Reviews

Norman Kelvin, editor, *The Collected Letters of William Morris*


These handsome volumes just fail to achieve a satisfying narrative unity. There is the promising beginning in which disillusion with Liberalism and dissatisfaction with Wardle’s chintzes result in Morris’s joining the SDF and in the Firm’s move to Merton Abbey; there is the bulky middle formed around the break with the SDF and the formation of the Socialist League; the volume ends, however, with Morris still in control, more or less, of *The Commonweal* and with the beginning of *News from Nowhere* still over a year away. Not that this is grounds for serious complaint, since it is the quantity of unpublished or uncollected letters which forces a halt in 1888. Of the nine-hundred-and-three letters printed here, less than a fifth appeared in Philip Henderson’s *The Letters of William Morris to His Family and Friends* (1950), and even when the previous availability of many others in works by May Morris, E.P. Thompson and R. Page Arnot, together with the Scheu correspondence in *The Socialist Register*, is taken into account, the unfamiliar remains predominant.

Will all this newly assembled material force a significant revision of the post-Thompson picture of Morris’s life and work in the 1880s? Reason to hesitate in answering comes with the first, fragmentary, text “From a letter to Georgiana Burne-Jones” (as quoted by Mackail): it reminds us of Professor Kelvin’s frank admission in the Introduction to Volume I as to how much of the correspondence which he would most want to read is as yet unrecovered and is most probably irrecoverable. Some of his close friends and associates seem to have been either careless with it, or in the control of the images they intended to leave to posterity, very careful indeed. Much of what has rewarded Kelvin’s diligent search comes in the form of small batches of often brief communications preserved by people whose contact with Morris, however important to them, was decidedly limited. It is impossible to be sure why these letters were kept, but the fact that they were may be an impressive testimony to Morris’s perceived sincerity and disinterestedness, the content of so many amounting to reproof or discouragement. However valuable this material, the profit does not come primarily in the form of direct self-revelation.

There are, however, a number of new, intimate letters which do prompt reflection, particularly those addressed to Jenny between 1885 and 1888. The opening of one dated August 7 1888, “I am bound to write you a little line however shabby ...” strikes a recurrent note. His vital concerns are offered as entertainment and distraction; as a mark of his affection he offers his time; he offers it in the character of Joe Gargery ladling out excessive gravy. The reiterated promise “What larx!” is made uninnocently and uneasily. In imposing on his wife responsibility for the constant care of the epileptic, he knew he had surrendered the right to contest the medical authority which Janey might understandably interpret in her own interests.
Do not the embarrassed gestures reveal a sense of helplessness in relation to Jenny which must inevitably associate itself with other experiences of individual helplessness which he was coming to recognize as specifically political in character?

Other fresh family letters prompt no such interpretative ingenuity, such as those to his mother for whom the strenuous and repeatedly extended lecture tour of March 1888 is described in one sentence: “I was rather longer in Scotland than I intended, and went about a good deal”.

There are, of course, more detailed reports to which we can turn, and there is overtly personal reflection on events, though mostly in the fragmentary material recovered from Mackail. However, the expectation that it should be possible, now, to trace the progress of Morris’s formation through these years is hardly fulfilled. What is offered is a challenging opportunity to observe directly, in a signal instance, how action educates.

A good deal of uncertainty attends such observation, as to how much, for instance, Morris recognized of the distinctively metropolitan character of the political culture of late nineteenth-century London. Certainly he ceased, quite early, to see London as potentially the site of an insurrection, but it is not really clear how he saw his variously unsatisfactory comrades. Almost certainly the moralistic terms, “wastrel”, “scoundrel”, which come in acceptably enough from his devoted daughter, were not his, but did he recognize that, by the desperate, socialist organizations necessarily would be exploited in the interests of individual survival? Or that they would offer to some, occupations no more peculiarly specialized than those odd ones which Georg Simmel use to illustrate the force of his proposition that “Cities are above all the seat of the most advanced economic division of labour”? To err in exaggerating Morris’s innocence in these matters might be a proper, though indirect, tribute to his generosity and tact.

