

Review

William Morris: A Reference Guide, by Gary L. Aho; pp. xliii + 428. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1985. \$59.00.

This is the first comprehensive bibliography of its subject, and it provides a needed guide through the vast range of commentary which appeared from Morris' death in 1896 until 1982. Morris was not only a major Victorian poet, but also a pioneering designer and environmentalist, founder of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, creator of the Kelmscott Press, co-translator of Icelandic sagas, author of accomplished prose romances and the finest British utopia since More, and a towering figure in the history of English socialism. Provision of a full and representative overview of Morris criticism is therefore more complex than it would be for most of his literary contemporaries. One cannot simply consult *PMLA*, other equivalent national bibliographies, and bibliographies of Victorian poetry to find appropriate references. Victorianists and others in the many disciplines touched by Morris' work are likely to find that the greatest value of this bibliography lies in its account of fields at the limits of their own expertise.

In sheer volume, the guide's 1900-odd entries (excluding book reviews and auction catalogues) mark the wide attraction of Morris' achievements and example. His reputation declined in the first half of the twentieth century, but the last thirty-five years have witnessed a growing interest in all aspects of his work. Professor Aho's bibliography lists 220 entries for 1953-62, 310 for 1963-72, and 517 for 1973-82; a full account of the articles, books, and exhibitions which greeted the 1984 sesquicentennial of Morris' birth would probably yield several hundred in the years since 1982.

One of the bibliography's most impressive features is its inclusion of 150 entries in fourteen foreign languages—among them Norwegian, Danish, Icelandic, German, French, and Italian—and the evidence Professor Aho assembles for a modest but steady interest in Morris' work in Iceland, Germany, Japan, the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and elsewhere. He cites discussions of Morris' influence on the Senegalese poet and statesman Leopold Senghor, for example (Faulkner, 1970.12); on the Swahili novelist Shaaban Robert (Mulokozi, 1975.38), and the Ceylonese translator and historical preservationist Coomaraswamy (Lipsey, 1977.24).

Morris showed little interest in the United States (see entry 1903.7), but his influence on North American craftwork and design has been enormous. Several entries record the activities of an early twentieth-century William Morris Society, located in Chicago. In general, the commentaries on the American arts and crafts movement, book design, and the history of socialism are among the bibliography's fullest and most astute.

The range of Aho's search also emerges in the variety of his sources. It is not surprising to find citations of the *Fortnightly Review*, the *TLS*, *Apollo*, *The Daily Worker*, and *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, but more intriguing are entries from the *Vole*, *Musk-Ox*, *Spur*, *Circum-Spice*, *Kairos*, and *Humberside*. He annotates references to Morris in many Victorian biographies and surveys of literature, culture, and design; these too seem to document a general rise in the understanding and appreciation of Morris' works.

Professor Aho's twenty-one page introduction provides a biographical sketch, brief history of the reception of each of the several strands of Morris' work, and a useful account of the efforts of the William Morris Society (founded in 1955) to further Morris' public reputation and study of his work. Aho also summarizes at length the major books of Morris criticism—for example, the biographies by J. W. Mackail and Jack Lindsay; the accounts of his socialism by R. P. Arnot, E. P. Thompson, and Paul Meier; more general commentaries by May Morris and Aymer Vallance; the studies of his designs (interiors, tapestry, wallpaper, textiles, stained glass, and others) by Nikolaus Pevsner, Peter Floud, Barbara Morris, and A. C. Sewter; the longer descriptions of his indebtedness to Icelandic sources by Karl Litzenberg and Karl Anderson; Peter Faulkner's anthology of contemporary reviews and responses to Morris' writings; and the studies of his work at the Kelmscott Press by Joseph Dunlap and William Peterson. The longer entries in this volume, in fact, provide an excellent prolegomena to the study of its subject.

Aho's briefer entries also note some previously unrecorded anecdotes and biographical details, and the opinions of important contemporaries and successors. Two of the more revealing—not necessarily of Morris—are Arthur Benson's recollection that Henry James once called Morris a "bloody, lusty, noisy grotesque" (1926.8), and William Allingham's record of Tennyson's reaction to the news of Morris' conversion to socialism: "He has gone crazy" (1907.2). Against such views, one could array Edward Burne-Jones's remark, recorded by his close friend J. Comyns Carr, that "I think Morris's friendship began everything for me, everything that I afterwards cared for" (1922.5); G. D. H. Cole's nostalgia at the memory that *Nowhere* "made me a socialist, and I have never had cause to regret either the fact or the manner of my conversion" (1931.4); and many other testimonials

for what May Morris called his "talent of giving himself to his friends" (1919.7). Also interesting are Arthur Symons' remark that Morris' prose romances showed that he "loved all visible beauty indifferently, as a child does" (1904.15), and Yeats's 1933 account that "reading Morris's *Sigurd* to Anne . . . last night when I came to the description of the birth of Sigurd and that wonderful first nursing of the child, I could hardly read for my tears" (1954.20).

