

John Butler Yeats: Portrait of William Morris

Jan Marsh

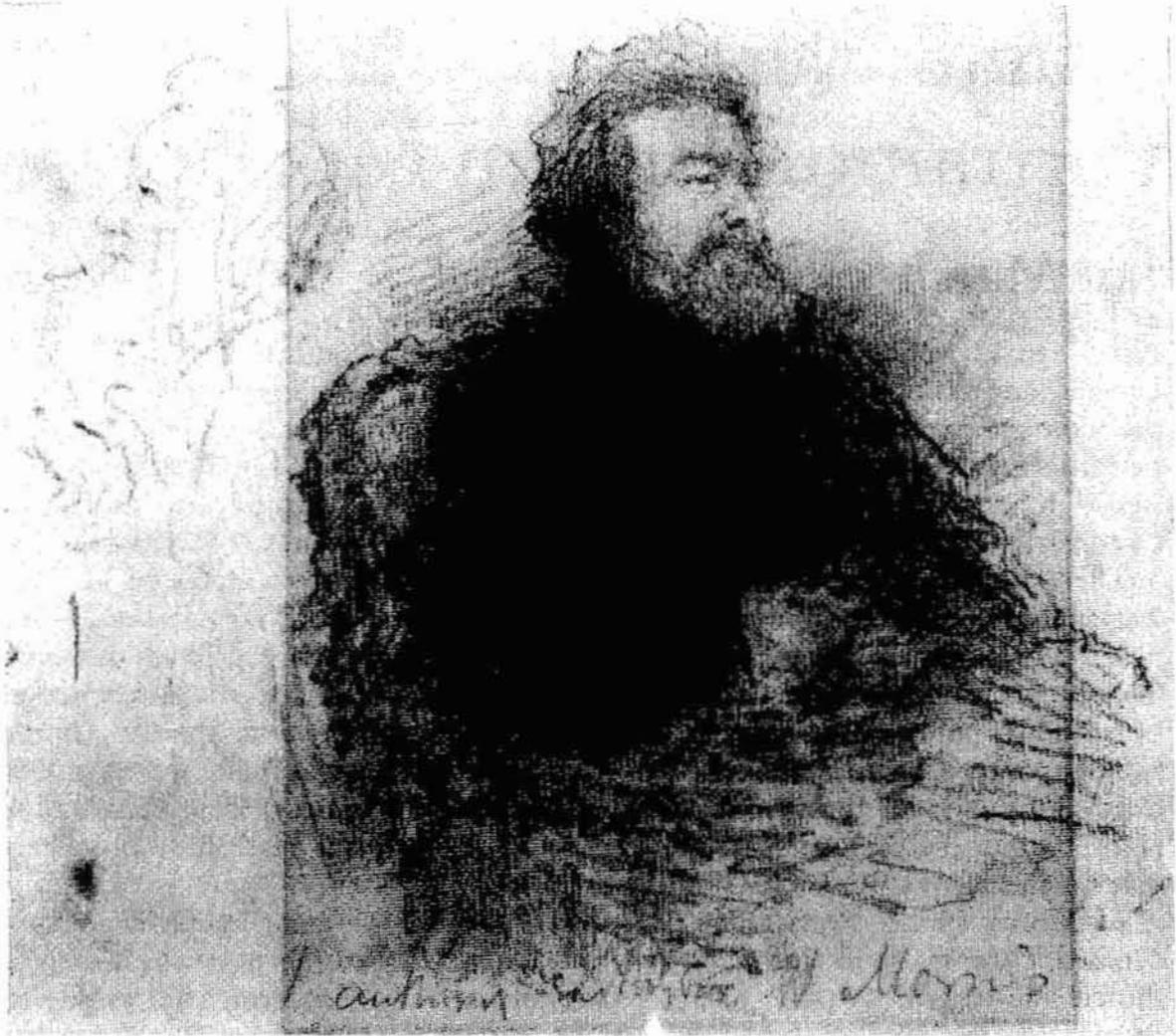
From 9 to 11 April 1886 William Morris visited Dublin on behalf of the Socialist League, addressing a number of meetings.¹ Among the gatherings was one at the Contemporary Club, an intellectual-artistic debating society founded a few months earlier, which met above Ponsonby's bookstore at 116 Grafton Street. Artist John Butler Yeats was a member of the Contemporary Club and customarily sketched the speakers while listening to the debates.

