William Morris, Philip Webb
and ‘Mark Rutherford’

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The activities and beliefs of that group of artists, socialists and literary men associated
with William Morris in the latter part of the nineteenth century have been well
documented. Some attention, in particular, has been paid by E.P. Thompson and
others to the warm and enduring friendship between Philip Webb and William Morris.
Morris met Philip Webb, his ‘life-long friend’, when he was articled to the architect
G.E. Street. It was Webb who built Red House at Bexley Heath with Morris in
1860, and it was the need to furnish the house which led to the formation of the
famous Firm. Webb’s and Morris’s aesthetic and political concerns coincided in almost
all respects, with Webb quietly providing intellectual and practical support for his
more obviously illustrious friend throughout their lives. In the 1870s, Webb joined
Morris in his opposition to the British Government’s stance on the ‘Eastern Question’,
and was a signatory to Morris’s 1876 letter (along with W.T. Stead and others) to the
Daily News, expressing outrage at Britain’s inaction regarding Turkish atrocities in
the Turkish Empire, and objecting strongly to any interference should Russia declare
war on Turkey. Webb also joined Morris as an active member of the Society for the
Protection of Ancient Buildings, formed in 1877 with Morris as Honorary Secretary;
later on, in the 1880s, whilst Burne-Jones refused to follow Morris into socialism,
Webb placed his political allegiance wholeheartedly with his friend, and later took
over from Morris as Treasurer of the Socialist League. During the last, difficult years
of the League, Webb formed part of a small group which could be relied upon to give
continued political support to Morris.

Rather less well known than Philip Webb’s warm partnership with and loyalty to
William Morris is the architect’s life-long friendship with the novelist, ‘Mark
Rutherford’. ‘Rutherford’ (a pseudonym for William Hale White, 1831–1913) wrote
six novels, was a part-time parliamentary correspondent for several provincial
newspapers, and worked, until his retirement in 1891, as Director of Contracts in
the Admiralty. It is not clear exactly when or how William Hale White met Philip
Webb, as only a small part of their correspondence remains intact, and this mainly
dates from their later years. It is certain that they were acquainted with one another
in the 1870s, and the surviving letters make it clear that their friendship was long­
standing. Hale White was also acquainted with William Morris, and it seems likely
that he was introduced to him by Webb. Writing to a friend in 1884, Hale White
recounted a visit paid to him by the author of The Earthly Paradise, and the letter
provides an illuminating, humorous account of Morris’s public demeanour:

You would have liked to have been here a night or two ago. Morris, Earthly Paradise
Morris came to dinner with us. He is unlike any fancy picture which the imagination
might draw of him. He is broad-shouldered, ruddy, wears a blue shirt with no neck­
tie, and talks with great vehemence; oftentimes with a kind of put-on roughness
I think – as if he meant to say “If you think that I am an Earthly-Paradisaical creature with wings you are egregiously mistaken.” Nevertheless he was very interesting and humorous. Some of the tapestry now in progress at his works is simply wonderful. I never saw the like. 

Hale White regarded Morris’s death in 1896 as marking the end of the Victorian age. The letter in which he records Morris’s passing is laden with a gloomy world-weariness and sense of an ending which were altogether characteristic of the fin de siècle:

Morris’s death made me sad. One by one everybody who has made the Victorian age pleasant and worth living in is going. Never since the Dark Ages – this is literal fact – has there been a prospect so barren as that now before us. Hardly a man of letters or artist of the smallest consequence will be alive in a very few years... All the circumstances of his death were pathetic. The love of life was strong in him: he enjoyed it as few people did, and did not want to die. 

There are fleeting references to the Morris circle – Burne-Jones, Rossetti and Swinburne, as well as Philip Webb – scattered throughout Hale White’s correspondence, and it seems that he was fairly well acquainted with many of them. He certainly met Arthur Hughes, the Pre-Raphaelite painter, in 1875, and in 1889 his son, Jack, married Hughes’s daughter, Agnes.

