Let us get clear of the fog

by Catherine Moody

Of all that William Morris created, the most original and the most valuable to mankind was the invention of a new way of life.

By the early nineteenth century industrialization was recognized by men of thought and understanding to be at the root of inexorable changes that were eroding the culture won over the centuries from savagery. A new savage was being made. Economic necessity was making the worker — a slave.

In the foregoing centuries the artist and craftsman were the builders of the material form of man’s civilization. When the Industrial Revolution began to take place there was enough artistic capital in existence for industrialists to use design forms that had been evolved in the past. They could dispense with the artist — he was the worker that was no longer needed — redundant for the first time in the whole of history. Redundancy has dogged the artist and craftsman ever since. Is the place of the craftsman assured even now? Is the basic need for master craftsmanship now recognized by the majority or only by very few?

It was, at first, perceptive men outside their class who saw the craftsman’s plight. They began to speak on behalf of those inarticulate men whose skill lay most in hand and eye. Of these, John Ruskin showed most clearly the significance of events. He influenced many for his words were apt and telling. Morris read his words and followed his clear direction.

He gathered a band of workmen, shared all their difficulties and proved that Ruskin’s theories were right.

Morris attacked the problems of one craft after another and it was, as he wrote to Mrs Burne-Jones, ‘... in very nearly the same conditions as those of the shepherd boy that made a watch all by himself...’. But he found it enjoyable; in fact he found it was about the most enjoyable way of spending one’s life.

Wishing others to share in this he established workshops. He gathered round him men of skill and traditional knowledge. All his friends, his wife and their wives, and even the maid, Red Lion Mary, were all drawn in. In making things as well as they can
be made individuals became equals. George Campfield, William Morris' foreman at Merton Abbey, said that conditions were 'as near Paradise as anything well could be'.

Morris was aware that it was not enough to make his own small community of 'right doing'. He spent many years in political activity, lecturing, writing, hoping to inform and convert.

One of the greatest developments from Morris' work has been the teaching in Schools and Colleges of Art.

The crafts were at first learnt from workmen who had already begun to loose something through industrialization. Morris worked with and learnt from them. Like-minded friends caught his enthusiasm and went off to work out their own lines of discovery. Such vital sparks burst from his activities that many new trails were lit. The Schools of Art were being established all over the country during Morris' lifetime and many who taught in them were sifting good techniques from bad and rejecting the makeshifts that had been imposed by trade.

'Mr Bellamy', Morris wrote in *Commonweal*, 'worries himself unnecessarily in seeking, with obvious failure, some incentive to labour to replace the fear of starvation which is at present our only one; whereas it cannot be too often repeated that the true incentive to useful and happy labour is, and must be, pleasure in the work itself.' The Schools of Art have profited by this.

Well equipped craft workshops, a sufficient measure of time to pursue the work for its own sake, and a desire to pass on newfound knowledge has produced a select number of master craftsmen of the highest skill, skill that has embodied an aesthetic sense as organic as that of the pre-industrial age.

All artist craftsmen since Morris owe to him their style and status. He made such a man socially acceptable. Unconventional though he may have been, he was always respected. He was known as a responsible man who had no use for empty convention. He was a craftsman who was also a poet, and obviously a gentleman. He established a standard other than that of income. Without him that would have been the only one. In country places craftsmen have congregated in a pleasant atmosphere of community. They did not need to feel that they were loosing caste through not associating with 'high society'. The greatest artist craftsmen have lived simple lives in the material sense but rich intellectually, approaching their craft with humility, knowing its innate dignity, able to practise without being despised by their neighbours.
The public too, Morris’ customers, he taught to despise slick finish and ostentation. For a generation or so there were those who, without any first hand experience of craftsmanship, could look for good construction honestly revealed or could value the delicacy of natural dyes and materials.

Even if this was sometimes a rather superficial cult, it had a very beneficial influence. It did much to restore the relationship between craftsman and patron, where customer had taken the place of a man who commissions the work.

Now we have arrived at a time when much of our physical environment is well designed – some of it excellently – and when the welfare of those concerned with the production of commodities is protected by law and by trade unions we can feel that much of the work of William Morris, and of the humanitarians of his time, has now born fruit. Morris used up his life to this end and we, perhaps, have no need to worry any more. So long as standards of living remain high we can look forward to these trends continuing. Working hours for the producers of our material environment, if monotonous, are comparatively short. Automation is coming and tedious work will be done by machinery. Problems of planning and communication are being tackled and so the proportion of the working day, often wasted in travel from home to work, may tend to be reduced. Everyone now has a share of leisure and for occupation during leisure periods there is scope for various pursuits as well as the services of mass entertainment.

