William Morris: In Memoriam

Amy C. Morant

'O kindreds of the people! the soul that dwelt herein,
This goodly way-worn body, was keen for you to win
Good days and long endurance. Who knoweth of his deed
What things for you it hath fashioned from the flame of the fire of need?
But of this at least well wot we that forth from your hearts it came,
And back to your hearts returneth for the seed of thriving and fame.
In the ground wherein ye lay it the body of this man
No need of his abideth, no glory that he wan,
But evermore the Markmen shall bear his deeds o'er Earth
With the joy of the deeds that are coming, the garland of his worth.'

(From A Tale of the House of the Wolfings and all the Kindreds of the Mark, by William Morris).

How can we more fitly sum up – we of the movement of which William Morris was both fashioner and fashioned – than in these noble words of his own devising, the thoughts that arise in us and the message we would pass round among the moving multitudes of our host in many lands, as we stand to-day with bared heads and stirred hearts before the empty place that held this brave and most gifted warrior of all our English band? 'Goodly days and long endurance!' for this indeed he worked and sang and fought, for all the kindreds of the people, the many, not the few; and as from their hearts he drew the inspiration so thither let it return for realization, that while the songs of his dreams re-echo, as everywhere at our gatherings they shall, they may fire us for the deeds that are coming to make fair the face of the earth; fair as the picture which he loved to draw so vividly that we spring to it with instant recognition as to the outer framework of the goal of our
socialist striving, as in that deftly-fashioned masterpiece of half-historic, half-prophetic romance, *The Roots of the Mountains*, thus: —

'... Withal there was the good and dear land; the waxing corn on the acres; the blossoming vine on the hill-side; and about the orchards and alongside the ways, the plum trees and cherry trees and pear trees that had cast their blossom and were over-hung with little young fruit; and the fair apple trees a blossoming, and the chestnuts spreading their boughs from their twisted trunks over the green grass. And there was the goodly pasture for the horses and the neat, and the thymy hill grass for the sheep; and beyond it all, the thickets of the great wood, with its unfailing store of goodly timber of ash and oak and holly and yoke-elm. There need no man lack unless man compelled him, and all was rich enough and wide enough for the waxing of a very great folk ... What they would, that did they, and they had all things pleanteously.'

And if sorrow dims the eyes as the personal loss strikes home to one and another, while link on link of memory brings the strong kind familiar figure near, we turn to each other, again with his own words on our lips and say, now 'he wend his ways to the Gods and the ancient Fathers, and the hope of the latter days.'

'And how shall his feet be cumbered if we tangle them with woe,
And the heavy rain of sorrow drift o'er the road he go?
He has toiled, and his toil was troubous to make the days come;
Use we his gifts in gladness, lest he grieve for the Ancient Home.'

To those outside our movement, as the average cultured classes of his own time and social level largely are, perhaps best of all that can be said of him in these days of dark cities and wan, dim faces, and heart turned adrift in snow-wastes of intellectual despair, is this which none may gainsay: *he had the joy of life*. More than all else this marks his achievement and stamps itself in gathering clearness on the ripening products of his thought and of his craft: the joy of life poured from him as from a brimming cup into the world around him — and the sad and the poor, yes and even the rich and the sordid, came crowding to drink it in, for this more than all else do we poor manikins crave in the twilight of this doubt-ridden and dying century: *the joy of life*, the freshness as of things seen through childhood's eyes, the childhood of the world ere the curse of Mammon fell, the joy that wakens with the
touch of spring and glories in the enchanting mastery of growth, rebirth and freshness of desire that thrills in the splendour of summer and glows in the keen brightness of winter’s clearest day. This William of ours has been called ‘The last of the Pagans’—shall we not say he came in response to that deep outburst of the other William, his predecessor, and perhaps of all other English poets the most in contrast to himself, William Wordsworth.

‘The World is too much with us: late or soon
Buying or selling we lay waste our powers.
Little we reck of treasures that our ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon
This sea, that bares her bosom to the moon,
These winds, that will be howling at all hours,
And are up gathered now like sleeping flowers—
For this, for everything we are out of tune,
They move us not. Great God! I’d rather be
A pagan suckled in a creed outworn,
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn,
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea
And hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.’

