Reviews


When Stephen Prickett's *Victorian Fantasy* appeared in 1979, I was surprised to find Morris represented only on the very small scale of two of the early romances. The present volume, though as a compilation it has none of the unity of Professor Prickett's book (an impression increased by the non-chronological ordering of its contents), gives him a good deal more attention. Indeed Morris and his predecessor on Hammersmith Mall, George MacDonald, are the two strongest presences in the book. However, this does not mean that many of Morris's works are discussed. What we have is Norman Talbot on *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, Anne Cranney Francis on *News from Nowhere*, and Ken Goodwin on the more general topic of 'The Realism of Magic in the Fantasy Tradition of William Morris', together with a discussion by Bruce L. Edwards Jnr. of C.S. Lewis's positive account of Morris in *Revaluations*. Other articles which aroused my interest were Kath Filmer on MacDonald's *Lilith* as a critique of Victorian society, Barbara Garlick on Christina Rossetti's use of fantasy to subvert current sexual politics, John Strugnett on Richard Jefferies' *After London*, and R.J. Dingley on *Dracula* and *The War of the Worlds* as invasion narratives.

All the pieces relating to Morris offer some illumination. Talbot (whose defence of the language used by Morris in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* appeared in *The Journal* in the spring of 1989) argues that the story reverses the expectations of the Quest-romance by the role it gives to the woman Birdalone, and by its questioning of the role of the male Arthur, although Talbot has to admit that the ending of the story, with Birdalone reduced to a 'pledge' for the knights to the town, is a disappointment. He implies that had Morris lived longer he would have revised the ending in a more acceptable way. I wonder if there is any evidence for this. Anne Cranney Francis, writing from a feminist perspective, presents *News from Nowhere* convincingly as a political challenge to contemporary society by stressing the subversive potentialities of fantasy, as discussed by recent theorists like Rosemary Jackson in *Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion* (1981). Her attitude is well-balanced, and her points supported from the text; she is particularly good on the disagreement between Guest and Hammond over the idea of human nature in Chapter XIV. She sees *News from Nowhere*, by its successful critique of society, offering an example to modern feminists who wish to challenge the idea of social reality, citing Ursula le Guin's defence of fantasy literature: "Those who refuse to listen to dragons are probably doomed to spend their lives acting out the nightmares of politicians." Ken Goodwin – an old Morris hand – discusses what he considers to be Morris's plain diction and his use of transformation scenes to give force to his romances, and contrasts his practise with later Christian fantasists like Charles Williams, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. Although it is an interesting argument, I was not convinced by
the ascription to the Morris of the late romances of the same philosophy of “stoic, even fatalistic acceptance of the inevitability of the operation of the Wheel of Fortune” said to be shown in *The Earthly Paradise* – and in the contraflexive of the designs of that period. Didn’t Morris’s Marxism, not mentioned here, have an impact on his thinking by the time he came to write the late romances? Surely we find something different from the “cycle of chance, and alternation between joy and misery” which Goodwin rightly attributes to the earlier writings.

Josephine Guy’s *The British Avant-Garde*, as the work of a single author, has a far stronger sense of direction than Kath Filmer’s collection. Subtitled ‘The Theory and Politics of Tradition’, its main argument is that the idea of the avant-garde can best be seen “not in terms of a specific function, nor in terms of a set of features or aspects, but rather in terms of a relationship: all avant-garde movements...define themselves in relation to the past – to tradition.” But the form that relationship takes will, she argues, vary in different cultures: in France, with its revolutionary tradition, it could be confrontational, but in Britain, with a ‘gradualist’ intellectual tradition, it would take more oblique forms. In Britain in the late nineteenth century, therefore, she argues, it is reasonable to speak of an avant-garde, but its strategies of articulation are not confrontational. Guy’s last three chapters consider Pater, Morris and Wilde in this interesting context, and for some readers at least it is a relief to emerge from the sometimes rather complicated theorising into these specifics. Guy has no difficulty in showing the subversive elements in Pater and Wilde, noting the perhaps surprising fact that these could be expressed in the usually ‘conservative’ medium of literary criticism.

With Morris this is clearly not the case. The question that interests Guy is a significant one which can be overlooked by those too close to Morris: what is the relation between his Socialist politics and his preference for traditional narrative literary forms, particularly those associated with medievalism? Guy does not make the elucidation of this problem easier for herself by making any distinction between Morris’s earlier and later works, and she oddly claims that he was at one time a member of the P.R.B., and that he resigned from the S.D.F. “in the 1870’s” – before it was founded. She also states categorically that “in all Morris’s writing...there is no detailed and convincing explanation of the process or the means of revolutionary change.” However, the argument itself is of considerable interest: it is that Morris, working from within the British intellectual tradition, was aware that a directly confrontational approach would be self-defeating, so that his particular use of medieval tradition was “an entirely appropriate, if not always completely successful, response to his political vision.” This strikes me as an insight which might be usefully pursued at greater length than Guy is able to pursue it. Perhaps it might also lead to a fuller consideration of exactly how traditional or radical Morris’s use of those narrative traditions is, in both the early poetry and the late romances.

