Artist, Poet, and Socialist: Academic Deliberations on William Morris at the University of Toronto, Canada

E. L. Panayotidis-Stortz

Between 1896 and 1925, William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement became a popular topic of interest with professors and students at the University of Toronto. Morris was written about in the university press, in academic books and biographies, as part of the curriculum, in theses, and especially in lectures on and off campus. He was discussed by a prestigious group of academics at the university including the political economist James Mavor, the Professor of Greek, John Charles Robertson, and Pelham Edgar, Professor of English Literature at Victoria College. To Edgar, Morris was a man of letters of the highest literary prominence, while for Robertson, the classicist, Morris’s social criticism, as delineated in his 1891 novel News from Nowhere, served as an effective commentary on the ancient Greek world as portrayed in Plato’s Republic. Notably, it was through Mavor’s ‘remembrances’ that Morris would move from the realm of myth to reality and be transformed from a friend and comrade to a rebellious - yet wealthy - revolutionary socialist who was politically naive and aesthetically lacking in his perception of natural beauty(!). Though Edgar, Robertson, and Mavor all offered diverse representations of Morris to suit their own particular interests and agendas, they were united in the study of Morris: the artist, the poet, and the socialist.

Since knowledge of Morris and the Movement’s aesthetic philosophies had been steadily on the rise in architectural and artistic circles in the last decades of the nineteenth century, these scholars’ dissemination of the ‘academic Morris’ was mediated through a cultural interaction with social-aesthetic interests on and off campus. Through their writings, and especially their public lectures, all three academics were brought into closer contact with agents and groups in the community who themselves intellectually adhered to and practised Arts and Crafts social-aesthetic ideas. Significantly, most of the community groups interested in Morris and involved in the practice of Arts and Crafts philosophies were women’s cultural organizations, such as the Toronto branch of the Woman’s Art Association of Canada (WAAC), the local branch of the National Council of Women of Canada (NCWC), and the Ladies’ League of School Art. Sympathetic causes often brought these various agents and groups into collective action: for example, when Mavor’s federal initiative to settle the Russian Doukhobors succeeded in 1899, the WAAC and the NCWC stepped in to socially acculturate and economically support Doukhobor women by selling their
ethnic handicrafts. Though these social relations were characterized by gender divisions (male intellectualism and female skilled practice) and class and ethnic inequities, these women's groups were integral in shaping and institutionalizing the evolving Morris and Arts and Crafts discourse in Toronto.

Similar interest in Arts and Crafts philosophies was also evident on campus, where knowledge about Ruskin, Morris, the Arts and Crafts Movement, and English art, was not restricted to deliberations among the professorate but was disseminated by the university press and its student writers. Particularly influential in this sphere of exchange was Victoria College's student journal Acta Victoriana (1878) which featured articles on such topics as Holman Hunt and the Pre-Raphaelite Movement, John Ruskin, Elbert Hubbard and the Roycrofters in upstate New York, and of course William Morris. Particularly interesting was Pelham Edgar's 1904 article 'William Morris, Poet, Artist, and Socialist', in which the English professor, clearly believing that Morris's poetry suffered at the expense of his other ventures, pointed out that '[Morris's] Socialism although not of the vulgar type ... and the supervision of his business stood in the way of his poetry.' Edgar added: 'Even Morris could not achieve the impossible feat of preaching a revolutionary propaganda upon dismal street corners, [and] attend ... to the artistic detail of a rapidly increasing business, while at the same time preserving the freshness of mind which the exercise of the poetic faculty demands.'

Discussions of Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement's philosophies on and off campus coincided with the advent of British idealist social reform and concerns about rampant industrialization and poverty, and their relationship to character-formation, morality, and citizenship. Conceptualized principally in the work of social critic John Ruskin, philosopher T. H. Green, and economist Arnold Toynbee, idealist theories merged with the older tradition of noblesse oblige to reorganize English society around bonds of community, fellowship, education, and a shared sense of citizenship through social service. Crucial to these discussions was the relationship between art and societal reform and the ways in which artistic production could be used to morally, and economically 'elevate' the lives of the poor and the working classes and aesthetically ennoble all members of society. These ideas found practical form in the educational programmes of settlement homes and women's cultural voluntary organizations, in the manual arts curricular in the public school system, and perhaps most importantly, in the formation of technical education in Ontario in the early decades of the twentieth century.

