

Morris, William (1834–1896)

Jason M. Kelly

William Morris was a writer, designer, and political activist. One of the early exponents of the aesthetic approach, later known as the Arts and Crafts movement, his intellectual breadth was seemingly boundless. His father, William Morris (1797–1847), was a speculative investor, and his success provided the young William with a luxurious childhood and a financially secure life dominated by the romantic medievalism of the age. He devoured the works of Sir Walter Scott and even had his own suit of armor. His fascination with medieval literature and history fed his imagination, and probably contributed to his embrace of the Oxford Movement, which dominated the teaching at Marlborough College, his school between 1848 and 1851.

The Oxford Movement was a high-church movement that criticized the secularism of nineteenth-century Anglicanism. It emphasized the continuities between Roman Catholicism and the Church of England, both theologically and liturgically, and attempted to steer the church towards its origins. He entered Exeter College, Oxford in 1853, hoping to join the clergy and continue the reform of the Church of England begun by the founders of the Oxford Movement.

At Oxford, Morris found a friend in Ned Jones (later Edward Burne-Jones), who was also drawn to Anglo-Catholicism and shared his desire for the transformation of Victorian society. It was through the writing of John Ruskin that Morris and Burne-Jones found their model for reform. Morris, already disaffected with the art of industrial Britain, read Ruskin's *Stones of Venice* (1851–3) soon after it was published, taking note of Ruskin's observation that the Industrial Revolution had sapped British workers of their creative energy. Not only were their labor and social conditions atrocious, but repetitive and mindless factory work had robbed them of

their humanity. Ruskin argued that while labor was a necessary element of life, the manufacture of goods need not be oppressive.

After taking his degree at Oxford, Morris devoted himself to the arts, joining his friend Burne-Jones in London, where they associated themselves with the Pre-Raphaelites. Under the influence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, they committed themselves to painting, even as Morris experimented in the fields of poetry and the decorative arts. Through Rossetti, Morris met Jane Burden, whom he married in 1859. After that, he began a new phase in his life as the patron-employer to the Pre-Raphaelites and the nascent Arts and Crafts movement.

In 1859-60 he worked with his friend Philip Webb to design the medievalist Red House in Kent. Unwilling to furnish it with products of modern industry, he called upon his friends to design the furnishings. This was the germ of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner, & Co., founded in 1861. "The Firm," as Morris called it, was devoted to traditional craft techniques and the gothic revival. Products ranged from stained glass to tapestries to pottery to bookbinding. Traveling to the Continent and studying books and manuscripts in libraries, Morris experimented and rediscovered numerous preindustrial manufacturing techniques. In effect, he took Ruskin's criticism and applied it in practice.

Morris's success in the decorative arts was coupled with success in literary endeavors. Between 1868 and 1870 he published his poetic masterpiece, *The Earthy Paradise*, to positive reviews. Around the same time, however, Jane and Rossetti began a love affair to Morris's stoic, but melancholic chagrin. Morris, who believed that the marriage contract should not limit natural affection, tolerated their relationship and even leased Kelmscott Manor with Rossetti, leaving Jane, their children, and Rossetti to live together for extended periods of time. Tensions between Rossetti and Morris heightened in the mid-1870s, in part due to Rossetti's laudanum addiction and increasingly prickly personality. Morris

cut his ties to Rossetti in 1877.

In 1876 William Morris began the public, political phase of his career. Angered by British policy in the Balkans, he joined the Eastern Question Association, publishing a number of newspaper articles and organizing protests. In 1877 he formed the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, or “Anti-Scrape.” Founded on principles developed from Ruskin, the organization attempted to prevent the “restoration” of architectural antiquities in Britain. By 1879 he became treasurer to the working-class National Liberal League. But it was in 1883 that his belief in the improvement of working-class conditions found him a member of the Democratic Federation (later the Social Democratic Federation). Marxist in inspiration, it became the most prominent voice for socialism in Britain between 1881 and 1884.

Marx's involvement in the SDF was short-lived. He and nine other members of the Executive Council resigned in late 1884, due partly to Henry Mayers Hyndman's “arbitrary rule” of the SDF, and founded the Socialist League. The manifesto of the new organization was profoundly anti-capitalist and internationalist. Joined by Edward Aveling, Eleanor Marx-Aveling, Andreas Scheu, and a number of other prominent socialists, the group never consolidated into a unified body. Morris was part of a faction that denounced parliamentary compromise, but, on the other hand, he denounced the random violence of the anarchists in the League.

During the late 1880s Morris became more convinced of the imminence of an international revolution. He edited the League's journal, *The Commonweal*, and spoke at protests throughout Britain. An economic crisis in Britain had led to increased interest in socialism by the British working class, and the events of Bloody Sunday 1887 proved the intransigence of the Liberal government. Nevertheless, the influence of anarchists within the League, such as Peter Kropotkin, defections to the SDF, and the growth of Fabianism suggested to Morris that the socialist

revolution would be a more protracted endeavor than he had initially imagined. By 1890 the League finally split, and Morris joined the newly founded Hammersmith Socialist League.

The last years of Morris's life saw a continued interest in socialist politics, and in 1890 he published one of his most important literary works in serial. *News from Nowhere* was a utopian fantasy set in the future that outlined a socialist, agricultural society in which labor was edified through meaningful work. In it Morris answered objections to the practicalities of socialism and rejected the technological society outlined in Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1889). Additionally, Morris began taking a more active role in the various arts and crafts societies and guilds, including the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society and the Art Workers' Guild. His final endeavor was the foundation of the Kelmscott Press, devoted to hand printing. He published the famed Kelmscott Chaucer, illustrated by Burne-Jones, as well as a printing of John Ruskin's "Nature of the Gothic."

SEE ALSO: [Bloody Sunday Demonstration, 1887](#); [Britain, Trade Union Movement](#); [Kropotkin, Peter \(1842–1921\)](#); [Marx, Eleanor \(1855–1898\)](#)

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