Morris and Bernard Shaw

by E. E. Stokes Jnr

I have been convinced for a number of years that Bernard Shaw's twelve-year friendship with William Morris was the single most valuable personal contact in Shaw's long and varied life. This conviction has been deepened by my work this year in organizing and cataloguing the T. E. Hanley Collection of Shaw and Shaviana at the University of Texas. Time and time again, in turning over the many thousands of items comprising the collection, I have been struck by evidences of Morris' influence on Shaw, both in ideas and in aesthetic awareness. Shaw's innumerable references to Morris, in both published works and unpublished material to be found in the collection, make it clear that for Shaw himself his intercourse with Morris was of deep and lasting significance.

Not the least striking evidence of Morris' influence is the meticulous care Shaw took with the appearance of his published works. I have handled hundreds of proofs corrected in Shaw's hand. Many of these demonstrate Shaw's keen attention to the arrangement of title pages and the appearance of pages of text. His insistence upon changes to insure the handsomeness of the published book sometimes evoked despair on the part of his printers and publishers. But the resulting excellence in typography and format contributed considerably to Shaw's books being eagerly sought by collectors like Dr T. E. Hanley. Under the influence of Morris, Shaw thus led the way not only in the publishing of plays (sometimes before they were produced on the stage, as in the case of Mrs Warren's Profession) but in the detailed attention to their typographical presentation which constituted a reaction against the ugliness of much Victorian printing.

Shaw and Morris met as socialists. It is necessary to insist on the primary importance of this fact, since their socialism, however different and even widely divergent in details, was the one central connecting link between them. As a world-outlook and a programme for implementing change, socialism was the nucleus from which grew the various other aspects of their relationship. Viewed in the historical and intellectual context of socialism,
Morris and Shaw appear as the greatest socialist men of letters of the later nineteenth century in England.

Morrisians need no rehearsal of the reasons for William Morris' espousal of socialism as the means for changing, or smashing, the modern industrial society he hated. Shaw came to socialism from a quite different direction and for rather different reasons. During the earlier years of his career in London Shaw was involved in the philosophical and theological controversies of the period (as Morris was not). It was not until he attended a lecture by Henry George in September, 1882, and read Progress and Poverty that Shaw's interests switched to economics, and shortly after that he read Marx and became a socialist. 'Marx made a man of me,' he said, even though his later Fabian socialism was non-Marxian. His approach to social change was strongly influenced by Mill and the earlier Utilitarians as well as by the marginal utility economists: Marx served more as an inspiration, a prophetic voice denouncing nineteenth-century capitalism, than as a doctrinal source. Marx's one fundamental contribution to Shaw's thinking was his insight into the basic role of economics in social change.

Shaw's route to socialism was thus more rationalist and technical, more 'intellectual' if you will, than Morris', and it was because of this that Morris' influence on Shaw's socialist thinking was so salutary. Morris, who lacked the patience and the technical equipment to read Marx or any economist with thoroughness, became a socialist because of his disgust with the ugliness, the shoddy vulgarity, the progressive dehumanization of the society around him. Through his influence, Shaw's socialism and his general outlook became warmer, more human, and imbued with an aesthetic quality which set him quite apart from the other Fabians (including his admired colleague Sidney Webb). This result is what gives such importance to Shaw's relationship with Morris during the still-formative period of Shaw's intellect.

The Socialist aspect of the Morris-Shaw relationship may be divided into two phases. After their initial meeting at a social gathering of the Democratic Federation, in the spring of 1884, they participated in what may be called the 'active' phase for the next several years. Together they appeared on socialist platforms and at street corner meetings, Shaw lectured repeatedly at Morris'
converted Hammersmith coach house, and they took prominent part in the great socialist demonstrations in London in the mid-eighties. Their cordial and mutually helpful personal relations as socialists remained unaltered when, by early 1885, the socialist movement had split into three principal groups—the old S. D. F., Morris’ Socialist League, and the Fabian Society. Unlike many other comrades of the time, they found it possible to disagree as to means and still remain fast friends, devoted to the same ultimate end. Shaw, more than any other Fabian, contributed his energies and his lecturing skill to the rival socialist groups, no doubt largely because of his friendship with Morris. The ‘active’ phase was climaxed by the two men’s involvement in the demonstration of 13 November 1887, afterward known as Bloody Sunday, in Trafalgar Square.

