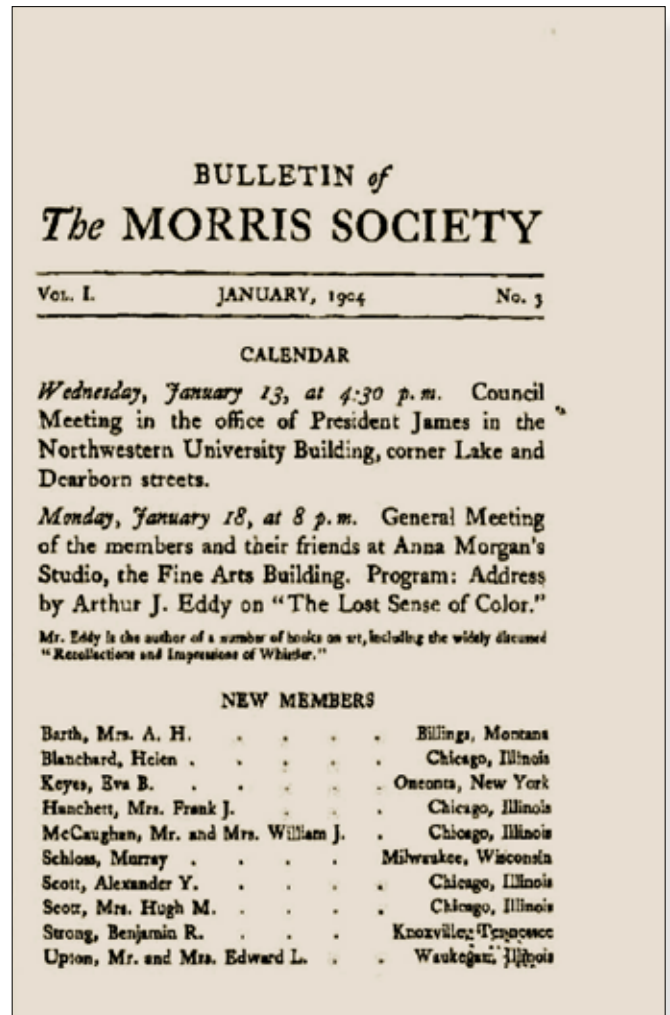


*News from Anywhere; 1973 cover*



Cover, 1904 edition

## I WAS THERE: ORIGINS OF THE U. S. WILLIAM MORRIS SOCIETY, 1971-1988

*Florence S. Boos*

As the William Morris Society in the United States celebrates its fiftieth anniversary, I'd like to record memories of what to me has been a warm and sustaining source of fellowship. I have been a member since its inception, and will hope to add a bit of context, for the late 1960s and early 70s were periods of considerable social foment, as well as years which saw the formation of many specialized cultural organizations, including this one.

### The First Morris Society, 1903-1905

First, I want to take a detour to mention that the first Morris Society was begun, not in Britain, but in the American Midwest. This one was short-lived, lasting from late 1903-early 1905, mainly because one of its two guiding spirits, Oscar Lovell Triggs, a lecturer in English at the University of Chicago, lost his job when his employers were offended by his avant garde political views. As shown

in this early issue of the *Bulletin of the Morris Society*, the "Morris Movement" brought together those attracted to many of the progressive causes of the day—Arts and Crafts practitioners, advocates of democratic education and the settlement movement, admirers of the modern literature of Whitman, Ibsen, and Morris, and supporters of alternate non-capitalist labor practices. As the then-emerging industrial center of the nation and a hub of socialist and anarchist activity, Chicago would have been a natural location for such an initiative. Elizabeth Helsinger and I have discussed this effort in two articles (<https://morrissociety.org/wp-content/uploads/49-6-VestibuleSong.pdf>; <https://morrissociety.org/wp-content/uploads/35-48FirstMorrisSociety.pdf>).

### THE (PRESENT) MORRIS SOCIETY IN THE UNITED STATES

As a graduate student of Victorian literature, I had sketched out a dissertation on Pre-Raphaelite poetry in general, before I settled on a sub-topic, the poetry of Dante G. Rossetti. My Rossetti studies convinced me, however, that for a long project

it was not sufficient to admire an author's literary writings. In order to co-habit, as it were, over a long period with someone from a different time and place, one had to identify with, or at least admire, many aspects of his/her work and private life. Morris stood out not only for his multiple achievements, but for his progressive and ethical approach to each of his endeavors. For someone who had witnessed the protests of the Vietnam era and the rise of oppositional movements in the 1960s, Morris seemed a hero for his willingness to champion the then-unpopular cause of socialism, as well as for the egalitarian principles behind his practice of the decorative arts. His poetry—musical, pictorial, varied, strongly emotional, embedded in real-world history and geography, and vast in scope—seemed to call out for more attention.

