A CONVERSATION WITH NORTHROP FRYE
ABOUT WILLIAM MORRIS

Christopher Lowry

This previously unpublished interview with Northrop Frye took place in January
1988. It was originally intended for publication in the *Journal of Wild Culture*, a
magazine that ceased to exist ten years ago. As a co-founder of the Society for the
Preservation of Wild Culture and senior editor of the magazine, I had the idea that
I would like to interview Northrop Frye about William Morris. The vision that
inspired *Wild Culture*—a marriage of ecology and imagination pitched in an
amusing and harmonious key, with a vernacular and dilettante edge—seemed to
owe an unacknowledged debt to Morris. I thought perhaps that I could link the
principles behind the Arts and Crafts Movement, and Morris’s radical vision of
social and ecological justice, with the mission of *Wild Culture*. I was fascinated by
the way Morris walked his talk, living his ideals. If a conversation with Professor
Frye could elucidate Morris’s social attitude, I imagined, then the parallel path
ahead might be illuminated for our circle of cultural workers and green city
activists in the Society for the Preservation of Wild Culture. In any case, it would
be interesting to try.

On learning of my interest in Morris, and after examining a few issues of *Wild
Culture*, Professor Frye graciously agreed to talk to me. He consented to a thirty-
minute interview at his first-floor office in Massey College at the University of
Toronto. The result is a series of questions and answers on several aspects of
Morris’s thought.

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Christopher Lowry: Can you recall your first introduction to Morris? Was it as a literary figure or a political figure?

Nedro Frye: Well, it was more a literary figure. I was interested in Blake because it was the subject of my first book and, of course, one of Blake’s main interests was the democratizing of art, of making it a general possession. Morris carried that a good deal further from the study of Carlyle and Ruskin, and he felt that the difference between the major and the minor arts—painting, music, literature on the one hand, and pottery, ceramics, and textiles on the other—was a class distinction of the kind to get rid of. He concentrated on what were then called the minor arts as a kind of index of social stability, and that led him to the second thing which is interesting about him: the feeling that the index of social stability has a great deal to do with the relation of man to nature. That is, that the exploiting of men by other men was something that Morris as a socialist knew was wrong, but he also realized as a socialist what they did not realize: that the exploiting of nature by men was equally bad.

Lowry: That is striking, the cross-over that he was able to achieve, because most socialists weren’t particularly ecologists or necessarily artists.

Frye: Of course Morris lived before the days of Stalinism and putting industry in front of everything else, but certainly the general Marxist thrust was in the direction of exploiting nature as much as possible, which is very different from the way that Morris wanted it.

Lowry: Asia Briggs describes Morris as being “too active and exuberant... and too much aware as a working craftsman of the sens of the honest and the genuine” to be a cynic (E3). It’s a marvellous connection which I’ve never seen made in that way; the idea that you wouldn’t be a victim of what may be considered the disease of the decadent culture, which is cynicism, if you worked with your hands.

Frye: That’s right. [Morris] was an Oxford graduate, and, in nineteenth-century terms, a ‘gentleman’ who didn’t work with his hands, and then [he] had to give all that up and did work with his hands.

Lowry: In his utopian fiction, News from Nowhere, Morris describes his vision of the future as communism with a large “C.” You’ve already referred to a distinction in his ecological vision between him and Marx. According to his essays he seems to have gotten his socialism through social exchanges, more through conversation with other socialists, thinkers, and friends than through reading. He claims he didn’t get very far with Marx’s economics.

Frye: I don’t think he read twenty pages of Das Kapital. Not everybody agrees with that but I just don’t think he got anywhere with it.

Lowry: So it comes more out of a tradition of English socialism which is much broader and in some crucial ways different from Orthodox Marxism.

