

William Morris and 'making socialists'

We print here an article based on the notes for a talk given by Colin Waugh to a meeting of the Wakefield Socialist History Group, titled 'William Morris: revolutionary socialist or utopian dreamer?', on 27 February 2016 at the Red Shed, Wakefield.

In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, which was published in 1937, George Orwell claimed that: 'The real Socialist writers . . . have always been dull, empty windbags . . .' listing as examples Bernard Shaw, Henri Barbusse, Upton Sinclair, Waldo Frank . . . and William Morris. Was he right to say this about Morris or not?

First, some points about Morris's background. He was born in 1834. His childhood was spent in a large house in Walthamstow, now part of East London but then on the edge of Epping Forest. His parents' money came from investments in Cornish tin and copper mining – in short, from an industry in which workers underwent extreme forms of exploitation. Morris's parents were very wealthy but not members of the landowning class.

Morris went to Oxford University. At this stage his most likely career destination was to become an Anglican clergyman. But he rebelled against this. He was influenced heavily by the ideas of the art critic and social commentator John Ruskin, and mingled with the Pre-Raphaelite artistic coterie whose work Ruskin championed. He made himself into a skilled designer and craftsman, developing a design business in such fields as furniture, textiles and wallpaper which catered successfully to a well-off clientele. He always worked with his own hands in this business.

Morris became a socialist in January 1883. In 1896, he died prematurely, aged 62, from a kidney and diabetic condition combined with overwork. Why did he become a socialist?

Morris became a socialist when he was 49. He did so, then, not as a young man but as a result of extensive life experience and insights he gained through it. To become a skilled craftsman and designer, he must have had extensive and sustained contact with working-class artisans, and it's likely that this would have prompted him to think about

labour processes, and in particular to contrast the freely chosen, satisfying and profitable craft and design work he did himself with the work of artisans declassed into sweated labour, and with factory work. Based on his own account, I believe it suddenly clicked with him that this difference was due to capitalism. Further, as he wrote in 1894:

'[it] dawned on me that . . . the seeds of a great change were beginning to germinate. The whole face of things was changed to me by that discovery, and all I had to do then in order to become a Socialist was to hook myself on to the practical movement, which . . . I have tried to do as well as I could.'

However, it's important to note that Morris kept up his work as craftsman, employer, mainstream writer etc all through his years of socialist activity, and that he did so as a way of funding this activity. In other words, sustaining his business was now in his eyes a part of his duty as a socialist. So what sort of socialist did Morris initially become?

Morris became an organised socialist when he joined the Democratic Federation in January 1883. This organisation had been founded by the wealthy lawyer Henry Myers Hyndman in 1881, in an attempt to link together the radical workers' clubs that existed in some areas of London. (There were similar clubs in other cities.) Just before this, Hyndman had read Marx's *Capital* and plagiarised parts of it in his book *England For All*. In 1884, the Democratic Federation was renamed as the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) and became a socialist party, publishing the paper *Justice*. As such it was the first party in the UK with a claim to be 'Marxist'. The main turning points in Morris's life as a socialist were as follows.

On 27th December 1884, Morris, with Eleanor Marx, her partner Edward Aveling, Ernest Belfort Bax and a majority of the SDF's Council, passed a

motion of censure on Hyndman for his autocratic and - as they saw it - unprincipled behaviour. But then they walked out of the SDF to form the Socialist League. The Socialist League published a weekly paper called *Commonweal*. Till late in 1890 Morris sustained this paper, both as editor, by himself writing articles and by his own money.

Morris's view of what was possible was changed by the attacks carried out both by the police and by military units on the unemployed demonstrations that attempted to rally in Trafalgar Square and Hyde Park on 13th and 21st November 1887.

At the fourth conference of the Socialist League, held in May 1888, those who were opposed to participation in electoral politics – mainly, that is, Morris himself and a group of anarchists – voted to expel the Bloomsbury branch (mainly Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling). This left the Socialist League under the control of its anarchist members, and Morris marginalised within it. In 1889 the anarchists stripped Morris of his position as editor of *Commonweal*, although he continued to support it financially. Eventually, in November 1890, Morris and the League's Hammersmith branch seceded to form the Hammersmith Socialist Society. Later (in 1894) Morris wrote that he eventually learned from 'some of my anarchist friends . . . quite against their intention, that Anarchism was impossible'.

After 1890, Morris was partially reconciled to the SDF. However, towards the end of his life he moved away both from an under-estimation of union activity which he initially shared with Hyndman, and from his own unqualified rejection of electoral activity. For example, in 1896 he wrote:

'a widespread opinion cannot be defeated, and need not fear the temporary decision of the ballot-box . . . The Socialistic idea has at last taken hold of the workmen . . . and they are pushing it forward practically . . . Socialism has not yet formed a party in Great Britain, but it is essential that it should do so . . . This Socialist party must include the whole of the genuine labour movement . . . it must also include all that is definitely Socialist amongst the middle class . . .'

