

Versions of the Past, Problems of the Present, Hopes for the Future: Morris and others rewrite the Peasants' Revolt

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Anna Vaninskaya has commented on nineteenth century fascination with the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. As she says, 'A Victorian interested in the Revolt could consult not just scholarly editions of primary sources or footnoted academic treatises, but popular children's histories, illustrated historical romances, cheap political pamphlets and expensive private press *objets d'art*'.¹ My article draws on this rich diversity by contrasting William Morris's *A Dream of John Ball* with two near-contemporary if now lesser-known fictional retellings of the Revolt: Charlotte M. Yonge's *The Wardship of Steepcombe* (1896), and *The Banner of Saint George* (1901) by Mary Bramston. These three texts exemplify widely disparate historical paradigms: Morris's visionary account emerges as different in kind from the two more conventional historical novels. At the same time, there are intriguing links, parallels and comparisons between them, some perhaps coincidental, others indicating shared concerns and preoccupations at the *fin de siècle*. All three were produced during the period identified by Krishan Kumar as 'The moment of Englishness'. Kumar argues that during the final decades of the nineteenth century, when new commercial rivals such as Germany and the United States began to threaten Britain's industrial supremacy, and faith in the empire began to waver, a degree of English self-consciousness began to emerge. 'English intellectuals and artists – historians, political theorists, literary and cultural critics, composers, poets and novelists – for the first time began an inquiry into the character of the English people as a nation, with a distinct sense of its history, its traditions and its destiny'.²

In Morris's case, Nicholas Salmon has further argued that nineteenth century socialists saw the Peasants' Revolt as indicating an indigenous socialist tradi-

tion, and that 'viewed in this context *A Dream of John Ball* appears as much a celebration of national identity as of revolutionary aspirations'.³ All three authors discussed here are sympathetic to participants in the rising in varying degrees, regarding their motivation and behaviour as linked to positive national traditions and characteristics. Given this fundamental similarity, the differences between the texts are revealing, and may reflect what other late Victorian writers and readers thought about the Peasants' Revolt, whether or not they were aware of Morris's views. It may be useful for Morris scholars to see *A Dream of John Ball* in this context, as this approach points up the alterity of his account. While, as I shall argue, *A Dream of John Ball* is by far the most artistically and politically sophisticated of the three versions, Yonge and Bramston were not unheard voices in their time. Both were professional, popular and widely read authors; Yonge especially was one of the nineteenth century's most respected best sellers. And one year after its publication in 1901, Bramston's *The Banner of Saint George* was included in Jonathan Nield's exhaustive listing of *A Guide to the Best Historical Novels and Tales*.⁴

Increasingly the work of writers such as historiographer Hayden White, and literary critic Stanley Fish, has tended to blur the line between 'academic' history and other textual genres; texts labelled as history and fiction (whether historical, utopian, dystopian or science fiction) take as their reference point the society within which they are written. If, as Vaninskaya notes, interpretations of the Revolt were an ideological battleground, many of the verbal weapons employed were forged during long centuries of debate. As Lister M. Matheson points out, during the period separating the fourteenth century from the late nineteenth, the personalities and events of the Revolt were frequently re-evaluated. Writers and artists tended either to valorise Wat Tyler, John Ball and Jack Straw as popular folk heroes, or to denigrate rebellion of any kind as an offence in the eyes of God and the Establishment.⁵

Both attitudes persisted into Victorian culture: for example, the triumphalist re-enactment of the slaying of rebel leader Wat Tyler at the 1884 Lord Mayor's Show has been suggested as one of several prompts for *A Dream of John Ball*. At the same time, new standards and practices in historical scholarship were enabling major revision of the medieval period. During the 1870s and 1880s 'scientific' historians such as Freeman, F. R. Green, Stubbs and Thorold Rogers produced carefully considered political, social and economic analyses of the Revolt, while the newly available Rolls Series (so called because it appeared by direction of the Master of the Rolls, the official custodian of the records of the Court of Chancery and of the other Courts) offered valuable, if sometimes contradictory, primary sources.⁶

Morris's sources for *A Dream of John Ball* have been the subject of much scholarly analysis. Most critics stress his main reliance on Froissart; Michael Holzman

notes the close correspondence between John Ball's sermon to the rebels in both Morris and Froissart, adding that there are also evident debts to Walsingham, Knighton and a range of secondary sources including Thorold Rogers.⁷ Carole Silver sums up:

