

William Morris and
His Work.

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Authentic.

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Writer, inventor, artist, sculptor, translator and politician, a man well schooled in many things, though absolutely perfect in none, a man of high character, of an even temper and of kind disposition; a man with many warm friends and bitter enemies, such was William Morris.

Morris, one of the most important characters of the nineteenth century, is not widely studied although there is no obvious reason for this. It is the purpose of this treatise to take up the most important points in Mr. Morris's life and to show forth his genius in its true light.

William Morris was born at Elm House, Clay Hill, Walthamstow, on the twenty-fourth of March 1834. He was the third child and eldest son of a family of nine. His ancestry did not belong to the aristocratic class of English people but were among the best respected of the middle classes. William's father was a Welshman by birth, but his parents removed from Wales to London while he was quite young. William's mother, Emma Shelton, was a daughter of a rich English land owner. She was well educated, sweet tempered, and in every way fitted to be a mother in the highest sense of the word.

Physically, Morris was very delicate in his early childhood and was confined in doors most of the time. This is one of the reasons for

his learning to read when he was very young. At the age of four years he was deep in the Waverley novels and had acquired the habit of reading swiftly, and remembering well. He also acquired a love for good reading which staid with him throughout life.

His father's commercial undertakings prospered well, and when William was six years old the family moved to Woodford Hall, a beautiful old mansion on the high road between Epping and London. This house was situated in a park of about fifty acres and was very close to one of the large English forests. The land was covered with luxuriant grass and other vegetation and was populated just enough so that it looked neither barren nor crowded.

It was here that William spent the next ten years of his life,

riding around, exploring and studying
 nature or attending a preparatory school
 at Walthamstow. His father died in 1842
 and shortly after this, William was
 sent to attend Marlborough college, at
 that time a young and unsettled insti-
 tution. He is described here as, "a thick-
 set strong-looking boy with a high colour
 and black curly hair, good-natured and
 kind but with a fearful temper." He
 cared little for the school games but
 liked to fish, collect bird's eggs, etc.

Monie staid at Marlborough
 until 1851. He did well in school but
 on account of the poor condition of the
 institution was taken out before he completed
 the course. After leaving Marlborough he
 was given a year's private tutoring and
 in 1853 he was sent to Exeter college at
 Oxford. At the examination in the Hall
 of Exeter, he sat beside the boy who

was destined to be his most intimate and lifelong friend; namely, Sir Edward Burne-Jones.

When Morris entered Oxford he expected that all his childish aspirations would be realized. He was doomed to disappointment however. He soon found out that the instructors were practically worthless and if he wished to learn anything he must do it by his own efforts.

Outside of Burne-Jones he had very few friends at Exeter but at Pembroke he became intimately acquainted with Fulford, Faulker, Crow Price and others with whom he was connected more or less throughout his after life. This party used to congregate in one of their lodging places to read Shakespeare, Keats, Milton, Tennyson and other great works, both for the pleasure and for the intellectual.

benefit. They also read history and science, discussed religion and politics, and played whist and singletick, in all of which Morris excelled.

It was at this time that Morris began the study of art as well as literature, and in the long vacation of 1854 he visited the continent on a sight-seeing expedition. He studied the works of Van Eyck and Memling and ever afterwards considered them unapproached masters of the art of painting. He also visited the churches of Amiens, Beauvais, and Chartres, which he considered the greatest works of human skill in architecture.

In the college year of 1855 Morris did his first real writing. He wrote several short poems and also some prose. His works at this time had no great amount of merit, but acted as a stimulus to him to do

something better.

In the summer term of 1855 the "Brotherhood," as they now called themselves, came back to Oxford filled with new ideas and bubbling over with enthusiasm. After due deliberation they finally decided to found a first class magazine and furnish all the matter themselves. This magazine was to be called the "Oxford and Cambridge Monthly," and was to be filled mostly with poetry and art. Several really creditable numbers of this magazine came out in 1856. It did not take well, however, and soon had to be given up.

