**The Conspiracy of Good Taste: chapter 2**

William Morris Middle class socialism and art

**His Work as an Icon**

"Morris's work as both as a designer and writer on the applied arts revolutionised the taste of the later nineteenth century, not only in Britain but in Europe and America" (Flyer for the William Morris Gallery, London, 1993).

The position Morris holds as an icon of the truly socialist artist is without comparison. In Britain he is a household name familiar to almost any people with connections to 'the arts'. He represents ideals of connection to nature, unalienated craft work, utopian vision, Civilised Socialism and a kind of romantic stripped-pine aesthetic which still appeals to many. There is such an aura of respect around the myth that is William Morris that it is difficult to find critical studies amongst the many publications dealing with Morris and his Arts & Crafts Movement. As the blurb above claims, his status extends throughout the western world and references to him are legion, most of them reverent. Undoubtedly he was a person with many personal qualities. But even the most benign middle class leaders were and are unwitting participants in class oppression.

"The rest of us are merely inventing methods of getting what we desire. William Morris taught us what to desire" (Graham Wallas, quoted by Waters, 1990, p.47).

As mentioned in the introduction, culture was seen as a crucial site for indoctrination and for the management of the 'impoverished' working class personality. The 'intellectual heritage of the race', to which the working class were invited to aspire, was of course the heritage of those upstairs.

**On the Edge of Epping Forest**

"I was born at Walthamstow in Essex in March 1834, a suburban village on the edge of Epping Forest, and once a pleasant place, but now terribly cocknified and chocked up by the jerry builder" (William Morris, letter to Andreas Scheu, 5.8.1883, quoted by Briggs, 1962, p.29).

Morris was born into an undistinguished and not particularly wealthy middle class family. From the earliest age he was imbued with romanticism and brought up with a love and knowledge of things medieval. Before the age of seven he was reading Scott's novels and had been riding through the park on his Shetland pony dressed up in a miniature suit of armour. In 1840 the family moved to nearby Woodford Hall. This was rather grand and run in a manner which had many 'medieval' aspects. The Hall brewed its own beer, churned its own butter and made its own bread. His father had his own coat of arms with a white horse's head. If the family did not have an ancient or noble lineage it certainly aspired to that style.
"In spite of his Welsh blood and of that vein of romantic melancholy in him which it is customary to regard as of Celtic origin, his sympathies were throughout with the Teutonic stocks. Among all the mythologies of Europe the Irish myth... perhaps interested him least: for Welsh poetry he did not care deeply; and even the Arthurian legend never had the same hold on his mind, or meant as much to him, as the heroic cycle of the Teutonic race" (Mackail, 1899, p.13).

Just before he went to Marlborough public school in 1847, his father died, leaving the family very wealthy. This wealth was from a lucky investment in mine holdings in Devon which turned out to be extraordinarily rich in copper.

We do not have much information on his early life and the influence of his parents. Frederick Kirchinoff attempts an analysis in William Morris, the Construction of a Male Self, 1856-1872, but with the slender evidence available it is not too convincing. However, perhaps his most insightful comment is on the influence of Morris's father:

"Morris remained, like his father before him, a business man. Years earlier, when he was simply living on his income, he had been unable to fix a coherent set of personal goals: it was not until he had grown used to the idea of running a business -- that he found a sense of direction" (Kirchinoff, 1990, p.19. See also Press & Harvey, 1991).

At Marlborough he read the medieval writers: Chaucer, Froissart, and particularly Malory's Morte d'Arthur and all things Arthurian. Being sent away to public school, so soon after the death of his father, must have been a huge emotional strain, if a similar experience of one close friend of mine is anything to go by. The public schools are an important arena for the conditioning of the oppressor class. This can be a cruel process in which there is rarely a place for compassion or grieving. "Mr Fearon, the Secretary to the Charity Commissioners, who entered Marlborough in the same term, remembers him as fond of mooning and talking to himself, and considered a little mad by the other boys" (Mackail, p.17).

Marlborough had only just started in 1843 and was pretty disorganised by all accounts, so the boys had a degree of freedom which would be unheard of today. We know little of this period but Morris is reported as having a wild temper and would resort to "beating his own head, dealing himself vigorous blows, to take it out of himself" (Mackail, p.43). By his own account it was not a happy time.

**Topsy Goes to Oxford**

At the time Morris went up to Oxford University in 1853 there was talk of an alliance between the proletariat and the aristocracy under the leadership of Disraeli. This would clearly have appealed to Morris's medievalism and about this time he went through an aristocratic and high churchman phase. Then he was influenced by the Christian Socialists Charles Kingsley and F.D.Maurice.
His socialist and medieval interests met in Carlyle's *Past & Present* (1843). In this the life in a 12th century monastery was contrasted with a "blistering old testament attack on the morality of industrial capitalism." Morris continued to research medievalism and his studies of illuminated manuscripts and other artifacts embellished his earlier fantasies with endless authentic detail. For Morris this romantic medieval dream world was becoming more and more an alternative reality into which he could escape. Having this world with which he could compare contemporary conditions gave him some insights, but the romance was strong and he was often carried away by it.

His main revelation at Oxford was undoubtedly the works of John Ruskin, whose chapter, 'The Nature of Gothic', in the second volume of *The Stones of Venice*, Morris later reprinted in a Kelmscott Press edition. Ruskin had many clear insights into the importance of pleasure and creativity in work. His writing was poetic and occasionally penetrating in its social analysis, in spite of the classist stereotypes.

"We have much studied, and much perfected, of late, the great civilised invention of the division of labour; only we give it a false name. It is not, truly speaking, the labour that is divided; but the men: -- Divided into mere segments of men -- broken into little fragments and crumbs of life; so that all the little piece of intelligence that is left in a man is not enough to make a pin, or a nail, but exhausts itself in making the point of a pin or the head of a nail" (Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, 1852).

Ruskin's writing was very influential. He is considered the father of the Arts & Crafts Movement and was a constant influence on Morris throughout his life. But Ruskin's interest in crafts and guilds was motivated by an authoritarian right wing goal to establish a utopian feudalism.

At Oxford Morris met his life-long friend Edward Burne-Jones. Together they formed a brotherhood whose aim was a 'crusade and holy warfare against the age'. This was to be a very spiritual war and at one stage they even planned their own monastery.

**The Poet**

At Oxford Morris discovered he had a gift for poetry, in the fashionable romantic style of the times exemplified by Robert Browning and Alfred Lord Tennyson.