Morris carefully bases his fictional versions of events on the medieval and contemporary works of English historians. Supplementing Froissart's account of the rebellion with such sources as Holinshed's *Chronicles* and the *Chronicle of John Hardyng*, he turns to nineteenth century historians for analysis and interpretation. He derives materials from Sir Henry Maine, Bishop Stubbs, Edward Freeman, John Richard Green and Thorold Rogers, as well as from the more popular writings of Southey, Macaulay and Cobbett.⁸

But in some ways Morris takes his historical framework lightly, adding a skirmish (Chapter VI) for which there is no documentary evidence, and changing the circumstances of John Ball's release from Maidstone Castle. Also, the original serialised version (see next para) was only brought into line with recorded history when the 1888 text set the action in midsummer 1381.

A Dream of John Ball appeared first in serial form in *Commonweal* between November 1886 and January 1887. Subsequently, a revised version was published in 1888 by Longmans, Green & Co., with six reprints between 1888 and 1900. The Kelmescott edition was issued in 1892. Given Morris's fame and high cultural profile during these years, it is likely that both Yonge and Bramston at least knew of the existence *A Dream of John Ball*. Bramston, I suspect, had read it, although this is impossible to prove. At all events, the years immediately following Morris's death in 1896 saw frequent and widely-read reappraisals and evaluations of his life and work, such as the 1899 biography by J.W. Mackail.

Fiona MacCarthy has written of *A Dream of John Ball* that it 'operates on several different levels like one of his designs for textiles or for wallpapers, superficially easy to read but revealing hidden depths and complexities the more closely you examine it'.⁹ Among these complexities must surely be the implications of the title, with its shifting meaning of the term 'dream', as symbolised by the traditionally soporific white poppy which recurs throughout the text; growing near the road where the narrator awakes, decorating Will Green's house, and carried by the narrator into the church where it withers and dwindles as the night fades into day. Dreams and visions weave throughout the narrative which Morris/the speaker describes as 'my dream of things past, present, and to come'. He falls asleep and dreams a typical 'anxiety dream' (he is giving a lecture in his nightshirt) from which he seems to awake but in fact finds himself within a dream of the fourteenth century in which John Ball features. In his turn, the dreamed John Ball experiences a vision or dream of Morris/the narrator, who appears in the Kent countryside in fourteenth century guise. The two men are therefore dreaming of

each other, and so therefore are inhabiting overlapping visions. 'Thou hast been a dream to me as I to thee' John Ball tells the Narrator before they part. And John Ball also tells of a dream or vision he experienced in prison.¹⁰

Then there is a further meaning of 'dream' in the sense of an ideal; both figures share a dream of future freedom and fellowship. Norman Kelvin writes that 'the dreams *John Ball* and *News from Nowhere* are metaphors, embracing the entire texts and delivering socialist messages to the world'.¹¹ An added layer of intertextuality also comes from the tradition of medieval dream literature, well known to Morris via Chaucer and Langland. Here, the dream partakes of visionary status, conveying significant truths and prophecies beyond natural sight: as Morris declares at the end of *News from Nowhere*, 'if others can see it as I have seen it, then surely it may be called a vision rather than a dream.'¹²

Such classification of Morris's later fiction, including *A Dream of John Ball*, as dreams, vision or Romances,¹³ would make a major division between Morris's text and the two novels under discussion; they are of different genres. While both Yonge and Bramston also impart political messages, they do so via the medium of the traditional 'historical novel', rather than Morris's innovative and evocative prophetic utterance.

II

Long before Morris turned to socialism, he had been an ardent reader of Charlotte M. Yonge. Both Fiona MacCarthy and Peter Faulkner record his smitten reaction to Yonge's 'chivalric' novels, particularly the best-selling *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853), suggesting that the key to Morris's interest was Yonge's ability to convey medievalist ideals of honour and self-sacrifice through a story of upper middle class Victorian families inspired by the Oxford Movement. But by the end of the century, Yonge, although still widely read, was no longer a centre of controversy. By then, a baffled reviewer noted that it was only Mackail's biography of Morris which had sent him to *The Heir of Redclyffe*; on reading Yonge's novel he failed to see its early attractions for Morris and his circle.¹⁴

