Reviews

Fiona MacCarthy, William Morris. *A Life for Our Times*. Faber and Faber, 1994. 780 pp. 34 colour and 175 black-and-white illustrations. £25.00

Handsomeley produced, more fully and variously illustrated than any previous book on Morris, flowingly written, Fiona MacCarthy's labour of love will win many new admirers for him, and open new ideas for old friends. Labour of love indeed; for its intended four years to production had to be extended to five, so much and so various is the material, so extended the search that has given this crown to the century of Morris studies since his death in 1896.

'Morris for our Time' it is subtitled, and timely too in days when his example and his ideas are more than ever needed to sustain and inspire us in a world yet more horrific than he knew. Every conceivable source - and as the author says, sources have been places no less than documents: places where Morris worked, lived, travelled - all have been tapped and scrutinised: the old ones, and many new. Among these, the letters of his last years, which Norman Kelvin has been gathering and annotating for the last volume of his *Collected Letters*. Such a book is not written by sitting comfortably, stroking the keys of the word-processor.

In the ever-increasing succession of books on Morris, several have, from time to time, attempted what has been attempted here: the seeing, and presenting, of the whole man. Something like this it was for half a century assumed that the most famous, Mackail's, had achieved: and it will always remain uniquely captivating for its evocations of Morris's vigorous days from childhood to the end. But gradually it became clearer and clearer that there was more to tell, much that Mackail had not known, and that he had not been allowed to tell, by Burne-Jones, who commissioned him. Still in the Centenary year of 1934 Mackail held the field, but there began to be signs of change: and when in 1950 Philip Henderson's *Letters of William Morris to his Family and Friends* appeared the way was opened up for more illuminating material to help generate more books. It will be worth while to take a brief overview and to note factors that have made MacCarthy's book possible: not least of which is the steady growth of interest in the man and his works. Changes in the nature of publishing have made acceptable to the public, as to the publishers, the big biography - of which the Longford family have been such conspicuous exponents. Biographies have again been published on the large scale of Morris's own century, though the nineteenth-century three decker has been reconstituted in massive single volumes, with illustrations rare in those days, and making free use of personal and intimate material such as was more often than not kept secret but is now - and more and more as television invades the field - not only permitted but expected. This gave new scope for the vastly increased and accessible material. Now a book on a fitting scale became possible; Morris could be dealt with generously in all his range: and not only a larger factual account, but more inquiry, more speculation, more subtlety became possible. This is much to our advantage as readers and students. To the advantage of the author too, but an advantage coupled with a heavier burden. Even with Morris, whose life is so closely defined by his successive but recurrently overlapping fields of work, the more material and its implications, the more diligent effort is needed to understand
connections, secure the significant facts, including often anecdotal matter from unexpected, improbable sources - to miss nothing, but to find out, too, the limits of significance of every fragment seen in the kaleidoscope. As time passes, the immediacy of first inquiry may distance us from first notes taken: a small error of transcription may lead us into a dubious conclusion. The scope and shaping of the whole must always be kept in mind: and our perceptions of these change as we grow into the material... It is not surprising that this book called for that extra year.

Not only factual information has been taken in and re-ordered: the author is beset by the existing literature - which in Morris's case has been increasing year by year - not only in substantial full-length books but in published papers - most, in the nature of things, arguing a case - all of which must be examined, and which may or may not modify the author's own stance or open up unsuspected issues not to be ignored. To this our attention is called early in the book: "We have had the Marxist Morris, the Freudian Morris, the Jungian Morris, and now the Green Morris." And other instances could be added: but this is not quite so simple as it seems. A Freudian Morris, a Jungian Morris, must be a matter of esoteric speculation: but in respect of concerns political or environmental, we call Morris's own word and actions in aid. We have, ever since E.P. Thompson, ample evidence of Morris's study and use of Marxism: much the same can be said of the 'Green' Morris: whether we have had a Marxist account of Morris is quite another thing. It has been the intention of this author not to limit Morris to one plane of interpretation: but naturally what we have at the end of the 680 pages is her Morris: these pages must persuade that this is the largest, most valid view that is now available - for our time. The only way to get at him for our time is to secure him in his own, see what he did, what ideas he evolved to understand and deal with the crafts he must practise, the needs of his enterprises, the demands of love and friendship, the social problems he saw, with outrage - a large field of activity making another kind of moral and intellectual demand on his amazing resources. We shall serve neither him nor ourselves by imposing on him and his deeds the shifting circumstances and equally shifting - and loaded - language of the ending of the twentieth century. The matter of language is important for such a man, poet, lecturer, theoretician and romancer. Often his has been thought artificial, obscure with antique word and phrase. But all depends on the use he is making of it: he is much more various than most. His sense of language is of structure, meaning, concreteness: early influenced by Trench's Study of Words. This strong sense of language served him well in The Defence of Guenevere, filling its poems with physical immediacy, colour, astonishment, something heraldic: it served him no less in beating out his ideas, from the first lecture on 'The Decorative Arts' to his later deliveries on art and social order, on work and labour, on socialist theory. And in the precious series of detailed letters to Thomas Wardle, it helps us, as it helped Wardle, to know precisely what Morris needed, and would have, for his great new textile enterprise.

