

“I have had some 55 years experience, I won't say of the world, but of myself; the result of which is that I am almost prepared to deny that there is such a thing as an individual human being: I have found out that my valuable skin covers say about a dozen persons, who in spite of their long alliance do occasionally astonish each other very much by their strange and unaccountable vagaries...it is impossible but that some of the men inside my skin who go to make up that complexity are but types of many others in the world, and the probably even some of those are in this room at present. So that when I tell you of my so called personal desires for and hopes of the future the voice is mine, but the desires and hopes are not only mine, but are those of, I really think, many others, and you as practical men and women, as I hope you are, cannot afford to disregard them.”

— William Morris, “How Shall We Live Then?”, 1889

“Fierce and yet at the same time overflowing with gentleness...the undecided *brusquerie* of the shy, the reserve of the man filled with his own thoughts and self-contained, but with sudden fits of *bonhomie* and gusts of enthusiasm which all at once fire, exalt, and transfigure him.”

— Gabriel Mourey, art critic, October 1886.

### Session I. Remembering William Morris

We will discuss William Morris and his importance to nineteenth century art, literature, design and political thought. We will explore how we can use the history Morris's life to gain insight into the problems and debates of the historical period in which he lived and the relevance of his ideas today, particularly his views on art and society, his visionary politics and his deep love of the natural world. We will also discuss the debate over how we remember him.

#### Readings:

- Morris, William to Andreas Scheu, 5 September 1883, (including “A Rather Long Winded Sketch of My Very Uneventful Life,” in Philip Henderson, ed., *The Letters of William Morris*, NY: Longman. (This letter begins with an interesting discourse on cloth, dying and the shoddiness of the age before he gets down to write Scheu about this life.) 183-188.
- Levitas, Ruth, “Representations of William Morris,” *Reviews in History*, July 1996. 1-3.
- Thompson, E.P., *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary*, 2nd Ed, Merlin Press, 1977. 700-705; 712-715.
- Salvatore, Nick, “Biography and Social History: An Intimate Relationship,” Cornell University ILR School, September 2004. 189-191.

To T. C. Horsfall<sup>1</sup> September 1883

I have long felt sure that commercialism must be attacked at the root before we can be on the road for those improvements in life which you and I so much desire. A society which is founded on the system of *compelling* all well-to-do people to live on making the greatest possible profit out of the labour of others, must be wrong. For it means the perpetuating the division of society into civilized and uncivilized classes: I am far from being an anarchist, but even anarchy is better than this, which is in fact anarchy and despotism mixed: if there is no hope of conquering this—let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die.

Of course I do not discuss these matters with you or any person of good will in any bitterness of spirit: but there are people with whom it is hard to keep one's temper; such as the philistine middle-class Radicals; who think, or pretend to, that now at last all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.

<sup>1</sup> From Mackail, ii. 113. Morris had first met T. C. Horsfall four years earlier in connection with the formation of the Manchester Art Museum.

To Andreas Schen<sup>1</sup> Kelmscott House, Upper Mall Hammersmith, 5 September 1883

I will ask about the brown cloth; perhaps it might be got from some Scotch warehouse: but I fear that such goods have become strange to England; we are got too clever by half to give people the real article when shoddy will do as well. As to the black dyeing the recipe would run something like this: pass your goods through a bath of *log-wood* (Fr. *bois de Campêche*) then through another bath of galls and sulphate of iron (trade name *Copperas*): goods so dyed would not stand the sun so well as if 'woaded' as the dyers used to call it, i.e. passed through the cloth-dyers' indigo-va: they would

<sup>1</sup> From *The Socialist Review*, March 1929. Andreas Schen, described by May Morris as 'the Austrian revolutionary, fiery and eloquent speaker of striking aspect in his brown close-fitting Jaeger clothing, his fine head like nothing less than one of Dührer's careful studies of a curly-bearded German warrior', became chief promoter of the Scottish Social Democratic Party. He died in 1927 and was the author of *Umschwärzunge* (*Seeds of Upland*). See p. 170.

Morris to A. Schen 9/5/1883

be apt to turn 'rusty', but it would be thought good dyeing nowadays.

As to the blankets: it is common to make the warps of cotton, and even to mix cotton with Australian wool for the weft: the best blankets made at Witney (a jolly little old town in Oxfordshire) have good worsted warps and their weft is all of pure English wool, which is firmer, though not so soft as the Australian: generally the inferior blankets have scarlet or some gaudy colour woven into their ends; the best ones have a dark indigo blue only: but of course this distinction is trivial.

If you want to know anything more in detail about dyeing, or any other matter of my work, I shall be very happy to tell you, or to show you what we do at Merton Abbey, where I am both a dyer and a cotton-printer: only you understand we only use the old methods that obtained before the apotheosis of shoddy, and the free exchange of adulterated wares which Gladstone praised so at Kirkwall's other day.

I send you a rather long-winded sketch of my very uneventful life: but since you have that I venture to offer you the rest of my books if you won't think them too cumbersome, as they are a library in themselves and weigh about half a ton—Thor and Odin forgive me! (for I musn't use the ugly word).

Make any use you please of said sketch: I shall try to get round to the meeting on Monday. I want to see the East-Enders; how I wish they would write and abuse us (the Executive) for not being busier to teach them Socialism! If they would only do that and give us a shilling a month! but we English are a lumpish lot. You see by the way that the Trades Unionists have thrown out the Land Nationalisation amendment: I knew they would, and I can't say that I'm sorry: how the bourgeois press will butter them.

I was born at Walthamstow in Essex in March 1834, a suburban village on the edge of Epping Forest, and once a pleasant place enough, but now terribly cocknified and choked up by the jerry-builder.

My Father was a business man in the city, and well-to-do; and we lived in the ordinary bourgeois style of comfort; and since we belonged to the evangelical section of the English Church I was brought up in what I should call rich establishmentarian puritanism; a religion which even as a boy I never took to.

I went to school at Marlborough College, which was then a new and very rough school. As far as my school instruction went, I think I may fairly say I learned next to nothing there, for indeed next to nothing was taught; but the place is in very beautiful country, thickly scattered over with prehistoric monuments, and I set myself eagerly to studying these and everything else that had any history in it, and so perhaps learned a good deal, especially as there was a good library at the school to which I sometimes had access. I should mention that ever since I could remember I was a great devourer of books. I don't remember being taught to read, and by the time I was 7 years old I had read a very great many books good, bad and indifferent.

