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WILLIAM MORRIS AND THE IDEA OF ENGLAND



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In his thoughtful Introduction to the first volume of *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, Norman Kelvin wrote of Morris's "nontheoretical, intense Englishness" as a "fundamental trait."¹ This is not an observation that would be likely to stir dissent, it seems to me. But in fact Morris was working in a period in which, as he well knew, the idea of Englishness was being actively contested (as, to judge from some recent television series, it still is). His awareness of the argument is suggested by the opening words of his lecture on 'Early England', given in 1886:

I am no patriot as the word is generally used; and yet I am not ashamed to say that as for the face of the land we live in I love it with something of the passion of a lover.²

Here Morris is trying to create a definition of his own position which distances itself both from the arrogance of the apologists for Imperialism at this high period of the British Empire, and from the emotionless intellectualism of those who deny any feeling for their country at all. Morris is prepared, passionately, to assert his *love* for "the face of the land we live in." His position has been finely described by Stephen Yeo in a chapter dealing with 'Oppositional Englishness' in the book edited by Robert Colls and Philip Dodd in 1986, *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880-1910*. Yeo describes Morris's position as "an exemplary combination of love of place (mainly bits of England) with principled resistance to Nation and to State."³ It is that combination which I hope to explore in this Lecture, in the context suggested by Colls and Dodd, who show how much attempted definition of Englishness was going on at the time in many areas of culture. To mention the most obvious, there is the study of the English language (R. C. Trench in *On the Study of Words* in 1851 argued that "There is nothing that will help more to form an English heart in ourselves and in others"⁴); the creation of the great dictionaries, including the *English Dialect Dictionary* and the *New English Dictionary*; the collecting of folklore and folksong as an extension of this; the

development of the study of English language and literature: F. J. Furnivall is a remarkable figure here, founding the Early English Text Society in 1864, the Chaucer Society in 1868, the Ballad Society and the New Shakspeare Society in 1873, the Wiclif Society in 1881 together with the Browning Society, the Shelley Society in 1886 — to say nothing of the National Amateur Rowing Association in 1891⁵; all this contributing to the development of the study of English literature in the universities to which many of us now belong, although this development was sardonically viewed in 1886 by Morris: “What is intended seems to me a chair of *Criticism*, and against the establishment of such a Chair I protest emphatically, for the result would be merely vague talk about literature, which would teach nothing ... Hyper-refinement and paradox would be the order of the day, and the younger students would be confused by the literary polemics which would be sure to flourish round such a Chair.” (C.L. II, 589) There was also a more clearly defined interest in English art, with the opening of the Tate Gallery in 1897; the National Trust was founded in 1895 to conserve the English countryside; and above all there was a great expansion of the study of English history, to which we will return.

We may try to explain *why* there was so much concern with self-definition in England at this time. No doubt it had to do, on the one hand, with the so rapidly and bewilderingly changing appearance of the country; on the other, with the upsurge of Imperialist energy which followed the nomination of Victoria as Empress of India in 1876. J. H. Grainger, in his incisive book *Patriotisms: Britain 1900-1939*, sees it as related to the challenging of Britain's position by foreign rivals: “It is only when British pre-eminence, industrial and commercial, is challenged at the end of the nineteenth century that serried *patriae*, cogitated and programmatic as well as felt, spring up again.”⁶ However it was motivated, the concern with Englishness was certainly prominent in the last decades of the nineteenth century. How can we see Morris in this context?

It seems clear that Morris's view was shaped by two main influences: the English landscape and English history. Accounts of his childhood stress his vivid pleasure in Epping Forest with its abundant hornbeams and hazels, and Geoffrey Grigson finds the Forest in the early poems — the “place where the hornbeams grow” of ‘Shameful Death’ and the “copses of green hazel” in ‘Geffray Teste Noire’.⁷ By this time Morris had already begun to develop his historical interests.

At Marlborough, by his own account in the autobiographical letter to Andreas Scheu, “I learned next to nothing [there], for indeed next to nothing was taught; but the place is in very beautiful country, thickly scattered over with prehistoric monuments, and I set myself eagerly to studying these and everything else that had any history in it, and so perhaps learned a good deal, especially as there was a good library at the school to which I sometimes had access.” (C.L. II, 227-8) Oxford was similar from the academic point of view: “I took very ill to the studies of the place, but fell to vigorously on history, and specially medieval history.” (p.228) And of course Oxford also offered its splendid architecture, the chance to see medieval manuscripts, to read Kingsley and Ruskin, to discuss their ideas with friends. Above all, Morris developed his enthusiastic and exact understanding of the Gothic in all the forms available, and the related literature, such as Thorpe's *Northern Mythology*, Froissart's *Chronicles*, and Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*. The Gothic being an international style led Morris and Burne-Jones to the Continent to see the works of Memling and Van Eyck, the Musée de Cluny, the great cathedrals: Amiens, Beauvais, Chartres, Rouen. The fact that Gothic is not a national style (though of course it has its national variations) may well have contributed to Morris's attractive internationalism of outlook. The account of it with which he was most familiar, too, Ruskin's in *The Stones of Venice*, makes no assertion of its Englishness, though it does endow it with what are seen as particularly Northern qualities, especially Savageness:

...we should err grievously in refusing either to recognise as an essential character of the existing architecture of the North, or to admit as a desirable character in that which it may yet be, this wildness of thought, and roughness of work; this look of mountain brotherhood between the cathedral and the Alp; this magnificence of sturdy power⁸

Morris's early stories in *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* are similarly Medieval and Northern European, with an English setting only for ‘The Story of an Unknown Church’, and the opening of ‘Gertha's Lovers’ more characteristically romantic: “Long ago there was a land, never mind where or when”⁹ In the early poems the most definite settings are those of the France of the Froissartian group, but even in them the main emphasis is on mood and atmosphere, not on specific locations (“Beside the haystack in the floods ...”)¹⁰

Geoffrey Grigson has remarked that before he went to Kelmscott Manor in 1871, "the young Morris is still only the proprietor, so to say, of the landscapes and properties of childhood."¹¹ No clear idea of England is yet expressed, obviously not in the classical *Life and Death of Jason*, or in the anthology of stories constituting *The Earthly Paradise*, which come from many sources but not from England. There is indeed the attractive opening evocation of:

... London, small, and white, and clean,
The clear Thames bordered by its gardens green ...
While nigh the thronged wharf Geoffrey Chaucer's pen
Moves over bills of lading....

