

KELMSCOTT LECTURE 1989
THE CHANGE BEYOND THE CHANGE
A DREAM OF JOHN BALL



THE CHANGE BEYOND THE CHANGE

A DREAM OF JOHN BALL

*The Annual Kelmscott Lecture
of the William Morris Society
given at the London School of Economics
on 26th October 1989*

THE CHANGE BEYOND
THE CHANGE
A DREAM OF JOHN BALL



RODNEY HILTON

WILLIAM MORRIS SOCIETY

First published by the William Morris Society, 1990
Kelmescott House, 26 Upper Mall, Hammersmith, London W6 9TA

ISBN 0 903283 12 3

Copyright © Rodney Hilton 1990

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author through the publisher

Printed at the Russell Press, Nottingham

THE CHANGE BEYOND THE CHANGE A DREAM OF JOHN BALL

William Morris and Socialism

I remember when I was a youth in the early 1930s that a family friend who, like my parents, was a member of the Independent Labour Party, was trying to counter my incipient Marxist tendencies. She emphasised very strongly that the sort of socialism for which the I.L.P. stood was that of William Morris, not of Karl Marx.

In those days, in spite of what Morris himself had written, the image of him as a Romantic dreamer, projecting a Utopian vision of socialism — perhaps based on a faulty reading of *News from Nowhere* — was very prevalent. Thanks to later serious writings on Morris, above all that of E. P. Thompson, we know very well that in the 1880s, Marx's influence on Morris was considerable.¹ It very much influenced his political thinking and activity in the Socialist League. He had read the first volume of *Capital* in 1883 and was particularly impressed by the historical sections, especially, it would seem, by Part VIII, entitled 'So-called Primitive Accumulation'.²

Already in 1884, in his lecture on 'Architecture and History' to the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, he showed, in his description of the historical context of architectural production, the influence of Marx. It was J. Thorold Rogers whom he specifically named as one of the 'painstaking collectors of facts' on whom he relied. But he also added an oblique reference, obviously to Marx, in contrasting the 18th century workshop system with the contemporary factory system — "it was with a ready sympathy that I read the full explanation of the change and its tendencies in the writings of a man, I will say, a great man, whom, I suppose, I ought not to name in this company ...".³

In 'The Hopes of Civilisation', written in 1885, he again composes a perceptive sketch of human history and specifically pays tribute to Marx — "to Germany we owe the school of economists, at whose head stands the name of Karl Marx, who have made modern socialism what

it is ... the new school, starting with a historical view of what had been and seeing that a law of evolution swayed all events in it, was able to point out that, whether socialism was desirable or not, it is at least inevitable. Here then was at last a hope of a different kind to any that had gone before ...".⁴ *A Dream of John Ball* was published in 1888 and its historical schema as well as its message convey very clearly the importance of Marx's influence.

Modern writers who discuss *A Dream* in the context of Morris's political thinking, quite naturally concentrate on the last three chapters, when the William Morris who appears in the dream about 1381 as 'the man from Essex', talks to Ball about 'Days to Come', and in particular on the final chapter about 'The Change beyond the Change'.⁵ It is here that 'the man from Essex' tells Ball that although in the 19th century workers would compete so that they might become capitalists, rather than combine to overthrow capitalism, in the end they *will* combine and 'The Host of Fellowship' — a phrase intended to be resonant in 1381 — will accomplish the destruction of capitalism.

A Dream of John Ball

Morris begins by describing his frequent dreams about historic buildings and then this more real dream about his appearance in Kent in 1381. He appears as a 'scholar', clad in a black gown. The implication is that he would have been to a university, Oxford or Cambridge in those days. He would therefore be a cleric, like John Ball. As we shall see, clerics played a significant role, before and during the events of 1381. He meets the men of Kent and especially the prosperous yeoman, William Green, with whom he establishes his credentials as a rebel by responding to William Green's quotation from a letter of John Ball — 'John the Miller that ground small, small, small' by quoting the next line in reply — 'The king's son of heaven shall pay for all.'⁶ His credentials are still further accepted by the armed Kentishman, whom he meets in a tavern (or 'pot-house'), when it is clear that he really is a man from Essex where the rebellion against the infamous Poll Tax had already begun.

