After London: A Dream of Utopia
Irene Moran, Sampieri, Messina 1983 N.P.

Irene Moran of the University of Calabria, ‘a cockney through and through . . . until I moved to Italy’, believes that ‘the utopian dreams of Richard Jefferies and William Morris take on a new meaning for us’, now that the optimism of a ‘mechanistic society . . . seems to be on the ebb’. In a way After London provides a literary–historical background for the emergence of the Greens and the Ecology Party. It has an apparently simple theme: the growing disgust of nineteenth century British writers with the development of the city, their revulsion. D. H. Lawrence’s ‘real urbs’, Siena, is contrasted with ‘the development of a new type of city, the “megalopolis”’. Increasing hatred for this ‘wen’ is traced through journalism, the graphic arts, and literature, climaxing in a study of Dickens. Dickens, it is argued, finally turned his back on London; he connected it with death and with physical corruption and pollution which were morally associated with wealth. Dickens’ verdict was in harmony with James Thomson’s in his City of Dreadful Night. London was left ‘waiting for . . . the fate that Richard Jefferies and William Morris . . . reserved for it’. Irene Moran seems almost to regard ‘the foul swamp which . . . covered London’ in Jefferies’ After London, Wild England as some kind of divine justice, the dies irae. The parallel title of her own book is suggestive.

The countryside really appears only as the antithesis of the hated great city. It is a ‘green garden’. It is the ‘wild (as) refuge from civilization’ in a memorable study of the attitude of his readers to George Borrow. It is Thomas Hardy’s Egdon Heath which resists time and change, passive acceptance of which is ‘the only hope for the survival of modern man’. This dichotomy of city and country is the context within ‘Utopianism in nineteenth century England’ and News from Nowhere are set. The bald summary I have given, though I have tried to use Irene Moran’s own words, is quite inadequate to a work of such sensitivity and sophistication, of insight and erudition, based on a catholic reading of literary criticism and social history. Stimulating ideas are clothed in pleasing language with only the rarest lapses: why use the word ‘emargination’, which is not even in The Concise Oxford Dictionary? Fascinating as is the argument, particularly fascinating for the understanding of many Victorian writers which it brings, can we accept it? does it help us to understand the utopias?

There is no doubt that Irene Moran’s interpretation would lead logically to Richard Jefferies’ utopia, but to News from Nowhere? There is, after all, a world of difference between the miasma of Jefferies’ swamp and Morris’s ‘London, small, and white, and clean’ or the Garden City of Morris’s March 1874 letter: ‘suppose people lived in little communities among gardens and
green fields, so that you could be in the country in five minutes walk’. In *News from Nowhere* machinery exists but is servant not master; there is urban life, a forward projection from Lawrence’s Siena, the market towns of some of Morris’ later romances. That many sensitive Victorians loathed the evils of the megalopolis is without doubt but some of them sought to improve the city not just to flee from it. In an unkind moment one might argue that the philosophy of escape from the city, whether Richard Jefferies’ or that of contemporary back to nature, organic composting, simple life communities, is a reaction by first generation, tortured intellectuals not unlike the age-old behaviour of the urban British new rich who buy themselves country retreats!

I believe there is a reason why Irene Moran’s treatment of Morris, full of interest as it is, seems to this reviewer slightly out of focus. It comes from the way in which she has adopted Karl Mannheim’s distinction ‘between the absolute and relative utopia: the former is absolutely unobtainable. . . . The latter . . . unobtainable only in the context of the prevailing social order but . . . plausible in a hypothetical new order’. Whether this is, or is not, a useful distinction in general is not the point; as applied by Irene Moran to Morris it becomes a straightjacket. Though there is a slight qualification in one passage, Irene Moran emphasises that ‘the absolute utopia . . . found its complete expression in the work of William Morris’. *News from Nowhere* is a ‘turning upside down of the actual world’; ‘the romance does not tell us how this society comes into being’. To justify this surprising statement John Goode is quoted: ‘How the Change Came is as much a dream as Nowhere itself’. Revealingly Morris’s satirical and subtle explanation of how men came to change from feeling work as pain to finding their pleasure in work is not mentioned; it does not fit in with the argument that ‘absolute utopia is absolute rest’.

