Reclaiming William Morris

By Nicholas Salmon

HOW Morris became a socialist is rather more complicated than is generally thought. Morris himself only made rare statements about how he became a socialist, spread out in his writings over 16 years. One of the things that finally convinced him was, ironically, John Stuart Mill's attack on Fourier's utopian socialism.

Before that, however, the crucial influence on him was the British social critics, such as Carlyle, Cobbett and Ruskin. They convinced him absolutely that capitalism as a system was wasteful, that it destroyed workers' enjoyment in their work, and that it destroyed artistic creation.

Morris entered politics as a Liberal, with the Eastern Question Association, set up against the Conservative Party's threat to go to war with Russia over the Balkans. He lost his belief in the Liberal Party as a result of their failure to act on this issue. Morris defended the small nationalities that were being attacked by the Turks, the Bulgarians in particular — he supported their right to independence from Turkish oppression — but the British Conservative government supported the Turks because they did not want the Russians to gain influence.

Morris joined the National Liberal League, which was a radical organisation, on the left of the Liberal Party. The failure of the Liberal government elected in 1880 to keep to any of its radical promises disillusioned him. He joined the Radical Union, a group of radical clubs on the very far left of the Liberal Party, but eventually became completely disillusioned with parliamentary politics.

Morris had been lecturing, attending meetings, going with delegations to see Gladstone and other Liberal leaders. He could have been elected a Liberal MP if he had pursued that course. He rejected conventional politics because he realised that parliament was only defending bourgeois interests.

Biography

1834: Born into a wealthy middle-class family.
1861: Founds Morris & Co., the decorating business which accounts for most of his 20th century fame.
1868-70: Publishes "The Earthly Paradise", which makes him, at the time, better-known as a poet.
1876: Becomes Treasurer of the Eastern Question Association, a Liberal-oriented campaign against the threats of the then Conservative government to go to war against Russia.
1883, January: Joins the Democratic Federation, the first socialist group to develop in Britain since the collapse of Chartism in the 1850s. (It renames itself Social Democratic Federation, SDF, in August 1884). Studies Karl Marx's *Capital*.
1884, December: Splits off from the SDF with Eleanor Marx, Edward Aveling, Ernest Belfort Bax, and others, to form the Socialist League.
1885-90: Edits the Socialist League's paper *Commonweal*, and leads its agitation in street meetings and public lectures.
1890, May: Ousted by anarchists as editor of *Commonweal*.
1890, December: Leaves Socialist League, forms Hammersmith Socialist Society.
1893: With Henry Hyndman and George Bernard Shaw, writes *Manifesto of the English Socialists* in an unsuccessful effort to unite the various socialist groups.
1894: Reconciled with SDF.
1896, October: Dies.

The movement Morris joined

THE modern British socialist movement really only began with the Democratic Federation in 1881. And even that, when it began, was not really socialist, but a combination of radical groups. It was only when Hyndman, who had read Marx, took it over, that it moved in a socialist direction. It was only in 1883, after Morris had joined, that it began to pass openly socialist resolutions.

Morris joined the Democratic Federation in January 1883 after he had attended a series of meetings which they held on possible stepping stones to socialism. He was elected treasurer of the Federation in the summer of 1883.

The whole of Morris's life was about enthusiasms. He was never one to sit around and say "let's see how it goes." When he took up dying, he went and got his hands dirty in the vats. He came from a very privileged background, but he became an artisan. He learned what it was to work. Whatever he did, he threw his whole person into it. He was a doer. That distinguished him from Ruskin, Carlyle and Cobbett, and to a certain extent from Marx and Engels, who were more satisfied to present their ideas in a theoretical manner rather than on the streets, at a practical level.

Morris was never going to sit down and theorise in the abstract. I think Hyndman was extremely pleased to "catch" Morris, who was nationally known as an author and designer, for the Democratic Federation. Probably Hyndman thought that Morris would be a figurehead, a name on the letterhead. But once Morris threw himself into something, he was absolutely dedicated. He was going to do everything he could, no holds barred.

Tension between Morris and Hyndman was inevitable. You could not have two such larger-than-life figures in the same organisation. It is also true that Morris was rather better accepted by the working-class members of the Democratic Federation than Hyndman. Many of the early members of the Democratic Federation were artisans rather than ordinary workers, and Morris appealed to them. He did not go around wearing a top hat like Hyndman. He wore blue serge. His hands were dirty from the dying vat.