My Father died in 1847 a few months before I went to Marlborough; but as he had engaged in a fortunate mining speculation before his death, we were left very well off, rich in fact.

I went to Oxford in 1853 as a member of Exeter College; I took very ill to the studies of the place; but fell to very vigorously on history and especially mediæval history, all the more perhaps because at this time I fell under the influence of the High Church or Puseyite school; this latter phase however did not last me long, as it was corrected by the books of John Ruskin which were at the time a sort of revelation to me; I was also a good deal influenced by the works of Charles Kingsley, and got into my head therefrom some socio-political ideas which would have developed probably but for the attractions of art and poetry. While I was still an undergraduate, I discovered that I could write poetry, much to my own amazement; and about that time being very intimate with other young men of enthusiastic ideas, we got up a monthly paper which lasted (to my cost) for a year; it was called the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, and was very *young* indeed. When I had gone through my schools at Oxford, I who had been originally intended for the Church!!! made up my mind to take to art in some form, and so articleed myself to G. E. Street (the architect of the new Law Courts afterwards) who was then practising in Oxford; I only stayed with him nine months however; when being in London and having been introduced by Burne-Jones, the painter, who was my great college friend, to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the leader of the Pre-Raphaelite School, I made up my mind to turn painter, and studied the art but in a very desultory way for some time.

At this time the revival of Gothic architecture was making great progress in England and naturally touched the Pre-Raphaelite move-

ment also; I threw myself into these movements with all my heart: got a friend to build me a house very mediæval in spirit in which I lived for 5 years, and set myself to decorating it; we found, I and my friend the architect especially, that all the minor arts were in a state of complete degradation especially in England, and accordingly in 1861 with the concerted courage of a young man I set myself to reforming all that: and started a sort of firm for producing decorative articles. D. G. Rossetti, Ford Madox Brown, Burne-Jones and P. Webb the architect of my house were the chief members of it as far as designing went. Burne-Jones was beginning to have a reputation at that time; he did a great many designs for us for stained glass, and entered very heartily into the matter; and we made some progress before long, though we were naturally much ridiculed. I took the matter up as a business and began in the teeth of difficulties not easy to imagine to make some money in it: about ten years ago the firm broke up, leaving me the only partner, though I still receive help and designs from P. Webb and Burne-Jones.

Meantime in 1858 I published a volume of poems *The Defence of Guinevere*; exceedingly young also and very mediæval; and then after a lapse of some years conceived the idea of my *Earthy Paradise*, and fell to work very hard at it. I had about this time extended my historical reading by falling in with translations from the old Norse literature, and found it a good corrective to the maundering side of mediævalism. In 1866 (I think) I published the *Life and Death of Jason*, which, originally intended for one of the tales of the *Earthy Paradise*, had got too long for the purpose. To my surprise the book was very well received both by reviewers and the public, who were kinder still to my next work, *The Earthly Paradise*, the first series of which I published in 1868. In 1872 I published a fantastic little book chiefly lyrical called *Love is Enough*. Meantime about 1870 I had made the acquaintance of an Icelandic gentleman, Mr E. Magnússon, of whom I learned to read the language of the North, and with whom I studied most of the works of that literature; the delightful freshness and independence of thought of them, the air of freedom which breathes through them, their worship of courage (the great virtue of the human race), their utter unconventionality took my heart by storm. I translated with Mr Magnússon's help, and published, *The Story of Greitur the Strong*, a set of Sagas (about 6) under the title of *Northern Love Stories*, and finally the Icelandic version of the *Nibelung Tale*, called the *Volstunga Saga*.

In 1871 I went to Iceland with Mr Magnússon, and, apart from my pleasure in seeing that romantic desert, I learned one lesson there, thoroughly I hope, that the most grinding poverty is a trifling evil compared with the inequality of classes. In 1873 I went to Iceland again. In 1876 I published a translation of the *Æneid* of Virgil, which was fairly well received. In 1877 I began my last poem, an *Epic of the Niblung Story* founded chiefly on the Icelandic version. I published this in 1878 under the title of *Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs*.

Through all this time I have been working hard at my business, in which I have had a considerable success even from the commercial side; I believe that if I had yielded on a few points of principle I might have become a positively rich man; but even as it is I have nothing to complain of, although the last few years have been so slack in business.

Almost all the designs we use for surface decoration, wallpapers, textiles, and the like, I design myself. I have had to learn the theory and to some extent the practice of weaving, dyeing, & textile printing: all of which I must admit has given me and still gives me a great deal of enjoyment.

But in spite of all the success I have had, I have not failed to be conscious that the art I have been helping to produce would fall with the death of a few of us who really care about it, that a reform in art which is founded on individualism must perish with the individuals who have set it going. Both my historical studies and my practical conflict with the philistinism of modern society have *forced* on me the conviction that art cannot have a real life and growth under the present system of commercialism and profit-mongering. I have tried to develop this view, which is in fact Socialism seen through the eyes of an artist, in various lectures, the first of which I delivered in 1878.

About the time when I was beginning to think so strongly on these points that I felt I must express myself publicly, came the crisis of the Eastern Question and the agitation which ended in the overthrow of the Disraeli government. I joined heartily in that agitation on the Liberal side, because it seemed to me that England risked drifting into a war which would have committed her to the party of reaction: I also thoroughly dreaded the outburst of Chauvinism which swept over the country, and feared that once we were amusing ourselves with an European war no one in this country would listen to anything of social questions; nor could I see in England at any time any party more advanced than the Radicals, who

were also it must be remembered hallowed as it were by being in opposition to the party which openly proclaimed themselves reactionists; I was under small illusion as to the result of a victory of the Liberals, except so far as it would stem the torrent of Chauvinism, and check the feeling of national hatred and prejudice for which I shall always feel the most profound contempt. I therefore took an active part in the anti-Turk agitation, was a member of the committee of the Eastern Question Association, and worked hard at it; I made the acquaintance of some of the Trades Union leaders at the time; but found that they were quite under the influence of the Capitalist politicians, and that, the General Election once gained, they would take no forward step whatever. The action and want of action of the new Liberal Parliament, especially the Coercion Bill and the Stockjobber's Egyptian War, quite destroyed any hope I might have had of any good being done by alliance with the Radical party, however advanced they might call themselves.