I suspect that Irene Moran does not really understand the influence of Iceland and the sagas on Morris, and this may be why she does not give us as clear an interpretation of *News from Nowhere* as of so much else she writes about. For one thing she seems to confuse the world of the sagas with ‘primitive Germanic societies’. *The House of the Wolfings* is described as ‘apparently a translation of Icelandic legend’. Then she argues that Morris ‘was not inspired so much by the heroic aspect of the saga as by the values of community life’. This apposirion is a simplification. In a letter to Andreas Scheu in 1883 Morris wrote that the sagas ‘took my heart by storm’, among several reasons, because of ‘their worship of courage, the great virtue of the human race’. Fellowship, the importance of which in Morris’s ideas Irene Moran admirably brings out, made a man into a hero in *The House of the Wolfings* as in *The Roots of the Mountains*, and the achievement of the hero was to enlarge fellowship. This is important for an understanding of Morris. He was a revolutionary; he did not wish simply to escape from the city, nor to destroy it. Fighting for change was at the core of his being, ‘absolute rest’ was anathema. The logical climax of the argument of Irene Moran’s book seems to this reviewer to be Jefferies’ *Wild England*, NOT *News from Nowhere*. 
What the writer has to say about William Morris is of primary interest to readers of *The Journal*, but the consequent emphasis which has been given to this review is unbalanced. *After London: a dream of Utopia* is an extremely thoughtful and thought provoking work, of real insight, which stimulates and challenges. Hopefully some British publisher will soon make it available to British readers.

*Lionel M. Munby*

*William Morris—ein Mann gegen die Zeit*

Hans-Christian Kirsch, Eugen Diederichs Verlag, Cologne 1983
ISBN 3 424 00772 2 Price: circa £20

This is the first full length biography of Morris in German. As the author and his publishers have also produced the first German translation of ‘How we live and how we might live’, we have here an important publishing event and an auspicious moment in the developing awareness of Morris. As members of the Society pore over their world maps, they must frequently sigh at the sight of large expanses of the globe where the natives do not yet benefit from the Society’s work, so they can now give thanks to Hans Christian Kirsch and the Eugen Diederichs Verlag for furthering the aims of the Society, ‘to improve and diffuse knowledge of the life, work and influence of William Morris’ and to ‘preserve and make available’ his works. They have admirably carried out their mission in partis infidelibus.

Morris was well known in Germany at the turn of the century but is remembered today if at all, for the Kelmscott Press, as a precursor of Jugendstil and a pioneer of some ideas about the applied arts.

In Germany in the 1890s there was considerable interest in modernising education in art and the crafts and in developing new styles and aesthetic ideals for a variety of reasons ranging from philosophical to fashion, nationalism and the need for export-led industrial prosperity. It was in this intellectual climate, particularly open to currents from Britain, that Morris’s influence came to be important. In his last chapter Mr Kirsch gives some indication of Morris’s importance but there is need for further study. By 1895 the great Viennese architect Otto Wagner was quoting Morris. ‘The Firm’ became the model for art industries in Vienna, Munich and Dresden. The Press inspired numerous German printers, was a key source for Jugendstil book design and for a woodcut revival and led to the founding of the very publishers of the book under review. Red House inspired the ‘Artists’ Houses’ erected by the anglophile Duke at Darmstadt in 1901.

Morris’s indirect influence was certainly enormous, for instance in the importance of manual craftsmanship, truth to materials, simplicity and overall harmony of interior design as shown in the ‘Vienna Secession’ or again, on plans for craft communities, on the importance of working with one’s hands as reiterated by Gropius and on individual designers such as Riemenschneider and...
Van de Velde. There were some inevitable ironies in this development. Kelmscott Press lay-outs were combined with Beardsleyan drawings; through Muthesius, Morrisian principles were adapted to industrial design while the social concern which was the main spring of his actions was played down and forgotten. In 1897 ‘How I became a Socialist’ was translated, related articles appeared and in 1900, Lunacharski, who eventually became Soviet Cultural Commissar, visiting the Paris exhibition, wrote at length in praise of the Morrisian influence he found there, but the view that Morris’s social ideas were the unimportant fantasies of a dreamer and an unfortunate solecism, triumphed. There were no connections to be made between the eternal verities of art and every day politics.

