Reviews


Peter Stansky, Professor of History at Stanford University, has a special interest in nineteenth and twentieth-century British cultural history. His books include works on William Gladstone, the Liberal Party, the Bloomsbury circle and George Orwell; but most of us know him primarily as the author of *Redesigning the World: William Morris, the 1880s and the Arts and Crafts* (1985) – an important contribution to Morrisian studies – and the Oxford Past Masters volume on *William Morris* (1983) – excellent as a short introduction to his life and works.

The curious title of Professor Stansky’s latest book indicates not only the range of his essays and reviews, selected from 45 years of scholarship and revised for this republication, but also by the sub-title suggests a continuity of theme. The ‘Radical Domestic’, meaning ‘the interplay of radicalism and domesticity’ (p. viii), is an appealing and potentially very useful term that deserves to be adopted by others. Another theme in these essays is the nature of Englishness or Britishness, although Stansky does not differentiate between these identities. He sees Morris, Orwell, E. M. Forster and the Beatles as embodying particular qualities which characterise our society, its politics and its arts. For instance, he says that Forster in his mature years, ‘almost against his will, came to embody those virtues we admire and think of as peculiarly English: a firm belief in liberty, in fairness, in standing up for individual values, in refusing to be pompous’ (p. 166). Thankfully, Stansky does not focus much on our society’s undesirable qualities, such as snobbery, racism, sexual repression, moral hypocrisy and national delusions of grandeur, against which those ‘virtues’ have to contend.

The second of this book’s seven sections is concerned with William Morris. In the first of seven pieces here, Stansky offers his review of Morris studies around 1996, covering all the important publications around the centenary and in doing so mentions some of our Society’s prominent members. He cites Fiona MacCarthy’s biography as an instance of how, compared to earlier admirers of Morris, we are nowadays, ‘for better or worse, more accepting of the fragmented Morris and do not see as great a need to resolve how all the parts of his multiple activities fit together’ (p. 54). Stansky considers that the catalogue for the V&A’s centenary exhibition is ‘in some ways more satisfactory than the exhibition itself’ (p. 55), with Linda Parry’s essay on Morris’s textiles singled out for special praise. I agree with Stansky that the exhibition ‘rather slighted the writer and political activist’, whereas the catalogue has ‘fine essays by Peter Faulkner and Nicholas Salmon’ on these aspects of Morris (p. 56). Stansky is gentle with Paul Greenhalgh by suggesting only that his essay on ‘Morris after Morris’ is ‘too gloomy’ for arguing that Morris’s socialism has had ‘no significant impact in the
political arena during the twentieth century’, against which Stansky suggests that Morris ‘had much to do with the forces that led to the Labour Party, much as he might have disliked its present form, and the ideas behind what one can see as the positive parts of Britain’s welfare state’, and that ‘Morris’s view of community’ has been ‘a compelling and influential alternative to the business corporatism that we see all around us’ (p. 56). Stansky concludes his review with a pleasing observation, that of Morris’s various homes Kelmscott Manor, the oldest and dearest to him, ‘reaches back furthest and suggests the importance of historical continuity in terms of design, poetry, and politics – that a rich past could lead to a radical future – that was so important to William Morris and is so much a part of his vital legacy’ (p. 58). Seen thus, Kelmscott Manor is a prime example of the Radical Domestic element in British culture.

Like Stansky (pp. 59-60), I remain puzzled by the sub-title of MacCarthy’s biography of Morris, *A Life for Our Time*. Apart from occasional glancing references to recent history and culture, she hardly attempts to show Morris’s relevance to modern experience and concerns; so we are obliged to wonder if she alludes to her interest in Morris’s love and sex life, or to what Stansky identifies as her emphasis on Morris’s ‘contradictions and divisions, on conflicting psychological aspects of his personality’ (p. 60). Stansky prefers the latter of these explanations: ‘MacCarthy, in the postmodern fashion, appears to be comfortable with the divided Morris and, on the whole, is quite happy to celebrate all of his parts’ (p. 61). Despite his reservations – which I share – about some aspects of this biography, Stansky asserts – and I agree with him – that ‘one could hardly hope to read a better telling of a most extraordinary life’ (p. 62).

Stansky follows this with a discussion of *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* by E. P. Thompson, including a comparison of its two versions; and though he again questions the aptness of the sub-title – ‘more euphonious than precise’ (p. 65) – he is warm in his praise for Thompson’s achievement.

The next two pieces are appreciative reviews of Norman Kelvin’s *Collected Letters of William Morris* and *William Morris: Design and Enterprise in Victorian Britain* by Charles Harvey and Jon Press.

