All through the French nineteenth century, with the growth of class-consciousness among the urban proletariat, especially in Paris, there was a strong feeling that the Great Revolution of 1789 had been left incomplete - only the bourgeoisie had really benefited from it. Hence the Revolutions of 1830, 1848 and 1871, of which the most radical and influential was the Commune of 1871. 1830 resulted in a change of monarch; 1848 in a Republic, to be followed by the dictatorship of Napoleon III. All three attempts to take the 1789 Revolution further were met by military repression.

In the late 1860s, Napoleon relaxed press censorship: immediately, criticism of the Empire, and discussion of all manner of social ideas, communist, anarchist, back-to-the-Jacobinism-of-1793, broke out. When Napoleon declared war on Prussia in 1870, and capitulated within six weeks, the immediate reaction was the declaration of the Third Republic, and the overthrow of the Imperial regime. Peace was not made until January 1871; in the meantime, war continued in the provinces and around Paris, which was besieged by the bulk of the Prussian Army. A Government of National Defence was set up which was seen by the Parisians as a device for reducing resistance until such time as a capitulation could be arranged.

For five months, Paris had been cut off from the rest of France, except by balloon; starved - these were the days of the rat and cat menus, of joints from the elephant in the Paris zoo - and frustrated to the nth degree by the incompetence of its government, while still hoping, by means of revolutionary ‘torrential sorties’ to turn the tide of war. Came 18 March 1871, when a new government led by an undersized historian called Adolphe Thiers, dubbed by Morris, following Marx, the ‘vile dwarf’, sent in troops to seize the cannon on the heights of Montmartre, which had been paid for by public subscription. There was a riot in the great Parisian tradition; the soldiers fraternised with the National Guards (local militia): two unpopular officers were shot, and Thiers ordered a withdrawal of government and regular Army to Versailles, where a new National Assembly, packed with the most reactionary provincial elements, was already in place. Thiers immediately began planning the reconquest of the capital, with the aid of prisoners of war released by the Prussians, while in Paris an 80-strong Commune was elected, made up of workmen, journalists, lawyers and doctors. Instead of marching immediately on Versailles, and securing their position, they talked a lot, and legislated a little. Their political persuasions ranged through the entire spectrum of 1860s ideas. They even summoned up the potent ghost of 1793 (‘La patrie en danger’) by establishing a Committee of Public Safety. Morris must have had them in mind, when Old...
Hammond describes the Committee set up during the English revolution of 1952 as chronicled in *News from Nowhere*: ‘... its old members had little administrative capacity, though, with the exception of a few self-seekers and traitors, they were honest courageous men, many of them endowed with considerable talents of other kinds’. All believed that, to meet the needs of the hour, an autonomous Paris Commune should be established as an example for the liberation and federation of all the communes of France. The pamphlet on the Commune which Morris wrote in 1886, with Belfort Bax, the doctrinaire English Marxist, and Victor Dave, the Belgian anarchist, comments as follows: ‘The result might have been different if the Commune has wasted less time in parliamentary pros and cons, and addressed itself more to organising its splendid army’. (By ‘army’ is meant the militia, known as the Garde Nationale, which on paper amounted to 200,000 officers and men, but eventually to some 10,000, who were more often than not available only for the defence of their own neighbourhoods. By the final week of the struggle, there were probably no more than a thousand manning the last barricades. The regular army, which was finally about 120,000 strong, was overwhelmingly pro-Versailles). Another capital error, the failure to take over the central bank of France, is also castigated: ‘The very heart of the enemy was within their grasp, and they refused to clench their hand’. Lenin in 1917 used the history of the Commune as a check-list of how not to run a revolution.

The only offensive operation mounted by the Commune, in early April, was a total failure; thereafter, there was no coherent strategy. From the start, the Versailles troops shot all prisoners out of hand; once inside Paris, they were conducting simple mopping-up operations. The Commune started life on 18 March: during the week ending 28 May, known as La Semaine Sanglante, the Bloody Week, when anything that moved in central Paris was shot, it was making its last stand. The cemetery of Père Lachaise was fought over, and the last organised group of Communards, 147 strong, were shot against what is now called the Mur des Fédérés. The Commune had lasted just 72 days.

