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978-1-108-05461-4 - William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist: The Art of William Morris; Morris as a Writer: Volume 1

May Morris

Excerpt

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THE ART OF WILLIAM MORRIS

INTRODUCTION

THE miscellaneous nature of the writings in this volume calls for a few observations to preface them. One side of Morris's immense and varied production might easily be overlooked. He wrote for special purposes or in special circumstances quite a considerable amount of occasional prose, and I have brought together a number of articles and letters on various subjects that would otherwise remain unnoted in the papers and magazines of a past day. A review of Rossetti's poems is preserved here; one of Morris's most rare visits to the Royal Academy is recorded, also an address on the pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. All of these were written before my Father began to devote his energies to the Socialist movement. From this period date the important lectures published in the Collected Edition of his works. Later on, when the movement had become widespread, and the work had been taken up by younger men, and the need for such complete devotion to it had passed away, we have a certain number of short technical articles on dyeing and on stained glass, and others on different sides of book-production—these last the outcome of his professional success as a printer.

Morris's letters and other writing collected here concerning the work of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings call for a few words of special notice. The first Annual Meeting of the S.P.A.B. was held in Willis's Rooms on June the 21st, 1878. My Father read the Report of the year's work, which was of his writing, with a few notes supplied to him about cases dealt with. There are also addresses by him printed in three later Reports. We have also the Manifesto of the Society on its formation in 1877, which he wrote, as originally issued; it is headed by a long list of distinguished names forming the Committee.

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Of the series of letters, the two published in *The Athenæum* of March the 10th and April the 4th, 1877, are historical, being the first public expression of the growing apprehension of a small group of people for the safety of fine buildings of a bygone age. Morris here proclaims the necessity of protecting our historical monuments as national property: and it is a satisfaction to know that in these latter days that passionate desire has become a guiding inspiration.

Among the preoccupations of the first year of the Society was the question of restoring the choir of Canterbury Cathedral; and the duel in *The Times* between the opposing interests, from which we have taken Morris's letters, is interesting to read about to-day: not least because it reminds us that in 1877, when the matter of preserving the life-history of an old building came to the public as a fresh idea, the attitude of the clergy towards this newly-formed body was far different from what it has come to be at the present time. The Rev. W. J. Loftie had written as well as Morris, and his letter was an indictment of restoration already carried out in the building and a foreboding for the future. In answering these two letters the Dean remarks: 'If I understand Mr Loftie and Mr Morris aright, they think nothing should be done to a building after it is completed, but it should be left to moulder away till it becomes a picturesque ruin.' And he allows his pen still further to run away with him in the following: 'Mr Morris's Society probably looks on our Cathedral as a place for antiquarian research or for budding architects to learn their art in. We need it for the daily worship of God.' Morris's letter of July is in answer to this. The correspondence is typical of the feeling that prevailed in those early days of misunderstanding of the aims of the Society and indignation at interference. (It will be remembered that one stalwart country Vicar remarked that he could stand on his head in his choir if he chose). Now happily such feeling scarcely exists.

We see him concerned very early in the ever-recurring question of the threatened destruction of the City of Lon-

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don churches, while a short letter on the vulgarization of Oxford is melancholy reading to-day for us who watch the steady progress of the vulgarization since his time. Introduction

Then his attention is claimed by a remote building among the water-meadows of the Thames. The preservation of the church at Inglesham, concerning which my Father wrote a short appeal for the Society, is typical of the work successfully carried through in humble places that gave much satisfaction to him. These small churches all along the waters of the Upper Thames have a quiet composed beauty specially their own. But Inglesham is surely the jewel of them all, a fair building standing in its apple-orchard as in a sweet and simple garden beside the reed-grown edges of the young Thames.

The monuments in Westminster Abbey are the subject of much outspoken comment published in the press—as authoritative a pronouncement as could be desired—while, in the following letter to W. R. Lethaby, he expressed his feeling on the matter in familiar and unparliamentary language. It was the sort of denunciation that he allowed himself among his intimate friends with the certainty that he would be understood.

