

What William Morris means to me

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This is the text of a lecture given at the Crafts Study Centre — founded by Mr. Tanner — in the Holburne Museum, Bath, in May 1986. The lecture was illustrated with visual material which it is unfortunately impossible to include here.

I sometimes think it might be a good idea if we each carried about with us a sort of dossier about ourselves, which we could present at a first meeting. I suppose mine would read something like this:

I was born rather more than 82 years ago. Even as a schoolboy during the First World War I realised the obscenity, the evil, and the utter futility of war, and I have been a pacifist all my life. I am a Quaker. Politically I would call myself an Ecological Socialist if I may coin such a term. And if I have a hero that man is William Morris: I owe more to him than any other human being.

Perhaps I should mention that as a boy I had two great longings — to be a teacher and to be an artist — and I have never wavered. It has been my great good fortune to live two long happy lives — in Education and in Art.

But to begin: we have all played the game — who from the past would you most like to meet? For me would it be the painter, Masaccio or Piero Della Francesca, or the poet Shelley? No: it would be that great Romantic and Revolutionary — William Morris.

Alas! I wasn't born until 7 or 8 years after his death, but I sometimes find it hard to believe that I never actually knew him.

For all that is written about his medievalism and his inconsistencies he is still my man, and for me his life and work are as immensely important today as they were a century ago.

Suppose he had never lived.

To state the most obvious thing first: even in his lifetime he was acknowledged as the greatest designer of patterned textiles and papers the world had ever known. Today many thousands of people enjoy them. How we should have missed his influence on typography, his pioneering work for what today we call conservation, and his passionate outrage at the ugliness and squalor and human degradation and exploitation in capitalist Victorian England!

You may say that he did not win the battle, but he put it this way; these are his words:

Men fight and lose the battle, and the thing they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out to be not what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name.¹

Suppose William Morris came back today.

He would be outraged! The pylons striding across the level Kelmscott landscape would be but one of a thousand unnecessary uglinesses he would deplore. He would loathe the noise of military aeroplanes, and would be quick to learn that — without the consent of the people — England has become an occupied country, peppered with American military bases. He would be shocked to learn that our pursuit of nuclear power has already made the Irish Sea the most poisonous in the world; and that the prime purpose of such places as Sellafield is to produce plutonium with which to make bombs capable of annihilating the entire planet; and that it is England that has added most to the acid rain that kills Scandinavian forests. He would be horrified to find that our traditional agriculture is fast being replaced by a greedy ‘monoculture’ or ‘agrobusiness’, that destroys in its wake our trees and hedgerows, our woodlands and flowery meadows, creating a prairie — and all to satisfy the lust for money. In London he would of course make first for his beloved Victoria & Albert Museum, with which he had been so intimately connected. I can picture his anger at the so-called “voluntary” £2 admission fee, and I can picture his confrontation with Roy Strong and how he would demolish this misguided man.

How I wish I could have heard the first public lecture he gave, when he was 43, to the Trades Guild of Learning, under the title ‘The Decorative Arts’, in which he expressed his love of England. Listen to his words:

There, out in the country, we may still see the works of our fathers yet alive amidst the very nature they were wrought into, and of which they are so completely a part. For there, indeed, if anywhere, in the English country, in the days when people cared about such things, was there a full sympathy between the works of man, and the land they were made for. The land is a little land; too much shut up within the narrow seas, as it seems, to have much space for swelling into hugeness. There are no great wastes overwhelming in their dreariness, no great solitudes of forests, no terrible untrodden mountain-walls: all is measured, mingled, varied, gliding easily one thing into another: little rivers, little plains, swelling, speedily-changing uplands, all beset with handsome orderly trees; little hills, little mountains, netted over with the walls of sheep-walks: all is little; yet not foolish and blank, but serious rather, and abundant of meaning for such as choose to seek it: it is neither prison nor palace, but a decent home.²

And he strove all his life to guard it and keep it like that. ‘Small is beautiful.’ If he were here now I could hear him asking for any signs that 1986 is designated as the U.N. Year of Peace, and finding none. Instead he would learn that 1986 opened with our Government publishing plans to spend an astronomical sum on nuclear submarines.

I can picture his dismay on learning that American war planes were allowed to set off from an Oxfordshire village only some 20 miles from his beloved Kelmscott for a raid on Libya, killing innocent civilians; and he would realise, alas! that just as in his day, Peace is a dirty word, and preparation for War is extolled. He would certainly march in protest with C.N.D. and would support F.O.E. and Greenpeace and the Woodland Trust. And I like to think he would be chairman of the Trustees of the Crafts Study Centre in this building — for he is the father of it all.

