

WILLIAM MORRIS (1834-1896):

CRITIC OF STATE SOCIALISM



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In the century since his death much has been written about William Morris. Some of it, such as the biographies by E.P. Thompson¹ and Fiona MacCarthy,² has been excellent. Much of it — a prime example is an article in *The Guardian* which seemed to blame Morris for the murderous activities of Pol Pot — has been nonsense. Worse still have been the attempts by totalitarians of the Right (the Strasserite variety of National Socialists) and the Left (the Trotskyists of the Socialist Workers Party and the Stalinists of the New Communist Party) to claim Morris, an unquestionable Libertarian, as one of their own. Morris, who called himself a Communist, was a man of the Left, but he was no State Socialist, and a careful reading of his criticisms of State Socialism will more than reward the effort for the Libertarian of any stripe.

BEAUTY AND UGLINESS

Morris was originally destined for the Church (his mother had visions of him becoming a Bishop) but after his education at Marlborough and Oxford he rejected theology and fell in love with the creative arts. In turn architect, weaver of carpets and tapestries, designer of wallpapers and soft furnishings, campaigner for the protection of ancient buildings, manufacturer of stained glass, poet, translator, novelist and writer of fantasy whose work prefigures that of C.S. Lewis and Tolkien, anything Morris turned his hand to he excelled at. Like many of the artists of his day, Morris was horrified by the ugliness, squalour and shoddiness of Victorian industrialism and found himself increasingly in revolt against it. In a public lecture on the decorative arts he stated: "... everything made by man's hands has a form, which must be either beautiful or ugly; beautiful if it is in

accord with nature, and helps her; ugly if it is discordant with nature ...". These words were spoken in 1878.³ In the years to come, his revolt would take an explicitly political form.

Having previously been involved in the Eastern Question Association, which opposed the efforts of "Greedy gamblers on the stock exchange, idle officers ... and ... the Tory Rump"⁴ to drag Britain into war with Russia, at the age of fifty Morris crossed the river of fire and entered active Socialist politics. In his autobiographical sketch "How I Became A Socialist" he wrote: "... the consciousness of revolution stirring amidst our hateful modern society prevented me ... from crystallizing into a mere railer against 'progress' and ... from wasting time and energy in any of the numerous schemes ... to make art grow where it no longer has any root ...".⁵

"THE ABOLITION OF THE STATE IN EVERY FORM ... A WARFARE OF FREEDOM AGAINST AUTHORITY"

British socialism was then in its infancy and was largely dominated by the person of H. M. Hyndman,⁶ whose supposed Marxism barely concealed a Tory jingoism and at times a rabid anti-semitism. For Hyndman the socialist project meant little more than the removal of property from private hands into those of a state ruled by a Jacobinical Committee of Public Safety, a view which did not prevent him from seeing the Social Democratic Federation, which Morris joined in 1883, as his own private property. Morris, who described Hyndman's political ideas as a "sort of Bismarkian State Socialism", wrote of him: "Hyndman can accept only one position in such a body as the S.D.F., that of Master ...".⁷ (Hyndman held the offices of S.D.F. President and Editor of its paper *Justice*, and it is significant that when he broke from the British Socialist Party — as the S.D.F. was to become — he took the name National Socialist Party for his new group.) When the split came it was natural that Morris be among the rebels against Hyndman's authoritarianism who broke away to form the Socialist League. The League's *Manifesto*, written by Morris, proclaimed its opposition to State Socialism as "no better solution".⁸ Another manifesto issued by League member Joseph Lane stated: "... we aim at the abolition of the state in every form and variety ... we pursue a warfare of freedom against authority ...".⁹

It was in the pages of the League's journal *Commonweal* that Morris reviewed Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*,¹⁰ which depicts a state-directed utopia where property is nationalised and workers are drafted into labour battalions.¹¹ Morris described the book as "deadly dull". In reply to it he wrote *News From Nowhere*,¹² which was first published in serial form in *Commonweal*.

"A LIFE SCARCE WORTH THE LIVING ..."

Morris was no stranger to utopian writings — he had read Fourier¹³ and counted More's *Utopia* amongst his favorite books. In *News From Nowhere* he draws upon his considerable literary skills to sketch an outline of a libertarian socialist society. The landscape of Nowhere is much like the countryside around the Thames which Morris loved and fought to conserve. London is no longer a dirty, sprawling metropolis but is small, clean and white. A clear river — people fish for salmon in it — is bordered by green gar-



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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

dens. Elsewhere the great industrial cities are gone, leaving only small towns like the Oxford which Morris favoured. Even in Central London there are orchards, while many people have returned to the countryside to live and work in small well appointed villages whose impact on the environment is minimal. In his “Prefatory Sonnet” to *The Story of Grettir The Strong*,¹⁴ Morris had written of:

“A life scarce worth the living, a poor fame
Scarce worth the winning, in a wretched land
Where fear and pain go upon either hand
As toward the end men fare without an aim.”¹⁵