The regular army lost some 800 men: the massacres in the Paris streets were of the order of 25,000 men, women and children. 10,000 others were either shot at courts-martial, or deported to New Caledonia. 4,000 escaped, and took refuge in England and Switzerland. Most returned to France after the general amnesty of 1880. A few stayed on in the UK: Brunel, one of the Commune's field commanders, became a tutor at the Royal Naval College, and counted the future King George V among his students. Some, among them the famous Red Virgin, Louise Michel, Morris became acquainted with. From 1880, the Commune was commemorated every year in Paris, and the English socialists followed suit.

In Britain, after the collapse of Chartism, there was something of a political vacuum on the radical left, with the workers mainly concerned with developing trades unionism, or flirting with republicanism, and the upper classes continuing to believe that all was for the best in the best of all possible worlds. This changed after the Commune, though for years socialism was looked upon as something foreign, not home-grown. Karl Marx, who, on 30 May 1871 - two days after the final collapse - finished his *Civil War in France*, the most influential, if not the most accurate of the histories of the Commune, was in Hampstead, from where he had tried ineffectually to direct the Commune through the First International.
Ex-Communards also gave public lectures on the Utopian Socialists, like Fourier and Cabet, so despised by Marx and Engels. Later, anarchists such as Kropotkin, who eventually settled in England, and Malatesta, were to be encountered in Commonweal circles.

Fiona MacCarthy suggests in her biography of Morris that his emotional involvement with the Commune was partly due to a felt need to compensate for an initial tepid reaction. (Perhaps, too, he may have been influenced by the reactions of John Ruskin. Initially favourable to the Commune, Ruskin began denouncing the ‘bloodstained ouvrier and pétroleuse’ after the burning of the Louvre.) In the July of 1871, Morris was off on his Icelandic expedition, surrounded by new sensations and discoveries, though in a letter to Jane Morris we find him comparing boulders in the Icelandic lava fields to ruined Parisian barricades. Throughout his life, he showed the keenest sympathy for lost and failing causes, perhaps best expressed in the line in ‘Sir Peter Harpdon’s End’ in The Defence of Guenevere: ‘I like the straining game/Of striving well to hold up things that fall’.

In the 1880s, the period of Morris’s greatest political activity, the references to the Commune in his speeches and published works are legion, although the 18 March commemorations come in for fairly routine bits of rhetoric of which Morris eventually tired: in a letter to Jenny Morris in March 1887, he remarks that he has to speak on the 18th, but by this time has said all he has to say on the subject.

More and more, Morris was making the ideology of the Commune his own. He acknowledged the need for violence to consummate the coming revolution, and rejected the parliamentary approach, and what became the ‘inevitability of gradualness’ of the Fabians.

In an article he wrote in 1887 for Commonweal, on education for Communism, he put forward a programme which was in all essentials that of the Commune: dissolve the standing army, and replace it by a people’s militia; suppress the judiciary and the centralised state – in other words, destroy the capitalist state, and replace it by small independent administrative units. In France, the smallest of such units is the commune, and the aim of the Paris Commune was to create a free federation of all the communes in France, open to the rest of Europe. In News from Nowhere, Old Hammond speaks of ‘Our units of management: a commune or a ward or a parish (we have all three), and of how ‘we discourage centralisation all we can’. In A Short History of the Commune, this kind of social organisation is described as a federalist administration entirely opposed to the French tradition of centralisation.

It is possible to compare in detail some of the main features of the Commune with those of Nowhere, as they are set out in the chapter ‘How the Change Came’. For example, ‘the workmen’s regular organisation – a federation of all, or almost all, the recognised wage-paid employments’ is paralleled by the Commune’s Chambre Fédérale des Sociétés Ouvrières. Even Napoleon III’s late concessions to the working class at the end of the 1860s find an echo in the improvements in working conditions granted to British workers just before the Change . . . The Commune was immensely prolific in the production of wall-posters, so was the Committee of Public Safety set up in London during the Change. The Commune also set up such a Committee during its last desperate days . . . There is one episode in the history of the Commune which is directly referred to in News from Nowhere:
the demonstration by the ‘Friends of Order’ (Les Amis de L’Ordre). In both accounts, a crowd of semi-armed clubmen and rentiers straggle down a street protesting against the establishment of the Commune, and run head on into a group of National Guards. Shots are exchanged, and there are some casualties... The episode of the Trafalgar Square Massacre, where the soldiers eventually refuse to fire on, and even fraternise with, the crowd, has some points of resemblance with the behaviour of the French Army, during the confrontation of 18 March, the first of the Commune’s 72 days.

