

# Studying the Past, Envisioning the Future

## Teaching History via William Morris's *News from Nowhere*

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While teaching an upper-division literature course entitled 'The Self in British Literature and Life' which focused on utopias, I was surprised to find that students engaged well with William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890). The class was composed of twenty English majors at a small, private university in South Texas. (I should note here that this class was exceptional, both in personality and intellect, and that though much of what follows did happen in class, some of it also comes from my reflection on what is possible.) Most of my surprise arose from the fact that students were willing to believe Morris's vision of a communist world when they had thoroughly rejected Thomas More's version of utopia and Francis Bacon's scientific worldview. The students struggled with the earlier versions of utopia and were unwilling to accept that society could share its wealth until they read Morris. I believe this was so because of both the number and quality of the rules for utopia in More and Bacon (for example, household size is regulated by number rather than any sense of family in *Utopia*) and because Morris's novel works to create a utopia that is alternately Edenic and realistic both in its locations

and in its ideas. It is, I would suggest, the blending of fantasy and reality that attracts students to this novel and ultimately allows them to learn about Morris's time, his view of the past, and his sense of possibilities for the future. Morris is able to create an aesthetic sensibility about history that is far more attractive to students than the 'dry as dust' history they usually associate with the subject.

*News from Nowhere* also 'works' for college-aged students because of its transitional nature in that the novel was written at the fin de siècle. The novel is transitional also in the sense that critics recognise it both for looking backward to the Middle Ages in its structure (for example, Krishan Kumar compares the novel to pilgrimage literature such as *Pilgrim's Progress* and *The Canterbury Tales*) and for looking forward as a version of post-revolution time when everyone is living a socialist dream. So while students can learn something about history as Morris and his contemporaries conceived of earlier periods, they also become aware of the social and political topics that had value at the end of the nineteenth century.

Given all of these attractions, the novel works to teach students about history because Morris builds the study of history into the novel in several ways giving students something and someone to identify with especially in the character of Guest, the narrator. Morris creates comparisons between the present of this utopian society with the recent past, with the nineteenth century, and with the Middle Ages. Additionally, history and the study of history are discussed as topics by the novel. In trying to figure out this utopia's view of education, Guest asks about the study of history. Dick informs him that 'I have heard my great-grandfather say that it is mostly in periods of turmoil and strife and confusion that people care much about history'.<sup>1</sup> The sense is that this new time has no worries and therefore no need to learn history – there is no fear of repeating past mistakes or any need for collective memory. Yet some history books do exist, and are filled with stories of 'many people who were hereditarily afflicted with a disease called Idleness, because they were the direct descendants of those who in bad times used to force other people to

work for them – the people, you know, who are called slave-holders or employers of labour in the history books' (34). This concept of work life is unbelievable in the new present where work is considered pleasure, and money is immaterial. Still, there are people like the great-grandfather, old Hammond, who study history and tell stories. This sense of history as storytelling may be another factor in attracting students to the novel. I teach at a Hispanic Serving Institution, meaning that our population is over sixty percent Hispanic, and one of the elements of my students' culture is the value placed on storytelling for passing along cultural ideals.

Of the few historians remaining, old Hammond is figured as an important bridge between this new present and William Guest's time. Hammond still haunts the British Museum, one of the museums that remain from former times as reminders of a previous material culture. Dick tells Guest that 'my kinsman is too old to do much work in the Museum, where he was a custodian of the books for many years; but he still lives here a good deal; indeed I think ... he looks upon himself as a part of the books, or the books a part of him, I don't know which' (45). As it turns out in this new present reading and being occupied with books are not positive attributes, but eccentric ones. In class, we discussed the idea of reading as eccentric and the work of reading when I presented ideas from Stephen Arata's article 'On Not Paying Attention'. The students were intrigued by Arata's discussion of the states of consciousness that factory workers exhibit from the repetitive action of their work and how that might relate to reading.<sup>2</sup> In Morris's utopia the work of reading is not valorised because reading is not seen as work. Alternately, readers could understand this comment on books to mean that Hammond is a relic, a part of the history that is becoming increasingly irrelevant. None the less, Hammond is a resource as he knows 'more of all that has happened within the last two hundred years than anybody else does' (47), and his knowledge of history is necessary for our narrator, Guest, to feel comfortable in this new world. In fact as readers, we need Hammond's comparative history lesson to understand fully the world within the

utopia as well as our own.

