

Late Victorian Orientalism

Representations of the East in
Nineteenth-Century Literature, Art
and Culture from the Pre-Raphaelites
to John La Farge

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Chapter 2

EMPIRES AND SCAPEGOATS: THE PRE-RAPHAELITES IN THE NEAR EAST

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In his 2009 *Victorian Literature and Post-Colonial Studies*, Patrick Brantlinger unravelled the skein of 'post-colonial' historiographies since the appearance of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978. Concluding that 'there were, perhaps, as many Orientalisms as Orientalists',¹ he outlined the prior range of responses by nineteenth-century British visitors and colonial occupiers to the cultures they encountered and/or conquered – from brutal denial of all legal rights in the case of the Australian Tasmanians, on the one hand, to adoption of native ways and active participation in tribal practices and communities ('going native') in India and the Middle East, on the other.

The Near East, of course, already held a place in the British *imaginarium* as the site of Bethlehem, Jerusalem and the Sea of Galilee. Only in a metaphorical way could Britons claim with William Blake that their prophet's 'holy feet' had ever walked 'upon England's mountains green',² and those who had read the Bible could not ignore the moral resonance of the names of Tyre, Babylon, Nineveh and other sites they would never see. As for the staples of 'classical education', had not the Greeks ventured to Troy and traded with the Phoenicians, the Syrians' ancient ancestors (Figures 2.1 and 2.2)?

Napoleon's invasion of Egypt and Syria in 1798–99 had already intensified European interest in the region, and a number of British travellers had written accounts of their journeys in it. Among these were Edward Lane's *Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (1836), Thackeray's *Notes of a Journey from Cornhill to Grand Cairo* (1846), Richard Burton's *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah* (1855–56) and Lucie Duff Gordon's posthumous *Letters from Egypt* (1865). Even Florence Nightingale had journeyed down the Nile in 1849–50.³ But the Ottoman Empire ruled Turkey, Palestine, Syria,

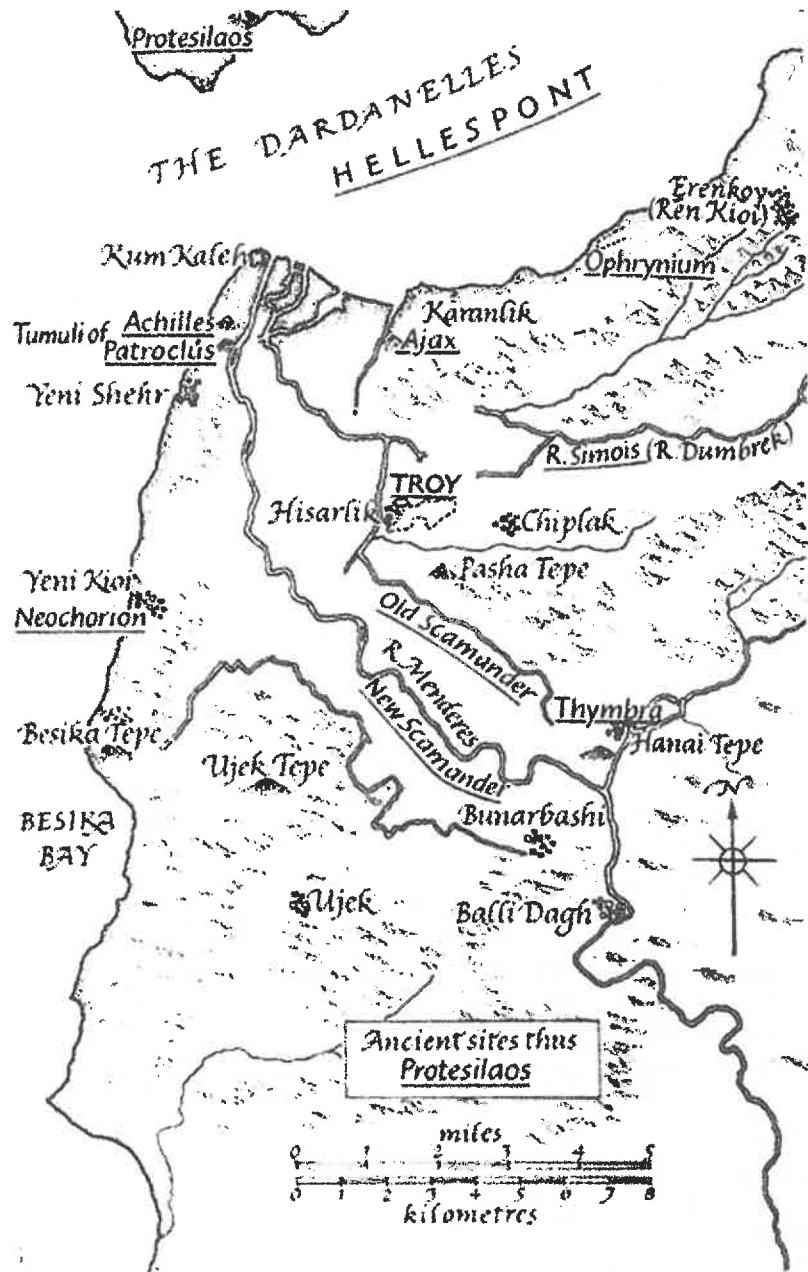


Figure 2.1 Map of the Troad.

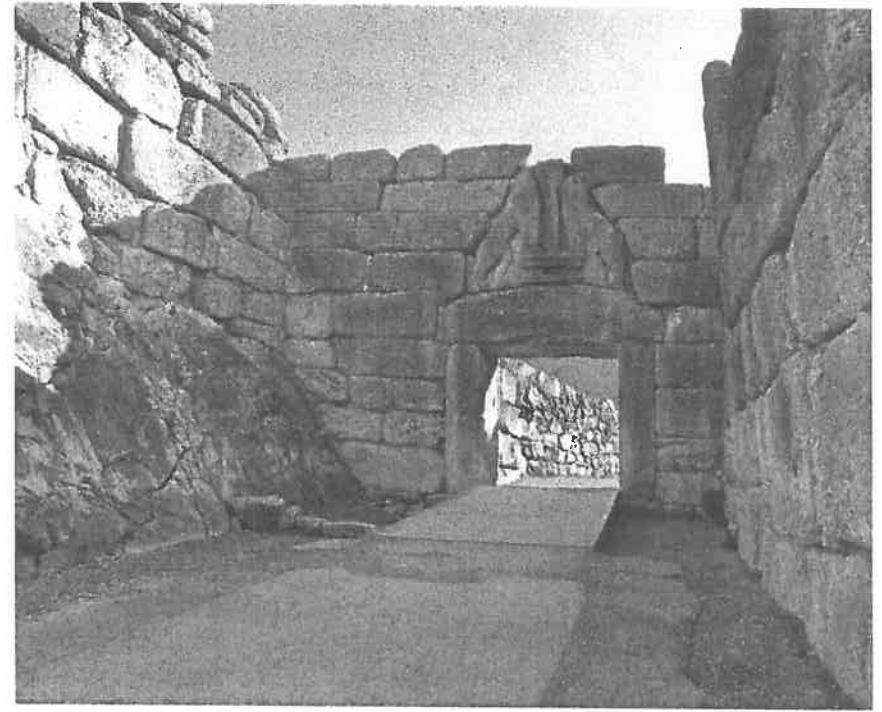


Figure 2.2 Lion Gate, Mycenae, c. 1300–1250 BCE. Photo: Andreas Trepte.

Persia, Upper Egypt, the Sudan and Afghanistan, and so British visitors in these regions were conscious that they were crossing thresholds into someone else's imperial domain.

In roughly the same period, the British government discovered 'special' (read 'military and commercial') interests in some of these regions, which triggered three Anglo-Afghan Wars (the first 1839–42) and culminated in the suppression of the Egyptian independence movements of 1882–98 (see appendix 'British Presence in the Near East'). When the British Empire reached its high point in the early twentieth century, it controlled India, large areas of Africa, parts of Persia, Afghanistan and Egypt (including the Suez Canal after 1869). Liberal and Conservative prime ministers alike feared that the rulers of France harboured similar aims and that the Tsarist regime in Russia was poised to expand overland through Pakistan and Afghanistan towards India. Since they also believed that none of the 'lesser' regimes in these regions were capable of independent government, they found themselves in an uneasy Near Eastern alliance of convenience with the Muslim Ottoman Empire, whose corruption, incompetence and brutality towards

minority populations were legendary.⁴ At the same time they were pressured by Christian Britons who were determined to regain control of the temple and other 'holy' sites in Jerusalem⁵ and come to the aid of their persecuted Middle Eastern fellow Christians in Syria.

