future, like the medieval cathedral, will be “such an abode of man as no private enterprise could come anywhere near for beauty or fitness because only collective thought and collective life could cherish the aspirations which give birth to its beauty, or have the skill and leisure to carry them out.” England in News from Nowhere is rich in buildings that suggest Gothic and yet they have an originality of their own. “I fairly felt as if I were alive in the fourteenth century,” the narrator says. “Like the medievals, we like everything trim and clean and orderly and bright—as people always do when they have a sense of architectural power,” a character explains. But the change in architecture must be preceded by a change in the fundamental organization of the world.

“Meantime we are waiting,” Morris says in “The Revival of Architecture,” “for that new development of society, some of us in cowardly inaction, some of us amidst hopeful work towards the change; but at least we are waiting for what must be the work, not of the leisure and taste of a few scholars, authors, and artists, but of the necessities and aspirations of the workman throughout the civilized world.”

A DREAM OF JOHN BALL

“Ah ye good people, matters go not well to pass in England, nor shall they, till everything be held in common.”

John Ball’s Speech—Froissart

IN THE PEASANTS’ REVOLT of 1381 Morris found the perfect subject. He had used the contrast between medieval and modern many times before, but in this romance the lines between past and present which too often makes the parallels forced, blurs and then disappears. The vision of the rebel priest is fused with the vision of the modern socialist into a unity at once imaginative and forceful. The struggle of man to be free becomes one story, not a series of pathetic interludes with accidental similarities; and all true men are members of the Fellowship. To Morris, John Ball and his Kentishmen in the fourteenth century find their counterpart in the little band of socialists in the nineteenth. The masters, however, are more numerous in the Victorian scene; the villeins unaware sometimes of their serfdom; and masters and serfs alike too set in the belief that the present system is inevitable. And rousing the modern worker to a sense of his own position and of the dependence of one man upon another—“Kent is well off, but what of Essex?”—is more difficult than stirring the sense of justice of the yeomen in a little medieval town on the road to London. The modern problem is of symphonic complexities; the medieval has the simplicity of plain chant. But the song of freedom is the same, and Morris transposes from one form to another until the reader recognizes the modern in the medieval, and hears the melody of the future in that of the past.

When he took the late fourteenth century as his setting for a romance with revolutionary overtones, Morris chose well. It was a time of great change, comparable to the one he felt was in the immediate future for the Victorian world. The Black Plague, the Papal Schism, the bitter and endless wars, prepared the way for the passing of the old order. A new class, not fully conscious of its unity as yet, was emerging to replace the dominant lords. In the burghers’ struggle for freedom, the serf also was involved, and while the turmoil of the transition meant advancement for the middle class finally, it was a time when “even the serf had
dreams,” and villeinage disappeared with the system that created it. The spirit of rebellion was not local. It spread with the swiftness and sympathy of an internationale. The “White Hoods” in Flanders, the “Maillotins” in Paris, “Tuchins” in Languedoc, and three hundred thousand of the “nobles commons of England” were on the march. It is not surprising that the wise and witty Froissart, observing it all between fear and despair, thought that the “nobles of England” were in great payll to have been destroyed,” that the country was “at a point to be lost without recovery,” and that “the commonties throughout all the world” were following the “ensample of the Gaunttoyes.”

And the picture of peasant well-being and solidarity which Morris wished to present to his nineteenth century reader is, in this period at least, not entirely the romantic’s dream. The decade before the revolt of 1381 was marked by high wages and low prices, and statistics show that the worker was in a better position than he had been earlier and that he held this advantage until about 1500. The scarcity of labour after the Black Plague and the ineffectiveness of the Statute of Labourers, the fourteenth century version of a ceiling on wages, frequently placed the bargaining power within his control, and when bargaining failed, protective unions and strikes proved more convincing to unwilling or difficult employers. As a contemporary record reads: “Everyone shall aid others to resist their lords with strong hands.” The spirit of fraternity was considerably fostered too by the absence of a police system. In his English Social History Trevelyan says:

The villein farmer striving for freedom, the free workman in constant revolt against the statute of labourers, were neither of them in such real subjection to their betters as the agricultural labourers in the well-polic’d countryside of the nineteenth century, when the poor had been deprived of the bow and club, and had not yet been armed with the vote. In the fourteenth century when every man was expected to take his own part with stick or fist, with arrow or knife, a union of sturdy villagers was less easily overawed.

The appeal this material holds for the propagandist is clear enough: a decadent world marked by violence and corruption, a spirit of rebellion afloat, and resentment at old injuries brought to a head by the fresh injustice of exorbitant taxation. The end of the fourteenth century, as well as the nineteenth, witnessed the breakdown of the old order and the slow and painful beginnings of the new.

No two contemporary accounts agree on all the details of the Social Revolt of 1381 and modern scholarship has still to arrive at a final picture of the events; so any summary of the story runs the risk of challenge at every point. Yet a traditional view of the rising has emerged from the many and frequently conflicting sources. It tells how the three great poll tax fanned the smouldering and inarticulate resentment of the poorer classes into an unmistakable and purposeful flame; how the commissions sent into disturbed areas only increased the resentment and unified opinion in favor of those who refused to pay; how Sir Simon Burley chose the wrong time to reclaim an escaped serf, an industrious man who had long left the manor and lived in the town; how a collector offered an insufferable insult to the daughter of one Tyler of Dartford, and how the father smashed the collector’s head in revenge; and finally what with the growing discontent that accompanies all times of change, and with one incident after another forcing the issue, how the men of Kent and Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk, rose in rebellion and marched on London to tell their King how sadly misgoverned was his realm and to offer their help in setting it right. According to Froissart, by no means trustworthy on all points but Morris’ chief source, the Monday after Trinity Sunday in 1381, the men of Kent and Essex met their leader Wat Tyler at Canterbury. There “all the common people made great feast, for all the towne was of their assent.” They proceeded to Rochester, and on the way pillaged the houses of advocates and of “procurers of the King’s courte, and of the archbysshoppe, and had mercy on none.” At Rochester they were welcomed by sympathizers, men of the “same secte,” and the rebels had good cheer before taking to the road again. By Wednesday they were at Blackheath. A messenger was sent to the King, and on Thursday the royal barge sailed down the Thames to Rotherhithe. Nothing came of the venture, because the King would not alight and he was persuaded by his advisers to return to the Tower. The commons then marched on London, where the sympathy of many within the walls won entrance for them.

All that day and night the city was at their mercy, Friday, however, the King arranged to meet the commons at Mile End, and there they were silenced by false promises, and with a pathetic simplicity, some sixty thousand of them promised to return home, taking with them the King’s banner and his letters granting them freedom. The royal word “apaeed well the common people,” Froissart says, “sche as were good playne men, that were come thysder and wyste not why.” John Ball, Wat Tyler, and Jack Straw, and thirty thousand others, according to the chronicler, remained away from Mile End and refused the settlement they rightly distrusted. (The reader of the romance remembers the warning John Ball gives at the Cross: “Therefore there is nought can undo us except our own selves and our hearkening to soft words from them who would slay us.”) The next morning, Saturday, the king met Wat Tyler
William Morris

at Smithfield, and the disillusioning close of the rebellion followed. The rebel was murdered, the people outwitted, and their ruler's promise broken. Only the young king's presence of mind relieves the story, and there is some bitterness in the thought that his courageous act—if it were courage and not mere obedience to a calculated plan that prompted it—was intended not only to save his own life but to gull his foolish and not ignoble subjects. In the dangerous moments after the death of Tyler, Richard disarmingly offered himself to the commons as their leader and so averted the possible massacre of the royal party. This revolt of 1381, so significant as a study in transition, provides the background for the romance.

With his love of England that had nothing of jingoism in it—"the land is a little land . . . it is neither prison nor palace but a decent home"—and with his emphasis on the native tradition of socialist thinking, Morris probably never worked with material so sympathetic to his temperament and his aims. The story of Ball, Tyler, and Straw offered the possibilities of a medieval setting in the countryside of revolutionary Kent; a striking leader in the rebel priest; and a slogan of the strongest egalitarian appeal:

When Adam delved and Eve span
Who was then the gentleman?

