This is a clearly written and sympathetic study of Rossetti’s poetry, based on the argument that his most significant poetry is that in which he deals with ‘the reception of experience in a part of the inner life where the protections of ordinary living are discarded and emotions such as pain and ecstasy, guilt and fear are felt in their full power’. (p.14) Thus, although more extraverted poems like “Jenny” are not ignored, the main emphasis falls on *The House of Life* sonnets. Resolutely avoiding biographical explanations, the author successfully illuminates many of the inner qualities of the sonnets. She gives a thoughtful account of both the imagery and the diction, arguing that the elaboration of the latter is usually justified by the poet’s sense that the drama revealed to his inward gaze is ‘so vivid and compelling that he must couch it in language which challenges attention by its own intensity and self-consciousness.’ (p.98). This takes us to the point at which disagreement over Rossetti’s achievement is likely to occur, but even if we feel that intensity is better conveyed by dramatic rather than self-conscious language, there is no doubt of the accuracy of the account given here of Rossetti’s later diction. The brief chapter on “The importance of Dante” is most illuminating on the extent to which ‘Dante’s searing imagination . . . etched the images of his theology on Rossetti’s impressionable mind.’ (p.140). And the comparative discussion of *The House of Life* with Mrs. Browning’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and Christina Rossetti’s *Manna Inominata* is relevant and convincing.

The final chapter, “Matters of temperament”, attempts to give precision to the term Pre-Raphaelite by bringing into consideration other poems by Christina Rossetti and some by William Morris. The account given of the Morris poems is unexceptionable, stressing the contrast between *The Defence of Guenevere* volume and *The Earthly Paradise*, and concentrating mainly on the latter. Morris’s ‘faith in the power of narrative’ is stressed (p.177), and particular attention is given to “Ogier the Dane” and “The Death of Paris”. The conclusion, supported by reference to the introductory lyrics, is that the overall theme of the work is ‘life damaged by the passing of time and the failing of love.’ (p.191).

(Here it may be noted that Joan Rees makes no reference to the argument of American scholars like Blue Calhoun in *The Pastoral Vision of William Morris* (1975) that the poem must be seen in the overall perspective of the pastoral year with its movement through the seasons, indeed, the book is scanty in its references and has no bibliography - a strange omission from a University Press and one which will certainly be regretted by readers wishing to follow up some of the insights here given.)
For the author, Morris is ultimately prevented by his own desire for self-concealment from achieving the combination of 'acute physical perception and penetrating introspection' (p.195) which she sees as quintessentially Pre-Raphaelite and finds in the two Rossettis. Morris, on the other hand, 'hankered for the role of minstrel in an organic society but in ungenial times he could not escape the need to give expression to his own heart.' (ibid.) This is an interesting suggestion - perhaps Morris found the 'minstrel' role to his own satisfaction in the late prose romances - and one characteristic of this unpretentious and thoughtful study. Peter Faulkner

Philip Webb and his work by W.R. Lethaby
a new edition prepared by Godfrey Rubens with additional material from Lethaby’s manuscripts in the RIBA Library.

Raven Oak Press.

Godfrey Rubens has done signal service in presenting us with W.R. Lethaby’s account of his friend and teacher, and in adding to the original published text material never used until now. Taken from Lethaby’s papers in the Library of the RIBA, this includes a version of Webb’s commitment to Socialism - which predates that of Morris - somewhat modified to suit Lethaby’s own mystical outlook of later years: remembered passages of conversation: a few letters - though many quotations in the main text from Webb letters - and a note on Webb by May Morris, to whom until his death he was a devoted friend and counsellor; with a handlist of Webb’s buildings taken from the complete catalogue of John Brandon-Jones and Rory Spence. Forty two exceedingly pale illustrations add a visual element with photographs and some plans of buildings shown in photograph - one of the latter offering the unique photograph of Webb, on site during the building of one of his great houses, which is surely how he should be remembered.

Access to the book’s contents through the normal apparatus of index, the enumeration and placing of illustrations, the general arrangement of all the new material, has not been eased by the odd typography and make up of the volume - something on which both author and subject would have expressed themselves trenchantly. Yet this book is one to assert itself triumphantly over any oddities of presentation, and the new edition is amply justified.

