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William Morris in the Twenty-First Century



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William Morris's Germania: The Roots of Socialism

Introduction

One need not search far afield for applications of William Morris's thought to twenty-first-century concerns. Issues connected with environmentalism, pacifism, capitalist globalization, conservation, and the need for unalienated labour are still with us today, and they are not likely to go away. But how many of those who use Morris's name as an icon and his ideas as tools in contemporary debates pause to reflect on the process of application as such? What does it mean to take a set of writings almost a century and a half old, and produced (in relation to some commentators) in a country thousands of miles away and interpret them in line with a modern agenda? The question opens a hermeneutical Pandora's Box, but if Morris himself cannot provide the answer, his case may serve as an example, or perhaps a warning, to all those who set out to adapt the past to the ends of the present.

At first sight, Morris's fascination with things Germanic appears as one of the least relevant aspects of his legacy. In the 1930s, perhaps, his and other late-Victorian English socialists' flirtation with the discourse of 'Aryanism' would have seemed ominously pertinent, but even then it would have involved a misunderstanding of the meaning of Aryanism in the nineteenth century, and it is certainly no longer a pressing concern. A more sophisticated observer might point out that Morris's idealized picture of democratic Teutonic communities provides a useful model of decentralized administration of the kind more familiar from *News from Nowhere*. This case could indeed be argued, though inevitably with a large degree of poetic licence – for while Morris presents the old village community as desirable in many respects, he hardly maintains that it is literally practicable

at the present stage of historical development. A third approach is wanting to bring this seemingly most dated of Morris's preoccupations into the twenty-first century, an approach that deals metacognitively with the problem of interpretation. Morris and his fellow socialist writers had access to the same primary sources as the academic historians and philologists of their time, yet the version of the past that they produced – though parasitic upon – was also different in key ideological respects from the versions of the existing historical schools. Students of Morris also deal with the same set of primary texts, yet different versions of the man and, more importantly, of the worldview he stands for, abound, no less politically inflected than the literary and historical adaptations for which Morris and his peers were responsible in the nineteenth century. Those engaging in the act of interpretation would profit from knowing how their subject went about the same task, whether he exploited existing discourses in the same way as his own ideas have been exploited since his death. It would take a much longer study to draw out all the parallels between modern uses of Morris and Morris's own use of the past, but those who invoke the Morrisian ideal in contemporary causes may do well to recall how that ideal was forged by Morris himself in his application of the national rhetoric and the academic disciplines of his day.

The Teutonic Myth

If Red House, Kelmscott House, and Kelmscott Manor are for us today both real and imaginary spaces, accessible locations but also symbols invested with particular political, aesthetic, and even utopian associations, the place that was for Morris most intimately entwined with the concept of socialism was one he could never have gone to, because it was an imagined community in a quite literal sense. The Mark of the early Germanic tribes existed mainly in the imagination of nineteenth-century historians, but it was as important for Morris's development of the socialist

ideal as any real geographical site. The burgs and steads of the Germanic Barbarians in *The House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the Mountains*, whose descendants the Englishmen of Morris's day could claim to be, may have been situated in some central European forest, in the Alps or the Carpathians – as various commentators have speculated – but their precise location is irrelevant.¹ It is not where they were, but *what* they were that matters. Whether on European soil in the first centuries AD, or in a different but related form in the English countryside of the Middle Ages and the future, the Teutonic 'village community' was the crucial and defining *topos* of Morris's politics – *topos* both in the Greek sense of place or locality, and the modern sense of 'traditional motif' or 'literary convention'. The model of socialist administration that Morris presented in his utopia, and in the historical lectures and essays upon which it drew, owed a lot to the conjectured primitive communism of the Germanic 'theoths', with their 'folk-motes' and collective ownership of land. Of all the places that played a part in shaping Morris's worldview, the most intriguing was an imaginary construct – 'Germania'. Its originator may have been Tacitus, but in the last third of the nineteenth century it was revived in a complex new guise for the use of contemporary British culture. The national myth of Teutonism had a long history, going back at least to the sixteenth century, but around the time that Morris was discovering Iceland and casting about for a political solution to his dissatisfaction with modern civilization, it was undergoing a remarkable renaissance.² To understand the myth and

- 1 See T. A. Shippey, 'Goths and Huns: the Rediscovery of the Northern Cultures in the Nineteenth Century', in *The Medieval Legacy: A Symposium*, ed. Andreas Haarder et al. (Odense: Odense University Press, 1982), p. 63.
- 2 See Hugh MacDougall, *Racial Myth in English History: Trojans, Teutons, and Anglo-Saxons* (Montreal: Harvest House, 1982); Peter Mandler, *The English National Character: The History of An Idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair* (London: Yale University Press, 2006), ch. 3; J. W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). There is a large literature on Morris in this context; see, among others, Florence Boos, 'Morris's German Romances as Socialist History', *Victorian Studies*, 27.3 (Spring 1984), pp. 321–42; William Whirla, "Sympathetic Translation" and the "Scribe's Capacity": Morris's

its adaptation by socialist writers, is to get a glimpse into the processes of political co-optation, whether in Morris's time or in our own.

