

A Reassessment of *A Dream of John Ball*

Nicholas Salmon

The origin of this article dates back to 1992 when I obtained my PhD for a thesis on 'William Morris: The Political Vision 1883–1890'. I had the privilege of having the late John Goode as my external examiner (although it didn't seem such a privilege at the time as anyone who has taken a viva voce will appreciate). Despite John Goode being in extremely poor health – indeed, he sadly died shortly after our meeting – we had a lively discussion which centred around our respective views about the propaganda value of *A Dream of John Ball*. He had very positive views about the work which he had set out in his paper 'William Morris and the Dream of Order' in the book *Literature and Politics in the Nineteenth Century* edited by John Lucas. I, on the other hand, always had reservations about *A Dream of John Ball* as a successful work of propaganda. This article is, in part, my reply to John Goode.

A Dream of John Ball, was serialised in *Commonweal* in eleven instalments between 13 November 1886 and 22 January 1887. According to Sparling, Morris originally had the idea for a serialised story about the Peasants' Revolt in the early autumn of 1886. Initially he hoped that it might be written by one of the other members of the League.¹ This unnamed individual could well have been Bax, Morris's collaborator on the chapters concerning feudalism in 'Socialism from the Root Up', who had expressed an interest in the fourteenth century and even presented Morris with an article his brother had written on a yeoman ancestor in Surrey.² Whatever the identity of this individual, however, he eventually refused on the grounds that he lacked an 'epic faculty', an excuse to which Morris is reported to have replied: 'Epic faculty be hanged for a yarn! Confound it, man, you've only got to tell a story!'³

In the end the potential readership such a story would attract led him to write it himself. During the summer and early autumn of 1886, while continuing his collaboration with Bax on 'Socialism from the Root Up', he refreshed his knowledge of the social and political background of the fourteenth century by re-reading Froissart's *Chronicles of England, France and Spain* and familiarising himself with the work of contemporary historians such as Freeman, Green and Stubbs.⁴ The project immediately gripped his imagination and he found time to utilise his more detailed historical research in a trilogy of lectures collectively entitled 'England, As It Was, As It Is, and As It Might Be'. The first of these, 'Early England', was delivered before the Hammersmith Branch of the Socialist League at Kelmscott House on 12 December 1886.⁵ It was followed by 'Feudal England' on 13 February 1887 and 'Art and Industry in the 14th Century' on 15 May 1887.⁶

The choice of John Ball's rebellion as a subject for dramatic interpretation once

more illustrated Morris responding to contemporary historical and political developments. During the 1870s and 1880s the events of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 had undergone a significant historical reassessment. The old view that the rebellion was an uncoordinated expression of discontent gave way to a more sophisticated interpretation of it as a watershed in the consciousness and organisation of ordinary people. In particular it came to be seen as the first example of common grievances finding expression through the strength of social solidarity. The prominent Victorian writer Stubbs, an historian whom Morris had read and admired,⁷ went so far as to describe the event as a 'revolutionary uprising . . . one of the most portentous phenomena to be found in the whole of our history'.⁸

This reassessment of the Peasants' Revolt was seized upon by the infant socialist movement in England, and subsequently transformed into a powerful revolutionary precedent to be exploited for propaganda purposes. The architect of this reorientation was Hyndman. He recognised the potential that folk heroes such as John Ball and Wat Tyler offered as a means of developing a myth of an indigenous socialist tradition with which to counteract the monopoly of socialist ideas from the continent. In *The Historical Basis of Socialism in England* (1883) he was quite open in expressing these intentions. Alluding to the propaganda to be derived from the careful representation of historical events in England's past, he urged his disciples 'to show that the idea of socialism is no foreign importation into England. Tyler, Cade, Ball, Kett, More, Bellers, Spence, Owen, read to me like sound English names: not a foreigner in the whole batch'.⁹

There has been a tendency in recent criticism to overlook the fact that Morris was one of Hyndman's disciples during his formative months in the socialist movement. Although the influence of Hyndman on his subsequent political development never rivalled that of Marx and Engels, he remained sympathetic to the essential 'Englishness' of his outlook. Like Hyndman, Morris adopted an insular rather than an international stance when viewing the possibilities of revolutionary change. All his propaganda activities were undertaken with the intention of precipitating an *English* revolution which would restore specifically *English* working practices and values. At no point in his voluminous socialist writings does he consider how this revolution would be viewed by hostile bourgeois states on the continent, or how it would be sustained in a world still reliant on the economics of competition. Viewed in this context *A Dream of John Ball* appears as much as a celebration of national identity than of revolutionary aspirations.

