, the book shows how the multiple meanings of wonder are embedded across the range of Morris’s work, spanning his pre-socialist days to his retirement from the Socialist League. It is noticeable that the parameters for the discussion of some of the book’s major themes are established without reference to the prose romances at all: pointing to a shared language of wonder that links Morris to Rachel Carson and the defence of the wild, Bennett draws on observations about *News from Nowhere* and a rich discussion of Morris’s impressions of Iceland to frame the second chapter, on the topography of wonder (pp. 57-58).

In the first chapter Bennett demonstrates the full value of the conceptual analysis and her flair for revealing the sensuality and imagery of Morris’s writing. This chapter discusses Morris’s aesthetics and politics to explore ideas of the body, well-being, human animality and sexuality. It captures both the deep distress underpinning his critique of capitalism and his confidence in socialism’s remedial power. The insights that wonder brings to the interpretation of Morris’s work are also demonstrated by Bennett’s treatment of the continuities of his thought. This argument is advanced at different points within each of the chapters and it also runs throughout the book.
Concerned to explode ‘cliché’d myths that Morris was ‘a nostalgic medievalist’ who hankered for the return of ‘benign …] feudalism’ (pp. 80, 91), Bennett is nevertheless impelled to correct Bernard Shaw’s and E.P. Thompson’s well-known appraisals of the romances as examples of his recidivist Pre-Raphaelite tendencies (p. 138). Morris had a sophisticated idea of social dynamics, to borrow Bax’s language, but this did not inhibit him from celebrating the Gothic and the ‘nobility’ of the communal ways of life he associated with it (pp. 104, 129). Bennett’s discussion of the Kelmscott Press and her inclusion of illustrations taken from the romances emphasise the potency of this emotional connection to the past and the political inspiration Morris drew from it. The influence of Wordsworth and Coleridge that she detects in Morris’s work similarly closes the gap between the Romantics and Late Romantics that critics of Pre-Raphaelitism typically invoke when sandwiching Morris’s revolutionary politics between the phases of his apparently languid writings (pp. 74-78).

How far wonder helps Bennett develop these arguments is difficult to judge because the concept appears so elastic. The ‘human capacity for wonder’ emerges as an ‘essential attribute in the instigation of social as well as personal change’ (p. 141). Equally, Morris used wonder to expose the ‘follies and the horrors’ of capitalism and it was Morris’s ‘own willingness to wonder that first led him to join the Socialist movement’ (p. 143). Perhaps inevitably, the flexibility of the concept tends to undermine its explanatory value. Moreover, the stretching sometimes suggests tighter or more straightforward affinities between Morris and his contemporaries than more differentiated analysis sustains. Bennett locates Morris firmly in Marxist, socialist traditions but wonder also points to his convergence with Georges Sorel – tricky to locate within Marxism – and the anarchist Peter Kropotkin (pp. 84, 159, 165). While Bennett’s acknowledgement of the diverse influences active on Morris is a real strength of her analysis, wonder does not help her develop the point. Rather than capturing the complexity of Morris’s communism, wonder tends to homogenise these divergent currents. Thus it supports a generalised theory of revolution which Kropotkin, Sorel, Marx, Engels and H.M. Hyndman seemingly shared (pp. 163-65).

While wonder triggers a number of valuable insights it also limits Bennett’s investigations. She seems reluctant to push the analysis of sexuality to scrutinise Morris’s more conventional castings of women and she is inclined to adopt his focus on the manly when discussing art production (p. 97). Wonder reinforces the revolutionary nature of Morris’s socialism but also softens the edges of the critique. Bennett’s account abounds with references to Morris’s anti-capitalism, but wonder is less well-suited to the examination of exploitation, repression or political corruption than it is to the discussion of their transcendence. In the architecture of wonder, vision is a major theme. Wonder shows that nineteenth-century capitalism had ‘failed to
offer a vision of life inclusive and generous enough to produce its own vital and relevant architecture’ (p. 131) – as if Morris might have contemplated a reformed version that included such a vision. This is not what Bennett means, but the language of wonder inclines in this direction. Wonder covers Morris’s disappointments and despair, but not his expressions of anger, frustration and disgust.

