

WILLIAM MORRIS  
Romantic to Revolutionary



*William Morris*

# WILLIAM MORRIS

*ROMANTIC*  
*to*  
*REVOLUTIONARY*

*by*

E. P. THOMPSON



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## FOREWORD

THIS book is a study of William Morris rather than a biography. J. W. Mackail's *Life of William Morris*, published over fifty years ago, is likely to remain the standard year-by-year narrative of the main events in Morris's life. But many new sources have become available since Mackail wrote this book, and, moreover, his account has serious defects. First, his close connection with the family and intimate friends of Morris inhibited frankness on certain matters. Second, Mackail's dislike of Morris's revolutionary convictions resulted in a totally inadequate treatment of the political activities which absorbed Morris's whole energy in the years of his full maturity. For this reason I have found it necessary to introduce a great deal of new biographical material into this book, and in particular into the treatment of the years of "practical Socialism."

It should be emphasized that the discussions in this book of the Romantic Movement, Pre-Raphaelitism, and of Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin, have been introduced in an attempt to put William Morris within the context of his times and that the points brought into prominence have been selected accordingly. Equally, the treatment of the Socialist movement in the 1880s must be read alongside other accounts of the Social-Democratic Federation and of the "New Unionism" if the Socialist League is not to be seen out of its true proportion.

William Morris's genius was so versatile that any overall judgement on his life must be the result of the collaboration of many specialist opinions. While I am responsible for the judgements in this book, I could never have completed it without the most generous assistance of every kind from many people. Graeme Shankland encouraged me to borrow ideas from his unpublished study of Morris; he has also criticized parts of the manuscript. Dr. S. Sokkary sent me his unpublished thesis on Morris's prose romances. Professor G. D. H. Cole kindly read a sketch of some of my conclusions and sent me his comments. Alick West, Douglas Garman, and Arnold Kettle all read and criticized parts of the manuscript, while Maurice Cornforth has constantly encouraged me in the dual role of critic and publisher.

In my search for material I have met with equal generosity.

Mr H. L. Beales, Professor Guy Chapman, Professor Oswald Doughty, Dr. H. M. Pelling, Sir Sidney Cockerell, Mr Chimen Abramsky, and Mr H. H. Verstage are among those who have responded to my enquiries and helped me to find sources. Mr J. F. Horrabin put at my disposal for a year his interesting collection of handbills of the early Socialist movement. Mr Fred Henderson entertained me for an afternoon with reminiscences of the Socialist League, and has given me permission to publish five letters to himself from Morris. Dr Radford has kindly allowed me to quote from letters of Eleanor Marx in her possession. Mr Derek Crossley undertook some research in London on my behalf. Mr John Mahon gave me transcripts of letters of F. Engels to his father, John Lincoln Mahon, while I am indebted to the courtesy of the Society for Cultural Relations with the Soviet Union and of Mr A. Tushunov, Deputy Director of the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute, Moscow, for photostats of Mahon's own letters. Moreover, my enquiries led to two friendships of inestimable value. Mrs. Florence Mattison has given me access to all documents compiled by her late husband, Alf Mattison, which are still in her possession, and also to the wealth of her memories of her own and her husband's part in the movement, while the late Mr Ambrose Barker, a Communist-Anarchist since 1879 and a founder-member of the Socialist League, gave me the benefit of his encouragement and of his recollections, and, since his death, his kindness has been continued by his close friend, Miss Ella Twynam.

To all these, and to many other people who have answered my enquiries or helped me in various ways, I am deeply indebted. Great as these debts are, however, there is a further one which cannot be measured in any terms. From the conception of this book until its completion, Dona Torr has given me her encouragement, her friendship, and her criticism. She has repeatedly laid aside her own work in order to answer enquiries or to read drafts of my material, until I have felt that parts of the book were less my own than a collaboration in which her guiding ideas have the main part. It has been a privilege and an education to be associated so closely with a Communist scholar so versatile, so distinguished, and so generous with her gifts.

