

DEATH OF WILLIAM MORRIS

The burial of Morris's Socialism. *In extenso* from the *Times*.

05- The death of Mr. William Morris, which, we
 regret to say, took place shortly after 11 o'clock
 on Saturday morning at Kelmscott House,
 Hammersmith, after a long illness, removes
 10- from the world a man whom we do not hesitate
 to call a great artist. A poet, and one of our half
 dozen best poets, even when Tennyson and
 Browning were alive; an artist whose influence
 is visible almost everywhere; a craftsman who
 15- devoted himself, in a commercial age, to the
 union of arts and crafts, it may be said of him,
 with little or no exaggeration, that he adorned
 all that he touched. And, if another famous
 epitaph may be allowed to suggest itself, we
 20- should say that, while his best work — a poem
 of his own, a volume from the Kelmscott Press
 — is often present on our bookshelves, most of
 us find something in the nature of a monument
 to Mr. Morris in the better taste of our domestic
 25- surroundings. It is seldom, indeed, that an
 Englishman is an artist of this type. True, Mr.
 Morris was neither a painter nor a sculptor. He
 studied painting for a time, but preferred to
 give his energies to the more practical arts with
 30- which his name has been so long associated,
 and to the poems some of which, we do not
 doubt, will live long after him. No one who has
 witnessed the Arts and Crafts Exhibitions,
 which he helped to promote — and which are
 35- renewed this year in an exhibition opened for a
 private view on the day of his death — will deny
 that he possessed and effectively used a
 remarkable diversity of gifts. To these he added
 a strenuous and outspoken English nature,
 40- such as rarely combines with the typical
 artistic temperament.

Of Mr. Morris's poems, important as they
 are, we need not speak at any length. They
 have been before the world for a long time, and
 45- the world at once made up its mind that their
 author, if not a poet of the first rank, was an
 earnest and sweet singer, who did not fritter
 away his genius on fugitive pieces and
 newspaper lyrics, but had enough industry and
 50- ambition for large subjects. The "Earthly
 Paradise," a series of 24 romances told by
 travellers who take their way, not to
 Canterbury, but towards an imaginary Utopia
 in the West, is probably Mr. Morris's best
 55- known work. It had been preceded in 1858 by
 the "Defence of Guenevere, and other poems,"
 and in 1867 by the "Life and Death of Jason," a
 great poem in more senses than one, in 17
 books. The "Earthly Paradise" was the work of
 60- the years 1868-70; or perhaps it would be more
 correct to say that those were the years in
 which its various parts were published. Then
 came "Love is Enough; or, the Freeing of
 Pharamond — a Morality," in 1873, and this
 was followed a few years later by translations
 in verse — and often in poetry — of the *Æneid*
 and the *Odissey*, and "Poems by the Way," in
 1892. Surely no poet can have worked harder,
 or, considering the extent of his work, with

65- greater success. Nor should his prose romances
 be forgotten, "A Dream of John Bull" [*sic*]
 (1888), "News from Nowhere" (1891), and
 others. The latest of them "The Well at the
 70- World's End," was only issued just before his
 death.¹ Besides these were "The Story of Grettir
 the Strong" and "The Story of the Volsungs and
 the Niblungs," translations from the ancient
 75- Icelandic Sagas undertaken in collaboration
 with Mr. Eiríkr Magnússon, and a translation,
 in 1895, of the famous Anglo-Saxon epic of
 Beowulf. Criticism, especially of well-known
 work, is out of place in an obituary notice. As
 regards these translations, we may adhere to
 80- what we said of them at the time — that their
 English is "a marvel in these days of novel and
 newspaper." But this is true also of all that
 Morris wrote or did. He never omitted to be
 thorough — never forgot that he was a
 85- craftsman as well as an artist. His English,
 indeed, was always singularly pure, and made
 up in simplicity what it may have lacked in
 vigour. If his verse, with its weak rhymes, is
 sometimes a little cloying, a little hyper-Lyidian
 90- — though this is never the fault of his Virgil —
 his descriptions are often so vivid that one
 hardly knows where the real ends and the ideal
 begins. The following seven lines, taken nearly
 at random from the "Earthly Paradise," will
 95- serve as an example: —
 Dusky and dim, though rich with gems and
 gold,
 The house of Venus was; high in the dome
 The burning sunlight you might now
 100- behold,
 From nowhere else the light of day might
 come
 To curse the Shame-faced Mother's lovely
 home;
 105- A long way off the shrine the fresh sea-
 breeze,
 Now just arising, brushed the myrtle-trees.

