The ‘First’ William Morris and the 39 Articles

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There is an anomaly, so far apparently not noticed by readers, in J. W. Mackail’s standard *Life of William Morris*.¹ That it should have gone unnoticed is the more peculiar in that it concerns a matter of some substance: the religious convictions of the “first”² Morris, the writer of *The Defence of Guenevere* and the prose romances published in *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*. Mackail quotes a letter³ written by Morris to his friend Cormel Price in October, 1855. Morris was deciding just then to be an architect rather than a priest, and the question had arisen whether he, like Edward Burne-Jones, would leave Oxford without his degree:

... make your mind easy about my coming back 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 that you are “extra Ecclesiam Anglicanam” [outside the Church of England] which I’m not, and don’t intend to be, and I won’t sign the 39 Articles.

Despite these apparent obstacles, Mackail says, “Morris passed the Final Schools without difficulty” and graduated in April, 1856; and the University records confirm this.⁴ The question is, how did he avoid the difficulty?

In the authoritative new Princeton Edition of the *Letters*,⁵ Norman Kelvin says simply that, “In the event, Morris signed and took his B.A. in 1856.” Kelvin goes on to explain that “it was not until the University Tests Act of 1871 that compulsory subscription to the articles of the Church of England was abolished.” This is an accurate statement of the legal position at the time, but it implies what is not true of Morris: that he conformed. As his comment to Price shows, it was for Morris a matter of conscience: he was willing neither to commit himself to everything in the Articles nor to declare himself “extra Ecclesiam Anglicanam”, a course which he might have seen as a sort of self-excommunication. Though the end of his Oxford years coincides with his shift from a religious to an aesthetic vocation, he was not ready — if ever he was — to reject his religious inheritance completely.

Morris, it can be shown, did not conform in this any more than in the other major issues of his life and work. And that he squarely confronted such a difficulty is a significant insight into his religious opinions at the time. But the explanation of how he was able to take his degree without religious compromise also provides an insight into
the profound changes just then being made in the Oxford religious tests, changes that anticipated by some fifteen years the passage of the University Tests Act of 1871.

Morris's passage through the processes of examination late in 1855 and graduation in early 1856 came during the first application of new University statutes made necessary by the Oxford University Reform Act of 1854 (17 and 18 Vict., Chap. 81).6 Gladstone, then member for Oxford and Chancellor of the Exchequer, was the minister responsible for drafting that Act and seeing it through Parliament; and he, with others, was considerably surprised and shaken on June 22, 1854, when James Heywood successfully moved an amendment abolishing tests at matriculation, gaining a majority of 91.7 On June 29, the government having acknowledged the principle established by that majority, the tests previously invoked by the University, requiring subscription to the 39 Articles as a prerequisite to graduation, were abolished for Bachelors of Arts, Law, Medicine, and Music.8

From that point there should have been no obstacle between Morris and his B.A., whatever the state of his conscience on religious matters. But the points at issue in the abolition of religious tests had disturbed Oxford for many years,9 involving, as abolition did, not only religious differences but conflicting economic and personal interests, debates on educational theory, and political faction. In the event, the history of the 1854 Act's enforcement fulfilled the promise made in the House of Lords by Lord Stanley, who

had not the slightest doubt that if there was a general agreement in opinion adverse to the present Motion [to abolish tests] among those who had the principal conduct of affairs in the government of the University, it would be in their power to throw every obstacle in the way of carrying out the Resolution, and preventing it from having practical effect.10

The fact that Morris and others of his time were freed, finally, from religious tests verified, albeit belatedly, the latter portion of Lord Stanley's speech:

though technically it would be possible for the University to interpose such obstacles to the working of the Resolution as would render it practically inoperative, the expression of the national will, and of the national opinion, contained in a deliberate and formal Resolution of the House of Commons, would convey to the governing body an indication of public feeling which he suspected they would not think it safe, or wise, or expedient to quarrel with.11

In the high feeling prevalent in the University immediately after the bill passed, with Keble and Pusey threatening to resign, there was a disposition to frustrate its provisions, particularly with regard to the tests. William Sewell, fellow of Morris's College, Exeter, spoke at Oriel to a group of Tractarians, taking as his text, "Young men exhort to be sober-minded", in order, according to a contemporary report