This was, generally speaking, the situation when Edmund Goldzamt’s William Morris und die sozialen Ursprünge der modernen Architektur was made available in East Germany in 1976 having previously been published in Polish in 1967 and Russian in 1973. Although Goldzamt offered some thoughtful analysis of Morris’s thought and demonstrated the importance of socialism in many of its aspects, his account of Morris is limited by his general thesis, which is to take issue with Pevsner and show Morris to have been a pioneer not of the modern movement but of particular trends in modern architecture and planning which are concerned with the needs of society as a whole and come to fruition in the work of various East European architects. . . . Thus the field has been left clear for Mr Kirsch, whose thesis, as far as he has one, is implicit rather than explicit. He acknowledges Morris’s socialism and sees him as a pioneer of many of the concerns of the ‘Greens’, the German ecological party. The ‘man against his age’ is seen as a man for our time. But these conclusions are modestly left to the reader; Mr Kirsch’s main interest is in providing a well-balanced all-round introduction to Morris.

He has written a book on Ireland and knows England well. He begins by explaining how his own interest in Morris was aroused while reading some essays on a walking tour in Wales followed by a visit, with not unfamiliar difficulties, to Kelmscott Manor. There is a brief discussion of some Morrisian terms which give an introduction to his ideas and then we are off to an account of Morris’s family and childhood. There are just sufficient references to the social and political context, to enable the German reader who will know little of British history, to make sense of Morris’s environment.

There are many good things in Mr Kirsch’s treatment, especially his easy, unforced tone and clear affection for his subject. I particularly enjoyed his tolerance and understatement when dealing with what must seem to the educated European as one of the most incredible of our tribal institutions, the public school, in this case Marlborough, in its unreformed condition. It is thought provoking to have Britain characterised as a country where poets have had influence on public events, from ‘Blake & Shelley’ to ‘Spender & Orwell!’ Mr Kirsch enlivens his account by quoting interesting insights from other writers such as Jack Lindsay or Roderick Marshall on the ‘mandala’ at Red House and in Morris’s designs, without necessarily going along with them. He also has insights of his own, in
relating Morris’s marital problems to Rossetti’s, as well as to the problems of class distinction, and in putting the course of Morris’s friendships in the wider context of his need for fellowship. Both colour and black and white illustrations are well chosen and well reproduced; the colour plate of Guenevere * is good enough to remind one what a loss it was that Morris gave up painting. The book is beautifully produced.

There are some things it is worth criticising in the hope that they will be made good in a second edition, which this book certainly deserves, preferably in paperback so that it could reach a larger readership. Georgiana Burne-Jones was not the daughter of George MacDonald the novelist; Morris’s motto ‘As I can’ comes from van Eyck not van Dyck. The caption to the illustration on page 117 should read ‘Jenny, born January 1861’, page 151 Radcote is misspelled and on page 154, Granton. Ford Madox Brown’s ‘Take your son, Sir’, admittedly an enigmatic painting, is given the most banal of explanations as a roué being shown the bastard he has had by his servant when it is exceedingly unlikely that the highly respectable Brown would have let his wife and child pose for such a theme. This does lead to a wider complaint of perhaps an over emphasis, however up to date, on the love affairs of the circle. This might be justified, but it does seem to have been included at the expense of other subjects, such as Morris’s designs, which we may hope will receive more extensive evaluation in the next edition. Some words require better translations—‘Hütte’ does not do justice to ‘Cottage’ and a word must be found for ‘Commonwealth’ that includes the non-economic connotations which the word possesses in English.

The fact remains that Mr Kirsch has carried out his chosen task admirably. German readers now have available to them a sound, up to date and well rounded introduction to Morris and we may hope for a new wave of interest, study and influence.

