A Lesson in International Relations: Morris and the SPAB

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Examinations of William Morris's work in historic preservation generally make few distinctions between his efforts within England and those in other countries. However, when Morris and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) expanded their efforts to include the protection of ancient monuments outside of Britain, they were forced to change from the confrontational tactics which had been successful in England to a much more compromising and conciliatory style. This abrupt change in attitude was the result of a strong nationalistic reaction in these countries to the Society's initial efforts. This response shocked Morris and his friends and prompted a drastic change in their attitudes and techniques.

From all indications, SPAB was formed solely to protect British buildings. The society's Manifesto and several contemporary letters by Morris refer to protecting "our ancient buildings" or "our historical monuments." However, soon after
founding the society, Morris began to push for an expansion of the society’s program to include continental structures. Morris’s conversion to this plan seems to have occurred in 1878 when he travelled to Italy to bring Jane Morris and their daughters back to England. Morris visited St. Mark’s Cathedral in Venice and witnessed a restoration in progress which was stripping medieval mosaics from the baptistery. In 1879, when an extensive restoration of the west front of St. Mark’s was announced, Morris was spurred to a frenzy of activity. He wrote letters to periodicals, recruited prominent friends and organised meetings and lectures.

Morris’s tactics in the furtherance of historic preservation were blunt and forceful. W.R. Lethaby described Morris’s methods as:

hardly tactful! At one cathedral, on having some commercial work of stalls shown to him . . . he burst out with indignation: ‘why I could carve them better with my teeth.’ A Canon on pointing out improvements he wanted in [a] cathedral, was answered ‘The place is not good enough for you.’ After a painful visit to [a] church which was being skinned alive, he rushed to the window of the inn shaking his fist as the parson passed by.

Morris’s abrasive techniques included deriding parliament even when asking help from an MP. On one occasion when visiting a medieval church with John Bruce Glasier, Morris began shouting:

What the hell is that? Who the hell has done that? . . . [T]he offending object . . . was . . . a sculptured memorial . . . in shining white marble jammed into the old gray stonework . . . What infernal idiot has done that? Morris again demanded, and heedless of the consternation around him poured forth a torrent of invective against the unknown perpetrators of the crime. For the moment I thought that he might actually spring upon the excrescence and tear out the hateful thing with his bare fists.

Morris continued this confrontational approach when working to save St. Mark’s. In his first letters to the English press, Morris took the same tone which he had used in his attacks on English restorations. In a letter to the Daily News, he censures the Italians for their “headlong rashness” and belittles them for their ignorance, characterizing them as “those that neither know nor care that [St. Mark’s] has now become a work of art, a monument of history and a piece of nature.” Morris showed remarkable insensitivity. He did not even attempt to understand the workings of the Italian government, and thus SPAB’s memorial was addressed to the wrong ministry. The work on St. Mark’s was supervised by the Ministry of Public Instruction but SPAB sent its memorial to the Ministry of Public Works. Morris admitted, after learning of his mistake, “as to the different ministries, I knew nothing.”

Even while Morris was beginning his campaign, friends tried to dissuade him from his blunt tactics. William de Morgan, with the encouragement of George Wardle, wrote Morris a long letter outlining a more subtle and sensitive approach to the issue. He told Morris that “[t]he Italians are... in such a state of susceptibility as to be wounded by presentation of the Memorial” and suggested that “out of deference to this feeling” they should turn over the Memorial to the British ambassador in Rome to use his discretion as to its delivery. He emphasized that the SPAB should make every attempt not to appear to make “an unwarrantable intrusion into other folk’s business.”

The Italian reaction to SPAB’s actions came quickly. There was an uproar in the
Italian press at what they perceived as English arrogance. The reasons for this quick and violent response are complicated. In part, it was the result of a feeling of anger at British chauvinist attitudes. In general, Victorian Englishmen looked down upon Italians. Although large numbers of well-to-do British tourists spent time in Italy, they had little contact with Italians. In his study of British travellers in Southern Europe, John Pemble has observed that “the British were almost all alike in that they had little interest in the idea of close contact with Mediterranean people... The art and ruins of the South were deemed more important.” Certainly, British condescension to foreigners contributed to the sensitivity of the Italians to SPAB’s protest.

