

78. Walter Crane on William Morris

1896

Walter Crane (1845-1915) was an associate of Morris in the Arts and Crafts Movement; his obituary article was entitled 'William Morris: Poet, Artist and Craftsman, and Social Reconstructor.'

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The death of William Morris marks an epoch both in art, and in social and economic thought. The press notices and appreciations that have appeared, for the most part, have dwelt upon his work as a poet and an artist and craftsman, and have but lightly passed over his connection with Socialism and advanced thought.

But, even apart from prejudice, a hundred will note the beauty and splendour of the flower to one who will notice the leaf and the stem, or the roots and the soil, from which the tree springs.

Yet the greatness of a man must be measured by the number of spheres in which he is distinguished—the width of his range and appeal to his fellows.

In the different branches of his work William Morris commanded the admiration—or, what is equally a tribute to his force, excited the opposition—of as many different sections of specialists.

As a poet he appealed to poets by reason of many distinct qualities. He united pre-Raphaelite vividness (as in 'The Haystack in the Floods') with a dream-like wistful sweetness and flowing narrative, woven in a kind of rich mediæval tapestry of verse, and steeped with the very essence of legendary romance (as in *The Earthly Paradise*), or the heroic spirit of earlier time (as in *Sigurd, the Volsung*)—while all these qualities are united in his later prose romances.

His architectural and archæological knowledge again was complete enough for the architect and the antiquary. His classical and historical lore won him the respect of scholars. His equipment as a designer and craftsman, based upon his architectural knowledge and training, en-

abled him to exercise an extraordinary influence over all the arts of design, and gave him his place as leader of our latter-day English revival of handicraft—a position, perhaps, in which he is widest known.

In all these capacities the strength and beauty of William Morris's work has been freely acknowledged by his brother craftsmen, as well as by a very large public.

There is, however, still another direction, in which his vigour and personal weight were shown, with all the ardour of an exceptionally ardent nature, wherein the importance and significance of his work are as yet but partially apprehended. I mean his work in the cause of Socialism; in which he might severally be regarded as an economist, a public lecturer, a propagandist, and a controversialist.

No doubt many even of the most emphatic admirers of William Morris's work as an artist, a poet, and a decorator, have been unable to follow him in this direction, while others have deplored or even denounced his self-sacrificing enthusiasm. There seems to have been insuperable difficulty to some minds in realising that the man who wrote *The Earthly Paradise* should have lent a hand to try and bring it about, when once the new hope had dawned upon him.

There is no greater mistake than to think of William Morris as a sentimentalist, who, having built himself a dream-house of art and poetry, sighs over the turmoil of the world, and calls himself a Socialist because factory chimneys obtrude themselves upon his view.

It seems to have escaped those who have inclined to such an opinion that a man, in Emerson's phrase, 'can only obey his own polarity.' His life must gravitate necessarily towards its centre. The accident that he should have reached economics and politics through poetry and art, so far from disqualifying a man to be heard, only establishes his claim to bring a cultivated mind and imaginative force to bear upon the hard facts of Nature and Science.

The practice of his art, his position as an employer of labour, his intensely practical knowledge of certain handicrafts—all these things brought him face to face with the great Labour question; and the fact that he was an artist and a poet, a man of imagination and feeling, as well as intellect, gave him exceptional advantages in solving it—at least theoretically. His practical nature and sincerity moved him to join hands with men who offered a practicable programme, or at least who opened up possibilities of action towards bringing about a new social system.

His own personal view of a society based upon an entire change of

economic system is most attractively and picturesquely described in *News from Nowhere, some chapters of a Utopian Romance*. He called it *Utopian*; but in his view, and granting the conditions, it was a perfectly practicable Utopia. He even gave an account (through the mouth of a survivor of the old order) of the probable course of events which might lead up to such a change. The book was written as a sort of counterblast to Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backwards* which on its appearance was very widely read on both sides of the water, and there seemed at one time some danger of the picture there given of a socialised state being accepted as the only possible one. It may be partly answerable for an impression in some quarters that a socialist system must necessarily be mechanical. But the society described in *Looking Backwards* is, after all, only a little more developed along the present lines of American social life—a sublimation of the universal supply of average citizen wants by mechanical means, with the main spring of the machine altered from individual profit to collective interest. The book did its work, no doubt, and appealed with remarkable force to minds of a certain construction and bias, and it is only just to Bellamy to say that he claimed no finality for it.

