Reviews

*Victorian Poetry*, 34:3 (Autumn 1996). Published by the Department of English, West Virginia University, USA.

This special issue of *Victorian Poetry*, guest edited by Florence Boos, brings together ten essays on a wide range of Morris's poetry by many of the foremost Morris scholars across the world. As Boos notes in her introductory essay, the very diversity of Morris's many interests has militated against him in terms of his poetry being taken seriously: 'its originality and experimental qualities might have been better appreciated had he accomplished somewhat less in other areas of his life. It has proved difficult for many twentieth-century critics to sort out the relations between his various endeavors, much less identify with them...' (p. 285)

Morris's poetry does, I believe, pose certain difficulties for today's readers. Few people actively choose to read long narrative poetry, the vast majority of Morris's oeuvre. Critical attention to Morris's poetry in the 1970s and 1980s tended to favour the shorter poems in *The Defence of Guenevere*, around which a substantial body of articles has developed. However, the mood is undoubtedly changing, and into the 1990s publications and ongoing research suggest that a wider range of Morris's poetry is now being considered. If students are to be encouraged to read Morris's work, then they will perhaps increasingly look to informed, exciting criticism to help them find a way in, and many of the essays in this edition of *Victorian Poetry* certainly offer such a perspective.

Two essays on *The Defence*, by W. David Shaw and Karen Herbert, both focus on the radical use of language in the 1858 volume. Shaw's essay, 'Arthurian Ghosts: The Phantom Art of *The Defence of Guenevere*' argues that Morris writes as a 'kind of medium' (p. 299), conjuring up voices from the medieval past via his vivid dramatic monologues. But, Shaw argues, this ventriloquism also involves an emptying-out of many of our expectations of referentiality and signification in language. In 'Dissident Language in *The Defence of Guenevere*' Herbert suggests that the volume 'investigates the role of language and memory in the often contradictory relations between private desire and community sanction' (p. 313). Both articles focus predominantly on the Arthurian poems in *The Defence* (i.e. on four out of a total of thirty poems in the volume); undoubtedly there is still room for more readings of the less well known pieces in this distinctive and important collection.
Three essays are dedicated to *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-70). David Latham bravely admits (following in the footsteps of Georgiana Burne-Jones) that *The Earthly Paradise* is ‘the first poem I ever fell asleep reading’ (p. 329), and then he goes on to consider one of the unpublished *Earthly Paradise* manuscripts, ‘The Story of Dorothea’. Amanda Hodgson locates *The Earthly Paradise* and Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* in the context of the mid-nineteenth-century desire for the certainty and authority of epic, and she argues that both works critique a model in which ‘a single confident voice presents actions and heroes about whose status there can be no doubt’ (p. 342). Hodgson also writes authoritatively on nineteenth-century debates about the relation of myth to history, an area crucial to considerations of Morris’s poetry. In ‘Laxdaela Saga and “The Lovers of Gudrun”: Morris’ Poetic Vision’ Linda Julian discusses the revisions Morris made to the Old Norse source for his poetic retelling of the tale, and how it contributed to his development as a writer.

The finest essay in the volume for me is Herbert Tucker’s ‘All for the Tale: The Epic Macropoetics of Morris’ *Sigurd the Volsung*, which I read while I was engaged in writing a chapter on *Sigurd* for my own PhD thesis. Arguably one of the most difficult of Morris’s poetical works to find a way in to, *Sigurd* is enjoying renewed critical interest, featuring as the subject of three papers at the 1996 William Morris Centenary Conference (by Simon Dentith, Jane Ennis and Amanda Hodgson), part of Hodgson’s ongoing research into Victorian solar mythology, and in my own work where I focus on representations of masculinity in the poem. Tucker’s discussion of this ‘Victorian antique’ (p. 375) is an excellent piece of criticism, which attempts to answer precisely why it is so difficult to read the poem. He argues that *Sigurd* demands the most exacting commitment of its reader: ‘The peculiar macropoetics of *Sigurd* mean that to receive the story in a temper of critical detachment, no matter how sympathetic or discerning, is to reject its deepest premise’ (p. 388).

Ken Goodwin considers Morris’s *Poems by the Way* (1891) as ‘The Summation of a Poetic Career’ (p. 397, title), an approach that seems particularly apt for Morris’s final volume of poetry which brings together poems touching on a lifetime’s diverse interests. And Peter Faulkner considers the final poem in the volume, ‘Goldilocks and Goldilocks’, which is rarely commented upon.