The romanticism of Percy Shelley had been a "passionate protest against an intolerable social reality", inspired by 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity'. With John Keats there is, Thompson claims, a proportion and tension maintained between escapeism and a harsh reality. Morris's first collection of poems published in 1858, *The Defence of Guenevere*, had some of this tension, although the book sold less than three hundred copies and some of these were bought by Morris to give to friends. The Romantic movement believed in a utopia, the birth of which would be midwifed by its own poetry. This poetic had its own language, images, attitudes and conventions. Morris was imbued with these from early in his youth. He probably even thought in these terms and when he
came to put pen to paper he could be fluent in this idiom. By the time of Earthly Paradise (1868), it was evident that his romanticism was little more than a yearning nostalgia, an escape from reality into youthful fantasy: however, this time it was a huge success with the Victorian public!

"This endless poem, with its strong soap-opera element, was very popular for Victorian family readings and helped establish Morris in the public mind as a poet of arcadia, his images reinforcing the escapist mood" (Marsh, 1982, p.14).

The future fame and glamour of Morris was largely founded on the popularity of this book. Most critics agree that his later romances are little but lightweight fantasy, a retreat to the safety of childhood memories.

So, in short, the literature produced by this great socialist was slight. If you were a rebellious arty youth in the sixties and probably since, you tended to be directed to William Morris. He was the man who was supposed to combine art and revolution. I can remember my own perplexed reaction on attempting to read Morris's poetry and romances as a young artist yearning for a way to end class oppression. I was puzzled that this sort of writing could be considered relevant to modern life. Cheap and maligned science fiction and detective novels had much more to say and were written in a language I could relate to.

The Brotherhood

William Holman Hunt and John Everett Millais, two of the original Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, had apparently attended the Chartist meeting on Kennington Common, but their bohemian revolt was mainly against an increasingly suffocating middle class respectability and hypocrisy.

Morris and Burne-Jones had come to London in 1856 and been completely taken with Dante Gabrielle Rossetti at a time when the original PRB had broken up. Rossetti persuaded Morris to try his hand at painting. The two from Oxford gave new life to Rossetti's circle and it set off on a new round of bohemian revolt. Although this 'revolt' seems to have consisted of little more than hopping on and off furniture in enthusiastic discussion and other such high jinx.

Morris's wealth also allowed them to go to some lengths in drawing their medieval fantasies from life. Once the whole group went to Oxford to make a mural. Morris decided to have a complex piece of armour they required actually made up by a local smith. Mackail reports:

"One afternoon when I was working high up on my picture, I heard a strange bellowing in the building, and turning round ... saw an unwonted sight. The basinet was being tried on, but the visor, for some reason would not lift, and I saw Morris embedded in iron, dancing with rage and roaring inside. The mail coat came in due time, and it was
so satisfactory to its designer that the first day it came he chose to dine in it. It became him well; he looked very splendid" (Mackail, p.120).

They seem to have achieved nothing but an impoverished sentimentalising of a lost age. Their "exaggerated rejection of contemporary society ultimately led the Pre-Raphaelites into narcissism and futility. As an article in their own journal, The Germ, tried to point out, they missed 'the poetry of the things about us ... our railways, factories, mines, roaring cities, steam vessels and endless novelties and wonders produced everyday which if they were found only in the Thousand and One Nights or any poem classical or romantic, would be gloried over without end!'" (Tames, 1972 p.12).

Art was Rossetti's religion and, as we would see it now, therapy. However their dramatic disappointment in the world and retreat into fantasy can still, occasional, exert a strong appeal, to judge from the recurrences of Pre-Raphaelite imagery.

They attempted to live their fantasies. They constructed the ideal romantic woman and found living examples of the type, which Rossetti and Morris then married. The ideal was "remote, unattainable and sad". They gave their melancholy and detachment from life the status of beauty.

"She was slim and thin... a little above the middle height of women, well-knit and with a certain massiveness about her figure... Her face, like her figure, had something strong and massive amidst its delicacy...dark brown abundant silky hair, a firm clear cut somewhat square jaw, and round well-developed lips... a straight nose with wide nostrils and perfectly made... high cheeks... and to light all this up, large grey eyes set wide apart" (from an unpublished novel of 1870, quoted by Thompson, 1955, p.93).

Jane Burden's upward mobility

The 'ideal' woman he married, in April 1859, was Jane Burden, a working class beauty Rossetti had discovered in Oxford.

"Perhaps the young girl was swept into the role of Guenevere or Isuelt before she herself had found out who she was ... It's hard to say whether she's a grand synthesis of all the Pre-Raphaelite pictures ever made -- or they a 'keen analysis' of her -- whether she's an original or copy" (Henry James, Letters, 1920).

Jane Burden's beauty was revered by the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood and they idealised her body. She accepted her position on the pedestal but was "unresponsive, silent, a poised, majestic presence ... The victim of unexplained ailments, which seem to have had some nervous origin" (quoted by Thompson, 1955, p.197).

She was perhaps just another sacrifice to modern glamour and the idealisation of love.

"I fancy that her mystic beauty must sometimes have weighed rather heavily upon her ... She was a Ladye in a Bower, an ensorcelled Princess, a Blessed Damozel, while I feel she would have preferred to be a 'bright, chatty little woman' in request for small
theatre parties and afternoons up the river" (Graham Robertson, quoted by Thompson, 1955 p.198).

She was not only under pressure because of the idealisation of her body:

"It must be presumed that Jane was given a crash course in middle class manners, etiquette and household management during the year between her engagement and marriage... Accent being the key index of class in Britain, she would learn how to speak 'properly' and be instructed in polite phraseology and expression."

These are quoted from Jane and May Morris: a biographical story 1839-1938 by Jan Marsh (1986) with no comment on the stress that such a forceful denigration of her upbringing would entail. This was not simply a change of culture, but one culture that defines itself in terms of its disgust for the other demanding its annihilation.

This was of course not an isolated case. In about 1860 the massively influential Mrs Beeton's Book of Cookery and Household Management appeared for the first time. Much of what Jane had to learn was detailed in Mrs Beeton's famous tome. (There was a copy around when I was young which goes to show what a ubiquitous bible of manners it became. I remember thinking that it was referred to with awe just because it was so thick.)

The process was violent enough to cut her off from her family:

"There is no evidence that she did seek out any family connections ... Her mother had died in Oxford earlier in the year, on 2nd Feb 1871, at the age of 66. Jane did not go to the funeral... Neither of her daughters seems to have recalled meeting their Burden grandmother... If they were not taken to see their granny, it must have been because the social gulf was considered unbridgeable" (Marsh, 1986).

