A Note on Morris and Imperialism

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One of Morris's strongest and, to many today, most attractive political feelings was his hatred of aggressive nationalism. As he explained in his letter to Scheu in 1883, this was an important motivation for his first political action, joining the Eastern Question Association in 1877 to protest against Disraeli's imperialistic foreign policy. He hoped that a Liberal victory would "stem the torrent of Chauvinism, and check the feeling of national hatred and prejudice for which I shall always feel the most profound contempt." However, as he went on to explain, the Liberal government that came in on the fall of Disraeli disappointed him, especially in its colonial policy: "The action and want of action of the new Liberal Parliament, especially the [Irish] Coercion Bill and the Stockjobbers' Egyptian War quite destroyed any hope I might have had of any good being done by alliance with the radical party ..."

The consistency of Morris's hostility to Imperialism has been well traced by E.P. Thompson, and it may be felt in many of the letters. On 11th February, 1878 Morris tells Jenny that "The worst part of it all is that war fever is raging in England, & people go about in a Rule Britannia style that turns one's stomach." In April he is even more despondent, asking Jane to tell George Howard that "he may now just as well come back for the boat-race as the general election" since "the peace-party are in a very small minority." Perhaps there will be peace (in fact there was) but "still even in that case Mr. D. will be the darling of this people."[I, 476]

Morris was, as one would expect, particularly concerned about the effects of imperial expansion on the cultures of the colonised peoples. In 'The Art of the People' in 1879 he drew his audience's attention to the poignant fact that while the developing interest in decorative art had led pattern-designers to look to the East for inspiration, the very art that they admired was being destroyed by "the advance of Western conquest and commerce": "While we meet here in Birmingham to further the spread of education in art, Englishmen in India are, in their shortsightedness, actively destroying the very sources of that education ..." He is disturbed by a sense of British responsibility for what is happening in India, though he expresses this in a rather ponderous way:

Chance-hap has made us the lords of many millions out there; surely, it behoves us to look to it, lest we give to the people whom we have made helpless, scorpions for fish and stones for bread.

The resort to metaphor here suggests Morris's feeling of powerlessness.

The election of Gladstone and the Liberals temporarily raised Morris's hopes, but he could see how difficult it was for the new government to dissociate itself from the results of Disraeli's expansionism. In February 1881 he wrote to Jane:
But I repeat the government ie Gladstone is much stronger in the country than I thought for, and if he could only stop these damned little wars he might stop in till he has carried the regular liberal program, and we should make a good step forward. But little wars with defeats & inglorious victories dovetailed into one another shake a Government terribly, & especially a Liberal one. [II, 15]

As Norman Kelvin notes, Britain was then at war in Afghanistan and the Transvaal, and had launched campaigns against the Kaffirs and Zulus. Gladstone's government failed to cope with the problems of Ireland and the colonies. In March Morris was commenting to Jane on the defeat of the British forces by the Boers at Majuba Hill: "the papers are amusing to a cynic at the moment; so hard at work they are to discover some magic for explaining the all too natural drubbing we have caught at the hands of the Boers." [II, 28] Later in the month he told Jane, "Politics seem to be getting much quieter here: it seems like that we shall make peace with the Boers in spite of the Yells of the Jingoes and the colonists." [II, 33]

