The Journal of
William Morris Studies

Volume XIX Number 4 Summer 2012

Editorial
   Patrick O’Sullivan  3

Obituary: Peter Preston
   Peter Faulkner  4

A William Morris Letter
   Peter Faulkner  7

Morris and Devon Great Consols
   Florence S. Boos & Patrick O’Sullivan  11

Morris and Pre-Raphaelitism
   Peter Faulkner  40

‘And my deeds shall be remembered, and my name that once was nought’:
   Regin’s Role in Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs
   Kathleen Ullal  63

Morris’s Late Style and the Irreconcilabilities of Desire
   Ingrid Hanson  74

Reviews. Edited by Peter Faulkner  85

   (Phillippa Bennett)  85

Joseph Phelan, The Music of Verse. Metrical Experiment in Nineteenth-Century Poetry (Peter Faulkner)  89
Martin Crick, *The History of the William Morris Society* (Martin Stott) 92


Susie Harries, *Nikolaus Pevsner: The Life* (John Purkis) 100

Paul Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack: Englishness, Patriotism and the British Left, 1881–1924* (Gabriel Schenk) 103

James C. Whorton, *The Arsenic Century* (Mike Foulkes & Patrick O’Sullivan) 105

Guidelines for Contributors 109

Notes on Contributors 111

ISSN: 1756-1353

Editor: Patrick O’Sullivan (editor@williammorrissociety.org.uk)
Reviews Editor: Peter Faulkner (reviews@williammorrissociety.org.uk)
Designed by David Gorman (dagorman2000@yahoo.co.uk)
Printed by the Short Run Press, Exeter, UK (http://www.shortrunpress.co.uk/)

All material printed (except where otherwise stated) copyright the William Morris Society.
Editorial

Patrick O’Sullivan

This issue brings the usual mixture of Morrisian subjects, although it is first necessary – sadly – to mark the death of one of the stalwarts of the William Morris Society in recent times, Peter Preston. Peter Faulkner does this in the pages immediately following this editorial, so all I can (and must) do here is to record that as Chair of the Society, Peter Preston was extremely welcoming to me when I first became editor, and always most helpful and encouraging. Later I also learned that he was one of the best and most patient chairs of potentially divisive meetings I have ever had the privilege to watch and marvel at, and I frequently thought how good it was for all concerned, not least the Society, that it was he, and not I, who was occupying that particular position.

In this issue, we reproduce a previously unpublished letter by Morris with comments by Peter Faulkner. Florence Boos and I then discuss the relationship between Morris and the Devon Great Consols mine, the source of the Morris family wealth, and the departure point for much ill-informed sniping at Morris’s reputation over recent years. Peter Faulkner next broadens the subject to that of Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites, and the extent to which the influence of Pre-Raphaelitism on Morris’s work was retained over his lifetime. Our third and fourth articles, by Kathleen Ullal, and by Ingrid Hanson, then confirm a trend I think I may have noticed since becoming editor – the continued, perhaps increasing interest in Morris’s late prose romances.

We then carry reviews of books on another of these (The Wood Beyond the World), and on the ways in which Morris’s metrical thinking interacts with his poetic practice in Love is Enough. Next come reviews of Martin Crick’s history of the William Morris Society, and of biographies of Morris’s life-long friend Edward Burne-Jones, and of Niklaus Pevsner, an early twentieth century champion of Morris. The wider impact of Morris’s ideas is then considered in a review of Patriotism and the British Left, from Morris’s time until the first Labour administration in 1924. Finally, Mike Foulkes and I review a book which provides much interesting background for the issue of ‘William Morris and Arsenic’, which brings us back, in a way, to Devon Great Consols.
Peter Preston (1944–2011)

Peter Faulkner

My most vivid memories of Peter – and I am sure this is true for many others who knew him – are of him as a genial host. He had a great talent for bringing people together in a warm and friendly atmosphere, whether on a small or a large scale, as Chair of the Society’s committee or convivially presiding over meetings concerned with Morrisian matters. John Purkis remarks that ‘he had a notable “presence” in a way that many academics don’t. And he ran the show. It was like meeting Mr Vincent Crummles, the actor manager in Nicholas Nickleby, who “received Nicholas with an inclination of the head, something between the courtesy of a Roman emperor and the nod of a pot companion” and immediately gave him a job to do’. There was indeed always something generously Dickensian about Peter. He played a leading part in the Society’s last three conferences, at Ruskin College, Oxford, in 1990, at Exeter College, Oxford, in 1996, and at Royal Holloway in 2005, when he and his fellow-organisers Phillippa Bennett, Ruth Levitas and Rosie Miles had the difficult task of building up the right Morrisian spirit in the wake of the London bombings which took place on the conference’s opening day. I have clear memories of him at all three events, both as a lecturer and as a vigorous and enthusiastic conversationalist at table or in common rooms. It is relevant that his second academic post – the first was as a WEA Tutor Organiser – involved a residential centre – he was Warden of Lincoln Adult Education Centre, of the University of Nottingham, from 1973 to 1980.

The William Morris Society has benefited greatly from the services of people from the democratic world of adult education, and Peter was one of these. By a nice coincidence, it was in Hammersmith that Peter was born, on 25th February 1944. He went to school in London, and read English at the University of Nottingham. He married Barbara in 1966, and took a Certificate of Education at the University of Sussex; he wrote an MA dissertation on Charles Dickens. In 1980 the family – Rebecca, born in 1972, and Ben, born in 1976 – moved to Nottingham, and Peter became first a Lecturer and then a Senior Lecturer in the Continuing Education Department of the University. Teaching in Nottingham, and with a strong interest in the relation between literature and place, Peter became involved with the establishment of the D.H. Lawrence Centre in
1991. His energy, enthusiasm and organising abilities ensured a successful career, culminating in his becoming Head of School and Director of Continuing Education in 2003; he retired in 2005, but continued with many activities – from 2008 to 2011 he was Chair of the Board of Writing for the East Midlands.

All this is said without mentioning his commitment to Morris, which dated back to 1980. In that year Dick Smith, another distinguished servant of the Morris cause, who was Librarian at the University of Nottingham, became Hon. Sec. of the Society, and he encouraged Peter’s interest in Morris. Thus in 1982 Peter worked with Dick and Ray Watkinson to organise a successful Morris weekend with the Extra-Mural Department of Nottingham University; from this there developed the East Midlands Study Group – by far the most successful of the Society’s groups outside London – and Peter’s increasing involvement in the Society. So in 1987, when Dick Smith stepped down from the post of Hon. Sec. due to ill-health, he was succeeded by Peter, who had been co-opted onto the committee the previous year, and taken over the editorship of the Newsletter from Lionel Young in January. Peter ceased to be Hon. Sec. in 1990, and was succeeded by John Purkis, and in 1993 Lionel Young took over the Newsletter from Peter. The centenary year, 1996, saw a fine range of Morris activities, including the conference at Exeter College, Oxford, for which Peter concentrated on arranging the remarkably varied programme of lectures and visits. He also co-edited the William Morris Centenary Essays, and concluded his part of the Introduction with words that retain their value for us today: ‘Variety, equality and freedom are high on the current political agenda, and in a society where art and culture are all too readily commodified, and where the vigilance that liberty demands of us is still necessary, the courage and commitment of Morris’s lifelong endeavour offers a sustaining hope’.

Peter had worked hard to bring together the Society and the Trustees of Kelmscott House, but in 1998 the Kelmscott House Trust decided not to back the proposals from the Joint Working Party on uniting the Society and the Trust. In a letter at the time, Peter wrote sadly: ‘It seems as though every time we think we have dealt with the issue it comes back to haunt us’. However, he was not a person to give up on an idea he believed in, and he supported the moves which led to the termination of the separate existence of the Trust. These were controversial matters, and it is more pleasant to record that in November 2003 Peter brought together a number of his interests in the Kelmscott Lecture, published in 2007 as Dreaming London: the Future City in Morris and Others. Again, Peter sees Morris as a source of sustaining hope: ‘For us, reading News from Nowhere, a century after its composition and at least a century before it is set, that hope should be sustaining, for our children and their children and all the generations to come’. He had become Chair of the Society in 2005, serving in that capacity until 2008, and strongly supported our near-neighbours, the Emery Walker Trust; it is good
to be able to record that the Trust is endowing a three-year course of lectures in Peter’s memory. A man who enjoyed playing an active role, he was Chair again from 2009 to 2011, when he was succeeded by Ruth Levitas. He presided over the AGM in May, so that it members were shocked indeed to hear of his death from pancreatic cancer only five months after that event. As Martin Crick has shown in his recent History of the Society, it has been fortunate in the quality of those who have come forward to lead it throughout the fifty years of its existence. Of these leaders, Peter Preston was one of the most vigorous and purposive, and he will be much missed. At the memorial service in Nottingham celebrating his life, those present were delighted to hear that Peter was famous for comic songs and in particular singing the ‘Lonely Pterodactyl’ to his children. If we cannot have the pleasure of listening to that performance, we can still hear his voice in his many publications, and I conclude with a list of these in recognition of his scholarly range and to encourage members to seek them out and be reminded of a remarkable and wide-ranging scholar:

1989 co-editor of D.H. Lawrence in the Modern World, Macmillan
1993 co-editor, The Literature of Place, Macmillan
1993 co-editor, Raymond Williams: Education, Politics and Letters, St. Martin’s Press
1994 co-editor, Writing the City, Routledge
1994 A D.H. Lawrence Chronology, St. Martin’s Press
1995 Introduction and Notes to the Wordsworth Classics edition of Dickens, The Old Curiosity Shop
1995 co-editor Literature in Adult Education: Reflections on Practice, Department of Adult Education, Nottingham University
1996 Introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of Lawrence, Mr Noon
1997 editor, Everyman edition of Arnold Bennett Anna of the Five Towns
1999 co-editor, William Morris Centenary Essays, University of Exeter Press.
2000 Introduction and Notes to The Voyage and Other Stories by Katherine Mansfield, Naples, Loffredo Editore
2002 Introduction and Notes to the Wordsworth Classics edition of Dickens, Little Dorrit

Peter was also the author of numerous scholarly articles, particularly in The Journal of the D.H. Lawrence Society and Etudes lawrenciennes.
A William Morris letter

Peter Faulkner


The letter (Figures 1–2) is written on two sides of a single folded sheet of Morris’s Kelmscott House writing paper, as was common at the time; the address is printed in small capitals on the top right-hand side of the first page. Morris provides a date in November, but no indication of the year, although it clearly belongs to a period of political activism, probably the late 1880s, possibly 1886. Gaps have been left in the text below in order to indicate the four pages of the letter.

I am not at present able to specify the year, and I hope that members will be able to do so in view of the historical references in the letter; please send suggestions to reviews@williammorrissociety.org.uk.

KELMSCOTT HOUSE,
UPPER MALL,
HAMMERSMITH.
Nov: 24

Dear Sir

I am engaged on 13th Dec: (and on all Mondays) This is of less importance, as I don’t think I could have been of much use at the conference, as my only suggestion would be to rescind the rule about out.o.door relief and grant it freely: not of course under with the view that this would bring about a good state of things if it were permanent, or even that our present system of society can be looked upon as stable, but as a measure tending towards revolution. I ought also to mention that I do not believe in the State, as at present constituted,
Figure 1 – Pages 4 and 5 of facsimile of letter. (See text for explanation.)
of things if it were permanent, or even that our present system of society can be looked upon as stable, but as a measure tending towards revolution. I ought also to mention that I do not believe in the state, nor in a present constitution, doing away a system of production & exchange.

At the same time though I am sure that the government cannot do anything here, the existing evils as regards employment being at the root of the things which these people are agitating for in favour of the unemployed are pressing on them, and though if they could be adopted by the government I doubt their being so popular as to be acceptable to the constituencies.
doing even being able to do anything even to palliate the existing evils as regards employment. Because it is necessary to the present system of production & exchange that there should be a mass of workmen out of employment;

and it is the only real function of government at present to sustain this system at any cost. The purpose of any constitutional government in dealing with such matters as this of the Unemployed is to draw the attention of people from the artificial famine produced by our system of production & exchange.

At the same time though I am sure that the Government cannot do any one of the things which those (such as the SPE) who are agitating for in favour of the unemployed are pressing on them and though if they could be adopted by the government I doubt their permanent utility, I yet think that the agitators are doing good service in showing the impotence of our rulers and the approaching bankruptcy of our sham society.

You can make any use of this letter you please.

I am

Dear Sir

Yours faithfully

William Morris

NOTES

1. out.o.door - out-of-door relief was that provided for the poor in Britain without the demand that they should stay in a workhouse, which provided ‘indoor relief’ after the introduction of the New Poor Law in 1834. Henry Fawcett in his Political Economy in 1876 argued that ‘Out-of-door relief ought to be greatly restricted’. (OED)

2. a caret is used here to insert the word ‘only’

3. a caret is used here to insert the material in brackets, evidently the initial letters of the organization referred to; unfortunately the first two cramped initials indicating the name of the organization are hard to decipher; suggestions for the name would be welcome.
Morris and Devon Great Consols

Florence S. Boos & Patrick O’Sullivan

Most Morris enthusiasts know that he came from a very well-off family, a major source of whose wealth was the Devon Great Consols mine, about three miles (5 km) west of Tavistock, Devon (Figure 1). Biographers have told us much about Morris’s early life, family, friends, marriage, work, colleagues, writings, designs, comrades and political activities, but most of the information on the origins of his family fortune can be found in two books, and a few articles. Morris was, of course (from 1855 to 1877), a shareholder in the mine, and for a shorter period (1871–1875) a member of its Board of Directors, just before his interests turned, almost for the first time in his life, to politics. An interesting question, therefore, and one which biographers have not really addressed, is ‘What, if any, was the impact of Morris’s association with Devon Great Consols on the development of his political ideas?’ What we therefore propose is to examine the history of the mine before, during and following Morris’s directorship, in the search for ideas and episodes which may have influenced his political thinking, and then to discuss key aspects of his writings which may (or may not) help us evaluate our case.

One problem with this approach is that Morris was not a particularly vocal member of the Board, and only made direct written reference to it in a few of his letters. The beginning of Morris’s relationship with Devon Great Consols predates his own acquisition of shares, in that his father, William Morris senior, was a founder shareholder of the mine: following his father’s early death in 1847, his mother (Emma Shelton Morris), relied heavily on the family interest in the mine in order to maintain her own standard of living and that of her children. And even after Morris resigned his directorship in 1875, his uncle Thomas Morris continued to act until 1879 as ‘Resident Director’ (see below), and his brother Stanley remained a director until 1890, by which time the mine was almost moribund.

And of course, his other siblings also owned shares in Devon Great Consols, given to them on their maturity – like his own – by their mother, and Emma Shelton Morris remained a shareholder in the mine until her death in 1894.
Therefore, although Morris terminated his formal relationship with Devon Great Consols during the mid 1870s, his family relationships surely meant that he could scarcely have missed hearing about events at the mine, and in particular the prolonged period of industrial unrest which broke out soon after he resigned from the Board. How and whether any of this experience influenced the development of his political ideas, is the subject of our article.

I THE RISE AND FALL OF DEVON GREAT CONSOLS

Work at Devon Great Consols began in March 1844, when the noted mining engineer Josiah Hitchens obtained a licence from ‘the Lord of the Soil’, the seventh Duke of Bedford, to prospect for copper. The original lease was for twenty one years, at 1/15th royalties, rising to 1/12th when annual profits reached £20,000, which they soon did. Operations began during August, and in November, the main lode was struck at Wheal Maria at the western end of the site (Figure 2). It was soon clear that here was the largest copper sulphide (chalcopyrite, CuFeS2) lode ever discovered in Southwest England, and very rich – the ore being 17% copper. Other workings were then established eastward, culminating in Wheal Emma, opened in 1848.

A total of 1024 shares was issued in May 1844, at £1 each. The original shareholders were Hitchens (144 shares), Richard Gard, a partner in the same stock broking firm as Morris’s father (288), the brothers William (W.A.) and John Thomas (144 each), Thomas Morris, uncle of William Morris (32 shares), and William Morris senior (272). The original directors were Gard, Hitchens and W.A. Thomas, with Thomas Morris appointed in May 1845 as ‘Resident Director’, with overall responsibility for day-to-day operations. In May 1846, the mine was reconstituted as the joint stock Devonshire Great Consolidated Copper Mining Company (hence ‘Devon Great Consols’), and John Thomas and William Morris senior added to the Board. Besides share income, directors received an annual fee of 100 guineas (£105; ca £5,400 in modern terms).

For the next twenty years, Devon Great Consols remained the largest copper supplier in Europe. Between 1861 and 1870, it produced 142,000 tons (ca 130,000 t) of an estimated global production of 900,000 tons (ca 820,000 t) of copper.

Figure 1 – Devon Great Consols today from the main Gunnislake-Tavistock road. Spoil heap from Wheal Anna Maria right middle ground. (Photograph copyright Brendan O’Sullivan).
During the height of its prosperity (1855–1856), some 20–30,000 tons (18–27,000 t) of ore was raised per year, generating annual receipts of £100–160,000 (£4.5–9.5 million). By 1865, the mine had paid its original shareholders more than £920 (ca £47,000) for every original £1 share; during the same period the Duke of Bedford, in true Ricardoan fashion, collected more than £210,000 (ca £10.8 million) in royalties.

At its peak, more than 6,000 jobs in the Tavistock/Caradon district of West Devon and East Cornwall depended on Devon Great Consols: the mine generated annual expenditure of some £50,000 (£2–3 million), as well as £1200 (£52–55,000) in local rates and taxes, and by 1864, it directly employed 1230 workers. Miners received £3 12s (ca £160) and surface workers £3 5s (£145) per month, while ‘bal-maidens’ – young women who broke up the raw ore at the surface – were paid 1s–1s 3d (£2.20–£2.75) per day, and child workers (271 boys, 161 girls), some as young as eight, 4d to 8d (75p–£1.50). Engineers designed and constructed lathes, sawmills, water-wheels, railways, an on-site foundry, hauling-, punching- and cutting-machines, complex platforms to support shaft interiors, and elaborate systems of ovens, pipes and baths for refining copper (and later arsenic, see below). In 1857, the company’s lease was renewed, and a railway built from the mine to the port of Morwellham some 4½ miles (7.2 km) to the south, a measure which considerably reduced the cost of transporting ore to the River Tamar from 5s (£11) to 1s per ton.

By the later 1860s, however, the copper began to be worked out, world prices fell with development of new sources overseas, and the mine began to lose profitability. But the lodes, as at many other Southwest mines, were lined with ‘mispickel’ (arsenopyrite [arsenic sulphide]; FeAsS), which until then had been left in situ, and in 1866–8 it was decided that while copper would still be extracted, production at the mine would begin to switch mainly to arsenic, at that time used very widely indeed in pesticides, dyes, glass, paints, enamels, textiles and wallpapers. The ore was roasted (‘calcined’) on site, and condensed at the top end of flues, a two-stage process producing the white crystalline powder arsenic trioxide (‘white arsenic’; $\text{As}_2\text{O}_3$). Conditions for surface workers who shovelled these crystals out of the condensers were primitive; mouth-masks and hessian sacking which covered their ears, feet and ankles were all the protection available to most of them. By 1870, Devon Great Consols was already supplying half the world’s arsenic, eventually yielding some 72,279 tons (66,708 t). Annual output overtook copper production by about 1880, and peaked during the 1880s at ca

Figure 2 – Site map of Devon Great Consols, from Goodridge, p. 230 (see Note 2). Reproduced with the permission of the Devonshire Association.
3200–3300 tons (ca 3000 t), with highest annual receipts reaching some £26,000 (£1.25–1.5 million).\(^7\)

From this time, however, the mine went into decline. By 1872, with a few exceptions, it had ceased to earn a dividend, and in 1873 the ninth Duke was asked to forgo his dues (he refused). Instead, he favoured expansion; at his stipulation a new lease was granted to explore for tin, widely believed to lie, as at many mines farther west, beneath the copper – first at Wheal Josiah, then at Wheal Emma. In order to raise funds, Devon Great Consols was reorganised in 1872 as a public liability company with 10240 £1 ‘new’ shares, ten times the original number.\(^8\) However, no great quantities of tin were found, and by 1888 the search was abandoned. By 1880, the mine was losing £5,000 (ca £240,000) per year, although it is interesting to note that, on the strength of two good years (1880–1881), the directors raised their annual fees from 100 guineas (by then ca £5,000) to 500 (ca £25,000).\(^9\)

In 1885 the Duke finally agreed to forgo his dues, provided no dividend was paid. In 1899, the last of these, on a £1 share, was £2s 6d (£7.13). During 1900–1903, work ceased, the mine closed, and its equipment and other fixtures were sold. By then, Devon Great Consols had paid out some £1,225,216 (£5.5 million) in dividends, more than £119 (ca £5300) per original share. The land reverted to the eleventh Duke, who ordered the site cleared and restored; hence few traces of the original Devon Great Consols now exist. Several attempts were made during the twentieth century to reactivate the mine, but with very limited success. According to Frank Booker, some 2,000 t of recoverable minerals lie beneath its surface, and there are indeed romantic exploration geologists who still believe that workable deposits of tin exist somewhere below the abandoned workings.