There is no mention of the Contemporary Club in Morris's report of his long weekend in Dublin for *Commonweal* (8 May). He does record speaking on Friday 9 April speaking on 'The Aims of Art' at the Molesworth Hall to an audience 'mostly of "ladies and gentlemen"', most of whom disliked the introduction of socialist politics into such a theme.² Yeats' portrait was specific to the Contemporary Club and depicts Morris comfortably and informally seated, rather than on a public platform, so it is likely that the Contemporary Club debate took place later in the evening than the meeting at Molesworth Hall. It is also likely that his theme was similar for both audiences.

As Morris spoke, Yeats made one of his characteristic pencil sketches, whose detailed, delicate, swift lines gave informal immediacy to the portrait. Morris is shown half-length, wearing a dark jacket and seated in an armchair, profile to right, with the familiar beard and bushy hair that stands vertically from the forehead. On the margin of the drawing, lower right, is the inscription 'W. Morris' in what could be Morris's autograph, or it may be by Yeats, who has later added, lower left, 'author of "Earthly Paradise"'.³

According to his biographer, Yeats felt Morris had 'no genuine philosophy' to expound, although he attracted a large audience. And while John Butler Yeats sketched, William Butler Yeats monopolised Morris (presumably during the discussion), talking about literature.⁴ The presence of William, then aged 20, is not recorded by his latest biographer, who devotes several pages to an account of the Contemporary Club in relation to W. B. Yeats' political formation.⁴ But W. B. Yeats himself recalled how Morris 'came to Dublin when I was a boy and I had some talk with him about the old stories'.⁵ Along with others by John Butler Yeats, the portrait sketch of Morris passed into the ownership of the Contemporary Club, and thence to the National Museum of Ireland which in 1966 transferred it to the National Gallery of Ireland.⁶ It was reproduced in William Murphy, *Prodigal Father: The Life of John Butler Yeats 1839–1922* (Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 147, and in Hilary Pyle, *Yeats: Portrait of an Artistic Family* (National Gallery of Ireland, 1997), p. 65.

According to Murphy, Yeats also – at some unknown date – made an oil portrait of Morris, which went to New York (where Yeats settled and died) and is



John Butler Yeats, *sketch of William Morris*.
© National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin.

currently unlocated. The source for this information is Yeats' letter to his daughter Lily dated 11 May 1916.⁷

Two other portrait drawings by Yeats which claim to depict Morris also exist. One is another Contemporary Club sketch now in the National Gallery of Ireland (NGI 6079) which Hilary Pyle identifies as Morris, although he manifestly is not the sitter, resembling Morris only in possession of a full beard – as worn by many men at the time. The second is a sketch showing three elderly men that remains with the Yeats family, and which was included in a 1987 exhibition on John Butler Yeats in New York and illustrated in the accompanying catalogue by Fintan Cullen, *Drawings of John Butler Yeats 1839-1922* (Albany Institute of Art History, New York, 1987), pp. 54-55. The right-hand figure has a dark jacket and bushy beard, and is identified by a later inscription added by Lily Yeats giving William Morris's name. Cullen suggests that this sketch was also done at the Contemporary Club; if so, the artist moved his seat, for this shows the sitter in half profile to left.

Problematically, however, this sitter's hair shows none of the unruliness that unmistakably marked Morris's and which is so visible in the NGI sketch. If the Yeats family drawing was also done in Dublin, one would have to conclude that Morris had his hair cropped sometime during the Contemporary Club discussion. More probably, Lily Yeats' identification is faulty. Just possibly, the drawing was made on a quite different occasion, perhaps in London, when Morris's hair had been recently trimmed – although this is unlikely insofar as all other portraits show him with the customary bush.

All other suggestions and information welcome.

NOTES

With thanks to Peter Faulkner and Fintan Cullen.

- ¹ See Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for our Time* (London: Faber, 1994), 540ff; William Morris, *Political Writings: Contributions to 'Justice' and 'Commonweal'*, ed. Nicholas Salmon (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1994), pp. 139-41.
- ² *Political Writings*, p. 139.
- ³ William Murphy, *Prodigal Father: The Life of John Butler Yeats 1839-1922* (Cornell University Press, 1978).
- ⁴ Roy Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life, 1. The Apprentice Mage* (Oxford: OUP, 1997), pp. 41-44.
- ⁵ See W. B. Yeats' preface to Lady Isabella Augusta Gregory's English rendering of *Cuchulain of Muirthemne: The Story of the Men of the Red Branch of Ulster* (London: John Murray, 1902).
- ⁶ John Butler Yeats, *Sketch of William Morris*, Pencil on buff paper, 16.8 x 19 cm. Ref. no. NGI 6078.
- ⁷ See *Prodigal Father*, pp.186 and 580, n. 61.