The social spectacle which readers can and will squint at is thoroughly absorbing, and Professor Kelvin could have done much to bring it better into focus had he drawn, particularly in his Introduction, on the work of Gareth Stedman Jones (Outcast London rev. ed. 1984 and “Working-class culture and working-class politics in London …”, Languages of Class, 1983). His failure to do so correlates significantly with his reliance on Ensor’s England 1870-1914 (1936) when annotating Morris’s observations on British imperialist adventuring. Generally, though, the annotation is helpful, thorough and economical; it is outstandingly conscientious where the designs and their sources are concerned (although it would have been helpful to indicate how some objects in museums could be positively identified).

The Introduction claims that “the language of design expresses most effectively the egalitarianism, the truth, the concrete meaning, the inventive freshness and vigor required to rescue us from the corrupted, worn-out vehicle”. (p.xxxi) Unhappily the “vehicle” is language, and Professor Kelvin is associating himself enthusiastically with a view which he ascribes to Morris. Without stopping to ask him how, if “decorative images” constitute a language, it should be one absolutely resistant to corruption, it is as well to remind ourselves how much Morris’s view of language owes to Carlyle, and above all to Cobbett, neither of whom would encourage assent to propositions such as “only when we are out of history will the word become truth
again” (p.xxxiv), which is offered here as a gloss on News from Nowhere.

What does leave its mark on the letters is Morris’s distrust not of language itself, but of a range of discourses, particularly those of literary criticism, political economy and sociology. It is useless, for instance to look for any development of his remark to May (26th March, 1888) that he thinks Anna Karenina better than War and Peace but “heavy reading sometimes”, just as it is with the one terse sentence (from a letter to F.S. Ellis, 18th February 1886) which throws any light on his translation of the Odyssey. It is a risky business to interpret the silences in any text, but it seems likely that in these letters Morris stops where, had he gone on, he would have situated himself within a discourse which he felt alien and inimical. Writing of The House of the Wolfings, R. Page Arnot remarks that “The technical terms then coming into use, endogamy and exogamy, matriarchy and patriarchy, totemic clans and all the rest, lurk unseen and unmentioned behind the vivid description of how Goths early fought against the aggressors of the Roman Empire”. In other words Morris entertained the hope that by replacing the abstract with the concrete he could avoid inscribing his alienation in the text. The abruptness of some letters here needs to be understood as symptomatic of a recognition that his critique of capitalist relations of production is itself a product of capitalism. It is as though he is deftly reserving the space for such a critique when he writes, in September 1888 to Laura Mary Forster about her blind-stamped leather work:

None of the designs seems quite up to the mark: this sort of thing wants very good design to make it worth doing. There are in the museums somewhere specimens of bookcases and the like, mostly of the 15th-Century in ‘Cuir-bouillé’ which have designs that you ought to look at: and of course you will find many things on a small scale which would give you hints. But certainly I could be of more use to you if I were to talk to you than I can by merely writing … I should think the kind of work would be very suitable for binding big books.

Her failures interest him, because he perceives that success in this craft would result in the production of objects which, like the roughly made furniture referred to in a letter to Horsfall (11-28th February 1881), would be costly, unmarketable and hence the means of the maker’s political education.

In this edition, two illustrations, a portrait of Laura May Forster and a photograph of a meagre, partly perished binding on a volume of Praeterita, help to ensure that this correspondence will not be overlooked. The quality of the plates stimulates the tactile imagination here and in much more pleasurable instances. The majority of the ninety-four images reproduced are portraits, offered it seems for physiognomic reading, since as a rule the names of photographers are omitted and sometimes those of painters and draughtsmen, and there are few indications of medium, let alone size. Readers of Morris’s correspondence will not regard the significance of these images dependent of the conditions of their production, and will be naturally curious when confronted with, say, the photographically-based drawing, or could it be lithograph, of Thomas Wardle (p.11).

This review has not anticipated any of the precise biographical and historical inquiries by which the value of such an edition as this will be tested; it would be wrong to end without saying that there is every indication that the serious inquirer is well served, not least by the generously full index. 

Charles Page
For those who can recall the magnificent and unprecedented commemorative exhibition of Victorian and Edwardian Decorative Arts at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1952, Jeremy Cooper’s book, thanks to his serious scholarship, is an important sequel. In the intervening years some of the gaps of which the exhibition organisers were aware have been filled and a clearer perspective on the influence of the pioneers a hundred years ago has been revealed.

