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William Morris in the Twenty-First Century



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TONY PINKNEY

Versions of Ecotopia in *News from Nowhere*

I shall be using a memorable formulation of John Ruskin's in *Fors Clavigera* as my way into William Morris's *News from Nowhere*, and I feel this Ruskinian approach is appropriate not only because of the general influence of Ruskin upon Morris, but also because of Ruskin's own lively interest in questions of utopia. For instance, in July 1870 he wrote to thank the bookseller Frederick Startridge Ellis for getting hold of a copy of Thomas More's *Utopia* for him: 'Thank you for getting the *Utopia* for me. What an infinitely wise – infinitely foolish – book it is! Right in all it asks – insane, in venturing to ask it, all at once – so making its own wisdom folly for ever more; and becoming really the most mischievous book ever written.'¹ When Morris's own utopia was published in book form in 1891 Ruskin was, sadly, in no fit condition to read or comment upon it. But I like to think that, despite the disagreements he would presumably have had with its socialism, Ruskin might have felt of *News from Nowhere* some of the same things he felt about More's *Utopia*: infinitely wise, infinitely foolish, insane, and – in that beautiful phrase – the most mischievous book ever written, and I shall myself endeavour, in a Morean spirit, to be mischievous about Morris's utopia in this chapter.

In the fifth letter of *Fors Clavigera* Ruskin makes the much-cited claim that 'there are three Material things, not only useful, but essential to Life. No one "knows how to live" till he has got them. These are, Pure Air, Water,

¹ *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols. (London: George Allen, 1903–12), XXXVII, p. 12. This chapter was initially written for delivery as a paper at the Ruskin Library in Tokyo in November 2008 and an earlier version of it was published in the Library's *Bulletin*, no. 56 (March 2009), pp. 6–13.

and Earth.² Pure air, pure water, pure earth – these are all certainly very important values to William Morris, in both his political articles and lectures and of course in *News from Nowhere* itself, which has occasionally been referred to by scholars of utopianism as ‘our first Ecotopia.’³ But if we are dealing here with the traditional names of the four elements, then clearly there is one missing in this Ruskinian list. Air, water, and earth, yes indeed; but where is fire, the fourth of the elements? So my question in this essay is: how can we have a fully ecological or ecotopian vision of pure air, pure water and pure earth which does not simply exclude the fourth element of fire? I shall be understanding ‘fire’ here as a kind of metaphor, as a symbol for a whole cluster of values that we associate with the term ‘modernity’: values such as mobility, dynamism, experiment, innovation, individuality. It is precisely those values, you might argue, which have led us to the environmental crisis we now face, as we all pursue our own individual patterns of eager consumption regardless of the ecological impacts they have on the world we inhabit. The fire of our restless modernity is burning up the planet quite literally, in the form of global warming and climate change. If we extinguish that fire, if we abandon the values of modernity, then yes, perhaps we could indeed return to a more innocent and Ruskinian world of pure air, pure water and pure earth. But is it possible to have our cake and eat it? Can we have pure earth, water and air without wholly sacrificing fire, without wholly giving up our energetic modernity?

I am going to explore this question centrally through William Morris’s work, and in particular through his utopia *News from Nowhere*, since it is in the genre of utopia, above all, that we carry out thought-experiments which are too difficult for us to realize in the actual world just at present. But I will also need to set Morris’s late nineteenth-century utopia in dialogue with some of the most powerful utopias or ecotopias of our own time, works such as Ursula Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* (1974), Ernest Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* (1975) and Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Pacific Edge* (1990).

2 *The Works of John Ruskin*, XXVII, p. 90.

3 See, for instance, Krishan Kumar, ‘*News from Nowhere*: The Renewal of Utopia’, *History of Political Thought*, 14 (Spring 1993), p. 143.

I shall aim to let these utopias speak to each other, and indeed in some degree to rewrite each other, to swap and share narrative energies. So I shall to some extent, through a focus on Morris, be asking a more general question: to what extent does the western tradition of utopian writing succeed in imagining an environmentally desirable future which does not just sacrifice those values of modernity – speed, possibility, experiment, multiplicity – which have caused the ecological crisis in the first place? To what extent can the western utopia give us pure air, pure water and pure earth, which we are all agreed we so desperately need, and also retain or sustain the dangerous element of fire alongside them?

