Morris and the ‘Kingsley Movement’

by Elizabeth Brewer

In a letter to the Austrian socialist, Andreas Scheu, in 1883, William Morris said, of his Oxford days,

I was also a good deal influenced by the works of Charles Kingsley, and got into my head therefrom some socio-political ideas which would have developed probably but for the attractions of art and poetry.1

What were the ‘works’ that influenced him, and the ideas that they contained, and how in fact did they influence Morris? Charles Kingsley seems now to be known primarily as the author of *The Water Babies*, and perhaps also as the originator of ‘muscular Christianity’, but it was as a writer very outspoken on controversial matters of the day that Morris would first have encountered him. In the late 1840s and 1850s Kingsley, who was rector of the little country living of Eversley in Hampshire all his adult life, was known — indeed was notorious — as a social reformer with very decided views on some religious matters, too. Since his father was rector of a London parish, he was aware of an important aspect of both rural and urban life in the mid-19th century, the appalling suffering of the poor. Like Disraeli and Mrs Gaskell before him, he saw the novel as a medium through which he could touch the consciences of the rich and the educated, and prompt them to take some action. There was, of course, little excuse for the widespread ignorance of and indifference to contemporary suffering, for the findings of government commissions and the newspapers were constantly exposing it. Day by day, readers of *The Times* were reminded of the terrible conditions in which the poor had to live and work both in
town and country by the Rev. Lord Sydney Godolphin Osborne, ‘the famous S.G.O. of the newspapers’ as Carlyle called him; and it was probably by him in the first instance that Kingsley was alerted to the pressing need to do something about these social problems, for Kingsley was related to S.G.O. by marriage, and had worked with him as a curate in Dorset, where agricultural conditions were very bad. But at the same time as Kingsley was beginning his work as social reformer through the medium of fiction, he was also instrumental with the Christian Socialists F.D. Maurice, John Ludlow and others, in setting up trade associations in London to help poor workers in various trades in a practical way.

As time went on, Kingsley seems to have become disillusioned with the whole business of trying to make the influential care, and of helping the oppressed to help themselves. The Associations that the Christian Socialists had set up mostly failed because of the dishonesty and unbusinesslike ways of their members. Kingsley had delivered his message, and he turned his attention to other subjects in his subsequent books. William Morris says that this early influence by Kingsley did not develop; it seems, however, that it lay dormant in Morris’s mind, to bear fruit for the most part much later in his career. As a result of his attraction to art and poetry, Morris had something more precious and lasting to give to the world in the decades after he first encountered Kingsley’s ideas, than direct involvement with social reform could have achieved. Nevertheless, in minor ways in his life and in his early writing, as well as in his later socialism, one can from time to time detect what may well be the influence of Kingsley.

In her Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones, Mrs Burne-Jones gives a very clear impression of the close-knit group of young men that formed around Burne-Jones and Morris at Oxford. Their general disappointment with their life in the university bound them closer together, and their interests and enthusiasms shaped the course of the liberal education that they were devising for themselves. As befitted young men preparing for holy orders, Morris and Burne-Jones seem to have read much theology and related material in their first year, but by 1855 their intellectual diet included a good deal of contemporary
writing, especially fiction. It would probably have been virtually impossible for any alert undergraduate interested in contemporary literature not to be aware of Kingsley's writing, and Mackail tells us that at Oxford, Kingsley was read much more than Newman by 'passionate Anglo-Catholics', among whom Morris must surely have been counted. Mrs Burne-Jones also records an occasion when the group met at Dixon's, where they 'talked on a myriad subjects and Ted read some Yeast.' This was Kingsley's first novel, which had appeared first in serial form in Fraser's Magazine in 1848, and was later re-issued in book form. She adds that Kingsley's subsequent novels Alton Locke, Hypatia, and Westward Ho! 'had all been welcomed gladly by the set.' and mentions 'a list of the books and stories that the Set especially liked when they were together.' This included Charlotte Yonge's Heir of Redclyffe and Sintram, 'all Fouque's books', as well as some of Dickens, and 'Carlyle towards the last'. Thus it seems that Kingsley's novels ranked high in the esteem of the group, and it is probable that his books contributed some of the 'myriad subjects' on which they talked: the topics discussed were ones that Dixon, it seems, had never heard discussed before, which suggests that they may well have been topical and probably controversial issues, such as those with which Yeast is concerned. Burne-Jones himself says that Morris and he were 'as full of enthusiasm as the first crusaders' in their Oxford days, before they had really discovered art, and it is likely that some of their enthusiasms were inspired by the Christian Socialists; who 'must be glorious fellows', said Burne-Jones, 'if Maurice and Kingsley are fair examples.'