Morris could use his well loved Froissart as his chief source, although he would wisely avoid duplicating either the scenes or the tone of the chronicler. In the medieval record there was too much said of the pointless violence of the rising to embarrass the modern champions of the commons. But in the romance the facts could be judiciously introduced against an imaginary setting; the tragic ending intensified; the destruction minimized; and the idealism heightened. It was, after all, the ideal behind the revolt that concerned Morris most, and this he could picture in the quiet village where John Ball preached the "Fellowship" in the days preceding the Feast of Corpus Christi and its bitter octave of 1381.

For the poet in search of an ideal popular leader, Froissart's picture of John Ball, the "folishe priest," affords excellent material. Though the chronicler's attitude toward the rebellion is unmistakably antagonistic, that refreshing fairness found time and again in the medieval account has left John Ball with more than a touch of nobility. Even in the pages of the friend of aristocrats, the priest's message has force: "and in the beginning of the worlde they sayd ther were no bonde men . . . "; "why shuld they then be kept so undre like bestes, the which they wold no longer suffre, for they wolde be all one." "The meane people loved him" (and "such as intended to no goodness," of course, Froissart adds), and news of his preaching had reached London, where he had many supporters as well as in the country round. Every Sunday after Mass he preached to the people, and his sermon, for its poetic strength and simplicity—the heart of the matter given in words all could understand—could be a fourteenth century version of the best in Morris:

A ye good people, the maters goethe not well to passe in Engelande, nor shall not do tyll everythyng be common; and that there be no viliayns nor gentylmen, but that we may all be unyed toguyder, and that the lorde be no greter maisters than we be. What have we deserved or why shulde we be kept thus in servage? . . . They are clothed in velvet and chamlet furred with grise, and we be vestured with pore clothe; they have their wynes, spyes, and good breed, and we have the drawynge out of the chaffe, and drinke water; they dwell in fayre houses, and we have the payne and travelde, rayne, and wynde in the feldes; and by that that cometh of our labours they kepe and maynteyne their estastes. . . . Let us go to the Kyng . . . and if we go togyder, all maner of people that be now in any bondage wyll folowe us, to thentent to be made fre; and when the Kyng seysh us, we shall have some remedy, outher by fayrenesse or otherwise.  

The gift of lively prose in the medieval supporter of the status quo gave Morris the spur to create in the main character of the romance the spokesman of those ideals which seemed to him to vary in expression at different times in the world's history, but to be always fundamentally the same in their demand for the decent life for the common man, a life free from fear and free from want. John Ball's vision of the world after the victory he hopes for is like Morris' land of the future, after what he considered the inequalities and social callousness of Victorian England have been purged. There will be no master then, but that will be the only loss. Men will share the fields they till, the cloth they weave, the homes they build. "And man shall help man, and the saints in heaven shall be glad, because men no more fear each other; and the churl shall be ashamed, and shall hide his churlishness till it be gone, and he be no more a churl; and fellowship shall be established in heaven and on the earth."

"Fellowship" indeed is always Morris' answer to "Devil Take-the-Hindmost" and John Ball's speech at the Cross, in which hell is defined as the place where "every man is for himself," is one long protest in medieval terms against the principle of laissez-faire in any age. Economically too it is not good for man to be alone, and all the implications of the speech are directed against the Victorian system, or lack of it, in which the responsibility of man for man is lost. The priest, naturally
enough, sees the solution in the understanding of the nature of the Church on earth and the application of such an understanding directly and fearlessly to the problem at hand. Heaven and earth are one; the Church is the manifestation of that unity in this world. The life of the Church is in every man and he kills that life who isolates himself from other men—"fellowship is heaven; and lack of fellowship is hell." The Foeman is the rich man who forgets his fellowship not only with the saints in heaven but with the poor in Essex—the oppressor who is "a world to himself, and needeth no helper nor helpeth any," The men of Kent are fairly prosperous, but their sense of brotherhood with the others in England, poorly clothed and poorly housed, will not let them stand idle. If the ideal does not move them, John Ball suggests self-interest: the interdependence of one group on another will result finally in all paying for the suffering and injustice inflicted on some.

Transposed into modern terms, this sermon could be heard weekly at the socialists' outdoor pitch in the Hammersmith area. On Sunday mornings Morris would leave the happy breakfast parties with Edward Burne-Jones, and very much without his old friend's blessing, he would hurry away to give to a handful of Victorian workers virtually the same message that John Ball gave to a larger and more attentive audience of Kentish men. In the medieval sermon, as in the socialist lecture, there is the usual emphasis on unity as the strength of the poor; of the necessity of action, not dreams; of the "most miserable sin" of all, forgetting their own interest in a mistaken play for the favor of the rich man whom the poor man "deemeth to be other than he." There is the same hope: that the fellowship is waxing stronger, "not strong to bear, but to do." And of course the ideal of absolute equality that John Ball preached was at the root of all Morris' social thinking.

Morris, vigorous and forthright, and rarely subtle either in his thoughts or in their presentation, uses a rather complicated device in the conversation between John Ball and the narrator on the evening after the skirmish. Morris knew that any momentous change in society must be based on a conscious revaluation of history. He also knew that his Victorian readers were, for the most part, as complacent in their historical assumptions as they were in their faith in progress. He wanted them to look back over the crowded years between the revolt of John Ball and the revolt of William Morris and to see that expense from a new vantage point—to see it with all the wonder that it roused in John Ball—because for a very different set of reasons, they too had never seen it before. He wished to present in the simplest terms his own reading of history—the story of the steady advance toward the inevitable end—the "great revolt"—and of the increasing domination of class over class that will cause it. To be effective as propaganda and as art, this reading within the delicate compass of a tale had to be given with convincing detachment—none of the platform socialist rant—and with great simplicity. The speech at the Cross made use of the expedient of expressing a modern problem in medieval terms and letting the reader draw the conclusions. But in the conversation in the Church, the modern viewpoint is given explicitly though it is emphasized by the comment of the medieval priest. Artistically this double vision, the narrator looking back to the past and John Ball looking forward to the present, results in the desired detachment. Under the spell of the tale, the single argument has double force because of this device of using two spokesmen to express the same idea in terms understandable in their own world. The modern "free" labourer is to the medieval mind a thrall. For the Victorian reader the new and unwelcome concept of "lower class slavery" is thus strengthened by the seemingly independent judgment of two eras. Each age, medieval and modern, agrees on the ever widening chasm between rich and poor, Disraeli's two nations, and the reader receives the argument with twofold impact. It was as if Morris instead of using the familiar device of the past as a mirror for the present, used two mirrors, and allowed both past and present to exchange views in double vision and to conclude that the reflection of tyranny is always recognizable whether in lord or capitalist and that servitude is that and nothing else whether it be called thralldom or "free" labour.

By means of question and answer this twofold emphasis is artistically sustained. John Ball questions; he receives his answers; his conclusions from the answer are adjusted to fact, and in the ironic correction of John Ball's mistakes lies the lesson for the Victorian. Swiftly the movement of five hundred years is sketched in modern terms: the break up of the feudal system, the disappearance of serfdom, the growth of the modern commercial system, the rise of "free" labour and the capitalist co-ordinator, the industrial revolution with its changes in production and communication, capitalist wars, cycles of prosperity and depression, laissez-faire, and the ills of modern England. Simultaneously the medieval priest and the modern socialist, by pointed question and simple answer, evolve a story of commercial society that is one in meaning though different in expression.

John Ball looks at the history of the times that follow his and sees in it a riddle: every apparent gain is a real failure, and the bitter irony of progress is softened only by the hope of eventual revolt. He rejoices at the passing of villeinage only to find that it is succeeded by a new mastery, a worse tyranny than the serf ever knew, a tyranny under which a man must be thrall or thief. The growth of commercialism means for a
while that a man will earn three pence where he once earned two, but it is only a temporary improvement. In the new society, the serf who was sometimes thrall and sometimes free, has disappeared and the labouring men, "Thralls after the new fashion," thrive only so long and so far as such prosperity suits their masters. With the enclosures, the last vestige of freedom goes, and men are again bought and sold at the Cross, not literally now, but in that market in which they paradoxically buy the right to labour with their labour. When the narrator explains the modern system, John Ball says: "The man may well do what thou sayest and live, but he may not do it and live a free man," and to him: "the greatest fool is he who takes the name of freedom at the price of being a slave."