Let us turn first, then, to Morris’s utopia *News from Nowhere*, which was first published in instalments in his socialist newspaper *Commonweal* through 1890, and then appeared in book form in 1891. In its opening pages the narrator William Guest returns to his home on the river Thames in Hammersmith after a meeting of the Socialist League in central London. The League meeting has been a noisy, confused discussion of what society might look like after a socialist revolution, both immediately after the upheaval and in the longer term, when the new socialist culture has settled in and bedded down. In the wake of the debate, William Guest longs passionately to see the new post-revolutionary world – ‘if I could but see a day of it!’ he thinks desperately – and he wakes up the next morning with his wish magically fulfilled.⁴ It was winter as he went to bed, but it is June now, and, as he slowly begins to realize as he makes his way to the river for an early morning swim, he is in utopia.

We know that the water of the new society is pure because Guest sees salmon nets on the opposite side of the river. Salmon had vanished from the Thames in the early nineteenth century as the human and industrial filth of the growing city was emptied directly into the river, but the post-revolutionary Thames of the mid twenty-second century is pure enough for the fish to have returned, not just in ones or twos but in significant

4 *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. May Morris, 24 vols. (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1910–15; repr. London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1992), XVI, p. 4. All future references to *News from Nowhere* in my text are to this edition.

numbers. We must therefore understand Guest's early morning swim as a baptismal immersion into the pure new element of the socialist world. And clearly socialist air is just as pure as socialist water, for we learn a few lines later that 'though there was a bridge across the stream and houses on its banks, how all was changed from last night! The soap-works with their smoke-vomiting chimneys were gone; the engineer's works gone; the lead-works gone; and no sound of rivetting and hammering came down the west wind from Thorneycroft's' (p. 8). So the air is pure in a double sense: not only has the contamination from the old Victorian industrial chimneys gone, but the noise pollution associated with those manufacturing processes has vanished too. And as for the purity of the earth in the transformed London of *News from Nowhere* we can take that for granted because of the abundance of flowers and fruit-trees we witness everywhere in what has clearly been reconstructed as a spacious and fertile garden-city.

Environmentally speaking, then, so far, so good: *News from Nowhere* is well on the way to living up to its claim to be the 'first Ecotopia.' Earth, air and water have been redeemed or purified, and it seems that the means of doing this has been the abolition of the fourth element, fire, understood here as the dirty, polluting processes of industrial manufacture for private profit. The capitalist owners of the soap-works, lead-works and engineer's are disposed of in the civil war of 1952-4, and for a while thereafter their industrial plant is used by the socialist society in its old form, but as the new community begins to develop itself further the polluting old factories are replaced by more environmentally benign places and processes of work, or what the book itself refers to as 'banded workshops', with some new, never very clearly defined but presumably ecologically responsible power source.

All this is true enough and constitutes a very familiar reading of *News from Nowhere*. I want now to ask a more troubling question: is there a social cost to this environmental utopianism, and can we construe the suppressed element, 'fire', in a more positive sense here? Let us go back to some aspects of Guest's description of London. The engineer's works have gone, and so too, presumably, have those of Thorneycroft's, which was a marine and mechanical engineering company based in Chiswick, just upriver from Morris's own house in Hammersmith. At this point in the book William Guest is still baffled as to where – and when – he is; he is

responding bewilderedly to the startling surfaces of things, not thinking matters through in any depth. And if he did think things through a little bit more here, he might, I would suggest, come to rather different conclusions about the absence of any engineering workshops up and down the river. For William Guest is a time traveller, propelled mysteriously forward from the late nineteenth century to the mid twenty-second century. And if, like H. G. Wells's Time Traveller, you hope at some point to return to your own time after exploring the future, you are clearly going to require a time machine. In Wells's story the time machine has been stolen by the Morlocks, but in *News from Nowhere* William Guest is going to have to get one built from scratch if he ever wants to get back to his own Victorian world, and one would think therefore that he would have serious personal need of engineering skills and workshops, and not just environmentally celebrate the fact that they have disappeared.