Keeping in mind Brantlinger's postulated tripartite spectrum of imperial reactions – domination, immersion and advocacy – in what follows I will consider the contrasting ways in which three British Pre-Raphaelite artists and writers, none of whom were directly involved in the military or diplomatic work of the empire, viewed the policies of imperial rule in a part of the world only one of them ever saw.

William Holman Hunt

William Holman Hunt (1827–1910) and Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882) were members of a group of aspiring London art students and their friends who in the early 1850s formed a community of mutual support called the 'Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood',⁶ and who were befriended a few years later by the artist Edward Burne-Jones (1833–1898) and his friend, the artist, writer and socialist William Morris (1834–1896).

Holman Hunt (hereinafter 'Hunt') was strongly attracted to the Near East and lived there for four extended periods – from 1854 to 1855, 1869 to 1872, 1875 to 1878 and then in 1892, a total of six and a half years (Figure 2.3). Hunt was a fascinated observer and fervent admirer of Near Eastern art, but he was also a loyal Briton, idiosyncratic Christian and in his later life, a convinced Zionist.

Much of what we know of Hunt's life and opinions is set forth in *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (1905), a two-volume exposition of his artistic principles, early days as a struggling painter, relationships with fellow artists and passionate interest in the history and cultures of the Near East (Figure 2.4). A complex man, Hunt had a precise memory for detailed observations of Near Eastern cultures⁷ and was widely admired in his old age for Christian paintings such as *The Open Door* and *The Shadow of Death*. Nonetheless in his youth he had cheerfully signed with his Pre-Raphaelite 'brothers' a document which affirmed their belief in no immortality 'save in that perennial influence exerted by great thinkers and workers', and which appended a list of names of such 'immortals' (Figures 2.5 and 2.6).⁸

In his youth Hunt had also believed strongly in the need for a vigorous revival of 'English' art, which

should stamp a nation's individuality; it should be a witness of its life to all eternity [...] There must be a real necessity for design felt in the nation; it must be a real want, food to the intellectual and sensuous hunger of the people; it must be

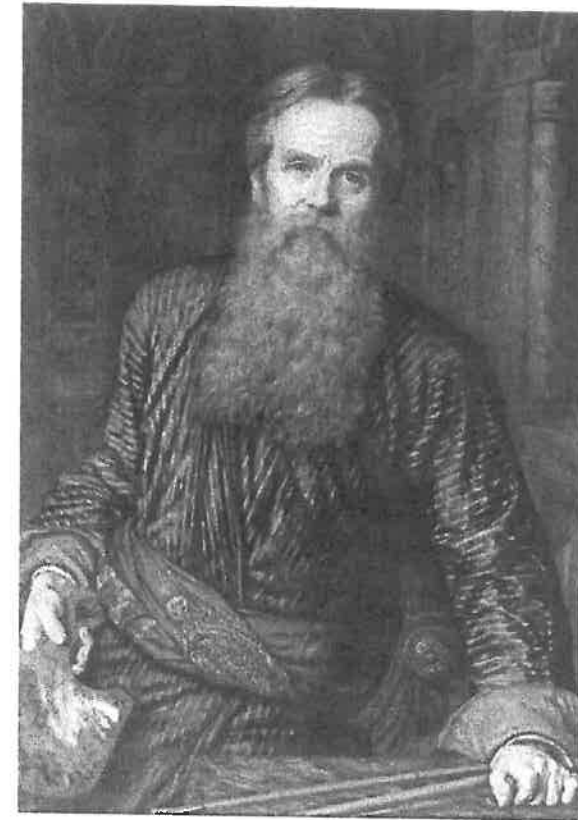


Figure 2.3 Holman Hunt, self-portrait, 1867. Uffizi Gallery.

an adjunct to religion, or if you quarrel about names, about what men have in the place of religion [...] it will not be found in latter days if it is done only to flatter the rich. (1.370; emphasis in the original)

Somewhat lesser nationalistic counterparts of these views were shared by his fellow Pre-Raphaelites, along with his distaste for slavish imitation of 'the Old Masters', for 'the language they used was then a living one, now it is dead; for us to repeat their treatment for subjects of sacred or historic import is mere affectation' (85) and emulation of it would 'have no effect but to make the beholders look upon the sacred history as a fabulous tale, and the heroes acting in it as legendary favourites' (1.369). Along with contemporary American painters such as Frederic Church and Sanford Gifford, Hunt – who in adolescence had worked as a warehouse clerk – also construed John Ruskin's doctrine of 'truth to nature' in *Modern Painters* as an injunction to



Figure 2.4 John Ballantyne, *Portrait of Holman Hunt in His Studio*, 1865. National Portrait Gallery.

include the lives and aspirations of 'ordinary' people as subjects of art. His much-admired *Shadow of Death* was initially denounced for its depiction of Christ as a working carpenter, and *The Triumph of the Innocents*, a representation of the flight to Egypt, portrayed Joseph as a labourer who attentively guides his donkeys as they pull Mary in a humble cart.

Interestingly, the passionately religious Hunt also disliked most of the religious establishments he encountered. His *Strayed Sheep* and *The Hireling Shepherd* may be interpreted as allegories of ecclesiastical indifference and corruption, and he believed that 'truth to nature' required an open-eyed understanding of geological and evolutionary origins. He acknowledged that 'religion' was a work in progress ('religion, or if you quarrel about names, what men have in the place of religion'), and also that the appearances of nature were archetypes of the moral law within ('My types were of natural figures such as language had originally employed to express transcendental ideas [...] [Their] symbolism was designed to elucidate, not to mystify, truth') (1.350–51).

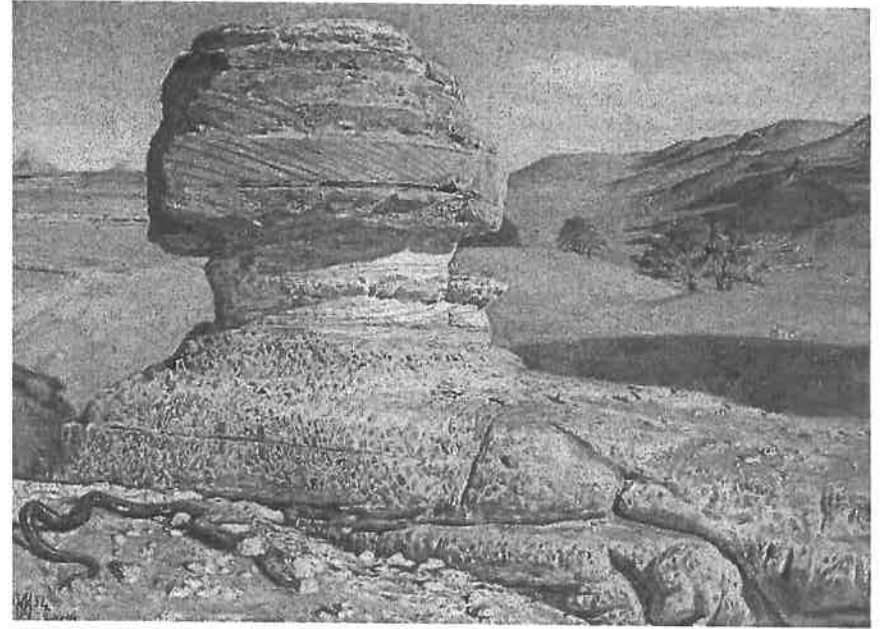


Figure 2.5 Holman Hunt, *The Sphinx in the Vicinity of Gaza*, 1854. Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Sheffield.