There is no record of how she felt after the death of her father, aged 55, in 1865. Afterwards her sister Bessie came to stay but "nothing is recorded of Bessie's personality ... Morris complained of her being dull." How different would have been the attention she got if she had been a beauty like Jane. Throughout Jan Marsh's book one is struck by the lack of any outrage or feeling on these issues. In her other general study of the Pre-Raphaelite women she does at least comment:

"The enclosed rooms in which these ladies live, looking out on inviting sunlit landscapes, and the tangled strands binding their vigorous limbs, are surely metaphors of women's conditions, signifying the docile, passive, reflective and domestic role that dominated Victorian ideas of femininity" (Marsh, 1987).

Morris had fallen for an image, one transfixed by the pain of her idealisation and displacement. He never seemed to connected with her as a close friend and his marriage was an unhappy one.

It was from the background of his unhappiness in this relationship that Morris came to Revolutionary Socialism. But Socialism never helped him analyse the problem of
this relationship, never mind solve it. Yet now we begin to see that such issues may be at
the heart of alienation.

It was not always a case of rich upper class men choosing beautiful or sexy
working class women. The reverse may be illustrated in the famous partnership of
Beatrice and Sidney Webb, perhaps the most influential individuals in the moulding of
British socialism. Although the middle class Beatrice was sorry for the lower classes and
admired the qualities they retained in the extreme adversity that they endured, she
"showed a particularly haughty and contemptuous attitude towards the lower middle
class and she was never surprised when she found members of it lacking in self control
or in true refinement of manners" (Royden Harrison, in Levy, 1987, p.53).

If they did not conform properly to good taste and give up working class
mannerisms and culture they were to be derided. To her it was the working classes who
went up in the world and wanted to take their culture with them who were the real
threat. Sidney had had a lower class upbringing on the edge of poverty and had risen
through the civil service by a consistent chain of examination successes. Accordingly
"she was merciless in her dealings with him. He had to stop wearing grubby shirts, stop
dropping his aitches, stop talking about what he would do when he was prime minister.
He had also to stop writing to her in terms which suggested anything remotely of lust"
(Royden Harrison in Levy, 1987 p.54).

The subjugation of Sidney to the middle class ideals took a heavy toll on him.
When asked later why he would not write his autobiography he answered that he could
not because he 'had no inside'. The working class soul is a social entity -- by giving up
your identity you give up your connection to that soul.

The Firm and The Art & Crafts Movement

After his spell of painting with Rossetti Morris's next project, with his architect
friend Phillip Webb, was to build The Red House at Bexley Heath in 1859. It was
described by a visitor as 'vividly picturesque'. The brotherhood were invited in to design
the fixtures and fittings and the success of this venture led to the formation of The Firm.
As W.R.Letharby claimed, "The national arts had been flattened out and destroyed in the
name of gentility, learning and 'taste'" (quoted by Thompson, 1955, p.128).

The Firm, managed and run by Morris, became his way of waging "holy warfare
against the age" to compensate for this loss. But the age was undeterred; the Firm's work
was mainly confined to the luxury market. By the mid eighties the Arts & Crafts were
already being considered by many of his clients and admirers as a sufficient end in itself.

Outside of The Firm, the Arts & Crafts Movement in reality produced very little of
note. The Clarion Handicraft Guild was one of the larger organisations inspired by
Morris. By 1904 it had 30 branches throughout Britain and was holding annual
exhibitions of its work. The exhibition in 1902 did not impress Montague Blatchford, the
eminent socialist, who commented that the work displayed was "amateurish, imitative and not particularly useful." In 1907 the strength of the Guild began to wane and the exhibition of that year was even called "rubbish" by A.J.Penty, an otherwise enthusiastic supporter of Arts & Crafts. By this time the movement had also lost any remnants of a political critique.

The Arts & Crafts Movement did not occur in isolation. Following similar themes were the painters of chocolate-box landscapes, novelists and garden designers.

"In the innocent enthusiasm of the books she wrote, Gertrude Jekyll helped forge these fantasia however much she wanted to dispel them. Her nostalgia for olde countrye life hid forever the poverty behind the painting" (Trifit, 1989).

Jekyll was a brilliant gardener who, as the middle class fashion for a country retreat took off, advocated a contrived naturalism of the 'authentic' English country garden. The illustrations in her popular books, reprinted many times, are usually of very grand old country mansions. She also bought old rural cottage furniture and helped create a rural antiques demand. Soon enough the labourers' houses were furnished with cheap mass-produced veneered pieces in place of the sturdy old stuff bought by the middle class dealers. This old rural simply-crafted furniture provided the model for the Arts & Craft aesthetic.

In the context of an already well developed romantic interpretation of the Southern English landscape the mythical ideals produced by the ruralist movement were powerful. The Arts & Crafts Movement of Ruskin and Morris, along with the efforts of Sharp, Williams-Ellis and many others, formed an arcadian ethos that became a cornerstone of modern nationalism. The old rural artefacts and customs were repackaged as 'emblems of patriotism'. On the basis of such nationalism the First World War, a war of unprecedented scale, ferocity and horror, was fought. More than one working class writer has cynically interpreted the way this war was fought as simply an excercise in culling the working class:

"The old men of the upper classes who were in command possessed the half-concealed knowledge that if they did not dispose of them in this roulette-wheel fashion then those millions would turn round and sweep them away" (Sillitoe, 1972, p.114).

More tragically the carnage simply encouraged the need for escape and the arcadian myth was transfixed in the pain and loss of all those brothers, husbands and sons sacrificed for their country.

"The very labourer, with his thatched cottage and narrow slip of ground, attends to their embellishment. The trim hedge, the grass-plot before the door, the little flower bed bordered with snug box, the woodbine trained up against the wall, and hanging its blossoms about the lattice, the plot of flowers in the window, the holly, providentially planted about the house, to cheat winter of its dreariness, and to throw in a semblance of green summer to cheer the fireside: all these bespeak the influence of taste, flowing down
from high sources, and pervading the lowest levels of the public mind" (Washington Irving, quoted by Jones, 1912).

This suggests that the conscious humanitarian motives and strategies Morris undoubtedly had were in fact overwhelmed by the unconscious values in which they were embedded. His later 'international' socialism did not annul the damage of the Arts & Crafts Movement. In fact because his socialism didn't challenge the basis of taste, it was the vehicle for it. Morris continued to adhere to Ruskinian concepts of art & architecture throughout his conversion to Marxist socialism. We might even presume to let Ruskin speak for the underlying values Morris held:

"Of course I am a Socialist -- of the most stern sort -- but I am also a Tory of the sternest sort" (Ruskin, 1886, in a letter to Cockerell, quoted by Swenarton, 1989, p.169).

Morris was not 'of the sternest sort' but his values were still those of the rentier class in spite of his professed ideals.

