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## William Morris and the Mesh of Memory

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In this article, I am going to trace the lingering influence of William Morris on Miriam Daniell, Helena Born, William Bailie and Helen Tufts. They were not nationally recognised names on the nineteenth-century left, nor were they part of his direct circle. Hence they have been outside the scope of biographies of Morris. Nevertheless, uncovering the impact of a radical thinker and inspirational figure like Morris upon people tucked away beyond the boundaries of a celebrated life can provide some political and cultural indicators about how a critical consciousness of capitalism was transmitted through small journals, meetings, personal correspondence and conversation.

During the mid-1970s when I began writing about Edward Carpenter I came across two rebellious New Women from Bristol who became socialists during the late 1880s, Miriam Daniell and Helena Born. Somewhat later, during the early 2000s, I discovered a stash of love letters at the Tamiment Library in New York from Helena Born to an anarchist in Boston, Massachusetts, called William Bailie. In 2009 I started nosing around trying to find out more. Inevitably it took longer than I expected and involved conducting research in America.

The result was to be my latest book, *Rebel Crossings: New Women, Free Lovers, and*

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*Radicals in Britain and the United States* (2016). It follows the lives of these British and Irish migrants in the United States, from the nineteenth century into the twentieth.

### **I. William Morris and Bristol**

On 3 March 1885 William Morris spoke on ‘Art and Labour’ in Bristol’s museum on Park Street, Clifton. It was quite an occasion for the artistically inclined members of Bristol’s middle class, but Morris made sure that half the tickets went to the Trades’ Council and other labour groupings, including the recently formed Bristol Socialist Society.

This was a cluster consisting mainly of studious, skilled working-class men and one of their number, Samuel Bale, has left us an account of the meeting. He describes Morris in his ‘dark blue serge jacket [...] the lion-like head of hair just beginning to turn grey [...] [he] looked into our faces, but his penetrating blue eyes seemed to suggest faraway thoughts’. He seemed ‘fearless’ and full of an inspiring ‘strength’ which he conveyed to the workers in the audience.<sup>1</sup> Bale continues:

The two sections of the audience were poles asunder – the literary folk who were curious and perhaps apprehensive, listened attentively and without emotion until the end, then dutifully joined in the applause of thanks; while we workmen, somewhat shy and painfully conscious of the unusual surroundings and our shortcomings soon realized the presence of a champion, forgot ourselves and frequently burst into rounds of applause.<sup>2</sup>

They heard Morris describe how the worker under present conditions was robbed of all pleasure in daily work and declare the need to ensure that work should be useful and ‘accompanied by pleasure in the doing’, while all irksome work should be done by machines. He declared that the rich not only had wealth, but that they possessed the ‘power of allowing or forbidding the other class, the poor, to earn themselves a livelihood’. The middle-class members of the audience were firmly told that in society at present there were ‘two camps, that of the people and that of their masters’.<sup>3</sup> It was up to them to choose which they would support.

After the lecture Morris went to an Exhibition of Women’s Industry in Clifton. Then the following morning he made a point of meeting up with three socialists: a shoe-maker, a clerk and a wire worker. On 11 March he reported to his daughter, May Morris, that the socialists in Bristol were ‘mostly of the S.D.F. branch’ and would not break away.<sup>4</sup> They were committed to parliamentary action.

Despite not recruiting to the Socialist League, the meeting had raised £4, and Morris had aroused lasting interest in both the working-class socialist contingent and

middle-class Clifton. Hugh Holmes Gore, a young trainee solicitor, got in touch with the Socialist League shortly afterwards. He did not join the League, but instead formed the Clifton and Bristol Christian Socialist group in 1886, acting as the link between the middle-class and working-class socialists in Bristol.<sup>5</sup>

## **II. Miriam Daniell, Helena Born and Robert Allan Nicol**

One of Gore's causes was keeping the common footpaths open. A fellow campaigner was another solicitor, Edward Tuckett Daniell, who was in the radical wing of the Liberal Party. In 1881 Daniell had married Miriam Wheeler, the daughter of a prosperous Congregational grocer. Born in 1861, Miriam was several years his junior. She was interested in ideas, had won several prizes in local art competitions and was restless in the middle-class circles in which she and her husband moved. Their marriage was not, it seems, particularly happy.