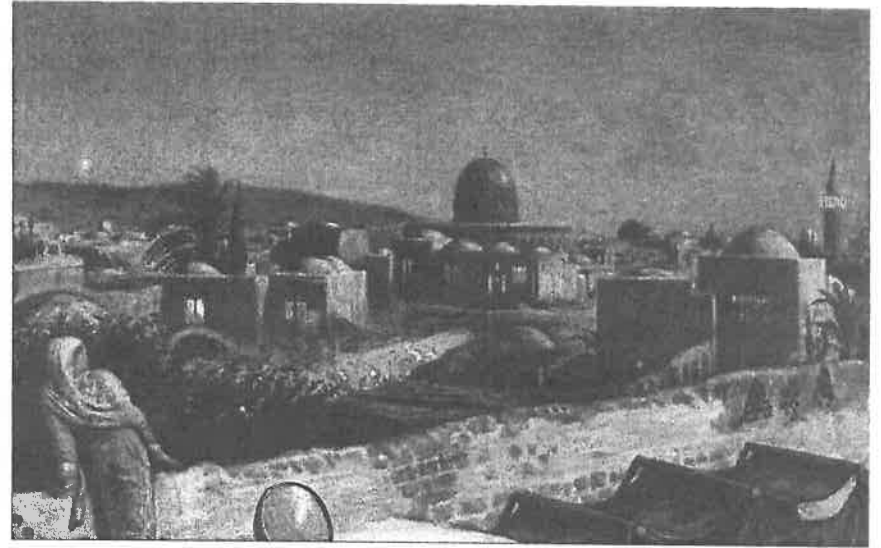


Figure 2.6 Holman Hunt, *The Mosque al Ahakra in Jerusalem During Ramadan*, 1854–55. Whitworth Art Gallery.

As Nicholas Tromans has suggested, Hunt's 'symbolism' represented a prophetic perspective from which the present and its limitations might be seen at a moral and historical distance. Such a typology allowed for 'the morphing of a truth from one format to another or, more precisely, allow[ed] for a fact to remain unchanged while the culture around it shifts the context in which that fact is understood'.⁹ In *Pre-Raphaelitism*, Hunt expressed respect for the views of Henry Wentworth Monk, a Canadian Zionist and prophet of world peace, whose 'enthusiasm for the progressive thought, stored in the Bible' (1.434) might 'bring men on the road toward the abolition of war at least as we stand at present, with the Hague Tribunal' (1.434–5). One of his finest portraits is of Monk, depicted with an intense gaze and holding a Bible and newspaper in his hand, twin revelations of things to come.

Some mixture of Hunt's chiliastic biblical hopes and his ideals of 'truth to nature' may have led him to idealise the Near East. Before he left England he told fellow painter Augustus Egg that he had wanted to visit Syria ever since boyhood (1.348), and his travel accounts bear witness to his fascination with local food, customs, landscapes, clothing, architecture and physiognomies. Nothing bored him. On his arrival in Cairo he was unable to sleep from excitement as he observed the crowd outside his window:

The noise of life was like the ringing bells of a festa, and it was impossible to turn one's eyes from the open window, where each minute brought forward a new scene, each scene being one of the perennial dramas of the East, heard of, imagined often, but hitherto cut off from me by the intervening leagues of sea [...] It was to me the slaking of a long thirst, and I was often drawn to the window to the flowing stream of strange life. (1.373–4)

The landscapes of Syria attracted him, especially the Dead Sea, so repellent to others that it was only with the greatest difficulty that he found a guide to instruct him on how to get there. For him the trek was 'a journey of inconceivable delights' (1.459), and when he arrived he

felt a novel joy in life. I looked around to account for my exhilaration of spirit, and could only discern a sweet purity in the very barrenness of the scene around; it was a pleasure to inhale the living breeze, wafted from the distant Mediterranean, and perfumed by forty miles of aromatic hillside and plain. Separation of this kind leads man to an understanding of the poet shepherd's aspiration when he sang: 'My soul thirsteth after thee, my flesh longeth for thee: in a barren and dry land where no water is.' (1.467)

The site of this mystical experience also gave him the proper backdrop for his poignant *Scapegoat*, arguably his most striking religious canvas (Figure 2.7).

In keeping with the chiliastic qualities of Hunt's Christianity, he could also respect non-Christian religions, up to a point, or at least their practitioners. When he arrived in Boulak (Egypt), he expressed gratitude for 'the fresh opening of a great volume of living pictures' (1.373):

The memories I retain in my mind as though they had been interrupted only for a moment. I bless the meanest of the original actors for the delights they gave me, and may my benediction have some weight against the condemnation of the pious believers in perdition for all the followers of Mahomet. (1.375)

He also thought well of Jews who had converted to Christianity, although he intensely disliked missionaries, or at least those in Jerusalem,

who lorded it over the local population, emulated the leisure and ostentation of English gentry, and, enabled by an excess of contributions from abroad, lacked proper Christian humility.¹⁰

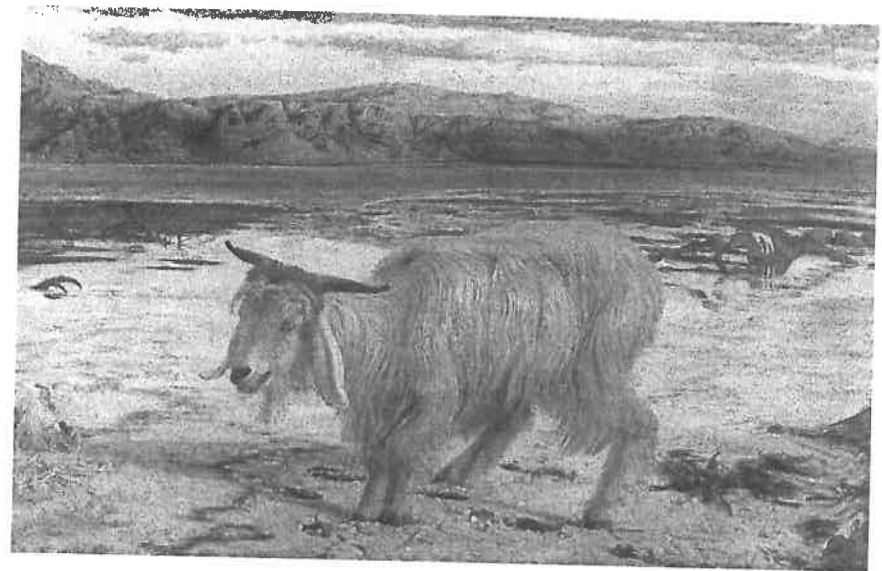


Figure 2.7 Holman Hunt, *The Scapegoat*, final version, 1854–55. Lady Lever Art Gallery.

More concretely, he petitioned against a local bishop Samuel Gobat who had sanctioned child marriage and winked at rampant promiscuity in the local diocesan school.¹¹

However, as might be expected in a painter, Hunt was particularly exasperated by Muslim clerics who condemned all images of the human form. Artists and travel writers have often been accused of fixation on 'picturesque' landscapes, but Hunt's chief ambition was to paint the *peoples* of the Near East in accordance with his professed canons of 'truth to nature'. He was initially dismayed therefore when most potential models he asked refused to sit for him on religious grounds, and he was often forced to settle for landscape-renderings of miniature human figures seen from a distance. When he did find Arab and Jewish models for *The Shadow of Death* and *The Finding of the Savior in the Temple*, he made sustained efforts to paint them as individual portraits (Figures 2.8 and 2.9).

Not all of the barriers he encountered were confessional, of course. During his expeditions in the desert he sometimes had to fend off assaults from local people who threw stones at him, tried to steal his equipment and in one case apparently attempted to kill him. He was physically resourceful and learned to brandish a rifle, although fortunately seems not to have needed to use it.