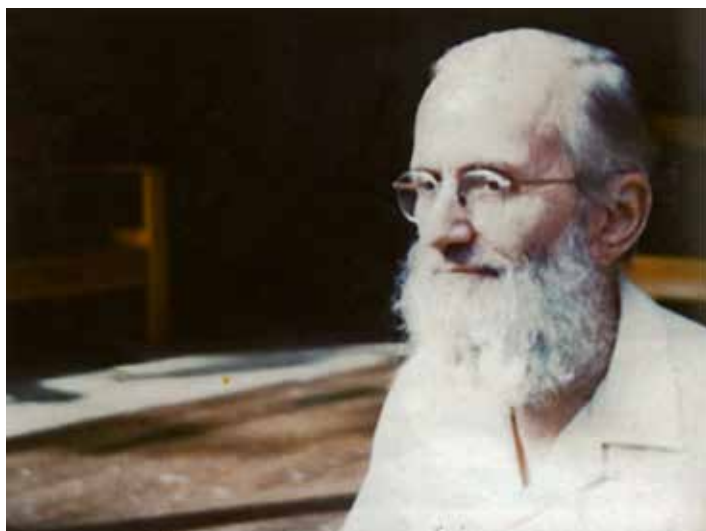
In those dark days before Facebook, Twitter, and even e-mail, and when conference and research sites seemed even more geographically dispersed and expensive relative to income than at present, one of the few ways of sharing common literary interests was through joining an organization devoted to a particular topic. As soon as I learned of its existence, in the mid- or late 1960s, I became a member of the British Morris Society and, from this, I later learned of the formal initiation of a U. S. branch of the main Society. This was founded by Joseph Dunlap, whom I knew by reputation because I owned and had read a copy of his nearly thousand-page dissertation, "The Road to Kelmscott: William Morris and the Book Arts before the Kelmscott Press" His irregular publication for members, *News from Anywhere*, conveys a sense of a wide net of activities. My copy of the 32-page 1973 issue, for example, edited by Barbara and Joseph Dunlap, reviews a host of Morris-related articles, books, and lectures, with an appended essay by Susan Otis Thompson on "A 'golden Age' in American Printing." As the accompanying image indicates, the issue is printed, not mimeographed, and Thompson's article is nicely



*News from Anywhere*, 1973

illustrated.

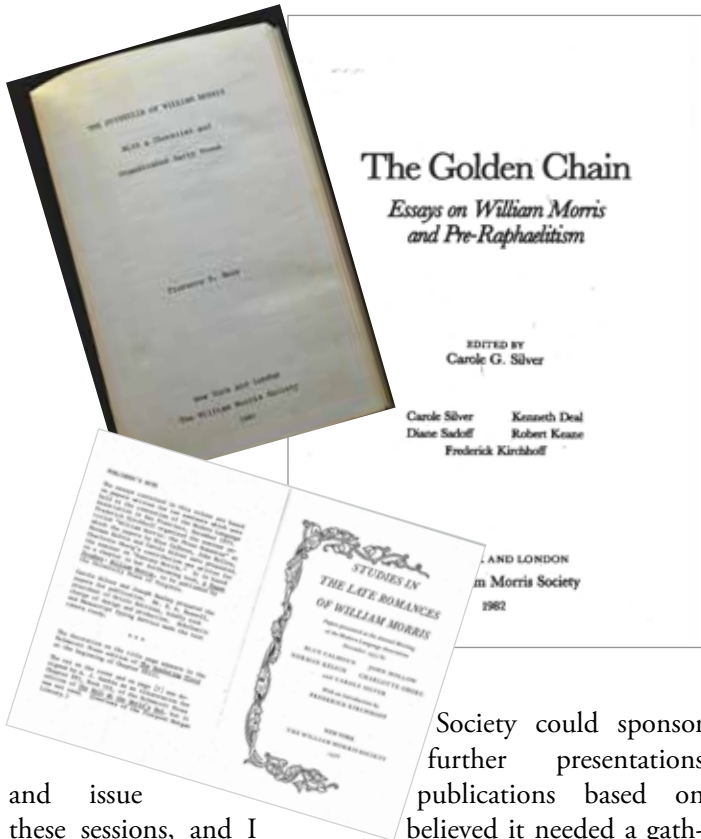
I began to attend Modern Language Convention meetings in 1969 and, at these, I met Carole Silver, Joe Dunlap, Norman Kelvin, Frederick Kirchhoff, Charlotte Oberg, Blue Calhoun, Hartley Spatt, Frank Sharp, and later, Mark Samuels Lasner and other Morrisians, at the Morris Society "special sessions." The benefits of these panels, and of the Society that promoted them, were immediately apparent to me. I hoped the Morris