William Morris was such a pagan as this: he brought us these much needed glimpses of wonder and mystery and beauty lying round about us, rich and inexhaustible on all hands; in the stories of our forefathers and their kinsfolk in other lands, in the daily joys and sorrows changes and chances which make all the world akin, in the simple beauties of the common wayside things, in tender sketches of pleasant summer lands, in the lives of men and women, the witchery of maidenhood, and the stilling of heart’s desire, in the hills and the dales, and the hedgerows and the tilling of the good soil and the harvester’s delight. Consider well the lines which form the prelude to that epoch-marking tale already quoted above.

While carried o’er the iron road,
We hurry by some fair abode,
The garden bright amidst the hay,
The yellow wain upon the way.
The dining men, the wind that sweeps
Light locks from off the sun-sweet heaps,
This gable grey, the hoary roof,
Here now, and now so far aloof.
How surely then we long to stay,
And midst its sweetness wear the day,
And neath its changing shadows sit,
And feel ourselves a part of it.
Such rest, such stay, I strove to win,
With these same leaves that lie herein.

Surely the passionate gratitude that wells up in countless hearts, not
here in England only but in places widely sundered as the poles and
varying in custom and habit as Iceland from Cathay, towards this past
master of poetry and handicraft, springs from the sense deep-lying in
all that here was one who, finding his fellows toiling in perpetual irks-
someness over the iron road of commercialism and all harnessed more
or less closely to the Juggernaut car of Mammon, wooed them by
speech and song and art and pictured tapestry, by fair colour and
fitness of form, to stay awhile, if only in imagination among manlier,
brighter, healthier scenes than these in which in an evil hour the mod-
ern man has fallen.

This note of mingled gladness and strength and purity may be said
perhaps to be specially the key-note of his later work, for until he had
outgrown what may be called his academic stage and won through his
first fervour of mediævalism in which the ecclesiastic cold touch
affected to some degree even his robust and sunny nature, a touch of
melancholy, a breathing of self-distrust comes out here and there in his
work and life. For proof of this early mediævalism see his first indepen-
dent work, The Defence of Guinevere, or run over some of the titles
of his chief contributions to the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine
(1856), which he was largely instrumental in founding — as ‘The
Churches of Northern France,’ ‘The Story of the Unknown Church,’
‘The Chapel in Lyonesse,’ ‘A Night in a Cathedral,’ ‘Pray but One
Prayer for Us,’ and so on; while for the change of tone and fibre which
is above referred to and which coincides more or less with his increas-
ing trend towards Icelandic and other northern forms of epic and lyric
art, compare these lines from the prelude of The Earthly Paradise, in
the course of writing which the change was slowly coming—

The heavy trouble, the bewildering care
That weighs us down who live and earn our bread,
These idle verses have no power to bear.

And again,

Dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time,
Why should I strive to set the crooked straight?
Let it suffice me that my murmuring rhyme
Beats with light wing against the ivory gate,
Telling a tale not too importunate
To those who in the sleepy region stay,
Lulled by the singer of an empty day.

Compare this, I say, with the ring of such lines as these from the Wolfing’s Tale—

“Tis the hardy heart, beloved, that keepeth me alive
As the vinya-leek in the garden by the rain and the sun doth thrive,
So I thrive by the praise of the people; it is blent with my drink and my meat,
As I slumber in the night-tide it laps me soft and sweet;
And through the chamber-window, when I waken in the morn,
With the wind of the sun’s arising from the meadow is it borne,
And biddeth me remember that yet I live on earth,
Then I rise and my might is with me, and fills my heart with mirth,
As I think of the praise of the people; and all this joy I win
By the deed that my heart commandeth and the hope that lies therein.

