Commemorating
William Morris:

Robin Page Arnot and the early history of the
William Morris Society

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Archives and manuscripts have been collected by the University of Hull since 1928, and over the years a wide spectrum of material has been acquired, from the family and estate papers of the East Riding landed gentry to archives which document the history of the labour movement in Britain. In 1978 the first instalment of the papers of Robin Page Arnot, a lifelong member of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and official historian of the miners' unions, was deposited in the Brynmor Jones Library. The second and final instalment has recently been catalogued and contains papers relating to Arnot's role in the foundation of the William Morris Society. This article outlines the background and content of the manuscripts documenting that role, within the wider context of Arnot's life and work.

Arnot was born at Greenock on the Clyde on 15 December 1890, the grandson of a Chartist and son of John Arnot, a self-educated journalist who became editor of The Greenock Telegraph. Arnot became involved in politics at an early age when he joined the Greenock branch of the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) in 1907. A year later he won a scholarship to study in the Faculty of Arts at Glasgow University, specialising in Ancient Greek, and continued to be politically active through the University Fabian Society. Arnot left Glasgow for London in the spring of 1914 to become a researcher, primarily on the subject of control of industry, within the Fabian (later Labour) Research Department (LRD), founded by Beatrice Webb. On the resignation of G.D.H. Cole, who was moving to a lectureship in Oxford, he was appointed Secretary, a post which he was to retain until 1927, and he remained on the Executive Committee of the LRD for over fifty years.

Following the outbreak of the First World War, Arnot's political convictions prompted him to resist military service. He was characteristic of many of his contemporaries on the Left in being simultaneously a member of the SDF, the Fabian Society and the Independent Labour Party (ILP). His resistance to conscription resulted, in May 1917, in a charge of refusal to obey military orders, for which he received a sentence of two years' hard labour. It was during and after the war that Arnot began to acquire his specialist knowledge of the miners in Britain and the development of their trade unions. In 1919 he was largely responsible for researching the miners' evidence to the Sankey Commission of Inquiry into the coal industry.

The Russian Revolution of November 1917 exerted a profoundly radical influence on Arnot's political development, transforming as it did the whole character of
discussion about socialism from a theoretical ideal to a practical experiment. The political bounds of possibility widened for many on the Left and the logical step for Arnot was to attend the Communist Unity conference in July 1920, which resulted in the establishment of the Communist Party of Great Britain. He then served on the Executive Committee of the CPGB between 1924 and 1938 and acted as a British representative to the Communist International (Comintern) throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

A period of intense political activity for Arnot in the early 1920s culminated in his involvement in the General Strike in 1926. In mid-1925, industrial relations had begun to deteriorate within the British coal industry, following the mine-owners' unilateral suspension of the national wages agreement with the miners. Arnot urged greater preparedness on the part of the miners and the wider trade union movement, to counteract the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies (OMS) set up by the government in September 1925. This official body anticipated a future general strike and was seen as a manifestation of 'legal fascism' by the CPGB. However the OMS was accompanied by the appointment of a Royal Commission to investigate the coal crisis, upon which the trade union movement set its hopes for a settlement.

In October 1925, Arnot was imprisoned for a second time, following the arrest of the entire CPGB executive under the Incitement to Mutiny Act of 1797. Arnot was released with six other members of the executive the following April and, following the outbreak of the General Strike on 1 May 1926, travelled to Co. Durham to address a May Day meeting in Chopwell. Perceiving the need to co-ordinate the strategy of trade unions on a local level if the strike was to have any chance of success, Arnot remained in Tyneside to draw up a plan of campaign with local trade unionists. The practical outcome was the formation of the Northumberland and Durham General Council and Joint Strike Committee, on which Arnot sat as a representative of the LRD.

Of particular note following his departure from the secretaryship of the LRD in 1927 was his participation in the Comintern debates in Moscow on the nature of, and appropriate communist reaction to, fascism. Alongside Harry Pollitt and R. Palme Dutt, Arnot subscribed to what later became the Comintern orthodoxy on the subject, namely the theory of 'class against class' and the labelling of social democratic parties as 'social fascists'.

