

# Editorial – Why Morris?

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Some readers – especially those whose attention span only runs to 140 characters – may be pleased to learn that owing to a truly Einsteinian conjunction of time and space, and of pressure upon it, this editorial, my last in this position, may well be shorter than usual (Not much as it turned out). I also need to resolve a dilemma: whether to produce a much longer article entitled ‘Seven myths about William Morris’, or a much shorter statement of why – despite the last eight years – I still think Morris is important: hence my title. In effect, I have in fact decided to do both, but at much shorter length than the first subject really requires.

Over the past eight years, I have indeed observed recurrent reference to a number of what I consider to be myths about William Morris. The first of these, of course, is that ‘William Morris’s wallpapers poisoned his customers’, which despite clear evidence to the contrary, is an idea still being peddled by various presenters of programmes on BBC4.<sup>1</sup> So, once more, and for the record (and will people with or without a science background please stop repeating this nonsense on any future television or other kinds of programme they may be asked to make?): there never was a ‘silent but deadly’ gas produced in damp rooms by William Morris’s arsenical wallpapers, or anybody else’s. Because any gas which might have been produced would have been an arsenic compound, it was assumed at the time that it would be poisonous, but in fact the only credible candidate gas was shown not to be toxic as long ago as 1914 (or perhaps even 1899). Most well-documented cases of arsenic poisoning, either in the home, or in the workplace, were caused either by ingestion of arsenic, or by exposure of the skin, or by breathing arsenic vapour produced in industrial processes, or – as in the case of Clare Boothe Luce – arsenic dust.<sup>2</sup>

The second shibboleth is that William Morris was a failure both as an artist and as a socialist because his products could only be afforded by the rich and their ‘swinish luxuries’. Such statements ignore both what Morris was trying to achieve, and also the effects of attempting to do that in a market economy. What Morris was trying to demonstrate, of course – very successfully as it turned out – is that artefacts which are ‘both useful and beautiful’ are much better made by methods which ignore the ‘cost-cutting’ demands of the ‘free’ market, which only serve to drive down quality, and therefore lead to a great production of trash, as

in the case of present-day China. But of course, when such objects are then sold in a market economy, their 'market' price, which greatly exceeds their true value (i.e. that of the human labour incorporated in their production), is bound to be highly inflated. Aneurin Bevan understood perfectly this key difference between socialist and capitalist economics; when castigated by Brendan Bracken for being a 'Bollinger Bolshevik', Nye famously pointed out that under socialism, everyone would be able to drink champagne if they liked.<sup>3</sup> Hence Nowhere's 'Golden Dustman'.

Myth number three is that Morris was a 'Little Englander' – that because he so loved the English landscape, and because his politics stemmed from his Romantic attachment to that landscape, and to the medieval English past, Morris, was, as Engels labelled him, 'a sentimental socialist', whose socialism did not begin with 'the [abstract] laws of history', and whose ideas therefore do not travel. Owen Holland skewers this particular myth at more length below (see pp. 26–52), so that all I will point out here is that if Morris's ideas were developed specifically to fit the demands of England and the English people, their culture and their landscape, then it is indeed truly astounding how similar the expression of those ideas as set out in *News from Nowhere* is to the economy, polity, and society established in 1936 by the people of Andalusia, the Levante, Catalonia and especially Aragón.<sup>4</sup> Neither does it seem to me (*pace* Fiona MacCarthy) that Morris's attachment to the past, and to place, necessarily makes him a ('back to the land') 'conservative radical', even though, socialism, especially in its modern, much less authoritarian, greener form, is often as much about saving communities and a specific way of life (and hence a particular landscape), and that it is capitalism, especially the rapacious modern neo-liberal kind, which practises Schumpeterian 'creative destruction'.<sup>5</sup> Wishing to preserve traditions for the sake of them, or because they are part of some Herderian/Burkean 'natural order', is conservatism, but wishing to defend people and communities against change for the sake of it (that is, usually, for profit) is not. Besides, what the Spanish anarchists tried to achieve in 1936 was a completely new way of doing things, based on their own traditional ideas, mores and principles of *pueblo*, but with an economic system in which there were no bosses, and especially no landlords; a system which had never been tried before.

