Review
Reviewed Work(s): The Collected Letters of William Morris. Volume I. 1848-1880 by William Morris and Norman Kelvin
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Anthony's book attests to his sense of Ruskin's relevance, but he presents neither a convincing picture of Ruskin's views nor a convincing argument for attention being paid to them. The prophet still awaits his own interpreter: or perhaps a vehicle of interpretation larger than that of the academic contribution that Anthony is making. Ruskin may thus be caught in a vicious circle, since the social circumstances in which his ideas may be received must possess something congenial and receptive to them. Nevertheless, as Anthony well points out, Ruskin thrives on contradiction and paradox. However bleak the outlook, his notions possess a resistant and enduring quality which will reach readers and influence how they feel as well as what they think and do. What we need to seize on is the essential and full humanity of his vision of social justice, as we recognize the boldness of his elaborations of it in terms of both style and analysis. We need a firm critical response to Ruskin's view. We need a confrontation with the difficult problems that he raises of authoritarianism and authority, slavery and loyalty, obedience and freedom.

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William Morris. *The Collected Letters of William Morris. Volume I 1848-1880.* edited by Norman Kelvin. Princeton N.J.. Princeton University Press. 1984. Pp. lx-iv. 626. $55.00.

This is a magnificent accomplishment: the first volume of the Collected Letters of William Morris. The two further volumes to come will be eagerly awaited. Based on fifteen years of searching for material, meticiously edited and fully footnoted, they will ultimately include 2400 letters, 1500 not having been previously published. Here we have a magnificent source for the life and work of William Morris.

The letters have come from 140 Libraries and private collections. In 1950 Philip Henderson published an invaluable selection of Morris's letters, and other letters have of course appeared in various books about Morris. But now we have all that have survived and found so far. Undoubtedly a few more will be brought forward in the wake of the publication of this book. But we needn't wait to recognize that Norman Kelvin has produced a definitive and exemplary work.

In recent years interest in Morris has reached a new intensity, as his preoccupations seem less those of an "idle singer" than of an individual who speaks directly to many of our contemporary problems. He is concerned with life, art, their relationship,and the role of politics. All these grand themes are present in this first volume, although his politics are a comparatively late entry. He has yet to make his conversion to socialism. The decade of the 1880's will be his greatest period of political activity.

The present volume runs from 1848 to 1880 containing 659 entries, but actually somewhat more letters that that; some of the short letters to the same correspondent

are grouped together. Not surprisingly—who would know that he would become William Morris and hence his letters were worth saving?—those from his youth are comparatively rare, with just a few surviving being written from his Public School, Marlborough, and a tantalizing few from his time at Oxford. The letters illuminate many aspects of his life, but it must be admitted that he is not one of the great letter writers in the language. These are not letters that one reads as a considerable contribution to literature. They are intensely interesting because of what they tell us about Morris—they serve to complete and enlarge the picture of his life. They do not, as far as I can tell, introduce dramatic changes in how we see the man. He writes a lively and serviceable prose and the letters bring, as good letters do, the day-to-day man to life and make very clear his multiple concerns. Norman Kelvin writes an excellent introduction with a brief analysis of the nature of the letters that will follow in the succeeding volumes; he includes useful material on his editorial practices, and then the letters begin.

Morris writes an unpretentious prose, rather lean and straightforward, and we can see in it part of his campaign to remove "mumbo-jumbo" from the world. In a way the letters have stronger power of survival than much of his later long poems and even perhaps the prose romances he wrote towards the end of his life which may be a trifle elevated for modern tastes. Although he was born 150 years ago this year, we can see in his early letters confusions similar to those felt by many a young person today, as he casts about for a career. He is fortunate in the sense that his father's investments gave him economic freedom, but we find him in a letter to his mother explaining that he will not be taking holy orders but uncertain as to what to do. We have the letters of the architectural tour of nothern France that helped foster the commitment of Edward Burne-Jones and himself to the life of art. But in what form? His was always a restless spirit, given to the "fidgets." Would he be an architect, a painter, a poet? He first emerges as a poet with comparatively little concern for politics: "I can't enter into politico-social subjects with any interest, for on the whole I see that things are in a muddle, and I have no power or vocation to set them right in ever so little a degree. My work is the embodiment of dreams in one form or another" (p.28).

There has been a continual debate about whether Morris's life has a unity, or was an unhappy combination of different and perhaps even conflicting interests. Those who are unhappy with his eventual commitment to Marxism tend to discount his politics. But by now that battle has been fought over and won so thoroughly that some of those who see his eventual socialist politics as central to his life in their zeal can make the argument somewhat tendentious—as in the recent exhibition celebrating his 150th birthday at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London.

In his first forty-six years covered in this volume, we see the themes of his life gathering strength as they grow into the varied and fascinating symphony of his accomplishments. Depressed at the lack of decent furniture for his dream house, Red House, being built for him and his beautiful wife Jane by his great friend Philip Webb, he starts his firm of designers in 1861, and then becomes its sole proprietor in 1875.

Many of the letters reflect, in a negative way by what they leave out, the traumas of his marriage. As Norman Kelvin points out, he asks no questions of his wife during the time of her affair with Rossetti. He maintains his friendly and concerned tone for her, and for their two daughters, Jenny the elder sadly becoming increasingly ill with epilepsy, May the younger who would follow him in his design career, and in his politics. This refusal to write about his marital difficulties is most manifest in the vivid letters from Iceland where he had gone in part to be out of the way at the time that Jane's affair was at its most intense. Like many who preach the importance of love, he did not find it himself in his own life.

In 1876 he writes to Magnusson that "I was born *not* to be a chairman of anything" (p286). Yet his boundless energy increasingly involves him as the leader in more and more causes—the themes of the symphony increase in intensity as this volume makes its stately progress through his life. Almost despite himself, he becomes more and more political over the Eastern Question and plunges into the maelstrom on the side of Gladstone and the Liberals. Yet as early as 1878, he is dubious: "I am full of shame and anger at the cowardice of the so-called Liberal party." He contrasts them with "our working-class allies (who all along have been both staunch and sagacious)" (p444), and yet he continues to praise Gladstone in this volume. Perhaps even more important than his direct political involvement in these years was his founding in 1877 of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, enunciating principles of saving buildings that have still not triumphed in our much more sensitive days to the need to protect the environment. Restoration can still be the enemy of the soul of a building. The many public and private letters about buildings in this volume attest to his belief in architecture as the Queen of the Arts.

We also have his modest letter about the crucial lecture he gave in December 1877, fully explained in an excellent note by the editor. "It's true that I have a kind of promise to lecture the Trade Guild of Learning and have repented it; but if I ever do give the lectures in question I am sure it will quite exhaust my feeble knowledge on the subject" (p.396). With the modest title "The Decorative Arts," this talk made clear that the strands of his life were coming together ready to plunge him into the decade of his greatest activity—which, alas, undoubtedly was one of the causes of his comparatively early death in 1896 at the age of 62. As quoted in the note, Morris said he did "not want art for a few any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few" (p.397). He drove himself extremely hard to achieve a beautiful and, as he became more and more political, a democratic socialist world. Presumably politics will provide the main theme of the next volume of the letters, as the Kelmscott Press and his book collecting major themes of the third volume. So the assessment of Morris's letters is necessarily incomplete. But let me record the profound gratitude of all those who are interested in nineteenth century England, and in the modern world, for this, the considerable first volume of a splendid enterprise.

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