GOOD WORK, GOOD REST

SOME IDEAS FROM WILLIAM MORRIS

BY CONN NUGENT

Morris in 1887, age 53. Morris & Co. had attracted a wide following for its decorative work, and Morris himself was well known for his epic poetry and his translations of the Icelandic Sagas. But underneath was an unpublicized disgust with society. "Apart from the desire to produce beautiful things, the leading passion of my life has been and is hatred of modern civilization . . . this sordid, aimless, ugly confusion." That "leading passion" would draw Morris to socialism.

Conn Nugent, who did the Cuba article "Havana Province 1977" in the Fall 77 CQ, has lately assumed a position of financial responsibility with New Alchemists at Woods Hole, Massachusetts — a group William Morris would undoubtedly applaud.

—SB

I found that the causes of the vulgarities of civilization lay deeper than I had thought, and little by little I was driven to the conclusion that all these uglinesses are but the outward expression of the innate moral baseness into which we are forced by our present form of society, and that it is futile to attempt to deal with them from the outside.

WILLIAM MORRIS covered ground. He was a prolific and influential designer: furniture, wallpapers, fabrics, books, stained glass. He was a poet and essayist. And he could weave, paint, embroider, dye, and brew beer.

His talents earned him fame and a comfortable living. Even more, he was happy in his work. Morris thrived on it all, poems to tapestries. In the process, he developed a reputation for energy and geniality. He was also known for a fierce, short-lived temper (he used to kick through door panels), but in a way that too meshed with the image of a contented extrovert.

So when, in 1883, Morris declared himself a socialist — and there weren't many English socialists in those days — the news caused a stir. He was 49 years old. Until his death in 1896, Morris became an agitator for class upheaval, convinced that both politics and art demanded social equality.

WHAT WAS WRONG

MORRIS'S HAPPINESS was real. He loved to make things and was healthy enough to recognize that the things he made were beautiful. He also appreciated the conditions of his labor. The partners in the firm of Morris & Co. were friends and fellow craftsmen. Everyone in the operation made a decent wage and worked in pleasant surroundings.

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"Larkspur" wallpaper. In 1861, Morris and a few friends set up what came to be known as Morris & Co., specialists in the decorative arts. In one ten year period, Morris contributed over 600 original designs. His importance for later artists was considerable. Sometimes that influence is obvious — Art Nouveau, for example. Other times the influence is surprising. One unlikely follower was Walter Gropius, founder of the Bauhaus movement in architecture. He and other minimalists were impressed by Morris's insistence on the marriage of beauty and utility and the need for art to be everywhere.

But an artist looks outward, and Victorian England was a sore sight for anyone with compassion and strong taste. Imperialism was in its heyday. The dominant culture was mannered and extravagant: refinement had come to mean fat furniture, repressed sexuality, and a godawful smugness. The political power and the social delicacy rested on an economic system as raw as a wound. It may be difficult to imagine the squalor of working-class lives and the ugliness of the urban environment. For years, Morris seethed. When at last he emerged into political life, he came prepared with a systematic criticism.

He proceeded from a moral assumption. Mastership, the setting of one human being over another, was radically unjust. "Nothing can argue me out of this feeling, which I say plainly is a matter of religion to me: the contrasts of rich and poor are unendurable and ought not to be endured by either rich or poor."

To Morris, industrial capitalism was a form of advanced, hypocritical mastership. Capitalist competition had bred "a state of perpetual war," and only the winners were aware of it. There was competition for profit, "the war between the organizers of labor." It produced gluts of ugly products accompanied by artificial famines that kept workers ill-paid or unemployed. There was competition between worker and superior, "the war of class against class." It ensured a mutually debasing alienation from honest labor. And maybe worst of all, there was competition for security and status, "the war of rival men." It thrived on anxiety, and anxiety provoked a kind of social cowardice that throttled cooperation and friendship. "We live in daily terror lest we should lose, some of us our domination over others, some of us our leisure, some of us our decent livelihood; and that fear forces us, I say, to deal hardly with our fellow men, lest they should rise above us and take our places."

All this has implications for art. Art is a product of voluntary work, Morris said: it is "man's expression of his joy in labor."* When workers are free from anxiety and solicitous of their fellows, they will seek enjoyable work. They will take to making things that will please themselves and please others. Those things will be art, and beauty will become commonplace.