The Wardship of Steepcombe was published by The National Society in 1896. As such it was intended as a prize or reward book for older children attending schools run by the Society, which had been founded in 1812 in order to provide education, and to train teachers within the framework of the Church of England. Surviving copies are attractively bound and illustrated; I own one with a name plate identifying a 1901 prizewinner at Whitelands College. Although intended for a younger readership, the novel displays those characteristics which made Yonge's adult historical fiction so popular. Writing of her collaboration with the historian E.A. Freeman, Susan Walton notes that Yonge 'did not skim over grim

realities' or 'violent events', suggesting that she shrewdly turned to historical fiction just as the sensation novel was taking over the market.¹⁵

The publisher's advertising description of *The Wardship of Steepcombe* encapsulates what the reader may expect:

*A story of the troublous times of the youth of King Richard II and of the work done by Wickliffe and William of Wykeham respectively, concluding with a graphic and spirited description of Wat Tyler's rebellion.*¹⁶

'Graphic and spirited' may be interpreted as bloodthirsty, while mention of two fourteenth century religious figures indicates Yonge's central interest: the history of the Church in England.

The story begins with a retrospective and grisly account of the Black Death, which is correctly seen as the cause of the subsequent labour shortage which both temporarily improved the lot of the villeins (by enabling them to press for increased freedom and higher wages), but which then tempted feudal landlords to clamp down on wages and freedom of movement of labour (e.g. *via* the Statute of the Labourers of 1351). Readers follow the fortunes of the villein a-Coombe family as their landlord Sir Diggory Upton forces them to return to the estate of Steepcombe, which he administers during the minority of his ward and nephew, Miles Upton. The a-Coombe brothers Simon and Allan are separated when Allan is saved from villeinage by joining the household of Bishop William of Wickham; Simon follows the rebels to London where the brothers are reunited in time to witness the murder of the Archbishop of Canterbury (and Chancellor of England) Simon of Sudbury, the subsequent mayhem in the city, and the crucial meeting between King Richard II and the protesters. Meanwhile Miles Upton struggles against the harsh decisions of his uncle Sir Diggory in a narrative which parallels that of the young King Richard against his royal uncles, including the notorious Duke of Lancaster, John of Gaunt.

Yonge cites Stowe as one of her major sources, and also employs two chapter headings taken from Southey's drama *Wat Tyler* (Chapters XV and XIX). As a publicist of the Oxford Movement, Yonge combined medievalism, expressed as respect and admiration for the culture of pre-Reformation England, with a dislike of industrialisation and urbanisation. For her, since it did not necessarily improve quality of life or spiritual health, material 'progress' was to be viewed with scepticism. In some ways her vision of the fourteenth century might well have met with Morris's approval, since both writers abhorred industrial, urban 'civilisation' as degrading, and as a decline from a former wholesome, healthy medieval neighbourliness.

In Yonge's novel, Winchester is depicted as a thriving attractive city where work on the cathedral provides rewarding employment for stonemasons and carvers, while the rest of the populace supports itself via other crafts or trades.

The Church provides education for many of the city's boys, the sick are cared for, and townsfolk generally support each other in everyday life. A pageant is vividly described, the streets decorated with flowers and greenery as well as embroidered banners and textiles, the procession colourful, in striking, handmade costumes. Outside the city, work on the land is seen as hard yet satisfying, and after town life, young Simon a-Coombe is delighted to be amongst the birds and the beasts.

For all of her long life, Yonge lived in the village of Otterbourne just outside Winchester, and as Susan Walton notes: 'living in an area steeped in history she longed to know how people experienced the events about which she read'.¹⁷ At the same time, Yonge's framework was teleological, with human history seen as part of the working of a divine plan within which the individual Christian quest for salvation is paramount; throughout history all should strive for 'the one thing needful'¹⁸ in whatever social station they find themselves. Thus, although expressed via the human interest centred on the a-Coombe family and young Miles Upton, the main message of the novel is social and religious. Rather vaguely, readers are told that the undoubted evils of villeinage will fade away, possibly to be replaced by equally deplorable conditions: 'bondage, no one knows exactly how, died away in England in the course of a generation or two'.¹⁹ But there is sympathy for those who fight against injustice, corruption and oppression.

