

Supplement to *British Book News*: NO. 32  
on Writers and their Work

# WILLIAM MORRIS

By PHILIP HENDERSON

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Mr. Philip Henderson was born in 1906 and has held varied posts in the world of letters. He was for some years Assistant Editor, Everyman's Library, was from 1933-4 Literary Editor of *New Britain*, while from 1943 to 1946 he was associated with *British Book News*, the parent journal of this series. His many publications include *And Morning in His Eyes*, 1937, a book on Christopher Marlowe to which he has recently added an up-to-date study; *The Complete Poems of John Skelton* ; and *The Letters of William Morris*, 1950. In the present survey he draws upon his wide knowledge of Morris to present a lucid and persuasive conspectus of his life and work.

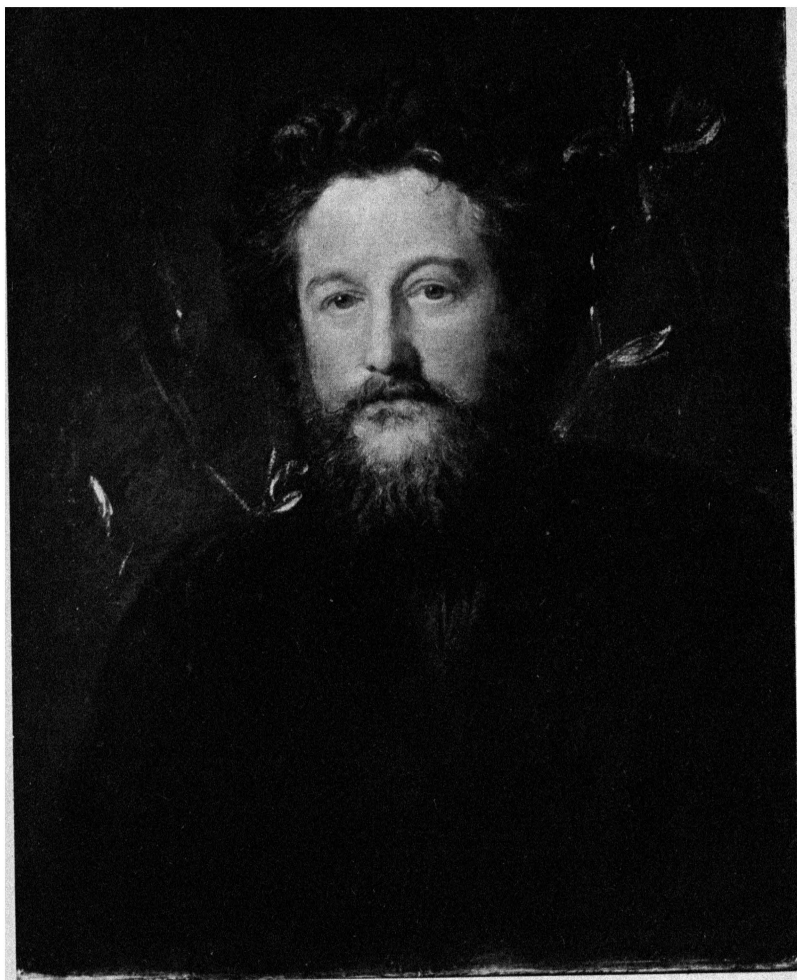
*Bibliographical Series*  
*of Supplements to 'British Book News'*

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GENERAL EDITOR  
T. O. Beachcroft







WILLIAM MORRIS

*from a painting of 1880 by G. F. WATTS in the National Portrait Gallery.*

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# CONTENTS

WILLIAM MORRIS page 7

A SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY 39

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COLOPHON OF THE KELMSCOTT PRESS  
DESIGNED BY WILLIAM MORRIS

¶ WILLIAM MORRIS was born on 24 March 1834, at Clay Hill,  
Walthamstow : he died at Hammersmith on 3 October 1896.

## WILLIAM MORRIS

THE Upper Thames above Radcot Bridge meanders through some of the oldest, sleepest country in England. It is bordered by water-meadows, and the villages are built of orange-grey Cotswold stone in a native Gothic style that survived in this part of the country well into the seventeenth century. The churches of Bampton, Lechlade, Fairford, and Faringdon date from the days when the Cotswolds were a wool centre. Fairford has some medieval glass, Faringdon the alabaster tomb of Sir Henry Unton, ambassador to Paris in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, and in the churchyard of Kelmscott is the grave of William Morris—a solid unpretentious affair designed by his friend Philip Webb. Morris was carried to the grave on 6 October 1896 on a farm wagon with a yellow body and bright red wheels, wreathed with vine and strewn with willow boughs—‘the only funeral’, remarks W. R. Lethaby, ‘I have ever seen that did not make me ashamed to have to be buried’.<sup>1</sup>

With the death of William Morris, poet, designer, typographer, and Socialist, the nineteenth century came to a symbolic end and England lost one of her greatest men. For Morris, with his rare combination of qualities, his largeness of nature, his sweetness and idealism, his solidity, his immense practical energy, was something that only England, perhaps, could have produced. Yet he had nothing in common with the commercial, scientific, industrial society of his (or our own) day. He turned away from what he called ‘the dull squalor of civilization’ to romance, myth, and epic. In this, of course, he was at one with many poets and artists of the nineteenth century—Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, Burne-Jones, Rossetti and Wagner. But Morris, though his work is not free from nostalgia, compared with most of these, is unusually wholesome. His rejection of his age was more fundamental than either Carlyle’s or Ruskin’s; and

<sup>1</sup> *Philip Webb and his Work*, p. 195.

though he fell under the influence of Marx, when he became a Socialist, his attack upon capitalist society went beyond Marx in its rejection of the whole fabric of industrial civilization. He was not interested in organizing men more efficiently into units of production: he had seen what machinery had made of the cities of England already, and he saw what machinery was making of men. Art for him included everything made by the hand of man, and with Ruskin he defined beauty in art as the result of man's pleasure in the thing made. Reduce man's working day to a round of soul-destroying labour, make him a machine-minder, house him in a hovel, one of thousands of hovels exactly alike spreading across the face of the country like a disease, and what he produces will inevitably bear the imprint of such conditions. As Morris said in his lecture *The Lesser Arts*: 'Unless people care about carrying on their business without making the world hideous, how can they care about art?' So, when he came to write his Utopia, *News from Nowhere*, he projected the outward conditions of Chaucer's England into the future—anticipating, as has been rather unkindly remarked, the garden suburb. In the nature of things, frustration and sadness are implicit in such a vision. No man can deny his age with impunity, or without sentimentalism, and some of this sentimentalism infected Morris's poetry, his prose romances, his book designs, and his tapestries.

A rich man, he lived partly at Kelmscott, a haven of grey gables and rook-haunted elms, with sometimes 'a sense of the place being too beautiful to live in', and partly at Hammersmith, in a fine Georgian house on the banks of the Lower Thames. As a Socialist, he worked for the future, but his heart was in the past. He advocated revolution and founded the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. He said 'What business have we with art at all unless all can share it?' Yet only the rich could afford the sumptuous productions of Morris & Co. and the Kelmscott Press. Theoretically Morris despised luxury in art, yet his goods

were the last word in luxury. He was quite aware of these contradictions himself and they were, to some extent, forced upon him by conditions beyond his control. But they made him furious. While at work on the interior decorations of Rounton Grange, Northallerton, in 1876, he was heard striding about one of its empty rooms and talking to himself excitedly. Asked if anything was the matter, he replied: 'It is only that I spend my life in ministering to the swinish luxury of the rich.' In compensation, much of his time in later life was given to touring the grim industrial areas of northern England and Scotland to spread the gospel of Socialism. But as he travelled by train he carried his note-book with him, translating Homer or writing romances which are visions of a regenerated mankind living close to nature in harmony and simplicity.

