

'Morning Chats with William Morris'

A Forgotten Portrait of Morris in Ireland

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The influence of William Morris in Ireland was as profound as it was multifarious. His extraordinary energy, boundless interests, revolutionary zeal, cultural ideology, beautifully crafted designs and charismatic personality won wide admiration. His ideas of craftsmanship and design reform were eagerly reported in Irish press, including his 1879 lecture, 'The Art of the People', delivered to the Birmingham School of Art, and his 1882 lecture, 'The Progress of Decorative Art in England', at the Manchester Art and Industrial Exhibition.¹ His poetry and literary work were enthusiastically discussed² as were his concerns for Ireland's social and economic regeneration.³ His most direct influence is generally perceived as being on the young William Butler Yeats, as well as his two sisters Elizabeth and Susan (who had worked with May Morris at Kelmscott), and who later joined Evelyn Gleeson's Dublin-based Morris-inspired Arts and Crafts enterprise, the Dun Emer Guild and Industries, established in 1902.⁴ Recently Jan Marsh has drawn attention to this connection in considering the portrait sketches of Morris by the Yeats's father, the painter John Butler Yeats, completed at the time of Morris's second Irish sojourn in 1886.⁵

Without question Morris's ideas and example shaped several key aspects of the emerging Irish Arts and Crafts movement of the *fin-de-siècle*, which of course owed so much to the Yeats family, but where else in Ireland, if anywhere, was Morris's influence registered with such a direct and intimate connection?⁶ Or indeed, outside the Yeats circle, was the Morrisian influence in Ireland as generic as it was in several other European countries?⁷ And indeed was Morris's influence confined to Dublin? If Morris bitterly complained of finding himself 'ministering to the swinish luxury of the rich'⁸ how he did he relate to

the affluent mercantile class of Ireland's industrial north-east, whose cotton and linen merchants had been such important early patrons and collectors of the Pre-Raphaelites (including Morris' Oxford Union collaborators Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Val Prinsep)?⁹

It remains little known that exactly ten years before W. B. Yeats began visiting Morris at Kelmscott another young Irishman met and was greatly influenced by Morris. In April 1877 Robert Ponsonby Staples (1853–1943), a young painter, aspiring Aesthete, and son of a Co. Tyrone landlord, timidly visited Kelmscott Manor after having secured a rare interview with Morris. Whilst researching the work of Staples recently I came across his notes from the meeting and the portrait drawing that Staples completed of Morris during the course of the interview [Fig. 1].¹⁰ The interview, part of which Staples published some years later, is an interesting (if brief) document that sheds some fresh light not only on Staples but also, to some extent, on Morris and his influence in Ireland.¹¹

'Furnished with an introduction' from Walter Crane, whom Staples had met through his uncle Coutts Lindsay's Grosvenor Gallery, he called at Kelmscott Manor on the morning of the 10 April 1877.¹² Although happy to talk freely on any topic Staples initially detected 'a shade of annoyance' in Morris at being asked to sit for a portrait; he declared, 'I hate sitting, and the only other recent likeness of me is by [W. B.] Richmond a neighbour of ours'. However, after a while Morris 'seemed good natured and was prepared to sit a little, but finding this was not necessary enjoyed a pipe in his armchair with his feet up.'¹³ In the interview Morris 'talked at' the young artist on such diverse topics as the modern Church, the New Testament, Rembrandt and North American Indians, and much closer to home about the affairs of the British Museum and Royal Academy. Staples, who had spent much of the 1870s on the Continent, directed some of the conversation towards his own interests, especially French art. At first Morris seemed somewhat reticent to be drawn on the topic: 'I do not know Courbet's works very well. One good thing he did was to pull down the Column Vendôme which was a horrid bit of imperial upholstery'; but of the Impressionists he declared, ending in 'a hearty laugh', that 'if I wanted a picture, I should want something a little more than that! It's so vague; I can carry about as much in my own mind, I want a little more than I remember myself.'¹⁴ To clarify his position, Morris



Fig. 1. R. P. Staples, *William Morris in his Study at Kelmscott*, 11 April 1877. Private collection.