Along with Ruskin, Morris held essentially perverse upper class notions of work. Notions that romanticised and raised manual work above all other work and especially above the reproductive work of women. In fact if work does not result in objects it is simply not seen. The fetishisation of the male body as warrior, harking back to the Teutonic Cycle, is transferred to the heroic manual worker. An image which found its true home in both Stalinist and Nazi cultures.

Architecture was central to Morris's ideas and yet even with all the talk of manual labour there was no real relationship to the building site. The medieval Guilds of Freemen, which are such a model for Ruskin and Morris, soon became used by people such as A.J.Penty, as a method of curtailing class struggle in the building industry. Penty was an overtly fascist supporter of Guild Socialism, as it was known. This movement collapsed in the winter of 1922-23 (see Swenarton, 1989, p.169).

The myths about work and the nature of the landscape, forged in the 19th century are still going strong today. They are institutionalised in our heritage and conservation industries and also in the minds of all those who aspire to respectable good taste. Half of us visit the countryside twelve times a year or more. "Eager to preserve a pastoral ideal and create the landscape of his imagination, urban man is neglecting social and agricultural realities" (Hewison, 1993).

Morris started the Kelmscott Press after the Socialist League failed in 1890. His intention according to his biographer and friend Aymer Vallance was to produce a "perfect and lasting monument before he should die and pass away". Morris believed that the "only work of art that surpasses a complete medieval book is a complete medieval building". One of his earliest editions in 1892 was Ruskin's The Nature of Gothic. We should now note that he never considered publishing the work of his working class comrades who had given so much to the struggle.
Much is made of the intricate attention paid to every stage of design and production. The paper was "hand made from the linen shirts of certain peasants" (Vallance, 1897). But all said and done this was nothing but an escape. "William Morris's romantic late 19th century attempt to infuse the printing trades with higher values now seems like a misguided sentiment buoyed up by a sea of money" (Betsy Davids and Jim Petrillo, 'The Artist as Book Printer', Joan Lyons, 1985).

Socialists Rich...

It was wealthy men who led and financed the groups which had their own papers and which made the running in the official history of British Socialism.

H.M. Hyndman, the 'father of British Socialism', had a terrific air of confidence about him. A wealthy middle class man, just over forty, typical perhaps of the class of empire builders, he organised a union of the autonomous London radical clubs that led to the formation of the Social Democratic Federation in 1881. Hyndman, something of a jingoist on the quiet, became leader of this SDF and financed its paper Justice.

Morris joined the SDF in January 1883, but later split, on the issue of parliamentary strategies, and formed the Socialist League with its paper Commonweal. The League and this paper were financed by Morris to the tune of £500 a year -- a small fortune at that time.

Morris also managed and sponsored his own Hammersmith branch of the League and provided the premises. The measure of their dependency was that as soon as Morris died the branch fell apart. The same was true earlier of Commonweal. It folded soon after Morris withdrew his support.

Historians tend to play down or ignore how wealth creates artificial organisations and distorts individual contributions. Consider the different tone E.P. Thompson uses in the following two extracts:

"Morris had already made a serious sacrifice to the Cause, raising money from the sale of some of the most treasured early books in his private collection...

Tom Mann selling all his personal possessions down to his kitchen table in order to keep the propaganda alive in Newcastle" (Thompson, 1955, pp.371 & 563).

Notice how Thompson only uses the word sacrifice in relation to Morris's sale. But who actually made the greater sacrifice?

The wealthy Socialists, including Morris and Engels, would also fund a few selected agitators with 'workhouse rations'. This sort of patronage would have exerted a powerful directing influence on the movement. Not to say that it was not resisted: at one time Engels required J.L. Mahon to submit to his son-in-law Edward Aveling's direction if he wished to receive funds. As the upper class Aveling was a profligate, a fact which was widely known, though possibly not to Engels, Mahon refused. Later Mahon's stand was vindicated when Eleanor Marx was driven to suicide on account of Aveling's behaviour.

Tom Maguire
I want to spend some time describing the life of the best working class agitator in The League. First, in order to offset the tendency to dwell on the criticism of upper class heroes whilst their working class counterparts go unmentioned. Working class people do not own the publishing houses or academies necessary to research and publish their own history. Secondly, to contrast the work of Morris with a working class artist who was really connected to the people.

The year was 1883, a seventeen year old Catholic working class photographer picked up a copy of The Christian Socialist from the Secular Hall bookstall in Leeds. He was immediately hooked and began looking for other people to put these ideas into action. By hanging around Vicars Croft, 'the popular spouting place', he had soon gathered a small group who formed a branch of the SDF.

"Early in 1885... strolling through the Market place of Leeds, my attention was attracted by a pale but pleasant featured young fellow, who in a clear voice was speaking to a motley crowd. After listening for a while I began to feel a strong sympathy with his remarks, and what is more -- a sudden interest in and liking for the speaker; and I remember how impatiently I waited for his reappearance on the following Sunday" (Alf Mattison, Ford, 1895).

Within a year of the League's split from the SDF, at the end of 1884, Tom Maguire was criticising Morris's Commonweal for being boring and written in a language unsuitable for the workers. Morris was stung by the criticism but decided that the "literary character of the paper should be maintained." In spite of this snub Maguire followed up his criticism in his usual practical way with an article on 'The Yorkshire Miners and their Masters'. This was the first detailed article on the conditions of workers carried in the Commonweal.

Maguire was ambitious as a writer and planned a clear textbook of socialist theory in accessible language. "People call themselves socialists," he wrote, "but what they really are is just ordinary men with socialist opinions hung around, they haven't got it inside of them" (Ford, 1895). His Machine-Room Chants, inspired by his organising work with the tailoresses, and occasional verse in socialist papers, stand out from other socialist versifying of the time by reason of their greater range and realism. "Socialists looked more to middle class writers for their material than to workers" (Waters, 1990, p.120). Most of the poets in the Commonweal were 'pallid, overstrained and romantic', dealing only in cliched symbols and archetypes.

"Maguire wrote directly from his own experience: he was a forerunner of the poetry of Tressell; he did not romanticise the working people, but described them with all their weaknesses, without condescension and with an underlying faith in their power. In his versatility, his cultural achievements, his enthusiasm and self-sacrifice, he typified all that was best in the Socialist League. And he was perhaps the most able working class agitator the League produced" (Thompson, 1955, p.619).
In spite of the above eulogy Thompson refers to Maguire as a 'mouthpiece of Morris' when all the evidence points to his originality and independence of thought. Just because he stayed in the League until the bitter end does not imply a servile loyalty.

In 1889, the year of The Great Dock Strike, there was a great surge of confidence amongst the unskilled workers. This kept Maguire and his friends busy helping various new unions that were forming. This activity was in contrast to the passivity of the League in London, although branches in Manchester, Aberdeen and Bradford were also active. Unfortunately and perhaps typically, this intense period of activity also led to the group splitting on the question of violence.