William Morris was born at Elm House, Walthamstow, on 24 March 1834, one of a family of nine of Welsh descent. To-day Walthamstow is geographically an extension of East London, but when Morris was a child the village stood in pleasant Essex country overlooking the valley of the Lea, within a mile or so of Epping Forest. It was a favourite residence of 'City men', who drove up daily to London in the stage coach. Morris's father was a bill-broker with offices in Lombard Street, well-to-do and soon to be made rich by the steep rise in the price of copper shares. The family moved three times during Morris's childhood, but they always remained in the neighbourhood of Epping Forest. From Woodford Hall, to which they moved when Morris was six, the course of the Thames might be traced winding through the marshes, with white and ruddy-brown sails moving among the cornfields and pastures. In his later romances, Morris often returned in imagination to this scene of his boyhood—'the wide green sea of Essex marshland, with the great domed line of the sky, and the sun shining down in one flood of peaceful light over the long distance'. There was something

Flemish in the landscape, and it was to the art of Flanders that Morris was drawn by natural inclination.

It is important to stress Morris's different environments, whether during the early years in Essex or the middle and later years in Oxfordshire (in both cases it was an environment of river and marsh), because his mind reflected things with the clarity of water, and his eye was so sharp and accurate, his memory so retentive, that anything which once impressed him was remembered in its minutest detail and liable to appear in his work years later. 'A man careless of metaphysics and religion', so he described himself, 'as well as of scientific analysis, but with a deep love of the earth and the life on it, and a passion for the history of the past of mankind.'

At school at Marlborough Morris tells us that he learnt nothing at all, but he spent much of his time exploring the strange bare Wiltshire country with its ancient British ruins of Avebury and Stonehenge. In 1853 he went up to Exeter College, Oxford, where he formed friendships, destined to be for life, with Burne-Jones, Charles Faulkner, Cormel Price, and Philip Webb. Webb he met after he had given up all idea of a clerical career (for which his family had originally intended him) and was working in the Oxford office of George Edmund Street, the Gothic Revival architect.

Oxford, at that time, was still in its main aspects a medieval city—'a vision of grey-roofed houses, a long street, and the sound of many bells'. The Anglo-Catholic Tractarian Movement was still in the air and Morris and his friends were so much affected by it that they formed a Brotherhood to launch 'a crusade and holy war against the age'. But gambling in railway shares had proved more exciting than theological controversy, and the growth of the Great Western Railway really finished off Tractarianism, as far as the outside world was concerned. Once the railway reached Oxford, it was the end of the Middle Ages. But, within the cloistered walls of their colleges, Morris and

his friends were enthusiastically discovering Froissart, Carlyle, Kingsley, Tennyson, Browning, and above all the *Morte d'Arthur* and Ruskin's *Stones of Venice*. It is not too much to say that Ruskin's book, with its magnificent chapter 'On the Nature of Gothic', came with the force of a revelation and set Morris on the path he was to follow for the rest of his life. In the minds of these young men the Gothic Revival had already become a Gothic Renaissance. When, in the Long Vacation of 1854, Morris and Burne-Jones visited Belgium and Northern France, they saw for the first time the painting of Memling and Van Eyck and the cathedrals of Amiens, Beauvais, and Rouen. On his return Morris wrote in *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*: 'I think these same churches of north France the greatest, the most beautiful, the kindest and most loving of all the buildings the earth has ever borne.' This visit confirmed his decision to be an architect and inspired perhaps the finest description of Amiens that has ever been written.

The spirit of the rather lush perfervid tales Morris was writing at this time comes out in the description of the garden in *The Story of the Unknown Church* :

... in the garden were trellises covered over with roses and convolvulus, and the great-leaved fiery nasturtium; and specially all along by the poplar trees were there trellises, but on these nothing grew but deep crimson roses; and hollyhocks too were all in blossom at that time, great spires of pink, and orange and red, and white, with their soft, downy leaves. I said that nothing grew on the trellises by the poplars but crimson roses, but I was not quite right, for in many places the wild flowers had crept into the garden from without; lush green briony, with green-white blossoms, that grows so fast, one could almost think that we see it grow, and deadly nightshade, *La bella donna*, O! so beautiful; red berry, and purple, yellow-spiked flower, and deadly, cruel-looking, dark green leaf. . . .

Remarkable and typical of Morris is the intense feeling for primary colours, the sense of texture, the physical feel of the

flowers, and the striving for meticulous accuracy of vision. Already he is looking at the world with a craftsman's eye.

If in the early tales everything is inclined to be too 'beautiful'—the word itself recurs rather too often—that cannot be said for the poems he was also writing and which appeared in *The Defence of Guenevere*. These have all the savagery as well as the colour and pageantry of the Middle Ages : suggesting rather the vigour of thirteenth-century stained glass than the sickliness of Burne-Jones and the sultry over-charged atmosphere of Rossetti. In his medievalism Morris was always much nearer to the real thing than any of the other Pre-Raphaelites, though it is true that there is a close parallel between some of these poems and some of Rossetti's water-colours done about this time, or a little earlier—'Arthur's Tomb', for example. *The Defence of Guenevere* is nearer to the abrupt colloquialism of Browning than to the melliflence of Tennyson : *The Idylls of the King* are anaemic in comparison. Nor does Morris seem to have been embarrassed by the moral considerations which falsify so much Victorian poetry. The title poem with the passionate figure of Guenevere defending her adulterous love for Lancelot—'My face made beautiful with my young blood' ; 'King Arthur's Tomb' with the last anguished meeting of the lovers, separated by the body of the dead king ; 'Concerning Geffray Teste Noir' with the knights cutting down the townsfolk of Beauvais and the bones of the burnt women in the market place ; and 'The Haystack in the Floods', the most tragic poem in the book, telling of how Jehane and her Robert are overtaken by the tyrant Godmar, from whom they are fleeing, and of how Robert is bound and butchered before her eyes—these should have convinced readers at the time that here was no sentimental medievalist.

With a start

Up Godmar rose, thrust them apart ;  
From Robert's throat he loosed the bands  
Of silk and mail ; with empty hands

Held out, she stood and gazed, and saw,  
The long bright blade without a flaw  
Glide out from Godmar's sheath, his hand  
In Robert's hair ; she saw him bend  
Back Robert's head ; she saw him send  
The thin steel down ; the blow told well,  
Right backward the knight Robert fell,  
And moan'd as dogs do, being half dead,  
Unwitting, as I deem : so then  
Godmar turn'd grinning to his men,  
Who ran, some five or six, and beat  
His head to pieces at their feet. . . .  
This was the parting that they had  
Beside the haystack in the floods.