In his first year as an undergraduate Morris was reading 'great portions of the Acta Sanctorum', the series of lives of the saints begun by Jesuit scholars in the 17th century. There seems to have been widespread interest in this work in the mid-19th century: Newman had suggested that there should be an English version, and J.A.Froude had contributed a life of St. Neot to the four volumes which came out in 1844/5. It was this newly awakened interest in saints' lives which also prompted Kingsley's first published work, The Saint's Tragedy (though the life of Kingsley's heroine, St. Elizabeth of Hungary,
was not included in the *Acta Sanctorum*) and this play was enthusiastically acclaimed at Oxford when it first appeared. It is certainly possible that Morris knew it as well as those other books of Kingsley's specifically mentioned by Mrs Burne-Jones.

Kingsley had begun the first version of *The Saint's Tragedy* in 1842 as a wedding present for his wife, in the form of a large illuminated manuscript. The narrative had been intended to show that marriage was not incompatible with a life of religious dedication and indeed asceticism. It was to enable him (as well as his wife) to counter the Puseyite emphasis on the importance of celibacy with the argument that as useful and holy a life could be lived in the state of matrimony. Fanny Kingsley, before her marriage, had intended to enter a Puseyite convent, and Kingsley himself had had to wrestle with the personal problem of whether a true vocation did not also involve celibacy. When, however, *Tract XC* came out, Kingsley became disillusioned with the Oxford Movement and saw it as disguised popery of the most pernicious kind. His hostility to Roman Catholicism, largely based on his strong disapproval of the idea of a celibate priesthood, made him decide to re-fashion and publish his life of St. Elizabeth to show how dangerous were the demands made by Catholics, Roman or Anglo-, of their conscientious followers. William Morris in later life claimed that Ruskin had provided him with 'a corrective to High Church and Puseyite doctrines', but Kingsley may also have been partly responsible for his change of attitude. For in 1892, referring to his Oxford years, Morris said that he 'was to some extent touched by the Kingsley movement which, like Puseyism, was a reaction against Puritanism.' This rather puzzling reference to 'the Kingsley movement' suggests the extent to which Kingsley's ideas were having an effect on his contemporaries, and Morris's further definition of it as being 'like Puseyism. . . . a reaction against Puritanism' seems to indicate that the movement was not concerned with socialist or political ideas. Although by 1848 Kingsley was out of sympathy with Puseyism, a reaction against Puritanism is apparent in all his work. His attitude to the human body and to sex, indeed his almost sacramental concept of sex, often strikes the reader as in advance of his time, and as looking forward
The Saint's Tragedy shows the devout young Elizabeth happily married to Lewis, the Landgrave of Thuringia. She and her husband take a spiritual director, who soon sends Lewis off to his death on a crusade, and determines to make a saint of Elizabeth. He deprives her of her young children and forces upon her ever greater acts of asceticism and self-abnegation, until she dies, half-starved and ill, but in a state of insurpassable sanctity. The drama, suggesting that, carried to their logical conclusions, the demands of such forms of religion as these are preposterous and destructive, is an answer to the moral pressures exerted by advanced Anglo-Catholics at the end of the 1840s. Mrs Kingsley records the impact that the play made at Oxford, where a reaction had set in against Puseyism. Undergraduates found in it, she said, 'a book which showed that there was poetry in the strife against asceticism.' One seems to hear echoes of The Saint's Tragedy in Morris's later condemnation of 'those terrible doctrines of asceticism, which born of the despair of the oppressed and degraded, have been for so many ages used as instruments for the continuance of that oppression and degradation.'

