

# Reviews

*Edited by Peter Faulkner*

William Morris, *The Wood Beyond the World*, edited by Robert Boenig, Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2010, 236 pp. ISBN 978-1-55111-982-3, Pbk. \$22.95/£15.50.

The Broadview edition of *The Wood Beyond the World* is a welcome addition to the limited range of available editions of William Morris's last romances; still largely eschewed by mainstream publishers. As a scholarly edition, with appendices, footnotes and a detailed introduction, it will appeal particularly to academics and their students, although Morris's romances are still far from staples of the academic curriculum; indeed it will be interesting to see whether production of editions such as this will play a role in changing that. The interest and value of this edition is not however limited to the academic world; it also provides a useful introduction both to the late romances and to William Morris for the general reader, and might encourage those Morris enthusiasts for whom the last romances have always been something of a stumbling block to give them another chance. For devotees this edition will no doubt present its problems as well as its merits, but they too should celebrate any attempt to treat these narratives as a serious element of Morris's legacy and worthy of continuing discussion.

Robert Boenig, Professor of English at Texas A&M University, sets himself an ambitious task in the Introduction, attempting to provide an overview of Morris's life and work in addition to detailed analysis of aspects of *The Wood Beyond the World*. He does so with some success, condensing the main events and interests of Morris's life into just over eleven pages, and for those readers unfamiliar with Morris's life and work this will no doubt provide an interesting context for the story. For those more familiar with Morris, some of the omissions and interpretations in this biographical section will be problematic. Morris's political activities, for example, receive particularly short shrift, with mention made of his joining the Social Democratic Federation, but no reference to the Socialist League or the Hammersmith Socialist Society. The word Communism appears to be studiously avoided in relation to Morris, with the more palatable Socialism being the sole term of choice, although Boenig is by no means alone

in the world of Morris scholarship in demonstrating that preference. Notably, he appears to draw a distinction between Morris's interests in art and politics, referring to them as 'disparate' enthusiasms, (p. 11) and thus overlooking Morris's repeated attempts in his essays and lectures to demonstrate their integral relationship. In fairness, Boenig does refer the reader to Morris's biographers for further information, but even a necessarily potted history of his life should do justice to the importance of the Socialist League and Morris's insights into the relationship between social and economic structures and cultural productions.

It is in the material which follows that the real strength of Boenig's Introduction lies. There is a section on the prose style of the last romances, followed by considerations of *The Wood Beyond the World* in relation to medieval narrative, the visual arts and Morris's Socialism. In his discussion of Morris's prose style, Boenig provides an insightful close reading of an extract from *The Wood Beyond the World*, analysing Morris's use of archaic and Anglo-Saxon-derived words in addition to examining his idiom and syntax. He also contrasts Morris's language in the romances favourably with his translation of *Beowulf*, claiming that 'he exercised the restraint necessary for successful archaizing' in the former, while occasionally taking it 'to extremes' in the latter. (p. 27) C.S. Lewis's essay 'William Morris' is cited in a footnote as providing a defence of Morris's 'archaizing style', (p. 28) although there is no mention of Norman Talbot's excellent article on the same subject '“Whilom, as tells the tale”: the Language of the Prose Romances', published in *The Journal of the William Morris Society* in 1989, which is still the most astute and comprehensive discussion of the subject. Nonetheless Boenig offers a useful exploration of Morris's choice of language and style in his final narratives, and while his conclusion that 'Morris's game is to evoke a longing for the past' (p. 27) is somewhat reductive, he makes a strong case for a reconsideration of the language of the romances which has been so often the focus of criticism.

There is a similarly effective close reading of an extract from *The Wood Beyond the World*, examining its relationship to Pre-Raphaelitism in the section on the visual arts, which also includes a consideration of the aesthetics of the Kelmscott Press edition. Less convincing is the discussion of the narrative in the context of Morris's Socialism, in which Boenig appears to be on less secure ground. He cites the well-known example of the reviewer in *The Spectator* who interpreted *The Wood Beyond the World* as a Socialist allegory, together with Morris's dismissive response, but his suggestion that Morris 'intended the socialist allegory when he first plotted out the book' before 'autobiographical content not given to socialist interpretation interposed' (p. 38) is unconvincing. The relationship between the late romances and Morris's politics is a subject of ongoing debate, and narrow political interpretations of these stories are fraught with difficulties, but the rejection of overt Socialist allegory does not necessitate a denial of the more complex and subtle ways in which Morris's Socialist convictions are articulated in his late

romances.

The scholarly apparatus which frames the narrative of *The Wood Beyond the World* in this edition also includes a varied range of appendices, and in these Boenig has adopted an innovative approach in his choice of material. Appendix A places the romance in the context of Anglo-Saxon and Medieval narratives, with examples from Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* in addition to Morris and A.J. Wyatt's translation of *Beowulf* and Morris and Magnússon's translation of *The Story of the Volsungs and the Niblungs*. In the brief introductions to these extracts Boenig indicates their relevance for our reading of *The Wood Beyond the World*, and these are certainly valuable additions for anyone wishing to understand more about the ways in which Morris's last romances relate to other aspects of his literary work, and are influenced by earlier stories and writers, although the notably extensive selections from Malory seem rather excessive and need greater justification. Appendix B consists of Morris's article 'How I Became a Socialist', published in *Justice* in 1894, together with 'The Socialist Ideal: Art', which appeared in *The New Review* in 1891. The latter is a less obvious but interesting choice, although its direct relevance to *The Wood Beyond the World* could be further elaborated.

In the final section, Appendix C, Boenig provides extracts from work by Morris's contemporaries, including Karl Marx and John Ruskin, together with Robert Buchanan's scurrilous treatment of Pre-Raphaelitism in his article 'The Fleshly School of Poetry' and William Hurrell Mallock's parody 'How to Make a Modern Pre-Raphaelite Poem'. While these are informative and, in the latter case, entertaining, perhaps the most useful extract included is that from May Morris's 'Introduction' to volume XVII of *The Collected Works of William Morris*, in which she explains the context and process of Morris's writing of *The Wood Beyond the World*. Boenig's description of May's introductions as 'rambling' (p. 232) is unjust (especially as he himself acknowledges the valuable information they contain) and she remains for me one of the most perceptive and sensitive readers of her father's romances in her various introductions to the *Collected Works*. Useful as they are, these appendices would have been enhanced by the inclusion of material relating more directly to Morris's romances from contemporary reviews, or indeed more recent scholarship, and in terms of Morris's contemporaries, George Bernard Shaw and W.B. Yeats are regrettable omissions – Yeats in particular in that he wrote so eloquently about his love of the late romances.

In terms of the text of *The Wood Beyond the World* presented in this edition, Boenig explains that he takes the *Collected Works* version as his base text, as opposed to the Kelmscott edition of 1894 or the Lawrence & Bullen edition published the year after. His justification is that the *Collected Works* edition punctuates the dialogue, unlike the earlier versions, which is admittedly easier for the modern reader, although where there are differences between the three early texts, Boenig has followed the Kelmscott version. Marginal headings have

however proved a problem in this Broadview edition. These appeared in red in the top corner of the page in the Kelmscott edition, but to compensate for the difference in pagination May Morris placed them in the margins alongside the relevant text in the *Collected Works*, even though this meant that they appeared at various points down the page. Boenig's compromise is to follow May Morris's example but to place these headings in the body of the text itself rather than the margins – something which does not work in that it is both aesthetically unappealing and also fractures the narrative.