There are long-standing themes which any account of Morris must address; and they are addressed here, all, I think and sometimes in surprising ways. At the outset, the author has chosen to explore the personality in terms of the special identity, the difference from family which he so early displays, his oddity, as recorded from schooldays at Marlborough by several contemporaries: that "rum and indescribable deportment" which at first astonished, then endeared him to later friends, from the Oxford Set - but which must often have been frightening as well, with its sudden
flashes into violence, and instantly out again, which made him a constant butt, especially for practical jokes. The suggestion that his relation with friends, especially with Rossetti from early to late days might well be seen as sado-masochistic is well presented and credible: but I find less than convincing the idea that the famous rages are somehow linked to native genius, and am surprised to find Bernard Shaw's long-explored fantasy of 1949 resurrected. Instant brief rage such as Morris experienced from childhood; epilepsy which Jenny suffered from the age of sixteen; and genius; do not add up to a meaningful syndrome: echoes of "genius is to madness near allied" get us no nearer to Morris. Shaw in describing these outbursts as 'eclampsias' was pretending to a scientific knowledge he did not possess.

Advantage has been taken of access to the remaining letters which will be presented in Norman Kelvin's final volume: and this has enabled a much fuller account of Morris's last days, the care and concern of friends, the nature of the complex of illnesses which killed him: indeed the whole family relationship between Morris and Jane as they moved into age, the stress, not only for the parents but for May, of Jenny's incapacity, as well as the sad and bizarre relations between May and Shaw and Sparling, are all well and often movingly dealt with. And in discussing the restraint laid on Mackail in the writing of the Life, by Burne-Jones, it is suggested, and credibly, that much as Morris loved him, constant companions as they were, two other friends have equal claim to relationships as strong as his: Webb, the silent, from whom in Street's office Morris said he first learned about socialism - as well as drains - and Faulkner, helpless with a stroke from 1888, dying in 1892; self-effacing like Webb, and like Webb, close to Morris in his sense of social responsibility. Webb, too, had a special sympathy for Jane, knew about her childhood, understood her rejection of it. He if anybody might have explained the source of her silences.

The relationship with the Wardles - George and brother-in-law Thomas - is of great importance - to all three men, and much good use has been made of that invaluable cache of Morris's letters to Tom Wardle during their researches together at Hencroft. Tom Wardle is shown as he was, a man as powerful and tenacious as Morris but of calmer temperament: this account seems to run out with Morris's vehement and closely worded letters of complaint about the carelessness in printing his fabrics: but whatever coolness may have fallen between them was repaired, they worked together if not by way of trade, then in common causes of conservation, and one of Morris's very last letters is to Wardle, remembering their days in Derbyshire and Leek. George Wardle presents more of a problem: but in spite of his reserve and self-effacement, partly consequent on the fact of being married to Madeleine Smith of the famous poisoning trial of 1857, he understood Morris extremely well, took the steps or caused Morris to take them, that made Queen Square the base from which Morris began his dyeing experiments, and when these called for more than an old sink in the basement, arranged for Morris to work with Tom Wardle in Leek. Now this, at some remove in time, gave back to Morris, changed in form, the intended enterprise of Red House, where Morris as workmaster and chief designer should be free of the tangle that the Firm had become to him. But perhaps it is no longer possible to retrieve more about George Wardle: he may well have taken good care of that.

An unavoidable difficulty in writing any book on Morris - other than one confined to technicalities - is Rossetti. His powerful presence - well attested by all the characters in the Morris story, not least by Morris - has pulled much writing on Morris (and
others) out of focus, and made various versions of the famous triangle the centre of the scene. Important as this relationship was, it has led to a lot of speculation as to its genesis and nature, and taken attention away from Morris’s work and ideas. There is a strong tendency for students of the Victorians, of the Pre-Raphaelites, of the world of Arts and Crafts, to stand on either side of a line between Rossetti and Morris: Rossetti, not least in the USA, commanding a romantic interest, redefining the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, diminishing Morris — though not that other disciple, Burne-Jones, whose ultimate aestheticism is easily aligned with Rossetti’s, while Morris’s art in all its variety is edged from the centre and spelled always with a small A. “They never threw together after the first year or two”, said Webb. From the moment when Jones introduced Morris to Rossetti in the summer of 1856, Gabriel, not many years older and still very unsure of himself as an artist, exercised hypnotic influence on them: “I have got beyond that”, Morris is quoted as saying, “I want to be as much like Gabriel as I can”. It cannot be denied that Rossetti had as strong an intellect as imagination: perhaps stronger: had too, as his devoted brother says, a shrewd business instinct, the instinct of a trained financier . . . Charming and generous as he could be, and enormously encouraging where, as in the case of Jones and Morris, he saw genius, he was all the same tenaciously self-centred: the whole of his relationship with Lizzie Siddal shows this.

