

CORRESPONDENCE

What I expect of the William Morris Society

The Editor

Sir,

The Society has now been established for six years, and, in spite of the occasional pangs of depression which are liable to seize us in the course of any undertaking against odds, a great deal has been accomplished. Most of the work we have produced consists of data and critical opinion, directed to the end of finding out exactly what Morris did and said, and so producing an accurate image of the man in our minds. Our success in this is shown by

the number of recent references to Morris in all kinds of places.

But the dangers of this approach are these: first, mere *historiography* – the exploration of pleasant nineteenth century by-ways and the accumulation of trivial information; this easy toil is a self-deceiving way of avoiding the bigger issues which Morris had the courage to face, and which are clearly there on the pages of his well-known writings: second, *fragmentation* – owing to the specialist trainings forced upon us by modern education, we tend to be only too competent (more competent than Morris?) to discuss one small aspect of Morris' work, but in the process *the whole man* disappears – like certain climbers we scabble about among the foothills, demonstrating our agility on this or that difficult piece of rock-face, and appear not to see the mountain which is staring us in the face.

The remedy is more activity of a contemporary relevance. I have been more than once told: 'Ah, but you see, we don't *know* what Morris would have thought if he were still alive today.' Agreed, we don't *know*, but we have a pretty good idea. Morris at least *did* things, and shared with Milton a profound distrust of cloistered and unexercised virtue. Without going to the other extreme and founding a new political party – I am afraid I find it difficult to believe that an individualist like Morris would have been at home in any of our present parties – I think we might consider ourselves as a pressure group in cultural matters. The work that Morris began in this field is not yet done; we should be, for example, pressing for the liberalisation of technical education, reviewing recent design, commenting on the National Gallery restorations, challenging the new buildings in the City, worrying over commercial television, and contributing the odd pamphlet to the present 'culture and society' war. I know that we may, many of us, do these things as individuals – it would be more effective to do them as a group.

Morris is in his grave, but his ideas are marching on. Or do we leave him as a corpse for the PhD students to devour?

Yours, etc.

JOHN PURKIS