#### II Working Conditions, Industrial Relations

Devon Great Consols considered itself a model employer. Especially during the prosperous years (1844–1864), its directors tried to maintain the appearance of benign treatment of their workers. They employed a resident doctor, provided baths, heated changing and drying rooms – highly necessary in the wet conditions underground – lockers in which to keep dry clothes, hot water for tea and coffee, ovens supervised by surface workers to heat meals, and warm rooms in which to take them. They also hired a schoolteacher for the younger children—as the Factory Acts of 1833 required—although parents were charged ‘a small fee’.\(^{10}\) In 1859 – a year in which the total dividend from the mine was £45,056 (ca £1.95 million), or £43 (£1856) per share – they paid out 100 guineas (£105, ca £4500; later reduced to 20 guineas, £21 or ca £900) for the children’s elementary education.\(^{11}\)
Once employees began to earn more than 8d (£1.50) per day, they were charged up to 1s 6d (ca £3.25) per month on a sliding scale for medical care, and 4s (ca £8.65) per month if they actually fell ill. These charges seem small, but compared to a miner’s monthly wage for 1864 (£13 12s; ca £160) they were not, at least for those required to pay them. Victims of onsite injuries received subsistence of £1 (ca £4.5) per month, and miners were expected to collect for the families of those killed in accidents.

The directors also encouraged what they regarded as the virtues of temperance and abstinence. Boys and girls were kept separate at meal times, and — surely a rarity for those days, except in coal mines and munitions factories — the mine was a complete no-smoking area. Seven hundred copies of British Worker and Band of Hope were sold monthly in and around the mine, and funds were provided to support a brass band, a glee club, and a choir. Apparently, no ‘singer’ ever failed to find a job at Devon Great Consols, and those workers and managers (a minority) who lived at the mine itself formed a tight-knit community.

Within the mine, iron tamping tools for drilling blast holes were forbidden (as they caused sparks), and copper tools used instead; gunpowder was strictly rationed. Despite these measures, ‘as early as March 1846, (the mine) had acquired a reputation for fatalities’. All work below ground was conducted by candlelight; as well as wet, the mine was also, like many in the region, very hot at depths – up to 30º C – although linking shafts (‘winzes’) were used to keep the ‘levels’ ventilated. Most workers did not live at the mine, but in Tavistock or Gunnislake, or in the surrounding villages. Many were therefore required to walk 4–5 miles (6.5–8 km) to work, and of course the same distance home again, often while carrying their exhausted children. Three shifts were originally worked (6 am–2 pm, 2 pm–10 pm, 10 pm–6 am), but later, as prosperity declined, the night-time shift was abandoned.

Levels were connected by near vertical ladders, and at the end of their shift, it often took men an hour to climb back to the surface. Not everyone worked in the deepest parts of the mine, of course, but those who did faced a near-vertical climb from the bottom (e.g. of Wheal Joseph) of ca 225 fathoms (ca 405 m). Up to one third of miners’ total daily energy conversion was therefore often expended on going to and returning from work. Even so, younger men considered it a matter of honour to make the entire climb without once pausing for breath. Later, two examples of the fearsome ‘man engine’ — on which men rode up and down the rods used to transmit power from the surface to the pumps below, jumping by candlelight from the ‘up’ rod to the ‘down’ — were installed, at Wheal Josiah (664 feet; 200m), and Wheal Emma (1140 feet; 340 m). Conditions for surface workers were scarcely better. ‘Bal-maidens’ spent most of their time breaking rocks of ore into fragments small enough to go to the crusher, and ‘pickers’, surface workers who separated the crushed ore from the waste, worked their entire shift kneeling
on tables in order to perform their task. As they were on piecework (see below), miners were charged for blasting powder, candles, and the use of crushing and separating equipment.

Industrial relations at the mine during the early, expansionist years were, however, generally quiescent, although in 1850, two hundred ‘pickers’ (mostly young people) staged a one-day strike in order to protest against reduction of wages. They were all instantly dismissed, although re-engaged the following day, at even lower rates. By 1865, with mining becoming less profitable, and food prices rising, the miners of the Caradon (East Cornwall) district, many of whom worked at Devon Great Consols, formed a Miners’ Mutual Benevolent Association (MMBA) which drew up draft rules regarding wages, and proposed establishment of wages committees for each mine, to settle disputes over wage fixing.

Despite figures widely quoted, precise historical wage rates at Devon Great Consols, as well as at other mines in the Southwest, are difficult to assess, mainly because of the methods of allocating work. Of these, the simpler was ‘tutwork’, whereby pairs of experienced miners – who then took on extra men as partners – agreed to work a certain section of lode – a ‘pitch’ – at a fixed price per fathom (see Note 15), according to the nature of the ground, and always for two months. A more complex method was ‘tribute’, where rather than a fixed price per fathom, miners were paid a percentage of the royalty received on each ton of ore. Thus ‘tribute’ wages fluctuated both with the price of copper, and the quality of the ore, as well as factors affecting ‘tutwork’.

Both methods therefore involved piecework, and both were speculative, ‘tribute’ the more so. On the bimonthly ‘Setting Day’, always a Saturday, miners gathered at the mine, and the Clerk described each pitch in turn, stating how many men were needed in order to work each one. An auction then took place, in which ‘pairs’ would bid against each other for the right to work each pitch. Clearly the lowest bid for each pitch won, and so things went on until all were taken.

Thus wages were fixed as a result of competition between the men, and might vary a great deal according to the value of each ‘pitch’, and the ‘bargain’ struck in order to secure it. During the prosperous 1840s, about 130 men were employed at Devon Great Consols annually on ‘tutwork’, and about the same number on ‘tribute’, although the latter number increased later in the decade. Tutwork wages were about £3 (£155) per month, and ‘tribute’ ca £4 6s (£220). By 1864, however, with the decline in quality of the ore, there was very little ‘tribute’. During the 1860s, ‘tutwork’ prices varied between £18 and £22 (£80–£980) per fathom, whereas during the 1850s, the highest ‘tribute’ ever paid was 10s (£2.25) in the £, the lowest 4d (8p).

Miners in Southwest England were therefore essentially self-employed in a speculative occupation, one of the main reasons, it is often argued, why trade unionism has historically never been very strong in that region. One of the min-
ers’ principal grievances was that overseers (‘mine captains’) often let pitches to ‘diluted labour’ – ‘pairs’ consisting either entirely of, or including, men unskilled at mining, such as agricultural labourers. Such ‘diluted’ teams slowed up the work, and also tended to strike lower ‘bargains’. This practice, and low wages generally, were the main grievances the proposed wages committees were designed to address.

However, in March 1866, as soon as the MMBA issued its draft rule book, twenty mine managers in the Tavistock/Caradon area issued a public declaration that they would ‘withhold employment from all persons who shall become members of the society’, on the grounds that it was ‘subverting the authority invested in mine agents and causing irreparable damage to mining enterprise’. The local magistrates reacted hysterically to the prospect of a lock out, calling out 130 police officers, 130 special constables, 150 soldiers from the 66th Regiment stationed at Plymouth, and ‘a body’ of Marines. On Setting Day (3 March 1866) two thousand people – mostly onlookers not miners – assembled at the mine. The Chairman, W.A. Thomas, told them that ‘if you go on this way, (the mine will close)’, and that ‘my friends and I are carrying a number of mines; we are spending money without a farthing of remuneration, and all has gone for your support’: he then sat down amid silence. But of twenty-four pitches auctioned, only four were ‘set’. Thomas then jumped to his feet and delivered ‘a sermon on market forces the like of which was not heard again until the 1980s’, but still no bargains were agreed. The pitches were left open until Monday, while the miners ‘consider(ed) their duty to God, and to their fellow men’.

On learning the employers’ reaction, the miners, somewhat charitably one feels, rewrote their rulebook to omit the contentious clause about wages committees, but the owners maintained that their other objections, to ‘diluted labour’, and to ‘taking pitches from another member’ (i.e. underbidding) were still untenable. They would support formation of a ‘benefit society’ for the assistance of the old, weak or infirm, but no rules which interfered with the working of the mine. Despite support from local clergy, and from the Tavistock Gazette, but probably because of recruitment of blackleg labour from West Cornwall, many MMBA men eventually drifted back to work, although some left the area or even emigrated.

A second major grievance was the ‘five week month’, or the ‘thirteenth pay-day’. In Southwest England, by custom, mine workers were paid ‘monthly’ (i.e. every four weeks), and Setting Day was also pay day; thus there were thirteen pay days per year. Surface workers were paid fixed wages, but as explained, fixing miners’ pay was somewhat more complicated, with ‘bargains’ set on alternate months. During intervening months, miners received ‘subsistence’, based on an estimate of their first month’s earnings, and adjustments were made the following month. From 1844 to 1872, there had been only twelve pay days per year,
four of which therefore took place in ‘five-week’ months, during the last week of which miners, who were, after all, on piecework, believed that they more-or-less worked for nothing.\(^\text{25}\)

In 1872 an extra, thirteenth Setting Day was introduced, a measure which went some way toward reducing the impact of diminishing returns at the mine on wages. However, in 1878, the Board decided to cut costs by reintroducing twelve pay days, a move the workforce interpreted as a thinly disguised pay cut. An immediate withdrawal of labour followed, including 150 workers at Wheal Emma.

Again the strikers received considerable local support, including both that of the Vicar of Tavistock and the Portreeve,\(^\text{26}\) the Duke, and even the now-ailing W.A. Thomas. But a principal figure in this dispute was Peter Watson, who joined the Board in 1877, and became its Chairman in 1880 with the resignation of W.A. Thomas. Unlike most directors of Devon Great Consols, past or present, Watson had first hand, practical experience of running a mine, but unfortunately for the work force, he also possessed an even more uncompromising attitude to disputes. At a Board meeting to discuss the strike, he accused the local clergy of having ‘irritated the people and brought this strike on’.\(^\text{27}\) So when Thomas Morris, the Resident Director, promised the men that there would be no reduction of wages, they stated they were prepared to accept his word, but not that of the ‘London Directors’ – Watson, and Morris’s brother (Hugh) Stanley Morris, who together had restored the ‘five week month’ in the absence of other members of the Board.

This time the strike lasted two months, and was successful, mainly because on this occasion there were no blacklegs available. Watson was adamant that the five week month was ‘an absurd matter’, but eventually was forced to withdraw. However, he contrived a settlement by stating that he would concede on the ‘five week month’ if the men would take a substantial pay cut, from £14 9s (\£35.60) to £13 7s (\£32.80) per month (8%), and also agree, in turn, that the masters alone possessed the right to determine wage rates. When they unwarily agreed, and returned to work, three more reductions followed over the next eighteen months.\(^\text{28}\)

The subsequent history of industrial relations at the mine is of more disputes, wage cuts and arguments among the directors. After \textit{ca} 1880, no one seemed able, or inclined, to raise sufficient funds to upgrade the mine or its facilities (e.g. by introducing electric light). The number of workers at the mine gradually fell, from more than 700 in 1880, to \textit{ca} 400 by 1900.\(^\text{29}\)
Two members of the Morris family – the ‘seasoned risk-takers’ William Morris senior, and his brother Thomas Morris – were among the founder shareholders of Devon Great Consols. From the outset, the Morris family held an approximate 30% stake in the mine – W. Morris senior 272 shares, Thomas Morris thirty two – which it maintained almost until closure. Subsequently, three other members also served on its Board – Morris’s uncle Francis Morris, who took over when William Morris senior died in 1847, Morris himself, a director from 1871 to 1877, and (Hugh) Stanley Morris, his brother, who succeeded him.

After the first full year of operations (1845–6), the original £1 shares were worth £800, and the first annual dividend £7, 622 (ca £920,000) or £71 (ca £8650) per share. Thus within eighteen months of the opening of the mine, William Morris senior had become – by modern standards – a millionaire. When he died his estate – one of the top 1% of those declared intestate that year – was valued at £60,000 (ca £3.5 million). Two thirds of this sum (£40,000, ca £2.3 million) represented his stake in Devon Great Consols.

Nevertheless, Emma Shelton Morris, his widow, needed to liquidate some of these assets in order to pay off her husband’s trading debts. With the loss of his bond-broking income, and his share capital, she was now heavily dependent on Devon Great Consols, and sold twenty two shares in 1850, and forty in 1851, realising ca £20,000 (ca £1.17 million).

Twenty of these shares were sold to her brother-in-law Francis Morris so that he could assume her husband’s seat on the Board. Together with Thomas Morris, the ‘Resident Director’, he advised Emma to retain her remaining shares (ca 200?), which would have brought in a regular annual income during the 1850s and 1860s of ca £51 per share (ca £115,000). These sums would have been redistributed over the years, as she also decided to endow each of her nine children, sons and daughters alike, with thirteen shares at their majority, a generous gift intended to confer independence. By the time she died in 1894, her Devon Great Consols stocks were almost worthless, but the rest of her estate was assessed at over £16,000 (ca £960,000).

Thomas and Francis Morris participated in thirteen other mining ventures between 1847 and 1874, all unsuccessful. As we have seen, during the 1878 strike, Thomas travelled to London to present the miners’ views to the Board, assuring them that their wages would not be cut. He loyally supported their demands, and accused Peter Watson of ‘improper use of proxy votes’, but the shareholders’ ballots went against him. His downfall as Resident Director came a year later, when the ‘London directors’, including his nephew Stanley, reprimanded him for allegedly buying timber without consent, and granting miners a small
number of unauthorised extra holidays. Thus confronted, he declined to seek re-
election and retired. He died nine years later in 1888, leaving a more modest estate
than that of his sister-in-law to his disabled son and four unmarried daughters of
£9,500 (ca £570,000).36

It seems likely that when his uncle Francis resigned in 1871, Morris’s mother
urged him to take the ‘family seat’ on the Board of Devon Great Consols. But
the Board was run more or less autocratically by W. A. Thomas, and the sole
personal record of Morris’s attendance is a series of passages in four letters to his
mother.37 In the first, provisionally dated 11 June [1872?], he reported the Board’s
intention to reconstitute itself as a limited-liability company, multiply its shares
by a factor of ten, and assume liability for a call of £48 per (old) share. He also
reassured her that there was ‘no chance of all this money being called for’, and
added that she could tell his brother Arthur that ‘the price of copper is high and
like to remain so’.

In the second, dated 23 November 1872, he wrote to her neutrally that ‘last
Friday we had the new contract for arsenic, & got a very good price for it’, and in
the third, written on 25 May [1874?], he remarked that he was

… expecting Arthur here this morning to talk about the D. G. C. I don’t know
what may happen at the meeting, but think that nothing will be done: things are
looking a little better there, & the last sale was (comparatively) good as I daresay
you have heard.

Finally, in the fourth letter, dated 27 May 1875, he notified his mother that

I have just come from the DGC meeting & I suppose, ended my business there,
extcept for receiving my 100 pounds which they were once again kind enough to
vote us. Stanley will tell you all about the meeting.

On the whole, these dutiful and rather laconic passages seemed designed
to avoid any serious discussion or confrontation. Morris was also very much
otherwise engaged. During his five year tenure on the Board, he composed Love
Is Enough, illuminated more than two hundred manuscripts, temporarily ceded
Kelmscott to his quondam friend Dante Rossetti, studied old Norse and modern
Icelandic in preparation for his two journeys to Iceland, and managed during
interstices to fulfill his obligations as manager of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner &
Co.

When he became a director in 1871, Morris bought fourteen shares, and one
more in 1872 38—bad investments in monetary terms, for they nullified any
financial advantage he gained from his director’s fees. He sold his last shares
in 1877. After he left his last directors’ meeting in 1875, he reportedly sat on his
obligatory top hat,39 an interesting gesture. It is difficult to imagine him in this
garb in the first place, but contemporary pictures of miners and mine agents bear
witness to the rigidity of a dress code of suits, hats and constricting neckwear as class-stratified marks of respectability. Haberdashery may have been a ‘lesser art,’ but purgation took precedence in the case at hand. Years later, in 1895, Morris converted his inheritance from his mother to art, and at his death in 1896 left his books, his two homes, and his shares in Morris & Co and the Kelmscott Press—but no securities.40

Much has recently been made of Morris’s income from Devon Great Consols, and the ‘fabulous’41 wealth it produced. Charles Harvey & Jon Press, however, give a more sober account, and show that his net income over the twenty-three years during which he held, bought and sold shares (1855–1877) was £8,803 (ca £392,000), or ca £380 (ca £17,000) per annum.42 Thus although Morris was indeed initially made financially secure—his mother’s strategy—by his ownership of Devon Great Consols shares, unlike his father, he did not become a millionaire, although he was, of course, vastly better off than most of his later political comrades. During 1861–2 he sold two of his original thirteen shares—an act for which his family thought him wicked and mad43—but these were bought by his mother and given to his brother Stanley. Later, on becoming a director, as indicated, he bought fifteen ‘old’ shares for £1660 (ca £76,000), but subsequently (1874–77) made a considerable loss, when selling all of his 260 ‘new’ shares (i.e. 26 ‘old’ shares) for £755 (ca £35,000).

Morris’s income from shares declined steadily after 1869, so that what had been a regular financial support during his twenties and early thirties fell quite rapidly over the five years of his late thirties to almost nothing at all. By the mid 1870s, with declining copper prices, imports from abroad, and the failure to find tin, Devon Great Consols no longer provided Morris with reliable income. Partly as a result, in 1875, he took the decision to reorganise ‘the Firm’, from Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co to Morris & Co, under his sole ownership, an episode which biographers describe as ‘saddening and disillusioning’, and which earned the disapproval, and even the enmity of some of his oldest friends.44

After Morris’s resignation, (Hugh) Stanley Morris, the second surviving brother, took over the ‘family seat’45 and held it until 1890, when he too was forced out. He and another director attacked Peter Watson at a shareholders’ meeting, asserting that he had displayed ‘enormous and everlasting egotism’ in his negotiations with the Duke, and chosen to ‘overlook the valuable assistance that he had received in this matter’, and other transactions. The shareholders supported Watson, however, and Stanley was ousted by the man whom he had helped marginalise his own uncle eleven years earlier.46
In this section, we discuss Morris’s experience of Devon Great Consols as a template for his indictment of nineteenth-century capitalism. We argue that our analysis confirms Charles Harvey & Jon Press’s view that

[Morris’s] personal knowledge of Victorian capitalism was one factor which made his critique of modern industrial society so powerful and influential … 47

As indicated, much has been made of the belief that Morris took advantage of the wealth he received from his father’s speculation without any consideration for the workers who produced it, to say nothing of showing any ‘remorse’ for their plight. 48 However, one year before he resigned from the Board of Devon Great Consols (1874) – and one might well write ‘that’ for ‘as if’ – he wrote to Rosamund Howard that

… when I see a poor devil drunk and brutal I always feel, quite apart from my aesthetical perceptions, a sort of shame as if I myself had some hand in it’ [italics added]. 49

Morris’s departure from the Board may also have prompted his hopes – expressed during a period of renewed repression at the mine – that others of his background would join him in his political work:

The middle classes will one day become conscious of the discontent of the proletariat; before that some will have renounced their class and cast in their lot with the working men, influenced by love of justice or insight into facts.