On his return to settle in London, Arnot soon became active as a member of the Marx Commemoration Committee, formed on the initiative of the LRD to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Karl Marx's death. The establishment of a Marxist Library and Workers' School and Education Centre, which opened its doors at 37A Clerkenwell Green on 30 October 1933, was the practical outcome. Known simply as the Marx Memorial Library, this institution was an attempt to counteract the recent burning of books in Germany (including works by Marx, Engels and Lenin), through education and the collection of Marxist literature. Arnot was appointed as the first Principal of the Library, a post which combined the development and teaching of courses in Marxist political and economic theory and which principally occupied his time up to and during the Second World War.

Appointed as the official historian of the miners' trade unions in 1925, Arnot had already undertaken extensive research for what was to prove his life's great work, the five-volume history of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain (Allen & Unwin,
In 1950 he retired from full-time work on the journal Labour Monthly, which he had helped to found in 1921, in order to devote his time to historical research, undertaking more detailed studies of the Scottish Miners’ Federation in 1955 and the South Wales Miners’ Federation in 1967.

In the early 1950s Arnott became increasingly engaged in the debate within the Communist movement surrounding the political legacy of William Morris and the desire to commemorate him as a ‘founding father’ of communism in Britain. In 1934, the centenary of Morris’s birth, he had published his first important work on the subject, entitled William Morris: A Vindication, in an attempt to reclaim Morris in political terms from the anti-communist bias of the official celebrations, which were attended by Stanley Baldwin. Arnott was consequently a known authority on Morris amongst his comrades and became an active participant in attempts by the Party in London to propagandise about Morris. Arnott’s papers include a small number of letters discussing arrangements for him to speak at CPGB branch meetings on the subject over the period 1949–1953.

In May 1951 Arnott was given access to material on which to base a political reassessment of Morris, following the purchase by Freeman Bass of a series of previously unknown letters between Morris and Reverend John Glasse, an Edinburgh-based member of the Socialist League, over the years 1886–1895. Arnott’s commentaries on the letters were published in Labour Monthly and in pamphlet form, but although he was convinced of the consequent need to revise and extend his 1934 pamphlet, it was not until 1964 that this project eventually came to fruition. William Morris: the Man and the Myth (Lawrence & Wishart) took the form of an extended commentary on the Glasse letters, as well as the correspondence during 1884–1888 between Morris and John Mahon, the first Secretary of the Socialist League, who was responsible in the late 1880s for socialist propaganda amongst the miners and ironworkers of Northumberland resulting in the formation of the North of England Socialist Federation. Arnott wrote with the principal intention of rescuing Morris from what he perceived to be continuing myths about Morris’s political significance, contending that it was valid to define him as a Marxian communist. Drafts of both the Labour Monthly articles and William Morris: the Man and the Myth are included within the deposit, accompanied by correspondence with E.P. Thompson, Graeme Shankland and Sydney Cockerell about Arnott’s research.

In late 1951 Arnott’s work took on a wider significance following a decision by the National Cultural Committee of the CPGB to celebrate the fifty-fifth anniversary of Morris’s death, on 3 October 1951. Responsibility for a ‘Morris Meeting’ was delegated to the newly formed CP Literature Group. Stella Jackson was asked to undertake the general planning and subsequently contacted Arnott as the best candidate to speak at the event. A protracted correspondence has survived between Jackson and Arnott which details how, due to inexperience and lack of funds on the part of the Literature Group and a lack of communication with the higher echelons of the Party, the meeting was scaled down, postponed and finally shelved completely in late 1952.

However, those determined to commemorate Morris were not deterred. Within the Communist Party an attempt was made to initiate a broadly based committee, which could both publicise Morris’s work to the wider working-class movement and emphasise his contribution to the cultural heritage of the British people. This
determination is documented by the minutes of a meeting between Arnot, Barbara Niven, Graeme Shankland and David Gregory-Jones in April 1952, which resolved that a William Morris Commemoration Committee should be formed, and by the correspondence between Arnot, Shankland and Stanley Morison, which survives from early 1953.  

By 1953, the project had broadened beyond the Communist Party, and contacts had been established with a number of individuals chosen for the varied contributions which they could make to an understanding of Morris. Those who had responded positively to the idea of commemorating Morris in a permanent way included Andrew Rothstein, Nikolaus Pevsner, Freeman Bass and Percy Horton, and they were eventually brought together at Red House, Bexleyheath in October 1953. As a result of the meeting, the William Morris Society was born.