However, the poems do not investigate or dramatise *that* world, a mark of Morris's distance from the medieval poet he admired ("My Master, Geoffrey Chaucer").

Following Grigson's suggestion, however, we can see aspects of the English landscape playing their part in a number of the *Earthly Paradise* poems, most obviously those for the months, which usually begin with the evocation of a setting, and then go on to suggest a human relationship within it — sometimes very poignantly as in the central stanza of 'June':

See, we have left our hopes and fears behind
To give our very hearts up unto thee;
What better place than this then could we find
By this sweet stream that knows not of the sea,
That guesses not the city's misery,
This little stream whose hamlets scarce have names,
This far-off, lonely mother of the Thames?

Thus the English landscape remained of great importance to Morris, while his intellectual enthusiasm for the North was developing: 'The Lovers of Gudrun' and 'The Fostering of Aslaug' in *The Earthly Paradise* attest to this, as of course do his visits to Iceland in 1871 and 1873, his study of the Icelandic language, his translations, and his epic *Sigurd the Volsung*. The Preface to the translation of the *Völsunga Saga* refers to it as "the Great Story of the North, which should be to all our race what the Tale of Troy was to the Greeks" — though interestingly he goes on to add, "to all our race first, and afterwards, when the change of the world has made our race nothing more than a name of what has been — a story too then should it be to those that

come after us no less than the Tale of Troy has been to us."¹² If Morris uses the idea of the Nordic race, he sees it as subject to the laws of historical change.

This Northern emphasis is clearly in line with Ruskin's argument, and it corresponds also with some of the influential historical writings of the period to which Morris turned as he moved in the late 1870s into public affairs — the Eastern Question Association, the foundation of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. In his letter of the 5th March 1877 to *The Athenaeum* which led to the establishment of the Society, his interest in recent historical writing is made central. Morris attacked architectural 'restoration' in order to encourage the protection of "these relics, which, scanty as they are now become, are still wonderful treasures, all the more priceless in this age of the world, when the newly-invented study of living history is the chief joy of so many of our lives." (*C.L.* I, 351) The historians Morris had in mind, who greatly changed the view of England in the generation after Macaulay and Buckle, included J. R. Green, E. A. Freeman and William Stubbs, whose work is referred to explicitly in Morris and Bax's *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome* (1893). Macaulay had celebrated the England developing since 1685 in which "the constant effort of every man to better himself" had made the nation prosperous;¹³ Buckle in 1857 had seen European progress as the result of scepticism and freedom leading to increased mastery over nature: the Middle Ages had been a period of violence and credulity when "everything of real importance was altogether neglected ... the useful arts were entirely unknown."¹⁴

Such views of the English past were strongly contested by the historians Morris admired. They all took a far more positive view of the Middle Ages, and saw England as developing from even older, Teutonic, roots. Freeman, in his *History of the Norman Conquest*, presented the British form of parliamentary government as having come down from the Witanegemot as "a common Aryan possession".¹⁵ J. W. Burrow, in his fine study of Victorian historians, *A Liberal Descent*, remarks that Freeman no doubt conceived *The History of the Norman Conquest* as "a national epic, but it is sometimes easier to think of it as a patriotic oratorio, with music by Stanford or Sullivan."¹⁶ However, the patriotism was part of what Burrow terms Freeman's "cult of 'Teutonic' democracy": England could be seen as the evolving fulfilment of the Teutonic spirit. It was consistent therefore that Freeman should have regretted the loss of access to

“the old heroic songs of the English folk” and the effect of the Conquest in what he called “this abiding corruption of our language”.¹⁷ Freeman himself attempted to write a ‘pure’ English with simple sentence-construction, and was sorry that the modern Englishmen had come to prefer Arthur to Hengest and Cerdic.

J. R. Green, also named with approval by Morris, believed — in the words of his wife Alice Green — “that it was the great impulses of national feeling, and not the policy of statesmen, that formed the groundwork and basis of the history of nations.”¹⁸ His great work is *A Short History of the English People*, first published in 1874, with its emphatically populist title. His perspective, like Freeman’s, is Liberal: overall he sees the English people moving towards freedom through their democratic institutions. But he does give more space to their sufferings and defeats. He opens, strikingly, in fifth-century Sleswig, with “the German race ... a race of land-holders and land-tillers” with their “hatred of cities, and their love ever within their little settlements of a jealous independence.” (*S.H.* p.3) Then on to the English Conquest: “It is with the landing of Hengest and his war-band at Ebbsfleet on the shores of the Isle of Thanet that English history begins.” (*S.H.* p.7) Green is a clear, often vivid writer, with strong sympathies. He is enthusiastic about ‘The English Revival, 1071-1127’, i.e. the diminution of the distinction between English and Norman, and he sees the development of the borough as the crucial area in which “the English people won back again the full traditions of Teutonic liberty” (*S.H.* p.92) This process is evident also in the achievement of ‘The Great Charter, 1215-17’, on which “it is impossible to gaze without reverence ... But in itself,” Green asserts, “the Charter was no novelty.” (*S.H.* p.128) Later, Green celebrates the establishment of “the Parliament of the Realm” when the assembly of 1295 was extended to include “the burgesses and knights of the shire” (*S.H.* p.179), and the victory of the craft-gilds over the merchant-gilds in 1261. (*S.H.* p.201) But Green’s is no simple success story. Soon “the trade-gilds themselves became an oligarchy as narrow as that which they had despised” (*S.H.* p.201), while “The hundred years that followed the brief sunshine of Crécy [1346] and ‘The Canterbury Tales’ are years of the deepest gloom; no age in our history is more sad and sombre ... Literature reached its lowest ebb ... political freedom was all but extinguished.” (*S.H.* pp.222-3) Green devotes a good deal of sympathetic attention to the Peasants’ Revolt. He gives a careful account of the changes in the system of land-tenure,