‘Bloody Sunday’ and its aftermath marked the transition from the ‘active’ to the ‘passive,’ or ‘intellectual,’ phase of their socialist relationship, which lasted during the remaining nine years of Morris’ life. While largely ceasing to appear together on socialist platforms (except at Hammersmith), they engaged in some socialist enterprises of perhaps even greater significance. Their personal intimacy, meanwhile, was deepening steadily. The results of this in the socialist sphere became increasingly evident. Shaw’s essay ‘The Transition to Social Democracy’ was written at Kelmscott Manor, almost, one might say, under the aegis of Morris. According to one Shaw biographer, the essay ‘was heartily approved on its historical side’ by Morris. That real reciprocity existed is clear. Morris, who ordinarily avoided the Fabians as a group, in fact ‘heartily disliked’ them ‘as a species’ according to Shaw, was induced by Shaw to give a paper on Gothic architecture before the Fabian Society in the summer of 1890. On a more public level, Morris and Shaw came to exhibit their intellectual affinity as socialists. In the January, 1891, number of The New Review, a group of three articles appeared on ‘The Socialist Ideal.’ The first one, on ‘Art,’ was by William Morris, the second,

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2 Archibald Henderson, George Bernard Shaw, His Life and Works, p. 206.

3 Bernard Shaw, Major Critical Essays (London: Constable), preface to the first edition of The Quintessence of Ibsenism, p. 11. Shaw first suggested that Morris give a paper on himself, which he flatly refused to do! Later, one of Morris’ lectures, entitled ‘Communism’, delivered before the Hammersmith Socialist Society in 1893, was published by the Fabian Society as Fabian Tract No. 113, with Bernard Shaw as editor.
on ‘Politics,’ by Bernard Shaw, and the third, on ‘Literature,’ by Shaw’s friend Henry S. Salt. Finally, Morris and Shaw, together with H. M. Hyndman, Sidney Webb, and some lesser lights, joined in drafting the Joint Manifesto of British Socialists, issued on May Day, 1893. In the later ‘intellectual’ phase of their socialist relationship the two men moved closer together in ideas as well as in personal friendship. By the early 1890’s they came to represent, in their quite different ways, what was to be regarded as ‘typical’ English socialism—advocacy of gradual change by orderly, non-violent means. This was perhaps recognized by the editors of The New Review when they selected Morris and Shaw, along with Henry Salt, to present the socialist case.

Before they met they had been aware of each other’s work in literature. Now they were to discover a number of common literary interests. The most important of these were Dickens and Ruskin. They had kindred attitudes toward Shakespeare. ‘Shakespeare,’ says Shaw, ‘was not in the Morris movement, which was strongly anti-rhetorical.’ Shaw’s later celebrated criticism of the Bard and of ‘Bardolatry’ was evoked in large part by what Shaw considered to be meaningless rhetoric and bombast in Shakespeare. There were also writers for whom they lacked a common sympathy. The most notable of these was Shelley, a major influence for Shaw, but a poet about whom Morris neither knew nor cared much, preferring Keats instead among the Romantics.

Beyond the sphere of literature as such, Morris and Shaw found much common ground in the other arts. Morris’ intimate knowledge of the Pre-Raphaelite movement quickened Shaw’s own interest in this group. In painting and architecture, particularly the latter, they found much to agree on. For example, they reacted in almost the same way to the Renaissance architecture of Italy. On the other hand, music, one of the lifelong preoccupations of Shaw, had no place in their artistic intercourse, because of Morris’ lack of interest in it. This points up a highly significant

4 Shaw, as a literate young Victorian, was acquainted with Morris’ work as poet and prose romancer. Morris had read the earlier chapters of Shaw’s novel An Unsocial Socialist, serialized in the socialist magazine To-Day in early 1884, and was amused enough by them to become curious about Shaw.