Two versions of the story exist: that which appeared in *Commonweal* and the more familiar version published by Reeves and Turner in April 1888¹⁰ and subsequently included in the *Collected Works*. Morris made about one hundred additions and alterations to the original text, as well as dividing it up into formal chapters.¹¹ The *Commonweal* version appeared as a single uninterrupted narrative. The vast majority of these changes were designed to either put back the time of year of the action from late summer to midsummer, or to make the detail of fourteenth century life more vivid and accurate. Hence, the 'late summer grass' of the *Commonweal* version becomes the 'midsummer grass', while the upstairs 'rooms' in Will Green's house are changed to the more realistic single 'chamber or

loft'.¹² The change in the timing of the action was obviously made for the sake of accuracy as the main events of the Peasants' Revolt took place in June 1381.

There are, however, some more important changes to the text which are worth noting. The first of these occurs at the very beginning of the story where after a comment on William Cobbett's 'sweeping Wiltshire downs', Morris inserted an extensive passage describing a dream the narrator had in which he had come across a medieval town while 'journeying . . . down the well-remembered reaches of the Thames betwixt Streatley and Wallingford'.¹³ A second change is made at the end of what became chapter 2, and consists of the addition of the five stanzas of a song that the narrator hears while at Will Green's house. This appears to have been written especially for the revision of the book and is therefore one of the few examples of original poetry Morris produced in the late 1880s. Finally, a number of alterations were made to John Ball's famous speech on fellowship in order to clarify its meaning.

The most extensive reference to the Peasants' Revolt that Morris made prior to his collaboration with Bax on 'Socialism from the Root Up' was in an article entitled 'The Lord Mayor's Show' which appeared in *Justice* on 15 November 1884. This – along with one or two other scattered allusions – indicates that Morris considered the rebellion to have been important as an early example of the people being mobilised for a genuine political purpose, and because its leaders expressed what appeared to be socialist aspirations. Morris's reason for writing 'The Lord Mayor's Show' was the decision made by the authorities in charge of the 1884 procession to adopt as one of its themes the murder of Wat Tyler outside St. Bartholomew's Church at the height of the revolt. Morris used this as an opportunity to attack the popular bourgeois notion that Tyler had been a 'ruffian agitator' at the head of an uninformed rabble 'of foolish and ignorant armed peasants, knowing not what they asked for'.¹⁴ On the contrary, he informed his readers, the peasants had been pursuing a serious political purpose:

we need make no mistake about the cause for which Wat Tyler and his worthier associate John Ball fell; they were fighting against the fleecing then in fashion, viz.; serfdom or villeinage, which was already beginning to wane before the advance of the industrial guilds.¹⁵

Morris went on to quote Froissart's *Chronicles* in order to show that in pursuing this aim a difference in consciousness could be perceived between the peasants and their leaders. For the people the rebellion was about personal freedom and economic independence. They aspired to nothing more than the abolition of the feudal obligations that bound them to their masters. Leaders such as John Ball, on the other hand, looked beyond these limited aims and viewed the rebellion as the first step on the way to destroying the feudal hierarchy and replacing it with a new society based on equality and fellowship. In 'The Lord Mayor's Show' Morris illustrated this by quoting from one of the open-air speeches Froissart records John Ball making outside his church in Kent: 'Ah ye good people, the matter goeth not well to pass in England, nor shall do till every thing be common, and there be no villeins nor gentlemen, but that we all be united together'.¹⁶ In 'Feudal England', a lecture he delivered shortly after the end of the

serialisation of *A Dream of John Ball*, he went on to argue that it was the advanced ideas of men 'like Wat Tyler, Jack Straw, and John Ball' which caused them to suffer 'for daring to be before their time'.¹⁷ Nevertheless, despite the socialistic aspirations of John Ball, Morris never considered the Peasants' Revolt to have occupied a central position in the revolutionary process.