It’s difficult to imagine how the application of any single concept can fully illuminate Morris’s work, given its breadth and depth. Nevertheless, by drawing our attention to wonder, Bennett undoubtedly brings out the magical qualities of Morris’s socialism. Whether or not wonder defines Morris’s romances or provides the best lens to view his work in the round, her enthusiasm for these stories is infectious and fans of these last works will delight in her reminders of the exploits of Birdalone, Ralph, Ursula, Hallblithe and the rest. The case she makes for their restoration to a central place in Morris scholarship is compelling and her pioneering thematic discussion demonstrates the real potential for their continued analysis.

Ruth Kinna

Simon Dentith, Nineteenth-Century British Literature Then and Now: Reading with Hindsight (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 182 pp., £95.00 hbk, ISBN 9781472418852.

It was with great sadness that I learnt of the death of Simon Dentith in November 2014. He was a friend and champion of both research and teaching in English and Victorian Studies. I knew him both from the British Association of Victorian Studies, of which he was President from 2006 to 2009, and the now-lost English Subject Centre (ESC). Indeed, one of my distinct memories of Simon is his presence at an event organised by the ESC on ‘Teaching the Victorian Novel’ and I remember him shaking his leonine head of hair and worrying at the all-too-easy elision that (mostly young, mostly female) students would make between themselves and (say) Jane Eyre or Dorothea Brooke. This slippage from then to now, and the question of how we read the Victorians from a twenty-first-century perspective, is one of the animating principles of this, his final book. In the Preface Dentith states his two main concerns: the first is how do we read nineteenth-century texts when ‘a whole social and political history [has] unrolled since they were written’ (p. vii)? The second issue, which is related, is that the inevitable unrolling of history means we know a great deal (more) now that the Victorians could not comprehend themselves. Dentith questions whether reading with hindsight brings a threat to ‘the authenticity […] of the knowledge or feelings that were available to the original actors’ (p. viii).

Chapter One sets out the book’s theoretical stall, suggesting that the term ‘Victorian’ itself is one constructed through hindsight. Dentith is interested in how we
have continually to negotiate the ‘suggestive play of continuity and difference’ (p. 7) between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries. There is a danger that reading with hindsight contains a certain arrogance in relation to how we read the Victorians, as exemplified by Lytton Strachey: we know more and we know better. Dentith uses Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* (1960) and Ricoeur’s *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004) as his touchstones in wanting to hold on to ‘the otherness of the historical horizon’ (p. 13) rather than have this otherness assimilated into our more contemporary preoccupations with the Victorians that focus on sexuality, class and feminism. He also notes his own interest in the relations between nineteenth-century liberalism and neoliberalism, as well as late Victorian utopianism and our own situation of ecological crisis. If there is a phrase that sums up Dentith’s main concern in this work it is found at the end of Chapter One when he says he desires ‘to historicise reception history’ (p. 18), seeking to ground reception history in the social history which underpins it.

Chapter Two focuses on the gap between the nineteenth century and now, as memoirs such as Alisdair Gray’s *A Book of Prefaces* (2000) and John Lucas’s *The Good That We Do* (2001) will become impossible in the future as the connection back to the Victorians through lived memory is lost. Pretty much none of us can now have that active memorial relationship to the nineteenth century. Dentith suggests that the Victorian narrative of (and belief in) progress, not least through educational betterment, has also been undermined and challenged in recent years. Although many facets of the man-made cityscapes of Victorian Britain are now lost to us, Dentith also cites natural landscapes that are vanished, such as Hardy’s Egdon Heath.

Chapter Three, on *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), focuses on the issue that appeared to be worrying Simon at the English Subject Centre event cited above. He notes that:

>a version of liberal feminism has, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, established itself as a kind of common sense. The central narrative of this [involves] the heroine emerg[ing] from a repressive background to establish or realise her own successful identity […].

(p. 48)

It strikes me that this is one of the reasons why so many Victorian fictions which contain some version or other of this narrative retain such appeal today. It is almost *de rigeur* for filmic and televisual adaptations of Victorian texts now to tell this story too. But the all-too-easy elision bothers Dentith and he reminds us that both Eliot’s novel and *Jane Eyre* also involve renunciation for their female characters. This is probably one of the greatest dangers that the book highlights: namely, the loss of otherness associated with Victorian women’s struggles at a particular moment in time.
for greater rights, freedom and autonomous subjectivity. From a feminist perspective, the fact that it is still all too easy to identify strongly with Maggie Tulliver as a young woman today is surely an indictment of inequalities that remain in our contemporary culture.

