The Revision of News From Nowhere
by J Alex Macdonald

Following a common nineteenth century practice Morris revised his famous utopian novel between its initial serial publication and the first authorised publication in book form. As far as I know the changes he made have not been studied and they are certainly interesting enough to warrant a note.

Utopian stories were enormously popular in the 1880's and 90's, and the most popular of them all was Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (1888). Morris read the book in early May of 1889 but, unlike many thousands of his contemporaries, his reaction was negative. In a letter to Bruce Glasier on the 13th he wrote 'I suppose you have seen or read, or at least tried to read, *Looking Backward*. I had to on Saturday having promised to lecture on it. Thank you, I wouldn't care to live in such a cockney paradise as he imagines.' The lecture had been given the day before at a meeting sponsored by the Hammersmith Branch of the Socialist League at Kelmscott House, and in June a review followed in the League's journal *Commonweal*. The review admitted that Bellamy gave 'satisfactory answers to many ordinary objections' to Socialism, but Morris feared that people would accept Bellamy's picture of life under Socialism as the only possible one, and he objected strongly to the American's mechanistic and utilitarian approach to solving


social problems. His decision to write a utopia of his own was largely the result of this reaction to *Looking Backward*, as Andreas Scheu later observed in recalling a conversation he had with Morris about it: "I must surely write something as a counterblast to this," Morris said, and his *News from Nowhere* was the consequence."^4

The ‘counterblast’ was begun in the Autumn of 1889 and it ran as a weekly serial in *Commonweal* between 11 January and 4 October 1890. Three days after the last instalment appeared Morris wrote to Bruce Glasier ‘I shall now presently begin to touch up *News from Nowhere* for its book form’, and a letter to H. M. Hyndman on 22 December indicates that the revision had not yet been completed.\(^5\) It was completed by March of 1891, for in that month Reeves and Turner of London published the first authorized edition,\(^6\) which is used here as the basis for comparison with the original serial version. So that the discussion may be followed from any of the generally available texts the relevant passages in the revised version (R) are cited by chapter numbers and paragraph numbers (e.g. X, 17) rather than by page numbers of the first edition; passages from *Commonweal* (C) are cited by date of the instalment.

One of the most frequent criticisms of *News from Nowhere* has been that the book is too idyllic to be taken seriously. Bruce Glasier recalled that Morris was both ‘surprised and amused’ when the ‘little volume’ was ‘solemnly discussed as a

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4 Letter to A. R. Wallace (3 February 1909), British Museum, Add. MS 46440.

5 *Letters of William Morris*, pp. 328, 331.

6 The first edition in book form was an unauthorized reprint from *Commonweal* by Roberts Brothers of Boston late in 1890. Boston was the centre of the Bellamy inspired ‘Nationalist’ movement, dedicated to replacing economic competition with cooperation, which reached its peak around 1890. This undoubtedly encouraged publication there of the most significant of the more than sixty sequels and replies to *Looking Backward*. Bellamy countered with a review of *News from Nowhere* in his Nationalist journal *New Nation* (14 February 1891, p. 47) in which he chiefly objected to the lack of government in Morris’ utopia.
textbook of Socialist politics, economics and morality...’, and many have accepted this condescending attitude toward the novel. Philip Henderson has recently written that in it Morris was ‘merely abolishing everything he disliked in the nineteenth century and replacing it by everything he nostalgically longed for’. The implication, that News from Nowhere was simply an escape into romance for Morris, is at least partly repudiated by the fact that he made some additions to the revised version which were obviously intended to correct oversights in the first version. A clear example is the first long addition (R VII 44–49) which begins

We came just here on a gang of men road-mending, which delayed us a little; but I was not sorry for it; for all I had seen hitherto seemed a mere part of a summer holiday; and I wanted to see how this folk would set to on a piece of real necessary work...

Morris obviously anticipated his critics and added the passage as a concession to reality. However, the work which is described in the addition is nothing like what one would expect ‘real necessary work’ to be. Dick calls it ‘right down good sport trying how much pick-work one can get into an hour’, and Morris emphasises the pleasure taken by these handsome workers in their road-mending. So what emerges after all is not a description of the nuts and bolts of the utopia but another affirmation of the principle of joy in labour as the necessary foundation for a happy life.