Yonge follows Walsingham's account of the Revolt by making Jack Straw a priest, identifying him as John Santley, a cleric who renounces his religious title:

Brother me not; I hate the idle crew of monks and friars too much to bear their feigning title. Call me Jack Straw, as the honest folks of Kent call me. ... I would see one blaze destroy every one that grinds the faces of the poor, be he king, lord, Archbishop, Abbot, lawyer perverting justice, begging friar mulcting the poor with lies. Woe unto you all! Let one flame burn up all pride, and vanity, hypocrisy and tyranny, and let us have all things in common, as in the days of the holy Apostles.

An idealistic young Brother, Bartle Cree, is then inspired by Straw/Santley, agreeing that '[n]aught is to be amended if all sit still and preach patience and do nothing'. Yonge does however 'preach patience' indirectly. A hermit (or 'anker') with whom Santley and Cree take refuge, regales them with warning tales of the Jacquerie in France. Similar horrors are later perpetrated by the rebels when they reach London. Cree then bitterly repents his participation in the rising, and 'to his last day upheld that the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God'. More positive emphasis is given to Wickliffe and to Wickham, and the eventual effects of their mission on the English Church. The novel ends with Cree reading aloud from 'one of the first copies of Wickliffe's bible completed, but not yet proscribed. ... readings from it were the life and oracle of his flock'.²⁰

Clearly Morris's take on the fourteenth century Church differs vastly from

Yonge's, yet it can be argued that the spiritual vision of *A Dream of John Ball* is one of its most complex and memorable features. Morris possessed far too much historical understanding to dismiss the central place of the Church in fourteenth century culture and society. In the *Dream*, the township church is beautiful and newly built; the cross dominates the open meeting space, and a statue of St Clement denotes the blacksmith's house. John Ball is definitely 'a priest of God' who says Mass, prays, wears 'a pair of beads', and hears confessions. Morris acknowledges that not all priests are of Ball's calibre; the township parson has fled, and Ball himself shares his moments of self doubt when he muses 'hadst thou kept thy tongue between thy teeth [as no doubt did many other priests] thou mightest have been something ... comfortable to many a poor man' without risking his own neck.²¹

Especially in his earlier speeches, Ball makes quite orthodox mention of Heaven, Hell, the saints and so on; but gradually his interpretation of the Mystical Body or the Communion of Saints (i.e. the eternal spiritual unity of all believers past, present and to come) is combined and elided with the ideal of earthly Fellowship, a concept which by the end of Chapter 7 acquires a capital letter. In the final chapter, it has become 'the Host of the Fellowship', a phrase reminiscent of 'the Heavenly Host' (the angels) and even of the consecrated Eucharist. Famously, 'fellowship is heaven, and lack of fellowship is hell: fellowship is life, and lack of fellowship is death'.²²

During their colloquy in the church, Ball asks the Narrator directly about his religious beliefs, sensing that 'there seemeth something betwixt us twain as it were a wall that partest us'. He is unconvinced by Morris's humanist view that 'though I die and end, yet mankind liveth, therefore I end not'. Here I find Morris's historical sense entirely convincing; while identifying and celebrating the ideal of fellowship embedded in Ball's belief and practice, he admits that, as the heading of Chapter 11 states, 'Hard is it for the Old World to see the New', both in terms of religious doctrine as well as economic theory. On the other hand, the Narrator surprises Ball with the prediction that 'in those days shall there be neither abbey nor priory in the land, nor monks or friars, nor any religious';²³ perhaps wishful thinking which does not entirely accord with the religious history of late-Victorian England.

III

Mary Bramston's novel *The Banner of Saint George* (1901) shares Morris's aversion to the power tactics of the fourteenth century Church. Bramston's hero is a real historical person, the stonemason William Grindecobbe who led the citizens of St Albans against the impositions of its Abbot both before and during the

Peasants Revolt. A novelist, educator and friend of Charlotte Yonge, Mary Eliza Bramston (1841–1912) cited 'Walsingham's Chronicle' as the basis of her novel, stating that 'This tale of the Peasant Revolt in Essex and Herts is of course an embroidery, but the framework on which it hangs is fuller of historical details than often lie ready to an author's hand'.²⁴ Subtitled *A Picture of Old England*, the novel is imagined as a tapestry or worked textile in which the historical record supports, and is embellished by, colourful additions wrought by the novelist's creative art.

