The Communist Poet-Laureate: William Morris's *Chants for Socialists*

Nicholas Salmon

It would be fair to assume that before his entrance into the national political arena Morris had only a limited knowledge of the upsurge in interest in popular music and verse. Yet this was an important element in the resurgence of Victorian working-class culture. As the music critic of the Times, Francis Hueffer, remarked in 1877: 'It is no exaggeration to say that with the exception perhaps of natural science ... there is no branch of human knowledge, or of human art, in which the change that the half-century of the Queen's reign has seen is so marked as it is in the love of music'. Everybody sang: they sang in their homes, they sang part songs and glees in groups, they joined choral societies, and they sang in crowds. Most significantly, some of the more enlightened members of the middle classes recognised that songs could be used as a means of mobilising support for campaigns for social reform. Songs began to emerge as essential tools in many of the hard-fought battles for social and moral betterment amongst which can be cited various evangelical crusades, the temperance movement, female emancipation and the fight against poverty. Songs had become, in fact, essential contemporary weapons of propaganda.

Given this background it is not surprising that Morris's first political poem was a song which dated from the period of his involvement with the Eastern Question Association [EQA]. 'Wake, London Lads' was written in January 1878, and although not the first of Morris's published poems designed to be sung (the honour of which goes to a carol 'French Noel: Masters, in this Hall' printed in 1860 in a *Collection of Ancient Christmas Carols* with an arrangement for four voices by Edmund Sedding) was his first excursion into poetry designed primarily for propaganda purposes. The idea for a song to introduce the large Exeter Hall meeting of 16 January 1878 called 'to protest against England being dragged into war', at which Morris delivered his controversial speech on the 'Opening of the Dardanelles', was, according to Morris, suggested by Mr. F. W. Chessel. Written to the air 'The Hardy Norseman's Home of Yore' - a refrain returned to later in the *Chants for Socialists* - it was printed on one side of a single demi-octavo sheet which was circulated among the predominately working-class audience before the meeting.

The reception of 'Wake, London Lads' was everything that Morris could have desired. The Exeter Hall meeting attracted a vast audience sufficient to fill the hall three times over. It was with great difficulty that the more rowdy members of the war-party were kept out. The noise in the street was such, as Morris wrote to
Janey three days later, that it ‘was like the sea roaring against a lighthouse’. A choir and suitable accompaniment had been organised to perform ‘Wake, London Lads’ at the beginning of the proceedings. ‘They sang it well together’, Morris went on to say, adding:

... they struck up while we were just ready to come on to the platform & you can imagine I felt rather excited when I heard them begin to tune up: they stopped at the end of each verse and cheered lustily: we came on to the platform just about the middle of it.

From Morris’s remark in the same letter that he had a bundle of copies of the song in his possession it is quite possible that it was also sung at other meetings organised by the EQA around the time.

An examination of the text of the song shows that Morris had already gained a good working knowledge of the requirements of this form of propaganda. Although not entirely free of the archaisms and redundancies that characterise much of his earlier poetry, the language is direct, the diction is clear, and the rhythm ideally suited to the accompaniment. However, despite its simplicity of construction its appeal is unashamedly didactic. Morris bids the ‘London Lads’ to remember how their forefathers had sacrificed their lives during past moments of England’s history – such as the Civil War – in order that ‘lovely freedom’s glimmering spark’ should light up the land. The threat of participation in an ‘unjust war’ on behalf of the Turks had, he claimed, descended like a metaphorical fog on the land of liberty, and under its cover the forces of reaction threatened to reforge the chains of oppression not only in Europe but also at home. It was the duty of all true Englishmen to cherish their tradition of liberty and, by opposing the forces of reaction, ensure its survival into the future.

Further evidence that Morris was aware of the power of these songs as a means of mobilising popular support occurred later in the same campaign. A little over a month after the success of the Exeter Hall meeting the tide of popular opinion had turned sharply in favour of the war-party and the EQA found its meetings increasingly disrupted by opponents. On 25 February 1878 the force of this reaction led Morris to write to his daughter May that ‘the people are gone crazy, & are quite determined on war if the Government can find any excuse for picking a quarrel’. The reason for this reversal of fortunes was that the Government had been successful in exploiting the patriotic fervour of the working classes. As Morris put it ‘people go about in a Rule Britannia style that turn’s one’s stomach’. Significantly, this patriotism soon found its way into the Music Halls, where shrewd managers were always eager to take advantage of the enthusiasm generated by appeals to national pride. Numerous songs and sketches were written on the theme, one of which was even responsible for adding a new word to the language: ‘jingoism’. Ironically, it was a word that was soon to enter Morris’s own vocabulary.