That his intrusion into the Morris–Jane relationship not only destroyed (in a certain sense) their marriage is clear — that it no less brought about the destruction of the Firm is equally clear, though this has been looked at only as brought about by a one-sided act of Morris’s. But what was the Firm, what was its history? Mackail’s presentation of this is defective, however attractive, one of many things which justify Jane’s remark after the Life was published — that “Mackail was not an artist so did not understand such a man”. His easy story buttressed by Ned’s is that the Red House was built to be the House Beautiful: that in setting up this home in the country Morris could find nothing fit to furnish it, so set to work making what was not there to be bought. Whatever small measure of truth there is in this, it fails entirely to take into account Morris’s way from Beaumont Street and Street’s office to the acre and a quarter in Upton near Bexley. It was to be the base for a creative life in which Morris with friends would design and make fine domestic objects and furnishings — it was not conceived as the loose Artists’ Co-operative into which it was turned as 1861 opened before the seven partners. Gabriel, alarmed at seeing his acolyte geniuses take wing on their own account — Morris especially, who was poet as well as artist, but also had money, was seen from the outset as patron — travestied the real Red House — which now ceased to be the centre of Morris’s creative work, drawn back by Gabriel to Red Lion Square. When in 1873, Webb, seeing the disruption caused by the changed relationship between Jane and Rossetti, Morris and Rossetti — and knowing full well how Madox Brown distrusted this — wrote formally to propose the disbandment of the Firm, he was but suggesting a new order in which the original project could resume its course.

These are examples of areas of particular importance for understanding Morris, about all of which Fiona MacCarthy has illuminating things to say. Here we are indeed offered Morris whole. While closely re-examined, the steady march of his life from enterprise to enterprise, aspiration to aspiration, is maintained. People and events and precious places all keep their distinct life with that order which Morris so
loved: an order of living, a comprehensive flow, the great river of experience, always so vivid to him. We have been given a new guide and what we share in future with Morris and his friends – many friends – will never be the same again. Because he was the man he was, all will continue to have physical and moral presence, such as lives in the great Iceland Journals, but no less in the few words which in a letter evoke the flowers of Kelmscott, the scent of a childhood garden. Morris, in all his variety of work, was never isolated. Whether illuminating a page of poetry, designing a carpet, writing a letter, his remarkable power of concentration enabled him to go on doing three or four things ready to his hand – without distraction or confusion: so he is never alone. A social being above all, he is always in a recognisable space. No dreamer, a hater of abstraction, he was always somewhere – not least in NOWHERE, to which he always points us.

Ray Watkinson


This is the first of the seven books in ‘The William Morris Library’, a series covering Morris as poet, theorist of art, writer of romances, craftsman as well as socialist. Nicholas Salmon has brought together in a single volume the more substantial of Morris’s articles and policy statements from Justice and Commonweal over the period 1884 to 1890.

This volume is not intended as a complete record of all Morris’s articles in the two socialist journals. It omits most of his short ‘Notes’ and announcements, presumably judged too ephemeral – as editor of Commonweal Morris was frequently called on to write ‘fillers’. A Dream of John Ball and News From Nowhere were originally published in serial form in Commonweal and have understandably been left out. Some have Morris’s poems which, although written as socialist propaganda (as it was called), are not strictly speaking articles.

The lectures ‘Signs of the Times’, ‘Whigs, Democrats and Socialists’, ‘How We Live and How We Might Live’, ‘Feudal England’, ‘The Society of the Future’, ‘Monopoly’ and ‘The Development of Modern Society’ are also omitted as being available elsewhere. But the long series of articles, contributed to Commonweal from 1886 to 1888, and which was later expanded and published in Morris’s lifetime as the book Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome, is included and takes up one-sixth of the volume.

Most of the articles are from Commonweal, since Morris stopped writing for Justice after he left the Social Democratic Federation and helped set up the rival Socialist League at the end of 1884. Some have appeared elsewhere (I recall having read ‘Work in a Factory as It Might Be’ and a few of the other articles in other selections), but most have never been republished before. The articles are republished in their original form, including misprints and spelling mistakes. It is not clear why, but this explains the appearance in the text of the occasional ‘sic’, not always appropriately since Morris’s ‘develop’ is a perfectly legitimate alternative spelling of ‘develop’.