This special Morris edition of *Victorian Poetry* concludes with an essay by Norman Kelvin considering the relative lack of inclusion of Morris in recent critical work on the 1890s. This is an important and interesting point which raises various issues. Much of the current great interest in the Victorian *fin de siècle* focuses on debates around race and sexuality. Perhaps critics have perceived there to be little of interest in Morris’s work in relation to race and imperialism and male (homo)sexuality. The Morris of the 1880s onwards is associated predominantly with the politics of socialism - *i.e.* issues related to class - and class as a topic of research and debate has somewhat disappeared (temporarily?) from view, certainly in literary studies. A notable omission to me in the range of poetry considered in this edition of *Victorian Poetry* is that there is nothing specifically on Morris’s political poetry, particularly *The Pilgrims of Hope*. And it was certainly noticeable in the Victoria and Albert Museum’s 1996 William Morris exhibition that Morris’s socialism was dealt with by being tucked away in the corner of a large room of tapestries. Kelvin offers
suggestions of how Morris fits into the decade of ‘art for art’s sake’, which is so often taken as diametrically opposed to Morris’s own ethos of socially-concerned work and art.

Finally, Victorian Poetry 34:3 also reproduces a number of illustrated pages from various of Morris’s poetical works, including the calligraphic manuscript A Book of Verse (1870), Kelmscott editions, and one of Jessie M. King’s wonderful Beardsleyesque illustrations to the Bodley Head edition of The Defence of Guenevere (1904). This issue is an important addition to considerations of Victorian poetry and will also be welcomed by all Morris scholars.

Rosie Miles


Despite the assertion of the publishers’ accompanying literature, this is not the first full-length biography of William de Morgan. That honour went to A. M. W. Stirling’s William de Morgan and His Wife, which caps it both in date, 1922, and also in extent, being double Hamilton’s length, although admittedly dealing with Evelyn’s artistic career as well as her husband’s.

However, Hamilton’s book is welcome in being both well illustrated and extremely readable, without Mrs Stirling’s digressive structure. As Evelyn de Morgan’s sister, Mrs Stirling had immediate family access to her joint subjects denied to a modern biographer, and so Hamilton uses her as source material, together with May Morris’s excellent 1917 articles in The Burlington Magazine on de Morgan’s art. As most modern readers will be more interested in de Morgan’s glorious, if hand-to-mouth, years as artist potter, it is perhaps unfortunate that half of the book deals with the period from 1907 onwards, after the final closure of the Sands End pottery. From Florence, de Morgan wrote: ‘Here’s the factory at an end for good and I know it will mean reproachful faces of men out of work at all points of the compass for me when I come back.’

The financial difficulties de Morgan faced during his first career, as potter, are well conveyed. For instance, a note in 1899 to Blunt, the London manager, from Florence, where de Morgan spent many winters for health reasons: ‘I’ve had to resort to a desperate measure to raise £5 for the chaps here, lest they go dinnerless. I have written a cheque on my bank knowingly overdrawn.’ There is an interesting reflection of de Morgan as an employer in a letter in which he refers to having to dismiss workers due to a trade down-turn during the Boer War: ‘It is melancholy to think that my men should be driving omnibuses. What I am curious to see is if, when any of them come back (if they do) they will be happy and won’t find it dull by comparison.’ Is this an acknowledgement of the repetitious nature of labour even in art pottery? Notwithstanding this, it is pure de Morgan - the copious letter extracts are wonderful in themselves.

Hamilton deals in detail with the various novels, nine in total, including two completed by Evelyn and published posthumously, following the very successful Joseph Vance of 1906 which launched his second career, as novelist. Hamilton provides very full summaries of all the novels, together with judicious snatches of the
cockney dialogue which were one of the books' main features - sales suffered when history ruled it inappropriate in *An Affair of Dishonour*, set in Charles II's time. Interestingly, Hamilton traces the adoption of a cockney idiom to the exchange of cod cockney letters between de Morgan and Edward Burne-Jones amongst others. Plots were not de Morgan's strong point as a novelist, as Hamilton acknowledges: 'It seems evident that he did not know how his stories were going to develop when he started his books. He let the characters dictate what happened to them and to the plot.' This may well account for the great length of many of them - *Joseph Vance* runs to 528 pages, *Alice for Short* to 635 and *It Can Never Happen Again* to 799.

