Imagine if you can a room in a private house “a good deal littered with odds and ends of art and literature” in which sit two neighbours – Mr Olaf Evans “a kind of artist and literary man” and Mr James Brown “a businessman.” To assure a convivial evening’s entertainment, on the table between them lie “pipes and tobacco, and materials for grog.” Perhaps, you may think, this is the prelude to an evening of idle conversation between two friends, in which the only object of serious interest is to be found in checking the level of the brandy in their glasses against the dull red coals of the fire or watching the smoke from their pipes waft deliciously towards the rafters.

However, you would be wrong. For Mr. Olaf Evans had invited his neighbour round to hear a reading of his latest epic poem, ‘The Birth of the Bruce’, the manuscript of which lies “in a conspicuous place” on the table. The more observant witnesses of the scene might also notice that Mr. Brown is to be seen “looking furtively at the MS” of the poem as though the prospect of this artistic treat has an appeal somewhat on a par with a visit to the dentist with a bad tooth. Indeed, in his desperate attempts to turn the attention of his host away from a reading of the noble Scotsman’s heroic adventures, he suddenly finds himself in the uncomfortable position of defending his living as a capitalist businessman. Only Mr Olaf Evans smiles, for it had been precisely his intention to manipulate Mr Brown’s bourgeois philistinism for his own political purposes. Mr Evans, you see, is not only an artist but a regular open-air speaker in the East-End on behalf of the Socialist League!

This gently ironic episode occurs at the beginning of Part II of ‘Honesty Is The Best Policy; or, The Inconvenience of Stealing’, one of four ‘dialogues’ that Morris contributed to Commonweal between 21 May 1887 and 26 January 1889. The reader can be forgiven for being ignorant of the existence of these pieces as none of Morris’s major biographers have considered them worthy of mention. Yet they span an important period in both Morris’s political and his artistic development: the first appearing almost immediately after the end of the serialization of A Dream of John Ball, and the last barely a year before the publication of New from Nowhere. They also represent the only serious attempt made by Morris to dramatize contemporary issues through the medium of prose.

The immediate inspiration for the dialogues lies in his experiences in writing A Dream of John Ball. Although Morris was notoriously reticent in passing comment on his own creative writings, he is recorded by Owen Carroll as saying that his whole intention in building the descriptive landscape in the early part of A Dream of John
Ball had been in order to exploit the conversational opportunities offered by the concluding chapters set in the moon-lit church. The flexibility offered by fictitious dialogue obviously impressed him, for it was a technique he was later to employ with considerable success in both his socialist 'interlude'—The Tables Turned: or, Nupkins Awakened—and in the conversations between the Guest and old Hammond in News from Nowhere. It wasn't long before he also realised that the technique might serve as a useful propaganda weapon to be employed in Commonweal, as dramatized conversations on contemporary political issues not only provided the writer with an opportunity to entertain his audience, but also made it possible to present more complex ideas in a manner accessible to his working-class readers.

Although there is no evidence that Morris intended his four dialogues to be viewed as a group, taken together they do offer the reader a series of amusing insights into aspects of contemporary political thought. The first, 'The Reward of Labour', was published in Commonweal in two parts on 21 and 28 May 1887. The action takes place outside a philanthropical meeting of Social Science at which the speaker has just held forth on "the noble sentiments showing the harmony that should exist between the rich and the poor..." Morris's contempt for speakers who advocated a nebulous "religion of Humanity" was familiar to the readers of Commonweal, and would possibly have been associated with the "demi-semi-socialistic speeches" of Joseph Chamberlain that he had been attacking at the time. More likely they would have recognised in its religious language a sarcastic reference to John Bright—the popular ex-radical leader—who's increasingly conciliatory remarks had led Morris to dub him "the Quaker pope".

The conversation that follows between the three characters—"An East-End Weaver", a "West-End Landowner" and an "Earnest Enquirer"—is a ruthless attack on the inappropriateness of advocating consensus politics in a society founded on organised injustice. The "Earnest Enquirer"—whose studied naïveté in many ways prefigures that of William Guest in News from Nowhere—opens the discussion by questioning the weaver about his work, earnings and way of life. From the answers to these questions he learns that the latter is a skilled worker in a useful occupation, who by working 60 hours a week can earn about £60 a year. His wife is also employed on occasions, and this money, along with that brought in by the eldest of his five children (who works half-time in a shoe-shop), brings the family's income up to £75 per annum. Of this sum £26 a year is used to pay the rent of his impoverished dwelling in the East End.