But perhaps the more effective teaching occurs when the lesson is less obviously pointed. Morris' strongest argument is left unstated—such loneliness can exist only when the world creating it is sound—and though the conversations in the church may fade, the vision of the little village remains in the soft glow of late afternoon. Pugin used the visual method earlier and literally, and his "Contrasts" were clear. Morris' purpose is identical, but in the romance he is content with creating the medieval picture and he leaves the contemporary for the reader to form by implication. Morris falls asleep in London, the "great wen," in Cobett's words, where filth and dirt are the rule for the poor and vulgarity is fast becoming the rule for the rich, and he awakens in a village between London and Canterbury early in the fateful week of the rebellion. As clearly as if it were stated, we grasp his meaning: this is the way the poorer classes lived in those days; here is a yeoman's house, here is the commoner's inn, and here is his church. What has Victorian England to show to equal it?

As often as we are prepared for Morris' ability to evoke the past, the little piece of the fourteenth century world we meet in _John Ball_ comes like the shock one gets on suddenly finding a good reproduction of a medieval illumination, with all its color and delicacy, set in the drab pages of a modern book. Our first view is of the Kentish countryside with its gardenlike trimness, its contours gently rising and falling, its land unhedged and cultivated in strips, and of three little villages seen in the distance through the clear bright air. Beyond the copse rises the clean white line of a new steeple, built in a living tradition and safe from restoring parsons. Morris finds himself clothed in a neat black dress, long and yet free, and relieved by embroidery. A well turned pen and ink case is at his side. He approaches the village, and in it is visible almost all that he loved in the medieval scene. The houses are oak frame work, well white washed. (Coulton says the medieval villages looked clean because the builders knew the value of lime to prevent weathering.) Here and there rubble-stone is added for strength, and on the arches, freestone, to allow for the mason's love of decoration. The blacksmith's house has a gaily painted St. Clement. (Who is the patron of the Victorian worker and where does he ply his trade?) Will Green—he would be of the lower classes in nineteenth century England—is fairly prosperous; so the first floor of his house is stone. The great room on the main floor is simply furnished and the walls are hung with coverings of green worsted "with birds and trees woven on it." ("Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful," was Morris' needed advice to his contemporaries.) We find in the Rose the contrast to the Victorian "pub" where nineteenth century workmen sought refuge from their cheerless homes. The main room of the medieva] tavern has oak panelling, with whitewashed wall above, and a rose stem pattern near the moulding. Above the oven shed, in bold natural colour is a great rose of plaster. No pastels for Morris—living red, the rose in its "proper color!"

 Everywhere, in the tavern, the home, and the church, is that beauty in the details of life that comes, Morris feels, only from the joy of free labour. The tavern bowls are earthen pots but they are gay in color and curiously turned. The pewter salt cellar is good in shape and covered carefully with a white cloth. The wassail bowl at Will Green's house is of polished wood "with speckles in it," and on its silver band is inscribed a legend: "In the name of the Trinity, fill the cup and drink to me." The very tiles on the church floor are glazed with the care that comes only with the real interest of the craftsman. Many things are crude, but nothing shoddy. The clothes of Will Green and his men are made of a rough but serviceable stuff, and not unattractive in form and colour. Their long bows are of the finest wood, a joy to behold in their supple strength and a greater joy to hear when the men shoot at the butts on their common ground, and a man can hear the "twang of the bow-string and the plump of the shaft in the target" through the still afternoon air. Such beauty in the surroundings of daily life is the true record of man—not the chronicles alone with their tales of "kings and scoundrels." Look at a Victorian village, Morris unmistakably intends to say, and draw what conclusions you will.

It must have been with a special joy that Morris contemplated the Church in his medieval village. He tells us that "architectural peep shows" were among his most satisfactory dreams, and that he always re-created the scene in detail, often down to the "meditative lens" scratching about close to the "very jambs of the richly carved Norman doorway of the church." Such a re-creation we find in _John Ball_. The chancel is "so new that the dust of the stone still lay white on the midsummer grass
beneath the carvings of the windows." When John Ball and Morris enter in their strange midnight visit, Morris sees the magnificent nave, free from benches, and paved with glazed tiles, from which the tall shafts rise. A vision for the secretary of Anti-scape! No austere grayness gives a puritan touch to the scene—mistaken notion of the Gothic spirit—but the walls are covered with colorful pictures in which the medieval artist has been allowed free rein—for bishops and lawyers crowd the gates of Hell in the Last Judgment and St. Christopher, with Will Green's face and figure, carries the Christ Child. Rood screen, and chancel, and newly carved stalls, jewel-like windows—everywhere is "rich and fair color, and delicate and dainty form."

Certainly Morris never found happier expression for the simple yet fundamental message of Fellowship he so earnestly wished to bring to his times. That the form of the message gave free play to his artist's love of the medieval confirms its integrity: it was literally one with the man. But A Dream of John Ball has an interest beyond the response it awakens as an admirable medium for the translation of an ideal into terms of a lifelong enthusiasm. It has additional value as a test case of how a Victorian, working in the traditions of a great revival, used the material of history; and the result of the test may prove illuminating as a sample of nineteenth century medievalism with a purpose. So often Victorian medievalism is a nebulous thing—unmodified praise for the responsibility of group to group in the feudal system, a social structure of infinite variety and covering several centuries; or praise of the Guilds, unqualified by any hint as to their nature or origin or to the times in which their power was felt. But A Dream of John Ball is related to a series of actual events which can be checked, with the time, place, and characters known.

Though no formal comparison of the vision and the actuality can take from the magic and beauty of Morris's re-creation, it is possible that such a test may result in a re-evaluation of the romance on the grounds for which it is so often praised—for the truth of its picture of 1381.

Of course Morris was writing a romance; and though it had a frankly political aim and was intended to instruct by an historical parallel, it was never meant to be the fairly faithful re-creation that Carlyle achieves in Past and Present. The heart of the piece, John Ball's sermon at the Cross, has no original in any contemporary account, though the chronicles are rich in comment on the nature of Ball's message to his followers. It is truth hid in the trappings of the tale we can expect from Morris with his love of "uncritical or traditional" history. The poet takes over the field of the historian with not unexpected results: an increase in vividness and in the sense of reality, and a loss in exactness and in complexity. Yet it is instructive to contrast the dream with the reality—the idyllic picture of village life, the manly struggle in meadow and on road, with the grim face Truth wears in poll tax lists and "antient indictments." One of the most complex and formidable events, or series of events, in English history, is reduced to its simplest terms—with what loss of accuracy and with what revelation of Morris as an artist we can judge by comparing the probable sources with the nineteenth century version. What was the state of Victorian scholarship? How account for Morris' omission of so much of the action or for the removal of the center of interest from London to an unnamed village east of the Medway? Or for the apparent denial of one point seemingly stressed by contemporaries, John Ball's Wyclifite tendencies? Or how explain the inaccuracies and doubtful judgments implicit in the tale? Though it may be said with truth that too much critical writing on the sources of poets is based on a fundamental lack of understanding of the creative mind, as if the poet needed the armory of facts necessary to fire the slowly kindling spirit of the scholar, a consideration of sources, approached in the full consciousness of its limitations, should tell something of Morris as historian and craftsman. Froissart would have been enough for any poet, but the fact remains that Morris knew more. How did he handle his shears as he cut into the gorgeous bolt of stuff, his artist's knowledge of the medieval period? What was the pattern he followed?