Frye: Very different. It’s the Carlyle-Ruskin tradition which is concerned not with asking the question of ‘who are the workers?’ but the question, ‘what is work?’
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Lowry: Morris's emphasis on individuation is also very contrary to Marx.
Frye: Yes, very much so. He hadn't any feeling for a mass movement as such, and felt that when a person had found his work or what his vocation was then he had defined himself as an individual, but he thought in terms of people and not in terms of masses.

Lowry: How do you think that he would have reconciled his own religious convictions with the Marxist idea that religion is the opiate of the masses?
Frye: He didn't have any religious convictions.

Lowry: How would you say he responded to religion then?
Frye: I don't think he responded to religion at all. He was very deeply interested in the Middle Ages but he thought of the Middle Ages as a time of respect for craftsmanship. The whole theological apparatus he didn't react to at all.

Lowry: Well maybe I'm thinking more in terms of what Jung would have called the religious instinct. When reading Morris I read an affinity even with William Blake, and Blake's idea that 'All Gods reside in the human breast.'
Frye: Well that, I think, was in his mind all right, but it was something he didn't very often put to the surface. In The Earthly Paradise you'll get a group of old men who are shipwrecked on an island in the North Atlantic telling the great stories of classical and Northern culture, and he obviously thought of these stories as the shaping elements of human civilization, which is a very Blakean view, but he was rather defensive about that, and sort of blacked it out and repressed it. He kept saying, 'I'm the idle singer of an empty day.' Well, nobody could call Morris idle.

Lowry: Morris declared that 'the leading passion of my life has been and is hatred of modern civilization' ('How I Became a Socialist,' 381). News From Nowhere seems to be a vision of supplanting that. That is, what he called civilization was socialism which is a society of equality. Do you think this dream was viable then, at the end of the nineteenth century in some way?
Frye: Well, Morris simply applied a different sort of criteria to society which he got mainly through Ruskin. He looked at nineteenth-century England and decided it was ugly, and he looked at what nineteenth-century restorers did to medieval cathedrals and he thought it was totally destructive. In other words, certain ages have a sense of beauty and a sense of craftsmanship, and other ages just lack them entirely, and he saw the industrialization, the decay, the degeneration of craftsmanship and an honest day's work for an honest day's pay. It's the same thing as Ezra Pound picked up later, the perception of misery as something that industrialized civilization is cursed with.

Lowry: Morris envisioned supplanting this corruption that plagues civilization with a new society where there are no rich, no poor, there's no waste; the true meaning of commonwealth. Do you think that there's any potential to integrate that in the future, or is something going on towards that new?
Frye: People are beginning to wake up to the fact that the unlimited exploitation of nature will not work and is very dangerous, and after we've used up everything there won't be very much to go on with, and Morris certainly told them that one hundred years ago.

Lowry: This gets back to the tradition of Ruskin and Carlyle. Morris rails against private property as a basic evil and suggests that from it all other inequities arise. The argument goes that if there was no private property there would be no conflicts based on power and money, but this has always seemed to me to be false consciousness or contrary to both history and experience. I wonder if Morris understood a viable way to do away with property that escapes me?

Frye: Well, I don't know if he did. In Ruskin there is an attack not so much on property in itself as on the extraordinary inequities of rich and poor, and the exploiting of one class by another. Carlyle talked about the Dandies and the Drudges. The Dandies being what he called the unworking aristocracy and the Drudges being the exploited workers, and I think it was more the sense of the general injustice inherent in the class system that bothered Morris rather than the existence of property itself. That view of private property as in itself evil was anarchist but not really socialist, and of course many of Ruskin's friends and associates weren't really anarchists.

Lowry: Morris makes a very telling remark about his political education. He says that his anarchist friends convinced him against their intention that anarchism was impossible and he learned from reading the anti-socialist tracts of Mill that socialism was necessary.

Frye: Well ... I think that Mill's essays on socialism were of course looked over and revised a good deal by his wife, who was a much more militant socialist than Mill himself was, and I imagine that Morris saw the implications in those essays that Mill didn't see.

Lowry: Morris insists in News from Nowhere that the reward for labour is life. I wonder how one might raise children to understand that the reward for labour is life?