This overwhelming giant of unsurpassed vitality, who encompassed many lives and produced in his own short span more than a dozen ordinary men, is a supreme example for us today. What he strove for, his unswerving pursuit of excellence, the standards he lived by, and above all his vision of the good life we could all have if we cared passionately enough to achieve it, make him tremendously relevant to us today. He is one of those few men whom history will never overtake!

He had a lust for life, and his life and his work were an inseparable unity. He used to say he wanted to live in order to *work*, rather than to work in order to *live*! He often repeated, 'What other blessings are there in life save these two, fearless rest and hopeful work? Troublous as life is . . . it has given surely to each one of us those times, when at last, after many a struggle with incongruous hindrances, our own chosen work has lain before us disentangled from all encumbrances and unrealities, and we have felt that nothing could withhold us, not even ourselves, from doing the work we were born to do, and that we were men and worthy of life.'³

The facts of Morris's life are so well known that I need not dwell upon them here. He was born of well-to-do parents three years before Victoria came to the throne. As a schoolboy at Marlborough, the Wiltshire Downs — with their barrows and Avebury and Silbury Hill — meant most to him. At 19, as a handsome, dynamic undergraduate at Oxford, he met his lifelong friend, Burne Jones. The story of how, with Dante Gabriel Rossetti, they saw Jane Burden at the theatre, and how she became the Pre-Raphaelite ideal of beauty, is well known. This tall, silent, large-boned 17-year-old girl with a pale ivory face, thick brows, a neck like a tower, and an abundance of black crinkly hair swept them all off their feet. Morris wrote poems to her, and when he was 24 he painted his 'Queen Guenevere' — 'La Belle Iseult' — that hangs in the Tate Gallery. And that lustrous, swarthy, magnetic Italian, Rossetti, made sensuously beautiful drawings of her too. He was the central influence on Morris, aesthetically, at this time, and Ruskin had most influence on his thought.

The famous chapter from Ruskin's *Stones of Venice* called 'The Nature of Gothic' had been published as a sixpenny pamphlet when Morris was 20, and this became his bible. He would read aloud to his friends such serious, thought-provoking statements as these:

It is verily this degradation of the operative into a mere machine, which, more than any other evil of the times, is leading the mass of nations everywhere into vain, incoherent, destructive struggling for a freedom of which they cannot explain the nature to themselves . . . The kind of labour to which they are condemned is verily a degrading one, and makes them less than men . . . Never encourage the manufacture of any article not absolutely necessary, in the production of which Invention has no share.⁴

I wonder if he dreamed then that one day he would publish that chapter in splendid form from his own press? Here is the magnificent volume he printed at his Kelmscott Press when he was 58. See its glorious title page and its sparkling wood-engraved capitals. And listen to this paragraph from his own preface. You must hear it now, out of turn, because it epitomises his ultimate philosophy:

Science has in these latter days made such stupendous strides, and is attended by such a crowd of votaries . . . that she seems to need no more than a little humility to temper the insolence of her triumph, which has taught us everything except how to be happy. Man has gained mechanical victory over Nature, which in time to come he may be able to enjoy, instead of starving amidst of it . . .

it may well be that the human race will never cease striving to solve the problem of the reason for its own existence; yet it seems to me that it may do this in a calmer mood when it has not to ask the question, Why were we born to be so miserable? but rather, Why were we born to be so happy?⁵

But let me return to the young William Morris, who found ready outlets for his exuberant happiness. Poetry came naturally to him, and he did not take it very seriously. He was amazed that his friends thought it good. His first volume was published in 1858, when he was 25, the year before his marriage to Jane Burden.

From his boyhood, the English countryside, its wild plants and trees, was an abiding comfort to him, and as he grew older it became an ever deeper source of inspiration. Listen to this sonnet from the first volume, which he called 'Summer Dawn':

Pray but one prayer for me 'twixt thy closed lips,
Think but one thought of me up in the stars.
The summer night waneth, the morning light slips,
Faint and grey 'twixt the leaves of the aspen,
 betwixt the cloud-bars,
That are patiently waiting there for the dawn:
Patient and colourless, though Heaven's gold
Waits to float through them along with the sun.
Far out in the meadows, above the young corn,
The heavy elms wait, and restless and cold
The uneasy wind rises; the roses are dun;
Through the long twilight they pray for the dawn,
Round the lone house in the midst of the corn.
Speak but one word to me over the corn,
Over the tender, bow'd locks of the corn.⁶

Now Morris commissioned his friend, Philip Webb, to build a home for Janey and himself that would be the very symbol and embodiment of civilised human life. This was The Red House, built in a cherry orchard at Bexley Heath. As is well known, the house and all its fittings and furniture and hangings were a vigorous protest against the ugliness and shoddiness of the age. That versatile galaxy of friends surrounding Morris all applied themselves to the joyful task of creating what to us today may seem anachronistic but which in 1860 was a revolution in taste and a revelation of honest craftsmanship.