Towards the end of his life, in a lecture to the Hammersmith Branch of the Socialist League on 13 Nov 1887, on The Society of the Future, Morris again rejects the whole concept of asceticism as vigorously, if not as intemperately, as Kingsley himself had done:

I demand a free and unfettered animal life for man first of all: I demand the utter extinction of all asceticism . . . Well, but this demand for the extinction of asceticism bears with it another demand: for the extinction of luxury. . . . Shall I tell you what luxury has done for you in Modern Europe? It has covered the merry green fields with the hovels of slaves, and blighted the flowers and trees with poisonous gases, and turned the rivers into sewers.

It might be Kingsley himself speaking: there are the same emotive words, the same passionate denunciations of what man has done to his environment, that recur again and again in Kingsley's writing throughout his career. What Morris read when he was young seems sometimes to have come to the surface again later in his career: his tutor, Mr Guy, with whom he read before
going up to Oxford, considered that *The Life and Death of Jason* was a product of the days when Morris had studied the *Medea* with him in 1852. In the same way, Kingsley’s ideas, early assimilated, may well have shaped Morris’s later thought.

There were other elements in *The Saint’s Tragedy* which may have helped to produce the effect of which Mackail speaks in discussing the events of 1854:

> the religious struggle which seemed for a while likely to land both Morris and Burne-Jones in the Roman Church was practically over, and with this clearing of the air social ideals rose to a more important place, and the monastic element began to fade away from the ideas of the Brotherhood.  

Kingsley’s play is concerned not only with the dangers of some aspects of Catholicism, but also with the condition of the poor and the problems that arose from poverty. He adapts the chronicle by Canisius, his source for the saint’s life, to the purposes of contemporary social criticism, a point which an early reviewer was quick to take when he complained that passages in the play sounded like a tract on the Irish famine. The peasants’ cry for bread is met by the church’s answer, expressed in very 19th-century tones, that almsgiving is demoralising: ‘Let the poor alone. Let want teach them the need of self-exertion, and misery prove the foolishness of crime.’ Morris, in his early prose tale ‘Lindenborg Pool’, later used a medieval setting for contemporary comment in a way very similar to Kingsley’s, in a strange tale with a 13th-century setting. In the nightmarish experience in the castle where the people mock the holy things, Morris comments by implication on contemporary depravity and indifference. Like Kingsley, he does more than merely provide historical background for his characters: he projects himself back into the 13th-century and endeavours to give a sense of how a priest of that time would have thought and felt.

There are some interesting similarities, too, in some aspects of form between *The Saint’s Tragedy* and the poems which Morris wrote for the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*. *The Saint’s Tragedy* intersperses passages of prose among the verse, and uses a variety of different verse-forms to suggest character and to create atmosphere and mood. In such poems as ‘Sir Peter Harpdon’s End’, ‘The Chapel in Lyonesse’ and ‘The Blue
"Closet", where rather similar semi-dramatic effects are created, Morris could have found a model in Kingsley's play. 'Rapunzel' is a good example of the kind of pattern that Kingsley frequently uses: the Prince, the Witch and Rapunzel converse with each other in lyrical passages freely varied to give a slightly dramatic effect, unusual in other poems of the period.

Mackail reports that Morris said that his first poems were imitations of Mrs Browning, and it is of course possible to see resemblances between her poems and some of his. But when one considers how in *The Saint's Tragedy* a 13th century story is adapted for contemporary comment, how religious practices which Morris was shortly to reject are exposed to censure, and how Kingsley uses very varied metrical forms in a rather unusual way, somewhat similar to that later used by Morris in *The Defence of Guenevere* volume, there seems a strong case for conjecturing that this play may have been an unacknowledged influence on Morris at some time during his Oxford years.

