Reviews

Zuzanna Shonfield,

In the biographical drama of the Pre-Raphaelite circle, the figure of John Marshall, professor of anatomy, medical man and friend of Madox Brown and Gabriel Rossetti, has always played an attendant role, visible only at moments of crisis. His domestic life, revealed through the diaries of his elder daughter Jeannette, here edited and summarised by Zuzanna Shonfield, does not suggest that he deserves a larger part. The diaries, kept from 1870 when Jeannette was 15 through to 1891 when she married, show the Marshall menage in Savile Row to have been narrow in outlook and activities. Indeed, its discontented inmates, engaged in dressmaking and husband-hunting, throw into relief the artistic and intellectual distinction of other households of the period, notably those of Morris and Burne-Jones, whom Marshall also knew.

Perhaps Jeannette was half conscious of this, for although her observations were always opinionated, her comments on women from the “artistic” world were uniformly bitchy. Lucy Madox Brown’s guests were “most singularly attired, the ladies sad and the gentlemen mad”. Edith Holman Hunt was “a regular judy”. At a garden party at The Grange, Effie Stillman was “a telegraph post”, Aglaia Coronio “looking awful”, Janey Morris “like a maniac” and Jenny Morris “out and out the ugliest person I ever saw”. On another occasion, May Morris, “in a brown-red bedgown with no tucker, was a guy, everyone voted”. She too was pronounced ugly, while the Ionides, Coronios and Spartalis were “furriners of doubtful cleanliness”.

Yet Jeannette and her sister Ada had pretensions to taste and talent, winning praise for their interior décor, which in the mid-1870s was based on Aesthetic principles, including wallpaper with “a wonderful kind of Morris pattern, with pale green, yellows, mauves etc and little gold lines. Sweet!” Jeannette’s own geometric needlework adorned every horizontal surface and hung from brass rails and chair-backs. Impressed by the first Arts & Crafts Exhibition, she entered three pieces of her own in the second. But – and here one would like to know more – some years earlier her work had failed to please Miss Burden, described as “supervisor of the Morris embroidery team”. Ada enrolled at the Slade School but lasted only a day, after seeing a male model “all but unclothed”.

The most intriguing entries concern Rossetti and the gossip current at the time of his death in 1882, to the effect that his wife Lizzie died “from poison which she took herself. They had only been married 2 years and she found herself superseded and took laudanum”. At Rossetti’s retrospective at the RA, Jeannette saw the model for ‘The Blue Bower’ standing in front of the canvas: “It was ‘Fanny’, who lived with Rossetti and because of whom his poor wife committed suicide”, recorded the diary. “Nasty, common-looking creature.”

To be sure, the constraints of respectable feminity no doubt necessitated some private frankness, and comments never intended for public utterance should not be judged too harshly. The conditions under which Jeannette lived and wrote were constricting and
snobbish and the “sour disenchantment” of her outlook reflected circumstances as much as character – a perspective that seems not to have occurred to her editor, who has otherwise created a readable and well-researched narrative.

Jan Marsh


_Double Harness_ is a title which might give a suggestion of plodding drudgery, of a ploughman’s progress. If so, it does not do the book justice. This is a vehement, passionate work, a work born of the horror felt by a Quaker artist who finds himself in his old age amid the jingoistic materialism of the late 1980s. To read Robin Tanner’s book (and his Bath lecture, published in the last issue of _The Journal_) is to catch something of the dismay of Morris himself. Morris is Tanner’s hero, as he made clear in his lecture and as he makes clear in his autobiography.

Robin Tanner was born in 1904, in Bristol, but was much influenced by spending part of his childhood in Wiltshire, a county to which he returned after travels as a teacher and HMI, and which formed the inspiration for his finest etchings. As a child, he had no use for mechanical toys, and preferred drawing and using unusual materials (himself and a urinal, on one well-remembered occasion) to make a work of art. Descriptions of the short-sightedness of his teachers are interspersed with quotations from Traherne. The quotations indicate how embedded in the English mystic landscape tradition Tanner is. He becomes a reader of Hardy, Jefferies and W. H. Hudson, and later a listener to Delius, Vaughan Williams, Butterworth, and Finzi. In print-making, he traces his ancestry through F. L. Griggs to Samuel Palmer and Blake. Binyon’s book on Palmer, and the big 1926 Palmer exhibition, emerged while Tanner was in his twenties.