Art, said Morris, is "the intelligent production of beautiful things." It should embrace most of the objects of daily life, rooftop to teacup. The distinction between "art" and "craft," between "artist" and "artisan" struck Morris as aristocratic flim-flammery, a bequest from the egotism of the Renaissance.

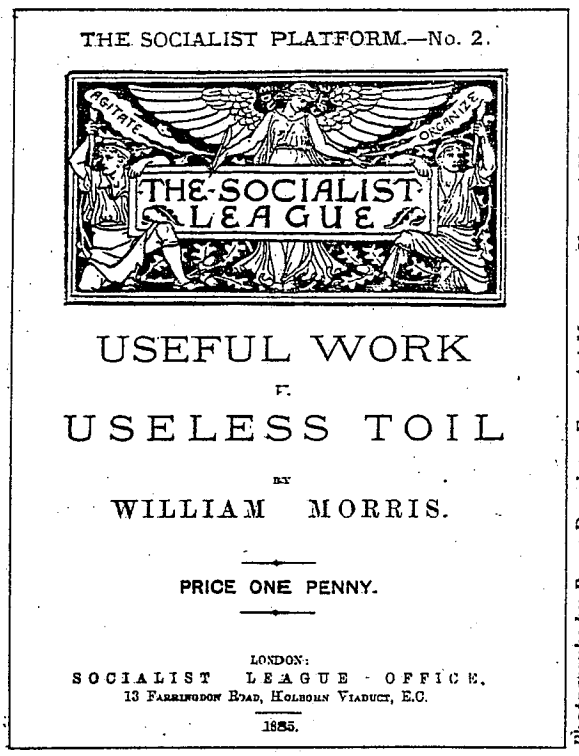
You can see all this in Morris's own work. He was a talented painter, for instance, but he chose to decorate walls and furniture, not framed canvas. He liked to perform each stage of creation. When he found few fabric colors to his liking, he taught himself how to dye. He learned fancy embroidery by taking out the stitches on medieval jerseys. Art was the *doing* of something as well as the thing produced.

Morris considered himself lucky and unusual, and that was precisely the problem. Under capitalism, he said, art would remain uncommon, often abstruse. It had to be so: workers had no control of their work, products were duplicated makeshift, and neither producer nor consumer could lead the vigorous, unworried lives needed to cultivate the senses.

WHAT HE WANTED

MORRIS PAINTED a vivid picture of an ideal society which, as a good Marxist, he called communism. He anticipated a transition period of blunders and slow progress that would follow a socialist takeover (more on that later), but he kept faith that "equality of condition" would usher in the greatest age of history.

Unlike most Utopias, Morris's ideal was not a mechanical paradise that relieved people from challenge and exertion. The opposite: life would be vigorous and personalized. Simple, productive work would be the


THE SOCIALIST PLATFORM.—No. 2.

AGITATE EDUCATE ORGANIZE

THE SOCIALIST LEAGUE

USEFUL WORK
v.
USELESS TOIL

BY

WILLIAM MORRIS.

PRICE ONE PENNY.

LONDON:
SOCIALIST LEAGUE OFFICE,
13 Farringdon Road, Holborn Viaduct, E.C.

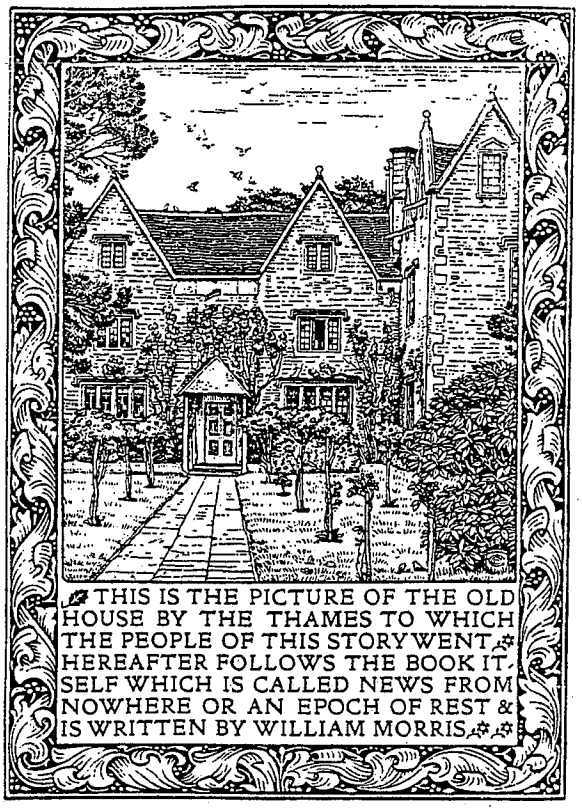
1885.