Hinder [such justice], and who knows what violence you may be driven into, even to the renunciation of the morality of which we middle-class men are so proud; advance it, strive single-heartedly that truth may prevail, and what need you fear? At any rate not your own violence, not your own tyranny? 50

and the next year that

... when the mask falls from the face of this huge tyranny of the modern world, and it is shown as an injustice conscious of its own wrong to the honest and just of the upper classes themselves[,] the risks of destruction will seem light compared with the degradation of championing an injustice. Yes[,] I believe that if the intelligent of the working classes and the honourable and generous of the employing class could learn to see the system under which we live as it really is, all the dangers of change would seem nothing to them and our capitalistic society would not be worth 6 months purchase. 51
It also seems quite possible that Morris may have had in mind his Uncle Thomas’s dismissal, and Peter Watson’s attacks on the miners during the disputes of 1878–1879, when he wrote that

… the Trades Unions claimed some share in the increase of the profit of the capitalists; that also had to be yielded, how ungraciously[,] accompanied with what unmanly complaints, what base slander of the workers at the hands of their masters, some of you may forget but I remember … 52

The rise and fall of Devon Great Consols may also almost be read as an allegory of Morris’s view of industrial capitalism as an instrument for the creation of ‘illth’. 53 Again in ‘Socialism,’ for example, he argued that

… [feudal] groups have since the full development of the commercial period been resolved into two great classes, those who possess all the means of production of wealth save one, and those who possess nothing except that one, the power of labour. The first class[,] the rich[,] therefore can compel the latter, or the poor, to sell that power of labour to them on terms which ensure the continuance of the rich class, and therefore properly operating upon the poor class and indeed are called their masters … 54

‘Freedom of contract’ in such contexts has always been hypocrisy, for destitute workers must sell their labour for whatever the market may bring, and

… the [masters] are able nowadays to dispense with the exercise of visible force in compelling them to work which in earlier days of the world masters used towards their slaves. 55

Mineral wealth, in his view, was an especially exploitative as well as extractive case. Not only did it stoke addictive, thinly-disguised get-rich-quick fantasies, but also provided a windfall for landowners such as the Duke of Bedford, when

… the earth beneath the surface is found out to be rich in mineral and [the landowner] is paid enormous sums for leave and license to labour them into marketable wares. And all the while in each case he has been sitting still doing nothing, or it may be worse than nothing. 56

Morris also condemned not only the payment of subsistence wages and ‘employment … of women and children of whom it is not even pretended that a subsistence wage is given’, but

… an elaborate system of cooperative organization [which] has gone along with the invention of the machines: the increased wealth so produced has notoriously not gone to the labourer but has enriched the classes who live upon his labour … the upper classes can now with a cheap generosity afford to declare all classes
equal before the law; … a sham equality I say, so long as men have not economi-
cal equality … 57

He also evoked the mine’s everyday practices in his description of how workers
must

… pay to a benefit society or a trade union a tax for the precariousness of his
employment brought about by the gambling of his masters, he has to help them
to pay their poor rates and thus actually enables the master to shut his factory
gates on him when there is an open trades dispute between employers and
employed; since otherwise the master would be taxed for his subsistence in the
workhouse. 58

As for diligent managers, most of these are more destructive than the idle rich
they serve:

[Y]ou will say[,] do not the masters[,] or what you call the possessing class[,] work? Undoubtedly a large part of them do work, but for the most part their
work is unfruitful or sometimes directly harmful … [apart from those engaged in
a few useful occupations] the rest are engaged in gambling or fighting for their
individual shares of the tribute which their class has compelled the working class
to yield to it; they are never producing wealth[,] hard as they may work.
… mostly he does seem to be doing something and receives his pompous title of
an ‘organizer of labour,’ but what he does even then is nothing but organizing the
battles with his enemies[,] the other capitalists who happen to be in the same way
of business as himself, and so both his idleness and his industry do but serve to
make life hard and anxious for all of us.59

Particularly repellent were members of the master-class who styled themselves
providers of opportunity:

… the rich and well-to-do, the usurpers of property[,] … mostly protest loudly
that they are friends of the workers and wish them well, and that they dread a
change in the basis of society quite as much in the interest of the workers as in
their own interests … I have been almost forced to believe in the genuineness of such
professions as far as individuals are concerned: I have talked with people who, at
least for the moment, believed that it was not only good and right in the abstract
for the mass of mankind to be overworked & underpaid[,] to dread starvation
daily, to be forced to have neither education or leisure or pleasure or hope, that it
was not only good for the universe, but good for the slavelings themselves, and
that the wise among them see it to be good, the ignorant among them feel it to be
so, and that they have nothing to gain & everything to lose by any possible
change in the basis of society.60
More poignant echoes of the doomed strikes at Devon Great Consols may also be read in Morris’s elegiac comments regarding the fate of trades unions (‘some of you may forget but I remember’). Confronted with the bleak alternative of ‘my way or the highway’, he wrote that

… they can no longer be considered as fighting bodies … chiefly I believe because the issue has been changed since the time when they were most vigorously at strife with the masters: the Trade Unions claimed a mere rise of wages when the selling price of the article they made rose, admitting the necessity of their accepting lower wages when it fell … the real question now is whether the masters have any claim to profits at all.61

The 1866 strike, over ‘diluted labour’, represented a significant defeat for the unions in the Caradon district, and while the ‘five week month’ strike of 1878 was initially hailed as a victory, the outcome for the miners soon turned sour as successive wage reductions followed.

At their worst, Trades Unions could become a force for reaction:

[The class struggle in England is entering into a new phase, which may even make the once dreaded Trades Unions allies of capital, since they in their turn form a kind of privileged group among the workmen: in fact they now no longer represent the whole class of workers as working men but rather are charged with the office of keeping the human part of the capitalists’ machinery in good working order and freeing it from any grit of discontent.62

Similar spectres of cooptation underlay Morris’s sceptical refusal to accept the bona fides of any ‘reform’ not predicated on the basic assumption of equal rights for all participants. In another, later essay he did permit himself a countervailing hope that such limited organisations might be replaced by something broader, more autonomous and more egalitarian:

… this older form of limited trades-unionism is, I firmly believe, now in process of transformation into a new unlimited combination of the workers from which everything may be hoped. I must refer you to the International Congress just ended in London as a very encouraging sign of the times: for … at that Congress there was a general recognition of the fact of that unhappy struggle of the classes which is the inevitable result of inequality[,] and which it is our business to bring to an end.63

He also reminded listeners that the same employers who condemned unions for their alleged coercion had established protection rackets – ‘cartels’ – of their own. One of these, the ‘Association of Smelters,’ organised Devon and Cornwall mining companies throughout the mid-nineteenth century in order to fix wages and set prices ‘in restraint of trade’.64
Competition is getting so fierce among the privileged that they are reducing profits to a minimum, ... nay to such a pitch is this getting that as you know, the last new discovery of commercialism is an elaborate scheme for shutting down the safety-valve and sitting on the boiler [i.e. the hope of gain through competition]. The rings and trusts which are now being elaborated ... indicate the decrepitude of Competition and are a forecast of its fall ...65

In passages such as these, Morris expressed his conviction that the pyramid-scheme of capitalist waste will consume the wealth it pretends to create in a technologically accelerated Hobbesian war of 'all against all,' and he saw signs of this 'commercial war' in imperial Britain's frenetic trade cycles, and its searches for cheaper labour and new markets. And in its abuse of its workers, the constant searches for new foreign markets, its dependence on fickle and costly cycles of trade, and its failure to offer steady employment, the history of Devon Great Consols provided miniatures of all these phenomena. Moreover, by defeating their workers' attempts to better their conditions, the directors of Devon Great Consols, and other mines, contributed partly to their own downfall, as the most highly skilled miners left the district, many of them to work in competing mines abroad.

[And then] there are the unemployed. Nothing has been done for them in the mass, and nothing will be done for them, because nothing can be done while the present system lasts.

The captains of industry[,] like other captains cannot always keep their armies on the highest war footing, and at times are obliged to disband a great many of their men, as too many people know practically at the present moment.66

Appalled by all this, Morris convinced himself, as did almost every principled nineteenth-century socialist, that capitalism was doomed to self-destroy:

Cut-throat competition, ever cheapening means of production, and exhausting markets on one hand; on the other, the unceasing struggle of the workers to improve their condition at the expense of the capitalists, will make employment for profit more difficult both to get and to give; will, in fact, bring about deadlock and ruin in spite of occasional improvements in trade. But if the workers have learned to understand their positions ... that very increase in the productivity of labour, which will ruin capitalism, will make Socialism possible.67

Grimmest of all for Morris was the grotesque maw of 'overproduction' in the midst of scarcity, and its last recourse to the most insatiable 'market' of all: war.
... trade is said to be suffering depression caused by over-production: over-production of what? Of wealth? … What! You have created too much wealth? You cannot give away the overplus; nay you cannot even carry it out into the fields and burn it there and go back again merrily to make some more of what you don’t want; but you must actually pick a sham quarrel with other people and slay 100,000 men to get rid of wares which when rid of you are still intent on producing with as much ardour as heretofore: O lame and impotent conclusion of that Manchester school which has filled the world with the praises of its inventiveness, its energy …

Like most of his comrades in the Socialist League, Morris—who entered active political life as part of an antiwar movement—would have been stunned to see how quickly professions of ‘internationalism’ and ‘working-class solidarity’ crumbled to dust during the late summer of 1914. But what if ‘military Keynesianism’ and ‘military-industrial complexes’ had not become part of our vocabulary, but minerals were nonetheless part of our everyday technological life? What might Morris have thought of a hypothetical ‘Devon Great Peoples’ Mine’, say, organised on socialist, or at least social-democratic principles? Morris, in the end, unlike most of his comrades, would have none of it.

Now, as to occupations, we shall clearly not be able to have the same division of labour in them as now … we shall either make all these occupations agreeable to ourselves in some mood or to some minds, who will take to them voluntarily, or we shall have to let them lapse altogether.

Why did he embrace this apparently ‘Luddite’ view? ‘Some minds, who take to [technological intricacies] voluntarily’ may consider this aspect of his socialism naive, but he was not politically naive. Part of his lifelong passion for all things green and natural (literally, politically and metaphorically) was deeply embedded in his temperament. But part of it derived from his desire to distance himself from the managerial class of his origins and the military and technological advancements they hoped would make them rich. Consider, for example, the following passage:

… how is it with the professional classes? The noble class of hangers-on to which I myself belong? Here at any rate I am at home, and I think I can tell you something about them. … here I stand before you, one of the most fortunate of this happy class, so steeped in discontent, that I have no words which will express it: no words, nothing but deeds, wherever they may lead me to, even [if] it be ruin, prison, or a violent death. … I can only say we are driven by discontent and unhappiness into a longing for revolution: that we are oppressed by the
consciousness of the class of toiling slaves below us, that we despise the class of idle slave-owners above us.\textsuperscript{70}

Morris’s intermittent involvement with Devon Great Consols brought him into direct contact with the exploitive origins of ‘technological advancements,’ as well as the free-riders, pyramid-schemers and market-cornerers who hoped to ‘make a killing’ from them. Repelled by what he had seen, and inspired by an antiwar movement and ‘the beauty of the earth,’ he decided (so to speak) to throw away the ring, and embrace the shire.

V CONCLUSIONS

Throughout his life, William Morris encountered less starkly destructive manifestations of the class-divide than Devon Great Consols. During his darkest moments, his own work for Morris & Co. seemed to cater to ‘the swinish luxuries of the rich’.\textsuperscript{71} And that for the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings brought him into contact with well-off people who wanted to tear down their ancestors’ work in the name of Victorian progress.

But crassness and heedlessness are one thing, and gross exploitation another. It would have been possible for a nineteenth-century artist with no direct experience of large-scale venture capitalism to see through the exponentially multiplying theft of surplus profit, the avidity and general uselessness of corporate directors, the destructiveness of economic cycles of scarcity, overproduction and depletion, and the resemblance between economic activity and thinly disguised class-warfare, and its all-too-real extensions by other means. It might have been possible to understand all this without first-hand experience, but the latter certainly helped. Among major British socialists, only Friedrich Engels possessed more first-hand experience of a large-scale capitalist enterprise than Morris, and his role as a partner in the firm of Ermen & Engels seems to have involved no active resistance to the company’s labor practices.\textsuperscript{72}

It would of course have clarified matters had Morris at some point written something such as the following (say, in a letter to Georgiana Burne-Jones):

Although I felt distaste for my family’s mining enterprises, it took me years to work out why, or rather to understand what I could do to attempt to remedy society’s monstrous organization ‘for the misery of life’. Within my lights I tried to be a dutiful family member, and behave cordially toward Stanley, Arthur, my mother, Uncle Thomas and others. But it seemed an effort when I could not feel any kinship with their habits of thought and life; my friends and immediate family were all to me, and those with whom I have shared my love of art.
Morris, one of the more candid figures in the history of British literature, left no such statement. But it seems reasonable to conjecture that his experiences at Devon Great Consols reinforced, if they did not create, his evolution from a hopeful ‘advanced’ Liberal to a committed socialist, utopian communist, and even pioneer environmentalist.

Thus in *News from Nowhere*, he wrote that

... whatever coal or mineral we need is brought to grass (*sic*) and sent whither it is needed with as little as possible of dirt, confusion, and the distressing of quiet people’s lives. One is tempted to believe from what one has read of the condition of those districts in the nineteenth century, that those who had them under their power worried, befouled, and degraded men out of malice prepense: but it was not so; like the miseducation of which we were talking just now, it came of their dreadful poverty. They were obliged to put up with everything, and even pretend that they liked it; whereas we can now deal with things reasonably, and refuse to be saddled with what we do not want.73

This passage does not read all that differently from a description of the mine from 1860

… the surface of Devon Great Consols is, considering the extent of the mines, but little disfigured with burrows, and does not show those peculiar features of mining desolation characteristic of the great mines … The work and buildings are in many places closely surrounded by thick woods … At Wheal Maria, one would never suspect from the surface that it had [until very recently] been one of the most productive mines in the West.74

Apart from the mysterious ‘force barges’ sailing silently up the Thames, power in Nowhere is supplied by human labour, horses, wind, or water. Steam engines are not mentioned, and were in any case anathema to Morris.75 There were six of these at the mine, but thirty-three water wheels, so that ‘probably no other mine of its complexity made (such) efficient use of water (power) … as did Devon Great Consols’.76

At the end of ‘The Society of the Future,’ Morris reflected that

[o]ne reason which will make some of you think [my visions] strange is a sad and shameful one. I have always belonged to the well-to-do-classes, and was born into luxury, so that necessarily I ask much more of the future than many of you do; and the first of all my visions, and that which colours all my others, is of a day when that misunderstanding will no longer be possible; when the words poor and rich, though they will still be found in our dictionaries, will have lost their old meaning.77

William Morris’s abilities to acknowledge, reflect on, and act to resolve the con-
Tradictions of his life and those of the society in which he lived evoked one of nineteenth-century Britain’s most wide-ranging attacks on the assumptions of market capitalism. But they also enabled him to understand and reconcile the potential inconsistencies of a principled private life.

Notes

1. This article is based on a talk with the same title given at Kelmscott House on 26 November 2011. We thank the William Morris Society for the opportunity to rehearse our ideas in public. Sections on Devon Great Consols are chiefly by PO’S, and those on Morris’s socialism mainly by FSB.


3. Individual mines were named using the Cornish generic ‘Wheal’ (English, shaft), and a specific denoting members of the Board, their families, or the Duke’s. Thus Wheal Maria (Figure 2) was named for Maria Hitchens, wife of Joseph, Wheal Fanny for Fanny their daughter, Wheal Ana Maria for the 7th Duchess of Bedford, Wheal Josiah for Hitchens himself, and Wheal Emma for Emma Shelton Morris, wife of William Morris senior, and mother of William Morris.
5. What these sums amount to in modern (2005) money may be assessed using the UK National Archives Currency Convertor (http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency/), as last consulted February 2012. Modern equivalents to nineteenth century money are from now on shown in italic font.
7. In 1893, 3966 tons (3600 t) were sold for £41372 (ca £2.5 million); Roger Burt, Peter Waite & Raymond Burnley, *Devon and Somerset Mines. Metalliferous and associated minerals, 1845–1913*, Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1984, p. 41. (Afterwards Burt)
8. Hence the reason why, in accounts of Morris’s holding in the company (e.g. Harvey & Press, *Design*, p. 24), in 1872 his shares increase ten times in number.
9. Clearly the tendency for boards of directors to award themselves fee increases (i.e. bonuses!) on the basis of indifferent performance is not new.
10. No one seems to give the actual figure.
11. According to Thomas Morris, twenty guineas were now allocated to the school and ten to the dispensary; *Mining Journal*, May 1874, p. 594.
12. Booker, p. 158.
15. Booker, p. 159; Goodridge, p. 246. One imperial fathom equals six imperial feet, two imperial yards, or 1.8288 m.
20. Murchison, Anon. 1864. Consequently there was considerable inequality between the shareholders of the mine and those who worked to produce their wealth. During the late 1840s, the average annual dividend per share in Devon Great Consols was £35 (ca £2200), whereas wages for ‘tutworkers’ were £38 per annum (ca £2000), and for ‘tribute’ £50 (ca £2700). Thus the annual wage for ‘tutwork’ for a miner (and his family) paid slightly less than a single share, but ‘tribute’, in these more prosperous years, 1.25 times as much. However, the ‘pickers’ who went on strike against reduced wages in 1850 earned only £30 per year (ca £1500), or 72% of the average annual dividend per share. These last figures also applied only to men – women’s wage rates for the same work were 50% of male wages (Murchison, p. 506). In 1856, the annual dividend was £58 per share (ca £2500), whereas miners’ wages for that year were £40 (ca £2000). For 1865, the equivalent values are £62 per share (ca £2140), and ‘underground’ wages of £43 per annum (ca £1900). Children’s wages were extremely low; for the youngest only 4d per day, or just over £5 per annum (ca £226), rising to 18 3d per day, or £20 per year (ca £850). These sums are equivalent to only 11–40% of the annual dividend per single share at that time (Goodridge 1964 ['tutwork' and tribute are not separated in these data]; Anon. 1864). Later, of course, the mine ceased to pay a dividend, but these data are surely confirmation that during the ‘good’ years, despite the paternalist attitude of the Board, the rewards for shareholding, and for the hard, physical, dangerous work of mining, were highly disproportionate. Small wonder then that many miners’ families in the Southwest were too poor to buy flour or meat, and lived off potatoes and salted pilchards (Proctor, p. 596).
21. Murchison; Booker, p. 166.
22. Woodcock, p. 58. More or less the same reason that the UK government is currently refusing to involve employees in setting managerial salaries and bonuses.
23. Booker, p. 160; Woodcock, p. 60. Perhaps when mentioning his lack of remuneration, Mr Thomas forgot that the previous year, the mine had paid its fourth highest dividend ever (£63488, or ca £60 [ca £2666] per share), so that he may actually have received ca £8640 (£384,000) from that source for that year alone, to say nothing of the total income received during his entire directorship (1844–ca 1880).
24. January, March and May. Pay days therefore occurred in February, April and June; Woodcock, p. 62.

25. Arithmetically, they may not have lost money, but work was often arranged so that earnings for a five week month were no greater than those for four weeks. No one seems to mention that miners’ families, who also had to wait an extra week for their money four times per year, may not have liked the ‘inconvenience and distress’ of this system either (Goodridge, p. 248).

26. The returning officer for elections.

27. Woodcock, p. 65.

28. Ibid.


35. Woodcock, p. 65.

36. Latham, pp. 44–45.


38. Harvey & Press, Design, p. 24. It was required ex officio that Board members be shareholders.


41. Meharg, Venomous Earth, p. 135.

42. Harvey & Press, Design, Table 1, p. 24.

43. Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, 31 May 1896, My Diaries. A personal narrative of


45. Stanley Morris, born 1837, was a gentleman farmer who raised Jersey and Guernsey cattle near Southampton and speculated in other mining ventures. (Harvey & Press, ‘City’, p. 12) He was the only brother interviewed by J.W. Mackail for The Life of William Morris (London: Longmans Green & Co, 1899, 2 vols, Afterwards Mackail, Life), and later recalled that William ‘knew the names of birds’ as well as plants and trees, and was familiar with Gerard’s Herbal. The two boys had fished, boated, skated and shot redwings and field-fares (Mackail, notebooks WMG 54.4.5, vol. I, 1844, 1847), and that William ‘[n]ever spoke of any unhappiness of his boyhood’.

46. Mining Journal, 29 November 1890; Goodridge, p. 258. As indicated, Mackail interviewed only Emma, Henrietta, and Stanley for his Life, and little is otherwise known about Morris’s interactions with his brothers and sisters. Dorothy Coles and Janet Grierson have studied his relations with his older sisters Emma Oldham and Isabella Gilmore, and his youngest brother Edgar worked for him at Merton Abbey, but no extant documents tell us anything about his relations with his youngest sister Alice Gill, or his younger brothers Thomas, an officer in the Gordon Highlanders, and Arthur, a colonel in the 60th Royal Rifles (Coles; Janet Grierson, Isabella Gilmore: Sister to William Morris, London: SPCK, 1962, 243 pp.). In a letter of 23 November 1877 to Jane Morris, then in Europe, Morris wrote that ‘There is a letter for you, Janey dear, from Alice apparently; I will send it on next writing’ (Kelvin, vol. I, p. 413) which Kelvin glosses as ‘possibly Alice Gill’. On 6 April 1874 (Kelvin, vol. I, p. 221) Morris told Aglaia Coronio that ‘Unluckily tomorrow I have to go to my sister’s at Weybridge in the afternoon’, also a possible reference to Alice.