Any student of Morris is under a debt to the late Miss May Morris for her Prefaces to the twenty-four volumes of her father's collected works, and for her two volumes, *William Morris, Artist, Writer, Socialist* (Blackwell, 1936), as well as to Mr. Philip



Henderson for his edition of *The Letters of William Morris* (Longmans, Green & Co, 1950). In addition I am grateful to publishers for their permission to quote from the following *From William Morris to Whistler*, by Walter Crane (G. Bell & Sons), *My Days and Dreams*, by E Carpenter, and *Reminiscences of a Mid and Late Victorian*, by E B Bax (George Allen and Unwin), *Journals of T. J Cobden-Sanderson* (R Cobden-Sanderson), *A J. Mundella*, by W. H G Armytage (Ernest Benn); *Time Was*, by Graham Robertson (Hamish Hamilton), *William Morris*, by J B Glasier (Longmans, Green & Co Ltd)

For permission to draw upon unpublished material I am particularly indebted to the Society of Antiquaries of London, who hold the copyright of all unpublished writings of Morris, to the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, and in particular to Dr F. de Jong, for allowing me to quote from the correspondence of the Socialist League and from other documents, and to the Borough of Walthamstow Public Library and Museum for permission to make use of extracts from unpublished letters of Morris to J Bruce Glasier I am also indebted to the authorities of the British Museum the Bishopsgate Institute the British Library of Political Science the Bodleian Library Sheffield University Library Norwich City Library and of the Brotherton Library, Leeds University, for granting me facilities to consult documents in their keeping, and, in certain cases, permitting me to draw upon them in my text. I should like to take this opportunity of thanking the Librarians and Staffs of all these Institutions for their ready assistance and response to all my requests

*January, 1955*



## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations have been used in the footnotes to the text

Brit. Mus Add MSS. British Museum Additional Manuscripts, comprising letters of Morris to his family, lectures, diaries, and other documents

Glasier MSS Letters of Morris to J Bruce Glasier in the Morris Museum, Water House, Walthamstow

Hammersmith Minutes Minutes of the Hammersmith Branch of the Democratic Federation and S D F (until December, 1884), Hammersmith Branch, Socialist League (until December, 1890), and Hammersmith Socialist Society (until December, 1896) Preserved, with several gaps, among Brit Mus Add MSS 45891-4

Int Inst Soc. Hist International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam Documents collected by the historian of Anarchism, Dr M Nettlau, comprising correspondence of the Socialist League, 1885-8, and various letters of Joseph Lane, Frank Kitz, Ambrose Barker, and others Correspondence of Morris and G B Shaw with Andreas Scheu

Mattison MSS Correspondence and diaries of the late Mr Alf Mattison, in the possession of Mrs Florence Mattison

*Works* *The Collected Works of William Morris* in 24 Volumes (Longmans, 1910-15)

*Letters* *The Letters of William Morris to his Family and Friends*, Edited by Philip Henderson (Longmans, Green & Co 1950).

*Unpublished Letters* *Unpublished Letters of William Morris to the Rev. John Glasie* (Labour, Monthly, 1952)

Glasier: J Bruce Glasier, *William Morris and the Early Days of the Socialist Movement* (Longmans, 1921).

Mackail. J W Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, 2 Volumes, (Longmans, 1899)

- Marx-Engels Sel Cor *Selected Correspondence of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels*, translated and edited by Dona Torr (Lawrence & Wishart, 1936)
- May Morris May Morris, *William Morris, Artist, Writer, Socialist*, 2 Volumes, with an introduction to Vol 2 by George Bernard Shaw (B Blackwell, 1936)
- Memorials· G B[urne]-J[ones], *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, 2 Volumes (Macmillan, 1904)

PART I

WILLIAM MORRIS AND THE ROMANTIC REVOLT



## CHAPTER I

### SIR LAUNCELOT AND MR. GRADGRIND

#### *I The First Revolt*

WILLIAM MORRIS was born in March, 1834—ten years after the death of Byron, twelve years after Shelley's death, thirteen years after the death of Keats. As he grew to adolescence, the reputation and influence of the last two poets was growing up beside him. He was caught up in the last great eddies of that disturbance of the human spirit which these poets had voiced—the Romantic Revolt. Romanticism was bred into his bones, and formed his early consciousness. And some of the last clear notes of this passionate revolt were sounded when, in 1858, the young William Morris published *The Defence of Guenevere*.