Stansky’s brief essay on ‘William Morris and C. R. Ashbee’ (pp. 76-88) carefully charts the dynamics of Morris’s influence upon this prominent disciple, in particular how Morris, though keen for his ideas to spread and be acted upon, was unwilling to give unqualified endorsement to his follower’s own ventures. The intermediary role of Edward Carpenter and his own significant influence on Ashbee are clearly and succinctly explained here too.

Stansky’s essay on Martin Conway (pp. 89-109) mainly concerns the shaky foundation and early collapse of the National Association for the Advancement of Art, showing how the class-ridden attitudes towards art, design and industry, which this body was meant to dispel, were built into itself from the outset, thereby ensuring its failure.

The final essay in this section considers the degree of influence that Morris may have had upon the Bloomsbury circle. Stansky argues that, ‘although, as an immediate ancestor, Bloomsbury paid him comparatively little attention’, Morris ‘helped make Bloomsbury possible’ by showing that it was conceivable ‘to live lives that were deeply imbued with art, yet were not overtly attenuated
and refined’ (p. 123). This is a difficult claim to make about the privileged and precious lifestyle of Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant at Charleston Farmhouse, a million miles from an earthly paradise open to everyone. Stansky’s wistful attempt to show their Morrisian credentials is intriguing but ultimately unconvincing. The essay is understandable and forgivable as an expression of Stansky’s sincere wish to connect his two leading enthusiasms. He actually shows us that the Radical Domestic can dwell in very different and distant places.

There is one matter on which I think Stansky should be challenged. He continually asserts that Morris was a committed Marxist (e.g. pp. 81, 86, 89, 110), but this view is nowhere substantiated. Discussing E. P. Thompson’s revised appraisal of Morris’s later political beliefs, however, Stansky observes: ‘Thompson reveals both his own independence and that of his subject: that Morris must be seen neither as a doctrinaire Marxist nor as a jolly, non-ideological Englishman who happened to subscribe to a few Marxist ideas as a kind of window dressing’ (p. 64). As Stansky does not question Thompson’s revised view of Morris, he implies his assent to it, which is inconsistent with his own assertions elsewhere. It is a fact that Morris was influenced significantly by his reading of Marx, but the extent to which he adopted Marx’s economic and historical theories, his social ideals or his revolutionary programme, has been much debated. If one is to claim an affinity between Morris’s political beliefs and anyone else’s (including one’s own), it is essential to show where and how they relate. I regard Morris’s socio-political ideas as too wide-ranging, too complex and sufficiently original to be accommodated within anyone else’s creed, although most kinds of socialists and liberals can benefit from Morris and frequently have done so. We should avoid labelling Morris as anything other than the definitive Morrisian.

From William Morris to Sergeant Pepper also contains sections headed ‘Biography as History’, ‘Bloomsbury’, ‘The 1930s and After’, ‘George Orwell’ and ‘The Other: The Jew’. Lack of space and their lesser relevance to this journal prevents me discussing them in detail here; but I must recommend the pieces on Bloomsbury (especially ‘Bloomsbury in Sussex’) and Orwell (especially ‘Utopia and Anti-Utopia: William Morris and George Orwell’ and ‘The Englishness of George Orwell’) to anyone interested in those subjects, and also the essay on ‘Oswald Mosley and Unity Mitford’ from the 1930s section.

The final section of this book consists of just one essay – no longer than some of the others – in which Stansky provides a detailed analysis of Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band. This essay can stand as a warning of the perils awaiting almost any scholar who ventures far beyond his or her special period (in Stansky’s case, the period 1850-1950) or who – as also happens here – examines pop songs using a critical method more suitable for high-brow poetry.

A basic assumption behind Stansky’s analysis of Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band is that, of the Beatles’s albums, it ‘is the most sustained, the most thought-out of all – a single work of art’ (p. 311), but this is mistaken. The material on Sergeant Pepper was composed and assembled somewhat haphazardly and there is no continuity or sequential development in the music or lyrics through the album. Stansky is obviously unaware of the genesis of Sergeant Pepper – which is well documented – or the explanation of its songs given by their composers, which leads him to make some erroneous statements and bizarre
speculations about the lyrics. His analysis of ‘A Day in the Life’ is especially misguided.