Hunt also painted temples and mosques with respect as works of art, though Trombas has pointed out that the historical origins of Christian and non-Christian sites were intertwined.¹² Several petitions were needed to permit him to enter the mosque constructed above the Dome of the Rock, the legendary site of the Temple of Solomon, but when allowed entrance the Christian Hunt was awed by what he saw:

Had the Jews still possessed it, there would have been signs of bloody sacrifice. Had any sect of Christians possessed it, the place would have been desecrated either by tinselled dolls and tawdry pictures, as in the Church of the Sepulchre, or else by the ugliness, emptiness, and crass vulgarity of the Anglican and Prussian worship, as found in the city of Jerusalem. In the case of the Moslem there was not an unsightly nor a shocking object in the whole area, it was guarded, fearfully and lovingly, and it seemed a temple so purified of the pollution of perversity that involuntarily the text, 'Here I will take my rest for ever', rang in my ears. (2.8)

Politically, Hunt remained for all his complex sensibilities an idiosyncratic British nationalist. In his youth he followed eagerly the news of the Crimean War with concern for his country's fortunes and later in Jerusalem responded angrily when German residents seemed pleased by British setbacks and expressed hopes for a Russian victory. He concluded that 'our long-retarded and still incomplete triumph had marred our prestige, and it was easy to see

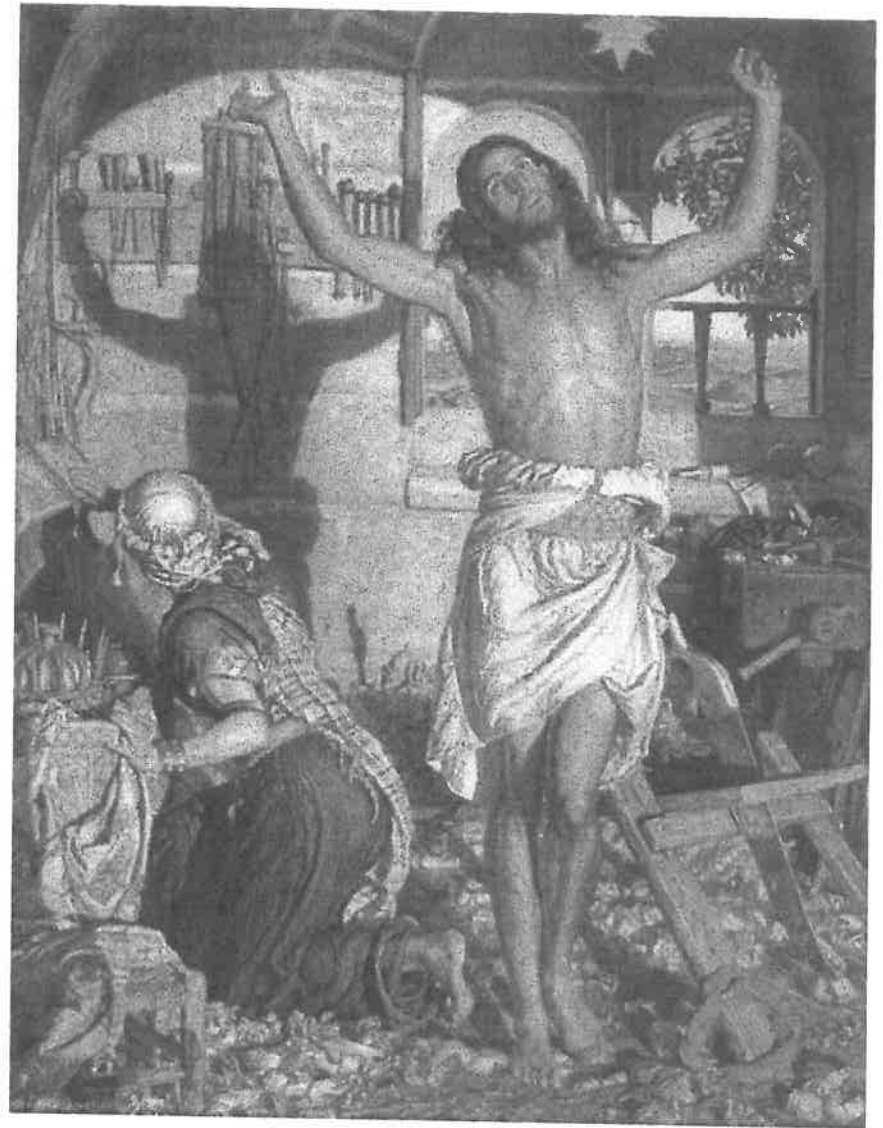


Figure 2.8 Holman Hunt, *The Shadow of Death*, 1873.

that we should have to fight for it all again in the East' (2.78), yet on the other hand when he stopped in the Crimea on his way home he felt that 'the spectacle of Christian nations contending in blood together in the Crimea was of humiliating sadness' (2.82).

In later life, Hunt did espouse the establishment of a Jewish-governed homeland, a view in diametrical opposition to British foreign policy at the



Figure 2.9 Holman Hunt, *The Finding of the Savior in the Temple*, 1860.

time, though he was never willing to join Israel Zangwill's Jewish Territorial Organisation. In a letter to the *Times* in 1905, the year his autobiography appeared, he expressed concern not only for the Jews then fleeing Russia, but also for the other victims of Russian violence, including 'Armenians, Poles, Finns, Moslems [...] who are in the same miserable plight as the Jewish wanderers'.¹³ Hunt was thus not the only British intellectual who was never quite able to reconcile his dogmatic Anglican Christianity and emotional attachment to the ideal of an 'enlightened' imperialism of John Bull with his fascination with other cultures in all their sensory, artistic, linguistic and ethnic complexity.

Austen Henry Layard and Dante Gabriel Rossetti

The painter and poet Dante G. Rossetti wrote only one poem on a Middle Eastern subject, 'The Burden of Nineveh', but it is one of his best and best-known works, in large part for its use of a striking central image, the statue of an Assyrian bull, to create a subtle but encompassing social critique.¹⁴ The title of the poem itself evoked several nuanced senses of the word 'burden': a refrain, something 'borne', a metaphorical 'weight' (the biblical 'sins' of ancient Nineveh, for example), the quite literal 'weight' of an Assyrian bull and the massive plunder (or 'rescue', according to one's point of view) of this

and other cultural relics by intrepid adventurer/archaeologist Austen Henry Layard (1817–1894), in a period in which the British government sought to control the regions of the Near and not-so-Near East from Constantinople eastward.

A Briton born in Paris and raised from age 3 to 12 in Florence, Italy, Layard was taught by his father to appreciate Italian art, but was sent by his family to England at 17 to obtain legal training. Abandoning the prospect of a comfortable life in his English uncle's law firm, in 1839, at the age of 22, Layard set forth vigorously, ostensibly to travel overland through Asia in order to practice law in Ceylon, but in reality, as it would turn out, to acquaint himself with the archaeological treasures of the Near East.

A gifted polyglot and linguist who was willing to forgo comforts and shake off would-be attackers, Layard quickly learned Farsi, several Arab dialects¹⁵ and what little was known about cuneiform. His ultimate aim was a diplomatic post in Constantinople, an ambition unrealised until many years later when he served as Her Majesty's ambassador to the Ottoman Empire from 1877 to 1880.¹⁶ However, the deeper motive which drove his temporary expatriation was, in his words,

an irresistible desire to penetrate to the regions beyond the Euphrates [...] A deep mystery hangs over Assyria, Babylonia, and Chaldea. With these names are linked great nations and great cities dimly shadowed forth in history. After a journey in Syria the thoughts naturally turn eastward; and without treading on the remains of Nineveh and Babylon our pilgrimage is incomplete. (*NR*, 65–66)

Already aware in rough outline of what was known of Persian history and its artefacts, Layard tried to guess the location of Nineveh as he passed by Mosul en route to Bagdad. When he returned to the region in 1842, he learned that the French consul M. Botta had organised excavations at Kouyunjik and Khorsabad which yielded Assyrian remnants. Botta generously shared with him a description of his discoveries, but believing that these were not the ruins of Nineveh, with a small subsidy from the British ambassador in Constantinople, Layard pressed on to nearby Nimrud, where he was astounded when his workers uncovered the remains of a city stretching over 60 acres.