However, as the letter to Scheu already quoted indicates, the British military occupation of Egypt - "The Stockjobbers' Egyptian War" - in 1882 helped to convince Morris that Britain's colonial policy was not changing: he referred in a letter the following year to his disillusionment over "events in Ireland and Egypt (especially the latter, where the Liberal 'leaders' 'led' the party into mere Jingoism)." [II, 202] In 1883, then, he made his most important political decision, joined the Democratic Federation, and started to read Marx: the lecture 'Art under Plutocracy' was given in November. But it was 1885, at least on the evidence of the letters, that Morris had most occasion to articulate his view of Imperialism. The death of Gordon at Khartoum led to one of those outbursts of nationalistic feeling which Morris found most disturbing; and through his membership of the Socialist League he was able to make his views clear and public. The League passed a resolution in February stating that "the check inflicted on the British invaders should be hailed by all supporters of the cause of the people as a triumph of right over wrong, of righteous self-defence over ruffianly brigandage." [II, 390, N.3]. Morris wrote of these events in a letter to May with remarkable coolness: "Let me see, you have been away nearly three weeks; what has happened in that time? Khartoum fallen - into the hands of the people it belongs to." [II, 388] In the same letter he told May that he had had dinner with Sir W. B. Richmond and his wife: "I found Richmond seriously excited as to the success of British arms, & had to enlighten him on the subject of patriotism." [II, 389] In March Morris wrote to Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, a prominent supporter of the Egyptian cause, regretting that he could not get to a meeting organised to protest against the war in Sudan, but adding: "I hope by this time most people know what we Socialists think of Khartoum-stealers and the spreaders of the blessings of shoddy civilization." [II, 397] And later in the same month he wrote on behalf of the Socialist League to James Mavor explaining the League's view of the necessity to "attack the Gordon-worship which has been used as a stalking horse for such wide spread murder," and arguing that questions about the Mahdi's fanaticism were irrelevant: "Surely it must be considered an article of faith with us to sympathise with all popular revolutionary movements, though we may not agree with all the tenets of the revolutionists." [II, 410] It is therefore not surprising that his so far unpublished lecture 'Commercial War', which Eugene Le Mire reports as first delivered on the 27th March 1885, argued
powerfully against Imperialism. The Commercial War of the title is a force which works “to drag off poor wretches from our pinched fields and our dreadful slums, to kill and be killed in a cause they know nothing of.” The process of colonization is vividly described:

What is to be done? ... Conquer new markets from day to day; flatter and cajole the men of our colonies to consider themselves what they are not, Englishmen responsible for every quarrel England may lead them into: conquer valiant barbarians all over the world: rifle them rum them missionary them into subjection, then train them into soldiers for civilization ...4

The case has seldom been made with more force or point.

In April, the Socialist League’s polemical rider to the main proposal of a great peace meeting held at St. James’s Hall and chaired by Charles Bradlaugh, was proposed by Morris:

He was convinced that no war had ever been undertaken by the English people that had been more unpopular with the English people than the war in the Soudan. [Cheers] That was rather a strange thing. The whole English people made war, and the whole English people condemned it. Why was that? Because they were forced into war. And who forced them into it? Those capitalists and stock-jobbers of whom he had just spoken, and who could not exist as a class without this exploitation of foreign nations to get new markets ...5

Later in the month the League held its own successful protest meeting, and it is not surprising that the topic was addressed in Morris’s lecture entitled ‘The Depression of Trade’ first given, according to Le Mire, in July. In it Morris discusses “the essence of the society that took the place of feudalism: free competition – that is in other words a desperate war in which every man fights for his own hand; the aim of that struggle being to live free from labour at the expense of those that labour.” In the course of the lecture Morris accurately noted that the allies of imperial expansion had now taken over the formerly anti-colonialist economists of the Manchester School, converting them to “the doctrines of ‘your money or your life!’” He describes the process as one in which economic and military processes together “force our wares on the natives of the countries we long to benefit”:

people don’t want the goods we offer them, but they are poor and have to buy something which [will] serve their term anyhow, so they accept cheap and nasty, grumbling; their own goods made slowly and at greater cost are driven out of the market, and the metamorphosis begins which ends in turning fairly happy barbarians into very miserable half-civilized people surrounded by a fringe of exploiters and middle-men varied in nation but of one religion ‘Take care of number one.’9

The direction of Morris’s argument is to make his working-class audience see that “the case of our workers at home as far as their conquest by the capitalist is concerned is much nearer to that of the Arab or Zulu or South Sea islander than seems at first.”

Morris sees Imperialism as capitalism’s voracious search for markets in a more competitive world, and mocks the recently formed Imperial Federation League who “are trying to persuade themselves that Australia and Canada will consider themselves one country with each other and with England so as to give weight to any attempts
at Burglary which it may be convenient for us to make.” 11 In September he was writing to Blunt, puzzled over the latter’s standing for Parliament as a Conservative while attacking Imperialism: “Anyway I will forgive any one who will attack those base ruffians the Cotton-jingoes.” (II,458)

Imperial concerns do not appear so prominently in Morris’s writings of the next decade, but his basic position remained unchanged. It finds powerful expression in News from Nowhere in Old Hammond’s account of the economic system and its operations in the nineteenth century in Chapter XV. The exposition is vigorous and brilliantly polemical, as in the account of the ‘opening up’ of countries outside the commercial system to serve the “ravening monster” of the World Market:

“When the civilized World-Market coveted a country not yet in its clutches, some transparent pretext was found – the suppression of a slavery different from, but not so cruel as that of commerce; the pushing of a religion no longer believed in by its promoters; the ‘rescue’ of some desperado or homicidal madman whose misdeeds had got him into trouble among the natives of the ‘barbarous’ country – any stick, in short, which would beat the dog at all. Then some bold, unprincipled, ignorant adventurer was found (no difficult task in the days of competition), and he was bribed to ‘create a market’ by breaking up whatever traditional society there might be in the doomed country, and by destroying whatever leisure or pleasure he found there. He forced wares on the natives that they did not want, and took their natural products in ‘exchange’, as this form of robbery was called, and thereby he ‘created new wants’ to supply which (that is, to be allowed to live by their new masters) the hapless, helpless people had to sell themselves into the slavery of hopeless toil so that they might have something wherewith to purchase the nullities of ‘civilization’.”

Because there is so much else in News from Nowhere, this passage is easily passed over. But it is one of the most convincing pieces of Victorian anti-Imperialism, and all the more striking and courageous as being written at the beginning of the decade of the Diamond Jubilee, the high point of the British Empire.

Until the final volume of the Collected Letters appears we cannot be sure how frequently Morris wrote of this topic in his last years, but E.P.Thompson has emphasised its prominence in 1896. In that year Morris attended the New Year meeting of the Social Democratic Federation and seconded a resolution of international fraternal greetings. With the Jameson Raid in mind, he went on to discuss African affairs, as the report from Justice indicates:

As far as Africa was concerned [he said] there was a kind of desperation egging on all the nations to make something of the hitherto underdeveloped country; and they were no doubt developing it with a vengeance.[Laughter and cheers.] When he saw the last accounts about the Transvaal he almost wished he could be a Kaffir for five minutes in order to dance around the ‘ring’. [Laughter and cheers.] He thought it was a case of a pack of thieves quarrelling about their booty. The Boers had stolen their land from the people it belonged to; people had come in to help them ‘develop’ their stolen property, and now wanted to steal it themselves. [Laughter and cheers.] The real fact, however, that we had to deal with was that we lived by stealing – that was, by wasting – all the labour of the workmen.12
Morris was just fit enough to write for the May Day issue of *Justice*. Thompson argues convincingly that “He intended the article as a final testament to the movement”\(^\text{13}\), and notes that Imperialism was its central theme. Once again the topic shows Morris at his most eloquent and authoritative:

> Look how the whole capitalist world is stretching out long arms towards the barbarous world and grubbing and clutching in eager competition at countries whose inhabitants don't want them: nay, in many cases, would rather die in battle, like the valiant men they are, than have them. So perverse are these wild men before the blessings of civilization which would do nothing worse for them (and also nothing better) than reduce them to a propertyless proletariat.

> And what is all this for? For the spread of abstract ideas of civilization, for pure benevolence, for the honour and glory of conquest? Not at all. It is for the opening of fresh markets to take in all the fresh profit - producing wealth which is growing greater and greater every day; in other words, to make fresh opportunities for *waste*; the waste of our labour and our lives.\(^\text{14}\)

The American literary historian Patrick Brantlinger recently published a fine book entitled *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914* in which he showed in detail how disturbingly pervasive were imperialistic and racialist sentiments throughout the period. The Introduction concludes with a quotation from Jomo Kenyatta followed by:

> The unsung heroes of this book are those Victorian and Edwardian opponents of imperialism, such as Hobson, William Morris, and Olive Schreiner, who expressed a similar vision [of a nonexploitive, nonimperialist world]. They were always in the minority, though sometimes able to win local skirmishes. But before my own critique of the ideology of imperialism begins, it is worth noting that, even at the height of the rule of darkness, alternative, anti-imperialist visions of our common life together were available.\(^\text{15}\)

It is because he contributed such a vision that Morris continues to deserve our respect.

**NOTES**

   Subsequent references to the *Collected Letters* are given in brackets after quotations.
3. Ibid., p. 526.
10 Ibid., pp.125-6.
11 Ibid., p.128.
12 Thompson, pp.629-30.
13 Ibid., p.631.
14 Ibid., p.632.