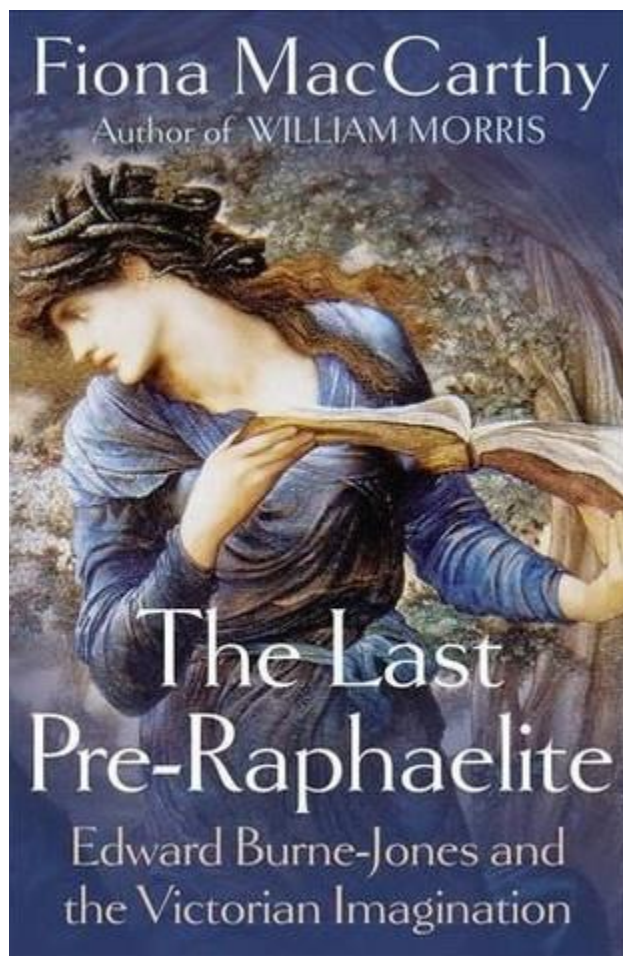


The Last Pre-Raphaelite: Edward Burne-Jones and the Victorian Imagination

By Fiona MacCarthy.