Time and space alike would fail her to deal with the many sidedness of our great comrade’s activities, or the wonderful stories of curious love laid up in him. The birth of his decorative business, which deliberately set itself to revolutionary work among the fripperies, gauderies, and gim-crackeries of modern furnishing, was a striking instance of his unrivalled energy in forging a conviction into an act. Talking with four friends over dinner of how such a thing might be, and what sore need there was of it. William Morris said simply, ‘that being so, why not we five do it?’ and he put down a sum on the table as first share, and so the enterprise was started over which he kept sway till his death. In all
directions of art and craft it branched out, and numberless are the lives whose opportunities have been opened and their lot redeemed by the artistic activities so set in motion by him. Of his Socialist songs, his lectures (street corner and other) his pamphlets and great teaching works, such as *News from Nowhere,* and *The Dream of John Ball,* among Socialists I need not speak, while the Kelmscott Press embodies his ideal of the re-juvenating of the noble art of printing and the restoration to us of our early English masters in a fair and fitting form. His architectural fights against Vandalism in church and hall and house bear witness, no less than his sallies into the troubled field of Socialist agitation, to the indomitable energy and restless activity of his temper. True it is, as one of his friends writes of him in a London weekly that he 'crammed the joyous labour of three life-times into sixty years and a half to benefit his humbler fellow-craftsmen.'

Of personal and characteristic reminiscences many rise unbidden before my mind: as of a pleasant boat-race party in his house by Thames-side some ten years ago, and of him jogging round the guest-table with a big black bottle under each arm and proving with merry assurance in the intervals of his hospitality that 'a sheep was a vegetable;' or of sitting far on into the night with him, questioning of the struggle to come, and hearing him tell of the rivers of blood which, as he then thought, must run in the streets before yet the shame of England could be removed; or of his standing broad-side, dogged and unmoved, shaking his great mane, with Annie Besant by his side, dealing such home-thrusts into our evil marriage system and the prostitution of womanhood to-day, both in it and outside, as made his hearers, stung with the very shame and bitterness of it, howl and shake fists at him from every corner of the hall; or of the strange days of the first Socialist mission to Oxford, when that giant fell among pigmies, and of that unwonted figure stamping about the pavement in unmeasured vituperation and unmitigated wrath, regardless of consequences, with my brother and two others as his bodyguard, before some more than ordinary barbaric specimen of modern academic architecture; or of his more peaceable later days in his home circle or in the hall in which he bade the comrades assemble week after week to speak and work for Socialism, when he drew so wonderfully near to his own early conceived ideal, the embodiment indeed of his religion and simple philosophy of life, the standing marvel of which was that it remained so
simple among so great complexities and so complete a grasp of human
nature.

The calm wise heart that knoweth how to rest,
The man too kind to snatch out at the best,
Since he is part of all, each being a part,
Beloved alike of his wide-loving heart.

And so it was with him—great, simple, sound and sturdy; and by the
greatest and simplest in whatever corner or by-way of life, most surely
and readily to be understood; so that friends he had in all spheres and
by none can be forgotten.

Strife he had to deal with, at home and abroad, but therein he was
not quelled, till he fell asleep fair and softly when the world had no
more of deeds for him to do. And few foes he left behind to hate him.

And we carry his words on with us, for

The hope of every nation is the banner that we bear,
And the world is marching on.

NOTE

This obituary appeared in the *The Labour Chronicle: A Monthly
Magazine of Socialism and Trade-Unionism*, Vol. III, No. 29, 2
November 1896, pp. 172–74. *The Labour Chronicle* appeared in the
Liverpool district, and was first published by the Liverpool Fabian
Society. At the time of this obituary it was being published jointly by
the Liverpool Fabians and the Independent Labour Party.

Amy Constance Morant (1864–?) was born and brought up in
Hampstead, London, and was the sister of Sir Robert Laurie Morant
(1863–1920), civil servant and education reformist. In the 1891 census
her profession is listed as ‘Literary’ and she published *Carina Songs
and others* in 1896. She translated Paul Leroy-Beaulieu’s *The Modern
State in Relation to Society and the Individual* (1891) and Albert
Schaefle’s *The Impossibility of Social Democracy* (1892), and edited
Schaefle’s *The Theory and Policy of Labour Protection* (1893). She also
published a number of pamphlets in 1895 on the subjects of trades
unions, liberalism and Keir Hardie. As is clear from the obituary, she met Morris, and was a member of the Hammersmith branch of the Independent Labour Party and the Fabians.

Thanks to John Purvis, of Stamford, Lincs., for sending the obituary and for his stalwart efforts in trying to track down the elusive Amy. Thanks too to Ruth Livesey, Dept. of English, Royal Holloway, Egham.