The publication in The Times of 13 September 1955 of a letter signed by Stanley Morison, Nikolaus Pevsner, Edmund Penning-Rowsell and J. Brandon-Jones formally launched the Society, and its first members’ meeting was held on 7 December 1955. Some of the first tasks of the Society, namely the drawing up of a set of rules and a statement of aims, as well as the need to develop a varied programme of events and to attract as wide a membership as possible, are reflected in Arnot’s correspondence as a Committee member and the reports of the Programme and Publicity Subcommittees which he received in that capacity.

Of particular interest in terms of the issues dealt with by the Society in its early years is the material documenting its response to the withdrawal of the Nonesuch Press edition of Morris’s writings from the Moscow Book Exhibition in November 1959. The exhibition was arranged by the Soviet Relations Committee of the British Council with the aim of promoting goodwill between Britain and the Soviet Union. However the event was marred by the removal by a party of scrutators of a number of works from display, on the pretext that a Soviet audience would find them offensive. As the news broke in the Sunday newspapers in Britain on 22 November, Arnot’s instinctive reaction as both a Communist and a committed Morrisian was to be “greatly perturbed”, lamenting that “It will be very hard to repair the damage caused by this action.” The Honorary Secretary of the Society, R.C.H. Briggs, was equally concerned and made a formal complaint to the British-Soviet Friendship Society, whilst Arnot himself took up the matter with the General Secretary of the CPGB, John Gollan. According to Alexander Rybin, Head of the Soviet publishing organisation Glavizdat, the basis for the withdrawal of the Morris edition derived not from any opposition to Morris or his writings per se, but to the inference in the accompanying commentary of a parallel between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. That the criticism had no basis in fact confirmed Briggs’s suspicion that the action was the result of “a piece of low-level officialdom”. Indeed, on 3 December, the Daily Worker reported that the Soviet authorities had admitted it to be “the consequence of a serious mistake”. In Arnot’s view the whole incident revealed a lack of understanding within the Soviet Union of Morris’s political significance.

Other significant events covered by Arnot’s papers are the first exhibition mounted by the Society, The Typographical Adventure of William Morris, which opened in London in July 1957, and the Society’s campaign in 1958 against an Air Ministry proposal to site an aviation aid in the vicinity of Kelmscott Manor.

Arnot was already in his sixties when he became involved in the William Morris
Society and had behind him over thirty years of activism within the Communist movement, as a propagandist, strategist, committee member, lecturer and historian. He employed all of these skills in working towards the establishment of the Society as a permanent focus for the commemoration of William Morris. His commitment in this respect reveals another side to the orthodox Communist which he remained until his death in May 1986, namely his commitment to the ideal of communism and the hope of its realisation on which he based his life’s work. A catalogue of Arnot’s papers is now available and includes a detailed list of the material relating to the William Morris Society and Arnot’s research into Morris.

NOTES

All manuscript references are to the first and second deposits of Arnot’s papers, held by the Brynmor Jones Library [DAR and DAR(2) respectively]. Enquiries about access to the collection should be addressed to: The University Archivist, Brynmor Jones Library, University of Hull, Hull HU6 7RX.


2 For Arnot’s correspondence during his imprisonment, see DAR/2/1–12.

3 See DAR/6/1 for material relating to the founding conference of the CPGB.

4 For Arnot’s correspondence during his second period of imprisonment, see DAR/2/13–14.

5 Arnot’s role in the General Strike is discussed in more detail in A. Mason, The General Strike in the North East (Hull; University of Hull Publications, 1970).

6 Documentation of Arnot’s work within the Communist International during this period has not survived.

7 For further details of the establishment of the Marx Memorial Library, see DAR(2)/11/1–6 & 159.

8 For details of Arnot’s appointment, see DAR/3/1.

9 DAR(2)/12/1.

10 For Arnot’s work on the Glass letters, see Labour Monthly July & September 1951, as well as the Labour Monthly pamphlet, ‘The unpublished letters of William Morris: introduced by Robin Page Arnot’, 1951 series, no.6.

11 DAR(2)/6/4–5, 12–14 & 16.

12 DAR(2)/12/2.

13 DAR(2)/12/2–3.

14 DAR(2)/12/4, 5, 71 & 72–74.


16 DAR(2)/12/85.

17 DAR(2)/12/85 & 86.

18 Daily Worker 28 November 1959.

19 DAR(2)/12/84.

20 DAR(2)/12/86.

21 DAR(2)/12/61–70 & 79–82.