The articles themselves make fascinating reading as a socialist commentary on the events of a period which covers the tail-end of the second Gladstone government
(whose imperialist policies were a contributory factor to Morris moving from being a Liberal to being a Socialist), the first elections under the Third Reform Act of 1885, the defeat of Gladstone’s Irish Home Rule Bill, the Great Depression of the 1880s, and the tough law-and-order policies of the Tory government which came into office in 1886 and was still there when Morris stopped contributing to Commonweal at the end of 1890. They confirm Morris as having been not only an eloquent advocate of pure Socialism (which was already evident from his previously republished lectures), but also as a skilful socialist journalist, ably analysing contemporary events with a fine knowledge of socialist theory and tactics.

As one of the foremost experts on Morris’s political views in this period, Nicholas Salmon provides a useful forty-page introduction. However, although Morris might not have objected to his views on socialist tactics being described as ‘purist’, he most certainly would to being called a ‘British politician’ (p. xlviii). Political activist perhaps, but surely he would have gone into one of his notorious rages if someone had dared to call him a ‘politician’.

Adam Buick


It is perhaps Morris’s poetry that has least benefited from the sustained revaluation that has been effected with respect to all the other areas of his work. Even in the pages of this journal, Edward Hollamby has recently remarked that Morris is not now noted for the skill of his poetry – and this despite the fact that in his own time he was perhaps best known as a poet. Perhaps the nadir of his reputation as a poet can be found in Tim Hilton’s 1970 book on the Pre-Raphaelites, a book anyway largely hostile to Morris, in which his poetry is simply dismissed (along with the wallpaper designs) as ‘boring’ – though of course it would be possible to cite counter evidence, not least Peter Faulkner’s long-term championing of the early poetry especially. So it is especially heartening to see two books published almost simultaneously which seek to effect major revaluations of the poetry, and which both concentrate, strikingly, on precisely the early verse. The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems is the volume that seizes the attention of Isobel Armstrong and Jerome McGann, though in very different terms. In both cases the argument about Morris’s poetry is made as part of wider arguments about nineteenth- and twentieth-century poetry.

I have no hesitation in saying that Isobel Armstrong’s book, Victorian Poetry, is destined to become the major reference point on its topic for this generation. It is, by any standards, a remarkable piece of scholarship, seeking to locate the nineteenth-century poets in their opposing and overlapping cultural and political milieux. The accounts she gives of both the poems and their cultural politics are dense and sometimes challenging, but always worthwhile – she brilliantly and persuasively demonstrates how the opposing intellectual formations of Tennyson and Browning offer contrasting models or possibilities for subsequent nineteenth-century poetry.
How does Morris fare in this context? In a chapter called ‘A new radical aesthetic; the Grotesque as cultural critique’, Morris’s early poetry is seen as taking on the heartland of conservative, Tennysonian, aesthetics – the land of myth – and wresting it to radical ends. The key intellectual figure who enables this attempt, in Armstrong’s account, is John Ruskin.

It comes as no surprise, of course, to see Ruskin brought forward as Morris’s intellectual forebear, but this is not the familiar Ruskin that we are offered. Armstrong points us in the direction of, not so much the author of ‘The Nature of Gothic’, as the writer on the ‘Grotesque Renaissance’ from the third volume of The Stones of Venice. Readers of those volumes will recall that Ruskin postpones his discussion of the Grotesque – one of the characteristics of Gothic – from the chapter devoted to that topic to the penultimate chapter of the book, in order to develop with appropriate space the fundamental distinctions he wishes to make between the powerful and benign Gothic grotesque, and the wholly degenerate Renaissance grotesque. In a virtuoso argument, Armstrong seizes all the way that Ruskin locates these different types of grotesque in the divisions of labour which produce them. Morris’s early poetry, she argues, is dialectical in that it uses the categories of the grotesque, produced by the servile conditions of nineteenth-century labour, to think the mythical materials it handles. The unlocated speaking voice of many of these poems, the unsettling use of ballad forms, the disturbing violence and the highly charged and explicit eroticism of the poetry, are all forms of a grotesque aesthetic which implicitly mounts a critique of the conditions in which the poetry is produced.

This is a powerful but difficult argument to make, and one which takes us to the central question to be asked about Morris’s poetry – and indeed, not just the poetry, but the whole evocation of the medieval past which characterizes not just his life’s work, but a whole phase of nineteenth-century cultural history. Is the poetry to be seen as symptomatic of personal and cultural alienation, or diagnostic of it? Does the poetry uncritically inhabit the splits and contradictions of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism, or does it hold up those splits and contradictions to critical analysis? As readers, are we in the position of Jehane, at the end of ‘The Haystack in the Floods’ – who, it will be recalled, can only confront her terrible position “with a rueful smile, As though this thing had made her mad”. Or does the poetry offer us another position in which we are better placed to see and understand the horror of her – and our – position? Armstrong’s case, ambitious and perhaps not always wholly persuasive, though always searching and engaging, is strongly that the poetry uses the categories of the grotesque to diagnose the splits of the nineteenth-century world.

