

Real and imaginary topography in *News from Nowhere*

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Forget six counties overhung with smoke,
Forget the snorting steam and piston stroke,
Forget the spreading of the hideous town ;
Think rather of London, small, and white, and clean,
The clear Thames bordered by its gardens green

Stanza from the Prologue, *The Earthly Paradise*, William Morris,
1865

News from Nowhere, written after seven years of intense and pre-eminent political activity (some say overly so (EPT, 572)) in the funding and organising of various permutations of the nascent socialist movement, can be read as an account of his own personal journey of discovery, a parable of his own life rooted in Morris's personal and political *lieux de mémoire*. In the novel, Morris maps out the future, laying an imaginary *mappa mundi Morrissi* over the topography of the Thames Valley upriver from sea to source, tidal reaches to little stream. Taking the form of a voyage of discovery in the best utopian tradition, the novel recounts a trip into *Terra Cognita*, the capital city adventuring into the hinterland beyond. Morris turns certain conventions upside-down, topsy-turvy, reversing the methods of contemporary social investigators such as Andrew Mearns and General Booth, whose footsteps he followed. The reader is translated not into the reality of

Outcast London (Mearns 1883), or *Darkest England* (Booth, 1890) unknown to the well-off middle classes, but into a transformed but known world, where major landmarks serve as signposts and symbols. Despite the fictional pretence of foreignness (p.49), 'a place very unlike England' (p.49), everything is done to enable the reader to recognise the setting, from the opening pages where Hammersmith is identifiable from the street names (The Broadway, The Creek, King's Street), the river (Chiswick Eyot, Putney, Barn Elms, Surrey Banks), the peregrination through London, and upstream past towns and landmarks to the upper reaches of the Thames. This transparent transposition is anchored on the real *loci* of Morris's own world from Kelmscott House, Hammersmith to Kelmscott Manor, Oxfordshire.

Leaving aside the foreign climes Morris travelled to, the places associated with Morris are in chronological order : Oxford from 1853-1855 as an undergraduate, where he met Burne-Jones, Rossetti, & Janey; Red Lion Square in London (1856-59) where he began his married life as a poet; Red House in Bexley Heath (Kent) for six years 1859-1865 where he set up house & business; Queen Square off Piccadilly, where the family lived 'above the shop' and the showrooms opened at 466, Oxford Street in 1877 ; Kelmscott Manor, Oxfordshire leased in 1871 as a country home; sojourns in Leek for his dyeing experiments; Kelmscott House, acquired in

1879, which became the family's London home till his death in 1896; Merton Abbey where he set up his textiles & tapestry works in 1881; Westminster Palace Chambers at the time of his 'conversion' to socialism in 1883-4 and Farringdon Road, not far from Red Lion Square, from 1884 to 1890 both used for his political activities.

'Discouraged and bewildered at the turn the [socialist] movement was taking', with 'palliation' in the form of State socialism, Fabianism, and the New Trades' Unions gaining ground (Thompson, p.572), Morris's farewell article for *Commonweal*, (November 15, 1890) asked 'Where are we now?' At the time the novel was published, although his literary and professional personae were flowering, it could be said that on the personal and political levels, Morris was indeed asking himself where he stood and perhaps 'going nowhere'. ***News from Nowhere*** may thus be read as an attempt to answer that quandary, a personal quest, a record of all that was important to him, a return to his younger days, and places of private happiness. Thus emblems and souvenirs, public and private are to be found in profusion. He manages to weave his boyhood haunts, Epping Forest, Walthamstow & Woodford (p.55), into the account, a way of rendering homage to the fast disappearing rural aspect of areas he knew. The novel may therefore be read as a nostalgic valedictory taking stock as Morris, reaching a

turning point in his political and professional life, stood back to recall, reminisce, and write what may be considered to be a fictionalised, romanticised autobiographical novel, as much as a particular form of socialist utopia, an attempt at "convincing people that Socialism is good for them and is possible", a means "to make Socialists" ('Where are we now?' *Commonweal*, Nov.1890) by means of a lyrical evocation of a better world.

