Morris and the Blunts
by Geoffrey Syer

Many readers of *News from Nowhere* will perhaps have been slightly puzzled by a sentence in Chapter XXIV:

“We landed presently just where I remembered that river making an elbow to the north towards the ancient house of the Blunts; with the wide meadows spreading on the right-hand side, and on the left the long line of beautiful old trees overhanging the water.”

But it is to the house of Dick’s friend Walter Allen, Guest and Dick are going, not to that of the Blunts, although it is still standing “in green old age, and is well inhabited”. The reference to the Blunts remains unexplained and there is no further mention of them in the book. It is, in fact, a tribute to the poet and traveller Wilfrid Scawen Blunt and his wife Lady Anne, with whom Morris had been on friendly terms for some years. In the years previous to the publication of the novel in 1890, as Blunt records in his entertaining and revealing *My Diaries*, Morris had visited Blunt’s house Newbuildings in Sussex (transferred to the banks of the Thames in the Book) and Blunt in turn had spent many happy hours at Kelmscott gudgeon fishing and arguing about poetry and politics.

Blunt was one of those wealthy radicals of highly individualistic, even eccentric, views, in whom the nineteenth century was so rich. With a growing reputation as a poet, he had with his wife made several dangerous pioneering journeys in Arabia and Mesopotamia. Their most important journey, one which was to rank them as explorers not far below Burton, Doughty and Palgrave, was across the great Nefud desert to the remote little feudal town of Hail. Blunt was only the fourth European man to cross that desert and his wife the first European woman. This and their other journeys had given them a great respect for desert Arabs and other peoples as yet uncorrupted by
the false values of Western industrial society. In the 1880s, encouraged by Anne, the grand-daughter of Byron and the daughter of Lady Lovelace, co-inventor with Charles Babbage of the differential calculator, the direct ancestor of the modern computer, Blunt had spent much time in anti-imperialist politics, thus carrying on his wife’s family traditions of radical intellectual activity and concern for the rights of small nations. He became a bitter opponent of Gladstone over the British occupation of Egypt and the Sudan in the 80s, and in the Irish land agitation he was to go to prison, claiming to be the first Englishman to do so. Because of their fame in the Arab world and the trust they had built up there, he and Anne were briefly considered by Gladstone’s Cabinet as possible mediators between the British Government and the Mahdi over the possible release of Gordon from his virtual imprisonment in Khartoum. They did not go; but it is pleasant for the historical imagination to consider what might have happened to the British Empire in Africa if their offer had been accepted. It was such actions rather than his poetry, fine though some of it is, that gave Blunt influence over the literary and intellectual avant-garde at the end of the last century and the beginning of this.¹

For Morris, too, imperialism was anathema. The “expansion of England” became for him simply a cover for the cupidity of the ruling class, and the World Market, a device for flooding the world with cheap and shoddy goods which ousted the native arts. As a member of the old anti-Disraeli Eastern Question Association he had welcomed, as had Blunt, Gladstone’s Midlothian speech, which asserted the principle of freedom for small nations, but the invasion of Egypt and the Irish Coercion Bill brought disillusion with Gladstone and the Liberals. By 1885 Gladstone was ‘the new Attila, the new Ghengis Khan, the modern Scourge of God’.² The famous split within the Social Democratic Federation was brought about partly by dissension over the attitude that Socialists should adopt towards the expanding Empire. Although there were other and more important causes of the schism, notably the Chairman, Hyndman’s, arrogant ways and the fundamental disagreement on whether the fight for Socialism should take place in or out of Parlia-

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ment, imperialism generated as much bitterness. In a letter to Robert Thompson of January 1st 1885 Morris accused Hyndman of 'coquetting with jingoism'. He 'cannot change his nature and be otherwise than a jingo and a politician even if he tries'.

The Socialist League, the product of the split, was formed about the time that the British column was struggling across the Sudan to rescue Gordon, and one of its first publications, the *Manifesto of the Socialist League on the Soudan War*, attacked British interference as wicked and unjust. A few thousand Arabs will be killed, then the prospect of a British protectorate, railways, new markets, new colonial ports, a conquest of the country in the interests of British commerce. But it is all hypocrisy and fraud, the Manifesto goes on. The Mahdi, a brave man in oriental fashion delivering his country, has repeatedly declared his willingness to release the garrisons and to refrain from aggression on Egypt. ‘Mr. Wilfrid Scawen Blunt’, it continues, “was in a position, even when the “Christian Hero” was wantonly waging an offensive war against the Mahdi, to ensure the success of the negotiations for his release, as well as that of the garrisons, had he been allowed to make them, as he assuredly would, had this been the real object in view...” Bax (the Manifesto is anonymous but bears the mark of Bax’s style rather than that of Morris) returns to the theme in the second number of *The Commonweal*.