The traditional view, embodied in Froissart, and in a measure in Morris' tale, ignores the scope and complexity of the rising of 1381. We are likely to think of it as a rebellion of the peasants of Kent and Essex with London as the main stage of action and the will to abolish serfdom as the cause. Actually many more levels of society were involved than the term "Peasants' Revolt" suggests; the rebellion flared over a wide area from the Humber to the Medway—Norfolk, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire being involved as well as Kent and Essex—and the reasons for the uprising were as numerous as the interests involved. Kriechn has called it a social revolt, and rightly so. It was not a maneuvered political change, nor an upheaval that cut vertically through all classes but a rising of the "have-nots" everywhere. It was town against gown in Cambridgeshire, priest against abbot at St. Edmundsbury, village against landlord monastery at St. Albans, apprentice and journeyman against master in London, and, of course, peasant against lord in Kent and Essex and in the disaffected areas of East Anglia. In one town, to the north, it was the old mayor against the new, and in another it was a quarrel among the burghers. Nor does the traditional view of the time element give any notion as to the true nature of the revolt. From the Monday before the feast of Corpus Christi (Thursday, June 19 in 1381) until the following Saturday when Tyler was killed and the rebels dispersed is usually thought of as
the "hurrying time" when "the nobles were in great paryl to be destroyed." But the revolt actually began in May, with angry warnings earlier, and it flared up again here and there as late as Michaelmas. The indictments, pardons and fines dragged on into the following years.

Before the nineties, a Victorian looking for comment on the meaning of the revolt would have turned to Thorold Rogers' Six Centuries of Work and Wages and his History of Agriculture and Prices in England. The opinion of this professor of political economy and member of Parliament, Oman says, was accepted without criticism for twenty years. According to Rogers and his school, with the shortage of labour after the Black Death and the high wages demanded by the workers in spite of the statutes, the lords determined to turn back the clock and to take from their tenants the rights acquired in other and different times. The money payments which the lord gladly took in days of labour plenty proved insufficient with the rising wages and low costs, and only a revival of the payments in labour would again give the lords their old advantage. "I cannot account for the outbreak on any other grounds than that of an attempt on the part of the customary tenants to vindicate their right to pecuniary commutation as against a threatened invasion of the custom." What he offers as an explanation in The History of Agriculture and Prices in 1866 becomes, as W. J. Ashley has noted, the scholarly fact of Six Centuries of Work and Wages in 1884. A generalization based on insufficient proof, therefore, became the current Victorian opinion on the meaning of the revolt. Ashley, writing in 1893, says that "although this explanation of the Peasant Rising is now so generally accepted as to pass for undoubted fact, no evidence has yet been adduced that can be regarded as confirming it." Less harshly, Oman says "later research has shown it to be only one cause among many, and in some instances without any application to the events." With Réville's Le Soulèvement des Travaillers d'Angleterre en 1381, Powell's The Rising in East Anglia, Powell and Trevelyan's The Peasants' Rising and Lollards, and Trevelyan's brief but excellent account in England in The Age of Wycliffe, all published in the nineties, there was general agreement as to the inadequacy of Rogers' theory. But even without the supplementary evidence of the Public Record Office, in the form of indictments, confessions, and poll tax lists, it is surprising that so limited an explanation held ground so long. The chroniclers alone, without further research, suggest wider implications and a pattern far more involved than any Rogers realized.

The studies in the nineties, then, culminating in Oman's Great Revolt of 1381 changed the conception of the causes and the extent of the rebellion. After Oman, Réville, Powell, and Trevelyan it was no longer possible to consider the revolt as a rising of serfs against those who would keep them bound or of peasants against those who would renew the old villeinage. The rebellion now appeared as the focal point for many elements of discontent of which agrarian unrest was but one, even though an important one. People were discontented with the conduct of the war that drained England of money and man power. They resented John of Gaunt and his followers—"We will have no king named John"—and political grievances combined with social unrest. The workers were rebellious against statutes that artificially lowered their wages when the labour market had turned in their favor. Above all, in spite of every artificial restraint, the lower classes were in an unusually comfortable position during these years. They were not like the hard driven hopeless Jacquerie, who rose in despair in a bitter and fruitless anarchy that was just as bitterly suppressed. "They had arrived at a class and condition," says Powell, "in which extortion was well calculated to produce dangerous results." Extortion came in the form of the poll tax levied by parliament in 1380. More stringent than usual, and more likely to provoke resentment, the tax failed of its purpose because of the widespread falsification of returns. The obviously doctored records were re-checked by visiting commissions with the expected results. What happened in Fobbing, Corringham, and Stanford might have happened anywhere. The commissioners were driven out and their local accomplices murdered.

The poll tax is the starting point for most of the contemporary accounts. To the chroniclers it looked like the cause of the revolt but it was really only the occasion. The violence in Essex quickly spread to Kent and the conflagration was under way. On June second Abel Kerith riotously entered the monastery of Lesness; on the sixth, one Robert Cave, baker of Dartford, led a group against Rochester castle; on the seventh Wat Tyler of Colchester was chosen leader by the insurgents of Maidstone, and the familiar tale begins. There are as many variations as to what happened in the week of June tenth as there are contemporary accounts. The main action, already suggested in the traditional story, is enough, however, for the present purpose, since the differences concern details of London events—material of which Morris used so little. But what is extremely important is the character and temper of the revolt, since the spirit of 1381, as Morris portrays it in A Dream of John Ball, is open to question.

A cool summary of the events of the revolt would be enough perhaps to explain the thrill of horror in the chroniclers' descriptions and the sense of doom just narrowly escaped, still fresh as late as Stow's Elizabethan survey of London. In the vast panorama of centuries we are
likely to forget the very real drama at the end of the fourteenth. But the year 1381 suggests an "II" similar to the "II" of Tours and Lepanto—one of the idle yet fascinating conjectures of history as to what might have been if the delicate balance of events were tipped to the other side. "II," as Morris said regretfully in "Art and Its Producers," "the stout yeomen of Kent and Essex, gathered on the 'Fair-field at Mile-End,' had had wits not quite so simple as to trust the young scoundrel of a king, who had just had his leader murdered under trust, but had carried out the peasants' war to its due conclusion." One hundred thousand discontented men, half-certain of their aims and guided by the slenderest thread of organization, marched on London to set the wrong things right. Behind them, were thousands more as far north as the Humber, only waiting for the slightest victory to unloose the force of their dissatisfaction against those they held responsible. From Wednesday until Saturday the rebels were the apparent masters of the situation—real mastery would have involved clearer purpose and firmer control. But to a contemporary, the structure of society was suddenly upturned, and nowhere was there evidence that anyone intended to do anything about it. In a sense it was more serious than the brutal terrorism of the Jacquerie. The English had at least some program, and its very moderation made it more dangerous. This new order was a possibility. The rebels even strove to keep discipline, as men conscious of a higher purpose than revenge. But the pressure of events proved too great for the leaders and the slender structure of organization was crushed under the weight of the discontent to which it gave expression. What would have happened if there had been a little more planning and wiser leadership, it is impossible to say. But the darkest moments of the rebellion are relieved by these remnants of order and purpose.

There are differences of opinion as to how much actual preparation preceded the revolt. Oman thinks there was little. "It is dangerous to conclude as some writers have done, that this simultaneous action was due to deliberate organization." He takes issue with Powell, who feels that there is "good reason to believe that it was the matured result of a comprehensive plan, carried on by means of a more or less perfect organization extending throughout the Eastern Counties." But much or little, there certainly was some. The "Magna Societas," the great company of the Norfolk revolt, in the name of which messengers were sent throughout the shire, attests a spirit of association, even if there was not a closely organized group. The letters sent by John Ball and his confederates are evidence of an audience fully prepared to understand their cryptic sayings; and the rebels everywhere looked to London as the source of propaganda and the determiner of the course of action. When the peasants rose in 1381, there had been enough preparation, conscious or unconscious, to spread the flame of rebellion with astonishing rapidity. It was recognized as the time to take from the "haves" what the "have nots" either coveted or justly considered as their own, to wrest from one's neighbor his flitch of bacon or sack of lime or from the monastic landlord rights long overdue. Those who took advantage of the times ranged from the well intentioned and honest men eager for justice, whose existence even Froissart admits, to the members of the Scarborough "white hoods and red tails" composed of all those who "had old quarrels or wished to pick new ones."

