

William Morris: Life and Times

William Morris did not become a committed socialist until the age of fifty, but the early years of his life involved him in a range of experiences which contributed to making his last 13 years a solid commitment to the cause of revolutionary socialism.

Born in 1834 into a family whose father had become wealthy through some copper mining shares, Morris never had to suffer the type of deprivation that 19th century capitalism thrust on the mass of the population. Nevertheless, at an early age he avoided the smug complacency that the landed and industrial capitalists of mid-Victorian England overwhelmingly adopted. While most of the wealthy ignored the squalor brought about by the development of capitalist industry the young Morris became involved with the critics and opponents of the existing society.

At Exeter College, Oxford, where Morris went in the early 1850s he met a group from Birmingham, most of whom - like Edward Burne-Jones - were to be lifelong friends and some of whom - like Charles Faulkner - were to be associated with his later socialist activity. The early aim of this group was to set up a religious brotherhood and they sought to enlist Morris in their "crusade and holy warfare against the age". Morris soon rejected the religious aspect of this movement. But for many opponents of mid-19th century capitalist society, religion provided a standpoint from which to make critical attacks. Similarly, others looked back to mediaeval society as a basis for criticising the horrors of 19th century capitalism. For writers like Thomas Carlyle the mediaeval church had provided a social bond that had disintegrated with the development of money and market relations. Morris was influenced by some of these ideas although he rejected Carlyle's solution of creating some type of feudal bond between the aristocracy and the wage worker. Perhaps more influential on Morris at this time was John Ruskin, whose work *On The Nature of Gothic*, although based on an idealistic view of the mediaeval craftsmen, did express the idea that pleasurable labour was the only foundation on which any real art could flourish. Morris was later to develop this theme in a form central to his arguments for socialism.

Morris was acutely aware of the large scale sufferings at this time and was especially horrified at the reports of human degradation brought about by the Crimean War, but he felt he could not ". . . enter into politico-social subjects with any interest, for on the whole I see that things are in a muddle, and I have no power or vocation to set them right in ever so little a degree". Such a feeling of powerlessness reflected the weakness of all opposition political movements in the 1850s and the near absence of organised protest in the years after the last great Chartist demonstration of 1848. It also reflected the power of the landed and industrial capitalists in mid-Victorian England.

In 1855, while on a trip to France, Morris decided to dedicate himself to art. He was already writing poetry and continued to do so throughout his life. He then looked to architecture, joining the architect G .S. Street in Oxford, and although he stayed only nine months this had an important influence on him.

Street encouraged all his workers to practice a wide range of crafts and Morris, although at the time he had difficulty in applying himself to much of the work, took up many different crafts. He joined a group called the pre-Raphaelites - a "group of painters who regarded all art since the Renaissance as in decay, and who also adopted a mediaeval standpoint in their criticism of their society. They blamed the growth of industrial production (or materialism, as they called it) rather than the system of capitalism.

Morris took up painting but, as he had limited abilities, he switched to trying other crafts. He worked at stone carving, stained glass, illustrated manuscripts (on which he became an authority), as well as embroidery for wall hangings. He also designed furniture and, of all things, mediaeval armour. When he decided to marry in 1859 he gained the co-operation of a life long friend and future associate of his socialist activity, Philip Webb, in the design and building of his own house. The variety of craftwork involved led Morris and a number of friends into the foundation of a firm to enable them to spread what Morris hoped would be a revival of art in useful products. At the basis of the project was the belief in the dignity of work, of human labour, and the pleasure that could be derived from producing useful things. The "Firm" ventured into other crafts such as wallpapers and later produced textiles, carpets, tapestries and dyed and printed cotton, and eventually books at the Kelmscott Press. But it was always struggling to remain a viable enterprise.

Morris's venture into learning and practising this wide range of crafts had been partly inspired by a mediaeval outlook and the realities of running a business based on quality of workmanship under capitalist conditions were constantly to confront him. To get away from the financial problems plaguing the firm he would often withdraw into writing poetry. Consequently much of his poems are escapist in tone and it is not surprising that his most well known poem of the time, *The Earthly Paradise*, gained its influence precisely because it deliberately sought to evade current problems. In ruling class circles Morris gained the reputation of being a safe, romantic sentimentalist of no real threat to capitalist values and that reputation tended to stay with him even after he became a socialist.

