The Radfords, William Morris and the Socialist League

Ann MacEwen

In June 1885, the Radfords moved from a top-flat in Brunswick Square to 9 Hammersmith Terrace, and here Ernest became actively involved with William Morris in both the Arts and Crafts movement and the Socialist League. Dollie gave birth to two daughters – Hester, 1887 and Margaret, 1889 – and continued trying to earn money by her pen. Hammersmith Terrace runs parallel to the Thames, not far upstream from Hammersmith Bridge and a five-minute walk from William Morris’s home – Kelmscott House – in Upper Mall. The mid-18th century terrace itself is brick, four-storey and parapeted, unadorned apart from simple porches and the railings to the narrow areas that light the street-side basements. The great attraction of the terrace is that its gardens back onto the Thames and that the houses present their best sides architecturally to this prospect, with long sash-windows offering spectacular views of the river. Inside, number 9 has hardly been altered, and still contains the original fireplaces, doors, architraves, cornices and wainscots, and an elegant staircase that curves up from the entrance hall. It is a moderate-sized house, with a main room on the riverfront side, and a smaller road-front room on each of its four floors and in the basement.

Ernest had mixed feelings about the owner of the house and his family:

We have a Pre-Raphaelite for a landlord—F. G. Stephens to wit. Our relations so far have been purely of a business character. His soaring spirit appears not to prevent him from being ‘keen’ to the verge of unpleasant-business in an affair of shillings. However no doubt he would say the
same of me. He is a perfect gentleman, and his wife wears an amber waistlet. The son, a handsome lad, is a prig, but well mannered and pleasant withal.

The Radfords spent rather little of the next six months in Hammersmith. After settling in, they spent a month in the Terrace leading much the same life as in Brunswick Square, with visits to and from old friends and relations—Comyns, Pinsents, Radford cousins from Westbourne Grove, Dollie’s father and sister, Augustine Birrell, Rowes, William Archer—and in getting to know the Morris circle. The Emery Walkers called, and in August Dollie and Ernest went to hear ‘Mr Shaw’s lecture on “Socialism and Scoundrelism” at Mr. Morris’s studio. It was a very clever discourse’. September found Dollie, Ernest and Maitland aged fourteen months holidaying in Devon, first on Dartmoor near Widecombe-in-the-Moor with William Thompson and his brother at Natworthy Manor, and then with the Radford relations in Plymouth. Pages of the diary are filled with doggerel lines by Dollie and William about the days on Dartmoor, which capture beautifully the feeling of release from London preoccupations—socialist ones for Ernest—and the fun and laughter of a family holiday with old friends, as an excerpt shows:

We are far from the bustle of London,
The papers, the Scheus and the Shaws;
The Socialist, teacher and talker,
Are forgotten and faded away
From the mind that, last week, pondered over
Their words through the whole of the day.

Politics was never far from Ernest’s mind at this time: ‘I have seen a great many English citizens in the course of the last twelve weeks and have taken a view of politics from all sides. These last have run high throughout the Elections’. The general election of November 1885 had taken place against a background of unrest over the ‘Land’ question, the proposal for Home Rule in Ireland, and the mass misery of the Great Depression as the British monopoly in world markets ended, and ruin was spelt for the British farmer. The killing of General Gordon at the siege of Khartoum at the beginning of the year had already undermined confidence in Glad-
stone's second ministry. 'Today we hear the terrible news from Khartoum' recorded Dollie on 5 February, no doubt in response to lurid descriptions of the siege in the press. But Ernest would have shed no tears for Gordon or the loss of Khartoum. He would have explained to Dollie why it was the Socialist League was opposed to Britain’s imperial conquest in East Africa, and was campaigning against a ‘wicked and unjust’ war in the Sudan. Even Dollie’s father, who was no socialist, and supported Gladstone, said that Gordon got no more than he deserved at Khartoum despite being held up as a hero. He, however, blamed Gordon for disobeying orders, not for being engaged in a colonial war.

Such were the issues which must have inspired political debate in Scarborough during that autumn of 1885. Even though the Liberal government had legislated to ameliorate conditions in Ireland, and at home had extended the franchise to rural workers, the prime minister’s espousal of Irish Home Rule split his party, and Gladstone was defeated at the polls in the general election. The Conservatives did not obtain a clear majority however, thanks to the votes of the newly enfranchised farm workers, who supported the Liberal cause. There was a hung parliament until the summer of 1886, when another election saw a working Tory majority under Lord Salisbury. Whilst Ernest was surveying the political scene from Yorkshire during this 1885 election, the Socialist League for its part was urging people not to vote at all. It kept up this anti-parliamentary stance until its collapse in 1890, and its final demise in 1891.

