

# Editorial: In praise of scholarship

*Patrick O'Sullivan*

I am very pleased that this issue of the *Journal* contains essays by four distinguished Morris scholars – Florence Boos, Beth Helsing, Lynn Hulse and Wendy Parkins. As this is ‘my’ penultimate issue, it is good to see the *Journal* attracting input from scholars of such distinction, even though it seems that it continues to be ignored – long may that happen – by the utilitarian bean counters who compile various spurious tables of ‘academic success’. Much of this current reputation is surely due to the efforts of my predecessor, Rosie Miles, who oversaw conversion of *JWMS* from a (highly valuable) ‘house journal’ into a full-blown scholarly periodical. As to the current issue, I feel I must also reveal, as its editor, that none of the above contributions were in any way solicited by me: their arrival was entirely spontaneous.

Sadly, this issue also marks the passing of Norman Kelvin, the indefatigable editor of *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, which – along with the *Collected Works* – is surely the Morris source most frequently cited in these and other pages. I never actually spoke to Norman – I saw him at the ‘News from Nowhere’ conference held in Oxford during the early 1990s, but was too in awe of him to introduce myself – but had I known of him then what I now learn from Peter Faulkner’s article, (p. 6) I would certainly have done so. The article mentions Norman’s contribution to the special issue we compiled in honour of Peter (*JWMS* Vol. XX No. 2, Summer 2013): when I asked for contributions to this volume, Norman was one of the very first to agree – by return. As I did not know then of the friendship between Norman and Peter, this rapid and positive response represented a most pleasant surprise – another piece of serendipity, if solicited this time. During the course of our correspondence, Norman invited me to his house on Riverside Drive; an offer which – as I possess no interest in mega-cities (even Art-Deco ones), and am terrified of flying – I was unlikely to take up. But now, again on reading Peter’s article, I am fairly glad I did not own up to this particular piece of chicken-heartedness to a veteran of World War II.

In this issue we mark the impact of Morris’s journeys to Iceland, particularly

upon his family (his ‘Icelandic Imaginary’), and the lively relationship between Morris’s sister-in-law Elizabeth (‘Bessie’) Burden and the Royal School of Needlework. Articles then follow discussing the impact of Morris’s work and ideas on early twentieth century Chicago, and the formation of the first William Morris Society. We also print reviews of books on Eleanor Marx, erstwhile comrade of Morris, and two on John Ruskin – a man currently appearing in various feature films, not always to his advantage it seems, but who was the early ‘master’ of Morris and his circle. These are followed by reviews of books on ‘faith’ and ‘spirituality’ – not words, as Richard Frith points out, associated with Morris (although ‘hope’ is another matter) – in the work of Algernon Charles Swinburne, on Sir Ambrose Heal, entrepreneur of the Arts and Crafts, and on the stained glass of the J. Paul Getty Museum. Finally, I am very pleased to print two masterly reviews of books on Morris’s political ideas – one on the legacy of E.P. Thompson, whose *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* I have always considered a great work of literature as well as scholarship, the other on *Utopia as Method*.

As Martin Crick points out in his review, it was Thompson who identified a key aspect of Morris’s thought; that socialist revolution requires not just an economic change, but a moral one. As far as ‘Morris the Green’ is concerned, this point could not be more crucial. For a ‘red-green’ revolution, which is what it must surely now be, would not see Nature – as does capitalism – as a source of (personal) ‘wealth’, nor even as a set of resources to be harnessed, either in the pursuit of profit, or in the interests of the ‘glorious revolution’, but as a community, of which humanity is only one component (an entirely legitimate one, however – you will not find Lovelock’s ‘planetary cancer’ in Morris). Thus, in *News from Nowhere*, the wilderness is not tamed, but left in peace (‘We like these pieces of wild nature’), and the productive landscape no longer ‘an ill-kept, poverty-stricken farm’, but ‘a garden, where nothing is wasted and nothing is [spoiled]’ (Chapter 10), and commodities are taken from Nature in order to make goods *only* on the basis of need (Chapter 15).

It seems that it is fashionable to decry the value of scholarship, to predict ‘the death of the book’, and to argue that scholars should get out of their ivory tower (these prophets do love cliché) and engage with the wider community via social media, particularly in the interests of engaging the attention of ‘young people’. Apart from underestimating the capacity of such people to do these things for themselves (I write as the father of a family full of ‘reds’), I have reservations about this approach. Although I understand these things only in vague terms, one thing I think my generation must avoid if we are to get Morris’s ideas across to those younger than ourselves – the vast majority of the human species these days I’m afraid – is being thought ‘sad’. And I do find such arguments somewhat patronising of young people. For example, during the original occupation of Tahrir Square, Jeremy Paxman asked one of the occupiers, Gigi Ibrahim, what

she intended to put in place of the Mubarak regime. ‘After all, you young people don’t have an ideology, do you? What’s your political position?’ Back came the most wonderful answer: ‘I’m a revolutionary socialist!’

The inhabitants of Nowhere do not encourage ‘bookishness’, at least not the ‘early’ kind. Instead, like Morris, who hated school, and schools (‘boy farms’), and who learned stained glass making, bleaching and dyeing, and Icelandic for himself, people learn anything they need to learn—skills, techniques, languages—as and when they are needed. However, places of book-learning are not unheard of:

... where the houses are thinly scattered they run large, and are more like the old colleges than ordinary houses as they used to be. That is done for the sake of society, for a good many people can dwell in such houses, as the country dwellers are not necessarily husbandmen; though they almost all help in such work at times. The life that goes on in these big dwellings in the country is very pleasant, especially as some of the most studious [people] of our time live in them, and altogether there is a great variety of mind and mood to be found in them which brightens and quickens the society there. (Chapter 10)

So, maybe the opposite is true. Maybe people such as myself do need to get out more, and ‘down with kids’. If so, my only question would be: ‘Without the work of such people as Norman Kelvin, Edward Thompson, and indeed *all* the contributors to this issue (and to this *Journal*), what are we going to tell them?’