Buoyed by this, he and his diggers excavated what they could. Layard deciphered inscriptions with the help of his scholarly correspondents, began to block out a series of elegant drawings which later rendered his published accounts attractive as well as distinctive and successfully petitioned the British Museum for money to continue. Amazingly, the grand vizier of the Ottoman Empire offered no resistance, decreeing that 'no obstacle should be put in the way of his taking the stones which [...] are not being utilized [...] or of his

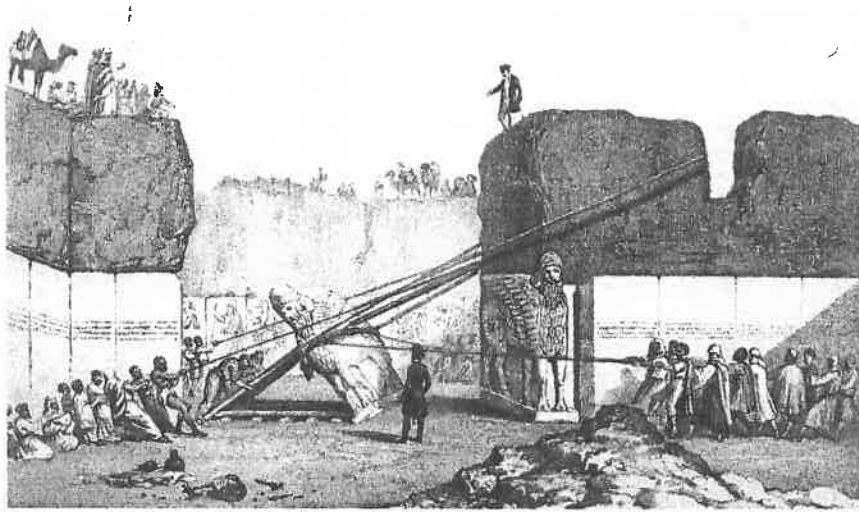


Figure 2.10 Lowering the Great Winged Bull. H. A. Layard, *Nineveh and Its Remains*, 1849.

taking such stones as he may wish amongst those which he has been able to discover'.¹⁷ Layard was well aware of the implications of this remarkable complaisance, as his later account of the excavations made clear:

Had these palaces been by chance exposed to view some years before, no one would have been ready to take advantage of the circumstance, and they would have been completely destroyed by the inhabitants of the country. *Had they been discovered a little later, it is highly probable that there would have been insurmountable objections to their removal.* It was consequently just at the right moment that they were disinterred; and we have been fortunate enough to acquire the most convincing and lasting evidence of that magnificence, and power, which made Nineveh the wonder of the ancient world, and her fall the theme of the prophets, as the most signal instance of divine vengeance. (*NR*, 293; emphases mine)

In 1846–47 Layard oversaw the careful uncovering, rewrapping and transportation by raft down the Tigris river of many ornamented slabs and colossal statues en route to the British Museum (Figure 2.10). Some of the sections of the ancient city which remained were later destroyed or excavated, and the rest presumably remain in situ awaiting their chances in an area still riven by war, migration and imperial interventions.

After he returned to England, Layard published *Illustrations of the Monuments of Nineveh* (1849), *Inscriptions in the Cuneiform Character* (1851) and an illustrated two-volume reconstruction of his discoveries, *Nineveh and Its Remains* (1848–49).

The latter went through four reprintings in seven months, and a less expensive abridged version, *A Popular Account of Discoveries at Nineveh*, appeared in 1851, as well as a sequel, *Discoveries in the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon*, which followed in 1853.

By way of complex interconnections, in 1850 Holman Hunt had applied for the position of artist in Layard's second Mesopotamian expedition and was told with sincere regret that had he applied a day earlier the job would have been his. One can only conjecture how different Hunt's paintings would have been if he had applied his talents to the excavations in Assyria, rather than to the biblical scenes of Palestine.¹⁸

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, another Pre-Raphaelite art student, may well have discussed the museum's remarkable acquisition in conversations with Hunt, and in 1850 he drafted two rudimentary stanzas of a poem on the topic.¹⁹ There the matter might have rested had Rossetti not met a group of Oxford students – among them William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones – who solicited his poetry for an ambitious new undertaking called *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* (*OCM*). In the *Magazine's* first number, Burne-Jones had already written the following tribute to him, 'Why is the author of the Blessed Damozel, and the story of Chiaro, so seldom on the lips of men? If only we could hear him oftener, live in the light of his power a little longer?' (60). Moreover, Rossetti remarked to his friend William Allingham 'that [their] notice in the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* was the most gratifying thing by far that ever happened to me – and unmistakably genuine'.²⁰ As a token of his gratitude, he not only provided poems for the *Magazine* but offered tutorials in painting, and Burne-Jones, Morris and several others took lessons from him.²¹

Rossetti extensively revised drafts of 'The Staff and the Scrip' and 'The Blessed Damozel' for the *Magazine*, but arguably his most original contribution was the newly entitled 'Burden of Nineveh', cast in the voice of a critical contemporary artist.²² In it, he expanded the earlier fragmentary draft to 16 stanzas (and later to 20 in the final redaction of the poem in 1870),²³ and in each revision he added more specific events, images and descriptions from Layard's work.

Both stanzas of the initial fragment echoed Layard's remark that the 'magnificence, and power which had made Nineveh the wonder of the ancient world' had also made its 'fall the theme of the prophets'. The following rough lines of the original, for example, were largely replicated in the *OCM's* stanza five:

On the grey stones the shape lay scor'd.
That day when, nigh the gates, the Lord
Shelter'd His Jonah with a gourd,

This sun, (I said) here present, pour'd
Een this shadow that I see.²⁴

In his later versions, Rossetti drew extensively from Layard's *Popular Account of the Discoveries at Nineveh*.²⁵ He rewrote the poem's opening stanza as a first-person description by an artist who watched the entrance of the massive statue into the British Museum – one of the last objects from the expedition so transported because of its bulk, weight and potential fragility²⁶:

Sighing I turned at last to win
Once more the London dirt and din:
And as I made the swing-door spin
And issued, they were hoisting in
A wingèd beast from Nineveh. (st. 1)²⁷

The descriptions of the bull also became more explicit in this 1856 version:

A human face the creature wore,
And hoofs behind and hoofs before,
And flanks with dark runes fretted o'er.
'Twas bull, 'twas mitred minotaur;
 A dead disbowel'd mystery;
The mummy of a buried faith,
Stark from the charnel without scathe,
Its wings stood for the light to bathe, –
Such fossil cerements as might swathe
 The very corpse of Nineveh. (st. 2)

Layard-derived details also appeared in the 'colour'd Arab straw-matting, Half-ripp'd', which surrounded the carefully packed statue, taken from Layard's remark that the remains had been wrapped in 'mats and felts' (*NR*, 274). Rossetti referred to the Assyrian king by name as mentioned in Layard's account and added the detail that the excavators of Nimrud included Chaldean Christians, described by Layard as 'strong and hardy men, [who] could alone wield the pick; the Arabs were employed in carrying away the earth':

Within thy shadow, haply, once
Sennacherib has knelt, whose sons
Smote him between the altar-stones: [...]
Ay, and who else? [...] till 'neath thy shade
Within his trenches newly made

Last year the Christian knelt and pray'd –
Not to thy strength – in Nineveh. (*NR*, 83)

This oversimplifies the religion of the pious excavators, however. In *Nineveh's* ninth chapter, Layard extensively described the Yezidis, persecuted adherents of an eclectic religion which professed respect for Mohammed and the Koran as well as the Old and New Testaments, and anticipated a second coming of the Muslim prophet Imaum Mehdi as well as Christ,²⁸ and whose adherents conducted ornate ancient rites within the walls of the unearthed chambers.

Layard also recorded the dramatic moment of the Arabs' discovery of the statue in his account as follows:

I saw two Arabs [...] urging their mares to the top of their speed. 'Hasten, O Bey', exclaimed one of them – 'hasten to the diggers, for they have found Nimrod himself. Wallah, it is wonderful, but it is true! We have seen him with our eyes. There is no God but God'; and both joining in this pious exclamation, they galloped off [...] One of the workmen, on catching the first glimpse of the monster [the giant head], had thrown down his basket and had run off toward Mosul as fast as his legs could carry him. (*NR*, 98–99)

In Rossetti's condescending variant of this scene, Layard's jubilant workers became childish figures in a 'sculptured court [...] 'O'er which Time passed, of like import / With the wild Arab boys at sport, – / A living face looked in to see:²⁹ (st. 4), ignoring the labour which had excavated the remains (Figure 2.11).

Rossetti did however evoke the original antecedents of the rituals Layard had described:

Deemed they of this, those worshippers,
When, in some mythic chain of verse
Which man shall not again rehearse,
The faces of thy ministers
 Yearned pale with bitter ecstasy. (st. 9)

This extended even to the images of warriors depicted on the walls of the palace in Layard's illustrations (Figure 2.12):²⁹

As though the carven warriors woke,
As though the shaft the string forsook,
The cymbals clashed, the chariots shook,
 And there was life in Nineveh. (st. 4)



Figure 2.11 Discovery of Gigantic Head. H. A. Layard, *Nineveh and Its Remains*, 1849.

