

For What in All the World
is So Good as to
Fear Nothing?

Four newly discovered letters by
William Morris

R. A. WILSON
Keble College, Oxford

with an Introduction by
FLORENCE S. BOOS
University of Iowa



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INTRODUCTION

Florence S. Boos
University of Iowa

It is an exciting moment when a voice from the past erupts into our present, conveying traces of its author's distinct personality and urgent message. The letters in this volume from William Morris to the 27-year-old Kenneth A. Macaulay, especially that of 17 March 1884, constitute a remarkable testimony to his thought processes in the early stages of his socialist career (1882-96) and reflect his honest probing of issues which would preoccupy him until his death in 1896. In slightly more than 700 words Morris proffers a concise and eloquent exposition of several related topics: the nature of an ideal socialist society; the potentially violent consequences of inequality; the means to creating this new society; and finally, the personal difficulties which must be faced by those who champion this new order.

What had led Morris to his convictions, so unusual for a person of his education and social class? In a lecture delivered to a Fabian audience in 1891, he provides a rare personal account of the emotions behind his early political development:

[F]rom the earliest time that I can remember ... [I saw] that the greater part of people were ill-fed ill-clad ill-housed overworked ... These thoughts made me uncomfortable and

discouraged ... so of course I thrust them aside as much as I could. Yet I was conscious that I was acting a shabby part in doing so ... Well the time came when I found out that those unpleasant thoughts about the greater part of the population were intimately connected with the very essence of my work ... I would not have said a word of all this, but that I know that what has happened to me has happened to other people though not quite in the same way. ... [How Shall We Live Then]

The gap between Morris's childhood discomfort and adult commitment was largely created by two experiences. The first was his awareness of the exploitative practices of Devon Great Consols, the copper mining company on which his father's wealth had been based, and of whose economic trajectory he would have been apprised through his original family's continued involvement with the mine. Over a period of four decades Devon Great Consols went from astounding boom to horrific bust, mistreating its workers even in prosperous times and eventually disappointing its investors as costs mounted and competition increased. The mine was also distinctive for its utilization of the most efficient machinery and transport to increase immediate profits while degrading its environment—whereas in a socialist society, Morris tells Kenneth Macaulay, 'machinery would be used to minimize labour instead of being used to make monopoly profits as it is now.'

A second source of Morris's unease was occupational; as the owner of Morris and Co. he faced daily competition over profits, since for the Firm to survive its artistic products were forced to conform to the market. Economic historians Charles Harvey, Jon Press, and Mairi Maclean have detailed Morris's financial agility in reinvesting repeatedly in new lines of artistic work, and art historians Linda Perry and Margaretta Frederick have documented the care with which he adapted his design practice



William Morris lecturing

to his competitors and changing public tastes, or as his letter expresses it, 'to the stimulus now given by gambling in various forms and degrees'. These successes must have come at some inner emotional cost, for they prompted Morris's lifelong loathing of 'the slavery of profit and the sordid anxieties attending it', that is, the waste, depredation, and immorality of 'competitive commerce'. Morris thus simultaneously viewed himself as a risk-taking entrepreneur, as the manager of a cooperative business coordinating many federated art workers, and finally, as an individual artist himself. It was this complex identity—as a member of a privileged class, and as a fellow labourer—which enabled him to devote his political life to the causes of radical cooperation and worker solidarity.

Not coincidentally Morris's letter to Macaulay was composed in the wake of his delivery of *Art Under Competitive Commerce* at the West Bromwich Institute, an organization established to promote adult education for citizens and workers. Nearly thirty years earlier as a recent Oxford graduate, Morris and his friends had founded in 1856 the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, whose articles manifested a strong interest in the women's and worker education movements of their time, and throughout his speaking career (1877–96) Morris lectured to audiences in many such institutions as well as to specifically working class political audiences. Prior to delivering his lecture to the West Bromwich Institute, for example, he had presented it under the title *Art Under Plutocracy* to the Manchester Ancoats Brotherhood, formed to provide cultural experiences for workers.

The first claim introduced in Morris's letter mounted what was perhaps his most radical assault on a heavily class-stratified society; a truly just society must provide absolute equality for all its citizens: 'equality of Condition as far as mere livelihood goes'. He later repeats the point, emphasizing its importance: the change to socialism 'would involve the abolition of the

distinctions of master and man ... [greater capacity] has no claim to better food, lodging, clothing, education or social consideration.' This was a conviction Morris had come to as early as 1880, when he had told the audience of another adult education institution, the Men's and Women's College of London, that through simplicity of life 'we [are] best preparing the arts for that greater equality of Society to which I am sure the world must come at last, and which as I firmly believe, will once more awake art with many other good things.' Morris never wavered from his conviction that not mere nominal political representation but economic and social equality were moral and practical imperatives, and this view underlay his mistrust of fellow socialist travellers such as the Fabians (founded 1884), whom he suspected of seeking only partial reforms. As late as his 1894 essay 'Why I am a Communist', he insisted that equality was the basis of fellowship: 'real Communism ... is a state of Society the essence of which is Practical Equality of condition. ... I can see no other system under which men can live together except these two, Slavery and Equality.'