That aside, the text of the romance is presented lucidly with a series of footnotes in which textual variations and explanations of words are helpfully included. And herein lies the real issue for the lover of Morris's romances. Seeing and reading *The Wood Beyond the World* in a scholarly format with footnotes and sub-headings is a strikingly different experience from reading it in its Kelmscott Press or even *Collected Works* edition, as Boenig would no doubt concur. The romances are only fully appreciated, as I have argued elsewhere, when read in their original form. The combined intellectual and aesthetic experience of narrative, font, marginal headings, leaf and flower punctuation marks and decorative letters is the most rewarding experience for any reader of these works, and the Dover facsimile edition, first published in 1972, proved invaluable for the majority of readers who possessed no access to *The Wood Beyond the World* in its Kelmscott edition. When teaching this romance to third-year undergraduates, armed with their own modern editions, I always show them a copy of the Dover edition in order to give them some idea of what it might be like to read in its original form, and after looking through and reading sections of it, they invariably agree that the romance makes a good deal more sense to them – and holds more immediate appeal – when presented this way.

This is not a criticism of Boenig's approach, for he sets out to do something quite different in this Broadview edition, which I would certainly recommend to my students and the general reader. But I would recommend it with this proviso: read *The Wood Beyond the World* if you possibly can in the Kelmscott edition first, or at least in a facsimile version, and after that read it again in Boenig's scholarly edition. Then you will have the best of both worlds.

*Phillippa Bennett*

Joseph Phelan, *The Music of Verse. Metrical Experiment in Nineteenth-Century Poetry*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 225 pp., £50. Hbk ISBN 978-0-230-24746-8.

Joseph Phelan begins his Introduction entertainingly with a negative review of Robert Southey's 1821 *A Vision of Judgment*. The reviewer had argued that the poet 'does not ... possess his *Arsis and Thesis* as he ought', and Phelan suggests that this is 'a shortcoming that most modern readers of nineteenth-century poetry might also feel'. (p. 1) His aim in writing this scholarly work is to focus on 'the recovery of nineteenth-century metrical thinking in all its peculiarity and complexity, and on the ways in which this metrical thinking interacts with poetic practice'. (p. 2) Later in the Introduction, he goes so far as to claim that an approach that emphasises metre in this way may bring back to life 'many nineteenth-century poems formerly consigned to oblivion' (p. 8); his examples are the Southey poem, Longfellow's *Evangeline*, Morris's *Love is Enough* - 'an extraordinary experiment in the application of the principles of alliterative verse to modern English poetry' - and Coventry Patmore's *The Unknown Eros*.

Morrisians will clearly have been encouraged by this to want to find Phelan's account of *Love is Enough*, which is given in the third chapter, 'Native Traditions: Anglo-Saxon and Alliterative Verse'. Phelan argues that discussions of these matters were wide-ranging and took many different forms until very late in the nineteenth century, when a broadly accepted account of the rules of Anglo-Saxon versification emerged. Some earlier writers had seen the versification as relatively free, others felt it was structured on principles no longer recognisable; some argued that it was 'barbarian' and designed for recitation, and yet others that it was constrained by the habits of the monastery scriptorium. Alliteration rightly came to be seen as a central feature, relating the poetry to Scandinavian and Icelandic verse. Early scholars were J.J. Conybeare, with his *Illustrations of Anglo-Saxon Poetry* of 1826, the Danish writer Erasmus Rask, whose *Grammar of the Anglo-Saxon Tongue* was translated in 1830, followed by the American George Perkins Marsh in his *Lectures on the English Language* in 1863, who argued that poetry in English could be reinvigorated by an infusion of Anglo-Saxon elements such as alliteration. (p. 109) It is in this context that we encounter a section entitled 'The Alliterative Revival: William Morris'. As Phelan suggests, *Love is Enough*, published soon after Morris's return from Iceland in late 1872, though greatly admired by Rossetti, puzzled many of its readers at the time and has subsequently received little critical attention. The structure is indeed complex: an outer frame of rustic lovers, speaking in rhyming octosyllables; the Emperor and Empress in the next frame, in more dignified decasyllables; a third plane, in which a personified Love interprets the action in a dignified heroic metre; the central 'dramatic interlude' of 'The Freeing of Pharamond'; and the mysterious Music in rhymed dactyls,

which unites the whole.

Phelan argues convincingly that Morris showed an impressive awareness of the contemporary understanding of alliterative versification when he moves to that mode in the Mayor's opening speech, and in the interlude or morality play that follows and is at the centre of the work. The speech opens thus:

Since your grace bids me speak without stint or sparing  
A thing little splendid I pray you to see:  
Early is the day yet, for we near the dawning  
Drew on chains dear-bought, and gowns done with gold ...

Phelan examines this in some detail, and follows with a consideration of other passages of the poem. He considers the justice of Patmore's statement that while Morris sometimes used the form to 'excellent effect', it would have been better if he could have adhered more closely to 'the alliterative law of the original metre'. (p.111) Phelan considers different ways in which the lines may be read, suggesting that reluctance to admit the presence of a mid-line caesura led to 'rushed and garbled' readings, but also remarking that other readings could be 'laborious'. He concludes that 'Morris's innovation of making the whole line rather than the hemistich [half-line] part of an alternating couplet produced effects at once too novel and too subtle for many of his contemporaries'. (p. 117) At the end of this section, Phelan goes on to discuss 'The Message of the March Wind' – from *The Pilgrims of Hope* – published in long lines in the 'trade' edition of *Poems by the Way* in 1893, in which most of us encounter it, but with its long lines divided into half-lines in the Kelmscott Press edition of the same year. He points out, accurately, that this form brings the poem 'closer to Morris's ideal of an English poetry reinvigorated by the strength of its Anglo-Saxon and Nordic precursors'. (p.117) But it seems to me that the English eye finds such short lines problematic when used extensively.

We have considered the third chapter first because of its attention to Morris. The other substantial chapters deal respectively with 'The English Hexameter in Theory and Practice', and '“The Accent of Feeling”: Towards Free Verse'. The account of hexameter begins with Southey's *A Vision of Judgement* (1821), then considers the theory and practice of William Whewell and J.S. Blackie, the 'liberation' of the hexameter in Longfellow's *Evangeline* (1847) and Clough's *The Bothie of Toper-na-Fuosich* (1848), and ends with the views of Arnold, Clough and Francis Newman, whose 'ballad' translation of Homer Arnold savaged. Phelan argues that by the 1860s interest shifted to alliterative poetry and experiments with ametrical verse (the subject of the third chapter), and that the hexameter reverted to being mainly a subject of 'antiquarian curiosity' (p. 77); he cites (p. 87) W.J. Stone's 1899 essay *On the Use of Classical Metres in English Verse* with its

dismissal of English hexameter as a shoddy form whose lines ‘can be reeled off by anybody’. (p. 87)

This is highly disappointing from the Morrisian point of view, since it denies the possibility of considering Morris’s *Sigurd the Volsung* (1876) or his translations of the classical epics in this context. Reviewers of *Sigurd* did not find it easy to describe its versification, but some referred explicitly to hexameter. The *Atlantic Monthly* saw Morris as having found the best form for the English epic: ‘A hexameter composed like this, of iambic and anapestic feet with a constant variety of relative arrangement and fluctuating caesura, has many of the qualities which render the Latin hexameter most delightful’. Theodore Watts was less appreciative of the choice of metre, but his reason was that ‘English hexameters are essentially lyrical, and therefore unfit for the heavy business of dramatic narrative’. Francis Hueffer remarked that the poem was in English hexameter in the sense that its lines ‘contain six high-toned or accentuated syllables’. Jane Ennis, the editor of the Thoemmes Press edition of *Sigurd* in 1994, states that its meter is ‘anapaestic hexameters’ with additional alliteration. The fullest account is that by Herbert Tucker in his magisterial *Epic* in 2008:

His six-stress line freely employs an ambling Greekish-Latinate hexameter, typically in triple anapestic-dactylic rhythm, over a constant eight-beat structure that stems from vernacular English balladry ...

