William Morris and the Socialism of Robert Blatchford

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I

'I have always been a Socialist of the Morris School', wrote Robert Blatchford in 1913. But socialists of the 'Morris School' were not as common in 1913 as they had been two decades earlier. Gas and water socialism—along with Labour Party politics—was fast replacing the broad-ranging critique of commercial civilisation advanced in socialist thought in the 1880's and early 1890's. Blatchford was highly suspicious of this transformation, and called for a revival of the moral fervour of the early years of the socialist movement, a fervour that he found expressed most of all in the work of William Morris.

Born in 1851, seventeen years the junior of Morris, Robert Blatchford was the most popular socialist of the 1890's. His newspaper, the Clarion, more an anecdotal working class weekly than a revolutionary standard, was the only socialist paper of the decade that consistently showed a profit, and his most important book, Merrie England, sold well over one million copies. Blatchford's conversion to socialism had taken place largely due to the influence of Morris. In response to a series of articles on the conditions of life in the Manchester slums that Blatchford wrote for Edward Hulton's Sunday Chronicle in 1889, a reader sent him a copy of 'A Summary of the Principles of Socialism', written by Hyndman and Morris in 1884. Blatchford immediately accepted the pamphlet's argument, and later wrote, 'I was full of anger and pity for the wrongs and sufferings of the poor, and burning with eagerness to help the underdog, I went in for Socialism.' The emotional outrage that characterised the 'Summary' was more important in Blatchford's conversion than was its marxism. Indeed, it was Blatchford's empathy for the poor, his sentimental desire to right all wrongs, that characterised his socialism even in its earliest days.

The romantic critique of capitalism loomed large in the writings of both Morris and Blatchford. Blatchford distrusted economic theory,
and Morris had great difficulty at first in grappling with the economic writings of Marx and Engels. Both writers expressed their debt to nineteenth century English and American social thinkers more than to continental theorists—the names Carlyle, Dickens, Ruskin, Thoreau, Whitman, appear throughout their writings. Recollecting the period before he joined the Democratic Federation, Morris wrote, ‘looking backward, I cannot help saying . . . how deadly dull the world would have been twenty years ago but for Ruskin’, a belief that Blatchford fully shared. Most of the inspiration for welding this romantic critique to a marxist analysis of capitalism came from Morris. Nonetheless, it was propagandists like John Bruce Glasier and Robert Blatchford who widened his circle of admirers: Morris’ thoughts on the quality of English life were translated by Blatchford into a prose accessible to a wider audience than could be claimed by Morris himself.

Despite the superficial similarities, there were enormous differences between the work of these two socialists. While Morris finally mastered economic theory, Blatchford did not. Moreover, the penetrating critique of society that informed the latter work of Morris was largely absent in many of Blatchford’s writings. Blatchford’s ‘New Religion’ was much more sentimental than that of his mentor, its critique of society equally damning, but less carefully considered and developed. And Blatchford could never whole-heartedly accept the possibility of revolutionary change: he could never write, as Morris did, ‘the consciousness of revolution stirring amidst our hateful modern society prevented me . . . from crystallising into a mere railer against progress . . . and thus I became a practical socialist’.

‘He was our best man’, wrote Blatchford in an obituary to Morris, ‘the only “celebrity” I ever sought’. Yet the contact between the two men was of a limited nature, Blatchford only establishing the Clarion and realizing a moderate degree of success late in 1891, less than four years before Morris’ health began to fail. In 1892 Blatchford sent his friend, Edward Fay, to interview Morris for the paper, resulting in a rather insubstantial piece that appeared on 19 November. Blatchford first met Morris five months later. Already the Hammersmith Socialist Society had begun to sell the Clarion at its meetings, familiarising Morris all the more with Blatchford’s work. The two men spent an evening together in Hammersmith. Blatchford was rather taciturn, later writing, ‘He told me to come again as often as I pleased. But I was loth to trouble him; it was a pity to waste him in talk. But it was a red-letter day. It was grand to find my one hero better than his work.’ Morris later recalled that Blatchford appeared uncomfortable. Nonetheless, he was impressed, writing to James Leatham, ‘I saw Blatchford last night,
and rather liked the looks of him'. Moreover, Morris believed that Blatchford could do much to further the cause of socialism in England.\(^7\)