So impoverished was English design that the group decided to found the firm of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., Fine Art Workmen, in Painting, Carving, Furniture and Metals. Its output during its 14 years of life was prodigious, and when it was dissolved and became solely Morris & Co. it continued to be a profound influence.

For a while all went well. But although Morris set great store by fellowship and revelled in working with his friends, and delighted in his two daughters (born 1861 and 1862), he was in some ways now a brooding solitary, given to lonely self-absorption. And it is sadly clear that after a few years of marriage any love between him and Jane began to wane. In 1865 they sold The Red House, and moved to Queen Square in Bloomsbury.

In *The Earthly Paradise* — that large collection of romantic narrative verse which was published when Morris was only 35 and made him famous — he makes explicit the sadness of his own life. Even his most discreet and respectable biographer, Burne Jones's son-in-law, J. W. Mackail, wrote, 'there is an autobiography so delicate and so outspoken that it must needs be left to speak for itself.'⁷

Listen first to the opening and the fourth stanzas:

'Of Heaven or Hell I have no power to sing.
I cannot ease the burden of your fears,
Or make quick-coming death a little thing,
Or bring again the pleasure of past years;
Nor for my words shall ye forget your tears,
Or hope again for aught that I can say,
The idle singer of an empty day . . .

Dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time,
Why should I strive to set the crooked straight?
Let it suffice me that my murmuring rhyme
Beats with light wings against the ivory gate,
Telling a tale not too importunate
To those who in the sleepy region stay,
Lulled by the singer of an empty day.⁸

In the lines on September Morris writes:

Look long, O longing eyes, and look in vain!
Strain idly, aching heart, and yet be wise,
And hope no more for things to come again
That thou beheldest once with careless eyes!
Like a new-awakened man thou art, who tries
To dream again the the dream that made him glad
When in his arms his loving love he had.⁹

In the lines on December he is more explicit still:

Out break the bells above the year foredone,
Change, kindness lost, love left unloved alone;
Till their despairing sweetness makes thee deem
Thou once wert loved, if but amidst a dream.¹⁰

A year after he had written those lines Morris discovered Kelmscott Manor near Lechlade, and took the lease of it jointly with Rossetti, and although great grief was to come, it was the peace and timeless beauty of this gray-gabled Cotswold house that

sustained him to the end. Rossetti — always a Londoner and never a countryman — installed himself in the best rooms and shocked the village by his strange habits. Morris realised an ambition and buried his sorrows by making a journey to Iceland, leaving Janey and the children with Rossetti. She must have found it hard to resist the passionate love-making of Gabriel, and much of her time was spent in sitting as a model for his paintings.

The years that followed were emotionally stormy for Morris. When, long after his death, his devoted daughter May came to edit his poems, she omitted the bitter lines about Rossetti that her father had once scribbled hurriedly in pencil that I am now going to read:

We meet, we laugh and talk, but still is set
A seal over things I never can forget
But must not speak of still. I count the hours
That bring my friend to me — with hungry eyes
I watch him as his feet the staircase mount.
Then face to face we sit; a wall of lies
Made hard by fear and faint anxieties
Is drawn between us and he goes away,
And leaves me wishing it were yesterday.¹¹

He *did* go away, ultimately, from Kelmscott, though the triangular situation only ended with his death in 1882. Then that artful diplomat, poet, and traveller, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, won Jane's affection.

Morris must have suffered deeply. My heart aches for him. With typical Victorian uprightness the Morrises kept up a normal relationship before everyone, and from now Morris seemed quickly to reach his richest fulfilment as both artist-craftsman and thinker.

Now came the great era of the hand-block-printed wall papers and textiles. For some years before Morris established his works at Merton Abbey near Wimbledon in 1881, the firm had produced work that came as a refreshing surprise and revelation to England, and now there seemed no end to what was possible.