Tucker has already discussed the ‘folk-hexameter’ of *Pilgrims of Hope*, and he goes on to show that Morris uses ‘the same common measure’ in his translations of the national epics of Virgil, Homer and *Beowulf*. All this does not imply that it is adequate to describe *Sigurd* as simply hexametric, but it does raise the question why Phelan does not give any consideration at all to what is arguably Morris’s greatest poetic achievement. In view of the respect for Morris shown in his account of *Love is Enough*, it is difficult indeed to understand this omission.

In his final chapter “‘The Accent of Feeling’: Towards Free Verse’, Phelan argues that earlier writers sometimes credited with trying to create ‘proto-free verse’ such as Milton, Blake, Southey and Arnold were in fact pursuing alternative metrical ideals in the attempt to make their verse more expressive. This is clearly the case also with Hopkins. Attention is drawn to oddities like Martin Tupper’s *Proverbial Philosophy* and Samuel Warren’s *The Lily and the Bee* – a poem in praise of the Great Exhibition. The major figure is necessarily Walt Whitman, whose interest in ‘contemporary theories of language’ and insistence on the importance of ‘thought’ is emphasised. (p. 159) Phelan quotes some recently discovered notes by Whitman about verse forms, which he describes as ‘a kind of Rosetta stone for Whitman scholars, revealing the surprising depth and range of his reading on the subject of versification’. (p. 161) Whitman is contrasted favourably with Swinburne, in whose poetry ‘sound and sense exist on different planes’, (p. 173) a view

that recent Swinburne critics have been trying to disprove. Phelan suggests that Robert Bridges's *Milton's Prosody* provided terms which proved useful to Modernists such as Pound and Eliot. He concludes with Eliot's 1942 lecture 'The Music of Poetry' and its mysterious claim that only when the conventions and traditions of poetry are suspended can the poet hear the 'etherial music ... which has hitherto chirped unnoticed in the expanse of prose'. (p. 180)

There is plenty to learn for this scholarly book, but I do not think that it justifies the claim made in the Introduction that the approach adopted by Phelan, which emphasises metre, may bring back to life 'many nineteenth-century poems formerly consigned to oblivion'. I don't believe that *A Vision of Judgment* can ever recover from Byron's brilliantly dismissive scorn, or that Longfellow's *Evangeline* or Coventry Patmore's *The Unknown Eros* will become critically respected because they show sophisticated versification. Even *Love is Enough* will probably remain little read, though it would be good if a Morris critic would use Phelan's work to do what Phelan does not attempt to do: relate the skilled versification to an analysis of the poem's themes and ambition.

The attractive cover of the book makes use of the design 'Poesis' by Morris and Burne-Jones for the Royal School of Needlework, which I don't remember seeing reproduced before. Poesis appears to be instructing a young angel; she holds a pen and is writing in a large book, presumably obeying or specifying the rules of prosody. Phelan's book deserves attention for the light it throws on such matters, perhaps too easily ignored in our libertarian days.

*Peter Faulkner*

Martin Crick, *The History of the William Morris Society*, London: The William Morris Society, 2011, 248 pp. Pbk, ISBN 9780903283304, £15.

The idea of a history of the first fifty years of the William Morris Society was initially mooted in 2000, but reaction from trustees when canvassed was, to say the least, unenthusiastic. Ronald Briggs, its Secretary for over twenty years until 1980, and a figure who looms large in this history right into the new Millennium, responded by saying 'I can see no good purpose in raking out the unhappy differences which racked the Society for some years from 1980 and which seemed very un-Morrisian'. (p. 160) Lionel Young, one of Briggs's chief critics, and for many years the Society's Treasurer, was equally unhappy, writing that a history would 'stir up a hornets' nest' because 'from 1980 onwards there were really bad things happening'. (p. 161) It is a credit to the Society that it pressed on with the project, though perhaps fortunate that it took more than a decade to come to fruition – an



interval during which almost all of the protagonists in its most difficult period retired from day-to-day activities of the Society, and many died.

Martin Crick, a member of the Society and a historian, who has also written a history of the Social Democratic Federation, has produced a thorough, fair and comprehensive guide to the first fifty years. And boy what a story! As Joseph Mirwitch, a Committee member for many years self-deprecatingly summarised the 'events' to the 2002 AGM '... never in the history of literature has an author had so thrilling a plot, so surreal events to tell of, and a cast of such colourful characters and yet produced so bland an account'. (p. 149) A decade later, this book lays it all out in rather more dramatic and readable style.

So why all the fuss? Carlyle is partly remembered for his aphorism that history is about the lives of great men, and the History of the William Morris Society tends to bear this out. The problem is that the 'great man' at the centre of this story is not William Morris. Crick traces the origin of the Society from a letter to *The Times* of 13 September 1955, which sets out its proposed aims: 'to promote a forum for the exchange of ideas on [Morris's] contemporary influence over the whole range of his artistic and political activities'. (p. 28) What Crick's history reveals though is something which has bedevilled many a small voluntary organisation; the disproportionate influence of one or two strong characters on its culture and direction. One person above all others stands out in this history – Ronald Briggs. There is no doubt that Briggs's sheer commitment to the Society, and the force of his personality, carried it forward for many years. Crick records many occasions on which he complained that the Committee basically just turned up to meetings and in between did nothing. Edmund Penning-Rowell, probably Briggs's sternest critic, was, as early as 1958, complaining that 'I scent a certain l'état c'est moi-ism' in Briggs's attitude towards the Committee, remarking 'I know you feel that the Committee members do less than they might, but my experience is that the less they are called on to meet, the less responsible they feel'. (p. 42)

The worm at the heart of the Society at this point was, ironically, Kelmscott House. The house is crucial to Morris's life and achievements in a way that nowhere else he lived was, apart from Kelmscott Manor. It is unsurprising therefore that when the opportunity arose to acquire it, via a bequest by the then owner Helen Stephenson in late 1969, the Society leapt at it. Unfortunately, the Committee at the time, with the sole exception of Penning-Rowell, did not think through the implications of owning and managing a valuable property expensive to maintain. Its future and an unfolding financial crisis which accompanied it, determined in large part the Society's activities and priorities over the next thirty years, the problem only being finally resolved in 2002. By that time the bulk of the house had been lost to the Society for the previous twenty years – ever since the lease was put on the market by the trustees in October 1982 (for £950,000), and featuring in the *Sunday Times* as its 'house of the week'.

Crick records that the early years of ownership of Kelmscott House were joyful in a bohemian way, with the creation of a William Morris Centre, and the appointment of a series of Research Fellows from overseas supported by the Leverhulme Trust, most of whom went on to make major contributions both to the Society and to Morris studies. Indeed, development and sustenance of an American Society, effectively formed in 1958, and a Canadian Society from 1983, were in significant part, achievements of the group of Fellows who passed through Kelmscott House at that time: specific chapters are devoted to the histories of both of these parallel societies.