The book, written by Lethaby after long pressure from S.C. Cockerell, in an episodic way - partly because Lethaby was very reluctant to write it, and put it off until Webb’s death. But he began it a week after that event, and it appeared as a series of articles in The Builder, the magazine. The list of chapters - the original articles - immediately defines themes, all subjects of which any student of Webb, of Morris, of Ruskin, would wish to know more, and better: themes which unfold Webb’s life in its abiding concerns. Presented in Lethaby’s slightly discursive way, these concerns as they are revealed through Webb’s engaging personality give
and are given extraordinary illumination. The illumination is twofold -
from the author, and from his subject; for here we have a loving and pen-
etrating account by one man of genius of another of yet higher genius
and more rigorous mind; both men with remarkable gifts of verbal ex-
pression, the sort of power which comes from deep reading and much
earnest talk with like-minded friends, not from any study of style in
writing, any more than their achievements in building and design sprang
from concerns with style, which both despised. The incisive bright char-
acter of their writing comes from their sharp perceptions of reality. In
Webb’s case expression comes through wry and sparkling imagery of
Chaucerian vividness and simplicity - of words; elliptical and compressed
often as to thought. It is not learned writers on architecture who come to
mind in reading these words - but Swift, Blake, Manley Hopkins, Brow-
ing. Indeed it can’t surprise us to learn of Webb’s lifelong love of Thomas
Bewick and his world of birds and beasts, his observations of human life
especially but not only in the countryside. Intimately connected as these
were for Bewick with the fable as a vehicle of expression, they were so
for Webb too, as when he suggests that a client might do well to read Aes-
rop’s fable of the Miller, his son, and their Ass. In an age when expression
ran so often to prolixity and inexactitude for the sake of colour or per-
suasion, Webb’s tautness gives us over and over memorable insights memor-
ably phrased: exactly the qualities of his own buildings, of his own aust-
ere but rich life: a life lived without personal vanity or greed and with re-
markable consistency and rectitude.
In the central matter of architecture, at a time when a great deal of rich
and superfluous building was going on, when artists and architects, novel-
ists and actors, as well as bankers and industrialists, could make money
as never before; when commissions for an architect who had come through
the office of one of the most eminent of the day, George Street, were read-
ily available, Webb built hardly more than one house a year over his fifty
years of practice - and ruled his clients like the master he was. Quite early,
like Morris with whom his friendship began in Street’s Oxford office, he
saw that the essence of the Gothic in which they both began lay not in its
manners but in its principles: that good architecture can come only of
good building practice carried out for good reason. All his life he went on learn-
ing from those whose hands did the building, from the close and humble
study of the actual crafts which make up building.
Passing through Webb’s life with Lethaby, we are shown the character of
the Oxford in which he was brought up, to which Morris came in 1853,
and where the two became friends from the moment of the latter’s join-
ing Street’s office in 1856. We get a new view of the inner working life
of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co., of architectural practice and of
Webb’s own dealings with clients: surely Sir Lowthian Bell of whom the
story is told (first by Bell himself) that Morris turned on him like a wild
beast, complaining that he spent his whole life ‘ministering to the swinish
luxury of the rich’, had already been chastened by exchanges with his archi-
itect? We learn too of the major part played by Webb in ‘Antiscrape’ - of
his wide historical knowledge, of his love of music, of his capacity for friendship and of his commitment to the same socialist causes and bodies as Morris - in respect of which it is worth noting that Morris once introduced Webb - to Hyndman no less - as ‘the man who introduced me to socialism’: last and not least, from May Morris’s letter to Lethaby who had asked her for her memories - of his tender insight into the lives of children. This rationalist founder of functional architecture, this apostle of good building as a human art, had all the qualities of sainthood. No wonder that Morris and that whole circle so valued him.

Ray Watkinson

Textiles by William Morris and Morris Co. 1861-1940
Oliver Fairclough and Emmeline Leary
Introduction by Barbara Morris.

A book on Morris’s design and manufacture of textiles, carpets, embroideries and tapestries was long awaited and although biographers have covered historic and aesthetic aspects of this work no publication exists which considers this important output in isolation. This book is very pretty and illustrations of textiles not published before make it a worthwhile purchase for Morris scholars. Barbara Morris’s Introduction is, as expected, a fascinating and learned summary of a subject about which she knows a great deal.

The authors, both members of staff at the City Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham, must be commended for producing a work of such scope in such a short time: it had to double as a catalogue for the exhibition Bright Blossoms and Strange Birds. It is a pity, however, that more time was not available for research as many mistakes have been made, which in what could become a standard work is worrying.

The reader will find problems with the general arrangement and the separation of technical chapters from relevant catalogue sections, while footnotes make reading, and use as reference, very difficult. The main chapters are sensibly divided by technique with Emmeline Leary responsible for those (and the catalogue sections) on Embroidery, Printed and Woven Textiles and Oliver Fairclough for those on Carpets and Tapestries, and the history of the two Morris Companies.