Pure water, pure air, pure earth: all pure because the fourth element, fire, has been abolished. But you can see, I hope, that I am trying here – albeit mischievously – to give fire a new symbolic meaning, one that would make its abolition more troubling to us. By 'fire', in this context, I mean the scientific ingenuity, the skills of technological bricolage, that one might see as characteristic of engineering, rather than the polluting processes of manufacture with which those skills are associated for Morris in the late Victorian period. *News from Nowhere* throws out the baby of scientific and technological advance with the bathwater of the capitalist factory. In his book *The Country and the City* Raymond Williams quotes the description of the utopian Thames which I have been using and remarks that 'if we look only at that imagined London, we find the dreaming and often backward-looking Morris.'⁵ And the necessary critique of Morris's political and environmental vision in *News from Nowhere* has been ably articulated by the political Left in recent decades. We find it very trenchantly expressed in Perry Anderson's chapter on Morris in his *Arguments within Western Marxism*:

5 Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (St Albans, Herts: Paladin, 1975), p. 327.

Economically, the forces of production have ceased to advance. Culturally, science has become a marginal pursuit, yielding no new major discoveries or inventions. Education has been dismantled, leaving children to learn from life rather than schools or books. Knowledge of or interest in the past has widely dwindled. Literary forms have contracted; the novel is vanishing. Politics, too, have disappeared – small motes are enough to deal with sporadic local issues ... Travel, despite the absence of frontiers, appears minimal. The 22nd century is an 'epoch of repose'.⁶

All of which is to say that, in effect, the values of modernity, of 'fire' in a positive sense, have been too thoroughly abolished in *News from Nowhere* as its twenty-second century remodels itself so completely on a fourteenth-century Gothic paradigm. We are indeed presented with an environmentally benign world, one which proves very beautiful and sensuously seductive indeed in that journey up the Thames to the village of Kelmscott which occupies the last third of the book, but we have to pay a very high price for this: science, research, book learning, mobility, foreign travel, technology – all have vanished from the green utopian Morris world.

What Morris's Marxist critics do not see, however, is that *News from Nowhere* itself suspects that something of this sort has happened, that the element of fire or modernity has been too radically suppressed in its depicted new society, and it may even be beginning to muster certain narrative resources to do something about this situation. I am very struck, for example, by two crucial uses of the word 'disappointed' in the book. The second of them occurs just as William Guest is about to start his journey by rowing boat up the Thames with Dick and Clara. At breakfast in the Hammersmith Guest House Annie says to Dick about their trip upriver: 'don't make your description of the picture too fine, or else he will be disappointed when the curtain is drawn. I don't want him to be disappointed' (p. 143). This is a strange anxiety, surely, for an inhabitant of utopia to feel towards a visitor. If you live in a settled socialist utopia, in what is, by generic definition, the best of all possible worlds, how could you possibly believe that an outsider might be disappointed by – rather than marvelling at or overwhelmed by – what your community has to offer him, either in London or in the Oxfordshire countryside upriver?