In 1888 Miriam joined the Bristol Women's Liberal Association where she formed a close friendship with another young woman, just a year older than herself, Helena Born. Helena had been brought up in the Devon countryside and her father was a farmer's son. But he began to deal in property and they moved to Clifton. There Helena attended a Unitarian church where she came across Radical Liberalism and women's suffrage. Despite being excruciatingly shy, after she discovered the Bristol Women's Liberal Association in 1885 she became a dogged and efficient organiser.

By 1888 she had come to admire Walt Whitman and Henry David Thoreau, and to despise the conspicuous consumption characteristic of the Clifton middle class. Miriam seems to have introduced her to socialist ideas. Regardless of their differing circumstances, both young women felt personally constrained, and discussed their own emancipation on long walks into the countryside. Changing society and changing their own circumstances intertwined. Together they developed an ideal of the simplification of life that was economic, aesthetic and political.

In autumn 1889 several startling, and indeed potentially slanderous, consequences followed a row between Miriam and her husband. Miriam left Edward Tuckett Daniell and went to live with a young socialist Edinburgh University student, Robert Allan Nicol, in St. Phillips, a poor working-class area of Bristol. Helena Born accompanied the couple to give a not entirely convincing cover of respectability.

An American friend of Helena's called Helen Tufts, who was eventually to marry William Bailie, has left us a description of the trio's home in St. Phillips:

They set an example of practical simplicity in household matters, showing aesthetic possibilities in color and ingenious and artistic adaptation which were a revelation to their neighbors. With their own hands they tinted the walls of

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their rooms and waxed the uncarpeted floors, while from the most commonplace materials they improvised many articles of furniture and decoration, combining both beauty and utility.<sup>6</sup>

As if this were not bad enough, Miriam, Helena and Robert, along with Hugh Holmes Gore and the Bristol Socialist Society, were also to be swept into the upsurge of New Unionist militancy which erupted in Bristol that autumn. Miriam proved to be a charismatic speaker, and from October 1889 until the summer of 1890 it was to be non-stop agitation and organisation for all of them.

First they supported around 1,700 striking cotton workers, mainly women; then, early in 1890, they tried to unionise tailoresses. In a leaflet for the tailoresses Miriam raised equal pay as one of the demands. Recruitment of the scattered workforce proved difficult, but that May, Robert, as secretary of one of the new unions, the Gasworkers and General Labourers' Union, introduced equal pay on their programme with the support of Eleanor Marx.

By then, however, Miriam and Robert would have been brooding over a devastating discovery. Proud, defiant Miriam was pregnant. The scandal now could not be evaded. Probably with the encouragement of Edward Carpenter, who Robert visited that summer, they decided to flee to America. Miriam persuaded Helena to accompany her and all three left Britain in August 1890, an apprehensive Helena clutching her copy of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

### **III. William Bailie**

During the 1880s William Bailie was experiencing a similar process of radicalisation, though he came from a very different background. William was born into a skilled working-class Protestant family in Belfast in 1866. But his father died when he was young, and the small studious boy was apprenticed at the age of eleven to a wicker worker. He learned about politics from his workmates who were Protestants and Catholics, from reading, from night school, and then from lectures – including one given by the American land reformer, Henry George.

He eventually came across a reading room organised by an enlightened Unitarian, Rev. James Christopher Street. He had already found Edward Gibbon's *Life of Mahomet* (1859), and in 1884 he read about Buddha and Tolstoy, and perused a pamphlet by William Morris on *Art and Socialism*. This reading helped him to make sense of what he had observed happening in the wicker workshop – the loss of artistry, the misuse of machines, the increased pace of labour. Morris's assertion that work should be worthwhile and pleasant to do registered with William and remained with him.