'Powdered' was printed in 1874 from blocks measuring 10" × 20", first as a wall paper and later as a chintz. See how perfectly the 4 flowers are rendered, and how marvellously the fine swirling leafage envelops them. Here is the bill for the 5 yards at 3/- a yard I bought to make this dress, just half a century ago, from Morris & Co., 17, George Street, Hanover Square. Heather [Mrs. Tanner] has worn this dress for more than 40 years, and although it has faded it still looks fresh and springlike.

'Strawberry Thief' was printed in 1883, from blocks measuring 20" × 17" This is a piece of the original printing at Merton Abbey. Morris had to re-discover many a lost or submerged craft; and this design, with its intricate structure and many colours, triumphantly marks the perfection Morris achieved with the subtle technique of indigo discharge.

Like Phyllis Baron and Dorothy Larcher — those great block printers who came long after him — he loved indigo, and wore a workman's indigo shirt without a tie. The technique was described in the firm's 1911 Catalogue thus:

The cloth is first dyed in an Indigo Vat to a uniform depth of blue; and is then printed with a bleaching agent which reduces or removes the colour as required by the design. Mordants are next printed on the bleached parts and others where Red is wanted. The whole length of material is then immersed in a Madder Vat calculated to give the proper tint. This process is repeated for the Yellow, which is Weld (*Reseda luteola*), the three colours being super-imposed to give green, purple, or orange. All loose colouring matter is then cleared away, and the colours are set by passing the cloth through soap at almost boiling point.

The final treatment in the process is to lay the printed cloth flat on the grass, with its patterned face to the light, so that the whites in the design may be completely purified, and all fugitive colour removed in Nature's own way.¹²

'Blackthorn', with a repeat of 25" × 22", was designed 9 years later, in 1892, and must surely rank with the 'Honeysuckle' as one of Morris's finest. This precious fragment is from Morris's original first printing at Merton Abbey 94 years ago, and the colours are as fresh as ever. It is a supreme example of his skill in combining five wild English plants — blackthorn, snakeshead fritillary, corn marigold, violet, and water avens — within an exceptionally complex geometrical structure.

Not since the late 70s had Morris treated plants with such a degree of naturalism. I love the rich, dark, sullen colours against which the sparkling stars of blackthorn are so beautifully disposed. This masterly orchestration of muted browns and greens and reds and blues is surely unique in block printing. How horrified and angry he would be to see how shallow and untrue most modern reprints of 'Blackthorn' are!

I wish there were time to say more about the great out-pouring of printed stuffs and papers, of the masterly Hammersmith carpets, the furniture, and the arresting double-woven woollen tissues, such as this lovely 'Bird', which hangs behind the altar in Kelmscott and in his own Exeter College in Oxford. There are the great tapestries too — Burne Jones's 'Vision of the Holy Grail' and 'The Heart of the Rose', to name but two, and William Morris's own 'Woodpecker'. There were wonderfully ambitious embroideries too, especially during the 80s when his daughter May took over this side of the firm's production.

Blouse: Heather is wearing a blouse of indigo-dyed wool, designed, made, embroidered in various strengths of indigo, and worn by May. The easy freedom of the embroidery and the way in which it becomes a vital part of the garment give me keen pleasure.

I cannot begin to speak of the firm's magnificent stained glass; but Rodbourne near Malmesbury, and the incomparable windows at Selsley near Stroud, are not far away.

But here is one of his own cartoons, 'Cartoon for Window at Ladock in Cornwall', drawn with his own hand — and with what force and grace and understanding of the subtle craft!

But while, largely perhaps through his emotional tie with the past, all this fine workmanship was being created, his acute awareness of the wretchedness of life for the majority of his fellow men and his own conscience led him to take a stand which his friends thought, in the least, extraordinary. Everything about him convinced him of the need for social change, indeed, for a new order — not a few reforms, but nothing less than a social revolution.

His first political utterance came in 1876, when he was shocked by the news that England was on the verge of a totally unjust war with Russia, in support of Turkey. In a now famous letter to *The Daily News* he wrote:

I say it would be impossible for even that clever trickster [Disraeli] to do this . . . if a large minority were but half in earnest and spoke and said “No”. But now, not even the wretched packed Parliament we have got is sitting . . . the members are too busy shooting in the country, and the nation is dumb. . . .