The "Earnest Enquirer", recalling the radical speech they have just heard in the Hall, then innocently suggests that in the present climate of social co-operation the weaver enjoys economic and social privileges that compensate him for his obvious poverty and hard work:

I have heard of so much being done for the benefit of the East-end, People's Palaces, Mosaic pictures, and the like, that I suppose by now it is quite a pleasant place; that small and squalid as your house is, you can get out of it at once into fresh air, pleasant gardens, roomy squares; and that it is well supplied with libraries, baths, and, in a word all the benefits of civilisation.

Morris's reference here to the new 'People's Palaces' was extremely topical. As part of the Jubilee celebrations of 1887 the Queen had agreed to visit the East End on 14
May (the day on which Morris published the first section of ‘The Rewards of Labour’) to open a showpiece ‘People’s Palace’ at Mile End. The authorities made little attempt to disguise the transparent political purpose of this event, and The Times leader on the day even described the venture as “practical Socialism which works by cooperation and kindness, and not by envy and antagonism.” Although the same paper later chose to report the visit as an unqualified success, the hypocrisy surrounding the occasion aroused a great deal of opposition amongst the Socialists and Irish, which manifested itself in open hostility to the Queen. The latter noted with some disquiet “the booing and hooting ... all along the route.”

As far as Morris was concerned, the ‘People’s Palaces’ were the epitome of the unpracticality of contemporary radical reform. In Commonweal for 28 May 1887 he made his views on the matter very clear:

The East-end people may be congratulated on the new “palace” they are getting, though the word is an unsavoury one in the mouth of the people. But what a number of East-enders there will be whose poverty will prevent them from using it! People too ragged, dirty, ignorant – in a word, too degraded to use it. And even those of the workers who can use it, can they do so with due pleasure and content? Surely not, when they contrast its magnificence with their own narrow, inconvenient, sordid dwellings and their wretched surroundings. Until their private houses are roomy, comfortable, and pleasant, they cannot really enjoy public buildings; they have got to go back again to their narrow, shabby lodgings, and beastly workshops – and live there.

Besides palliatives such as ‘People’s Palaces’, those who advocated the politics of consensus also attempted to foster social harmony by encouraging mutual respect between the classes. Understandably Morris regarded such ‘moral’ compensation as preposterous in a society based on conflict between the classes. The “Earnest Enquirer”, therefore, after having satisfied himself that nothing practical has been done to compensate the weaver for his hard work and poverty, takes up this theme. Surely, he suggests to the weaver, like the poor philosophers of ancient times, society bestows upon him “a sort of veneration because you add so much to the wealth of the community and take so little from it.” The weaver has no hesitation in disabusing him of such a belief:

A working-man honoured and respected? Yes, when he’s a working-man representative. But look here, as to the respect I’m held in, I don’t want to be vague, so I ask you to take the trouble to notice the way in which the policeman (a public servant, mind you) speaks to an East-ender and a West-ender; that will enlighten you as to the respect paid to me as a philosopher...

Morris not only intended ‘The Rewards of Labour’ to be read as an indictment of the underlying ethics of the consensus politics of statesmen such as Joseph Chamberlain and Lord Randolph Churchill, but also as a straight-forward demonstration of the enormous gulf in the economic reward and status afforded the classes in late-Victorian England. As is often the case in Morris’s writings, this is achieved by the simple expedient of antithetical juxtaposition. Having established that the weaver is “skilful, industrious, useful, poor, and despised”, his position is starkly contrasted with that of the Landowner. In the latter’s ensuing conversation
with the “Earnest Enquirer”, he is discovered to enjoy an income of £6,000 a year from his investments. This he uses to pursue his hobbies of shooting, horse-racing and yachting. Furthermore, his status as a man of property carries with it society’s respect and admiration, although he does acknowledge – in an amusing aside obviously made at Morris’s own expense – that this respect would be seriously diminished if he were a poet. The “Earnest Enquirer” is left to ponder this obvious injustice.