The Victorian and Edwardian era is short in historical time but densely active with, shall we say, Charles Barry at one end and Ambrose Heal at the other – to pick two names from the cast of hundreds who people Jeremy Cooper’s wide-ranging drama. Such a story could be exhausting and impenetrable, but thanks to the author’s style, constantly leavened by anecdotes and brief quotations, the text is illuminating, fascinating and entertaining.

The scope is most succinctly conveyed by listing the eight chapters, which follow the first introductory one: ‘A Matter of Style’ – a subject which dominates the story until the last chapters, when consciences begin to prick. The story unfolds through: ‘A.W. Pugin’, ‘William Burges’, ‘Geometric Gothic’, ‘From Nankin to Bedford Park’, ‘Morris & Company’, ‘The Arts & Crafts Movement’, ‘The New Art’, and ‘Liberty’s and Heals’. Each chapter is illustrated, supplemented by several pages of densely packed illustrations and generous captions. This organisation leads to some repetition, but it lightens the text of each chapter and helps readers to keep the subject in clear perspective and in sharp focus as they proceed.

Battles waged with savage sarcasm by defenders of styles in the 1880’s are still being waged in the “anything-goes” era of the Thatcher appeal to Victorian values. There are battles between prosperous participants searching for novelty, with little evidence until the end of the century that the arguments about private indulgencies were giving way to a sense of public responsibility. Nevertheless it is a most entertaining scene to observe, and how generously this book displays it. Occasionally inventions in form and pattern are truly stimulating, as is the clear air and light in Sidney Barnsley’s house built in 1902. There is so much to admire in so many of the participants and how well Jeremy Cooper brings out their achievements and their characters. There is the fanatic industry and moral purposes of Pugin, who eschewed assistants: “Clerk, my dear Sir, clerk?” he is reported to have said, “I never employ one. I should kill him in a week”. The author stresses how Pugin strove to abstract the essence from medieval examples to realise a revolutionary reformed Gothic, but unfortunately does not appear to illustrate this explicitly. Then there is Burges’s attitude to travel: “Measure much, sketch little and above all keep your fingers out of chemicals”.

‘Geometric Gothic’ is a term coined in the 1960’s by that remarkable collector Charles Handley-Read, whose enthusiasm and scholarship Jeremy Cooper rightly acknowledges. His term is a helpful one if one thinks of gothicised furniture as being small buildings on which decoration is organised. Naturally Butterfield figures here, but one wishes the author had taken Burges’s advice when describing Butterfield’s search for a pew design that was comfortable, simple and convenient:
“Measurements please”. Here we are also introduced to William White, a ‘muscular goth’, an alpine climber, the inventor of a valveless closet, a wasteless lavatory, a promoter of Swedish gymnastics, and a believer that Bacon was Shakespeare. Another ‘muscular goth’ is Charles Bevan, with his “sledgehammer blows of self assertion and solid geometry.” Better known (to the reviewer) is J.P. Seddon, the architect son of a cabinet maker who designed the delightful All Saints Church at Ayot St. Peter, and in 1860 the first residences in this country designated as ‘bungalows’ (from the Hindi derivation) – in one of which Rossetti died in 1882.

In ‘From Nankin to Bedford Park’ we encounter a plea for a middle way between the “very dull form of Classical style and the screeching, sensational poetry, or Daily Telegraphese of the Gothic Revival”, and we breathe the lighter air of designers like E.W. Godwin and C. Dresser, whose silverware in the British Museum already has a Bauhaus flavour. Again one is impressed by such men’s serious endeavour. At the end of the chapter preceding ‘Morris & Company’ the author is obliged to sew up a rag-bag labelled “Aesthetic variety”, which in less well organised hands might have been the repository of much more miscellanea. However, from here on we see invention being disciplined by conscience. William Morris’s titanic energy is of course recognised, as is the problem of reconciling his principles with his market, a problem for which, in the author’s view, a resolution was sought by those who followed Morris and found his teaching the main inspiration. There is Ashbee’s passionate concern for human well-being, Lethaby’s for integrity – “Art is not a special sauce applied to cooking – it is the cooking itself” – and Voysey’s for the soul – “Too much luxury is the death of the soul”, and “Cold vegetables are preferable to ugly dishcovers. One offends the body and the other the soul”.