War *did* break out between Turkey and Russia, six months later, when Morris wrote his pamphlet: ‘Unjust War: To the Working Men of England.’ Let me quote just a few sentences from it:

And who are they who flaunt in our faces the banner inscribed on one side *English Interests*, and on the other *Russian Misdeeds*? Let us look at these saviours of England’s honour . . . Do you know them? — Greedy gamblers on the Stock Exchange, idle officers of the army and navy (poor fellows!), desperate purveyors of exciting war-news for the comfortable breakfast tables of those who have nothing to lose by war, and lastly, in place of honour, the Tory Rump, that we fools, weary of peace, reason, justice, chose at the last election to ‘represent’ us! O shame and double shame, if we march under such a leadership as this, in an unjust war against a people who are *not* our enemies, against Europe, against freedom, against nature, against the hope of the world.¹⁴

Now William Morris was often led to suspend his own beloved art in order to strive publicly for what he called FELLOWSHIP upon this earth, as life was meant to be and still might be. This was all he desired and all he could conceive of *Heaven*. He strove that the *Arts* might be re-created and knit together into one vital organic Art, filling the whole of life. And he strove that *the people* be re-created and knit together into one vital organic commonwealth. He contended that the proper dignity of every human being must be respected. He claimed that each one is born with creative power, with the attributes of the artist and craftsman. The arts are therefore at the very centre, the core of life. He craved that mankind should come into its predestined inheritance; that life should be simple and uncluttered, courageous, and full of hope; and that the creative gifts of everyone should be fostered and cherished.

I wonder what his old college felt when, just before his fiftieth birthday, it elected him an Honorary Fellow, and on the same day that he declared himself a Socialist and joined the Social Democratic Federation? Certainly Janey and Rossetti and Burne-Jones showed some embarrassment, though a number of his friends went along with him.

By 1885 he had become the editor of *The Commonweal*, the journal of the Socialist League, which years later published his great Utopian *News from Nowhere*, an underrated prose work which I constantly implore people to read. It describes a marvellous vision of the England of some remote future under realised Socialism. This is no phoney Utopia, but is full of modern ideas and common sense.

In 1878 the Morrises moved to a handsome house on Upper Mall at Hammersmith, with the Thames flowing past it, which they renamed Kelmscott House. Here much of the weaving was done in the sheds nearby, and one of the large rooms was thrown open for lectures and discussions. Morris addressed meetings at windy street corners, sometimes clashing with the police, whom he humiliated with his crushing answers to their questions. He lectured without fees all over the country, and he issued pamphlets. The titles of his lectures and essays speak for themselves:

‘The Art of the People’.

‘The Beauty of Life’.

‘How we live and how we might live’.

‘Art and Socialism’.

‘Useful Work vs. Useless Toil’.

‘A Factory as it might be’.

I have read them many times, and on re-reading them recently I felt even more deeply their relevance and importance for us today. They are loaded with wisdom, with love of humanity, and with the most urgent desire for BEAUTY in the lives of everyone. No Englishman has ever poured his lifeblood so freely out of *true* patriotism for his country.

At the present time, when our Government deliberately starves the Arts at the expense of technology, and asserts that they are *not* central to the life of the nation but a very nice addition to enjoy when we can afford it, and at a time moreover when those of us who gave our entire professional lives to building up a liberal education for *all* have to watch our achievement callously denigrated and cast asunder, it is refreshing and heartening to feel the spirit of Morris still with us, and to hear that commanding voice utter assertions like these:

What I claim is liberal education; opportunity, that is, to have a share of whatever knowledge there is in the world, according to my capacity or bent of mind, historical or scientific; and also to have my share of skill of hand which is about in the world, either in the industrial handicrafts or in the fine arts; picture-painting, sculpture, music, poetry, acting, or the like: I claim to be taught . . . more than one craft to exercise for the benefit of the community . . . the claim for education involves a claim for abundant leisure, which once more I make with confidence; because when once we have shaken off the slavery of profit, work would be organised so unwastefully that no heavy burden would be laid on the individual citizens . . .

Again, if the necessary reasonable work be of a mechanical kind, I must be helped to do it by machine, not to cheapen my labour, but so that as little time as possible may be spent upon it, and that I may think of other things while I am tending the machine.¹⁵

This wide-ranging lecture, which he delivered in his own house in 1884 to the Hammersmith Branch of the Social Democratic Federation, also had this to say:

Nor will I submit to waste my time and energies in making some trifling toy which only a fool can desire; I will rebel sooner than do that . . .