The study or presence of history in *Nowhere* is difficult to imagine because this new place seems to eliminate the possibility of nationalism, though some racial or ethnic or cultural distinctions still remain. Evidence of these distinctions is revealed in the fact that everyone assumes that the Guest is from another place and is a stranger in distance rather than time. We find the discussion of nationalism in the context of the National Gallery when Dick cannot imagine what the name refers to: 'I have sometimes puzzled as to what the name means: anyhow, nowadays wherever there is a place where pictures are kept as curiosities permanently it is called a National Gallery' (39). Without this sense of nationalism, history seems to have been neglected; or, Morris's commentary on history is that it is a celebration of nationalist ideals, ideals that are not necessary in a communist society. This is another way in which my students connected with the novel, especially as the Iraq War continued through the semester we met. While many of my students are politically active, one found it necessary to miss class to attend peace protests where she encountered many counter-protesters who questioned her nationalism. Matthew Beaumont argues that the sense of history in *Nowhere* diverges because it 'is not made in the macrological events of an evolving civilisation but in the micrological processes of daily life'.<sup>3</sup> And for Morris, daily life isn't celebrated via books or museums but in the experience of living.

The study of the past often carries negative connotations in *Nowhere*. After Guest and Hammond have been talking about the civil war that led to this new present, Dick rejoins them and complains that 'something or another troubles me, and I feel as if something untoward were going to happen. You have been talking of past miseries to the guest, and have been living in past unhappy times, and it is in the air all around us, and makes us feel as if we were longing for something that we cannot have' (123). The discussion of history lingers in the room and feels superstitious in Dick's estimation, in part because it creates a feeling of reminiscence or desire – one of the emotions nearly missing from

utopian society but present in Nowhere. In 'A Pilgrimage of Hope' Krishan Kumar argues that Morris's utopia is 'characterised by a sense of intense longing, a highly personalised desire that emerges in the form of an eroticism that suffuses the entire account of the new society'.<sup>4</sup> Still, while personal or physical desire remains, material desire has been eliminated. In her analysis of the novel as a utopia Ruth Kinna suggests that the novel is about 'the education of desire', a phrase she connects to arguments made by E. P. Thompson, G. D. H. Cole, and Miguel Abensour.<sup>5</sup> Our students can also identify with the need for the 'education of desire' given that they live in a society where instant gratification is taken for granted. Our students learn about a world that revels in rest when they read *News from Nowhere*, a concept that many people can't stop text-messaging long enough to appreciate.

In addition to exploring the sense and presence of history in the novel, Morris also studies the past, particularly the Middle Ages. Morris first introduces us to this past through costume. His concern with clothing shows the difference between Guest's time in history, the Middle Ages, and the time that Guest is visiting. The main variance between these time periods is in the cultural values of artistic taste. Guest's first impression of Dick is that 'his dress was not like any modern work-a-day clothes I had seen, but would have served very well as a costume for a picture of fourteenth century life: it was of dark blue cloth, simple enough, but of fine web, and without stain on it' (5). This appreciation of the clothing is partly based on its quality and tastefulness – Guest's entire perception of this strange world is described through terms of artistic impression. When he meets the women in the guest house, he compares them with women from his own late-nineteenth-century era:

As to their dress, which of course I took note of, I should say that they were decently veiled with drapery, and not bundled up with millinery; that they were clothed like women, not upholstered like arm-chairs, as most women of our time are. In short, their dress was somewhat between that of the ancient classical

costume and the simpler forms of the fourteenth century garments, though it was clearly not an imitation of either. (11)

Not only do we learn something about the attractiveness of the situation Guest finds himself in, but we also receive a specific impression of what a transformed notion of dress might be for women (which also relates to the late-nineteenth-century movement for dress reform). This multi-level comparison teaches students about the place of art as well as society's relationship to simplicity. Given that my students are very much a part of a visual culture and watch the news more than read it, Morris's use of visual aesthetics in the novel is easy for twenty-first century students to understand. This aesthetic awareness provides students with a 'real' sense of these time periods by giving them a sense of history.