Joseph R. Dunlap



Norman Kelvin, Carole Silver, Hartley Spatt



and issue these sessions, and I believed it needed a gathering place for an annual meeting where decisions about future Morris Society events could be made. Looking at my c.v., I see that I gave talks at MLA, Morris Society sessions in 1977 and 78, as well as in successive years; and I volunteered to prepare the elaborate write-ups that were needed each year to petition MLA to grant the next year's meeting. My early proposals were successful, but I was distressed when one year the task passed to someone else and we were denied. I could see how precarious our situation was and how useful it would be to obtain MLA Allied Status, ensuring (at the time) two yearly panels. According to the MLA guidelines, this couldn't be granted to any organization that was merely a branch of another, as the U. S. Morris Society then was. For Allied Status, we needed autonomy: a constitution, membership list, governing structure, and a history of independent activities. Joe argued in vain to the authorities that a simple organization suited our actual size and intentions.

I must have been a rather insistent young woman, for after a certain amount of delay and confusion, I wrote our first by-laws, which provided for an annual meeting, rotating officers, a newsletter, regularized membership fees, and elaborate election rules. I also established a rotating governing committee of Carole, Gary Aho (whom I had met in 1982 at a Morris session in Boca Raton, Florida), and Hartley Spatt, our treasurer, with Joe as lifetime Honorary Secretary, and myself as chairperson. I look back with bemusement at some of the contents of these early by-laws, for as a child of the 60s and student of political revolutions, I carefully added provisions for alternate nomi-

Society could sponsor further presentations publications based on



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to gain Allied Status. As a consequence, we conducted annual MLA sessions from 1983 to the present—occasions for perhaps two hundred-odd presentations, with accompanying tours to local sites of Pre-Raphaelite and Arts and Crafts interest throughout North America, in Los Angeles, Seattle, San Francisco, Chicago, Philadelphia, New York, Washington, D. C., Toronto, and Vancouver, as well as many receptions and dinners in the spirit of Morrisian camaraderie.

All these changes alarmed the U. K. Morris Society, who were initially quite opposed to the separation. In his valuable *History of the William Morris Society 1955-2005* (London, 2011), Martin Crick devotes three dense pages of the 22-page chapter on the U. S. Morris Society to this situation and its eventual resolution. I should give as background that I had no desire for the Society to depart from its central focus on William Morris and Pre-Raphaelitism or from its essentially Anglophilic orientation—that is, I didn't believe that we should overlap the Victorian Society of America or follow the Canadian Morris Society in becoming fully independent of the British wing and with a shifted, broader Arts and Crafts focus. I was also attached to the U. K. Society through close ties with its members, who had befriended me on my several trips to Britain.

In 1978, the U. K. Society granted me a summer fellowship to live in Kelmscott House while I worked on an edition of the *Socialist Diary*, and my husband, Bill, our 5-year old son, Eugene, and I lived for eight weeks in Jane Morris's former bedroom. When I returned to Kelmscott House alone more briefly in late summer 1980, the house was deserted prior to its lease/sale to future residents, and the once-lively home exuded an uncanny and haunted air. I am thus perhaps the last



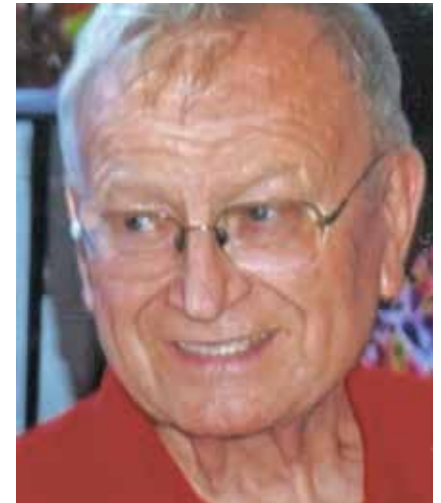
David Latham, 1978 KelmscottHouse

person ever to have lived there before the U. K. Society vacated it. During our stay, Bill and I became friends with many members of the Morris Society, as well as those who helped me with the Diary, and we enjoyed sociable trips to visit their homes and favorite sites in many places, among them east London, Kensington, Richmond Park, Surrey, Cambridge, and Nottingham.

During my visits, I had been repeatedly impressed by the shared dedication of the U. K. Society's members to their common enterprise and to their (from my perspective) ferociously organized and extensive endeavors. Among our hosts, three elderly retirees were especially cordial to us, Ray Watkinson, Dick Smith, and Leo Young, and I was charmed to learn that they were all former Communists. All were gentlemanly, urbane, gifted, and successful in their respective fields and, in that pre-electronic day, they communicated frequently with one another, and with Bill and me, in long, serious letters. In short, I felt our residence in Kelmscott House was an imprinting experience, and that the opportunity to come to know British people outside of the parameters of academic life was one that deepened a lifelong attachment to British culture.