They all move from the pot-house to the cross by the church under a banner depicting Adam and Eve, inscribed with Ball's famous slogan 'When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?' Ball preaches his sermon, thanking his audience for his delivery from the Archbishop of Canterbury's prison.⁷ He preaches Fellowship, prefers

revolt to charity and tells them that freedom from lords will allow the peasants to enjoy all the fruits of their labour. As he preaches, the man from Essex ponders on the theme which he will develop in later discussions with John Ball — "how men fight and lose the battle and the things they fought for come 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".

The men of Kent do, however, fight and win the battle of Township's End. After dining with William Green, John Ball and the man from Essex retire to the 'white steepled church' where lie the dead of both sides from the battle. John Ball asks the man from Essex to 'talk of days to come'. The man forecasts the long future history of the struggle of servile peasants and then wage-workers against their lords and masters. He predicts the defeat of the 1381 rising but emphasises that nevertheless the lords will fail to re-impose servile villeinage. A free peasantry will emerge, but commercial development, linked especially with the development of sheep farming to provide wool for an international market, through the 'Easterlings' (the traders of the Hanseatic League), will produce class divisions among the peasants. The numbers of wage labourers will increase and capitalism will begin to develop, first with the division of labour in craft industry, then with the industrial revolution and the creation of a new servitude.⁸

The man from Essex traces for John Ball the historical evolution from slavery through medieval villeinage to the exploitation of wage labour in industrial capitalism. Ball finds it hard to understand how all this can happen when men have been freed but is also convinced that his own efforts will not have been in vain. They both agree that, in the end, the workers will defeat the new servitude.

William Morris's Historical Understanding

The assertion by Morris, as the man from Essex, when talking with John Ball, that in spite of defeat, the rebels of 1381 would achieve success in gaining freedom, was basically correct. This must be stressed, in spite of some modern historians' negative assessment of the 1381 rising — 'an unnecessary historical catastrophe', 'a passing episode in the social history of the late middle ages'.⁹ As I have suggested, much of his understanding was based on Marx's description of the process of primitive accumulation in *Capital*, I. It is, of course, possible to pick out some of Morris's historical inaccuracies. The

contrast he suggests between poor Essex peasants and the rich yeomen of Kent can be shown to be faulty; he was unaware that the division of labour in craft production, which he locates in the 18th century, was already in existence, at any rate in the very important textile industry, by the 14th century; and there were no organised craft guilds in 14th century Canterbury.¹⁰ But we must not expect Morris to anticipate, in the 1880s, the results of a century of subsequent historical research.

Was Morris's perception of the history of social and economic evolution over five centuries, ending in the destruction of capitalism, over simplistic? We must understand that *A Dream* was not a political tract for the late 1880s but a vision informed by historical understanding.¹¹ Perhaps we should also say that it was not even a totally unreasonable vision in the 1880s, given the rapid development of industrial capitalism, the strengthening of an organised working class and the rapid expansion of socialist movements. Neither was the 'historical understanding' which lay behind the vision basically faulty, even though it was necessarily briefly expressed. Over those centuries, and from the medieval period onwards, it should be accepted that popular struggle against exploitation contributed positively to historical development, from 1381 to the Levellers and Diggers in the 17th century and to the Chartists in the 19th century. Furthermore, Morris's linking of changing economic and social structures with the complex history of successes and defeats shows a shrewd insight, which continues to be relevant in the late 20th century.,

It is interesting that Morris should have chosen 1381 and John Ball as the starting point for his vision of the uneven progress of humankind towards socialism, rather than, say, the revolutionary movements of the 17th century. It is not, however, surprising. He was, in a sense, a medieval historian, his focus being, as we know, on the history of art and architecture. Nor was this history backward looking and nostalgic. He admired the work of the craftsmen, the masons and the sculptors of the middle ages, but he was fully conscious that their work was determined by the social and economic conditions within which they existed.¹² Perhaps 1381 appealed to him, not only because of his general interest in the period, but because it was a movement in which practical struggle was inspired by ideas as well as by immediate needs. This combination would seem to him to be admirably illustrated in the career of John Ball. We may look at his choice of the theme with all the greater interest in view of the great increase in our knowledge and understanding of 1381, since Morris's time. And, in fact, in examining

the rising and John Ball in the light of new research, we do not correct Morris, but justify and extend his vision.