Both socialists shared the conviction that the morally transformed life played a crucial role in the battle for socialism. In this context they believed that the most important duty of socialists was educational, to make more socialists. Morris held to this belief consistently from his earliest days with the Socialist League. As late as November 1890, in his farewell address in *Commonweal*, he still emphasized its importance. Blatchford, although the first president of the Manchester I.L.P., became increasingly disgusted with political activity, and ascribed heroic proportions to the anti-political stance assumed by Morris:

To produce and pay honour to beautiful things was his vocation, and all his experience and knowledge of social questions, added to his fervid indignation against wrong, and his melting sympathy for the unfortunate, never betrayed him into the quagmire of politics.\(^8\)

Ultimately it did, however, contrary to Blatchford's interpretation of the matter. In a letter to Glasier in 1886 Morris indicated that parliamentary activity could be engaged in when the movement was stronger. By 1894, although still stressing the educational role of socialism, he admitted that times had changed, and that it was now necessary to further the practical struggle with both parliamentary and municipal action.\(^9\) Ironically, while it was partially the *Clarion* and the work of Robert Blatchford that drew Morris closer to the acceptance of politics, Blatchford became increasingly ambivalent, especially to parliamentary politics and the tactics of the I.L.P.

His dislike of Hardie led Blatchford to propose the founding of a united socialist party, independent of all existing organisations. The proposal, gaining widespread support in the *Clarion*, attracted Morris, who, in October 1894, wrote Blatchford on behalf of the Hammersmith Socialist Society. He hoped the establishment of such a party would end the minor differences separating the various socialist organisations of the early 'nineties, and expressed his desire that no attempt to gain control of the executive should be endeavoured until such a party had been firmly established.\(^10\) The following year Morris still believed that a united socialist party could be created, and continued to hope that Blatchford, building on the momentum that followed the success of *Merrie England*, might be able to bring it about. Blatchford was encouraged by this support, although it was cut short by the death of Morris in 1896.\(^11\) Soon thereafter practical politics were put aside, the new party failed to materialise, and Blatchford gradually faded from the political limelight.
For William Morris one channel for revolutionising the means of production, and at the same time for effectively propagating the socialist gospel, was the arts and crafts movement. Small craft workshops could provide the setting for men and women to develop greater pride in their work, reassert control over the work process, and by so doing arrive at an understanding of capitalist exploitation. Holding to the belief that all work could be ennobling through its honesty, Morris developed a critique of the shoddiness and vulgarity of commercial production that appealed to Blatchford and his followers. The vehemence with which Morris condemned machine-made goods, and the division of labour that was responsible for them, during his interview for the *Clarion* in 1892, was echoed by Blatchford’s brother, Montague, almost a decade later:

> these cheap machine-made imitation artists ..., these glass-eyed leaders of those who have no eyes, learn to live upon shams and amidst shams until they ultimately become shams themselves, and have not in many cases sufficient real perception left in them to be aware of their own unreality, or ashamed of their own degradation. 

Montague Blatchford indicted capitalism for such a state of affairs, and, like Morris, called for a social revolution that would create a world in which true craftsmanship could flourish: ‘The true remedy is not to copy the old work, but to reproduce the conditions that called it forth.’

In 1901 Julia Dawson, a *Clarion* columnist, received a letter from Godfrey Blount, the tireless propagandist of the craft movement, urging Blatchford’s readers to pay more attention to the aesthetic doctrines of Morris. In order to facilitate this she encouraged the establishment of the Clarion Handicraft Guild. Blatchford was at first unenthusiastic, believing that the Clarion Fellowship was already providing enough recreational activities through its camera clubs, cycle clubs, drama societies, field clubs, scouting organisations and vocal unions. But with the rapid growth of the handicraft guilds he was soon converted and became a defender of guild activity, although he confessed to having read few of Morris’ essays on art.

The initial euphoria that accompanied the growth of the Clarion Handicraft Guild was great. ‘Joy in work, and hope in leisure’ became their motto as thousands of *Clarion* readers joined together to enjoy the social intercourse the guilds could offer, and to discover their hidden talents in jewelry-making, book-binding, furniture-construction, and
other guild activities. Such ‘wholesome’ learning was certainly in keeping with Blatchford’s rather puritanical desire to prevent the working class from straying into frivolous leisure activities. And yet the guilds did not reach out to those most likely to opt for such activities. Coming primarily from both the highly skilled sections of the working class and from the expanding lower middle class, many guild members’ personal concerns for status and respectability often militated against the idle, non-instructive, amusements that Blatchford feared. Moreover, working class presence was diluted even further by a large contingent of professional craftsmen, some with their own small factories, all attempting to use the guilds as a means of selling their products. But while the membership was diverse, guild participants ideally worked together to apply the test of ‘simplicity’ to all their products, to ‘avoid sham’, and to illustrate the ‘beauty, utility, and durability of handicraft, against the ugliness, uselessness and impermanence of machine goods’.14