Photographs by Barry Donahue, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University

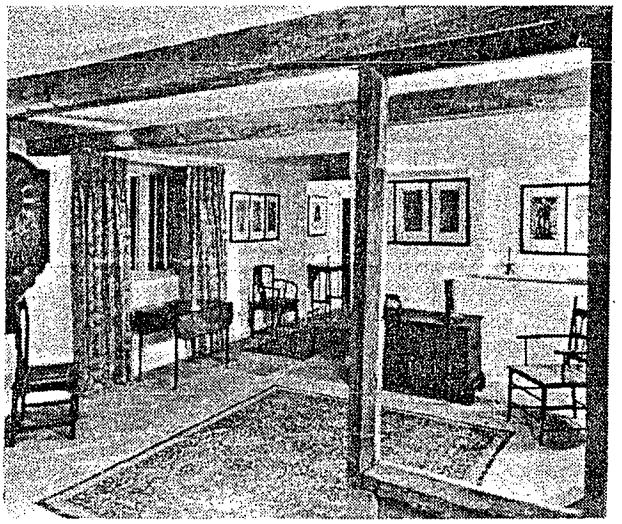
Morris's most famous pamphlet, one of many he churned out for the Socialist League in the 1880s.

The difference between Useful Work and Useless Toil is that Useful Work has *hope:* hope of rest without anxiety; hope of a useful product; and hope of pleasure in the work.

*Morris was a man of his time on women's issues. He never used feminine pronouns to indicate human beings. I hope readers will excuse him.



Frontpiece for *News from Nowhere*, Morris's "prose romance" of what life would be like in the 21st Century. Morris designed the typeface and the border. The drawing, by G.M. Gere, is of the house at Kelmscott.



The North Hall at Kelmscott, Morris's home for the later part of his life. He practiced what he preached. Of this house, Bernard Shaw wrote: "Everything that was necessary was clean and handsome: everything else was beautiful and beautifully presented."

common experience of society. All people not limited by age or disability would work to satisfy themselves; if they didn't, they would have no claim to the work of others.

When we think of communism today, the image may be of a tight-run state economy. But Morris's ideal, while fiercely egalitarian, demanded self-reliance and decentralization. It was a vision of apparent paradox: more producers, less production; individualism, but no dominance.

It begins with an idea of contentment. Happiness, Morris said, consists of "the pleasurable exercise of our energies and the enjoyment of the rest which that exercise or expenditure of energy makes necessary." For the rest to be restful, the exertion must be satisfying. And the most rewarding exertion of all is taking care of yourself, sometimes in concert with others, often alone. Finding out what you want and then working to satisfy yourself is a demanding job, but it's necessary for the basics. "My ideal of the society of the future is first of all the freedom and cultivation of the individual will . . . shaking off the slavish dependence, not on other men, but on artificial systems made to save men manly trouble and responsibility: and in order that this will may be vigorous in us, I demand the utter extinction of all asceticism. If we feel the least degradation in being amorous, or merry, or hungry, or sleepy, we are so far bad animals, and therefore miserable men."

No asceticism, but no luxury either. Luxury, Morris said, is a symptom of discontent with the earth itself, a "warping of the natural beauty of things." Free men and women will seek simplicity because they will find that "the true secret of happiness lies in the taking of a genuine interest in all the details of daily life."

Simplicity does not imply uniformity, for differences in temperament and inclination will make for a variety of goods and activities. People will lead simple lives because they will discover that only simplicity can be savored, and that, in any case, freedom demands it.