the introduction of leases and the rise of the free labourer; then to the Black Death, the Statute of Labourers, and popular unrest:

‘Mad’ as the landowners called him, it was in the preaching of John Ball that England first listened to a declaration of natural equality and the rights of man It was the tyranny of property that then as ever aroused the defiance of socialism. A spirit fatal to the whole system of the Middle Ages breathed in the popular rime which condensed the levelling doctrine of John Ball: “When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?” (*S.H.* pp.250-1)

Nevertheless, the result was violently suppressed and serfdom reinstated. The Middle Ages end, for Green, in the violence of the Wars of the Roses, and the repression of Henry VIII’s ‘New Monarchy’. Wolsey establishes the “new despotism”, and Thomas Cromwell continues his work: “At Cromwell’s death his policy was complete. The Monarchy had reached the height of its power. The old liberties of England lay prostrate at the feet of the King.” (*S.H.* p.349)

In view of these developments and his interest in them, it is not surprising that we find Morris developing a clearer idea of English history and of Englishness in the late 1870s and 1880s. Morris’s very first lecture of the 4th December 1877, ‘The Decorative Arts’ (now ‘The Lesser Arts’) is on what was to become his central theme: “that great body of art, by means of which men have at all times more or less striven to beautify the familiar matters of everyday life.” (*C.W.* XXII, 4) And Morris related the history of “these arts” to contemporary developments in the general study of history, feeling that he lived “at a time when history has become so earnest a study among us as to have given us, as it were, a new sense: at a time when we so long to know the reality of all that has happened, and are to be put off no longer with the dull records of the battles and intrigues of kings and scoundrels” (p.8)

Morris wants to imagine a future in which the decorative arts will have recovered, but finds it hard to do so “amid the squalor” of modern London, just as our forebears, living in “the pretty, carefully whitened houses, with the famous church and its huge spire rising above them ... could [hardly] have imagined a whole county or more covered with hideous hovels, big, middle-sized, and little, which should one day be called London.” (p.11) He sees the difficulty of recommending beauty and art in that city: “how can I ask

working-men passing up and down these hideous streets day by day to care about beauty?" (p.16) Even the museums — for which at least London is good — are closed on the only day when "an ordinary busy man" might be able to go there. (p.16) But outside London, in the country, "we may still see the works of our fathers yet alive amid the very nature they were wrought into, and of which they are so completely a part. For there indeed if anywhere, in the English country, in the days when people cared about such things, was there a full sympathy between the works of man and the land they were made for" — the 'land' being seen as one which, though small in scale, is "abundant of meaning for such as choose to seek it: it is neither prison nor palace, but a decent home." (p.17) This is the model which Morris will consistently draw on and develop. It involved an emphasis on 'democratic' qualities: "its best too, and that was in its very heart, was given as freely to the yeoman's house, and the humble village church, as to the lord's palace or the mighty cathedral: never coarse, though often rude enough, sweet, natural and unaffected, an art of peasants rather than of merchant-princes or courtiers ... [which survived] while over-seas stupid pomp had extinguished all nature and freedom, and art was become, in France especially, the mere expression of that successful and éxultant rascality, which in the flesh no long time afterwards went down into the pit for ever." (p.18) This idea of England, partly defined by contrast with pre-Revolutionary France, allows Morris to call for "Simplicity of life, begetting simplicity of taste ... simplicity everywhere, in the palace as well as in the cottage" (p.24) to prevent the processes which "cut down the pleasant trees among the houses, pull down ancient and venerable buildings for the money that a few square yards of London dirt will fetch; blacken rivers, hide the sun and poison the air" (p.24) Morris's "dream" or "hope" (p.27) of a better future depends on his vision of the English past, and is one with his sense of the beauty of the English landscape.

1877, the year of this lecture, was also the year of the letter which led to the founding of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, and of Morris's involvement with the Eastern Question Association, in its attempts to resist Disraeli's imperialist policy. In his eloquent Manifesto 'To the Working-men of England' in May, Morris sees England as a deeply divided country, being led into war by "Greedy gamblers on the Stock Exchange, idle officers of the army and navy (poor fellows!) worn-out mockers of the Clubs, desperate

purveyors of exciting war-news for the comfortable breakfast-tables of those who have nothing to lose by war; and lastly, in the place of honour, by the Tory Rump, that we fools, weary of peace, reason and justice, chose at the last elections to 'represent' us." He went on to warn the working men of the "folly and insolence" of the ruling class: it would be better for England to perish than for "these men" to triumph and "deliver you bound hand and foot for ever to irresponsible capital."¹⁹ The England that Morris would preserve — or rather, in fact, create (for how much power did these working-men possess in 'democratic' England at the time?) — was one in which the working-class would actually take the initiative in claiming its rights. As Morris put it later, in his letter to Scheu, his action in 1877 was motivated by his disquiet at "the outburst of Chauvinism which swept over the country." A victory for the Liberals would at least help to "stem the torrent of Chauvinism, and check the feeling of national hatred and prejudice for which I shall always feel the most profound contempt." (C.L. II, 280) These are remarkable words for an Englishman in the era of Imperialism, and show how different Morris's vision was from that of most of his contemporaries.