But more immediately he had to go looking for work and, aged eighteen, he set off for Britain where he found employment in Manchester. Before long, thanks to an Irish woman who arranged marriages, he was married to a woman from Ireland slightly older than himself. The couple had nothing at all in common, but sober, hard-working William was regarded as a good catch. He had, however, several fatal flaws from his wife Ellen's point of view – meetings, books and politics.

William was constantly questing for understanding. First he tried the Secularists, and then he discovered the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) in Salford and found a mentor in J. Hunter Watts, who knew William Morris. Towards the end of 1888 Morris, who was on a speaking tour, gave a lecture for his friend Charles Rowley, who ran the Ancoats Settlement in Manchester. Shortly after this William Bailie left the SDF and joined the Socialist League. He threw himself into organising the branch and into outdoor speaking.

Though there were inevitably internal wrangles, the little group were intense idealists from many different lands. A later account by 'J.B.S.' describes how they were 'comrades in life and death, every fibre of our being was devoted to the cause'.<sup>7</sup> Revolution seemed to be just around the corner and the small gang of Marxist theorists, including William, used to set off with confidence to challenge the misleading bourgeois economists who came to speak at Ancoats.

They decided to create a Socialist Club to foster personal fellowship and comradely debate. William invited a range of speakers, the anarchist communist Prince Kropotkin, the New Life socialist Edward Carpenter who sympathised with anarchism, the Fabian Graham Wallas and William Morris.

Contact with Morris was clearly significant: throughout his life William kept the postcard Morris sent him dated 6 November 1889. Morris agreed to speak on 'The Class Struggle' and William booked the Secular Hall for him.<sup>8</sup> Morris was also to lecture for Ancoats in the new Islington hall. In his talk on the 1539 Revolt of Ghent he described how citizens resisted paying an oppressive tax.<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note that Morris was stressing human action, unlike the deterministic approach to Marxism which was characteristic of some sections of the SDF.

By 1889 anarchist communist ideas were gaining supporters in Manchester and William became friendly with two energetic exponents, Alf Barton and Herbert Stockton. The socialists' outdoor meetings were being increasingly harassed by the police – unlike the meetings of the Salvation Army who were left alone. William joined the anarchist communists' direct action free speech protests against this discriminatory zeal, and was arrested as a consequence.

At the same time William was also sympathetic to the left-wing Unitarian John Trevor, advising him not to set up a Working Man's Church but a 'Labour Church'

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as it was important to stand for a principle rather than a particular class.<sup>10</sup> Both the free speech campaign and the Labour Church were to continue throughout the 1890s, but William, Ellen and their family left Manchester in 1891 for Boston.

#### **IV. Boston**

In Boston William encountered Miriam and Robert who were associated with an Individualist group of anarchists and a paper called *Liberty*, edited by Benjamin Tucker. Through Tucker he made a close friend, Archibald Simpson, a printer who worked on Tucker's publishing projects. Formerly close to the Chicago anarchists, Simpson had become an Individualist anarchist.

Tucker, an inveterate logician, loved converting socialists and anarchist communists to his brand of anarchism and he took William under his wing. Miriam was also a protégé, and clashed with William over an article he wrote in June 1892 which sought to burst the 'bubble' of 'enthusiasm'.<sup>11</sup> Bristling, Miriam responded with a fervent defence of the 'creative instinct of Ardor' in a poem entitled 'Enthusiasm'.<sup>12</sup> But Tucker sided with William Bailie and although Miriam's poems continued to appear in *Liberty*, she was to be sidelined and she withdrew from the Individualist Anarchist circle. In 1893 she, Robert and Helena went to live in a communal ranch in California where Miriam died early in 1894.

#### **V. Helena and William**

Helena returned to Boston in 1894 and joined the Walt Whitman Fellowship. In 1895 she met a young woman, Helen Tufts, from an impoverished WASP family, whom she gradually introduced to ideas about women's emancipation and socialism.