I won't submit to be dressed up in red and marched off to shoot at my French or German or Arab friend in a quarrel that I don't understand.¹⁶

I should like to have heard his voice rise to a vehement crescendo in what he called his last claim. This was it:

My last claim is that the material surroundings of my life should be pleasant, generous, and beautiful; that I know is a large claim, but this I will say about it, that if it cannot be satisfied, if every civilised community cannot provide such surroundings for all its members, I do not want the world to go on; it is a mere misery that man has ever existed. I do not think it possible under the present circumstances to speak too strongly on this point. I feel sure that the time will come when men and women will find it difficult to believe that a rich community such as ours, having such command over external Nature, could ever have submitted to live such a mean, shabby, dirty life as we do.¹⁷

That makes me want to adapt Wordsworth and say:

Morris! thou shouldst be living at this hour:
England hath need of thee.

We need the idealism for which he was derided, for we must surely know that it is the *idealists* in any community who are the most *practical*. His loathing of competition — which he saw as war — led him to strive for harmony, shared experience, and fellowship. These were the words he put into the mouth of John Ball, in *A Dream of John Ball*:

“Forsooth, brothers, fellowship is heaven, and lack of fellowship is hell And the deeds that ye do upon the earth, it is for fellowship’s sake that ye do them, and the life that is in it, that shall live on and on for ever, and each one of you part of it, while many a man’s life upon the earth from the earth shall wane.”¹⁸

I shall never forget how, in the very early days of conceiving the idea of this Crafts Study Centre — long before we could find any possible home for such a venture — they were the *optimistic* words of the *visionary idealist*, William Morris, that most urged us forward:

if some half-dozen men at any time earnestly set their hearts on something coming about which is not discordant with nature, it will come to pass one day or other; because it is not by accident that an idea comes into the heads of a few; rather, they are pushed on, and forced to speak or act by something stirring in the heart of the world which would otherwise be left without expression.¹⁹

How often we were buoyed up by those words! And, in the midst of all the hard labour the venture entailed, how often we reminded ourselves that the Father of The Arts and Crafts Movement thought of *Work* as ‘*our faithful daily companion*’!

I will not dwell on the sad story of how Morris was often abused and let down and how he had to face appalling frustrations. He was glad to escape, when he could, from the fellow men he was striving to help, and to get on with his work or seek a few days' peace at Kelmscott. Kelmscott never failed him. I have sometimes sat in the Tapestry Room where he wrote most of his letters, and although the great Elms are no more, the garden and landscape beyond are as peaceful as ever. Georgiana Burne-Jones, who had also known sorrow in her marriage, was a warmly sympathetic correspondent and friend. Let me quote passages from some of his letters to her:

I have seen a many wonders, and have a good memory for them; and in spite of all grumblings have a hope that civilised people will grow weary of their worst follies and try to live a less muddled and unreasonable life; not of course that *we* shall see much of that change in the remnant that is left of our days.

I am sitting now, at 10 p.m., in the tapestry-room, the moon rising red through the east-wind haze, and a cow lowing over the fields. I have been feeling chastened by many thoughts, and the beauty and quietness of my surroundings . . .²⁰

I can't pretend not to feel being out of this house and its surroundings as a great loss. I have more than ever at my heart the importance for people of living in beautiful places; I mean the sort of beauty which would be attainable by all, if people could but begin to long for it. I do most earnestly desire that something more startling could be done than mere constant private grumbling and occasional public speaking to lift the standard of revolt against the sordidness which people are so stupid as to think necessary . . .²¹

In another letter he wrote:

You know my faith, and how I feel I have no sort of right to revenge myself for any of my private troubles on the kind earth: and here I feel her kindness very specially, and am bound not to meet it with a long face.²²

In September 1887 he wrote:

I have had three very good days at Kelmscott: once or twice I had that delightful quickening of perception by which everything gets emphasised and brightened, and the commonest landscape looks lovely: anxieties and worries, though remembered, yet no weight on one's spirits — *Heaven* in short. It comes not very commonly even in one's younger and brighter days, and doesn't quite leave one even in the times of combat . . .²³

I am glad he had that experience and was able to tell a friend about it, away from the turmoil of London and of lecturing in Leeds, Manchester, Birmingham and other centres. Here he could for a few days be a private person again.