If I gloss over Chapters Four and Five – on Dickens’s *David Copperfield* (1850) and Trollope’s *Phineas Finn* (1869) and *Phineas Redux* (1874) – it is only to spend more time on Chapters Six and Seven, which will be of particular interest to readers of this journal in their focus on Ruskin and Morris. Dentith heads this section of the book by noting how both men ‘suggest equally complex relations to current concerns, and […] challenge too easy an assimilation to our present preoccupations’ (p. 101). In Chapter Six, ‘“The things that lead to life”: Ruskin and use-value’, Dentith focuses on Ruskin’s major assault on the political economy of his day, *Unto This Last* (1860), and in particular considers the question of value. Ruskin’s awareness that capitalism tends ‘to undermine affective social relationships and substitute[s] purely economic relations for them’ (p. 103) has been picked up recently by Richard Bronk in *The Romantic Economist* (2009), although Dentith is critical of Ruskin ultimately being reductively ‘recruited for management advice’ (p. 204). This chapter is long and sustained, taking in both John Stuart Mill and Marx in the discussion of Ruskin’s focus on intrinsic value outside of economic exchange, and it ultimately ends up with a consideration of how Ruskin’s writings have been appropriated for and by contemporary environmental concerns (for example, in ‘The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century’).

Chapter Seven, ‘Utopia under the sign of hindsight’, focuses its wide-ranging consideration of Morris through, at its core, readings of *News from Nowhere* (*NfN*). Dentith is aware that utopian writing can be especially ‘vulnerable to the knowingness provided by the backward glance’ (p. 123), although he also reminds us that in reading Morris with hindsight we are also reading Morris’s own ‘multiple acts of hindsight’ (p. 128) as he reinterprets and selectively uses a version of the medieval. The chapter is impressive in its awareness of how projections through time permeate Morris’s intention in *NfN*: after all, the original context of the work was to inspire struggling members of the Socialist League to look up from the immediate struggle and ‘be inspired by the view at the far horizon’ (p. 130). But the future that *NfN* imagines is also inherently bound up with the actions of the present, in that the novel does not allow Guest ultimately to remain in an achieved, more appealing future.

Dentith discusses *NfN*’s romantic critique of capitalism, pitching an alienated labour associated with industrialisation against a ‘nature’ which can facilitate ‘human nature in all its affective fullness’ and a ‘reconfigured imagination of the rural’ (p. 126). He discusses two recent assessments of the utopian tradition – Susan Buck-
Morss’s *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* (2000) and David Harvey’s *Spaces of Hope* (2000), noting how neither have anything to say about Morris because Morris’s seeming rejection of the urban and modernity presents problems for the lived experience of the twentieth century. This is an issue that has also recently occupied Tony Pinkney. Dentith suggests that both Ruskin and Morris warn against ‘a world finally exhausted by globalisation – by which is meant the extension of capitalist social relations to every last corner’ (p. 128), and the invocation of nature as a counterbalance to the urban appearing (pace Fredric Jameson) as a form of mere nostalgia. The chapter also considers *NjVs* (and Morris’s) commitment to craft production and also inevitably the question of *NjVs* (at least partially) problematic engagement with the position of women. Dentith notes, rightly, that ‘still more than in the late nineteenth century, we live in a world of divided labour, and Morris’s capacity to speak to that condition is a voice we can still hear’ (p. 140), before turning once again to the question of ecological concerns. Here he is aware of the backlash against presentist readings of Morris that wish to co-opt him to the Green movement, such as Sara Wills’s *The Greening of William Morris* (2005). On Wills’s work Dentith writes ‘this is not a mere debunking of contemporary scholarship, but rather an attempt to return to the original arguments and contexts of Morris’s works, to recognise their difference from the eco-centred arguments of the present, and nevertheless to put them to work in the here and now’ (p. 142). This latter quotation could be taken as summary of Dentith’s case here for a responsible, historically aware criticism of nineteenth-century texts.