With the first signs of revolt, rebel leaders assumed control. Besides the well known figures of the London episode, Tyler, Ball, and Straw, three others stand out in contemporary accounts: John Wraw, the least sympathetic, the disgruntled opportunist of the Suffolk rising; Geoffrey Lisler, of Norwich, who succeeded only modestly in his dier's trade, but who rose to "King of the Commons" and showed considerable talent as a revolutionary organizer; and William Gryndcobbe of St. Albans, who once walked naked through the streets of the town in punishment for violence done to the monks, and apparently never forgot his penance. To the credit of the monastic historian it must be said that with the objectivity which occasionally marks the chroniclers' account of their enemies, and is indeed one reason for their attractiveness, the story of this rebel leader is touched by the finest idealism of the revolt. Naturally, the men who followed these leaders were mostly peasants, but they were also joined by wealthy yeomen and even by members of the gentry, particularly in outlying sections. Sir Roger Bacon, of Baconshorpe, was Geoffrey Lisler's willing lieutenant.

But the preparation and the leadership served to keep order only here and there once the revolt was under way. It is true that when the men of Kent first entered the city they "did no hurt" and "they took nothing from any man but bought all things at a just price." Even the Savoy was sacked with the intent to destroy and not to loot. But all too soon the promise of their early activities was felt. The spirit revealed in a Kentish indictment of activities of the first days of the revolt becomes the rule and not the exception.

Item dicunt quod Johannes Onewyne de Melkhouse die lune proxima post festum Sancte Trinitatis apud Apuldre domos Willelme Horne cum alis ignatis prostraverunt.11

London provided more than private dwellings, and the rebels followed their attack on the Savoy by raids on the Temple, the Inns of Court, the priory of Knights Hospitallers, and Fleet and Newgate pris-
ons. The rebellion raged like a mighty fire, only here and there under
control, and in the sudden spurs of flame, little people and little things
were illumined. As in so many revolutionary accounts, the meaning of
events seems lost in the brilliancy of the pictures and the light that flares
into corners unlit by the calmer records of ordinary history. The revolt
of 1381 becomes a series of scenes, tragic, comic, and grotesque.

On Corpus Christi night the royal party looks down from the Tower
of London and sees camped round its base and on to St. Catherine’s
wharf, an army of peasants discussing the fate of those within. ‘The odor
of roasted flesh still rises from the cellars of The Savoy, where drunken
rebels, stupefied by the rich wines of their enemy, John of Gaunt, were
unable to escape the fires set by their comrades. At St. Albans the insurgent
townsmen rush into the monastery parlor and rip up the strange
covering on its floor—millstones taken from peasant querns one hundred
years before by the proud Roger Norton. Again they demand a charter
they say St. Olfa granted them, and the abbot temporizes with offers of
bread and ale—unable to produce what never existed. On one grim night
the rebels are forced to dig up the bodies, already corrupt, of William
Gryndocbe and his friends, and replace them on the gibbets from
whence they had secretly removed them for decent burial. At Bury St.
Edmunds the townfolk conduct a puppet show. On two pikes they
place the severed heads of lifelong friends, the gentle and musically
gifted Prior Cambridge and John le Cavendish, justice of the shire. The
puppeteers enact their play and the heads bow and duck, lawyer’s lips
to prelate’s ear in an exchange of confidences. At Norwich, Geoffrey
Lister, “King of the Commons” dines in state with four noblemen to
serve him and Sir Steven Hales (‘because he is a comely knight) to carve
before him and to take assay of his meates.” At Peterborough, however,
the strong minded and violent Bishop Despenser gives “absolution with
his sword” to rebels threatening his abbey church. At Cambridge
the bells of St. Mary’s summon the people to a treasure hunt which ends
in the usual bonfire. Records and books of the University are gathered in
the market place, and when the flames rise, old Margery Starre throws
the manuscripts in one by one with the words “Away with the learning
of clerks! Away with it.” In London again, the rebels meet their king,
and surprisingly enough, present their fairly moderate demands: aboli-
tion of serfdom, free marketing, a four pence per acre ceiling on land
rent, and general amnesty.

Very little of this canvas of the revolt could have been unfamiliar to
Morris with his well known love and knowledge of the medieval chronic-
liers. He had known them since his Oxford days when he read them and
Latin poetry with “rapid and prodigious assimilation,” and in later

years his astonishingly rich collection of early books included the Chroni-
cle of St. Albans, Higden’s Polychronicon, Grafton’s Chronicle at Large,
and the Annales of John Stow—all containing material on the revolt.\textsuperscript{12}
Though most of the factual background for \textit{A Dream of John Ball}
could have been drawn from Froissart alone, there are hints from other sources.
We can be fairly certain that Morris knew Knighton, with his generous
samples of the incendiary letters circulated among the rebels and his
naive admiration for the “pious” Duke of Lancaster;\textsuperscript{13} Walsingham and
his long and vivid account of the St. Alban’s rising, written in beautiful
and flexible Latin, adapting itself to the flow of rapid narrative and to
the rich invective each side heaped on the other; and Malverne, the con-
tinuator of Higden. He also knew Stow’s version, which summarizes the
most important features of the earlier chroniclers and has the additional
merit, in George Kriehn’s opinion, of being based in part on the Anoni-
males Chronicle of York, the one important contemporary chronicle
that could not have been known to Morris, since it was not discovered
until the nineties. He must have read with much amusement, though
with little profit, the five stanza account in Grafton’s rhymed history, in
which amazingly bad verse is united to amazing oversimplification.

\textit{They asked the Jake Strawe and Wat Tyler}
\textit{To be made dukes of Essex and Kent}
\textit{To rule the King thens forth in peace and warre,}
\textit{For they be wise of royal regiment.}

Though there is no definite proof, he may also have known the Chroni-
cles Anglie, based on Walsingham’s Historia Anglicana, the lively but
shorter account of the Monk of Evesham, and the brief and colorless re-
cord of Adam of Usk.

But of all the chroniclers Froissart is Morris’ favorite. His story of the
revolt has epic swing. There is a sense of doom in Froissart and though
the threat is directed against his own world, he reviews it for the most
part with dramatic objectivity. He is not the acrimonious recorder of a
monastery that has suffered, and though there is no doubt as to where he
stands, his presentation of the popular view is marked by grace and
force. But of course the very qualities that make the Chronicles great
literature, the poetic intensity, the heightening of figure and incident,
the long and beautiful speeches, sometimes lessen their value to the his-
torian. Froissart’s authority for English domestic events is at times ac-
nowledged to be weak. Oman speaks of his “well-known capacity for
going wrong.” It has even been questioned that Froissart’s account comes
from a first hand witness. Kriehn objects to M. Kervyn de Lettenhove’s
statement that Froissart’s informant was Robert de Namur, Lord of
William Morris

Beaufort and Chievres, and in London at the time of the rising.14 So it is likely that Morris' most important primary source, as well as his secondary, Thorold Rogers, is not the most reliable on the events of 1381.

Whatever may be said, then, in praise of A Dream of John Ball as the artist's idyllic re-creation of a medieval village or as the propagandist's effective play of light and shadow upon the meaning of past events, it must be admitted that as historical re-creation it has its limitations. When the picture of the peasants' revolt of the romance is compared with that of scholarship, it is evident that deliberately in some cases, mistakenly in others, Morris has ignored the scope, the complexity, even the dramatic possibilities of the rising, and once, at least, he has read more into the sources than the record will justify.

It would be too much, of course, to expect Morris to anticipate the scholarship of the nineties and to reject Thorold Rogers' theory of the cause of the rising, but the fact remains that his romance is built squarely on an erroneous hypothesis. With one or two important exceptions, Morris follows Rogers. We know Morris knew Rogers' work at least three years before he wrote his romance—and probably longer. In a lecture to Anti-Scape in 1884 he referred with praise to the research of the Oxford professor. Rogers' conclusions satisfied the artist's sense of the past. Work and Wages would be one of the "tool" books Morris mentioned in his reading list—valuable as a check on the knowledge gathered from the great traditional sources of the chronicles, supplemented by the visible signs of history in the form of art. "Mr. William Morris has actually based his assertion on the serfs' Economic History.15 Not only does Morris accept Rogers' explanation of the cause of the rising but the narrator's message to John Ball implies agreement with Rogers' conclusion as to the effects. "And yet when the lords have vanquished, and all England lieth under them again, yet shall their victory be fruitless; for the freemen that hold free lands shall they not bring under the collar again, and villeinage shall slip from their hands, till there be, and not long after ye are dead, but few unfree men in England; so that your lives and your deaths both shall bear fruit." Actually the Peasants' Revolt had little effect on the movement of the times. It came, rather, as an illumination—a sudden bright and flaming consciousness of the position of men and the concept of personal freedom. That it little influenced the status of the villein is generally conceded, and whether or not it even hastened the decline of villeinage is a matter of debate. Oman says "Villeinage died out from natural causes and by slow degrees . . . it certainly had not been destroyed once and for all, by the armed forces of Wat Tyler's Hurling Time."16 "It must remain a matter of opinion whether this process (disappearance of villeinage) was accelerated or retarded by the Peasants' rising" is Trevelyan's attitude.17 With Rogers, it was not a matter of opinion but a fact that "The rebellion was put down, but the demands of the villeins were silently and effectually accorded. . . ."