To appreciate just why this was so, and to understand the contemporary significance of *A Dream of John Ball* to the readers of *Commonweal*, it is necessary to consider the book in relation to the conclusions reached in 'Socialism from the Root Up'. Morris began collaborating on this joint venture with Bax in the early part of May 1886 and the first chapter entitled 'Ancient Society' appeared in the 15th May edition of the paper. Thereafter three distinct phases can be detected in the publication of this important work. The first covered the period May to October 1886, when thirteen chapters were written tracing the development of human civilisation from barbarism to capitalism, and concluded with an assessment of the utopian socialists such as Owen, Saint Simon and Fourier. The second phases commenced in February 1887 and ran until August of the same year. During this period a further seven chapters were produced which detailed the origins of scientific socialism and the theories of Karl Marx. Finally – and somewhat out of the blue – two further chapters appeared between March and May 1888¹⁸ which described the achievements of the contemporary socialist movement and offered suggestions as to the organisation of society after the revolution.

It is clear both from his letters and his *Socialist Diary* that Morris found the concentration required in grappling with the theoretical aspects of socialism one of the most taxing features of his propaganda work. Therefore it is hardly surprising that he chose to follow each period of sustained concentration on 'Socialism from the Root Up' with a withdrawal from the project. These rest periods were dedicated to the production of new works of creative propaganda: the first phase to *A Dream of John Ball*; the second to *The Tables Turned; or Nupkins Awakened* and some of the socialist 'Dialogues'; and the third to *The House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the Mountains*. In varying degrees these works were written as a means of exploring and clarifying some of the more important ideas demonstrated in drier – and more theoretical – terms in 'Socialism from the Root Up'.

A Dream of John Ball is probably the best example of this. In the chapters of 'Socialism from the Root Up' published in *Commonweal* immediately prior to the serialisation of the novel, Morris and Bax were principally occupied with tracing the various stages in the progress of human civilisation up to, and including, the advent of capitalism. Although some attention was paid to 'primitive communism' and 'ancient classical civilisation',¹⁹ their argument was mainly concerned with the nature of medieval feudalism and its subsequent transformation into capitalism.

According to their account two periods could be identified in the Middle Ages which were linked by a transitional phase in the second half of the fourteenth century. The first of these was characterised by the nation's adherence to a set of principles which they termed 'the theory of Medieval Society'.²⁰ The temporal basis of this theory is described in chapter II of 'Socialism from the Root Up' as

. . . the existence of an unbroken chain of service from the serf up to the emperor, and of protection from the emperor down to the serf; it recognises no absolute ownership of land; God is the one owner of the earth, the emperor and his kings are his vice-gerents there, who may devolve their authority to their feudal vassals, and they in turn to theirs, and so on until it reaches the serf, the proletarian, on whom all this hierarchy lives, and who has no rights as regard his own lord except protection from others outside the manor that he lives and works on; to him his personal lord was the incarnation of the compulsion and protection of God, which all men looked for and acknowledged.²¹

The reference to God is significant, because Morris and Bax went on to argue that this temporal hierarchy was only possible because of the existence of a distinctive form of religion. What distinguished the early Middle Ages from classical times was that the individualistic devotion encouraged by early Christianity had evolved into a genuine fellowship of the Church. The old idea that the Church should exist in isolation from the State gave way to the view that participation in both temporal and spiritual matters was essential in order to foster and encourage heavenly virtues. This meant that the Church not only acted as the link between the earthly and heavenly kingdoms, but also sought to influence men to adopt the values of equality, fraternity and fellowship in their temporal affairs. As Morris and Bax put it, the task of the Church was to bring 'the kingdom of heaven to earth by breathing its spirit into the temporal power'.²²

Despite these laudable sentiments – and some notable achievements in architecture and handicrafts – by 1350 the basis of medieval society was already being undermined. Even taking into account the mediative efforts of the Church, feudalism remained an oppressive system. By concentrating power in the hands of a few it was inevitable that before long the more unscrupulous would seek to abuse their privileges for personal gain. When such abuses occurred they were often met with open rebellion amongst the serfs. Although these uprisings never seriously threatened the stability of society, they had a psychological significance in encouraging the people to develop an independence of mind and desire for personal liberty. As an example of this Morris and Bax cited the exploits of Robin Hood (a figure who is referred to with admiration in *A Dream of John Ball*).