The book concludes with a chapter titled ‘Writing with Hindsight: The Victorian Novel in Succeeding Centuries’, focusing on novels of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that are set in the nineteenth century. The novel has always been Dentith’s focus throughout his varied writings and he comments on how the novel’s flexibility of form ‘permits the action of hindsight to be realised or kept at bay by a wide variety of formal means, which turn especially on the multiple ways in which the distance between past and present is realised in the narration’ (p. 145). Lurking over this chapter (and indeed perhaps the whole book), though only specifically addressed right at its end, is the question of the neo-Victorian. I say this with interest, having just created and taught an MA module on ‘Neo-Victorianism: Writing the Victorians in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries’. I can confirm that there is an entire substantial sub-genre of Victorian Studies devoted to the critical issues raised by and in recent novels that look back to the nineteenth century. It is notable that Dentith seems keen to avoid the term ‘neo-Victorian’ for much of his book, even though his concerns are very relevant to neo-Victorian studies. He briefly discusses works such as John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), A.S. Byatt’s *Possession* (1990) and
Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) – all of which have become veritable ‘classics’ of neo-Victorianism – alongside less-well-known works such as J.G. Farrell’s *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973). Had it existed, Dentith would no doubt have included discussion of Tony Pinkney’s long-awaited sequel to *News from Nowhere* (complete with modernity).

All in all this is a thoughtful and wide-ranging contribution to our continuing critical and creative questions into the twenty-first century as to how we read, write and engage with the Victorians. I am only sorry we won’t be able to read more of Simon’s thoughts on the Victorians, including Morris, in the future.

**Rosie Miles**


The central message of this book – for Morrisians at least – is that the political ideas of the late-nineteenth-century ‘socialist revival’ in Britain, in which ‘our dear Morris’ was of course a principal player, are based on a misconception regarding the nature of biological evolution, and that these ideas are therefore invalid, if not just scientifically, then also in general.

The ‘misconception’ is that of the French naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, who in his *Philosophie Zoologique* (1809) put forward the idea that organisms evolve via ‘the inheritance of acquired characteristics’; that morphological changes induced in organisms by life experience (the giraffe’s long neck, the blacksmith’s heavy musculature) are passed on to their descendants, leading eventually to divergence of forms and thus to speciation. This theory is now discredited – how would such changes be transmitted to the gene pool? – but during the early nineteenth century, it not only influenced many scientists, including Darwin, but also (apparently) political radicals, such as William Godwin and Herbert Spencer, and those of the French Revolution, many of whom seized upon it as a scientific basis for believing that the creation of a new and more just society would lead not just to changes in ‘human nature’, but also in the (physical) ‘nature of humans’. These ideas were then passed down the radical heritage to the revolutionaries of late-nineteenth-century London, so that both Morris’s strategy of ‘making socialists’, and Kropotkin’s theory of evolution as ‘mutual aid’, are characterised as ‘Lamarckian’, i.e. lacking scientific basis, and therefore invalid.

I must confess that I read this story with astonishment! No-one, be they socialist, communist, Trotskyist, anarchist, or any combination of those labels to whom I have
spoken about such matters over the past fifty years, has ever indicated to me that they believed that establishment of a socialist society would lead to changes in the human genome. Changes in ‘human nature’, yes – what Morris described as ‘moral change’ – but in the genetic make-up of human beings? Surely not! Agreed Morris describes the people of Nowhere as especially large, healthy and handsome, but these traits are surely not genetic, but the results of cleaner air, cleaner water and improved diet? Hence the reason my sons are taller than me.

And yet, certain passages in *News from Nowhere*, primarily Old Hammond’s contention (Chapter Ten) that ‘making socialists’ will ‘take the sting out of heredity’ might indeed be read as if based on Lamarckism. And while we may think that Morris’s descriptions of working conditions under Victorian capitalism as inducing ‘real infirmity […] making degradation of both mind and body’ refer only to the effects of environmental factors, he also writes of the middle class being ‘hereditarily afflicted [sic] with idleness’ (Chapter Six). Surely what Morris means here is that children brought up in an atmosphere of idleness would be prone to it themselves. Or did he really mean that such factors induced hereditable traits? The author certainly argues that case, but elsewhere writes of Darwin being hooked on his own metaphors (acquired from Malthus and from Spencer) of ‘struggle’ and ‘survival’ (pp. 229-30). So whereas Darwin is given the benefit of the doubt where metaphor is concerned, Morris is not.