The Communards sought to justify their setting fire to historic buildings during the Bloody Week by stressing their importance as symbols of centuries of bitter oppression. Similarly, Morris and his collaborators, in their ‘Short History’, have no hesitation in claiming that ‘in face of a coalition composed of all the monarchies and centralisations: the centralising Republic, rotten Orleanism, foul imperialism, plus the German Empire, it is not wonderful if, surrounded by such enemies of the human race, the heroes of the Revolution, driven to despair, made up their minds not to vanish till they had destroyed with them the Paris of Centralisation and Monarchy’. For Morris, with his abiding sense of the value of fine buildings, and his love of Paris, this was indeed a hard saying, as well as an indication of the over-riding importance he attached to the Cause, and to the Commune as a major historical contributor to its eventual triumph. Elsewhere, in that year of 1886, he is still, in Chants for Socialists, keening over the dead of the Commune: ‘Nothing ancient is in their story, e’en but yesterday they bled/Youngest they of earth’s beloved, last of all the valiant dead’.

At about the same time, he was writing: ‘Those who believe that they can deal with capitalism in a piecemeal way, very much underrate the strength of the tremendous organisation under which we live. Rather than lose anything which it considers of importance, it will pull the roof of the world down upon its head’. In other words, why should capitalist ruthlessness not be met by revolutionary fervour?

Morris believed that the ultimate life-and-death clash between capitalism and the forces of the Revolution was inevitable. When the three main characters of The Pilgrims of Hope meet the full force of the Versailles war machine on the Paris barricades, they see it as ‘that first fight of the uttermost battle whither all the nations wend’. It was inevitable, and it would be international, as Morris believed from his encounters with ex-Communards in London, such as Leo Frankel, the Hungarian goldsmith, and one-time Minister of Labour in the Commune, who regularly addressed fellow-exiles in the upstairs room of the ‘Blue Post’ pub in Soho. The concept of the ‘international proletariat’ was already well-established: in the aftermath of the Commune over 1,700 foreigners were arrested in Paris, mostly Belgians and Poles.

Study of the Commune had confirmed Morris in his philosophy of regeneration through defeat. In a Commonweal article of March 1887, he asked why, after 16 years, it was still commemorated, and commented: ‘I have heard it said, and by good socialists too, that it is a mistake to celebrate a defeat... The Commune is but one link in the struggle which has gone on through all the history of the oppressed against their oppressors; and without all the defeats of past times, we should now have no hope of final victory’.
In the decades following the Commune, William Morris so thoroughly absorbed its ideas that after News from Nowhere (1890), in which Commune-style revolution, involving the destruction of the capitalist state, is followed by a Commune-style reordering of society, and what he called an ‘Epoch of Rest’, he virtually never returns to the subject again. The coming of the Epoch of Rest meant the end of Commune-style defeats, and the true ‘End of History’.

NOTES
There is evidence that Morris read Marx’s Civil War in France (1871), which is more reportage than history, as well as P-O Lissagaray’s standard work Histoire de la Commune de 1871 (1876: dated from Fitzroy Square). Both are still in print. He would probably have also known some of the many personal memoirs by ex-Communards. I have also consulted L’Insurgé, by Jules Vallès, (Paris: Les Editeurs Francais Réunis 1950), and Dictionnaire de la Commune, by Bernard Noël, 2 vols., (Paris: Flammarion 1978). The edition of News from Nowhere and The Pilgrims of Hope I have used is Three Works by William Morris, (London: Lawrence & Wishart 1977).

1 Morris: The Pilgrims of Hope, (Three Works), p. 167: ‘... the vile dwarf’s stroke/To madden Paris and to crush her ...’
4 ibid.
5 V. I Lenin: The State and Revolution, (London: Lawrence & Wishart nd), passim.
7 ibid., p. 304.
9 ibid., p. 270.
10 ibid., p. 296.
11 ibid., p. 313. ‘These Friends of Order had some successes at first, and got many officers of the regular army, and by their means laid hold of munitions of war’. Noël, Dictionnaire de la Commune, I, p. 33: ‘Les Amis de l’Ordre menacent d’abord les fédérés, qui leur barrent le chemin, puis les coups de canne succèdent aux insultes, enfin des coups de feu éclatent: 2 fédérés sont tués, 7 blessés’.
12 ibid., p. 307.
13 Short History of the Commune, op. cit.
14 ibid.
15 Short History of the Commune, op. cit.
16 ibid., p. 171.
17 ibid., op. cit., ‘Meeting the War Machine’, p. 171.