His first job was as a teacher in Greenwich, and he became an evening student of etching at Goldsmiths’ under the direction of Stanley Anderson, whom Tanner describes as “uninspiring, and I cannot say I greatly admired his own work”. He describes the influence upon him of the Dutch 17th century print-makers: Van Ostade, Potter, Van de Velde, whose work he saw in the V & A Print Room. More crucially, he acknowledges with warmth the impact of F. L. Griggs. At roughly the same time, he fell under the influence of Lethaby’s _Form in Civilisation_ and Mackail’s _Life of Morris_. He became a supporter of gipsies and of Jesus as a pacifist, and an opponent of fox-hunters and the God of the Old Testament. He was influenced by Professor Cisek, of the Vienna School of Arts and Crafts, and Cisek’s emphasis on “The Child as Artist” (a most unusual interest for an English artist of the time).

After Greenwich, he was given a job as teacher in his home county of Wiltshire, and it was here that he encouraged children to produce truly remarkable murals, which are illustrated in this book but which have now disappeared. The murals, on the theme of the seasons, show a confidence in composition and strength in design which could only be brought about by a great teacher, the kind of teacher who knows when not to teach.

Somewhat reluctantly, he accepted an offer to become an HMI, though it meant years away from Wiltshire and etching. He was posted first to Leeds, where he describes forcefully his struggles against 1930s racism, anti-semitism, and Philistinism. As Inspector, he injected a new awareness of the importance of children’s art, in the face of
such opposition as he memorably describes when, proclaiming the virtues of his Wiltshire
children’s murals before an audience of teachers, only two believed they could actually
have been executed by children.

His work as Inspector seemed to bring out the best in teachers, as in Margaret Gilvary,
one of those whom Tanner sees as having led the revolution in education that took place
immediately after the war. She was a teacher of infants in Bristol, and she wrote: “Steady,
exploratory living, in a considerate and peaceful atmosphere, is all I crave for children,”
and “I want to send out civilised, courteous, thoughtful, healthy, questioning, vital, real
human beings, of high purpose, with self-control and a love of good things”. Tanner
quotes her report at length. Her beliefs are evidently his beliefs. It is right that this book
should emerge at the time of Kenneth Baker’s very different vision of education. And in
recalling the mood of the country outside the world of education in the 1950s, Tanner
could almost be describing the late 1980s: “Clearly the only god was material gain,
fought for in bitter competition with one’s fellows. The great unmeasurable qualities of
feeling, of personal creativity, of discrimination, of sensitive awareness of others, and of
dedicated service seemed more and more to be regarded as lesser by-products,
commendable but unimportant … schools still tended to be valued according to results.”
This has uncanny echoes in a world of Education measured by the crisp step (the
ravishing stride?) of our present Secretary of State. The difference between “then and
now” is, as Tanner sees it, that then in Education there lay hope.

Though with little etching, Tanner’s years as Inspector were far from uncreative. Not
only did his sometimes acerbic comments stimulate teachers to ever greater creative
efforts with their children, but he was teaching courses at Darlington along with Leach,
Lucie Rie, and Hans Coper (a remarkable gathering), and worked also on a major record
of the textile designs of Barron and Larcher, whom he describes endearingly here.

Tanner retired in 1964, to devote himself to his wife Heather – his relationship with
whom forms a gentle undercurrent to the main flow of the work – and to etching. He is
quite clear as to the purpose of his etching, and the following passage has a distinctly
Morrisian ring: “I was usually described as one of the last of that school of pastoral
etchers whose source was the English countryside. But for me that was not enough. I
wanted to make it clear that my work was a protest against the ruination of this source
through exploitation, greed, and deplorable thoughtlessness. I wanted to show what
could still be ours if we had a passionate desire for it.” A little later he admits his Morris
roots: “The craft of etching plays into my hands as a William Morris socialist who wants
art for the many, not for the few” (though he then rather oddly sets against this, “a
painting can be the possession of one person only”): what about the painting in the public
gallery?) His Morris interests extend to being a News from Nowhere Utopian: “If I had
my way I would never sell any of my prints, but would give them to anyone who really
wanted to possess them for pleasure.” Certainly, Tanner is important in having preached
Morris to Oxfordshire when study of Morris was rare.

This is a book full of passion. As a result, it sometimes rambles or confuses, and
occasionally appears to contradict itself. But it convinces us as a testament of integrity,
and that is an achievement in autobiography. It ends on a see-saw between hope and
despair: hope in the Green politics, in CND, and in the Craft Revival; despair in the sense
that the values fought for by post-war Socialism have been spurned. “Much that was won
after a long struggle has been trodden upon: we seem no more advanced than when

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William Morris was striving to enlighten the masses nearly a century ago.” Robin Tanner’s passion, his political awareness, his natural understanding, and his etchings, make this a valuable book. By his knowledge of and enthusiasm for not only art education but also plants, he persuades us of the value of both. Plants are understood afresh, as a solace, a source of consolation. His intense, typically English, etchings, with their dreamlike clarity (well reproduced in this well-designed book) deserve to be more widely known. And his views on education in, with, and by art should be read by all teachers. And by the present Secretary of State for Education.

Nicholas Friend