In the ‘New Art’ the unique aesthetic of Mackintosh is recognised and here aesthetic is the word, because Mackintosh creates a unique and complete ambience which one not only sees but feels. Jeremy Cooper rightly makes the point that Mackintosh had no interest in furniture making, nor any apparent feeling for craft. His inspiration came from the drawing board, not the bench. Not so Ambrose Heal, whose contribution to design and marketing for a wider public is given long overdue recognition; Arthur Liberty showed in his very different way a similar concern to widen the market.

The author rightly recognises many other makers and retailers, who before World War I wanted (to use Alvar Aalto’s analogy) to find ways of getting the Burgundy round an ever-enlarging table without diluting it. This search, to which Gordon Russell so notably contributed in the World War II and Attlee years, still goes on. But Jeremy Cooper is not tempted to exceed his title’s time-span – which incidentally is as long as the period from its conclusion to the present day. It is hard to believe that the more recent period could be so creatively rich and so characterful – and has the Burgundy got any further without dilution? It is a story that one day must be told.

In distinguishing the 1880s from the 1980s Jeremy Cooper states that a century ago British designers dominated the world in furniture and interior design, mentioning the two-way Anglo-Japanese traffic and the British impact on the Secession. One should perhaps add the influence of the British “New Art” on Frank Lloyd Wright’s furniture and interior design. Furthermore, a visit to the
Kunstindustrimuseet in København shows how Danish architects and furniture designers were inspired by the British Arts & Crafts movement. What has gone wrong since? In periods of superficial prosperity the flowers become more exotic, fine art flourishes, while craft (technology) is taken for granted and does not command respect. The balance between the drawing-board and the bench is upset. Yet designers abound and technology becomes more wonderful. Is it the makers and marketers who are letting the public down? It was not so, apparently in 1910.

The nineteenth century, as described in this book, gives a picture of luxurious middle-class comfort, demanding the support of numerous servants; yet furniture, furnishings and servants do not alone spell comfort, which in the later Victorian period for the first time depended on architects grasping the new technologies that were emerging using gas, electricity, communication systems, carpet sweepers, dumb waiters, ventilating systems, plumbing, central heating and so on. Much of such technology Lord Armstrong had incorporated in Cragside in 1880, yet none of this enterprise by the client, apparently, rubbed off on Norman Shaw. In the eighteenth century architects had a total concept of the interior, but later, upholsterers were to assume almost total responsibility for how the interior was fitted out, leaving the architect to toy with appearances while fashion and physics drifted further apart.

The preoccupation with style and the inclusion of “and Interiors” in the author’s title leads the reviewer to raise wider questions about what makes an interior, which is dependent on craft, technology and style. Consideration of this would perhaps constitute a different book, but the desire is a measure of the stimulation of Jeremy Cooper’s scholarship.

The publishers could have better served the author and his readers by a more spacious and orderly arrangement of photographs (some of which, particularly those in colour, are perhaps larger than life) and their lengthy captions. The nine chapters are supplemented by some fifty sections of photographs and captions, – none of whose pages have printed numbers, which is an irritation. Moreover, the business of relating the grouped captions to particular illustrations is hard work, specially when the figure numbers are cropped away.

Nevertheless, the final view must be one of gratitude to Jeremy Cooper for the feat of combining scholarship with an attractive style, and for enlarging our admiration and appreciation of a once maligned period, which is now unlikely to suffer the critical scorn that followed the seminal exhibition in 1952.

Two small points:

The chair, illustrated in Fig. 435, tentatively attributed to Rossetti, is now, I learn, established as being designed by Philip Webb.

Sidney Barnsley’s sideboard shown in Fig. 559, in his home in Pinbury, has for many years been in Edward and Tania Barnsley’s home in Froxfield.

David Medd

Gillian Naylor has produced an outstanding contribution to the Macdonald Orbis series of finely illustrated books recording artists in terms of their own writings and work – a series in which Morris has been preceded by Van Gogh and Degas. Their writings, of course, are much more restricted in range than those of Morris, and this must have produced Gillian Naylor’s main problem: how to give a full representation of Morris’s many-sidedness within even the generous space available to her. She explains in an introductory Note that the main area she feels under-represented is that of Morris’s Nordic interests, though she is able to include extracts from Morris’s first Icelandic journal. While this is a reasonable self-criticism, most readers are more likely to be aware of the richness and variety of the material offered.