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

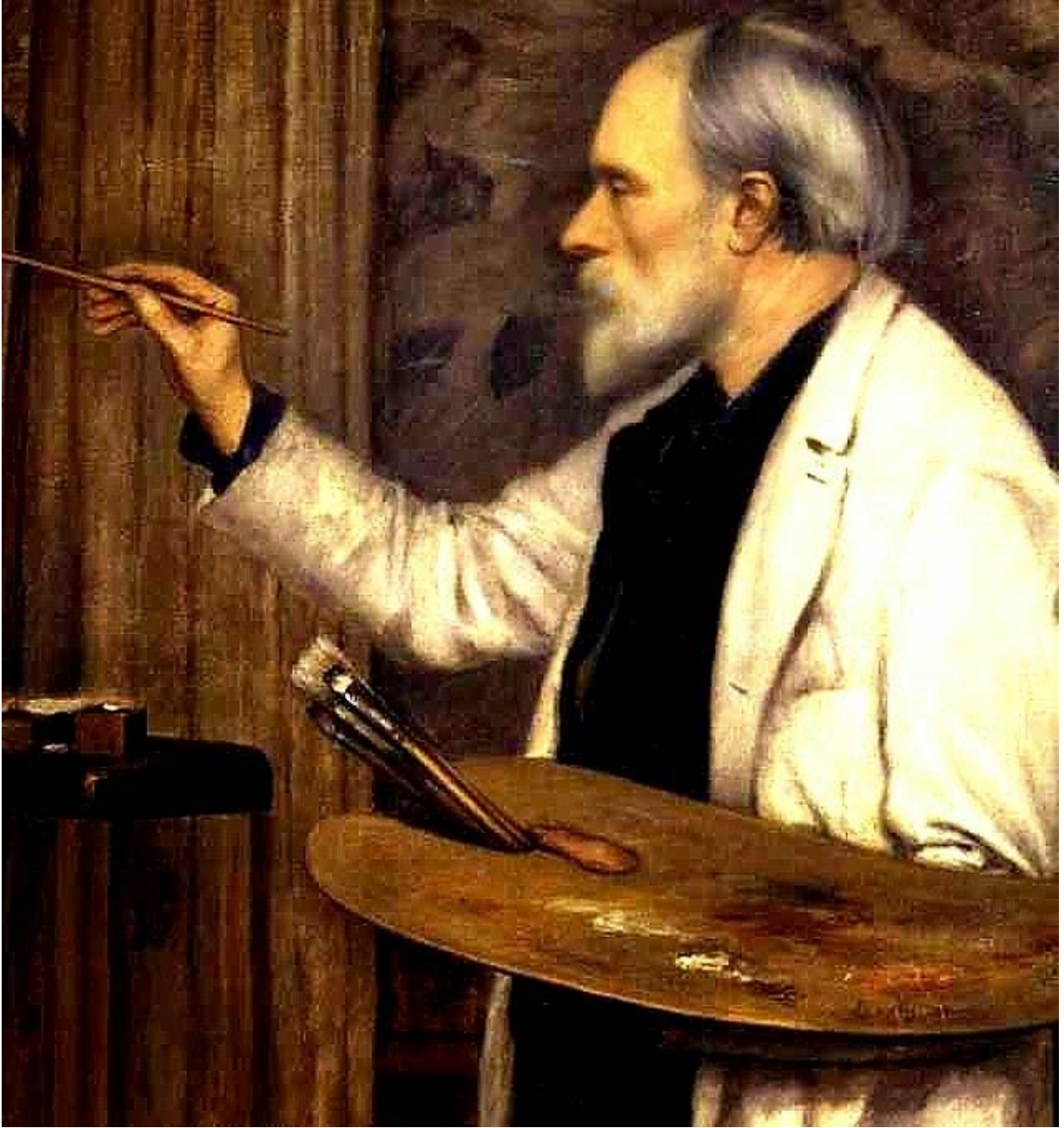
The Last Pre-Raphaelite: Edward Burne-Jones and the Victorian Imagination.

London; Faber & Faber, 2011. Illustrated. 629 pages. All images are from the public domain, *Wikiart* in the Creative Commons Attribution –Share Alike License or are covered under the pre 1923 rule.

So many people know at least a few pieces of Edward Burne-Jones's extraordinary art, but few know of his life. In this biography Fiona MacCarthy shows why this is so. His art devoured his life. Burne-Jones was a man obsessed. Underlying these obsessions was the belief that the world could be made beautiful through art, especially for the poor and those who battled through life in the Victorian Era. He had several obsessions that never left him, entwining into motivations that dominated his life. He was obsessed with female beauty (both real and unreal) and also with his artistic techniques that led him into slow perfectionist efforts that meant many of his works were unfinished. He was obsessed with some stories that became the basis of so much of his art. Foremost amongst these were the stories of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Greek myths seem a close second, with Chaucer, Medieval legends, the world of Europe's myths, Gothic fiction and Sir Walter Scott being in his pantheon. He read one Scott novel twenty seven times.

This selective fascination with fiction was from a man who was on friendly terms with Tennyson, Browning, Rossetti, Swinburne, Morris, Ruskin, George Elliot, George Du Maurier and Wilde. Rudyard Kipling was his beloved nephew. He did not ignore any of these people, but treated them as co-workers or workers in the same field, fiction. His inspirations for his art remained several decades past at least and usually took several hundred years to vintage. Other people's stories devoured his imagination and creativity, becoming ingrained into his worldview and dominating not only his art, but his life. Unlike several other Pre-Raphaelites, he did not write fiction, but his witty, whimsical, at times acerbic comments and shrewd assessments show his literary skill.

Fiona MacCarthy painstakingly chronicles his life from his birth, which made him an only child and his father a widower. He started life in 1833 as Ned Jones, living just a little above dire poverty and ended up as Sir Edward Burne-Jones, baronet, with a funeral in Westminster Abbey. The Jones's battled poverty in Birmingham's crowded industrialised heart, but Ned had an artistic talent that got him to Oxford University, which led him eventually a very long way in England's fairly rigid caste system.