The first guild was established in Liverpool, and it always remained one of the largest. With its classes offered several nights during the week, it became the model for other guilds to follow. By the end of 1904 there were some thirty branches throughout England, and weekly reports from them were printed in the Clarion.15 As early as 1902 Julia Dawson campaigned enthusiastically for an exhibition of the products of the guilds. When the first show opened at the annual Clarion meet in Stafford, only items from the Liverpool Guild, along with those from several independent entrepreneurs, were displayed. The reviewers tended to ignore the obvious failure of the exhibition, although in tones mocking the efforts of a Saturday night pottery crowd, Montague Blatchford remarked, ‘much of it struck me as being amateurish, imitative, and not particularly useful’.16 The 1903 exhibition didn’t fare much better. Held in Chester, a town specifically chosen for its history of medieval craftsmanship, it was attended by Walter Crane. In his opening address he praised the rapid advancement of the arts and crafts movement, and hoped that the exhibition would lead to a gradual improvement of public taste. Nonetheless, observers considered the products of the Birmingham guild too ornate, and Bristol’s bedroom furniture too heavy. And once again there were numerous complaints at the participation of commercial craftsmen.17

The 1904 exhibition, held at the Manchester Atheneum, was attended by the Lord Mayor, the Duchess of Sutherland, Emmeline Pankhurst, Blatchford and Crane, and was considered more successful than the others. The fourth exhibition was not held until 1907, but appeared to be the most successful of all. Housed in the Bishopsgate
Institute in London, it was entitled, 'An Exhibition of Handicraft and Sweated Trades', and sought to contrast the quality of the products of sweated industry with those made by individual craftsmen. Walter Crane again opened the exhibition, commenting on the immense improvement in the quality of the various display pieces. He also emphasised the importance of the show’s theme, and saw the juxtaposition of the products of the two systems of labour as a means of propaganda for the expansion of handicraft work.\^18

The 1907 exhibition was the last to be held, although the idea of craftsmanship that had permeated the ranks of the Clarion movement was applied the following year to the Manchester Clarion Café. This socialist meeting place, a 'new and striking departure in restaurant architecture and decoration', as the Manchester Guardian put it, resembled Charles Mackintosh's Cranston tearoom in Glasgow in its emphasis on a light and open interior that broke with earlier cumbersome and stuffy restaurant designs. Inspired by Ruskin and Morris, it
was executed by the St. George's Guild of Crafts, and exhibited a quality of workmanship seldom found in the Clarion Handicraft Guild. 19

The lasting success of the café—it was not closed until 1936—was contrasted by the rapid demise of the guilds. By 1907 the weekly reports in the Clarion had virtually disappeared, and the hesitant call made by Julia Dawson in 1909 for another exhibition went unanswered. While the café was Morris-inspired in both its design and the quality of its execution, even the London exhibition had its share of ‘rubbish’ as A.J. Penty of Orage’s New Age claimed. ‘If the exhibition is intended as a foretaste of what art will be like under socialism’, he wrote, ‘I can only say that I do not like it’. 20 Most of all, Penty, normally an enthusiastic supporter of the arts and crafts movement, was disturbed by the number of incompetent amateurs who failed to appreciate the importance Morris gave to quality in workmanship.

In his lectures and essays on art, Morris advanced the cause of
marxist cultural criticism by claiming that art was a social phenomenon, and by insisting that all craftsmen should not only strive to create the best products possible, but should work together to understand the social bases of artistic production. It was a message lost on Blatchford and the Clarion Handicraft Guild. There, as Penty recognised, superficiality reigned triumphant, and quality was seldom achieved. Moreover, each craft worker failed to understand the communal bases of production, simply striving for the highest possible level of individual achievement.

