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Victorian Dreamer

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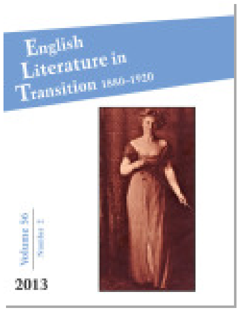

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Book Reviews

Victorian Dreamer

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

BY THE TIME of Sir Edward Burne-Jones's death in 1898, his penchant for dreamy decadence had been eclipsed by more explicit decadence, and by impressionism, realism and, soon, modernism. Fiona MacCarthy's biographical rescue of the mid-Victorian escapist is the inevitable follow-up to her earlier life of Burne-Jones's closest colleague in the arts, the robust, assertive, many-sided William Morris. Son of the keeper of a frame shop, Jones, who hyphenated his names as he aspired to class mobility, began with less education and less money than Morris, his privileged but perennially unkempt Oxford classmate. Both intended unadventurous careers in the clergy, but Morris became a prolific artist, author, and designer—and a radical socialist; Burne-Jones became a sensitive artist in many forms, and a gentleman with a titular handle—a baronet in 1894.

Displaying obvious promise, Morris and Burne-Jones were soon sponsored by the Pre-Raphaelite visionary John Ruskin and his disciple Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Once Ruskin fostered, and subsidized, Burne-Jones's experiences of Renaissance Italy, the fledgling painter would write, "Birmingham is my city according to the facts … but in reality Assisi is my birthplace." Like his fellow artistic rebels, especially Morris, he loathed coarse, crass Victorian materialism and the unromantic surface of industrial newness. He developed an appetite for Quattrocento stained glass and mosaics, illuminated manuscripts and tapestries, early printing, medieval church interiors, Arthurian myth, and Chaucer. Morris refused to enter the "Great Exhibition" of 1851 at the Crystal Palace, the seedbed of modernism. Burne-Jones, seeing it after the magnificent prefabricated structure had been moved from Hyde Park across the Thames to Sydenham, was dismayed by its "gigantic wearisomeness" and its "cheerless monotony [of] iron and glass, glass and iron." His life's work was to create its antidote, a tribute to an imagined yesterday.

Evoking the otherworldliness of Greek myth and early Christian iconography while working as a founding partner of Morris's Arts and Crafts design firm, he made a comfortable living from Morris & Company projects. On his own he painted elaborately detailed canvases which often led to helpless passion for his sultry models, and to nervous collapses when they failed to reciprocate. Fiona MacCarthy explains his *The Golden Stairs* (1876–1880), nine feet high, and painted from a precarious wooden platform, as "the defining painting of the Aesthetic Movement." It was his "quintessential dream picture. The [eighteen] girls on the stairway have a somnambulistic look." While their draping gowns are much alike, the heads of the descending young women were all drawn from "stunners," in the Rossettian term—some his intimate friends, some the daughters of friends, some hired models, one his daughter, Margaret, for whom his affection was close to unhealthy. He left the meaning of the canvas obscure.

Burne-Jones's indomitable and extraordinarily forgiving wife, Georgiana, who would write a fact-filled if unrevealing biography of her "Ned" published in 1904, requested return of "the illicit and improbably romantic letters … he scribbled out in such a frenzy of devotion to the succession of women he adored,… receiving a rather mixed response." Most have since vanished.

For years he sold little, as he initiated many works, finished few and exhibited fewer. "I have sixty pictures, oil and water, in my studio," he once said, seemingly exultantly, "and every day I would gladly begin a new one." His professional world changed when in May 1877 the glittering Grosvenor Gallery on New Bond Street in London opened. Established by Sir Coutts Lindsay with his wife's money—Blanche's mother, Hannah FitzRoy, was a London Rothschild who had married "out"—it featured eight Burne-Jones paintings in the inaugural exhibition. One was *The Beguiling of Merlin*, in which the exotic stunner, in diaphanous draperies, is the Greek-born Marie Zambaco, whose draperies in real life the artist often removed. Although she darkly resembled Jane Morris, William's unfaithful spouse who conducted a long-running affair with Rossetti, many Pre-Raphaelite stunners also appeared on canvas, somehow, to be replicas of the iconic Janey.