The catalogue is confusing: although we are told in the Foreword that it is not intended to be comprehensive, certain titles, such as ‘list of known printed fabrics’ lead the reader to believe otherwise. Random lists of the exhibits, (many represented at Birmingham only by photographs) further add to the confusion as nowhere is it explained that lists are only of items
which were part of a selected display. The title ‘Catalogue of the Textiles’ could be construed as meaning lists of the output of the two firms. There are quite startling omissions in the lists of known patterns and at least twenty-eight are left out including Compton designed in 1896 as a wallpaper but issued also as a printed cotton. Many names of patterns are listed incorrectly; Dearle’s woven Persian is New Persian (Persian is another design); Brocatel and Persian Brocatel are two different fabrics; Indian Print should be Indian Pink and Wild Tulip was the name of a Morris wallpaper and of a fabric made by Alexander Morton after a Morris design but not by him. The two greatest mistakes occur in the chapter concerning carpets where a large Hammersmith carpet illustrated in colour from the collection at Kelmscott Manor is not recognised as the Bullerswood design referred to in the text, and a sample of Wilton machine-made carpet is identified as the Lily when it is nothing of the kind, nor is it anything like the point-paper which is claimed to belong to it. Such mistakes point to the fact that basic sources, quoted in the bibliography, have not been checked.

The Tapestry chapter is well written and interesting and far surpasses the rest of the book in scholarship, accuracy and style. This chapter is longer than the others and is noticeably the nucleus around which the book has been written and the exhibition devised. Unfortunately both authors fall into the trap of assuming that other designers associated with Morris firms—Henry Dearle and May Morris in particular—were simply copyists of inferior ability, when this study, which includes the later period, gave them an opportunity to look in greater detail at their mature work and to recognise their abilities and originality.

To have emphasised such specific details may seem churlish but in the case of Morris textiles, where many other reliable texts are now out of print, accuracy is essential. It is hoped that the authors will have an opportunity to revise the book in subsequent printings of this paper-back which, I am sure, will be called for in the not too distant future.

Linda Parry


Mrs. Battiscombe’s new life of Christina Rossetti is, in the best sense, a popular biography: attractive in format, admirably printed and illustrated, not too long, and always readable. It is at the same time well-documented and scholarly making full and discriminating use of the vast accumulations of published and unpublished material now available to Rossetti specialists. Readers who are worried at times, as I was, by a curious feeling that they
have read this book before, perhaps in some previous existence, need not be uneasy: in 1965 Mrs. Battiscombe wrote an excellent pamphlet on Christina Rossetti for the Writers and their Works series, and she has incorporated many of its sentences and paragraphs into the present work.

Christina Rossetti, admittedly, was far from the centre of the Morris circle. Yet for many years she was acquainted with almost everyone who knew the Morrices. She could have answered so many questions; but her role was that of the quiet, often ironical, observer, and unfortunately she was always discreet. What did she know about her brother’s relationship with Janey, for instance? What did she think about it? Mrs. Battiscombe devotes a couple of sensible pages to these questions (pp. 151-2), but, like other investigators, leaves many uncertainties unresolved.

All biographers admit, crossly or sympathetically, that Christina’s life was uneventful, and modern research seems to have added little to the rather depressing pages of Mackenzie Bell, more than eighty years ago. What has changed is the attitude of the biographers: interest has turned to her ‘inner life’, which tends to mean, of course, an obsession with her sexual frustrations, real or imagined. Mrs. Battiscombe handles all this with tact and common sense, never forgetting that any valid discussion of Christina’s emotions and motives must be set in the context of Christina’s own time. Lona Mosk Packer’s theory (1963) that Christina was in love with William Bell Scott is discussed at some length, in the light of later evidence, and is convincingly rejected. Professor Packer’s book is still essential reading, of course, as Mrs. Battiscombe acknowledges: this new Life is a valuable supplement, at times a useful corrective, to it.

Mrs. Battiscombe is a biographer, not a literary critic; understandably, her quotations from Christina’s works tend to be chosen for the light they throw on Christina herself. Nevertheless, this affectionate and unsentimental portrait will encourage many readers to turn again to the poetry.

John Swannell

Journeyman Press will presently publish, by permission of the Society of Antiquaries, an edited version of Morris’s novel of modern life - never finished, never before printed. This has been prepared by Penelope Fitzgerald, who has also been responsible for a full scholarly transcript, with all Morris’s corrections, second thoughts, notes, which is to appear in the 1982 Dickens Studies Annual. A special William Morris Society issue of the Journeyman volume will be available to members in the coming Spring.