In a telling thought experiment, Rossetti conflated these long-since-deconsecrated effigies with their Greek, Egyptian and Christian counterparts ('all relics here together');

Why, of those mummies in the room
 Above, there might indeed have come
 One out of Egypt to thy home,
 An alien. Nay, but were not some
 Of these thine own 'antiquity'?
 And now, – they and their gods and thou
 All relics here together, –now
 Whose profit? Whether bull or cow,

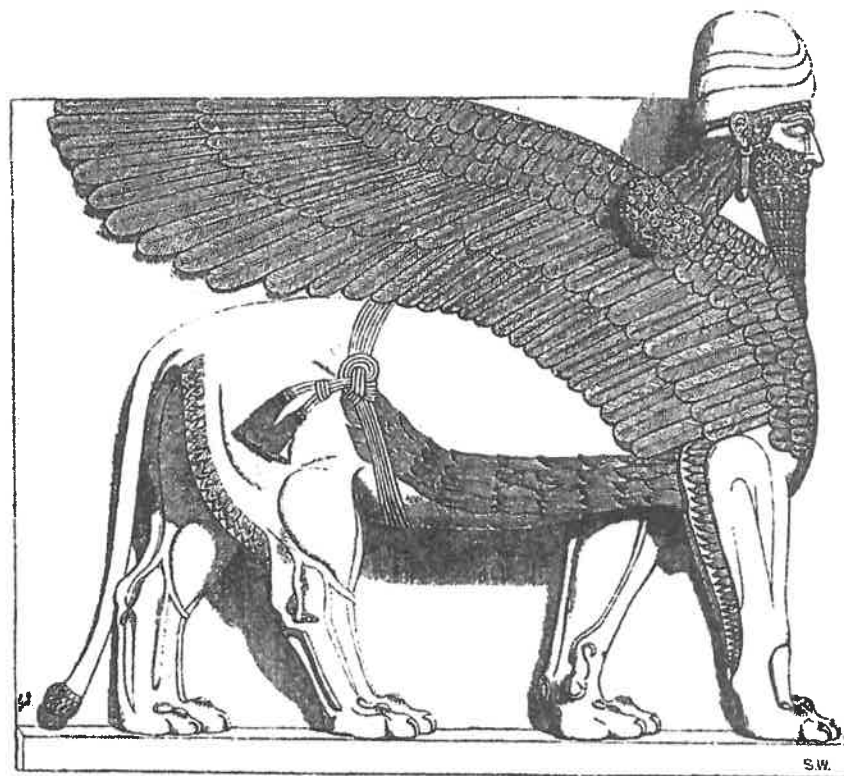


Figure 2.12 Winged Human-headed Lion. H. A. Layard, *Nineveh and Its Remains*, 1849.

Isis or Ibis, who or how,
 Whether of Thebes or Nineveh? (st. 11)

At this point, Rossetti's conventional *memento mori* became something deeper – a *sic transeunt cultūs et imperia mundi*:

For as that Bull-god once did stand,
 And watch'd the burial-clouds of sand,
 Till these at last without a hand
 Rose o'er his eyes, another land,
 And blinded him with destiny:
 So may he stand again; till now,
 In ships of unknown sail and prow,
 Some tribe of the Australian plough
 Bear him afar, a relic now

Of London, not of Nineveh. (st. 14, OCM)

The smile rose first, –anon drew nigh
 The thought: [...] Those heavy wings spread high
 So sure of flight, which do not fly;
 That set gaze never on the sky;
 Those scripted flanks it cannot see;
 Its crown, a brow-contracting load;
 Its planted feet which trust the sod: [...]

(So grew the image as I trod)

O Nineveh, was this thy God,
Thine also, mighty Nineveh? (st. 16 OCM; st. 20, 1870; emphases mine)

Rossetti's mockery took in the eternal recurrence of all empires: their plunder and arrogance ('Its crown, a brow contracting load'), their pretentiousness ('Those heavy wings spread high / So sure of flight, which do not fly') and their philistinism and heedless ignorance ('Its planted feet which trust the sod [...] those scripted flanks it cannot see'). The largely apolitical elder son of an expatriate Italian revolutionary, Rossetti never returned to the incisive historical irony of this relatively early work.

William Morris

William Morris was a pioneering decorative artist, the author of many volumes of essays, prose, poetry and translations, and a committed anarcho-socialist who travelled the length of Britain on behalf of the Socialist League. In 1855 most of these accomplishments lay in the future. Morris was then a 21-year-old undergraduate at Oxford, where he submitted for the annual Newdigate Prize for poetry a contribution on an assigned topic: 'The Rising of the Mosque in the Place of the Temple of Solomon' (Figure 2.13).

In setting the prize topic, the judges were well aware of current British 'interests' in Palestine, where, as Hunt experienced, Islamic officials restricted access to areas Christians held sacred. The university officials who had chosen the topic presumably expected deprecations of the Dome of the Rock, a Muslim shrine on the Temple Mount, then believed to have been the location of the Temple of Solomon.³⁰ The winning poem accordingly celebrated a second coming of Christ which would reinstate the Mount's Christian character and usher in a Christian realm of 'peace and brotherhood', which, as we have seen, was the view espoused by Hunt, Henry Wentworth Monk and many of their compatriots. The second-place winner called for the conversion of the Jews, interpreted the temple's destruction as a punishment for Jewish rejection of Christ and predicted a similar fate for the Dome ('Then fall, thou



Figure 2.13 William Morris at Oxford, 1857. William Morris Archive.

Mosque! Then Temple, spring from earth, / And let the shout of worlds
 announce thy second birth!³¹

The young Morris, whose poem did *not* win the prize, instead welcomed the chance to write an elegiac overview of the history of a peaceful site on which

[David once] lay praying, thinking of the flowers
 That grow about the hills of Bethlehem. (ll. 52–53),

and evoked a pastoral image of a ruined temple where

[t]he wild winds [which] threshed the charred cedar beams
 As erst the tread of oxen threshed the grain. (ll. 101–2)

The historical Jesus appeared in his poem only as a brief and elusive presence: in the manger, in patterns in the night sky and in the sepulchre after his crucifixion.

More poignantly described were the influx of humble folk who came to express their admiration for a great healer. Notably, also, the absence of orthodox Christian verities about resurrection in 'The Rising' tacitly sidestepped the prize's set theological topic in passages such as the following:

The warriors who lay dreaming on the hills
Lie dreaming now within their quiet graves
Or seem to dream, for there the white bones lie
With nothing moving them. (ll. 171–74)

Almost as pointed was Morris's refusal to celebrate the Crusaders' conquests as triumphs:

Ah me! they slew the woman and the babe
They slew the old man with his hoary hair,
The youth who asked not mercy, and the child
Who prayèd sore that he might see the sun
Some few days more – those soldiers of the cross.
Pray Christians for the sins of Christian men. (ll. 276–81)

Morris's likely source for the account of these atrocities was Henry Hunt Milman's *History of Latin Christianity*, which he read during his time at Oxford.³² In Milman's description,

no barbarians, no infidel, no Saracen, ever perpetuated such wanton and cold-blooded atrocities of cruelty as the wearers of the Cross of Christ [...] on the capture of that city [...] Children were seized by their legs, some of them plucked from their mother's breasts and dashed against the walls, or whirled from the battlements. Others were obliged to leap from the walls, some tortured, roasted by slow fires. They ripped up prisoners to see if they had swallowed gold [...] The Jews were burned alive in their synagogue. Even the day after, all who had taken refuge on the roofs [...] were hewn to pieces; still later the few Saracens who had escaped, not excepting babes of a year old, were put to death.³³

Morris must have realised that any poetic counterpart of this shocking passage, however muted, would not find favour with the judges.

In a different register, the poem's final passages offered an elegiac appreciation of the temple's venerable past and Ruskinian 'stain of time',³⁴ which neither called for nor anticipated any form of Christian restoration:

When will the cross once more
Be lifted high above its central Home?
Never perhaps. Yet many wondrous things
That silent dome has looked on quietly [...]
I wonder what Araunah's floor was like
Before the flood came down upon the Earth. (ll. 293–300)

Morris's evident distaste for violence veiled in sanctimony suggested that he was already sceptical of wars of conquest disguised as wars of 'liberation', and all the other attributes of the poem – its secularism, distaste for hypocrisy, compassion for the sorrows of ordinary people and sense that buildings and structures are haunted by those who dwelt in them – reappeared in his later writings.