One of the most illuminating, and moving, features of the correspondence between Webb and Hale White is the profound admiration and affection for William Morris which emanates from Webb’s letters. In 1888 he lent a copy of Morris’s translation of Homer’s Odyssey to Hale White, and reflected on his feelings towards his closest friend:

I never am quite satisfied that what I feel and say of Morris’s work is quite unprejudiced, partly because all contemporary work is subject to being judged by partial blindness; and again, I have known and quarrelled and rejoiced with him for so many years that he is rounder to my eyes than, probably, to anyone else’s...he is most free of modern poets from thinness of thought in verse; and partly because he enjoys doing his verse, as he does in doing a piece of dyeing, or hand weaving – and all just like a child. His very egotism is amusing and childlike. Again, you see, I am a poor non-educated ill furnished bundle of strange fancies and ideas; well, Morris understands me, and never praises what I do, so that I have no call with him to pull out my too ready scepticism. Now, don’t laugh, I am most surely of a melancholy temperament, and I have found for more than thirty years it has been good corrective to rub shoulders with Morris’s hearty love-of-lifedness.

It was partly their shared interest in house building and architecture which intellectually united William Hale White with Morris, Webb and also John Ruskin. Indeed, Hale White, although himself a literary man, deemed Morris’s most important work to have been in the field of art and architecture:

His most effectual service was not, I think, done by his books, but by his art and by the immense aid he gave in the preservation of our landscapes and buildings. 

A description of Hale White’s house in Carshalton, which was designed by one of Webb’s pupils, appears in Ruskin’s Fors Clavigera, and several letters from Ruskin to Hale White have survived. Their friendship began through an exchange of letters in the Daily Telegraph in 1865, in which they discussed the shortcomings of ‘Modern Houses’. Hale White, albeit in an untheorised way, was heartily in sympathy with
Ruskin’s ideal of a contemporary version of ‘Gothic’ in architecture, based on “the customary way in which masons and carpenters did their work”. The more superficial Gothic style of some Victorian architects, which copied interesting Gothic features whilst at the same time often ignoring modern requirements, was the type of unpractical historicism that Hale White deplored in his letter on ‘Modern Houses’, which Ruskin warmly endorsed. He lambasted Victorian villas as damp, drafty constructions in which, in his own experience, “the floorboards yawned, the plaster peeled off, the damp came in leprous patches on the walls, and eventually one or two of the bricks themselves tumbled in.”

Webb discusses architecture a great deal in his letters to Hale White, often enthusing about the various mediaeval buildings both men had visited. On one occasion Webb asks White to try to use his influence in Bedford – the novelist’s home town – to attempt, on behalf of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, to prevent a fourteenth-century Priory from being destroyed (Bedford Council wanted to demolish it to make room for a recreation ground). “The proposal is, of course, brutal – as is usual in such cases – and a move must be made to stop them,” Webb wrote in 1898. Whilst Hale White was on a tour of Somerset in 1899, Webb urged him to visit the ruins of Cleeve Abbey, and the letters written this summer sparked off a discussion between the two men on the relative merits of Renaissance and Mediaeval art and architecture. These letters are most interesting, as in them Webb clearly articulates the commitment – political as well as aesthetic – to mediaeval art shared by the Morris circle. His praise of Cleeve Abbey was uncontentious:

The enchanted roof of Cleeve Abbey Refectory is a perfect example of grace and skill. I would that I had been with you when there, though my enthusiasm would most likely have shocked you. The ‘day room’ is dreadfully battered: it must have been a lovely place when its double ton of vaulting was standing. It would take much to persuade me that the monks were not appreciative of their noble housing.

Complications arose in the correspondence between the two men when Hale White praised a painting by Botticelli in a subsequent letter. Webb was decidedly less enthusiastic about the famous Italian painter of the Renaissance, and explained why:

The ‘Calumny’ of Botticelli is, as you say, a ‘noble picture’, but it has the strength and weakness of the Early Italian renaissance, when positive affectations were beginning to tell on painting. Envy, the Calumniated, with the three figures on the throne, and the figure of Repentance, are mediaeval in their directness; while the other figures are more or less attentudinised. The latter weakness belonging especially to the Renaissance.

