The blurb of Ethel Mannin’s *Sunset over Dartmoor*, published in 1977, tells us, strikingly, that it was its author’s ninety-fifth book. She managed to sustain a career as a left-wing journalist and popular novelist from the 1920s well into the 1960s, and in view of the vitality and political idealism that seems to pervade much of her writing, it is a pity that most of her books are now buried in the stacks of our public libraries. I hope that they will come back into the limelight of fashion. Their interest for Morrisians is that they show the pervasive influence of Morris’s ideas.

This is evident in her satire of 1945, *Comrade, O Comrade*, which is described in its blurb as providing ‘a comprehensive and hilarious “Lowdown on the Left” . . . a sheer delight to the reader who can claim to have preserved his political sanity in these ideology-ridden times’. The text seems to me to live up to this claim, and the entertaining quality is enhanced by Leonard Boden’s caricatures of such obvious targets as Peter Isinglass, the bourgeois comrade, and by its central character, the naive young Irishman Larry Lanaghan, as he passes through social worlds bewilderingly far from his own. But although the emphasis is on the forms of extravagance and complacency found in various, mostly left-wing, political groups as they existed in the Thirties, the satire is not aggressive, and the overall feeling remains sympathetic to the ideals which the characters fail to live up to. Towards the end of the book its two most attractive characters, Larry and an independent-minded young woman called Jackie, discuss the confusions of contemporary politics. Jackie comments:

‘There was an English poet called William Morris who said that the less people were governed the better. He called himself a socialist and he said anarchism was impossible but in his ideas about government he was an Anarchist, all the same. He wrote lovely poetry, and he made lovely books and tapestries, and he was altogether an artist. No one seems to think much about him nowadays – hardly anyone reads him and his socialism is considered old-fashioned. He hadn’t much use for politics. He wrote a book called *News from Nowhere*, about an imaginary community who lived according to the laws of common consent, and had all things in common. They turned the Houses of Parliament into a dung-market, and their children didn’t go to school, being too busy learning to waste their time there!’

‘Sure he had the right ideas!’ Larry cried. ‘He and me old Da would get on fine together!’

‘We could go and see where he lived,’ Jackie suggested. ‘He had a lovely old house beside the Thames, and all the young socialists of those days used to gather there – the common working people.’
Larry's eyes glowed.

'Wouldn’t there be the fine good talk there at all times, the fine poetic talk settin’ the world to rights?'

She answered him in his own idiom, smiling. 'There would so. It’s been said that the poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world!'²

And so the couple take a bus to Hammersmith, and make their way through back-streets and alleyways to the river. An illustration shows them leaning on a parapet as they have their final talk, which leads Jackie, who is an artist, to articulate her position:

‘If I'm a symbol of anything it’s of the artist driven into the ivory tower by political disillusion. It’s not that I’m aloof from the struggle for a better world, but just that I don’t see it being achieved through the various political parties, with their splits and their internal bickers and their jealousies and hostilities. I believe as Morris did in the perfectibility of human nature, but no political struggle is going to achieve the necessary change of heart in man. It means, therefore, that there are no short cuts to Utopia. People will achieve the good life when they are ready for it – love of their fellow-men must desire it, and faith create it – out of that love. It’s not likely to come in our time, but others will know it after us.’

‘And there’s nothing we can do to help bring it about?’

‘We can keep the desire for it in our hearts, and help keep the flame alive in others. You have something to take back home now – a vision. Men must first desire the good life – they must be given the vision. A poet can impart it all unaware.’³

The couple then walk along Chiswick Mall and arrive at Kelmscott House, where Jackie laid a hand on Larry’s arm⁴ and spoke again of Morris:

‘It was here Morris lived, and it can’t have been much different then. There would be horse-traffic on the road, and more traffic on the river – more barges and boats with tall red sails. The house was called the ‘Retreat’ when he took it over, but he named it Kelmscott after the manor house he had higher up the river. He did a lot of weaving here. The house was hung with his tapestries, and he had carpet looms as well. Weaving and dyeing made up a big part of his life here . . . He got a kind of medieval splendour and richness into his colours. They say his golds and amethysts were like sunsets. He believed that work and love were the important things. In his socialism there was the vision that reaches beyond all parties and politics.’