John Charles Robertson's essay 'The Social Ideals of Plato and William Morris', first presented as a conference paper to the Ontario Educational Association (OEA) annual conference in 1898 and revised for publication, is ripe for analysis. This essay is relatively unknown but best exemplifies the sort of ambivalent dialogue which characterized discussions of Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement in Ontario. In this article, I want to emphasize particularly those aspects of Morris and Arts and Crafts philosophies which were adopted by Toronto advocates, and to illustrate how those ideas found currency in a variety of social, economic, and political debates, pivotal as they were in the organization of the modern industrial state. By taking a mostly intellectual approach, I want to explore the extent to which Morrisian and Arts and Crafts philosophies and practices were discussed outside of architectural and artistic circles in Toronto between 1896-1925 and dispel the currently held notion
that Morris was known chiefly as 'an artist and a designer'.

John Charles Robertson was a formidable presence at the university and in the classical community of scholars and students. Born in Goderich, Ontario in 1864 (d. 1956), Robertson was a prestigious gold medal graduate of the University of Toronto's Honours Classics Course (1883) and a post-graduate of Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. Returning to Canada in 1887, Robertson secured consecutive teaching and administrative appointments in Ontario's secondary school system, first as a Classical Master at Owen Sound Collegiate and finally as Head Master (or Principal) of the Toronto Junction High School (now Humberside Collegiate). For Robertson, as for many young men of his class and educational rank, teaching in the school system was only a stepping stone to executive positions in the educational or government bureaucracy or in more prestigious university faculty posts. With great fanfare and self-congratulatory commentary from his new employers in 1894, Robertson was appointed a lecturer in Greek at Victoria College, a position he held until his retirement as Professor Emeritus in 1932.

In 1939, J. M. Dent and Sons of Canada published John Charles Robertson's Mixed Company, an eclectic collection of papers delivered during the span of his thirty-eight year academic career, following its author's wishes to make scholastic writings available to a lay reading audience. Compiled as an emeritus project, Mixed Company followed on the heels of Robertson's The Story of Greece and Rome. The Growth and their Legacy to our Western World, which he co-authored with his son H. Grant Robertson, himself a Professor of Classics at University College. In varying degrees, both books examine contemporary meanings of Greece and Rome and highlight the ancient culture's spiritual, intellectual, and material legacy to the modern world. The Toronto Star reported that it was an 'ancient story ... [which] becomes as interesting as the front page of a good newspaper'.

Though seven of the ten chapters in Mixed Company reflected Robertson's lifelong fascination with the Ancient Greek world, three chapters stood out by their sheer incongruity and contemporaneous context. Of the three, 'The Social Ideals of Plato and William Morris', originally written as a conference presentation for the Classical section of the OEA in 1898, is the most evocative. In this 23-page essay, Robertson contrasted Morris - 'one of the most interesting characters of the Victorian period' - with that 'noble Greek' Plato and showed how their theories of the ideal life, as illustrated respectively in the Republic and News from Nowhere, were influenced by each man's individual perspective and historical context. Though Robertson outlined how Plato's and Morris's ideal shared certain fundamental similarities - especially their notions of community and co-operative fellowship - the substantial body of the text discusses their 'significant differences'. Plato's ideal society, Robertson argued, was based on an efficient and stable social system which was led by a naturally pre-ordained elite governing (or guardian) class of men who combined public service and moral leadership. Trained through 'careful discipline' and a strictly supervised course in literary, philosophical, and musical studies, this guardian class possessed 'the intellectual insight into truth which is the highest and rarest power with which man is endowed', producing the most accomplished of its class, the philosopher-kings. Plato reasoned that the most eminently sought-after ideal in Greek society was the life of the mind - a combination of moral goodness and spiritual vision only for the most accomplished of this guardian
To the rest of the male citizenry remained the task of ‘doing to the best of one’s ability that one thing which nature had made him most capable of doing’.22 Going against your own pre-determined position in life or giving your attention to a multitude of interests and activities were both ‘ineffective service ... [and] a weakness of character’.23 Robertson concluded that ‘only by wisely guided co-operation can men make the best of life, and only by doing one thing well can each one properly co-operate’ in the working of the state.24