However, the novels had a popular contemporary following and allowed the older de Morgan to enjoy belated success - and solvency. Hamilton succeeds in capturing the spirit of his wonderful subject through anecdotes and extracts from de Morgan's letters. For example, a wealthy prospective customer went to Orange House eager to buy an expensive pot, and de Morgan pointed out some of his most successful products. 'What do you want it for?' he asked. The customer replied 'I want it for a wedding present.' 'Is it for so-and-so's wedding' asked de Morgan. 'Yes' was the reply. 'My dear chap', de Morgan said, 'don't give the bride any more of my pots - she is inundated with them! You take my advice and just go round to Mappin and Webb's and choose her an unusual piece of silver. She'll like it ever so much better.' De Morgan's unworldliness was a life-long trait - he set fire to the roof of 40 Fitzroy Square by connecting the chimney from a small kiln directly into the small fireplace in his room during the 1870s, and blew out all the windows of a polytechnic room whilst engaging in self-directed war work during the Great War. According to his own account: 'Innocently expecting the hydrogen to burn like a Christian with a lambent flame, scarcely visible by daylight, we put a match to the hydrogen bottle, it busted with a loud report and blew out a lot of glass.' Although he was a fine research chemist, as shown by his paper on lustre-ware, included here by Hamilton, these mishaps happened to him with disturbing frequency.

De Morgan's headstone, designed by Evelyn, describes him as Artist: Potter; Inventor: Novelist. Hamilton succeeds in demonstrating de Morgan's breadth of interest and also his sense of fun. Edmund Gosse concluded his eulogy thus: 'He was a true artist and in these iron times we do well to remember his gentle, loving and lovable personality.' Hamilton clearly agrees, and we are indebted to him for his well researched and sympathetic portrait of the alchemist potter.

Ian Jones


Any publication which attempts to resurrect the reputation of an early socialist with the energy and commitment of Tom Maguire is to be welcomed. Born in 1866 into a working-class Irish immigrant family in Leeds, Maguire helped form the local branch of the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) in September 1884 and then joined William Morris's Socialist League (SL). He was one of the signatories of the League's splendid Marxist 'Manifesto' which appeared in *Commonweal* in February 1885.
However, Maguire never reconciled himself to Morris’s implacable anti-parliamentary stance, and soon became involved in trade union activity and municipal politics. His greatest achievement was to organise - in 1890 - local support for the gas workers in Leeds against the anti-union policies adopted by the Liberal-dominated City Corporation. He was also one of the founding members of the East Hunslet Independent Labour Club, and later campaigned for the Independent Labour Party. His tragic early death of pneumonia in March 1895, aged 29, deprived the socialist movement of one of its most dedicated propagandists.

Unfortunately, and I approached this book in a very positive frame of mind, John Battle appears in places in his Introduction to have a rather hazy grasp of the early socialist movement. William Morris, for example, is portrayed as an exponent of some nebulous ‘idealism’ (p. 7) rather than as one of the principal English interpreters of Marx and the literature of scientific socialism. In fact, virtually everything that is said about Morris is incorrect. In the course of the Introduction we learn that he wrote The Defence of Guinevere (sic) in 1885 when he ‘was aged twenty and only a year older than Maguire’ (p. 15), and that A Dream of John Ball was a ‘poem’ (p. 15).

Some of these errors are due to Battle’s failure to sufficiently cross-reference the dates used in the Introduction. For example we are told on page 7 that Maguire left the SDF and joined the SL in 1885, attracted by the ‘idealism of William Morris and the vision of the Commonwealth with its “joy in work and abolition of wage slavery”.’ If this was the case how can it be reconciled with the statement on the following page that ‘between 1884-1895 Tom Maguire increasingly questioned the relevance of the Socialist’s League’s revolutionary purism’? As it stands this rather begs the question of why Maguire joined the SL in the first place!

However, the bulk of the book consists of twenty of Maguire’s poems. Although nobody could accuse Maguire of being a great poet, his poems are incisive - and often humorous - attacks on capitalism. One of my favourites is ‘The Song of the Microbe’ which one could imagine a revolutionary Arthur Askey singing as he pranced around the stage in a red boiler suit: ‘I’m a merry little Microbe, And my heart is light and gay, And I love the sunny weather, In the merry month of May’ (p. 22). Ignore the apparent flippancy, as this poem has a serious - and accessible - message, as do ‘An Underpaid Agitator’, ‘The Coming of Democracy’, ‘To the Wage Slave’ and ‘A Victim’. Taken together the poems offer an excellent contemporary commentary on a deplorable system, and are highly recommended to all those with an interest in social history and the living conditions of the working class.