‘It’s his like the world needs today, I’m thinkin,’ Larry said.⁵

In this up-to-date version of the ending of News from Nowhere the characters part at a bus stop in the Broadway, where Jackie asserts: ‘It’ll come again, that vision. People will get back to it when all their party politics have failed them . . . It’s good-bye now, Larry.’⁶ And Larry returned to Ireland with these words, and this Morrisian ideal, as his most valued memory.
Ethel Mannin was only a name to me when I read the novel, and I then set out to find out how she came to have this Morrisian emphasis in her work. Since she was a very active journalist and autobiographer, as well as a popular novelist, the evidence was not far to seek. In her 1930 autobiographical Confessions and Impressions she tells of her happy relationship with her parents, the negativity of her schooling, and her education afterwards through friends and reading. Ch. IX, ‘Education in Earnest’, tells of her friendship with ‘a colonial artist’ in the studio of the firm of advertisers for which she was working at the age of fifteen. The New Zealander took her to tea at the ABC, then ‘an oak tea-room over a cinema’, and talked about many things:

I learned the meaning of sabotage, of the activities of the I.W.W. and Eugene V. Debs. I learned about William Morris and the Kelmscott Press, and about Upton Sinclair. I read The Brass Check, and a good deal of Graham Wallas and Cunninghame Graham on social economy. I read Prince Kropotkin’s Mutual Aid as a sort of text book, along with Ingersoll’s Essays. We were very ‘red’. We sat under the trees or among the bracken surrounded by lovers, and J. S. would read to me from John Stuart Mill or Morris’s News from Nowhere. In that most important year of my life I abandoned the exoticism of Wilde from the simplicities of Morris - The Earthly Paradise became as well-thumbed as my Imitation of Christ, and Ingersoll’s Essays were my Bible. J. S. introduced me to The Light of Asia and The Hounds of Heaven, both of which were in the nature of profound experiences for me. . .

This may read somewhat extravagantly, but there seems no reason to doubt its overall authenticity as an account of the early development of a remarkable young woman in a particular pre-war milieu. Mannin gives a very similar account in her 1932 book All Experience. In Ch. XI ‘Tea-Shops’ she recalls her early serious years’ reading of Cunninghame Graham, Graham Wallas and J. S. Mill, and often having tea with the artist from New Zealand at a cinema in Holborn, ‘after the office closed in the evening and [we] talked of socialism, the I.W.W., William Morris, Upton Sinclair – or rather he talked and I listened. In these “Oak Tea Rooms” I had read to me long passages from “News from Nowhere” and “The Earthly Paradise”, and the Essays of Robert Green Ingersoll – and learned more in nine months than I had learned in nine years of schooling; I learned what the school had never attempted to teach me – to think’. Some of the same material finds its way into Mannin’s 1933 novel Venetian Blinds.

The 1934 autobiography, Forever Wandering, is clearly a more political book, with its awareness of the rise and effects of Fascism and the Soviet Union. Of the latter, she writes, despite having criticised some aspects, including the dull propaganda art:

Having gone to Russia I shall always count [it] as the most worth-while journey I have ever made. I found there a life which is real, free of the tyranny of shams, religious, conventional, moral; a life that has purpose and meaning; where progress is a reality, not a newspaper catch-phrase; a life illuminated by
an ideal – the ideal of the right to live, as opposed to merely existing, for every man. It is we of the capitalist Western world who are the barbarians. . . .