Hans Brill

* So-called. Its true title is ‘La Belle Iseult’ as is witnessed by May Morris and Philip Webb.

The Political Writings of William Morris

A welcome contribution to the Morris celebrations is a new edition of Leslie Morton’s Political Writings of William Morris. Introducing the new edition, Morton argues the importance of News from Nowhere for an understanding of Morris’s thought. It is ‘the final expression of his preoccupation, unique among socialists in its intensity, with human needs and human happiness’. Many of his earlier lectures had been attempts to answer the questions ‘what do people need to enjoy full dignified, happy lives?’ and ‘what kind of society will best help them to fulfil these needs?’ ‘But in News From Nowhere these speculations were brought together in a great imaginative utopia.’
The original selection consists of eight lectures covering the development of Morris’s political thought from his first public lecture, *The Lesser Arts* (1877) to *Communism* (1893). With these are four extracts from *The Commonweal* which have a more ‘day-to-day’ political flavour, two letters to his daughter Jane, vividly describing speaking tours in Scotland and the North-East and *How I Became a Socialist* which first appeared in *Justice*.

Now, because of the importance he ascribes to *News From Nowhere*, Leslie Morton has added two items which illustrate some of the thought behind that work. One is Morris’s *Commonweal* review of Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*, a popular utopian work, more of science fiction than of socialism, which horrified Morris and which he feared was spreading false ideas of what socialists stood for. He saw Bellamy as one ‘perfectly satisfied with modern civilisation, if only the injustice, misery and waste of class society could be got rid of; which half-change seems possible to him’. This essential acceptance of bourgeois values led Bellamy to see the path to socialism by way of all private monopolies being absorbed into one giant monopoly. Morris was far-sighted in seeing that though this was economically logical it was politically unlikely. More probable was ‘the recurrence of break-ups and re-formations of this kind of monopoly, under the influence of competition for privilege, or war for the division of plunder, till the flood comes and destroys them all’. It was a remarkable anticipation of the argument between Kautsky and Lenin that was to divide European socialists quarter of a century later, and was but one of Morris’s insights in this review. Bellamy assumed that such a giant monopoly would be the foundation of a highly centralised, mechanised and urbanised society which would plan and order the lives of its citizens. Morris, in the review, succinctly sets forth his own views of society in opposition to this ‘machine life’ and so presents the germ of his own masterpiece. Even so he warns against the dangers of all utopias—that some might accept the details as a blueprint while others might reject the principles through distaste for the details. ‘The only safe way of reading a Utopia is to consider it as the expression of the temperament of its author.’

The other addition is Morris’s splendid socialist critique of More’s *Utopia* which he saw as the link between ‘the surviving Communism of the Middle Ages’ and ‘the hopeful and practical progressive movement of today’. He saw in More a contradiction for ‘the spirit of the Renaissance was strong within him’, yet this was, ‘itself, the intellectual side of the very movement’, the ‘advancing wave of Commercial Bureaucracy’, which More strove against. As a result Utopia is itself a place of contradictions, a land of reason and rational pleasures, embodying ‘the Communistic side of Medieval society’, but also one with priests, bondslaves, a king and ‘cruel punishments for the breach of the marriage contract’.

The new edition has also as its frontispiece a drawing of Morris by George Howard, later Earl of Carlisle. In it Morris appears wearing his glasses, as his friends saw him day by day but as he does not appear in most of his portraits.
Ray Watkinson, who came across the portrait in the Carlisle Museum, contributes a note on it.

*Jim Fyorth*

*William Morris*, Peter Stansky, Oxford University Press, 1983 £1.95 (past Master series)

There has long been a need for a brief introduction to Morris, and our member Peter Stansky, Professor of History at Stanford University, has produced one within the space of 99 small pages, which has appeared appropriately in time for the 150th Anniversary Year. The little volume, which follows the usual chronological approach, is very readable, but there are signs of hasty composition, with a number of errors and several assessments which are open to question. Space will only permit consideration of a few of the latter. I would not agree, for example, that 'at times he acted like a spoilt child, would bang his head against the wall, could not react to others with delicacy and mature concern!' Stories of Morris's temper have been much exaggerated, but the point is that his outbursts were directed against objects and not human beings, and were far from the reactions of a spoilt child. Throughout his life, although he could never suffer fools gladly, he showed outstanding 'delicacy and concern' in his personal relations.

