Reviews


It is surprising that a book on this subject has not already been published. Nature, gardens and flowers, in particular, proved highly important to Morris's life and work and without his intimate knowledge of the history and science of plants his designs would not have been so successful as patterns nor workable as practical blueprints for many uses – stained-glass windows, book illumination and design, tile and furniture decoration, wallpapers, printed and woven textiles, embroideries, carpets and tapestries.

This book is arranged in four sections covering the countryside of Morris's youth, his education and the importance of history to his views on nature, his own gardens and, finally, the use of plants in his own work. The author's approach to the subject has been systematic and intelligent and the book is enjoyable to read and highly entertaining.

Derek Baker has used various sources for his work including Morris's own writings and those of contemporaries. As someone with knowledge of and interest in flower painting he has applied this unusual approach to a study of Morris's own practical use of plant forms. Important comparisons are made between Morris's work and various historical artistic masterpieces. The most convincing shows that the garden trellis from Martin Schongauer's *Madonna in a Bower of Rose* altarpiece of 1473, in the church at Colmar, was the source for Morris's *Trellis* wallpaper. Morris may or may not have seen the original while honeymooning on the Rhine but he was a great collector of photographs and engravings so is likely to have known and admired the work, at second if not at first hand.

For me the real importance of this publication is the author's sterling research on Morris's own gardens. By studying various historical documentation in local record offices – surveys and maps for instance – he has been able to re-create the Essex of Morris's childhood (including Humphry Repton's suggestions for improvements to the garden at Woodford Hall written less than thirty years before the Morris family moved there) to suggest the size and form of the medieval garden at Red House (two small plots enclosed in wattle fences) and to show what the gardens at Kelmscott Manor looked like before May Morris destroyed the orchard and some flowerbeds in order to provide much needed vegetables in the 1930s.

The book is to be recommended not to design and garden historians (although they would enjoy it) but to anyone with an interest in Morris. Sadly, many discerning readers may pass it by believing that it is simply another pot-boiler put out in Morris's centennial year as a means to re-use pretty illustrations and to make lots of money by doing so. For this one must blame the misleading, rather fatuous title, chosen, no doubt, to make it attractive to the widest possible audience. This work is not just about flowers but much, much more. On the production level the book suffers badly from the poor standard of illustrations, despite including a number of excellent photographs by the author. It is a pity that the publishers did not use more of these instead of well-known images reproduced in poor colour and eccentric scale. Ignore all this and buy if for the text – it is well worth it.

Linda Parry

Morris studies have profited considerably from Nicholas Salmon's energy and commitment during the centenary year. One instance is that we owe to him the inauguration of a very useful new series with the Sheffield Academic Press, which bring together in practical-looking and inexpensive paperbacks Morris's views on a number of his (and our) main concerns, each edited by an expert in the field. The first three volumes demonstrate the potential of the series for making Morris's idea more accessible to a new – no doubt mainly student – readership. The conception of the series reminds us that, although there have of course been previous selections from Morris's works, sometimes in paperback, these are mostly out of print at present, and at all events were usually wide-ranging rather than selectively focused; the main exceptions would be A.L. Morton's Political Writings, and William Peterson's The Ideal Book. So all these books are to some extent breaking fresh ground, and so give their editors interesting opportunities.

Salmon himself has appropriately edited the volume on Morris and History. He gives us a 22-page introduction, deftly showing the influences at work on Morris's historical imagination, followed by five complete historical lectures, including the little known 'Development of Modern Society' of 1890, three briefer articles from Commonweal and Justice and selections from 'Socialism from the Root Up', written with Belfort Bax – selections which focus on England and end with Ch. 9, 'The Industrial Revolution in England', presumably because the following fourteen chapters are more political and economic. Salmon claims that Morris was 'a historian of considerable ability' (p. 1) and hopes that the book will help to make this clear. I think it must contribute substantially to doing so; surely no one can read Morris's account of, say, Early England without being infected by the quality of the imaginative response conveyed in some of his most assured writing. We become aware of an encounter between a writer and what seems his natural subject-matter. But I would have welcomed further guidance from Salmon on the likely response to Morris's reading of English history – for this is what the present book stresses – of a modern medieval historian; would it now be accepted as a serious historical account? Salmon's Introduction also makes a point that seems to me to raise a very significant question about Morris's revolutionary politics. We are told near the end that Morris's historical writings show that 'sudden revolutionary acts' are unlikely to accomplish deep changes in society, and that 'the history of human society has been evolutionary not cataclysmic' (p. 22). Is there not a paradox to confront, then, in Morris's stubborn adherence to revolutionary politics despite apparently holding this view of history? And was it one that Morris ever confronted himself?