The words 'Teuton' and 'Teutonic' proliferated in the titles of books around the turn of the twentieth century, before disappearing almost entirely after the 1920s. They were used in connection with comparative philology and the study of Germanic languages, English constitutional history, Scandinavian literature and mythology (e.g. the Brothers Grimm), medieval history, archaeology, law, and racial taxonomy, usually contrasting the Teutons with the Latins, Gauls, and Slavs. Several books attempted to prove that the Anglo-Saxons and other branches of the Teutonic race were one of the lost tribes of Israel; there was even a Teutonic international language called 'Tutonish'. The main constituents of the ideology behind these various publications rested upon the assumption of the superiority of the Germanic peoples. The national myth purported to demonstrate the Germanic origins of the English, who possessed – as the best representatives of the Germanic genius, and in inheritance from their Germanic forefathers – the freest political institutions in a world they were destined to lead. Though Gibbon had already traced the 'most civilized nations of modern Europe' to the 'woods of Germany', and 'the original principles of our present laws and manners' to 'the rude institutions of those barbarians', the crescendo of Teutomania reached its apogee in the works of Thomas Carlyle and Charles Kingsley, and of professional historians from Sharon Turner and J. M. Kemble to J. R. Green, Bishop Stubbs, and Edward Freeman.³ Carlyle spoke of the Norsemen as 'our fathers; the men whose blood

still runs in our veins, whom doubtless we still resemble in so many ways; 'spiritually as well as bodily these men are our progenitors.'⁴ Kingsley, in a series of lectures tellingly entitled *The Roman and the Teuton*, argued that the English kept 'unbroken the old Teutonic laws, unstained the old Teutonic faith and virtue'. The 'Teuton had his definite laws ... [which] form the groundwork of our English laws and constitution.' God had 'appointed for this race' a 'strange and complicated education,' 'by which he has fitted it to become, at least for many centuries henceforth, the ruling race of the world,' fulfilling 'a glorious destiny.'⁵ The culmination came, of course, in the work of E. A. Freeman and his colleagues, whose task it was to show how 'the many small Teutonic kingdoms in Britain had grown into one Teutonic kingdom of England, rich in her barbaric greatness and barbaric freedom, with the germs ... of every institution which we most dearly prize.'⁶ Other recurring motifs of nationalistic writing included the 'free forests' of Tacitus's Germany, the communal basis of Teutonic society, the democratic nature of Teutonic institutions, especially as contrasted with decadent and despotic Rome, the narrative of the revivification of Europe by vigorous, liberty-loving Germanic invaders, the purity of English blood, the superiority of the Germanic element in the English tongue, the glories of King Alfred, and the Saxon origin of the Parliament in the Witenagemot. In the mid to late Victorian period, the evidence of the new disciplines of philology and anthropology was brought in to corroborate the conclusions of the older historians, the academic discourse of Anglo-Saxonism percolated to and was popularized via elementary education, and the 'Aryan' race (especially its English branch) emerged as God's chosen people.⁷

Calligraphy and the Icelandic Sagas', *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*, 10 (Fall 2001), p. 63; Nicholas Salmon, 'A Study in Victorian Historiography: William Morris's Germanic Romances', *Journal of the William Morris Society*, 14.2 (Spring 2001), pp. 59–89; Marcus Waithé, *William Morris's Utopia of Strangers: Victorian Medievalism and the Ideal of Hospitality* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006).
 3 Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 6 vols. (1776–88; London: Oxford University Press, 1929), I, p. 245. The rest of Gibbon's account, closely following Tacitus but interspersed with numerous moralizations, is not at all favourable to the Germans, though he does highlight their love of liberty, democracy, and independence.

4 Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1897 [1841]), pp. 16, 20. The first chapter is an unabashed panegyric on Teutonism.
 5 Charles Kingsley, *The Roman and the Teuton: A Series of Lectures Delivered before the University of Cambridge* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1864), pp. 17, 9, 6, 13.
 6 Qtd. in Whitla, p. 62.
 7 See Stephen Heathorn, "Let us remember that we, too, are English": Constructions of Citizenship and National Identity in English Elementary School Reading Books, 1880–1914', *Victorian Studies*, 38.3 (Spring 1995), pp. 395–427, and *For Home, Country*,

If one were looking for a single work that could serve as a microcosm of these themes, as well as a model of the convergence of the disciplines in the production of the patriotic myth, no better candidate than Freeman's *Comparative Politics* could be found. Freeman, who succeeded William Stubbs as Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford, aimed to apply the 'comparative method' of philology, mythology, and anthropology – all branches of one 'scientific' inquiry – to politics, and thereby establish the original unity of the 'primitive institutions of the Aryan nations, above all, in the three most illustrious branches of the common stock – the Greek, the Roman, and the Teuton.' He called to his aid Max Müller, E. B. Tylor, Sir Henry Maine, and the German historians, while looking forward to the monumental accomplishment of Stubbs's *Constitutional History*. He appealed to philology for the revelation of the unrecorded stages of prehistory: a common Victorian practice to which everyone from Marx to Morris resorted. In fact, Morris's romance descriptions of the folk-wandering and the sundering of the kindreds are inconceivable outside the conceptual framework of the Aryan migrations and dispersion within which Freeman and the philologists worked. Freeman expounded the theory of likenesses between institutions – whether due to derivation from a common source, to reproduction or imitation, or to mere historical analogy – which provided the foundation for all subsequent equivalencies between Teutonic and modern English social formations. But above all, he was concerned with showing the unbroken line of continuity between the first Greek-Aryan democracies and 'the last measure of progress' achieved in contemporary England, with explaining why the English race, as successor to the kinsmen who went before it, held by rights 'the first place among the nations of the earth' and in the history of mankind. The racial rhetoric attained here its full flower: the Teutons, as the Greeks and Romans before them, wrote Freeman, were entrusted with the mission of ruling and teaching the world; as the Aryan family stood out above the other nations of earth, so these three in their turn, having reached the highest

and Race: Constructing Gender, Class, and Englishness in the Elementary School, 1880–1914 (London: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

stage of civilization available to their age, towered above the less brilliant branches of the Aryan family. And at the present time it was the Teutonic race, whose 'truest representatives' the English could boast themselves to be, that enjoyed predominance on both sides of the Atlantic. Though the Scandinavians and the Swiss preserved unchanged many relics of the Teutonic past, it was the English political institutions that could claim 'the most unbroken descent from the primitive Teutonic stock.' Of these Parliament was of course the foremost example: the fruit of continuous growth from Anglo-Saxon times and a living proof that the English had 'preserved more faithfully than any of our kinsfolk the common heritage of our common fathers.' And though modern Europe was the product of the union of Roman and Teutonic elements, England, by virtue of its history, was a specimen of the pure Teutonic strain.⁸