Maguire and Alf Mattison then joined the Fabian Society. At the time there was an general attempt to infiltrate the Fabians, which provoked some alarm amongst its middle class leadership, but in the end the radical provincial groups, who these people represented, joined the Independent Labour Party (ILP): the Fabians breathed a sigh of relief. Maguire had great hopes for the ILP but was soon disillusioned. The intrigues of the ILP depressed him. "I want to get away from your damn party politics and silly quarrels ... We get mixed up in disputes among ourselves ... and can't keep a straight line for the great thing" (Ford, 1895).

In the winter of 1893 he was running The Labour Champion, a militant trade unionism paper, in Leeds and engaged in agitation on the question of unemployment, the pain which he was to know only too well from his own situation in the bitter and desperate winters of '94/95. Profoundly moved by the suffering caused by unemployment at this time before social benefits, he wrote a passionate "Out o' Work's Prayer":

"O God of Humanity, gaze on me, powerless, pulseless, and spent, 
Shrunken of muscle and withered of heart and of mind, 
With all that was hope in me strangled, distorted, broken and bent -- 
All that was man in me loosened and left far behind..."

"On February 10th 1895, he was lecturing on the theme of 'Labour Federation'. Three weeks later Alf Mattison heard that he was ill, and hurrying to his home, where he lived with his mother, found him suffering from pneumonia, without food or fire in the house. The aid of comrades came too late, and two days later, on March 8th, Tom Maguire died... The people lined the streets for two miles when the funeral procession, 1000 strong, went by. No other man in Yorkshire had given such long and such notable service to the cause; and yet, this man at his death, was only twenty-nine" (Thompson, 1955, p.705).

But the last word should go to Maguire;
"Political progress is not made after the fashion of a Corydon-Phyllis dance, jigging along ... through pleasant places with the sun shining over us" (Ford, 1895).

...and Socialists Famous
It was not only the wealth of the upper class socialists that influenced the movement. People such as Prince Kropotkin had a tremendous glamour which had a powerful effect on the young working class radicals. Engels comments incisively on what a powerful allure this could be in a letter to H.Schluter in 1890:

"The most repulsive thing here is the bourgeois 'respectability' which has grown deep into the bones of the workers ... I am not at all sure for instance, that John Burns is not secretly prouder of his popularity with Cardinal Manning, the Lord Mayor and the bourgeoisie in general than of his popularity with his class. And Champion ... has intrigued for years with bourgeois and especially conservative elements ... Even Tom Mann, whom I regard as the finest of them, is fond of mentioning that he will be lunching with the Lord Mayor. If one compares this with the French, one can see what a revolution is good for after all" (Thompson, 1955, p.668).

"Some of the pioneers (if Bruce Glasier's recollections can be trusted) regarded Morris with an awe which was near to being sickly. To them he seemed a figure of romance, coming from the glamorous and fairy tale world of the Pre-Raphaelite Romantics" (G.B. Shaw, quoted by Thompson, 1955, p.351).

Of course not everyone was taken in by the glamour, although those that opposed it, like Dan Chatterton, tended to become 'mad' outsiders. Archivists and historians do not tend to record such incidents when the heroes are challenged and when they do, rarely treat them as significant.

"Max Nettlau, who witnessed Chatterton haranguing William Morris at the Autonomie Club in January 1890, recorded with sadness: 'the most beautiful words of Morris woke in the old man nothing but the remark that hanging was nevertheless necessary for the public good'" (quoted by Whitehead, 1984).

Hyndman always wore his top hat and frockcoat to rallies and was fond of mocking his audience by thanking them for 'supporting his class'. Morris and Hyndman were both noted for their imposing presence, writing fluency and influential contacts.

Morris's Hammersmith clubroom was a fashionable meeting place for the young avant-garde; H.G.Wells was amongst them in his red tie; so was W.B.Yeats. Morris had a mythic reputation as the picturesque author of The Earthly Paradise and manager of The Firm with its salubrious premises in Oxford Street. It seems that the working class members had to put up with a good deal of snobbery from such fellows -- but were also mesmerised by its allure.

**The Great Gulf**

"On Sunday I went a-preaching Stepney way. My visit intensely depresses me as these Eastwards visits always do; the mere stretch of houses, the vast mass of utter shabbiness and uneventfulness, sits upon one like a nightmare; of course what slums there are one doesn't see. You would perhaps have smiled at my congregation; some
twenty people in a little room, as dirty as convenient and stinking a good deal. It took the fire out of my fine periods, I can tell you: it is a great drawback that I can't talk to them roughly and unaffectedly. Also I would like to know what amount of real feeling underlies their bombastic revolutionary talk when they get to that. I don't seem to have got at them yet -- you see this great class gulf lies between us all" (from a letter to Mrs Burne-Jones 1885, quoted by Meier, 1978, p.40 and Tames, 1972, p.36).

The problem for these leaders of men, who felt that they were pioneers in a new social order, was that they knew little about the people that they were meant to be leading. And what knowledge they had was coloured by their class viewpoint. Hyndman thought that they were "never quite conscious agents of history themselves", whilst to Morris they were "good fellows enough, who had only to be got to listen to reason." The nature of class oppression and the differences that gave rise to this gulf were not understood. Although there were upper class people like Henrietta and Samuel Barnett, who were obsessed with the question of communication between the classes, nobody could think clearly in this area. This however is not surprising as the key way the oppressor class is prepared for its role is to develop a mental blank in their perception of the oppressed and the key way that the working class is prepared for its role is to 'learn' that what they have to say is of no importance.

The culture of the capitalist class was, above all, one of books. Morris believed that the subject of socialism was "a difficult and intricate one, and to understand it really requires a great deal of reading" (Morris letter to R.Thompson, 24th July 1884, quoted by Swenarton, 1989, p.80). The notion that working class liberation depends on reading a lot of books seems particularly ludicrous to me and I'm sure it would have done to working class people of the time.

This gulf was also evident in their publications. When Morris wrote the manifesto of the League it was his instructions to them rather than something that was based on their demands. Generally the publications from the League suffered from a detachment from the lives of the majority of the population. When their theory didn't communicate, it was thought to be because it was 'too detailed': too complicated for simple minds. But really, it was detail that was missing! The point was that it was too abstract and rarely came down to earth. Broad historical generalisations were not so much incomprehensible as boring. They never included anecdotes and facts from the lives of the readership.

The implication was that a lack of intelligence or at least education was the problem. The truth was, Morris's words did not connect to the lived experience of workers nor to their language.