The case against Kropotkin appears stronger, in that he sought to repudiate the competitive model of evolution advanced by Darwin in *On the Origin of Species* (1859), and, using a great deal of scientific data, including his own, argued that cooperation – ‘Mutual Aid’ – was a more significant factor in evolution than competition, and that the most successful species are those which cooperate in groups and not those which live as individuals. As for human evolution, Darwin, brought up a Whig, and instinctively a liberal, sought, in *The Descent of Man* (1874), to develop a more collaborative model for our own species, which he based, however (in line with Victorian *mores*), on the family, whereas Kropotkin possessed a wealth of anthropological data which showed that it was the group (the foraging ‘Band’) within which early humans cooperated and that in such societies the bourgeois nuclear family did not (and does not) exist.

The real villain of this piece, however, is not Lamarck, or Spencer, or even Thomas Henry Huxley (‘Darwin’s Bulldog’), the two last of whom are allocated lengthy accounts describing their own political use of evolutionary ideas, but, as just indicated, that old pessimist the Rev. Thomas Malthus and his Iron Law of Population, as propounded in *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), from whom, of course, Darwin did indeed obtain the idea of ‘the struggle for existence’. And it
seems that in nineteenth-century England (Britain?), whether people accepted the notion of Malthusian struggle or not strongly influenced their politics, with liberals emphasising the ‘naturalness’ of competition and the free market and ‘anti-Malthusian’ socialists stressing the evolutionary heritage of cooperation. This schism was expressed in late-nineteenth-century England via the anti-Parliamentary, ‘root up’ ideas of revolutionaries, such as Kropotkin and Morris, vis à vis those of the Fabians, who advocated ‘top down’ gradual reform via ‘parliamentary socialism’. (In fact it surely still exists today, in the form of a Malthusian, free-market New Labour as against the anti-Malthusian Corbynistas). One Fabian who most strongly opposed Morris was H.G. Wells, several of whose dystopias were apparently attempts to refute News from Nowhere.

All in all, this is a very interesting, if rather lengthy, book. It begins not with the nineteenth century, but the modern era, and not with a discussion of Malthus, Darwin et al., but of the twentieth-century argument between ‘selfish-gene’ Neo-Darwinists, such as Richard Dawkins and John Maynard-Smith, and V.C. Wynne-Edwards and his idea of ‘group selection’, which would not be too far from Kropotkin. At the end, this argument is revisited and brought up to date, although not quite, as I will explain below. Sadly, although erudite, the book is also rather clumsily edited, containing numerous errors, some of which (principle/principal, phosphorous [i.e. PO₄⁻²] not phosphorus) are no doubt down to Microsoft, but others (Oswald Moseley [sic], Fors Calvigera [sic], ‘gone [sic] extinct’, ‘different to’, ‘unique enough’, and H.G. Wells taking the ‘elevator’ to his classroom in the Normal School) surely to carelessness. Was Kropotkin imprisoned at Clairvaux, or Clairveaux? And was the originator of ‘emergent evolution’ Conway or Conwy Lloyd Morgan?

Less pardonably, both early humans and modern forager (‘hunter-gatherer’) peoples are referred to on at least nine occasions as ‘primitive’, and at least once as ‘savage’, words which Survival International have spent many years trying to get us not to use. There is also confusion between ‘morals’ (personal standards) and ‘morality’ (the standards of society, which is what is usually meant). Last, but by no means least, and not including quotes, the species Homo sapiens is referred to throughout this book (more than three hundred times, in fact) as ‘man’, ‘mankind’, ‘he’, ‘him’ and/or ‘his’, which is, I am afraid, in the twenty-first century, unacceptable.

To end where we began, did Morris base his political ideas on a discredited scientific theory, and does that mean that they, and socialism, are scientifically untenable? All I have space to say here is that in order to answer this question, other factors beyond those included in the author’s discussion surely need to be taken into account. For example, as explained some years ago by Fritjof Capra in The Web of Life: A New Synthesis of Mind and Matter (1996), many evolutionary biologists have long
recognised that Darwinian natural selection is too slow to account for those spectacular bursts of evolution which appear to punctuate the fossil record (e.g. in the wake of the mass extinction at the end of the Cretaceous, during which the dinosaurs are said to have perished). Those who study the ‘emergent’ properties of living systems are satisfied that evolution does not only take place via Darwinian natural selection, but also by direct exchange of DNA (between bacteria), and by symbiosis (i.e. it takes place at community level, not just species: hence the proliferation of organisms otherwise unknown to science preserved in the Burgess Shale so beloved of Stephen Jay Gould and the bursts of evolution following not only the Cretaceous mass extinction, but also those at the end of the Ordovician, Devonian, Permian and Triassic). Life may therefore not have evolved solely by competition, but, as Lynn Margulis put it, by ‘networking’, which again is surely what Kropotkin meant by ‘mutual aid’.