Morris read Marx's *Capital* in 1883, and, contrary to what some people say, he was greatly influenced. In the Morris centenary exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London is his copy of "Le Capital" — the French edition, because it had not yet been translated into English. Ironically, it has been lent to the museum by John Paul Getty, of all people. Anyone who tells you that Morris did not care about Marx only has to look at the annotations in that book. Morris never claimed to be an economist, but he certainly understood the Marxist theory of surplus value, and explained it in his own writings.

The voice of toil

I heard men saying, Leave hope and praying,
All days shall be as all have been;
To-day and to-morrow bring fear and sorrow,
The never-ending toil between.

When Earth was younger mid toil and hunger,
In hope we strove, and our hands were strong;
Then great men led us, with words they fed us,
And bade us right the earthly wrong.

Go read in story their deeds and glory,
Their names amidst the nameless dead;
Turn them from lying to us slow-dying
In that good world to which they led;

Where fast and faster our iron master,
The thing we made, for ever drives,
Bids us grind treasure and fashion pleasure
For other hopes and other lives.

Where home is a hovel and dull we grovel,
Forgetting that the world is fair;
Where no babe we cherish, lest its very soul perish;
Where mirth is crime, and love a snare.

Who now shall lead us, what god shall heed us
As we lie in the hell our hands have won?
For us are no rulers but fools and befoolers,
The great are fallen, the wise men gone.

I heard men saying, Leave tears and praying,
The sharp knife heedeth not the sheep;
Are we not stronger than the rich and the wronger,
When day breaks over dreams and sleep?

Come, shoulder to shoulder ere the world grows older!
Help lies in nought but thee and me;
Hope is before us, the long years that bore us
Bore leaders more than men may be.

Let dead hearts tarry and trade and marry,
And trembling nurse their dreams of mirth,
While we the living our lives are giving
To bring the bright new world to birth.

Come, shoulder to shoulder ere earth grows older!
The Cause spreads over land and sea;
Now the world shaketh, and fear awaketh
And joy at last for thee and me.

William Morris

For Morris, Marx gave the scientific explanation for something which he had already come to by himself. Morris said that in medieval times the artisan was part of a string of art, right from the bottom to the top. Feudal society, despite all its problems, did have obligations and rights. Though Morris never said that feudal society was an ideal, he did believe that workers were less alienated from their work then. And in the historical sections of *Capital* he would have found Marx showing how human history is always moving on — anyone who believes that there will never be another stage beyond capitalism only needs to look back to feudalism. Feudalism moved on to capitalism, and capitalism will move on to something else.

Anyone who believes that Morris had no idea of historical determinism should read *A Dream of John Ball*. John Ball is a peasant leader, fighting a revolution in which he hopes that the people will win fellowship, but in fact it will lead to a situation where people are in competition with each other under a capitalist state.

What differentiated Morris so radically from his teachers, like Carlyle and Ruskin, who were backward-looking and hostile to democracy? Part of it was his reading of scientific socialism. One of Ruskin's biographers said that Ruskin, Carlyle and Cobbett prescribed, but they never offered any source of action, any way of changing society. They looked at the situation of the working class, but not at how the working class could change that situation. Ruskin's vague attempts to change society were farcical enterprises like the Guild of St George.

Morris realised very early that society would not be changed by such partial schemes. He became very critical of the cooperative movement for precisely that reason. Much as he admired Robert Owen, he believed that Owen was misguided in believing that you could set up ideal communities within the existing structure.

Morris came to reject any "palliatives" within the existing system. The criticism of Ruskin and Carlyle was so powerful that it convinced him that the whole system was corrupt. It was no good trying to fiddle with the system. Their criticism said that capitalist conditions were terrible, and there should be some sort of moral crusade or some of Carlyle's "heroes" to change them. Morris concluded, even before he read Marx, that it was necessary to get rid of the capitalist system.

Morris was interested in handicrafts, primarily, not the fine arts, and he realised that the handicrafts had been created by working people. The working people had been disenfranchised from art. Before 1883 Morris believed that the middle class could redeem themselves. If they stopped buying mass-produced goods and bought artistic goods, if they would demand only beautiful goods, then they could bring about a regeneration. But after reading *Capital* and other socialist books, around 1882-3, Morris always looked to the generation of class consciousness among the working class to change society.