There is just the possibility—though it would be dangerous to press it too far—that Rogers' presentation also influenced Morris' form in places. Rogers' account has several fancied dialogues: the lawyers argue the case for their lords; the poor priest's imaginary sermon is summarized. Rogers' simplification and his style can be seen in an excerpt:

It is very possible also that pernicious lawyers, bailiffs, and agents pointed out to the impoverished and angry lords that after all, in law and in past times these serfs had no rights at all; that they possessed what they had by the good natured easiness of their superiors; and their black ingratitude should be punished by resuming those lands and that liberty which had been so grossly abused.

There follows an imaginary dialogue in which the lawyers argue very much in the strain of Morris' lords. It will be remembered that Morris breaks into the thought of the narrator with direct discourse in which the lords argue their position. Again in reading John Ball's speech at the Cross in the romance, the sermon of the poor priest in A History of Agriculture and Prices is at least suggested. At any rate the resemblance in the situation is too striking to pass without comment, even though Rogers' scene may have had no direct influence or lurked only in the background of Morris' mind. Certainly no literary merit would strengthen anyone's remembrance. Rogers' sermon begins with the familiar theme of equality "When Adam delved and Eve span"; and continues:

And when they told them that the lords had determined to drag them back to their old servitude, the preacher could discourse to them of the natural equality of man, of the fact that all, Kings, lords, and priests, live by the fruit of the earth and the labour of the husbandmen, and that it would be better for them to die with arms in their hands than to be thrust back without an effort on their part, into the shameful slavery from which they had been delivered. And as their eyes kindled, and they grasped their staves, he could tell them to keep their ears open for the news of their deliverance, that on the password being given, they were to once more to the appointed place, where a great work could be done for God's people by his appointed servant.18

While Morris' use of the reasoning and perhaps even the tone of
Rogers takes nothing from his work as a prose poem, it should temper the praise frequently given A Dream of John Ball as a perfect miniature of the medieval past. As has been said, it would be too much to expect Morris to anticipate the scholarship of Oman, Trevelyan, Revilë and Powell. But since Morris was frequently right through an almost intuitive sense of the past rather than through seasoned and deliberate scholarship, his wrong instinct in this case comes as a surprise. Even the partial justification that the poet must simplify—that “serendip” is not the legal phrase of Vinogradoff’s Villeinage in England but the symbol of every form of oppression in Feudal England—must not be pressed too strongly, because Morris was presenting this view of history to the Socialist audience of the Commonweal—and in all good faith—as his understanding of a very important aspect of English events. John Ball’s speech at the Cross was one of his favorite pieces. He used to read it in his rich chant at the Hammersmith Socialist parties. For the workmen there, according to May Morris, it was “no dream for the moment.” But it is a dangerous symbol, however poetic, which has at its roots a discredited theory.

Another question arises in considering the historical background. Was Morris justified by anything in his sources in giving the rebels, and in particular the priest himself, communist aims, even the mild communism of John Ball’s sermon? It is well to note here that the word communism itself is dangerous in the richness of its connotations. It would take a John Stuart Mill using the method of the essay on Nature to analyze the many shapes the word, or the idea, assumes in Morris alone. When he used the term it could mean the spirit of association that marked the guilds, or the apparent survivals of communal holdings in unhedged tillage, or a society so loosely organized that the anarchists could claim him for their own. Sometimes it seems as if any form of social responsibility in the middle ages won from him this term of approbation—“medieval communism.” But in the sermon at the Cross, John Ball offers his followers common ownership and common reward. “The reaper shall eat in fellowship the harvest that in fellowship he has won . . . and the tithe barn shall garner the wheat for all men to eat of when the seasons are untoward, and the raindrift hideth the sheaves in August; and all shall be without money and without price.” There is only one place in the mass of information the chronicles offer where any justification for such an interpretation of the motives of the rebels can be found: in Froissart’s account of John Ball’s sermon: “Aye good people, the maters gate not well to passe in Englande, nor shall not tyll every thing be common.” Nowhere else are communal holdings demanded, not even from the most radical group at Smithfield when Tyler and the recalcitrants lingered for even greater concessions. Certainly the four point program of the rebels gave no hint of Communism. They wanted private holdings for every one at the low price of 4d per acre—a revolutionary but not a communistic suggestion. A modern distributist would be more likely to find a spiritual ancestor in the fourteenth century insurgent than would the modern communist. Even the confession of Jack Straw—and surely any hint would have been readily seized upon by the chroniclers—is devoid of any plan for communal holdings. The friars and the Wycliffites share the blame in contemporary chronicles for the radical teaching that inspired the revolt; but neither evangelical poverty nor dominion by grace as Wycliffe intended it could be the basis for a genuine communism. In Trevelyan’s opinion “the attempt to picture the rising as a communistic movement ignores the plainest facts.”

Of course Morris has too keen an historical sense to emphasize strongly the communistic element he suggests, but it is undeniable that he sees John Ball in the position of the late Victorian of his own League and that he wishes to suggest the essential likeness of their doctrine. It is effective propaganda and effective art, but it is doubtful historical representation.

To cavil at the dreaminess, the hushed intensity of feeling, where the emotion is almost lost in the quietness that cloaks it; to object to the soft blurriness that muffles even the clash of arms, would be to wish a good romance unwritten and the author’s talent other than it was. But when the “Dream” is checked with the reality the loss of life and vigor in the imaginative work is apparent. Granting the excellence of much in Morris’ tale, one could wish that Carlyle had fancied the subject in his excursions into chronicle material and treated it in the manner of The French Revolution, though, naturally, on a smaller scale. To give a notion of the force and violence of 1881, the perfect combination might be, for example, William Gryndcobbe’s harsh alterations with the determined abbot of St. Albans and the style of the middle sections of Past and Present. The revolt is stern stuff. John Ball at Blackheath would have been more convincing than John Ball discouraging in soft rhythms to an orderly group at a newly carved cross in a Kentish village. The tremendous rush of events is lost in the “Dream.” It is a quiet backwater Morris presents with a noble priest addressing a following already unified and motivated by the “wrath of battle and the hope of better times”—no zealot urging the terrible simile of the wheat and the tares and the bloody harvest time for lords and lawyers; no mob compounded of opportunists and of honest and well-intentioned men—“zelatores veritatis et justitiae, non fures aut latrones”—and of the raggle taggle of every revolutionary effort. All is serene and hushed in the village east of the revolutionary effort. Will Green, Medway, somewhere between Chatham and Sittingbourne.
secure in his leadership, is followed by a group equally sure of their aim. Order, purpose, idealism mark this threshold of revolt—excellent as typical of Morris' art and his propaganda—but so short of satisfying as a glimpse of the living past. The full and usually undisciplined play of human effort seems lost. If Wat Tyler's hurling time was ever heralded by such thoughtful and peaceful preparation as Morris pictures, there is no hint of it in any record that has survived. There was some plan, and undoubtedly similar, but far less orderly preparation, but *A Dream of John Ball* as a picture of the revolt is an idealization rather than a recreation. Whether it is wiser to drive a lesson by a selective arrangement of past events colored by a personal mood, or to make the point by giving the event in all its force, its narrowness and rudeness as well as its strength as in *Past and Present* is debatable, and dependent finally on the success of the individual effort. Morris chose the first way, and probably, as with Carlyle, the inevitability that seems to attend the union of talent and subject ruled that neither could do other than he did. But whatever the reason, the lovely *Dream of John Ball* (when viewed solely from its use of historical material) is a very limited imaginative picture of June, 1381. Morris is able to view the sheer physical detail of the past with the accuracy of a contemporary, but with a certain lack of historical sense—as though the very vividness of the past lost for him the perspective of the years. Perhaps this quality, paradoxically enough, is the result of his real medievalism—he seems to have caught the trick of the chroniclers, and sights, sounds and smells are magnified by his very nearness, but the final meaning of events blurs.