It was about this time while on a tour in the northern part of France that Morris and Burne-Jones decided to drop their literary work and become artists; Jones to be a painter and Morris an architect. On this account they decided to close up their affairs at Oxford as quickly as possible.

This they did the next term. Burne-Jones then went to London to take painting lessons, while Morris took up the study of architecture at Oxford. Morris plunged into his new calling with his usual ardor and thoroughness and learned very rapidly. He also did some work in clay modelling, wood and stone carving, and illuminating.

But at this time another great factor entered in, which changed the whole trend of Morris's life. At the end of each week he went up to London and spent Sunday with Burne-Jones. Jones at this time was studying art under Rossetti who was an artist of the highest class. Morris soon became well acquainted with Rossetti for whom he had a great respect. Rossetti then began to use his influence to get Morris to give up architecture and study painting. Morris finally consented

and moved to London to take up his work. Thus began his career as a painter.

The giving up of architecture was not considered by Morris to be a light matter. He was anxious and ill-humored for some time afterwards. But under the direct influence of Rossetti he finally became contented and took up the work with as much zeal as he had taken up architecture.

After Morris gave up architecture he and Burne-Jones had to change lodging places so that they could have more room. They found vacant a room known as "Red Lion Square" and decided to rent it. As they could find no furniture to suit them, they decided to make their own. From this came the beginning of Morris's work as a decorator and manufacturer and also the Morris chair so familiar to us all. He and Jones designed and decorated their own furniture.

and did their own upholstery work.

Shortly after Morris and Jones had become settled in Red Lion Square the authorities at Oxford decided to have the inside of the University museum painted in the new Gothic styles. The Pre-Raphaelites, Rossetti, Morris, Jones, and others were fired with the idea of doing this work and offered their services immediately. The conditions which they made and which were accepted were that the authorities should furnish the material and the artists would do the work free of charge.

The taking up of the work however, under such conditions could not possibly be successful. There were many beautiful paintings made, Morris's among them, but the work was never finished. This was due entirely to ill-management on the part of Rossetti and the Oxford authorities.

Along with his painting Morris kept writing some, and in 1858 his first book of poems came out. It consisted

of the "Defense of Guenevere," "King Arthur's Tomb," and other poems. This book of poems ranks high in English literature and has been widely read by the English people.

Morris was now thirty-six years old, a strong, robust, fine-looking man but with a temper that often times became uncontrollable. He hated society and would put up most any kind of an excuse to keep from attending social functions of any sort.

It was at this time that he moved to the Manor House at Kelmscott, a beautiful place, where he spent twenty-five of the most useful years of his life. The house is situated on the Upper Thames about thirty miles by water from Oxford. The situation and make-up of the house and other buildings, the surrounding country, the garden, the orchard, and the water ways just suited Morris's fancy and he came to love the place very deeply.

In 1871 Morris decided that he needed a rest. So he, Faulkner, and two others decided to take a trip to Iceland a country that he had read a great deal about. The three months that they were there they spent mostly in travelling through the country on horse-back. They visited all the points of historical and mythological interest and became well acquainted with the people and their language. This trip was of great value to Morris as is shown in his later work.

It was shortly after his return from Iceland that the firm of Morris & Co. dissolved. Morris had furnished most of the capital for the firm, but Rossetti and some of the others insisted on having a certain per cent of the profits. This caused much hard feeling especially between Morris and Rossetti who were never on friendly terms afterwards.

Between the years 1871 and 1874 Morris did some very beautiful illuminating work. The "Book of Verses" is

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especially fine, containing fifty-one pages.

The years 1875 and 1876 are known in Morris's life as the period of dyeing. In account of his inability to get any dyeing well done he decided to take up the work himself. He became interested in the work and, as was characteristic of him, worked at it heart and soul for two years, sending to France for a professional dyer and setting up a shop for himself. His success in this line was varied.

