Reviews


John Goode is known to Morrisians mainly for his thoughtful and challenging essay of 1972, ‘William Morris and the Dream of Revolution’, and more widely for his books George Gissing: Fiction and Ideology (1978) and Thomas Hardy: The Offensive Truth (1988). His early death, not long after he had taken the Chair of English at Keele, was a sad though not unexpected event — he had had a heart transplant in 1983. Keele University Press has produced a handsome and consistently interesting book from his uncollected essays, royalties from which will go to Harefields Hospital.

The excellent introduction by Terry Eagleton does much of the normal work of the reviewer in defining Goode’s particular qualities, especially in one of its summarising comments: “one of the paradoxes of his work is that you get all along the sense of an unusually strong, independent critical personality, but one which is oddly unaware of itself as such because it is perpetually to be seen in the process of submitting itself to the words on the page”. These essays give the impression of a consistently serious mind working on material that is worth taking seriously, and anyone interested in the same material will find much here that will inform and stimulate. The main emphasis is on the nineteenth century, from Clough — for whose Amours de Voyage Goode makes high claims — through George Eliot, Henry James, Hardy, Gissing and Morris to Margaret Harkness and Mark Rutherford, with D.H. Lawrence from the twentieth century. The last essay, Goode’s inaugural lecture at Keele, has the longest title: “The Uninteresting Actual Frog”, or Is There Life After Postmodernism? Here Christina Rossetti’s ‘A Frog’s Fate’ serves as a gruesomely amusing reminder of the problems and challenges of the actual. Goode is not much given to epigrams, but his response here to the complacency that speaks of “the end of history” is memorable: “As long as there is injustice, there will be history.”

Morris is discussed in four of the essays. ‘Gissing, Morris, and English Socialism’ is mainly about Gissing’s Demos (1886), in which the Westlakes are based to some extent on the Morrises. Goode discusses the ways in which the novel both deliberately misrepresents contemporary Socialism and reflects some of the tensions within it. Although Goode shows an impressive knowledge of the socialist politics of the period, his conclusions are bleaker than seems to me appropriate. At least, most readers would surely feel that it is reading too grimly against the grain to claim that “News from Nowhere is as depressing as The Nether World”. The long essay on the Dream of Revolution has already been referred to. It is a consistent argument against Raymond Williams’s dismissal in Culture and Society of Morris’s imaginative writings by contrast with the political lectures. Goode argues that in the imaginative writings of his socialist years, Morris struggled, with a good deal of success, to solve in practice the theoretically insoluble problem of creating a socialist art in a capitalist society. By contrasting Morris with Gissing, James and Hardy, and by a careful examination of Sigurd the Volsung, A Dream of John Ball, The House of the Wolfings, The Roots
of the Mountains and, briefly, News from Nowhere, Goode comes to the conclusion that Morris "creates a revolutionary literature because he discovers forms which dramatize the tensions of the revolutionary mind". This is very interesting and sustained argument, although again giving us a rather more sombre Morris than I find in these texts. It is notable that in his essay of 1991, 'Now Where Nowhere: William Morris Today', Goode criticises his own earlier account of Morris as not having recognised the narrative function of the chapters in News from Nowhere describing how the Change comes and the New Life begins. Now he thinks we should go on reading the novel "not because it will tell us what we want but because it will tell us that wanting is not enough and that if we want it enough we will have to make others want it in equal measure".

News from Nowhere is also included in 'Writing Beyond the End' (1992), dealing with the time-travelling fictions of the period, After London, A Crystal Age, Looking Backward and, more unexpectedly, the third part of Edward Carpenter's Towards Democracy, 'After Civilisation', which is found to be "exhilarating ... but you end up feeling unsure about what you are to do with this exhilaration". Goode offers yet another reading of News from Nowhere, this time stressing the importance of the contrast between Guest and Ellen: "he sees past and present as loss and gain, and she as rhythm of work and rest". Finally, Goode sets H.G. Wells's condescending 1896 view of Morris - "His dreamland was no futurity but an illuminated past" - against Old Hammond answering his own question about the object of Revolution: "Surely to make people happy ... How can you prevent the Counter Revolution from setting in except by making people happy?" Goode sees Morris as more up-to-date than Wells. It is because his criticism moves so consistently and subtly between literature and political awareness of our world that Goode is always worth our most serious attention and that it is a great pleasure to encounter this book.