The personal roots to be traced in the novel are reinforced by the political message Morris was attempting to put across in this propagandist fiction. The transmogrification of smog and railways into summer skies and effortless non-mechanical, horse-drawn or river-borne transport, of cinders and grime into hay meadows and fruit gardens, magically lands the reader in a world freed from the plague of capitalism and its corollaries. The novel takes the form of an incursion into **London** from the outskirts to Bloomsbury and back to Hammersmith, a circular trip, (going nowhere?) before setting forth 'up' river, following **The Thames** westward, the direction of discovery, (going somewhere?) towards paradise, a New Arcadia, a theme Morris had previously evoked both before his 'conversion' to socialism :

(...) we cannot quite imagine it ; any more, perhaps, than our forefathers of ancient London, living in the pretty, carefully whitened houses, with the famous church and its huge spire rising above them,- than they, passing about the fair gardens running down to the broad river, could have imagined a whole

country or much covered over with hideous hovels, big, middle-sized, and little, which should one day be called London.¹

and after :

Less lucky than King Midas, our green fields and clear waters, nay, the very air we breathe, are turned not to gold (which might please some of us for an hour maybe) but to dirt ; and to speak plainly we know full well that under the present gospel of Capital not only there is no hope of bettering it, but that things grow worse year by year, day by day. Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die, choked by filth.²

Both prophetic and nostalgic, Morris looks forward to a world that reflects the imagined ideals of the mediaeval past. He illustrates his thesis with places and buildings which epitomise his love of ancient architecture and hatred of late Victorian society. *Nowhere* is a place where the evils of mercantilism have been overthrown, transformed, down-sized to a more appropriate role. His premonition is grounded in identifiable, if transmuted, surroundings : London and the Thames, which have such a predominant place in the novel that they might be described as principal characters.

'Ugly London'³

London, growing from 3 million inhabitants in 1861 to 4.5 million in Greater London in 1881, with the fastest growth rate in Britain, was spilling out into the neighbouring counties

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1. 'The Lesser Arts', Lecture given to the Trades Guild of Learning, London, 1877, Reprinted in *Hopes and Fears for Art*, London, 1882.
 2. *Art and the People*, 1884.
 3. *Pall Mall Gazette*, 4 September 1888. See Emmanuel Roudault, 2004, p.59)

of Middlesex, Kent, Surrey. In 1845 London had been described by Engels in *The condition of the working class in England* ⁴ as never ending sprawl.

'A town such as London, where a man may wander for hours together without reaching the beginning of the end, without meeting the slightest hint which could lead to the inference that there is open country within reach, is a strange thing. This colossal centralisation, this heaping together of two and a half millions of human beings at one point, has multiplied the power of this two and a half millions a hundredfold; has raised London to the commercial capital of the world, created the giant docks and assembled the thousand vessels that continually cover the Thames.' (Italics mine)

The phenomenon can best be described as 'suburbanisation' of the population denounced by Morris as a 'monstrosity', a 'cockney nightmare'. (Roudault, 2004)

Morris, like others able to afford it, followed the trend moving out of London seeking quieter spots within reach of the centre. Hammersmith was the most westerly London borough, any further upstream and he would have been outside London, in the county of Middlesex. Morris and his set lived in the Bohemian districts on the riverside and in run-down areas of former 18th century glory such as Soho and Holborn, slightly rough neighbourhoods for the artistic and intellectual middle class. Notable residents along the Thames included Carlyle & Leigh Hunt at Cheyne Row, Chelsea, Holman Hunt at Putney, Burne-Jones, The Grange, Richmond

4. Published in English in 1892. However Engel's article 'England in 1845 and 1885', a revisiting of his work and conclusions, was first published in the first issue of *Commonweal* in March 1885, MacCarthy, p.511.

(MacCarthy, p.398). As the Fulham District railway reached its tentacles out of London, Burne-Jones' residence was surrounded by noise and building by 1883. Morris's residence at 26, Upper Mall, London W6 i.e. Kelmscott House, since 1879, was situated at the far western limit of the capital. His 'fictionary', the Merton Works, were on the Surrey Bank, reachable by train (District line from Hammersmith to Wimbledon) or on foot through Fulham, Putney, Tooting and Wandsworth. Despite his loathing of the means of transport, Morris chose a London residence which was not too far from a convenient station⁵.