McGann approaches the poetry from a wholly different angle, but though he has very different things to say about the poetry, the two books are not finally incompatible. McGann writes as the author of a series of books about Romantic, nineteenth-century, and twentieth-century poetry, which have as their distinctive focus the material history of the poetry in their successive editions. He is thus well placed to write about Morris’s poetry, and he argues that Morris’s interest in the material form of the poetry can be dated right from the first edition of The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems in 1858, long before the more obvious interest in these questions represented by the Kelmscott Press itself. Morris used Bell and Daldy as publishers of the poems, who in turn used the Chiswick Press as printers, described
by McGann as "one of the few fine-printing houses then operating in England" (p.47). Some thirty years before the Kelmscott Press, and before that Press's own beautiful edition of The Defence of Guenevere, Morris was evincing a concern for the material quality of his writings as art-objects in their own right.

But this is only a small aspect of the case made by McGann, whose book is one of the most distinctive and original accounts of the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century poetry that I know of. Briefly his argument is this: that Morris can be seen as one of the main precursors of modernist poetry precisely because of his interest in the material existence of his writing. This is not simply because of the widespread early twentieth-century interest in fine art printing, which meant that so many of the modernist writers were first published in the myriad fine art presses that abounded in the wake of the Kelmscott Press. More generally, McGann's case is that Morris's very interest in the material existence of the poetry acts to draw the attention of the reader to the poetry's formal qualities, in a way that precisely anticipates the self-referential qualities of modernist writing. But this makes the argument sound aridly formalistic; quite to the contrary, because McGann is so evidently expert and enthusiastic about the bibliographical matters he discusses, the argument has a freshness and attractiveness which might not be anticipated. This is even apparent in the material form of McGann's own book; it too is beautifully produced, with lots of reproductions of pages from Morris's writings, and indeed from the avant-garde poetry of the twentieth century. Morris's own dialectical account — how, in the process of history, "men fight and lose the battle, and the thing they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out to be not what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name" — is here remarkably exemplified: in the production of this book — produced, doubtless, with the aid of the most high-tech wizardry — something of the aims of Morris's craft methods has been, extraordinarily, achieved.

McGann's account of the early poetry has several aspects. In the first place, it offers a revaluation of the poetry — especially poems like 'Golden Wings' — as requiring, by their insistence on their own materiality, a reading which pays attention to the force and particularity of their perceptions. The poems thus form part of a tradition of Romantic and nineteenth-century poetry which acts to cleanse the doors of perception — and the allusion to Blake is apt, because McGann convincingly offers Blake as a forerunner of Morris in this respect, where the material existence of the poems and their illustrations form part of their rhetoric. This aspect of the argument is mounted with especial reference to A Book of Verse, the unique illustrated collection of poems produced by Morris in 1870 with the collaboration of Charles Fairfax Murray, Burne-Jones, and George Wardle. McGann makes some of the most persuasive accounts of these poems as material objects with respect to the poems in this volume. Finally — and this is where the argument begins to coincide with the argument made by Isobel Armstrong — the very emphasis on fine printing means that the texts themselves, as material objects, exemplify the very arguments about industrial capitalist production and craft production that Morris and Ruskin were making. The proof of the pudding, in this account, is in your hands as you read.

So here are two very different, ambitious, and original re-readings of nineteenth-century poetry which both afford an important place — in McGann's case, a central place — to Morris's early poetry. Armstrong's book is perhaps better placed, by its
emphasis on the grotesque, to address the unsettling, indeed disturbing, quality of these early poems; while McGann writes very well not only on the material existence of this poetry, but on its capacity to hold the reader’s attention on the renovations in perception that the poems effect. The strength of both these books together is that they claim an important place for Morris’s early poetry in the light of the larger movements and transitions of English poetry. The case has certainly been made elsewhere for Morris’s later poetry, but not in such ambitious and wide-ranging contexts. It remains to be seen whether such a different case could be made.

Simon Dentith


This cryptic title may ring a bell with readers of The Book Collector where this text first appeared in vol. 25 no. 4 (Winter 1976) on pp.491–506. Readers of The Journal of the William Morris Society will probably remember T.J. Cobden-Sanderson as a prominent figure in the Arts & Crafts Exhibition Society, but the reference to his two-handed engine may well puzzle them. For it alludes to a couple of lines from John Milton’s Lycidas (1637) which Cobden-Sanderson quoted in his unpublished manuscript written in 1919 – ‘Pro Iraundia sua Apologia’.

His wrath had been directed fiercely between 1902 and 1908 against Emery Walker, his former partner in the Doves Press. Below the title of his ‘Apologia’ (an attempt to defend and vindicate his angry behaviour towards Walker), Cobden-Sanderson had written:

But that two-handed engine at the door
Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more.

