



# Editorial

---

In his lecture, 'Art: A Serious Thing', delivered on 12 December 1882 at the Leek School of Art, Morris emphasised the importance that he attached to the militancy of the nineteenth-century labour movement:

I have taken note of many strikes and I must needs say without circumlocution that with many of these I have heartily sympathized: but when the day comes that there is a serious strike of workmen against the poisoning of the air with smoke or the waters with filth, I shall think that art is getting on indeed [...].<sup>1</sup>

It hardly needs to be mentioned that Morris's vision of an ecological strike, in which he imagines workers making general, social demands that go beyond the immediate context of any particular industrial dispute, is hauntingly prescient during the early twenty-first century.

The Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg, who has become a figurehead within the contemporary ecological movement, recently urged people to acknowledge the scale of the 'existential crisis' associated with the effects of anthropogenic climate change.<sup>2</sup> She has encouraged people to participate in a global climate strike due to commence on 20 September 2019. Climate change knows no borders or boundaries, but its consequences are already, and will continue to be, unevenly distributed along class and colour lines. This concerns everyone, and Morrisians everywhere and nowhere should not hesitate to support the climate strike, as well as related acts of civil disobedience and mass protest.

Extreme and abnormal weather events are now the new normal: hurricanes, tornadoes, heat waves that cause raging wildfires and droughts, bursts of excessive rainfall that lead to flash floods. Merely to list some of the wider effects of the changing climate is to invoke images of an apocalypse: ocean dead zones, shrinking glaciers, melting ice caps and rising sea levels, forced climate migration, tipping points and feedback loops, the sixth mass extinction.<sup>3</sup> But these images do not belong to a dystopian future; they constitute and define our present. Why, one might ask, does it make sense to continue cultivating habits of critical detachment of the kind traditionally associated with academic or scholarly reflection when the situation so clearly and urgently demands collective and political intervention? It is a valid question. And what would it mean for a utopian thinker such as Morris to know that the horizon of the possible is, and has been for some time, structured in advance in a way that we are only now beginning to grasp?

As Elizabeth Carolyn Miller has written in her introduction to a recent special issue of *Victorian Studies*, such circumstances 'dictate [...]' that climate change must move into every

---

field of academic debate and every part of the university curriculum'.<sup>4</sup> For those with an interest in the literature, culture and politics of the nineteenth century, it is doubly important to recognise Victorian England's 'unique historical role in cultivating the fossil fuel economy and the resulting surge in greenhouse gas emissions'.<sup>5</sup> Morris was a dedicated opponent of what Andreas Malm has characterised as the regime of fossil capital, created during the nineteenth century, and which 'has since been reproduced and enlarged'.<sup>6</sup> Malm offers the hopeful reminder that 'anything built over time can potentially be torn down (or escaped)', but adds the tempered warning that the 'famed "window of opportunity" for abolishing the fossil economy within tolerable bounds – even returning it to safer conditions – is still there', but the 'point of *too late* is coming closer by the day, and the closer it comes, the more swift and comprehensive the emissions cuts must be'.<sup>7</sup> Malm's book was published in 2016, and since that date, the darkening clouds of the political horizon and the further intensification of inter-imperialist conflict have made it less, not more, likely that the rulers of the current social and economic dispensation will see through the necessary changes. Morris's revolutionary ecosocialism has, of course, long been a topic of concern for this *Journal*, but new submissions on the subject that take account of the challenges and burdens associated with the present conjuncture are always welcome. Let us, in the meantime, continue to educate, agitate and organise for a 'serious strike [...] against the poisoning of the air'.

\*

In the current issue of the *Journal*, I am pleased to introduce three illuminating and historically informed articles that deal with a wide range of Morrisian matters. Anne Anderson's article on Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'lost' gifts to Jane Morris combines detailed descriptions of works which were sold at the 1939 Kelmscott Manor Sale with speculation on what these works might have to say about the relationship between the artist and his muse. It builds upon the research presented in her earlier article, "I thank you so much for thinking me still worthy of making so lovely a present to": Gifts from Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Jane Morris', which appeared in the *Journal* in 2015. Thomas Spray considers the links between the Old English poem *Beowulf*, the Old Norse *Grettis Saga* and Morris's late romances, suggestively outlining the late-Victorian academic and philological contexts of Morris's various projects of translation and literary creation. Stephen Basdeo, meanwhile, examines the significance of Morris's references to Robin Hood in *A Dream of John Ball*, suggesting some of the ways in which Morris laid claim to earlier radical mediations of the outlaw's legend in the work of the eighteenth-century antiquary Joseph Ritson. Peter Faulkner's obituaries of John Purkis and Godfrey Rubens follow this editorial.

Owen Holland  
Editor

---

#### NOTES

1. *The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris*, ed. by Eugene D. LeMire (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969), p. 51.
2. Jonathan Watts, 'Greta Thunberg backs climate general strike to force leaders to act', *The Guardian*,

- 22 April 2019, available online: <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/22/greta-thunberg-backs-general-strike-climate-change-environment>> [last accessed 10 June 2019].
3. For a fuller elaboration, if you can stomach it, see David Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth: A Story of the Future* (London: Allen Lane, 2019).
  4. Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, 'Climate Change and Victorian Studies: Introduction', *Victorian Studies*, 60: 4 (Summer 2018), 537-542 (538).
  5. *Ibid.*, p. 539.
  6. Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London: Verso, 2016), p. 13.
  7. *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 10.