"Poor merry Dinadan, that with jape and scoff  
Kept us all merry, in a little wood

"Was found all hack'd and dead Sir Lionel  
And Gauwayne have come back from the great quest,  
Just merely shamed, and Lauvaine, who loved well  
Your father Launcelot, at the King's behest

"Went out to seek him, but was almost slain,  
Perhaps is dead now, everywhere  
The knights come foil'd from the great quest, in vain,  
In vain they struggle for the vision fair"<sup>1</sup>

Thereafter the impulse of revolt in English poetry was almost spent, and the currents set—in the poetry of Morris himself, as well as of Tennyson and their contemporaries—away from the main channels of life, and towards ever-more-secluded creeks and backwaters. What had once been a passionate protest against an intolerable social reality was to become little more than a yearning nostalgia or a sweet complaint. But, throughout all the years of his despair, between 1858 and 1878, the fire of Morris's first

<sup>1</sup> "Sir Galahad, A Christmas Mystery "

revolt still burnt within him. The life of Victorian England was an intolerable life, and ought not to be borne by human beings. The values of industrial capitalism were vicious and beneath contempt, and made a mockery of the past history of mankind. It was this youthful protest, still burning within him, which brought him into contact, in 1882, with the first pioneers of Socialism in England. And when he found that these pioneers not only shared his hatred of modern civilization, but had an historical theory to explain its growth, and the will to change it to a new society, the old fire flared up afresh. Morris, the Romantic in revolt, became a realist and a revolutionary.

That is why a study of William Morris, the revolutionary, must start with some mention of the Romantic revolt in poetry before his birth. But, first, let us summarize the main events of his first twenty-five years. Morris, in 1883 (the year in which he joined the Democratic Federation), described in a letter to the Austrian Socialist, Andreas Scheu, some of the events of his early life, as they appeared in importance from his new standpoint

"I was born at Walthamstow—a suburban village on the edge of Epping Forest, and once a pleasant place enough, but now terribly cocknified and choked up by the jerry-builder

"My Father was a business man in the city, and well-to-do, and we lived in the ordinary bourgeois style of comfort, and since we belonged to the evangelical section of the English Church I was brought up in what I should call rich establishmentarian puritanism, a religion which even as a boy I never took to

"I went to school at Marlborough College, which was then a new and very rough school. As far as my school instruction went, I think I may fairly say I learned next to nothing there, for indeed next to nothing was taught; but the place is in very beautiful country, thickly scattered over with historical monuments, and I set myself eagerly to studying these and everything else that had any history in it, and so perhaps learned a good deal, especially as there was a good library at the school to which I sometimes had access. I should mention that ever since I could remember I was a great devourer of books. I don't remember being taught to read, and by the time I was 7 years old I had read a very great many books good, bad and indifferent.

"My Father died in 1847 a few months before I went to Marlborough, but as he had engaged in a fortunate mining speculation before his death, we were left very well off, rich in fact.

"I went to Oxford in 1853 as a member of Exeter College; I took very ill to the studies of the place; but fell to very vigorously on history



and especially medieval history, all the more perhaps because at this time I fell under the influence of the High Church or Puseyite school, this latter phase however did not last me long, as it was corrected by the books of John Ruskin which were at the time a sort of revelation to me, I was also a good deal influenced by the works of Charles Kingsley, and got into my head therefrom some socio-political ideas which would have developed probably but for the attractions of art and poetry. While I was still an undergraduate, I discovered that I could write poetry, much to my own amazement, and about that time being very intimate with other young men of enthusiastic ideas, we got up a monthly paper which lasted (to my cost) for a year, it was called the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, and was very young indeed. When I had gone through my schools at Oxford, I who had been originally intended for the Church<sup>1</sup> made up my mind to take up art in some form, and so articulated myself to G. E. Street—who was then practising in Oxford, I only stayed with him nine months however, when being introduced by Burne-Jones, the painter, who was my great college friend, to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the leader of the Pre-Raphaelite School, I made up my mind to turn painter, and studied the art but in a very desultory way for some time.”<sup>1</sup>