47. Harvey & Press, ‘City’, p. 3. It is not widely recognised (but see Harvey & Press, Design, p. 40) that before he joined the Board of Devon Great Consols, Morris, along with his uncle Francis, had also been (1856–1864?) a director of Boiling Well, a copper, zinc, lead and silver mine near Gwithian, West Cornwall (Dines, vol. I, p. 35, vol. 2; pp. 147–148; Roger Burt, Peter Waite & Ray Burnley, Cornish Mines. Metalliferous and associated minerals, 1845–1913, Exeter: University of Exeter, p. 39), and of the unsuccessful British Mining & Smelting Ltd (1865–1874).

48. Andrew Meharg, ‘The arsenic green’, Nature 423, 2003, p. 688; Meharg, Venomous Earth, pp. 137, 144, 147. It is also said that waste from the mine poisoned the River Tamar, and ‘nearly killed off’ the salmon fishery (Booker, p. 159). By 1864, Devon Great Consols had become the lessee of the Tamar fish-
ery, and had set up lagoons at the outflow from the mine in order to precipitate copper from the effluent. As this process produced almost pure metal, it was very lucrative (see Anon., 1864, Burt, pp. 39–40, Moses Bawden, ‘Mines and Mining in the Tavistock District’, TDA, XLVI, 1914, pp. 256–264), and ‘every precaution (was) taken to ensure as little injury to the fish as possible’ (‘Report on Mines’; Bedford Estate, 1868, as quoted by Colin Buck, ‘Devon Great Consols Mine’, Tamar, 25, 2003, p. 22). The waste would still have been rich in acidic sulphur compounds, however. Often these were also reclaimed, in order to produce sulphuric acid, but we have no record of this process at Devon Great Consols.

51. ‘Socialism’, 1885 (italics added); Florence S. Boos, ‘ “Socialism” and “What we have to look for”: two unpublished lectures by William Morris’, JWMS, XIX No. 1, 2010, pp. 9–51 (p. 34).
52. Ibid.
56. Boos, ‘Socialism’, p. 24. ‘The Bedford Harvest’ was indeed considerable; ‘few landlords have ever been in a more enviable position’ (Booker, p. 152, p. 155). Successive Dukes, despite belonging to a class which despises ‘trade’, were clearly hard-headed businessmen, or knew how to employ those who were. The original lease for Devon Great Consols was only granted after several other ‘undercapitalised’ proposals were rejected, and the Duke hired Josiah Hitchens as his own agent to search for funds. In 1856, when that lease was renewed ahead of schedule in order to extend the set east of Wheal Emma, and build a railway to Morwellham, the Duke exacted a fine of £20,000 (ca £890, 000), a sum felt throughout the industry to be ‘a heavy tax’. He also insisted that the new railway carry goods for himself and all his tenants at the uneconomical rate of 1s (ca £2.60) per ton, and levied charges at the port of 4d (85p) per ton on copper ore, 3d (65p) on timber, and on coal, and 2d (42p) on iron. Over the next decade, the first of these probably generated £400 (ca £17,500) per year, and the third ca £30 (ca £1300). By 1865 the Duke had received ca £210,000 (£10–11 million) in total royalties (Murchison, p. 506; Goodridge, pp. 236, 238; Booker p. 160). He also claimed £2,052 (ca £104,000) for damage to his pheasant coverts. The Duke
was also ‘Lord of the Soil’ for other mines in Tavistock area, so his ‘harvest’
may well have been even greater than the data used here imply. Some of
this was reinvested in Tavistock, in the shape of Bedford Square and its sur-
rounds, and also to build some 250 cottages in and around the district, partly
in order to alleviate a chronic housing shortage caused mainly by growth of
the mine. Each of these cost the Duke £22 (ca £1000), but were let at £5 3d to
£6 (£2.75–£3) per week, plus 1d per week for a replaceable kitchen stove!
Although the Duke supported the miners over reintroduction of the ‘five
week month’ — an action of which he ‘strongly disapproved’ — he remained
‘obdurate’ over suspension of his dues, and in the matter of supplying funds
to purchase rock drills, with which the Board hoped to speed up the search
for tin. From 1870 to 1883, while scarcely any dividend was paid, he con-
tinued to receive his royalties. He then agreed to remit them by 50%, and
eventually (in 1886) to forgo all dues, provided no dividend was paid. In
1893 a new lease was negotiated at 1/30th of receipts, rising to 1/24th if total
dividends exceeded £15,000 (Goodridge, pp. 250–255). From 1881–1886,
he received dues of £10,000 (ca £500,000), even though no dividend was
paid (Booker, footnote, p. 173). Eventually he lost patience with the squab-
bling directors, and in 1901 made it clear that he would not renew the lease
(although he might for another company). But as to his dues, he remained as
unrepentant as he had been in 1868, when his principal mining agent wrote
that:

‘Had the Duke thought fit to work his own mineral grounds, he would
have been the gainer of £982, 842 19s 10d (sic!), in addition to the £269,
506 3s received in dues and premiums, making a total of £1,252,349 2s
10d, and doubtless if his grace could take the mines into his own hands
… he could pay all … losses sustained and still realize a handsome profit;
which clearly shows how little cause the mining company generally …
have to complain of the rate of dues’ (Booker, Note 6, p. 249).

57. Boos, ‘Socialism’, p. 27.
Afterwards Boos, ‘Commercial War’; JPRS.
62. Ibid.
63. See also Florence S. Boos, ‘William Morris’s “Equality”: a critical edition’,
64. John Goodridge, ‘Tamar View, The Horn of Plenty and the Devonshire Great
Consolidated Copper Mining Company’, *TDA*, CXL, 2008, p. 238.
66. ‘What We Have to Look For’, 1895, as in Boos, ‘Socialism’, p. 38; Boos, ‘Commercial War’, p. 58.
68. Boos, ‘Socialism’, p. 16.
73. James Redmond, ed, *William Morris, News from Nowhere*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970, Chapter X, p. 58. Use of the phrase ‘brought to grass’ may be a direct link to Morris’s experience of the mines of Devon and Cornwall, it being the local expression for the raising of ores to the surface.
75. ‘How we live and how we might live’, 1884; Morton, p. 140.
Morris and Pre-Raphaelitism

Peter Faulkner

Morris was a fourteen-year-old schoolboy at Marlborough when the mysterious initials PRB were first seen on paintings in 1848. As Martin Meisel observed in 1977, the Pre-Raphaelites’ programme was so full of ‘internal contradictions, ideological and temperamental’, and *The Germ* offered ‘so little in the way of a manifesto’, that historians of the movement ‘have generally had to settle for little more than the sentence that begins the third paragraph of the initial advertisement: “The endeavour held in view throughout the writings on Art will be to encourage and enforce an adherence to the simplicity of nature ...”’. The alternative title of the journal was ‘Thoughts towards Nature’. When the critical establishment set about the group, Meisel suggests, they ‘sought and expected his [Ruskin’s] championship’, ‘absorbed many of his formulations’ and ‘allowed themselves, in Ruskin’s 1851 pamphlet *Pre-Raphaelitism*, to be represented as attempting to carry out “to the very last letter” his admonitions at the close of *Modern Painters I*: “Go to Nature in all singleness of heart, and walk with her laboriously and trustingly, having no other thoughts but how best to penetrate her meaning, and remembering her instructions; rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, and scorning nothing ...”’. Meisel’s argument is that it did not take long for the ‘internal contradictions’ of the group to begin showing themselves in the paintings of the three leading Pre-Raphaelites, and for the emphasis on Nature to become too simple a criterion. Morris himself was to point out differences of emphasis among the painters when he addressed the topic in a lecture in Birmingham in 1891, as we shall see later. But the question for this article is how far the influence of Pre-Raphaelitism shows itself in Morris’s work.

I

Morris went up to Exeter College, Oxford in January 1853, where he began his lifelong friendship with Edward Jones – later Burne-Jones – from Birmingham. During the next academic year he moved into rooms in the college, and in the summer of 1854 he became aware of the PRB through reading Ruskin’s *Edinburgh*
Lectures. Burne-Jones later recalled that Morris ‘ran in’ with a copy of the book, enthusiastically reading aloud from it to him. Ruskin had written:

Pre-Raphaelitism has but one principle, that of absolute, uncompromising truth in all that it does, obtained by working everything, down to the most minute detail, from nature only ... Every Pre-Raphaelite landscape is painted to the last touch, in the open air from the thing itself. Every Pre-Raphaelite figure, however studied in expression, is a true portrait of some living person. Every minute accessory is painted in the same manner.4

Burne-Jones’s recollection went on: ‘And there we first saw about the Pre-Raphaelites, and there I first saw the name of Rossetti. So for many a day after that we talked of little else but paintings which we had never seen, and saddened the lives of our Pembroke [College] friends’. Soon after, Millais’s Return of the Dove to the Ark was on view ‘at Mr Wyatt’s shop in the High Street’, ‘and then, Edward said, “we knew”’.5 The young men wanted to align themselves with what they saw as the most exciting developments in the art of the time.

Morris spent part of his summer vacation from Oxford in 1854 in visiting Belgium and France with his sister Henrietta; they saw the late medieval paintings of the van Eycks, Memling and Roger van der Weyden, and the great cathedrals of Amiens, Beauvais, Chartres and Rouen. Linda Parry has observed that now Morris ‘was able to study at first hand paintings, sculpture, tapestries and other forms of early medieval northern European decoration, which became his greatest artistic influence’.6 The Northern preoccupation was to inflect his response to Pre-Raphaelitism, giving it a different focus from that of the painters, who responded more to Italy and the South; all shared a keen interest in history. Back in Oxford, Morris moved into rooms adjoining those of Burne-Jones, and in March 1855 he came of age, and inherited thirteen shares in Devon Great Consols, which gave him the large income of £741 in that year, while Burne-Jones ‘spent whole days in Bagley Wood making minute and elaborate studies of flowers and foliage’,7 as advocated by Ruskin. The young men kept up their interest in Pre-Raphaelite painting. During the Easter vacation, Morris and Burne-Jones saw pictures by Millais and Madox Brown, including The Last of England, and around the same time a copy of the Pre-Raphaelite journal, The Germ.8 In the Royal Academy in June Morris saw paintings by Brown, Dyce, Leighton, and Millais, while during the summer term in Oxford, Morris and Burne-Jones visited ‘Mr. Coombes’s collection at the Clarendon Press, which included two pictures by Holman Hunt and Rossetti’s watercolour of Dante drawing the head of Beatrice’.9 Thomas Coombe, the printer to the University, also owned Millais’s Christ in the Carpenter’s Shop and his Return of the Dove to the Ark, Collins’s Convent Thoughts and Hunt’s Converted British Family.10

The summer vacation of 1855 was spent with Burne-Jones and William Fulford
in Northern France, where they were profoundly impressed by the great Gothic cathedrals of Amiens, Beauvais, Rouen and Chartres. Morris had visited the cathedrals during the previous summer, but now his response became deeper, and found expression in writings such as ‘The Churches of North France: Shadows of Amiens’. The group also visited Paris, not an idea that appealed to Morris, but he was able to see and enjoy the medieval tapestries at the Hotel de Cluny. And at the Exposition Universelle the friends were, according to Fiona MacCarthy, ‘excited to find seven Pre-Raphaelite paintings hanging in the Beaux-Arts section ... one by Collins, three by Millais and three by Hunt, including his *Light of the World*’.11

It was at the end of this trip that Morris and Burne-Jones made their momentous decision not to devote their lives to the church but to art – Burne-Jones as a painter and Morris as an architect. Both returned to Oxford for the new academic year, and Morris took his pass degree in October/November 1855. In November also Morris and Cormell Price planned *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, made possible by Morris’s recently inherited wealth. In it, in 1856, Morris published his early romances, accounts of the architecture he admired, and several poems. In ‘The Story of the Unknown Church’, as MacCarthy observes, ‘Morris’s descriptions of the gardens of the abbey – the roses, the convolvulus, great fiery nasturtiums, “great spires” of hollyhocks – have the pictorial fluency of one of his own chintzes; and as always with Morris his description of the beauties and the fruitfulness of nature is shot through with a sense of the erotic’.12 Just before publication of the first number of the *Magazine*, in January 1856, Morris and Burne-Jones came across Rossetti’s ‘Maids of Elfenmere’ illustration to William Allingham’s *Day and Night Songs*, and Holman Hunt’s illustration to Woolner’s poem *My Beautiful Lady* in *The Germ*; these illustrations seemed deeply affecting to both men.13

Morris entered the architectural practice of G.E. Street in Oxford in January 1856, where he met Philip Webb. By Easter 1856 Burne-Jones had met Rossetti and been greatly taken by his charm and enthusiasm for art; he began to paint, under Rossetti’s guidance. Mackail records of this period that Morris ‘became an ardent pupil, as he was already a keen admirer, of the Pre-Raphaelite school’.14 He was wealthy enough by now to be able to buy works of art; thus in May he bought Arthur Hughes’s *April Love* for £30 through the agency of Burne-Jones. Now Morris met Rossetti and also fell under his influence. In July he was writing: ‘Rossetti says I ought to paint, he says I shall be able; now as he is a very great man, and speaks with authority and not as the scribes, I *must* try. I don’t hope much, I must say, yet will try my best - he gave me practical advice on the subject’.15 Still articulated to Street, he began slowly: two self-portrait drawings date from this time. Soon Morris followed Burne-Jones to London, when Street moved his practice there in August 1856, and when Rossetti took him to Brown’s studio in Kentish
Town, he bought *The Hayfield* for 40 guineas. Morris accompanied Street on a tour of the Low Countries in the autumn of 1856, but, encouraged by Rossetti, he left Street’s practice and abandoned architecture at the end of the year. He and Burne-Jones took unfurnished rooms in Red Lion Square, for which they made their own painted furniture.

Morris worked at his drawing through the spring and summer of 1857, and in June began his first painting, a scene from Malory showing ‘Sir Tristram after his illness in the Garden of King Mark’s Palace recognised by the Dog he had given Iseult’. Rossetti told Bell Scott: ‘It is being done all from nature of course, and I believe will turn out capitally’. But it seems unlikely that the painting was ever completed.\(^16\)

Morris continued to buy pictures, to Rossetti’s delight—he told William Allingham, ‘You know, he is a millionaire and buys pictures’.\(^17\) He bought several of what Ray Watkinson describes as Rossetti’s ‘new, brilliant, bizarre water-colours’.\(^18\) These included *The Blue Closet* and *The Tune of Seven Towers*, which stimulated poems by Morris with the same titles, as well as three others. During the summer of 1857, again under Rossetti’s influence, Morris became involved in painting the Debating Chamber of the Oxford Union with murals on Arthurian themes; Morris’s was *How Sir Palomydes loved La Belle Iseult*.\(^19\) As is well known, the poor technique employed in the execution of the murals meant that they soon decayed. Morris got more pleasure from decorating the ceiling, as Burne-Jones related: ‘he set to work upon the roof, making in a day a design for it which was a wonder to us for its originality and fitness, for he had never before designed anything of the kind, nor, I suppose, seen any ancient work to guide him. Indeed, all his life he hated the copying of ancient work as unfair to the old and stupid for the present, only good for inspiration and hope’.\(^20\) Morris was discovering his true vocation. It was in Oxford at this time that he met Jane Burden, who was to be the model of his surviving painting *La Belle Yseult*, and later his wife.

Work on the murals continued until the spring of 1858, by which time Morris had published his first book of poetry, *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*. When Bell Scott visited the Debating Chamber in June, he found that the murals had already deteriorated; all that could be seen of Morris’s was Tristram’s head over a row of sunflowers.\(^21\) Soon after, Morris began work on his portrait of Jane as *La Belle Iseult*, clearly in the Pre-Raphaelite mode. As Watkinson noted:

Some records have identified the subject in the past as Guenevere, but the scene, confirmed by May Morris, shows Iseult’s mourning of Tristram’s exile from King Mark’s court. She stands wistful in her chamber, the little love-gift dog lying in Tristram’s place in her bed. Down the side of her mirror is inscribed the word ‘DOLOURS’ – grief – and her crown has sprigs of rosemary for remembrance.\(^22\)

This is a Pre-Raphaelite painting, done with a great concern for detail and show-
ing many varieties of pattern. But it did not come easily: Philip Webb told W.R. Lethaby that Morris, ‘after struggling over his picture for months, “hating the brute”, threw it up’. It was not in painting that he was to find his fulfillment.23

II

Morris had begun writing poetry at Oxford in 1855, and only three years later he had written enough to publish The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems, dedicated to ‘my friend Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Painter’. Some reviewers related the volume to Pre-Raphaelitism. Richard Garnett remarked that ‘the Pre-Raphaelite poets and painters have made the Arthurian cycle their own, by a treatment ... strange and original’,24 and related the poems to ‘certain alfresco illustrations of Arthurian romance attempted at Oxford by painters of this school’. Garnett also noted the resemblance of Morris’s poems to ‘the beautiful poems, contributed by the painter [Rossetti] to the defunct Oxford and Cambridge Magazine’, emphasising ‘their richness of colouring, depth of pathos, poetical but eccentric conception, and loving elaboration of every minute detail’. The Tablet remarked that the book’s dedication acknowledged ‘the Pre-Raphaelite sympathies of the author’, and that ‘many passages read like descriptions of a Pre-Raphaelite picture’ in their “fidelity to nature” in both ‘the description of gestures, attitudes, features and garments’ and in ‘the language of their interlocutors’. More negatively, H.F. Chorley in The Athenaeum remarked that ‘we must draw attention to his [Morris’s] book of Pre-Raphaelite minstrelsy as to a curiosity which shows how far affectionation may mislead an earnest man towards the fog-land of Art’. Similarly, the Saturday Review described Morris as ‘the pre-Raphaelite poet. So he is hailed, we believe, by himself and the brotherhood’. The whole movement is condemned: ‘when painters think it is their whole duty to work through a microscope, and try to paint every stain on every leaf, as well as every leaf on every tree, they not only forget what art is, but are ignorant of what artistic imitation is. This is extravagance is, we think, what Mr. Morris delights in’. Sir John Skelton later recalled having received a letter in 1860 from the editor of Fraser’s Magazine, John Parker, remarking: ‘For myself, I am sick of Rossetti and his whole school. I think them essentially unmanly, effeminate, mystical, affected and obscure. You ought really to say more as to Morris’s obscurity and affectionation’. A later critic, H.H. Statham, in his general and illuminating retrospective account of Morris’s achievement in 1897, remarked that The Defence of Guenevere was ‘essentially a representation in poetry of what used to be termed the pre-Raphaelite spirit in painting’. Of one specific but representative poem he remarks: ‘The feeling for decorative effect in this poem (“Golden Wings”), for the colour of the objects named, is characteristic of a decorator poet’. A detail like the ‘red-brick lip’ of the moat ‘might have come
out of a “P.R.B.” picture’. He tellingly compares Morris's art to that of Burne-Jones: ‘As in the pictures, so in the poems, the personages who are presented to us are but personages who [unlike Chaucer’s] fill a composition in a decorative manner’. Modern criticism has generally accepted this view, choosing its examples of Pre-Raphaelite poetry by Morris mainly from *The Defence*, although the evaluation has changed: the volume is now regarded by many critics as Morris's major achievement in poetry. But it is generally agreed that, because of the poor reception of *The Defence* at the time, Morris gave up writing poetry, and concentrated on the design work which was to make him famous.

**III**

Morris and Jane were married on 26 April 1859. Morris was wealthy enough to be able to commission Philip Webb to build him a house in Kent, which became known as Red House, first occupied in 1860. It was in furnishing Red House that Morris was to embark on the activities in the realm of design which proved to be his true vocation; as Paul Thompson observed, ‘Pattern-making was the foundation of the art of William Morris. It was his special genius in design’. He and a group of friends established Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. in 1861, and Morris was soon designing wallpapers and stained glass. How far can we see the activities of the Firm as based on Pre-Raphaelite principles? Some products such as stained glass, embroidery, woven textiles, carpets and tapestry had medieval precedents; others such as wallpaper and printed textiles were more modern. However, designs for all might be derived from medieval models, and incorporate the element of ‘naturalism’ celebrated by Ruskin.