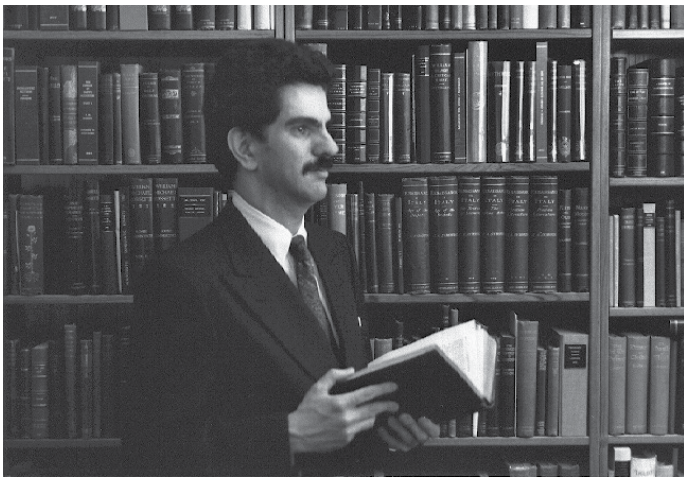
In hindsight, I wonder if it was entirely a coincidence that the U. K. Society honored me by an invitation to deliver its annual spring lecture at the Art Workers Guild of London in May, 1983. It must have been on that visit that Leo Young, the U. K. Society treasurer and a man of impeccable elegance and formality, invited me to dinner at a very fine restaurant. We got right to the topic at hand: loss of American revenues and subscriptions to (as it was then named) the *Journal of the William Morris Society* would be a terrible blow to the U. K. Morris Society, and moreover, the British members wondered why the Americans would wish to sever what, to them, had been a set of gratifying international friendships. I explained to Leo all the reasons for our need for autonomy and that, under the new arrangement, we could continue all our former ties except that we would collect our dues and reimburse them for publications (in fact, this organizational change didn't occur until more than a decade later, after Mark Samuels Lasner became president and regularized our finances). Leo was visibly relieved and laughed, "I thought this was another American Revolution." (Even Communists may be less fond of revolutions nearer home). In any case, he drove me back to my lodgings in his very fine car at alarming speed with the dexterity of a man who had managed 32 bomber missions during the Second World War and remained a friend for many years afterwards.

Back on the home front, the U. S. Society circulated a survey to determine the interests and locations of its members, still mostly from the East Coast; organized book sales and sessions; maintained our still-close ties with the U. K. Society; and gained new members through the decade. Gary Aho, a sociable medievalist whose interests centered on Morris and Iceland, became president in 1985 and prepared a very good newsletter with emphasis on the arts—his wife, Pat, was a craftsperson and their Amherst home was entirely decorated in lovely Morris designs. I still miss Gary, who died in 2019. He was a fine extempore speaker with a heart open to good causes and a great traveler, family member, scholar, and friend.



Gary Aho (1935-2019)

However, the Society only achieved stability—geographically, organizationally, and financially—when Mark Samuels Lasner became its president in 1989, beginning a 19-year term



Mark Samuels Lasner, c. 1980s-90s



Florence circa 1983

and ensuring the Society's continued survival. I was vice-president for ten of those years, tending to MLA sessions and, when in 2004 Mark was forced to resign suddenly due to ill health, I became president once again from late 2004-2007. My second tenure convinced me that the most time-consuming part of the president's job at the time was editing the *U.S. William Morris Society Newsletter* (now *Useful and Beautiful*), so when I was succeeded as president by Fran Durako, I retained the editorship (2007-2021) in order to free future presidents for other matters.

In conclusion, I wish to say that the Morris Society has always seemed special to me—an academic and cultural organization, but yet not narrowly so, a meeting place for those of disparate occupations but congenial interests, and a testament to the kindred purposes of art, literature, and political aspirations. Through the Morris Society, I've met artists, printers, art historians, businesspeople, civil servants, librarians, bibliophiles, writers, historians, architects, museum curators and administrators, lawyers, booksellers, journalists, interior decorators, counselors, town planners, advertising consultants, union leaders, and many others, as well as, quite predictably, my fellow teachers and researchers. As a pattern, all of these seem attracted to several aspects of Morris's life: those interested in his politics are drawn to his art; those who admire his book designs appreciate his eco-socialism; and those who enjoy his poetry and romances also sympathize with his social ideas. When I came to edit the William Morris Archive and later the *Routledge Companion to William Morris*, or even, more modestly, *Useful and Beautiful*, I was able to call on the help of many friends from the Society in Britain, the United States, and Canada. It is a source of sincere gratification to me that the U. S. William Morris Society managed to survive those somewhat dramatic first years, has since prospered and expanded, and may now celebrate its fiftieth year of existence as it prepares to carry its spirit and traditions into the future.



William Morris Society in the U.S. Newsletter October, 1985