Kelmescott House,
Upper Mall,
Hammersmith.

My dear Mr Lethaby, [no date]

Thanks for the papers duly received. I don't (by the way) agree with you that I have said the worst of the monuments; I think on the contrary that I have let them down very easily. I cannot see why one should show any tenderness to such monstrous and ghastly pieces of perversity and bluntness of feeling as they exhibit themselves in spoiling one of the 3 or 4 most beautiful buildings in the world. By themselves they are lumps of ineptitude and insults, I will not say to beauty, but to the common sense of a simply stupid person. If they were only this, as they would be say in St Paul's, I wouldn't trouble my head about them any more

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than I do about such scrawls at humanity as Racine or Pope —but in Westminster Abbey—My dear fellow, if I have said so little about the unspeakable wretches who daubed them on there, it is simply because ‘I couldn’t do justice to them,’ as the celebrated Yorkshire man said.*

I really must take you to the transepts at Westminster one of these days, & explain. You needn’t be afraid, I don’t think the beak will give you more than 14 days; though I shall probably get 2 months.

Yours very truly,
William Morris.

There is considerable interest attached to the review of Rossetti’s *Poems*: the considered opinion by one poet of the work of another, that one, too, who not so long before had been his leader and master in another art. Judging from the letters of the time, he found it rather a difficult task. The fact that Morris so seldom expressed publicly his views on the making of poetry gives this review an added importance.

The visit my Father paid to the Royal Academy in 1884 and wrote about afterwards in *To-day* was to me who accompanied him most stimulating. As will be seen in the article, the survey of the pictures was made in a frame of mind anxious to praise yet unhopeful, and, in the wilderness of uninteresting exhibits, he welcomed with refreshment what struck him as good work, as answering some at least of his ‘four aims.’ There was no hesitating in our walk round the galleries; with a swift eye he picked out the pieces he writes of, passing by without waste of time or expression of distaste all but the ‘crimes’ alluded to, and considering and commenting on the points of the work he liked. His enjoy-

* A favourite story of a Yorkshireman who was very foul-mouthed when angry. One day when he was carting a load of turnips up a steep slope certain friends quietly removed the tail of his cart. On reaching the top of the hill the cart was empty and his pals alongside awaiting the flowers of speech. But he, after looking, turned away and remarked, ‘Na, I canna do justice to it.’

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ment of Brett's Western Highland picture 'McLeod's Introduction Maidens' and his reference to the possibilities of Iceland scenery as subjects for a painter, are interesting, while the practical suggestion that English artists should form a society for painting the old houses of England as valuable records for the future was certainly worth consideration. There is little wonder that he wrote with bitterness and sorrow about the ruin of Millais's art—Millais who had meant so much to the circle led by Morris in the days of their young and generous enthusiasms.

As a *pendant* to this paper on the art of the day, the lecture he gave some years later at Birmingham on the pre-Raphaelite School also finds a place here. The considered views of later life on the painters who aroused the aforesaid enthusiasms of youth give it a special interest, and there are in it certain passages on the character of the movement, its success and non-success as a school and the attitude of the public to the new art that will always be quotable. In both paper and lecture we find Morris's *idée fixe* expressed: the longing for a new art in a new world; a plea for thought alive and vigorous, as against the languor of convention.

The 'Examination of William Morris before the Royal Commission on Technical Instruction in 1882' presents points of interest that justify its inclusion *in extenso*, only a few extracts having been made in one of the Introductions to our 'Collected Works.' The questions asked were comprehensive and to the point, and elicited answers of a highly practical nature on every side of the question of craft-production. Questions of style arose; of the different qualities in French and English style in designing for the manufacturers; the training of the manufacturers' designer was asked about, and Morris's view noted of the necessity of study of old examples side by side with study of natural forms; drawing in elementary schools was touched on, and Morris remarked that 'everybody ought to be taught to draw just as much as everybody ought to be taught to read

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and write.' Museums were discussed, and one point that, as those around Morris well remember, worried him was the circulation of works of art lent to provincial museums, and his terror lest work of irreplaceable value should be accidentally damaged is here expressed. This indeed touches us nearly in the life of to-day, when the treasures from overseas have been shown of late years to a wondering public, while in our delight in these things we are apt to forget the dangers they run in transit by sea and rail.