Exactly how Morris came to make the leap to seeing the degraded, beaten-down working class of the 1880s as the force that could remake society is a difficult question. Nobody has really come up with the explanation. E P Thompson in his book *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary* talks about Morris crossing a "river of fire" to the working class.

Reading Marx influenced him, and of course other members of the Democratic Federation may have influenced him too. Hyndman, for example, knew Marx: he had plagiarised some of Marx's theories without acknowledging them, and consequently Marx had fallen out with Hyndman. That was unfortunate, because if the link could have been maintained between Hyndman and Marx it might have done a lot of good for the early socialist movement in the 1880s. In fact, Hyndman became idiosyncratic in his views, to a certain extent, in the 1880s, although he also orchestrated the socialists' unemployment agitation of the mid-1880s which was extremely successful and really frightened the bourgeoisie for a time.

The Irish question was very important for the early Democratic Federation, and it was crucial for Morris too. Ireland got more column space from Morris in *Commonweal*, the socialist paper he edited between 1885 and 1890, than any other issue. Morris believed that a revolution in Ireland would be a great blow to bourgeois rule. It would disrupt the Empire and landlordism. For a time, though he did change his attitude on this, he felt that an Irish revolution had the potential to be a proletarian revolution. He believed that the socialist movement in Britain could take great hope from the way that working people in Ireland were organising themselves in revolt against the capitalist system. Many of his articles warned the Irish to make certain, after Ireland got independence, that they nationalised the land and did not allow the landlords to retain power. He believed that not only should Ireland have its independence, as a matter of course, but also that the revolution could be a proletarian revolution.

On the Jewish question there are perhaps half a dozen examples in Morris's writings of the traditional music-hall anti-

Eleanor Marx

Hammersmith Branch of the Socialist League

semitic stereotypes, usually derived from Dickens. But in that period it is difficult to find anyone who did not use those stereotypes. They were part of the culture. Morris was not anti-semitic. He subscribed to a fund for Jewish refugees. He worked with Jews who were a crucial element in the socialist movement in East London.

The socialist movement in that period was open to debate. In *News from Nowhere* Morris parodies a meeting of the Socialist League. There are six members there, and six points of view, including four different philosophies of anarchism. The early socialist movement in this country was all about arguments and disputes. Often the socialists would be better at arguing against each other than against capitalism.

Splits and Sunday socialism

IN late 1884, the Democratic Federation — which had been renamed Social Democratic Federation, SDF — split. Morris and others formed a new group, the Socialist League. It was a complicated split. Morris wanted to keep the SDF together, but Hyndman took over control of *Justice*, the SDF magazine, and refused to allow the Executive of the SDF to influence what he put into it.

When Morris had first joined the SDF, he still listened to the idea of palliatives or stepping stones. He supported the eight-hour day and railway nationalisation. Gradually, during the course of 1884, he began to have serious doubts about palliatives. They were taking people away from what he called the central issues — organising and educating the workers to take over the means of production.

Even if palliatives were granted, the capitalists would just take something away somewhere else. Palliatives meant just going round and round in circles. If palliatives worked, they would create a middle class, or the *embourgeoisement* of a section of the working class. In a sense, that is what we have at the moment: if you buy enough people off with tax cuts, you can blur the class distinction and get enough people in the middle who will act as a buffer. Morris came to believe that parliament was there for only one purpose: to protect the capitalist system. If a socialist party went into parliament, it would end up defending the system it was there to attack. It would be corrupted by the parliamentary system.

Morris was gradually drifting away from the position Hyndman maintained (though sometimes inconsistently) on using parliament and struggle for palliatives as stepping stones to revolution.

Morris had suspicions of Hyndman personally, too. Engels was in the background, orchestrating the Eleanor Marx/Edward Aveling faction. Engels did not think that the SDF was a Marxist organisation, and he was probably working towards a split.