The contrary vision, which found increasing favour as the century drew towards its close, may be found in the work of the historian J.A. Froude. His *History of England* (1856-70) takes a far more positive view of Henry VIII than did Green, presenting him as "the honest Englishman, confronted by the wiles of polished foreigners, diplomats, priests ...",²⁰ and celebrates the defeat of the Spanish Armada as having "saved the Reformation and thus determined the fate of Europe as a place where life and energy were possible."²¹ However, Froude was not unaware of the problems of the Elizabethan period and was critical of Elizabeth's pragmatism. But his response to this, as Burrows observes, was "to follow Drake into his simpler world."²² As early as 1852 he had reviewed an edition of Hakluyt's *Voyages* under the title 'England's Forgotten Worthies', and he played an influential part in the creation of the 'Tudorism' which Alan Howkins discusses in his contribution to *Englishness*, 'The Discovery of Rural England'. Howkins argues that the idea of the Tudor period as quintessentially English developed under the influence of historians like Froude and J. R. Seeley, whose *Expansion of England* was published in 1883. Howkins sees it as "a move from the community of the medieval village based on the Church and the Latinate culture, internationalist in some sense and often associated with radicalism,

to the more aggressive, expansionist, sophisticated and, above all, English world of Elizabeth".²³ Morris always remained committed to 'medieval' internationalism and radicalism, if not to "the Church and the Latinate culture."

Of the many lectures of those busy years, I should like to refer next to 'Art and the Beauty of the Earth', delivered in the town-hall at Burslem on the 13th October, 1881, in which Morris contrasted the two worlds of his recent experience, Oxfordshire and London: the former with its beautiful character and equally beautiful barns — "the works of the Thames-side country bumpkins, as you would call us" — and London with its squalor and "ruffianism" in which "brutal and reckless faces and figures" go past, arousing Morris's own anger "till I remember, as I hope I mostly do, that it was my good luck only of being born respectable and rich, that has put me on this side of the window among delightful books and lovely works of art, and not on the other side, in the empty street, the drink-steeped liquor-shops, the foul and degraded lodgings." (C.W. XXII, 163; 171) Could the former England be re-created? Only, Morris was coming to think, by Socialism. In early 1883 he joined the Democratic Federation and set enthusiastically about reading and discussing Marx. This led to several of his finest lectures — 'Art and Plutocracy', 1883; 'Useful Work versus Useless Toil', 1884; 'How we live and How we might live', 1884, 'The Aims of Art', 1886. In all of these the project is to conduct a political analysis of capitalism, with an obvious application to England but no exclusive focus there. His commitment to Socialism necessarily strengthened his hostility to the Imperialist spirit, which was becoming increasingly prominent and assertive. In early 1885 May was away from home for some weeks, and her father wrote to her about what had been happening in her absence, one of the great tragedies of Imperialism, the death of Gordon: "What has happened? Khartoum fallen — into the hands of the people it belongs to." (C.L. II, 388) And later in the same letter:

On Saturday last I dined at Richmonds ... I found Richmond [Sir W.B. Richmond the painter, whom Morris had supported successfully for the Slade Professorship in 1874] seriously excited as to the success of the British arms, & had to enlighten him on the subject of patriotism. (C.L. II, 389)

This was a subject on which Morris could speak with authority, because of his concern for the condition of England. He was to write

more directly of it in his next major work, *A Dream of John Ball*. Here Morris brings to life the story of the Peasants' Revolt (seen by J. R. Green so sympathetically) and relates it, through a discussion between the narrator and the priest, to the politics of the present. The two men part in "fellowship", and then the narrator finds himself back in the "sooty discomfort" of Victorian London, looking at "the few willow trees left us by the Thames Conservancy" and hearing "the frightful noise of the 'hooters' ... that call the workmen to the factories." (C.W. XVI, 288) Morris successfully integrates his knowledge of the English past with his hope for a new order owing nothing to the spirit of nationalism and everything to the ideal of fellowship.

He was to look more carefully at the development of English society in lectures he gave in the next four years. The first, on 'Early England', delivered in 1886, has already been recorded. It shows Morris at his best as an expositor, and also shows his consistent belief in the necessity to link past and present. Morris used Charles Elton's *Origins of English History* (1882), which began with the prehistoric inhabitant of Britain, deplored the Roman Conquest, celebrated "primitive communism and cooperative husbandry"²⁴ and ended with the Synod of Whitby: "England, at last united ... was ready ... to assert her claim to an important place among the civilized nations of the West."²⁵ Morris begins with the tribes on the Wiltshire downs familiar from his schooldays, with Stonehenge, Avebury, Silbury Hill; then "the Roman servitude" establishing its "great taxgathering ... bureaucracy", the curse of the ancient world "as our commercial market-hunting bureaucracy is the great curse of the modern world." (Le Mire, p.161) Then the invading English, Jutes and Saxons in their "undecked or half-decked luggers" (p.162) Here Morris attacks "certain fifth-rate romanticists" who try to draw a parallel between these "men of the earlier world" and: "the offscourings of our commercial civilization ... the ruffians who are the quite worthy pioneers of American or English colonial civilization are to the backbone commercial; they are stockjobbers down on their luck" (p.162) Their 'vulgarity' (a new concept, Morris notes) is remote from the qualities of "these terrible sea rovers who founded the English nation amidst rapine and bloodshed in these islands." (p.163) The evidence for the spirit of these people Morris finds in the epic poem *Beowulf* which "breathes the very spirit of courageous freedom." (p.163) They did not exhibit the crude individualism of "the hideous