I joined a committee (of which Mr Herbert Burrows was Secretary) which tried to stir up some opposition to the course the Liberal government and party were taking in the early days of this parliament; but it speedily fell to pieces, having in fact no sort of practical principles to hold it together; I mention this to show that I was on the look out for joining any body which seemed likely to push forward matters.

It must be understood that I always intended to join any body who distinctly called themselves socialists, so when last year I was invited to join the Democratic Federation by Mr Hyndman, I accepted the invitation hoping that it would declare for Socialism, in spite of certain drawbacks that I expected to find in it; concerning which I find on the whole that there are fewer drawbacks than I expected.

I should have written above that I married in 1859 and have two daughters by that marriage very sympathetic with me as to my aims in life.

To C. J. Faulkner<sup>1</sup>

23 October 1883

... As to Hyndman lecturing in your hall I would ask you to lay before the Master the fact that I am quite as much a Socialist as he is; that I am an officer of the same Association, and am distinctly going

<sup>1</sup> Mackail, ii. 119. Morris lectured in November to the Russell Club, in the hall of University College, on 'Democracy and Art', concluding with an appeal to the audience to join the Social Democratic Federation, which created a scandal. The authorities had found it difficult to believe that a Fellow of Exeter College could really be a Socialist. This lecture was later published as *Art under Plutocracy*.

"Morris got up and walked round his chair, then, going across to Mr. Hopps and shaking his fist to emphasize his words, he said, 'Well, damn it, man, you catch your God Almighty—we'll have Him!'"<sup>1</sup>

Certain characteristics reappear in many stories. We know of his surprising energy. "When I talked to him", wrote Watts-Dunton,

"of the peril of such a life of tension as his, he pooh-poohed the idea. 'Look at Gladstone', he would say; 'look to those wise owls your chancellors and your judges. Don't they live all the longer for work? It is rust that kills men, not work.'"<sup>2</sup>

Those who knew him well were astonished, above all, by his ability to pass rapidly from one kind of work to another, the extent and depth of his interests, and his remarkable imaginative fertility. His son-in-law, Halliday Sparling, close associate in his work both in the League and the Kelmescott Press, has left a picture of Morris in his study:

"He would be standing at an easel or sitting with a sketchbook in front of him, charcoal, brush or pencil in hand, and all the while would be grumbling Homer's Greek under his breath. . . the design coming through in clear unhesitating strokes. Then the note of the grumbling changed, for the turn of the English had come. He was translating the *Odyssey* at this time and he would prow about the room, filling and lighting his pipe, halting to add a touch or two at one or other easel, still grumbling, go to his writing-table, snatch up his pen, and write furiously for a while—twenty, fifty, and one hundred or more lines, as the case might be. . . the speed of his hand would gradually slacken, his eye would wander to an easel, a sketch-block, or to some one of the manuscripts in progress, and that would have its turn. There was something well-nigh terrifying to a youthful onlooker in the deliberate ease with which he interchanged so many forms of creative work, taking up each one exactly at the point at which he had laid it aside, and never halting to recapture the thread of his thought. . ."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> May Morris, II, p. 221.

<sup>2</sup> *Athenaeum*, October 10th, 1896.

<sup>3</sup> H.H. Sparling, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

## Thompson, Romantic to Revolutionary

We are told by many witnesses of his capacity for total concentration, his almost child-like absorption in the immediate matter on hand, whether it were fishing, lecturing, or appearing as the Archbishop of Canterbury. We know of his ability to master even uncongenial work, once he had set his mind upon it. "Anyone can be a public speaker", he once said, "if he only pegs away sufficiently at it."<sup>1</sup> We know of his physical impatience of restraint, his vigorous gestures, his perpetual pacing of the room,<sup>2</sup> his irritation at the trivialities of "polite" intercourse. His acquaintance, William Sharp, summed up these characteristics well. "I never saw him at any of those literary gatherings where he might have been expected to put in an appearance", wrote Sharp:

"His method of enjoyment was 'to do something', and it fretted him to sit long or listen long. Indeed, this physical impatience rendered him apparently more heedless to music, the theatre, lectures, than he really was, though when heart and brain were both under a spell, as when some speaker was urging in some new and vigorous way the claims of the people or. . . when a friend was reading from the manuscript of a poem. . . he would listen intently, leaning forward, with his vivid blue eyes gleaming out beneath his mass of upstanding and outstanding grizzled grey hair. . . so eagerly interested that it was possible to see the nervous life within him."<sup>3</sup>

Beneath the bluff, self-critically humorous exterior, there persisted (says Sharp) "a curious kind of shyness" from his youthful years.

His generosity, where his sympathies were engaged, is proverbial: indeed, in his last years his feelings of guilt at his comfortable life in the midst of poverty, made him a target for imposters as well as honest men. Several of his friends relate the constant trickle of refugees to his house, whom

<sup>1</sup> A. Compton-Rickett, *op. cit.*, p. 233.

<sup>2</sup> See Edward Carpenter in *Freedom*, December, 1896: "At meals even it would happen that he could not sit still, but, jumping up from the table and talking vehemently, would quarter-deck the room."

<sup>3</sup> *Atlantic Monthly*, December, 1896.

Morris helped in a prompt and liberal manner. Over and above his unceasing assistance to the propaganda, he was often giving help privately where he could. When a comrade in the Hammersmith League hurt his leg and was unemployed, Morris privately sent him £2 a week for six months until the wound was healed: there must be a score of similar unrecorded incidents. So great was his hatred of meanness that he sometimes went too far the other way, handing over money to the movement on occasions when it should have been a point of political principle for the comrades to find the money through activity. But any flavour of "commercial" dealings pulled him up short. A sculptor once asked to borrow £10 from him to buy some marble, and tactlessly offered interest. "What?" answered Morris. "Do you think I'm a damned pawnbroker?"<sup>1</sup> A good deal has been written of Morris's famous "rages". Perhaps they were not so frequent as has sometimes been supposed, since Sir Sydney Cockrell, who was Secretary to the Kelmescott Press in Morris's last years, witnessed only "about half a dozen of them".