The popular success of these Music Hall songs was not lost on Morris. Early in 1880 he used the refrain of one of them – ‘Our Country Right or Wrong’ – as the title for a lecture he wrote aimed for delivery to a radical or liberal audience in the run up to the general election of that year. This lecture, in which Morris made
his most sustained attack on the horrors of war, is interesting because it extended and clarified the argument of ‘Wake, London Lads’ in its condemnation of the sentiment behind such songs:

... false patriotism becomes National Vain-glory, which is both begotten of ignorance and begets it: a legacy of the injustice of past times, it breeds injustice in us in the present that we may be unjustly dealt with in the future: it gabbles of the valour of our forefathers, while it is busy in undoing the deeds that their valiant lives accomplished: it prates of the interests of our country, while it is laying the trail of events which will ruin the fortunes, and break the hearts of the citizens.14

Later, at the beginning of his active campaign for the socialist cause, he wrote to his daughter Jenny of the intense irritation he experienced when ‘2 young mashers... hummed and whistled music-hall tunes’ during a railway journey to a lecture engagement.15

The success of ‘Wake, London Lads’ led Morris to write a series of songs for the socialist cause. As he wrote in Commonweal in April 1885 he was entirely in agreement with John Ruskin that a ‘cause which cannot be sung of is not worth following’.16 The first group of these songs were begun in 1884 when ‘The Day is Coming’ appeared in Justice on 29th March. The latter was subsequently published by the Democratic Federation as an eight page pamphlet sold for a penny.17 This was followed by ‘The Voice of Toil’ (published in Justice, 5 April 1884, p. 5, and later coupled with ‘The Day is Coming’ and issued as another eight page penny pamphlet), ‘All for the Cause’ (Justice, 19 April 1884, p. 5), and ‘No Master’ (Justice, 7 June 1884, p. 5).18 These, together with ‘The March of the Workers’ and ‘The Message of the March Wind’ which appeared in Commonweal in February and March 1885, were subsequently gathered together under the title of Chants for Socialists and published by the Socialist League in 1885. Later in the same year another edition was also published which included a further ‘chant’, ‘Down Among the Dead Men’, which was the only one of the series not to make a contemporary appearance in either Justice or Commonweal.

In addition Morris wrote two other songs. The first of these, ‘Socialists at Play’, appeared in the July 1885 edition of the Commonweal and also as a pamphlet published by the Socialist League. Two years later, after Bloody Sunday, ‘A Death Song’ was issued as a penny pamphlet as a memorial to Alfred Linnell who had died as a result of the injuries he received in Trafalgar Square. This song was included in later editions of Chants for Socialists.

These poems were written at a time when Morris, following his experiences with the EQA and the conclusions he had reached in his series of lectures published as Hopes and Fears for Art (1882), had begun to reassess his attitude to poetry. This revaluation occurred when he came to the conclusion that the decorative arts were being destroyed by capitalism. As he wrote to Georgiana Burne-Jones on 21 August 1883: ‘Poetry goes with the hand-arts I think, and like them has now become unreal: the arts have got to die, what is left of them, before they can be born again’.19 In another letter to Georgiana Burne-Jones he went further and implicitly criticised the creative motivation of his own early poetry,
saying that he had no sympathy with Swinburne’s *Tristram of Lyonesse* because it was founded on an ‘intense study and love of literature’ which entirely ignored the requirements of an age in which ‘the surroundings of life are so stern and unplayful, that nothing can take serious hold of people, or should do so, but that which is rooted deepest in reality’. It was to be a not altogether successful attempt to create such a poetry of revolutionary realism which was to occupy him during his first few years with the Social Democratic Federation and the Socialist League.

Morris was challenging literary opinion in suggesting that it was the role of the poet in the nineteenth century to confront reality rather than use his or her art as a means of escape. Many of his contemporaries were appalled to see him abandon what they saw as his true vocation. Edward Burne-Jones, in a letter to an unidentified correspondent written soon after Morris started his propaganda work for ‘the Cause’, stated:

*I shall never try again to leave the world than I can control to my heart’s desire – the little world that has the walls of my workroom for its furtherest horizon – and I want Morris back to it, and want him to write divine books and leave the rest.*

George Gissing was just as emphatic. Having heard that Morris had been charged with disorderly conduct and striking a policeman at a trial of eight socialists who had been held for obstruction in September 1885, he wrote sadly to his brother:

... what the devil is such a man doing in that gallery? It is painful to me beyond expression. Why cannot he write poetry in the shade? ... Keep apart, keep apart, and preserve one's soul alive – that is the teaching for the day. It is ill to have been born in these times, but one can make a world within the world.

