

*Jane Morris: The Burden of History* by Wendy Parkins. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2013. xxi, 200 pp. + 9 b/w illus. ISBN: 978-0-7486-4127-7. £70.

*William Morris and the Art of Everyday Life* edited by Wendy Parkins. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010. 188 pp. + 10 colour illus. ISBN: 978-1-4438-1757-8. £34.99.

Biographers usually concentrate on their subject, according little attention to partners; if the latter are themselves eminent, they are expected to have their own biographies. By contrast, in the biographies of William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones by Fiona MacCarthy, the stories of Jane Morris and Georgiana Burne-Jones are interwoven with those of their husbands as far as the scanty documentary evidence permits. Wendy Parkins, however, feels that justice has still not been done and sets out to remedy matters. She assumes that her readers still believe in the Jane Morris myth, the silent figure recumbent on a sofa, though there is little evidence that it is more than a myth as Jan Marsh's book on Jane and her daughter May made very clear, confirmed by the more recently published *Collected Letters of Jane Morris* (2012).

Parkins's book is organized around five themes: Scandal, Silence, Class, Icon, and Home. This scheme works well, though it is unfortunate that Jane Morris's activity as an embroider and her role in the Firm are thereby present mainly in the last chapter. Parkins's approach is not primarily biographical; her "emphasis on textual representation situates the biographical in relation to the discourse and generic conventions through which lives are told (and re-told)" (as in Marsh's *Legend Elizabeth Siddal*, 1989).

In chapter 1, Parkins tells us that her "aim is not to counter the myth of Jane Morris's sexuality but to contextualise the illicit relationships and the narratives of desire [these relationships] generated within a more complex account of the scandalous emotional history of the central players." We are not told what this "myth of Jane Morris's sexuality" consists of – perhaps it alludes to the unanswerable question, "how far did Jane and Gabriel go?" Indeed, Parkins does rehearse the gradual revelation of Rossetti and Morris's liaison by successive biographers. J.B. Bullen takes it almost for granted that they were lovers (*Rossetti: Painter and Poet*, 2011), whereas John Simons (*Rossetti's Wombat*, 2008) finds it highly unlikely. Parkins takes us through the relevant correspondence; although Marsh has already covered much of this ground, it is convenient to have it all brought together here. The second part of this chapter considers "Jane's Last Fling" (in Marsh's words) with Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, perhaps the most perplexing thing about Jane Morris. It seems that Blunt wished to seduce Jane in order to bring himself closer to Rossetti. But what did Jane see in him? As Parkins says, "his charm for