card-sharpening border ruffians of America and the colonies" (p.163) — "pure individualists — for they were "corporate bodies of men," with obligations to the family, the gens and the people. (p.164) They also, like the Greeks, kept slaves ("a blot"). Unlike the Romans, "they had no idea of a city" (p.164) and lived in small settlements. Later their great men began to establish themselves in towns, and feudalism comparable to that Morris believed to have developed in Scandinavia developed in England. Christianity, too, played a part — but a negative one in that it destroyed vernacular literature and "the account of the mythology of the North from the Low German branch of the great Teutonic race." (p.167)

Then came the attacks of the Northmen — "these bold strong-thieves" (p.168) — pillaging not conquering, whose depredations were stayed by Alfred, "the one sole man of genius who ever held an official position among the English." (p.170) The feudal system was also developing, so that the King became "no longer the head of a clan ... but the master of the land, giving fiefs to his earls and thanes, who in their turn gave them to their free men". (p.171) Morris quotes freely from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in Benjamin Thorpe's edition in the Rolles Series of 1861, particularly about later Norse attacks, in response to which the inhabitants exhibited "the English tendency to muddle of which we have seen so much since". (p.173) Thus England fell to Danish Kings, before being "drawn into the European whirlpool" (p.174) by the Norman Conquest. Harold the Hapless was "the last King of Early England" (p.175); unfortunately there was no "English saga-man [to tell us] of that field of Hastings." (p.175)

Morris then reflects on the results of the Norman Conquest. Socially and politically he feels that it was inevitable that England should become part of "the great European Feudal System". (p.176) The next period of history was to be that of the development of the gilds. These, however, soon fell "in their turn under the double course of bureaucracy and commercialism, which grew to be ruling powers as feudalism or the society of status waned into capitalism or the society of contract." (pp.176-7) Culturally his response is divided: in architecture the French influence was strong but produced "such glorious and beautiful [buildings] that there is no room for regret left." (p.177) But in literature the French influence is — along the lines of Freeman — regretted:

The great works of the English poets ever since Chaucer's time have had to be written in what is little more than a dialect of French and I cannot help looking on that as a mishap. If we could only have preserved our language as the Germans have theirs, I think we with our mingled blood would have made the world richer than it is — but these are vain regrets. (p.177)

Morris's speculations here bear some resemblance to those of the Dorset poet William Barnes in his *English Speech-Craft* (1878) and of Gerard Manley Hopkins in his attempts to re-animate the language. They also point forward to Morris's own attempts in his later prose romances to create a simplified form of English — recently described by Norman Talbot as "a masterly and elaborately crafted style", based on Early English.²⁶ Finally, Morris notes that "stout-hearted and valiant" as the Early English were, "they seem to have had a good share of that stupid wastefulness of which many Englishmen are still proud." (p.177) Maybe that characteristic helps to explain Harold's defeat: nowadays it will "reduce ten counties to the condition of filthy cinder-heaps in order that ten thousand men may have ten thousand a year each (at other people's expense in all ways)." (p.177) For Morris, then, Early England may have left a legacy of courage and determination, but it was betrayed by "stupid wastefulness" as well as by the inexorable movement of history towards feudalism.

'Feudal England' takes the story on from the Norman Conquest, but seems to me to do so with less conviction. The Conquest is said to have introduced into England "the complete Feudal system" (*C. W.* XXIII, 39) which would culminate in the fourteenth century. Prominence is given, as in Green, to the development of the gilds and the towns, and to Magna Charta. Edward I's victory at Evesham is said to have taken England "towards bureaucracy". (p.47) Parliament, however, is not idealised, but said to have been used *against* "the rising liberty of the towns." (p.48) The reign of Edward III is "the complete and central period of the Middle Ages in England" (p.51) — and of feudalism. Its art is "the loveliest, brightest, and gayest of all the creations of the human mind and hand." (p.51) Similarly, "the life of the worker in it was better than it had ever been." (p.53) But feudalism could not cope with the newly free men who made the "town corporations and craft gilds". (p.55) Serfdom seemed to come to an end, but re-established itself afterwards in the form of the modern proletarian. Fortunately, however, his

exploitation will soon end in “the triumph of fellowship.” (p.58) There is something rather perfunctory, it seems to me, about this.

‘Art and Industry in the Fourteenth Century’, of 1887, is more impressive, with its eloquent opening account of seeing Peterborough Cathedral arising amidst the mediocrity and squalor of the modern railway city. The emphasis is on “the gulf” between that society and the present. (C.W. XXII, 379) As in the previous lecture, the “ordinary life of the workmen then was easy ... storm, plague, famine, and battle were his foes then.” (pp.381-2) His rise had been through the guilds in the towns, in which “the spirit of association” remained alive: “The progress of the guilds,” Morris says strikingly, “was the form which the class-struggle took in the Middle Ages.” (p.385) However, the “communistic aspirations” of the century were defeated by the forces of “bureaucracy” and “that thrice-accursed spirit of nationality which so hampers us even now in all our attempts towards the realization of a society.” (p.388) In that future society, buildings like Peterborough Cathedral will smile on “their newborn sisters the houses and halls of the free citizens of the new Communes.” (p.390) Here it is very clear that Morris’s enthusiasm for the English medieval past was not that of a nationalist but of a man for whom the zeal of the patriot was dangerous and atavistic.