But the Society lacked both the finances and the organisational capacity either to renovate the very dilapidated house or to establish a properly resourced William Morris Centre in it. Its preservation nevertheless became an obsession for many, particularly Ronald Briggs, who, according to some accounts, gave the impression of owning the place, including at one stage installing his son. As Crick puts it 'he and others were seduced by the notion of owning Morris's house'. (p. 88) One observer was more blunt, saying 'it was like the donation of Constantine to the Christian church, a society devoted to spreading the word ... changed to a group of middle-aged men playing with a doll's house'. (p. 88) Crick's history certainly gives the impression that this long-running fracas over the control of money and property all-too-often diverted the Society from its founding purposes. Members and potential members failed to receive the most basic level of service.

From the perspective of the present, the early days seem to be characterised by a kind of 'great and good' elitism (there were complaints that all of the Committee lived in Hampstead), with those associated either with May Morris or Morris himself, given special reverence. It is noticeable too that until the late 1970s the Society was heavily dominated by men. Just one member of the first Committee elected, a Miss B. Goshawk, was a woman, and she merits just one further passing mention in the history, in contrast to well over sixty for Briggs. Such gender imbalance obviously reflected the nature of the wider society in which the Society operated, but does not suggest – despite a significant sprinkling of Communist and Labour Party activists amongst its leading members – that there was very much desire to challenge it via the Society's own practice.

The desire to connect Morris's thought to the present day was always there, and the Newsletter, and the increasingly respected *Journal*, gradually developed and consolidated as the years went by, the essential glue to maintaining a Society presence for members outside London. They were supplemented by an increasingly diverse programme of events, some in collaboration with other organisations such as The Institute of Contemporary Arts, and the Lucas Aerospace Shop Stewards Combined Committee (1981; 'What future for work?'). In terms of energy and visibility, the turning point seems to have been the mid-1980s, with

activities reflecting changes in the wider political culture with the emergence of new social movements based on race, feminism and the environment, and challenges to the nature of technology and work. Crick pin-points this shift of emphasis to a symposium 'How we live and how we might live' in March 1986, organised with Friends of the Earth, which he characterises as 'a new departure for the Society'. (p. 109) The trend was consolidated by activities associated with the hundredth anniversary in 1990 of the publication of *News from Nowhere*, which provided an opportunity to bring Morris's ideas to a wider audience in a conference entitled 'Utopia Today', with contributions including utopia and sexuality, the nature of work and art, the role of architecture, ecology, and the problems of markets, and planning in a socialist society.

It was also reflected in changes in the composition of the Committee. Crick comments that by the mid 1990s the Committee contained a mixture of 'long-standing members who had been involved in the previous disputes [during] the [19]80s ... and new younger members who did not regard ownership of the House as sacrosanct and felt ... it [to] be an encumbrance and a hindrance to the Society's prime purpose, which was educational'. (p. 143) The wide-ranging and successful Centenary Conference at Exeter College, Oxford in 1996 reflected this new confidence and desire to emphasise the educational aspects of the Society's mission. Even so, disputes over Kelmscott House continued to cause considerable strife, with the Secretary of the Society, Derek Baker, resigning in 1997 after a particularly acrimonious meeting. Crick records that 'others also commented on the ill-feeling and abusive tone of many of the meetings which Ray Watkinson [a former President] found "shocking and un-Morrisian"'. (p.144)

Crick does not spare the protagonists in this honest and at times distressing history. He lays bare the dark heart of the Society, and it is unsurprising that a number of people were unhappy with the prospect of its revelation. It is a tribute to his skill as a historian that the results are instructive rather than prurient. Anyone who has been active in the labour movement or the voluntary sector, while perhaps being shocked at some of the vitriol and un-comradely behaviour, will none-the-less recognise the pressures which a combination of passionately held views and deployment of very scarce resources, can create. The most recent decade of the William Morris Society, only part of which is covered here, has been marked by a far more temperate and focused approach to promoting the original idea of 'a forum for the exchange of ideas on his contemporary influence over the whole range of his artistic and political activities', and the ways in which its business is conducted. The results, in terms of membership, the range of Society activities, a highly successful conference to celebrate the Society's fiftieth anniversary ('William Morris in the Twenty-first Century'), and the profile of Morris himself in current cultural and political discourse, are reflected in that.

*Martin Stott*

Fiona MacCarthy, *The Last Pre-Raphaelite. Edward Burne-Jones and the Victorian Imagination*, London: Faber & Faber 2011, 629 pp., thirty-one colour illustrations, thirty-three black-and-white photographs, thirty-two illustrations in text. ISBN 978-0-571-22861-4, £25.00.

With its striking cover of the female head from *The Beguiling of Merlin* rather than a depiction of the artist, this is a splendidly lively and thought-provoking biography, and an admirable follow-up to the author's equally thorough account of William Morris. The publishers too are to be congratulated on the number and quality of the illustrations and the book's overall design. Its Preface offers some thoughtful comments from the perspective of the completed biography, and its twenty-seven chapters take us at a brisk pace through the eventful life of the artist, from the small beginnings in Birmingham, through Oxford and the meeting with Morris, to the marriage to Georgie, establishment of the Firm, the four important visits to Italy, the dramatic and unsettling affair with Maria Zambaco and the later passionate asexual relationships with younger women; we pass on to Burne-Jones's achievement of public success as a painter via the Grosvenor Gallery from 1877, through his later years of unceasing effort in his studio at the Grange and relaxation with his family in rural Rottingdean, to his death and funeral; the Epilogue describes the fall and recovery of his reputation as an artist. This is familiar territory, but MacCarthy brings to her narrative a lively style, and draws effectively on Burne-Jones's numerous and illuminating letters to a variety of correspondents. As she notes, we have no complete – or even incomplete – edition of these letters, but she has been industrious in tracking them down and incorporating them skilfully into the story. She does not idealise Burne-Jones, nor does she criticise him; the facts of his behaviour in his marriage, for instance, are recorded in a way that will make most readers feel sympathetic to Georgie, but at the same time they will be able to see how Georgie's stoical self-possession was problematic for her husband, who responded so sensitively to women prepared to admit that they were in any kind of trouble and needed support. All in all, one would judge Burne-Jones to have been a successful man, but this biography shows that this success was achieved at a cost. In this it does not differ from the earlier lives by Georgie herself and by Penelope Fitzgerald, but it gives us a good deal of information played down by the former – she makes no mention of Maria Zambaco, for instance – and not known in such detail to the latter.