The Rising of 1381

I have already suggested that Morris had a good historical understanding of the end of feudal society, the beginnings of capitalism, even as early as the late medieval and early modern periods, and the development of machine industry, all in a social as well as an economic context. He also had some correct perceptions of the situation in 1381. He was aware that the conditions of peasants and labourers in England had improved after the Black Death. Although he could not know all the details, he was aware that there was what has been called a 'feudal reaction' on the part of the ruling class of landlords. This was their response to improved peasant conditions, especially falling rents, due to a reduced population and an increase in the amount of available land. They attempted to re-impose the conditions of villeinage of the pre-Black Death period.¹³ Morris must also have been aware of peasant subversiveness before the rising itself. This is expressed in *A Dream* by the introduction into the narrative of a Robin Hood ballad sung by one of the Kentish peasants before John Ball preaches his sermon. As John Ball arrives, the ballad singer claps the man of Essex on the shoulder and says "Was it not sooth that I said, brother, that Robin Hood should bring us John Ball?"

The legends of Robin Hood were certainly already well known in the 14th century. The 'rimes of Robin Hood' are referred to as one of the favourites of Sloth, the idle priest satirised by William Langland in his *Piers Plowman*, written not long before 1381.¹⁴ They go back much further and there is indeed a vigorous (and probably pointless) historical research industry involving attempts to track down the 'real' Robin Hood as far back as the 13th century. In fact, he is a legendary figure and the 'rimes' of which we have authentic late medieval versions, embody what was the important historical reality — the legend itself. Although the ballads contain what we might call 'good stories' which would be enjoyed by a wide range of people, their message is subversive, as one would expect of tales of outlaws, living in defiance of the law in the royal forest, which was supposed to be the exclusive hunting reserve of the king and his favourites. Some historians, who are inclined to belittle lower class rebellion and subversion in any form, try to emphasise that the ballads are harmless jolly tales, much

appreciated, for example, by feudal retainers. Morris was right to use them as an illustration of subversive feeling on the eve of the rising.¹⁵

What Morris did not know about and which would have interested him greatly, was the long history of peasant revolts, revealed by research mostly done after his time. Before 1381, and in all parts of England, there had been village rebellions, going back at least to the late 12th century.¹⁶ Many of them are well documented, so that we know a lot about their causes and their consequences. For the most part, they were protests against increases in rents, labour services and servile exactions such as *merchet* (marriage fines), *heriot* (death duties) and *tallage* (seigneurial taxation). Associated with these protests were assertions by the peasants that they were of free status and tenure and that therefore arbitrary rent increases and demands linked with servile status were illegal. Peasants had quite a lot of experience of legal processes in manorial courts and did not hesitate to set up funds to hire lawyers and prosecute their lords in the royal courts. One argument that was often used, if at all plausible, was that they were tenants of the Ancient Demesne of the Crown, that is, of manors which had been part of the royal demesne at the time of Domesday Book, and whose tenants should not have their rents and services changed, even when (as often happened) other feudal lords had acquired the manor. So many of these cases appeared in the 13th and 14th centuries that in 1377, lords stated that they feared an uprising like that of the *Jacquerie* in France in 1358. They petitioned successfully in Parliament for a Statute which would prevent any litigation over Ancient Demesne status.¹⁷

There was sometimes violence against the lords and their agents, especially when the peasants' cases were turned down in the royal courts (as they usually were). But peasant movements were not riotous or irrational. Litigation or straightforward refusal to pay rents and perform services were very often the culmination of non-violent conflicts at the manorial court level. Furthermore, it was almost always the richer peasants, who often had official positions in the manor, who led the protests, legitimately in the manor court, as well as in the organisation of appeals to the royal court or eventually in illegal rebellion.¹⁸ The point to be stressed is that although these well-to-do peasant leaders might be seen by manorial lords and their agents as officials of the manor court and therefore responsible to the lord, they themselves and their fellow peasants would be likely to see themselves as representatives of the manor or village community. Without

idealising the medieval village community, within which there were undoubtedly social divisions between peasants with large holdings and poor cottagers, it could represent the interests of all.