Against this background, the fragility of Morris’s democratic and inclusive social theory was already a foregone conclusion. From the first paragraph, Robertson presented Morris as ‘a man of singularly varied interests and of manifold gifts [but] ... far inferior to that Noble Greek’.25 In arguing against Morris’s vision of society, Robertson did not restrict himself to *News from Nowhere* but utilized Morris’s writings on art, his poetry, and articles written about him in the English art press.26 Robertson criticized Morris for not recognizing ‘those innate and ineradicable differences between man and man ... that necessary division of classes based on inborn capabilities and, therefore of function’.27 He also took issue with Morris’s assertion that slavery and the exclusive privileges of a ruling class was the ultimate downfall of ancient Greece. The ‘total absence of any form of government ... [and] the complete license [of each individual] ... to do exactly what he pleases and to do it as he pleases’ in *News from Nowhere* struck Robertson as anarchy, not as socialism. Rejecting Morris’s government of and by the people, Robertson was partial to Plato’s model of a paternalistic and centralized enlightened government which regulated for the better every aspect of its citizens’ lives.

In his conclusion, Robertson contrasted the ideal societies as essentially materialistic in Morris’s case and spiritual in Plato’s. Robertson argued that for Morris, ‘human welfare ... [was] very much a matter of physical conditions ... and in this present life ... he dwells on the ... beauty of material things, not of high thought, but of skilful handiwork’.28 Such a vision of the ideal always ends in death, Robertson claimed. Plato on the other hand, ‘sees through and beyond all sensual beauty [in] a spiritual vision of better things - life is merely a preparation for another fuller existence’ where the soul realizes it own immortality.29 While ‘[Morris] looks only at earth, and calls it heaven; [Plato] ... seeks to bring heaven into touch with the earth’.30

Robertson’s attention to the ancient Greek’s spiritualism and morality remained a consistent theme in his work and was perhaps best formulated in a paper he gave in 1928 to the Victoria College Classical Club as a rebuttal to his colleague Maurice Hutton’s paper on the limitations of Greek morality. Calling Hutton’s conclusions ‘sweeping and untrue’, Robertson challenged ‘the conventional idea [that the Greeks] were more clever than moral, while the Englishman was stupid, but exceedingly moral’.31 Robertson’s belief that morality and spirituality far exceed mere cleverness was conceived in the midst of the earnest evangelicalism at Victoria College and was debated in educational circles in the light of the victory of empirical science over religion in the late nineteenth century.

Clearly, Morris’s vision of the ideal society was at odds with Plato’s spiritual idealism and Robertson’s own theory of social organization in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Toronto. Robertson whole-heartedly accepted Plato’s notion of an elite guardian class of men who were inherently pre-ordained to contribute to the public good by assuming their rightful positions of authority in various institutions
of the state (government, education, the church, law, and business). The men most suited to the important task of leading and serving as moral exemplars, Robertson contended, were the Classical or Liberal Arts university graduates. By the turn of the century, the study of the Classics, identified as a masculine and elite imperative, and as the 'soul ... of the Arts [curriculum] in the university', came to define the 'gentleman'. This specially-gifted caste of men, intrinsically privileged from birth, dedicated their lives 'to the service of God and State'.

Interestingly, clear intellectual traditions and values underlay Robertson’s connection of the way Plato speaks of the training of the guardian class and the way students in the Honours Classic course were taught at the University of Toronto during the time Robertson was an undergraduate and during his career as a teacher after 1894. By criticizing Morris’s democratic and egalitarian vision of a world co-operatively governed by makers as opposed to thinkers, Robertson advocated the divine ordering of his own society, the pre-eminent and continuing value of the classical curriculum, and the life of the mind as the highest form of human achievement.