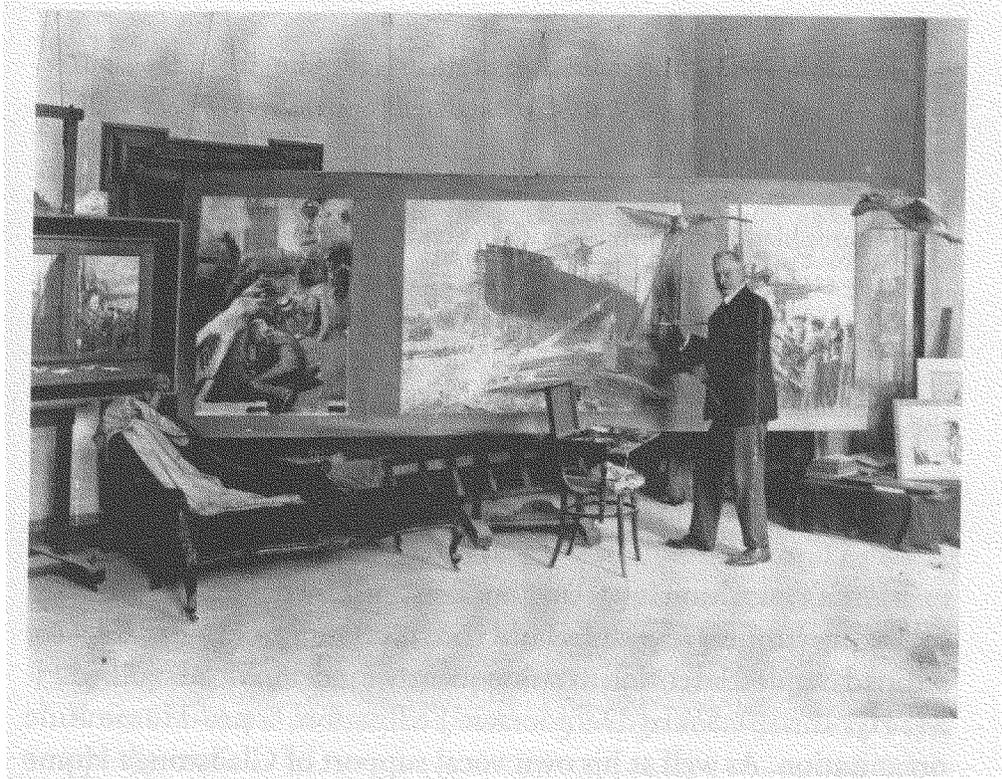


Fig. 2. R. P. Staples at work on his *Shipbuilding* murals for Belfast City Hall, Northern Ireland, c. 1905. Image courtesy of Ulster Museum.

pressed the point, 'Well in painting I am only interested in what is decorative.'¹⁵

This idea clearly struck a deep cord with Staples whose greatest achievement, following his return to Ireland after 1900, was a proposed scheme of decorative mural paintings for the new City Hall in Belfast, which would, in its unusual 'modern life' iconography, glorify the city's dockers and linen mill workers. The scheme, begun in 1905, comprised over 50 feet of canvas and was divided between two individual sections, one depicting 'Shipbuilding' [Fig. 2] and the other showing 'Linen-making.' As Staples and his scheme ran into intractable difficulties with civic dignitaries he made his sentiments expressly clear in a letter to the local press:

It is to the poor working people of Belfast to whom I hope and believe the works I have done will appeal now and hereafter, to show them that scenes torn from the grime and toil of their daily life, may

be made beautiful; the thousands of the Island, who, when they and their friends pass through the City Hall, will appreciate the great hulk of the steel-clad ship they have pieced together; or the riveter in his tawny jacket, the skilled mechanic, fitting with utmost care the multitudinous blades of a turbine, with the companion picture of a holiday group starting down the lough. Then a group of York Street spinning girls, with bare arms and feet on the wet tiles of the damp rooms, with a dainty doffing mistress supervising them, shows well beside a panoramic view of Belfast with men and women flax-pulling. These are simple everyday things, but I know the interest they have evoked, and may be of more permanent value than a complete series of vermilion-coated aldermen and mayors.¹⁶

Morris's own humanitarian concerns and conversion to Socialism following his first trip to Ireland in October 1877 can hardly have escaped Staples' attention as subsequently, in 1878, Morris joined H. M. Hyndman's Social Democratic Federation, a pro-Home Rule organisation. As well as his own vocal support of Gladstone's Home Rule Bill, Staples' support of a dock strike in Belfast during 1907, recalling in many ways Morris's own support of the 1889 dockers' strike, brought him into direct conflict with the Belfast Corporation. Staples' civic patrons in the end proved loathe to see images of dockers on the walls of their Reception Room, in the lavish Neo-Baroque City Hall built by Sir Alfred Brumwell Thomas between 1898 and 1906. Staples' estrangement from Belfast's Unionist councillors resulted in their decision to cancel the mural project in 1913 when it was practically completed.