"I gave my 'Monopoly' (lecture) at the Borough of Hackney Club, which was one of the first workman's clubs founded, if not the first; it is a big club, numbering 1600 members; a dirty wretched place enough, giving a sad idea of the artisans' standard of comfort: the meeting was a full one, and I suppose I must say attentive, but the comings
and goings all the time, the pie boy and the pot boy, was rather trying to my nerves: the audience was civil and inclined to agree, but I couldn't flatter myself that they mostly understood me, simple as the lecture was" (William Morris's Diary, 27 March 1887).

The Commonweal had similar problems. We have already heard how the literary standard of the Commonweal was the barrier over which working class contributors were required to leap. There was apparently no agitational policy at all. Only in one pamphlet by Edward Averling, The Factory Hell, do we see any attempt at an analysis of working conditions.

What should have been one of Morris's most useful publications, 'Socialism, its Growth and Outcome', co-written with Ernest Belfort Bax, was spoilt by its lack of examples which related to working class life. Apart from this the book also included moral diatribes and condescending attitudes. The generalised image of working class people, in the mind of the middle class socialists, was based not on either scientific study nor on direct contact with working class life. All that was left was a cloud of classist myths and stereotypes of working people. In spite of this Thompson, almost comically, repeatedly insists that Morris's socialism was scientific. However 'correct' his Marxist analysis, it was hard for him to get away from the 'moral improvement' of the working class.

**Working Class Anger**

An unfriendly observer of the Hammersmith Branch of the League gives us some insight into its composition. "It needed but a glance over this assembly to understand how very theoretical were the convictions that had brought its members together" (quoted by Thompson, 1955, p.498). Morris attracted the middle class interested in a 'pure' socialism whilst the East End branches of the League tended to be working class and attracted to anarchistic communism. Maybe Anarchy best expressed the class hatred and the outrage at the blatant injustice of class oppression and a more direct belief in people's ability to take power into their own hands.

This anger was something even Morris, with his recurrent temper, could never hope to understand. A good illustration is to be found in Dan Chatterton's response to Lord Brabazon, guest speaker at the Clerkenwell branch of the SDF in 1887:

"Chatterton who, for all his diatribes against the aristocracy had never got a chance of giving one of its members 'a bit of his mind', was naturally on hand. The noble philanthropist had just been round the world and was full of emigration as a panacea for the congested poverty of the old country. He discoursed on the subject for an hour, to the amusement of the audience of which no member could have raised the price of a railway ticket to Clacton-on-Sea, much less the fare to Canada.

Then Chatterton struggled on to the platform and poured out his indignation. Gaunt, ragged, unshaven, almost blind he stood, the embodiment of helpless furious
poverty, and shaking his palsied fist in Brabazon's face, denounced him and his efforts to plaster over social sores, winding up with a lurid imaginative account of the Uprising of the People and a procession in which the prominent feature would be the head of the noble lecturer on a pike. I shall never forget Lady Brabazon's face while this harangue was delivered" (H.H. Champion, quoted by Whitehead, 1984).

There is an important difference between an expression of anger in images of violence and its actual realisation or a proposal for its realisation. A liberation struggle needs to differentiate quite clearly between the inevitable, and sometimes useful, expression of angry fantasy and irrational policies of violence. Here lies the border between sanity and madness.

Good Taste censors the expression of such outrage or dismisses it as having no part in legitimate knowledge. Yet an outraged rant, replete with violent imagery, may be all that can fully communicate the experience of injustice -- quite apart from the cathartic effect on the ranter.

Working Class Ignorance

"The frightful ignorance and want of impressibility of the average English workman floors me at times" (William Morris's Diary, 1887, quoted by Thompson, 1955, p.507).

Morris describes his audience at a typical radical club:

"The sum of it all is that the men at present listen respectfully to Socialism, but are perfectly supine (earlier; taken with no enthusiasm, puzzled.) and not inclined to move except along the lines of radicalism and trades unionism ... the working men listened attentively trying to understand, but mostly failing to do so ... I doubt if most of them understood anything I said; though some few of them showed they did by applauding the points. ...I felt very down cast amongst these poor people in their poor hutch. ...A fresh opportunity (if I needed it) of gauging the depths of ignorance and consequent incapacity of following an argument which possesses the uneducated averagely stupid person" (Diary, quoted by Thompson, 1955, p.508-10).

Thompson then comments with wonderful understatement and bemusement, "To some degree he did not understand the people he most wanted to reach." But what is coming over in these quotes is a terrible reinforcement of the central tenet of working class oppression, the supposed lack of intellectual capability.

"The dominant language discredits and destroys the spontaneous political discourse of the dominated. It leaves them only silence or a borrowed language, whose logic departs from that of popular usage but without becoming that of erudite usage, a deranged language, in which the 'fine words' are only there to mark the dignity of the expressive intention, and which, unable to express anything true, real or 'felt', dispossesses the speaker of the very experience it is supposed to express" (Bourdieu, 1984, p.462).
It is easy to misunderstand the distraction caused by the bind of daily oppression, and its echoes from our early life, as a permanent lack of intelligence. This distraction may often be dispelled by simply bringing people's attention away from their misery and on to the matter presently at hand. This might be achieved by respectfully acknowledging their presence by asking for names, and other basic questions. That still leaves the question of language and terminology. It is often the case that a problem of communication is interpreted by those in the dominant position as a lack of intelligence.

It was only in April 1887 that Morris, addressing striking Northumberland miners, got for the first time a realistic picture of the power and intelligence of working class people. He had not really listened to working class people and thought that stupefying poverty had addled their brains. What he did not realise was that his grand presence itself would have intimidated many working class people and prevented them showing their true intelligence which even then might take a form not immediately recognised by a middle class witness. And to the extent that it is true that class oppression does temporarily interfere with the functioning of our intelligence, it is also true that an uprising can quickly clarify the mind.

It was only the work of agitators in The League, quite distant from Morris, in the North of England, like Mahon and Maguire, that was effective in forming active workers' movements. And in reports of their speeches we see that they are presenting things in straightforward, practical terms -- not at all the same thing as 'simple'.

The transformation of the image of the working class that occurred during the Dock Strike of 1889 is instructive. The 'criminal classes' of bourgeois fiction proved their power and ability for disciplined revolt and were to be seen marching through London, self-organised in disciplined ranks. In spite of this The League and the SDF held a lofty detachment to what was happening in the streets. The same is true of Fabian socialists like Beatrice Webb.

"The dockers whom she had sadly written off as incorrigible sensualists, incapable of self-discipline and virtually devoid of hope or ambition organised themselves into a trade union and staged one of the most triumphant strikes in the history of British labour" (Royden Harrison, in Levy, 1987, p.54).