6 Perry Anderson, *Arguments within Western Marxism* (London: Verso, 1980), p. 166.

Annie's use of the word picks up a briefer but even more telling appearance of it earlier in the text. When you arrive in utopia as a baffled visitor, whether you come from the opposite side of the existing world in your shipwrecked boat or from the distant past of the new society, as Guest himself does, you need to find an authoritative elder inhabitant of utopia who can learnedly explain to you the principles and history of the bewildering new society. When you do meet this figure there will follow those long passages of systematic sociological disquisition which make utopias so turgid for those who approach them as if they were novels, that is, with the wrong set of generic expectations. The learned elderly utopian and his long lectures to the visitor are simply a necessary structural component of the genre and must be accepted as such; one has to grit one's teeth and not just endure them, but actually learn to love them. H. G. Wells rather wittily described this generic expository figure as the Old Man Who Knows Everything, and he is represented in *News from Nowhere* by Old Hammond, whom William Guest meets in the British Museum, a very apt place, of course, for long historical and sociological explanations. Old Hammond, then, is the very keeper of utopia's conscience; he is the storehouse of its customs, values and memories; he may be 105 years old now, but in him its flame burns brighter than in any of the other figures we see in the book. And yet only a few pages into his discussions with William Guest the Old Man Who Knows Everything says these amazing words to him: 'my friend, I am old and perhaps disappointed' (p. 58). So there it is again, that generically impossible word 'disappointed'; for how, we have to ask ourselves once more, can anybody possibly be disappointed in utopia, which is by definition the best of all possible worlds? Old Hammond's words to Guest seem to me to be arguably the most important of the whole book, and there has been precious little commentary on them in the body of criticism that has grown up around *News from Nowhere*.⁷ Hammond himself comes out with them quite suddenly and doesn't follow them up in any helpful way, so we have got little context for making sense of his disappointment. It occurs in the chapter which is called 'Concerning

7 For a brief earlier reflection, see my blog entry for 1 June 2009 at <<http://william-morrisunbound.blogspot.com/>>.

Love', in which he explains to Guest the history of Dick and Clara's complex relationship, and the two men then go on to discuss the position of women in Morris's *Nowhere* more generally. But Hammond's remark does not seem confined to its immediate sexual context. Rather does it seem to me to resonate enigmatically beyond these particular pages, into some overall judgement of the new society, some fundamental disappointment with utopia from the person who is, bafflingly, at the very same time, its most central spokesperson.

There are, then, reasons for suggesting that *News from Nowhere* itself believes that there is something problematic, something 'disappointing', about the utopian world which it is presenting to us; it both celebrates and problematizes this world in a single gesture. So it is not just Morris's critics who believe that, despite all the pure air, water and earth in *News from Nowhere*, the fourth element, fire, is missing, that the cost of this environmental utopia may be too high; the book itself also offers us some significant pointers in this direction. I want now to move forwards to Kim Stanley Robinson's 1990 ecological utopia *Pacific Edge*, which I believe has some very important narrative and political lessons for Morris's *News from Nowhere*.

Robinson is probably best known for his awesome trilogy on the terraforming of Mars – *Red Mars*, *Green Mars*, *Blue Mars* – which was published across the 1990s and which surely constitutes the great science-fictional achievement of that decade. But *Pacific Edge* is an important book too and depicts an ecological utopia in the small town of El Modena, Orange County, California.⁸ Capitalism's destructive energies have been decisively fettered by the legal battles and victories of an earlier generation of activists, and for the most part the younger generation can enjoy the fruits of that victory, with their endless softball games and their extraordinary flying bicycles. But as Kevin Claybourne takes up his seat as Green Party representative on the town council, he begins to see sinister intentions behind the chairman's proposals to change the local water laws and developmental zoning rules. There is, he realizes, a subterranean plot afoot to develop Rattlesnake Hill, the last area of genuine wilderness around Modena, and

8 Kim Stanley Robinson, *Pacific Edge* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990).

one particularly tied up with his own childhood because his grandfather, Tom Barnard, lives up on that very hill. Barnard had been a crucial figure in the earlier epochal legal battles which created the new ecotopia, but he has been living in a depressive, reclusive state after the death of his wife, almost as cut away from the social energies of the younger ecotopians as we can imagine Old Hammond being in the British Museum in *News from Nowhere*. In the course of *Pacific Edge*, though, Tom Barnard gradually realizes he must descend from Rattlesnake Hill, must re-involve himself in the social struggle, and thus help out a younger generation who are not used to dealing with an anti-wilderness conspiracy of this complexity. The ecological revolution, we can thus see, is never definitively won, it must always be struggled for all over again in the next generation, with the crucial proviso that the re-emergence of the *older* activists is no less important here too. I am thus inclined to see Tom Barnard as a positive role model, a putative narrative paradigm, for Morris's Old Hammond, who I like to imagine coming out of his seclusion in the British Museum to re-engage with – to challenge and ginger up – a revolutionary world which, as we have seen, in some important if not very clearly defined ways 'disappoints' him.