"They were startling at the moment, but they were over in a very few minutes, and when he became calm he was like a penitent child."<sup>2</sup>

Shaw, on the other hand, was convinced that his rages were "pathological": they "left him shaken as men are shaken after a fit":

"Being a great man, Morris could face and bear great trials; but on some utterly negligible provocation anything might happen, from plucking hairs out of his moustache and growing, 'Damned fool, damned fool,' to kicking a panel out of a door."<sup>3</sup>

He was, says Shaw, "rich in the enormous patience of the greatest artists", but went "unprovided with the small change of that virtue which enables cooler men to suffer fools

gladly". In open-air speaking he was at a disadvantage through his slowness at repartee when dealing with hecklers, and "the provocations and interruptions of debate. . . infuriated Morris, especially when they were trivial and offensive (he could bear with any serious and honest utterance like an angel); so that at last the comrades when there was a debating job to be done, put it on me. . .".<sup>1</sup> When once in one of his rages, Morris was capable of a flow of language not customarily found in the vocabulary of a Victorian gentleman; and sometimes seems to have revelled in the artistry of a row for its own sake. Surely no one but an artist could have conceived of those "Homeric passages" on the upper Thames near Kelmescott, when Morris would encounter on the water some "salaried minion" of the hated Thames Conservancy Board, and, leaning out of their punts, they would engage each other in colourful invective and defamations of character until they drifted out of earshot on the quiet reaches.<sup>2</sup>

Morris was always impatient with what he considered to be "fads", especially when they seemed to direct the attention of comrades away from essentials in the Socialist movement. True, he was thought to be a faddist himself because of his unconventional simple blue serge suit, his refusal to dress like his class. But this was not only consistent with his whole attitude to the decorative arts:<sup>3</sup> it was also a plain matter of convenience—he passed so rapidly from one type of work to another that he was forced to find fitting and workmanlike clothes—and almost without forethought he pioneered the saner fashions of our own century. But vegetarianism, teetotalism, "simple lifers", had little of his sympathy. "When we are a society of equals", he wrote, "we shall be able to consider all these niceties of life and to do what we think best."<sup>4</sup> When he was told that a young middle-class acquain-

<sup>1</sup> May Morris, II, p. xxxix.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 620. On April 5th, 1890, he was writing to his wife: "We met some Conservancy men going up the water in a big punt this morning; which makes me uneasy, as I fear their bedeviling the river: they are a crying example of the evils of bureaucratic centralization" (Brit. Mus. Add. MSS. 45338).

<sup>3</sup> *Works*, XXII, p. 265. <sup>4</sup> *Commonweal*, October 6th, 1888.

<sup>1</sup> R. A. Muncey in *The Leaguer*, October, 1907.

<sup>2</sup> *Observer*, November 19th, 1950.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, November 6th, 1949.

tance had retired to the woods to lead a natural life, he only grinned and remarked: "Let us know when she comes out."<sup>1</sup>

To any form of asceticism he was firmly opposed, as every page of *News from Nowhere* reveals. Simplicity did not imply deprivation of the senses, but the clearing away of a clutter of inessentials. Lecturing on "The Society of the Future", he said:

"I demand a free and unfettered animal life for man first of all: I demand the utter extinction of all asceticism. If we feel the least degradation in being amorous, or merry, or hungry, or sleepy, we are so far bad animals, and therefore miserable men. And you know civilization *does* bid us to be ashamed of all these moods and deeds, and as far as she can, begs us to conceal them, and where possible to get other people to do them for us."<sup>2</sup>

He could scarcely hide his disappointment if—after a public meeting—the comrades were all teetotal, and took him to have lemonade in some temperance hotel. "I'd like to ask you to have a drink", he would say to such friends. "And then he would add, as in despair: 'But you *won't* drink.'<sup>3</sup>

With Yeats he found a congenial companion:

"I saw him once at Hammetsmith, holding up a glass of claret towards the light, and saying, 'Why do people say it is prosaic to get inspiration out of wine? Is it not the sunlight and the sap in the leaves? Are not grapes made by the sunlight and the sap?'"<sup>4</sup>

Morris never attempted to disguise his disgust at Victorian Grundyism, with—

"his increasing sense of the value of moral purity among those whose surroundings forbid them to understand even the meaning of physical purity; its scent of indecency in Literature and Art, which would prevent the publication of any book written out of England or before the

<sup>1</sup> *Works*, XXII, p. xxiv.

<sup>2</sup> May Morris, II, p. 457.

<sup>3</sup> Salt, *Seventy Years Among Savages*, p. 80. See also May Morris, I, p. 663.

<sup>4</sup> *Fortnightly Review*, March, 1903.

middle of the 19th century, and would reduce painting and sculpture to the production of petticoated dolls without bodies."<sup>1</sup>

His own life and Janey's had, perhaps, been "unconventional", and his experience led him to beware of dogmatizing on questions of personal and sexual morality. The Socialist movement of the 'eighties and 'nineties, with its sense of sudden liberation from all bourgeois conventions, was a period rife both in speculation and in unconventional practice in sexual relations; naturally there were muddles and naiveties enough, but the atmosphere was healthy in so far as secretiveness and hypocrisy were replaced by open advocacy of unorthodox behaviour.

Morris did not identify himself with any "school" of thought: with Edward Carpenter, or with Joseph Lane's Anarchist-Communist "free love", nor did he bestow more than a chuckle upon Bax's solemn opinion that "many generations of rational social life" in a Socialist society would "modify" and "eradicate" "the coarser side of the sexual passion... by a gradual succession of inherited changes in the human organism through the medium of its social and economic surroundings".<sup>2</sup> His own views were set forward in public (but not pressed) in his Notes to the League Manifesto (Appendix I, p. 740), and in Chapter IX of *News from Nowhere*. The test, as he saw it, lay not in "mere theological views as to chastity", but in the happiness and fullness of life of the men and women of the future. Speaking at a League meeting in 1885 on the occasion of the *Pall Mall Gazette* exposures of prostitution in London he rounded upon the prurient Grundies of the Press:

"Two things are to be noticed," he said. "First, the children of the poor are always the victims. Second, the terrible and miserable unhappiness of the whole affair. There is much talk of immorality. Whatever is unhappy is immoral. It is unhappiness that must be got rid of."

