

Review

The Collected Letters of William Morris, Volume II: Part 1, 1881-1884, Part 2, 1885-88, ed. Norman Kelvin. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987. 450 pp., \$45.00; 550 pp., \$52.00.

Sometimes the best biography of an articulate, introspective person whose activities were far-ranging and multifaceted may be a fully annotated edition of letters. This is arguably the case with Norman Kelvin's edition of the letters of William Morris, two volumes of which are now in print. Volume II (bound in two parts) records Morris at one of the most publicly active and well-documented periods of his life—a period whose many activities included the development of a new series of designs and products at the Merton Abbey works; a new translation (of *The Odyssey*); fervent engagement in the nascent socialist movement, at first in the Social Democratic Federation and later in the faction-torn Socialist League; complex responses to an extended network of family and social ties; and authorship of a very wide range of works in which he sought to express his passionate convictions about the principles which should underlie creation of art and distribution of wealth. The latter included hundreds of commentaries on events of the day (as editor of *Commonweal*, described with some justice in an 1888 letter as “the only tolerable representative of general socialism in the English language”); a long narrative poem (*The Pilgrims of Hope*); a dramatic skit (“The Tables Turned . . .”); and historical romances (*The House of the Wolfings* and *A Dream of John Ball*).

The volume begins, appropriately, with the new year of 1881, when Morris sent his reflections to Georgiana Burne-Jones, who invariably evoked his most searching self-evaluations: “I have of late been somewhat melancholy . . . just so much as a man of middle age who has met with rubs (though less than his share of them) may sometimes be allowed to be. When one is just so much subdued one is apt to turn more specially from thinking of one's own affairs to more worthy matters. . . . Though to me, as I suppose to you, every day begins and ends a year, I was fain to catch hold of ancient custom . . . in writing a word of hope for the new year, that it may do a good turn of work toward the abasement of the rich and the raising up of the poor.” It ends in 1888, for Morris a disheartening year, in which bitter factional disputes between anarchists and parliamentarians in the Socialist

Other annotations become useful brief essays in themselves. One explains Morris' indebtedness to Richard Jeffries' *After London*, for example, and another traces Morris' use of Thorold Roger's *Agriculture and Prices in England* for *A Dream of John Ball*. Even letters familiar from Philip Henderson's selected edition of *The Letters of William Morris to His Family and Friends* gain from Kelvin's provision of social, political, and chronological contexts and a plenitude of relevant detail. A final list of correspondents and a fifty-four page subject-index ensure that the edition provides a serious guide to Morris' preoccupations and social milieu, and two very useful appendices reprint the 1885 Socialist League Manifesto and Emery Walker's "Essay on Printing."

Morris was often irreverently blunt, of course, and his letters to socialist comrades and the invalid Jenny are full of exasperated asides. Even the forbearance of some of his recorded responses can be dryly pointed. To a phrenologist who had presumably expressed some opinion about his evolutionary state, he wrote: "Dear Sir/ I am obliged to you for your note inviting me to offer myself to the Greenwich Zoo as a possible candidate but my principles as a revolutionary Socialist prevent me accepting your flattering offer./ I am, dear Sir, Yours faithfully." To the Manchester philanthropist Thomas Coglean Horsfall, who wished to exclude nude representations from a proposed art museum, he replied with a mixture of eloquence and gentle mockery that "I appreciate the intention of keeping naked figures out of your picture gallery, but please observe that on such a pretty road one stops not. The next step must be in the direction of Mohamed and you will be bound to refuse admittance to human figures clad also. Meantime you will notice that your rule will exclude Michael Angelo's "Creation of Man" and his "Fall" and his "Deluge" and dozens of other sublime works. . . . 'Tis impossible to teach people art or reverence for the human body, without showing them tis possible to be naked and not ashamed."

To the poet William Allingham, who asked for his views on religion and reformist politics, he answered that "a God who he stood in the way of man making himself comfortable on the earth would be no God for me. . . . It is this profit which curses all modern Society and prevents any noble enterprises, while it *compels* us . . . to market-wars which bring forth 'murders great and grim.'" The dying D. G. Rossetti sent him a copy of his *Ballads and Sonnets* in 1881, and Morris replied to the friend of his youth and intimate enemy of his middle age that "those pieces of this vol: which I have not seen before . . . seem to me well up to your mark and full of beauty and interest: it was perhaps somewhat of a surprise to me when I heard that you had written the historical ballads, but I think they quite justify your choice of subject: The King's Tragedy in particular is magnificent." To his old friend, A. C. Swinburne, who had sent him a copy of *Tristram of Lyonesse*, he

material & instruments of labour without being taxed for the maintenance of a proprietary class."

Many of his deepest personal and political reflections appear in the letters he sent to his close friend Georgiana Burne-Jones. These record a personal transition from simple pain at the poverty he confronts ("the vast mass of utter shabbiness and uneventfulness [of East London], sits upon one like a nightmare"), to active commitment to the "cause" of socialism ("whatever hope or life there is in me is staked on the success of the cause"). At an early stage of this process, he remarked of his work for the S. P. A. B. that "to take that trouble in any degree it is needful that a man should be touched with a real love of the earth, a worship of it, no less. . . . You know the most refined and cultured people, both those of the old religions and these of the new vague ones, have a sort of Manichean hatred of the world (I use the word in its proper sense, the home of man). Such people must . . . lead the world at present, and I believe will do so till all that is old is gone, and history has become a book from which the pictures have been torn. Now if you ask me why I kick against the pricks in this matter, all I can say is, first because I cannot help it, and secondly because I am encouraged by a sort of faith that something will come of it, some kind of culture of which we know nothing at present." In 1882, shortly before he joined the S.D.F., he wrote his friend that "I am older, and the year is evil; the summerless season, and famine and war, and the folly of peoples come back again, as it were, and the more and more obvious death of art before it rises again, are heavy matters to a small creature like me, who cannot choose but think about them, and can mend a scarce a whit."

An intensely ambivalent response to familiar locations others might regard with more conventional nostalgia emerged when he revisited Oxford, which he felt "a kind of terror [which] always falls upon me as I near it. . . . You miss my faith, and how I feel I have no sort of right to revenge myself for my private troubles on the kind earth: and here I feel her kindness especially and am bound not to meet it with a long face." Returning to Oxford from bitter Socialist League disputes in 1887, he reported on the loss of a sense of an inner state of grace: "Once or twice I had that old quickening of perception by which everything gets emphasized and tened, and the commonest landscape looks lovely. . . . It comes not only even in one's younger and brighter days, and doesn't quite disappear in the times of combat."

As already suggested that Morris' letters are also notable for their fact self-examination and careful consideration of alternative factions. At one point, for example, caught in wretched political contention, he wrote that "I dont love contention; I even shrink from it. I dont persons. Indeed I know that all my faults lie on the other

advantage I shall have, that I shall know much better what to do and what to forbear than this first time."

Norman Kelvin's magisterial second double-volume of Morris' letters, in short, provides a surprisingly unified narrative of Morris' public and private life in the period of his most intense political activity. As that period drew to a close, Morris resolved to gather together the subplots of his life once again, and to "get used to such trifles as defeats, and refuse to be discouraged by them. Indeed, I am an old hand at that game, my life having been passed in being defeated; as surely as every man's must be who finds himself forced into a position a little ahead of the average in his aspirations" (Letter, 15 August 1889, to Andreas Scheu). His last eight years of correspondence and renewed effort will be recorded in Kelvin's third and final volume.

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