It might also be mentioned that there were other forms of local solidarity in the shape of the so-called parish guilds or fraternities. They were essentially social and religious associations. They are already found in the 12th century and had become numerous in English towns and villages by the end of the 14th century, especially in East Anglia.¹⁹ Like craft guilds, they were expressions of collective identity. They were regarded with suspicion by the royal government, which had for long regarded such organisations as 'covins' and 'conspiracies' (*conjuraciones*). They included women as well as men and their members are referred to in their surviving records as 'brothers' and 'sisters'. The term 'fellow' was less often used, normally to describe one or two associates of guild officials. The term 'fellowship' only appears to be used instead of 'fraternity' from the 15th century onwards.²⁰ Nevertheless, as an evocative term covering both brothers and sisters, its use in *A Dream* was very suitable.

The Rebels' Demands in 1381

The 1381 rising was, and still is, seen as a swift response to the Poll Tax, to the way in which it was collected and to the attempts to punish local resistance. But it was more than that. It cannot be understood unless we see it as the combination over the centuries of rebellious practice and rebellious ideas, eventually expressed in the programme of demands put before Richard II by the rebel leaders in London at Mile End and Smithfield.²¹ One group of demands can be seen as emerging directly from the two centuries of the practice of rebellion, almost always at the village level. The overriding demand was for freedom for all — free status for the peasants and the end of servile villeinage; freedom for wage workers from the compulsions exercised by the Justices of the Peace as a result of the Statutes of Labourers, aimed at keeping down wages. The natural and anticipated consequences for a free peasantry would be a reduction in rents and the abolition of labour services. So, no rent was to be paid beyond four pence an acre. Another important, though less well documented demand, was for equal access for rich and poor alike to fish and game in rivers, woods and parks.

The other demands which were made were less closely linked with practical protest and rebellion and may have been articulated under the influence of ideas put forward by the radical intellectuals who were closely associated with the rebels. In the condition of 14th century England these people were drawn from the clergy, the only literate people in touch with the lower ranks of society. At least twenty-four clerics, apart from John Ball himself, can be named.²² Most of them, unlike Ball, were established parish priests, rectors, vicars or chaplains. They would have been more aware of the conditions of their peasant and labouring parishioners than were the higher clergy or the monks, who were often even richer landowners than many of the lay aristocracy.

The parish clergy also had their own grievances. In particular, they too suffered from taxation which was grossly regressive. No or little distinction was made between poor vicars and rich pluralists.²³ Their role in the rebellion was recognised by the government after the defeat of the rising, when collectors of subsidies were excused from taking money due from chaplains and clerics in the archdeaconry of Essex, who had gone into hiding for fear of being implicated in the proceedings against the rebels.²⁴

The wider demands which were included in the rebels' programme, perhaps due to this clerical influence, contained a vision of social reconstruction beyond that implied by the demands already mentioned. Lordship was to be abolished, although it was expressed as everybody having equal lordship — except for the king, concerning whose impartiality above the social struggle, many rebels still had illusions. The abolition of the legal system was envisaged. Hatred for lawyers was very intense during the rising. The alternative, however, was very vaguely articulated as the adoption of the so-called Law of Winchester, implying little more than popular policing.²⁵ More important, the abolition of the secular social hierarchy, implied in the abolition of lordship, was matched by a demand for the abolition of the church hierarchy and the confiscation of church property, to be divided amongst the people.

The suggestion that these more far-reaching demands may have been due to the influence of the clerical supporters of the rising derives from our knowledge that there was a long history of radical social ideas associated very often with Christian heretical movements, though sometimes shared by clerics who remained theologically orthodox. They were, in fact, concepts of freedom and equality which could find

justification in the Bible, especially in the New Testament. There were many heretical strands, some of which could be called 'evangelical', deriving their ideas from the Gospels. There were others which were 'millenarian', looking forward to the very near end of the world as they knew it and of the arrival of a new and holy era, before the final judgement.

The great majority of these movements were socially radical and began as early as the late 14th century.²⁶ They were, however, mainly European and until the 14th century had relatively little impact in England. It was not unreasonable, in fact, to suppose that John Ball's activity was an early manifestation of this type of movement in England. Ball was not a heretic and was certainly not, as was alleged after 1381, a follower of John Wyclif, who in some ways was socially quite conservative.²⁷

John Ball's Ideas

What were Ball's ideas and what accepted social doctrines did he undermine? Perhaps we should consider the sermons of the orthodox and conformist preachers, speaking to the laity from the pulpit, rather than the writings of theorists which would hardly reach the people. The sermons which have reached us from this period do in fact often contain social doctrine as well as religious or moral exhortations. In particular, they emphasise the very old theory of the three estates or orders. This theory emphasises the harmonious co-existence of those who fight (the aristocracy), those who pray (the clergy) and those who work to provide subsistence for all (the peasants). These are status groups, not classes. They are defined in terms of the social honour attributed to them, not in terms of their place in the social relations of production.²⁸