The strength of the book lies in MacCarthy's awareness that she is telling the life of an artist, and that the interplay between the artist and his art is of central importance. The detail of *The Beguiling of Merlin* on the cover shows the dramatic features of Maria Zambaco, which also appear in several of the other paintings. In this case, as MacCarthy remarks, she appears as 'his temptress ..., the pursuit of the ancient magician by the sexually predatory Nimue. If he saw

her as Nimüe then he himself was Merlin'. (p. 208) This suggests how closely Burne-Jones's art was related to his life, even if he can be described by MacCarthy as 'the most supremely intellectual' of Victorian painters because of his 'range of scholarly reference' and the 'literary bias' shown in his subject-matter. (p. 28) In considering Burne-Jones the man, she is able to quote effectively from his numerous letters to the many women he admired – she remarks, tellingly, that 'Burne-Jones was never not in love' (p. xxiii) – especially those to May Gaskell published by Joscelyn Dimbleby in 2004 as *A Profound Secret*. Although Burne-Jones told May to burn his letters to her, she did not do so. Indeed, as MacCarthy remarks, 'Fortunately for posterity, few of the recipients of Burne-Jones's uniquely wild and witty, fantastical love letters did as they were told.' (p. 412) They certainly reveal his romanticism, as he tells May: 'I keep thinking of that first sight of you ... I still see those divine little figures moving in a land no man ever saw, in a light none can dream of – better than Italy sun ever did'. (p. 410) When they met, she was thirty nine, with three children, and Burne-Jones was fifty eight. He saw her at the piano in her town house, 3 Marble Arch, later writing to her that 'I watched you from the sofa and you looked like all the Queens of the world'. (p. 411)

If we are tempted to be censorious about Burne-Jones and his adored women, including those whom MacCarthy neatly calls the 'Girls on the Golden Stairs', we have to take into account the gratitude that many of them felt for his emotional sympathy and the widening of their aesthetic experience. May was later to write to Lord Milner about her vivid recollection of 'one very delicious day in London' spent 'buying a new dress (very pretty) and wandering from one lovely thing to another with B J in South Kensington. It is one of the most instructive and heavenly things I know to go round with a man who sees Beauty – clearly and simply Beauty'. (p. 414) We are reminded of other aspects of Burne-Jones's personality: his sense of humour, seen in his many witty drawings and caricatures; his support for the sadly discredited Simeon Solomon and for Constance Wilde; his vivacious and brilliantly illustrated letters to girls such as Katie Lewis and his granddaughter Angela, and his general support for liberal causes. MacCarthy makes no attempt to simplify her subject's complexity, leaving readers to draw their own conclusions.

MacCarthy's clear account of the development of Burne-Jones's art begins with Ruskin's enthusiasm for a painter whom he saw as the leader of the second generation of Pre-Raphaelites. In 1859 Ruskin wrote of him as 'the most wonderful of all the Pre-Raphaelites in redundancy of delicate and pathetic fancy – inferior to Rossetti in depth – but beyond him in grace and sweetness'. (p. 76) But Burne-Jones's art was to develop dramatically, mainly as a result of his four visits to Italy and his exposure there to new ranges of art. As Ruskin wrote enthusiastically in the fifth volume of *Modern Painters* about Giorgione, Veronese and Titian, so did Burne-Jones move his attention from the medieval to the Italian

sixteenth century. Then, on his second Italian journey, he painted a copy of the Luini fresco of Christ and Mary Magdalen in Milan for Ruskin, and later wrote of Luini that ‘nothing is like him anywhere for perfect beauty’. (p. 149)

The relationship with Ruskin became more difficult as Burne-Jones gained in confidence and broke away from his mentor’s evaluations. Most seriously, in 1871 Ruskin denounced the ‘dark carnality’ (p. 223) of Michelangelo’s art, which Burne-Jones had come greatly to admire. MacCarthy argues persuasively that in the 1870s his style moved away from the ‘relatively static and decorative classicism’ of the previous decade to work of ‘greater dramatic power and psychological depth’, (p. 239) in paintings such as those greatly admired at the Grosvenor Gallery in 1877. In discussing Burne-Jones’s relationship to Frederic Leighton, MacCarthy gives a central insight into his art when she states that Leighton thought art more important than narrative, while Burne-Jones ‘loved a story more than anything on earth’. (p. 193) She writes appreciatively about a number of specific works, including *The Golden Stairs* and *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid*, which, MacCarthy argues, ‘sums up most exactly his philosophy of art, his conviction that a life through beauty was everybody’s birthright regardless of their income or social position’. (p. 341) She writes equally well about *The Briar Rose* sequence, for which Burne-Jones’ wonderfully supportive patron William Graham obtained £15,000 from Agnew’s the dealers. She argues that the sequence is ‘one of Burne-Jones’s most intensely and enchantingly Pre-Raphaelite works in its exactness of decorative detail, its truth to nature, its verisimilitude’. (p. 402)

Nevertheless, there is no general discussion of Burne-Jones and Pre-Raphaelitism, which makes the book’s title something of a puzzle. For Burne-Jones’s art was never static. As late as the successful retrospective exhibition of his work at the New Gallery in 1893, MacCarthy argues, we can sense ‘a new confidence and clarity of vision’ in ‘the colossal strangeness of Burne-Jones’s later works’ (p. 426) – a striking and insightful phrase. Towards the end, a good deal of attention is rightly given in this context to the immense unfinished painting *The Sleep of Arthur in Avalon*, which members may have seen on its triumphant return from Puerto Rico to the Tate in 2008. MacCarthy finds that in it ‘Burne-Jones is at his most romantic, poetic and abstracted’: ‘It is anti-materialist and supra-politics. *Arthur in Avalon* pours scorn on the commercial values of the art market in its very unmarketability’. (p. 475) Nevertheless, we are told later, the painting, ignored by the Tate, was bought in a sale in 1958 by the Puerto Rican industrialist and philanthropist Luis Antonio Ferre, and exhibited in a purpose-built gallery in Ponce. (pp. 533–4) Even Burne-Jones’s art could not finally defeat the market.

Another strength of the book is the importance attached in it to Burne-Jones’s work in a variety of media apart from painting. We learn about his early work in stained glass and his great contribution to the Firm and the Company in this medium. Already during the middle 1860s, MacCarthy argues, he is showing ‘his

great élan, his sure sense of composition' in the designs for the 'superb dramatic windows' of the church in Lyndhurst, and the 'beautifully poignant depiction of St Mary Magdalen' in the church at Ladock in Cornwall. (p. 184) The work in stained glass continued of course until the end of Burne-Jones's life. MacCarthy is eloquent about the *Last Judgement* window in Birmingham, which she considers his finest; she writes of 'its almost Expressionist quality of movement, the fluency with which the design spreads right across the whole surface of the glazing, the relationship between the stained glass and the architectural masonry that frames it. Light shines out of darkness. It has something of the power and coherence of a vast symphonic poem.' (p. 471) It is a pity that the excellent illustrations do not include this window, but there is a reproduction of the contemporary Gladstone memorial window at St. Deiniol, Hawthorden, described as 'A beautiful example of his later, more free-flowing, designs for stained glass'. (Plate XXI)

Burne-Jones's work in other media is also highly praised. For instance, MacCarthy gives an illuminating account of the complicated manner in which the mosaics for the American church in Rome were prepared – Burne-Jones never actually went to Rome at the time – and praises the quality of the *Annunciation* and the *Tree of Life*, the two mosaics completed and installed in Burne-Jones's lifetime. In another medium, MacCarthy argues that Burne-Jones's contribution was essential to the success of the tapestries produced at Merton Abbey, since 'William Morris's solo designs were relatively clumsy' and it was only in collaborative work that Morris and Co. tapestry achieved 'its real originality'. (p. 387) She argues that *The Adoration of the Magi* tapestry, originally made for Exeter College, Oxford, in 1886, and reproduced in nine further versions, 'found its way into the spiritual experience of the nation, like Hunt's *The Light of the World*', though she suggests that it is not so much 'a straightforward Christian interpretation' as one embodying what the *Art Journal* called the artist's 'peculiar vein of mysticism'. (p. 389) Thus there is ample evidence for the claim that, by the time of the formation of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society in the winter of 1886, 'Just as much as William Morris, though in another way, Burne-Jones was the role model for the Arts and Crafts'. (p. 383)