In the same essay, Stansky makes some questionable assertions about Liverpool’s cultural history. He says that, although culture was important in the city during the nineteenth century, ‘no famous writers or artists came from Liverpool, even to begin there and go on to London’ (p. 314). He forgets that, during the nineteenth century, Philip Wilson Steer, Arthur Hugh Clough, Augustine Birrell and Richard Le Gallienne were born in Liverpool; in the 1850s, the city was home to the ‘Liverpool Pre-Raphaelites’, including William Lindsay Windus, James Campbell, William Davis and William Bond, who flourished under the patronage of the tobacco merchant John Miller; and John Masefield was a sea cadet (1891–94) and Lytton Strachey was an undergraduate (1897–99) in Liverpool. Stansky is inaccurate when he says that ‘the noise of the Cavern Club and the Mersey Sound . . . came to the fore at the end of the 1950s’ (p. 314): the Beatles secured their residency at the Cavern late in the autumn of 1961, and their first single ‘Love Me Do’ – was released a year later, but the Mersey Sound was identified only after their next single, ‘Please Please Me’, reached number one, when Beatlemania was born, and other pop groups from Liverpool were signed up by major labels. Elsewhere in this book, I found only two errors of fact: Morris & Co.’s Merton Abbey works were opened in 1881, not 1888 (p. 77), and Charlie Chaplin in fact was not Jewish (p. 41) but was merely presumed by some people to be so.

This is a book to be dipped into rather than read right through, mainly because of its inevitable repetitions, but also because it does not advance a specific theory about the material discussed. Its unifying theme of the Radical Domestic recurs gently in the background. All of the essays and reviews are accessible and engaging and each of them is self-contained; so a reader who is unfamiliar with the Bloomsbury group, for example, can in a congenial quarter of an hour gain a nodding acquaintance with one or two of its figures, along with some awareness of the scholarship and debates surrounding them. This collection shows Professor Stansky to be a civilised and humane thinker, a scholar who is as reflective as he is perceptive, and an engaging conversationalist. His reputation, already secured by his other works, is mainly affirmed by this diverse collection.

Martin Haggerty

This book will particularly interest members of our Society because it examines the characters and attitudes of the two most prominent and influential interpreters of architecture in twentieth century Britain, both of whom professed to be Morrisians. Nikolaus Pevsner was co-opted onto the committee of the William Morris Society in 1956 and remained there until ill-health forced him to resign in 1978. In fact, for many years, before the Society acquired Kelmscott House (of which he was one of the original Trustees), committee meetings were held in
Pevsner’s rooms at 12 Bloomsbury Square. On 15th January 1958, John Betjeman gave what the subsequent Newsletter described as a ‘spellbinding’ reading of Morris’s poetry and prose to 150 members and guests at the Society’s first ever social function, held in the Great Drawing Room of the Arts Council’s headquarters at 4 St James Square. Betjeman was a member of the Society from 1960 until his death in 1987. Both men’s commitment to promoting the public reputation of Morris is unquestionable; but one may easily infer from Stylistic Cold Wars that their motives for doing so, and even the grounds of their underlying appreciation of Morris, were very different. Betjeman’s and Pevsner’s shared concern with architectural style and their shared occupation as writers upon it was a field of strong disagreement and intense rivalry between these two men, exacerbated by their dislike of each other’s personality. One gets no sense of Morrisian fellowship between them.

When Hubert de Cronin Hastings appointed John Betjeman as an assistant editor of the Architectural Review in 1929, it was not solely for his journalistic ability, but also because he could be relied on to espouse Modernist design in a journal that Hastings was determined to drag out of its staid, conservative, essentially Edwardian attitudes and concerns. Strange as it seems to us now, the young Betjeman, half-convinced by Marxism and half-converted to Quakerism, for a while in his journalism tried to condemn the decorative, traditional, romantic and extravagant elements of architecture and design in favour of the modern, the urbane and the functional. His emotional commitment to this position is obviously doubtful, however; it is easily apparent in his muddled reasoning, unsubstantiated assertions and occasional lapses into levity. Mowl’s analysis of Betjeman’s articles published in the Architectural Review is illuminating. According to Mowl, Betjeman, who must have been uncomfortable in this environment, was ‘at his most disruptive and mischievous’ when, in a 1930 article on the recent history of interior decoration, he suggested that the Art Workers’ Guild, Morris’s worthy successors, might, because of their empathy with ‘an olde worlde cottage in Surrey, earth closets and white-wash’, be inclined to ‘give a hearing in England to le Corbusier’; and Mowl comments, ‘It would be interesting to know whether Le Corbusier ever heard of his supposed primitive affinity with earth closets’ (p. 29). In this same article, however, Betjeman was ‘acting as a modest pioneer’ to restore the reputations of William Morris and Charles Rennie Mackintosh who were ‘still at least half in the shade of the unfashionably recently dead’ (p. 29), gently transgressing the journal’s editorial policy to do so. Those two figures, alone among late-Victorian designers, might be allowed moderate praise in that journal, but only to provide respectable precedents for aspects of the work of a new generation of practitioners, who were sometimes – as in this article – claimed to belong to a British tradition of simple logical design stretching back to John Soane.