Robertson’s comparative discussion of Plato’s elite thinkers and Morris’s mass of makers was part of an on-going debate on vocationalism at the OEA. This ultimately impacted on questions of manual arts education, technical training, and the role of the educational system in industrial prosperity. Morrisian and Arts and Crafts philosophies were well-known and increasingly discussed at the OEA’s Manual Arts section in the early decades of the twentieth century. Eschewing Morris’s dislike of formal educational structures. Morrisian advocates at the OEA consistently argued for a form of educational training which united the individual’s mental and manual capacities and elevated art and craft work to the legitimacy of other curriculum offerings. Significantly, advocates more often justified their approach towards training of the ‘whole individual’ not on Morris’s socialist tenets but on Ruskin’s ethical and evangelical notion of handwork as a noble expression of one’s humanity. Consequently, critics like Robertson could argue that a ‘natural’ division between thinkers and makers was in no way an unequal social arrangement but a rational and moral ordering based on the virtuous exercise of all work - whether mental or manual.

With the legislation of the Technical Education Act in 1911, and with Ontario’s expanding industrial and manufacturing sectors, this debate was the cultural foundation of vocational training agendas in Ontario. It can be argued that if Morris’s vision of society, as illustrated in News from Nowhere, was of little or no consequence - that it did not stir up popular working-class passions - these critics perhaps would not have opposed it so vehemently. I suggest rather that Morris’s ideal of society, even when diluted and transformed somewhat in the Canadian context, was read by many critics as a threatening message of revolutionary change to the existing social, political, and economic order.

NOTES

1 I would like to thank Paul J. Stortz for his judicious comments on various drafts of this paper.

2 Rev. Canon A. Armstrong wrote an MA thesis (University of Toronto) on Ruskin in 1905 entitled ‘Ruskin as a religious Teacher’ in which he discussed Ruskin ‘bringing the knowledge of God’s will into the minutest details of our lives’ (p. 1).
Judy Mills and Irene Dombra, University of Toronto Doctoral Theses, 1897-1967, (Toronto 1968). Morris’s, Rossetti’s and Ruskin’s poetry was also included in Representative Poetry Mainly of the XVIII and the XIX Centuries, (Toronto 1915), which was edited by English Professors W. J. Alexander and W. H. Clawson. Alexander was Armstrong’s thesis supervisor. Robin Harris, English Studies at Toronto: A History, (Toronto 1987), pp. 64-65.

3 For an elaborated discussion of Mavor and particularly his promotion and contention of Morris in Toronto cultural communities see my forthcoming article ‘James Mavor: Cultural Ambassador and Aesthetic Educator to Toronto’s Elite’, Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies.

4 Morris’s popularity increased with the publication of several key biographies written shortly after his death, particularly Aymer Vallance’s William Morris: His Art, His Writing, and His Public Life, (London 1897); and J. W. Mackail’s The Life of William Morris, (London 1899). What becomes enshrined as Morris’s life and practice is garnered particularly from Mackail’s text and only punctuated by Mavor’s personal recitations.

5 Though an official Art Department did not exist at the university until 1933, suggestions about the importance of art had been put forward by such artists as J. W. L. Forster who cited John Ruskin’s Slade Professorship at Oxford as evidence of the importance of the need for a Chair in Aesthetics. For Forster ‘Art and Aesthetics [are] fundamentals to the better modes of life’. ‘The University and the Fine Arts’, Acta Victoriana, XXXI, No. 3 (1907), p. 136.

6 Founded in 1878, Acta Victoriana related the monthly ‘doings’ of its students, faculty and alumni, and discussed issues concerning the wider university community and society including religious, missionary, and social action concerns, sports and travel, and questions dealing with literary, scientific, and artistic interest. The journal was run by a ten-member student editorial board, overseen by a Faculty Advisory Board which consisted of C. C. James and Professor Pelham Edgar. Acta Victoriana 1878-1990: An Index with a Subject Authority, (Toronto 1990). On Edgar, see his autobiography, Across My Path, (Toronto, 1952).