So gradually some people were siding with Morris, others with Hyndman. Morris tried to keep the two sides together. Letters that have come to light recently show that Morris never intended to leave the SDF, but he seems to have been persuaded in the last few days before the split. A rumour was put round while he was on a speaking tour in Scotland that he did not know anything about Marx and surplus value. It really annoyed Morris that his credibility was being undermined. He stormed back to London. He and his supporters won the vote on the Executive, but then Morris led them out of the SDF, so Hyndman won. He retained the whole organisation of the SDF.

Some people remarked that Morris had won, but he had ended up with all the malcontents. He started off on a bad footing with the Socialist League. He had become the leader of a faction that he did not want to lead. He had no fundamental argument with Hyndman, but he saw the justice of the people who did have an argument with Hyndman, and he sided with them because he saw that Hyndman was not giving way at all.

The split was a catastrophe for both sides. It weakened the SDF. The Socialist League had a certain amount of success in the first couple of years, but never really got going.

The first few issues of the Socialist League's paper, *Commonweal*, were absolutely stunning, with contributions from people like Shaw, Engels, Aveling, Bax... Morris, as editor, had a tremendous standing in the movement.

Morris's own *Notes on News* formed a commentary on each week in politics from a Marxist perspective. He had opinions on everything, from the Channel Tunnel to Jack the Ripper. Many of the issues discussed then are the same as those of today — unemployment, poverty, Ireland, imperialistic wars... Anyone who says that Morris's writing was medieval and archaic should read those columns.

In the 19th century, capitalism was still largely a lot of small firms competing with each other. Morris argued that capitalism would be increasingly dominated by larger and larger businesses competing for larger and larger profits, on a world market. He failed to anticipate technological change. But much of what he wrote is still fresh today. Today we are going back to social conditions that Morris described. All the small gains that have been made are being systematically taken away again. We have more in common with the 19th century now, with the systematic destruction of the Health Service, the underfunding of education, the withdrawal of working-class rights, than we had twenty years ago.

The same bourgeois myths are spread today as were spread a hundred years ago. Yet people believe them! That's why there has to be another attempt, another drive to change people's attitudes!

Morris was a high-profile character who got a lot of good publicity for the socialist movement. The bourgeois press regarded him as a bit of a crank, so they reported his meetings, which was useful propaganda.

Virtually every Sunday he made one or two open-air speeches in the East End of London. In addition, over the seven years he was really active in the movement, from 1883 to 1890, he gave an average of something like one formal lecture a week, and not just in London — in Leeds, Bradford, Sheffield, Dublin, Scotland... He was a very public figure.

Almost single-handed he created the Socialist League branches in many areas by his public speaking. In Norwich, for example, where I come from, the Socialist League branch became one of the most influential in the country. On one visit there Morris spoke to ten thousand people in the market square.

That was during the Free Speech campaign, to establish the right of socialists to speak on the streets. Morris played a big role in that. Whenever a socialist meeting — even an SDF meeting — was broken up by the police, Morris would go the next week to speak in the same place. Because Morris was so well-known, the police probably would not interfere. He was arrested once, but only fined a nominal amount.

One thing we must say for the socialists of that period — Hyndman, Morris, Shaw, all of them — is that the profile that socialism had by the end of the 1880s, compared to what it had at the beginning of the 1880s, showed that they managed to educate people extremely well. Morris said that by the late 1880s you could go into the East End of London and talk to anyone about socialism, and they would know what you were talking about. Every time Morris went into the streets, small boys would shout "Socialist Morris."

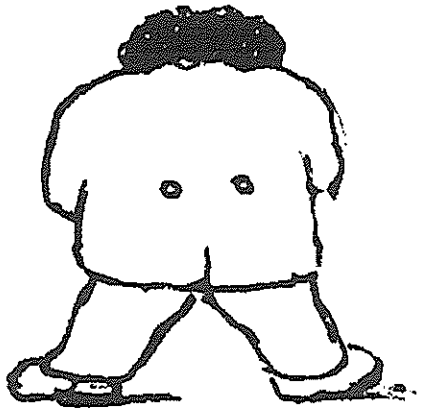
But, as Morris himself said, the job was first to educate the

workers on the need for socialism, and then to organise them to achieve it; and, as far as the Socialist League was concerned, they had not organised the workers to do anything.

The Socialist League supported the SDF's unemployment agitation — which was aimed at "palliatives" as well as arguing for revolution — but in a very lukewarm fashion. Morris thought that Hyndman was using the unemployed agitation to engineer riots — using the working class to promote his political position. Morris said that it was no good having unorganised riots. The people had to be organised so that they knew what they were doing. Socialists had to educate them first.