Morris’s emphasis on nature made his designs different from the more abstract and geometrical forms advocated, in the wake of the Great Exhibition, by the Design Reform group led by Sir Henry Cole and including Richard Redgrave, A.W.N. Pugin and Owen Jones. During 1852 Owen Jones was asked to draw up a list of axioms concerning the application of art to manufacture, which were sold as penny pamphlets. They later appeared as a preface to Jones’s *Grammar of Ornament* in 1856; Proposition 13 ran: ‘Flowers or other natural objects should not be used as ornaments, but conventional representations founded upon them’. Christopher Dresser supplied a plate showing ‘the geometrical arrangement of natural forms’. Recent critics such as Christopher Morley have argued that this was not an extreme position, but it was often felt to be so. It was the approach satirised by Dickens in his anti-Utilitarian novel *Hard Times* in 1854. In its second chapter, the children in the class-room are asked some questions by the ‘government officer’ who represents everything that Dickens detests. Sissy Jupe – reduced to ‘girl number twenty’ in bureaucratic language – is asked if she would carpet a
room with representations of flowers, and replies that she would do so because she is fond of flowers. The official turns on her triumphantly to suggest that she should not logically make a choice by which people would put heavy chairs on the flowers and walk over them on heavy boots. She replies:

‘It wouldn't hurt them, sir. They wouldn't crush and wither if you please, sir. They would be the pictures of what was very pretty and pleasant, and I would fancy …’

This statement enables the official to complete his triumph with the assertion, ‘Aye, aye, aye! But you mustn't fancy. That's it! You are never to fancy!’ to which Mr. Gradgrind gives his enthusiastic assent: ‘You are not, Cecilia Jupe, to do anything of that kind’. The official concludes with a declaration about the new principles of interior decoration:

‘You are not to have, in any object of use or ornament, what would be a contradiction in fact ... You don't walk upon flowers in fact; you cannot be allowed to walk on flowers in carpets ... You must use for all these purposes, combinations and modifications (in primary colours) of mathematical figures which are susceptible of proof and demonstration. This is the new discovery. This is fact. This is taste’.

No wonder the girl sits down looking ‘as if frightened by the matter-of-fact prospect the world afforded’. Morris’s designs would certainly not have appealed to the government officer, who represents the attitude Dickens associated with the Department of Practical Art, set up in 1852 in order to improve the quality of British design. Critics have varied in their responses to Dickens’s argument, some seeing it as an effective part of his critique of the bureaucratic view of life and others finding his position Philistine. Allen Samuels in 1992 argued that it was hard to sympathise with Dickens’s view because the tide of history, giving us modernism and the Bauhaus, has ‘gone against Dickens’. This effectively wipes Morris’s designs out of the historical record.

For Morris’s designs occupied a middle ground. As Colin Cruise has recently argued in his book on Pre-Raphaelite drawing: ‘To some extent, however, the practices of those Pre-Raphaelite artists designing for Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. .... acted as a counterbalance to the kind of industrial-design training devised by Henry Cole, Richard Redgrave, Christopher Dresser ... and others involved in the reform of the Schools of Design’. He goes on to argue, in relation to the Arts and Crafts movement, that ‘Through their design practices, Morris and his colleagues forged a link between the activity of reproducing nature faithfully and abstracting from it in order to produce good domestic design’. Morris’s earliest designs were for tiles and wallpapers, the latter a booming industry in 1862. The three early designs – ‘Trellis’, ‘Daisy’ and ‘Fruit’ – are described by Paul Thompson as ‘extraordinarily old-fashioned’. They certainly show Morris’s indebtedness to nature as well as to medieval precedent. Linda Parry remarks that
they were ‘closely associated with the informal medievalism of the early firm’.33

We may discern this quality also in the Firm’s stained glass, part of the great Victorian revival of that pre-Renaissance medium which was part of the Gothic Revival. Morris designed some hundred and fifty images, but most of these were small backing-figures, often angels; his most successful, St Peter, was used ten times. He ceased to produce designs after 1873, but continued to shoulder the responsibility for leading and colour, making the crucial choice of the coloured glass supplied by Powell’s. In addition, he took over from Webb the designing of backgrounds to the windows, often, as one would expect, using various forms of foliage with great success, as in the west window at Leigh in Staffordshire of 1874, praised by Paul Thompson, where ‘the foliage is mixed with fruit and flowers, pineapples, pomegranates, and roses’.34

Morris’s style as a designer was to develop remarkably; as Colin Cruise has remarked, the early simplicity was soon replaced by ‘a sophisticated graphic complexity that became Morris’s most successful and characteristic contribution to the history of design’.35 The early wallpapers were followed in 1871 by more geometric designs deriving from eighteenth-century papers, and then, between 1872 and 1876, by a series of more complex designs, in a two-layer format, including ‘Jasmine’ and ‘Vine’, ‘Branch’ and ‘Lily’ – the importance of nature to Morris is obvious simply from the titles. Paul Thompson pointed out that it was Morris who pioneered the increasing use of flowers in design during the early 1870s: ‘it was Morris who led the return to British flowers, many wild from the country hedges, in parallel with the partly wilder, flower-filled garden, reflecting the changing seasons rather than the efficiency of the greenhouse’.36 Pugin had written in 1849 in his Floriated Ornament that nature is ‘the fountain head of beautiful design’, but that adaptation and ‘disposition’ of natural forms was essential. Morris followed this path, while adding a Ruskinian concern for the conditions of the worker. Cruise argues that ‘the Pre-Raphaelite pictorialist agenda’ became less relevant as design moved on. He also notes that wallpaper design profited particularly from ‘the revival of plant drawing’: ‘Arts and Crafts wallpaper patterns offered a way of reintroducing floral and vegetable motifs into the domestic setting and signalled a return to nature rather than favouring artifice and illusion in pattern design’. He cites Walter Crane, Selwyn Image and J.D. Sedding to support his case.37

Overall, as Ellen E. Frank argued in 1977 in discussing Baillie Scott’s fine house Blackwell, built in the Lake District in 1898, the decorative style to be found there involved what she terms ‘the domestication of Nature’, which she finds importantly in Morris’s work: ‘Morris and Scott manifest their inherited reverence for Nature by reconstituting external landscape among walls and carvings within ...Victorians contrive to have Nature, however distant, real but no longer threatening’. This is ‘a Nature of home furnishings’.38 Frank goes on to show Morris’s concern to bring Nature onto domestic walls, and quotes his 1881 lecture ‘Some
Hints on Pattern Designing’ on his preference for ornament ‘that reminds us of the outward face of the earth, of the innocent love of animals, or of man passing his days between work and rest’. Frank illustrates her point with reproductions of the ‘Bird and Anemone’ wall paper of 1882, and the ‘Black Thorn’ of 1890, and quotes further from Morris’s lecture:

Is it not better to be reminded, however, simply, of the close vine-trellis that keeps out the sun by the Nile side; or the wild woods and their streams, with the dogs panting beside them; or of the swallow sweeping above the garden boughs towards the house-eaves where their nestlings are, while the sun breaks the clouds on them; or of the many-flowered summer meadows of Picardy?

In all patterns, Morris likes ‘unmistakeable suggestions of gardens and fields, and strange trees, boughs, and tendrils’. With typical concern for material and function, Morris argues that ‘the more mechanical the process [of production], the less direct should be the imitation of natural forms’. Thus tapestry enables the maker to turn his wall into ‘a rose hedge or a deep forest, for its material and general capabilities almost compel us to fashion plane above plane of rich, crisp and varying foliage with bright blossoms, or strange birds showing through the intervals’.40

As early as 1897, Aymer Vallance, in his William Morris. His Art, his Writings, his Public Life, raised the question of the relation between the work of Morris and Co. and Pre-Raphaelitism. Beginning from the fact that the movement began in the art of painting, Vallance asks whether its principles could be applied more broadly, adding what he terms ‘the domestic element’. He then makes a grand claim:

It is due to William Morris that all arts were brought within the comprehension of one and the same organic scheme; and here he proved himself in advance of the Pre-Raphaelites, that he did succeed in giving the revival of art a wider and profounder scope than they.41

Because the Pre-Raphaelites were painters whose works were most often kept in private hands or seen in ‘obscure galleries’, their reputation could reach only a limited public:

It is, therefore, a supreme achievement of William Morris’s to have brought Art, through the medium of the handicrafts, within reach of thousands who could never hope to obtain but a transitory view of Pre-Raphaelite pictures; his distinction, by decorating the less pretending but not less necessary articles of household furnishing, to have done more than any man in the present century to beautify the plain, everyday home-life of the people.42

This may be extravagant in its neglect of the other partners in the Firm of 1861,
particular Rossetti and Brown, and in its optimistic idea of ‘the people’ who could afford the Firm’s products, but it does draw attention to continuities as they were seen at the time.

Ray Watkinson makes a related point in his 1970 *Pre-Raphaelite Art and Design*:

All this [the early work of the Firm, particularly in furniture] might be called the Pre-Raphaelitism of design: the simplicity of form, the unsophisticated construction, the pictorial and heraldic enrichment of flat surfaces were certainly meant to get behind the renaissance norms; and certainly none of it would have come about in the way it did had not Rossetti first have been one of that other group of seven, the PRB, or Morris and Burne-Jones not first been moved by Pre-Raphaelite painting.\(^{43}\)

In design, as much as in painting, there were established conventions which limited what the designer could do. But ‘the steady reference to nature, to unmediated actuality, to sensory experience’ of the Pre-Raphaelite painters could equally be a stimulation to designers. However, the relation of design to nature was complex, for it became apparent to Victorians such as Owen Jones and Dresser that all ‘art and ornament’ was derived ultimately ‘from some actual observed fragment of the real world’. Watkinson argues that the influence of Rossetti on Morris was crucial and liberating, enabling him to develop a rich and expansive conception of design, moving him towards ‘the achievement ... of a contained exercise of the imagination, an emotional effect, by the combination of colours, forms, arrangements, rather that the strictly associative values of reference to the historic styles’.\(^{44}\)

IV

It is not surprising that references to Pre-Raphaelitism as a critical term grow fewer as the years passed and each of the group of painters pursued his own different way. But the term was evidently a significant one to the young Henry James as late as 1869, as is shown in the wonderfully entertaining account of a visit to Morris’s home in Queen Square, Bloomsbury, which he gave to his sister in a letter of March of that year:

Morris’s poetry, you see, is only his sub-trade. To begin with, he is a manufacturer of stained glass windows, ecclesiastical and medieval tapestry, altar-cloths, and in fine everything quaint, archaic, pre-Raphaelite – and I may add, exquisite ... everything he has and does is superb and beautiful. But more curious than anything is himself
Then there is his wife:

Oh, ma chère, such a wife! *Je n’en reviens pas* - she haunts me still. A figure cut out of a missal – out of one of Rossetti’s or Hunt’s pictures – to say this gives but a faint idea of her, because when such an image puts on flesh and blood, it is an apparition of fearful and wonderful intensity. It is hard to say whether she’s a grand synthesis of all the Pre-Raphaelite pictures ever made or they a ‘keen analysis’ of her – whether she’s an original or a copy ....

Morris himself is also vividly described:

He is short, burly, corpulent, very careless and unfinished in his dress ... He has a very loud voice and a nervous restless manner and a perfectly unaffected and business-like address. His talk is wonderfully to the point and remarkable for clear good sense.

No wonder that James concluded that ‘it was a long rich sort of visit, with a strong peculiar flavour of its own’. 45

V

Morris returned to poetry in 1867, with the publication of *The Life and Death of Jason*, to be followed between 1868 and 1870 by the four volumes of *The Earthly Paradise*. Its slow-moving narratives from a variety of sources, offered by a poet who described himself as ‘The idle singer of an empty day’, proved very popular. None of the reviewers of these volumes (which included Walter Pater in the *Westminster Review*) referred to Pre-Raphaelitism, which was by then no longer a significant movement in English painting. But an intelligent, unsigned review in the *New Englander* in October 1871, contrasting Morris’s poetry with Chaucer’s, did make such a reference in considering Morris’s elaborate descriptions of ‘houses and gardens and temples’: ‘What a fondness he has for the accumulation of details. He loves to enumerate. He has a Pre-raphaelite’s longing to give everything – everything external’. His bent is ‘to miss nothing that the eye can take in as it slowly, pensively passes, without passion of either joy or grief, from object to object …’. Later, the reviewer remarks convincingly: ‘Mr. Morris has the painter’s eye. To him things are as parts of pictures and made to be painted’. 46

A recent critic who may be seen as following this line is Elizabeth Helsinger, who gives a convincing account of Morris’s subtle and comforting use of colour in the *Earthly Paradise* poems, by contrast with the sharpness and vitality of those in *The Defence of Guenevere*. 47

In 1876 Morris published a very different poem, *Sigurd the Volsung*, the fruit of his growing devotion to Icelandic literature and culture. It is hardly surprising
that reviewers of these books made no reference to Pre-Raphaelitism, since the energetic anapaests of Sigurd aim to bring the reader into a harsher, more heroic world than that of The Earthly Paradise. Tony Pinkney, in a review of Helsinger’s book, goes so far as to say that ‘Morris himself had to wade through and out of Pre-Raphaelitism, first by immersing himself in the world of Icelandic sagas and then by crossing the “river of fire” which led to his socialist commitment and to the vitality of The Pilgrims of Hope. 48 But in 1881 we find the young Gerard Manley Hopkins telling Morris’s old Oxford friend the Rev. R. W. Dixon, ‘I must hold you and Morris to belong to one school … I used to call it the school of Rossetti: it is in literature the school of the Pre-raphaelites’. 49 We may assume that it was pre-Icelandic poetry by Morris that Hopkins had in mind – Pinkney is surely right to find an increasing vitality in the later poetry.

VI

In 1875 Morris had found it necessary to reorganise the Firm, with himself in control, and it became known as Morris & Co. Morris continued to produce lively designs, which, as the years went by, showed the variety of influences affecting his work. In his 1878 lecture which was to become known as ‘The Lesser Arts’, Morris spoke to his audience about the factors affecting creative work:

For your teachers, they must be Nature and History; as for the first that you must learn of it is so obvious that I need not dwell upon that now: hereafter, when I have to speak more of matters of detail, I may have to speak of the manner in which you must lean of Nature. As to the second I do not think that any man but one of the highest genius could do anything in these days without much study of ancient art, and even he could be much hindered if he lacked it … Let us therefore study it wisely, be taught by it, be kindled by it; all the while determining not to imitate or repeat it; to have either no art at all, or an art which we have made our own.

50

We have seen how the Pre-Raphaelite respect for nature was embodied in Morris’s early decorative work. It is not surprising that as his career developed his indebtedness to earlier historical traditions became equally important. Morris took inspiration from any source that struck him as appropriate: in addition to the Indian influence on ‘Snakeshead’, Parry refers to the Italian influence on ‘Bird’, the Chinese influence on some of Morris’s rugs, and the Persian influence on the Holland Park carpet. More medieval sources are to be found for the embroideries such as ‘Daisy’, woven textiles such as ‘Dove and Rose’ and ‘Peacock and Dragon’ and the tapestries, though ‘Acanthus and Vine’ is related by Parry to sixteenth-century French work. 51 Nevertheless, the central point of reference continued to
be nature, as shown illuminatingly by Baker, particularly with respect to ‘Acanthus’, ‘Honeysuckle’ and ‘Blackthorn’.

Caroline Arscott, in her fine William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones. Interlacings, remarks that designs such as ‘Jasmine’ (1872) and ‘Acanthus’ (1875) are ‘extraordinary, powerful tangles of plant life’, and that this vitality persists in ‘Tulip’ (1875), ‘Columbine’ (1876) and ‘Honeysuckle’ (1876), in which ‘Geometry rules the pattern, but we are finally made to wonder how geometry can survive in a chock-full visual zone where the mutant clasp of tendrils offers both a pull down and a climbing up and where the pulse of life pushes pattern elements in and out of a three-dimensional complex’. It is indeed ‘the pulse of life’ that we can experience in these designs if we give them more than customary attention.

VII

During the late 1870s Morris had moved into public life, via the Eastern Question Association in 1876 and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, founded in 1877. In 1883 he committed himself to Socialism – ‘crossing the river of fire’, in his words as effectively quoted by E. P. Thomson – and began lecturing on art and socialism. Is there any link here with Pre-Raphaelitism? Thompson himself devoted the third chapter of his biography to ‘Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelites’, whose influence he did not underestimate, but his conclusion is well balanced. He recalls the ‘clear note of excitement of the young men in revolt against the orthodoxies on every side. Political revolt was present in the movement’, but suggests that ‘it was not uppermost in young in Morris’s or Burne-Jones’s mind’.

The strongest case for associating Pre-Raphaelitism with Morris’s socialism was made by William Gaunt, who argued in both The Pre-Raphaelite Tragedy (1942) and in his selection of Morris’s writings in 1948 that the Pre-Raphaelite ideal found its fulfillment in Socialism. Strikingly, as Gaunt put it, ‘His early attachment to King Arthur had led him irresistibly to Karl Marx … The art of the fourteenth century was a plank of political revolution’. Nevertheless, there were sources other than Pre-Raphaelitism for Morris’s estimate of the medieval period, including his reading at Oxford of Carlyle, Kingsley and Ruskin.

A more balanced assessment is given by Krishnan Kumar in his Cambridge edition of News from Nowhere. After describing Morris’s experiences as a disciple of Rossetti and in Street’s practice, as well as his enthusiastic reading of Ruskin, Kumar remarks that none of this was wasted, all contributed to the development which flowered in Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. But the political element came only later; the Pre-Raphaelites did not follow Ruskin when he began his incursions into ‘The Political Economy of Art’ in 1857. The issue which Ruskin was now addressing, ‘was also, more delicately, side-stepped by the Brotherhood.
who remained resolutely unpolitical'. When he became a revolutionary socialist, Morris ‘parted company decisively with his friends in the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood’ and indeed with Ruskin as well. But the Pre-Raphaelite and Ruskinian background of his thought, with its emphasis on the centrality of art, gave his politics its special form – which, Kumar suggests, perhaps extravagantly, made Morris’s Marxism anticipate a Marxism incorporating Marx’s early, then unknown, ‘Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts’. Hence Morris’s hostility to Bellamy, the Fabians and all forms of state socialism.  

Morris & Co. opened its shop in Oxford Street in 1877, and in 1881 the Company’s works were moved to a larger and more convenient site at Merton Abbey, south of the Thames; between 1881 and 1885 Morris designed a fine series of chintzes, including ‘Eyebright’, ‘Brother Rabbit’, ‘Bird and Anemone’ and ‘Strawberry Thief’.

Arscott remarks on how these designs ‘do not set the animals in opposition to the plant life but show a symbiotic involvement and imply a sharing of substance. The potential spring of the rabbit coming from the muscly back legs is just like the unfurling of a leaf; a common concentrated energy exists in plant and animal life’. In 1883 Morris saw a piece of Genoese brocaded velvet with diagonal patterning, which Peter Floud showed in 1959 to have had a great influence on Morris. This influence is to be seen particularly in the great series of chintzes produced between 1881 and 1885, with their ‘repeating device of meandering stems with curving leaves and flower heads’, and with names taken from tributaries of the Thames, such as ‘Kennet’, ‘Cray’, ‘Wandle’, ‘Evenlode’, ‘Wey’ and ‘Windrush’.

In respect to the popular ‘Willow Bough’ wallpaper of 1887, May Morris recorded: ‘We were walking one day by our little stream that runs into Thames, and my Father pointed out the detail and variety in the leaf forms, and soon afterwards this paper was done, a keenly-observed rendering of our willows that has embowered many a London living-room’. She also relates ‘Wild Tulip’ to Kelmscott: ‘the peony and wild tulip are two of the richest blossomings of the spring garden at the Manor’.

At Merton Abbey, Morris was also able to extend further the range of products. The Company was now producing woven textiles and rugs and carpets, some on a small scale for sale in the shop, and others on a larger scale as commiss-
sioned by wealthy clients. Among the finest of the carpets were ‘Holland Park’ in 1883, and the magnificent ‘Bullerswood’ in 1889, which incorporates several of Morris’s favourite motifs. A chapter is devoted to Morris as ‘The Master’ in Malcolm Haslam’s splendidly illustrated book *Arts and Crafts Carpets* in 1991. Haslam quotes F.S. Ellis to the effect that ‘It was about 1875 that his [Morris’s] mind was specially fired by the magnificence of the ancient Oriental carpets which were just then being imported in large quantities’.63 Morris soon made himself an expert on Persian carpets, advising the South Kensington Museum on their purchase, and going on to make carpets of his own; a loom was installed in the coach house in Hammersmith, when the family moved into Kelmscott House in the early summer of 1878, a hand-weaver from Glasgow was employed, and some young girls taken on to make rugs – on sale by the summer of 1879. In May 1880 Morris & Co. exhibited these rugs and carpets in Oxford Street. A leaflet issued by Morris & Co. interestingly shows Morris’s approach: he wanted to ‘equal the Eastern ones [carpets] in materials and durability’, but not in design; the new carpets should ‘show themselves obviously to be the outcome of modern and Western ideas, guided by those principles that underlie all architectural art in common’. This pronouncement shows Morris’s continuing determination to avoid the uncreative imitation of historical styles, however attractive in themselves, but to incorporate elements from historical sources when they could extend his art. Concluding his account of Morris’s carpets, Haslam remarks that the later ones combined motifs in such a way that ‘one is at a loss to say whether they are Persian or Gothic, until, that is, one realizes that they are neither; they are pure Morris’.64 This striking formulation applies indeed widely to Morris’s dealings with the artefacts of the past, and brings out the force of his genius.