In 1930, Pevsner came to England from Germany and began laying the foundations of his career as an architectural historian here. Whether or not he read Betjeman’s article on interior decoration is not known, though it is very possible that he did. If so, he must have been appalled by its lack of scholarship, logic or clarity, yet it might also have sown the seed of an idea with him, that Morris was a pioneer of the Modern Movement, providing the basis of his ground
Victorian apart from nineteenth-century achievements in engineering’ (p. 78), served as chairman of the Victorian Society for many years. On the basis of Mowl’s appraisal of Pevsner’s views, which perhaps is an incomplete one, an enigma emerges that seems to allow only disturbing solutions.

In the early 1930s, when Pevsner and Betjeman were both champions of the Modern Movement, they were bizarre allies. Pevsner was not only sincere but zealous in this creed and he remained loyal to it; but it was far otherwise with Betjeman. Mowl observes that, even in 1930, ‘With Evelyn Waugh and Osbert Lancaster as his friends and a personal affection for all things complex, crumbling and antique, Betjeman was not ideally cast as the champion of avant-garde Modernism in architecture’ (p. 35). In contrast again, ‘Where the Modern Movement was concerned Pevsner could be disturbingly myopic’ (p. 108) and he seriously applied his mind to the problem of how a democratic society could be, in Pevsner’s own words, ‘brought round to the saving grace of a Bauhaus style without the application of force’. Mowl suggests that Pevsner, recognising the innate conservatism of British taste, hoped for a gradual process by which the public, led by planners, would allow the gradual replacement of most of the historic built environment by rational and stylistically pure new architecture. A concerted campaign of education and persuasion would be necessary to achieve this end, which is how Mowl invites us to interpret Pevsner’s *Buildings of England* guides.

It is undeniable that Pevsner’s guides ‘were and are used not only by middle-class tourists and architectural enthusiasts, but also by planners and predatory architects looking for prestigious support in schemes of emotion and profitable rebuilding’ (p. 125). Mowl says that Pevsner must therefore ‘carry some responsibility for the gross planning errors, as for the successes, of the next twenty-five years’ from 1951, when the first three volumes were published (p. 146). Betjeman, who was himself involved with the *Shell Guides*, never made this severe charge, though he did criticise Pevsner’s guides for being ‘impersonal’, for not telling a reader what a place ‘is really like’; ‘it is the eye and the heart that are the surest guides’, he insisted, knowing that Pevsner employed a team of assistants and did not personally visit all of the places described in his guides. The *Shell Guides* provided a less thorough coverage of any county’s architecture and contained more scholarly slips than did the *Buildings of England*, but they engaged emotionally as well as analytically with the places they dealt with; they could be colourful, quirky, witty, passionate or eccentric, but never clinical or anodyne. A more significant distinction was that the *Shell Guides* were overtly committed to the preservation of a wide variety and great quantity of historic buildings and also willing to condemn a lot of modern developments. To explain the superior reputation of Pevsner’s guides, Mowl suggests that they ‘only won because Britain’s disastrous economic situation after the war made colourless austerity and self-denying functionalism the more acceptable creed’ (pp. 100-101).

From the 1950s onwards, Betjeman and Pevsner became, as Mowl describes them, ‘natural Establishment figures on committees, commissions and trusts: Betjeman would be the driving force in English conservation, Pevsner the solemn seal upon conservation enterprises, the authoritative voice and natural chairman, probably to his own amusement, of bodies concerned with the preservation of the
breaking study published six years later. In *Pioneers of the Modern Movement from William Morris to Walter Gropius* (reissued in 1960 as *Pioneers of Modern Design*), Pevsner suggested that the Bauhaus and its associated values were, as Mowl puts it, ‘only a natural step on from Morris’s version of the Middle Ages’ (p. 30). In his obituary of Pevsner published in our Society’s *Journal* (Vol. V, No. 4, Winter 1983–84, p. 4), Hans Brill accorded special praise to *Pioneers of Modern Design* among Pevsner’s many publications; and yet Pevsner’s view of Morris, expressed in *Pioneers* and elsewhere, is ambiguous, eccentric or even puzzling. In *Pioneers*, he described Morris as ‘the one real forerunner of Corbusier’ and claimed that ‘building in his hands became an abstract art, both musical and mathematical’. On the penultimate page of that book, he rhapsodises over Gropius’s model factory for the Werkbund Exhibition at Cologne in 1914 and proceeded to assert that ‘the artist who is representative of this century of ours must needs be cold, as he stands for a century cold as steel or glass, a century the precision of which leaves less space for self-expression than did any period before’. This is indeed a chilling pronouncement and one that seems diametrically opposed to the example and teachings of Morris, unless we are willing, in despair, to forsake Morris’s hopeful idealism and to accommodate ourselves and our artists to the prevailing inhumanity of our age.