Early in January 1886, Ernest began his new term of art-lecturing based on London to good audiences, and joined the Hammersmith Branch of the Socialist League. The Radfords attended the ‘At Home’ of the branch on the 6th February, as Dollie describes:

We went round to Mr. Morris' and aided in putting the room in order—then we came home and Connie [Black] and Mr Furnivall dined with us. Gracie [Black], Hume Pinsent, and Miss Birrell and her sister joined us and we went in a mighty body to the 'At Home'. It was a very informal meeting—music and recitations. Miss Morris sang to her guitar, and looked very beautiful. Ernest recited 'Hiawatha' and 'The Cad' with much success. I played 'Chaeone' and sang 'Little Binks' with moderate success. A gentleman recited half of 'The Revenge' and then broke
down, another gentleman sang a song inciting the proletariat to revolt, and so on. A very young socialist babe was present. I wish Mr. Morris were less noisy, his presence is so boisterous I feel its overpowering. Introduced to Mr. and Mrs. Walter Crane. Walter Crane is a member of the League and sent some of his pictures to adorn the walls. We are members of the League too and we sent our cups and silver spoons! Connie and Gracie [Black] stayed all night. In bed very late—1.30—Mr. Shaw was at the 'At Home', but did not perform.5

It seems from this entry that Dollie had joined the League; she was certainly a member by the summer, for she appears with Ernest in a photograph of the League's garden party at Kelmscott House, the Morris's home.6

Early in February, Dollie records an event which seems to have propelled Ernest into the inner counsels of the League: 'Great panic, and placards of the "Rioters"', she wrote. This is a reference to what has become known as 'Black Monday'—8 February 1886. A Tory-backed meeting of the workless in Trafalgar Square had been taken over by the Social Democratic Federation (S.D.F.) and addressed by its leaders, who then marched at the head of eight to ten thousand people to Hyde Park for a socialist rally. They started off down Pall Mall, the heart of London's clubland, where they were jeered at by the clubmen, and pelted by their servants. The marchers responded by lobbing stones and metal bars through club windows, and then running riot to loot shops in Piccadilly and later Oxford Street.7 The effect of the 'riot' was the public panic Dollie noted in her diary two days after the event. The wave of fear that gripped London did not however deter the Radfords from going that Wednesday evening to see the pantomime 'Aladdin' at Drury Lane, although it had caused Hammersmith traders to put up their shutters on police advice.

The following Sunday, 14 February, a League committee meeting was called to consider the aftermath of 'Black Monday':

Ernest went to the private business of the 'League'. He has drawn up a very good motion in connection with 'last Monday's riots', but the League has not considered it so far.

There would have been plenty to discuss at the meeting: how far the
‘riots’ had revolutionary significance, the absence of the police who could easily have quelled the disorder at its outset, the League’s relations with the S.D.F., and its own role in this period of massive discontent among working people. Its leaders had stood aside from the S.D.F.’s involvement in the Trafalgar Square meeting, in line with their conviction that the League’s priority was to ‘make Socialists’ who could lead a future mass movement in the overthrow of capitalism. They saw agitations to ameliorate present conditions, which the S.D.F. sought to lead, and participation in parliamentary elections, as deterents to the revolutionary change without which they believed there could be no real improvement in the lives of working people. But, despite the poor relations between the two bodies, the Council of the League expressed sympathy with the S.D.F. members facing prosecution after the ‘riots’, and Morris himself went bail for several of them.

Within the League itself there were serious divisions of opinion which two years later were to split it apart. There was the ‘antiparliamentary’ question – for not all members were purist about this or about the League’s detachment from the growing mass movement among unskilled workers and the campaign to create a socialist Labour Party. Ernest Radford was to find himself at the heart of these controversies the following year.

The League’s membership at this time was probably around six to seven hundred, and there were perhaps 2,500 regular readers of Commonweal, its journal. Although the leadership lacked unity, Commonweal, and its outdoor and other propaganda meetings, in which William Morris played a leading part, were influential. But its Council’s neutral attitude whenever workers were forced into militant action lost it support, whilst its opposition to the reformism and opportunism embraced by Hyndman and the S.D.F., opened the door to the growing anarchist section within the League’s ranks.