My fourth 'myth' (it may not be one) is one which has puzzled me for much of the last eight years. Why is it that so many authors cannot seem to resist concluding that Morris, a man who is on record as stating that the key motivating factor of his artistic life was 'hatred of modern civilisation', is somehow at the same time an ancestor of Modernism, both the visual and the written kind? It is almost as if scholars educated in the Modernist paradigm need somehow to seek approval for Morris's ideas and his legacy among those who clearly do not share them, or his aspirations. It was of course Nikolaus Pevsner who argued that it

was via his revival of decorative honesty, of the (surely early medieval) idea of the artist as a servant of the community (as opposed to a rich patron?), and in the 'simplicity and directness' of Red House, that Morris was a pioneer of modernism in design, influencing, for example, Gropius and the Bauhaus, although not perhaps the 'undisciplined individualism' of later modernism. But even Pevsner recognised that modern artists are 'painfully severed' from their public, a tendency he ascribed to the elitism stemming from Romanticism.<sup>6</sup>

However, in Morris's own time, there is surely more responsibility for this particular 'myth' to be laid at the door of the Aesthetic Movement, and the doctrine of 'art for art's sake' – something which, along with Morris's increasing politicisation during the early 1880s, led for a while to differences between Morris and Burne-Jones<sup>7</sup> – and of its twentieth century corollary that 'art is anything that artists do', than with the Romantics. Morris did not live long enough to hear it,<sup>8</sup> but it was not that long after his death that composers of 'art music' (that written for the concert hall, the ballet and the opera house) began to write pieces which (as a musician myself, I believe) can only really be fully understood by fellow composers, and visual artists surely began to paint in much the same way.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, although Morris was a fan of some nineteenth century novelists (e.g. Scott, Dickens, Dumas, Hugo, Zola), I cannot believe that he would have approved of the modernist novel, to say nothing of its post-modern successor, with its inward-looking preoccupation with the self and the individual.

As for your books, they were well enough for times when intelligent people had but little else in which they could take pleasure, and when they must needs supplement the sordid miseries of their own lives with imaginations of the lives of other people. But I say flatly in spite of all their cleverness and vigour, and capacity for story-telling, there is something loathsome about them. Some of them, indeed, do here and there show some feeling for those whom the history-books call 'poor,' and of the misery of whose lives we have some inkling; but presently they give it up, and towards the end of the story we must be contented to see the hero and heroine living happily in an island of bliss on other people's troubles; and that after a long series of sham troubles (or mostly sham) of their own making, illustrated by dreary introspective nonsense about their feelings and aspirations, and all the rest of it; ...<sup>10</sup>

And Fiona MacCarthy (*passim*) is surely correct when she writes that Morris possessed too strong a sense of the importance of history to be a true modernist. After all, one does not need to have met Flora Poste to know that radical modernity involves the wholesale rejection of anything 'old-fashioned' or 'outdated'. As for the existentialist (modernist? post-modernist?) sentiment that 'Hell is other people', we surely only need to substitute:

... fellowship is heaven, and lack of fellowship is hell: fellowship is life, and lack of fellowship is death: and the deeds that ye do upon the earth, it is for fellowship's sake that ye do them, and the life that is in it, that shall live on and on for ever, and each one of you part of it, while many a man's life upon the earth from the earth shall wane.<sup>11</sup>

It also seems to me to something of a myth that Morris was the ancestor of what used to be called 'town and country planning'. True, in his very first lecture on 'Art and Society',<sup>12</sup> he pointed out the great inherent value of the English landscape produced by centuries of careful management, and true his ideas may well have prompted people such as Ebenezer Howard to develop the concept of 'the Garden City',<sup>13</sup> but there are no planners in Nowhere! Instead, 'How matters are managed' clearly points out (and it is interesting that Morris chooses a selection of 'planning issues' – 'a new town-hall built; a clearance of inconvenient houses; or say a stone bridge substituted for some ugly old iron one' – in order to make his point), decisions are not made by a professional elite, but initiated by, and approved by, communities themselves.<sup>14</sup>

Last, come two complementary myths which, again for reasons of space, I will take together. These are sixth that Morris came eventually to be reconciled to the parliamentary route to socialism, and seventh that he was therefore somehow the ancestor of 'green politics'. As the second proposition falls if the first is not correct, I devote more attention to that.