It may be worth emphasizing what Morris was saying: equality and frugality are interdependent. It's a truism that preachers of simplicity come from affluence; in a competitive society only the successful can realize the shallowness of extravagance. Morris wanted to short-cut the process. He believed that general simplicity of living required a social compact that ruled out great disparities in wealth, and thus minimized envy and insecurity. In his world, no one could work "for" anyone else: all surplus value would be communal.

Under these circumstances, Morris said, art would flourish. "Labor would be expended on things worth doing, and it is a fact past discussion that as soon as things worth doing are made, the intellect, the skill, the artistic feeling of the makers are called out by their production; in a word, they exercise men's pleasurable energies, and therefore make them happy. Such wares as this are works of art."

Since people would want to meet many of their own needs, and since most people like variety, there would

be much less division of labor in Morris's communism. Instead, individual work lives would themselves be divided. Workers would master two or three different crafts, with rough work interspersed. If the community needed some mechanical or repetitive slogging to be done, the work would be carried out by people who either would be in the mood for it or would simply assume the voluntary habit of dedicating some of their time to the commonweal. If the work were so unattractive that neither taste nor conscience would suffice, then the hell with it, Morris said: let it go undone.

In keeping with his disdain for "vicarious living," Morris presumed that the few functions of government would be localized and direct. "(I feel that) it will be necessary for the unit of administration to be small enough for every citizen to feel himself responsible for its details, and be interested in them; that individual men cannot shuffle off the business of life on to the shoulders of an abstraction called the State, but must deal with it in conscious association with each other." Morris feared that a centralized, urban culture would tend to shield its citizens from their own appetites and responsibilities, and the result would be a dull, mass-market sameness. "Variety of life is as much an aim of true Communism as equality of condition, and nothing but a union of these two will bring about real freedom."

The glue of this new society – it's governing principle and shared value – would be what Morris called *fellowship*. It's a hard term to pin down, a mixture of the charity Saint Paul talked about with the men-at-arms comradeship of a pre-civilized tribe. Love of neighbor, to be sure, but also a recognition of kinship and common fate.

Again, Morris's work provides some background. Most of his famous epic poems describe noble quests. Their characters are wandering pilgrims, bound to each other by a love that emerges from common purpose. His translations – the Odyssey, the Aeneid, the Icelandic Sagas – cover similar ground. In his decorative art, Morris always worked in harness, both with designers and hand laborers. He was sad that class background limited his circle of friends; he envisioned a fellowship of the whole society, where we could all trust ourselves and shake off that timid anxiety that Morris abhorred.

In Morris's ideal world, fellowship could operate both as a catalyst for daily life, giving purpose to all kinds of work, and as an eternal principle. It would take something of the role that Christianity played in medieval society – a unity of assumptions – but in a tactile, immediate way, with no postponement of justice.

This spiritual dimension is what distinguishes Morris's fellowship from conventional ideas of brotherhood. "Fellowship is heaven," says the hero in a famous Morris romance, "and lack of fellowship is hell." Fellowship is eternal, looking forward and back. We must cherish both ancestors and descendents; honor tradition and keep up a home for the children. There is a central idea of legacy here that anticipates the revival of the notion that we are stewards of this planet, morally bound to keep it thriving.

HOW TO GET THERE

AT THE BEGINNING of the lectures in which Morris presented his vision of improvement (lectures with giveaway titles like "A Factory as it Might Be"; "The Society of the Future"; "How We Live and How We Might Live"), he generally filed a disclaimer. For example: "We Socialists have not set ourselves to build up a system to please our tastes . . . It would be futile to map out the details of life in a condition of things so different from that in which we have been born and bred."

What he *was* sure of, Morris said, was that a socialist revolution would put the realization of his ideals

"Marigold" wallpaper. "Above all things, avoid vagueness; run any risk of failure rather than involve yourself in a tangle of poor weak lines that people can't make out. Definite form bounded by firm outline is a necessity for all ornament." Maybe a little narrowminded (what about Oriental prints?), but a useful corrective to the feeble stuff of his own day.

work which would be irksome to do by hand is done by immensely improved machinery; and in all work which it is a pleasure to do by hand machinery is done without. There is no difficulty in finding work which suits the special turn of mind of everybody; so that no man is sacrificed to the wants of another. From time to time, when we have found out that some piece of work was too disagreeable or troublesome, we have given it up and done altogether without the thing produced by it. Now, surely you can see that under these circumstances all the work that we do is an exercise of the mind and body more or less pleasant to be done: so that instead of avoiding work, everybody seeks it: and, since people have got defter in doing the work generation after generation, it has become so easy to do, that it seems as if there were less done, though probably more is produced. I suppose this explains that fear, which I hinted at

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A page from *News from Nowhere*. Text, type and layout by Morris. Morris reintroduced what has been called the "architectural concept of the book."