A self-portrait painted just before his death in 1898



Three Burne Jones sketches of relatives and friends



Edward Burne-Jones

A slow perfectionist who worked long hours on a high workload, his time was absorbed with the practicalities of his various art forms. A shy man, who only wanted to do his work then relax, he disliked the endless meetings, community obligations, dinners, public speaking events, titles and ceremonies that absorbed the lives of so many Victorian celebrities. An inactive Republican, he did cave in to pressure to accept a knighthood and then a baronetcy. Disliking the traditional art world of England, he also accepted bureaucratic positions with established traditional galleries and art societies. In these cases his motives seemed a mixture of promoting his children, feeling obliged and an attitude succinctly summed up as

words he apparently never said: “I will do whatever it is you want if you will then go away and let me paint.”

By the 1880s he was a famous figure in several different artistic fields. While best known now for his pre-Raphaelite paintings, drawings and lead lights, his tapestries were magnificent. His book illustrations stood out for their originality in the golden age of book illustration. His stage sets and costumes impressed. His jewellery, furniture, murals and mosaics are fresh and vivid a hundred years on.

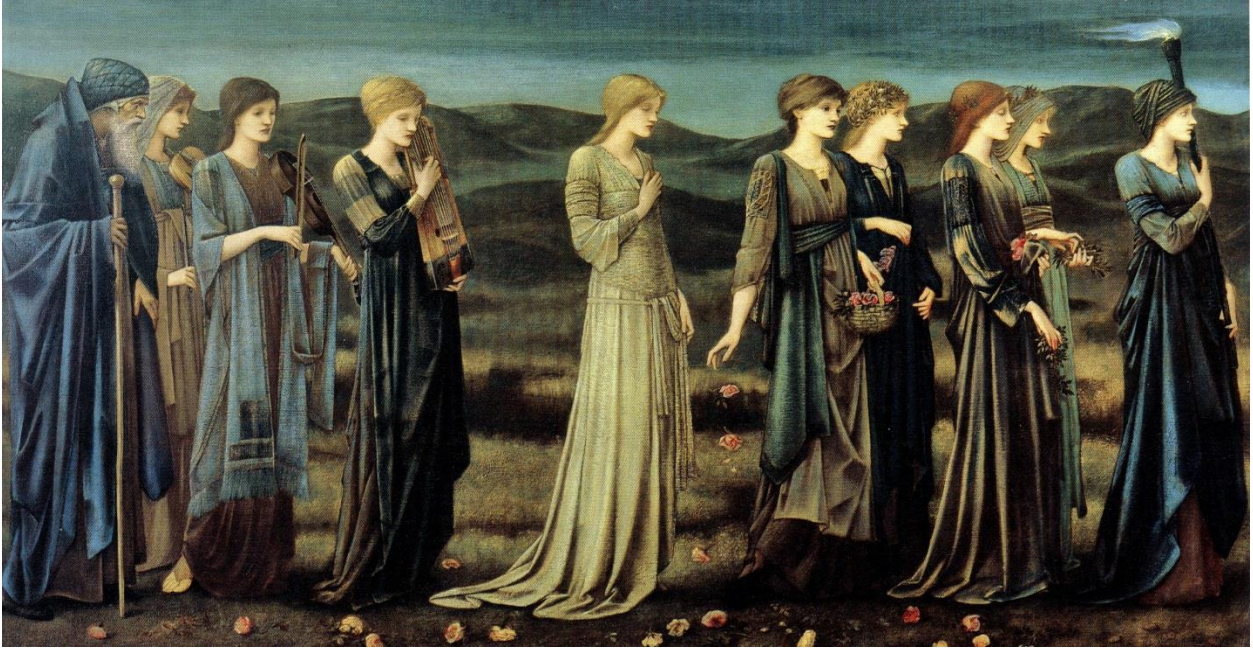
What amazes is how much this physically weak family man, prone to melancholia and nervous disorders, a frail, often sick or exhausted man who did not live to any great age, produced so much in so many different fields. His achievements came against both social pressures and production problems. This was caused by the way so much of his art had to be done working with others - and this often involved financial worries.

