

Bevis Hillier, *Betjeman: The Bonus of Laughter* (London: John Murray, 2004), 746 pp., £25.00 hbk, £12.99pbk, 36 b&w and 14 colour illustrations, ISBN 07195 64956 (hbk) and 07195 6557x (pbk).

Peter Draper, ed., *Reassessing Nikolaus Pevsner* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 262 pp., £55.00 hbk, 45 b&w illustrations, ISBN 07546 35821.

THE FORMS IN WHICH these most recent accounts of the two contrasting pillars of Victorian Society are presented are wonderfully appropriate: the concluding volume of Bevis Hillier's immensely detailed life of John Betjeman (1906–1984), and a volume of academic essays about Nikolaus Pevsner (1902–1983). There seems no point now in trying to decide which of the two made the greater contribution to the development of interest in Victorian culture: we can salute the remarkable achievements of both.

What Betjeman contributed, as Hillier shows in extraordinary detail, was enthusiasm, based on extensive knowledge and deep affection for the English past. Hillier spent twenty eight years on the three volumes of this biography; this final one takes us from 1960 to Betjeman's death in 1984. Hillier successfully employs what he calls the 'tectonic' method, with each of the thirty chapters devoted to a particular aspect of Betjeman's life. This enables the reader to maintain a clear sense of the range of Betjeman's achievements, alongside an account of his private life. Through his poetry (Poet Laureate from 1972), his journalism and his television programmes Betjeman played an important role in English cultural life, helping to encourage an affectionate view of aspects previously neglected or derided, like Victorian architecture and life in the suburbs. He was an immensely sociable man, so that the book deploys a range of interesting characters from Barry Humphries to Mary Wilson, Tom Driberg to John and Myfanwy Piper, Osbert Lancaster to Mervyn Stockwood, and less public figures like Jonathan Stedall and Reg Read, with all of whom he is shown in lively and often highly entertaining interaction. Not that the more sombre side of the story is downplayed: Hillier also shows Betjeman's periods of dejection and sadness, the problems of his marriage, and his struggle to hold on to his religious faith. All in all, Hillier's is a major achievement, effectively conveying his affection for its subject. My only reservation concerned the Epilogue; it seemed to me that it was counter-productive to argue directly with critics of Betjeman's poetry; the evaluation of Betjeman's work conveyed throughout the text would have been better left to speak for itself. There are a number of good photographs, including the jolly one on

the cover, and one in colour of the Bedford Park battle, with Pevsner holding a banner saying 'Norman Shaw is Specially Nice'.

Morris features occasionally in these pages. The second chapter is devoted to the founding of the Victorian Society in 1958, and to Betjeman's difficult relationship to Pevsner – one gets the impression that academics were only a rung or so higher on Betjeman's ladder than local-government officials. It is interesting to learn that at the preliminary meeting convened by Betjeman's friend the Countess of Rosse in Stafford Terrace two topics for discussion were whether the Society should be set up independently or as a branch of the SPAB, and what its relations should be to the (recently established) William Morris Society. Speaking for the latter, R. C. H. Briggs stated that he feared 'some overlapping ... and the splintering of effort', though he also pointed out that Morris had 'rebelled against much that he found in Victorian England'. In the lively poem that Peter Clarke wrote about the occasion, 'Macaulay Helps to Found the Victorian Group', we find the following lines (Kenneth Clark and Pevsner had been unable to attend the meeting, while Betjeman evidently played the role of lion-heart by his rousing speech):

Supported (though by proxy) by Sir Kenneth and 'The Dok' –
See our Lion-Heart arouses us: 'The Foe is at the Gate!'
Will you let the Pass be sold? Fight as Morris fought of old
To save our priceless heritage before it's all too late!

Hillier gives us a good deal of information about the Victorian Society, and particularly its early campaigns, which began with two defeats – over Euston Arch and the Coal Exchange – before its success over Bedford Park. Betjeman had been concerned over the Coal Exchange before the Victorian Society was formed, and had arranged to speak there to the SPAB in 1957, when he remarked: 'I wonder what Morris would have said if he had known the SPAB was ever going to meet in a building put up in 1847. I think he would have said, "It's all right if it's a good building"'. We know how Morris tests one ... This surprisingly light, airy, fantastic, imaginative interior is what he would have liked ... Let us not write the Victorians off as no good'. Part of Betjeman's persuasiveness shows in his confident assertion about Morris's taste. Hillier devotes chapter II to 'The Battle for Bedford

Park', which began in 1963 when there were plans to demolish some of the original houses and replace them with flats, and culminated in the official listing of 356 houses at Grade II in 1967; Betjeman's poem 'Narcissus' is a pleasing evocation of the spirit of Bedford Park, with its 'De Morgan lustre glowing round the hearth'. One of the very few occasions when Hillier fails to give any details is in his account of Betjeman's 1960s travels, where he simply states: 'In 1969, after a trip to Iceland following in the footsteps of William Morris, John again went to Spain ... ("Out of the ice-box into the fire," he commented)'. It is hard to imagine Betjeman in Iceland; from Hillier's account it is clear that there was nothing of the Puritan in him to respond to the simplicity of the culture that so drew Morris.