Here is a man ... who works hard and usefully and is paid for it with £60 a-year and contempt; and here is another ... who does nothing at all and is paid for it with £6,000 a-year and respect. As an earnest enquirer, I ask if you can tell me why?

This question remains unanswered in ‘The Rewards of Labour’. However, it is an example of Morris’s precise attention to detail in matters concerning Commonweal that he offered his readers his own answer the following week when he began the serialization of his lecture ‘How We Live And How We Might Live.’ In ‘The Rewards of Labour’ he satisfied himself by ending on a characteristically topical and humorous note:

While they have been taking, a small crowd has gathered about them, under the impression that an open-air meeting is going on. Enter to them a policeman, under the same impression, who pushes through the ring, and, seeing the Weaver, catches hold of him and gives him a rough shake, and says “Come, YOU get out of this.” Exit Weaver, hurriedly, glad to get off so lightly. Then policeman turns round to Landowner, who is very nicely dressed, touches his helmet, and says, “Shall I get you a cab, sir?” Landowner nods and moves off to meet the cab, and the small crowd disperses.

The second of the dialogues, ‘The Boy Farms At Fault’, appeared in Commonweal two months later, on 30 July 1887. Once again the inspiration for the piece was topical. Every year the middle-class press carried a crop of letters from distressed parents concerning the troubles they had in dealing with their sons returning from public school for the long summer vacation. Morris, seizing on this example of what he termed contemptuously the “well-fed, well-housed bourgeois on the hunt for some artificial trouble or other”, decided to turn one such imagined conversation between a returned schoolboy and his injured father to a rather more serious propaganda purpose.

Picking up where he had left off in ‘The Reward of Labour’, Morris uses the conversation between the father and son to again launch an attack on bourgeois notions concerning work. The dialogue begins with the father chiding his son for his idleness during the vacation, and contrasting this with his own hard work in providing him with food, clothing, a comfortable home and an expensive education. The tables are turned, however, when the boy rounds on his father and asks, “What do you do, Pa, when you’re not having a holiday?” Recalling a day he had spent with his father at his office in the City during the previous Christmas holiday, he points out that the latter’s ‘work’ had consisted of nothing more than reading the paper, chiding his clerks (who actually did the work), writing a letter, and enjoying a leisurely lunch with a business acquaintance before going home. He concludes:
Come, Pa, turn to and make me wiser now by telling me how it is that you can't stand me doing nothing and boring people through the holidays, and you keep me gratis all the while; and there you are all the while doing the same thing, and being kept gratis; and you would be very much surprised if they were to send you off to a man-farm and try to get something out of you in the way of work – a big strong chap like you. 17

There is a temptation to read ‘The Boy Farms At Fault’ as a posthumous conversation between William Morris the socialist and his own businessman father. William Morris Snr. worked in the City – in fact he and his wife Emma lived for a time over his office in Lombard Street11 and it is by no means inconceivable that his young son visited him there on occasions. It would certainly not be beyond the bounds of possibility – especially when considering how often Morris utilized his own experiences as material for his creative work – that he was recalling one of these visits when writing the piece. If so the father’s closing remark – “I wonder what will happen to that boy. Suppose he should turn Socialist when he grows up!!” – assumes both a poignant and ironic quality.

Morris contributed one final dialogue to Commonweal during 1887. This was ‘Honesty Is The Best Policy; Or, The Inconvenience of Stealing’, which was published in two parts on the 5th and 12th November, shortly after the successful first performance of The Tables Turned. Like ‘The Boy Farms At Fault’ – as has already been noted – the action revolves around the conversation of two characters. Mr James Brown (a liberal businessman) and Mr Olaf Evans, “a kind of artist and literary man.”12 The latter is a thinly disguised caricature of Morris himself: the name ‘Evans’ recalling his Welsh ancestry and ‘Olaf’ his Nordic predilections. In case his readers failed to make this identification immediately, further clues are provided later on when it is revealed that Evans is a regular open-air speaker in the East End on behalf of the Socialist League, and is engaged in writing an epic poem “on the Birth of the Bruce.”