Kingsley's first novel *Yeast*, written when he was only 29, was addressed to his contemporaries, to remind them of their responsibility towards the poor, particularly on their family estates. It at once caused a furore because of its outspoken attack on the indifference of the landed gentry, and made him very unpopular. To a rich and sensitive young reader with a conscience it must have been rather disturbing, and probably Morris found it so, with his comfortable unearned income. It is the story of Lancelot, who recuperating in the home of his host Squire Lavington, after a serious hunting accident, falls in love with the squire's daughter, and at the same time has his eyes opened to the actualities of rural poverty through his conversations with the squire's gamekeeper. His love is returned, but before they can marry, Lancelot's beloved dies of typhus contracted while endeavouring to alleviate the sufferings of the poor in their filthy hovels. Kingsley depicts very graphically the wretchedness and degradation of the agricultural labourer: the book is intended to provide food for thought, to work in the mind like yeast. What can and should be done to remedy an intolerable state of affairs? Kingsley does not pro-
vide any definite answer, or any political programme: he leaves it to the individual conscience to reflect and to act.

In *Yeast*, Morris would have found a pattern for the breaking down of social barriers that he advocated in his later writing, for example in *Art and Socialism*. Kingsley's hero, Lancelot, and his host's gamekeeper become friends and companions, a feature of the novel which shocked his contemporaries. Kingsley showed, not only in his fiction but in his own relationships with his servants and parishioners, and with the working-class poet Thomas Cooper, the extent to which it was indeed possible to bridge the gulf between social classes. In addition to these matters, *Yeast* is to some extent concerned with matters of faith, too, for in describing 'what some at least of the young in these days are really thinking and feeling', Kingsley sees his contemporaries as 'wandering either towards Rome, towards sheer materialism, or towards an unchristian and unphilosophic spiritualist Epicurism.' He is particularly critical of that self-indulgent high church piety which results in merely superficial good works, or in opting out by entering a religious community.

The importance of the environment is another topic in *Yeast* which must have attracted Morris's attention and sown the seeds for future development. In the mid-19th-century, overcrowded subhuman housing conditions without water or sanitation not only fostered cholera, typhus and a host of lesser scourges, but also produced moral degradation. Morris's feeling for the necessity of decency is as strong as Kingsley's, and is expressed in his later lectures. In *How We Live and Might Live*, he condemns pollution and 'profit ....... which turns beautiful rivers into filthy sewers', a message which Kingsley passionately expounded throughout his career, from *Yeast* to *The Water Babies*. Though Morris was apparently not committed to sanitary reform, the cause to which Kingsley and others devoted much energy in the 1850s and 1860s, he contributed an article to the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* on cholera, prompted by a wood-engraving by a German artist. It is entitled 'Death the Avenger' and 'Death the Friend', and describes as 'the most terrible figure of all', the figure of Cholera 'sitting waiting in the background of a Paris ball-scene'.

In an undated letter, probably of 1886 or 1887, to the Rev.
W. Sharman, Morris says that he learned one thing from his early upbringing and schooldays, and that one thing was rebellion. For this reason, it seems likely that he would have found Kingsley's early novels very congenial: they are novels of protest, 'a denunciation in every chapter', as Owen Chadwick says of *Alton Locke*.

Kingsley's second novel, *Alton Locke*, is a much better book than *Yeast*, and is even more likely than *Yeast* to have implanted in Morris those socio-political ideas which lay dormant for almost thirty years. It denounces the evils of sweated labour and competition, but although it was very widely read and again made Kingsley notorious as an inflammatory writer a 'Church of England parson and a Chartist', as he claimed to be at a meeting of angry working-men in 1848—unrestricted commercial competition was still an abuse which Morris considered it necessary to condemn in the Manifesto of the Socialist League in 1885, more than 30 years later. The remedy that Kingsley proposes for these problems is the formation of associations of working men, and this was of course already being put into operation by the Christian Socialists at the time that he was writing. John Ludlow and the other members of this group, inspired by the efforts of Louis Blanc in France, were establishing associations of tailors and other workers, to manufacture goods on a profit-sharing basis. Could the fact that ordinary clergymen and other professional people were able to start manufacturing associations have suggested to Morris the idea of the Firm?

It also seems possible that Kingsley's emphasis on the importance of making art and the heritage of the past, as well as the pleasures of the countryside, available to the ordinary working-man may have had some influence on William Morris. Kingsley gives poignant expression in *Alton Locke* to the deprivation of the poor — their deprivation not only of material goods and the very necessities of life, but also of aesthetic experience, condemned as they are to endless toil in hideous surroundings. His description of his young hero's first encounter with Guido's *St Sebastian* at the Dulwich Art Gallery movingly suggests how much art can mean to the uneducated, and
Kingsley was a constant worker in the cause of art for the people. He argued for the Sunday opening of art galleries, and wrote a number of expositions of famous pictures, to enable uneducated people to enjoy them, for the short-lived Christian Socialist journal *Politics for the People*.