Indicating a willingness to be led outside her comfort zone in an engagement with her sources, Bramston adds that she 'followed the details there given [in Walsingham's Chronicle] as far as I could, sometimes finding them so medieval that they gave quite a shock to the picture my imagination was working at'. Her Preface also mentions Knighton's *Chronicon*, plus a secondary source, Jusserand's *Wayfaring Life in the Middle Ages* (1889). And the novel's claim to meticulous reportage of the Peasants' Revolt has stood the test of time, the only obvious inaccuracy being that Bramston locates John of Gaunt in London playing the heavy uncle to the teenage King Richard when modern research places him in the North negotiating with the Scots.²⁵

Her hero, Grindecobbe, 'big, broad and florid, with blue eyes which gleamed and sparkled with every change of mood and thought' is a natural leader, a loving father, a courageous upholder of the rights of the citizen, an opponent of violence, and finally steadfast unto death as he is executed for his principles. His 'heroism, law-abidingness and moderation' are held by the author to be truly English traits worthy of 'a nation working its way towards [the] civilisation and freedom' assumed to have been attained by 1901.²⁶

Such a context indicates that Bramston's historical paradigm is that of traditional Whig History, a construction of democratic progress which differs from both Morris's socialist vision, and from Yonge's teleological view. Perhaps because of Whig History's tendency to denigrate the Middle Ages, Bramston's vision of the fourteenth century is much less idyllic than Morris's, and also less favourable than Yonge's. For example, in *The Banner of Saint George*, the streets of St Albans are malodorous, foul and ill paved. And travelling the countryside, apothecary Alan Harding is 'shocked to find how large a part sheer hunger played in the lives of these poor folk' forced to exist on 'wild roots and herbs'.²⁷ Lack of respect for human life, and the brutality of fourteenth century justice have, it is implied, by 1901 been remedied by Englishmen and Englishwomen sharing the same 'hard commonsense' and law abiding moderation displayed by Grindecobbe and his associates. Morris, on the other hand, contrasts the 'trimness and handiness' of the Kent countryside, the beauty of the buildings and the quality of clothing and accoutrements sported by the inhabitants, with the squalor of late nineteenth century London. The Kentish folk are shown as enjoying a healthy and satisfying

lifestyle; they join the Revolt in solidarity and fellowship with their oppressed Essex comrades, thus setting an example of selflessly concerted political action.

In *The Wardship of Steepcombe* all classes, given goodwill, can live in harmony and mutual prosperity, with individuals free to seek a satisfying earthly life combined with spiritual salvation. Bramston possesses a more nationalist agenda: a reviewer in the *Daily Chronicle* described *The Banner of Saint George* as a novel likely to ‘make Englishmen proud of their race’ and a prime example of English manhood is the brawny bighearted blue eyed Grindecobbe.²⁸ He is a father figure for young Alan Harding, whose parents suffer from the cruelty of the Essex landowner Sir Walter Rickdon. Early in the novel Alan is taken by his sick and embittered mother Pernel to hear the radical preacher John Ball announce that ‘we be all come from one mother, Eve, and one father, even Adam. Why should some dwell in fair houses, and sleep on down, and feast off gold and silver, while others have the pain and the travail, rain and wind in the fields; and by the sweat and blood of some, others maintain their estates?’²⁹ Interestingly, these words do not figure in Walsingham’s account, although he cites the famous Adam/Eve couplet and summarises Ball’s discourse. Bramston writes of Ball’s words that ‘they are historical’, so she like Morris may have taken them directly from Froissart’s *Chronicle* or from a secondary source quoting Froissart.

For Bramston John Ball is not so much an initiator of the Revolt as a mouth-piece for widespread opinion:

Alan listened spell bound. All this was in the air of the day and John Ball only said what many men thought; but the first time a lad hears the unformed thought of the time put into words is for ever memorable to him.

He goes on to participate in the Revolt, although following Grindecobbe’s example, he takes neither life nor property: ‘let us glory in the name [of the commons] and do nothing to disgrace it—let us have no rioting, nor suffer others to riot but let us claim our rights and defend them with courage and calmness’.³⁰ In this resolve Grindecobbe and Alan are unlike the wild-eyed followers of ‘scannel-voiced’, half-demented Jack Straw.