Morris himself belonged to the ‘anti-parliamentary’ group within the League, but by 1887 he could see that if Leaguers were not to be left behind in a situation of growing militancy among unskilled workers, it must sooner or later adopt a more flexible attitude to industrial and parliamentary action. Some League members, however, notably young John Mahon, an engineer, socialist agitator and ‘parliamentarian’, were moving too fast for Morris. The group was already advocating the amal-
gamation of the various socialist bodies, and trying to work out the basis of a socialist Labour Party which would put up worker candidates for parliament. Mahon himself was striving to set up a Socialist Federation in the north of England, where industrial unrest among miners and iron-workers was acute. Eleanor and Edward Marx-Aveling were involved in converting the Radical Clubs in the east end of London to socialism, and were urging them to cut loose from the Liberal Party and form a socialist working men's party. Such was the divide in the League when Ernest took the chair at its Third Annual Conference on May 29, 1887.

What would have been Ernest’s credentials for this exacting role? As a barrister, debater and lecturer, he was a practised public speaker and familiar with the rituals of formal meetings; and as someone on terms of personal friendship with people in both the anti-parliamentary and the parliamentary camps, he would have been trusted to hold the balance fairly at a conference where feelings were bound to run high. Just as in his relationship with Karl Marx and his daughter Eleanor, the bonds that drew Ernest to William Morris and his daughter May were as much cultural as political; with the Marxes there was the shared interest in the poet Heine, in Shakespeare, and in amateur theatricals. Similarly, William Morris, who had studied architecture, and was an acclaimed poet and artist, as well as a consummate craftsman, must have found much besides socialism in common with the young Ernest, who had abandoned law for the arts. And May Morris shared with Dollie and Ernest a love of amateur theatricals.

The parliamentary issue dominated the 1887 Conference. Morris’s resolution from the Hammersmith branch proposed that discussion on it be deferred for a year, but this he withdrew when it did not meet with unanimous approval. A resolution from Mahon on the parliamentary side was countered by Morris with an uncompromising anti-parliamentary amendment which, after prolonged discussion and controversy over the validity of some of the votes cast, was carried by seventeen votes to eleven. Defeated in the voting, the parliamentary group, which included the Avelings, declined to stand for the Council. The day after the Conference, the group met in private, with Aveling in the chair, and agreed that the ‘parliamentary’ doctrine should be spread in London and the north through bodies affiliated to the League, and then that an extraordinary
congress should be called to overthrow the conference decision – a factionalist tactic which came to nothing in the end.10

At the beginning of June, Dollie and her two children (Maitland, nearly three years old, and Hester, just four months) went on holiday to the Radford family home in Plymouth, where Ernest was to join them towards the end of the month. From their letters to each other while she was away, and from other sources, it is clear that Ernest was committed to the cause of socialist unity, but that he wanted to steer clear of the post-Conference combat within the League. He told Dollie, soon after her arrival, that he had just seen the Avelings, but had committed himself to nothing. This suggests that Eleanor and Edward had wanted him to join the ‘parliamentary’ faction but that Ernest had declined to be drawn in. He went on to say, ‘I am gradually interviewing all the heads of the Political Socialists’.

This would have been part of Mahon’s plan for unofficial discussions among selected individuals from different sections of the Socialist movement, of whom Ernest was one, and Henry Hyde Champion of the Fabian Society another; these private talks were intended to lead on to proposals for the amalgamation of the various socialist organisations. A few days after his non-committal exchange with the Avelings, Ernest had another discussion with Edward Aveling, who was all set to be a leader in the campaign for unity. It ended in a political row which left Ernest with serious reservations about how far he could work with Aveling in the movement, as he related to Dollie on 9 June:

I have been a great deal in Socialist Councils of late, and have got into a great row with Aveling which no doubt will blow off. I hope it will. Then things will be as before with the difference that I shall have clearly defined the limits of my political relations with him.

Dollie’s reply shows that this was not the first eruption between the two men, and that the tension between them distressed Eleanor:

Do not bother a bit about Aveling: he will like you much better in the end, and it would have been impossible to keep up an intercourse without that frankness. It only matters for Eleanor’s sake, and she must understand perfectly, and feel really easier and freer now she has not to
stand up between you and him, as it were, constantly.

