

WILLIAM MORRIS'S LETTERS ON EPPING FOREST

An Introduction

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In the initial entry for this section, we are publishing “Three Letters on Epping Forest” written by William Morris (1834-1896). Morris was an English artist, master craftsman, designer, poet, socialist, and forerunner of modern ecological thought. His designs for furniture, wallpaper, fabrics, stained glass, and other decorative arts revolutionized Victorian sensibilities and spawned the late nineteenth century arts and crafts movement. Hence, he earned a reputation as one of the outstanding figures of his century.

Yet, today Morris is remembered as much for his contributions to political and ecological thought as he is for his artistic legacy. Intellectually, Morris was influenced by the English Romantic social critic, John Ruskin, whose *Unto This Last* (1860/1967) stressed the need for a more organic society based on the principles of art and intrinsic value, as opposed to utilitarian mechanics and money. Production and possession may not actually contribute to wealth, he argued, but rather *illth* (a word he coined). Wealth, for Ruskin (and later Morris) was the “possession of useful articles *which we can use*” (pp. 71-73). Conversely, the possession of useless things, things we cannot use and which have no intrinsic value, can only be defined as *illth*.

Morris combined Ruskin’s romantic critique of capitalist civilization—which had helped inspire Morris’ artistic revolt and his endless search for renewed connections between art and labor through a revival of craftsmanship—with a brand of Marxian socialism. He first read Marx’s *Capital* in 1883 (the year of Marx’s death) and openly declared himself a socialist at the same time. In the following year, he helped to found the Socialist League, a Marxian socialist organization, in which Eleanor Marx also played a leading role. Morris campaigned tirelessly for socialism, writing numerous lectures and articles on the subject, editing the Socialist League’s publication *Commonweal*, and engaging actively in demonstrations.

In recent decades, Morris’ writings on socialism have drawn increasing interest. As historian Asa Briggs (1962) has remarked: “One of the reasons why his writings are relevant in the twentieth century—in some ways more relevant than they were in the nineteenth century—is that they provide the materials for a critique of twentieth-century Socialism (and Communism) as much as for a critique of nineteenth-century capitalism” (p. 17). A key element here is the fact that his thought (unlike much of socialism) was ecological at its core.

In *News From Nowhere*, Morris (1962) envisioned a future society in which the antagonism of town and country would be eliminated, with the dispersal of workshops and population to the countryside, coupled with an expansion of gardens

and of areas where nature was allowed to take its course. Throughout his writings, he argued that whatever human beings produce must necessarily be “either beautiful or ugly; beautiful if it is in accord with Nature and helps her; ugly if it is discordant with Nature and thwarts her” (p. 85). “Wealth,” he observed, “is what Nature gives us and what a reasonable man can make out of the gifts of Nature for his reasonable use. . . . But think, I beseech you, of the product of England, the workshop of the world, and will you not be bewildered, as I am, at the thought of the mass of things which no sane man could desire, but which our useless toil makes—and sells?” (Morris, 1962, pp. 121-122).

Morris was alarmed by the pollution in the cities and the toxic environment in which industrial workers were compelled to labor. As he wrote in *Commonweal* (1886):

A case of white-lead poisoning reported in the press this week is worth a little notice by workmen generally. Stripped of verbiage it amounts to this, that a man was killed by being compelled to work in a place where white-lead was flying about and that no precautions were taken to prevent his dying speedily. A shilling a-week extra was the handsome sum given to the poor man thus murdered in compensation for his being killed. It is quite impossible that the man's employers did not know the risk he ran of this speedier death, and the certainty of his being poisoned sooner or later, and yet all that the jury durst say about the matter was “to express a hope that Mr. Lakeman (the factory supervisor) would be able to make representations to the Home Office with reference to the case, to show the necessity of some extra precaution being taken for people working in mixing factories.”

Yet, further, this is only an exaggerated example of the way in which the lives of working-people are played with. Under present conditions, almost the whole labour imposed by civilisation on the “lower classes” is unwholesome; that it to say that people's lives are shortened by it; and yet because we don't see people's throats cut before our eyes we think nothing of it. After all, probably Tamerlane was a blessing to the world compared with the factory system. (p. 122)

In “A Factory as It Might Be,” Morris (1934) envisioned a socialism in which factories would be set amidst gardens, cultivated by means of the voluntary labor of workers:

Impossible I hear an anti-Socialist say. My friend, please to remember that most factories sustain to-day large and handsome gardens; and not seldom parks and woods of many acres in extent; with due appurtenances of highly paid Scotch professional gardeners, wood reeves, bailiffs, gamekeepers, and the like, the whole being managed in the most wasteful way conceivable; *only* the said gardens, etc., are, say, twenty miles away from the factory, *out of the smoke*, and are kept up for *one member of the factory only*, the sleeping partner to wit, who may, indeed, double that part by organising its labour (for his own profit), in which case he receives ridiculously disproportionate pay additional. (p. 647)

Such a factory of the future, Morris suggested “must make no sordid litter, befoul no water, nor poison the air with smoke. I need say nothing more on that point, as ‘profit’ apart, it would be easy enough” (p. 648).

Morris, however, was not concerned simply with the improvement of conditions within the cities and factories, or the promotion of gardens, but was passionately dedicated as well to nature for its own sake, arguing for the preservation of what

little remained of England's forests. He had envisioned the expansion of Epping Forest in the vicinity of London (Morris, 1962). He followed this vision up in the last years of his life by actively arguing against the thinning of trees in Epping Forest, in opposition to the committee of so-called experts put in charge of it.

The following three letters are of more than antiquarian interest in this respect because they embody a critique of the ecological dangers of various forms of professional "expertise" (usually of a commercial character). A Professor Fisher replied to Morris' initial letter in defense of Epping Forest in an article appearing in the *Daily Chronicle*. Fisher stated that "the report of [the] committee does not contain a word in favor of working the forests commercially" and he accused Morris of writing about the current condition of Epping Forest without having "spent a day there," relying instead on reports of others and memories from his boyhood (cited in Kelvin, 1996, p. 273). Morris responded with a sharpening of his critique in his second letter and then went on to inspect Epping Forest and to report on his findings in his third letter, with an even more telling effect. His suggestion in the second letter that it might be possible to neutralize one specialty by recourse to another "and get the advice of an artist or two about such matters"—though "they also are often narrow enough, and care nothing for what will not make a picture"—constitutes a radical reconceptualization of the way in which we might view the construction of expertise in this realm. Above all, Morris sought to remove the decision-making power over the felling of trees—and the gradual conversion of a forest into a landscaped park—from elite decision makers, placing it instead in the hands of the public in general.

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