But the book passed almost unnoticed. Nor did work in Street's office involve the building of cathedrals. Indeed, much of it involved the 'restoration' of old churches, a practice which Morris was later to found a society to prevent. He remained with Street a year, and in the autumn of 1856 went with him on his second visit to the Low Countries. It was after this visit that he adapted Van Eyck's motto *Als ich Kanne* for his own, in the French form *Si je puis*. In this year also he first met Rossetti, who persuaded him to give up architecture and become a painter. Believing that the high-water mark of English romantic poetry had been reached by Keats, romantic painting was, in Rossetti's view, a virgin field. 'If a man has any poetry in him', he declared, 'he should paint, for it has all been said and written, and they have scarcely begun to paint it.' The idea of painting poetry sounds nowadays little more than illustration, and this is what Rossetti's painting, and the bulk of Pre-Raphaelite painting, really is. But if Blake, Constable, Turner, and Samuel Palmer are not romantic painters, one is at a loss to know who are. The Pre-Raphaelites painted as though these great artists, in whose work the English romantic tradition may be seen at its best, had never existed. Worse still, the 'poetry' they painted usually consisted of such false and sentimental

emotions as nowadays can only raise a smile or fill us with a feeling of nausea.

Morris became an ardent admirer and pupil of the Pre-Raphaelite school, and got to know Holman Hunt and Madox Brown. At that year's Royal Academy he saw, 'fell in love with', and bought Arthur Hughes' 'April Love'. This painting, considered the very height of exquisite sentiment, represents a girl in a violet dress standing in an ivy-covered Gothic archway; her face is averted with a tearful smile from a shadowy lover, who is partly seen weeping against a window-sill in the background. At the same exhibition Morris saw Holman Hunt's even more unpleasant 'Scapegoat', Millais' 'Autumn Leaves', and Wallis's 'Death of Chatterton', which is still one of the most popular pictures in the Tate Gallery.

'The long battle between the Palladian and Gothic styles for the new University Museum had been at last decided by the Oxford authorities in favour of the latter', writes Mackail. 'Woodward's plans, in a style of mixed Rhenish and Venetian Gothic, had been accepted. . . .' Besides his work on the Museum, Benjamin Woodward was building a debating hall for the Union Society. Above a gallery, which ran round its inside walls, was a broad belt of wall divided into bays, pierced by twenty six-foil circular windows, surmounted by an open timber roof. It was arranged that Rossetti, who was a friend of Woodward's, should fill the blank spaces with frescoes, and to this end he enrolled his friends, among them Morris, Burne-Jones, and Arthur Hughes. The ten paintings were to be a series of scenes from that Bible of the later Pre-Raphaelites, the *Morte d'Arthur* of Mallory. For his subject Morris chose a strangely prophetic one—prophetic, that is, as far as his own future domestic life was concerned, 'How Sir Palomydes loved Là Belle Iseult with an exceeding great love, and how she loved not him again, but rather Sir Tristram'. The subject, Mackail remarks, was one for which he felt 'a singular and almost morbid attraction, that

of the unsuccessful man and despised lover'. Burne-Jones has left a delightful account of the proceedings in the Union debating hall during its decoration by this band of zealots.

For the purposes of our drawing we often needed armour, and of a date and design so remote that no example existed for our use. Thereupon Morris, whose knowledge of all these things seemed to have been born in him, and who never at any time needed books of reference for anything, got to work to make designs for an ancient kind of helmet called a basinet, and for a great surcoat of ringed mail with a hood of mail and the skirt coming below the knees. These were made for him by a stout little smith who had a forge near the Castle. Morris's visits to the forge were daily, but what scenes happened there we shall never know; the encounters between these two workmen were always stubborn and angry as far as I could see. One afternoon when I was working high up at my picture, I heard a strange bellowing in the building, and turning round to find the cause, saw an unwonted sight. The basinet was tried on, but the visor, for some reason, would not lift, and I saw Morris embedded in iron, dancing with rage, and roaring inside. The mail coat came in due time, and was so satisfactory to its designer that the first day it came he chose to dine in it. It became him well; he looked splendid.

The episode is typical of Morris, with his firm grasp of practical details, and his determination to bring the Middle Ages right into the present to the extent of dining in chain mail. There is also his sudden uncontrollable rage when thwarted by intractable inanimate objects. These rages passed as soon as they came, leaving him humble and repentant. In fact Morris was always too ready to blame himself and was known to deal his own head resounding blows with his fists in self-punishment. When he was bored he would stand rubbing his back against the wall like a sheep. Such endearing habits naturally made him the butt of his friends, who delighted to 'set him off' by all kinds of practical jokes. Burne-Jones, for instance, would send a letter to Morris & Co. in indecipherable handwriting,

or a bulky parcel which consisted entirely of layers of wrappings. This habit of teasing Morris persisted among his friends long after they had all left Oxford.

Unfortunately the knowledge of tempera painting had died out in England, and the paint was applied directly to the damp plaster of the walls of the Union over a coat of whitewash, with the result that within a year all the frescoes had faded to ghosts of themselves. Of Morris's painting, William Bell Scott reported that in 1858 little remained but Tristram's head over a row of sunflowers. Since then, however, all the frescoes have been restored by Professor Tristram, the expert on medieval wall paintings.

When this work was going forward in the autumn of 1857, Morris met *Là Belle Iseult* in the flesh. Her real name was Jane Burden and she was the daughter of a livery stable keeper—or 'groom', as he is described in the marriage register—of Holywell. As a matter of fact, it was Rossetti who saw her first and invited her to pose for them. Both Morris and Rossetti fell in love with her. Morris painted her as *Iseult on the Ship*, and his shy yet passionate adoration appears in his poem 'Praise of my Lady'. And from that time, Rossetti never ceased painting her, her image becoming more and more romantically distorted and surrounded in picture after picture with a strange, sultry, brooding atmosphere. The portrait which is said to be the best likeness is the 'Proserpine', of which several versions exist—'so strange and unreal', wrote Henry James, who saw it when he visited the Morris's at Queen Square in 1869, 'that if you hadn't seen her you'd pronounce it a distempered vision, but in fact an extremely good likeness'. Morris married Jane Burden in April 1859, and from then on she became a cult among these later Pre-Raphaelites and their friends, just as Elizabeth Siddal had been for the original Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. But Jane Morris remains a shadowy figure in the background of her husband's life, suffering from a succession of nervous ailments. To Henry James she was

an apparition of fearful and wonderful intensity. . . . Imagine a tall lean woman in a long dress of some dead purple stuff, guiltless of hoops. . . . with a mass of crisp black hair heaped into great wavy projections on each side of her temples, a thin pale face, a pair of strange, sad, deep, dark, Swinburnian eyes, with great thick black oblique brows joined in the middle and tucking themselves away under her hair, a mouth like 'Oriana' in our illustrated Tennyson, a long neck without any collar, in lieu thereof some dozen strings of outlandish beads. . . .

In fine, Jane Morris was the first and most famous product of Morris & Co. Very different is James's account of Morris.

He impressed me very agreeably. He is short, burly, corpulent, very careless and unfinished in his dress. . . . He has a very loud voice and a nervous restless manner and a perfectly unaffected and businesslike address. His talk indeed is wonderfully to the point and remarkable for clear good sense. . . . He is an extraordinary example, in short, of a delicate sensitive genius and taste, saved by a perfectly healthy body and temper.