The novel, and his own choice of residence, embody his refusal of back-street London living conditions portrayed by Gustave Doré, Mayhew and Dickens (*Our Mutual Friend*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*) in the 1870s, of the bustle and mayhem in the main thoroughfares filmed by the Lumière Brothers in the 1890s, of the pollution and stench of the river, the 'noisome effluvia' as *The Times* had uncharacteristically put it⁶. It is also a rebuttal of 'municipal socialism' denying the improvements local government, recently extended by the establishment of county councils in 1888⁷, could bring to the

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5. The District Railway opened between South Kensington and Westminster in 1868 and was linked to the Metropolitan line, converging at Hammersmith Broadway station. The Inner Circle was completed in 1884. The Piccadilly line was to be added in 1906.
 6. In 1858 when disinfected curtains were hung in Barry & Pugin's new neo-gothic Houses of Parliament.
 7. Newly in charge of licensing, roads & bridges, education & young offenders, weights & measures, gas meters, animal disease, explosives.

(mis)management of living conditions. As the reader follows William Guest-Morris into London, the personal quest and political message mingle to create a picture-book of Morris's London from Hammersmith to Bloomsbury via Kensington, Westminster, Piccadilly, Trafalgar Square and Holborn.

Hammersmith & Chiswick were still partially in the countryside. Mention of the factories belching smoke and bellowing noise (48), which can be traced on Whitbread's 1871 Map of London, and the 'ugly suspension bridge', recently built when the novel was published, situate the reader fairly and squarely in the dull, industrial Hammersmith of the late 19th century, even if, south of the river, on the Surrey bank, nature still held sway at Barn Elms, and along the river.

Kensington, noted for its market gardens and nurseries until 19th century expansion of London, when it grew from a parish of 10,000 to a borough of 176,000 by 1901 (Weinreb & Hibbert, 1983) has returned to a natural state, no longer even gardens, but now a forest spreading across the north of London, reaching Epping Forest, Morris's childhood haunt.

Westminster is identified by the **Abbey**⁸ and the rebuilt neo-Gothic **Houses of Parliament**, barely 40 years old in 1890. Living in a 'bachelor pad' in Westminster Palace

8. Westminster Abbey is of 13th century English gothic, influenced by Amiens Cathedral (which Morris admired). Crowning place of English Kings since William the Conqueror.

Chambers from 1883-4 and becoming increasingly involved in politics, Morris could hardly ignore the power of the symbol of the seat of power. Likewise, as founder of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, he could not resist a jibe at the renovation of the Abbey or its 'beastly monuments' (69), ruining both exterior and interior aspects, as he had done more than a decade earlier in his lecture "The Decorative Arts". However no mention of "the matchless" 14th century hall is made, despite Morris's love of that period, the several associations with people admired by Morris and his opinion that Westminster Hall⁹ exemplified the organic works of craftsmen, "alive amidst the very nature they were wrought into" ('The Lesser Arts', 1877, p245). The omission is telling. The journey into London is political lesson as much as, if not more than, an aesthetic pilgrimage.

Similarly **Piccadilly**, is the scene for a lesson on social economy. One of the two ancient highways westward out of London (the other being Oxford Street), it was developed in the 17th century. It is portrayed in the novel as remaining a commercial district with 'an elegant arcade to protect foot-passengers, as in some of the Italian cities' and where folk [were] 'very thick on the ground.' (70) Morris was again

9. Commissioned by Richard II to house his magnificent court, and completed the year he was deposed in 1399, the rebuilding was entrusted to a master carpenter and mason (Hugh Herland, Henry Yevele). The hall was also the place where in 1535 the trial of Thomas More took place, father of utopia, whose book is one of the select few Morris had printed by the Kelmscott Press.

drawing on his own mental map of the plush shopping district. Nearby Oxford Street was where Morris, Marshall & Co.'s shop was opened in 1865, to which Morris makes an oblique reference in the novel: "a very good market for pretty things, and is mostly kept for the handsomer goods", (71) while self-deprecatingly mentioning "my piece of cotton print which does duty with me for a tobacco pouch". (73)

The political pilgrimage continues via **Trafalgar Square**¹⁰, which has become a sunny, south-sloping orchard, a 'fair abode of gardens', in stark contrast to the 'tall ugly houses', 'paved be-fountained square' and 'ugly bronze images (one on top of a tall column)' guarded by policemen, surrounded by soldiers, on a grey, chilly November day. It is as if Morris half-wished to erase the memory, the "phantasmagoria of another day" (77) of Bloody Sunday 'a fight which took place here in about the year 1887' (78), yet the central events of 'how the change came' are re-staged in that very same spot, a place with powerful associations for both socialists and the middle-classes, symbolic point of departure for the fictional revolution.