In 1868 Morris began studying and translating Icelandic Sagas and in 1871 he visited Iceland. In the Sagas he saw the vision of a classless tribal society based on kinship social relations - in stark contrast to the world of the alienated worker producing goods for the market and the commercial priorities of British capitalism. The experience of Iceland broadened his ideas on the history of human society and he found it ". . . a good corrective to the maundering side of mediaevalism". He learned of a pre-capitalist society that was not mediaeval and that "the most grinding poverty is a trifling evil compared with the inequality of classes".

Soon after Morris' Icelandic trips and in the same year that he published his own version of an Icelandic Saga (1876) he became involved in direct political activity. In that year he became treasurer of the Eastern Question Association, supporting Gladstone and the Liberals against the Tory government's policy of support for Turkey in a war with Russia. Morris's concern

had arisen because of his horror at this backing of a state whose rulers had only recently been exposed for atrocities in Bulgaria. He also feared that the war would spread jingoism. But the prime concern of both Disraeli, the Prime Minister, and Gladstone was not with human suffering. Their main interest was to keep Russia away from the Dardanelles and beyond that the Suez Canal and the trade routes to India.

If Morris was still at this time somewhat naive about politics he learned quickly. He addressed his 1877 pamphlet on the war between Russia and Turkey not to the politicians but to "the working-men of England" and named one of the causes of the war as the "gamblers on the Stock Exchange".

Morris quickly saw that the Liberals were just another Party supporting capitalism and instead he turned to studying socialism. His initial ideas came from Ruskin, J .S. Mill and Fourier, but on joining the Social Democratic Federation in 1883 Morris set about reading Marx. Capital did much to clarify his thinking and provided the foundation for his work and commitment during the remainder of his life. Marx's materialistic conception of history provided an explanation for Morris's own experiences of Icelandic, mediaeval and modern capitalist societies. It also made clear what Morris had believed and expressed himself in a lecture on the Lesser Arts given in 1878 - that history had meaning in the sense that it held for the future the possibility of a classless society where a popular art could flourish on the basis of pleasurable work. Morris clearly understood that this change in society could only be brought about with a change in the consciousness of the majority of people. "Practical socialism", as he called revolutionary socialism, was a question of "making socialists" and therefore it was necessary to "educate the people in the principles of socialism".

Morris remained committed to this view in the years that followed despite the differences that arose within the various organisations advocating socialism. The Social Democratic Federation split in 1884 because Hyndman was an opportunist politician who sought to gain support by advocating reforms and was willing to form alliances with other political parties for that purpose. He also supported nationalism, especially when jingoism could gain popular appeal. Morris despised this opportunism and along with others such as Marx's daughter Eleanor, left the SDF and formed the Socialist League.

Morris's propaganda work for the League dominated his life for the next few years. He gave lectures up and down the country, edited and wrote numerous articles for the League's paper *Commonweal* and came up against the law on a number of occasions during his outdoor propaganda activities. In the later 1880s the development of the New Unionism drew a larger number of workers into the unions. It enabled politicians to foist themselves on the backs of the working class by offering palliatives to workers to gain votes (without having to change existing attitudes or propagate socialism). Morris opposed this reformist trend.

When some members of the Socialist League called for participation in parliamentary elections Morris, although not opposed to using Parliament as such, believed that concentrating on these elections would have directed the

League away from the essential task of "making socialists" and instead into advocating reforms. The differences led to the Parliamentarists breaking away, leaving Morris and his associates at the mercy of anarchists, who soon dominated the League. When this happened Morris and his socialist friends withdrew to form the Hammersmith Socialist Society.

In the last years of his life Morris sought to bring about some unity among the various people and organisations calling themselves socialists. Although he never abandoned his belief in the necessity of "making socialists" he recognised that the expected growth of support for a socialist revolution was not to take place in his own lifetime. In one of his later writings, *News From Nowhere*, he portrays the socialist objective of a stateless, moneyless, classless society, and also predicts a long period of struggle with a series of diversions before the working class would consciously decide to bring about socialism.