Morris's second point is one that may have been obscured by his strong support for what he termed the 'Social Revolution', his apprehension that violent revolt, if carried out merely as an act of revenge and power, could lead to tragic suffering rather than a genuine transformation of the social order. As Dr Wilson notes in his commentary, fear of worker resentment and violence was widespread among the upper and middle classes of the period, prompting both resistance to and support for the extension of public education and the suffrage. Morris shares this concern, but with reverse sympathies; he hopes that members of his class may help in guiding justifiable unrest toward changes beneficial to all. As he writes in his second preserved letter to Macaulay, 'I am afraid my views wouldn't suit your supporters at all [that is, the wealthy patrons of the West Bromwich Institute], because

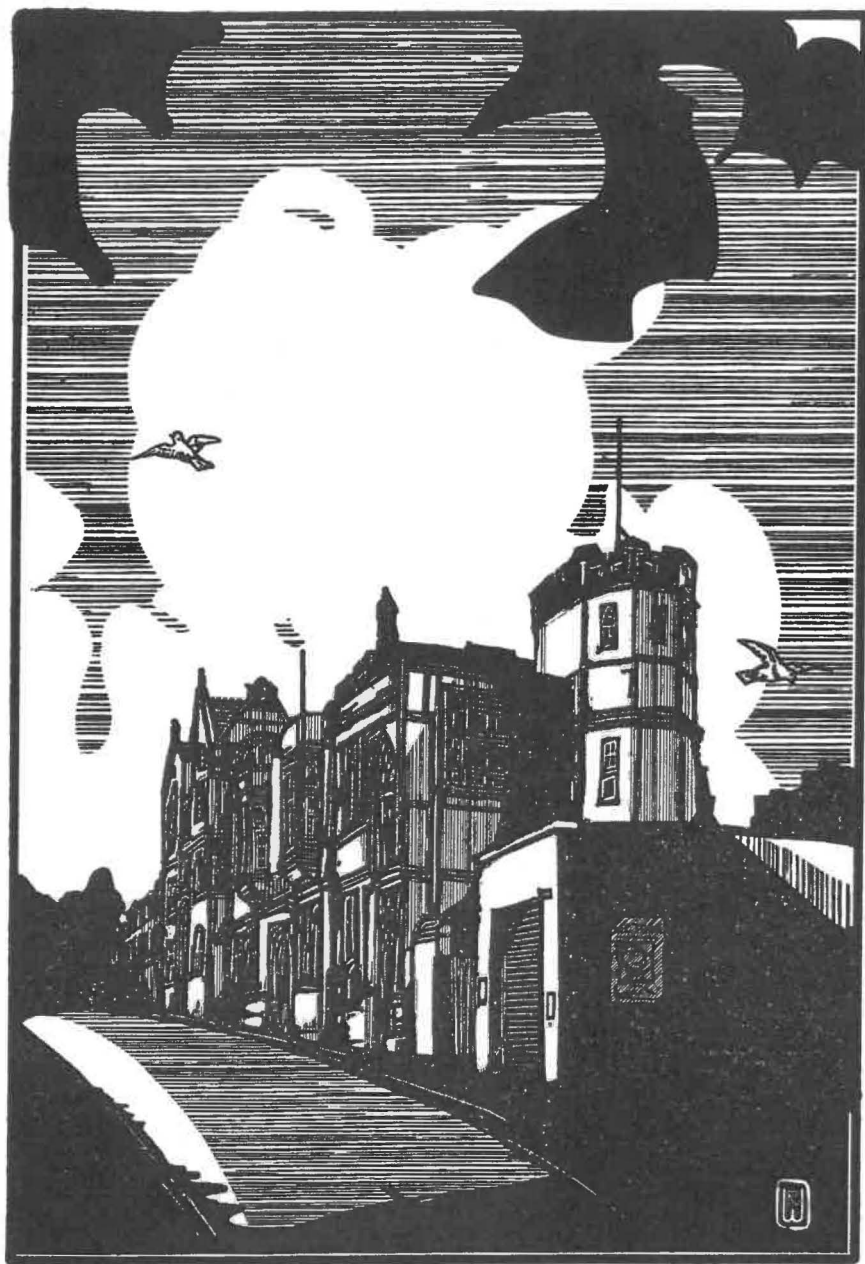
they couldn't help seeing that if they were carried out they would involve what *they* would think their ruin, & what I should think their freeing, from a troublesome and degrading slavery.'