As to his relations with Morris, MacCarthy is in a position to write with authority, and does so here. She takes what we may call the political element in Burne-Jones more seriously than some other commentators, as her remark about *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid* – quoted above – shows. She tells us of Burne-Jones's admiration for Parnell and his sympathy for Irish nationalism, as well as his involvement in the Eastern Question Association, of which Morris was treasurer. But the Association fell apart in 1878 when Gladstone changed his mind and supported Disraeli's policy. 'Our heads will sink with shame at the dishonour and business of such a war as people want now', a disillusioned Burne-Jones wrote to Rosalind Howard. (p. 279) The depth of his disillusion with poli-

tics drove him back to his studio, while Morris's experience pushed him towards Socialism. When this led Morris into dangerous situations as on Bloody Sunday in 1887, Burne-Jones sank 'into a misery of incomprehension', we are told; in his view 'Artists were made to make art, not to dissipate their energies and talents by marching on Trafalgar Square.' (p. 350)

But as Morris's energy declined during the 1890s, and his activities for Socialism grew less strenuous, the two men came together again. 'The close creative partnership between Morris and Burne-Jones was resurrected', MacCarthy notes, though sadly 'at a time when both men were ageing visibly'. (p. 429) Morris's establishment of the Kelmscott Press in 1891 provided one avenue for cooperation, and we are given a full account of Burne-Jones's contribution in the form of the 106 illustrations by him that appear on Kelmscott Press books, published at a time when he was also producing designs for stained glass and tapestries for Morris & Co. Their work together on the Kelmscott Chaucer, which brought them happy memories of their shared enthusiasm for Chaucer's works when they read him at Oxford, is nicely commemorated in the 1896 cartoon of Chaucer embracing the two friends, with the inscription 'Bless ye, my children'. (Reproduced on p. 466) Slightly bizarre evidence of the closeness of the relationship at this time is shown when Burne-Jones was so keen to introduce May Gaskell to Morris that he took her to Kelmscott House, a place which Burne-Jones tended to avoid, finding its atmosphere gloomily reminiscent of *Wuthering Heights*. May was disconcerted by Morris, who appeared unkempt, and in her view unwashed, direct from work at the Press. Burne-Jones wrote to assure her that 'he really is [clean] underneath' and that Morris had greatly appreciated her visit. (p. 414) By the end of her account of the relationship between the two men, MacCarthy has surely succeeded in what she tells us was one of her aims, 'to bring Burne-Jones out from under William Morris's shadow'. (p. xxii) Readers may well be stimulated to debate by her challenging conclusion that 'creatively Burne-Jones was more than Morris's equal. He was the greater artist although Morris was unarguably the greater man'. (p. xxii)

*Peter Faulkner*

Susie Harries, *Nikolaus Pevsner: The Life*, London: Chatto & Windus, 2011, 866 pp., Forty-four black and white illustrations. ISBN 9780701168391, Hbk, £30.

Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, whom we revere as one of the founders of the William Morris Society, is the subject of this long biography. It is a well-balanced narrative, full of good stories and extracts from personal papers, very readable and easy to



follow; but I do not think there is enough analysis at the level that the subject requires. Still, the author realises that Pevsner was not a simple soul, in spite of the way he beamed out at us from harmless-looking spectacles. He was very much a part of the angst-ridden world of the twentieth century, and needed to dodge about on his route to becoming a national treasure.

There is good coverage of the German background. Pevsner, an assimilated Jew who called himself a Lutheran, found that the promise of a career as an Art Historian could not be fulfilled in the Germany of the 1930s. In September 1933 he was dismissed from his post in Göttingen University and tried to find employment in England. For a time he still thought that he would be able to come to terms with the Nazi regime; this has been a stumbling block. Was he really so naïve? Or like many people in similar situations, did he have problems with giving up a comfortable life and going into exile?

He was a mature family man when he came to live among the English; unlike many of his contemporaries who retained their accents, Pevsner worked hard at the language. More than that, he was determined to solve the baffling problem of English humour, and found himself able to make jokes in English. For all his efforts he never obtained a full-time academic job at this stage, which was not surprising since the discipline of Art History was not recognised in many British institutions. At one time he became a buyer of glass and textiles for Gordon Russell.

He was lucky in that his wife Lola and two of his children had been able to join him, because, when war came, his eldest child Uta remained in Germany. His mother Annie made every effort to avoid transportation, but in 1942 she committed suicide rather than go to a death-camp. Although he had received a permanent permit to remain in Britain in 1938, Pevsner, like many others, was himself interned for a while during 1940. When he was released there was no hope of getting an academic position, and he found himself clearing rubble in Kentish Town. He reflected: 'Why shouldn't a man like me – a creature of luxury, author, lecturer – try to earn my money honestly and usefully, try to offer some help to England in this way?' Fortunately, in November 1941, Jim Richards offered him the assistant editorship of the *Architectural Review*, and his friendship with Allen Lane led to the editorship of King Penguins in 1942. This was a remarkable series, especially if you consider when it was launched: his own book on *The Leaves of Southwell* contained an introduction which deals with the position of the artist in the Middle Ages, an essay still of interest to followers of Morris. He became renowned for *An Outline of European Architecture*, published by Penguin in 1943. This has never been out of print, and is responsible for making a whole generation look at buildings.

Towards the end of the war he shared with Allen Lane and many others the ideal of England as the New Jerusalem, which was to arise from the ruins around

them, a socially responsible society clad in new architecture. In this context Lane gave Pevsner a free hand to embark upon the *Buildings of England* and another series on the history of Art and Architecture. The *BoE*, often to be referred to simply as 'Pevsner', is really the hero of this book. Guidebooks had been prohibited during the war, so that there was an appetite for such a series when peace came. Harries compares the idiosyncrasies of the early editions and the tidying up which followed: Pevsner sometimes showed his irritation with uncooperative landlords, but also put in some rare flights of fancy. In *Cornwall* (1951), at St Ruan Major, he describes the church of St Rumonus, 'so little visited that at the time of writing a white owl was nesting in the timbers of the S porch roof'.

During the fifties Pevsner was gradually accepted as an authority, and held a number of academic positions. From his base at Birkbeck College he went out on lecture tours throughout the country, and became Slade Professor at Cambridge, where he was immensely popular, from 1949 to 1955. A student said: 'In the period just before lunch we flocked to hear him on fine art, and just before dinner (both unpopular times) ... to hear him on architecture'. Pevsner shared his pleasure with the city of Cambridge; 'My happiness is also due to ... the wonderful chance of being able to walk through a town for a whole mile without being hurt by the sight of a single building. That can only happen in three towns in the whole of England'.

From this point on the narrative is largely concerned with the progress of the *BoE* and the honours that this modest man began to receive. As I read on I began to see that the author is clearly a supporter of the Establishment and has difficulty, in spite of her many jokes, in dealing with Pevsner's left-wing leanings. For example, we learn a lot about the aristocratic connections of the original committee of the Victorian Society, of which Pevsner soon became a leading member. Alas! Pevsner, she is at pains to point out, was not respectful to the aristocracy, who, of course owned many of the country houses he wished to visit. Nor did he have any time for what she calls the 'landed interest'.

And so, either inadvertently or because of her bias, the William Morris Society is never mentioned throughout the book. I would therefore like to conclude with my own tribute to Nikolaus Pevsner, who was one of the kindest men I have ever known. In 1960, while I was working for the WEA in Nottingham, I wrote to ask him to give a lecture on Morris, and booked a large hall. All was going well when I received a telephone call from him. He had written the Saturday I had chosen into his 1964 diary! (I still marvel at this as I assumed that some printer had provided him with stock for future years.) However, he kindly agreed to come a fortnight later and I duly notified those who had applied. The hall was full; I operated the projector and he solemnly banged on the floor of the stage to summon the next slide. Afterwards he suggested that somebody as interested in Morris as I appeared to be should join the Society, and so I did. To this day I still remember

the man who said to me: 'I will go anywhere to lecture on William Morris'.