According to Mowl, Pevsner was ‘unconvincing’ in his claim that Morris pioneered ‘the art of the machine’, so ‘Pevsner’s insistence that William Morris was a true pioneer of the Modern Movement can only have been tactical, a move to flatter the susceptible English art-buffs’ (p. 86). If we are persuaded by Mowl’s argument, we are led either to admit an ambivalence in Pevsner’s attitude, a regard for Morris which he was sincerely attempting to accommodate with his general opinions, which enables us to credit him with integrity, or to consider Pevsner a hypocrite in his pronouncements. The latter option is not only unpleasant but fails to explain the assiduity with which Pevsner advanced his favourable view of Morris, which it was not necessary for him to do, or to reorganise his voluntary and sustained commitment to the work of our Society. Mowl points out that ‘Ornament and pattern was never Nikolaus’s special pleasure’ (p. 94), something appropriate for an advocate of Modernist architecture but rather peculiar in an admirer of Morris’s work as a designer. Drawing attention to Pevsner’s claim, in one of his 1955 Reith Lectures, he stated that by 1850 ‘the great art of English painting was dead altogether’. Mowl suggests that it was an indirect way of saying ‘I don’t like the Pre-Raphaelites’ (p. 144). Mowl does not mention the possibility – known amongst our members – of admiring Morris’s work but not liking that of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais or William Holman Hunt; but he does point out that ‘Rossetti and his followers fit perfectly into Pevsner’s earlier analysis of English painting as being biased towards accurate observation and moral teaching’, and he goes on to ask why Pevsner chose to make that surprising assertion. Mowl’s answer is that ‘at this point in his lectures Pevsner was building up to a final peroration urging the English, whose conservatism had been a theme of an earlier discourse, to abandon conservatism as something cowardly and unworthy and embrace instead “the new Style”’ (p. 144). Mowl considers it incongruous and paradoxical that Pevsner, impecably opposed to historicism and with his ‘distaste for most things
past when he was overtly far more enthusiastic about the future' (p. 138). Both men ‘found secure niches in the Establishment hierarchy’: Mowls says that, in the public consciousness, ‘John was an official, lovable rogue, Nikolaus the reliable deliverer of appropriate judgements’ (p. 157). They also received official recognition and awards, culminating in knighthoods for each of them in 1969.

Candida Betjeman has calculated that, in the 1960s alone, her father made more than fifty television programmes, mostly on aspects of British heritage, affectionately observing the idiosyncrasies at least as much as enthusing about the grander glories of this culture, and Mowl argues that the effect of ‘these relaxed and entertaining half-hour slots on the nation’s environmental awareness cannot be calculated’ but must have been important (p. 163). He also wrote occasional pieces – typically observant, charming and witty – for newspapers to advance his preservationist views to the British public. Mowl describes Betjeman’s public image at this time as ‘everyone’s favourite uncle mellowing into the wisdom of old age’ (p. 166).

After I had mentioned that I was reading a book about Betjeman and Pevsner, a friend of mine sent a postcard on which he wrote: 'I heard Pevsner speak once or twice – Betjeman too. Pevsner seemed a cold fish and a member of the audience shouted out, “what about the bloody people?” after listening to a talk about the spatial relationships of the Roehampton estate.' Betjeman’s personal style, his message and their combined effect upon ordinary people were quite different. Mowl states that what made Betjeman such an influence ‘was not simply his genius with words, but his huge delight in using that genius to insist that ordinary places and ordinary emotions were subtle and important, and that what we inherited we should keep’ (pp. 150-151). Betjeman’s warmth, his generous attitude, and his appreciation of what is familiar, contrasts with Pevsner’s empirical thoroughness and cold rationalism, suggesting Betjeman to be by far the more congenial companion – in person or in print – for most of us and, according to my own view of Morris, the one whose company he would more likely have chosen.

*Stylistic Cold Wars* is an illuminating, entertaining and frequently provocative study of two contrasting but equally fascinating characters, as well as an engaging account of the contest between their alternative visions of the past and future of British architecture. People who are acquainted with Betjeman and Pevsner mainly through their writings will learn a lot more about them by reading *Stylistic Cold Wars* and they will probably be surprised by some of what it reveals. Friends of Pevsner are likely to be uncomfortable with Mowl’s representation of him. Probably Betjeman’s friends will be happier with this book, but they might unite with Pevsner’s friends to question some of Mowl’s account of the relationship between them. But *Stylistic Cold Wars* also encourages and assists the reader to consider what happened to Britain’s built environment during the twentieth century and to reflect on the social and aesthetic values which competed for supremacy in that arena. This is the principal and significant value of the book.