The architects at this time seemed to have a mania for destroying or changing the ancient buildings. This angered Morris and the other great artists so they formed The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings which society still exists. Carlyle was an active member of this society which really accomplished a great deal in saving the ancient relics.

Another public organization

which Morris became interested in and for which he spent much time and money was the Eastern Question Association. It was shortly after the Russo-Turkish War and it looked as if the aristocratic class of England were going to declare war on Russia. This was the action that Morris was fighting and it was for this purpose that the Eastern Question Association was formed. England did not declare war due partially at least to Morris's efforts. At the end of this campaign Morris had such a severe attack of gout that he was forced to go with his family to Italy to spend the season. He never recovered his full strength again.

By the year 1880 Morris's business had increased to such an extent that he decided the quarters in London to be too small and he began to look about for a new

location. He finally found a suitable one at Merton Abbey on the outskirts of London. Here there was good air and water the last of which was very necessary to his business because in his dyeing poor water would spoil the work.

After he had become well settled there he sent out a catalogue which advertised the following goods: Painted Glass Windows, Arras Tapestry woven in the high-warp loom, Carpets, Embroidery, Tiles, Furniture, General house decorations, Painted cotton goods, Paper hangings, Figured woven stuffs, Furniture velvets and cloths, and Upholstery. It is quite evident that his manufacturing establishment was large and varied but that all work done was in the art line. He was general supervisor of the whole concern and did a tremendous amount of work designing and painting.

He was very careful that

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there should be no faulty work sent out. He threw anything that was the least bit wrong away, and thus lost nearly all the profit. But Morris worked more for the love of art than to make money.

He was very good to all his workmen and had but little trouble with them, probably because at this time he began to take up the Socialistic theory of life and wished to practice it as far as possible.

We now come to one of the most important periods of Morris's life, namely, his Socialistic career. He had carefully and exhaustively studied the theory of Socialism and finally decided that it was the only thing that would do away with class distinctions and thus make the world better.

Consequently in 1883, he joined the Democratic Federation, a Socialist organization and for the remainder of his

life he belonged either to this or another similar organization. The next five or six years of his life were spent chiefly in building up this organization. He was the heart of the whole thing. He lectured in nearly all parts of Great Britain, wrote many articles for the "Commonweal," a Socialistic organ, and also furnished a large per cent of the funds necessary to keep it together.

"Revolution by means of Education," was his watchword and he hoped for, but didn't expect to live to see, the time when there would be no classes in society but all men would be equal; when the employed would be on equal footing with the employer.

The Socialists did not gain much headway but it was through no fault of Morris. As was his wont, he put all his energies into the

work, and went right into the dirtiest slums, lecturing to the laboring classes and trying to explain to them the laws by which society should be ruled. He never tried to incite anyone to violence however. He believed that society could be revolutionized peacefully and this was the end for which he worked.

In 1885 and '86 while he was having a short breathing spell from his Socialistic work, Morris took up a new occupation; namely, translating Homer's *Odyssey*. His translation is literal in the highest sense of the word, but it is not widely used because in his attempt to make a truly literal translation he has necessarily robbed the work of much of its poetical beauty. It is probably the most exact translation that has ever been made of the "*Odyssey*."

From about 1890 until his death Morris spent most of his time and energy on the Keluscott Press. He became interested in printing and found that the kind of type used and the way in which it was set up made a great deal of difference in the appearance of the printed page. So he decided to invent some new fonts of type and do his own printing. This he did and in 1892 he had three printing presses in full operation, and from then he not only printed his own works but also made scores of reprints.

After he had gotten his printing establishment in order he commenced to write Romance again, this time in prose, and some of his best works came out at this time. Among

them are: "The Dream of John Ball," "Guns
from Nowhere," "The House of the Wolfings,"
and "The Roots of the Mountains."

