A William Morris letter

Peter Faulkner


The letter (Figures 1–2) is written on two sides of a single folded sheet of Morris’s Kelmscott House writing paper, as was common at the time; the address is printed in small capitals on the top right-hand side of the first page. Morris provides a date in November, but no indication of the year, although it clearly belongs to a period of political activism, probably the late 1880s, possibly 1886. Gaps have been left in the text below in order to indicate the four pages of the letter.

I am not at present able to specify the year, and I hope that members will be able to do so in view of the historical references in the letter; please send suggestions to reviews@williammorrissociety.org.uk.

KELMSCOTT HOUSE,
UPPER MALL,
HAMMERSMITH.

Nov: 24

Dear Sir

I am engaged on 13th Dec: (and on all Mondays) This is of less importance, as I don’t think I could have been of much use at the conference, as my only suggestion would be to rescind the rule about out.o.door\(^{1}\) relief and grant it freely: not of course under with the view that this would bring about a good state of things if it were permanent, or even that our present system of society can be looked upon as stable, but as a measure tending towards revolution. I ought also to mention that I do not believe in the State, as at present constituted,
Figure 1 – Pages 4 and 1 of facsimile of letter. (See text for explanation.)

permanent duty, I yet think the architects are doing good service in showing the importance of our rulers and the apparent bankruptcy of our sham state. You can make any use of this for you please.

[Signature]

William Morris

Dear Sir,

I am engaged on 13th

[Signature]

Dear Sir,

This is of less importance, as I don’t think I could have been of much use at the conference, so my only suggestion would be to restate the rule about autocratic and print it first. Of course I am in full agreement with the view that this would bring about a good state.
of things if it were permanent, or even that our present system of society can be looked upon as stable, but as a measure tending towards revolution. I ought also to mention that I do not believe in the State, nor in present constituted, being on the system of production & exchange, able to do anything here to pull up the existing evils as regarded employment. It is necessary to the present system of production & exchange that there should be a mass of workers out of employment; and it is the real function of government at present to sustain this system at any cost. The purpose of any constitutional government in dealing with such matters as this of the unemployed is to draw the attention of people from the artificial famine produced by our present system, and to lead them to see that the Government cannot do anything to help those who are agitating for, in favour of the unemployed are pressing on them and though if they could be adopted by the government I doubt their
doing even being able to do anything even to palliate the existing evils as regards employment. Because it is necessary to the present system of production & exchange that there should be a mass of workmen out of employment;

and it is the only real function of government at present to sustain this system at any cost. The purpose of any constitutional government in dealing with such matters as this of the Unemployed is to draw the attention of people from the artificial famine produced by our system of production & exchange.

At the same time though I am sure that the Government cannot do any one of the things which those (such as the SPE) who are agitating for in favour of the unemployed are pressing on them and though if they could be adopted by the government I doubt their permanent utility, I yet think that the agitators are doing good service in showing the impotence of our rulers and the approaching bankruptcy of our sham society.

You can make any use of this letter you please.

I am

Dear Sir

Yours faithfully

William Morris

NOTES

1. out.o.door - out-of-door relief was that provided for the poor in Britain without the demand that they should stay in a workhouse, which provided ‘indoor relief’ after the introduction of the New Poor Law in 1834. Henry Fawcett in his Political Economy in 1876 argued that ‘Out-of-door relief ought to be greatly restricted’. (OED)

2. a caret is used here to insert the word ‘only’

3. a caret is used here to insert the material in brackets, evidently the initial letters of the organization referred to; unfortunately the first two cramped initials indicating the name of the organization are hard to decipher; suggestions for the name would be welcome.