

Morris at Oxford and Dublin

by A. L. Irvine

WHAT was it like to attend one of Morris' political meetings? I have read a good deal of Morris literature in the last 50 years, but on that matter I can recall next to nothing. We know that at the gatherings of his own Hammersmith Socialist Society, held in what had been the stables of Kelmscott House, one might hear such brilliant men as Haldane and Shaw, but of what happened at the meetings which carried Morris, with such unselfish devotion, to all parts of these islands hardly any record, so far as my knowledge goes, is preserved.

There is just one occasion of which not one but two descriptions survive, the address to the Russell Club (of young Oxford Liberals) given in the Hall of University College in November 1883. The recent reprinting of part of that address by the Socialist Party of Great Britain reminded me that the scene is vividly described in *The Experiences of a Literary Man*, published by my friend the late Stephen Gwynn in 1926, and no doubt long out of print. The meeting is also recorded at some length by Mackail, who gives the title of the address as *Democracy and Art*, while Gwynn calls it *Art and Plutocracy*. I would seldom back Gwynn against Mackail for accuracy, but *Art and Plutocracy* is the title Morris chose when he printed the address in February 1884.

Writing more than forty years later, Gwynn clearly had a very vivid picture of the scene. For when Morris had said his say, the Master of the College, the historian J. F. Bright, rose and declared (to quote Gwynn) that the hall had been lent for a lecture on art and would certainly not have been made available for preaching socialism. The face of Morris flamed red above his white shirt front – the only time I have heard of W.M. in a boiled shirt – but, before the explosion came, the Slade Professor, John Ruskin, rose in the body of the hall and with a few tactful and

well-chosen words, averted the storm: I have read nothing that did him more honour.

Gwynn went up as a scholar to Brasenose in 1882, and Morris became an Honorary Fellow of his College (Exeter) in January 1883, just four days before he joined the two-year-old Democratic Federation: the two things seem hardly compatible in Victorian Oxford. He came to Oxford, according to Gwynn, about once a year, and the latter appears to have heard him several times. The last meeting was dissipated by a young tory with a bottle of sulphuretted hydrogen. Gwynn, like so many others, was struck with his resemblance to an old sea-captain. ('Beg pardon, sir,' said the man in the street, 'but were you ever captain of the Sea Swallow?')

But Gwynn's liveliest memories came from his native Dublin. He does not give the date, but a letter from Morris does. It was April 1886, when he records that 'The last meeting, on the Tuesday evening, was peaceful and even enthusiastic.' This suggests that not all meetings were so. Gwynn's was on the previous Saturday, at a working-men's club, in a 'long dining room packed with three or four hundred men.' The audience was most respectful, however little interested in the arts, but the meeting only came to life when the native speakers, socialist or otherwise, got to their feet. It reached its climax when a one-legged beggar man, quite out of order, began to orate from the back of the room, till some of us younger men, who had gone there as a sort of retinue to Morris, went to enforce the chairman's authority and pulled him down.' The fight that followed grew lively, and sticks were flying all over the hall, till someone, perhaps a functionary retained for the purpose, turned off the main. 'There was a moment's dead silence, then a roar of laughter, and we all groped our way harmoniously down the narrow stairs.'

Afterwards, over whisky and water at the Contemporary Club, they heard Morris' opinion of such godforsaken reactionary tories – not the epithets commonly applied to a working-class audience in Dublin. His troubles were not yet over. He had to face, not with complete success, cross-examination by some clever young Irish barristers, before he could retire to a corner where he discoursed to Yeats upon sagas and to Walter Osborne on stained glass. It was nearly four o'clock before Gwynn and Osborne escorted him back to his hotel. Of Yeats we have heard plenty, but who now remembers the gifted painted Osborne? I

wish there were many more such lively reminiscences. Perhaps someone will unearth them?

[When this was written I forgot that Morris himself had left a lively account of the second Oxford meeting in February 1885 (Mackail vol. ii p. 141). It took place in the famous Holywell Music Room, said to be the oldest concert hall in Europe, 'Just opposite to where Janey used to live'.]