With the building of the Red House, Bexley Heath, a new period begins in Morris's life. He had discussed the plans of the house with Webb during a holiday in France in the autumn of 1858, as they rowed down the Seine together from Paris to Le Havre, and he moved into it with his wife in 1860. Built among the apple orchards of Kent, with its steep tiled roof and deep Gothic porches, the Red House was of superficially medieval design : in all essentials it was a modern house—the first modern house—because here construction was frankly shown and stucco was rejected in favour of plain brick. In all respects the exterior design was an expression of its inside requirements. Out of the furnishing of this house grew Morris & Co. 'To my mind', Morris said in one of his lectures, 'it is only here and there (out of the kitchen) that you can find in a well-to-do house things that are of any use at all.' So, in furnishing his own house, he began by making a clean sweep of Victorian knick-knacks, and would have nothing that was not

both useful and pleasant to look at. 'Upon entering the porch', writes a contemporary, 'the hall appeared to one accustomed to the narrow ugliness of the usual middle-class dwelling of those days as being grand and severely simple.' 'The walls were bare, and the floors,' writes Lady Burne-Jones, 'nor could Morris have endured any chair, table, sofa or bed, nor any hanging such as were then in existence. . . . For the walls of other rooms than the drawing-room [which had frescoes by Burne-Jones] Morris designed flower patterns, which his wife worked in wool on a dark ground.'<sup>1</sup> Morris had his own ideas about gardens; these, too, were given a medieval flavour. The Red House garden was 'spaced formally into four little square gardens making a big square together; each of the smaller squares had a wattled fence round it, with an opening by which one entered, and all over the fence roses grew thickly'.<sup>2</sup> Each enclosure in the garden had its own particular show of flowers; on one side was a bowling alley, on the other orchard walks. At the back of the house was a small well-court, formed by the two sides of the house and rose-trellises. 'This little court,' says Lady Burne-Jones, 'with its beautiful high-roofed brick well in the centre summed up the feeling of the whole place.' It was the kind of house a prosperous Flemish burgher might have had in the fifteenth century. Good cheer flowed in abundance as the friends—Rossetti, Burne-Jones, Madox Brown, Swinburne, Prinsep, and others—met for the week-end. 'It was the most beautiful sight', writes one, 'to see Morris coming up from the cellar before dinner, beaming with joy, with his hands full of bottles of wine and others tucked under his arms.'

But Morris's income, derived from the same Devonshire copper mine that had made his father rich, began to dwindle fast, and 'the idea came to him', writes Burne-Jones, 'of beginning a manufactory of all things necessary for decoration

<sup>1</sup> *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, i, 213.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* i, 212.

of a house. Webb had already designed some beautiful table glass . . . metal candlesticks, and tables for the Red House, and I had already designed several windows for churches, so the idea grew of putting our experiences together for the service of the public.' In 1861 the firm of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., Fine Art Workmen in Painting, Carving, Furniture and the Metals, was founded. It included, besides Morris, Rossetti, Burne-Jones, and Webb, Ford Madox Brown, Arthur Hughes, P. P. Marshall, and C. J. Faulkner, who gave up his post as a mathematical don at Oxford to keep the Firm's books. Most of the capital was provided by Morris (who, as time went on, also did most of the work) and the others took out twenty shares of £1 each. From the early days of the Firm, with its offices in Red Lion Square,<sup>1</sup> dates the cabinet designed by Webb and painted by Morris with the legend of St. George (the interior was deep crimson—'Dragon's blood') now in the Victoria and Albert Museum. Wallpapers by Morris followed—the Trellis was the first in 1862—the subject probably taken from the rose trellises at Red House; then the Daisy paper, which was actually issued first, and the germ of this is to be found in a Froissart Manuscript in the British Museum. For their other designs the Firm made good use of the South Kensington Museum. They produced anything from glass drinking vessels to wrought iron bedsteads and stained glass windows, for private houses as well as churches, and while some of their products inevitably seem to-day 'arty' period pieces, they should be compared with the utterly debased designs current at that time. The revolution in taste effected by Morris will then be appreciated. At their best his textile designs remain individual works of art and among the finest specimens of their kind, while his experiments with vegetable dyes, as distinct from the crude colours produced by the aniline dyes

<sup>1</sup> In 1865 Morris & Co. moved to 26 Queen Square, Bloomsbury; in 1875 it was reorganized under Morris's sole control, and in 1881 it moved to Merton Abbey, Surrey, with showrooms in Oxford Street.

then commonly in use, were triumphantly successful, as is shown by the fact that Morris fabrics actually improve with washing. As Lethaby remarks: 'Morris's colour-work glows from within, something happened to the several items in association, as when bells chime.'<sup>1</sup>

Burne-Jones's work is hardly to our taste to-day, though there can be no doubt that he was a very gifted designer. Superficially, nothing could be less like the very solid downright Morris than the work of his closest friend. But, looking deeper, one sees that there is much in common between the inner worlds of these two men. After *The Defence of Guenevere*, Morris moved steadily away from his earlier dramatic style to the tranced dream-world of *Jason* and *The Earthly Paradise*, where the decorative element smooths away and dilutes all painful emotion. But, as suggested earlier, his dream-world has none of the unwholesomeness of Burne-Jones's, which, even at its finest in the Perseus and Briar-Rose sequences, is diffused with a peculiar phantasmal effulgence, like the light from an underworld. Morris never leaves the earth's surface or the light of day. The main difference between them is that Burne-Jones is reported to have said that he would like to forget the world and live inside a picture.

Morris's poetry and his designs can be studied together with some advantage. 'If his poems were too like wall-papers', as G. K. Chesterton remarked, 'it was because he really could make wallpapers.' Morris took a good deal of trouble to get over what his age regarded as the defects of his early poetry, its violence and abruptness, and in *Jason* and *The Earthly Paradise* he achieved a quiet refinement. In fact, all that is most interesting in his personality is excluded from this excessively good-mannered poetry. One suspects that it increasingly became a soporific and that he worked to forget personal unhappiness and frustration. He had, it seems, deliberately to deaden his emotions with diffuseness and over-elaboration to achieve the desired

<sup>1</sup> *Philip Webb and his Work*, p. 45.

tapestry effect. The result is not great poetry, but it has great charm. Morris rejected any idea of inspiration in his poetry and said it was merely a matter of craftsmanship.

Perhaps the best parts of *The Earthly Paradise* are the short poems on the months, which introduce each day of story-telling : poems, Mackail tells us, in which may be found 'an autobiography so delicate and so outspoken that it must be left to speak for itself'. They breathe an elegaic lyricism peculiarly English, and have a clarity, sweetness, and simplicity peculiar to Morris. Thus he writes of April :

When Summer brings the lily and the rose,  
 She brings us fear ; her very death she brings  
 Hid in her anxious heart, the forge of woes ;  
 And, dull with fear, no more the mavis sings.  
 But thou ! thou diest not, but thy fresh life clings  
 About the fainting autumn's sweet decay,  
 When in the earth the hopeful seed they lay.

Ah ! life of all the year, why yet do I  
 Amid thy snowy blossoms' fragrant drift,  
 Still long for that which never draweth nigh,  
 Striving my pleasure from my pain to sift,  
 Some weight from off my fluttering mirth to lift ?  
 —Now, when far bells are ringing, ' Come again,  
 Come back, past years ! why will ye pass in vain ? '

In the verse on September, Morris writes of himself as :

Like a new-wakened man thou art, who tries  
 To dream again the dream that made him glad  
 When in his arms his loving love he had.