The myth manifested itself in many aspects of Victorian culture: in the political dream of an Anglo-American alliance based on common Saxon blood, in the receptivity to different strands of German culture, from comparative philology to Wagner, and – in the fields of history and anthropology – in the preoccupation with the village community or Mark, which had been introduced into historical discourse by J. M. Kemble's *The Saxons in England* (1849).⁹ Patriotic historians and socialists alike made political capital out of the notion of the Mark, but before this may be adequately considered, it is necessary to provide a brief background sketch of the different paradigms of historical thinking that contributed to the formation and politicization of the concept.

- 8 E. A. Freeman, *Comparative Politics* (1873; London: Macmillan and Co., 1896), pp. 23–5, 29–30.
- 9 J. W. Burrow, "The Village Community" and the Uses of History in Late Nineteenth-Century England, in *Historical Perspectives: Studies in English Thought and Society in Honour of J. H. Plumb*, ed. Neil McKendrick (London: Europa Publications, 1974), pp. 255–84.

The Schools of Victorian Historiography and the Village Community

The relevant aspects of Victorian historiography may be conceptualized in terms of a continuum (necessarily very selective) from the particular to the general, both in terms of content and methodology.¹⁰

	Some Schools of Late Victorian Historiography		
	Particular	----->	General
School:	Constitutional History	History of Institutions	Anthropology
Focus:	Germanic – comparative	Aryan or Indo-European	World
Topics:	English Constitution	Political and legal institutions	Social evolution: religion, family, state
Some allied disciplines:	Philology, Law, Ethnology, Folklore	Philology, Law	Mythology, Philology
Representative authors:	Stubbs, Freeman, Dicey	Maine, Freeman (Maitland)	McLennan, Tylor, Lang, Lubbock, Morgan, Frazer
Related scholarship:	Maurer, Waitz, Nasse	Maurer, Waitz, Nasse	Bachofen, Max Müller

Constitutional history was by its nature comparative, and the domain it surveyed extended beyond England to the 'Germanic' as a whole. Tacitus was its earliest source text, and Bishop Stubbs and Edward Freeman

¹⁰ See John Burrow, 'Historicism and Social Evolution', in *British and German Historiography 1750–1950: Traditions, Perceptions, and Transfers*, ed. Benedikt Stuchtey and Peter Wende (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 251–64; and Peter Mandler, "Race" and "Nation" in Mid-Victorian Thought, in *History, Religion, and Culture: British Intellectual History, 1750–1950*, ed. Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore, and Brian Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 224–44.

its foremost practitioners. Next along the spectrum in the direction of generality came the history of institutions, or what Freeman called 'comparative politics', for Freeman, along with Sir Henry Maine, was also its leading exponent. Institutional history relied on philology and jurisprudence as its base disciplines (Maine and Maitland were notable jurists), and together with its constitutional counterpart owed a great debt to the work of German historians like G. L. von Maurer and Waitz. In it, the classical Mediterranean and Indian worlds joined the Germanic, to produce the category known – from philology – as Aryan or Indo-European. Finally, anthropology lay at the extreme general end of the spectrum. Represented by J. F. McLennan, John Lubbock, Edward Tylor, Andrew Lang, James Frazer, and the American Lewis Morgan, the anthropological paradigm regarded the whole world as its field of inquiry, and took its evidence from ethnology and comparative mythology (not to mention Darwinian and Spencerian metaphors of biological evolution), abstracting from the practices of contemporary primitive peoples and the 'survivals' in European culture the successive stages of human development. It was the study of social evolution from savagery to civilization, and though it came to focus on the universal institutions of religion and the family, its method and conclusions were eminently applicable to the politically orientated concerns of historians: socialist and otherwise. The boundaries between these categories were blurred (the evolutionary perspective, for instance, was not limited to anthropology), and overlap was extremely common. The best-known socialist application of mainstream academic scholarship in this genre, Friedrich Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, incorporated all of them.¹¹

Given this background, we can now return to the specific issue of the village community or Mark, which was a concept of paramount importance for most historians concerned with 'Germania'. Publications on the village community are too numerous to list: the anarchist prince Peter Kropotkin, in his comparative consideration of the subject in *Mutual*

¹¹ Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State: In the Light of the Researches of Lewis H. Morgan* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1972 [1884]).

Aid, cited over thirty different authors from what was obviously a thriving pan-European scholarly industry. Seen as a whole, the literature presents a tangle of cross-references, though it is usually divided into the Roman and Teutonic camps – the former denying, the latter endorsing the significance, and even the existence of the Mark. But cutting across this division, four schools of thought may be distinguished, each endowing the village community with its own ideological colouring.

The Village Community

Positive		Negative	
1. Freeman, Green (Stubbs)	2. Engels, Bax, Morris	3. Maine, Seebohm, Gomme	4. Maitland
Liberal democracy, prefigures modern English Parliament	Common land ownership, democracy, prefigures future communism	Communitistic and stagnant, superseded by modern individualism	Individualistic, lack of modern corporate consciousness

The village community of professional historiography, though tainted by Whiggism, chauvinism, and racialism, could easily be turned to socialist (and even anarchist) uses, depending on the relative emphases accorded to its political and economic aspects. For the Liberal patriots Freeman and Green it was an embodiment of the cult of 'primeval Teutonic freedom [and] social democracy', and this version, based on the researches of von Maurer, was the one most readily adapted by Morris and others.¹² The Liberals were not known as the democratic Teutonists for nothing. They emphasized direct democracy and local self-government, whether in the primeval German forest or in the surviving Swiss *Landesgemeinden*.¹³

12 Burrow, 'Village', pp. 257, 259. See Mandler, and Paul Meier, *William Morris: The Marxist Dreamer*, trans. Frank Gubb, 2 vols. (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1978), I, pp. 106–10, 247–59, especially the chapter entitled 'Barbarism or Socialism: The Dialectics of an Alternative'.