Martin Haggerty

This is both an attractive and an informative book, published for the exhibition at the Geffrye Museum originally inspired, as David Dewing acknowledges in his Introduction, by David Rodgers (whose name is unfortunately misspelt). The first five chapters, by Charlotte Gere, introduce Wilde, discuss the origins of the Aesthetic Movement and associated artistic circles, relate the vogue for manuals of instruction on household decoration to Wilde’s lecture tours, and finally focus on Wilde’s own House Beautiful in Tite Street. Morris, as one would expect, features prominently in the discussion of the origins of the movement and is given great credit for transforming the way in which people of modest means decorated their house, by making art available to them, not through an elaborate process of commissioning, but from a shop, although I was not altogether convinced by the concluding observation that ‘By the 1870s Morris had come a long way from a strictly Gothic style . . . but he kept to the ideals of Medievalism with the stained glass and tapestries [sic] which the firm continued to supply’. In discussing Wilde’s lectures, Gere notes the derivativeness of the ideas expressed in them, commenting that Wilde’s ‘Art and the Handicraftsman’ shows ‘more than a hint’ of Morris’s ‘The Lesser Arts’, published in *Hopes and Fears for Art* in 1882. She notes among the most patent plagiarisms, Wilde’s ‘Have nothing in your house that has not given pleasure to the man who made it and is not a pleasure to those who use it. Have nothing in your house that is not useful or beautiful’. Gere remarks that at the time Wilde gave the lectures, he was ‘still without the slightest practical experience of home decoration’, so that the advice was given with an assurance Wilde’s views, hastily recycled from the works of Ruskin and Morris, hardly merited. It was only after his marriage to Constance Lloyd in 1884 that he was in a position to put into practice some of his ideas, with the advice of Godwin and Whistler, when he obtained the lease of 16 – now 33 – Tite Street, Chelsea, and endeavoured to make it into his own House Beautiful.

In her excellent chapter on the house, Gere quotes a remarkable letter from Wilde to W. A. S. Benson of 16 May 1885, about the use of wallpaper, which Wilde largely avoided:

I don’t at all agree with you about the decorative value of Morris’s wallpapers. They seem to me often deficient in real beauty of colour . . . as regards design, he is far more successful with those designs which are meant for textures which hang in folds . . . I am surprised to find we are at such variance on the question of the value of pure colour on the walls of a room . . . I have seen far more rooms spoiled by wallpapers than anything else: when everything is covered with a design the room is restless and the eye disturbed.

Wilde concludes by expressing the hope that Morris will ‘devote his time, as I think he is doing, to textile fabrics, their dyes and their designs’. One doubts whether Benson passed on this interesting observation to Morris. Wilde ended his letter by inviting Benson to visit the house, where he would be shown ‘a little
room with blue ceiling and frieze (distemper), yellow (oil walls, and white woodwork and fittings, which is joyous and exquisite, the only piece of design being the Morris blue-and-white curtains, and a white-and-yellow silk coverlet. This more restrained attitude to decoration was becoming more usual, as we can see in the later work of Philip Webb. It was highly regrettable that Wilde’s carefully composed interior – which Yeats found slightly too contrived – survived only until April 1895, when it was swept away in the sale resulting from his bankruptcy. Gere reproduces the poster for this lamentable event.

The final chapter, ‘The Aesthetic Interior’ by Lesley Hoskins, places Wilde in his context and brings the book to an appropriate end. Hoskins begins by stressing the increasingly wide dissemination of ideas about ‘the artistic interior’ in the 1870s and 1880s, noting that the term ‘aesthetic’ was not employed in the advertising material – perhaps it sounded pretentious. Her account of the interiors of the period is drawn, as she tells us, largely from the numerous published manuals and from manufacturers’ and retailers’ catalogues. Her thorough and strikingly illustrated account moves from Walls, Ceilings and Woodwork through Floors, Chimney-pieces, Furniture, Textiles, and Lighting, to Ornaments and Pictures – ending with those ‘absolute staples of the middle-class artistic interior . . . the peacock feather and the Japanese fan’. In a Postscript, Hoskins concludes that for ‘well over a century there was a popular demand for “art” in the design of domestic goods’; what this implies for twentieth-century taste is left for the reader of this attractive if expensive book to ponder. Much of its appeal obviously lies in the illustrations, including a number of aesthetic interiors by painters like John Atkinson Grimshaw, Walter Crane, Kate Hayllar, Jessie Fairfax Bates and Louise Jopling, but I could find no sign in my copy of the announced Frontispiece by Jopling, Blue-and-White, although the painting is reproduced in colour on p. 45.

