Morris and Trafalgar Square

'TRAFALGAR SQUARE is not a suitable place for a constant succession of public meetings . . . Sir Charles Warren proposes to stop a public nuisance and he ought to be vigorously upheld'. With these words a leading article in the Daily News for 9 November 1887 applauded the proclamation of meetings in the Square made the day before by the Commissioner of Police for the Metropolis. Morris took up the challenge:

'Sir - Apropos of the fitness of Trafalgar Square for public meetings, allow me to describe it briefly for the benefit of such of your readers as have not been in London. It is a large sunken area, capable of holding several thousand persons, of extremely easy access, and with wide streets leading from it in every direction, so that a meeting can easily disperse from it without choking the streets. It is dominated by the raised footway and balustrades on three sides, and the Nelson Column rises from the midst of the fourth side, affording good speaking platforms for the orators, while at the same time a crowd once in it is helpless for any harm if there is a good force of police in attendance. It is a place that nobody wants to walk through or loiter in except poor houseless persons driven to use it as a dormitory. In short, it is the most convenient place in all London for a large open air meeting, and to speak plainly, that is the reason why Sir C. Warren, acting, as you have practically told us, under instructions from the Tory Government, has closed it to the public. The Government has a heavy job on hand in sustaining the privilege of the monopolists on either side of St George's Channel. Discontent is growing on all hands, and the Government, with the usual wisdom of reactionaries, thinks the safest course is to sit upon the safety valve. This is not a matter for surprise, but it is somewhat astonishing that the Daily News should support coercion with such vigour as it did yesterday. A friend of mine told me that after
reading your leader on the subject he turned the paper over and over to see if he had not got hold of the Standard by some accident; and I should have done the same if I had not from the first taken care that my penny insured me a copy of my familiar instructor in the ways of Liberalism. I must add that I most sincerely hope that all lovers of freedom will make it a matter of duty to attend next Sunday's meeting, and by their presence ensure its good order. If an impressive protest is not at once made against this act of headstrong folly, the liberty of free speech in London is gone, and will have to be slowly and laboriously won back at the cost of great suffering to those whom conscience and duty put forward in the battle, and of abundant inconvenience to the public at large.

I am, Sir, yours obediently,

WILLIAM MORRIS

Kelscott House, Upper Mall, Hammersmith, Nov. 10'

The Daily News, the chief Liberal newspaper, had vigorously protested against the repressive measures taken by the Government under the recently passed Irish Coercion Act. Morris, in a letter to that paper for 16 October, had pointed out that repression was the same whether it occurred in Ireland or in England.

Under the headline 'What must be done at once', the Pall Mall Gazette for 10 November 1887 called for the formation of a Law and Liberty League which should defend the rights of citizens against encroachments by the Executive. Morris' response appeared in the next issue:

'All people who understand the value of free speech, what it means and what the repression of it means, have reason to thank you for your outspoken article of last evening. Of course, everybody knows that Trafalgar-Square is the most convenient place in London for a large open-air meeting, and that a meeting held there creates the minimum disturbance to the public. And I should also think that only the very simple doubt that that is precisely the reason why the Tory Government have made up their minds to close it to their political opponents and to the discontented of all kinds.'

On 12 November, Sir Charles Warren issued a further notice prohibiting processions near the Square. The Metropolitan Radical Federation, which on 2 November had decided to hold a meeting there to protest against the imprisonment in Cork Goal of William O'Brien, MP, resolved to continue with it in defiance of the ukases, as the P.M.G. dubbed them, of the Commissioner. In this the Federation was supported by many other organizations which saw the proclamations as a threat to freedom. On the afternoon of 13 November 1887 processions converging on the Square were repulsed and broken up by some 4,300 police. Morris marched
with the contingent from Clerkenwell Green and reached the scene just after 4 p.m. when the confusion was at its highest.

His next letter to the P.M.G. appeared on 18 November:

'Sir—I don't quite like the title of the League set on foot by you for I cannot see, especially after last Sunday, what relation there is between Law and Liberty other than between the Wolf and the Lamb. I agree with your correspondent "A Lawyer" that if the enactments on the statute book were enforced all liberty would soon be stopped. However, as it is clear from your very satisfactory leaders that the intention of the League is good, I send my subscription: all the more as it seems to me that such a defensive body will be specially needed after the lamentable decision come to by the Federation of Radical Clubs last night; a decision which will certainly encourage the Government to persevere on its path of repression of free speech.

I am, Sir, yours obediently,

WILLIAM MORRIS

Kelmscott House, Upper Mall, Hammersmith. November 17'

The 'lamentable decision' was to hold a further protest meeting on the 20 November in Hyde Park rather than Trafalgar Square. Morris' regrets were probably mingled with relief, for in Commonweal (19 November 1887) he expressed the opinion that had the crowd gone into the Square on Bloody Sunday, 'the result would probably have been a far bloodier massacre than Peterloo.'

Morris' last communication to the P.M.G. about Trafalgar Square appeared on 21 November 1887. It reveals his familiarity with the heavy-handedness of the Executive and ends on a practical and characteristic note:

'I congratulate you on the success of the meeting in the Memorial Hall, and hope that the new League may flourish. It is certainly good that all of us who think we are on the lines of progress should unite to get what amount of fair play may be possible under present conditions for poor men who are brave enough to express their opinions. And that all the more as for my part I believe that the present Tory terror is not a mere chance blunder of the 'stupid party,' but is a sign of the setting in of that reaction which is as it were the wrong side of a period of progress: timid and 'respectable' people get alarmed at the prospect of things drawing near which they have heard talked of for long without fear, and consequently they tacitly or actively join the obscurantist party; such times are sure to be rough ones for all who are on the popular but apparently weaker side, and they must be prepared to suffer under the blows of authority, and to resist pertinaciously each according to his lights; pertinacity is the great virtue to line our enthusiasm with in these days, in which the mere tyranny of the executive appears so strong, and at least cannot be overthrown by one great Napoleonic stroke.
One example I might give of the necessity for combined protection of poor people against the tyranny of the law-courts which, perhaps will not be familiar to all your readers: On the morning of the day on which your meeting was held, nine of the prisoners were enabled to appeal from Sir J. Ingham’s sentence, chiefly through the exertions of Mrs Besant (whose conduct throughout this trouble has been beyond praise), who got responsible persons to stand bail for them; these prisoners being poor would not have been able to appeal if they had not had bail found for them, since, according to our equal (?) laws, a prisoner appealing must find two sureties who will bind themselves to pay all expenses of the appeal if it fails. I ask you, Sir, how a poor man can find such sureties unless he has external help? And I must also ask you to say if I am not justified in asserting that such a law is a class law, made for the oppression of the poor? Then there is the gross iniquity of the acceptance of the unsupported testimony of professional witnesses (the police) always ready to hand, and always with a necessary bias (to say the least of it) against the accused. And again, even if the accused comes before a jury, and expects to be tried by his peers, what happens really? As a matter of fact, in England he is tried, not by the jury, but by the judge, who has the last word in that abuse of all abuses the judge’s summing up, which practically directs the jury what verdict to give. It is true that juries are sworn to give a verdict according to the evidence, but it is no less true that they mostly, and habitually, break this oath by giving their verdict not according to the evidence, but according to the judge’s view of it.

I earnestly hope, Sir, that the Law and Liberty League, which, much to your credit, you have set on foot, will do good service in dragging to light the results of these and kindred abuses, and will save some poor honest men from the malignant attacks of a harassed tyranny.

I am (of course) always available for bail when required.’

R.C.H.B.

The letters of Morris quoted above have not previously been re-published.