I really wish I could be whole-hearted in my enthusiasm for this first publication by The Ford Maguire Society. However, if readers are willing to overlook the limitations of the Introduction, they will certainly enjoy Maguire’s acute observations of nineteenth-century life.

Nicholas Salmon


Keith Alldritt has produced a clearly written and up-to-date account of Yeats’s life and achievement, and has been able to make use of the recent edition of the poet’s
letters edited by John Kelly but not, as we are told, of materials published after 1939. This is because the authorised biographer, Ray Foster, has been given a monopoly on these quotations until his more detailed biography is completed. Foster's first volume was published, to critical acclaim, earlier this year, but I have so far been unable to obtain a review copy. Alldritt's book is a sound piece of work in the circumstances. What he stresses, and claims that previous biographers, following Yeats's lead, have tended to underplay, is the idea of Yeats as a combative person in both public and private. According to Alldritt, Yeats was not so much the 'sensitive introvert' that he liked to appear as 'a dedicated careerist, a man of determined self-interest, a man preoccupied with money, a seeker after social standing and a combative man with a violent temper that sustained him in many nasty quarrels' (p. xii). The strength of the book, however, is that his awareness of these aspects of Yeats's character does not lead Alldritt to oversimplify the complex man who is his subject. By the end of the book we still respect Yeats, but we do so in the light of a fuller sense of his whole personality. We hear more than previously about Yeats's involvement with younger women in his last decade, but again the treatment is humane rather than reductive. Alldritt's last sentence refers to Yeats's friends at the Sligo wake celebrating 'the vigorous life of Yeats the man', and this book has something of that celebratory spirit about it, which makes it enjoyable to read despite its refusal to flatter its subject.

As far as Morrisians are concerned, it adds little to what we know about the young Yeats and the ageing Morris. Yeats went to Kelmscott House and attended meetings in the coach-house; he was impressed by the Morris family, but the relationship did not last very long, though Yeats maintained respect for Morris throughout his life. Most of the evidence is in either the text or the annotations to Vol. I of The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats. Here we find Yeats telling Katherine Tynan in June 1887 that May 'is decidedly beautiful and seems very intelligent', and expressing an interest in Sparling's Irish Minstrelsy, though in April 1888 he refers to Sparling's 'atheisms and negations'. Yeats saw a performance of Nupkins Awakened in June 1888, noting: 'Morris really acts very well. Miss Morris does not act at all but remains herself most charmingly throughout her part'. Morris spoke encouragingly to Yeats when his Wanderings of Oisin appeared in January 1889, and apparently said he would review it for Commonweal, but didn't. There is nothing as substantial in the letters as the remarks about Morris Yeats made in his Autobiographies, where he appears as one of Yeats's 'chief of men'. Alldritt emphasises the importance to Yeats of his visits to Kelmscott House, which he describes as 'one of the great intellectual centres of the England of the day' (p. 58), and makes an interesting suggestion that I have not seen elsewhere: that it was here that Yeats came to see 'the importance of management and promotion in the development of the arts' (p. 71), which he was to develop in his work for the Irish theatre and elsewhere in his active and productive life.

Peter Faulkner

This little booklet is one of the most useful publications of the centenary year as it includes the full text of the address Morris gave at the prize-giving of the Cambridge School of Art on 21 February 1878 (although strangely the date of this lecture is not given in the text). Dedicated Morrisians will, of course, be familiar with this lecture as, apart from the complete version published in the Cambridge Chronicle (and used in the booklet), portions of the same lecture were also published in the Cambridge Express on 23 February 1878. What is significant, however, is that May Morris did not include it in either The Collected Works or Artist, Writer, Socialist and until now it has not been reprinted.

Apart from the lecture itself there is also a short Preface by Professor Ian Gordon and an Introduction by our ex-President, Fiona MacCarthy. Professor Gordon points out in his Preface that the Cambridge School of Art had been originally opened by Morris's mentor, John Ruskin, on 29 December 1858, and has a history which links it with the present Anglia Polytechnic University, while in her Introduction Fiona MacCarthy skilfully places the lecture in the context of Morris's other activities in the late 1870s, describing it as an 'early and attractive ... example of his platform oratory' (p, xvi). This publication can be recommended as a useful addition to any Morris library.