The first part of the men’s conversation – which takes place on the way to a bus stop – is interesting chiefly because it includes one of Morris’s rare direct references to the economic theories of Karl Marx. Brown, it transpires, is annoyed because the pears on the fruit tree in his garden have been stolen. While he admits that the theft itself is of little consequence, what he objects to is the fact that the robbers will sell their ill-gotten gains on the black market and use the money to buy beer. Evans (or Morris) has little sympathy with this view and dismisses the whole episode as a “Touching instance of the Marxian formula, C-M-C!”

This reference to Marx’s definition of the early form of indirect exchange which succeeded primitive barter indicates once again how Morris intended the dialogues to complement ideas that he had been developing elsewhere. For the regular readers of Commonweal, Evans’ remark would have immediately recalled the more detailed comments that he and Bax had made on the subject a few months earlier in Socialism From the Root Up. In Chapter XVI of the latter (which had appeared on 12 March 1887) they had defined this first important stage in economic development:

The seller has a commodity which he does not propose to consume, and therefore he acquires with it money, with which money he buys in turn another commodity equal in quantity to that with which he has parted, but different from it in quality.
Marx has formulated this transaction, by the well-known and useful formula, Commodity, Money, Commodity: C – M – C.\(^{13}\)

Taking this as their starting point they went on to show how this relationship developed in pre-commercial society when the element of gain was introduced. Hence the original formula was re-defined as C-M-C-M-C, in which the purpose of subsequent transactions was to obtain a favourable increase in commodity amounts whereby to obtain money. When this stage of economic development was in turn superseded by capitalism - a system under which capital accumulation became possible as a result of the exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie - money, rather than commodities, became the initiating factor in all transactions, with a further redefinition of the original formula to M-C-M. The object thereby became the maximising of profit in the production and sale of the commodity in question:

The modern man of Commerce necessarily begins his transaction with money. He buys, say, indigo, which he never sees, receives for it more money than he gave for it, and goes on steadily in this process, dealing ... with one class of goods only; and all the goods in which he deals represent to him so much money: they are only present in his transactions nominally. Money is the be-all and end-all of his existence as a commercial man.\(^{14}\)

Brown is the epitome of this definition of the capitalist: (i) he deals in a single commodity (soap), (ii) he at no point directly participates in the production and distribution of his product (a workforce of 500 is employed for this purpose), (iii) his primary motivation for production is the maximising of money revenues (a fact emphasised by his consideration of retirement due to the small margins to be obtained during a period of economic depression), and (iv) the bulk of the profits generated devolve to him personally. When Evans asks how he can justify his monopoly of the rewards of the business, he replies that he is entitled to it as payment for the risks he takes in investing his capital. Evans responds by paraphrasing a fable from Proudhon’s ‘What is Property’:

... once upon a time the lion and the other carnivorous beasts went a-hunting, and had good sport; and at the end of the day they met to divide the spoil, the lion in the chair. The chairman made the carcases (sic) be separated into four equal portions, besides the guts and other offal, which was put into a heap by itself. Great expectancy there was among the beasts; the leopard purred and waved his tail; the bear rolled about jovially; water ran from both sides of the wolf’s mouth; the jackals whined happily; – the fox, though he smiled a good deal, as his custom is, was the only one that seemed uneasy. “Friends,” said the chairman, “here is the wealth which our united labour has produced: I thus apportion it according to the sacred rights of property; the first is mine because I am called lion; the second because I kindly allow you to live; the third because of my strength, beauty and nobility, without which the world were a dull place indeed; as for the fourth, let him touch it who dares; but yonder heap of offal you may divide amongst you as you please; but if you follow my advice you will consume it with thrift and temperance.”\(^{15}\)

Once again this reference to Proudhon would have struck a chord with the readers of Commonweal. A large section of Chapter XIV of Socialism From The Root Up
had been devoted to Proudhon, who was portrayed as a pivotal figure in the transition from utopian to scientific socialism. Morris and Bax had singled out ‘What is Property?’ (1840) for particular praise as the work “of a Communist pure and simple”.\textsuperscript{16} Morris, himself, probably read this essay in January or early February 1887 and enjoyed Proudhon’s controversial style and pithy epithets, which in places are reminiscent of early Dickens. Proudhon’s argument was particularly relevant for mention in ‘Honesty Is The Best Policy’, as he was the first to advance the theory that all interest, rent and profit – rather than being a justifiable award for entrepreneurial risk – was in fact nothing more than open robbery.