In the first years of exhibition, the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society published in their catalogues introductory notes on the crafts written by different hands: Walter Crane, W. A. S. Benson, Somers Clarke, W. R. Lethaby, J. H. Pollen, and many another of the familiar names are there; in the second Exhibition (1889) we even have an essay by F. Madox Brown (on Mural Decoration). These were gathered later into a little volume with the title *Arts and Crafts Essays, by members of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society*. They are all eminently practical, clear and concise and as valuable as longer treatises would be, fulfilling well their intention as notes for the guidance of students; but I am only concerned here with those written by Morris, on 'Textiles' and on 'Dyeing as an Art,' and, together with Emery Walker, on 'Printing.*' The volume also contains a short preface by Morris. Re-reading these notes of his after the lapse of years, one is struck by the direct and clear exposition of the technique in the three crafts dealt with. They are stimulating, exciting: one could almost go to the dye-pots and start producing beautiful colours regardless of the years of experience needed to pursue this art: the practical remarks on carpets seem to make the production of a simple pattern a mere nothing; and so with the other textiles. The few hints, slight as they seem, as to where to look, East and West, for fine examples of the crafts open out a way to further study; the essentials of the beauty of

* Sir Emery Walker showed me the MS. and his own share in the essay—only a paragraph or two at the beginning.

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good work of past times are shown to be based on simple Introduction
rules of taste and selection : so simple that 'anybody' could
learn how, if they wanted to!

I am indebted to the courtesy of the publishers for permission to include here Morris's article on Stained Glass from *Chambers's Encyclopædia*. The permission is specially welcome, as nowhere else has my Father written in any detail on this subject, which was one of the earliest of the arts that he mastered and practised so successfully. The technical notes are as interesting and informing as those on the aesthetic side of the subject or on its history.*

It was when the Kelmscott Press was in full swing and Morris was becoming possessed of volume after volume of the choicest early printing that he read a paper on 'The Ideal Book' before the Bibliographical Society. In reading it one may remember that at the time he was somewhat isolated in his enthusiasm for fine printing, and that the rules of taste laid down here were not yet familiar to most people. The paper on 'Gothic Woodcuts of the Fifteenth Century' with lantern illustrations, given before the Society of Arts, was, like the above-named, on general lines, while a more specialized article was written on 'The Books of Augsburg and Ulm' for *Bibliographica*.

The paper published in *The Magazine of Art* displays yet another of Morris's many interests, for he writes not only as a student of medieval manuscripts but as one who had himself written and decorated manuscripts fitted to stand beside the best of them.

A few introductions to books issued by his friends bear witness to an accessibility with which he is not always credited; and all through his life occasional letters to the public press show his interest in the discussions of the day.

'A Gossip about an Old House' appeared in *The Quest*, a short-lived periodical carefully printed and issued by the

* In the *Encyclopædia Britannica* is an important and scholarly article on 'Mural Decoration' written jointly by J. H. Middleton and William Morris.

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The Art of William Morris Birmingham Guild of Handicrafts, to which the young Birmingham artists contributed. Morris's article was illustrated with drawings of Kelmscott Manor by C. M. Gere and E. H. New.

Concerning the verses included in this volume, there is justification in gleaning some half a dozen from the slim collection of *Juvenilia*. All the poems have been shown to a great authority, and these few have been passed for one reason or another.* Of one, after pointing out the faults, it is said, 'Yet I cannot help liking it: there is an *aura* of poetry about it.' Of another, 'The Night Walk,' the master critic remarks, 'I don't think I could pardon "faster" and "passed her" to *anybody* but Morris. But it is worth keeping.' And so on. These efforts, groping as they are, of the boy who was to become a poet, show his predilection, the wavering pictures in his mind, his efforts to focus his thoughts, and I cannot bear to pass them by altogether.