But most revealing of all, because they give us a glimpse of the strange baffled relationship between Morris and his wife, are the lines on January.

From this dull rainy undersky and low,  
 The murky ending of a leaden day,  
 That never knew the sun, this half-thawed snow,  
 These tossing black boughs faint against the gray  
 Of gathering night, thou turnest, dear, away  
 Silent, but with thy scarce-seen kindly smile  
 Sent through the dusk my longing to beguile.

There, the lights gleam, and all is dark without !  
 And in the sudden change our eyes meet dazed—  
 O look, love, look again ! the veil of doubt  
 Just for one flash, past counting, then was raised !  
 O eyes of heaven, as clear thy sweet soul blazed  
 On mine a moment ! O come back again  
 Strange rest and dear amid the long dull pain !

Morris began to write the verse stories which form *The Earthly Paradise* in the middle 1860's. It was for him a period of great emotional stress, the reason for which can only be guessed in the light of the recurrent theme of his poetry—the transience and bitterness of love. His abandoned novel also dealt with the love of two brothers for one woman. Doubtless one would not be far from the mark in supposing Rossetti cast for the role of one of the brothers. Mackail had, as he confessed to use much tact in dealing with these years in his biography of Morris.<sup>1</sup>

The scheme of *The Earthly Paradise* is set forth in the Argument at the beginning of the Prologue. 'Certain Gentlemen and mariners of Norway, having considered all they had heard of the Earthly Paradise, set sail to find it, and after many troubles and the lapse of many years came old men to some Western land, of which they had never before heard : there they died, when they had dwelt there certain years, much honoured of the strange people.' These travellers, who had left Europe to escape the Black Death—for the poem is set in the time of Chaucer—include a Swabian scholar, a Breton and a Scandinavian born in Byzantium, where his father was a member of the body-guard of the Greek emperor. They do not find the Earthly Paradise, though they sail steadily west till they reach a far

<sup>1</sup> 'Of course, my difficulties over the work itself were great, especially in the constant need for what is called "tact", which is a quality unpleasantly near untruthfulness often ; and especially I feel that my account of all those stormy years of *The Earthly Paradise* time and the time following it must be excessively flat owing to the amount of tact that had to be exercised right and left.' (From an unpublished letter of J. W. Mackail to Mrs. Coronio, 12 May 1899.) See also in this context Oswald Doughty's *A Victorian Romantic : Dante Gabriel Rossetti*.

outpost of surviving ancient Greek civilization. Here they are hospitably entertained by the Elders of the city, to whom they relate stories at intervals during the year, and are entertained in the same way by their hosts. Twelve of the stories are from medieval sources and twelve from classical sources. The conclusion we are invited to draw is that the only earthly paradise is the world of art, where the agony and strife of human hearts is caught and stilled in a strange blending of dream and reality.

By addressing him in the medieval manner as 'mine own master dear', Morris directly challenges comparison with Chaucer. But how different is the languor of his autumnal world from the springtime vigour with which the Canterbury Pilgrims set out, with the young sun in the sign of the Ram, sap rising in the flowers, and the birds making love in the trees all night—the eternal enchanted springtime of the medieval imagination. Morris gives the impression of writing with an aching heart, Chaucer with a smile on his lips. Morris aimed at the direct simplicity of his master, but gone is the sly humour, the earthiness, and in its place a gentle archaism. Among Morris's pilgrims there is no young Squire, certainly no Wife of Bath. Everything is pitched in a key which suggests a pale reflection of the Knight's tale: Chaucer's style has suffered a strange sea-change in its passage to the nineteenth century.

The story of *Jason*, originally intended for *The Earthly Paradise*, grew to such proportions—it is an epic romance of seventeen books—that it had to be published first, and with its publication Morris suddenly achieved popularity as a poet. *Jason* proved to be one of the most widely read poems of the nineteenth century, and its vogue did not abate till the 1914 war, the date at which the Victorian era really ends. It is a poem carried through in a spirit of happy craftsmanship and satisfies by the very perfection with which the poet realizes his aim. Its effect is essentially pictorial. 'The pictures are clear and chaste, sweet and lucid, as early Italian work', wrote Swinburne on its

appearance. 'There are crowds and processions, battle-pieces, and merry-makings, worthy of Benozzo and Carpaccio, single figures or groups of lovers, in flowery watery land, worthy of Sandro or Filippino. The seapieces are like the younger Lippi's. . . . Rarely but in ballad and romance periods has such poetry been written, so broad and sad and simple.'<sup>1</sup> Though somewhat exaggerated in tone, Swinburne's tribute gives a better idea of Morris's achievement than the sour strictures of modern critics, who are in any case out of sympathy with his aims. For it has become the fashion—perhaps it is less the fashion now than it was when we were allowed to admire little but the wit of Dryden, the Metaphysicals and the later Elizabethans—to ignore the romantic narrative poetry of the nineteenth century, in spite of the fact that it forms a large and important part of the English tradition. Morris aimed in his poetry quite frankly at entertainment, he meant us to *enjoy* it. This may seem strange in an era of Existentialism and an 'age of anxiety', but it is a worthy aim and one that has a respectable ancestry going back to Homer.

So with this Earthly Paradise it is,  
 If ye will read aright, and pardon me  
 Who strive to build a shadowy isle of bliss  
 Midmost the beating of the steely sea,  
 Where tossed about all hearts of men must be. . . .

But, in grafting classical tales on to a medieval setting in the manner of Chaucer, Morris was writing at a treble remove from his subject, so that what emotion comes through to us is like an image refracted from a succession of mirrors, or, as he says himself, 'like an old dream, dreamed in another dream'. May Morris tells us that the story which gave her father the greatest trouble, and the one for which the largest number of early drafts exist, is 'The Hill of Venus', which retells the Tannhäuser legend. As Morris tells it, it has affinities with *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*: it is Tannhäuser

<sup>1</sup> Reprinted in *Essays and Studies* (1875).

without the Venusberg, for the Burne-Jonesian figure of Love which appears offers a very 'shadowy bliss' indeed. Once more it is the tale of a man awakening from a dream of love to shiver in the cold winds of reality.

Swinburne was by no means so enthusiastic about *The Earthly Paradise*.

His Muse is like Homer's Trojan women [he wrote in one of his letters], she drags her robes as she walks. I really think any Muse (when she is neither resting nor flying) ought to tighten her girdle and step out. It is better than Tennyson's short-winded concision—but there is such a thing as a swift and spontaneous style. Top's [the name which Morris's friends gave him on account of his mop of curly hair] is spontaneous and slow; and, especially my ear hungers for more force and variety of sound in the verse. It looks as if he purposely avoided all strenuous emotion or strength of music in thought and word; and so when set by other work as good his seems hardly done in earnest.