You might object that there is nothing in *News from Nowhere* itself that suggests that Old Hammond will indeed return to the political fray, that I am anachronistically projecting back from Robinson's 1990s text into Morris's 1890s one. That is true enough, so I want now to move on to focus the issues I am discussing – the costs of an environmental utopia, and whether anything can be done about them, whether it is possible to have pure air, water and earth and none the less sustain the values of 'fire' or modernity alongside them – by moving on to the character of Ellen in Morris's book. The twenty-year-old Ellen is not part of the group of younger socialists that the narrator William Guest meets in Hammersmith Guest House at the opening of *News from Nowhere*. In fact, she does not materialize in the text until Chapter XXII, some two thirds of the way through the book, when Guest is already well under way on his upriver journey to Kelmscott Manor, where the book will end. Yet despite her late appearance Ellen utterly dominates the text. Consistently described by Guest as 'strange' and 'wild', she has an energy, a charisma, far beyond that of the other younger figures such as Dick, Clara, Annie, Bob the weaver or Boffin

the Golden Dustman. The key question, I think, in terms of interpreting *News from Nowhere* is this: is Ellen just a continuation of the values of the other young Nowherians, intensifying them perhaps, but still fundamentally at one with them, or does she represent something radically new, something quite unprecedented, in the book? Here, for me, is the crucial passage, in which William Guest reflects on this extraordinary young woman, with whom he will soon be falling in love:

of all the persons I had seen in that world renewed, she was the most unfamiliar to me, the most unlike what I could have thought of. Clara, for instance, beautiful and bright as she was, was not unlike a *very* pleasant and unaffected young lady; and the other girls also seemed nothing more than specimens of very much improved types which I had known in other times. But this girl [Ellen] was not only beautiful with a beauty quite different from that of 'a young lady', but was in all ways so strangely interesting; so that I kept wondering what she would say or do next to surprise and please me. (p. 182)

So the other young utopians are merely quantitative improvements on figures that Guest has known in his own time; Ellen, however, is qualitatively different, she is something else entirely, a quite new kind of utopian in the making. She has taken lessons from Old Hammond, so she is in some sense bound to him and his fate in the book. She has followed Guest up the Thames because, like Old Hammond himself, she is clairvoyant enough to grasp that Guest is from the past and has a crucial lesson for her society. She envisages for herself a future beyond the ending of *News from Nowhere* itself, even if at the moment that future can only be visualized in maternal terms: 'I shall have children; perhaps before the end a good many' (p. 194). But I would prefer to open out that formulation, to allow it to respond to the qualities of leadership and charisma she demonstrates in the book, and to recast it as follows: 'I shall have political adventures; perhaps before the end a good many'.

My 'authority' for this rewriting of Morris's sentence is Ursula Le Guin's wonderful utopia, *The Dispossessed*, perhaps the most profound of that whole generation of 'critical utopias' (Tom Moylan's term) which emerged in the 1970s after the countercultural revolts of the 1960s.⁹ For

9 Ursula Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* (London: Gollancz, 1974).

I see Ellen in *News from Nowhere* as being a first, incomplete rough draft of the character Shevek in Le Guin's utopia. In *The Dispossessed*, the anarchist revolutionaries, or Odonians, had left their home planet Urras two centuries earlier to set up a utopian world on its barren moon Anarres. In contrast to the humanly exploitative and environmentally profligate capitalist life-style of the home planet, they have set up a decentralist, co-operative, environmentally sensitive community on the moon, under very difficult natural circumstances. But across those two centuries the energy of the Odonian revolution has dwindled alarmingly. A narrow, philistine, rigidly bureaucratic mentality now governs Anarres, and it is this that a younger generation, led by the theoretical physicist Shevek and his friends, will have to challenge, in a bold reassertion of the original anarchist energies of their society. As in Robinson's *Pacific Edge*, the revolution is always in danger, it must always be fought and won all over again; and Shevek and his young allies accordingly set up a Syndicate of Initiative that will publish works that the Anarres bureaucracy would rather suppress, and even, more radically still, will dare to reopen relations with the capitalist homeworld of Urras itself. Shevek is as radically new a presence in his society as Ellen is in hers, and I am therefore inclined to think that he offers us a workable model of her future narrative career in *News from Nowhere*, as a figure who will be able to regalanize her community, to tap back into its founding revolutionary energies and rescue it from the kind of entropy that seems insensibly creeping up upon it.

