William Morris was famous for doing it himself. His experiments with crafts such as embroidery, tapestry weaving, dyeing, and textile and book printing were unconventional for a man of his station and, as his friend Edward Burne-Jones’s cartoons memorably convey, he approached them with manic energy and concentration.

But if Morris did it himself, he did not do it alone. Instead, he was supported by collaborators, workmen, artisans, businessmen, and multiple women (including his wife, his daughters, and his friends’ wives, among others), many of whom still struggle to receive adequate credit. To take just one example, Morris’s famous dyeing experiments would not have been possible without his relationship with Thomas Wardle of Hencroft Dye Works, Leek (UK), a dyer and businessman working in his family’s Staffordshire trade. Their deeply collaborative partnership, along with Morris’s collaborations with some of Wardle’s dyemen, was instrumental in reviving the natural dye techniques that Morris later took with him to his workshops at Merton Abbey.

Brenda M. King, who passed away in 2021, has long been Wardle’s champion. For the past twenty years, she has sought to reclaim his work and legacy as stemming from ideas about craft revival that were independently derived, arguing that Morris recognized their mutual interests and commitments, rather than inspired them. In The Wardle Family and Its Circle: Textile Production in the Arts and Crafts Era, King looks at the people and places that shaped Wardle and that Wardle shaped. Prominently featured are his wife, Elizabeth, herself a celebrated embroiderer and the founder of the Leek Embroidery Society, and the wider community of artisans of the town of Leek.

King’s previous book, Silk and Empire (2005), took on broad topics by focusing on silk, a neglected subject within studies of colonial trade as compared to a vast literature on cotton in India and elsewhere. King positioned Thomas Wardle was the central actor there, too: his research into wild silks, and scientific experiments with dyeing tussar silk, raised the profile of Indian silks in export markets such as England and France and made his dyed tussar a sensation among the “artistic” elite in London at shops such as Liberty’s & Co. In that book, King argued that Wardle’s interventions in the Indian silk industry were mutually beneficial. Wittingly or not, King’s attribution of colonial beneficence followed a pattern of self-justification familiar to imperial functionaries everywhere. Like those of his contemporary John
Lockwood Kipling, Wardle's efforts to both salvage and reshape artisanal industries rested on claims that these were dead or threatened—and on the colonial official's ability to solve problems of colonialism's own making.

Where that book traced textiles across empire, *The Wardle Family* is rooted in a particular place. The book focuses on Leek, Staffordshire, which King elevates as a culturally important town and center of Gothic Revival architecture; as she argues, Leek was “no backwater. It was a globally connected and culturally refined centre in the late nineteenth century” (p. xi). King asserts that Leek had “a lot to offer architects, as it provided the necessary capital along with both a creative community and a positive attitude to new ideas,” not to mention access to “different crafts, materials and trades, many of which could be supplied in the town” (p. 2). Despite Morris's repeated lament about the disappearance of traditions and techniques, these were, evidently, still active or latent in towns such as Leek, even if they also underwent reinvention in the era of industrialization and empire. In King's view, much of the credit for stimulating and promoting Leek local industries is due to the Wardles' various interlocking enterprises.

The book focuses specifically on the activities of the Leek Embroidery Society, connected as it was to Hencroft, with a focus on historical and ecclesiastical needlework. It will therefore interest scholars of regional Arts and Crafts, embroidery and needleworks, and Gothic Revival.

Chapter 1 introduces the three principal Wardles. George Young Wardle, only briefly discussed here, was the general manager of Morris & Co. from 1870 to 1890 and also a draughtsman and designer. It was likely George who introduced Morris to his brother-in-law, Thomas Wardle (they shared surnames but were not related), and sister Elizabeth Wardle, after Morris showed an interest in dyes and color.

The next three chapters focus on embroidery, and often on Elizabeth Wardle rather than her husband. The Leek Embroidery Society, founded by Elizabeth in 1879/80, was an artistic enterprise that organized female labor in and around Leek. Chapter 2, “The Business of Stitch,” argues that the Leek Embroidery Society and Thomas Wardle's dye business enjoyed a mutually beneficial relationship: the Society developed a distinctive style of using Wardle's soft and lustrous tussar silks and, in doing so, demonstrated what the product could do. This promoted sales of Wardle's dyed silks, to which the Society had preferential access.