The news from *News from Nowhere* is encouraging. A character tells us that "all work is now pleasurable; either because of the hope of gain in honor and wealth with which the work is done, which causes pleasurable excitement, even when the actual work is not pleasant; or else because it has grown into a pleasurable *habit*, as in the case with what you may call mechanical work; and lastly (and most of our work is of this kind) because there is conscious sensuous pleasure in the work itself; it is done, that is, by artists."

within reach. "The abolition of private ownership in the means of production and exchange" was the key demand of all socialists, he said. "We are all prepared to accept whatever consequences may follow the realization of this claim."

It bears noting that Morris assumed that public ownership of capital, "the destruction of privilege," and "the collective authority of the majority" would all go hand-in-hand. If only.

In any case, Morris was under no illusion that the change would come quickly. The necessary class revolution would be preceded by ". . . a long period of half-formed aspirations, abortive schemes, doubtful experiments, and half and half measures interspersed with disappointment, reaction and apathy." This preliminary stage would be essential for the training of worker-leaders and the development of class consciousness. Genuine revolution, Morris said, must be adamant and well-informed. It would succeed only when sufficient members of the working class demanded the abolition of monopoly and the establishment of equality of condition. If that could be accomplished by peaceful means, fine; if not, so be it. "We must not say 'We must drop our purpose rather than carry it across this river of violence.'"

Let's assume, as Morris did, that collective ownership would necessarily imply a society of equal producers with "due opportunity free to everyone for the satisfaction of his needs." There would be an immediate and radical social improvement, according to Morris. But there would also be mistakes and disappointments as men and women slowly learned to shake off old habits. Especially at first, there would have to be a collective authority which would be prepared to "coerce people not to coerce." The machinery of this authority is what is often called socialism. "All genuine Socialists admit that Communism is the necessary development of Socialism," he wrote, ". . . but I think it quite probable that in the early days of Socialism the reflex of the terror of starvation, which so oppresses us now, would drive us into excesses of utilitarianism . . . So that it is not unlikely that the public opinion of a community would be in favor of cutting down all the timber in England, and turning the country into a big Bonanza farm or a market garden under glass."

It would all sort itself out in time. The necessary first step would be attainment of real leisure. The labor-force would be increased by the elimination of unemployment and by the assimilation of the non-productive classes (Morris hadn't bargained on bureaucracies or "service" industries). Machinery would at last be used as real labor-saving devices, and new machines would be built without regard to the skewed requirements of profit. People would gradually free themselves of the fear of deprivation. They would find that they could enjoy decent material lives and ample leisure at the same time.

The people could ask themselves what "they really want to do." At first, Morris presumed, they would just want to do less work. But of course in the Morris scheme of things, good rest requires good work. Workers would begin to beautify their factories and shops and seek ways of making work downright enjoyable. As the demand for frivolous objects diminished, people would try their hand at new and useful skills, and discover their own aptitudes and limitations. It

would take time, and a lot of self-examination. But eventually workers "would set aside their machines in all cases where the work seemed pleasant or desirable for handiwork; till in all crafts where production of beauty was required, the most direct communication between a man's hand and his brain would be sought for." Popular art would emerge. The making of beautiful things would enrich the "mood of energy"; the contemplation of beautiful things would add dimension to the "mood of idleness." "The elaboration of machinery, I say, will lead to the simplification of life, and so once more to the limitation of machinery."*

Government authority would become simpler and more flexible as people conquered their fears of domination. When communal decisions were required (to build a bridge, say), the citizens would probably meet in something akin to tribal councils. But by and large, there would be little need for formal decision-making, much less for a code of law. The society would be one of shared circumstances and shared values. There would doubtless be conflicts (Morris assumed that people will always be fighting over sex), but they would be utterly personal, with no political overtones, and susceptible to informal mediation by neighbors. Fellowship would provide the real law of the land: "I am not pleading for any form of arbitrary or unreasonable authority, but for a *public conscience* as a rule of action."