Towards the end of the book, Kingsley’s working-class but self-taught, imaginative hero becomes seriously ill and in high fever has a strange, symbolic dream in which he experiences the whole history of life on earth, from its almost inanimate beginnings, through all its later developments, into a visionary future. It seems highly probable that this very striking episode in the novel influenced Morris: there is a similarity between Kingsley’s and Morris’s use of the dream device which is worth noting. For both, it says something about experience that cannot be said in any other way. It explicitly or implicitly criticises the present, but at the same time can suggest a vision of better things. What is, in the real world, is implicitly censured by what is in the dream world. In Alton Locke’s dream, the failures and the wrongs of the past give place to a vision of a more glorious future for mankind:

Age after age, gradually and painfully, by hunger and pestilence, by superstitions and tyrannies, by need and blank despair . . . . shall you be driven back . . . . till you become as you were before you fell . . . .

Out of Paradise you came, from liberty, equality, and brotherhood, and unto them you shall return again. You went forth in unconscious infancy — you shall return in thoughtful manhood. You went forth in ignorance and need — you shall return in science and wealth, philosophy and art.

Morris, in his letter to Cormell Price in 1856, indicated how important to him the idea of the dream was:

I can’t enter into politico-social subjects with any interest, for on the whole I see that things are in a muddle, and I have no power or vocation to set them right in ever so little a degree. My work is the embodiment of dreams in one form or another.\(^\text{13}\)

It is for his embodiment of dreams, both as artist and as writer, that we value Morris most highly now.

Although his reading of Kingsley as, no doubt, of Dickens too, would have made Morris painfully aware of the immensity of the muddle, at this stage in his life, these thought-provoking
novels must have had on him very much the effect that Kingsley had hoped that they would have on their first readers. Mrs Burne-Jones says of Morris in 1879 that he was ‘growing more restless and disturbed in mind by the conditions of modern life, and his conscience was dragging him towards some definite work for its amendment.’ Before he turned to socialism, however, Morris provided an indirect answer to the problems of his time, in creating a vision that was to be an inspiration both for his contemporaries and for future generations.

*Hypatia*, which came out in 1853, was another of Kingsley’s novels that was a favourite, according to Mrs Burne-Jones, with Morris’s ‘set’ at Oxford. It is now quite unknown to most people, but Morris would have found it congenial in several ways: the style, though marred by Carlylese and too much preaching, is as always with Kingsley, lively and vigorous, and the story is well told. The book gives a vivid picture of life in 5th-century Alexandria: before Flaubert’s *Salammbô*, it recreates a sense of the animation and turbulence of a great metropolis, at the same time sophisticated and barbaric. Because it is not directly concerned with 19th-century society, *Hypatia* would have had for Morris the sort of interest of Scott’s historical novels, without the challenging social criticism of *Yeast* and *Alton Locke*. There is nothing in *Hypatia* that would have troubled Morris’s conscience.

The Early Christian novel, the sub-genre of the historical novel to which *Hypatia* belongs, was briefly popular in the mid-19th-century. Not the first of its kind, *Hypatia* nevertheless seems to have triggered off others, notably Cardinal Wiseman’s *Fabiola* in 1855 and J.H.Newman’s *Callista* in 1856, both intended as in a sense an answer to Kingsley’s representation of some aspects of the early church. He once again condemns the fanaticism and asceticism of the monks, while Wiseman and Newman emphasise what they see as the beauty of Christian belief and practice at this period, and the glory of martyrdom. In 1853, when *Hypatia* appeared, celibacy was a topic much discussed by Morris’s and Burne-Jones’s ‘set’, sometimes seriously, sometimes not. They were still attracted by the idea of founding a ‘small conventual society working in the heart of London’ on the lines of Hurrell Froude’s Proj-
ect for the Revival of Religion in Great Towns. It may be that Kingsley’s novel, however, with its strong implied criticism of monasticism, contributed to the gradual decline of this youthful ambition.