Even so Morris appears to have been reluctant at first to assume the poet laureateship of the socialist movement. He even approached Swinburne on 17 November 1883 with the suggestion that the latter join the Democratic Federation and contribute some verse to one of the early editions of *Justice*: ‘You ought to write us a song, you know, that’s what you ought to do: I mean to be set to music, for singing at meetings of the faithful’. Despite politely claiming a certain sympathy with Morris’s political views, Swinburne – probably aware of his own poetic reputation – discreetly declined the invitation:

*I do trust you will not ... regard me as a dilettante democrat if I say that I would rather not join any Federation. What good I can do to the cause ... will I think be done as well or better from an independent point of action and of view.*

The chants themselves reveal that Morris had internalised at least one of the lessons he had learned from his participation in the EQA. To achieve the maximum propaganda value Morris wrote the songs for occasions when strong
emotions were likely to be aroused. Many of the chants were thus written specifically for important events such as Hyndman’s debate with Bradlaugh on 17 April 1884, an entertainment of the Socialist League held at the South Place Institute on 11 June 1885 and for Alfred Linnell’s funeral on 18 November 1887. For the latter occasion Morris wrote ‘A Death Song’ which was sold as a penny pamphlet with an illustration by Walter Crane depicting a policeman clubbing the unfortunate Linnell. All proceeds from the sale of this pamphlet were donated to a fund for the benefit of Linnell’s orphans.

To ensure the chants were immediately accessible to working-class audiences they were designed to be sung to well-known refrains. The two most popular were ‘The Hardy Norseman’s Home of Yore’ (used for ‘Wake, London Lads’ and ‘No Master’) and ‘John Brown’s Body lies a Mouldering in the Grave’ (used for ‘The March of the Workers’). According to May Morris the measure of the latter turned out to be too heavy for the familiar wording of the song. In the Collected Works she explained that this happened because

... some one unluckily furnished my father not with the original words as a guide, but with another set of verses, the long racing metre of which he followed. When he found out how much simpler the original John Brown song was, he was rather vexed about it.

It is possible that Morris was actually presented with the words of the ‘Battle Hymn of the Republic’.

The problem to be confronted when considering the success of the Chants is one of critical perspective. This arises because Morris decided to include many of them in Poems by the Way (1891) and therefore offer them up for critical appraisal. Why he did this is not clear. Mackail has pointed out that a vast amount of previously unpublished material was left out of this volume. This included a number of longer narrative poems which dated from the period of The Earthly Paradise. If Morris had decided to include these they would certainly have received sympathetic attention from the critics. Even leaving these aside, Mackail went on to state ‘there are still sufficient on these yet unpublished pieces, – lyrics, sonnets, and ballads, – to make up a second volume of “Poems by the Way” as large as the first’. Given the extent of this unpublished material, the fact that the volume was compiled in association with the sober Fairfax Murray, and the knowledge that Morris had no illusions about the poetic value of the chants, there must have been a reason why he chose to have them reprinted.

Part of the explanation for their inclusion probably lies in the title of the volume itself: Poems by the Way. It included material which ranged from ballads, love-lyrics and romances from the period of The Earthly Paradise, through Nordic translations and verses produced for various pictures, tapestries and embroideries, to the later medievalist romances such as ‘Goldilocks and Goldilocks’. As each of these groups represented a stage in his poetic development, to exclude any reference to the socialist verses would have undoubtedly been regarded by Morris as hypocritical.

It is also possible that he wanted to make a more specific statement by their inclusion. In the early 1890s various critics began to consider the possible
successors to Tennyson as poet-laureate. At this time Morris was still regarded as one of the main contenders. As one critic put it ‘a formidable competitor for any one save Lord Tennyson himself’. What the critics objected to, however, was the fact that Morris had deserted poetry for socialism. *Poems by the Way* was inevitably going to be the volume on which his future reputation was to rest, and it may have been this thought that made him decide to include the socialist verses as a reminder of his continued commitment to ‘the Cause’.

The first edition of *Poems by the Way* issued by the Kelmscott Press in 1891, was limited to a mere 250 copies sold at two guineas each, and was almost completely passed over by the critics. Indeed, the half dozen reviews that did appear mostly followed the publication of the cheaper Chiswick Press edition which was published later in the same year. The socialist poetry evoked from these contemporary reviewers one of two responses: either it was completely ignored or viewed simply as the inferior product of a once great poet whose Muse had sadly deserted him following his conversion to socialism. Of the latter the following remarks are representative: an anonymous reviewer in the *Saturday Review* complained of Morris’s ‘almost pathetically crude Socialism’; Richard Garnett in the *Illustrated London News* that there was ‘but little poetic worth to Mr. Morris’s purely socialistic poetry’; and Oliver Elton writing in the *Academy*, after showing himself to be the most sympathetic to Morris’s political standpoint, concluding sadly that ‘the songs... which are written expressly in honour of the “Cause” are not always the happiest or strongest in the book’.