The relation between the two is discussed by Peter Faulkner in 'Pevsner's Morris', *JWMS*, XVII, No. 1, (Winter 2006), pp. 49–71.

*John Purkis*

Paul Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack: Englishness, Patriotism and the British Left, 1881–1924*, Ipswich, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1998, 240 pp. ISBN 978-1-84383-636-0, £17.99.

*In Red Flag and Union Jack*, originally published in 1998, re-published in paperback in 2011, Paul Ward describes the relation between the British Left and nationalist and patriotic feeling during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, beginning with various socialist thinkers and movements (including William Morris and the Arts and Crafts), before focusing on Labour formulating itself as a 'national' party and taking office in 1924. The terms 'oppositional Englishness' and 'radical patriotism' are used to describe a viewpoint which differentiated the state from the nation, whilst 'social patriotism' is the idea that government and state are integrally linked to 'Britain' or 'Englishness'. Ward argues that the Labour Party moved from radical patriotism to social patriotism, resulting from a greater belief in a democratic system which saw the ruling government as a legitimate representation of the nation. He also argues that radical patriotism survived further into the twentieth century than hitherto assumed; some critics placed its end in the aftermath of the Boer War, while Ward follows it into the First World War.

Chapter One summarises the relation between politics and an idea of the 'nation'. As in the rest of the book, wars and revolutions are regarded as catalyst points which force political thinkers to support or reject patriotism or, in this case, Englishness. Sometimes this leads writers to declare that they are English first and socialist second, as did Robert Blatchford when supporting the Boer War in 1899, and some socialists the First World War in 1914. Chapter Two is the most relevant to Morris, describing models of 'oppositional Englishness' which utilise a golden-age concept of a nation's past to inspire social development in the future. *News from Nowhere* – in which 'the best has been taken from the past and thrust into the future' (p. 27) – is used as an example, and the novel is placed in the context of other writers who used the past and a version of England for political ends; most notably Blatchford in *Merrie England*, said by Ward to be more influential in its time than *News from Nowhere*. The next two chapters span the period 1881 to 1906, and describe the tensions between socialist writers and

accusations of foreignness – which Morris satirised in his play *The Tables Turned*, where in Part One the judge assumes that cockney ‘revolutionists [...] are foreigners’ – as well as the difficulty of reconciling socialism with the British Empire and the Boer War.

The rest of the book shifts attention to the Labour Party, as it changed from a left-wing pressure group which proclaimed itself socialist in 1918 to a national party. Chapter Five covers the transition to parliamentary socialism while also identifying the continuing presence of ‘radical patriotism’ in opposition to the state. This stance is complicated by the threat of the ‘German menace’ and the declaration of war, which dominate the next three chapters. The war made patriotism, and whether socialists supported their country in a global sense, an important topic – and Ward does an effective job of including both pro-war and anti-war viewpoints as they existed before in the Labour Party. The last two chapters follow Labour’s responses to the Russian revolution, and consider the nature of the British Empire, as political thinkers continued to grapple with the question of whether their support should be given to other countries in a context of global socialism, or their own country should come first. Ward concludes with a summary of ‘British socialism’ through to the Second World War. This is described as an ‘invented tradition’ formed by left-wing thinkers using nationality – mainly ideas of Englishness – to justify their social policies.

Morris is not mentioned as much as he perhaps ought to be – and when he is referred to, it is mostly for his role in the Arts and Crafts rather than as a socialist writer and thinker. He is included in a list of thinkers who ‘adhered to the socialist movement’, suggesting that he followed socialist thinking rather than contributed to it himself. Instead, through his Arts and Crafts work, Morris is described in limited terms as a ‘guardian of rural Britain against the encroachment of urban capitalism’. (p. 5) In 1924, however, we are told that Sidney Webb referred to Morris at the Labour Party conference, describing him as a ‘great British socialist’, who reaffirmed ‘the ancient doctrine of human fellowship’. (p. 181) Ward writes that ‘it is not quite unnecessary to draw attention to Morris’s *News from Nowhere*’ in his footnote to Webb’s speech, when drawing readers’ attention to Morris is surely essential at that point. He quotes a passage from the book which seems to contradict Webb’s belief that ‘class war’ was unnecessary, but does not mention Morris’s beliefs about fellowship and life – most famously delivered in *A Dream of John Ball* – which Webb was directly referring to in his speech. The book aims to provide an overview of British socialism and nationality, and not to focus too much on individuals, but even with a broad scope Morris’s contribution as an English socialist writer should have a more notable presence, especially when that contribution is so long-lasting in its influence.

Attitudes and responses to Englishness are almost exclusively considered through degrees of patriotic feeling, to the extent that issues regarding that con-

cept are sometimes forgotten, particular when the book discusses the Boer War and First World War. Ward asserts that ‘cultural attitudes to Englishness among the left’ is a theme of the book, albeit one, as he admits, ‘taken up rather tenuously’. (p. 5) Morris’s presence in the book would doubtless have been greater had cultural attitudes been more of a focus. Other writers have addressed that subject, however; for example Michelle Weinroth in *Reclaiming William Morris* (1997), which describes the tension between aesthetics of ‘Englishness’ and anti-imperial socialism in Morris’s legacy.

This paperback edition is an exact copy of the hardback from 1998, including the repetition of a few small typographical errors, and the sometimes confusing lack of capitalisation of book titles and the use of ‘left’ in a political sense. It is, overall, a well-researched and referenced book, which will be of great interest to those concerned with the formation of the Labour Party, and the wider struggle between socialism and patriotism, but it has limited appeal for readers looking for an account of Morris’s place in this context.

*Gabriel Schenk*

James C. Whorton, *The Arsenic Century. How Victorian Britain was poisoned at home, work & play*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 412 pp. Hbk ISBN10: 0199574707, £16.99; pbk ISBN10: 0199605998, £9.99.

James Whorton’s account of Victorian Britain and its intimate relationship with arsenic depicts a society ignorant of its own excess, where technology based on arsenic compounds in combating pests, decorating walls, even the human body, often overrode all other considerations. Flooding of everyday lives with arsenic in various forms brought profound changes to food, medicine, drinking water, occupational and domestic health, human relationships, and wealth. For much of the nineteenth century, the British public was also gripped by ‘arsenic fever’; the perception (and media creation) that deliberate arsenic poisoning was more common than it really was. Widespread use of arsenic in various forms, especially in pest control, together with ease of purchase and availability, contributed to its reputation. Accidents caused by inadvertent contamination of food and drink, especially beer, were notorious, as were those of deliberate adulteration of food, in order to increase profit margins. Finally, in January 1901, the Royal Commission on Arsenical Poisoning from Consumption of Beer, chaired by the great physicist Lord Kelvin, established regulatory concentrations (‘tolerances’) for arsenic in goods via the Food and Drugs Act of that year. These were soon adopted by the USA, and later the WHO. ‘Arsenic’ here, by the way, means ‘white arsenic’

– arsenious oxide or arsenic (III) oxide ( $\text{As}_2\text{O}_3$ ) – rather than the un-combined element. The chemist in one of us would refer to this as its speciation, that is, its chemical type or form.