13 Burrow, 'Village', pp. 261, 269. See especially the opening of E. A. Freeman, *The Growth of the English Constitution from the Earliest Times* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1872).

Green is as adamant about the democratic law-making and administration in the communal folkmoot as he is about each villager's 'jealous independence' in his homestead.¹⁴ What he describes is certainly not primitive communism, but it could be called primitive Liberalism. And just as the socialists' political platform integrated liberal democracy into a greater vision of economic transformation, so their historiography focused not only on self-government, but on the collective ownership of land, though their references remained identical to those of the Liberals.¹⁵ The Liberals incorporated the village community into their narrative of the continuity of English history: modern parliamentary democracy was the 'revival and perfection of ancient Teutonic democracy on a wider scale'.¹⁶ Socialists like Morris, Engels, and E. B. Bax merely replaced 'modern democracy' with 'future communism', but retained, partially in the form of the dialectic, the concept of the 'restoration on a higher level'.

The third school of thought was – unlike the first – much more aware of the communitistic nature of the village community, but regarded this – unlike the second – as an impediment to progress. Whereas the socialists maintained that the breakdown of primitive communism and the emergence of class society were negative and regrettable (though inevitable) developments, writers like Maine, Stubbs, George Gomme, and Frederic Seebohm claimed that progress only began when the system of co-ownership gave way to individualism and private property.¹⁷ Equally, if the socialists now looked forward to a revival of village communalism on a universal scale – just as Freeman hailed the return to origins in greater democracy – Maine could only lament both. As for Seebohm, he was the very antithesis of Morris and other socialist writers of history in his endorsement of individualism. According to Seebohm, the village community and

14 J. R. Green, *A Short History of the English People* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1874), p. 3.

15 See, for instance, E. B. Bax's 'Universal History from a Socialist Standpoint', in *The Religion of Socialism* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1886), pp. 1–37, 547, 557–8.

16 Burrow, 'Village', p. 268.

17 Frederic Seebohm, *The English Village Community*, 3rd ed. (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1884).

the tribal household, whether in Tacitus's Germania or in Anglo-Saxon England, were indeed 'marked by the two notes of community and equality', and 'connected with a form of the open or common field system of husbandry'. But in contradistinction to the free Mark of the democratic Teutonist school, they were characterized from the very beginning by serfdom and manorial tendencies.¹⁸ He could have found no better way of spiting Morris if he had set out to do so intentionally than by wishing that 'the knowledge what the community and equality of the English village and of the Keltic tribe really were under the old order may at least dispel any lingering wish or hope that they may ever return'. 'Communitistic systems ... are hardly likely ... to be the economic goal of the future,' they are 'historical survivals,' 'economic stages for ever past,' not 'types likely to be reproduced in the future.' 'The freedom of the individual and growth of individual enterprise and property which mark the new order imply a rebellion against the bonds of the communism and forced equality, alike of the manorial and of the tribal system. It has triumphed by breaking up both the communism of serfdom and the communism of the free tribe.'¹⁹ Seebohm here is simultaneously confirming the facts and reversing the interpretation of Marxist historiography, for one of its most dearly held tenets – not to mention the guiding hope of Morris's political writing – was the dialectical return on a higher level of tribal and medieval forms of communality.²⁰ For Seebohm, communism was the opposite of freedom and democracy, and the Teutonist socialist dream of the 'spontaneous communalism of free men' was a mere delusion.²¹

The fourth school – effectively in the person of F. W. Maitland – also took up the communal and individualist strands, but in a completely different way. Significant parts of Maitland's work were dedicated to the elucidation of the concept of voluntary association and corporate identity,

18 Seebohm, p. 437; see ch. 9, 'The German Side of the Continental Evidence'.

19 Seebohm, pp. 441, 439.

20 See also Raphael Samuel, 'British Marxist Historians, 1880–1980: Part One,' *New Left Review*, 120 (March–April 1980), pp. 21–96.

21 Seebohm, p. viii; Burrow, 'Village', p. 275.

which were vital to Morris's historical theory.²² 'The spirit of association' was a phrase he shared with many writers on the Middle Ages (e.g. the German historian of guilds and trade unions, Lujo Brentano), but unlike these, Maitland did not consider the ancient village community to be a truly corporate body. On the contrary, he claimed that individualism was primitive and corporateness modern, that the Mark was merely an association of individuals without awareness of a corporate identity. Unity was first abstracted from plurality and the many members at last considered one body or 'person' only in the borough of the later Middle Ages, though the threads of development stretched back from it to the village community and forward to the freely formed companies.²³ Maitland did not draw moral distinctions between capitalistic and communitistic associations – between the guild and the joint-stock company. When he spoke of the 'wealth of group-life' in England and imagined an English Fellowship law book, he did not differentiate between churches, religious houses, mendicant orders, Non-Conforming bodies, the Presbyterian system, universities, the village community, the manor, the township, New England towns, counties and hundreds, chartered boroughs, guilds, Inns of Court, merchant adventurers, companies of all sorts, including those involved in trading, colonialism, and war, friendly societies, trade unions, clubs, the Lloyd's Coffee House, the Stock Exchange, trusts and corporations, parliamentary assemblies, and South Australian statutes for communitistic villages. Such an indiscriminate '*Korporationslehre*' would not have been acceptable to a single socialist.²⁴ And unlike most historians hitherto considered, Maitland did not care for local institutions as such: a recent essay comparing him to Stubbs emphasises Maitland's lack of concern for ultimate origins, and for the village community in particular.²⁵

22 Burrow, 'Village', p. 280.

23 See Frederic William Maitland, 'Introduction,' *Political Theories of the Middle Age*, by Otto Gierke (1900; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), pp. vii–xlv.