'In “The Nature of Gothic” Ruskin advanced the idea which became crucial to Morris's thinking: there was virtue in the lack of perfection or roughness in the Gothic craftsman or sculptor, for it reflected the humanity of the art and the pleasure the maker took in the work' (p. 13). Morris rarely refers to the dubious concept of Gothic roughness, and it would be better to quote from Morris's preface to his Kelmscott Press edition of 'The Nature of Gothic' for the idea which became crucial to his thinking: 'For the lesson which Ruskin teaches us is that art is the expression of man's pleasure in labour.'

'Pugin, Ruskin and Morris saw in the Gothic style an important statement about workmen in the fourteenth century... They may have thought that the fourteenth century marked the apogee of Gothic in England, but they believed that Gothic made an important statement about workmen throughout the Middle Ages, and not merely in the fourteenth century.

'Morris found there (in Iceland) a comparatively primitive world that was far more rewarding to the spirit than “civilised” England, demonstrating how humankind could do without the advances of the nineteenth century. He found there qualities of endurance and heroism: models for his ideal individuals' (pp. 48/9). It was not the society of contemporary Iceland but that of the Sagas whose values Morris so much admired.

'He (Morris) was convinced that art could not flourish in a society of “commercialism and profit mongering”, but there is of course hardly an absolute
guarantee that, if human beings turn from thinking only of profits, art will automatically flourish' (p. 65). Morris, of course, held no such absurdly simplistic view, and considered that art would flourish again only after a total reconstruction of the social order.

After referring to the move in the 1960s and early 1970s towards communes of so-called hippies or flower-children, who ‘often wore a rather Pre-Raphaelite, semi-medieval sort of dress’, Stansky continues—‘The lack of realism in Morris’s vision of utopia is not so much in the sort of economy he depicts as in one of his basic premises: that humans need not be aggressive. The reasons why most communes have not been able to survive is that human beings are not sufficiently able to maintain peaceful relations with one another’ (p. 76). Morris’s realism would have foreseen the inevitable collapse of pathetic attempts to build retreats of counter-culture in the jungle of American capitalism, and their foredoomed failure may have been an important factor in any aggression which developed within the communes. Their experience has no relevance whatever to the type of society Morris envisions.

The flippant comment that Guest fades from the feast to celebrate the hay-making in *News from Nowhere* ‘perhaps because he had never learned how to wield a scythe’ (p. 77) shows a surprising inability to respond to the moving conclusion of the story, when Guest realises that the fellowship and beauty of the new life are not for him, and he must return to the misery and ugliness of his own world.

To turn to the errors: Stanley Baldwin did not give a speech celebrating Morris in Walthamstow in 1934, and the ‘ponds’ at the Water House are in fact a complete moat dating from the Middle Ages, which must have provided a wonderful island for the Morris children’s games (p. 6). There is no evidence that Morris ‘kept a fond memory of Marlborough’ (p. 8) nor was Oxford University ever a ‘beloved institution’ for him (p. 11). He did not refuse to go into the Exhibition of 1851 ‘because he hated what he had heard of the ugliness and vanity inside’ (p. 8). He is unlikely to have made the journey to the Exhibition and then to have refused to go in, and the source * says ‘he declined to see anything more wonderful in it than that it was “wonderfully ugly”, and , sitting himself down on a seat, steadily refused to go over the building with the rest of the family’.