The official response was also virulent. Italy had only recently been unified and Italian officials were sensitive about Italy’s international prestige. A letter from Rezzasco, the Italian Minister of Public Instruction, to SPAB was blistering in its condemnation of their activities. He begins by relating that he “cannot really comprehend the recently awakened tenderness of the English for our monuments & especially for the Basilica of St. Mark’s.” He sarcastically refers to Italians as “we poor vandals,” highlighting the slight which the Italians perceived in SPAB’s highhanded approach. Morris’s letter of 31 October to the Daily News was particularly singled out as offensive.10

In response to SPAB’s campaign, Italian officials gave interviews to the British press expressing their outrage. The Times reported the “commotion and indignation” caused by SPAB’s activities.11 This led to opposition in Britain as well to SPAB’s work on St. Mark’s. In the SPAB archives there is an entire file of articles and other press clippings from the winter of 1879-1880, criticizing their work. These pieces include a poem on St. Mark’s, part of which reads:

...But sad to say that Englishmen
    Have lately tried by voice and pen,
    To cast reflections on her name,
    And seek to lower her former fame
    Forgetful of the debt they owe,
    And of the blessings still that flow

...No wonder that a cry of shame
    Across the Alpine valleys came,
    And that Italia’s patriot press
    Surprise and anger should express
    And rake up every Vandal deed
    That Britain wrought and that the seed
Of hate and bitterness is sown...12

The bad publicity which SPAB received clearly worried Morris for as soon as the Italian government’s responses were reported, Morris felt compelled to answer them. In a letter to The Times two days later, Morris stated his belief that he did not think that “in the long run they will feel aggrieved at our eagerness to save them from some of the same loss that we have suffered.”13

The SPAB continued to be attacked in the Italian Press. Morris prepared an apologetic letter to be printed in the Italian journals in an attempt to defuse the situation. He acknowledged that the Italian perception was that SPAB had “cast a
slur on the Italians as being specifically incompetent or careless in dealing with their ancient buildings.” The events of the previous weeks had definitely changed Morris’s attitude for he describes the “difficulty and delicacy of addressing a foreign nation on its own affairs.” Significantly, this letter was also sent to the Daily News in London with a request that it be printed so that it might “help to set right many who hitherto have had somewhat confused notions of our aims and objectives.” Morris also attempted to make a favourable impression with individual Italians as well; in writing to Pietro Saccardo he emphasizes “the goodwill which our Society bears both the Italian People and to Venice.”

In early December 1879, the proposed work on St. Mark’s was cancelled. It became a matter of dispute whether the cessation of the work was the result of SPAB’s protest or was an independent decision by Italian officials. SPAB’s insistence on credit for stopping the restoration is further evidence of a general insensitivity on their part. Even if SPAB’s campaign were responsible for cancellation of work on the cathedral, Italian self-respect demanded that the Italian government should not be seen as giving in to foreign demands. An SPAB member living in Venice reported that “Public opinion is very adverse to the movement made in England . . . throughout Italy. Here it is very strong.”

In an effort to continue to oppose restoration of St. Mark’s while accommodating the sensibilities of the Italians, Morris worked with other members of the SPAB (most notably Sir Henry Wallis) to form a separate St. Mark’s Committee which would monitor the status of restoration activity. A concerted effort was made to constitute the Committee as an international body. Americans, Frenchmen, Germans and Italians were approached for membership. The Committee’s character is remarkable in its emphasis on denying any censure of the Italians. It describes their motives as “being actuated by the most cordial and friendly feeling towards the Italian nation” and promises that “extreme care will be taken to act as delicately as possible by friendly representations and with every determination not to wound any national susceptibilities.” However, even with these explicit aims the Committee continued to be looked upon as anti-Italian. The American poet Longfellow refused to become a member on the grounds that he feared that “anything that looks like foreign interference will do more harm than good with the sensitive Italians.” The formation of the St. Mark’s Committee seems to be a tacit acceptance that SPAB was to some extent “tainted” by its earlier actions. Morris concedes that “the only cure for all this is to assure people of the fact that the St. Mark’s Committee has no connection with S.P.A.B.”

In practice, however, the division between the two groups was blurred. In January 1882, Morris and Wallis received news of impending work at St. Mark’s. Although the Committee should have been the primary source of opposition to the restoration, Morris wrote immediately to Thackeray Turner, SPAB’s secretary. Morris felt he could not immediately summon the Committee so he gave Turner detailed instructions to transmit to SPAB’s Italian correspondent. He ended the letter by telling Turner that he would be away for a week but that upon his return he would arrange for a Committee meeting. Surprisingly, he asks Turner “if you can find the list of names [of the Committee], I shall be glad.” Clearly, although the Committee was publicly portrayed as a separate entity, it really was an instrument of SPAB.

Soon after beginning to make its protests abroad, SPAB set up foreign
correspondents in the countries involved to report on restoration projects. Partially this was due to SPAB’s practice of only responding to restorations where there was first hand information available. However, it also seems clear that a significant factor was the need to have access to detailed knowledge of local reactions to their foreign work and thus to avoid public relations disasters like their first efforts in regard to St. Mark’s. In Italy, the correspondent was originally English. In 1882, however, Onorato Carlandi was chosen to be the correspondent in Rome. The selection of an Italian correspondent is obviously a sign of SPAB’s recognition that in order to be effective in Italy, it must placate Italian public opinion.

