

Ray Watkinson (1913–2003)

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Ray Watkinson, who died on January 13th at the age of 89, was one of the giants of Morris studies. To describe him as an art-historian will seem to the many who knew him during his long and active life as absurdly reductive: he was a man of wide interests with an astonishing range of knowledge. Less than a month before his death he was able to explain the mysterious initials PSA shown on a late-Victorian photograph of a well-groomed group on a boat at Hammersmith Pier as meaning Pleasant Sunday Afternoons, and to offer some characteristic comments on the likely politics of the group – Ray was a lifelong Communist, in the sense of the term in which it was also true of William Morris, whose personality and achievement he so much admired. He was someone to whom one could always turn for a piece of recondite information, but, much more than that, he was an inspiring teacher who shared his enthusiasms with all those with whom he came into contact, either by word of mouth or by letter. How many of us must have kept files of those letters, eccentrically typed on an increasingly ancient machine never superseded by a word-processor, and packed with news and opinions articulated with an energy reminiscent of Carlyle (whose politics he abominated). He may indeed have been one of the last generation of great letter-writers. In his scholarly publications, Ray wrote appreciatively about many artists, including the robust Hogarth and the great Northumbrian engraver, Thomas Bewick, but his major books were on the nineteenth century, *William Morris as Designer* (1967), *Pre-Raphaelite Art and Design* (1970), and, co-authored with Teresa Newman, *Ford Madox Brown* (1991). These books, with their emphasis on the importance of design alongside that of the fine arts, have helped to shape understanding of the Victorian period.

Born into a working-class Methodist family in Manchester in 1913, Ray made his way to Stretford Grammar School and the Manchester School of Art before he began his career as teacher and scholar of the arts and crafts, a career which took him to Poole, Watford (where his politics apparently got him dismissed), Woolwich, Brighton, the London College of Printing, and Goldsmith's College. In the Thirties, he was active in Aid for Spain and other left-wing groups, and he became art critic of the *Daily Worker*. During the war, he was involved in drawing technical illustrations at the Avro aircraft factory in Manchester. In later years, he lived in Brighton, in a three-storey terraced house convenient for the station, where the visitor would find shelves of books uniformly covered in brown paper, as well as genial hospitality and wide-ranging conversation; he arranged for this remarkable library to go to the University of Brighton.

I first met Ray at a conference on William Morris in Loughborough in 1977, where his wide-ranging talk on Morris as Designer, subtitled 'Art, Work, and Social Order', delivered with few or no notes, impressed me with its remarkable clarity of both thought and delivery. The relationship that began then was to prove a lasting one, in the course of which I was encouraged in numerous letters

to bestir myself on behalf of the Cause – for Ray, this was principally that of Morris the designer and political activist. I must have been one of a very large number who, over the years, found themselves indebted to him for helping them to develop intellectually and personally in response to the vitality of his commitment. Ray was a formative influence on the development of the William Morris Society (founded in 1955), serving for many years on its committee, editing its *Journal*, and eventually becoming its President. He was a Trustee of the William Morris Gallery, of Kelmscott House and of Red House in Bexleyheath (recently acquired by the National Trust), as well as chair of the Marx Memorial Library. He was also active in the promotion of the Morris Exhibition at the V&A in 1996, of which Linda Parry was the curator. She has recorded that

Ray was a vital force in the development of the exhibition during the three years of organisation. His comprehensive knowledge of Morris's life was invaluable in helping to plan a clear and simple thematic route for the exhibition. Furthermore, his views on the importance of Morris's early achievements as a painter were finally explained in full in the catalogue. This entry, in which Ray considered Morris's early literary and artistic preferences alongside his developing social and political ambitions, provides one of the most original views of Morris's artistic career.

Ray decided to resign the Presidency of the Society on reaching the age of eighty, but to the end of his life he continued to offer his advice to the editors of the *Journal* and to the Honorary Secretaries of the Society, advice that was not always followed, but was always recognised as serving to keep its recipients up to the mark set by Morris. It is appropriate to end these remarks with that name, by which Ray set such store. (With his impressive beard, he somewhat resembled his hero, but his trim figure never resembled the stout Morris of Burne-Jones's caricatures). Like Morris, he strove to encourage a saner attitude to life and politics, and he made a significant contribution to that cause. Those who knew him will not forget his humanity, his wit, or his sense of purpose.