24 Maitland, pp. xxvii, ix.

25 Burrow, 'Village', p. 281; see James Campbell, 'Stubbs, Maitland, and Constitutional History,' in Stuchtey and Wende, pp. 112–13.

Socialist Adaptations

How did the socialists go about their selective adaptation of this material? Marx had noted provocatively that the focus on 'the primitive age of every people' on the part of mainstream scholars 'corresponds to the socialist tendency, though these learned men have no idea that they are connected with it. And they are then surprised to find what is newest in what is oldest.'²⁶ Now, the 'enlightened' bourgeois historians, jurists, and anthropologists to whom Morris was likely to refer approvingly would have been surprised indeed to learn that their interest in primitive society betokened unconscious socialist leanings.²⁷ When they looked at Germanic village communities, collective ownership, and democratic decision-making, they saw not the prototype of a socialist utopia, but the antecedents of modern Liberal representative institutions, or even more narrowly, explanations of some recalcitrant aspects of English property law. The reason was that the scanty evidence furnished by Caesar and Tacitus, by the records and law books of the early Middle Ages, and by the anthropological analogy of contemporary 'primitive' societies, could be adapted to the purposes of both ideological groupings, moulded to act as the legitimating origin of 'English liberty' or 'socialist solidarity' in turn. In just the same way in the first half of the twentieth century Baldwinian conservatives and orthodox Marxists both managed to find support for their views in Morris's writings, and eco-theorists can do so now alongside New Labourites.²⁸

26 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, 50 vols. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975–2004), XLII, p. 557.

27 Green, Freeman, and Stubbs were the 'enlightened historians' mentioned by Morris and E. B. Bax in their chapter on 'The Rough Side of the Middle Ages' in *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1893), p. 76.

28 See for example, Michelle Weinroth, *Reclaiming William Morris: Englishness, Sublimity, and the Rhetoric of Dissent* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996) and R. Page Arnot, *William Morris: The Man and the Myth* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1964) on the earlier claims; Ruth Kinna, *William Morris: The Art of Socialism* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000) on Labour co-optations; and

The writers who functioned within the parameters of the Teutonist ideology were not entirely blind to the dangers inherent in anachronistic co-optation. Morris formally disapproved of the 'reading [of] the spirit of the present into the records of the past', and he was not the only one to aim at historical objectivity.²⁹ Freeman, in *The History of the Norman Conquest of England*, blatantly contradicted his own practice and castigated his Liberal and Tory contemporaries for being too fond of discovering modern political institutions like the Parliament or trial by jury in the Anglo-Saxon Witenagemot or the practices of Alfred. But his criticisms did not go very far, and he was quite ready to admit that the 'germs' and 'rudiments' of later institutions were to be found in the earliest times.³⁰ The search for origins was, in fact, the defining characteristic of the constitutional and institutional schools, and the very *raison d'être* of William Stubbs's monumental work on *The Constitutional History of England*. There was nothing extreme or misguided *per se* in insisting that the roots of the present lay deep in the past, but saying that English constitutional history developed 'from the primeval polity of the common fatherland' was taking it a stage further, whilst engaging in the kind of comparisons for which J. R. Green's popular *A Short History of the English People* was notable, bordered on sheer propaganda.³¹ Despite his friend Stubbs's warning that analogies were not proofs, or the (admittedly hypocritical) admonitions of his other friend Freeman against this very proceeding, Green immediately equated the 'Old English' 'witan', who 'met to settle questions of peace and war, to judge just judgement, and frame wise laws', with 'their descendants, the Wise Men of a later England, [who] meet in Parliament at Westminster,

William Morris and News from Nowhere: A Vision for our Time, eds. Stephen Coleman and Paddy O'Sullivan (Devon: Green Books, 1990) on ecology.

29 Morris and Bax, *Growth*, p. 20.

30 Edward A. Freeman, *The History of the Norman Conquest of England, Its Causes and Its Results*, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1867–79), I, p. 73.

31 William Stubbs, *The Constitutional History of England in its Origin and Development*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1874–8), I, XI, and the Preface.

to frame laws and do justice for the great empire which has sprung from this little body of farmer-commonwealths in Sleswick.³²

Morris was firmly opposed to imperialistic applications of the kind revealed in Green's rhetoric, and his opinion of Parliament, that grand institution of English liberty, may be concisely illustrated by the use made of it in Nowhere – as a dung market. He could not have agreed with the Liberals' employment of Germanic precedents as a vindication of the present system – they were a model for the future, not a justification of the status quo. While the Teutonists indulged their penchant for drawing analogies between primitive Germanic freedoms and contemporary English institutions, the socialists preferred to create similar identities between the past and the as-yet-unattained communist future. They differed little in their methods from the apologists of the status quo, but they took care to substitute their vision of a socialist alternative for the utopia of existing bourgeois 'democracy'. The Marxist dialectic replaced the Liberal obsession with 'continuity'.