Exactly why he quoted these lines is not entirely clear. Sadly, what is all too clear is that he was prone to smite his friends with devastating scorn. Writing of Morris on 8th December 1905 in his journal, Cobden-Sanderson declared: “He should have become an architect, a master builder; he became instead – an upholsterer.” That was a wounding phrase to use against the memory of a man who, with his wife Jane, had encouraged him to take up bookbinding at the age of forty-three and to abandon the legal career in which he had lost heart. Both Walker and Morris has been on friendly terms with Cobden-Sanderson, and both had collaborated with him on book production at the Kelmscott Press. All three had worked together in the Arts & Crafts Exhibition Society.

Cobden-Sanderson’s friendship with Walker began in 1885. Its development can be gauged from a book inscribed in January 1896: ‘To a perfect friend, an imperfect souvenir. To E.W. from T.J.C-S.’ That Cobden-Sanderson was conscious of his own defects is plain from his journal for 28th September 1902 when he admitted that he had “a bias to fault-finding – to carping – to envy, hatred and malice”. A much harsher view was held by a former employee in Cobden-Sanderson’s Doves Bindery: Douglas Cockerell, brother of Sydney who was the Secretary at the Kelmscott Press, declared that “Cobden-Sanderson’s egotism was almost entire and he was insanely jealous of any reputation, even Morris’s, that might rival his own. He lived in a world of his...
own creation, swayed by emotional storms of great intensity, and I doubt if he was capable of true friendship."

The strain which caused a breakdown in the friendship between Cobden-Sanderson and Walker was aggravated by false assumptions made by both men about their respective roles as partners in the Doves Press, and it was a main factor in the partnership being terminated in 1908. By then Cobden-Sanderson was utterly determined to have sole control in deciding what titles should be published and on every aspect of their design and production. At the outset of their venture, Walker contributed everything which his partner was unable to provide except for capital, which was put up by his partner's wife, Annie Cobden-Sanderson. Their first need was a new type for the exclusive use of their Press. As neither partner was capable of designing a new typeface, it was based upon roman types popular in Venice in the last decades of the fifteenth century. Walker had photos made of these types which formed the basis of drawings inked over the enlarged photographs made by Walker's draughtsman. Walker himself supervised the punchcutting and typecasting; he also supervised the setting up of the printing plant and the recruitment of staff. When all was in place, he made brief daily visits to check that production standards were maintained.

Cobden-Sanderson had his own ideas about The Ideal Book or the Book Beautiful: his tract on this subject was printed and published as the second book from the Doves Press in 1902. He also commissioned an illuminated manuscript of his tract from the calligrapher, Edward Johnston, with whom Cobden-Sanderson had studied lettering. Johnston's lettering was a feature of many Doves Press books, none of which were ever illustrated. Walker had an expert knowledge of book illustration and disliked the way Johnston's lettering was used in some Doves Press books.

Their most serious disagreement was over the use of the Doves Press type. Unfortunately Cobden-Sanderson came to regard it as an essential part of his concept of The Ideal Book, and he could not tolerate the idea that a fount of the Doves Press type might pass into the hands of his former partner, despite the fact that in the written agreement which brought their partnership to an end, it was specified that Walker was entitled to a single fount of the type for his own use if he survived his former partner. That eventuality became so unbearable for Cobden-Sanderson to contemplate that he made up his mind to destroy the Doves Press type, punches and matrices by throwing them into the Thames.

As early as June 1909 he warned Sydney Cockerell, Walker's previous partner, that "a two-handed engine stands ready at the door and when the seasons have revolved it will be my turn to strike, to strike once and strike no more!" News of this wanton act of destruction was first challenged by Walker's solicitors in a letter they wrote on 19th April 1917 to The Times Literary Supplement which had published a review of the Catalogue Raisonné of Books Printed at the Doves Press 1900–1916. In this catalogue the destruction of the Doves Press type was mentioned: ever since, its legality and morality has often been debated.

Many of the sources where this controversy can be followed are listed in the 'Bibliography' which has been added to this new edition of Mr Nash's text of 1976. The works cited include several which were published after 1976. Mr Nash tells a complicated story with wit and style. He quotes from the memoirs of a fellow-American, William Dana Orcutt – "would-be novelist and president of the Society of Printers in Boston" – who began by revering Cobden-Sanderson as the equal of
Morris, but later regretted that he and others had placed a halo over Cobden-
Sanderson’s head to which he had no possible claim.