<sup>1</sup> *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> *Commonweal*, August 7th, 1886.

and he met Bax on the rebound with: 'Dead! the church! you mind its hoofs, Bax, and its teeth: neither end is safe.'<sup>1</sup>

~~Morrison~~ <sup>Thompson</sup> his breach with the orthodoxies of Victorian morality will help us to understand the importance of his personal example in his breach with the even greater orthodoxy of class. True, Edward Carpenter and others had familiarized themselves with certain aspects of working-class life; while, at the time of the Dock Strike, middle-class "slumming" was almost respectable. But these facts re-emphasize how firmly demarked the social classes were at the end of the nineteenth century—revealing themselves not only in the class outlook of those who observed every social distinction, but also in the self-consciousness of those who deliberately ignored them. The attitude of middle-class men and women (including many of those who joined the Socialist ranks) to the working class was vitiated by half-conscious feelings—of fear, of guilt, of patronage, of contempt.

Then, as now, there were middle-class men and women to whom Socialism was a form of Charity Organization Society, or a passing adventure of an exhibitionist kind. There is no shade of this in Morris's attitude. On certain points of principle he broke deliberately with the customs of his class. "My dear", he wrote guiltily to one of his earnest young daughters, in 1888, "to confess and be hanged I went 2nd class to Kelmescott with your mother: we did not like to be scrowdged"<sup>1</sup>—revealing in this passing manner that he (and the unhappy Jane) had been in the custom of travelling third class on their way to Kelmescott. But, in general, Morris's attitude to the working class was unself-conscious and free of inhibitions. He had a greater respect for craftsmanship than he had for academic learning, and he always felt that his own craftsmanship joined him to the working people. Despite certain failures in communication, he always succeeded in impressing any working-class gathering which he addressed with his honesty of purpose. "So convinced was he of the utility of open-air propaganda", recalled Frank Kitz,

"that he stood by my side on many a windy, inclement night at the corner of some wretched East-End slum whilst I endeavoured to gain him an audience. . . He had no feeling of contempt for those who do the rough work of the movement. . . Although his audience were at first somewhat mystified by his method of delivering his message, for he was no great orator, they gradually grasped his meaning: and as he preached to those toil-worn crowds in the gloomy East-End byways. . . he would

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warm to his subject, and his audience would enter into the spirit of his address."<sup>1</sup>

His comradeship in the "Cause" was a source of enrichment to many lives. Wilfred Scawen Blunt was astonished to find that Morris regarded women with the respect of equality:

"He was the only man I ever came in contact with who seemed absolutely independent of sex considerations. He would talk in precisely the same tone to a pretty woman as to a journeyman carpenter—that is to say, he would be interested if she had anything interesting to tell him, but not for a minute longer."<sup>2</sup>

With the comrades he was careful not to impose his views by force of his personal authority. Bruce Glasier's book of reminiscences is full of accounts of Morris's unself-conscious part in the casual comradeship of the movement. The same note recurs in many reminiscences. John Bedford Leno, the veteran Chartist poet, attended a lecture at Hammersmith, and was warmly welcomed by Morris: he later recalled with joy "this oasis in the desert of an old man's life."<sup>3</sup> Alf Mattison, the Leeds engineer and historian of the movement, cherished as a "priceless possession" his memory of calling at Kelmescott House in 1892. After Morris had paced with him up and down the garden, interrogating him on the movement in the North, he stayed to supper after the Sunday lecture:

"What a pleasant time we had! There was Morris at the head of the table; May Morris at my side, and about six or eight more comrades. Morris was in a hearty and jovial mood. . . Tales were told and songs were sung. . . Often since that time, when the Social outlook was depressing and hope seemed fled, I have recalled that happy occasion, and under his manifold inspirations have again taken the road to Socialism—the earthly paradise of the toiling millions."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Freedom*, May, 1916.

<sup>2</sup> MS. reminiscence in Brit. Mus. Add. MSS. 45350.

<sup>3</sup> J.B. Leno, *The Aftermath* (1892), p. 86.

<sup>4</sup> Mattison MSS.

For many comrades, these famous Sunday suppers seemed to open new windows on the wealth of life. One Hammersmith Leaguer recorded:

"We first discussed a Socialist colony, and Morris went into every detail, with such zeal that he made us think it a project dear to his heart. He talked about the upper reaches of the Thames and about salmon fishing, about his country house, 'Kelmescott', about the folklore. . . and some of the doings when feasts used to take place *inside* the churches. . ."<sup>1</sup>

Nor should we forget the conscious efforts made by Morris to instill this spirit of comradeship into the movement, and to enrich the day-to-day struggle with an eager cultural life. "It was William Morris's great hope", wrote Edward Carpenter:

"that these branches growing and spreading, would before long 'reach hands' to each other and form a network over the land—would constitute in fact 'the New Society' within the framework of the old."<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes he described this spirit as the "Religion of Socialism":

"It has been seen over and over how a religion, a principle—whatever you may chose to call it—will transform poltroons into heroes, by forcing men to make the best of their better qualities, and making the excess of what they have got in them that is good, supply the defects of their lacking qualities. . . Let us remember that the Religion of Socialism. . . calls upon us to be better than other people, since we owe ourselves to the Society which we have accepted as the hope of the future."<sup>3</sup>

Here, then, are some aspects of the personality—humorous, brusque, shy, meditative, vehement by turns—which so strongly impressed all who knew him, and which has left its

<sup>1</sup> R.A. Muncey in *The Leaguer*, October, 1907.