So if Morris's Old Hammond did indeed return to the political fray, as Tom Barnard does in Kim Stanley Robinson's *Pacific Edge*, and if Ellen did indeed found a Syndicate of Initiative among the younger utopians, as the physicist Shevek does in *The Dispossessed*, then we might truly hope that 'fire' would return to the pure earth, water and air of *News from Nowhere*. The revolution might shake itself free from the lethargy that seems in danger of engulfing it in Morris's text; it might cease to be 'an epoch of rest', as the subtitle of the book puts it, and reintroduce new kinds of dynamism, challenge, and discovery, both political and technological. It might then finally prove possible, in this unwritten sequel to *News from Nowhere* that I am sketching here, to inject the values of modernity, of what H. G. Wells used to call a 'kinetic' utopia, back into the environmental utopianism of

News from Nowhere as we have it.¹⁰ Of course, we do not actually have this sequel (unless someone proves rash and brave enough to write it in the near future), so it can only remain an object of speculation, but we might get some idea of what it would look like from one of the finest of recent environmental utopias, indeed the very one which has given this new sub-genre its name: Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* (1975). For Callenbach's text is in my view the most powerful effort so far at bringing the environmental and scientific wings of the western utopian tradition together, the most detailed effort to heal the rift that set in between Thomas More's low-tech sustainable *Utopia* of 1516 and Francis Bacon's wildly imaginative high-tech scientific fantasy *New Atlantis* of 1627; or, in the terms which I have been using in this paper, to bring all four elements – air, water, earth and fire – together.

In Callenbach's book, the three western states of Northern California, Oregon and Washington have broken away from the United States to form an ecologically sound, 'steady-state' economy and society.¹¹ Twenty years after this secession, a US reporter, William Weston, is allowed into the closed world of Ecotopia to assess cultural and social developments and report back to his US newspaper and its readership. During his mission Weston gets involved with Marissa Brightcloud, a female forester who, in her sexual energy and dynamism, has something in common with Morris's Ellen herself, who (in Morris's words) has 'often troubled men's minds disastrously' (p. 188). Weston has the full sexual relationship with Marissa that William Guest, alas, never does with Ellen, and he is thereby ultimately moved to stay in the good new society rather than, as with Guest, to return to the bad old world to fight against it. In the building of their environmentally responsible, 'steady-state' economy and culture, the Ecotopians have to an extent pursued a policy of willed regression, with aeroplanes entirely abolished, bicycles replacing cars as the dominant

10 See my 'Kinetic Utopias: H. G. Wells's *A Modern Utopia* and William Morris's *News from Nowhere*', *Journal of William Morris Studies*, 16.2&3 (Summer–Winter 2005), pp. 49–55.

11 Ernest Callenbach, *Ecotopia* (Berkeley, California: Banyan Tree Books, 1975).

means of urban transport, ritual 'war games' with war paint and spears becoming popular, and hunting for game with bows and arrows in the countryside becoming an assertion of a robust, outdoors-oriented, post-industrial mode of existence.

But, equally, the 'steady-state' philosophy involves the most sustained and massive of scientific efforts too. As evidence of that we could point to the magnetic-suspension train on which William Weston travels into San Francisco in the opening pages of the book, the great thermal-gradient power plant he visits at Punta Gorda, the new kinds of bio-degradable plastic developed from plants rather than oil products, and a still tentative plan to harvest electricity directly from the photosynthetic processes of plants. And much attention is accordingly given, in the utopian expositions of this text, to the institutional organization of science and research in Ecotopia. I do not have space to go into the detail of such organization, but I hope you get from my brief remarks a sufficient sense of the interaction of ecology and modernity in Callenbach's still very impressive future vision.