Judgements such as these – although fair in literary terms – have had the effect of greatly underestimating the impact of the *Chants* as socialist propaganda. They were immensely popular amongst the rank and file of the movement. According to Buxton Forman the *Chants* ran to two editions in 1885, another in 1888 (when they were coupled with ‘The Socialist Platform’ and the ‘Manifesto of the Socialist League’) and one more in 1892 (similar to the second edition of 1885). May Morris confirms that there was always ‘a steady demand at meetings and open-air demonstrations’ for copies of the penny pamphlets. Christopher Waters has pointed out that the *Chants* also figured prominently in wider collections of socialist songs. A number of them were published in Carpenter’s *Chants for Labour: A Song-Book of the People* (1888) and thereafter they were included in no less than eight further collections which appeared between 1888 and 1912. According to Waters, of the 532 titles featured in these nine songbooks no less than eight per cent were written by Morris.

The *Chants* had a far wider appeal than Morris could have envisaged. Shortly after the publication of ‘The Day is Coming’ in September 1883, for example, the *Christian Socialist* announced that the poem ‘was read from the pulpit of at least one London church on 22nd September, and will be heard from other pulpits during the next two weeks’. The same paper also urged its readers to purchase a copy of the song as ‘it ought to stir the blood of any Englishman that hears it’. The *Chants* even reached the United States where they were taken up by bodies such as the Women’s Socialist Union and the Knights of Labour. Many of them were also published in radical and socialist newspapers such as *The Appeal to Reason*, *The Coming Nation*, the *Workmen’s Advocate* and *People*.
Their main purpose was, of course, to enliven meetings and entertainments of the SDF and SL, and to act as a counter to the activities of the various other organisations seeking to attract working class support. In this respect they were again remarkably successful. When a large open-air meeting was held in Norwich Market Place on 12 August 1888, for example, Morris’s chant ‘No Master’ was sung by the assembled crowd in opposition to no less than two Salvation Army bands, a Gospel Band and the peals of the nearby St. Peter Mancroft’s Church. An anonymous ‘Platform Guest’, writing in the Norfolk Daily Standard, reported that ‘the audience sang with gusto’.

The Chants also served as entertainments on socialist outings. E. P. Thompson quotes the Bradford socialist F. W. Jowett recalling how he and his comrades sang ‘The March of the Workers’ with enthusiasm on walks in the surrounding countryside, all the time believing that the people were indeed ‘marching on’. Morris, himself, volunteered to take the responsibility for funding a Democratic Federation band in order to provide accompaniment for the songs, while later, no less a person than Gustav Holst formed a choir which met at Kelmscott House to sing the Chants at meetings of the Hammersmith Branch of the Socialist League.

The popular success of the Chants shows that Morris had made considerable advances in his appreciation of the essential requirements of a popular song. The basic weakness of ‘Wake, London Lads’ had been that Morris’s bourgeois paternalism had expressed itself in a moral appeal to the working classes more suitable to be read than sung. Most popular late Victorian songs, however, had little intellectual content to distract the singer but instead concentrated on reinforcing shared sentiments through simplicity of construction. To be successful they needed to be easy to memorise and to be in tune with the ideas expressed in the lyrics. The sonorous language and rousing choruses of the Chants were an entirely appropriate complement to their dominant theme of the workers marching inexorably to the rebirth of society. In this sense at least, Morris can be seen responding to the realities of his age and exploiting an existing form for his own political ends.

However, borrowed forms impose their own limitations. By exploiting the sentiment to be gained from black and white judgements, simple antitheses and banal generalisations, the Chants lay themselves open to the criticism that they romanticise both the cause and the workers. As E. P. Thompson has pointed out, while the Chants are both moving and effective as propaganda they ‘cannot be said to lay the foundations of a poetry of “revolutionary socialism”’. More recently Jack Mitchell has extended this criticism by arguing that Morris failed to portray the reality of ordinary people engaged in the historic class struggles of their era, primarily because he was incapable of escaping the traditional conventions which required the poet to focus on the dreams of a ‘sensitive individual psyche’.