A 14th century sermon well illustrates the way in which this theme was presented:

Knights and other gentles should set their business about good government in time of peace and about diverse points of arms in time of war ... priests should principally intermet to learn the law of Christ and lawfully to teach it ... and lower men should hold them content with the questions and subtlety of their own labour. If every part of Christ's church would hold them content with their own occupations, then the grace of almighty God should flourish.²⁹

Even William Langland, the social aspect of whose message in *Piers Plowman* is by no means conformist and which has echoes in John Ball's letters, accepts the 'estate' concept. In Passus VIII, when Piers is to plough his half-acre, a knight humbly asks him to teach him how to plough. But Piers replies, "Surely, Sir Knight, I shall toil for both of us and all my life will labour for love of thee, if thou wilt keep my church and me from the wasters and the wicked that would us destroy". The knight is exhorted to "do no harm to thy bondman that it may be well with thee, he is here thine underling" — that is, on earth — he may do better than the knight in heaven.³⁰

This constant theme of preachers and others in support of the existing order was, as we have seen, rejected not only by Ball but by other parish priests. On the other hand, it was always heavily emphasised by those clerics who clearly benefited from that order. The wealthy Augustinian abbey of St Mary in the Fields at Leicester was one of many landowners which had to face a peasant rebellion. Its tenants at Stoughton took the abbey to the king's court in 1276 in protest against the imposition on them, as free sokemen, of villein services. They lost their case and one of the canons wrote a jeering poem in Latin about the whole episode, ending up by saying:

What should a serf do other than serve and his son too?
He shall be purely a serf and have no freedom.
The judgement of the law and the king's court prove this.³¹

Ball's preaching contradicted these views. Unfortunately, although the quotations we have given about socially orthodox attitudes are authentic, we have to rely on the enemies of the rebels for versions of what Ball was preaching. Was his message distorted? To some extent, this is possible. But there are reasons for supposing that the essence of his message was correctly reported. The versions in different histories and chronicles, unlikely to be copied from a single written source, are similar; there was little need to invent in order to shock their readers; they fit in with previous official condemnations of Ball, as we shall see; the ideas also fit in with what we know about radical or heretical preaching during the middle ages. What he preached clearly undermines the whole three-estate concept.

The most vivid report is that of the aristocratic writer, Jean Froissart, who learned about the details of the 1381 rising when he came to London in 1388. By then, one supposes, Ball's sermons had become

somewhat legendary. They are expressed with Froissart's usual literary skills:

My good friends, matters cannot go well in England until all things shall be in common; when there shall be neither vassals nor lords; when the lords shall be no more masters than ourselves ... are we not all descended from the same parents, Adam and Eve? ... It is by our labour that they have the wherewith to support their pomp. We are called serfs and if we do not perform our services, we are beaten

These sentiments fit in with what we read elsewhere about the 1381 program — except for the suggestions that all things should be in common. That would not be a peasant demand, even though it did enter into some millenarian dreams.

Thomas Walsingham, chronicler of the wealthy landowning abbey of St Albans, wrote a version of the sermon, nearer to the time. As a member of an institution actually threatened by the rebels, he would obviously not give an unbiased account:

... to corrupt more people with his doctrine he (John Ball) began a sermon in this fashion, 'When Adam dalf and Eve span, wo was thanne a gentleman' ... he tried to prove that all men were created equal by nature and that servitude had been introduced by the unjust and evil oppression of man against the will of God, who, if it had pleased him to create serfs, surely in the beginning of the world, would have appointed who should be a serf and who a lord ... he (God) had now appointed a time, wherein, laying aside the yoke of long servitude, they might, if they wished, enjoy their liberty so long desired.³²

John Ball's Preaching before 1381

John Ball was preaching what were considered to be subversive ideas well before 1381, though we do not have any texts of these sermons, even from hostile reporters. There is an item in the Register of Simon of Sudbury, the Archbishop of Canterbury (1375-81) who was the royal Chancellor at the time of the rising — a post equivalent to that of a modern prime minister — and who met his death at the hands of the rebels. The item is entitled *Denunciatio contra Johannem Balle ab Archiepiscopo Cantuarensi* (Denunciation of John Ball by the Archbishop of Canterbury). It speaks of the need to check 'pseudo-prophets' and refers back to Ball's illegal preaching, leading to his public excommunication by Simon Islip, who was archbishop of