SECOND THOUGHTS

THE POWER of Morris's ideology may be limited by his personality and tastes. He was no-nonsense and hard working. He couldn't stand subtlety and over-refinement. So maybe it's not surprising that his writing lacks some analytic consistency. His arguments, as Raymond Williams said, are very often "generalized swearing." Connections which Morris said were axiomatic – collective property to equality of condition to fellowship – seem difficult instead.

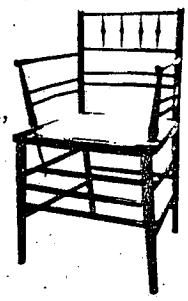
Morris also tended toward myth and idealization. He preferred Gothic art to modern portraiture, and ancient sagas to the realistic novel. His own poetry and fiction portray no complicated individuals, only characters with assigned virtues. He loved the old-time warriors whose works he translated, men free of ambivalence and full of communal purpose. Morris was drawn to the promise that socialism could make us all stout comrades; he had no use for close investigation of personalities, assuming that all types of human temperament could be reconciled in the appropriate environment. Maybe he was right in believing that a voluntary communism of fellowship could become habitual. But psychology, religion, and twentieth century history have persuaded a lot of people that evil is adaptive and various. It may be our fate to require checks and balances. Morris is more optimistic.

He can seem dogmatic on the drawbacks of mass production. Granted that many of the products of his day and ours are pretty ugly; granted that we are mugged by a market of sham needs and wastefulness. But who doesn't have factory-made favorites? I like my blue jeans, I like my bicycle, and I think the cups and saucers from Woolworth's look very fine. There's utility and beauty. We may have lost touch with the art of medieval weaving, but neither did Morris anticipate the esthetics of a ball bearing.

Still, the man overwhelms criticism. His legacy is powerful because it *does* come from personal life, his and ours. He had a rock sense that privilege is wrong. To those who agree, Morris's insistent rage on the question, his impatience with sophisticated argumentation about it, remain very moving.

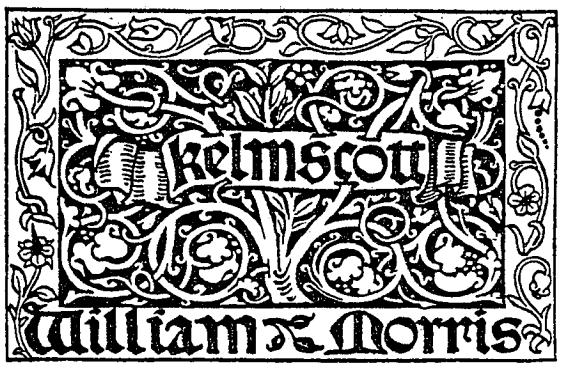
And who hasn't been happy doing what Morris said would make us happy? Working hard at things we want to do, savoring the rest and satisfaction that follows, making something beautiful for friends. Feeling useful in a useful cause. Morris took the experience of human happiness and tried to systematize it. It's not a bad approach.

Morris has been called a visionary, and rightly. But he was no escapist. You have to work and you have to take care of yourself in this world, and Morris insisted we live at full-tilt and meet things head on. "Take trouble," he said, "and turn your trouble into pleasure: that I shall always hold is the key to a happy life." ■



The "Morris Chair."

*Morris was careful not to describe just what an "Art of the People" would look like. He would say only that he presumed that truly popular art would use nature as its inspiration and would appeal directly to the senses. He made no claim for his own work as any kind of prototype.



Morris's colophon for the Kelmscott Press.

RECOMMENDED READING

By Morris

Selected Writings and Designs, edited by Asa Briggs ($5.50, Peter Smith).

Signs of Change (lectures on society, out of print, try your library)

News from Nowhere (a utopian romance, out of print).

About Morris

William Morris: His Work and Influence by A. Clutton-Brook (out of print).

William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary by E.P. Thompson ($4.50, Penguin).

William Morris: His Life, Work and Friends by Phillip Henderson ($8.95, CHR Classics).

For Scholars

Collected Works of William Morris (out of print)

William Morris: Artist, Writer and Socialist (all his speeches, annotated by his daughter May).