There is much truth in Mitchell’s argument. The Chants are full of the optimism characteristic of Morris’s early years in the socialist movement, and there can be no mistaking the personal nature of the utopia he envisaged for the future. In ‘The Day is Coming’, the first of the Chants, it is ‘the wonderful days a-coming, when all shall be better than well’ which provides the antithetical
structure in which the positive future is contrasted with the negative present. The resulting utopia includes all the usual Morrisian features: good housing; enjoyable work; leisure, food; fellowship; a beautiful environment; and, of course, a share in art. However, precisely because this utopia is individual and abstract its contrast with capitalism exaggerates the latter’s vices to such an extent that it loses contact with reality altogether. If one took ‘The Day is Coming’ as a realistic presentation of working-class conditions in the nineteenth century, it would be necessary to accept that all the workers were lodged like ‘swine’, ‘too faint and weary to stand’, fearful of ‘the hunger-wolf anear’ and liable at any moment to ‘droop and die’. One can’t help feeling that mobilising such a band of miserable people is a forlorn hope.

A similar problem is encountered when one considers Morris’s portrayal of the working class. As has already been remarked, the Chants were primarily written to be sung at meetings of the SDF and SL. Yet on close examination it can be seen that they were all directed at the enlightened working men who were already committed to ‘the Cause’. Clearly Morris felt it was important to encourage such converts, and the Chants are full of appeals to these ‘few against the world’ as they are styled in ‘No Master’, to accept the moral responsibility for the education of the mass of their brothers so that the revolutionary transformation of society can be accomplished. Unfortunately, in emphasising the value of this work Morris sacrifices the remainder of the labouring population to a Blakean wilderness. ‘How long shall they reproach us’, he asks in ‘The Day is Coming’, ‘where crowd on crowd they dwell, / Poor ghosts of the wicked city, the gold-crushed hungry hell?’ In no way can this be termed the language of social realism.

It is difficult to imagine the Chants being sung today. Now we have spin-doctors, cliché-mongers and design consultants. Attempts to get the attention of the working-class are now firmly in the hands of the media. Yet, despite their obvious limitations, the Chants show Morris responding to contemporary society in a way that disproves the absurd allegations that he was some sort of romantic dreamer out of touch with his age. Morris, without doubt, was the first Victorian modernist.

NOTES
2 ‘French Noel: Masters, in the Hall’ was written while Morris was working in the office of the architect, Edmund Street, presumably under the persuasion of his fellow pupils who at that time had a taste for part-song. See The Work of William Morris: An Exhibition Arranged by the William Morris Society, (London: William Morris Society, 1962), p. 53.
3 The Times, 17 January 1878, p. 6.
6, carried a report of this speech which may correspond to a MSS on the same subject at the Emery Walker House in Hammersmith.


8 ibid., I, pp. 434-36.

9 For some inexplicable reason 'Wake, London, Lads' was omitted from the Collected Works, a fact which probably explains why the poem has attracted little critical attention. However, Norman Kelvin has reproduced it in full in The Collected Letters, I, pp. 436-37.


11 ibid., I, p. 446.


14 B.M. Add, MS.45334[4].

15 The Collected Letters of William Morris, II, p. 188.

16 Commonweal, April 1885, p. 23.

17 Justice, 29 March 1884, p. 4.


20 ibid., II, p. 119.


24 B.M. Add. MS. 45345.


28 Fortnightly Review, 1 May 1890.

29 The Books of William Morris, p. 158.


31 Saturday Review, 6 February 1892.


33 Academy, February 1892, p. 197.

34 This attitude has continued to the present day. See, for example, J. M. S. Tompkins’s William Morris: An Approach to the Poetry (London: Cecil Woolf, 1988), in which there is not a single reference to Chants for Socialists.
35 The Books of William Morris, pp. 118-19 and p. 133.
36 The Collected Works of William Morris, XXIV, p. xxxii.
37 See An 'Idle Singer' and His Audience, pp. 95-96. Oscar Wilde, in a review of Carpenter's Chants for Labour published in the Pall Mall Gazette on 15 February 1889, agreed that Morris's contributions had little literary value, but made the important point that this was because they were designed to be sung rather than read.
39 ibid., p. 133.
41 Christian Socialist, October 1883, p. 66.
42 See 'Morris's “Chants” and the Problems of Socialist Culture', p. 142.
43 Eastern Daily Press, 13 August 1888, p. 5.
44 The Norfolk Daily Standard, 13 August 1888, p. 3. The Tory paper, The Norfolk Chronicle and Norwich Gazette (18 August 1888, p. 3), was, however, less enthusiastic describing the 'chant' as sung 'to a dismal, soul-racking tune'.
52 ibid., IX, pp. 180-81.
53 ibid., XXIV, p. 409.
54 ibid., IX, p. 181.