

William Morris 1834-1896

"A life in which every human being should find unrestricted scope for his best powers and faculties."

When Morris proclaimed this as his hope and ambition for the future he was treated as a silly dreamer; the mere idea was dismissed as puerile fantasy. But there was nothing dream-like about Morris's sturdy propagandist methods of fighting to achieve this, his strongest desire, and nothing fanciful about his acceptance of the hard fact that its achievement was bound to be a long and often disillusioning process. However, for a persistent stresser of the class issue, as Morris was, misrepresentation is inevitable. What is our view? We know, as he did, that such an extension and encouragement of individuality throughout society *is* historically possible; we hold, with him, that its attainment is well worth the struggle; he constantly maintained, as we do, that the oppressively different conditions prevalent to-day are the result solely and only of the division of society into classes, exploiting and exploited, and that the one possible means of changing those conditions is to do away with class society.

Who, then, was this William Morris? Contemptuously referred to in his day as the "poet upholsterer" or the "craftsman Socialist", he presents to our study one of the most admirable personalities and complex intellects of the nineteenth century. Orthodoxy knows him best as artist and craftsman, reviver of dead or dying arts such as tapestry, weaving, dyeing, and the staining of glass, a maker of dignified furniture, rich textiles and fine books. But, alas for orthodoxy, here was an artist who would not conform to artistic tradition and spurn the affairs of this world. He knew, and cried it from the housetops, that art is a *social* phenomenon, and that for an artist to attempt to divorce himself or his works from society is mere childishness. To Morris art was inseparable from the everyday life of society, or else it was poisoned at the roots; and the underlying cause of the sordid "eyeless vulgarity" of current everyday life was, he saw and insisted, simply the private ownership of the means of life. His art and his Socialism are inseparable. (It must, of course, be understood that, although in many respects his "Socialism" was a good deal nearer to our position than that of most of his contemporaries, he naturally had by no means a complete grasp of the Socialist case as we understand it. In particular he was no student of economics, and admittedly found the subject bewildering apart from broad essentials.)

Born in 1834, two years after the Reform Bill, he grew up in the period of definite capitalist ascendancy and consequent smugness. His family was well-to-do; he had, however, the good fortune to run wild considerably and thus both gathered reserves of vitality and escaped much of the conventional training and discipline. A great deal of his childhood was spent roaming Epping Forest (wilder then than now) where he acquired a deep love of open air and stored up rich memories of the shapes, colours and movements of wild plants, which, years later, were incorporated in his designs and decorations. Early in life, also, he showed a fondness for studying architecture, particularly the simple, massive, spacious Gothic.

He was sent to Oxford to take Holy Orders, but religion seems to have slipped almost unperceived from his life after his early days at college. He found there a group of unconventional friends, and, before long, had decided on architecture as a career. His Oxford friends, the chief of whom was Burne-Jones, were all connected with the Pre-Raphaelite movement in painting, and in revolt against the ugliness of contemporary

life. The emotional reaction against drabness and dirt was expressed by means of glowing colours applied to subject-matter deliberately archaic, as far removed as possible from hated industrialism. Morris, on leaving Oxford, worked in London as an architect, living with his friend Burne-Jones, in close association with Rossetti, the leader of the Pre-Raphaelite school. Presently he gave up architecture and began learning to be a painter, writing poetry meanwhile; but his real career started when, after his marriage in 1859, he attempted to furnish a house, but failed to find any goods on the market fine enough either in design, material or workmanship to suit his taste. Characteristically undaunted, he decided to design personally, with the enthusiastic help of a group of friends, not merely the furniture and decorations, but the house itself. So the Red House at Upton was built and furnished. In the course of its building the firm of Morris & Co. was founded. The firm's history is one of magnificent technical achievement in every branch of decorative art, the details of which are not, however, relevant to our purpose here. Suffice it to say that Morris always resented the fact that the competitive and exploiting social system made it impossible for his beautiful products to reach the mass of the population, although it was not until the firm had been in existence for some fifteen years that he began to realise that, with the Socialist movement, lay the explanation of his difficulties and the solution of his problems.