For Morrisians, we suppose, the word ‘arsenic’ either signifies wallpapers, Madeleine Smith, Devon Great Consols, or all three. These subjects are indeed dealt with here, extending the material in Andrew Meharg’s *Venomous Earth*, 1993, and building on Paul Bartrip’s excellent (and more dispassionate) account in the *English Historical Review*, 1994. As to the first, the Victorian love of arsenic ‘green’ meant that some fifty shades of this colour were available, with a bewildering range of names; Scheele’s green (copper arsenite;  $\text{CuHAsO}_3$ ), Brilliant green, Schweinfurt green (copper acetoarsenite), Paris, Vienna, Munich and Leipzig greens – named for the cities below which they were used to poison sewer rats – even Emperor and Emerald greens. These were used not only in paints and wallpapers, but in documents, toys, confectionery and its wrappers, playing cards, curtains, hats, artificial flowers, even ball gowns and socks. To say that arsenic was ‘in the blood’ was probably literally true.

Despite attempts by women’s societies (e.g. the Ladies’ Sanitary Association of 1857) to educate, and the *British Medical Journal* blaming arsenic for numerous mental and physical ailments: despite evidence presented to Parliament from the National Health Society, from GPs and Medical Officers, and from some twenty other countries, by the 1860s, the use of wallpapers employing green pigments containing arsenic was rife. Instead, the public was alerted to such ‘dangers’ by the popular press, as well as by melodramatic novels such as *The Green of the Period*, and *Minsterborough*. Many manufacturers, however, including Morris, who years later described doctors at this time as ‘bitten by witch fever’, were confident their products were safe, even in the face of what appeared to be mounting evidence. They were not alone. Many physicians, including the Principal of the Laboratory of the Government Chemist, rejected the evidence until apparent first-hand experience changed their opinion.

The ‘free-from-arsenic’ campaign of the 1870s, however, as well as some manufacturers advertising wallpapers as ‘arsenic-free’, slowly eliminated their production, if not their presence; Morris & Co. made this change perhaps rather late, in 1883. Removal of old wallpaper (itself hazardous) was also thought preferable to slow, dust-laden effects over time. Even the walls of the royal palaces were stripped. Introduction of new, organic-based aniline compounds produced from coal-tar – ‘the purples from Perkin’; all hated by William Morris – together with a further ‘shy away from green’ campaign, began very slowly to loosen the stranglehold of arsenic on colour production. By 1900, a Home Office report indicated that wallpapers were largely arsenic-free.

However, none of these campaigns, popular or official, was based on sound science, but on circumstantial evidence, some of which, such as that presented

in *The Lancet*, came from writers whose families had ‘suffered’ arsenic poisoning, and who were therefore not entirely disinterested. And as it turns out, the evidence on which they were based was indeed flawed, in that there never was a ‘silent but deadly’ mysterious gas given off by arsenical wallpapers, even in damp houses (See William Morris Society Newsletter, Spring 2011, pp. 10–17); a conclusion published in 2005 which Whorton does not mention. (Arsenic dust from old paints and wallpapers was another matter, however). Therefore, William Morris may well have been over-dismissive of ‘evidence’ that he was poisoning his customers – he blamed their illnesses on the indoor water closet – but he was not actually guilty in this matter, despite what many still believe.

As to Madeleine Smith, and ‘arsenic fever’ in general, the problem was that the symptoms of arsenic poisoning are very similar to those of bacterially-based gastro-enteritic disease, itself common in an epoch of unsound drinking water and indifferent food preservation. As well as widely employed as rat poison, arsenic was also used as a medicine to treat asthma, psoriasis, eczema and chorea; the ubiquitous ‘medicinal’ Fowler’s Solution was still registered in the British Pharmacopoeia in 1952. Self-administering of near-lethal quantities of arsenic was also common; in soaps and wafers amongst women, in order to enhance ‘beauty’, and in men to increase potency, prowess, weight-gain, even stamina. Even Darwin’s constant poor health may have been at least partly due to his ingesting arsenic for his various ‘ailments’.

Not until the Coroners Act of the 1860s were all cases of suspicious death followed up. Forensic tests for arsenic, introduced from the 1830s, were prone to ‘false-positives’. When life insurance policies and burial clubs were introduced, on a ‘pay-into-weekly’ basis, temptation for ‘early realisation’ became quite common. With limited chemical knowledge, law courts often set chemist against chemist in their presentation of evidence, and ironically became *de facto* training-grounds for poisoners. Madeleine Smith, found ‘case not proven’ under Scottish law, though demonised by the press, was given the benefit of doubt because her supposed poisoned lover, Emile L’Angelier, was known to self-administer arsenic. After her trial, she left Glasgow for the South Coast in order to escape notoriety, and – as many Morrisians will know – married George Wardle, later business manager of Morris & Co., worked for ‘the Firm’ as an embroiderer, and became treasurer, and librarian, of the Bloomsbury branch of the Socialist League. More recently, still demonised by some (e.g. Professor Meharg), she has become something of a *cause célèbre*, in that her real ‘crime’ may have been that although not married she and Emile had enjoyed ‘an improper connection’.

Occupational exposure in mine, office, factory or farm underpinned other routes to chronic (and sometimes acute) arsenic poisoning. Roasting of arsenic ores, and scraping of oxide condensate from flue walls at mines such as Devon Great Consols, led to a variety of skin diseases (‘arsenic pock’), and to cancer of

the lungs, and of the scrotum (see gruesome sketch, p. 298). Morris's connection to the mine is discussed in greater detail elsewhere in this issue; by 1870, it supplied half the world's arsenic, and in 1871 (or maybe 1872) he wrote to his mother that 'we had the new contract for arsenic, and got a very good price for it'. Even living close to arsenic smelters was thought hazardous, and, in some cases, death was attributed to local atmospheric concentrations. Paint and dye workers, wall-paper hangers, strippers and even sellers suffered, as did artificial-flower makers. Evidence from 'paper-stainers', however, such as those who worked for Morris at Merton Abbey, despite various issues identified, did not indicate any serious problems. Eventually the Factory and Workshops Act of 1895 required that all arsenic, lead and phosphorus manufacturing be closely monitored. Whether all this was 'most agreeable' to Morris (p. 297) is debatable – where is the evidence for that statement? And at the time, and even later, he was never really 'one of the *chief* shareholders' (*Ibid.*; our emphasis) in Devon Great Consols, although his father, and subsequently his mother, obviously were.

Whorton's epilogue might well be considered 'a story told over and over again', where supposed new cases of poisoning are in fact either a legacy from 'the Arsenic Century', the actions of a negligent industry, or a failure of the official monitoring system. Thirty nine pages or so of notes, sources and references, and three pages of vital abbreviations – though the index is spartan – allow readers to explore the sources and make up their own mind about the general topic of arsenic in Victorian England, but probably not 'Morris and arsenic'. One or two other points of correction must also be made. First, arsenic is not a metal, but a metalloid, exhibiting the properties of both metals and non-metals, and the distinction is important as it determines its chemistry and thus its impact on nature. Second, the correct spelling of phosphorus – that old scourge of undergraduates (and some of their teachers) – is just that, and not 'phosphorous', which refers to certain phosphorus compounds, but not the element. Third, the book occasionally also uses the phrase 'the 1800s' to mean the nineteenth century. A pity such basic errors appear in an otherwise scholarly account.

*Mike Foulkes*  
*Patrick O'Sullivan*