III

A poll of members of the Clarion Fellowship in fifty-four towns in 1901 found that literary study came second only to social evenings in their preference. Blatchford, who was not that familiar with Morris’ writings on art, always felt more comfortable with his literary works, echoing this preference. He considered The Defence of Guenevere one of the best works in the English language, although he believed it was followed closely by parts of The Earthly Paradise. Five of the songs Morris wrote for the socialist movement were included in the popular Clarion Songbook, and the idea of fellowship developed in A Dream of John Ball was central to Blatchford’s hopes for the Clarion Fellowship. His admiration for the aesthetic vision of this particular work was great:

The chief delight of John Ball for me lies in the delicate beauty of the pictures. The new church, with the white stone dust still upon the grass, the interior of the drinking room at the Rose, the figures of the yeomen returning from practice at the butts, all these are perfect.

On the reading list for John Smith of Oldham, the fictional worker to whom Blatchford addressed his Merrie England, was News from Nowhere. Blatchford considered the world of the future to which Morris led his readers pure and noble, and, perhaps more importantly, entirely possible. He derived much inspiration from Nowhere, and in 1907 published his own utopian novel, The Sorcery Shop, which he ironically subtitled ‘an impossible romance’. By no means an excellent literary work, The Sorcery Shop does share many characteristics with Nowhere. In both utopias the large metropolis has disappeared, Morris’ London resolved into its constituent communities, Blatchford’s Manchester transformed into an oversized Candleford Green:

The great square presented an animated picture of rich colour, and noble form, and eager, happy, human life. The place was a garden: a garden of
green lawns, and bright spring flowers, and sparkling fountains, and stately
trees—a garden surrounded by marble palaces, and canopied by a blue and
smokeless sky. Here the people—the beautiful, brave, impossible people—
gathered in their thousands, walking, lounging, laughing, talking, as
though the square were occupied by troops of friends (p. 28).

One observer has claimed that Morris’ utopia is filled by ‘exact replicas
of Morris himself’, while in describing The Sorcery Shop, Blatchford’s
biographer has commented that his utopian future is ‘a dream of
England small and white and clean, of Manchester as an independent
commune peopled by Robert Blatchfords . . .’.23 The two writers do
indeed loom large in their works, and a close study of their utopias
again reveals many of the differences between them. Morris emerges as
the greater thinker; the penetrating critique of society he offers in
Nowhere cannot be compared with the maudlin tale offered by
Blatchford, a tale parodied a few years later by Edward Herbert in his
Newaera, a Socialist Romance. While Nowhere presents an indictment
of the economic structure that underlies a whole way of life, The
Sorcery Shop merely attacks its outward manifestations. And while
Nowhere depicts a people sharing Morris’ own hearty appetite for life,
the inhabitants of Blatchford’s world are puritanical souls: they are, as
one of the visitors remarks, ‘all vegetarians and non-smokers and
teetotallers who don’t know the meaning of the word “damn”’ (p. 27).

What makes Nowhere so possible, while The Sorcery Shop remains
impossible, is ‘the change’ that transforms Morris’ England. The condi-
tions under which his citizens live are brought about by two years of
civil war. The London of the future marks a qualitative break with the
past, a break brought about by war, and discussed in depth by Morris in
his chapter, ‘How the Change Came’. There is a marked difference
between this and The Sorcery Shop. In Nowhere the past weighs heavily
on the present, and the memory of the change plays an important role in
determining the life-style of those in the future society. But Blatchford
shrugs off the past, and has little understanding of its transformative
potential. Stanley Pierson describes The Sorcery Shop as a charming
utopian novel set in Manchester in the aftermath of a Morris-inspired
revolution.24 But there is no revolution. There is merely evasion, a
mystical transformation of society. Blatchford’s inability to discuss just
how society progresses from here to there becomes tautological: ‘The
change . . . is due to the changed ideal of the people’ (p. 189). And that’s
that.

A French critic has claimed that The Sorcery Shop differs from News
from Nowhere because Blatchford and Morris were so different, as
were, more importantly, the periods in which they wrote.25 In liter-
nature, as in arts and crafts, Blatchford borrowed from Morris, but something was left behind. The vision of rest was captured, but the means of social transformation were not. Moreover, by 1907 the sentimental utopia that Blatchford offered seemed peculiarly out of place. His biographer is most succinct in his characterisation of Blatchford’s novel: ‘It is the dying voice of William Morris in a world thrilling to the new voice of H.G. Wells’.