This is precisely the point Morris goes on to make in the conclusion to the dialogue. The thieves who stole Brown’s pears did so in order to fulfill the elementary formula of indirect exchange C-M-C. They stole the pears to exchange for money to buy beer. Their guilt lay in the unlawful acquisition of the original commodity. Brown’s manufacture of soap, however, is a compound theft based on a circuitous process of robbing the people. He acquires the original capital with which to manufacture the soap by stealing the accumulated surplus-value of previous transactions. Hence when he uses this money to manufacture a product (soap) for exchange for money plus an increment (profit), he is guilty of theft both in the original accumulation of capital and in the monopoly of the value added by those engaged in the manufacturer of the actual product.

Morris published one final dialogue, entitled ‘Whigs Astray’, in \textit{Commonweal} the 19th and 26th January 1889. This piece, written at a time when there were indications that the country was recovering from the recession which had proved so encouraging to the socialists in 1887, is Morris’s most ambitious attempt at sustained contemporary political satire. In it he himself appears thinly disguised as the humorously named Owen Marx Bakounine Jones, “an architect (unsuccessful)”.\textsuperscript{17} The name has both personal and political connotations. On the one hand it recalls his Welsh ancestry and the period spent articled to G. E. Street in 1856, on the other it is an ironic comment on the increasing factionalism that had beset the Socialists following ‘Bloody Sunday’. Arrayed against him are the Rev. Swain Stride, “a Nonconformist parson”, and a religionised Mr. Brown, now glorying under the Christian-name Jeremiah.

Like the previous three dialogues, ‘Whigs Astray’ is very much a topical work, although written against a rather different economic background. The revival in trade after 1887 had made it possible for statesmen across the political spectrum to turn their attention to the advocacy of specific measures for the improvement of the conditions of the working-classes. The “politics of consensus” which Morris had attacked so rigorously in ‘The Rewards of Labour’ was actually becoming an established reality. This movement was aided in particular by the creation of the County Councils following the Local Government Act of 1888. These provided an opportunity for popular representation on a body with actual administrative power over living conditions. Morris was well aware of this and it can hardly be a coincidence that the two parts of ‘Whigs Astray’ appeared in \textit{Commonweal} on either side of the first meetings of the County Councils, held on 23 January 1889.

The revival in trade, and the passing of the Local Government Act, had been accompanied by a tendency for many supporters of the Establishment to profess an interest in schemes to ameliorate the worst excesses of the capitalist system. Morris
viewed this development with understandable suspicion, noting on one occasion how it had become “fashionable for even West-End dinner-parties to affect an interest” in Socialism. This new social awareness found expression in the publication of numerous radical or pseudo-socialist manifestos offering various programmes of social regeneration. Morris, sensitive to the damaging counter-propaganda these schemes represented, criticized them in *Commonweal* on three grounds: (i) their motives, (ii) their right to be called socialistic, and (iii) the irrelevant nature of the solutions they proposed.

These criticisms are developed in ‘Whigs Astray’. Stride and Brown are introduced as typical bourgeois proponents of the new gradualism. They have invited Jones round to discuss a radical programme of reform they have drafted in response to what they consider to be the ‘hopeful’ direction in which society is moving. It soon becomes apparent through Jones’s questions, however, that their good intentions amount to nothing more than self-deception. Their newly discovered concern for the poor is only made possible because a short-term improvement in economic prosperity has made it unnecessary for them to devote their time to the defence of their own interests. For this reason, what they believe to be a genuine altruistic interest in the well-being of the working-classes merely becomes part of an unspoken conspiracy to ensure social stability and safeguard the existing system.