Mr Nash concludes that “a re-evaluation of Cobden-Sanderson’s largely self-created
role in printing history is long overdue”. I once tried to do that in an essay on ‘Cobden-
Sanderson’s partnership with Emery Walker’ in Cobden-Sanderson. The Master
Craftsman (The Adagio Press, Harper Woods, 1969). In my essay I printed for the first
time some of the unpublished letters written by Cobden-Sanderson which were included
in ‘Pro Iracundia sua Apologia’ (a manuscript which is now in the Stouse Collection at
the Bancroft Library at Berkeley, Banc Mss 83/3z). Mr Nash disagrees with my remark
made in 1969 after reading that manuscript when I wrote that “the typographical
distinction of the Doves Press must go to Cobden-Sanderson”. I agree with Mr Nash
that Walker deserves credit for supervising the creation of the Doves Press type, and
also for setting up the printing-house and establishing its standards of presswork. I also
agree whole-heartedly that Cobden-Sanderson had no justification for using his ‘two-
handed engine’ to deprive his partner of his fount of the Doves Press type. Nevertheless,
I still believe that the typographical distinction of the Doves Press books, especially the
choice of titles, layout, and use of Johnston’s lettering, was due to Cobden-Sanderson,
whose views on The Ideal Book or the Book Beautiful had been set down on paper
before the two incompatible partners joined forces.

John Dreyfus

William Morris, The Tables Turned, or Nupkins Awakened
Edited and with an introduction by Pamela Bracken Wiens.
Ohio University Press, Athens, Ohio. 99 pp. $29.95.

Readers of The Journal will remember Pamela Bracken Wiens’ article in the spring
of 1991 on Morris’s little-known play. Now she has placed Morris enthusiasts further
in her debt by producing a model edition of it, on which she and Ohio University
Press are to be warmly congratulated. It is a very attractive piece of book-making
(though I’m a little puzzled by the cover-decoration) which now makes accessible for
the first time, outside May Morris’s William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist, this
intriguing work.

The Introduction is thorough and informative, showing that Morris devoted a good
deal of time and energy to the play, in which he famously took the part of the
Archbishop of Canterbury – one of the three witnesses, together with Lord Tennyson
and the scientist Professor Tyndall, representing the anti-socialist but rather
bewildered Establishment. (Tennyson’s last remark is “I don’t want to understand
Socialism: it doesn’t belong to my time”.) We are shown how the play’s concern with
the prosecution of socialists on the grounds of obstruction arose from the events of
1887 (Nicholas Salmon has recently remarked in his Introduction to Morris’s Political
Writings that “the campaign for free speech was rarely absent from the pages of
Commonweal” throughout the period 1885-7). We are also shown how the optimistic
vision of the second, post-revolutionary Part may be related to News from Nowhere.
Wiens also relates the play to some recent discussions of the development of socialist
theatre, of which it is a predecessor.

One remark in the Introduction did, however, strike me as surprising, when Wiens
says that the play will seem uncharacteristic of Morris to some readers aware of his "better known sensibilities":

The sarcastic humour, contemporary parody, and overall realistic ambience of especially Part I seem far removed from Morris's medievalesque temper... [Walter] Crane's masque, Beauty's Awakening: A Masque of Winter and Spring (1899), for example, offers the kind of visual tableaux and ideological correctness we might expect of a Morris drama. (p.27)

Is such a "medievalesque-tempered" Morris still the usual image of him? I shouldn't have thought so. If it is, this play will certainly help to modify it. Wiens praises the "conversational prose" of Morris's dialogues in Commonweal by contrast with Mary Pinch's rather undramatic speech in Part I of the play. The fact that the first three of the dialogues (now available in Salmon's Political Writings) were written in 1887 – 'The Reward of Labour' in May, 'The Boy Farms at Fault' in July and 'Honesty is the Best Policy' in November – suggest that Morris was working consistently at this kind of dialogue at the time. That he moved away from it subsequently (and never wrote the second play which Yeats referred to in a letter of 1888) is a matter for some regret. Certainly The Tables Turned benefits from some lively dialogue, although my own favourite speech is that in which Mr. Hungary, Q.C., the prosecutor, differentiates between the various socialist groups, selecting the Fabian Democratic Parliamentary League for particular opprobrium, because it

exacts from every applicant a proof of some special deed of ferocity before admission, the most guilty of their champions veiling their crimes under the specious pretexts of vegetarianism, the scientific investigation of supernatural phenomena, vulgarly called ghost-catching, political economy, and other occult and dull studies.

The irony of this contrasts nicely with the song of the socialists at the end of the play, as they dance round Citizen Nupkins, singing to the tune of the Carmagnole:

What's this that the days and the days have done?
Man's lordship over man hath gone.

How fares it then, with high and low?
Equal on earth, they thrive and grow.

It is an enrichment of our overall sense of Morris to have this work drawn to our attention by this fine publication.

Peter Faulkner


Rarely is published a book which manages to combine thematically stimulating ideas with such a mass of irritatingly erroneous nonsense. Szczelkun's thesis is that certain middle-class converts to working-class improvement, specifically those named in the book's title, were in reality seeking to use their own culture of good taste as a means
of dominating workers: “This book follows the lives of three men who were influential in the direction of this cultural oppression . . . who managed to repress and stymie the development of urban working class culture in the 20th century.” (p.3) Morris, we are informed, offered the workers a “vision of and for his own class” and this consisted of “diversionary fantasies.” (p.36) Nobody can accuse Mr Szczelkun of measured understatement.