It was in 1881 that Morris gave the lecture, quoted earlier, to the students of the Working Men’s College, called ‘Some Hints on Pattern-Designing’, which is worth quoting again because of its clear exposition of his principles as a designer. In discussing the making of carpets, he acknowledges that it may be necessary to go to ‘the school of Eastern designers’ for the best examples of the art, but then adds:

Now, after all, I am bound to say that when these [technical] difficulties are conquered, I, as a Western man and a picture-lover, must insist on plenty of meaning in your patterns; I must have unmistakable suggestions of gardens and fields, and strange trees, boughs and tendrils, or I can’t do with your pattern, but must take the first piece of nonsense-work a Kurdish shepherd has wove from tradition and memory; all the more, as even in these there will be some hint of past history.65

He told his audience that design, for whatever medium, must convey a sense of rational growth, ‘and in recurring patterns, at least, the noblest are those where one thing grows visibly and necessarily from another’. Morris’s advice to his audi-
ence was therefore: ‘Study any or all of the styles that have real growth in them, and as for the others, don’t do more than give a passing glance at them, for they can do you no good’.66

During the 1890s the space available at Merton enabled Morris to fulfill a long-standing ambition, to revive one of the great medieval art forms, and to make tapestries. Morris taught himself to weave, and wrote enthusiastically about the form’s potential: ‘The noblest of the weaving arts is Tapestry, in which there is nothing mechanical: it may be looked upon as a mosaic of pieces of colour made up of dyed threads’. He admired the qualities of medieval tapestry, writing about it with great relish: ‘You really may almost turn your wall into a rose-hedge or a deep forest, for its material and general capabilities almost compel us to fashion plane above plane of rich, crisp, and varying foliage, with bright blossoms, or strange birds showing through the intervals’. By contrast, he dismissed Renaissance realism as ‘wholly unfit for tapestry’.67 It has been argued by critics such as Paul Thompson that Morris’s achievement in this mode was less impressive than might have been hoped, since he relied on Burne-Jones for his central figures, and Burne-Jones failed to show ‘any real feeling for tapestry’.68 However, in her recent biography of Burne-Jones, Fiona MacCarthy has vigorously argued the contrary case, claiming that Burne-Jones delighted in and exploited ‘the scope and scale and the particular possibilities’ of tapestry.69 In either case, the models for both men would have been medieval rather than Victorian.

IX

In 1890 Morris founded the Kelmscott Press. Printing, with its origins in Gutenberg’s fifteenth century, is of course not a medieval art or craft, but Morris’s interest in it clearly developed from his enthusiasm for the calligraphy and illumination of medieval manuscripts, first enjoyed during his Oxford days and remaining with him to the end of his life. Of the typefaces Morris designed, while Golden is roman, deriving from a type by Jensen, Troy – with its reduced form as Chaucer – is a blackletter, which Morris himself described as ‘semi-Gothic’;70 we can discern a scribler tradition behind it. The foliated designs by Morris for individual letters shows the same influence. The relation of the Press to Pre-Raphaelitism was thoughtfully considered by Samuel D. Albert in his contribution to Pocket Cathedrals in 1991; Albert offers a detailed account of the book-work of Morris and Burne-Jones, beginning with Morris’s dissatisfaction with the disjunction between the contents and layout of The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine in 1856, and going on to ‘the Book That Never Was’, as Joseph Dunlap aptly named the planned Earthly Paradise during the 1860s, and to the development of the books of the Kelmscott Press itself, with incisive discussions of the Adam and Eve frontis-
piece to *The Dream of John Ball* and the attractive frontispiece to *The Wood Beyond the World*. Albert sees the fullest success of the partnership in *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, in particular in three images, ‘The Prologue’, ‘The Knight’s Tale’ and ‘Troilus and Criseyde’, each of which is considered with sensitivity and precision. He argues that ‘the impact of the Pre-Raphaelite ideals to which both men were exposed in their college years and their study with Rossetti are evident throughout their bookmaking enterprises’, and defines these ideals as ‘emotional intensity, visual stasis and medievalism’. His conclusion is that ‘Without the legacy of these Pre-Raphaelite friendships, forces and interconnections, the Kelmscott Press and its commanding contributions to the art of the book might never have been, or at least might have been very different indeed’.71

During the last decade of his life Morris wrote the series of books which have come to be known as his Late Romances, beginning with the semi-historical *The House of the Wolfgangs* in 1888, and culminating in the posthumous *The Sundering Flood* in 1897. In his 1973 anthology *Pre-Raphaelite Writing*, Derek Stanford remarked that Pre-Raphaelitism expressed itself successfully in painting and poetry, but not in fiction. There is no Pre-Raphaelite novel, the nearest approach being Morris’s late romances, which constitute ‘a case of their own’, since Morris was the only Pre-Raphaelite to be ‘quite at home in fiction’.72 Stanford included a chapter from *The Wood Beyond the World* in his anthology. Anna Vaninskaya has recently related Morris’s stories to the growing popularity of the romance form in the later nineteenth century. But she notes that, although reviewers described Morris’s style in the romances in aesthetic terms, only one seems to have related them to Pre-Raphaelitism, and that was in the dismissive form of Watts-Dunton’s remark about it as belonging to the ‘antediluvian days’. In her view, ‘Morris’s literary reputation was made only after he had abandoned the Pre-Raphaelite foibles of his first volume, *The Defence of Guenevere*.73 But although this is accurate as history, many modern critics would see these ‘foibles’ as the quality giving energy and significance to Morris’s early poems, by contrast with those of his middle period.

At all events, the Late Romances were not popular in the way that the imperialist romances of the period were. Their mysterious and poetic worlds offer a kind of pleasure which Phillippa Bennett has associated convincingly with the reanimation of the feeling of wonder in their readers. She concluded her lecture fittingly by referring to Ralph on his way to the Well at the World’s End, finding the world ‘full of fair things and marvellous adventures’.74 It is not difficult to see in this a revival of the early spirit of Pre-Raphaelitism. Indeed, George Bernard Shaw found the Romances ‘a startling relapse into literary pre-Raphaelitism’. Accord-
ing to Shaw, the Pre-Raphaelites had detested Cervantes for making Don Quixote’s housekeeper and the curate burn in a ‘great conflagration’ of the romances that the Don had collected, and Morris had aimed at the Kelmscott Press to ‘resuscitate Don Quixote’s burnt library’ through writing and publishing his Romances. But E.P. Thompson, who quoted Shaw, defended the Romances, remarking accurately that ‘These are tales, not so much of desire unsatisfied, but of desire fulfilled … Where, in The Earthly Paradise, pleasure had always seemed an uneasy dream on the edge of a bitter reality, here we are always on the edge of awakening to the freshness and fulfillment of life …’. He went on to remark that ‘The mournful Pre-Raphaelite ladies of earlier years have given way, in these romances, to maidens who can shoot with the bow, swim, ride and generally do most things, including making love, a good deal more capably than their young men, who weep for joy so often that it is a matter of surprise that their armour does not fall to pieces with rust’. Perhaps he felt that Pre-Raphaelitism had transferred its spirit from the maidens to the males.

XI

On 2 October 1891 Morris was invited to speak at a private showing of an exhibition of ‘Paintings of the English Pre-Raphaelite School in the City of Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery’. This gave him the opportunity to give his account of Pre-Raphaelitism, a movement which had begun over forty years before. He described it admiringly as a ‘really audacious attempt’ to reject the prevailing mode of Academical Art, ‘a portion of the general revolt against Academicism in Literature as well as in Art’. In his view, its defining element was Naturalism, truth to nature, which at the time had offended the public but which had been vindicated by the powerful arguments of Ruskin. But Morris went on to argue that Naturalism alone was not enough. The work of the Brotherhood had been sustained by two further principles: these concerned incident and ornament. Incident provided vitality – the painters aimed at ‘the conscientious presentment of incident’. And ornament was ‘the third side necessary in work of art’. Here Morris spoke more personally, in a way revealing his view that works of art should be parts of whole domestic arrangements:

No picture it seems to me is complete unless it is something more than a representation of nature and the teller of a tale. It also ought to have a definite, harmonious, conscious beauty. It ought to be ornamental. It ought to be possible for it to be part of a beautiful whole in a room or church or hall.

In this respect, Rossetti was the leader. But the decorative aspect of Pre-Raphaelitism had needed another artist to complete its development: ‘your townsman,
Burne-Jones’. For Morris, it was difficult to speak of Burne-Jones, because they were such close friends, but he found it necessary to assert that Burne-Jones added ‘the element of perfect ornamentation, the completely decorative side of the Art’. Thus art was taken back to the healthy state in which it had been before the Renaissance. The movement thus showed itself to be ‘a branch of the great Gothic Art which once pervaded all Europe’.

All this is well argued, and shows Morris’s awareness that the paintings of the school embodied various qualities, and should not be seen as having a single, easily-defined characteristic. He also ended his lecture with some good advice to his audience: they should not admire a picture ‘because it is done by some man with a great name’; rather, they should ‘find out for yourselves whether you can like it yourselves or not’. But from the point of view of this article, what is interesting is that Morris insists strongly on the importance of ornament in art, but still conceives of Pre-Raphaelitism solely in terms of painting, and so does not ask whether he was himself a Pre-Raphaelite designer.

XII

It is clear that there is no simple answer to the question of Morris’s relation to Pre-Raphaelitism. Very different views have been expressed by the critics quoted, from Watkinson on the early furniture of the Firm – ‘none of it would have come about in the way it did had not Rossetti first have been one of that other group of seven, the PRB, or Morris and Burne-Jones not first been moved by Pre-Raphaelite painting’ – and Susan Casteras’s ‘Without the legacy of these Pre-Raphaelite friendships, forces and interconnections, the Kelmscott Press and its commanding contributions to the art of the book might never have been, or at least might have been very different indeed’, to Malcolm Haslam’s remark about the later carpets, ‘one is at a loss to say whether they are Persian or Gothic, until, that is, one realizes that they are neither; they are pure Morris’. Morris insisted that the influences to be drawn on by an artist were inevitably Nature and History, and, as far as he was concerned, Pre-Raphaelitism was part of that History. But his enthusiasm for nature and the arts of the Middle Ages, especially architecture and calligraphy, preceded his reading of Ruskin’s Edinburgh lecture; it was ‘the great Gothic Art which once pervaded all Europe’ that inspired him. Caroline Arscott seems to me to have been particularly successful in describing the qualities to which we respond in Morris; in her striking phrase, they offer ‘the vision of embodied cosmic unity’. If Morris did achieve, and convey, such a vision, and if we then press Arscott’s term beyond the visual, as in the vision at the end of News from Nowhere, we will find ourselves, with Morris, in the area of concern over our human attitude to the earth on which we live. Here, it seems to me, the
strongest element was Morris's innate awareness of, and sympathetic response to, the natural world. This was undoubtedly encouraged by his reading of Ruskin and others, and by his knowledge of a wide range of works of visual art, but it was not dependent on them so much as on his own inner being.

NOTES

1. This is a revised version of a lecture given at the conference on Pre-Raphaelitism at the University of Dundee in July 2011. I am grateful to Dr Jo George for her invitation to give the lecture.


4. Cook & Wedderburn, XII, p. 157. Ruskin gave four lectures on Architecture and Painting in Edinburgh during November 1853, the last being ‘Pre-Raphaelitism’. The lectures were published in 1854.


9. *ibid.*


13. Ray Watkinson, ‘Painting’, in Parry, pp. 90–98; p.90. Watkinson’s is the fullest account we have of this aspect of Morris’s work.


15. Parry, p. 91.


22. Parry, p. 102.
32. Cruise, p. 183.
34. Paul Thompson, p. 145.
35. Cruise p. 182.
39. Frank, pp. 76-77.
40. Frank, p. 78, pp. 79-80.
42. Vallance, p. 15.
44. Watkinson, pp. 175, 176, 195.
49. *CH*, p. 201.
51. Parry, p. 225; Paul Thompson, p. 122; Parry, p. 280.
55. E.P. Thompson, p. 61.
58. Arscott, p. 171.
59. Parry, p. 263.
60. Arscott, p. 191.
64. Haslam, pp. 58, 62, 78.
67. *CW*, Vol. XXII, p. 194; and see Note 49.
68. Paul Thompson, p. 119.


76. E.P. Thompson, p. 681.


78. Arscott, p. 223.
‘And my deeds shall be remembered, and my name that once was nought’: Regin’s Role in *Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs*

*Kathleen Ullal*

How on earth does Regin, as Snorri Sturluson’s avaricious ‘contriver-of-evil’, become transformed, in William Morris’s reshaping of *Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs*, into one of the most troubling and affecting characters in the poem? In reshaping the saga, Morris bestows careful attention on the character of Regin, anti-hero, and a crucial element in Morris’s redaction. As such, Regin deserves close consideration.

Morris’s interest in Regin was primarily because of his skills as a craftsman and an artist. Such skills are, however, so often interwoven and interlinked with memory and its manipulation, that the latter may also be viewed as a central element. The evocative nature of memory, its malleability, along with its power to shape lives and actions, are explored throughout the poem. Grimhild, for example, uses her powerful potions in order to distort and entangle the memories of Gunnar and Sigurd, to devastating effect on the lives of both men, as well as those of the women they marry. But it is the close association of memory with Regin’s craftsmanship which defines the most important section of the poem, Book II, entitled ‘Regin’. Morris’s artistic and literary treatment of different forms of memory in the poem – individual, collective, mythological – reveals a deep fascination with the power of memory to shape, and reshape, our lives and worlds. Our attention is drawn, then, not solely to Regin’s craftsmanship, but to the many ways in which Morris links Regin’s artistic skills with memory.

Through Regin Morris touches, too, on the relationship between memory and history. Since Morris’s time, our understanding of this relationship has
become ever more complex, as critical scholarship continues to reveal. Two of the earliest and most important studies are Maurice Halbwachs's *The Collective Memory* (1950), and Frances Yates's *The Art of Memory* (1966). Yates's account, while essentially tracing the importance attached to memory in the pre-print Renaissance world, also underscores the often untapped power of memory to shape the individual and society. In contrast, Halbwachs's work focused on the ways in which memory is both ‘autobiographical and historical’ in which ‘the former … make[s] use of the latter, since our life in history belongs, after all, to general history’. Halbwachs demonstrated the ways in which memory spans time, over which nothing much may change, but which exists within a cognisance of history as a series of events, a record of changes. Our memories of the past, for example, are composed from events which ‘we say “we remember” but only know about through newspapers or testimony of those directly involved … [and] often know such events no better than … historical events that occurred before [we were] born’.2

It is clear from both authors’ work that memory and history are social constructs, and that both are shaped by the human condition at the individual as well as the collective level. Both seem infinitely malleable and are made visible, as the historian Patrick Hutton notes,3 via the artistic and social phenomena through which we choose to remember the past, such as the monuments we erect, the museums we fund, the literary canon we acknowledge, as well as in the public rhetoric via which we recall, reconstruct, or represent the past. Morris’s treatment of Regin, ‘Singer of ancient days’,4 indicates a deep interest in how the craftsman might be remembered, even after death, through his own work, as well as how that work might enrich the lives and memories of those who experience it. Morris’s interest in the Icelandic sagas may simply have stemmed from the pleasure they gave him, as revealed in his letters to Georgiana Burne-Jones, drawn as he was to the world of the Icelanders, whose social structures he had come to know and admire. He also believed that the sagas offered a great ‘corrective to the mauldering side of medievalism’ and, at the same time, told the tale of the Norse cosmos, a world far more attractive to Morris than the Roman, which he believed to have been the ‘great curse of the ancient world’. A more complex reason for his interest – and the one most influential for this essay – is related to the ‘new spirit animating historical study’ during Morris’s time. This manifested itself in an apparent preference for the past over the present; one which might be traced in part to an identity crisis in the Victorian psyche, thought to stem from ‘an increasing alienation of individuals from “community structures” ’. The attraction of the sagas for Morris, then, may literally have stemmed from their being part of the distant past, and therefore capable of being coherently reshaped.5

While translating the *Volsunga Saga* (1870) – with the help of Eiríkr Magnús-son – Morris seems to have been drawn especially to *Sigurd*, the ‘central myth of
the Norse heroic tradition’. He described his feelings about the work in a letter to his friend, Charles Elliot Norton:

The scene of the last interview between Sigurd and the despairing and terrible Brynhild touches me more than anything I have ever met with in literature. There is nothing wanting in it, nothing forgotten, nothing repeated, nothing overstrained; all tenderness is shown without the use of a tender word, all misery and despair without a word of raving, complete beauty without an ornament, and all this in 2 pages of moderate print. In short it is to the full meaning of the word inspired.

These spare but haunting words reveal how much the story moved him. Morris suggests that while his friend may have ‘read abstracts of the story’, these would have given him ‘little idea of the depth and intensity of the work’ because of the disjointedness stemming from its ‘having been put together from varying versions of the same song’. So as well as indicating his appreciation of the deep humanity of the sagas, I think the letter hints too at Morris’s wish to make the story more coherent, in effect to reshape the legend, making it more human and less heroic, more about the social community in which the hero lives than the martial world in which he is the central figure. Recreating and reshaping the social order are thus central to Morris’s redaction, reflected in the attention he allot to individual behaviour in shaping stable and admirable social structures, and apparent most of all in his reshaping of Regin.

Morris clearly felt some ambivalence about recreating the story though, as evidenced by his comments later in the same letter that he had in mind to make an epic of the tale, but felt that ‘it would be foolish for no verse could render the best parts of it’. Epic, though, is exactly the genre he selects, although he adapts the form by making it more generous and inclusive, refusing to favour one story over another; he is relatively even-handed in the attention he bestows on all the main characters, heroic or otherwise. Before turning to Regin then, it is worth considering what epic means for us as social beings.

In *Imagination and Power: A Study of Poetry on Public Themes*, Thomas R. Edwards ‘discusses the “complicated self-awareness” which epic induces. It associates us gratifyingly with past greatness, with heroes who are our heroes; yet it also reminds us soberingly that it all is past, that we are less than our heritage’. Further, epic ‘allows us an imaginative association with greatness even as it makes us recognize that we are ordinary … and it allows us some comfort in this rueful understanding’. I think the duality articulated here was already discernible to Morris at the time he was writing *Sigurd*, hence his choice – and reshaping – of the epic form. Such a compound mix is evident too in Simon Dentith’s suggestion that the price paid for modernity was the loss of epic’s soothing and reassuring power. But that is surely felt only by those whose story epic tells – the victors,
not the losers, of history. Morris quite clearly is attentive, and sensitive, to the many stories, not the one. It is through Regin especially that Morris makes this clear, as he probes the ways in which memory and history serve to shape Regin’s life and fate.

Morris’s Regin is a more important, more complex and more appealing character than Snorri Sturluson’s version of him in the *Prose Edda*, where he appears in only four relatively short paragraphs. He is first mentioned as the son of the powerful Reidmar, who has just demanded gold from the gods for their killing of his son Otter; Regin then helps his brother Fafnir kill their father for the gold and, when Regin asks for his share, is ordered by Fafnir to disappear, or else face the same fate as their father. Later, Regin becomes smith to King Hjalprek, adopts Sigurd as his foster son, forges a sword for him, and then eggs him on to kill Fafnir for the gold. Finally, Regin is killed by Sigurd, who has already received a supernatural warning from the birds, whose language he can now understand, that Regin plans to murder him. Snorri’s brevity is transformed by Morris who, in contrast, names a whole section of the poem after Regin, allowing him at the same time some of the most haunting verses, forcing a reconsideration of the story from a perspective other than that of the heroic. It must be granted that Snorri is just as economical in relaying the story of Sigurd and Brynhild, and indeed other characters in the saga, but Regin, as an avaricious ‘contriver-of-evil’, elicits little sympathy in Snorri. He thus represents an unusual character for Morris to focus on; as such, Regin – not only ‘Master of Masters’ but also ‘Master of Sleight’ – is one of the most troubling and thought-provoking characters in *Sigurd*.