Morris was particularly incensed by the blatant manner in which the advocates of such schemes attempted to pass them off to the public as “socialistic”. As far as he was concerned any system of palliatives was at best liberalism taking an assumed name. He highlights this form of bourgeois hypocrisy when he has Stride describe the nature of his own “socialist” beliefs:

I say I am a practical Socialist; and yet I cannot be one of your hard-shell Socialists, with your impossible nostrums of the abolition of capital and railways, and your preposterous ideals of communism and equality; and your false political economy, dead in the teeth of all the accurate thinkers of the day, such as Mill and Tennyson and Ricardo and Swinburne, and – and – Lord Rosebery and Auberon Herbert. But yet, you see I was bothered that there should be no true Socialist party that I could work with heartily, and now I really think that we are getting one....

The manifesto that Stride and Brown present to Jones is of interest because it uses quotes from an actual document. This was ‘A Radical’s Creed’ by the Rev. John Page Hopps, which appeared in the *Pall Mall Gazette* on 10 December 1888. The choice of this particular work was as usual extremely appropriate. Morris had met Hopps in Leicester when he was being entertained to supper after delivering one of his socialist lectures. According to May Morris, Hopps is said to have remarked on this occasion: “That’s an impossible dream of yours, Mr. Morris; such a Society would need God Almighty Himself to manage it.” May went on to describe her father’s reaction to this platitude: “Morris got up and walked round his chair, then, going across to Mr. Hopps and shaking his fist to emphasize his words, he said, ‘Well damn it, man, you catch your God Almighty – we’ll have Him!’”

Not only is Hopps parodied in ‘Whig’s Astray’ as the Rev. Swain Stride, his own manifesto is ruthlessly torn apart by Jones. This manifesto consisted of a ten-point programme which included all of the most popular radical proposals current at the time: (i) the use of parliamentary legislation to protect the poor from the worst excesses
of the system and improve their living standards, (ii) government by the people, for the people, and in the interests of the people, (iii) the encouragement of decentralisation and local government, (iv) the shifting of the burden of financial responsibility from the poor to the rich, (v) a reform of the poor-laws, (vi) compensation to those exposed to loss and ruin, (vii) state responsibility for finding jobs for the unemployed, (viii) free access to justice, (ix) land nationalisation, and (x) the abolition of the House of Lords. Jones is consistent in his opposition to each of these proposals on the familiar grounds that the success of palliatives in the long-term was necessarily precluded by the existence of the class-struggle. He concludes by pointing out that the description ‘Advanced Radicals’ is over-long for their purposes and suggests an alternative: “try W-H-I-G-S A-S-T-R-A-Y – it means the same thing if it don’t spell it.”

Despite the dialogues’ serious propaganda purpose, however, the overriding impression left on the reader is that of their humour. Behind each can be detected that mischievous individual that John Ruskin playfully alluded to as that “Rustic-Russet and Burly-Surly Carle Guillelmus Mauritius.” Nowhere else in his creative writing does Morris display such an obvious sense of the absurd. Whether it be through the sheer irreverence of the chubby schoolboy who turns the tables on his pompous father, or of his own self-parody in the figures of Mr. Olaf Evans and Mr. Owen Marx Bakounine Jones “an architect (unsuccessful)”, the dialogues more than any other of his works confirm that Morris really did have a sense of the ridiculous. My only regret is that Mr Olaf Evans never did finish his reading of ‘The Birth of the Bruce’.

NOTES

1 The quotations in this and the next paragraph are from Commonweal, 12 November 1887, p. 364.

2 ‘William Morris’ by Owen Carroll, Everyman, 23 September 1933.

3 Commonweal, 21 May 1887, p. 165.

4 Ibid. 2 April 1887, p. 105.

5 Ibid. 23 April 1887, p. 129.

6 Ibid. 21 May 1887, p. 165.

7 The Times, 14 May 1887.


9 Commonweal, 28 May 1887, p. 179. The quotations in the next two paragraphs are from ibid, pp. 170-1.

10 Commonweal, 30 July 1887, p. 241. The quotations in the next two paragraphs are from this page.

12 Commonweal, 5 November 1887, p. 356. The quotations in this and the next paragraph are from ibid, pp. 356 and 357.

13 Ibid. 12 March 1887, p. 82

14 Ibid. 12 March 1887, p. 82.

15 Ibid. 12 November 1887, p. 365.

16 Ibid. 5 February 1887, p. 42.


18 Ibid. 22 June 1889, p. 194.


21 Ibid p. 221.

22 Commonweal, 26 January 1889, p. 27.