That figure is given a much more positive presentation in Morris’s work, where he is portrayed as an orderly and resourceful leader, while Yonge, in partially eliding him with the preacher John Ball, makes him inspiring and idealistic if misguided. Bramston’s unattractive Straw is contrasted with ‘a more cultivated and much saner-looking person with a dark bushy beard’. This is John Kirkby, whose beard is frequently insisted upon, even as the identifier of his disembodied head on London Bridge. Bramston’s narrative voice informs readers that ‘There were among the leaders of the Essex rebellion a large Socialist and a small Anarchist contingent, though such names were as yet unknown. ... Kirkby was

the leader of the Socialists, Jack Straw of the Anarchists'. When both address the rebels:

... there was a kind of fierce inspiration in Straw's speech which set Alan's heart beating wildly: for was he not after all the son of the murdered Harding? He was followed by John Kirkby, who spoke in a much milder and more reasonable manner. The one wanted to destroy all that differentiated one man's station from another, if needs were by the death of him who held it; the other wanted to redistribute the goods of earth more fairly, but with no violence. One object was more amiable than the other but hardly more practicable.³¹

Kirkby must surely be a cameo portrait of Morris, despite Bramston's pragmatic toning down of Morris's revolutionary agenda. Fiona MacCarthy quotes Eiríkr Magnússon's description of Morris as 'ruddy complexioned, sturdily framed, brawn necked, shock headed',³² while 'Topsy's' bushy beard features in numerous cartoons, portraits and photographs. Whether or not Bramston had read *A Dream of John Ball*, it seems clear that she was aware of Morris's persona and his political ideals.

IV

I was initially drawn to a comparison of *The Banner of Saint George* with *A Dream of John Ball* by the prominence in both texts of the theme or symbol of the banner. Although Bramston lacks Morris's highly developed aesthetic sense, both authors describe their own version of the peasants' banner. In Bramston's novel, the aspirations of the rebels, as well as their Englishness, are expressed by the banners they carry, and especially by the standard brought from London to St Albans in order to signify King Richard's all too brief agreement to their requests. This banner is set up as an object of veneration outside the Abbey, and Bramston explains that her 'title owes its existence to the description in Walsingham of Richard of Wallingford's arrival at St Albans bearing the king's letter: *deferens ante eum vexillum, sive pencellum, displicatum, de armis Sancti Georgii, juxta morem illorum qui Londoniis tot scelera perpetrarunt*'.³³ It is not the only one in the novel, since for their march on London the rebels assemble beneath banners provided by each locality; and it is the description of one of these which indicates that Bramston's own 'embroidery' includes their actual design. While medieval illustrations record the St George's Cross carried by the rebels, and Walsingham refers only to 'the arms of St George', Bramston clearly imagines a representation of St George and the Dragon. In a moment of homespun ekphrasis, the widow Pernel Harding hands over the banner she has made for her son Alan's band.

‘See!’ she said ‘here is a good linen pennon—indeed it is the sheet I have been keeping by me for my shroud: and on it is St George in blue, and the dragon in red. Didst thou think I could work so well, Alan? I trow I had almost forgot the art, which I used to ply before thou wert born!’ ‘But how did thou get the pattern Mother?’ said Alan, looking with admiration at the outlined saint, impaling the red dragon with his lance. ‘I took it from a picture of Mistress Fenn’s that her mistress gave her. The saint’s legs be too short, I fear, because of the selvedge in their way, but none could deny it is St George’.

Pernel’s needlework is interwoven with Bramston’s Whig ideology of progress on a nation’s road to freedom and with the maintenance of values such as truth, honour and moral obligation, which can be shared by all classes, symbolised by the juxtaposition of the King’s banner and Pernel’s homely effort:

[Alan] had not... the sense of the obligation of nobility, the son of William Harding had no noble blood in his veins, but the sense of the obligation of *worth* has at all times, thank God, been equally potent with Englishmen and Englishwomen.