More recently, cell biologists have studied the evolutionary effects of epigenetic factors – that is, factors carried by cells from one generation to another, but located not in the genetic material making up the nucleus, but in the main body of the cell. These include enzymes whose role is to suppress, or turn on, particular (combinations of) genes, leading to morphological changes in offspring not necessarily shared by their parents. The action of epigenetic factors may therefore offer one explanation of the way in which evolutionary changes may indeed sometimes take place at faster rates than predicted by Darwinian mechanisms, which involve genetic inheritance, a much slower process.

Even more seductive is the possibility that some biochemical changes ‘switched on’ by epigenetic factors in the cells of one generation may actually be expressed in their immediate descendants (e.g. in the children and grandchildren of those women who were pregnant during the ‘Dutch Hunger’ of the winter of 1944-45, some of whom, depending on which trimester of their mothers’ pregnancy coincided with the ‘Hunger’, may in fact be smaller or larger than average, and less prone, or more so, to obesity and Type 1 diabetes). Such differences may indeed – astoundingly – be characteristics acquired as a result of their parents’ and grandparents’ life experience, and in that sense may indeed be truly ‘Lamarckian’, as Nessa Carey explains in The Epigenetics Revolution: How Modern Biology is Rewriting Our Understanding of Genetics, Disease and Inheritance (2012).

However, the real point here is that, as in the ‘William Morris poisoned his customers with arsenic’ story, the argument itself is based on a misconception, which is that a species which has invented language and culture still needs to depend on genetics for transmission of evolutionary traits. Whereas it is of course the case that since at least 50,000, maybe 100,000 years ago, our species has indeed continued to
evolve genetically, but has relied overwhelmingly on information to transmit its (cultural) legacy, not genes. Any attempt to invalidate Kropotkin’s thinking, or Morris’s, on Darwinian grounds, seems therefore to me to be entirely beside the point.

Patrick O’Sullivan


Giles Waterfield’s excellent book, *The People’s Galleries: Art Museums and Exhibitions in Britain 1800-1914*, looks at a new type of art museum that arose during the second half of the nineteenth century: museums that would appeal to a popular audience. Inspired by a combination of civic pride, enthusiasm for education and a desire to improve standards of design among manufacturers and artisans, these galleries arose in London and in the great industrial cities of Britain. A permanent collection was not the main purpose of these new museums: many housed temporary exhibitions by local artists. Commendably, this new type of art museum was free and stayed open until late in the evening, enabling working people to enjoy the delights within their doors.

The author is clearly an expert on the history of museums in Great Britain. An independent curator and writer, Giles Waterfield is an Associate Lecturer at the Courtauld Institute of Art as well as the director of Royal Collection Studies. He was Director of Dulwich College Picture Gallery until 1996, when he left to concentrate on writing novels and researching and teaching on the history of museums. In 1991 he published *Palaces of Art: Art Galleries in Britain 1790-1990* and in 1998 organised an important exhibition, *Art Treasures of England: The Regional Collections* at the Royal Academy. It was this exhibition that brought the attention of the government to the plight of regional museums and led, for the first time, to them being assisted by a national system of grant funding.

*The People’s Galleries* is a coffee-table sized book, well-illustrated and methodically divided into three sections. The first section, ‘Britain and the Visual Arts’, focuses on the predecessors of Victorian museums and the cultural and social context in which art museums developed in Britain. The second section, ‘Creating the Art Museum in Victorian Britain’, explores the establishment of the new type of museum that arose during the second half of the nineteenth century: their patrons and publics, the art they collected and its display, the role of temporary exhibitions and educational programmes and the buildings that housed these great institutions. The third section of the book is ‘The Aftermath’ in which Waterfield suggests that these art museums represented a bold experiment which passed with changing social attitudes, briefly
examines their later history and argues that after their short-term victories their success was partial and fleeting.

The title of the book is splendid: *The People’s Galleries* conjures up Morris’s heartfelt cry: ‘I do not want art for a few any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few’. I knew very little about the history of museums in Great Britain before opening the pages of this enthralling book. I wrongly assumed that public museums, being such a wonderful idea, must always have existed. Wrong. In 1800 Britain possessed just one public museum: the British Museum. Thankfully, by 1900 there were hundreds of museums across the country. *The People’s Galleries* pays particular attention to the development of this new type of museum in the regions, and the six civic galleries that were generally regarded as notably important: Birmingham, Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester and Nottingham. It is pleasing that the author looks beyond the nation’s capital to the less well-studied smaller regional museums.