The fact is that Morris gave no more than a small part of himself to poetry, which remained for him the recreation of a man busy in other ways. But his opinion of Swinburne was no more complimentary. Soon after the publication of *Tristram of Lyonesse* in 1882, he wrote :

But to confess and be hanged, you know I never could really sympathise with Swinburne's work ; it always seemed to me to be founded on literature, not on nature. . . . In these days the issue between art, that is, the god-like part of man, and mere bestiality is so momentous, and the surroundings of life are so stern and unplayful, that nothing can take serious hold of people, or should do so, but that which is rooted deepest in reality and is quite at first hand ; there is no room for anything which is not forced out of a man of deep feeling, because of its innate strength and vision.

Such criticism has a familiar ring to-day, and it was written when Morris was preparing to plunge into revolutionary politics. Unfortunately it disposes of his own poetry no less than Swinburne's. Also it ignores that craving for

romance which was so conspicuous a feature of the nineteenth century, when England had become 'the workshop of the world' at the price of heavy and tasteless comfort on the one hand and, on the other, the spread of poverty and squalor and degradation.

In the same year (1871) as Morris took Kelmscott Manor, jointly with Rossetti, he paid his first visit to Iceland. The joint tenancy was never a success from the beginning and Rossetti finally left Kelmscott four years later. Like all the chief events of Morris's life, the Iceland journey has its own symbolic significance: for it coincided with a turning away from romance, and all that Rossetti's influence had meant, and a growing appeal for him of the grim and stoical world of the sagas. Indeed, Rossetti's influence had been so powerful that it was natural that Morris should now react against it. Other things, too, contributed to bring their friendship to an end.<sup>1</sup> Morris had been studying Icelandic for some two years previously with Eiríkr Magnússon; together they had produced a diluted prose version of the *Volsunga Saga* and some translations of the Eddas, which bear little relation to the original. Morris was to visit Iceland again in 1873, but during his first visit he kept a journal into which he put some of his finest descriptive writing. The *Iceland Journal* is, indeed, more vivid than the epic *Sigurd the Volsung* (1876), for which Morris drew upon both the Icelandic *Volsunga Saga* and the German *Nibelungenlied*, and which he considered to be the crown of his achievement as a poet. But *Sigurd* is really a weakening and romancing of the saga material: 'great play is made of background, but the central tragedy is dissipated in rhetoric, which results from failure to face the stark jealous hatred

<sup>1</sup> The later prose romances are definitely northern in feeling, too, and designed to show the superiority of the free northern tribes to Roman civilization. On his return from Iceland, Morris wrote *Love is Enough*, a poignantly lyrical work which, with its elaborate structure of a play within a play, is removed as far as possible from reality. In its search for a dream-mistress it is also a clear case of sublimation.

and love motives of the originals.'<sup>1</sup> One is conscious of a massive effort, but the starkness and simplicity are gone, in spite of the fact that Morris was himself deeply moved by the very simplicity of the saga itself, writing to Charles Eliot Norton in 1869 :

the scene of the last interview between Sigurd and the despairing and terrible Brynhild touches me more than anything I have ever met with in literature : there is nothing wanting in it, nothing forgotten, nothing repeated, nothing overstrained ; all tenderness shown without the use of a tender word, all misery and despair, without a word of raving, complete beauty without an ornament, and all this in two pages of moderate print.

Morris's *Sigurd* runs to 345 pages. He disliked Wagner, who treated the same material in his *Ring der Nibelungen*, though there is a definite Wagnerian element in such lines as :

But forth by dale and lealand doth the son of Sigmund wend,  
Till far away lies Lymdale and the folk of the forest's end ;  
And he rides a heath unpeopled and holds the westward way,  
Till a long way off before him come up the mountains grey ;  
Grey, huge beyond all telling, and the host of the heaped  
clouds,  
The black and the white together, on that rockwall's coping  
crowds ;  
But whiles are rents athwart them, and the hot sun pierceth  
through ;  
And there glow the angry cloud-caves 'gainst the everlasting  
blue  
And the changless snow amidst it ; but down from that cloudy  
head  
The scars of fires that have been, show grim and dusky red. . . .

The poem has a sort of baffled splendour, but the passion and the creative power are all with Wagner. *Sigurd* finally palls by its unrelieved greyness of mood and the monotony of its galloping anapaestic rhythm. It is one of the last

<sup>1</sup> Dorothy M. Hoare, *The Works of Morris and Yeats in relation to Early Saga Literature*.

attempts, and an almost successful one, to write epic in the grand manner.

Turning to the Iceland Journal of 1871, one can see what Morris really felt.

I confess I shuddered at my first sight of a really northern land. (The Faroes seemed to me such a gentle sweet place when we saw them again after Iceland.) The hills are not high, especially on one side, as they slope beechless into the clear but grey water ; the grass was grey between greyer ledges of stone that divided the hills in regular steps : it is not savage, but mournfully empty and barren, the grey clouds, dragging over the hill-tops or lying in the hollows, being the only thing that varied the grass, stone and sea. . . .

It was hard and even dangerous travelling. Morris, Magnusson, and Faulkner spent all day in the saddle and sometimes slept out at night. From Lithend, the site of Gunnar's hall, they went up the valley down which the Markfleet comes roaring from the glaciers. The Journal continues :

Past this the cliffs were much higher, and most unimaginably strange : they overhung in some places much more than seemed possible ; they had caves in them just like the hell-mouths in thirteenth-century illuminations ; or great straight pillars were rent from them with flat tops of grass and a sheep or two feeding on it, however the devil they got there : two or three tail-ends of a glacier too dribbled over them hereabouts, and we turned out of our way to go up to one : it seemed to fill up a kind of cleft in the rock wall, which indeed I suppose it had broken down ; one could see its spiky white waves against the blue sky as we came up with it. . . . The great mountain-wall which closes up the valley with its jagged teeth was right before us : often the wall would be cleft, and you would see a horrible winding street, with stupendous straight rocks for houses on either side : the bottom of the cleft quite level, but with the white glacier stream running out of it, and the whole blocked up at the end by the straight line of the master mountain.

It is a pity that Morris did not write more of such direct and vivid prose ; his later romances, except for *The Dream of John Ball* and *News from Nowhere*, are cast in such an archaic

idiom as to be practically unreadable to-day, though when they were written they delighted many people and provided Morris with a much-needed avenue of escape for his imagination when his hopes for a new world had come to a dead end. W. B. Yeats has described the enchantment of these romances in *Ideas of Good and Evil* and wrote later that they were 'the only books I was ever to read slowly that I might not come too quickly to the end'. (*Autobiographies*, p. 174.) To Bernard Shaw they seemed an attempt to rewrite Don Quixote's destroyed library.

Vividness and strength is always apparent in Morris's writing when he is wrestling with the world about him, or describing actual things, or the events of history, instead of escaping into myth and legend, into woods beyond the world or to wells at the end of it. It is there in his last long poem, *The Pilgrims of Hope*, so different from all his other poetry, in which he returned once more to his own private misery in a setting of the Paris Commune.<sup>1</sup> It is in all the lectures he began to give at the end of the 1870's. These lectures, Morris tells us, gave him more trouble than anything else he ever wrote, for here he was wrestling with a problem that has occupied us very much since his time—the relationship of art to society. It was mainly through this channel that, like Ruskin before him, Morris approached Socialism. As he wrote in 1883 :

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.

This was the lecture on *The Decorative Arts*, into which Morris put the whole of his aesthetic philosophy. It was

<sup>1</sup> The hero of the poem shows great generosity and forbearance towards his best friend, who has secretly become his wife's lover.

actually given in 1877, the year which also saw the foundation of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings and the opening of Morris & Co.'s showrooms in Oxford Street.

