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# Morris and Burne-Jones at Oxford

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I am led to write this article by having read once again, this time in Julian Beecroft's *William Morris*, published by Flame Tree Publishing in 2019, the statement that Morris read Theology at Oxford. Beecroft writes that in 1855 Morris's future 'seemed to lie with the Church', but he then adds: '[h]owever, bored with theology – the subject he was supposed to be studying – he immersed himself instead in medieval history'.<sup>1</sup> But this does not make sense, as the degree did not exist until 1869.<sup>2</sup>

Born on 24 March 1834 in Walthamstow, Morris attended Marlborough College from 1848 to Christmas 1851. In 1852 he studied with the Rev. F.B. Guy in preparation for Oxford, and in July he matriculated at Exeter College, Oxford, formally entering the college by fulfilling its academic requirement, with the intention of being ordained.<sup>3</sup> He went up to Oxford in January 1853, where he met Edward Jones, also intending to be ordained, and they became lifelong friends.<sup>4</sup> Because of their intended ordination, the two undergraduates would have attended a short series of lectures by the Regius Professor of Divinity on the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England, Joseph Butler's *Analogy of Religion*, and the Greek New Testament, but the degree course taken by both men was the most popular Arts degree, in Classics, known at Oxford as Greats and focusing on Ancient Rome, Ancient Greece, Latin, Greek and classical philosophy, particularly the works of Plato and Aristotle. Greats consisted of two parts, five terms of Mods or Moderations, followed, for those successful in Mods, by seven terms of the full Greats course. The degree thus takes four academic years, one year more than most degree courses at Oxford and elsewhere.<sup>5</sup>

Penelope Baker, the archivist at Exeter College, has kindly supplied me with invaluable information about Morris and Jones at the college. Information from the Entrance Book for 2 June 1852 shows both men as 'admitted', while a note under

‘Jones’ adds: ‘resided full term but did not take his degree’. The archivist’s useful summary runs as follows:

Burne-Jones seems to have consistently gained a second class, and gone up to the third year a term before Morris, who is always listed in the third-class column. Despite this it seems that Morris gained a degree in 1856, whereas Burne-Jones left without a degree.<sup>6</sup>

If we go back over the period the two men were at Oxford, we find Morris in the summer vacation of 1854 visiting Northern France and particularly enjoying Gothic architecture. He met Cormell Price, who became his very good friend ‘Crom’. In the following year, Morris read extensively in two of his favourite writers, Chaucer and Malory, and in the summer he went with Burne-Jones and another friend to France again. Here, he and Burne-Jones made the important decision to devote their lives to Art rather than the Church: Burne-Jones would learn to paint by working with Dante Gabriel Rossetti, while Morris would train as an architect by entering the practice of the successful Oxford architect G.E. Street. On 29 September Morris wrote to Price: ‘[m]y life is going to become a burden to me, for I am going (beginning from Tuesday next) to read for six hours a day at Livy, Ethics, &c. – please pity me’.<sup>7</sup> Kelvin’s note explains that, having made the decision to devote his life to Art, Morris was keen to complete his university studies by reading for his Final Schools, and to enter Street’s practice as soon as possible.<sup>8</sup> A letter to Price dated 6 October reassured him that Morris was intending to return to Oxford ‘next term’:

I am certainly coming back, though I should not have done so if it had not been for my Mother; I don’t think even if I get through Greats that I shall take my B.A. because they won’t allow you not to sign the 39 Articles unless you declare you are ‘extra Ecclesiam Anglicanum’ which I’m not, and don’t intend to be, and I won’t sign the 39 Articles. Of course I should like to stay up at Oxford for a much longer time, but (I told you, didn’t I?) I am going if I can to be an architect, and I am too old already and there is no time to lose, I MUST make haste.<sup>9</sup>

It is not clear why Morris was so concerned about the Thirty-Nine Articles. Kelvin tells us that ‘[i]n the event, Morris signed and took his B.A. in 1856’.<sup>10</sup>

Morris wrote to his mother on 11 November 1855 to explain his decision not to enter the church but instead to go into Street’s chambers in Oxford, where he met Philip Webb.<sup>11</sup> He took his M.A., and moved to London when Street moved his