Canterbury from 1349 to 1366. In 1366, the Register of Simon Islip's successor, Simon Langham (1366-68), records a mandate to the Dean of Bocking in Essex and to all the clergy in his deanery. The mandate refers to John Ball's preaching of multiple errors and scandals. It forbids the faithful in the deanery to listen to Ball under penalty of major excommunication, the guilty to be cited before the Archbishop. A letter patent was sent out from the royal chancery in 1376 to five Essex men, two of whom were parsons, ordering them to arrest John Ball, chaplain, already excommunicated for contumely by the Archbishop. He was to be delivered to the sheriff of Essex, to be physically punished until the Holy Church be satisfied in respect of contempt and injury.³³

According to Sudbury's denunciation, dated April 1381 — the month before the rising — Ball had never bothered to obtain absolution from excommunication before 1366, but returned to preach in cemeteries, churches and market places, not only attacking bishops and archbishops but the pope. A chronicle, possibly from Westminster Abbey, confirms that Ball was preaching in various towns and villages throughout England, encouraging the people to participate in a conspiracy (*conjuratio*). Chroniclers well away from the main areas of revolt refer to his activities. The chronicler at Kirkstall Abbey in Yorkshire refers to him as a priest of the Lollard sect. The chronicler at Dieulacres Abbey in Staffordshire refers to him as a heinous (*nephandus*) priest, striving alongside Jack Straw, Piers Plowman and others to destroy the laws and customs of the kingdom, especially those concerning the bondage of the serfs of lords. A monk from Evesham Abbey, Worcestershire, writing a life of Richard II, states that John Ball preached in many places, encouraging insurrection and disturbances and asserting that by doing so, his hearers would acquire the salvation of their souls. The chronicler of Dunstable Priory in Bedfordshire, closer to the main events of 1381, says that Ball was executed at St Albans for preaching in northern parts and exciting the people to sedition.³⁴ In short, Ball was not only a well-known preacher of rebellion long before the rising, but in 1381 was one of three recognised leaders, together with Wat Tyler and Jack Straw.

It may be that Ball had been an adviser and one of the organisers of the rising, before the outbreak, or at least from the very beginning. The so-called letters of John Ball and other leaders, which are quoted by some chroniclers, are very likely authentic, if extremely cryptic, messages. One of them is especially interesting, in that, in it, Ball

identifies himself as having been originally a chantry priest at York and now in Colchester, Essex. The other letters, no doubt purposefully obscure, are addressed to various people under what are probably pseudonyms, such as John Nameless, John the Miller, Jack the Carter, Jack Trewman and so on. They give warnings as well as instructions — “Beware of guile in borough” says a letter attributed to Ball. One of Ball's letters has a very clear message:

John Ball, Saint Mary priest, greets well all manner of men and bids them in the name of the Trinity, Father and Son and Holy Ghost to stand manly together in truth, and help truth and truth shall help you. Now reigneth pride in price and covetous is held wise and lechery without shame and gluttony without blame. Envy reigneth with treason and sloth is taken in great season. God deliver us, for now is the time. Amen.³⁵

In *A Dream*, Ball predicts his own death by execution. According to the Evesham chronicler, he refused to ask the king for mercy. He was hanged, drawn and quartered at St Albans.

Conclusion

Apart from the evocative description of the mobilisation of the men of Kent, their battle, their appreciation of John Ball's sermon and their celebration of their victory at Township's End, the main theme of *A Dream* is the discussion between John Ball and William Morris in his manifestation as the 'man of Essex'. As I have suggested, one may make some corrections, a hundred years later, to Morris's historical account of change from the defeat of 1381 until his hoped-for achievement of socialism in the 20th century. Nevertheless, his perception was remarkably shrewd, especially in his emphasis on the alternation of success and defeat as the changing working population confronted many different sorts of exploiters. Based very much on the historical analyses of Marx and Engels, he adds, even though briefly, a human dimension to this story of fluctuating fortunes. What is more, even though he was looking into a dark future beyond 1888, his combination of realistic pessimism and determined optimism, can have seemed to be by no means irrelevant to those who read *A Dream* in the succeeding decades and may even have apposite lessons to us today.