The stability of medieval society was also threatened by the growth of the guilds. The guilds originated in the vestiges of ideas surviving from the primitive communism of the tribes. At first they existed merely as types of benefit societies which operated within the existing framework of feudalism. From this base evolved the guilds-merchant which were associations for the protection of trade within the various handicrafts. The crucial development, however, occurred near the end of the early period of feudalism when the guilds-merchant in turn underwent a transformation. They were either assimilated into the existing corporations of the free towns, or radically reformed into new craft-guilds with the aim of protecting and regulating the handicrafts.

The rise of the guilds and free towns was accompanied by changes in the ancient conditions of serfdom. Some of the field serfs began to drift to the towns where they were obliged, in order to obtain work, to become affiliated to the crafts-guilds. Although nominally 'free men' they were forced to assume

subservient positions in the workshops, thus laying the foundations for the future class-based society. At the same time another group was able to escape the restraints of serfdom altogether and assume the status of 'free labourers'. This group was subsequently to become the copyholding class, farming land whose tenure remained unfree. The significance for Morris and Bax of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 was that it aided this disintegration of the old order:

This movement towards the break-up of serfdom is marked by the peasant's war in England led by Wat Tyler and John Ball in Kent, and John Lister (dyer) in East Anglia, which was the answer of the combined yeomen, emancipated and unemancipated serfs, to the attempt of the nobles to check the movement.²³

This analysis raises the awkward question of how a contemporary audience would have viewed the rebellion in *A Dream of John Ball*, and, more specifically how they would have interpreted the role of Ball himself. As was noted, in his earlier references to the Peasants' Revolt written without Bax, Morris had been attracted to the character of Ball because he appeared to be advocating a socialistic philosophy in advance of his time. In this respect Morris would no doubt have agreed with Green's assessment that 'Priests like Ball openly preached the doctrines of communism'.²⁴ This view of John Ball has persisted to this day. John Goode was an influential advocate of this view. In his important essay, 'William Morris and the Dream of Revolution', he argued forcefully that what marks out John Ball from his followers is his more sophisticated 'political consciousness'.²⁵ He is a 'theorist' who raises the level of the rebellion 'beyond that of liberty to that of equality'.²⁶

Although on the surface there is much to commend this view, Ball's ideas seem far less revolutionary when viewed in the light of the conclusions reached in 'Socialism from the Root Up'. According to Morris and Bax the Peasants' Revolt broke out in response to the misery and corruption that accompanied the inevitable disintegration of feudalism. This fell into decline because the temporal authorities were unable to uphold the theoretical obligations and duties on which the feudal hierarchy relied. Likewise, their spiritual counterparts failed to convince the people that they shared a community of interests that could be translated into actual social change. As the Medieval Church had attempted to do this by participating in temporal matters it, too, had become irreparably corrupted by association. Against this background it is difficult to see John Ball's advocacy of 'the Fellowship of the Church'²⁷ as anything more than a call for a return to the ideals of Medieval Christianity somehow cleansed of complicity with the secular power.

John Ball's contradictory role in the rebellion can be traced back to these religious beliefs.²⁸ Although the Medieval Church's emphasis on the ideals of fellowship and equality were in many ways communistic in appearance, they were in fact a manifestation of a distinctly religious philosophy. The aim at all times was to do God's will upon earth. This leads to the inconsistencies in Ball's position. The Medieval Church, and to an extent Ball himself, shared the contemporary belief in the irrelevance of human will in relation to an omniscient God. This means that Ball, in attempting to change the course of human history

by pursuing his own personal aspirations, is actually negating the religion from which they spring. If his rebellion were to be successful it would also imply that it was possible to exercise free-will as a means of overcoming existing social factors in determining the direction of human history. For this reason the narrator, in order to allow Ball to come to terms with his own role in the historical process, must reveal to him his alienation, then the gap that exists between his own desires and the social forces underlying his rebellion, and, finally, show that these forces are the result of the existence of laws determining the progress of human history.