FROM MIND-NUMBING DRUDGERY TO CREATIVE JOY

Morris was greatly concerned with work — he often put in a sixteen hour day, even while restricting the hours of employees at his factory at Merton Abbey. In Nowhere, work is no longer mind-numbing drudgery performed unwillingly in dark satanic mills. It is a creative joy undertaken in clean, airy workshops by freely associated producers whose efforts are devoted to making useful artifacts which are at once both functional and pleasing to the eye. There is no oppressive division of labour, which reduces the labourer to a small cog in a large machine. A dustman can also be a skilled artisan creating fine work in gold. Earlier Morris had written: “... worthy work carries with it the hope of pleasure in rest, the hope of our pleasure in using what it makes, and the hope of pleasure in our daily creative skill. All other work but this is worthless; it is slaves’ work — mere toiling to live, that we may live to toil.”¹⁶

As a revolutionary, Morris was no parliamentary place-seeker aiming to climb into office on the backs of his fellows. He writes of Parliament: “... on the one hand a kind of watch committee to see that the interests of the upper classes took no hurt; and on the other a sort of blind to delude the people into supposing that they had some share in the management of their own affairs.”¹⁷ Nowhere is a society without a government and all that government entails, where the Houses of Parliament have been usefully redeployed as a manure store, and the parliament is the whole people. A society where the individual no longer needs an elaborate system of government to force him to give way to the will of the majority of his equals. In Nowhere there is no longer criminal nor civil law, but obligations arrived at by mutual consent and based upon commitment to a communal ideal.

MONEY AND MARRIAGE

Nowhere is a society without a market as it is understood today, and without money. It is a world of free access where cut-throat competition has been replaced by voluntary co-operation and people give to the common pool according to their abilities and take from it according to their needs. Given the finite nature of natural resources and that each individual has a differing concept of their abilities and needs — some feel that they need things that others consider to be useless or even harmful — is such a society either desirable or possible?

And if money is not to be abolished must we continue with the banks creating money out of nothing and charging interest for its use, particularly when it is used by governments which in turn burden the citizenry with high rates of

tax to meet the interest charges? Or can money be reformed by such means as free enterprise currencies which do not bear the magic symbols of the state’s financial necromancers but are freely accepted by those using them, or by the LETs schemes nowadays advocated by the Greens?

Marriage is an institution which no longer exists in Nowhere — Morris’s own marriage was far from happy. Yet human relationships, although unencumbered by many of the problems which bedevil today’s lovers — the hard-nosed bureaucrats of the Child Support Agency would have no place in Nowhere — appear to be both monogamous and heterosexual. Morris has nothing to say about sexual minorities, which is somewhat odd considering that some of his socialist comrades — such as Edward Carpenter — were gay.

FIGHTING FOR WHAT MORRIS MEANT

Nowhere is no rigid blueprint of the future (it is, however, a far better written and more attractive book than Bellamy’s work). But it does show that a decentralised, libertarian, collectivist society in which the basic unit of social self-administration is the village council, could possibly work. Whether or not people are willing and able to generate the considerable effort and goodwill needed to make it work is, of course, another matter. To date, efforts, however valliant, at trying to make such a society work have been crowned with anything but success. As Morris’s most recent biographer Fiona MacCarthy has written: “... the Communism Morris was proposing is ... in many ways the obverse of ‘Communism’ as it arose in the 1930s in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe in the years after the war.”¹⁸

In Morris’s *The Dream of John Ball*, the hero (Morris himself) ponders “... how men fight and lose the battle and the thing they fought for comes about in despite of their defeat, and when it comes about turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name ...”.¹⁹ Perhaps the best way of commemorating Morris is to consider if it is worth fighting for what he meant. And if it isn’t, what is the alternative?

NOTES

1. E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, Merlin Press, London, 1977.
2. Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life For Our Time*, Faber and Faber, London, 1994.
3. William Morris, *The Lesser Arts*, 1878.
4. William Morris, *To The Working Men of England*, 1877.
5. William Morris, “How I Became a Socialist”, *Justice*, June 16, 1894.
6. H. M. Hyndman, *Record of An Adventurous Life*, London, 1911.
7. William Morris to J. L. Lyons, December 25, 1884.
8. William Morris, *Manifesto of the Socialist League*, 1884.
9. J. Lane, *An Anti Statist Communist Manifesto*, 1887.
10. E. Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, New American Library, New York, 1960.
11. Amongst prominent state socialist advocates of labour conscription were Shaw and Trotsky. Stalin applied the principle with deadly effect.
12. William Morris, *News From Nowhere*, Kelmscott, 1932, republished in *Three Works by William Morris*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1973.
13. Fourier was an early nineteenth century utopian socialist.
14. Asa Briggs (ed.), *William Morris, Selected Writings and Designs*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1962, p. 71.
15. William Morris, 1869.
16. William Morris, *Useful Work Versus Useless Toil*, 1885.
17. *News From Nowhere*.
18. *William Morris: A Life For Our Time*, p. 664.
19. *Three Works by William Morris*, p. 53.