7 J. L. Rutledge, ‘Holman Hunt and the Pre-Raphaelite Movement’, Acta Victoriana, XXX, No. 4 (January 1907), pp. 230-231. The article reproduces Holman Hunt’s ‘Light of the World’ and suggests that the attack on the PRB was so disturbing to Holman Hunt that he ‘considered the advisability of forsaking his chosen calling and emigrating to Canada to take up farming’ (p. 233). An obituary on Holman Hunt is found in Acta Victoriana, XXXIV (1910-1911). Also in Acta Victoriana, Ethel Chadwick, ‘Some Glimpses of John Ruskin’, Acta Victoriana, XXXII, No. 5 (February 1909); and Ethel Hume Patterson, ‘William Morris and the Roycrofters’, Acta Victoriana, XXVIII, No. 1 (October 1904), pp. 15-22. References and critiques of articles of interest are found in other journals such as the English Independent Review (October 1906) in which Morris’s biographer J. W. Mackail had written ‘The Genius of William Morris’, Acta Victoriana, XXX, No. 2 (1907). Short fictional pieces such as Albert R. Carman’s ‘The Typewriter and the Ruskinite’, Acta Victoriana, XXIX, No. 2 (1905-1906), pp. 182-183, discussed Ruskin’s ideas on architecture.

9 On the emergence of the ‘Idealistic ethic’ at the University of Toronto, see Sara Z. Burke, *Seeking the Highest Good: Social Service and Gender at the University of Toronto, 1888-1937*, (Toronto 1996).

10 For a Canadian example of settlement homes, see Cathy L. James, ‘Gender, Class and Ethnicity in the Organization of Neighbourhood and Nations: The Role of Toronto Settlement Houses in the Formation of the Canadian State, 1900-1914’, PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 1996.

11 I discuss the relationship between Ontario’s educational system and the emergence of Arts and Crafts social-aesthetic philosophies in ‘Every Artist Would be a Workman and Every Workman an Artist: Morrisian and Arts and Crafts ideas and ideals at the Ontario Educational Association, 1900-1920’, in the forthcoming collected papers from the 1996 Centennial Conference Proceedings to be published by Exeter University Press.


14 A Group of Classical Graduates’, *Honour Classics in the University of Toronto*, (Toronto 1929).

15 In 1938 the University conferred an honorary degree of doctor of laws on Robertson.

16 David and Sheila Latham’s, *An Annotated Critical Bibliography of William Morris* cites the 1940 edition of *Mixed Company*, listing it as an English publication although its author and publisher were Canadian and it was only printed in England (at The Temple Press, Letchworth).


18 ‘Easy History’, *Star* (18 February 1928). Graduate Records, A73-0026-381, University of Toronto Archives, Ontario, Canada.


20 Robertson, *Mixed Company*, op. cit., p. 56. Robertson cited the Longmans, Green and Co. reprint version of Morris’s *News from Nowhere*. It was originally serialized in the Socialist League’s journal *Commonweal* between 11 January and 4 October 1890, and eventually published in 1890 in Boston by Roberts Brothers, and by Reeves and Turner in England in 1891.


22 ibid., p. 59.

23 ibid., p. 60.

24 ibid., p. 60.

25 ibid., p. 66.

26 Robertson may have read the review of *News from Nowhere* in the Toronto *Week* (27 March 1891), pp. 272-3.


28 ibid., p. 67.

29 ibid., p. 75.
‘Athenians and English Contrasted in Merit’, *Varsity*, 28 February 1928. Graduate Records, A73-0026-381, University of Toronto Archives, Ontario, Canada.

32 Honour Classics in the University of Toronto, p. 58. See for example R. D. Gidney and W. Millar, *Professional Gentlemen: The Professions in Nineteenth-Century Ontario*, (Toronto 1995), in which they analyze how the acquisition of a liberal education was a socially (and culturally) constituted ranking and a deliberate site from which to train generations of the male political elite.