In ‘A Socialist Summer School’ she warmly celebrates the democratic and idealistic spirit of the Independent Labour Party (ILP), particularly as embodied in Jimmy Maxton – whom she compares to A. S. Neill, the progressive head of Summerhill School. At this time the ILP and the Communist Party were close, but Mannin suggests that she was thought right-wing, despite her dislike of reformism. In fact, she sees the collapse of the system as at hand: ‘One of the two things must happen, and that within our time, either rebirth or extermination; a proletarian revolution or a capitalist war’.11

In 1939 Mannin published another autobiographical book, Privileged Spectator. Subtitled ‘A Sequel to Confessions and Impressions’, the book deals with her life between 1930 and 1938. She gives a lively summary of her work so far, and reaches the conclusion that she has passed through Marxism to anarchism, then on to pacifism in the Tolstoyan tradition. She ends by praising some of her heroes, including Shakespeare, Marlow, Da Vinci, and concludes: ‘We need a return to the William Morris broad conception of art in relation to life, in terms of colours and designs and craftsmanship, and windows opening on to Heaven, instead of narrowing it down to the preciosities of cliques and coteries who seek through their obscurities to keep art esoteric’.12 We need all kinds of insights: ‘Delvaux and Dali open windows to Heaven no less than Raphael and Botticelli, and William Morris with his Earthly Paradise’.13 She praises the taxi-driver Herbert Hodge, and her own father, ‘Bob’ Mannin: ‘He belongs to the William Morris, John Burns, tradition of Socialists, and still likes to reflect upon the great days at Kelmscott, and his youthful association with John Burns’.14

It is in her 1952 This Was a Man. Some Memories of Robert Mannin by his daughter Ethel Mannin that the origins of Mannin’s enthusiasm for Morris is made clearer. It is an affectionate 104-page memoir of Robert Mannin, who died in 1948. She tells how as a young man in London he bought many books, from which he educated himself, especially Nelson’s Sevenpenny Classics in their scarlet covers, and a shilling non-fiction library with blue covers; both included Wells, Gissing, Belloc, Baring and London. ‘Although my father read Shakespeare . . . I did not come to Shakespeare through him – nor to the works of William Morris, for, oddly enough, despite my father’s association with Morris in the early socialist days, and despite his admiration for him, he had nothing of Morris on his shelves’.15 Of poets he liked Burns for, and Kipling despite, his politics, Omar Khayyam and Robert Service. Political books he liked included Blatchford’s Merrie England and Howard Evans’ Our Old Nobility of 1909 attacking landlordism. He loved information and conversation, though he was also happy ‘dreaming’ on his own. ‘Except for membership of William Morris’s Socialist League when he was a mere boy, he was never a member of any political party, and he had no illusions about the “socialism” of the Labour Party in power, but he had a great admiration for “Jimmy” Maxton, the leader of the Independent Labour Party, whom he saw in the direct tradition of Keir Hardie . . . His socialism went a great deal deeper than any politics or party policy; it was the authentic socialism of the Early Christians,
the true communism of ‘all things in common’, utterly – and tragically – remote from Stalinism’. His beliefs are traced back to 1887:

It was his pride that he was on the plinth in Trafalgar Square in November 1887 with Cunninghame Graham, John Burns, H. W. Nevinson, and other eminent supporters of the rights of Man and the ideals of the French Revolution, in the great demonstration on behalf of the unemployed. The mounted police rode into the crowd in an attempt to break up the meeting, and for resisting the police John Burns and others were arrested. My father was only sixteen at the time and the occasion made a great impression on him. He sang with John Burns in the Socialist League choir in Westminster, and attended the Socialist League gatherings at William Morris’s house in Hammersmith.

Later she remarks that ‘The socialist classics [were] on the shelves – No. 5 John Street, The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists, The Iron Heel, The People of the Abyss, Merrie England.’ Having supported the Boer cause at the time of the South African War, in 1914 her father ‘firmly maintained the socialist line that the war was a war of the ruling-classes of England and Germany, and as such no concern of the working-classes of either nation’. And ‘Of the second world-war he remarked with a sigh that for a peace-loving nation we did seem to get mixed up in a lot of wars’. He raised £100 to help Ethel when he learnt in 1940 that she was going to be a conscientious objector, but was also proud of his son who won a decoration in Normandy in 1945. Mannin ascribes a great influence to him: ‘for such as I am . . . my father made me. He made me a socialist in the old William-Morris, Keir-Hardie tradition. He gave me my feeling for the under-dog, the under-privileged, the dispossessed. With his insistence that war was murder he sowed in me the seeds of my ultimate pacifism’. One of his favourite sayings was ‘When Adam delved and Eve span – who was then the gentleman?’ He belonged to ‘the days before socialism became a debased word, and when men were naive enough to believe that a war could end a war. Bob Mannin was like Keir Hardie and Jimmy Maxton, whom he so much admired, a political innocent, the socialist pure-in-heart and sea-green incorruptible. In this nylon-pylon-skylon age we are unlikely to see his like again’.

