

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?”

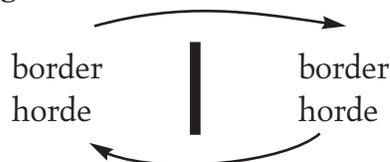
On the other  his cash came from
selling luxuries to the well becashied

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

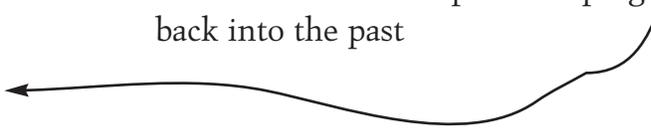
4.

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

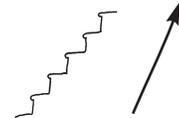
John Ruskin writing fiercely of "industrial wrong"
just as writers in other countries
scalded the "political wrong"

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.

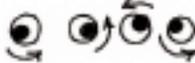
There was a factional dust-devil at the Federation in 1885
as the drive for Socialism gathered people and problems

—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