The values of chivalry are attainable by all; after Alan has repaid an obligation by saving a member of the landowning De Rivers family:

perhaps [he] never... knew a sweeter or more gladdening popularity, or a greater contentment with himself than he felt for upholding the honour of the bands of St George and proving that one could act knightly without being a knight.³⁴

Visually, Morris’s banner as shown in Burne Jones’s famous realisation, is very different from Pernel’s short-legged St George:

a banner on a high-raised cross pole, a picture of a man and a woman half-clad in skins of beasts seen against a back-ground of green trees, the man holding a spade and the woman a distaff and spindle, rudely done enough, but yet with a certain spirit and much meaning; and underneath this symbol of the early world and man’s first contest with nature were the written words

*When Adam delved and Eve span
Who was then the gentleman?*³⁵

The iconography of the Morris/Burne Jones banner, which served as Frontispiece for several of the Longman reprints, has been extensively analysed by scholars, including Stephen Eisenman. He argues that ‘Morris’s implicit claim in *John Ball* that communism is indigenous to England and a basic human drive was given an added dimension’ by Burne Jones’s image which ‘shows the first humans occupied with hard but satisfying labour in conditions of equality and mutual aid’.³⁶ And both text and etching present the Peasants’ Revolt as a crucial point on

the journey from the primitive communist past to the post-revolutionary future of 'the change beyond the change'. The meaning of Morris's banner, with its invocation of the natural basis of communism, is very different from Bramston's evocation of chivalric honour, drawn from the ideology of knighthood.

V

In the final chapters of *A Dream of John Ball*, the two dreamers, Ball and the Narrator, attempt to share their experiences of revolutionary struggle. The Morris persona succeeds in highlighting historical events such as the Enclosures, industrialisation, urbanisation, changes in transport and communications, 'trickle-down' capitalism, and colonial globalisation of production; all of which are defamiliarised by Ball's questions and responses, and which resonate today as much as they must have done with Morris's original readers. Morris's use of language is significant here, since the dreamers must communicate across five centuries. Although convincing choice of idiom is a problem common to all writers setting their texts in the past, Morris's approach is significantly different from that of Yonge or Bramston.

Yonge explains that 'the language of the story is conventional, since, though English was commonly spoken, it would be difficult to understand the old form of it'.³⁷ This is clearly a pragmatic decision aimed at her teenage readership, and generally shared by other writers in the genre. Bramston writes that Alan Harding's account of Grindecobbe's last days 'is of course rendered into modern English'.³⁸ Morris in contrast seeks 'To make a New Tongue' to express his vision of 'the change beyond the change'.³⁹ One of the most telling sentences in *A Dream of John Ball* reads 'I felt strangely, as though I had more words to say than the words I knew I could make clear: as if I wanted to get from other people a new set of words'. This statement does not involve a transcription of the actual speech of Will Green and his fellows, for 'if I were to give you the very words of those who spoke to me you would scarcely understand them, although their language was English too'.⁴⁰ On the contrary, as Will Abberley has argued, Morris seeks 'an a-historical tongue' in his late fiction which aims to 'resist the degradation of modern language'. For Abberley, 'Morris's rebelling peasants protect their Germanic vocabulary and oral community against encroaching artificial Latinisms and writing culture', while 'Ball uses Teutonisms to encode natural instincts for co-operation and solidarity'.⁴¹ Just as the image on the banner evokes the inherent communism of the earliest times, so the language of the medieval peasants harks back to the egalitarianism of early Northern European society: significantly, the Morris persona regales the company at the Rose tavern with a tale of Iceland, which his hearers applaud as concerning 'such men [as] have been and

will be, and belike are not far from this same door even now'.⁴²

In summary, Bramston responded to Kumar's 'moment of Englishness' by constructing a national identity of moderation, commonsense, courage, hardy determination and an innate sense of honour, enduring characteristics apparently capable of gradually transforming medieval conditions into the society of 1901. Yonge saw things differently. Writing for a teenage audience, she envisioned history less as inevitable material 'progress' (in her opinion, the values of medieval chivalry and satisfying work were sadly lacking in nineteenth century culture), than as a changing set of circumstances within which fascinatingly varied but all too human individuals must work out their own salvation, hopefully supported by a vibrant national Church. While it is intriguing to contrast Morris's historical paradigm with those of other late Victorians, the comparison makes it clear that his vision is different in kind from those of Yonge and Bramston, and by implication, from that of many other contemporary writers of historical fiction. Whether it is classified as a Romance, a vision or a novel, *A Dream of John Ball* links the experiences of 1381 with those of 1887, and resonates with readers today: as Morris says it is his 'dream of things past, present and to come'.⁴³