Helena Born and William Bailie were finally to meet through their mutual friend Archibald Simpson. His partner Flora Tilton, along with her sister Josephine, was a high-minded advocate of free love and anarchism who had campaigned for birth control from the 1870s. In April 1898 Flora held a party for Josephine and Helena who were about to head off to a remote farm to live self-sufficiently. William arrived carrying one of his baskets for Josephine. By this time he was separated from his wife Ellen and living in his workshop.

The attraction between William and Helena was instant. Both were lonely and had known little joy. In the brief time before Helena was due to depart they discovered that they had much in common, including William Morris. William had kept all his Morris pamphlets from his Manchester days, blackened by being handed round in the workshop. He sent her a precious copy of one of Morris's books which he owned – unfortunately no title has been recorded.

Despite being warned against William Bailie because he was married, Helena

met him again and they went on a picnic. They had only just encountered each other, but a deep affinity was awakened. Then Helena was off to the wilds of Epsom, New Hampshire, with Josephine. William meanwhile was left in his workshop no doubt puzzling over a book Helena had loaned him, Alice B. Stockham's *Karezza: Ethics of Marriage* (1896) which offers advice on sex without orgasm. William, bereft with loss and longing, was even driven to write a poem for his absent love and posted it to Helena in Epsom.

Separation meant that they were compelled to conduct a love affair by letters. We have only a one-sided record because Helena's letters to William have survived, though most of his to her have not. That April she responded tactfully to his poem: '[y]our lines are very sweet – they are dear to me, and I love the spirit in which you wrote them'.<sup>13</sup> Initially Helena adjusted better than William. She set about creating her own little world in the room at the top of Josephine's house regardless of the wind whistling around the hill outside: 'I have Morris' portrait on the wall and Emerson's and Whitman's conspicuous'.<sup>14</sup>

Helena was used to working in printing and publishing but the farm work was daunting. She esteemed Josephine but was not as close to her as she was to Helen Tufts who was let into the secret in the summer. William paid several snatched visits and passion intensified. They thought they were loving discreetly but of course Josephine knew what was going on long before Helena confessed that October, just before she was leaving.

Back in Boston William and Helena set up a Pure Food Restaurant and Helen Tufts moved into lodgings with them to provide a cover, just as Helena had done with Robert and Miriam. The Restaurant failed and Helena was forced again to seek work. Her writing during this period dwells bitterly on the sacrifice of yielding time to a system based on competition and profit. Her love for William and the friendships and intellectual stimulation she experienced through her participation in a group called the Walt Whitman Fellowship sustained her spirits.

In 1901 Helena died of cancer, leaving William and Helen Tufts distraught in their grief. Gradually William and Helen formed a free union and were later to marry.

## **VI. William Bailie and Helen Tufts**

In the early twentieth century William and Helen became involved with an anarchist paper called *Free Society* but broke away after the assassination of President McKinley because they both were utterly opposed to endorsing violence.

In 1903 William gave a talk for the Walt Whitman Fellowship, offering 'reminiscences and [an] estimate' of William Morris.<sup>15</sup> He and Helen were cocooned together in a single room: 'I hear him springing on the stairs', she wrote in 1906.<sup>16</sup>



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They cooked an omelette but forgot it as they made their way through Morris's *Sigurd*, spotting their dinner cold in the pan when they were going to bed.

Having abandoned his hopes for revolution and being too opposed to the state to join the Socialist Party, William kept searching. He began to accept the need for immediate municipal reform, and was denounced by his former anarchist comrades. Then in 1907 he joined the Boston City Club, working with the progressive businessman Edward Filene on plans to improve Boston. William now energetically pursued aspects of Morris's vision through routes within capitalism. William proposed well-designed homes with gardens, surrounded by green spaces, dreaming of wild wasteland and time for individual thought and creativity.