For the Teutonic myth, as Hugh MacDougall pointed out in *Racial Myth in English History* (1982), could easily be appropriated for nationalistic and imperialist purposes. The most blatant example, perhaps, is Sir Charles Dilke’s account of his travels in the colonies, published in 1869 as *Greater Britain: a Record of Travel*. For Dilke, a prominent Tory politician, ‘Saxondom’ was the hope of the world. Everywhere he saw a struggle between the “dear races” (of Anglo-Saxon origin) and the “cheap races” (including Irish, Chinese, Malays and Indians), but he believed “that Saxondom will rise triumphant from the doubtful struggle.”²⁷ This was a matter for celebration because “the gradual extinction of the inferior races is not only a law of nature, but a blessing to mankind.”²⁸ That Morris’s Northern enthusiasms did not take him in this lamentable direction must be due in part to the internationalism of the Gothic tradition to which his principal adherence lay, as well as to the internationalism of the Socialist tradition to which he later committed himself. The account of ‘Socialism Triumphant’ in which *Socialism. Its Growth and Outcome* culminates envisages a world-wide federal system, with “the great council of the socialised world” at one end, and “federations of

localities arranged for convenience of organisation” at the other.²⁹ More research on the relation of the Teutonic and Gothic traditions might clarify the issue further, but the modern Morrisian can only note with relief that the author of *Sigurd the Volsung* thought as an internationalist.

It was consistent with Morris’s overall enterprise to find him later in 1887 lecturing on ‘The Society of the Future’ and in 1889 on ‘How Shall We Live Then?’ (a lecture which does not survive), titles which point towards the future; though it is important to note too that other activities of this period related very much to the present: a speech against the ‘Latest Irish Coercion Bill’; a speech ‘Against the Execution of the Chicago Anarchists’; a speech ‘At the Funeral of Alfred Linnell’ (18th December 1887); ‘Against “Sweating” Practices in the London Industries’; a speech to commemorate ‘Bloody Sunday’ in November 1888; and numerous contributions to *Commonweal*. There was also a (lost) lecture of May 1889 on Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* and Grant Allen’s ‘Individualism and Socialism’.³⁰ As we know, it was Bellamy’s book which had the effect of driving Morris to formulate his own opposing view of the future in *News from Nowhere* in the columns of *Commonweal*. After the dream of John Ball, a backward look, we have the dream of William Guest, taking us into the future. In what ways does that world relate to England, the subject, as we have seen, of so much of Morris’s thoughtful attention and emotional concern over the years?

I referred earlier to Morris’s response to England as being shaped by two main influences: landscape and history, and these are both strongly felt presences in *Nowhere*. It is a commonplace of criticism that Morris’s Utopia is unusual in its setting, not no-place but England transformed, and a good deal of pleasure is to be derived from recognising references in the text to places in London or the Thames Valley which we already know, however interestingly transformed or defamiliarized: Hammersmith, Kensington, Westminster Abbey, the Houses of Parliament, Trafalgar Square, the British Museum. One of the early reviewers, Lionel Johnson, was incensed by the uncomplimentary remarks passed on the latter and on St. Paul’s: nevertheless he found the picture of London, “embowered in orchards and set with gardens ... very inviting”³¹ as we do today. Morris’s love of the Thames Valley comes out in the wonderful account of the journey up the Thames, with the Valley redeemed from the pollution of industry:

I walked upstream a little, watching the light mist curling up from the river till the sun gained power to draw it all away; saw the bleak speckling the water under the willow boughs, whence the tiny flies they fed on were falling in myriads; heard the great chub splashing here and there at some belated moth or other, and felt almost back again in my boyhood. (*C. W.* XVI, 153-4)

What we now feel as the 'Green' element in this culminates in the person of Ellen, whose romantic appeal for the narrator is symbolic of a longing for a new way of life. Her well-known words to Guest when they finally reach Kelmscott encapsulate this spirit:

"Oh me! O me! How I love the earth, and the seasons, and weather, and all that grows out of it — as this has done!" [This being the house with its "lichened wall".] (p.202)

Again, this is not nationalistic but universal; although the landscape is English, the feeling is simply human. I think Morris avoids the sentimentality which is so often associated with English ruralism. But how easily his text could be appropriated is shown in the review by Lionel Johnson, with its concluding remark (before quoting Matthew Arnold's 'A Wish'): "Its readers will turn, again and again, to these virile and pleasant pages, and especially to those which tell of England's natural beauty, of the sylvan Thames, and of the Oxfordshire meadows."³² This way of describing the Valley, essentialising the 'natural' countryside, directly contradicts Morris's political understanding in which the landscape is socially produced. The narrator cannot separate the landscape from people working in it: when Dick talks of the hayfields, Guest remembers the women he had seen labouring in the fields, gaunt, graceless, poor, listless: "How often had that marred the loveliness of the June day to me; how often had I longed to see the hayfields peopled with men and women worthy of the sweet abundance of midsummer, of its endless wealth of beautiful sights, and delicious sounds and scents." (*C. W.* XVI, 143-4)

