



## Beyond beauty

**Mark Stocker** applauds a brilliantly researched and vivid biography of Edward Burne-Jones

### **The Last Pre-Raphaelite: Edward Burne-Jones and the Victorian Imagination**

Fiona MacCarthy  
Faber & Faber, £25  
ISBN 9780571228614

Edward Burne-Jones would have made a fascinating guest on the late Anthony Clare's television and radio series *In the Psychiatrist's Chair* – transported there, naturally, in his celebrated *Car of Love* (c. 1891–98). Over a century after his death in 1898, Burne-Jones remains a fascinating enigma as both an artist and a person. Fiona MacCarthy, in her exhaustive and authoritative 629-page biography, notes how Burne-Jones' friend and



mentor John Ruskin complained: 'I want to reckon you up and it's like counting clouds.'

The quest for 'beauty' was central to Burne-Jones' art, life, thoughts and feelings. He declared: 'I mean by a picture a beautiful romantic dream of something that never was, never will be – in a light better than any light that ever shone – in a land no one can define or remember, only desire – and the forms divinely beautiful.' His luminous and numinous, Wagnerian painting *Laus Veneris* (*In Praise of Venus*) (1873–75) and *Last Judgement* stained-glass window in St Philip's Cathedral, Birmingham, make us feel better people simply for having beheld them. Early 20th-century modernists, particularly of the anti-Victorian Bloomsbury genus, denigrated such beauty, but in her final chapter MacCarthy charts Burne-Jones' belated yet triumphant rehabilitation in the later era of flower power, psychedelia and 'beautiful people'. As Burne-Jones himself stated, 'Everything has to go through its period of neglect; if it survives that and comes to the surface again, it's pretty safe.' His more recent collectors –

Andrew Lloyd-Webber, Yves Saint Laurent and Jimmy Page – would testify to that.

Though MacCarthy's biography is relatively conventional and firmly chronological in structure, its compelling theme and uncluttered, jargon-free writing make it a pleasure to read. The weakest point is the title, which probably reflects the publisher's marketing ploy rather than the author's intention. Burne-Jones might have been the ultimate Pre-Raphaelite, but he was not the last. There were 'Jones clones' like Robert Bateman, Evelyn de Morgan and J.M. Strudwick, as well as the more estimable Walter Crane, and his influence permeated well into the 20th century, being evident in the work of Robert Anning Bell, Byam Shaw, Glyn Philpot (at least early on), the Ricketts and Shannon circle, and others besides.

In a book which admirably balances context and narrative, the opening scenes are set in the industrial Birmingham of Burne-Jones' youth. Would his obsession with beauty and its counter, a hatred of ugliness, have been as intense had he grown up in Lewes

The works illustrating this review are by Edward Burne-Jones (1833–98)

- 1 *The Adoration of the Magi*, 1888 (woven 1894)  
Wool and silk tapestry on cotton carp, 258×384cm  
Manchester Metropolitan University
- 2 *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid*, 1880–04  
Oil on canvas, 290×136cm  
Tate, London



2

or Ludlow? It seems unlikely. By page 30 we reach the beginnings of Burne-Jones' lifelong friendship and collaboration with William Morris: their dramatic conversion from Christianity to the gospel of art during a visit to northern France in 1855 and their subsequent plans to redesign the world, starting off with Red House, near Bexleyheath. The rest, of course, is history. Burne-Jones repeatedly rued his failure to make the world a more beautiful place in the face of Victorian philistinism. Critic Julia Cartwright sensed

a 'thrill of pleasure' among spectators at the 1888 Arts and Crafts exhibition at the New Gallery, London, such was the collective impact of the Burne-Jones and Morris tapestries woven at Merton Abbey (1894; Fig. 1), the 'Persian' lustreware of William de Morgan and the metalwork of William Benson.

MacCarthy does not expressly say so, but the powerful aesthetic, moral and literary ideals that united Burne-Jones, Morris and Dante Gabriel Rossetti in mid 19th-century London, together with their ensuing achievements, arguably make them as important in the history of modern art as the infinitely more vaunted Paris-based Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso working half a century later. Similarly, Burne-Jones' friend, the 'wicked angel' Algernon Charles Swinburne, is surely a worthy – and considerably kinkier – precursor of Guillaume Apollinaire.

Swinburne is one of the many characters, all deftly portrayed, who tread the stage of this monograph. Another is the solemn, silvery, skull-capped 'Signor', George Frederick Watts, who urged Burne-Jones to loosen up and develop his admirable sense of design. Appropriate emphasis is elsewhere given to Georgiana Burne-Jones, whose forbearing and constant loyalty toward her frequently maddening husband verged on the heroic. Georgiana's two-volume *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones* (1903) is praised for providing 'the woman's sense of the importance of domestic background and emotional history that distinguishes her book from the event-centred biographies written by men that were *de rigueur* at the period.' However, the decadent excesses of Burne-Jones' friends, Rossetti, Swinburne and the egregious Simeon Solomon (nicknamed, with typical Victorian political incorrectness, 'the Jujube'), as well as those of his younger admirers Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley, were airbrushed from Georgiana's decorous account. Nor, of course, does she tell us of Burne-Jones' devastating love affair with the sultry Anglo-Greek artist Maria Zambaco, although Georgiana allusively observes, in a turn of phrase that would have made Wilde

jealous, how 'Two things had tremendous power over him – beauty and misfortune – and far would he go to serve either.' MacCarthy reveals considerably more, but implicit is her belief that quotations and facts should speak for themselves; the result is an absence of salaciousness or vulgar sensationalism. We may wince at Burne-Jones's thankfulness for little girls – which turned to annoyance when they grew up and married – and feel equally uncomfortable about his obsessive, even creepy, use of very young female models, but that perhaps says as much about our own moral anxieties as it does about the artist's apparent lack of them.

Burne-Jones' formidable, eminently Victorian workaholicism emerges powerfully from these pages. He seems to have died somewhat prematurely, aged 64, simply, it would appear, from being himself, much like his dearest friend William Morris at a similar age. There is a compelling intellectual and emotional consistency to Burne-Jones' formal qualities as an artist once, with Watts' encouragement, he had moved on from his delightful but niggly medievalism of the early 1860s. An equally impressive multi-media versatility defines the Burne-Jones aesthetic, whether he is designing embroidered slippers for his 'pet', Frances Horner, jewellery (such as a cross for the lucky 1883 May Queen of Whitelands College), mosaics or the more familiar stained glass, tapestries and, in his final collaboration with Morris, stately illustrations for *The Works of Henry Chaucer*, published by Kelmscott Press in 1896. A common, if shallow, criticism of Burne-Jones is that he 'does the pretty'. But there is far more to him than that. Citing *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid* (1884; Fig. 2), MacCarthy cogently explains that 'The painting encapsulates many bitter social conflicts of the Victorian age and it established Burne-Jones on a new footing as the most important painter of his time.' **A**

*Mark Stocker is an associate professor in the Department of History & Art History at the University of Otago, New Zealand.*