John Ball's education in the truths of historical determinism is acted out symbolically against the gradual dawning of a new day. It begins with the narrator revealing how Ball is alienated from both the spiritual and temporal realities of his own age. He points out that the ideal of 'the Fellowship of the Church'²⁹ is already anachronistic in a world where the feudal hierarchy on which it relied had begun to disintegrate through corruption and abuse. The ethics of individuality are now more important to the priesthood than those of community: 'as thou thyself saidst . . . with a few words spoken and a little huddling-up of the truth, with a few pennies paid, and a few masses sung, thou mightest have had a good place on this earth and in . . . heaven'.³⁰ These ethics had also begun to pervade the consciousness of the ordinary people. As has been noted, the men who create the rebellion that Ball leads are not seeking equality or community but personal freedom and liberty. They are asserting their right to self-determination.

John Ball also has to accept that the direction his rebellion takes is diametrically opposed to that which he had hoped. Far from aiding the growth of fellowship, the release from serfdom led instead to the break-up of feudalism. This was a development that Morris and Bax had again referred to in 'Socialism from the Root Up'. They argued that the freeing of labour was the first precondition for capitalist production. Once it had been achieved medieval society was characterised by the rise of individualism. This manifested itself most obviously in the establishment of the wage relationship and the decline in influence of the Church in temporal affairs. It is an illustration of the close link between 'Socialism from the Root Up' and *A Dream of John Ball* that the narrator's explanation for these changes – made amidst the gloom of the summer's night – is a verbatim re-writing of this analysis.

The final stage of John Ball's education occurs just before the dawning of the new day. Having confronted the reality of his own alienation and the impending destruction of his own milieu, he now has to face the fact that the course of history cannot be influenced by man's individual will – however noble his aspirations – but is pre-determined by events forged in the past and encountered in the present. It is worth pointing out that for the readers of *Commonweal*, familiar with 'Socialism from the Root Up', this would already have been apparent. They would have realised that John Ball's aspirations for fellowship had been frustrated precisely because he was out of touch with the historical origins of the rebellion he led. In the case of Ball himself, however, it is left to the narrator to illustrate how the destruction of feudalism was the crucial factor that enabled the rise of capitalistic exploitation.

In the chapters of 'Socialism from the Root Up' published prior to the appearance of *A Dream of John Ball*, Morris and Bax had never carried their

critique of capitalism further than an account of the events surrounding the Paris Commune of 1871. As it was their declared intention to resume the theoretical work early in 1887, Morris appears to have been reluctant to anticipate any of the conclusions they might come to concerning the ultimate demise of capitalism and the subsequent reorganisation of society. This decision undermined the terms under which he was able to give John Ball any hope for the future. After the closely argued re-education Ball receives from the narrator, the latter's bland assertion – unsubstantiated by either historical fact or contemporary events – that despite everything the 'Fellowship of Man shall endure'³¹ simply lacks credibility.

As a work of propaganda *A Dream of John Ball* remains ambiguous precisely because of the complexity of the issues it confronts. Its greatest achievement is in giving dramatic expression to the laws of history. By confirming the progression from feudalism to capitalism it establishes determinism as a living principle underlying all human history. Both John Ball and the narrator are thereby given a more acute perception of the forces influencing the changes towards which they are working. Unfortunately, all this is achieved at the expense of acknowledging the limitations confronting the revolutionary consciousness. An individual vision cannot be transformed into effective social action unless it is shared by others. Until this occurs the visionary has no alternative but to remain alienated in the world he wished to transform. Hence in the end John Ball must return to a rebellion that is to have consequences diametrically opposed to those he intended, while the narrator is left to face the prospect of nineteenth century capitalism.