The Great Lancashire Cotton Strike of 1884, when Morris and Hyndman went up to address a mass meeting, was the only time that The League made serious contact with industrial workers en masse but the class gulf made leadership difficult.

"The difficulty he had adapting himself to working class audiences. Despite his burning sympathy and zeal of his new conversion; he could not rid himself of a superior attitude" (Meier, 1978, p.40).

"I may say without fear of contradiction that we of the English middle classes are the most powerful body of men the world has yet seen, and that anything we have set our heart upon we will have" (Morris quoted by Meier, 1978, p.35).
Morris's Taste

Morris's aesthetic remained close to the ideas expressed by Ruskin in The Nature of Gothic and are not only irredeemably romantic but also quite rigid. Even our arch fan Edward Thompson admits that Morris does not recognise the "active agency" of art (see Thompson, 1955, p.763).

His art had to be heroic or sweet, epic or soothing -- a solace. The subtitle of News from Nowhere is 'An Epoch of Rest'. He hated the Social Realists, the Impressionists, even Shakespeare was dubious. His only advice to people who wanted beauty was to "Look back! Look back!" Art should be for repose and escape. He wanted the artist to have the sympathy of 'simple people'. But these people exist only in myth.

E.P.Thompson claims that his writings on art are amongst his greatest achievements, but at the same time he admits that he failed to have a consistent theory. In keeping with his time his concept of culture was rigidly elitist and he could only connect his taste in art with his 'scientific' socialism in the most idealistic ways. His love of romantic verse only communicated to the comrades because they had already grown accustomed to romantic verse being thrust on them as an incontestable form of excellence.

"The city is 'wicked' and a 'hell', like Shelley's 'London': the lives of the workers are 'squalid' and 'sordid', and they are 'poor ghosts' who 'droop and die'. The sense of 'crowds' as something oppressive is present. Morris rarely expresses any sense of vitality in the working class, but only the Cause itself, the hope of the future" (Thompson, 1955, p.775).

This fear of 'the masses' is taken up by many later intellectuals and writers such as H.G.Wells (see Carey, 1992).

If his poetry was stifled with all the words, images and rhythms of Romanticism then his later romances were worse. The Fabian George Bernard Shaw saw them as "a startling relapse into literary Pre-Raphaelitism".

The importance of poetry amongst the working class intelligensia was much more significant than it is today. In the intellectual and lively atmosphere of metropolitan clubland of the 1870s, poetry had a place which is difficult for us to imagine today. Poetry still had a connection with the oral; with the sounds of words. Not that many worker poets got published, but it is perhaps not surprising if we assume Morris's attitudes were widely shared. In Club Life and Socialism in Mid-Victorian London (1983), Stan Shipley mentions J.B.Leno, a Chartist who in 1864 was also on the First International (The General Council of The International Working Man's Association), as a notable exception.

Morris' letters to an aspiring young worker poet in response to his request for criticism of his poetry give us an insight into how formal, narrow and exclusive were the
rules that defined 'good' poetry. The poet in question, Fred Henderson, was a socialist pioneer in Bradford and then Norwich.

"Horace was right in saying that neither gods nor men can stand mediocrity in a poet: it is like colour in art, it must be either right or wrong, it cannot be 'pretty good'" (quoted by Thompson, 1955, p.875).

By now we know from comparative anthropology that the meanings of colours are culture specific (red as warm, blue as cold, may be the only universal). Morris saw middle class language and taste in poetry as a universal truth.

"You made a mistake: a great part of it is in blank verse: now there is only one measure in English that can be used without rhyme and make genuine verse, the ordinary 10 syllable heroic to wit, and there is only one man living who can write that with success, that is Tennyson" (Thompson, 1955, p.877).

This is the best support he can offer to a proletarian poet who begs him for help. Fred was later arrested in the famous Norwich riot 'The Battle of Ham Run' in 1887 and subsequently tortured on the treadmill. Morris goes on to reveal how basic his lack of appreciation of working class culture really is:

"But now language is utterly degraded in our daily lives, and poets have to make a new tongue each for himself: before he can even begin his story he must elevate his means of expression from the daily jabber to which centuries of degradation have reduced it. And this is given to few to be able to do" (ibid. p.879).

From this lambast of oral language and dialect he goes on to recommend that Fred study Homer and Beowulf. Fortunately Fred was not easily deterred and in the late 1880s his first volume of poetry was an immediate success. We should note that Thompson does not note the title of his book. These attitudes, made preposterously explicit in these letters, would have been implicit in his many circles of influence.

The section on his letters to Fred Henderson, although revealing his attitude to aesthetics, is left out of the later editions of E.P.Thompson's study. This is a pattern I have noticed in other books. Slight breaks with good taste occur in first editions which might have escaped the attention of chief editors. The success of the book then presumably brings it to the attention of the publishers and it is intuitively tidied up for the second or subsequent editions. The point of quoting at length from E.P.Thompson is to show how historians can record such classist attitudes without comment and, apparently, without awareness.

**News of Nothing**

The famous socialist utopia Looking Backward by Edward Bellamy was published in 1888 and quickly assumed an authoritative status, bringing many in the middle classes to socialist positions. Socialism was to be a redemption for their capitalist sins, and an
expiation of guilt: "he offered his middle class listeners immediate redemption by the acceptance of socialism" (Meier, 1978, p.39).

"To Bellamy, a kindly, academic man, not actively associated with the movement of the working class, all this violence, greed and selfish conflict was extremely distasteful. It was untidy and unreasonable, it was the tidiness and reason of socialism that most appealed to him. Its triumph, therefore, would be a triumph of abstract reason, not of a revolutionary class" (Morton, 1952).

There was a deep middle class desire for purification and cleanliness. They had risen from the dirt of the working class and feared that any reappearance of dirt might drag them back. I have even heard Fabian socialism summed up as a form of social hygiene.

Morris was repelled by the crude military and centralised aspects of the utopia described by Bellamy and decided he must do better. He immediately started work on News from Nowhere which began to appear as a serial in The Commonweal on January 11th 1890. Bluntly put, Morris wanted a romantic feudal style of socialism. As with the medieval nobility the means of escape from the misery of life lay in 'the way of dream and illusion' (Huizinga, 1919, p.81). He never understood the excitement of the quality of life in cities. Nor did he appreciate the aesthetics and potentially liberating aspects of mass production.

"Being unable to talk to them about themselves, and about reality as they knew it, he was left with only the prospects offered by utopias" (Meier, 1978, p.41).

The characters in Earthly Paradise have been criticised as shadows or fairy story archetypes; the characters in News from Nowhere are certainly cardboard cut-outs. Morris detested realism: "The men are handsome, strong, attentive and amorous, everybody looks younger than his age and women of forty have not a single wrinkle" (Berneri, 1950, p.260). Even the English weather becomes eternally fine and warm.

