

William Morris, *Kunde von Nirgendwo* (Frankfurt: Trotzdem Verlag, 2004), 240 pp., €14 pbk, ISBN 39317 86196.

IT SEEMS FAIR TO SAY that compared to other countries, Britain in particular, there has been a paucity of publications on and of Morris's work in Germany. It is therefore a pleasure to be able to report the publication of a new edition of *News from Nowhere* in German.

The new edition is based on the 1980 edition of *Kunde von Nirgendwo*, edited by Peter Reifsteck and published by Schwarzwurzel Verlag, which uses the first German translation of *News from Nowhere* by Natalie Liebknecht.¹ This first translation was serialised in the journal *Die Neue Zeit* in 1892–93 by Karl Kautsky and Wilhelm Liebknecht, the father of Karl Liebknecht and co-founder of the Social Democratic Workers' Party. The Reifsteck edition also contained Wilhelm Liebknecht's original foreword to *Kunde von Nirgendwo* when it was published as a book in 1900, Reifsteck's own foreword to his 1980 edition, and an important essay by Gert Selle from his own 1974 edition of *Kunde von Nirgendwo*.

In this essay, entitled 'Morris and his novel',² Selle emphasises that in Germany Morris is primarily known as an artist and precursor of the *Jugendstil* movement but not as an influential political thinker. This, he argues, can be attributed to the fact that the '*bürgerliche Kunstwissenschaft*', the bourgeois-driven study of the arts, at least in Western Germany, has either discredited or obscured Morris's role as a committed socialist. Whether or not we believe Selle, he rightly points out that Morris was both artist *and* revolutionary activist and that he understood these two roles as interdependent. While a large part of Selle's essay is biographical, he skilfully establishes links with *News from Nowhere*, such as the cataclysmic effect of 'Bloody Sunday' on Morris and the importance of the event in *News*. Selle portrays Morris as a practical man who took issue with 'bombastic revolutionary talk' and 'metaphysical subtleties' and as a man who was more interested in a practical 'education of revolution', such as in *News from Nowhere*. Selle leaves no doubt that Morris was radical; for Morris, a revolution without the acquisition of the means of production and the dissolution of the prevalent bourgeois institutions, what Selle calls the 'Chilean way', was inconceivable. Selle agrees with E. P. Thompson's appraisal of Morris as 'the greatest moral initiator of Communism'

within the English tradition and finally praises Morris for having written 'a romanticising, very personal yet still most modern Utopia of accomplished proletarian revolution which is difficult to surpass in its humanity'.

While it is good to see Selle's essay reprinted, it is equally satisfying to see that the new edition of *Kunde von Nirgendwo* has been enriched by a collection of primary and secondary literature and a timely epilogue by Ulrich Klemm. In this epilogue Klemm focuses on four main aspects: firstly, a bibliographical introduction to Morris and his attempt to combine art and politics; secondly, Morris as a political reformer positioned between Romanticism and anarchism; thirdly, Morris's reception in Germany; and fourthly, the relevance of *News from Nowhere* in the age of capitalism. Klemm complements Selle's now slightly dated article by commenting on other major publications in German on Morris since 1974, for example Hans Christian Kirsch's biography of Morris (1983; second edition 1996), Richard Saage's more general work on Morris in his *Politische Utopien der Neuzeit* (1991) and *Utopieforschung* (1997), and Charlotte and Peter Fiell's *William Morris* (1999). Kirsch's biography in particular, paying tribute to Morris as 'one of the last universal artists in the tradition of the Renaissance', can be considered a milestone in research on Morris in German. One of Klemm's strongest points is that he sees Morris, much more strongly than Selle does, as a prophet of an environmental-conscious community and central to current ecological discourse. Klemm emphasises Morris's centrality to the debate of the 1980s about the unity of art, socialism and ecology which is evidenced, for example, by Manfred Pfister's translation of some of Morris's lectures.³ Klemm shows that Morris was influenced by Marx, Ruskin and Kropotkin, but rightly points out that Morris was strongly opposed to anarchic violence. Klemm also draws an interesting parallel with the German performance artist Joseph Beuys who, much like Morris, tried to express a unity of art and politics in his work.

Klemm's account, however, suffers from some inaccuracies. There are quite a few mistakes in punctuation and factual mistakes (Morris did not study *theology* at Oxford and did not move to Kelmscott House at the beginning of the 1870s). More problematic, perhaps, is Klemm's claim that Morris saw capitalism and industrialism primarily as an aesthetic problem', without an explanation of Morris's theory of the

'aesthetic'. The absence of such an explanation might mislead the reader who is not familiar with Morris's theoretical edifice into supposing that Morris did not see capitalism and industrialism as social, political and ecological problems. However, as we know, he did.

I do not wish, however, to be too critical, since the many merits of the edition by far outweigh the minor shortfalls. As a Morris enthusiast whose mother tongue is German, and a supporter of the green movement, it is a pleasure for me to see a German edition of *News from Nowhere* with a timely reappraisal of Morris as a champion of environmental justice.

NOTES

1. There have only been two other translations of *News from Nowhere* so far: Paul Seliger's translation under the title *Neues aus Nirgendland* (Stuttgart: Ditzel Verlag, 1901) and Carmen Janetzki's translation under the title *Kunde von Nirgendwo. Ein Zeitalter der Ruhe* (Berlin: DDR Aufbau Verlag, 1991).
2. My translation. All subsequent translations are my own.
3. Manfred Pfister, ed., *Rot und Grün. Reden Zur Revolution von Kunst und Gesellschaft* (Passau: University of Passau: 1987). Also see Jan Hollm's review of this publication in *Journal of the William Morris Society* 10: 4 (Spring 1994), pp. 54–55.

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