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Suzanne Fagence Cooper, *How We Might Live: At Home with Jane and William Morris* (London: Quercus, 2022), 536 pp., £30.00, ISBN 9781529409482

In *How We Might Live: At Home with Jane and William Morris*, Suzanne Fagence Cooper asks: what of the women behind the myth of the great William Morris? Until the publication of *The Collected Letters of Jane Morris* in 2012, Jane Morris had been largely viewed through her relationships—as the wife of William, and the lover and obsession of Dante Gabriel Rossetti—and as the striking, languid pre-Raphaelite ideal, through her modelling for many of the group’s most famous paintings. In this new joint biography of William and Jane Morris, Fagence Cooper considers Jane’s letters, alongside those of their friends and colleagues, and a wealth of other evidence such as Jane’s little-examined keepsake books, to form a more complete picture of Jane as a highly capable and complex individual and an indispensable collaborator in William’s project of radical homemaking. *How We Might Live* reconfigures biographical scholarship on William Morris—which has been done very thoroughly and to much critical acclaim previously, although with very different approaches, by Fiona MacCarthy and E. P. Thompson—presenting ‘Morris’ and ‘Mrs Morris’ as ‘Jane and William, on equal terms’ (3).

The book takes its title from ‘How We Live and How We Might Live’, William Morris’s 1885 lecture on the better way of life offered by socialism. Fagence Cooper examines how the Morrises lived and breathed this radical philosophy, not just in the beautiful domestic objects, wallpapers, and furniture, designed and sold by Morris and Co., but in their homes, which functioned as ‘a microcosm of the deeper social adjustments that Jane and William were both seeking’ (5). *How We Might Live* exhibits the deep entanglement of the personal and the political, and chapters are themed around the places the couple lived, together and apart, from Oxford to Iceland. Fagence Cooper shows how the home was where aesthetic and political ideas were discussed and debated, and where art was made and exhibited.

Fagence Cooper argues that the stimulating artistic and social environment of the Morris home is largely the product of Jane Morris’s unglamorous, uncredited domestic labour. While Jane’s own artistic achievements and the work she did for Morris & Co. are notable and deserve mention alongside William’s (and have been highlighted by Jan Marsh in the exhibition and book, *Pre-Raphaelite Sisters*), *How We Might Live* is original in that it takes Jane’s domestic labour seriously. Fagence Cooper collates and analyses the importance of Jane’s domestic role: organising trips, parties, and dinners, making and maintaining friendships and business connections, and also the more general housework and caring responsibilities. A particularly illuminating aspect of the book is insight into the illness of their daughter, Jenny, and its effect on Jane’s own health, with Fagence Cooper arguing that the general perception of Jane’s frailty and poor health cannot be considered separately from her burden of being Jenny’s chief caregiver. *How We Might Live*’s sparse use of sketches, caricatures, and photographs by friends, rather than completed artworks, continue Fagence Cooper’s attempt to depict the ‘real’ Jane and William. Jane’s family recipes, re-printed here for the first time, form a charming addition and underscore this presentation of Jane as a three-dimensional person.

Nevertheless, many gaps in Jane’s story exist. There are periods of missing correspondence, and due to her working-class upbringing, there is little evidence of Jane’s life until she meets William. This forms much of Jane’s myth: she is ‘a blank space, a nobody, as if she only became a fully-formed person after she moved into the orbit of the artists’ (83). Unfortunately, despite Fagence Cooper’s desire to give equal space to William and Jane in the biography, we do not meet Jane until chapter four. Fagence Cooper attempts to ‘build up a picture of [Jane’s] world from scraps of information she dropped later, or from

what we can discover about her background: where she lived, the sights and sounds of the city, the events happening around her' (77). Perforce, at times the book relies on inference, speculation, and narrativization. One of the central subjects that Fagence Cooper attempts to disentangle, for example, is the question of love between William and Jane, and, while it is impossible to know the truth, Fagence Cooper presents a nuanced, forgiving, and non-judgemental version of Jane.

The fondness that Fagence Cooper has for the Morrises is palpable, and, occasionally, this leads her to jump too quickly to their defence. Her dismissal of Oscar Wilde's 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' as 'flippant' and a rehashing of William Morris's ideas feels like an oversimplification. With reverence to William, she argues that '[Wilde] would never reach the audiences that William touched' (358). At times, Fagence Cooper dilutes her own critical analysis: she acknowledges that William generally envisioned limited roles for women—both in his utopian novel, *News From Nowhere* (1890), and at Morris & Co.—despite asserting earlier that 'at every stage of his relationship with Jane, William demonstrated an open-mindedness and sensitivity that was extraordinary for a man of his time. Or indeed, perhaps, of any time' (111-2).

Fagence Cooper's biography follows recent efforts to highlight the artistic contributions of the women on the fringes of Morris's artistic circle, led mainly by Jan Marsh. These efforts include the aforementioned *Pre-Raphaelite Sisters* exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery and its accompanying book by Marsh, and the 2017 book on Morris's daughter entitled *May Morris: Arts & Crafts Designer* by Marsh, Anna Mason, and Jenny Lister. Acknowledging the 'great women' behind the 'great men' is no longer revolutionary, but this biography is an essential addition to scholarship on Morris and the pre-Raphaelite circle, which has tended to marginalise the women doing the 'mundane' work on the periphery. *How We Might Live* provides a necessary reminder that 'great' art and ideas do not spring from a single source but are a product of cumulative social communities and networks.

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Sophie Thompson is a CHASE-funded PhD researcher in Victorian literature and culture at the University of Kent. Her thesis examines the representation of childhood in British socialist writings of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and how this intersects with emerging social and scientific concerns about the environment. She is also an editor for *Romance, Revolution and Reform*, an open-access journal for nineteenth-century research.