*Hypatia* would, however, have fitted in very well with the more serious reading of Morris and Burne-Jones in their first year at Oxford, because it recreates a world into which their theological studies had already led them. Such characters as Cyril of Alexandria and even St. Augustine figure in the book, and the heroine, Hypatia, was herself an historical character. But Kingsley in writing it had his own times as much in mind as the past: he saw human nature as remaining essentially the same through the centuries. In a final paragraph addressed to his readers he reminded them that he had shown them their own likenesses ‘in toga and tunic, instead of coat and bonnet.’ The book thus makes the point that a romance set in far-off times and places may yet have an important message for the modern reader, and from the very first Morris’s romances, no matter what their setting, carry a weight of symbolic meaning and contemporary relevance. That it was possible to do this through the medium of fiction Morris would have been more likely to learn from Kingsley than from most of the other writers particularly favoured by the ‘set’.

Another aspect of *Hypatia* which may well have influenced Morris is the Norse element. Early in the book a group of Viking adventurers is introduced and their story is woven in and out of that of the other characters. Kingsley provides them with songs appropriate to their culture. Mackail informs us that Burne-Jones came to Oxford full of the fascination of the Celtic and Scandinavian mythologies, and this important influence upon Morris was perhaps reinforced by Kingsley’s adaptations of similar material.

*Westward Ho!* also enjoyed by the ‘set’ was originally intended by Kingsley to whip up enthusiasm for what most people believed in 1854 to be the admirable cause of the Crimean War, and it at once became a best-seller. It is alluded to very favourably in the first number of the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, but it is impossible to trace any direct or obvious borrowings or influences from this novel in Morris’s writing.
The 'merry England' image, the sense of a golden age, of past glories, and of a quintessential Englishness are to be found in both writers, and both admire the now unfashionable virtue of manliness. In *Westward Ho!* this quality often appears in, the form of 'muscular Christianity': Morris's praise of manliness, for example in his socialist and political writing as well as in his romances, dispenses with the rather pious element in Kingsley's concept. But both love a fight. The encounters in Kingsley are fierce and bloodthirsty; no less so are Morris's in his early prose romances.

The influence of Kingsley on Morris is diffused and difficult to pinpoint, but an examination of his writing can provide many examples of the extent to which their thought overlapped. The *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* with its very large number of references to various aspects of Kingsley's work suggests how greatly the various contributors admired him and regarded him as an authority. He was for them a primary source of information about the system of slop-work tailoring, for instance, condemned in *Alton Locke*. He had opened their eyes to the 'ignorance, crime and misery' that existed everywhere in 'this civilised country', even 'in our Arcadia, the agricultural districts these last, it would seem, according to Kingsley, the worst of all.' Presumably it was through these descriptions that Morris was first made aware of the sufferings of the poor which were later to destroy his peace of mind.

Elsewhere in the *Magazine*, Kingsley's sermons and religious views are commented on with approval, and his *Sermons for the Times* are praised for their 'most forcible language'. The group of friends approved, too, of Kingsley's attitude to the vexed question of Eternal Punishment, for his liberal views on which F.D.Maurice lost his chair at King's College, London: 'With Mr Kingsley may we not ask, if we shall attribute to God in Heaven less mercy than to fathers on Earth?' Kingsley is looked up to as one who might take his place among 'the wise', and as one of the 'great writers of the present day'. These are large claims, but they indicate the extent to which Kingsley was esteemed, especially by highly intelligent young men, in his own day. It would be strange if Kingsley's deep concern for
his suffering contemporaries, at the same time so wide-ranging and so forcefully expressed, had failed to influence Morris’s thought and unique vision of what makes life worth living, as well as his later work for the cause of socialism.

FOOTNOTES


3 Ibid, p. 92.


5 Also in the letter to Andreas Scheu, quoted above.

6 See *Collected Works of William Morris* (London 1915) Vol. XXII, p.xxxi, ‘Notes of a biographical talk by William Morris at Kelmscott House, Nov. 28, 1892 (taken down in the room at the time).’


9 In Mackail, op. cit. p. 65.