Christine Poulson's volume devoted to Art and Design brings together, as Morris never did, the writings on his main area of practical activity; it is surprising that no previous selection has done this. One aspect that seems curious today, when we are so used to visual material, is that these discussions were never illustrated – Morris
seems to have been quite happy to offer his (sensible and illuminating) observations verbally, without resorting, as Ruskin for example did, to frequent illustration. Hence a marked difference in the appearance of the two men’s Collected Works. It was, I think, only when it came, late in his life, to printing, that Morris’s practice changed in this respect. Poulson has organised her book in six sections, each with its own Introduction, so that her general Introduction is comparatively brief. But it manages to cover a good deal of ground, and does not try to conceal the problems Morris encountered as a successful businessman converted to Socialism but needing to keep up his practice. The organisation of the sections gives coherence to the book. We begin with the Firm, then move on in succession to Stained Glass, Textiles, Furnishing and Decorating a House, Printing, and finally to Art and Society, ending with the 1888 lecture ‘The Revival of Handicraft’. This provides an illuminating overall account of Morris’s public views on these matters, expressed so solidly and unpretentiously, although it is unlikely that students will find in this material as much stimulus to their own aspirations to design as they will in looking at Morris’s designs themselves. Perhaps the Bibliography might have steered more emphatically in this direction by guiding them towards some of the ‘Other Important Works’ cited in it. (I can see the convenience of a common Bibliography for the series, but it can give a rather bland effect). The brief section on Printing includes ‘The Ideal Book’, but unfortunately the printer has throughout the series ignored Morris’s insistence that ‘the tail [margin must be] largest of all’ (p. 149), somewhat to the detriment of what are in general attractively produced books; and no doubt economic motives account for ignoring Morris’s view that ‘small pica [11-point, as a footnote informs us] seems to me the smallest type that should be used in the body of any book’ (p. 147) – the size of type for quotations in the Introduction is surely well below this.

Chris Miele’s subject, Architecture, is perhaps more like Salmon’s in that it clearly preoccupied Morris throughout his life, but never led to complete articulation in a single work. Miele insists in his lively, and occasionally tendentious, Introduction that Morris ‘never defined an architectural theory as neatly or comprehensively as the masters of the genre did’ (p. 1). These masters, it seems, are Pugin, Ruskin, Lethaby, Le Corbusier, Venturi and Rossi. Morris’s work is said to be not less interesting than theirs, but simply less systematic. Morris’s architectural views are well represented here, by the early fiction ‘The Story of the Unknown Church’, the Manifesto of SPAB, the Address to the First AGM of the SPAB, and a good range of later material, including the little known ‘The Housing of the Poor’ from Justice in 1884 and ‘Ugly London’ from the Pall Mall Gazette in 1888, together with three important letters, here given a section of their own, which might have been incorporated into the main body at the appropriate dates. There are also ten plates, in black-and-white on ordinary paper, of buildings Morris admired or disliked. This is a good range of material, and it shows Morris’s architectural views very well. The Introduction itself, however, raises for me a number of problems, not least in the way it concludes, with the line of thought which Miele finds in ‘Architecture and History’ in 1884 in which the sense of doom is so strong that it hardly matters how any particular building looks – we can only wait ‘until society is reconstituted along fairer lines’ (p. 24). Is this, I wonder, the appropriate note on which to end the Introduction to a book intended to interest a new public in Morris’s ideas?

The three books give us three Morrises. Salmon’s historian is the most confident
and assured; Poulson's design-expositor is generally assured, but troubled over the incompatibility between the values of the Firm and those of the society in which it exists; and Miele's architectural thinker is the most troubled and problematic, because of the nature of his concerns. Each of these books is useful and interesting, and together they offer a valuable stimulus to our thinking about Morris today. I hope there will be further volumes in this promising series.