The manifesto of the Socialist League was drawn up by Morris and Bax. It was an anti-parliamentary manifesto, a very "purist" Marxist manifesto. Aveling and Eleanor Marx drew up another document which they wanted the League to adopt, which involved entering local government and seeking ameliorative reforms. That was rejected at the first annual meeting of the Socialist League in 1885, which immediately alienated Aveling and Marx, with Engels in the background. Right from the very beginning, there was the same division that had been present in the SDF. Bax, too, moved increasingly to a parliamentary view. Morris had to rely on the anarchists' support to maintain the anti-parliamentary approach. Gradually, the others left, Aveling, Marx, and Bax, going back to the SDF. Finally, in 1890, the anarchists took over the Socialist League and pushed Morris out, leaving him with a small group, the Hammersmith Socialist Society.

In 1883-4, Morris believed that he could bring about the revolution in his own lifetime. Around 1886, I think, he came round to the idea that there would not be a revolution in his lifetime. Ironically, it was because of the unemployed agitation of the SDF. The fact that the agitation often degenerated into riots convinced him that there was a long job of education and organisation still to do, and Bloody Sunday, in November 1887, when Trafalgar Square demonstrations were broken up by the police, confirmed him in what he had already decided, partly also, I suppose, because of the organisational problems of the Socialist League. When Morris revised *News from Nowhere*, between 1890 and 1891, he put the date of the future revolution back 50 years.



"Morris the outsider", by his lifelong friend Edward Burne-Jones

Morris always, to the end of his life, believed that there must be a working-class revolution which brings the means of production and distribution into the hands of the working class, and that the capitalist system must be destroyed. But after 1887 his debate became less with the parliamentarists, and more with the anarchists. He did not believe that you could have a society where you could have no social control whatsoever.

If you read the section on "How the Change Came" in *News from Nowhere* (1890), you will see that palliatives do not play a significant role in how he saw the revolution coming about. His views continued to develop after 1890. For one thing, he tried to bring the various fragments of the socialist movement together. The SDF, the Fabians, and the Hammersmith Socialist Society formed a joint committee in 1893 which Morris chaired to try to bring about a united socialist party. It was never going to work, but he, Hyndman and Shaw wrote a *Manifesto of the English Socialists* as a compromise document. Morris was keen to get the newly-formed Independent Labour Party involved, but Hyndman would not countenance it because he did not believe that the ILP was a socialist organisation.

Morris acknowledged in the late 1880s and the 1890s that the New Unionism was proving that the working class could get organised and successfully gain concessions. The Local Government Act of 1888 meant that socialists could get elected in local government. Morris came to accept that this sort of effort for reforms might be an inevitable experiment that would have to be gone through before the workers could go on to revolutionary principles.

Morris always warned against the danger that "the society of inequality might accept quasi-socialist machinery, and work it for the purpose of upholding that society in a somewhat shorn condition", but by 1893 he had shifted quite a bit from his old "purism." He was actively campaigning on behalf of socialist candidates in elections.

Reassessing the unions

MORRIS has often been criticised for his lack of support for the trade unions. But you have to understand that Morris was an older man in the socialist movement of his time. The trade unions that he had seen in the 1860s and 1870s were Liberal organisations of the aristocracy of labour. It took him some time to see that new unions were coming up, led by socialists like Tom Mann, which were organising workers and winning concessions. When he wrote *News from Nowhere* in 1890, the trade unions did not play a part in the story. When he revised the novel in 1891, the trade unions did play a part. He became interested in the idea of the general strike. He learned from the workers — that the workers themselves could organise and be successful. Morris learned from the SDF, too. He was reconciled with it in 1894.

In the Socialist League William Morris became like John the Baptist, speaking in the wilderness. He was telling people: don't vote, don't get involved in elections, don't get involved in cooperatives, don't do this, don't do that. What *do* you do? That was the dilemma of the Socialist League. People want to do something, in immediate activity, when they become socialists.