NOTES

1. Anna Vaninskaya, *William Morris and the Idea of Community: Romance, History and Propaganda, 1880–1914*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010, p. 120. (Afterwards Vaninskaya) See also Anna Vaninskaya, 'Dreams of John Ball: Reading the Peasants' Revolt in the Nineteenth Century', *Nineteenth Century Contexts*, Vol. 31, No 1, March 2009, pp. 45–57.
2. Krishan Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 224.
3. Nicholas Salmon, 'A Reassessment of *A Dream of John Ball*', *Journal of the William Morris Society*, XIV, No. 2, Spring 2001, pp. 29–38.
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 12. *News from Nowhere*, London: Longman, 1910, p. 238.
 13. Vaninskaya, pp. 35–36.
 14. Peter Faulkner, *Against the Age. An Introduction to William Morris*, Abingdon, UK: Routledge Revivals 2011/1980, Chapter 1, e-version; MacCarthy, pp. 65–66; Bass, pp. 55–85 (p. 65).
 15. Susan Walton, 'Charlotte M. Yonge and the "historic harem" of Edward Augustus Freeman', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, Vol. 11, No. 2, Autumn 2006, pp. 226–255, especially pp. 232 and 238. (Afterwards Walton)
 16. Publisher's description, back pages, Charlotte M. Yonge, *The Wardship of Steepcombe*, London: National Society (Afterwards *Wardship*), nd but

- known, from biography to be 1896; see C.R. Coleridge, *Charlotte Mary Yonge*, London: Macmillan, 1903, p. 367.
17. Walton, p. 230.
 18. Expression from St Luke's Gospel, frequently used in nineteenth century writing, e.g. in *Hard Times*.
 19. *Wardship*, p. 314.
 20. *Wardship*, pp. 187–188, 315, *ibid.* The Jacquerie was a revolt by peasants which took place in northern France during the summer of 1358 (and thus the Hundred Years' War). The revolt, which was suppressed after a few weeks of violence, centred on the valley of the River Oise north of Paris. The rebellion became known as the Jacquerie because the nobles derided the peasants as 'Jacques' or 'Jacques Bonhomme' for their padded surplice named a *jacque*. Their leader, Guillaume Cale, was referred to by the (aristocratic) chronicler Jean Froissart as Jacques Bonhomme ('Jack Goodfellow') or Callet. The word *jacquerie* subsequently became a synonym for peasant uprisings in general, both in English and in French. (Wikipedia; Jacquerie)
 21. *DoJB*, pp. 27, 32.
 22. *DoJB*, p. 19.
 23. *DoJB*, pp. 90, 121.
 24. Mary E. Bramston, *The Banner of Saint George*, London: Duckworth, 1901, p. v. (Afterwards *Banner*) For more information on Mary Bramston's career and work, see Julia Courtney, unpublished PhD thesis, University of London 1990, *Charlotte M. Yonge, A Novelist and Her Readers*, pp. 450–466. (Afterwards Courtney, thesis)
 25. John A.F. Thomson, *The Transformation of Medieval England*, London: Longman, 1983, p. 28.
 26. *Banner*, pp. 3, vii.
 27. *Banner*, p. 32.
 28. Courtney, thesis, p. 466.
 29. *Banner*, p. 41. Here, Ball's sermon is based not on Walsingham but on Froissart, although it was also quoted in nineteenth century secondary sources; see Michael Holzman (as Note 7), in Boos & Silver, pp. 98–116.
 30. *Banner*, pp. 41, 125.
 31. *Banner*, pp. 49, 51, 52.
 32. MacCarthy, p. 279.
 33. *Banner*, p. x. 'Carrying unfurled in front of him a banner or standard with the arms of Saint George according to the usage of the rebels who had committed the crimes in London'; David Preest (transl.), *The Chronica Maiora of Thomas of Walsingham*, Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: Boydell, 2005, p. 134.
 34. *Banner*, pp. 60, 179–180, 71.

35. *DoJB*, pp. 23–24.
36. Eisenman, pp. 93, 95.
37. *Wardship*, p. vii.
38. *Banner*, p. 247.
39. Will Abberley, ‘“To make a New Tongue”: Natural and Manufactured Language in the Late Fiction of William Morris’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, Vol. 17, No. 4, Dec 2012, pp. 397–412. (Afterwards Abberley)
40. *DoJB*, pp.74, 5.
41. Abberley, p. 401.
42. *DoJB*, p.17.
43. *DoJB*, p. 16.