In fact, this aesthetic sense of the Middle Ages carries over from clothing to both architecture and the relationship with Nature that is in evidence in *Nowhere*. In describing the villages of this new present, nineteenth-century paintings of villages are imagined as the counterpoint:

our villages are something like the best of such places, with the church or mote-house of the neighbours for their chief building. Only note that there are no tokens of poverty about them: no tumble-down picturesque; which, to tell you the truth, the artist usually availed himself of to veil his incapacity for drawing architecture. Such things do not please us, even when they indicate no misery. Like the mediævals, we like everything trim and clean, and orderly and bright; as people always do when they have any sense of architectural power; because then they know that they can have what they want, and they won't stand any nonsense from Nature in their dealings with her. (65)

This aesthetic sense drawn from the Middle Ages of building design and the relationship between Nature and human creation seems to be a return to simplicity. While offering an aesthetic impression, this quotation also reveals to readers something of the economic inequality that belonged to the pre-revolution era.

This simplicity is also picked up in the political life of the new present when referring to how democracy is working now. In describing the changes in government, Hammond describes how community decisions are made: 'at the next ordinary meeting of the neighbours, or Mote, as we call it, according to the ancient tongue of the times before bureaucracy, a neighbour proposes [a] change, and of course if everybody agrees, there is an end of the discussion' (79). So while the government of the Middle Ages is not idealised, the language of that period certainly is. Importantly, the Middle Ages is represented as an era before bureaucracy, hence a simpler time; however, what is perhaps overlooked in such an idealisation is the lack of freedom for all (were peasant workers truly free under the feudal system?) and the centralised wealth of the period.

This romanticised, although occasionally criticised, version of the Middle Ages continues through the novel. If the mediæval period is more attractive than the nineteenth century, none the less the present time of Nowhere is clearly the most attractive option of all. Almost immediately upon waking up in this strange future, Guest begins to describe the differences between his own era and the changed world in which he finds himself. One of the first things he notices is how clear the water of the Thames is. The salmon have returned to the river and 'the soap-works with their smoke-vomiting chimneys were gone; the engineer's works gone; the leadworks gone; and no sound of riveting and hammering came down with the west wind from Thorneycraft's' (6). The most significant change in the future is the renewed environment. As Guest and Ellen travel up the river, she says, 'don't you find it difficult to imagine the times when this little pretty country was treated by its folk as if it had been an ugly characterless waste, with no delicate beauty to be guarded, with no heed taken of the ever fresh pleasure of the recurring seasons, and changeful weather, and diverse quality of the soil, and so forth? How could people be so cruel to themselves?' (171). As readers know, it is not difficult for Guest to imagine. However, in this age of global warming, it may be difficult for students to imagine the future as a return to simplicity in terms of valuing the natural world.

The next surprise for Guest is that money has become obsolete. When he tries to pay Dick for the boat ride, Dick suggests that ‘your coins, they are curious, but not very old; they seem to be all of the reign of Victoria; you might have given them to some scantily-furnished museum. Ours have enough of such coins’ (8). Not only is money no longer used, but it had been so plentiful during the nineteenth century that the museums have enough of that kind of thing and wouldn’t be interested in acquiring more. This criticism of the material culture of the nineteenth century by comparison to this new present continues throughout the novel as Guest comes to understand the transformed and renewed culture of Nowhere.

Morris’s reflection on his own present in the novel provides a direct critique of not only the current moment in history but also a concern about the nineteenth-century media version of the present that may become history. Students can understand these concerns given their access to twenty-four-hour news channels which both report and commentate on events without any time delay. Guest reflects after only his first day in Nowhere that ‘I smiled faintly to think how the nineteenth century, of which such big words have been said, counted for nothing in the memory of this man [Dick], who read Shakespeare and had not forgotten the Middle Ages’ (43). Guest’s ability to negotiate his new present is hindered by his nineteenth-century epistemology. He is only able to overcome this when he meets Hammond in the British Museum.

