

## Reviews

Isabelle Gadoin, ed., *News from Nowhere: William Morris* (Paris, Ellipses, 2004), 230pp., €15.50 pbk, 4 b&w illustrations, ISBN 27298 20787.

ALONG WITH EARLY ASPARAGUS AND CHERRIES, May, in France, heralds the arrival each year of the new syllabus for the *CAPES* (Certificat d'aptitude au professorat de l'enseignement du second degré) and *Agrégation* (or *Agrég*, for short): the two principal competitive examinations (*concours*) giving access to a lifelong teaching career in France's secondary education system. Both exams are fundamentally academic, but between successful *agrégés* and *capésiens*, the former are deemed to have carried off the greater prize: the *Agrég* representing a distinct advantage (in addition to the official requirement of a doctorate) for university job applicants. It is the universities who teach the candidates for both *concours*. Thus, with the announcement of the syllabus, comes a flurry of activity as dons and publishers, in the editorial equivalent of *Beaujolais Nouveau*, rush to get the customised books onto the shelves for the start of classes in late September. Turn-round time for editors and authors is typically six to eight weeks: the very essence of a 'cockney', 'sham' production process...?

And yet, this volume of essays on *News from Nowhere* – part of this year's syllabus for the *CAPES/Agrég* in English Studies – is an example of what can be achieved at such breakneck pace. Beyond the perhaps understandable clutch of typos and repetitions (any candidate unable to recall when Morris was born and died, or when he published *News from Nowhere* will have little excuse), the 18 contributions here – eight of them in English – are remarkably cogent and sometimes challenging. Peter Faulkner provides a concise and lively top and tail on Morris's life and later impact, reminding us of the problematical relationship between Morris, on the one hand, and modernism and socialism, on the other. Isabelle Gadoin's own contribution on 'art vs. craft, toil vs. work', anchors that same discussion firmly in the

Morrisian lexicon and serves as an overall introduction to the other essays which are divided into three sections, dealing in turn with the 'aesthetic foundations of Morris's thought', 're-reading history and utopia', and 'Morris's socialism'.

The contributors to the first section explore the complex socialist aesthetics of Morris's 'utopian romance'. In a sense, this is synonymous with assessing the contrasting strands of medievalism at work in *News from Nowhere*: the essay by Lesley Lawton, for example, underlines the strength of Ruskin's presence. Anne-Florence Gillard-Estrada develops this by arguing that *News from Nowhere* 're-directed the medievalist trend in the British Ruskinian tradition' (p. 33), effectively politicising the PRB vision/version of beauty. Isabelle Cases adopts a similar approach in respect of architecture: the small-scale, human, authentic vernacular is inescapably part of a wider political project. Simone Lavabre, writing on Morris's contribution to the 'lesser arts', shows how *News from Nowhere* reflects the extent to which Morris was part of a developing 'tradition', whose first stage was ushered in by the Gothic revival in architecture: the attendant rebirth of related arts was clearly a key factor in enabling Morris to pursue his chosen medievalist course.

The third part of the book is allocated to the old chestnut of Morris's precise relationship with socialism – utopian and/or scientific. While they could not reasonably be expected to crack the problem, the articles here certainly compare and contrast in a helpful way, providing a synthesis of many of the points of contention which will not only be useful to the *CAPES/Agrég* candidates. The definition, as has often been the case in this area, tends to proceed as much by negation as affirmation, setting Morris against the utopian vision of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (Hervé Picton), indeed against the inevitability of any form of gradualism, notably in its Fabian guise (Joëlle Harel). But Patrice Bouche ('Morris, utopie et marxisme'), reminds us that disaffection with palliatives does not imply a monovalent commitment to Marxism. Perhaps the negations (Tri Tran works through Morris's critique of parliamentary democracy, State socialism, indeed of all forms of the State) are ultimately longhand for emphasising the critical aims, rather than the programmatic intent, of *News from Nowhere*.

Of the three section headings, shading successively towards art his-

tory, the history of ideas and political history, the second is the least successful, or perhaps the most adventurous, attempting, as it does, to take in the higgledy-piggledy medieval street that is Morris's idiosyncratic ethics, or what Cornelius Crowley sees as 'the invention-conservation of an English *imaginaire*' (p. 86). The 'historicism' of *News from Nowhere* (Georges Letissier), its rather less than revolutionary views on women (Laïli Dor and John Watters) and the 'pleasure quest' in Nowhere (Jean-Baptiste Picy), are all looked at here as translations of the rich array of (mainly native) influences on the book's development – Matthew Arnold, Barry, Carlyle, Owen Jones, Marx, Pre-Raphaelitism, Pugin, Ruskin ... The perplexing contradictions which those influences throw up are very well tackled by Richard Somerset, who meets the dilemma of Morris's dynamism/stasis head-on, discussing this in terms of 'the changing political implications of evolutionary theory' (p. 109) and emerging into the unavoidable, 'central paradox of Morris, who follows what seems to be a particularly English pattern in showing himself a disconcertingly conservative type of socialist' (p. 117).

Like any great *œuvre*, that of Morris legitimately resists attempts at pigeon-holing. *News from Nowhere*, as a section cut from the mature end of his work, presents a tantalising, at times exasperating, range of his most antagonistic urges: to the point where, for some readers, Nowhere almost deletes itself beneath the chiasmus of conservative socialism and radical nostalgia. Not everyone, that is, will be lulled by what Morris calls 'the endless beauty of motion' ('The Lesser Arts'), whether it be oscillation between the two poles of a political contradiction, or the constant migration from one art or craft to the next. This collection of articles, under the discipline imposed by the preparation for the *CAPES/Agrég*, manages to gather itself and hold Morris down long enough to admire some of the complexities of his thought, but also to hold him at sufficient distance to make out the map of his main ideas. For these reasons alone, the book certainly deserves a longer life than that promised to a *concours* mayfly.

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