Peter Faulkner


There are historians who are given university chairs in recognition of their capacity to raise research funding and there are historians who work from home and make lasting contributions to our historical knowledge; far from all university academics are remote from the latter process, but few salaried historians in our time exceed the scrupulous attention to detail, the concise expression and the accessibility of penetrating analysis found in the writings of Edmund and Ruth Frow whose work is rooted in the tradition of autodidactic labour history. We are lucky to be able to share in the fruits of their enthusiastic and tough toil, and those of us interested in Morris's excursions north of the Watford Gap, to the industrial metropolis of Manchester and Salford (the Frows never allow readers to confuse the two) have here a comprehensive and well-researched short account.

Morris first went to Manchester as a businessman rather than a socialist, but even then, in his October 1883 lecture on 'The Progress of Decorative Art', he warned his audience to choose between "art or dirt". Six months later, he was back in Manchester as a socialist, addressing a 'respectable' artistic gathering at the Manchester Royal
Institution on the evils of “competitive commerce”. This led to some outrage, with the Liberal free-trader, Henry Dunkerly, rejecting the view that art could not flourish under capitalism and Morris responding to him in print.

His visit to the Ancoats Recreation Committee in January 1884 began an important association between Morris and its founder, Charles Rowley (who, to Morris’s regret, was the same year thrown off of Manchester Council on which he had served since 1875) and with the hundreds of working men and women who filled halls to hear his lectures in Ancoats during subsequent visits to Manchester. After August 1885 the Socialist League had a branch in the city after the Manchester Socialist Union dissolved and joined forces with it (why not with the SDF, it would be interesting to know) and Morris spoke there regularly, as well as to the Salford branch of the SDF. On more than one occasion his indoor audiences were around a thousand (which modern political speaker could draw such a crowd?) and he also spoke in the open in Albert Square and on a cold March morning in 1894 “from a lorry pitched on a piece of waste land” near to Trafford Bridge. The latter meeting was captured by a local poet, part of whose fine literary effort the Frows reproduce. Morris was due to make his annual autumn visit to Manchester and Salford at the time of his death a century ago.

Despite a couple of typographical errors which affect dates, and perhaps an unintentional suggestion on page 12 that it was not until 1885 that Morris became a committed socialist, this is history-writing at its best. One question, though: why no reference to News from Nowhere with Morris’s strange reference to “a place called Manchester, which has now disappeared.” This obliteration of the city from the finest socialist utopia ever written still irritates some Lancashire socialists (as it did Moses Baritz decades ago) and the city’s removal from the liberated society is hardly compensated for by Blatchford’s much inferior Manchester-set socialist utopian novel, The Sorcery Shop. Probably it was Manchester, as the home of free-trade Liberalism and the epitome of industrialism, which Morris wanted to disappear, rather than the place in which he spent such happy times.

Stephen Coleman


“A good engraving is better than a bad painting” ran one Victorian aphorism or, more likely, sales pitch. This handsomely produced survey of the Pre-Raphaelite contribution to the Victorian print world by the author of the Dictionary of Victorian Print Engravers, Publishers and their Works (1979) concentrates on the commercially produced, limited-edition print, sold for framed display in the home. A lucrative business for exploiting what we’d now call the subsidiary rights of popular images. T. Jones Barker’s The Relief of Lucknow was a top seller, followed by Holman Hunt’s Light of the World and Millais’s Cherry Ripe. Painters and publishers lived like princes on massive profits, according to Engen, while the poor engravers, racked between impossible deadlines and artists’ perfectionist demands, often ended up insane or dead. Technically, the fine steel plate was gradually supplanted by the mezzotint and both were annihilated by photo-engraving, so the heyday of the art roughly coincides...
with the period covered in Paul Goodman's *Victorian Illustrated Books 1850-70* (British Museum 1994) which this text usefully complements.