Nicholas Salmon


Alison Byerly seems to me to have written a more modest and convincing book than its sweeping title (with its use of the term literature rather than fiction) and the associated blurb suggest. The latter tells us that it 'confronts a significant paradox in the development of literary Realism: the very novels that present themselves as purveyors and celebrants of direct, ordinary human experience also manifest an obsession with art that threatens to sabotage their Realist claims.' My experience of Victorian fiction is that it shows no such obsession; the range of references to art in all its forms is appropriate to the part played by art in the human experience of the authors, their characters, and their readers, and so is in harmony with the novels' claim to realism. At all events, what we actually find here is a thoughtful and consistently argued account of the part played by references to the non-literary arts, particularly painting, theatre and music, in some of the novels of Thackeray, Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot and Hardy; no explanation is offered for the absence of Dickens and Trollope.

The strength of the book lies in its discussions of the uses of art references of various kinds in specific novels, following on from a consideration of changing attitudes to art in the literature of and after the Romantic period - from idealisation, towards suspicion of the uses of which art may be put by society. We are led to contrast the ideality of the bird's song in Keats or Shelley with the social reality of one of Jane Austen's young ladies at the pianoforte, and to see the implied tensions and discrepancies as they expand in significance in some of the major novels of the century. The Perils of Theatricality is a sub-heading with wide implications, here leading to a
particularly illuminating account of Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair*. This chapter also includes perceptive commentary on some of Thackeray’s own illustrations, followed by a consideration of Bronte and the Theatre of Patriarchy, in which we are shown the elements of self-display required of the Victorian middle-class woman as exposed in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*. In the chapter on George Eliot there are convincing accounts of the contrast between the heroines who ‘see themselves pictorially’ and those capable of self-forgetfulness, and of the significance, which I had hardly noticed before, of the characters’ voices. Finally, in Hardy our attention is drawn to his tendency to present all the arts other than the theatrical as ‘natural expressions of different kinds of truth’, and his emphasis on the social utility of the arts. A brief coda discusses how, in the aesthetic fiction of Pater and Wilde at the end of the century, the contrast between art and the fiction disappears, leaving ‘a kind of flatness’ in the reader’s experience, which is compared to the ‘flattening-out of pictorial space’ in Pre-Raphaelite art.

Since Alison Byerly is not concerned here with poetry, there is no discussion of Morris or Rossetti, though her approach might prove equally illuminating in relation to their work. But we are shown something of the importance of Ruskin’s account of truth in art, and in the Hardy chapter we encounter the architect George Somerset in *The Laodicean*, and Hardy’s own paper ‘Memories of Church Restoration’, written for the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in 1906, with its suggestion that the ‘human associations’ that permeate the walls of a building are its most important ‘spiritual attribute’. Nevertheless, the main effect of this interesting book is to enrich our reading of Victorian fiction.

Peter Faulkner

**John Burdick, *William Morris. Redesigning the World*, (Tiger Books International 1997), 128pp. 100 illus., £18.95.**

My eye was attracted to this illustrated Morris book, of which I had not heard, in a cut-price bookshop in Brighton. I liked the ‘Angeli Laudantes’ on the cover (though they appear in different colour-tones within), and could see that the book contained many other illustrations, mostly in colour. But what a missed opportunity! If another Morris picture-book was to be produced, why entrust it to someone with no particular knowledge of his subject when there is no dearth of Morris scholars and enthusiasts? The result is something that looks good and seems well-intentioned in its view of Morris and his achievement, but is actually shoddy. Perhaps I should have looked at the back flap, where the jacket illustration is described as ‘Orchard Portiere’, and the author as the founder of a nationally syndicated radio theatre ensemble rather than a Victorian scholar. What we find are four chronological chapters clearly derived from secondary sources and sometimes inaccurate - the last one should be on the Socialism, but devotes several pages to going back over earlier material; lots of pictures, but no explanation of their order of presentation or the details of original sizes except in the case of paintings - occasionally there are two versions of the same work in different sizes and colours on different pages; no suggestions about where anyone interested in Morris might either see his work or read more about him - and
no indication of where the book’s title is derived from; and, finally, an index relating to a book about Renaissance painting. It is alarming to imagine Morris’s response to such a botched piece of work.

Nevertheless, quite a few of the pages are good to look at, particularly those showing furniture, and we even have Walter Crane’s ‘Homage to Morris in Elysium’.

Peter Faulkner