The travellers continue along **Long Acre**, about which Dick's etymological musings remind the reader of the rural past, (83) and mention of Endell Street, (84) allow the reader

10. Only named such in 1835, formerly the site of the King's Mews. Nash and Barry laid out the new square in 1840, but long a place for political demonstrations.

to trace the route taken from Trafalgar Square (by deduction, up St Martin's Lane) "Holborn that side, Oxford Road that." (84) Morris lived in this area for several years : Red Lion Square¹¹ is just the other side of Holborn from Long Acre (where the real covered market place of Morris's time, Covent Garden, was situated) and saw Morris set up house in London with his bachelor friends on graduating from Oxford in 1856, whilst 37, Farringdon Street, where he set up the Socialist League on its secession from the SDF in 1884, is a stone's throw further east and referred to implicitly in the first words of the novel 'Up at the League'. Endell Street is close to the spot at Seven Dials where the Socialist League contingency marching to Trafalgar Square on Bloody Sunday in 1887, including Morris, were attacked by the police. (MacCarthy, 568) Morris is drawing heavily on his personal political experiences, as much as his professional life here.

The reader is thus guided in his mind's eye towards Bloomsbury and "a pillared portico quite familiar to me - no less an old friend, in fact, than the British Museum". It is the building as much as Hammond the antiquarian that Morris/Guest considers to be a friend, both place and character personifying Morris's love of "exceedingly beautiful books"(86). Hammond-Morris remarks "I am much tied to the

11. Bloomsbury, a 17th century development, reached the height of fashion in the 18th century, but by 1866 it had become 'a very unfashionable area, though very respectable', Weinreb & Hibbert, 1983.

past, *my* past, you understand." The museum¹², as befitting its "dreary classical" facade, plays the role of a temple, a sacred place, in which the novice, Guest, is initiated into the new religion, and goes through his political catechism with Hammond, his alter-ego ("his face (...) seemed strangely familiar to me, as if I had seen it before – in a looking-glass in might be" (88)) playing the role of spiritual guide: "-do you know anything or nothing about us?" (89)

William Guest reaches Bloomsbury and goes no further East, the real haunts of William Morris were in the areas described in the novel. When he did venture east in real life, Morris was horrified. In 1886 he wrote of 'a-preaching Stepney Way. My visit intensely depressed me, as these Eastward visits always do: the mere stretch of houses, the vast mass of utter shabbiness and uneventfulness, sits upon one like a nightmare" (WM to Georgina Burne-Jones, Henderson, 279). By way of recalling the importance of the Docks and the 1889 Dock Strike, a passing reference is made to them "When you get down to the Thames side you come on the Docks" (101) but they, and the rest of the East End remain elusive in the

12 The museum was opened in 1759 as a repository for the collections of Sir Henry Sloane, the Earls of Oxford's manuscripts, and the Cotton family library and enriched by Egyptian and classical collections in the early 19th century and the bequest of George III's library. Suggested by Antonio Panizzi, Keeper of Printed Books, and later Principal Librarian, the domed reading room, where Marx amongst others studied, was built over the grass quadrangle in the mid-nineteenth century. The east wing was added following the removal of the natural history sections to the new South Kensington Museum in 1883.

novel. Aldgate and Canning Town are mentioned but the East End remains 'as unexplored as Timbuctoo' as a contemporary expression put it. (Briggs, 313-6) This was indeed a different world, an unknown world within the same city, a world of open poverty, den of deprivation and vice, alluded to in the account of the Clearing of Misery (100) a world Morris recoils from physically and fictionally – preferring to take his reader through charted if changed waters.

***“A thing so beautiful and interesting as the Thames”
(205)***

The trip up river, westwards, away from East End can be seen as a form of escapism, a refusal of reality, as can his homes at Hammersmith and Kelmscott. Turning his back on modernity, on the tumult and crush of London (exemplified by the underground railway carriage in first chapter) Morris takes refuge in “the familiar face of the Thames” (46), the backwaters and the river of which Guest/Morris was proud to say “I know every yard of the Thames from Hammersmith to Cricklade” (204). ‘It was one of the minor stupidities of our time’ comments Guest/Morris, “that no one thought fit to write a decent book about what may fairly be called our only English river” (205), sweeping away by inference any claims by the Severn or the Trent to such a title. The metaphorical associations of the symbolic function of water – cleansing, purifying, baptismal – are reinforced by those of the ebb and

flow of tides and the river (the Thames is tidal up to Teddington) and the trip up river is against that flow, thus more difficult, arduous, worthy of attempt and imbued with a greater moral quality, up towards the source of the river, the well of life, the source of inspiration (literally for Morris – his willow patterns, his meditative fishing trips, observing the flora and fauna of the river & meadows) – but also allegory of trip backwards in time – going up the centuries, from modern day London to ancient Oxford and on up through the ages, the blessed, hallowed times of harmony, the model of 14th century life.