After several hours of conversation with Hammond, Guest is better able to understand this new present, as well as the historical reality of the nineteenth century. One of his many questions is about whether there has been a change in population because London is so much less crowded. Hammond responds that ‘the population is pretty much the same as it was at the end of the nineteenth century; we have spread it, that is all. Of course, also, we have helped to populate other countries – where we were wanted and were called for’ (65). With this last suggestion, Morris is interestingly picking up nineteenth-century debates about what to do with the expanding population, many of whom

were paid to move to Australia or the United States. It is not mentioned here, but the problem of the 'old maid' which found much discussion in English newspapers is also addressed in that there is no gender imbalance in this new present.

In addition to this question about population that hints at popular, if not political, discussions from the nineteenth century, Guest also asks more directly about politics in *Nowhere*. Hammond characterises nineteenth-century politics in his response: 'I do say that differences of opinion about real solid things need not, and with us do not, crystallise people into parties permanently hostile to one another, with different theories as to the build of the universe and the progress of time. Isn't that what politics used to mean?' (77). Without the necessity for party politics that had stagnated social and political change in the nineteenth century, politics has come to mean the discussion of ideas and the decisions to be made for and about society and is no longer about party ideals. The most significant political change, of course, is that communism has been achieved. With regard to nineteenth-century views of communism, Hammond says, 'A terrible tyranny our Communism, is it not? Folk used often to be warned against this very unhappiness in times past, when for every well-fed, contented person you saw a thousand miserable starvelings. Whereas for us, we grow fat and well-liking on the tyranny; a tyranny, to say the truth, not to be made visible under any microscope I know' (81). The change in sentiment about communism comes after several years of civil strife that led to this new system: it took a civil war to moderate the class differences that existed in nineteenth-century England. This is one of the most difficult elements of the text for students because communism will often carry specific, negative connotations for them. While they can grasp the problems with partisan politics, they aren't yet open to the possibilities of communism.

Perhaps the greatest change that accompanied this move to communism is unrelated to politics but speaks to the social and economic ramifications of this shift. Hammond again describes the nineteenth century when he says:

It is clear from all that we hear and read, that in the last age of civilisation men had got into a vicious circle in the matter of production of wares. They had reached a wonderful facility of production, and in order to make the most of that facility they had gradually created (or allowed to grow, rather) a most elaborate system of buying and selling, which has been called the World-Market: and that World-Market, once set a-going, forced them to go on making more and more of these wares, whether they needed them or not. (83)

What was considered progress and growth and called colonisation and industrialisation in the nineteenth century is described by this new historian as a system entirely out of control. Hammond's role as historian in the novel continues to reveal a history that is credible to students of today.

This palatable history culminates in the chapter entitled 'How the change came' when Hammond relates the story of the revolution. His description of the events which led to the change derive from riots that took place in late-nineteenth-century England. Morris uses real history to construct this history for the novel. Krishan Kumar argues that Morris incorporates

elements of 1789, 1830, 1848 and 1871 – the principal revolutions up to Morris's time – and looking ahead to 1917, 1926 (the British General Strike), and even 1933 and 1936. Additionally, one of the only named figures in the whole history of how the change came is Gladstone, who is recalled as 'a notable politician of the nineteenth century, [who] was especially singled out for reprobation in this respect ['mis-timed pedantry and foolish-pentimentality']'.<sup>6</sup>

One other important historical detail that Morris includes in this chapter is the social influence of newspapers. Newspaper delivery and reporting was a vital part of late-nineteenth-century life and in the novel this historical reality is represented accurately in the tale of the revolution.

As the novel progresses and Guest moves past his own preoccupation with the nineteenth century and its differences from

the new present in which he finds himself, the tone changes. In his visit to the Grumbler and his daughter Ellen, the Grumbler describes the nineteenth century in the following terms 'you could see from the same place six quite big and fine houses; and higher up the water, garden joined garden right up to Windsor; and there were big houses in all the gardens. Ah! England was an important place in those days' (142). This nostalgia for the past is not shared by any of the other characters with reference to the nineteenth century and is in part why this character is referred to as the Grumbler.