The example shows how closely related is Morris's feeling for the English landscape to his sense of history. And it is important to emphasise again how non-nationalistic this was. As Guest leaves Hammersmith by the Broadway, he admires the buildings, whose "generosity and abundance of life" make him chuckle with pleasure. The great hall — which turns out to be Hammersmith Market — is of "a splendid and exuberant style of architecture, of which one can say little more than that it seemed to me to embrace the best qualities

of the Gothic of northern Europe with those of the Saracenic and Byzantine, though there was no copying of any one of those styles." (p.24) Opposite there is a theatre, "not unlike the Baptistry at Florence, except that it was surrounded by a lean-to that clearly made an arcade or cloister to it." (p.24) If not Post-Modernism, we certainly have something generously eclectic and outgoing here. This goes with the spirit of Hammond's remarks about "foreign nations" in the account of 'How Matters are Managed'. Now "the whole system of rival and contending nations" has disappeared, but "natural variety" has not diminished: "Cross the water and see. You will find plenty of variety: the landscape, the buildings, the diet, the amusements, all various." Why force people into nations and "stimulate their patriotism — i.e., their foolish and envious prejudices?" (p.85) This genuine internationalism goes with a powerful denunciation of Imperialism by Hammond:

"When the civilized World-Market coveted a country not yet in its clutches, some transparent pretext was found ... any stick, in short, which would beat the dog at all. Then some bold, unprincipled, ignorant adventurer was found (no difficult task in the days of competition), and he was bribed to 'create a market' by breaking up whatever traditional society there might be in the doomed country, and by destroying whatever leisure or pleasure he found there." (p.95)

The adventurers of this passage are of the same type as those denounced in 'Early England' and point us forward to the world of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

For if Nowhere is a place of great 'natural' beauty, it is also the successor of the England of 'Bloody Sunday' in Trafalgar Square, which shadows Guest's mind, as he passes through it early in the novel, with memories of November 1887. These events are also alluded to in the powerful chapter 'How the Change Came', with its rewriting of the events of 1887 to produce a positive outcome. This chapter alone is evidence of how Morris's imagination refused any depoliticised version of an essential England for a sense of a struggling and changing society. Morris's hatred of his own society may have led him to accept the idea of a future civil war with fewer reservations than we now feel appropriate; but he consistently sees England as an evolving political phenomenon, without the idealization of some of the Whiggish historians to whom he was indebted. *News from Nowhere* successfully conveys his belief in a future Society of Equals in which

work will be performed for fulfilment and not for profit. The poignancy of its conclusion derives from Guest's sudden loss of that world, as he finds himself inexorably back in class-ridden nineteenth-century England:

... as I turned round the corner which led to the remains of the village cross, I came upon a figure strangely contrasting with the joyous, beautiful people I had left behind in the church. It was a man who looked old, but whom I knew from habit, now half-forgotten, was really not much more than fifty. His face was rugged, and grimed rather than dirty; his eyes dull and bleared; his body bent, his calves thin and spindly, his feet dragging and limping. His clothing was a mixture of dirt and rags long over-familiar to me. As I passed him he touched his hat with some real good-will and courtesy, and much servility. (pp.209-10)

Almost everything in the book can be seen as Morris's repudiation of that figure as the representative Englishman. He believed that the worker of the past had not been so abject; Socialism encouraged him to believe that the man of the future need not be so either. He — and why not, in view of Ellen, she? — would be a truly human person, living in harmony with the earth, in an England seen simply as a place rather than a nation-state.

This is underlined in another way by what struck one of the early reviewers, Maurice Hewlett, as a "bizarre state of things"³³ — the changed physical appearance of the people of Nowhere, perhaps associated with improved weather conditions. The physical aspects of the people are often described, as they are not only healthier and more vigorous, but surprisingly non-Nordic: Dick, typically as it turns out, is "dark-haired and berry-brown of skin, well-knit and strong", Boffin is "tall, dark-haired and exceedingly handsome," the shop-boy is "a brown-skinned boy of about twelve," the girl in the Hall of the Bloomsbury market is "a very pretty dark-haired young girl," Walter is "tall, black-haired, very kindly-looking and thoughtful," Philippa's daughter is "a tall, strong girl, black-haired and gypsy-like of face; among the reapers is a "tall handsome woman, with black wavy hair and deep-set grey eyes": only Ellen contrasts: she is "light-haired and grey-eyed, but with her face and hands tanned quite brown with the sun." All this led Maurice Hewlett to remark in some exasperation:

The *English* nation had disappeared. The race was now *Italian*: artistic,

not serious; sensuous, not speculative; emotional and yet superficial; energetic and yet self-indulgent.³⁴

From our point of view, the nationalist and complacent assumptions of Hewlett's account are obvious: the English are serious, speculative, emotional in a deep way, and energetic in a non-self-indulgent way. By contrast, Nowhere refuses such easy stereotyping in nationalist terms.

John Lucas, in his recent book *England and Englishness* (1991), has looked at 'Ideas of Nationhood in English Poetry 1688-1900', welcoming whatever evidence he could find of a politically radical form of Englishness, and insisting on the central importance of urban experience in the Victorian period. Knowing of Morris's Socialism, Lucas is disappointed by what he sees as his commitment to rural values:

Yet while Morris had no wish to bless the squire and his relations, his detestation of the city made it impossible for him to see it as other than the determining factor in the dehumanisation of its inhabitants. The visionary utopia of *News from Nowhere* is arrived at by a journey upriver from London and away from the symbol of its degraded work — Hammersmith Bridge. And Morris's poems promote a vision of England whose vitality is inseparable from its rurality.³⁵

At first sight this criticism may seem to be based on a simple misreading of the book: the new Hammersmith Bridge (built around 2003) is described as finer than the Ponte Vecchio at Florence, "of stone arches, splendidly solid, and as graceful as they were strong (Chapter II), and the new London is as fine as the "old house". It is not the city but the economic system that Morris held responsible for "the dehumanisation of its inhabitants", as the book makes abundantly clear. Nevertheless, there is a good deal of truth in the criticism that Morris's *poetry* is ruralist. On the other hand, *Socialism. Its Growth and Outcome* considers "three theories of the transformation of the modern town" (p.314), insisting that "One thing all such schemes must take for granted as a matter of principle, to wit the doing away of the antagonism between town and country; and all tendency for the one to suck the life out of the other." (p.316) Both must exist in harmonious interchange of social energy.