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practice there, sharing rooms with Burne-Jones.<sup>12</sup> In the 2018 book *Edward Burne-Jones*, edited by Alison Smith, the first chapter, by Elizabeth Prettejohn, is entitled ‘Burne-Jones: Intellectual, Designer, People’s Man’, and in it she argues that Burne-Jones was unique among Victorian artists in having been educated at Oxford rather than at a school of art: he was an Oxford intellectual, as his choice of subject-matter frequently shows.<sup>13</sup> His Oxford career was made possible by ‘an enlightened institution, King Edward’s School, Birmingham’, and there, Prettejohn notes:

the young Burne-Jones, evincing intellectual promise, was encouraged to transfer, aged fifteen, from the commercial to the classical department, in which he could learn Greek as well as Latin, like a gentleman, and prepare for university. He duly entered Exeter College, Oxford, in 1853, and there began his lifelong friendship with William Morris, who had been at an elite public school (Marlborough) but was impressed by the superior classical knowledge of his new friend, trained at King Edward’s.<sup>14</sup>

We might argue that Morris’s education in Classics was also of great importance, despite the fact that, as MacCarthy notes, in his *Socialist Diary* for 27 January 1887, Morris described himself as someone who loathed ‘all Classical art and literature’; in mitigation, MacCarthy goes on to state that Morris considered Homer ‘a supra-classicist’ – for him, *The Odyssey* was not so much a work of literature as a work that had grown up from ‘the very hearts of the people’.<sup>15</sup> In her edition of *William Morris’s Socialist Diary* Florence Boos notes that the entry for 26 January 1887 relates to a visit by Morris to the South Kensington Museum at which he was shown some ‘scraps of woven stuff from the tombs of Upper Egypt’ and had been struck by ‘the contrast between the bald ugliness of the Classical pieces and the great beauty of the Byzantine [which] was a pleasing thing to me, who loathe so all Classical art and literature’.<sup>16</sup> Boos notes in a footnote that ‘these comments from the author of *The Life and Death of Jason*, twelve classical *Earthly Paradise* tales and translations of Homer and Virgil, should not be taken too literally; within the week he was working on his ‘Odyssey’ at Rottingdean’.<sup>17</sup> Morris’s writings show his knowledge of the Classics as much as they do his reading of Chaucer and Malory. Both he and Burne-Jones drew confidently on having read Greats (rather than Theology) at Oxford.

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#### NOTES

1. Julian Beecroft, *William Morris* (London: Flame Tree Publishing, 2019), p. 14.
2. See Daniel Inman, *The Making of Modern English Theology: God and the Academy at Oxford, 1833-1945* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), pp. 119-23.
3. Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (London: Faber and Faber 1994), p. 53.

- (Afterwards MacCarthy, *William Morris*).
4. See Fiona MacCarthy, *The Last Pre-Raphaelite: Edward Burne-Jones and the Victorian Imagination* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011). This book gives an impelling account of how 'Edward or "Ted" Jones, born into respectable poverty in Birmingham, transformed himself into Sir Edward Burne-Jones, one of the great figures of the Victorian age' (p. 1).
  5. See Richard Jenkyns, 'The Beginnings of Greats, 1800-1872: Classical Studies', in *The History of the University of Oxford*, vol. VI, *Nineteenth-Century Oxford, Part 1*, ed. by M.G. Brook and M.C. Curthoys (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) pp. 513-19.
  6. The archivist's summary was sent to me by email on 3 February 2019. It is based on the information in the college archives in which the two men's results for the college examinations, known as 'Collections', are recorded as follows: Collections Lent Term 1853 – First Year – Class II Jones, Class III Morris; Collections Michaelmas Term 1853 – First Year – Class II Jones, Class III Morris; Collections Lent Term 1854 – Second year – Class II Jones, Class III Morris; Collections Michaelmas Term 1854 – Third Year – Class II Jones, Second Year – Class III Morris; Collections Lent Term 1855 – Third Year – Class II Jones, Class III Morris.
  7. *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, ed. by Norman Kelvin, 4 vols in 5 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984-96), I, p. 23.
  8. *Ibid.*
  9. *Ibid.*
  10. *Ibid.*, p. 24
  11. *Ibid.* For further discussion of this period in Morris's life, see MacCarthy, *William Morris*, pp. 95-98.
  12. MacCarthy, *William Morris*, p. 109.
  13. Elizabeth Prettejohn, 'Burne-Jones: Intellectual, Designer, People's Man', in *Edward Burne-Jones*, ed. by Alison Smith (London: Tate Publishing, 2018), pp. 13-21 (14-15). Prettejohn concludes: 'His was the approach of an intellectual, not an artisan' (p. 15).
  14. *Ibid.*, p. 15
  15. MacCarthy, *William Morris*, p. 562. Here MacCarthy is quoting from Morris's contribution to the *Pall Mall Gazette* for 2 February 1886, in which he responded to the editor's request to specify his one hundred favourite books.
  16. *William Morris's Socialist Diary*, ed. by Florence S. Boos (London and New York: Journeyman Press, 1985), p. 23.
  17. *Ibid.*, p. 23, n. 24.