Finally, two details struck me. One concerned Mary Elcho – formerly Wyndham – at Stanway, her Tudor house in Gloucestershire; we are told that she entertained widely there, including ‘her close friends Burne-Jones and Morris’, and that she enlisted Morris in ‘reviving’ the house, ‘even persuading him to overcome his fixed resolution not to copy old designs. For Stanway he hand-painted a black-and-white paper, and he hung with his own hands his Willow-bough paper in a bedroom’. I have not previously come across this story. The other was the delightful description, derived from Georgina Sime’s ‘A Whiff of William Morris as a Socialist’ in Brave Spirits (privately printed, London n.d.), of Crane, Shaw and Wilde all attending a meeting at Kelmscott House: ‘Wilde seemed an incongruous figure, sporting a large crimson dahlia in his buttonhole’.

Peter Faulkner

As John Christian remarks in his illuminating Foreword to this book, Charles Fairfax Murray is a ubiquitous figure in accounts of the late nineteenth-century art world, but although many people 'have a picture of a short, thick-set figure with bandy legs, snub nose, and stiff, curly hair', he has nevertheless remained very much an enigma. Now, thanks to the energy and scholarship of Murray’s grandson, David Elliott, we can get to know him much better — though we are shown that, temperamentally, he was always one to prefer to get on quietly with his life without attracting too much attention. In this way, it seems, he was able happily to have and support one family in Italy and, from 1888, a second family in London, while spending most of his time on business and with neither. In this context, Elliott’s remark that ‘He was an unconventional family man’ strikes a singularly measured note.

However, it is not as a family man that Murray is chiefly of interest, and what this book makes clear is just how successful Murray was, firstly as a subordinate practitioner — as Burne-Jones’s studio assistant, as a worker in the early years of the Morris Firm, and as Ruskin’s copyist in Italy — and later as a dealer, collector, and generous benefactor of public galleries. His range of contacts was very wide, from the Pre-Raphaelites and their successors, including especially Burne-Jones, Morris and Marie Stillman, to the curators and connoisseurs like Cavalcasselle, Morelli, von Bode and Berenson, of all of whose activities we learn much here.

In this review I will concentrate on Murray’s relationship with Morris, which before the publication of this book could best be felt through the heart-felt gratitude that May Morris more than once expressed to Murray for his help and advice when she was editing the Collected Works, and in some of the letters that Morris wrote to Murray. I particularly like the spirit of the letter of 9 September 1874 which runs: ‘My dear Murray, Will you come & dine tomorrow and have a bed: 7 o’clock to dinner though I dare say the kids and J. would be glad to see you earlier though I shant be at home till then. I will take care that you have a pudding’, and in the much later one of 7 August 1888 when Morris told Jenny: ‘Murray called yesterday afternoon by the way in his usual excellent high spirits’. Now we can see the relationship in more detail than has been possible before, and recognise the basis of Elliott’s judgment that Morris and Murray shared ‘a fellowship of respect and mutual interests that ended only with Morris’s death’ (p. 56). And this despite the view that Jane expressed in a letter to Rossetti in 1880 that ‘I thought him more conceited than ever when in London last, and insufferably dirty’ (quoted p. 100). Murray was clearly not a bland social being; some found him pugnacious, some arrogant, some extremely helpful. But his friendship with Morris survived to the end.

Murray’s association with Morris began early. By 1867, when he was eighteen, he was already Burne-Jones’s assistant and engaged in repainting the twelve Zodiac panels for the Green Dining Room in South Kensington. From 1870 he was helping substantially with the illustration of Morris’s calligraphical works, including the Book of Verse (for the cover to which he painted the fine miniature of Morris, reproduced in this book), the Rubaiyat, the Horace, and the Virgil.
Morris took Murray to Bruges to celebrate his twenty-first birthday, his first trip abroad, and in May 1871 he was with Morris at the discovery of Kelmscott Manor. His diary records the event in the flat way that is apparently characteristic of his writing: ‘Breakfasted with Mr Morris. Went with him to Farringdon, lunched at Lechlade and drove over to Kelmscott to look at a house and returned in the evening’. In Italy in 1872 – when he found Ruskin cutting up an illuminated manuscript – Murray recorded in a letter a remark by Morris about Ruskin that I have not come across before: ‘Mr Morris declares him to be a brilliant rhetorician . . . without caring much for art’ (p. 36). Murray was working for the Firm on its glass, translating Burne-Jones’s drawings into larger cartoons and showing himself to be, in A. C. Sewter’s words, ‘the most brilliant stained-glass painter in the Firm’s service’, but this ceased when he took up residence in Italy in 1873; he married Angelica Colivicchi in 1875.