To return finally to the Rising of 1381, which was Morris's starting point for a vision of the future, I have tried to show how Morris's conception of change, of a succession of triumphs and failures could,

in fact, be projected backwards from 1381. Morris probably did not know that in success and in defeat the rising was a continuation of a series of successes and defeats, going back two centuries and more in England and perhaps five centuries or more in Europe as a whole. In a feudal society which was primarily agrarian, the successes, and the failures were primarily located in the struggle of peasants against lay and ecclesiastical landlords, though the rebellions of artisans and labourers against mercantile oligarchies in the increasingly important urban sector of medieval society cannot be neglected in this general context.³⁶

Morris would, no doubt, have been particularly interested in the role of those radical intellectuals, like John Ball, who were active before 1381. They were almost all clerics, but nevertheless unorthodox thinkers who challenged those accepted interpretations of Christian teaching which justified the rule of lords and kings, bishops and popes. Ball was one of a long line, before as well as after him, of radical thinkers who identified with the "lower men" who did not "content themselves with the questions and subtlety of their own labour."

Notes

1. E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (London, 1955, 1977). Citations will be from the 1977 edition. An earlier discussion of Morris's Marxism is in A. L. Morton and George Tate, *The British Labour Movement* (London, 1956).
2. K. Marx, *Capital*, I (London, 1976), p.873ff.
3. W. Morris, 'Architecture and History', *Collected Works*, vol. 22, p.311.
4. Idem, 'The Hopes of Civilisation', *Collected Works*, vol. 23, pp.74-5.
5. For example, John Goode, 'William Morris and the Dream of Revolution', in John Lucas, ed., *Literature and Politics in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1971).
6. The letters of John Ball are collected in R. H. Robbins, *Historical Poems of the XIVth and XVth centuries* (New York, 1959), pp.54-5 and in R. B. Dobson, ed., *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381* (London, 1970), pp. 380-3. This is a remarkably useful collection of original sources in translation, illustrating all aspects of the rising.
7. In fact, Ball had been imprisoned at Maidstone, not at Canterbury, as Morris thought.
8. The export of English wool to the textile manufacturing centres of Flanders and northern Italy was considerable from the late thirteenth century to the early 1360s,

- but dropped off to be largely replaced by woollen cloth exports, from the late 1370s through the fifteenth century and beyond. See E. M. Carus-Wilson and O. Coleman, *England's Export Trade 1275-1547* (Oxford, 1963), for useful tables and graphs for quick consultation. These figures, based on customs accounts, would not be known to Morris.
9. R. B. Dobson, in the introduction to op. cit., (note 6), dismisses any idea that the revolt had any positive consequences, pp.27-9. This negative view was shared by M. M. Postan in *The Medieval Economy and Society* (London, 1972), p.154.
 10. C. C. Dyer, 'The Social and Economic Background to the Rural Revolt of 1381' in R. H. Hilton and T. H. Aston, eds., *The English Rising of 1381* (Cambridge, 1984); the division of labour in medieval craft industry was well illustrated long ago for Flanders and northern Italy; and for England by George Unwin in *Industrial Organisation* (London, 1904), and in *The Gilds and Companies of London* (London, 1908) — too late for Morris; the ubiquity of craft guilds in all middle-sized to large towns used to be assumed in Morris's time, a view not sustainable today.
 11. E. P. Thompson, in op. cit., (note 1), p.675, rightly insists that *A Dream* contains "realistic meditations on the meaning of history".
 12. This is clear from the lecture on 'Architecture and History' (note 3).
 13. Examples of lords' attempts to use their jurisdictional powers to combat declining income are in R. H. Hilton, *The English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1975), p.58ff.
 14. Sloth appears at the beginning of Passus VII — *Piers Plowman* by William Langland: *An Edition of the C — Text*, ed. Derek Pearsall (London, 1978), p.129.
 15. A debate about Robin Hood is in R. H. Hilton, ed., *Peasants, Knights and Heretics* (Cambridge, 1976).
 16. See 'Peasant Movements before 1381' in R. H. Hilton, *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism* (London, 1985). Other examples of village peasant movements continue to emerge from manorial and royal court records.
 17. Well presented by Rosamund Faith in 'The Great Rumour of 1377 and Peasant Ideology' in Hilton and Aston, eds., op. cit., (note 10).
 18. See C. C. Dyer, op. cit., (note 10).
 19. H. F. Westlake, *The Parish Gilds of Medieval England* (London, 1919).
 20. L. Toulmin-Smith, ed., *English Gilds: Original Ordinances of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*, Early English Text Society (London, 1870), includes records of social and religious gilds as well as of craft gilds.
 21. There is much written about the 1381 rising. An important early monograph was that of A. Réville, *Le Soulèvement des Travailleurs en Angleterre en 1381* (Paris, 1898), followed shortly by another influential work by Charles Oman, *The Great Revolt of 1381* (Oxford, 1906), re-issued with an introduction and notes by E. B. Fryde in 1969. See also, R. H. Hilton, *Bondmen Made Free* (London, 1973); R. B. Dobson, op. cit., (note 6), Part III, gives translations of sources which describe the rebels in London.
 22. H. B. Workman, *John Wyclif* (Oxford, 1926), vol. 2, pp.294-5, gives a list of fifteen clerics who supported the rebels. The other names crop up in various legal and other sources.
 23. Workman, op. cit., draws attention to the regressive clerical taxation of 1379 and 1380 as well as to the keeping down of clerical salaries under the Statute of Labourers;