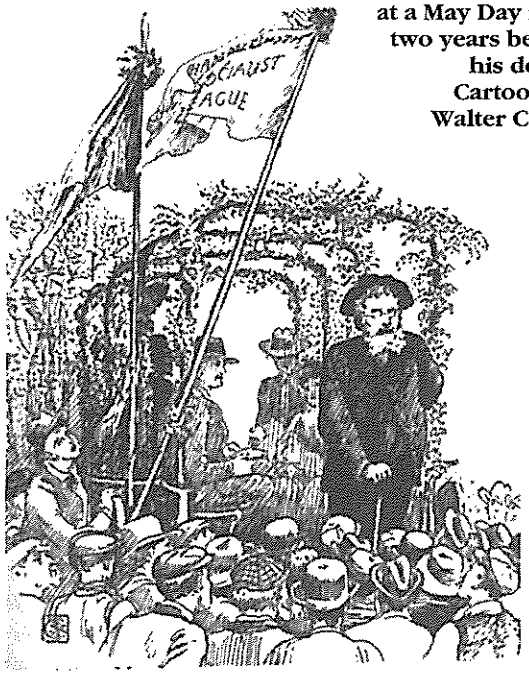
Morris never solved that problem when he was centrally active in the movement. He then realised, in later years of reflection, that he had made a mistake. Trade union agitation had been proved to be successful. It was a way of organising the workers.

The bourgeoisie did not remain static in this period, either. They started to say: "We are all socialists now." They tried to hijack socialist ideas in perverted form, for their own purposes. What could be regarded as progressive pieces of legislation were passed, for example, the laws creating parish councils and then county councils. Perhaps Morris's anti-parliamentarism partly reflected the fact that the suffrage was still very limited. In 1886 Morris commented that he had seven votes himself: he could vote in Merton, where he had his factory, in London, where he had his showroom, in Kelmscott, as a member of Oxford University... and large numbers of workers had no vote.

Morris was not a utopian socialist, but he was always contrasting what society would be like after the revolution with how it was then. He did that for simple educational reasons. Faced with a crowd of workers, he said, you could spout details about surplus value to them, but they would not listen. If you deliberately juxtaposed "how we live and how we might live", then you could encourage a great leap of imagination after the future. Most of his later lectures, after 1887 especially, are on that theme. They are still fresh and relevant today. Nowadays, we do not talk about what is going to happen after the revolution. We're always talking about how it is going to be achieved, whereas Morris was always talking about a vision of the future.

Morris argued that from Marx and scientific socialism you could derive some picture of what would happen in the future. For example, once you get rid of wage-slavery, that releases tremendous resources.

A lot of *News from Nowhere* is based on the medieval vision that Morris always liked, and a lot of it is a bit dodgy. All the people can speak five or six languages, yet you never see anyone being taught anything. What you first see women doing is acting as waitresses and serving in shops, which seems to me to be precisely the sort of thing they do today. Morris did tend to think that



Morris speaking at a May Day rally two years before his death. Cartoon by Walter Crane

women should be womanly and men should be manly. As on the Jewish question, he reflected his times.

Yet a lot in *News from Nowhere* is very modern, too. Despite what is sometimes said, it is not a future without machines. Railways are being replaced by electric-powered barges, for example.

In his later years Morris was isolated. He had lost control of the Socialist League. He ended up as the leader of an inconsequential small socialist grouping, the Hammersmith Socialist Society, which was really more of a debating club than an effective organisation. In 1891, and again in 1893, he was seriously ill.

Robert Blatchford, in the *Clarion*, urged Morris to become one of the leaders of the ILP. If Morris had been a younger man, and he had been fit, he could have become one of the first ILP MPs. His position in the early labour movement would have been entirely different.

In fact, he had very little to do with the ILP. He regarded himself, I think, as on the opposite pole of the socialist movement from the ILP, but he was the person who tried to get the ILP involved in the joint committee in 1893. Maybe, if there had been a socialist labour party set up in 1893, it might have been influenced much more actively by the Marxist tradition than in fact the ILP and the Labour Party were.

A reputation hijacked

ONE thing we will get over and over again in this centenary year is the myth that because Morris had lots of money, he couldn't be a socialist. But you need to have one or two William Morrises with money and spare time to get the movement going. In the 1880s Morris was subsidising the movement with vast sums of money. He became quite hard-up at one point.