Elliott gives an account of the break-up of the Firm and its reconstitution as Morris and Co. which argues that Burne-Jones was far less supportive of Morris than has usually been assumed. Elliott writes: ‘Desperate for money, and fearing that wrangling over the future of the Firm would lead to its failure, Burne-Jones pressed Morris to dissolve the partnership and let him out . . . It was a measure of William Morris’s stature that he mentioned Burne-Jones’s betrayal of their friendship to no-one’ (p. 57). Burne-Jones’s behaviour, Elliott argues, was concealed by Murray’s buying up the incriminating letters at the Watts-Dunton sale, and by the decisions of both Georgiana Burne-Jones and Mackail to ignore the evidence of which they were aware; it was made known to May in 1902 (p. 221) but still not publicly admitted. I don’t find that Elliott’s account settles the matter. If Burne-Jones was as mercenary in his attitude as his quoted letter to Rossetti of 1874 suggests, why did he waive his claim to the £1,000 compensation when it was offered? I think there is more to be said by those with a more detailed knowledge of these matters than mine.

Murray worked a good deal as a copyist for Ruskin in Italy, as readers of the last issue of this Journal will know. He became the Italian correspondent of the newly-established Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in 1877, and, we are shown, advocated a more diplomatic tone in dealing with the Italian authorities than Morris initially adopted. He became increasingly involved in art dealing but still continued to paint: in 1881 he exhibited at the Grosvenor a painting called Pharamond and Azalais, presumably based on the characters in Morris’s Love is Enough. In 1883 he broke with Ruskin, and in 1887, while his wife returned to Florence, he remained in London, in contact with many in the art world. He now began to spend more time in London, where in 1888 he painted Blanche Richmond, daughter of Sir William, and they soon became lovers; he established a second family with her, while still supporting his family in Italy. He started to collect books and manuscripts, and was involved with Morris in this activity. Thus it was in the 1890s that their relationship was re-established, though Murray had no inclination towards Socialism. I was pleased to come across Morris’s comment to Murray, on reading of Burne-Jones’s baronetcy in the morning paper, ‘We must mind how we behave ourselves now, eh, Murray?’ (p. 125) He gave Morris a good deal of help as he became involved in the Kelmscott Press, especially helping
him in compiling *Poems by the Way*, and Morris produced for him at the Press in 1892 an Italian edition of Savanarola's *Epistola de Contemptu Mundi*, the only work of the Press not selected by Morris himself. Morris wrote vigorously in support of Murray as a candidate for the post of Director of the National Gallery in 1894, but he was not selected. It was Murray who made the three drawings of the dead Morris in October 1896, and bought his choice of Morris's library from the executors of the estate. He continued to help Burne-Jones to the end his life, and took over the Grange on Burne-Jones's death in 1898. His concern to make art available to a wider public is evident in many of the transactions of his last decade, when he sold many works by Rossetti and Burne-Jones to the Birmingham City Art Gallery at below their market value, gave 46 portraits to the Dulwich Picture Gallery, and made substantial bequests to the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, including Titian's *Tarquin and Lucretia*. He died in 1919.

The illustrations to the book appear as introductions to each of the twelve chapters, where I feel they make less impact than if they had come together. But still, though not numerous, they give some idea of the range of Murray's work as an artist. His self-portrait at the age of 17 (reproduced in the last issue of this *Journal*), the cover of Morris's *Book of Verse* of 1870, a drawing of his wife Angelica (the title of which has unfortunately been transposed from p. 47 to p. 63), a brightly coloured copy of Botticelli's *Adoration of the Magi* made for Ruskin, a drawing of Effie Stillman in 1882, the 1887 portrait of Morris in brown and black, an 1888 pastel drawing of Blanche Richmond, and the title page of the Kelmscott Press edition of Savanarola's *Epistola* for which Murray designed the wood-block, show something of his talent and versatility. The final illustration, a sombre 1904 portrait of Murray by Francois Flameng, is also used on the dust-jacket.

Elliott might have been better served by his publisher. The glossy white paper used throughout can have a glaring effect, and the un-Morrisian layout of the type, with a wide central margin and narrow outward ones, is unpleasing. The Select Bibliography has a number of errors, with italics used inconsistently and dates appearing erratically. This is unfortunate, but cannot detract from Elliott's considerable achievement. He has gathered his material from a wide range of sources in England, Italy and the United States, and created a convincing biographical narrative. He emphasises that Murray was nothing of a writer – all his talents were practical and visual. It is all the more satisfying that we now have an account of this man of many parts that will go a good deal of the way towards satisfying the curiosity that his remarkable life and achievements inevitably arouse.

Peter Faulkner