Finally, Barbara Dennis’s scholarly account of Charlotte Yonge brings us in touch with the Oxford Movement, an aspect of Victorian culture that touched Morris as a young man in Oxford and in her popular novel *The Heir of Redclyffe*, but which (though it helped to encourage the church-building that the Firm’s stained glass was to profit from) he was soon to distance himself from. Chapter Seven deals briefly with the relation of the fine arts to the Oxford Movement, concentrating mostly on architecture (the form most interesting to Charlotte Yonge).
Dennis shows how these Ecclesiological interests are reflected in some of Yonge's novels, particularly *Pillars of the House* (1873), which also contains a debate about art and religion in the contrast between a Ruskinian young woman artist and her confused, irreligious painter brother. Maybe a novel to look out for in the second-hand bookshop?

Peter Faulkner


The annual Kelmscott Lecture has become an important event in the William Morris Society's calendar. Many of the lectures have subsequently been published by the Society, bringing the work of leading Morris scholars like John Dreyfus, Barbara Morris and Paul Thompson to a wide readership. This, the text of Peter Faulkner's 1991 lecture, is a worthy addition to the series. Faulkner's work will of course be well-known to many readers. As well as editing this *Journal*, he has made a major contribution to our understanding of Morris's writings and poetry. His *Against the Age: An Introduction to William Morris* (1980) is one of the few introductory texts to do justice to Morris's literary output, and many new researchers have been the beneficiaries of his support and encouragement.

In this lecture, Faulkner addresses the question of 'Englishness', which has been the subject of much recent interest and scholarship, notably in John Lucas's *England and Englishness* (1991). The definition of Englishness was also being attempted in Morris's own time, and Faulkner begins by briefly surveying its different manifestations. These included the contemporary fascination with the English language in its broadest sense, including the study of dialect, folklore and folksong; renewed interest in English literature and art; the beginning of attempts to preserve the English countryside; and above all the expansion of the study of English history. The task is to set Morris in this context, and Faulkner makes the essential point that his declared love for his country was very different both from contemporary patriotism and from 'the emotionless intellectualism of those who deny any feeling for their country at all'. As Morris himself put it in 'Early England', a lecture of 1886, "I am no patriot as the word is generally used; and yet I am not ashamed to say that as for the face of the land we live in I love it with something of the passion of a lover".

The two influences which did most to shape Morris's view were history and landscape, and these form the main themes of the lecture. Of the two, that of English history is developed more fully. Morris's interest in history was awakened at Marlborough, and confirmed by his experiences at Oxford – above all, by his exposure to the Gothic Revival. As yet, though, there was no clear idea of England; Gothic, after all, was an international style, and this led Morris and Burne-Jones to the Continent to see the great cathedrals of northern France. One of the strongest features of the lecture is the way in which Faulkner sets Morris's growing awareness of England's history within the historiographical context. In particular, he emphasises the importance of historians like J.R. Green and E.A. Freeman, who stressed England's Teutonic roots, and took a generally positive view of the Middle Ages. Such views were to be reflected in Morris's own writings and lectures, as he came to the belief that the former England could only be re-created by socialism.
Faulkner then goes on to examine the key lectures in which Morris set out his view of the development of English society, beginning with ‘The Decorative Arts’ (1877), and leading on to ‘Early England’, ‘Feudal England’ and ‘Art and Industry in the Fourteenth Century’ (1886–87), which are discussed in some detail. Also discussed is A Dream of John Ball, in which “Morris successfully integrates his knowledge of the English past with his hope for a new order owing nothing to the spirit of nationalism and everything to the ideal of fellowship”. Finally, Faulkner examines the ways in which Morris’s future world, the world of News from Nowhere, reflects his notions of England’s historical development.

The influence of English landscape, or, to be more precise, ‘bits of England’, as Stephen Yeo puts it, is also considered, though rather less fully. Morris’s childhood on the edge of Epping Forest was of great importance, though his youthful writings primarily drew upon medieval, Northern European, settings, rather than uniquely English ones. However, there are occasional references to Epping Forest in a few early poems, and Faulkner does see aspects of English landscape contributing to some parts of the Earthly Paradise. This is a fascinating topic, which deserves fuller treatment than the lecture format permits. However, it is not until the discussion of News from Nowhere that Faulkner returns to the theme of landscape, reminding us with evident approval that “Morris’s Utopia was unusual in its setting, not no-place but England transformed”, and pointing out how closely Morris’s feeling for the English landscape was related to his sense of history.

This attractively produced pamphlet provides a thoughtful and well-written introduction to an important topic, and should achieve a wide readership.

Jon Press

Mill Road/Merton High Street, London Borough of Merton.
An Archaeological Investigation: Interim Report
Museum of London Archaeology Service, December 1992

This is a report of the investigation of a redevelopment site which lies within the area of the Merton Abbey industrial complex used by William Morris. After the dissolution of the Priory in 1538 the monastic buildings were largely demolished, and in 1724 a “manufactory for printing calicoes” was established. Morris took over a number of eighteenth-century buildings which stood in the area being excavated; one was used as a dormitory for apprentice boys and one as a Meeting Room. The report contains photographs of the building in 1913 and extracts from an oral history interview with Mr D. Griffiths, one of the last apprentices (1934–9). These buildings were destroyed c.1940. The report describes what was discovered after trenches had been driven across the site in the summer of 1992. Though nothing of importance was found from the period when Morris used the factory, the investigators found evidence of earlier medieval occupation and seventeenth- and eighteenth-century buildings and artefacts. The report recommends that the stone-built late medieval walls should be preserved.