An examination of the Annual Reports of the SPAB in the early 1880s shows that the number of foreign projects that the society became involved with grew each year. After 1882, “Foreign Work” became a separate section of each Annual Report. SPAB’s efforts included campaigns in Egypt to protect both ancient and Moslem structures and a foreign correspondent was established in India to monitor the protection of ancient buildings. In Italy they became involved in work to prevent damaging restorations of the Ponte Vecchio in Florence, the Town Hall in St. Gemignano and the Byzantine cathedral on the island of Torcello.

Throughout this period, Morris continued to be the driving force behind SPAB’s activities outside of England. In an unpublished letter to Newman Marks he asks Marks to “please put down on tomorrow’s agenda, Mr. Morris to call attention to proposed restoration of Baptistery Ravenna,” showing that Morris was the originator of SPAB’s campaign to protect the Baptistery. At the urging of William Holman Hunt, Morris also persuaded SPAB to make a protest against restoration of the mosques of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem by the Ottoman government. As well as providing Morris with information about the restoration, Hunt, apparently at Morris’s request, also used his contacts in the Holy Land to obtain information about the Ottoman government’s reaction to the protest. The information which Hunt obtained was used by SPAB in organizing their campaign. Morris’s and Hunt’s concern with local reaction evidences a marked increase in sensitivity to foreign sensibilities.

Morris was also the major proponent of SPAB’s protest against the restoration of the Bigallo in Florence. Morris’s letter to the Prefect of Florence is a remarkable example of his change in attitude and style in regards to foreign restorations. He “begs most respectfully to lay observations before” the Prefect. He surprisingly concedes that the restoration is prompted by “the most laudable feelings.” He then proceeds through an extremely tactful argument against the restoration, obviously mindful of the susceptibilities of the recipient. He refers to Florence as a “mighty city” and ends by “respectfully imploring” the Prefect to use his influence. The difference between it and similar letters written to Englishmen is startling. In his letter protesting the restoration to the Baptistery in Ravenna, Morris also uses a supplicating tone; he “beg[s] with all humility to pray that [the officials] reconsider” their plans. Morris had clearly been converted to a conciliatory approach with foreign governments.

The problems faced when the SPAB strove to further architectural preservation in other European countries are remarkably similar to those facing the leaders of modern environmental organizations. Just as Western conservationists must justify their actions to influence Brazilians to save their rainforests or African nations to protect
their wildlife, Morris and the SPAB were forced to justify their movement to protect historical sites in Italy and other countries. Rather than stridently declaring his criticisms of restoration as he would do in Britain, Morris made his communications requests or suggestions and he tried to phrase them tactfully. He modified his methods in order to achieve his goals without creating a backlash. We tend to think of Morris as uniformly liberal and progressive. It has become almost axiomatic to characterize Morris as unaffected by the nationalistic attitudes of his time. However, an examination of Morris’s early efforts in foreign countries on behalf of SPAB reveals that he was originally far from untainted by British chauvinism. Morris's attitudes were radically changed by his initial experiences in furthering architectural preservation abroad. It is to his credit that in a relatively short period of time he saw the error of his previous actions and altered his methods in order to further his goals.

NOTES

I would like to thank the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings for granting me access to their archives, and in particular, the Society’s archivist, Mrs. Cecily Greenhill, for her assistance in using them. (The Editor would like to make it clear that these letters were not accessible to Dr. Norman Kelvin when he was preparing the relevant volumes of *The Collected Letters*.)

2 Morris to Editor of *The Times*, 4 June 1877; ibid I, p. 374.
4 Handwritten Resolution and Paper relating to Westminster Abbey with notation in Morris’s hand that it was sent to J.D. Peddie, MP. [Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection, New York Public Library, Astor Lennox and Tilden Foundation]. In this resolution which was sent to Peddie to enlist his aid, Morris dismisses parliament as “those who have so much to talk about on the other side of the road [from Westminster Abbey].”
7 Morris to George Street, 2 December 1879; Archives of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB Archives).
8 William De Morgan to Morris, 30 November 1879; SPAB Archives.
10 M.Rezzzasco to Newman Marks, 19 November 1879; SPAB Archives.
12 Clipping in file marked “Venice – Press”; SPAB Archives.
13 Morris to Editor of *The Times*, 22 November 1879; *Collected Letters*, Vol. I, 544
15 Morris to Editor of the *Daily News*, November 1879; SPAB Archives.
16 Morris to Pietro Saccardo, 13 December 1879; *Collected Letters*, Vol. I, 547. There is a slightly different version of this letter in a copyist’s hand in the SPAB archives.
Charles Eliot Norton to Sir Henry Wallis, 5 October 1880 (British Library). Norton had been asked to approach prominent Americans for membership. It appears from Norton’s description of Longfellow’s response that he had been singled out by Morris and Wallis as a desirable addition to the committee.


Morris to Thackeray Turner, January, 1882; SPAB Archives.

Morris to Newman Marks, 28 April, 1880; SPAB Archives.

William Holman Hunt to Morris, 11 November 1881; and motion in Morris’s handwriting, SPAB Archives.

Hunt to Morris, 2 December 1881; SPAB Archives.