J. W. Mackail judged News from Nowhere to be ‘essentially insular’, and perhaps the addition of a section on relations with foreign countries was intended to forestall this objection (R XIV 1–8). In keeping with the libertarian principles upon which the utopia is based Hammond dismisses the problem by saying that ‘the whole system of rival and contending nations... has disappeared...’; he emphasises the resulting

real variety among peoples, and distinguishes it from the merely mechanical variety imposed by cartographers as the result of political shuffles.

More than half the changes which Morris made to the original story were made in Chapter XVII describing ‘How The Change Came’. This seems to indicate that the section was particularly important to him, and that he wanted the fictional course of events to be as clear as possible. A long addition (R XVII 22–37: ‘To explain this you must understand... now for the crash aforesaid.’) of about four pages describes the formation of the Federation of Combined Workmen and a period of State Socialism. The passage is a significant one. When he left the Socialist League in November of 1890, about the time he was revising *News from Nowhere*, Morris commented

I neither believe in State Socialism as desirable in itself, nor, indeed, as a complete scheme do I think it possible. Nevertheless, some approach to it is sure to be tried, and to my mind this will precede any complete enlightenment on the new order of things. The success of Mr. Bellamy’s utopian book, deadly dull as it is, is a straw to show which way the wind blows.¹⁰

This new attitude is reflected in Hammond’s retrospective admission, in the added passage, that some of the measures leading to State Socialism were ‘necessary’. The other important point about this passage is the central role which Morris gives to the Federation of Combined Workers, a body which did not even exist in the original *Commonweal* version of 24 May. He had only grudgingly admitted after the great Dock Strike of 1889 that Trade Unionism would give a sense of combination to the workers, if no material gain in their position, but now, in the revision, the Federation is seen as a crucial catalyst in the revolutionary process. The difference is clearly revealed by comparing the original (C May 24)

In London a convention of leaders was got together, and sat under the old revolutionary name of the Committee of Public Safety;

with the revised version (R XVII 38):

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 235.
In London a convention of leaders was got together from the Federation of Combined Workmen, and sat under the old revolutionary name of the Committee of Public Safety; 

In terms of the story the addition makes the 'convention of leaders' more plausible because it gives the leaders somewhere definite to come from—they do not now merely 'arise' or 'emerge' out of the masses but come from the body which represents the workers. In terms of the development of Morris' own thought the addition confirms the interpretation that he was moving away from the purism of his years with the Socialist League.

There is a rather curious addition later in the chapter (at R XVII 78). Hammond speaks of the working-men 'amongst whom, indeed, were some capable and "squareheaded" persons', but in the revised version he qualifies 'though, as aforesaid, the abler men were not then the recognised leaders'.

When Morris left the Socialist League he did so largely because he felt its public voice, especially in the Commonweal, was becoming irresponsible in its violent anarchist outbursts, and his secession from the Social Democratic Federation at the end of 1884 had much to do with the dictatorial personality of H. M. Hyndman. This comment added to the revision can surely be taken as a reflection of his accumulated disillusionment at the squabbling between various Socialist groups.

The next addition of about fifteen lines (R XXIII 1: 'I came to the hurdles ... was not amongst them.') adds detail which helps the reader visualize the scene described, especially in the comparison of the field of brightly dressed workers to a 'gigantic tulip bed'. Also added, a line or two later, was the phrase 'holding a basket in her hand', a small touch which brings Ellen more clearly into view. Among utopian novels News from Nowhere is almost unique in its loving attention to detail, especially of landscape and architecture, and in this addition Morris the poet can be seen at work.

Another indication of Morris' ability to convey the general

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11 As early as July 1890 he had written to D. J. Nicoll, the proprietor of the paper, saying 'I think you are going too far: at any rate further than I can follow you.' Letters of William Morris, p. 324.
through the particular was the addition of Chapter XXVI to the revised version. Like the addition describing the road-menders it shows some citizens engaged in a piece of ‘real necessary work’—house building. It also allows these average citizens to speak directly to the reader; in many utopias and dystopias the citizens are merely described, by a paternalistic or all-knowing spokesman like Looking Backward’s Dr Leete or Brave New World’s Controller, and this chapter emphasises the egalitarian basis of Morris’ ideal commonwealth. The title of the chapter, ‘The Obstinate Refusers’, is of interest because it stresses the individual freedom available in ‘Nowhere’, a feature which is decidedly uncommon in utopian literature.