His first appearance on public platforms was in connection with the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings, which he helped to found, and which he facetiously nicknamed the Anti-Scrape. A little later he joined the Eastern Question Association, then the National Liberal League, and, finally, in 1883, the Democratic Federation. There followed a period of strenuous political activity, lecturing, writing and street-corner propaganda. The DF became the SDF and produced a weekly paper, *Justice*, but it was not long before Morris and Hyndman found themselves unable to agree. Continual dissension as to tactics, principles and authority led to the secession of Morris, at the end of 1884, and the formation of the Socialist League. This body held that the time was not ripe for Parliamentary action, and that the business of the moment, and, indeed, of some time to come, was simply *to make Socialists*, however slow and unspectacular that task might prove. When a sufficient number of Socialists had been made, they said it would be time enough to consider taking political action. In 1886 and 1887 a number of "Free Speech" demonstrations, and, in particular, the events of Bloody Sunday, when an unemployed demonstration was broken up by force of arms, helped to make the Socialist League's name known for its propagandist activities on these occasions, and Morris became a prominent political figure. But opportunism was creeping in; Morris found his policy opposed, he was considered too slow; Anarchist tendencies also began to show themselves. In 1889 he was deposed from the editorship of the Party journal, the *Commonweal*, and, in the following year, he withdrew from the League, his local branch forming itself into the independent Hammersmith Socialist Society. The League rapidly degenerated into loud-mouthed Anarchism, while the Hammersmith Socialist Society never achieved much more than a local influence except in so far as the lectures delivered there by Morris were subsequently published and had a fair sale.

It must be remembered that, throughout his life, even at the height of his political activities, he continued to make beautiful objects of every kind, to lecture frequently on art, and to write romances, poems and translations from Greek, Latin and Icelandic. All his work is outstanding for its consistent high quality; in nothing is he less than good. He was a man of superb energy, of unconquerable vitality, beset by an

ever-present conception of things as they might be, as they some day *would* be, and yet always able to take a youthful delight in the homely pleasures of cooking, camping or playing hide and seek. "An incorrigible dreamer, if you like, but master of his dreams; not drifting hither and thither on the tide of his emotions, but navigating his imagination with a port in view; no visionary enveloped in an atmosphere of vague idealism, but a sane level-headed man if ever there was one."

His theories on art have been much discussed of late. His—rather Ruskin's—definition of art as *man's expression of joy in his labour* has been so bandied about and manhandled that it is not easy to strip off all recent associations and discover what Morris was really trying to convey. Art, he declared, cannot be produced by someone who is unhappy in their work, whereas people whose general everyday occupation gives them joy will consciously, or unconsciously, find means of embodying that joy in the products of their labour and attempting to convey it to others. It does not follow, and Morris certainly did not mean, that everything that anyone has found pleasure in making *must* be a work of art. He applied the definition in a general social sense rather than to each particular product. He always emphasised the social foundations of art, and, by means of this definition, he wished to make it clear that capitalism, by its ruthless exploitation of the mass of mankind, by forcing almost all men to toil at uncongenial occupations, is destroying all possibility of genuine widespread artistic creation. It must be repeated that, to Morris, art, if confined to a small leisured class, did not deserve the name. He was very much influenced by the art theories of Ruskin, particularly by his conception of the intimate relationship between beauty and utility. Ruskin had declared, in special reference to unnecessary ornamentation in architecture, that a thing that is not useful cannot be beautiful. This is also true in a sense which, perhaps, neither Ruskin nor Morris intended, that is, that beauty—for example, rich and varied colours, rhythmic movements, harmonious sounds, graceful lines, intertwining patterns—is *physically useful* to us in that it exercises and develops our five senses, our "best faculties". It gives us "life, and that more abundantly". But, apart from that, Morris very astutely perceived that this same distinction between beauty and utility has as its basis the class factor; it can only arise in class-divided society. Abolish classes and establish production for use instead of profit, and you destroy for ever this arbitrary distinction between use and beauty.