London astride its river with the Docks, and its bridges as signs of its prosperity and splendour was the centre of the economic system Morris had come to detest. He was unable to follow what has been called the 'Miasmal School' in admiring the 'fog-and-Whistler cocktail' by which "the evening mist clothes the riverside with poetry, as with a veil, the poor buildings lose themselves in the dim sky, and the tall chimneys become *campanili* and the warehouses are palaces in the night" (Whistler quoted by Shrapnel), or Ruskin's admiration of Turner (Shrapnel, 64)¹³. What Morris saw were the visible and audible signs of the pollution wrought by the smoke-vomiting soap-works, the noisy engineer's works and lead-works as *prima facie* evidence against the wrongs of

13 Téléràma hors série, *Un siècle de lumière. Turner, Whistler, Monet*, October 2004.

capitalism. As the journey progresses up the river, so the places become less fraught with negative allusions, the countryside more and more beautiful, as the ties with the capital, home of the hated 'counting houses', are loosened.

Morris's real and fictional boat trips are reminiscent of the **Royal Progresses** from Greenwich to Hampton Court, adorning, even glorifying the Thames with their barge appearances, ceremonial rowboats, and elaborate apparel (Shrapnel, p.26), revisiting past splendour. The symmetry between his real boat trips from Hammersmith to Kelmscott in 1880 and 1881 and the trip upriver in the novel reveals the inspiration he drew from the former, rewriting and condensing two empirical events into a nostalgic vision of a future past, both analeptic and prospective:

"The Thames as I remembered it; for setting aside the hideous vulgarity of the cockney villas of the well-to-do, stockbrokers and other such, which in older time marred the beauty of the bough-hung banks, even this beginning of the country Thames was always beautiful, and as we slipped between the lovely summer greenery, I almost felt my youth come back to me, and as if I were on one of those water excursions which I used to enjoy so much in days when I was too happy to think that there could be much amiss anywhere."
(169)

The real trip in 1880 took 5 days (like the peregrination of Chaucer's pilgrims setting out from Southwark for Canterbury) travelling in a boat aptly named **The Ark**, in company of Janey and three 'boisterous bachelors' (MacCarthy) (strangely pre-empting JKJerome's 1889 *Three*

Men in a Boat), Morris's daughter May & a school friend, and their housemaid who left the party at Hampton Court, a symmetric total of 4 men and 4 women. In the novel the trip takes three days and Guest/Morris floats, apparently effortlessly upstream, against the flow, with his mixed and changing party of four, guided by Dick, the amateur 'waterman' plying his boat as work-pleasure, hardly the epitome of hard-working, foul-mouthed real-life, but fast-disappearing breed¹⁴.

A comparison of the two trips reveals the condensing of time, the skipping of the first tedious 'cockney' reaches travelled on the first day in the real trip, with the fictional party reaching Runnymede on the first day, a convenient breaking point, allowing the resting place and the first sights the following day, Eton and Windsor, to be highlighted. The three fictional days each have their historical and social highlights. Hampton Court is associated with a meal in the common hall, Runnymede as a stopover. On third and last day of the fictional voyage, references to precious old spots (Wallingford, Abingdon, Oxford & Godstow) and new-fangled bastardisation (Reading & Pangbourne) continue the mirrored but contrasting images. The river trip serves as an aesthetic

14. There were 40,000 between Windsor and Gravesend at one time whose language was so uncouth that a 1761 statute imposed fines of 2/-6d for each wicked word and a Society for Promoting Religion and Morality amongst Watermen, Bargemen and Rivermen was established in 1786 (Shrapnel, 26).

backdrop, as a series of scenes which illustrate the new envisaged paradise.