Not only is there too much order in the shire whose indictments read like a series of housebreaking charges and whose march from Canterbury to London was marked by destruction, but there is little in the chronicles to justify the main action of the piece, the armed combat in the meadows. With the gusto of a chronicler Morris describes a miniature Agincourt, where the bowmen won victory with the "message of death the grey goose bears between its wings." We see the fight on the commons, with the rough and winding medieval road as the strategic point. We watch the cool and measured shooting and hear the satisfying "whir and plump" of the arrows. We follow billmen and bowmen as they leap the hedge for hand to hand combat with the safer but slower armored men. And then the fading of the bright scene comes with the suddenness of a transition in Froissart. Few would care, for the sake of accuracy, to sacrifice this chapter. As a description of a medieval fight, it is lively and thoroughly convincing. But as an imagined incident of the week of June tenth, it is highly improbable. There were few direct encounters such as Morris pictures. Either the rebels had the upper hand and were met with virtually no organized opposition, or, in the end, the odds were overwhelmingly against them, and what followed was a rout and not a contest. The king easily dispersed their band at Billericay and the warlike Bishop Despenser sent them wildly retreating over their wagon barricades at North Walsham. At the Abbey of St. Benedict de Hulm the monks fough all night to keep from entering four hundred insurgents under the leadership of the abbot's carter. But for the most part, the peasants had their day, and except for Despenser, no one competent marshaled troops in an attempt to restore order until the leaders were taken, by guile and chance, quite as much as by force. So although no lover of the medieval would forego the sight of Will Green's bowmen against Rafe Hopton and the Knight of the Three Red Kine, it is doubtful if such manly and open encounters characterized the skirmishes of 1381.

While the liberties Morris takes with historical characters and the time element little affect the literary success of the romance, they have some interest as indications of his use of material. It was Stowe who first recorded the story of the father who so "smote the collector with his lathing staffe that the braine flewe out of his head." This was not Wat Tyler of Colchester, the spokesman at Smithfield, but another, John Tyler of Dartford. Morris uses the popular tale, but from the tone of the passage and his linking the latter with the modern and Bohemian rebels, he also, apparently, has made the popular mistake. He identifies the greater Tyler with the lesser, though Stowe distinguishes between the two. Apart from one other reference in which with dubious geography or knowledge of the path of the rebellion, Morris has the lords looking "to the north of the Thames for Wat Tyler and his men," the chief is not mentioned again. So dominant a figure would have taken from the dramatic effectiveness of John Ball—a better spokesman for Morris' views since he was connected with the inspiration of the revolt and its nobler aspects rather than with the practical management and the defeat.

John Wraw, the leader in Suffolk, is neglected and Geoffrey Litster is in Morris the John Litster of the *Chronicon Angliae* and of *The Anales*, and not the William Litster of Froissart. It must have been with real pleasure that Morris, with his love of working in the dyeing vats, wrote of the northern rebel "wiping the woad from his arms as who would have to stain them red again, but not with grain or madder." Morris is in the minority in viewing Jack Straw as a name assumed by several of the insurgents. The tall figure with the wisp of straw in his helmet and in the armor not made for a yeoman is one of "Three 'Jack Straws' among the fellowship of the discontented, one of whom was over in Essex." But Petit-Dutaillis inclined to think of him as an actual per-
son, and Oman identifies him with Jack Rakestraw. Among the medi-
val chroniclers it is Knighton who says "Jack Straw" is only another
name for Wat Tyler himself. Sir John Newton, the knight who, Morris'
peasants think, may sally forth from Rochester Castle, has a variety of
roles in the records of the revolt. In Walsingham and in Stowe he is
whose resentment at Tyler's insolence starts the trouble that ends in
the rebel's death. Knighton does not mention him. In Froissart, he is
the captured prisoner who is sent as the peasant's spokesman. In Berner's
translation he is Sir Johan Moton, and Sir John Newton, in Johnes'.
Morris intends him for the same role as in Froissart, for John Ball and
the rebels plan "to put a word in his mouth to say to the King."

We expect liberties with chronology when the poet supplants the his-
torian, and Morris takes them.23 If John Ball were released from prison
"Three days ago, as he says in the speech at the Cross, there would
be little need for "preparation" in the Kentish village. It would have
been June fourteenth and Will Green and his men would have been at
Mile End, face to face with the King. Or if the day of release was
counted as one of the three, they all would have been at Blackheath
and listening to a far different sermon. Or if Ball were released on
the seventh instead of the eleventh (the more probable date) they
would have been at Canterbury where they did "light the Archbishop's house
for the candle," but did not release John Ball, as he says in his talk to
Will Green's men. The prison was at Maidstone, not Canterbury, and
the release probably took place on the return march, that is, on the
eleventh. With any possible arrangement of dates, John Ball certainly
would have been far away from the Kentish village. It was Monday be-
fore the feast of Corpus Christi that the mob reached Canterbury. Three
days later the revolt reached its climax. The scene Morris pictures should
have been laid in the previous week, but there would have been the real
difficulty of having the spokesman and leader still lodged in the Arch-
bishop's jail. Given his sources, Morris could have been accurate, if he
cared about such a minor point. What he could not have known, since it
is told in the Anonimale chronicle, was that Thomas Newton would not
have been at home for the rebels. He had been effectively robbed of
authority on June sixth when Robert Cave led the Kentishmen against
Rochester Castle. With equal freedom Morris pictures the St. Albans
riots and Listler's rising as ready to break out; whereas the trouble in the
abbey town began after Tyler entered London, and no signs of disturb-
ance were seen in Norwich until the twelfth, and the actual concentra-
tion of rebel bands did not occur until the seventeenth.

But whatever may be said in criticism of Morris' use of historical ma-
terial—his mistaken estimate of cause and effect, his questionable assign-
ment of communistic motives, his underplaying of violence and exag-
ergating the openness of the contest, his liberties with time, event,
and character—he succeeds where it is most needful. A Dream of John Ball
is a beautiful and essentially true expression of the hopes and longings
of 1381, of the inner drive that gave an emotional unity to the scattered
events and made Trelwylan conclude that the revolt threw "more light
on the aspirations and qualities of the working classes than any other rec-
ord of medieval times."24 The romance is the tribute to the better ele-
ments in the rising: the remnants of order and purpose that relieve the
darkest moments of the rebellion; the moderation that marked the peas-
ants' demands; the homely force and spiritual intensity of the cryptic
messages of the fabulous Piers Plowman, Jakke Treymen, and Jon
Nameless; and the moral earnestness of the real John Ball, to which the
chroniclers are the reluctant witnesses. If the revolt has not as yet found
the poet to bring out its depth and color, it has found in Morris the
spokesman of its idealism.

In re-creating this spirit of dedication, which was undoubtedly pre-
sent, Morris makes effective use of the enigmatic letters, mostly in verse,
circulated by the revolutionists and preserved by the disapproving
chroniclers. In spite of their crude expression, these little poems are fre-
quently marked by exalted feeling and an intensely religious tone. No
one who has read the medieval records misses the thrill of recognition
that comes with Will Green's question and the narrator's answer:

John the Miller, that ground small, small, small . . .
The King's son of heaven shall pay for all.