Morris's desire to protect old buildings from restoration is one aspect of his love of the past, his desire for an unchanging order, which came into conflict at this time with his Socialism. In the manifesto which he wrote for S.P.A.B., after complaining that the last fifty years of tampering with ancient buildings 'have done more for their destruction than all the foregoing centuries of revolution, violence, and contempt', he goes on :

For Architecture, long decaying, died out, as a popular art at least, just as the knowledge of mediaeval art was born. So that the civilized world of the nineteenth century has no style of its own amidst its wide knowledge of the styles of other centuries. From this lack and this gain arose in men's minds the strange idea of the Restoration of ancient buildings ; and a most strange and most fatal idea, which by its very name implies that it is possible to strip from a building this, that, and the other part of its history—of its life, that is—and then to stay the hand at some arbitrary point, and leave it still historical, living, and even as it once was.

In spite of the amount of time Morris gave to speaking at street corners and touring industrial areas, he was never genuinely a politician. He was always very much more than that. During the 1880's the study of Marx had become a driving force in his life ; but by the end of the eighties he was already becoming disillusioned and as disgusted with his socialist and anarchist comrades as he had been earlier with the Liberals and Radicals during his activity in the Eastern Question Association of the 1870's. Writing to Lady (then Mrs.) Burne-Jones in May 1885, he says :

On Sunday I went a-preaching Stepney way. My visit intensely depressed me, as these Eastwards visits always do : the mere stretch of houses, the vast mass of utter shabbiness and

uneventfulness, sits upon one like a nightmare : of course what slums there are one doesn't see. You would perhaps have smiled at my congregation ; some twenty people in a little room, as dirty as convenient, and stinking a good deal. It took the fire out of my fine periods, I can tell you : it is a great drawback that I can't *talk* to them roughly and unaffectedly. Also I would like to know what amount of real feeling underlies their bombastic revolutionary talk. . . .

In July 1888 he writes to the same correspondent :

Whatever might be said about the reception of ideal Socialism or Communism, towards this State Socialism things are certainly tending, and swiftly too. But then in all the wearisome shilly-shally of parliamentary politics I should be absolutely useless : and the immediate end to be gained, the pushing things just a trifle nearer to State Socialism, which when realized seems to me but a dull goal—all this quite sickens me. . . . Yet on the other hand I sometimes vex myself by thinking that perhaps I am not doing the most I can merely for the sake of a piece of 'preciousness'.

This 'preciousness' was, presumably, his 'ministering to the swinish luxury of the rich' by the productions of Morris & Company.

By 1888 Morris was becoming increasingly interested in typography. With Emery Walker, he supervised the printing of his romances *The House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the Mountains*, for which he used a special type modelled on an old Basel fount. Out of this interest came the founding of the Kelmscott Press in 1891. Morris had always been keenly interested in book production, and twenty years earlier had abandoned a scheme for an illustrated edition of *The Earthly Paradise* after Burne-Jones had made more than a hundred designs for the blocks. His main difficulty as a typographer lay in the fact that printing was a craft born on the threshold of the Renaissance, a period for him the root of all evils. He was bound, like the earliest printers, to treat book production as an extension of manuscript. As far as possible, therefore, in the Kelmscott books Morris reproduced by type and

wood-block all the characteristics of the illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages, and since the decoration was in black and white instead of in colour this meant that, in the more lavish productions, the page became too black and heavy. The Chaucer, printed in Gothic type, its borders encrusted with foliage, its decorated initials and its eighty-seven woodcuts by Burne-Jones, radiates its own peculiar splendour. The projected Froissart would have been even more magnificent. But the majority of books printed at the Kelmscott Press were not on this scale and were very much simpler and plainer. Morris designed two new founts of type : 'Troy' type, of which the 'Chaucer' is a smaller variant, a Gothic fount, and 'Golden' type, a Roman fount. 'Troy' was modelled on the early German printers ; 'Golden' on the Venetian printers of the fifteenth century.

The impetus which Morris gave to fine printing by his example at the Kelmscott Press was immense. Though his own taste was for decorated books, he admitted the value of 'books whose only ornament is the necessary and essential beauty which arises out of the fitness of a piece of craftsmanship for the use for which it is made'. Fitness for use was a revolutionary principle in the nineteenth century and out of it the whole modern movement of architecture and design has grown. In this, and in his recognition that the future of the arts is bound up with architecture, lies Morris's influence as a craftsman. He did not, as is often said, want to return to the Middle Ages and stay there : but he felt that in design, as in literature, the true English tradition had been lost since the fourteenth century, and that it was necessary to return to it if the arts were to be set on the right road again.

*The Dream of John Ball* (1886-7) and *News from Nowhere* (1890) stand apart from the other romances in that they are based upon history and located in a recognizable England. They were both written for the pages of *The Commonweal*, the journal of Morris's Socialist League, but into them he

put his deepest thoughts on life and human destiny. The first is set in the time of the Peasants' Revolt, in Kent in the fourteenth century, and its archaisms (unlike the other interminably long tales) strike one as a natural part of the subject. Otherwise, the language is idiomatic and of great purity and simplicity. John Ball, the priest who leads the revolt against feudalism, preaches from the village cross on the text that fellowship is heaven and lack of fellowship hell. His sermon is not unlike the later sermons of Hugh Latimer.

Forsooth, he that waketh in hell and feeleth his heart fail him, shall have memory of the merry days of earth, and how that when his heart failed him there, he cried on his fellow, were it his wife or his son or his brother or his gossip or his brother sworn in arms, and how that his fellow heard him and came and they mourned together under the sun, till again they laughed together and were but half sorry between them. This shall he think on in hell, and cry on his fellow to help him, and shall find that therein is no help because there is no fellowship, but every man for himself. Therefore, I tell you that the proud, despiteous rich man, though he knoweth it not, is in hell already, because he hath no fellow ; and he that hath so hardy a heart that in sorrow he thinketh of fellowship, his sorrow is soon but a story of sorrow—a little change in the life that knows not ill.

In the clear brilliance of its pictures of the Middle Ages, *John Ball* recaptures the vividness of *The Defence of Guenevere*. But the magic of the tale is in the second part, where the dreamer (who is, of course, Morris himself in the habit and likeness of Chaucer) sits talking with the priest all night in the moonlit church. The atmosphere is still that of *The Unknown Church* of the early Oxford days, but it is deepened and restrained by all the historical knowledge and experience acquired since. John Ball has suspected all along that this elderly man in the habit of Chaucer is 'a sending from another time', and in the church he questions him about things to come. With the dawn, the dreamer wakes in his bedroom at Hammersmith, with the dreary sound of

the early morning hooters in his ears calling the workmen to the factories. The concluding page gives us a sudden and revealing picture of Morris himself.