Here, in Morris's matter-of-fact narrative, the first great crisis of his life is described. The bill-broker's son, shielded in a prosperous middle-class home, sent to receive the stamp of the ruling class at a public school (which was still too disorganized and new to do its corrupting job effectively), doomed to a clerical career—suddenly taking the decision to throw the respectabilities to the winds, to turn his back on the recognized professions and careers, and to cast in his lot with Rossetti's circle of enthusiasts, Bohemians, and dedicated artists. It is true that the decision cost him no serious financial hardship. The toil, under appalling conditions, of the workers in the tin and copper mines of Devon and Cornwall shielded him from poverty, and gave him his freedom of choice—as he was later to understand only too well. But it was a real decision none the less, a conscious rejection of the accepted values and ambitions of his class. His whole life was to provide testimony that it was dictated by no mere whim or passing desire for amusement. Why did he take it? Why—when he had shown no particular aptitude in his youth—did he decide to dedicate his life to painting as an art?

<sup>1</sup> *Letters*, pp. 184-6

## II History and Romance

It is easy enough to point to the leading passion of William Morris's life at Marlborough and at Oxford. He himself described it often enough in later life. At one time he recalled his journeys to France in these years

"Less than forty years ago I first saw the city of Rouen, then still in its outward aspect a piece of the Middle Ages no words can tell you how its mingled beauty, history, and romance took hold on me, I can only say that, looking back on my past life, I find it was the greatest pleasure I have ever had" <sup>1</sup>

Medievalism was not a new discovery in his adolescence. He had read Scott's novels before he was seven. had ridden the glades of Epping Forest in a toy suit of armour. From his childhood his eye and visual memory were sharp for the architecture and art of the Middle Ages and his games were those of knights, barons and fairies. His father took him on occasion to see the old churches in their neighbourhood, and once they visited Canterbury and the church of Minster in Thanet. fifty years later—having never returned in the interval—he described the church from memory. In a lecture on *The Lesser Arts of Life* delivered in 1882, he recalled another early impression:

"How well I remember as a boy my first acquaintance with a room hung with faded greenery at Queen Elizabeth's Lodge, by Chingford Hatch, in Epping Forest . . . and the impression of romance that it made upon me; a feeling that always comes back on me when I read, as I often do, Sir Walter Scott's *Antiquary*, and come to the description of the green room at Monkbarns, amongst which the novelist has with such exquisite cunning of art imbedded the fresh and glittering verses of the summer poet Chaucer, yes, that was more than upholstery, believe me"

At Marlborough he was rather solitary, and thought to be eccentric, spending much of his time taking rubbings of brasses, visiting historical sites, and still in his teens storing in his imagination "endless stories of knights and chivalry".

But, for all this, he was not cut to the pattern of the romantic hero of late Victorian aestheticism—pale, nervous and sensitive, scorned and misunderstood by his fellows and the world. He was

<sup>1</sup> "The Aims of Art", *Works*, Vol. XXIII, p. 85

self-sufficient, it is true, and absorbed in a world of "romance" but the world of "romance" was not incompatible with the closest observation and study wherever his interests directed him: •

"On Monday I went to Silbury Hill which I think I have told you before is an artificial hill made by the Britons but first I went to a place called Avebury where there is a Druidical circle and a Roman entrenchment I think the biggest stone I could see had about 16 feet out of the ground in height and about 10 feet thick and 12 feet broad the circle and entrenchment altogether is about half a mile",

he wrote in a letter from Marlborough to his sister. By the time he went up to Oxford he had assumed the forthright, assertive manner that springs to mind with the first mention of his name. His friend, Dixon (the same Canon Dixon with whom the poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, was later to become intimate in correspondence) set down his memories of Morris at this time:

"At first Morris was regarded by the Pembroke men simply as a very pleasant boy who was fond of talking, which he did in a husky shout, and fond of going down the river with Faulkner . . . He was also extremely fond of singletick, and a good fencer In no long time, however, the great characters of his nature began to impress us His fire and impetuosity, great bodily strength, and high temper were soon manifested and were sometimes astonishing As . . . his habit of beating his own head, dealing himself vigorous blows, to take it out of himself . . . But his mental qualities, his intellect, also began to be perceived and acknowledged I remember Faulkner remarking to me, 'How Morris seems to know things, doesn't he?' And then it struck me that it was so I observed how decisive he was how accurate, without any effort or formality what an extraordinary power of observation lay at the base of many of his casual or incidental remarks. . . ."¹

This accurate grasp of detail persisted in all his medieval studies, and not only in his chief interest, in architecture and the architectural arts. He fell enthusiastically upon the collection of illuminated manuscripts in the Bodleian Library, and founded the store of knowledge which so astonished H. M. Hyndman, the Socialist leader, when, in the days of the Democratic Federation, they visited Oxford together, and the Curator at the Bodleian asked Morris to help in the identification of some recent acquisitions.

"Morris . . . taking them up one by one, looked, very quickly but

¹ Mackail, I, p 43.

very closely and carefully at each in turn, pushing it aside after inspection with 'Monastery So and So, date Such and Such', 'Abbey this in such a year', until he had finished the whole number, his decision being written down as he gave it. There seemed not to be the slightest doubt in the librarian's mind that Morris's judgement was correct and final, and though Morris hesitated here and there eventually his verdict was given with the utmost certainty."<sup>1</sup>

Amiens and Rouen. the grey, medieval streets of Oxford itself: illuminated manuscripts, brasses and carvings, already revealing their influence in the leaf patterns which he worked on the edges of his letters the ballads, Chaucer, Froissart, Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, and all that was written of the Arthurian cycle—these were the things which quickened his pulse and roused him to heights of enthusiasm in his youth. This enthusiasm for medievalism coloured all his contributions to the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, and culminated in his first great achievement, *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*. It imparted that special flavour of idealized chivalric romance blended with closely-wrought detail which is distinctive of his early *Story of the Unknown Church*, and which is marked in such a passage as this, from his adolescent romance, *A Dream*:

"She saw him walking down toward the gateway tower, clad in his mail coat, with a bright, crestless helmet on his head, and his trenchant sword newly grinded, girt to his side, and she watched him going between the yew-trees, which began to throw shadows from the shining of the harvest moon. She stood there in the porch, and round by the corners of the eaves of it looked down towards her and the inside of the porch two serpent-dragons, carved in stone, and on their scales, and about their leering eyes, grew the yellow lichen, she shuddered as she saw them stare at her, and drew closer toward the half-open door, she, standing there, clothed in white from her throat till over her feet, altogether ungirdled, and her long yellow hair, without plait or band, fell down behind and lay along her shoulders, quietly, because the night was without wind."

### III Mr Gradgrind

*A Dream* was written when Morris was twenty-one. the year, 1855. On every side industrial capitalism was advancing triumphantly. The challenge of Chartism had receded, although Ernest Jones was still trying to rally the remnants of the Chartist

<sup>1</sup> H. M. Hyndman, *The Record of an Adventurous Life* (1911), p. 355

Party. Four years before, the Great Exhibition of 1851 had ushered in twenty-five years of unchallenged industrial supremacy. London was already the financial hub of the world, and the export of capital, especially of railways, was going on apace. In this same year the first Limited Liabilities Act was passed, serving as the signal for an even wider section of the Victorian middle class to take its place at the feast. The most humane and intelligent men and women of this class were concerned, not so much with intellectual or cultural achievement, as with the practical problems involved in clearing up the worst squalor and muddles left by the speculators of the previous century—sewerage and paving, municipal government, the regulation of industrial conditions and the elimination of its worst abuses—these were among the concerns of enlightened minds. What on earth did Sir Launcelot and maidens in white ungirdled drapery have to do with such a time?