In two subsequent letters Webb articulates with some earnestness what amounts to an aesthetico-political manifesto in which he asserts the political superiority of mediaeval art. This superiority, he argues, lay in the way in which mediaeval art and architecture was rooted in the life of the people rather than being produced by professionally hire artists or sculptors. All art which had its roots in the culture of the people was, for Webb, the truest and most enduring. The letters, as an interesting and full expression of Webb’s aesthetic convictions, are worth quoting at some length. His quarrel with the Renaissance was, he wrote:

... that the high cultivation of the Renaissance in art did not carry the ‘people’ with it; for it was the beginning of an aristocracy in all the arts; and artists began to be supported by the upper classes, and to pander to the luxury of the time. Raphael
himself, with transcendent ability, lived with the great as their friend and companion, and had no spiritualism to put into his work for a class who— as a whole—had no spirituality in them; and Raphael to this day is looked upon by cultivated people as the greatest of all artists. I believe that to this day we feel the effect of this taint of faithlessness in artists; who could not from their ‘cultivated’ lives express the deeper feelings of the people, as Giotto did. And no one who studied closely the sculpture of the French in the 12th and 13th centuries, but must acknowledge that those carving-masons had a depth of unconscious feeling peculiarly belonging to the ‘people’ from whom they sprung. ... The English border ballads, of which I think you are too rashly scornful, remain to us also in fragments—much besmirched and broken in digging them up again; but still there remains in many of them a fine strain of the enchanting power of a people’s poetry; they had a strong and legitimate influence on Coleridge, Wordsworth, and even Tennyson.\(^{14}\)

In the letter preceding this, Webb had reiterated the fact that in his view the Victorian age still suffered from the hiving off of Art as an autonomous institution, distinct from the life and culture of the people. As far as he was concerned, Shakespeare was the last great artist influenced strongly by the mediaeval age:

... the work of Shakespeare owes its best to the mediaeval tradition which was alive within him—and which the pedantry of his time could not kill. After him, the really poetic quality—apart from exercises in style—steadily descended, and now we are all wallowing in the mire with only the occasional flash of genius to cheer us in our discontent.\(^{15}\)

It was from this ‘mire’ that Ruskin, Morris and Webb aimed to rescue the art and architecture of their own time.

Hale White understood and respected Webb’s project of breaking down the boundaries between art and lived experience, of inserting art back into the life of the ‘people’. In 1905, he commented in a letter to Webb that:

I have often reflected that everything I have heard you say about art directly refers to life. For non-reference to all that is human I never saw anything to surpass a huge house, built by --- for an immensely wealthy city merchant, which I went over yesterday. The merchant and his wife furnished it to their own liking, or rather to the liking of ---, and there is not one single article in the place beautiful or simple, not a thing selected because it satisfies by its form any special desire or need of the people who live in it. All is regulation Tottenham Court Road, touching the soul nowhere.\(^{16}\)

The alliance between usefulness and beauty which was a hallmark of Morris’s and Webb’s productions was much appreciated by Hale White. Throughout his correspondence with Webb he expresses his admiration for what is simple and useful in domestic architecture. By 1908 he was ready to reflect also on the beauty of Webb’s work:

I want to hear of something beautiful, and you can tell me more about beautiful things than anybody now left to me. I often think I would give a good deal to have a collection of the drawings, those, that is to say, understandable by me, of your houses. I do trust every one is sacredly preserved.\(^{17}\)

Webb wrote with clarity in these letters of the connections between his socialism and his architectural work. With characteristic humility he told his friend that:
I could now not pass the primary examination of the Royal Institute of British Architects, and yet I can lay drains fairly well, and am a good hand at decorative white wash, but could never become an ‘eminent’ architect, though, as a real socialist, I have some ideas on the ‘Theory of Life’ – and I do not think these ‘ideas’ are detrimental to my considered way of making mortar, which I have pounded at: forgive the pun, for it was accidental.18

Hale White did not follow Morris and Webb into socialism: he remained an old-fashioned Radical, though of a maverick, sceptical kind, throughout his life. This is interesting, since White, like both Morris and Webb, was vehemently anti-imperialistic, and it was partly Morris’s anti-imperialism which had led him into socialism. The capitalistic basis of imperialism was plain in Morris’s view. After the death of General Gordon in Khartoum in February 1885, a huge peace meeting was held at St. James’s Hall in April, with Charles Bradlaugh in the Chair. Morris, one of the speakers at the meeting, blamed the imperialist wars of the second half of the nineteenth century on:

Those capitalists and stock-jobbers of whom he had just spoken, ... who could not exist as a class without this exploitation of foreign nations to get new markets....19

Hale White was equally quick to discern the relationship between capitalism and war. Writing in his political column for the Birmingham Daily Post in 1876, he had reflected of ‘secret societies’ that:

The secret society particularly to be dreaded is that which is made up of all persons who have something to gain by war. All over Europe there are loan contractors, ship owners, colliery proprietors, and an immense number of military people whose one ambition is money or glory and who know that a war would bring both. Who shall say how much of the war fever and war-like writing is not due to these people, directly or indirectly? A gigantic capitalist, if war comes, can, by writing a sheet of notepaper, put hundreds of thousands of pounds in his pockets, the sufferers being the needy taxpayers for whom he negotiates the loan.20

White and Morris were of the same view during the crisis over the Eastern Question. Like Morris, White was firmly against any British attack on Russia in the Balkans, and denounced as mindless and brutal Disraeli’s war plans.21 Similarly, the Afghan War late in 1878 was regarded by Hale White, along with Morris and Burne-Jones, with utter loathing.22

Philip Webb and Hale White frequently exchanged views on the subject of imperialism. In 1905, having just finished reading the biography of Burne-Jones, White wrote excitedly to Webb:

I rejoice to discover that Burne-Jones, apart from his art, belonged to the church of the faithful, and that he could curse the iniquities of the day, Transvaal and other, and the doers there.23

In 1906, Philip Webb sent his friend a copy of Wilfrid Scawen Blunt’s pamphlet Atrocities of Justice Under British Rule in Egypt.24 Webb had clearly been both moved and outraged by Blunt’s disclosures of British injustices in Egypt:

Having the enclosed pamphlet in my hands again I send it to you, with the wish – if it be not against your inclination – to read, and let me know what you think of it. I suffer in spirit much if there is a clear case of injustice overlooked by the public, and the more so if it be ‘political justice’, accepted as such, when it is certain that it is the reverse, and by political custom has to be hushed up.25
By way of reply a few days later, White reflected on the more general socio-cultural effects of imperialism:

The Pamphlet stirs up a much larger question - Is our sovereignty over the Oriental races, Mohammedan and other, good or evil on the whole? I know what is to be said for our rule in India; that we keep the peace between Mohammedan and Hindu; that we have mitigated famine and pestilence, introduced railways and telegraphs. But have we not simply propped up these people: have we influenced them, put any self-support into them; do they in the least care for our civilization; is it adapted to them in any way; is not our system thoroughly unnatural out there, and will it not one day collapse?26

It was Britain's imperialist excursion into the Transvaal which finally made Hale White despair of the political future of his country, and his reflections on the Boer War perhaps provide an insight into why his anti-imperialism did not lead him into socialism. Popular jingoistic support for the war dealt a harsh blow to his faith in 'the people', and partly accounts for his lack of enthusiasm for the new socialist parties; Henry Hyndman, for example, was by no means an anti-imperialist figure.27 In 1906 White gloomily reflected that "There is nothing in manual Labour antagonistic to administrative jobbery or even to aggressive and foolish war."28

The correspondence between Philip Webb and William Hale White records in some depth the life-long friendship of two radical Victorians. The letters also give a real insight into some of the prevalent aesthetic and political concerns of both men and, in cameo, of the Morris circle in general. As such, they are of considerable interest to students of late Victorian cultural politics.

NOTES


2 Thompson, p. 207.

3 The fullest, most reliable biography of William Hale White to date is Wilfred Stone's Religion and Art of William Hale White (Stanford University Press, 1954). Hale White's six novels are: The Autobiography of Mark Rutherford, 1881; Mark Rutherford's Deliverance, 1885; The Revolution in Tanners Lane, 1887; Miriam's Schooling, 1890; Catharine Furze, 1893; Clara Hopgood, 1896.

4 The surviving autograph letters from Philip Webb to William Hale White are held in Bedford Public Library in the Mark Rutherford Collection. White's letters to Webb were collected together by the novelist's second wife and published in Letters to Three Friends (Oxford University Press, 1924). The surviving correspondence between the two men dates from 1888 to 1913.


6 Letter from Hale White to Mrs Colenutt, 26 October 1896. Letters to Three Friends, p. 79.

7 Letter from Philip Webb to Hale White, 1 March 1888.


11 Letter from Philip Webb to Hale White, 24 July 1898.

12 Letter from Philip Webb to Hale White, 7 June 1899.

13 Letter from Philip Webb to Hale White, 9 October 1899.

14 Letter from Philip Webb to Hale White, November 1899.

15 Letter from Philip Webb to Hale White, 28 October 1899.


18 Letter from Philip Webb to Hale White, 11 February 1899.

19 Quoted in Thompson, p. 387.


22 *B.D. Post*, 20 September 1879, p. 6.


25 Letter from Philip Webb to Hale White, 10 November 1906.