In 1911 William was much enthused by the visit of Raymond Unwin to Boston, writing an article in the *Boston Evening Transcript* on Unwin's ideas for garden cities. In his youth Unwin, like William, had been a member of the revolutionary Socialist League. A sharp-eyed Helen Tufts, now Helen Tufts Bailie, watched the two men together, recording in her diary how William wanted to reminisce about the 'the old Morris days in Manchester'. But she detected that 'the cool, practical' Unwin did not share William's interest in going over the past.<sup>17</sup>

Filene's reformed Boston was not to be and a disappointed William finally focused on running a small business, while Helen joined the respectable establishment, including the grouping that could claim ancestors who had fought the British, the Daughters of the American Revolution.

However the rebel reflexes remained. In 1928, outraged to discover that a blacklist of left and liberal speakers existed in the organisation, she mounted a campaign against it, writing an indignant pamphlet, 'Our Threatened Heritage'. As a result Helen briefly attained national notoriety. The leadership of the Daughters of the American Revolution emerged victorious; Helen was expelled. A verse in *The New York Times* caught the irony:

The fate of Mrs Bailie  
Is Oh! A very sad one  
They've put her on the black list  
Because she said they had one.<sup>18</sup>

America was in the throes of a red scare. And because William was Helen's husband, the right-wing press dug out details of William's past on the socialist and anarchist left, including his admiration for William Morris.

During the 1930s and 40s Helen Tufts Bailie came to support Roosevelt, but she retained a personal affection for the British socialist friends of Helena Born and



maintained her links with some of the American anarchists and their children, including Bertha Johnson. Like Helen Tufts Bailie, Bertha sent some material to the Labadie Collection at the University of Michigan, where the archivist Agnes Inglis was aware of the significance of communication through networks and memories. 'What an interwoven mesh society and friendship make', Bertha Johnson reflected to Agnes Inglis in 1941.

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**NOTES**

1. Samson Bryher (pseudonym of Samuel Bale), *An Account of the Labour and Socialist Movement in Bristol, Part I* (Bristol: Bristol Labour Weekly, 1929), pp. 26-28.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris*, ed. by Eugene D. LeMire (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969), p. 118.
4. *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, ed. by Norman Kelvin, 4 vols in 5 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984-1996), II, p. 403.
5. For an account of Gore's significance in the Bristol socialist movement see Mike Richardson, *The Enigma of Hugh Holmes Gore: Bristol's Nineteenth-Century Christian Socialist Solicitor* (Bristol: Radical History Group, 2016).
6. Helen Tufts, 'Biographical Introduction', in *Whitman's Ideal Democracy and Other Writings by Helena Born*, ed. by Helen Tufts (Boston: The Everett Press, 1902), p. xvi.
7. J.B.S., 'A Revolutionary Reminiscence', *The Co-operative News*, 5 August 1905, pp. 944-45.
8. William Morris to William Bailie, 6 November 1889, Helena Born Papers, Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York.
9. 'Reports Manchester', *Commonweal*, 5: 204 (7 December 1889), 391.
10. John Trevor, *My Quest for God* (London: Labour Prophet Office, 1897), pp. 241-42.
11. William Bailie, 'Bursting a Bubble', *Liberty*, 25 June 1892.
12. Miriam Daniell, 'Enthusiasm', *Liberty*, 20 August 1892, p. 4. See also Miriam Daniell, *Songs of Struggle & Sorrow: Selected from Anarchist Newspapers, 1892-1902*, ed. by Alliance of the Libertarian Left, available online: <<http://distro.libertarianleft.org/for/anarchist-classics-series/miriam-daniell-songs-of-struggle-and-sorrow/>> [last accessed 16 October 2018]; several of her poems are also quoted in Sheila Rowbotham, *Rebel Crossings: New Women, Free Lovers, and Radicals in Britain and the United States* (London: Verso, 2016).
13. Helena Born to William Bailie, no date (postmark 22 April) 1898, Helena Born Papers, Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Archives, New York.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Helen Tufts, 'Boston Letter', *The Demonstrator*, 20 May 1903, p. 3.
16. Helen Tufts Journal, 16 May 1906, p. 129, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.
17. *Ibid.*, 11 May 1911, p. 197.
18. Newspaper Cutting, *ibid.*, 11 July 1928, p. 217.