The 'French Noel' was printed in 1860 in a collection of *Antient Christmas Carols* arranged for four voices by Edmund Sedding. Readers will remember the Carol that comes in with such a strangely beautiful effect in 'The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon,' and will be interested to compare the smoother verses with these which are written with the early simplicity and directness of the designer who about that time was making the Daisy wall-paper. The two 'Ballads' are also early. The song *Haec Ille* is one of those discarded in the early writing of 'Cupid and Psyche' and replaced by the lovely lyric, 'O pensive tender maid.' And here also are two Sonnets and a poem, 'What all men long for,' of the *Earthly Paradise* time. A second poem of the same period, 'Praise of Wine,' I will not vouch for, but I

* I must express here something of my gratitude to the late Professor Saintsbury for his kindness in giving time to the consideration of these youthful poems. 'Your father's daughter,' he wrote, 'could never "trouble" me in any matter concerning his verse . . .' Kindnesses such as these that I meet with on all sides come to me like a 'bequest' from my Father and are greatly valued.

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am justified in including it by the appreciation of Professor Introduction
Saintsbury. ‘Couldn’t you print it as “doubtful”?’ he says, ‘for I do like it.’ Anyway, if Morris’s, it is the only poem of his celebrating this ‘gift of the Gods’ that I can recall. Again of this time are the two songs written for the *Orpheus* poem but evidently crowded out among the many lament-lyrics there.

That Morris made renderings into English of some of the Eddic lays, our readers of the Collected Works already know; in the Introduction to Volume VII are printed Baldur’s Dream and the Lay of Thrym from a rather rough draft. Since then another translation has been found which, unpolished as it is, shows that he was at work on this matter. The importance of the ‘Völuspá’ justifies the inclusion in this volume of the line for line rendering made at that time, when my Father’s mind was full of the matter of the North.

A fragment of *Egils Saga* is also included. Unsatisfactory as the presentment of unfinished matter must always be, this gives the English reader a tantalizing glimpse of Egil Skallagrimsson and his times, and I could not make up my mind to pass it by. My Father had great admiration for this the finest of the Icelandic Sagas. I remember his talking about the verses in it at the time when he was wrestling with them, and I think that he concluded that the difficulties they presented would prevent him from doing full justice to the Saga. But it is a thousand pities that he did not go on with the work. I am printing from a beautiful MS. with lightly ornamented letters.

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CHAPTER I. THE SPRING-TIME OF THE FIRM

IN the Introduction to the Collected Edition of Morris's writing, though incidental references were made to the work starting in Red Lion Square and ending in Merton Abbey, little stress was laid on this side of his life. But while I do not feel called on to enter deeply into a consideration of the creative aspect of his work, which would require a volume to itself, I feel that a connected account of his activities in this direction would be of interest and value to the general reader, more especially as it is a recognized fact that the greater part of what was his personal contribution to the decorative arts of the nineteenth century has been absorbed unconsciously and used by the craftsmen of Europe and the United States.

Indeed, the influence of his work, great as it has been in this country where the spirit was native and traditional in a measure, familiar in people's minds as English woodland and garden, was still greater in some continental countries where the decorative tradition was entirely dissimilar. It was taken up very soon in Holland, and from thence—suffering a sea-change on the way—passed in one direction to South Germany, in another to Belgium, and thence even made a slight impression on Paris, while at the same time not only the spirit of his work, but some of the detail for a while—though strangely transformed later—found a home in the Scandinavian countries.

The story of how Morris took up the work of furnishing and designing has been told so often that I need but touch upon it here. Even before he was married we know that the young men began designing wonderful and unusual painted furniture for the fittings at 17 Red Lion Square, where Morris and Burne-Jones had taken rooms in 1856, while among the books inscribed 'William Morris, Exeter College, Oxon' are some volumes bound in thick boards covered with white vellum, with heavy brass clasps and very