But *News from Nowhere* may be considered, apart from the underlying principle common to both—of the collective interest as the determining constructive factor of the social system—as its complete antithesis.

According to Bellamy it is apparently the *city* life that is the only one likely to be worth anything, and it is to the organisation of production and distribution of things contributing to the supposed necessities and comforts of inhabitants of cities that the reader's thoughts are directed.

With Morris the country life is obviously the most imposing, the ideal life. Groups of houses, not too large to be neighbourly, each with a common guest-hall, with large proportions of garden and woodland, take the place of crowded towns. Thus London, as we know it, disappears.

What is this but building upon the ascertained scientific facts of our day that the inhabitants of large cities tend to deteriorate in physique, and would die out were it not for the constant infusion of new blood from the country districts?

Work is still a hard necessity in *Looking Backwards*, a thing to be got rid of as soon as possible, so citizens, after serving the community as clerks, waiters, or what not, until the age of forty-five, are exempt.

With Morris work gives the zest to life, and all labour has its own

touch of art—even the dustman can indulge in it in the form of rich embroidery upon his coat. The bogey of labour is thus routed by its own pleasurable exercise, with ample leisure, and delight in external beauty in both art and nature.

As regards woman's question, it never, in his *Utopia*, appears to be asked. He evidently himself thought that with the disappearance of the commercial competitive struggle for existence and what he termed 'artificial famine', caused by monopoly of the means of existence, the claim of women to compete with men in the scramble for a living would not exist. There would be no necessity for either men or women to sell themselves, since in a truly co-operative commonwealth each one would find some congenial sphere of work. In fact, as Morris once said, 'settle the economic question and you settle all other questions. It is the Aaron's rod which swallows up the rest.'

I gather that he thought both men and women should be free, but by no means wished to ignore or obliterate sex, and all those subtle and fine feelings which arise from it, which really form the warp and weft of the courtesies and relationships of life.

Now, whatever criticisms might be offered, or whatever objections might be raised, such a conception of a possible social order, such a view of life upon a new economic basis as is painted in this delightful book, is surely before all things, remarkably wholesome, human and sane and pleasurable. If wholesome, human, sane, and pleasurable lives are not possible to the greater part of humanity under existing institutions, so much the worse for those institutions. Humanity has generally proved itself better than its institutions, and man is chiefly distinguished over other animals by his power to modify his conditions. Life at least means growth and change, and human evolution shows us a gradual progression—a gradual triumph of higher organisation and intelligence over lower, checked by the inexorable action of natural laws which demand reparation for breaches of moral and social law, and continually probe the foundations of society. Man has become what he is through his capacity for co-operative social action. The particular forms of social organisation are the crystallization of this capacity. They are but shells to be cast away when they retard growth or progress, and it is then that the living organism, collective or individual, seeks out or slowly forms a new home.

As to the construction and colour of such a new house for reorganised society and regenerated life, William Morris has left us in no doubt as to his own ideas and ideals. It may seem strange that a man who might

be said to have been steeped in mediæval lore,* and whose delight seemed to be in a beautifully imagined world of romance peopled with heroic figures, should yet be able to turn from that dream-world with a clear and penetrating gaze upon the movements of his own time, and to have thrown himself with all the strength of his nature into the seething social and industrial battle of modern England; that the 'idle singer of an empty day' should voice the claims and hopes of labour, stand up for the rights of free speech in Trafalgar Square, and speak from a wagon in Hyde Park, may have surprised those who only knew him upon one side; but to those who fully apprehended the reality, ardour, and sincerity of his nature, such action was but its logical outcome and complement, and assuredly it redounds to the honour of the artist, the scholar, and the poet whose loss we mourn to-day, that he was also a man.

* At the same time it must be remembered that his knowledge of mediæval life—the craft guilds and the condition of the labourer in England in the 15th century—helped him in his economic studies and his Socialist propaganda.