

Journalism, Contributions to Commonweal 1885-1890. By William Morris. Thoemmes. £18.75.

As is now well known William Morris was a socialist. From 1885-1890 he spoke at indoor and outdoor meetings throughout Britain for the Socialist League. He was also the editor of the League's official journal *Commonweal*. In this capacity, he not only contributed regular articles but also wrote a weekly column commenting on current events from a socialist point of view. Until now these comments have only been available to those with access to the bound volumes of *Commonweal*. His articles have already been published separately in a companion volume.

What makes these comments particularly interesting is that they reflect the basic position of the Socialist League, shared by Morris, that as capitalism could not be reformed to benefit the working class socialists should not waste their time campaigning either for reforms or to get people elected to parliament to press for them; they should rather concentrate exclusively on campaigning for socialism, with a view to building up a majority movement for it as rapidly as possible.

Morris's name has often been hi-jacked by Labour MPs but in fact he was opposed to the whole idea of a parliamentary Labour Party. He thought that such a party would have to resort to unprincipled vote-catching to get into parliament and that once there it wouldn't be able to do much for the workers and could end up helping the governing classes to govern.

Someone writing from this perspective is bound to throw a different light on the politics of the period 1885-1890 than can be found both in conventional history books and in the works of "Labour historians". It is this that makes this 670-page collection of short articles so fascinating.

The issue which dominated politics for most of this period was the Irish Question. When it opened Gladstone was the Prime Minister but he was twice defeated when he tried to get a Bill giving Home Rule to Ireland through Parliament. His Liberal Party in fact split over the issue with a section going over to the Tories.

The Tories and their Liberal Unionists allies won the July 1886 General Election. Lord Salisbury took over as Prime Minister. The new government, which had already "played the Orange card" to get elected, proceeded to pursue a policy of "coercion" (the official word for it) in Ireland.

As a socialist Morris was naturally on the side of the exploited (in this case the Irish peasantry) against their exploiters and oppressors (the Anglo-Irish landlords and their protectors, the British government), but that did not mean that he supported the Irish Nationalists. Far from it.

Morris realised that the Irish Nationalists represented Irish capitalism and that, if successful, they would merely impose a "new tyranny" on the peasantry by turning them into "*a fresh Irish proletariat to be robbed for the benefit of national capitalists*".

Morris was not opposed to "home rule" as such since the term could be used to

describe the high degree of decentralized decision-making and self-administration that people living in a particular area would enjoy in socialism. Home Rule under capitalism, however, he regarded as something quite different; it would merely be a change of masters: *"Undoubtedly when there is a parliament in Dublin the struggle of the Irish people for freedom will have to be begun again"*.

In his view, the most that could be said for it was that it would provide a framework within which the oppressed people in Ireland could come to see more quickly that the real conflict was not between "the Irish" and "the English" but between workers (of whatever nationality) and capitalists (of whatever nationality). It was for this reason (which turned out to be wrong) that Morris and the Socialist League were nevertheless prepared to go along with the proposal for Home Rule for Ireland.

Morris writes here on much else besides Ireland and the manoeuvrings at Westminster in connection with it. This was the period of the first demonstrations of the unemployed in Trafalgar Square, the fight to hold outdoor meetings without being obstructed by the police, the declaration "that we are all Socialists now" (by the Liberal politician, Sir William Harcourt, in August 1887), the execution of the Haymarket Martyrs in Chicago, the Bryant & May matchgirls strike, the strike for the dockers' tanner, and Jack the Ripper.

Morris comments on all of these as well as on trade unionism, the cooperative movement, Henry George's Single Tax panacea, women's rights (*"As long as men are slaves, woman can be no better. Let the women's rights societies adopt that last sentence as a motto - and act on it"*), war (*"the interests of the workmen are the same in all countries and they can never really be enemies of each other"*), vegetarianism (he wasn't one of course, being more into medieval banquets), Sunday closing (he wasn't a teetotaler either and was all for workers being able to drink on Sundays as long as it was real ale and not the slop that was all they could normally afford), and prisons (which he repeatedly denounces as barbaric places of torture).

Morris wrote as a Socialist in the SPGB tradition. Those who might be inclined to doubt our claim here should read the book. They will find that no other conclusion is possible.

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William Morris on History. Edited by Nicholas Salmon. Sheffield Academic Press. £6.95.

This is yet another book published to take advantage of the fact that this year is the centenary of William Morris's death. Not that we are complaining. Far from it. The cause of socialism can only gain from the wider diffusion of Morris's political writings.

Morris didn't claim to be a historian. He was, in this context, just a socialist writer and speaker who from time to time wrote and spoke on historical (as on other) subjects. All the pieces included in this book were composed after he had become a socialist. They cover such subjects as English society before and after the Norman conquest, the

Middle Ages, the medieval guilds, the Peasants' Revolt, and the rise of capitalism.

After reading them nobody will be able to claim, as some still do, that Morris proposed "a return to the Middle Ages". He did think that skilled craftsmen had enjoyed somewhat of a golden age for part of the Middle Ages, and did want to revive this but in a socialist society, not by going back to feudalism where he was well aware most producers were not guild craftsmen but serfs exploited by a class of feudal lords.

Morris became a socialist when he was nearly fifty, so it was only normal that he already had set views on certain subjects. One of these, for instance, was that the moral attitudes of the "Teutonic" peoples of Northern Europe -what he called their "manly" virtues- were superior to those of the Roman Empire.

Despite such personal views (and despite one bad talk in which he gives out good and bad points to the various English kings of the feudal period after the fashion of conventional history textbooks) Morris's general approach is that of the materialist conception of history.

In other words, he starts from the premise that it is the way humans in any society are related to each other, with regard to the production and distribution of the material means by which society and its individual members survive, that in the end determines the ideas and political structure of that society; and that social change occurs when advances in technology change these basic social relations of production and give rise to a new economic class which struggles against the established ruling class to consolidate the new mode of production economically, politically and ideologically.

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