<sup>2</sup> Carpenter, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

<sup>3</sup> *Commonweal*, August 28th, 1886.

permanent stamp upon the Socialist movement. So far from giving the impression of the "dreaming idealist", the impression gained by acquaintances was often the reverse. Margaret McMillan recalled his conversation:

"He talked nearly all the time about material things, not theories or speculations, but concrete things, and failing these, news of the doings in the party. He had nothing of Hyndman's fire and storm, nothing of Hardie's mysticism. It seemed as if you could put his information in your pocket."<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps if there is a dominant trait it is one of deep seriousness, combined with a total absence of affectation, a constant struggle to find the most direct honesty of expression. In one of his earlier lectures he said:

"It is good for a man who thinks seriously to face his fellows, and speak out whatever really burns in him, so that men may seem less strange to one another. . ."<sup>2</sup>

While Morris's acquaintance, Stopford Brooke, who knew him over twenty-five years, declared:

"His life was a wonder of work and pursuit and of intensity. His character. . . is a strange study, extraordinarily heterogeneous. People think it simple; it was amazingly complex. . ."<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the truth is twofold. His character *was* amazingly complex in the strange blend of the romantic and realist, in the fires of conflict through which he had passed and which still flickered within him to the end. But in the integration of his life, the splendid unity of aspiration and action of his later years, there is the simplicity of greatness. It was this simplicity which held so much influence over his contemporaries, and drew tributes from men so diverse as Tom Mann:

"He was to me the outstanding man among the intellectuals of the time, with a personality of so distinguished and commanding a type that I felt it a privilege to be identified with the same movement that held out such a glorious hope to the workers of the world. . ."<sup>2</sup>

**Ruth Levitas, "Representations of William Morris," *Reviews in History*, July 1996.**

*Note: This is an excerpt of book review that addresses some of the problems biographers of Morris have when it comes to his political life and his writings, and how their own political and personal views and experiences can influence their perspectives.*

The books reviewed are Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time*, and E.P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*.

I started reading Fiona MacCarthy's biography of Morris on the day of publication. (1994) I was riveted by it, found it hard to put down, was sorry when I finished it. MacCarthy clearly shares Morris's strong sense of place; and she writes about places passionately and evocatively, conveying their importance to Morris. To produce such a book, packed with information about the details of Morris's life, is a huge undertaking; it would be ungenerous indeed not to salute the achievement, and welcome this notable addition to scholarship on Morris. Indeed, I enjoyed the book so much that I was almost inclined to forgive the fact that the treatment of Morris's politics is relatively weak; for a project of such scale is bound to be better on some matters than on others. Morris's polymathic skills and interests present a rare challenge to a biographer. Nevertheless, in the present political climate, and taken together with general representations of Morris, it is significant that the main weakness of this book, which looks set to be the most widely-read book on Morris for a long time, is a political weakness.

On a second reading (also enjoyable), for this review, those reservations were accompanied by more considered questions about the nature of the book. There are different kinds of biography: so the question is, what kind is this? What aspects of Morris does it reveal, and what does it not reveal? In the introduction, MacCarthy observes that people tend to take particular views of Morris, and to appropriate him to their own position. 'The layers of theory have obscured his 'whole' personality' (viii). Her intention is to 'unwrap' Morris from this theorising, to present him whole. It is an intention both welcome and naive. Welcome, because it goes beyond the process of looking at facets of his work, and potentially enables the relations between these to become clear. Naive, because it does not acknowledge that any narrative of any life, whether biography or autobiography, contains an implicit theory - not necessarily an overt political position to which the subject/object is assimilated, but a theory of what it is to recount a life, to write a biography.

The subtitle of the book is apt: *A Life for Our Time*. The ambiguity is, of course, deliberate: is Morris's life relevant to our time, or is this an account for our time? It is intensely personal, focused on the detail of where Morris was and what he was doing, and especially on his personal relationships and what can be gleaned or constructed of his feelings. Narratives of this kind focus on emotions, responses, motivations. They involve inference, even at times speculation. Above all, they rest on an assumption that interior narratives are somehow more authentic than exterior ones, that the personal and private life is a better measure of the 'real' person than the public or political life. The strength of such accounts is that they can offer a real insight into the driving forces in an individual's life. The potential weaknesses are many: too much gossip, which makes for a fascinating read, but in the end adds little to a real understanding; the temptation to make inferences and extrapolations beyond the evidence; the temptation to indulge in amateur psychoanalysis, and even to intrude too far upon the privacy of a subject who cannot protest but undoubtedly would if they could; and, most importantly, a tendency to displace the public persona, to focus so much on the subconscious life that the conscious one is marginalised.

The Morris MacCarthy offers us is a sensitive Morris: bullied by Rossetti; dependent on a male camaraderie, despite being cast in the role of buffoon; a man deeply sexually insecure; a 'semi-feminist' in his expressed ideas on women's emancipation and in his actual behaviour towards his wife; a devoted

father to Jenny, his epileptic daughter. The detail of this is fascinating, though variously convincing. Rossetti comes across as thoroughly obnoxious, although references to his 'southern melancholy' (219), 'southern European callousness', and being 'southern European in temperament and looks' (114) add little. Morris's sexual insecurity, though plausibly argued, is necessarily an inference. In relation to Jenny, MacCarthy is carried away by her own image of Morris: on his death, she says, Jenny lost 'not just her father but her main companion and in a sense her last real link with the outside world'. But Morris's affection for his daughter is partly known because of the frequent letters he wrote her, the brunt of caring for Jenny fell on others. This does not detract from the importance of the relationship for both of them, but it flies beyond - indeed in the face of - the evidence.

Differences of interpretation are inevitable in any biography, and particularly so in those that seek to re/create a whole persona. But part of this whole was Morris's politics, and here I think there are serious problems with MacCarthy's book. Morris's political activities are given their due place. There is no attempt to suppress, nor to pretend that Morris changed his mind about socialism in later life. Indeed, at the outset MacCarthy remarks on the need to beware those 'anxious to play down - or even up - his revolutionary Socialism'. However, in various ways MacCarthy seeks to distance Morris from Marxism, while incorporating the reader to a supposedly consensual position. She says that 'we can feel quite certain that the world collapse of Marxism would have overjoyed him'; and 'perhaps in the light of our own mellow post-modern eclecticism we can accept Morris more readily as the conservative radical he really was'. She stresses Morris's closeness to intellectual anarchism, arguing not from Morris's political writing, but from his friendships with prominent anarchists, notably Stepniak and Kropotkin.

What is missing is a real grasp of the political thought, and the connection Morris saw between this and his attitudes to skill, craftsmanship and human work; and it is missing, I think, because MacCarthy has no fundamental grasp of the critique of capitalism embodied in socialism, including (but also pre-dating) Marxism. This underlies the repeated return to the question of Morris's supposed inconsistency, the gap between his theory and his practice, between his image of a factory as it might be, and how his own workshops actually were, notwithstanding the fact that he was a 'good employer'. But the whole assessment and conclusion of a Marxist analysis of capitalism is that its inherent problems cannot be overcome voluntarily by individuals, only by a transformation of the relations of production. And Morris himself made the point on numerous occasions: socialism required social transformation, collectively wrought, not individual philanthropy. Morris's concerns about art, skill and work led him to a fundamental critique of capitalism - a critique which is as relevant now as then. To say this is not to 'claim' Morris for Marxism, but to claim that he cannot be understood without a fundamental, felt grasp of an essentially Marxist critique of capitalism.