As a smith and talented craftsman, and member of a very long-lived race, Regin suggests both the crafting and the forging of history, since his life spans generations and thus also memory. He is also a seer; however, despite his ability to see the future, he still loses love, fame, wealth, and most of all, finds himself forgotten by the humans who have benefited so much from his skills. It is first through Regin, and his relationship with Sigurd, that questions and doubts begin to surface about power, whether in the form of a hero, wealth, gold, or wisdom, and the role memory plays in forming its shape or its acquisition.

There is some doubt as to whether Regin is a dwarf or a man, or even either of these. Morris initially describes him as ‘a certain man, beardless and low of stature’, as does Snorri, who also states that Regin’s father, Reidmar, is a farmer, ‘a powerful man with much skill in magic’. Yet, when Morris’s Regin begins to tell his story to Sigurd, he says that he comes ‘of the Dwarfs departed’. There is the suggestion here that Regin represents history as being irrevocably past, and yet, still there in the present. Regin’s race may have been forgotten, yet, in his role as Sigurd’s foster-father and teacher, he still bears influence on the present. The downfall of Regin’s race came with the arrival of ‘Gods amongst us’, and the seeds of change accompanying their arrival ultimately led to destruction rather than
growth. Frederick Kirchhoff describes the dwarves as aborigines who had at one time been the dominant race, until the coming of the Gods, who ‘undermined the power of the dwarves by teaching them the “hope and fear” of imaginative perception’. This new perception changed their lives, as, unhappy ‘with their lot and tormented by their new-found sense of guilt … the dwarves developed the arts of civilisation, but at length were corrupted by their greed for wealth and power’.  

For this reason Kirchhoff sees ‘lying behind the events of the poem … a mythic representation of Morris’s own ambivalence toward historical progress’.  

Equally, *Sigurd* may reflect Morris’s desire to explicate the formative patterns shaping life in order to effect change, rather than merely to record history’s progress. The many ways in which the past is remembered within the poem, through songs, weaving, story-telling, indicate Morris’s belief that history is plural, and because it has usually told the story of the victor, Regin’s sense of loss is representative of all those who have been displaced as the ‘losers’ in the ‘battle’ of history. Hence Morris’s redaction manages not only to make the many stories described in his letter to Norton a more coherent whole, but the poem also serves – in its reshaped epic form – to ensure that many voices are heard.

Regin regrets the passing of a simpler life, which had disappeared once the new race of Gods came on the earth. In their earlier state, untroubled by imagination, ‘the dwarves [could] live happy but uninspired lives. With it, they are destroyed by the boundlessness of their desire and the torments of their anxiety over things to come’.  

Regin’s regret over this is apparent in his impassioned reflections on the past, as he relates his race’s history to Sigurd:

> And how were we worse than the Gods, though maybe we lived not as long?  
> Yet no weight of memory maimed us, nor aught we knew of wrong;  
> What felt our souls of shaming, what knew our hearts of love?  
> We did and undid at pleasure, and repented nought thereof.  

As a dwarf Regin is troubled, then, not only by being part of a once powerful, but now usurped race, but also – thanks to their newly acquired faculty – by the terrible weight of memory. The word ‘maimed’, attached to memory, is loaded with meaning, with ‘weight’, leaving us with the sense that Regin is trapped, as well as debilitated by a memory which causes him to long for an innocent past now lost. At the same time, with his ability to see, and fear, the future – when he knows he will die at the hand of Sigurd – there can be no hope left in Regin’s life. He is scarred, too, by the memory of his father’s defiant words to the Gods, which Regin recalls when he tells Sigurd about his past:

> It was better in times past over, when we prayed for nought at all,  
> When no love taught us beseeching, and we had no troth to recall.
Through Regin, Morris highlights how closely woven together are memory and the past, pain and love. Regin’s pain stems from the loss of a simpler past – perhaps a distant past he had never experienced, but yet ‘remembers’ – when hearts which knew nothing of love meant that the dwarves led pleasurable lives, without guilt and without shame. Thus Morris gives some of the most moving words in the poem to Regin, when he relates the dubious inheritance bestowed on him by his father, Reidmar, ‘a covetous man and a king’ – an inheritance which ensures that Regin’s present is marred by grief-stricken memories of a lost past, as well as made fearful by knowledge of a future already mapped out for him and over which he has no control:

And to me the least and the youngest, what gift for the slaying of ease?
Save the grief that remembers the past, and the fear that the future sees;
And the hammer and fashioning-iron, and the living coal of fire;
And the craft that createth a semblance, and fails of the heart’s desire;
And the toil that each dawning quickens, and the task that is never done;
And the heart that longeth ever, nor will look to the deed that is won.18

There is a world of irony and heartache in this description of something which brings the ‘slaying of ease’ as a gift, an irony compounded by the hurt and depths of despair suggested by the following line – ‘the grief that remembers the past, and the fear that the future sees’. As Peter Burke writes, ‘victors can afford to forget, while the losers of battles are condemned to brood over it, relive it, and reflect how different it might have been’.19 This is especially true since Regin knows his fate, and thus ‘the craft that createth a semblance, and fails of the heart’s desire’ suggests a mind and soul being forced to confront a known and dreaded future, and to bear, at the same time, the burden of a past filled with grief. As Regin relates his past to Sigurd, ‘Yea we were exceeding mighty – bear with me yet my son; for whiles can I scarcely think it that our days are wholly done’, he echoes the earlier words of Sigurd’s own father, Sigmund, whose great sorrow was to die before his son was born. Sigmund’s dying words: ‘And the joy for his days that shall be hath pierced my heart to the root’, similarly call up heart-wrenching emotions associated with memories of the past on the one hand, and, since Sigmund is dying, the agony of the knowledge that he will never see his son; to all of which, according to his Volsung code of ethics, he must submit unflinching.20

As Sigurd’s foster father, Regin is an especially complex figure, since he is subservient to men, and yet his great wisdom and skills mean that he is appointed as foster-father to the future king and hero, who will be better than all other men before him. Regin is admonished to ensure that he teaches Sigurd everything he knows, the extent of which ‘three men’s lives thrice over thy wisdom might not learn’. ‘Three men’s lives thrice over’, based on a notional life-span of seventy years, amounts to six hundred years or so, taking us back to the Middle Ages.
Morris’s idealised vision of this age is reflected in the skills which Regin teaches Sigurd; ‘smithying … carving runes … tongues of many countries … soft speech for men’s delight … the dealing with the harp strings … winding ways of song … ’ – in essence, the literary, artistic and linguistic memory markers of the past. So, while Sigurd is the hero, all the understanding, knowledge, diplomacy and training he needs in order to make him fit for this role stem from the wisdom and teaching of Regin, ‘Master of Masters’. In contrast, in the human world it is only the ‘skills’ of fighting and war-making that Sigurd learns.21

One of the most striking images in the section which Morris entitled ‘Regin’ occurs with the re-forging of Sigmund’s sword. Sigurd asks Regin for a gift, and Regin says movingly there is nothing Sigurd might ask for that Regin would not get for him: ‘The world must be wide indeed / If my hand may not reach across it for aught thine heart may need’.22 Sigurd says he wishes for a sword, and Regin, after two failed attempts, finally forges together the broken shards of Sigurd’s father’s sword; those which Hiordis, Sigurd’s mother, collected from the battlefield on which Sigmund died. The re-forging of the sword is thus both a symbolic and a material link between past and present – Sigmund has held the sword in the past, and his son now holds it in his hands in the present. Both men are also linked via the sword to Regin, since it was he who originally made it for Sigmund, as Regin reveals:

But Regin cried to his harps strings: Before the days of men
I smithied the Wrath of Sigurd, and now is it smithied again:
And my hand alone hath done it, and my heart alone hath dared
To bid that man to the mountain, and behold his glory bared.23

Bound up in the sword, too, are images of the destruction it will likely wreak:

Then Sigurd saw it lying on the ashes slaked and pale,
Like the sun and the lightning mingled mid the even’s cloudy bale,
For ruddy and great were the hilts, and the edges fine and wan,
And all adown to the blood-point a very flame there ran
That swallowed the runes of wisdom wherewith its sides were scored.24

The idea of the flame causing the disappearance of wisdom harks back, via the death the sword will inflict, to earlier parts of the poem, in which we learn that men are only able to teach their sons the skill of battle. It harks back also to an earlier image, when Regin’s brother, Fafnir, in the semblance of a serpent, sits atop the great treasure of gold, sharing neither it nor his great wisdom with humans, thus rendering both useless.25

A key part of Regin’s fostering of Sigurd includes passing on the memory and history contained in story-telling about his own past, but with a dual purpose; to relate the past as history and at the same time to reveal its effect on him in the
present. He describes the pain he suffers at being forgotten by those very people with whom he has shared his skills and knowledge, those humans who, having learned from Regin’s many skills, so quickly forget from where their knowledge came. He tells how he taught their first generation skills such as reaping and sowing; then the next the craft of metal-working, sailing the seas, taming horses, yoke-beast husbandry, and the building of houses. After that another generation came along and he taught them needlework and weaving. Finally, he teaches them ‘the tales of old, and fair songs fashioned and true, and their speech grew into music, of measured time and due’.  

These ‘songs of measured time and due’ represent the last link in their memory of Regin. The importance for him in telling the tale is thus that at least he might be remembered. Regin’s other (and ulterior) motive is to goad Sigurd into an interest in the great deeds he has been born to do, the first of which is to win back for Regin the treasure and great knowledge for which he and his brother Fafnir murdered their father. Thus his story-telling evokes memories of the past, thereby helping Sigurd understand and fulfil his destiny, but at the same time allowing him treacherously to egg on his foster-son to commit murder for his own ends, thwarting the nobility which is part of Sigurd’s destiny. In effect, Regin repeats the sins of his own father, who urged his sons to ‘be evil and wise, that his will through them might be wrought’. Sigurd, in contrast, will break the pattern of revenge and thus act as a regenerative, rather than cyclically destructive, force.

Regin’s selfishness is redeemed, though, by his great love for his foster son. In recognising his own duplicity, Regin warns Sigurd to ‘trust not thy life in my hands in the day when most I seem / Like the Dwarfs that are long departed, and most of my kindred I dream’, a compassionate gesture (because he knows his own fate is sealed) from foster-father to son. Kirchhoff wonders whether Regin’s duality stems from the gift of imaginative perception bestowed on the dwarves by the gods, a dubious gift which compels a ‘lust for power [which] has its origin in the “hope and fear” of the future’. While ‘Regin may be a self deceiver … he seems genuinely to believe that the power he craves is power to undo the harm the gods have wrought’. This is so because if Regin does get his hands on the treasure his intention is:

To thaw this winter away and the fruitful tide to bring,
It shall grow, it shall grow into summer, and I shall be he that wrought,
And my deeds shall be remembered, and my name that once was nought;
Yea I shall be Frey, and Thor, and Freyia, and Bragi in one:
Yea the God of all that is, – and no deed in the wide world done,
But the deed that my heart would fashion: and the songs of the freed from the yoke
Shall bear to my house in the heavens the love and the longing of folk.
And there shall be no more dying, and the sea shall be as the land
And the world for ever and ever shall be young beneath my hand.30

Regin desires power then, but it is the power to do good, to introduce freedom, and to help ‘bear’ both the love and the longing of humanity. While we may not remember Regin in the dynastic conflagrations which ruin the saga world, we will remember that it was Regin – ‘Singer of ancient days’ – with his desire to remember the past, and be remembered by others, who fostered Sigurd, and helped make him the hero he became, a hero who ensured the cycle of vengeance was broken.

Morris’s use throughout the poem of words and expressions related to storytelling – such as ‘tales’, ‘deeds’, ‘fame’s increase’ – are almost a set of verbal worry beads, as he frets over the importance of story telling, of history, to life and to art, as Kirchhoff seems to indicate: ‘In his poetry and imaginative prose [Morris displays] an instinctive ability to submerge himself in a literary genre and work through it in such a way that its conventional themes and characters become the expression of his own deepest concerns’.31 That he makes Regin such a complex and affecting character is, I believe, Morris’s early recognition of what it means to be ‘other’, without power, the ‘loser’ rather than the ‘victor’ in history.

Five years after Sigurd, for example, he makes comparisons between his own privileged position with that suffered by the ‘brutal’ and ‘reckless’ workers he hears passing by his open study window, acknowledging that it is mere chance that has determined his own life be enriched by art and exquisite craftsmanship, while their lives in contrast are starkly impoverished. As he relates in ‘Art and the Beauty of the Earth’ (1881), his initial response to their presence was aggressive and lacking in sympathy for their lot.32 In retrospect, though, he understands how little control they possess over their lives and livelihood. Creating and reshaping the character of Regin may have helped him come to this more considerate understanding, as Morris’s exploration of the dwarf’s troubled past, his haunting memories, and his all too human weaknesses and strengths, similarly draw the same conflicting response.

By paying closer attention to Morris’s reshaping of Regin, with his troubled past and haunting memories, we may see more clearly the ways in which our own problematical relationship with history and memory is formed, especially since both are constructed essentially from the same events and images. We may see more clearly, too, the ways in which Morris believed that this most important of human relationships might be clarified and strengthened by paying closer attention to artists and their craftsmanship, and how these help shape our relationship with the past, and the future.
NOTES


11. Sturluson, pp. 110–113. In contrast to Sturluson’s brevity, the structure of Morris’s poem itself also indicates the need for a closer consideration. Morris divides the poem into four books, the second of which he names ‘Regin’.
If we agree with J.W. Mackail (The Life of William Morris, 2 Vols, London: Longmans, 1901, Vol. 1, p. 331) that Book I, which is named for Sigurd’s father Sigmund, is extraneous, then Regin clearly is an important focus of Morris’s attention.

15. Ibid..
16. Sigurd, p. 84.
17. Sigurd, p. 90.
20. Sigurd, p. 84, p. 62.
21. Sigurd, p. 76, p. 77,
27. Sigurd, p. 85; Oberg, pp. 102–103.
28. Sigurd, p. 84.
30. Sigurd, p. 100.
Morris’s Late Style and the Irreconcilabilities of Desire

Ingrid Hanson

In the first essay in his posthumous collection, On Late Style, Edward Said sets out to ‘explore the experience of late style that involves a nonharmonious, nonserene tension, and above all, a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness going against’. The notion of ‘late style’ seems particularly applicable to the work of William Morris, a writer always acutely aware of tensions and wary of serenity, yet whose romances of the 1890s, I suggest, perform the task of ‘highlighting and dramatizing’ what Said terms ‘irreconcilabilities’ in a new way, often in spite of themselves. As Christine Bolus-Reichert notes, Morris’s late romances have until recently been critically sidelined because ‘they seem to represent the final, decadent phase of an otherwise aesthetically innovative or socially committed career’. Recent recuperative work, including her own, however, has highlighted their continuity with Morris’s politics and his aesthetics. Readings such as Philippa Bennett’s, which emphasises the role of wonder in the late romances, or John Plotz’s, on the universality of desire in the tales, perform this kind of recuperation. But in doing so, they suggest a shift in Morris’s work towards what Said terms ‘the accepted notion of age and wisdom’, which entails ‘a new spirit of reconciliation and serenity’, in the service of an internally harmonious but culturally resistant political vision. Here, I argue, rather, that in spite of the romances’ evident concern with beauty and harmony, their style, their form, and above all their emphasis on the urgency of the erotic, express ‘lateness’ and dissonance in the form of an attenuated Gothic sensibility which simultaneously refuses and enacts notions of desire, violation and completeness.

If, as Julian Wolfreys suggests, the Gothic may be present ‘in the most conventional of narratives and the most unlikely discourses’, in the form of fragments, traces, tropes and signs rather than generic markers, it surfaces in Morris’s late works in their emphasis on the non-rational, the incarceration of women, in doublings, repetitions and iterations of the self within and across works, and in their emphasis on lushness and excess. Yet they offer beauty rather than sublimity and undercut the fear or terror associated with the Gothic by their stylistic
refusal of fragmentation or incompleteness. Unlike the early, self-evidently and deliberately disjointed romances which foreshadow and inhabit them, these late works do not immediately suggest a fracturing of identity or a grasping for wholeness. Nonetheless their very aesthetic expansiveness, and the universality of their generic characters, work in tension with their intertextual, haunted evocations of individual desire to suggest the irreconcilability of individual and communal identity. In resolution of this tension, instead of offering self-sacrificing battle, as do Morris’s socialist romances and poems of the 1880s, these late tales posit an economy of boundless abundance and corporeal mutuality through kisses and caresses, which complicate but cannot quite erase the boundaries between the self and the other.

Such abundance is evident in the form of the tales, as well as in their content. While Morris’s earliest Oxford and Cambridge Magazine romances (1856) and his Defence of Guenevere poems (1858) – collections he later respectively described as ‘very young’ and ‘exceedingly young’ – offer fragmented glimpses, scenes of somatic dissolution and ghostly reappearances after death, his late romances progress with narrative certainty through the magical events and landscapes of the tales. They are firmly rooted in the material world, however anti-realist its portrayal; they make solid the ungraspable distances and chronological disjunctions of the earlier stories. Morris’s last romance, The Sundering Flood (1897) tells a tale of the separation of two lovers, their quest to find each other and their final reunion in an elaboration of the far more uncertain and fragmented early romance ‘A Dream’. In this short, uncanny tale within a tale, told by a series of narrators, a momentary failure of understanding between lovers leads to repeatedly deferred consummation as they take on different bodily forms and appear fleetingly to one another over generations. By contrast, in The Sundering Flood, Osberne and Elfhild, separated first by the river which gives the tale its name, and then by war and attempted rape, journey through magical lands and encounter supernatural characters, but are finally united physically: And he cried out: “O my sweet, where is now the Sundering Flood?” And there they were in each other’s arms, as though the long years had never been.

A similar moment of reunion occurs at the end of ‘A Dream’, but with a less satisfying conclusion: the lovers clasp each other ‘after their parting of a hundred years’ and cling together lovingly until they ‘slowly faded away into a heap of snow-white ashes’. The Flood suggests amplitude rather than this kind of evanescence, certainty rather than doubt. The multiple narrators of the early story are replaced by a third-person omniscient narrator, except when characters within the tale recount their own adventures. In The Sundering Flood’s retelling, the landscapes and communities through which the lovers travel are not shifting and oneiric, but detailed and solid.

Yet the very certainty and solidity of these late romances suggests an eva-
sion; they diffuse the unmagical brutalities of violence and death, absorbing them into the tales, but never quite neutralising them. They defer endings by the expansiveness of their narration, and put off old age by magic. While the early romances deal with death via glimpsed ghosts or revenants, and snatched tales of afterlives, and with violence as vivid corporeal sensation, these late tales dramatise instead the struggle between desire and community, continuity and consummation. When deaths in battle occur, they are almost always subsumed into the narrative of desire which brings them about. As Anna Vaninskaya points out, Morris’s protagonists consistently choose death of the body rather than the kind of eternal half-life of inaction and loneliness which Hallblithe rejects in The Story of the Glittering Plain (1891), or indeed that from which Birdalorne rescues the three sisters in The Water of the Wondrous Isles. The stories themselves put off the finality of death: they offer conclusions in which death is neither defeated nor embraced but rather deferred by supernaturally long and happy earthly—and earthly—lives.8

In The Sundering Flood, edited by May Morris from manuscripts after her father’s death, there is no final ending for the hero. Rather, Osberne grows older year by year while Steelhead, his mentor, ‘changed not at all, but was ever the same’.9 Through this doubling, the story itself dramatises the longing for eternal life, without any of the violent transgressions or subversive longings which mark Oscar Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890).10 Instead Osberne’s maturing is marked, over the years, by the battle violence legitimised by the story, in which he is schooled by Steelhead. While the tale celebrates the vigorous longings and achievements of youth, its ending simultaneously offers up the impossibility of its continuity for the individual and suggests its perpetually re-invigorating presence in community.

Theodore Watts, writing in The Athenæum, noted the untimely quality of youthfulness in the romances: ‘at the age of sixty or thereabouts [Morris] is still pouring out his lovely things, more full of the glory of youth, more full of romantic adventure and romantic love, than any of the beautiful poems in his first volume’.11 This is not, as he rightly suggests, the youthfulness of Morris’s own younger days; there is little here of the tormented uncertainty which runs through his coruscating, fragmented early works. Instead, these late ‘lovely things’ explore irreconcilabilities in poetic prose suffused with a ‘nonserene’ and troublesome longing whose primary object is neither community nor continuity but consummation.