...to exhort the younger members of the university . . . to take especial care to avoid the company of dissenters should any intrude under the new bill; to warn them not to give Caesar, Jeremiah or Queen Victoria the things which belonged to the Church; and to join with him in as large amount of passive resistance to the decision of the legislature as was compatible with their position.12
The more extreme responses, like the Master of Balliol’s attempt to introduce a college test,\textsuperscript{13} were unsuccessful, perhaps because they conflicted so obviously with the Act. But the Act itself made changes necessary in both University and College statutes, changes to be prepared either by the appropriate governing bodies of the University and the Colleges, or — in their default — by the Executive Commissioners appointed under the Act. These new statutes were to be laid before Parliament by Michaelmas Term, 1855, the term appointed for Morris’s Final Schools examination.

But the revised examination statute then devised could be made to sustain that form of test Morris saw confronting him in October, 1855. This came about because the admission of dissenters made it necessary to alter the existing requirement that every pass student taking his “first Final School” be examined in theology, including “the Greek of the Acts and 4 Gospels, the bible story, the ‘evidence’ of Christianity, and the Articles of the Church”.\textsuperscript{14} This first-proposed amendment to the statute, wrote Dr. Francis Jeune, Master of Pembroke, was “intended to compel all, Jews, Dissenters, Roman Catholics, Churchmen alike, who may desire a degree to pass the B.A. theological examination, and to be instructed in the 39 Articles . . . .”\textsuperscript{15}

When this was thrown out by the Hebdomadal Council, Jeune took over with Pusey the framing of a new rule.\textsuperscript{16} When, on April 24, 1854, the new statute was adopted, for application one month later, it

required each candidate who objected to the Divinity Examination to offer some substitute for it and to bring to the Proctor a certificate from the head of his College or Hall . . . \textsuperscript{17}

And the statute revision as adopted in 1855 ended with the assertion that the requirements remained the same for those who belonged to the Anglican Church, and exempting those “outside” that Church.\textsuperscript{18}

This amended statute was approved by the Commissioners, gazetted, and passed through its period of Parliamentary scrutiny without objection. But at least one Oxford Head, Edward Hawkins of Balliol, was prepared to find in it justification for requiring Anglicans to subscribe to the Articles still, as the old rule had specified. And it was this interpretation that Morris faced at the time he wrote to Cormel Price, i.e. in October, 1855. But had it continued to be interpreted in this way, the new statute would hardly have survived, as it did, until all tests were finally removed in 1871.

The Hawkins interpretation, however, didn’t withstand its first challenge. Shortly after the Oxford University Reform Act received the Royal Assent on August 1, 1854, Sir Culling Eardley, Bart., applied to his old College, Oriel, for readmission to permit him to take the B.A. degree.\textsuperscript{19} He had passed through the entire course of studies and examinations in the 1820s but had stopped short of the degree because of his Evangelical reservations about subscribing to the 39 Articles. Provost Hawkins stonewalled on the application from November 18, 1854, until April 30, 1855, using the argument that the statutes were under revision, that this was made necessary under the Reform Act, which prohibited the tests required under the existing statutes. Finally, on April 30, 1855, he wrote to Eardley to say that a new statute had been passed which eliminated tests and penalties for all those “qui extra Ecclesiam Anglicanam sint”, but leaving the same conditions for all Anglicans — including
subscription. Since Eardley had earlier described himself as a “nonconformist”, Hawkins insisted he could only admit him as “extra Ecclesiam”. Eardley refused to sign himself thus, citing clause 45 of the Act, which removed the necessity for subscription or religious declaration at matriculation. But, after some sparring, Hawkins wrote, on June 9, 1855,

_if you are a member of the Church of England_, then you must perceive that you do not come within the terms of the [University] statute, and I am not at liberty to re-admit you into this College [without signing the 39 Articles]. But if you are “extra Ecclesiam Anglicanam”, then I am at liberty; and I left the determination to yourself. One of the two you must be, and not both at once.  

Eardley’s response to this was exactly the same as Morris’s: he refused either to sign the Articles or to declare himself outside the Church. Instead, he wrote on June 19 to inform Hawkins that his case would be brought before the House of Lords by Lord Monteagle, one of the evangelical champions. On August 14, 1855, three Lords, the Earl of Harrowby, Lord Campbell, and the Lord Chancellor, spoke to Eardley’s petition, and all took the position that the Provost of Oriel’s decision was contrary to the Act of 1854. Eardley records that “the subject was then allowed to drop”.