William Morris's birthplace was neither a
 library nor a studio. He was born in 1834, at
 110- Walthamstow, of that commercial class whose
 characteristics he so little admired in after life.
 His father, a substantial merchant, died in 1844,
 leaving, we believe, a considerable property.
 Young Morris was educated first at Forest
 School, Walthamstow, and then at the recently
 115- founded Marlborough College, whence he passed
 to Exeter College, Oxford. It was in the early
 days of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, to whom
 Oxford furnished a congenial home. Given the
 Pre-Raphaelite movement on the one hand, and
 120- a residence at Oxford on the other, it is easy to
 understand the forces that influenced an
 artistic undergraduate in those days. For a long
 time after 1856, the year of his degree, he and
 his friends, Rossetti among them, left behind
 125- them a material memento of their Oxford life in
 the shape of the eight or ten frescoes of
 Arthurian subjects, since hopelessly ruined and
 at last removed, that used to decorate the

1. It was part of the listing of new books in *The Times* published on the day of Morris's death. F.P.

130 debating-room of the Union. More lately, unless
we are mistaken, some of Mr. Morris's hand-
work has adorned the chapel of his old college,
of which he was elected honorary Fellow, with
135 Sir E. Burne-Jones, in 1882. It was in 1863
that he established, with partners in the under-
taking, the factory for the production of artistic
glass, tiles, wall-paper, and the like, for which his
name has long been famous; and it was in con-
140 sequence of this unusual combination of manu-
facture and literature that he seemed to have a
sort of dual existence in the eyes of the public.
His poems were "by Morris, the wall-paper
maker," his wall-papers "by Morris, the poet."

145 We have referred to his poems as his best
work, and might justify the epithet on the
ground that they are *cære perennius*, while the
concrete productions of his factory must needs
perish in process of time, or be debased by the
imitations of inferior art. But we do not know
150 that Morris himself would have taken this view
of the fruits of his life. One cannot read his
poems without feeling that their easy music,
not hammered out, but flowing free, must have
been a source of pleasure to the writer; yet his
sense of beauty and his energy perhaps found a
155 still keener gratification in the material things
produced by his hand and under his direction.
Enlarging on whatever Mr. Ruskin has said of
the nobility of honest work, and utterly
despising the notion that an artist should plan
160 and design, but save in the finest of fine art,
not execute, Morris held not only that executive
handicraft was within the province of an artist,
but that all crafts demanded artistic treatment.
This principle he preached and practised with a
165 good deal of enthusiasm, we wish we could add
with an equal degree of success. It was of "us
handicraftsmen" that he spoke to the Trades'
Guilds; and it was as a "common fellow" that he
addressed a gathering of Birmingham artists
170 and workmen. His cardinal principle was "Art
made by the people, and for the people, as a joy
to the maker and the user." "I do not want art
for a few any more than education for a few, or
freedom for a few." "You," he said, "you whose
175 hands make those things that should be works
of art, you must be all artists, and good artists
too, before the public at large can take real
interest in such things; and when you have
become so, I promise you that you shall lead
180 the fashion; fashion shall follow your hands
obediently enough." That, he went on to say, is
better than "working helplessly among the
crowd of those who are ridiculously called
185 manufacturers, that is, handicraftsmen, though
the more part of them never did a stroke of
hand-work in their lives, and are nothing better
than capitalists and salesmen." It was the
gospel of handiwork, its aims, methods, and
190 rewards; taught, indeed, by a fellow-workman,
but by one whom fortune permitted to exhort
and to lead. There can be no doubt of the
hopefulness with which Morris taught and

195 followed his opinions. If they led him, as they
have led other generous men before him,
towards Socialism, the world can afford to
judge him indulgently, as not apprehending
much danger from his rhetoric. We do not
desire to enlarge on the unpractical extremes to
200 which his industrial and political opinions
tended; they are only the result of a warm heart
and a mistaken enthusiasm; they indicate, not
the strength of the man, but his weakness, and
are as nothing compared with the lasting work
of his better genius. It is to be feared that his
205 ideals and aspirations for art will never
approach realization. Here and there his
example will continue to animate individuals;
but no human power, even if the economic
relations between consumers and producers,
210 between users and makers, could change at his
bidding, would give the mass of our workers a
love or a knowledge of art. Our national nature,
and the inevitable laws of economy, will not
yield to persuasion, or promises, or dreams.
215 Until they do so, only those who are willing to
cry in the wilderness will prophesy the artistic
millennium.

220 It must be allowed, however, that Morris's
actual work was far more practical than his
doctrine. The factory that he established more
than 30 years ago in conjunction with such
artists and kindred spirits as D.G. Rossetti, E.
Burne-Jones, and Ford Madox Brown, was at
225 first an experiment, but soon became a com-
mercial success, and ultimately worked some-
thing like a domestic revolution. It may be
suspected that fashion had as much share in
the result as the latent æstheticism of the
British public; and fashionable Mr Morris's
230 work certainly became, greatly to the improve-
ment of our houses, and possibly of our taste
also. To say that a thing, no matter what, was
"designed by Morris" was to pass a final verdict
in its favour. Whether this improved state of
235 things is permanent or not, whether Mr. Morris's
admirers and customers followed him with
much conviction and intelligence, may be left
as open questions. What is evident is that we
are not at one with our fathers in matters of
240 taste, and that our present ideas on such
subjects have been mainly influenced by Mr.
Morris and his school. Into the more serious
issues that underlie his principles, and those of
all real artists, it is not our business to enter.
245 We record only work done, and only indicate
the intention that inspired it; we say, in one
word, that Morris's death has taken from us an
original and singularly sincere artist, who
worked hard to make the world a little more
250 beautiful and a little more honest. His book on
Socialism is nothing. It is always the expert in
one subject who desires eminence in another. It
is not the political visionary, but the delightful
poet, the thorough craftsman, the subtle
255 designer, the sumptuous printer, the many-
sided man himself, whom we shall remember.

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