The Grosvenor's unsound financial footing, and Sir Coutts's luxurious inefficiency, combined to abort its existence in 1887. By then, apparently unknown to MacCarthy, Bernard Shaw, in his first novel, *Immaturity*, unpublished for fifty years, had exploited it—and Burne-Jones. In pages written in February 1880 he describes a vast private gallery in the mansion of the fictional Halket Grosvenor, in Richmond. Like Lindsay, Grosvenor is an unsuccessful painter who pours his pounds into exhibiting "representations of spirits, seasons, and other abstractions in diaphanous draperies," and "incidents derived from mythology, classic history, early Christianity, or personification of influences." At the end of the gallery is an "enormous" Tintoretto.

Late in life Burne-Jones would be elected an Associate of the Royal Academy and exhibit there, but on failing to be elevated to full member, he resigned. His lucrative work with Morris & Company continued. Perhaps his most memorable achievement was the design for, and illustrations in, Morris's *Kelmscott Chaucer* (1891), the culmination, in 106 wood engravings, of his long association with the "Topsy" of his early years. They envisioned a collaborative *Morte d'Arthur* to follow, but a set of grand tapestries depicting the quest for the Grail resulted instead. With possessive resentment, Burne-Jones, who had encouraged the aspiring Aubrey Beardsley when he was eighteen, was enraged by Beardsley's intrusion into that "sacred territory" (MacCarthy's term). J. M. Dent's commission for a *Morte d'Arthur*, an open challenge in relatively inexpensive line-block and linotype to the handcrafted Kelmscott art-of-the-book, proved a work of genius, but also a ruthless parody of Burne-Jones's melancholy knights and elongated, wistful ladies. Beardsley's art, often mordantly satiric, was "lustful," he carped, and he declared to May Morris, "I wish Beardsley could be got rid of…." Sir Edward would not have long to wait. Beardsley died, at twenty-six, a few months before Burne-Jones, at sixty-four.

The Sleep of Arthur in Avalon, Burne-Jones's last great painting, reappeared in an exhibition in 1916, unintended as such, but a striking patriotic emblem amidst a war of wholesale death. Although the artist's ultimate fantasy, it disappeared then into a private collection. When its owner died in 1958, it was bought at auction by a Puerto Rican millionaire for a meager £1,680. That dismal statistic exposed the decline in reputation of a painter who never really excited his audience. A master of color and figure, Burne-Jones remains nevertheless a major nineteenth-century artist. Yet his work is enervated by what MacCarthy, in a rich biography that is much too long and excessive in detail, concedes are its pervasive "droopiness and sighs."

Despite MacCarthy's sweeping title, the last Pre-Raphaelite was the "surprisingly spry" William Holman Hunt, then seventy, who had shared a studio with Rossetti and whose gloomily inspirational *Light* *of the World* (1854) made him an early fortune. The last of the last, he died twelve years after Burne-Jones, in 1910.

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Volume I of New Gissing Biography

Pierre Coustillas. *The Heroic Life of George Gissing, Part 1: 1857–1888*. London: Pickering and Chatto, 2011. 384 pp. $99.00 £60.00

VOLUME ONE of Pierre Coustillas's long-awaited three-volume biography of George Gissing charts the first thirty-one years of Gissing's life, from his childhood and education to rustication from Owens College and self-imposed exile in America, to the painful forging of a literary career in London. The volume ends with the death of his first wife, Nell Harrison, the composition and publication of *The Nether World* (1889) and with it the completion of his absorption in the world of the London poor as a fictional subject.

There is something altogether reassuring in looking to Coustillas as a guide through Gissing's life. Given his quite remarkable record in Gissing studies—author, editor and bibliographer—we cannot help but be confident that his biography will achieve a comprehensiveness that emanates from a scholar who knows more about Gissing than any man living. But in the light of this fact neither can an attentive reader miss the wholly impressive effort that Coustillas has made to spread his material before us with masterly concision.

Take his synoptic handling of Gissing's brother, Algernon, the "mediocre" novelist. Coustillas produces one paragraph in a wonderful act of compression covering his literary career and the content and significance of his published work. With the assembly of the crucial facts of the writer's career completed, Coustillas then evaluates it. He does not hold back from pointing out that Algernon's "obstinacy in pursuing his career as a mediocre novelist" "condemned his family, not to speak of himself, to permanent semi-starvation." Might we think, after this trenchant critique, that Amy Reardon would have more than a point?

Another example of Coustillas's capacity for deft elaboration is the information he shares about one of Gissing's pupils, Walter Grahame, whom Gissing began to tutor in 1884. He unobtrusively informs us that Grahame's cousins were the writers Kenneth Grahame and Anthony Hope before returning to the pertinent facts of his engagement: "the