And now I must speak of the crowning glory of his life as a craftsman. As early as 1870 he had reformed his own handwriting and begun making illuminated books. The first he called simply 'A Book of Verse', which he made for Georgie Burne-Jones; and as might be expected, it is wonderfully fresh and alive, and it is full of that visionary blending of medieval and modern that marked all his work. It was the forerunner of endless research and study and practice. He enjoyed copying fine old manuscripts on

vellum, and the technique of illuminating enthralled him. Slowly he amassed an unsurpassed collection of incunabula and early fine printing and bindings. It was not therefore surprising that he yearned to have his own press, design his own type, and publish books of the kind he dreamed of.

We have heard too little of that quiet genius who most encouraged him — his friend and neighbour Emery Walker. He was 17 years younger than Morris, yet he had an encyclopedic knowledge of the art of the book, which he gladly shared with Morris. Indeed, in the last decade of Morris's life he became his closest friend. William used to say that he regarded that day lost on which he did not see Emery.

At last, in 1890–91 The Kelmscott Press was founded. Emery Walker declined the invitation to become a partner, but throughout the life of the Press he was its indispensable adviser and source of technical knowledge.

Paper was the first consideration. None made in England at the time satisfied them. Walker knew a good paper-maker called Joseph Batchelor, and the two friends journeyed down to his mill at Little Chart in Kent in October, 1890, bearing some exquisite paper made in Bologna in 1473 which was their ideal. Batchelor was certain he could make paper of this superb quality — and he did. There was satisfaction all round.

In 1891 he made paper with a Primrose watermark by Morris. Two years later he made Perch, with that fish as its watermark, and lastly in 1895 he made Apple, with its small neat W.M. enclosing an apple with two leaves.

Apple Paper. A friend who bought some at a sale at Kelmscott Manor bequeathed some sheets to me. Here is one. *Listen* to it! How it rings! What music! Sometimes I dare to print one of my own etchings on it, when I am always amazed at the almost loving way in which its seductive surface yields to the ink. I should recognise its unique white — the result of using only pure linen rag — anywhere, and I have never known a paper so tough and yet so sensitive.

Morris was as fastidious about *Ink*. None made in England satisfied the two perfectionists, and a splendidly rich warm Black was ultimately found in Hanover.

Vellum and leather were mostly English, since The Vatican absorbed most that was prepared in Italy.

The first press to be installed was an English Albion, very similar to Caxton's.

The designing of the three Kelmscott types — first 'Golden' (1890), then 'Troy' (1891), and then 'Chaucer' (1892) was a long, slowly considered, gradually evolving process. May Morris described vividly how 'Golden' was designed. She wrote:

First, Mr. Walker got his people to photograph upon an enlarged scale some pages from Jenson and Aretino . . . These enlargements enabled Father to study the proportions and peculiarities of the letters. Having thoroughly absorbed these he started designing his own type on this big scale. When done, each big letter was photographed down to the size the type was to be. Then he and Walker criticized them and brooded over them; then he worked on them again on the

large scale until he got everything right . . . when the design had been passed into the expert and sympathetic hands of Mr. Prince, and been cut, the impression — a smoked proof — was again considered, and the letter sometimes re-cut. My father used to go about with matchboxes containing these ‘smokes’ in his pockets, and sometimes as he sat and talked to us he would draw one out and thoughtfully eye the small scraps of paper inside. And some of those letters seemed to be diabolically inspired, and would not fall into line for a while, and then there were great consultations till the evil spirit was subdued!²⁴

It was this immense thoroughness and absorbed attention to detail that characterised everything William Morris touched, and which continues to be an inspiration to many of us today. Those forty books published before his death are all triumphs of workmanship, and the greatest of them all, *The Works of Chaucer*, was five strenuous years in the making. Burne Jones’s 87 designs, with Morris’s magnificent borders, full of roses and columbines, all had to be cut in wood and printed in situ with the type; and the binding too was treated as an equally important work of art.

In little more than 6 years this super-human Morris designed 644 title pages, borders, decorative initials, and marginal ornaments. The astonishing ease with which he produced them so amazed W. R. Lethaby that he described Morris at work. He wrote:

He would have two saucers, one of Indian ink, the other of Chinese White. Then, making the slightest indications of the main stems of the pattern he had in mind with pencil, he would begin at once his finished, final ornament by covering a length of ground with one brush and painting the pattern with the other . . .

He seemed to have the idea that a harmonious piece of work needed to be the result of one flow of mind. The actual drawing with the brush was a most agreeable sensation to him; the forms were led along and bent over and rounded at the edge with positive pleasure; they were *stroked* into place, as it were, with a sensation like that of smoothing a cat! It was to express this sensuous pleasure that he used to say that all good designing was felt in the stomach.²⁵

While the making of the great *Chaucer* was in progress, and in spite of serious illness, Morris took every opportunity to proclaim his beliefs. Perhaps his most well known admonition was:

Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful.²⁶

But he also declared, with great vehemence:

The greatest danger that threatens civilisation today is one of her own breeding — that men struggling for all the luxuries of life deprive their whole race of the Beauty of life.