Among the reproductions which were
illustrated by Burne-Jones and Morris,
and gotten out by the Kelmscott press,
the one which is the most deserving
of mention is the "Kelmscott Chaucer."

It took a year and nine months of
actual work to print this volume. When
completed it contained eighty-seven
illustrations by Burne-Jones, a full-page
wood-cut title, fourteen large borders,
eighteen borders or frames for the pictures,
and twenty-six large initial words.

All of these besides the ornamental initial
letters large and small were designed by
Morris himself, also a white pigskin
binding with silver clasps. This work
illustrated the Pilgrims as they looked when
they left London to visit the tomb of
Thomas A. Becket. It is one of the

greatest of modern works.

This was Morris's last finished work. He was now sixty-three years old and the tremendous amount of work he had done began to tell on his health. Nervous prostration set in, he was unable to rest peacefully, and he began to fail. His physician advised him to Norway in 1897 but this trip did him more harm than good as, soon after his return congestion of the lungs set in.

It became apparent to all that the end was near and everything in human power was done to make his last days peaceful and painless. Morris did not fear death but wished that he might live longer in order that he might accomplish more. He grew weaker day by day during the summer and early fall and on the morning of Saturday, the third of October, 1897, between the hours of eleven and twelve he died.

peacefully and without pain.

His burial which took place in the Kensal Green Churchyard October sixth, was very simple. Despite a cold and stormy day many of the laborers from London and the surrounding country followed the coffin from Seclade station to the churchyard. Rev. W. F. Adams, one of Morris's schoolfellows at Marlborough read a short impressive service, the body was lowered into the ground, and William Morris, one of the greatest Englishmen of the nineteenth century, passed forever from the sight of his friends.

Although Morris's life was not chiefly a literary one, his work in this line ranks near the top, His prose is good but is easily outclassed by his poetry which is known as the "Poetry of Exile." Morris's poetry was considered of such a high class that after Tennyson's death in 1892 he was

practically offered the position of Poet Laureate. But knowing that the Poet Laureate was supposed to write odes and ceremonial poems, both of which he detested, he declined the offer.

Although Morris's vocabulary was not extraordinarily large, his words are usually well chosen, forcible, and to the point. Some of his descriptions are especially fine in this respect. For instance in the play, "Sir Peter Warpdon's End," where Lady Alice is lamenting over Sir Peter she says: "

"I cannot bear the noise and light
 street out there, with this thought
 alive,
 Like any curling snake within my
 brain;"

Continuing on the same thought she says:

"It goes slow, comes slow, like a big mill-wheel
 in some broad stream, with long green weeds
 a-way,
 and soft and low it rises and it falls,
 still going onward"

In a few simple words he makes us see her worrying and we can easily feel the thought that haunts her brain. The figure of speech in the first couplet is especially forceful.

Time will not allow us to give any more examples but they are found in all his works. Clear, distinct, descriptions, brilliant well-chosen figures of speech, and clean-cut easily understood sentences. His subjects were always of the best and covered a wide range. He has written on Greek and Icelandic mythology as well as on modern subjects. As a literary man he certainly ranks with the first.

Among Englishmen, Morris is considered great as a writer, great as an artist, but as a worker for humanity he is considered the greatest. Although a member of the upper class of society his sympathies were entirely with the laboring men and it is said

that he gave his life trying to change the conditions of society so that the lower classes might be bettered.

For nearly ten years Morris travelled from one city to another, lecturing and arguing with the people. He went into the dirtiest slums of London and helped the people to awaken and assert their rights. No task that would help the poor was too great for him to undertake. Many claim that his work was in vain because the Socialist party which he founded came to naught. His work was not in vain. His influence was indirectly the cause of the Trades Unions of today which are of great benefit to the working man. It was through the efforts of Morris and his small body of followers that the people not only of England but of the whole

civilized world were made to look into the existing conditions of society and to take steps for the improvement of the same, and in years to come when the working men realize what Maria has really done for them she will be looked upon as one of the greatest men in history.