Themes of gender feature prominently in this chapter or rather, one might expect them to do so. King argues that being a wife and mother of ten did not inhibit Elizabeth from achieving international recognition for her artistry in needlework and her work as a manager and colorist directing the work of the Society. For King, such success is evidence that she was unaffected by societal structures: “Clearly she was not held back by living in a small provincial town or by any low expectations that being a wife and mother engendered”; moreover, like “many women in Leek, Elizabeth found that the family home could be a place of liberation” (pp. 27–28). And yet, though Elizabeth's accomplishments and international reputation are not in question, it is hard to see how the evidence supports these stronger claims.

As much as this is a story of female labor and artistry, King also expresses concern for the “unnamed” men—dyers in Wardle's workshop—who prepared the fibers and deserve, she argues, equal credit. This commendable concern makes it all the more perplexing, however, that she declines to name the needlewomen in the Society (whose names, uncharacteristically, were in fact recorded).

The Society's needleworks were commissioned by prominent patrons, collected by institutions such as the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Whitworth Gallery of Art, and displayed at ma-
major Victorian exhibitions. Why then did a full-scale replica of the Bayeux Tapestry become one of its biggest projects? Chapter 3 discusses the original eleventh-century “tapestry” (it is, in fact, an embroidery), its iconography, historical context, materials, and techniques, and compares these to Leek Embroidery Society’s re-creation. Their replica traveled as a paid attraction throughout Europe and America before finally being purchased by the Reading Museum (UK). While this is an interesting—and somewhat enigmatic—episode and object, it is not clear what significance King attaches to the project within the context of the rest of the book.

The final chapter, “Stitch Meets Stone,” is a comprehensive catalogue of Gothic Revival projects in Leek, with an emphasis on ecclesiastical embroideries, which functioned as focal points not just for ritual and faith but for the creation of a community among their makers. In contrast to earlier church decorations, where specific items were commissioned by individual patrons, these projects were complete designs by the architect. Needlewomen praised architects as the best designers of embroideries, given their familiarity with proportion, simplicity, and the familiar Design Reform principle of subordination of “decoration” to “construction,” or, to put it another way, of surface embellishment to effects built from the material itself. The needlewomen worked with the specific requirements of ecclesiastical embroideries: they needed to balance fineness of technique and materials while also retaining legibility from afar. This section of the book is encyclopedic, providing a catalogue of architects, commissions, and sources, but it offers little description or analysis of the embroideries themselves or their function and meaning in context. Moreover, the fact that many designs and materials were explicitly Indian—the altar frontal for All Saints Church in Leek featured designs named “Tanjore Lotus,” and “Allahabad Marigold”—surely deserves consideration, however. What meanings did appropriating Indian styles and materials have within the Victorian Gothic Revival church?

One of the most vexing aspects of this book (aside from its tendency toward repetition) is the chapters’ repeated promise that a given topic will be fully discussed later—in the conclusion. Analysis, theory, and a sense of larger stakes are confined to these brief final comments. This structural issue mirrors a stylistic tendency toward asserting rather than analyzing or narrating. King clearly seeks to elevate and validate Wardle and his family’s work, and is fond of superlatives and bold statements. In describing a two-day embroidery exhibition in Leek in 1881, a passage of approximately 140 words includes a large number of marks of praise (“remarkable,” “rich,” “spectacular explosion of creativity and refined skills,” “excellent,” “influential,” “high point,” “leading,” “unique,” all on p. 48), and yet few details of the arrangement of the displays, the objects included, or even the names of the makers are noted. Rarely are voices from primary sources included, and a small number of illustrations apparently take the place of visual and material analysis of the pieces.

For the researcher, a minimal scholarly apparatus makes following up with sources or scholarly conversations difficult. While King has included an appendix of important collections and archival repositories, the book includes few footnotes and specific details about these sources; this is unfortunate given that King surely undertook a formidable amount of primary-source research. (As in her first book, King’s strength is in scouring regional collections in the UK, which in this case includes searching local churches and private collections for embroideries that remain in situ or within family collections.)

King has put in a vast amount of effort in telling the Wardles’ story independently from that of Morris’s, and, in so doing, illustrating the role that a regional center such as Leek had within the broader Arts and Crafts and Gothic Revival movements. But Thomas Wardle didn’t do it all himself,
any more than Morris did. Wardle and his company were dependent on colonial networks that denied equivalent agency to colonized skilled makers of the subcontinent. Unfortunately, the reader interested in a global analysis of these trends, or of Wardle’s activities in India, will have to wait. The eighteen volumes of dye sample books discovered in 2012 at the Botanical Survey of India in Kolkata receive only a few pages of text in the conclusion, and there is still work to be done that would set Wardle’s work in the context of local dye practices and artisanal histories in India. Trading one heroic figure—and his entourage—for another still leaves much in the shadows.

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