

William Morris

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William Morris, socialist and innovator in the Arts and Crafts movement

William Morris (March 24, 1834 – October 3,

1896) was an English artist, writer, socialist and activist. He was one of the principal founders of the British arts and crafts movement, best known as a designer of wallpaper and patterned fabrics, a writer of poetry and fiction and a pioneer of the socialist movement in Britain.

His family was wealthy, and he went to school at Marlborough College, but left in 1851 after a student rebellion there. He then went to Exeter College, Oxford after studying for his matriculation to the university. He became influenced by John Ruskin there, and met his life-long friends and collaborators, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones, Ford Madox Brown and Philip Webb there as well. He also met his wife, Jane Burden, a working-class woman whose pale skin, figure, and wavy, abundant dark hair were considered by Morris and his friends the epitome of beauty.

These friends formed an artistic movement, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. They eschewed the tawdry industrial manufacture of decorative arts and architecture and favoured a return to hand-craftsmanship, raising artisans to the status of artists. He espoused the philosophy that art should be affordable, hand-made, and that there should be

no hierarchy of artistic mediums.

Morris had two daughters, Jane (called Jenny) and Mary (called May).

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Business career

Morris left Oxford
to join an
architecture firm, but soon
found himself drawn more and

more to the decorative arts. He and Webb built Red House at Bexleyheath in Kent, Morris's wedding gift to Jane. It was here his design ideas began to take physical shape. (In honour of his connection with Bexleyheath, a bust of Morris was added to an original niche in the brick clock tower in the town centre in 1996.) He also built Standen House in Sussex along with Webb.



David's Charge to Solomon (1882), a stained-glass window by Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris in Trinity Church, Boston, Massachusetts.

In 1861, he founded the firm of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. with Gabriel Rossetti, Burne-Jones, Ford Madox Brown and Philip Webb. In 1874 Rossetti and Ford Madox Brown decided to leave the firm, requiring a return on their shares which proved to be a costly business. Throughout his life, he continued to work in his own firm,

although the firm changed names. Its most famous incarnation was as Morris and Company. The company encouraged the revival of traditional crafts such as stained glass painting, and Morris himself single-handedly recreated the art of tapestry weaving in Britain. His designs are still sold today under licences given to Sanderson and Sons and Liberty of London.



Morris' painting *Queen Guinevere*

Poetry

Morris had already begun publishing poetry and short stories through a magazine founded with his friends while at university. His first independently published work, *The Defence of Guenevere* was coolly received by the critics, and he was

discouraged from publishing more for a number of years. He had also made a painting of King Arthur's Queen Consort. However, "The Haystack in the Floods", probably these days his best-known poem, dates from just after this time. It is a grimly realistic piece set during the Hundred Years War in which the doomed lovers Jehane and Robert have a last parting in a convincingly portrayed rain-swept countryside.

When he returned to poetry it was with *The Earthly Paradise*, a huge collection of poems loosely bound together with the theme of a group of medieval wanderers who set out to search for a land of everlasting life and after much disillusion discover a surviving colony of Greeks with whom they exchange stories. The collection brought him almost immediate fame and popularity.

The last-written stories in the collection are retellings of Icelandic sagas, and from then until his Socialist period Morris's fascination with the ancient Germanic and Norse peoples dominated his writing. Together with his Icelandic friend Eiríkr Magnússon he was the first to translate many of the Icelandic sagas into English, and his own epic retelling of the story of Sigurd the Volsung was his favourite among his poems.

Due to his wide poetic acclaim, Morris was offered the Poet Laureateship, after the death of Tennyson in 1892, but declined.

Architecture

Although Morris never became a practising architect, his interest in architecture continued throughout his life. In 1877, he founded the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. His preservation work resulted indirectly in the founding of the National Trust. Combined with the inspiration of John Ruskin — in particular his essay "The Nature of Gothic" from the second volume of *The Stones of Venice* — architecture played an important symbolic part in Morris's approach to socialism.

Fantasy novels

In the last nine
years of his life,

Morris wrote a series of fantasy novels later to be a strong influence on J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. In many respects, Morris was an important milestone in the history of fantasy, because, while

other writers wrote of foreign lands, or of dream worlds, Morris' works were the first to be set in an entirely invented world: a fantasy world.^[1]

These were attempts to revive the genre of medieval romance, and not wholly successful, partly because he eschewed many literary techniques from later eras.^[2] In particular, the plots of the novels are heavily driven by coincidence; while many things just happened in the romances, the novels are still weakened by the dependence on it.^[3] Nevertheless, large subgenres of the field of fantasy have sprung from the romance genre, but indirectly, through their writers' imitation of William Morris.^[4]



Covers of *The Well at the World's End*, vols. 1-2, Ballantine Books.

Socialism

Morris and his daughter May were amongst

Britain's first socialists, working directly with Eleanor Marx and Engels to begin the socialist movement. In 1883, he joined the Social Democratic Federation, and in 1884 he organised the breakaway Socialist League. Morris found himself rather awkwardly positioned as a mediator between the Marxist and anarchist sides of the socialist movement, and bickering between the two sides eventually tore the Socialist League apart. This side of Morris's work is well-discussed in the biography (subtitled "Romantic to Revolutionary") by E. P. Thompson. It was during this period that Morris wrote his best-known prose works, in particular *A Dream of John Ball* and the utopian *News from Nowhere*.

Morris and Rossetti rented a country house, Kelmscott Manor at Kelmscott, Oxfordshire, as a summer retreat, but it soon became a retreat for Rossetti and Jane Morris to have a long-lasting affair. After his departure from the Socialist League, Morris divided his time between the Company, then relocated to Merton Abbey,^[5] Kelmscott House in Hammersmith, the Kelmscott Press, and Kelmscott Manor. At his death in 1896 he was interred in the Kelmscott village churchyard.