As David Goodway explains, throughout the 1880s, Morris 'eschewed parliamentarianism', culminating in the lecture 'The Policy of Abstention' (1887), delivered only twice during his lifetime. When the split came in the Socialist League, it was over this very issue, and the earlier decision of the Fabian Society, to follow the parliamentary road, with Eleanor Marx, Edward Aveling and others forming the Bloomsbury Socialist Society, and Morris, May, Jenny, the Cobden-Sandersons, Andreas Scheu, Emery Walker and others (and slightly later Bax and Webb) the abstentionist Hammersmith Socialist Society. From 1890 Morris moderated his position somewhat, but did so reluctantly, retaining his distaste for conventional politics.<sup>15</sup> Thus we read in *News from Nowhere* that, 'Concerning Politics', there are none, and that:

... a man no more needs an elaborate system of government, with its army, navy, and police, to force him to give way to the will of the majority of his equals, than he wants a similar machinery to make him understand that his head and a stone wall cannot occupy the same space at the same moment.<sup>16</sup>

Nearer the end (1895), he told the prominent Fabian, Sidney Webb, 'the world is going your way Webb, but it is not the right way in the end'. And although parliamentary socialists may claim Morris as one of their own, as David Goodway

summarises, Morris was an anti-statist who advocated ‘decentralised federation’, and ‘placed the state and politics in a wholly secondary and instrumental position ... (H)is view of the proper character of human living left little place for them’.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore it follows that Morris’s writings may also have influenced green politics (good thing too, if they serve as antidote to those of the likes of Teddy Goldsmith or James Lovelock), but that without the economic transition upon which *all* of Morris’s other ideas depend – the abolition of the profit motive – none of them (or ‘town and country planning’) can be put fully into practise. Without the economic revolution Morris knew to be essential, as with the price of his products, putting any of his ideas into practice can only ever operate at the margin.

So then, to answer my original question – ‘Why Morris?’ In 2010, Jo Homan asked me to review the exhibition ‘Inspired by Nature’ at RHS Rosemoor in Mid Devon.<sup>18</sup> I deleted the following paragraph from my review, as I did not wish to seem ungrateful to the organiser(s) of that particular exhibition, but I reproduce it here as summary of what I mean:

PS: Note to all future organisers of Morris exhibitions and other Morris material. In 1987, the ecological footprint of our species began to exceed the capacity of the Earth to support us. Despite Morris’s tremendous influence on design, literature, politics etc, his most important contribution is therefore yet to come, in that [in the shape of *News from Nowhere*] he also knew how to save the world from ecological ruin without resorting to totalitarianism. Please give this aspect of Morris’s ideas more prominence; that way there may actually be some future generations around to enjoy Morris’s works.

In this issue, we print articles by Julia Courtney on comparison between Morris’s account of the Peasants’ Revolt, and those by two other Victorian authors – Charlotte M. Yonge, and Mary Bramston. Owen Holland then charts the international dissemination of *News from Nowhere*, and gives a highly valuable annotated bibliography of translations up until 1915, while Stephen Williams describes Philip Webb’s visit to Oxford during November 1886, and then reproduces Webb’s own account, again suitably annotated. Finally I discuss the possibility that the Dixon paintings (located in Cheltenham Museum and Art Gallery) may actually serve as an image of Nowhere.

We also carry a substantial number of reviews, of the facsimile edition of Morris’s manuscript version of *The Odes of Horace*, of Fiona MacCarthy’s *Anarchy and Beauty* which accompanied the recent exhibition of the same name at the National Portrait Gallery, and of a (nearly) new edition of Elizabeth Wilhide’s influential *William Morris: Décor & Design*. Frank C. Sharp then reviews Wendy Parkins’s ‘thematic study’ of Jane Morris, and Clive Wilmer assesses the impact of

Ruskin's Guild of St George on the early socialist movement, and others. Helena Nielsen then reviews a biography of Dimiter Blagoev, a Bulgarian contemporary of Morris, and Diana Andrews one of Alec Miller, an important but perhaps now neglected member of the Arts & Crafts. Gabriel Schenk and Peter Faulkner next each discuss one book on the Gothic revival and Martin Crick reviews a new assessment of E.P. Thompson and the new left, while David Goodway does the same for a collection of essays on libertarian socialism. Finally, I must point out that I deeply regret the error printed in the last issue in the obituary of Norman Kelvin.