Reassessing Nikolaus Pevsner derives from a conference held in July 2002. The lucid Introduction, by Paul Crossley, gives a survey of Pevsner's life and achievements, including a summary of the argument of *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*, as it was known in 1936, the book that showed Pevsner's early interest in Morris. It also shows how during the War years when he was writing for the *Architectural Review*, Pevsner expanded his point of view to take account of the English picturesque as seen in garden design and in vernacular craft work. Crossley ends with an eloquent tribute: 'Everyone in England who loves architecture is in Pevsner's debt'. Most of the following 12 chapters substantiate this and other relevant claims, but there are a number of surprises on the way, particularly in the contributions about Pevsner's early years. Ute Engel, in discussing the German context in which Pevsner formed his ideas, shows his debt to Wilhelm Pinder, who supported the Nazis in the 1930s. She argues that he had formed his idea of the Modern Movement by as early as 1931, when he contrasted the aestheticism of Le Corbusier with the social responsibility of Walter Gropius, and that his belief in 'community and collectivism' led him, as late as May 1933, to support the Nazi line expounded by Goebbels – against Furtwangler, the Jewish conductor who had protested against the expulsion from Germany of German-Jewish musicians – that art must be subordinate to politics. By this time his family was already experiencing the persecution that would lead him to exile in England in 1935. Even in his 1940 book *Academies of Art, Past*

and Present, Pevsner asserted that ‘a school such as the Bauhaus is certainly only possible as a State school, and can – of course – only be successfully run by one strong personality’ – a passage which he left unchanged in the 1973 edition. Similarly, Stefan Muthesius, in the most challenging chapter in the book, draws attention to an article which Pevsner – amazingly – published in a German academic journal in 1936, which Muthesius describes as ‘a kind of sociologising addendum to the *Pioneers* book of the same year’. In this article (in German, here translated by Muthesius) Pevsner discussed Morris’s decision to become an artist, but emphasised that this was to be an artist of a particular kind, not, in Pevsner’s translated words, ‘a freely creating individual who only lives for the designing of his own feelings, but as a servant to the most useful tasks which serve the general populace: as architect’. Similarly, in a lecture to the Royal Society of Arts in London in 1936, he claimed that as a result of the new stress on the crafts in Germany, that country now appeared ‘nearer to William Morris ... and further away from Gropius than parliamentary England and fascist Italy’. Muthesius remarks that we need more biographical information to be able to explain these utterances, which seem so extraordinary today, but that this is simply not available to us. None of the other articles throws light on this perplexing aspect of the early Pevsner. I was stuck by the fact that Pevsner at no point seems to have shown any interest in or knowledge of Marxism or the Soviet Union, (neither appears in the index), in relation to which we might find such an emphasis on the communal at that period more intelligible.

The positive aspects of Pevsner’s achievement come out in the other contributions, which cover his work as general editor of the Pelican History of Art Series, his accounts of nineteenth-century architectural writers, his significance for medieval studies in Britain, his interest in Englishness and his ideas on industrial design. Although no specific article is devoted to it, the Penguin Buildings of England series is the evident key text. The important part played by Allen Lane of Penguin books is succinctly recorded in a reminiscence by Pevsner. Lane asked Pevsner what he would like to do by way of publications after the King Penguin series, and Pevsner sketched out his ideas of both the History of Art and the Buildings of England series, each likely to run to over 40 volumes: ‘Allen said, yes, we can do both, and that was the end of the meeting’.

Pevsner's encounter with English culture seems to have been central for his development away from the severity of his early commitment to the Modernism of the Bauhaus. Lynne Walker discusses what she calls 'the remarkable series of articles' written by Pevsner under the nom de plume of Peter F. Donner in the wartime *Architectural Review* with the running title 'Treasure Hunt'. In these articles, readers' attention was drawn to the interesting features of the ordinary architecture around them, much of it necessarily Victorian, and Walker relates them to Pevsner's later work for the Victorian Society in the field of preservation. Andrew Causey discusses the Reith Lectures of 1955, which were published as *The Englishness of English Art* in the following year. In this book, as Causey notes, 'Pevsner left his audience in no doubt that the picturesque was England's biggest contribution to the visual arts'. This was the principle that enabled him to expand his aesthetic beyond Modernism, although he never faltered in his admiration for that movement. This point is expanded in Michela Rosso's contribution, 'The Rediscovery of the Picturesque'. In this area, Ian Christie develops a lively argument about *The Englishness of English Art* as a riposte both to Bloomsbury Francophilia and to English downplaying of the visual. He relates the book illuminatingly to contemporary developments in what has come to be known as 'cultural criticism', referring to E. P. Thompson's *William Morris*, as well as to the work of Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, though pointing out that, with the exception of John Berger, the New Left was never visually orientated. Gillian Naylor provides a characteristically clear account of Pevsner's ideas on industrial design in Britain, especially though his influence on Michael Farr, author of *Design in British Industry* in 1955, and the book ends with Nigel Whiteley's account of the complex relationship between Pevsner and his student, and later critic, Reyner Banham.

What part did Morris play in Pevsner's overall thinking? It would be interesting to take this question further. In *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*, Morris is presented as part of the dialectic that brings Modernism into existence. Later, he and the Arts & Crafts play their part in the English tradition that Pevsner defines and upholds. Alexandrina Buchanan remarks on the Morrisian concern at the centre of *Pioneers*: 'What business have we with art at all, unless all can share it?' Then, towards the end of her contribution, she refers to Morris as Pevsner's 'hero', and quotes his much later remark, of 1972,

in *Some Architectural Writers of the Nineteenth Century*: 'It is this realism that distinguishes Morris from Ruskin, this sense of the urgency of effective action. In reading and rereading Morris's lectures, one nearly always finds answers to the question: What can be done?' This is a fine and appropriate tribute to Morris, the man who could inspire both the academic and the academic-hater, as well as readers today.

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