His 17 March letter expands on this view: it is the members of both classes, not merely the workers, who require a moral and political education:

This revolution will I say certainly come about; but it will come about accompanied by grievous disturbance and violence unless both masters and men face the thing boldly and with coolness; both of them finding out what the due claims of labour are; both of them educating themselves on the matter, feeling discontent at the present anomalies, and organizing a complete change which would involve the abolition of the distinctions of master and man: ...

A trace of Morris's indebtedness to the writings of John Ruskin (who had attended the first delivery of this lecture at Oxford) may appear in his remark that 'reasonable men' will wish to be 'led by superior capacity', an echo of Ruskin's appeal in *Unto this Last* to members of his class to guide those in their employ through sacrifice ('rather than fail in any engagement [the merchant] is bound to meet failure and any form of distress, poverty, or labour which may ... come upon him', 'The Roots of Honour'). This reliance on 'natural' leaders is notably absent from Morris's later essays and journalism, however, and reports of his many friendships with working-class socialists bear testimony to his willingness to respect and learn from their different experiences.

At this point the question arises: how can the drastic change Morris advocates be effected? This is, of course, a question



West Bromwich Institute

pondered by sincere would-be reformers from ancient times to ours, and one which would preoccupy Morris for many years in his roles as a member of the Social Democratic Federation (1882-4), a prominent leader within the Socialist League (1885-90) and Hammersmith Socialist Society (1890-6), and a socialist elder statesman who advocated for unity within a fractured socialist and labour movement (1891-6). If Morris's views in 1884 are yet unspecific—he tells Macaulay that 'radical improvement, revolution I should call it, for it cannot stop short of that, will take place naturally and inevitably, nay is now taking place'—his remarks do offer some cautions as well as a justification for his later career of promoting socialism to popular audiences. As the late Nicholas Salmon noted in 1996:

Between 1883 and 1890 he was probably the most active propagandist in the whole country: in a seven year period he addressed over 1000 meetings and was heard in person by as many as 250,000 people. His articles and editorials reached thousands more. As [E. P.] Thompson has written, "every group of Socialists included some who had been converted by his words." ... His lecture campaign of 1883 to 1890 remains one of the most impressive ever undertaken by a British politician. (Political Writings: Contributions to Justice and Commonweal, 1994, xlvi, xlviii)

And finally, as Morris writes to a young inquirer who, like himself, is an art entrepreneur and member of the middle classes, honesty impels him to present the worst possible case for activism; he who would seek a socialist society will face personal rejection and perhaps—with a glance backward at the slaughter of the Paris Communards in 1871—even death. His words are interlaced with personal experience: 'a manufacturer may use his position to spread discontent, ... by doing this, that is by renouncing his class and acting for the abolition of classes he

may & probably will be of great use: only, I say, he must be prepared for any consequences and shake off all prejudices.' Not surprisingly during this early period of his socialism Morris hoped that many others of his social class would join with him in supporting the loss of their own narrow privileges for the public good. In his lecture he had appealed directly to the more prosperous members of his audience: 'Help us now, you whom the fortune of your birth has helped to make wise and refined; and as you help us in our work-a-day business toward the success of the cause, instil into us your superior wisdom, your superior refinement, and you in your turn may be helped by the courage and hope of those who are not so completely wise and refined.' (*Art Under Plutocracy*). In this case hope wrestled with experience, for in delivering his lecture on previous occasions Morris had faced open hostility from his genteel audiences; after his Oxford talk, John Bright, the Master of Balliol College and Morris's host, rose to denounce his attempt to spread 'Socialist propaganda', and at Cambridge his remarks had been greeted by several minutes of mingled hisses and applause.

Morris may have viewed his correspondent as a younger counterpart of himself in his dual dedication to art and social betterment, and in closing he challenges Macaulay in personal terms to join wholeheartedly in a strenuous endeavour. From the *Defence of Guenevere* onwards Morris's poetry had been filled with depictions of heroism under stress, and in 1883 (the year this lecture was first delivered) he had written Andreas Scheu of his admiration for Icelandic sagas: 'their worship of courage (the great virtue of the human race), their utter unconventionality took my heart by storm' (15 September). For Morris, difficulties challenged rather than repelled, and he enjoins both his immediate correspondent and himself: 'To be able to [be of great use the manufacturer] must be a convinced Socialist: which to my mind will make a man of him; for what in all the world is so good as to fear nothing?'

Though the young Kenneth Macaulay preserved Morris's letters and bequeathed them to his descendants, we cannot know how deeply he took their contents to heart. As Dr Wilson's commentary suggests, however, Morris's words hold both an immediate and universal relevance, as they leap over the decades with their challenge to create a fully socialized world, 'a time of rest for the world, when mastery has turned into fellowship.'^[1]

[1] The voice of Ellen as imagined by Guest at the conclusion of *News from Nowhere*, Chapter 32.