There are seven main chapters, organised in a basically chronological way: Dreamer of Dreams; Fine Art Workmen; Queen Square; Kelmscott Manor; Commitment; Design and Socialism; and, The Final Years. Each contains introductory sections by the editor together with selections from the relevant writings and a great deal of splendid visual material, some of it, like the Merton Abbey dye-book, little known. To give an idea of the balance, there are three large sections of exclusively visual material amounting to 190 pages in all; the writings are contained in some 140 pages of large type with black-and-white illustrations. I would have preferred a slightly higher placing of the material on the page and a narrower central margin, but this is a handsome book, its expense justified in terms of the quality of the printing and, in most cases, of the colour reproduction. It is interesting to note that it was filmset in St. Helens, but printed and bound in Barcelona.

Finally, one is led to speculate about possible buyers of this book. Those who already know Morris will enjoy the range of visual material made available to those strong enough to manage this weighty volume. Those who do not will surely be given a sense of Morris’s creative energy, and his delight in colour and design, and will learn something of his own views on life and society. The book concludes with a useful bibliography, and a list of houses with decorations by Morris. All in all, a book to be welcomed and likely to give much pleasure.

Peter Faulkner


Fiona MacCarthy and her publishers have produced a substantial, handsome and very well illustrated account of the man who has some claim to be considered Morris’s major successor in the twentieth century. Drawing freely on Gill’s detailed
diaries, she follows him from his birth in Brighton in 1882, through his early years in Brighton, Chichester and London, to Ditchling and the Ditchling Common community, and then to its successors, Capel-y-ffin and Pigotts, as Gill strove to realise his ideal of “a cell of good living in the chaos of our world”. She takes Gill’s previous Catholic biographers, Robert Speaight and Donald Attwater, to task for glossing over the abundant evidence of Gill’s energetic extra-marital sexual activities, although she does not comment on Malcolm Yorke’s intelligent discussion of Gill’s erotic work in *Eric Gill, Man of Flesh and Spirit* in 1981.

Unfortunately, the book has received a good deal of attention from the media focusing on what we may euphemistically term Gill’s private life. The question that arises is whether that emphasis is justified by the book itself. Certainly Ms MacCarthy wants to put the record straight, to bring out all the facts as she has found them. But she is no debunker: she thinks highly of Gill’s achievement in many areas, and she brings out the warmth and directness of response which Gill brought to so many of his human relationships. The generous illustrations to the book provide plenty of evidence of Gill’s energy and the range of his abilities, in many branches of lettering, in stone-carving, in type design, in book illustration, in erotic wood-engraving. The area in which she seems least interested is that of Gill’s writings, the lack of attention to which leaves something of a gap at the centre of the book. The Bibliography lists the following publications in Gill’s early years at Pigotts: *Art-Nonsense and Other Essays* (1929), *Clothes* (1931), *An Essay on Typography* (1931), *Beauty Looks After Herself* (1933), *Art and a Changing Civilization* (1934), *Money and Morals* (1934), *Work and Leisure* (1935). Of *Art-Nonsense* we are told, rather confusingly, that it is “the first of whole series of editions of Gill’s collected essays” (p. 232), and that these publications helped to make Gill “the licensed social critic” – what is an unlicensed one? – but we learn nothing of the substance of his social criticism, only that “the tone was somewhat bullying”, that it marked the first public use of Perpetua, and that the model for the engraved frontispiece (p. 233) was Beatrice Warde, Gill’s current mistress, of whom an account is then given. We hear a little about Gill’s idiosyncratic views on clothes, but *Beauty and Art* (to my mind one of Gill’s most interesting books) are not mentioned; neither is *Money and Morals*, while *Work and Leisure* is referred to early on very briefly, together with *Work and Property*. The lively 1933 pamphlet *Unemployment* – addressing itself to one of the central problems of the decade, which still remains with us – appears only in the form of a (reduced) illustration of the title page, commenting on the engraving and the type employed. Perhaps the author believes that Gill’s social thought is so well known that it can be taken for granted, but without serious consideration of it he is left as a rather light-weight figure, victim of a kind of privatization: no successor of Morris at all! Perhaps he wasn’t, but there is not enough evidence here to argue the case. Ms MacCarthy has thus written the fullest and liveliest account of Gill to date, but not the definitive one.