In the late 1870s and 1880s, Morris, now in his late forties and early fifties, broke with the 'radical' (Gladstonian) wing of the Liberal Party, driven in part by his mature contempt of the injustices of British imperialism. As an actively committed socialist and co-founder of the Socialist League, he condemned not only Her Majesty's government's alliance of convenience with the Ottoman Empire against insurgencies in Bulgaria, Bosnia, Serbia and Montenegro, but also its wars and land seizures in Egypt, Africa, Afghanistan, India and the Far East. As the editor of the League's journal *Commonweal* from 1885 to 1889 and contributor to other Socialist papers such as *Justice* and *Liberty*, he publicly opposed these imperialist ventures at every turn.

With Marx³⁵ and most other contemporary socialists, Morris viewed imperialism as a rapacious system of competition – a Leviathan, in effect – which victimised workers in an endless search for geopolitical domination and ever-enlarging markets. He believed that it was the capitalists of all countries – not workers, civilians or soldiers – who benefited from foreign wars of aggression, for 'all wars now waged have at bottom a commercial cause'.³⁶ In the words of the historian 'Old Hammond' in Morris's utopian romance *News from Nowhere* (1890):

The appetite of the World-Market grew with what it fed on: the countries within the ring of 'civilisation' (that is, organised misery) were glutted with the abortions of the market [...] When the civilised World-Market coveted a country not yet in its clutches, some transparent pretext was found – the suppression of a slavery different from and not so cruel as that of commerce; the pushing of a religion no longer believed in by its promoters; the 'rescue' of some desperado or homicidal madman whose misdeeds had got him into trouble amongst the natives of the 'barbarous' country – any stick, in short, which would beat the dog at all.

Then some bold, unprincipled, ignorant adventurer was found [...] and he was bribed to 'create a market' by breaking up whatever traditional society there might be in the doomed country, and by destroying whatever leisure or pleasure he found there. (Chapter 15)³⁷

In the ironically titled 1880 essay 'Our Country Right or Wrong', Morris condemned the Second Anglo-Afghan War of 1878–80 as a cowardly attack whose unsavoury nature had been glossed over in official accounts:

People at home don't bother their heads [about] what becomes of the rights and wrongs of a set of barbarians [...] it could be slipped into without notice almost, and would be sure to be successful, *brilliantly* successful it might be called without any extra expense.³⁸

This famous victory was achieved, moreover,

that we might at last have the honor and glory of performing a great act of generosity, in *pardoning* of men who have fought against us in open battle in defence of their native country – and for their own necks.³⁹

It was common to hear apparently educated people the other day gravely insisting on the necessity for the utter destruction of Cabul as a matter of revenge.⁴⁰

I cannot explain the [Afghan] war otherwise than thus: if ever war was waged for war's sake that [one] has been – that democracy might be checked in England. I can only say of it further, that the end proposed was ruinous folly, and the means employed villainous injustice.⁴¹

Morris also campaigned against British expansion into the Sudan, along with Wilfred Scawen Blunt, a Conservative opponent of British imperialism and author of *The Future of Islam* (1882) and later *Atrocities of Justice under the English Rule in Egypt* (1907),⁴² who had also served a brief prison sentence for his opposition to British rule over Ireland in 1888.⁴³

As for Egypt, Morris's longest statement on the topic of contemporary British campaigns there appeared in his February 1884 *Justice* essay, 'The Bondholders' Battle', written shortly before General Gordon ensconced himself in Khartoum⁴⁴:

The monstrous blundering in Egypt [...] is due to the fact that Englishmen allow their rulers to do what they please in the name of the country. The truth is that our entire action in Egypt has been shaped by a gang of international loan-mongers from the first outbreak of the soldiery under Arabi until now [...]



Figure 2.14 General Charles George Gordon. National Portrait Gallery.

we were obliged to [...] waste millions on butchering industrious peasants who only wished to be relieved from the grip of the usurers.⁴⁵

We ought equally to say that we do not intend to annex the country under any circumstances whatever [...] [We should] raise our voice against the dispatch of English or Indian troops to Egypt, knowing right well that such a step, if it is not to land us in disaster, can only be taken at the expense of an alliance, direct or indirect, with the banded military brigandism of Central Europe [...] The workers have many accounts to settle nearer home, without allowing a Liberal government to promote reaction under the pretence of putting down slave-dealing, or to annex Egypt for the benefit of the upper and middle classes.⁴⁶

These remarks proved prescient, for the army of the Mahdi (Muhammed Ahmad) stormed General Gordon and his soldiers at Khartoum in January 1885, and British reinforcements (which included an Indian contingent) fought two campaigns against Egyptian nationalists to 'restore order' during the spring (Figure 2.14). It was not until 1922 that England nominally loosened its grip on Egypt.⁴⁷

Morris died in 1896, before the Sudan was conquered in 1898 and before the Second Boer War broke out in 1899. There is little doubt what he would have had to say about these and other imperial routs and famous victories, then or now.

A brief coda

Layard, Hunt, Rossetti and Morris thus represented a range of approaches to Near Eastern art and history which graduated Brantlinger's dichotomy of obliteration and immersion, but all of them strove at various points to apply 'universal' ethical norms to what they saw.

Hunt, for example, the Christian nationalist of the three, was also the most deeply attracted to the complexities of Near Eastern cultural history. Rossetti, otherwise no political radical, focused with mordant accuracy on the eventual detritus of an imperial power fascinated by the remains of its predecessors. Morris, finally, cried out in a capitalist wilderness against addictions to wealth and domination that corrupt all powers great and small.⁴⁸

All of them, finally, were willing to look at least briefly across geographical and ethnographic boundaries to the artistry and aspirations of other cultures. They interpreted what they saw through autochthonal lenses, but their resolutions offered Archimedean standpoints for searching critiques of their own.

APPENDIX: BRITISH PRESENCE IN THE NEAR EAST

- 1789 Napoleon's armies invade Egypt and Syria
- 1807–12 Anglo-Russian War
- 1807–1809 Anglo-Turkish War
- 1839–42 First Anglo-Afghan War (East India Company vs. Afghanistan, intended to preclude Russian invasion of India)
- 1853–56 Crimean War (Britain, France and Turkey vs. Russia)
- 1856–57 Anglo-Persian War
- 1869 Suez Canal completed
- 1877–78 Russo-Turkish War (the 'Eastern Question')
- 1878 Britain assumes control of Cyprus
- 1878–80 Second Anglo-Afghan War
- 1881–99 Mahdist War/Anglo-Sudan War
- 1882 Anglo-Egyptian War (British invasion of upper Egypt)
- 1885 Fall of Khartoum, death of General Gordon and invasion of Sudan in vengeance
- 1896–98 Expedition against the Mahdi, defeated at Omdurman

European and other excavations in the Near East

- 1842 Botta, French consul general at Mosul, begins excavations which uncovered palace at Khorsabad (near Nineveh)
- 1847 Austen Henry Layard excavates Assyrian remains at Kouyunjik (Nineveh) near Mosul
- 1853 Frank Calvert identifies site of Troy (Hisarlik)
- 1871, 1878–79 Heinrich Schliemann excavates Troy sites