The easiest response to this book is to cast it aside on the grounds of its numerous errors (not only relating to Morris, incidentally, but we shall confine ourselves to those only). Aveling was not Engels’ son-in-law, as stated on page 24 but Marx’s; to describe News From Nowhere as depicting “a romantic feudal style of socialism” (p.35) is not only linguistically confused in its suggestion that social equality and aristocratic hierarchy could be advocated simultaneously, but betrays an obvious non-reading (or perhaps non-reading) of the utopian novel in question; worse still, the claim that Morris helped to form “an arcadian ethos that became a cornerstone of modern nationalism” (p.21) and even inspired millions of workers to die for England in the First World War (p.6) misses entirely Morris’s fierce hostility to nationalism and imperialism which pervaded his political life. (Contrast with this nonsense Peter Faulkner’s excellent published 1992 Kelmscott lecture, William Morris and the Idea of England.)

These errors aside, this book does have a case to make. It is that too frequently the socialist movement has been blighted by the elitism of those who have descended upon it from above as leaders, but have never really believed in the capacity of (to use that awful piece of cultural shorthand) ‘ordinary working people’ to think and act for themselves. “The problem for these leaders of men, who felt that they were pioneers in a new social order, was that they knew little about the people that they were meant to be leading.” (p.28) There is much of historical value in this claim and it is just a pity that Stefan Szczelkun makes his case so inadequately. A couple of worthwhile strikes against Morris’s alleged class paternalism come close to their target. Using Jan Marsh’s biographical study as source, the claim is made that Jane Burden was the victim of a mixture of sexual idealisation and cultural subordination (p.19) and, amusingly, we are informed of how the Bradford working-class poet, Fred Henderson, upon seeking literary advice from Morris, was urged to imitate Tennyson and read Beowulf and Homer. (p.34)

The underlying belief (article of faith, perhaps) within this book is that there is something somehow wholesome and pure about ‘working-class culture’. This is not the place to dispute that romanticised and deeply flawed perspective, beyond noting that workers have broken strikes as well as fought them, been racists and fascists as well as (sadly, more often than) anti-racists and anti-fascists, and have sung offensive ‘culturally autonomous’ rugby songs at least as often as songs of struggle. Szczelkun may wish to elevate upon a pedestal of proletarian authenticity such figures as Tom Maguire and Dan Chatterton, but readers should not be blinded to the facts that Maguire ultimately sold out to Fabian reformism, Chatterton is mainly remembered as a spouter of impotently pro-violent anarchistic drivel, whereas at least Morris stayed true to revolutionary socialist principles until the end of his days. I have attempted to argue in a previous issue of The Journal (Autumn, 1994) that Morris’s politics were marked by a distinct absence of elitism, and it is within the context of that argument that this book remains so utterly unconvincing.

Stephen Coleman

There has long been a need for a scholarly history of the SDF; Archbold and Lee’s partisan account is outdated and incomplete and Tsuzuki’s political biography of Hyndman and his SDF, itself over thirty-years old, over-emphasises the role of Hyndman the leader at the expense of recognising that a real Marxian socialist movement was emerging in Britain in the 1880s. Of course, this was the organisation with which Morris threw his lot in 1883 and which, at the end of the following year, he seceded from, together with most of its other decent socialist thinkers. Morris rejected Hyndman’s ‘Bismarckian State Socialism’, as well as his support for a palliative programme and electoral dealing. Crick devotes only two pages to the split (pp. 38–39) and fails to connect it with the later ‘impossibilist’ splits of 1903-4 (which are dealt with more extensively in chapter XI), even though one can well see these departures from the SDF as being about very similar principles and policies.

As a study of the SDF this is a valuable book, although it casts little new light upon Morris’s political thought or activity. Crick does make an interesting comparison between the American, Henry George (whose ideas had such a huge impact upon early socialists in Britain) and Morris in relation to their being the only early radicals to explore fully the concept of alienation (p.19); this theme could be interestingly developed. Contrary to the political image of Morris as a wildly anti-parliamentary advocate of street revolution, Crick usefully reminds us of Morris’s disdain for Hyndman’s rhetoric in support of violence, which the former termed ‘turnip bogie’.

At a time when Clause Four is being thrown on to the scrapheap for the sake of a more vacuous and platitudinous version of ‘Labour values’, it is useful to be reminded that the SDF was at its strongest when it placed class struggle at the forefront of its programme and meant by Social Democracy things which would doubtlessly scare those seeking to construct an SDP Mark-II; instructively, it was in its sad latter days as a principleless, right-of-centre monument to Labourism that the SDF lost all political significance and finally died.

Stephen Coleman