To assess Morris's Socialism, taken as a whole, is a confusing task. At first sight his avoidance of any but the most generalised economic problems, and his exuberant claim that the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were something of approaching a Golden Age, make him appear no more than a muddled-headed old Utopian with his heart in the right place and his head in the clouds. But go a little deeper and you find that, on many points, he took up a position similar to that of the SPGB. He never ceased to maintain that the fundamental cause of all present social problems was class-divided society, production for profit and not for use. He insisted that the only true practical task for many years to come must be simply, to use his famous slogan, "Education towards Revolution". He disliked seeing untaught masses rushed hither and thither by hotheads and careerists: "Of course", he said, "as long as people are ignorant, compromise plus sentiment always looks better to them than the real article." He early learned, from experience of the slow progress of the one important work of making Socialists, that "Socialism in our time" was a vain hope. Nevertheless, though he gave the social reformers credit for the best of intentions, he steadfastly repeated that no amount of reform could give us Socialism. Neither did he advocate that strange hybrid, "State Socialism"; by Socialism he meant common

ownership of the means of life, production not for profit, but for use, and he was not to be put off by any fake or substitute.

To sum up, we may say that William Morris was, indeed, a man of contradictions. He glorified in the past, but dreamed of the future; too energetic to be thoroughly reflective, he was yet too reflective not to see the limitations inflicted on his energies by capitalism; an idealistic view of history and a bourgeois life of honest industry and artistic endeavour led him to Marxist Socialism and soap-box propaganda; he detested capitalism's "sordid, aimless, ugly confusion", yet he was fascinated by such things as railway organisation; his personality was assertive, emphatic, virile; none the less, the main bulk of his literary work (*The Earthly Paradise*, *The Life and Death of Jason*, and the many prose romances), though its quality is always good and his writing is outstanding for its melodious clarity in a rather pretentious period, is yet inclined to be discursive, lacking in concision, in that terse economy of phrase that gives lasting virility to style. His books always paint a colourful and pleasing picture; his craftsmanship maintains a fine level; yet from a man of his extreme vigour and bluntness this general impression of sunny meadows, serene rivers and calm-browed heroes comes, somehow, incongruously. This is not to dismiss his work as anaemic; and, in short poems here and there, in many descriptive passages in his longer works, his manner is as forthright as anyone's. The main flavour of his literary work, however, is pleasantly satisfying rather than stimulating, graceful rather than incisive. Similarly, with much of his decorative work, the detail of his designs has a grand robustness, but the total effect is over complicated and inclined to monotony, though this, of course, is more apparent to modern taste than it would be in his own day.

But all these contradictions fail to detract at all from his vivid, simple exuberance; they serve, in fact, to show up the directness and simplicity of his personal relationships as yet another contradiction, for such characteristics seem strange indeed in one who embodied so many conflicting tendencies. The man himself was an unresolved contradiction, personifying the contradictory forces ever present in capitalist society, but only in the 1850-1890 period becoming crystallised and apparent to all careful observers. It has been said that he was born as the tide of bourgeois ascendancy was setting in, but capitalism bears within itself the seeds of its own destruction, and it is in the time of capitalist expansion and complacency that those seeds begin to take firm root, ready, in course of time, to produce class-conscious Socialists and ultimately a Socialist working class. Just at that epoch of industrial consolidation and political criticism came Morris, in truth, "a wanderer between two worlds". His life, inasmuch as it condenses within itself innumerable streams of nineteenth century thought and feeling, is an illuminating study. Many of his theories seem strangely remote from us, though it is not yet forty years since his death, but it may be that capitalism has so blunted our senses that we can no longer appreciate his meaning. Most of his Socialist propaganda is clear enough, however, and there is nothing dreamlike or effeminate about this:-

"Intelligence enough to conceive, courage enough to will, power enough to compel. If our ideas of a new society are anything more than a dream, these three qualities must animate the due effective majority of the working people: and then I say the thing will be done."

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