And that would appear to be it. 'Our revels are now ended . . . This rough magic I here abjure'. I wish my successor every success (not my best sentence ever). Or as Morris did not quite put it, as he sat on his top hat: 'My business is done here, I think'.

## NOTES

1. BBC4, *Hidden killers of the Victorian home*, 2013, presenter Susannah Lipscomb, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0317nl8>; BBC4 *Fabric of Britain: the story of wallpaper*, 2013, presenter Susan Catcher, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03bm1rg>. See also <http://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/conservation-blog/weeks-post-free-arsenic>. (All as seen 13 April 2015)
2. William R. Cullen & Ronald Bentley, 'The toxicity of trimethylarsine: an urban myth', *Journal of Environmental Monitoring*, Vol. 7, part 1, 2005, pp. 11–15; Patrick O'Sullivan, 'Devon Great Consols and William Morris', *Reports and Transactions of the Devon Association for the Advancement of Science*, Vol. 145, 2013, pp. 155–172.
3. Not me, I hate the stuff!
4. Patrick O'Sullivan, '¡Homenaje a Aragón! *News from Nowhere*, collectivisation and the sustainable future', *Journal of William Morris Studies*, Vol. XIX, No. 3, 2011, pp. 93–111. (Afterwards *JWMS*)
5. Paul Mason, 'To move beyond boom and bust, we need a new theory of capitalism' [*Wrong!*], 23 March 2015; Giles Tremlett, 'The Podemos revolution: how a small group of radical academics changed European politics', 31 March 2015; Yanis Varoufakis, 'How I became an erratic Marxist', 18 February 2015. All at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/>. (as seen 14 April 2015)
6. Peter Faulkner, 'Pevsner's Morris', *JWMS*, Vol. XVII, No. 1, 2006, pp. 49–72 (pp. 51, 61, 52). See also remarks by Tony Judt as quoted in review by Clive Wilmer (p. 89 below).

7. Peter Faulkner, *Against the Age. An Introduction to William Morris*, London; George Allen & Unwin, 1980, pp. 102–104; Penelope Fitzgerald, *Edward Burne-Jones. A Biography*, London: Michael Joseph, 1975, pp. 191–192; Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris. A life for our time*, London: Faber & Faber, 1994, pp. 481–482, 504–505 ('The only time I failed Morris', p. 482). Afterwards MacCarthy.
8. Just as well, judging by his reaction to *The Ring* ('a sandy-haired German tenor tweedledeeing over the unspeakable woes of Sigurd, ...'; MacCarthy, p. 372).
9. Thus leading to £2.5 million being paid for 'art' in the shape of an unmade, soiled bed. In music, *The Rite of Spring* is likewise often said to be the beginning of this tendency, but I am thinking here not so much of Arnold Schoenberg but of Alban Berg and Anton Webern. I would be interested to know, for example, how many compositions commissioned of modern composers by the BBC for the Proms, have ever been played anywhere again.
10. James Redmond, ed, *William Morris, News from Nowhere*, London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1970, Chapter XXII, pp. 129–130. (Afterwards *NfN*) I am extremely grateful to Peter Faulkner for his help on this specific point (even though he will not like what I have said!), and for his unstinting support these past eight years.
11. *A Dream of John Ball and A King's Lesson*, London: Longmans, Green & Co. (The Swan Library), Chapter 4, pp. 36–37.
12. 'The Lesser Arts', 1877. As in A.L. Morton, ed, *The Political Writings of William Morris*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1979, pp. 31–56.
13. I recently saw Bourneville for the first time, and thought, 'I must have died and gone to Nowhere'.
14. *NfN*, pp. 74–75.
15. David Goodway, *Anarchist Seeds beneath the snow: left libertarian thought and British writers from William Morris to Colin Ward*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006, pp. 22–24 (and references therein to work by E.P. Thompson, Ruth Kinna and Rodney Barker; afterwards Goodway). I once heard Barbara Castle claim Morris as one of her influences (on *Desert Island Discs*), and sent her a copy of our book. She replied very graciously, but addressed her thank you letter to 'Dear Mr Sullivan'. Serves me right!
16. *NfN*, p. 72, p. 64.
17. MacCarthy, p. 644; Goodway, *Ibid.*
18. Patrick O'Sullivan, 'Inspired by Nature', RHS Rosemoor, Devon, 29 May–29 August 2010; William Morris Society Newsletter, Autumn 2010, p. 24.