But though its more virulent nationalistic strains held no appeal, Teutonist ideology permeated socialist thinking nonetheless, and the Liberal historians' 'tendency to ascribe to ancient Saxon ancestors the social organization of later times and to exaggerate their political progressiveness' was equally observable in socialist theory and propaganda.³³ Morris shared the same penchant for 'the forests of Germania' as Stubbs, Freeman, and Green, and in *The House of the Wolfings* he echoed their methods by drawing parallels between 'the custom of our forefathers' and the 'councils' and 'Things' of the Folk, or between the neighbours chosen to give the 'Doom' and our own 'Jury'.³⁴ And it is no accident that his automatic invocations of 'our Saxon forefathers' put one in mind of Freeman's 'forefathers and

32 Stubbs, I, p. 11; Green, p. 4.

33 MacDougall, p. 129.

34 William Stubbs, *The Constitutional History of England*, abr. James Cornford (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. xxvii; William Morris, *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. May Morris, 24 vols. (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1910–15), XIV, p. 7.

kinsmen, Green's 'our English fathers,' and Stubbs's 'our forefathers'.³⁵ In 1870 Morris had already spoken of the *Volsunga Saga* as 'the Great Story of the North, which should be to all our race what the Tale of Troy was to the Greeks', and the Preface to the first volume of the *Saga Library* made Morris's participation in this discourse even more explicit.³⁶ The Icelanders (as Morris's lecture on 'The Early Literature of the North – Iceland' had also explained) represent 'the Gothic branch of the great Teutonic race': the most progressive, intellectual, and active branch at that. Their language is 'akin to our own. Their ancient laws ... nearly the same as those under which the freemen of Kent and Wessex lived, for they were 'free men of the tribes' who had fled from 'the oppression of the early form of feudality'.³⁷ All of this is as faithful a paraphrase of Stubbs, Maine, and Freeman as could be found: glorification of the race, the common origin of Germanic institutions, and the transition from democratic tribal egalitarianism (the Mark) to feudalism (the manor) were, of course, among their main preoccupations. What made the Icelanders such perfect replicas of the hypothetical Goths, furthermore, was their retention of prehistoric memories of Teutonic mythology and customary law that had nearly disappeared in the rest of Europe, 'so completely forgotten', as Engels wrote in *The Mark*, 'that recently G. L. Maurer has had to re-discover their real significance'.³⁸

Engels also took up another strand of the institutional historians' practice in his use of the term 'Aryan', and Morris's collaborator E. B. Bax became the most vocal English proponent of the 'Aryan' element in socialism: 'Though Socialism has no sympathy with anti-Semitism as generally understood, it certainly represents the reassertion of the typical Aryan ethics (whether classical or Norse) of social utility as against the typical

35 William Morris, *The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris*, ed. Eugene D. LeMire (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969), p. 160; Freeman, *Politics*, p. 24; Green, pp. 4, 7; Stubbs, I, pp. 1, 12.

36 Morris, *Collected Works*, VII, p. 286; *The Saga Library*, ed. William Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon, 6 vols. (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1891–1905).

37 Morris and Magnússon, I, pp. v–vi.

38 Morris and Magnússon, I, pp. vi–vii; Marx and Engels, XXIV, p. 441.

Semitic ethics of personal holiness.³⁹ This kind of rhetoric had its roots in comparative theology, which 'associated particular racial groups with certain spiritual characteristics', specifically differentiating between the Semitic and Aryan cultures and their respective contributions to Christianity. The two concepts, however, possessed no stable meaning, so Bax had merely to pick and choose among the available options.⁴⁰ And just as the Teutonists, using philology as a tool, focused on the unrecorded stages of history that succeeded the Aryan peoples' dispersion from their original home, so Bax reserved the bulk of his 'Universal History from a Socialist Standpoint' for an exposition of the evolution of primitive society, disposing of the rest of 'universal history' in just a few pages. Engels devoted a whole book to the subject: *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, in which he drew upon and interpreted many of the same mainstream sources as Bax, Morris, and Marx in his *Ethnological Notebooks*.⁴¹ Marx himself, as early as 'Forms Which Precede Capitalist Production' in the *Grundrisse* (1857–8), had considered the differences between Oriental, Classical, and Germanic forms of communality, the opposition of the Germanic commune to town life, and the Germanic character of the Middle Ages – concerns echoed by academic and socialist historians alike.⁴² Some years later, in letters to Engels of 14 and 25 March, 1868, Marx offered a virtual résumé of the Teutonists' case. He showed a thorough acquaintance with Maurer's work on the German Mark and property forms, referred to the Russian village community, to Grimm, and to a 'Celtic (Welsh) book of

39 The 'Semitic', in Bax's (*Religion*, p. 98) and Freeman's conception, included the Christian.

40 See Kidd, pp. 171, 182, 187, 190.

41 See the lecture on 'Early England' and the series of articles on 'The Development of Modern Society' and 'Socialism from the Root Up' in *William Morris on History*, ed. Nicholas Salmon (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996). See also Samuel, pp. 34–7.

42 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Allen Lane, 1973), pp. 471–9; Green, p. 3; Freeman makes the absence of the conception of the city among the Teutons a fundamental thesis of his chapter on the State in *Comparative Politics*. See also Engels, pp. 215–16; Bax, *Religion*, p. 26, pp. 176–7; *Unpublished Lectures of William Morris*, p. 164.

laws from the 11th century which is entirely communist' and which shows that 'common ownership' was not limited to the Germanic tribes. He also quoted Tacitus and Caesar as primary sources on communal ownership of land and settlement 'according to gentes and kinships', admitted that Scandinavia was 'as important for German jurisprudence and economics as for German mythology', and noted that 'Germanic primitive villages, in the form described, still exist here and there in Denmark'.⁴³

