

**WILLIAM MORRIS AND  
THE EARLY DAYS OF THE  
SOCIALIST MOVEMENT**

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William Morris and the early days of the socialist movement by J. Bruce Glasier

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**J. BRUCE GLASIER**

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J. BRUCE GLASER, at work in his Study, May 14th, 1920.

*From a Snapshot by Mrs. Wright-Robinson, enlarged  
and reproduced by Fredk. Hollzer.*

# WILLIAM MORRIS AND THE EARLY DAYS OF THE SOCIALIST MOVEMENT

BEING REMINISCENCES OF MORRIS' WORK AS  
A PROPAGANDIST, AND OBSERVATIONS ON  
HIS CHARACTER AND GENIUS, WITH SOME  
ACCOUNT OF THE PERSONS AND CIRCUM-  
STANCES OF THE EARLY SOCIALIST AGITATION

TOGETHER WITH A SERIES  
OF LETTERS ADDRESSED BY  
MORRIS TO THE AUTHOR

BY  
J. BRUCE GLASIER

WITH A PREFACE BY  
MAY MORRIS

*WITH TWO PORTRAITS*

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## PREFACE

THE most fitting introduction to the pages that follow would be Bruce Glasier's own words in an article called 'Why I am a Socialist.' He is describing his early life when during the summer months he kept his father's sheep on the braes of Kyle: 'Then came the days of herding, with Burns's poems turned over page by page among the heather, and the never-ceasing song of the streams down the glens.'<sup>1</sup>

The whole passage—too long to quote—is steeped in the wonder of wild places; he who wrote it and possessed this memory of romance had the poet's heart, the poet's vision, and when, before mid-life, a treasure of friendship came to him, it was a gift for which he was spiritually prepared, prized at its full value. What he gave in return for the pure joy that the friendship with William Morris brought into his life can be judged in reading the memories written here. The man of Scottish and Highland blood and he of the Welsh kin had much in common; both gave unconsciously, with the simplicity of wise children, and to us who look back and begin to see their lives in due proportion, the record of such kindness, such steadfastness, as united these two men in their labour for the common good, is something to rejoice over. For surely if ever an earthly love was illumined with light from the Unknown, it was the affection that Bruce Glasier bore my father. The feeling was neither blind nor uncritical, nor does it show in the younger man any abnegation of independence of spirit. In one of the last letters Bruce wrote to me, he says: 'I know I must have tried his

<sup>1</sup> *Labour Leader*, 1 June 1906.

patience sorely many a time, for I was a wee bit wild and boisterous in those days, and though I loved and indeed worshipped him as the greatest man then bearing us company on earth, our Socialist League equalitarian ideas sometimes led us into foolish affectations of almost irreverence. But his generous heart forgave us all.'

Glacier had been for some years busied with Socialist lecturing when my father became acquainted with the Scottish circle in Glasgow and Edinburgh, and the meeting with this 'half-mythical being,' who was pictured by the ingenuous young men as leading an Arcadian life in the world of poetry and art down South, was to them an exciting event. When the hero comes out of the clouds and stands before his admirers as a man and a good comrade, there is danger of disappointment, of a sense of disillusion. But in this case there was no shadow: indeed, the light of reality shone more warmly and happily, and Glacier writes with a sort of epic directness of the first meeting with the poet, and at once gives the keynote of the story he tells us: 'I felt as one enriched with a great possession.'

It is worth while attempting to get the full significance of such words, uttered by one who had spent his life as a young man in the grey atmosphere of Scottish manufacturing centres, dedicating every possible moment to the cause he had at heart: it meant the release of pent-up thoughts, the splendid proclaiming—by a master-voice—of one's own inarticulate ideals; it was indeed the blossoming of the wilderness.

The chapter on Glasgow in the Dawn is, to my mind, of the greatest interest, approaching the subject from the standpoint of a man in the centre of the Labour movement, with outlook and values professedly not those of the student. We get a series of intimate pictures of the Socialist doings of those days, as they might impress Bruce's friends who were either themselves of the working-class, or had cast in their lot with that of Labour. From first to last, indeed, the volume has this special weight: it is the story of that



particular phase of British Socialism, told in vivid glimpses by a single-hearted apostle of the cause—himself a poet and 'dreamer'—told in plain language to his fellows, the men with whom he lived and worked and whom he has largely influenced by his force of character. For me it must always have a special value for the simple and serious expression of that unmoved affection which so coloured his life.