The historical survey of the five hundred years lying between John Ball and the dreamer should be read in conjunction with the prophetic survey in the historical chapters of *News from Nowhere*. Both are implicitly Marxist and should be pondered by those who think of Morris as an unpractical dreamer. Though he regarded *News from Nowhere* as a trifle, it appears now more like his masterpiece, for into it he put not only his social philosophy and hopes for the future, but also his love of the earth and its seasons, his tenderness, his humanity, and his wisdom. The enchanting simplicity of its style is one with the fundamentally child-like nature of the man himself. Once more the tale is given the framework of medieval allegory. The writer comes home at night after 'a brisk conversational discussion up at the League as to what would happen on the Morrow of the Revolution', at the conclusion of which he 'finished by roaring out very loud, and damning all the rest as fools'. Next morning he wakes up into the twenty-first century. The revolution has taken place and the people of England have been living for about a hundred and fifty years in a state of ideal communism. Machinery has not been abolished entirely, but it is nowhere in evidence and one has the impression that production has reverted again to handicraft: at any rate, whatever industry there is has not been allowed to spoil either the town or the country. Towns have once more taken on a medieval aspect, money has fallen into disuse and everyone lives in a condition of sophisticated simplicity. Perhaps it is all too 'trim and clean and orderly and bright', and everybody too uniformly good-humoured, but one must remember that it is Utopia where there are no laws except enlightened public opinion, where economics are left delightfully vague and dustmen dress as troubadours. Familiar places like Hammersmith, Piccadilly (now an arcaded shopping street reminiscent of

Padua), Trafalgar Square (an orchard), the British Museum, and Hampton Court have been assimilated easily and delightfully into the future. The only thing that 'dates' is the rather trying *camaraderie*, which is evidently based on the behaviour of Morris's immediate circle. Writing in 1890, Morris chose 1952 as the great revolutionary year in English history, the first year of the civil war which marked the change-over from the remnants of degenerate capitalism to communism.

'The world was being brought to its second birth', says old Hammond, the antiquarian who relates how the change came about, 'how could that take place without a tragedy? Moreover, think of it. The spirit of the new days, of our days, was to be delight in the life of the world. . . . In times past, indeed, men were told to love their kind, to believe in the religion of humanity and so forth. But look you, just in the degree that a man had elevation of mind and refinement enough to be able to value this idea, was he repelled by the obvious aspect of the individuals composing the mass which he was to worship; and he could only evade that repulsion by making a conventional abstraction of mankind that had little actual or historical relation to the race; which to his eyes was divided into blind tyrants on the one hand and apathetic degraded slaves on the other. But now, where is the difficulty in accepting the religion of humanity, when the men and women who go to make up humanity are free, happy, and energetic at least, and most commonly beautiful of body also, and surrounded by beautiful things of their own fashioning, and a nature bettered and not worsened by contact with mankind? This is what this age of the world has reverved for us.'

Significantly, the word 'art' has died out, 'because it has become a necessary part of the labour of every man who produces'. The historical account of the actual change-over and the years leading up to it, as given by Hammond, is most real and convincing, and here Morris's political experience stood him in good stead—not, of course, that he really supposed that London would ever appear as he imagines it. But he did think that once the towns had lost

their importance as commercial and manufacturing centres, the people would naturally return to the country and simplicity of life. Needless to say, everyone in *News from Nowhere* only works at what interests them, for no one is any longer obliged to earn the right to live. And since work has once more become a pleasure, instead of a drudgery for the majority of people, it is natural that their surroundings should have also once more become pleasant. The long account of the river trip up the Thames from Hammersmith to Kelmscott, through the enchanted countryside, is a re-creation of a similar journey Morris made with his family and friends in the summer of 1880. The final chapters are set at Kelmscott itself.

*News from Nowhere* is a picture of life as Morris would have had it, not as he thought it would ever be, and the saddest part about it is its title. In the end it all fades as a dream in which we have been impossibly happy and in which all complexities and conflicts are resolved into a golden harmony. Yet when the dreamer wakes once more in 'dingy Hammersmith', it is not altogether with despair, for he still hears the voice of Ellen coming to him from that Nowhere of the future :

Go back again, now that you have seen us, and your outward eyes have learned that in spite of all the infallible maxims of your day there is yet a time of rest in store for the world, when mastery has changed into fellowship—but not before. Go back again, then, and while you live you will see all round you people engaged in making others live lives which are not their own, while they themselves care nothing for their own real lives—men who hate life though they fear death. Go back and be happier for having seen us, for having added a little hope to your struggle. Go on living while you may, striving, with whatsoever pain and labour needs must be, to build up little by little the new day of fellowship, and rest, and happiness.

It is in such passages that we see the essential greatness of William Morris.

The volume of Morris's literary work was immense, but it is only a small part of his total achievement. His influence has lived on in other spheres than literature, but as a poet it was immediately felt by the young W. B. Yeats. Yeats was then living with his father in the new red-brick suburb of Bedford Park, built by Norman Shaw on Morris principles (with even a pub called *The Tabard*, after Chaucer), and in *Autobiographies* he has written of how Morris stopped him one day in Holborn and said: 'You write my kind of poetry', and 'would have said more had not he caught sight of a new ornamental cast-iron lamp-post, and got very heated on the subject.' (*Autobiographies*, p. 181.) Morris's influence may be seen in Yeats's interest in Celtic legend, and in such early works as *The Wanderings of Oisín* and *The Shadowy Waters*. But as he developed away from the Celtic Twilight towards a greater and greater realism, he, like Morris, took Chaucer as his model, but with very different results.

It is doubtful if anyone now reads *Sigurd* which, Shaw tells us, Morris used to chant, 'rocking from one foot to the other like an elephant'; but *Jason* and some of the stories of *The Earthly Paradise*, with their beautiful introductory poems on the months, can still be enjoyed. Morris is best remembered by his lyrics, 'Golden Wings', 'A Garden by the Sea', and the other pieces he collected in *Poems by the Way*. To Yeats he seemed 'the happiest of poets' because he did everything with 'an unheard of ease'. But at the heart of his poetry there is sadness and loss.

This sadness and sense of loss he sought in the longer poems to smother beneath an abundance of descriptive detail, such as we find in Flemish tapestries. Much of Morris's poetry is not only like tapestry, he also wrote verses for the fabrics woven at Merton Abbey. The 'Vine' tapestry bears this inscription:

I draw the blood from out the earth;  
I store the sun for winter mirth.

and into the 'Orange Tree' were woven the lines :

Amidst the greenness of my night,  
My odorous lamps hang round and bright.

But as an example of that enchanted legendary quality which he commanded perhaps more than any poet of his age, one cannot do better than turn to 'Golden Wings', with its tranced atmosphere :

Midways of a walled garden,  
In the happy poplar land,  
Did an ancient castle stand,  
With an old knight for a warden.

Many scarlet bricks there were  
In its walls, and old grey stone ;  
Over which red apples shone  
At the right time of the year. . . .

Morris's last words, as he lay dying, were : ' I want to get mumbo-jumbo out of the world.' He had spent his life fighting mumbo-jumbo in its various forms and some of the things he fought for have been achieved ; others have come about in a form in which he would hardly recognize them ; and many things that he loathed have since grown to monstrous proportions, so that simplicity, harmony, and fellowship, and the healing influences of nature in our lives, seem to be further away than ever. One might say of Morris's achievement, with John Ball : ' men fight and lose the battle, and the thing they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out to be not what they meant.' As Bernard Shaw has observed, Morris grows in stature the further we draw away from him in time. His greatness lies not so much in anything he did, for he never fully expressed himself in any one activity : his greatness is in his vision and in what he was.

# WILLIAM MORRIS

## A

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