We can now pose the question: 'was Morris ever a 'utopian dreamer?', and first we need to ask ourselves why there are people who think of him in this way.

This idea is based primarily on his novel, *News from Nowhere*. (The full title of this is *News from Nowhere or an Epoch of Rest. Being some chapters from a utopian romance*.) The narrator of *News from Nowhere* falls asleep in Hammersmith in 1890 and wakes up 100 or more years later in a socialist or communist England. He spends a few days there

meeting people in London, and then on a journey by river to Oxfordshire. Then the dream fades and he's back in Hammersmith in 1890. What were the circumstances under which Morris wrote *News from Nowhere*?

Chapters 1 to 30 of the novel (out of 32) were first published in instalments in *Commonweal* between the 11th January and 4th October 1890. *News from Nowhere*, then, was written for - and published in - a paper largely under anarchist control. It's therefore not surprising that in it Morris bends the stick towards a conception of social organisation that downplays central control, and in this respect the novel can be seen as at least partly an attempt to keep on board for socialism the best elements of those within the Socialist League who were drawn towards - though not yet fully committed to - anarchism. But what triggered the writing of *News from Nowhere* in the first place?

Morris was prompted to write *News from Nowhere* by the publication in the USA in 1887 of Edward Bellamy's novel *Looking Backward 2000-1887*. Bellamy's narrator falls asleep in an underground room something like a nuclear bunker in Boston in 1887. The house above is destroyed in a fire and he is only rediscovered and awakened in 2000. He finds that society has been peacefully reorganised into a form of highly industrialised and urbanised 'socialism' (basically what would later be termed a command economy). Short-lived, so-called 'Nationalist' groups sprang up all over the US amongst middle-class supporters of Bellamy's vision.

In his review of *Looking Backward*, published in *Commonweal* in June 1889, Morris wrote:

' . . . there is a certain danger in books such as this: a twofold danger; for there will be some temperaments to whom the answer given to the question "How shall we live then?" will be pleasing and satisfactory, others to whom it will be displeasing and unsatisfactory. The danger to the first is that they will accept it with all its necessary errors and fallacies . . . as conclusive statements of facts and rules of action, which will warp their efforts in futile directions. The danger to the second, if they are but enquirers or very young Socialists, is that they, also accepting its speculations as facts, will be inclined to say, "If that is socialism, we won't help its advent, as it holds out no hope to us."

Also, in January 1890, Morris wrote a review of the recently published book *Fabian Essays*, in which he essentially criticised Sydney Webb on the same grounds as those on which he had criticised Bellamy.

So *News from Nowhere* was an attempt by Morris to get across through fiction his belief that socialism wouldn't necessarily have to be like *Looking Backward* or Webb's 'gas and water' model. In it, he is basically saying: 'OK, socialism might be like that, but it could equally well be like this' - thereby encouraging people to think for themselves about what it should be like, and how to move towards it.

Moreover, if we turn now to the underlying aim of *News from Nowhere*, it is clear from other evidence that Morris rejected the whole idea of putting forward utopias or, as Marx and Engels had called them in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, written and published early in 1848: 'fanciful depictions of the future society'.

Struggle

Within this perspective, the crucial chapter in *News from Nowhere* is titled 'How the change came'. In this chapter the character called Hammond explains to the narrator that the change from capitalism to socialism took place by struggle, including violence on both sides. This is in contrast to the peaceful transition in *Looking Backward*, in which big firms in each sector agree to become one huge monopoly covering every sector.) So, as I argued previously, Morris in 1890 was trying to get readers to think concretely about how the transition from capitalism to socialism might happen and what they would have to do to bring this about.

At one level, then, *News from Nowhere* can be viewed as a thought experiment: Morris imagines himself trying to explain to people used to living in a communist society what capitalism had been like and why people put up with it.

Morris had in fact carried out a previous thought experiment in *A Dream of John Ball* (published in 1886-87). In this, a socialist from the 1880s goes back in a dream to Kent in the 1380s, where peasants who are in revolt are marching on London. While the others sleep after a skirmish, the socialist has a long discussion with the radical priest John Ball, who the peasants have freed from imprisonment in Canterbury. (Historically Ball is famous for his argument: 'When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman'. He was captured and hung, drawn and quartered in his home town of St Albans.) *A Dream of John Ball* poses the question to readers: if you could talk to John Ball, how would you explain to him the course of history between 1380s and 1880s, what capitalism is, how it arose, why people allowed this to happen and related issues?

So Morris was not 'a utopian dreamer'. Both *A Dream of John Ball* and *News from Nowhere* were

ways of prompting readers to think about historical processes and human choices, and Morris's purpose in both was to pose practical and theoretical problems to activists and potential activists.

On this basis, we can now address the question: what is essence of Morris's socialism?

