

# William MORRIS

*on History*

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among the dry bones, terrible as they seemed (*sic*) to the rich of that period, and it took a long course of economic events before the power of privilege was even shaken.

Meantime we need make no mistake about the cause for which Wat Tyler and his worthier associate John Ball fell; they were fighting against the fleecing of the people by that particular form of fleecing then in fashion, viz.: serfdom or villeinage, which was already beginning to wane before the advance of the industrial guilds. We need not grumble therefore if the sword of St. Paul in the city arms is sometimes innocently taken for Wat Tyler's instrument of martyrdom, however little the worthy city fathers may like the construction we should put on that legend. Nor will we say that he and John Ball died for nothing, however doleful is the story (an oft repeated one) of the stout men of Kent breaking up half in fear and irresolution, half deluded by the lies and empty promises of their masters, to whom, as ever, any course seemed good that enabled them to keep the people down.

## WHY WE CELEBRATE THE COMMUNE OF PARIS

1887

The "moons and the days" have brought us round again to the anniversary of the greatest tragedy of modern times, the Commune of Paris of 1871, and with it the recurring duty for all Socialists of celebrating it both enthusiastically and intelligently. By this time the blatant slanders with which the temporarily unsuccessful cause was assailed when the event was yet fresh in men's minds have sunk into the dull gulf of lies, hypocritical concealments, and false deductions, which is called bourgeois history, or have become a dim but deeply rooted superstition in the minds of those who have information enough to have heard of the Commune, and ignorance enough to accept the bourgeois legend of it as history.

Once more it is our duty to raise the whole story out of this poisonous gloom and bring it to the light of day, so that on the one hand those who are not yet touched by Socialism may learn that there was a principle which animated those who defended revolutionary Paris against the mingled dregs of the woeful period of the Second Empire, and that that principle is still alive to-day in the hearts of many thousands of workers throughout civilisation, and year by year and day by day is growing in strength and in the hold it has of the disinherited masses of our false society; and on the other hand that we Socialists may

soberly note what went on in this story, and may take both warning and encouragement from its events. I have heard it said, and by good Socialists too, that it is a mistake to commemorate a defeat; but it seems to me that this means looking not at this event only, but at all history in too narrow a way. The Commune of Paris is but one link in the struggle which has gone on through all history of the oppressed against the oppressors; and without all the defeats of past times we should now have no hope of the final victory. Neither are we yet sufficiently removed in time from the events to judge how far it was even possible to avoid the open conflict at the time, or to appreciate the question as to what would have become of the revolutionary cause if Paris had tamely yielded itself up to the perfidy of Thiers and his allies. One thing, on the other hand, we are sure of, that this great tragedy has definitely and irrevocably elevated the cause of Socialism to all those who are prepared to look on the cause seriously, and refuse to admit the possibility of ultimate defeat. For I say solemnly and deliberately that if it happens to those of us now living to take part in such another tragedy it will be rather well for them than ill for them. Truly it is harder to live for a cause than to die for it, and it injures a man's dignity and self-respect to be always making noisy professions of devotion to a cause before the field is stricken, on which he is to fight in the body. But with the chance of bodily sacrifice close a-head there come also times of trial which either raise a man to the due tragic pitch or cast him aside as a useless and empty vapourer. To use a transparent metaphor, on the march to the field of battle there are plenty of opportunities for the faint-hearted to fall out of the ranks, and many will do so whose courage and devotion were neither doubted by others nor by themselves while the day of actual battle was far distant. So such times of trial are good because they are times of trial; and we may well think that few indeed of those who fell sixteen years ago, who exposed themselves to death and wounds at all adventure, were mere

accidental braggarts caught in the trap. Of those whose names are well known this was far from being the case, and who can doubt that the nameless multitude who died so heroically had sacrificed day by day other things than life, before it came to that?

Furthermore, it must surely be rather more than doubtful to all thoughtful men if the mere exercise of every-day and civil virtues, even when directed towards the social end, will suffice to draw the world out of its present misery and confusion. Consider the enormous mass of people so degraded by their circumstances that they can scarcely understand any hope for their redemption that can be put before them in peaceful and constitutional times. Yet these are the very people for whom we are working; and are they to have no hand in the work, then? is it to be once more according to the degrading Positivist motto, "everything *for* you, nothing *by* you?" Meanwhile in these people, unless we Socialists are all wrong, there are seeds of manly and social feeling, capable of large development; and surely when the time comes that their hope will be made manifest, as it was in the time of the Commune, and will lie before them for their hands to take, they will then have part in the work indeed, and by the act of doing so will at once raise themselves out of the slough of degradation into which our false society has cast them and in which it keeps them. The revolution itself will raise those for whom the revolution must be made. The newborn hope translated into action will develop their human and social qualities, and the struggle itself will fit them to receive the benefits of the new life which revolution will make possible for them. It is for boldly seizing the opportunity offered for thus elevating the mass of the workers into heroism that we now celebrate the men of the Commune of Paris. True they failed in conquering immediate material freedom for the people, but they quickened and strengthened the ideas of freedom by their courageous action and made our hope of to-day possible; and if to-day any one doubts that they were fighting for the emancipation of labour, their

enemies at the time had no doubt about the matter. They saw in them no mere political opponents, but "enemies of society," people who could not live in the same world with them, because the basis of their ideas of life was different—to wit, humanity, not property. This was why the fall of the Commune was celebrated by such hecatombs sacrificed to the bourgeois god, Mammon; by such a riot of blood and cruelty on the part of the conquerors as quite literally has no parallel in modern times. And it is by that same token that we honour them as the foundation-stone of the new world that is to be.

## REVOLUTIONARY CALENDAR: WAT TYLER

1888

*Wat Tyler.*—Wat Tyler, *i.e.*, Walter, the tiler or thatcher, was an artisan of Dartford, in Kent, and became a leader in the great peasant rebellion which took place in England in the early years of Richard II (1381), and which was much more dangerous to the tyranny of the day than is usually supposed; it spread from the north of East Anglia, all through Essex and Kent, and along the south coast to Exeter. The immediate occasion of Wat Tyler's own rebellion as related by the chroniclers, was his resistance to a bailiff, who, calling for the poll-tax then being levied by the very unpopular Government, treated his young daughter brutally, and was slain by Wat with his lath-rendering axe. The rebellion, however, in which the valiant tiler was a leader, had much deeper roots than resistance to a mere tax. It was a protest against the reaction of the landlords against the inevitable movement which was abolishing serfdom; the serfs were gradually turning into tenants, and much unfree *land* was being held by free *men*; and these the landlords were attempting to force into serfdom on the ground that their lands were the lands of serfs, and that therefore they must be serfs. Wat Tyler and the Kentish bands gathered at Blackheath on June 11, 1381, and on the next day marched thence into London, where the feeling of the people was with them and where they met with no resistance. The Court was