Though the Report cannot be purchased, a copy will be kept at Kelmscott House for members to consult.

John Purkis
David Nash, *Secularism, Art and Freedom*

I have only once in my life been to the city of Leicester, a fact which limits the possibility of saying very much about a book which is in the main a local history of secularism in Leicester. In mitigation I offer the information that my one and only visit took place in order to address the Leicester Secular Society on “The Case Against Individualism”.

David Nash has written a work of highly competent scholarship which casts much needed light upon the day-to-day culture and thought of Victorian and Edwardian secularism. Of course, Leicester, with its excellent Secular Hall, built in its current form in the 1880s, is not typical of most urban secular traditions in that it was particularly well organised and enjoyed wide popular support; when a mass meeting was held in the Floral Hall in 1885 to support Bradlaugh’s parliamentary oath agitation “upwards of 2,500 townpeople were present.” (p.133) It is little wonder that one Anglican minister in 1872 regarded the industrial workers of the city as being characterised by “Dissent, Democracy and Drunkenness”. The autodidactic independence of mind of the secularists was a threat to both priests and politicians.

Nash’s study offers interesting insights into the late Victorian struggle between various groups to satisfy the new working-class demand for leisure, and in doing so makes the important points about the inevitable cultural compromise between the supply of rational instruction and the demand for less edifying amusements. Edward Royle has described G.J. Holyoake, whose ideas and personality the Leicester Secular Society reflected, according to Nash, as a pedantic, pretentious snob. Frederick James Gould, a key figure in Leicester secularism, whose ideas and influences are very clearly documented by Nash, seems also to have been in the snobbish tradition of blaming impoverished workers for their cultural plight.

Chapter 9 (pp.145-166) of this book concerns Morris’s visit to the Leicester Secular Society in January 1885, an occasion which Nash claims “had a profound effect on the thinking of most members of the Society, leaving an indelible imprint on Leicester secularism, and indeed wider Leicester society, for years to come.” (p.146) Morris was invited to give either ‘Art Under Plutocracy’ or ‘Art and Socialism’ as his lecture and chose to give the latter. The meeting was publicised in the city by 1,000 window stickers and another 1,000 handbills. Sydney Gimson, who with his brother met Morris from the train and noted that the visitor greeted them as friends and equals, remembered Morris as “an indifferent lecturer”. There is evidence that some present considered Morris to be merely an idealistic dreamer, for Gimson quotes Morris as saying to the committee members after the lecture, “They all think I’m not practical because I write a bit of poetry. I run a good business all right. Because I can’t help stringing a few rhymes together it doesn’t mean I’m not practical.” Not a verbatim quote, one suspects, but probably a fair enough summary of Morris’s sentiments.

Morris’s influence upon the affluent Gimson brothers is fully described by Nash. Ernest, whose discussion with Morris after the 1885 lecture went on until the early hours of the next morning, became an architect, much influenced by the Arts and Crafts movement. In 1890 he entered into a partnership to form a firm of furniture designers. “He insisted that the same craftsman should be involved in the total production of any piece. Thus his workmen were encouraged to follow a piece of furniture from its cutting out from roughly hewn wood to its final polishing.” (p.151)
Ernest played a major part in the design of his brother Sydney’s pastoral retreat of Stoneywell, built on the site of the medieval priory of Ulverscroft. As a man whose wealth derived from Leicester’s expanding engineering industry, Sydney Gimson had little time for his brother’s respect for the Arts and Crafts or the political ideas of Morris; instead, his response to Morris amounted to no more than an individualistic retreat from urban ugliness. Indeed, neither of the Gimson brothers was to accept Morris’s socialism: proof that both rationalists and aesthetes could square the circle of being inspired by what Morris had to say about Art without bothering their heads with why it was that he said it.

Morris’s visit to Leicester had an impact upon other secularists than the middle-class Gimsons. In 1866 a branch of the Socialist League was formed in Leicester and met in the Secular Hall. Its mainstay, who had been at Morris’s lecture, was the working-class autodidact, Tom Barclay. The link between secularism and socialism, not just as rational critiques but as cultural responses, was well stated by Barclay in his highly readable *Autobiography of a Bottlewasher*:

The slave, wage slave or otherwise, does not know he is such. If he learns that he is, and becomes a rebel, what support does he get from his fellow slaves? Some are concentrated on ‘the next world’, saving their souls: some are absorbed by trivialities: football, cricket and horse racing; you’d think they must be capitalists and millionaires: and some are breaking their hearts and risking their health in desperate efforts to cease being proletaires and rank themselves amongst the capitalists.

Not much has changed. David Nash’s readable book has reminded me that I must return to the Leicester Secular Hall before too long.

Stephen Coleman