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The Last Pre-Raphaelite: Edward Burne-Jones and the Victorian Imagination, by Fiona MacCarthy

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Last Pre-Raphaelite: Edward Burne-Jones and the Victorian Imagination, by Fiona MacCarthy; pp. xiii + 629. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012, \$35.00.

In her noteworthy new biography of Edward Burne-Jones, the first to be published in over thirty-five years, Fiona MacCarthy has crafted a compellingly written and expertly researched account of the Victorian artist's life, loves, and labors. From his humble birth in industrial Birmingham to the distinction of a memorial service in Westminster Abbey, MacCarthy frames Burne-Jones's story as a quest in keeping with the chivalric tales he so often portrayed in his own work. Charting her tale spatially as well as chronologically, MacCarthy follows in Burne-Jones's footsteps, immersing the reader in the artist's world, while vividly animating his diverse social circle and their various haunts with vibrant and thoughtfully delineated detail. And yet, through the accumulation of these striking vignettes, the figure that emerges in MacCarthy's narrative is not quite a heroic one. Acknowledging "Burne-Jones's innate resistance to biography," MacCarthy evidently struggles at times with what she perceives to be the artist's perverse nature (xxi). After completing her triumphant biography of Burne-Jones's lifelong friend and working partner William Morris in 1994, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time*, MacCarthy was already deeply conversant with the archives of their shared lives. Indeed, this book is less an independent volume than the second half of a whole, and the two men naturally manifest as foils, Morris the strident social reformer and pioneer of modern design, and Burne-Jones the willow aesthete and painter of escapist reveries.

In contrast to the solidity and earnestness of Morris, Burne-Jones is, by MacCarthy's account, frustratingly mercurial and elusive. In her estimation, Burne-Jones "was the greater artist although Morris was unarguably the greater man" (xxii). A subtle impatience particularly with the artist's sexual foibles seeps into MacCarthy's prose. Much like the Arthurian enchanter in his painting *The Beguiling of Merlin* (1873–74), Burne-Jones is depicted as a man riddled with insecurities and desperate to be loved, enthralled by one lovely woman after another. Using letters from newly accessible troves in private collections, MacCarthy fleshes out the areas of his personal life that Georgiana Burne-Jones, the artist's wife and author of the magisterial, two-volume *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones* (1904), was unable or unwilling to discuss. This biography, therefore, sheds new light on his succession of passionate, extramarital attachments to a series of women, including his scandalous affair with the Greek sculptor Maria Zambaco, as well as his ardent but presumably chaste infatuations with Frances Horner (née Graham) and Helen Mary Gaskell, among others. While Georgie Burne-Jones resolutely resigned herself to becoming a companion and manager of sorts to her husband in middle age, one muse after another paraded through the artist's heart in a gathering of women that mirrors Edward Burne-Jones's painting *The Golden Stairs* (1880). This work, which MacCarthy previously described as his "lascivious assemblage of dream women," incorporates several portraits of his darlings, seemingly corroborating

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the artist's real-life obsessiveness (*William Morris* [Faber and Faber, 1994], xiv). These secretive passions, with their suggestion of repressed Victorian sensuality, are the ideal fodder for the biographer and make for a compelling read. However, such psycho-sexual preoccupation with Burne-Jones's hidden desires obscures the true radical quality of his work.

If Burne-Jones's many affairs of the heart are tantalizing, but ultimately insubstantial, it is because the great true love of his life was Morris and the work they pursued together with united ardor from their first meeting as Oxford undergraduates to their deaths just two years apart. The diminished treatment of their inseparable bond is an unexpected and significant shortcoming of this otherwise fine biography. In her preface, MacCarthy remarks that one of her primary motivations is to disentangle the two men's lives and careers, thereby staking a new claim for Burne-Jones apart from the robust figure of Morris. This impulse is laudable, but both biographies also suggest MacCarthy's fundamental skepticism over the extent of their enduring friendship. She perceives a streak of malice and jealousy in Burne-Jones's series of *Topsy* cartoons, intimations of cowardliness in his decision not to follow his comrade into socialist political activism, and an alienation fostered by Morris's tenderness toward Georgiana. Although MacCarthy's opinion of Burne-Jones has evidently softened during the years of her research, she frequently keeps Morris at a distance. Consequently, she has done an injustice to one of the most tender and dedicated couples of the Victorian age. By unpicking their intimately interwoven relationship, MacCarthy succeeds in proving their substantial individual achievements. Yet, by so separating warp from weft, we lose the grand tapestry of their lives.

Part of the struggle for a biographer, largely dependent on letters and diaries, resides in the fact that so much of the relationship between Burne-Jones and Morris was expressed not through words, but through their work, created side-by-side during innumerable hours together over the course of forty years. Even when their personal lives diverged, over politics or love affairs, they maintained a sacred ritual of retreating together to the studio every Sunday in the communion of brother artists. The profoundly collaborative nature of their partnership in producing the vast number of decorative arts commissions for Morris & Co. expressed a unity of aims, if not means, throughout their careers, acting as a shared language of visual communication that transcended words. MacCarthy provides a glimpse of this workshop comradeship, as well as the underlying revolutionary ideals that motivated them in their quest to reform Victorian society through art. She writes, "Theirs was a working partnership based on sheer enjoyment of one another's company, a constant toing and froing of ideas. . . . Most importantly they shared the strong idealism that was central to the venture. Art was for everyone" (154). Ultimately, their work is the true testament to their enduring passion, for each other and for their shared cause. The women on the stairs would come and go, but Morris and Burne-Jones remained true brothers in arms from first to last.

Burne-Jones's oft-documented objection to the idea of the artist's biography, to the public scrutiny of private letters, was counterbalanced by his belief that an artist's oeuvre should stand as a lasting testament instead. Perhaps for this reason, it is in the vivid, evocative, and highly perceptive passages dedicated to Burne-Jones's paintings, stained-glass windows, mosaics, and tapestries that MacCarthy's biography excels. Her final description, fittingly reserved for Burne-Jones's monumental unfinished canvas,

The Last Sleep of Arthur in Avalon (1881–98), encapsulates the strengths and weaknesses of her narrative. She describes the potent visual power of the painting in evocative detail, but falls back in the end on the image of the artist as a desperately lovelorn Victorian endlessly painting his amorous obsessions, rather than as the formidable artistic visionary: “It seemed more than ever the expression of Burne-Jones’s particular obsessions, his quest for love and beauty, his subdued eroticism. *Arthur in Avalon* is the ultimate Burne-Jones fantasy of the king at rest in his own flowery paradise surrounded by a cohort of the women he adored” (535). MacCarthy’s engaging biography has indeed succeeded in reviving Burne-Jones for a new generation, but the persona of the melancholy, heartsick dreamer remains largely untroubled.

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