BOOK REVIEWS


Roderick Marshall was an American academic who wrote on *Italy in English Literature*, then studied in India and wrote articles on Indian, Chinese and Muslim subjects, and in 1968 moved with his second wife to Kelmscott Manor where he spent the rest of his life. As the Forward tells us, he and his wife came to love the Manor and to feel close involvement with the man who had loved it so much before them. They also came to feel that no available account of Morris really came close to revealing his inner personality. The book is an attempt to do this, to give 'the sense of a living man treating Life's dilemmas with a supply of ripostes that do, indeed, have relevance to our time.' (p. xvi). The approach is therefore primarily biographical, but working largely from Morris's writings (every story or poem is searched for biographical insights). Morris's central concern is seen as the creation of an Earthly Paradise through the imagination and
despite a realistic awareness of human suffering; and this is seen as exhibiting parallels with the Jungian idea of the integration of the personality symbolised by the mandala of Eastern meditation (though it is admitted that Morris was unaware of the term). All this makes for a rather heady brew, and my own reactions to it are mixed.

The production of the book by the Compton Press is very attractive—the dust-cover with Burne-Jones's 'Souls being Received into the Heavenly Paradise' from The Golden Legend of 1892 is excellent, with the red titling making a lively composition. The same illustration provides a frontispiece. There are eleven other illustrations on photographic paper, the glossiness of which I find less satisfactory when the illustration is from a Kelmscott book. Unfortunately, however, the editor does not seem to have checked the relationship between illustrations and text (evidently, although Dr Marshall completed the book in 1973, he did not live to see it through the press), and the index must be the briefest and least satisfactory ever compiled. The forms of reference to other works are not always helpful either. Nevertheless, the book is a pleasure to look at and to handle.

As far as the biographical element is concerned, Dr Marshall is both interesting and provoking. The thoroughness of the attention given to the material is attractive, but the insistence on a biographical approach seems excessive. Take this remark on 'the purport' of the early poem, 'The Wind': 'before he had really won Jane, Morris perhaps because of his self-doubt,
Gimson and the Barnsleys
'Wonderful furniture of a commonplace kind'

Mary Comino
Deputy Director of Cheltenham Museum

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the rumour of some shadowy "sin" of hers — there must have been some kind of "talk" — and her tendency to shudder away from him, had taken to possessing the girl in dreams and thereby lost her — horribly — forever' (p. 38). It is certainly a strange and difficult poem, but so definite a psychological explanation seems to me to reduce its interest, as well as being based on little substantial evidence: would Morris have insisted on marrying Jane if she had a 'tendency to shudder away from him'? The reader needs to treat such statements with caution, but if he does so he will often find himself meeting with new and worthwhile suggestions. For instance, the insistence that Jason is by no means as escapist poem, but rather 'a losing battle for hopes indispensable to Morris's well-being' (p. 76) is well supported, as is the argument that there are really two Earthly Paradises, a happy version planned in the early Red House years and surviving in the apologues in the published work and the original prologue, and the volumes as eventually published with their groundbass of suffering and unhappiness. And we are well reminded of a number of the poems published eventually in Poems by the Way which are often unfairly neglected. 'Earth the Healer, Earth the Kee' is described as 'one of Morris's finest poems' (p. 192), and the judgement is convincing whether or not one accepts the biographical interpretation. On the other hand, though, I don't at all agree that 'Goldilocks and Goldilocks' is a 'rather silly little poem' (p. 283). At all events, the close scrutiny of often ignored texts challenges the reader in a positive way.

Dr Marshall sees Morris as having found the clue to achieving his earthly paradise in Kelmscott Manor itself, and his account of the house and the country in which it stands is full of affection and warmth. He dismisses the notion that 'the house was bare of creature comforts or even modest luxuries' as 'sheer myth' (p. 238), though Wilfrid Scawen Blunt — admittedly a man used to the best country houses — described life there in 1889 as 'extremely primitive. There were few of the conveniences of modern life.' (My Diaries, I (1921), 24). Through his experience of Kelmscott, Dr Marshall argues, Morris was able to achieve a greater serenity and acceptance of the personal tragedy of his marriage, emerging to express his vision in the prose romances of the last years, full of the mythic scenery to which the mandala may be seen as belonging. In emphasising this pattern of development, it was unfortunately felt necessary to make a wholesale attack on the view of Morris which emphasises his Marxism. Dr Marshall allies himself with Bruce Glasier and L.W. Eshleman, and makes extravagant statements such as 'It is certain that when he joined the Democratic Federation in 1883 Morris had never heard of Marx, and it is possible that he never read more than the historical portion of Das Kapital' (p. 252), and that by 1890 he 'had done all he could for Socialism; now, as he felt the years closing in, he must do what he could for William
Morris' (p. 271). Here an unnecessary wedge is inserted between Morris's political and artistic concerns, the integration of which was so central to Morris's later thought. If the mandala is to be introduced into our view of Morris, it must co-exist, however unusually, with the latter's form of Marxism, rather than be offered as a substitute for it. And while returning to the mandala, it seems a pity that so little attention is given to Morris as a designer or to the quality of his interest in Eastern patterns.

William Morris and his Earthly Paradises is, then, a book with undeniable faults. But for this reader at least these were largely compensated for by the warmth of the writer's enthusiasm for Morris and his sense that Morris's ideas and attitudes have much to offer to our age, as well as by the quality of the production of this handsome book.

Peter Faulkner