also on clerical poll taxes see R. N. Swanson, *Church and Society in Late Medieval England* (Oxford, 1989).

24. *Calendar of Close Rolls, 1381-5* (London, 1920), p.17.
25. Alan Harding, 'The Revolt against the Justices' in Hilton and Aston, eds., op. cit., (note 10).
26. The literature on medieval heresy is considerable. See S. Runciman, *The Medieval Manichee* (Cambridge, 1947); W. L. Wakefield and A. P. Evans, eds., *Heresies of the High Middle Ages* (New York, 1969); N. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (London, 1970); G. Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages*, 2 vols. (Manchester, 1967).
27. For example, Wyclif's 'Of Servants and Lords', in *The English Works of Wyclif*, ed. F. D. Matthew, Early English Text Society (London, 1880).
28. G. Duby's *Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined* (Chicago, 1981) is the best comprehensive work on the subject. See also R. Mousnier, *Les Hiérarchies Sociales de 1450 à nos jours* (Paris, 1969), p.19. He describes this concept of social stratification very well — and believes in it as a pre-capitalist reality.
29. *Middle English Sermons*, W. O. Ross, ed., Early English Text Society (London, 1938), p.224.
30. *Piers Plowman*, pp.147-8, (note 14). There is a modern English translation by A. Burrell in the Everyman's Library (London, 1912, 1916).
31. R. H. Hilton, 'A Thirteenth Century Poem on Disputed Villein Services' in *Class Conflict ...* (note 16).
32. R. B. Dobson, op. cit., (note 6), pp.371, 374-5, quoting from J. Froissart, *The Chronicles of England, France and Spain*, and T. Walsingham, *Gesta Abbatum Monasterii Sancti Albani*.
33. D. Wilkins, *Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae*, vol.3 (1737), pp.173-3; 64-5 (the latter also being in *Registrum Simonis de Langham*, ed. H. C. Wood, Canterbury and York Society (1956), p.149; *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1374-7* (London, 1916), p.415.
34. *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden*, vol. 9 (continuation by J. Malverne), Rolls Series (London, 1866), p.7; *Kirkstall Abbey Chronicle*, John Taylor, ed., Thoresby Society (1952), p.65; the *Dieulacres Chronicle* is published by M. V. Clarke and V. H. Galbraith in the *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 14 (1930), pp.164-81; *Vita Ricardi Secundi*, vol. 2, by a Monk of Evesham, ed. T. Hearne (1729), p.33; *Annales Monastici*, vol. 3 (*Annales Prioratus de Dunstaplia*, ed. H. R. Luard, Rolls Series (London, 1884-9), p.418.
35. For the letters of John Ball, see note 6.
36. M. Mollat and P. Wolff, *Ongles Bleus, Jacques et Ciompi: les révolutions populaires en Europe aux XIVe et XVe siècles* (Paris, 1970) and R. H. Hilton, 'Révoltes urbaines et rurales au moyen âge' in F. Gambelle and M. Trebitsch, eds., *Révolte et Société*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1989).