The answer (or a part of it) is implicit in the question. In 1854, when Morris had just gone up to Oxford, Dickens published in *Hard Times* one of his most angry attacks upon Victorian utilitarianism:

"Now what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only found the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts. . . ."

So Mr. Gradgrind orders the schoolmaster at the opening of the book. The scene of the action, Coketown, is dedicated to Fact.

"You saw nothing in Coketown but what was severely workful. If the members of a religious persuasion built a chapel there . . . they made it a pious warehouse of red brick with sometimes (but this only in highly ornamented examples) a bell in a bird-cage on the top of it. The solitary exception was the New Church, a stuccoed edifice with a square steeple over the door, terminating in four short pinnacles like florid wooden legs. All the public inscriptions in the town were painted alike, in severe characters of black and white. The jail might have been the infirmary, the infirmary might have been the jail, the town-hall might have been either, or both, or anything else, for anything that appeared to the contrary in the graces of their construction. Fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the material aspect of the town, fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the immaterial. The school was all fact, and the school of design was all fact, and the relations between master and man were all fact, and everything was fact between the lying-in hospital and the cemetery, and what you couldn't state in figures, or show to be

purchaseable in the cheapest market and saleable in the dearest, was not, and never should be, world without end, Amen."

Dickens's picture may be caricature but it is of the best order of caricature, which delineates the essential lines of truth. Mr. Bounderby, the coarse, brutal and avaricious mill-owner of *Hard Times*, the type of the earlier Industrial Revolution, was now giving way to his more sophisticated cousin, Mr. Gradgrind. Gradgrind not only has power, wealth, political influence—he also has a theory to justify and perpetuate human exploitation. The Victorian middle class had constructed from bits of Adam Smith and Ricardo, Bentham and Parson Malthus a cast-iron theoretical system, which they were now securing with the authority of the State and the Law, and sanctifying with the blessings of Religion. The laws of supply and demand were "God's laws," and in all the major affairs of society all other values must bend before commodity values. Capital and labour were bound together by indissoluble ties, and upon the prosperity of capital depended the prosperity of the working class. Even excessive charity might endanger the working of these "natural" laws, by subsidizing and encouraging poverty, and (Dickens maintained) "the *Westminster Review* considered Scrooge's presentation of the turkey to Bob Cratchit as grossly incompatible with political economy." State regulation of the hours and conditions of adult labour (unless extended to "defenceless" children, or, in exceptional cases, the "weaker" sex) was not only bad political economy but a monstrous interference with God's laws, which would bring down a terrible retribution. The market was the final determinant of value, and if there was insufficient demand to make fine architecture or beautifully planned towns *pay*, this was sufficient evidence that such commodities as these were insignificant in the realm of Fact.

Medievalism was one of the characteristic forms taken by the later flowering of the romantic movement in mid-nineteenth-century England. It was, in its essential impulse, a revolt against the world of the Railway Age, and the values of Gradgrind. It posed the existence, in the past, of a form of society whose values were finer and richer than those of profit and capitalist utility. A hundred years lie between us and *The Defence of Guenevere*. In this time our attitude towards the Middle Ages, and the form

of our own revolt against industrial capitalism, have radically altered—and William Morris in his maturity helped to change our revolt from negative into positive channels. To-day we have reservations which make it difficult for us to penetrate through the medieval trappings to the conflicts within the writers of this time. The very words "romance" and "chivalry" have connotations which often arouse hostility, and later developments of medievalism, when revolt degenerated into escapism and sentimentality, have made many people look on the whole period with indifference or distaste. But within this prevailing predisposition toward medieval themes and settings, some of the most significant conflicts of ideas of Morris's time found their expression. From this same soil, from this same yearning for the ideal, the heroic and the passionate, in a world of Cash and Fact, grew both the Jesuit Hopkins and the pagan and Communist, William Morris. Therefore, we must use sympathy to break free from our preconceptions and to understand this climate of the past.