But this book does more than tell the story of a particular phase of Socialism in this country; it has a wider and more permanent value. British Socialism is not a purely materialistic criticism of economic theory; behind it there is a basis of ethical criticism and theory. Marxian economics—apart from Marx's historical survey—is little read or understood except by his foreign disciples. William Morris's criticism of modern society and his revolt against it was fundamentally ethical, and the tremendous import of his teaching depended upon his experience as poet and artist. 'It must always be remembered that behind and deeper than all political and economic Socialism there is somewhere present, giving vitality to the theory, just that criticism of life, that demand for freedom and beauty, that craving for fellowship and joy in creative work, that revolt against sordidness, misery, and ugliness of a cramped existence, which Morris so gloriously and with such magnificent humanity expressed. Morris had the heart of Socialism, and no critic has answered him yet.'<sup>1</sup> But because his teaching was not purely economic, his influence on current Socialistic teaching is likely to be overlooked by historians, whereas there is not one of the older Socialist leaders who has not come under his personal influence to a greater or less extent, and this book gives an experience which was repeated in some degree all over the country in his many lecturing tours. Not everywhere was there a follower so prepared to profit by his opportunities, but nowhere was the teaching entirely without result.

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Mellor, in *Hastings' Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, art. Socialism.

Morris's teaching was in truth no new departure ; it was a continuation of the British Socialist tradition (as compared with the French, or the Italian or German), but he carried it to a higher point and set a permanent mark on it, as these memories help to show.

In what estimation William Morris held his Scottish friend will be gathered in the letters which are included at the end of the volume. He stood high in my father's confidence, and in those stormy days, when sordid quarrels perforce wasted the time of men who were meant for better things, Bruce was one to be relied on for his loyalty and steadiness of purpose—a comfort and solace to that unwilling leader of turbulent spirits.

In some of the letters, Morris's standpoint between the Parliamentary Socialists and the Anarchists is brought out clearly, and, as he has been claimed by both parties, it is well to have the story of it now given definitely in his own words. It is well, too, that those who in future days may be interested in his life and thought should know that he saw the drawbacks—faults, weaknesses, what you will—of both parties, and declined to be committed to theories and acts he did not accept.

In writing to friends about this proposed volume, Glasier showed diffidence and hesitation ; 'lest I might unwittingly in any way deface your Father's image,' he told me in one letter. 'But,' he added, 'it has been borne in upon my mind that I ought not to allow my recollection of these wonderful days with your Father to perish with me.' And so, having taken leave of a busy life that had become more and more dedicated to lecturing and writing in the cause of Socialism, he set to work. In the last protracted illness, in an atmosphere of unclouded serenity, this active spirit, though rejoicing in the coming freedom, did not allow itself to waste precious hours in contemplation ; till the last, Glasier went on writing untiringly. 'The Meaning of Socialism' was finished before 'William Morris and the Early Days of the Socialist Movement' was written, and

the last of his literary work, besides articles for the weekly *Labour Leader*, was the preparation of a volume of poems of various dates.

Of the satisfaction of leaving practically completed this tribute to his friend and teacher I will say nothing. There are moments in a man's life that one cannot intrude upon, though Glasier himself has allowed us a glimpse of what this meant to him.

Something of the beauty of Glasier's character is shown unconsciously in these pages, his integrity, loyalty, unswerving sense of duty, his disinterestedness in labouring for no material reward, besides the lighter qualities, his comradeship and good humour, his sense of fun and enjoyment of adventure—all the things that endeared him to my father. Indeed, the work breathes of the unaffected, unselfish spirit of the man, and scarcely calls for any such introducing words. But in writing them, two pictures linger persistently and unbidden in my mind: first, the young lad lying on the braes, drinking in the poetry of sky and earth, welcoming life and its riddle; then, the man of middle age, sitting at a desk with bowed head, writing on the blotted page his lament over the dead hero. The song of youth and the lament are now alike part of a story, and in the picture of Glasier that accompanies this volume, where he lies freed of all questionings and all griefs, something may be divined of the calm peace and expectancy with which he waited for the future.

MAY MORRIS

KELMSCOTT,  
*January 1927.*