NOTES

- ¹ H. H. Sparling, *The Kelmscott Press and William Morris, Master Craftsman*, (London 1924), pp. 103-4.
- ² Philip Henderson (ed.), *The Letters of William Morris to His Family and Friends*, (London: Longmans 1950), p. 254.
- ³ *The Kelmscott Press and William Morris, Master Craftsman*, op. cit., pp. 103-4.
- ⁴ Michael Holzman in 'The Encouragement and Warning of History: William Morris's *A Dream of John Ball*' – in *Socialism and the Literary Artistry of William Morris*, Florence Boos and Carole Silver eds., (Columbia: University of Missouri Press 1990) – has suggested that Morris may also have gained inspiration for incidents in the book from Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles* and Thomas Walsingham's *Historia Anglicana*, cf. pp. 102-3. According to Carole Silver, Morris had been utilising images and motifs from Froissart since he wrote *The Defence of Guenevere*. See *The Romance of William Morris*, (Athens: Ohio University Press 1981), p. 18.
- ⁵ Eugene LeMire (ed.), *The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris*, (Detroit, Wayne State University Press 1969), p. 260.
- ⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 261 and 264.

- ⁷ William Morris and E. Belfort Bax, *Socialism, Its Growth and Outcome*, (London 1893), p. 76.
- ⁸ *The Constitutional History of England*, (Oxford 1887: 3rd edition), II, p. 471.
- ⁹ H. M. Hyndman, *The Historical Basis of Socialism in England*, (London 1883), p. 4.
- ¹⁰ H. Buxton Forman, *The Books of William Morris: With Some Account of his doings in Literature and in the Allied Arts*, (London 1897), p. 138.
- ¹¹ These textual changes have rarely been appreciated. Michael Holzman in 'The Encouragement and Warning of History: William Morris's *A Dream of John Ball*', op. cit., for example, after making the valid point that *A Dream of John Ball* should be read in relation to the serialisation of 'Socialism from the Root Up' in *Commonweal*, then quotes from the revised edition without apparently appreciating that Morris made any changes. Details of these changes can be found in my article 'The Revision of *A Dream of John Ball*', *The Journal of the William Morris Society*, 10 (Autumn 1993), pp. 15-17.
- ¹² May Morris (ed.), *The Collected Works of William Morris*, (London: Longman, Green and Co. 1910-15), XVI, pp. 218 and 258.
- ¹³ *ibid.*, XVI, p. 215.
- ¹⁴ *Justice*, 15 November 1884, p. 2.
- ¹⁵ *ibid.*, 15 November 1884, p. 2.
- ¹⁶ *ibid.*, 15 November 1884, p. 2.
- ¹⁷ *Commonweal*, 10 September 1887, p. 290.
- ¹⁸ Just how 'out of the blue' the appearance of these chapters were is illustrated in E. P. Thompson's *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, (London: Merlin Press 1977), where it is stated confidently that these articles appeared 'during 1886 and 1887' (p. 391).
- ¹⁹ *Commonweal*, 15 May 1886, p. 53.
- ²⁰ *ibid.*, 22 May 1886, p. 61.
- ²¹ *ibid.*, 22 May 1886, p. 61.
- ²² *ibid.*, 22 May 1886, p. 61.
- ²³ *ibid.*, 22 May 1886, p. 61.
- ²⁴ *History of the English People*, (London 1878), II, p. 475.
- ²⁵ 'William Morris and the Dream of Order', in *Literature and Politics in the Nineteenth Century*, John Lucas (ed.), (London: Methuen and Co. 1976), p. 249.
- ²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 250.
- ²⁷ *The Collected Works of William Morris*, op. cit., XVI, p. 233.
- ²⁸ Morris clearly wanted to emphasise the religious nature of Ball's message. For this reason he based the style of his language on that used by Froissart. The latter has John Ball delivering the following speech: 'My good friends, matters cannot go on well in England until all things shall be in common; when there shall be neither vassals nor lords; when the lords shall be no more masters than ourselves. How ill they behave towards us! for what reason do they thus hold us in bondage? Are we not all descended from the same parents, Adam and Eve? And what can they show, or what reason can they give, why they should

be more masters than ourselves?' *The Chronicles of England, France, Spain
Etc.*, (London, J. M. Dent & Co. 1906), pp. 207-208.

²⁹ *The Collected Works of William Morris*, op. cit., XVI, p. 233.

³⁰ *Commonweal*, 29 May 1886, p. 69.

³¹ *The Collected Works of William Morris*, op. cit., XVI, p. 284.