

# In Praise of William Morris

Poet, Publisher, Artist, Designer, Furniture Maker, Socialist


## 1.

You have to admit he was groovy,  
in the hipster sense (say around 1959)  
this William Morris

He made things, well-limned and beauteous  
and sold them in his shop

He had a genius for design and form  
a high metabolism and hundreds of projects

He was very very sympathetic to the struggling worker  
and was driven to the barricades by the rage-stirring question:  
“How could people starve in a culture of plenty?”

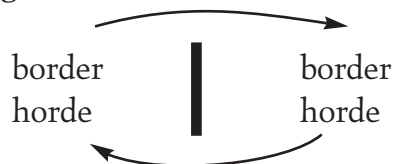
On the other  his cash came from  
selling luxuries to the well becashied


They still sell his wallpapers in fancy catalogues  
Rich people forgive  
forays into communism  
from the guard towers of the commune of ultrawealth.

In the late 1870s and early '80s  
Morris became a Socialist

It was what William Gaunt termed “Pre-Raphaelite Socialism”  
—that “everyone should be an artist”  
as in “art is the expression of pleasure in labour”  
as in why not cut the haikus of Basho  
on the woodsman’s axe

The way Morris saw it the world was riven with Commercial War  
State 'gainst State & Seller v. Seller



and the  v. those who toil for wages  
cap-eyes

It was a way of keeping the Machine in Check!  
If hand-fashioning could be done as effectively  
and pleasantly for the worker  
as by a machine  
then set aside the machine!

2,

King Arthur's Round Table  
so symbolic to the painters and poets  
was a paradigm for communism  
it seemed to Wm Morris

who wrote "My business is to stir up revolution"  
and so he gifted his skills upon  
the Muse of Pamphleteering

as surely and steadily as, say, George Bernard Shaw  
several decades later.

In 1883 Morris signed on with the Democratic Federation  
just about the only overt socialist group around

It soon changed its name to the  
Social Democratic Federation  
to make its politics more translucent

3.

William Morris, to his garlanded praise in the time-track  
began to walk the talk

He even sold some rare books to pay for socialist pamphlets

In Socialism he sought the unblemished beauty of religion  
and antique form  
but of course he ran headlong into the World of Splinters  
Careerists and Twisting Factions

and also the brutalized facts of the masses  
who even today would have preferred the fumes of NASCAR  
to the utter thrill of the Rouen cathedral.

If he had stuck in his lectures to Art  
it would not have created hostility

but there's nothing quite like raising the banners of the Left  
to bring on the snarls of the press, the hostility of acquaintances  
and the dismaying disorder of the Inside

Ahh, factions! How Many Factions can You Fit on a Bristle  
of a Printing Press Inking Brush?

Answer: plenty  
as many as there are foxéd old pamphlets in the British Museum

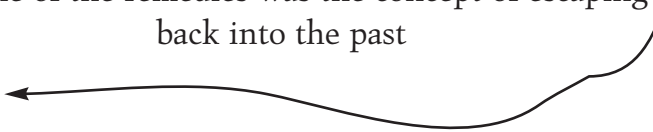
4.

### Some of the Origins

Thomas Carlyle's 1843 *Past and Present*  
on the Chartist movement

in a time of "great industrial distress"

One of the remedies was the concept of escaping  
back into the past



to find ideas for reform

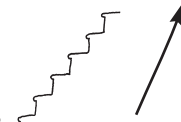
John Ruskin writing fiercely of "industrial wrong"  
just as writers in other countries  
scalded the "political wrong"

William Morris was fueled by the Middle ages  
and began to make glass, fabrics, chairs, tables


as if a medieval craftsperson—

REVOLUTION!

as he took the use-rounded antique steps  
up toward



The path  
from the 14th C



that Morris foresaw  
as surely as his hand shaped brilliance

### The Socialist League

5.


There was a factional dust-devil at the Federation in 1885  
as the drive for Socialism gathered people and problems

—something about the secession of a body of Edinburgh  
socialists from the Federation

with the result that Wm Morris found himself at the head  
of something called the Socialist League

you can look it up in the leaflets  
and position papers of the era

6.

Friends were amazed, and some alarmed, that he  
was working to destroy the economic system  
that saw the  invest in images & art

The art crowd  
was like a fluffy salad of talking endives  
whose moneyed onions made sure a favored painter thrived.

Down in the garden of art the dancing money lurks  
but please don't stand against a war with the Turks

So William Morris left the jive of the endive  
the pleasant ride of the scholar-designer  
to take the bumpy road from medieval reveler  
to analytic Marx and the ancient Leveller

however much for an aesthete and lover of beauty  
he perforce had to face the shabbiness and  
out-of-luck-and-pluck  
in the big neighborhoods of English cities

7.

### **A Stink-Bomb from Right Wingers**

In 1885 Morris gave a talk “in a music-room in Holywell”  
at Oxford in which he spoke of Socialism

Young right wingers yowled and  
beat their feet on the floor at his words  
Then they moved toward the stage

Someone had a bottle of a stinky chemical  
which they opened and spread in fumes of vom-vom  
to kill the meeting

8.

### **Bloody Sunday**

November 13, 1887

The weather was bleak and gloomy  
of the sort to damp down revolutionary ire

Economic depression had knocked people out of work  
The workers were upset  
The issue of the Irish and the way the gov’t dealt with the Irish  
were a factor in the disquietude

Thousands were set to converge upon Trafalgar Square  
from several directions

William Morris was one of the marchers

The gov’t had ordered the police and troops to kill the march  
They attacked and sent it scattering  
during which one young man, Alfred Linnell,  
was wounded and died a few weeks later

Morris’s speech at the young man’s funeral

had a theme of bread and roses

25 years before the great strike at the cloth mills of  
Lawrence, Mass

came up with the historic banner  
“We want bread and roses too”

He said, “...if society had been differently constituted,  
his life might have been a delightful, a beautiful and a happy one  
It is our business to organize.... to try to make this earth  
a beautiful and happy place.”

That’s what we should do  
find Alfred’s gravesite

and place there loaves and roses day ’pon day  
till bread and the flowers of fun  
bescent each place beneath the sun

9.

Then in 1889 some avowed anarchists  
got control of the Socialist League

and voted Morris out of power

Thereafter, in the words of William Gaunt  
it became a “small and bitter sect”

Welcome, o sect, to the tens of thousands of  
leftist hickory cudgels

gathered in the great cudgel-stands  
of dusty hallways  
by empty meeting rooms

10.

He spent the last seven years of his life  
going out in a blaze of publishing

He founded the Kelmscott Press

for which he designed type, selected the best of papers

and worked with the best artists

His last great work was a famous edition of Chaucer  
with Edward Burne-Jones doing the drawings  
for the woodcuts

Ahh, Sun-Flower, weary of time

It took him five years to publish the Kelmscott Chaucer  
—a folio in pigskin with a silver clasp

Yeats termed it the “most beautiful book in the world”

A blaze of publishing so that the socialist publisher could die  
at 62  
that October of '96

in the monumentality of his time-track.

Praise William Morris  
but please know this:

*Great art and socialism  
still can kiss  
Great art & égalité  
bread and bliss*

—Edward Sanders  
April 2007