*Peter Faulkner*
170 pp. £14.95

Here is a book of which the first thing to say is that it expresses with deep feeling and entire clarity, out of personal experience, the same essential ideas and convictions as Morris wrote and spoke so steadily for the last twenty years of his life. It is not a book about Morris, who all the same has a presence in it; nor a book about the crafts in the vein of the books on crafts, general or particular, such as have been published in their hundreds since Walter Crane and Lewis F. Day and the multitude of members of the Arts and Crafts Movement began, around a century ago. It is something different in kind and far more penetrating, and a book which no lover of Morris, no sharer of Morris’s concerns, ought to be without. If fifteen pounds, its price all but a few pence, seems a lot for a hundred and seventy pages and no pictures, it is very little indeed for what those pages hold.

It begins with a simple statement in three lines, of which the rest of the book is an elaboration – about art, or about work, in terms of our common cultural assumptions: but is really about, inseparably about, both, and our necessity for them. “The history of art is really the history of skilled work – no more and no less – and when we marvel at the products of other periods and cultures, we marvel at the achievements of a tradition of skilled work, not ‘art’.” Now that is, in all it says and all that it implies, a wholly Morrisian statement: it is, moreover, one that is as true and essential whether said of the most sophisticated or the most primitive of cultures.

Coleman’s introductory chapter, which begins thus, is entitled ‘The Fall of Daedalus’; and it is in terms of that myth that he unfolds the ancient allegory not just for our time but for the whole evolution of the cultures we inherit – often the fruit of pillage – and of which we are also victims. But even this use of myth expresses precise and intuitive references, not as standing for an abstraction. It is this pursuit, examination, and expression of ideas through real-life experiences, his own and others’, that is the unique strength of the book and gives intense pleasure and excitement in the reading, the harmonics of our own experience awakened, the appeal to the senses and the muscles under all the appeal to intellectual questioning, making this little book worth whole shelves of solemn academic studies. Last year died our dear and good member Robin Tanner, and in all he did, said, wrote and taught the same fundamentals appeared. Robin was a Friend; and to Friends violence is forbidden; but not joy, and not anger. Anger and joy are offered in the present book as it takes us through a range of experiences very different indeed from Robin Tanner’s, or from Morris’s: experiences of a child of the middle of the twentieth century; experiences unorthodox, of a life rather than of a career; which has been richly accepted, struggled with, enjoyed, shared – above all shared and its meaning questioned as shared with a great diversity of other folk – unexpected sources of wisdom, knowledge – and skill. One of the most original chapters – with no intention to aim at originality – is Chapter Three: ‘The Pig’. This recounts a particular passage of the author’s life in real time and place, which because of its nature and circumstances takes us as deep into the middle ages as any imaginative passage in Morris – or Chaucer: but it is not aimed at reconstruction: it tells of the
real, albeit a real almost entirely disappeared from our modern life – though such as
still obtains in other worlds than the England of the nineteen eighties. This slice of
life – as much a slice of life as anything in Zola or Gorky or Hardy – is so well
presented and so well understood that it takes on all the allegorical, almost the
mythical quality of the Daedalus story or its Northern counterpart, the story of
Wayland the Smith.

The writer’s account of his own acquisition of traditional manual skills and his
understanding of what they do for those who really exercise them; the contrast
between a way of life based on work of this kind and the abstracted toil that follows
on the ever-increasing mechanisation of industries based on high technology and
automation, including the automation of minds, is beautifully drawn. In the end, the
essence of the book’s meaning is that expressed by Morris when a decade after his
writing of ‘Love is enough’ he exclaimed angrily to friends – “This is a lie! and it was
I who wrote it. Love and work, work and love; this is what we must have.” And the
great question unfolded in this transparent exposition of Coleman’s experiences
(always seen in relation to others, never in mere theoretical terms) is – how, in the
world of work created by the development of an industrial and science-based
society, is the second of those components, essential to human life, to be secured:
work that cannot generate love is not worth doing.

There is no more important book on this subject to be read than this: and it is to
be hoped that the Hall of the Society of Antiquaries will be filled to overflowing
when its author speaks to us in September.

Ray Watkinson