Staples' Belfast City Hall murals, if installed, would have been a lasting legacy to Belfast's rich industrial heritage, and furthermore they would also been an enduring testament to the influence of Morris, in his championing of art 'beyond the easel', his highlighting of the social and cultural value of the worker, and his influence on painters as well as design reformers and craft-workers. The upcoming centenary of the City Hall in 2006 offers an unprecedented opportunity for the exhibition of Staples' designs and finished panels for the City Hall scheme, and indeed offers a unique instance to glimpse at the fascinating influence in Ireland of William Morris.

NOTES

- 1 William Morris, 'Labour and Art', *The Irish Builder*, 15 March 1879, p. 90; and 'Mr. Morris and Decorative Art', *Hibernia: A Monthly Popular Review*, vol. 1, November 1882, p.167.
- 2 John Howard Pentland, 'Mr. Morris as a Critic', *Hibernia: A Monthly Popular Review*, vol. 1, August 1882, pp. 114–15.
- 3 See *The Irish Times*, 12 April 1886, and for a recent analysis of Morris's political and social interests in Ireland see Edmund and Ruth Frow, 'William Morris and Ireland', *Saothar: Journal of the Irish Labour History Society* 21 (1996), pp. 108–09.
- 4 On Yeats see Peter Faulkner, *William Morris and W. B. Yeats*, (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1962), and R. F. Forster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life*, vol. 1 (London: Oxford University Press, 1997); on Yeats's sisters see Nicola Gordon Bowe, 'Two Early Twentieth-Century Irish Arts and Crafts Workshops in Context: An Túr Gloine and the Dun Emer Guild and Industries', *Journal of Design History* 2: 2–3 (1989), pp. 193–206.
- 5 Jan Marsh, 'John Butler Yeats: Portrait of William Morris', *Journal of William Morris Studies* 15: 3 (Winter 2003), pp. 27–29.
- 6 For a discussion of Morris's influence on the Irish Arts and Crafts movement see P. Oswald Reeves, 'Irish Arts and Crafts', *The Studio* 72, no. 295, October 1917, pp. 15–22; and Nicola Gordon Bowe and Elizabeth Cumming, *The Arts and Crafts Movements in Dublin & Edinburgh, 1885–1925*, (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1998).
- 7 For examples of Morris's influence in Europe see Katalin Keserü, 'The Workshops of Gödöllo: transformations of a Morrisian Theme', *Journal of Design History* 1: 1 (1988), pp. 1–23; M. Snodin and E. Stavenow-Hidemark (eds.), *Carl and Karin Larsson: Creators of the Swedish Style* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1997); and Amy Ogata, *Art Nouveau and the Social Vision of Modern Living: Belgian Artists in a European Context* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
- 8 Morris quoted in Fiona McCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (London: Faber & Faber, 1994), p. 412.
- 9 For Francis M'Cracken's collection, which included work by D. G. Rossetti, W. Holman Hunt and Ford Madox Brown, see Martyn Anglesea, 'A Pre-Raphaelite Enigma in Belfast', *Irish Arts Review* 1:

- 2 (Summer 1984), pp. 40–45; and for Robert Lloyd Patterson's collection, which included Val Prinsep, see S. B. Kennedy, *The R. L. Patterson Collection* (Belfast: Ulster Museum, 1982), p. 120. For a contextual discussion of William Morris in relation to the Arts and Crafts movement in the industrial north-east of Ireland, see J. McBrinn, 'The Peasant and Folk Art Revival in Ireland, 1890–1920: With Special Reference to Ulster', *Ulster Folklife* 48 (2002), pp. 14–62.
- 10 R. P. Staples, *Some celebrities & how I sketched them* notebook (Private Collection, n. d.), n. p.; the interview is also recorded in R. P. Staples' *Diary*, 11 April 1877 (Private Collection).
- 11 See, 'Morning Chats with William Morris by R. Ponsonby Staples', *The New Budget*, 2 October 1895, p. 24.
- 12 R. P. Staples, op. cit., (Private Collection, n. d.), n. p.
- 13 R. P. Staples, *ibid.*
- 14 R. P. Staples, *ibid.*
- 15 R. P. Staples, *ibid.*
- 16 R. P. Staples, 'Four Years on Decorations for City Hall', *The Northern Whig*, 1 May 1909, p. 12.