The works covered here include etchings by the Pre-Raphaelite artists themselves, professional reproductions of their works, and woodblock illustration, each being a different process and project. Samuel Palmer described etching as possessing the excitement of gambling without its guilt and ruin, while Rossetti’s anxiety over Dalziels’ cutting of his woodblocks is legendary, although the trouble caused by his insistence that the illustrations to the first edition of Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market* be cut by Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co (and by the reluctant Charles Faulkner, not otherwise known as an engraver) suggests he had a somewhat cavalier attitude to the art. Burne-Jones’s professional relationships with engravers, including Felix Jasinski, are listed here, but sadly there’s only a brief mention of the 1865 collaboration with Morris – somewhat strangely described as B-J’s “old Oxford colleague” – on the abortive *Earthly Paradise* endeavour (and no mention at all of Joseph Dunlap’s *The Book that Never Was*).

Other minor mistakes deserve correction. Millais’s *Fireside Story* is wrongly captioned as belonging to the Moxon *Tennyson*, and Burne-Jones’s *Summer Snow* design for *Good Works* in 1863 is both described as showing snowflakes when clearly petals are falling, and identified as accompanying “a poem by Christopher Jones”, when this name, given in the magazine’s index of illustrators, is well known to have been the half-disguised artist’s name (and that of his short-lived son, who was born and died the following year).

Jan Marsh


MacColl (1859-1948) was a fine painter, a good curator, and an energetic critic who worked tirelessly to educate the public in the artistic values he believed in. He helped establish the National Art Collections Fund, and was involved in many public controversies, in particular with the Royal Academy over the Chantrey Bequest and, unsuccessfully, in defence of the old Westminster Bridge. He emerges from this biography as a determined controversialist and an engaging personality – an unusual combination. Maureen Borland clearly admires MacColl, and has familiarised herself with the papers at the University of Glasgow. She is not a scholar, and is disinclined to provide much contextualisation for some of what she describes; for instance, although the book’s title includes the word poet, it is hard to tell from the book how important poetry was to him, or what his arguments about prosody were founded on. The writing does not always avoid cliché (“MacColl had remained a smouldering volcano for nearly three years, but early in 1909, it was inevitable that he would feel it was time for an explosion” (p.179)), but the book nevertheless succeeds in giving the reader a sense of MacColl’s complex personality.

MacColl’s career as an art critic began with a review of the Royal Academy’s winter exhibition in February 1890. Ms Borland describes his as a radical new voice, to be associated with George Moore and Charles Whibley and contrasted with “the Establishment gurus, William Richmond, Walter Crane and Harry Quilter” (p.67) –
a strange placing of Crane. Its implication is, I think, that MacColl lacked interest in the Arts & Crafts although writing during the heyday of the movement, and this is borne out by the rest of the book. There are only three references to Morris, for instance. We are told that in the late 1870s MacColl, on his way to University College, would "stop to gaze with delight at the 'rich display in Morris's new Oxford Street shop'" (p.21). In 1883 MacColl and some friends at the university started the Oxford Magazine. He later denied that it had been "the last flare-up the Aesthetic Movement", saying that its general colour was indicated rather by an interest in Arnold Toynbee's work in East London and in "the visits of the Social Democrats, Morris and Hyndman, and the 'Tory Democracy'" (p.33). The longest reference to Morris takes a far more negative position, however, as part of a powerful attack by MacColl on Sir William Richmond's planned redecoration of the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral:

It is time to protest against the pattern craze in English decoration when we see such an application as this. William Morris, having little architectural sense, conceived that the whole of decoration lay in the invention of repeating patterns, and that the more patterns one crammed into a given space the better that space was decorated. Morris never invented a pattern that would really bear looking into, choking up, as he did, the defects of his leading motive with small wormy detail; but he had an agreeable sense of colour, so that his fabrics are frequently pleasant to look at as spottings or shimmerings of tint. But in Sir W. B. Richmond we have a decorator not only devoid of the architectural sense and the pattern sense to an extent that makes Morris by contrast a king, but failing in colour too. (p.106)

I cannot remember a more negative account of Morris, nor one more resolutely wrong-headed. But of course MacColl's target was Richmond, and it is a striking piece of journalism. Morrisians should not allow themselves to be put off by this from learning more about one of the most interesting figures in the British art world of his time.

Peter Faulkner.