Morris’s own body became ill during the later 1890s while his writings concerned themselves more and more with beautiful bodies fully alive. Sensuality is expressed in fantastical worlds in which notions of character are absorbed into the central question of erotic desire and its fulfillment. The stories from this time both expand and circumscribe what might legitimately be desired, freeing their
women from dependence on men, but nonetheless contriving to reduce all the heroines – from The Hostage to Elfhild via the Lady of Abundance, Ursula, the Maid and Birdalone – to universal desiring and desired objects. As Angela Carter argues in relation to the stereotypes of pornography, ‘the nature of the individual is not resolved into but is ignored by these archetypes, since the function of the archetype is to diminish the unique “I” in favour of a collective, sexed being’.12

These are not the recalcitrant, awkward, contentious women of Morris’s early poems, but rather uniformly beautiful and sexually responsive young women in the relentless male gaze of the stories. In The Water of the Wondrous Isles, with its erotic enumeration of Birdalone’s naked body parts by her benign double the wise woman Habundia, the ghostly voice of Guenevere’s fractured, aggressive, blazonic self-description might be heard. But where the early poem writthes and twists and shifts, Birdalone’s moment of self-awareness is continuous with the smoothly confident prose of the story.13 The reader is invited to participate in the text’s lingering gaze as Birdalone becomes aware of herself by looking and hearing. While there is no distortion or contortion in this description – as there is in Guenevere’s – neither does it suggest an active subject. Rather Habundia, a benign, mothering Frankenstein, brings Birdalone into being by her words: from her ‘strong and clean-wrought ankles and feet’ to her ‘carven chin’ and lips ‘of finest fashion’ she is a woman carefully crafted to give pleasure.14 This moment marks the beginning of Birdalone’s adulthood and – in the tale’s textually coercive narrative of availability – her experience of being universally desired.

John Plotz argues that the late romances’ lack of naturalistic individuality or personal interiority arises from their refusal of empathy, in favour of a more active ‘intersubjectively constituted solidarity’.15 Yet Morris does not allow such solidarity to be the final word of his romances; they are not primarily concerned with the communal good, but with individual – if not individualised – yearning which works alongside universalism and against solidarity. The exigencies of desire are necessarily exclusive to some extent, even within the tales’ narratives of abundant and promiscuous eroticism. Individual desire is evoked, or drawn in from beyond the replete world of the tale, by an explicit textual voyeurism which takes the fairytale motifs of imprisonment, violence and violation and uses them as a source of pleasure.

Plotz suggests that the romances’ ‘depersonalization’ arises not from ‘the elimination of romantic desire and sensual beauty from the texts but rather from a new way of generalizing such desire’. He goes on to qualify this statement by arguing that ‘particular bodies do not disappear from the romances […]. Bodily beauty is frankly described and treasured, and yet from it follows none of the breathless romance that it would be expected to provide in a Victorian novel’.16 Bodily beauty – particularly female beauty – is not just described and treasured, however; it is also exploited and objectified in a way which is ‘nonserene’ and
'nonharmonious’ in its very insistence on the equation of beauty, erotic desire and availability.

Plotz’s endorsement of the intense and widespread corporeal desire of the romances does not fully register its frequently uncomfortable, oppressive or threatening tone for the women who are its objects. Birdalonde, desired by almost all the men who come across her, feels compelled to submit to their embraces: from the old castellan who knelt at her feet and ‘kissed her hand again, and again, and yet again,’ and followed her with his eyes, or the priest who ‘caught her hand and kissed it’ and longed sullenly for her, to Atra’s lover, Arthur, the Black Squire. At the very first sight of her, Arthur, who later becomes her lover, falls to his knees and kisses first one hand and then another, ‘and then both the hands together all over the backs of them, and then the palms thereof, and he buried his face in the two palms and held them to his cheeks’.17 The tales foist this general desirability on their female characters in an echo of the words of the wise woman to the Lady of Abundance in her girlhood: ‘henceforth no man who seeth thee once will forget thee ever, or cease to long for thee: of a surety this is thy weird’.18 Like Birdalone, the Lady of Abundance is offered to readers for their pleasure, in a textual move which insists on the legitimacy of the desires of the body and the crossing of boundaries it entails.

While the early romances explored battle violence between men as a way of crossing boundaries between the world, the self and the other, the late tales dramatise the dissonance between individual and communal desire, act and knowledge. Howard Booth points out, in relation to News from Nowhere, that ‘the closing chapters […] indulge an older man’s fantasy’ in their account of Guest’s feelings for Ellen. The late romances replay this element of erotic fantasy over and over again. In doing so they perform the double act of affirming desire expressed through kisses and embraces as a way of knowing, and at the same time demonstrating its limitations and the difficulties of reconciling its vagaries with the common good.19 As Morris himself commented in a letter to Burne-Jones, discussing his need to take political action: ‘I wish I were not so damned old. If I were but twenty years younger. But then you know there would be the Female complication somewhere. Best as it is after all’. 20 The sense that the ‘Female’ is always a ‘complication’ is elaborated with less subtlety in the late romances than in any of his other works.

The tales themselves serve the function of fulfilling but at the same time whetting desire. In The Well at the World’s End (1896), Ralph urges the Lady of Abundance, when she pauses in her tale of an earlier lover, to ‘go on with thy tale, for the words thereof are as thy kisses to me, and the embracing of thine hands and thy body: tell on, I pray thee’. The kisses and embraces of the tale itself, then, offer a means of both pleasure and knowing, expressed through a fantasy of erotic availability.
In the same tale, Ralph and Ursula’s mutual acknowledgement of their love is achieved after Ralph rescues the ‘mother-naked’ Ursula from ‘a huge bear, as big as a bullock’, which pursues her as she comes out of the river after bathing. Ursula, having nothing but a little axe with which to attack the bear, does so vigorously; ‘but he, […], having risen to his hind legs, fenced with his great paws like a boxer, and smote the axe out of her hand, and she cried out bitterly and swerved from him and fell a-running again’. Ralph slays the bear, and when Ursula has dressed, he ‘cast himself upon her without a word, and kissed her greedily’, while she in turn, ‘kissed and caressed him as if she could never be satisfied’. While the fin-de-siècle socialist journalism of Commonweal and Justice offered images of sexual rapacity and vampiric greed as a representation of capitalist exploitation, here transferral of the idea of greed to the realm of shared pleasure suggests an economy of the body rather than of money, in which appetite is mutual rather than predatory.

Nonetheless such mutuality is suspect. Greed, a potent signifier of immoral individualism associated in Morris’s earlier works with money-love and cowardice, becomes strangely polyvalent in the late romances, suggesting something of the destructive possibilities of desire and its fulfillment. While it is employed in a negative sense to make evident the designs of such evil characters as the King’s Son in The Wood Beyond the World (1894), who is ‘greedy’ for the Maid’s beauty, it is also used both for the passionate desire of lovers such as Ralph and Ursula, and for the overwhelming yearnings of men who are not entirely evil but rather overcome by a woman’s erotic appeal. In The Water of the Wondrous Isles, the Black Knight who kidnaps Birdalone has lips ‘over-sweet and licorous’ and eyes which ‘she must needs suffer, as he gazed greedily on the trimness of her feet and legs’. His greedy desire is reprehensible, but not wholly unexpected in the tale, and Birdalone restrains but does not entirely rebuff him. The denial of impermeable boundaries between the self and the other, the acceptance of mutual dependence and intersubjectivity, is here dramatised in all its complexity. Birdalone refuses the touch of the Knight’s hand and prevents him from raping her, but she cannot refuse his gaze. The tale itself similarly condemns the Knight but cannot turn away from dwelling on his desires.

There are, in the romances’ obsessive dwelling on desire, attenuated elements of what Andrew Smith describes as the essence of ‘Male Gothic’: ‘male violence, female persecution and semi-pornographic scenes’. It is a characteristic of Morris’s late style, however, that it simultaneously celebrates and neutralises its fragments of the Gothic, offering a lush fantasy in which desire, both mutual and unreciprocated, is expressed through kisses, rather than in the detail suggested by ‘semi-pornographic scenes’. Male violence is passed over quickly and female persecution is of short duration, but these motifs nonetheless run through all the romances and drive their plots. In The Well at the World’s End, Ralph rescues the
Lady of Abundance from her captors, one of whom is leading her ‘by a rope tied about her neck [...] as though he were bringing a cow to market’, while in *The Sundering Flood* Elfhild twice narrowly escapes rape by the chapman, who first comes to her house and then captures her on the road. In both stories the heroes encounter thralls, torture victims and captives.\(^{25}\)

In the representation of overwhelming desire, the tales demonstrate its affinities with violence and its capacity to manipulate rather than reward. In *The Wood beyond the World*, Walter is tantalised by the Lady showing him the Maid’s body. She kisses the silent Maid’s cheeks and lips, undoes the lacing of her gown and bares her shoulders to show her off to Walter, who is ‘shamefaced’ and ‘confused [...] with the fresh sight of the darling beauty of the maid’. Later Walter secretly observes the Maid being molested by the King’s Son, who ‘thrust himself close up against her, [...] smiled on her licorously, and took her by the shoulders, and kissed her face many times’, while extracting a promise of more from her.\(^{26}\) While the King’s Son is odious and deceptive, and the Maid escapes before she must fulfil her promise, there is a textual acceptance of the limitlessness of desire which is at odds with the tale’s narrative of escape. In this regard, it intersects with anxious contemporary social as well as literary tropes of violation and oppression.

These are tales which are, as Said writes of Adorno, ‘in, but oddly apart from’ the present.\(^{27}\) They engage with it obliquely, offering it back to itself in altered form. In 1885, ten years before the publication of *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, the romance most concerned with female incarceration, Morris had read and publicly commented on W.T. Stead’s sensational exposé of the sexual exploitation of young girls in London. In a series of articles entitled ‘The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon’, published in his journal *The Pall Mall Gazette*, Stead provided intimate details of the seduction or abduction and rape of young girls in brothels and private homes in London, comparing the trade to the sacrifice of virgins to the Minotaur in ancient Greece.\(^{28}\) *Commonweal* subsequently carried an account of a meeting ‘on the recent exposures’, at which Morris is reported to have commented on the economic aspects of prostitution, noting that ‘the real Minotaur is Capital – not one man, but the whole system is guilty’.\(^{29}\) Against the gothic, underground machinations of this kind aspect of capitalism, and the class and gender anxieties raised by Stead’s reports, Morris sets his anti-realist tales of predation and entrapment overcome by an economy of mutual, corporeal generosity. His political response to Stead’s exposures is in large part one which looks for systemic rather than personal causes and emphasises the economic over the sensational. His literary imagination, however, reframes the images of sexual violence and the lushly excessive reportage of these events to write fairy tales which confront, without resolving, the irreconcilabilities of pleasure and desire, coercion and refusal.

As Roger Luckhurst points out, ‘the Gothic [...] stands for everything not:
not modern, not enlightened, not free, not Protestant, not English’, 30 a formulation which works in tension, in Morris’s writing, with Said’s concept of late style ‘going against’. While what Morris’s style goes against may not be quite contiguous with Luckhurst’s list, he dramatizes ‘going against’ the contemporary world through the anti-realism of the late romances, drawing on familiar Gothic tropes but avoiding the Gothic’s frightening transgressions, re-imagining the events of the world in fantastic form, but without terror. In the generalised world of the romances, there are few taboos to transgress, and the boundaries between good and evil may be traversed, as they are by such characters as the Black Knight in The Water of the Wondrous Isles, or the Lady of Utterbol’s maid, Agatha, in The Well at the World’s End. In each case the intended capture and ravishment of the tale’s protagonist is averted because of their beauty. Yet there are figures located entirely outside the economy of generosity in which beauty and kindness regulate overwhelming desire. The late romances are haunted by the foundational figure of the witch, a shape-shifter who captures young girls, and who evokes the madams whom Stead depicts in the ‘Maiden Tribute’ as much as the magical sorceresses of fairy and folk tale.

The fascination of the witch for Morris is evident across his work, from her early appearance in ‘Rapunzel’ to her key role in The Water of the Wondrous Isles or The Well at the World’s End. 31 In 1893 he oversaw the Kelmscott Press publication of Lady Wilde’s translation of Meinhold’s Sidonia the Sorceress, an early favourite with Burne-Jones and Rossetti. The witch, capable of utilising sexuality in the interests of dominance, but unsusceptible to desire, remains as a symbol of trouble, opposition and anxiety in the romance world of acquiescence.

This is not the kind of dissonance which Tony Pinkney suggests characterises Morris’s portrayal of Ellen in News from Nowhere, who functions in the closed world of Nowhere as a marker of potential future change, ‘injecting aesthetic as well as sexual dissonance into a culture that has nearly collapsed into one-dimensional postmodernity’. 32 In the lush, desiring worlds of the romances, witches suggest not change and futurity, but rather the fear of what is hidden and deadened; like the people of the Acre of the Undying in The Story of the Glittering Plain, they evoke neither journey nor return, but imprisonment, absence and a predatory desire for control which serves as a distorted double to the tales of travelling and returning, touching and discovering. 33

Yet, like the unresolved ghosts of past tales and the shadows of present events, the tales absorb their revenant witches into their amplitude and confidence, offering the pleasures of the tale as both an alternative to the world and a means of understanding it. Said writes of the composer Richard Strauss’s late works: ‘Truly this world is prehistorical in its freedom from daily pressures and cares, and its seemingly limitless capacity for self-indulgence, amusement and luxury; and this too is a characteristic of twentieth-century late style’. 34 While ‘self-indulgence,
amusement and luxury’ sound rather less purposeful, more languid than Morris’s work, there is a sense of all of these qualities in the late romances, in their representation of universal passion and its objects as much as in their dense, highly patterned and repetitive prose.

Indeed these are qualities identified by Morris’s contemporaries, notably Swinburne. Reviewing the romances shortly after Morris’s death – a fact which surely influences the hyperbolic tone of his article – he describes *The Wood Beyond the World* as a ‘beautiful story of adventure and suffering and love which enchanted all readers’, and compares Morris with Coleridge, ‘the most imaginative, the most essentially poetic, among all poets of all nations and all time’. The self-indulgence and amusement in these stories function as a refusal of the dominant literary forms and social structures of Morris’s day.

Michael Wood notes, in words which might apply as much to Morris as to Said, that ‘it is part of the generosity of Said’s critical imagination that he sees “amusement” as a form of resistance. He can do this because amusement, like pleasure or privacy, does not require reconciliation with a status quo or a dominant regime’. At the same time, in Morris’s work, it exposes its own aporias. His late style looks forward to the twentieth century in this indulgence of the physical and corporeal alongside the insistence on an aesthetics of alterity, foreshadowing elements of the intensity of Ezra Pound’s early Romanticism, and D. H. Lawrence’s preoccupation with the corporeal and erotic.

If there is always, for Morris, the kind of ‘relationship between bodily condition and aesthetic style’ which Said posits in his analysis of late style, it is a relationship as evident in the irreconcilabilities of age and youth, longing and satisfaction in the texts of the late romances as it is in the energetic battle-lore of the early works. As Said’s friend and colleague, Stathis Gourgouris writes, ‘late style is precisely the form that defies the infirmities of the present, as well as the palliatives of the past, in order to seek out [its] future, to posit it and perform it even in words and images, gestures and representations, that now seem puzzling, untimely or impossible’. To an extent this may seem to be what Morris’s work always does, and to that extent, he was always ‘late’, out of his time. Here, in the last romances, however, haunted as they are by his earlier works, by the literature of the past and by the history of the present, he combines defiance with self-indulgence to create stories which rely, more than any of his earlier work, on the simultaneous performance and denial of consummation, individual satisfaction, and communal happiness.

NOTES

1. Edward W. Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature against the Grain*, Lon-
don: Bloomsbury, 2006, p. 7 (Afterwards Late Style).
15. Plotz, p. 938.
16. Ibid.
22. ‘Capital is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks’. Capital, abridged edn, David McLellan, ed, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 149.
27. Introduction, Late Style, p. xiv.
29. Commonweal, 1.8, September 1885, p. 78.
34. Late Style, p. xiv.
37. Quoted in Michael Wood, Introduction to Late Style, p. xv.
Reviews

Edited by Peter Faulkner


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 subheadings 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 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 dactylics,
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’.

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’. At the end of this section, Phelan goes on to discuss ‘The Message of the March Wind’ – 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’.

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


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-Rowsell, probably Briggs’s sternest critic, was, as early as 1958, complaining that ‘I scent a certain l’etat 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-Rowsell, 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*

95

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 Nimüe. 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, Hawtorden, 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


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’.


John Purkis


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 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 (As₂O₃) – 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; CuHAsO₃), 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, wallpaper 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
Contributions to the Journal are welcomed on all subjects relating to the life and works of William Morris. The Editor would be grateful if contributors could adhere to the following guidelines when submitting articles and reviews:

1. Contributions should be in English, and word-processed or typed using 1.5 spacing, and printed on one side of A4 or 8.5 x 11 paper. They should be ca. 5000 words in length, although shorter and longer pieces will also be considered.

2. Articles should ideally be produced in electronic form (e.g. as a Word.doc or .rtf format). Please send your article as an email attachment to editor@williammorris-society.org.uk, or on a floppy disk or CD, and marked for the attention of the Editor, JWMS, to The William Morris Society, Kelmscott House, 26 Upper Mall, Hammersmith, London w6 9ta, United Kingdom

3. Contributions in hard copy only are also accepted, and may be sent to the same address.

4. In formatting your article, please follow JWMS house style by consulting a recent issue of the Journal. Back issues are available from the William Morris Society at the above address, or online at http://www.morrissociety.org/jwms.samples.html.

5. An expanded version of these guidelines, which contributors are also urged to consult, may be found at http://www.williammorrissociety.org.uk/contributors.shtml, or may be obtained from the Editor. Articles which do not follow JWMS house style may be returned to authors for re-editing.

6. Copyright. Remember to obtain permission from the copyright owner/owning institution(s) (e.g. the Tate Gallery, William Morris Gallery, etc.) in order to reproduce any image(s) you wish to include. Please note that it is ultimately the author's responsibility to secure permissions to reproduce images. Copies of permissions to reproduce copyright illustrations will be requested from authors by the editor once articles have been accepted for publication. Permissions relating to Morris's own works should be sought from: The General Secretary, Society of Antiquaries of London, Burlington House, Piccadilly, London, w1j 0be, United Kingdom, or by email at admin@sal.org.uk.

7. At the end of your article please include a short biographical note of not more than fifty words.

Please note that the views of individual contributors are not to be taken as those of the William Morris Society.
Notes on Contributors

Phillippa Bennett is Senior Lecturer and Course Leader for English at the University of Northampton, and Vice-Chair of the William Morris Society. She has published a number of articles on William Morris, and is particularly interested in his last romances and their relationship to his aesthetic and political ideals. Her *The Last Romances and the Kelmscott Press*, based on her 2006 Kelmscott Lecture was published in 2009.


Peter Faulkner taught English at the University of Exeter until his retirement in 1998; he is a former editor of this Journal and Honorary Secretary of the Society.

Mike Foulkes is Associate Professor in Environmental Analytical Chemistry at Plymouth University. His research interests include ‘Arsenic Speciation in Poultry’ (MAFF/DEFRA), and the European Measurement and Testing programme ‘Arsenic species in the Environment’. He is also co-author of numerous scientific publications regarding other toxic elements.

Ingrid Hanson was winner of the Peter Floud Memorial Prize 2008, and gained her PhD in 2011 at the University of Sheffield, where she now teaches part-time. She has published articles on Morris in *English* and *The Review of English Studies* and is currently completing a monograph on violence in Morris’s texts and contexts.

Patrick O’Sullivan is Editor of the *Journal*, and taught Environmental Science at the recently (and imprecisely) renamed ‘Plymouth University’ for more years than he now cares to think about.
John Purkis joined the William Morris Society in 1960, and is a former Honorary Secretary. He was with the Open University from 1970, and is currently writing a memoir of his time in Finland during the 1950s.

Gabriel Schenk is a DPhil student at Pembroke College, Oxford. He is currently researching King Arthur as a heroic ‘type’ translated into different literary forms, between the Eglinton Tournament and the Second World War.

Martin Stott has been a member of the William Morris Society since 1995 and joined the Committee in 2011.

Kathleen Ullal completed her MA at the University of Waikato, New Zealand in 2010. Her thesis traced the themes of memory and history in three major works from the beginning, middle and end of Morris’s career.