

Article

INTRODUCTION

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Artist, writer, and socialist, William Morris (1834-1896) helped found a revolutionary organization (the *Socialist League*), wrote its manifesto, edited its newspaper, lectured widely on art and politics, delivered hundreds of political speeches, authored romances, a play, poetry, essays, and newspaper articles, as well as being one of 19th-century Britain's leading artists and a hugely influential innovator in design, decoration, book-making, and other arts. Morris fervently longed for a revolution that would abolish capitalism and lead to communism.

In the 120 years since his death, William Morris's work has been extensively discussed. He continues to fascinate many people. His influence on his contemporaries and on posterity has been considerable in his many fields of endeavour. Yet, the unity of his work has seldom been understood. Most of those who have even heard of him know only one aspect of what he did, such as his wallpapers, his tapestries, or some of his books. Many socialists are familiar with his best-known book, the utopian romance *News from Nowhere*; but it is only one example of a literary output that fills twenty-four volumes of Morris's collected writings.

That Morris's thought and work should still frequently be misconstrued is not only the result of simple ignorance, but also of decades of political and ideological struggle. He was a major English writer and artist of the 19th-century, as well as an important revolutionary thinker and activist. Some on the right tried to recuperate him as a great artist, while ignoring his communism or dismissing it as an 'eccentricity'; on the left, some hailed him as the source of a home-grown, English tradition of revolutionary communism, who also happened to be a great writer and artist. A constant struggle has been waged to this day to eclipse or discredit Morris's revolutionary politics and to strip his artistic work of its political dimensions; but those sympathetic to the latter have often failed to grasp the nature, scope, and import of the interpenetration of art and revolution in his work.

In an effort to stimulate new thinking on the unity of Morris's life's work, and more specifically on the unity of his political, literary, and artistic views and activities, Michelle Weinroth and Paul Leduc Browne convened two gatherings of William Morris

specialists, in 2010 at the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences in Montreal and in 2011 at the University of Ottawa. The outcome of the discussions was a book, *To Build a Shadowy Isle of Bliss: William Morris's Radicalism and the Embodiment of Dreams*, published in 2015 by McGill-Queen's University Press.

To Build a Shadowy Isle of Bliss builds on the work of those who have highlighted the interpenetration of Morris's aesthetics and politics. The book focuses on Morris's radicalism – his revolutionary communist theory and practice, to be sure, his imagining of a world freed of exploitation, waste, environmental destruction – but especially his exploration of new ways of seeing, feeling, thinking, writing, and sharing. William Morris invites us not only to criticize capitalism, but on a deeper level to rethink ourselves, to explore new epistemologies and sensibilities. In discussing William Morris, we can be seen as returning to a half-forgotten figure of the 19th century. However, in many respects, Morris was ahead of us and we have yet to catch up with him.

In order to launch the book and encourage further debate, Paul Leduc Browne organized a round table in Ottawa at the conference of the Society for Socialist Studies in 2015. Those who made presentations at that event were asked to use *To Build a Shadowy Isle of Bliss* as a starting point for a discussion of some theme of interest to the members of the Society for Socialist Studies and to people who study William Morris. After the round table, several people were invited to submit papers along those lines for publication in *Socialist Studies*. The following articles by Jason Camlot, Nicholas Frankel, Colin Mooers, Leo Panitch, Michelle Weinroth and Paul Leduc Browne are contributions to that conversation and to future debates about William Morris. Jason Camlot, Colin Mooers, and Leo Panitch have written short pieces in the format proposed for the round table; Nicholas Frankel, Michelle Weinroth, and Paul Leduc Browne have proposed longer papers.

These three longer papers all address in their respective ways the centrality of work in Morris's theory and practice. Paul Leduc Browne sets the table by revisiting Morris's *News from Nowhere* through the lens of his concept of work, while criticizing the accounts of two recent critics who see Morris through different lenses and associate him with fascism and Stalinism. Nick Frankel argues in his article that design, for Morris (who was one of the pioneers of modern design), “was a moral and political matter, both its production and its consumption intimately if not always clearly related to broader matters of civic and political justice.” Morris's theory and practice of the “ornament” was not only a critique of contemporary forms of alienated labour, but a major vehicle of a revolutionary ethics and epistemology. Michelle Weinroth, for her part, addresses an age-old conundrum in Morris studies. In the last half-dozen years of his life, following a decade of intense involvement in political agitation and organization within the Socialist League (the communist party Morris co-founded), Morris scaled back his agitational activities and built a new enterprise, the Kelmscott Press, which published hand-made

books, each a work of art that soon also became a very expensive luxury item. Michelle Weinroth offers a new interpretation of the Kelmscott Press, arguing that it was not a turn away from revolutionary politics, as many have asserted, but in fact an experiment in a new form of socialist education.

Jason Camlot also addresses the theme of education, showing how we can find in Morris's writings the basis of a critique of neoliberal ideas on higher education. Colin Mooers takes up the theme of work in Morris's thought, showing its connection to Marx's theory of use-value and exchange value, and its importance as a basis for criticism of capitalism and thinking an alternative, along the way highlighting the problematic character of Fredric Jameson's "American Utopia." Finally, Leo Panitch celebrates *News from Nowhere* and raises the question of the "vehicles and agencies" of the transition from capitalism to socialism, expressing disappointment that *To Build a Shadowy Isle of Bliss* does not, in his view, address this question.