The latter point was an indication of the prevailing tendency. Bax – and Freeman in his half-hearted way – frowned upon 'the inability of man to interpret the past otherwise than in terms of the world in which he lives': a sentiment which many would echo with regard to the tug-of-war between different claimants to Morris's political legacy throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century.⁴⁴ But despite such admirable self-consciousness, the whole endeavour of both groups – professors of history in their academic publications, and the socialists in their tracts and essays – was always 'to find what is newest in what is oldest'. In fact, in his romances Morris managed to add another dimension to this quest by demonstrating the potential of the 'oldest' literary form to give expression to the most cutting-edge political ideology. Socialism was uncovered not only in the proprietary and legislative practices of primitive tribes, but in the literary practices inherited from them as well. Communal storytelling complemented communal landholding, and while Engels wished for the revival of the Mark in the appendix to *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific*, the romances actually brought it back for the general fiction-reading public.⁴⁵ Furthermore, because Teutonist genealogical assumptions allowed Morris to adopt Germanic social organization as a model for the socialist future, *The House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the Mountains* could be read alongside *News from Nowhere* as proto-socialist utopias. They shared not only the concept of the local community, but a similarly indeterminate status suspended between the 'historical' and the 'imaginary'. The Barbar-

43 Marx and Engels, XLII, pp. 547, 558.

44 Bax, *Religion*, p. 166.

45 Marx and Engels, XXIV, p. 456.

ian society of the Wolfings and the socialist society of Nowhere were the beginning and end terms of a single historical sequence. The same theory of social evolution which presupposed the existence of the primitive village community and defined its outstanding features, also accounted for the future existence of the federated socialist community. And while the latter obviously belonged – for the time being at least – to the imaginary realm, the former was an equally ideological construction. To deny the Mark, in its communistic and democratic guise, was just as reasonable as to deny the socialist utopia itself. To endorse both was the aim of socialist historians like Engels and Morris.

Philological Reconstructions

It is impossible to speak about the uses of history in Victorian England without bringing up the uses of philology. The two were directly related, and though the twentieth century was to witness an even closer symbiosis between structural linguistics and anthropology, the late nineteenth-century version of such cross-disciplinary fertilization demonstrated most clearly the extent of the interpretative licence. Philology not only served as a method for interpreting history, but created historical categories which would have been inconceivable without it. In this regard its contribution to the institutional school was immense – the very concept of the Aryan or Indo-European, the extrapolation from a linguistic to a racial family, would not have been possible without the discoveries of comparative philology. It revealed cultural affinities, uncovered connections between the different peoples of antiquity, and could even be used for purposes of racial classification or for tracing 'ethnological development'.⁴⁶ For a long time (before archaeology extended the span of human prehistory further than

46 J. W. Burrow, 'The Uses of Philology in Victorian England', in *Ideas and Institutions of Victorian Britain: Essays in Honour of George Kitson Clark*, ed. Robert Robson (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1967), pp. 180–204.

any linguistic speculation could reach) philology was deemed to provide the only 'scientific' gateway into the far past, the most precise method of reconstructing the world of the common Aryan ancestors before their dispersion, and demonstrating the continuity between prehistory and modern times. It was therefore a model for other kinds of comparative 'inquiry into the remote past': for comparative mythology and folklore, religion, and politics, as well as for legal and social history. Philology could even act as a substitute for anthropology by revealing 'man's earliest states of consciousness' as efficaciously as the savages who were the social evolutionists' objects of study.⁴⁷ The philological habit of reconstruction – cultural and political extrapolation from etymological origins – might, in fact, serve as the type of all hermeneutical activity. From the patronymic local name ending in *ing* one made a leap to the free village community of the Anglo-Saxon settlers, or in the opposite direction to the Roman manorial type of tribal household.⁴⁸ And thence it was but a short distance to the democratic communistic utopia at one extreme, or to an endorsement of the triumph of economic individualism at the other. In the Preface to his study of English village communities, Seebohm made no bones about the vast political implications of the choice of linguistic interpretation: he stressed its importance for state action, for 'the future happiness of the human race – the success or failure of the planet'. The leadership role of the 'English speaking nations', the way politicians were to view the nature of economic development depended, in effect, on the findings of toponymy.⁴⁹

It is not surprising then that philological reconstructions abounded in the work of most writers concerned with the Aryan, and, in particular, the Germanic idea: from Sharon Turner in *The History of the Anglo-Saxons* to William Stubbs in *The Constitutional History of England*, from Freeman and Seebohm to Marx and Engels – who were as interested as Morris in Icelandic remains, though mainly for the clues they provided to early social organization. Engels, for instance, dealt with various words for 'gens' and 'king', and even found proofs for the prevalence of mother-right in the

47 Burrow, 'Philology', pp. 195, 187–8, 196.

48 See Seebohm, p. 367.

49 Seebohm, p. viii.

word choices of the Old Norse *Völuspá*.⁵⁰ It makes sense, therefore, to end by considering Morris's village community from a philological point of view, to look at the relationship between the 'Mark' as an etymological entity and as a historical concept. 'Mark' may have meant boundary, or wood, or the province enclosed by the boundary; it occurred in the *Edda*, and had cognates in various Germanic languages. Jacob Grimm was the first to speculate about it, but by Morris's time the ambiguous signifier had become encrusted with very specific historical associations. One can see the creative process at work in J. R. Green, who enthused over the 'little [Saxon] farmer-commonwealth ... girt in by its own border or "mark", a belt of forest or waste or fen which parted it from its fellow villages, a ring of common ground', and even in Engels, who spoke of 'the boundary forest of the Germans' and its equivalents in other tongues, and of the 'territory delimited by these uncertain boundaries' as 'the common land of the tribe'.⁵¹ Morris adopted the 'Mark' into his romances to mean the space inhabited by related *gentes* or Houses, located in the clearing of a wood, and characterized by the various attributes of the Barbarian stage of social organization. *The House of the Wolfings* opens with what is effectively a several-page-long definition of the Mark, and the first chapter, which in any case reads like an anthropological primer, is also a perfect specimen of historical-philological reconstruction.

