

Book Reviews

Post-1800

MARK A. ALLISON. *Imagining Socialism: Aesthetics, Anti-politics, and Literature in Britain, 1817–1918*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. 288. \$90.00 (cloth).
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In his 1890 socialist utopia *News from Nowhere*, William Morris famously makes a bid for the institution of labor as a form of art, which he understood in an expansive sense as “beauty produced by the labour of man both mental and bodily” (“Art and Labour,” in *Unpublished Lectures of William Morris*, ed. Eugene LeMire [1969], 94). In *News from Nowhere*, as Mark A. Allison reminds readers in *Imagining Socialism: Aesthetics, Anti-politics, and Literature in Britain, 1817–1918*, labor is both “a mode of artistic practice” and a mechanism for social reform (11). Taking such modes of practice as his focus, Allison offers a compelling account of the relationship between aesthetics and British socialist activism in the long nineteenth century. Where previous scholarship has focused on the aesthetic productions engaged with, or produced by, British socialists of the period, Allison’s primary concern is with how aesthetic resources serviced socialist communitarian initiatives by defamiliarizing the naturalness of the conditions of the present and making it conceivable that the world could be otherwise.

As such, imagination is figured as a radical utopian act: once the world can be imagined otherwise, new lived realities can be made possible. In coining the term *utopia*, Thomas More playfully combined the Greek *eu-topos*, meaning *good place*, with *ou-topos*, meaning *no place*. Imagination, therefore, lies at the heart of the utopian enterprise: the good place must be imagined into existence. Like all utopias, Allison contends, socialism is inherently future-oriented; the British nineteenth-century experience of socialism was of a life that had not yet come into being (29). The only way either to experience socialism fully, or to bring it about, was to use the imagination (30). Like other studies of the intersection of aesthetics and politics in this period, Allison deploys deep literary and cultural historicist scholarship to explore the potential of the aesthetic. While the range and handling of such material is impressive, one of the more distinctive aspects of Allison’s approach lies in his application of utopian critical theory, which steps beyond the particular way that utopia was figured in

nineteenth-century socialist discourse to offer a wider theorization of the utopian impulse underpinning British socialist interventions. Ernst Bloch's idea of the concrete utopia is a guiding concept in Allison's project. A concrete utopia supersedes mere daydream or compensatory escapism: it is an anticipatory mode of hope that offers a real possible future, the point being not just to imagine but to create a different world. Robert Owen's commitment to the design of his proposed Villages of Unity and Mutual Co-operation, for instance, is figured as an example of Bloch's "wishful image," a form of concrete utopia serving "as a synecdoche for an expansive vision of how the world 'should be'" (56). A second major theme is the ambivalent antipolitical character of the "aesthetically suffused" (225) strain of socialism that is the focus of Allison's admirable study.

Following an extensive introduction, the book's five chapters range chronologically across Britain's "socialist century" (for Allison, from 1817 to 1918). In his epilogue, Allison charts the "endpoint" (225) of the constitutive importance of the aesthetic to socialism. The three chapters in which Allison engages explicitly with his principal argument are the most fruitful. In his chapter on Robert Owen's 1817 plan for a new state of society, Allison eschews the more common emphasis on Owenite socialism's utilitarianism and instead uncovers a "latent aesthetic core" (25) in his antipolitical vision of social governance. In the third chapter, Allison offers a nuanced interpretation of mid-century Christian socialism, acknowledging the movement's political shortcomings while usefully reevaluating its significance to British socialism. For example, Allison assesses the establishment of cooperative workshops and Working Men's Associations in the context of the "aesthetic logic" (115) directing the design of the cooperatives and their contribution to what he sees as the socialist prioritization of social rather than political reform. The final chapter focuses on the fin-de-siècle revival, the phase of British socialism that most obviously engaged with an aesthetic mode of practice. Here, however, Allison employs Herbert Marcuse's concept of "repressive desublimation" (192)—the process by which art is stripped of its transformative power—to introduce a more equivocal note, suggesting that while William Morris had a profoundly dynamic role in the evolution of socialist artistic culture, he may inadvertently have contributed "to a dispersal of the energies and resources that the aesthetic had hitherto lent to British anti-political socialism" (192). If for most of the century the aesthetic was a latent impulse driving socialist reformers' antipolitical initiatives, Morris—as activist and artist—made it manifest and emancipated socialism from "cultural impoverishment" (220). Morris's artistic success may also, however, have worked counterintuitively against his intention to "make socialists" (220) by leading his readers away from concrete and transformative modes of affective reception toward mere abstract escapism.