Notes

- 1 Patrick Brantlinger, *Victorian Literature and Post-Colonial Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 74.
- 2 William Blake, 'And did those feet in ancient time', 'Preface to *Milton*', in *The Prophetic Books of William Blake*, edited by E. R. D. MacLagan and A. G. B. Russell (London: A. H. Bullen, 1907), ll. 1–2.
- 3 Anthony Sattin, *Lifting the Veil: British Society in Egypt 1768–1956* (London: J.M. Dent, 1988); Florence Nightingale, *Letters from Egypt, or a Journey on the Nile, 1849–50*, ed. Anthony Sattin (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1987); Edward Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (London: Ward Lock, 1890); William Thackeray, *Notes of a Journey from Cornhill to Grand Cairo* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1846); Richard Burton, *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah* (London: Longman, 1855–56); Lucie Duff Gordon, *Letters from Egypt, 1863–65* (London: 1865).
- 4 Elie Kedourie, *England and the Middle East: The Destruction of the Ottoman Empire 1914–1921* (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1956), chapter 1.
- 5 Access to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was contested by competing Christian groups, and that to the Dome of the Rock, believed to be the site of Solomon's Temple, was denied non-Muslims until the late nineteenth century. Russia had claimed the right to protect Christian sites in the city, a stance which caused anxiety during a period when Britain was engaged in a war against Russia in the Crimea. See William Whitla, 'William Morris's "The Rising of the Mosque in Place of the Temple of Solomon": A Critical Text', *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 9 (Spring 2000): 46–47.
- 6 To the extent that they shared a common aesthetic, the Pre-Raphaelites maintained a respect, alternately, for Ruskinian 'truth to nature' and romantic symbolism, and a historicist interest in the authentic simplicity of pre-Renaissance art. With limited connections for rising in the world, for some years they felt excluded and even attacked by members of the Royal Academy of Art and the journalistic arbiters of literary taste of their day. See William E. Fredeman, *The Pre-Raphaelites: A Bibliocritical Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965).
- 7 A major part of his recollections concerns his memories of conversations with John Everett Millais, whom he considered his closest friend. A subtext is his desire to claim credit for ideas he had suggested to the latter, as well as to assert his early kindnesses to Rossetti and his own primacy in suggesting principles for the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. He exhibits distaste for Rossetti's later reputation as a leader, since to the disciplined Hunt the young Rossetti had seemed uncommitted and unremarkable as a painter.
- 8 *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (London: Macmillan, 1905), vol. 1, 159. References in parentheses refer to this edition.

- 9 Nicholas Tromans, 'Palestine: Picture of Prophecy', in *Holman Hunt and the Pre-Raphaelite Vision*, ed. Katharine Lochnan and Carol Jacobi (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2008), 1xx.
- 10 Hunt's diary, March 1855, John Rylands Library MS 1211, f. 61, cited in Tromans, 'Palestine: Picture of Prophecy', 151.
- 11 Gobat, the Protestant bishop in Jerusalem, had celebrated the first Protestant marriage among his congregation, between a 14-year-old girl from one of the diocesan schools under his management and a man accused of pimping his female relations. In 1858 Hunt published a pamphlet detailing claims against the bishop, but alluding only indirectly to the controversy surrounding the school (Tromans, 151–52).
- 12 *Ibid.*, 149.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 157–58.
- 14 'Ave', Rossetti's poem on the girlhood of Mary, Jesus's mother, is also nominally set in the Middle East, but the location seems peripheral to the poem's focus, since Mary is only described as living through 'the long days in Nazareth'.
- 15 Layard had studied Persian and cuneiform before leaving London, and H. W. F. Saggs describes him as having by 1841 'a good command of several dialects of Persian, some facility in Arabic, an intimate acquaintance with remote parts of the Luristan mountains, and a detailed knowledge of tribal organization amongst both the tribes of the mountains and the Arabs of Khurzistan'. Austen Henry Layard, *Nineveh and Its Remains*, ed. and intro. H. W. F. Saggs (New York: Praeger), 33; quotations from Layard in parentheses are from this edition.
- 16 This was the period of the 'Eastern Question', the nationalist revolts in the Balkans, eventuating in the 1878 Treaty of Berlin which leased Cyprus to the British.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 50.
- 18 Layard himself, weary of the physical strains of life in the Middle East, was to decline the long-delayed offer of an appointment in Constantinople and become a Liberal politician and foreign minister, though on several occasions in open disagreement with the policies of his party (*ibid.*, 64).
- 19 For these two stanzas, see <http://rossettiarchive.org>. According to the editors, William Michael Rossetti's diary records that the early stanzas were written in November 1850.
- 20 Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), 115; *Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Allingham*, ed. George Hill (London: T. F. Unwin, 1897), 173.
- 21 Richard Watson Dixon and later another Oxonian named Valentine Prinsep also took lessons from him.
- 22 William Michael Rossetti states that his brother used the longer 1849 version for his first draft and the popular abridged 1851 version for the 1856 account (<http://www.rossettiarchive.org>).
- 23 The 1881 version remained unchanged from 1870. See also Andrew Stauffer, 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "The Burden of Nineveh": Further Excavations', *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 16 (Spring 2007): 45–58; Florence Boos, *The Poetry of Dante G. Rossetti* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), 207–15.
- 24 According to Jonah 4:6–11, the prophet Jonah, sent by God to preach to the Ninevites, became discouraged at their resistance. When a gourd which had sprung up over him as he rested wilted and died, he expressed the desire to live no more, to which God responded, 'And should I not spare Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than six score thousand persons.'

- 25 William Michael Rossetti, as cited in <http://www.rossettiarchive.org>.
- 26 In 1845 Layard reported the find of 'two winged bulls of great size', about 14 feet high and weighing 20 tonnes apiece. Layard, *Nineveh and Its Remains*, 44.
- 27 Other changes improved wording, for example: 'Delicate harlot – eldest grown / Of earthly queens! There on thy throne' became 'Delicate harlot! On thy throne / Thou with a world beneath thee prone.'
- 28 The note on the Rossetti Archive incorrectly calls them Christians.
- 29 Fine examples appear in chapter 13, 'Warrior Hunting the Lion', in Layard, *Nineveh and Its Remains*; and in chapter 9, 'Eunuch Warrior in Battle', and chapter 10, 'Warriors before a Besieged City: A Battering-Ram Drawn Up to the Walls, and Captives Impaled', in Layard, *A Popular Account of Discoveries at Nineveh* (London: John Murray, 1851).
- 30 William Whitla, 'William Morris's "The Mosque Rising in the Place of the Temple of Solomon": A Critical Text', *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 9 (Spring 2000): 43–82. The Temple Mount is no longer considered to have been the location of Solomon's temple.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 50–52.
- 32 *History of Latin Christianity* (London: Murray, 1854), vol. 3, bk 7, chapter 6, 238–39, 'Incidents of the Crusades'.
- 33 Milman's account follows that of Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of Rome*, vol. 5, chapter 53, AD 1099. I am indebted to the late Joseph Dunlap for pointing out to me the relation between this episode and the accounts of Gibbon and Milman.
- 34 John Ruskin, 'The Lamp of Memory', in *The Genius of John Ruskin – Selections from His Writings* (London: Forgotten Books, 2018), 133.
- 35 Though already convinced of the need for a reorganization of society along cooperative rather than competitive lines, Morris's views were sharpened by his reading of Marx's *Das Kapital* in 1883.
- 36 William Morris, 'The Depression of Trade', in *Unpublished Lectures of William Morris*, Eugene LeMire (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006), 126. The lecture was delivered in 1885.
- 37 *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. May Morris (London: Longmans, 1910–15), vol. 16.
- 38 William Morris, *Our Country Right or Wrong*, ed. Florence Boos (London: William Morris Society, 2008), 85; emphasis in the original.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 74; emphasis in the original. In response to the Afghanistani ruler Amir Sher Ali Khan's denial of entry to Britain's envoy General Sir Neville Chamberlain in 1879, Her Majesty's government attacked Afghanistan in force. An army commanded by Ayub Khan defeated British troops at Maiwand and besieged the British garrison at Kandahar. Ten thousand British soldiers marched from Kabul in 1880 to break the siege and end the Second Anglo-Afghan War.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 79.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 85.
- 42 His other political writings included *The Secret History of the English Occupation of Egypt* (1907), *Gordon at Khartoum* (1911) and *The Land War in Ireland* (1912).
- 43 In 1888 he served three months in Galway and Kilmainham prisons.
- 44 Gordon left Britain in January 1884 and arrived at Khartoum on 18 February 1884; Khartoum was besieged from 18 March onwards. The siege ended and Gordon was killed on 26 January 1885.

- 45 William Morris, *Political Writings: Contributions to Justice and Commonweal, 1883–1890*, ed. and intro. Nicholas Salmon (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1994), 10–11 (*Commonweal*, 9 February 1884, 4).
- 46 Morris, *Political Writings*, 12–13.
- 47 In the spring of 1884 in a public demonstration against the Sudan War, Morris and one of his comrades also urged ratification of a declaration that ‘this meeting believes [...] the invasion of the Soudan has been prompted solely by the desire to exploit the country in the interests of capitalists and stock-jobbers’.
- 48 Only Hunt, who outlived Morris as well as Rossetti, seemed in later life to favour British political intervention of any sort, in the form of British efforts to assist the formation of a Jewish state.