Let me sum up, in conclusion, where my argument has been. We have seen that Morris's socialist utopia *News from Nowhere* does indeed offer us pure air, pure water and pure earth, that it gives us a transfigured post-capitalist London, which is now a relaxed, spacious, green garden-city, and a responsibly farmed and managed countryside. But, as I have tried to show, there is a price to be paid for all these environmental goods in the loss of the fourth element 'fire', by which I here mean the values we associate with the term 'modernity': change, dynamism and experiment, both personal and technological. Yet what Morris's critics so often miss is that *News from Nowhere* is to some extent aware of all this, aware that too much may have been sacrificed, and that through the motifs of Old Hammond's disappointment and Ellen's charismatic emergence in the last third of the book it has created narrative resources that may be capable of dealing with this situation, of reintroducing the fire and energy which are missing in the book's 'epoch of rest'.

The wager of this chapter is that we can then use the narrative paradigms afforded to us by some of our own best recent ecological utopias to see how those unwritten Morrisian stories, that speculative sequel to *News from Nowhere*, might proceed: we can model Old Hammond's post-textual

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future on that of the elderly and reclusive Tom Barnard in *Pacific Edge*, who must come out of his depressive retirement and re-fight old battles, and Ellen's on that of Shevek and his socially challenging Syndicate of Initiative in *The Dispossessed*. Utopias have always spoken to and developed each other in this kind of way, and I am simply radicalizing this inherent generic process here. And if we can extend *News from Nowhere* in this way, if we can inject back into it those missing values of modernity, of political and technological experiment, we might end up with something like the world depicted in Callenbach's *Ecotopia*, an environmental utopia which achieves its goals not simply by regressing backwards behind modern science, but rather also by going forwards and deploying all the complex resources of technology in its quest for a sustainable steady-state economy. In a post-modern, twenty-first-century world we shall surely want our ecotopias to be post-industrial rather than pre-industrial, to have emerged on the other side of scientific modernity rather than just regressing back behind it to some long-lost happy Hobbitland; and I would suggest, then, finally, that within the largely pre-industrial ecotopia of Morris's *News from Nowhere* there is a more adequate, more modernist, more fiery ecotopia struggling to get out, through the extraordinary figure of Ellen above all.

PIERS J. HALE

William Morris, Human Nature and the Biology of Utopia

Given such low conventional expectations about what human behaviour is like, it is of little wonder that some readers have regarded with incredulity the people described in *News from Nowhere*. Students, asked to comment on Morris's vision, will often praise it as an appealing utopia, but dismiss its characters as being incompatible with conceivable reality.

— STEPHEN COLEMAN, 1990¹

In *News from Nowhere* (1891) William Morris presented his most extensive, and what was to become his most enduring, portrayal of life under socialism. The artificial struggle for existence necessitated by capitalism is no more and the relationship between humanity and nature no longer antagonistic.² The world has truly entered the 'epoch of rest' that Morris so desired. Significantly in *News from Nowhere* not only had Morris dared to imagine a totally different environment to that which dominated nineteenth-century England, but he had imagined a brave new humanity to people his dream as well. Well-formed and vigorous, courteous, selfless, healthy and beautiful, the people of Nowhere stand in stark contrast to the humanity not only of Morris's time, but to our own, and in this respect

¹ Stephen Coleman, 'How Matters Are Managed: Human Nature and Nowhere', in *William Morris and News from Nowhere: A Vision for Our Time*, ed. Stephen Coleman and Paddy O'Sullivan (Bideford: Green Books, 1990), pp. 75–89 (p. 75).

² Piers J. Hale, 'Labour and the Human Relationship with Nature: The Naturalization of Politics in the Work of Thomas Henry Huxley, Herbert George Wells, and William Morris', *Journal of the History of Biology*, 36 (2003), pp. 249–84.