Except for uneasiness about wars and about the unpredictable ascendancy of formerly backward countries, which may by their quick progress upset world balance in the export market, or through forcing other standards of living upon us – except for these things, which are perhaps outside the designer’s province, it seems difficult to visualize any improvement on the kind of life we enjoy in England and other similar countries.

Why should we worry? For various reasons we do worry. There often seems little justification for what are obviously paradoxes of progress. Standards of morals and behaviour do not seem to have risen as they should be expected to. But again, crime and violence need not concern the artist. However, a great deal of futility seems to occupy many peoples’ lives; there is a growing bulk of unproductive work, time and brain used in recording and classifying, in office work not in workshop work; in shortsighted expedients; in the prodigal use of certain unreplaceable
capital resources. One remembers the good things lost and realizes
the lack of intrinsic value in things gained; all these tendencies
that have a quality of futility and cannot be seen to have any
positive, constructive good in them, are the source of unease.

On the other hand, when the degradation of the industrial
worker of the past is considered, today's conditions must seem
ideal compared with what was suffered. For all good things one
must expect to pay a price. Perhaps one can be too discontented
with a clean and prosperous life that would amaze William Morris.

The reasons on both sides blanket one. How can the engulfing
wave of progress be measured? How can we compare today with
the hopes and fears of a time that cannot be more than faintly
recalled? One cannot do it unless by chance, through a break, one
sees the Glittering Plain.

One must feel, with the keenness of a shock the essential vital
quality that Morris sought. In News From Nowhere, Morris' Utopian
novel, most explicitly and most evocatively is his ideal shown. Every so often one meets it - some piece of work or some
individual who can communicate this quality.

As the direct personal influence of his life grows fainter and
those who knew Morris became fewer, it behoves us to be alert
and make certain that all he rediscovered does not again escape us.

Today there is probably no more secure place for the crafts­
man than there was in the later nineteenth century. Compared to
most employment today it is an extremely precarious living. Un­
remitting work may produce a moderate livelihood, but there is
always an urge of economic competition pressing the craftsman
to find means to make his work more like that of industry. For
simple everyday needs a designer for industry may find that a
fairly brief acquaintance with a craft is sufficient to make him
able to digest the requirements and express them in terms of
certain production methods, but we have needs beyond the simple
mechanics of life. We need drama in our architecture, spiritual
food in our dining-rooms, sympathetic reason in our living-rooms,
we need social and ceremonial forms and forms associated with
our deepest religious belief. If we are to continue to evolve an
art belonging to the whole of our lives we need craftsmen who
can practise their craft for many years, and who can reach the
height of a master craftsman's skill. We need more than isolated
individuals, for we need the community of craftsmen and patron
so that both sides of the job should interplay.

The teaching in the Schools of Art has been going on since
Morris. The equipped craftrooms are there, but can a student feel justified in spending the time needed to master a craft when the prospect is so uncertain? Modern commerce, the changing economics of earning a living, the growing importance of income as a basis of standards, the growing gulf between the 'museum piece' and new work—all these things are having their effect.

It is time to ask 'What next?' lest behind these barriers our present design becomes tepid and our craftsmen, discouraged, lose their skill. If once this is lost, no new Morris could patch up the civilization so severely crippled.

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There is no easy cure but we must search for practical means to improve the situation. To strengthen our understanding of the Morris tradition it would be well if we could remedy the lack of consistent representation in museums of the work of craftsmen since Morris. All over the country men have worked, often alone, but closely following his example. At the present time their work is shown sporadically and the examples acquired are not necessarily the best work of the individual.

Along with an understanding of the tradition there needs to be some encouragement of craftsmanship on a national scale. The commercial world really has no place for it and some more suitable means of support than government grant needs to be found. Welcome as such grants are, they can by fluctuating, cripple the very development they have fostered by being withdrawn after encouraging its growth. Within recent years there has been more than one casualty through such variation. Let us try to make sure that master craftsmen can keep going and have an assured living, and let us see clearly what is happening to the training and tradition.

NOTE TO ARTICLE ON THE FACING PAGE

Mr Faulkner's essay, *William Morris and W. B. Yeats*, was awarded a prize in the first Peter Floud Memorial Prize Competition, 1961, and is published by the Dolmen Press, Dublin and the Oxford University Press, price 10s. 6d.