Professor Aho also has a gift for wry choice of quotations to characterize the more marginal entries on his (genuinely comprehensive) list. Against several hundred discussions of Morris' utopian socialism and anarcho-communism, for example, one bizarre entry claims him as a "pioneer of fascism" (Neil, 1934.50), and in 1945, William Orcutt insisted that "as a matter of fact, William Morris never fitted into the socialist picture at all" (1945.3). A more recent article in the *California Co-Evolution Quarterly* cites Morris' writings in support of a mellow view that "the most rewarding exertion of all is taking care of yourself" (Nugent, 1978.41), and Roderick Marshall finds in them parallels to "mandalic experience" (1979.33). Lavaterian touches emerge in Rosalie Glynn Grylls's claim that "the smallness of [Morris'] eyes . . . hinted at limitations" (1964.16), and the spirit world intervened to prompt May Hughes's record of Morris' posthumous revelations (1936.7).

In general, Aho permits the most trivial, captious, or absurd opinions to fall by their own weight (the "small-eyes" remark, for example, is glossed as one of several "unusual asides"); but he takes some care to refute some simple but persistent errors of anecdotal fact. Wilde did not visit Morris' deathbed (Wilde was then in prison), and Morris did not sell his library to support socialist causes. He was, however, a vigorous Marxist, in any reasonable understanding of the term: after Thompson's pioneering work it is idle to claim otherwise, but a few still try. Aho's humor and patience seem most sorely strained by Elbert Hubbard's assertions (1899.7 and 1900.8) that Morris was a "musical composer of no mean ability" (he loved music, but wrote none), and a famous blacksmith who employed 3,000 workers at Morris and Company. Of Hubbard's inclusion of Morris under the rubric "Business and Economics," in a *Guide Book for Little Journeys to the Homes of the Great*, Aho notes that he "rests, uncomfortably, one supposes, between Philip D. Armour and Andrew Carnegie" (1926.5). In his introduction, Aho also remarks that "in his own lusty, huckstering, inimitable style (inimitable until Sinclair Lewis created *Babbitt*), Hubbard celebrated William Morris' life and works; and he flattered Morris and Co. artifacts and Kelmscott Press books with his limp imitations" (p. xxxiv-xxxv).

As I suggested above, Professor Aho's survey and annotations of the critical responses to Morris' writings accurately trace the curve of Morris'


reception. Most Victorians preferred Morris' *Earthly Paradise* and prose romances to *The Defence*, a tendency that was exactly reversed in the early and mid-twentieth century, but there were several exceptions to this pattern. In 1910, George Saintsbury suggested that Morris' great popularity ironically deflected critical attention from the high quality of his prosody ("for variety and idiosyncrasy of important meters, and for management of that variety, William Morris was quite exceptionally noteworthy" [1910.10]), and in 1912, John Drinkwater considered him "among the supremely important poets" (1912.3). In the period of greatest decline, the twenties and thirties, John Buchan argued that *The Defence* inaugurated "an epoch, as much as did Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*" (1923.4), but also included in his anthology several books from *Jason*, and three tales from *The Earthly Paradise*. In his 1930 *Eight Victorian Poets*, F. L. Lucas noted that *Love Is Enough* had been unjustly disregarded, and found a "unity of atmosphere not soon forgotten" in *Sigurd the Volsung* (1930.8).

Most obviously helpful to students and others may be the bibliography's careful commentary on recent work. Professor Aho provides eclectic and appreciative responses to all the more recent books on Morris' poetry: by Jessie Kocmanova (1964.17), Blue Calhoun (1975.11), Northrop Frye (1976.19), Charlotte Oberg (1978.42), Frederick Kirchoff (1979.24), Peter Faulkner (1980.17), J. M. Baissus (1980.6), and Carole Silver (1982.35).

Also valuable, because well designed, are the volume's thirty-nine pages of author and subject indices, the latter subdivided into obvious categories, such as "William Morris and . . ." ; "Influenced by William Morris"; "Influences on William Morris"; "Contemporaries"; "Organizations and Movements" (e. g., Kelmscott Press); "Places"; "Writings"; "Bibliographies"; "Biographies"; "Catalogues and Guides"; and "Dissertations." One can readily use these divisions to trace the history of a given topic or controversy: discussions of Shaw's relation to Morris, for example, or debates about Morris' Marxism. More helpful still would have been an index category for anthologies, whose shifting selections reflect assorted hegemonic and other changes in criticism and taste, and an umbrella subject index of all the entries, which would have enabled the reader to examine topics (American reactions to Morris, for example), which cut across several categories.

The instances of philistinism and cooptation which Aho dryly cites are fortunately unrepresentative. Most of the works listed are perceptive; many contribute new details, some reflect impressive scholarship, and a few approach real eloquence. The appearance of this guide should have a clarifying effect on Morris criticism: contributions of several long forgotten and obscurely published authors can be revived, and critics who

turn to Morris can begin with a better understanding of the ground their predecessors have explored.

Finally, the volume makes especially clear the degree to which Morris should continue to benefit more than most of his contemporaries from recent reexaminations of Victorian culture. His pioneering innovations in design were never questioned, but his remarkable dialectical mixture of unapologetic romanticism, "green" environmentalism, and revolutionary socialism seem more subtly relevant as the consequences of mass industrialization spread over the globe. If Shaw was right, at any rate, that Morris "towers greater and greater above the horizon" as he recedes into the past (1936.12), Professor Aho has provided an unusually scholarly and insightful *tour d'horizon*. 

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