News from Nowhere has room for characters like Ellen’s grandfather, the old grumbler, who is not satisfied with life or literature in the new world, and who is undoubtedly a reflection of one aspect of Morris’ mind and feelings. ‘If they brigaded me into a regiment of workers,’ he said after reading of Bellamy’s ‘industrial army’, ‘I’d just lie on my back and kick’,\textsuperscript{12} and the fact that obstinate refusal is possible in this utopia gives it an attractiveness that few utopias possess.

Two comments added near the end of the novel show something of Morris’ own feelings at the time. At (R XXVII 2), after Ellen decides to travel with Guest in one of the boats, Morris added

\textit{As for me I felt young again, and strange hopes of my youth were mingling with the pleasure of the present; almost destroying it, and quickening it into something like pain.}

Here, clearly, is a sign of the intensity of his longing for the kind of world he describes, and for Ellen who represents it, and of his pain at the realization that he would find neither in his own life. And it was possibly in defiance of this sense of pain and loss that he made a final addition (R XXXII 22) to the last page of the book: ‘and strange to say, I found that I was not so despairing’. Perhaps he wanted merely to emphasise the hopeful note with which the novel ends, but it is at least arguable that the frustration and disillusionment he

felt at this time led him to prop up his wavering hope with an affirmation.

None of these additions suggest a new interpretation of the movement of Morris’ thought in the Winter of 1890–91. For example, E. P. Thompson and others have presented evidence to show that Morris moved away from the purist stance of his years with the Socialist League; the additions to Chapter XVII confirm that interpretation and, more importantly, show that *News from Nowhere* for that reason may be taken seriously as a source for the study of Morris’ Socialism. It is of interest to know what Morris did *not* revise, as well as what he did change or add, and what he himself considered important in *News from Nowhere*, the book which sums up so many of his varied interests and connects them in a unified picture of the life to come.

**APPENDIX—List of Minor Changes and Additions**

(NB—changes of punctuation and capitalization have been omitted)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R II 20</td>
<td>‘O, not very old,’ he said; ‘it was built, or at least opened, in 2003. There used to be a rather plain timber bridge before then.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C Jan 18</td>
<td>‘O, not very old,’ he said; ‘it was built, or at least opened, in 1971.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R IV 11</td>
<td>I heard him, though my eyes were turned away from him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C Feb 1</td>
<td>I thought his eye rather wandered from me, and didn’t wonder.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R X 2</td>
<td>and in short, that you have so refined your education, that now you have none.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C Mar 22</td>
<td>and in short, that your education is like the ‘snakes in Iceland’ — nonexistent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R X 5</td>
<td>Fortunately most children have had that at all times, or I do not know that we should ever have reached our present position.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C Mar 22</td>
<td>Fortunately most children have had that at all times.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R X 21</td>
<td>to hear her, for instance, singing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C Mar 22</td>
<td>to hear her, say, singing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
for I thought him rather vague here
On some comparatively trifling occasion
for I thought him rather vague here
On some trifling occasion
years and years
for long
Thus the ‘lesson’ began. (added)
This was a victory for the people as far as it went. (added)
and again the people cried ‘victory’. (added)
by means of its feeble national workshops
which had by that time established some feeble national workshops
last sixty years
last twenty years
in some way or other (added)
in the parliamentary faction fight (added)
engaged in such business
engaged in such work
When the conflict was once really begun, it was seen how little of any value there was in the old world of slavery and inequality (added)
after you were old
after you are old
Presently at a place where the river flowed round a headland of the meadows, we stopped a while for rest and victuals, and settled ourselves on a beautiful bank
At a place where the river flowed round a headland of the meadows, we stopped a while for rest and victuals on a beautiful bank
though I don’t see why it should not be
though I don’t see why it shouldn’t be