Peter Faulkner


Fiona MacCarthy, in her recent biography William Morris: A Life for Our Time (1994), has quite rightly pointed out that 'Morris had a sense of place so acute as to be almost a disability'. It is therefore welcome that the present volume written by David Rodgers, the Curator of Kelmscott House, aims - according to the fly-leaf - to focus 'on the private life behind the public figure' and to examine 'Morris's life in the context of the homes in which he lived'. Rodgers achieves this by devoting chapters to Morris's childhood homes, the Red House, Queen Square, Kelmscott Manor and Kelmscott House.

However, as soon as one begins to read Rodgers' text, it becomes clear that William Morris at Home is a far more sophisticated book than the fly-leaf suggests. In fact it is a well-researched and stylishly written biographical account of Morris and his circle. Rodgers, who has an extensive knowledge of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelites, is particularly entertaining when describing Morris and Janey's life at the Red House. He then goes on to describe in detail the setting up of the Firm, the move to Queen Square, Rossetti and Morris's negotiations to lease Kelmscott Manor, and Morris's final years at Kelmscott House. Perhaps more could have been said of the Morrises time at Horrington House, which remains a sadly neglected episode in the otherwise well-documented course of their married life. Nevertheless, I am pleased to note that Rodgers, unlike some previous biographers, gives a good account of Morris's activities as a revolutionary socialist.

By necessity books of this nature tend to cover territory that is familiar to most Morrisians. However, I was impressed by the way that Rodgers extended his research to give the reader insights into some of the less well-documented aspects of Morris's life. The Prologue, for example, contains one of the best accounts I have read of Morris's funeral at the church in Kelmscott village. Rodgers is particularly successful in showing how the diverse backgrounds of the mourners reflected the variety of Morris's activities in the arts, literature and politics. There is also a humorous description of the Morris family's excursion up the Thames on the Ark in 1880, and an entertaining account of Morris's idiosyncratic views on food and drink.

The book concludes with a series of recipes which the fly-leaf claims 'is devoted to dishes culled from Morris's notes and diaries, including a number which were recorded by his daughter May, whose cookery notebook is still at Kelmscott Manor'. Although I suspect this is a slightly exaggerated claim, Morris was probably familiar with variants of many of the dishes described, and they certainly look appetizing.

The one thing that did mystify me was why Ebury Press thought it necessary to employ a specialist photographer to take a series of 'staged' photographs of Red
House, Kelmscott Manor and Kelmscott House. While these photographs are technically of a high standard they appear totally incongruous in a book that is otherwise well illustrated from contemporary sources. The fact that the photographer appears to have had a limited number of props – including a totally inappropriate panama hat – means that all the pictures look much the same. The cover photograph, in particular, must be the most uninspiring picture to have ever appeared on the cover of an illustrated book about Morris.

However, this should not deter readers from buying a book which is a useful addition to any Morris library. As Hans Brill, President of the William Morris Society, writes in his Foreword: ‘... this book will, I hope, encourage readers to enquire further into his [Morris’s] life, work and ideas’ (p. 7). These are sentiments I thoroughly endorse.

Nicholas Salmon


It is a pleasure to welcome The William Morris Chronology, in an attractive and unfussy edition from the Thoemmes Press. Here Nicholas Salmon has successfully completed a project which he tells us began with his supervisor’s suggestion that it would be helpful for his research if he could compile a list of Morris’s day-to-day political activities during the last twenty years of his life. With the help of Derek Baker, and of his own extensive reading in Morris scholarship, Salmon (who gives meticulous credit to the sources he has employed) has produced an amazingly detailed Chronology of Morris’s whole life. Now any scholar can find out where Morris was and what he was doing on numerous specific days throughout his busy life. Any biography can now be reread in the light of the Chronology, and it may be that some popular myths will fall by the way. It was obviously a matter of scholarly judgment for Salmon to decide how much space to give to any particular entry, and in general he has properly opted for brevity. But the occasional longer entries can give entertaining insights. For instance, Maud Herapath’s visit to Kelmscott Manor in August 1896, while Morris was on his Norwegian voyage, vividly reveals a conventional mind responding to a novel experience: ‘The house is lovely for its oldness but oh! so so artistic & grubby... We did not accept tea but sat in a row in the plain painfully plain dining room & stared at Miss Morris and wondered why she dressed in such a sloppy way with no stays’. For these vivid moments, but more for its overall accuracy, this very useful book is to be enthusiastically welcomed. It is to be hoped that its highly varied contents will stimulate research by its readers when they note particular activities or associations of Morris of which they were not previously aware.

Peter Faulkner