Tom Shippey, who discusses Morris's use of the word 'Mark', offers the best description of

the tangled way in which 'lost worlds' of Germanic prehistory were 'reconstructed' from words and fragments: first a couple of names ... then increasingly positive statements about the historical and geographical implications of the names ... and, before the process reached its climax, an attempt by Morris to 'feel his way back' from words and names to description of a country and a social condition. ... the process of philological reconstruction itself offered plausibility and claimed truth ... philologists excelled in wringing as much as possible out of fragmentary evidence.

Shippey goes on to claim that the source of the conflict between the Goths and the Huns which forms the central plotline of *The Roots of the Mountains* – and the source of those mountains themselves – is an Eddic poem

50 Engels, pp. 147–8, 196–7, 169, 189, 198.

51 Green, p. 3; Engels, p. 153.

found in an edition of the *Corpus Poeticum Boreale* which Morris owned. Whatever the accuracy of this assertion, it is certainly true, as Shippey points out, that the tendency 'to stretch from single words to whole histories' was characteristic not just of philologists, but of students of all the interrelated disciplines that attempted to reconstruct the lost world of Germanic prehistory.⁵² In whose image they reconstructed it was a function of their ideological and political allegiance, and where Morris's allegiances lay was no secret. The particular nexus of history, philology and socialism that Morris inherited and transformed may be exemplified by the following excerpt from Marx's letter about 'Germanic primitive villages': 'The general [*das Allgemeine*] in German and Nordic means only the communal land, and ... the particular, the special [*das Sondere, Besondere*] means only private property divided off from the communal land.'⁵³ What Morris did was provide a fictional illustration of the etymological and political point, since for him the roots of socialism, like the roots of those unspecified mountains, were to be found in the Germanic village community. Those of us studying the roots of Morris's own thinking should heed the philological lesson and keep in mind the written word's susceptibility to ideological interpretation.

Conclusion

The nineteenth-century academic community interested in the Germanic Mark was fairly small but international, and scholars (whether they were philologists, historians, jurists, anthropologists, mythographers, or economists) not only cited each other at every step, but drew upon the same relatively limited pool of primary evidence. Disagreements, though fierce, were mainly about matters of interpretation: the terms of the discussion were common. Parallels with the worldwide and highly interdisciplinary community of twenty-first century Morris enthusiasts will readily leap to

52 Shippey, pp. 60–1, 63–4.

53 Marx and Engels, XLII, p. 558.

mind. But new data, which would radically alter the accepted paradigms (though it did not arrive in time to influence Morris's historiography), was about to be furnished by *fin de siècle* archaeologists, ethnologists, and historians uncovering hitherto untapped archival sources. Modern Morris studies can hardly hope for an infusion of fresh primary material on a similar scale, and therefore remains, like most author-centred studies, locked into the game of interpretation. Theories proliferate, but the number of texts upon which they operate is finite. And so, perhaps paradoxically, the game looks set to go on forever. Until new information arrived, the socialist village community was as likely a proposition as the Liberal imperialist one; the scattered facts, appropriately selected, could accommodate either ideological arrangement. An authorial corpus sufficiently extensive and varied – such as Morris's – is subject to the same pressures: for any testimonial of a particular opinion or tendency one may find another of its opposite number. Who is to say whether the 'Marxist' Morris is more representative than the 'Romantic' one if what he wrote in 1865 is as authentic as what he wrote in 1885? Given the complexity and multidimensionality of even one man's output, any agenda-driven approach will omit important counterexamples, whether through lack of sources, sheer ignorance, or deliberate suppression. But at bottom, the difficulty remains hermeneutical: literary critics who deduce the existence of a worldview on the basis of selected quotations are behaving just like the Victorian historians who drew sweeping conclusions from the evidence of three morphemes, a saga, and two books of laws. To engage in any act of interpretation is to become in a certain sense a romancer. 'Doesn't the fool realise', Morris is reported to have replied to a query about his sources for *The House of the Wolfings*, 'that it's a romance, a work of fiction – that it's all LIES! Hasn't the pedantic ass ever heard of creative imagination ... an artist who knows his business can fill out an epoch on the strength of half a dozen details. Well, more than half a dozen, but all the same!'⁵⁴ One could only wish for twenty-first-century Morris critics to be blessed with Morris's methodological self-awareness.

54 H. Halliday Sparling, *The Kelmscott Press and William Morris Master-Craftsman* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1924), p. 50.

DAVID LATHAM

Between Hell and England: Finding Ourselves in the Present Text

'Fellowship is heaven and lack of fellowship is hell.'

— WILLIAM MORRIS, *A Dream of John Ball*¹

The inspiration for Oscar Wilde's insistence that any reputable 'map of the world' must include Utopia² arose from the idealism at the heart of William Morris's signature interest in the government of 'the province of art'. W. B. Yeats described all of Morris's work as the prophetic vision of a perfect life, adding that 'more than any other man of modern days [Morris] tried to change the life of his time into the life of his dream.'³ In a complementary observation, Arthur Clutton-Brock noted that Morris did not try to reform the world of literature as he did the world of life.⁴ Like all great artists who turn from tragedies to romances as the culmination of their careers, Morris turned from the hindrances of routine and detail

- 1 William Morris, *A Dream of John Ball* (London: Reeves & Turner, 1888), p. 29. Hereafter, cited within parentheses. The title for my essay is from *A Dream of John Ball*, as Morris depicts the jocular peasants unable to imagine a narrator choosing to visit their sorry station on Earth 'unless he had the choice given him between hell and England' (p. 13).
- 2 Oscar Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism', in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Robert Ross (New York: Bigelow, 1921), VII, p. 23. The full quotation is: 'A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not even worth glancing at.'
- 3 W. B. Yeats, Review of *The Well at the World's End*, *Bookman*, 10 (November 1896), pp. 37–8.
- 4 A. Clutton-Brock, 'The Prose Romances of William Morris', *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 January 1914, pp. 9–10.