Blunt, not a ‘Christian Hero’, perhaps, but an honest man and one whose disinterested love of the Arab race is beyond question, could have concluded successful negotiations if he had been permitted by the Press and influential people, who, however, preferred annexation.

In what remained of Morris’s life, relations between the two families were cordial. Morris issued a Kelmscott Press edition of Blunt’s best verse and wove for him the Botticelli tapestry. For his part Blunt had the highest possible regard for the man who was in many ways so different from himself. In his description of Morris’ last days (he was with him much during this period and dined with him - he was like ‘a man risen from the grave’ - a few days before he died), he wrote:
I consider Morris' to have been the strongest intellect I have had the good fortune to come into contact with during my life. His range of knowledge was the widest, his reasoning power the keenest and his capacity for work. [sic] His artistic influence on the generation to which I belong has been, I think, more lasting than any of his contemporaries though both Swinburne and Rossetti were technically his superiors in verse, and his supremacy in imaginative art was confined to those of the craftsman. He had a larger outlook on the world than any of the Pre-Raphaelite group, a more powerful brain, a more persistent purpose in the work achieved.

Blunt describes in his diary the influence they had on each other. Morris weaned Blunt from home politics after one of the latter's unsuccessful forays into political action. In return Blunt did the same for Morris —

who was at that time in a mood of reaction from his socialistic fervour. He had quarrelled with Hyndman, and was disgusted at the personal jealousies of his fellow-workers in the cause and at their cowardice in action... In some ways our two positions were the same. We both had sacrificed much socially to our principles, and our principles had failed to justify themselves by results, and we were both driven back on earlier loves, art, poetry, romance.5

In a latter entry, that for September 30 1891, he writes that Morris 'has found Socialism impossible and uncongenial, and has thrown it wholly up for art and poetry, his earlier loves. I fancy I may have influenced him in this.'6

The truth was that Blunt could not follow his friend into Socialism. As a wealthy land-owner he ran his estates in the firm patriarchal way in which they had been run for the previous century and he had little understanding of the life that the urban proletariat lived. He was more familiar with the kind of life led by Arab nomads than he was with that led by millions of his fellow countrymen. And always before him was the grand gesture that his wife's grandfather had made, that noble Romantic sacrifice which had made Byron famous throughout Europe and which had inspired so many nationalists in the nineteenth century. Not that Blunt was ungenerous. With individuals he was unfailingly kind. Francis Thompson, the poet, spent some of his dying weeks as his guest. Philip Webb, the architect of Morris' Red House, lived his last years for a nominal rent in a
cottage on Blunt’s Crabbet estate. His generous tribute to Morris shows how much he valued him. It was unfortunate that he could not attend the funeral. He set out for Kelmscott on the day but the bad weather drove him, who was as usual in indifferent health, back home.

After Morris’s death in 1896, Jane and May spent some time at the Blunts’ estate Sheyk Obeyd in Egypt where they enjoyed riding donkeys and sight-seeing. Until 1904 when Wilfrid and Anne separated with some acrimony, Jane was a regular if somewhat infrequent visitor to the Blunts. Thereafter she met Anne less often, especially of course, when Anne went to live more or less permanently in Egypt. But they never lost touch and Anne’s diary7 records their meeting from time to time, Jane usually being recorded as looking sad but beautiful.

1. See, for example, the Preface to Shaw’s John Bull’s Other Island, E.M. Forster’s Wilfrid Blunt and Lytton Strachey’s portrait of Gordon, an essay which owes much to Blunt’s Gordon at Khartoum.


7. This diary, the unpublished MS of which is now in the British Library, must be one of the longest nineteenth century diaries in existence, extends (with a few gaps) from 1847 to 1917. It contains some interesting information about Morris and his circle, including an amusing record of a visit to Kelmscott House in 1891.