When Morris declared himself a socialist in his lecture in University College Oxford in 1883, it was the authorities and not the residents who were aghast (p. 28). The SPAB is the Society for the Protection/not the Preservation of Ancient Buildings, a not unimportant difference, since one aim of the Society was to protect buildings against ignorant ‘preservation’. Morris’s objection to the Fabians was not their dry, ‘unsentimental approach’ but to their reformism, and his ‘personal preaching’ extended far beyond an appearance every Sunday morning by Hammersmith Bridge (pp. 62/63) Finally, Morris’s father died in 1847, not 1849, and when Morris was thirteen, not eleven (p. 2).
It is a great pity that more time was not spent on this essay, which as it stands can only receive a qualified commendation.

Richard S. Smith


Pre-Raphaelite Photography
Graham Ovenden, Academy Editions/St. Martin’s Press ppbk £6.95
First published 1972 84 pp. 77 reproductions

The relationship between photography and painting has become much clearer since the publication of Aaron Scharf’s ‘Art and Photography’. Now we all know that nineteenth century painters made great use of photographs; that photographers—most of them, in the first decade of the invention, trained as painters—looked to painting for ideas and formal arrangements. The 64 photographs reproduced here have mostly become familiar by now, and there is little difficulty in making the connections between Pre-Raphaelite painting and photography, as between photography and Impressionism. But contrary to what is asserted on the back cover, these photographs do not show any identity between photography and Pre-Raphaelite painting, which was not photographic in its procedures however convenient these, and every other kind of painter from 1840 onward, found the camera as an aid—Ingres and Courbet as much as Rossetti and Arthur Hughes.

It is regrettable that this reissue in what ought to be handy form, leaves everything to be desired in terms of production and reproduction: the text, though, still offers useful information.

R.W.

For later notice

John Ruskin’s Labour
ISBN 0 521 25233 4

Subtitled ‘A study of Ruskin’s social theory’ this is part of a polemic being developed in proportion as serious reading of Ruskin and Morris proceeds, in which the former is sedulously cultivated as an antidote to the latter. Good on Ruskin, whom Anthony reads with diligence, it has an ingenious line in denigration of Morris. Too serious to dismiss, it will be reviewed in our Winter issue.

Too late for review in the Summer issue, we have two more publications from Italy, both by Edvige Schulte, Professor of English Language and Literature in the University of Naples. First, excerpted from a volume in memory of Alfonso
Tesauro, her own paper on the Aesthetic and Political Thought of William Morris: 33 pp with one illustration, the opening text-page of the Kelmscott Chaucer, beautifully reproduced. Secondly, what will be as welcome to English as to Italian readers, the first translation into Italian of Morris’s poem ‘The Pilgrims of Hope’; with facing pages of Italian and English text, the latter facsimile from the Collected Works. A short foreword locates the original in Volume XXIV of the CW, acknowledges the share of Maria Lima and Vanda Polese in the translation. There is a portrait of Morris, what seems an admirably condensed Life (9 pp): a useful bibliography, and a substantial Introduction. What a good way to improve your Italian and your knowledge of Morris at the same time!


New Publications

William Morris’s Printing Press

24 pages. 245 × 155 mm. ISBN 0 903283 02 6

Produced for the Society by Anthony Eyre, Michael Bassett, Clare Belfield, John Chidley and Susan Rogers under the direction of John Leath MSTD, and printed on the Albion press at Kelmscott House, once used by Morris, and given to the Society by Sir Basil Blackwell, who writes its history here. Rosalind Bliss contributes a new wood engraving, Ray Watkinson a short account of the Kelmscott Press. 300 copies, the first 50 printed on hand-made paper and signed by the authors and artist, for £15.00 each; the rest at £3.50 each.

Orders to Anthony Eyre, William Morris Society, Kelmscott House; cheques payable to the Society.

The Society gratefully acknowledges the assistance of the Crafts Council.

Morris at First Hand

Published by the William Morris Society in celebration of the 150th anniversary of his birth, this portfolio (12¼" × 8¾"—31 × 22 cm app.) is available to members at £3.00. It contains in facsimile, three important documents, with a fine portrait drawing by George Howard. These are: the text of Unjust War, of May 1877: the letter to Georgiana Burnie-Jones of June 1884, on his position as a socialist employer: and that to Charles Faulkner of October 1886 on love, sex, and marriage: Morris’s own hand, on three matters of abiding concern.