It is always gratifying to read a book where the author cares passionately about the subject matter. Wakefield clearly does, no more so than in the weighty middle section of the book. Many of these new museums were paid for through bequests by philanthropic, newly-rich liberal businessmen. Wakefield writes that education was a driving force behind the Victorian provisional museum and art gallery. They offered practical, artistic, intellectual and moral education through a variety of forms, with the public lecture and school museum visit being the only forms that flourish up to the present day. William Morris is briefly mentioned in this chapter on education in the Victorian gallery in reference to his early support for The Ancoats Museum in Manchester. Inspired by John Ruskin, the museum was founded by Thomas Horsfall (1844-1932), the son of a wealthy Manchester-based cotton manufacturer. His aim was to create an art museum that would alleviate the miserable dullness and emptiness of the life lived by a very large proportion of the inhabitants of Manchester. An innovative feature was the Mother’s Room, intended for small children and their mothers. At first Morris believed this little museum could help break down the divisions between classes but he later became disillusioned, coming to regard it as manipulative and patronising.

Wakefield notes that women were, for the most part, excluded from positions of power in these new museums as was the case in national museums. Even after the Married Women’s Property Act of 1882, giving married women greater control of their own property, there were relatively few significant women donors and collectors. The essential problem was that, in comparison to men, women seldom had access to the large sums of money required for active patronage. Lady Charlotte Guest (better known in museum circles as Charlotte Schreiber), who ran her husband’s ironworks in Wales, was a remarkable exception, donating a notable collection of ceramics to
the South Kensington Museum. There was also a limited representation of women artists in the collections and, where they were represented, it was usually by works of a domestic nature or untroubling landscapes. Again, regrettably, very few women employees are recorded in museums until early in the twentieth century other than in the traditional subsidiary roles of typists and housemaids. We learn that this limited inclusion extended to the visitor: it was acceptable for a middle- or upper-class woman to be seen in a museum, under the ‘protection’ of a man or servant, even though such places might bring the visitor into circulation with ‘undesirables’. I would like to have known more about the visitor participation of working-class women.

We learn that visitor numbers to the exhibitions at the newly opened museums was staggering. In 1888, over a million people visited the Birmingham City Art Gallery – this was more than the whole population of the city, and the annual figures remained at well over half a million until 1900. In 1907, 800,000 visitors were recorded in Bradford with regular attendance of over 4,000 on Sundays, at a time when the city’s population was 280,000. Why were these new art galleries so popular? Wakefield believes that the Victorian passion for exhibitions, fired by the Great Exhibition of 1851, played a part, as did the ease and popularity of travelling by railway and the growing prosperity of many working people. There was a belief, shaped by city authorities in many of the industrial towns, that art and culture should be available to the working class. There is also the practical consideration that these galleries had far fewer competing factors in the mid-nineteenth century than in the twenty-first: there was no Facebook, no video games, no televised football matches, no on-line shopping or giant retail shopping parks, no cinema and no reality television. The galleries offered entertainment, a place to learn about beauty and an escape from the working world. The phenomenon of wild popularity lasted until around 1900, when visitor numbers started to recede: people had started to find other avenues of entertainment – by 1917 there were 4,500 cinema picture palaces across the country as well as more well-mannered music halls than in the past now offering clean, family entertainment. The regional galleries had also shifted in the nature of their exhibitions, turning away from popular entertainment to more avant-garde art. In 1910, the Brighton Art Gallery held an innovative exhibition, Modern French Artists, featuring 120 artists, many of them unknown in Britain, including Matisse, Vlaminck and Rouault.

The People’s Galleries is a fascinating, inspiring, well-researched and well-illustrated book made even more enjoyable by the passionate enthusiasm of its author. Art for All: yes please.

Fiona Rose

In the early Victorian period the village of Chelsea was a left-over part of London, with a misty zone of mud along the riverside. In 1874 the Chelsea Embankment was opened, and a large area became available for gardens and amenities. The muddy side-lanes were turned into new streets; the one which linked the Royal Hospital Road to the Embankment was called Tite Street, after a well-known MP who had helped the borough to remodel the new district. Plots of land became available along the street, and the first person to rush forward and arrange to build a house was James McNeill Whistler. Whistler needed a studio-house and chose E.W. Godwin to be his architect.

