

By his works

by Loyd Haberly

REACHING into the ragbag of memory, I find remnants of what Emery Walker and Sidney Cockerell and Bernard Shaw told me about William Morris. Those remnants are less bright now than the faces and vivid personalities of three gifted older men talking to a craftsman just beginning. So also when I turn back to the days when I bound for Mrs Gaskell in her Edwardian treasure-house the volumes of witty and profoundly wise letters that Burne-Jones wrote to her towards the close of his understanding lifelong association with Morris. Those letters portrayed in affectionate phrase and lively caricature what William Morris was saying or doing. Deaf though she was in her great age, Mrs Gaskell supplied addenda in our practical clocked conversations which let me question her for two minutes through a speaking tube, and then allowed her three minutes to answer. The gracious, brave woman, made young again by memories of the painter she revered, is what I recollect – along with such Burne-Jones aphorisms as ‘Once twelve men held together for a while, and they changed the world’.

While I was engraving upon boxwood some of the pencilled illustrations which Burne-Jones did early in life for the tale of Eros and Psyche, silver-haired Catterson-Smith told me how William Morris impressed him when he was an apprentice wood-engraver, cutting backgrounds on the blocks for the Kelmscott Chaucer. His impression was of a master whose identity was almost wholly merged with inner imaginings that bodied forth or spoke forth complete. William Morris saw on the blank page the still-undrawn design, and heard – as in a whirr of starling wings – whole measures of the still-unwritten poem.

Locked in the eternal loneliness of the working craftsman, he could only be known and understood through his works, whether graphic or in words or glass or tapestry. A craftsman of the authentic mediaeval mystique can in no otherwise be measured.

The enduring excellence of the Middle Ages was a rich and varied imagining of created things – which included the exciting and always perilous creative use of skills. William Morris, by some

trick of inheritance, possessed this excellence. The hands of Burne-Jones could never perfectly shape or set the jewels of his own mind, whereas – except for a very few examples of heavy-handedness – William Morris wrought as he thought, with an instinct set in the place of studied procedure. Seldom does one of his creations tease the beholder or the reader to speculate whether it could have been better done with better training. The sunken strata of good traditions surfaced again in him, as solid and sure as in Chaucer's day.

His immense eagerness and energy, overflowing and overgrowing like the forces of outdoors, were of that carved and painted mediaeval otherwhere which one man in many hundreds will always inhabit. One man here, and one man there, born under the same spangle of star, is a mediaeval man – ready to respond to Tewkesbury glass or the Luttrell Psalter, or *The Flower and The Leaf* or William Morris, and also ready to take up creative tools because of these.

Lying on the Oxford Union floor in my long-ago student days, I looked up understandingly at colourful William Morris, alive enough up there in the painted ceiling which was his earliest complete expression. Liking it was my first way of saying that William Morris is an easy one for the fortunate to know.