First, it centres on a distinction between valid work and alienated labour. I consider that Morris reached for himself the insight which Marx had expressed in 1875 (in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*) when he said that 'in a higher phase of Communist society . . . labour . . . [would become] life's prime want'.

Secondly, Morris believed that only workers can make a socialist revolution. Like Marx, he was clear throughout his years as a socialist that, as Marx expressed it in 1867 (in the *Rules of the First International*), 'the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves'. Morris believed that people like himself could help with this, but workers were necessarily the prime agents.

Thirdly, Morris concentrated on what he saw as the necessity to 'make socialists' - that is, to engage in ideological as well as political and economic struggle. Morris pursued two main activities aimed at 'making socialists': (a) writing articles for *Justice* and for *Commonweal*, and (b) giving talks, both on street corners and in speeches and lectures both indoors and outdoors across Britain. I believe that we can identify an underlying method on which he based these talks, and that this method is crucial. So what, then, was Morris's method for 'making socialists'?

His focus was on promoting dialogue between socialistic sympathisers from the 'middle class' and a thinking section of the working class. He himself conducted a dialogue of this kind through short pieces of writing and talks. These short pieces of writing include: 'A Factory as it Might Be' (1884), 'Useful Work Versus Useless Toil' (1884), 'Dawn of a new Epoch' (1888), 'The Present Outlook of Socialism in England' (1896), while the talks include: 'Art and Labour' (1884), 'How We Live and How We Might Live' (1884) 'Socialism: The Ends and the Means' (1886), 'The Policy of Abstention' (1887), 'What Socialists Want' (1887), 'True and False Society' (1888), 'Monopoly; or How Labour is Robbed' (1890), 'Communism' (1893). What makes these articles and talks so special?

They are never pedantic, never patronising, never preachy, never personalised, never demagogic, never manipulative, never dogmatic. They never assert socialist ideas as an orthodoxy, never try to blind people with science, never make obscure references, never assume that listeners' will agree,

never try to bounce listeners over questionable points, never use rhetorical or logical tricks, never ridicule workers' standpoints. They always try to connect with workers' own good sense, always centre on patient persuasion using reasoned argument, always stay close to concrete realities, always use an informal approach, are always fairly short and meticulously prepared. They always use plain language. To me it's highly significant that in his 'Diary' - covering 1887 - Morris repeatedly voiced his fear that workers in his audiences did not understand his points about socialism. The fact that he felt this tells me that they almost certainly did.

This methodology was important because it recognised both the role of workers themselves in shaping and reshaping socialism at the level of ideas and also the need to keep ideas and actions linked.

In conclusion, there is evidence that some working-class activists were themselves moving in the same direction as Morris. For example, within the SDF, there were the classes in Marxism organised by the bricklayer Jack Fitzgerald, who was part of the group which in 1904 split to form the Socialist Party of Great Britain (SPGB). Another example is the educational procedure used within the SLP group in Edinburgh that was organised by the refuse collector James Connolly and the engineering technician George Yates (which had split from the SDF in 1903). And above all there was the Plebs League, founded in 1908 by mineworkers, railway-workers and others who were or had been students at Ruskin College, including Noah Ablett, Will Craik, George Sims and George Harvey. So Morris's approach was arguably in line with a direction in which advanced workers themselves were - or would shortly be - moving.

This is perhaps reflected in the tribute, quoted by E. P. Thompson in his biography of Morris, that came from a Lancashire SDF branch when Morris died, the spelling and punctuation of which indicate someone to whom the written word did not come easily: 'Comrade Morris is not dead there is not a Socialist living whould belive him dead for he Lives in the heart of all true men and women still and will do so to the end of time.'

Orwell was wrong, then.



Post-16 Educator:

annual subscription rates (6 issues)

1. Individuals:

- 1.1 Unwaged - £3.00
- 1.2 Students / Part time teachers/lecturers / Retired - £6.50
- 1.3 First time subscription as full time teacher/lecturer - £9.50
- 1.4 Regular individual - £12.50
- 1.5 Supporting - £30.00

(All the above please use form below, personal cheque or bankers order only. Or for alternative payment methods such as Internet Bank Transfer, email us on post16educator@runbox.com)

2. Institutions (eg libraries, union branches):

- 2.1 New subscriptions - £18.50
 - 2.2 Regular institutional - £25.00
- (Official orders to address below.)

 To: *Post-16 Educator*, 39 Scarle Road,
 WEMBLEY HA0 4SR (Phone 0208 903 4940)

Name: _____

Address: _____

I wish to subscribe and enclose cheque payable to 'Post-16 Educator' for 1.1 £3.00 1.2 £6.50 1.3 £9.50 1.4 £12.50 1.5 £30.00 (Tick as appropriate)

Bankers Order:

To (name of your bank): _____

Address of your bank: _____

Your account number: _____

Your bank sort code: _____

Signature: _____

Please pay *Post-16 Educator* the sum of :
 every year, starting on (date):