Our present system of society is based on a state of perpetual war. I know you have often been told that competition is a good thing, and stimulates the progress of the race. I say war, or competition, whatever you please to call it, means at best pursuing your own advantage at the cost of someone else’s loss.²⁷

Fortunately the stupendous, epoch-making *Chaucer* was finished by June 1896, in time for William Morris to see it. We are told that Emery Walker nursed him with

the patience and tenderness of a woman. He died on the 3rd of October, and three days later his body was borne on a farm waggon festooned with vines to Kelmscott churchyard. It was a day of great gales and floods, and the church he loved and protected happened to be decorated for harvest festival. He would have relished the scene. W. R. Lethaby said, 'Well: it was the only funeral I've ever seen that did not make me ashamed to have to be buried', and Bernard Shaw said, 'You cannot lose a man like that by his death, but only by your own.'

In her biography of Burne-Jones which Penelope Fitzgerald wrote ten years ago she said:

If Morris were to die what would be left? The century was closing on an imperialist nation, preparing for next year's jubilee, well on the way to destroying everything that was relevant to the human scale of living in a small green country. More people than ever lived on a blackened earth, under clouded skies. 'Shoddy is King', Morris had said, and with all his influence in so many directions, the values of craftsmanship were more in peril than ever.²⁸

Earlier in this talk I read the words that Morris put into the mouth of John Ball, expressing what he knew to be the inevitable partial failure of his own valiant struggle. I should like to read them again:

Men fight and lose the battle, and the thing they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat; and when it comes it turns out to be not what they meant; and *other men* have to fight for what they meant under another name.²⁹

We are the '*other men*', and the fight is still on, for we are still inspired and tantalised by the sanity of his vision of a world as it might be if we had the will and determination to make it so.

NOTES

¹ *A Dream of John Ball* (1888), Ch. 4, in *Collected Works* (CW) XVI, 231–2.

² 'The Lesser Arts' (1877) in CW XXII, 17.

³ 'The Lesser Arts of Life' (1882) in CW XXII, 296.

⁴ John Ruskin, *Stones of Venice* II (1853) in E.T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, eds., *The Works of John Ruskin* XI (1904), 194, 196.

⁵ Preface to *Kelmscott Stones of Venice* in May Morris, ed., *William Morris: Artist Writer Socialist* (1936), I, 293.

⁶ 'Summer Dawn' in CW, I, 144.

⁷ J.W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris* (Oxford 1950), 216.

⁸ 'An Apology' to *The Earthly Paradise* in CW III, 1.

⁹ 'September' in CW V, 1.

¹⁰ 'December' in CW VI, 1.

¹¹ Quoted by Philip Henderson in *William Morris: His Life, Work and Friends* (1967), pp. 93–4.

¹² Catalogue of Morris and Company, 1911.

¹³ Letter to *The Daily News*, 24 Oct. 1876; in N. Kelvin, ed., *The Collected*

Letters of William Morris I (1984), 324.

¹⁴ 'To the Working Men of England', 11 May 1877; in P. Henderson, ed., *The Letters of William Morris . . .* (1950), Appendix II, 388–9.

¹⁵ 'How we live and how we might live' (1884) in CW XXIII, 18, 20.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 20.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 21–2.

¹⁸ *A Dream of John Ball* in CW XVI, 230.

¹⁹ 'The Lesser Arts' in CW XXII, 13.

²⁰ Letters to Georgiana Burne-Jones, Oct. 1879; in Henderson, ed., *Letters*, p. 132.

²¹ *ibid.*, 1880, p. 139.

²² *ibid.*, August 1881, p. 150.

²³ *ibid.*, September 1887, p. 275.

²⁴ May Morris, Introduction to CW XV, xxii–iii.

²⁵ Quoted in H.H. Sparling, *The Kelmscott Press . . .* (1924), p. 67.

²⁶ 'The Beauty of Life' in CW XXII, 76.

²⁷ 'How we live . . .' in CW XXIII, 5.

²⁸ Penelope Fitzgerald, *Edward Burne-Jones: A Biography* (1975), p. 268.

²⁹ See Note 1 above.