The Radfords' relationship with Eleanor and Edward Marx-Aveling as a couple was not easy. Like so many others, Dollie and Ernest felt affection and admiration for Eleanor but distrusted Edward, and tolerated him only for her sake. We do not know what the 'great row' was about, but a fragment of a letter written by Ernest to Mahon a day or two after it happened suggests that Aveling was maligning Ernest in some way and, in Ernest's words, 'would make it crooked if he could. What he says about my having obtained, or having caused to obtain, any special information from him is the merest bunkum and blather'.

In the same letter, Ernest declared himself in favour of Mahon's ideas for a socialist Labour Party:

I think your general idea as sketched is very good. I shall be glad to have a talk with Champion soon. If such a party is formed I shall certainly wish to join it. But please do not bring me into prominence which I have as yet done nothing to deserve. I believe it important that known workers should take the lead.

Champion, an ex-member of the S.D.F., was prominent among a group in the Fabian Society who were also trying to bring together all the socialist organisations at this time. He put forward a plan to this end to a private meeting with representatives of the Socialist League and the Fabians. Perhaps this was the Fabian meeting that Dollie hoped in her letter of 7 June that Ernest was going to chair:

I hope you are taking the chair to-night: it is a very good role I think that of the only chairman: a very necessary and important one in this matter. Distinguish yourself again. I wish I could hear Mrs Besant speak. Will she allude to your former correspondence I wonder!

In July, Mahon himself took exception to working with Aveling in the socialist movement. He refused to state the reasons, but the two men had often been at personal and political loggerheads. After meetings with Champion and others who would have included Ernest, Mahon returned to the north to work independently as an agitator and organiser for the unity cause. The Avelings and the 'parliamentarian' Bloomsbury
branch, having failed in their bid to overturn the Conference decision, directed their attention to the new movement to organise unskilled workers of east London into trade unions, and were actively involved in the successful fights of the Gasworkers and the Dockers for shorter hours and higher wages, both of which were achieved in 1889. They were also engaged in the European effort to form a Second Workers’ International which bore fruit in 1889, the First International having disintegrated in 1872 after the fall of the Paris Commune. The Aveling’s goal was the formation of a mass socialist Labour Party recruited from the unions and with the backing of a new Marxist International. Mahon, in contact with the trade unionist and socialist Tom Mann in the north, joined in union agitations for the eight-hour day and a living wage. As individual socialists penetrated the mass movement, and others became involved at the international level, the Socialist League continued to stand aside from the new union militancy, and before long ceased as an organisation to be a force in the fight for a socialist Labour Party.

Early in September, Ernest was on a visit to William Morris at Kelmscott Manor, the Elizabethan house Morris rented on the upper Thames. From there, he wrote a line to his brother George saying ‘this is a jolly old place down here. Morris is capital company in the country.’ But, for Dollie, the world had changed from the beautiful place it had been at Trenley Villa earlier in the summer; after a month or so back in Hammersmith she was tired and depressed. The day after Ernest’s departure she wrote an apologetic letter to him.

The burden of Dollie’s _cri de coeur_ was surely her fear that whilst she loved Ernest deeply, she did not deserve his love because of her frailties and inadequacies. She felt hopeless about what she saw as her inability to share in his life of the mind, and her failure to help him towards a leading role in redressing the wrongs of the world. By not writing of his commitment to socialism and work in the Socialist League, it seems she did not see these as part of fulfilling her altruistic ambitions for him. There may also have been aspects of League socialism and its achievements about which she had doubts at this time, feeling that it stood in the way of realising her personal dream of working with Ernest for a better world – the theories of class struggle, for example, and of revolutionary change.