IV

On Sunday afternoon, 9 August 1896, John Bruce Glasier lectured at Kelmscott. The tone was subdued. Morris was on a cruise to Spitzbergen hoping to regain his health. Blatchford, present at Kelmscott that afternoon, would be writing Morris’ obituary in two months, making his ‘one hero’ larger than life. ‘Already the old Kelmscott regime seemed passing away’, lamented Glasier. And indeed it was; six months later Blatchford attended the last meeting of the Hammersmith Socialist Society. Already the ideas of Morris were being distorted. To borrow from Edward Thompson, the ‘wind... was blowing up the “Morris tradition” into a sentimental afflatus’.

Blatchford outlived Morris by close to half a century, becoming increasingly disillusioned all the while. As Philip Poirier has remarked, he ‘grew weary of waiting for John Smith to see the light as he saw it’. His jingoism in the Boer War led to the loss of many followers; others left a few years later after his rejection of Christianity. His hostility to the Labour Party continued unabated, and in the 1920’s he turned to spiritualism. Blatchford felt more and more at home in his own idealized past. Indeed, this had been diagnosed as early as 1913: ‘There is, too, in the man, as in his work, a certain sad earnestness, as of him who has found the times out of joint and tried to set them right.’ Blatchford began to cling desperately to the romantic vision of Morris, quoting from the prologue to The Earthly Paradise in a collection of essays he published in 1928. Here Morris’ desire for a ‘London, small and white and clean’, is contrasted by Blatchford’s own bleaker image, reminiscent of the despair of James Thomson: ‘We are dooming ourselves to a precarious servitude in an overgrown City of Dreadful Night’.

While Morris was able to develop a penetrating critique of capitalism, and base his socialist agitation on that critique, Blatchford could never grasp the full thrust of his mentor’s teaching. The hypnotic presence and profound insight that characterised his hero, and that so intimidated Blatchford during their meeting in 1892, was not to be found in Blatchford himself. Yet it was Blatchford who attempted to
bring Morris into the twentieth century, and it is perhaps our misfortune that he was unable to do so. We remember him as a translator of socialism for millions of English men and women in the 1890's. But something was lost in the translation. Blatchford did much to popularise Morris, but in the process ultimately sentimentalised and trivialised his accomplishment.

NOTES

1 Clarion, 10 January 1913, p. 1.
5 Clarion, 10 October 1896, pp. 324–5.
6 Ibid.
8 Clarion, 10 October 1896, pp. 324–5.
11 'What We Have to Look For', lecture notes dated 30 March 1895, British Library Add. MSS, 45334; letter, Blatchford to Morris, 6 February 1895, BL Add. MSS. 45345.
12 Clarion, 6 July 1901, p. 209.
13 Clarion, 21 September 1901, p. 6.
14 The coverage of the arts and crafts movement in the Clarion was extensive. Godfrey Blount's letter appeared in Dawson's column on 1 June 1901, p. 170. The first lengthy article concerning the new group appeared on 21 September 1901, p. 6. Blatchford discussed the Guild on 11 October 1907, p. 7. Dawson emphasized the debt to Morris on 30 March 1901, p. 98, and 23 October 1903, p. 2. Other material used here is drawn from 25 May 1901, p. 162; 1 June 1901,
By the end of 1902 there were clubs in Blackpool, Glasgow, Halifax, Liverpool, Manchester and London. These were soon joined by others in Altrincham, Belfast, Birmingham, Bradford, Brighton, Cheriton, Chester, Coventry, Derby, Eccles, Fenton, Folkestone, Hunstanton, Keighley, Kilmarnock, Leeds, Newcastle, Northampton, Oldham, Seacombe, Stoke, West Bromwich and Wilmslow.

16 *Clarion*, 4 April 1902, p. 10.

17 *Clarion*, 8 May 1903, p. 2; 15 May 1903, p. 2.

18 For the 1904 exhibition, see Stewart Dick, ‘Handicraft Exhibition at Manchester’, *The Craftsman* 8 (May 1905): 195–204; *Manchester Guardian*, 29 October 1904, p. 8; *Clarion*, 28 October 1904, p. 1; 4 November 1904, pp. 2, 5. For the 1907 exhibition, see the *Times*, 23 September 1907, p. 8; 4 October 1907, p. 12; *Clarion*, 27 September 1907, p. 7.

19 *Manchester Guardian*, 22 February 1934; see also Souvenir of the Opening of the Manchester Clarion Café, in the archives of the Manchester Central Library.


21 Arts and crafts were seventh on the list, political activity tenth. *Clarion*, 23 November 1901, p. 2.