Mannin’s most systematic account of Morris’s ideas is given in her 1944 Bread and Roses. A Utopian Survey and Blue-Print, a little-known but interesting contribution to the literature of Utopianism. (It appears in neither of the main bibliographies of Morris, by Aho and Latham, nor, I believe, in the main Utopian bibliographies). More and Morris are the two thinkers most fully discussed, praised for having seen ‘the dream whole’ rather than trying like ‘our present-day Planners’, to build ‘a brave new world . . . on the crumbling foundations of the old one’. News from Nowhere is discussed extensively in Ch. III, ‘Utopian Administration’; only in it, suggests Mannin, ‘do we find any real libertarian spirit’. But she is not uncritical; she argues that the psychological and mechanical developments of the twentieth century mean that ‘a more complex form of organisation than he envisaged would be called for’, and argues that ‘anarchosyndicalism would probably best solve the problem’. She praises in particular Morris’s economic critique of imperialism, a system then still very powerful. She
also sees Morris as a pioneer in his educational ideas and his awareness of ‘the futility of the orthodox educational system’.28 As she puts it: ‘Morris realised, in short, that true education is creativeness – release into happy creative activity according to temperament and ability’.29 In the chapter ‘Utopia and Religion’ Mannin refers to the feast in the church at the end of News from Nowhere, and goes on: ‘Is it too much to suggest that there is more of the true spirit of religion in this than in a fashionable crowd listening to platitudes from the pulpit, their minds remote equally from heaven and earth? Love of the good earth is ultimately love of God, creator of heaven and earth’.30 Hers is a vaguely pantheistic religion, into which she has less difficulty than perhaps she should in accommodating Morris. The last chapter of the book is called ‘Utopia – The Will to Dream’ and is of course directed at her readership at the end of the Second World War. She draws attention to the destruction of the environment currently taking place, and calls for something far beyond reform. Her final belief is that ‘Man must find a new way of living or perish’.31 This is a book not so much of scholarship – though it is based on wide reading – as of Utopian enthusiasm. Perhaps that is why it is not as well known as cooler and more sceptical accounts.

In 1971 Mannin published Stories from My Life, another autobiographical work, and in it she firmly – and justifiably – stated the continuity of her political ideals (which had by this time become strongly involved with the cause of the Palestinian people). She concluded: ‘I have been a socialist all my adult life, from the age of fifteen, and now, at close of play, in the seventies, am more than ever convinced of the necessity for social revolution’.32 It is a position, however far from obvious practicalities, that Morris would surely have recognised and saluted.

NOTES

1 Ethel Mannin, Comrade, O Comrade, (Jarrolds [1945]), dustwrapper.
2 ibid., p. 152.
3 ibid., p. 154.
4 ibid., p. 155.
5 ibid., p. 155.
6 ibid., p. 156.
7 Ethel Mannin, Confessions and Impressions, (Jarrolds 1930), p. 56.
8 ibid., pp. 56–7.
9 Ethel Mannin, All Experience, (Jarrolds 1932), p. 75.
11 ibid., p. 268.
13 ibid., p. 311.
14 ibid., p. 321.
15 Ethel Mannin, This Was A Man, (Jarrolds 1952), pp. 18–19.
16 ibid., pp. 24–5.
17 ibid., p. 27.
18 ibid., p. 41.
19 ibid., p. 71.
20 ibid., p. 71.
21 ibid., p. 101.
22 ibid., p. 103.
23 ibid., p. 104.
25 ibid., p. 8.
26 ibid., p. 40.
27 ibid., p. 44.
28 ibid., p. 59.
29 ibid., p. 60.
30 ibid., p. 174.
31 ibid., p. 184.