

The Revision of *A Dream of John Ball*

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Most readers of the *Journal* will be aware of the many changes that Morris made to *News from Nowhere* between its serialisation in *Commonweal* in 1890 and its publication in book form in 1891. These alterations were first detailed by Michael Liberman in 1971 in his PhD “William Morris’s *News from Nowhere*: A Critical and Annotated Edition”, a summary of which can be found in a paper he published in *Nineteenth Century Literature* entitled “Major Textual Changes in William Morris’s *News from Nowhere*”.¹

However, *News from Nowhere* was not the only one of Morris’s socialist works to be revised between its appearance in *Commonweal* and its formal publication. Indeed all of Morris’s more important socialist works received at least some minor revisions. These range from the relatively insignificant changes in punctuation made to the sections of ‘The Pilgrims of Hope’ published in *Poems by the Way*, to the more extensive editing of ‘An Old Story Retold’ (later published in revised form as *A King’s Lesson*), ‘Socialism from the Root Up’ (which appeared as *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome* in 1893) and *A Dream of John Ball*.

The latter was originally serialised in *Commonweal* in eleven instalments which appeared between 13 November 1886 and 22 January 1887. Morris then revised it during the autumn of 1887 for its formal publication by Reeves and Turner in April 1888. This is the version that May Morris included in Volume XVI of the *Collected Works*.

During his revision Morris divided the text into chapters, added chapter headings,

altered the punctuation and made over one hundred changes to the text. The *Commonweal* version of the story appeared as a single uninterrupted narrative. This narrative was subsequently subdivided by Morris to form twelve chapters. It should be noted, however, that there is no direct correlation between these chapters and the original instalments. Instead the division was achieved as follows:

- Instalment 1 [13 November 1886, pp. 257–258] = Chapter 1
- Instalment 2 [20 November 1886, pp. 266–267] = Chapters II and III
- Instalment 3 [27 November 1886, pp. 274–275] = Chapter IV
- Instalment 4 [4 December 1886, pp. 282–283] = Chapter V
- Instalment 5 [11 December 1886, pp. 290–291] = Chapter VI
- Instalment 6 [18 December 1886, pp. 298–299] = Chapters VII and VIII
- Instalment 7 [25 December 1886, p. 307] = Chapter IX
- Instalment 8 [1 January 1887, p. 3] = Chapter X
- Instalment 9 [8 January 1887, p. 13] = Chapter XI
- Instalments 10 and 11 [15 January 1887, pp. 20–21 and 22 January 1887, pp. 28–29] = Chapter XII

It is outside the scope of an article in the *Journal* to list all the changes in punctuation. It is sufficient to say that Morris wrote at great speed and had a tendency to build complex sentence structures liberally sprinkled with random dashes, colons and semi-colons. While this technique enabled him to fill the pages of *Commonweal* each week it also meant that he was prone to obscure his meaning at times. In the *Commonweal* version this weakness was most apparent in the presentation of John Ball's speeches in the market place. Most of the changes in punctuation were therefore made to clarify his message. To aid this process many of Ball's longer speeches were also subdivided into shorter paragraphs. Hence his famous fellowship speech which begins "Forsooth, ye have heard it said ..." (CW, XVI, 230) and ends "... a little change in the life that knows not ill" (CW, XVI, 231) – which appears as a single passage in the *Commonweal* version – becomes three shorter paragraphs in the Reeves and Turner edition.

The changes Morris made to the text itself are largely stylistic. However, there are two important tendencies to be discerned. The first is that the action is shifted from late summer to midsummer. Hence the "late summer grass" of the *Commonweal* version is transformed into the "midsummer grass" (CW, XVI, 218) while the apples reddening on the trees become "the early apples". These changes were obviously made for the sake of accuracy, as the main events of the Peasants' Revolt took place during the second and third weeks of June 1381. Indeed, Morris himself contributed an article on Wat Tyler to a regular feature in *Commonweal* called the 'Revolutionary Calendar' which appeared on 9 June 1888.² This feature dated Tyler's march on London as taking place on Tuesday, 12 June 1381, and his murder on Saturday, 16 June. The change in the timing of the action also made the short summer night more realistic.

A second set of changes were aimed at enhancing the details of fourteenth-century life. As background research for *A Dream of John Ball*, Morris had re-read Froissart's *Chronicles of England, France and Spain* and familiarised himself with the work of contemporary historians such as Freeman, Green and Stubbs. He utilised this knowledge in a trilogy of lectures collectively entitled 'England, As It Was, As It Is,

and *As It Might Be*' which he delivered between 12 December 1886 and 15 May 1887. One of these lectures, 'Feudal England', was serialised in *Commonweal* in the summer of 1887 as Morris was in the process of revising *A Dream of John Ball*. It is possible that discussion resulting from these lectures determined him to tidy up one or two of the details of his portrayal of medieval England. Hence we learn that the bucklers carried by Will Green and his comrades are boiled "and then moulded into shape" (CW, XVI, 226) and that each archer carried "two dozen arrows" (CW, XVI, 245) rather than a dozen in the *Commonweal* version. Similarly the "rooms" in the upper storey of Will Green's house are described more realistically as "the chamber or loft above" (CW, XVI, 258).

In addition to these minor alterations there are two more significant changes to the text. The first of these occurs at the very beginning of the story, where, after a comment on William Cobbett's "sweeping Wiltshire downs" (CW, XVI, 215), Morris inserted an extensive passage describing a dream the narrator had in which he had come across a medieval town while "journeying ... down the well-remembered reaches of the Thames betwixt Streatley and Wallingford" (CW, XVI, 215). The second change is made at the end of what becomes Chapter II, and consists of the addition of five stanzas of a song that the narrator hears while at Will Green's house. This appears to have been composed especially for the revision of the book and is therefore one of the few examples of original poetry produced by Morris in the late 1880s.

NOTES

- ¹ Michael Liberman's article can be found in *Nineteenth Century Literature*, 41, (December 1986), pp. 349-56. Also see Anne Cranny-Francis's "William Morris's *News from Nowhere*: the Propaganda of Desire", (PhD, UEA, 1983) and J. Alex MacDonald's "The Revision of *Nowhere*", *Journal of the William Morris Society*, 3, No. 2, (Summer 1976), pp. 8-15.
- ² *Commonweal*, 9 June 1888, p. 182.