In its original design the White House was a functional, almost ‘modern’, building with a large studio upstairs; the enormous green roof with its pronounced slope did not please the Metropolitan Board of Works. Its clean lines and lack of ornament were considered to be ‘ugly and unsightly’ (p. 36) and the architect was persuaded to include stone surrounds to the door and some sculpture. The interior of the house was designed as a unit, with yellow bricks round the fireplace, and the furniture was upholstered in pure yellow velvet. Godwin explained that ‘the architect’s work should not be confined to the mere bricks and mortar of a house. The decorator, the upholsterer, and the cabinet maker should be as much subject to the architect as the joiner, the plumber or the glazier’ (p. 38). This was in the tradition of Pugin. But Whistler was what we would call a minimalist; a visitor noted that ‘furniture was limited to the barest necessities and frequently, too few of those’ (p. 38). There were never enough chairs for his famous Sunday breakfasts.

There was a sad ending to all this. Cox, always keen to tell a story, embarks on a description of the quarrel between Ruskin and Whistler. Sides were taken and we are told that ‘William Rossetti suggested that the ageing critic had suffered from a mental collapse’ (p. 56). The trial was a farce, and Whistler emerged victorious, but his damages were limited to one farthing. At first I felt that we were leaving the subject of Tite Street, but when Whistler realised that he had to pay the legal costs, in addition to the outstanding bills on his new house, he became desperate. The bailiffs lived in the house and Whistler employed them to wait at table. On the 9 May 1879 he was declared bankrupt. His life fell apart and all his possessions, including the White House, were sold. Finally he departed for Venice.

The next sections, which deal with the many different artists who flocked to colonise the street, are the most interesting part of the book. Whistler eventually
returned and took as his pupils Walter Sickert and Mortimer Menpes; both dressed like Whistler and imitated his style of painting, following him round Chelsea ‘like faithful puppies’ (p. 85). Of course, Sickert broke away at a later time, but Menpes, as the picture on p. 84, *A Little Shop in Chelsea*, demonstrates, learned how to use empty space, with the foggy sweetshop tucked away in the top half of his canvas. It is a credit to Cox that his picture research has been so extensive that even a minor artist like this is brought to life with both a photograph and a colour illustration of the work being displayed. Wilde had lived in Tite Street as a lodger from 1879 and on his marriage in 1884 he took over a terraced house on the west side of the street. He had been lecturing on the ‘House Beautiful’ in America and Whistler pointed out that he now had the opportunity ‘to show us one’ (p. 130).

Oscar was now ‘subdued, meditative, married’ (p. 132). From 1887 he was editor of *The Woman’s World* and went to his office in Fleet Street. His two sons were born in the house. Constance kept a visitors’ book, which was signed by William Morris. Cox is not really interested in this domestic life, and is itching to get on to the story of Wilde’s trial and downfall. In 1895 the house was abandoned and all the family’s personal effects were sold. John Singer Sargent moved into Tite Street in 1886 and stayed there until his death in 1925. ‘No. 31 Tite Street was not merely a home, it was also a virtual factory for portraits’ (p. 210). Cox illustrates his life with two cartoons by Max Beerbohm, showing the fashionable ladies queuing in the street and the social life which went on while he painted. Although this is really the ending of the story of fashionable Tite Street, Cox concludes by pointing out that Augustus John lived there from 1940 to 1950 and the book ends with his portrait *Field Marshal Lord Montgomery*. 

Although this is a well-presented book, full of good stories and excellent illustrations, it takes a very old-fashioned approach to its subjects. Books about the Pre-Raphaelites used to be like this and the readers were entertained with jolly tales about their colourful personalities. But Tite Street backed on to Paradise Walk, one of the worst slums in London; as Cox points out, it was visible from Wilde’s house and Constance tried to help its inhabitants. As one who was taught by H.J. Dyos, who showed in *Victorian Suburb: A Study of the Growth of Camberwell* (1961) that urban history is worth doing well, I can only say that there is a lot more to be found out about a Victorian street than this book provides us with and that mere anecdotage about ‘smart bohemians’ is not a substitute for art history.

**John Purkis**
Notes on Contributors

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