The Kelmscott Press

In January 1891,
Morris founded the
Kelmscott Press at
Hammersmith,
London, in order to
produce examples
of improved
printing and book
design. The books
were designed to

make reference to the methods and techniques he
used, what he saw as traditional methods of
printing and craftsmanship, in line with the Arts
and Crafts movement as a whole, and in response
to the prevalence of lithography, particularly those
lithographic prints designed to look like woodcut
prints. He designed clear typefaces, such as his
Roman 'golden' type, which was inspired by that of
the early Venetian printer Nicolaus Jenson, and
medievalizing decorative borders for books that
drew their inspiration from the incunabula of the



William Morris, publisher

15th century and their woodcut illustrations. Selection of paper and ink, and concerns for the overall integration of type and decorations on the page made the Kelmscott Press the most famous of the private presses of the Arts and Crafts movement. It operated until 1898, producing 53 works, comprising 69 volumes, and inspired other private presses, notably the Doves Press.

Among book lovers, the Kelmscott Press edition of *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, illustrated by Burne-Jones, is considered one of the most beautiful books ever produced. A fine edition facsimile of the Kelmscott *Chaucer* was published in 2002 by The Folio Society.

Morris today



"Vision of the Holy Grail" (1890)

The Morris Societies in Britain, the US, and Canada are active in preserving Morris's work and ideas.

The influence of William Morris lives on in modern interiors and architecture. Companies such as Harvest House and Stickley Furniture continue to sell Arts and Crafts-style pieces.

In April 2007, *The Guardian* newspaper reported that funding for the William Morris Gallery in Walthamstow was threatened by cost cutting by the London borough of Waltham Forest. A campaign to avoid the reduction in opening times and dismissal of key staff is underway.^[6]

Literary works

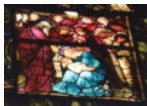
- *The Defence of Guinevere, and other Poems* (1858)
- *The Life and Death of Jason* (1867)
- *The Earthly Paradise* (1868–1870)
- *Love is Enough, or The Freeing of Pharamond: A Morality* (1872)
- *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Nibelungs* (1877)
- *Hopes and Fears For Art* (1882)
- *A Dream of John Ball* (1888)

- *The House of the Wolfings* (1889)
- *The Roots of the Mountains* (1890)
- *News from Nowhere* (1890)
- *The Story of the Glittering Plain* (1891)
- *The Wood Beyond the World* (1894)
- *Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair* (1895)
- *The Well at the World's End* (1896)
- *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* (1897)
- *The Sundering Flood* (1897) (published posthumously)

Gallery



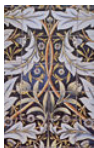
Edward Burne-Jones-designed and Morris & Co.-executed Nativity windows (1882), Trinity Church,



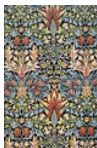
Edward Burne-Jones-designed and Morris & Co.-executed *The Worship of the Shepherds* window

Boston.

(1882), Trinity Church,
Boston.



Panel of ceramic tiles
designed by Morris
and produced by
William De Morgan,
1876



Snakeshead printed
textile, 1876



Kennet printed textile,
1883



Detail of *Woodpecker*
tapestry, 1885

Notes

- Morris also translated large numbers of medieval and classical works, including collections of Icelandic sagas such as *Three Northern Love Stories* (1875), Virgil's *Aeneid* (1875), and Homer's *Odyssey* (1887).
- Morris's book, *The Wood Beyond the World*, is considered to have heavily influenced C. S. Lewis' Narnia series, while J. R. R. Tolkien was inspired by Morris's reconstructions of early Germanic life in *The House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the*

Mountains.

- Editor and fantasy scholar Lin Carter credits Morris with originating the imaginary-world fantasy with *The Well at the World's End* and his subsequent fantasy novels. These contain no reference to this world; they are set neither in the past nor in the future (as is *News from Nowhere*), and not on another planet.
- There is a fountain located in Bexleyheath town centre in London named the Morris Fountain, created in his honour and unveiled on the anniversary of his birth.
- Morris designed the ceiling within the dining room of Charleville Forest Castle.

References

1. ^ Lin Carter, ed. *Kingdoms of Sorcery*, p 39
Doubleday and Company Garden City, NY, 1976
2. ^ L. Sprague de Camp, *Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers: The Makers of Heroic Fantasy*, p 46
ISBN 0-87054-076-9
3. ^ L. Sprague de Camp, *Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers: The Makers of Heroic Fantasy*, p 40
ISBN 0-87054-076-9
4. ^ L. Sprague de Camp, *Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers: The Makers of Heroic Fantasy*, p 26
ISBN 0-87054-076-9
5. ^ William Morris Society: Merton Abbey

6. ^ News from Waltham Forest

See also

- Arts and Crafts movement
- Eco-socialism
- Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood
- Victorian decorative arts
- Social Democratic Federation
- Socialism
- Socialist League

External links

- Project Gutenberg e-texts of works by William Morris
- The Online Books Page e-texts of works by William Morris
- *William Morris and his Circle*
- *William Morris Stained Glass*
- The William Morris Gallery (London Borough of Waltham Forest)
- The William Morris Internet Archive (marxists.org)
- The William Morris Society
- William Morris Tiles and Textiles
- Works by William Morris at Project Gutenberg

- William Morris Exhibition
- "Rapunzel" by William Morris
- Campaign to save The William Morris Gallery
- A Morris and De Morgan tile panel at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London

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