Chapters on Capel Lofft's now obscure Chartist epic *Ernest; or, Political Regeneration* (1839) and utopian socialism's role in the genesis of *Middlemarch* have, in Allison's words, a "more oblique" relationship to the main body of the study (25), and Allison's contribution in them is less persuasive accordingly. He does, however, speak substantively on these works. His recuperation of the neglected Lofft epic is particularly welcome: Allison offers the first sustained critical engagement with the poem in English.

Allison provides a sensitive interpretation of the cultural logic of the British socialist movement in the long nineteenth century. In utopian terms, art is powerful precisely because it is able to move people—in Miguel Abensour's words—"to desire better, to desire more, and, above all, to desire differently" (221, quoting "William Morris: The Politics of Romance," trans. Max Blechman, in *Revolutionary Romanticism: A Drunken Boat Anthology*, ed. Max Blechman [1999], 125–62, at 146). The education of desire has the capacity to break the ideological hold of the present and to change horizons of expectation. In studying the aesthetic potential of British socialist culture, however, Allison also confronts its failures, and he charts the process by which its power diminished as the twentieth century progressed. In *Imagining Socialism*, Allison recreates a period when the aesthetic might have functioned as a resource to uphold oppositional political (or, indeed, antipolitical) initiatives, and his book

is thus a valuable addition to the growing body of scholarship on the cultural life of nineteenth-century politics and activism.

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VICTOR BAILEY, ed. *Nineteenth-Century Crime and Punishment*. Vol. 1, *Crime and Criminals*. London: Routledge, 2021. Pp. 396. \$150.00 (cloth).

VICTOR BAILEY, ed. *Nineteenth-Century Crime and Punishment*. Vol. 2, *Justice, Mercy and Death*. London: Routledge, 2021. Pp. 386. \$145.00 (cloth).

VICTOR BAILEY, ed. *Nineteenth-Century Crime and Punishment*. Vol. 3, *Next Only to Death: Secondary Punishments*. London: Routledge, 2021. Pp. 404. \$150.00 (cloth).

VICTOR BAILEY, ed. *Nineteenth-Century Crime and Punishment*. Vol. 4, *Prison and Prisoners*. London: Routledge, 2021. Pp. 378. \$160.00 (cloth).

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In the 1990s, Pickering & Chatto (now part of Routledge) entered the academic publishing world marketing multivolume editions of primary-source materials to those university libraries that could afford to buy such high-end items. Some of these projects, notably those concerning Romantic era writers, were extremely valuable, drawing together substantially unpublished manuscript materials from a variety of archival sources. Others were less useful, compilations of printed materials that were already widely available on microfilm (and now in digital databases), with a critical introduction (sometimes all too brief and underdeveloped). Given the ever more relentless pressure of expectations for academic publishing, however, especially those sanctioned by governments in Britain and Australia, the number of these multivolume projects quickly proliferated.

The new four-volume *Nineteenth-Century Crime and Punishment* edited by Victor Bailey ranks among the very best examples of this sort of work. Bailey is outstandingly well qualified to select and comment upon the materials. The Charles W. Battey Distinguished Professor of Modern British History at the University of Kansas, he has previously published a pioneering account of juvenile delinquency in early twentieth-century Britain; a superb study of suicide in Victorian Kingston-upon-Hull; a compact and vivid account of policing in East End London during the late nineteenth century; and, most recently, a massive and important analysis of imprisonment in twentieth-century Britain. He has also found time to produce a variety of substantial and outstanding articles on crime, policing, and penal policy in modern Britain.

These four volumes are particularly distinguished by the generously proportioned secondary text that Bailey has provided in explaining the substance of the nearly two hundred excerpts from manuscripts, parliamentary papers, and print sources through which he presents a portrait of “change in penal policy and practice across the long nineteenth century” (1:15). The first volume contains a twenty-page account of the aims and substance of the project overall, while each individual volume contains an additional twenty pages explaining the relationship of the documents both to one another and to the larger narrative they illustrate. A person new to the field of criminal justice will learn just about everything they need to know about crime and punishment from 1776 through 1914 simply by reading Bailey’s one hundred or so explanatory pages. Students preparing for comprehensive exams, and young scholars starting out as teachers, will be grateful for how much Bailey has done to ease their introduction to a large and still steadily expanding field.