Dollie wrote a Christmas letter to Eleanor Marx from Plymouth, no
doubt as a token of love after a year during which they had not seen much of one another, and political and personal differences between Ernest and Aveling had put a strain on relationships. Eleanor replied:

My dear Dollie,
Certainly no letter has been more welcome to me this Christmas time than yours. It is pleasant to know you have thought of me — it is so hard to give up old friends. And you are a very old friend, Dollie, one of the few who knew my Father and Mother well and therefore doubly dear to me ... I envy Edward and you being in Devonshire. Here it has been terribly cold for the last two days, and in the streets here one sees so many starving people — people with hunger in every line of their faces — that one cannot but be wretched. Have you heard of the Trafalgar Square business?¹³ No one who has not seen the police can, however, have the faintest conception of how disgracefully they behaved. Have you been writing at all lately? We as usual are very hard at work, and what with constant lecturing at all the Radical Clubs (not to mention Socialist ones) and our own work we hardly ever seem to have a spare moment. I send you a little book of ours on the working class movement in America.¹⁴

Goodbye, my dear, dear Dollie. May all good be with you in this New Year and in all years.
Your loving old friend, Tussy.

The letter tells us much about Eleanor herself, and her relationship with Dollie. It illustrates the two sides of Eleanor's passionate personality: the public and political inspired by her father's revolutionary cause, and the private one based initially on loving family relationships. In her Introduction to The Daughters of Karl Marx, Sheila Rowbotham suggests that Eleanor never resolved the problem of finding a balance between the brilliant and hard-headed Socialist writer, speaker and organiser, and the private person who wrote intimately to her sister with gentle enquiries about family, pets and the children's health.¹⁵

In calling Dollie 'a very old friend' in her 1887 letter, Eleanor was remembering the time, probably beginning during the late 1870s, when Dollie, in her early twenties, became virtually a member of the Marx household. With literary and theatrical interests in common, she was part of the personal and family life that meant so much to Eleanor.
Three years Eleanor’s junior, Dollie became like a younger sister, sharing in the tribulations as well as the pleasures of Marx family life. She helped care for Mrs Marx during her terminal illness in 1881, and was painfully involved in Eleanor’s nervous breakdown at the beginning of 1882. She knew of the tensions which had led to Eleanor’s neurotic condition—the inner struggle between commitment to her much-loved father’s cause, and his opposition to her engagement to Lissagaray, the strain of nursing her parents, and her desire for personal freedom. Dollie’s capacity for caring and hunger for affection had found in Eleanor a reciprocal need to give and receive the kind of two-way love and identity of interests she associated with her parental home, in spite of the tensions there. She had hoped to find such emotional security in her relationship with Aveling, but within a year, had discovered that his constancy did not match her own. It was in this context that Dollie was ‘doubly dear’ to Eleanor.

Dollie’s transformation into wife and mother seems not to have diminished Eleanor’s affection, even if their ways of life were now so different and they were separated by distance—Hammersmith was a long haul from Chancery Lane—as well as by political differences and the underlying animosity and tension between Aveling and Ernest. As her letter describes, Eleanor was being very active politically, and was still required to earn a living by devilling for others at the British Museum and by teaching. The ‘little book’ she sent Dollie about the working class movement in America was an account of a political tour of the United States she and Aveling had made in the autumn of 1886 (see note 14, supra).

Nothing, however, can better highlight the contrast in the ways of life of the two old friends at the end of 1887, than the events in Trafalgar Square on 13 November, which Eleanor experienced at first hand and commented on to Dollie. This was ‘Bloody Sunday’, when, in defiance of a ban on meetings, about fifteen thousand people converged on the Square to protest against repression in Ireland and to assert the right of free speech. Processions were broken up by police charges of the utmost brutality, backed up by soldiery, before the marchers even reached the Square. Two hundred people were taken to hospital; two sustained fatal injuries. William Morris, George Bernard Shaw, Annie Besant and the Avelings had joined a contingent some six thousand strong at Clerkenwell Green, which, as it entered St Martin’s Lane, was attacked by the police.
The marchers scattered, some making off, and others (including Morris, Shaw, Annie and Eleanor) managing to force their way into the Square where they were battered again.

Eleanor spared Dollie the searing description she wrote of the débacle to her sister Laura: how it was no joke to be knocked down by a brute of a policeman, how men and women were pushed under the horses’ hooves by the police, how she shouted herself hoarse calling on men to stand and fight, and how sickening it was to see them run.17 In the view of Yvonne Kapp, what Eleanor learned from ‘Bloody Sunday’ was that the working class had not yet enough experience of struggle, but that it should continue confrontational tactics.18 Morris drew the conclusion that working people had not yet enough education or organisation to engage in struggle. According to Edward Thompson, ‘Bloody Sunday’, and a smaller confrontation in the Square a week later, when a man in the street called Alfred Linnell was mortally injured by the police, showed to Morris not so much the weakness of the people, as the true face of reaction.19 He remained firm in his conviction that revolutionary change was necessary, but now believed he would not see it in his lifetime. He had also to come to terms with both the turn towards Fabianism and gradualism, as disillusion with confrontational tactics spread, and, at the other extreme, the strengthening of the anarchist group within the League.