	Real trip	Fictional version
Day 1	Sunbury = 'Cockney waters'	Hampton Court, Runnymede
Day 2	Marlow (via Chertsey, Staines, Runnymede -picnic tea- Windsor, Eton, Maidenhead, Cliveden woods, Cookham	Datchet lock, Eton, Windsor, Maidenhead, Clewer reach, Bisham, Medmenham, Hurley, Wargrave, Shiplake, Reading, Caversham, Maple-Durham meads
Day 3	Sonning (via Hurley Lock, Lady Place, Henley)	Maple-Durham Lock, 'cockneyfied' Pangbourne, Basildon, Goring & Streatley reaches Wallingford, Day's Lock, Abingdon, Oxford by Oseney, Hinksey, Medley Lock, Port Meadow, Godstow nunnery, Kelmscott
Day 4	Wallingford, Dorchester, Oxford - Janey takes train ahead to Kelmscott	
Day 5	Tadpole, Radcot Bridge, Kelmscott	

The first port-of-call is **Hampton Court** "a kind of early super-suburbia, a mammoth exercise in top executive-style river-living" (Shrapnel, 1977, p.26) glowingly described in the novel:

"A little town of quaint and pretty houses, some new, some old dominated by the long walls and sharp gables of a great red-brick pile of building, partly of the latest Gothic, partly of the court-style of Dutch William." (170)

"There was still a sort of tradition of pleasure and beauty which clung to that group of buildings, and people thought going to Hampton Court a necessary summer outing, as they did in the days when London was so grimy and miserable." (171)

Yet no mention is made by Morris of **Kingston upon Thames**, where the crowning of seven Anglo-Saxon kings took place, celebrated by Jerome K Jerome, 'poet laureate of the

suburban Thames' (Shrapnel, p.27) probably precisely because of its suburban nature.

"The quaint back-streets of Kingston, where they came down to the water's edge, looked quite picturesque in the flashing sunlight, the glinting river with its drifting barges, the wooded towpath, the trim-kept villas on either side... [which Morris excoriated] the distant glimpses of the old grey palace of the Tudors..." (*Three men in a boat*)

At **Runnymede**, "one of the prettiest places on the lower Thames" (180) where he "felt almost back again in my boyhood" and "they were making hay busily by now, in the simple fashion of the days when I was a boy" (178) he makes no reference to the signing of Magna Carta in 1215 and the historical significance of this place. Instead this is where the travellers meet an old man, Henry Morsom, Ellen's grandfather, whose praise of past times leads Guest/Morris to explode in anger.

"What you mean is that you decockneyized the place, and sent the damned flunkies packing, and that everybody can live comfortably and happily, and not a few damned thieves only, who were centres of vulgarity and corruption wherever they were, and who, as to this lovely river, destroyed its beauty morally, and had almost destroyed it physically, when they were thrown out of it." (180)

Coming to **Windsor** on the second day of the fictional journey, the reader understands why. Morsom, Hammond's rural *alter-ego*, explains.

"That is Windsor Castle ...we wouldn't pull the buildings down, since they were there, just as with the buildings of the Dung Market. You know, of course, that it was the palace of our old mediaeval kings, and was used later on for the same purpose by the parliamentary commercial sham-kings" (184)

Some praise is however reserved for **Eton's** "beautiful old buildings which were built for a great college or teaching-place by one of the mediaeval kings"¹⁵ (183), an institution less fraught with the weight of the hated parliamentary monarchy.

At **Maidenhead** Morris again denounces "the once sorely becockneyed reaches of the river" (185), a reference to the stretching suburbia following the building of the Great Western Railway along the Thames to Reading, Swindon and further, which Morris was not averse to availing himself of, travelling to Lechlade by rail, to get to Kelmscott. In both real and fictional boating parties, Morris practically ignores Reading¹⁶ perhaps for that very reason 'the old sordidness of so-called manufacture', 'a nice town enough in its way, mostly rebuilt (...) one of the most populous places on the Thames round about here.' (186-7) As the journey progresses 'We stopped again at Abingdon, which like **Wallingford**¹⁷, was in a way both old and new to me'. (206) The implicit opposition between, on the one hand, towns which had grown and evolved slowly over the centuries, almost organically, with the suburban, industrial sprawl that mechanisation had brought at an ever increasing pace in the twenty-five years previous to

15. Henry IV in 1440.

16. Swindon, a town which grew up around the railway works, manufacturing locomotives & carriages, is as far from Kelmscott as Oxford, although not on the Thames.