5 From Venice, on 23 September 1891, Shaw wrote a remarkable and witty letter to Morris containing harsh criticisms of Italian Renaissance architecture. The views expressed in this letter were embodied in his essay ‘On Going to Church’, published in The Savoy, No. 1, January 1896, pp. 13-28.
feature of the artistic side of their relationship: it was carried on completely on Morris’ terms. Shaw understood and accepted this. Morris only gradually took Shaw into his full confidence so far as the arts in general, aside from literature, were concerned. It was not until Shaw proved himself an adept by writing *The Sanity of Art* in reply to Nordau’s *Degeneration* in 1895 that their artistic relationship became fully unrestrained.

Space does not permit me to dwell upon more intimate aspects of the Morris-Shaw relationship, especially those concerning Morris’ family. The ‘Mystic Betrothal’ of Shaw and Morris’ daughter, May, is recounted in Shaw’s introduction to the second volume of May Morris’ *William Morris Artist Writer Socialist.* I have catalogued a letter, beautiful both in calligraphy and content, from May Morris to Shaw, discussing his essay on her father. Shaw’s essay is the best single source of information on all aspects of his relationship with Morris.

This relationship, as we have seen, was almost as varied as the lives and work of the men themselves. Characterized by genuine mutual appreciation, it was, in the final analysis, fully unrestrained in all its aspects. Further, it acted as a catalyst in the intellectual lives of the two men and, through them, influenced others. The supremely important result of the Morris-Shaw relationship, as has been suggested, was the effect that it had upon Bernard Shaw. Morris influenced Shaw deeply and in a variety of ways, and Shaw passed on this influence to others.

Morris’ influence upon Shaw’s socialism was considerable. He gave to Shaw’s Fabianism a revolutionary zeal for social change and a vision of the new social order that one day might come into being, thus adding purposiveness to what had been a rather opportunistic creed. Association with Morris reinforced Shaw’s own opposition to anarchism. Shaw’s qualified espousal of Marxist revolutionism in later life may be traced, at least in part, to the early influence of Morris.

Of equal significance was Morris’ artistic influence. The Ruskin-Morris art doctrine and the influence of Morris’ Pre-Raphaelitism

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7 The relationship was not without influence upon Morris as well, in socialism and art as well as in personal life, though this was limited by the disparity in their years and in their maturity as artists and thinkers.
pervade Shaw's early critical writings and *The Sanity of Art*. By his contact with Morris, Shaw gained an attitude toward art and art history which he retained during the remainder of his life, and he achieved a tolerance and sympathy for romantic art which might not otherwise have been so marked. In addition to matters of attitude, Morris influenced Shaw artistically in specific ways. The results of Morris' influence on Shaw's printed books have already been mentioned. Shaw became interested in the Arts and Crafts movement and was rather closely connected with it. In 1907, he founded the Fabian Arts Group, which, while short-lived, was intended as a demonstration of the Morrisian principle that socialism and art might be blended. The dual influence of Morris (artistic as well as socialist) may be seen at work here. Morris' specifically literary influence on Shaw was, by comparison, limited. This arose, in the main, from their working in different departments of literature, though Shaw was unstinting in his praise and appreciation of Morris' work. In the matter of literary technique, Morris may have exerted at least an indirect influence—Shaw's admiration of Morris' prose style, so unlike the 'worn-out Macaulayese' of conventional Victorian prose, may have inspired Shaw to forge his own fresh and original prose style.

It was therefore extremely valuable to Shaw, for a variety of reasons, that he should have known William Morris. Though, like Shaw, Morris was in rebellion against the age, he represented what was best in the high Victorian period. For a young rebel of the anti-Victorian generation like Shaw to come in contact with a man of Morris' calibre from the older generation therefore offered an unique opportunity for the best in the older tradition to be imbibed and carried on. Looking back from our dubious vantage point of the turbulent mid-twentieth century we can see in Morris more and more the attributes of a prophet. Fighting his battles against the tawdry, the vulgar, the unjust, the anti-human, he seems, with keen prophetic insight, to have been fighting our battles as well. Shaw served as a receptor for the cardinal Morrisian doctrines in art and in social thought, and he adapted these to his own purposes. As the leading dramatist of modern times and perhaps the dominant literary figure of the earlier twentieth century, Shaw, with his greater fame, was able to project the artistic ideas and much of the social thought of Morris far into the present century.

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8 For the series of pamphlets planned by the Group, Shaw's *The Sanity of Art*, that truly Morrisian document, was republished, with a preface by Shaw.