Ernest Radford was once again elected unanimously to the Chair for the 1888 Annual Conference of the League. The dispute between pro- and anti-parliamentarians followed the same lines as in 1887, with a resolution from the Bloomsbury branch calling on the Conference to bring together all socialist bodies to discuss federation, a course to which Morris was still implacably opposed. Although he was depressed at the continuing dispute within the League, a diary entry by Ernest suggests that Morris was reasonably relaxed the day before the Conference:

Saturday May 19th. Called on Morris to talk about taking the Chair at the Conference of the Socialist League, as last year. Talked of many things. Morris gave me two books.

What were the ‘many things’ they talked of? The embittered state of the League’s affairs would certainly have been one. But perhaps both men would have been glad to turn their minds from the depressing prospect of
the Conference next day and to talk of pleasanter things: maybe of Ernest’s appointment the previous month as secretary of the newly-formed Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society and of the preparations for its first exhibition; maybe of literature and poetry; and perhaps the two books Morris gave Ernest that day were copies of his own works.

The conference was gruelling. Discussion continued for nearly twelve hours, at the end of which the Bloomsbury resolution on federation was rejected by a large majority. The Hammersmith Branch had urged ‘cordial co-operation’ with other socialist organisations, but the split was beyond healing. Eleanor, Aveling and other ‘parliamentarians’ refused to stand for election, with the result that a Council of the League with a pronounced anarchist wing was elected to take over. The intransigent Bloomsbury Branch had been threatened with exclusion from the League at the Conference and a week later it was suspended; shortly after, the independent Bloomsbury Socialist Society was formed.\(^{20}\)

Ernest Radford’s brief diary entry for the Conference day gives no details of the proceedings, which must have been extremely taxing for the Chair. He simply records the hours it all took, Dollie’s appearance at the Hall with an unofficial visitor, and their supper at the Morris’s that evening. He gives a fuller account of the day after the Conference, Whit Monday, when Morris and his daughter Jenny, the Radfords, Emery Walker and his daughter Dolly, and Bruce Glasier, who was a delegate from Glasgow, went on a carefree outing:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Sunday May 20th. Conference of Socialist League at Farringdon Road.} \\
\text{Took the Chair about 10.30, and left it finally about 9.30 at night. Dollie turned up in the evening with her only visitor Mr Win (?). He had never before seen socialists in their den. His admission was quite irregular, and I hope he was suitably impressed with what he heard. D and I to supper with Morris and others.} \\
\text{Whit Monday, May 21st. In the morning, Morris called with Jenny Morris. We made up a party (with Walker and Dolly Walker) and a Scottish delegate (Glasier) and went for a Cockney outing on the Thames. To Kew. Loitered along the bank to Richmond. Lay down on the grass on the slope of Richmond Hill and enjoyed ourselves in true Bank Holiday fashion.}
\end{align*}
\]
Morris perhaps at his best at such a time. Morris suggested a House Boat Excursion to Oxford, which I wish may someday come off.

This sounds like a golden day of relaxation for all concerned, after the tensions of the day before. Morris, whose sudden rages were well-known, had boasted to his wife Janey, at the Conference-day supper, that he had not lost his temper in public. But later that evening the strain had told, and he had burst into a paroxysm of anger over an innocuous remark about paintings, made by Glasier. Such seizures, in which he sometimes lost consciousness, were in fact a form of epilepsy; maybe the noisy and boisterous behaviour which Dollie had found so overpowering at the League 'At Home' two years earlier, owed something to the same cause. The attacks would vanish as suddenly as they had begun, and calm had returned to him on this post-Conference morning when he called at 9 Hammersmith Terrace for the Radfords. Morris's enjoyment of a rare day out with his beloved elder daughter and close friends had been infectious. He felt especially close to Jenny, who had suffered seriously from epilepsy since her mid-teens, and he would have been at his most tender on such a day, responding to the holiday mood for Jenny's sake, and helping everyone else in the party to do so too.