After all of these experiences and through his interactions with diverse people, Guest finally comes to terms with his own role as a historian in *Nowhere*. He is with Ellen, who alone seems to understand that he is from another time. As they travel up the Thames, he relates a history of the river. He seems to need encouragement in his own process of becoming a historian, and Ellen provides this when she says, 'you might tell me a great deal and make many things clear to me, if you would' (177). He agrees reluctantly, and she follows up with

I think sometimes people are too careless of the history of the past – too apt to leave it in the hands of old learned men like Hammond. Who knows? Happy as we are, times may alter; we may be bitten with some impulse toward change, and many things may seem too wonderful for us to resist, too exciting not to catch at, if we do not know that they are but phases of what has been before; and withal ruinous, deceitful, and sordid. (177)

Ellen acknowledges here that we must study history to keep from repeating it. Matthew Beaumont reads this quote as a criticism of Hammond 'who idealises the past and so opens up the possibility of its return'.<sup>7</sup> However, Ellen's idea is more that all of us need in some ways to be historians so that we are not hearing only part of the story or referring only to experts for our lessons.

It is just after this 'lesson' in the boat that Guest returns to his present in the late nineteenth century. Readers are left to understand that once he can acknowledge the role of history and his place as a historian, his story is complete. It is complete because

there is nothing left for Guest to accomplish. Nonetheless in recognising Guest's relationship to history, students learn their own lessons about history as well. They have learned about life in the Middle Ages (as filtered through a particular Victorian lens) and events related to political unrest in nineteenth-century England. Perhaps most importantly, Morris has taught them to appreciate a holistic sense of history, a history that permeates not just time but all of life. Gregory Ludlow suggests that 'In *News from Nowhere*, Morris stored the personal and professional experiences of a lifetime and the ideals and dreams for a better future. It is this combination of idealism and realism that has led to his continuing popularity'.<sup>8</sup> Students enjoy such a mixture of the ideal and the real as they struggle with this same dynamic as they move into adulthood. Lesley Lawton also argues that 'Morris makes of his utopia essentially a hybrid form, uniting the real with the imaginary in an attempt to persuade and seduce the reader into action in the real world by means of fiction'.<sup>9</sup> My students were seduced in part because service to community is one of their interests. For these students, acting on their ideals is a regular occurrence and finding an author who endorses this participation in active history works with their lived reality. Hopefully then, students will begin to see how their lives are being written into or omitted from the historical record, how current media versions of society could affect history, and why it is necessary for all of us to tell stories both in life and in novels to preserve the multiple histories of which we, and our societies are made.

#### NOTES

- 1 William Morris, *News from Nowhere* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2004), p. 26. Future page references are given in the text.
- 2 Stephen Arata, 'On Not Paying Attention', *Victorian Studies* 46: 2 (2004), pp. 193–205.
- 3 Matthew Beaumont, 'News from Nowhere and the Here and Now: Reification and the Representation of the Present in

- Utopian Fiction', *Victorian Studies* 47: 1 (2004), pp. 33–54; p. 43.
- 4 Krishan Kumar, 'A Pilgrimage of Hope: William Morris's Journey to Utopia', *Utopian Studies* 5: 1 (1994), pp. 89–107; quote from p. 91.
- 5 Ruth Kinna, 'The Relevance of Morris's Utopia', *The European Legacy* 9: 6 (2004), pp. 739–50; quote from p. 742.
- 6 Kumar, p. 98.
- 7 Beaumont, p. 48.
- 8 Gregory Ludlow, 'Imagining the Future: Mercier's *L'An 2440* and Morris's *News from Nowhere*', *Comparative Literature Studies* 29: 1 (1992), pp. 20–38; quote from p. 37.
- 9 Lesley Lawton, 'Lineaments of Ungratified Desire: William Morris's *News from Nowhere* as Utopian Romance', *Anglophonia* 3 (1998), pp. 113–23; quote from p. 114.