The myth that Morris's socialism was only a passing fancy started as early as his obituaries. When he died in 1896, he had been largely out of public socialist activity for five years, because of ill-health and being confined to a small group. Most of the obituaries, apart from those in the socialist press, mentioned his socialism but concentrated on him being a poet, craftsman and designer.

The first biography — apart from one, not very important, by Aylmer Vallance — was by J W Mackail, in 1899. It was a travesty, because Mackail had not known Morris in his socialist period, and he did not know much about socialism either. Morris the socialist came second or third to Morris the artist, designer and poet.

Morris's writings were still printed a great deal in working-class publications. My grandfather was an organiser for the AUCE, forerunner of USDAW, and in that union's paper, *New Dawn*, in the 1910s and '20s, there is quite a lot of Morris — an abridged version of *News from Nowhere*, some of his socialist poems, and so on. But the memory of Morris the socialist had been sidelined into sections of the labour movement, and erased in mainstream culture by Morris the artist and designer.

Then a dreadful thing happened with the *Collected Works*, published in 1910-15. They were edited by William Morris's daughter May, who was sympathetic to her father's socialism, but because of editorial control over her none of Morris's journalism and very few of his socialist writings, lectures and manifestos appeared in the *Collected Works*.

If all of Morris's socialist writings had been included, the *Collected Works* would have been at least half as long again. May Morris tried to rectify the shortcoming in 1936, when she put together two further volumes called *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, one of which was another volume of his socialism. But once you had a *Collected Works* with almost no socialism in it, most writers were going to go no further than that.

Mackail was married to the daughter of Morris's old friend Edward Burne-Jones, who had no sympathy with Morris's socialism whatsoever. And the Burne-Jones family were directly related to Stanley Baldwin, the Tory prime minister. In 1934 Stanley Baldwin opened the exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum to celebrate 100 years since Morris's birth, and neither he nor the exhibition mentioned Morris's socialism at all. In just 38 years, Morris's socialism had been written out of history.

But people on the left began to look at Morris again. Middleton Murry was the first, in 1932, to reassert Morris's Marxism. Robin Page Arnot, a member of the Communist Party, wrote *William Morris, A Vindication*, in 1934.

The next major book was E P Thompson's *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, published in 1955 and revised in 1977. Our view of Morris today is pretty well as Thompson described him. Paul Meier wrote *William Morris: the Marxist Dreamer* (French edition 1972, English 1978), which is a strange book. He tries to create a Marxist orthodoxy and fit Morris into it — to establish that everything that Morris wrote was influenced by having seen documents written by Marx and Engels. Since some of those documents had not been published in English, and some of them had not been published at all, this relies on Morris having seen them at Engels' house or via Engels and Bax, although we only know of Morris meeting Engels four or five times. The approach devalues Morris as a thinker, implying that Morris himself could not possibly have thought through a paper bag and that everything he wrote must have been derived from someone else.

It was only in 1994 that I managed to publish Morris's political writings from *Commonweal*. This year I have brought out the journalism. That doubles what was available in the *Collected Works*. There are still all the lectures to come.

Morris wrote out all his lectures, and on the back of the manuscript there are always notes of the questions people asked and how best to reply. Will genius be destroyed in a socialist society? Will individuality be crushed? You can also see how Morris changed his lectures depending on whether he was speaking to a middle-class or a working-class audience.

Despite what's been published, we will get all the old myths repeated this year. Morris was not a Marxist; Morris was not really a socialist; Morris would have supported the Green Party. He would not have supported anything of the sort! He would have said that you cannot have environmental improvements or conservation within a capitalist system. You have to have a revolution. We have an abominable environment because we have a capitalist system.

It is up to the socialists to rediscover Morris's socialism. We should stop looking at his designs. They are not going to live on. The designs are Victorian. His ideas are not. They are ideas for the 21st century.

Socialism has gone in cycles. There have been periods when it has gone down and periods when it has risen. It will rise again. And it is essential that when it does, Morris is taken seriously. There has been a systematic attempt to demean Morris as a political thinker, and it is about time it was turned round.

● *Nicholas Salmon was talking to Martin Thomas and Sean Matgamna. Nicholas Salmon has edited Morris's* Political Writings *and* Journalism *(Thoemmes Press, 1994 and 1996), and is the next editor of the William Morris Society* Journal.