Frye: Well, of course you know that the children in News from Nowhere are not getting much education anyway. They're not being put in school to learn how to read books. They're trained to be active in practical ways as much as possible. Morris is not afraid of child labour as long as the social conditions are right for it and it's not exploited labour.

Lowry: He seems to think that they would absorb culture and ideas, or have a natural inclination to study.

Frye: Yes, he thinks that they pick things up very quickly and much more quickly than if they were taught them in school.

Lowry: And they would turn to their elders and ask for instruction.

Frye: Yes, or get it out of a kind of apprenticeship system.

Lowry: Maybe this comes out of his own experience, because in his
autobiographical sketch he says that he had read a great many books by the age of seven.

Frye: Yes. But he wouldn’t have read those at school.

Lowry: No, so he had this idea that children would spontaneously be drawn to knowledge if they were given the freedom.

Frye: Yes.

Lowry: If he were a child today, do you think he would be a reader or do you think he would be schooled by a television?

Frye: Well, it would be difficult to say. I suppose everybody gets seduced by television now, and the passivity of mind that builds up staring at a tube would produce a very different kind of William Morris.

Lowry: Morris says that happiness arises from taking pleasure in work, and pleasure of work arises if a worker approaches it creatively. Could you elaborate on how it might be possible for children to learn this?

Frye: Well, for Morris there was a very keen pleasure in creative work and, as I say, he was interested in the question of what work is rather than who the workers are, and he defines—well, I guess he doesn’t define, but he assumes that work means really creative action, and he feels that nothing gives a greater sense of self-satisfaction than to be released to do that kind of creative work. It’s the sort of thing you get in kindergarten teaching—theory as far as children are concerned.

Lowry: Montessori and Waldorf...

Frye: Yes, they’re all sprawled out on their tummies doing things.

Lowry: Yeah, he suggested that making art is joy and contentment, and happy daily work or art equals a kind of hybrid notion of work/pleasure. How do you think Morris would view the condition of the artist in the twentieth century, which is more often defined by commercial art, stardom, and/or by sensual excess, suffering, and despair?

Frye: Well, I don’t think he would have very much good to say about most of the contemporary trends in the arts. The feeling for nature in his leaf and floral patterns—on his book designs and his wallpaper designs and that kind of thing, and the textiles he did—that’s very different, and his whole feeling for taste, from what you get now; I think he would have had a horror of that kind of Bauhaus functionalism that came in the twentieth century. But I think he would have approved of certain things, such as the rather benevolent attitude of the government towards the arts in the form of subsidies.

Lowry: Do you think he would have seen the whole movement of modernism, and the sort of anguish and irony and the grotesque in modern art, as a kind of sign of the ones who are suffering from what’s wrong with the culture?

Frye: Well, no doubt he would.

Lowry: He says in News From Nowhere that in the old days these things—disappointment, ruin, misery, despair—were felt by those who worked for change because they could see farther than other people. He disparages pettiness and
meanness in the nineteenth century as such retained by commercial morality, and he implies that it is a meagre century in comparison with the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. What did the Middle Ages and the Renaissance have that the nineteenth century didn’t have?

Frye: Well, the Middle Ages had a sense of craftsmanship, the carving and the cathedrals and the painting and the sculpture and the architecture of the Middle Ages was an age of craftsmanship, and so was the literature, and he just didn’t see any of that kind of thing being produced in his own time at all.

Lowry: So we’re talking about craftsmanship, and I wonder, a man named Arthur Pendas wrote a critique of Morris charging that he talked about arts for the people and beautiful books for mankind but he created very ornate and costly and therefore elitist art objects.

Frye: I’m sure that’s so easy to say, but it’s a paradox that everybody gets involved in, and if you want to democratize art you do get involved with well-to-do patrons. That was the same paradox that Blake was in. He wanted his art to be for all the patrons, but in practice he had to keep alive by doing these engraved poems for the people who could afford to buy them. But that was a matter of coming to terms with social conditions of which he didn’t approve; and Morris’s business firm, he paid very small salaries it’s true, but he at least gave an honest product for an honest price.