That happy outing seems to mark a turning point in Morris's life. Behind him lay five years of unstinting work for the socialist cause which had sapped his creative powers, during the last two of which faction squabbles within the League had ended ingloriously, at the fourth Conference. Ahead, was the realisation that the League would never be in the vanguard of the fight for socialism, and that his own part in the future struggle would be more one of theory and inspiration than of action. During the summer and early autumn, he allowed himself to relax, spending two months at Kelmscott Manor. Here he was occupied in writing verse and prose romances, his first investigations into the art of printing, and attending to the affairs of Morris & Co. and Commonweal.

During the first months of his work as secretary of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, Ernest was still involved with the League. In mid-June, he was at a special meeting of the Branch at which a League policy document was accepted and approved. It included a statement on the
meaning of international Revolutionary Socialism which is worth recording:

- from each according to his capacity, to each according to his needs; abolition of private ownership and means of production; federation of communities, meaning the abolition of nationality; abstention from reform via parliamentary action; co-operation (not federation) with socialists who think differently.23

The year before, Ernest had been in favour of John Mahon’s ideas for a parliamentary Socialist Party, although not wanting to play a leading role in it. How did he vote at this special branch meeting, on a statement that rejected the parliamentary path?

And where did Dollie stand this mid-June on the issues which were rending the League? She was a member, though not of its inner councils as was Ernest. William Morris had been her socialist hero since 1884, when she had been deeply moved by his lecture on ‘How We Live And How We Might Live’, recording in her diary that it was a beautiful address, and that she was more than ever convinced of the seriousness and beauty of the socialist movement. But Morris, as well as being a visionary socialist, had read Karl Marx and believed in the theory of class-struggle as an ongoing thread through history. He did not pull his punches at the beginning of the lecture, painting in measured and simple language a grim picture of capitalist society: one based on war between nations, rival capitalists, against colonial peoples, between classes – and saying that revolutionary change, not necessarily bloody, was needed before conditions of life could be good for all. The message was stark, calculated, as Morris said, to strike fear in some and hope in others. Dollie might well have felt alienated were it not for the hopeful part of his message – his vision of decent life, and his view of socialists as missionaries – Morris’s term – educating working people in the iniquities of capitalism and raising their hopes for equality of condition.24

Early in June 1888, Dollie had come under Morris’s political influence again. With Amy Levy, she went to hear him speak on ‘The Hopes of Civilization’ at Kelmscott House. The message was essentially the same as in 1884, but this time he took his listeners step by step through a Marxist analysis of history, from the Reformation to their own epoch of rapa-
cious Commercialism. In the struggle ahead, Morris foresaw a possible strengthening of capitalism, but also the growing discontent of working people, and, through education, their growing political awareness – a powerful combination leading to the hope and promise of socialism. This new system, said Morris, not only sees how labour can be freed of its fetters to produce wealth for all, but brings its own moral aspirations, faith and potential for beauty. His hope was that the transition to socialism, and eventually to absolute equality of condition, which he termed communism, would be step by step, but he warned that the proprietor classes were not likely to give up the means of production without compulsion.25

Dollie, of course, can have been no stranger to Marxist thought. Around the end of the 1870s and early 1880s, she had more or less lived in the Marx household; Eleanor Marx was her great friend, and Ernest was at that time involved with the Democratic Federation, which was dominated by the self-styled Marxist, Hyndman. But there is no evidence that Dollie had studied Marx’s theories of class struggle, and she was not politically active. As she had earlier confessed, in a humorous poem, she had never known a working man, although in Marx’s circles she had rubbed shoulders with ‘nihilists of every station and German socialists of every plan’.26

It was to take Morris’s interpretation of Marxism, with its open and speculative approach to an alternative way of life, to win Dollie’s heart and mind for the socialist cause. Her idealistic nature would have responded to his insistence that the role of socialists is not only to teach working people to challenge present conditions and desire a better world, but to help them articulate their needs, and develop moral and aesthetic aspirations as well as economic ones. In another lecture, ‘The Society of the Future’, Morris had said something else she would have liked: he had called himself a practical visionary, someone who knows what is going on in the world but has a vision of what socialism could be like, and who, by communicating such hopes and dreams for the future, can turn people towards it.27 Later in life, Dollie was to believe that women of vision, who refuse to allow doubters and cynics to extinguish their hope, play a leading part in changing attitudes, and showing the way to a more just society.