But MacCarthy's book is not, after all, an intellectual biography, but a personal one. It is notable that she writes: 'In these years of his conversion Morris changed his personality, withdrawing from his old haunts and his old friendships. It is to some extent a hidden period'. Since there is ample information about what Morris was doing and thinking - after all, there is a mass of lecture material and journalism, as well as letters, on which MacCarthy draws - this can only arise from an assumption that the political is not personal enough. The only account of Morris to deal primarily and thoroughly with Morris's socialist years and with his political thought remains Edward Thompson's *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, first published in 1955, and revised in 1977.

Although Thompson's book is sometimes referred to as a biography, it isn't. It isn't even an intellectual biography in a conventional sense of a chronological account of the development of an individual's thinking. Returning to it, I was struck by how little of Morris's personal or artistic life appears in this account. It is a very specific account, with two main aims which govern the selection of material. Firstly,

to show Morris's movement from an essentially romantic rejection of industrial society to a revolutionary socialist position; and to show how in this shift, Morris created a novel synthesis, characterised by what Thompson calls 'moral realism'. Secondly, to provide an account of Morris's political years which is not focused simply on Morris, but on his place in the emergent and evolving socialist movement of the 1880s and 1890s. Morris's political thought is read against the actual issues and conflicts which he was confronting. It becomes impossible, confronted with what Morris says about his own position, to suggest that he was more of an anarchist than a Marxist. But Thompson makes two points which are of crucial significance here. One is that while it is indisputable that Morris read and was influenced by Marx (and indeed recommended Marx's work to others), there is a certain anachronism in simply dubbing Morris's own analysis of capitalism as Marxist. Ideas about the fundamentally exploitative nature of capitalism were in the early 1880s common to those calling themselves socialists. (Indeed a reading of the Owenite journal *The Pioneer* from the 1830s would demonstrate how central this economic analysis was to pre-Marxist socialism). Secondly, however, Morris was always seeking for points of unity. Thompson's account emphasises Morris's attempts to avoid sectarian squabbles as far as possible - attempts which did not always succeed, but which contributed to the general respect in which he was held by the socialist movement.

As Thompson observes in the postscript written for this second edition, he has been read as attempting to claim Morris for Marxism, when this was not his intention. (Or if it was his intention in 1955, it was no longer so in 1977.) Thompson's postscript is one of the most powerful pieces of writing about the relationship between utopianism and Marxism in general, and in particular between utopianism and Marxism in Morris's socialism. Thompson insists that Morris is both a utopian and a Marxist, without 'either a hyphen or a sense of contradiction ... between the two terms', and that 'Morris may be assimilated to Marxism only in the course of a re-ordering of Marxism itself' - a re-ordering away from economism towards precisely that moral realism which Morris represents (806-7). And even then, assimilation is not possible, since utopia and Marxism represent different operative principles, of desire and knowledge, which need to be held in relation to one another, but can never be reduced to each other. Morris's particular contribution was to sustain this synthesis; and socialism - and the world - are poorer without it.

This statement has, however, to be read in the light of Thompson's own changing political affiliations, which emphasize the inadequacy of the label Marxist. For what Thompson is trying to do is to distance himself from Stalinism, from economism and from Althusserianism, while holding on - like Morris - to an essentially Marxist analysis of capitalism. It is not theoretically necessary to place the moral strand in socialist thought outside Marxism.... But it was politically necessary for Thompson. And in the case of Morris, it emphasises the fact that this element came from the romantic critique, to be integrated with the economic analysis of revolutionary socialism into a very particular, and particularly compelling political vision.

Thompson's book remains essential reading for anyone who would understand Morris's politics. But it is a partial account, and it omits elements which are of particular interest today. There is almost no discussion of the ecological element in Morris's thought, and the relationship of this to his analysis of capitalism. And there is, surprisingly, not very much discussion of Morris's ideas about work, skill, craftsmanship and art. There is certainly room for a new study of Morris's social and political theory. But such a book can only be satisfactorily written, I think, by someone who has an intuitive as well as cognitive grasp of Morris's far-reaching critique of capitalism and its consequences - for human relationships, for work, for art, for the environment. It may be hard for a committed socialist to summon up the cheek to follow Thompson; but we too need a "life for our time."

will make an effort to contribute to this wonderful effort to examine the individual in labor and social history. However, as the essays in this issue are, by virtue of space limitations, incomplete biographical portraits, and as I have no knowledge of the broader research projects they are drawn from, I will not offer a detailed analysis of them. Rather, I will try to address some of the broader themes raised by these essays concerning the relationship between biography and social history.

In the introduction to *Eugene V. Debs*, I referred to the book as a 'social biography,' one that intended to explore both the individual and the broader social context. I did not think that I had just invented a new genre; rather, I was intrigued by a question applicable to the lives of all human beings. How, in what ways, with what success, does an individual interact with, create a life from, and possibly alter a culture and a society not of their own making, one which they largely inherit? The approach here was not to reinvent the romantic view of the 'great man' rising above society's limitations, which had been rightly criticised; nor was it to frame my work within a specific psychological analysis. I neither felt knowledgeable enough nor comfortable with the idea of subjecting this pre-Freudian Debs to such a systematic reading. But in exploring the interaction between the public and the private in this man's life, I sought to understand the patterns of choices made in each sphere from the possibilities he then envisioned. In this regard, I wrote *Debs* very much in a humanistic tradition and hoped the reader, while better understanding historical forces, may also see in layered depictions of the subject something of themselves as well.

Am I not then, as the literary critics might suggest, simply 'making up' my subject, deluding myself that I can actually encounter another person in this manner? I thought then, and do now, that the impossibility of absolute objectivity is not therefore an invitation to sophisticated relativism. Rather, the traditional imperatives of the historian's craft themselves provide guidelines to exploring this play between the individual and the social world he or she inhabits.

