

**WILLIAM MORRIS:
AN APPRECIATION,
PP. 10-45**

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William Morris: An Appreciation, pp. 10-45 by James Morton

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JAMES MORTON

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BY

JAMES MORTON

Of Darvel, Ayrshire

As read before the XL Club, Glasgow

March 4th, 1901



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larger in every way, we find that at this very period the working class or proletariat, the descendants, that is, of those serfs from whom the now powerful Middle Class had grown, the remarkable thing, I say, is that this very period should be the lowest in their whole history. At the close of the Middle Ages, with mutton and beef at $\frac{1}{2}d.$ per pound, wheat 4s. per quarter, and his 6d. a day, the serf and artisan, by ten weeks' ordinary work, could provision his household for a year, and was on the whole a tolerably jolly fellow. At the beginning of this century, notwithstanding the enormous multiplication of every commodity, his descendants found mutton and beef $7\frac{1}{2}d.$ per pound, wheat 100s. a quarter, and his wage 1s. 4d. to 1s. 8d. a day, so that, even with a twelve or fourteen hours' work-day all the year round, hunger was hard to drive from the door, and it is, I believe, a fact in social history, that at no period had the working man been so poor or his life so pleasureless. How miserable was his lot at that time, how harassed and overtaxed, may be gleaned from the history which hangs around the Factory Acts and such other crumbs of privilege as the Chartist and like movements extracted from parliament. And the surroundings too had been completely altered from the time of the country serf, for commercialism had seen the growth of modern industrial cities, the meagre and monotonous housing of the work-

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man, with the sordidness and squalor which inevitably follow.

Such was the condition of life during the early years of the nineteenth century, such was the England on which John Ruskin first looked with that clear eye and sensitive temperament, and to which he ventured to offer his gospel of "Modern Painters" and "Stones of Venice." Such, a little later, was the England which young Morris saw from his student's window at Oxford, through those dreamy, distant eyes that saw and hoped so much. But we must not anticipate. We must learn of what stuff this young student is made of whom we mean to speak, and whom, I dare say, you think I have been rather tardy in introducing.

William Morris had been born in 1834 at Walthamstow in Essex, and was the only son of William Morris, a Discount Broker, who had come to London a young man of twenty from Worcester, and had worked his way into a position of considerable affluence. The Morrises were of Welsh descent, and their ancestors had lived for generations in a quiet valley on the upper Severn, leaving nothing noteworthy to chronicle. His mother was a Sheldon of Worcester, a family with a history dating back to Henry VII., who had landed estates and supplied many members of the Bar and Church. He appears to have been delicate in infancy and early childhood, for his

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mother tells us he had to be kept alive on calves' feet jelly and beef tea, but a glowing testimonial is due to these diets (or perhaps to the mother's care), for the delicate child cast his ailments early from him, and grew through healthy youth into a most robust and vigorous manhood. "Topsy" was a pet name given to him by his earliest companions, and one which stuck to him throughout his life, from the remarkable strength and unkemptness of his thick hair, which indeed must have been phenomenal,—in after years he used to amuse his children by lifting them up while they caught hold of the dark curly locks. His general physical strength and vitality were altogether exceptional. He could lift the heaviest weight in his teeth with apparent ease, and once, when describing how he had seen passengers staggering off the channel steamer laden with luggage, he illustrated his point to the amazement and horror of the audience by getting a chair under each arm, and then stooping and lifting the coal-scuttle in his teeth. In later days he was known in London by his broad, full figure dressed always in suit of blue serge, blue cotton shirt, with large soft hat on his massive head; and "by his rocking walk and breezy ruddy complexion had quite the cast of a Baltic sea captain." His temper too was hot and passionate (in a letter at an early period his fellow-lodger wrote, "Topsy has

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broken only one window to-day"), and he had "the unceasing restlessness of a wild creature." Even at work or meals he could not sit still for long, but must be continually shifting and fidgeting, getting up to cross the room or look out of the window, and then sitting down again. This restless element was a necessity to him as a means of working off his great bodily strength and superabundant vitality. "And with this great physical strength," says his biographer, "went the gift of profound and almost dreamless sleep, taken, to use his own phrase, in solid bars. From this he awoke at the full height of his energy. Within ten minutes of waking in the morning he had dressed and begun the business of the day. He was often at work at his writing, or his designing, or his loom, by the summer sunrise; and in those undisturbed hours lay a great part of the secret of the immense copiousness of his production, both as a poet and as a decorative artist."

His delicate childhood, however, had been the means of his early taking to books. His sisters say they never remember his learning to read, and he himself could not remember a time when he could not read. By the age of four he was deep in the *Waverley* novels, and by seven he had read all and knew every one thoroughly, a circumstance which had a most marked effect on his after life. It was in this

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way he became thoroughly saturated with the ways of the mediæval world. The leisurely life, the freshness and beauty of the surroundings both of nature and art, the charm of chivalry and romance, indeed the whole atmosphere of the Middle Ages he seemed to adopt as his own from that time forth. As a boy his most favourite pastime was to dress himself in a suit of armour and ride his pony round the park. He was a keen angler both in boyhood and throughout his life, and there was no bird or flower in the district around of which he did not know the names and habits. A bad speller at school, and never very clear about some words all his life, he did not appear as a brilliant scholar at Marlborough College, whither he went when he left his home tutor. But he was a keen collector of birds' eggs, made long walks with the boys, and interested them all the way by endless tales about knights and fairies, in which "one adventure rose out of another and the tale flowed on from day to day for a whole term." Also at this school he did a great amount of desultory reading, and knew all about English Gothic both from books and old buildings in the neighbourhood.

But his years at Oxford were more full of incident, and they gave direction to his after life. In 1853 Oxford was in its main aspects a mediæval city, and the name roused, in Morris's own words, "A vision of gray-roofed