At the time of the mid-June meeting of the Hammersmith branch, it is likely that Dollie would have supported Morris, and the League’s policy
statement. Whatever the pros and cons of the anti-parliamentary and the parliamentary ways forward to socialism, her instinctive empathy with the practical utopianism of Morris, and her antipathetic feelings towards the amorality of the parliamentarian Aveling, would have weighed heavily with her.

William Morris did not drop out of political activity in the aftermath of the Fourth Annual Conference of the League. In 1889 he was a League delegate to the International Working Men's Congress in Paris, at which Eleanor Marx was also present, as a translator. He returned, however, to the long-drawn out collapse of the League. The anarchists ousted him from the editorship of Commonweal in mid-1890, even though it continued to print instalments of his utopian masterpiece, News from Nowhere. Towards the end of 1890, he made his final breach, in an article 'Where Are We Now?', in which he took stock of the past years of socialist effort, and restated his belief that their task was to 'make Socialists'. The Hammersmith Branch severed connections with the League soon after, and was re-named the Hammersmith Socialist Society, with Emery Walker, typographer and printer, as secretary, and for which Morris drafted the 'Statement of Principles'.

NOTES

1 The information on which this article is based is from the collection of Ann MacEwen, grand-daughter of Dollie and Ernest Radford. Material quoted is from diaries kept during this period and from letters (indicated by author and [in some cases approximate] date). This is the second article by Mrs MacEwen which JWMS has recently carried, the first being ‘Ernest Radford and the first Arts and Crafts Exhibition, 1888’, vol. xvii (1), Winter 2006, pp. 27–38. In that article, more details are given as to the sources of information used. Further biographical information on the lives of Ernest and Dollie Radford is also included.

2 F.G. Stephens (1828–1907) was an original member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and later became well known as an art critic.

3 Andreas Scheu (1884–1927) was a Viennese Socialist and political
refugee, who came to London in 1874, but later moved to Scotland and became secretary of the Edinburgh branch of the Social Democratic Federation; George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950) came to London in 1876 and was soon involved in left-wing politics.


5 Connie and Grace Black, sisters, friends of Dollie and Ernest Radford, Constance married Edward Garnett and, as Constance Garnett, translated the great Russian novelists (Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Turgenev). She was an early undergraduate at Newnham College, Cambridge; David Garnett the novelist was her son. See Richard Garnett (Connie’s grandson), *Constance Garnett, a Heroic Life*. London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1991, 480 pp. Grace was an artist. She studied at the Slade, and married Edwin Human, an engineer whose career took the couple to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka).

Hume Pinsent was a West-Country friend of Ernest. His sister, Edith Pinsent, married Ernest’s brother John. Miss Birrell was the sister of the Liberal politician and writer, Augustine Birrell (1850–1933). Walter Crane (1845–1915) was a renowned designer and illustrator, and participant in both the Socialist League and the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society.

6 A copy of this photograph is part of the collection of Ann MacEwen.

7 EPT, pp. 406–11.

8 EPT, p. 409.


10 EPT, pp. 446–54.

11 Annie Besant (1847–1933), secularist and freethinker, who joined the Fabian Society in 1885, and later became a theosophist.

12 EPT, p. 473.

13 There have been many accounts of the events of 'Bloody Sunday' (13 November 1887); see EPT, pp. 488–91.


Marx, Vol. 1, Family Life 1855-1883. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1976, 775 pp., includes a number of affectionate references to Dolly; see pp. 193–4, 218, 222–3, 236, 283.

16 Prosper Olivier Lissagaray (1838–1901), author of the History of the Paris Commune; the only contemporary account which, according to Karl Marx, was not ‘mere trash’; F. Wheen. Karl Marx. London: Fourth Estate, 1999, p. 352.


19 EPT, p. 502.

20 EPT, pp. 508–9.

21 Fiona MacCarthy, William Morris. A Life for Our Time. London: Faber, 1994, 780 pp., discusses Morris’s seizures (pp. 77–9), and the outburst to Bruce Glasier (p. 577).


26 Untitled poem in Dollie Radford’s diary, 23 January 1884.


28 ‘Where are we now?’, Commonweal, 15 November 1890; published
29 EPT, pp. 580–1.

Editor's Note: The new editor is extremely grateful to Peter Faulkner for his extensive help in preparing this article for printing.