The point, however, had been made. And Provost Hawkins himself admitted afterwards (though well before the more absolute prohibitions of the 1871 Act) that under the Act of 1854 no subscriptions were required for matriculation or the first degree: “By the law of the land all persons of every creed, or of none, are admissible to the University, and (at present) to the first Degree in Arts, Law, or Medicine . . .”

There is nothing to indicate Morris’s reaction to these events except the mute testimony of the University records. He had entered Oxford originally intending to take Orders, and the evidence of his letters suggests that he only gave up that purpose during his last year. It seems unlikely — considering the tone of his remarks already quoted — that he would have had any strong objection to the usual Divinity Examination that formed part of the Final Schools for every student of Literae Humaniores.

It seems that Morris took the usual Final Examination. When he left Oxford for the long vacation of 1855, the University was in the midst of the first passionate responses to the Act of the previous year. A number of obstacles were being prepared against its enforcement, in the making of which Morris’s College, Exeter, was taking the lead. It is not at all surprising, considering Sir Culling Eardley’s experience, that he heard that one must either sign the Articles or declare himself extra Ecclesiam. He may very easily have missed the account of the Lords discussion in The Times since he was either in France on the day it appeared or on his way back to England.

Difficulties in the way of graduation get no mention in Mackail or elsewhere, probably because the issue was settled before Morris returned to the University. Though some Heads, like Hawkins, reacted initially against the abolition of tests, the law was finally obeyed. So, Morris’s subscription for his B.A. appears as “Gulielmus Morris El Coll, Exon” and dated “April 2 El 1856 Termino S. Hilarii 1856”. This is in a volume entitled Degree Signatures 1854–72 covering exactly the years between the abolition of tests for undergraduates and the more comprehensive abolition following the Act of
There is another volume of signatures, titled *Registrum Subscript: 1848–1857*; and it is prefixed by the 39 Articles. Morris’s name, of course, does not appear there. Coming as it did at a crucial time in his life, Morris’s refusal to sign the Articles, or to declare himself *extra Ecclesiam*, has a significance not so far acknowledged. For one thing, Morris’s behaviour here shows that he was not simply turning his back on his religion when he left Oxford University to take an apprenticeship in architecture. The strength of his Evangelical background was not so abruptly ended. And to be conscious of the religious aspect of Morris’s personal crisis at this time is to be more alert to the unsteadiness of opinion, the extraordinary variety of religious and historical perspectives in his earliest writing, for *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, published in 1856, and *The Defence of Guenevere*, published in 1858.

**NOTES**

3. I, 82.
4. Mackail, I, 87, 103; see also Oxford University, *Degree Signatures, 1854–72* (Bodley No. S.P. 96).
9. A useful, though hardly unbiased account of the quarrel at Oxford is Sir George Young’s *University Tests . . . with Facts and Documents of the Movement for their Abolition* (London, 1868). There had been an unsuccessful attempt to remove the tests by Act of Parliament in 1834. In the acrimonious discussion before and during the Parliamentary debates, dissenters, evangelicals, liberals, some Roman Catholics, and Thomas Arnold’s Broad-Churchmen were ranged against the Hebdomadal Board (i.e. the Heads of Houses and the Vice-Chancellor), the Tractarians, the tutors generally, Convocation, and the Conservatives, including – most important of all – the majority of the House of Lords, who defeated the bill on August 31, 1834 (see Ward, pp. 87–92).
11. Ibid.
Letter to Gladstone, Nov. 8 (Gladstone Papers, B.L. 44221, ff. 203–4).

Pusey actually drafted a statement of points to be covered by the new rule (B.L. Add. Ms. 44221).


Quoted by Eardley, p. 33.


Morris may have had a point when he wrote his mother, “an University education fits a man about as much for being a ship-captain as a Pastor of Souls” (*Letters*, I, 24–5). In Morris’s time at Oxford, people taking Orders could augment the meagre Divinity studies at undergraduate level with a postgraduate Voluntary Theology Examination, but not many candidates did so (see Ward, p. 249).

Exeter, for example, was the first College to adopt statutes excluding non-Anglicans from scholarships and fellowships (Ward, p. 207).

Bodley No. S.P. 96.