To some extent he was helped by his initial business partner and lifelong friend William Morris, who was his opposite. For most of his life Morris was robust and thickset, sedulous, cheery and self-confident. For most of his life Burne-Jones was thin, frail and prone to melancholic moods and self-doubts. Burne-Jones had a dread of public speaking: Morris bellowed about socialism from street corners. Morris was uxorious and monogamous; Burne-Jones soon became resigned to a respectable veneer of married life and was attracted to other women. He came close to running off to Europe with Maria Zambaco, one of his models who became a lover. He nervously agreed to leave English domesticity and respectability behind, for her but at the last moment opted for the safest option, marital respectability. Morris came from a family of wealthy mine owners who lived happily on an estate on the edge of Epping Forest. Burne-Jones's grew up in the industrial slums of Birmingham. From the early 1880s onward Morris was a radical socialist who found that politics devoured much of his time. Burne-Jones, while a Republican expressing cynical ideas about British imperialism, disliked politics; he saw it as a worthless distraction from art. Morris was dismayed by Burne-Jones's business and social connections with conservatives. His nephews Stanley Baldwin and Rudyard Kipling were leading figures in the Conservative establishment. Burne-Jones probably disliked the way that his wife Georgie was won over for life to Morris's version of socialism.



The Adoration of the Magi. One of Burne Jones's tapestries

With so many differences, amazingly the two men worked well together. From the time they first met as Oxford University students in the 1850s until their deaths in the 1890s, they were united by their shared taste in art and a detestation of the crass commercialism and ugly industrialisation which were spreading across England. Burne-Jones was initially one of the partners in Morris's firm which designed and produced a variety of household furniture, furnishings, art, books and designs. After Morris dissolved the partnership Burne-Jones was kept on as a consultant, but was in reality a creative partner and the main designer in Morris's companies for decades. Even after Morris's death in 1896 Burne-Jones conscientiously carried on with the firm's projects for the last two years of his life. But at that time his tremendous reputation was beginning to wane. During and just after the First World War a brief revival for his stained glass window designs was fuelled by the need for commemorative art for England's war dead. Once this need faded, he was amongst the forgotten artists of the past for several decades.