It would be inappropriate to end this discussion with *News from Nowhere* to the neglect of the last years of Morris's life. What it seems to me that we find in the work of his last period is a free-ranging

imagination in the prose romances which refuses to be restricted to any particular landscape, and a political commitment that sees Britain as only one part of a world-wide economic system. Morris's continuing and urgent concern for the future of the English people is expressed in the final lectures and articles in terms of an international ideal. 'How I Became a Socialist' of 1894 exemplifies this well. The early influences he notes were of course from within the natural tradition of social criticism, as expressed in the "open rebellion" of Carlyle and Ruskin. On joining the Socialist Democratic Federation he "even tackled Marx", thoroughly enjoying "the historical part of Capital." (C.W. XXIII, 278) There was no difficulty in assimilating the Marxist account of historical developments with what he already believed because both challenged the complacent progressivism which supported the development of international capitalism. There is no specific reference to England in the article — except perhaps in the remark about humanity's ending "in a counting-house on the top of a cinder-heap, with Podsnap's drawing-room in the offing." (p.280) The social revolution to which Morris looked forward would be international; its beneficiary, the English only in so far as they are part of humanity. *Poems by the Way*, Morris's last volume of poetry, included an impressive little poem, in rhyming couplets, called 'Mine and Thine'. The text says that it is 'From a Flemish Poem of the Fourteenth Century'. This helps to support the contention that Morris's 'oppositional Englishness' was quite compatible with an internationalism the achievement of which is surely the great political and cultural task of the next decade — or century. The poem concludes:

Yea, God, well counselled for our health,
 Gave all this fleeting earthly wealth
 A common heritage to all,
 That men might feed them therewithal,
 And clothe their limbs and shoe their feet
 And live a simple life and sweet.
 But now so rageth greediness
 That each desireth nothing less
 Than all the world, and all his own;
 And all for him and him alone.

Notes

1. N. Kelvin, ed., *The Collected Letters of William Morris* Vol I, Princeton U.P. 1984, xxviii. Subsequent references to this and to Vol II (1987) are given in brackets after quotations, with the abbreviation C.L..
2. E. Le Mire, ed., *The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris*. Wayne State U.P. 1969, p.158. Subsequent references in brackets are to 'Le Mire'.
3. In R. Colls and P. Dodd, eds., *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880-1910*, Croom Helm 1986, p.312.
4. R. C. Trench, *On the Study of Words* (1851) in Everyman edition, J.M. Dent 1927, p.23.
5. For Furnivall, see E. Benzie, *F. J. Furnivall: A Victorian Scholar Adventurer*, Pilgrim Books, Norman Oklahoma, 1983.
6. J. H. Grainger, *Patriotisms: Britain 1900-1939*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986, p.21.
7. G. Grigson, Introduction to *A Choice of William Morris's Verse*, Faber and Faber 1969, p.15.
8. J. Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice* in C. Wilmer, ed., *Unto This Last and other Writings by John Ruskin*, Harmondsworth 1985, p.82.
9. In P. Faulkner, ed., *William Morris: Early Romances in Prose and Verse*, J. M. Dent 1973, p.173.
10. *ibid*, pp.118-122.
11. G. Grigson, *op. cit.* p.114.
12. In May Morris, ed., *The Collected Works of William Morris*, Longmans 1910-1915, VII, 286. Subsequent references in brackets to C.W.
13. Lord Macaulay, *The History of England*, Albany Edition 1898, Vol. I, 292.
14. H. T. Buckle, *The History of Civilisation in England*, Oxford University Press 1919, Vol I, 159.
15. E. A. Freeman, *The History of the Norman Conquest*, Vol. I, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1867, 86.
16. J. W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past*, Cambridge U.P. 1981, p.158.
17. Freeman, *op. cit.*, V. 586.
18. J. R. Green, *A Short History of the English People*, Macmillan 1909. Introduction by Alice S. Green, p.xiii. Subsequent references are given in brackets as S.H..
19. See Appendix to Philip Henderson, ed., *The Letters of William Morris to his Family and Friends*, Longmans Green, 1950, pp.388 and 389.
20. Quoted in Burrows, *Liberal Descent*, *op. cit.*, p.259.
21. *ibid*. p.251.
22. *ibid*. p.277.
23. Colls and Dodd, *Englishness*, *op. cit.* p.70.
24. C. Elton, *Origins of English History*, Bernard Quaritch 1882, p.405.
25. *ibid*, p.415.
26. N. Talbot, "'Whilom, as tells the tale": the Language of the Prose Romances' in *The Journal of the William Morris Society*, VIII, 2 (Spring 1989), 25.
27. Quoted in Hugh A. MacDougall, *Racial Myth in English History: Trojans, Teutons and Anglo-Saxons*, Harvest House, Montreal, 1982, p.99.

28. *ibid*, p.99.
29. W. Morris and E. Belfort Bax, *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome*. Swan Sonnenschein 1893, p.291.
30. The information in this paragraph is largely derived from *Le Mire*, *op. cit.*
31. Lionel Johnson, review in *Academy* 23 May 1891; quoted in P. Faulkner, ed., *William Morris: The Critical Heritage*, Routledge 1973, p.392.
32. *ibid*. p.343.
33. M. Hewlett in *National Review*, August 1891; quoted in *ibid*. p.346.
34. *ibid*. p.346.
35. John Lucas, *England and Englishness*, The Hogarth Press 1991, p.204.

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