Lowry: There’s something else I found as a bit of a tangent to Morris. He repeatedly places a very strong emphasis on the value of good looks physically, and in a strange way our youth-worshipping, beauty-obsessed society is kind of a grotesque parody of Morris’s values in this respect. But he had a very interesting theory about it in New from Nowhere. He said pleasure begets pleasure, freedom and good sense make natural and healthy love, which breeds beautiful children. Do you think he meant it literally as an opinion about evolution or as a metaphor for consciousness?

Frye: Well, not so much about evolution, but he thought that the natural beauty of the human body would have a chance to emerge under equalized social conditions. Even as late as the First World War, if you looked at the officers and the enlisted men in the British Army, they were just two different races of people. The officers had been brought up on protein foods, and they were all big and handsome, and the enlisted men had starved and kept alive on very inferior foods, and they were all stunted and warped, and Morris saw all this around him and realized how much beauty there could be in the world if there were more good health, and how much more good health there would be if social conditions were equalized.

Lowry: Morris criticizes the nineteenth-century university as an institution of pretence and hypocrisy, a place of commercial learning in the main devoted to producing cultivated parasites and handing out meal tickets called degrees. He contrasts this with his vision of the art of knowledge. Do you share his misgivings about contemporary education?
Frye: Well, I imagine what he said about Oxford was true in his day. The curriculum at Oxford was centuries out of date, and essentially the public schools and the universities were used for training what was essentially a military upper class. That was why there was so much emphasis on flogging and Spartan discipline and compulsory games and that sort of thing. It was really a military training for an upper class which would form an old-boy network, so once you made your social contacts of course you were in. So that was really what Morris was thinking about, and I think that was really what the educational set-up was like in his day, pretty well. You notice that he spent a good deal of his time talking to the new Working Men's College, mechanic institutes, and that kind of thing for the working-class people.

Lowry: What do you think Morris meant by the art of knowledge?

Frye: I suppose what he meant was the teaching of principles of thinking rather than stuffing the people's heads with obsolete and misinformation.

Lowry: In *New From Nowhere*, Morris writes that "The spirit of the new days, of our days, was to be delight in the life of the world; intense and overweening love of the very skin and surface of the earth on which man dwells, such as a lover has in the fair flesh of the woman he loves: this, I say, was to be the new spirit in time" (158). It seems to me that many people are now beginning to absorb and express this idea and this dream from many sources and in many ways. Would you agree with that?

Frye: Well, I certainly agree that the awareness of nature as man's habitat and as a kind of complement to human life is much more intense than it has been, and in a way the relation of man and nature takes up a great deal of what used to be sexual games, which, again, were an upper-class amusement.

Lowry: Do you think there's any potential for the realization of this kind of new spirit of the age through some kind of long-range, morphic resonance?

Frye: Well, yes, trends start with a very small minority, and they gradually grow; if the conditions are right, they begin to turn into mass movements.

Lowry: Morris believed with Ruskin, that beauty was unattainable except as the expression of man's joy in every-day work. His company, the firm, was a group of artists producing together what most interested them. Is this ideal relevant for artists today?

Frye: Well, yes. That is the sense of craftsmanship as linked with creativity and secondly with social function you learn from Ruskin: that where you have gross inequalities in the leisure class and an exploited class, the result is more and more useless and ugly products are made for the benefit of the leisure class. And so that's why Morris says, "have nothing in your houses which you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful" (Collected Works, 12: 76) and that kind of sharpened sensitivity to the things around you and the things that you use and handle all the time.
Lowry: Well, Dr. Frye, I see we’re out of time. It has been delightful to talk with you about Morris’s views on nature and culture, and the spaces that we inhabit between the two. Thank you very much.

Works Cited