The Wedding of Psyche

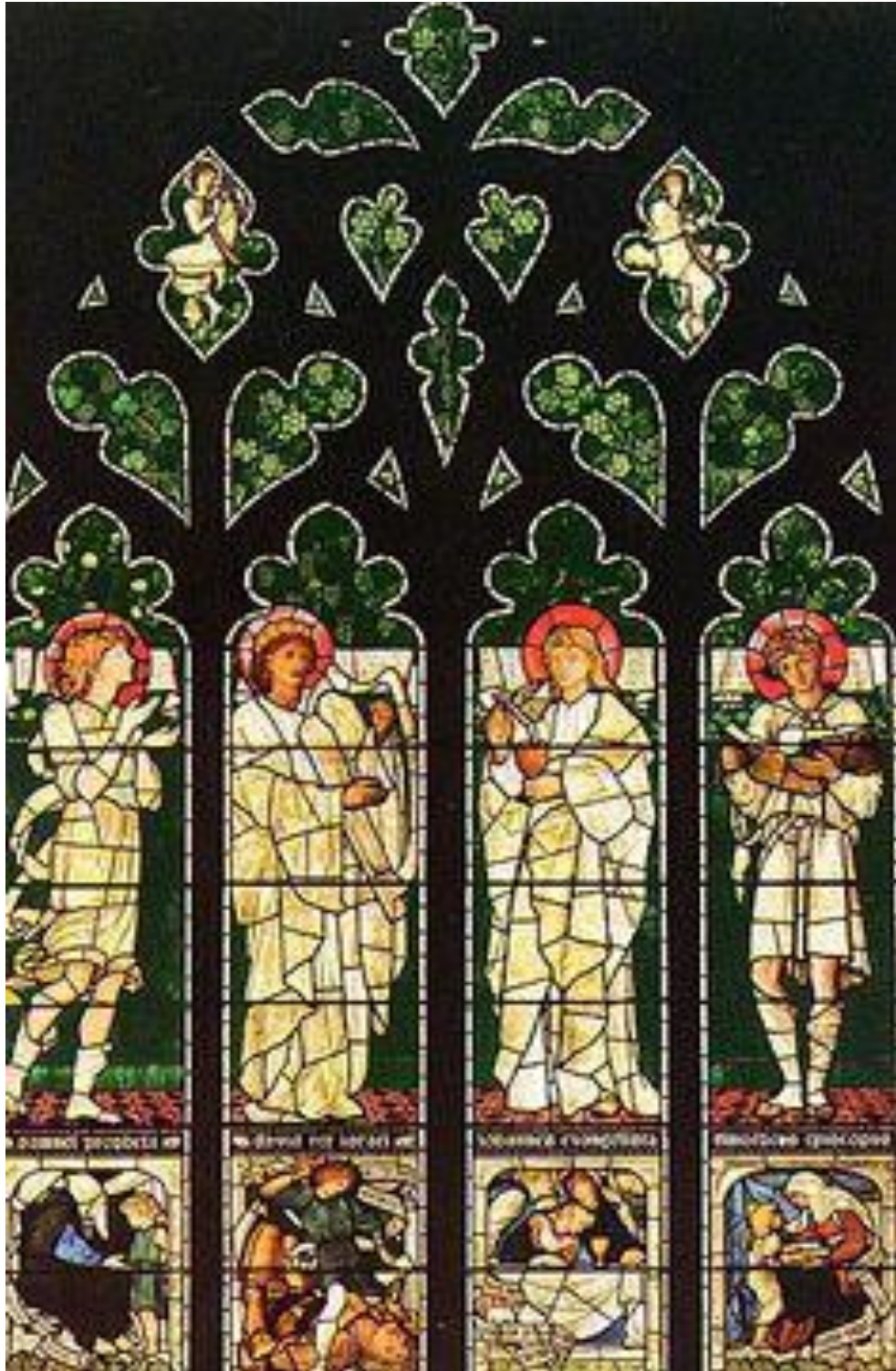


The Sleeping Beauty

The tree of Forgiveness. Many criticise his portrayals for lacking sensuality and being pallid, sad and sexless. Clearly this is not so.



His personal life outside art and his circle of friends, relatives and acquaintances was mostly unexceptional, so much of MacCarthy's focus goes towards the artistic influences that inspired Burne-Jones. From there she focuses on the development and creation of his art. She also places his art in the context of his times and looks at how it fluctuated in public taste.



One of Burne-Jones's stained glass windows. His innovations were so successful and so imitated it is generally forgotten how stilted stained glass windows were before he revolutionised their design.

One of the most interesting chapters in MacCarthy's biography is the last, which traces the revival of interest in Burne-Jones and his work and why this has occurred. The combination of 1960s hippie taste and Pre-Raphaelite art made for a rejuvenating, if strange idyll. We can only wonder what staid but liberal Burne-Jones would have made of that era.

One criticism that can be made of the book is that although the included art works are finely reproduced and show his artistic development there should have been more of them. Another criticism is the title. Burne-Jones was not the last Pre-Raphaelite. Two of the original founders from 1848, Holman Hunt and Michael Rossetti, both outlived Burne-Jones. Hunt lived until 1910 and despite weakening eyesight was working as late as 1905. William Rossetti, the group's chronicler, advancer and support, lived until 1919. Other well-known later major Pre-Raphaelite artists were still producing Pre-Raphaelite works years after Burne-Jones died. These include the American Walter Crane, the Irishman Byam Shaw, and in England Arthur Hughes, Henry Payne, Evelyn de Morgan, Henry Halliday, Eleanor Fortescue-Brickdale, Sidney Harold Metayard and John William Waterhouse. Into the 1920s several others were creating authentic Pre-Raphaelite paintings, but they and their works have yet to gain the attention they deserve. The last of these late Pre-Raphaelites (many of whom were taught or inspired by Burne-Jones) was probably Frank Cadogan Cowper, who died in 1958, just a few years after finishing his last Pre-Raphaelite paintings. He nearly made it to the middle 1960s revival.

This is probably the most detailed, fair and interesting biography of Burne-Jones and is essential for anyone wanting expertise in his work.

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