The basis for this approach to biography is rooted in ideas and events larger than the individual subject. In *Debs*, for example, the larger issue concerned how non-elite Americans experienced the transition to industrial capitalism at the beginning of the twentieth century. Encountering Amos Webber, in *We All Got History*, opened up the tantalising prospect of exploring something of the private and public life of an unknown American. My biography of Franklin, *Singing in a Strange Land*, in turn, has at its core a desire to know more about the intersection of racial identity, religious belief, and social and political activism in black America over the last century. Beneath these issues lay two other concerns: an abiding interest to examine the tension between the promise of American democracy and its actual experience in daily life, and a persistent effort to investigate changing understandings of manhood over time and in different social contexts. That is a broad agenda, and each book fails in its own way to fully meet the goal. Yet that failure is not a result of the chosen form – a traditional social history, like all human activity, would also have its imperfections. Further, I would never claim that my subject was in any fashion representative of his times. That sentiment recalls the well-known 'great man' historiography and obliterates the central dynamic I find interesting, that between the public life and the known private reality. The men I have written about were, however, involved in and engaged with the world about them. By focusing sharply on the choices made

from the possibilities seen in a time not our own, we can learn much about their commitments and those of others, allies and opponents alike. In that interplay, a broader social history entwines with a more private pattern. The result, if done well, sheds light far beyond any individual, even if it does not always reach into every corner of social life. The value, then, of understanding a particular life in its broad social context is precisely this: it examines the process of historical change through an individual who, like other humans, grapples simultaneously with complex forces both public and private.

The scaffolding the biographer erects for this project is itself quite complex. Its foundation is what Hannah Arendt once called the 'brutally elementary data' of historical research itself.<sup>6</sup> To evoke a life in full motion with the world requires a broad and extensive research strategy, one that recognises that the particular is in fact the prism that reveals social as well as personal meaning. Thus, in the process of research, nothing – not the faintest inference – is unimportant. An example from *Debs* will illustrate my point.

Among other qualities, Eugene Debs was known for his hostility to most forms of organised religion. Yet there was a peculiar biblical tone to many of his speeches that suggested a familiarity with the central strands of the Judeo-Christian tradition. At first I found this confusing. Was not socialism the antithesis of religious faith, I innocently asked? I then recalled that Debs grew to adulthood in a particular culture that had been periodically roiled by religious revivals. This led me to explore that environment far more carefully than I might have otherwise (there is very little primary material on Debs' early years). I began to uncover a powerful political culture in his community and in other parts of the American Midwest that avidly melded the millennial promises of American democracy and evangelical Protestantism into what later scholars would call America's civil religion.<sup>7</sup> This not only helped me understand the biblical refrains even in his overtly socialist speeches, it also led me to one of the central themes of that book. When Debs publicly announced himself a socialist in 1897, at age 42, he bore within him a definition of that term that reflected the culture of his childhood. His socialism, and its consequent appeal to many Americans, owed far less to Marx, Engels, or Lenin than to his understandings of Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and the promise of American democracy. Had I not stopped to explore those particular rhetorical expressions in his oratory, much would have been lost.

The test, then, for biography is not whether the subject is representative, whatever that may mean, but rather what is it that we might learn from a study of a specific life. The editors of this issue of *Labour History* caught this well when they cited Bernard Bailyn: 'The drama of people struggling with conditions that confine them through cycles of limited life spans is the heart of all living history'. The poignancy of this fundamental human dilemma is what drew me toward biography well before I was conscious of its power. But how, in a practical sense, does one imagine such a research project?

It is not enough, I would insist, to hang the burden of a traditional social or institutional history upon the inert form of the chosen one, occasionally evoking that body to highlight an interpretative point. No. One must rather grant the individual his particularity in all its dimensions – or as many as one can possibly discover; and the biographer must be willing to explore these byways wherever they may lead.

Assume, for a moment, that one's focus is a relatively unknown working man, a local union activist. The records of that union, its local, and other unions with whom there were joint involvements are of obvious importance; as would be union publications, contemporary newspapers, and archival collections of politicians, industrialists, and union leaders as relevant. But to stop there is to truncate the broader task of exploring the tension between the personal and the public, the individual and the social. To the extent possible it is essential to follow one's subject out of the union hall and its political culture and into the other dimensions of his or her life. Not to do this would be to deny to that person and to historical thought the very complexity we as individuals experience daily.

Where might this approach take us? It takes us into the plant, the world of work, where distinctions based on skill, race, ethnicity, gender, and other factors often give a deeper meaning to pronounced claims of group solidarity. Critical too is the home, especially the natal home and its influences. John McGreevy's objection to the 'underlying argument' in discussions of class in contemporary historical writing is well taken. We historians, he wrote, too often assumed without evidence 'that consciousness formed as a laborer is more important than consciousness developed in the home'.<sup>5</sup> The public space surrounding this imagined worker's adult home also carries complex meanings. In cities such as Detroit, Cleveland, Chicago and elsewhere, white working men and women frequently claimed democracy's promise in the union hall even as they simultaneously fought, politically and physically, the growing presence of black Americans in or near their neighborhoods. Often, the public and private meaning of the home finds its deepest expression in community life, particularly in the church. What faith one embraced or rejected, what church one attended, how the profession of faith encouraged (or not) engagement with social and political life – all this is critical to developing a portrait of a given individual. For what is assured, as we know from our own lives, is that the world's mega-forces – war, economic transformation, political upheaval, and pestilence among them – will inevitably touch the biographical subject. A research agenda both broad and deep allows the biographer to explore the particular response of one individual who occupies a specific social and cultural space without losing perspective on those transformations. Indeed, it is precisely the play between the two that is the crux of the matter.

Biography, of course, is not the only form of historical writing, but it does provide a valuable perspective. As the articles in this issue suggest, recent interest in biographical writing among labor and social historians in many countries has increased. This is welcome, and I hope my comments suggest the serious scope the biographical approach demands. Biography is a form of historical writing. Beyond the qualities noted above, it shares certain characteristics with other forms of the discipline. In brief, to grasp the complexity of the past, the historian needs an intellectual and disciplinary rigor, coupled with a supple and sensitive analysis that acknowledges the 'otherness' of that past, and an empathy for one's historical subjects that undermines neither. To attempt less is but to add to posterity's condescension toward history's less famous and least powerful men and women.