17. Dating back to Saxon times Wallingford was a significant walled medieval market-town similar in size and status to other Oxfordshire towns like Burford grown rich at the time of the wool-trade.

1890, is a major part of the sub-text of the novel, and Morris's political message.

These continue as 'We skirted **Oxford** by Oseney' (206) where, 'the railway having disappeared, and therewith the various level bridges over the streams of Thames, we were soon through Medley Lock (...) and I was taken ashore at Godstow' to visit the ancient Nunnery, site of the legend of Fair Rosamund¹⁸. Morris makes only passing mention of his *alma mater*, 'that once don-beridden city' where the meadows had been 'getting daily more and more squalid' (206) where his aesthetic tastes had been formed and life-long friendships made. It is however here, between Oxford and Godstow that Morris-Guest places a direct, concise reference to a Marxist interpretation of history: "the older imperfect communal period, through the time of the confused struggle and tyranny of the rights of property, into the present rest and happiness of complete Communism.' (207). Reminding the reader of the central political thesis of his book, as the boat party nears the end of its journey, these lines clash in tone and style with the ambient lyricism and hark back to the pseudo-Socratic dialogue in the central didactic section of the novel. The final reaches of the river from Godstow see Morris waxing lyrical over the beauty of the summer meadows both in the

18. It was near here that C.L. Dodgson composed *Alice's Adventures Underground* on a summer afternoon's river outing in 1862. (Morley, p.278)

descriptive passages and through the voice of Ellen “Oh the beauty of the fields!’ she said; ‘I had no idea of the charm of a very small river like this.” (209), “Oh me! Oh me! How I love the earth, and the seasons, and weather, and all things that deal with it, and all that grows out of it (...)” (220)

The parallels with his record of the real trip “They were haymaking on the flat flood-washed spits of ground and islets all about Tadpole’ (MacCarthy) are unmistakable. Indeed the final paragraphs of Ch. XXX, ‘The Journey’s End’ read like a diary Morris might have kept of his arrival at **Kelmscott** on the river trips made in 1880 and 1881.

“He pulled his skulls through the water, and on we went, turning a sharp angle and going north a little. [Kelmscott Manor is indeed north of the river, up a little stream.] Presently we saw before us a bank of elm-trees, which told us of a house amidst them, though I looked in vain for *the grey walls I expected to see there.*” (Italics mine).

“In a few minutes we had passed through a deep eddying pool into the sharp stream that ran from the ford, and beached our craft on a tiny strand of limestone-gravel, and stepped ashore into the arms of our up-river friends, our journey done.” (218)

The **Old House**, “this many-gabled old house built by the simple country-folk of the long-past times (...) regardless of all the turmoil that was going on in the cities and courts, is lovely still” (220) is the Oxfordshire Manor he leased from 1876, 17 miles south west and upstream of Oxford¹⁹. In Morris’s

¹⁹ The name Kelmscott derives from ‘Coenhelm’s Cottage(s) – part of Broadwell Manor, mentioned in the Domesday Book in 1086. Cottagers, *non-placet* Morris, were unfree villeins in medieval times.

time the village had one public house, a school, built in 1874, and a **church**: 'a simple little building with one little aisle divided from the nave by **three round arches**, a chancel and a rather roomy transept for so small a building' had 'windows mostly of the graceful Oxfordshire fourteenth-century type'. (226)

Ever-seeking Utopia, multiplying the means to achieve harmony through his artistic and political commitments, Morris had reached the end of his personal quest, a place where happiness had eluded him but where he had found peace, the resting place he had dreamt of long before writing *News from Nowhere*, *An Epoch of Rest* or even leasing the Manor²⁰. Having revisited his London haunts, and his beloved Thames, the journey of (self) discovery, the autobiographical stock-taking in the novel ends when William Guest/Morris finally alights. As the journey progresses upstream, the scaling down of the river underscores the overwhelming impressions the gigantism of 19th century London conveyed, and emphasises the Lilliputian dimensions of the travellers, dwarfs in the city, giants in the countryside. "The smallness of