News from Nowhere did reach a much wider audience than the usual socialist propaganda. The socialism it promoted replaced industrialism with a rural vision. It captured the arcadian ideal of the era and gave it a socialist costume. These utopian visions were libertarian compared with others who believed in an overtly paternalist state which was to be the perfect father to the innocent and primitive working class children. The paternalism of Morris was not so crude and so his persuasive and charming vision was perhaps even more insidious. He appealed in the most reasonable way for 'a decent life' in the workshop and home before the provision of the public libraries, museums and picture galleries favoured by municipal socialists like the Webbs. Nonetheless this decent life did not imply working class liberation in any practical sense and he and his fellow socialists were "mapping their own personal desires onto a generalised image of the working class" (Waters, 1990, p.64).
"George Duveau in his Sociogie de l'Utopie, incidentally remarks that there are, with very rare exceptions, no workers' utopias. In fact, if we restrict ourselves to the study of English literature, we are obliged to admit that, from St Thomas More to the most recent writers, utopias have always been a bourgeois phenomenon" (Meier, 1978, p.27).

Whereas Morris gave us a banal goal but no way to get there, what we need is the concrete techniques of liberation without preconceptions about where this will lead. All visions of heaven have been empty and dull. However the process of actively emerging from the confusion of oppression towards a greater clarity and rationality of human relations is exciting, requiring a certain emotional catharsis.

He wanted the working class to 'free themselves from masters and do it themselves' -- but the vision he offered was like a beacon shining in the wrong direction - - like a road sign that has been turned to direct us down a cul-de-sac. It was his vision of and for his own class. It was ultimately the values of his class that he wished the workers would take as their values. He lectured at them and marvelled at their wretched state. But he did not listen to them or really join them in struggle. He suggested diversionary fantasies and not real productive possibilities. Lastly, it is important to distinguish between keeping the bigger picture in view in our individual struggles, and being utopian.

"Though we are in many ways familiar with the thought of the utopias of the nineteenth century, they are nevertheless more foreign to us than those of the more distant past. In spite of the fact these utopian writers were no doubt inspired by the highest motives, one cannot help 'feeling bitter about the nineteenth century', like the old man in News from Nowhere, bitter even about the love these utopian writers lavished on humanity, for they seem like so many over-affectionate and over-anxious mothers who would kill their sons with attention and kindness rather than let them enjoy one moment of freedom" (Beneri, 1950).

Middle Class Liberation?

Morris does, in his correspondence, briefly enter into the middle class position in oppression. "They themselves suffer from the same system....their lives made barren and dull by it" (Thompson, 1955, p.176). But he never forms an organisation to lead middle class people. Ernest Belfort Bax, the philosopher in the League, seemed to be groping for insights into the sham and hypocrisy which was so much part of the middle class Victorian family. He complained how the Victorian citizen could be outraged by damage to property whilst starvation was the natural order of things. Morris simply didn't think any further about critiquing his own class. He took on the easier job of advising others or escaping into fantasy.

Morris hated the work of Aubrey Beardsley, whose work did address middle class decadence and the characteristics of oppressor manners. Until Linda Zatlin's recent
feminist reappraisal the establishment view was that whilst his style is to be admired, the content is deplored.

Beardsley's "protest was not merely an advocacy of sexual education and sexual exploration, but also a disapproval of social hypocrisy and the sexist social conventions which foisted that hypocrisy. ...When Beardsley drew men, he unclothed their lust for power over women. ...When he drew women, he portrayed their intelligence and their sexuality, in bold defiance of Victorian convention." He also exposes "the dependence of most men on money, intellectual coercion and sex for their identity as males and his approbation of a masculinity not contingent on the exploitation of others" (Zatlin, 1990).

He was obsessed with observing the acquisition of wealth, the coercion of aspiring artists to conform and men's power over women and their objectification. It is perhaps not surprising that Beardsley's drawings were criticised as ugly and were at the time perceived as a threat to good taste whilst the work of Morris was about a refinement of good taste.

In 1891 the Morris household at Kelmscott had six servants expected to work very hard for their six to nine pounds per year. We do not hear this from Morris himself, in spite of his voluminous writings and 'class consciousness', but from one who entered service with him about this time, Floss Gumer. It is by such omissions and silences that our image of both Morris and ourselves is distorted.

Health and Emotion

The characteristics of oppressor culture are typified by the stiff upper lip: the control of emotional discharge. With his typical elegant lucidity, Morris found a clever way to put this so it sounded most reasonable.

"So it is a point of honour with us not to be self centred, not to suppose that the world must cease because one man is sorry; therefore we should think it foolish, or if you will, criminal, to exaggerate these matters of sentiment and sensibility ... So we shake off these griefs in a way which perhaps the sentimentalists would think contemptible and unheroic, but which we think necessary and manly" (Meier, 1978, p.216).

"'Manly, unmanly' -- these are words as important in Morris's vocabulary as 'hope'... Man ought to be the master of his emotions, not their victim" (Thompson, 1955, p.205).

But the point is, do we 'master' our emotions by repressing their expression? I would readily agree that it is at times appropriate to regulate their expression, to be in control of when we express emotions, but this is very different from their wholesale repression. Also, although we need to base our actions on our thinking rather than our emotion, this should not imply that the expression of emotion has no place or function.
We find in Thompson's account evidence which suggests that the denial of this aspect of our physicality may have been an important factor in the breakdown in Morris's health.

"In February, 1891, Morris's health collapsed. More than once before attacks of gout had followed hard upon the heels of some disappointment, and it is reasonable to connect this most serious illness of all with the failure of the League and a new turn for the worse of the condition of his daughter, Jenny" (Thompson, 1955, p.671).

"I was thinking ... how I have wasted the many times I have been 'hurt' and (especially of late years) have made no sign, but swallowed down my sorrow and anger, and nothing done! Whereas if I had gone to bed and stayed there for a month or two and declined taking any part in life ... I can't help thinking it might have been very effective. Perhaps you remember that this game was tried by many of the Icelandic heros, and seemingly with great success" (ibid. p.720).

Later as his illness progressed and he became weaker the emotions repeatedly broke through his manly veneer of self-control: "In his weakness, his strong emotional control was relaxed. When 'Georgie' had said something of the life of the poor, he broke into tears" (ibid. p.727). As Ronald Laing, the radical Scottish psychiatrist has said, "The breakdown is the breakthrough", but for Morris perhaps, the tears came too late and soon after, on the 3rd October 1896, he died.

Extras

Report on a 1993 Morris/ Ruskin conference