These lines are from the indictment of John Ball in the Chronicon
Angliae, and they are also attributed by the continuator of Knighton to
Jakke Mylner, who asked "help to turne hys myyne aright." The natu-
ralness with which Morris turns the evidence of history to the imagina-
tive uses of the romance is an illustration of the easy assimilation of facts
that characterized his scholarship always. And it is an illustration too of
the critical soundness that recognized the letters for what they were:
true witnesses of the popular movement surviving in unfriendly accounts
emanating from the opposite camp. There was a spirit afloat and Piers
Plowman was adopted by the rebels as its prophet. Oddly enough, the
title character of a poem fundamentally conservative is met at every
turn of the revolutionary road. He is joined by Jak Carter, Jakke Mylner,
and their fellows, whose names are proofs of the propaganda that flour-
ished in a group for the most part little educated and vigilantly watched,
but alert to the power of song and symbol. Petit-Dutaillis says that tales
of outlawry were much in vogue and that Ganelon and Robin Hood
It was symbolic of the end of a long preparation and the sign that deliverance was at hand, and that the “King’s son of heaven he shall pay for all.”

Undoubtedly Morris softens the outlines of the vigorous priest, “once of St. Mary’s York, but now of Colchester,” and to some readers this may seem a loss. But he does catch the spiritual intensity that can be found even in the most unfriendly of medieval accounts. The rebel priest’s letters, or those attributed to him, are full of the counsel of Morris’s speech at the Cross, though without the cadenced rhythms, the “yaws,” and “nays,” and “forsooths.” “John Ball Sente Marye prist greete wele alle maner men and byddes hem in the name of the Trinite, Fadur, and Sone and Holy Gost stonde manlyche togedyr in tretwe, and helpe tretwe, and tretwe schal helpe Yowe. . . .”22 Another letter, attributed to Jak Carter, but probably of common origin, strikes a similar note, in which moral counsel is coupled with advice to chastise well “Hob the Robber,” Alexander Hales, the Lord Treasurer. The rebels are advised to “make a gode ende of that ye have begunne, and do well and ay bettur and bettur, for at the even, men heryb the day.”23

In one important respect, however, Morris follows, in his characterization of the priest, neither Thorough Rogers nor the chroniclers. The John Ball of the romance is not a Wycliffite. Perhaps Morris’s lack of sympathy with modern protestantism made him unwilling to see his hero as the follower of the man commonly thought of as the precursor of the later movement. But whatever the motive, he pictures the lords as looking to the Lollards for possible support—at least for help in doing away with the church holidays that rob the rich of the service of the poor—and John Ball as a radical, but with the radicalism of reformers within the church. Rogers, on the other hand, considers Ball as the chief of the “poor priests,” who prior to the revolt “honeycombed the minds of the upland folk with what may be called religious socialism.”24 The chroniclers, too, are loud in their denunciation of the rebel’s Lollardry. “Docuit et perversa dogmata perfidi Iohannis Wyclif, opiniones quos tenuit, et insanias falsas, et plura quae longum foret recitare,” says the Chronicon Angliae.25 Knighton’s continuator calls Ball Wycliff’s John the Baptist; and the Fasciculi Zizaniorum contains a confession ascribed to Ball in which he admits being a follower of Wycliff for two years—not only in his social theories but in his heresies as well.26 That John Ball was a Lollard is denied by Oman and Trevelyan, and the accusations in the chronicles are ascribed either to prejudice or to reporting long after the event. On this point Morris anticipates the scholarship of the nineties. He may have been right through one of those intuitive soundings of the past that often marked his medievalism, with his guess in this case

\[\text{Jon Balle greteth yowe alle and doth Yowe to understande, he hath rungen youre bell. Nowe ry3t and my3t, wyle and skyle. God spede every ydle. Nowe is tyme Lady helpe to Ihesu thi sone, and thi sone to his fadur, to make a gode ende, in the name of the Trinite of that is begunne amen, amen, pur charite, amen.}\]
strengthened by his sensitivity to the popular thinking expressed in the letters and songs. And there is no Lollardy in them.

Not only does Morris treat with sympathetic understanding the idealism present in the revolt and in the teachings of its leader, but he suggests a picture of the well being of the English peasantry at the close of the century that most would accept as essentially true. Of course there is the poet's heightened effect. It could be objected with justice that the medieval eyesores are strangely missing from the romance, and that the scene resembles some village from one of Morris' early printed books, a country counterpart of the town illustrations, for example, of his gorgeous _Eunuchus_ of Terence. But there is nevertheless universal agreement that the period was marked by lower class prosperity. The people of Kent were particularly favored and it is well Morris chose that shire as the setting for the romance. They were also traditionally in a better position than other counties. According to the legendary tale, the men of Kent met William the Conqueror at Swanscombe and gave him the choice of the oak of peace or the sword of war—but their ancient laws must be guaranteed. Actually the story seems without historical basis—the strongest evidence in the Domesday Book merely granting special privileges to the four Laths in the east of Kent.

But Morris makes effective use of it in John Ball's speech:

> Men of Kent, I wit well that ye are not so hard bested as those of other shires, by the token of the day when behind the screen of leafy boughs ye met Duke William with bill and bow as he wended Londonward from that woeful field of Senlac.

Legally, too, the men of Kent enjoyed undoubted privileges and the sanction for them was historical as well as legendary. Vinogradoff says that "the basis of Kentish social law is the assumption that every man is entitled to be considered as personally free." This privilege "resulted in a greater development of individual freedom and a certain looseness of social relations." Lifting from the Kentishmen some of the agrarian burdens seemed to free them too for greater political action. They carried on their tradition in Jack Cade's rebellion in the following century, and commemorated it in a song that Morris may have known, in which their complaint is sung to a liturgical dirge, very much as John Ball's men in the romance sing revolutionary words to the plain chant of the church.

Certainly Morris' picture of the peasants of Kent as prosperous and revolutionary is fairly well borne out by the evidence—taking into account, of course, the freedom the poet must have in an imaginative recreation and a "dream." There is one flaw in the picture though. Why did Morris, who must have known that the special privileges of Kent freed them from most of the servile burdens of the agrarian system, still retain Rogers' theory that it was a return to serfdom they resented? Their grandfathers had not been villeins and a return was therefore impossible. Fellowship with the other shires would have been just as effective in showing Kentish spirit, and accuracy need not have been sacrificed. Perhaps Morris' wish to generalize, to use the revolt as a lesson, caused him to ignore what he must have known: the highly political nature of Kentish aims. In the romance the King is referred to only once and John of Gaunt not at all. Yet it was the passionate loyalty to one and the just as intense hatred of the other that is recognized as the main motive in the uprising in that shire.

But after all the real triumph of *A Dream of John Ball* does not necessarily depend on its satisfying the sense of historical accuracy on particular points. The wonder of it lies in its embodiment of feudalism—the easy fusion into a unified picture of facts gathered through a lifetime. A turn of phrase, a snatch of song, a view of a newly carved rood screen send echoes down the years of enthusiastic learning. Here is a knowledge of the Middle Ages that is warm, human, and sometimes fallible—important for its own sake, and for its evidence of the search of a later age to find in the earlier an answer to its own riddle. Here is all the grace of things known well and long familiar, where a word of William Green's can suggest the poet's devotion to Chaucer as easily as an outright tribute. As naturally as he wears his medieval costume, the narrator fancies his resemblance to Morris' idol. Harry Bailey's genial self steps across the pages for a moment and is gone when the yeoman says "Look no more on the ground, as though thou sawest a hare, but let thine eyes and thine ears be busy to gather tidings to bear back to Essex—or heaven!" *A Dream of John Ball* is compounded of the artist's knowledge of beauty of line and color and delight in all the gear, tackle and trim of medieval life; of the poet's alertness to the living literature of the ballads and the peoples' songs of hope; and of the enthusiasm of the lover of history, catching in a phrase here and there the very likeness of the past. Certainly no admirer of the medieval would wish the romance undone, and he would gladly follow down the Roman road to Will Green's house. One last flickering of the critical spirit, however, might offer the suggestion to the dreamer that he remove his pen and ink case, the pouch embroidered very prettily "and made of hard leather chased with a hunting scene," and toss it over the hedge thick with white poppies. It would be better to enter a village of 1881 without it. The rebels had a disconcerting way with such owners. "They spared none whom they thought to be learned," says Stowe. "Especially if they found any to have pen and ink, they pulled off his hood, and all with one voice of crying: 'Hale him out and cut off his head.'"