20. An unpublished novel written in 1871, *The Novel on Blue Paper*, was 'uncannily prophetic of Kelmescott', MacCarthy, p. 274. Morris seems to have been accomplished at literary 'déjà vu'. According to the account given by May Morris (II; 325 recounted in EPT p.566) the first scene in the novel, published in January 1890 in *Commonweal*, was enacted in real life in May 1890, following his eviction from the Socialist League: 'At ten the Conference broke up, and the Hammersmith group went back on the underground. For a few moments they stood on the embankment and watched the lights and traffic on the Thames. "The wind's in the West", said Morris. "I can almost smell the country. "'

the scale of everything, the short reaches, and the speedy change of the banks, give one the feeling of *going somewhere*, of coming to something strange, a feeling of adventure." (209) Anticipation of arrival, of achievement are mingled in that 'going somewhere', somehow intimating 'somewhere over the rainbow, where skies are blue', a never-never land of eternal youth and happiness, never-ageing folk and work-pleasure.

"And so on we went up the Thames still – or whither?" (214) The curious final line to Ch. XXIX, as the fictional journey approached its denouement, echoes the title of Morris's final article for *Commonweal*, 'Where are we now?', written the same year as the final chapters of the novel. Ellen's final imagined exhortation "Go back again," begs the question back to where, as much as back to what or back to which period. "Go back and be the happier for having seen us, ...Go on living while you may, striving, with whatsoever pain and labour needs must be, to build up little by little the new day of fellowship, and rest, and happiness." (228) Her plea can thus be interpreted not only as a political programme, but also as a personal reminder, a closure which writing the novel may have allowed him to make on his past life, a private absolution and preparation for the end.

Topography in the novel:

settings for chapters, narration of fictional journey

I Discussion & Bed

'Up at the League', 'banks of Thames', 'an ugly suspension bridge', 'the shabby London suburb where he was', Chiswick Eyot (Hammersmith)

II A morning bath

The Thames: 'up towards Chiswick', 'Down towards Putney', Barn Elms, Surrey banks

III The Guest House & Breakfast Therein

(Kelmscott House, Hammersmith) talk of Epping Forest, Walhamstow, Woodford)

IV A Market by the Way

(Hammersmith) King Street, The Creek, the Broadway

V Children on the Road

Kensington, Kensington Gardens/wood (Paddington, Notting Hill, Primrose Hill, Kingsland, Stoke-Newington, Clapton, Lea marshes, Epping Forest), Westminster Abbey, the Houses of Parliament, St. Pauls

VI A little shopping

Piccadilly

VII Trafalgar Square

Parliament House: 'the Dung Market', the National Gallery

VIII An Old Friend

Long Acre, Endell Street, Holborn, Oxford Road [St.], the British Museum

IX Concerning Love

Interior 'room of the old type'

X Question & Answers

Aldgate, the Lea, the Docks, Cannings Town, Hampstead, Oxford, Hindhead in Surrey, Middlesex & Essex forest, Cumberland & Westmoreland

XVI Dinner in the hall of the Bloomsbury Market

Domestic interior, 'back to Hammersmith'

XVII How the Change came

'back to Hammersmith', the City, (Trafalgar Square, Manchester, London, Glasgow, Bristol, Parliament House);

XIX The drive back to Hammersmith

Wiltshire wheat harvest;

*XX The Hammersmith Guest House again**XXI Going up the river**XXII Hampton Court and a praiser of past times**XXIII An early morning by Runnymede**XXIV Up the Thames*

the second day Eton & Windsor, Datchet lock, Clewer reach, Bisham, Medmenham, Hurley, Wargrave, Shiplake, Reading, Caversham, Maple-Durham meads, the Blunts, Basildon

XXV The third day on the Thames

Basildon railway bridge, Maple-Durham Lock, Pangbourne, Goring & Streatley reaches

XXVI The Obstinate Refusers

Berkshire

XXVII The Upper waters

Berkshire, the White Horse, Wallingford 'a biggish hall - collection of articles of manufacture & art', Day's Lock, Abingdon, Skirting Oxford by Oseney (Lock), Hinksey, Medley Lock, Port Meadow, Godstow

XXVIII The Little River

'still 25 miles from our resting place';

XXIX A resting-place on the Upper Thames

'up the Thames still- or whither?';

*XXX The Journey's End**XXXI An old house among new folk*

[Kelmscott Manor] 'the old house' 'a jewel of a house'

XXXII The feast's beginning — The end

Walks out of house —> lay in bed in 'dingy Hammersmith'.

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